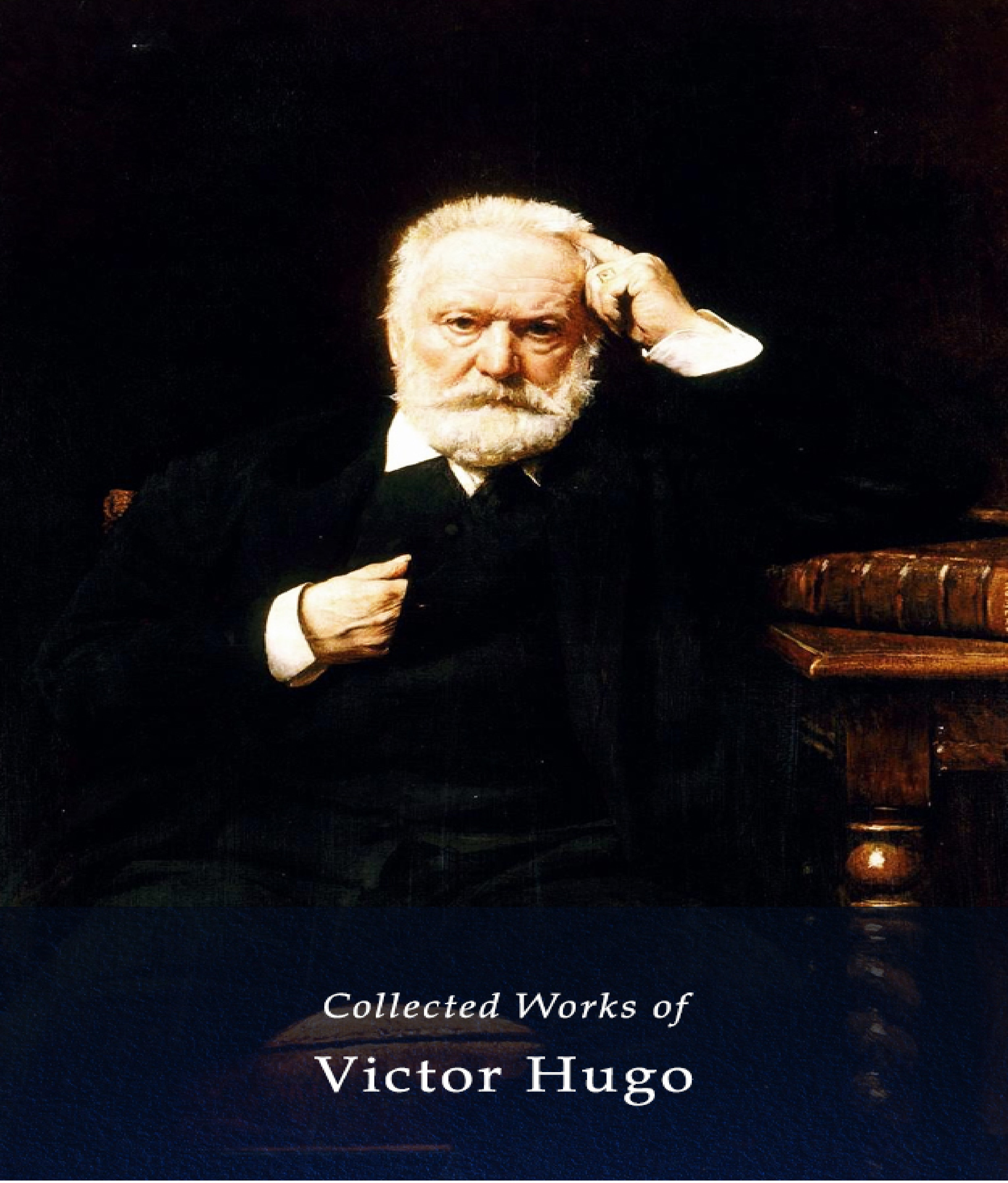

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VICTOR HUGO
(1802-1885)

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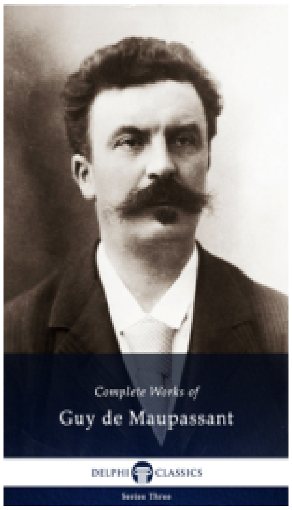
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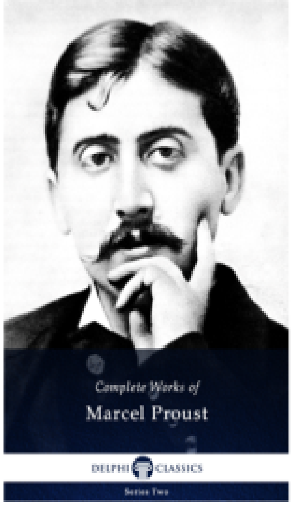
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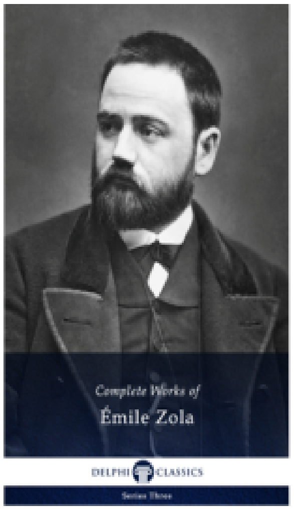
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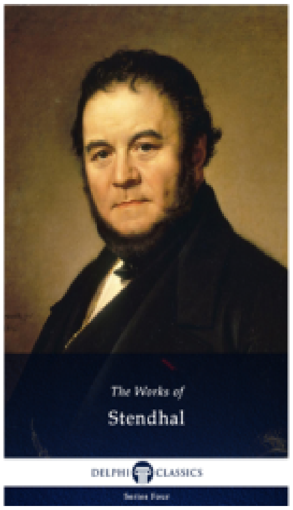
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The Novels

PHARMACIE
TABACS
PARIS

The birthplace of Victor Hugo – Besançon, France, 1802

BUG-JARGAL

Anonymous translation, 1833

Written in 1818, this is Hugo’s first novel. Completed by the author in fifteen days, after a bet at the age of sixteen, *Bug-Jargal* appeared in the *Conservateur littéraire*, Hugo brothers’ magazine, in 1820. The story occurs in Santo Domingo and features a friendship between the enslaved African prince of the title and a French military officer named Leopold D’Auverney, during the tumultuous early years of the Haitian Revolution.

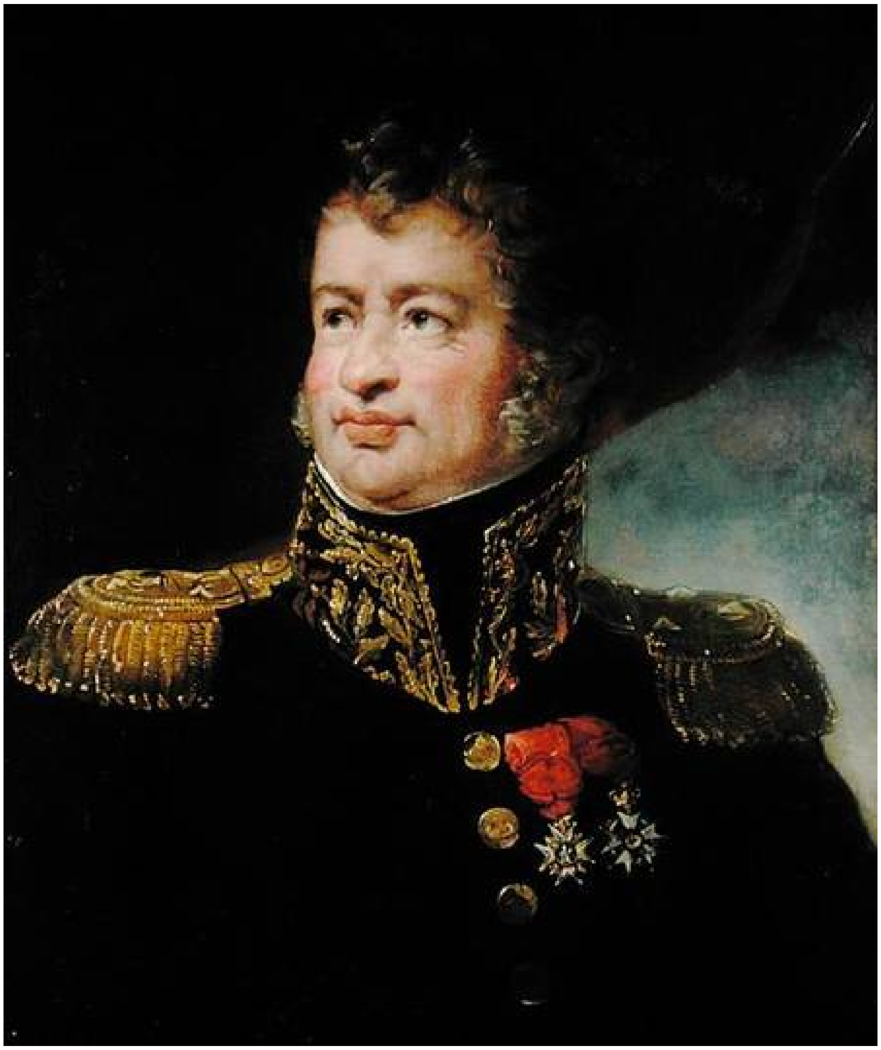

Général d’Empire Joseph Léopold Sigisbert Hugo (1773-1828), Victor Hugo’s father, who fought in Napoleon’s army

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The original French text of this novel can be accessed via this link.

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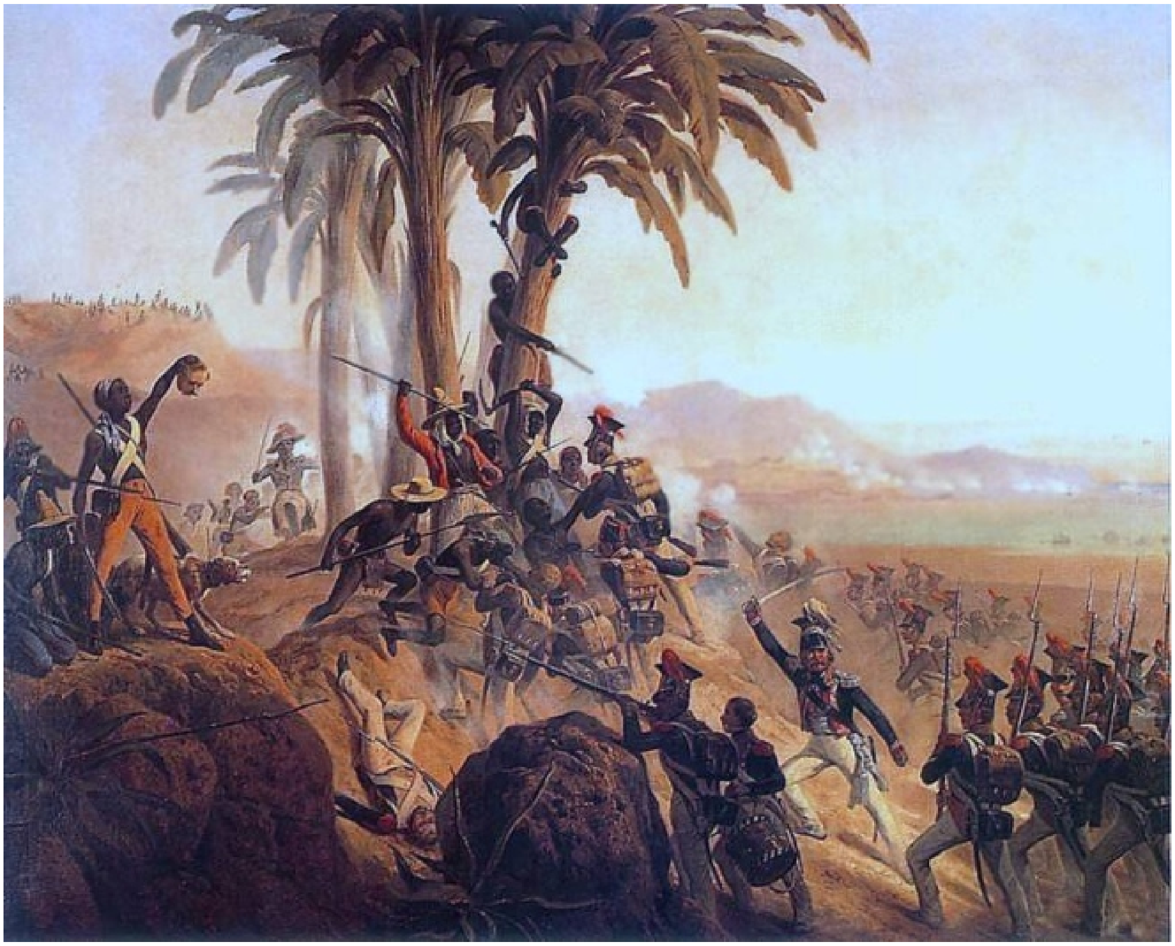

Battle on Santo Domingo, 1804 — one of the main historical events in Hugo’s first novel

PROLOGUE

WHEN it came to the turn of Captain Leopold d’Auverney, he gazed around him with surprise, and hurriedly assured his comrades that he did not remember any incident in his life that was worthy of repetition.

“But, Captain d’Auverney,” objected Lieutenant Henri, “you have — at least report says so — traveled much, and seen a good deal of the world; have you not been to the Antilles, to Africa, and to Italy? and above all, you have been in Spain. But see, here is your lame dog come back again!”

D’Auverney started, let fall the cigar that he was smoking, and turned quickly to the tent door, at which an enormous dog appeared, limping toward him.

In another instant the dog was licking his feet, wagging his tail, whining, and gamboling as well as he was able; and by every means testifying his delight at finding his master; and at last, as if he felt that he had done all that could be required of a dog, he curled himself up peaceably before his master’s seat.

Captain d’Auverney was much moved, but he strove to conceal his feelings, and mechanically caressed the dog with one hand, while with the other he played with the chin-strap of his shako, murmuring from time to time, “So here you are once again, Rask, here you are!” Then, as if suddenly recollecting himself, he exclaimed aloud, “But who has brought him back?”

“By your leave, Captain—”

For the last few seconds Sergeant Thaddeus had been standing at the door of the tent, the curtain of which he was holding back with his left hand, while his right was thrust into the bosom of his greatcoat. Tears were in his eyes as he contemplated the meeting of the dog and his master, and at last, unable to keep silence any longer, he risked the words, “By your leave, Captain.”

D’Auverney raised his eyes.

“Why, it is you, Thaddeus? and how the deuce have you been able — eh? Poor dog, poor Rask! I thought that you were in the English camp. Where did you find him, Sergeant?”

“Thanks be to Heaven, Captain, you see me as happy as your little nephew used to be when you let him off his Latin lesson.”

“But tell me, where *did* you find him?”

“I did not find him, Captain; I went to look for him.”

Captain d’Auverney rose, and offered his hand to the sergeant, but the latter still kept his in the bosom of his coat.

“Well, you see, it was — at least, Captain, since poor Rask was lost, I noticed that you were like a man beside himself; so when I saw that he did not come to me in the evening, according to his custom, for his share of my ration bread — which made old Thaddeus weep like a child; I, who before that had only wept twice in my life, the first time when — yes, the day when—” and the sergeant cast a sad look upon his captain. “Well, the second was when that scamp Balthazar, the corporal of the Seventh half brigade, persuaded me to peel a bunch of onions.”

“It seems to me, Thaddeus,” cried Henri, with a laugh, “that you avoid telling us what was the first occasion upon which you shed tears.”

“It was doubtless, old comrade,” said the captain kindly, as he patted Rask’s head, “when you answered the roll-call as Tour d’Auvergne, the first grenadier of France.”

“No, no, Captain; if Sergeant Thaddeus wept, it was when he gave the order to fire on Bug-Jargal, otherwise called Pierrot.”

A cloud gathered on the countenance of D’Auverney, then he again endeavored to clasp the sergeant’s hand; but in spite of the honor that was attempted to be conferred on him, the old man still kept his hand hidden under his coat.

“Yes, Captain,” continued Thaddeus, drawing back a step or two, while D’Auverney fixed his eyes -upon him with a strange and sorrowful expression— “yes, I wept for him that day, and he well deserved it. He was black, it is true, but gunpowder is black also; and — and—”

The good sergeant would fain have followed out his strange comparison, for there was evidently something in the idea that pleased him; but he utterly failed to put his thoughts into words, and after having attacked his idea on every side, as a general would a fortified place, and failed, he raised the siege, and without noticing the smiles of his officers, he continued:

“Tell me, Captain, do you recollect how that poor negro arrived all out of breath, at the moment when his ten comrades were waiting on the spot? We had had to tie them though. It was I who commanded the party; and with his own hands he untied them, and took their place, although they did all that they could to dissuade him; but he was inflexible. Ah, what a man he was;

you might as well have tried to move Gibraltar! And then, Captain, he drew himself up as if he were going to enter a ball-room, and this dog, who knew well enough what was coming, flew at my throat—"

"Generally, Thaddeus, at this point of your story you pat Rask," interrupted the captain; "see how he looks at you."

"You are right, sir," replied Thaddeus, with an air of embarrassment; "he *does* look at me, poor fellow; but the old woman Malajuda told me it was unlucky to pat a dog with the left hand, and—"

"And why not with your right, pray?" asked D'Auverney, for the first time noticing the sergeant's pallor, and the hand reposing in his bosom.

The sergeant's discomfort appeared to increase. "By your leave, Captain, it is because — well, you have got a lame dog, and now there is a chance of your having a one-handed sergeant."

"A one-handed sergeant! What do you mean? Let me see your arm. One hand! Great heavens!"

D'Auverney trembled, as the sergeant slowly withdrew his hand from his bosom, and showed it enveloped in a blood-stained handkerchief.

"This is terrible," exclaimed D'Auverney, carefully undoing the bandage. "But tell me, old comrade, how this happened."

"As for that, the thing is simple enough. I told you how I had noticed your grief since those confounded English had taken away your dog — poor Rask, Bug's dog. I made up my mind today to bring him back, even if it cost me my life, so that you might eat a good supper. After having told Mathelet, your *bât* man, to get out and brush your full-dress uniform, as we are to go into action to-morrow, I crept quietly out of camp, armed only with my saber, and crouched under the hedges until I neared the English camp. I had not passed the first trench when I saw a whole crowd of red soldiers. I crept on quietly to see what they were doing, and in the midst of them I perceived Rask tied to a tree; while two of the *milords*, stripped to here, were knocking each other about with their fists, until their bones sounded like the big drum of the regiment. They were fighting for your dog. But when Rask caught sight of me, he gave such a bound that the rope broke, and in the twinkling of an eye the rogue was after me. I did not stop to explain, but off I ran, with all the English at my heels. A regular hail of balls whistled past my ears. Rask barked, but they could not hear him for their shouts of 'French dog! French dog!' just as if Rask was hot of the pure St. Domingo breed. In spite of all I crushed through the thicket, and had almost got clean away when two red coats confronted me. My saber accounted for one, and would have rid me of the other had his pistol not unluckily had a bullet in it. My right arm suffered; but ‘French dog’ leaped at his throat as if he were an old acquaintance. Down fell the Englishman, for the embrace was so tight that he was strangled in a moment — and here we both are. My only regret is that I did not get my wound in to-morrow’s battle.”

“Thaddeus, Thaddeus!” exclaimed the captain in tones of reproach; “were you mad enough to expose your life thus for a dog?”

“It was not for a dog, it was for Rask.”

D’Auverney’s face softened as Thaddeus added: “For Rask, for Bug’s dog.”

“Enough, enough, old comrade!” cried the captain, dashing his hand across his eyes; “come, lean on me, and I will lead you to the hospital.”

Thaddeus essayed to decline the honor, but in vain; and as they left the tent the dog got up and followed them.

This little drama had excited the curiosity of the spectators to the highest degree. Captain Leopold d’Auverney was one of those men who, in whatever position the chances of nature and society may place them, always inspire a mingled feeling of interest and respect. At the first glimpse there was nothing striking in him — his manner was reserved, and his look cold. The tropical sun, though it had browned his cheek, had not imparted to him that vivacity of speech and gesture which among the Creoles is united to an easy carelessness of demeanor, in itself full of charm.

D’Auverney spoke little, listened less, but showed himself ready to act at any moment. Always the first in the saddle, and the last to return to camp, he seemed to seek a refuge from his thoughts in bodily fatigue. These thoughts, which had marked his brow, with many a premature wrinkle, were not of the kind that you can get rid of by confiding them to a friend; nor could they be discussed in idle conversation. Leopold d’Auverney, whose body the hardships of war could not subdue, seemed to experience a sense of insurmountable fatigue in what is termed the conflict of the feelings. He avoided argument as much as he sought warfare. If at any time he allowed himself to be drawn into a discussion, he would utter a few words full of common-sense and reason, and then at the moment of triumph over his antagonist he would stop short, and muttering “What good is it?” would saunter off to the commanding officer to glean what information he could regarding the enemy's movements. His comrades forgave his cold, reserved, and silent habits, because upon every occasion they had found him kind, gentle and benevolent. He had saved many a life at the risk of his own, and they well knew that though his mouth was rarely opened, yet his purse was never closed when a comrade had need of his assistance.

D'Auverney was young; many would have guessed him at thirty years of age, but they would have been wrong, for he was some years under it. Although he had for a long period fought in the ranks of the Republican army, yet all were in ignorance of his former life. The only one to whom he seemed ever to open his heart was Sergeant Thaddeus, who had joined the regiment with him, and would at times speak vaguely of sad events in his early life. It was known that D'Auverney had undergone great misfortunes in America; that he had been married in St. Domingo, and that his wife and all his family had perished in those terrible massacres which had marked the Republican invasion of that magnificent colony. At the time of which we write, misfortunes of this kind were so general that any one could sympathise with, and feel pity for, such sufferers.

D'Auverney, therefore, was pitied less for his misfortunes than for the manner in which they had been brought about. Beneath his icy mask of indifference the traces of the incurably wounded spirit could be at times perceived. When he went into action his calmness returned, and in the fight he behaved as if he sought for the rank of general; while after victory he was as gentle and unassuming as if the position of a private soldier would have satisfied his ambition. His comrades, seeing him thus despise honor and promotion, could not understand what it was that lighted up his countenance with a ray of hope when the action commenced, and they did not for a moment divine that the prize D'Auverney was striving to gain was simply — *death.*

The Representatives of .the People, in one of their missions to the army, had appointed him a Chief of Brigade on the field of battle; but he had declined the honor upon learning that it would remove him from his old comrade Sergeant Thaddeus. Some days afterward, having returned from a dangerous expedition safe and sound, contrary to the general expectation and his own hopes, he was heard to regret the rank that he had refused. "For," said he, "since the enemy's guns always spare me, perhaps the guillotine, which ever strikes down those it has raised, would in time have claimed me."

Such was the character of the man upon whom the conversation turned as soon as he had left the tent.

“I would wager,” cried Lieutenant Henri, wiping a splash of mud off his boot which the dog had left as he passed him— “I would wager that the captain would not exchange the broken paw of his dog for the ten baskets of Madeira that we caught a glimpse of in the general’s wagon.”

“Bah!” cried Paschal the aid-de-camp, “that would be a bad bargain: the baskets are empty by now, and thirty empty bottles would be a poor price for a dog’s paw; why, you might make a good bell-handle out of it.”

They all laughed at the grave manner in which Paschal pronounced these words, with the exception of a young officer of Hussars named Alfred, who remarked:

“I do not see any subject for chaff in this matter, gentlemen. This sergeant and dog, who are always at D’Auverney’s heels ever since I have known him, seem to me more the objects of sympathy than raillery, and interest me greatly.”

Paschal, annoyed that his wit had missed fire, interrupted him: “It certainly is a most sentimental scene; a lost dog found, and a broken arm—”

“Captain Paschal,” said Henri, throwing an empty bottle outside the tent, “you are wrong; this Bug, otherwise called Pierrot, excites my curiosity greatly.”

At this moment D’Auverney returned, and sat down without uttering a word. His manner was still sad, but his face was more calm; he seemed not to have heard what was said. Rask, who had followed him, lay down at his feet, but kept a watchful eye on his master’s comrades.

“Pass your glass, Captain D’Auverney, and taste this.”

“Oh, thank you,” replied the captain, evidently imagining that he was answering a question, “the wound is not dangerous; there is no bone broken.”

The respect which all felt for D’Auverney prevented a burst of laughter at this reply.

“Since your mind is at rest regarding Thaddeus’s wound,” said Henri, “and, as you may remember, we entered into an agreement to pass away the hours of bivouac by relating to one another our adventures, will you carry out your promise by telling us the history of your lame dog, and of Bug — otherwise called Pierrot, that regular Gibraltar of a man?”

To this request, which was put in a semi-jocular tone, D'Auverney at last yielded.

"I will do what you ask, gentlemen," said he; "but you must only expect a very simple tale, in which I play an extremely second-rate part. If the affection that exists between Thaddeus, Rask, and myself leads you to expect anything very wonderful, I fear that you will be greatly disappointed. However, I will begin."

For a moment D'Auverney relapsed into thought, as though he wished to recall past events which had long since been replaced in his memory by the acts of his later years; but at last, in a low voice and with frequent pauses, he began his tale.

CHAPTER ONE

I WAS born in France, but at an early age I was sent to St. Domingo, to the care of an uncle, to whose daughter it had been arranged between our parents that I was to be married. My uncle was one of the wealthiest colonists, and possessed a magnificent house and extensive plantations in the Plains of Acul, near Fort Galifet. The position of the estate, which no doubt you wonder at my describing so minutely, was one of the causes of all our disasters, and the eventual total ruin of our whole family.

Eight hundred negro slaves cultivated the enormous domains of my uncle. Sad as the position of a slave is, my uncle’s hardness of heart added much to the unhappiness of those who had the misfortune to be his property. My uncle was one of the happily small number of planters from whom despotic power had taken away the gentler feelings of humanity. He was accustomed to see his most trifling command unhesitatingly obeyed, and the slightest delay on the part of his slaves in carrying it out was punished with the harshest severity; while the intercession either of my cousin or of myself too often merely led to an increase of the punishment, and we were only too often obliged to rest satisfied by secretly assuaging the injuries which we were powerless to prevent.

Among the multitude of his slaves, one only had found favor in my uncle’s sight; this was a half-caste Spanish dwarf, who had been given him by Lord Effingham, the Governor of Jamaica. My uncle, who had for many years resided in Brazil, and had adopted the luxurious habits of the Portuguese, loved to surround himself with an establishment that was in keeping with his wealth. In order that nothing should be wanting, he had made the slave presented to him by Lord Effingham his fool, in imitation of the feudal lords who had jesters attached to their households. I must say that the slave amply fulfilled all the required conditions.

Habibrah, for that was the half-caste’s name, was one of those strangely formed, or rather deformed, beings who would be looked upon as monster if their very hideousness did not cause a laugh. This ill-featured dwarf was short and fat, and moved with wondrous activity upon a pair of slender limbs, which, when he sat down, bent under him like the legs of a spider. His enormous head, covered with a mass of red curly wool, was stuck between his shoulders, while his ears were so large that Habibrah’s comrades were in the habit of saying that he used them to wipe his eyes when he wept. On his face there was always a grin, which was continually changing its character, and which caused his ugliness to be of an ever-varying description. My uncle was fond of him, because of his extreme hideousness and his inextinguishable gayety. Habibrah was his only favorite, and led a life of ease, while the other slaves were overwhelmed with work. The sole duties of the jester were to carry a large fan, made of the feathers of the bird of paradise, to keep away the sand-flies and the mosquitoes from his master. At meal-times he sat upon a reed mat at his master’s feet, who fed him with titbits from his own plate. Habibrah appeared to appreciate all these acts of kindness, and at the slightest sign from my uncle he would run to him with the agility of a monkey and the docility of a dog.

I had imbibed a prejudice against my uncle’s favorite slave. There was something crawling in his servility; for though outdoor slavery does not dishonor, domestic service too often debases. I felt a sentiment of pity for those slaves who toiled in the scorching sun, with scarcely a vestige of clothing to hide their chains; but I despised this idle serf, with his garments ornamented with gold lace and adorned with bells Besides, the dwarf never made use of his influence with his master to ameliorate the condition of his fellow-sufferers; on the contrary, I heard him once, when he thought that he and his master were alone, urge him to increase his severity toward his ill-fated comrades. The other slaves, however, did not appear to look upon him with any feelings of anger or rancor, but treated him with a timid kind of respect; and when, dressed in all the splendor of laced garments and a tall pointed cap ornamented with bells, and quaint symbols traced upon it in red ink, he walked past their huts, I have heard them murmur in accents of awe, “He is an obi” (sorcerer).

These details, to which I now draw your attention, occupied my mind but little then. I had given myself up entirely to the emotion of a pure love, in which nothing else could mingle — a love which was returned me with passion by the girl to whom I was betrothed — and I gave little heed to anything that was not Marie. Accustomed from youth to look upon her as the future companion of my life, there was a curious mixture of the love of a brother for a sister, mingled with the passionate adoration of a betrothed lover.

Few men have spent their earlier years more happily than I have done, or have felt their souls expand into life in the midst of a delicious climate and all the luxuries which wealth could procure, with perfect happiness in the present and the brightest hopes for the future. No man, as I said before, could have spent his earlier years more happily —

[D’Auverney paused for a moment, as if these thoughts of by-gone happiness had stifled his voice, and then added:]

And no one could have passed his later ones in more profound misery and affliction.

CHAPTER TWO

IN the midst of these blind illusions and hopes, my twentieth birthday approached. It was now the month of August, 1791, and my uncle had decided that this should be the date of my marriage with Marie. You can well understand that the thoughts of happiness, now so near, absorbed all my faculties, and how little notice I took of the political crisis which was then felt throughout the colony. I will not, therefore, speak of the Count de Pernier, or of M. de Blanchelande, nor of the tragical death of the unfortunate Colonel de Marchiste; nor will I attempt to describe the jealousies of the Provincial House of Assembly of the North, and the Colonial Assembly (which afterward called itself the General Assembly, declaring that the word “Colonial” had a ring of slavery in it). For my own part, I sided with neither; but if I did espouse any cause, it was in favor of Cap, near which town my home was situate, in opposition to Port au Prince.

Only once did I mix myself up in the question of the day. It was on the occasion of the disastrous decree of the 15th of May, 1791, by which the National Assembly of France admitted free men of color to enjoy the same political privileges as the whites. At a ball given by the Governor of Cap, many of the younger colonists spoke in impassioned terms of this law, which leveled so cruel a blow at the instincts of supremacy assumed by the whites, with perhaps too little foundation. I had, as yet, taken no part in the conversation, when I saw approaching the group a wealthy planter, whose doubtful descent caused him to be received merely upon sufferance by the white society. I stepped in front of him, and in a haughty voice I exclaimed, “Pass on, sir! pass on! or you may hear words which would certainly be disagreeable to those with *mixed blood* in their veins.” He was so enraged at this insinuation that he challenged me. We fought, and each was slightly wounded. I confess that I was in the wrong to have thus provoked him, and it is probable that I should not have done so on a mere *question of color;* but I had for some time past noticed that he had had the audacity to pay certain attentions to my cousin, and had danced with her the very night upon which I had insulted him.

However, as time went on, and the date so ardently desired approached, I was a perfect stranger to the state of political ferment in which those around me lived; and I never perceived the frightful cloud which already almost obscured the horizon, and which promised a storm that would sweep all before it. No one at that time thought seriously of a revolt among the slaves — a class too much despised to be feared; but between the whites and the free mulattoes there was sufficient hatred to cause an outbreak at any moment, which might entail the most disastrous consequences.

During the first days of August a strange incident occurred, which threw a slight shade of uneasiness over the sunshine of my happiness.

CHAPTER THREE

ON the banks of a little river which flowed through my uncle’s estate was a small rustic pavilion in the midst of a clump of trees. Marie was in the habit of coming here every day to enjoy the sea breeze, which blows regularly in St. Domingo, even during the hottest months of the year, from sunrise until evening. Each morning it was my pleasant task to adorn this charming retreat with the sweetest flowers that I could gather.

One morning Marie came running to me in a great state of alarm. Upon entering her leafy retreat she had perceived, with surprise and terror, all the flowers which I had arranged in the morning thrown upon the ground and trampled under foot, and a bunch of wild marigolds, freshly gathered, placed upon her accustomed seat. She had hardly recovered from her terror, when, in the adjoining coppice, she heard the sound of a guitar, and a voice, which was not mine, commenced singing a Spanish song; but in her excitement she had been unable to catch the meaning of the words, though she could hear her own name frequently repeated. Then she had taken to flight, and had come to me full of this strange and surprising event.

This recital filled me with jealousy and indignation. My first suspicions pointed to the mulatto with whom I had fought; but even in the midst of my perplexity I resolved to do nothing rashly. I soothed Marie’s fears as best I could, and promised to watch over her without ceasing, until the marriage tie would give me the right of never leaving her.

Believing that the intruder whose insolence had so alarmed Marie would not content himself with what he had already done, I concealed myself that very evening near the portion of the house in which my betrothed’s chamber was situated.

Hidden among the tall stalks of the sugarcane, and armed with a dagger, I waited; and I did not wait in vain. Toward the middle of the night my attention was suddenly attracted by the notes of a guitar under the very window of the room in which Marie reposed. Furious with rage, with my dagger clutched firmly in my hand, I rushed in the direction of the sound, crushing beneath my feet the brittle stalks of the sugar-canes. All of a sudden I felt myself seized and thrown upon my back with what appeared to be superhuman force; my dagger was wrenched from my grasp, and I saw its point shining above me; at the same moment I could perceive a pair of eyes and a double row of white teeth gleaming through the darkness, while a voice, in accents of concentrated rage, muttered, “Te tengo, te tengo!” (I have you, I have you).

More astonished than frightened, I struggled vainly with my formidable antagonist, and already the point of the dagger had pierced my clothes, when Marie, whom the sound of the guitar and the noise of the struggle had aroused, appeared suddenly at her window. She recognized my voice, saw the gleam of the knife, and uttered a cry of terror and affright. This cry seemed to paralyze the hand of my opponent. He stopped as if petrified; but still, as though undecided, he kept the point of the dagger pressed upon my chest. Then he suddenly exclaimed in French, “No, I cannot; she would weep too much,” and, casting away the weapon, rose to his feet, and in an instant disappeared in the canes; and before I could rise, bruised and shaken from the struggle, no sound and no sign remained of the presence or the flight of my adversary.

It was some time before I could recover my scattered faculties. I was more furious than ever with my unknown rival, and was overcome with a feeling of shame at being indebted to him for my life. “After all, however,” I thought, “it is to Marie that I owe it; for it was the sound of *her* voice that caused him to drop his dagger.”

And yet I could not hide from myself that there was something noble in the sentiment which had caused my unknown rival to spare me. But who could he be? One supposition after another rose in my mind, all to be discarded in turn. It could not be the mulatto planter to whom my suspicions had first been directed. He was not endowed with such muscular power; nor was it his voice. The man with whom I had struggled was naked to the waist; slaves alone went about half-clothed in this manner. But this could not be a slave; the feeling which had caused him to throw away the dagger would not have been found in the bosom of a slave — and besides, my whole soul revolted at the idea of having a slave for a rival. What was to be done? I determined to wait and watch.

CHAPTER FOUR

MARIE had awakened her old nurse, whom she looked upon almost in the light of the mother who had died in giving her birth, and with them I remained for the rest of the night, and in the morning informed my uncle of the mysterious occurrence. His surprise was extreme, but, like me, his pride would not permit him to believe that a slave would venture to raise his eyes to his daughter. The nurse received the strictest orders from my uncle never to leave Marie alone for a moment; but as the sittings of the Provincial Assembly, the threatening aspect of the affairs of the colony, and the superintendence of the plantation allowed him but little leisure, he authorized me to accompany his daughter whenever she left the house, until the celebration of our nuptials; and at the same time, presuming that the daring lover must be lurking in the neighborhood, he ordered the boundaries of the plantation to be more strictly guarded than ever.

After all these precautions had been taken, I determined to put the matter to further proof. I returned to the summer-house by the river, and repairing the destruction of the evening before, I placed a quantity of fresh flowers in their accustomed place. When the time arrived at which Marie usually sought the sweet shades of this sequestered spot, I loaded my rifle and proposed to escort her thither. The old nurse followed a few steps behind.

Marie, to whom I had said nothing about my having set the place to rights, entered the summer house the first. “See, Leopold,” said she, “my nest is in the same condition in which I left it yesterday; here are your flowers thrown about in disorder and trampled to pieces, and there is that odious bouquet which does not appear at all faded since yesterday; indeed, it looks as if it had been freshly gathered.”

I was speechless with rage and surprise. There was my morning’s work utterly ruined, and the wild flowers, at whose freshness Marie was so much astonished, had insolently usurped the place of the roses that I had strewn all over the place.

“Calm yourself,” said Marie, who noticed my agitation; “ this insolent intruder will come here no more; let us put all thoughts of him on one side, as I do this nasty bunch of flowers.”

I did not care to undeceive her, and to tell her that he *had* returned; yet I was pleased to see the air of innocent indignation with which she crushed the flowers under her foot. Hoping that the day would again come when I should meet my mysterious rival face to face, I made her sit down between her nurse and myself.

Scarcely had we done so when Marie put her finger on my lips: a sound, deadened by the breeze and the rippling of the stream, had struck upon her ear. I listened; it was the notes of a guitar, the same melody that had filled me with fury on the preceding evening. I made a movement to start from my seat, but a gesture of Marie's detained me.

"Leopold," whispered she, "restrain yourself; he is going to sing, and we shall learn who he is."

As she spoke, a few more notes were struck on the guitar, and then from the depths of the wood came the plaintive melody of a Spanish song, every word of which has remained deeply engraved on my memory:

Why dost thou fear me and fly me?
Say, has my music no charms?
Do you not know that I love you?
Why, then, these causeless alarms?
Maria!

CHAPTER FIVE

A PROLONGED quavering note upon the guitar, like a sob, concluded the song.

I was beside myself with rage. King! black! slave! A thousand incoherent ideas were awakened by this extraordinary and mysterious song. A maddening desire to finish for once and all with this unknown being, who dared to mingle the name of Marie with songs of love and menace, took possession of me. I grasped my rifle convulsively and rushed from the summer-house. Marie stretched out her arms to detain me, but I was already in the thicket from which the voice appeared to have come. I searched the little wood thoroughly, I beat the bushes with the barrel of my rifle, I crept behind the trunks of the large trees, and walked through the high grass.

Nothing, nothing, always nothing! This fruitless search added fuel to the fire of my anger. Was this insolent rival always to escape from me like a supernatural being? Was I never to be able to find out who he was, or to meet him? At this moment the tinkling of bells roused me from my reverie. I turned sharply round, the dwarf Habibrah was at my side.

"Good-day, master," said he, with a sidelong glance full of triumphant malice at the anxiety which was imprinted on my face.

"Tell me," exclaimed I, roughly, "have you seen any one about here?"

"No one except yourself, senor mio," answered he, calmly.

"Did you hear no voice?" continued I.

The slave remained silent, as though seeking for an evasive reply.

My passion burst forth. "Quick, quick!" I exclaimed. "Answer me quickly, wretch! did you hear a voice?"

He fixed his eyes boldly upon mine; they were small and round, and gleamed like those of a wild cat.

"What do you mean by a voice, master! There are voices everywhere — the voice of the birds, the voice of the stream, the voice of the wind in the trees—"

I shook him roughly. "Miserable buffoon!" I cried, "cease your quibbling, or you shall hear another voice from the barrel of my rifle. Answer at once; did you hear a man singing a Spanish song?"

"Yes, senor," answered he, calmly. "Listen, and I will tell you all about it. I was walking on the outskirts of the wood listening to what the silver bells of my *gorra* [cap] were telling me, when the wind brought to my ears some Spanish words — the first language that I heard when my age could have been counted by months, and my mother carried me slung at her back in a hammock of. red and yellow wool. I love the language; it recalls to me the time when I was little without being a dwarf — a little child, and not a buffoon; and so I listened to the song."

"Is that all you have to say?" cried I, impatiently.

"Yes, handsome master; but if you like I can tell you who the man was who sang."

I felt inclined to clasp him in my arms. "Oh, speak!" I exclaimed; "speak! Here is my purse, and ten others fuller than that shall be yours if you will tell me his name."

He took the purse, opened it, and smiled. "Ten purses fuller than this," murmured he; "that will make a fine heap of good gold coins. But do not be impatient, young master, I am going to tell you all. Do you remember the last verse of his song — something about 'I am black, and you are white, and the union of the two produces the beautiful light'? Well, if this song is true, Habibrah, your humble slave, was born of a negress and a white, and must be more beautiful than you, master. I am the offspring of day and night, therefore I am more beautiful than a white man, and—"

He accompanied this rhapsody with bursts of laughter.

"Enough of buffoonery," cried I; "tell me who was singing in the wood!"

"Certainly, master; the man who sang such buffooneries, as you rightly term them, could only have been — a fool like me! Have I not gained my ten purses?"

I raised my hand to chastise his insolence, when a wild shriek rang through the wood from the direction of the summer-house. It was Marie's voice. Like an arrow I darted to the spot, wondering what fresh misfortune could be in store for us, and in a few moments arrived, out of breath, at the door of the pavilion. A terrible spectacle presented itself to my eyes.

An enormous alligator, whose body was half concealed by the reeds and water plants, had thrust his monstrous head through one of the leafy sides of the summer-house; his hideous, widely-opened mouth threatened a young negro of colossal height, who with one arm sustained Marie's fainting form, while with the other he had plunged the iron portion of a hoe between the sharp and pointed teeth of the monster. The reptile struggled fiercely against the bold and courageous hand that held him at bay.

As I appeared at the door, Marie uttered a cry of joy, and extricating herself from the support of the negro, threw herself into my arms with, “I am saved! I am saved!”

At the movement and exclamation of Marie the negro turned abruptly round, crossed his arms on his breast, and casting a look of infinite sorrow upon my betrothed, remained immovable, taking no heed of the alligator, which, having freed itself from the hoe, was advancing on him in a threatening manner. There would have been a speedy end of the courageous negro had I not rapidly placed Marie on the knees of her nurse (who, more dead than alive, was gazing upon the scene), and coming close to the monster, discharged my carbine into its yawning mouth. The huge reptile staggered back, its bleeding jaws opened and shut convulsively, its eyes closed; and after one or two unavailing efforts it rolled over upon its back, with its scaly feet stiffening in the air. It was dead.

The negro whose life I had so happily preserved turned his head, and saw the last convulsive-struggles of the monster; then he fixed his eyes upon Marie, who had again cast herself into my arms, and in accents of the deepest despair, he exclaimed in Spanish, “Why did you kill him?” and without waiting for a reply leaped into the thicket and disappeared.

CHAPTER SIX

THE terrible scene, its singular conclusion, the extraordinary mental emotions of every kind which had accompanied and followed my vain researches in the wood, had made my brain whirl. Marie was still stupefied with the danger that she had so narrowly escaped, and some time elapsed before we could frame coherent words, or express ourselves otherwise than by looks and clasping of the hands.

At last I broke the silence: “Come, Marie, let us leave this; some fatality seems attached to the place.”

She rose eagerly, as if she had only been waiting for my permission to do so, and leaning upon my arm, we quitted the pavilion. I asked her how it had happened that succor had so opportunely arrived when the danger was so imminent, and if she knew who the slave was who had come to her assistance; for that it *was* a slave was shown by his coarse linen trousers — a dress only worn by that unhappy class.

“The man,” replied Marie, “is no doubt one of my father’s negroes, who was at work in the vicinity when the appearance of the alligator made me scream; and my cry must have warned him of my danger. All I know is, that he rushed out of the wood and came to my help.”

“From which side did he come?” asked I.

“From the opposite side from which the song came, and into which you had just gone.”

This statement upset the conclusion that I had been drawing from the Spanish words that the negro had addressed to me, and from the song in the same language by my unknown rival. But yet there was a crowd of other similarities. This negro of great height and powerful muscular development might well have been the adversary with whom I had struggled on the preceding night. In that case his half-clothed person would furnish a striking proof. The singer in the wood had said, “I am black” — a further proof. He had declared himself to be a king, and this one was only a slave; but I recollected that in my brief examination I had been surprised at the noble appearance of his features, though of course accompanied by the characteristic signs of the African race.

The more that I thought of his appearance, the nobleness of his deportment, and his magnificent proportions, I felt that there might be some truth in his statement that he had been a king. But then came the crushing blow to my pride: if he had dared to gaze with an eye of affection upon Marie, if he had made her the object of his serenades — *he,* a *negro* and a *slave* — what punishment could be sufficiently severe for his presumption? With these thoughts all my indecision returned again, and again my anger increased against the mysterious unknown. But t at the moment that these ideas filled my brain, Marie dissipated them entirely by exclaiming, in her gentle voice:

“My Leopold, we must seek out this brave negro, and pay him the debt of gratitude that we owe him; for without him I should have been lost, for you would have arrived too late.”

These few words had a decisive effect. They did not alter my determination to seek out the slave, but they entirely altered the design with which I sought him; for it was to recompense and not to punish him that I was now eager.

My uncle learned from me that he owed his daughter’s life to the courage of one of his slaves, and he promised me his liberty as soon as I could find him out.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Up to that time my feelings had restrained me from going into those portions of the plantation where the slaves were at work; it had been too painful for me to see so much suffering which I was powerless to alleviate. But on the day after the events had taken place which I have just narrated, upon my uncle asking me to accompany him on his tour of inspection, I accepted his proposal with eagerness, hoping to meet among the laborers the preserver of my much-beloved Marie.

I had the opportunity in this visit of seeing how great a power the master exercises over his slaves, but at the same time I could perceive at what a cost this power was bought; for though at the presence of my uncle all redoubled their efforts, I could perceive that there was as much hatred as terror in the looks that they furtively cast upon him.

Irascible by temperament, my uncle seemed vexed at being unable to discover any object upon which to vent his wrath, until Habibrah the buffoon, who was ever at his heels, pointed out to him a young negro, who, overcome by heat and fatigue, had fallen asleep under a clump of date-trees. My uncle stepped quickly up to him, shook him violently, and in angry tones ordered him to resume his work.

The terrified slave rose to his feet, and in so doing disclosed a Bengal rose-tree upon which he had accidentally lain, and which my uncle prized highly. The shrub was entirely destroyed.

At this the master, already irritated at what he called the idleness of his slave, became furious. Foaming with rage, he unhooked from his belt the whip with wire-plaited thongs which he always carried with him on his rounds, and raised his arm to strike the negro who had fallen at his feet.

The whip did not fall. I shall, as long as I live, never forget that moment. A powerful grasp arrested the hand of the angry planter, and a negro (it was the very one that I was in search of) exclaimed, “Punish me, for I *have* offended you; but do not hurt my brother, who has but broken your rose-tree.”

This unexpected interposition from the man to whom I owed Marie’s safety, his manner, his look, and the haughty tone of his voice, struck me with surprise. But his generous intervention, far from causing my uncle to blush for his causeless anger, only increased the rage of the incensed master, and turned his anger upon the newcomer.

Exasperated to the highest pitch, my uncle disengaged his arm from the grasp of the tall negro, and pouring out a volley of threats, again raised the whip to strike the first victim of his anger.

This time, however, it was torn from his hand, and the negro, breaking the handle studded with iron nails as you would break a straw, cast it upon the ground and trampled upon the instrument of degrading punishment.

I was motionless with surprise, my uncle with rage; for it was an unheard-of thing for him to find his authority thus contemned. His eyes appeared ready to start from their sockets, and his lips quivered with passion.

The negro gazed upon him calmly, and then, with a dignified air, he offered him an ax that he held in his hand. “White man,” said he, “if you wish to strike me, at least take this ax.”

My uncle, beside himself with rage, would certainly have complied with the request, for he stretched out his hand to grasp the dangerous weapon; but I in my turn interfered, and seizing the ax threw it into the well of a sugar-mill which was close at hand.

“What have you done?” asked my uncle, angrily.

“I have saved you,” answered I, “from the unhappiness of striking the preserver of your daughter. It is to this slave that you owe Marie; it is the negro to whom you have promised liberty.”

It was an unfortunate moment in which to remind my uncle of his promise. My words could not soothe the wounded dignity of the planter.

“His liberty!” replied he, savagely. “Yes, he has deserved that an end should be put to his slavery. His liberty indeed! we shall see what sort of liberty the members of a court-martial will accord him.”

These menacing words chilled my blood. In vain did Marie later join her entreaties to mine. The negro whose negligence had been the cause of this scene was punished with a severe flogging, while his defender was thrown into the dungeons of Fort Galifet, under the terrible accusation of having assaulted a white man. For a slave who did this; the punishment was invariably death.

CHAPTER EIGHT

You may judge, gentlemen, how much all these circumstances excited my curiosity and interest. I made every inquiry regarding the prisoner, and some strange particulars came to my knowledge. I learned that all his comrades displayed the greatest respect for the young negro. Slave as he was, he had but to make a sign to be implicitly obeyed. He was not born upon the estate, nor did any one know his father or mother: all that was known of him was that some years ago a slave ship had brought him to St. Domingo. This circumstance rendered the influence which he exercised over the slaves the more extraordinary, for as a rule the negroes born upon the island profess the greatest contempt for the *Congos* — a term which they apply to all slaves brought direct from Africa.

Although he seemed a prey to deep dejection, his enormous strength, combined with his great skill, rendered him very valuable in the plantation. He could turn more quickly, and for a longer period, than a horse the wheels of the sugar-mills, and often in a single day performed the work of ten of his companions to save them from the punishment to which their negligence or incapacity had rendered them liable. For this reason he was adored by the slaves; but the respect that they paid him was of an entirely different character from the superstitious dread with which they looked upon Habibrah the Jester.

What was more strange than all was the modesty and gentleness with which he treated his equals, in contrast to the pride and haughtiness which he displayed to the negroes who acted as overseers. These privileged slaves, the intermediary links in the chain of servitude, too often exceed the little brief authority that is delegated to them, and find a cruel pleasure in overwhelming those beneath them with work. Not one of them, however, had ever dared to inflict any species of punishment on him, for had they done so, twenty negroes would have stepped forward to take his place, while he would have looked gravely on, as though he considered that they were merely performing a duty. The strange being was known throughout the negro quarter as Pierrot.

CHAPTER NINE

THE whole of these circumstances took a firm hold upon my youthful imagination. Marie, inspired by compassion and gratitude, applauded my enthusiasm; and Pierrot excited our interest so much that I determined to visit him and offer him my services in extricating him from his perilous position. As the nephew of one of the richest colonists in the Cap, I was, in spite of my youth, a captain in the Acul Militia. This regiment, and a detachment of the Yellow Dragoons, had charge of Fort Galifet; the detachment was commanded by a non-commissioned officer, to whose brother I had once had the good fortune to render an important service, and who therefore was entirely devoted to me.

[Here the listeners at once pronounced the name of Thaddeus.]

You are right, gentlemen; and as you may well believe, I had not much trouble in penetrating to the cell in which the negro was confined. As a captain in the militia, I had of course the right to visit the fort; but to evade the suspicions of my uncle, whose rage was still unabated, I took care to go there at the time of his noonday *siesta.* All the soldiers too, except those on guard, were asleep, and guided by Thaddeus I came to the door of the cell. He opened it for me, and then discreetly retired.

The negro was seated on the ground, for on account of his height he could not stand upright. He was not alone; an enormous dog was crouched at his feet, which rose with a growl, and moved toward me.

“Rask!” cried the negro.

The dog ceased growling, and again lay down at his master’s feet, and began eating some coarse food.

I was in uniform, and the daylight that came through the loophole in the wall of the cell was so feeble that Pierrot could not recognize my features.

“I am ready,” said he, in a clear voice.

“I thought,” remarked I, surprised at the ease with which he moved, “that you were in irons.”

He kicked something that jingled.

“Irons; oh, I broke them!”

There was something in the tone in which he uttered these words that seemed to say, “I was not born to wear fetters.”

I continued: “I did not know that they had permitted you to have a dog with you.”

“They did not allow it; I brought him in.”

I was more and more astonished. Three bolts closed the door on the outside, the loophole was scarcely six inches in width, and had two iron bars across it.

He seemed to divine my thoughts, and rising as nearly erect as the low roof would permit, he pulled out with ease a large stone placed under the loophole, removed the iron bars, and displayed an opening sufficiently large to permit two men to pass through. This opening looked upon a grove of bananas and cocoanut trees which covered the hill upon which the fort was built.

Surprise rendered me dumb; at that moment a ray of light fell on my face. The prisoner started as if he had accidentally trodden upon a snake, and his head struck against the ceiling of the cell. A strange mixture of opposing feelings passed over his face — hatred, kindness, and astonishment being all mingled together; but recovering himself with an effort, his face once more became cold and calm, and he gazed upon me as if I was entirely unknown to him.

“I can live two days more without eating,” said he.

I saw how thin he had become, and made a movement of horror.

He continued: “My dog will only eat from my hand, and had I not enlarged the loophole, poor Rask would have died of hunger. It is better that he should live, for I know that I am condemned to death.”

“No,” I said; “no, you shall not die of hunger.”

He misunderstood me. “Very well,” answered he, with a bitter smile, “I could have lived two days yet without food, but I am ready: to-day is as good as to-morrow. Do not hurt Rask.”

Then I understood what he meant when he said “I am ready.” Accused of a crime the punishment for which was death, he believed that I had come to announce his immediate execution; and yet this man endowed with herculean strength, with all the avenues of escape open to him, had in a calm and childlike manner repeated, “I am ready!”

“Do not hurt Rask,” said he, once more.

I could restrain myself no longer. “What!” I exclaimed, “not only do you take me for your executioner, but you think so meanly of my humanity that you believe I would injure this poor dog, who has never done me any harm!”

His manner softened, and there was a slight tremor in his voice as he offered me his hand, saying, “White man, pardon me; but I love my dog, and your race have cruelly injured me.”

I embraced him, I clasped his hand, I did my best to undeceive him. “Do you not know me?” asked I.

“I know that you are white, and that a negro is nothing in the eyes of men of your color; besides, you have injured me.”

“In what manner?” exclaimed I, in surprise.

“Have you not twice saved my life?”

This strange accusation made me smile; he perceived it, and smiled bitterly: “Yes, I know it too well: once you saved my life from an alligator, and once from a planter; and what is worse, I am denied the right to hate you. I am very unhappy.”

The strangeness of his language and of his ideas surprised me no longer; it was in harmony with himself. “I owe more to you than you can owe to me. I owe you the life of Marie — of my betrothed.”

He started as though he had received some terrible shock. “Marie!” repeated he in stifled tones, and his face fell in his hands, which trembled violently, while his bosom rose and fell with heavy sighs.

I must confess that once again my suspicions were aroused; but this time there were no feelings of anger or jealousy. I was too near my happiness, and he was trembling upon the brink of death, so that I could not for a moment look upon him as a rival; and even had I done so, his forlorn condition would have excited my compassion and sympathy.

At last he raised his head. “Go,” said he; “do not thank me.” After a pause he added, “And yet my rank is as lofty as your own.”

These last words roused my curiosity. I urged him to tell me of his position and his sufferings; but he maintained an obstinate silence.

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My proceedings, however, had touched his heart, and my entreaties appeared to have vanquished his distaste for life. He left his cell, and in a short time returned with some bananas and a large cocoanut; then he reclosed the opening and began to eat. As we conversed, I remarked that he spoke French and Spanish with equal facility, and that his education had not been entirely neglected. He knew many Spanish songs, which he sang with great feeling. Altogether he was a mystery that I endeavored in vain to solve, for he would give me no key to the riddle. At last, with regret, I was compelled to leave him, after having urged on my faithful Thaddeus to permit him every possible indulgence.

CHAPTER TEN

EVERY day at the same hour I visited him. His position rendered me very uneasy, for in spite of all our prayers, my uncle obstinately refused to withdraw his complaint. I did not conceal my fears from Pierrot, who however listened to them with indifference.

Often Rask would come in with a large palm-leaf tied round his neck. His master would take it off, read some lines traced upon it in an unknown language, and then tear it up. I had ceased to question him in any matters connected with himself.

One day as I entered he took no notice of me; he was seated with his back to the door of the cell, and was whistling in melancholy mood the Spanish air, “Yo que soy contrabandista” (“A smuggler am I”). When he had completed it, he turned sharply round to me, and exclaimed: “Brother, if you ever doubt me, promise that you will cast aside all suspicion on hearing me sing this air.”

His look was earnest, and I promised what he asked, without noticing the words upon which he laid so much stress, “If you ever doubt me.” He took the empty half of a cocoanut which he had brought in on the day of my first visit, and had preserved ever since, filled it with palm wine, begged me to put my lips to it, and then drank it off at a draught. From that day he always called me *brother.*

And now I began to cherish a hope of saving Pierrot’s life. My uncle’s anger had cooled down a little. The preparations for the festivities connected with his daughter’s wedding had caused his feelings to flow in gentle channels. Marie joined her entreaties to mine. Each day I pointed out to him that Pierrot had had no desire to insult him, but had merely interposed to prevent him from committing an act of perhaps too great severity; that the negro had at the risk of his life saved Marie from the alligator; and besides, Pierrot was the strongest of all his slaves (for now I sought to save his life, not to obtain his liberty); that he was able to do the work of ten men, and that his single arm was sufficient to put the rollers of a sugar-mill in motion. My uncle listened to me calmly, and once or twice hinted that he might not follow up his complaint.

I did not say a word to the negro of the change that had taken place, hoping that I should soon be the messenger to announce to him his restoration to liberty. What astonished me greatly was, that though he believed that he was under sentence of death, he made no effort to avail himself of the means of escape that lay in his power. I spoke to him of this.

"I am forced to remain," said he simply, "or they would think that I was afraid."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ONE morning Marie came to me radiant with happiness; upon her gentle face was a sweeter expression than even the joys of pure love could produce, for written upon it was the knowledge of a good deed.

"Listen," said she. "In three days we shall be married. We shall soon—"

I interrupted her.

"Do not say *soon,* Marie, when there is yet an interval of three days."

She blushed and smiled. "Do not be foolish, Leopold," replied she. "An idea has struck me which has made me very happy. You know that yesterday I went to town with my father to buy all sorts of things for our wedding. I only care for jewels because you say that they become me; I would give all my pearls for a single flower from the bouquet which that odious man with the marigolds destroyed. But that is not what I meant to say. My father wished to buy me everything that I admired; and among other things there was a *basquina* of Chinese satin embroidered with flowers, which I admired. It was very expensive. My father noticed that the dress had attracted my attention. As we were returning home, I begged him to promise me a boon after the manner of the knights of old: you know how he delights to be compared to them. He vowed on his honor that he would grant me whatever I asked, thinking of course that it was the *basquina* of Chinese satin; but no, it is Pierrot's pardon that I will ask for as my nuptial present."

I could not refrain from embracing her tenderly. My uncle's word was sacred, and while Marie ran to him to claim its fulfillment, I hastened to Fort Galifet to convey the glad news to Pierrot.

"Brother," exclaimed I, as I entered, "rejoice! your life is safe. Marie has obtained it as a wedding present from her father."

The slave shuddered.

"Marie — wedding — my life! "What reference have these things to one another?"

"It is very simple," answered I. "Marie, whose life you saved, is to be married—"

"To whom?" exclaimed the negro, a terrible change coming over his face.

"Did you not know that she was to be married to me?"

His features relaxed. “Ah, yes,” he replied; “and when is the marriage to take place?”

“On August the 22d.”

“On August the 22d! Are you mad?” cried he, with terror painted in his countenance.

He stopped abruptly; I looked at him with astonishment. After a short pause he clasped my hand: “Brother,” said he, “I owe you so much that I must give you a warning. Trust to me; take up your residence in Cap, and get married before the 22d.”

In vain I entreated him to explain his mysterious words.

“Farewell,” said he, in solemn tones; “I have perhaps said too much, but I hate ingratitude even more than perjury.”

I left the prison a prey to feelings of great uneasiness, but all these were soon effaced by the thoughts of my approaching happiness.

That very day my uncle withdrew his charge, and I returned to the fort to release Pierrot. Thaddeus, on hearing the noise, accompanied me to the prisoner’s cell; but he was gone! Rask alone remained, and came up to me wagging his tail. To his neck was fastened a palm-leaf, upon which were written these words: “Thanks; for the third time you have saved my life. Do not forget your promise, friend;” while underneath, in lieu of signature, were the words: “Yo que soy contrabandista.”

Thaddeus was even more astonished than I was, for he was ignorant of the enlargement of the loophole, and firmly believed that the negro had changed himself into a dog. I allowed him to remain in this belief, contenting myself with making him promise to say nothing of what he had seen. I wished to take Rask home with me, but on leaving the fort he plunged into a thicket and disappeared.

CHAPTER TWELVE

MY uncle was furiously enraged at the escape of the negro. He ordered a diligent search to be made for him, and wrote to the governor placing Pierrot entirely at his disposal should he be retaken.

The 22d of August arrived. My union with Marie was celebrated with every species of rejoicing at the parish church of Acul. How happily did that day commence from which all our misfortunes were to date! I was intoxicated with my happiness, and Pierrot and his mysterious warning were entirely banished from my thoughts.

At last the day came to a close, and my wife had retired to her apartments, but for a time duty forbade me joining her there. My position as a captain of militia required me that evening to make the round of the guards posted about Acul. This nightly precaution was absolutely necessary owing to the disturbed state of the colony, caused by occasional outbreaks among the negroes, which, however, had been promptly repressed. My uncle was the first to recall me to the recollection of my duty. I had no option but to yield, and, putting on my uniform, I went out. I visited the first few guards without discovering any cause of alarm; but toward midnight, as half buried in my own thoughts I was patroling the shores of the bay, I perceived upon the horizon a ruddy light in the direction of Limonade and St. Louis du Morin. At first my escort attributed it to some accidental conflagration; but in a few moments the flames became so vivid, and the smoke rising before the wind grew so thick, that I ordered an immediate return to the fort to give the alarm, and to request that help might be sent in the direction of the fire.

In passing through the quarters of the negroes who belonged to our estate, I was surprised at the extreme disorder that reigned there. The majority of the slaves were afoot, and were talking together with great earnestness. One strange word was pronounced with the greatest respect: It was Bug-Jargal, which occurred continually in the almost unintelligible dialect that they used. From a word or two which I gathered here and there, I learned that the negroes of the northern districts were in open revolt, and had set fire to the dwelling-houses and the plantations on the other side of Cap. Passing through a marshy spot, I discovered a quantity of axes and other tools, which would serve as weapons, hidden among the reeds.

My suspicions were now thoroughly aroused, and I ordered the whole of the Acul militia to get under arms, and gave the command to my lieutenant; and while my poor Marie was expecting me, I, obeying my uncle’s orders (who, as I have mentioned, was a member of the Provincial Assembly), took the road to Cap, with such soldiers as I had been able to muster.

I shall never forget the appearance of the town as we approached. The flames from the plantations which were burning all around it threw a lurid light upon the scene, which was only partially obscured by the clouds of smoke which the wind drove into the narrow streets. Immense masses of sparks rose from the burning heaps of sugar-cane, and fell like fiery snow on the roofs of the houses, and on the rigging of the vessels at anchor in the roadsteads, at every moment threatening the town of Cap with as serious a conflagration as was already raging in its immediate neighborhood. It was a terrible sight to witness the terror-stricken inhabitants exposing their lives to preserve from so destructive a visitant their habitations, which perhaps was the last portion of property left to them; while, on the other hand, the vessels, taking advantage of a fair wind, and fearing the same fate, had already set sail, and were gliding over an ocean reddened by the flames of the conflagration.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

STUNNED by the noise of the minute-guns from the fort, by the cries of the fugitives and the distant crash of falling buildings, I did not know in what direction to lead my men; but meeting in the main square the captain of the Yellow Dragoons, he advised me to proceed direct to the governor.

Other hands have painted the disasters of Cap, and I must pass quickly over my recollections of them, written as they are in fire and blood. I will content myself with saying that the insurgent slaves were already masters of Dondon, of Terrier Rouge, of the town of Ouanaminte, and of the plantation of Limbe. This last news filled me with uneasiness, owing to the proximity of Limbe to Acul. I made all speed to the Government House. All was in confusion there. I asked for orders, and begged that instant measures might be taken for the security of Acul, which I feared the insurgents were already threatening. "With the governor (Monsieur de Blanchelande) were M. de Rouvray, the brigadier and one of the largest landholders in Cap; M. de Touzard, the lieutenant-colonel of the Regiment of Cap; a great many members of the Colonial and the Provincial Assemblies, and numbers of the leading colonists. As I entered, all were engaged in a confused argument.

"Your Excellency," said a member of the Provincial Assembly, "it is only too true — it is the negroes, and not the free mulattoes. It has often been pointed out that there was danger in that direction."

"You make that statement without believing in its truth," answered a member of the Colonial Assembly, bitterly; "and you only say it to gain credit at our expense. So far from expecting a rising of the slaves, .you got up a sham one in 1789 — a ridiculous farce, in which with a supposed insurgent force of three thousand slaves *one* national volunteer only was killed, and that most likely by his own comrades."

"I repeat," replied the Provincial, "that we can see further than you. It is only natural. We remain upon the spot and study the minutest details of the colony, while you and your Assembly hurry off to France to make some absurd proposals, which are often met with a national reprimand *Ridiculus mus."*

The member of the Colonial Assembly answered with a sneer: "Our fellow-citizens reelected us all without hesitation."

"It was your Assembly," retorted the other, "that caused the execution of that poor devil who neglected to wear a tricolored cockade in a cafe, and who commenced a petition for capital punishment to be inflicted on the mulatto Lacombe with that worn-out phrase, 'In the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.'"

"It is false!" exclaimed the other; "there has always been a struggle of principles against privileges between our Assemblies."

"Ha, monsieur! I see now you are an Independent."

"That is tantamount to allowing that you are in favor of the White Cockade: I leave you to get out of that confession as best you may."

More might have passed, but the governor interposed: "Gentlemen, gentlemen, what has this to do with the present state of affairs, and the pressing danger that threatens us? Listen to the reports that I have received. The revolt began this night at ten o'clock among the slaves in the Turpin Plantation. The negroes, headed by an English slave named Bouckmann, were joined by the blacks from Clement, Tremes, Flaville, and Nôe. They set fire to all the plantations, and massacred the colonists with the most unheard-of barbarities. By one single detail I can make you comprehend all the horrors accompanying this insurrection. The standard of the insurgents is the body of a white child on the point of a pike."

A general cry of horror interrupted the governor's statement.

"So much," continued he, "for what has passed outside the town. Within its limits all is confusion. Pear has rendered many of the inhabitants forgetful of the duties of humanity, and they have murdered their slaves. Nearly all have confined their negroes behind bolts and bars. The white artisans accuse the free mulattoes of being participators in the revolt, and many have had great difficulty in escaping from the fury of the populace. I have had to grant them a place of refuge in a church, guarded by a regiment of soldiers; and now, to prove that they have nothing in common with the insurgents, they ask that they may be armed and led against the rebels."

"Do nothing of the kind, your Excellency!" cried a voice which I recognized as that of the planter with whom I had had a duel— "do nothing of the kind! give no arms to the mulattoes!"

"What! do you not want to fight?" asked a planter, with a sneer.

The other did not appear to hear him, and continued: "These men of mixed blood are our worst enemies, and we must take every precaution against them. It is from that quarter that the insurgents are recruited; the negroes have but little to do with the rising." The poor wretch hoped by his abuse of the mulattoes to prove that he had nothing in common with them, and to clear himself from the imputation of having black blood in his veins; but the attempt was too barefaced, and a murmur of disgust rose up on all sides.

"Yes," said M. de Rouvray, "the slaves *have* something to do with it, for they are forty to one; and we should be in a serious plight if we could only oppose the negroes and the mulattoes with whites like you."

The planter bit his lips.

"General," said the governor, "what answer shall be given to the petition? Shall the mulattoes have the arms?"

"Give them weapons, your Excellency; let us make use of every willing hand. And you, sir," he added, turning to the colonist of doubtful color, "go arm yourself, and join your comrades."

The humiliated planter slunk away, filled with concentrated rage.

But the cries of distress which rang through the town reached even to the chamber in which the council was being held. M. de Blanchelande hastily penciled a few words upon a slip of paper and handed it to one of his aides-de-camp, who at once left the room.

"Gentlemen," he said, "the mulattoes will receive arms; but there are many more questions to be settled."

"The Provincial Assembly should at once be convoked," said the planter who had been speaking when first I entered.

"The Provincial Assembly!" retorted his antagonist; "what is the Provincial Assembly?"

"You do not know because you are a member of the Colonial Assembly," replied the favorer of the White Cockade.

The Independent interrupted him. "I know no more of the Colonial than the Provincial; I only recognize the General Assembly."

"Gentlemen," exclaimed a planter, "while we are losing time with this nonsense, tell me what is to become of my cotton and my cochineal."

"And my indigo at Lumbe?"

"And my negroes, for whom I paid twenty dollars a-head all round?" said the captain of a slave-ship.

"Each minute that you waste," continued another colonist, "costs me ten quintals of sugar, which at seventeen piastres the quintal makes one hundred and thirty livres, ten sous, in French money, by the—"

Here the rival upholders of the two Assemblies again sought to renew their argument.

“Morbleu,” said M. de Rouvray in a voice of thunder, striking the table violently, “what eternal talkers you are! What do we care about your two Assemblies? Summon both of them, your Excellency, and I will form them into two regiments; and when they march against the negroes we shall see whether their tongues or their muskets make the most noise.”

Then turning toward me he whispered: “Between the two Assemblies and the governor nothing can be done. These fine talkers spoil all, as they do in Paris. If I was seated in his Excellency’s chair, I would throw all these fellows out of the window, and with my soldiers and a dozen crosses of St. Louis to promise, I would sweep away all the rebels in the island. These fictitious ideas of liberty, which they have all run mad after in France, do not do out here. Negroes should be treated so as not to upset them entirely by sudden liberation; all the terrible events of to-day are merely the result of this utterly mistaken policy, and this rising of the slaves is the natural result of the taking of the Bastile.”

While the old soldier thus explained to me his views — a little narrow-minded perhaps, but full of the frankness of conviction — the stormy argument was at its height. A certain planter, one among the few who were bitten with the rabid mania of the revolution, and who called himself Citizen General C — , because he had assisted at a few sanguinary executions, exclaimed:

“We must have punishments rather than battles. Every nation must exist by terrible examples: let us terrify the negroes. It was I who quieted the slaves during the risings of June and July by lining the approach to my house with a double row of negro heads. Let each one join me in this, and let us defend the entrances to Cap with the slaves who are still in our hands.”

“How?”

“What do you mean?”

“Folly!”

“The height of imprudence!” was heard on all sides.

“You do not understand me, gentlemen. Let us make a ring of negro heads, from Fort Picolet to Point Caracole. The rebels, their comrades, will not then dare to approach us. I have five hundred slaves who have remained faithful: I offer them at once.”

This abominable proposal was received with a cry of horror. “It is infamous! It is too disgusting!” was repeated by at least a dozen voices.

“Extreme steps of this sort have brought us to the verge of destruction,” said a planter. “If the execution of the insurgents of June and July had not been so hurried on, we should have held in our hands the clew to the conspiracy, which the ax of the executioner divided forever.”

Citizen C — was silenced for a moment by this outburst; then in an injured tone he muttered: “I did not think that 1 above all others should have been suspected of cruelty. “Why, all my life I have been mixed up with the lovers of the negro race. I am in correspondence with Briscot and Pruneau de Pomme Gouge, in France; with Hans Sloane, in England; with Magaw, in America; with Pezll, in Germany; with Olivarius, in Denmark; with Wadstiôrn, in Sweden; with Peter Paulus, in Holland; with Avendano, in Spain; and with the Abbe Pierre Tamburini, in Italy!”

His voice rose as he ran through the names of his correspondents among the lovers of the African race, and he terminated his speech with the contemptuous remark, “But after all, there are no true philosophers here.”

For the third time M. de Blanchelande asked if any one had anything further to propose.

“Your Excellency,” cried one, “let us embark on board the ‘Leopard,’ which lies at anchor off the quay.”

“Let us put a price on the head of Bouckmann,” exclaimed another.

“Send a report of what has taken place to the Governor of Jamaica,” suggested a third.

“A good idea, so that he may again send us the ironical help of five hundred muskets!” sneered a member of the Provincial Assembly. “Your Excellency, let us send the news to France, and wait for a reply.”

“Wait! a likely thing indeed,” exclaimed M. de Rouvray; “and do you think that the blacks will wait, eh? And the flames that encircle our town, do you think that they will wait?

Your Excellency, let the tocsin be sounded, and send dragoons and grenadiers in search of the main body of the rebels. Form a camp in the eastern division of the island; plant military posts at Trou and at Vallieres. I will take charge of the plain of Dauphin; but let us lose no more time, for the moment for action has arrived.”

The bold and energetic speech of the veteran soldier, hushed all differences of opinion. The general had acted wisely. That secret knowledge which every one possesses, most conducive to his own interests, caused all to support the proposal of General de Rouvray; and while the governor with a warm clasp of the hand showed his old friend that his counsels had been appreciated, though they had been given in rather a dictatorial manner, the colonists urged for the immediate carrying out of the proposals.

I seized the opportunity to obtain from M. de Blanchelande the permission that I so ardently desired, and leaving the room, mustered my company in order to return to Acul — though, with the exception of myself, all were worn out with the fatigue of their late march.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

DAY began to break as I entered the marketplace of the town and began to rouse up the soldiers, who were lying about in all directions wrapped in their cloaks, and mingled pell-mell with the Red and Yellow Dragoons, fugitives from the country, cattle bellowing, and property of every description sent in for security by the planters. In the midst of all this confusion I began to pick out my men, when I saw a private in the Yellow Dragoons, covered with dust and perspiration, ride up at full speed. I hastened to meet him; and in a few broken words he informed me that my fears were realized — that the insurrection had spread to Acul, and that the negroes were besieging Fort Galifet, in which the planters and the militia had taken refuge. I must tell you that this fort was by no means a strong one, for in St. Domingo they dignify the slightest earthwork with the name of fort.

There was not a moment to be lost I mounted as many of my soldiers as I could procure horses for, and taking the dragoon as a guide, I reached my uncle’s plantation about ten o’clock. I scarcely cast a glance at the enormous estate, which was nothing but a sea of flame, over which hovered huge clouds of smoke, through which every now and then the wind bore trunks of trees covered with sparks. A terrible rustling and crackling sound seemed to reply to the distant yells of the negroes which we now began to hear, though we could not as yet see them. The destruction of all this wealth, which would eventually have become mine, did not cause me a moment’s regret. All 1 thought of was the safety of Marie: what mattered anything else in the world to me?

I knew that she had taken refuge in the fort, and I prayed to God that I might arrive in time to rescue her. This hope sustained me through all the anxiety I felt, and gave me the strength and courage of a lion.

At length a turn in the road permitted us to see the fort. The tricolor yet floated on its walls, and a well-sustained fire was kept up by the garrison. I uttered a shout of joy. “Gallop, spur on!” said I to my men, and redoubling our pace we dashed across the fields in the direction of the scene of action. Near the fort I could see my uncle’s house; the doors and windows were dashed in, but the walls still stood, and shone red with the reflected glare of the flames, which, owing to the wind being in a contrary direction, had not yet reached the building. A crowd of the insurgents had taken possession of the house, and showed themselves at the windows and on the roof. I could see the glare of torches and the gleam of pikes and axes, while a brisk fire of musketry was kept up on the fort. Another strong body of negroes had placed ladders against the walls of the fort and strove to take it by assault, though many fell under the well-directed fire of the defenders. These black men, always returning to the charge after each repulse, looked like a swarm of ants endeavoring to scale the shell of a tortoise, and shaken off by each movement of the sluggish reptile.

We reached the outworks of the fort, our eyes fixed upon the banner which still floated above it. I called upon my men to remember that their wives and children were shut up within those walls, and urged them to fly to their rescue. A general cheer was the reply, and forming column I was on the point of giving the order to charge, when a loud yell was heard; a cloud of smoke enveloped the fort and for a time concealed it from our sight; a roar was heard like that of a furnace in full blast, and as the smoke cleared away we saw a red flag floating proudly above the dismantled walls. All was over. Fort Galifet was in the hands of the insurgents.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I CANNOT tell you what my feelings were at this terrible spectacle. The fort was taken, its defenders slain, and twenty families massacred; but I confess, to my shame, that I thought not of this. Marie was lost to me — lost, after having been made mine but a few brief hours before; lost, perhaps, through my fault, for had I not obeyed the orders of my uncle in going to Cap I should have been by her side to defend her, or at least to die with her. These thoughts raised my grief to madness, for my despair was born of remorse.

However, my men were maddened at the sight. With a shout of "Revenge!" with sabers between their teeth and pistols in either hand, they burst into the ranks of the victorious insurgents. Although far superior in numbers, the negroes fled at their approach; but we could see them on our right and left, before and behind us, slaughtering the colonists, and casting fuel on the flames. Our rage was increased by their cowardly conduct.

Thaddeus, covered with wounds, made his escape through a postern gate. "Captain," said he, "your Pierrot is a sorcerer — an *obi* as these infernal negroes call him; a devil, I say. We were holding our position, you were coming up fast; all seemed saved — when by some means, which I do not know, he penetrated into the fort, and there was an end of us. As for your uncle and Madame—"

"Marie!" interrupted I, "where is Marie?"

At this instant a tall black burst through a blazing fence, carrying in his arms a young woman who shrieked and struggled: it was Marie, and the negro was Pierrot!

"Traitor!" cried I, and fired my pistol at him; one of the rebels threw himself in the way, and fell dead.

Pierrot turned, and addressed a few words to me which I did not catch; and then grasping his prey tighter, he dashed into a mass of burning sugar-canes. A moment afterward a huge dog passed me, carrying in his mouth a cradle in which lay my uncle's youngest child. Transported with rage, I fired my second pistol at him; but it missed fire.

Like a madman I followed on their tracks; but my night march, the hours that I had spent without taking rest or food, my fears for Marie, and the sudden fall from the height of happiness to the depth of misery, had worn me out. After a few steps I staggered, a cloud seemed to come over me, and I fell senseless.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

WHEN I recovered my senses I found myself in my uncle’s ruined house, supported in the arms of my faithful Thaddeus, who gazed upon me with an expression of the deepest anxiety. “Victory!” exclaimed he, as he felt my pulse begin to beat; “victory! the negroes are in full retreat and my captain has come to life again!”

I interrupted his exclamations of joy by putting the only question in which I had any interest: “Where is Marie?” I had not yet collected my scattered ideas: I felt my misfortune without the recollection of it.

At my question Thaddeus hung his head. Then my memory returned to me, and like a hideous dream I recalled once more the terrible nuptial day, and the tall negro bearing away Marie through the flames. The rebellion which had broken out in the colony caused the whites to look on the blacks as their mortal enemies, and made me see in Pierrot — the good, the generous, and the devoted, who owed his life three times to me — a monster of ingratitude and a rival. The carrying off my wife on the very night of our nuptials proved too plainly to me what I had at first only suspected; and I now knew that the singer of the wood was the wretch who had torn my wife from me. In a few hours how great a change had taken place!

Thaddeus told me that he had vainly pursued Pierrot and his dog when the negroes, in spite of their numbers, retired; and that the destruction of my uncle’s property still continued, without the possibility of its being arrested. I asked what had become of my uncle. He took my hand in silence and led me to a bed, the curtains of which he drew. My unhappy uncle was there, stretched upon his blood-stained couch, with a dagger driven deeply into his heart. By the tranquil expression of his face it was easy to see that the blow had been struck during his sleep.

The bed of the dwarf Habibrah, who always slept at the foot of his master’s couch, was also profusely stained with gore, and the same crimson traces could be seen upon the laced coat of the poor fool, cast upon the floor a few paces from the bed. I did not hesitate for a moment in believing that the dwarf had died a victim to his affection for my uncle, and that he had been murdered by his comrades, perhaps in the effort to defend his master. I reproached myself bitterly for the prejudice which had caused me to form so erroneous an estimate of the characters of Pierrot and Habibrah; and of the tears I shed at the tragic fate of my uncle, some were dedicated to the end of the faithful fool. By my orders his body was carefully searched for, but ail in vain; and I imagined that the negroes had cast the body into the flames. I gave instructions that in the funeral service over my uncle's remains prayers should be said for the repose of the soul of the devoted Habibrah.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

FORT GALIFET had been destroyed, our house was in ruins; it was useless to linger there any longer, so that evening I returned to Cap. On my arrival there I was seized with a severe fever. The effort that I had made to overcome my despair had been too violent; the spring had been bent too far and had snapped. Delirium came on. My broken hopes, my profound love, my lost future, and, above all, the torments of jealousy made my brain reel. It seemed as if fire flowed in my veins; my head seemed ready to burst, and my bosom was filled with rage. I pictured to myself Marie in the arms of another lover, subject to the power of a master, of a slave, of Pierrot! They told me afterward that I sprang from my bed, and that it took six men to prevent me from dashing out my brains against the wall. Why did I not die then?

The crisis, however, passed. The doctors, the care and attention of Thaddeus, and the latent powers of youth conquered the malady: would that it had not done so! At the end of ten days I was sufficiently recovered to lay aside grief, and to live for vengeance.

Hardly arrived at a state of convalescence, I went to M. de Blanchelande, and asked for employment. At first he wished to give me the command of some fortified post, but I begged him to attach me to one of the flying columns, which from time to time were sent out to sweep those districts in which the insurgents had congregated. Cap had been hastily put in a position of defense, for the revolt had made terrible progress, and the negroes of Port au Prince had begun to show symptoms of disaffection. Biassou was in command of the insurgents at Lumbe, Dondon, and Acul; Jean François had proclaimed himself generalissimo of the rebels of Maribarou; Bouckmann, whose tragic fate afterward gave him a certain celebrity, with his brigands ravaged the plains of Limonade; and lastly, the bands of Morne-Rouge had elected for their chief a negro called Bug-Jargal.

If report was to be believed, the disposition of this man contrasted very favorably with the ferocity of the other chiefs. “While Bouckmann and Biassou invented a thousand different methods of death for such prisoners as fell into their hands, Bug-Jargal was always ready to supply them with the means of quitting the island. M. Colas de Marjue and eight other distinguished colonists were by his orders released from the terrible death of the wheel to which Bouckmann had condemned them; and many other instances of his humanity were cited which I have not time to repeat.

My hoped-for vengeance, however, still appeared to be far removed. I could hear nothing of Pierrot, The insurgents commanded by Biassou continued to give us trouble at Cap; they had once even endeavored to take position on a hill that commanded the town, and had only been dislodged by the battery from the citadel being directed upon them. The governor had therefore determined to drive them into the interior of the island. The militia of Acul, of Lumbe, of Ouanaminte, and of Maribarou, joined with the regiment of Cap and the Red and Yellow Dragoons, formed one army of attack; while the corps of volunteers under the command of the merchant Poncignon, with the militia of Dondon and Quartier-Dauphin, composed the garrison of the town.

The governor desired first to free himself from Bug-Jargal, whose incursions kept the garrison constantly on the alert; and he sent against him the militia of Ouanaminte and a battalion of the regiment of Cap. Two days afterward the expedition returned, having sustained a severe defeat at the hands of Bug-Jargal. The governor, however, determined to persevere, and a fresh column was sent out with fifty of the Yellow Dragoons and four hundred of the militia of Maribarou. This second expedition met with even less success than the first. Thaddeus, who had taken part in it, was in a violent fury, and upon his return vowed vengeance against the rebel chief Bug-Jargal.

[A tear glistened in the eyes of D’Auverney; he crossed his arms on his breast, and appeared to be for a few moments plunged in a melancholy reverie. At length he continued.]

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE news had reached us that Bug-Jargal had left Morne-Rouge, and was moving through the mountains to effect a junction with the troops of Biassou. The governor could not conceal his delight. “We have them!” cried he, rubbing his hands. “They are in our power!’

By the next morning the colonial forces had marched some four miles to the front of Cap. At our approach the insurgents hastily retired from the positions which they had occupied at Port-Mayat and Fort Galifet, and in which they had planted siege guns that they had captured in one of the batteries on the coast. The governor was triumphant, and by his orders we continued our advance. As we passed through the arid plains and the ruined plantations, many a one cast an eager glance in search of the spot which was once his home; but in too many cases the foot of the destroyer had left no traces behind. Sometimes our march was interrupted, by the conflagration having spread from the lands under cultivation to the virgin forests.

In these regions, where the land is untilled and the vegetation abundant, the burning of a forest is accompanied with many strange phenomena. Far off, long before the eye can detect the cause, a sound is heard like the rush of a cataract over opposing rocks; the trunks of the trees flame out with a sudden crash, the branches crackle, and the roots beneath the soil all contribute to the extraordinary uproar. The lakes and the marshes in the interior of the forests boil with the heat. The hoarse roar of the, coming flame stills the air, causing a dull sound, sometimes increasing and sometimes diminishing in intensity as the conflagration sweeps on or recedes. Occasionally a glimpse can be caught of a clump of trees surrounded by a belt of fire, but as yet untouched by the flames; then a narrow streak of fire curls round the stems, and in another instant the whole becomes one mass of gold-colored fire. Then uprises a column of smoke, driven here and there by the breeze; it takes a thousand fantastic forms — spreads itself out, diminishes in an instant; at one moment it is gone, in another it returns with greater density; then all becomes a thick black cloud, with a fringe of sparks; a terrible sound is heard, the sparks disappear, and the smoke ascends, disappearing at last in a mass of red ashes, which sink down slowly upon the blackened ground.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

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ON the evening of the third day of our march we entered the ravines of Grande-Riviere; we calculated that the negro army was some twenty leagues off in the mountains.

We pitched our camp on a low hill, which appeared to have been used for the same purpose before, as the grass had been trodden down and the brushwood cut away. It was not a judicious position in a strategical point of view, but we deemed ourselves perfectly secure from attack. The hill was commanded on all sides by steep mountains clothed with thick forests — their precipitous sides having given these mountains the name of the Dompte-Mulâtre. The Grande-Riviere flowed behind our camp, which being confined within steep banks was just about here very deep and rapid. Both sides of the river were hidden with thickets, through which nothing could be seen. The waters of the stream itself were frequently concealed by masses of creeping plants, hanging from the branches of the flowering maples which had sprung up at intervals in the jungle, crossing and recrossing the stream, and forming a tangled net-work of living verdure. From the heights of the adjacent hills this mass of verdure appeared like a meadow still fresh with dew, while every now and then a dull splash could be heard as a teal plunged through the flower-decked curtain, and showed in which direction the river lay. By degrees the sun ceased to gild the crested peaks of the distant mountains of Dondon; little by little darkness spread its mantle over the camp, and the silence was only broken by the cry of the nightbird, or by the measured tread of the sentinels.

Suddenly the dreaded war songs of “Oua-Nasse” and of “The Camp of the Great Meadow” were heard above our heads; the palms, the acomas, and the cedars, which crowned the summits of the rocks, burst into flames, and the lurid light of the conflagration showed us numerous bands of negroes and mulattoes, whose copper-hued skins glowed red in the firelight upon the neighboring hills. It was the army of Biassou.

.The danger was imminent. The officers, aroused from their sleep, endeavored to rally their men. The drum beat the “Assembly,” while the bugles sounded the “Alarm.” Our men fell in hurriedly and in confusion;

but the insurgents, instead of taking advantage of our disorder, remained motionless, gazing upon us, and continuing their song of “Oua-Nasse.”

A gigantic negro appeared alone on one of the peaks that overhung the Grande-Riviere; a flame-colored plume floated on his head, and he held an ax in his right hand and a blood-red banner in his left. I recognized Pierrot. Had a carbine been within my reach I should have fired at him, cowardly although the act might have been. The negro repeated the chorus of “Oua-Nasse,” planted his standard on the highest portion of the rock, hurled his ax into the midst of our ranks, and plunged into the stream. A feeling of regret seized me; I had hoped to have slain him with my own hand.

Then the negroes began to hurl huge masses of rocks upon us, while showers of bullets and flights of arrows were poured upon our camp.

Our soldiers, maddened at being unable to reach their adversaries, fell on all sides, crushed by the rocks, riddled with bullets, and transfixed by arrows. The army was rapidly falling into disorder. Suddenly a terrible noise came from the center of the stream.

The Yellow Dragoons, who had suffered most from the shower of rocks, had conceived the idea of taking refuge under the thick roof of creepers which grew over the river. It was Thaddeus who had at first discovered this—

Here the narrative was suddenly interrupted.

CHAPTER TWENTY

MORE than a quarter of an hour had elapsed since Thaddeus, his arm in a sling, had glided into the tent without any of the listeners noticing his arrival, and taking up his position in a remote corner had by occasional gestures expressed the interest that he took in his captain's narrative; but at last, considering that this direct allusion to himself ought not to be permitted to pass without some acknowledgment on his part, he stammered out —

"You are too good, Captain!"

A general burst of laughter followed this speech, and D'Auverney, turning toward him, exclaimed severely: "What, Thaddeus, you here? And your arm?"

On being addressed in so unaccustomed a tone, the features of the old soldier grew dark; he quivered, and threw back his head, as though to restrain the tears which seemed to struggle to his eyes. "I never thought," said he, in a low voice, "that you, Captain, could have omitted to say *thou* when speaking to your old sergeant."

"Pardon me, old friend," answered the captain, quickly; "I hardly knew what I said. Thou wilt pardon me, wilt thou not?"

The tears sprang to the sergeant's eyes in spite of his efforts to repress them. "It is the third time," remarked he— "but these are tears of joy."

Peace was made, and a short silence ensued.

"But tell me, Thaddeus, why hast thou quitted the hospital to come here?" asked D'Auverney, gently.

"It was — with your permission, Captain — to ask if I should put the laced saddle cloth on the charger for to-morrow."

Henri laughed. "You would have been wiser, Thaddeus, to have asked the surgeon-major if you should put two more pieces of lint on your arm," said he.

"Or to ask," continued Paschal, "if you might take a glass of wine to refresh yourself. At any rate, here is some brandy; taste it — it will do you good, my brave sergeant."

Thaddeus advanced, saluted, and apologizing for taking the glass with his left hand, emptied it to the health of the assembled company: "You had got, Captain, to the moment when —

yes, I remember, it was I who proposed to take shelter under the creepers, to prevent our men being smashed by the rocks. Our officer, who did not know how to swim, was afraid of being drowned, and, as was natural, was dead against it until he saw — with your permission, gentlemen — a great rock fall on the creepers without being able to get through them. 'It is better to die like Pharaoh than like Saint Stephen,' said he; 'for we are not saints, and Pharaoh was a soldier like ourselves. ' The officer was a learned man, you see. And so he agreed to my proposal, on the condition that I should first try the experiment myself. Off I went; I slid down the bank and caught hold of the roof of the creepers, when all of a sudden some one took a pull at my legs. I struggled, I shouted for help, and in a minute I received half a dozen saber-cuts. Down came the dragoons to help me, and there was a nice little skirmish under the creepers. The blacks of Morne-Rouge had hidden themselves there, never for a moment thinking that we should fall right on the top of them. This was not the right time for fishing, I can tell you. We fought, we swore, we shouted. They had nothing particular on, and were able to move about in the water more easily than we were; but, on the other hand, our sabers had less to cut through. We swam with one hand and fought with the other. Those who could not swim, like my captain, hung on to the creepers, while the negroes pulled them by the legs.

"In the midst of the hullabaloo I saw a big negro fighting like Beelzebub against five or six others. I swam up to him, and recognized Pierrot, otherwise called Bug — But I mustn't tell that yet, must I, Captain? Since the capture of the fort I owed him a grudge, so I took him hard and fast by the throat; he was going to rid himself of me by a thrust of his dagger, when he recognized me and gave himself up at once. That was very unfortunate, was it not, Captain? For if he had not surrendered, ' he would not — But you will know that later on, eh? "When the blacks saw that he was taken they made a rush at me to get him off; when Pierrot, seeing no doubt that they would all lose their lives, said some gibberish or other, and in the twinkling of an eye they plunged into the water, and were out of sight in a moment. This fight in the water would have been pleasant enough if I had not lost a finger and wetted ten cartridges, and if the poor man — but it was to be, was it not, Captain?"

And the sergeant respectfully placed the back of his hand to his forage-cap, and then raised it to heaven with the air of an inspired prophet.

D’Auverney was violently agitated. “Yes,” cried he, “thou art right, my old Thaddeus; that night was a fatal night for me!”

He would have fallen into one of his usual reveries had they not urgently pressed him to conclude his story. After a while he continued.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

WHILE the scene which Thaddeus has just described was passing behind the camp, I had succeeded, by aid of the brushwood, with some of my men in climbing the opposite hills until we had reached a point called Peacock Peak, from the brilliant tints of the mica which coated the surface of the rock.

From this position, which was opposite a rock covered with negroes, we opened a withering fire. The insurgents, who were not so well armed as we were, could not reply warmly to our volleys, and in a short time began to grow discouraged. We redoubled our efforts, and our enemies soon evacuated the neighboring rocks, first hurling the dead bodies of their comrades upon our army, the greater proportion of which was still drawn up on the hill. Then we cut down several trees, and binding the trunks together with fibers of the palm, we improvised a bridge, and by it crossed over to the deserted positions of the enemy, and thus managed to secure a good post of vantage. This operation completely quenched the courage of the rebels. Our fire continued. Shouts of grief arose from them, in which the name of Bug-Jargal was frequently repeated. Many negroes of the army of Morne-Rouge appeared on the rock upon which the blood-red banner still floated; they prostrated themselves before it, tore it from its resting-place, and then precipitated it and themselves into the depths of the Grande-Riviere. This seemed to signify that their chief was either killed or a prisoner.

Our confidence had now risen to such a pitch that I resolved to drive them from their last position at the point of the bayonet, and at the head of my men I dashed into the midst of the negroes. The soldiers were about to follow me across the temporary bridge that I had caused to be thrown from peak to peak, when one of the rebels with a blow of his ax broke the bridge to atoms, and the ruins fell into the abyss with a terrible noise.

I turned my head: in a moment I was surrounded, and seized by six or seven negroes, who disarmed me in a moment. I struggled like a lion, but they bound me with cords made of bark, heedless of the hail of bullets that my soldiers poured upon them. My despair was somewhat soothed by the cries of victory which I heard from our men, and I soon saw the negroes and mulattoes ascending the steep sides of the rocks with all the precipitation of fear, uttering cries of terror.

My captors followed their example. The strongest among them placed me on their shoulders, and carried me in the direction of the forest, leaping from rock to rock with the agility of wild goats. The flames soon ceased to light the scene, and it was by the pale rays of the moon that we pursued our course.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

AFTER passing through jungles and crossing” many a torrent, we arrived in a valley situated in the higher part of the hills, of a singularly wild and savage appearance. The spot was absolutely unknown to me. The valley was situated in the heart of the hills, in what is called the “double mountains.” It was a large green plain, imprisoned by walls of bare rock, and dotted with clumps of pines and palm-trees. The cold, which at this height is very severe, was increased by the morning air, the day having just commenced to break; but the valley was still plunged in darkness, and was only lighted by flashes from the negroes’ fires. Evidently this spot was their headquarters; the shattered remains of their army had begun to reassemble, and every now and then bands of negroes and mulattoes arrived, uttering groans of distress and cries of rage. New fires were speedily lighted, and the camp began to increase in size.

The negro whose prisoner I was had placed me at the foot of an oak, whence I surveyed this strange spectacle with entire carelessness. The black had bound me with his belt to the trunk of the tree, against which I was leaning, and carefully tightening the knots in the cords which impeded my movements, he placed on my head his own red woolen cap, as if to indicate that I was his property; and after making sure that I could not escape or be carried off by others, he was preparing to leave me, when I determined to address him; and speaking in the Creole dialect, I asked him if he belonged to the band of Dondon, or of Morne-Rouge. He stopped at once, and in a tone of pride replied, “Morne-Rouge.” Then an idea entered my head. I had often heard of the generosity of the chief Bug-Jargal; and though I had made up my mind that death would soon end all my troubles, the thought of the tortures that would inevitably precede it should I fall into the hands of Biassou filled me with horror. All I wanted was to be put to death without torment. It was perhaps a weakness, but I believe that the mind of man ever revolts at such a death. I thought then that if I could be taken from Biassou, Bug-Jargal might give me what I desired — a soldier’s death. I therefore asked the negro of Morne-Rouge to lead me to Bug-Jargal.

He started: “Bug-Jargal!” he repeated, striking on his forehead in anguish; then, as if rage had suddenly overtaken him, he shook his fist, and shouting, “Biassou, Biassou!” he left me hastily.

The mingled rage and grief of the negro re called to my mind the events of the day, and the certainty we had acquired of either the death or capture of the chief of the baud of Morne-Rouge. I felt that all hope was over, and resigned myself to the threatened vengeance of Biassou.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

A GROUP of negresses came near the tree to which I was fastened, and. lighted a fire. By the numerous bracelets of blue, red, and violet glass which ornamented their arms and ankles; by the rings which weighed down their ears and adorned their toes and fingers; by the amulets on their bosoms and the collar of charms suspended round their necks; by the aprons of variegated feathers which were their sole coverings — I at once recognized them as *griotes.* You are perhaps ignorant that among the African blacks there exists a certain class with a rude talent for poetry and improvisation, which approaches closely to madness. These unhappy creatures, wandering from one African kingdom to another, are in these barbarian countries looked upon in the same light as the minstrels of England,. the minnesingers of Germany, and the troubadours of France. They are called “griots,” and their wives “griotes.” The *griotes* accompany the barbaric songs of their husbands with lascivious dances, and form a grotesque parody on the *nautch* girls of India and the *almes* of Egypt.

It was a group of these women who came and sat down near me, with their legs crossed under them according to their custom, and their hideous faces lighted up by the red light of a fire of withered branches. When they had formed a complete circle they all joined hands, and the eldest, who had a heron’s plume stuck in her hair, began to exclaim, “Ouanga!” I at once understood that they were going through one of their performances of pretended witchcraft. Then the leader of the band, after a moment’s silence, plucked a lock of hair from her head and threw it into the fire, crying out these words, “Male o guiab,” which in the jargon of the Creoles means, “I shall go to the devil.” All the *griotes* imitated their leader, and throwing locks of their hair in the fire, repeated gravely, “Male o guiab.” This strange invocation, and the extraordinary grimaces that accompanied it, caused me to burst into one of those hysterical fits of laughter which so often seize on one even at the most serious moments. It was in vain that I endeavored to restrain it — it ‘would have vent; and this laugh, which escaped from so sad a heart, brought about a gloomy and terrifying scene.

Disturbed in their incantations, the negresses sprang to their feet, Until then they had not noticed me, but now they rushed close up to me, screaming “Blanco, Blanco!” I have never seen so hideous a collection of faces, distorted as they were with passion, their white teeth gleaming, and their eyes almost starting from their heads. They were, I believe, about to tear me in pieces, when the old woman with the heron's plume on her head stopped them with a sign of her hand, and exclaimed seven times, "Zote corde?" ("Do you agree?") The wretched creatures stopped at once, and to my surprise tore off their feather aprons, which they flung upon the ground, and commenced the lascivious dance which the negroes call "La chica."

This dance, which should only consist of attitudes and movements expressive of gayety and pleasure, assumed a very different complexion when performed by these naked sorceresses. In turn, each of them would place her face close to mine, and with a frightful expression of countenance would detail the horrible punishment that awaited the white man who had profaned the mysteries of their Ouanga. I recollected that savage nations had a custom of dancing round the victims that they were about to sacrifice, and I patiently awaited the conclusion of the performance which I knew would be sealed with my blood; and yet I could not repress a shudder as I perceived each *griote,* in strict unison with the time, thrust into the fire the point of a saber, the blade of an ax, a long sail-maker's needle, a pair of pincers, and the teeth of a saw.

The dance was approaching its conclusion, and the instruments of torture were glowing red with heat. At a signal from the old woman, each negress in turn withdrew an implement from the fire, while those who had none furnished themselves with a blazing stick. Then I understood clearly what my punishment was to be, and that in each of the dancers I should find an executioner. Again the word of command was given, and the last figure of the dance was commenced. I closed my eyes that I might not see the frantic evolutions of these female demons, who in measured cadence clashed the red-hot weapons over their heads. A dull, clinking sound followed, while the sparks flew out in myriads. I waited, nerving myself for the moment when I should feel my flesh quiver in agony, my bones calcine, and my muscles writhe under the burning tortures of the nippers and the saws. It was an awful moment. Fortunately it did not last long.

In the distance I heard the voice of the negro whose prisoner I was, shouting, "Que haceis, mujeres, ne demonio, que haceis alii, devais mi prisonero?" I opened my eyes again; it was already broad daylight. The negro hurried toward me, gesticulating angrily. The *griotes* paused, but they seemed less influenced by the threats of my captor than by the presence of a strange-looking person by whom the negro was accompanied.

It was a very stout and very short man — a species of dwarf — whose face was entirely concealed by a white veil, pierced with three holes for the eyes and mouth. The veil hung down to his shoulders, and displayed a hairy, copper-hued breast, upon which was hung by a golden chain the mutilated sun of a monstrance. The cross-hilt of a heavy dagger peeped from a scarlet belt, which also supported a kind of petticoat striped with green, yellow, and black, the hem of which hung down to his large and ill-shaped feet. His arms, like his breast, were bare; he carried a white staff, and a rosary of amber beads was suspended from his belt, in close proximity to the handle of his dagger. His head was surmounted with a pointed cap adorned with bells; and when he came close I was not surprised in recognizing in it the *gorra* of Habibrah, and among the hieroglyphics with which it was covered I could see many spots of gore: without doubt, it was the blood of the faithful fool. These blood-stains gave me fresh proofs of his death, and awakened in me once again a fresh feeling of regret for his loss.

Directly the *griotes* recognized the wearer of Habibrah’s cap, they cried out all at once, “The Obi!” and prostrated themselves before him. I guessed at once that this was a sorcerer attached to Biassou’s force.

“Basta, basta” (“enough”), said he, in a grave and solemn voice, as he came close up to them. “Devais el prisonero de Biassou.” (“Let the prisoner be taken to Biassou.”)

All the negresses leaped to their feet and cast their implements of torture on one side, put on their aprons, and at a gesture of the Obi fled like a cloud of grasshoppers.

At this instant the glance of the Obi fell upon me. He started back a pace, and half waved his white staff in the direction of the retiring *griotes*, as if he wished to recall them; then muttering between his teeth the word “Maldicho” (“accursed”), he whispered a few words in the ear of the negro, and crossing his arms retired slowly, apparently buried in deep thought.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

MY captor informed me that Biassou had asked to see me, and that in an hour I should be brought before him. This, I calculated, gave me another hour in which to live. Until that time had elapsed, I allowed my glances to wander over the rebel camp, the singular appearance of which the daylight permitted me to observe.

Had I been in any other position, I should have laughed heartily at the ostentatious vanity of the negroes, who were nearly all decked out in fragments of clerical and military dress, the spoils of their victims. The greater portion of these ornaments were not new, consisting of torn and blood-stained rags. A gorget could often be seen shining over a stole, while an epaulet looked strange when contrasted with a chasuble. To make amends for former years of toil, the negroes now maintained a state of utter inaction: some of them slept exposed to the rays of the sun, their heads close to a burning fire; others, with eyes that were sometimes full of listlessness, and at others blazed with fury, sat chanting a monotonous air at the doors of their *ajoupas* — a species of hut with conical roofs somewhat resembling our artillery tents, but thatched with palm or banana leaves. Their black or copper-colored wives, aided by the negro children, prepared the food for the fighting-men. I could see them stirring up with long forks, ignames, bananas, yams, peas, cocus and maize, and other vegetables indigenous to the country, which were boiling with joints of pork, turtle, and dog in the great boilers stolen from the dwellings of the planters. In the distance, on the outskirts of the camp, the *griots* and *griotes* formed large circles round the fires, and the wind every now and then brought to my ears strange fragments of their barbaric songs, mingled with notes from their tambourines and guitars. A few videttes posted on the high ground watched over the headquarters of General Biassou — the only defense of which in case of attack was a circle of wagons filled with plunder and ammunition. These black sentries posted on the summits of the granite pyramids, with which the valley bristled, turned about like the weathercocks in Gothic spires, and with all the strength of their lungs shouted one to the other the cry of “Nada, nada!” (“Nothing, nothing!”) which showed that the camp was in full security. Every now and then groups of negroes, inspired by curiosity, collected round me, but all looked upon me with a threatening expression of countenance.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

AT length an escort of negro soldiers, very fairly equipped, arrived. The negro whose property I appeared to be unfastened me from the oak to which I was bound, and handed me over to the escort, receiving in exchange a bagful of piastres. As he lay upon the grass counting them with every appearance of delight, I was led away by the soldiers. My escort wore a uniform of coarse cloth, of a reddish-brown color, with yellow facings; their head-dress was a .Spanish cap called a *montera*, ornamented with a large red cockade. Instead of a cartouche case, they had a species of game-bag slung at their sides. Their arms were a heavy musket, a saber, and a dagger. I afterward learned that these men formed the body-guard of Biassou.

After a circuitous route through the rows of *ajoupas* which were scattered all over the place, I came to a cave which Nature had hollowed out in one of those masses of rock with which the meadow was full. A large curtain of some material from the looms of Thibet, which the negroes called *katchmir*, and which is remarkable less for the brilliancy of its coloring than for the softness of its material, concealed the interior of the cavern from the vulgar gaze. The entrance was guarded by a double line of negroes, dressed like those who had escorted me thither.

After the countersign had been Exchanged with the sentries who marched backward and forward before the cave, the commander of the escort raised the curtain sufficiently for me to enter, and then let it drop behind me. A copper lamp with six lights, hung by a chain from the roof of the grotto, cast a flickering light upon the damp walls. Between the ranks of mulatto soldiers I perceived a colored man sitting upon a large block of mahogany, which was partially covered with a carpet made of parrots' feathers. His dress was of the most absurd kind. A splendid silk girdle, from which hung a cross of Saint Louis, held up a pair of common blue trousers, while a waistcoat of white linen which did not meet the waistband of the trousers completed the strange costume. He wore high boots, and a round hat with a red cockade, and epaulets — one of gold with silver stars, like those worn by brigadiers; while the other was of red worsted, with two copper stars (which seemed to have been taken from a pair of spurs) fixed upon it, evidently to render it more worthy of its resplendent neighbor. A saber and a pair of richly chased pistols lay by his side. Behind him were two white children dressed in the costume of slaves, bearing large fans of peacock feathers.

Two squares of crimson velvet, which seemed to have been stolen from some church, were placed on either side of the mahogany block.

One of these was occupied by the Obi who had rescued me from the frenzy of the *griotes*. He was seated with his legs crossed under him, holding in his hand his white wand, and not moving a muscle: he looked like a porcelain idol in a Chinese pagoda, but through the holes in his veil I could see his flashing eyes fixed steadfastly upon mine.

Upon each side of the general were trophies of flags, banners, and pennons of all kinds. Among them I noticed the white flag with the lilies, the tricolor, and the banner of Spain; the others were covered with fancy devices. I also perceived a large standard entirely black. At the end of the grotto, I saw a portrait of the mulatto Oge who, together with his lieutenant Jean Charanne, had been broken on the wheel the year previous for the crime of rebellion. Twenty of his accomplices, blacks and mulattoes, suffered with him. In this painting Oge, the son of a butcher at Cap, was represented in the uniform of a lieutenant-colonel, and decorated with the star of Saint Louis and the Order of Merit of the Lion, which last he had purchased from the Prince of Limburg.

The negro general into whose presence I had been introduced was short and of vulgar aspect, while his face showed a strange mixture of cunning and cruelty. After looking at me for some time in silence, with a bitter omen on his face, he said —

“I am Biassou.”

I expected this, but I could not hear it from his mouth, distorted as it was by a cruel smile, without an inward trembling; yet my face remained unchanged, and I made no reply.

“Well,” continued he, in his bad French, “have they already empaled you, that you are unable to bend before Biassou, generalissimo of this conquered land, and brigadier of his Most Catholic Majesty?” (The rebel chiefs sometimes affected to be acting for the King of France, sometimes for the Republic, and at others for the King of Spain.)

I crossed my arms upon my chest, and looked him firmly in the face.

He again sneered. “Ho, ho!” said he; “me pareces hombre de buen corazon (“you seem a courageous man”); well, listen to my questions. Were you born in the island?”

"No, I am a Frenchman."

My calmness irritated him. "All the better; I see by your uniform that you are an officer. How old are you?"

"Twenty."

"When were you twenty?"

To this question, which aroused in me all the recollection of my misery, I could not at first find words to reply. He repeated it imperiously.

"The day upon which Leogri was hanged," answered I.

An expression of rage passed over his face as he answered, "It is twenty-three days since Leogri was executed. Frenchman, when you meet him this evening you may tell him from me that you lived twenty-four days longer than he did. I will spare you for to-day; I wish you to tell him of the liberty that his brethren have gained, and what you have seen at the headquarters of General Jean Biassou."

Then he ordered me to sit down in one corner between two of his guards, and with a motion of his hand to some of his men, who wore the uniform of aides-de-camp, he said, "Let the Assembly be sounded, that we may inspect the whole of our troops; and you, your reverence," he added, ttirning to the Obi, "put on your priestly vestments, and perform for our army the holy sacrament of the Mass."

The Obi rose, bowed profoundly, and whispered a word or two in the general's ear.

"What," cried the latter, "no altar! but never mind, the good Giu has no need of a magnificent temple for His worship. Gideon and Joshua adored Him before masses of rock; let us do as they did. All that is required is that the hearts should be true. No altar, you say! why not make one of that great chest of sugar which we took yesterday from Dubussion's house?"

This suggestion of Biassou was promptly carried into execution. In an instant the interior of the cave was arranged for a burlesque of the divine ceremony. A pyx and a monstrance stolen from the parish church of Acul were promptly produced (the very church in which my nuptials with Marie had been celebrated, and where we had received Heaven's blessing, which had so soon changed to a curse). The stolen chest of sugar was speedily made into an altar and covered with a white cloth, through which, however, the words "Dubussion and Company for Nantes" could be plainly perceived.

When the sacred vessels had been placed on the altar, the Obi perceived that the crucifix was wanting. He drew his dagger, which had a cross handle, and stuck it into the wood of the case in front of the pyx. Then without removing his cap or veil, he threw the cope which had been stolen from the priest of Acul over his shoulders and bare chest, opened the silver clasps of the missal from which the prayers had been read on my ill-fated marriage day, and turning toward Biassou, whose seat was a few paces from the altar, announced to him that all was ready.

On a sign from the general the katchmir curtains were drawn aside, and the insurgent army was seen drawn up in close column before the entrance to the grotto. Biassou removed his hat and knelt before the altar.

"On your knees!" he cried, in a loud voice.

"On your knees!" repeated the commander of the battalions.

The drums were beaten and all the insurgents fell upon their knees. I alone refused to move, disgusted at this vile profanation about to be enacted under my very eyes; but the two powerful mulattoes who guarded me pulled my seat from under me, and pressed heavily upon my shoulders, so that I fell on my knees, compelled to pay a semblance of respect to this parody of a religious ceremony. The Obi performed his duties with affected solemnity, while the two white pages of Biassou officiated as deacon and sub-deacon. The insurgents, prostrated before the altar, assisted at the ceremony with the greatest enthusiasm, the general setting the example.

At the moment of the exaltation of the host, the Obi raising in his hands the consecrated vessel exclaimed in his Creole jargon, "Zote cone bon Giu; ce li mo fe zote voer. Blan touye li: touye blan yo toute!" ("You see your good God; I am showing Him to you. The white men killed him: kill all the whites!")

At these words, pronounced in a loud voice, the tones of which had something in them familiar to my ear, all the rebels uttered a loud shout and clashed their weapons together. Had it not been for Biassou's influence, that hour would have been my last. To such atrocities may men be driven who use the dagger for a cross, and upon whose mind the most trivial event makes a deep and profound impression.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

AT the termination of the ceremony the Obi bowed respectfully to Biassou; then the general rose and, addressing me in French, said:

"We are accused of having no religion. You see it is a falsehood, and that we are good Catholics."

I do not know whether he spoke ironically or in good faith. A few moments later he called for a glass bowl filled with grains of black maize; on the top he threw some white maize, then he raised it high in his hand so that all the army might see it.

"Brothers," cried he, "you are the black maize; your enemies are the white maize."

With these words he shook the bowl, and in an instant the white grains had disappeared beneath the black; and, as though inspired, he cried out, "Where are the white now?"

The mountains re-echoed with the shouts with which the illustration of the general was received; and Biassou continuing his harangue, mixed up French, Creole dialect, and Spanish alternately:

"The season for temporizing has passed; for a long time we have been as patient as the sheep to whose wool the whites compare our hair; let us now be as implacable as the panthers or the tigers of the countries from which they have torn us. Force alone can obtain for us our rights; and everything can be obtained by those who use their force without pity. Saint Loup [Wolf] has two days in the year consecrated to him in the Gregorian calendar, while the Paschal Lamb has but one. Am not I correct, your reverence?"

The Obi bowed in sign of corroboration.

"They have come," continued Biassou— "these enemies of ours have come as enemies of the regeneration of humanity; these whites, these planters, these men of business, veritable devils vomited from the mouth of hell. They came in the insolence of their pride, in their fine dresses, their uniforms, their feathers, their magnificent arms; they despised us because we were black and naked, in their overbearing haughtiness; they thought they could drive us before them as easily as these peacock feathers disperse the swarms of sandflies and mosquitoes."

As he uttered these concluding words, he snatched from the hands of his white slaves one of the large fans, and waved it over his head with a thousand eccentric gesticulations. Then he continued:

"But, my brethren, we burst upon them like flies upon a carcass; they have fallen in their fine uniforms beneath the strokes of our naked arms, which they believed to be without power, ignorant that good wood is the stronger when the bark is stripped off; and now these accursed tyrants tremble, and are filled with fear."

A triumphant yell rose in answer to the general's speech, and all the army repeated, "They are filled with fear!"

"Blacks, Creoles and Congos," added Biassou, "vengeance and liberty! Mulattoes, do not be led away by the temptations of the white men! Your fathers serve in their ranks, but your mothers are with us; besides, 'O bermanos de mi alma' ('O brethren of my soul') have they ever acted as fathers to you? Have they not rather been cruel masters, and treated you as slaves, because you had the blood of your mothers in your veins? While a miserable cotton garment covered your bodies scorched by the sun, your cruel fathers went about in straw hats and nankeen clothes on work-days, and in cloth and velvet on holidays and feasts. Curses be on their unnatural hearts! But as the holy commandments forbid you to strike your father, abstain from doing so; but in the day of battle what hinders you from turning to your comrade and saying, 'Touye papa moe, ma touye quena toue!' ('Kill my father, and I will kill yours!') Vengeance then, my brethren, and liberty for all men! This cry has found an echo in every part of the island; it has roused Tobago and Cuba. It was Bouckmann, a negro from Jamaica, the leader of the twenty-five fugitive slaves of the Blue Mountain, who raised the standard of revolt among us. A glorious victory was the first proof that he gave of his brotherhood with the negroes of St. Domingo. Let us follow his noble example, with an ax in one hand and a torch in the other. No mercy for the whites, no mercy for the planters! let us massacre their families, and destroy their, plantations! Do not allow a tree to remain standing on their estates; let us upturn the very earth itself that it may swallow up our white oppressors! Courage then, friends and brethren! we will fight them and sweep them from the face of the earth. We will conquer or die. As victors, we shall enjoy all the pleasures of life; and if we fall, the saints are ready to receive us in heaven, where each warrior will receive a double ration of brandy and a silver piastre each day!"

This warlike discourse, which to you appears perfectly ridiculous, had a tremendous effect on the insurgents. It is true that Biassou’s wild gesticulations, the manner in which his voice rose and fell, and the strange sneer which every now and then appeared on his lips, imparted to his speech a strange amount of power and fascination. The skill with which he alluded to those points that would have the greatest weight with the negroes added a degree of force which told well with his audience.

I will not attempt to describe to you the outburst of determined enthusiasm which the harangue of Biassou roused among the rebels. There arose at once a discordant chorus of howls, yells and shouts. Some beat their naked breasts, others dashed their clubs and sabers together. Many threw themselves on their knees, and remained in that position as though in rapt ecstasy. The negresses tore their breasts and arms with their fish-bone combs. The sounds of drums, tomtoms, guitars, and tambourines were mingled with the discharge of firearms. It was a veritable witches’ Sabbath.

Biassou raised his hand, and as if by enchantment the tumult was stilled, and each negro returned to his place in the ranks in silence. The discipline which Biassou had imposed upon his equals by the exercise of his power of will struck me, I may say, with admiration. All the soldiers of the force seemed to exist only to obey the wishes of their chief, as the notes of the harpsichord under the fingers of the musician.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

THE spectacle of another example of the powers of fascination and deception now attracted my attention. This was the healing of the wounded.

The Obi, who in the army performed the double function of healer of souls and bodies, began his inspection of his patients. He had taken off his sacerdotal robes, and was seated before a large box in which he kept his drugs and instruments. He used the latter very rarely, but occasionally drew blood skillfully enough with a lancet made of fish-bone; but he appeared to me to use the knife, which in his hands replaced the scalpel, rather clumsily. In most cases he contented himself with prescribing orange-flower water, or sarsaparilla, and a mouthful of old rum. His favorite remedy, however, and one which he said was an infallible panacea for all ills, was composed of three glasses of red wine, in which was some grated nutmeg and the yolk of an egg boiled hard; he employed this specific for almost every malady. You will understand that his knowledge of medicine was as great a farce as his pretended religion; and it is probable that the small number of cures that he effected would not have secured the confidence of the negroes had he not had recourse to all sorts of mummeries and incantations, and acted as much upon their imaginations as upon their bodies. Thus, he never examined their wounds without performing some mysterious signs; while at other times he skillfully mingled together religion and negro superstition, and would put into their wounds a little *fetish* stone wrapped in a morsel of lint, and the patient would credit the stone with the healing effects of the lint. If any one came to announce to him the death of a patient, he would answer solemnly: “I foresaw it; he was a traitor: in the burning of such and such a house he spared a white man’s life; his death was a judgment” — and the wondering crowd of rebels applauded him as he thus increased their deadly hatred for their adversaries.

This impostor, among other methods, employed one which amused me by its singularity. One of the negro chiefs had been badly wounded in the last action. The Obi examined the wound attentively, dressed it as well as he was able, then, mounting the altar, exclaimed, “All this is nothing.” He then tore two or three leaves from the missal, burned them to ashes, and mingling them with some wine in the sacramental cup, cried to the wounded man “Drink! this is the true remedy.” The patient, stupidly fixing his eyes on the impostor, drank, while the Obi with raised hands seemed to call down blessings on his head; and it may be the conviction that he was healed which brought about his cure.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

ANOTHER scene in which the Obi also played the principal part succeeded to this. The physician had taken the place of the priest, and the sorcerer now replaced the physician.

"Listen, men!" cried the Obi, leaping with incredible agility upon the improvised altar, and sinking down with his legs crossed under his striped petticoat— "listen. Who will dive into the book of fate? I can foretell the future. 'He estudiado la cienca de los Gitanos' ('I have studied the sciences of the gypsies'). A crowd of mulattoes and negroes hurriedly crowded up to him. "One by one," said the Obi, in that voice which called to my mind some remembrances that I could not quite collect. "If you come altogether, altogether you will enter the tomb."

They stopped. Just then a colored man dressed in a white jacket and trousers, with a bandana handkerchief tied round his head, entered the cave. Consternation was depicted on his countenance.

"Well, Rigaud," said the general, "what is it?"

Rigaud, sometimes called General Rigaud, was at the head of the mulatto insurgents at Lagu — a man who concealed much cunning under an appearance of candor, and cruelty beneath the mask of humanity. I looked upon him with much attention.

"General," whispered Rigaud, but as I was close to them I could catch every word, "on the outskirts of the camp there is a messenger from Jean François who has brought the news that Bouckmann has been killed in a battle with the whites under M. de Touzard, and that his head has been set upon the gates of the town as a trophy."

"Is that all?" asked Biassou, his eyes sparkling with delight at learning the diminution of the number of chiefs and the consequent increase of his own importance.

"The emissary of Jean François has in addition a message for you."

"That is all right," replied the general; "but get rid of this air of alarm, my good Rigaud."

"But," said Rigaud, "do you not fear the effect that the death of Bouckmann will have on the army?"

"You wish to appear more simple than you are; but you shall see what Biassou will do. Keep the messenger back for a quarter of an hour, and all will go well.”

Then he approached the Obi, who during this conversation had been exercising his functions as fortune-teller, questioning the wondering negroes, examining the lines on their hands and foreheads, and distributing more or less good luck according to the size and color of the piece of money thrown by each negro into a silver-gilt basin which stood on one side. Biassou whispered a few words in his ear, and without making any reply the Obi continued his prophetic observations.

“He,” cried the Obi, “who has in the middle of his forehead a little square or triangular figure will make a large fortune without work or toil. The figure of three interlaced *S’s* on the forehead is a fatal sign; he who has it will certainly be drowned if he does not carefully avoid water. Four lines from the top of the nose, and turning round two by two toward the eyes, announces ‘ that you will be taken prisoner, and for a long time languish in a foreign prison.”

Here the Obi paused. “Friends,” continued he, “I have observed this sign in the forehead of Bug-Jargal, the brave chief of Morne-Rouge.”

These words, which convinced me that Bug-Jargal had been made prisoner, were followed by a cry of grief from a band of negroes who wore short scarlet breeches. They belonged to the band of Morne-Rouge.

Then the Obi began again: “If you have on the right side of the forehead in the line of the moon a mark resembling a fork, do not remain idle, and avoid dissipation of all kinds. A small mark like the Arabic cipher 3 in the line of the sun betokens blows with a stick.”

An old negro here interrupted the magician, and dragging himself to his feet begged him to dress his wound. He had been wounded in the face, and one of his eyes almost torn from the socket hung upon his cheek.

The Obi had forgotten him when going through his patients. Directly, however, he saw him he cried out: “Round marks on the right side of the forehead in the line of the moon foretell misfortunes to the sight. My man, let me see your hand.”

“Alas, excellent sir,” answered the other, “it is my eye that I want you to look at.”’

“Old man,” replied the Obi, crossly, “it is not necessary to see your eye; give me your hand, I say.”

The miserable wretch obeyed, moaning, “My eye! my eye!”

“Good,” cried the Obi; “if you see on the line of life a spot surrounded by a circle you will lose an eye. There is the mark. You will become blind of an eye.”

“I am so already,” answered the negro, piteously.

But the Obi had merged the physician in the sorcerer, and thrusting him roughly on one side continued: “Listen, my men. If the seven lines on the forehead are slight, twisted, and lightly marked, they announce a short life. He who has between his eyebrows on the line of the moon the figure of two crossed arrows will be killed in battle. If the line of life which intersects the hand has a cross at its junction it foretells death on the scaffold; and here I must tell you, my brethren,” said the Obi, interrupting himself, “that one of the bravest defenders of our liberties, Bouckmann, has all these fatal marks.”

At these words all the negroes held their breath, and gazed on the impostor with glances of stupid admiration.

“Only,” continued the Obi, “I cannot reconcile the two opposing signs, death on the battlefield and also on the scaffold; and yet my science is infallible.”

He stopped, and cast a meaning glance at Biassou, who whispered something to an officer, who at once quitted the cavern.

“A gaping mouth,” continued the Obi, turning on his audience a malicious glance, “a slouching carriage, and arms hanging down by the side, announces natural stupidity, emptiness, and want of reasoning powers.”

Biassou gave a sneer of delight; at that moment the aid-de-camp returned, bringing with him a negro covered with mud and dust, whose feet, wounded by the roots and flints, showed that he had just come off a long journey. This was the messenger whose arrival Rigaud had announced. He held in one hand a letter, and in the other a document sealed with the design of a flaming heart; round it was a monogram, composed of the letters *M* and *N* interlaced, no doubt intended as an emblem of the union of the free mulattoes and the negro slaves. Underneath I could read this motto, “Prejudice conquered; the rod of iron broken; long live the king!” This document was a safe-conduct given by Jean François.

The messenger handed his letter to Biassou, who hastily tore it open, and perused the contents, then with an appearance of deep grief he exclaimed, “My brothers!” All bowed respectfully.

“My brothers, this is a dispatch to Jean Biassou, generalissimo of the conquered states, Brigadier-General of his Catholic Majesty, from Jean François, Grand Admiral of France, Lieutenant-General of the army of the King of Spain and the Indies. Bouckmann, chief of the hundred and twenty negroes of the Blue Mountain, whose liberty was recognized by the Governor-General of Belle Combe, has fallen in the glorious struggle of liberty and humanity against tyranny and barbarism. This gallant chief has been slain in an action with the white brigands of the infamous Touzard. The monsters have cut off his head, and have announced their intention of exposing it on a scaffold in the main square of the town of Cap. Vengeance!”

A gloomy silence succeeded the reading of this dispatch; but the Obi leaped on his altar, and waving his white wand, exclaimed in accents of triumph —

“Solomon, Zerobabel, Eleazar Thaleb, Cardau, Judas Bowtharicht, Avenoes, Albert the Great, Bohabdil, Jean de Hagul, Anna Baratio, Daniel Ogromof, Rachel Flintz, Allornino — I give you thanks! The science of the spirits has not deceived me. Sons, friends, brothers, boys, children, mothers, all of you listen to me. What was it that I predicted? The marks on the forehead of Bouckmann announced that his life would be a short one, that he would die in battle, and that he would appear on the scaffold. The revelations of my art have turned out true to the letter, and those points which seemed the most obscure are now the most plain. Brethren, wonder and admire!”

The panic of the negroes changed during this discourse to a sort of admiring terror. They listened to the Obi with a species of confidence mingled with fear, while the latter, carried away by his own enthusiasm, walked up and down the sugar-case, which presented plenty of space for his short steps.

A sneer passed over Biassou’s face as he addressed the Obi: “Your reverence, since you know what is to come, will you be good enough to tell me the future of Jean Biassou, Brigadier-General?”

The Obi halted on the top of his strange altar, which the credulity of the negroes looked upon as something divine, and answered, “Venga vuestra merced” (“Come, your Excellency”). At this moment the Obi was the most important man in the army; the military power bowed to the spiritual.

“Your hand, General,” said the Obi, stooping to grasp it. “Empezo” (“I begin”). “The line of junction equally marked in its full length promises you riches and happiness; the line of life strongly developed announces a life exempt from ills, and a happy old age. Its narrowness shows your wisdom and your superior talents, as well as the generosity of your heart; and lastly, I see what chiromancers call the luckiest of all signs — a number of little wrinkles in the shape of a tree with its branches extending upward; this promises health and wealth; it also prognosticates courage. General, it curves in the direction of the little finger; this is the sign of wholesome severity.”

As he said this, the eyes of the Obi glanced at me through the apertures of his veil, and I fancied that I could catch a well-known voice under the habitual gravity of his intonation, as he continued —

“The line of health, marked with a number of small circles, announces that you will have, for the sake of the cause, to order a number of executions;, divided here by a half-moon, it shows that you will be exposed to great danger from ferocious beasts, that is to say from the whites, if you do not exterminate them. The line of fortune surrounded, like the line of life, by little branches rising toward the upper part of the hand, confirms the position of power and supremacy to which you have been called; turning to the right, it is a symbol of your administrative capacity. The fifth line, that of the triangle prolonged to the root of the middle finger, promises you success in all your undertakings. Let me see your fingers: the thumb marked with little lines from the point to the nail shows that you will receive a noble heritage — that of the glory of the unfortunate Bouckmann, no doubt,” added the Obi, in a loud voice. “The slight swelling at the root of the forefinger, lightly marked with lines, promises honors and dignities. The middle finger shows nothing.

Your little finger is covered with lines crossing one another; you will vanquish all your enemies, and rise high above your rivals. These lines form the cross of Saint Andrew, a mark of genius and foresight. I also notice the figure of a circle, another token of your arrival at the highest power and dignity. ‘Happy the man,’ says Eleazar Thaleb, ‘who possesses all these signs. Destiny has its choicest gifts in store for him, and his fortunate star announces the talent which will bring him glory.’ And now, General, let me look at your forehead. ‘He,’ says Rachel Flintz, of Bohemia, ‘who bears on his forehead, on the line of the sun, a square or a triangular mark, will make a great fortune.’ Here is another prediction: ‘If the mark is on the right, it refers to an important succession;’ that of Bouckmann is, of course, again referred to. The mark in the shape of a horseshoe between the eyebrows, on the line of the moon, means that prompt vengeance will be taken for insult and tyranny. I have this mark as well as you.”

The curious manner in which the Obi uttered these words, “I have this mark,” attracted my attention.

“The mark of a lion’s claw which you have on your left eyelid is only noticeable among men of undoubted courage. But to close this, General Jean Biassou, your forehead shows every sign of the most unexampled success, and on it is a combination of lines which form the letter *M*, the commencement of the name of the Blessed Virgin. In whatever part of the forehead, and in whatever line of the face, such a sign appears, the signification is the same — genius, glory, and power. He who bears it will always bring success to whatever cause he embraces, and those under his command will never have to regret any loss. He alone is worth all the soldiers of his army. You, General, are the elect of Fate.”

“Thanks, your reverence,” said Biassou, preparing to return to his mahogany throne.

“Stay a moment, General,” said the Obi, “I forgot one last sign: The line of the sun, which is so strongly marked on your forehead, proves that you understand the way of the world; that you possess the wish to make others happy; that you have much liberality, and like to do things in a magnificent manner.”

Biassou at once recognized his forgetfulness, and drawing from his pocket a heavy purse, he threw it into the plate, so as to prove that the line of the sun never lies.

But this miraculous horoscope of the general had produced its effect upon the army. All the insurgents, who since the news of the death of Bouckmann attached greater weight than ever to the words of the Obi, lost their feelings of uneasiness and became violently enthusiastic; and trusting blindly in their infallible sorcerer and their predestined chief, they began to shout, “Long live our Obi! long live our general!”

The Obi and Biassou glanced at each other; and I almost thought I could hear the stifled laugh of the one replied to by the sardonic chuckle of the other. I do not know how it was, but this Obi tormented me dreadfully; I had a feeling that I had seen or heard him before, and I made up my mind to speak to him.

"Ho, Obi, your reverence, doctor, here!" cried I to him. He turned sharply round. "There is some one here whose lot you have not yet cast — it is mine."

He crossed his arms over the silver sun that covered his hairy breast, but he made no reply.

I continued: "I would gladly know what you prophesy with regard to my future, but your worthy comrades have taken my watch and my purse, and I suppose you will not give me a specimen of your skill for nothing."

He advanced quickly to me, and muttered hoarsely in my ear: "You deceive yourself; let me see your hand."

I gave it, looking fixedly at him; his eyes sparkled as he bent over my hand.

"If the line of life," said he, "is cut by two transverse lines, it is the sign of immediate death: your life will be a short one. If the line of health is not in the center of the hand, and if the line of life and the line of fortune are united so as to form an angle, a natural death cannot be looked for; do not, therefore, look for a natural death! If the bottom of the forefinger has a long line cutting it, a violent death will be the result": prepare yourself for a violent death!"

There was a ring of pleasure in his sepulchral voice as he thus announced my death, but I listened to him with contempt and indifference.

"Sorcerer," said I, with a disdainful smile, "you are skillful, for you are speaking of a certainty."

Once more he came close to me. "You doubt my science," cried he; "listen, then, once more. The severance of the line of the sun on your forehead shows me that you take an enemy for a friend, and a friend for an enemy."

These words seemed to refer to the treacherous Pierrot whom I loved, but who had betrayed me, and to the faithful Habibrah whom I had hated, and whose blood-stained garments attested his fidelity and his devotion.

"What do you say?" exclaimed I.

"Listen until the end," continued the Obi. "I spoke of the future; listen to the past. The line of the moon on your forehead is slightly curved; that signifies that your wife has been carried off."

I trembled, and endeavored to spring from my seat, but my guards held me back.

"You have but little patience," continued the sorcerer; "listen to the end. The little cross that cuts the extremity of that curve shows me all: your wife was carried off on the very night of your nuptials."

"Wretch!" cried I, "you know where she is! Who are you?"

I strove again to free myself, and to tear away his veil; but I had to yield to numbers and to force, and had the mortification of seeing the mysterious Obi move away repeating, "Do you believe me now? Prepare for immediate death."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

As if to draw my attention from the perplexity into which I had been thrown by the strange scene that had just passed, a new and more terrible drama succeeded to the farce that had been played between Biassou and the Obi. Biassou had again taken his place upon his mahogany throne, while Rigaud and the Obi were seated on his right and left; the latter, with his arms crossed on his breast, seemed to have given himself up to deep thought. Biassou and Rigaud were chewing tobacco, and an aid-de-camp had just asked if he should order a general march past of the forces, when a tumultuous crowd of negroes, with hideous shouts, arrived at the entrance of the grotto. They had brought with them three white prisoners to be judged by Biassou, but what they desired was easily shown by the cries of "Muerte! Muerte!" ("Death, death!") the latter, no doubt, emanating from the English negroes of Bouckmann's band, many of whom had by this time arrived to join the French and Spanish negroes of Biassou.

The general with a gesture of his hand commanded silence, and ordered the three captives to be brought to the entrance of the grotto. I recognized two of them with considerable surprise; one was the Citizen General C — , that"

philanthropist who was in correspondence with all the lovers of the negro race in different parts of the globe, and who had proposed so cruel a mode of suppressing the insurrection to the governor. The other was the planter of doubtful origin, who manifested so great a dislike to the mulattoes, among whom the whites insisted on classing him. The third appeared to belong to a section called "poor whites" — that is to say, white men who had to work for their living; he wore a leathern apron, and his sleeves were turned up to his elbows. All the prisoners had been taken at different times, endeavoring to hide themselves in the mountains.

The "poor white" was the first one that was questioned.

"Who are you?" asked Biassou.

"I am Jacques Belin, carpenter to the Hospital of the Fathers, at Cap."

Surprise and shame struggled for the mastery in the features of the general. "Jacques Belin!" repeated he, biting his lips.

"Yes," replied the carpenter; "do you not recognize me?"

“Begin,” retorted the general, furiously, “by recognizing *me* and saluting me.”

“I do not salute *my slave”* replied the carpenter, sturdily.

“Your slave, wretch!” cried the general.

“Yes,” replied the carpenter; “yes, I was your first master. You pretend not to recognize me, but remember, Jean Biassou, that I sold you for thirty piastres in the St. Domingo slave market.”

An expression of concentrated rage passed over Biassou’s face.

“Well,” continued the carpenter, “you appear ashamed of having worked for me; ought not Jean Biassou to feel proud of having belonged to Jacques Belin? Your mother, the old idiot, has often swept out my shop; but at last I sold her to the major-domo of the Hospital of the Fathers, and she was so old and decrepit that he would give me only thirty-two livres and six sous for her. There is my history and yours; but it seems as if the negroes and the mulattoes are growing proud, and that you have forgotten the time when you served Master Jacques Belin, the carpenter of Cap, on your knees.”

Biassou listened to him with that sardonic smile which gave him the appearance of a tiger.

“Good!” said he. Then turning to the negroes who had captured Belin, “Get two trestles, two planks, and a saw, and take this man away. Jacques Belin, carpenter of Cap, thank me, for you shall have a true carpenter’s death.”

His sardonic laugh too fully explained the horrible punishment that he destined for the pride of his former master; but Jacques Belin did not blench, and turning proudly to Biassou, cried —

“Yes, I ought to thank you, for I bought you for thirty piastres, and I got work out of you to a much greater amount.”

They dragged him away.

CHAPTER THIRTY

MORE dead than alive, the other two prisoners had witnessed this frightful prologue to their own fate. Their timid and terrified appearance contrasted with the courageous audacity of the carpenter; every limb quivered with affright.

Biassou looked at them one after the other with his fox-like glance, and, as if he took a pleasure in prolonging their agony, began a discussion with Rigaud upon the different kinds of tobacco — asserting that that of Havana was only good for manufacturing cigars, while for snuff he knew nothing better than the Spanish tobacco, two barrels of which Bouckmann had sent him, being a portion of the plunder of M. Lebattres' stores in the island of Tortue. Then, turning sharply upon the Citizen General C — , he asked him —

"What do you think?"

This sudden address utterly confounded the timid citizen, and he stammered out, "General, I am entirely of your Excellency's opinion."

"You flatter me," replied Biassou; "I want *your* opinion, not mine. Do you know any tobacco that makes better snuff than that of M. Lebattres?"

"No, my lord," answered C — , whose evident terror greatly amused Biassou.

"'General,' 'your Excellency,' 'my lord!' you are an aristocrat."

"Oh, no, certainly not," exclaimed the citizen general. "I am a good patriot of '91, and an ardent negrophile."

"'Negrophile'!" interrupted the general; "pray, what is a 'negrophile'?"

"It is a friend of the blacks," stammered the citizen.

"It is not enough to be a friend of the blacks; you must also be a friend of the men of color."

"Men of color is what I should have said," replied the lover of the blacks, humbly. "I am mixed up with all the most famous partisans of the negroes and the mulattoes—"

Delighted at the opportunity of humiliating a white man, Biassou again interrupted him: "'Negroes and mulattoes'! What do you mean, pray? Do you wish to insult me by making use of those terms of contempt invented by the whites? There are only men of color and blacks here — do you understand that, Mr. Planter?"

“It was a slip, a bad habit that I picked up in childhood,” answered C — . “Pardon me, my lord, I had no wish to offend you.”

“Leave off this *my lording* business! I have already told you that I don’t like these aristocratic ways.”

C — again endeavored to excuse himself, and began to stammer out a fresh explanation. “If you knew, citizen—”

“Citizen, indeed!” cried Biassou, in affected anger; “I detest all this Jacobin jargon. Are you by chance a Jacobin? Remember that you are speaking to the generalissimo of the king’s troops.”

The unhappy partisan of the negro race was dumfounded, and did not know in what terms to address this man, who equally disdained the titles of “my lord” or “citizen” — the aristocratic or republican modes of salutation. Biassou, whose anger was only assumed, cruelly enjoyed the predicament in which he had placed C — .

“Alas,” at last said the citizen general, “you do not do me justice, noble defender of the unwritten rights of the larger portion of the human race!”

In his perplexity to hit upon an acceptable mode of address to a man who appeared to disdain all titles, he had recourse to one of those sonorous periphrases which the republicans occasionally substituted for the name and title of the persons with whom they were in conversation.

Biassou looked at him steadily and said, “You love the blacks and the men of color?”

“Do I love them?” exclaimed the citizen C — . “Why, I correspond with Brissot and—”

Biassou interrupted him with a sardonic laugh. “Ha, ha! I am glad to find in you so trusty a friend to our cause; you must, of course, thoroughly detest those wretched colonists who punished our insurrection by a series of the most cruel executions; and you, of course, think with us that it is not the blacks, but the whites, who are the true rebels, since they are in arms against the laws of nature and humanity? You must execrate such monsters!”

“I do execrate them,” answered C — .

“Well,” continued Biassou, “what do you think of a man who, in his endeavors to crush the last efforts of the slaves to regain their liberty, placed the heads of fifty black men on each side of the avenue that led to his house?”

C — grew fearfully pale.

“What do you think of a white man who would propose to surround the town of Cap with a circle of negro heads?”

“Mercy, mercy!” cried the terrified citizen general.

“Am I threatening you?” replied Biassou, coldly. “Let me finish — a circle of heads that would reach from Fort Picolet to Cape Caracol. What do you think of that? Answer me!”

The words of Biassou, “Do I threaten you,”

had given a faint ray of hope to C — , for he fancied that the general might have heard of this terrible proposition without knowing the author of it; he therefore replied with all the firmness that he could muster, in order to remove any impression that the idea was his own:

“I consider such a suggestion an atrocious crime.”

Biassou chuckled. “Good! And what punishment should be inflicted on the man who proposed it?”

The unfortunate C — hesitated.

“What!” cried Biassou, “you hesitate! Are you, or are you not, the friend of the blacks?”

Of the two alternatives the wretched man chose the least threatening one, and seeing no hostile light in Biassou’s eyes, he answered in a low voice: “The guilty person deserves death.”

“Well answered,” replied Biassou, calmly, throwing aside the tobacco that he had been chewing. His assumed air of indifference had completely deceived the unfortunate lover of the negro race, and he made another effort to dissipate any suspicions which might have been engendered against him.

“No one,” cried C — , “has a more ardent desire for your success than I. I correspond with Brissot and Pruneau de Pomme-Gogue in France, with Magaw in America, with Peter Paulus in Holland, with the Abbe Tamburini in Italy—” and he was continuing to unfold the same string of names which he had formerly repeated, but with a different motive, at the council held at M. de Blanchelande’s, when Biassou interrupted him.

“What do I care with whom you correspond? Tell me rather where are your granaries and storehouses, for my army has need of supplies. Your plantation is doubtless a rich one, and your business must be lucrative since you correspond with so many merchants.”

C — ventured timidly to remark: “Hero of humanity, they are not merchants, but philosophers, philanthropists, lovers of the race of blacks.”

“Then,” said Biassou, with a shake of his head, “if you have nothing that can be plundered, what good are you?”

This question afforded a chance of safety of which C — eagerly availed himself. “Illustrious warrior,” exclaimed he, “have you an economist in your army?”

“What is that?” asked the general.

“It is,” replied the prisoner, with as much calmness as his fears would permit him to assume, “a most necessary man — one whom all appreciate, one who follows out and classes in their proper order the respective material resources of an empire, and gives to each its real value, increasing and improving them by combining their sources and results, and pouring them like fertilizing streams into the main river of general utility, which in its turn swells the great sea of public prosperity.”

“*Caramba!*” observed Biassou, leaning over toward the Obi. “What the deuce does he mean by all these words strung together like the beads on your rosary?”

The Obi shrugged his shoulders in sign of ignorance and disdain, as citizen C — continued:

“If you will permit me to observe, valiant chief of the regenerators of St. Domingo, I have carefully studied the works of the greatest economists of the world — Turgot, Raynal, and Mirabeau the friend of man. I have put their theories into practice; I thoroughly understand the science indispensable for the government of kingdoms and states—”

“The economist is not economical of his words,” observed Rigaud, with his bland and cunning smile.

“But you, eternal talker,” cried Biassou, “tell me, have I any kingdoms or states to govern?”

“Not yet perhaps, great man, but they will come; and besides, my knowledge descends to all the useful details which are comprised in the interior economy of an army.”

The general again interrupted him: “I have nothing to do with the interior economy of the army; I command it.”

“Good!” replied the citizen; “you shall be the commander, I will be the commissary. I have much special knowledge as to the increase of cattle—”

“Do you think we are going to breed cattle?” cried Biassou, with his sardonic laugh. “No, my good fellow, we are content with eating them. When cattle become scarce in the French colony I shall cross the line of mountains on the frontier and take the Spanish sheep and oxen from the plains of Cotury, of La Vega, of St. Jago, and from the banks of the Yuna; if necessary I will go as far as the Island of Jamaica, and to the back of the mountain of Cibos, and from the mouths of the Neybe to those of Santo Domingo; besides, I should be glad to punish those infernal Spanish planters for giving up Oge to the French. You see I am not uneasy as regards provisions, and so have no need of your knowledge."

This open declaration rather disconcerted the poor economist; he made, however, one more effort for safety. "My studies," said he, "have not been limited to the reproduction of cattle; I am acquainted with other special branches of knowledge that may be very useful to you. I can show you the method of manufacturing pitch and working coal mines."

"What do I care for that?" exclaimed Biassou., "When I want charcoal I burn a few leagues of forest."

"I can tell you the proper kinds of wood to use for shipbuilding — the chicarm and the sabieca for the keels; the yabas for the knees, the medlars for the framework, the hacomas, the gaïacs, the cedars, the acomas—"

"Que te lleven todos los demonios de los diez-y-siete infernos!" ("May the devils of the thirty-seven hells fly away with you!") cried Biassou, boiling over with impatience.

"I beg your pardon, my gracious patron," said the trembling economist, who did not understand Spanish.

"Listen," said Biassou. "I don't want to build vessels; there is only one vacancy that I can offer you, and that is not a very important one. I want a man to wait upon me; and now, Mr. Philosopher, tell me if that will suit you. You will have to serve me on your bended knees; you will prepare my pipe, cook my *calalou* and turtle soup, and you will stand behind me with a fan of peacock or parrot feathers like those two pages. Now, will the situation suit you?"

Citizen C — , whose only desire was to save his life, beat the earth with a thousand expressions of joy and gratitude.

"You accept my offer, then?" asked Biassou.

"Can you ask such a question, generous master? Do you think that I should hesitate for a moment in accepting so distinguished a post as that of being in constant attendance on you?"

At this reply the diabolical sneer of Biassou became more pronounced. He rose up with an air of triumph, crossed his arms on his chest, and thrusting aside with his foot the white man’s head who was prostrate on the ground before him, he cried in a loud voice:

“I am delighted at being able to fathom how far the cowardice of the white man could go; I had already measured the extent of his cruelty. Citizen: C — , it is to you that I owe this double experience. I knew all; how could you have been sufficiently besotted to think that I did not? It was you who presided at the executions of June, July and August; it was you who placed fifty negro’ heads on each side of your avenue; it was you who proposed to slaughter the five hundred negroes who were confined in irons after the revolt, and to encircle the town of Cap with their heads from Fort Picolet to Cape Caracol. If you could have done it, you would have placed my head among them; and now you think yourself lucky if I will take you as my body-servant. No, no, I have more regard for your honor than you yourself have, and I will not inflict this affront on you; prepare to die!”

At a gesture of Biassou’s hand the negroes removed the unhappy lover of the blacks to a position near me, where, overwhelmed by the honor of his position, he fell to the ground without being able to articulate a word.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

“IT is your turn now,” said the general, turning to the last of the prisoners — the planter who was accused by the white men of having black blood in his veins, and who had on that account sent me a challenge.

A general clamor drowned the reply of the planter. “Muerte! Mort! Touye!” cried the negroes, grinding their teeth and shaking their fists at the unhappy captive.

“General,” said a mulatto, making himself heard above the uproar, “he is a white man, and he must die.”

The miserable planter, by cries and gesticulations, managed to edge in some words. “No, general! no, my brothers! it is an infamous calumny. I am a mulatto, like yourselves, of mixed blood; my mother was a negress, like your mothers and sisters.”

“He lies!” cried the infuriated negroes; “he is a white man; he has always detested the colored people.”

“Never!” retorted the prisoner; “it is the whites that I detest. I have always said with you, ‘Negre ce blan; blan ce negre’ (‘The negroes are the masters; the whites are the slaves’).”

“Not at all!” cried the crowd, “not at all! Kill the white man, kill him!”

Still the unhappy wretch kept repeating in heart-rending accents, “I am a mulatto, I am one of yourselves.”

“Give me a proof,” was Biassou’s sole reply.

“A proof?” answered the prisoner, wildly; “the proof is that the whites have always despised me.”

“That may be true,” returned Biassou, “but you are an insolent hound to tell us so.”

A young mulatto stepped to the front and addressed the planter in an excited manner. “That the whites despised you is a fact; but, on the other hand, you affected to look down upon the mulattoes among whom they classed you. It has even been reported that you once challenged a white man who called you a half-caste.”

A howl of execration arose from the crowd, and the cry of “Death” was repeated more loudly than ever; while the planter, casting an appealing glance at me, continued, with tears in his eyes:

"It is a calumny; my greatest glory and happiness is in belonging to the blacks. I am a mulatto."

"If you really were a mulatto," observed Rigaud, quietly, "you would not make use of such an expression."

"How do I know what I am saying?" asked the panic stricken wretch. "General, the proof that I am of mixed blood is in the black circle that you see round the bottom of my nails."

Biassou thrust aside the suppliant hand. "I do not possess the knowledge of our chaplain, who can tell what a man is by looking at his hand. But listen to me: my soldiers accuse' you — some, of being a white man; others, of being a false brother. If this is the case you ought to die. You, on the other hand, assert that you belong to our race, and that you have never denied it. There is one method by which you can prove your assertion. Take this dagger and stab these two white prisoners!"

As he spoke, with a wave of his hand, Biassou designated the citizen C — and myself.

The planter drew back from the dagger which, with a devilish smile on his face, Biassou presented to him.

"What!" said the general, "do you hesitate? It is your only chance of proving your assertion to the army that you are not a white, and are one of ourselves. Come, decide at once, for we have no time to lose."

The prisoner's eyes glared wildly; he stretched out his hand toward the dagger, then let his arm fall again, turning away his head, while every limb quivered with emotion.

"Come, come!" cried Biassou, in tones of impatience and anger, "I am in a hurry. Choose: either kill them, or die with them!"

The planter remained motionless, as if he had been turned to stone.

"Good!" said Biassou, turning toward the negroes; "he does not wish to be the executioneer, let him be the victim. I can see that he is nothing but a white man; away with him!"

The negroes advanced to seize him. This movement impelled him to immediate choice between giving or receiving death. Extreme cowardice produces a bastard species of courage. Stepping forward, he snatched the dagger that Biassou still held out to him, and without giving himself time to reflect upon what he was about to do, he precipitated himself like a tiger upon the citizen C — , who was lying on the ground near me. Then a terrible struggle commenced; The lover of the negro race, who had at the conclusion of his interview with Biassou remained plunged in a state of despair and stupor, had hardly noticed the scene between the general and the planter, so absorbed was he in the thought of his approaching death; but when he saw the man rush upon him, and the steel gleam above his head, the imminence of his danger aroused him at once. He started to his feet, grasped the arm of his would-be murderer, and exclaimed in a voice ,of terror:

"Pardon, pardon! What are you doing? What have I done?"

"You must die, sir," said the half-caste, fixing his frenzied eyes upon his victim, and endeavoring to disengage his arm. "Let me do it; I will not hurt you."

"Die by your hand," cried the economist; "but why? Spare me! you wish perhaps to kill me because I used to say that you were a mulatto. But spare my life, and I vow that I will always declare that you are a white man. Yes, you are white; I will say so everywhere, but spare me!"

The unfortunate man had taken the wrong method of suing for mercy.

"Silence, silence!" cried the half-caste, furious at the idea of the danger he was incurring, and fearing that the negroes would hear the assertion.

But the other cried louder than ever that he knew that he was a white man, and of good family. The half-caste made a last effort to impose silence on him; then finding his efforts vain, he thrust aside his arms, and pressed the dagger upon C— 's breast. The unhappy man felt the point of the weapon, and in his despair bit the arm that was driving the dagger home.

"Monster! wretch!" exclaimed he, "you are murdering me!" Then casting a glance of supplication toward Biassou, he cried, "Defend me, avenger of humanity!"

Then the murderer pressed more heavily on the dagger; a gush of blood bubbled over his fingers and spattered his face. The knees of the unhappy lover of the negro race bent beneath him, his arms fell by his side, his eyes closed, he uttered a stifled groan and fell dead.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

I WAS paralyzed with horror at this scene, in which I every moment expected to play an important part.

The "avenger of humanity" had gazed on the struggle without a lineament of his features changing. When all was over, he turned to his terrified pages. "More tobacco," said he, and began to chew calmly. The Obi and Rigaud were equally impassible, but the negroes appeared terrified at the horrible drama that their general had caused to be enacted before them.

One white man, however, yet remained to be slaughtered; my turn had come. I cast a glance upon the murderer who was about to become my executioner, and a feeling of pity came over me. His hps were violet, his teeth chattered, a convulsive tremor caused every limb to quiver. By a mechanical movement his hand was continually passed over his forehead, as if to obliterate he traces of the blood which had so liberally sprinkled it; he looked with an air of terrified wonder at the bleeding body which lay at his feet, as though he were unable to detach his strained eyeballs from the spectacle of his victim. I waited for the moment when he would resume his task of blood. The position was a strange one: he had already tried to kill me and failed, to prove that he was white; and now he was going to murder me to show that he was black.

"Come," said Biassou, addressing him, "this is good; I am pleased with you, my friend." Then glancing at me, he added, "You need not finish the other one; and now I declare you one of us, and name you executioner to the army."

At these words a negro stepped out of the ranks, and bowing three times to the general, cried out in his jargon, which I will spare you:

"And I, General?"

"Well, what do you want?" asked Biassou.

"Are you going to do nothing for me, General?" asked the negro. "Here you give an important post to this dog of a white, who murders to save his own skin, and to prove that he is one of ourselves. Have you no post to give me, who am a true black?"

This unexpected request seemed to embarrass Biassou, and Rigaud whispered to him in French:

"You can't satisfy him; try to elude his request."

"You wish for promotion, then?" asked Biassou of the true black. "Well, I am willing enough to grant it to you. What grade do you wish for?"

"I wish to be an officer."

"An officer, eh? And what are your claims to the epaulet founded on?"

"It was I," answered the negro, emphatically, "who set fire to the house of Lagoscelte in the first days of August last. It was I who murdered M. Clement the planter, and carried the head of his sugar refiner on my pike. I killed ten white women and seven small children, one of whom on the point of a spear served as a standard for Bouckmann's brave blacks. Later on I burned alive the families of four colonists, whom I had locked up in the strong room of Fort Galifet. My father was broken on the wheel at Cap, my brother was hung at Rocrow, and I narrowly escaped being shot. I have burned three coffee plantations, six indigo estates, and two hundred acres of sugar-cane; I murdered my master, M. Noe, and his mother—"

"Spare us the recital of your services," said Rigaud, whose feigned benevolence was the mask for real cruelty, but who was ferocious with decency, and could not listen to this cynical confession of deeds of violence.

"I could quote many others," continued the negro, proudly, "but you will no doubt consider that these are sufficient to insure my promotion, and to entitle me to wear a gold epaulet like my comrades there," pointing to the staff of Biassou.

The general affected to reflect for a few minutes, and then gravely addressed the negro. "I am satisfied with your services, and should be pleased to promote you; but you must satisfy me on one point. Do you understand Latin?"

The astonished negro opened his eyes widely. "Eh, General?" said he.

"Yes," repeated Biassou, quickly; "do you understand Latin?"

"La — Latin?" stammered the astonished negro.

"Yes, yes, yes, Latin; do you understand Latin?" said the cunning chief, and unfolding a banner upon which was embroidered the verse from the Psalms, "In exitu Israël de Egypto," he added, "Explain the meaning of these words."

The negro, in complete ignorance of what was meant, remained silent and motionless, fumbling with the waistband of his trousers, while his astonished eyes wandered from the banner to the general, and from the general back again to the banner.

"Come, go on!" exclaimed Biassou, impatiently.

The negro opened and shut his mouth several times, scratched his head, and at last said slowly: “I don’t understand it, General.”

“How, scoundrel!” cried Biassou; “you wish to become an officer, and you do not understand Latin!”

“But, General—” stammered the puzzled negro.

“Silence!” roared Biassou, whose anger appeared to increase; “I do not know what prevents me from having you shot at once. Did you ever hear such a thing, Rigaud? He wants to be an officer, and does not understand Latin. Well, then, idiot, as you do not understand, I will explain what is written on this banner: *In exitu*— ‘Every soldier’ — *Israël*— ‘who does not understand Latin’ — de *Eyypto*— ‘cannot be made an officer.’ Is not that the translation, reverend sir?”

The Obi bowed his head in the affirmative, and Biassou continued:

“This brother of whom you are jealous, and whom I have appointed executioner, understands Latin!” He turned to the new executioner: “You know Latin, do you not? Prove it to this blockhead. What is the meaning of *Dominus vobiscum?”*

The unhappy half-caste, roused from his gloomy reverie by the dreaded voice, raised his head; and though his brain was still troubled by the cowardly murder that he had just committed, terror compelled him to be obedient. There was something pitiable in his manner, as his mind went back to his schooldays, and in the midst of his terrible feelings and remorse he repeated, in the tone of a child saying its lesson, *“Dominus vobiscum* — that means, ‘May the Lord be with you.’”

“Et cum spirito tuo,” added the mysterious Obi, solemnly.

“Amen,” repeated Biassou; then, resuming his angry manner, and mingling with his reproaches some Latin phrases to impress the negroes with the superior attainments of their chief, he cried: “Go to the rear rank, *sursum corda!* Never attempt to enter the places of those who know Latin, *orate fratres,* or I will have you hung. *Bonus, bona, bonuml”*

The astonished and terrified negro slunk away, greeted by the hoots and hisses of his comrades, who were indignant at his presumption, and impressed with the deep learning of their general.

Burlesque though this scene was, it inspired me with a very high idea of Biassou’s administrative capabilities. He had made ridicule the means of repressing ambitious aspirations, which are always so dangerous to authority in undisciplined bodies, and his cunning gave me a fuller idea of his mental powers, as well as of the crass ignorance of the negroes under his command.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

THE breakfast hour had now arrived. The shell of a turtle was placed before Biassou, in which smoked a species of olla-podrida seasoned with bacon, in which turtle-flesh took the place of lamb; an enormous carib cabbage floated on the surface of the stew, and, in addition, on strips of bark, were dried raisins and water melons, a loaf of maize bread; a bottle of wine, bound round with tarred string, completed the feast. Biassou took from his pocket a few heads of garlic and rubbed his bread with them; then, without even ordering the bleeding form to be carried away, he began to eat, inviting Rigaud to do the same. There was something terrible in Biassou's appetite.

The Obi did not join their repast; like others in his profession, I could easily understand that he never took anything in public, to induce a belief among the negroes that he lived entirely without food.

During breakfast, Biassou ordered one of his aides-de-camp to direct the review of the army to commence, and the different corps began to defile past in fairly good order. The negroes of Morne-Rouge were the first; there were about four thousand of them, divided into companies commanded by chiefs, who were distinguished by their scarlet breeches and sashes. This force was composed of tall and powerful negroes; some of them carried guns, axes, and sabers, but many had no other arms than bows and arrows, and javelins rudely fashioned by themselves. They carried no standard, and moved past in mournful silence. As they marched on, Biassou whispered to Rigaud:

"When will Blanchelande's and Rouvray's shot and shell free me from these" bandits of Morne-Rouge? I hate them; they are nearly all of them Congos, and they only believe in killing in open battle — following the example of their chief Bug-Jargal, a young fool, who plays at being generous and magnanimous. You do not know him, Rigaud, and I hope you never will; for the whites have taken him prisoner, and they may perhaps rid me of him, as they did of Bouckmann."

"Speaking of Bouckmann," answered Rigaud, "there are the negroes of Macaya just passing, and I see in their ranks the negro whom Jean François sent to you with the news of Bouckmann's death. Do you know that that man might upset all the prophecies of the Obi, if he were to say that he had been kept for more than half an hour at the outposts, and that he had told me the news before you sent for him?"

"Diabolo!" answered Biassou, "you. are in the right, my friend; this man's mouth must be shut. Wait a bit."

Then raising his voice he called out "Macaya!" The leader of the division left the ranks, and approached the general with the stock of his firelock reversed, in token of respect.

"Make that man who does not belong to your division leave his rank and come forward."

Macaya speedily brought the messenger of Jean François before the general, who at once assumed that appearance of anger which he knew so well how to simulate.

"Who are you?" cried he.

"General, I am a black."

"*Carramba!* I can see that well enough; but what is your name?"

"My name is Vavelan; my patron saint is Sabas, deacon and martyr, whose feast is on the twentieth day before the nativity of our Lord."

Biassou interrupted him: "How dare you present yourself on parade, amid shining muskets and white cross-belts, with your sword without a sheath, your breeches torn, and your feet muddy?"

"General," answered the negro, "it is not my fault. I was dispatched by the Grand Admiral, Jean François, to bring you the news of the death of the chief of the English negroes; and if my clothes are torn and my feet bemired, it is because I have run, without stopping to take breath, to bring you the news as soon as possible; but they detained me at—"

Biassou frowned. "I did not ask you about that, but how you dared to enter the ranks in so unbecoming a dress. Commend your soul to Saint Sabas, your patron, the deacon and martyr, and go and get yourself shot."

And here I had another proof of the ascendency that Biassou exercised over the insurgents. The unfortunate man who was ordered to go and get himself executed did not utter a protest; he bowed his head, crossed his arms on his breast, saluted his pitiless judge three times, and after having knelt to the Obi, who gave him plenary absolution, he left the cavern. A few minutes afterward a volley of musketry told us that Biassou's commands had been obeyed, and that the negro was no more.

Freed from all sources of uneasiness, the general turned to Rigaud, a gleam of pleasure in his eye, and gave a triumphant chuckle which seemed to say, “Admire me!”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

BUT the review still continued. This army, which had presented so curious a spectacle in camp, had a no less extraordinary appearance under arms. Sometimes a horde of almost naked negroes would come along armed with clubs and tomahawks, marching to the notes of a goat’s horn like mere savages; then would come regiments of mulattoes, dressed in the English or Spanish manner, well armed and equipped, regulating their pace by the roll of the drum; then a band of negresses and their children carrying forks and spits; then some tag-rag, bent under the weight of an old musket without lock or barrel; then griotes with their feathered aprons, griots dancing with hideous contortions, and singing incoherent airs to the accompaniment of guitars, tomtoms, and balafos; then would be a procession of priests, or Obi men, of half-castes, quarter-castes, free mulattoes, or wandering hordes of escaped slaves with a proud look of liberty on their faces and shining muskets on their shoulders, dragging in their ranks well-filled wagons, or some artillery taken from the whites, which were looked on more as trophies than as military engines, and yelling out at the top of their voices the songs of “Grand-Pre” and “Oua-Nasse.” Above the heads of all floated flags, banners, and standards of every form, color, and device — white, red, tricolor, with the lilies, with tlie cap of liberty, bearing inscriptions: “Death to Priests and Nobles!”
“Long live Religion!”
“Liberty and Equality!”
“Long live the King!”
“ Viva Espana!”
“No more Tyrants!” etc. — a confusion of sentiments which showed that the insurgents were a mere crowd collected together, with ideas as different as were the men who composed it. On passing in their turn before the cave the companies drooped their banners, and Biassou returned the salute. He addressed every band either in praise or censure, and each word that dropped from his mouth was received by his men with fanatical respect or superstitious dread.

The wave of savage soldiery passed away at last. I confess that the sight that had at first afforded some distraction to my feelings finished by wearying me. The sun went down as the last ranks filed away, and his last rays cast a copper-colored hue upon the granite portals of the cave.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

BIASSOU seemed to be dreaming. When the review was concluded, his last orders had been given, and the insurgents had retired to the huts, he condescended to address me again.

“Young man,” said he, “you have now had the means of judging of my power and genius; the time has now arrived for you to bear the report to Leogri.”

“It is not my fault that he has not had it earlier,” answered I, coldly.

“You are right,” replied Biassou. He then paused, as if to note what the effect would be upon me of what he was going to say, and then added: “But it will depend upon yourself whether you ever carry the message or not.”

“What do you mean?” exclaimed I, in astonishment.

“Why,” replied he, “that your life depends upon yourself, and that you can save it if you will.”

This sudden paroxysm of pity — the first, and no doubt the last, which had ever possessed Biassou — surprised me much, and astonished the Obi so greatly that he leaped from the position which he had so long maintained, and placing himself face to face with the general addressed him in angry tones:

“What are you saying? Have you forgotten your promise? Neither God nor you can dispose of this life, for it belongs to me.”

At that instant I thought that I recognized the voice; but it was only a fleeting recollection, and in a moment had passed away.

Biassou got up from his seat without betraying any anger, spoke for a few moments in whispers to the Obi, and pointed to the black flag which I had already remarked; and after a little more conversation the Obi nodded in sign of assent. Both of them then reverted to their former positions.

“Listen to me,” said the general, drawing from his pocket the dispatch which Jean Francois had sent to him. “Things are going ill. Bouckmann has been killed. The whites have slaughtered more than two thousand of our men in the district of Cul-de Sac. The colonists are continuing to establish and to fortify military posts. By our own folly we have lost the chance of taking Cap, and it will be long before another occasion will present itself. On the eastern side our line of march has been cut by a river, and the whites have defended the passage by a pontoon battery and a fortified camp. On the south side they have planted artillery on the mountainous road called the Haut-du-Cap. The position is, in addition, defended by a strong stockade, at which all the inhabitants have labored, and in front of it there is a strong chevaux-de-frise. Cap, therefore, is beyond our reach. Our ambush in the ravines of Dompte-Mulatre was a failure; and, to add to all these misfortunes, the Siamese fever has devastated our camps. In consequence, the Grand Admiral (and I agree with him) has decided to treat with the Governor Blanchelande and the Colonial Assembly. Here is the letter that we have addressed to the Assembly on this matter. Listen!"

GENTLEMEN OF THE HOUSE OF DEPUTIES — In the great misfortunes which have afflicted this great and important colony we have also been enveloped, and there remains nothing for us to say in justification of our conduct. One day you will render us the justice that our conduct merits.

According to us, the King of Spain is a good king, who treats us well, and has testified it to us by rewards; so we shall continue to serve him with zeal and devotion.

We see by the law of Sept. 28, 1791, that the National Assembly and the King have agreed to settle definitely the status of slaves, and the political situation of people of color. We will defend the decrees of the National Assembly with the last drop of our blood.

It would be most interesting to us if you would declare, by an order sanctioned by your general, as to your intentions regarding the position of the slaves. Knowing that they are the objects of your solicitude through their chiefs, who send you this, they will be satisfied if the relations now broken are once again resumed.

Do not count, gentlemen Deputies, upon our consenting to take up arms for the revolutionary Assemblies. We are the subjects of three kings — the King of Congo, the born master of all the blacks; the King of France, who represents our fathers; and the King of Spain, who is the representative of our mothers. These three kings are the descendants of those who, conducted by a star, worshiped the Man God. If we were to consent to serve the Assemblies, we might be forced to take up arms and to make war against our brothers, the subjects of those three kings to whom we have sworn fidelity. And, besides, we do not know what is meant by the will of the Nation, seeing that since the world has been in existence we have always executed that of the King. The Prince of France loves us; the King of.Spain never ceases to help us. We aid them — they aid us; it is the cause of humanity; and, besides, if these kings should fail us we could soon enthrone a king of our own.

Such are our intentions, although we now consent to make peace.

“You see,” said Biassou, after he had read this piece of negro diplomacy, every word of which has remained imprinted on my memory, “that our intentions are peaceable; but this is what we want you to do: Neither Jean Francois nor I have been brought up in the schools of the whites, or learned the niceties of their language; we know how to fight, but not how to write. Now, we do not wish that there should be anything in our letter at which our former masters can laugh. You seem to have learned those frivolous accomplishments in which we are lacking. Correct any faults you may find in this dispatch, so that it may excite no derision among the whites, and — I will give you your life!”

This proposition of becoming the corrector of Biassou’s faults of spelling and composition was too repugnant to my pride for me to hesitate for a moment; and besides, what did I care for life? I declined his offer. He appeared surprised.

“What!” exclaimed he, “you prefer death to scrawling a few marks with a pen on a piece of paper?”

“Yes,” replied I.

My determination seemed to embarrass him. After a few moments of thought he again addressed me: “Listen, young fool! I am less obstinate than you are. I give you until tomorrow evening, up to the setting of the sun, when you shall again be brought before me. Think well, then, before you refuse to obey my wishes. Adieu. Let night bring reflection to you; and remember that with us death is not simply death — much comes before you reach it.”

The frightful sardonic grin with which he concluded his last speech too plainly brought to my recollection the awful tortures which “it was Biassou’s greatest pleasure to inflict upon his prisoners.

“Candi,” continued Biassou, “remove the prisoner, and give him in charge to the men of Morne-Rouge. I wish him to live for another day, and perhaps my other soldiers would not have the patience to let him do so.”

The mulatto Candi, who commanded the guard, caused my arms to be bound behind my back; a soldier took hold of the end of the cord, and we left the grotto.

CHAPTER THTRTY-SIX

WHEN any extraordinary events, unexpected anxieties or catastrophes, intrude themselves suddenly into a life up to that period peaceful and happy, these unexpected emotions interrupt the repose of the soul which lay dreaming in the monotony of prosperity. Misfortune which comes on you in this manner does not seem like an awakening from bliss, but rather like a dream of evil. With the man who has been invariably happy, despair begins with stupor. Unexpected misery is like cramp — it clasps, and deadens everything. Men, acts, and things at that time pass before us like a fantastic apparition, and move along as if in a dream. Everything in the horizon of our life is changed, both the atmosphere and the perspective; but it still goes on for a long time before our eyes have lost that sort of luminous image of past happiness which follows in its train, and interposes without cessation between it and the somber present. Then everything that is appears to be unreal and ridiculous, and we can scarcely believe in our own existence, because we find nothing around us that formerly used to compose our life, and we cannot understand how all can have gone away without taking us with it, and why nothing of our life remains to us.

“Were this strained position of the soul to continue long, it would disturb the equilibrium of the brain and become madness — a state happier perhaps than that which remains, for life then is nothing but a vision of past misfortune, acting like a ghost.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

GENTLEMEN, I hardly know why I lay before you my ideas upon such a subject; they are not those which you understand, or can be made to understand. To comprehend them thoroughly, you must have gone through what I have. But such was the state of my mind when the guards of Biassou handed me over to the negroes of Morne-Rouge. I was still in a dream — it appeared as if one body of phantoms passed me over to another; and without opposing any resistance I permitted them to bind me by the middle to a tree. They then gave me some boiled potatoes, which I ate with the mechanical instinct that God grants to man even in the midst of overwhelming thought.

The darkness had now come on, and my guards took refuge in their huts — with the exception of half-a-dozen who remained with me, lying before a large fire that they had lighted to preserve themselves from the cold night-air. In a few moments they were all” buried in profound sleep.

The state of physical weakness into which I had fallen caused my thoughts to wander in a strange manner. I thought of those calm and peaceful days which but a few weeks ago I had passed with Marie, without being able to foresee any future but one of continued happiness. I compared them with the day that had just expired — a day in which so many strange events had occurred as almost to make me wonder whether I was not laboring under some delusion.

I had been three times condemned to death, and still remained under sentence. I thought of my future, bounded only by the morrow, and which offered nothing but misfortune and a death happily near at hand. I seemed to be the victim of some terrible nightmare. Again and again I asked myself if all that had happened was real: was I really in the power of the sanguinary Biassou, and was my Marie lost to me forever? Could this prisoner, guarded by six savages, bound to a tree, and condemned to certain death, really be I? In spite of all my efforts to repel them, the thoughts of Marie would force themselves upon me. In anguish I thought of her fate; I strained my bonds in my efforts to break them, and to fly to her succor, ever hoping that the terrible dream would pass away, and that Heaven would not permit all the horrors that I dreaded to fall upon the head of her who had been united to mo in a sacred bond. In my sad preoccupation the thought of

Pierrot returned to me, and rage nearly took away my senses; the pulses of my temples throbbed nearly to bursting. I hated him, I cursed him; I despised myself for having ever had friendship for Pierrot at the same time I had felt love for Marie; and without caring to seek for the motive which had urged him to cast himself into the waters of Grande-Riviera, I wept because he had escaped me. He was dead, and I was about to die, and all that I regretted was that I had been unable to wreak my vengeance upon him.

During the state of semi-somnolency into which my weakness had plunged me, these thoughts passed through my brain. I do not know how long it lasted, but I was aroused by a man's voice singing distinctly, but at some distance, the old Spanish song, "Yo que soy contrabandista. " Quivering with emotion I opened my eyes; all was dark around me, the negroes slept, the fire was dying down. I could hear nothing more. I fancied that the voice must have been a dream, and my sleep-laden eyelids closed again. In a second I opened them; for again I heard the voice singing sadly, but much nearer, the same song —

This time it was not a charm — it *was* Pierrot's voice. A few moments elapsed; then it rose again through the silence and the gloom, and once more I heard the well-known air of "Yo que soy contrabandista. " A dog ran eagerly to greet me, and rolled at my feet in token of welcome; it was Rask! A tall negro stood facing me, and the glimmer of the fire threw his shadow, swelled to colossal proportions, upon the sward. It was Pierrot!

The thirst for vengeance fired my brain; surprise rendered me motionless and dumb. I was . not asleep. Could the dead return? If not a dream, it must be an apparition. I turned from him with horror.

When he saw me do this, his head sank upon his breast. "Brother," murmured he, "you promised that you would never doubt me when you heard me sing that song. My brother, have you forgotten your promise?"

Rage restored the power of speech to me. "Monster!" exclaimed I, "do I see you at last? Butcher, murderer of my uncle, ravisher of Marie, dare you call me your brother? Do not venture to approach me!"

I forgot that I was too securely tied to make the slightest movement, and glanced to my left side as though to seek my sword.

My intention did not escape him, and he continued in a sorrowful tone of voice: "No, I will not come near you; you are unhappy and I pity you —

while you have no pity for me, though I am much more wretched than you are.”

I shrugged my shoulders; he understood my feelings, and in a half dreamy manner continued:

“Yes, you have lost much; but, believe me, I have lost more than you have.”

But the sound of our conversation had aroused the negro guard. Perceiving a stranger, they leaped to their feet and seized their weapons; but as soon as they recognized the intruder they uttered a cry of surprise and joy, and cast themselves at his feet, striking the ground with their foreheads.

But neither the homage that the negroes rendered to Pierrot, nor the fondlings of Rask, made any impression upon me at the moment. I was boiling over with passion, and maddened at the bonds that restrained me, and at length my fury found words. “Oh, how unhappy I am!” I exclaimed, shedding tears of rage. “I was grieving because I thought that this wretch had committed suicide, and robbed me of my just revenge; and now he is here to mock me, living and breathing under my very eyes, and I am powerless to stab him to the heart! Is there no one to free me from these accursed cords?”

Pierrot turned to the negroes, who were still prostrate before him. “Comrades,” said he, “release the prisoner!”

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

HE was promptly obeyed. With the greatest eagerness, my guards cut asunder the ropes that confined me. I rose up free; but I remained motionless, for surprise rooted me to the spot.

"That is not all," said Pierrot; and snatching a dagger from one of the negroes, he handed it tome. "You can now have your wish. Heaven would not be pleased should I dispute your right to dispose of my life. Three times you have preserved it. Strike! it is yours, I say; and if you wish, strike!"

There was no sign of anger or of bitterness in his face; he appeared resigned and mournful. The very vengeance offered to me by the man with whom I had so much longed to stand face to face, prevented my seizing the opportunity. I felt that all my hatred for Pierrot, all my love for Marie, could not induce me to commit a cowardly murder; besides, however damning appearances might be, a voice from the depths of my heart warned me that no criminal, no guilty man, would thus dare to stand before me and brave my vengeance. Shall I confess it to you — there was a certain imperious fascination about this extraordinary being which conquered me in spite of myself. I pushed aside the dagger he offered to me.

"Wretch!" cried I, "I wish to kill you in fair fight; but I am no assassin. Defend yourself!"

"Defend myself!" replied he, in tones of astonishment, "and against whom?"

"Against me!"

He started back. "Against you! That is the only thing in which I cannot obey you. Look at Rask there: I could easily kill him, for he would let me do it; but as for making him fight me, the thing would be impossible — he would not understand me if I told him to do so. I do not understand you; in your case I am Rask."

After a short silence, he added: "I see the gleam of hate in your eyes, as you once saw it in mine. I know that you have suffered much; that your uncle has been murdered, your plantations burned, your friends slaughtered. Yes, they have plundered your house, and devastated your inheritance; but it was not I that did these things, it was my people. Listen to me. I one day told you that your people had done me much injury; you said that *you* must not be blamed for the acts of others. What was my reply?"

His face grew brighter as he awaited my reply, evidently expecting that I would embrace him; but fixing an angry gaze upon him, I answered —

“You disdain all responsibility as to the acts of your people, but you say nothing about what you have yourself done.”

“What have I done?” asked he.

I stepped up close to him, and in a voice of thunder I demanded, “Where is Marie? What have you done with Marie?”

At this question a cloud passed over his face; he seemed momentarily embarrassed. At last he spoke. “Marie!” said he; “yes, you are right. But too many ears listen to us here.”

His embarrassment, and the words “You are right,” raised the hell of jealousy in my heart; yet still he gazed upon me with a perfectly open countenance, and in a voice trembling with emotion, said —

“Do not suspect me, I implore you! Besides, I will tell you everything; love me, as I love you, with perfect trust.” He paused to mark the effect of his words, and then added tenderly, “May I not again call you brother?”

But I was a prey to my jealous feelings, and his friendly words seemed to me but the deep machinations of *a* hypocrite, and only served to exasperate me more. “Dare you recall the time when you did so, you monster of ingratitude?” I exclaimed.

He interrupted me, a tear shining in his eye: “It is not I who am ungrateful.”

“Well, then,” I continued, “tell me what you have done with .Marie!”

“Not here, not here!” answered he— “other ears than ours listen to our words; besides, you would not believe me, and time presses. The day has come, and you must be removed from this. All is at an end. Since you doubt me, far better would it have been for you to take the dagger and finish all; but wait a little before you take what you call your vengeance — I must first free you. Come with me to Biassou.”

His manner, both in speaking and acting, concealed a mystery which I could not understand. In spite of all my prejudices against the man, his voice always made my heart vibrate. In listening to him, a certain hidden power that he possessed subjugated me. I found myself hesitating between vengeance and pity, between the bitterest distrust and the blindest confidence. I followed him.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

WE left the camp of the negroes of Morne-Rouge. I could not help thinking it strange to find myself at perfect liberty among a horde of savages, in a spot where the evening before each man had seemed only too ready to shed my blood. Far from seeking to bar our progress, both the negroes and the mulattoes prostrated themselves on all sides, with exclamations of surprise, joy, and respect. I was ignorant what rank Pierrot held in the army of the insurgents; but I remembered the influence that he used to exercise over his companions in slavery, and this appeared to me to account for the respect with which he was now treated.

On our arrival at the guard before the grotto, the mulatto Candi advanced before us with threatening gestures, demanding how we dared approach so near the general's quarters; but when he came close enough to recognize my conductor, he hurriedly removed his gold-laced cap, as though terrified at his own audacity, bowed to the ground, and at once introduced us into Biassou's presence with a thousand apologies, of which Pierrot took no heed.

The respect with which the simple negro soldiers had treated Pierrot excited my surprise very little; but seeing Candi, one of the principal officers of the army, humiliate himself thus before my uncle's slave, made me ask myself who this man could be whose power was illimitable. How much more astonished was I then, when, upon being introduced into the presence of Biassou — who was alone when we entered, and was quietly enjoying his calalou — he started to his feet, concealing disappointment and surprise under the appearance of profound respect, bowed humbly to my companion, and offered him his mahogany throne.

Pierrot declined it. "No, Jean Biassou," said he. "I have not come to take your place, but simply to ask a favor at your hands."

"Your Highness," answered Biassou, redoubling his obeisances, "you know well that all Jean Biassou has is yours, and that you can dispose as freely of all as you can of Jean Biassou himself."

"I do not ask for so much," replied Pierrot, quickly; "all I ask is the life and liberty of this prisoner," and he pointed to me.

For a moment Biassou appeared embarrassed, but he speedily recovered himself. "Your servant is in despair, your Highness; for you ask of him, to his great regret, more than he can grant. He is not Jean Biassou’s prisoner, does not belong to Jean Biassou, and has nothing to do with Jean Biassou.”

“What do you mean?” asked Pierrot, in severe tones, “by saying that he does not belong to you? Does ‘ any one else hold authority here except you?”

“Alas, yes, your Highness.”

“Who is it?”

“My army.”

The sly and obsequious manner in which Biassou eluded the frank and haughty questions of Pierrot showed, had it depended solely upon himself, that he would gladly have treated his visitor with far less respect than he felt himself now compelled to do.

“What!” exclaimed Pierrot, “your army! And do not you command it?”

Biassou, with every appearance of sincerity, replied, “Does your Highness really think that we can command men who are in insurrection because they will not obey?”

I cared too little for my life to break the silence which I had imposed upon myself, else, having seen the day before the despotic authority that Biassou exercised over his men, I might have contradicted his assertions, and laid bare his duplicity to Pierrot.

“Well, if you have no authority over your men, and if they are your masters, what reason can they have for hating your prisoner?” , “Bouckmann has been killed by the white troops,” answered Biassou, endeavoring to conceal his sardonic smile under a mask of sorrow, “and my men are determined to avenge upon this white man the death of the chief of the Jamaica negroes. They wish to show trophy against trophy, and desire that the head of this young officer should serve as a counterpoise to the head of Bouckmann in the scales in which the good Giu weighs both parties.”

“Do you still continue to carry on this horrible system of reprisals? Listen to me, Jean Biassou! it is these cruelties that are the ruin of our just cause. Prisoner as I was in the camp of the whites (from which I have managed to escape), I had not heard of the death of Bouckmann until you told me. It is the just punishment of Heaven for his crimes. I will tell you another piece of news: Jeannot, the negro chief who served as a guide to draw the white troops into the ambush of Dompte-Mulâtre — Jeannot also is dead. You know — do not interrupt me, Biassou! — you know that he rivaled you and Bouckmann in his atrocities; and pay attention to this — it was not the thunderbolt of Heaven, nor the bullets of the whites, that struck him; it was Jean Francois himself who ordered this act of justice to be performed.”

Biassou, who had listened with an air of gloomy respect, uttered an exclamation of surprise. At this moment Rigaud entered, bowed respectfully to Pierrot, and whispered in Biassou’s ear. The murmur of many voices was heard in the camp.

“Yes,” continued Pierrot, “Jean Francois, who has no fault except a preposterous love of luxury and show; whose carriage with its six horses takes him every day to hear Mass at the Grande-Riviere — Jean Francois himself has put a stop to the crimes of Jeannot. In spite of the cowardly entreaties of the brigand, who clung in despair to the knees of the priest of Marmalade who attended him in his last moments, he was shot beneath the very tree upon which he used to hang his living victims upon iron hooks. Think upon this, Biassou. Why these massacres which provoke the whites to reprisals? Why all these juggleries which only tend to excite the passions of our unhappy comrades, already too much exasperated? There is at Trou-Cofii a mulatto impostor, called Romaine the Prophet, who is in command of a fanatical band of negroes; he profanes the holy sacrament of the Mass, he pretends that he is in direct communication with the Virgin, and he urges on his men to murder and pillage in the name of Marie.”

There was a more tender inflection in the voice of Pierrot as he uttered this name than even religious respect would have warranted, and I felt annoyed and irritated at it.

“And you,” continued he, “you have in your camp some Obi, I hear — some impostor like this Romaine the Prophet. I well know that having to lead an army composed of so many heterogeneous materials, a common bond is necessary; but can it be found no where save in ferocious fanaticism and ridiculous superstition? Believe me, Biassou, the white men are not so cruel as we are. I have seen many planters protect the lives of their slaves. I am not ignorant that in some cases it was not the life of a man, but a sum of money that they desired to save; but at any rate their interest gave them the appearance of a virtue. Do not let us be less merciful than they “ are, for it is not our interest to be so. “Will our cause be more holy and more just because we exterminate the women, slaughter the children, and burn the colonists in their own houses? These, however, are every-day occurrences.

Answer me, Biassou! must the traces of our progress be always marked by a line of blood and fire?”

He ceased. The fire of his glance, the accent of his voice, gave to his words a force of conviction and authority which it is impossible for me to imitate. Like a fox in the clutches of a lion, Biassou seemed to seek for some means of escape from the power that constrained him.

While Biassou vainly sought for a pretext, the chief of the negroes of Cayèr, Rigaud, who the evening before had calmly watched the horrors that had been perpetrated in his presence, seemed to be shocked at the picture that Pierrot had drawn, and exclaimed with a hypocritical affectation of grief, “Great heavens! how terrible is a nation when roused to fury!”

CHAPTER FORTY

THE confusion in the camp appeared to increase, to the great uneasiness of Biassou. I heard afterward that it was caused by the negroes of Morne-Rouge, who hurried from one end of the camp to the other, announcing the return of my liberator, and declaring their intention of supporting him in whatever object he had come to Biassou's camp for. Rigaud had informed the generalissimo of this, and it was the fear of a fatal division in the camp that prompted Biassou to make some sort of concession to the wishes of Pierrot.

"Your Highness," remarked he, with an air of injured innocence, "if we are hard on the whites, you are equally severe upon us. You are wrong in accusing us of being the cause of the torrent, for it is the torrent that drags us away with it. But what can I do at present that will please you?"

"I have already told you, Senor Biassou," answered Pierrot; "let me take this prisoner away with me."

Biassou remained for a few moments silent, as though in deep thought; then putting on an expression of as great frankness as he was able, he answered, "Your Highness, I wish to prove to you that I have every desire to please you. Permit me to have two words in private with the prisoner, and he shall be free to follow you."

"If that is all you ask, I agree," replied Pierrot.

His eyes, which up to that moment had wandered about in a distrustful manner, glistened with delight, and he moved away a few paces to leave us to our conversation.

Biassou drew me on one side into a retired part of the cavern, and said in a low voice, "I can only spare your life upon the condition that I proposed; are you ready to fulfill it?"

He showed me the dispatch of Jean Francois; to consent appeared to me too humiliating.

"Never!" answered I, firmly.

"Aha! " repeated he, with his sardonic chuckle, "are you always as firm? You have great confidence, then, in your protector. Do you know who he is?"

"I do," answered I, quickly. "He is a monster, as you are; only he is a greater hypocrite."

He started back in astonishment, seeking to read in my glance if I spoke seriously.

"What!" exclaimed he, "do you not know him then?"

With a disdainful look, I replied: "I only know him as my uncle's slave; and his name is Pierrot."

Again Biassou smiled bitterly. "Aha, that indeed is strange: he asks for your life and liberty, and you say that you only know him for a monster like myself."

"What matters that?" I answered; "if I do gain a little liberty, it is not to save my own life, but to take his."

"What is that you are saying?" asked Biassou. "And yet you seem to speak as you believe; I cannot think that you would trifle with your life. There is something beneath all this that I do not understand. You are protected by a man that you hate; he insists upon your life being spared, and you are longing to take his! But it matters little to me; you desire a short spell of freedom — it is all that I can give you. I will leave you free to follow him; but swear to me, by your honor, that you will return to me and reconstitute yourself my prisoner two hours before the sun sets. You are a Frenchman, and I will trust you."

What shall I say, gentlemen? Life was a burden to me, and I hated the idea of owing it to Pierrot, for every circumstance pointed him out as a just object of my hatred. I could not think for a moment that Biassou (who did not easily permit his prey to escape him) would allow me to go free except upon his own conditions. All I desired was a few hours' liberty which I could devote to discovering the fate of my beloved before my death. Biassou, relying upon my honor as a Frenchman, would grant me these, and without hesitation I pledged it.

"Your Highness," said Biassou, in obsequious tones, "the white prisoner is at your disposal; you can take him with you, for he is free to accompany you wherever you wish."

"Thanks, Biassou," cried Pierrot, extending his hand. "You have rendered me a service which places me entirely at your disposal. Remain in command of our brethren of Morne-Rouge until my return."

Then he turned toward me; I never saw so much happiness in his eyes before. "Since you are free," cried he, "come with me." And with a strange earnestness he drew me away with him.

Biassou looked after us with blank astonishment, which was even perceptible through the respectful leave that he took of my companion.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

I WAS longing to be alone with Pierrot. His embarrassment when I had questioned him as to the fate of Marie, the ill-concealed tenderness with which he had dared to pronounce her name, had made those feelings of hatred and jealousy which had sprung up in my heart take far deeper root than at the time I saw him bearing away through the flames of Fort Galifet her whom I could scarcely call my wife. What did I care for the generous indignation with which he had reproved the cruelties of Biassou, the trouble which he had taken to preserve my life, and the curious manner which marked all his words and actions? What cared I for the mystery that appeared to envelop him, which brought him living before my eyes when I thought to have witnessed his death? He proved to be a prisoner of the white troops when I believed that he lay buried in the depths of Grande-Riviere — the slave become a king, the prisoner a liberator. Of all these incomprehensible things one was clear — Marie had been carried off by him; and I had this crime to punish, this outrage to avenge. However strange were the events that had passed under my eyes, they were not sufficient to shake my determination, and I had waited with impatience for the moment when I could compel my rival to explain all. That moment had at last arrived.

We had passed through crowds of negroes, who cast themselves on the ground as we pursued our way, exclaiming in tones of surprise, “Miraculo! yano esta prisonero!” (“A miracle! he is no longer a prisoner!”); but whether they referred to Pierrot or to myself I neither knew nor cared. We had gained the outskirts of the camp, and rocks and trees concealed from our view the outposts of Biassou; Rask in high good humor was running in front of us, and’ Pierrot was following him with rapid strides, when I stopped him.

“Listen to me!” cried I; “it is useless to go any further: the ears that you dreaded can no longer listen to us. What have you done with Marie? Tell me that!”

Concentrated emotion made my voice tremble. He gazed upon me kindly.

“Always the same question?” said he.

“Yes, always,” returned I, furiously; “always! I will put that question to you as you draw your last breath, or as I utter my last sigh. Where is Marie?”

“Can nothing, then, drive away your doubts of my loyalty? But you shall know all soon.”

“Soon, monster!” repeated I, “soon! it is now, at this instant, that I want to know all. Where is Marie? Where is Marie? Answer, or stake your life against mine. Defend yourself!”

“I have already told you,” answered he, sadly, “that that is impossible; the stream will not struggle against its source — and my life, which you have three times saved, cannot contend against yours. Besides, even if I wished it, the thing is impossible; we have but one dagger between us.”

As he spoke, he drew the weapon from his girdle and offered it to me. “Take it,” said he.

I was beside myself with passion. I seized the dagger and placed the point on his breast; he never attempted to move.

“Wretch!” cried I, “do not force me to murder you. I will plunge this blade into your heart if you do not at once tell me where my wife is!”

He replied in his calm way: “You are the master to do as you like; but with clasped hands I implore you to grant me one hour of life, and to follow me. Can you doubt him who thrice has owed his life to you, and whom you once called *brother?* Listen: if in one hour from this time you still doubt. me, you shall be at perfect liberty to kill me. That will be time enough; you see that I do not attempt to resist you. I conjure you in the name of Marie — of your wife,” he added slowly, as though the victim of some painful recollection— “give me but another hour, I beg of you, not for my sake, but for yours.”

There was so much pathos in his entreaties that an inner feeling warned me to grant his request, and I yielded to that secret ascendency which he exercised over me, but which at that time I should have blushed to confess.

“Well,” said I, slowly, “I will grant you one hour, and I am ready to follow you;” and as I spoke I handed him his dagger.

“No,” answered he, “keep it; you still distrust me, but let us lose no time.”

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

AGAIN we started. Rask, who during our conversation had shown frequent signs of impatience to renew his journey, bounded joyously before us. We plunged into a virgin forest, and after half an hour's walking came out on a grassy opening in the wood. On one side was a waterfall dashing over rugged rocks, while the primeval trees of the forest surrounded it on all sides. Among the rocks was a cave, the gray face of which was shrouded by a mass of climbing plants. Rask ran toward it barking; but at a sign from Pierrot he became silent, and the latter, taking me by the hand, led me without a word to the entrance of the cave.

A woman with her back toward the light was seated on a mat; at the sound of our steps she turned. My friends, it was Marie! She wore . the same white dress which she had worn on the day of our marriage, and the wreath of orange blossoms was still on her head. She recognized me in a moment, and with a cry of joy threw herself into my arms. I was speechless with surprise and emotion. At her cry an old woman carrying a child in her arms hurried from an inner chamber formed in the depth of the cave; she was Marie's nurse, and she carried my uncle's youngest child.

Pierrot hastened to bring some water from a neighboring spring, and threw a few drops in Marie's face, who was overcome by emotion; she speedily recovered, and opening her eyes exclaimed —

"Leopold! my Leopold!"

"Marie!" cried I, and my words were stifled in a kiss.

"Not before me, for pity's sake!" cried a voice, in accents of agony.

We looked round, it came from Pierrot. The sight of our endearments appeared to inflict terrible torture on him; his bosom heaved, a cold perspiration bedewed his forehead, and every limb quivered. Suddenly he hid his face in his hands and fled from the grotto, repeating in tones of anguish —

"Not before me! not before me!"

Marie half raised herself in my arms, and following his retreating form with her eyes, exclaimed, "Leopold, our happiness seems to trouble him; can it be that he loves me?"

The exclamation of the slave had shown that he was my rival, but Marie's speech proved that he was my trusty friend.

"Marie," answered I, as the wildest happiness mingled with the deepest regret filled my heart, "Marie, were you ignorant of it?"

"Until this moment I was," answered she, a blush overspreading her beautiful features. "Does he really love me, for he never let me know it?"

I clasped her to my bosom, in all the madness of happiness. "I have recovered both wife and friend! How happy am I, but how guilty, for I doubted him!"

"What!" cried Marie, in surprise, "had you doubts of Pierrot? Oh, you have indeed been in fault. Twice has he saved my life, and perhaps more than life," she added, casting down her eyes. "Without him the alligator would have devoured me; without him the negroes — It was Pierrot who rescued me from their hands when they were about to send me to rejoin my unhappy father."

She broke off her speech with a flood of tears.

"And why," asked I, "did not Pierrot send you to Cap, to your husband?"

"He tried to do so," replied she, "but it was impossible. Compelled as he was to conceal me both from the whites and the blacks, his position was a most difficult one; and then, too, he was ignorant where you were. Some said that they had seen you killed, but Pierrot assured me that this was not the case; and a something convinced me that he spoke the truth, for I felt that had you been dead I should have died at the same time."

"Then, Pierrot brought you here?" asked I.

"Yes, my Leopold; this solitary cave is known only to him. At the same time that he rescued me, he saved all that remained alive of our family, my little brother and my old nurse — and hid us here. The place is very nice, and now that the war has destroyed our house and ruined us, I should like to live here with you. Pierrot supplied all our wants. He used to come very often; he wore a plume of red feathers on his head. He used to console me by talking of you, and always assured me that we should meet again; but for the past three days I have not seen him, and I was beginning to be uneasy, when to-day he came back with you. He had been seeking for you, had he not?"

"Yes," replied I.

"But if so, how can he be in love with me? Are you sure of it?"

"Quite," answered I. "It was he who was about to stab me beneath your window, and spared me lest it should afflict you; it was he who sang the love songs at the pavilion by the river."

“Then he is your rival,” exclaimed Marie, with naive surprise; “and the wicked man with the wild marigolds is Pierrot! I can hardly believe that: he was so respectful and humble to me, much more so than when he was our slave. It is true that sometimes he looked at me in a strange manner, but I attributed his sadness to our misfortunes. If you could only know with what tenderness he spoke of you, my Leopold! His friendship made him speak of you as much as my love did.”

These explanations of Marie enchanted and yet grieved me. I felt how cruelly I had treated the noble-hearted Pierrot, and I felt all the force of his gentle reproach, “It is not I who am ungrateful.”

At this instant Pierrot returned. His face was dark and gloomy, and he looked like a martyr returning from the place of torture, but yet retaining an air of triumph. He came toward me, and pointing to the dagger in my belt said. “The hour has passed!”

“Hour! what hour?” asked I.

“The one you granted me; it was necessary for me to have so much time allowed me in which to bring you here. Then I conjured you to spare my life; now I supplicate you to take it away.”

The most tender feelings of the heart — love, gratitude and friendship — united themselves together to torture me. Unable to say a word, but sobbing bitterly, I cast myself at the feet of the slave. He raised me up in haste.

“What are you doing?” cried he.

“I pay you the homage that is your due; but I am no longer worthy of friendship such as yours. Can your friendship be pushed so far as to forgive me my ingratitude?”

For a time his expression remained stern; he appeared to be undergoing a violent mental contest. He took a step toward me, then drew back, and seemed on the point of speaking; but no words passed his lips. The struggle was a short one, he opened his arms to embrace me, saying:

“May I *now* call you brother?”

My only reply was to cast myself on his breast.

After a short pause he added:

“You were always kind, but misfortune had rendered you unjust.”

“I have found my brother once again,” said I. “I am unfortunate no longer, but I have been very guilty.”

“Guilty, brother? I also have been guilty, and more so than you; you are no longer unhappy, but I shall be so forever!”

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

THE expression of pleasure which the renewal of our friendship had traced on his features faded away, and an appearance of deep grief once more pervaded them.

“Listen,” said he coldly. “My father was the King of Kakongo. Each day he sat at the door of his hut and dispensed justice among his subjects. After every judgment, according to the custom of the kings his ancestors, he drank a full goblet of palm wine. “We were happy and powerful. But the Europeans came to our country; it was from them that I learned the accomplishments which you appeared to be surprised at my possessing. Our principal acquaintance among the Europeans was a Spanish captain; he promised my father territories far greater than those he now ruled over, treasure, and white women. My father believed him, and gathering his family together, followed him. Brother, he sold us as slaves!”

The breast of the negro rose and fell, as he strove to restrain himself; his eyes shot forth sparks of fire; and without seeming to know what he did, he broke in his powerful grasp a fancy medlar-tree that stood beside him.

“The master of Kakongo in his turn had a master, and his son toiled as a slave in the furrows of St. Domingo. They tore the young lion from his father that they might the more easily tame him; they separated the wife from the husband, and the little children from the mother who nursed them, and from the father who used to bathe them in the torrents of their native land. In their place they found cruel masters and a sleeping place shared with the dogs!”

He was silent, though his lips moved as though he were still continuing his narrative; after a moment’s pause he seized me roughly by the arm, and continued: “Brother, do you understand? I have been sold to different masters like a beast of burden. Do you remember the punishment of Oge? It was on that day that I saw my father after a long separation: *he was on the wheel!”*

I shuddered; he went on:

“My wife was outraged by white men, and she died calling for revenge. I must tell you I was guilty toward her, for I loved another; but let that pass by. All my people urged me to deliver and avenge them; Rask brought me their messages. I could do nothing for them, I was fast in your uncle’s prison. The day upon which you obtained my release, I hurried off to save my children from the power of a cruel master. Upon the very day that I arrived, the last of the grand-children of the King of Kakongo had expired under the blows of the white man; he had followed the others!”

He interrupted his recital, and coldly asked me: “Brother, what would you have done?”

This frightful tale froze me with horror. I replied by a threatening gesture. He understood me, and with a bitter smile he continued:

“The slaves rose against their master, and punished the murder of my children. They chose me for their chief. You know the frightful excesses that were perpetrated by the insurgents. I heard that your uncle’s slaves were on the point of rising. I arrived at Acul on the night upon which the insurrection broke out. You were away. Your uncle had been murdered in his bed, and the negroes had already set fire to the plantation. Not being able to restrain them (for in destroying your uncle’s property they thought that they were avenging my injuries), I determined to save the survivors of his family. I entered the fort by the breach that I had made. I intrusted your wife’s nurse to a faithful negro. I had more trouble in saving your Marie; she had hurried to the burning portion of the fort to save the youngest of her brothers, the sole survivor of the massacre. The insurgents surrounded her, and were about to kill her. I burst upon them, and ordered them to leave her to my vengeance; they obeyed me, and retired. I took your wife in my arms; I intrusted the child to Rask — and I bore them both away to this cavern, of which I alone knew the existence and the access. Brother, such was my crime!”

More than ever overwhelmed with gratitude and remorse, I would again have thrown myself at his feet, but he stopped me.

“Come,” said he, “take your wife and let us leave this, all of us.”

In wonder I asked him whither he wished to conduct us.

“To the camp of the whites,” answered he. “This retreat is no longer safe. To-morrow at break of day the camp of Biassou will be attacked, and the forest will assuredly be set on fire. Besides, I have no time to lose. Ten lives are in jeopardy until my return. We *can* hasten because you are free; we *must* hasten because I am not.”

These words increased my surprise, and I pressed him for an explanation.

“Have you not heard that Bug-Jargal is a prisoner? “ replied he, impatiently.

“Yes; but what has Bug-Jar gal to do with you? “ In his turn he seemed astonished, and then in a grave voice he answered: “I *am Bug-Jargal”*

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

1HAD thought that nothing that related to this extraordinary man could have surprised me. I had experienced some feelings of astonishment in finding the slave Pierrot transformed into an African king; but my admiration reached its height when from his own confession I learned that he was the courageous and magnanimous Bug-Jargal, the chief of the insurgents of Morne-Rouge; and I now understood the respectful demeanour shown by all the rebels, even by Biassou, to Bug-Jargal, the King of Kakongo. He did not notice the impression that his last words had made upon me.

"They told me," continued he, "that you were a prisoner in Biassou's camp, and someone would need to deliver you."

but I heard a report that Biassou had announced his intention of executing, before sunset to-day, a young prisoner named Leopold d'Auverney. They doubled my guards, and I was informed that my execution would immediately follow yours, and that in the event of escape ten of my comrades would suffer in my stead. So you see that I have no time to lose."

I still detained him. "You made your escape then?" asked I.

"How else could I have been here? It was necessary to save you. Did I not owe you my life? Come, let us set out; we are an hour's march from the camp of the whites, and about the same distance from that of Biassou. See, the shadows of the cocoanut-trees are lengthening, and their round tops look on the pass like the egg of the giant condor. In three hours the sun will have set. Come, brother, time waits for no man."

In three hours the sun will have set! These words froze my blood, like an apparition from the tomb. They recalled to my mind the fatal promise which bound me to Biassou. Alas! in the rapture of seeing Marie again, I had not thought of our approaching eternal separation. I had been overwhelmed with my happiness; a flood of joyful emotions had swept away my memory, and in the midst of my delight I had forgotten that the inexorable finger of death was beckoning to me. But the words of my friend recalled everything to my mind. *In three hours the sun will have set!* It would take an hour to reach Biassou's camp. There could be no faltering with my duty. The villain had my word, and it would never do to give him the chance of despising what he seemed still to put trust in — the word of a Frenchman; better far to die. The alternative was a terrible one, and I confess that I hesitated for a moment before I chose the right course. Can you blame me, gentlemen?

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

WITH a deep sigh, I placed one hand in that of Bug-Jargal, and the other in that of Marie, who gazed with anxiety on the sadness that had overspread my features.

“Bug-Jargal,” said I, struggling with emotion, “I intrust to you the only being in the world that I love more than you — my Marie. Return to the camp without me, for I may not follow you.”

“Great heavens!” exclaimed Marie, hardly able to breathe from her terror and anxiety, “what new misfortune is this?”

Bug Jargal trembled, and a look of mingled sorrow and surprise passed over his face. “Brother, what is this that you say?”

The terror that had seized upon Marie at the thought of the coming misfortune, which her love for me had almost caused her to divine, made me determine to spare her the dreadful truth for the moment. I placed my mouth to Bug-Jargal’s ear, and whispered in hurried accents: “I am a prisoner. I swore to Biassou that two hours before sunset I would once more place myself in his hands; in fact, I have sworn to return to my death!”

Filled with rage, in a loud voice he exclaimed: “The monster! This then was his motive for a secret interview with you: it was to bind you with this fatal promise. I ought to have distrusted the wretch. “Why did I not foresee that there must be some treachery lurking in the request, for he is a mulatto, not a black?”

“What is this — what treachery — what promise?” said Marie, in an agony of terror. “And who is Biassou?”

“Silence, silence,” repeated I, in a low voice to Bug-Jargal; “do not let us alarm Marie.”

“Good,” answered he; “but why did you give such a pledge — how could you consent?”

“I thought that you had deceived me, and that Marie was lost to me forever. What was life to me then?”

“But a simple promise cannot bind you to a brigand like that.”

“I gave my word of honor.”

He did not seem to understand me. “Your word of honor,” repeated he; “but what is that? You did not drink out of the same cup; you have not broken a ring together, or a branch of the red blossomed maple?”

“No, we have done none of these things.”

“Well, then, what binds you to him?”

“My honor!”

“I cannot understand you; nothing pledges you to Biassou; come with us!”

“I cannot, my brother, for I am bound by my promise.”

“No, you are not bound,” cried he, angrily. “Sister, add your prayers to mine, and entreat your husband not to leave you. He wishes to return to the negro camp from which I rescued him, on the plea that he has promised to place his life in Biassou’s hands.”

“What have you done?” cried I.

It was too late to stay the effects of the generous impulse that had prompted him to endeavor to save the life of his rival by the help of her he loved. Marie cast herself into my arms with a cry of anguish, her hands clasped my neck, and she hung upon my breast speechless and breathless.

“Oh, my Leopold, what does he say?” murmured she, at last. “Is he not deceiving me? It is not immediately after our reunion that you must quit me again. Answer me quickly, or I shall die. You have no right to throw away your life, for you have given it to me. You would not leave me, never to see me again?”

“Marie,” answered I, “we shall meet again, but it will be in another place.”

“In another place! Where?” she asked, in faltering accents.

“In heaven,” I answered; for to this angel I could not lie.

Again she fainted, but this time it was from grief. I raised her up, and placed her in the arms of Bug-Jargal, whose eyes were full of tears.

“Nothing can keep you back, then,” said he. “I will add nothing to my entreaties; this sight ought to be enough. How can you resist Marie? For one word such as she has spoken to you I would have sacrificed the world; and you cannot even give up death for her!”

“Honor binds me,” answered I, sadly. “Farewell, Bug-Jargal! farewell, brother! I leave her to you.”

He grasped my hand, overwhelmed with grief, and appeared hardly to understand me. “Brother,” said he, “in the camp of the whites there are some of your relatives; I will give her over to them. For my part, I cannot accept your legacy.”

He pointed to a rocky crag which towered high above the adjacent country. “Do you see that rock?” asked he; “when the signal of your death shall float from it, it will promptly be answered by the volley that announces mine.”

Hardly understanding his last words, I embraced him, pressed a kiss upon the pale lips of Marie, who was slowly recovering under the attentions of her nurse, and fled precipitately, fearing that another look or word would shake my resolution.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

I RUSHED headlong, and plunged into the depths of the forest, following the tracks that we had left but a short time before, not daring to cast a last glance behind me. To stifle the grief which oppressed my heart, I dashed, without a moment's pause, through the thickets, past hill and plain, until I reached the crest of a rock from which I could see the camp of Biassou, with its lines of wagons and huts swarming with life, and looking in the distance like a vast ant-hill. Then I halted, for I felt that I had reached the end of my journey and my life at the same time. Fatigue and emotion had weakened my physical powers, and I leaned against a tree to save myself from falling, and allowed my eyes to wander over the plain, which was to be my place of execution.

Up to this moment I had imagined that I had drained the cup of bitterness and gall to the dregs; but I had not until then tasted the most cruel of all misfortunes — that of being constrained by powerful moral force to voluntarily renounce life when it appeared most sweet. Some hours before, 1 cared not for the world; extreme despair is a simulation of death which makes the reality more earnestly desired. Marie had been restored to me, my dead happiness had been resuscitated, my past had become my future, and all my overshadowed hopes had beamed forth more gloriously than ever; and again had a new life — a life of youth and love and enchantment — shone gloriously upon the horizon. I was ready to enter upon this life; everything invited me to it; no material obstacle, no hinderance, was apparent. I was free, I was happy, and yet — I was about to die. I had made but one step into paradise, and a hidden duty compelled me to retrace it, and to enter upon a path the goal of which was death!

Death has but few terrors for the crushed and broken spirit; but how heavy and icy is his hand when it grasps the heart which has just begun to live and revel in the joys of life! I felt that I had emerged from the tomb, and had for a moment enjoyed the greatest delights of life, love, friendship, and liberty; and now the door of the sepulcher was again opened, and an unseen force compelled me once more to enter it forever.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

WHEN the first bitter pang of grief had passed, a kind of fury took possession of me; and I entered the valley with a rapid step, for I felt the necessity of shortening the period of suspense. When I presented myself at the negro outpost, the sergeant in command at first refused to permit me to pass. It seemed strange that I should be obliged to have recourse to entreaties to enable me to effect my object. At last two of them seized me by the arms and led me into Biassou's presence.

As I entered the grotto he was engaged in examining the springs of various instruments of torture with which he was surrounded. At the noise my guard made in introducing me he turned his head, but my presence did not seem to surprise him.

"Do you see these?" asked he, displaying the horrible engines which lay before him.

I remained calm and impassive, for I knew the cruel nature of the "hero of humanity," and I was determined to endure to the end without blenching.

"Leogri was lucky in being only hanged, was he not?" asked he, with his sardonic sneer.

I gazed upon him with cold disdain, but I made no reply.

"Tell his reverence the chaplain that the prisoner has returned," said he to an aid-decamp.

During the absence of the negro, we both remained silent, but I could see that he watched me narrowly. Just then Rigaud entered; he seemed agitated, and whispered a few words to the general.

"Summon the chiefs of the different bands," said Biassou, calmly.

A quarter of an hour afterward, the different chiefs in their strange equipments were assembled in the grotto. Biassou rose.

"Listen to me, friends and comrades! The whites will attack us here at daybreak; our position is a bad one, and we must quit it. At sunset we will march to the Spanish frontier. Macaya, you and your negroes will form the advanced guards. Padrejan, see that the guns taken at Pralato are spiked; we cannot take them into the mountains. The brave men of Croix-des-Bouquets will follow Macaya; Toussaint will come next with the blacks from Leogane and Trose. If the griots or the griotes make any disturbance, I will hand them over to the executioner of the army. Lieutenant-Colonel Cloud will distribute the English muskets that were disembarked at Cape Cabron, and will lead the half-breeds through the by-ways of the Vista. Slaughter any prisoners that may remain, notch the bullets, and poison the arrows. Let three tons of arsenic be thrown into the wells; the colonists will take it for sugar, and drink without distrust. Block “up the roads to the plain with rocks, line the hedges with marksmen, and set fire to the forest. Rigaud, you will remain with me; Candi, summon my body-guard. The negroes of Morne-Rouge will form the rearguard, and will not evacuate the camp until sunrise.”

He leaned over to Rigaud, and whispered hoarsely: “They are Bug-Jargal’s men; if they are killed, all the better. ‘Muerta la tropa, murte el gefe!’ (‘If the men die, the chief will die.’)

“Go, my brethren,” he added, rising, “you will receive instructions from Candi.”

The chiefs left the grotto.

“General,” remarked Rigaud, “we ought to send that dispatch of Jean Francois; affairs are going badly, and it would stop the advance of the whites.”

Biassou drew it hastily from his pocket. “I agree with you; but there are so many faults, both in grammar and spelling, that they will laugh at it.”

He presented the paper to me. “For the last time, will you save your life? My kindness gives you a last chance. Help me to correct this letter, and to re-write it in proper official style.”

I shook my head.

“Do you mean no?” asked he.

“I do,” I replied.

“Reflect,” he answered, with a sinister glance at the instruments of torture.

“It is because I have reflected that I refuse,” replied I. “You are alarmed for the safety of yourself and your men, and you count upon this letter to delay the just vengeance of the whites. I do not desire to retain a life which may perhaps have saved yours. Let my execution commence.”

“Ha, boy!” exclaimed Biassou, touching the instruments of torture with his foot, “you are growing familiar with these, are you? I am sorry, but I have not the time to try them on you; our position is a dangerous one, and we must get out of it as soon as we can. And so you refuse to act as my secretary? Well, you are right; for it would not after all have saved your miserable life, which, by the way, I have promised to his reverence my chaplain. Do you think that I would permit any one to live who holds the secrets of Biassou?”

He turned to the Obi, who just then entered. “Good father, is your guard ready?”

The latter made a sign in the affirmative.

“Have you taken it from among the negroes of Morne-Rouge, for they are the only ones who are not occupied in preparations for departure?”

Again the Obi bowed his head.

Then Biassou pointed out to me the black flag which I had before remarked in a corner of the grotto. “That will show your friends when the time comes to give your place to your lieutenant. But I have no more time to lose; I must be off. By the way, you have been for a little excursion; how did you like the neighborhood?”

“I noticed that there were enough trees upon which to hang you and all your band.”

“Ah,” retorted he, with his hideous laugh, “there is one place that you have not seen, but with which the good father will make you acquainted. Adieu, my young captain, and give my compliments to Leogri.”

He bade me farewell with a chuckle that reminded me of the hiss of the rattlesnake, and turned his back as the negroes dragged me away. The veiled Obi followed us, his rosary in his hand.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

I WALKED between my guards without offering any resistance, which would indeed have been hopeless. We ascended the shoulder of a hill on the western side of the plain, and then my escort sat down for a brief period of repose. As we did so, I cast a last lingering look at the setting sun, which would never rise again for me on this earth.

When my guards rose to their feet, I followed their example, and we descended into a little dell, the beauty of which under any other circumstances would have filled me with admiration. A mountain stream ran through the bottom of the dell, which by its refreshing coolness produced a thick and luxuriant growth of vegetation, and fell into one of those dark-blue lakes with which the hills of St. Domingo abound. How often in happier days have I sat and dreamed on the borders of these beautiful lakes, in the twilight hour, when beneath the influence of the moon their deep azure changed into a sheet of silver, or when the reflections of the stars sowed the surface with a thousand golden spangles! How lovely this valley appeared to me! There were magnificent plane-trees of gigantic growth, closely grown thickets of *mauritias*, a kind of palm, which allows no other vegetation to flourish beneath its shade; date-trees and magnolias with the goblet-shaped flowers. The tall catalpa, with its polished and exquisitely chiseled blossoms, stood out in relief against the golden buds of the ebony-trees; the Canadian maple mingled its yellow flowers with the blue aureolas of that species of the wild honeysuckle which the negroes call “coali”; thick curtains of luxurious creepers concealed the bare sides of the rocks, while from the virgin soil rose a soft perfume, such as the first man may have inhaled amid Eden’s groves.

We continued our way along a footpath traced on the brink of the torrent. I was surprised to notice that this path closed abruptly at the foot of a tall peak, in which was a natural archway, from which flowed a rapid torrent. A dull roar of falling waters and an impetuous wind issued from this natural tunnel. The negroes who escorted me took a path to the left which led into a cavern, and seemed to be the bed of a torrent that had long been dried up. Overhead I could see the rugged roof, half hidden, by masses of vegetation, and the same sound of falling waters filled the whole of the vault.

As I took the first step into the cavern, the Obi came to my side, and whispered in a hoarse voice, “Listen to what I have to predict: only one of us two shall leave by this path and issue again from the entrance of the cave.”

I disdained to make any reply, and we advanced further into the gloom. The noise became louder, and drowned the sound of our footfalls. I fancied that there must be a waterfall near, and I was not deceived. After moving through the darkness for nearly ten minutes, we found ourselves on a kind of internal platform caused by the central formation of the mountain. The larger portion of this platform, which was of a semicircular shape, was inundated by a torrent which burst from the interior of the mountain with a terrible din. Above this subterranean hall the roof rose into the shape of a dome, covered with moss of a yellowish hue. A large opening was formed in the dome, through which the daylight penetrated; and the sides of the crevice were fringed with green trees, gilded just now by the last rays of the setting sun. At the northern extremity of the platform the torrent fell with a frightful noise into a deep abyss, over which appeared to float, without being able to illuminate its depths, a feeble portion of the light which came through the aperture in the roof.

Over this terrible precipice hung the trunk of an old tree, whose topmost branches were filled with the foam of the waterfall, and whose knotty roots pierced through the rock two or three feet below the brink. This tree, whose top and roots were both swept by the torrent, hung over the abyss like a skeleton arm, and was so destitute of foliage that I could not distinguish its species. It had a strange and weird appearance; the humidity which saturated its roots prevented it from dying, while the force of the cataract tore off its new shoots, and only left it with the branches that had strength to resist the force of the water.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

IN this terrible spot the negroes came to a halt, and I knew that my hour had come. It was in this abyss, then, that was to be sunk all my hopes in this world. The image of the happiness which but a few hours before I had voluntarily renounced brought to my heart a feeling of regret, almost one of remorse. To pray for mercy was unworthy of me, but I could not refrain from giving utterance to my regrets.

“Friends,” said I to the negroes who surrounded me, “it is a sad thing to die at twenty years of age, full of life and strength, when one is loved by one whom in your turn you adore, and when you leave behind you eyes that will ever weep for your untimely end.”

A mocking burst of laughter hailed my expression of regret. It came from the little Obi. This species of evil spirit, this living mystery, approached me roughly.

“Ha, ha, ha! you regret life then, Labadosea Dios! My only fear was that death would have no terrors for you.”

It was the same voice, the same laugh that had so often before baffled my conjectures. “Wretch!” exclaimed I, “who are you?”

“You are going to learn,” replied he, in a voice of concentrated passion; and thrusting aside the silver sun that half concealed his brown chest, he exclaimed, “Look!”

I bent forward. Two names were written in white letters on the hairy chest of the Obi, showing but too clearly the hideous and ineffaceable brand of the heated iron. One of these names was Effingham; the other was that of my uncle and myself, D’Auverney! I was struck dumb with surprise.

“Well, Leopold d’Auverney,” asked the Obi, “does not your name tell you mine?”

“No,” answered I, astonished to hear the man name me, and seeking to re-collect my thoughts. “These two names were only to be found thus united upon the chest of my uncle’s fool. But the poor dwarf is dead; and besides that, he was devotedly attached to us. You cannot be Habibrah.”

“No other!” shrieked he; and casting aside the blood-stained cap, he raised his veil and showed me the hideous features of the household fool. But a threatening and sinister expression had usurped the half-imbecile smile which was formerly eternally imprinted on his features.

“Great God!” exclaimed I, overwhelmed with surprise, “do all the dead, then, come back to life? It *is* Habibrah, my uncle’s fool!”

“His fool, and also his murderer.”

I recoiled from him in horror. “His murderer, wretch! Was it thus that you repaid his kindness—”

He interrupted me. “His kindness! rather say his insults.”

“What!” I again cried, “was it you, villain, who struck the fatal blow?”

“It was,” he replied, with a terrible expression upon his face. “I plunged my knife so deeply into his heart that he had hardly time to cast aside sleep before death claimed him. He cried out feebly, ‘Habibrah, come to me!’ *but I was with him already!”*

The cold-blooded manner in which he narrated the murder disgusted me. “Wretch! cowardly assassin! You forgot, then, all his kindness; that you ate at his table, and slept at the foot of his bed—”

“Like a dog!” interrupted Habibrah, roughly, “como un perro. I thought too much of what you call his kindness, but which I looked upon as insults. I took vengeance upon him, and I will do the same upon you. Listen: do you think that because I am a mulatto and a deformed dwarf that I am not a man? Ah, I have a soul stronger, deeper, and bolder than the one that I am about to set free from your girlish frame. I was given to your uncle as if I had been a pet monkey. I was his butt; I amused him, while he despised me. He loved me, do you say? Yes, forsooth; I had a place in his heart between his dog and his parrot; but I found a better place there with my dagger.”

I shuddered.

“Yes,” continued the dwarf, “it was I, I that did it all. Look me well in the face, Leopold d’Auverney: you have often laughed at me, now you shall tremble before me. And you dare to speak of your uncle’s liking for me — a liking that carried degradation with it. If I entered the room, a shout of contemptuous laughter was my greeting; my appearance, my deformities, my features, my costume — all furnished food for laughter to your accursed uncle and his accursed friends, while I was not allowed even to remain silent; it was necessary for me to join in the very laughter that was’ leveled at me! I foam with rage while I think of it. Answer me: do you think that after such humiliations I could feel anything but the deadliest hatred for the creature that inflicted them upon me? Do you not think that they were a thousand times harder to endure than the toil in the burning sun, the fetters, and the whip of the driver, which were the lot of the other slaves? Do you not think that they would cause ardent, implacable, and eternal hatred to spring up in the heart of man as lasting as the accursed brand which degrades my chest? Has not the vengeance that I have taken for my sufferings been short and insufficient? “Why could I not make my tyrant suffer something of what I endured for so many years? Why could he not before his death know the bitterness of wounded pride, and feel what burning traces the tears of shame leave upon a face condemned to wear a perpetual smile? Alas! it is too hard to have waited so long for the hour of vengeance, and then only to find it in a dagger thrust! Had he but known the hand that struck him, it would have been something; but I was too eager to hear his dying groan, and I drove the knife too quickly home: he died without having recognized me, and my eagerness balked my vengeance. This time, however, it shall be more complete. You see me, do you not? Though in point of fact you may be unable to recognize me in my new character. You have always been in the habit of seeing me laughing and joyous; but now nothing prevents me from letting my true nature appear on my face, and I do not greatly resemble my former self. You only knew my mask; look now upon my real face!”

At that moment his appearance was truly terrible. “Monster!” exclaimed I, “you deceive yourself; there is more of buffoonery than heroism in your face even now, and nothing in your heart but cruelty.”

“Do not speak of cruelty,” retorted he, “think of your uncle—”

“Wretch!” returned I, “if he were cruel, it was at your instigation. You, to pretend to pity the position of the poor slaves! Why, then, did you not exert all your influence to make their master treat them less harshly? Why did you never intercede in their favor?”

“I would not have done so for the world. Would I ever attempt to hinder a white man from blackening his soul by an act of cruelty? No, no! I urged him to inflict more and more punishment upon his slaves, so as to hurry on the revolt, and thus draw down a surer vengeance upon the heads of our oppressors. In seeming to injure my brethren I was serving them.”

I was thunderstruck at such a cunning act of diplomacy carried out by such a man.

“Well,” continued the dwarf, “do you believe now that I had the brain to conceive and the hand to execute? What do you think of Habibrah the buffoon? What do you think of your uncle’s ‘fool’?”

“Finish what you have begun so well,” replied I. “Let me die, but let there be no more delay.”

“And suppose I wish for delay? Suppose that it does my heart good to watch you in the agonies of suspense? You see Biassou owed me my share in the last plunder. When I saw you in our camp I asked for your life as my share, and he granted it willingly; and now you are mine, I am amusing myself with you. Soon you will follow the stream of the cataract into the abyss beneath; but before doing so, let me tell you that I have discovered the spot where your wife is concealed, and it was I that advised Biassou to set the forest on fire: the work, I imagine, is already begun. Thus your family will be swept from the face of the earth. Your uncle fell by steel, you will perish by water, and your Marie by fire!”

“Villain! villain!” I exclaimed, and I made an effort to seize him by the throat, but. a wave of his hand summoned my guards.

“Bind him!” cried he; “he precipitates his hour of doom!”

In dead silence the negroes began to bind me with the cords that they had carried with them. Suddenly I fancied that I heard the distant barking of a dog, but this sound might be only an illusion caused by the noise of the cascade.

The negroes had finished binding me, and placed me on the brink of the abyss into which I was so soon to be hurled. The dwarf, with folded arms, gazed upon the scene with a sinister expression of joy. I lifted my eyes to the opening in the roof so as to avoid the triumphant expression of malice painted on his countenance, and to take one last look at the blue sky.

At that instant the barking was more distinctly heard, and the enormous head of Rask appeared at the opening. I trembled.

The dwarf exclaimed, “Finish with him!” and the negroes, who had not noticed the dog, raised me in their arms to hurl me into the hell of waters which roared and foamed beneath me.

CHAPTER FIFTY

“COMRADES!” cried a voice of thunder.

All looked at the spot from whence the sound proceeded. Bug-Jargal was standing on the edge of the opening, a crimson plume floating on his head.

“Comrades,” repeated he, “stay your hands!”

The negroes prostrated themselves upon the earth in token of submission.

“I am Bug-Jargal!” continued he.

The negroes struck the earth with their heads, uttering cries the meaning of which I could not comprehend.

“Unbind the prisoner!? commanded the chief.

But now the dwarf appeared to recover from the stupor into which the sudden appearance of Bug-Jargal had thrown him, and he seized by the arm the negro who was preparing to cut the cords that bound me. “What is the meaning of this? What are you doing?” cried he.

Then, raising his voice, he addressed Bug-Jargal: “Chief of Morne-Rouge,” cried he, “what are you doing here?”

“I have come to command my own men,” was the reply.

“Yes,” answered the dwarf, in tones of concentrated passion, “these negroes do certainly belong to your band; but,” added he, raising his voice again, “by what right do you interfere with my prisoner?”

The chief answered, “I am Bug-Jargal!” and again the negroes struck the ground with their foreheads.

“Bug-Jargal,” continued Habibrah, “cannot contravene the orders of Biassou. This white man was given to me by Biassou; I desire his death, and die he shall. Obey me,” he added, turning to the negroes, “and hurl him into the abyss!”

At the well-known voice of the Obi the negroes rose to their feet and took a step toward me. I thought all was lost.

“Unbind the prisoner!” cried Bug-Jargal again.

In an instant I was free. My surprise was equaled by the fury of the Obi. He attempted to throw himself upon me. The negroes interfered; then he burst out into imprecations and threats.

“Demonios! rabia! inferno de mi alma! How, wretches, you refuse to obey me? Do you not recognize my voice? “Why did I lose time in talking to this accursed one? I ought to have had him hurled without delay to the fishes of the gulf. By wishing to make my vengeance more complete I have lost it altogether. Orabia de Satan. Listen to me: if you do not obey me, and hurl him into the abyss, I will curse you; your hair shall grow white, the mosquitoes and sandflies shall eat you up alive; your legs and your arms shall bend like reeds; your breath shall burn your throat like red-hot sand; you shall die young, and after your death your spirit shall be compelled to "turn a millstone as big as a mountain, in the moon where it is always cold!"

The scene was a strange one. I was the only one of my color in a damp and gloomy cavern surrounded by negroes with the aspect of demons, balanced as it were upon the edge of a bottomless gulf, and every now and then threatened by a deformed dwarf, by a hideous sorcerer upon whose striped garments and pointed cap the fading light shone faintly, yet protected by a tall negro who was standing at the only point from which daylight could be seen. It appeared to me almost that I was at the gates of hell, awaiting the conflict between my good and evil angels, to result in the salvation or the destruction of my soul. The negroes appeared to be terrified at the threats of the Obi, and he endeavored to profit by their indecision.

"I desire the death of the white man, and he *shall* die; obey me!"

Bug-Jargal replied solemnly: "He shall live! I am Bug-Jargal; my father was the King of Kakongo who dispensed justice at the gate of his palace."

Again the negroes cast themselves upon the ground.

The chief continued: "Brethren, go and tell Biassou not to unfurl the black banner upon the mountain-top which should announce to the whites the signal of this man's death, for. he was the savior of Bug-Jargal's life, and Bug-Jargal wills that he should live."

They rose up. Bug-Jargal threw his red plume on the ground before them. The chief of the guard picked it up with every show of respect, and they left the cavern without a word. The Obi, with a glance of rage, followed them down the subterranean avenue.

I will not attempt to describe my feelings at that moment. I fixed my eyes, wet with tears, upon Pierrot, who gazed upon me with a singular expression of love and tenderness.

"God be praised," said he, "you are saved! Brother, go back by the road by which you entered; you will meet me again in the valley."

He waved his hand to me and disappeared from my sight.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

EAGER to arrive at the appointed meeting-place, and to learn by what fortunate means my savior had been enabled to make his appearance at so opportune a moment, I prepared to leave the cavern in which my nerves had been so severely tried; but as I prepared to enter the subterranean passage an unexpected obstacle presented itself in my path. It was Habibrah!

The revengeful Obi had not in reality followed the negroes as I had believed, but had concealed himself behind a rocky projection of the cave, waiting for a propitious moment for his vengeance; and this moment had come. He laughed bitterly as he showed himself. A dagger, the same that he was in the habit of using for a crucifix, shone in his right hand. At the sight of it I recoiled a step.

"Ha, accursed one! did you think to escape me? But the fool is not such a fool after all! I have you, and this time there shall be no delay. Your friend Bug-Jargal shall not wait for you long — you shall soon be at the meeting-place; but it will be the wave of the cataract that shall bear you there."

As he spoke he dashed at me with uplifted weapon.

"Monster!" cried I, retreating to the platform, "just now you were only an executioner; now you are a murderer."

"I am an avenger!" returned he, grinding his teeth.

I was on the edge of the precipice; he endeavored to hurl me over with a blow of his dagger. I avoided it. His foot slipped on the treacherous moss which covered the rocks, and he rolled into the slope polished and rounded by the constant flow of water.

"A thousand devils!" roared he.

He had fallen into the abyss. I have already mentioned that the roots of the old tree projected through the crevices of the rocks, a little below the edge of the precipice. In his fall the dwarf struck against these, and his striped petticoat caught in them; he grasped at them as a last hope of safety, and clung to them with all the energy of despair. His pointed bonnet fell from his head; to maintain his position he had to let go his dagger, and the two together disappeared in the depths of the abyss.

Habibrah, suspended over the terrible gulf, strove vainly to regain the platform, but his short arms could not reach the rocky edge, and he broke his nails in useless efforts to obtain a hold on the muddy surface of the rocks which sloped down into the terrible abyss. He howled with rage. The slightest push on my part would have been sufficient to hurl him to destruction; but such an act would have been one of cowardice, and I made no movement. This moderation on my part seemed to surprise him. Thanking Heaven for its mercies, I determined to abandon him to his fate, and was about to leave the cave, when, in a voice broken with fear, and which appeared to come from the depths of the abyss, be addressed me.

"Master," cried he, "master, do not go, for pity's sake! Do not, in the name of Heaven, leave a guilty creature to perish whom it is in your power to save! Alas! my strength is failing me; the roots bend and slip through my fingers; the weight of my body drags me down: I must let go, or my arms will break! Alas! master, the fearful gulf boils and seethes beneath me! Nombre santo de Dios! Have you no pity for the poor fool? He has been very guilty, but prove that the white men are better than the mulattoes, the masters than the slaves, by saving him!"

I approached the brink of the precipice, and the feeble light that broke through the aperture in the roof showed me on the repulsive features of the dwarf an expression which I had never noticed before — that of prayer and supplication.

"Senor Leopold," continued he, encouraged by the movement of pity that I showed, "can you see a fellow-creature in so terrible a position of peril, without stretching out a hand to save him? Give me your hand, master; with very slight assistance from you I can save myself: I only ask for a little help. Help me then, and my gratitude shall be as great as my crimes!"

I interrupted him. "Unhappy wretch, do not recall them to my memory."

"It is because I repent of them that I do so. Oh, be generous to me! Oh, heavens, my hand relaxes its grasp, and I fall! Ay desdichado! Your hand, your hand! in the name of the mother who bore you, give me your hand!"

I cannot describe the tone of agony in which he pleaded for help. In this moment of peril I forgot all; he was no longer an enemy, a traitor, and an assassin, but an unhappy fellow-creature, whom a slight exertion upon my part could rescue from a frightful death. He implored me in heart-rending accents. Reproaches would have been fruitless and out of place. The necessity for help was urgent and immediate. I stooped, knelt down on the brink of the precipice, and grasping the trunk of the tree with one hand, I extended the other to Habibrah.

As soon as it was within his reach, he grasped it with both his hands, and hung on to it with all his strength. Far from attempting to aid “ me in my efforts to draw him up, I felt that he was exerting all his powers to draw me down with him into the abyss. If it had not been for the assistance afforded to me by the trunk of the tree, I must infallibly have been “dragged over by the violent and unexpected jerk that the wretched man gave me.

“Villain!” cried I, “what are you doing?”

“Avenging myself!” answered he, with a peal of devilish laughter. “Aha, madman! have I got you in my clutches once more? You have of your own free-will placed yourself again in my power, and I hold you tight. You were saved and I was lost; and yet you of your own accord place your head between the jaws of the alligator, because it wept after having roared. I can bear death, since it will give me revenge. You are caught in the trap, *amigo*, and I shall take a companion with me to feed the fishes of the lake.”

“Ah, traitor!” cried I, struggling with all my strength, “is it thus that you serve me when I was trying to save you?”

“Yes,” hissed he. “I know that we could have saved ourselves together, but I would rather that we should die at the same moment.

I had rather compass your death than save my life. Come down!”

As he spoke, his brown muscular hands renewed their grasp upon mine with unexpected strength; his eyes blazed, his mouth foamed. The strength, the departure of which he had before so piteously bewailed, had returned to him, increased a thousand-fold by the hope of revenge. His feet were planted like two perpendicular levers on a ledge of rock, and he struggled like a tiger against the root which, entangled in his clothes, supported him in spite of himself; for he was endeavoring with all his might to shake himself free, so as to bring all his weight to bear on me, and to drag me more quickly into the yawning gulf below. In his rage he endeavored to bite me, while his hideous features were rendered more terrible by their expression of satanic frenzy. He looked like the demon of the cave seeking to drag down his victim to his abode of gloom and darkness.

One of my knees, by good fortune, was planted in a groove of the rock, and my arm was wound round the trunk of the tree, and I strove against the efforts of the dwarf with all the strength that the feeling of self-preservation could give me at such a moment. Every now and then I drew a long breath, and shouted “Bug-Jargal!” with all the force of my lungs. But the roar of the cascade and the distance that he must be off gave me but faint hopes of my voice reaching him.

The dwarf, who had not anticipated so vigorous a resistance on my part, redoubled his efforts. I began to grow weak, though in reality the struggle had not taken so long as the narration of it. A violent pain paralyzed my arm, my sight grew dim, bright sparks flashed before my eyes, and a buzzing sound filled my ears. I heard the creaking of the root as it bent, mingled with the laugh of the monster, and the abyss seemed to rise up toward me as though eager to engulf its prey. But before I gave up all hope I made a last effort, and collecting together my exhausted forces, I once again shouted, “Bug-Jargal!”

A loud bark replied to me; it was Rask who thus answered my appeal for help. I glanced upward: Bug-Jargal and his dog were gazing at me from the orifice in the roof. He saw my danger at once. “Hold on!” cried he.

Habibrah, fearing that I might yet be saved, foamed with rage; and crying, “Come down there! come down!” he renewed the attack with almost supernatural vigor.

At this moment, weakened by the long struggle, my arm lost its hold of the tree. All seemed over with me, when I felt myself seized from behind. It was Rask! At a sign from his master he had leaped down on the platform, and seized me by the skirts of my uniform with his powerful teeth.

This unlooked-for aid saved me. Habibrah had exhausted all his strength in a last convulsive effort; while I put forth all mine, and succeeded in withdrawing my hand from his cramped and swollen fingers. The root, which had been for some time yielding, now parted suddenly; Rask gave me a violent pull backward, and the wretched dwarf disappeared in the foam of the cascade, hurling a curse at me which was swallowed up with him in the whirl of waters.

Such was the terrible end of my uncle’s fool.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

THE excitement of the last few hours, the terrible struggle and its awful conclusion, had utterly exhausted me; and I lay where I had fallen, almost deprived of sense or power of motion. The voice of Bug-Jargal restored me to myself.

“Brother,” cried he, “hasten to leave this place. In half an hour the sun will have set; I will meet you in the valley. Follow Rask.”

The words of my friend restored hope, strength, and courage to me. I rose to my feet. The great dog ran rapidly down the subterranean passage; 1 followed him, his bark guiding me through the darkness. After a time I saw a streak of light, and in a few minutes I gained the entrance, and breathed more freely as I passed through the archway. As I left the damp and gloomy vault behind me, I recalled to my mind the prediction of the dwarf, and its fatal fulfillment, “One only of us shall return by this road!” His attempt had failed, but the prophecy had been carried out.

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

BUG-JARGAL was waiting for me in the valley. I threw myself into his arms; but I had so many questions to put to him that I could not find words in which to express them.

"Listen to me," said he. "Your wife, my sister, is in safety in the camp of the white men; I handed her over to a relative of yours who was in command of the outposts, and I wished again to constitute myself a prisoner, lest they should execute the ten prisoners whose lives were security for my reappearance. But your relative told me to return, and, if possible, to prevent your execution; and that the ten negroes should not be executed until Biassou should announce the fact by displaying a black flag on one of the highest peaks of the mountains. Then I returned to do my best. Rask led me to where you were; thanks be to Heaven, I arrived in time! You will live, and so shall I."

He extended his hand to me, adding, "Brother, are you satisfied?"

I again clasped him to my breast; I entreated him not to leave me again, but to remain with the white troops, and I promised him to exert all my influence to procure him a commission in the colonial army.

But he interrupted me with an angry air. "Brother," asked he, "do I propose to you to join *my* army?"

I kept silence, for I felt that I had been guilty of a folly; then he added in a tone of affected gayety:

"Come, let us hurry to the camp to reassure your wife."

This proposal was what I most ardently desired; we started at once. The negro knew the way, and took the lead; Rask followed us.

Here D'Auverney stopped suddenly, and cast a gloomy look around him; perspiration in large beads covered his forehead; he concealed his face with his hands. Rask looked at him with an air of uneasiness.

"Yes, you may well look at me like that," murmured he.

An instant afterward he rose from his seat in a state of violent agitation, and followed by the sergeant and the dog, rushed hurriedly from the tent.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

"I WILL lay a bet," said Henri, "that we are nearing the end of the drama; and I should really feel sorry if anything happened to Bug-Jargal, for he was truly a famous fellow."

Paschal removed from his lips the mouth of his wicker-covered flask, and said, " I would give twelve dozen of port to have seen the cocoanut cup that he emptied at a draught."

Alfred, who was gently humming the air of a love-song, interrupted himself by asking Henri to tie his aguilettes; then he added: "The negro interests me very much, but I have not dared to ask D'Auverney if he knew the air of 'Beautiful Padilla.'"

"What a villain that Biassou was!" continued Paschal; "but for all that he knew the value of a Frenchman's word! There are, however, people more pitiless than Biassou — my creditors, for instance."

"But what do you think of D'Auverney's story?" asked Henri.

"Ma foi," answered Alfred, "I have not paid much attention to it; but I certainly had expected something more interesting from D'Auverney's lips; and then I want to know the air to which Bug-Jargal sang his songs. In fact, I must admit that the story has bored me a little."

"You are right," returned Paschal, the aid-de-camp. "Had I not had my pipe and my bottle, I should have passed but a dreary evening. Besides, there were a lot of absurdities in it: how can we believe, for instance, that that little thief of a sorcerer (I forget his name) would have drowned himself for the sake of destroying his enemy?"

Henri interrupted him with a smile. "You cannot understand any one taking to water, can you, Captain Paschal? But what struck me more than anything was, that every time D'Auverney mentioned the name of Bug-Jargal, his lame dog lifted up his head."

The sound of the sentry carrying arms warned them of D'Auverney's return. All remained silent. He walked up and down the tent for a few moments with folded arms, without a word.

Old Sergeant Thaddeus, who had returned with his captain, bent over Rask and furtively caressed him, hoping by that means to conceal his countenance, which was full of anxiety, from the eyes of his officer. At length, after making a strong effort, D'Auverney continued his narrative.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

RASK followed us. The highest rock in the valley was not yet lighted by the rays of the sun; a glimmer of light touched it for an instant, and then passed away.

The negro trembled, and grasped my hand firmly. “Listen,” said he.

A dull sound like the discharge of a piece of artillery was heard, and was repeated by the echoes of the valleys.

“It is the signal,” said the negro in a gloomy voice. “It was a cannon shot, was it not?”

I nodded in sign of the affirmative.

In two bounds he sprang to the top of a lofty rock; I followed him. He crossed his arms and smiled sadly. “Do you see that?” asked he.

I looked in the direction to which he pointed; and on the lofty peak to which he had drawn my attention during our last interview with Marie, and which was now glowing in the rays of the setting sun, I saw a huge black flag, its folds flapping idly in the breeze.

[At this point of his recital D’Auverney again paused.]

I learned afterward that Biassou, in a hurry to leave his ground, had ordered the flag to be hoisted without waiting for the return of the negroes who had been dispatched to assist at my execution.

Bug-Jargal was still in the same position, his arms folded, and his eyes eagerly fixed upon the fatal signal. Suddenly he started, and seemed about to descend from his post of observation. “Great heavens! my unfortunate comrades!” cried he. “Did you hear that gun?”

I made no reply.

“It was the signal, my brother. They are leading them now to the place of execution.”

His head fell upon his breast; after a short pause, he said: “Go, brother, and rejoin your wife; Rask will guide you to her;” and he whistled an African air, which Rask appeared to recognize, for he wagged his tail and seemed ready to set, out.

Bug-Jargal grasped my hand, and strove to smile; but his features were contracted, and his look was ghastly. “Farewell forever!” cried he, and dashed into the thicket by which we were surrounded.

I remained motionless; the little that I understood of the position made me fear the worst.

Rask, on seeing his master disappear, advanced to the edge of the rock, and raising his head uttered a plaintive howl. Then he turned to me; his tail was between his legs and his eyes were moist. He looked at me with an air of inquietude, and turned to the spot from which his master had disappeared, and barked several times. I understood him, and shared his fears. Suddenly he dashed off in pursuit of his master, and I should soon have lost sight of him had he not every now and then halted to give me time to come up to him. In this manner we passed through many a valley and leafy glade; we climbed hills and crossed streams. At last —

D'Auverney's voice failed him, an expression of despair covered his face, and he could not find words to continue his narrative. "Continue it, Thaddeus," said he, "for I can go on no further."

The old sergeant was not less distressed than his captain, but he made an effort to obey him.

"With your permission, gentlemen," said he, "and since it is your wish, Captain, I must tell you, gentlemen, that Bug-Jargal (otherwise called Pierrot) was a tall negro, very strong, very gentle, and the bravest man in the world — except you, Captain, if you please. But I was terribly prejudiced against him — for which I will never pardon myself, though you, Captain, have forgiven me — so much so, that when we heard that your execution had been fixed for the evening of the second day I flew into a furious rage with the poor fellow, and felt a fiendish pleasure in informing him that his death would pay for yours, or that if he escaped ten of his men would be shot by way of reprisal. He said nothing upon hearing this, but an hour afterward he made his escape through a great hole which he pierced in the wall of his prison."

[D'Auverney made a movement of impatience, and Thaddeus continued.]

"Well, when we, saw the great black flag hoisted on the mountain, and as the negro had not returned — a fact which surprised none of us — our officers ordered the signal gun to be fired, and I was directed to conduct the ten negroes to the place of execution, which was a spot we call the Devil’s Mouth, about — but it does not matter how far it was from the camp. Well, as you can imagine, we did not take them there to set them at liberty. I had them bound, as is the custom, and paraded my firing party, when who should burst upon us but the tall negro. He was out of breath with the speed that he had made.

“‘Good-evening, Thaddeus,’ said he. ‘I am in time.’

“No, gentlemen, he did not utter another word, but hastened to unbind his comrades. I stood there in stupefaction. Then (with your permission, Captain) there was a good deal of generous argument between the other negroes and himself, which might have lasted longer, but — well, it is no good hiding the fact, it was I that stopped it. At any rate he took their place. Then the great dog came, poor Rask! He leaped at my throat: he ought to have held me longer, but Pierrot made a sign to him, and the poor brute released me; but he could not be prevented from taking his place at his master’s feet. Then, believing that you were dead, Captain — well, I was in a fine rage. I gave the word; Bug-Jargal fell, and a bullet broke the dog’s foot.

“Since that time, gentlemen,” continued the sergeant, sadly, “Rask has been lame. Then I heard groans in the adjacent wood; I reached it, and found you: a stray bullet had hit you as you were running forward to save the tall negro. Yes, Captain, you were wounded, but Bug-Jargal was dead!

“We carried you back to the camp; you were not dangerously wounded, and the doctors soon cured you; but I believe Madame Marie’s nursing had a good deal to do with it.”

The sergeant stopped in his story, and D’Auverney, in a solemn voice, added: “Bug-Jargal was dead!”

Thaddeus bowed his head. “Yes,” said he, “he spared my life, and I — I killed him.”

EPILOGUE

THE reader, in general, is seldom satisfied with the conclusion of a narrative unless it enters into every detail in winding up the story. For this reason the minutest researches have been made into the facts having reference to the concluding details of the last scenes of Leopold D'Auverney's life, as well as those of his sergeant and the dog Rask.

The reader is already aware that the captain's feelings of melancholy arose partly from the death of Bug-Jargal, otherwise called Pierrot; but he is not acquainted with the fact that those feelings were terribly increased by the loss of his beloved Marie — who, after having been preserved from the horrors that attended the taking of Fort Galifet, perished in the burning of Cap, which took place some weeks later.

The fate of Leopold d'Auverney may be briefly recapitulated. A great victory had been won by the Republican forces against one of those united European armies which so often struggled vainly against our soldiers; and the General of Division, who was in command of the entire force, was seated in his tent drawing up, from the reports of his staff, the bulletin which was to be sent to the National Convention concerning the victory of the day before. As he was thus occupied, an aid-de-camp announced to him the arrival of a Representative of the People, who demanded an audience. The general loathed these embassadors of the guillotine, who were sent by the party of the Mountain to humiliate the military officers, and too often to demand the heads of the most gallant of the men who had fought bravely for the Republic — looking upon them as chartered informers charged with the hateful mission of spying upon glory. But it would have been dangerous for him to refuse to admit him, especially after such a victory as had resulted to the arms of the Republic. The gory" idol which France had then set up almost invariably demanded victims of the highest lineage; and the executioners of the Place de la Revolution were delighted if they could at the same time cause a head and a coronet to fall — were it one of thorns, like that of Louis XVI.; of flowers, like those of the girls of Verdun; or of laurels, like those of Custine or of Andre Chenier. The general, therefore, gave immediate orders that the Representative of the People should be introduced to his presence.

After a few clumsy congratulations regarding the recent victory, the Representative of the People came up close to the general, and muttered in a suppressed voice; “But this is not all, Citizen General; it is not enough to destroy the foreign enemy — those nearer home must be also crushed.”

“What do you mean, Citizen Representative?” asked the astonished general.

“There is in your division,” answered the emissary of the Convention, in an unpleasant manner, “à captain named Leopold d’Auverney, who is serving in the Thirty-second Brigade; do you know him, General?”

“Know him! certainly I do,” replied the general; “only as you came in I was reading the report of the adjutant-general which refers to him. The Thirty-second Brigade had in him an excellent officer, and I was about to recommend him for promotion.”

“What, Citizen General!” interposed the representative, harshly, “were you thinking of promoting him?”

“Such was most certainly my intention, citizen.”

“Victory has blinded you, General,” cried the representative, imperiously; “take care what you say or do. If you cherish serpents who are the enemies of the people, take care that the people do not crush you and the serpents at the same moment. This Leopold d’Auverney is an aristocrat, a hater of the revolution, a royalist, a Girondin! Public justice demands his head, and he must be given up to me on the spot.”

“I cannot do so,” replied the general, coldly.

“How! you cannot do so?” shouted the representative, whose rage was redoubled at this opposition. “Are you ignorant, General, of the extent of my power? I, in the name of the Republic, command you, and you have no option but to obey. Listen to me: in consideration of your recent success, I will read you the report which has been handed in regarding this D’Auverney, and which I shall send with him to the Public Prosecutor: ‘Leopold Auverney (formerly known as D’Auverney), captain in the Thirty-second Brigade, is convicted of having, at a meeting of conspirators, narrated an anti-revolutionary tale, conducing to the ridicule of the true principles of Equality and Liberty, and exalting the worn-out superstitions known under the names of *royalty* and *religion;* convicted, secondly, of having used expressions deservedly forbidden by all good republicans, to describe certain recent events, notably those referring to the negroes of St. Domingo; convicted, thirdly, of having made use of the expression

Monsieur instead of *Citizen* during the whole of his narrative; and, by the said narrative, of having endeavored to bring into contempt the Republic one and indivisible, and also to propagate the infamous doctrines of the Girondins.’ Death is the punishment for these crimes, and I demand his body. Do you hesitate, General, to hand this traitor over to me, to meet the well-merited punishment of his crimes?”

“Citizen,” answered the general, with dignity, “this enemy of his country has given his life for her. As a contrast to your report, listen to an extract from mine: ‘Leopold d’Auverney, captain in the Thirty-second Brigade, has contributed largely to the success that our arms have obtained. A formidable earthwork had been erected by the allies; it was the key to their position, and it was absolutely necessary to carry it at the point of the bayonet. It was an almost impregnable position, and the death of the stormers who led the attack was almost inevitable. Captain d’Auverney volunteered to lead the forlorn hope; he carried the earthwork, but was shot down at the moment of victory. Sergeant Thaddeus of the Thirty-second, and a large dog were found dead within a few paces of him.’ It was my intention to propose that the National Convention should pass a vote that Captain Leopold d’Auverney had merited the thanks of his country. You see, Citizen Representative,” continued the general, calmly, “that our duties differ slightly. We both send a report to the Convention. The same name appears in each list: you denounce him as a traitor, I hold him up to posterity as a hero; you devote him to ignominy, I to glory; you would erect a scaffold for him, while I propose a statue in his honor. He is fortunate in having, by death in action, escaped the infamy you proposed for him. He whose death you desired is dead; he has not waited for you.”

Furious at seeing his conspiracy disappear with the conspirator, the Representative muttered, “Dead, is he? More’s the pity!”

The general caught his words, and in indignant tones exclaimed: “There is still something left for you, Citizen Representative. Go seek for the body of Captain d’Auverney among the ruins of the redoubt. Who can tell if the bullets of the enemy may not have spared his head for his country’s guillotine?”

THE END

BUG-JARGAL

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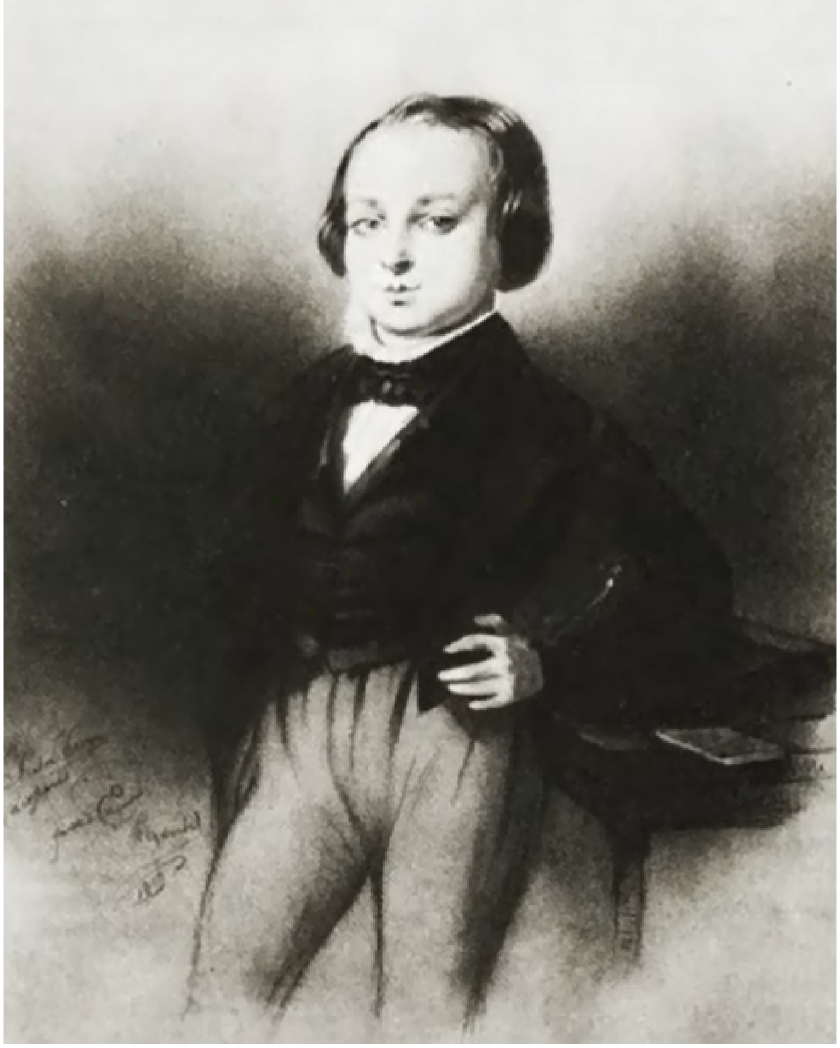

A young Hugo

PREFACE DE L’EDITION ORIGINALE

L’épisode qu’on va lire, et dont le fond est emprunté à la révolte des esclaves de Saint-Domingue en 1791, a un air de circonstance qui eût suffi pour empêcher l’auteur de le publier. Cependant une ébauche de cet opuscule ayant été déjà imprimée et distribuée à un nombre restreint d’exemplaires, en 1820, à une époque où la politique du jour s’occupait fort peu d’Haïti, il est évident que si le sujet qu’il traite a pris depuis un nouveau degré d’intérêt, ce n’est pas la faute de l’auteur. Ce sont les événements qui se sont arrangés pour le livre, et non le livre pour les événements.

Quoi qu’il en soit, l’auteur ne songeait pas à tirer cet ouvrage de l’espèce de demi-jour où il était comme enseveli; mais, averti qu’un libraire de la capitale se proposait de réimprimer son esquisse anonyme, il a cru devoir prévenir cette réimpression en mettant lui-même au jour son travail revu et en quelque sorte refait, précaution qui épargne un ennui à son amour-propre d’auteur, et au libraire susdit une mauvaise spéculation.

Plusieurs personnes distinguées qui, soit comme colons, soit comme fonctionnaires, ont été mêlées aux troubles de Saint-Domingue, ayant appris la prochaine publication de cet épisode. ont bien voulu communiquer spontanément à l’auteur des matériaux d’autant plus précieux qu’ils sont presque tous inédits, l’auteur leur en témoigne ici sa vive reconnaissance. Ces documents lui ont été singulièrement utiles pour rectifier ce que le récit du capitaine d’Auverney présentait d’incomplet sous le rapport de la couleur locale, et d’incertain relativement à la vérité historique.

Enfin, il doit encore prévenir les lecteurs que l’histoire de Bug-Jargal n’est qu’un fragment d’un ouvrage plus étendu, qui devait être composé avec le titre de Contes sous la tente. L’auteur suppose que, pendant les guerres de la révolution, plusieurs officiers français conviennent entre eux d’occuper chacun à leur tour la longueur des nuits du bivouac par le récit de quelqu’une de leurs aventures. L’épisode que l’on publie ici faisait partie de cette série de narrations; il peut en être détaché sans inconvénient; et d’ailleurs l’ouvrage dont il devrait faire partie n’est point fini, ne le sera jamais, et ne vaut pas la peine de l’être.

Janvier 1826.

PRÉFACE DE 1832.

En 1818, l'auteur de ce livre avait seize ans; il paria qu'il écrirait un volume en quinze jours. Il fit *Bug-Jargal*. Seize ans, c'est l'âge où l'on parie pour tout et où l'on improvise sur tout.

Ce livre a donc été écrit deux ans avant *Han d'Islande*. Et quoique, sept ans plus tard, en 1825, l'auteur l'ait remanié et récrit en grande partie, il n'en est pas moins, et par le fond et par beaucoup de détails, le premier ouvrage de l'auteur.

Il demande pardon à ses lecteurs de les entretenir de détails si peu importants; mais il a cru que le petit nombre de personnes qui aiment à classer par rang de taille et par ordre de naissance les œuvres d'un poëte, si obscur qu'il soit, ne lui sauraient pas mauvais gré de leur donner l'âge de *Bug-Jargal*; et, quant à lui, comme ces voyageurs qui se retournent au milieu de leur chemin et cherchent à découvrir encore dans les plis brumeux de l'horizon le lieu d'où ils sont partis, il a voulu donner ici un souvenir à cette époque de sérénité, d'audace et de confiance, où il abordait de front un si immense sujet, la révolte des noirs de Saint-Domingue en 1791, lutte de géants, trois mondes intéressés dans la question, l'Europe et l'Afrique pour combattants, l'Amérique pour champ de bataille.

24 mars 1832.

I

Quand vint le tour du capitaine Léopold d’Auverney, il ouvrit de grands yeux et avoua à ces messieurs qu’il ne connaissait réellement aucun événement de sa vie qui méritât de fixer leur attention.

Mais, capitaine, lui dit le lieutenant Henri, vous avez pourtant, dit-on, voyagé et vu le monde. N’avez-vous pas visité les Antilles. l’Afrique et l’Italie, l’Espagne? Ah! capitaine, votre chien boiteux!

D’Auverney tressaillit, laissa tomber son cigare, et se retourna brusquement vers l’entrée de la tente, au moment ou un chien énorme accourait en boitant vers lui.

Le chien écrasa en passant le cigare du capitaine; le capitaine n’y fit nulle attention.

Le chien lui lécha les pieds, le flatta avec sa queue, jappa, gambada de son mieux, puis vint se coucher devant lui. Le capitaine, ému, oppressé, le caressait machinalement de la main gauche, en détachant de l’autre la mentonnière de son casque, et répétait de temps en temps: — Te voilà. Rask! te voilà! — Enfin il s’écria: — Mais qui donc t’a ramené?

— Avec votre permission, mon capitaine…

Depuis quelques minutes, le sergent Thadée avait soulevé le rideau de la tente, et se tenait debout, le bras droit enveloppé dans sa redingote, les larmes aux yeux, et contemplant en silence le dénouement de l’odyssée. Il hasarda à la fin ces paroles: *Avec votre permission. mon capitaine…* D’Auverney leva les yeux.

— C’est toi, Thad; et comment diable as-tu pu?… Pauvre chien! je le croyais dans le camp anglais. Où donc l’as-tu trouvé?

— Dieu merci! vous m’en voyez, mon capitaine, aussi joyeux que monsieur votre neveu. quand vous lui faisiez décliner *cornu*, la corne; *cornu*, de la corne…

— Mais dis-moi donc où tu l’as trouvé?

— Je ne l’ai pas trouvé, mon capitaine, j’ai bien été le chercher.

Le capitaine se leva, et tendit la main au sergent; mais la main du sergent resta enveloppée dans sa redingote. Le capitaine n’y prit point garde.

— C’est que, voyez-vous, mon capitaine, depuis que ce pauvre Rask s’est perdu, je me suis bien aperçu, avec votre permission, s’il vous plaît, qu’il vous manquait quelque chose. Pour tout vous dire, je crois que le soir où il ne vint pas, comme à l'ordinaire, partager mon pain de munition, peu s'en fallut que le deux Thad ne se prît à pleurer comme un enfant. Mais non, Dieu merci, je n'ai pleuré que deux fois dans ma vie: la première, quand… le jour où… — Et le sergent regardait son maître avec inquiétude. — La seconde, lorsqu'il prit l'idée à ce drôle de Balthazar, caporal dans la septième demi-brigade, de me faire éplucher une botte d'oignons.

— Il me semble, Thadée, s'écria en riant Henri, que vous ne dites pas à quelle occasion vous pleurâtes pour la première fois.

— C'est sans doute, mon vieux, quand tu reçus l'accolade de La Tour d'Auvergne, premier grenadier de France? demanda avec affection le capitaine, continuant à caresser le chien.

— Non, mon capitaine; si le sergent Thadée a pu pleurer, ce n'a pu être, et vous en conviendrez, que le jour où il a crié *feu* sur Bug-Jargal, autrement dit Pierrot.

Un nuage se répandit sur tous les traits de d'Auverney. Il s'approcha vivement du sergent, et voulut lui serrer la main; mais malgré un tel excès d'honneur, le vieux Thadée la retint sous sa capote.

— Oui, mon capitaine, continua Thadée, en reculant de quelques pas, tandis que d'Auverney fixait sur lui des regards plans d'une expression pénible; oui. j'ai pleuré cette fois-là; aussi, vraiment, il le méritait bien! Il était noir, cela est vrai mais la poudre à canon est noire aussi, et.., et…

Le bon sergent aurait bien voulu achever honorablement sa bizarre comparaison. Il y avait peut-être quelque chose dans ce rapprochement qui plaisait à sa pensée; mais il essaya inutilement de l'exprimer; et après avoir plusieurs fois attaqué, pour ainsi dire, son idée dans tous les sens, comme un général d'armée qui échoue contre une place forte, il en leva brusquement le siège, et poursuivit sans prendre garde au sourire des jeunes officiers qui l'écoutaient:

— Dites, mon capitaine, vous souvient-il de ce pauvre nègre; quand il arriva tout essoufflé, à l'instant même où ses dix camarades étaient là? Vraiment, il avait bien fallu les lier. — C'était moi qui commandais. Et quand il les détacha lui — même pour reprendre leur place, quoiqu'ils ne le voulussent pas. Mais il fut inflexible. Oh! quel homme! c'était un vrai Gibraltar. Et puis, dites, mon capitaine? quand il se tenait là, droit comme s'il allait entrer en danse, et son chien, le même Rask qui est ici, qui comprit ce qu'on allait lui faire, et qui me sauta à la gorge…

— Ordinairement. Thad, interrompit le capitaine, tu ne laissais point passer cet endroit de ton récit sans faire quelques caresses à Rask; vois comme il te regarde.

— Vous avez raison, dit Thadée avec embarras; il me regarde, ce pauvre Rask; mais… la vieille Malagrida m'a dit que caresser de la main gauche porte malheur.

— Et pourquoi pas la main droite?, demanda d'Auverney avec surprise, et remarquant pour la première fois la main enveloppée dans la redingote, et la pâleur répandue sur le visage de Thad.

Le trouble du sergent parut redoubler.

— Avec votre permission, mon capitaine, c'est que… vous avez déjà un chien boiteux, je crains que vous ne finissiez par avoir aussi un sergent manchot.

Le capitaine s'élança de son siège.

— Comment? quoi? que dis-tu, mon vieux Thadée? manchot! — Voyons ton bras. Manchot, grand Dieu!

D'Auverney tremblait; le sergent déroula lentement son manteau, et offrit aux yeux de son chef son bras enveloppé d'un mouchoir ensanglanté.

— Hé! mon Dieu! murmura le capitaine en soulevant le linge avec précaution. Mais dis-moi donc, mon ancien?…

— Oh! la chose est toute simple. Je vous ai dit que j'avais remarqué votre chagrin depuis que ces maudits Anglais nous avaient enlevé votre beau chien, ce pauvre Rask, le dogue de Bug… Il suffit. Je résolus aujourd'hui de le ramener, dût-il m'en coûter la vie, afin de souper ce soir de bon appétit. C'est pourquoi. après avoir recommandé à Mathelet, votre soldat, de bien brosser votre grand uniforme, parce que c'est demain jour de bataille. Je me suis esquivé tout doucement du camp, armé seulement de mon sabre; et j'ai pris à travers les haies pour être plus tôt au camp des Anglais. Je n'étais pas encore aux premiers retranchements quand, avec votre permission, mon capitaine, dans un petit bois sur la gauche, j'ai vu un grand attroupement de soldats rouges. Je me suis avancé pour flairer ce que c'était, et, comme ils ne prenaient pas garde à moi, j'ai aperçu au milieu d'eux Rask attaché à un arbre, tandis que deux milords, nus jusqu'ici comme des païens, ce donnaient sur les os de grands coups de poing qui faisaient autant de bruit que la grosse caisse d'une demi-brigade. C'étaient deux particuliers anglais, s'il vous plaît, qui se battaient en duel pour votre chien. Mais voilà Rask qui me voit, et qui donne un tel coup de collier que la corde casse, et que le drôle est en un clin d'oeil sur mes trousses. Vous pensez bien que toute l'autre bande ne reste pas en arrière. Je m'enfonce dans le bois. Rask me suit. Plusieurs balles sifflent à mes oreilles. Rask aboyait: mais heureusement ils ne pouvaient l'entendre à cause de leurs cris de *French dog! French dog!* comme si votre chien n'était pas un beau et bon chien de Saint — Domingue. N'importe, je traverse le hallier, et j'étais près d'en sortir quand deux rouges se présentent devant moi. Mon sabre me débarrasse de l'un, et m'aurait sans doute délivré de l'autre, si son pistolet n'eût été chargé à balle. Vous voyez mon bras droit. — N'importe! *french dog* lui a sauté au cou, comme une ancienne connaissance, et je vous réponds que l'embrassement a été rude… l'anglais est tombé étranglé. — Aussi pourquoi ce diable d'homme s'acharnait — il après moi, comme un pauvre après un séminariste! Enfin, Thad est de retour au camp, et Rask aussi. Mon seul regret, c'est que le Bon Dieu n'ait pas voulu m'envoyer plutôt cela à la bataille de demain. — Voilà!

Les traits du vieux sergent s'étaient rembrunis à l'idée de n'avoir point eu sa blessure dans une bataille.

— Thadée!… cria le capitaine d'un ton irrité. Puis il ajouta plus doucement: — Comment es-tu fou à ce point de t'exposer ainsi, — pour un chien?

— Ce n'était pas pour un chien, mon capitaine, c'était pour Rask.

Le visage de d'Auverney se radoucit tout à fait. Le sergent continua:

— Pour Rask, le dogue de Bug…

— Assez! assez! mon vieux Thad, cria le capitaine en mettant la main sur ses yeux. — Allons, ajouta-t-il après un court silence, appuie-toi sur moi, et viens à l'ambulance.

Thadée obéit après une résistance respectueuse. Le chien, qui, pendant cette scène, avait à moitié rongé de joie la belle peau d'ours de son maître, se leva et les suivit tous deux.

II

Cet épisode avait vivement excité l’attention et la curiosité des joyeux conteurs. Le capitaine Léopold d’Auverney était un de ces hommes qui, sur quelque échelon que le hasard de la nature et le mouvement de la société les aient placés, inspirent toujours un certain respect mêlé d’intérêt Il n’avait cependant peut-être rien de frappant au premier abord; ses manières étaient froides, son regard indifférent. Le soleil des tropiques, en brunissant son visage, ne lui avait point donné cette vivacité de geste et de parole qui s’unit chez les créoles à une nonchalance souvent pleine de grâce. D’Auverney parlait peu, écoutait rarement, et se montrait sans cesse prêt à agir. Toujours le premier à cheval et le dernier sous la tente, il semblait chercher dans les fatigues corporelles une distraction à ses pensées. Ces pensées, qui avaient gravé leur triste sévérité dans les rides précoces de son front, n’étaient pas de celles dont on se débarrasse en les communiquant, ni de celles qui, dans une conversation frivole, se mêlent volontiers aux idées d’autrui. Léopold d’Auverney, dont les travaux de la guerre ne pouvaient rompre le corps, paraissait éprouver une fatigue insupportable dans ce que nous appelons les luttes d’esprit. Il fuyait les discussions comme il cherchait les batailles. Si quelquefois il se laissait entraîner à un débat de paroles, il prononçait trois ou quatre mots pleins de sens et de haute raison, puis, au moment de convaincre son adversaire, il s’arrêtait tout court, en disant: A quoi bon? et sortait pour demander au commandant ce qu’on pourrait faire en attendant l’heure de la charge ou de l’assaut.

Ses camarades excusaient ses habitudes froides, réservées et taciturnes, parce qu’en toute occasion ils le trouvaient brave, bon et bienveillant. Il avait sauvé la vie de plusieurs d’entre eux au risque de la sienne, et l’on savait que s’il ouvrait rarement la bouche, sa bourse du moins n’était jamais fermée. On l’aimait dans l’armée, et on lui pardonnait même de se faire en quelque sorte vénérer.

Cependant il était jeune. On lui eût donné trente ans, et il était loin encore de les avoir. Quoiqu’il combattit déjà depuis un certain temps dans les rangs républicains, on ignorait ses aventures. Le seul être qui, avec Rask, pût lui arracher quelque vive démonstration d’attachement, le bon vieux sergent Thadée, qui était entré avec lui au corps, et ne le quittait pas, contait parfois vaguement quelques circonstances de sa vie. On savait que d’Auverney avait éprouvé de grands malheurs en Amérique; que, s’étant marié à Saint-Domingue, il avait perdu sa femme et toute sa famille au milieu des massacres qui avaient marqué l’invasion de la révolution dans cette magnifique colonie. A cette époque de notre histoire, les infortunes de ce genre étaient si communes, qu’il s’était formé pour elles une espèce de pitié générale dans laquelle chacun prenait et apportait sa part. On plaignait donc le capitaine d’Auverney, moins pour les pertes qu’il avait souffertes que pour sa manière de les souffrir. C’est qu’en effet, à travers son indifférence glaciale, on voyait quelquefois les tressaillements d’une plaie incurable et intérieure.

Dès qu’une bataille commençait, son front redevenait serein. Il se montrait intrépide dans l’action comme s’il eût cherché à devenir général, et modeste après la victoire comme s’il n’eût voulu être que simple soldat. Ses camarades, en lui voyant ce dédain des honneurs et des grades ne comprenaient pas pourquoi, avant le combat il paraissait espérer quelque chose, et ne devinaient point que d’Auverney, de toutes les chances de la guerre, ne désirait que la mort.

Les représentants du peuple en mission à l’armée le nommèrent un jour chef de brigade sur le champ de bataille; il refusa, parce qu’en ce séparant de la compagnie il aurait fallu quitter le sergent Thadée. Quelques jours après, il s’offrit pour conduire une expédition hasardeuse, et en revint, contre l’attente générale et contre son espérance. On l’entendit alors regretter le grade qu’il avait refusé: - Car, disait-il, puisque le canon ennemi m’épargne toujours, la guillotine, qui frappe tous ceux qui s’élèvent aurait peut-être voulu de moi.

III

Tel était l’homme sur le compte duquel s’engagea la conversation suivante quand il fut sorti de la tente.

— Je parierais, s’écria le lieutenant Henri en essuyant sa botte rouge, sur laquelle le chien avait laissé en passant une large tache de boue, je parierais que le capitaine ne donnerait pas la patte cassée de son chien pour ces dix paniers de madère que nous entrevîmes l’autre jour dans le grand fourgon du général.

— Chut! chut! dit gaiement l’aide de camp Paschal, ce serait un mauvais marché. Les paniers sont à présent vides, j’en sais quelque chose; et, ajouta-t-il d’un air sérieux, trente bouteilles décachetées ne valent certainement pas, vous en conviendrez, lieutenant, la patte de ce pauvre chien, patte dont on pourrait, après tout, faire une poignée de sonnette.

L’assemblée se mit à rire du ton grave dont l’aide de camp prononçait ces dernières paroles. Le jeune officier des hussards basques, Alfred, qui seul n’avait pas ri, prit un air mécontent.

— Je ne vois pas, messieurs, ce qui peut prêter à la raillerie dans ce qui vient de se passer. Ce chien et ce sergent, que j’ai toujours vus auprès de d’Auverney depuis que je le connais, me semblent plutôt susceptibles de faire naître quelque intérêt. Enfin, cette scène...

Paschal, piqué et du mécontentement d’Alfred et de la bonne humeur des autres, l’interrompit.

— Cette scène est très sentimentale. Comment donc! un chien retrouvé et un bras cassé!

— Capitaine Paschal, vous avez tort, dit Henri en jetant hors de la tente la bouteille qu’il venait de vider, ce Bug, autrement dit Pierrot. pique singulièrement ma curiosité.

Paschal, prêt à se fâcher, s’apaisa en remarquant que son verre, qu’il croyait vide, était plein. D’Auverney rentra; il alla se rasseoir à sa place sans prononcer une parole. Son air était pensif, mais son visage était plus calme. Il paraissait si préoccupé, qu’il n’entendait rien de ce qui se disait autour de lui. Rask, qui l’avait suivi, se coucha à ses pieds en le regardant d’un air inquiet.

— Votre verre, capitaine d’Auverney. Goûtez de celui-ci.

— Oh! grâce à Dieu, dit le capitaine, croyant répondre à la question de Paschal, la blessure n'est pas dangereuse, le bras n'est pas cassé.

Le respect involontaire que le capitaine inspirait à tous ses compagnons d'armes contint seul l'éclat de rire prêt à éclore sur les lèvres de Henri.

— Puisque vous n'êtes plus aussi inquiet de Thadée, dit-il, et que nous sommes convenus de raconter chacun une de nos aventures pour abréger cette nuit de bivouac, j'espère, mon cher ami, que vous voudrez bien remplir votre engagement, en nous disant l'histoire de votre chien boiteux et de Bug... je ne sais comment, autrement dit Pierrot, ce vrai Gibraltar!

A cette question, faite d'un ton moitié sérieux, moitié plaisant, d'Auverney n'aurait rien répondu, si tous n'eussent joint leurs instances à celles du lieutenant.

Il céda enfin à leurs prières.

— Je vais vous satisfaire, messieurs; mais n'attendez que le récit d'une anecdote toute simple, dans laquelle je ne joue qu'un rôle très secondaire. Si l'attachement qui existe entre Thadée, Rask et moi vous a fait espérer quelque chose d'extraordinaire, je vous préviens que vous vous trompez. Je commence.

Alors il se fit un grand silence. Paschal vida d'un trait sa gourde d'eau-de-vie, et Henri s'enveloppa de la peau d'ours à demi rongée, pour se garantir du frais de la nuit, tandis qu'Alfred achevait de fredonner l'air galicien de mata-perros.

D'Auverney resta un moment rêveur, comme pour rappeler à son souvenir des événements depuis longtemps remplacés par d'autres; enfin il prit la parole, lentement, presque à voix basse et avec des pauses fréquentes.

IV

Quoique né en France, j’ai été envoyé de bonne heure à Saint-Domingue, chez un de mes oncles, colon très riche, dont je devais épouser la fille.
Les habitations de mon oncle étaient voisines du fort Galifet, et ses plantations occupaient la majeure partie des plaines de l’Acul.

Cette malheureuse position, dont le détail vous semble sans doute offrir peu d’intérêt, a été l’une des premières causes des désastres et de la ruine totale de ma famille.

Huit cents nègres cultivaient les immenses domaines de mon oncle. Je vous avouerai que la triste condition des esclaves était encore aggravée par l’insensibilité de leur maître. Mon oncle était du nombre, heureusement assez restreint, de ces planteurs dont une longue habitude de despotisme absolu avait endurci le cœur. Accoutumé à se voir obéi au premier coup d’oeil, la moindre hésitation de la part d’un esclave était punie des plus mauvais traitements, et souvent l’intercession de ses enfants ne servait qu’à accroître sa colère. Nous étions donc le plus souvent obligés de nous borner à soulager en secret des maux que nous ne pouvions prévenir.

— Comment! mais voilà des phrases! dit Henri à demi-voix, en se penchant vers son voisin. Allons, j’espère que le capitaine ne laissera point passer les malheurs des ci-devant noirs sans quelque petite dissertation sur les devoirs qu’impose l’humanité, et caetera. On n’en eût pas été quitte à moins au club Massiac.

[Nos lecteurs ont sans doute oublié que le club Massiac, dont parle le lieutenant Henri, était une association de négrophiles. Ce club, formé à Paris au commencement de la révolution, avait provoqué la plupart des insurrections qui éclatèrent alors dans les colonies.

On pourra s’étonner aussi de la légèreté un peu hardie avec laquelle le jeune lieutenant raille des philanthropes qui régnaient encore à cette époque par la grâce du bourreau. Mais, il faut se rappeler qu’avant, pendant et après la Terreur, la liberté de penser et de parler s’était réfugiée dans les camps. Ce noble privilège coûtait de temps en temps la tête à un général; mais il absout de tout reproche la gloire si éclatante de ces soldats que les dénonciateurs de la Convention appelaient « les messieurs de l’armée du Rhin”.]

— Je vous remercie, Henri, de m'épargner un ridicule, dit froidement d'Auverney, qui l'avait entendu.

Il poursuivit.

— Entre tous ces esclaves, un seul avait trouvé grâce devant mon oncle. C'était un nain espagnol, griffe

[Une explication précise sera peut-être nécessaire à l'intelligence de ce mot.

M. Moreau de Saint-Méry, en développant le système de Franklin, a classé dans des espèces génériques les différentes teintes que présentent les mélanges de la population de couleur.

Il suppose que l'homme forme un tout de cent vingt-huit parties, blanches chez les blancs, et noires chez les noirs. Partant de ce principe. il établit que l'on est d'autant plus près ou plus loin de l'une ou de l'autre couleur, qu'on se rapproche ou qu'on s'éloigne davantage du terme soixante-quatre, qui leur sert de moyenne proportionnelle.

D'après ce système, tout homme qui n'a point huit parties de blanc est réputé noir.

Marchant de cette couleur vers le blanc, on distingue neuf souches principales, qui ont encore entre elles des variétés d'après le plus ou le moins de parties qu'elles retiennent de l'une ou de l'autre couleur. Ces neuf espèces sont le sacatra, le griffe, le marabout, le mulâtre, le quarteron, le métis, le mameluco, le quarteronné, le sang-mêlé.

Le sang-mêlé, en continuant son union avec le blanc, finit en quelque sorte par se confondre avec cette couleur. On assure pourtant qu'il conserve toujours sur une certaine partie du corps la trace ineffaçable de son origine.

Le griffe est le résultat de cinq combinaisons, et peut avoir depuis vingt-quatre jusqu'à trente-deux parties blanches et quatre-vingt-seize ou cent quatre noires.]

de couleur, qui lui avait été donné comme un sapajou par lord Effingham, gouverneur de la Jamaïque. Mon oncle, qui, ayant longtemps résidé au Brésil, y avait contracté les habitudes du faste portugais, aimait à s'environner chez lui d'un appareil qui répondît à sa richesse. De nombreux esclaves, dressés au service comme des domestiques européens, donnaient à sa maison un éclat en quelque sorte seigneurial. Pour que rien n'y manquât, il avait fait de l'esclave de lord Effingham son fou, à l'imitation de ces anciens princes féodaux qui avaient des bouffons dans leurs cours. Il faut dire que le choix était singulièrement heureux, le griffe Habibrah (c’était son nom) était un de ces êtres

dont la conformation physique est si étrange qu’ils paraîtraient des monstres, s’ils ne faisaient rire. Ce nain hideux était gros, court, ventru, et se mouvait avec une rapidité singulière sur deux jambes grêles et fluettes, qui, lorsqu’il s’asseyait, se repliaient sous lui comme les bras d’une araignée. Sa tête énorme. lourdement enfoncée entre ses épaules, hérissée d’une laine rousse et crépue, était accompagnée de deux oreilles si larges, que ses camarades avaient coutume de dire qu’Habibrah s’en servait pour essuyer ses yeux quand il pleurait. Son visage était toujours une grimace, et n’était jamais la même; bizarre mobilité des traits, qui du moins donnait à sa laideur l’avantage de la variété. Mon oncle l’aimait à cause de sa difformité rare et de sa gaieté inaltérable. Habibrah était son favori. Tandis que les autres esclaves étaient rudement accablés de travail, Habibrah n’avait d’autre soin que de porter derrière le maître un large éventail de plumes d’oiseaux de paradis, pour chasser les moustiques et les bigailles. Mon oncle le faisait manger à ses pieds sur une natte de jonc, et lui donnait toujours sur sa propre assiette quelque reste de son mets de prédilection. Aussi Habibrah se montrait-il reconnaissant de tant de bontés; il n’usait de ses privilèges de bouffon, de son droit de tout faire et de tout dire, que pour divertir son maître par mille folles paroles entremêlées de contorsions, et au moindre signe de mon oncle il accourait avec l’agilité d’un singe et la soumission d’un chien.

Je n’aimais pas cet esclave. Il y avait quelque chose de trop rampant dans sa servilité; et si l’esclavage ne déshonore pas, la domesticité avilit. J’éprouvais un sentiment de pitié bienveillante pour ces malheureux nègres que je voyais travailler tout le jour sans que presque aucun vêtement cachât leur chaîne; mais ce baladin difforme, cet esclave fainéant, avec ses ridicules habits bariolés de galons et semés de grelots, ne m’inspirait que du mépris. D’ailleurs le nain n’usait pas en bon frère du crédit que ses bassesses lui avaient donné sur le patron commun. Jamais il n’avait demandé une grâce à un maître qui infligeait si souvent des châtiments; et on l’entendit même un jour, se croyant seul avec mon oncle, l’exhorter à redoubler de sévérité envers ces infortunés camarades. Les autres esclaves cependant, qui auraient dû le voir avec défiance et jalousie, ne paraissaient pas le haïr. Il leur inspirait une sorte de crainte respectueuse qui ne ressemblait point à de l’amitié; et quand ils le voyaient passer au milieu de leurs cases avec son grand bonnet pointu orné de sonnettes, sur lequel il avait tracé des figures bizarres en encre rouge, ils se disaient entre eux à voix basse: C’est un obi [un sorcier]!

Ces détails, sur lesquels j’arrête en ce moment votre attention, messieurs, m’occupaient fort peu alors. Tout entier aux pures émotions d’un amour que rien ne semblait devoir traverser, d’un amour éprouvé et partagé depuis l’enfance par la femme qui m’était destinée, je n’accordais que des regards fort distraits à tout ce qui n’était pas Marie. Accoutumé dès l’âge le plus tendre à considérer comme ma future épouse celle qui était déjà en quelque sorte ma sœur, il s’était formé entre nous une tendresse dont on ne comprendrait pas encore la nature, si je disais que notre amour était un mélange de dévouement fraternel, d’exaltation passionnée et de confiance conjugale. Peu d’hommes ont coulé plus heureusement que moi leurs premières années; peu d’hommes ont senti leur âme s’épanouir à la vie sous un plus beau ciel, dans un accord plus délicieux de bonheur pour le présent et d’espérance pour l’avenir. Entouré presque en naissant de tous les contentements de la richesse, de tous les privilèges du rang dans un pays où la couleur suffisait pour le donner, passant mes journées près de l’être qui avait tout mon amour, voyant cet amour favorisé de nos parents, qui seuls auraient pu l’entraver, et tout cela dans l’âge où le sang bouillonne, dans une contrée où l’été est éternel, où la nature est admirable; en fallait-il plus pour me donner une foi aveugle dans mon heureuse étoile? En faut-il plus pour me donner le droit de dire que peu d’hommes ont coulé plus heureusement que moi leurs premières années?

Le capitaine s’arrêta un moment, comme si la voix lui eût manqué pour ces souvenirs de bonheur. Puis il poursuivit avec un accent profondément triste:

— Il est vrai que j’ai maintenant de plus le droit d’ajouter que nul ne coulera plus déplorablement ses derniers jours.

Et comme s’il eût repris de la force dans le sentiment de son malheur, il continua d’une voix assurée.

V

C’est au milieu de ces illusions et de ces espérances aveugles que j’atteignais ma vingtième année. Elle devait être accomplie au mois d’août 1791, et mon oncle avait fixé cette époque pour mon union avec Marie. Vous comprenez aisément que la pensée d’un honneur si prochain absorbait toutes mes facultés, et combien doit être vague le souvenir qui me reste des débats politiques dont à cette époque la colonie était déjà agitée depuis deux ans. Je ne vous entretiendrai donc ni du comte de Peinier, ni de M. de Blanchelande, ni de ce malheureux colonel de Mauduit dont la fin fut si tragique.

Je ne vous peindrai point les rivalités de l’assemblée provinciale du nord, et de cette assemblée coloniale qui prit le titre d’assemblée générale, trouvant que le mot coloniale sentait l’esclavage. Ces misères, qui ont bouleversé alors tous les esprits, n’offrent plus maintenant d’intérêt que par les désastres qu’elles ont produits. Pour moi, dans cette jalousie mutuelle qui divisait le Cap et le Port-au-Prince, si j’avais une opinion, ce devait être nécessairement en faveur du Cap, dont nous habitions le territoire, et de l’assemblée provinciale, dont mon oncle était membre.

Il m’arriva une seule fois de prendre une part un peu vive à un débat sur les affaires du jour. C’était à l’occasion de ce désastreux décret du 15 mai 1791, par lequel l’Assemblée nationale de France admettait les hommes de couleur libres à l’égal partage des droits politiques avec les blancs. Dans un bal donné à la ville du Cap par le gouverneur, plusieurs jeunes colons parlaient avec véhémence sur cette loi, qui blessait si cruellement l’amour-propre, peut-être fondé, des blancs. Je ne m’étais point encore mêlé à la conversation, lorsque je vis s’approcher du groupe un riche planteur que les blancs admettaient difficilement parmi eux, et dont la couleur équivoque faisait suspecter l’origine. Je m’avançai brusquement vers cet homme en lui disant à voix haute: - Passez outre, monsieur; il se dit ici des choses désagréables pour vous, qui avez du sang mêlé dans les veines. - Cette imputation l’irrita au point qu’il m’appela en duel. Nous fûmes tous deux blessés. J’avais eu tort, je l’avoue, de le provoquer; mais il est probable que ce qu’on appelle le préjugé de la couleur n’eût pas suffi seul pour m’y pousser; cet homme avait depuis quelque temps l’audace de lever les yeux jusqu'à ma cousine, et au moment où je l'humiliai d'une manière si inattendue, il venait de danser avec elle.

Quoi qu'il en fût, je voyais s'avancer avec ivresse le moment où je posséderais Marie, et je demeurais étranger à l'effervescence toujours croissante qui faisait bouillonner toutes les têtes autour de moi.

Les yeux fixés sur mon bonheur qui s'approchait, je n'apercevais pas le nuage effrayant qui déjà couvrait presque tous les points de notre horizon politique, et qui devait, en éclatant, déraciner toutes les existences. Ce n'est pas que les esprits même les plus prompts à s'alarmer, s'attendissent sérieusement dès lors à la révolte des esclaves, on méprisait trop cette classe pour la craindre; mais il existait seulement entre les blancs et les mulâtres libres assez de haine pour que ce volcan si longtemps comprimé bouleversât toute la colonie au moment redouté où il se déchirerait.

Dans les premiers jours de ce mois d'août, si ardemment appelé de tous mes vœux, un incident étrange vint mêler une inquiétude imprévue à mes tranquilles espérances.

VI

Mon oncle avait fait construire, sur les bords d’une jolie rivière qui baignait ses plantations, un petit pavillon de branchages, entouré d’un massif d’arbres épais, où Marie venait tous les jours respirer la douceur de ces brises de mer qui, pendant les mois les plus brûlants de l’année, soufflent régulièrement à Saint-Domingue, depuis le matin jusqu’au soir, et dont la fraîcheur augmente ou diminue avec la chaleur même du jour.

J’avais soin d’orner moi-même tous les matins cette retraite des plus belles fleurs que je pouvais cueillir.

Un jour Marie accourt à moi tout effrayée. Elle était entrée comme de coutume dans son cabinet de verdure, et là elle avait vu, avec une surprise mêlée de terreur, toutes les fleurs dont je l’avais tapissé le matin arrachées et foulées aux pieds; un bouquet de soucis sauvages fraîchement cueillis était déposé à la place où elle avait coutume de s’asseoir. Elle n’était pas encore revenue de sa stupeur, qu’elle avait entendu les sons d’une guitare sortir du milieu du taillis même qui environnait le pavillon; puis une voix, qui n’était pas la mienne, avait commencé à chanter doucement une chanson qui lui avait paru espagnole, et dans laquelle son trouble, et sans doute aussi quelque pudeur de vierge, l’avaient empêchée de comprendre autre chose que son nom, fréquemment répété. Alors elle avait eu recours à une fuite précipitée, à laquelle heureusement il n’avait point été mis d’obstacle.

Ce récit me transporta d’indignation et de jalousie. Mes premières conjectures s’arrêtèrent sur le sang-mêlé libre avec qui j’avais eu récemment une altercation; mais, dans la perplexité où j’étais jeté, je résolus de ne rien faire légèrement. Je rassurai la pauvre Marie, et je me promis de veiller sans relâche sur elle, jusqu’au moment prochain où il me serait permis de la protéger encore de plus près.

Présumant bien que l’audacieux dont l’insolence avait si fort épouvanté Marie ne se bornerait pas à cette première tentative pour lui faire connaître ce que je devinais être son amour, je me mis dès le même soir en embuscade autour du corps de bâtiment où reposait ma fiancée, après que tout le monde fut endormi dans la plantation. Caché dans l’épaisseur des hautes cannes à sucre, armé de mon poignard, j’attendais. Je n’attendis pas en vain. Vers le milieu de la nuit, un prélude mélancolique et grave, s’élevant dans le silence à quelques pas de moi, éveilla brusquement mon attention. Ce bruit fut pour moi comme une secousse; c’était une guitare; c’était sous la fenêtre même de Marie! Furieux, brandissant mon poignard, je m’élançais vers le point d’où ces sons partaient, brisant sous mes pas les tiges cassantes des cannes à sucre. Tout à coup je me sentis saisir et renverser avec une force qui me parut prodigieuse; mon poignard me fut violemment arraché, et je le vis briller au-dessus de ma tête. En même temps, deux yeux ardents étincelaient dans l’ombre tout près des miens, et une double rangée de dents blanches, que j’entrevoyais dans les ténèbres, s’ouvrait pour laisser passer ces mots, prononcés avec l’accent de la rage: Te tengo! te tengo! [Je te tiens! je te tiens!]

Plus étonné encore qu’effrayé, je me débattais vainement contre mon formidable adversaire, et déjà la pointe de l’acier se faisait jour à travers mes vêtements, lorsque Marie, que la guitare et ce tumulte de pas et de paroles avaient réveillée, parut subitement à sa fenêtre. Elle reconnut ma voix, vit briller un poignard, et poussa un cri d’angoisse et de terreur. Ce cri déchirant paralysa en quelque sorte la main de mon antagoniste victorieux; il s’arrêta, comme pétrifié par un enchantement; promena encore quelques instants avec indécision le poignard sur ma poitrine, puis le jetant tout à coup: - Non! dit-il, cette fois en français, non! elle pleurerait trop! - En achevant ces paroles bizarres, il disparut dans les touffes de roseaux; et avant que je me fusse relevé, meurtri par cette lutte inégale et singulière, nul bruit, nul vestige ne restait de sa présence et de son passage.

Il me serait fort difficile de dire ce qui se passa en moi au moment où je revins de ma première stupeur entre les bras de ma douce Marie, à laquelle j’étais si étrangement conservé par celui-là même qui paraissait prétendre à me la disputer. J’étais plus que jamais indigné contre ce rival inattendu, et honteux de lui devoir la vie. - Au fond, me disait mon amour-propre, c’est à Marie que je la dois, puisque c’est le son de sa voix qui a fait seul tomber le poignard. - Cependant je ne pouvais me dissimuler qu’il y avait bien quelque générosité dans le sentiment qui avait décidé mon rival inconnu à m’épargner. Mais ce rival, quel était-il donc? Je me confondais en soupçons, qui tous se détruisaient les uns les autres. Ce ne pouvait être le planteur sang-mêlé, que ma jalousie s’était d’abord désigné. Il était loin d’avoir cette force extraordinaire, et d’ailleurs ce n’était point sa voix. L’individu avec qui j’avais lutté m’avait paru nu jusqu’à la ceinture. Les esclaves seuls dans la colonie étaient ainsi à demi vêtus. Mais ce ne pouvait être un esclave; des sentiments comme celui qui lui avait fait jeter le poignard ne me semblaient pas pouvoir appartenir à un esclave; et d’ailleurs tout en moi se refusait à la révoltante supposition d’avoir un esclave pour rival. Quel était-il donc? Je résolus d’attendre et d’épier.

VII

Marie avait éveillé la vieille nourrice qui lui tenait lieu de la mère qu'elle avait perdue au berceau. Je passai le reste de la nuit auprès d'elle, et, dès que le jour fut venu, nous informâmes mon oncle de ces inexplicables événements. Sa surprise en fut extrême; mais son orgueil, comme le mien, ne s'arrêta pas à l'idée que l'amoureux inconnu de sa fille pouvait être un esclave. La nourrice reçut ordre de ne plus quitter Marie; et comme les séances de l'assemblée provinciale, les soins que donnait aux principaux colons l'attitude de plus en plus menaçante des affaires coloniales, et les travaux des plantations, ne laissaient à mon oncle aucun loisir, il m'autorisa à accompagner sa fille dans toutes ses promenades jusqu'au jour de mon mariage, qui était fixé au 22 août. En même temps, présumant que le nouveau soupirant n'avait pu venir que du dehors, il ordonna que l'enceinte de ses domaines fût désormais gardée nuit et jour plus sévèrement que jamais.

Ces précautions prises, de concert avec mon oncle, je voulus tenter une épreuve. J'allai au pavillon de la rivière, et, réparant le désordre de la veille, je lui rendis la parure de fleurs dont j'avais coutume de l'embellir pour Marie.

Quand l'heure où elle s'y retirait habituellement fut venue. je m'armai de ma carabine, chargée à balle, et je proposai à ma cousine de l'accompagner à son pavillon. La vieille nourrice nous suivit.

Marie, à qui je n'avais point dit que j'avais fait disparaître les traces qui l'avaient effrayée la veille, entra la première dans le cabinet de feuillage.

— Vois, Léopold, me dit-elle, mon berceau est bien dans le même état de désordre où je l'ai laissé hier; voilà bien ton ouvrage gâté, tes fleurs arrachées, flétries; ce qui m'étonne, ajouta-t-elle en prenant un bouquet de soucis sauvages, déposé sur le banc de gazon, ce qui m'étonne, c'est que ce vilain bouquet ne se soit pas fané depuis hier. Vois, cher ami, il a l'air d'être tout fraîchement cueilli.

J'étais immobile d'étonnement et de colère. En effet, mon ouvrage du matin même était déjà détruit, et ces tristes fleurs, dont la fraîcheur étonnait ma pauvre Marie, avaient repris insolemment la place des roses que j'avais semées.

— Calme-toi, me dit Marie, qui vit mon agitation, calme-toi; c’est une chose passée, cet insolent n’y reviendra sans doute plus; mettons tout cela sous nos pieds, comme cet odieux bouquet.

Je me gardai bien de la détromper, de peur de l’alarmer; et sans lui dire que celui qui devait, selon elle, n’y plus revenir, était déjà revenu, je la laissai fouler les soucis aux pieds, pleine d’une innocente indignation. Puis, espérant que l’heure était venue de connaître mon mystérieux rival, je la fis asseoir en silence entre sa nourrice et moi.

A peine avions-nous pris place, que Marie mit son doigt sur ma bouche; quelques sons. affaiblis par le vent et par le bruissement de l’eau, venaient de frapper son oreille. J’écoutai; c’était le même prélude triste et lent qui la nuit précédente avait éveillé ma fureur. Je voulus m’élancer de mon siège, un geste de Marie me retint.

— Léopold, me dit-elle à voix basse, contiens-toi, il va peut-être chanter, et sans doute ce qu’il dira nous apprendra qui il est.

En effet, une voix dont l’harmonie avait quelque chose de mâle et de plaintif à la fois sortit un moment après du fond du bois, et mêla aux notes graves de la guitare une romance espagnole, dont chaque parole retentit assez profondément dans mon oreille pour que ma mémoire puisse encore aujourd’hui en retrouver presque toutes les expressions.

«Pourquoi me fuis-tu, Maria? [On a jugé inutile de reproduire ici en entier les paroles du chant espagnol: Porque me huyes, Maria? etc] pourquoi me fuis-tu, jeune fille? pourquoi cette terreur qui glace ton âme quand tu m’entends? Je suis en effet bien formidable! je ne sais qu’aimer, souffrir et chanter!

«Lorsque, à travers les tiges élancées des cocotiers de la rivière, je vois glisser ta forme légère et pure, un éblouissement trouble ma vue, ô Maria! et je crois voir passer un esprit!

«Et si j’entends, ô Maria! les accents enchantés qui s’échappent de ta bouche comme une mélodie, il me semble que mon cœur vient palpiter dans mon oreille et mêle un bourdonnement plaintif à ta voix harmonieuse.

«Hélas! ta voix est plus douce pour moi que le chant même des jeunes oiseaux qui battent de l’aile dans le ciel, et qui viennent du côté de ma patrie;

«De ma patrie où j’étais roi, de ma patrie où j’étais libre!

«Libre et toi, jeune fille! j’oublierais tout cela pour toi; j’oublierais tout, royaume, famille, devoirs, vengeance, oui, jusqu’à la vengeance! quoique le moment soit bientôt venu de cueillir ce fruit amer et délicieux, qui mûrit si tard!”

La voix avait chanté les stances précédentes avec des pauses fréquentes et douloureuses; mais en achevant ces derniers mots, elle avait pris un accent terrible.

«O Maria! tu ressembles au beau palmier, svelte et doucement balancé sur sa tige, et tu te mires dans l’oeil de ton jeune amant, comme le palmier dans l’eau transparente de la fontaine.

«Mais, ne le sais-tu pas? il y a quelquefois au fond du désert un ouragan jaloux du bonheur de la fontaine aimée; il accourt, et l’air et le sable se mêlent sous le vol de ses lourdes ailes; il enveloppe l’arbre et la source d’un tourbillon de feu; et la fontaine se dessèche, et le palmier sent se crisper sous l’haleine de mort le cercle vert de ses feuilles qui avait la majesté d’une couronne et la grâce d’une chevelure.

«Tremble, ô blanche fille d’Hispaniola! [Nos lecteurs n’ignorent pas sans doute que c’est le premier nom donné à Saint-Domingue par Christophe Colomb, à l’époque de la découverte, en décembre 1492.] tremble que tout ne soit bientôt plus autour de toi qu’un ouragan et qu’un désert! Alors tu regretteras l’amour qui eût pu te conduire vers moi, comme le joyeux katha, l’oiseau de salut, guide à travers les sables d’Afrique le voyageur à la citerne.

«Et pourquoi repousserais-tu mon amour, Maria? Je suis roi, et mon front s’élève au-dessus de tous les fronts humains. Tu es blanche, et je suis noir; mais le jour a besoin de s’unir à la nuit pour enfanter l’aurore et le couchant qui sont plus beaux que lui!”

VIII

Un long soupir, prolongé sur les cordes frémissantes de la guitare, accompagna ces dernières paroles. J’étais hors de moi. « Roi! noir! esclave!” Mille idées incohérentes, éveillées par l’inexplicable chant que je venais d’entendre, tourbillonnaient dans mon cerveau. Un violent besoin d’en finir avec l’être inconnu qui osait ainsi associer le nom de Marie à des chants d’amour et de menace s’empara de moi. Je saisis convulsivement ma carabine, et me précipitai hors du pavillon. Marie, effrayée, tendait encore les bras pour me retenir, que déjà je m’étais enfoncé dans le taillis du côté d’où la voix était venue. Je fouillai le bois dans tous les sens, je plongeai le canon de mon mousqueton dans l’épaisseur de toutes les broussailles, je fis le tour de tous les gros arbres, je remuai toutes les hautes herbes. Rien! rien, et toujours rien! Cette recherche inutile, jointe à d’inutiles réflexions sur la romance que je venais d’entendre, mêla de la confusion à ma colère. Cet insolent rival échapperait donc toujours à mon bras comme à mon esprit! Je ne pourrais donc ni le deviner, ni le rencontrer!

En ce moment, un bruit de sonnettes vint me distraire de ma rêverie. Je me retournai. Le nain Habibrah était à côté de moi.

— Bonjour, maître, me dit-il, et il s’inclina avec respect; mais son louche regard, obliquement relevé vers moi, paraissait remarquer avec une expression indéfinissable de malice et de triomphe l’anxiété peinte sur mon front.

— Parle! lui criai-je brusquement, as-tu vu quelqu’un dans ce bois?

— Nul autre que vous, señor mio, me répondit-il avec tranquillité.

— Est-ce que tu n’as pas entendu une voix? repris-je.

L’esclave resta un moment comme cherchant ce qu’il pouvait me répondre. Je bouillais.

— Vite, lui dis-je, réponds vite, malheureux! as-tu entendu ici une voix?

Il fixa hardiment sur mes yeux ses deux yeux ronds comme ceux d’un chat-tigre.

— Que querre decir usted?[Que voulez-vous dire?] par une voix, maître? Il y a des voix partout et pour tout; il y a la voix des oiseaux, il y a la voix de l’eau, il y a la voix du vent dans les feuilles...

Je l’interrompis en le secouant rudement.

— Misérable bouffon! cesse de me prendre pour ton jouet, ou je te fais écouter de près la voix qui sort d'un canon de carabine. Réponds en quatre mots. As-tu entendu dans ce bois un homme qui chantait un air espagnol?

— Oui, señor, me répliqua-t-il sans paraître ému, et des paroles sur l'air... Tenez, maître, je vais vous conter la chose. Je me promenais sur la lisière de ce bosquet, en écoutant ce que les grelots d'argent de ma gorra [Le petit griffe espagnol désigne par ce mot son bonnet] me disaient à l'oreille. Tout à coup, le vent est venu joindre à ce concert quelque mots d'une langue que vous appelez l'espagnol, la première que j'aie bégayée, lorsque mon âge se comptait par mois et non par années, et que ma mère me suspendait sur son dos à des bandelettes de laine rouge et jaune. J'aime cette langue; elle me rappelle le temps où je n'étais que petit et pas encore nain, qu'un enfant et pas encore un fou; je me suis rapproché de la voix, et j'ai entendu la fin de la chanson.

— Eh bien, est-ce là tout? repris-je impatienté.

— Oui, maître hermoso, mais, si vous voulez, je vous dirai ce que c'est que l'homme qui chantait.

Je crus que j'aillais embrasser le pauvre bouffon.

— Oh! parle, m'écriai-je, parle, voici ma bourse, Habibrah! et dix bourses meilleures sont à toi si tu me dit quel est cet homme.

Il prit la bourse, l'ouvrit, et sourit.

— Diez bolsas meilleures que celle-ci! mais demonio! cela ferait une pleine fanega de bons écus à l'image del rey Luis quince, autant qu'il en aurait fallu pour ensemencer le champ du magicien grenadin Altornino, lequel savait l'art d'y faire pousser de buenos doblones; mais, ne vous fâchez pas, jeune maître, je viens au fait. Rappelez-vous, señor, les derniers mots de la chanson: « Tu es blanche, et je suis noir; mais le jour a besoin de s'unir à la nuit pour enfanter l'aurore et le couchant, qui sont plus beaux que lui.” Or, si cette chanson dit vrai, le griffe Habibrah, votre humble esclave, né d'une négresse et d'un blanc, est plus beau que vous, si señorito de amor, je suis le produit de l'union du jour et de la nuit, je suis l'aurore ou le couchant dont parle la chanson espagnole, et vous n'êtes que le jour. Donc je suis plus beau que vous, si usted quiere, plus beau qu'un blanc.

Le nain entremêlait cette divagation bizarre de longs éclats de rire. Je l'interrompis encore.

— Où donc en veux-tu venir avec tes extravagances? Tout cela me dira-t-il ce que c'est que l'homme qui chantait dans ce bois?

— Précisément, maître, repartit le bouffon avec un regard malicieux. Il est évident que el hombre qui a pu chanter de telles extravagances, comme vous les appelez, ne peut être et n'est qu'un fou pareil à moi! J'ai gagné las diez bolsas!

Ma main se levait pour châtier l'insolente plaisanterie de l'esclave émancipé, lorsqu'un cri affreux retentit tout à coup dans le bosquet, du côté du pavillon de la rivière. C'était la voix de Marie. - Je m'élance, je cours, je vole, m'interrogeant d'avance avec terreur sur le nouveau malheur que je pouvais avoir à redouter. J'arrive haletant au cabinet de verdure. Un spectacle effrayant m'y attendait. Un crocodile monstrueux, dont le corps était à demi caché sous les roseaux et les mangles de la rivière, avait passé sa tête énorme à travers l'une des arcades de verdure qui soutenaient le toit du pavillon. Sa gueule entrouverte et hideuse menaçait un jeune noir, d'une stature colossale, qui d'un bras soutenait la jeune fille épouvantée, de l'autre plongeait hardiment le fer d'une bisaiguë entre les mâchoires acérées du monstre. Le crocodile luttait furieusement contre cette main audacieuse et puissante qui le tenait en respect. Au moment où je me présentai devant le seuil du cabinet, Marie poussa un cri de joie, s'arracha des bras du nègre, et vint tomber dans les miens en s'écriant:

— Je suis sauvée!

A ce mouvement, à cette parole de Marie, le nègre se retourne brusquement, croise ses bras sur sa poitrine gonflée, et, attachant sur ma fiancée un regard douloureux, demeure immobile, sans paraître s'apercevoir que le crocodile est là, près de lui, qu'il s'est débarrassé de la bisaiguë, et qu'il va le dévorer. C'en était fait du courageux noir, si, déposant rapidement Marie sur les genoux de sa nourrice, toujours assise sur un banc et plus morte que vive, je ne me fusse approché du monstre, et je n'eusse déchargé à bout portant dans sa gueule la charge de ma carabine. L'animal, foudroyé, ouvrit et ferma encore deux ou trois fois sa gueule sanglante et ses yeux éteints, mais ce n'était plus qu'un mouvement convulsif, et tout à coup il se renversa à grand bruit sur le dos en roidissant ses deux pattes larges et écaillées. Il était mort.

Le nègre que je venais de sauver si heureusement détourna la tête, et vit les derniers tressaillements du monstre; alors il fixa ses yeux sur la terre, et les relevant lentement vers Marie, qui était revenue achever de se rassurer sur mon cœur, il me dit, et l'accent de sa voix exprimait plus que le désespoir, il me dit:

— Porque le has matado? [Pourquoi l’as-tu tué?]

Puis il s’éloigna à grands pas sans attendre ma réponse, et rentra dans le bosquet, où il disparut.

IX

Cette scène terrible, ce dénouement singulier, les émotions de tout genre qui avaient précédé, accompagné et suivi mes vaines recherches dans le bois, jetèrent un chaos dans ma tête. Marie était encore toute pensive de sa terreur, et il s'écoula un temps assez long avant que nous puissions nous communiquer nos pensées incohérentes autrement que par des regards et des serrements de main. Enfin je rompis le silence.

— Viens, dis-je à Marie, sortons d'ici! ce lieu a quelque chose de funeste!

Elle se leva avec empressement, comme si elle n'eût attendu que ma permission, appuya son bras sur le mien, et nous sortîmes.

Je lui demandai alors comment lui était advenu le secours miraculeux de ce noir au moment du danger horrible qu'elle venait de courir, et si elle savait qui était cet esclave, car le grossier caleçon qui voilait à peine sa nudité montrait assez qu'il appartenait à la dernière classe des habitants de l'île.

— Cet homme, me dit Marie, est sans doute un des nègres de mon père, qui était à travailler aux environs de la rivière à l'instant où l'apparition du crocodile m'a fait pousser le cri qui t'a averti de mon péril. Tout ce que je puis te dire, c'est qu'au moment même il s'est élancé hors du bois pour voler à mon secours.

— De quel côté est-il venu? lui demandai-je.

— Du côté opposé à celui d'où partait la voix l'instant d'auparavant, et par lequel tu venais de pénétrer dans le bosquet.

Cet incident dérangea le rapprochement que mon esprit n'avait pu s'empêcher de faire entre les mots espagnols que m'avait adressés le nègre en se retirant, et la romance qu'avait chantée dans la même langue mon rival inconnu. D'autres rapports d'ailleurs s'étaient déjà présentés à moi. Ce nègre, d'une taille presque gigantesque, d'une force prodigieuse, pouvait bien être le rude adversaire contre lequel j'avais lutté la nuit précédente. La circonstance de la nudité devenait d'ailleurs un indice frappant. Le chanteur du bosquet avait dit: - Je suis noir. - Similitude de plus. Il s'était déclaré roi, et celui-ci n'était qu'un esclave, mais je me rappelais, non sans étonnement, l'air de rudesse et de majesté empreint sur son visage au milieu des signes caractéristiques de la race africaine, l'éclat de ses yeux, la blancheur de ses dents sur le noir éclatant de sa peau, la largeur de son front, surprenante surtout chez un nègre, le gonflement dédaigneux qui donnait à l’épaisseur de ses lèvres et de ses narines quelque chose de si fier et de si puissant, la noblesse de son port, la beauté de ses formes, qui, quoique maigries et dégradées par la fatigue d’un travail journalier, avaient encore un développement pour ainsi dire herculéen; je me représentais dans son ensemble l’aspect imposant de cet esclave, et je me disais qu’il aurait bien pu convenir à un roi. Alors, calculant une foule d’autres incidents, mes conjectures s’arrêtaient avec un frémissement de colère sur ce nègre insolent; je voulais le faire rechercher et châtier... Et puis toutes mes indécisions me revenaient. En réalité, où était le fondement de tant de soupçons? L’île de Saint-Domingue étant en grande partie possédée par l’Espagne, il résultait de là que beaucoup de nègres, soit qu’ils eussent primitivement appartenu à des colons de Santo-Domingo, soit qu’ils y fussent nés, mêlaient la langue espagnole à leur jargon. Et parce que cet esclave m’avait adressé quelques mots en espagnol, était-ce une raison pour le supposer auteur d’une romance en cette langue, qui annonçait nécessairement un degré de culture d’esprit selon mes idées tout à fait inconnu aux nègres? Quant à ce reproche singulier qu’il m’avait adressé d’avoir tué le crocodile, il annonçait chez l’esclave un dégoût de la vie que sa position expliquait d’elle-même, sans qu’il fût besoin, certes, d’avoir recours à l’hypothèse d’un amour impossible pour la fille de son maître. Sa présence dans le bosquet du pavillon pouvait bien n’être que fortuite; sa force et sa taille étaient loin de suffire pour constater son identité avec mon antagoniste nocturne. Etait-ce sur d’aussi frêles indices que je pouvais charger d’une accusation terrible devant mon oncle et livrer à la vengeance implacable de son orgueil un pauvre esclave qui avait montré tant de courage pour secourir Marie?

Au moment où ces idées se soulevaient contre ma colère, Marie la dissipa entièrement en me disant avec sa douce voix:

— Mon Léopold, nous devons de la reconnaissance à ce brave nègre; sans lui, j’étais perdue! Tu serais arrivé trop tard.

Ce peu de mots eut un effet décisif. Il ne changea pas mon intention de faire rechercher l’esclave qui avait sauvé Marie, mais il changea le but de cette recherche. C’était pour une punition; ce fut pour une récompense.

Mon oncle apprit de moi qu’il devait la vie de sa fille à l’un de ses esclaves, et me promit sa liberté; si je pouvais le retrouver dans la foule de ces infortunés.

X

Jusqu’à ce jour, la disposition naturelle de mon esprit m’avait tenu éloigné des plantations où les noirs travaillaient. Il m’était trop pénible de voir souffrir des êtres que je ne pouvais soulager. Mais, dès le lendemain, mon oncle m’ayant proposé de l’accompagner dans sa ronde de surveillance, j’acceptai avec empressement, espérant rencontrer parmi les travailleurs le sauveur de ma bien-aimée Marie.

J’eus lieu de voir dans cette promenade combien le regard d’un maître est puissant sur des esclaves, mais en même temps combien cette puissance s’achète cher. Les nègres, tremblants en présence de mon oncle, redoublaient, sur son passage, d’efforts et d’activité; mais qu’il y avait de haine dans cette terreur! Irascible par habitude, mon oncle était prêt à se fâcher de n’en avoir pas sujet, quand son bouffon Habibrah, qui le suivait toujours, lui fit remarquer tout à coup un noir qui, accablé de lassitude, s’était endormi sous un bosquet de dattiers. Mon oncle court à ce malheureux, le réveille rudement, et lui ordonne de se remettre à l’ouvrage. Le nègre, effrayé, se lève, et découvre en se levant un jeune rosier du Bengale sur lequel il s’était couché par mégarde, et que mon oncle se plaisait à élever. L’arbuste était perdu. Le maître, déjà irrité de ce qu’il appelait la paresse de l’esclave, devient furieux a cette vue. Hors de lui, il détache de sa ceinture le fouet armé de lanières ferrées qu’il portait dans ses promenades, et lève le bras pour en frapper le nègre tombé à genoux. Le fouet ne retomba pas. Je n’oublierai jamais ce moment. Une main puissante arrêta subitement la main du colon. Un noir (c’était celui-là même que je cherchais!) lui cria en français:

— Punis-moi, car je viens de t’offenser; mais ne fais rien à mon frère, qui n’a touché qu’à ton rosier!

Cette intervention inattendue de l’homme à qui je devais le salut de Marie, son geste, son regard, l’accent impérieux de sa voix, me frappèrent de stupeur. Mais sa généreuse imprudence, loin de faire rougir mon oncle, n’avait fait que redoubler la rage du maître et la détourner du patient à son défenseur. Mon oncle, exaspéré, se dégagea des bras du grand nègre, en l’accablant de menaces, et leva de nouveau son fouet pour l’en frapper à son tour. Cette fois le fouet lui fut arraché de la main. Le noir en brisa le manche garni de clous comme on brise une paille, et foula sous ses pieds ce honteux instrument de vengeance. J’étais immobile de surprise, mon oncle de fureur; c’était une chose inouïe pour lui que de voir son autorité ainsi outragée. Ses yeux s’agitaient comme prêts à sortir de leur orbite; ses lèvres bleues tremblaient. L’esclave le considéra un instant d’un air calme; puis tout à coup, lui présentant avec dignité une cognée qu’il tenait à la main:

— Blanc, dit-il, si tu veux me frapper, prends au moins cette hache.

Mon oncle, qui ne se connaissait plus, aurait certainement exaucé son vœu, et se précipitait sur la hache, quand j’intervins à mon tour. Je m’emparai lestement de la cognée et je la jetai dans le puits d’une noria, qui était voisine.

— Que fais-tu? me dit mon oncle avec emportement.

— Je vous sauve, lui répondis-je, du malheur de frapper le défenseur de votre fille. C’est à cet esclave que vous devez Marie; c’est le nègre dont vous m’avez promis la liberté.

Le moment était mal choisi pour invoquer cette promesse. Mes paroles effleurèrent à peine l’esprit ulcéré du colon.

— Sa liberté! me répliqua-t-il d’un air sombre. Oui, il a mérité la fin de son esclavage. Sa liberté! nous verrons de quelle nature sera celle que lui donneront les juges de la cour martiale.

Ces paroles sinistres me glacèrent. Marie et moi le suppliâmes inutilement. Le nègre dont la négligence avait causé cette scène fut puni de la bastonnade, et l’on plongea son défenseur dans les cachots du fort Galifet, comme coupable d’avoir porté la main sur un blanc. De l’esclave au maître, c’était un crime capital.

XI

Vous jugez, messieurs, à quel point toutes ces circonstances avaient dû éveiller mon intérêt et ma curiosité. Je pris des renseignements sur le compte du prisonnier. On me révéla des particularités singulières. On m'apprit que ses compagnons semblaient avoir le plus profond respect pour ce jeune nègre. Esclave comme eux, il lui suffisait d'un signe pour s'en faire obéir. Il n'était point né dans les cases; on ne lui connaissait ni père ni mère; il y avait même peu d'années, disait-on, qu'un vaisseau négrier l'avait jeté à Saint-Domingue. Cette circonstance rendait plus remarquable encore l'empire qu'il exerçait sur tous ses compagnons, sans même en excepter les noirs créoles, qui, vous ne l'ignorez sans doute pas, messieurs, professaient ordinairement le plus profond mépris pour les nègres congos; expression impropre, et trop générale, par laquelle on désignait dans la colonie tous les esclaves amenés d'Afrique.

Quoiqu'il parut absorbé dans une noire mélancolie, sa force extraordinaire, jointe à une adresse merveilleuse, en faisait on sujet du plus grand prix pour la culture des plantations. Il tournait plus vite et plus longtemps que ne l'aurait fait le meilleur cheval les roues des norias. Il lui arrivait souvent de faire en un jour l'ouvrage de dix de ses camarades pour les soustraire aux châtiments réservés à la négligence ou à la fatigue. Aussi était-il adoré des esclaves; mais la vénération qu'ils lui portaient, toute différente de la terreur superstitieuse dont ils environnaient le fou Habibrah, semblait avoir aussi quelque cause cachée; c'était une espèce de culte.

Ce qu'il y avait d'étrange, reprenait-on, c'était de le voir aussi doux, aussi simple avec ses égaux, qui se faisaient gloire de lui obéir, que fier et hautain vis-à-vis de nos commandeurs. Il est juste de dire que ces esclaves privilégiés, anneaux intermédiaires qui liaient en quelque sorte la chaîne de la servitude à celle du despotisme, joignant à la bassesse de leur condition l'insolence de leur autorité, trouvaient un malin plaisir à l'accabler de travail et de vexations.

Il parait néanmoins qu'ils ne pouvaient s'empêcher de respecter le sentiment de fierté qui l'avait porté à outrager mon oncle. Aucun d'eux n'avait jamais osé lui infliger de punitions humiliantes. S'il leur arrivait de l'y condamner, vingt nègres se levaient pour les subir à sa place; et lui, immobile, assistait gravement à leur exécution, comme s'ils n'eussent fait que remplir un devoir. Cet homme bizarre était connu dans les cases sous le nom de Pierrot.

XII

Tous ces détails exaltèrent ma jeune imagination. Marie, pleine de reconnaissance et de compassion, applaudit à mon enthousiasme, et Pierrot s’empara si vivement de notre intérêt, que je résolus de le voir et de le servir. Je rêvais aux moyens de lui parler.

Quoique fort jeune, comme neveu de l’un des plus riches colons du Cap, j’étais capitaine des milices de la paroisse de l’Acul. Le fort Galifet était confié à leur garde, et à un détachement des dragons jaunes, dont le chef, qui était pour l’ordinaire un sous-officier de cette compagnie, avait le commandement du fort. Il se trouvait justement à cette époque que ce commandant était le frère d’un pauvre colon auquel j’avais eu le bonheur de rendre de très grands services, et qui m’était entièrement dévoué...

Ici tout l’auditoire interrompit d’Auverney en nommant Thadée.

— Vous l’avez deviné, messieurs, reprit le capitaine. Vous comprenez sans peine qu’il ne me fut pas difficile d’obtenir de lui l’entrée du cachot du nègre. J’avais le droit de visiter le fort, comme capitaine des milices. Cependant, pour ne pas inspirer de soupçons à mon oncle, dont la colère était encore toute flagrante, j’eus soin de ne m’y rendre qu’à l’heure où il faisait sa méridienne. Tous les soldats, excepté ceux de garde, étaient endormis. Guidé par Thadée, j’arrivai à la porte du cachot; Thadée l’ouvrit et se retira. J’entrai.

Le noir était assis, car il ne pouvait se tenir debout à cause de sa haute taille. Il n’était pas seul; un dogue énorme se leva en grondant et s’avança vers moi. - Rask! cria le noir. Le jeune dogue se tut, et revint se coucher aux pieds de son maître, où il acheva de dévorer quelques misérables aliments.

J’étais en uniforme; la lumière que répandait le soupirail dans cet étroit cachot était si faible que Pierrot ne pouvait distinguer qui j’étais.

— Je suis prêt, me dit-il d’un ton calme.

En achevant ces paroles, il se leva à demi.

— Je suis prêt, répéta-t-il encore.

— Je croyais, lui dis-je, surpris de la liberté de ses mouvements, je croyais que vous aviez des fers.

L’émotion faisait trembler ma voix. Le prisonnier ne parut pas la reconnaître.

Il poussa du pied quelques débris qui retentirent.

— Des fers! je les ai brisés.

Il y avait dans l’accent dont il prononça ces dernières paroles quelque chose qui semblait dire: Je ne suis pas fait pour porter des fers. Je repris:

— L’on ne m’avait pas dit qu’on vous eût laissé un chien.

— C’est moi qui l’ai fait entrer.

J’étais de plus en plus étonné. La porte du cachot était fermée en dehors d’un triple verrou. Le soupirail avait à peine six pouces de largeur, et était garni de deux barreaux de fer. Il paraît qu’il comprit le sens de mes réflexions; il se leva autant que la voûte trop basse le lui permettait, détacha sans effort une pierre énorme placée au-dessous du soupirail, enleva les deux barreaux scellés en dehors de cette pierre, et pratiqua ainsi une ouverture où deux hommes auraient pu facilement passer. Cette ouverture donnait de plain-pied sur le bois de bananiers et de cocotiers qui couvre le morne auquel le fort était adossé.

Le chien, voyant l’issue ouverte, crut que son maître voulait qu’il sortit. Il se dressa prêt à partir; un geste du noir le renvoya à sa place.

La surprise me rendait muet; tout à coup un rayon du jour éclaira vivement mon visage. Le prisonnier se redressa comme s’il eût mis par mégarde le pied sur un serpent, et son front heurta les pierres de la voûte. Un mélange indéfinissable de mille sentiments opposés, une étrange expression de haine, de bienveillance et d’étonnement douloureux, passa rapidement dans ses yeux. Mais, reprenant un subit empire sur ses pensées, sa physionomie en moins d’un instant redevint calme et froide; et il fixa avec indifférence son regard sur le mien. Il me regardait en face comme un inconnu.

— Je puis encore vivre deux jours sans manger, dit-il.

Je fis un geste d’horreur; je remarquai alors la maigreur de l’infortuné.

Il ajouta:

— Mon chien ne peut manger que de ma main; si je n’avais pu élargir le soupirail, le pauvre Rask serait mort de faim. Il vaut mieux que ce soit moi que lui, puisqu’il faut toujours que je meure.

— Non, m’écriai-je, non, vous ne mourrez pas de faim!

Il ne me comprit pas.

— Sans doute, reprit-il en souriant amèrement, j’aurais pu vivre encore deux jours sans manger; mais je suis prêt, monsieur l’officier; aujourd’hui vaut encore mieux que demain; ne faites pas de mal à Rask.

Je sentis alors ce que voulait dire son je suis prêt. Accusé d’un crime qui était puni de mort, il croyait que je venais pour le mener au supplice; et cet homme doué de forces colossales, quand tous les moyens de fuir lui étaient ouverts, doux et tranquille, répétait à un enfant: Je suis prêt!

— Ne faites pas de mal à Rask, répéta-t-il encore.

Je ne pus me contenir.

— Quoi! lui dis-je, non seulement vous me prenez pour votre bourreau, mais encore vous doutez de mon humanité envers ce pauvre chien qui ne m’a rien fait!

Il s’attendrit, sa voix s’altéra.

— Blanc, dit-il en me tendant la main, blanc, pardonne, j’aime mon chien; et, ajouta-t-il après un court silence, les tiens m’ont fait bien du mal.

Je l’embrassai, je lui serrai la main, je le détrompai.

— Ne me connaissiez-vous pas? lui dis-je.

— Je savais que tu étais un blanc, et pour les blancs, quelque bons qu’ils soient, un noir est si peu de chose! D’ailleurs, j’ai aussi à me plaindre de toi.

— Et de quoi? repris-je étonné.

— Ne m’as-tu pas conservé deux fois la vie?

Cette inculpation étrange me fit sourire. Il s’en aperçut, et poursuivit avec amertume:

— Oui, je devrais t’en vouloir. Tu m’as sauvé d’un crocodile et d’un colon; et, ce qui est pis encore, tu m’as enlevé le droit de te haïr. Je suis bien malheureux!

La singularité de son langage et de ses idées ne me surprenait presque plus. Elle était en harmonie avec lui-même.

— Je vous dois bien plus que vous ne me devez, lui dis-je. Je vous dois la vie de ma fiancée, de Marie.

Il éprouva comme une commotion électrique.

— Maria! dit-il d’une voix étouffée; et sa tête tomba sur ses mains, qui se crispaient violemment, tandis que de pénibles soupirs soulevaient les larges parois de sa poitrine.

J’avoue que mes soupçons assoupis se réveillèrent, mais sans colère et sans jalousie. J’étais trop près du bonheur, et lui trop près de la mort, pour qu’un pareil rival, s’il l’était en effet, pût exciter en moi d’autres sentiments que la bienveillance et la pitié.

Il releva enfin sa tête.

— Va! me dit-il, ne me remercie pas!

Il ajouta, après une pause:

— Je ne suis pourtant pas d’un rang inférieur au tien!

Cette parole paraissait révéler un ordre d’idées qui piquait vivement ma curiosité; je le pressai de me dire qui il était et ce qu’il avait souffert. Il garda un sombre silence.

Ma démarche l’avait touché; mes offres de service, mes prières parurent vaincre son dégoût de la vie. Il sortit, et rapporta quelques bananes et une énorme noix de coco. Puis il referma l’ouverture et se mit à manger. En causant avec lui, je remarquai qu’il parlait avec facilité le français et l’espagnol, et que son esprit ne paraissait pas dénué de culture; il savait des romances espagnoles qu’il chantait avec expression. Cet homme était si inexplicable, sous tant d’autres rapports, que jusqu’alors la pureté de son langage ne m’avait pas frappé. J’essayai de nouveau d’en savoir la cause; il se tut. Enfin je le quittai, ordonnant à mon fidèle Thadée d’avoir pour lui tous les égards et tous les soins possibles.

XIII

Je le voyais tous les jours à la même heure. Son affaire m’inquiétait; malgré mes prières, mon oncle s’obstinait à le poursuivre. Je ne cachais pas mes craintes à Pierrot; il m’écoutait avec indifférence.

Souvent Rask arrivait tandis que nous étions ensemble, portant une large feuille de palmier autour de son cou. Le noir la détachait, lisait des caractères inconnus qui y étaient tracés, puis la déchirait. J’étais habitué à ne pas lui faire de questions.

Un jour j’entrai sans qu’il parût prendre garde à moi. Il tournait le dos à la porte de son cachot, et chantait d’un ton mélancolique l’air espagnol: Yo que soy contrabandista [Moi qui suis contrebandier.]. Quand il eut fini, il se tourna brusquement vers moi, et me cria:

— Frère, promets, si jamais tu doutes de moi, d’écarter tous tes soupçons quand tu m’entendras chanter cet air.

Son regard était imposant; je lui promis ce qu’il désirait, sans trop savoir ce qu’il entendait par ces mots: Si jamais tu doutes de moi... Il prit l’écorce profonde de la noix qu’il avait cueillie le jour de ma première visite, et conservée depuis, la remplit de vin de palmier, m’engagea à y porter les lèvres, et la vida d’un trait. A compter de ce jour, il ne m’appela plus que son frère.

Cependant je commençais à concevoir quelque espérance. Mon oncle n’était plus aussi irrité. Les réjouissances de mon prochain mariage avec sa fille avaient tourné son esprit vers de plus douces idées. Marie suppliait avec moi. Je lui représentais chaque jour que Pierrot n’avait point voulu l’offenser, mais seulement l’empêcher de commettre un acte de sévérité peut-être excessive; que ce noir avait, par son audacieuse lutte avec le crocodile, préservé Marie d’une mort certaine; que nous lui devions, lui sa fille, moi ma fiancée; que, d’ailleurs, Pierrot était le plus vigoureux de ses esclaves (car je ne songeais plus à obtenir sa liberté, il ne s’agissait que de sa vie); qu’il faisait à lui seul l’ouvrage de dix autres, et qu’il suffisait de son bras pour mettre en mouvement les cylindres d’un moulin à sucre. Il m’écoutait, et me faisait entendre qu’il ne donnerait peut-être pas suite à l’accusation. Je ne disais rien au noir du changement de mon oncle, voulant jouir du plaisir de lui annoncer sa liberté tout entière, si je l’obtenais. Ce qui m’étonnait, c’était de voir que, se croyant voué à la mort, il ne profitait d’aucun des moyens de fuir qui étaient en son pouvoir. Je lui en parlai.

— Je dois rester, me répondit-il froidement; on penserait que j’ai eu peur.

XIV

Un matin, Marie vint à moi. Elle était rayonnante, et il y avait sur sa douce figure quelque chose de plus angélique encore que la joie d'un pur amour. C'était la pensée d'une bonne action.

— Ecoute, me dit-elle, c'est dans trois jours le 22 août, et notre noce. Nous allons bientôt...

Je l'interrompis.

— Marie, ne dis pas bientôt, puisqu'il y a encore trois jours!

Elle sourit et rougit.

— Ne me trouble pas, Léopold, reprit-elle; il m'est venu une idée qui te rendra content. Tu sais que je suis allée hier à la ville avec mon père pour acheter les parures de notre mariage. Ce n'est pas que je tienne à ces bijoux, à ces diamants, qui ne me rendront pas plus belle à tes yeux. Je donnerais toutes les perles du monde pour l'une de ces fleurs que m'a fanées le vilain homme au bouquet de soucis; mais n'importe. Mon père veut me combler de toutes ces choses-là, et j'ai l'air d'en avoir envie pour lui faire plaisir. Il y avait hier une basquina de satin chinois à grandes fleurs, qui était enfermée dans un coffre de bois de senteur, et que j'ai beaucoup regardée. Cela est bien cher, mais cela est bien singulier. Mon père a remarqué que cette robe frappait mon attention. En rentrant, je l'ai prié de me promettre l'octroi d'un don à la manière des anciens chevaliers; tu sais qu'il aime qu'on le compare aux anciens chevaliers. Il m'a juré sur son honneur qu'il m'accorderait la chose que je lui demanderais quelle qu'elle fût. Il croit que c'est la basquina de satin chinois; point du tout, c'est la vie de Pierrot. Ce sera mon cadeau de noces.

Je ne pus m'empêcher de serrer cet ange dans mes bras. La parole de mon oncle était sacrée; et tandis que Marie allait près de lui en réclamer l'exécution, je courus au fort Galifet annoncer a Pierrot son salut, désormais certain.

— Frère! lui criai-je en entrant, frère! réjouis toi! ta vie est sauvée, Marie l'a demandée à son père pour son présent de noces!

L'esclave tressaillit. .

— Marie! noces! ma vie! Comment tout cela peut-il aller ensemble?

— Cela est tout simple, repris-je. Marie, à qui tu as sauvé la vie, se marie.

— Avec qui? s'écria l'esclave; et son regard était égaré et terrible.

— Ne le sais-tu pas? répondis-je doucement; avec moi.

Son visage formidable redevint bienveillant et résigné.

— Ah! c'est vrai, me dit-il, c'est avec toi! Et quel est le jour?

— C'est le 22 août.

— Le 22 août! es-tu fou? reprit-il avec une expression d'angoisse et d'effroi.

Il s'arrêta. Je le regardais, étonné. Après un silence, il me serra vivement la main.

— Frère, je te dois tant qu'il faut que ma bouche te donne un avis. Crois-moi, va au Cap, et marie-toi avant le 22 août.

Je voulus en vain connaître le sens de ces paroles énigmatiques.

— Adieu, me dit-il avec solennité. J'en ai peut-être déjà trop dit; mais je hais encore plus l'ingratitude que le parjure.

Je le quittai, plein d'indécisions et d'inquiétudes qui s'effacèrent cependant bientôt dans mes pensées de bonheur.

Mon oncle retira sa plainte le jour même. Je retournai au fort pour en faire sortir Pierrot. Thadée, le sachant libre, entra avec moi dans la prison. Il n'y était plus. Rask, qui s'y trouvait seul, vint à moi d'un air caressant; à son cou était attachée une feuille de palmier; je la pris et j'y lus ces mots: Merci, tu m'as sauvé la vie une troisième fois. Frère, n'oublie pas ta promesse. Au-dessous étaient écrits, comme signature, les mots: Yo que soy contrabandista.

Thadée était encore plus étonné que moi; il ignorait le secret du soupirail, et s'imaginait que le nègre s'était changé en chien. Je lui laissai croire ce qu'il voulut, me contentant d'exiger de lui le silence sur ce qu'il avait vu.

Je voulus emmener Rask. En sortant du fort, il s'enfonça dans des haies voisines et disparut.

XV

Mon oncle fut outré de l’évasion de l’esclave. Il ordonna des recherches, et écrivit au gouverneur pour mettre Pierrot à son entière disposition si on le retrouvait.

Le 22 août arriva. Mon union avec Marie fut célébrée avec pompe à la paroisse de l’Acul. Qu’elle fut heureuse cette journée de laquelle allaient dater tous mes malheurs! J’étais enivré d’une joie qu’on ne saurait faire comprendre à qui ne l’a point éprouvée. J’avais complètement oublié Pierrot et ses sinistres avis. Le soir, bien impatiemment attendu, vint enfin. Ma jeune épouse se retira dans la chambre nuptiale, où je ne pus la suivre aussi vite que je l’aurais voulu. Un devoir fastidieux, mais indispensable, me réclamait auparavant. Mon office de capitaine des milices exigeait de moi ce soir-là une ronde aux postes de l’Acul; cette précaution était alors impérieusement commandée par les troubles de la colonie, par les révoltes partielles de noirs, qui, bien que promptement étouffées, avaient eu lieu aux mois précédents de juin et de juillet, même aux premiers jours d’août, dans les habitations Thibaud et Lagoscette, et surtout par les mauvaises dispositions des mulâtres libres, que le supplice récent du rebelle Ogé n’avait fait qu’aigrir. Mon oncle fut le premier à me rappeler mon devoir; il fallut me résigner, j’endossai mon uniforme, et je partis. Je visitai les premières stations sans rencontrer de sujet d’inquiétude; mais. vers minuit, je me promenais en rêvant près des batteries de la baie, quand j’aperçus à l’horizon une lueur rougeâtre s’élever et s’étendre du côté de Limonade et de Saint-Louis du Morin. Les soldats et moi l’attribuâmes d’abord à quelque incendie accidentel; mais, un moment après, les flammes devinrent si apparentes, la fumée, poussée par le vent, grossit et s’épaissit à un tel point, que je repris promptement le chemin du fort pour donner l’alarme et envoyer des secours. En passant près des cases de nos noirs, je fus surpris de l’agitation extraordinaire qui y régnait. La plupart étaient encore éveillés et parlaient avec la plus grande vivacité. Un nom bizarre, Bug-Jargal, prononcé avec respect, revenait souvent au milieu de leur jargon inintelligible. Je saisis pourtant quelques paroles, dont le sens me parut être que les noirs de la plaine du nord étaient en pleine révolte, et livraient aux flammes les habitations et les plantations situées de l’autre côté du Cap. En traversant un fond marécageux, je heurtai du pied un amas de haches et de pioches cachées dans les joncs et les mangliers. Justement inquiet, je fis sur-le-champ mettre sous les armes les milices de l’Acul, et j’ordonnai de surveiller les esclaves; tout rentra dans le calme.

Cependant les ravages semblaient croître à chaque instant et s’approcher du Limbé. On croyait même distinguer le bruit lointain de l’artillerie et des fusillades. Vers les deux heures du matin, mon oncle, que j’avais éveillé, ne pouvant contenir son inquiétude, m’ordonna de laisser dans l’Acul une partie des milices sous les ordres du lieutenant; et, pendant que ma pauvre Marie dormait ou m’attendait, obéissant à mon oncle, qui était, comme je l’ai déjà dit, membre de l’assemblée provinciale, je pris avec le reste des soldats le chemin du Cap.

Je n’oublierai jamais l’aspect de cette ville, quand j’en approchai. Les flammes, qui dévoraient les plantations autour d’elle, y répandaient une sombre lumière, obscurcie par les torrents de fumée que le vent chassait dans les rues. Des tourbillons d’étincelles, formés par les menus débris embrasés des cannes à sucre, et emportés avec violence comme une neige abondante sur les toits des maisons et sur les agrès des vaisseaux mouillés dans la rade, menaçaient à chaque instant la ville du Cap d’un incendie non moins déplorable que celui dont ses environs étaient la proie. C’était un spectacle affreux et imposant que de voir d’un côté les pâles habitants exposant encore leur vie pour disputer au fléau terrible l’unique toit qui allait leur rester de tant de richesses; tandis que, de l’autre, les navires, redoutant le même sort, et favorisés du moins par ce vent si funeste aux malheureux colons, s’éloignaient à pleines voiles sur une mer teinte des feux sanglants de l’incendie.

XVI

Etourdi par le canon des forts, les clameurs des fuyards et le fracas lointain des écroulements, je ne savais de quel côté diriger mes soldats, quand je rencontrai sur la place d'armes le capitaine des dragons jaunes, qui nous servit de guide. Je ne m'arrêterai pas, messieurs, à vous décrire le tableau que nous offrit la plaine incendiée. Assez d'autres ont dépeint ces premiers désastres du Cap, et j'ai besoin de passer vite sur ces souvenirs où il y a du sang et du feu. Je me bornerai à vous dire que les esclaves rebelles étaient, disait-on, déjà maîtres du Dondon, du Terrier-Rouge, du bourg d'Ouanaminte, et même des malheureuses plantations du Limbé, ce qui me remplissait d'inquiétudes à cause du voisinage de l'Acul.

Je me rendis en hâte à l'hôtel du gouverneur, M. de Blanchelande. Tout y était dans la confusion, jusqu'à la tête du maître. Je lui demandai des ordres, en le priant de songer le plus vite possible à la sûreté de l'Acul, que l'on croyait déjà menacée. Il avait auprès de lui M. de Rouvray, maréchal de camp et l'un des principaux propriétaires de l'île, M. de Touzard, lieutenant-colonel du régiment du Cap, quelques membres des assemblées coloniale et provinciale, et plusieurs des colons les plus notables. Au moment où je me présentai, cette espèce de conseil délibérait tumultueusement.

— Monsieur le gouverneur, disait un membre de l'assemblée provinciale, cela n'est que trop vrai; ce sont les esclaves, et non les sang-mêlés libres; il y a longtemps que nous l'avions annoncé et prédit.

— Vous le disiez sans y croire, répartit aigrement un membre de l'assemblée coloniale appelée générale. Vous le disiez pour vous donner crédit à nos dépens; et vous étiez si loin de vous attendre à une rébellion réelle des esclaves, que ce sont les intrigues de votre assemblée qui ont stimulé, dès 1789, cette fameuse et ridicule révolte des trois mille noirs sur le morne du Cap; révolte où il n'y a eu qu'un volontaire national de tué, encore l'a-t-il été par ses propres camarades!

— Je vous répète, reprit le provincial, que nous voyons plus clair que vous. Cela est simple. Nous restions ici pour observer les affaires de la colonie, tandis que votre assemblée en masse allait en France se faire décerner cette ovation risible, qui s'est terminée par les réprimandes de la représentation nationale: ridiculus mus!

Le membre de l’assemblée coloniale répondit avec un dédain amer:

— Nos concitoyens nous ont réélus à l’unanimité!

— C’est vous, répliqua l’autre, ce sont vos exagérations qui ont fait promener la tête de ce malheureux qui s’était montré sans cocarde tricolore dans un café, et qui ont fait pendre le mulâtre Lacombe pour une pétition qui commençait par ces mots inusités: - Au nom du Père, du Fils et du Saint-Esprit!

— Cela est faux, s’écria le membre de l’assemblée générale. C’est la lutte des principes et celle des privilèges, des bossus et des crochus!

— Je l’ai toujours pensé, monsieur, vous êtes un indépendant!

A ce reproche du membre de l’assemblée provinciale, son adversaire répondit d’un air de triomphe:

— C’est confesser que vous êtes un pompon blanc! Je vous laisse sous le poids d’un pareil aveu!

La querelle eût peut-être été poussée plus loin, si le gouverneur ne fût intervenu.

— Eh, messieurs! en quoi cela a-t-il trait au danger imminent qui nous menace? Conseillez-moi, et ne vous injuriez pas. Voici les rapports qui me sont parvenus. La révolte a commencé cette nuit à dix heures du soir parmi les nègres de l’habitation Turpin. Les esclaves commandés par un nègre anglais nommé Boukmann, ont entraîné les ateliers des habitations Clément, Trémès, Flaville et Noé. Ils ont incendié toutes les plantations et massacré les colons avec des cruautés inouïes. Je vous en ferai comprendre toute l’horreur par un seul détail. Leur étendard est le corps d’un enfant porté au bout d’une pique.

Un frémissement interrompit M. de Blanchelande.

— Voilà ce qui se passe au-dehors, poursuivit-il. Au-dedans, tout est bouleversé. Plusieurs habitants du Cap ont tué leurs esclaves; la peur les a rendus cruels. Les plus doux ou les plus braves se sont bornés à les enfermer sous bonne clef. Les petits blancs [Blancs non propriétaires exerçant dans la colonie une industrie quelconque.] accusent de ces désastres les sang-mêlés libres. Plusieurs mulâtres ont failli être victimes de la fureur populaire. Je leur ai fait donner pour asile une église gardée par un bataillon. Maintenant, pour prouver qu’ils ne sont point d’intelligence avec les noirs révoltés, les sang-mêlés me font demander un poste à défendre et des armes.

— N’en faites rien! cria une voix que je reconnus: c’était celle du planteur soupçonné d’être sang-mêlé, avec qui j’avais eu un duel. N’en faites rien, monsieur le gouverneur, ne donnez point d’armes aux mulâtres.

— Vous ne voulez donc point vous battre? dit brusquement un colon.

L’autre ne parut point entendre, et continua:

— Les sang-mêlés sont nos pires ennemis. Eux seuls sont à craindre pour nous. Je conviens qu’on ne pouvait s’attendre qu’à une révolte de leur part et non de celle des esclaves. Est-ce que les esclaves sont quelque chose?

Le pauvre homme espérait par ces invectives contre les mulâtres s’en séparer tout à fait, et détruire dans l’esprit des blancs qui l’écoutaient l’opinion qui le rejetait dans cette caste méprisée. Il y avait trop de lâcheté dans cette combinaison pour qu’elle réussît. Un murmure de désapprobation le lui fit sentir.

— Oui. monsieur, dit le vieux maréchal de camp de Rouvray, oui, les esclaves sont quelque chose; ils sont quarante contre trois; et nous serions à plaindre si nous n’avions à opposer aux nègres et aux mulâtres que des blancs comme vous.

Le colon se mordit les lèvres.

— Monsieur le général, reprit le gouverneur, que pensez-vous donc de la pétition des mulâtres?

— Donnez-leur des armes, monsieur le gouverneur! répondit M. de Rouvray; faisons voile de toute étoffe! Et, se tournant vers le colon suspect: - Entendez-vous, monsieur? allez vous armer.

Le colon humilié sortit avec tous les signes d’une rage concentrée.

Cependant la clameur d’angoisse qui éclatait dans toute la ville se faisait entendre de moments en moments jusque chez le gouverneur, et rappelait aux membres de cette conférence le sujet qui les rassemblait. M. de Blanchelande remit à un aide de camp un ordre au crayon écrit à la hâte, et rompit le silence sombre avec lequel l’assemblée écoutait cette effrayante rumeur.

— Les sang-mêlés vont être armés, messieurs, mais il reste bien d’autres mesures à prendre.

— Il faut convoquer l’assemblée provinciale, dit le membre de cette assemblée qui avait parlé au moment ou j’étais entré.

— L’assemblée provinciale! reprit son antagoniste de l’assemblée coloniale. Qu’est-ce que c’est que l’assemblée provinciale?

— Parce que vous êtes membre de l’assemblée coloniale! répliqua le pompon blanc.

L’indépendant l’interrompit.

— Je ne connais pas plus la coloniale que la provinciale. Il n’y a que l’assemblée générale, entendez-vous, monsieur?

— Eh bien, repartit le pompon blanc, je vous dirai, moi, qu’il n’y a que l’assemblée nationale de Paris.

— Convoquer l’assemblée provinciale! répétait l’indépendant en riant; comme si elle n’était pas dissoute au moment où la générale a décidé qu’elle tiendrait ses séances ici.

Une réclamation universelle éclatait dans l’auditoire, ennuyé de cette discussion oiseuse.

— Messieurs nos députés, criait un entrepreneur de cultures, pendant que vous vous occupez de ces balivernes, que deviennent mes cotonniers et ma cochenille?

— Et mes quatre cent mille plants d’indigo au Limbé! ajoutait un planteur.

— Et mes nègres, payés trente dollars par tête l’un dans l’autre! disait un capitaine de négriers.

— Chaque minute que vous perdez, poursuivait un autre colon, me coûte, montre et tarif en main, dix quintaux de sucre, ce qui, à dix-sept piastres fortes le quintal, fait cent soixante-dix piastres, ou neuf cent trente livres dix sous, monnaie de France!

— La coloniale, que vous appelez générale, usurpe! reprenait l’autre disputeur, dominant le tumulte à force de voix; qu’elle reste au Port-au-Prince à fabriquer des décrets pour deux lieues de terrain et deux jours de durée, mais qu’elle nous laisse tranquilles ici. Le Cap appartient au congrès provincial du nord, à lui seul!

— Je prétends, reprenait l’indépendant, que son excellence monsieur le gouverneur n’a pas droit de convoquer une autre assemblée que l’assemblée générale des représentants de la colonie, présidée par M. de Cadusch!

— Mais où est-il, votre président M. de Cadusch? demanda le pompon blanc; où est votre assemblée? il n’y en a pas encore quatre membres d’arrivés, tandis que la provinciale est toute ici. Est-ce que vous voudriez par hasard représenter à vous seul une assemblée, toute une colonie?

Cette rivalité des deux députés, fidèles échos de leurs assemblées respectives, exigea encore une fois l’intervention du gouverneur.

— Messieurs, où voulez-vous donc enfin en venir avec vos éternelles assemblées provinciale, générale, coloniale, nationale? Aiderez-vous aux décisions de cette assemblée en lui en faisant invoquer trois ou quatre autres?

— Morbleu! criait d’une voix de tonnerre le général de Rouvray en frappant violemment sur la table du conseil, quels maudits bavards! J’aimerais mieux lutter de poumons avec une pièce de vingt-quatre. Que nous font ces deux assemblées, qui se disputent le pas comme deux compagnies de grenadiers qui vont monter à l’assaut! Eh bien! convoquez-les toutes deux, monsieur le gouverneur, j’en ferai deux régiments pour marcher contre les noirs; et nous verrons si leurs fusils feront autant de bruit que leurs langues.

Après cette vigoureuse sortie, il se pencha vers son voisin (c’était moi), et dit à demi-voix: - Que voulez-vous que fasse entre les deux assemblées de Saint-Domingue, qui se prétendent souveraines, un gouverneur de par le roi de France? Ce sont les beaux parleurs et les avocats qui gâtent tout, ici comme dans la métropole. Si j’avais l’honneur d’être monsieur le lieutenant-général pour le roi, je jetterais toute cette canaille à la porte. Je dirais: Le roi règne, et moi je gouverne. J’enverrais la responsabilité par-devant les soi-disant représentants à tous les diables; et avec douze croix de Saint-Louis, promises au nom de sa majesté, je balaierais tous les rebelles dans l’île de la Tortue, qui a été habitée autrefois par des brigands comme eux, les boucaniers. Souvenez-vous de ce que je vous dis, jeune homme. Les philosophes ont enfanté les philanthropes, qui ont procréé les négrophiles, qui produisent les mangeurs de blancs, ainsi nommés en attendant qu’on leur trouve un nom grec ou latin. Ces prétendues idées libérales dont on s’enivre en France sont un poison sous les tropiques. Il fallait traiter les nègres avec douceur, non les appeler à un affranchissement subit. Toutes les horreurs que vous voyez aujourd’hui à Saint-Domingue sont nées au club Massiac, et l’insurrection des esclaves n’est qu’un contrecoup de la chute de la Bastille.

Pendant que le vieux soldat m’exposait ainsi sa politique étroite, mais pleine de franchise et de conviction, l’orageuse discussion continuait. Un colon, du petit nombre de ceux qui partageaient la frénésie révolutionnaire, qui se faisait appeler le citoyen-général C***, pour avoir présidé à quelques sanglantes exécutions, s’était écrié:

— Il faut plutôt des supplices que des combats. Les nations veulent des exemples terribles: épouvantons les noirs! C’est moi qui ai apaisé les révoltes de juin et de juillet, en faisant planter cinquante têtes d’esclaves des deux côtés de l’avenue de mon habitation, en guise de palmiers. Que chacun se cotise pour la proposition que je vais faire. Défendons les approches du Cap avec les nègres qui nous restent encore.

— Comment! quelle imprudence! répondit-on de toutes parts.

— Vous ne me comprenez pas, messieurs, reprit le citoyen-général. Faisons un cordon de têtes de nègres qui entoure la ville, du fort Picolet à la pointe de Caracol; leurs camarades insurgés n’oseront approcher. Il faut se sacrifier pour la cause commune dans un semblable moment. Je me dévoue le premier. J’ai cinq cents esclaves non révoltés; je les offre.

Un mouvement d’horreur accueillit cette exécrable proposition.

— C’est abominable! c’est horrible! s’écrièrent toutes les voix.

— Ce sont des mesures de ce genre qui ont tout perdu, dit un colon. Si on ne s’était pas tant pressé d’exécuter les derniers révoltés de juin, de juillet et d’août, on aurait pu saisir le fil de leur conspiration, que la hache du bourreau a coupé.

Le citoyen C*** garda un moment le silence du dépit, puis il murmura entre ses dents:

— Je croyais pourtant ne pas être suspect. Je suis lié avec des négrophiles; je corresponds avec Brissot et Pruneau de Pomme-Gouge, en France; Hans-Sloane, en Angleterre; Magaw, en Amérique; Pezll, en Allemagne; Olivarius, en Danemark; Wadstrohm, en Suède; Peter Paulus, en Hollande; Avendano, en Espagne; et l’abbé Pierre Tamburini, en ltalie!

Sa voix s’élevait à mesure qu’il avançait dans sa nomenclature de négrophiles. Il termina enfin, en disant:

— Mais il n’y a point ici de philosophes!

M. de Blanchelande, pour la troisième fois, demanda à recueillir les conseils de chacun.

— Monsieur le gouverneur, dit une voix, voici mon avis. Embarquons-nous tous sur le Léopard, qui est mouillé dans la rade.

— Mettons à prix la tête de Boukmann, dit un autre.

— Informons de tout ceci le gouverneur de la Jamaïque, dit un troisième.

— Oui, pour qu’il nous envoie encore une fois le secours dérisoire de cinq cents fusils, reprit un député de l’assemblée provinciale. Monsieur le gouverneur, envoyez un aviso en France, et attendons!

— Attendre! attendre! interrompit M. de Rouvray avec force. Et les noirs attendront-ils? Et la flamme qui circonscrit déjà cette ville attendra-t-elle? Monsieur de Touzard, faites battre la générale, prenez du canon, et allez trouver le gros des rebelles avec vos grenadiers et vos chasseurs. Monsieur le gouverneur, faites faire des camps dans les paroisses de l’est; établissez des postes au Trou et à Vallières; je me charge, moi, des plaines du fort Dauphin. J’y dirigerai les travaux; mon grand-père, qui était mestre-de-camp du régiment de Normandie, a servi sous M. le maréchal de Vauban; j’ai étudié Folard et Bezout, et j’ai quelque pratique de la défense d’un pays. D’ailleurs les plaines du fort Dauphin, presque enveloppées par la mer et les frontières espagnoles, ont la forme d’une presqu’île, et se protégeront en quelque sorte d’elles-mêmes; la presqu’île du Mole offre un semblable avantage. Usons de tout cela, et agissons!

Le langage énergique et positif du vétéran fit taire subitement toutes les discordances de voix et d’opinions. Le général était dans le vrai. Cette conscience que chacun a de son intérêt véritable rallia tous les avis à celui de M. de Rouvray; et tandis que le gouverneur, par un serrement de main reconnaissant, témoignait au brave officier général qu’il sentait la valeur de ses conseils, bien qu’ils fussent énoncés comme des ordres, et l’importance de son secours, tous les colons réclamaient la prompte exécution des mesures indiquées.

Les deux députés des assemblées rivales, seuls, semblaient se séparer de l’adhésion générale, et murmuraient dans leur coin les mots d’empiétement du pouvoir exécutif, de décision hâtive et de responsabilité.

Je saisis ce moment pour obtenir de M. de Blanchelande les ordres que je sollicitais impatiemment; et je sortis afin de rallier ma troupe et de reprendre sur-le-champ le chemin de l’Acul, malgré la fatigue que tous sentaient, excepté moi.

XVII

Le jour commençait à poindre. J'étais sur la place d'armes, réveillant les miliciens couchés sur leurs manteaux, pêle- mêle avec les dragons jaunes et rouges, les fuyards de la plaine, les bestiaux bêlant et mugissant, et les bagages de tout genre apportés dans la ville par les planteurs des environs.

Je commençais à retrouver ma petite troupe dans ce désordre, quand je vis un dragon jaune, couvert de sueur et de poussière, accourir vers moi à toute bride. J'allais à sa rencontre, et, au peu de paroles entrecoupées qui lui échappèrent, j'appris avec consternation que mes craintes s'étaient réalisées; que la révolte avait gagné les plaines de l'Acul, et que les noirs assiégeaient le fort Galifet, où s'étaient enfermés les milices et les colons. Il faut vous dire que ce fort Galifet était fort peu de chose; on appelait fort à Saint-Domingue tout ouvrage en terre.

Il n'y avait donc pas un moment à perdre. Je fis prendre des chevaux à ceux de mes soldats pour qui je pus en trouver; et, guidé par le dragon, j'arrivai sur les domaines de mon oncle vers dix heures du matin.

Je donnai à peine un regard à ces immenses plantations qui n'étaient plus qu'une mer de flammes, bondissant sur la plaine avec de grosses vagues de fumée, à travers lesquelles le vent emportait de temps en temps, comme des étincelles, de grands troncs d'arbres hérissés de feux. Un pétillement effrayant, mêlé de craquements et de murmures, semblait répondre aux hurlements lointains des noirs, que nous entendions déjà sans les voir encore. Moi, je n'avais qu'une pensée, et l'évanouissement de tant de richesses qui m'étaient réservées ne pouvait m'en distraire, c'était le salut de Marie. Marie sauvée, que m'importait le reste! Je la savais renfermée dans le fort, et je ne demandais à Dieu que d'arriver à temps. Cette espérance seule me soutenait dans mes angoisses et me donnait un courage et des forces de lion.

Enfin un tournant de la route nous laissa voir le fort Galifet. Le drapeau tricolore flottait encore sur la plate-forme, et un feu bien nourri couronnait le contour de ses murs. Je poussai un cri de joie. - Au galop, piquez des deux! lâchez les brides! criai-je à mes camarades. Et, redoublant de vitesse, nous nous dirigeâmes vers le fort, au bas duquel on apercevait la maison de mon oncle, portes et fenêtres brisées, mais debout encore, et rouge des reflets de l’embrasement, qui ne l’avait pas atteinte, parce que le vent soufflait de la mer et qu’elle est isolée des plantations.

Une multitude de nègres, embusqués dans cette maison, se montraient à la fois à toutes les croisées et jusque sur le toit; et les torches, les piques, les haches, brillaient au milieu de coups de fusil qu’ils ne cessaient de tirer contre le fort, tandis qu’une autre foule de leurs camarades montait, tombait, et remontait sans cesse autour des murs assiégés qu’ils avaient chargés d’échelles. Ce flot de noirs, toujours repoussé et toujours renaissant sur ces murailles grises, ressemblait de loin à un essaim de fourmis essayant de gravir l’écaille d’une grande tortue, et dont le lent animal se débarrassait par une secousse d’intervalle en intervalle.

Nous touchions enfin aux premières circonvallations du fort. Les regards fixés sur le drapeau qui le dominait, j’encourageai mes soldats au nom de leurs familles renfermées comme la mienne dans ces murs que nous allions secourir. Une acclamation générale me répondit, et, formant mon petit escadron en colonne, je me préparai à donner le signal de charger le troupeau assiégeant.

En ce moment un grand cri s’éleva de l’enceinte du fort, un tourbillon de fumée enveloppa l’édifice tout entier, roula quelque temps ses plis autour des murs, d’où s’échappait une rumeur pareille au bruit d’une fournaise, et, en s’éclaircissant, nous laissa voir le fort Galifet surmonté d’un drapeau rouge. - Tout était fini!

XVIII

Je ne vous dirai pas ce qui se passa en moi à cet horrible spectacle. Le fort pris, ses défenseurs égorgés, vingt familles massacrées, tout ce désastre général, je l'avouerai à ma honte, ne m'occupa pas un instant. Marie perdue pour moi! perdue pour moi peu d'heures après celle qui me l'avait donnée pour jamais! perdue pour moi par ma faute, puisque, si je ne l'avais pas quittée la nuit précédente pour courir au Cap sur l'ordre de mon oncle, j'aurais pu du moins la défendre ou mourir près d'elle et avec elle, ce qui n'eût, en quelque sorte, pas été la perdre! Ces pensées de désolation égarèrent ma douleur jusqu'à la folie. Mon désespoir était du remords.

Cependant mes compagnons, exaspérés, avaient crié: vengeance! nous nous étions précipités le sabre aux dents, les pistolets aux deux poings, au milieu des insurgés vainqueurs. Quoique bien supérieurs en nombre, les noirs fuyaient à notre approche, mais nous les voyions distinctement à droite et à gauche, devant et derrière nous, massacrant les blancs et se hâtant d'incendier le fort.

Notre fureur s'accroissait de leur lâcheté.

A une poterne du fort, Thadée, couvert de blessures, se présenta devant moi.

— Mon capitaine, me dit-il, votre Pierrot est un sorcier, un obi, comme disent ces damnés nègres, ou au moins un diable. Nous tenions bon; vous arriviez, et tout était sauvé, quand il a pénétré dans le fort, je ne sais par où, et voyez! - Quant à monsieur votre oncle, à sa famille, à madame...

— Marie! interrompis- je, où est Marie?

En ce moment un grand noir sortit de derrière une palissade enflammée, emportant une jeune femme qui criait et se débattait dans ses bras. La jeune femme était Marie; le noir était Pierrot.

— Perfide! lui criai- je.

Je dirigeai un pistolet vers lui; un des esclaves révoltés se jeta au-devant de la balle, et tomba mort. Pierrot se retourna, et parut m'adresser quelques paroles; puis il s'enfonça avec sa proie au milieu des touffes de cannes embrasées. Un instant après, un chien énorme passa à sa suite, tenant dans sa gueule un berceau, dans lequel était le dernier enfant de mon oncle. Je reconnus aussi le chien; c'était Rask. Transporté de rage, je déchargeai sur lui mon second pistolet; mais je le manquai.

Je me mis à courir comme un insensé sur sa trace; mais ma double course nocturne, tant d’heures passées sans prendre de repos et de nourriture, mes craintes pour Marie, le passage subit du comble du bonheur au dernier terme du malheur, toutes ces violentes émotions de l’âme m’avaient épuisé plus encore que les fatigues du corps. Après quelques pas je chancelai; un nuage se répandit sur mes yeux, et je tombai évanoui.

XIX

Quand je me réveillai, j’étais dans la maison dévastée de mon oncle et dans les bras de Thadée. Cet excellent Thadée fixait sur moi des yeux pleins d’anxiété.

— Victoire! cria-t-il dès qu’il sentit mon pouls se ranimer sous sa main, victoire! les nègres sont en déroute, et le capitaine est ressuscité!

J’interrompis son cri de joie par mon éternelle question:

— Où est Marie?

Je n’avais point encore rallié mes idées; il ne me restait que le sentiment et non le souvenir de mon malheur. Thadée baissa la tête. Alors toute ma mémoire me revint; je me retraçai mon horrible nuit de noces, et le grand nègre emportant Marie dans ses bras à travers les flammes s’offrit à moi comme une infernale vision. L’affreuse lumière qui venait d’éclater dans la colonie, et de montrer à tous les blancs des ennemis dans leurs esclaves, me fit voir dans ce Pierrot, si bon, si généreux, si dévoué, qui me devait trois fois la vie, un ingrat, un monstre, un rival! L’enlèvement de ma femme, la nuit même de notre union, me prouvait ce que j’avais d’abord soupçonné, et je reconnus enfin clairement que le chanteur du pavillon n’était autre que l’exécrable ravisseur de Marie. Pour si peu d’heures, que de changements! Thadée me dit qu’il avait vainement poursuivi Pierrot et son chien; que les nègres s’étaient retirés, quoique leur nombre eût pu facilement écraser ma faible troupe, et que l’incendie des propriétés de ma famille continuait sans qu’il fût possible de l’arrêter.

Je lui demandai si l’on savait ce qu’était devenu mon oncle, dans la chambre duquel on m’avait apporté. Il me prit la main en silence, et, me conduisant vers l’alcôve, il en tira les rideaux.

Mon malheureux oncle était là, gisant sur son lit ensanglanté, un poignard profondément enfoncé dans le cœur. Au calme de sa figure, on voyait qu’il avait été frappé dans le sommeil. La couche du nain Habibrah, qui dormait habituellement à ses pieds, était aussi tachée de sang, et les mêmes souillures se faisaient remarquer sur la veste chamarrée du pauvre fou, jetée à terre à quelques pas du lit.

Je ne doutai pas que le bouffon ne fût mort victime de son attachement connu pour mon oncle, et n’eût été massacré par ses camarades, peut-être en défendant son maître. Je me reprochai amèrement ces préventions qui m’avaient fait porter de si faux jugements sur Habibrah et sur Pierrot; je mêlai aux larmes que m’arracha la fin prématurée de mon oncle quelques regrets pour son fou. D’après mes ordres, on rechercha son corps, mais en vain. Je supposai que les nègres avaient emporté et jeté le nain dans les flammes; et j’ordonnai que, dans le service funèbre de mon beau-père, des prières fussent dites pour le repos de l’âme du fidèle Habibrah.

XX

Le fort Galifet était détruit, nos habitations avaient disparu; un plus long séjour sur ces ruines était inutile et impossible. Dès le soir même, nous retournâmes au Cap.

Là, une fièvre ardente me saisit. L’effort que j’avais fait sur moi-même pour dompter mon désespoir était trop violent. Le ressort, trop tendu, se brisa. Je tombai dans le délire. Toutes mes espérances trompées, mon amour profané, mon amitié trahie, mon avenir perdu, et par-dessus tout l’implacable jalousie, égarèrent ma raison. Il me semblait que des flammes ruisselaient dans mes veines; ma tête se rompait; j’avais des furies dans le cœur. Je me représentais Marie au pouvoir d’un autre amant, au pouvoir d’un maître, d’un esclave, de Pierrot! On m’a dit qu’alors je m’élançais de mon lit, et qu’il fallait six hommes pour m’empêcher de me fracasser le crâne sur l’angle des murs.

Que ne suis-je mort alors! Cette crise passa. Les médecins, les soins de Thadée, et je ne sais quelle force de la vie dans la jeunesse, vainquirent le mal, ce mal qui aurait pu être un si grand bien. Je guéris au bout de dix jours, et je ne m’en affligeai pas. Je fus content de pouvoir vivre encore quelque temps, pour la vengeance.

A peine convalescent, j’allai chez M. de Blanchelande demander du service. Il voulait me donner un poste à défendre; je le conjurai de m’incorporer comme volontaire dans l’une des colonnes mobiles que l’on envoyait de temps en temps contre les noirs pour balayer le pays.

On avait fortifié le Cap à la hâte. L’insurrection faisait des progrès effrayants. Les nègres de Port-au-Prince commençaient à s’agiter; Biassou commandait ceux du Limbé, du Dondon et de l’Acul; Jean-François s’était fait proclamer généralissime des révoltés de la plaine de Maribarou; Boukmann, célèbre depuis par sa fin tragique, parcourait avec ses brigands les bords de la Limonade; et enfin les bandes du Morne-Rouge avaient reconnu pour chef un nègre nommé Bug-Jargal.

Le caractère de ce dernier, si l’on en croyait les relations, contrastait d’une manière singulière avec la férocité des autres. Tandis que Boukmann et Biassou inventaient mille genres de mort pour les prisonniers qui tombaient entre leurs mains, Bug-Jargal s’empressait de leur fournir les moyens de quitter l’île. Les premiers contractaient des marchés avec les lanches espagnoles qui croisaient autour des côtes, et leur vendaient d'avance les dépouilles des malheureux qu'ils forçaient à fuir; Bug-Jargal coula à fond plusieurs de ces corsaires. M. Colas de Maigné et huit autres colons distingués furent détachés par ses ordres de la roue où Boukmann les avait fait lier. On citait de lui mille autres traits de générosité qu'il serait trop long de vous rapporter.

Mon espoir de vengeance ne paraissait pas près de s'accomplir. Je n'entendais plus parler de Pierrot. Les rebelles commandés par Biassou continuaient d'inquiéter le Cap, ils avaient même une fois osé aborder le morne qui domine la ville, et le canon de la citadelle avait eu de la peine à les repousser. Le gouverneur résolut de les refouler dans l'intérieur de l'île. Les milices de l'Acul, du Limbé, d'Ouanaminte et de Maribarou, réunies au régiment du Cap et aux redoutables compagnies jaune et rouge, constituaient notre armée active. Les milices du Dondon et du Quartier-Dauphin, renforcées d'un corps de volontaires, sous les ordres du négociant Poncignon, formaient la garnison de la ville.

Le gouverneur voulut d'abord se délivrer de Bug-Jargal, dont la diversion l'alarmait. Il envoya contre lui les milices d'Ouanaminte et un bataillon du Cap. Ce corps rentra deux jours après complètement battu. Le gouverneur s'obstina à vouloir vaincre Bug-Jargal; il fit repartir le même corps avec un renfort de cinquante dragons jaunes et de quatre cents miliciens de Maribarou. Cette seconde armée fut encore plus maltraitée que la première.

Thadée, qui était de cette expédition, en conçut un violent dépit, et me jura à son retour qu'il s'en vengerait sur Bug- Jargal.

Une larme roula dans les yeux de d'Auverney; il croisa les bras sur sa poitrine, et parut quelques minutes plongé dans une rêverie douloureuse; enfin il reprit.

XXI

— La nouvelle arriva que Bug-Jargal avait quitté le Morne-Rouge, et dirigeait sa troupe par les montagnes pour se joindre à Biassou. Le gouverneur sauta de joie: - Nous les tenons, dit-il en se frottant les mains. Le lendemain l’armée coloniale était à une lieue en avant du Cap, Les insurgés, à notre approche, abandonnèrent précipitamment Port- Margot et le fort Galifet, où ils avaient établi un poste défendu par de grosses pièces d’artillerie de siège, enlevées à des batteries de la côte; toutes les bandes se replièrent vers les montagnes. Le gouverneur était triomphant. Nous poursuivîmes notre marche. Chacun de nous, en passant dans ces plaines arides et désolées, cherchait à saluer encore d’un triste regard le lieu où étaient ses champs, ses habitations, ses richesses; souvent il n’en pouvait reconnaître la place.

Quelquefois notre marche était arrêtée par des embrasements qui des champs cultivés s’étaient communiqués aux forêts et aux savanes. Dans ces climats, où la terre est encore vierge, où la végétation est surabondante, l’incendie d’une forêt est accompagné de phénomènes singuliers. On l’entend de loin, souvent même avant de le voir, sourdre et bruire avec le fracas d’une cataracte diluviale. Les troncs d’arbres qui éclatent, les branches qui pétillent, les racines qui craquent dans le sol, les grandes herbes qui frémissent, le bouillonnement des lacs et des marais enfermés dans la forêt, le sifflement de la flamme qui dévore l’air, jettent une rumeur qui tantôt s’apaise, tantôt redouble avec les progrès de l’embrasement. Parfois on voit une verte lisière d’arbres encore intacts entourer longtemps le foyer flamboyant. Tout à coup une langue de feu débouche par l’une des extrémités de cette fraîche ceinture, un serpent de flamme bleuâtre court rapidement le long des tiges, et en un clin d’oeil le front de la forêt disparaît sous un voile d’or mouvant; tout brûle à la fois. Alors un dais de fumée s’abaisse de temps à autre sous le souffle du vent, et enveloppe les flammes. Il se roule et se déroule, s’élève et s’affaisse, se dissipe et s’épaissit, devient tout à coup noir; puis une sorte de frange de feu en découpe vivement tous les bords, un grand bruit se fait entendre, la frange s’efface, la fumée remonte, et verse en s’envolant un flot de cendre rouge, qui pleut longtemps sur la terre.

XXII

Le soir du troisième jour, nous entrâmes dans les gorges de la Grande-Rivière. On estimait que les noirs étaient à vingt lieues dans la montagne.

Nous assîmes notre camp sur un mornet qui paraissait leur avoir servi au même usage, à la manière dont il était dépouillé. Cette position n'était pas heureuse; il est vrai que nous étions tranquilles. Le mornet était dominé de tous côtés par des rochers à pic, couverts d'épaisses forêts. L'aspérité de ces escarpements avait fait donner à ce lieu le nom de Dompte-Mulâtre. La Grande-Rivière coulait derrière le camp; resserrée entre deux côtes, elle était dans cet endroit étroite et profonde. Ses bords, brusquement inclinés, se hérissaient de touffes de buissons impénétrables à la vue. Souvent même ses eaux étaient cachées par des guirlandes de lianes, qui, s'accrochant aux branches des érables à fleurs rouges semés parmi les buissons, mariaient leurs jets d'une rive à l'autre, et, se croisant de mille manières, formaient sur le fleuve de larges tentes de verdure, l'oeil qui les contemplait du haut des roches voisines croyait voir des prairies humides encore de rosée. Un bruit sourd, ou quelquefois une sarcelle sauvage, perçant tout à coup ce rideau fleuri, décelaient seuls le cours de la rivière.

Le soleil cessa bientôt de dorer la cime aiguë des monts lointains du Dondon; peu à peu l'ombre s'étendit sur le camp, et le silence ne fut plus troublé que par les cris de la grue et les pas mesurés des sentinelles.

Tout à coup les redoutables chants d'Oua-Nassé et du Camp du Grand Pré se firent entendre sur nos têtes; les palmiers, les acomas et les cèdres qui couronnaient les rocs s'embrasèrent, et les clartés livides de l'incendie nous montrèrent sur les sommets voisins de nombreuses bandes de nègres et de mulâtres dont le teint cuivré paraissait rouge à la lueur des flammes. C'étaient ceux de Biassou.

Le danger était imminent. Les chefs s'éveillant en sursaut coururent rassembler leurs soldats; le tambour battit la générale; la trompette sonna l'alarme; nos lignes se formèrent en tumulte, et les révoltés, au lieu de profiter du désordre où nous étions, immobiles, nous regardaient en chantant Oua-Nassé.

Un noir gigantesque parut seul sur le plus élevé des pics secondaires qui encaissent la Grande-Rivière; une plume couleur de feu flottait sur son front; une hache était dans sa main droite, un drapeau rouge dans sa main gauche; je reconnus Pierrot! Si une carabine se fût trouvée à ma portée, la rage m’aurait peut-être fait commettre une lâcheté. Le noir répéta le refrain d’Oua-Nassé, planta son drapeau sur le pic, lança sa hache au milieu de nous, et s’engloutit dans les flots du fleuve. Un regret s’éleva en moi, car je crus qu’il ne mourrait plus de ma main.

Alors les noirs commencèrent à rouler sur nos colonnes d’énormes quartiers de rochers; une grêle de balles et de flèches tomba sur le mornet. Nos soldats, furieux de ne pouvoir atteindre les assaillants, expiraient en désespérés, écrasés par les rochers, criblés de balles ou percés de flèches. Une horrible confusion régnait dans l’armée. Soudain un bruit affreux parut sortir du milieu de la Grande-Rivière. Une scène extraordinaire s’y passait, les dragons jaunes, extrêmement maltraités par les masses que les rebelles poussaient du haut des montagnes, avaient conçu l’idée de se réfugier, pour y échapper, sous les voûtes flexibles de lianes dont le fleuve était couvert. Thadée avait le premier mis en avant ce moyen, d’ailleurs ingénieux...

Ici le narrateur fut soudainement interrompu.

XXIII

Il y avait plus d'un quart d'heure que le sergent Thadée, le bras droit en écharpe, s'était glissé, sans être vu de personne, dans un coin de la tente, où ses gestes avaient seuls exprimé la part qu'il prenait aux récits de son capitaine, jusqu'à ce moment où, ne croyant pas que le respect lui permit de laisser passer un éloge aussi direct sans en remercier d'Auverney, il se prit à balbutier d'un ton confus:

— Vous êtes bien bon, mon capitaine.

Un éclat de rire général s'éleva. D'Auverney se retourna, et lui cria d'un ton sévère:

— Comment: vous ici, Thadée! et votre bras?

A ce langage, si nouveau pour lui, les traits du vieux soldat se rembrunirent; il chancela et leva la tête en arrière, comme pour arrêter les larmes qui roulaient dans ses yeux.

— Je ne croyais pas, dit-il enfin à voix basse, je n'aurais jamais cru que mon capitaine pût manquer à son vieux sergent jusqu'à lui dire vous.

Le capitaine se leva précipitamment.

— Pardonne, mon vieil ami, pardonne, je ne sais ce que j'ai dit; tiens, Thad, me pardonnes-tu?

Les larmes jaillirent des yeux du sergent, malgré lui,

— Voilà la troisième fois, balbutia-t-il; mais celles-ci sont de joie.

La paix était faite, Un court silence s'ensuivit,

— Mais, dis-moi, Thad, demanda le capitaine doucement, pourquoi as-tu quitté l'ambulance pour venir ici?

— C'est que, avec votre permission, j'étais venu pour vous demander, mon capitaine, s'il faudrait faire mettre demain la housse galonnée à votre cheval de bataille.

Henri se mit à rire.

— Vous auriez mieux fait, Thadée, de demander au chirurgien-major s'il faudrait mettre demain deux onces de charpie sur votre bras malade.

— Ou de vous informer, reprit Paschal, si vous pourriez boire un peu de vin pour vous rafraîchir; en attendant, voici de l'eau-de-vie qui ne peut que vous faire du bien; goûtez-en, mon brave sergent.

Thadée s'avança, fit un salut respectueux, s'excusa de prendre le verre de la main gauche, et le vida à la santé de la compagnie. Il s'anima.

— Vous en étiez, mon capitaine, au moment, au moment où... Eh bien oui, ce fut moi qui proposai d'entrer sous les lianes pour empêcher des chrétiens d'être tués par des pierres. Notre officier, qui, ne sachant pas nager, craignait de se noyer, et cela était bien naturel, s'y opposait de toutes ses forces, jusqu'à ce qu'il vit, avec votre permission, messieurs, un gros caillou, qui manqua de l'écraser, tomber sur la rivière, sans pouvoir s'y enfoncer, à cause des herbes. - Il vaut encore mieux, dit-il alors, mourir comme Pharaon d'Egypte que comme saint Etienne. Nous ne sommes pas des saints, et Pharaon était un militaire comme nous. - Mon officier, un savant comme vous voyez, voulut donc bien se rendre à mon avis, à condition que j'essaierais le premier de l'exécuter. Je vais. Je descends le long du bord, je saute sous le berceau en me tenant aux branches d'en haut, et, dites, mon capitaine, je me sens tirer par la jambe; je me débats, je crie au secours, je reçois plusieurs coups de sabre; et voilà tous les dragons, qui étaient des diables, qui se précipitent pêle-mêle sous les lianes (C'étaient les noirs du Morne-Rouge qui s'étaient cachés là sans qu'on s'en doutât, probablement pour nous tomber sur le dos, comme un sac trop chargé, le moment d'après.) - Cela n'aurait pas été un bon moment pour pêcher! - On se battait, on jurait, on criait. Etant tout nus, ils étaient plus alertes que nous; mais nos coups portaient mieux que les leurs. Nous nagions d'un bras, et nous battions de l'autre, comme cela se pratique toujours dans ce cas-là. - Ceux qui ne savaient pas nager, dites, mon capitaine, se suspendaient d'une main aux lianes et les noirs les tiraient par les pieds. Au milieu de la bagarre, je vis un grand nègre qui se défendait comme un Belzébuth contre huit ou dix de mes camarades; je nageai là, et je reconnus Pierrot, autrement dit Bug... Mais cela ne doit se découvrir qu'après, n'est-ce pas, mon capitaine? Je reconnus Pierrot. Depuis la prise du fort, nous étions brouillés ensemble; je le saisis à la gorge; il allait se délivrer de moi d'un coup de poignard, quand il me regarda, et se rendit au lieu de me tuer; ce qui fut très malheureux, mon capitaine, car s'il ne s'était pas rendu... - Mais cela se saura plus tard. - Sitôt que les nègres le virent pris, ils sautèrent sur nous pour le délivrer; si bien que les milices allaient aussi entrer dans l'eau pour nous secourir, quand Pierrot, voyant sans doute que les nègres allaient tous être massacrés, dit quelques mots qui étaient un vrai grimoire, puisque cela les mit tous en fuite. Ils plongèrent, et disparurent en un clin d'oeil. - Cette bataille sous l'eau aurait eu quelque chose d'agréable, et m'aurait bien amusé, si je n’y avais pas perdu un doigt et mouillé dix cartouches, et si... pauvre homme! mais cela était écrit, mon capitaine.

Et le sergent, après avoir respectueusement appuyé le revers de sa main gauche sur la grenade de son bonnet de police, l’éleva vers le ciel d’un air inspiré.

D’Auverney paraissait violemment agité.

— Oui, dit-il, oui, tu as raison, mon vieux Thadée, cette nuit-là fut une nuit fatale.

Il serait tombé dans une de ces profondes rêveries qui lui étaient habituelles, si l’assemblée ne l’eût vivement pressé de continuer. Il poursuivit.

XXIV

— Tandis que la scène que Thadée vient de décrire... (Thadée, triomphant, vint se placer derrière le capitaine), tandis que la scène que Thadée vient de décrire se passait derrière le mornet, j'étais parvenu, avec quelques-uns des miens, à grimper de broussaille en broussaille sur un pic nommé le Pic du Paon, à cause des teintes irisées que le mica répandu à sa surface présentait aux rayons du soleil. Ce pic était de niveau avec les positions des noirs. Le chemin une fois frayé, le sommet fut bientôt couvert de milices; nous commençâmes une vive fusillade. Les nègres, moins bien armés que nous, ne purent nous riposter aussi chaudement; ils commencèrent à se décourager; nous redoublâmes d'acharnement, et bientôt les rocs les plus voisins furent évacués par les rebelles, qui cependant eurent d'abord soin de faire rouler les cadavres de leurs morts sur le reste de l'armée, encore rangée en bataille sur le mornet. Alors nous abattîmes et liâmes ensemble avec des feuilles de palmier et des cordes plusieurs troncs de ces énormes cotonniers sauvages dont les premiers habitants de l'île faisaient des pirogues de cent rameurs. A l'aide de ce pont improvisé, nous passâmes sur les pics abandonnés, et une partie de l'armée se trouva ainsi avantageusement postée. Cet aspect ébranla le courage des insurgés. Notre feu se soutenait. Des clameurs lamentables, auxquelles se mêlait le nom de Bug-Jargal, retentirent soudain dans l'armée de Biassou. Une grande épouvante s'y manifesta, plusieurs noirs du Morne-Rouge parurent sur le roc ou flottait le drapeau écarlate; ils se prosternèrent, enlevèrent l'étendard, et se précipitèrent avec lui dans les gouffres de la Grande-Rivière. Cela semblait signifier que leur chef était mort ou pris.

Notre audace s'en accrut à un tel point que je résolus de chasser à l'arme blanche les rebelles des rochers qu'ils occupaient encore. Je fis jeter un pont de troncs d'arbres entre notre pic et le roc le plus voisin; et je m'élançai le premier au milieu des nègres. Les miens allaient me suivre, quand un des rebelles, d'un coup de hache, fit voler le pont en éclats. Les débris tombèrent dans l'abîme, en battant les rocs avec un bruit épouvantable.

Je tournai la tête; en ce moment je me sentis saisir par six ou sept noirs qui me désarmèrent. Je me débattais comme un lion; ils me lièrent avec des cordes d'écorce, sans s'inquiéter des balles que mes gens faisaient pleuvoir autour d'eux.

Mon désespoir ne fut adouci que par les cris de victoire que j’entendis pousser autour de moi un instant après; je vis bientôt les noirs et les mulâtres gravir pêle-mêle les sommets les plus escarpés, en jetant des clameurs de détresse. Mes gardiens les imitèrent; le plus vigoureux d’entre eux me chargea sur ses épaules, et m’emporta vers les forêts, en sautant de roche en roche avec l’agilité d’un chamois. La lueur des flammes cessa bientôt de le guider; la faible lumière de la lune lui suffit; il se mit seulement à marcher avec moins de rapidité.

XXV

Après avoir traversé des halliers et franchi des torrents, nous arrivâmes dans une haute vallée d'un aspect singulièrement sauvage. Ce lieu m'était absolument inconnu.

Cette vallée était située dans le cœur même des mornes, dans ce qu'on appelle à Saint-Domingue les doubles montagnes. C'était une grande savane verte, emprisonnée dans des murailles de roches nues, parsemée de bouquets de pins, de gayacs et de palmistes. Le froid vif qui règne presque continuellement dans cette région de l'île, bien qu'il n'y gèle pas, était encore augmenté par la fraîcheur de la nuit, qui finissait à peine. L'aube commençait à faire revivre la blancheur des hauts sommets environnants, et la vallée, encore plongée dans une obscurité profonde, n'était éclairée que par une multitude de feux allumés par les nègres; car c'était là leur point de ralliement. Les membres disloqués de leur armée s'y rassemblaient en désordre, les noirs et les mulâtres arrivaient de moment en moment par troupes effarées, avec des cris de détresse ou des hurlements de rage, et de nouveaux feux, brillants comme des yeux de tigre dans la sombre savane, marquaient à chaque instant que le cercle du camp s'agrandissait.

Le nègre dont j'étais le prisonnier m'avait déposé au pied d'un chêne, d'où j'observais avec insouciance ce bizarre spectacle. Le noir m'attacha par la ceinture au tronc de l'arbre auquel j'étais adossé, resserra les nœuds redoublés qui comprimaient tous mes mouvements, mit sur ma tête son bonnet de laine rouge, sans doute pour indiquer que j'étais sa propriété, et après qu'il se fut ainsi assuré que je ne pourrais ni m'échapper, ni lui être enlevé par d'autres, il se disposa à s'éloigner. Je me décidai alors à lui adresser la parole, et je lui demandai en patois créole, s'il était de la bande du Dondon ou de celle du Morne-Rouge. Il s'arrêta et me répondit d'un air d'orgueil: Morne-Rouge! Une idée me vint. J'avais entendu parler de la générosité du chef de cette bande, Bug-Jargal, et, quoique résolu sans peine à une mort qui devait finir tous mes malheurs, l'idée des tourments qui m'attendaient si je la recevais de Biassou ne laissait pas que de m'inspirer quelque horreur. Je n'aurais pas mieux demandé que de mourir, sans ces tortures. C'était peut- être une faiblesse, mais je crois qu'en de pareils moments notre nature d'homme se révolte toujours. Je pensai donc que si je pouvais me soustraire à Biassou, j'obtiendrais peut-être de Bug-Jargal une mort sans supplices, une mort de soldat.

Je demandai à ce nègre du Morne-Rouge de me conduire à son chef, Bug-Jargal. Il tressaillit. Bug-Jargal! dit-il en se frappant le front avec désespoir; puis passant rapidement à l'expression de la fureur, il grinça des dents et me cria en me montrant le poing: - Biassou! Biassou! - Après ce nom menaçant, il me quitta.

La colère et la douleur du nègre me rappelèrent cette circonstance du combat de laquelle nous avions conclu la prise ou la mort du chef des bandes du Morne-Rouge. Je n'en doutai plus; et je me résignai à cette vengeance de Biassou dont le noir semblait me menacer.

XXVI

Cependant les ténèbres couvraient encore la vallée, où la foule des noirs et le nombre des feux s'accroissaient sans cesse. Un groupe de négresses vint allumer un foyer près de moi. Aux nombreux bracelets de verre bleu, rouge et violet qui brillaient échelonnés sur leurs bras et leurs jambes, aux anneaux qui chargeaient leurs oreilles, aux bagues qui ornaient tous les doigts de leurs mains et de leurs pieds, aux amulettes attachées sur leur sein, au collier de charmes suspendu à leur cou, au tablier de plumes bariolées, seul vêtement qui voilât leur nudité, et surtout à leurs clameurs cadencées, à leurs regards vagues et hagards, je reconnus des griotes. Vous ignorez peut-être qu'il existe parmi les noirs de diverses contrées de l'Afrique des nègres, doués de je ne sais quel grossier talent de poésie et d'improvisation qui ressemble à la folie. Ces nègres, errant de royaume en royaume, sont, dans ces pays barbares, ce qu'étaient les rhapsodes antiques, et, dans le moyen âge les minstrels d'Angleterre, les minsinger d'Allemagne, et les trouvères de France. On les appelle griots, leurs femmes, les griotes, possédées comme eux d'un démon insensé, accompagnent les chansons barbares de leurs maris par des danses lubriques, et présentent une parodie grotesque des bayadères de l'Hindoustan et des almées égyptiennes. C'étaient donc quelques-unes de ces femmes qui venaient de s'asseoir en rond, à quelques pas de moi, les jambes repliées à la mode africaine, autour d'un grand amas de branchages desséchés, qui brûlait en faisant trembler sur leurs visages hideux la lueur rouge de ses flammes.

Dès que leur cercle fut formé, elles se prirent toutes la main, et la plus vieille, qui portait une plume de héron plantée dans ses cheveux, se mit à crier: Ouanga! Je compris qu'elles allaient opérer un de ces sortilèges qu'elles désignent sous ce nom. Toutes répétèrent: Ouanga! La plus vieille, après un silence de recueillement, arracha une poignée de ses cheveux, et la jeta dans le feu en disant ces paroles sacramentelles: Malé o guiab! qui, dans le jargon des nègres créoles, signifient: - J'irai au diable. Toutes les griotes, imitant leur doyenne, livrèrent aux flammes une mèche de leurs cheveux, et redirent gravement: - Malé o guiab!

Cette invocation étrange, et les grimaces burlesques qui l'accompagnaient, m'arrachèrent cette espère de convulsion involontaire qui saisit souvent malgré lui l'homme le plus sérieux ou même le plus pénétré de douleur, et qu’on appelle le fou rire. Je voulus en vain le réprimer, il éclata. Ce rire, échappé à un cœur bien triste, fit naître une scène singulièrement sombre et effrayante.

Toutes les négresses, troublées dans leur mystère, se levèrent comme réveillées en sursaut. Elles ne s’étaient pas aperçues jusque-là de ma présence.

Elles coururent tumultueusement vers moi, en hurlant: Blanco! blanco! Je n’ai jamais vu une réunion de figures plus diversement horribles que ne l’étaient dans leur fureur tous ces visages noirs avec leurs dents blanches et leurs yeux blancs traversés de grosses veines sanglantes.

Elles m’allaient déchirer. La vieille à la plume de héron fit un signe, et cria à plusieurs reprises: Zoté cordé! zoté cordé! [Accordez-vous! Accordez-vous!] Ces forcenées s’arrêtèrent subitement, et je les vis, non sans surprise, détacher toutes ensemble leur tablier de plumes, les jeter sur l’herbe, et commencer autour de moi cette danse lascive que les noirs appellent la chica.

Cette danse, dont les attitudes grotesques et la vive allure n’expriment que le plaisir et la gaieté, empruntait ici de diverses circonstances accessoires un caractère sinistre. Les regards foudroyants que me lançaient les griotes au milieu de leurs folâtres évolutions, l’accent lugubre qu’elles donnaient à l’air joyeux de la chica, le gémissement aigu et prolongé que la vénérable présidente du sanhédrin noir arrachait de temps en temps à son balafo, espèce d’épinette qui murmure comme un petit orgue, et se compose d’une vingtaine de tuyaux de bois dur dont la grosseur et la longueur vont en diminuant graduellement, et surtout l’horrible rire que chaque sorcière nue, à certaines pauses de la danse, venait me présenter à son tour, en appuyant presque son visage sur le mien, ne m’annonçaient que trop à quels affreux châtiments devait s’attendre le blanco profanateur de leur Ouanga. Je me rappelai la coutume de ces peuplades sauvages qui dansent autour des prisonniers avant de les massacrer, et je laissai patiemment ces femmes exécuter le ballet du drame dont je devais ensanglanter le dénouement. Cependant je ne pus m’empêcher de frémir quand je vis, à un moment marqué par le balafo, chaque griote mettre dans le brasier la pointe d’une lame de sabre, ou le fer d’une hache, l’extrémité d’une longue aiguille à voiture, les pinces d’une tenaille, ou les dents d’une scie.

La danse touchait à sa fin; les instruments de torture étaient rouges. A un signal de la vieille, les négresses allèrent processionnellement chercher, l’une après l’autre, quelque arme horrible dans le feu.

Celles qui ne purent se munir d’un fer ardent prirent un tison enflammé. Alors je compris clairement quel supplice m’était réservé, et que j’aurais un bourreau dans chaque danseuse. A un autre commandement de leur coryphée, elles recommencèrent une dernière ronde, en se lamentant d’une manière effrayante. Je fermai les yeux pour ne plus voir du moins les ébats de ces démons femelles, qui, haletants de fatigue et de rage, entrechoquaient en cadence sur leurs têtes leurs ferrailles flamboyantes, d’où s’échappaient un bruit aigu et des myriades d’étincelles. J’attendis en me roidissant l’instant où je sentirais mes chairs se tourmenter, mes os se calciner, mes nerfs se tordre sous les morsures brûlantes des tenailles et des scies, et un frisson courut sur tous mes membres. Ce fut un moment affreux.

Il ne dura heureusement pas longtemps. La chica des griotes atteignait son dernier période, quand j’entendis de loin la voix du nègre qui m’avait fait prisonnier. Il accourait en criant: Que haceis, mujeres de demonio? Que haceis alli? Dexaïs mi prisonero! [Que faites-vous, femmes du démon? Que faites-vous là? laissez mon prisonnier!] Je rouvris les yeux. Il était déjà grand jour. Le nègre se hâtait avec mille gestes de colère. Les griotes s’étaient arrêtées; mais elles paraissaient moins émues de ses menaces qu’interdites par la présence d’un personnage assez bizarre dont le noir était accompagné.

C’était un homme très gros et très petit, une sorte de nain, dont le visage était caché par un voile blanc, percé de trois trous, pour la bouche et les yeux, à la manière des pénitents. Ce voile, qui tombait sur son cou et ses épaules, laissait nue sa poitrine velue, dont la couleur me parut être celle des griffes, et sur laquelle brillait, suspendu à une chaîne d’or, le soleil d’un ostensoir d’argent tronqué. On voyait le manche en croix d’un poignard grossier passer au-dessus de sa ceinture écarlate qui soutenait un jupon rayé de vert, de jaune et de noir, dont la frange descendait jusqu’à ses pieds larges et difformes. Ses bras, nus comme sa poitrine, agitaient un bâton blanc; un chapelet, dont les grains étaient d’adrézarach, pendait à sa ceinture, près du poignard; et son front était surmonté d’un bonnet pointu orné de sonnettes dans lequel, lorsqu’il s’approcha, je ne fus pas peu surpris de reconnaître la gorra d’Habibrah. Seulement, parmi les hiéroglyphes dont cette espèce de mitre était couverte, on remarquait des taches de sang. C’était sans doute le sang du fidèle bouffon. Ces traces de meurtre me parurent une nouvelle preuve de sa mort, et réveillèrent dans mon cœur un dernier regret.

Au moment où les griotes aperçurent cet héritier du bonnet d'Habibrah, elles s'écrièrent toutes ensemble: - L'obi! et tombèrent prosternées. Je devinai que c'était le sorcier de l'armée de Biassou. - Basta! Basta! dit-il en arrivant auprès d'elles, avec une voix sourde et grave, dexaïs el prisonero de Biassu [Il suffit! il suffit! Laissez le prisonnier de Biassou!]. Toutes les négresses, se relevant en tumulte, jetèrent les instruments de mort dont elles étaient chargées, reprirent leurs tabliers de plumes, et, à un geste de l'obi, elles se dispersèrent comme une nuée de sauterelles.

En ce moment le regard de l'obi parut se fixer sur moi; il tressaillit, recula d'un pas, et reporta son bâton blanc vers les griotes, comme s'il eût voulu les rappeler. Cependant, après avoir grommelé entre ses dents le mot maldicho [Maudit.], et dit quelques paroles à l'oreille du nègre, il se retira lentement, en croisant les bras, et dans l'attitude d'une profonde méditation.

XXVII

Mon gardien m’apprit alors que Biassou demandait à me voir, et qu’il fallait me préparer à soutenir dans une heure une entrevue avec ce chef.

C’était sans doute encore une heure de vie. En attendant qu’elle fût écoulée, mes regards erraient sur le camp des rebelles, dont le jour me laissait voir dans ses moindres détails la singulière physionomie. Dans une autre disposition d’esprit, je n’aurais pu m’empêcher de rire de l’inepte vanité des noirs, qui étaient presque tous chargés d’ornements militaires et sacerdotaux, dépouilles de leurs victimes. La plupart de ces parures n’étaient plus que des haillons déchiquetés et sanglants. Il n’était pas rare de voir briller un hausse-col sous un rabat, ou une épaulette sur une chasuble. Sans doute pour se délasser des travaux auxquels ils avaient été condamnés toute leur vie, les nègres restaient dans une inaction inconnue à nos soldats, même retirés sous la tente. Quelques-uns dormaient au grand soleil, la tête près d’un feu ardent; d’autres, l’oeil tour à tour terne et furieux, chantaient un air monotone, accroupis sur le seuil de leurs ajoupas, espèces de huttes couvertes de feuilles de bananier ou de palmier, dont la forme conique ressemble à nos tentes canonnières. Leurs femmes noires ou cuivrées, aidées des négrillons, préparaient la nourriture des combattants. Je les voyais remuer avec des fourches l’igname, les bananes, la patate, les pois, le coco, le maïs, le chou caraïbe qu’ils appellent tayo, et une foule d’autres fruits indigènes qui bouillonnaient autour des quartiers de porc, de tortue et de chien, dans de grandes chaudières volées aux cases des planteurs. Dans le lointain, aux limites du camp, les griots et les griotes formaient de grandes rondes autour des feux, et le vent m’apportait par lambeaux leurs chants barbares mêlés aux sons des guitares et des balafos. Quelques vedettes, placées aux sommets des rochers voisins, éclairaient les alentours du quartier général de Biassou, dont le seul retranchement, en cas d’attaque, était un cordon circulaire de cabrouets, chargés de butin et de munitions. Ces sentinelles noires, debout sur la pointe aiguë des pyramides de granit dont les mornes sont hérissés, tournaient fréquemment sur elles-mêmes, comme les girouettes sur les flèches gothiques, et se renvoyaient l’une à l’autre, de toute la force de leurs poumons, le cri qui maintenait la sécurité du camp: Nada! Nada! [Rien! Rien!]

De temps en temps, des attroupements de nègres curieux se formaient autour de moi. Tous me regardaient d'un air menaçant.

XXVIII

Enfin, un peloton de soldats de couleur, assez bien armés, arriva vers moi. Le noir à qui je semblais appartenir me détacha du chêne auquel j’étais lié, et me remit au chef de l’escouade, des mains duquel il reçut en échange un assez gros sac, qu’il ouvrit sur-le-champ. C’étaient des piastres. Pendant que le nègre, agenouillé sur l’herbe, les comptait avidement, les soldats m’entraînèrent. Je considérai avec curiosité leur équipement. Ils portaient un uniforme de gros drap, brun, rouge et jaune, coupé à l’espagnole; une espèce de montera castillane, ornée d’une large cocarde rouge [On sait que cette couleur est celle de la cocarde espagnole.], cachait leurs cheveux de laine. Ils avaient, au lieu de giberne, une façon de carnassière attachée sur le côté. Leurs armes étaient un lourd fusil, un sabre et un poignard. J’ai su depuis que cet uniforme était celui de la garde particulière de Biassou.

Après plusieurs circuits entre les rangées irrégulières d’ajoupas qui encombraient le camp, nous parvînmes à l’entrée d’une grotte, taillée par la nature au pied de l’un de ces immenses pans de roches dont la savane était murée. Un grand rideau d’une étoffe thibétaine qu’on appelle le katchmir, et qui se distingue moins par l’éclat de ses couleurs que par ses plis moelleux et ses dessins variés, fermait à l’oeil l’intérieur de cette caverne. Elle était entourée de plusieurs lignes redoublées de soldats, équipés comme ceux qui m’avaient amené.

Après l’échange du mot d’ordre avec les deux sentinelles qui se promenaient devant le seuil de la grotte, le chef de l’escouade souleva le rideau de katchmir, et m’introduisit, en le laissant retomber derrière moi.

Une lampe de cuivre à cinq becs, pendue par des chaînes à la voûte, jetait une lumière vacillante sur les parois humides de cette caverne fermée au jour. Entre deux haies de soldats mulâtres, j’aperçus un homme de couleur, assis sur un énorme tronc d’acajou, que recouvrait à demi un tapis de plumes de perroquet. Cet homme appartenait à l’espère des sacatras, qui n’est séparée des nègres que par une nuance souvent imperceptible. Son costume était ridicule. Une ceinture magnifique de tresse de soie, à laquelle pendait une croix de Saint-Louis, retenait à la hauteur du nombril un caleçon bleu, de toile grossière; une veste de basin blanc, trop courte pour descendre jusqu’à la ceinture, complétait son vêtement. Il portait des bottes grises, un chapeau rond, surmonté d’une cocarde rouge, et des épaulettes, dont l’une était d’or avec les deux étoiles d’argent des maréchaux de camp, l’autre de laine jaune. Deux étoiles de cuivre, qui paraissaient avoir été des molettes d’éperons, avaient été fixées sur la dernière, sans doute pour la rendre digne de figurer auprès de sa brillante compagne. Ces deux épaulettes, n’étant point bridées à leur place naturelle, par des ganses transversales, pendaient des deux côtés de la poitrine du chef. Un sabre et des pistolets richement damasquinés étaient posés sur le tapis de plumes auprès de lui.

Derrière son siège se tenaient, silencieux et immobiles, deux enfants revêtus du caleçon des esclaves, et portant chacun un large éventail de plumes de paon. Ces deux enfants esclaves étaient blancs.

Deux carreaux de velours cramoisi, qui paraissaient avoir appartenu à quelque prie-Dieu de presbytère, marquaient deux places à droite et à gauche du bloc d’acajou. L’une de ces places, celle de droite, était occupée par l’obi qui m’avait arraché à la fureur des griotes. Il était assis, les jambes repliées, tenant sa baguette droite, immobile comme une idole de porcelaine dans une pagode chinoise. Seulement, à travers les trous de son voile, je voyais briller ses yeux flamboyants, constamment attachés sur moi.

De chaque côté du chef étaient des faisceaux de drapeaux, de bannières et de guidons de toute espèce, parmi lesquels je remarquai le drapeau blanc fleurdelysé, le drapeau tricolore et le drapeau d’Espagne. Les autres étaient des enseignes de fantaisie. On y voyait un grand étendard noir.

Dans le fond de la salle, au-dessus de la tête du chef, un autre objet attira encore mon attention, C’était le portrait de ce mulâtre Ogé, qui avait été roué l’année précédente au Cap, pour crime de rébellion, avec son lieutenant Jean- Baptiste Chavanne, et vingt autres noirs ou sang-mêlés. Dans ce portrait, Ogé, fils d’un boucher du Cap, était représenté comme il avait coutume de se faire peindre, en uniforme de lieutenant-colonel, avec la croix de Saint-Louis, et l’ordre du mérite du Lion, qu’il avait acheté en Europe du prince de Limbourg.

Le chef sacatra devant lequel j’étais introduit était d’une taille moyenne. Sa figure ignoble offrait un rare mélange de finesse et de cruauté. Il me fit approcher, et me considéra quelque temps en silence; enfin il se mit à ricaner à la manière de l’hyène.

— Je suis Biassou, me dit-il.

Je m’attendais à ce nom, mais je ne pus l’entendre de cette bouche, au milieu de ce rire féroce, sans frémir intérieurement. Mon visage pourtant resta calme et fier. Je ne répondis rien.

— Eh bien! reprit-il en assez mauvais français, est-ce que tu viens déjà d'être empalé, pour ne pouvoir plier l'épine du dos en présence de Jean Biassou, généralissime des pays conquis et maréchal de camp des armées de su magestad catolica? (La tactique des principaux chefs rebelles était de faire croire qu'ils agissaient, tantôt pour le roi de France, tantôt pour la révolution, tantôt pour le roi d'Espagne.)

Je croisai les bras sur ma poitrine, et le regardai fixement. Il recommença à ricaner. Ce tic lui était familier.

— Oh! oh! me pareces hombre de buen corazon. [Tu me parais homme de bon courage.] Eh bien, écoute ce que je vais te dire. Es-tu créole?

— Non, répondis-je, je suis français.

Mon assurance lui fit froncer le sourcil. Il reprit en ricanant:

— Tant mieux! Je vois à ton uniforme que tu es officier. Quel âge as-tu?

— Vingt ans.

— Quand les as-tu atteints?

A cette question, qui réveillait en moi de bien douloureux souvenirs, je restai un moment absorbé dans mes pensées. Il la répéta vivement. Je lui répondis:

— Le jour où ton compagnon Léogri fut pendu.

La colère contracta ses traits; son ricanement se prolongea. Il se contint cependant.

— Il y a vingt-trois jours que Léogri fut pendu, me dit-il. Français, tu lui diras ce soir, de ma part, que tu as vécu vingt- quatre jours de plus que lui. Je veux te laisser au monde encore cette journée, afin que tu puisses lui conter où en est la liberté de ses frères, ce que tu as vu dans le quartier général de Jean Biassou, maréchal de camp, et quelle est l'autorité de ce généralissime sur les gens du roi.

C'était sous ce titre que Jean-François, qui se faisait appeler grand amiral de France, et son camarade Biassou, désignaient leurs hordes de nègres et de mulâtres révoltés.

Alors il ordonna que l'on me fit asseoir entre deux gardes dans un coin de la grotte, et, adressant un signe de la main à quelques nègres affublés de l'habit d'aide de camp:

— Qu'on batte le rappel, que toute l'armée se rassemble autour de notre quartier général, pour que nous la passions en revue. Et vous, monsieur le chapelain, dit-il en se tournant vers l'obi, couvrez-vous de vos vêtements sacerdotaux, et célébrez pour nous et nos soldats le saint sacrifice de la messe.

L’obi se leva, s’inclina profondément devant Biassou, et lui dit à l’oreille quelques paroles que le chef interrompit brusquement et à haute voix.

— Vous n’avez point d’autel, dites-vous, señor cura!cela est-il étonnant dans ces montagnes? Mais qu’importe! depuis quand le bon Giu [Patois créole. Le bon Dieu.] a-t-il besoin pour son culte d’un temple magnifique, d’un autel orné d’or et de dentelles? Gédéon et Josué l’ont adoré devant des monceaux de pierres; faisons comme eux, bon per [Patois créole. Bon père.]; il suffit au bon Giu que les cœurs soient fervents. Vous n’avez point d’autel! Eh bien, ne pouvez-vous pas vous en faire un de cette grande caisse de sucre, prise avant-hier par les gens du roi dans l’habitation Dubuisson?

L’intention de Biassou fut promptement exécutée. En un clin d’oeil l’intérieur de la grotte fut disposé pour cette parodie du divin mystère. On apporta un tabernacle et un saint ciboire enlevés à la paroisse de l’Acul, au même temple où mon union avec Marie avait reçu du ciel une bénédiction si promptement suivie de malheur. On érigea en autel la caisse de sucre volée, qui fut couverte d’un drap blanc, en guise de nappe, ce qui n’empêchait pas de lire encore sur les faces latérales de cet autel: Dubuisson et Cie. pour Nantes.

Quand les vases sacrés furent placés sur la nappe, l’obi s’aperçut qu’il manquait une croix; il tira son poignard, dont la garde horizontale présentait cette forme, et le planta debout entre le calice et l’ostensoir, devant le tabernacle. Alors, sans ôter son bonnet de sorcier et son voile de pénitent, il jeta promptement la chape volée au prieur de l’Acul sur son dos et sa poitrine nue, ouvrit auprès du tabernacle le missel à fermoir d’argent sur lequel avaient été lues les prières de mon fatal mariage, et, se tournant vers Biassou, dont le siège était à quelques pas de l’autel, annonça par une salutation profonde qu’il était prêt.

Sur-le-champ, à un signe du chef, les rideaux de katchmir furent tirés, et nous découvrirent toute l’armée noire rangée en carrés épais devant l’ouverture de la grotte. Biassou ôta son chapeau et s’agenouilla devant l’autel. - A genoux! cria-t-il d’une voix forte. - A genoux! répétèrent les chefs de chaque bataillon. Un roulement de tambours se fit entendre. Toutes les hordes étaient agenouillées.

Seul, j’étais resté immobile sur mon siège, révolté de l’horrible profanation qui allait se commettre sous mes yeux; mais les deux vigoureux mulâtres qui me gardaient dérobèrent mon siège sous moi, me poussèrent rudement par les épaules, et je tombai à genoux comme les autres, contraint de rendre un simulacre de respect à ce simulacre de culte.

L’obi officia gravement. Les deux petits pages blancs de Biassou faisaient les offices de diacre et de sous-diacre.

La foule des rebelles, toujours prosternée, assistait à la cérémonie avec un recueillement dont le généralissime donnait le premier l’exemple. Au moment de l’exaltation, l’obi, élevant entre ses mains l’hostie consacrée, se tourna vers l’armée, et cria en jargon créole: - Zoté coné bon Giu; ce li mo fe zoté voer. Blan touyé li, touyé blan yo toute. [Vous connaissez le bon Dieu; c’est lui que je vous fais voir. Les blancs l’ont tué; tuez tous les blancs. Depuis, Toussaint Louverture avait coutume d’adresser la même allocution aux nègres. après avoir communié.] A ces mots, prononcés d’une voix forte, mais qu’il me semblait avoir déjà entendue quelque part et en d’autres temps, toute la horde poussa un rugissement; ils entrechoquèrent longtemps leurs armes, et il ne fallut rien moins que la sauvegarde de Biassou pour empêcher que ce bruit sinistre ne sonnât ma dernière heure. Je compris à quels excès de courage et d’atrocité pouvaient se porter des hommes pour qui un poignard était une croix, et sur l’esprit desquels toute impression est prompte et profonde.

XXIX

La cérémonie terminée, l’obi se retourna vers Biassou avec une référence respectueuse. Alors le chef se leva, et, s’adressant à moi, me dit en français:

— On nous accuse de n’avoir pas de religion, tu vois que c’est une calomnie, et que nous sommes bons catholiques.

Je ne sais s’il parlait ironiquement ou de bonne foi. Un moment après, il se fit apporter un vase de verre plein de grains de maïs noir, il y jeta quelques grains de maïs blanc; puis, élevant le vase au-dessus de sa tête, pour qu’il fût mieux vu de toute son armée:

— Frères, vous êtes le maïs noir; les blancs vos ennemis sont le maïs blanc.

A ces paroles, il remua le vase, et quand presque tous les grains blancs eurent disparu sous les noirs, il s’écria d’un air d’inspiration et de triomphe: Guetté blan si la la [Voyez ce que sont les blancs relativement à vous.].

Une nouvelle acclamation, répétée par tous les échos des montagnes, accueillit la parabole du chef. Biassou continua, en mêlant fréquemment son méchant français de phrases créoles et espagnoles:

— El tiempo de la mansuetud es pasado. [Le temps de la mansuétude est passé.]. Nous avons été longtemps patients comme les moutons, dont les blancs comparent la laine à nos cheveux; soyons maintenant implacables comme les panthères et les jaguars des pays d’où ils nous ont arrachés. La force peut seule acquérir les droits; tout appartient à qui se montre fort et sans pitié. Saint-Loup a deux fêtes dans le calendrier grégorien, l’agneau pascal n’en a qu’une! - N’est-il pas vrai, monsieur le chapelain?

L’obi s’inclina en signe l’adhésion.

— ... Ils sont venus, poursuivit Biassou, ils sont venus les ennemis de la régénération de l’humanité, ces blancs, ces colons, ces planteurs, ces hommes de négoce, verdaderos demonios vomis de la bouche d’Alecto! Son venidos con insolencia [Ils sont venus avec insolence.]. Ils étaient couverts, les superbes, d’armes, de panaches et d’habits magnifiques à l’oeil, et ils nous méprisaient parce que nous sommes noirs et nus. Ils pensaient, dans leur orgueil, pouvoir nous disperser aussi aisément que ces plumes de paon chassent les noirs essaims des moustiques et des maringouins!

En achevant cette comparaison. il avait arraché des mains d’un esclave blanc un des éventails qu’il faisait porter derrière lui, et l’agitait sur sa tête avec mille gestes véhéments. Il reprit:

— ... Mais, ô mes frères, notre armée a fondu sur la leur comme les bigailles sur un cadavre; ils sont tombés avec leurs beaux uniformes sous les coups de ces bras nus qu’ils croyaient sans vigueur, ignorant que le bon bois est plus dur quand il est dépouillé d’écorce. Ils tremblent maintenant, ces tyrans exécrés! Yo gagné peur! [Jargon créole. Ils ont peur.]

Un hurlement de joie et de triomphe répondit à ce cri du chef, et toutes les hordes répétèrent longtemps:

— Yo gagné peur!

— ... Noirs créoles et congos, ajouta Biassou, vengeance et liberté! Sang-mêlés, ne vous laissez pas attiédir par les séductions de los diabolos blancos. Vos pères sont dans leurs rangs, mais vos mères sont dans les nôtres. Au reste, o hermanos de mi alma [O frères de mon âme.], ils ne vous ont jamais traités en pères, mais bien en maîtres; vous étiez esclaves comme les noirs. Pendant qu’un misérable pagne couvrait à peine vos flancs brûlés par le soleil, vos barbares pères se pavanaient sous de buenos sombreros, et portaient des vestes de nankin les jours de travail, et les jours de fête des habits de bouracan ou de velours, a diez y siete quartos la vara [A dix-sept quartos la vara (mesure espagnole qui équivaut à peu près à l’aune).]. Maudissez ces êtres dénaturés! Mais, comme les saints commandements du bon Giu le défendent, ne frappez pas vous-même votre propre père. Si vous le rencontrez dans les rangs ennemis, qui vous empêche, amigos, de vous dire l’un à l’autre: Touyé papa moé, ma touyé quena toué [Tue mon père, je tuerai le tien. On a entendu en effet les mulâtres, capitulant en quelque sorte avec le parricide, prononcer ces exécrables paroles.]! Vengeance, gens du roi! Liberté à tous les hommes! Ce cri a son écho dans toutes les îles; il est parti de Quisqueya [Ancien nom de Saint-Domingue, qui signifie Grande- Terre. Les indigènes l’appelaient aussi Aity.], il réveille Tabago à Cuba. C’est un chef des cent vingt-cinq nègres marrons de la montagne Bleue, c’est un noir de la Jamaïque, Boukmann, qui a levé l’étendard parmi nous. Une victoire a été son premier acte de fraternité avec les noirs de Saint-Domingue. Suivons son glorieux exemple, la torche d’une main, la hache de l’autre! Point de grâce pour les blancs, pour les planteurs! Massacrons leurs familles, dévastons leurs plantations; ne laissons point dans leurs domaines un arbre qui n'ait la racine en haut. Bouleversons la terre pour qu'elle engloutisse les blancs! Courage donc, amis et frères! nous irons bientôt combattre et exterminer. Nous triompherons ou nous mourrons. Vainqueurs, nous jouirons à notre tour de toutes les joies de la vie; morts, nous irons dans le ciel, où les saints nous attendent, dans le paradis, où chaque brave recevra une double mesure d'aguardiente [Eau-de-vie.] et une piastre-gourde par jour!

Cette sorte de sermon soldatesque, qui ne vous semble que ridicule, messieurs, produisit sur les rebelles un effet prodigieux. Il est vrai que la pantomime extraordinaire de Biassou, l'accent inspiré de sa voix, le ricanement étrange qui entrecoupait ses paroles, donnaient à sa harangue je ne sais quelle puissance de prestige et de fascination. L'art avec lequel il entremêlait sa déclamation de détails faits pour flatter la passion ou l'intérêt des révoltés ajoutait un degré de force à cette éloquence, appropriée à cet auditoire.

Je n'essaierai donc pas de vous décrire quel sombre enthousiasme se manifesta dans l'armée insurgée après l'allocution de Biassou. Ce fut un concert distordant de cris, de plaintes, de hurlements. Les uns se frappaient la poitrine, les autres heurtaient leurs massues et leurs sabres. Plusieurs, à genoux ou prosternés, conservaient l'attitude d'une immobile extase. Des négresses se déchiraient les seins et les bras avec les arêtes de poissons dont elles se servent en guise de peigne pour démêler leurs cheveux. Les guitares, les tamtams, les tambours, les balafos, mêlaient leurs bruits aux décharges de mousqueterie. C'était quelque chose d'un sabbat.

Biassou fit un signe de la main; le tumulte cessa tomme par un prodige; chaque nègre reprit son rang en silence. Cette discipline, à laquelle Biassou avait plié ses égaux par le simple ascendant de la pensée et de la volonté, me frappa, pour ainsi dire, d'admiration. Tous les soldats de cette armée de rebelles paraissaient parler et se mouvoir sous la main du chef, comme les touches du clavecin sous les doigts du musicien.

XXX

Un autre spectacle, un autre genre de charlatanisme et de fascination excita alors mon attention; c’était le pansement des blessés. L’obi, qui remplissait dans l’armée les doubles fonctions de médecin de l’âme et de médecin du corps, avait commencé l’inspection des malades. Il avait dépouillé ses ornements sacerdotaux, et avait fait apporter auprès de lui une grande caisse à compartiments dans laquelle étaient ses drogues et ses instruments. Il usait fort rarement de ses outils chirurgicaux, et, excepté une lancette en arête de poisson avec laquelle il pratiquait fort adroitement une saignée, il me paraissait assez gauche dans le maniement de la tenaille qui lui servait de pince, et du couteau qui lui tenait lieu de bistouri. Il se bornait, la plupart du temps, à prescrire des tisanes d’oranges des bois, des breuvages de squine, et de salsepareille, et quelques gorgées de vieux tafia, Son remède favori, et qu’il disait souverain, se composait de trois verres de vin rouge, où il mêlait la poudre d’une noix muscade et d’un jaune d’œuf bien cuit sous la cendre. Il employait ce spécifique pour guérir toute espèce de plaie ou de maladie. Vous concevez aisément que cette médecine était aussi dérisoire que le culte dont il se faisait le ministre; et il est probable que le petit nombre de cures qu’il opérait par hasard n’eût point suffi pour conserver à l’obi la confiance des noirs, s’il n’eût joint des jongleries à ses drogues, et s’il n’eût cherché à agir d’autant plus sur l’imagination des nègres qu’il agissait moins sur leurs maux. Ainsi, tantôt il se bornait à toucher leurs blessures en faisant quelques signes mystiques; d’autres fois, usant habilement de ce reste d’anciennes superstitions qu’ils mêlaient à leur catholicisme de fraîche date, il mettait dans les plaies une petite pierre fétiche enveloppée de charpie; et le malade attribuait à la pierre les bienfaisants effets de la charpie. Si l’on venait lui annoncer que tel blessé, soigné par lui, était mort de sa blessure, et peut-être de son pansement: - Je l’avais prévu, répondait-il d’une voix solennelle, c’était un traître; dans l’incendie de telle habitation il avait sauvé un blanc. Sa mort est un châtiment! - Et la foule des rebelles ébahis applaudissait, de plus en plus ulcérée dans ses sentiments de haine et de vengeance. Le charlatan employa, entre autres, un moyen de guérison dont la singularité me frappa. C’était pour un des chefs noirs, assez dangereusement blessé dans le dernier combat. Il examina longtemps la plaie, la pansa de son mieux, puis, montant à l’autel: - Tout cela n’est rien, dit-il. Alors il déchira trois ou quatre feuillets du missel, les brûla à la flamme des flambeaux dérobés à l’église de l’Acul, et, mêlant la cendre de ce papier consacré à quelques gouttes de vin versées dans le calice: - Buvez, dit-il au blessé; ceci est la guérison [Ce remède est encore assez fréquemment pratiqué en Afrique, notamment par les Maures de Tripoli, qui jettent souvent dans leurs breuvages la cendre d’une page du livre de Mahomet. Cela compose un philtre auquel ils attribuent des vertus souveraines. Un voyageur anglais, je ne sais plus lequel, appelle ce breuvage une infusion d’Alcoran.]. - L’autre but stupidement, fixant des yeux pleins de confiance sur le jongleur, qui avait les mains levées sur lui, comme pour appeler les bénédictions du ciel; et peut-être la conviction qu’il était guéri contribua-t-elle à le guérir.

XXXI

Une autre scène, dont l'obi voilé était encore le principal acteur, succéda à celle-ci; le médecin avait remplacé le prêtre, le sorcier remplaça le médecin.

— Hombres, escuchate! [Hommes, écoutez! - Le sens que les Espagnols attachent au mot hombre, dans ce cas, ne peut se traduire. C'est plus qu'homme, et moins qu'ami.] s'écria l'obi, sautant avec une incroyable agilité sur l'autel improvisé, où il tomba assis les jambes repliées dans son jupon bariolé, escuchate, hombres! Que ceux qui voudront lire au livre du destin le mot de leur vie s'approchent, je le leur dirai; hé estudiado la ciencia de las gitanos [J'ai étudié la science des Egyptiens.].

Une foule de noirs et de mulâtres s'avancèrent précipitamment.

— L'un après l'autre! dit l'obi, dont la voix sourde et intérieure reprenait quelquefois cet accent criard qui me frappait comme un souvenir; si vous venez tous ensemble, vous entrerez tous ensemble au tombeau.

Ils s'arrêtèrent. En ce moment, un homme de couleur, vêtu d'une veste et d'un pantalon blanc, coiffé d'un madras, à la manière des riches colons, arriva près de Biassou. La consternation était peinte sur sa figure.

— Eh bien! dit le généralissime à voix basse, qu'est-ce? qu'avez-vous, Rigaud?

C'était ce chef mulâtre du rassemblement des Cayes, depuis connu sous le nom de général Rigaud, homme rusé sous des dehors candides, cruel sous un air de douceur. Je l'examinai avec attention.

— Général, répondit Rigaud (et il parlait très bas, mais j'étais placé près de Biassou, et j'entendais), il y a là, aux limites du camp, un émissaire de Jean-François. Boukmann vient d'être tué dans un engagement avec M. de Touzard; et les blancs ont dû exposer sa tête tomme un trophée dans leur ville.

— N'est-ce que cela? dit Biassou; et ses yeux brillaient de la secrète joie de voir diminuer le nombre des chefs, et, par conséquent, croître son importance.

— L'émissaire de Jean-François a en outre un message à vous remettre.

— C'est bon, reprit Biassou. Quittez cette mine de déterré, mon cher Rigaud.

— Mais, objecta Rigaud, ne craignez-vous pas, général, l'effet de la mort de Boukmann sur votre armée?

— Vous n’êtes pas si simple que vous le paraissez, Rigaud, répliqua le chef; vous allez juger Biassou. Faites retarder seulement d’un quart d’heure l’admission du messager.

Alors il s’approcha de l’obi, qui, durant ce dialogue, entendu de moi seul, avait commencé son office de devin, interrogeant les nègres émerveillés, examinant les signes de leurs fronts et de leurs mains, et leur distribuant plus ou moins de bonheur à venir, suivant le son, la couleur et la grosseur de la pièce de monnaie jetée par chaque nègre à ses pieds dans une patène d’argent doré. Biassou lui dit quelques mots à l’oreille. Le sorcier, sans interrompre, continua ses opérations métoposcopiques.

«- Celui, disait-il, qui porte au milieu du front, sur la ride du soleil, une petite figure narrée ou un triangle, fera une grande fortune sans peine et sans travaux.

«La figure de trois S rapprochés, en quelque endroit du front qu’ils se trouvent, est un signe bien funeste: celui qui porte te signe se noiera infailliblement, s’il n’évite l’eau avec le plus grand soin.

«Quatre lignes partant du nez, et se recourbant deux à deux sur le front au-dessus des yeux, annoncent qu’on sera un jour prisonnier de guerre, et qu’on gémira captif aux mains de l’étranger.”

Ici l’obi fit une pause.

— Compagnons, ajouta-t-il gravement, j’avais observé ce signe sur le front de Bug-Jargal, chef des braves du Morne- Rouge.

Ces paroles, qui me confirmaient encore la prise de Bug-Jargal, furent suivies des lamentations d’une horde qui ne se composait que de noirs, et dont les chefs portaient des caleçons écarlates; c’était la bande du Morne-Rouge.

Cependant l’obi recommençait: « - Si vous avez, dans la partie droite du front, sur la ligne de la lune, quelque figure qui ressemble à une fourche, craignez de demeurer oisif ou de trop rechercher la débauche.

«Un petit signe bien important, la figure arabe du chiffre 3, sur la ligne du soleil, vous présage des loups de bâton...”

Un vieux nègre espagnol-domingois interrompit le sorcier. Il se traînait vers lui en implorant un pansement. Il avait été blessé au front, et l’un de ses yeux, arraché de son orbite, pendait tout sanglant. L’obi l’avait oublié dans sa revue médicale. Au moment où il l’aperçut il s’écria:

— Des figures rondes dans la partie droite du front, sur la ligne de la lune, annoncent des maladies aux yeux. - Hombre, dit-il au misérable blessé, ce signe est bien apparent sur ton front; voyons ta main.

— Alas! exelentisimo señor, repartit l'autre, mir usted mi ojo! [Hélas! très excellent seigneur, regardez mon oeil.]

— Fatras [Nom sous lequel on désignait un vieux nègre hors de service], répliqua l'obi avec humeur, j'ai bien besoin de voir son oeil! - Ta main, te dis-je!

Le malheureux livra sa main, en murmurant toujours: mi ojo!

— Bon! dit le sorcier. - Si l'on trouve sur la ligne de vie un point entouré d'un petit cercle, on sera borgne, parce que cette figure annonce la perte d'un oeil. C'est cela, voici le point et le petit cercle, tu seras borgne.

— Ya le soy [Je le suis déjà.], répondit le fatras en gémissant pitoyablement.

Mais l'obi, qui n'était plus chirurgien, l'avait repoussé rudement, et poursuivait sans se soucier de la plainte du pauvre borgne:

«Escuchate, hombres! - Si les sept lignes du front sont petites, tortueuses, faiblement marquées, elles annoncent un homme dont la vie sera courte.

«Celui qui aura entre les deux sourcils sur la ligne de la lune la figure de deux flèches croisées mourra dans une bataille.

«Si la ligne de vie qui traverse la main présente une croix à son extrémité près de la jointure, elle présage qu'on paraîtra sur l'échafaud...”

— Et ici, reprit l'obi, je dois vous le dire, hermanos, l'un des plus braves appuis de l'indépendance, Boukmann, porte ces trois signes funestes.

A ces mots tous les nègres tendirent la tête, retinrent leur haleine; leurs yeux immobiles, attachés sur le jongleur, exprimaient cette sorte d'attention qui ressemble à la stupeur.

— Seulement, ajouta l'obi, je ne puis accorder ce double signe qui menace à la fois Boukmann d'une bataille et d'un échafaud. Pourtant mon art est infaillible.

Il s'arrêta, et échangea un regard avec Biassou. Biassou dit quelques mots à l'oreille d'un de ses aides de camp, qui sortit sur-le-champ de la grotte.

«- Une bouche béante et fanée, reprit l'obi, se retournant vers son auditoire avec son accent malicieux et goguenard, une attitude insipide, les bras pendants, et la main gauche tournée en dehors sans qu'on en devine le motif annoncent la stupidité naturelle, la nullité, le vide, une curiosité hébétée.”

Biassou ricanait. - En cet instant l’aide de camp revint; il ramenait un nègre couvert de fange et de poussière, dont les pieds, déchirés par les ronces et les cailloux, prouvaient qu’il avait fait une longue course. C’était le messager annoncé par Rigaud. Il tenait d’une main un paquet cacheté, de l’autre un parchemin déployé qui portait un sceau dont l’empreinte figurait un cœur enflammé. Au milieu était un chiffre formé des lettres caractéristiques M et N, entrelacées pour désigner sans doute la réunion des mulâtres libres et des nègres esclaves. A côté de ce chiffre je lus cette légende: « Le préjugé vaincu, la verge de fer brisée; vive le roi!” Ce parchemin était un passeport délivré par Jean-François.

L’émissaire le présenta à Biassou, et, après s’être incliné jusqu’à terre, lui remit le paquet cacheté. Le généralissime l’ouvrit vivement, parcourut les dépêches qu’il renfermait, en mit une dans la poche de sa veste, et, froissant l’autre dans ses mains, s’écria d’un air désolé:

— Gens du roi!...

Les nègres saluèrent profondément.

— Gens du roi! voilà ce que mande à Jean Biassou, généralissime des pays conquis, maréchal des camps et armées de sa majesté catholique, Jean-François, grand amiral de France, lieutenant général des armées de sa dite majesté, le roi des Espagnes et des Indes:

«Boukmann, chef de cent vingt noirs de la Montagne Bleue à la Jamaïque, reconnus indépendants par le gouvernement général de Belle-Combe, Boukmann vient de succomber dans la glorieuse lutte de la liberté et de l’humanité contre le despotisme et la barbarie. Ce généreux chef a été tué dans un engagement avec les brigands blancs de l’infâme Touzard. Les monstres ont coupé sa tête, et ont annoncé qu’ils allaient l’exposer ignominieusement sur un échafaud dans la place d’armes de leur ville du Cap. - Vengeance!”

Le sombre silence du découragement succéda un moment dans l’armée à cette lecture. Mais l’obi s’était dressé debout sur l’autel, et il s’écriait, en agitant sa baguette blanche, avec des gestes triomphants:

— Salomon, Zorobabel, Eléazar Thaleb, Cardan, Judas Bowtharicht, Averroès, Albert le Grand, Bohabdil, Jean de Hagen, Anna Baratro, Daniel Ogrumof, Rachel Flintz, Altornino! je vous rends grâces. La ciencia des voyants ne m’a pas trompé. Hijos, amigos, hermanos; muchachos, mozos, madres, y vosotros todos qui me escuchais aqui [Fils, amis, frères, garçons, enfants, mères, et vous tous qui m'écoutez ici.], qu'avais-je prédit? que habia dicho? Les signes du front de Boukmann m'avaient annoncé qu'il vivrait peu, et qu'il mourrait dans un combat; les lignes de sa main, qu'il paraîtrait sur un échafaud. Les révélations de mon art se réalisent fidèlement, et les événements s'arrangent d'eux-mêmes pour exécuter jusqu'aux circonstances que nous ne pouvions concilier, la mort sur le champ de bataille, et l'échafaud! Frères, admirez!

Le découragement des noirs s'était changé durant ce discours en une sorte d'effroi merveilleux. Ils écoutaient l'obi avec une confiance mêlée de terreur; celui-ci, enivré de lui-même, se promenait de long en large sur la caisse de sucre, dont la surface offrait assez d'espace pour que ses petits pas pussent s'y déployer fort à l'aise. Biassou ricanait.

Il adressa la parole à l'obi.

— Monsieur le chapelain, puisque vous savez les choses à venir, il nous plairait que vous voulussiez bien lire ce qu'il adviendra de notre fortune, à nous Jean Biassou, mariscal de campo.

L'obi, s'arrêtant fièrement sur l'autel grotesque où la crédulité des noirs le divinisait, dit au mariscal de campo: - Venga vuestra merced! [Vienne votre grâce!] En ce moment l'obi était l'homme important de l'armée. Le pouvoir militaire céda devant le pouvoir sacerdotal. Biassou s'approcha. On lisait dans ses yeux quelque dépit.

— Votre main, général, dit l'obi en se baissant pour la saisir. Empezo [Je commence.]. La ligne de la jointure, également marquée dans toute sa longueur, vous promet des richesses et du bonheur. La ligne de vie, longue, marquée, vous prédit une vie exempte de maux, une verte vieillesse; étroite, elle désigne votre sagesse, votre esprit ingénieux, la generosidad de votre cœur; enfin j'y vois ce que les chiromancos appellent le plus heureux de tous les signes, une foule de petites rides qui lui donnent la forme d'un arbre chargé de rameaux et qui s'élèvent vers le haut de la main, c'est le pronostic assuré de l'opulence et des grandeurs. La ligne de santé, très longue, confirme les indices de la ligne de vie; elle indique aussi le courage; recourbée vers le petit doigt, elle forme une sorte de crochet. Général, c'est le signe d'une sévérité utile.

A ce mot, l'oeil brillant du petit obi se fixa sur moi à travers les ouvertures de son voile, et je remarquai encore une fois un accent connu, caché en quelque sorte sous la gravité habituelle de sa voix. Il continuait avec la même intention de geste et d'intonation:

— ... Chargée de petits cercles, la ligne de santé vous annonce un grand nombre d'exécutions nécessaires que vous devrez ordonner. Elle s'interrompt vers le milieu pour former un demi-cercle, signe que vous serez exposé à de grands périls avec les bêtes féroces, c'est-à-dire les blancs, si vous ne les exterminez. - La ligne de fortune, entourée, comme la ligne de vie, de petits rameaux qui s'élèvent vers le haut de la main, confirme l'avenir de puissance et de suprématie auquel vous êtes appelé; droite et déliée dans sa partie supérieure, elle annonce le talent de gouverner. - La cinquième ligne, celle du triangle, prolongée jusque vers la racine du doigt du milieu, vous promet le plus heureux succès dans toute entreprise. - Voyons les doigts. - Le pouce, traversé dans sa longueur de petites lignes qui vont de l'ongle à la jointure, vous promet un grand héritage: celui de la gloire de Boukmann sans doute! ajouta l'obi d'une voix haute. - La petite éminence qui forme la racine de l'index est chargée de petites rides doucement marquées: honneurs et dignités! - Le doigt du milieu n'annonce rien. Votre doigt annulaire est sillonné de lignes croisées les unes sur les autres: vous vaincrez tous vos ennemis, vous dominerez tous vos rivaux! Ces lignes forment une croix de Saint-André, signe de génie et de prévoyance! - La jointure qui unit le petit doigt à la main offre des rides tortueuses: la fortune vous comblera de faveurs. J'y vois encore la figure d'un cercle, présage à ajouter aux autres, qui vous annonce puissance et dignités!

«Heureux, dit Éléazar Thaleb, celui qui porte tous ces signes! le destin est chargé de sa prospérité, et son étoile lui amènera le génie qui donne la gloire.”

— Maintenant, général, laissez-moi interroger votre front. « Celui, dit Rachel Flintz la bohémienne, qui porte au milieu du front sur la ride du soleil une petite figure carrée ou un triangle, fera une grande fortune...” La voici, bien prononcée. « Si ce signe est à droite, il promet une importante succession...” Toujours celle de Boukmann! « Le signe d'un fer à cheval entre les deux sourcils, au-dessous de la ride de la lune, annonce qu'on saura se venger de l'injure et de la tyrannie.” Je porte ce signe: vous le portez aussi.

La manière dont l'obi prononça les mots, je porte ce signe, me frappa encore.

— On le remarque, ajouta-t-il du même ton, chez les braves qui savent méditer une révolte courageuse et briser la servitude dans un combat. La griffe de lion que vous avez empreinte au-dessus du sourcil prouve votre bouillant courage. Enfin, général Jean Biassou, votre front présente le plus éclatant de tous les signes de prospérité, c'est une combinaison de lignes qui forment la lettre M, la première du nom de la Vierge. En quelque partie du front, sur quelque ride que cette figure paraisse, elle annonce le génie, la gloire et la puissance. Celui qui la porte fera toujours triompher la cause qu'il embrassera; ceux dont il sera le chef n'auront jamais à regretter aucune perte; il vaudra à lui seul tous les défenseurs de son parti. Vous êtes cet élu du destin!

— Gratias, monsieur le chapelain, dit Biassou, se préparant à retourner à son trône d'acajou.

— Attendez, général, reprit l'obi, j'oubliais encore un signe. La ligne du soleil, fortement prononcée sur votre front, prouve du savoir-vivre, le désir de faire des heureux, beaucoup de libéralité, et un penchant à la magnificence.

Biassou parut comprendre que l'oubli venait plutôt de sa part que de celle de l'obi. Il tira de sa poche une bourse assez, lourde et la jeta dans le plat d'argent, pour ne pas faire mentir la ligne du soleil.

Cependant l'éblouissant horoscope du chef avait produit son effet dans l'armée. Tous les rebelles, sur lesquels la parole de l'obi était devenue plus puissante que jamais depuis les nouvelles de la mort de Boukmann, passèrent du découragement à l'enthousiasme, et, se confiant aveuglément à leur sorcier infaillible et à leur général prédestiné, se mirent à hurler à l'envi: - Vive l'obi! Vive Biassou! L'obi et Biassou se regardaient, et je crus entendre le rire étouffé de l'obi répondant au ricanement du généralissime.

Je ne sais pourquoi cet obi tourmentait ma pensée; il me semblait que j'avais déjà vu ou entendu ailleurs quelque chose qui ressemblait à cet être singulier; je voulus le faire parler.

— Monsieur l'obi, señor cura, doctor medico, monsieur le chapelain, bon per! lui dis-je.

Il se retourna brusquement vers moi.

— Il y a encore ici quelqu'un dont vous n'avez point tiré l'horoscope, c'est moi.

Il croisa ses bras sur le soleil d'argent qui couvrait sa poitrine velue, et ne me répondit pas.

Je repris:

— Je voudrais bien savoir ce que vous augurez de mon avenir; mais vos honnêtes camarades m’ont enlevé ma montre et ma bourse, et vous n’êtes pas sorcier à prophétiser gratis.

Il s’avança précipitamment jusqu’auprès de moi, et me dit sourdement à l’oreille

— Tu te trompes! Voyons ta main.

Je la lui présentai en le regardant en face. Ses yeux étincelaient. Il parut examiner ma main.

«- Si la ligne de vie, me dit-il, est coupée vers le milieu par deux petites lignes transversales et bien apparentes, c’est le signe d’une mort prochaine. - Ta mort est prochaine!

«Si la ligne de santé ne se trouve pas au milieu de la main, et qu’il n’y ait que la ligne de vie et la ligne de fortune réunies à leur origine de manière à former un angle, on ne doit pas s’attendre, avec ce signe, à une mort naturelle. - Ne t’attends point à une mort naturelle!

«Si le dessous de l’index est traversé d’une ligne dans toute sa longueur, on mourra de mort violente!” Entends-tu? prépare-toi à une mort violente! Il y avait quelque chose de joyeux dans cette voix sépulcrale qui annonçait la mort; je l’écoutai avec indifférence et mépris.

— Sorcier, lui dis-je avec un sourire de dédain, tu es habile, tu pronostiques à coup sûr.

Il se rapprocha encore de moi,

— Tu doutes de ma science! eh bien! écoute encore. - La rupture de la ligne du soleil sur ton front m’annonce que tu prends un ennemi pour un ami, et un ami pour un ennemi.

Le sens de ces paroles semblait concerner ce perfide Pierrot que j’aimais et qui m’avait trahi, ce fidèle Habibrah, que je haïssais, et dont les vêtements ensanglantés attestaient la mort courageuse et dévouée.

— Que veux-tu dire? m’écriai-je.

— Ecoute jusqu’au bout, poursuivit l’obi. Je t’ai dit de l’avenir, voici du passé: - La ligne de la lune est légèrement courbée sur ton front; cela signifie que ta femme t’a été enlevée.

Je tressaillis; je voulais m’élancer de mon siège. Mes gardiens me retinrent.

— Tu n’es pas patient, reprit le sorcier; écoute donc jusqu’à la fin. La petite croix qui coupe l’extrémité de cette courbure complète l’éclaircissement. Ta femme t’a été enlevée la nuit même de tes noces.

— Misérable! m’écriai-je, tu sais où elle est! Qui es-tu?

Je tentai encore de me délivrer et de lui arracher son voile; mais il fallut céder au nombre et à la force; et je vis avec rage le mystérieux obi s’éloigner en me disant:

— Me crois-tu maintenant? Prépare-toi à ta mort prochaine!

XXXII

Il fallut, pour me distraire un moment des perplexités où m'avait jeté cette scène étrange, le nouveau drame qui succéda sous mes yeux à la comédie ridicule que Biassou et l'obi venaient de jouer devant leur bande ébahie.

Biassou s'était replacé sur son siège d'acajou; l'obi s'était assis à sa droite, Rigaud à sa gauche, sur les deux carreaux qui accompagnaient le trône du chef. L'obi, les bras croisés sur la poitrine, paraissait absorbé dans une profonde contemplation; Biassou et Rigaud mâchaient du tabac; et un aide de camp était venu demander au mariscal de campo s'il fallait faire défiler l'armée, quand trois groupes tumultueux de noirs arrivèrent ensemble à l'entrée de la grotte avec des clameurs furieuses. Chacun de ces attroupements amenait un prisonnier qu'il voulait remettre à la disposition de Biassou, moins pour savoir s'il lui conviendrait de leur faire grâce que pour connaître son bon plaisir sur le genre de mort que les malheureux devaient endurer. Leurs cris sinistres ne l'annonçaient que trop: Mort! Mort! - Muerte! muerte! - Death! Death! criaient quelques nègres anglais, sans doute de la horde de Boukmann, qui étaient déjà venus rejoindre les noirs espagnols et français de Biassou.

Le mariscal de campo leur imposa silence d'un signe de main, et fit avancer les trois captifs sur le seuil de la grotte. J'en reconnus deux avec surprise; l'un était ce citoyen-général C***, ce philanthrope correspondant de tous les négrophiles du globe, qui avait émis un avis si cruel pour les esclaves dans le conseil, chez le gouverneur. L'autre était le planteur équivoque qui avait tant de répugnance pour les mulâtres, au nombre desquels les blancs le comptaient. Le troisième paraissait appartenir à la classe des petits blancs; il portait un tablier de cuir, et avait les manches retroussées au-dessus du coude. Tous trois avaient été surpris séparément, cherchant à se cacher dans les montagnes.

Le petit blanc fut interrogé le premier.

— Qui es-tu, toi? lui dit Biassou.

— Je suis Jacques Belin, charpentier de l'hôpital des Pères, au Cap.

Une fine surprise mêlée de honte se peignit dans les yeux du généralissime des pays conquis.

— Jacques Belin! dit-il en se mordant les lèvres.

— Oui, reprit le charpentier; est-ce que tu ne me reconnais pas?

— Commence, toi, dit le mariscal de campo, par me reconnaître et me saluer.

— Je ne salue pas mon esclave! répondit le charpentier.

— Ton esclave, misérable! s’écria le généralissime.

— Oui, répliqua le charpentier, oui, je suis ton premier maître. Tu feins de me méconnaître; mais souviens-toi, Jean Biassou; je t’ai vendu treize piastres-gourdes à un marchand domingois.

Un violent dépit contracta tous les traits de Biassou.

— Hé quoi! poursuivit le petit blanc, tu parais honteux de m’avoir servi! Est-ce que Jean Biassou ne doit pas s’honorer d’avoir appartenu à Jacques Belin? Ta propre mère, la vieille folle! a bien souvent balayé mon échoppe; mais à présent je l’ai vendue à monsieur le majordome de l’hôpital des Pères; elle est si décrépite qu’il ne m’en a voulu donner que trente-deux livres, et six sous pour l’appoint. Voilà cependant ton histoire et la sienne; mais il paraît que vous êtes devenus fiers, vous autres nègres et mulâtres, et que tu as oublié le temps où tu servais, à genoux, maître Belin, charpentier au Cap.

Biassou l’avait écouté avec ce ricanement féroce qui lui donnait l’air d’un tigre.

— Bien! dit-il.

Alors il se tourna vers les nègres qui avaient amené maître Belin:

— Emportez deux chevalets, deux planches et une scie, et emmenez cet homme. Jacques Belin, charpentier au Cap, remercie-moi, je te procure une mort de charpentier.

Son rire acheva d’expliquer de quel horrible supplice allait être puni l’orgueil de son ancien maître. Je frissonnai; mais Jacques Belin ne fronça pas le sourcil; il se tourna fièrement vers Biassou.

— Oui, dit-il, je dois te remercier, car je t’ai vendu pour le prix de treize piastres, et tu m’as rapporté certainement plus que tu ne vaux.

On l’entraîna.

XXXIII

Les deux autres prisonniers avaient assisté plus morts que vifs à ce prologue effrayant de leur propre tragédie. Leur attitude humble et effrayée contrastait avec la fermeté un peu fanfaronne du charpentier; ils tremblaient de tous leurs membres.

Biassou les considéra l’un après l’autre avec son oeil de renard; puis, se plaisant à prolonger leur agonie, il entama avec Rigaud une conversation sur les différentes espèces de tabac, affirmant que le tabac de la Havane n’était bon qu’à fumer en cigares, et qu’il ne connaissait pas pour priser de meilleur tabac d’Espagne que celui dont feu Boukmann lui avait envoyé deux barils, pris chez M. Lebattu, propriétaire de l’île de la Tortue. Puis, s’adressant brusquement au citoyen-général C***:

— Qu’en penses-tu? lui dit-il.

Cette apostrophe inattendue fit chanceler le citoyen. Il répondit en balbutiant

— Je m’en rapporte, général, à l’opinion de votre excellence...

— Propos de flatteur! répliqua Biassou. Je te demande ton avis et non le mien. Est-ce que tu connais un tabac meilleur à prendre en prise que celui de M. Lebattu?

— Non vraiment, monseigneur, dit C***, dont le trouble amusait Biassou.

— Général! Excellence! monseigneur! reprit le chef d’un air impatienté; tu es un aristocrate!

— Oh! vraiment non! s’écria le citoyen-général; je suis un bon patriote de 91 et fervent négrophile...

— Négrophile, interrompit le généralissime; qu’est-ce que c’est qu’un négrophile?

— C’est un ami des noirs, balbutia le citoyen.

— Il ne suffit pas d’être ami des noirs, repartit sévèrement Biassou, il faut l’être aussi des hommes de couleur.

Je crois avoir dit que Biassou était sacatra.

— Des hommes de couleur, c’est ce que je voulais dire, répondit humblement le négrophile. Je suis lié avec tous les plus fameux partisans des nègres et des mulâtres...

Biassou, heureux d’humilier un blanc, l’interrompit encore: -Nègres et mulâtres! qu’est-ce que cela veut dire? Viens-tu ici nous insulter avec ces noms odieux, inventés par le mépris des blancs? Il n’y a ici que des hommes de couleur et des noirs, entendez-vous, monsieur le colon?

— C’est une mauvaise habitude contractée dès l’enfance, reprit C***; pardonnez-moi, je n’ai point eu l’intention de vous offenser, monseigneur.

— Laisse là ton monseigneur; je te répète que je n’aime point ces façons d’aristocrate.

C*** voulut encore s’excuser; il se mit à bégayer une nouvelle explication.

— Si vous me connaissiez, citoyen...

— Citoyen! pour qui me prends-tu? s’écria Biassou avec colère. Je déteste ce jargon des jacobins. Est-ce que tu serais un jacobin, par hasard? Songe que tu parles au généralissime des gens du roi! Citoyen!... l’insolent!

Le pauvre négrophile ne savait plus sur quel ton parler à cet homme, qui repoussait également les titres de monseigneur et de citoyen, le langage des aristocrates et celui des patriotes; il était atterré. Biassou, dont la colère n’était que simulée, jouissait cruellement de son embarras.

— Hélas! dit enfin le citoyen-général, vous me jugez bien mal, noble défenseur des droits imprescriptibles de la moitié du genre humain.

Dans l’embarras de donner une qualification quelconque à ce chef qui paraissait les refuser toutes, il avait eu recours à l’une de ces périphrases sonores que les révolutionnaires substituent volontiers au nom ou au titre de la personne qu’ils haranguent.

Biassou le regarda fixement et lui dit;

— Tu aimes donc les noirs et les sang-mêlés?

— Si je les aime! s’écria le citoyen C***, je corresponds avec Brissot et...

Biassou l’interrompit en ricanant.

— Ha! Ha! Je suis charmé de voir en toi un ami de notre cause. En ce cas, tu dois détester ces misérables colons qui ont puni notre juste insurrection par les plus cruels supplices, Tu dois penser avec nous que ce ne sont pas les noirs, mais les blancs qui sont les véritables rebelles, puisqu’ils se révoltent contre la nature et l’humanité. Tu dois exécrer ces monstres!

— Je les exècre! répondit C***.

— Hé bien! poursuivit Biassou, que penserais-tu d’un homme qui aurait, pour étouffer les dernières tentatives des esclaves, planté cinquante têtes de noirs des deux côtés de l’avenue de son habitation?

La pâleur de C*** devint effrayante.

— Que penserais-tu d’un blanc qui aurait proposé de ceindre la ville du Cap d’un cordon de têtes d’esclaves?...

— Grâce! grâce! dit le citoyen terrifié.

— Est-ce que je te menace? reprit froidement Biassou. Laisse-moi achever... D’un cordon de têtes qui environnât la ville, du fort Picolet au cap Caracol? Que penserais-tu de cela, hein? réponds!

Le mot de Biassou, Est-ce que je te menace? avait rendu quelque espérance à C***; il songea que peut-être le chef savait ces horreurs sans en connaître l’auteur, et répondit avec quelque fermeté, pour prévenir toute présomption qui lui fût contraire:

— Je pense que ce sont des crimes atroces.

Biassou ricanait.

— Bon! et quel châtiment infligerais-tu au coupable?

Ici le malheureux C*** hésita.

— Hé bien! reprit Biassou, es-tu l’ami des noirs, ou non?

Des deux alternatives, le négrophile choisit la moins menaçante; et ne remarquant rien d’hostile pour lui-même dans les yeux de Biassou, il dit d’une voix faible:

— Le coupable mérite la mort.

— Fort bien répondu, dit tranquillement Biassou en jetant le tabac qu’il mâchait.

Cependant son air d’indifférence avait rendu quelque assurance au pauvre négrophile; il fit un effort pour écarter tous les soupçons qui pouvaient peser sur lui.

— Personne, s’écria-t-il, n’a fait de vœux plus ardents que les miens pour le triomphe de votre cause. Je corresponds avec Brissot et Pruneau de Pomme-Gouge, en France; Magaw en Amérique; Peter Paulus, en Hollande; l’abbé Tamburini, en Italie...

Il continuait d’étaler complaisamment cette litanie philanthropique, qu’il récitait volontiers, et qu’il avait notamment débitée en d’autres circonstances et dans un autre but chez M. de Blanchelande, quand Biassou l’arrêta.

— Eh! que me font à moi tous tes correspondants! indique-moi seulement où sont tes magasins, tes dépôts; mon armée a besoin de munitions. Tes plantations sont sans doute riches, ta maison de commerce doit être forte, puisque tu corresponds avec tous les négociants du monde.

Le citoyen C*** hasarda une observation timide.

— Héros de l’humanité, ce ne sont point des négociants, ce sont des philosophes, des philanthropes, des négrophiles.

— Allons, dit Biassou en hochant la tête, le voilà revenu à ses diables de mots inintelligibles. Eh bien, si tu n’as ni dépôts ni magasins à piller, à quoi donc es-tu bon?

Cette question présentait une lueur d’espoir que C*** saisit avidement.

— Illustre guerrier, répondit-il, avez-vous un économiste dans votre armée?

— Qu’est-ce encore que cela? demanda le chef,

— C’est, dit le prisonnier avec autant d’emphase que sa crainte le lui permettait, c’est un homme nécessaire par excellence. C’est celui qui seul apprécie, suivant leurs valeurs respectives, les ressources matérielles d’un empire, qui les échelonne dans l’ordre de leur importance, les classe suivant leur valeur, les bonifie et les améliore en combinant leurs sources et leurs résultats, et les distribue à propos, comme autant de ruisseaux fécondateurs, dans le grand fleuve de l’utilité générale, qui vient grossir à son tour la mer de la prospérité publique.

— Caramba! dit Biassou en se penchant vers l’obi. Que diantre veut-il dire avec ses mots, enfilés les uns dans les autres comme les grains de votre chapelet?

L’obi haussa les épaules en signe d’ignorance et de dédain. Cependant le citoyen C*** continuait:

— ... J’ai étudié, daignez m’entendre, vaillant chef des braves régénérateurs de Saint-Domingue, j’ai étudié les grands économistes, Turgot, Raynal, et Mirabeau, l’ami des hommes! J’ai mis leur théorie en pratique. Je sais la science indispensable au gouvernement des royaumes et des états quelconques...

— L’économiste n’est pas économe de paroles! dit Rigaud avec son sourire doux et goguenard.

Biassou s’était écrié:

— Dis-moi donc, bavard! est-ce que j’ai des royaumes et des états à gouverner?

— Pas encore, grand homme, repartit C***, mais cela peut venir; et d'ailleurs ma science descend, sans déroger, à des détails utiles pour la gestion d'une armée.

Le généralissime l'arrêta encore brusquement.

— Je ne gère pas mon armée, monsieur le planteur, je la commande.

— Fort bien, observa le citoyen; vous serez le général, je serai l'intendant. J'ai des connaissances spéciales pour la multiplication des bestiaux...

— Crois-tu que nous élevons les bestiaux? dit Biassou en ricanant; nous les mangeons. Quand le bétail de la colonie française me manquera, je passerai les mornes de la frontière, et j'irai prendre les bœufs et les moutons espagnols qu'on élève dans les hattes des grandes plaines de Cotuy, de la Vega, de Sant-Jago, et sur les bords de la Yuna; j'irai encore chercher, s'il le faut, ceux qui paissent dans la presqu'île de Samana et au revers de la montagne de Cibos, à partir des bouches du Neybe jusqu'au-delà de Santo-Domingo. D'ailleurs je serai charmé de punir ces damnés planteurs espagnols, ce sont eux qui ont livré Ogé! Tu vois que je ne suis pas embarrassé du défaut de vivres, et que je n'ai pas besoin de ta science nécessaire par excellence!

Cette vigoureuse déclaration déconcerta le pauvre économiste; il essaya pourtant encore une dernière planche de salut.

— Mes études ne se sont pas bornées à l'éducation du bétail. J'ai d'autres connaissances spéciales qui peuvent vous être fort utiles. Je vous indiquerai les moyens d'exploiter la braie et les mines de charbon de terre.

— Que m'importe! dit Biassou. Quand j'ai besoin de charbon, je brûle trois lieues de forêt.

— Je vous enseignerai à quel emploi est propre chaque espèce de bois, poursuivit le prisonnier; le chicaron et le sabiecca pour les quilles de navire, les yabas pour les courbes; les tocumas [Néfliers.] pour les membrures; les hacamas, les gaïacs, les cèdres, les accomas...

— Que te lleven todos los demonios de las diez-y-siete infiernos! [Que puissent t'emporter tous les démons des dix-sept enfers!] s'écria Biassou impatienté.

— Plaît-il, mon gracieux patron? dit l'économiste tout tremblant, et qui n'entendait pas l'espagnol.

— Ecoute, reprit Biassou, je n'ai pas besoin de vaisseaux. Il n'y a qu'un emploi vacant dans ma suite; ce n'est pas la place de mayor-domo, c'est la place de valet de chambre. Vois, señor filosofo, si elle te convient. Tu me serviras à genoux; tu m’apporteras la pipe, le calalou [Ragoût créole.] et la soupe de tortue; et tu porteras derrière moi un éventail de plumes de paon ou de perroquet, comme ces deux pages que tu vois. Hum! réponds, veux-tu être mon valet de chambre?

Le citoyen C***, qui ne songeait qu’à sauver sa vie, se courba jusqu’à terre avec mille démonstrations de joie et de reconnaissance.

— Tu acceptes donc? demanda Biassou.

— Pouvez-vous douter, mon généreux maître, que j’hésite un moment devant une si insigne faveur que celle de servir votre personne?

A cette réponse, le ricanement diabolique de Biassou devint éclatant. Il croisa les bras, se leva d’un air de triomphe, et, repoussant du pied la tête du blanc prosterné devant lui, il s’écria d’une voix haute:

— J’étais bien aise d’éprouver jusqu’où peut aller la lâcheté des blancs, après avoir vu jusqu’où peut aller leur cruauté! Citoyen C***, c’est à toi que je dois ce double exemple. Je te connais! comment as-tu été assez stupide pour ne pas t’en apercevoir? C’est toi qui as présidé aux supplices de juin, de juillet et d’août; c’est toi qui as fait planter cinquante têtes de noirs des deux côtés de ton avenue, en place de palmiers; c’est toi qui voulais égorger les cinq cents nègres restés dans tes fers après la révolte, et ceindre la ville du Cap d’un cordon de têtes d’esclaves, du fort Picolet à la pointe Caracol. Tu aurais fait, si tu l’avais pu, un trophée de ma tête; maintenant tu t’estimerais heureux que je voulusse de toi pour valet de chambre. Non! non! j’ai plus de soin de ton honneur que toi-même; je ne te ferai pas cet affront. Prépare-toi à mourir.

Il fit un geste, et les noirs déposèrent auprès de moi le malheureux négrophile, qui, sans pouvoir prononcer une parole, était tombé à ses pieds comme foudroyé.

XXXIV

— A ton tour à présent! dit le chef en se tournant vers le dernier des prisonniers, le colon soupçonné par les blancs d’être sang-mêlé, et qui m’avait envoyé un cartel pour cette injure.

Une clameur générale des rebelles étouffa la réponse du colon. - Muerte! muerte! Mort! Death! Touyé! touyé! s’écriaient-ils en grinçant des dents et en montrant les poings au malheureux captif.

— Général, dit un mulâtre qui s’exprimait plus clairement que les autres, c’est un blanc; il faut qu’il meure!

Le pauvre planteur, à force de gestes et de cris, parvint à faire entendre quelques paroles.

— Non, non! monsieur le général, non, mes frères, je ne suis pas un blanc! C’est une abominable calomnie! Je suis un mulâtre, un sang-mêlé comme vous, fils d’une négresse comme vos mères et vos sœurs!

— Il ment! disaient les nègres furieux. C’est un blanc. Il a toujours détesté les noirs et les hommes de couleur.

— Jamais! reprenait le prisonnier. Ce sont les blancs que je déteste. Je suis un de vos frères. J’ai toujours dit avec vous: Nègre cé blan, blan cé nègre! [Dicton populaire chez les nègres révoltés, dont voici la traduction littérale: « Les nègres sont les blancs, les blancs sont les nègres.” On rendrait mieux le sens en traduisant ainsi: Les nègres sont les maîtres, les blancs sont les esclaves.]

— Point! point! criait la multitude! touyé blan, touyé blan! [Tuez le blanc! Tuez le blanc!]

Le malheureux répétait en se lamentant misérablement:

— Je suis un mulâtre! Je suis un des vôtres.

— La preuve? dit froidement Biassou.

— La preuve, répondit l’autre dans son égarement, c’est que les blancs m’ont toujours méprisé.

— Cela peut être vrai, répliqua Biassou, mais tu es un insolent.

Un jeune sang-mêlé adressa vivement la parole au colon.

— Les blancs te méprisaient, c’est juste; mais en revanche tu affectais, toi, de mépriser les sang-mêlés parmi lesquels ils te rangeaient. On m’a même dit que tu avais provoqué en duel un blanc qui t’avait un jour reproché d’appartenir à notre caste.

Une rumeur universelle de rage et d’indignation s’éleva dans la foule, et les cris de mort, plus violents que jamais, couvrirent les justifications du colon, qui, jetant sur moi un regard oblique d’étonnement et de prière, redisait en pleurant:

— C’est une calomnie! Je n’ai point d’autre gloire et d’autre bonheur que d’appartenir aux noirs. Je suis un mulâtre!

— Si tu étais un mulâtre, en effet, observa Rigaud paisiblement, tu ne te servirais pas de ce mot [Il faut se souvenir que les hommes de couleur rejetaient avec colère cette qualification, inventée, diraient-ils, par le mépris des blancs.].

— Hélas! sais-je ce que je dis? reprenait le misérable. Monsieur le général en chef, la preuve que je suis sang-mêlé, c’est ce cercle noir que vous pouvez voir autour de mes ongles [Plusieurs sang-mêlés présentent en effet à l’origine des ongles ce signe, qui s’efface avec l’âge, mais renaît chez leurs enfants.].

Biassou repoussa cette main suppliante.

— Je n’ai pas la science de monsieur le chapelain, qui devine qui vous êtes à l’inspection de votre main. Mais écoute; nos soldats t’accusent, les uns d’être un blanc, les autres d’être un faux frère. Si cela est, tu dois mourir. Tu soutiens que tu appartiens à notre caste, et que tu ne l’as jamais reniée. Il ne te reste qu’un moyen de prouver ce que tu avances et de te sauver.

— Lequel, mon général, lequel? demanda le colon avec empressement. Je suis prêt.

— Le voici, dit Biassou froidement. Prends ce stylet et poignarde toi-même tes deux prisonniers blancs.

En parlant ainsi, il nous désignait du regard et de la main. Le colon recula d’horreur devant le stylet que Biassou lui présentait avec un sourire infernal.

— Eh bien, dit le chef, tu balances! C’est pourtant l’unique moyen de me prouver, ainsi qu’à mon armée, que tu n’es pas un blanc, et que tu es des nôtres. Allons, décide-toi, tu me fais perdre mon temps.

Les yeux du prisonnier étaient égarés. Il fit un pas vers le poignard, puis laissa retomber ses bras, et s’arrêta en détournant la tête. Un frémissement faisait trembler tout son corps.

— Allons donc! s’écria Biassou d’un ton d’impatience et de colère. Je suis pressé. Choisis, ou de les tuer toi-même, ou de mourir avec eux.

Le colon restait immobile et comme pétrifié.

— Fort bien! dit Biassou en se tournant vers les nègres; il ne veut pas être le bourreau, il sera le patient. Je vois que c'est un blanc; emmenez-le, vous autres...

Les noirs s'avançaient pour saisir le colon. Ce mouvement décida de son choix entre la mort à donner et la mort à recevoir. L'excès de la lâcheté a aussi son courage. Il se précipita sur le poignard que lui offrait Biassou, puis, sans se donner le temps de réfléchir à ce qu'il allait faire, le misérable se jeta comme un tigre sur le citoyen C***, qui était couché près de moi.

Alors commença une horrible lutte. Le négrophile, que le dénouement de l'interrogatoire dont l'avait tourmenté Biassou venait de plonger dans un désespoir morne et stupide, avait vu la scène entre le chef et le planteur sang-mêlé d'un oeil fixe, et tellement absorbé dans la terreur de son supplice prochain, qu'il n'avait point paru la comprendre; mais quand il vit le colon fondre sur lui, et le fer briller sur sa tête, l'imminence du danger le réveilla en sursaut. Il se dressa debout; il arrêta le bras du meurtrier en criant d'une voix lamentable:

— Grâce! grâce! Que me voulez-vous donc? Que vous ai-je donc fait?

— Il faut mourir, monsieur, répondit le sangmêlé, cherchant à dégager son bras et fixant sur sa victime des yeux effarés. Laissez-moi faire, je ne vous ferai point de mal.

— Mourir de votre main, disait l'économiste, pourquoi donc? Epargnez-moi! Vous m'en voulez peut-être de ce que j'ai dit autrefois que vous étiez un sang-mêlé? Mais laissez-moi la vie, je vous proteste que je vous reconnais pour un blanc. Oui, vous êtes un blanc, je le dirai partout, mais grâce!

Le négrophile avait mal choisi son moyen de défense.

— Tais-toi! tais-toi! cria le sang-mêlé furieux, et craignant que les nègres n'entendissent cette déclaration.

Mais l'autre hurlait, sans l'écouter, qu'il le savait blanc et de bonne race. Le sang-mêlé fit un dernier effort pour le réduire au silence, écarta violemment les deux mains qui le retenaient, et fouilla de son poignard à travers les vêtements du citoyen C***.

L'infortuné sentit la pointe du fer, et mordit avec rage le bras qui l'enfonçait.

— Monstre! scélérat! tu m'assassines!

Il jeta un regard vers Biassou.

— Défendez-moi, vengeur de l’humanité!

Mais le meurtrier appuya fortement sur le poignard; un flot de sang jaillit autour de sa main et jusqu’à son visage. Les genoux du malheureux négrophile plièrent subitement, ses bras s’affaissèrent, ses yeux s’éteignirent, sa bouche poussa un sourd gémissement. Il tomba mort.

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XXXV

Cette scène, dans laquelle je m'attendais à jouer bientôt mon rôle, m'avait glacé d'horreur. Le vengeur de l'humanité avait contemplé la lutte de ses deux victimes d'un oeil impassible. Quand ce fut terminé, il se tourna vers ses pages épouvantés.

— Apportez-moi d'autre tabac, dit-il; et il se remit à le mâcher paisiblement.

L'obi et Rigaud étaient immobiles, et les nègres paraissaient eux-mêmes effrayés de l'horrible spectacle que leur chef venait de leur donner.

Il restait cependant encore un blanc à poignarder, c'était moi; mon tour était venu. Je jetai un regard sur cet assassin, qui allait être mon bourreau. Il me fit pitié. Ses lèvres étaient violettes, ses dents claquaient, un mouvement convulsif dont tremblaient tous ses membres le faisait chanceler, sa main revenait sans cesse, et comme machinalement, sur son front pour en essuyer les taches de sang, et il regardait d'un air insensé le cadavre fumant étendu à ses pieds. Ses yeux hagards ne se détachaient pas de sa victime.

J'attendais le moment où il achèverait sa tâche par ma mort. J'étais dans une position singulière avec cet homme; il avait déjà failli me tuer pour prouver qu'il était blanc; il allait maintenant m'assassiner pour démontrer qu'il était mulâtre.

— Allons, lui dit Biassou, c'est bien. Je suis content de toi, l'ami! Il jeta un coup d'oeil sur moi, et ajouta: - Je te fais grâce de l'autre. Va-t'en. Nous te déclarons bon frère, et nous te nommons bourreau de notre armée.

A ces paroles du chef, un nègre sortit des rangs, s'inclina trois fois devant Biassou, et s'écria en son jargon, que je traduirai en français pour vous en faciliter l'intelligence:

— Et moi, général?

— Eh bien, toi! que veux-tu dire? demanda Biassou.

— Est-ce que vous ne ferez rien pour moi, mon général? dit le nègre. Voilà que vous donnez de l'avancement à ce chien de blanc, qui assassine pour se faire reconnaître des nôtres. Est-ce que vous ne m'en donnerez pas aussi à moi qui suis un bon noir?

Cette requête inattendue parut embarrasser Biassou; il se pencha vers Rigaud, et le chef du rassemblement des Cayes lui dit en français:

— On ne peut le satisfaire, tâchez d'éluder sa demande.

— Te donner de l'avancement? dit alors Biassou au bon noir; je ne demande pas mieux, Quel grade désires-tu?

— Je voudrais être official [Officier.].

— Officier! reprit le généralissime, eh bien! quels sont tes titres pour obtenir l'épaulette?

— C'est moi, répondit le noir avec emphase, qui ai mis le feu à l'habitation Lagoscette, dès les premiers jours d'août. C'est moi qui ai massacré M. Clément, le planteur, et porté la tête de son raffineur au bout d'une pique. J'ai égorgé dix femmes blanches et sept petits enfants; l'un d'entre eux a même servi d'enseigne aux braves noirs de Boukmann. Plus tard, j'ai brûlé quatre familles de colons dans une chambre du fort Galifet, que j'avais fermée à double tour avant de l'incendier. Mon père a été roué au Cap, mon frère a été pendu au Rocrou, et j'ai failli moi-même être fusillé. J'ai brûlé trois plantations de café, six plantations d'indigo, deux cents carreaux de cannes à sucre; j'ai tué mon maître M. Noë et sa mère...

— Epargne-nous tes états de service, dit Rigaud, dont la feinte mansuétude cachait une cruauté réelle, mais qui était féroce avec décence, et ne pouvait souffrir le cynisme du brigandage.

— Je pourrais en citer encore bien d'autres, repartit le nègre avec orgueil; mais vous trouvez sans doute que cela suffit pour mériter le grade d'official, et pour porter une épaulette d'or sur ma veste, comme nos camarades que voilà.

Il montrait les aides de camp et l'état-major de Biassou. Le généralissime parut réfléchir un moment, puis il adressa gravement ces paroles au nègre:

— Je serais charmé de t'accorder un grade; je suis satisfait de tes services; mais il faut encore autre chose. - Sais-tu le latin?

Le brigand ébahi ouvrit de grands yeux, et dit:

— Plaît-il, mon général?

— Eh bien oui, reprit vivement Biassou, sais-tu le latin?

— Le... latin?..., répéta le noir stupéfait.

— Oui, oui, oui, le latin! sais-tu le latin? poursuivit le rusé chef. Et, déployant un étendard sur lequel était écrit le verset du psaume: In exitu Israël de Aegypto, il ajouta: - Explique-nous ce que veulent dire ces mots.

Le noir, au comble de la surprise, restait immobile et muet, et froissait machinalement le pagne de son caleçon, tandis que ses yeux effarés allaient du général au drapeau, et du drapeau au général.

— Allons, répondras-tu? dit Biassou avec impatience.

Le noir, après s'être gratté la tête, ouvrit et ferma plusieurs fois la bouche, et laissa enfin tomber ces mots embarrassés:

— Je ne sais pas ce que veut dire le général.

Le visage de Biassou prit une subite expression de tolère et d'indignation.

— Comment! misérable drôle! s'écria-t-il, comment! tu veux être officier et tu ne sais pas le latin!

— Mais, notre général..., balbutia le nègre, confus et tremblant.

— Tais-toi! reprit Biassou, dont l'emportement semblait croître. Je ne sais à quoi tient que je ne te fasse fusiller sur l'heure pour ta présomption. Comprenez-vous, Rigaud, ce plaisant officier qui ne sait seulement pas le latin? Eh bien, drôle, puisque tu ne comprends point ce qui est écrit sur te drapeau, je vais te l'expliquer. In exitu, tout soldat, Israël, qui ne sait pas le latin, de Aegypto, ne peut être nommé officier. - N'est-ce point cela, monsieur le chapelain?

Le petit obi fit un signe affirmatif. Biassou continua:

— Ce frère, que je viens de nommer bourreau de l'armée, et dont tu es jaloux, sait le latin.

Il se tourna vers le nouveau bourreau.

— N'est-il pas vrai, l'ami? Prouvez à te butor que vous en savez plus que lui. Que signifie Dominus vobiscum?

Le malheureux colon sang-mêlé, arraché de sa sombre rêverie par cette voix redoutable, leva la tête, et quoique ses esprits fussent encore tout égarés par le lâche assassinat qu'il venait de commettre, la terreur le décida à l'obéissance. Il y avait quelque chose d'étrange dans l'air dont cet homme cherchait à retrouver un souvenir de collège parmi ses pensées d'épouvante et de remords, et dans la manière lugubre dont il prononça l'explication enfantine.

— Dominus vobiscum... cela veut dire: Que le Seigneur soit avec vous!

— Et cum spiritu tuo! ajouta solennellement le mystérieux obi.

— Amen, dit Biassou. Puis, reprenant son accent irrité, et mêlant à son courroux simulé quelques phrases de mauvais latin à la façon de Sganarelle, pour convaincre les noirs de la science de leur chef: - Rentre le dernier dans ton rang! cria-t-il au nègre ambitieux. Sursum corda! Ne t'avise plus à l’avenir de prétendre monter au rang de tes chefs qui savent le latin, orate fratres, ou je te fais pendre! Bonus, bona, bonum!

Le nègre, émerveillé et terrifié tout ensemble, retourna à son rang en baissant honteusement la tête au milieu des huées générales de tous ses camarades, qui s’indignaient de ses prétentions si mal fondées, et fixaient des yeux d’admiration sur leur docte généralissime.

Il y avait un côté burlesque dans cette scène, qui acheva cependant de m’inspirer une haute idée de l’habileté de Biassou. Le moyen ridicule qu’il venait d’employer avec tant de succès [Toussaint Louverture s’est servi plus tard du même expédient avec le même avantage.] pour déconcerter les ambitions toujours si exigeantes dans une bande de rebelles me donnait à la fois la mesure de la stupidité des nègres et de l’adresse de leur chef.

XXXVI

Cependant l’heure de l’almuerzo [Déjeuner.] de Biassou était venue. On apporta devant le mariscal de campo de sû magestad catolica une grande écaille de tortue dans laquelle fumait une espèce d’olla podrida, abondamment assaisonnée de tranches de lard, où la chair de tortue remplaçait le carnera [L’agneau.], et la patate les garganzas [Les pois chiches.]. Un énorme chou caraïbe flottait à la surface de ce puchero. Des deux côtés de l’écaille, qui servait à la fois de marmite et de soupière, étaient deux coupes d’écorce de coco pleines de raisins secs, de sandias [Melons d’eau.], d’ignames et de figues; c’était le postre [Dessert.]. Un pain de maïs et une outre de vin goudronné complétaient l’appareil du festin. Biassou tira de sa poche quelques gousses d’ail et en frotta lui-même le pain; puis, sans même faire enlever le cadavre palpitant couché devant ses yeux, il se mit à manger, et invita Rigaud à en faire autant. L’appétit de Biassou avait quelque chose d’effrayant.

L’obi ne partagea point leur repas. Je compris que, comme tous ses pareils, il ne mangeait jamais en public, afin de faire croire aux nègres qu’il était d’une essence surnaturelle, et qu’il vivait sans nourriture.

Tout en déjeunant, Biassou ordonna à un aide de camp de faire commencer la revue, et les bandes se mirent à défiler en bon ordre devant la grotte. Les noirs du Morne-Rouge passèrent les premiers; ils étaient environ quatre mille divisés en petits pelotons serrés que conduisaient des chefs ornés, comme je l’ai déjà dit, de caleçons ou de ceintures écarlates. Ces noirs, presque tous grands et forts, portaient des fusils, des haches et des sabres; un grand nombre d’entre eux avaient des arcs, des flèches et des zagaies, qu’ils s’étaient forgés à défaut d’autres armes. Ils n’avaient point de drapeau, et marchaient en silence d’un air consterné.

Eu voyant défiler cette horde, Biassou se pencha à l’oreille de Rigaud, et lui dit en français:

— Quand donc la mitraille de Blanchelande et de Rouvray me débarrassera-t-elle de ces bandits du Morne-Rouge? Je les hais; ce sont presque tous des congos! Et puis ils ne savent tuer que dans le combat; ils suivaient l’exemple de leur chef imbécile, de leur idole Bug-Jargal, jeune fou qui voulait faire le généreux et le magnanime. Vous ne le connaissez pas, Rigaud? Vous ne le connaîtrez jamais, je l’espère. Les blancs l’ont fait prisonnier, et ils me délivreront de lui comme ils m’ont délivré de Boukmann.

— A propos de Boukmann, répondit Rigaud, voici les noirs marrons de Macaya qui passent, et je vois dans leurs rangs le nègre que Jean-François vous a envoyé pour vous annoncer la mort de Boukmann. Savez-vous bien que cet homme pourrait détruire tout l’effet des prophéties de l’obi sur la fin de ce chef, s’il disait qu’on l’a arrêté pendant une demi-heure aux avant-postes, et qu’il m’avait confié sa nouvelle avant l’instant où vous l’avez fait appeler?

— Diabolo! dit Biassou. vous avez raison, mon cher; il faut fermer la bouche à cet homme-là. Attendez!

Alors, élevant la voix:

— Macaya! cria-t-il.

Le chef des nègres marrons s’approcha, et présenta son tromblon au col évasé en signe de respect.

— Faites sortir de vos rangs, reprit Biassou, ce noir que j’y vois là-bas, et qui ne doit pas en faire partie.

C’était le messager de Jean-François. Macaya l’amena au généralissime, dont le visage prit subitement cette expression de colère qu’il savait si bien simuler.

— Qui es-tu? demanda-t-il au nègre interdit.

— Notre général, je suis un noir.

— Caramba! je le vois bien! Mais comment t’appelles-tu?

— Mon nom de guerre est Vavelan; mon patron chez les bienheureux est saint Sabas, diacre et martyr, dont la fête viendra le vingtième jour avant la nativité de Notre-Seigneur.

Biassou l’interrompit:

— De quel front oses-tu te présenter à la parade, au milieu des espingoles luisantes et des baudriers blancs, avec ton sabre sans fourreau, ton caleçon déchiré, tes pieds couverts de boue?

— Notre général, répondit le noir, ce n’est pas ma faute. J’ai été chargé par le grand-amiral Jean-François de vous porter la nouvelle de la mort du chef des marrons anglais, Boukmann; et si mes vêtements sont déchirés, si mes pieds sont sales, c’est que j’ai couru à perdre haleine pour vous l’apporter plus tôt; mais on m’a retenu au camp, et...

Biassou fronça le sourcil.

— Il ne s’agit point de cela, gavacho! mais de ton audace d’assister à la revue dans ce désordre. Recommande ton âme à saint Sabas, diacre et martyr, ton patron. Va te faire fusiller!

Ici j’eus encore une nouvelle preuve du pouvoir moral de Biassou sur les rebelles. L’infortuné, chargé d’aller lui-même se faire exécuter, ne se permit pas un murmure; il baissa la tête, croisa les bras sur sa poitrine, salua trois fois son juge impitoyable, et, après s’être agenouillé devant l’obi, qui lui donna gravement une absolution sommaire, il sortit de la grotte. Quelques minutes après, une détonation de mousqueterie annonça à Biassou que le nègre avait obéi et vécu.

Le chef, débarrassé de toute inquiétude, se tourna alors vers Rigaud, l’oeil étincelant de plaisir, et avec un ricanement de triomphe qui semblait dire: - Admirez! [Toussaint Louverture, qui s’était formé à l’école de Biassou, et qui, s’il ne lui était pas supérieur en habileté, était du moins fort loin de l’égaler en perfidie et en cruauté. Toussaint Louverture a donné plus tard le spectacle du même pouvoir sur les nègres fanatisés. Ce chef, issu, dit-on, d’une race royale africaine, avait reçu, comme Biassou, quelque instruction grossière, à laquelle il ajoutait du génie. Il s’était dressé une façon de trône républicain à Saint-Domingue dans le même temps où Bonaparte se fondait en France une monarchie sur la victoire. Toussaint admirait naïvement le premier consul; mais le premier consul, ne voyant dans Toussaint qu’un parodiste gênant de sa fortune, repoussa toujours dédaigneusement toute correspondance avec l’esclave affranchi qui osait lui écrire: Au premier des blancs le premier des noirs.]

XXXVII

Cependant la revue continuait. Cette armée, dont le désordre m’avait offert un tableau si extraordinaire quelques heures auparavant, n’était pas moins bizarre sous les armes. C’étaient tantôt des troupes de nègres absolument nus, munis de massues, de tomahawks, de casse-têtes, marchant au son de la corne à bouquin, comme les sauvages; tantôt des bataillons de mulâtres, équipés à l’espagnole ou à l’anglaise, bien armés et bien disciplinés, réglant leurs pas sur le roulement d’un tambour; puis des cohues de négresses, de négrillons, chargés de fourches et de broches; des fatras courbés sous de vieux fusils sans chien et sans canon; des griotes avec leurs parures bariolées; des griots, effroyables de grimaces et de contorsions, chantant des airs incohérents sur la guitare, le tam-tam et le balafo. Cette étrange procession était de temps à autre coupée par des détachements hétérogènes de griffes, de marabouts, de sacatras, de mamelucos, de quarterons, de sang-mêlés libres, ou par des hordes nomades de noirs marrons à l’attitude fière, aux carabines brillantes, traînant dans leurs rangs leurs cabrouets tout chargés, ou quelque canon pris aux blancs, qui leur servait moins d’arme que de trophée, et hurlant à pleine voix les hymnes du camp du Grand-Pré et d’Oua-Nassé. Au-dessus de toutes ces têtes flottaient des drapeaux de toutes couleurs, de toutes devises, blancs, rouges, tricolores, fleurdelysés, surmontés du bonnet de liberté, portant pour inscriptions: - Mort aux prêtres et aux aristocrates! - Vive la religion! - Liberté! Égalité! - Vive le roi! - A bas la métropole! - Viva España! - Plus de tyrans! etc. Confusion frappante qui indiquait que toutes les forces des rebelles n’étaient qu’un amas de moyens sans but, et qu’en cette armée il n’y avait pas moins de désordre dans les idées que dans les hommes.

En passant tour à tour devant la grotte, les bandes inclinaient leur bannière, et Biassou rendait le salut. Il adressait à chaque troupe quelque réprimande ou quelque éloge; et chaque parole de sa bouche, sévère ou flatteuse, était recueillie par les siens avec un respect fanatique et une sorte de crainte superstitieuse.

Ce flot de barbares et de sauvages passa enfin. J’avoue que la vue de tant de brigands, qui m’avait distrait d’abord, finissait par me peser. Cependant le jour tombait, et, au moment où les derniers rangs défilèrent, le soleil ne jetait plus qu’une teinte de cuivre rouge sur le front granitique des montagnes de l’orient.

XXXVIII

Biassou paraissait rêveur. Quand la revue fut terminée, qu’il eut donné ses derniers ordres. et que tous les rebelles furent rentrés sous leurs ajoupas, il m’adressa la parole.

— Jeune homme, me dit-il, tu as pu juger à ton aise de mon génie et de ma puissance. Voici que l’heure est venue pour toi d’en aller rendre compte à Léogri.

— Il n’a pas tenu à moi qu’elle ne vint plus tôt, lui répondis-je froidement.

— Tu as raison, répliqua Biassou. Il s’arrêta un moment comme pour épier l’effet que produirait sur moi ce qu’il allait me dire, et il ajouta: - Mais il ne tient qu’à toi qu’elle ne vienne pas.

— Comment! m’écriai-je étonné; que veux-tu dire?

— Oui, continua Biassou, ta vie dépend de toi; tu peux la sauver, si tu le veux.

Cet accès de clémence, le premier et le dernier sans doute que Biassou ait jamais eu, me parut un prodige. L’obi, surpris comme moi, s’était élancé du siège où il avait conservé si longtemps la même attitude extatique, à la mode des fakirs hindous. Il se plaça en face du généralissime, et éleva la voix avec colère:

— Que dice el exelentisimo señor mariscal de campo? [Que dit le très excellent seigneur maréchal de camp?] Se souvient-il de ce qu’il m’a promis? Il ne peut, ni lui ni le bon Giu, disposer maintenant de cette vie: elle m’appartient.

En ce moment encore, à cet accent irrité, je crus me ressouvenir de ce maudit petit homme; mais ce moment fut insaisissable, et aucune lumière n’en jaillit pour moi.

Biassou se leva sans s’émouvoir, parla bas un instant avec l’obi, lui montra le drapeau noir que j’avais remarqué, et, après quelques mots échangés, le sorcier remua la tête de haut en bas et la releva de bas en haut, en signe d’adhésion. Tous deux reprirent leurs places et leurs attitudes.

— Ecoute, me dit alors le généralissime en tirant de la poche de sa veste l’autre dépêche de Jean-François, qu’il y avait déposée; nos affaires vont mal; Boukmann vient de périr dans un combat. Les blancs ont exterminé deux mille noirs dans le district du Cul-de-Sac. Les colons continuent de se fortifier et de hérisser la plaine de postes militaires. Nous avons perdu, par notre faute, l’occasion de prendre le Cap; elle ne se représentera pas de longtemps. Du côté de l’est, la route principale est coupée par une rivière; les blancs, afin d’en défendre le passage, y ont établi une batterie sur des pontons, et ont formé sur chaque bord deux petits camps. Au sud, il y a une grande route qui traverse ce pays montueux appelé le Haut-du-Cap; ils l’ont couverte de troupes et d’artillerie. La position est également fortifiée du côté de la terre par une bonne palissade, à laquelle tous les habitants ont travaillé, et l’on y a ajouté des chevaux de frise. Le Cap est donc à l’abri de nos armes. Notre embuscade aux gorges de Dompte-Mulâtre a manqué son effet. A tous nos échecs se joint la fièvre de Siam, qui dépeuple le camp de Jean-François. En conséquence, le grand amiral de France [Nous avons déjà dit que Jean-François prenait ce titre] pense, et nous partageons son avis, qu’il conviendrait de traiter avec le gouverneur Blanchelande et l’assemblée coloniale. Voici la lettre que nous adressons à l’assemblée à ce sujet: écoute!

«Messieurs les députés,

«De grands malheurs ont affligé cette riche et importante colonie; nous y avons été enveloppés, et il ne nous reste plus rien à dire pour notre justification. Un jour vous nous rendrez toute la justice que mérite notre position. Nous devons être compris dans l’amnistie générale que le roi Louis XVI a prononcée pour tous indistinctement.

«Sinon, comme le roi d’Espagne est un bon roi, qui nous traite fort bien, et nous témoigne des récompenses, nous continuerons de le servir avec zèle et dévouement.

«Nous voyons par la loi du 28 septembre 1791 que l’assemblée nationale et le roi vous accordent de prononcer définitivement sur l’état des personnes non libres et l’état politique des hommes de couleur. Nous défendrons les décrets de l’assemblée nationale et les vôtres, revêtus des formalités requises, jusqu’à la dernière goutte de notre sang. Il serait même intéressant que vous déclariez, par un arrêté sanctionné de monsieur le général, que votre intention est de vous occuper du sort des esclaves. Sachant qu’ils sont l’objet de votre sollicitude, par leurs chefs, à qui vous feriez parvenir ce travail, ils seraient satisfaits, et l’équilibre rompu se rétablirait en peu de temps.

«Ne comptez pas cependant, messieurs les représentants, que nous consentions à nous armer pour les volontés des assemblées révolutionnaires. Nous sommes sujets de trois rois, le roi de Congo, maître-né de tous les noirs; le roi de France, qui représente nos pères; et le roi d'Espagne, qui représente nos mères. Ces trois rois sont les descendants de ceux qui, conduits par une étoile, ont été adorer l'Homme-Dieu. Si nous servions les assemblées, nous serions peut- être entraînés à faire la guerre contre nos frères, les sujets de ces trois rois, à qui nous avons promis fidélité.

«Et puis, nous ne savons ce qu'on entend par volonté de la nation, vu que depuis que le monde règne nous n'avons exécuté que celle d'un roi. Le prince de France nous aime, celui d'Espagne ne cesse de nous secourir. Nous les aidons, ils nous aident; c'est la cause de l'humanité. Et d'ailleurs ces majestés viendraient à nous manquer, que nous aurions bien vite trôné un roi.

«Telles sont nos intentions, moyennant quoi nous consentirons à faire la paix.

«Signé JEAN-FRANCOIS, général; BIASSOU, maréchal de camp; DESPREZ, MANZEAU, TOUSSAINT, AUBERT, commissaires ad hoc [Il paraîtrait que cette lettre, ridiculement caractéristique, fut en effet envoyée à l'assemblée.].”

— Tu vois, ajouta Biassou après la lecture de cette pièce de diplomatie nègre, dont le souvenir s'est fixé mot pour mot dans ma tête, tu vois que nous sommes pacifiques. Or, voici ce que je veux de toi. Ni Jean-François, ni moi, n'avons été élevés dans les écoles des blancs, où l'on apprend le beau langage. Nous savons nous battre, mais nous ne savons point écrire. Cependant nous ne voulons pas qu'il reste rien dans notre lettre à l'assemblée qui puisse exciter les burlerias orgueilleuses de nos anciens maîtres. Tu parais avoir appris cette science frivole qui nous manque. Corrige les fautes qui pourraient, dans notre dépêche, prêter à rire aux blancs. A ce prix, je t'accorde la vie.

Il y avait dans ce rôle de correcteur des fautes d'orthographe diplomatique de Biassou quelque chose qui répugnait trop à ma fierté pour que je balançasse un moment. Et d'ailleurs, que me faisait la vie? Je refusai son offre.

Il parut surpris.

— Comment! s'écria-t-il, tu aimes mieux mourir que de redresser quelques traits de plume sur un morceau de parchemin?

— Oui, lui répondis-je.

Ma résolution semblait l'embarrasser. Il me dit après un instant de rêverie:

— Ecoute bien, jeune fou, je suis moins obstiné que toi. Je te donne jusqu'à demain soir pour te décider à m'obéir; demain, au coucher du soleil, tu seras ramené devant moi. Pense alors à me satisfaire. Adieu, la nuit porte conseil. Songes-y bien, chez nous la mort n'est pas seulement la mort.

Le sens de ces dernières paroles, accompagnées d'un rire affreux, n'était pas équivoque; et les tourments que Biassou avait coutume d'inventer pour ses victimes achevaient de l'expliquer.

— Candi, ramenez le prisonnier, poursuivit Biassou; confiez-en la garde aux noirs du Morne-Rouge; je veux qu'il vive encore un tour de soleil, et mes autres soldats n'auraient peut-être pas la patience d'attendre que les vingt-quatre heures fussent écoulées.

Le mulâtre Candi, qui était le chef de sa garde, me fit lier les bras derrière le dos. Un soldat prit l'extrémité de la corde, et nous sortîmes de la grotte.

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XXXIX

Quand les événements extraordinaires, les angoisses et les catastrophes viennent fondre tout à coup au milieu d’une vie heureuse et délicieusement uniforme, ces émotions inattendues, ces coups du sort, interrompent brusquement le sommeil de l’âme, qui se reposait dans la monotonie de la prospérité. Cependant le malheur qui arrive de cette manière ne semble pas un réveil, mais seulement un songe. Pour celui qui a toujours été heureux, le désespoir commence par la stupeur. L’adversité imprévue ressemble à la torpille; elle secoue, mais engourdit; et l’effrayante lumière qu’elle jette soudainement devant nos yeux n’est point le jour. Les hommes, les choses, les faits, passent alors devant nous avec une physionomie en quelque sorte fantastique; et se meuvent comme dans un rêve. Tout est changé dans l’horizon de notre vie, atmosphère et perspective; mais il s’écoule un long temps avant que nos yeux aient perdu cette sorte d’image lumineuse du bonheur passé qui les suit, et, s’interposant sans cesse entre eux et le sombre présent, en change la couleur et donne je ne sais quoi de faux à la réalité. Alors tout ce qui est nous paraît impossible et absurde; nous croyons à peine à notre propre existence, parce que, ne retrouvant rien autour de nous de ce qui composait notre être, nous ne comprenons pas comment tout cela aurait disparu sans nous entraîner, et pourquoi de notre vie il ne serait reste que nous. Si cette position violente de l’âme se prolonge, elle dérange l’équilibre de la pensée et devient folie, état peut-être heureux, dans lequel la vie n’est plus pour l’infortuné qu’une vision, dont il est lui-même le fantôme.

XL

J’ignore, messieurs, pourquoi je vous expose ces idées. Ce ne sont point de celles que l’on comprend ni que l’on fait comprendre. Il faut les avoir senties. Je les ai éprouvées. C’était l’état de mon âme au moment ou les gardes de Biassou me remirent aux nègres du Morne-Rouge. Il me semblait que c’étaient des spectres qui me livraient à des spectres, et sans opposer de résistance je me laissai lier par la ceinture au tronc d’un arbre. Ils m’apportèrent quelques patates cuites dans l’eau, que je mangeai par cette sorte d’instinct machinal que la bonté de Dieu laisse à l’homme au milieu des préoccupations de l’esprit.

Cependant la nuit était venue; mes gardiens se retirèrent dans leurs ajoupas, et six d’entre eux seulement restèrent près de moi, assis ou couchés devant un grand feu qu’ils avaient allumé pour se préserver du froid nocturne. Au bout de quelques instants. tous s’endormirent profondément.

L’accablement physique dans lequel je me trouvais alors ne contribuait pas peu aux vagues rêveries qui égaraient ma pensée. Je me rappelais les jours sereins et toujours les mêmes que, peu de semaines auparavant, je passais encore près de Marie, sans même entrevoir dans l’avenir une autre possibilité que celle d’un bonheur éternel. Je les comparais à la journée qui venait de s’écouler, journée où tant de choses étranges s’étaient déroulées devant moi, comme pour me faire douter de leur existence, où ma vie avait été trois fois condamnée, et n’avait pas été sauvée. Je méditais sur mon avenir présent, qui ne se composait plus que d’un lendemain, et ne m’offrait plus d’autre certitude que le malheur et la mort, heureusement prochaine. Il me semblait lutter contre un cauchemar affreux. Je me demandais s’il était possible que tout ce qui s’était passé, que ce qui m’entourait fût le camp du sanguinaire Biassou, que Marie fût pour jamais perdue pour moi, et que ce prisonnier gardé par six barbares, garrotté et voué à une mort certaine, ce prisonnier que me montrait la lueur d’un feu de brigands, fût bien moi. Et, malgré tous mes efforts pour fuir l’obsession d’une pensée bien plus déchirante encore, mon cœur revenait a Marie. Je m’interrogeais avec angoisse sur son sort; je me roidissais dans mes liens comme pour voler à son secours, espérant toujours que le rêve horrible se dissiperait, et que Dieu n’aurait pas voulu faire entrer toutes les horreurs sur lesquelles je n’osais m’arrêter dans la destinée de l’ange qu’il m’avait donnée pour épouse. L'enchaînement douloureux de mes idées ramenait alors Pierrot devant moi, et la rage me rendait presque insensé; les artères de mon front me semblaient prêtes à se rompre; je me haïssais, je me maudissais, je me méprisais pour avoir un moment uni mon amitié pour Pierrot à mon amour pour Marie; et, sans chercher à m'expliquer quel motif avait pu le pousser à se jeter lui-même dans les eaux de la Grande-Rivière, je pleurais de ne point l'avoir tué. Il était mort! j'allais mourir; et la seule chose que je regrettasse de sa vie et de la mienne, c'était ma vengeance.

Toutes ces émotions m'agitaient au milieu d'un demi-sommeil dans lequel l'épuisement m'avait plongé. Je ne sais combien de temps il dura; mais j'en fus soudainement arraché par le retentissement d'une voix mâle qui chantait distinctement, mais de loin: Yo que soy contrabandista. J'ouvris les yeux en tressaillant; tout était noir, les nègres dormaient, le feu mourait. Je n'entendais plus rien; je pensai que cette voix était une illusion du sommeil, et mes paupières alourdies se refermèrent. Je les ouvris une seconde fois précipitamment; la voix avait recommencé, et chantait avec tristesse et de plus près ce couplet d'une romance espagnole:

En los campos de Ocaña,
Prisonero cai;
Me llevan à Cotadilla;
Desdichado fui! [Dans les champs d'Ocaña,/ Je tombai prisonnier;/ Ils m'emmenèrent à Cotadilla;/ Je fus malheureux.]

Cette fois, il n'y avait plus de rêve. C'était la voix de Pierrot! Un moment après, elle s'éleva encore dans l'ombre et le silence, et fit entendre pour la deuxième fois, presque à mon oreille, l'air connu: Yo que soi contrabandista. Un dogue vint joyeusement se rouler à mes pieds, c'était Rask. Je levai les yeux. Un noir était devant moi, et la lueur du foyer projetait à côté du chien son ombre colossale; c'était Pierrot. La vengeance me transporta; la surprise me rendit immobile et muet. Je ne dormais pas. Les morts revenaient donc! Ce n'était plus un songe, mais une apparition. Je me détournai avec horreur. A cette vue, sa tête tomba sur sa poitrine.

— Frère, murmura-t-il à voix basse, tu m'avais promis de ne jamais douter de moi quand tu m'entendrais chanter cet air; frère, dis, as-tu oublié ta promesse?

La colère me rendit la parole.

— Monstre! m'écriai-je, je te retrouve donc enfin; bourreau, assassin de mon oncle, ravisseur de Marie, oses-tu m'appeler ton frère? Tiens, ne m’approche pas!

J’oubliais que j’étais attaché de manière à ne pouvoir faire presque aucun mouvement. J’abaissai comme involontairement les yeux sur mon côté pour y chercher mon épée. Cette intention visible le frappa. Il prit un air ému, mais doux.

— Non, dit-il, non, je n’approcherai pas. Tu es malheureux, je te plains; toi, tu ne me plains pas, quoique je sois plus malheureux que toi.

Je haussai les épaules. Il comprit ce reproche muet. Il me regarda d’un air rêveur.

— Oui, tu as beaucoup perdu; mais, crois-moi, j’ai perdu plus que toi.

Cependant ce bruit de voix avait réveillé les six nègres qui me gardaient. Apercevant un étranger, ils se levèrent précipitamment en saisissant leurs armes; mais dès que leurs regards se furent arrêtés sur Pierrot, ils poussèrent un cri de surprise et de joie, et tombèrent prosternés en battant la terre de leurs fronts.

Mais les respects que ces nègres rendaient à Pierrot, les caresses que Rask portait alternativement de son maître à moi, en me regardant avec inquiétude, comme étonné de mon froid accueil, rien ne faisait impression sur moi en ce moment. J’étais tout entier à l’émotion de ma rage, rendue impuissante par les liens qui me chargeaient.

— Oh! m’écriai-je enfin, en pleurant de fureur sous les entraves qui me retenaient, oh! que je suis malheureux! Je regrettais que ce misérable se fût fait justice à lui-même; je le croyais mort, et je me désolais pour ma vengeance. Et maintenant le voilà qui vient me narguer lui-même; il est là, vivant, sous mes yeux, et je ne puis jouir du bonheur de le poignarder! Oh! qui me délivrera de ces exécrables nœuds?

Pierrot se retourna vers les nègres, toujours en adoration devant lui.

— Camarades, dit-il, détachez le prisonnier!

XLI

Il fut promptement obéi. Mes six gardiens coupèrent avec empressement les cordes qui m’entouraient. Je me levai debout et libre, mais je restai immobile; l’étonnement m’enchaînait à son tour.

— Ce n’est pas tout, reprit alors Pierrot; et, arrachant le poignard de l’un de ses nègres, il me le présenta en disant: - Tu peux te satisfaire. A Dieu ne plaise que je te dispute le droit de disposer de ma vie! Tu l’as sauvée trois fois; elle est bien à toi maintenant; frappe, si tu veux frapper.

Il n’y avait ni reproche ni amertume dans sa voix. Il n’était que triste et résigné.

Cette voie inattendue ouverte à ma vengeance par celui même qu’elle brûlait d’atteindre avait quelque chose de trop étrange et de trop facile. Je sentis que toute ma haine pour Pierrot, tout mon amour pour Marie ne suffisaient pas pour me porter à un assassinat; d’ailleurs quelles que fussent les apparences, une voix me criait au fond du cœur qu’un ennemi et un coupable ne vient pas de cette manière au-devant de la vengeance et du châtiment. Vous le dirai-je enfin? il y avait dans le prestige impérieux dont cet être extraordinaire était environné quelque chose qui me subjuguait moi-même malgré moi dans ce moment. Je repoussai le poignard.

— Malheureux! lui dis-je, je veux bien te tuer dans un combat, mais non t’assassiner. Défends-toi!

— Que je me défende! répondit-il étonné! et contre qui?

— Contre moi!

Il fit un geste de stupeur.

— Contre toi! C’est la seule chose pour laquelle je ne puisse t’obéir. Vois-tu Rask? je puis bien l’égorger, il se laissera faire; mais je ne saurais le contraindre à lutter contre moi, il ne me comprendrait point. Je ne te comprends pas; je suis Rask pour toi.

Il ajouta après un silence:

— Je vois la haine dans tes yeux, comme tu l’as pu voir un jour dans les miens. Je sais que tu as éprouvé bien des malheurs, ton oncle massacré, tes champs incendiés, tes amis égorgés; on a saccagé tes maisons, dévasté ton héritage; mais ce n’est pas moi, ce sont les miens. Ecoute, je t’ai dit un jour que les tiens m’avaient fait bien du mal; tu m’as répondu que ce n’était pas toi; qu’ai-je fait alors?

Son visage s’éclaircit; il s’attendait à me voir tomber dans ses bras. Je le regardai d’un air farouche.

— Tu désavoues tout ce que m’ont fait les tiens, lui dis-je avec l’accent de la fureur, et tu ne parles pas de ce que tu m’as fait, toi!

— Quoi donc? demanda-t-il.

Je m’approchai violemment de lui, et ma voix devint un tonnerre:

— Où est Marie? qu’as-tu fait de Marie?

A ce nom, un nuage passa sur son front; il parut un moment embarrassé. Enfin, rompant le silence:

— Maria! répondit-il. Oui, tu as raison... Mais trop d’oreilles nous écoutent.

Son embarras, ces mots: Tu as raison, rallumèrent un enfer dans mon cœur. Je crus voir qu’il éludait ma question. En ce moment il me regarda avec son visage ouvert, et me dit avec une émotion profonde:

— Ne me soupçonne pas, je t’en conjure. Je te dirai tout cela ailleurs. Tiens, aime-moi comme je t’aime, avec confiance.

Il s’arrêta un instant pour observer l’effet de ses paroles, et ajouta avec attendrissement:

— Puis-je t’appeler frère?

Mais ma colère jalouse avait repris toute sa violence, et ces paroles tendres, qui me parurent hypocrites, ne firent que l’exaspérer.

— Oses-tu bien me rappeler ce temps? m’écriai-je, misérable ingrat!

Il m’interrompit. De grosses larmes brillaient dans ses yeux.

— Ce n’est pas moi qui suis ingrat!

— Eh bien, parle! repris-je avec emportement. Qu’as-tu fait de Marie?

— Ailleurs, ailleurs! me répondit-il. Ici nos oreilles n’entendent pas seules ce que nous disons. Au reste, tu ne me croirais pas sans doute sur parole, et puis le temps presse. Voilà qu’il fait jour, et il faut que je te tire d’ici. Ecoute, tout est fini, puisque tu doutes de moi, et tu feras aussi bien de m’achever avec un poignard; mais attends encore un peu avant d’exécuter ce que tu appelles ta vengeance; je dois d’abord te délivrer. Viens avec moi trouver Biassou.

Cette manière d’agir et de parler cachait un mystère que je ne pouvais comprendre. Malgré toutes mes préventions contre cet homme, sa voix faisait toujours vibrer une corde dans mon cœur. En l’écoutant, je ne sais quelle puissance me dominait. Je me surprenais balançant entre la vengeance et la pitié, la défiance et un aveugle abandon. Je le suivis.

XLII

Nous sortîmes du quartier des nègres du Morne-Rouge. Je m'étonnais de marcher libre dans ce camp barbare où la veille chaque brigand semblait avoir soif de mon sang. Loin de chercher à nous arrêter, les noirs et les mulâtres se prosternaient sur notre passage avec des exclamations de surprise, de joie et de respect. J'ignorais quel rang Pierrot occupait dans l'armée des révoltés; mais je me rappelais l'empire qu'il exerçait sur ses compagnons d'esclavage, et je m'expliquais sans peine l'importance dont il paraissait jouir parmi ses camarades de rébellion.

Arrivés à la ligne de gardes qui veillait devant la grotte de Biassou, le mulâtre Candi, leur chef, vint à nous, nous demandant de loin, avec menaces, pourquoi nous osions avancer si près du général; mais quand il fut à portée de voir distinctement les traits de Pierrot, il ôta subitement sa montera brodée en or, et, comme terrifié de sa propre audace, il s'inclina jusqu'à terre, et nous introduisit près de Biassou, en balbutiant mille excuses, auxquelles Pierrot ne répondit que par un geste de dédain.

Le respect des simples soldats nègres pour Pierrot ne m'avait pas étonné; mais en voyant Candi, l'un de leurs principaux officiers, s'humilier ainsi devant l'esclave de mon oncle, je commençai à me demander quel pouvait être cet homme dont l'autorité semblait si grande. Ce fut bien autre chose quand je vis le généralissime, qui était seul au moment où nous entrâmes, et mangeait tranquillement un calalou, se lever précipitamment à l'aspect de Pierrot, et, dissimulant une surprise inquiète et un violent dépit sous des apparences de profond respect, s'incliner humblement devant mon compagnon, et lui offrir son propre trône d'acajou. Pierrot refusa.

— Jean Biassou, dit-il, je ne suis pas venu vous prendre votre place, mais simplement vous demander une grâce.

— Alteza, répondit Biassou en redoublant ses salutations, vous savez que vous pouvez disposer de tout ce qui dépend de Jean Biassou, de tout ce qui appartient à Jean Biassou, et de Jean Biassou lui-même.

Ce titre d'alteza, qui équivaut à celui d'altesse ou de hautesse, donné à Pierrot par Biassou, accrut encore mon étonnement.

— Je n'en veux pas tant, reprit vivement Pierrot; je ne vous demande que la vie et la liberté de ce prisonnier.

Il me désignait de la main. Biassou parut un moment interdit; cet embarras fut court.

— Vous désolez votre serviteur, alteza; vous exigez de lui bien plus qu'il ne peut vous accorder, à son grand regret. Ce prisonnier n'est point Jean Biassou, n'appartient pas à Jean Biassou, et ne dépend pas de Jean Biassou.

— Que voulez-vous dire? demanda Pierrot sévèrement. De qui dépend-il donc? Y a-t-il un autre pouvoir que vous?

— Hélas oui! alteza.

— Et lequel?

— Mon armée.

L'air caressant et rusé avec lequel Biassou éludait les questions hautaines et franches de Pierrot annonçait qu'il était déterminé à n'accorder à l'autre que les respects auxquels il paraissait obligé.

— Comment! s'écria Pierrot, votre armée! Et ne la commandez-vous pas?

Biassou, conservant son avantage, sans quitter pourtant son attitude d'infériorité, répondit avec une apparence de sincérité:

— Sù alteza pense-t-elle que l'on puisse réellement commander à des hommes qui ne se révoltent que pour ne pas obéir?

J'attachais trop peu de prix à la vie pour rompre le silence; mais ce que j'avais vu la veille de l'autorité illimitée de Biassou sur ses bandes aurait pu me fournir l'occasion de le démentir et de montrer à nu sa duplicité. Pierrot lui répliqua:

— Eh bien! si vous ne savez pas commander à votre armée, et si vos soldats sont vos chefs, quels motifs de haine peuvent-ils avoir contre ce prisonnier?

— Boukmann vient d'être tué par les troupes du gouvernement, dit Biassou, en composant tristement son visage féroce et railleur; les miens ont résolu de venger sur ce blanc la mort du chef des nègres marrons de la Jamaïque; ils veulent opposer trophée à trophée, et que la tête de ce jeune officier serve de contrepoids à la tête de Boukmann dans la balance où le bon Giu pèse les deux partis.

— Comment avez-vous pu, dit Pierrot, adhérer à ces horribles représailles? Ecoutez-moi, Jean Biassou; ce sont ces cruautés qui perdront notre juste cause. Prisonnier au camp des blancs, d'où j'ai réussi à m'échapper, j'ignorais la mort de Boukmann, que vous m'apprenez. C'est un juste châtiment du ciel pour ses crimes. Je vais vous apprendre une autre nouvelle; Jeannot, ce même chef de noirs, qui avait servi de guide aux blancs pour les attirer dans l'embuscade de Dompte-Mulâtre, Jeannot vient aussi de mourir. Vous savez, ne m'interrompez pas, Biassou, qu'il rivalisait d'atrocité avec Boukmann et vous; or, faites attention à ceci, ce n'est point la foudre du ciel, ce ne sont point les blancs qui l'ont frappé, c'est Jean-François lui-même qui a fait cet acte de justice.

Biassou, qui écoutait avec un sombre respect, fit une exclamation de surprise. En ce moment Rigaud entra, salua profondément Pierrot, et parla bas à l'oreille du généralissime. On entendait au-dehors une grande agitation dans le camp. Pierrot continuait:

— ... Oui. Jean-François, qui n'a d'autre défaut qu'un luxe funeste, et l'étalage ridicule de cette voiture à six chevaux qui le mène chaque jour de son camp à la messe du curé de la Grande-Rivière. Jean-François a puni les fureurs de Jeannot. Malgré les lâches prières du brigand, quoique à son dernier moment il se soit cramponné au curé de la Marmelade, chargé de l'exhorter, avec tant de terreur qu'on a dû l'arracher de force, le monstre a été fusillé hier, au pied même de l'arbre armé de crochets de fer auxquels il suspendait ses victimes vivantes. Biassou, méditez cet exemple! Pourquoi ces massacres qui contraignent les blancs à la férocité? Pourquoi encore user de jongleries afin d'exciter la fureur de nos malheureux camarades, déjà trop exaspérés? Il y a au Trou-Coffi un charlatan mulâtre, nommé Romaine-la- Prophétesse, qui fanatise une bande de noirs; il profane la sainte messe; il leur persuade qu'il est en rapport avec la Vierge, dont il écoute les prétendus oracles en mettant sa tête dans le tabernacle; et il pousse ses camarades au meurtre et au pillage, au nom de Marie!

Il y avait peut-être une expression plus tendre encore que la vénération religieuse dans la manière dont Pierrot prononça ce nom. Je ne sais comment cela se fit, mais je m'en sentis offensé et irrité.

— ... Eh bien! poursuivit l'esclave, vous avez dans votre camp je ne sais quel obi, je ne sais quel jongleur comme ce Romaine-la-Prophétesse! Je n'ignore point qu'ayant à conduire une armée composée d'hommes de tous pays, de toutes familles, de toutes couleurs, un lien commun vous est nécessaire, mais ne pouvez-vous le trouver autre part que dans un fanatisme féroce et des superstitions ridicules? Croyez-moi, Biassou, les blancs sont moins cruels que nous. J'ai vu beaucoup de planteurs défendre les jours de leur esclave; je n’ignore pas que, pour plusieurs d’entre eux, ce n’était pas sauver la vie d’un homme, mais une somme d’argent; du moins leur intérêt leur donnait une vertu. Ne soyons pas moins cléments qu’eux, c’est aussi notre intérêt. Notre cause sera-t-elle plus sainte et plus juste quand nous aurons exterminé des femmes, égorgé des enfants, torturé des vieillards, brûlé des colons dans leurs maisons? Ce sont là pourtant nos exploits de chaque jour. Faut-il, répondez, Biassou, que le seul vestige de notre passage soit toujours une trace de sang ou une trace de feu?

Il se tut. L’éclat de son regard, l’accent de sa voix donnaient à ses paroles une force de conviction et d’autorité impossible à reproduire. Comme un renard pris par un lion, l’oeil obliquement baissé de Biassou semblait chercher par quelle ruse il pourrait échapper à tant de puissance. Pendant qu’il méditait, le chef de la bande des Cayes, ce même Rigaud qui la veille avait vu d’un front tranquille tant d’horreurs se commettre devant lui, paraissait s’indigner des attentats dont Pierrot avait tracé le tableau, et s’écriait avec une hypocrite consternation:

— Eh! mon bon Dieu, qu’est-ce que c’est qu’un peuple en fureur!

XLIII

Cependant la rumeur extérieure s'accroissait et paraissait inquiéter Biassou. J'ai appris plus tard que cette rumeur provenait des nègres du Morne-Rouge, qui parcouraient le camp en annonçant le retour de mon libérateur, et exprimaient l'intention de le seconder, quel que fût le motif pour lequel il s'était rendu près de Biassou. Rigaud venait d'informer le généralissime de cette circonstance; et c'est la crainte d'une scission funeste qui détermina le chef rusé à l'espèce de concession qu'il fit aux désirs de Pierrot.

— Alteza, dit-il avec un air de dépit, si nous sommes sévères pour les blancs, vous êtes sévère pour nous. Vous avez tort de m'accuser de la violence du torrent; il m'entraîne. Mais enfin que podria hacer ahora [Que pourrais-je faire maintenant?] qui vous fût agréable?

— Je vous l'ai déjà dit, señor Biassou, répondit Pierrot; laissez-moi emmener ce prisonnier.

Biassou demeura un moment pensif, puis s'écria, donnant à l'expression de ses traits le plus de franchise qu'il put:

— Allons, alteza, je veux vous prouver quel est mon désir de vous plaire. Permettez-moi seulement de dire deux mots en secret au prisonnier; il sera libre ensuite de vous suivre.

— Vraiment! qu'à cela ne tienne, répondit Pierrot.

Et son visage, jusqu'alors fier et mécontent, rayonnait de joie. Il s'éloigna de quelques pas.

Biassou m'entraîna dans un coin de la grotte et me dit à voix basse:

— Je ne puis t'accorder la vie qu'à une condition; tu la connais, y souscris-tu?

Il me montrait la dépêche de Jean-François. Un consentement m'eût paru une bassesse.

— Non, lui dis-je.

— Ah! reprit-il avec son ricanement. Toujours aussi décidé! Tu comptes donc beaucoup sur ton protecteur? Sais-tu qui il est?

— Oui, lui répliquai-je vivement; c'est un monstre comme toi, seulement plus hypocrite encore!

Il se redressa avec étonnement; et, cherchant à deviner dans mes yeux si je parlais sérieusement:

— Comment! dit-il, tu ne le connais donc pas?

Je répondis avec dédain:

— Je ne reconnais en lui qu’un esclave de mon oncle, nommé Pierrot.

Biassou se remit à ricaner.

— Ha! ha! voilà qui est singulier! Il demande ta vie et ta liberté, et tu l’appelles « un monstre comme moi”!

— Que m’importe? répondis-je. Si j’obtenais un moment de liberté, ce ne serait pas pour lui demander ma vie, mais la sienne!

— Qu’est-ce que cela? dit Biassou. Tu parais pourtant parler comme tu penses, et je ne suppose pas que tu veuilles plaisanter avec ta vie. Il y a là-dessous quelque chose que je ne comprends pas. Tu es protégé par un homme que tu hais; il plaide pour ta vie, et tu veux sa mort! Au reste, cela m’est égal, à moi. Tu désires un moment de liberté, c’est la seule chose que je puisse t’accorder. Je te laisserai libre de le suivre; donne-moi seulement d’abord ta parole d’honneur de venir te remettre dans mes mains deux heures avant le coucher du soleil. - Tu es français, n’est-ce pas?

Vous le dirai-je, messieurs? la vie m’était à charge; je répugnais d’ailleurs à la recevoir de ce Pierrot, que tant d’apparences désignaient à ma haine; je ne sais pas si même il n’entra pas dans ma résolution la certitude que Biassou, qui ne lâchait pas aisément une proie, ne consentirait jamais à ma délivrance; je ne désirais réellement que quelques heures de liberté pour achever, avant de mourir, d’éclaircir le sort de ma bien-aimée Marie et le mien. La parole que Biassou, confiant en l’honneur français, me demandait était un moyen sûr et facile d’obtenir encore un jour; je la donnai.

Après m’avoir lié de la sorte, le chef se rapprocha de Pierrot.

— Alteza, dit-il d’un ton obséquieux, le prisonnier blanc est à vos ordres; vous pouvez l’emmener; il est libre de vous accompagner.

Je n’avais jamais vu autant de bonheur dans les yeux de Pierrot.

— Merci, Biassou! s’écria-t-il en lui tendant la main, merci! Tu viens de me rendre un service qui te fait maître désormais de tout exiger de moi! Continue à disposer de mes frères du Morne-Rouge jusqu’à mon retour.

Il se tourna vers moi.

— Puisque tu es libre, dit-il, viens!

Et il m’entraîna avec une énergie singulière.

Biassou nous regarda sortir d’un air étonné, qui perçait même à travers les démonstrations de respect dont il accompagna le départ de Pierrot.

XLIV

Il me tardait d’être seul avec Pierrot. Son trouble quand je l’avais questionné sur le sort de Marie, l’insolente tendresse avec laquelle il osait prononcer son nom, avaient encore enraciné les sentiments d’exécration et de jalousie qui germèrent en mon cœur au moment où je le vis enlever à travers l’incendie du fort Galifet celle que je pouvais à peine appeler mon épouse. Que m’importait, après cela, les reproches généreux qu’il avait adressés devant moi au sanguinaire Biassou, les soins qu’il avait pris de ma vie, et même cette empreinte extraordinaire qui marquait toutes ses paroles et toutes ses actions? Que m’importait ce mystère qui semblait l’envelopper; qui le faisait apparaître vivant à mes yeux quand je croyais avoir assisté à sa mort; qui me le montrait captif chez les blancs quand je l’avais vu s’ensevelir dans la Grande-Rivière; qui changeait l’esclave en altesse, le prisonnier en libérateur? De toutes ces choses incompréhensibles, la seule qui fût claire pour moi, c’était le rapt odieux de Marie, un outrage à venger, un crime à punir. Ce qui s’était déjà passé d’étrange sous mes yeux suffisait à peine pour me faire suspendre mon jugement, et j’attendais avec impatience l’instant où je pourrais contraindre mon rival a s’expliquer. Ce moment vint enfin.

Nous avions traversé les triples haies de noirs prosternés sur notre passage, et s’écriant avec surprise: Miraculo! ya no esta prisonero! [Miracle! Il n’est déjà plus prisonnier!] J’ignore si c’est de moi ou de Pierrot qu’ils voulaient parler. Nous avions franchi les dernières limites du camp; nous avions perdu de vue derrière les arbres et les rochers les dernières vedettes de Biassou; Rask, joyeux, nous devançait, puis revenait à nous; Pierrot marchait avec rapidité; je l’arrêtai brusquement.

— Ecoute, lui dis-je, il est inutile d’aller plus loin. Les oreilles que tu craignais ne peuvent plus nous entendre; parle, qu’as-tu fait de Marie?

Une émotion concentrée faisait haleter ma voix. Il me regarda avec douceur.

— Toujours! me répondit-il.

— Oui, toujours! m’écriai-je furieux, toujours! Je te ferai cette question jusqu’à ton dernier souffle, jusqu’à mon dernier soupir. Où est Marie?

— Rien ne peut donc dissiper tes doutes sur ma foi! - Tu le sauras bientôt.

— Bientôt, monstre! répliquai-je. C’est maintenant que je veux le savoir. Où est Marie? où est Marie? entends-tu? Réponds, ou échange ta vie contre la mienne! Défends-toi!

— Je t’ai déjà dit, reprit-il avec tristesse, que cela ne se pouvait pas. Le torrent ne lutte pas contre sa source; ma vie, que tu as sauvée trois fois, ne peut combattre contre ta vie. Je le voudrais d’ailleurs, que la chose serait encore impossible. Nous n’avons qu’un poignard pour nous deux.

En parlant ainsi il tira un poignard de sa ceinture et me le présenta.

— Tiens, dit-il.

J’étais hors de moi. Je saisis le poignard et le fis briller sur sa poitrine. Il ne songeait pas à s’y soustraire.

— Misérable, lui dis-je, ne me force point à un assassinat. Je te plonge cette lame dans le cœur, si tu ne me dis pas où est ma femme à l’instant.

Il me répondit sans colère:

— Tu es le maître. Mais, je t’en prie à mains jointes, laisse-moi encore une heure de vie, et suis-moi. Tu doutes de celui qui te doit trois vies, de celui que tu nommais ton frère; mais, écoute, si dans une heure tu en doutes encore, tu seras libre de me tuer. Il sera toujours temps. Tu vois bien que je ne veux pas te résister. Je t’en conjure au nom même de Maria... Il ajouta péniblement: - De ta femme. - Encore une heure; et si je te supplie ainsi, va, ce n’est pas pour moi, c’est pour toi!

Son accent avait une expression ineffable de persuasion et de douleur. Quelque chose sembla m’avertir qu’il disait peut-être vrai, que l’intérêt seul de sa vie ne suffirait pas pour donner à sa voix cette tendresse pénétrante, cette suppliante douceur, et qu’il plaidait pour plus que lui-même. Je cédai encore une fois à cet ascendant secret qu’il exerçait sur moi, et qu’en ce moment je rougissais de m’avouer.

— Allons, dis-je, je t’accorde ce sursis d’une heure; je te suivrai.

Je voulus lui rendre le poignard.

— Non, répondit-il, garde-le, tu te défies de moi. Mais viens, ne perdons pas de temps.

XLV

Il recommença à me conduire. Rask, qui pendant notre entretien avait fréquemment essayé de se remettre en marche, puis était revenu chaque fois vers nous, demandant en quelque sorte du regard pourquoi nous nous arrêtions, Rask reprit joyeusement sa course. Nous nous enfonçâmes dans une forêt vierge. Au bout d'une demi-heure environ, nous débouchâmes sur une jolie savane verte, arrosée d'une eau de roche, et bordée par la lisière fraîche et profonde des grands arbres centenaires de la forêt. Une caverne, dont une multitude de plantes grimpantes, la clématite, la liane, le jasmin, verdissaient le front grisâtre, s'ouvrait sur la savane. Rask allait aboyer, Pierrot le fit taire d'un signe, et, sans dire une parole, m'entraîna par la main dans la caverne.

Une femme, le dos tourné à la lumière, était assise dans cette grotte, sur un tapis de sparterie. Au bruit de nos pas, elle se retourna. - Mes amis, c'était Marie!

Elle était vêtue d'une robe blanche comme le jour de notre union, et portait encore dans ses cheveux la couronne de fleurs d'oranger, dernière parure virginale de la jeune épouse, que mes mains n'avaient pas détachée de son front. Elle m'aperçut, me reconnut, jeta un cri, et tomba dans mes bras, mourante de joie et de surprise. J'étais éperdu.

A ce cri, une vieille femme qui portait un enfant dans ses bras accourut d'une deuxième chambre pratiquée dans un enfoncement de la caverne. C'était la nourrice de Marie, et le dernier enfant de mon malheureux oncle. Pierrot était allé chercher de l'eau à la source voisine. Il en jeta quelques gouttes sur le visage de Marie. Leur fraîcheur rappela la vie; elle ouvrit les yeux.

— Léopold, dit-elle, mon Léopold!

— Marie!... répondis-je; et le reste de nos paroles s'acheva dans un baiser.

— Pas devant moi au moins! s'écria une voix déchirante.

Nous levâmes les yeux; c'était Pierrot. Il était là, assistant à nos caresses comme à un supplice. Son sein gonflé haletait, une sueur glacée tombait à grosses gouttes de son front. Tous ses membres tremblaient. Tout à coup il cacha son visage de ses deux mains, et s'enfuit hors de la grotte en répétant avec un accent terrible: - Pas devant moi!

Marie se souleva de mes bras à demi, et s’écria en le suivant des yeux:

— Grand Dieu! mon Léopold, notre amour paraît lui faire mal. Est-ce qu’il m’aimerait?

Le cri de l’esclave m’avait prouvé qu’il était mon rival; l’exclamation de Marie me prouvait qu’il était aussi mon ami.

— Marie! répondis-je, et une félicité inouïe entra dans mon cœur en même temps qu’un mortel regret; Marie! est-ce que tu l’ignorais?

— Mais je l’ignore encore; me dit-elle avec une chaste rougeur. Comment! il m’aime! Je ne m’en étais jamais aperçue.

Je la pressai sur mon cœur avec ivresse.

— Je retrouve ma femme et mon ami! m’écriai-je; que je suis heureux et que je suis coupable! J’avais douté de lui.

— Comment! reprit Marie étonnée, de lui! de Pierrot! Oh oui, tu es bien coupable. Tu lui dois deux fois ma vie, et peut-être plus encore, ajouta-t-elle en baissant les yeux. Sans lui le crocodile de la rivière m’aurait dévorée; sans lui les nègres... C’est Pierrot qui m’a arrachée de leurs mains, au moment où ils allaient sans doute me rejoindre à mon malheureux père!

Elle s’interrompit et pleura.

— Et pourquoi, lui demandai-je, Pierrot ne t’a-t-il pas renvoyée au Cap, à ton mari?

— Il l’a tenté, répondit-elle, mais il ne l’a pu. Obligé de se cacher également des noirs et des blancs, cela lui était fort difficile. Et puis, on ignorait ce que tu étais devenu. Quelques-uns disaient t’avoir vu tomber mort, mais Pierrot m’assurait que non, et j’étais bien certaine du contraire, car quelque chose m’en aurait avertie; et si tu étais mort, je serais morte aussi, en même temps.

— Pierrot, lui dis-je, t’a donc amenée ici?

— Oui, mon Léopold; cette grotte isolée est connue de lui seul. Il avait sauvé en même temps que moi tout ce qui restait de la famille, ma bonne nourrice et mon petit frère; il nous y a cachés. Je t’assure qu’elle est bien commode; et sans la guerre qui fouille tout le pays, maintenant que nous sommes ruinés, j’aimerais à l’habiter avec toi. Pierrot pourvoyait à tous nos besoins. Il venait souvent; il avait une plume rouge sur la tête. Il me consolait, me parlait de toi, m’assurait que je te serais rendue. Cependant, ne l’ayant pas vu depuis trois jours, je commençais à m’inquiéter, lorsqu’il est revenu avec toi. Ce pauvre ami, il a donc été te chercher?

— Oui, lui répondis-je.

— Mais comment se fait-il avec cela, reprit-elle, qu'il soit amoureux de moi? En es-tu sûr?

— Sûr maintenant! lui dis-je. C'est lui qui, sur le point de me poignarder, s'est laissé fléchir par la crainte de t'affliger; c'est lui qui te chantait ces chansons d'amour dans le pavillon de la rivière.

— Vraiment! reprit Marie avec une naïve surprise, c'est ton rival! Le méchant homme aux soucis est ce bon Pierrot! Je ne puis croire cela. Il était avec moi si humble, si respectueux, plus que lorsqu'il était notre esclave! Il est vrai qu'il me regardait quelquefois d'un air singulier; mais ce n'était que de la tristesse, et je l'attribuais à mon malheur. Si tu savais avec quel dévouement passionné il m'entretenait de mon Léopold! Son amitié parlait de toi presque comme mon amour.

Ces explications de Marie m'enchantaient et me désolaient à la fois. Je me rappelais avec quelle cruauté j'avais traité ce généreux Pierrot, et je sentais toute la force de son reproche tendre et résigné: - Ce n'est pas moi qui suis ingrat!

En ce moment Pierrot rentra. Sa physionomie était sombre et douloureuse. On aurait dit un condamné qui revient de la torture, mais qui en a triomphé. Il s'avança vers moi à pas lents, et me dit d'une voix grave, en montrant le poignard que j'avais placé dans ma ceinture:

— L'heure est écoulée.

— L'heure! quelle heure? lui dis-je.

— Celle que tu m'avais accordée; elle m'était nécessaire pour te conduire ici. Je t'ai supplié alors de me laisser la vie, maintenant je te conjure de me l'ôter.

Les sentiments les plus doux du cœur, l'amour, l'amitié, la reconnaissance, s'unissaient en ce moment pour me déchirer. Je tombai aux pieds de l'esclave, sans pouvoir dire un mot, en sanglotant amèrement. Il me releva avec précipitation.

— Que fais-tu? me dit-il.

— Je te rends l'hommage que je te dois; je ne suis plus digne d'une amitié comme la tienne. Ta reconnaissance ne peut aller jusqu'à me pardonner mon ingratitude.

Sa figure eut quelque temps encore une expression de rudesse; il paraissait éprouver de violents combats; il fit un pas vers moi et recula, il ouvrit la bouche et se tut. Ce moment fut de courte durée; il m’ouvrit ses bras en disant

— Puis-je à présent t’appeler frère?

Je ne lui répondis qu’en me jetant sur son cœur.

Il ajouta, après une légère pause:

— Tu es bon, mais le malheur t’avait rendu injuste.

— J’ai retrouvé mon frère, lui dis-je; je ne suis plus malheureux; mais je suis bien coupable.

— Coupable, frère! Je l’ai été aussi, et plus que toi. Tu n’es plus malheureux; moi, je le serai toujours!

XLVI

La joie que les premiers transports de l’amitié avaient fait briller sur son visage s’évanouit; ses traits prirent une expression de tristesse singulière et énergique.

— Ecoute, me dit-il d’un ton froid; mon père était roi au pays de Kakongo. Il rendait la justice à ses sujets devant sa porte; et, à chaque jugement qu’il portait, il buvait, suivant l’usage des rois, une pleine coupe de vin de palmier. Nous vivions heureux et puissants. Des européens vinrent; ils me donnèrent ces connaissances futiles qui t’ont frappé. Leur chef était un capitaine espagnol; il promit à mon père des pays plus vastes que les siens, et des femmes blanches; mon père le suivit avec sa famille... - Frère, ils nous vendirent!

La poitrine du noir se gonfla, ses yeux étincelaient; il brisa machinalement un jeune néflier qui se trouvait près de lui, puis il continua sans paraître s’adresser à moi.

— Le maître du pays Kakongo eut un maître, et son fils se courba en esclave sur les sillons de Santo-Domingo. On sépara le jeune lion de son vieux père pour les dompter plus aisément. - On enleva la jeune épouse à son époux pour en tirer plus de profit en les unissant à d’autres. - Les petits enfants cherchèrent la mère qui les avait nourris, le père qui les baignait dans les torrents; ils ne trouvèrent que des tyrans barbares, et couchèrent parmi les chiens!

Il se tut; ses lèvres remuaient sans qu’il parlât, son regard était fixe et égaré. Il me saisit le bras brusquement.

— Frère, entends-tu? j’ai été vendu à différents maîtres comme une pièce de bétail. - Tu te souviens du supplice d’Ogé; ce jour-là j’ai revu mon père. Ecoute: - c’était sur la roue!

Je frémis. Il ajouta:

— Ma femme a été prostituée à des blancs. Ecoute, frère: elle est morte et m’a demandé vengeance. Te le dirai-je? continua-t-il en hésitant et en baissant les yeux, j’ai été coupable, j’en ai aimé une autre. - Mais passons!

Tous les miens me pressaient de les délivrer et de me venger. Rask m’apportait leurs messages.

Je ne pouvais les satisfaire, j’étais moi-même dans les prisons de ton oncle. Le jour où tu obtins ma grâce, je partis pour arracher mes enfants des mains d’un maître féroce; j’arrivai. - Frère, le dernier des petits-fils du roi de Kakongo venait d’expirer sous les coups d’un blanc! les autres l’avaient précédé.

Il s’interrompit et me demanda froidement:

— Frère, qu’aurais-tu fait?

Ce déplorable récit m’avait glacé d’horreur. Je répondis à sa question par un geste menaçant. Il me comprit et se mit à sourire avec amertume. Il poursuivit:

— Les esclaves se révoltèrent contre leur maître, et le punirent du meurtre de mes enfants. Ils m’élurent leur chef. Tu sais les malheurs qu’entraîna cette rébellion. J’appris que ceux de ton oncle se préparaient à suivre le même exemple. J’arrivai dans l’Acul la nuit même de l’insurrection. - Tu étais absent. - Ton oncle venait d’être poignardé dans son lit. Les noirs incendiaient déjà les plantations. Ne pouvant calmer leur fureur, parce qu’ils croyaient me venger en brûlant les propriétés de ton oncle, je dus sauver ce qui restait de ta famille. Je pénétrai dans le fort par l’issue que j’y avais pratiquée. Je confiai la nourrice de ta femme à un noir fidèle. J’eus plus de peine à sauver ta Maria. Elle avait couru vers la partie embrasée du fort pour en tirer le plus jeune de ses frères, seul échappé au massacre. Des noirs l’entouraient; ils allaient la tuer. Je me présentai et leur ordonnai de me laisser me venger moi-même. Ils se retirèrent. Je pris ta femme dans mes bras, je confiai l’enfant à Rask, et je les déposai tous deux dans cette caverne, dont je connais seul l’existence et l’accès. - Frère, voilà mon crime.

De plus en plus pénétré de remords et de reconnaissance, je voulus me jeter encore une fois aux pieds de Pierrot, il m’arrêta d’un air offensé.

— Allons, viens, dit-il un moment après en me prenant par la main, emmène ta femme et partons tous les cinq.

Je lui demandai avec surprise où il voulait nous conduire.

— Au camp des blancs, me répondit-il. Cette retraite n’est plus sûre. Demain, à la pointe du jour, les blancs doivent attaquer le camp de Biassou; la forêt sera certainement incendiée. Et puis nous n’avons pas un moment à perdre; dix têtes répondent de la mienne. Nous pouvons nous hâter, car tu es libre; nous le devons, car je ne le suis pas.

Ces paroles accrurent ma surprise; je lui en demandai l’explication.

— N’as-tu pas entendu raconter que Bug-Jargal était prisonnier? dit-il avec impatience.

— Oui, mais qu’as-tu de commun avec ce Bug-Jargal?

Il parut à son tour étonné, et répondit gravement:

— Je suis ce Bug-Jargal.

XLVII

J’étais habitué, pour ainsi dire, à la surprise avec cet homme. Ce n’était pas sans étonnement que je venais de voir un instant auparavant l’esclave Pierrot se transformer en roi africain. Mon admiration était au comble d’avoir maintenant à reconnaître en lui le redoutable et magnanime Bug-Jargal, chef des révoltés du Morne-Rouge. Je comprenais enfin d’où venaient les respects que rendaient tous les rebelles, et même Biassou, au chef Bug-Jargal, au roi de Kakongo.

Il ne parut pas s’apercevoir de l’impression qu’avaient produite sur moi ces dernières paroles.

— L’on m’avait dit, reprit-il, que tu étais de ton côté prisonnier au camp de Biassou; j’étais venu pour te délivrer.

— Pourquoi me disais-tu donc tout à l’heure que tu n’étais pas libre?

— Il me regarda, comme cherchant à deviner ce qui amenait cette question toute naturelle.

— Ecoute, me dit-il, ce matin j’étais prisonnier parmi les tiens. J’entendis annoncer dans le camp que Biassou avait dèclaré son intention de faire mourir avant le coucher du soleil un jeune captif nommé Léopold d’Auverney. On renforça les gardes autour de moi. J’appris que mon exécution suivrait la tienne, et qu’en cas d’évasion dix de mes camarades répondraient de moi. - Tu vois que je suis pressé.

Je le retins encore.

— Tu t’es donc échappé? lui dis-je.

— Et comment serais-je ici? Ne fallait-il pas te sauver? Ne te dois-je pas la vie? Allons, suis-moi maintenant. Nous sommes à une heure de marche du camp des blancs comme du camp de Biassou. Vois, l’ombre de ces cocotiers s’allonge, et leur tête ronde parait sur l’herbe comme l’œuf énorme du condor. Dans trois heures le soleil sera couché. Viens, frère, le temps presse.

Dans trois heures le soleil sera couché. Ces paroles si simples me glacèrent comme une apparition funèbre. Elles me rappelèrent la promesse fatale que j’avais faite à Biassou. - Hélas! en revoyant Marie, je n’avais plus pensé à notre séparation éternelle et prochaine; je n’avais été que ravi et enivré; tant d’émotions m’avaient enlevé la mémoire, et j’avais oublié ma mort dans mon bonheur. Le mot de mon ami me rejeta violemment dans mon infortune. Dans trois heures le soleil sera couché! Il fallait une bonne heure pour me rendre au camp de Biassou.

— Mon devoir était impérieusement prescrit; le brigand avait ma parole, et il valait mieux encore mourir que de donner à ce barbare le droit de mépriser la seule chose à laquelle il parût se fier encore, l'honneur d'un français. L'alternative était terrible; je choisis ce que je devais choisir; mais, je l'avouerai, messieurs, j'hésitai un moment. Etais-je coupable?

XLVIII

Enfin, poussant un soupir, je pris d'une main la main de Bug-Jargal, de l'autre celle de ma pauvre Marie, qui observait avec anxiété le nuage sinistre répandu sur mes traits.

— Bug-Jargal, dis-je avec effort, je te confie le seul être au monde que j'aime plus que toi, Marie. - Retournez au camp sans moi, car je ne puis vous suivre.

— Mon Dieu, s'écria Marie respirant à peine, quelque nouveau malheur!

Bug-Jargal avait tressailli. Un étonnement douloureux se peignait dans ses yeux.

— Frère, que dis-tu?

La terreur qui oppressait Marie à la seule idée d'un malheur que sa trop prévoyante tendresse semblait deviner me faisait une loi de lui en cacher la réalité et de lui épargner des adieux si déchirants; je me penchai à l'oreille de Bug- Jargal, et lui dis à voix basse:

— Je suis captif. J'ai juré à Biassou de revenir me mettre en son pouvoir deux heures avant la fin du jour; j'ai promis de mourir.

Il bondit de fureur; sa voix devint éclatante.

— Le monstre! Voilà pourquoi il a voulu t'entretenir secrètement; c'était pour t'arracher cette promesse. J'aurais dû me défier de ce misérable Biassou. Comment n'ai-je pas prévu quelque perfidie? Ce n'est pas un noir, c'est un mulâtre.

— Qu'est-ce donc? Quelle perfidie? Quelle promesse? dit Marie épouvantée; qui est ce Biassou?

— Tais-toi, tais-toi, répétai-je bas à Bug-Jargal, n'alarmons pas Marie.

— Bien, me dit-il d'un ton sombre. Mais comment as-tu pu consentir à cette promesse? pourquoi l'as-tu donnée?

— Je te croyais ingrat, je croyais Marie perdue pour moi. Que m'importait la vie?

— Mais une promesse de bouche ne peut t'engager avec ce brigand?

— J'ai donné ma parole d'honneur.

Il parut chercher à comprendre ce que je voulais dire.

— Ta parole d'honneur! Qu'est-ce que cela? Vous n'avez pas bu à la même coupe? Vous n'avez pas rompu ensemble un anneau ou une branche d’érable à fleurs rouges?

— Non.

— Eh bien! que nous dis-tu donc? Qu’est-ce qui peut t’engager?

— Mon honneur, répondis-je.

— Je ne sais pas ce que cela signifie. Rien ne te lie avec Biassou. Viens avec nous.

— Je ne puis, frère, j’ai promis.

— Non! tu n’as pas promis! s’écria-t-il avec emportement; puis élevant la voix: - Sœur, joignez-vous à moi! empêchez votre mari de nous quitter; il veut retourner au camp des nègres d’où je l’ai tiré, sous prétexte qu’il a promis sa mort à leur chef, à Biassou.

— Qu’as-tu fait? m’écriai-je.

Il était trop tard pour prévenir l’effet de ce mouvement généreux qui lui faisait implorer pour la vie de son rival l’aide de celle qu’il aimait. Marie s’était jetée dans mes bras avec un cri de désespoir. Ses mains jointes autour de mon cou la suspendaient sur mon cœur, car elle était sans force et presque sans haleine.

— Oh! murmurait-elle péniblement, que dit-il là, mon Léopold? N’est-il pas vrai qu’il me trompe, et que ce n’est pas au moment qui vient de nous réunir que tu veux me quitter, et me quitter pour mourir? Réponds-moi vite ou je meurs. Tu n’as pas le droit de donner ta vie, parce que tu ne dois pas donner la mienne. Tu ne voudrais pas te séparer de moi pour ne me revoir jamais.

— Marie, repris-je, ne le crois pas; je vais te quitter en effet; il le faut; mais nous nous reverrons ailleurs.

— Ailleurs, reprit-elle avec effroi, ailleurs, où?...

— Dans le ciel! répondis-je, ne pouvant mentir à cet ange.

Elle s’évanouit encore une fois, mais alors c’était de douleur. L’heure pressait; ma résolution était prise. Je la déposai entre les bras de Bug-Jargal, dont les yeux étaient pleins de larmes.

— Rien ne peut donc te retenir? me dit-il. Je n’ajouterai rien à ce que tu vois. Comment peux-tu résister à Maria? Pour une seule des paroles qu’elle t’a dites, je lui aurais sacrifié un monde, et toi tu ne veux pas lui sacrifier ta mort?

— L’honneur! répondis-je. Adieu, Bug-Jargal; adieu frère, je te la lègue.

Il me prit la main; il était pensif, et semblait à peine m’entendre.

— Frère, il y a au camp des blancs un de tes parents; je lui remettrai Maria; quant à moi, je ne puis accepter ton legs.

Il me montra un pic dont le sommet dominait toute la contrée environnante.

— Vois ce rocher; quand le signe de ta mort y apparaîtra, le bruit de la mienne ne tardera pas à se faire entendre. - Adieu.

Sans m’arrêter au sens inconnu de ces dernières paroles, je l’embrassai; je déposai un baiser sur le front pâle de Marie, que les soins de sa nourrice commençaient à ranimer, et je m’enfuis précipitamment, de peur que son premier regard, sa première plainte ne m’enlevassent toute ma force.

XLIX

Je m’enfuis, je me plongeai dans la profonde forêt, en suivant la trace que nous y avions laissée, sans même oser jeter un coup d’oeil derrière moi. Comme pour étourdir les pensées qui m’obsédaient, je courus sans relâche à travers les taillis, les savanes et les collines, jusqu’à ce qu’enfin, à la crête d’une roche, le camp de Biassou, avec ses lignes de cabrouets, ses rangées d’ajoupas et sa fourmilière de noirs, apparût sous mes yeux. Là, je m’arrêtai. Je touchais au terme de ma course et de mon existence. La fatigue et l’émotion rompirent mes forces; je m’appuyai contre un arbre pour ne pas tomber, et je laissai errer mes yeux sur le tableau qui se développait à mes pieds dans la fatale savane.

Jusqu’à ce moment je croyais avoir goûté toutes les coupes d’amertume et de fiel. Je ne connaissais pas le plus cruel de tous les malheurs; c’est d’être contraint par une force morale plus puissante que celle des événements à renoncer volontairement, heureux, au bonheur vivant, à la vie. Quelques heures auparavant, que m’importait d’être au monde? Je ne vivais pas; l’extrême désespoir est une espèce de mort qui fait désirer la véritable. Mais j’avais été tiré de ce désespoir; Marie m’avait été rendue; ma félicité morte avait été pour ainsi dire ressuscitée; mon passé était redevenu mon avenir, et tous mes rêves éclipsés avaient reparu plus éblouissants que jamais; la vie enfin, une vie de jeunesse, d’amour et d’enchantement, s’était de nouveau déployée radieuse devant moi dans un immense horizon. Cette vie, je pouvais la recommencer; tout m’y invitait en moi et hors de moi. Nul obstacle matériel, nulle entrave visible. J’étais libre, j’étais heureux, et pourtant il fallait mourir. Je n’avais fait qu’un pas dans cet éden, et je ne sais

quel devoir, qui n’était pas même éclatant, me forçait à reculer vers un supplice. La mort est peu de chose pour une âme flétrie et déjà glacée par l’adversité; mais que sa main est poignante, qu’elle semble froide, quand elle tombe sur un cœur épanoui et comme réchauffé par les joies de l’existence! Je l’éprouvais; j’étais sorti un moment du sépulcre, j’avais été enivré dans ce court moment de ce qu’il y a de plus céleste sur la terre, l’amour, le dévouement, la liberté; et maintenant il fallait brusquement redescendre au tombeau!

L

Quand l’affaissement du regret fut passé, une sorte de rage s’empara de moi; je m’enfonçai à grands pas dans la vallée; je sentais le besoin d’abréger. Je me présentai aux avant-postes des nègres. Ils parurent surpris et refusaient de m’admettre. Chose bizarre! je fus contraint presque de les prier. Deux d’entre eux enfin s’emparèrent de moi, et se chargèrent de me conduire à Biassou.

J’entrai dans la grotte de ce chef. Il était occupé à faire jouer les ressorts de quelques instruments de torture dont il était entouré. Au bruit que firent ses gardes en m’introduisant, il tourna la tête; ma présence ne parut pas l’étonner.

— Vois-tu? dit-il en m’étalant l’appareil horrible qui l’environnait.

Je demeurai calme; je connaissais la cruauté du « héros de l’humanité”, et j’étais déterminé à tout endurer sans pâlir.

— N’est-ce pas, reprit-il en ricanant, n’est-ce pas que Léogri a été bien heureux de n’être que pendu?

Je le regardai sans répondre, avec un froid dédain.

— Faites avertir le chapelain, dit-il alors à un aide de camp.

Nous restâmes un moment tous deux silencieux, nous regardant en face. Je l’observais; il m’épiait.

En ce moment Rigaud entra; il paraissait agité, et parla bas au généralissime.

— Qu’on rassemble tous les chefs de mon armée, dit tranquillement Biassou.

Un quart d’heure après, tous les chefs, avec leurs costumes diversement bizarres, étaient réunis devant la grotte. Biassou se leva.

— Ecoutez, amigos! les blancs comptent nous attaquer ici, demain au point du jour. La position est mauvaise; il faut la quitter. Mettons-nous tous en marche au coucher du soleil, et gagnons la frontière espagnole. - Macaya, vous formerez l’avant-garde avec vos noirs marrons. - Padrejan, vous enclouerez les pièces prises à l’artillerie de Praloto; elles ne pourraient nous suivre dans les mornes. Les braves de la Croix-des-Bouquets s’ébranleront après Macaya. - Toussaint suivra avec les noirs de Léogane et du Trou. - Si les griots et les griotes font le moindre bruit, j’en charge le bourreau de l’armée. - Le lieutenant-colonel Cloud distribuera les fusils anglais débarqués au cap Cabron, et conduira les sang-mêlés ci-devant libres, par les sentiers de la Vista. - On égorgera les prisonniers. s’il en reste. On mâchera les balles; on empoisonnera les flèches. Il faudra jeter trois tonnes d’arsenic dans la source où l’on puise l’eau du camp; les coloniaux prendront cela pour du sucre, et boiront sans défiance. - Les troupes du Limbé, du Dondon et de l’Acul marcheront après Cloud et Toussaint. - Obstruez avec des rochers toutes les avenues de la savane; carabinez tous les chemins; incendiez les forêts. - Rigaud, vous resterez près de nous. - Candi, vous rassemblerez ma garde autour de moi. - Les noirs du Morne-Rouge formeront l’arrière-garde, et n’évacueront la savane qu’au soleil levant.

Il se pencha vers Rigaud. et dit à voix basse:

— Ce sont les noirs de Bug-Jargal; s’ils pouvaient être écrasés ici! Muerta la tropa, muerto el gefe! [Morte la bande, mort le chef!] Allez, hermanos, reprit-il en se redressant. Candi vous portera le mot d’ordre.

Les chefs se retirèrent.

— Général. dit Rigaud, il faudrait expédier la dépêche de Jean-François. Nous sommes mal dans nos affaires; elle pourrait arrêter les blancs.

Biassou la tira précipitamment de sa poche.

— Vous m’y faites penser; mais il y a tant de fautes de grammaire, comme ils disent, qu’ils en riront. - Il me présenta le papier. - Ecoute, veux-tu sauver ta vie? Ma bonté le demande encore une fois à ton obstination. Aide-moi à refaire cette lettre; je te dicterai mes idées; tu écriras cela en style blanc. Je fis un signe de tête négatif. Il parut impatienté.

— Est-ce non? me dit-il

— Non! répondis-je.

Il insista.

— Réfléchis bien.

Et son regard semblait appeler le mien sur l’attirail de bourreau avec lequel il jouait.

— C’est parce que j’ai réfléchi, repris-je, que je refuse. Tu me parais craindre pour toi et les tiens, tu comptes sur ta lettre à l’assemblée pour retarder la marche et la vengeance des blancs. Je ne veux pas d’une vie qui servirait peut-être à sauver la tienne. Fais commencer mon supplice.

— Ah! ah! muchacho! répliqua Biassou en poussant du pied les instruments de torture, il me semble que tu te familiarises avec cela. J’en suis fâché, mais je n’ai pas le temps de t’en faire faire l’essai. Cette position est dangereuse; il faut que j’en sorte au plus vite. Ah! tu refuses de me servir de secrétaire! aussi bien, tu as raison, car je ne t’en aurais pas moins fait mourir après. On ne saurait vivre avec un secret de Biassou; et puis, mon cher, j’avais promis ta mort à monsieur le chapelain.

Il se tourna vers l’obi, qui venait d’entrer.

— Bon per, votre escouade est-elle prête?

Celui-ci fit un signe affirmatif.

— Avez-vous pris pour la composer des noirs du Morne-Rouge? Ce sont les seuls de l’armée qui ne soient point encore forcés de s’occuper des apprêts du départ.

L’obi répondit oui par un second signe.

Biassou alors me montra du doigt le grand drapeau noir que j’avais déjà remarqué, et qui figurait dans un coin de la grotte.

— Voici qui doit avertir les tiens du moment où ils pourront donner ton épaulette à ton lieutenant. - Tu sens que dans cet instant-là je dois déjà être en marche. - A propos. tu viens de te promener, comment as-tu trouvé les environs?

— J’y ai remarqué, répondis-je froidement, assez d’arbres pour y pendre toi et toute ta bande.

— Eh bien! répliqua-t-il avec un ricanement forcé, il est un endroit que tu n’as sans doute pas vu, et avec lequel le bon per te fera faire connaissance. - Adieu, jeune capitaine, bonsoir à Léogri.

Il me salua avec ce rire qui me rappelait le bruit du serpent à sonnettes, fit un geste, me tourna le dos, et les nègres m’entraînèrent. L’obi voilé nous accompagnait, son chapelet à la main.

LI

Je marchais au milieu d’eux sans faire de résistance; il est vrai qu’elle eût été inutile. Nous montâmes sur la croupe d’un mont situé à l’ouest de la savane, où nous nous reposâmes un instant; là je jetai un dernier regard sur ce soleil couchant qui ne devait plus se lever pour moi. Mes guides se levèrent, je les suivis. Nous descendîmes dans une petite vallée qui m’eût enchanté dans un tout autre instant. Un torrent la traversait dans sa largeur et communiquait au sol une humidité féconde; ce torrent se jetait à l’extrémité du vallon dans un de ces lacs bleus dont abonde l’intérieur des mornes à Saint-Domingue. Que de fois, dans les temps plus heureux, je m’étais assis pour rêver sur le bord de ces beaux lacs, à l’heure du crépuscule, quand leur azur se change en une nappe d’argent où le reflet des premières étoiles du soir sème des paillettes d’or! Cette heure allait bientôt venir, mais il fallait passer! Que cette vallée me sembla belle! on y voyait des platanes à fleurs d’érable d’une force et d’une hauteur prodigieuses; des bouquets touffus de mauritias, sorte de palmier qui exclut toute autre végétation sous son ombrage, des dattiers, des magnolias avec leurs larges calices, de grands catalpas montrant leurs feuilles polies et découpées parmi les grappes d’or des faux ébéniers. L’odier du Canada y mêlait ses fleurs d’un jaune pâle aux auréoles bleues dont se charge cette espèce de chèvrefeuille sauvage que les nègres nomment coali. Des rideaux verdoyants de lianes dérobaient à la vue les flancs bruns des rochers voisins. Il s’élevait de tous les points de ce sol vierge un parfum primitif comme celui que devait respirer le premier homme sur les premières roses de l’Eden.

Nous marchions cependant le long d’un sentier tracé sur le bord du torrent. Je fus surpris de voir ce sentier aboutir brusquement au pied d’un roc à pic, au bas duquel je remarquai une ouverture en forme d’arche, d’où s’échappait le torrent. Un bruit sourd, un vent impétueux sortaient de cette arche naturelle. Les nègres prirent à gauche, et nous gravîmes le roc en suivant un chemin tortueux et inégal, qui semblait y avoir été creusé par les eaux d’un torrent desséché depuis longtemps. Une voûte se présenta, à demi bouchée par les ronces, les houx et les épines sauvages qui y croissaient. Un bruit pareil à celui de l’arche de la vallée se faisait entendre sous cette voûte. Les noirs m’y entraînèrent. Au moment où je fis le premier pas dans ce souterrain, l’obi s’approcha de moi, et me dit d’une voix étrange: - Voici ce que j’ai à te prédire maintenant; un de nous deux seulement sortira de cette voûte et repassera par ce chemin. - Je dédaignai de répondre. Nous avançâmes dans l’obscurité. Le bruit devenait de plus en plus fort; nous ne nous entendions plus marcher. Je jugeai qu’il devait être produit par une chute d’eau; je ne me trompais pas.

Après dix minutes de marche dans les ténèbres, nous arrivâmes sur une espèce de plate-forme intérieure, formée par la nature dans le centre de la montagne. La plus grande partie de cette plate-forme demi-circulaire était inondée par le torrent qui jaillissait des veines du mont avec un bruit épouvantable. Au-dessus de cette salle souterraine, la voûte formait une sorte de dôme tapissé de lierre d’une couleur jaunâtre. Cette voûte était traversée presque dans toute sa largeur par une crevasse à travers laquelle le jour pénétrait, et dont le bord était couronné d’arbustes verts, dorés en ce moment des rayons du soleil. A l’extrémité nord de la plate-forme, le torrent se perdait avec fracas dans un gouffre au fond duquel semblait flotter sans pouvoir y pénétrer, la vague lueur qui descendait de la crevasse. Sur l’abîme se penchait un vieil arbre, dont les plus hautes branches se mêlaient à l’écume de la cascade, et dont la souche noueuse perçait le roc, un ou deux pieds au-dessous du bord. Cet arbre, baignant ainsi à la fois dans le torrent sa tête et sa racine, qui se projetait sur le gouffre comme un bras décharné, était si dépouillé de verdure qu’on n’en pouvait reconnaître l’espèce. Il offrait un phénomène singulier: l’humidité qui imprégnait ses racines l’empêchait seule de mourir, tandis que la violence de la cataracte lui arrachait successivement ses branches nouvelles, et le forçait de conserver éternellement les mêmes rameaux.

LII

Les noirs s’arrêtèrent en cet endroit terrible, et je vis qu’il fallait mourir.

Alors, près de ce gouffre dans lequel je me précipitais en quelque sorte volontairement, l’image du bonheur auquel j’avais renoncé peu d’heures auparavant revint m’assaillir comme un regret, presque comme un remords. Toute prière était indigne de moi; une plainte m’échappa pourtant.

— Amis, dis-je aux noirs qui m’entouraient, savez-vous que c’est une triste chose que de périr à vingt ans, quand on est plein de force et de vie, qu’on est aimé de ceux qu’on aime, et qu’on laisse derrière soi des yeux qui pleureront jusqu’à ce qu’ils se ferment?

Un rire horrible accueillit ma plainte. C’était celui du petit obi. Cette espèce de malin esprit, cet être impénétrable s’approcha brusquement de moi.

— Ha! ha! ha! Tu regrettes la vie. Labado sea Dios! Ma seule crainte, c’était que tu n’eusses pas peur de la mort!

C’était cette même voix, ce même rire, qui avaient déjà fatigué mes conjectures.

— Misérable, lui dis-je, qui es-tu donc?

— Tu vas le savoir! me répondit-il d’un accent terrible. Puis, écartant le soleil d’argent qui parait sa brune poitrine: - Regarde!

Je me penchai jusqu’à lui. Deux noms étaient gravés sur le sein velu de l’obi en lettres blanchâtres, traces hideuses et ineffaçables qu’imprimait un fer ardent sur la poitrine des esclaves. L’un de ces noms était Effingham, l’autre était celui de mon oncle, le mien, d’Auverney! Je demeurai muet de surprise.

— Eh bien! Léopold d’Auverney, me demanda l’obi, ton nom te dit-il le mien?

— Non, répondis-je étonné de m’entendre nommer par cet homme, et cherchant à rallier mes souvenirs. Ces deux noms ne furent jamais réunis que sur la poitrine du bouffon... Mais il est mort, le pauvre nain, et d’ailleurs il nous était attaché, lui. Tu ne peux pas être Habibrah!

— Lui-même! s’écria-t-il d’une voix effrayante; et, soulevant la sanglante gorra, il détacha son voile. Le visage difforme du nain de la maison s’offrit à mes yeux; mais à l’air de folle gaieté que je lui connaissais avait succédé une expression menaçante et sinistre.

— Grand Dieu! m’écriai-je frappé de stupeur, tous les morts reviennent-ils? C’est Habibrah, le bouffon de mon oncle!

Le nain mit la main sur son poignard, et dit sourdement:

— Son bouffon, - et son meurtrier.

Je reculai avec horreur.

— Son meurtrier! Scélérat, est-ce donc ainsi que tu as reconnu ses bontés?

Il m’interrompit.

— Ses bontés! dis ses outrages!

— Comment! repris-je, c’est toi qui l’as frappé, misérable!

— Moi! répondit-il avec une expression horrible. Je lui ai enfoncé le couteau si profondément dans le cœur, qu’à peine a-t-il eu le temps de sortir du sommeil pour entrer dans la mort. Il a crié faiblement: A moi, Habibrah! - J’étais à lui.

Son atroce récit, son atroce sang-froid me révoltèrent.

— Malheureux! lâche assassin! tu avais donc oublié les faveurs qu’il n’accordait qu’à toi? tu mangeais près de sa table, tu dormais près de son lit...

— ... Comme un chien! interrompit brusquement Habibrah; como un perro! Va! je ne me suis que trop souvenu de ces faveurs qui sont des affronts! Je m’en suis vengé sur lui, je vais m’en venger sur toi! Ecoute. Crois-tu donc que pour être mulâtre, nain et difforme, je ne sois pas homme? Ah! j’ai une âme, et une âme plus profonde et plus forte que celle dont je vais délivrer ton corps de jeune fille! J’ai été donné à ton oncle comme un sapajou. Je servais à ses plaisirs, j’amusais ses mépris. Il m’aimait, dis-tu; j’avais une place dans son cœur; oui, entre sa guenon et son perroquet. Je m’en suis choisi une autre avec mon poignard!

Je frémissais.

Oui, continua le nain, c’est moi! c’est bien moi! regarde-moi en face, Léopold d’Auverney! Tu as assez ri de moi, tu peux frémir maintenant. Ah! tu me rappelles la honteuse prédilection de ton oncle pour celui qu’il nommait son bouffon! Quelle prédilection, bon Giu! Si j’entrais dans vos salons, mille rires dédaigneux m’accueillaient; ma taille, mes difformités, mes traits, mon costume dérisoire, jusqu’aux infirmités déplorables de ma nature, tout en moi prêtait aux railleries de ton exécrable oncle et de ses exécrables amis. Et moi, je ne pouvais pas même me taire; il fallait, o rabia! il fallait mêler mon rire aux rires que j'excitais! Réponds, crois-tu que de pareilles humiliations soient un titre à la reconnaissance d'une créature humaine? Crois-tu qu'elles ne vaillent pas les misères des autres esclaves, les travaux sans relâche, les ardeurs du soleil, les carcans de fer et le fouet des commandeurs? Crois-tu qu'elles ne suffisent pas pour faire germer dans un cœur d'homme une haine ardente, implacable, éternelle, comme le stigmate d'infamie qui flétrit ma poitrine? Oh! pour avoir souffert si longtemps, que ma vengeance a été courte! Que n'ai-je pu faire endurer à mon odieux tyran tous les tourments qui renaissaient pour moi à tous les moments de tous les jours! Que n'a-t-il pu avant de mourir connaître l'amertume de l'orgueil blessé et sentir quelles traces brûlantes laissent les larmes de honte et de rage sur un visage condamné à un rire perpétuel! Hélas! il est bien dur d'avoir tant attendu l'heure de punir, et d'en finir d'un coup de poignard! Encore s'il avait pu savoir quelle main le frappait! Mais j'étais trop impatient d'entendre son dernier râle; j'ai enfoncé trop vite le couteau; il est mort sans m'avoir reconnu, et ma fureur a trompé ma vengeance! Cette fois, du moins, elle sera plus complète. Tu me vois bien, n'est-ce pas? Il est vrai que tu dois avoir peine à me reconnaître dans le nouveau jour qui me montre à toi! Tu ne m'avais jamais vu que sous un air riant et joyeux; maintenant que rien n'interdit à mon âme de paraître dans mes yeux, je ne dois plus me ressembler. Tu ne connaissais que mon masque; voici mon visage!

Il était horrible.

— Monstre! m'écriai-je, tu te trompes, il y a encore quelque chose du baladin dans l'atrocité de tes traits et de ton cœur.

— Ne parle pas d'atrocité! interrompit Habibrah. Songe à la cruauté de ton oncle...

— Misérable! repris-je indigné, s'il était cruel, c'était par toi! Tu plains le sort des malheureux esclaves; mais pourquoi alors tournais-tu contre tes frères le crédit que la faiblesse de ton maître t'accordait? Pourquoi n'as-tu jamais essayé de le fléchir en leur faveur?

— J'en aurais été bien fâché! Moi, empêcher un blanc de se souiller d'une atrocité! Non! non! Je l'engageais au contraire à redoubler de mauvais traitements envers ses esclaves, afin d'avancer l'heure de la révolte, afin que l'excès de l'oppression amenât enfin la vengeance! En paraissant nuire à mes frères, je les servais!

Je restai confondu devant une si profonde combinaison de la haine.

— Eh bien! continua le nain, trouves-tu que j’ai su méditer et exécuter? Que dis-tu du bouffon Habibrah? Que dis-tu du fou de ton oncle?

— Achève ce que tu as si bien commencé, lui répondis-je. Fais-moi mourir, mais hâte-toi! il se mit à se promener de long en large sur la plate-forme, en se frottant les mains.

— Et s’il ne me plaît pas de me hâter, à moi? si je veux jouir à mon aise de tes angoisses? Vois-tu, Biassou me devait ma part dans le butin du dernier pillage. Quand je t’ai vu au camp des noirs, je ne lui ai demandé que ta vie. Il me l’a accordée volontiers; et maintenant elle est à moi! Je m’en amuse. Tu vas bientôt suivre cette cascade dans ce gouffre, sois tranquille; mais je dois te dire auparavant qu’ayant découvert la retraite où ta femme avait été cachée, j’ai inspiré aujourd’hui à Biassou de faire incendier la forêt, cela doit être commencé à présent. Ainsi ta famille est anéantie. Ton oncle a péri par le fer; tu vas périr par l’eau, ta Marie par le feu!

— Misérable! misérable! m’écriai-je; et je fis un mouvement pour me jeter sur lui.

Il se retourna vers les nègres.

— Allons, attachez-le! il avance son heure.

Alors les nègres commencèrent à me lier en silence avec des cordes qu’ils avaient apportées. Tout à coup je crus entendre les aboiements lointains d’un chien, je pris ce bruit pour une illusion causée par le mugissement de la cascade. Les nègres achevèrent de m’attacher, et m’approchèrent du gouffre qui devait m’engloutir. Le nain, croisant les bras, me regardait avec une joie triomphante. Je levai les yeux vers la crevasse pour fuir son odieuse vue, et pour découvrir encore le ciel. En ce moment un aboiement plus fort et plus prononcé se fit entendre. La tête énorme de Rask passa par l’ouverture. Je tressaillis. Le nain s’écria:

— Allons! Les noirs, qui n’avaient pas remarqué les aboiements, se préparèrent à me lancer au milieu de l’abîme.

LIII

— Camarades! cria une voix tonnante.

Tous se retournèrent; c’était Bug-Jargal. Il était debout sur le bord de la crevasse; une plume rouge flottait sur sa tête.

— Camarades, répéta-t-il, arrêtez!

Les noirs se prosternèrent. Il continua:

— Je suis Bug-Jargal.

Les noirs frappèrent la terre de leurs fronts, en poussant des cris dont il était difficile de distinguer l’expression.

— Déliez le prisonnier, cria le chef.

Ici le nain parut se réveiller de la stupeur où l’avait plongé cette apparition inattendue. Il arrêta brusquement les bras des noirs prêts à couper mes liens.

— Comment! qu’est-ce? s’écria-t-il, Que quiere decir eso?

Puis, levant la tête vers Bug-Jargal:

— Chef du Morne-Rouge, que venez-vous faire ici?

Bug-Jargal répondit:

— Je viens commander à mes frères!

— En effet, dit le nain avec une rage concentrée, ce sont des noirs du Morne-Rouge! Mais de quel droit, ajouta-t-il en haussant la voix, disposez-vous de mon prisonnier?

Le chef répondit:

— Je suis Bug-Jargal.

Les noirs frappèrent la terre de leurs fronts.

— Bug-Jargal, reprit Habibrah, ne peut défaire ce qu’a fait Biassou. Ce blanc m’a été donné par Biassou. Je veux qu’il meure; il mourra. - Vosotros, dit-il aux noirs, obéissez! Jetez-le dans le gouffre.

A la voix puissante de l’obi, les noirs se relevèrent et firent un pas vers moi. Je crus que c’en était fait.

— Déliez le prisonnier! cria Bug-Jargal.

En un clin d’oeil je fus libre. Ma surprise égalait la rage de l’obi. Il voulut se jeter sur moi. Les noirs l’arrêtèrent. Alors il s’exhala en imprécations et en menaces.

— Demonios! rabia! infierno de mi alma! Comment! misérables! vous refusez de m’obéir! vous méconnaissez mi voz! Pourquoi ai-je perdu el tiempo à écouter este maldicho! J’aurais dû le faire jeter tout de suite aux poissons del baratro! A force de vouloir une vengeance complète, je la perds! O rabia de Satan! Escuchate, vosotros! Si vous ne m’obéissez pas, si vous ne précipitez pas cet exécrable blanc dans le torrent, je vous maudis! Vos cheveux deviendront blancs; les maringouins et les bigailles vous dévoreront tout vivants; vos jambes et vos bras plieront comme des roseaux; votre haleine brûlera votre gosier comme un sable ardent; vous mourrez bientôt, et après votre mort vos esprits seront condamnés à tourner sans cesse une meule grosse comme une montagne, dans la lune où il fait froid!

Cette scène produisait sur moi un effet singulier. Seul de mon espèce dans cette caverne humide et noire, environné de ces nègres pareils à des démons, balancé en quelque sorte au penchant de cet abîme sans fond, tour à tour menacé par ce nain hideux, par ce sorcier difforme, dont un jour pâle laissait à peine entrevoir le vêtement bariolé et la mitre pointue, et protégé par le grand noir, qui m’apparaissait au seul point d’où l’on pût voir le ciel, il me semblait être aux portes de l’enfer, attendre la perte ou le salut de mon âme, et assister à une lutte opiniâtre entre mon bon ange et mon mauvais génie.

Les noirs paraissaient terrifiés des malédictions de l’obi. Il voulut profiter de leur indécision, et s’écria:

— Je veux que le blanc meure. Vous m’obéirez; il mourra.

Bug-Jargal répondit gravement:

— Il vivra! Je suis Bug-Jargal. Mon père était roi au pays de Kakongo, et rendait la justice sur le seuil de sa porte.

Les noirs s’étaient prosternés de nouveau.

Le chef poursuivit:

— Frères! allez dire à Biassou de ne pas déployer sur la montagne le drapeau noir qui doit annoncer aux blancs la mort de ce captif; car ce captif a sauvé la vie à Bug-Jargal, et Bug-Jargal veut qu’il vive!

Ils se relevèrent. Bug-Jargal jeta sa plume rouge au milieu d’eux. Le chef du détachement croisa les bras sur sa poitrine, et ramassa le panache avec respect; puis ils sortirent sans proférer une parole.

L’obi disparut avec eux dans les ténèbres de l’avenue souterraine.

Je n’essaierai pas de vous peindre, messieurs, la situation où je me trouvais. Je fixai des yeux humides sur Pierrot, qui de son côté me contemplait avec une singulière expression de reconnaissance et de fierté.

— Dieu soit béni, dit-il enfin, tout est sauvé. Frère, retourne par où tu es venu. Tu me retrouveras dans la vallée.

Il me fit un signe de la main, et se retira.

LIV

Pressé d'arriver à ce rendez-vous et de savoir par quel merveilleux bonheur mon sauveur m'avait été ramené si à propos, je me disposai à sortir de l'effrayante caverne. Cependant de nouveaux dangers m'y étaient réservés. A l'instant où je me dirigeai vers la galerie souterraine, un obstacle imprévu m'en barra tout à coup l'entrée. C'était encore Habibrah. Le rancuneux obi n'avait pas suivi les nègres comme je l'avais cru; il s'était caché derrière un pilier de roches, attendant un moment plus propice pour sa vengeance. Ce moment était venu. Le nain se montra subitement et rit. J'étais seul, désarmé; un poignard, le même qui lui tenait lieu de crucifix, brillait dans sa main. A sa vue je reculai involontairement.

— Ha! ha! maldicho! tu croyais donc m'échapper! mais le fou est moins fou que toi. Je te tiens, et cette fois je ne te ferai pas attendre. Ton ami Bug-Jargal ne t'attendra pas non plus en vain. Tu iras au rendez-vous dans la vallée, mais c'est le flot de ce torrent qui se chargera de t'y conduire.

En parlant ainsi, il se précipita sur moi le poignard levé.

— Monstre! lui dis-je en reculant sur la plate-forme, tout à l'heure tu n'étais qu'un bourreau, maintenant tu es un assassin!

— Je me venge! répondit-il en grinçant des dents.

En ce moment j'étais sur le bord du précipice; il fondit sur moi, afin de m'y pousser d'un coup de poignard. J'esquivai le choc. Le pied lui manqua sur cette mousse glissante dont les rochers humides sont en quelque sorte enduits; il roula sur la pente arrondie par les flots. - Mille démons! s'écria-t-il en rugissant. - Il était tombé dans l'abîme.

Je vous ai dit qu'une racine du vieil arbre sortait d'entre les fentes du granit, un peu au-dessous du bord. Le nain la rencontra dans sa chute, sa jupe chamarrée s'embarrassa dans les nœuds de la souche, et, saisissant ce dernier appui, il s'y cramponna avec une énergie extraordinaire. Son bonnet aigu se détacha de sa tête; il fallut lâcher son poignard; et cette arme d'assassin et la gorra sonnante du bouffon disparurent ensemble en se heurtant dans les profondeurs de la cataracte.

Habibrah, suspendu sur l'horrible gouffre, essaya d'abord de remonter sur la plate-forme; mais ses petits bras ne pouvaient atteindre jusqu'à l'arête de l'escarpement, et ses ongles s'usaient en efforts impuissants pour entamer la surface visqueuse du roc qui surplombait dans le ténébreux abîme. Il hurlait de rage.

La moindre secousse de ma part eût suffi pour le précipiter; mais c'eût été une lâcheté, et je n'y songeai pas un moment. Cette modération le frappa. Remerciant le ciel du salut qu'il m'envoyait d'une manière si inespérée, je me décidais à l'abandonner à son sort, et j'allais sortir de la salle souterraine, quand j'entendis tout à coup la voix du nain sortir de l'abîme, suppliante et douloureuse:

— Maitre! criait-il, maître! ne vous en allez pas, de grâce! au nom du bon Giu, ne laissez pas mourir, impénitente et coupable, une créature humaine que vous pouvez sauver. Hélas! les forces me manquent, la branche glisse et plie dans mes mains, le poids de mon corps m'entraîne, je vais la lâcher ou elle va se rompre. - Hélas! maître! l'effroyable gouffre tourbillonne au-dessous de moi! Nombre santo de Dios! N'aurez-vous aucune pitié pour votre pauvre bouffon? Il est bien criminel; mais ne lui prouverez-vous pas que les blancs valent mieux que les mulâtres, les maîtres que les esclaves?

Je m'étais approché du précipice presque ému, et la terne lumière qui descendait de la crevasse me montrait sur le visage repoussant du nain une expression que je ne lui connaissais pas encore, celle de la prière et de la détresse.

— Señor Léopold, continua-t-il, encouragé par le mouvement de pitié qui m'était échappé, serait-il vrai qu'un être humain vît son semblable dans une position aussi horrible, pût le secourir, et ne le fît pas? Hélas! tendez-moi la main, maître. Il ne faudrait qu'un peu d'aide pour me sauver. Ce qui est tout pour moi est si peu de chose pour vous! Tirez- moi à vous, de grâce! Ma reconnaissance égalera mes crimes.

Je l'interrompis:

— Malheureux! ne rappelle pas ce souvenir!

— C'est pour le détester, maitre! reprit-il. Ah! soyez plus généreux que moi! O ciel! ô ciel! je faiblis! Je tombe. - Ay desdichado! La main! votre main! tendez-moi la main! au nom de la mère qui vous a porté!

Je ne saurais vous dire à quel point était lamentable cet accent de terreur et de souffrance! J'oubliai tout. Ce n'était plus un ennemi, un traître, un assassin, c'était un malheureux qu'un léger effort de ma part pouvait arracher à une mort affreuse. Il m'implorait si pitoyablement! Toute parole, tout reproche eût été inutile et ridicule; le besoin d'aide paraissait urgent. Je me baissai, et, m'agenouillant le long du bord, l'une de mes mains appuyée sur le tronc de l'arbre dont la racine soutenait l'infortuné Habibrah, je lui tendis l'autre... - Dès qu'elle fut à sa portée, il la saisit de ses deux mains avec une force prodigieuse, et, loin de se prêter au mouvement d'ascension que je voulais lui donner, je le sentis qui cherchait à m'entraîner avec lui dans l'abîme. Si le tronc de l'arbre ne m'eût pas prêté un aussi solide appui, j'aurais été infailliblement arraché du bord par la secousse violente et inattendue que me donna le misérable.

— Scélérat! m'écriai-je, que fais-tu?

— Je me venge! répondit-il avec un rire éclatant et infernal. Ah! je te tiens enfin! Imbécile! tu t'es livré toi-même! je te tiens! Tu étais sauvé, j'étais perdu; et c'est toi qui rentres volontairement dans la gueule du caïman, parce qu'elle a gémi après avoir rugi! Me voilà consolé, puisque ma mort est une vengeance! Tu es pris au piège, amigo! et j'aurai un compagnon humain chez les poissons du lac.

— Ah! traître! dis-je en me roidissant, voilà comme tu me récompenses d'avoir voulu te tirer du péril!

— Oui, reprenait-il, je sais que j'aurais pu me sauver avec toi, mais j'aime mieux que tu périsses avec moi. J'aime mieux ta mort que ma vie! Viens!

En même temps, ses deux mains bronzées et calleuses se crispaient sur la mienne avec des efforts inouïs; ses yeux flamboyaient, sa bouche écumait; ses forces. dont il déplorait si douloureusement l'abandon un moment auparavant, lui étaient revenues, exaltées par la rage et la vengeance; ses pieds s'appuyaient ainsi que deux leviers aux parois perpendiculaires du rocher, et il bondissait comme un tigre sur la racine, qui, mêlée à ses vêtements, le soutenait malgré lui; car il eût voulu la briser afin de peser de tout son poids sur moi et de m'entraîner plus vite. Il interrompait quelquefois, pour la mordre avec fureur, le rire épouvantable que m'offrait son monstrueux visage. On eût dit l'horrible démon de cette caverne cherchant à attirer une proie dans son palais d'abîmes et de ténèbres.

Un de mes genoux s'était heureusement arrêté dans une anfractuosité du rocher; mon bras s'était en quelque sorte noué à l'arbre qui m'appuyait; et je luttais contre les efforts du nain avec toute l'énergie que le sentiment de conservation peut donner dans un semblable moment. De temps en temps je soulevais péniblement ma poitrine, et j'appelais de toutes mes forces: Bug-

Jargal! Mais le fracas de la cascade et l’éloignement me laissaient bien peu d’espoir qu’il pût entendre ma voix.

Cependant le nain, qui ne s’était pas attendu à tant de résistance, redoublait ses furieuses secousses. Je commençais à perdre mes forces, bien que cette lutte eût duré bien moins de temps qu’il ne m’en faut pour vous la raconter. Un tiraillement insupportable paralysait presque mon bras; ma vue se troublait; des lueurs livides et confuses se croisaient devant mes yeux, des tintements remplissaient mes oreilles; j’entendais crier la racine prête à se rompre, rire le monstre prêt à tomber, et il me semblait que le gouffre hurlant se rapprochait de moi.

Avant de tout abandonner à l’épuisement et au désespoir, je tentai un dernier appel; je rassemblai mes forces éteintes, et je criai encore une fois: Bug-Jargal! Un aboiement me répondit. J’avais reconnu Rask, je tournais les yeux, Bug- Jargal et son chien étaient au bord de la crevasse. Je ne sais s’il avait entendu ma voix ou si quelque inquiétude l’avait ramené. Il vit mon danger.

— Tiens bon! me cria-t-il.

Habibrah, craignant mon salut, me criait de son côté en écumant de fureur:

— Viens donc! viens! et il ramassait, pour en finir, le reste de sa vigueur surnaturelle.

En ce moment, mon bras fatigué se détacha de l’arbre. C’en était fait de moi! quand je me sentis saisir par-derrière; c’était Rask. A un signe de son maître il avait sauté de la crevasse sur la plate-forme, et sa gueule me retenait puissamment par les basques de mon habit. Ce secours inattendu me sauva. Habibrah avait consumé toute sa force dans son dernier effort; je rappelai la mienne pour lui arracher ma main. Ses doigts engourdis et roides furent enfin contraints de me lâcher; la racine, si longtemps tourmentée, se brisa sous son poids; et, tandis que Rask me retirait violemment en arrière, le misérable nain s’engloutit dans l’écume de la sombre cascade, en me jetant une malédiction que je n’entendis pas, et qui retomba avec lui dans l’abîme.

Telle fut la fin du bouffon de mon oncle.

LV

Cette scène effrayante, cette lutte forcenée, son dénouement terrible, m’avaient accablé. J’étais presque sans force et sans connaissance. La voix de Bug-Jargal me ranima.

— Frère! me criait-il, hâte-toi de sortir d’ici! Le soleil sera couché dans une demi-heure. Je vais t’attendre là-bas. Suis Rask.

Cette parole amie me rendit tout à la fois espérance, vigueur et courage. Je me relevai. Le dogue s’enfonça rapidement dans l’avenue souterraine; je le suivis; son jappement me guidait dans l’ombre. Après quelques instants je revis le jour devant moi; enfin nous atteignîmes l’issue, et je respirai librement. En sortant de dessous la voûte humide et noire je me rappelai la prédiction du nain, au moment où nous y étions entrés:

«L’un de nous deux seulement repassera par ce chemin.”

Son attente avait été trompée, mais sa prophétie s’était réalisée.

LVI

Parvenu dans la vallée, je revis Bug-Jargal; je me jetai dans ses bras, et j’y demeurai oppressé, ayant mille questions à lui faire et ne pouvant parler.

– Écoute, me dit-il, ta femme, ma sœur, est en sûreté. Je l’ai remise, au camp des blancs, à l’un de vos parents, qui commande les avant-postes; je voulais me rendre prisonnier, de peur qu’on ne sacrifiât en ma place les dix têtes qui répondent de la mienne. Ton parent m’a dit de fuir et de tâcher de prévenir ton supplice, les dix noirs ne devant être exécutés que si tu l’étais, ce que Biassou devait faire annoncer en arborant un drapeau noir sur la plus haute de nos montagnes. Alors j’ai couru, Rask m’a conduit, et je suis arrivé à temps, grâce au ciel! Tu vivras, et moi aussi.

Il me tendit la main et ajouta:

– Frère, es-tu content?

Je le serrai de nouveau dans mes bras; je le conjurai de ne plus me quitter, de rester avec moi parmi les blancs; je lui promis un grade dans l’armée coloniale. Il m’interrompit d’un air farouche.

– Frère, est-ce que je te propose de t’enrôler parmi les miens?

Je gardai le silence, je sentais mon tort. Il ajouta avec gaieté:

– Allons, viens vite revoir et rassurer ta femme!

Cette proposition répondait à un besoin pressant de mon cœur; je me levai ivre de bonheur; nous partîmes. Le noir connaissait le chemin; il marchait devant moi; Rask nous suivait…

Ici d’Auverney s’arrêta et jeta un sombre regard autour de lui. La sueur coulait à grosses gouttes de son front. Il couvrit son visage avec sa main. Rask le regardait d’un air inquiet.

– Oui, c’est ainsi que tu me regardais! murmura-t-il.

Un instant après, il se leva violemment agité, et sortit de la tente. Le sergent et le dogue l’accompagnèrent.

LVII

— Je gagerais, s'écria Henri, que nous approchons de la catastrophe! Je serais vraiment fâché qu'il arrivât quelque chose à Bug-Jargal; c'était un fameux homme!

Paschal ôta de ses lèvres le goulot de sa bouteille revêtue d'osier, et dit:

— J'aurais voulu, pour douze paniers de Porto, voir la noix de coco qu'il vida d'un trait.

Alfred, qui était en train de rêver à un air de guitare, s'interrompit, et pria le lieutenant Henri de lui rattacher ses aiguillettes; il ajouta:

— Ce nègre m'intéresse beaucoup. Seulement je n'ai pas encore osé demander à d'Auverney s'il savait aussi l'air de la hermosa Padilla.

— Biassou est bien plus remarquable, reprit Paschal; son vin goudronné ne devait pas valoir grand-chose, mais du moins cet homme-là savait ce que c'est qu'un Français. Si j'avais été son prisonnier, j'aurais laissé pousser ma moustache pour qu'il me prêtât quelques piastres dessus, comme la ville de Goa à ce capitaine portugais. Je vous déclare que mes créanciers sont plus impitoyables que Biassou.

— A propos, capitaine! voilà quatre louis que je vous dois! s'écria Henri en jetant sa bourse à Paschal.

Le capitaine regarda d'un oeil étonné son généreux débiteur, qui aurait à plus juste titre pu se dire son créancier. Henri se hâta de poursuivre.

— Voyons, messieurs, que pensez-vous jusqu'ici de l'histoire que nous raconte le capitaine?

— Ma foi, dit Alfred, je n'ai pas écouté fort attentivement, mais je vous avoue que j'aurais espéré quelque chose de plus intéressant de la bouche du rêveur d'Auverney. Et puis il y a une romance en prose, et je n'aime pas les romances en prose; sur quel air chanter cela? En somme, l'histoire de Bug-Jargal m'ennuie; c'est trop long.

— Vous avez raison, dit l'aide de camp Paschal; c'est trop long. Si je n'avais pas eu ma pipe et mon flacon, j'aurais passé une méchante nuit. Remarquez en outre qu'il y a beaucoup de choses absurdes. Comment croire, par exemple, que ce petit magot de sorcier... comment l'appelle-t-il déjà? Habitbas? comment croire qu'il veuille, pour noyer son ennemi, se noyer lui-même?

Henri l'interrompit en souriant:

— Dans de l’eau, surtout! n’est-ce pas, capitaine Paschal? Quant à moi, ce qui m’amusait le plus pendant le récit d’Auverney, c’était de voir son chien boiteux lever la tête chaque fois qu’il prononçait le nom de Bug-Jargal.

— Et en cela, interrompit Paschal, il faisait précisément le contraire de ce que j’ai vu faire aux vieilles bonnes femmes de Celadas quand le prédicateur prononçait le nom de Jésus; j’entrais dans l’église avec une douzaine de cuirassiers...

Le bruit du fusil du factionnaire avertit que d’Auverney rentrait. Tout le monde se tut. Il se promena quelque temps les bras croisés et en silence. Le vieux Thadée, qui s’était rassis dans un coin, l’observait à la dérobée, et s’efforçait de paraître caresser Rask, pour que le capitaine ne s’aperçût pas de son inquiétude.

D’Auverney reprit enfin:

LVIII

— Rask nous suivait. Le rocher le plus élevé de la vallée n’était plus éclairé par le soleil; une lueur s’y peignit tout à coup, et passa. Le noir tressaillit; il me serra fortement la main.

— Ecoute, me dit-il.

Un bruit sourd, semblable à la décharge d’une pièce d’artillerie, se fit entendre alors dans les vallées, et se prolongea d’échos en échos.

— C’est le signal! dit le nègre d’une voix sombre.

Il reprit: - C’est un coup de canon, n’est-ce pas?

Je fis un signe de tête affirmatif.

En deux bonds il fut sur une roche élevée; je l’y suivis. Il croisa les bras, et se mit à sourire tristement.

— Vois-tu? me dit-il.

Je regardai du côté qu’il m’indiquait, et je vis le pic qu’il m’avait montré lors de mon entrevue avec Marie, le seul que le soleil éclairât encore, surmonté d’un grand drapeau noir.

Ici, d’Auverney fit une pause.

— J’ai su depuis que Biassou, pressé de partir, et me croyant mort, avait fait arborer l’étendard avant le retour du détachement qui avait dû m’exécuter.

Bug-Jargal était toujours là, debout, les bras croisés, et contemplant le lugubre drapeau. Soudain il se retourna vivement et fit quelques pas, comme pour descendre du roc.

— Dieu! Dieu! mes malheureux compagnons! Il revint à moi. - As-tu entendu le canon? me demanda-t-il. - Je ne répondis point.

— Eh bien! frère, c’était le signal. On les conduit maintenant.

Sa tête tomba sur sa poitrine. Il se rapprocha encore de moi.

— Va retrouver ta femme, frère; Rask te conduira.

Il siffla un air africain, le chien se mit à remuer la queue, et parut vouloir se diriger vers un point de la vallée.

Bug-Jargal me prit la main et s’efforça de sourire, mais ce souffre était convulsif.

— Adieu! me cria-t-il d’une voix forte; et il se perdit dans les touffes d’arbres qui nous entouraient.

J’étais pétrifié. Le peu que je comprenais à ce qui venait d’avoir lieu me faisait prévoir tous les malheurs.

Rask, voyant son maître disparaître, s’avança sur le bord du roc, et se mit à secouer la tête avec un hurlement plaintif. Il revint en baissant la queue; ses grands yeux étaient humides; il me regarda d’un air inquiet, puis il retourna vers l’endroit d’où son maître était parti, et aboya à plusieurs reprises. Je le compris; je sentais les mêmes craintes que lui. Je fis quelques pas de son côté; alors il partit comme un trait en suivant les traces de Bug-Jargal! je l’aurais eu bientôt perdu de vue, quoique je courusse aussi de toutes mes forces, si, de temps en temps, il ne se fût arrêté, comme pour me donner le temps de le joindre. - Nous traversâmes ainsi plusieurs vallées, nous franchîmes des collines couvertes de bouquets de bois. Enfin...

La voix de d’Auverney s’éteignit. Un sombre désespoir se manifesta sur tous ses traits; il put à peine articuler ces mots:

— Poursuis, Thadée, car je n’ai pas plus de force qu’une vieille femme.

Le vieux sergent n’était pas moins ému que le capitaine; il se mit pourtant en devoir de lui obéir. - Avec votre permission. - Puisque vous le désirez, mon capitaine... - Il faut vous dire, mes officiers, que, quoique Bug-Jargal, dit Pierrot, fût un grand nègre, bien doux, bien fort, bien courageux, et le premier brave de la terre, après vous, s’il vous plaît, mon capitaine, je n’en étais pas moins bien animé contre lui, ce que je ne me pardonnerai jamais, quoique mon capitaine me l’ait pardonné. Si bien, mon capitaine, qu’après avoir entendu annoncer votre mort pour le soir du second jour, j’entrai dans une furieuse colère contre ce pauvre homme, et ce fut avec un vrai plaisir infernal que je lui annonçai que ce serait lui ou, à défaut, dix des siens, qui vous tiendraient compagnie, et qui seraient fusillés en matière de représailles, comme on dit. A cette nouvelle, il ne manifesta rien, sinon qu’une heure après il se sauva en pratiquant un grand trou...

D’Auverney fit un geste d’impatience. Thadée reprit:

— Soit! - Quand on vit le grand drapeau noir sur la montagne, comme il n’était pas revenu, ce qui ne nous étonnait pas, avec votre permission, mes officiers, on tira le coup de canon de signal, et je fus chargé de conduire les dix nègres au lieu de l’exécution, appelé la Bouche-du-Grand-Diable, et éloigné du camp environ... Enfin, qu’importe! Quand nous fûmes là, vous sentez bien, messieurs, que ce n’était pas pour leur donner la clef des champs, je les fis lier, comme cela se pratique, et je disposai mes pelotons. Voilà que je vois arriver de la forêt le grand nègre. Les bras m’en tombèrent. Il vint à moi tout essoufflé.

— J’arrive à temps! dit-il. Bonjour, Thadée.

— Oui, messieurs, il ne dit que cela, et il alla délier ses compatriotes. J'étais là, moi, tout stupéfait. Alors, avec votre permission, mon capitaine, il s'engagea un grand combat de générosité entre les noirs et lui, lequel aurait bien dû durer un peu plus longtemps... N'importe! oui, je m'en accuse, ce fut moi qui le fis cesser. Il prit la place des noirs. En ce moment son grand chien... Pauvre Rask! il arriva et me sauta à la gorge. Il aurait bien dû, mon capitaine, s'y tenir quelques moments de plus! Mais Pierrot fit un signe, et le pauvre dogue me lâcha; Bug-Jargal ne put pourtant pas empêcher qu'il ne vînt se coucher à ses pieds. Alors, je vous croyais mort, mon capitaine. J'étais en colère... - Je criai...

Le sergent étendit la main, regarda le capitaine, mais ne put articuler le mot fatal.

— Bug-Jargal tombe. - Une balle avait cassé la patte de son chien - Depuis ce temps-là, mes officiers (et le sergent secouait la tête tristement), depuis ce temps-là il est boiteux. J'entendis des gémissements dans le bois voisin; j'y entrai; c'était vous, mon capitaine, une balle vous avait atteint au moment où vous accouriez pour sauver le grand nègre. - Oui, mon capitaine, vous gémissiez; mais c'était sur lui! Bug-Jargal était mort! - Vous, mon capitaine, on vous rapporta au camp. Vous étiez blessé moins dangereusement que lui, car vous guérîtes, grâce aux bons soins de madame Marie.

Le sergent s'arrêta. D'Auverney reprit d'une voix solennelle et douloureuse:

— Bug-Jargal était mort!

Thadée baissa la tête.

— Oui, dit-il; et il m'avait laissé la vie; et c'est moi qui l'ai tué! -

HANS OF ICELAND

Translated by A. Langdon Alger

This novel was published in 1823 and is set in the area of Drontheim in Norway in 1699. Ordener Guldenlew, the main character, is a young man who is noble, brave and virtuous, and the son of the viceroy of Norway. He is in love with Ethel, who has been dishonoured by the King and imprisoned at the fortress of Munkholm.

Hugo, aged 13

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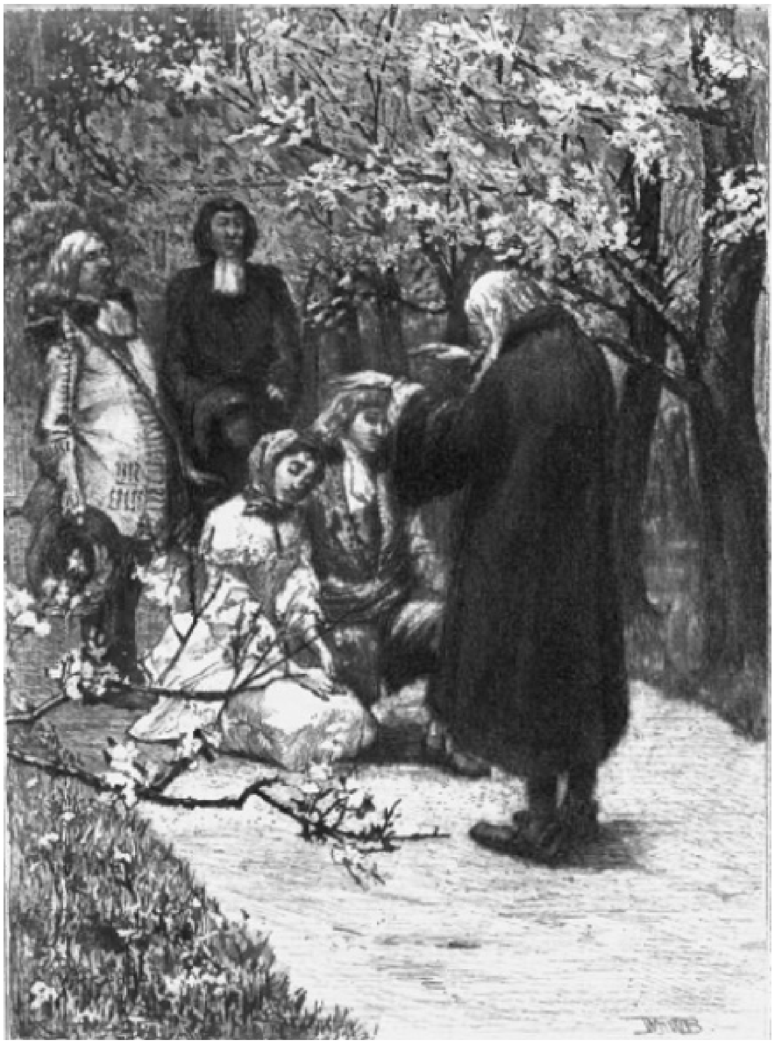

Schumacker blessing the young couple — an original illustration

CHAPTER I THE MORTUARY AND ITS VISITORS.

Did you see it? did you see it? did you see it? Oh! did you see it? Who saw it? Who did see it For mercy's sake, who saw it?

Sterne: Tristram Shandy.

That's what comes of falling in love, Neighbor Niels. Poor Guth Stersen would not be stretched out yonder on that great black slab, like a starfish forgotten by the tide, if she had kept her mind on mending her father's boat and patching his nets. Saint Usuph, the fisher, console our old friend in his affliction!"

"And her lover," added a shrill, tremulous voice, " Gill Stadt, that fine young man beside her, would not be there now, if instead of making love to Guth and seeking his luck in those accursed Roeraas mines, he had stayed at home and rocked his little brother's cradle, under the smoky cross-beams of his mother's hut."

Neighbor Niels, whom the first speaker addressed, interrupted: "Your memory is growing old along with yourself. Mother Oily. Gill never had a brother, and that makes poor Widow Stadt's grief all the harder to bear, for her home is now left utterly desolate; if she looks up to heaven for consolation, she sees nought but her old roof, where still hangs the cradle of her son, grown to be a tall young man, and dead."

‘'Poor mother!" replied old Oily, "it was the young man's own fault. Why should he go to Roeraas to be a miner?"

"I do believe," said Niels, "that those infernal mines rob us of a man for every escalin's worth of copper which we get out of them. What do you think, Father Braal? "

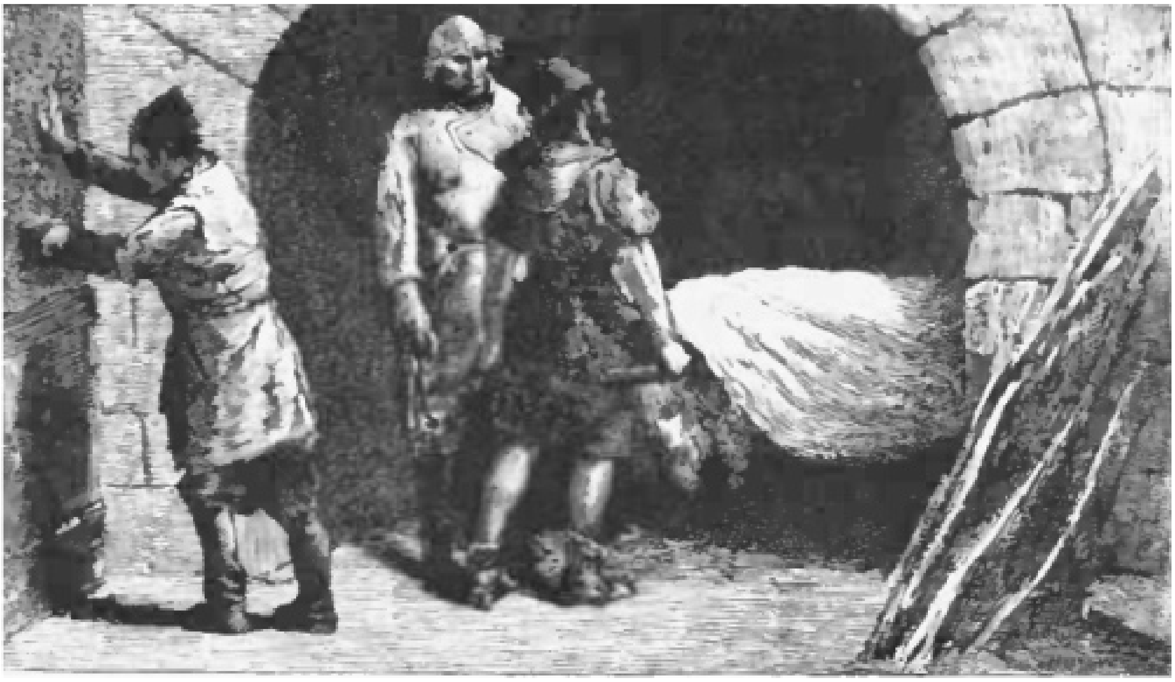

Spiagudry accompanied the Bearers, and the Door closed .

“Miners are fools,” replied the fisherman. “ If he would live, the fish should not leave the water. Man should not enter the bowels of the earth.”

“But,” asked a young man in the crowd, “how if Gill Stadt had to work in the mines to win his sweetheart?”

“A man should never risk his life,” interrupted Oily, “ for affections which are far from being worth a life, or filling it. A pretty wedding-bed Gill earned for his Guth! “

“So then that young woman,” inquired a curious bystander, “ drowned herself in despair at the death of this young man? “

“Who says so? “ loudly exclaimed a soldier, pushing his way through the crowd. “ That young girl, whom I knew well, was indeed engaged to marry a young miner who was lately crushed by falling rocks in the underground tunnels of Storwaadsgrube, near Roeraas; but she was also the sweetheart of one of my mates, and as she was going to Munkholm secretly, day before yesterday, to celebrate with her lover the death of her betrothed, her boat capsized on a reef, and she was drowned.”

A confused sound of voices arose: “ Impossible, master soldier,” cried the old women. The young ones were silent; and Neighbor Niels maliciously reminded fisher Braal of his serious statement: “ That ‘s what comes of falling in love!”

The soldier was about to lose his temper with his opponents; he had already called them “ old witches from the cave of Quiragoth,” and they were not disposed to bear so grave an insult patiently, when a sharp and imperious voice, crying “ Silence, silence, you old fools! “ put an end to the dispute. All w r as still, as when the sudden crow of a cock is heard amid the cackling of the hens.

Before relating the rest of the scene, it may be well to describe the spot where it occurred. It was as the reader has doubtless guessed one of those gloomy structures which public pity and social forethought devote to unknown corpses, the last asylum of the dead, whose lives were usually sad ones; where the careless spectator, the surly or kindly observer gather, and friends often meet tearful relatives, whom long and unendurable anxiety has robbed of all but one sad hope. At the period now remote, and in the uncivilized region to which I have carried my reader, there had as yet been no attempt, as in our cities of gold and mud, to make these resting-places into ingeniously forbidding or elegantly funereal edifices. Daylight did not fall through tomb-shaped openings, into artistically sculptured vaults, upon beds which seem as if the guardian of the place were anxious to leave the dead some of the conveniences of life, and the pillow seems arranged for sleep. If the keeper’s door were left ajar, the eye, wearied with gazing upon hideous, naked corpses, had not as now the pleasure of resting upon elegant furniture and happy children. Death was there in all its deformity, in all its horror; and there was no attempt to deck its fleshless skeleton with ribbons and gewgaws.

The room in which our actors stood was spacious and dark, which made it seem still larger; it was lighted only by a broad, low door opening upon the port of Throndhjem, and a rough hole in the ceiling, through which a dull, white light fell, mingled with rain, hail, or snow, according to the weather, upon the corpses lying directly under it. The room was divided by an iron railing, breast-high, running across it from side to side. The public entered the outer portion through the low door; in the inner part were six long black granite slabs, arranged abreast and parallel to each other. A small side door served to admit the keeper and his assistant to either section, their rooms occupying the rear of the building, close to the water. The miner and his betrothed occupied two granite beds; decomposition had already begun its work upon the young woman’s body, showing itself in large blue and purple spots running along her limbs on the line of the blood-vessels. Gill’s features were stern and set; but his body was so horribly mutilated that it was impossible to judge whether his beauty were really so great as old Oily declared.

It was before these disfigured remains, in the midst of the mute crowd, that the conversation which we have faithfully interpreted, began.

A tall, withered old man, sitting with folded arms and bent head upon a broken stool in the darkest corner of the room, had apparently paid no heed until the moment when he rose suddenly, exclaiming, “ Silence, silence, you old fools! “ and seized the soldier by the arm.

All were hushed; the soldier turned and broke into a burst of laughter at the sight of his strange interrupter, whose pale face, thin greasy locks, long fingers, and complete costume of reindeer leather amply justified this mirthful reception. But a clamor arose from the crowd of women, for a moment confounded: “ It is the keeper of the Spladgest! -That infernal doorkeeper to the dead! -That diabolical Spiagudry!- That accursed sorcerer! “

“Silence, you old fools, silence! If this be the witches’ Sabbath, hasten away and find your broomsticks; if you don’t, they’ll fly off without you. Let this worthy descendant of the god Thor alone.”

Then Spiagudry, striving to assume a gracious expression, addressed the soldier: “ You say, my good fellow, that this wretched woman -”

“Old rascal! “ muttered Oily; “yes, we are all ‘wretched women,’ to him, because our bodies, if they fall into his claws, only bring him thirty escalins’ reward, while he gets forty for the paltry carcass of a man.”

“Silence, old women!” repeated Spiagudry. “ In truth, these daughters of the Devil are like their kettles; when they wax warm, they must needs sing. Tell me, my valiant king of the sword, your comrade, this Guth’s lover, will doubtless kill himself in despair at her loss, won’t he? “

Here burst forth the long-repressed storm. “Do you hear the miscreant, the old Pagan! “ cried twenty shrill, discordant voices. “He would fain see one less man living, for the sake of the forty escalins that a dead body brings him.”

“And what if I would? “ replied the keeper of the Spladgest. “Doesn’t our gracious king and master, Christian V., -may Saint Hospitius bless him!- declare himself the natural guardian of all miners, so that when they die he may enrich his royal treasury with their paltry leavings? “

“You honor the king,” answered fisher Braal, “ by comparing the royal treasury to the strong-box of your charnelhouse, and him to yourself, Neighbor Spiagudry.”

“Neighbor, indeed!” said the keeper, shocked by such familiarity. “Your neighbor! say rather your host! since it may easily chance some day, my dear boatdweller, that I shall have to lend you one of my six stone beds for a week. Besides,” he added, with a laugh, “ if I spoke of that soldier’s death, it was merely from a desire to see the perpetuation of the custom of suicide for the sake of those great and tragic passions which ladies are wont to inspire.”

“Well, you tall corpse and keeper of corpses,” said the soldier, “ what are you after, with your amiable grimace, which looks so much like the last smile of a man who has been hanged? “

“Capital, my valiant fellow! “ replied Spiagudry. “ I always felt that there was more wit beneath the helmet of Constable Thurn, who conquered the Devil with his sword and his tongue, than under the mitre of Bishop Isleif, who wrote the history of Iceland, or the square cap of Professor Shoenning, who described our cathedral.”

“In that case, if you will take my advice, my old bag of leather, you will give up the revenues of the charnelhouse, and go and sell yourself to the viceroy’s museum of curiosities at Bergen. I swear to you, by Belphegor, that they pay their weight in gold there for rare beasts; but say, what do you want with me? “

“When the bodies brought here are found in the water, we have to give half the reward to the fisherman. I was going to ask you, therefore, illustrious heir to Constable Thurn, if you would persuade your unfortunate comrade not to drown himself, but to choose some other mode of death; it can’t matter much to him, and he would not wish to wrong the unhappy Christian who must entertain his corpse, if the loss of Guth should really drive him to that act of despair.”

“You are quite mistaken, my charitable and hospitable friend. My comrade will not have the pleasure of occupying an apartment in your tempting tavern with its six beds. Don’t you suppose he has already consoled himself with another Valkyria for the death of that girl? He had long been tired of your Guth, by my beard!”

At these words, the storm, which Spiagudry had for a moment drawn upon his own head, again burst more furiously than ever upon the luckless soldier.

"What, miserable scamp!" shrieked the old women; " is that the way you forget us? And yet we love such good-for-nothings! "

The young girls still kept silence. Some of them even thought greatly against their will, of course -that this graceless fellow was very good-looking.

"Oh, ho! "said the soldier; "has the witches' Sabbath come round again? Beelzebub's punishment is frightful indeed if he be condemned to hear such choruses once a week! "

No one can say how this fresh squall would have ended, if general attention had not at this moment been utterly absorbed by a noise from without. The uproar increased steadily, and presently a swarm of little ragged boys entered the Spladgest, tumultuously shouting and crowding about a covered bier carried by two men.

"Where does that come from? " the keeper asked the bearers.

"From Urchtal Sands."

"Oglypiglap! " shouted Spiagudry.

One of the side doors opened, a little man of Lappish race, dressed in leather, entered, and signed to the bearers to follow him. Spiagudry accompanied them, and the door closed before the curious crowd had time to guess, by the length of the body on the bier, whether it were a man or a woman.

This subject still occupied all their thoughts, when Spiagudry and his assistant reappeared in the second compartment, carrying the corpse of a man, which they placed upon one of the granite couches.

"It 's a long time since I've handled such handsome clothes," said Oglypiglap; then, shaking his head and standing on tiptoe, he hung above the dead man the elegant uniform of a captain in the army. The corpse's head was disfigured, and his limbs were covered with blood; the keeper sprinkled the body several times from an old broken pail.

"By Saint Beelzebub! " cried the soldier, " it is an officer of my regiment. Let me see; can it be Captain Bollar, -from grief at his uncle's death? Bah! he is the heir. Baron Randnier? He lost his estate at cards yesterday, but he will win it back to-morrow, with his adversary's castle. Can it be Captain Lory, whose dog was drowned, or Paymaster Stunck, whose wife was unfaithful to him? But, really, I don't see why he should blow out his brains for that! "

The crowd steadily increased. Just at this instant, a young man who was crossing the wharf, seeing the mob of people, dismounted from his horse, handed the bridle to the servant behind him, and entered the Spladgest. He wore a simple travelling dress, was armed with a sword, and wrapped in a large green cloak; a black plume, fastened to his hat by a diamond buckle, fell over his noble face and waved to and fro upon his lofty brow, shaded by chestnut hair; his boots and spurs, soiled with mud, showed that he had come a long distance.

As he entered, a short, thick-set man, also wrapped in a cloak and hiding his hands in huge gloves, replied to the soldier.

“And who told you that he killed himself? That man no more committed suicide, I’ll be bound, than the roof of your cathedral set itself on fire.”

As the double-edged sword makes two wounds, this phrase gave birth to two answers.

“Our cathedral! “ said Niels; “ it is covered with copper now. It was that miserable Hans who set it on fire to make work for the miners, one of whom was his favorite Gill Stadt, whom you see lying yonder.”

“What the devil! “ cried the soldier, in his turn; “ do you dare tell me, the second musketeer in the Munkholm garrison, that that man did not blow out his brains! “

“Ho was murdered,” coldly replied the little fellow.

“Just listen to the oracle! Go along with you. Your little gray eyes can see no better than your hands do under the big gloves with which you cover them in the middle of the summer.”

The little man’s eyes flashed.

“Soldier, pray to your patron saint that these hands may never leave their mark upon your face! “

“Oh! -enough of this!” cried the soldier, in a rage. Then, pausing suddenly, he said: “ No, there must be no word of a duel before dead men.”

The little man growled a few words in a foreign tongue, and vanished.

A voice cried out: “ He was found ou Urchtal Sands.”

“On Urchtal Sands? “ said the soldier; “ Captain Dispolsen was to land there this morning, from Copenhagen.”

“Captain Dispolsen has not yet reached Munkholm,” said another voice.

“They say that Hans of Iceland haunts those sands just now,” added a fourth.

“Then it is possible that this may be the captain,” said the soldier, “ if Hans was the murderer; for we all know that the Icelander murders in so devilish a fashion that his victims often seem to be suicides.”

“What sort of man is this Hans? “ asked some one.

“He is a giant,” said one.

“He is a dwarf,” said another.

“Has nobody seen him, then? “ put in a voice.

“Those who see him for the first time, see him for the last time also.”

“Hush! “ said old Oily; “ they say there are but three persons who ever exchanged human speech with him, that reprobate of a Spiagudry, Widow Stadt, and but he had a sad life and a sad death that poor Gill, who lies yonder. Hush! “

“Hush! “ was repeated on all sides.

“Now,” suddenly exclaimed the soldier, “ I am sure that this is indeed Captain Dispolsen. I recognize the steel chain which our prisoner, old Schumacker, gave him when he went away.”

The young man with the black plume broke the silence abruptly: “ Are you sure it is Captain Dispolsen? “

“Sure, by the merits of Saint Beelzebub!” said the soldier.

The young man left the room hurriedly.

“Get me a boat for Munkholm,” he said to his servant.

“But, the general, sir?”

“Take the horses to him. I will follow to-morrow. Am I my own master, or not? Come, night is falling, and I am in haste. A boat!”

The servant obeyed, and for some time stood watching his young master as he moved away from the shore.

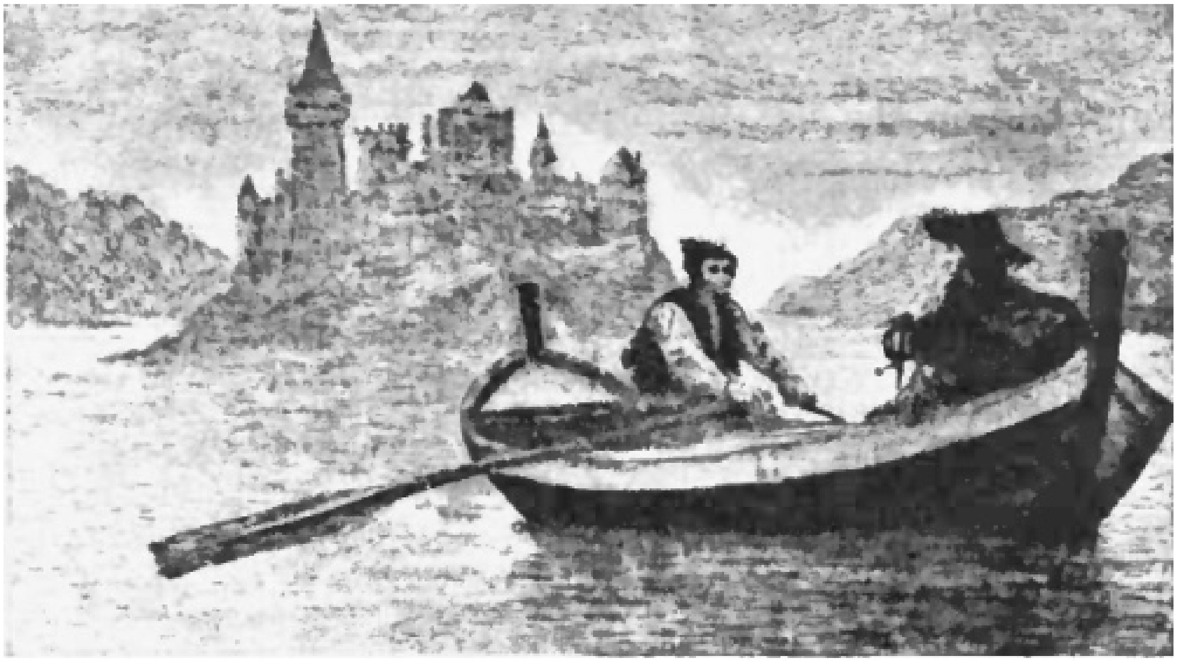

A Boat was just lauding at the Foot of the Gate

CHAPTER II. MUNCKHOLM FORTRESS.

I will sit by you while you tell me some pleasant tale to pass away the time.
Maturin: Bertram.

The reader is already aware that we are at Throndhjem, one of the four chief cities in Norway, although not the residence of the viceroy. At the date of this story (1699) the kingdom of Norway was still united to Denmark, and governed by a viceroy whose seat was in Bergen, a larger, handsomer, and more southerly town than Throndhjem, in spite of the disagreeable nickname attached to it by the famous Admiral Tromp.

Throndhjem offers a pleasant prospect as you approach it by the fjord to which the city gives its name. The harbor is quite large, although it cannot be entered easily in all weathers. At this time it resembled nothing so much as a long canal, lined on the right bv Danish and Norwegian ships, and on the left by foreign vessels, as prescribed by law. lu the background lay the town, situated on a well cultivated plain, and crowned by the lofty spires of the cathedral. This church one of the finest pieces of Gothic architecture, as we may judge from Professor Shoenuing’s book, so learnedly quoted by Spiagudry, which describes it as it was before repeated fires had laid it waste bore upon its highest pinnacle the episcopal cross, the distinctive sign that it was the cathedral of the Lutheran bishop of Throndhjem. Beyond the town, in the blue distance, were the slender white peaks of the Kiölen Mountains, like the sharp-pointed ornaments on an antique crown.

In the middle of the harbor, within cannon-shot of the shore, upon a mass of rocks lashed by the waves, rose the lonely fortress of Munkholm, a gloomy prison which then held a prisoner celebrated for the splendor of his long prosperity and for his sudden disgrace.

Schumacker, born in an obscure station, was loaded with favors by his master, then hurled from the chair of the Lord High Chancellor of Denmark and Norway to the traitor’s bench, dragged to the scaffold, and thence by royal clemency cast into a lonely dungeon at the extreme end of the two kingdoms. His creatures had overthrown him, but gave him no right to inveigh against their ingratitude. How could he complain if the steps gave way beneath him, which he had built so high for his own aggrandizement only?

The founder of the Danish nobility, from the depth of his exile, saw the grandees whom he had created share his own dignities between them. Count d’Ahlefeld, his mortal enemy, succeeded him as chancellor; General Arensdorf, as earl-marshal, distributed military titles, and Bishop Spollyson took the position of inspector of universities. The only one of his foes who did not owe his rise to him was Count Ulric Frederic Guldenlew, natural son of King Frederic III., and now viceroy of Norway. He was the most generous of all.

Toward the sombre rock of Munkholm the boat of the youth with the black plume now slowly moved. The sun sank rapidly behind the lonely fortress, whose walls cut off its last beams, already so horizontal that the peasant on the distant eastern hills of Larsynn might see beside him on the heather the faint shadow of the sentinel keeping his watch on Munkholm’s highest tower.

CHAPTER III THE DANDY’S CONFESSIONS.

Ah! my heart could receive no more painful wound! . . . A young man destitute of morals. . . . He dared gaze at her! His glance soiled her purity. Claudia! The mere thought drives me mad.
Lessing.

Andrew, go and order them to ring the curfew bell in half an hour. Let Sorsyll relieve Duckness at the portcullis, and Malvidius keep watch on the platform of the great tower. Let a careful lookout be kept in the direction of the Lion of Schleswig donjon. Do not forget to fire the cannon at seven o’clock, as a signal to lift the harbor chain. But no, we must wait a little for Captain Dispolsen; better light the signals instead, and see if the Walderhog beacon is lighted, as I ordered to-day. Be sure to keep refreshments ready for the captain. And, I forgot, -give Toric-Belfast, the second musketeer of the regiment, two days’ arrest; he has been absent all day.”

So said the sergeant-at-arms beneath the black and smoky roof of the Munkholm guard-house, in the low tower over the outer castle gate.

The soldiers addressed left their cards or bed to carry out his orders; then silence was restored. At this moment the measured beat of oars was heard outside.

“That must be Captain Dispolsen at last! “ said the sergeant, opening the tiny grated window which looked out upon the gulf.

A boat was just landing at the foot of the iron gate.

“Who goes there? “ cried the sergeant in hoarse tones.

“Open! “ was the answer; “ peace and safety.”

“There is no admittance here. Have you a passport?”

“Yes.”

“I must make sure of that. If you lie, by the merits of my patron saint, you shall taste the waters of the gulf! “ Then, closing the lattice and turning away, he added: “ It is not the captain yet.”

A light shone behind the iron gate. The rusty bolts creaked, the grating rose, the gate opened, and the ser- geant examined a parchment handed him by the new- comer.

“Pass in,” said he. “ But stay,” he added hastily, “ leave your hat-buckle outside. No one is allowed to enter the prisons of the State wearing jewels. The order declares that ‘ the king and the members of the royal family, the viceroy and members of the vice-regal family, the bishop, and the officers of the garrison, are alone excepted.’ You come under none of these heads, do you?”

The young man, without reply, removed the forbidden ornament, and flung it to the fisherman who brought him thither, in payment of his services; the latter, fearing lest he might repent his generosity, made haste to put a broad expanse of sea between the benefactor and his benefit.

While the sergeant, grumbling at the chancellor’s imprudence in being so prodigal with his passes, replaced the clumsy bars, and while the lingering sound of his heavy boots still echoed on the stairs leading to the guard-house, the young man, throwing his mantle over his shoulder, hurriedly crossed the dark vault of the low tower, the long parade-ground, and the ordnance-room, where lay a few old dismantled culverins, still to be seen in the Copenhagen museum, all nearer approach to which was forbidden by the warning cry of a sentinel. He reached the great portcullis, which was raised on sight of his parchment. Thence, followed by a soldier, he crossed diagonally, without hesitation, and like one familiar with the place, one of the four square courts which skirt the great circular yard, in whose midst rose the huge round rock upon which stood the donjon, called the castle of the Lion of Schleswig, from the forced sojourn there of Jotham the Lion, Duke of Schleswig, held captive by his brother, Rolf the Dwarf.

It is not our purpose to give a description of Munkholm keep, the more so that the reader, confined in a State prison, might fear that he could not escape through the garden. He would be mistaken; for the castle of the Lion of Schleswig, meant for prisoners of distinction only, among other conveniences affords them the pleasure of a walk in a sort of wild garden of considerable extent, where clumps of holly, a few ancient yews, and some dark pines grow among the rocks around the lofty prison, inside an enclosure of thick walls and huge towers.

Reaching the foot of the round rock, the young man climbed the rude winding steps which lead to the foot of one of the towers of the enclosure, having a postern below, which served as the entrance to the keep. Here he blew a loud blast on a copper horn handed to him by the warder of the great portcullis. “ Come in, come in! “ eagerly exclaimed

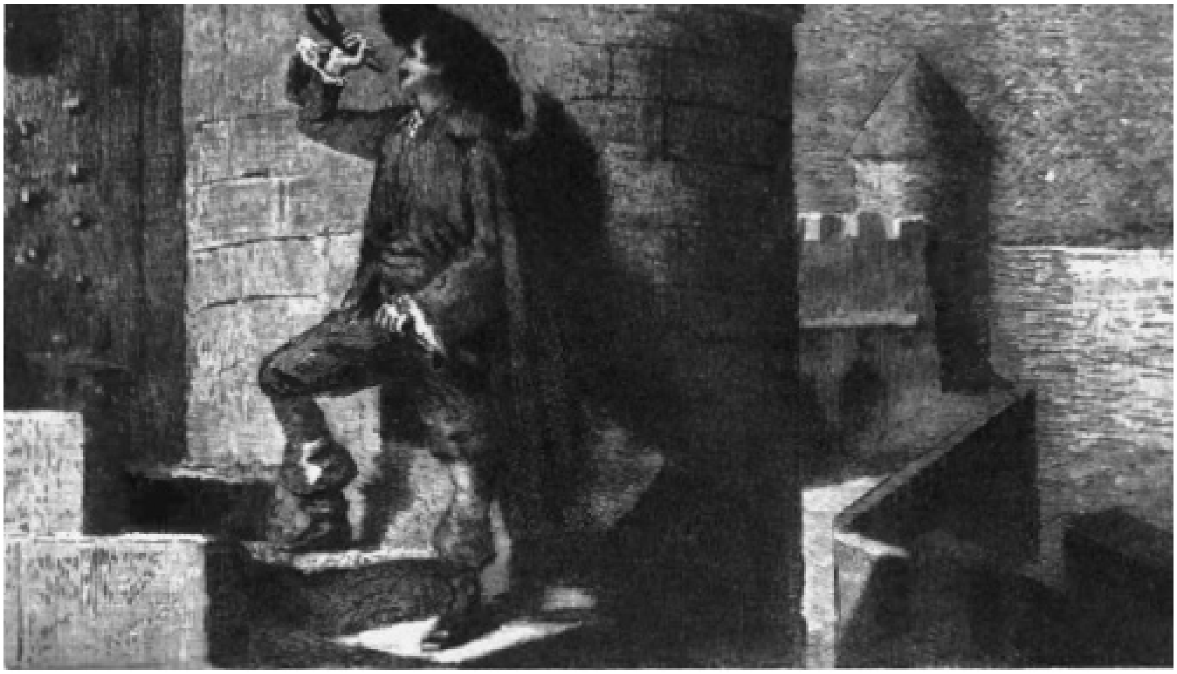

He blew a loud Blast on a copper Horn

a voice from within; “ it must be that confounded captain! “

As the postern swung open, the new-comer saw, in a dimly lighted Gothic apartment, a young officer stretched carelessly upon a pile of cloaks and reindeer-skins, beside one of the three-beaked lamps which our ancestors used to hang from the rose-work of their ceilings, and which at this moment stood upon the ground. The elegance and indeed excessive luxury of his dress was in strong contrast with the bare walls and rude furniture; he held a book, and turned slightly toward the new-comer.

“Is it you, Captain? How are you, Captain? You little suspected that you were keeping a man waiting who has not the pleasure of your acquaintance; but our acquaintance will soon be made, will it not? Begin by receiving my commiseration upon your return to this venerable castle. Short as my stay here may be, I shall soon be about as gay as the owl nailed at donjon doors to serve as scarecrow, and when I return to Copenhagen, to my sister’s wedding feast, the deuce take me if four women out of a hundred will know me! Tell me, are the knots of pink ribbon at the hem of my doublet still in fashion? Has any one translated a new novel by that Frenchwoman, Mademoiselle Scudéry? I have ‘ Clelia; ‘ I suppose people are still reading it in Copenhagen. It is my code of gallantry, now that I am forced to sigh remote from so many bright eyes; for, bright as they are, the eyes of our young prisoner you know who I mean have never a message for me. Ah!

were it not for my father’s orders! . . . I must tell you in confidence, Captain, that my father, -but don’t mention it, charged me to you understand me Schumacker’s daughter. But I have my labor for my pains; that pretty statue is not a woman; she weeps all day long and never looks at me.”

The young man, unable thus far to interrupt the officer’s extreme volubility, uttered an exclamation of surprise: -

“What! What did you say? Charged you to seduce the daughter of that unfortunate Schumacker! “

“Seduce? Well, so be it, if that is the name you give it now in Copenhagen; but I defy the Devil himself to succeed. Day before yesterday, being on duty, I put on for her express benefit a superb French ruff sent direct from Paris. Would you believe that she never even raised her eyes to look at me, although I passed through her room three or four times clinking my new spurs, whose rowels are no bigger than a Lombardy ducat? That ‘s the newest fashion, isn’t it?”

“Heavens! Heavens!” said the young man, striking his forehead; “but this confounds me! “

“I thought it would!” rejoined the officer, mistaking the meaning of the remark. “ Not to take the least notice of me! It is incredible, and yet it is true.”

The young man strode up and down the room in violent excitement.

“Won’t you take some refreshment, Captain Dispolsen? “ cried the officer.

The young man started.

“I am not Captain Dispolsen.”

“What! “ said the officer angrily, sitting up as he spoke; “and pray who are you, then, that venture to introduce yourself here at this hour? “

The youug man displayed his papers.

“I wish to see Count Grittenfeld, -I would say, your prisoner.”

“The Count! the Count! “ muttered the officer in some displeasure. “ But, to be sure, this paper is in order; here is the signature of Vice-Chancellor Grummond de Knud:

‘ Admit the bearer to visit all the royal prisons at any hour and at any time.’ Grummond de Kuud is brother to old General Levin de Knud, who is in command at Throndhjem, and you must know that this old general had the bringing up of my future brother-in-law.”

“Thanks for these family details, Lieutenant. Don’t you think you have told me enough of them?”

“The impertinent fellow is right,” said the lieutenant, biting his lips. “ Hullo, there, officer, officer of the tower! Escort this stranger to Schumacker, and do not scold if I have taken down your lamp with three beaks and but one wick. I was curious to examine an article which is doubtless the work of Sciold the Pagan or Havar the giant-killer; and besides it is no longer the fashion to hang anything but crystal chandeliers from the ceiling.”

With these words, as the young man and his escort crossed the deserted donjon garden, the martyr to fashion resumed the thread of the love adventures of the Amazonian Clelia and Horatius the One-eyed.

CHAPTER IV MASTER AND MAN.

Benvolio, Where the devil should this Romeo be? Came he not home to-night?

Mercutio. Not to his father’s; I spoke with his man.

Shakespeare: Romeo and Juliet.

A man and two horses entered the courtyard of the palace of the governor of Throndhjem. The horseman dismounted, shaking his head with a discontented air. He was about to lead the two animals to the stable, when his arm was seized, and a voice cried: “ How! You here alone, Poöl! And your master, -where is your master?”

It was old General Levin de Knud, who, seeing from his window the young man’s servant and the empty saddle, descended quickly, and fastened upon the groom a gaze which betrayed even more alarm than his question.

“Your Excellency,” said Poöl, with a low bow, “ my master has left Throndhjem.”

“What! has he been here, and gone again without seeing his general, without greeting his old friend! And how long since? “

“He arrived this evening and left this evening.”

“This evening, this very evening! But where did he stay? Where has he gone? “

“He stopped at the Spladgest, and has embarked for Munkholm.”

“Ah! I supposed he was at the antipodes. But what is his business at that castle? What took him to the Spladgest? Just like my knight-errant. After all, I am rather to blame, for why did I give him such a bringing up? I wanted him to be free in spite of his rank.”

“Therefore he is no slave to etiquette,” said Poöl.

“No; but he is to his own caprice. Well, he will doubtless return. Rest and refresh yourself, Poöl. Tell me,” and the general’s face took on an expression of solicitude, “tell me, Poöl, have you been doing much running up and down? “

“General, we came here direct from Bergen. My master was melancholy.”

“Melancholy! Why, what can have occurred between him and his father? Is he averse to this marriage? “

“I do not know. But they say that his Serene Highness insists upon it.”

“Insists! You say, Poöl, that the viceroy insists upon this match! But why should he insist unless Ordener refused? “

“I don’t know, your Excellency. He seems sad.”

“Sad! Do you know how his father received him? “

“The first time, it was at the camp, near Bergen. His Serene Highness said, ‘ I seldom see you, my son.’ ‘ So much the better for me, my lord and father,’ replied my master, ‘if you take note of it.’ Then he gave his Grace certain details about his travels in the North, and his Grace said: ‘ It is well.’ Next day my master came back from the palace and said: ‘They want me to marry; but I must consult my second father, General Levin.’ I saddled the horses, and here we are.”

“Really, my good Poöl,” said the general, in trembling tones, “ did he really call me his second father? “

“Yes, your Excellency.”

“Woe to me if this marriage distresses him, for I will sooner incur the king’s displeasure than lend myself to it. And yet, the daughter of the Lord High Chancellor of both kingdoms By the way, Poöl, does Ordener know that his future mother-in-law, Countess d’Ahlefeld, has been here incognito since yesterday, and that the count is expected?”

“I don’t know, General.”

“Oh, yes,” thought the old governor, “ he knows it; for why else should he beat a retreat the instant that he arrived?” Upon this, the general, with a friendly wave of the hand to Poöl, and a salute to the sentinel who presented arms to him, returned in anxious mood to the quarters which he had left in anxious mood.

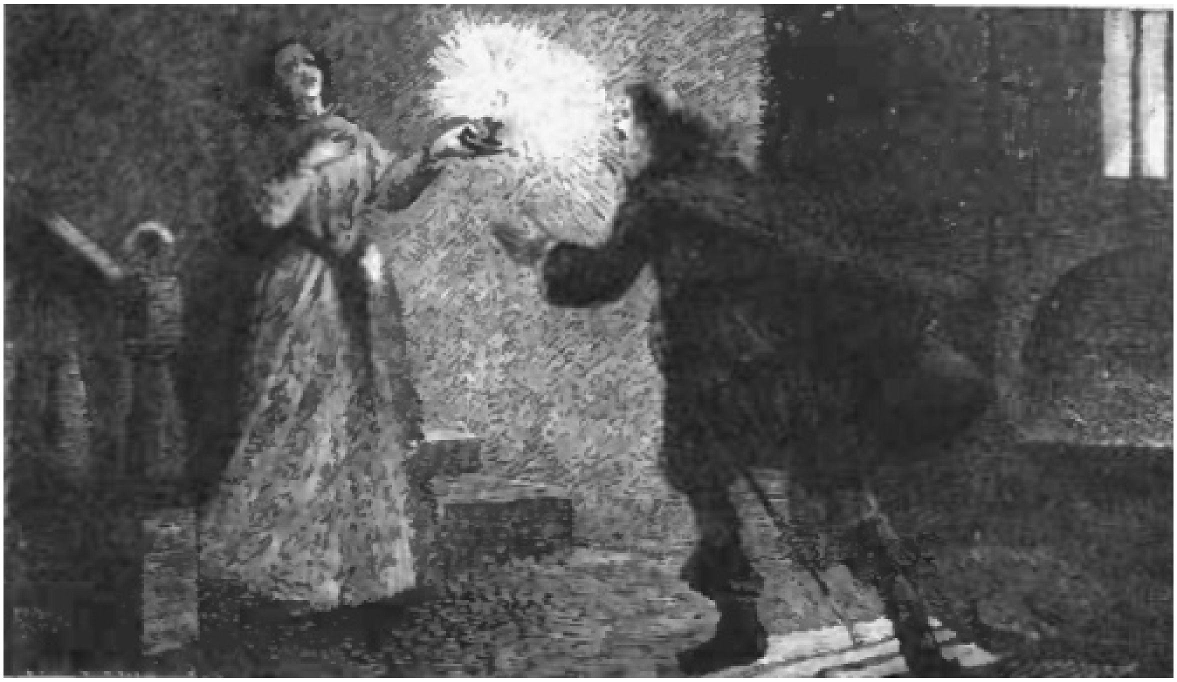

He vainly tried to grasp the Lamp

CHAPTER V THE BITTERNESS OP CAPTIVITY.

It seemed as if every emotion had stirred his heart, and had also deserted it; nothing remained but the mournful, piercing gaze of a man thoroughly familiar with men, who saw, at a glance, the aim and object of all things.-

Schiller: The Visions.

When, after leading the stranger along the winding stairs and lofty halls of the donjon of the Lion of Schleswig, the officer finally threw open the door of the room occupied by the man he sought, the first words that fell upon his ear were once more these: “ Has Captain Dispolsen come at last? “

The speaker was an old man, seated with his back to the door, his elbows on a writing-table, his head buried in his hands. He wore a black woollen gown, and above a bed at one end of the room hung a broken escutcheon, around which were grouped the broken collars of the orders of the Elephant and the Dannebrog; a count’s coronet, reversed, was fastened under the shield, and two fragments of a hand of Justice, tied crosswise, completed the strange ornamentation. The old man was Schumacker.

“No, my Lord,” replied the officer; then he said to the stranger, “This is the prisoner;” and leaving them together, he closed the door, without heeding the shrill voice of the old man, who exclaimed: “ If it is not the captain, I will see no one.”

At these words the stranger remained by the door; and the prisoner, thinking himself alone, for he had turned away, fell back into his silent revery. Suddenly he exclaimed: “ The captain has assuredly forsaken and betrayed me! Men, -men are like the icicle which an Arab took for a diamond; he hid it carefully in his wallet, and when he looked for it again he found not even a drop of water.”

“I am no such man,” said the stranger. Schumacker rose quickly. “ Who is here? “Who overhears me? Is it some miserable tool of that Guldenlew?”

“Speak no evil of the viceroy, my lord Count.”

“Lord Count! Do you address me thus to flatter me? You have your labor for your pains; I am powerful no longer.”

‘‘ He who speaks to you never knew you in your day of power, and is none the less your friend.”

"Because he still hopes to gain something from me; those memories of the unhappy which linger in the minds of men are to be measured by the hopes of future gain."

"I am the one who should complain, noble Count; for I remember you, and you have forgotten me, I am Ordener."

A flash of joy lit up the old man's sad eyes, and a smile which he could not repress parted his white beard, as when a sunbeam breaks through a cloud.

"Ordener! Welcome, traveller Ordener! A thousand prayers for the happiness of the traveller who remembers the prisoner! "

"But," inquired Ordener, " had you really forgotten me? "

"I had forgotten you," said Schumaker, resuming his sombre mood. " as we forget the breeze which refreshes us and passes by: we are fortunate if it does not become a whirlwind to destroy us."

"Count Griffenfeld." rejoined the young man, -did you not count upon my return? "

"Old Schumacker did not count upon it; but there is a maiden here, who reminded me this very day that it was a year on the 8th of last May, since you went away."

Ordener started.

"Heavens! Can it be your Ethel, noble Count? "

"Who else? "

"Your daughter, my Lord, has deigned to count the months of my absence! Oh, how many dreary days I have passed: I have traversed Norway from Christiania to Wardhus: but my journeying? always tended back toward Throndhjem."

"Use your freedom, young man. while you may. But tell me who you are. I would like, Ordener, to know you by some other name. The son of one of my mortal foes is called Ordener."

"Perhaps, my lord Count, this mortal foe feels greater kindness for you than you for him."

"You evade my question; but keep your secret. I might learn that the fruit which quenches my thirst is a poison which will destroy me."

"Count! " cried Ordener, angrily; " Count! " he repeated, in tones of pity and reproach.

"Why should I trust you," replied Schumacker, "you who to my very face defend the merciless Guldenlew? "

“The viceroy,” gravely interrupted the young man, “ has just ordered that for the future you shall be free and unguarded within the entire precinct of the Lion of Schleswig keep. This news I learned at Bergen, and you will doubtless soon hear it from headquarters.”

“This is a favor for which I dared not hope, and I thought you were the only person to whom I had mentioned my wish. So they lessen the weight of my chains as that of my years increases; and when old age renders me helpless, they will probably tell me, ‘ You are free.’ “

So saying, the old man smiled bitterly, and added: “And you, young man, do you still cling to your foolish ideas of independence?”

“If I had not those same foolish ideas, I should not be here.”

“How did you come to Trondhjem?”

“Why, on horseback.”

“How did you reach Munkholm? “

“By boat.”

“Poor fool! You think yourself free, and yet you only leave a horse for a boat. It is not your own limbs that carry out your wishes; it is a brute beast, it is material matter; and you call that free will! “

“I force animate beings to obey me.”

“To assume a right to the obedience of certain beings is to give others a right to command you. Independence exists only in isolation.”

“You do not love mankind, noble Count? “

The old man laughed sadly. “ I weep that I am a man, and I laugh at him who would console me. You will yet learn, if you do not already know, that misfortune creates suspicion as prosperity does ingratitude. Tell me, since you come from Bergen, what favoring winds blow upon Captain Dispolsen. Some good fortune must have befallen him, that he forgets me.”

Ordener looked grave and embarrassed.

“Dispolsen, my lord Count? I come here to-day to talk to you of him. I know that he possessed your entire confidence.”

“You know? “ broke in the prisoner, uneasily. “ You are mistaken. No one on earth has my confidence. Dispolsen has, it is true, my papers, and very important papers too. He went to Copenhagen, to the king, for me. I may even confess that I reckoned more surely upon him than upon any one else, for in the days of my prosperity I never did him a service.”

“Well, noble Count, I saw him to-day “

‘‘ Your distress tells me the rest; he is a traitor.”

“He is dead.”

“Dead! “

The prisoner folded his arms and bent his head, then looking up at the young man, said: “ I told you some good fortune must have befallen him! “

His eye turned to the wall, where the signs of his former grandeur hung, and he waved his hand, as if to dismiss the witness of a grief which he strove to conquer.

“I do not pity him; ‘t is but one man the less. Nor do I pity myself; what have I to lose? But my daughter, my unfortunate daughter! I shall be the victim of this infernal plot; and what is to become of her, if her father is taken from her? “

He turned quickly to Ordener. “ How did he die? Where did you see him? “

“I saw him at the Spladgest. No one knows whether he died by suicide or by the hand of an assassin.”

“That is now all-important. If he was murdered, I know who dealt the blow. Then all is lost. He bore proof’s of the conspiracy against me. Those proofs might have saved me and ruined them! Unhappy Ethel! “

“My lord Count,” said Ordener, bowing, “ to-morrow I will tell you whether he was murdered.”

Schumacker, without answering, cast on Ordener, as he left the room, a look of quiet despair more terrible than the calm of death.

Ordener found himself in the prisoner’s empty antechamber, not knowing which way to turn. Night was far advanced and the room was dark. He opened a door at haphazard and entered a vast corridor lighted only by the moon, which moved rapidly through pale clouds. Its misty beams fell now and again upon the long, narrow glass windows, and painted on the opposite wall what seemed a procession of ghosts, appearing and disappearing simultaneously in the depths of the passage. The young man slowly crossed himself, and walked toward a light which shone faintly at the end of the corridor.

A door stood ajar; a young girl knelt in a Gothic oratory, at the foot of a bare altar, reciting in low tones litanies to the Virgin, simple and sublime aspirations, in which the soul that rises toward the Mother of Seven Sorrows asks nothing but her prayers.

The young girl was dressed in black crape and white gauze, as if to show at a glance that her days had hitherto been passed in grief and innocence.

Even in this modest attitude she bore the impress of a strange nature. Her eyes and her long hair were black (a very rare beauty in the North); her eyes, raised to heaven, seemed kindled with rapture rather than dimmed by meditation. She seemed a virgin from the shores of Cyprus or the banks of the Tiber, clad in the fauciful disguise of one of Ossian's characters and prostrate before the wooden cross and stone altar of Christ Jesus.

Ordener started and almost fell, for he recognized the devotee.

She was praying for her father, for the mighty who had fallen, for the old and desolate prisoner; and she recited aloud the psalm of the deliverance out of Egypt. She prayed for another as well, but Ordener did not hear his name. He did not hear it, for she did not utter it; she merely recited the canticle of the Sulamite, the bride who awaits her bridegroom and the return of her beloved.

Ordener stepped back into the gallery; he respected the maiden holding converse with the sky. Prayer is a great mystery, and his heart was involuntarily filled with unknown but profane ecstasy.

The door of the oratory was gently closed. Soon a light borne by a white figure moved toward him through the darkness. He stood still, for he felt one of the strongest emotions of his life; he leaned against the gloomy wall; his body was weak, and his limbs trembled beneath him. In the silence of his entire being the beating of his heart was plainly audible to his own ear.

As the young girl passed, she heard the rustle of a garment, and a quick, sudden gasp, and cried out in terror.

Ordener rushed forward. With one arm he supported her, with the other he vainly tried to grasp the lamp which she had dropped, and which went out.

"It is I," he said softly.

"It is Ordener! " said the girl; for the last echo of that voice, which she had not heard for a year, still rang in her ear.

And the moon, passing by, revealed the joy of her fair face. Then she repeated, in timid confusion, freeing herself from the young man's arms, " It is my lord Ordener."

"Himself, Countess Ethel."

"Why do you call me countess? "

"Why do you call me my lord? "

The young girl smiled, and was silent. The young man was silent, and sighed. She was first to break the silence.

“How came you here? “

“Pardon me, if my presence disturbs you. I came to see the count, your father.”

“Then,” said Ethel, in a changed tone, “ you only came for my father’s sake.”

The young man bent his head, for these words seemed to him unjust.

“I suppose you have been in Throndhjem a long time,” she continued reproachfully, “ I suppose you have been here a long time already? Your absence from this castle cannot have seemed long to you.”

Ordener, deeply wounded, made no reply.

“You are right,” said the prisoner, in a voice which trembled with anger and distress; “ but,” she added, in a haughty tone, “ I hope, my lord Ordener, that you did not overhear my prayers? “

“Countess,” reluctantly replied the young man, “I did hear you.”

“Ah! my lord Ordener, it was far from courteous to listen.”

“I did not listen, noble Countess,” said Ordener in a low voice; “ I overheard you accidentally.”

“I prayed for my father,” rejoined the girl, looking steadily at him, as if expecting an answer to this very simple statement.

Ordener was silent.

“I also prayed,” she continued uneasily, and apparently anxious as to the effect which her words might produce upon him, “ I also prayed for some one who bears your name, for the son of the viceroy, Count Guldenlew. For we should pray for every one, even our persecutors.”

And she blushed, for she thought she was lying; but she was offended with the young man, and she fancied that she had mentioned him in her prayer; she had only named him in her heart.

“Ordener Guldenlew is very unfortunate, noble lady, if you reckon him among the number of your persecutors; and yet he is very fortunate to possess a place in your prayers.”

“Oh, no,” said Ethel, troubled and alarmed by his cold manner, “ no, I did not pray for him. I do not know what I did, nor what I do. As for the viceroy’s son, I detest him; I do not know him. Do not look at me so sternly; have I offended you? Can you not forgive a poor prisoner, you who spend your days in the society of some fair and noble lady, free and happy like yourself? “

“I, Countess! “ exclaimed Ordener.

Ethel burst into tears; the young man flung himself at her feet.

“Did you not tell me,” she continued, smiling through her tears, “that your absence seemed to you short?”

“Who, I, Countess ‘?”

“Do not call me countess,” said she, gently; “ I am no longer a countess to any one, and far less to you.”

The young man sprang up, and could not help clasping her to his heart in convulsive delight.

“Oh, my adored Ethel, call me your own Ordener! Tell me,” -and his ardent glances rested on her eyes wet with tears,- “ tell me, do you love me still? “

The young girl’s answer went unheard, for Ordener, carried away by his emotions, snatched from her lips with her reply that first favor, that sacred kiss, which in the sight of God suffices to make two lovers man and wife.

Both were speechless, because the moment was one of those solemn ones, so rare and so brief in this world, when the soul seems to feel something of celestial bliss. These instants when two souls thus converse in a language understood by no other are not to be described; then all that is human is hushed, and the two immaterial beings become mysteriously united for life in this world and eternity in the next.

Ethel slowly withdrew from Ordener’s arms, and by the light of the moon each gazed into the other’s face with ecstasy; only, the young man’s eye of fire flashed with masculine pride and leonine courage, while the maiden’s downcast face was marked by that modesty and angelic shame which in a virgin beauty are always blended with all the joys of love.

“Were you trying to avoid me just now,” she said at last, “ here in this corridor, my Ordener? “

“Not to avoid you. I was like the unfortunate blind man who is restored to sight after the lapse of long years, and who turns away from the light’s first radiance.”

“Your comparison is more applicable to me, for during your absence my only pleasure has been the presence of a wretched man, my father. I spent my weary days in trying to comfort him, and,” she added, looking down, “ in hoping for your coming. I read the fables of the Edda to my father, and when he doubted all men, I read him the Gospel, that at least he might not doubt Heaven; then I talked to him of you, and he was silent, which shows that he loves you. But when I had spent my evenings in vainly watching the arrival of travellers by various roads. and the ships which anchored in the harbor, he shook his head with a bitter smile, and I wept. This prison, where my whole past life has been spent, grew hateful to me; and yet my father, who until you came was all-sufficient for my wants, was still here; but you were not here, and I longed for that liberty which I had never known.”

There was a charm which no tongue can express, in the maiden’s eyes, in the simplicity of her love, and the sweet hesitation of her confession. Ordener listened with the dreamy delight of a being who has been removed from the world of reality to enjoy an ideal world.

“And I,” said he, “ no longer desire that liberty which you do not share! “

“What, Ordener! “ quickly exclaimed Ethel, “ will you leave us no more?”

These words recalled the young man to all that he had forgotten.

‘‘My Ethel, I must leave you this very night. I will see you again to-morrow, and to-morrow I must leave you again, to remain until I may return never more to leave you.”

“Alas’” mournfully broke in the girl, “must you leave rne again? “

“I repeat, my beloved Ethel, that I will come back soon to wrest you from this prison or bury myself in it with you.”

“A prisoner with him!” she said softly. “Ah! do not deceive me. Must I only hope for such happiness? “

“What oath do you require? What would you have me do? “ cried Ordener; “ tell me, Ethel, are you not my wife? “ And in a transport of affection he pressed her to his heart.

“I am yours,” she whispered.

The two pure and noble hearts throbbed rapturously together, and were but purer and nobler for the embrace.

At this moment a violent burst of laughter was heard close by. A man wrapped in a cloak opened a dark lantern which he had concealed, and the light suddenly revealed Ethel’s alarmed, confused face and Ordener’s proud but astonished features.

“Courage, my pretty pair! Courage! It strikes me that after so short a walk in the regions of Romance you can scarcely have followed all the windings of the stream of Sentiment, but that you must have taken a short-cut to reach the village of Kisses so quickly.”

Our readers have doubtless recognized the lieutenant, who so cordially admired Mademoiselle de Scudéry. Roused from his reading of “ Clelia “

by the midnight bell, which the two lovers had failed to hear, he started on his nightly rounds. As he passed the end of the eastern corridor, he caught a few words, and saw what seemed two ghosts moving in the gallery by the light of the moon. Being naturally bold and curious, he hid his lantern under his cloak, and advanced on tiptoe to the two phantoms, so disagreeably awakened from their ecstasy by his sudden burst of laughter.

Ethel made a movement to escape from Ordener; then, returning to his side as if instinctively, and to ask his protection, she hid her burning blushes on her lover's breast,

He raised his head with all the dignity of a king.

"Woe," said he, " woe to him who has frightened and distressed you, Ethel! "

"Yes, indeed," said the lieutenant; "woe befall me if I am so unfortunate as to alarm so sensitive a lady! "

"Sir Lieutenant," haughtily exclaimed Ordener, " I command you to be silent! "

"Sir Insolent," replied the officer, " I command you to be silent! "

"Do you hear me? " returned Ordener in tones of thunder. " -Buy pardon by your silence."

"*Tibi tua,*" responded the lieutenant; " take your own advice, buy pardon by your silence! "

"Silence! " cried Ordener in a voice which made the windows shake; and seating the trembling girl in one of the old arm-chairs in the corridor, he grasped the officer rudely by the arm.

"Oh, clown! " said the lieutenant, half laughing, half angry; " don't you see that the doublet which you are so mercilessly crushing is made of the finest Abingdon velvet? "

Ordener looked him full in the face.

"Lieutenant, my patience is not so long as my sword."

"I understand you, my fine fellow," said the lieutenant, with a sardonic smile. " You want me to do you the honor to fight with you. But do you know who I am? No, no, if you please! ' Prince with prince; clown with clown,' as the fair Leander has it."

"If he had added, ' Coward with coward,' " Ordener replied, " I should assuredly never have the distinguished honor of measuring weapons with you."

“I would not hesitate, most worthy shepherd, if you did but wear a uniform.”

“I have neither lace nor fringes, Lieutenant; but I wear a sword.” The proud youth, flinging back his cloak, set his cap firmly on his head and grasped his sword-hilt, when Ethel, roused by such imminent danger, seized his arm and clasped his neck, with an exclamation of terror and entreaty.

“You are wise, my pretty mistress, if you do not want your young coxcomb punished for his temerity,” said the lieutenant, who at Ordener’s threats had put himself upon his guard without any show of emotion; “ for Cyrus was about to quarrel with Cambyses, if it be not too great an honor to compare this rustic to Cambyses.”

“For Heaven’s sake, Lord Ordener,” said Ethel, “ do not make me the cause and witness of such a misfortune! “ Then lifting her lovely eyes to his, she added, “ Ordener, I implore you! “

Ordener slowly replaced his half-drawn blade in its scabbard, and the lieutenant exclaimed,

“By my faith, Sir Knight, I do not know whether you be a knight, but I give you the title because you seem to deserve it, let us act according to the laws of valor, if not of gallantry. The lady is right. Engagements like that which I believe you worthy to enter upon with me should not be witnessed by ladies, although begging this charming damsel’s pardon they may be caused by them. We can therefore only properly discuss the *duellum remotum* here and now, and as the offended party if you will fix the time, place, and weapons, my fine Toledo blade or my Merida dagger shall be at the service of your chopping-knife from the Ashkreuth forges or your hunting-knife tempered in Lake Sparbo.”

The “ duel adjourned,” which the officer suggested was usual in the North, where scholars aver that the custom of duelling originated. The most valiant gentlemen offered and accepted a *ducllum rcmotum.* It was sometimes deferred for several months, or even years, and during that space of time the foes must not allude by word or deed to the matter which caused the challenge. Thus in love both rivals forbore to see their sweetheart, so that things might remain unchanged. All confidence was put in the loyalty of a knight upon such a point; as in the ancient tournament, if the judges, deeming the laws of courtesy violated, cast their truncheon into the arena, instantly every combatant stayed his hand; but until the doubt was cleared up, the throat of the conquered man must remain at the selfsame distance from his victor’s sword.

“Very well, Chevalier,” replied Ordener, after a brief reflection; “ a messenger shall inform you of the place.”

“Good! “ answered the lieutenant; “ so much the bet- ter. That will give me time to go to my sister’s wedding; for you must know that you are to have the honor of fighting with the future brother-in-law of a great lord, the son of the viceroy of Norway, Baron Ordener Guldenlew, who upon the occasion of this ‘ auspicious union,’ as Artamenes has it, will be made Count Daneskiold, a colonel, and a knight of the Order of the Elephant; and I myself, who am a son of the lord high chancellor of both kingdoms, shall undoubtedly be made a captain.”

“Very good, very good, Lieutenant d’Ahlefeld,” impatiently exclaimed Ordener, “ you are not a captain yet, nor is the son of the viceroy a colonel; and swords are always swords.”

“And clowns always clowns, in spite of every effort to lift them to our own level,” muttered the soldier.

“Chevalier,” added Ordener, “you know the laws of duelling. You are not to enter this donjon again, and you are not to speak of this affair.”

“Trust me to be silent; I shall be as dumb as Mutius Scævola when he held his hand on the burning coals. I will not enter the donjon again, nor permit any Argus of the garrison to do so; for I have just received orders to allow Schumacker to go unguarded in future, which order I was directed to convey to him to-night, as I should have done had I not spent most of the evening in trying on some new boots from Cracow. The order, between you and me, is a very rash one. Would you like to have me show you my boots? “

During this conversation Ethel, seeing that their anger was appeased, and not knowing the meaning of a *duellum remotum*, had disappeared, first softly whispering in Ordener’s ear, “ To-morrow.”

“I wish, Lieutenant d’Ahlefeld, that you would help me out of the fortress.”

“Gladly,” said the officer, “ although it is somewhat late, or rather very early. But how will you find a boat? “

“That is my affair,” said Ordener.

Then, chatting pleasantly, they crossed the garden, the circular courtyard, and the square court, Ordener escorted by the officer of the guard, meeting with no obstacle; they passed through the great gate, the ordnance-room, the parade-ground, and reached the low tower, whose iron doors opened at the lieutenant’s order.

“Good-by, Lieutenant d’Ahlefeld,” said Ordener.

“Good-by,” replied the officer. “ I declare that you are a brave champion, although I do not know who you are or whether those of your peers whom you may bring to our meeting will be entitled to assume the position of seconds, and ought not rather confine themselves to the modest part of witnesses.”

They shook hands, the iron grating was closed, and the lieutenant went back, humming an air by Lully, to enjoy his Polish boots and French novel.

Ordener, left alone upon the threshold, took off his clothes, which he wrapped in his cloak and fastened upon his head with his sword-belt; then, putting into practice Schumacker’s principles of independence, he sprang into the still, cold waters of the fjord, and swam through the darkness towards the shore, in the direction of the Spladgest, a point which he was almost sure to reach, dead or alive.

The fatigues of the day had exhausted him, so that it was only with great difficulty that he landed. He dressed himself hastily, and walked towards the Spladgest, which reared its black bulk before him, the moon having been for some time completely veiled.

As he approached the building he heard the sound of voices; a faint light shone from the opening in the roof. Amazed, he knocked loudly at the square door. The noise ceased; the light disappeared. He knocked again. The light reappeared, and he saw a black figure climb out of the hole in the roof and vanish. Ordener knocked for the third time with the hilt of his sword, and shouted: “ Open, in the name of his Majesty the King! Open, in the name of his Serene Highness the Viceroy! “

The door opened slowly, and Ordener found himself face to face with the pale features and tall, thin figure of Spiagudry, who, his clothes in disorder, his eyes fixed, his hair standing erect, his hands covered with blood, held a lamp, whose flame trembled less visibly than his long and lanky figure.

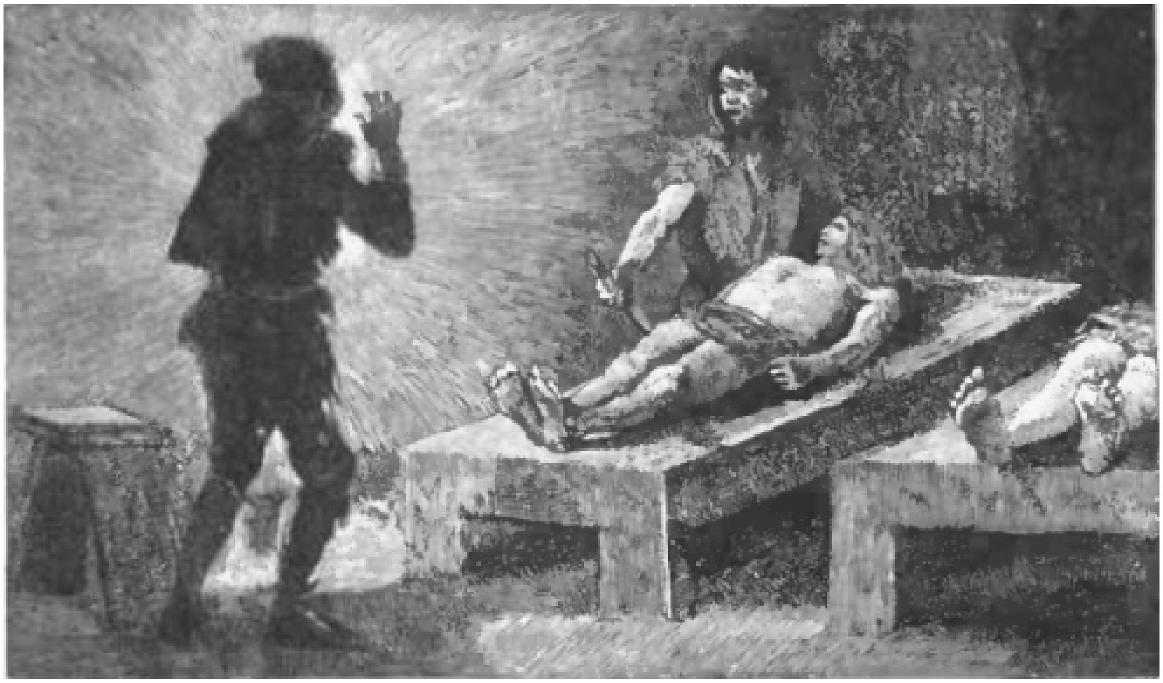

His Lamp lit up a strange and hideous Scene

CHAPTER VI GOLD IS OFTEN BOUGHT TOO DEARLY.

Pirro. Never!
Angelo. What! I believe you would try to play the virtuous man. Wretch! If you utter a single word -
Pirro. But, Angelo, I beseech you, for the love of God-
Angelo. Do not meddle with what you cannot prevent.
Pirro. Ah! When the Devil holds one by a single hair, as well yield him the entire head. Unhappy that I am!
Emilia Galotti.

An hour after the young traveller with the black plume left the Spladgest, night fell, and the crowd dispersed. Oglypiglap closed the outer door of the funereal structure, while his master, Spiagudry, gave the bodies deposited within a final sprinkling. Then both withdrew to their scantily furnished abode, and while Oglypiglap slept upon his wretched pallet, like one of the corpses intrusted to his care, the venerable Spiagudry, seated at a stone table covered with old books, dried plants, and fleshless bones, was buried in grave studies which, although really very harmless, had done no little to give him a reputation among the people, for sorcery and witchcraft, the disagreeable consequence of science at this period.

He had been absorbed in his meditations for some hours, and, ready at last to exchange his books for his bed, he paused at this mournful passage from Thormodr Torfesen:

“When a man lights his lamp, death is beside him ere it be extinguished.”

“With the learned doctor’s leave,” he muttered, “ he shall not be beside me to-night.”

And he took up his lamp to blow it out.

“Spiagudry!” cried a voice from the room where the corpses lay. The old man shook from head to foot. Not that he believed, as another might have done in his place, that the gloomy guests of the Spladgest had risen in revolt against their master. He was enough of a scholar to be proof against such imaginary terrors; and his alarm was genuine, because he knew the voice which called him only too well.

“Spiagudry! “ angrily repeated the voice, “ must I come and pull off your ears before I can make you hear me?”

“Saint Hospitius have mercy, not on my soul, but on my body! “ said the terrified old man; and with a step both hastened and delayed by fear, he moved towards the second side door, which he opened. Our readers have not forgotten that this door led into the mortuary.

His lamp lit up a strange aud hideous scene, on the one hand, the thin, tall, stooping figure of Spiagudry; on the other, a short, stout man, dressed from head to foot in the skins of wild beasts, still stained with dried blood, standing at the feet of Gill Stadt’s corpse, which, with the dead bodies of the young girl and the captain, occupied the background. These three mute witnesses, buried in shadow, were the only ones who could behold, without Flying in horror, the two living beings who now entered into conversation.

The features of the little man, thrown into vivid relief by the light, were singularly wild and fierce. His beard was red and bushy, and his forehead, hidden under an elkskin cap, seemed bristling with hair of the same color; his mouth was large, his lips thick, his teeth white, sharp, and far apart, his nose hooked like an eagle’s beak; and his grayish-blue eyes, which were extremely quick, flashed a side glance at Spiagudry, in which the ferocity of a tiger was only tempered by the malice of a monkey. This singular character was armed with a broadsword, an unsheathed dagger, and a stone axe, upon whose long handle he leaned; his hands were covered with thick gloves made of a blue fox-skin.

“That old ghost keeps me waiting a long time,” said he, as if talking to himself; and he uttered a sound like the roar of a wild beast.

Spiagudry would certainly have turned pale with fright, had he been capable of turning paler than he was. “ Do you know,” continued the little man, addressing him directly, “ that I come from Urchtal Sands? Do you want to change your straw bed for one of these beds of stone, that you keep me waiting thus? “

Spiagudry trembled more than ever; the two solitary teeth left to him chattered in his head.

“Excuse me, master,” said he, bending his long back to a level with the little man; “ I was asleep.”

“Do you want me to make you acquainted with a far sounder sleep than that? “

Spiagudry’s face assumed an expression of terror, the only thing which could be more comic than his expression of mirth.

“Well! what is it? “ continued the little man. “ What ails you? Is my presence disagreeable to you? “

“Oh, my lord and master! “ replied the old keeper, “ there can surely be no greater happiness for me than to see your Excellence.”

And the effort which he made to twist his frightened face into a smile would have unbent the brow of any but the dead.

“Tailless old fox, my Excellence commands you to hand over the clothes of Gill Stadt.”

As he uttered this name, the little man’s fierce, mocking features grew dark and sad.

“Oh, master, pardon me, but I no longer have them! “ said Spiagudry. “ Your Grace knows that we are obliged to turn over the property of all workers in the mine to the Crown, the king inheriting by right of their being his wards.”

The little man turned to the corpse, folded his arms, and said in a hollow voice: “ He is right. These miserable miners are like the eider duck; their nests are made for them, but their down is plucked from them.”

Then raising the corpse in his arms and hugging it to his heart, he began to utter wild yells of love and grief, like the howls of a bear caressing her young. With these inarticulate sounds were blended, at intervals, a few words in a strange lingo, which Spiagudry did not understand.

He let the corpse drop back upon the stone, and turned towards the guardian.

“Do you know, accursed sorcerer, the name of the illfated soldier who was so unlucky as to be preferred by that girl to Gill? “

And he kicked the cold remains of Guth Stersen.

Spiagudry shook his head.

“Well .’ by the axe of Ingulf, the first of my race, I will exterminate every wearer of that uniform! “ and he pointed to the officer’s dress. “ He on whom I must be avenged will surely be of the number. I will burn down the entire forest to consume the poisonous shrub that it contains. I swore it on the day that Gill died, and I have already given him a companion that will delight his corpse. Oh, Gill! so there you lie, lifeless and powerless, you who outswam the seal, outran the deer; you who outwrestled the bear in the mountains of Kiölen. There you lie motionless, you who traversed the province of Throndhjem, from the Orkel to the Lake of Miösen, in a single day; you who climbed the peaks of the Dovrefjeld as the squirrel climbs the oak. There you lie mute and dumb, Gill, -you who on the stormy summits of Kongsberg sang louder thau the thunder's roar. Oh, Gill! so it is in vain that for your sake I filled up the Färöe mines; in vain for your sake I burned the Throndhjem cathedral. All my labor is in vain, and I shall never see the race of the children of Iceland, the descendants of Ingulf the Destroyer, perpetuated in you; you will never inherit my stone axe; but you leave me the legacy of your skull, from which I may henceforth drink sea-water and the blood of men."

With these words he seized the corpse by the head, exclaiming: " Help me, Spiagudry! " And pulling off his gloves, he displayed his broad hands, armed with long, hard, crooked nails, like the claws of a wild beast.

Spiagudry, seeing him about to hew off the corpse's head with his sword, cried out with unconcealed horror, " Good heavens! master! A dead man! "

"Well," calmly responded the little man, " would you rather have me sharpen my blade upon a living one? "

"Oh, let me entreat your Grace- How can your Excellency commit such profanation? Your Worship- Sir, your Serenity would not-"

"Are you done? Do I require all these titles, living skeleton, to believe in your deep respect for my sabre? "

"By Saint Waldemar! By Saint Usuph! In the name of Saint Hospitius, spare the dead! "

"Help me, and do not talk of saints to the devil! "

"My lord," continued the suppliant Spiagudry, " by your illustrious ancestor, Saint Ingulf

"Ingulf the Destroyer was an outlaw like myself."

"In the name of Heaven," said the old man, falling on his knees, " whose anger I would spare you! "

Impatience overcame the little man. His dull gray eyes Flashed like a couple of live coals.

"Help me! " he repeated, flourishing his sword.

These words were uttered in the voice which might beseem a lion, could he speak. The keeper, shuddering and half dead with fright, sat down upon the black stone slab, and held Gill's cold, damp head in his hands, while the little man, by means of sword and dagger, removed the crown with rare skill.

When his task was done, he gazed at the bloody skull for some time, muttering strange words; then he handed it over to Spiagudry, to be cleaned and prepared, saying with a sort of howl,

“And I, when I die, shall not have the comfort of thinking that an heir to the soul of Ingulf will drink sea-water and the blood of men from out my skull.”

After a mournful pause, he added,

“The hurricane is followed by a hurricane, each avalanche brings down another avalanche, but I shall be the last of my race. Why did not Gill hate every human face even as I do? What demon foe to the demon of Ingulf urged him into those fatal mines in search of a handful of gold? “

Spiagudry, who now returned with Gill’s skull, interrupted him: “ Your Excellency is right; even gold, as Snorri Sturleson says, may often be bought at too high a price.”

“You remind me,” said the little man, “ of a commission I have for you; here is an iron casket which I found upon yonder officer, all of whose property, as you see, did not fall into your possession; it is so firmly fastened, that it must contain gold, the only thing precious in the eyes of men. You will give it to widow Stadt, in Thoctree village, to pay her for her son.”

He drew a small iron box from his reindeer-skin knapsack. Spiagudry received it with a low bow.

“Obey my orders faithfully,” said the little man, with a piercing glance; “ remember that nothing can prevent two demons from meeting; I think you are even more of a coward than a miser, and you will answer to me for that box.”

“Oh, master, with my soul! “

“Not at all. With your flesh and bones.”

At this moment the outer door of the Spladgest echoed with a loud knock. The little man was amazed; Spiagudry tottered, and shaded his lamp with his hand.

“Who is there? “ growled the little man. “ And you, old villain, how you will shake when you hear the last trump sound, if you shiver so now! “

A second and louder knock was heard.

“It is some dead man in haste to enter,” said the little man.

“No, master,” muttered Spiagudry, “ no corpses are brought here after midnight.”

“Living or dead, he drives me hence. You, Spiagudry, be faithful and be dumb. I swear to you, by the spirit of Ingulf and the skull of Gill, that you shall see the dead bodies of the entire regiment of Muukholm pass through your hostelry in review.”

And the little man, binding Gill’s skull to his belt, and drawing on his gloves, hurried, with the nimbleness of a goat, and by the help of Spiagudry’s shoulders, through the opening in the roof, where he vanished. A third knock shook the whole Spladgest, and a voice outside commanded him to open in the name of the king and viceroy. Then the keeper, moved alike by two different terrors, one of which might be called the terror of memory, and the other of hope, hurried toward the low door, and opened it.

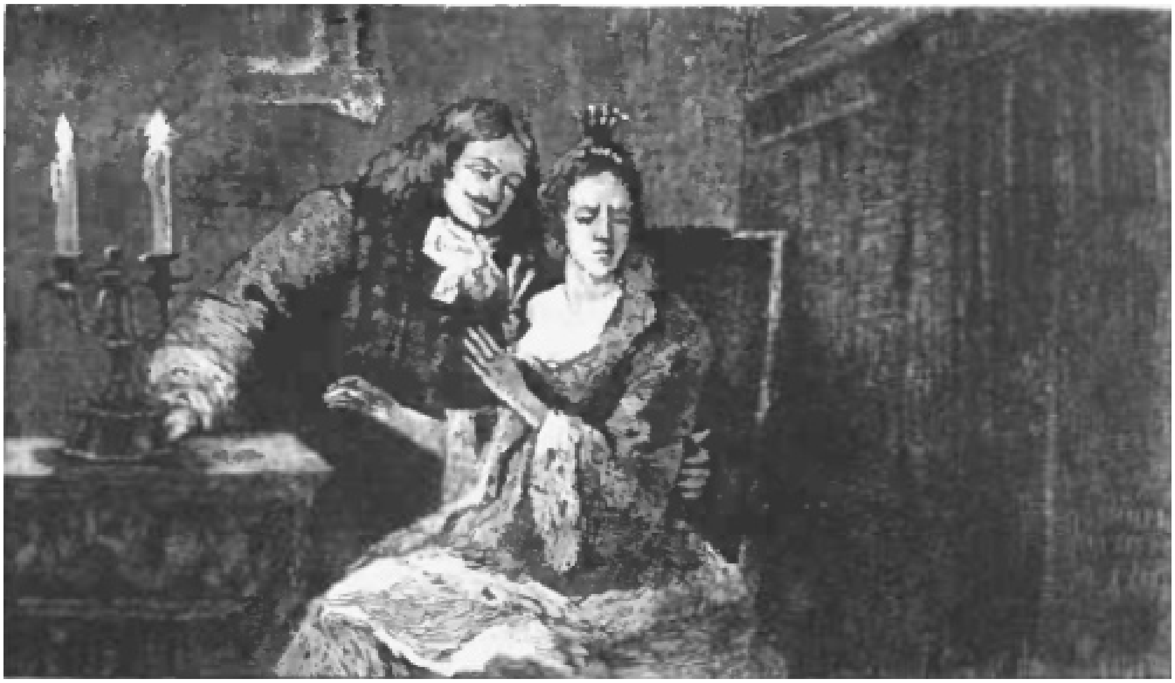

The noble Lady, Countess d’Ahlefeld

CHAPTER VII CHECKMATED.

In the pursuit of such pleasure as may be found in temporal felicity, she wore herself out, on rough and painful paths, without ever attaining her object.

Confessions of Saint Augustine.

Returning to his closet after leaving Poël, the governor of Throndhjem ensconced himself in a big easy-chair, and to distract his thoughts directed one of his secretaries to read over the petitions presented to the government.

Bowing low, the secretary began:

“1. The Rev. Dr. Anglyvius prays that a substitute may be provided for the Rev. Dr. Foxtipp, the head of the Episcopal library, on account of his incompetency. The petitioner does not know who should take the place of the said incompetent doctor; he would merely state that he, Dr. Anglyvius, has for a long time exercised the functions of librari -”

“Send the rascal to the bishop,” interrupted the general.

“2. Athanasius M under, priest and chaplain to the prisons, asks pardon for twelve penitent convicts on the occasion of the glorious marriage of his Grace, Ordener Guldenlew, Baron Thorwick, Knight of the Dannebrog, son of the viceroy, and the noble lady Ulrica d’Ahlefeld, daughter of his Grace the lord high chancellor of the two kingdoms.”

“Lay it on the table,” said the general. “ I pity convicts.”

“3. Faustus-Prudens Destrombidès, Norwegian subject and Latin poet, asks leave to write the epithalamium for the said noble pair.”

“Ah, ha! The worthy man must be growing old, for he is the same man who wrote an epithalamium in 1074, for the marriage planned between Schumacker, then Count of Griffenfeld, and Princess Louisa Charlotte of Holstein-Augustenburg.- a marriage which never took place. I fear,” muttered the governor,- “ that Faustus-Prudens is destined to be the poet of broken matches. Lay his petition on the table, and go on. Inquire, on behalf of the said poet, if there be not a vacant bed at the Throndhjem hospital.”

“4. The miners of Guldbrandsdal, the Färöe Islands, Sund-Moer, Hubfallo, Roeraas, and Kongsberg, petition to be released from the costs of the royal protectorate.”

“These miners are restless. I hear that they are even beginning to grumble at our long delay in answering their petition. Let it be laid aside for mature consideration.”

“5. Braal, fisherman, declares, in virtue of the Odelsrecht, that he persists in his intention of buying back his patrimony.

“6. The magistrates of Noes, Loevig, Indal, Skongen, Stod, Sparbo, and other towns and villages of Northern Throndhjem, pray that a price may be set upon the head of the assassin, thief, and incendiary, Hans, said to be a native of Klipstadur, in Iceland. Nychol Orugix, executioner for the province of Throndhjem, who claims that Hans is his property, opposes the petition. Beniguus Spiagudry, keeper of the Spladgest, to whom the corpse should belong, supports the petition.”

“That robber is a very dangerous fellow,” said the general, “ particularly now that we are threatened with trouble among the miners. Issue a proclamation offering a thousand crowns reward for his head.”

“7. Benignus Spiagudry, doctor, antiquary, sculptor, mineralogist, naturalist, botanist, lawyer, chemist, mechanic, physicist, astronomer, theologian, grammarian “

“Why,” broke in the general, “ is not this the same Spiagudry who keeps the Spladgest? “

“Yes, to be sure, your Excellency,” replied the secretary, “ keeper, for his Majesty, of the institution of the Spladgest, in the royal city of Throndhjem, sets forth that he, Benignus Spiagudry, discovered that the stars called fixed are not lighted by the star called the sun; item, that the real name of Odin is Frigg, sun of Fridulf; item, that the marine lobworm feeds on sand; item, that the noise of the inhabitants drives the fish away from the coast of Norway, so that the means of subsistence are growing less in proportion to the increase of the population; item, that the fjord known as Otte-Sund was formerly known as Limfjord, and only took the name of Otte-Sund after Otho the Red cast his spear into it; item, he sets forth that it was by his advice and under his direction that an old statue of Freya was changed into the statue of Justice, which now adorns the market-place in Throndhjem, and that the lion found at the feet of the idol has been turned into a devil, symbolizing crime; item

“Oh, spare me the rest of his eminent services! Let me see, what does he want? “

The secretary turned over several pages, and went on:

“Your most humble petitioner feels that he may justly petition your Excellency, in return for so many useful labors in the domain of science and literature, to increase the reward to ten escalins for every corpse, male or female, which cannot but be gratifying to the dead, as proving the value set upon their bodies.”

Here the door opened, and the usher in a loud voice announced, “The noble lady, Countess d’Ahlefeld.”

At the same time a tall woman, wearing the small coronet of a countess, richly dressed in scarlet satin trimmed with gold fringe and ermine, entered, and accepting the hand which the general offered her, seated herself beside him.

The countess was perhaps fifty years old. Age had added little to the furrows with which pride and ambition had long since marked her face. She looked at the old governor haughtily, and with an artificial smile.

“Well, General, your ward delays. He should have been here before sunset.”

“He would have been here, my lady Countess, if he had not gone to Munkholm upon his arrival.”

“To Munkholm! I hope it was not to see Schumacker?”

“That may be.”

“Could Baron Thorwick’s first visit be to Schumacker!”

“Why not, Countess? Schumacker is unfortunate and unhappy.”

“What, General! Is the viceroy’s son on familiar terms with a prisoner of state? “

“When Frederic Guldenlew confided his son to my care, he begged me, noble lady, to bring him up as if he were my own. I thought that an acquaintance with Schumacker might be useful to Ordener, who is destined some day to wield such power; consequently, with the viceroy’s permission, I obtained from my brother, Grummond de Knud, a permit to enter all the prisons, which I gave to Ordener. He often uses it.”

“And how long, noble General, has Baron Ordener had the pleasure of this useful acquaintance? “

“Rather more than a year, Countess. It seems that Schumacker’s society pleased him, for it kept him at Throndhjem for a long time; and it was only reluctantly, and by my express request, that he left the city last year to visit Norway.”

“And does Schumacker know that his comforter is the son of one of his greatest enemies? “

“He knows that he is a friend, and that is enough for him, as for us.”

“But you, General,” said the countess, with a searching look, “when you tolerated nay, encouraged this connection, did you know that Schumacker had a daughter? “

“I knew it, noble Countess.”

“And this fact seemed to you of no importance to your pupil? “

“The pupil of Levin de Knud, the son of Frederic Guldenlew, is an honest man. Ordener knows the barrier which separates him from Schumacker’s daughter; he is incapable of winning the affection, unless his purpose was upright, of any girl, above all the daughter of an unfortunate man.”

The noble Countess d’Ahlefeld blushed and paled. She turned away her head to avoid the calm gaze of the old man, as if it were that of an accuser.

“But,” she stammered, “ this connection strikes me, General, let me speak my mind, as strange and imprudent. It is said that the miners and tribes of the North are threatening to revolt, and that the name of Schumacker is mixed up with the affair.”

“Noble lady, you surprise me! “ exclaimed the governor. “ Schumacker has hitherto borne his misfortunes calmly. The report is doubtless ill-founded.”

At this moment the door opened, and the usher announced that a messenger from his Grace the lord high chancellor wished to speak with the noble countess.

The lady rose hurriedly, took leave of the governor, and while he continued his inspection of the petitions she hastened to her apartments in a wing of the palace, directing that the messenger should follow her.

She had been seated on a rich sofa in the midst of her women for a few instants only, when the messenger entered. The countess on seeing him made a slight gesture of aversion, which she hid at once by a friendly smile.

And yet the messenger’s appearance was not at all repulsive. He was a man of somewhat diminutive stature, whose plumpness suggested anything else rather than a messenger. Still, a close study of his face showed it to be frank to the point of impudence, and his look of good humor had a spice of deviltry and malice. He bowed low to the countess, and offered her a package sealed with silk thread.

“Noble lady,” said he, “ deign to permit me to venture to lay at your feet a precious message from his Grace your illustrious husband, my revered master.”

“Is he not coming himself? And why did he choose you as his messenger?” inquired the countess.

“Important business delays the coming of his Grace, as this letter will inform you, Madam. For myself, I am by the orders of my noble master to enjoy the distinguished honor of a private interview with you.”

The countess turned pale, and exclaimed in a trembling voice, “ With me, me, Musdœmon? “

“If it distresses the noble lady in the slightest degree, her unworthy servant will be reduced to despair.”

“Distress me! No, of course not,” returned the countess, trying to smile. “ But is this conversation so essential? “

The messenger bowed down to the ground.

“Absolutely essential. The letter which the illustrious countess has deigned to receive from my hands probably contains a formal order to that effect.”

It was strange to see the proud Countess d’Ahlfeld tremble and turn pale before a servant who paid her such profound respect. She slowly opened the package and read its contents. After a second reading she turned to her women, and said in a faint voice: “ Go; leave us alone.”

“I hope the noble lady,” said the messenger, bending his knee, “ will deign to pardon the liberty which I venture to take and the trouble which I seem to cause her.”

“On the contrary,” replied the countess, with a forced smile, “ I assure you that I am very happy to see you.”

The women withdrew.

“Elphega, have you forgotten that there was a time when you were not averse to being alone with me? “

It was the messenger who addressed the noble countess, and the words were accompanied by a laugh like that uttered by the Devil, at the instant that his compact expires and he seizes the soul which sold itself to him.

The great lady bowed her humbled head.

“Would that I had indeed forgotten it!” she murmured.

“Poor fool! Why should you blush for things which no human eye ever saw? “

“God sees what men do not see.”

“God, weak woman! You are not worthy to deceive your husband, for he is less credulous than you.”

“Your insults to my remorse are scarcely generous, Musdœmon.”

“Well, if you feel remorse, Elphega, why insult it yourself by daily committing fresh crimes? “

The Countess d’Ahlefeld hid her face in her hands; the messenger continued: “ Elphega, you must choose: remorse and more crimes, or crime and no more remorse. Do as I do: choose the second course; it is better at least it is more cheerful.”

“Heaven grant,” said the countess, in low tones, “ that those words may not be counted against you in eternity.”

“Come, my dear, a truce to jest.”

Then Musdœmon, seating himself behind the countess, and putting his arm about her neck, added: “ Elphega, try to be, at least in imagination, what you were twenty years ago.”

The unfortunate countess, the slave of her accomplice, strove to respond to his loathsome caresses. There was something too revolting, even for these degraded souls, in this adulterous embrace of two beings who scorned and despised each other. The illegal caresses which had once delighted them, and which some horrible and unknown expediency compelled them still to lavish upon each other, now tortured them. Strange but just change of guilty affections! Their crime had become their punishment.

The countess, to cut short this guilty torment, at last asked her odious lover, tearing herself from his arms, with what verbal message her husband had charged him.

“D’Ahlfeld,” said Musdœmon, “just as he was about to see his power continued by the marriage of Ordener Guldenlew to our daughter-”

“Our daughter! “ exclaimed the haughty countess; aud she fixed her eye on Musdœmon with a look of pride and contempt.

“Well,” coldly continued the messenger, “ I think that Ulrica is at least as much mine as his. I was saying that the match would not be wholly satisfactory to your husband unless Schumacker could at the same time be destroyed. In his remote prison the old favorite is yet almost as much to be dreaded as in his palace. He has obscure but powerful friends at court, powerful because they are obscure; and the king, learning a month since that the chancellor’s negotiations with the Duke of Holstein-Ploen were at a standstill, cried out impatiently: ‘ Griffenfeld knew more than all of them put together.’ A schemer named Dispolsen, come from Munkholm to Copenhagen, had several secret interviews with him, after which the king sent to the chancellor’s office for Schumacker’s patents of nobility and title-deeds. No one knows the object of Schumacher’s ambition; but if he desire nothing but his liberty, for a prisoner of state that is the same as to desire power! He must therefore die, and must die by authority of justice; we are now striving to invent a crime for him. Your husband, Elphega, on the plea of inspecting the northern provinces incognito, will assure himself of the result of our underhand dealings among the miners, whom we hope to incite to rebel, in Schumacker’s name, which revolt we can easily put down later. What troubles us is the loss of certain important papers relating to this plot, and which we have every reason to believe have fallen into the hands of Dispolsen. Knowing that he had set out to return to Munkholm, carrying to Schumacker his parchments, his diplomas, and possibly these documents which might ruin, or at least compromise us, we posted certain faithful men in the gorges of Kiölen, directing them to rid us of him, after robbing him of his papers. But if, as we are assured, Dispolsen left Bergen by water, our efforts in that quarter are in vain. However, as I came along I gathered vague reports of the murder of a captain by the name of Dispolsen. We shall see. Meantime we are searching for a famous bandit, Hans, called Hans of Iceland, whom we wish to put at the head of the revolt in the mines. And you, my dear, what news have you for me here? Has the pretty bird at Munkholm been caught in her cage? Has the old minister’s daughter finally fallen a prey to our *falco fulvus,* our son Frederic?”

The countess, recovering her pride, again exclaimed: “Our son!”

“I’ faith, how old may he be? Twenty-four. We have known each other some twenty-six years, Elphega.”

“God knows,” cried the countess, “ my Frederic is the chancellor’s lawful heir.”

“If God knows it,” laughingly replied the messenger, “ the Devil does not. Moreover, your Frederic is but a presumptuous youngster, quite unworthy of me, and it is not worth our while to quarrel for such a trifle. He is only fit to make love to a girl. Has he at least succeeded? “

“Not yet, so far as I know.”

“Oh, Elphega, do try to play a less passive part in our affairs. The count and myself, as you see, are tolerably active. I return to your husband to-morrow. For mercy’s sake, do not confine yourself to praying for our sins, like the Madonna whom the Italians invoke when about to commit a murder! D’Ahlefeld, too, must see to rewarding me a little more munificently than he has hitherto done. My fortune is closely connected with yours; but I am tired of being the husband’s servant when I am the wife’s lover, and of being only the tutor, the teacher, the pedagogue, when I am almost the father.”

At this instant midnight struck, and one of the women entered, reminding the countess that by the palace regulations all lights must be put out at that hour.

The countess, glad to end a painful interview, recalled her attendants.

“Permit me, gracious Countess,’’ said Musdœmon, as he withdrew, “ to retain a hope of seeing you to-morrow, and to lay at your feet my homage and sincere respect.”

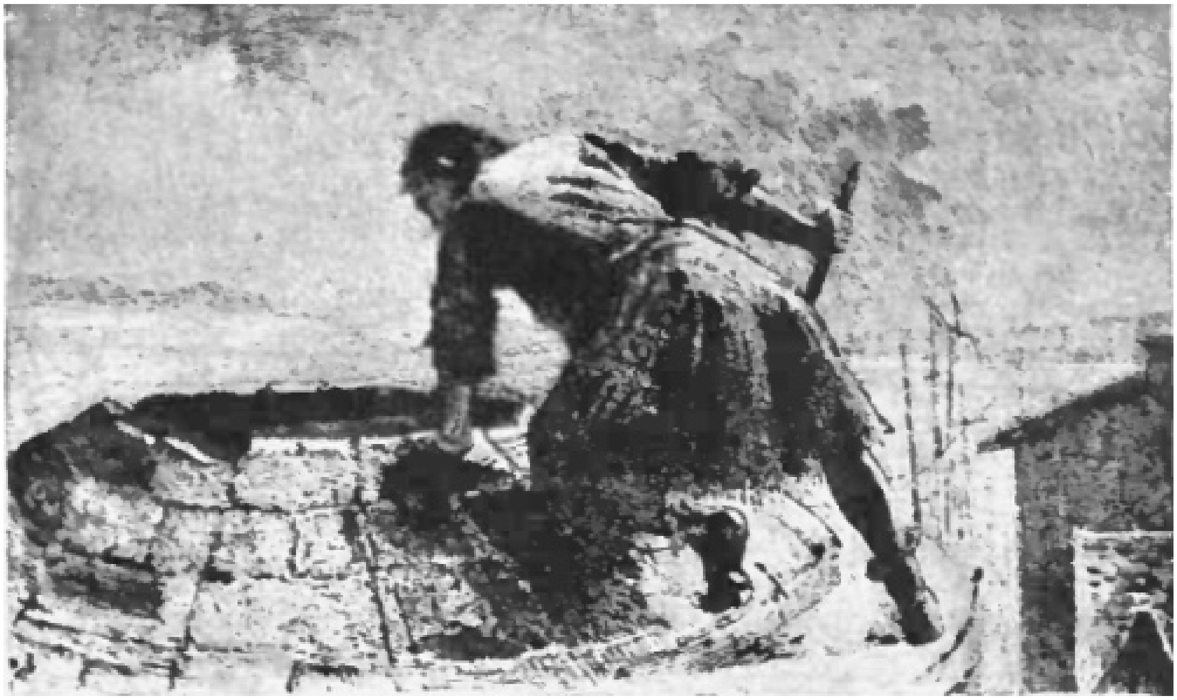

A low Growl was heard above their Heads

CHAPTER VIII BE FAITHFUL AND SILENT.

It cannot be but thou hast murdered him; So should a murderer look; so dead, so grim!
Shakespeare: Midsummer Night’s Dream.

Upon my honor, old man,” said Ordener to Spiagudry, “I began to think that the corpses who lodge in this building would have to open the door.”

“Excuse me, sir,” replied the keeper, in whose ears the names of king and viceroy still rang, as he repeated his trite excuse, “I was- I was sound asleep.”

“Then I suppose your dead men do not sleep, and it was probably they whom I heard talking just now.”

Spiagudry was confused.

“You stranger. you heard? “

“Oh, yes! but what does it matter? I did not come here to meddle with your affairs, but to interest you in mine. Let us go inside.”

Spiagudry was by no means anxious to allow the newcomer to see Gill’s body, but these last words comforted him considerably; and besides, how could he prevent his entrance?

He accordingly allowed the young man to pass, and closing the door, said: “ Benignus Spiagudry is at your service in all that relates to human science; yet if, as your unseasonable visit seems to show, you suppose that you are dealing with a sorcerer, you are wrong; *ne famun crcdas;* I am only a learned man. Enter my laboratory, stranger.”

“Not at all,” said Ordener; “ my errand is with these corpses.”

“These corpses! “ said Spiagudry, beginning to tremble again. “ But, sir, you cannot see them.”

“What! I cannot see bodies which are placed here for the sole purpose of being seen! I repeat, that I wish to question you concerning one of them; it is your duty to answer. Obey cheerfully, old man, or you will be forced to obey.”

Spiagudry had a sincere respect for swords, and he saw the flash of steel at Ordener’s side.

“*Nihil linn arrogat armis”* he muttered; and fumbling with his bunch of keys, he opened the grating, and admitted the stranger into the second section of the hall.

“Show me the captain’s clothes,” said the latter.

At this instant a ray from the lamp fell upon Gill Stadt’s bloody head.

“Good God! “ exclaimed Ordener, “ what abominable sacrilege! “

“Great Saint Hospitius, pity me! “ sighed the poor keeper.

“Old man,” continued Ordener, in threatening tones, “are you so remote from the toinb that you can safely violate the respect which is its due? And do you not fear, wretched fellow, that the living will teach you what you owe to the dead? “

“Oh,” cried the poor keeper, “ mercy! It was not I! If you only knew And he stopped; for he remembered the little man’s words: “ Be faithful, be dumb.” “ Did you see any one escape through that aperture? “ he asked faintly.

“Yes; was it your accomplice? “

“No; it was the guilty man, the only guilty man! I swear it by all the torments of hell, by all the blessings of heaven, by this same body so infamously profaned! “ and he fell upon the pavement before Ordener.

Hideous as Spiagudry was, there was yet an accent of truth in his despair and protestations, which convinced the young man.

“Old man,” said he, “ rise; and if you did not outrage death, do not degrade age.”

The keeper rose. Ordener continued: “ Who is the culprit? “

“Oh, silence, noble youth! You know not of whom you speak. Silence! “

And Spiagudry mentally repeated: “ Be faithful, be dumb.”

Ordener answered coldly: “ Who is the culprit? I must know! “

“In Heaven’s name, sir, do not say so! Be silent, for fear

“Fear will not silence me, but shall make you speak.”

“Excuse me; forgive me, young master! “ said the agonized Spiagudry. “ I cannot.”

“You can, for I insist. Tell me the profaner’s name! “

Spiagudry still strove to evade.

“Well, noble master, the profaner of this corpse is the assassin of that officer.”

“Then that officer was murdered? “ asked Ordener, reminded, by this abrupt transition, of the object of his search.

“Yes, undoubtedly, sir.”

“And by whom, by whom? “

“In the name of the saint on whom your mother called when she gave you birth, do not seek to know his name, young master; do not force me to reveal it.”

“If my desire to know it required any spur, you would add it, old man, in the shape of curiosity. I command you to name the murderer.”

“Well, then,” said Spiagudry, “ see these deep wounds, made by long, sharp nails on the body of this unfortunate man. They will name the assassin.”

And the old man showed Ordener a number of ugly scratches on the naked, freshly washed corpse.

“What! “ said Ordener, “ was it some wild beast? “

“No, my young lord.”

“But unless it was the Devil “

“Hush! Beware, lest your guesses come too close to the mark. Did you never hear,” added the keeper in a low voice, “ of a man or a monster with human face, whose nails are as long as those of Ashtaroth who ruined us all, or of Antichrist who will yet destroy us? “

“Speak more plainly.”

“‘ Woe unto you! ‘ says the Apocalypse “

“I demand the assassin’s name! “

“The assassin his name? My lord, have pity on me; have pity on yourself! “

“The second of those prayers would destroy the first, even if serious reasons did not compel me to tear that name from your lips. Abuse my patience no longer.”

“So be it, if you insist, young man,” said Spiagudry, raising himself, and in a loud voice. “ The murderer, the profaner, is Hans of Iceland.”

This terrible name was not unknown to Ordener.

“What! “ he cried, “ Hans! that execrable bandit! “

“Do not call him a bandit, for he has no followers.”

“Then, wretch, how do you know him? What common crimes have brought you together? “

“Oh, noble master, do not stoop to believe in appearances. Is the oak-tree poisonous because the serpent finds shelter within its trunk? “

“No idle words! A scoundrel has no friend who is not an accomplice.”

“I am not his friend, and still less his accomplice; and if all my oaths fail to convince you, sir, let me implore you to observe that this monstrous sacrilege exposes me, twenty-four hours hence, when Gill Stadt’s body is to be removed, to the torture allotted to those guilty of profanation, and thus casts me into the most fearful state of anxiety ever endured by innocent man.”

These considerations of personal interest moved Ordener more than the suppliant voice of the poor keeper, much of whose pathetic though useless resistance to the little man’s sacrilegious act they had doubtless inspired. Ordener reflected a moment, while Spiagudry tried to read in his face whether this pause meant peace or boded a storm.

At last he said, in a severe though quiet tone: “ Old man, speak the truth! Did you find any papers upon that officer? “

“None, upon my honor.”

“Do you know if Hans of Iceland found any? “

“I swear by Saint Hospitius that I do not know.”

“You do not know? Do you know where this Hans of Iceland hides? “

“He never hides; he roams about perpetually.”

“Perhaps; but where is his den? “

“That pagan,” whispered the old man, “ has as many dens as the island of Hitteren has reefs, or the dog-star rays.”

“I order you again,” broke in Ordener, “ to speak in plain terms. Let me set you an example; hearken. You are mysteriously allied with a brigand, whose accomplice you still declare that you are not. If you know him, you must know where he has gone. Do not interrupt me. If you are not his accomplice, you will not hesitate to lead me in search of him! “

Spiagudry could not contain his fright.

“You, noble lord! you, -great God! full of youth and life, you would provoke, seek out that demon! When four-armed Ingiald fought the giant Nyctolm, at least, he had four arms! “

“Well,” said Ordener, with a smile, “ if four arms are a requisite, will you not be my guide? “

“I! your guide! How can you jest with an old man who’ almost needs a guide himself? “

“Listen,” replied Ordener; “ do not try to jest with me. If this profanation, of which I would fain believe you innocent, exposes you to be punished for sacrilege, you cannot stay here. You must fly. I offer you my protection, but on condition that you lead me to the brigand’s lair. Be my guide, I will be your saviour. Nay, more: if I catch Hans of Iceland, I shall bring him here, dead or alive. You can then prove your innocence, and I promise to restore your office. Stay; meantime, here are more coins than your place brings you in a year.”

Ordener, by keeping his purse until the last, had observed that gradation in his arguments required by the wholesome laws of logic. They were strong enough in themselves to make Spiagudry consider. He began by taking the money.

“Noble master, you are right,” said he; and his eye, hitherto vague and uncertain, was fixed upon Ordener. “ If I follow you, I incur the future vengeance of the terrible Hans. If I stay, I fall to-morrow into the hands of Orugix the hangman. What is the penalty of sacrilege? Never mind. In either case, my poor life is in danger; but as, according to the wise remark of Saemond-Sigfusson, otherwise called the Sage, *inter duo pcricula œqualia, minus imminens eligcndum est,* I will follow you. Yes, sir, I will be your guide. Pray do not forget, however, that I have done all I could to dissuade you from your daring scheme.”

“Very good,” said Ordener. “ Then you will be my guide. Old man,” he added, with a meaning glance, “ I count upon your fidelity.”

“Oh, master! “ replied the keeper, “ Spiagudry’s faith is as pure as the gold which you so graciously gave me.”

“Let it remain so, or I will show you that the steel which I bear about me is as sterling as my gold. Where do you think Hans of Iceland is? “

“Why, as the southern part of the province of Throndhjem is full of troops sent thither on some errand of the lord chancellor, Hans must have gone in the direction of Walderhog cave, or toward Lake Miösen. Our road lies through Skongen.”

“When can you start? “

“At the close of the day now dawning, when night falls and the Spladgest is closed, your poor servant will begin his duties as your guide, for which he must deprive the dead of his care. We will try to hide the mutilation of the miner from the eyes of the people for this one day.”

“Where shall I meet you to-night? “

“In the market-place, if it please my master, near the statue of Justice, which was formerly Freya, and which will doubtless protect me with her shadow, in gratitude for the fine devil which I had carved at her feet.”

Spiagudry would probably have repeated the terms of his petition to the governor, had not Ordener interrupted him.

"Enough, old man; it is a bargain."

"A bargain," repeated the keeper.

He had scarcely uttered these words, when a low growl was heard above their heads. The keeper shuddered.

"What is that? " he said.

"Is there not," asked Ordener, equally surprised, ‘‘ any other living being dwelling here besides yourself? "

"You remind me of my assistant, Oglypiglap," replied Spiagudry, reassured by the thought. " It was probably his snores which we heard. A sleeping Lapp, Bishop Arngrimmsson says, makes as much noise as a waking woman."

As they talked, they approached the door of the Spladgest. Spiagudry opened it softly.

"Good-by, young sir," he said to Ordener; " may Heaven keep you merry. Good-by until to-night. If your road lead you by the cross of Saint Hospitius, deign to utter a prayer for your wretched servant, Benignus Spiagudry."

Then hastily closing the door, as much through fear of being seen as to guard his lamp from the early morning breezes, he returned to Gill's corpse, and did his best so to arrange it that the wound might not be perceived.

Many reasons combined to persuade the timid keeper to accept the stranger's perilous offer. The motives for his bold resolve may be ranked as follows: (1) fear of Ordener here and now; (2) dread of Orugix the hangman; (3) an ancient grudge against Hans of Iceland, -a grudge which he scarcely dared acknowledge even to himself, so strong was the power of fear; (4) a love of science, which would benefit largely by his journey; (5) confidence in his own cunning, which would enable him to evade Hans; (6) a wholly speculative attraction for certain metal contained in the young adventurer's purse, and probably also in the iron casket stolen from the captain and intended for Widow Stadt, a message which now ran a great risk of never leaving the messenger's hands.

Still another and a final reason was the well or ill founded hope of returning sooner or later to the post which he was about to desert. Besides, what did it matter to him whether the robber killed the traveller, or the traveller the robber? At this point in his meditations he could not help saying aloud: " It will be one more corpse for me, anyhow."

Another growl was heard, and the unhappy keeper shivered.

“Indeed, that is not Oglypiglap’s snore,” said he; “that noise comes from without.”

Then, after a moment’s thought, he added: “ How silly I am to be so frightened! The dog on the wharf probably waked and barked.”

Then he finished his arrangement of Gill’s disfigured remains, and closing all the doors, threw himself upon his mattress to sleep off the fatigue of the past night and gain strength for the comin” one.

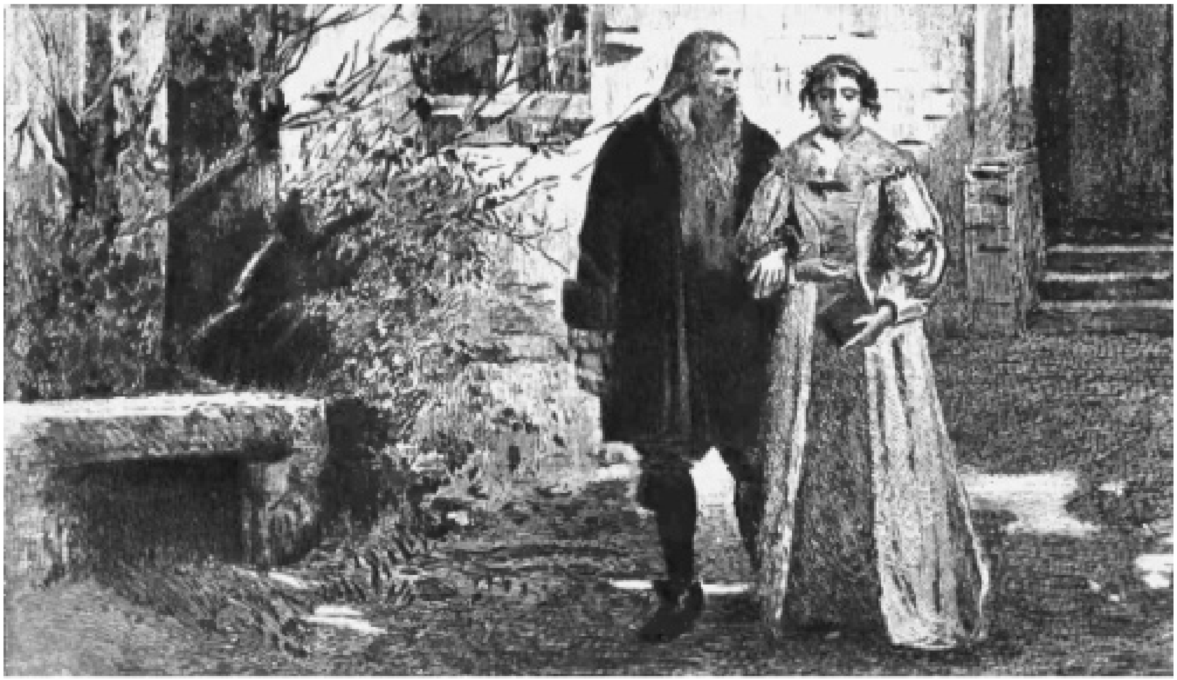

Schumacker, leaning on his Daughters Arm

CHAPTER IX THE CODE OF HONOR.

Juliet. Oh, think’st thou we shall ever meet again?
Romeo. I doubt it not: and all these woes shall serve For sweet discourses in our time to come.
Shakespeare: Romeo and Juliet.

The signal-light at Munkholm castle had just been extinguished, and in its place the sailor entering Throndhjem fjord saw the helmet of the soldier on guard gleam from afar in the beams of the rising sun like a planet moving in its orbit, when Schumacker, leaning on his daughter’s arm, came down as usual into the garden which surrounded his prison. Both had spent a restless night, the old man unable to sleep, the maiden kept awake by happy thoughts. They walked in silence for a time; then the aged prisoner said, fixing a sad and serious gaze upon the lovely girl:

“You blush and smile at your own thoughts, Ethel; you are happy, for you have no cause to blush for the past, and you smile at the future.”

Ethel blushed still deeper, and her smile faded.

“My lord and father,” she stammered in confusion, “ I brought the volume containing the Edda.”

“Very well; read, my daughter,” said Schumacker; and he resumed his meditations.

Then the melancholy captive, seated on a black rock shaded by a dark fir, listened to his daughter’s sweet voice without heeding the words which she read, as a thirsty traveller delights in the murmur of the stream that quenches his fever.

Ethel read him the story of the shepherdess Allanga, who refused a king until he proved himself a warrior. Prince Bagnar-Lodbrok could not win the maid until he returned triumphant over the robber of Klipstadur, Ingulf the Destroyer.

Suddenly a sound of footsteps and the rustling of the foliage interrupted the reading and roused Schumacker from his revery. Lieutenant d’Ahlefeld appeared from behind the rock upon which they sat. Ethel’s head drooped as she recognized their tormentor, and the officer exclaimed: -

“I’ faith, fair lady, your lovely lips just uttered the name of Ingulf the Destroyer. I heard you, and I presume that you were talking of his grandson. Hans of Iceland, and that reminded you of him. Ladies love to talk of robbers. By the way, there are tales of Ingulf and his descendants which are both fearful and interesting. Ingulf the Destroyer had but one son, born of the witch Thoarka; that son also had but one son, whose mother was likewise a witch. For four centuries the race has been perpetuated thus for the desolation of Iceland, there being always a single scion, who never produces more than one offshoot. By this series of solitary heirs the infernal spirit of Ingulf has been handed down to the present day, and flourishes in the famous Hans of Iceland, who was doubtless so happy as to occupy your virgin thoughts just now."

The officer paused for an instant. Ethel was silent from embarrassment, Schumacker from vexation. Delighted to find them willing, if not to answer, at least to listen, he added, " The Klipstadur outlaw's one passion is a hatred of the human race, his one thought to harm them."

"He is wise," abruptly remarked the old man.

"He always lives alone," resumed the lieutenant.

"He is fortunate," said Schumacker.

The lieutenant was charmed by this double interruption, which seemed to seal a compact for conversation.

"May the god Mithra preserve us," he cried, " from such wise men and such fortunate men! Accursed be the evilminded zephyr which brought the last demon of Iceland to Norway. I was wrong to say evil-minded, for they say it was a bishop to whom we owe the pleasure of possessing Hans of Klipstadur. If we may believe the story, certain Iceland peasants, having captured little Hans among the Bessestad mountains in his infancy, were about to kill him, as Astyages slew the Bactrian lion's whelp; but the bishop of Scalholt interfered, and took the cub under his own protection, hoping to make a Christian of the devil. The good bishop tried in a thousand ways to develop his infernal intellect, forgetting that the hemlock cannot be changed into a lily even in the hot-houses of Babylon. So when the young devil grew up, he repaid all this care by escaping one fine night upon the trunk of a tree, across the seas, lighting his flight by setting the bishop's house on fire. That's the old women's account of the way this Icelander came to Norway, and now, thanks to his education, he affords us a perfect type of the monster.

Since then the destruction of the Färöe mines, the death of three hundred men crushed beneath the ruins, the overthrow of the hanging rock at Golyn at midnight upon the village below, the fall of Half-Broer bridge from the rocks upon the high-road, the burning of Throndhjem cathedral, the extinction of beacon-lights upon the coast on stormy nights, and countless crimes and murders hidden in Lakes Sparbo or Miösen, or concealed in the caves of Walderhog and Rylass, and in the gorges of the Dovrefjeld, bear witness to the presence of this Ahriman incarnate in the province of Throndhjem. The old women declare that a new hair grows in his beard with every fresh crime; in that case his beard must be as luxuriant as that of the most venerable Assyrian magi. Yet you must have heard, fair lady, how often the governor has tried to stop the extraordinary growth of that beard."

Schumacker again broke the silence.

"And has every effort to capture this fellow," he asked with a look of triumph and an ironical smile, "been unsuccessful? I congratulate the chancellor."

The officer did not understand the ex-chancellor's sarcasm.

"Hans has hitherto proved as invincible as Horatius Cocles. Old soldiers, young militiamen, country boors, mountaineers, all fly or die before him. He is a demon who can neither be avoided nor caught; the best luck that can befall those who go in search of him is not to find him. You may be surprised, gracious lady," he went on, seating himself familiarly beside Ethel, who drew nearer to her father, "at all my curious anecdotes concerning this supernatural being. It was not without a purpose that I collected these strange traditions. It seems to me- and I shall be pleased if you, fair lady, share my opinion that the adventures of Hans would make a delicious romance, after the style of Mademoiselle de Scudéry's sublime stories, ' Artamenes,' or 'Clelia,' only six volumes of which latter I have yet read, but it is none the less a masterpiece in my eyes. Of course we should have to soften our climate, dress up our traditions, and modify our barbarous names. For instance, Throndhjem, which I should call ' Durtinianum,' should see its forests converted, by a touch of my magic wand, into delightful groves watered by a thousand streamlets far more poetic than our hideous torrents. Our dark, deep caves should give place to charming grottos carpeted with gilded pebbles and azure shells. In one of these grottos should live a famous magician, Haunus of Thule. For you must own that the name Hans of Iceland is by no means agreeable. This giant,- you must feel that it would be absurd not to make the hero of such a work a giant, this giant- should descend in a direct line from the god Mars (Ingulf the Destroyer affords no food for imagination) and the enchantress Theona,- don't you think I have made a happy change in the name Thoarka?

- daughter of the Cumean sibyl. Hannus, after being educated by the great Magian of Thule, should finally escape from the pontiff’s palace in a car drawn by two dragons, it would be very narrow-minded to cling to the shabby old legend of the trunk of a tree. Reaching the land of Durtinianum, and ravished by that enchanting region, he should choose it as the place of his abode and the scene of his crimes. It would be no easy matter to draw an agreeable picture of the robberies of Hans. However, we might soften their horror by an ingeniously planned love-affair. The shepherdess Alcyppe, walking one day with her lamb in a grove of myrtles and olives, should be noticed by the giant, who should suddenly yield to the magic of her eyes. But Alcyppe should love the handsome Lycidas, an officer of the militia, garrisoned in her village. The giant should be annoyed by the centurion’s happiness, and the centurion by the giant’s attentions. You can fancy, dear lady, how charming such imaginative powers might make the adventures of Haunus. I will wager my Polish boots against a pair of slippers that such a subject, treated by Mademoiselle de Scudéry, would set all the women in Copenhagen wild with delight.”

The last words roused Schumacker from the melancholy thoughts in which he had been buried during the lieutenant’s fruitless display of brains.

“Copenhagen! “ he exclaimed. “ What news is there from Copenhagen, sir officer? “

“None, i’ faith, that I know of,” replied the lieutenant, “save that the king has given his consent to the great marriage which is just now occupying the thoughts of both kingdoms.”

“What! “ rejoined Schumacker; “ what marriage? “

The appearance of a fourth speaker arrested the words on the lieutenant’s lips.

All three looked up. The prisoner’s moody features brightened, the lieutenant’s frivolous face grew grave, and Ethel’s sweet countenance, which had been pale and confused during the officer’s long soliloquy, again beamed with life and joy. She sighed heavily, as if her heart were eased of an intolerable weight, and her sad smile rested upon the new-comer. It was Ordener.

The old man, the girl, and the officer were placed in a singular position toward Ordener; they had each a secret in common with him, therefore each felt embarrassed by the presence of the other. Ordener’s return to the donjon was no surprise to Schumacker or Ethel, who were expecting him; but it amazed the lieutenant as much as the sight of the lieutenant astonished Ordener, who might have feared some indiscretion on the part of the officer in regard to the scene of the previous night, if the silence ordained by the etiquette of duelling had not reassured him. He could therefore only be surprised at seeing him quietly seated between his two prisoners.

These four persons could say nothing while together, for the very reason that they would have had much to say had they been alone. Therefore, aside from glances of intelligence and embarrassment, Ordener met with an absolutely silent reception.

The lieutenant burst out laughing.

"By the train of the royal mantle, my dear new-comer, here 's a silence by no means unlike that of the senators of Gaul when Brennus the Roman Upon my honor, I have forgotten which were the Romans and which the Gauls, the senators or the general Never mind. Since you are here, help me to enlighten this worthy old gentleman as to the news. I was just about to tell him, when you made your sudden entry on the stage, about the famous marriage which is now absorbing both Medes and Persians."

"What marriage? " asked Ordener and Schumacker with a single voice.

"By the cut of your clothes, sir stranger," cried the lieutenant, clapping his hands, " I guessed that you came from some other world. Your present question turns my doubt to certainty. You must have landed only yesterday on the banks of the Nidder in a fairycar drawn by two winged dragons; for you could not have travelled through Norway without hearing of the wonderful marriage of the viceroy's son and the lord chancellor's daughter.-"

Schumacker turned to the lieutenant.

"What! Is Ordener Guldenlew to marry Ulrica d'Ahlefeld? "

"As you say," replied the officer; " and it will all be settled before the fashion of French farthingales reaches Copenhagen."

"Frederic's son must be about twenty-two years old, for I had been in Copenhagen fortress a year when the news of his birth reached me. Let him marry young," added Schumacker with a bitter smile. " When disgrace comes upon him, at least no one can accuse him of having aspired to a cardinal's hat."

The old favorite alluded to one of his own misfortunes, of which the lieutenant knew nothing.

“No, indeed,” said he, laughing heartily. “ Baron Ordener will receive the title of count, the collar of the Order of the Elephant, and a colonel’s epaulettes, which would scarcely match with the cardinal’s hat.”

“So much the better,” answered Schumacker. Then after a pause he added, shaking his head as if he saw his revenge before him, “ Some day they may make an iron collar of his fine order; they may break his count’s coronet over his head; they may strike him in the face with his colonel’s epaulettes.”

Ordener seized the old man’s hand.

“For the sake of your hatred, sir, do not curse an enemy’s good fortune before you know whether it be good fortune in his eyes.”

“Pooh! “ said the lieutenant. “ What are the old fellow’s railings to Baron Thorwick? “

“Lieutenant,” cried Ordener, “ they may be more to him than you think. And,” he added, after a brief silence, “your grand marriage is not so certain as you suppose.”

“*Fiat quod vis*” rejoined the lieutenant, with an ironical bow; “ the king, the viceroy, and the chancellor have, it is true, made every arrangement for the wedding; but if it displeases you, Sir Stranger, what matter the lord chancellor, the viceroy, and the king!”

‘‘ You may be right,” said Ordener, seriously.

“Oh, by my faith! “ and the lieutenant threw himself back in a fit of laughter, “ this is too good! How I wish Baron Thorwick could hear a fortune-teller so well instructed in regard to the things of this world decide his fate. Believe me, my learned prophet, your beard is not long enough for a good sorcerer.”

“Sir Lieutenant,” coldly answered Ordener, “ I do not think that Ordener Guldenlew will ever marry a woman whom he does not love.”

“Ha, ha! here we have the Book of Proverbs. And who tells you, Sir Green mantle, that the “baron does not love Ulrica d’Ahlefeld? “

“And, if it please you, in your turn, who tells you that he does? “

Here the lieutenant, as often happens, was led by the heat of the conversation into stating a fact of which he was by no means certain.

“Who tells me that he loves her? The question is absurd. I am sorry for your powers of divination; but everybody knows that this match is no less a marriage of inclination than of convenience.”

“At least, everybody but me,” said Ordener, gravely.

“Except you? So be it. But what difference does that make? You cannot prevent the viceroy’s son from being in love with the chancellor’s daughter.”

“In love? “

“Madly in love!”

“He must indeed be mad to be in love with her.”

“Hullo! don’t forget of whom and to whom you speak. Would not one say that the son of the viceroy could not take a fancy to a lady without consulting this clown? “

As he spoke, the officer rose. Ethel, who saw Ordener’s face flush, hurried toward him.

“Oh! “ said she, “ pray be calm; do not heed these insults. What does it matter to us whether the viceroy’s son loves the chancellor’s daughter or not?”

The gentle hand laid on the young man’s heart stilled the tempest raging within. He cast an enraptured glance at his Ethel, and did not hear the lieutenant, who, recov- ering his good-humor, exclaimed: “ The lady acts with infinite grace the part of the Sabine woman interceding between her father and her husband. My words were rather heedless; I forgot,” he added, turning to Ordener, “that there is a bond of brotherhood between us, and that we can no longer provoke each other. Chevalier, give me your hand. Confess, you too forgot that you were speaking of the viceroy’s son to his future brother-in-law, Lieutenant d’Ahlefeld.”

At this name Schumacker, who had hitherto looked on with an indifferent or merely an impatient eye, sprang from his stone seat with a terrible cry: “ D’Ahlefeld! A D’Ahlefeld here! Serpent! How could I fail to recognize the abominable father in his son? Leave me in peace in my cell! I was not condemned to the punishment of seeing you. It only needs, as he desired just now, that the son of Guldenlew should join the son of d’Ahlefeld! Traitors! cowards! why do they not come themselves to enjoy my tears of madness and rage? Abhorred, abhorred race! Son of d’Ahlefeld, leave me! “

The officer, at first bewildered by the sharpness of these invectives, soon lost his temper and found his speech.

“Silence, lunatic! Cease your devilish litanies! “

“Leave me! leave me! “ repeated the old man; “ and take my curse, my curse upon you and the miserable race of Guldenlew, which is to be allied to you! “

“By Heaven! “ exclaimed the enraged officer, “ you insult me doubly!”

Ordener restrained the lieutenant, who was beside himself with passion.

“Respect an old man, even if he be your enemy, Lieutenant; we have already one question to settle together, and I will answer to you for the prisoner’s offences.”

“So be it,” said the lieutenant; “ you contract a double debt. The fight will be to the death, for I have both, my brother-in-law and myself to avenge. Think that with my gauntlet you pick up that of Ordener Guldenlew.”

“Lieutenant d’Ahlefeld,” replied Ordener, “ you espouse the cause of the absent with a, warmth which proves your generosity. Would there not be as much in showing pity for an unfortunate old man to whom adversity gives some right to be unjust? “

D’Ahlefeld was one of those souls in whom virtue is kindled by praise. He pressed Ordener’s hand, and approached Schumacker, who, exhausted by his emotion, had sunk back upon the rock, in the tearful Ethel’s arms.

“Lord Schumacker,” said the officer, “ you abused the privileges of your age, and I might have abused the privileges of my youth, if you had not found a champion. I enter your prison this morning for the last time, for I come to tell you that you may henceforth remain, by special order of the viceroy, free and unguarded in this donjon. Receive this good news from the lips of an enemy.”

“Go! “ said the old prisoner, in a hollow voice.

The lieutenant bowed and obeyed, inwardly pleased that he had won the approving glance of Ordener.

Schumacker sat for some time with folded arms and bent head, buried in thought. Suddenly he looked up at Ordener, who stood before him in silence.

“Well? “ said he.

“My lord Count, Dispolsen was murdered.”

The old man’s head again drooped upon his breast. Ordener went on: “ His assassin is a noted robber, Hans of Iceland.”

“Hans of Iceland! “ said Schumacker.

“Hans of Iceland! “ repeated Ethel.

“He robbed the captain,” added Ordener.

"And so," said the old man, " you heard nothing of an iron casket, sealed with the arms of Griffenfeld? "

"No, my lord."

Schumacker hid his face in his hands.

"I will restore it to you, my lord Count; trust me. The murder was committed yesterday morning. Hans fled toward the north. I have a guide who knows all his haunts. I have often roamed through the mountains of Throndhjem. I shall overtake the thief."

Ethel turned pale. Schumacker rose; his expression was almost joyful, as if he believed that virtue still existed in men.

"Noble Ordener," he said, " farewell." And raising his hand to heaven, he disappeared among the bushes.

As Ordener turned, he saw Ethel upon the moss-grown rock, pale as an alabaster image on a black pedestal.

"Good God, Ethel! " he cried, rushing to her and supporting her in his arms, " what is the matter? "

"Oh! " replied the trembling girl in scarcely audible tones. " Oh, if you have, I do not say a spark of love, but of pity for me, sir, if you did not speak yesterday only to deceive me, if it be not to cause my death that you have deigned to enter this prison, Lord Ordener, my Ordener, give up, in Heaven's name, in the name of all the angels, give up your mad scheme! Ordener, my beloved Ordener! " she continued, and her tears flowed freely, her head rested on the young man's breast, " make this sacrifice for me. Do not follow this robber, this frightful demon, with whom you would fight. In whose interest do you go, Ordener? Tell me, what interest can be dearer to you than that of the wretched woman whom but yesterday you called your beloved wife? "

She stopped, choked by sobs. Both arms were thrown around Ordener's neck, and her pleading eyes were fixed upon his.

‘‘ My adored Ethel, you are needlessly alarmed. God helps the righteous cause, and the interest in which I expose myself is no other than your own. That iron casket contains "

Ethel interrupted him: " My interest! Have I any other interest than your life? Ordener, what will become of me? "

"Why do you think that I shall die, Ethel? "

"Ah! Then you do not know this Hans, this infernal thief? Do you know what a monster you pursue? Do you know that he is lord of all the powers of darkness; that he overthrows mountains upon towns; that subterranean caverns crumble beneath his tread; that his breath extinguishes the beacons on every rocky coast? And how can you suppose, Ordener, that you can resist this giant aided by the demon, with your white arms and feeble sword? “

“And your prayers, Ethel, and the thought that I am fighting for you? Be assured, Ethel, the bandit’s strength and power have been greatly exaggerated. He is a man like ourselves, who deals out death until he himself be slain.”

“Then you will not heed me? My words are nothing to you? Tell me, what is to become of me if you go; if you roam from danger to danger, exposing for I know not what earthly interest your life, which is mine, by yielding it to a monster? “

Here the lieutenant’s tales recurred anew to Ethel’s fancy, exaggerated by her love and terror. She went on in a voice broken by sobs: “ I assure you, dear Ordener, they deceived you who told you that he was only a man. You should believe me rather than others, Ordener; you know that I would not mislead you. Thousands have tried to do battle with him; he has destroyed whole regiments. I only wish others would tell you the same; you might believe them and not go.”

Poor Ethel’s prayers would doubtless have shaken Ordener’s bold resolve, if he had not gone so far. The words uttered by Schumacker in his despair on the previous evening came back to him and strengthened him in his purpose.

“I might, my dear Ethel, tell you that I would not go, and yet carry out my plan; but I will never deceive you, even to console you. I ought not, I repeat, to hesitate between your tears and your true interests. Your fortune, your happiness, perhaps your life, -your very life, my Ethel, are at stake.” And he clasped her affectionately in his arms.

“And what do I care? “ she returned, weeping. “ My friend, my Ordener, my delight, for you know that you are my sole delight, do not give me a fearful and certain misery in exchange for a slight and doubtful misfortune. What is fortune or life to me?”

“Your father’s life, Ethel, is also at stake.”

She tore herself from his arms.

“My father’s life? “ she repeated in a low voice, turning pale.

“Yes, Ethel. This brigand, doubtless bribed by Count Griffenfeld’s enemies, has in his possession papers whose loss imperils the life of your father, already the object of so many attacks. I would die to win back those papers.”

Ethel was pale and dumb for some moments. Her tears were dried, her heaving breast labored painfully; she looked on the ground with a dull and indifferent gaze, the gaze of the condemned man as the axe is lifted over his head.

“My father’s life! “ she sighed.

Then she slowly turned her eyes toward Ordener.

“What you do is useless; but do it.”

Ordener pressed her to his bosom. “ Oh, noble girl, let me feel your heart beat against mine! Generous friend! I will soon return. Nay, you shall soon be mine; I would save your father, that I may better deserve to be his son. My Ethel, my beloved Ethel!”

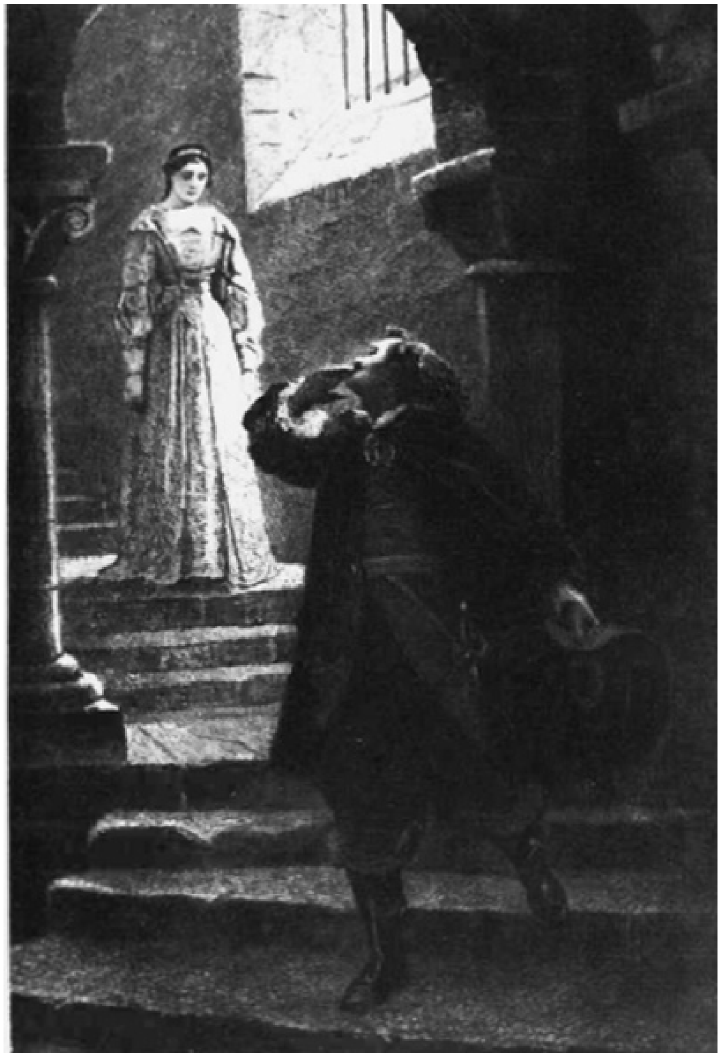

Farewell

Who can describe the emotions of a true heart which feels that it is appreciated by another noble heart? And if the love uniting these two similar souls be an indissoluble bond, who can paint their indescribable raptures? It seems as if they must feel, crowded into one brief in- stant, all the joy and all the glory of life, embellished by the charm of generous sacrifice.

"Oh, my Ordener, go; and if you never return, grief will kill me. I shall have that tardy consolation."

Both rose, and Ordener placed Ethel's arm within his own, and took that adored hand in his. They silently traversed the winding alleys of the gloomy garden, and reluctantly reached the gate which led into the world. There, Ethel, drawing a pair of tiny gold scissors from her bosom, cut off a curl of her beautiful black hair.

“Take it, Ordener; let it go with you; let it be happier than I am.”

Ordener devotedly pressed to his lips this gift from his beloved.

She added: “ Ordener, think of me; I will pray for you. My prayers may be as potent with God as your arms with the demon.”

Ordener bowed before this angel. His soul was too full for words. They remained clasped in each other’s arms for some time. As they were about to part, perhaps forever, Ordener, with a sad thrill, enjoyed the happiness of holding Ethel to his heart once more. At last, placing a long, pure kiss upon the sweet girl’s clouded brow, he rushed violently down the winding stairs, which a moment later echoed with the sweet and painful word, “ Farewell!”

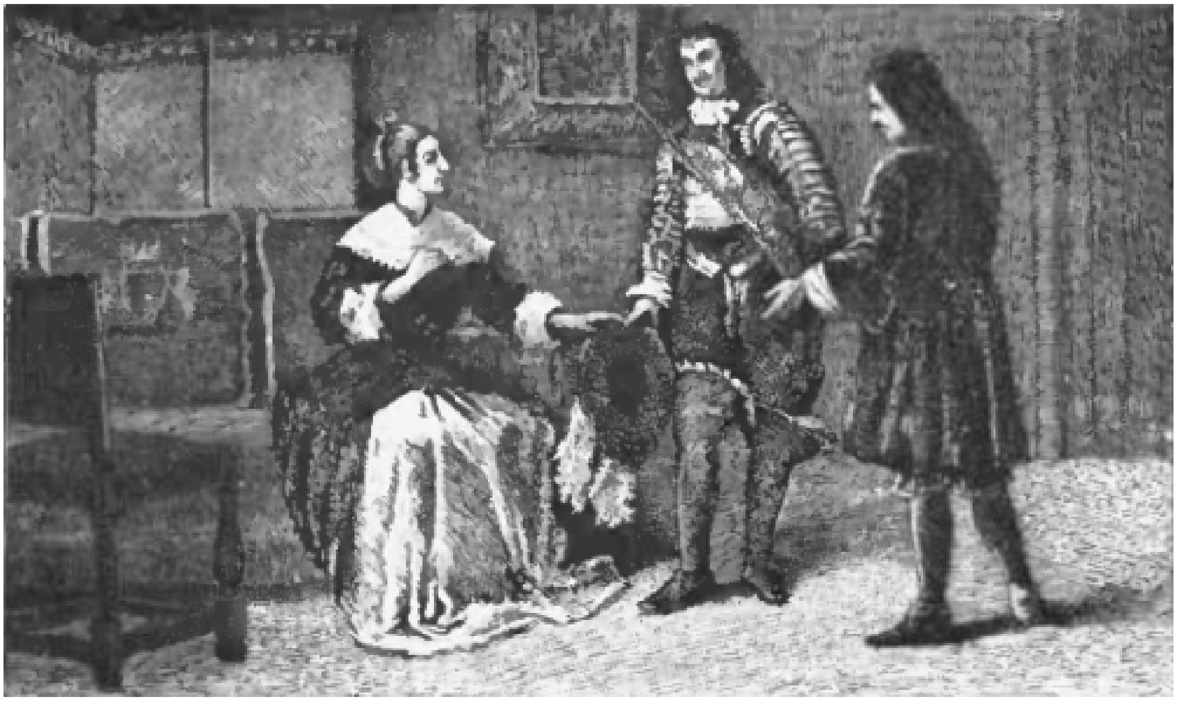

Countess d’Ahlefeld, Frederic, and Musdæmon

CHAPTER X TUTOR AND PUPIL.

You would never think her unhappy. Everything about her speaks of happiness. She wears necklaces of gold, and purple robes. When she goes out, a throng of vassals lie prostrate in her path, and obedient pages spread carpets before her feet. But none see her in the solitude that she loves; for then she weeps, and her husband does not see her tears. I am that miserable being, the spouse of an honorable man, of a noble count, the mother of a child whose smiles stab me to the heart.

Maturin: Bertram.

The Countess d'Ahlefeld rose after a sleepless night to face a restless day. Half reclining on a sofa, she pondered the bitter aftertaste of corrupt pleasures, and the crime which wastes life in ecstasy without enjoyment and grief without alleviation. She thought of Musdœmon, whom guilty illusions had once painted in such seductive colors, so frightful now that she had penetrated his mask and seen his soul through his body. The wretched woman wept, not because she had been deceived, but because her eyes were no longer blinded, tears of regret, but not of repentance; therefore her tears afforded her no relief. At this moment her door was opened. She dried her eyes quickly, and turned away, annoyed at being surprised, for she had given orders that she was not to be disturbed. On seeing Musdœmon her vexation changed to fright, which was dispelled when she found that her son Frederic was with him.

"Mother," cried the lieutenant, " how does it happen that you are here? I thought you were at Bergen. Have our fine ladies taken to running about the country? "

The countess received Frederic with kisses, to which, like all spoiled children, he responded very coldly. This was possibly the worst of punishments to the unhappy woman. Frederic was her beloved son, the only creature in the world for whom she felt an unselfish affection; for a degraded woman often, even when all sense of wifely duty has vanished, retains some trace of the mother.

"I see, my son, that when you heard I was in Throndhjem you hastened to me at once."

"Oh, no; not I. I was bored to death at the fort; so I came to town, where I met Musdœmon, who brought me here."

The poor mother sighed heavily.

“By the way, mother,” continued Frederic, “ I am very glad to see you, for you can tell me whether knots of pink ribbon on the hem of the doublet are still worn in Copenhagen. Did you think to bring me a flask of that Oil of Youth to whiten the skin? You did not forget, I hope, the last French novel, or the pure gold lace which I asked you to get for my scarlet cloak, or those little combs which are so much used just now to hold the curls in place, or -”

The poor woman had brought nothing to her son, the only love she had on earth.

“My dear boy, I have been ill, and my sufferings prevented my thinking of your pleasures.”

“Have you been ill, mother? Well, are you better now? By the bye, how is my pack of Norman hounds? I’ll wager that they have neglected to bathe my monkey in rose-water every night. You’ll see that I shall find my parrot Bilboa dead on my return. When I am away no one thinks of my pets.”

“At least your mother thinks of you, my son,” said his mother in a faltering voice.

Had this been the inexorable hour when the destroying angel hurls sinful souls into everlasting torments, he would have felt pity for the torture which at this instant wrung the heart of the unfortunate countess. Musdœmon laughed in his sleeve.

“Sir Frederic,” said he, “I see that the steel sword has no desire to rust in its iron scabbard. You do not care to lose the wholesome traditions of Copenhagen drawing rooms within the walls of Munkholm. But yet, allow me to ask you, what is the use of all this Oil of Youth, these pink ribbons, and little combs? What is the use of all these preparations for a siege, if the only feminine fortress within the walls of Munkholm is impregnable?”

“Upon my honor, she is,” laughingly responded Frederic. “ Certainly, if I have failed, General Schack himself would fail. But how can you surprise a fortress where nothing is exposed, where every post is unremittingly guarded? How can you contend against chemisettes which cover all but the neck, against sleeves that hide the whole arm, so that only the face and hands remain to prove that the young woman is not as black as the Emperor of Mauritania? My dear tutor, you yourself would have to go to school again. Believe me, that fort is not to be taken where Modesty is garrisoned.”

“Indeed! “ said Musdœmon. “ But may not Modesty be forced to surrender, if Love lay siege to it, instead of confining himself to a blockade of delicate attentions? “

“Labor in vain, rny dear friend. Love is already in possession of the place, but he serves to reinforce Modesty.”

‘‘ Ah, Sir Frederic, this is news indeed, with Love on your side “

“And who tells you, Musdœmon, that he is on my side? “

“On whose, then? “ exclaimed Musdœmon and the countess, who had listened in silence until now, but who was reminded of Ordener by the lieutenant’s last words.

Frederic was about to answer, and was already preparing a spicy account of the scene of the previous night, when he remembered the silence prescribed by the etiquette of duelling, which changed his gayety to confusion.

“I’ faith,” said he, “ I don’t know, that of some clown perhaps, some retainer.”

“Some soldier of the garrison? “ said Musdœmon, laughing heartily.

“What, my son! “ exclaimed the countess in her turn. “ Are you sure that she loves a rustic, a serf? What luck, if you are sure of it! “

“Oh, of course I am sure. But it ‘s not one of the soldiers of the garrison,” added the lieutenant, with an offended air. “ I am sure enough of what I say, however, to beg you, mother, to cut short my very unnecessary exile at that confounded castle.”

The countess’s face brightened on hearing of the young girl’s fall. Ordener Guldenlew’s eagerness to visit Munkholm now appeared to her in very different colors. She gave her son the benefit of them.

“You must give us an account, Frederic, of Ethel Schumacker’s loves. I am not surprised; the daughter of a boor can only love a boor. Meantime, do not curse that castle which yesterday afforded you the honor of the first advances towards an acquaintance, from a certain distinguished personage.”

“What, mother! “ said the lieutenant, staring at her,- “what distinguished personage?”

“A truce to jests, my son. Did no one visit you yesterday? You see that I know all about it.”

“I’ faith, more than I do, Mother. Deuce take me if I saw a face yesterday, except those of the masks carved beneath the cornices of those old towers.”

“What, Frederic! You saw nobody? “

“No one, mother! “

In omitting to mention his antagonist of the donjon, Frederic obeyed the law which bound him to silence; besides, could that clodhopper be counted as any one?

“What! “ said his mother. “ Did not the viceroy’s son visit Munkholm last night?”

The lieutenant laughed. “ The viceroy’s son! Indeed, mother, you must be dreaming, or else you are joking.”

“Neither, my son. Who was on guard yesterday? “

“I myself, mother.”

“And you did not see Baron Ordener? “

“Not a bit of it,” repeated the lieutenant.

“But consider, my boy, he may have entered in disguise. You never saw him, having been brought up at Copenhagen, while he was educated at Throndhjem. Remember all the stories about his caprices and whims, and his eccentric ideas. Are you sure, my son, that you did not see any one? “

Frederic hesitated an instant.

“No,” he cried, “ no one. I can say no more.”

“Then,” replied the countess, “ I suppose the baron did not go to Munkholm.”

Musdœmon, at first surprised like Frederic, had listened attentively. He interrupted the countess.

“Allow me, noble lady. Master Frederic, pray tell me the name of the dependent loved by Schumacker’s daughter.”

He repeated his question; for Frederic, who for some moments had been lost in thought, did not hear him.

“I do not know; or rather no, I do not know.”

“And how, sir, do you know that she loves a dependent? “

“Did I say so? A dependent? well, yes; he is a dependent.”

The awkwardness of the lieutenant’s position increased momentarily. This series of questions, the ideas to which they gave rise, his enforced silence, threw him into a confusion which he feared he could not much longer control.

“Upon my word, Mr. Musdœmon, and you, my lady mother, if a mania for asking questions be the latest fashion, you may amuse yourselves by questioning each other. For my part, I’ll have nothing more to say to you.”

And flinging open the door, he disappeared, leaving them plunged in an abyss of doubt. He hastened down into the courtyard, for he heard

Musdœmon’s voice calling him back.

He mounted his horse and rode toward the harbor, where he intended to take a boat for Munkholm, thinking that there he might find the stranger who had given rise to such serious thoughts in the greatest feather-brain of a feather-brained capital.

“If that was Ordener Guldenlew,” he reflected, “ then my poor Ulrica But no; it is impossible that he could be such a fool as to prefer the penniless daughter of a prisoner of State to the wealthy daughter of an allpowerful minister. At any rate, Schumacker’s daughter can be no more than a caprice; and there is nothing to hinder a man who has a wife from having a mistress too; in fact, it is quite the stylish thing. But no, it was not Ordener. The viceroy’s son would never wear such a shabby jacket. And that old black plume without a buckle, beaten bv the wind and rain! And that great cloak, big enough for a tent! And that disordered hair, with no combs and no frizzes! And those boots with iron spurs, covered with mud and dust! Indeed, it could never be he. Baron Thorwick is a knight of the Dannebrog. That fellow wore no decoration. If I were a knight of the Dannebrog, I believe I should wear the collar of the order to bed. Oh. no! He had never even read ‘ Clelia.’ No, it was not the viceroy’s son.”

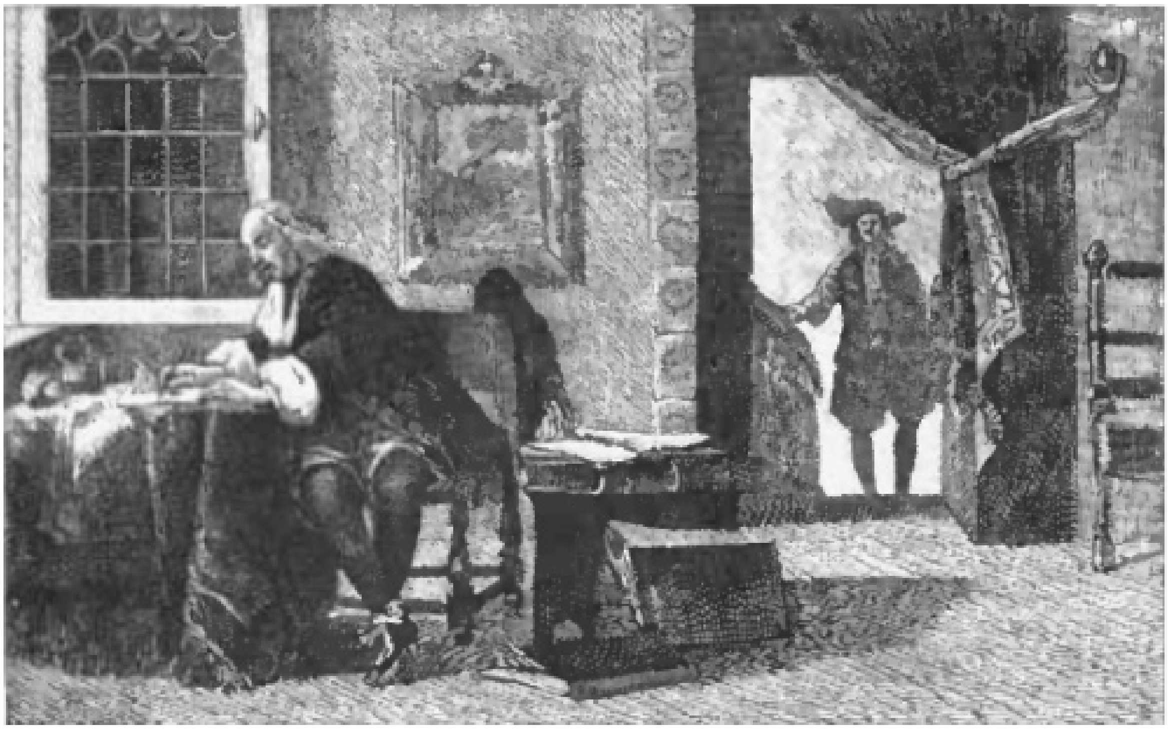

General Levin de Knud.

CHAPTER XI PLOTS AND COUNTERPLOTS.

If man could still retain his warmth of soul when experience has taught him, if he could inherit the legacies of time without bending beneath the weight, he would never attack those exalted virtues whose first lesson is ever self-sacrifice.

Madame De Staël: Germany.

Well, what is it? You, Poël! what brings you here?"

"Your Excellency forgets that you yourself summoned me."

"Did I? " said the general. " Oh, I wanted you to hand me that portfolio."

Poël handed the governor the portfolio, which he could have reached himself by stretching out his arm.

His Excellency mechanically replaced it without opening it; then he turned over some papers in an absent- minded way.

"Poël, I was going to ask you What time is it? "

"Six o'clock in the morning," replied the general's servant, who was facing the clock.

"I was going to tell you, Poël- What is the news today at the palace? "

The general went on shuffling his papers, writing a few words on each with a preoccupied air.

"Nothing, your Excellency, except that we are still expecting my noble master, about whom I see the general is anxious."

The general rose from his big writing-table, and looked at Poël somewhat angrily.

"Your eyes are very poor, Poël. I, anxious about Ordener, indeed! I know the reason for his absence; I do not expect him yet."

General Levin de Knud was so jealous of his authority that he would have considered it compromised had a subaltern been able to guess his secret thoughts, and learn that Ordener had acted without his orders.

"Poël," he added, " you may go."

The servant left the room.

"Really," exclaimed the general when he was left alone, " Ordener uses and abuses his privileges. A blade too often bent will break. To make me spend a night in sleepless impatience! To expose General Levin to the sarcasms of a chancellor's wife and the conjectures of a servant! And all this that an aged enemy may have those first greetings which are due to an old friend! Ordener! Ordener! whims are destructive of liberty I Let him come, only let him come now, deuce take me if I don't receive him as gunpowder does fire,- I'll blow him up! To expose the governor of Throndhjem to a servant's conjectures and a she-chancellor's sarcasms! Let him come! "

The general went on making marginal notes on his papers without reading them, so all-absorbing was his ill-temper.

"General! my noble father! " cried a familiar voice; and Ordeher clasped in his arms the old man, who did not even try to repress a cry of joy.

"Ordener, my good Ordener! Zounds! how glad I am! " He collected his thoughts in the middle of his phrase. " I am glad, Baron, that you have learned to control your feelings. You seem pleased to see me again. It was probably to mortify your flesh, that you deprived yourself of that pleasure for a whole day and night."

"Father, you have often told me that an unfortunate enemy should be put before a fortunate friend. I come from Munkholm."

"Of course," said the general, " when the enemy's misfortune is imminent. But Schumacker's future- "

"Looks more threatening than ever. Noble General, there is an odious plot on foot against that unlucky man. Men born his friends, would ruin him; a man born his foe, must serve him."

The general, whose face had gradually cleared, interrupted Ordener.

"Very good, my dear Ordener. But what are you talking about? Schumacker is under my protection. What men? What plots? "

Ordener could scarcely have replied plainly to this question. He had but very vague gleams of light, very uncertain suspicions as to the position of the man for whom he was about to expose his life. Many will think that he acted foolishly; but young hearts do what they think right by instinct, and not from calculation; and besides, in this world, where prudence is so barren and wisdom so caustic, who denies that generosity is folly? All is relative on earth, where all is limited; and virtue would be the greatest madness if there were no God behind man. Ordener was at the age to believe and to be believed. He risked his life trustingly. Even the general accepted reasons which would not have borne calm discussion.

"What plots? What men? Good father, in a few days I shall have solved the mystery; then you shall know all that I know. I must start off again tonight."

“What!” cried the old man, “ can you spare me but a few hours? Where are you going? Why are you going, my dear son? “

“You have sometimes allowed me, my noble father, to perform a praiseworthy act in secret.”

“Yes, my brave boy; but you are going without knowing why, and you know what an important affair requires your presence here.”

“My father has given me a month to consider the matter, and I shall devote that time to the interests of another. A good deed is often fruitful in good advice. Besides, we will see about it on my return.”

“How!” anxiously asked the general;” don’t you like this match? They say that Ulrica d’Ahlefeld is very beautiful. Tell me, have you seen her? “

“I believe I have,” said Ordener. “ Yes, I believe that she is handsome.”

“Well?” rejoined the governor.

“Well,” said Ordener, “ she will never be my wife.”

These cold, decisive words startled the general as if he had received a violent blow. He recalled the suspicions of the haughty countess.

“Ordener,” said he, shaking his head, “ I ought to be wise, for I have sinned. Well, I am nothing but an old fool! Ordener, the prisoner has a daughter

“Oh.” cried the young man, “ General, I wanted to speak to you of her. I ask your protection, father, for that helpless and oppressed young girl.”

“Indeed,” said the governor, gravely, “ your request is urgent.”

Ordener recovered himself.

“And why should it not be urgent for a poor captive whose life, and, what is far more precious, her honor, is in danger? “

“Life! honor! Why, I still govern here, and I know nothing of all these horrors! Explain yourself.”

“Noble father, the lives of the prisoner and his defenceless daughter are threatened by an infernal plot.”

“What you say is serious. What proofs have you?”

“The oldest son of a powerful family is even now at Munkholm. He is there to seduce Countess Ethel; he told me so himself.”

The general started back.

“Good God! Poor, forlorn creature! Ordener, Ordener, Ethel and Schumacker are under my protection. Who is this wretch? What is the name of the family? “

Ordener approached the general and wrung his hand.

“It is the D’Ahlefeld family.”

“D’Ahlefeld .’ “ said the governor. “ Yes, it is all clear. Lieutenant Frederic is at Munkholm now. My noble Ordener, would they marry you to such a brood! I understand your aversion, Ordener.”

The old man, folding his arms, thought for some moments, then clasped Ordener in his embrace.

“Ordener, you may go. Your friends shall not lack protection; I will guard them. Yes, go; you are perfectly right. That infernal Countess d’Ahlefeld is here; did you know it? “

“The noble lady, Countess d’Ahlefeld,” said the usher, opening the door.

At that name, Ordener mechanically withdrew to the back of the room; and the countess, entering without seeing him, exclaimed,

“General, your pupil is deceiving you. He never went to Munkholm.”

“Indeed? “ said the general.

“Good gracious, no! My son Frederic, who has just left the palace, was on duty yesterday in the donjon, and he saw no one.”

“Really, noble lady? “ repeated the general.

“So,” added the countess, with a triumphant smile, “ you need not wait for your Ordener any longer, General.”

The governor was cold and calm.

“I am no longer expecting him, Countess, it is true.”

“General,” said the countess, turning, “ I thought we were alone. Who is this? “

The countess looked searchiugly at Ordener, who bowed.

“Really,” she continued, “ I never saw him but once; still, if it were not for that dress, I should say General, is this the viceroy’s son? “

“Himself, noble lady,” said Ordener, with another bow.

The countess smiled.

“In that case, permit a lady who will soon be more closely allied to you, to ask where you were yesterday, Count? “

“Count! I do not think that I am so unfortunate as to have lost my noble father yet, my lady countess.”

“Certainly not; that was not my meaning. It is better to become a count by taking a wife than by losing a father.”

“One is no better than the other, noble lady.”

The countess, although slightly confused, made up her mind to laugh heartily.

“Come, the stories that I have heard are true. Your manners are somewhat boorish; but you will grow more used to accepting gifts from fair hands when Ulrica d’Ahlefeld has put the chain of the Order of the Elephant about your neck.”

“A chain indeed! “ said Ordener.

“You will see, General Levin,” resumed the countess, whose laugh was somewhat forced, “ that your intractable pupil will not consent to receive his colonel’s brevet from a lady’s hand either.”

“You are right, Countess,” replied Ordener; “ a man who wears a sword ought not to owe his epaulettes to a petticoat.”

The great lady’s face darkened.

“Ho! ho! whence comes the baron? Is it really true that your Highness was not at Munkholm yesterday? “

“Noble lady, I do not always satisfy all questions. But, General, you and I will meet again.”

Then, pressing the old man’s hand and bowing to the countess, he quitted the room, leaving the lady, amazed at the extent of her own ignorance, alone with the governor, who was furious at the amount of his knowledge.

CHAPTER XII SATAN’S ARMORY.

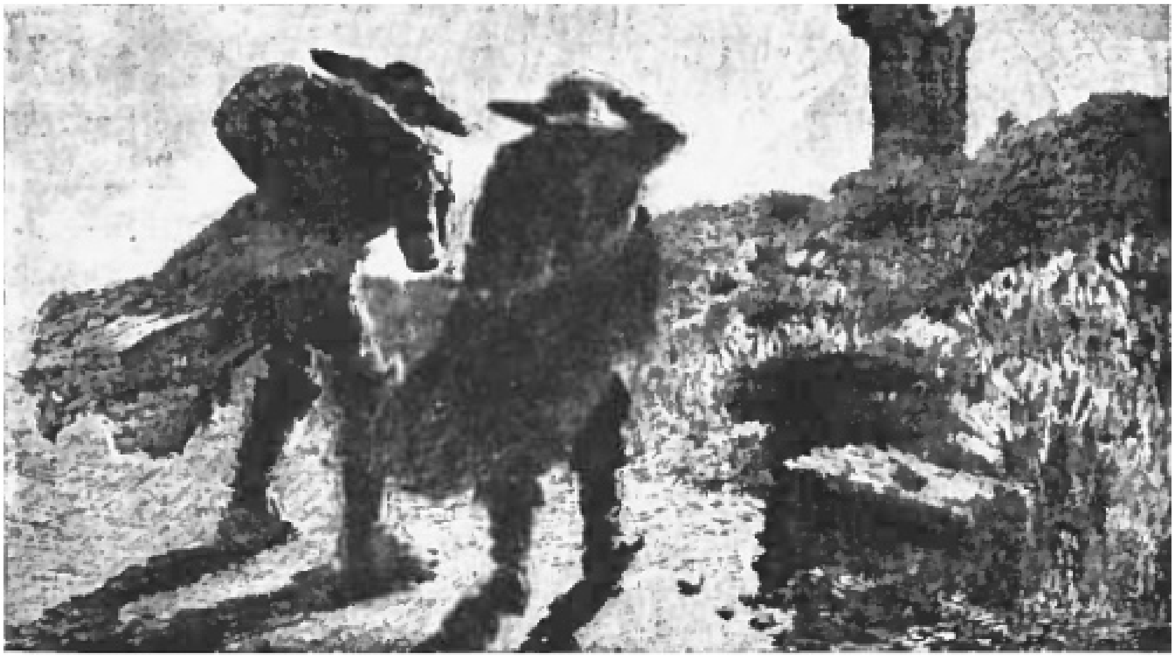

The two Travellers

The fellow that sits next him now, parts bread with him, and pledges the breath of him in a divided draught, is the readiest man to kill him.-

Shakespeare: Timon of Athens.

If the reader will transport himself to the highway leading from Throndhjem to Skongen, a narrow, stony road which skirts Throndhjem Fjord until it reaches the village of Vygla, he will not fail to hear the footsteps of two travellers, who left the city by what is known as Skongen Gate, at nightfall, and are rapidly climbing the range of hills up which the path to Vygla winds. Both are wrapped in cloaks. One walks with a firm, youthful step, his body erect and his head well up; the point of his sword hangs below the hem of his cloak, and in spite of the darkness, we see the plume in his cap waving in the breeze. The other is rather taller than his companion, but slightly bent; upon his back is a hump, doubtless formed by a wallet which is hidden by his large black mantle, whose ragged edges bear witness to its long and faithful service. His only weapon is a stick, with which he supports his rapid and uneven steps.

If darkness prevent our reader from distinguishing the features of the two travellers, he may perhaps recognize them by the conversation which one of them opens after an hour of silent, consequently tedious travel.

“Master, my young master! we have reached the point from which Vygla tower and Throndhjem spires may both be seen at the same time. Before us, on the horizon, that black mass is the tower; behind us lies the cathedral; its flying buttresses, darker still against the sky, stand out like the skeleton ribs of a mammoth.”

“Is Vygla far from Skongen?” asked the other wayfarer.

“We have to cross the Ordals, sir; we shall not reach Skongen before three o’clock in the morning.”

“What hour is that striking now? “

“Good heavens, master! you make me shiver. Yes, that is Throndhjem clock; the wind brings the sound to us. That ‘s a sign of storm. The northwest wind brings clouds.”

“In truth, the stars have all disappeared behind us.”

“Pray let us make haste, my noble lord, the storm is close at hand, and Gill’s corpse and my escape may already have been discovered in the city. Let us make haste! “

“Willingly. Old man, your load seems heavy; give it to me, I am younger and stronger than you.”

“No, indeed, noble master; it is not for the eagle to carry the shell of the tortoise. I am too far beneath you for you to burden yourself with my wallet.”

“But, old man, if it tires you? It seems heavy. What have you in it? Just now you stumbled, and it clinked as if there were iron in it.”

The old man sprang away from the young man.

“It clinked, master? Oh, no! you are mistaken. It contains nothing but food, clothes. No, it does not tire me, sir.”

The young man’s friendly offer seemed to give his old comrade a fright which he tried to disguise.

“Well.” replied the young man, without noticing it, “ if your bundle does not tire you, keep it,”

The old man, although his fears were set at rest, made haste to change the conversation.

“It is hard to travel by night as fugitives, over a road which it would be so agreeable, sir, to take by day as observers of Nature. On the shores of the fjord, to our left, are a quantity of Runic stones, upon which may be studied inscriptions traced, they say, by gods and giants. On our right, behind the rocks at the edge of the road, lies the salt-marsh of Sciold, which undoubtedly communicates with the sea by some subterranean passage; for the sea lobworm is caught there, that strange fish, which, as your servant and guide discovered, eats sand. It was in the Vygla tower, which we are now approaching, that the pagan king Vermond roasted the breasts of Saint Etheldreda, that glorious martyr, with wood from the true cross, brought to Copenhagen by Olaf III., and conquered from him by the Norwegian king. They say that since then repeated attempts have been made to turn that cursed tower into a chapel; every cross placed there, is consumed in its turn by fire from heaven.”

At this instant a tremendous flash of lightning covered the fjord, the hill, the rocks, the tower, and faded before the two travellers could distinguish any of these objects. They instinctively paused, and the lightning was almost immediately followed by a violent peal of thunder, which echoed from cloud to cloud across the sky, and from rock to rock along the earth.

They raised their eyes. All the stars were hidden, huge clouds rolled rapidly over one another, and the tempest hung like an avalanche above their heads. The tremendous blast, before which all these masses fled, had riot yet descended to the trees, which no breath stirred, and upon which no drop of rain had as yet fallen. The roar of the storm was heard aloft, and this, with the noise of the fjord, was the only sound to be heard in the darkness of the night, made doubly dark by the blackness of the tempest.

This tumultuous silence was suddenly interrupted, close beside the travellers, by a growl which made the old man tremble.

“Omnipotent God! “ he cried, grasping the young man’s arm, “that is either the laugh of the Devil in the storm, or the voice of -”

A fresh flash, a fresh peal, cut short his words. The tempest then burst with fury, as if it had only waited this signal. The travellers drew their cloaks closer, to protect themselves alike from the rain falling in torrents from the clouds, and from the thick dust swept in whirlwinds from the dry earth by a howling blast.

“Old man.” said the youth, “ a Hash of lightning just now showed me Vygla tower on our right; let us leave the path and seek shelter there.”

“Shelter in the Cursed Tower!” exclaimed the old man; “ may Saint Hospitius protect us! Think, young master; that tower is deserted.”

“So much the better, old man! We shall not be kept waiting at the door.”

“Think of the abominable act which polluted it! “

“Well, let it purify itself by sheltering us. Come, old man, follow me. I tell you that on such a night I would test the hospitality of a den of thieves.”

Then, in spite of the old man’s remonstrances, he grasped his arm and hastened toward the building, which, as the frequent flashes showed him, was close at hand. As they approached, they saw a light in one of the loopholes of the tower.

“You see,” said the young man, “that this tower is not deserted. You feel easier now, no doubt.”

“Oh, my God! my God! “ cried the old man, “ where are you taking me, maste? Saint Hospitius forbid that I should enter that oratory of the Devil! “

They had now reached the foot of the tower. The young traveller knocked loudly at the new door of this much dreaded ruin.

“Calm yourself, old man. Some pious hermit has come hither to sanctify this profane abode by dwelling in it.” “ No,” said his comrade, “ I will not enter. I’ll answer for it that no monk can live here, unless he has one of Beelzebub’s seven chains for a chaplet.”

However, a light had descended from one narrow window to another, and now shone through the key-hole.

“You are very late, Nychol! “ cried a sharp voice; “ the gallows was erected at noon, and it takes but six hours to come from Skougeu to Vygla. Did you have an extra job?”

These questions were asked just as the door was opened. The woman who opened it, seeing two strange faces instead of the one which she expected, uttered a frightened, threatening shriek, and started back.

Her appearance was by no means reassuring. She was tall; she held above her head an iron lamp, which threw a bright light upon her face. Her livid features, her bony, angular figure, were corpse-like, and her hollow eyes emitted ominous flashes like those of a funeral torch. She wore a red serge petticoat, reaching to her bare feet, and apparently stained in spots with deeper red. Her fleshless breast was half covered by a man’s jacket of the same color, the sleeves of which were cut off at the elbow. The wind, coming in at the open door, blew about her head her long gray hair, which was insecurely fastened with a strip of bark, and lent an added ferocity to her savage face.

"Good lady," said the younger of the new-comers, " the rain falls in floods; you have a roof, and we have gold."

His aged comrade plucked him by the cloak, whispering, " Oh, master, what are you saying? If this be not the abode of the Devil, it is the habitation of some robber. Our money, instead of protecting us, will be our ruin."

"Hush!" said the young man; and drawing a purse from his bosom, he displayed it to his hostess, repeating his request as he did so.

The woman, recovering from her surprise, studied them in turn with fixed and haggard eyes. " Strangers," she cried at last, as if she had not heard their voices, " have your guardian angels forsaken you? What would you with the cursed inhabitants of the Cursed Tower? Strangers, they were no mortals who sent you here for shelter, or they would have told you: Better are the lightning and the storm than the hearth within Vygla tower. The only living man who may enter here, enters the abode of no other human being; he only leaves solitude for a crowd; he lives only by death; he has no place save in the curses of men; he serves their vengeance only; he exists by their crimes alone; and the vilest criminal, in the hour of his doom, vents on him the universal scorn, and feels that he has a right to add to it his own contempt. Strangers! You must indeed be strangers, for your foot does not yet shrink with horror from the threshold of this tower. Disturb no longer the she-wolf and her cubs; return to the road travelled by the rest of mankind, and if you would not be shunned by your fellows, do not tell them that your face ever caught the rays of the lamp of the dwellers in Vygla tower." With these words, pointing to the door, she advanced toward the two travellers. The old man trembled in every limb, and looked imploringly at the young man, who, understanding nothing of the tall woman's words because of the great rapidity of her speech, thought her crazy, and was in no wise disposed to go out again into the rain, which still fell heavily.

"Faith, good hostess, you describe a strange character, whose acquaintance I would not lose this chance of making."

"His acquaintance, young man, is soon made, sooner ended. If your evil spirit urge you to seek it, go kill some living man, or profane the dead."

"Profane the dead! " repeated the old man, in a faltering voice, hiding himself in his companion's shadow.

"I scarcely comprehend," the latter said, " your suggestions, which seem somewhat indirect; it is shorter to stay here. No one but a madman would continue his journey in such weather.”

“Unhappy man! “ exclaimed the woman, “ do not knock at the door of one who can open no door save that of the tomb.”

“And if the door of the tomb should indeed open for me with that of your abode, woman, it shall not be said that I shrank from an ill-omened word. My sword is my safeguard. Come, close the door, for the wind is cold, and take this money.”

“Bah! what is your money to me! “ rejoined their hostess; “precious in your hands, in mine it would become more vile than pewter. Well, stay if you will, and give me the gold. It may protect you from the storms of Heaven; it cannot save me from the scorn of men. Nay; you pay a higher price for hospitality than others pay for murder. Wait here an instant, and give me your gold. Yes, it is the first time that a man’s hands have entered here filled with gold, without being stained with blood.”

So saying, after putting down her lamp and barricading the door, she disappeared beneath the arch of a dark staircase built at the back of the room.

While the old man shuddered, and, invoking the glorious Saint Hospitius under every name, cordially, but in an undertone, cursed his young companion’s imprudence, the latter took the light and surveyed the large circular apartment in which they had been left. What he saw as he approached the wall, startled him; and the old man, who had watched him closely, exclaimed,

“Good God, master! a gallows? “

A tall gallows, in fact, rested against the wall, reaching to the keystone of the damp, high, arched roof.

“Yes,” said the young man, “ and here are saws of wood and iron, chains and iron collars; here is a rack, and huge pincers hanging over it.”

“Holy saints of Paradise! “ cried the old man; “ where are we? “

The young man calmly went on with his inspection.

“This is a roll of hempen cord; here are furnaces and caldrons; this part of the wall is covered with tongs and scalpels; here are leathern whips with steel tips, an axe and a mace.”

“This must be the wardrobe of hell!” interrupted the old man, terrified by this dreadful catalogue.

“Here,” continued the other, “ are copper screws, wheels with teeth of bronze, a box of huge nails, and a lever. In truth, these are sorry furnishings.

It may seem to you hard that my impatience should have brought you hither with me.”

“Really, you agree to that! “

The old man was more dead than alive.

“Do not be frightened. What matters it where you are? I am with you.”

“A fine protection! “ muttered the old man, whose increasing terror modified his fear and respect for his young companion; “ a sword three feet long against a gibbet nine feet high! “

The big, red woman returned, and again taking up the iron lamp, beckoned to the travellers to follow her. They cautiously climbed a narrow, rickety flight of stairs built in the thickness of the tower wall. At each loophole a blast of wind and rain threatened to extinguish the quivering flame of the lamp, which their hostess shielded with her long, transparent hands. After stumbling more than once upon a rolling stone, in which the old man’s alarmed fancy saw human bones scattered over the stairs, they reached the next floor, and found themselves in a circular hall like the one below. In the centre, according to Gothic custom, burned a huge fire, the smoke of which escaped through a hole in the roof, but not without perceptibly obscuring the atmosphere of the hall. It was the light from this fire, combined with that of the iron lamp, which had caught the notice of the two wayfarers. A spit, loaded with fresh-killed meat, revolved before the flames. The old man turned from it in disgust.

“It was upon that execrable hearth,” said he to his comrade, “ that the embers of the true cross consumed the limbs of a saiut.” A rude table stood some distance away from the fire. The woman invited the travellers to be seated at it.

“Strangers,” said she, placing the lamp before them, “ supper will soon be ready, and my husband will probably make haste to get here, for fear the midnight ghost should carry him off as it passes the Cursed Tower.”

Ordener for the reader has doubtless already guessed that he and his guide, Benignus Spiagudry, were the two travellers could now examine at his leisure the strange disguise, in the concoction of which Benignus had exhausted all the resources of his fertile fancy, spurred on by a dread of recognition and capture. The poor fugitive had exchanged his reindeer-skin garments for a full suit of black, left at the Spladgest by a famous Throndhjem grammarian, who drowned himself in despair because he could not find out why “Jupiter” changed to “ Jovis” in the genitive. His wooden shoes gave place to a stout pair of postilion boots, whose owner had been killed by his horses, in which his slender shanks had so much spare room that he could not have walked without the aid of half a truss of hay. The huge wig of an elegant young Frenchman, slain by thieves just outside the city gates, concealed his bald pate and floated over his sharp, crooked shoulders. One of his eyes was covered with a plaster, and, thanks to a pot of paint which he had found in the pocket of an old maid who died of disappointed love, his pale, hollow cheeks were tinged with an unwonted crimson, an ornament which the rain had now divided with his chin. Before seating himself, he carefully placed beneath him the pack which he carried on his back, first wrapping it in his old mantle, and while he absorbed his comrade's entire attention, all his thoughts seemed centred in the roast which his hostess was watching, toward which he cast ever and anon a glance of anxiety and alarm. Broken ejaculations fell from his lips at intervals:

"Human flesh! *Horridas epulas!* Cannibals! A feast for Moloch! *Ne pueros coram populo Medea trucidet!* Where are we?- Atreus- Druidess- Irmensul- The Devil struck Lycaon with lightning-" Finally he exclaimed: " Good Heavens! God be thanked! I see a tail!"

Ordener, who, having watched and listened attentively, had closely followed the train of his thoughts, could not help smiling.

"That tail need not comfort you. It may be the Devil's hind quarter."

Spiagudry did not hear this pleasantry. His eyes were riveted on the back of the room. He trembled, and whispered in Ordener's ear,

"Master, look yonder, on that heap of straw, in the shadow! "

"Well, what is it? " said Ordener.

"Three naked bodies, the corpses of three children! "

"Some one is knocking at the door," cried the red woman, who was squatting by the fire.

In fact, a knock, followed by two louder raps, was heard above the ever-increasing din of the storm.

"It is he at last! It is Nychol! "

And seizing the lamp, their hostess hurried downstairs.

The two travellers had not had time to resume their conversation, when they heard a confused murmur of voices below, in the midst of which they caught these words, uttered in a voice which made Spiagudry start and shiver:

"Be quiet, woman; we shall stay. The thunderbolt enters without waiting for the door to be opened."

Spiagudry pressed closer to Ordener.

"Master, master," he quavered, " we are lost! "

The sound of footsteps was heard on the stairs, and two men in ecclesiastic dress entered the room, followed by the startled hostess.

One of these men was tall, and wore the black gown and close-clipped hair of a Lutheran minister; the other was shorter, and wore a hermit's robe tied with a girdle of rope. The hood drawn over his face concealed all but his long black beard, and his hands were entirely hidden by his flowing sleeves.

When he saw these two peaceful strangers, Spiagudry recovered from the terror which the peculiar voice of one of them had caused.

"Don't be alarmed, my good lady," said the minister. " Christian ministers do good even to those who injure them; why should they harm those who help them? We humbly beg for shelter. If the reverend gentleman with me spoke harshly to you just now, he was wrong to forget the gentle voice recommended to us in our ordination vows. Alas! the most saintly may err. I lost my way on the road from Skongen to Throndhjem, and could find no guide through the darkness, no shelter from the storm. This reverend brother, whom I encountered, being like myself far from home, deigned to allow me to accompany him hither. He praised your kind hospitality, dear lady; doubtless he was not mistaken. Do not say to us, like the wicked shepherd, *'Advene, cur intras?'* Take us in, worthy hostess, and God will save your crops from the storm, God will protect your flocks from the tempest, as you give a refuge to travellers who have gone astray! "

"Old man," broke in the woman in a fierce voice, " I have neither crops nor flocks."

"Well, if you are poor, God blesses the poor more than the rich. You and your husband shall live to a good old age, respected, not for your wealth, but for your virtues; your children shall grow up blessed in the esteem of all men, and be what their father was before them."

"Silence! " cried the hostess. " If they continue to be what we are, our children must grow old as we have, scorned by all, a scorn handed down from generation to generation. Silence, old man! Your blessing turns to curses on our heads."

“Heavens ‘. “ returned the minister, “ who then are you? Amid what crimes do you pass your life? “

“What do you call crime? What do you call virtue? We enjoy one privilege, we can possess no virtue and commit no crime.”

“The woman’s reason wanders,” said the minister, turning to the little hermit, who was drying his coarse robe before the fire.

“No, priest! “ replied the woman. “ Learn where you are. I would rather inspire horror than pity. I am not mad, but the wife of-”

A prolonged and violent knocking at the door drowned her words, to the great disappointment of Spiagudry and Ordener, who had silently listened to the dialogue.

“Cursed,” muttered the red woman, “ be the mayor and council of Skongen, who gave us this tower so near the high-road for our dwelling! Perhaps that is not Nychol, now.”

Still, she took up the lamp.

“After all, if it be another traveller, what matters it? The brook can flow where the torrent has passed.”

The four travellers, left alone, examined each other by the firelight. Spiagudry, terrified at first by the hermit’s voice, and then reassured by his black beard, might have trembled afresh if he had seen the piercing eye with which the monk observed him from beneath his cowl.

In the general silence the minister ventured a question: “ Brother monk, I presume that you are one of the Catholic priests who escaped from the last persecution, and that you were returning to your retreat when I was fortunate enough to meet you. Can you tell me where we are? “

The broken door of the ruined staircase opened before the hermit could answer.

“Woman, let a storm but burst, and there is always a crowd to sit at our hated board and take shelter beneath our accursed roof.”

“Nychol,” replied the wife, “ I could not help it! “

“What do I care how many guests you have, provided they pay? Money is as well earned by lodging a traveller as by strangling a thief.”

The speaker paused at the door, and the four strangers had ample opportunity to examine him.. He was a man of colossal size, dressed, like their hostess, in red serge. His enormous head seemed to rest directly upon his broad shoulders, in strong contrast with his gracious lady’s long, bony neck. He had a low forehead, flat nose, and thick eyebrows; his eyes, rimmed with red, shone like burning coals in a pool of blood. The lower part of his face was shaved smooth, exposing his big mouth, whose black lips were parted in a hideous grin, like the gaping edges of a never-healing wound. Two wisps of frizzled beard, extending from his cheeks to his chin, made his face seem square when seen from the front. He wore a gray felt hat, which dripped with rain, and which he did not deign to remove in the presence of the four travellers.

As he looked at him, Benignus Spiagudry uttered a cry of fright, and the Lutheran minister turned away, struck with horror and surprise; while the master of the house, recognizing, addressed him thus: “ What, are you here, minister! Indeed, I did not expect to have the pleasure of seeing your scared and woebegone face again to-day.”

The priest mastered his first feeling of repulsion. His face became serious and serene.

“And I, my son, rejoice at the chance which has brought together the shepherd and the lost sheep, to the end, no doubt, that the sheep may return to the fold.”

“Ah, by Haman’s gibbet,” rejoined the other with a loud laugh, “ this is the first time that ever I was compared to a sheep! Believe me, Father, if you would flatter the vulture, you must not call him a dove.”

“He who can change the vulture to a dove, consoles, my son, and does not flatter. You think that I fear you, and I only pity you!”

“You must indeed have a goodly store of pity. I should have fancied that you had exhausted it all on that poor devil to whom you displayed your cross this morning in the hope of hiding my gallows from his eyes.”

“That unfortunate man,” replied the priest, “ was less to be pitied than you; for he wept, and you laugh. Happy is he who learns in the moment of atonement how much less powerful is man’s arm than the word of God! “

“Well said, Father!” replied the host, with a horrid and ironical mirth. “ Happy is he. who weeps! That fellow to-day, moreover, had no other fault than that of loving the king so much that he could not live without making his Majesty’s picture upon little copper medals, which he then gilded artistically to render them more worthy of the royal effigy. Our gracious sovereign was not ungrateful, and rewarded him for such a display of affection with a fine hempen decoration, which, let me inform my worthy guests, was conferred upon him this very day, in Skongen market-place, by me, lord chancellor of the Order of the Gibbet, assisted by this gentleman here present, grand chaplain of the said order."

"Stop, wretched man! " broke in the priest. " How can he who punishes forget that punishment awaits us all? Listen to the thunder "

"Well, what is thunder? Satan's laughter."

"Good God, he has just looked on death, and he blasphemes!"

"A truce to your sermons, old fool! " cried the host, in a loud, angry tone, " unless you would curse the angel of darkness who has brought us together twice in one day, in the same carriage and under the same roof. Imitate your friend the hermit, who is silent, for he longs to be back again in his cave at Lynrass. I thank you, brother monk, for the blessing which I see you bestow upon the Cursed Tower every morning as you cross the hill; but the fact is that you always seemed tall to me until now, and that black beard of yours looked white. Are you sure that you are the hermit of Lynrass, the only hermit in the province of Throndhjem?"

"I am the only one," said the hermit in a hollow voice.

"We are, then," rejoined his host, " the two recluses of the district- Hollo, Becky, make haste with that roast lamb, for I am hungry. I was detained at Burlock village by that confounded Dr. Manryll, who would only give me twelve escalins for the corpse. That miserable fellow who keeps the Throndhjem Spladgest gets forty. Ha, Muster Periwig, what 's the matter with you? Are you going to tumble over? By the way, Becky, have you finished the skeleton of that famous magician, Orgivius the poisoner? It is high time it was delivered to the Bergen Museum. Did you send one of your little pigs to the mayor of Loevig to get what he owes me,- four double crowns for boiling a witch and two alchemists, and for removing several chains from the cross-beams of his tribunal, which they disfigured; twenty escalins for hanging Ishmael Typhaine, a Jew against whom the good bishop entered a complaint: and a crown for putting a new wooden arm to the stone gallows of the tower."

"Your wages," replied his wife in sour tones, "remain in the mayor's hands, because your son forgot to take a wooden spoon to receive the money, and none of the judge's servants were willing to put it into his hand."

The husband frowned.

"Only let their necks fall into my hands, and they shall see whether I need a wooden spoon to touch them. But we must manage the mayor carefully, for it is to him that robber Ivar complained that he was put to the rack by me, and not by a regular executioner, alleging that, as he had not yet been tried, he was not upon my level. By the way, wife, do keep the children from playing with my nippers and pincers; they have spoiled all my tools, so that I really could not use them today. Where are they, the little monsters? “ added the man, going up to the heap of straw where Spiagudry had fancied that he saw three dead bodies. “ Here they are in bed; they sleep through all our noise as soundly as if they had been hanged.”

From these words, whose grim horror was in strong contrast with the speaker’s mirth and fierce, frightful composure, the reader will have guessed who was the inhabitant of the Vygla tower. Spiagudry, who upon his first appearance recognized him from having often seen him act in his official capacity in the Throndhjem marketplace, felt ready to faint, particularly when he considered his own powerful personal motive for dreading this awful personage. He leaned over to Ordener, and said in scarcely articulate tones, “ It is Nychol Orugix, the hangman of the province of Throndhjein! “

Ordener, at first struck with horror, shuddered, and regretted both his journey and the storm. But soon a peculiar feeling of curiosity took possession of him, and although he pitied his old guide’s distress and terror, he devoted his entire attention to observing the speech and manners of the singular being before him, just as a man might listen eagerly to the growl of a hyena or the roar of a tiger, brought from the desert to one of our great cities. Poor Benignus was far from being sufficiently easy in his mind to make psychological observations. Hidden behind Ordener, he drew his mantle closely about him, raised a restless hand to his plaster, pulled the back of his loose periwig over his face, and sighed heavily.

Meantime the hostess had dished up the joint of roast lamb, with its reassuring tail, on a large earthen platter. The hangman seated himself opposite Ordener and Spiagudry, between the two clergymen; and his wife, after putting upon the table a jug of sweetened beer, a piece of *rindebrod,* and five wooden plates, sat down by the fire and busied herself in sharpening her husband’s dull tools.

“There, reverend sir,” said Orugix, laughing; “ the sheep offers you a piece of lamb. And you, Sir Periwig, was it the wind that blew your hair over your face? “

“The wind, sir, the storm “ stammered the trembling Spiagudry.

“Come, pluck up a spirit, old boy! You see that these reverend gentlemen and I are good fellows. Tell us who you are, and who your silent young friend is, and talk a bit. If your conversation is as amusing as your person, it must be funny indeed.”

“Your worship jests,” said the keeper, pursing his lips, showing his teeth and winking, to make himself look merry. “I am but a poor old man.”

“Yes,” interrupted the jovial hangman, “ some old scientist, some old sorcerer.”

“Oh, my lord and master, a scientist, but no sorcerer! “

“So much the worse; a sorcerer would complete our joyful Sanhedrim. Gentlemen and guests, let us drink to restore this old sage’s speech, so that he may enliven us at supper; the health of the man we hanged today, brother preacher! Well, father monk, do you refuse my beer?”

The hermit had, indeed, drawn from under his gown a large gourd of clear water, from which he filled his glass.

“Zounds, hermit of Lynrass! “ cried the hangman, “ if you will not taste my beer, I will taste the water which you prefer to it.”

“So be it,” answered the hermit,

“First take off your glove, worthy brother,” answered the hangman. “ Water should always be poured with the bare hand.”

The hermit shook his head, saying, “ It is a vow.”

“Well, then, pour,” said the hangman.

Hardly had Orugix raised the glass to his lips when he set it down hastily, while the hermit drained his at a draught.

“By the Holy Grail! good hermit, what is that infernal stuff? I have not drank its like since the day that I came near drowning in my voyage from Copenhagen to Throndhjem. Truly, hermit, that is no water from Lynrass spring; it is salt water.”

“Salt water,” repeated Spiagudry, his terror increasing as he looked at the hermit’s glove.

“Well, well! “ said the hangman, turning toward him with a loud laugh; “ so everything alarms you, old Absalom, even to the drink of a holy monk who chooses to mortify his flesh! “

“Alas! no, master! But salt water There is but one man “

“Come, come, you don’t know what you are talking about, sir doctor; your distress must be caused by your bad conscience, or else you despise our company.”

These words, uttered in a humorous tone, reminded Spiagudry that he must needs hide his fears. To mollify his much-dreaded host, he called his vast memory to his aid, and summoned up all the presence of mind which was left to him.

"I despise you, you, my lord and master! You, whose presence in a province gives that province the *mc- rum impcrium!* You, mighty hangman, the executioner of secular vengeance, the sword of justice, the shield of innocence! You, whom Aristotle in the sixth book and last chapter of his ' Politics ' ranks with magistrates, and whose salary Paris de Puteo, in his treatise *' De Syndico,'* fixes at five gold crowns, as this passage proves: *Quinque aureos manirolto!* You, sir, whose Cronstadt colleagues were ennobled when they had cut off three hundred heads, -you, whose terrible but most honorable functions are performed with pride in Franconia by the most recent bridegroom, in Reutlingen by the youngest of the city councillors, in Stedien by the last-made citizen! And do I not also know, good master, that your colleagues in France have the right of *havadium* upon every leper, upon pigs, and upon cake on Epiphany eve? How could I fail to feel the deepest respect for you when the abbot of Saint Germain des Piés gives you a boar's head every year, on Saint Vincent's Day, and puts you at the head of his procession! "

Here the keeper's erudite flow of fancy was abruptly cut short by the hangman.

"Upon my word, this is the first that I have heard of it. The learned abbot of whom you speak, my worthy friend, has hitherto defrauded me of all these fine privileges which you describe in such attractive fashion.-Strangers," continued Orugix, " aside from all this old fool's extravagant nonsense, it is quite true that I have missed my career. I am only the poor hangman of a poor province. "Well, I certainly ought to have done better than Stillison Dickoy, the famous hangman of Moscow. Would you believe that I am the same man who was chosen twenty-four years ago to behead Schumacker? "

"Schumacker, Count of Griffenfeld! " exclaimed Ordener.

"Does that surprise you, Sir Silent? Yes, that selfsame Schumacker who, strange to say, would again fall into my hands should it please the king to recall his reprieve. Let us empty this jug, gentlemen, and I will tell you how it happens that after so brilliant a beginning I end my career so miserably.

“In 1676, I was assistant to Ehum Stuald, the royal hangman at Copenhagen. At the time of Count Griffenfeld’s sentence, my master falling ill, I was, thanks to my powerful patrons, selected to act in his place. On June 5, - I shall never forget that day,- at five o’clock in the morning, assisted by the carpenter, I erected in the public square a huge gallows, which we hung with black, out of respect for the prisoner. At eight, the king’s guards surrounded the scaffold, and the Schleswig Uhlans kept back the crowd that thronged the square. Who would not have been dazzled in my place? Erect, and sword in hand, I stood waiting on the platform. All eyes were upon me; at that moment I was the most important personage in the two kingdoms. My fortune, thought I, is made; for what could all these great lords, who have sworn the chancellor’s ruin, do without me? I already regarded myself as the royal hangman of the town, by letters-patent; I had servants and privileges of every sort. Just listen! The clock on the fortress struck ten. The prisoner left his cell, crossed the square, and ascended the scaffold with a firm step and calm face. I wanted to tie his hair; he refused, and himself performed this last office. ‘ It’s a long time,’ he said smilingly to the prior of St. An-drew’s, ‘ since I dressed my own hair.’ I offered him the black bandage; he declined it scornfully, but without showing any contempt for me. ‘ My friend,’ said he, ‘ this is perhaps the first time on record, that the space of a few feet ever held the two officers representing the extremes of the law, the chancellor and the executioner! ‘

Those words have remained graven on my memory. He also refused the black cushion which I would have given him for his knees, embraced the priest, and knelt, after declaring his innocence in a loud voice. Then I broke his escutcheon with a single blow of my mace, crying aloud, as is the custom, ‘This is not done without just cause!’ This affront shook the count’s firm bearing; he turned pale, but soon mastered himself and said, ‘ The king gave me my arms; the king can take them from me! ‘ He placed his head on the block, turned his eyes toward the east, and I raised my sword in both hands. Now listen! At that instant a shout fell upon my ears, ‘ Pardon, in the king’s name! Pardon for Schumacker! ‘ I turned; I saw a royal aide-de-camp galloping toward the gallows waving a parchment. The count rose, with a look not of pleasure, but of satisfaction. The parchment was handed to him. ‘Good God!’ cried he, ‘ imprisonment for life! Their mercy is more cruel than death.’ He stepped, looking like a thief, from the scaffold which he had mounted so serenely. It was nothing to me. I had no idea that this man’s salvation meant my ruin. After removing the scaffold, I returned to my master still full of hope, although slightly disappointed at losing the golden crown, my fee for removing a head. That was not all. Next day I received an order to leave the city, and an appointment as executioner for the province of Throndhjem.

A provincial hangman, and that in the most miserable province of Norway! Now you shall see, gentlemen, how small causes sometimes bring about great results. The count's enemies, by way of displaying their generosity, had done all in their power to keep back the pardon until the execution was over. It lacked but one minute; they blamed me for being so slow, as if it would have been decent to prevent an illustrious man from amusing himself for a few moments, before he breathed his last! As if a royal executioner beheading a lord high chancellor could act with no more dignity and sense of proportion than a country hangman turning off a Jew! Ill-will was added to this. I had a brother; indeed, I think I have one still. He had changed his name, and succeeded in finding employment in the house of the new chancellor, Count d'Ahlefeld. My presence in Copenhagen disturbed the scoundrel. My brother despised me, because it might some time fall to my lot to hang him."

Here the fluent narrator stopped to give vent to his mirth; then he went on:

"You see, my dear guests, that I made the best of it. The deuce take ambition! I ply my calling honestly. I sell my dead bodies, or Becky turns them into skeletons, which the Bergen anatomical museum buys. I laugh at everything, even at that poor woman who was a gypsy, and whom solitude has driven mad. My three heirs are growing up in the fear of the Devil and the gallows. My name is the terror of all the children in Throndhjem. The city council furnish me with a cart and red clothes. The Cursed Tower protects me from rain as well as the bishop's palace could do. Old priests, driven hither by a storm, preach to me; learned men fawn upon me. In fine, I am as happy as most people; I drink, eat, hang, and sleep."

The hangman did not close this long speech without frequent interludes of beer and noisy bursts of laughter.

"He kills, and he sleeps!" murmured the minister; " poor wretch! "

"What a lucky fellow the rascal is! " exclaimed the hermit.

"Yes, brother monk," said the hangman; "just as much of a rascal as you are, but assuredly much luckier. You see, the business would be a capital one if people did not seem to take pleasure in cutting down my profits. Would you believe it, some great wedding has just afforded the chaplain newly appointed to Throndhjem a pretext for asking the pardon of twelve criminals who really belonged to me? “

“Belonged to you! “ cried the minister.

“Yes, to be sure, Father. Seven of them were sentenced to be whipped, two to be branded on the left cheek, and three to be hanged, which makes twelve in all. Yes, I shall lose twelve crowns and thirteen escalins if the pardon is granted. What do you think, strangers, of such a chaplain, who disposes so easily of my property? That confounded priest’s name is Athanasius Munder. Oh, if I could only get hold of him! “ The minister rose, and said in a quiet voice, with a calm manner, “My son, I am Athanasius Munder.”

At these words Orugix’s face became inflamed with fury; he started from his seat. Then his angry eye met the friendly gaze of the chaplain, and he sat down again slowly, in mute confusion.

There was a momentary silence. Ordener, who had risen from the table ready to defend the priest, was first to break it.

“Nychol Orugix,” said he, “ here are thirteen crowns to pay for the pardon of those prisoners.”

“Alas! “ interrupted the minister, “ who knows whether I can obtain their pardon? I must first manage to get a word with the viceroy’s son, for it all depends upon his marrying the chancellor’s daughter.”

“Sir chaplain,” answered the young man in a firm voice, “ your wish shall be granted. Even if Ordener Guldeulew never wears the marriage ring, the chains of your *protégés* shall be loosed.”

“Young stranger, you can do nothing in the matter; but God hears, and will reward you! “

Meantime, Ordener’s thirteen crowns had finished the work which the priest’s mild gaze began. Nychol’s anger being allayed, he recovered his good-humor.

“Come, reverend sir, you are a good man, worthy to serve in St. Hilary’s chapel; I spoke more harshly than I intended. You do but follow your own path; it is not your fault if it crosses mine. But there is one man to whom I do bear a grudge, and that ‘s the guardian of the dead at Throndhjem, that old sorcerer, the keeper of the Spladgest. What ‘s his name now, Spliugry? Spadugry? Tell me, you old philosopher, who seem to be a perfect Babel of learning, you who know everything, can’t you help me to remember the name of that magician, your brother? You must have met him sometimes of a Sabbath, riding through the air on a broomstick, eh? “

Certainly, if poor Benignus could have escaped at that moment upon some such aerial steed, the narrator of this story doubts not that he would most gladly have trusted his frail and terrified body to its tender mercies. Never before was his love of life so strong as now that he clearly perceived the extreme imminence of his danger. Everything that he saw frightened him, the legends of the Cursed Tower, the wild eyes of the red woman, the voice, gloves, and beverage of the mysterious monk, the rash courage of his young companion, and especially the hangman, the hangman, into whose abode he had fallen in his effort to escape from the charge of crime. He trembled so violently that he could scarcely move, particularly when the conversation turned upon himself, and he heard the dreadful Orugix’s question. As he had no desire to imitate the heroism of the priest, his faltering tongue found great difficulty in framing a reply.

“Well! “ repeated the hangman, “ don’t you know the name of the keeper of the Spladgest? Does your wig make you deaf?”

“Somewhat, sir; but,” he finally stammered out, “I don’t know his name, I swear I don’t.”

“He don’t know? “ said the hermit’s terrible voice. “He does wrong to take oath to it. That man’s name is Benignus Spiagudry.”

“My name! my name! Great heavens! “ exclaimed the affrighted old man.

The hangman burst out laughing. “ And who said that it was your name? We are talking of that dog of a keeper. In good sooth, this learned fellow is scared at nothing. How would it be if his ridiculous grimaces had a genuine cause? It would be fun to hang the old fool. So then, venerable doctor,” added the hangman, whom Spiagudry’s fears entertained, “ you do not know this Benignus Spiagudry? “

“No, master,” said the keeper, somewhat reassured by his disguise; “ I assure you I don’t know him. And since he is so unfortunate as to displease you, I should be very sorry, master, indeed I should, if I did know the fellow.”

“And you, hermit,” said Orugix, “ you seem to know him? “

“Yes, truly,” replied the hermit; “ he is a tall, dried-up, bald old fellow “

Spiagudry, justly alarmed at this minute description, hastily adjusted his wig.

"He has," added the hermit, " long hands like those of a thief who has not seen a traveller for a week, a bent back "

Spiagudry sat up as straight as he could.

"Moreover, he might easily be taken for one of the corpses in his charge if he had not such sharp eyes."

Spiagudry clapped his hand to his plaster.

"Many thanks, Father," said the hangman; " I shall know the old Jew now, wherever I may run across him."

Spiagudry, who was an excellent Christian, indignant at this intolerable insult, could not help exclaiming, " Jew, master! "

Then he stopped short, trembling lest he had said too much.

"Well, Jew or Pagan, what does it matter which, if he have dealings with the Devil, as they say he has? "

"I should readily believe it," rejoined the hermit, with a sarcastic smile, not quite hidden by his cowl, " if he were not such a coward. But how could he covenant with Satan? He is as cowardly as he is wicked. When fear takes possession of him, he actually forgets his own identity."

The hermit spoke slowly, as if with intention, the very deliberation of his words lending them peculiar force.

"He forgets his own identity! " mentally repeated Spiagudry.

"It 's a pity for a bad man to be a coward," said the hangman; " for he 's not worth hating. We fight a serpent, but we can only crush a lizard."

Spiagudry ventured a few words in his own defence.

"But, gentlemen, are you sure that the official of whom you speak is really what you say? Is his reputation so bad? "

"His reputation! " repeated the hermit; " he has the worst reputation of any man in the district! "

Benignus, in his disappointment, turned to the hangman.

"Master, what fault have you to find with him? For I do not doubt that your dislike is just."

"You are right, old man, not to doubt it. As his trade resembles mine, Spiagudry does all he can to injure me."

"Oh, master, never believe it! Or, if it be so, it is because he never saw you, as I have, surrounded by your good wife and lovely children, admitting strangers to the delights of your domestic circle. Had he enjoyed your kind hospitality as I have, sir, the unfortunate man could never be your enemy."

Spiagudry had scarcely ended this wily speech, when the tall woman, who had been silent until then, rose, and said in a sharp, stern voice, " The viper's tongue is never more venomous than when it is smeared with honey." Then she sat down again, and went on polishing her pincers, a task whose hoarse, grating sound, filling up the spaces in the conversation, performed the office of the chorus in a Greek tragedy, at the expense of the ears of the four travellers.

"That woman is crazy indeed!" thought the keeper, unable otherwise to explain the ill effect of his flattery.

"Becky is right, my fair-haired sage," exclaimed the hangman. "I shall think you have a viper's tongue, if you defend that Spiagudry much longer."

"God forbid, master! " exclaimed the latter; " I would not defend him for the world."

"Very good. You do not know how far he carries his insolence. Would you believe that the impudent scamp is bold enough to dispute my right to the possession of Hans of Iceland?"

"Hans of Iceland!" exclaimed the hermit.

"Yes, to be sure. Do you know that famous knave? "

"Yes," said the hermit.

"Well, every thief belongs to the hangman, doesn't he? What does that infernal Spiagudry do? He asks to have a price set upon the head of Hans."

"He asks to have a price set upon the head of Hans? " interrupted the hermit.

"He had the audacity to do so, and that, simply that the body might fall to his share, and I might be defrauded of my property."

"What an outrage, Master Orugix, to dare to dispute your right to a thing which so plainly belongs to you!"

These words were accompanied by a malicious smile, which alarmed Spiagudry.

"The trick is all the worse, hermit, because I only need one good hanging, such as that of Hans would be, to remove me from my obscurity, and to make the fortune which I failed to make by beheading Schumacker."

"Indeed, Master Nychol? "

"Yes, brother monk, on the day that Hans is arrested, come and see me, and we will sacrifice a fat pig to my future greatness."

“Gladly; but who knows whether I shall be at liberty upon that day? Besides, you just now sent ambition to the Devil.”

“Oh, why not, Father, when I see that to destroy my best founded hopes it only needs a Spiagudry, and a request to set a price upon a man’s head? “

“Ah! “ repeated the hermit, in a peculiar tone; “ so Spiagudry asked that a price be set!”

That voice was to the wretched keeper what the toad’s eye is to a bird.

“Gentlemen,” he urged, “ why judge rashly? It is not at all sure; it may be a false report.”

“A false report!” cried Orugix; “the thing is but too certain. The petition of the city council, supported by the signature of the keeper of the Spladgest, is in Throndhjem at this very moment. It only waits the decision of his excellency the governor-general.”

The hangman was so well informed, that Spiagudry dared not continue his defence; he contented himself with swearing inwardly, for the hundredth time, at his youthful companion. But what was his horror when he heard the hermit, who for some moments had seemed lost in thought, suddenly exclaim in bantering tones: “Master Nychol, what is the penalty for sacrilege? “

These words produced the same effect on Spiagudry as if his periwig and plaster had been torn off. He anxiously awaited the reply of Orugix, who stopped to empty his glass.

“That depends on the nature of the sacrilege,” said the hangman.

“Suppose it was profaning the dead? “

Upon this the shivering Spiagudry expected every instant to hear his name issue from the lips of the unaccountable monk.

“Formerly,” coolly remarked Orugix, “ they buried the offender alive, with the body he had outraged.”

“And now? “

“Now the punishment is milder.”

“Is milder! “ said Spiagudry, scarcely daring to breathe.

“Yes,” rejoined the hangman, with the satisfied and indifferent air of an artist talking of his own art; “ they brand him first, with a hot iron, with the letter S, on the calf of the leg.”

“And then?” broke in the old keeper, upon whom it would have been difficult to inflict this part of the sentence.

“Then,” said the executioner, “ they merely hang him.”

“Mercy ‘ “ said Spiagudry; “ hang him! “

“Well, what ‘s the matter with you? You look at me as the victim looks at the gallows.”

“I am glad,” said the hermit, “ to see that people are growing more humane.”

At this moment, the storm having ceased, the clear, intermittent sound of a horn was distinctly heard outside.

“Nychol,” said his wife, “they are in search of some malefactor; that ‘s the horn of the bowmen.”

“The horn of the bowmen! “ repeated each of the company, in different accents, but Spiagudry in tones of unmistakable terror.

They had scarcely uttered the words when there was a knock at the door.

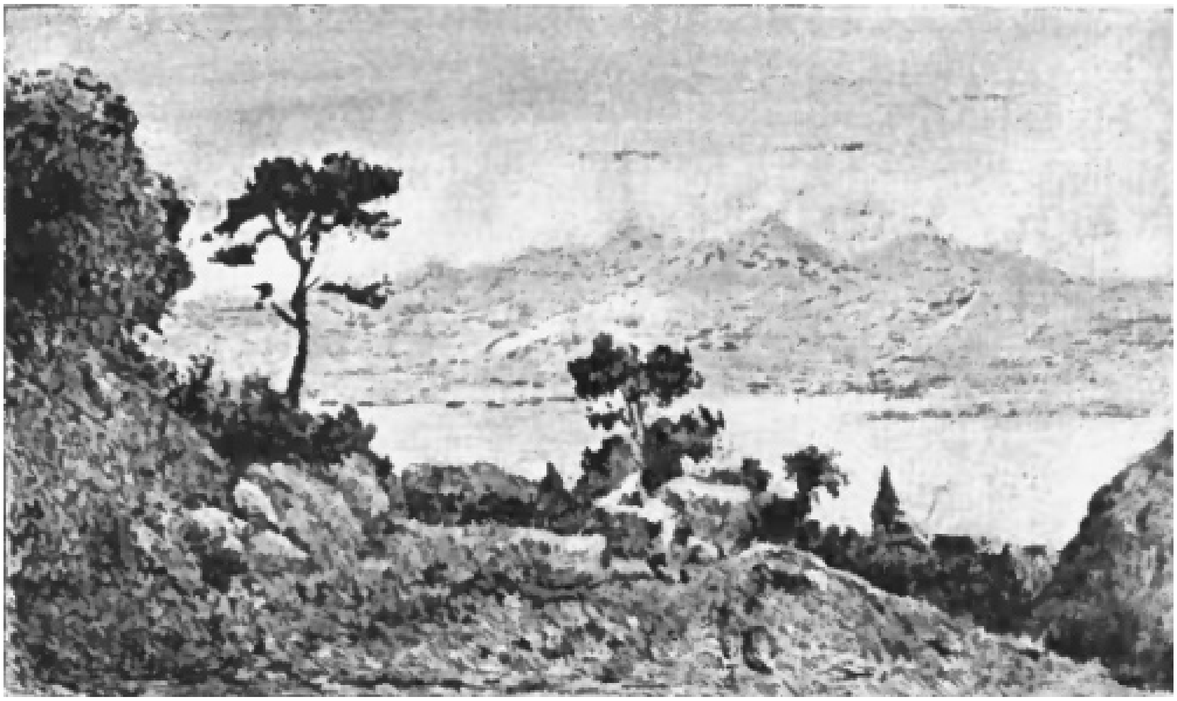

Loevig

CHAPTER XIII THE LOVING CUP.

Only a man, a sign, is needed; the elements of revolution are ready. “Who will be the first? So soon as there is a fulcrum, everything will move.
Bonaparte.

Loevig- is a large town, situated on the north side of Throndhjem fjord, and sheltered by a low chain of bare hills, singularly diversified by various sorts of crops, like broad bits of mosaic resting upon the horizon. The appearance of the town is gloomy; the fishermen’s cabins, made of twigs and reeds, the conical hut, constructed of earth and stones, in which the invalid miner spends the few days which his scanty savings allow him to devote to sunshine and rest, and the frail ruin which the chamois hunter in his turn decks with a straw roof and walls hung with skins, line streets longer than the town itself, because they are narrow and crooked. In a square where now exist only the remains of a great tower, once stood the ancient fortress built by Horda the Fine Archer, lord of Loevig, and brother-in-arms of the pagan king Halfdan, occupied in 1698 by the mayor of the town, who would have been the best-lodged citizen in the city, if it had not been for the silvery stork who every summer perched on the tip of the sharp spire of the church, like the white pearl on the top of a mandarin’s pointed cap.

On the morning of the same day that Ordener reached Throndhjem, another personage, also incognito, landed at Loevig. His gilded litter, although without armorial bearings, his four tall lackeys, armed to the teeth, instantly became the topic of every conversation, and roused the curiosity of all. The landlord of the Golden Gull, a small tavern at which the great man alighted, himself assumed an air of mystery, and answered every question with an “ I don’t know,” which seemed to imply, “ I know all, but you shall know nothing.” The tall lackeys were as mute as fishes, and more obscure than the mouth of a mine.

The mayor shut himself up in his tower, waiting with great dignity for the stranger to make the first visit; but the inhabitants were soon surprised to see him call twice at the Golden Gull in vain, and at evening lie in wait for a bow from the stranger, as he sat at the half-open window. From this the gossips inferred that the great man had made his high rank known to the lord mayor. They were mistaken. A messenger sent by the stranger presented himself at the mayor’s office to get his passport signed, and the mayor noticed upon the green seal two crossed hands supporting an ermine mantle, surmounted by a count’s coronet upon a shield, from which depended the collars of the Orders of the Elephant and the Dannebrog. This was enough for the mayor, who was most desirous of obtaining from the chancellor the lord mayoralty of Throndhjem. But his advances were useless, for the great man would see no one.

The second day of the traveller’s stay in Loevig was drawing to its close, when the landlord entered his room, saying with a low bow that the messenger expected by his Grace had arrived.

“Very well,” said his Grace; “ let him come up.”

A moment later the messenger entered, carefully closed the door, then bowing to the ground before the stranger, who had half turned toward him, waited in respectful silence until he should be addressed.

“I expected you this morning,” said the stranger; “ what detained you? “

“The interests of your Grace, Count; have I another thought? “

“How is Elphega? How is Frederic? “

“They are well.”

“Good! good! “ broke in the master; “ have you nothing more interesting to tell me? What is the news at Throndhjem? “

“Nothing, except that Baron Thorwick arrived there yesterday.”

“Yes, I know that he wanted to consult that old Mecklenburger, Levin, about his marriage. Do you know the result of his interview with the governor? “

“To-day at noon, when I left, he had not yet seen the general.”

“What! and he arrived last night! You surprise me, Musdœmon. And had he seen the countess? “

“Still less, sir.”

“Then you saw him? “

“No, noble master; besides, I do not know him.”

“And how, if no one has seen him, do you know that he is in Throndhjem? “

“Through his servant, who was at the governor’s palace yesterday.”

“But he, did he go elsewhere? “

“His servant declares that as soon as he arrived, he set off for Munkholm, after first visiting the Spladgest.”

The count’s eye flashed fire.

“For Munkholm! For Schumacker’s prison! Are you positive? I always suspected that honest Levin of being a traitor. For Munkholm! What can be the attraction there? Did he want to ask Schumacker’s advice also? Did he “

“Noble lord,” interrupted Musdœmon, “ it is by no means certain that he went there.”

“What! Then why did you say so? Are you trifling with me? “

“Pardon me, your Grace! I merely repeated what the baron’s servant said. But Mr. Frederic, who was on duty yesterday at Munkholm, saw nothing of Baron Ordener.”

“That ‘s no proof! My son does not know the viceroy’s son. Ordener may have entered the fortress in disguise.”

“Yes, sir; but Mr. Frederic asserts that he saw no one.”

The count grew calmer.

“That ‘s a different matter. Did my son really say so? “

“He assured me of the fact three separate times; and Mr. Frederic’s interests in this case are identical with your own.”

This suggestion quite relieved the count.

“Ah! “ said he, “ I understand. The baron, on his arrival, must have wished to take a short sail on the fjord, and his servant fancied that he went to Munkholm. After all, why should he go there? I was foolish to take alarm. My son-in-law’s lack of eagerness to see old Levin proves, on the contrary, that his affection for him is not so strong as I feared. You will hardly believe it, my dear Musdœmon,” added the count, “ but I actually imagined that Ordener was in love with Ethel Schumacker, and I constructed a romance and an intrigue out of this journey to Munkholm. But, thank God, Ordener is not such a fool as I am. By the way, my friend, how fares it with that young Danaë in Frederic’s hands? “

Musdœmon had shared his master’s fears regarding Ethel Schumacker, and had struggled against them without overcoming them quite so readily. However, charmed to see his master smile, he took care not to disturb his peace of mind, but rather sought to add to it, that he might increase that serene temper so necessary in the great for the well-being of their favorites.

“Noble Count, your son has failed with Schumacker’s daughter; but it seems that another has been more fortunate.”

The count interrupted, him eagerly.

“Another! What other? “

“Oh, I don’t know, some peasant, serf, or vassal.”

“Do you speak the truth?” cried the count, his stern, dark face beaming.

“Mr. Frederic declares that it is so, and he told the countess the same story.”

The count rose and paced the room, rubbing his hands.

“Musdœmon, dear Musdœmon, but one more effort, and our end is gained. The young shoot is blasted. We have only to uproot the parent tree. Have you any other good news? “

“Dispolsen has been murdered.”

The count’s features brightened.

“Ah, you see that we advance from victory to victory. Have we his papers? Above all, have we that iron casket? “

“I regret to inform your Grace that the murder was not committed by our people. He was killed and robbed upon Urchtal Sands, and the deed is attributed to Hans of Iceland.”

“Hans of Iceland! “ repeated his master, his brow again clouding. “ What! that famous brigand whom we meant to put in charge of our rebellion? “

“The same, noble Count; and I fear, from what I can gather, that it will be no easy task to find him. At any rate, I have secured a leader who will take his name, and can replace him if necessary, a wild mountaineer, tall and strong as an oak, fierce and bold as a wolf in a wilderness of snow, this terrible giant must surely look much like the real Hans of Iceland.”

“Then Hans of Iceland is tall? “ inquired the count.

“That is the general opinion, your Grace.”

“I cannot but admire, my dear Musdœmon, the art with which you lay your plans. When is the insurrection to break out? “

“Oh, very soon, your Grace; perhaps it is on foot even now. The royal protectorate has long been odious to the miners; they all grasped with joy at the idea of revolt. The movement will begin at Guldbrandsdal, extend to Sund-Moer, and reach Kongsberg. Two thousand miners can be raised in three days. The rebellion will be kindled in Schumacker’s name; our emissaries use no other. The reserve forces in the South and the garrisons at Throndhjem and Skongen can be called out, and you will be here on the spot most opportunely to put down the rebellion, a fresh and significant service in the eyes of the king, and to rid him of this Schumacker, the source of such anxiety to the throne. Upon these firm foundations will rise the structure to be crowned by the marriage of our noble lady Ulrica and Baron Thorwick.”

A private interview between two scoundrels is never long, because all that is human in their souls quickly takes alarm at the infernal qualities revealed. When two depraved spirits mutually display their naked vices, each is disgusted by the other’s iniquity. Crime itself revolts at crime; and two evil-doers conversing, with all the cynicism of intimacy, of their pleasures and their interests, are like a fearful mirror, each reflecting the other’s monstrous features. Their own degradation mortifies them when seen in another, their own pride confounds them, their own nothingness alarms them; and they cannot fly from themselves or disavow their own portrait in their fellowman; for each odious harmony, each frightful coincidence, each hideous parallel finds within them an untiring voice to denounce them in their ever-wearied ear. However secret may be their intercourse, it has always two intolerable witnesses, God, whom they cannot see, and conscience, which they feel.

His confidential talks with Musdœmon distressed the count the more because the latter always unhesitatingly imputed to his master a good share of the crimes committed or about to be committed. Many courtiers think it wise to save great men from the appearance of wrong doing; they assume the responsibility of evil, and often spare their patron’s blushes by allowing him to feign resistance to advantageous crime. Musdœmon, by a refinement of skill, pursued the contrary course. He wished it to seem that he seldom advised, and always obeyed. He knew his master’s soul as familiarly as that master knew his heart; therefore he never compromised himself without compromising the count. There was no head, save that of Schumacker, that the count would have been so glad to see fall; Musdœmon knew this as well as if his master had told him, and his master knew that he knew it.

The count had learned all that he wished to learn; he was satisfied; he was now eager to dismiss Musdœmon.

“Musdœmon,” said he, with a gracious smile, “ you are the most faithful and most zealous of all my servants. All goes well, and I owe it to your devotion. I make you private secretary to the chancellor’s office.”

Musdœmon bowed low. “ Nor is that all,” added the count; “ I will ask for you, for the third time, the Order of the Dannebrog. But I still fear that your birth, your humble relations.

Musdœmon blushed, turned pale, and hid his change of color by another bow.

“Come,” said the count, offering him his hand to kiss, “ come, Mr. Private Secretary, draw up your *pluecat!* It may chance to find the king in gracious mood.”

“Whether his Majesty grant my petition or not, your Grace’s kindness overwhelms me.”

“Make haste, my dear fellow, for I am anxious to be off. We must try to get some exact information about this Hans.”

Musdœmon, with a third bow, opened the door.

“Ah! “ said the count, “ I forgot. In your new position as private secretary, you may write to the chancellor’s office and order them to dismiss this mayor of Loevig, who compromises the dignity of his position in the eyes of the villagers by his servility to strangers whom he does not know.”

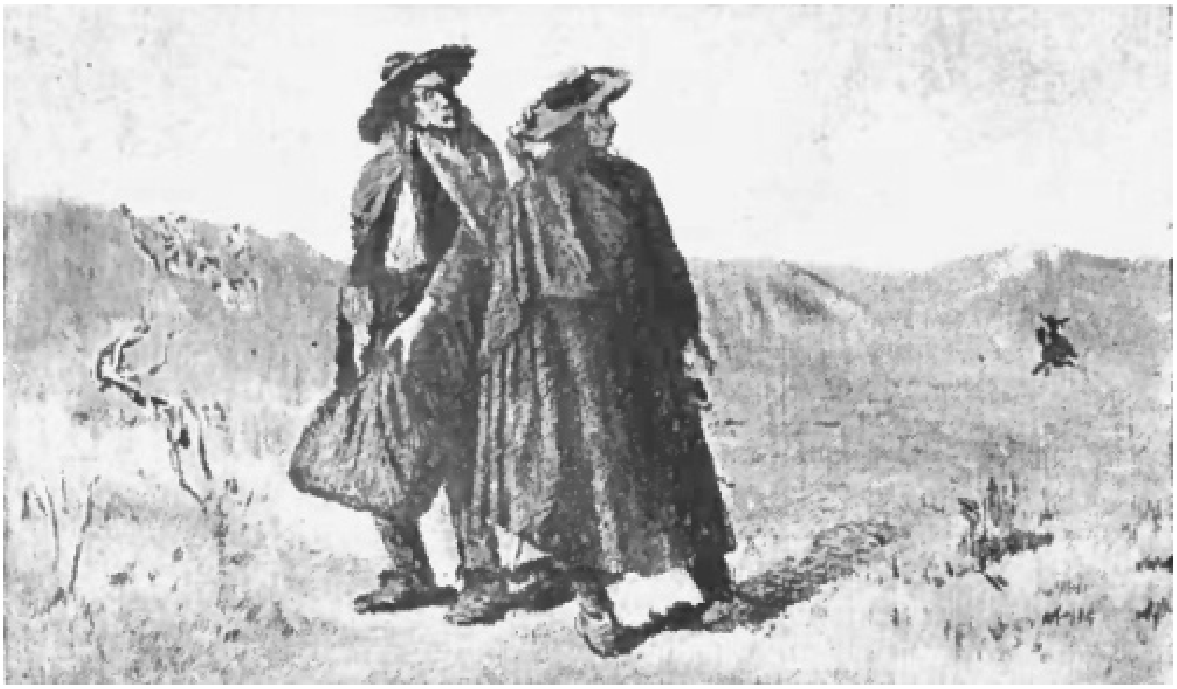

Don’t I hear the Tread of a Horse?

CHAPTER XIV GREEK MEETS GREEK.

The monk at midnight visiting the cross,
The knight taming his fiery steed,
The man who with dread sound of trumpet dies.
And he who dies with peaceful voice of prayer,
Are all the objects of Thy care, lavished alike
On every pious soul, whether he tonsure wear or helm.
Hymn to Saint Anselm.

Yes, master, we really owe a pilgrimage to Lynrass grotto. “Who would have thought that the hermit, whom I cursed as if he had been the Devil, would prove to be our guardian angel, and that the sword which seemed to threaten our very lives would serve for a bridge to take us over the abyss? “

It was in these somewhat grotesquely figurative terms that Benignus Spiagudry poured into Ordener’s ears his joy, his admiration, and his gratitude for the mysterious monk. As will readily be supposed, our two travellers Had left the Cursed Tower; nay, when we again encounter them, they have even left the village of Vygla far behind them, and are painfully pursuing a steep path, interrupted by frequent pools or blocked by huge stones, which transient torrents caused by storms had washed down from the wet, sticky soil. Day had not yet dawned; but the bushes growing above the rocks on either side of the road stood out against the clear sky like dark silhouettes, and various objects, although still colorless, gradually assumed form in the dim, dull light which daybreak in the North filters through the chill fogs of early morning.

Ordener was silent, for he had yielded to that somnolent state sometimes permitted by the mechanical motion of walking. He had not slept since the night before, when he allowed himself to rest in a fishing-boat moored in Throndhjem harbor for the few hours intervening between his departure from the Spladgest and his arrival at Munkholm. Accordingly, while his body moved toward Skongen his spirit had flown back to Throndhjem Fjord, to that gloomy prison and those melancholy towers which contained the only being on earth to whom he attached any idea of hope and happiness.

Awake, thoughts of his Ethel filled his mind; asleep, her memory became a fanciful image which irradiated all his dreams. In this second life of sleep, where for a time the soul alone exists, and the physical being with all its material ills seems to disappear, he saw the beloved maiden, no more beautiful, no purer, than in reality, but happier, freer, more wholly his own. Only, upon the road to Skongen, the oblivion of his body, the torpor of his senses, could not be complete; for from time to time a bog, a stone, the branch of a tree, impeding his progress, recalled him suddenly from the ideal to the real. He would then raise his head, half open his drowsy eyes, and regret the fall from bright celestial wanderings to his painful earthly journey, where nothing could compensate for his lost illusions, save that he felt close to his heart the ringlet which was his until Ethel herself should be his own. Then this memory revived the charming dream image, and he gently relapsed, not into slumber, but into a vague, persistent revery.

“Master,” repeated Spiagudry, in a louder tone, which, combined with a blow from the trunk of a tree, aroused Ordener, “ fear nothing. The bowmen turned to the right with the hermit when they left the tower, and we are far enough away from them to venture to speak. It is true that silence was most prudent until now.”

“Indeed,” said Ordener, yawning, “ you push your prudence to extremes. It is at least three hours since we left the tower and the bowmen behind us.”

“That is true, sir; but prudence never does any harm. Only think, if I had declared myself when the chief of that infernal troop asked for Beniguus Spiagudry in a voice like that of Saturn calling for his new-born son that he might devour him! Suppose, even, I had not taken refuge in a prudent silence at that awful moment, where should I be now, noble master? “

“Faith, old man, I fancy that at that moment nothing, not even pincers, could have drawn your name from you.”

“Was I wrong, master? If I had spoken, the monk, may Saint Hospitius, and Saint Usbald the Solitary, bless him! the monk would have had no opportunity to ask the captain of the archers whether his men did not belong to the Munkholm regiment; a trifling question, merely asked in order to gain time. Did you notice, sir, after that stupid archer answered ‘ Yes,’ with what a peculiar smile the monk requested him to follow him, saying that he knew the hiding-place of the fugitive, Benignus Spiagudry? “

Here the keeper paused for a moment, as if to make a fresh start; for he suddenly resumed, in a voice quivering with emotion. “ A good priest, a worthy and upright anchorite, practising the principles of Christian virtue and evangelic charity; and I was alarmed at his mere outward appearance, forbidding enough, truly; but what a beautiful soul lies beneath! Did you notice too, noble master, that there was something peculiar in the tone with which he said to me, ‘ We shall meet again! ‘ as he led away the archers? At any other time that tone would have alarmed me; but it is not the pious and excellent hermit’s fault. Solitude undoubtedly gives that strange intonation; for I know, sir,” here the voice of Benignus sank lower, “I know another hermit, that dreadful fellow who But no; out of respect for the venerable hermit of Lynrass I will not make so odious a comparison. Neither was there anything peculiar about his gloves; it is quite cold enough to wear them; and his salty beverage does not surprise me either. Catholic anchorites often follow singular examples; the very same thing, master, is alluded to in this line by the famous Urensius, the monk of Mount Caucasus:-

‘ Rivos despiciens, marls uudain potat amaram.’

“Why didn’t I think of that verse while I was in that confounded ruin at Vygla? A little better memory would have spared me much needless alarm. To be sure, it is not easy, is it, sir, to collect your thoughts in such a den, seated at the table of a hangman, a hangman, a creature given over to universal scorn and execration, who only differs from an assassin in the frequency and impunity of his murders; whose heart to all the atrocity of the most awful brigands unites the cowardice of which at least their daring crimes do not admit; a being who offers food and drink with the same hand that wields the instruments of torture, and crushes the bones of his miserable victims between the planks of the rack! Think of breathing the same air with a hangman! And the vilest beggar, if polluted by his loathsome touch, would cast aside with horror the last rags which protected his nakedness and his disease from the wintry blast! And the chancellor, after sealing his commission, flings the paper under the table in token of his malediction and his disgust! And in France, when the hangman dies in his turn, the provost’s assistants would rather pay a fine of forty pounds than succeed him ‘. And at Pesth, when Churchill was condemned to die, and they offered to pardon him if he would turn executioner, he preferred death to such a trade. Is it not still notorious, noble sir, that Turmeryn, bishop of Maastricht, ordered a church to be purified because the hangman had entered it; and that Czarina Petrowna washed her face whenever she witnessed an execution? You know also that the kings of France, to honor warriors, permit them to be punished by their comrades, so that these brave men, even if they be criminals, may not be made infamous by contact with the hangman. And finally, which is decisive, in the ‘ Descent of Saint George into Hell,’ by the learned Melasius Iturham, does not Charon give the robber, Robin Hood, precedence over the hangman, Philip Crass? Truly, master, if ever I attain to power, which God alone can foresee, I shall put down hangmen, and restore the ancient custom and the ancient tariff. For the murder of a prince a man shall pay, as in 1150, fourteen hundred and forty doublecrown pieces; for the murder of a count, fourteen hundred and forty plain crowns; for that of a baron, fourteen hundred and forty half-crowns; the killing of a mere noble shall be rated at fourteen hundred and forty escalins; and that of a citizen “-

“Don’t I hear the tread of a horse coming toward us? “ interrupted Ordener.

They looked back, and, as day had dawned during Spiagudry’s long soliloquy, they could distinguish, a hundred paces behind them, a man dressed in black waving one hand to them, and with the other urging on one of those small dingy white ponies so often seen, either wild or domesticated, in the lower mountain ranges of Norway.

“For mercy’s sake, master,” said the timid keeper, “ let us hasten; that black fellow looks to me just like an archer! “

“What, old man; we are two, and we should fly before a single man! “

“Alas! twenty sparrows fly before an owl. What glory is there in waiting for an officer of the law? “

“And who tells you that this is one? “ rejoined Ordener, whose eyes were not blinded by fear. “ Keep up your courage, my valiant guide; I recognize this traveller. Let us wait for him.”

The keeper was forced to submit. A moment later the horseman came up with them, and Spiagudry ceased to tremble when he saw the grave, calm face of the chaplain, Athanasius Munder.

The latter greeted them with a smile, and reined in his steed, saying in an almost breathless voice, “ My dear children, it is for your sake that I retrace my steps; and the Lord will surely not permit my absence, prolonged with a charitable intent, to injure those who sorely need my presence.’’

“Sir minister,” answered Ordener, “ we shall be happy to aid you in any way we can.”

"On the contrary, it is I, noble young man, who desire to serve you. Will you deign to tell me the object of your journey? "

"Reverend sir, I cannot."

"All I ask, my son, is that your refusal may proceed from inability, and not from distrust. If not, I am indeed unhappy! Unhappy is he whom the good man distrusts, even if he have seen him but once! "

The priest's modesty and unction touched Ordener deeply.

"All that I can tell you, Father, is that we are bound to the mountains of the North."

"So I thought, my son, and that is why I followed you. There are bands of roving hunters and miners in those mountains who might injure travellers."

"What then?"

"Well, I know that it is useless to dissuade a noble young man in search of adventure; but the esteem I feel for you inspires me with another plan for helping you. The unfortunate counterfeiter to whom I bore the last consolations of religion yesterday was a miner. Just before he died he gave me a paper inscribed with his name, saying that this passport would protect me from all danger if I ever had to travel among those mountains. Alas! what can it avail a poor priest who must live and die among prisoners, and who, moreover, *inter castra latronum,* should seek no other defence than patience and prayer, the only weapons of God! I did not decline the pass, because we should never distress by refusal the heart of one who in a few minutes more will have nothing to receive or to give on earth. The good God deigned to inspire rne, for now I can offer you this parchment, that it may go with you in all the perils of your journey, and that the gift of the dying man may benefit the traveller."

Ordener accepted the old priest's gift with emotion.

"Sir Chaplain," said he, " God grant that your prayer may be heard! Thank you.' But," he added, laying his hand on his sword, " I already carry my passport at my side."

"Young man," said the priest, "that poor parchment may perhaps protect you better than your steel blade. The gaze of a penitent man is more potent than the archangel's sword. Farewell! My prisoners await me. Pray sometimes for them and me."

"Holy priest," rejoined Ordener, with a smile, "I told you that your prisoners should be pardoned, and they shall be."

“Oh, do not speak with such assurance, my son! Do not tempt the Lord! No man can know what passes in the mind of another, and you cannot tell what the viceroy’s son may decide to do. Perhaps, alas! he will never condescend to admit a humble chaplain to his presence. Farewell, my son; may your journey be blessed, and may you sometimes remember the poor priest and pray for his unhappy prisoners.”

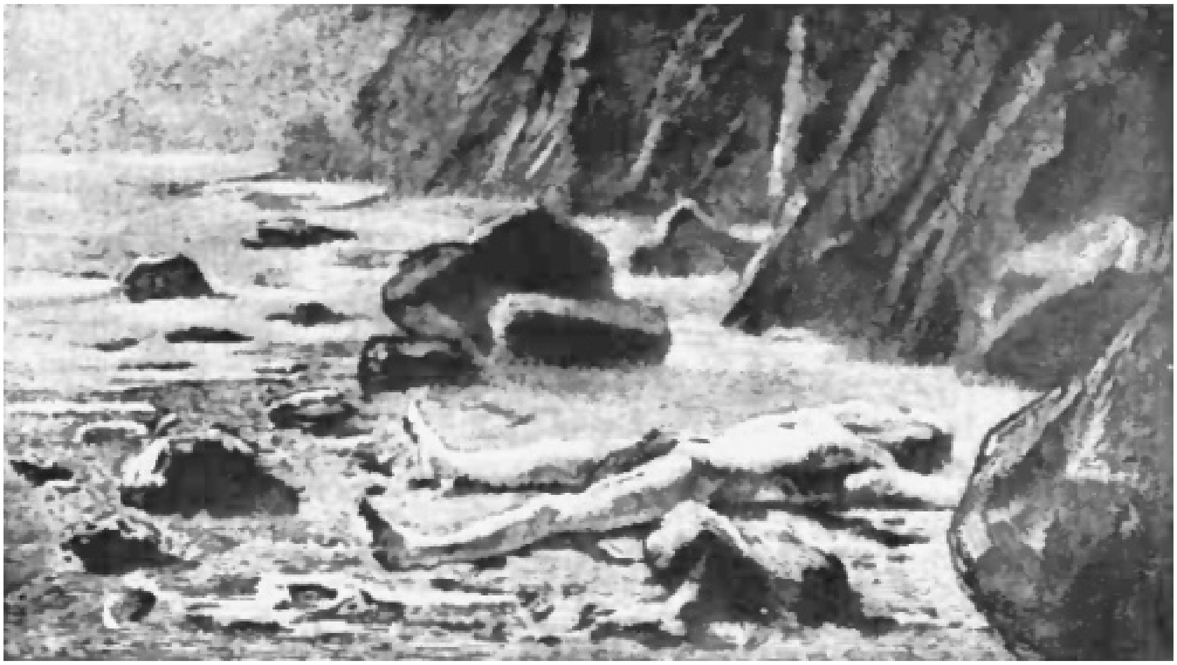

The Hermit of Lynrass

CHAPTER XV THE CHAPLAIN’S FREE PASS.

Welcome, Hugo; tell me, did you ever see so terrible a storm?
Maturin: Bertram.

In a room communicating with the apartments of the Governor of Throndhjem, three of his Excellency’s secretaries sat at a table loaded with parchments, papers, inkstands, and seals, a fourth chair, left vacant, showing that one of the scribes was late. They had been silently writing and thinking for some time, when one of them exclaimed: “ Did you know, Wapherney, that the poor librarian, Foxtipp, is to be dismissed by the bishop, owing to the letter which you wrote recommending Dr. Anglyvius’s petition to his favorable notice? “

“What nonsense are you talking, Richard? “ hastily inquired the secretary to whom Richard had not spoken. “ Wapherney could not have written in favor of Anglyvius, for the fellow’s petition disgusted the general when I read it to him.”

“So you told me,” answered Wapherney; “ but I found the word *tributatur* written on the petition in his Excellency’s own hand.”

“Indeed! “ exclaimed the other.

“Yes, my dear fellow; and several other of his Excellency’s decisions of which you told me, were also altered in marginal notes. For instance, on the petition of the miners, the general wrote, *negetur.”*

“What! I can’t understand that; the general dreaded the turbulent spirit of those miners.”

“Perhaps he wanted to frighten them into submission by his severity. What makes me think so is that Chaplain Munder’s request for the pardon of twelve condemned prisoners is also refused.”

The secretary whom Wapherney addressed, rose abruptly, saying, “ Oh, come now, I can’t believe that; the governor is too kind, and expressed too much compassion for those prisoners to “

“Very well, Arthur,” answered Wapherney; “ read it for yourself.”

Arthur took the petition and saw the fatal words.

“Really,” said he, “ I can scarcely credit my own eyes. I must present this to the governor again. What day did his Excellency mark these papers? “

“I believe it was some three days ago,” replied Wapherney.

“That was,” said Richard in a low voice, “ the morning before Baron Ordener’s brief appearance and mysteriously sudden disappearance.”

“Stay! “ quickly exclaimed Wapherney, before Arthur had time to answer; “ if here is not another *tribuatur* on Benignus Spiagudry’s ridiculous petition!”

Richard burst out laughing.

“Didn’t that old keeper of corpses disappear in a strange way, too? “

“Yes,” replied Arthur; “ a body was found in his charnel-house so mutilated that the officers of the law are in pursuit of him on a charge of sacrilege. But a little Lapp, who acted as his servant, and who was left alone at the Spladgest, thinks, as do most people, that the Devil carried him off for a sorcerer.”

“Here,” said Wapherney, laughing, “ is a fellow who leaves a good reputation behind him! “

He had hardly had his laugh out when the fourth secretary came in.

“Upon my honor, Gustavus, you are very late this morning. Did you happen to get married yesterday?”

“Oh, no! “ answered Wapherney; “ he only took the longest way round, so that he might pass under the fair Rosalie’s windows in his new cloak.”

“Wapherney,” said the new-comer, “ I only wish that you were right. But the cause of my delay is not half so agreeable; and I doubt if my new cloak produced the slightest effect upon the persons whom I visited.”

“Where have you been, then? “ asked Arthur.

“To the Spladgest.”

“Heaven is my witness,” cried Wapherney, dropping his pen, “ that we were just now speaking of that place! But though it may be talked of to pass away the time, I cannot conceive how anybody can enter it.”

“And still less,” said Richard, “ how anybody can linger there. But what did you see, my dear Gustavus? “

“Yes,” said Gustavus, “ you are curious to hear about it, if not to see it; and it would serve you right if I refused to describe those horrors which you would shudder to behold.”

The three secretaries crowded about Gustavus, who waited to be urged, although his desire to tell what he had seen was secretly no less lively than their curiosity to hear.

“Well, Wapherney, you can repeat my story to your little sister, who is so fond of frightful tales. I was pushed into the Spladgest by the crowd which thronged about it. The bodies of three soldiers and two bowmen from the Munkholm regiment had just been brought in, having been found yesterday some four miles away, in the ravine at the foot of Cascadthymore cliff. Some of the spectators declared that the poor fellows were the very ones sent out three days ago in the direction of Skongen to catch the runaway keeper of the Spladgest. If this be true, it is impossible to imagine how so many well-armed men could be murdered. The mutilation of the bodies seems to prove that they were flung from the top of the rocks. It made my hair stand on end to look at them."

"What, Gustavus! did you see them? " eagerly inquired Wapherney.

"They are still before my eyes."

"And has any one an idea as to the authors of the crime? "

"Some think that it may have been a band of miners, and assert that they heard the sound of the horn with which the soldiers call to one another, only yesterday among the mountains."

"Really! " said Arthur.

"Yes; but an old peasant demolished this supposition by remarking that there were neither mines nor miners in the neighborhood of Cascadthymore."

"Then who could it have been? "

"No one knows. If the bodies were not intact, it might be supposed the work of wild beasts, for their limbs are covered with long, deep scratches. The same is the case with the corpse of a white-bearded old man brought into the Spladgest day before yesterday, after that fearful storm which prevented you, my dear Leander Wapherney, from visiting your Hero across the fjord, on the Larsynn shore."

"All right, Gustavus," said "Wapherney, laughing. " But who was this old man? "

"From his height, his long white beard, and a rosary still clasped tightly in his hands, although he had been stripped of everything else, he was recognized as a hermit of the neighborhood; I believe they called him the Monk of Lynrass. It is evident that this poor man was murdered also; but for what purpose? People are not slaughtered now for their religious opinions, and the old hermit possessed nothing in the world but his serge gown and the good-will of all who knew him."

"And you say," observed Richard, " that his body was mangled, like those of the soldiers, as if by the claws of some savage animal? "

“Yes, my dear boy; and a fisherman declares that he noticed the same marks upon the body of an officer found murdered a few days since upon Urchtal Sands.”

“That is strange,” said Arthur.

“It is frightful,” said Richard.

“Come,” said Wapherney, “ silence, and to work, for I think the general will be here soon. My dear Gustavus, I am curious to see those corpses. If you like, we will stop a moment at the Spladgest when we leave here this evening.”

CHAPTER XVI THE WOMAN AND HER MASTER.

She with young unwakened senses,
Within her cabin on the Alpine field
Her simple homely life commences,
Her little world therein concealed.
    And I, God's hate flung o'er me,
    Had not enough, to thrust
    The stubborn rocks before me
    And strike them into dust!
    She and her peace I yet must undermine:
    Thou, Hell, hast claimed this sacrifice as thine!
    Goethe: Faust, Bayard Taylor's Translation.

In 1675, twenty-four years previous to the date of this story, sooth to say, the whole village of Thoctree rejoiced and made merry over the marriage of sweet Lucy Pelryhn and that tall, handsome, upright youth, Carroll Stadt, They had long been lovers, and every one felt a warm interest in the happy pair upon the day which was to change so many restless hopes and eager longings into assured and quiet bliss. Born in the same village, reared in the same fields, Carroll had often in their childhood slept in Lucy's lap when tired of play; Lucy had often, as a young girl, leaned on Carroll's arm as she returned from work. Lucy was the loveliest and most modest maiden in the land; Carroll the bravest and noblest lad in the village. They loved each other, and they could no more remember the day when their love began than they could recall the day when they were born.

But their marriage did not come, like their love, easily and as a matter of course. There were domestic interests to be consulted, family feuds, relations, obstacles. They were parted for a whole year; and Carroll suffered sadly far from Lucy, and Lucy wept bitter tears far from Carroll, before the dawn of that happy day which united them, thereafter never to suffer or to weep apart.

It was by saving her from great danger that Carroll finally won his Lucy. He heard cries from the woods one day; they were uttered by his Lucy, surprised by a brigand dreaded by all the mountain folk, and on the point of carrying her off to his den. Carroll boldly attacked this monster in human shape, who gave vent to strange growls like those of a wild beast. Yes, he attacked the wretch, whom none before had ventured to resist. Love lent him a lion’s strength. He rescued his beloved Lucy, restored her to her father, and her father gave her to her deliverer.

Now, the whole village made merry upon the day which united these two lovers. Lucy alone seemed depressed; and yet never had she gazed more tenderly at her dear Carroll. But her gaze was as sad as it was loving, and amid the universal rejoicing this was a subject for surprise. Every moment, as her husband’s happiness seemed to increase, her eyes expressed more and more love and despair.

“Oh, my Lucy,” said Carroll, when the sacred rites were over, “ the coming of that robber, a curse to the entire country, was the greatest blessing for me! “

She shook her head, and made no answer.

Night came; they were left alone in their new abode, and the sports and dancing on the village green went on more merrily than before, to celebrate the happiness of the bridal pair.

Next morning Carroll Stadt had vanished. A few words in his handwriting were brought to Lucy’s father by a hunter from the mountains of Kiölen, who met him before daylight wandering along the shore of the fjord.

Old Will Pelryhn showed the paper to his pastor and the mayor, and nothing was left of last night’s festival but Lucy’s gloom and dull despair.

This mysterious catastrophe dismayed the entire village, and vain efforts were made to explain it. Prayers for Carroll’s soul were said in the same church where but a few days before he himself sang hymns of thanksgiving for his happiness.

No one knew what kept Widow Stadt alive. At the end of nine months of solitary grief she brought into the world a son, and on the same day the village of Golyn was destroyed by the fall of the hanging cliff above it.

The birth of this son did not dissipate his mother’s deep depression. Gill Stadt showed no signs of resemblance to Carroll. His fierce, angry infancy seemed to prophecy a still more ferocious manhood. Sometimes a little wild man -whom those mountaineers who saw him from a distance asserted to be the famous Hans of Iceland- entered the lonely hut of Carroll’s widow, and the passersby would then hear a woman’s shrieks and what seemed the roar of a tiger. The man would carry off young Gill, and months would elapse;

then he would restore him to his mother, more sombre and more terrible than before.

Widow Stadt felt a mixture of horror and affection for the child. Sometimes she would clasp him in her maternal arms, as the only tie which still bound her to earth; again she would repulse him with terror, calling upon Carroll, her dear Carroll. No one in the world knew what agitated her soul.

Gill reached his twenty-third year; he saw Guth Stersen, and loved her madly.

Guth Stersen was rich, and he was poor; therefore he set off for Roeraas and turned miner, in order to make money. His mother never heard from him again.

One night she sat at the wheel, by which she earned her daily bread; the lamp burned low as she worked and waited in her cabin, beneath those walls which had grown old like herself, in solitude and grief, the silent witnesses of her mysterious wedding-night. She thought anxiously of her son, whose presence, ardently desired as it was, would recall much sorrow, perhaps bring more in its train. The poor mother loved her son, ungrateful as he was. And how could she help loving him, she had suffered so much for him?

She rose and took from an antique wardrobe a crucifix thickly coated with dust. For an instant she looked at it imploringly; then suddenly casting it from her in horror, she cried: “ I pray! How can I pray? Your prayers can only be addressed to hell, poor woman! You belong to hell, and to hell alone.”

She had relapsed into her mournful revery, when there was a knock at the door.

This was a rare event with Widow Stadt. For many long years, in consequence of the strange incidents connected with her history, the whole village of Thoctree believed that she had dealings with evil spirits; no one therefore ever ventured near her hut, strange superstitions of that age and ignorant region! She owed to her misfortunes the same reputation for witchcraft that the keeper of the Spladgest owed to his learning.

“What if it were my son, if it were Gill! “ she exclaimed; and she rushed to the door.

Alas! it was not her son. It was a little monk clad in serge, his cowl covering all of his face but a black beard.

"Holy man," said the widow, " what would you have? You do not know the house to which you come."

"Yes, truly! " replied the hermit in a hoarse and all too familiar voice.

And tearing off his gloves, his black beard, and his cowl, he revealed a fierce countenance, a red beard, and a pair of hands armed with tremendous claws.

"Oh! " cried the widow, burying her head in her hands.

"Well," said the little man, " have you not in four -and- twenty years grown used to seeing the husband upon whom you must gaze through all eternity? "

"Through all eternity! " she repeated in a terrified whisper.

"Hark ye, Lucy Pelryhn, I bring you news of your son."

"My son! Where is he? Why does he not come? "

"He cannot."

"But you liuve news of him. I thank you. Alas! and can you bring me pleasure? "

"They are pleasant tidings indeed that I bring you," said the man in hollow tones; " for you are a weak woman, and I wonder that you could bring forth such a son. Rejoice and be glad. You feared that your son would follow in my footsteps; fear no longer."

"What! " cried the enraptured mother, " has my son, my beloved Gill, changed? "

The hermit watched her raptures with an ominous sneer.

"Oh, greatly changed!" said he.

"And why did he not fly to my arms? Where did you see him? What was he doing? "

"He was asleep."

In the excess of her joy, the widow did not notice the little man's ominous look, nor his horrible, and scoffing manner.

"Why did you not wake him? Why did not you say to him, ' Gill, come to your mother? "

"His sleep was too sound."

"Oh, when will he come? Tell me, I implore, if I shall see him soon."

The mock monk drew from beneath his gown a sort of cup of singular shape.

"There, widow," said he, " drink to your son's speedy return! "

The widow uttered a shriek of horror. It was a human skull. She waved it away in terror, and could not utter a word.

“No, no! “ abruptly exclaimed the man, in an awful voice, “ do not turn away your eyes, woman; look. You asked to see your son. Look, I say! for this is all that is left of him.”

And by the red light of the lamp, he offered the dry and fleshless skull of her son to the mother’s pale lips.

Too many waves of misfortune had passed over her soul for one misery the more to crush her. She gazed at the cruel monk with a fixed and meaningless stare.

“Dead! “ she whispered; “ dead! Then let me die.”

“Die, if you choose! But remember, Lucy Pelryhn, Thoctree woods; remember the day when the demon, taking possession of your body, gave your soul to hell! I am that demon, Lucy, and you are my wife forever! Now, die if you will.”

It is the belief in those superstitious regions that infernal spirits sometimes appear among men to lead lives of crime and calamity. In common with other noted criminals, Hans of Iceland enjoyed this fearful renown. It was also believed that a woman, who by seduction or by violence, became the prey of one of these monsters in human form, by that misfortune was doomed to be his companion in hell.

The events of which the hermit reminded the widow seemed to revive in her these thoughts.

“Alas! “ she sobbed, “ then I cannot escape from this wretched existence! And what have I done? for you know, my beloved Carroll, I am innocent. A young girl’s arm is without strength to resist the arm of a demon.”

She rambled on; her eyes were wild with delirium, and her incoherent words seemed born of the convulsive quiver of her lips.

“Yes, Carroll, since that day, though polluted, I am innocent; and the demon asks me if I remember that horrible day! Carroll, I never deceived you; you came too late. I was his before I was yours, alas! Alas! and I must be forever punished. No, I can never rejoin you, you for whom I weep. What would it avail me to die? I should follow this monster into a world as fearful as himself, the world of the damned! And what have I done? Must my misfortunes in this life become my crimes in the next? “

The little monk bent a look of triumph and command upon her face.

“Ah! “ she suddenly exclaimed, turning toward him; “ ah, tell me, is not this some fearful dream induced by your presence? For you know but too well, alas! that since the day of my ruin, every night that I am visited by your fatal spirit is marked by foul apparitions, awful dreams, and frightful visions.”

“Woman, woman, cease your raving; it is as true that you are wide awake as it is true that Gill is dead.’’

The memory of her past misfortunes had, as it were, blotted out all thought of her fresh grief; these words revived it.

“Oh, my son! my son! “ she moaned; and the tones of her voice would have moved any but the wicked being who heard it. “ No, he will return; he is not dead; I cannot believe that he is dead.”

“Well, go ask him of Roeraas rocks, which crushed out his life; of Throndhjem Fjord, which swallowed up his body.”

The widow fell upon her knees, crying convulsively, “ God! great God! “

“Be silent, servant of hell! “

The wretched woman was silent. He added: “Do not doubt your sou’s death; he was punished for the sins of his father. He let his granite heart melt in the sunlight of a woman’s eyes. I possessed you, but I never loved you. Your Carroll’s misfortune was also his. My son and yours was deceived by his betrothed, by her for whom he died.”

“Died! “ she repeated. “ died! Then it is really true? Oh, Gill, you were born of my misery; you were conceived in terror and born in sorrow; your lips lacerated my breast; as a child, you never returned my caresses or embraces; you always shunned and repulsed your mother, your lonely and forsaken mother! You never tried to make me forget my past distress, save by causing me fresh injury. You deserted me for the demon author of your existence and of my widowhood. Never, in long years, Gill, never did you procure me one thrill of pleasure; and yet to-day your death, my son, seems to me the most insupportable of all my afflictions. Your memory today seems to me to be twined with comfort and rapture. Alas .’ alas! “

She could not go on; she covered her head with her coarse black woollen veil, and sobbed bitterly.

“Weak woman! “ muttered the hermit; then he continued in a firm voice: “Control your grief; I laugh at mine. Listen, Lucy Pelryhn. While you still weep for your son, I have already begun to avenge him. it was for a soldier in the Monkholm regiment that his sweetheart betrayed him. The whole regiment shall perish by my hands. Look, Lucy Pelryhn!”

He had rolled up the sleeves of his gown, and showed the widow his misshapen arms stained with blood.

“Yes,” he said with a fierce roar, “ Gill’s spirit shall delight to haunt Urchtal Sands and Cascadthymore ravine. Come, woman, do you not see this blood? Be comforted! “

Then all at once, as if struck by a sudden thought, he interrupted himself: “Widow, did you not receive an iron casket from me? What! I sent you gold and I bring you blood, and you still weep. Are you not human? “

The widow, absorbed in her despair, was silent.

“What! “ said he, with a fierce laugh, “ motionless and mute. You are no woman, then, Lucy Pelryhn!” and he shook her by the arm to rouse her. “Did not a messenger bring you an iron casket? “

The widow, lending him a brief attention, shook her head, and relapsed into her gloomy revery.

“Ah, the wretch! “ cried the little man, “ the miserable traitor! Spiagudry, that gold shall cost you dear! “

And stripping off his gown, he rushed from the hut with the growl of a hyena that scents a corpse.

CHAPTER XVII THE RALLYING-CRY.

My lord, I braid my hair; I braid it with salt tears because you leave me alone, and because you go hence into the hills.
The Count’s Lady (Old Romance).

Ethel, meantime, had already reckoned four long and weary days since she was left to wander alone in the dark garden of Schleswig tower; alone in the oratory, the witness of so many tears, the confidant of so many longings; alone in the long gallery, where once upon a time she had failed to hear the midnight bell. Her aged father sometimes accompanied her, but she was none the less alone, for the true companion of her life was absent.

Unfortunate young girl! What had that pure young soul done that it should be thus early given over to so much sorrow? Taken from the world, from honors, riches, youthful delights, and from the triumphs of beauty, she was still in the cradle when she was already in a prison cell; a captive with her captive father, she had grown up watching his decay; and to complete her misery, that she might not be ignorant of any form of bondage, love had sought her out in prison.

Even then, could she but have kept her Ordener at her side, would liberty have tempted her? Would she ever have known that a world existed from which she was cut off? Moreover, would not her world, her heaven, have been with her in that narrow keep, within those gloomy towers bristling with soldiers, toward which the passer-by would still have cast a pitying glance?

But, alas! for the second time her Ordener was absent; and instead of spending all too brief but ever recurring hours with him in holy caresses and chaste embraces, she passed days and nights in bewailing his absence, and praying that he might be shielded from danger. For a maiden has only her prayers and her tears.

Sometimes she longed for the wings of the free swallow which came to her to be fed through her prison bars. Sometimes her thought escaped upon the cloud which a swift breeze drove northward through the sky; then suddenly she would turn away her head and cover her eyes, as if she dreaded to see a gigantic brigand appear and begin the unequal contest upon one of the distant mountains whose blue peaks hung on the horizon like a stationary cloud.

Oh, it is cruel to live when we are parted from the object of our love! Few hearts have known this pang in all its extent, because few hearts have known love in all its depth. Then, in some sort a stranger to our ordinary existence, we create for ourselves a melancholy waste, a vast solitude, and for the absent one some terrible world of peril, of monsters, and of deceit; the various faculties which make up our being are changed into and lost in an infinite longing for the missing one; everything about us seems utterly indifferent to us. And yet we still breathe, and move, and act, but without our own volition. Like a wandering planet which has lost its sun, the body moves at random; the soul is elsewhere.

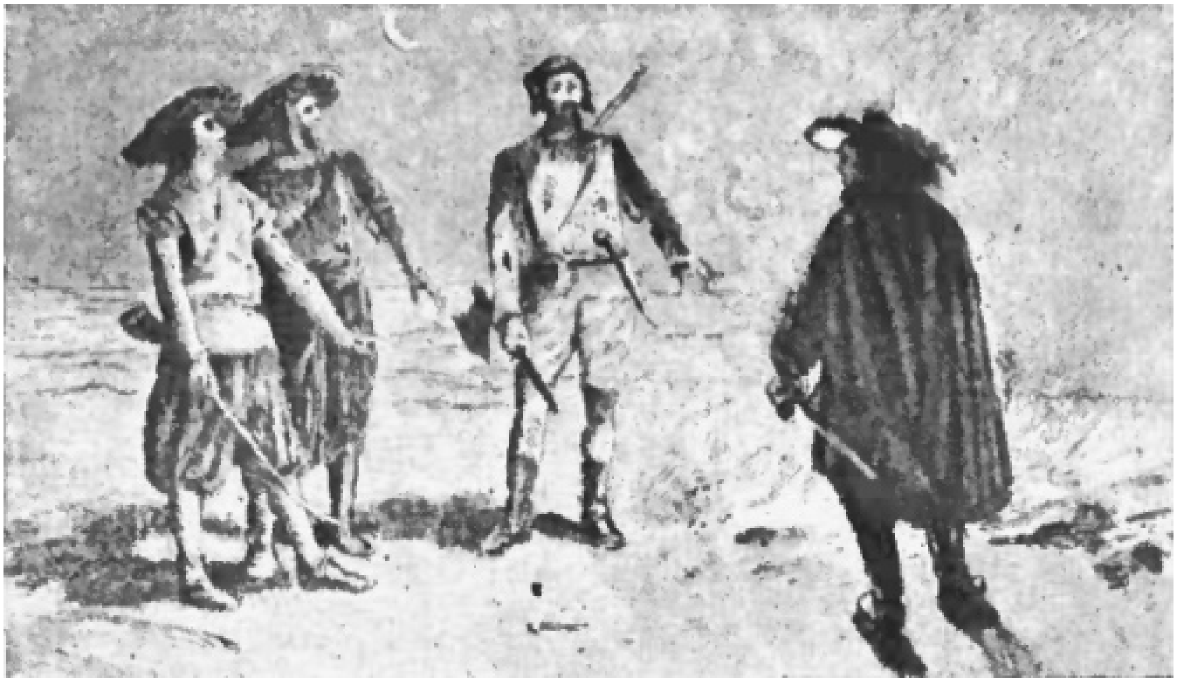

It is he! It is Mr. Hacket!

CHAPTER XVIII THE PROMISED REWARDS.

On a vast buckler those relentless men
Terrified hell with fearful oaths;
And beside a black bull which they had slain,
All, bathing their hands in blood, swore to be revenged.
The Seven Chiefs before Thebes.

The coast of Norway abounds in narrow bays, in creeks, coves, reefs, lagoons, and little headlands so numerous as to weary the traveller’s memory and the topographer’s patience. Formerly, if we are to credit popular tradition, every isthmus was haunted by some demon, each bay inhabited by some fairy, each promontory protected by some saint; superstition mingles all beliefs to create for itself imaginary terrors. Upon Kelvel strand, some miles to the north of Walderhog cave, there was but a single spot, they said, which was free from all jurisdiction either of infernal, intermediary, or celestial spirits. It was the glade lying along the shore, overhung by a cliff, on the top of which could still be seen vestiges of the manor of Ralph, or Rudolf, the Giant. This little wild meadow, bordered on the west by the sea, and closely shut in by rocks clad with heather, owed its exemption solely to the name of that ancient Norwegian lord, its first possessor. For what fairy, what devil, or what angel would venture to become master or guest of a domain once occupied and guarded by Ralph the Giant?

It is true that the mere name of the much dreaded Ralph sufficed to give an alarming character to a region wild in itself. But after all, a memory is not so much to be feared as a spirit; and no fisher, belated in rough weather, and mooring his bark in Ralph’s creek, had ever seen the will -o’- the-wisp sport and dance upon the summit of a rock, or a fairy ride through the heather in her phosphorescent car drawn by glow- worms, or a saint ascend toward the moon, after his prayers were said.

And yet, if the angry waves and wind had allowed a wandering mariner to land in that hospitable harbor upon the night after the great storm, he might have been struck with superstitious fear at the sight of three men, who upon that same night sat around a huge fire, blazing in the middle of the meadow. Two of them wore the broad felt hat and loose trousers of royal miners. Their arms were bare to the shoulder, their feet were cased in fawncolored leather boots; a red sash held their crooked swords and heavy pistols; each had a hunter's horn slung about his neck. One was old, the other was young; the old man's thick beard and the young man's long hair lent a wild and barbarous look to their faces, which were naturally hard and stern.

By his bearskin cap, his tanned leather jacket, the musket slung across his back, his short, tight-fitting drawers, his bare knees, his bark shoes, and the glittering axe in his hand, it was easy to guess that the companion of the two miners was a mountaineer from the north of Norway.

Certainly, any one who saw from afar these three weird figures, upon which the flames, fanned by the salt breeze, cast a red, flickering light, might well have been frightened, even had he no faith in spectres and demons; it would have been enough that he believed in thieves and was somewhat richer than the ordinary poet.

The three men constantly turned their heads toward the winding path through the wood which fringes Ralph's meadow, and judging by such of their words as were not carried off by the wind, they were expecting a fourth person.

"I say, Kennybol, do you know that we should not be allowed to wait so peacefully for this envoy from Count Griffenfeld, if we were in the neighboring meadow, Goblin Tulbytilbet's meadow, or yonder in St. Cuthbert's bay?"

"Don't talk so loud, Jonas," replied the mountaineer; " blessed be Ralph the Giant, who protects us! Heaven save me from setting foot in Tulbytilbet's meadow! The other day I thought I was picking hawthorn there, and I gathered mandrake instead, which began to bleed and shriek, and nearly drove me mad."

The young miner laughed.

"Nearly, Kennybol? For my part, I think that the mandrake's shriek produced its full effect upon your feeble brains."

"Feeble brains yourself!" said the vexed mountaineer; "just see, Jonas, he jests at mandrake. He laughs like a lunatic playing with a death's-head."

"Hum! " answered Jonas. " Let him go to "Walderhog cave, where the heads of those whom Hans, the foul fiend of Iceland, has murdered, come back every night to dance about his bed of withered leaves, and gnash their teeth to lull him to sleep."

"That 's so,'' said the mountaineer.

"But," rejoined the young man, " did not Mr. Hacket, for whom we are waiting, promise us that Hans of Iceland would take the lead in our rebellion? "

"He did," replied Kennybol; " and with the help of that demon we are sure to conquer the green jackets of Throndhjem and Copenhagen."

"So much the better!" cried the old miner. " But I'm not the man to stand guard beside him at night."

At this moment the rustle of dead leaves beneath the tread of a man drew the attention of the speakers; they turned, and the firelight gleamed on the new-comer's face.

"It is he! it is Mr. Hacket! Welcome, Mr. Hacket; you have kept us waiting. We have been here this three quarters of an hour."

"Mr. Hacket " was a short, fat man, dressed in black, and his jovial countenance wore a forbidding expression.

"Well, friends," said he, " I was delayed by my ignorance of the road and the necessary precautions. I left Count Schumacker this morning; here are three purses of gold which he bade me give you."

The two old men flung themselves upon the gold with the eagerness common among the peasants of barren Norway. The young miner declined the purse which Hacket offered him.

"Keep your gold, Sir Envoy; I should lie if I said that I had joined the revolt for your Count Schumacker's sake. I rebel to free the miners from the guardianship of the crown; I rebel that my mother's bed may have a blanket less ragged than the coast of our good country, Norway."

Far from seeming disconcerted, Mr. Hacket answered smilingly, " Then I will send this money to your poor mother, my dear Norbith, so that she may have two new blankets to shield her from the cold wind this winter."

The young man assented with a nod, and the envoy, like a skilful orator, made haste to add:-

"But be careful not to repeat what you just now inconsiderately said, that you are not taking up arms in behalf of Schumacker, Count Griffenfeld."

"But but," muttered the two old men, "we know very well that the miners are oppressed, but we know nothing about this count, this prisoner of state."

"What! " sharply rejoined the envoy; " are you so ungrateful? You groan in your subterranean caves, deprived of light and air, robbed of all your property, slaves to the most onerous tutelage! Who came to your rescue?

Who revived your failing courage? Who gave you gold and arms? Was it not my illustrious master, noble Count Griffenfeld, more of a slave and more unfortunate even than you? And now, loaded with his favors, would you refuse to use them to acquire his liberty with your own? “

“You are right,” interrupted the young miner; “ that would be an ill deed.”

“Yes, Mr. Hacket,” said the two old men, “ we will fight for Count Schumacker.”

“Courage, my friends! Rise in his name; bear your benefactor’s name from one end of Norway to the other. Only listen; everything seconds your righteous enterprise; you are about to be freed from a formidable enemy, General Levin de Knud, governor of the province. The secret power of my noble master, Count Griffenfeld, will soon procure his recall to Bergen. Come, tell me, Kennybol, Jonas, and you, my dear Norbith, are all your comrades ready? “

“My brethren of Guldbrandsdal,” said Norbith, “ only await my signal. To-morrow, if you wish “

“To-morrow; so be it. The young miners under your leadership must be the first to raise the standard. And you, my brave Jonas? “

“Six hundred heroes from the Färöe Islands, who for three days have lived on chamois flesh and bear’s fat in Bennallag forest, only ask a blast from the horn of their old captain, Jonas of Loevig town.”

“Good! And you, Kennybol? “

“All those who carry an axe in the gorges of Kiölen, and climb the rocks with bare knees, are ready to join their brothers, the miners, when they need them.”

“Enough. Tell your comrades that they need not doubt their victory,” added the envoy, raising his voice; “ for Hans of Iceland will be their captain.”

“Is that certain? “ asked all three at once, in a voice of mingled hope and fear.

The envoy answered: “ I will meet you four days hence, at the same hour, with your united forces, in Apsyl-Corh mine, near Lake Miösen, on Blue Star plain. Hans of Iceland will be with ine.”

“We will be there,” said the three leaders. “ And may God not desert those whom the Devil aids! “

“Fear nothing from God,” said Hacket, with a sneer. “ Stay; you will find flags for your troops among the ruins of Crag. Do not forget the war-cry, ‘Long live Schumacker! We will rescue Schumacker! ‘ Now we must part; day will shortly break. But first, swear the most profound secrecy as to what has passed between us.”

Without a word each of the three chiefs opened a vein in his left arm with the point of his sword; then, seizing the envoy’s hand, each let a few drops of blood trickle into it.

“You have our blood,” they said.

Then the young man exclaimed: “ May all my blood flow forth like that which I now shed; may a malicious spirit destroy my plans, as the hurricane does a straw; may my arm be of lead to avenge an insult; may my eyes dwell in my tomb; may I, still living, be haunted by the dead, and dead, be profaned by the living; may my eyes melt with tears like those of a woman, if ever I speak of what has occurred at this time in Ralph the Giant’s meadow. And may the blessed saints deign to hear this, my prayer! “

“Amen! “ repeated the two old men.

Then they parted, and nothing was left in the meadow but the smouldering fire, whose expiring embers burned up at intervals, and gleamed upon the summit of Ralph the Giant’s ruined and deserted towers.

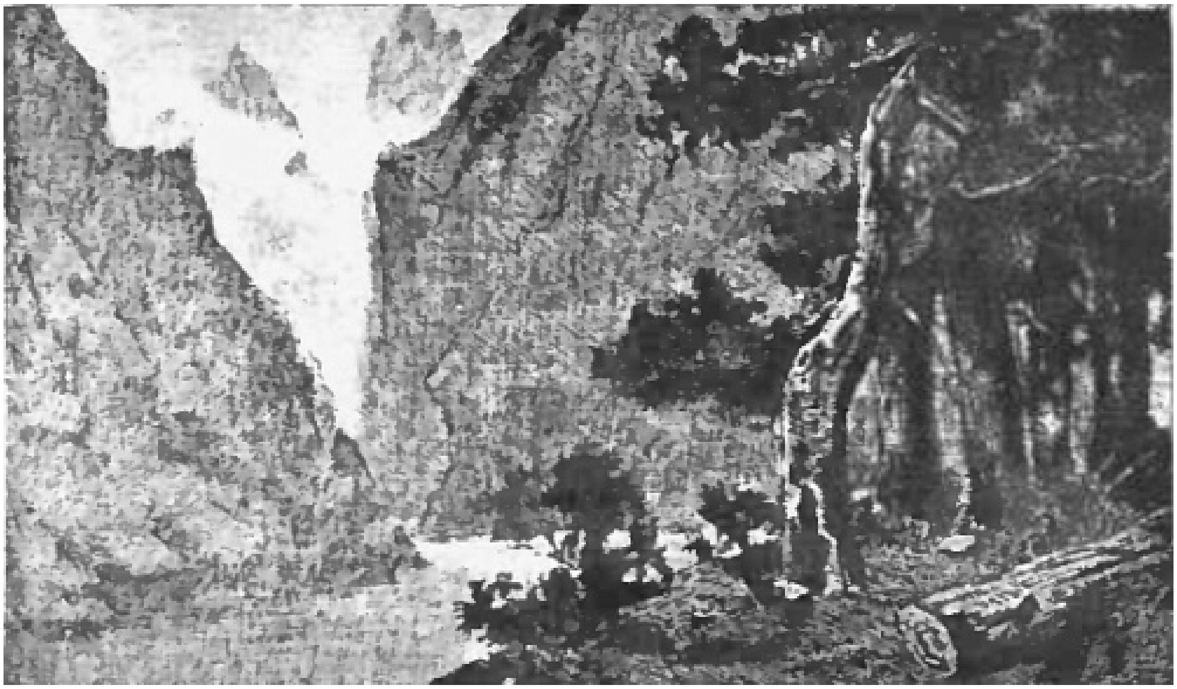

The Shores of Lake Sparbo

CHAPTER XIX THE GOVERNOR’S PERPLEXITIES.

Theodore. Tristam, let us be gone.
Tristam. This is a strange disgrace.
Theodore. Did any one see us?
Tristam. I know not, but I fear they did.
Lope Da Vega: The Gardener’s Dog.

Benignus Spiagudry found it hard to guess the motives which led a youth of fine appearance, and apparently likely to live for many long years, to become the voluntary antagonist of the much-dreaded Hans of Iceland. He had frequently and with much ingenuity broached the question since they started on their travels; but the young adventurer preserved a stubborn silence as to the cause of his journey. Nor was the poor fellow any more successful in satisfying his curiosity concerning various other details as to his strange comrade. Once he ventured to ask a question about his young master’s family and his name. “ Call me Ordener,” was the reply; and this very unsatisfactory answer was given in a tone which forbade further question. He was forced to submit; every one has his secrets, and good Spiagudry himself carefully concealed in his wallet, under his cloak, a certain mysterious casket, any inquiry as to which he would certainly have considered very disagreeable and greatly out of place.

Four days had passed since they left Throndhjem, but they had made little progress, owing to the bad state of the roads after the storm, and the multiplicity of crosscuts and roundabout routes which the runaway keeper thought it prudent to take in order to avoid too thickly settled regions. Leaving Skongen on their right, toward evening of the fourth day they reached the shores of Lake Sparbo.

The vast stretch of water reflecting the last gleams of daylight and the first stars of coming night set in a frame of tall cliffs, black firs, and lofty oaks, presented a gloomy but magnificent picture. The sight of a lake at evening sometimes produces, at a certain distance, a peculiar optical illusion; it seems as if a vast abyss, cleaving the earth from side to side, revealed the heavens beneath our feet.

Ordener paused to contemplate the old Druidical forests, which cover the steep shores of the lake as with a garment, and the chalky huts of Sparbo, scattered over the slope like a stray flock of white goats. He listened to the distant clink of the forges, mingled with the dull roar of the weird forests, the intermittent cry of wild birds, and the solemn music of the waves. To the north a huge granite bowlder, still gilded by the rays of the sun, rose majestically above the little village of Oëlmœ, its summit bending beneath a mass of ruined towers, as if the giant were weary of his load.

When the soul is sad, it delights in melancholy scenes; it adds to them its own gloom. Let an unhappy man be thrown among wild, high mountains beside some black lake in the heart of a dark forest, at the close of day, and he will see this solemn scene through a funereal veil; he will not feel that the sun is setting, but that it is dying.

Ordener lingered, motionless and mute, until his companion exclaimed: “ Capital, sir! You do well to ponder thus beside the most miasma-laden lake in Norway.”

This remark and the gesture which accompanied it, would have brought a smile to the lips of any but a lover parted from his mistress perhaps never again to meet her. The learned keeper added:-

“And yet I must rouse you from your meditations to remind you that day is drawing to a close, and we must make haste if we would reach Oëlmœ village before twilight overtakes us.”

The observation was correct. Ordener resumed his journey, and Spiagudry followed him, continuing his unheeded reflections upon the botanic and physiologic phenomena which Lake Sparbo affords the naturalist.

“Mr. Ordener,” said he, “ if you will listen to your devoted guide, you will give up your fatal enterprise; yes, sir, and you will take up your abode upon the shores of this most curious lake, where we can devote ourselves to all sorts of learned research; for instance, to the study of the *stclla canora pulustris*, a singular plant, which many scholars consider to be fabulous, but which Bishop Arngrimmsson asserts that he both saw and heard on the shores of Lake Sparbo. Added to this, we shall have the satisfaction of feeling that we dwell upon soil which contains more gypsum than any other in Europe, and where the hired assassins of Throndhjem are least likely to find their way. Doesn’t it attract you, young master? Come, renounce your senseless journey; for, not to offend you, your scheme is dangerous, without being profitable, *periculum sine pecunia;* that is to say, senseless, and conceived at a moment when you might better have been thinking of other things.”

Ordener, who paid no attention to the poor man’s words, merely kept up the conversation by those occasional meaningless monosyllables which great talkers are ready to accept in lieu of answers. Thus they reached Oëlmœ village, where they found an unusual bustle and stir.

The inhabitants hunters,- fishers, and blacksmiths had left their houses, and hastily collected about a central mound occupied by a group of men, one of whom blew a horn and waved a small black-and-white banner over his head. “ Probably some quack doctor,” said Spiagudry, “ *ambubaiarum collegia, pharmacopolæ*; some scamp who turns gold into lead and wounds into sores. Let us see. What invention of the Evil One will he sell these poor rustics? It would be bad enough if these impostors confined themselves to kings, if they all imitated Borch the Dane and Borri of Milan, those alchemists who so completely duped our Frederic III.; but they are just as greedy for the peasant’s mite as for the prince’s million.”

Spiagudry was mistaken. As they approached the mound they recognized by his black gown and round, pointed cap, the mayor, surrounded by a number of bowmen. The man blowing the horn was the town crier.

The fugitive keeper, somewhat disturbed, muttered: “ Truly, Mr. Ordener, I did not expect to stumble upon the mayor when I came into this hamlet. Great Saint Hospitius, protect us! What does he say? “

His uncertainty was of brief duration, for the crier’s shrill voice was quickly raised, and religiously heeded by the little group of villagers.

“In the name of his Majesty and by order of his Excellency, General Levin de Knud, governor, the lord mayor of Throndhjem notifies the inhabitants of all cities, towns, and villages in the province, that a reward of one thousand crowns is offered for the head of Hans, a native of Klipstadur, in Iceland, a murderer and incendiary.”

A vague murmur ran through the crowd. The crier continued:-

“A reward of four crowns is offered for the head of Benignus Spiagudry, ex-keeper of the Spladgest at Throndhjem, accused of necromancy and sacrilege. This proclamation shall be published throughout the province by the mayors of all cities, towns, and villages, who will see that it is carried out.”

The mayor took the proclamation from the crier’s hands, and added in a lugubrious and solemn voice:

“The life of these men is offered to whosoever will take it.”

The reader will readily believe that this reading was not heard unmoved by our poor, unfortunate Spiagudry. No doubt, the unusual signs of terror which he showed would have roused the attention of the bystanders, had it not just then been wholly absorbed by the first clause of the proclamation.

“A reward for the head of Hans! “ cried an old fisherman, who had hastened to the spot, trailing his wet nets behind him. “They might as well, by Saint Usuph, set a price itpon the head of Beelzebub! “

“To keep up a proper balance between Hans and Beelzebub,” said a hunter, recognizable by his chamois-skin jerkin, “ they should only offer fifteen hundred crowns for the head and horns of the latter fiend.”

“Glory be to the holy mother of God!” cried an old woman, her bald head shaking as she twirled her distaff. “ I only wish I might see the head of that Hans, so that I might make sure if his eyes are really live coals, as they say.”

“Yes, to be sure,” replied another old woman; “ it was just by looking at it that he set Throndhjem cathedral on fire. Now I should like to see the monster whole, with his serpent’s tail, cloven foot, and broad wings like a bat.”

“Who told you such nonsense, good mother? “ broke in the hunter, with a self-satisfied air. “ I ‘ve seen this Hans of Iceland with my own eyes in the gorges of Medsyhath; he is a man like ourselves, only he is as tall as a forty-year- old poplar.”

“Indeed! “ said a voice from the crowd, with singular emphasis.

This voice, which made Spiagudry shudder, proceeded from a short man whose face was hidden by the broad felt hat of a miner, his body wrapped in rush matting and sealskin.

“Faith! “ cried, with a coarse laugh, a smith who wore his heavy hammer slung across his shoulder, “ they may offer one thousand or ten thousand crowns for his head, and he may be four or forty feet tall, but I’ll not offer to go in search of him.”

“Nor I,” said the fisherman.

“Nor I; nor I,” repeated every voice.

“And yet any one who may feel tempted,” rejoined the little man, “ will find Hans of Iceland tomorrow at the ruins of Arbar, near Lake Miösen; the day after that at Walderhog cave.”

“Are you sure, my good man? “

This question was asked at one and the same time by Ordener, who listened to this scene with an interest easily understood by any one but Spiagudry, and by another short and tolerably stout man, dressed in black, with a merry countenance, who had issued from the only inn which the village contained, at the first sound of the crier’s horn.

The little man with the broad-brimmed hat seemed to be studying them both for a moment, and then answered in hollow tones: “ Yes.”

“And how can you be so certain? “ asked Ordener.

“I know where Hans of Iceland is, just as well as I know where Benignus Spiagudry is; neither of them is far off at this instant.”

All the poor keeper’s terrors were revived, and he scarcely dared look at the mysterious little man. Fancying that his French periwig had failed to disguise him, he began to pluck at Ordener’s cloak and to whisper: “ Master, sir, in Heaven’s name, have mercy! have pity! let us be off! let us leave this accursed suburb of hell!”

Ordener, although equally surprised, carefully examined the little man, who, turning his back to the light, seemed anxious to conceal his face.

“I ‘ve seen that Benignus Spiagudry,” cried the fisherman, “ at Throndhjem Spladgest. He’s a tall fellow. They offer four crowns for him.”

The hunter burst out laughing.

“Four crowns! I shan’t go a-hunting for him. I can get more for the skin of a blue fox.”

This comparison, which at any other time would have greatly offended the learned keeper, now comforted him. Still, he was about to address another prayer to Ordener to persuade him to continue his journey, when the latter, having learned all that he wished to know, forestalled him by making his way out of the crowd, which was beginning to disperse.

Although when they entered Oëlmœ village they had intended passing the night there, they quitted it, as if by common consent, without even alluding to the motive for their abrupt departure. Ordener was moved by the hope of a more speedy meeting with the brigand, Spiagudry by a desire to get away from the archers as speedily as might be.

Ordener was in too serious a mood to laugh at his comrade’s misadventures. He broke the silence in kindly tones.

“Old man, what is the name of the ruin where Hans is to be found to-morrow, according to that little man who seemed to know everything? “

"I don't know; I didn't quite catch the name, noble master," replied Spiagudry, who uttered no falsehood in so saying.

"Then," continued the young man, " I must make up my mind not to meet him until the day after to-morrow at Walderhog cave."

"Walderhog cave, sir! Indeed, that is Hans of Iceland's favorite haunt."

"Let us take that road," said Ordener.

"We must turn to the left, behind Oëlmœ cliff. It will take us at least two days to get to Walderhog cave."

"Do you know, old man," cautiously observed Ordener, " who that odd fellow was, who seemed to be so well acquainted with you? "

This question again awakened Spiagudry's fears, which had been lulled to sleep as the village of Oëlmœ faded in the distance.

"No, truly, sir," he answered, in trembling accents. " But he had a very strange voice."

Ordener tried to encourage him.

"Fear nothing, old man; serve me well, and I will protect you. If I return victorious over Hans, I promise you not only a pardon, but I will also give you the thousand crowns reward offered by the officers of the law."

Honest Benignus dearly loved his life, but he also loved gold. Ordener's promises sounded like magic in his ears; they not only banished all his terrors, but they excited in him a kind of garrulous mirth, which found vent in lengthy discourses, queer gestures, and learned quotations.

"Mr. Ordener," said he, " if I should ever have occasion to discuss the subject with Over-Bilseuth, otherwise called 'the Babbler,' nothing shall prevent me from maintaining that you are a wise and honorable young man. What more worthy and more glorious, in fact, *quid cithara, tuba, vel campana dignius*, than nobly to risk your life to free your country from a monster, a brigand, a demon, in whom all demons, brigands, and monsters seem to be combined? Nobody need tell me that you are moved by mercenary motives. Noble Lord Ordener yields the price of his conflict to the companion of his journey, to the old man who only guided him within a mile of Walderhog cave; for I am sure, young master, that you will allow me to await the result of your illustrious enterprise at the village of Surb, situated in the forest within a mile of Walderhog, will you not? And when your glorious victory is made known, sir, all Norway will thrill with joy like that of Vermund the Refugee, when from the summit of this same Oëlmœ cliff, which we just now passed, he saw the great fire kindled by his brother Halfdan on Muukholm tower in token of his deliverance.”

At these words Ordener interrupted him eagerly.

“What! is Munkholm tower visible from the top of this rock? “

“Yes, sir; twelve miles to the south, between the mountains which our fathers called Frigga’s Footstools. At this hour you should be able to see the light in the tower distinctly.”

“Indeed! “ exclaimed Ordener, fired by the idea of another glimpse of the seat of all his happiness. “Old man, of course there is a path leading to the top of the rock, is there not? “

“Yes, to be sure; a path which begins in the wood that lies just before us, and rises by a gentle slope to the bare crown of the cliff, whence it is continued by steps cut in the rock by Vermund’s companions, as far as the castle, where it ends. Those are the ruins which you see in the moonlight,”

“Well, old man, you shall show me the path; we will spend the night in those ruins, in those ruins from which Munkholm tower is visible.”

“Can you really mean it, sir? “ asked Benignus. “ The fatigues of the day -

“Old man, I will support your steps; my footing was never more secure.”

“Sir, the brambles that block the path, which has long been deserted, the fallen stones, the darkness “

‘‘ I will take the lead.”

“There may be some savage beast, some unclean animal, some hideous monster “

“I did not undertake this journey to avoid monsters.”

The idea of halting so near Oëlmœ was very unpleasant to Spiagudry; the thought of seeing Munkholm light, and possibly the light in Ethel’s window, enraptured and transported Ordener.

“Young master,” urged Spiagudry, “ give up this scheme; take my advice. I have a presentiment that it will bring us bad luck.”

This plea was as nothing in the face of Ordener’s longing.

“Corne,” said he, impatiently, “ you must remember that you agreed to serve me faithfully. I insist upon your showing me the path; where is it?”

“We shall come across it directly,” said the keeper, forced to obey.

In fact, they soon saw the path. They entered it; but Spiagudry observed, with surprise mixed with fright, that the tall grass was broken and trampled, and that Vermund the Refugee’s old footpath seemed to have been recently trodden.

CHAPTER XX THE STRAY SHOT STRUCK HOME.

Leonardo. The king requires your presence.
Hcnrique, How so?
Lupe Da Vega: La Fuerza Lastinosa.

General Levin De Knud sat at his desk, which was covered with papers and open letters, apparently lost in thought. A secretary stood before him awaiting his orders. The general now struck the rich carpet beneath his feet with his spurs, and now absently toyed with the decoration of the Elephant, hanging about his neck from the collar of the order. Occasionally he opened his lips as if to speak, then stopped, rubbed his head, and cast another glance at the unsealed despatches littering the table.

“How the devil! “ he cried at last.

This conclusive exclamation was followed by a brief silence.

“Who would ever have imagined,” he resumed, “that those devilish miners would have gone so far? Of course they were secretly egged on to this revolt; but do you know, Wapherney, the thing looks serious? Do you know that five or six hundred scoundrels from the Färöe Islands, headed by a certain old thief named Jonas, have already quitted the mines; that a young fanatic called Norbith has also taken command of the Guldbrandsdal malcontents; that all the hot-heads in Sund-Moer, Hubfallo, and Kongsberg, who were only waiting the signal, may have risen already? Do you know that the mountaineers have joined the movement, and that they are headed by one of the boldest foxes of Kiölen, old Kennybol? And finally, do you know that according to popular report in northern Throndhjem, if we are to believe the lord mayor, who has written me, that notorious criminal, upon whose head we have set a price, the much-dreaded Hans, has taken chief command of the insurrection? What do you say to all this, my dear Wapherney? Ahem! “

“Your Excellency,” said Wapherney, “ knows what measures- “

“There is still another circumstance connected with this lamentable affair which I cannot explain; that is, how our prisoner Schumacker can be the author of the revolt, as they claim. This seems to surprise no one, but it surprises me more than anything else. It is hard to believe that a man whose company my faithful Ordener loves can be a traitor; and yet it is asserted that the miners have risen in his name, his name is their watchword. They even give him the titles of which the king deprived him. All this seems certain; but how does it happen that Countess d'Ahlefeld knew all these details a week ago, at a time when the first real symptoms of trouble had scarcely begun to appear in the mines? It is strange! No matter, I must provide for every emergency. Give me my seal, Wapherney."

The general wrote three letters, sealed them, and handed them to his secretary.

"See that this message is sent to Baron Vœthaün, colonel of musketeers, now garrisoned at Munkholm, so that his regiment may march at once to the seat of the revolt; this to the officer in command at Munkholm, an order to guard the ex-chancellor more closely than ever. I must see and question this Schumacker myself. Then despatch this letter to Skongen, to Major Wolhm, who is in command there, directing him to send forward a portion of the garrison to the centre of rebellion. Go, Wapherney, and see that these orders are executed at once."

The secretary went out, leaving the governor plunged in meditation.

"All this is very alarming," thought he. " These miners rebelling in one place, this chancellor intriguing in another, that crazy Ordener nobody knows where! He may be travelling in the very midst of all these rioters, leaving Schumacker here under my protection to conspire against the State, and his daughter, for whose safety I have been kind enough to remove the company of soldiers to which that Frederic d'Ahlefeld belongs, whom Ordener accuses of- Why, it seems to me that this very company might easily stop the advance columns of the insurgents; it is very well situated for that. Wahlstrom, where it is stationed, is near Lake Miösen and Arbar ruin. That is one of the places of which the rebels will be sure to take possession."

At this point in his revery, the general was interrupted by the sound of the opening door.

"Well, what do you want, Gustavus? "

"General, a messenger asks to speak for a moment with your Excellency."

"Well, what is it now? What fresh disaster! Let the messenger come in."

The messenger entered, and handed a packet to the governor, saying, " From his highness the viceroy, your Excellency."

The general hurriedly tore open the despatch.

"By Saint George! " he cried, with a start of surprise, " I believe that they have all gone mad! If here is not the viceroy requesting me to proceed to Bergen. He says it is on urgent business, by order of the king. A fine time this to transact urgent business! ' The lord chancellor, now travelling in the province of Throndhjem, will take your place during your absence.' Here's a substitute in whom I have no confidence! ' The bishop will assist him-Keally, these are excellent governors that Frederic chooses for a country in a state of revolt, two gentlemen of the cloth, a chancellor, and a bishop! Well, no matter, the invitation is express; it is the order of the king. Needs must obey; but before I go I must see Schumacker and question him. I am sure that there is a plot to involve me in a network of intrigue; but I have one unerring compass, my- conscience."

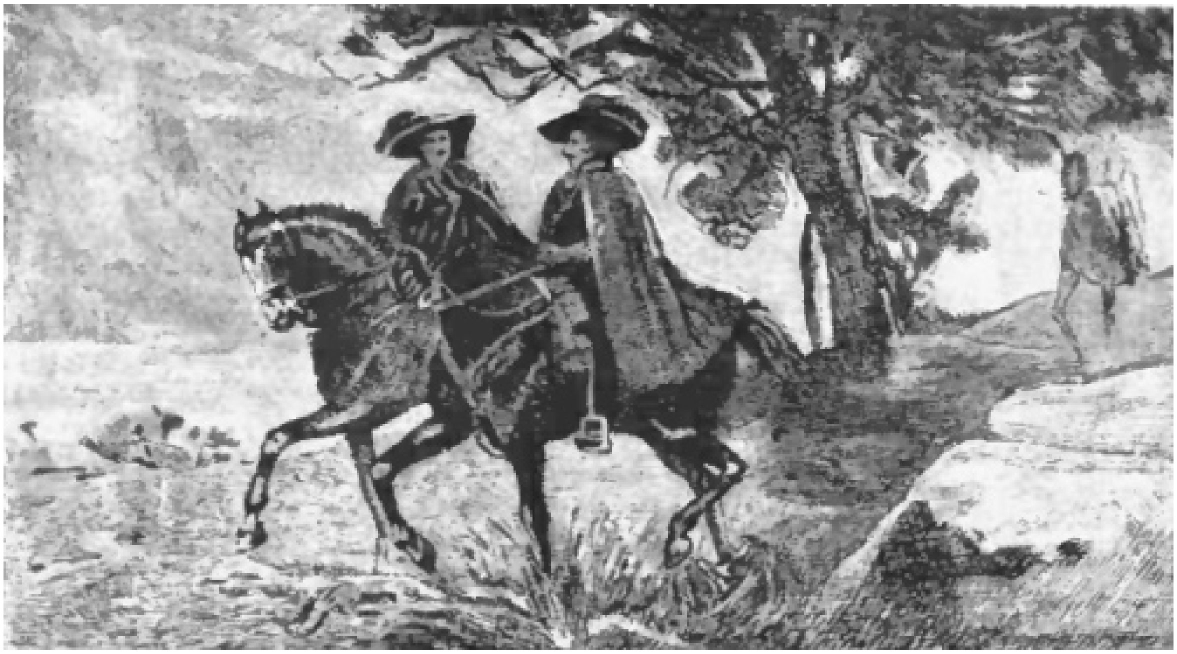

Two Horsemen muffled in brown Cloaks

CHAPTER XXI HIS FEARS WERE MORE THAN REALIZED.

The voice of thy slain brother's blood cries out.
Even from the ground, unto the Lord!
Cain: A Mystery.

"Yes, Count; it was this very day, in Arbar ruin. that we were told he might be found. Countless circumstances lead me to believe in the truth of this valuable information which I accidentally picked up yesterday, as I told you, at Oëlmœ village."

"Are we far from this Arbar ruin? "

"It is close by Lake Miösen. The guide assures ine that we shall be there before noon."

These words were spoken by two horsemen muffled in brown cloaks, who early one morning were pursuing one of the many narrow, winding paths which run in every direction through the forest lying between Lakes Miösen and Sparbo. A mountain guide, provided with a huntinghorn and an axe, led the way upon his little gray pony, and behind the travellers rode four men armed to the teeth, toward whom these two persons occasionally turned, as if afraid of being overheard.

"If that Iceland thief is really lurking in Arbar ruin," said one rider, whose steed kept a respectful distance behind the other, " it is a great point gained; for the difficulty hitherto has been to find this mysterious being."

"Do you think so, Musdœmon? And suppose he declines our offers? "

"Impossible, your Grace! What brigand could resist gold and a free pardon?"

"But you know that this is no common scoundrel. Do not judge him by yourself. If he should refuse, how can you keep your promise of night before last to the three leaders of the insurrection? "

"Well, noble Count, in that case, which I regard as impossible if we are lucky enough to find our man, has your Grace forgotten that a false Hans of Iceland awaits me two days hence at the hour and place appointed for meeting the three chiefs, at Blue Star, a place, moreover, conveniently near Arbar ruin? "

“You are right, my dear Musdœmon, as usual,” said the count; and each resumed his own particular line of thought.

Musdœmon, whose interest it was to keep his master in good humor, for the purpose of diverting him, asked the guide a question.

“My good man, what is that ruined stone cross yonder, behind those young oaks? “

The guide, a man with fixed stare and stupid mien, turned his head and shook it several times, as he said: “ Oh, master, that is the oldest gallows in Norway; holy king Olaf had it built for a judge who made a compact with a robber.”

Musdœmon saw by his patron’s face that the guide’s artless words had produced an effect quite contrary to that which he hoped.

“It is a curious story,” the guide added; “ good Mother Osia told it to me. The robber was ordered to hang the judge.”

The poor guide, in his simplicity, did not suppose that the incident with which he meant to entertain his employers was almost an insult to them. Musdœmon stopped him.

“That will do,” said he; “ we have heard the story before.”

“Insolent fellow! “ muttered the count, “ he has heard the story before. Ah, Musdœmon, you shall pay for your impudence yet.”

“Did your Grace speak to me? “ obsequiously asked Musdœmon.

“I was thinking how I could obtain the Order of the Dannebrog for you. The marriage of my daughter Ulrica and Baron Ordener would be an excellent opportunity.”

Musdœmon was profuse in protestations and thanks.

“By the way,” added his Grace, “ let us talk business. Do you suppose that the temporary recall which we sent him has reached the Mecklenburger? “

The reader may remember that the count was in the habit of thus designating General Levin de Knud, who was indeed a native of Mecklenburg.

“Let us talk business! “ thought the injured Musdœmon; “ it seems that my affairs are not ‘ business.’ Count,” he replied aloud, “ I think that the viceroy’s messenger must be in Throndhjem by this time, and therefore General Levin must be getting ready to start.”

The count assumed a kindly tone.

“That recall, my dear fellow, was one of your masterstrokes, one of your best planned and most skilfully executed intrigues.”

“The credit belongs as much to your Grace as to me,” replied Musdœmon, careful, as we have already remarked, to mix the count in all his machinations.

The master understood this secret desire of his confidant, but chose to seem unconscious of it.

He smiled.

“My dear private secretary, you are always modest; but nothing can make me depreciate your most eminent services. Elphega’s presence and the Mecklenburger’s absence assure my triumph in Throndhjem. I am now at the head of the province; and if Hans of Iceland accepts the command of the rebels, which I intend to offer him in person, to me will fall, in the eyes of the king, the glory of putting down this distressing insurrection and capturing this terrible brigand.”

They were chatting thus in low voices when the guide rode back to them.

“Masters,” said he, “here on our left is the hillock upon which Biorn the Just had the double-tongued Vellon beheaded in the presence of his entire army, the traitor having driven off the king’s allies and summoned the enemy to the camp, that he might have the appearance of saving Biorn’s life.”

All these reminiscences of old Norway did not seem to be to Musdœmon’s taste, for he hurriedly interrupted the guide.

“Come, come, good man, be silent and go your way, without turning back so often. What do we care about the foolish stories of which these ruins and dead trees remind you? You annoy my master with your old wives’ tales.”

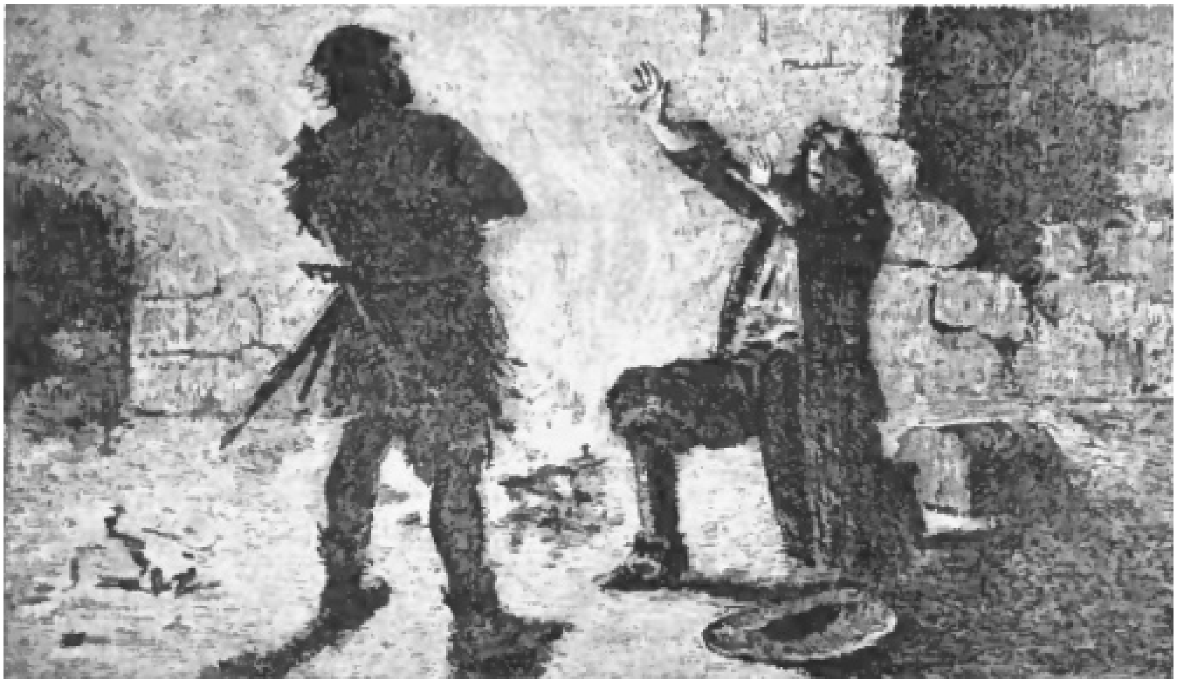

Mercy, Sir, Mercy!

CHAPTER XXII FRIENDSHIP HAS CLAIMS.

Now the hungry lion roars.
And the wolf behowls the moon;
While the heavy ploughman snores,
All with weary task foredone.
Now the wasted brands do glow,
Whilst the screech-owl, screeching loud,
Puts the wretch that lies in woe
In remembrance of a shroud.
Now it is the time of night,
That the graves, all gaping wide,
Every one lets forth his sprite,
In the church-way paths to glide.
Shakespeare: Midsummer Night's Dream.

Let us now retrace our steps. We left Ordener and Spiagudry struggling laboriously up the brow of Oëlmœ cliff by the light of the rising moon. This rock, bare of vegetation at the point where it begins to curve, is, from this peculiarity, called by the Norwegian peasants the Vulture's Neck, a name which gives an excellent idea of the aspect of this huge granite bowlder as seen from a distance.

As our travellers approached this part of the rock, the forest changed to heather. Grass gave place to moss; wild brier-roses, broom, and holly were substituted for oaks and beeches, a scantier growth, which in mountainous regions always shows that the summit is near, as it indicates the gradual diminution of the stratum of earth covering what may be termed the skeleton of the mountain.

"Mr. Ordener," said Spiagudry, whose lively mind seemed ever a prey to a varying world of ideas, " this is a very tiresome climb, and it takes all my devotion to follow you. But it seems to me that I see a superb *convolrulus* yonder to the right; how I should like to examine it. Why is it not broad daylight? Don't you think it was a great piece of impertinence to value a learned man like me at no more than four paltry crowns? 'T is true, the famous Phædrus was a slave, and Æsop, if we are to believe the learned Planudes, was sold at a fair like a beast of burden or household chattel. And who would not be proud to bear any sort of resemblance to the great Æsop? "

"Or to the celebrated Hans? " added Ordener, with a smile.

“By Saint Hospitius,” replied the keeper, “do not utter that name so lightly; I swear I could readily forego the latter comparison. But wouldn’t it be strange if Benignus Spiagudry, his companion in misfortune, should win the reward for his head? Mr. Ordener, you are more generous than Jason, for he did not give the golden fleece to the Argonaut pilot; and I am sure that your mission, although I do not clearly understand its object, is no less perilous than that of Jason.”

“Well,” said Ordener, “ since you know Hans of Iceland, tell me something about him. You say that he is by no means a giant, as is generally supposed.’’

Spiagudry interrupted him: “ Stop, master! Don’t you hear footsteps behind us? “

“Yes,” quietly answered the young man; “ don’t be alarmed; it is some animal frightened at our coming, and brushing against the bushes in its flight.”

“You are right, my young Cæsar; it is so long since these woods have seen the face of man! If we may judge by its heavy tread, it must be a good-sized animal. It may be an elk or a reindeer; this part of Norway abounds in these beasts. Wildcats are also found here; I saw one myself, which was brought to Copenhagen; he was monstrous big. I must give you a description of this ferocious animal.”

“My dear guide,” said Ordener, “ I would rather that you would give me a description of another and no less ferocious monster, the horrible Hans.”

“Speak lower, sir! How calmly you utter that name! You do not know-Good Heavens, sir! just hear that! “

As Spiagudry said this, he drew closer to Ordener, who did indeed distinctly hear a cry similar to the growl which, as the reader may remember, had so alarmed the timid keeper on the stormy night of their departure from Throndhjem.

“Did you hear that? “ he whispered, breathless with fright.

“To be sure I did” said Ordener; “ but I don’t see why you tremble so violently. It is the howl of some wild beast, possibly the cry of one of those very wildcats of which you were just talking. Did you expect to pass through such a place at this time of night without disturbing any of its inhabitants? I’ll warrant you, old man, they are far more frightened than you are.”

Spiagudry, seeing his young companion’s composure, was somewhat reassured.

“Well, it may be, sir, that you are right. But that yell sounded terribly like a voice that I- It was a very poor idea, let me tell you, sir, to insist upon climbing up to this Vermund’s castle. I fear we shall meet with some accident on the Vulture’s Neck.” “ Fear nothing while you are with me,” answered Ordener. “ Oh, nothing disturbs you; but, sir, nobody but the blessed Saint Paul can handle vipers without getting bitten. You did not even notice, when we struck into this confounded footpath, that it seemed to have been recently trodden, and that the grass had not had time to lift its head since it was trampled.”

“I confess that I did not pay much heed to it, and that my peace of mind is not dependent upon the state of a few blades of grass. See, we are now out of the thicket; we shall hear no more from the wild beasts; I need not therefore tell you, rny brave guide, to summon all your courage, but rather bid you muster all your strength, for this path, cut in the rock, will doubtless be even steeper than the one we have left.”

“It is not that it is steeper, sir, but the learned traveller, Snekson, says that it is often impeded by rocks or heavy stones too big to be handled, over which it is not easy to clamber. Among others, there is, just beyond the Maläer postern, which must be close at hand, a huge triangular granite bowlder, which I have always had the greatest desire to see. Schoenning asserts that he discovered the three primitive Runic characters on it.”

The travellers had for some time been climbing the face of the rock; they now reached a small, ruined tower, through which their path led, and to which Spiagudry drew Ordener’s attention.

“This is the Maläer postern, sir. This path hewn in the living rock contains several curious structures, which show the ancient style of fortification used in our Norwegian manor-houses. This postern, which was always guarded by four men- at- arms, was the first outwork of Vermund’s fort. Speaking of posterns, the monk Urensius makes an odd remark; he asks whether the word *janua,* derived from Janus, whose temple doors were so widely celebrated, has any connection with ‘ Janissary,’ a name applied to the troops who guard the sultan’s gate. It would be strange enough if the name of the mildest prince known to history should have passed to the most ferocious, soldiers upon earth.”

In the midst of all the keeper’s scientific twaddle, they journeyed laboriously along, over loose stones and sharp pebbles, mingled with the short, slippery grass which sometimes grows upon rocks. Ordener beguiled his weariness by thinking how delightful it would be to gaze once more upon distant Muukholm; all at once Spiagudry exclaimed: “ Oh, I see it I This sight alone repays me for all my trouble. I see it, sir, I see it! “

“See what?” said Ordener, who was just then thinking of Ethel.

“Why, sir, the three- sided pyramid described by Schoenning. I shall be the third scientific man, with Professor Schoenning and Bishop Isleif, to have the pleasure of studying it. Only it is a great pity that there is no moon.”

As they approached the famous bowlder, Spiagudry uttered an exclamation of horror and distress. Ordener, in surprise, asked with some interest the cause of this new emotion; but the archaeologist was for a time unable to reply.

“You thought,” said Ordener, “ that this rock blocked the path; on the contrary, you should be grateful to find that it leaves it entirely open.”

“And that is the very thing which provokes me,” said Benignus, in piteous accents.

“What do you mean? “ “Why, sir,” replied the keeper, “do you not see that the position of the pyramid has been changed; that the base, which rested on the path, is now uppermost; and that the bowlder stands upside down, upon the very side on which Schoenning discovered the primordial Runic letters? I am indeed unfortunate! “

“It is a pity,” said the young man.

“And besides,” hastily added Spiagudry, “ the overturning of this mass of stone proves the presence of some superhuman being. Unless it be the work of the Devil, there is but one man in Norway whose arm could

“My poor guide, there you are, giving way again to your foolish fears. Who knows but this stone has lain thus for more than a hundred years? “

“It is a hundred and fifty years, it is true,” said Spiagudry, more quietly, “ since the last scientific man observed it. But it seems to me to have been moved recently; the place which it formerly occupied is still damp. Look, sir.”

Ordener, impatient to reach the ruins, dragged his guide away from the marvellous pyramid, and succeeded, by gentle words, in removing the fresh fears with which this strange displacement inspired the aged scholar.

“See here, old man, you can take up your abode on the borders of this lake, and devote yourself to your important studies, when you get the thousand crowns reward for Hans’s head.”

“You are right, noble sir; but do not speak so lightly of so dubious a victory. I must give you one piece of advice which may help you to overcome the monster.”

Ordener drew eagerly toward Spiagudry. “ Advice! what is it? “

“The robber,” said the latter, in a low voice, casting uneasy glances around him, “ the robber wears at his belt a skull, from which he usually drinks. It is the skull of his son, of the mutilation of whose corpse I am accused.”

“Speak a little louder, and don’t be frightened; I can hardly hear you. Well, this skull? “

“This skull,” said Spiagudry, bending to whisper in the young man’s ear, “ you must try to obtain. The monster attaches a certain superstitious importance to its possession. His son’s skull once yours, you can do what you will with him.”

“That is all very well, my good fellow; but how am I to get this skull? “

“By some stratagem, sir. While the monster sleeps, perhaps.”

Ordener interrupted him: “ Enough. Your good advice is useless. I cannot be supposed to know when my enemy is asleep. My sword is the only weapon which I recognize.”

“Sir, sir! it has never been proved that the archangel Michael did not resort to stratagem to vanquish Satan.”

Here Spiagudry stopped short, and stretching out his hands, exclaimed in scarcely audible tones, “ Oh, heavens! Oh, heavens! What do I see? Look, master; is not that a short man walking before us in the path? “

“Faith,” said Ordener, raising his eyes, “ I see nothing.”

“Nothing, sir? To be sure, the path bends, and he has disappeared behind that rock. Go no farther, sir, I entreat you.”

“Surely, if the person whom you imagine that you saw disappeared so quickly, it shows that he has no idea of waiting for us; and if he chooses to run away, that is no reason why we should do the same.”

“Watch over us, holy Hospitius! “ ejaculated Spiagudry, who in all moments of danger remembered his favorite saint.

“You must,” added Ordener, “have taken the flickering shadow of some startled owl for a man.”

“And yet I really thought I saw a little man; to be sure, the moonlight often produces strange delusions. It was in the moonlight that Baldan, lord of Merueugh, took a white bed-curtain for his mother’s ghost; which led him to go next day and confess himself guilty of parricide before the judges of Christiania, who were about to condemn the dead woman’s innocent page. So we may say that the moonlight saved that page’s life.”

No one was ever more ready than Spiagudry to forget the present in the past. One anecdote from the vast storehouse of his memory was enough to banish all thought of the present. Thus the story of Baldan diverted his fears, and he added in a tranquil voice, “ It is quite possible that the moonlight deceived me too.”

Meantime, they gained the top of the Vulture’s Xeck, and began to get another glimpse of the ruins, which the steep slope of the rock had hidden from them as they ascended. The reader need not be surprised if we frequently encounter ruins on the topmost peak of Norwegian mountains. No one who has travelled among the mountains of Europe can have failed to notice the remains of fortresses and castles clinging to the top of the loftiest peaks, like the deserted nest of a vulture or the eyrie of some dead eagle. In Norway especially, at the period of which we write, the variety of these aerial structures was as amazing as their number. Sometimes they consisted of long dismantled walls, enclosing a rock, sometimes of slender pointed turrets, surmounting a sharp peak, like a crown; or upon the snowy summit of a lofty mountain might be seen great towers grouped about a massive donjon, looking in the distance like an antique diadem. Here were the graceful pointed arches of a Gothic cloister, side by side with the heavy Egyptian columns of a Saxon church; there, close by some pagan chieftain’s citadel with its square towers, stood the crenellated fortress of a Christian lord; or, again, a stronghold crumbling with age, neighbored by a monastery ravaged by war. Of all these edifices a strange medley of architectural styles, now almost forgotten, daringly constructed in apparently inaccessible spots but a few ruins remained to bear witness alike to the power and the impotence of man. Within their walls deeds were perhaps done far worthier of repetition than all the stories which are written now; but time passed; the eyes which witnessed them are closed; the tradition of them died with the lapse of years, like a fire which is not fed; and when that is lost, who can read the secret of the ages?

The manor-house of Vermund the Refugee, which our two travellers had now reached, was one of those places about which popular superstition has woven endless amazing histories and marvellous legends. By its walls composed of pebbles bedded in cement, now harder than stone it was easy to determine that it was built about the fifth or sixth century. But one of its five towers remained standing; the other four, more or less dilapidated, and strewing the top of the rock with broken fragments, were connected by a line of ruins, which also showed the ancient limits of the inner courts of the castle. It was very difficult to penetrate this enclosure, littered as it was with stones and shattered blocks of granite, and overgrown with weeds and brambles which, clambering from ruin to ruin, crowned the broken walls with verdure, or overhung the precipice with long, flexible branches. On these drooping tendrils, it was said, dim ghosts often swung in the moonlight, the guilty spirits of those who had wilfully drowned themselves in Lake Sparbo; and to these twigs, too, the water-sprite fastened the cloud which was to bear him home again at sunrise. Fearful mysteries were these, more than once witnessed by hardy fishermen, when, to take advantage of the time when dogfish sleep, they ventured to row as far as Oëlmœ cliff, which loomed up in the darkness over their heads like the broken arch of some huge bridge.

Our two adventurers climbed the manor wall, though not without some difficulty, and crept through a crevice, for the door was filled with fragments. The only tower which, as we have said, remained standing, was at the extreme edge of the rock. It was, Spiagudry told Ordener, from the top of this tower that Munkholm lighthouse could be seen. They went towards it, although the darkness was at that moment complete, the moon being hidden by a great black cloud. They were about to cross a breach in another wall, in order to enter what was once the second courtyard of the castle, when Benignus stopped short, and suddenly seized Ordener’s arm with such a trembling hand that the young man himself almost fell

“What now? “ asked Ordener in surprise.

Benignus, without answering, pressed his arm more firmly, as if begging him to be silent.

“Well “ said the young man.

Another pressure, accompanied by an ill-suppressed sigh, decided him to wait patiently until this fresh fright should cease.

At last Spiagudry asked, in a stifled voice: “ Well, master, what do you say now? “

“To what? “ said Ordener.

“Yes, sir,” added the other, in the same tone; “ I suppose you are sorry now that you came here? “

“No, indeed, my worthy guide; on the contrary, I hope to climb higher still. Why should you think that I am sorry? “

“What, sir, did you not see? “

“See! What? “

“You saw nothing? “ repeated the honest keeper, with ever-increasing terror.

“Truly I did not,” impatiently answered Ordener; “ I saw nothing, and I heard nothing but the sound of your teeth chattering with fright.”

“What! not behind that wall, in the shadow, those two flaming eyes, like comets, fixed directly upon us, did you not see them? “

“Upon my honor, I did not.”

“You did not see them move up and down, and then disappear among the ruins? “

“I don’t know what you are talking about. Besides, what if I did see them I “

“What! Mr. Ordener, don’t you know that there is but one man in Norway whose eyes gleam in that way in the dark? “

“Well, and what then? Who is this man with the eyes of a cat? Is it Hans, your much-dreaded Icelander? So much the better if he be here! It will spare us a journey to Walderhog.”

This “ so much the better “ was not to the taste of Spiagudry, who could not help betraying his secret thought by the involuntary ejaculation: “ Oh, sir, you promised to leave me at the village of Surb, a mile away from the battle.”

The generous and kindly Ordener understood, and smiled.

“You are right, old man; it would be unfair to make you share my danger; therefore fear nothing. You see this Hans of Iceland everywhere. May there not be some wildcat lurking among these ruins, whose eyes shine quite as fiercely as his do? “

Once more Spiagudry’s fears were set at rest, either because Ordener’s suggestion struck him as very plausible, or because his young companion’s composure proved contagious.

“Ah, sir,” said he, “ if it had not been for you I should have died a dozen deaths from fright as I climbed these rocks. To be sure, I should never have attempted such a task if it had not been for you.”

The moon, which now broke through the clouds, showed them the gateway to the highest tower, the foot of which they had already reached. They entered, after raising a thick curtain of vines, which showered them with drowsy lizards and old decayed bird’s-uests. The keeper picked up a couple of pebbles, and striking them together, produced a few sparks, by means of which he soon set fire to a heap of dead leaves and dry branches collected by Ordener. In a few moments a bright column of flame rose into the air, and banishing the darkness about them, permitted them to examine the interior of the tower.

Nothing was left but a circular wall, which was very thick, and was overgrown with moss and vines. The ceiling and floors of its four stories had crumbled away one after the other, and now formed a vast heap of rubbish upon the ground. A narrow spiral staircase, entirely without a railing, and broken in various places, was built in the wall, to the top of which it led. As the fire began to crackle cheerily, a swarm of owls and ospreys flew up heavily, with strange, weird cries, and huge bats now and then hovered above the flames, poised upon their ashen wings.

“Our hosts do not receive us very merrily,” said Ordener; “ but do not take fright again.”

“I, sir,” replied Spiagudry, seating himself close to the fire; “ I fear an owl or a bat! I have dwelt with corpses, and I do not fear vampires. Ah, I only dread the living! I am not brave, I admit; but at least I am not superstitious. Come, sir. take my advice; let us laugh at these ladies in black petticoats and with such hoarse voices, and let us be thinking of supper.”

Ordener thought of nothing but Munkholm.

“I have here a few provisions,” said Spiagudry, drawing his knapsack from under his cloak; “ but if your appetite be as good as mine, this black bread and mouldy cheese will not go far. I see that we shall have to observe the limits of the law laid down by the French king, Philip the Fair, *Nemo audeat comedere prater duo fercula cum potagio.* There must be nests of gulls or pheasants on the top of this tower; but how are we to get there by that dilapidated staircase, which does not look as if it would bear the weight of anything but a sylph? “

“Still,” answered Ordener, “ it must needs bear mine, for I shall certainly climb to the top of this tower.”

“What, master! to get a few gull’s-nests? Do not, for mercy’s sake, be so rash! It is not worth while to kill yourself for the sake of a better supper. Besides, suppose you should make a mistake and take the nests of these owls? “

“Much I care for your nests! Didn’t you tell me that I could see Munkholm light from the top of this tower? “

“So you can, young master; it lies to the south. I see that your desire to establish this point, so important to the science of geography, was your motive for taking this fatiguing journey to Vermund castle. But do consider, good Mr. Ordener, that it may sometimes be the duty of a zealous student to brave toil and hardship, but never to run into danger. I implore you, do not attempt that poor broken-down staircase, upon which even a crow would not venture to perch.”

Benignus was by no means anxious to be left alone in the tower. As he rose to take Ordener’s hand, his knapsack, which was lying across his knees, fell upon some stones, and gave forth a clear metallic ring.

“What have you in your wallet that rings so loudly? “ asked Ordener.

This was such a delicate question that Spiagudry lost all desire to restrain his young companion.

“Well,” said he, without answering the question, “ if, in spite of all my prayers, you persist in climbing to the top of this tower, at least beware of the broken places in the stairs.”

“But,” repeated Ordener, “ you have not told me what you have in your knapsack to make it sound so metallic.”

This indiscreet persistence was extremely unpleasant to the old keeper, who cursed the questioner from the bottom of his soul.

“Oh, noble master,” he replied, “ how can you show such curiosity about a paltry iron barber’s-basin, which clinked against a stone? If I cannot persuade you to change your mind,” he made haste to add, “ come back as soon as you can, and be careful to hold fast to the vines which cover the wall. You will see Munkholm lighthouse to the south, between Frigga’s Footstools.”

Spiagudry could not have said anything better calculated to drive every other idea out of the young man’s head. Ordener, throwing aside his mantle, sprang toward the staircase, up which the keeper followed him with his eyes until he could only see him move like a faint shadow upward to the top of the wall, dimly lighted by the flickering flames and the cold rays of the moon.

Then reseating himself and picking up his knapsack, he said: “ Now, my dear Benignus Spiagudry, while that young lynx cannot see you, and you are alone, make haste and break the cumbrous iron envelope which prevents you from taking possession, *oculis et manu,* of the treasure undoubtedly contained in this casket. When it is delivered from its prison, it will be lighter to carry and easier to conceal.”

Arming himself with a huge stone, he was about to break the lid of the box, when the firelight, falling on the iron lock, suddenly arrested the antiquarian.

“By Saint Willibrod the Numismatologist, I am not mistaken,” he exclaimed, eagerly rubbing the rusty lid; “those are indeed the arms of Griffenfeld. I came near doing a very foolish thing in breaking this lock. This may be the only perfect copy in existence of those famous armorial hearings destroyed in 1076 by the hangman’s hand. The devil! I will not touch this box. Whatever may be the value of its contents, unless, as seems scarcely probable, it should be coin of Palmyra or Carthaginian money, this is certainly still more precious. So here I am the sole owner of the now obsolete arms of Griffenfeld! Let me hide this treasure carefully, and I may some time discover the secret of opening the casket without committing an act of vandalism. The Griffenfeld arms! Oh, yes! here are the hand of Justice and the scales upon a gules ground. What luck! “

At each fresh heraldic discovery that he made as he polished the ancient coffer, he uttered a cry of admiration or an exclamation of content.

“By means of a solvent, I can open the box without breaking the lock. It probably contains the ex-chancellor’s treasure. If any one, tempted by the bait of the four crowns offered by the council for my head, should recognize me now and stop me, I can readily buy my freedom. So this blessed casket will save me.”

As he spoke, he looked up mechanically. All at once his grotesque features changed with lightning speed from an expression of intense delight to that of stupefied dismay; his limbs trembled convulsively, his eyes became fixed, his brow furrowed, his mouth gaped wide, and his voice stuck in his throat.

Before him, on the other side of the fire, stood a little man with folded arms. By his dress of blood-stained skins, his stone axe, his red beard, and the ravenous stare fastened on his face, the wretched keeper at once recognized the frightful character whose last visit he had received in the Spladgest at Throndhjem.

“It is I! “ said the little man, with terrible calmness. “ That casket will save you,” he added with a bitterly sarcastic smile. “ Spiagudry, is this the way to Thoctree? “

The unfortunate man tried to stammer a word of excuse.

“Thoctree! Sir My lord and master, I was

“You were going to Walderhog,” replied the other, in a voice of thunder.

The terrified Spiagudry mustered all his forces to deny the charge.

“You were guiding an enemy to my retreat. I thank you! ‘T will be one living man the less. Fear nothing, faithful guide; he shall follow you.”

The luckless keeper strove to shriek, but could with difficulty utter a feeble moan.

“Why are you so frightened at my presence? You were seeking me. Hark ye! Do not speak, or you are a dead man.”

The little man swung his stone axe above the keeper’s head. He added, in a voice which sounded like the roar of a mountain torrent as it bursts from some subterranean cave: “ You have betrayed me.”

“No, your Grace! No, your Excellency! “ gasped Benignus, scarcely able to articulate these words of apology and entreaty.

The other gave vent to a low growl.

“Ah! you would deceive me again! Hope not to succeed. Listen! I was on the roof of the Spladgest when you sealed your compact with that mad fool; twice you have heard my voice. It was my voice you heard amid the storm upon your road; it was I whom you met in Vygla tower; it was I who said, ‘ We shall meet again! “

The terrified keeper looked about him in despair, as if to summon help. The little man went on: “I could not let those soldiers who pursued you, escape my wrath; they belonged to the Muukholm regiment. I knew that

I should not lose you. Spiagudry, it was I whom you saw again in Oëlmœ village beneath the miner’s hat; it was my footstep and my voice that you heard, and my eyes that you saw as you climbed to these ruins. It was I! “

Alas! the unfortunate man was but too well convinced of these dreadful truths. He rolled upon the ground at the feet of his fearful judge, crying in faint and agonizing accents, “ Mercy! “

The little man, his arms still folded, fixed upon him a murderous look, more scorching even than the flames upon the hearth.

“Ask that casket to save you, as you said it would do,” he said sarcastically. “ Mercy, sir, mercy! “ repeated the expiring victim.

“I warned you to be faithful and to be dumb. You have not been faithful; but in future I protest that you shall be dumb.”

The keeper, grasping the horrible meaning of these words, uttered a deep groan.

“Fear nothing,” said the man; “ I will not part you from your treasure.”

At these words, unfastening his leather belt, he passed it through a ring on the cover of the casket, and by this means hung it about Spiagudry’s neck, the poor fellow bending beneath its weight.

“Come!” rejoined the monster, “to what devil will you confide your soul? Make haste and summon him, lest another demon whom you do not care about, take possession of it before him.”

The desperate old man, past all power of speech, fell at the little man’s knees, making countless gestures of terror and entreaty.

“No, no! “ said his tormentor; “ my faithful Spiagudry, you need not be distressed at leaving your young companion without a guide. I promise you that he shall go where you go. Follow me; you do but show him the way. Come! ‘

With these words, seizing the wretched man in his powerful arms, he bore him from the tower as a tiger might carry off a writhing serpent, and a moment later a fearful shriek rang through the ruins, mingled with a. horrible burst of laughter.

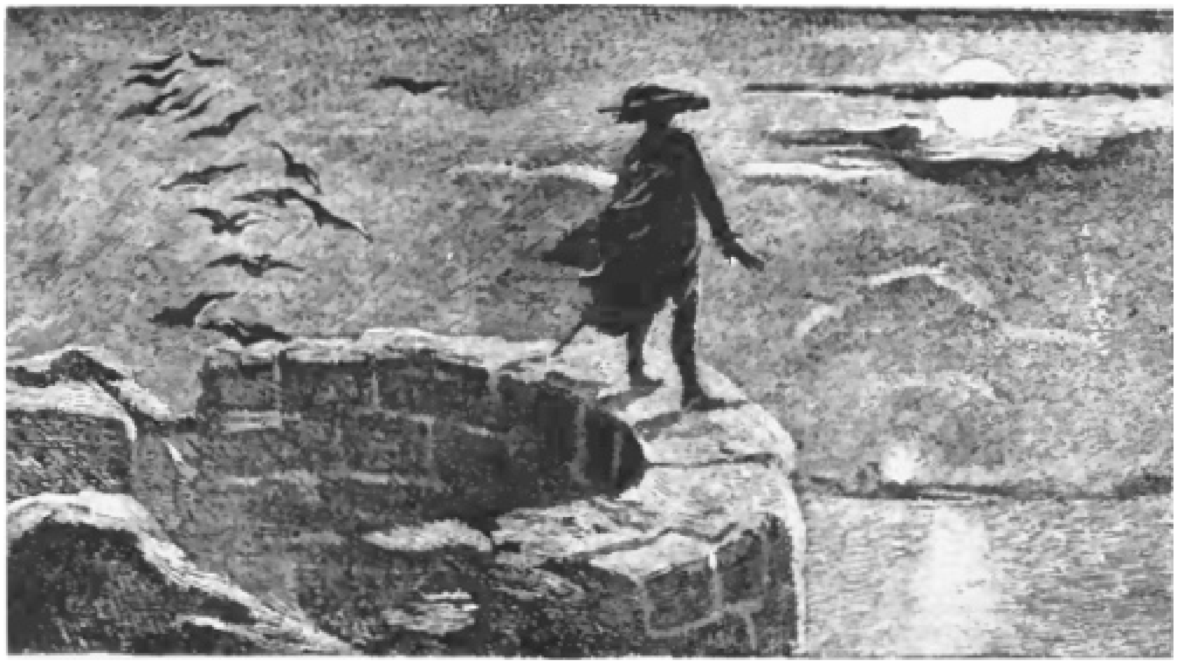

Ordener reached the Top of the Tower

CHAPTER XXIII SWORD AND GOWN.

Yes, we may reveal to the faithful lover's tear-wet eye the distant object of his adoration. But alas! the moments of expectation, the farewells, the thoughts, the sweet and bitter memories, the enchanting dreams of two beings that love! Who can restore these?

Maturin: Bertram.

Meantime the venturesome Ordener, after a score or more of narrow escapes from a fall during his perilous ascent, reached the top of the thick, round tower wall. At his unexpected visit, dusky old owls abruptly aroused from their nests, flew up, staring at him as they sailed away, and loose stones, displaced by his tread, rolled into the abyss, rebounding from projections in the masonry with a remote, hollow roar.

At any other time, Ordener's gaze would have roamed far and wide, and his mind would have dwelt upon the depth of the gulf yawning beneath him, which seemed even greater from the thick darkness of the night. His eye, taking in all the great masses of shadow on the horizon, their sombre outlines but half revealed by a nebulous moon, would have striven to distinguish between mist and rocks, between mountains and clouds; his imagination would have lent life to all the gigantic forms, the fantastic shapes with which moonlight clothes hills and vapors. He would have listened to the indistinct murmur of lake and woods blended with the shrill sough of the wind through the crevices in the stones and through the dried grass at his feet, and his fancy would have lent words to all those low voices through which material Nature speaks while man sleeps, in the silence of the night. But although the scene unconsciously acted upon his whole being, other thoughts filled his mind. Hardly had his foot touched the top of the wall, when his eye turned to the southern sky, and he thrilled with unspeakable rapture as he saw beyond and between two small mountains a point of light gleaming upon the horizon like a red star. It was Munkholm beacon.

None but those who have tasted the truest joys which life can give can understand the young man's happiness. His soul was filled with delight; his heart beat violently. Motionless, his eye fixed, he gazed at the star of hope and consolation. It seemed as if that beam of light traversing the darkness, and coming from the spot which held all that made life worth living, bore with it something of his Ethel. Ah! do not doubt it; one soul may sometimes hold mysterious communion with another, though widely parted by time and space. In vain the world of reality rears its barriers between two beings who love; inhabitants of an ideal world, they are present to each other in absence, they are united in death. What can mere bodily separation or physical distance avail if two hearts be indissolubly bound by a single thought and a common desire? True love may suffer, but it cannot die.

Who has not repeatedly lingered on a rainy night beneath some dimly lighted window? Who has not passed and repassed a certain door, rapturously wandered up and down before a certain house? Who has not abruptly retraced his steps, to follow, at evening, along some deserted, winding street, a floating skirt or a white veil suddenly recognized in the twilight? He who has never experienced these feelings may safely say that he has never loved.

As he gazed at the distant lighthouse, Ordener pondered. A sad and ironical contentment took the place of his first transports; a thousand varying thoughts and ideas crowded upon his agitated spirit. “ Yes,” said he, “ a man must labor long and painfully to win at last a ray of happiness in the vast night of existence. So she is there! She sleeps, she dreams, perhaps she thinks of me! But who will tell her that her Ordener even now hangs above an abyss, sad and lonely, surrounded by darkness, her Ordener, who retains nothing of her but a single ringlet pressed to his heart and a faint light upon the horizon! “ Then, looking at the ruddy glow of the huge fire burning in the tower beneath, and escaping through the crevices in the wall, he murmured: “ Perhaps from one of her prison windows she casts an indifferent glance at the far-off flame upon this hearth.”

All at once, a loud shriek and a prolonged burst of laughter rose from the brink of the precipice below; he turned abruptly, and saw that the interior of the tower was vacant. Alarmed for the safety of the old man, he hurriedly descended; but he had taken but a few steps when he heard a dull splash, as if a heavy body had been thrown into the deep waters of the lake.

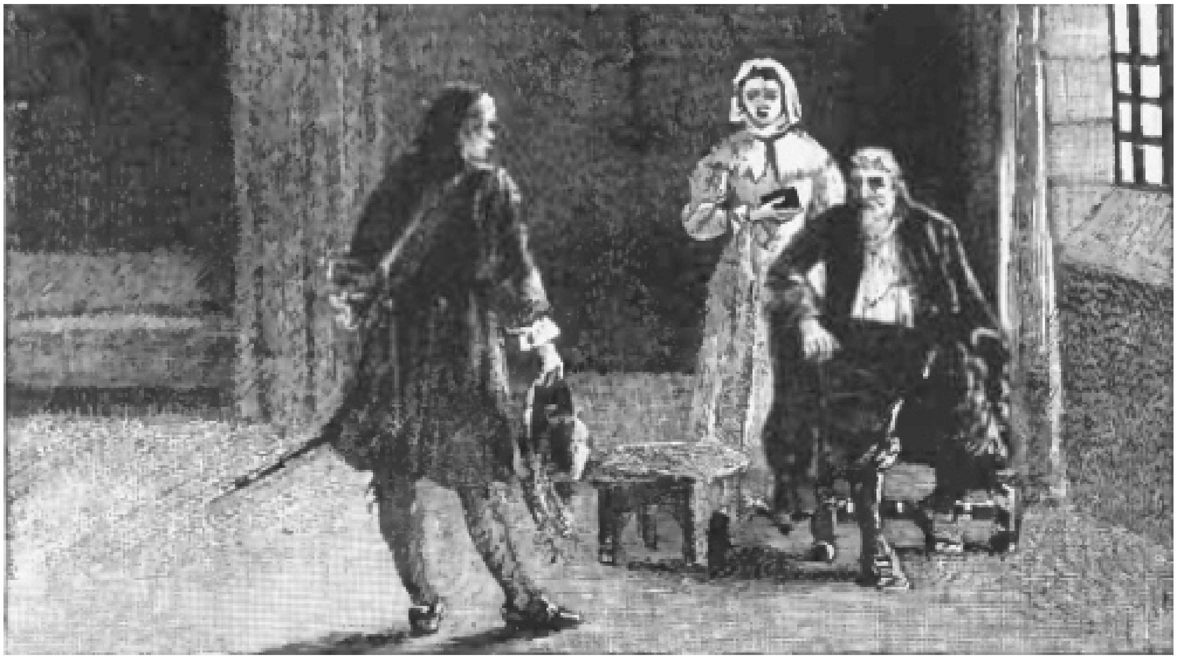

His Excellency the Governor

CHAPTER XXIV BEELZEBUB HIMSELF.

Count Don Sancho Diaz, lord of Saldana, shed bitter tears in his prison cell. Full of despair, he sighed forth in solitude his complaints against King Alfonso: “Oh, sad moments, when my white locks remind me how many years I have already passed in this horrible prison!”

Old Spanish Romance.

The sun was setting, and its horizontal beams threw the dark shadow of the prison-bars upon Schumacker’s woollen gown and Ethel’s crape dress, as they sat by the high-arched casement, the old man in a great Gothic chair, the young girl upon a stool at his feet. The prisoner seemed to be brooding, in his favorite melancholy attitude. His bald, wrinkled brow rested on his hand, and his face was hidden save for the long white beard which hung down his breast in sad disorder.

“Father,” said Ethel, trying by every means to rouse him, “ my lord and father, I dreamed last night of a happy future. Look, dear father; raise your eyes, and see that bright, cloudless sky.”

“I can only see the sky,” the old man replied, “ through my prison-bars, as I can only see your future, Ethel, through my misfortunes.”

Then his head, for an instant lifted, fell back upon his hands, and both were silent.

“Father,” rejoined the young girl, a moment later, in a timid voice, “ are you thinking of Lord Ordener?”

“Ordener?” said the old man, as if striving to recall the name. “ Ah, I know whom you mean! What of him?”

“Do you think that he will soon return, father? He has been gone so long! this is the fourth day.”

The old man shook his head sadly.

“I think that when four years have passed, his return will be as close at hand as it is today.”

Ethel turned pale.

“Heavens! Then you think that he will not come back?”

Schmnacker made no answer. The young girl repeated her question in an anxious and beseeching tone.

“Did he not promise to return?” said the old man, curtly.

“Yes, to be sure!” eagerly answered Ethel.

"Well, how can you reckon upon his coming, then? Is he not a man? I believe that the vulture will return to a dead body, but I have no faith in the return of spring when the year is on the wane."

Ethel, seeing that her father had relapsed into his wonted melancholy, took courage; the voice of her young and virginal soul proudly denied the old man's morbid philosophy.

"Father," she said firmly, " Lord Ordener will return; he is not like other men."

"What do you know about it, girl?"

"What you know yourself, my lord and father."

"I know nothing," said the old man." I heard words from a man, and they promised the actions of a god." Then he added, with a bitter smile: " I have weighed them well, and I see that they are too beautiful to be true."

"And I, sir, believe them because they are so beautiful."

"Oh, girl, if you were what you should be, Countess of Tönsberg and Princess of Wollin, surrounded, as you would be, by a swarm of handsome traitors and selfish adorers, such credulity would be most dangerous."

"It is not credulity, my lord and father, but confidence."

"It is easy to see, Ethel, that there is French blood in your veins."

This idea led the old man, by an imperceptible transition, to a different train of thought, and he added, with a certain complacency:

"For those who degraded your father to a point lower yet than that from which he had raised himself, cannot deny that you are the daughter of Charlotte, Princess of Tarentum, or that one of your ancestresses was Adela (or Edila), Countess of Flanders, whose name you bear."

Ethel's mind was running on quite other things.

"Father, you misjudge the noble Ordener."

"Noble, my daughter! What do you mean by that? I have made men noble who proved themselves very vile."

"I do not mean, sir, that his nobility is of the kind conferred by man."

"Do you know that he is descended from some 'jarl' or ' hersa '?"

"I know as little of his descent as you do, father. He may be," she added, with downcast eyes, " the son of a vassal or a serf. Alas! crowns and lyres may be painted upon the velvet covering of a footstool. I only mean that, judged by your own standard, my revered sire, he has a noble heart."

Of all the men whom she had seen, Ordener was the one whom Ethel knew at once best and least. He had dawned upon her destiny, like one of those angels who visited the first men, wrapped alike in mystery and in radiant light. Their mere presence revealed their nature, and they were at once adored. Thus Ordener had shown Ethel what men usually conceal, his heart; he had been silent concerning that of which they usually make boast, his country and his family. His look was enough for Ethel, and she had faith in his words. She loved him, she had given him her life, she was intimate with his soul, and she did not know his name.

“A noble heart!” repeated the old man; a noble heart! Such nobility is higher than any in the gift of kings; it is the gift of God. He is less lavish with it than are they.”

The prisoner raised his eyes to his shattered escutcheon as he added:” And he never withdraws it.”

“Then, father,” said the girl, “ he who retains the one should be easily consoled for the loss of the other.”

These words startled her father and restored his courage. He replied in a firm voice:-

“You are right, girl. But you do not know that the disgrace held by the world to be unjust is sometimes confirmed by our secret conscience. Such is our poor nature; once unhappy, countless voices which slumbered in the time of our prosperity wake within us and accuse us of faults and errors before unnoted.”

“Say not so, illustrious father,” said Ethel, deeply moved; for by the old man’s altered voice, she felt that he had allowed the secret source of one of his greatest sorrows to escape him.

She raised her eyes to his face, and kissing his pallid, withered hand, she added gently:” You are severe in your judgment of two noble men, Lord Ordener and yourself, my revered father.”

“You decide lightly, Ethel. One would say that you did not know that life is a serious matter.”

“Am I wrong then, sir, to do justice to the generous Ordener?”

Schumacker frowned, with a dissatisfied air.

“I cannot approve, my daughter, of such admiration for a stranger whom you may never see again.”

“Oh,” said the young girl, upon whose soul these cold words fell like a heavy weight, “ do not believe it. We shall see him again. Was it not for your sake that he went forth to brave such danger?”

“Like yourself, I confess that I was at first deceived by his promises. But no; he will never go upon his mission, and therefore he will never return to us.”

“He did go, sir; he did go.”

The tone in which the young girl pronounced these words was almost that of one offended and insulted. She felt herself outraged in her Ordener’s person. Alas! she was only too sure in her own soul of the truth which she asserted.

The prisoner replied, seemingly unmoved:” Very well. If he has really gone to fight that brigand, if he has rushed into such danger, it comes to the same thing, he will never return.”

Poor Ethel! how often a word indifferently uttered, painfully galls the hidden wound in an anxious and tortured heart! She bent her pale face to hide from her father’s stern gaze the tears which, in spite of all her efforts, fell from her burning eyes.

“Oh, father,” she sighed, “ while you speak thus, this noble and unfortunate youth may be dying for your sake!”

The aged minister shook his head doubtfully.

“That I can neither believe nor wish. And even so, how am I to blame? I should merely show myself ungrateful to the young man, as so many others have shown themselves to me.”

A deep sigh was Ethel’s only answer; and Schumacker, turning to his table, tore up with an absent air a few leaves of “ Plutarch’s Lives,” which volume lay before him, already tattered in countless places, and covered with marginal notes. A moment later the door opened, and Schumacker, without looking up, cried out as usual: “ Do not enter! do not disturb me! I will see no one!”

“It is his Excellency the governor,” was the answer.

An elderly man dressed in the uniform of a general, with the collars of the Elephant, the Dannebrog, and the Golden Fleece about his neck, advanced toward Schumacker, who half rose, muttering,” The governor! the governor!” The general bowed respectfully to Ethel, as she stood at her father’s side, timidly and anxiously watching him.

Perhaps before proceeding further, it will be well briefly to recall the motives of General Levin’s visit to Munkholm. The reader will remember the unpleasant news which disturbed the old governor, in the twentieth chapter of this truthful narrative. On receiving it, he at once saw the importance of questioning Schumacker; but he was extremely reluctant to do so. The idea of tormenting a poor prisoner, already a prey to so much that was painful, and whom he had known in his days of power, of severely scanning the secrets of an unfortunate man, even if guilty, was most unpleasant to his kind and generous soul. Still, his duty to the king required it. He ought not to leave Throndhjem without such fresh light as might be gained by questioning the apparent author of the rebellion among the miners. Accordingly, the night before his departure, after a long and confidential talk with Countess d'Ahlefeld, the governor made up his mind to visit the prisoner. As he approached the fortress, thoughts of the interests of the State, of the advantage to which his many personal enemies might turn what they would style his negligence, and perhaps too the crafty words of the chancellor's wife, worked within him, and confirmed him in his purpose. He therefore climbed to the Lion of Schleswig tower with every intention to be severe; he resolved to bear himself toward Schumacker the conspirator as if he had never known Griffenfeld the chancellor, to cast aside all his memories, and even his natural disposition, and to speak as a firm judge to this former fellow-sharer in the royal favor.

So soon, however, as he entered the ex-chancellor's apartment, the old man's venerable though sombre face made a strong impression upon him; Ethel's sweet though dignified expression touched him; and with his first glance at the two prisoners, his stern intentions died within him.

He advanced toward the fallen minister, and involuntarily offered him his hand, saying, without remarking that his politeness met with no response:

"How are you, Count Griffenf- His old habit overcame him for the moment; then he corrected himself quickly "Mr. Schumacker?" With this he paused, satisfied and exhausted by such an effort.

Silence ensued. The general racked his brain to find words harsh enough to correspond with this brutal beginning.

"Well," Schumacker said at last, " are you the governor of the province of Throndhjem?"

The governor, somewhat surprised to find himself questioned by the man he had meant to question, bowed his head.

"Then," added the prisoner, " I have a complaint to lay before you."

"A complaint! What is it? what is it?" And the kind-hearted Levin's countenance assumed a look of interest.

Schumacker went on, in a tone of considerable annoyance: “ By order of the viceroy I am to be left free and undisturbed in this donjon.”

“I am aware of the order.”

“And yet, Governor, I am importuned and annoyed by visits.”

“Visits! and from whom?” cried the general; “ tell me who dares “

“You, Governor.”

These words, uttered in a haughtv tone, offended the general. He answered, in a somewhat irritated voice: “ You forget that my power knows no limits when it is a question of serving the king.”

“Unless,” said Schumacker, “ it were those of the respect due to misfortune. But men know nothing of that.”

The ex-chancellor said this as if speaking to himself.

The governor heard him.

“Yes, indeed! yes, indeed! I was wrong, Count Griff”- Mr. Schumacker, I should say; I should leave the privilege of anger to you, since the power is mine.”

Schumacker was silent for a moment. “ There is,” he resumed thoughtfully, “ something about your face and voice, Governor, which reminds me of a man I once knew. It was very long ago. No one but myself can remember those days. It was in the time of my prosperity. He was one Levin de Knud, of Mecklenburg. Did you ever know the foolish fellow?”

“I knew him,” quietly replied the general.

“Oh, you remember him! I thought it was only in adversity that we remembered.”

“Was he not a captain in the Royal Guards? “ added the governor.

“Yes, a mere captain, although the king loved him dearly. But he thought of nothing but pleasure, and seemed to have no ambition. He was a strange, mad fellow. Can you conceive that a favorite could be so moderate in his desires?”

“I can understand it.”

“I was fond of this Levin de Knud, because he never gave me any alarm. He was the king’s friend as he might have been the friend of any other man. It seemed as if he loved him for his own sake, and not for his position.”

The general would have interrupted Schumacker; but the latter persisted, either from a spirit of contradiction, or because the train of thought into which he had drifted really pleased him.

“Since you knew this Captain Levin, Governor, you probably know that he had a son who died young. But do you remember what happened at the birth of this son?”

“I can better recall what occurred at the time of his death,” said the general, covering his eyes with his hand, and in a faltering voice.

“But,” continued the heedless Schumacker, “ this fact was known to very few persons, and it will show you just how peculiar this Levin was. The king wished to be the child’s godfather; would you believe that Levin refused? He did more; he chose an old beggar who hung about the palace gates, to hold his son at the baptismal font. I never could understand the reason for such an act of lunacy.”

“I will tell you,” replied the general. “ In choosing a guardian for his son’s soul, this Captain Levin doubtless thought that a poor man had more influence with God than a king.”

Schumacker considered for a moment, then said: “ You are right.”

The governor again attempted to turn the conversation to the object of his visit. But Schumacker cut him short.

“Excuse me; if it be true that you know this Levin of Mecklenburg, let me talk of him. Of all the men whom I knew in the days of my grandeur, he is the only one whose memory does not inspire me with disgust or horror. Although he carried his peculiarity to the verge of folly, his noble qualities, none the less, made him one man in a thousand.”

“I do not agree with you. This Levin was no better than other men. In fact, there are many who are better.”

Schumacker folded his arms, and raised his eyes to heaven. “Yes, that is the way with them all. You cannot praise a worthy man in their presence, that they do not instantly seek to disparage him. They poison everything, even the pleasure of just praise, rare as it is.”

“If you knew me, you would not accuse me of disparaging Gener- I mean, Captain Levin.”

“Nonsense! nonsense,” said the prisoner;” for loyalty and generosity, there were never two men like this Levin de Knud, and to say a word to the contrary is both an outrageous slander and a flattery of this miserable human race.”

“I assure you,” returned the general, trying to assuage Schumacker’s wrath, “ that I have not the slightest intention of wronging Levin de Knud.”

“Do not say that. Although he was so foolish, the rest of mankind is anything but like him. They are a false, ungrateful, envious set of slanderers. Do you know that Levin de Knud gave more than half his income to the Copenhagen hospitals?”

“I did not know that you knew it.”

“There it is!” triumphantly exclaimed the old man. “ You thought that you could safely brand him, trusting to my ignorance of the poor fellow’s good deeds!”

“Not at all, not at all!”

“Do you suppose, too, that I don’t know that he persuaded the king to give the regiment which he intended for him, to an officer who had wounded him in a duel, because, he said, the other outranked him?”

“I thought that transaction was a secret.”

“Well, tell me, Governor of Throndhjem, does that make it any less beautiful? If Levin concealed his virtues, is that a reason for denying them? Oh, how much alike men are! How dare you compare the noble Levin with them, he who, when he could not save a soldier convicted of an attempt to murder him, settled a pension upon his murderer’s widow?”

“Pooh! who would not do as much? “ Here Schumacker exploded. “ Who? You! I! Any other man, Sir Governor! Because you wear the showy uniform of a general, and stars and crosses on your breast, do you think yourself a very meritorious person? You are a general, and poor Levin, I dare say, died a captain. True, he was a foolish fellow, and never thought of promotion.”

“If he did not think of it himself, the king in his goodness thought of it for him.”

“Goodness? Say, rather, justice, if there be such a thing as the justice of a king! Well, what signal reward did he receive? “

“His Majesty paid Levin de Knud far beyond his deserts.”

“Capital!” cried the aged minister, clapping his hands. ‘‘ A faithful captain is perhaps, after thirty years’ service, made a major; and this distinguished mark of favor offends you, noble general? The Persian proverb is true which says that the setting sun is jealous of the rising moon.”

Schumacker’s fury was so great that the general could scarcely get in the words: “ If you persist in interrupting me You will not let me explain “

“No, no!” continued the other; “ I thought at first sight, General, that I caught a certain likeness between you and my good Levin; but no! there is none.”

“Do but listen to me- “

“Listen to you! and hear you say that Levin de Knud is unworthy of some trifling reward?”

“I swear it is not “

“You will presently I know you men try to persuade me that he is a knave, a hypocrite, and a villain, like the rest of you.”

“No, indeed!”

“How do I know? Or perhaps that he betrayed a friend, persecuted a benefactor, as you all do; or poisoned his father, or murdered his mother?”

“You are mistaken. I have not the slightest desire

“Do you know that it was he who compelled Vice chancellor Wind, as well as Scheele, Vinding, and Justice Lasson, three of my judges, not to sentence me to death? And you would have me hear him calumniated, and not defend him! Yes, that is what he did for me, and yet I had always done him more harm than good; for I am like you, vile and wicked.”

The noble Levin was strangely moved by this singular interview. The object alike of the most direct insults and the sincerest praise, he knew not how to take such rough compliments and such flattering abuse. He was shocked and touched. Now he wanted to get into a passion, and now to thank Schumacker. Present and yet unknown, he loved to hear the fierce Schumacker defend in him, and against him, a friend and an absent man; only he would have preferred that his advocate should put a trifle less bitterness and acrimony into his panegyric. But in his innermost heart the exaggerated praise bestowed on Captain Levin pleased him even more than the insults addressed to the governor of Throndhjem wounded him. Fixing his kindly gaze upon the favorite in disgrace, he allowed him to vent his gratitude and his wrath; until at last, after a prolonged invective against human ingratitude, he sank exhausted upon an arm-chair, into the trembling Ethel’s arms, saying in a melancholy voice: “ Oh, men! what have I done that I should be forced to know you? “

The general had not yet been able to broach the important topic of his visit to Munkholm. All his reluctance to torment the captive by a series of questions, revived; to his pity and emotion were added two powerful motives: Schumacker’s present state of agitation made it improbable that he could answer satisfactorily; and, moreover, on considering the affair more closely, it did not seem to the trusting Levin that such a man could be a conspirator. Still, how could he leave Throndhjem without examining Schumacker? This disagreeable necessity of his position as governor once more overcame all his scruples, and he began as follows, softening his voice as much as possible:

"Pray, calm your excitement, Count Schumacker."

This compromise struck the good governor as a happy inspiration, well fitted to reconcile the respect due to the sentence pronounced against him, with a proper regard for the prisoner's misfortune, as it combined his noble title and his humble cognomen. He added: " It is my painful duty- "

"First," interrupted the prisoner, " allow me, Governor, to return to a subject which interests me far more than anything that your Excellency can have to say to me. You assured me just now that that madcap Levin had been rewarded for his services. I am most anxious to know in what way."

"His Majesty, my lord Griffenfeld, raised Levin to the rank of general, and for more than twenty years the foolish fellow has grown old in peace, honored with this military dignity and the favor of his king."

Schumacker's head drooped.

"Yes; that foolish Levin, who cared so little whether he ever lived to be more than a captain, will die a general; and the wise Schumacker, who expected to die Lord Chancellor, grows old a prisoner of State."

As he uttered these words, he hid his face in his hands and heaved a deep sigh. Ethel, who understood nothing of the conversation, save that it distressed her father, instantly strove to divert him.

"Look yonder, father, to the north; I see a gleam of light which I never noticed before."

In fact, the night, which had now closed in, revealed a faint and distant light upon the horizon, apparently coming from some far-off mountain. But Schumacker's mind and eye were not, like those of Ethel, ever bent on the north; therefore he made no reply. The general alone was struck by the young girl's remark.

"It may be," thought he, " a fire kindled by the rebels; " and this idea forcibly reminding him of the purpose of his visit, he thus addressed the prisoner: " Mr. Griffenfeld, I am sorry to distress you, but you must allow me- "

"I understand you, Governor; it is not enough to spend my days in this dungeon, to lead a lonely, disgraced existence, to have nothing left but bitter memories of past grandeur and power, you must also intrude upon my solitude, gaze upon my sorrow, and enjoy my misfortune. Since that noble Levin de Knud, whom some of yuur outward features recall to me, is a general like yourself, why was not he permitted to fill your post; for he would never, I swear, Sir Governor, have come to torture a miserable prisoner."

During the course of this strange interview the general had more than once been on the point of revealing himself, that he might bring it to a close. This indirect reproach made it impossible; it accorded so well with his secret feelings that it almost made him feel ashamed of himself. Still, he tried to answer Schumacker's injurious charge. Strange to say, from their mere difference of character, the two men had mutually changed their position; the judge was in some sort obliged to justify himself to the prisoner.

"But," said the general, "if his duty compelled him, do not doubt that Levin de Knud "

"I do doubt it, noble Governor," exclaimed Schumacker; "do not doubt in your turn that he would have rejected, with all the generous indignation of his soul, the office of spy, or of increasing the agony of a wretched prisoner! No, I know him better than you; he would never have accepted the duties of an executioner. Now, General, I am at your service; do what you consider your duty. What does your Excellency require of me?"

And the old minister fixed his haughty gaze upon the governor, all whose resolution was gone. His first reluctance had returned, and was not to be overcome.

"He is right," thought he; " why should I torture an unfortunate man upon mere suspicion? Let some one else undertake the task!"

The effect of these reflections was prompt; he walked up to the astonished Schumacker and pressed his hand. Then he hurriedly left the room, saying: " Count Schumacker, always preserve the same esteem for Levin de Knud."

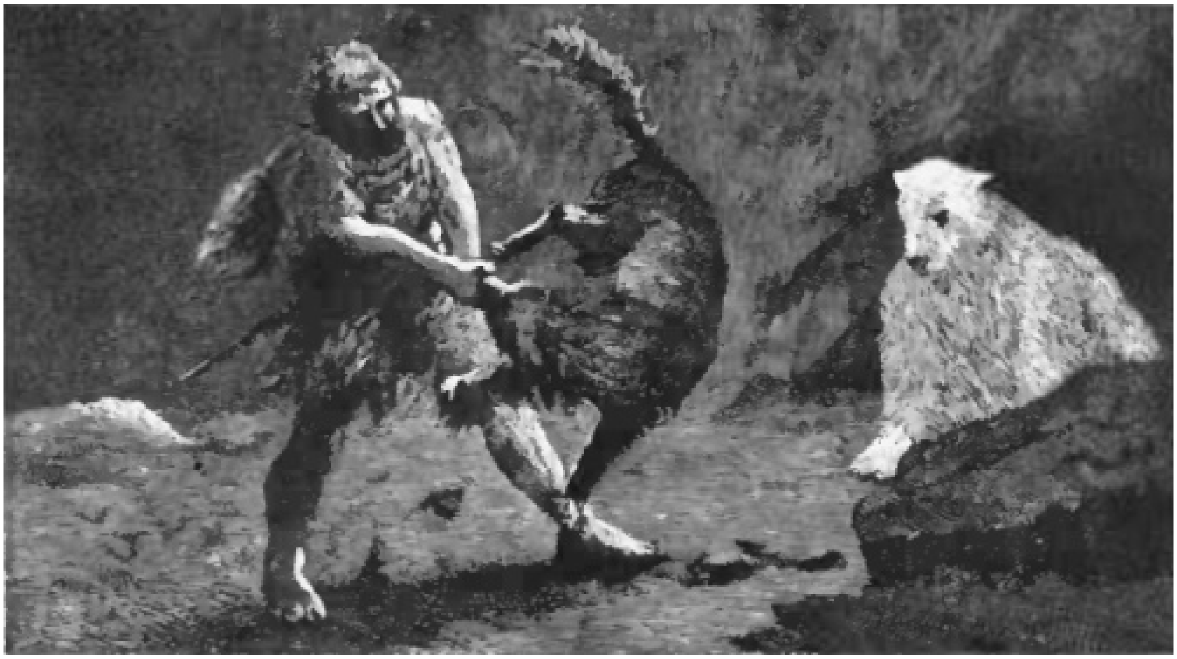

The Wolf of Miösen

CHAPTER XXV THE DEMON AT BAY.

Lion (roaring). Oh-
Demetrius. Well roared, lion!
Shakespeare: Midsummer Night’s Dream.

The traveller of the present day who visits the snowclad mountains which surround Lake Miösen like a white girdle, will scarcely find a vestige of what Norwegians of the seventeenth century knew as Arbar ruin. No one was ever able to decide the architectural period or the purpose for which this ruin, if we may give it the name, was built. As you left the forest which covered the southern shore of the lake, after climbing a slope crowned with here and there a fragment of wall or a bit of masonry once a tower, you reached an arched opening leading into the side of the mountain. This entrance, now completely closed by landslips, led into a species of gallery cut in the living rock, and piercing the mountain from side to side.

This tunnel, dimly lighted by conical air-holes made in the arched roof at regular intervals, ended in an oval hall in part excavated from the rock, and terminating in a cyclopeau stone wall. Around this hall, in deep niches, were rude images carved from granite. Some of these mysterious figures, which had fallen from their pedestals, lay heaped in confusion on the ground with other shapeless rubbish, covered with grass and weeds, among which crawled lizards, spiders, and all the hideous vermin born of damp earth and ruins.

Daylight penetrated to this place only through a door opposite the mouth of the gallery. This door, viewed in a certain light, was seen to be of pointed construction, of no especial date, and evidently the work of the architect’s whim.

This door might as well have been styled a window, although it was on a level with the ground, for it opened upon a fearful precipice; and it was impossible to imagine whither a short flight of stairs which overhung the abyss could possibly lead.

The hall formed the interior of a huge turret which from a distance, seen from the other side of the precipice, looked like any high mountain peak. It stood alone, and, as has already been said, no one knew to what sort of structure it had belonged. Above it, however, upon a plateau inaccessible even to the boldest hunter, was a mass of masonry which might be taken, being so remote, either for a rounded rock or for the remains of a colossal arch. This turret and crumbling arch were known to the peasants as Arbar ruin, the origin of the name being fully as obscure as that of the buildings themselves.

On a stone in the centre of this oval hall sat a little man dressed in the skins of wild beasts, whom we have already had occasion to mention several times in the course of our story.

His back was turned to the light, or rather to the faint twilight which filtered into the gloomy turret when the sun reached high noon. This light, the strongest natural light which ever entered the tower, was not sufficient to reveal the nature of the object over which the little man was stooping. An occasional muffled groan was heard, and it seemed to proceed from this object, judging by the feeble movement which it now and then made. Sometimes the little man straightened himself, and raised to his lips a cup, by its form apparently a human skull, filled with steaming liquid of some indistinguishable hue, and drank deep draughts.

All at once he started up.

“I hear steps in the gallery, I believe; can it be the chancellor of the two kingdoms already?”

These words were followed by a horrible burst of laughter ending in a savage roar, which met with an instant response in a howl from the gallery.

“Oh, ho! “ rejoined the lord of Arbar ruin; “ it is not a man. But it is an enemy all the same; it is a wolf.”

In fact, a huge wolf suddenly emerged from the vaulted gallery, paused a moment, then advanced stealthily toward the man, crouching to the ground and fixing upon him burning eyes which gleamed through the darkness. The man stood with folded arms, and watched him.

“Ah! ‘t is the old gray wolf, the oldest wolf in Miösen woods! Good-morning, wolf; your eyes glitter; you are hungry, and the smell of dead bodies attracts you. You too shall soon attract other hungry wolves. “Welcome, wolf of Miösen; I have always longed to make your acquaintance. You are so old that they say you cannot die; they will not say so tomorrow.”

The animal answered with a frightful yell, sprang back, and then bounded upon the little man.

He did not budge an inch. As quick as a flash, with his right arm he grasped the body of the wolf, which, standing on two legs before him, had thrown his forepaws upon his shoulders; with his left hand he guarded his face from the gaping jaws of his enemy, seizing it by the throat with such force that the creature, compelled to raise his head, could scarcely utter a sound.

“Wolf of Miösen,” said the triumphant man, “you tear my jerkin, but your skin shall replace it.”

As he mingled with these words of victory a few words in a strange jargon, a convulsive movement made by the dying wolf caused him to stumble upon the stones which were thickly strewn over the floor. The two fell together, and the roars of the man were blended with the howls of the beast.

Obliged in his fall to relax his grasp of the wolfs throat, the man felt the sharp teeth buried in his shoulder, when, as they rolled over one another, the two combatants struck against an enormous shaggy white body lying in the darkest corner of the room. It was a bear, who waked from his heavy sleep with a growl.

No sooner were the drowsy eyes of this new-comer opened wide enough to see the fight, than he rushed furiously, not upon the man, but upon the wolf, just then victorious in his turn, seized him violently by the back, and thus freed the human combatant.

This latter, far from showing any gratitude for so great a service, rose, covered with blood, and springing upon the bear, gave him a vigorous kick, such as a master might bestow on a dog guilty of some misdemeanor.

“Friend, who called you? Why do you meddle?”

These words were interspersed with furious ejaculations and gnashing of teeth.

“Begone! “ he added with a roar.

The bear, who had received at one and the same time a kick from the man and a bite from the wolf, uttered a plaintive remonstrance; then, hanging his great head, he released the famished beast, who hurled himself upon the man with fresh fury.

While the struggle was renewed, the rebuffed bear went back to his couch, sat gravely down, and gazed indifferently at the two raging adversaries, preserving the utmost silence, and rubbing first one fore-paw and then the other across the tip of his white nose.

But the small man, as the leader of the Miösen wolves returned to the charge, seized his bloody snout; then, by an unparalleled exertion requiring both strength and skill, he managed to clasp his entire jaw in one hand. The wolf struggled frantically with rage and pain; foam dropped from his compressed lips, and his eyes, distended with rage, seemed starting from their sockets. Of the two foes, the one whose bones were shattered by sharp teeth, whose flesh was rent by cruel claws, was not the man but the wild beast; the one whose howl was most savage, whose expression was most fierce, was not the animal but the man.

Finally, the latter, collecting all his strength, exhausted by the aged wolf's prolonged resistance, squeezed his muzzle in both hands with such force that blood gushed from the creature's nose and mouth; his flaming eyes grew dim, and half closed; he tottered, and fell lifeless at his victor's feet. The feeble twitching of his tail and the convulsive and occasional shudder which shook his entire frame, alone showed that he was not yet quite dead.

All at once a final quiver ran through the expiring frame, and all signs of life ceased.

"There you lie, dead, old wolf," said the little man, kicking him contemptuously. " Did you think that you could live on after you had encountered me? You will hasten no more with muffled step across the snow, following the scent and the track of your prey; you are food for wolves or vultures now yourself; you have devoured many a lost traveller on the shores of Miösen during your long life of murder and carnage; now you yourself are dead, you will eat no more men. 'T is a pity!"

He took up a sharp stone, crouched beside the wolf's warm, palpitating body, broke the limbs at their joints, severed the head from the shoulders, slit the skin from head to heel, stripped it off, as he might remove his own waistcoat, and in the twinkling of an eye nothing was left of the much-dreaded wolf of Miösen but a bare and bleeding carcass. He flung his trophy over his shoulders, bruised with bites, turning inside out the skin, still reeking and stained with long streaks of blood.

"Needs must," he muttered, " dress in the skins of beasts; that of a man is too thin to keep out the cold."

As he thus talked to himself, more hideous than ever beneath his loathsome burden, the bear, tired no doubt of inaction, furtively approached the other object lying in the shadow, to which we referred in the beginning of this chapter, and a crunching of bones, mingled with faint, agonized moans, soon rose from this gloomy quarter of the hall. The small man turned.

“Friend! “ cried he in threatening tones; “ ah, you good-for-nothing Friend! Here, come here!”

And picking up a huge stone, he hurled it at the monster’s head. The creature, stunned by the blow, reluctantly tore himself from his prey, and crawled, licking his bloody chaps, to fall panting at the little man’s feet, lifting his huge head and wriggling, as if to ask pardon for his rash act.

Then ensued between the two monsters for we may well apply that name to the dweller in Arbar ruin an exchange of significant growls. Those of the man expressed anger and authority; those of the bear, entreaty and submission.

“There,” said the man at last, pointing with his crooked finger to the flayed body of the wolf, “ there is your victim; leave mine to me.”

The bear, after smelling at the wolfs carcass, shook his head discontentedly, and turned his eye toward the man who seemed to be his master.

“I understand,” said the latter; “ that is too dead for you, while there is still life in the other. You are refined in your pleasures, Friend, quite as much so as a man; you like to have your food retain its life until the instant when you tear it limb from limb; you love to feel the flesh expire beneath your teeth; you enjoy nothing unless it suffers. We are alike; for I am not a man, Friend; I am superior to that wretched race; I am a wild beast like you. How I wish that you could speak to me, comrade Friend, to tell me whether my joy equals that which thrills your bearish soul when you devour a man’s heart. But no; I should be loath to hear you speak, lest your voice should recall to me the human voice. Yes, growl at my feet with that growl which makes the stray goatherd tremble among the mountains; it pleases me as the voice of a friend, because it proclaims you his enemy. Look up, Friend, look up at me; lick my hands with that tongue which has drunk so often of human blood. Your teeth are white like mine: it is no fault of ours if they be not red as a new-made wound; but blood washes away blood. More than once from the depths of some dark cave I have seen the maidens of Kiölen or Oëlmœ bathe their bare feet in some mountain torrent, singing the while in sweet tones; but I prefer your hairy snout and your hoarse cries to those melodious voices and satin-smooth faces; for they terrify mankind.”

As he said this, he sat down and yielded his hand to the caresses of the monster, who, rolling on his back at his master's feet, lavished all sorts of endearments upon him, like a spaniel displaying his pretty tricks before the sofa of his mistress.

Stranger yet was the intelligent attention with which he seemed to follow his master's words. The singular monosyllables with which the latter interspersed them seemed particularly intelligible to his understanding; and he showed his comprehension by rearing his head suddenly, or by a vague rumbling noise in the back of his throat.

"Men say that I shun them," resumed the little man; " but it is they that shun me; they do through fear what I should do through hate. Still, you know, Friend, that I am always glad to come across a man when I am hungry or thirsty."

All at once he saw a red glow start into life in the depths of the gallery, growing brighter by degrees and faintly tinting the damp old walls.

"Here comes one now. Talk of the Devil and you see his horns. Hullo, Friend!" he added, turning to the bear;" hullo! get up!"

The animal instantly rose.

"Come, I must reward your obedience by gratifying your appetite."

With these words, the man stooped toward the object lying on the ground.

The cracking of bones broken by a hatchet was heard; but no sigh or groan was now blended with it.

"It seems," muttered the small man, " that there are but two of us left alive in Arbar hall. There, good Friend, finish the feast which you began.''

He flung toward the aforementioned outer door what he had detached from the object stretched at his feet. The bear threw himself upon his prey so rapidly that the swiftest eye could not have been sure that the fragment was indeed a human arm, clad in a bit of green stuff of the same shade as the uniform worn by the Munkholm musketeers.

"Some one is coming," said the little man, keeping his eye on the light, which was steadily advancing. " Comrade Friend, leave me alone for a moment. Ho there! Away with you!"

The obedient beast rushed to the door, backed down the steps outside, and disappeared, bearing off his disgusting booty with a satisfied howl.

At the same instant a tall man appeared at the mouth of the tunnel, whose sinuous depths still reflected a dim light. He was wrapped in a long brown cloak, and carried a dark-lantern, which he turned full on the small man's face.

The latter, still seated on his stone with folded arms, exclaimed: " Ill befall you, you who come hither guided by an idea, and not by instinct!"

But the stranger, making no reply, seemed studying him carefully.

"Look at me," he continued, raising his head;" an hour hence you may have no voice left with which to boast that you have seen me."

The new-comer, moving his light up and down the little man's person, seemed even more surprised than frightened.

"Well, what astonishes you so much?" rejoined the little man, with a laugh like the breaking of bones." I have legs and arms like your own; only my limbs will not like yours serve to feed wildcats and crows!"

The stranger at length replied, in a low but confident voice, as if he only feared being heard from without: " Hear me; I come, not as an enemy, but as a friend."

The other interrupted," Then why did you not strip off your human form?"

"It is my purpose to do you a service, if you be he whom I seek."

"You mean, to ask a service. Man, you waste your breath. I can do no service to any save those who are weary of life."

"By your words," replied the stranger," I am sure that you are the man I want; but your stature Hans of Iceland is a giant. You cannot be he."

"You are the first who ever doubted it to my face."

"What! can it be? " And the stranger approached the little man. " But I always heard that Hans of Iceland was of colossal height."

"Add my renown to my height, and you will see that I am taller than Mount Hecla."

"Indeed! Tell me, I pray, are you really Hans, a native of Klipstadur in Iceland?"

"It is not in words that I should answer that question." said the little man, rising; and the look which he cast at the rash stranger made him start back several paces.

"Confine yourself, I beg, to answering it by that glance," he replied in a voice of entreaty, casting a look toward the exit, which showed his regret that he had ever entered; " I came here in your interests alone."

Upon entering the hall, the new-corner, having but a glimpse of the person whom he accosted, had retained his self-possession; but when the master of Arbar rose, with his tigerish visage, his thick-set limbs, his bloody shoulders, but half concealed by a skin still green, his huge hands armed with claws, and his fiery eyes, the bold stranger shuddered, like an ignorant traveller who thinks he is handling an eel and feels the sting of a viper.

“My interests? “ repeated the monster.” Have you come to tell me of some spring which I may poison, some village I may burn, or some Munkholm musketeer I may slaughter?”

“Perhaps. Listen: The miners of Norway are in a state of revolt. You know what disaster follows in the train of revolt.”

“Yes,- murder, rape, sacrilege, fire, and pillage.”

“All these I offer you.”

The little man laughed.

“I should not wait for you to offer them.”

The brutal sneer accompanying these words made the stranger again shudder. He went on, however:

“In the name of the miners, I offer you the command of the insurrection.”

The small man was silent for an instant. All at once his dark countenance assumed an expression of infernal malice.

“Does the offer really come from them?” said he.

This question seemed to embarrass the new-comer; but as he was sure that he was unknown to his terrible interlocutor, he readily recovered himself.

“Why have the miners rebelled?”

“To throw off the burden of the royal protectorate.”

“Only for that?” replied the other in the same mocking tone.

“They also wish to free the prisoner of Munkholm.”

“Is this the sole purpose of the movement?” repeated the small man in a voice which confused the stranger.

“I know of no other,” he stammered.

“Oh, you know of no other!”

These words were pronounced in the same sarcastic tone. The stranger, to hide the embarrassment which they caused him, hastily drew from beneath his cloak a heavy purse which he flung at the monster’s feet.

“Here is your pay as commander-in-chief.”

The small man spurned the purse with his foot.

“I will not have it. Do you imagine that if I wanted your gold or your blood I should wait for your permission to gratify my desire?”

The stranger made a gesture of surprise, almost of terror.

“It is a present from the royal miners.”

“I will not have it, I tell you. Gold is useless to me. Men will sell their soul, but they do not sell their life. That must be taken by force.”

“Then I may tell the miners that the terrible Hans of Iceland accepts their leadership, but not their gold?”

“I do not accept it.”

These words, uttered in curt tones, seemed to strike the pretended envoy from the rebellious miners very unpleasantly.

“What? “ he asked.

“No!” repeated the other.

“You refuse to take part in an expedition which presents so many advantages?”

“I am quite able to pillage farms, lay waste villages, and massacre peasants or soldiers, single-handed.”

“But consider that by accepting the offer of the miners you are assured of a free pardon.”

“Does this offer also come from the miners?” asked the other, with a laugh.

“I will not disguise from you the fact,” replied the stranger, with an air of mystery, “that it comes from an important personage who is deeply interested in the insurrection.”

“And is this important personage so sure that he will himself escape hanging?”

“If you knew who he is, you would not shake your head so significantly.”

“Indeed! Well, who is he?”

“I may not tell you.”

The small man stepped forward and clapped the stranger on the shoulder, still with the same sardonic sneer.

“Shall I tell you?”

The man wrapped in the cloak gave a start; it was a start of both fright and wounded pride. He was prepared for neither the monster’s abrupt proposal, nor for his savage familiarity.

“I am only laughing at you,” added the brigand. “ You little guess that I know all. This important personage is the Lord High Chancellor of Norway and Denmark; and you yourself are the Lord High Chancellor of Norway and Denmark.”

It was indeed he. On reaching Arbar ruin, toward which we left him journeying with Musdœmon, he had been unwilling to intrust to any one else the task of securing the brigand, by whom he was far from supposing himself known and expected. Never, even after years had elapsed, did Count d’Ahlefeld, with all his power and all his diplomacy, discover how Hans of Iceland acquired his information. Was it through Musdœmon’s treachery? True, it was Musdœmon who suggested to the noble count that it would be well to see the brigand in person; but what profit could he derive from his perfidy? Had the bandit captured upon some one of his numerous victims, papers relating to the chancellor’s schemes? But Frederic d’Ahlefeld was, with the sole exception of Musdœmon, the only living being acquainted with his father’s plans, and frivolous as he was, he was not quite so senseless as to expose such a secret. Moreover, he was in garrison at Munkholm, at least so the chancellor supposed. Those who read the close of this scene, without being any better able to solve the problem than was Count d’Ahlefeld, will see how much truth there was in this latter hypothesis.

One of Count d’Ahlefeld’s most marked characteristics was his great presence of mind. When he heard himself so abruptly named, he could not repress an exclamation of surprise; but in the twinkling of an eye, his pale, proud features lost their expression of fear and astonishment, and recovered their usual calm composure.

“Well, yes,” said he, “I will be frank with you; I am indeed the chancellor. But I hope you will be equally frank with me.”

A burst of laughter interrupted him.

“Have I waited to be urged to tell you my name, or to tell you your own?”

“Tell me with the same sincerity how you found me out?”

“Have you never heard that Hans of Iceland can see through mountains?”

The count tried to insist.

“Consider me as a friend.”

"Your hand, Count d'Ahlefeld," said the little man, with brutal familiarity. Then he stared the minister in the face, exclaiming: " Could our two souls escape from our bodies at this moment, I fancy that Satan would hesitate to decide which of the two belonged to the monster."

The haughty noble bit his lip; but between his fear of the robber and his desire to secure him as his tool, he managed to disguise his resentment.

"Do not imperil your own interests; accept the command of the rebellion, and trust to my gratitude."

"Chancellor of Norway, you count on the success of your schemes, like an old woman who dreams of the gown which she will spin from stolen hemp, while the cat's claws tangle her spindle."

"Reflect once more, before you reject my offers."

"Once more, I, the brigand, say to you, Lord Chancellor of both kingdoms, No!"

"I expected a different answer, after the eminent service which you have already rendered me."

"What service? " asked the robber.

"Was it not you who murdered Captain Dispolsen?" replied the chancellor.

"That may be, Count d'Ahlefeld; I do not know him. Who is he?"

"What! did not the iron casket which he had in charge fall to your share?"

This question seemed to sharpen the robber's memory.

"Stay!" said he; "I do remember that man and his iron casket. It was on Urchtal Sands."

"At least," rejoined the chancellor, " if you could restore that casket to me, my gratitude would be unbounded. Tell me what has become of that casket, for I am sure it is in your possession."

The noble minister laid such stress upon this request that the brigand was struck by it.

"So, then, that iron casket is of the utmost importance to your Grace, my Lord Chancellor?"

"Yes."

"What shall my reward be if I tell you where it is?"

"Anything that you may desire, my dear Hans."

"Well, I will not tell you."

"Pooh! you are joking! Think what a service you can do me."

“That is exactly what I am thinking.”

“I will insure you a vast fortune; I will ask your pardon from the king.”

“You had better beg your own from me,” said the bandit. “ Look you, Lord Chancellor of Norway and Denmark, the tiger does not devour the hyena. I will permit you to leave my presence with your life, because you are a scoundrel, and every instant that you live, every thought of your heart, causes fresh misery for mankind and fresh crime for yourself. But return not, or I may teach you that my hatred spares no one, not even a villain. As for your captain, do not flatter yourself that it was on your account I slaughtered him; it was his uniform which doomed him, as it did this other wretch, whom I did not murder to gratify you either, I assure you.”

With these words, he seized the noble count by the arm and dragged him toward the body lying in the shadow. As he finished his protestations, the light from the lantern fell upon this object. It was a mutilated corpse, and was indeed dressed in the uniform of an officer of the Munkholm Musketeers. The chancellor approached it with a sense of horror. All at once his eye rested on the pallid, blood-stained face of the dead. The livid, half-parted lips, the bristling hair, the discolored cheeks, and lustreless eyes could not disguise that countenance from him. He uttered a fearful shriek:” My God! Frederic! My son.’”

Doubt not that hearts seemingly the most hardened still conceal in their innermost recesses some trace of affection unknown even to themselves, apparently hidden by vice and passion, like a mysterious witness and a future avenger. It may be said to exist, that it may some day make crime acquainted with grief. It silently bides its time. The wicked man bears it in his bosom and is unconscious of it, because no ordinary affection is sufficient to pierce the thick crust of selfishness and iniquity which covers it; but let one of the rare and genuine sorrows of life appear unawares, and it plunges a sharp-edged sword into the dark regions of that soul and probes its lowest depths. Then the unknown sentiment of love is revealed to the wretched criminal, all the more violent for its long repression, all the more painful from his lack of sensibility, because the sting of misfortune was forced to stab the heart more deeply in order to reach it. Nature wakes and casts aside her chains; she delivers the miscreant to unwonted despair, to unheard-of torments; he feels, compressed into a single instant, all the sufferings which he has defied for years. The most various pangs rend him simultaneously. His heart, burdened by dull amazement, revolts to find itself a prey to convulsive agony. He seems to experience the pains of hell while still in this life, and something beyond despair is made clear to him.

Count d’Ahlefeld loved his son without knowing it. We say his son, because, being unaware of his wife’s guilt, as such he regarded Frederic, the direct heir to his name. Supposing him still at Munkholm, he was far from prepared to meet him in Arbar tower, and to find him dead! But there he lay, bruised and bleeding; it was he, impossible to doubt it. His emotions may be imagined when a realizing sense of his love for his son unexpectedly pierced his soul, together with the assurance that he was lost to him forever. All the sensations so inadequately described in these pages burst upon his heart at once like so many claps of thunder. Stunned, as it were, by surprise, terror, and despair, he cast himself upon the ground, and wrung his hands, repeating in woful accents:” My son! my son!”

The brigand laughed. It was horrible to hear such laughter mingled with the groans of a father looking upon the dead body of his son.

“By my ancestor Ingulf! you may call, Count d’Ahlefeld, but you cannot wake him.”

All at once his cruel face darkened, and he said in a melancholy voice:” Weep for your son, if you will; I avenge mine.”

The sound of footsteps hurrying along the gallery interrupted the words upon his lips; and as he turned in surprise, four tall men, with drawn swords, rushed into the room; a fifth, short and stout, followed, bearing a torch in one hand and a sword in the other. He was wrapped in a brown cloak, like that worn by the chancellor.

“My lord,” he exclaimed, “ we heard your voice, and hastened to your assistance.”

The reader has doubtless recognized Musdœmon and the four armed retainers who formed the count’s escort.

As the torchlight filled the room with its ruddy glow, the five new-comers paused in horror-stricken dismay; and it was indeed an awful sight. On the one hand, the bloody remains of the wolf, the disfigured body of the young officer; on the other, the father, with his wild eyes and frantic shrieks; and beside him the fearful monster, turning on his assailants a hideous front, indicative of dauntless surprise.

At the sight of this unlooked for reinforcement the idea of vengeance took possession of the count, and roused him from his despair.

“Death to that brigand!” he cried, drawing his sword; “ he has murdered my son! Kill him! kill him.’”

“Has he murdered Mr. Frederic?” said Musdœmon: and the torch in his hand did not reveal the slightest change in his countenance.

“Kill him! kill him!” repeated the frantic count.

And the whole six rushed upon the robber. He, surprised by this sudden attack, retreated toward the opening which overhung the precipice, with a fierce roar, expressive rather of rage than fear.

Six swords were directed against him, and his eyes flamed forth greater fury, while his features wore a more menacing expression than those of any of his aggressors. He had grasped his stone axe, and, forced by the number of his assailants to confine himself to defensive action, whirled it round and round in his hand so rapidly that the circle described, covered him like a shield. A myriad sparks flashed from the point of his assailants’ swords as they clashed against the edge of the hatchet; but not a single blade touched him. And yet, exhausted by his recent battle with the wolf, he lost ground imperceptibly, and soon found himself driven close against the door opening upon the abyss.

“Courage, friends!” shouted the count;” let us hurl the monster over this precipice.”

“Before I fall, the stars themselves shall fall,” replied the brigand.

But the aggressors redoubled their ardor and their assurance as they saw that the small man was compelled to descend one step of the flight which overhung the abyss.

“Good! one effort more! “ cried the lord chancellor; “ he needs must fall; push your advantage! Wretch, you have committed your last crime. Courage, men!”

While with his right hand he continued his fearful evolutions with the axe, the brigand, without deigning a reply, with his left hand grasped a horn which hung at his belt, and raising it to his lips, again and again blew a long, hoarse blast, which was answered suddenly by a roar from the gulf beneath.

A few instants later, as the count and his followers, still pressing the little man hard, rejoiced that they had driven him down a second step, the huge head of a white bear appeared at the broken end of the staircase. Struck dumb with amazement and fright, they shrank back. The bear climbed the stairs with a lumbering gait, showing his bloody jaws and sharp teeth as he did so.

"Thanks, good Friend!" cried the brigand. And taking advantage of his enemy's surprise, he sprang upon the back of his bear, who slowly descended the stairs backwards, still keeping his threatening front turned upon his master's foes.

Soon, recovering from their first astonishment, they beheld the bear, carrying the brigand beyond their reach, descend into the abyss, probably in the same way that he ascended, by clinging to the trunks of trees and to projecting rocks. They tried to roll great bowlders down upon him; but before they could detach a single one of those ancient granite fragments which had slumbered there so long, the brigand and his strange steed had vanished in a cave.

CHAPTER XXVI DEVOURED ALIVE.

No, no, laugh no more. Look you, that which I thought so humorous has its serious side as well, a very serious side, like everything in this world! Believe me, that word, chance, is blasphemy; nothing beneath the sun is the work of chance; and do you not see herein the purpose marked out by Providence?

-Lessing: Emilia Galotti.

Yes, a deep design often lies at the root of what men call chance. There seems to be a mysterious hand which marks the cause and purpose of events. We inveigh against fickle fortune, against the strange accidents of our lot, and lo! chaos is made clear by a fearful flash of lightning or a marvellous beam of light, and human wisdom is humbled by the great lessons of fate.

If, for instance, when Frederic d'Ahlefeld displayed his magnificent attire, his foolish complacency, and his presumptuous pride, in some sumptuous apartment, to the ladies of Copenhagen; if some man, endowed with the gift of second sight, had troubled his frivolous thoughts by gloomy revelations; if he had told him that one day the brilliant uniform of which he boasted should cause his death; that a monster in human shape should drink his blood as greedily as he, careless epicure that he was, drank the wines of France and Bohemia; that the locks upon which he could not lavish too many essences and perfumes should sweep the dust of a cave haunted by wild beasts; that the arm which he so gracefully offered to the fair ladies of Charlottenburg should be flung to a bear like a half-gnawed chicken-bone, how would Frederic have answered these dismal prophecies? With a laugh and a pirouette; and, more frightful still, most sensible men would have applauded his reckless conduct.

Let us consider his destiny more closely. Is it not strange to find that the crime of Count and Countess d'Ahlefeld met with such fitting punishment? They wove an infamous plot against the daughter of a prisoner; this unfortunate girl by a mere chance found a protector, who saw fit to remove their son, charged by them to carry out their abominable scheme. This son, their only hope, was sent far from the scene of his purposed villany; and hardly had he reached his destination, when another avenging chance caused his death. Thus in their attempt to bring dishonor upon an innocent yet detested young girl, they plunged their own guilty yet adored son into the oblivion of the grave. The wretched pair were made miserable by their own hands.

CHAPTER XXVII THE RASH INTRUDER.

Ah, here comes our lovely countess! Forgive me, Madam, if I may not have the honor of a visit from you today. I am busy. Another time, dear Countess, another time; but to-day I will not detain you longer.-

The Prince and Orsina.

The day after his visit to Munkholm, the governor of Throndhjem ordered his travelling carriage to be made ready very early in the morning, hoping to start off before Countess d’Ahlefeld was awake; but we have already observed that her slumbers were light.

The general had just signed his final instructions to the bishop, into whose hands the government was to be committed during his absence. He rose, put on his fur-lined coat, and was about to leave the room, when the usher announced the chancellor’s wife.

This piece of ill luck confused the old soldier, who could laugh at the fiery rain of a hundred guns, but not at the artifices of a woman. However, he took leave of the wicked creature with a tolerably good grace, and disguised his annoyance until she whispered in his ear with that crafty look which would fain seem confidential,

“Well, noble General, what did he say?”

“Who,- Poël? He said that the carriage was ready.”

“I mean the prisoner of Munkholm, General.”

“Oh! “

“Did he answer your questions satisfactorily?”

“Why Yes, to be sure, Countess,” said the much embarrassed governor.

“Did you find proofs that he was concerned in the conspiracy among the miners?”

The general involuntarily exclaimed, “ Noble lady, he is innocent.”

He stopped short, for he knew that he had uttered the conviction of his heart, not of his head.

“He is innocent!” repeated the countess, with a look of consternation and incredulity; for she trembled lest Schumacker had really proved to the governor the innocence which it was so much to the chancellor’s interest to deny.

The governor had had time to reflect; he answered the persistent gentlewoman in a tone which quieted her fears, for it revealed his doubt and anxiety.

“Innocent Yes, if you choose “

“If I choose, General!” And the wicked woman laughed aloud.

Her laughter offended the governor, who said, “ By your leave, Countess, I will report my interview with the ex-chancellor to the viceroy.” Then he bowed low, and went down to the courtyard, where his carriage awaited him.

“Yes,” said Countess d’Ahlefeld, as she returned to her rooms; “ go, my knight-errant, for your absence rids us of the protector of our enemies. Go; for your departure is the signal for my Frederic’s return. I wonder how you dared to send the handsomest young man in Copenhagen to those horrid mountains! Luckily, it will be easy enough now for me to have him recalled.”

At this thought she turned to her favorite attendant.

“Lisbeth, my dear, send to Bergen for two dozen of those little combs which our elegant young men are wearing in their hair, inquire for the famous Scudéry’s last novel, and see that my dear Frederic’s monkey is washed in rose-water every morning, without fail.”

“What! my gracious mistress,” asked Lisbeth, “ is there a chance that Mr. Frederic will come back?”

“Yes, indeed; and we must do everything that he wishes, so that he may be glad to see me again. I must arrange a surprise for him.”

Poor mother!

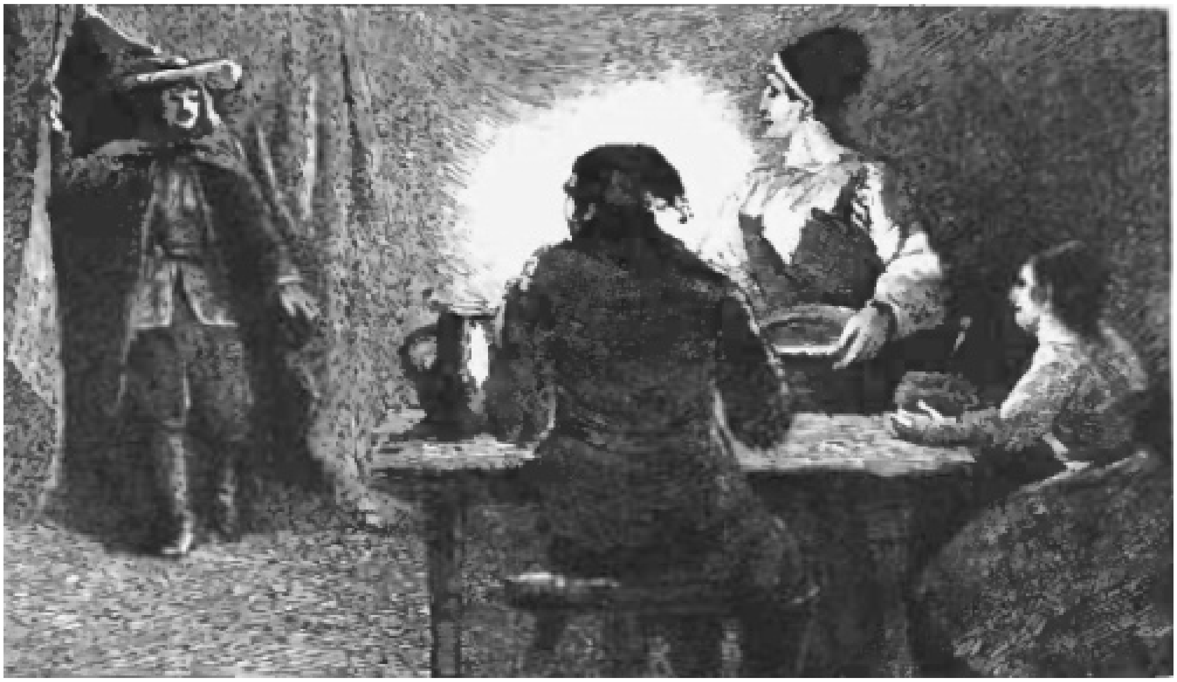

As Ordener crossed the Threshold, the Fisherman and his Wife-arose

CHAPTER XXVIII THE CREDULOUS HUNTER.

Bernard hurries along the shores of the Arlanza. He is like a lion rushing from his den, seeking the hunters, and resolved to conquer them or die. The brave and resolute Spaniard sets forth. With a quick step, in his hand a heavy spear, in which he puts his trust, Bernard traverses the ruins of Arlanza.-

Old Spanish Romance.

On descending from the tower from whose summit he had seen Munkholm light, Ordener looked in every direction, until he was exhausted, for his poor guide, Benignus Spiagudry. He called him repeatedly, but only echo answered. Surprised but not alarmed by this inexplicable disappearance, he attributed it to some panic which had seized upon the timid keeper, and after generously blaming himself for having left him, even for a few moments, he decided to spend the night upon the cliff, in order to give him time to return. Then he ate something, and wrapping himself in his mantle, laid down by the dying embers, kissed Ethel's ringlet, and soon fell asleep; for an anxious heart cannot keep awake a man whose conscience is clear.

At sunrise he rose, but found no trace of Spiagudry except his wallet and cloak, which had been left in the tower, showing that his flight had been very hasty. Then, despairing of his return, at least to Oëlmœ Cliff, Ordener resolved to set off without him, for it was on the next day that he hoped to meet Hans of Iceland at Walderhog.

It has been stated in the earlier chapters of this story that Ordener had accustomed himself to the hardships incident to a roving and adventurous life. Having already travelled through northern Norway several times, he did not need a guide, now that he knew where to find the robber. He accordingly turned his lonely steps toward the northwest, no longer having Benignus Spiagudry at his side to tell him just how much quartz or spar each hill contained, what traditions were connected with every ruin, and whether this or that gaping chasm was caused by an ancient flood or by some volcanic action. He walked a whole day through those mountains which, proceeding at intervals like foot-hills from the principal chain traversing the length of Norway, slope gradually down to the sea; so that the coast of that country is a mere succession of promontories and fjords, while inland it is nothing but a series of mountains and valleys, a strange conformation, which has caused Norway to be compared to the skeleton of a great fish.

It was no easy matter to travel in such a region. Sometimes he was forced to follow the stony bed of a dry stream, sometimes to cross, by an unsteady bridge made of a tree-trunk, over a road which torrents born but the day before had chosen for their bed.

Sometimes, too, Ordener would journey for hours without seeing any sign of the presence of man in these wild places, save an occasional glimpse of the sails of a windmill upon the top of a hill, or the sound of a distant forge, whose smoke blew hither and thither like a black plume, as the wind shifted this way and that.

Now and again he met a peasant mounted on a little gray pony, its head down, and scarcely more untamed than its master; or a dealer in furs and skins, seated in his sledge, drawn by reindeer, a long rope fastened behind, the end covered with knots, meant to frighten away wolves, as it rebounded from the pebbles in the road.

If Ordener asked this trader the way to Walderhog cave, the travelling merchant, familiar only with the names and positions of the places to which his business took him, would answer indifferently: “ Keep to the northwest till you come to Hervalyn village, then cross Dodlysax ravine, and by night you will reach Surb, which is only two miles from Walderhog.”

If Ordener put the same question to the peasant, the latter, deeply imbued with the traditions of the country and the fireside tales, would shake his head again and again, and stop his gray horse, as he said:” Walderhog! Walderhog cave! There the stones sing, the dry bones dance, and the demon of Iceland dwells; it cannot be to Walderhog cave that your worship wishes to go?”

“Yes, indeed,” Ordener would reply. “ Has your worship lost your mother, or has fire destroyed your farm, or has one of your neighbors stolen your fat pig?”

“No, truly,” the young man would answer.

“Then some magician must have cast a spell over your worship’s senses.”

“My friend, I asked you to tell me the way to Walderhog.”

“I am trying to answer your question, sir. Farewell. Keep to the north! I can tell you how to go there, but I do not know how you will get back.”

And the peasant would ride off, crossing himself as he went.

To the gloomy monotony of the road was added the inconvenience of a fine, penetrating rain, which took possession of the sky toward noonday, and increased the difficulties of the way. No song-bird dared venture forth; and Ordener, chilled to the bone beneath his cloak, saw only the goshawk and the falcon hover above his head, or the kingfisher fly up from the reeds of a pond with a fish in its claws, startled by his tread.

It was after dark when the young traveller, after making his way through the forest of aspens and beeches which lies close to Dodlysax ravine, reached the village of Surb, where (as the reader may remember) Spiagudry had asked leave to establish his headquarters. The smell of tar and the charcoal smoke told Ordener that he was approaching a seafaring population. He advanced to the first hut which he could see through the darkness. According to Norwegian custom, the low, narrow entrance was closed by a large, transparent fish-skin, tinged at this moment by the flickering red light of the fire. He knocked on the wooden doorpost, saying,

“It is a traveller!”

“Come in, come in,” answered a voice from within.

At the same instant an eager hand raised the fish-skin, and Ordener was admitted to the cone-shaped home of a Norwegian ‘longshore fisherman. It was a sort of circular tent made of wood and earth, in the centre of which blazed a fire, where the purple glow of turf was mixed with the white light of the pine. Beside this fire the fisherman, his wife, and two children dressed in rags were seated at a table set with wooden plates and earthen cups. On the opposite side of the fire was a pile of nets and oars; a couple of reindeer were asleep on a bed of dried leaves and skins, which by its ample size seemed intended also as a resting-place for the family and any guests whom it might please Heaven to send them. It took more than one glance to make out the arrangement of the hut; for a thick, pungent smoke, which found but scanty outlet through a hole in the pointed roof, wrapped everything in a misty but almost impenetrable veil.

As soon as Ordener crossed the threshold, the fisherman and his wife rose, and returned his greeting in a frank and friendly manner. Norwegian peasants welcome travellers perhaps as much from a lively feeling of curiosity inherent in their nature as from their native inclination to hospitality.

“Sir,” said the fisherman, “ you must be cold and hungry; here are fire to dry your cloak and excellent bark bread to satisfy your appetite. Afterward your worship may be willing to tell us who you are, where you come from, where you are going, and what stories the gossips relate in your native place.”

“Yes, sir,” added his wife;” and you might add to that bark bread which, as my husband says, is excellent a delicious bit of salt fish, seasoned with whale oil. Sit down, stranger.”

“And if your worship does not like Saint Usuph’s fare,” added the man, “ and will have patience for a few moments, I can promise you a splendid piece of venison, or at least a pheasant’s wing. We are expecting a visit from the best hunter in the three provinces. Isn’t that so, good Maase?”

“Maase,’’ the name which the fisherman gave his wife, is a Norwegian word meaning “ sea-gull.” The wife did not seem in the least offended, either because it was really her name, or because she took it as a term of endearment.

“The best hunter! I should say so,” she answered with great emphasis. “ He means my brother, the famous Kennybol. God bless all his undertakings! He has come to spend a few days with us, and you shall drink a mug of good beer with him. He is a traveller like you.”

“Many thanks, my kind hostess,” said Ordener, with a smile;” but I must be content with your tempting salt fish and a bit of this bark bread. I have not time to wait for your brother, the mighty hunter. I must set off again immediately.”

Good Maase, flattered by the stranger’s praises of her fish and her brother, and vexed at his hasty departure, exclaimed: “ You are very kind, sir. But why should you leave us so soon?”

“I must.”

“Must you venture among these mountains at this hour and in such weather? “

“My business is important.”

These answers roused the native curiosity of the young man’s entertainers as much as they excited their surprise.

The fisherman rose, and said:” You are in the house of Christopher Buldus Braal, fisherman, of the village of Surb.”

The woman added: “ Maase Kennybol is his wife and servant.”

When Norwegian peasants wish to ask a stranger's name in polite style, it is their custom to tell him their own.

Ordener answered: " And I am a traveller, who is neither sure of the name he bears nor of the road he travels."

This strange reply did not seem to satisfy fisher Braal.

"By the crown of Gorman the Old," said he, " I did not suppose there was more than one man in Norway just now who was not sure of his name. I mean the noble Baron Thorwick. who is to change his name, thev say to Count Danneskiold, on account of his famous marriage to the chancellor's daughter. At least, dear Maase, that 's the latest news from Throndhjem. I congratulate you, stranger, upon this likeness between you and the son of the viceroy, the great Count Guldenlew."

"As your worship," added the wife, her face beaming with curiosity, " does not seem able to tell us anything about yourself, can you not tell us something about what is going on just now, for instance, something about this wonderful marriage of which my husband speaks?"

"Yes," rejoined her husband, with a self-important air, " that's the very latest news. Within a month the viceroy's son will marry the chancellor's daughter."

"I doubt it," said Ordener.

"You doubt it, sir! I assure you that the thing is certain. I have it on the best authority. The fellow who told me had it from Mr. Poël, the favorite servant of the noble Baron Thorwick, that is, the noble Count Danneskiold. Can any storm have troubled the waters within the week? Has this grand match been broken oft'? "

"I think so," replied the young man, smiling.

"If that is so, sir, I am wrong. Never light the fire to fry the fish before it is in the net. But have they really quarrelled? Who told you so?"

"Nobody," said Ordener. " I merely imagined so."

At this frank confession the fisherman could not help transgressing the laws of Norwegian courtesy by a loud burst of laughter.

"A thousand pardons, sir. But it is easy to see that you are indeed a traveller, and probably a stranger. Do you fancy that things will turn out as you happen to wish, and that the sky will be clear or cloudy at your caprice? "

Here the fisherman, well versed in the affairs of the nation, as all Norse peasants are, began to explain to Ordener why this marriage could not fail to take place: it was essential to the interests of the d'Ahlefeld family; the viceroy could not refuse the king, who desired it; besides, it was said that the future husband and wife were very much in love. In a word, fisher Braal could not doubt that the match would come off; he only wished he was as sure of killing next day that confounded dogfish which infested Master-Bick pond.

Ordener was little inclined to carry on a political discussion with so uncouth a statesman, and was delighted when the arrival of another guest relieved him of all embarrassment.

"It is he; it is my brother!" cried old Maase.

And no less event than the arrival of her brother could have diverted her from the rapt admiration with which she listened to her husband's lengthy discourse.

The latter, while the two children threw themselves noisily upon their uncle's neck, quietly offered him his hand, saying,

"Welcome, brother."

Then, turning to Ordener:" Sir, this is our brother, the famous hunter Kennybol, from the mountains of Kiölen."

"A hearty greeting to you all," said the mountaineer, taking off his bearskin cap. " Brother, I 've had as bad luck in hunting upon your coast as you would probably have had if you had gone fishing in our mountains. I think I could sooner fill my game-bag if I chased elves and goblins in the misty forests of Queen Mab. Sister Maase, you are the first sea-mew whom I have caught sight of to-day. Here, friends, God keep you! but this wretched grouse is all that the best hunter in the province of Throndhjem has got in a whole day's tramp through the heather in this weather."

With these words he drew from his pouch and laid on the table a white ptarmigan, declaring that it was not worth a shot.

"But," he muttered between his teeth, " my faithful arquebuse, you shall soon hunt far bigger game. If you can bring down no more chamois or elk skins, you shall make holes in green jackets and red jerkins."

These words, but half heard, struck the curious Maase.

"Eh!" asked she; " what did you say, brother?"

"I said that there was always a goblin dancing under a woman's tongue."

"You are right, brother Kennybol," cried the fisherman. " Eve's daughters are all curious, like their mother. Weren't you talking of green jackets?"

"Brother Braal," replied the hunter, with some spirit, " I trust my secrets to no one but my musket, because I am sure that then they will never be repeated."

"There's talk in the village," boldly continued the fisherman, " of a revolt among the miners. Do you know anything about it, brother?"

The mountaineer picked up his cap and pulled it over his eyes, with a sidelong look at the stranger; then he bent toward the fisherman and said in a low, stern tone:" Silence!"

The fisherman shook his head several times.

"Brother Kennybol, the fish may be silent, but it falls into the net all the same."

There was a short pause. The two brothers exchanged meaning glances; the children picked the feathers from the ptarmigan as it lay on the table; the good wife listened, and hoped to guess more than was actually said; and Ordener studied them all.

"If you have but meagre fare to-day," suddenly observed the hunter, evidently anxious to change the subject, " it shall not be so to-morrow. Brother Braal, catch the king of fish, if you can, for I promise you plenty of bear's grease to dress it."

"Bear's grease! " cried Maase. " Has any one seen a bear in the neighborhood? Patrick, Regner, my boys, I forbid you to leave the house. A bear!"

"Make yourself easy, sister; you will have nothing to fear from him after tomorrow. Yes, it was really a bear that I saw about two miles away from Surb, a white bear. He seemed to be carrying off a man, or rather an animal. But no, it may have been a goatherd, for goatherds dress in the skins of animals; however, I was not near enough to tell. What amazed me, was that he carried his prey on his back, and not in his teeth."

"Really, brother? "

"Yes; and the creature must have been dead, for it made no attempt to defend itself."

"But," sagely inquired the fisherman, "if it were dead, how did it stay on the bear's back?"

"That 's more than I can say. Never mind; it shall be the bear's last meal. As I entered the village I engaged six strong companions, and to-morrow, sister Maase, I will bring you the handsomest white fur that ever ran over mountain snow."

“Take care, brother,” said the woman; “ you have seen strange things, truly. That bear may be the Devil.”

“Are you mad? “ interrupted the mountaineer, with a laugh;” the Devil change himself into a bear, indeed! Into a cat or a monkey, I grant you; but to a bear! Oh, by Saint Eldon the exorciser, you’re worse than any child or old woman, with your superstition!”

The poor woman hung her head.

“Brother, you were my lord and master before my revered husband cast his eyes upon me; do as your guardian angel bids you.”

“But,” the fisherman asked the mountaineer, “ where did you meet with this bear?”

“Between Lake Miösen and Walderhog.”

“Walderhog!” said the woman, crossing herself.

“Walderhog!” repeated Ordener.

“But, brother,” rejoined the fisherman;” I hope you were not travelling toward Walderhog.” q” I! Heaven forbid; it was the bear.”

“Shall you go there tomorrow in search of him?” broke in the terrified Maase.

“No, truly; how can you suppose, friends, that even a bear would venture to take refuse in a cave where “

He stopped short, and all three made the sign of the cross.

“You are right,” replied the fisherman;” wild beasts would be warned away by their instinct.”

“My good friends,” said Ordener, “ what is there so frightful about this Walderhog cave?”

They looked at one another in stupid surprise, as if they could not understand such a question.

“Is that where King Walder’s tomb is?” added the young man.

“Yes,” replied the woman;” a stone tomb which sings.”

“And that’s not all,” said the fisherman.

“No,” she added;” the bones of the dead dance there by night.”

“And that ‘s not all,” said the mountaineer.

All were silent, as if they dared not go on.

“Well,” asked Ordener, “ what else is there that is supernatural?”

“Young man,” said the mountaineer, gravely,” you should not speak so lightly; when you see an old gray wolf like me, shudder.”

The young man answered, with a gentle smile:” Still, I should like to know all the marvels which occur in this Walderhog cave; for that is exactly where I am going.”

These words seemed to turn his three hearers into stone.

“To Walderhog! Heavens! are you going to Wnlclerhog?”

“And he says that,” rejoined the fisherman, “just as I might say I’m going to Loevig to sell my codfish, or to Ralph’s meadow for herring. To Walderhog! Great Heavens!”

“Poor young man!” cried the wife;” were you born without a guardian angel? Have you no patron saint? Alas! it must be so; for you do not even seem to know your own name.”

“And what motive,” broke in the mountaineer, “can lead your worship to that fearful spot?”

“I have a question to ask,” answered Ordener.

The astonishment of his hosts grew with their curiosity.

“See here, stranger; you do not seem to be familiar with this part of the country. Your worship is doubtless mistaken; it cannot be to Walderhog that you wish to go.”

“Besides,” added the mountaineer,” if you want to speak with any human being, you will find none there.”

“None but the demon,” rejoined the woman.

“The demon! What demon?”

“Yes,” she added; “the one for whom the tomb sings and the dead dance.”

“Then you do not know, sir,” said the fisherman, dropping his voice and approaching Ordener, “you do not know that Walderhog cave is the favorite abode of “

The woman stopped him.

“Husband, do not speak that name; it brings ill luck.”

“Whose abode?” asked Ordener.

“That of Beelzebub incarnate,” said Kennybol.

“Really, my kind hosts, I know not what you mean.

I was surely told that Walderhog was the haunt of Hans of Iceland.”

A triple cry of terror arose.

“Well! Then you do know! He is the demon we mean!”

The woman drew her woollen kerchief over her face, and called on all the saints to witness that it was not she who uttered that name.

When the fisherman had somewhat recovered from his surprise, he looked steadily at Ordener, as if there were something about that young man which he could not comprehend.

“I did not expect, stranger, that even if I lived still longer than my father, who died at the age of one hundred and twenty, I should ever have to show the road to Walderhog to any human being possessed of his senses and believing in God.”

“Surely not,” cried Maase;” your worship will not go to that accursed cave; for if one only step foot inside, he must make a compact with the Devil;”

“I must go, my kind hosts, and the greatest service that you can do me is to show me the shortest road there.”

“The shortest way to reach the place where you wish to go,” said the fisherman, “ is to throw yourself from the top of the nearest rock into the next torrent.”

“Should I reach the same end,” quietly asked Ordener, “by preferring a useless death to a profitable danger?”

Braal shook his head, while his brother looked scrutinizingly at the young adventurer.

“I understand,” suddenly exclaimed the fisherman; ‘‘ you want to earn the thousand crowns reward which the lord mayor offers for the head of this Iceland demon.”

Ordener smiled.

“Young sir,” added the fisherman, with deep emotion, “take my advice; give up your scheme. I am old and poor, and I would not sell the remnant of my life for a thousand crowns if I had but one day left.”

The woman, with a beseeching, compassionate look, watched the effect of her husband’s entreaties. Ordener made haste to reply:” It is a much higher motive which leads me to seek this robber whom you call a demon; it is for the sake of others, not my own-”

The mountaineer, who had not taken his eyes from Ordener, interrupted him.

“I understand you now. I know why you seek the demon of Iceland.”

“I wish to force him to fight,” said the young man.

“That’s it,” said Kennybol;” you are intrusted with important interests, are you not?”

“So I just said.”

The mountaineer approached the young man with an air of great intelligence, and to his utter amazement whispered in his ear;” You come from Count Schumacker, from Griffenfeld, do you not?”

“Good man, he exclaimed,” how did you know that?”

And, indeed, it was hard for him to guess how a Norwegian mountaineer came to know a secret which he had confided to no one, not even to General Levin,

Kennybol leaned toward him.

“I wish you success,” he observed in the same mysterious whisper.” You are a noble young man to labor thus for the oppressed.”

Ordener’s surprise was so great that he could scarcely find words to inquire how the mountaineer had learned the purpose of his journey.

“Silence!” said Kennybol, putting his finger to his lip. “ I hope that you may gain all that you desire from the dweller in Walderhog; my arm, like yours, is loyal to the prisoner of Munkholm.”

Then, raising his voice, before Ordener could answer, he added:” Brother, dear sister Maase, regard this worthy youth as another brother. Come, I think supper is ready.”

“What!” interrupted Maase,” have you persuaded his worship to give up his plan for visiting the demon?”

“Sister, pray that no harm may come to him. He is a noble and worthy young man. Come, brave sir, take some food and a little rest beneath our roof; tomorrow I will show you your road, and we will set out in search, you of the Devil, and I of my bear.”

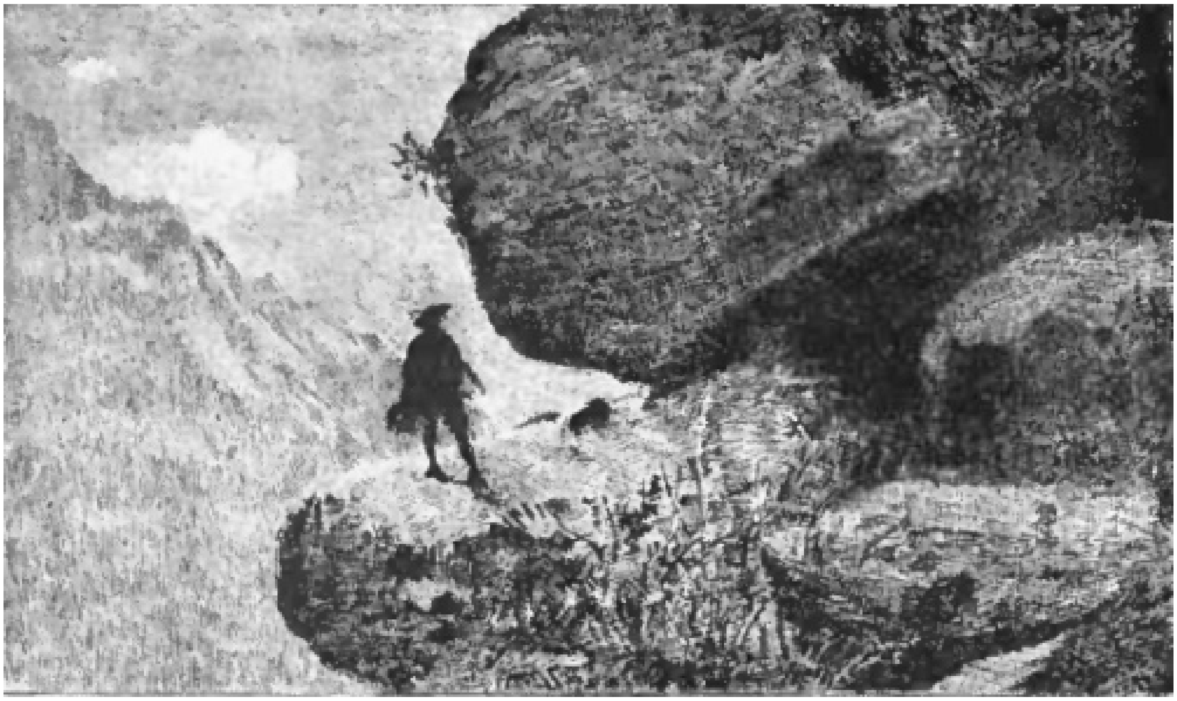

A Figure disappeared beneath the Roof of the Cavern . . .

CHAPTER XXIX THE ASTROLOGER’S PAPERS.

Comrade, ah! comrade, what comrade’s son art thou? From what race canst thou have sprung to dare attack Fafnir thus?-
Edda

The first rays of the rising sun were just reddening the highest peak of the rocks upon the seacoast, when the fisherman, who had come before the dawn to cast his nets off the shore opposite the mouth of Walderhog cave, saw a figure wrapped in a cloak or shroud descend from the rocks, and disappear beneath the much-dreaded arched roof of the cavern. Struck with terror, he commended his boat and his soul to Saint Usuph, and ran to tell his frightened family that he had seen one of the ghosts which dwell in the palace of Hans of Iceland return to the cave at daybreak.

This ghost, thenceforth the theme and dread of many a long winter evening, was no other than Ordener, the noble son of the Norwegian viceroy, who, while both kingdoms fancied him absorbed in paying tender attentions to his haughty betrothed, had come alone and unknown to risk his life for her to whom he had given his heart and his future, for the daughter of a proscribed man.

Evil omens, sad forebodings, had thus far accompanied him. He had left the fisherman and his family, and as they parted, good Maase knelt and prayed for him. Kennybol and his six comrades, who had pointed out the right road, quitted him within half a mile of Walderhog, and those dauntless hunters who sallied forth to face a bear with a laugh on their lips, gazed in terror upon the fearless traveller as he followed that unhallowed path.

The young man entered Walderhog cave as he might have entered a long-wished-for haven. He felt a transport of delight as he thought that he was about to accomplish the object of his life, and that in a few moments he might perhaps shed his last drop of blood for his Ethel. About to attack a brigand dreaded by an entire province, it might be a monster, a very demon, it was not that frightful image which filled his fancy; he saw only the figure of the sweet captive maid, praying perhaps for him before her prison altar. Had the object of his devotion been any other than it was, he might have weighed for an instant, only to scorn them, the dangers in search of which he had journeyed so far; but what room is there for reflection in a youthful heart throbbing with the double stimulus of heroic sacrifice and noble love?

He advanced proudly into the vaulted cavern, which echoed and re-echoed the sound of his footsteps, not deigning even a glance at the stalactites and the century-old columns of basalt which towered above him amid mosses, lichen, and ivy, a confused medley of weird forms, from which the superstitious credulity of the Norwegian country folk had more than once created hosts of evil spirits or long processions of ghosts.

With the same indifference he passed the tomb of King “Walder, to which so many mournful legends cling, and he heard no voice save the long-drawn sigh of the north wind through those gloomy galleries.

He traversed winding passages, dimly lighted by crevices half stopped with grass and heather. Ever and anon he stumbled over strange objects, which rolled from beneath his foot with a hollow sound, and assumed in the darkness the shape of broken skulls or long rows of white teeth with fleshless gums.

But his soul was undismayed. He was only surprised that he had not yet encountered the much-dreaded inhabitant of this horrible cave.

He reached a sort of circular hall, hewn from the rock. Here the subterranean road which he had thus far followed came to an end, and the rocky walls were without exit, save for a few wide fissures, through which he saw the mountains and woods outside.

Amazed that he should have thus traversed the fatal cavern in vain, he began to despair of finding the brigand. A singular monument in the middle of the underground hall caught his attention. Three long, massive bowlders, standing upright, supported a fourth, broad and square, as three pillars might uphold a roof. Beneath this gigantic tripod was an altar, also formed of a single block of granite, with a round hole in the middle of its upper surface. Ordener recognized it as one of those colossal Druidic structures which he had often seen in travelling through Norway, the most amazing instances being found in France, at Lokmariaker and Carnac, wondrous fabrics which have grown old, resting upon the earth like tents pitched for a day, and made solid by their mere weight.

The young man, lost in thought, leaned mechanically against this altar, whose stone lips were stained dark brown, so deep had they drunk of the blood of human victims.

All at once he started. A voice, apparently proceeding from the stone, fell upon his ear " Young man, you come to this place with feet which touch the tomb."

He rose quickly, and his hand sought his sword, while an echo, clear but faint as the voice of a dying man, repeated: " Young man, you come to this place with feet which touch the tomb." At this instant a hideous face appeared on the other side of the Druid altar, a face crowned with red hair, and disfigured by a brutal sneer.

"Young man," it again repeated. " you come to this place with feet which touch the tomb."

"And with a hand which touches a sword," calmly responded Ordener.

The monster emerged from beneath the altar, revealing his thick-set, muscular limbs, his wild, blood-stained dress, his hooked hands, and his heavy stone axe.

"It is I," he cried, with a growl like that of a wild beast.

"And I," answered Ordener.

"I expected you."

"I did more," replied the bold young man; " I sought you out."

The brigand folded his arms.

"Do you know who I am? "

"Yes."

"And you are not frightened? "

"Not now-"

"Then you were afraid to come here?" And the monster tossed his head with a look of triumph.

"Afraid I might not find you."

"You bid me defiance, and your feet have trampled on dead bodies!"

"Tomorrow they may tread upon your own."

The little man quivered with rage. Ordener stood motionless, in an attitude of haughty calm.

"Take care ' " muttered the brigand; " I will burst upon you and rend you as Norwegian hailstones do a lady's parasol."

"Such a shield would be all-sufficient for me."

Something in Ordener's eye seemed to daunt the monster. He plucked the hairs from his mantle, as a tiger might devour grass before it springs upon its prey.

"You teach me what pity means," he said.

“And you teach me what it is to scorn.”

“Child, your voice is soft, your face is fair, like the voice and the face of a girl; what death will you choose?”

“Your own.”

The small man laughed.

“Know you not that I am a demon, that my spirit is the spirit of Ingulf the Destroyer?”

“I know that you are a robber, that you commit murder for the love of gold.”

“You are wrong,” broke in the monster;” it is for love of blood.”

“Were you not paid by the d’Ahlefelds to slay Captain Dispolsen?”

“What are you talking about? What names are these?”

“Do you not know Captain Dispolsen, whom you killed on Urchtal Sands?”

“That may be, but I have forgotten him, as I shall forget you three days hence.”

“Do you not know Count d’Ahlefeld, who paid you to steal an iron casket from the captain?”

“D’Ahlefeld! Stay; yes, I know him. I drank his son’s blood only yesterday, from my son’s skull.”

Ordener shuddered with horror.

“Were you not content with your wages?”

“What wages?” asked the brigand.

“Hark ye; the sight of you offends me; I must have done. You stole, a week since, an iron casket from one of your victims, a Munkholm officer, did you not?”

At the word “ Munkholm “ the brigand started.

“An officer from Munkholm?” he muttered. Then he asked, with a look of surprise, “Are you too an officer from Munkholm? “

“No,” said Ordener.

“So much the worse!” and his face clouded.

“Enough of this,” rejoined the persistent Ordener; “ where is the casket that you stole from the captain?”

The little man meditated for a moment.

“By Ingulf! here’s a paltry iron box that occupies many minds. I will promise you there’ll not be so much search for that which holds your bones, if ever they be collected in a coffin.”

These words, as they showed Ordener that the robber knew the casket to which he referred, revived his hope of obtaining it.

“Tell me what you did with that casket. Is it in Count d’Ahlefeld’s possession?”

“No.”

“You lie, for you laugh.”

“Believe what you will. What matters it to me?”

The monster had assumed a mocking air which awakened Ordener’s suspicions. He saw that there was nothing to be done but to rouse him to fury if possible, or to intimidate him.

“Hear me,” said he, raising his voice;” you must give me that casket.”

The other answered with a savage sneer.

“You must give it to me!” the young man repeated in tones of thunder.

“Are you accustomed to issuing orders to buffaloes and bears?” replied the monster, still sneering.

“I would give this command to the very Devil in hell.”

“You may do so ere long, if you like.”

Ordener drew his sword, which gleamed in the darkness like a flash of lightning.

“Obey me!”

“Nay,” cried Hans, brandishing his axe;” I might have broken your bones and sucked your blood when you first appeared, but I restrained my wrath; I was curious to see the sparrow attack the vulture.”

“Wretch,” exclaimed Ordener,” defend yourself!”

“‘T is the first time I was ever told to do so,” muttered the brigand, gnashing his teeth.

With these words, he sprang upon the granite altar and gathered himself together, like a leopard awaiting the hunter on a high cliff, ready to spring upon him unawares.

From this vantage-ground he glared at the young man, apparently seeking the best side from which to attack him. All would have been over with Ordener had he hesitated an instant. But he gave the brigand no time to consider, and threw himself violently upon him, aiming the point of his sword at his face.

Then began the most fearful fight which imagination can picture. The little man, standing upon the altar, like a statue on its pedestal, looked like one of those horrid idols which, in barbarous ages, received in that same spot impious sacrifices and sacrilegious offerings.

His movements were so rapid that upon whatever side Ordener attacked him, he always met the monster face to face, and encountered his blade. He would have been hewn in pieces at the first onslaught, had he not had the lucky forethought to wrap his mantle loosely around his left arm, so that the greater part of his furious opponent's blows were foiled by this floating shield. Thus for some moments both made useless though tremendous efforts to wound each other. The small man's fiery gray eyes seemed starting from their sockets. Surprised to meet with such vigorous and bold resistance from a foe apparently so feeble, his savage sneers changed to silent rage. The brutal immobility of the monster's features, and Ordener's dauntless composure contrasted strangely with the swiftness of their motions and the vigor of their attack. Not a sound was heard but the clash of weapons, the young man's quick steps, and the hurried breathing of both adversaries, when the little man uttered a fearful roar. The blade of his axe had caught in the folds of the cloak. He braced himself; he shook his arm frantically, but only succeeded in entangling the handle with the blade in the clinging stuff, which, with every fresh effort, wound itself closer and closer about it.

The dreadful brigand felt the young man's steel upon his breast.

"Once more I ask you," said the triumphant Ordener, " will you give me that iron casket which you stole like a coward?"

The small man was silent for an instant; then he said, with a roar:" Curse you, no!"

Ordener rejoined, still retaining his victorious and threatening attitude:" Consider!"

"No; I tell you no!" repeated the brigand.

The noble youth lowered his sword.

"Well," said he, "release your axe from the folds of my mantle, and let us fight it out."

"With a disdainful laugh, the monster answered:

"Child, you play the generous man, as if I wanted your indulgence!"

Before the astonished Ordener could turn his head, the brigand had placed his foot on the shoulder of his loyal victor, and at one bound stood twelve paces away from him. With another leap he sprang at Ordener, and hung his entire weight upon him, as the panther hangs with teeth and claws to the flanks of the royal lion. His nails dug deep into the young man’s shoulders, his bony knees were pressed into his flesh, while his fierce face showed Ordener a bloody mouth and cruel teeth ready to tear him limb from limb. He ceased to speak; no human words issued from his heaving chest; a low roar mingled with hoarse, passionate yells alone expressed his rage. He was more hideous than a wild beast, more monstrous than a demon; he was a man deprived of all semblance of humanity.

Ordener tottered beneath the small man’s onslaught, and would have fallen at the unexpected shock, had not one of the heavy pillars of the Druid monument happened to be just behind to sustain him. He stood therefore half overthrown and gasping beneath the weight of his fearful foe. To gain any idea of the horrible spectacle offered at this moment, it must be remembered that all which we have described occurred in far less time than is required to write it.

As we said, the noble youth tottered, but he did not quake. He hastily addressed a farewell thought to Ethel. The thought of his love was like a prayer; it restored his strength. He threw his arms about the monster; then seizing his sword by the middle of the hlade, he pressed the point straight down upon his spine. The wounded brigand uttered a fearful scream, and with a sudden leap, which shook off Ordener, freed himself from his bold adversary’s arms, and fell back some paces, taking in his teeth a fragment of the green cloak, which he had bitten in his fury.

He leaped up, supple and agile as a young deer, and the battle began again, for the third time, more terrible than ever. By chance there was, close by, a pile of huge stones over which moss and weeds had grown for centuries undisturbed. Two ordinary men could scarcely have lifted the smallest of these rocks. Hans seized one in both arms and raised it above his head, poising it toward Ordener. His expression was frightful. The stone, Hung with great violence, moved heavily through the air; the young man had just time to spring aside. The granite bowlder broke to fragments against the subterranean wall with a tremendous noise, which was echoed back for many moments from the depths of the cavern.

Ordener, stunned and amazed, had barely time to recover before a second mass of stone was poised in the brigand’s grasp. Vexed that he should seem to stand like a coward to be pelted, he rushed toward the small man, with uplifted sword, to change this mode of warfare; but the fearful missile, launched like a thunderbolt, as it moved through the dense, dark air of the cave encountered the bare and slender blade; the steel was dashed to pieces like a bit of glass, and the monster’s fierce laugh rang out. Ordener was disarmed.

“Have you,” cried the monster, “ aught to say to God or the Devil ere you die?”

And his eye darted flame, and all his muscles swelled with rage and joy, and he flung himself with a thrill of impatience upon his axe, which, wrapped in the cloak, lay upon the ground. Poor Ethel!

All at once a distant roar was heard outside. The monster paused. The noise increased; shouts of men were mingled with the plaintive moan of a bear. The brigand listened. The cries of pain continued. He hastily seized his axe, and sprang, not toward Ordener, but toward one of the crevices in the rock. Ordener, overwhelmed with surprise to find himself thus unnoticed, hurried in his turn to one of these natural doors, and saw in a neighboring glade a large white bear at bay, surrounded by seven hunters, among whom he thought he recognized Kennybol, whose words had made such an impression upon him the night before.

He turned back. The brigand had left the cave, and a fearful voice outside shouted:” Friend! Friend! I am here! I am here!”

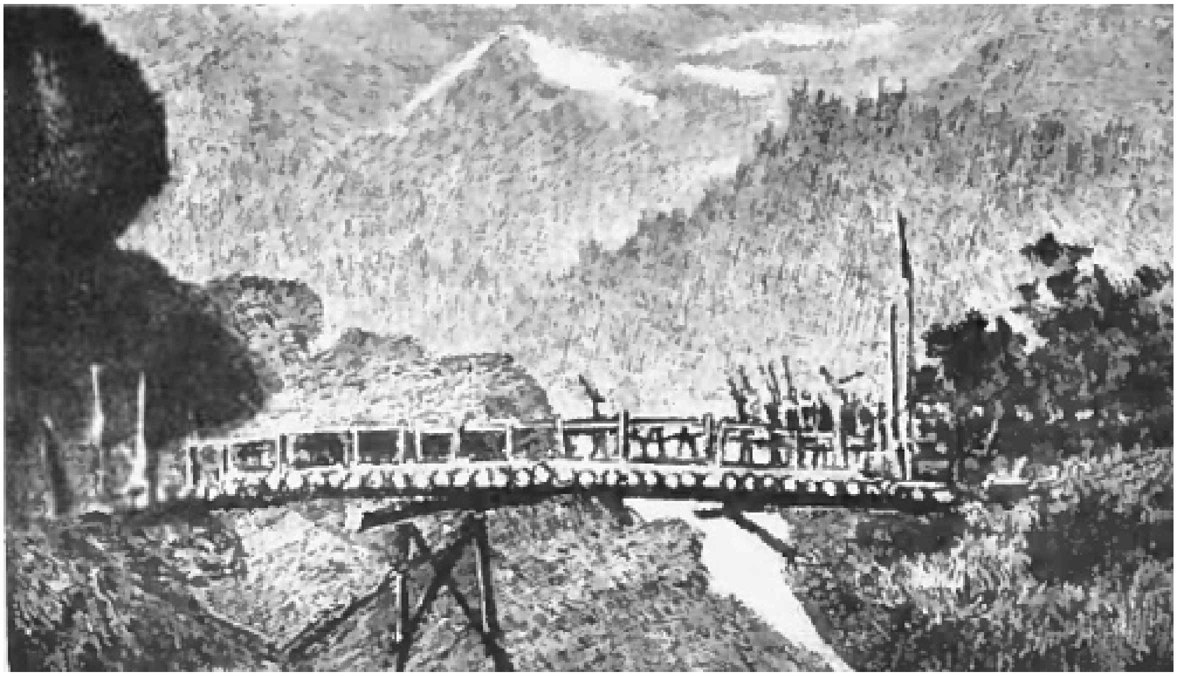

The Regiment of Musketeers on the March

CHAPTER XXX THE CAUSE OF FREEDOM.

Peter, good fellow, has lost his all at dice.
Régnier.

The regiment of musketeers from Munkholm was on the march through the narrow passes lying between Throndhjem and Skongen. Sometimes it moved along the brink of a torrent, and the long line of bayonets crept through the ravine like a huge serpent with glittering scales; sometimes it wound around a mountain, making it look like one of those triumphal columns about which curves an army of heroes in bronze.

The soldiers marched with trailing weapons and cloaks dragging in the dust, looking surly and tired, for these noble fellows are averse to anything but battle or inaction. The coarse banter and threadbare jests which delighted them but yesterday had lost their savor. The air was chill, the sky clouded. Nothing would raise a laugh in the ranks, unless one of the sutler-women should get an awkward tumble from her little Barbary horse, or a tin saucepan should happen to roll over the precipice and rebound from rock to rock.

To while away the monotony of the journey, Lieutenant Randmer, a young Danish baron, accosted old Captain Lory, who had risen from the ranks. The captain, moody and silent, moved with a heavy but confident step; the lieutenant, light and agile, played with a twig which he had plucked from the bushes that lined the road.

“Well, Captain, what ails you? You seem depressed.”

“And I should say I had good cause,” replied the old officer, without raising his eyes.

“Come, come, no regrets! Look at me. Am I depressed? And yet I would wager that I have quite as much cause as you.”

“I doubt it, Baron Randmer; I have lost all I possessed; I have lost everything I loved.”

“Captain Lory, our misfortunes are precisely the same. It is not a fortnight since Lieutenant Alberick won my castle and estate at a single deal of the cards. I am ruined; but am I the less gay?”

The captain answered in a very melancholy tone: “ Lieutenant, you have only lost your castle; but I have lest my dog.”

At this answer the light-minded baron seemed uncertain whether to laugh or sympathize; but he said: “ Be comforted, Captain. Only think, I, who have lost my castle “

The captain broke in upon his words:

“What of that? Besides, you may win back another castle.”

“Aud you may find another dog “

The old man shook his head.

“I may find another dog, but I shall never find my poor Drake.”

He paused; great tears gathered in his eyes and rolled one by one down his hard, stern face.

“He was all I ever had to love,” he added;” I never knew my parents. God grant them peace, and my poor Drake too! Lieutenant Randmer, he saved my life in the Pomeranian war. I called him Drake in honor of the famous admiral. My good dog! He never changed, as did my fortunes. After the battle of Oholfen, the great General Schack patted him, and said: ‘You ‘ve a fine dog there, Sergeant Lory! ‘ for I was only a sergeant then.”

“All!” interrupted the young baron, slashing his switch, “ how queer it must seem to be a sergeant.”

The old soldier of fortune did not hear him; he appeared to be talking to himself, and Randmer could only catch a word here and there.

“Poor Drake! After surviving so many breaches and trenches, to be drowned like a blind kitten in that confounded Throndhjem fjord! My poor dog! my trusty friend! You deserved to die on the field of battle, as I hope to do.”

“Come, come, Captain!” cried the lieutenant, “ how can you be so despondent? We may get a chance to fight to-morrow.”

“Yes,” contemptuously answered the old captain, “ with a pretty enemy!”

“What! do you despise those rascally miners, those devilish mountaineers?”

“Stone-cutters, highwaymen, fellows who don’t know the first rudiments of warfare! A fine set of blackguards to face a man like me, who has served in all the wars in Pomerania and Holstein, in the campaigns of Scania and Dalecarlia; who fought under the glorious General Schack and the brave Count Guldeulew!”

“But don’t you know,” interrupted Randmer, “ that these fellows are led by a formidable chief, a giant as big and as brutal as Goliath, a rascal who drinks nothing but human blood, a very Satan incarnate?”

"And who may he be? " asked the captain.

"Why, the famous Hans of Iceland!"

"Pooh! I'll wager that this great general does not know how to shoulder a musket or handle a carbine properly."

Randmer laughed.

"Yes, you may laugh," continued the captain. " It will be very funny, no doubt, to cross swords with scurvy pickaxes, and pikes with pitchforks! Here are worthy foes indeed! My brave Drake would have scorned to snap at their heels!"

The captain was still giving free vent to his indignation, when he was interrupted by the arrival of an officer, who ran up to them all out of breath,

"Captain Lory! my dear Randmer!"

"Well? " asked both at once.

"My friends, I am faint with horror! D'Ahlefeld, Lieutenant d'Ahlefeld, the lord chancellor's son! You know, my dear Randmer, that Frederic such a dandy! such a fop!"

"Yes," replied the young baron, " a great dandy! Still, at the last ball at Charlottenburg my costume was in much better taste than his. But what has happened to him?"

"I know whom you mean," said Lory; "you mean Frederic d'Ahlefeld, lieutenant of Company Three. The men wear blue facings. He neglects his duty sadly."

"You will not have to complain of him again, Captain Lory."

"Why not?" said Randmer.

"He is garrisoned at Wahlstrom," coldly added the old officer.

"Exactly," said the new-comer; " the colonel has just received a message. Poor Frederic!"

"But what lias happened? Captain Bollar, you alarm me."

Old Lory added: " Nonsense! The popinjay was absent from roll-call, I suppose, and the captain has sent the lord chancellor's son to prison: that is the misfortune which distresses you so sadly; I am sure it is."

Bollar clapped him on the shoulder.

"Captain Lory, Lieutenant d'Ahlefeld has been devoured alive."

The two captains looked each other in the face; and Randmer, startled for an instant, suddenly burst out laughing.

"Oh, Captain Bollar, I see you are as fond of a joke as ever! But you can't fool me in that way, I warn you."

And the lieutenant, folding his arms, gave way to mirth, swearing that what amused him the most was to see how readily Lory swallowed all Bollar’s ridiculous stories. As for the story, he said it was a capital one; and it was a most clever idea to pretend that Frederic, who took such dainty, such absurd care of his complexion, had been swallowed raw.

“Randmer,” said Bollar, seriously, “ you act like a fool. I tell you d’Ahlefeld is dead; I have it from the colonel, -dead!”

“Oh, how well you play your part!” rejoined the baron, still laughing;” what a funny fellow you are!”

Bollar shrugged his shoulders, and turned to old Lory, who quietly asked the particulars.

“Oh, yes, my dear Captain Bollar,” added the irrepressible mocker;” tell us who ate the poor devil. Did he serve as breakfast for a wolf, or supper for a bear?”

“The colonel,” said Bollar, “ received a despatch just now, informing him, in the first place, that the “Wahlstrom garrison is retreating toward us, driven back by a large party of rebels.”

Old Lory frowned.

“In the second place,” resumed Bollar, “that Lieutenant Frederic d’Ahlefeld, having gone into the mountains three days since to hunt, was captured near Arbar ruins by a monster, who carried him to his lair and there devoured him.”

At this, Lieutenant Randmer’s merriment increased.

“Oh, how our good Lory swallows your stories! That’s right; keep up a sober face, Bollar. You are wonderfully amusing; but you don’t tell us what this monster, this ogre, this vampire was, that carried off and ate up the lieutenant like a week-old kid!”

“I will not tell you,” impatiently answered Bollar; “but I will tell Lory, who is not such an incredulous fool. Lory, my dear fellow, the monster who drank Frederic’s blood was Hans of Iceland.”

“The leader of the rebels!” exclaimed the old officer.

“Well, Lory,” rejoined the scoffer,” do you think a man who handles his jaw so ably needs to know how to shoulder a musket “

“Baron Randmer,” said Bollar, “you are very like d’Ahlefeld in character; beware lest you meet with the same fate.”

“I declare,” cried Randmer, “ that Captain Bollar’s immovable gravity amuses me beyond expression.”

“And Lieutenant Randmer’s inexhaustible laughter alarms me more than I can say.”

At this moment a group of officers, engaged in eager conversation, approached our three speakers.

“Zounds!” cried Randmer, “ I must amuse them with Bollar’s story.”

“Comrades,” he added, advancing to meet them;” have you heard the news? Poor Frederic d’Ahlefeld has been eaten alive by the barbarous Hans of Iceland.”

As he said these words, he could not repress a burst of laughter, which, to his great surprise, was received by the new-comers almost with shouts of indignation.

“What! can you laugh? I did not think, Randmer, that you would repeat such a dreadful piece of news so lightly. How can you laugh at such a misfortune?”

“What!” said Raudmer, much confused;” is it really true?”

“Why, you just told us of it yourself!” was the general cry. “ Don’t you believe your own words?”

“But I thought it was one of Bollar’s jokes.”

An old officer interposed.

“Such a joke would be in very bad taste; but unfortunately it is no joke. Baron Vœthaün, our colonel, has just received the sad news.”

“A fearful affair! It is really awful “ repeated a dozen voices.

“So we are to fight wolves and bears with human faces,” said one.

“We are to be shot down,” said another, “ without knowing whence the bullet comes; we are to be picked off one by one, like birds in a cage.”

“D’Ahlefeld’s death,” said Bollar, in a solemn tone, “ makes me shudder. Our regiment is unlucky. Dispolsen’s murder, that of those poor soldiers found dead at Cascadthymore, d’Ahlefeld’s awful fate, here are three tragic events in a very short space of time.”

Young Baron Randmer, who had been silent, looked up.

“It is incredible,” said he;” Frederic, who danced so well!”

And after this weighty remark he relapsed into silence, while Captain Lory declared that he was greatly distressed at the young lieutenant’s death, and drew the attention of private Toric-Belfast to the fact that the brass clasp of his shoulder-belt was not so bright as usual.

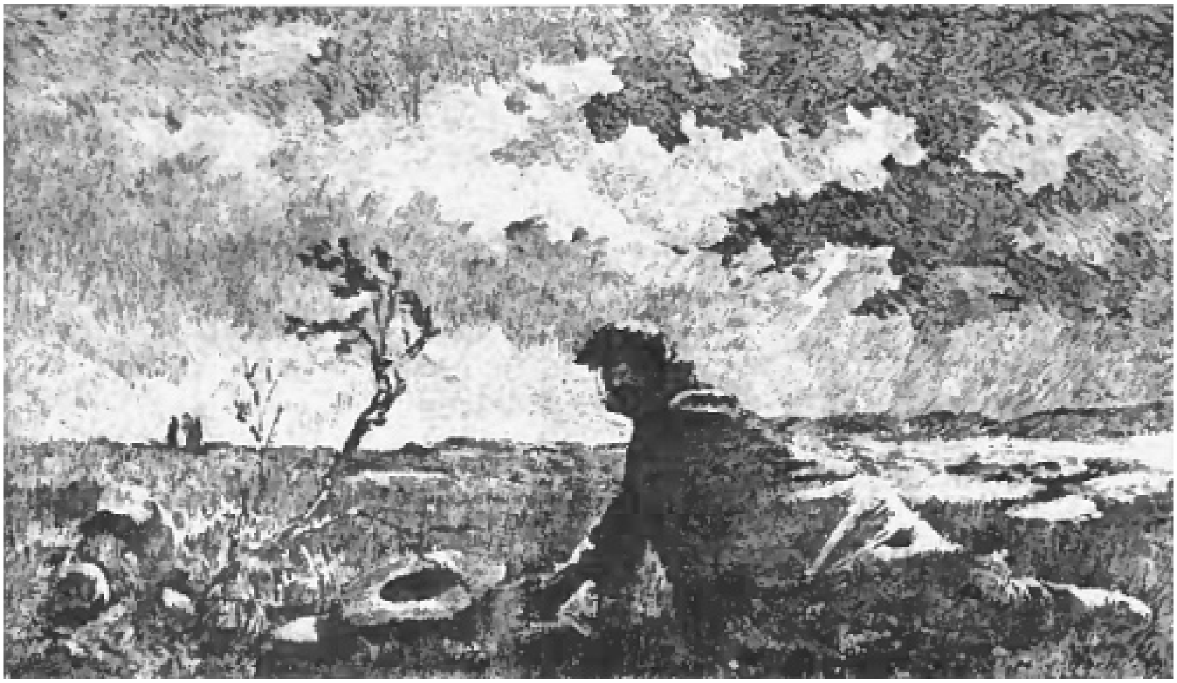

He saw the weird Forms sink into the Earth

CHAPTER XXXI NO QUARTER GIVEN.

"Hush, hush! here comes a man climbing down a ladder."

"Oh. yes; he is a spy."

"Heaven could grant me no greater favor than to let me offer you my life. I am yours; but tell me, for mercy's sake, to whom does this army belong?"

"To a count from Barcelona."

"What count?"

"What is it?"

"General, one of the enemy's spies."

"Whence come you?"

"I came here, little dreaming what I should find; little thinking what I should see."-

Lope De Vega: La Fuerza Lastimosa.

There is something desolate and forbidding in the aspect of a bare, fiat region when the sun lias set, when one is alone; when, as he walks, he tramples the dry grass beneath his feet, the dead brown leaves drop rustling from the trees, he hears the monotonous cry of the cricket, and sees huge, shapeless clouds sink slowly on the horizon like dead ghosts.

Such were Ordener's gloomy reflections on the night of his vain encounter with the Iceland robber. Startled by his abrupt disappearance, he at first tried to pursue him; but he lost his way in the heather, and wandered all day through a wild and uncultivated country, where he found no trace of man. At nightfall he was in a vast plain stretching to the horizon on every side, where there seemed no hope of shelter for the young traveller exhausted by fatigue and hunger.

It would have been a slight relief if his bodily suffering had not been aggravated by mental distress; but all was over. He had reached his journey's end without accomplishing his purpose. He could not even cherish those foolish illusions of hope which had urged him to pursue the monster; and now that nothing was left to sustain his courage, countless discouraging thoughts, for which he had hitherto had no room, assailed him. What could he do? How could he return to Schumacker unless he could take with him Ethel's salvation? What was the frightful nature of the misfortune which the possession of the fatal casket would prevent, and what of his marriage to Ulrica d'Ahlefeld? If he could only free his Ethel from her undeserved captivity; if he could fly with her, and enjoy uninterrupted happiness in some distant exile!

He wrapped himself in his mantle, and threw himself upon the ground. The sky was dark; a tempestuous light ever and anon appeared in the clouds as if through a veil of crape and then vanished; a cold wind swept across the plain. The young man scarcely heeded these signs of an immediate and violent storm; and besides, even could he have found shelter from the tempest and a place to rest from his fatigues, could he have found a spot where he might avoid his misery or rest from thought?

All at once confused sounds of men's voices fell upon his ear. In surprise, he rose upon his elbow, and perceived at some distance a number of shadowy forms moving through the darkness. He looked again; a light shone in the midst of the mysterious group, and Ordener, with astonishment which may easily be imagined, saw the weird forms sink one after the other into the centre of the earth, until all had disappeared.

Ordener was above the superstitions of his age and country. His serious and mature mind knew none of those vain beliefs, those strange terrors, which torture the childhood of a race as well as the childhood of a man. And yet there was something supernatural about this singular vision which filled him with devout distrust against his better judgment; for who can tell whether the spirits of the dead may not sometimes return to earth?

He rose, made the sign of the cross, and walked toward the spot where the apparition vanished.

Big drops of rain now began to fall; his cloak filled like a sail, and the feather in his cap, beaten by the wind, flapped in his face.

He stopped suddenly. A flash of lightning revealed just at his feet a large, round well, into which he must inevitably have fallen headlong had it not have been for this friendly warning. He approached the abyss. A faint light was visible at a fearful depth, and cast a red glow over the bottom of this huge opening in the bowels of the earth. The light, which seemed like a magic fire kindled by elves, only increased the immeasurable darkness which the eye was forced to pierce before reaching it.

The dauntless youth leaned over the abyss and listened. A distant murmur of voices rose to his ear. He no longer doubted that the beings who had so strangely appeared and disappeared before his very eyes had plunged into this gulf, and he felt an unconquerable desire, doubtless because it was so fated, to follow them, even should he pursue spectres to the mouth of hell. Moreover, the tempest now burst with fury, and this hole would afford him a shelter; but how was he to descend? What road had those he longed to follow taken, if indeed they were not phantoms? A second flash came to his aid, and showed him at his feet a ladder leading into the depths of the well. It consisted of a strong upright beam, crossed at regular intervals by short iron bars for the hands and feet of those who might venture into the gulf below.

Ordener did not hesitate. He swung himself boldly down upon the dreadful ladder, and plunged into the abyss without knowing whether it reached the bottom or not, without reflecting that he might never again see the sun. Soon he could only distinguish the sky from the darkness overhead by the bluish flashes which lit it up at brief intervals; soon the rain pouring in torrents upon the surface of the earth, reached him merely as a fine, vaporous mist. Then the whirlwind, rushing violently into the well, was lost above him in a prolonged moan. He went down and down, and yet seemed scarcely nearer to the subterranean light. He went on without losing heart, never looking below lest he should become dizzy and fall.

However, the air becoming more and more Stifling, the sound of voices more and more distinct, and the purplish glow which began to tinge the walls of the pit, warned him that he was not far from the bottom. He descended a few more rounds, and saw plainly at the foot of the ladder the entrance to an underground passage lighted by a flickering red flame, while his ear caught words which won his entire attention.

“Kennybol does not come,” said an impatient voice.

“What can detain him? “ repeated the same voice, after a brief pause.

“No one knows, Mr. Hacket,” was the reply.

“He intended to spend the night with his sister, Maase Braal, in the village of Surb,” added a different voice.

“You see,” rejoined the first speaker, “ I keep my promises. I agreed to bring Hans of Iceland for your leader. I have brought him.”

An indistinct murmur followed these words. Ordener’s curiosity, already aroused by the name of Kennybol, who had so astonished him the night before, was redoubled at the name of Hans of Iceland.

The same voice continued:

“My friends, Jonas, Norbith, what matters it if Kennybol is late? There are enough of us; we need fear nothing. Did you find your standards at Crag ruins?”

“Yes, Mr. Hacket,” replied several voices.

“Well, raise your banners; it is high time! Here is gold! Here is your invincible chief! Courage! March to the rescue of the noble Schumacker, the unfortunate Count Griffenfeld!”

“Hurrah! hurrah for Schumacker!” repeated many voices; and the name of Schumacker echoed and reechoed from the subterranean arches.

Ordener, more and more curious, more and more amazed, listened, hardly daring to breathe. He could neither believe nor understand what he heard. Schumacker connected with Kennybol and Hans of Iceland! What was this dark drama, one scene in which he, an unsuspected spectator, had witnessed? Whose life did they wish to shield? Whose head was at stake?

“In me,” continued the same voice, “ you see the friend and confidant of the noble Count Griffenfeld.”

The voice was wholly unfamiliar to Ordener. It went on:” Put implicit trust in me, as he does. Friends, everything is in your favor; you will reach Throndhjem without meeting an enemy.”

“Let us be oft”, Mr. Hacket,” interrupted a voice. “Peters told me that he saw the whole regiment from Munkholm marching through the mountain-passes to attack us.”

“He deceived you,” replied the other, in authoritative tones. “ The government as yet knows nothing of your revolt, and it is so wholly unsuspicious that the man who rejected your just complaints your oppressor, the oppressor of the illustrious and unfortunate Schumacker, General Levin de Knud has left Throndhjem for the capital, to join in the festivities on the occasion of the marriage of his ward, Ordener Guldenlew, and Ulrica d’Ahlefeld.”

Ordener’s feelings may be imagined. To hear all these names which interested him so deeply, and even his own, uttered by unknown voices in this wild, desolate region, in this mysterious tunnel! A frightful thought pierced his soul Could it be true? Was it indeed an agent of Count Griffenfeld whose voice he heard? What! could Schumacker, that venerable old man, his noble Ethel’s noble father, revolt against his royal master, hire brigands, and kindle a civil war? And it was for this hypocrite, this rebel, that he, the son of the Norwegian viceroy, the pupil of General Levin, had compromised his future and risked his life! It was for his sake that he had sought and fought with that Iceland bandit with whom Schumacker seemed to be in league, since he placed him at the head of these scoundrels! Who knows but that casket for which he, Ordener, was on the point of shedding his lifeblood. contained some of the base secrets of this vile plot? Or had the revengeful prisoner of Munkholm made a fool of him? Perhaps he had found out his name; perhaps and this thought was painful indeed to the generous youth he wished to ruin the son of an enemy by urging him to this fatal journey!

Alas ‘ when we have long loved and revered the name of an unfortunate man, when in our secret sonl we have vowed everlasting devotion to his misfortunes, it is bitter to be repaid with ingratitude, to feel that we are forever disenchanted with generosity, and that we must renounce the pure, sweet joys of loyal self-sacrifice. We grow old in an instant with the most melancholy form of old age: we grow old in experience, and we lose the most beautiful illusion of a life whose only beauty lies in its illusions.

Such were the dispiriting thoughts that crowded confusedly upon Ordener’s mind. The noble youth longed to die at that instant; he felt that his happiness had vanished. True, there were many things in the assertions of the man who described himself as Griffenfeld’s envoy which struck him as false or doubtful; but these statements, being only meant to deceive a set of poor rustics, Schumacker was but the more guilty in his eyes; and this same Schumacker was his Ethel’s father!

These reflections agitated him the more violently because they all thronged upon him at once. He reeled against the rounds of the ladder on which he stood, and listened still; for we sometimes wait with inexplicable impatience and fearful eagerness for the misfortunes which we dread the most.

“Yes,” added the voice of the envoy,” you are to be commanded by the much-dreaded Hans of Iceland. Who will dare resist you? You fight for your wives and your children, basely despoiled of their inheritance; for a noble and unfortunate man, who for twenty years has languished unjustly in an infamous prison. Come, for Schumacker and liberty await you. Death to tyrants!”

“Death! “ repeated a thousand voices; and the clash of arms rang through the winding cave, mingled with the hoarse note of the mountaineer’s horn.

“Stop!’’ cried Ordener.

He hurriedly descended the remainder of the ladder; f’or the idea that he might save Schumacker from committing a crime and spare his country untold misery had taken entire possession of him. But as he stood at the mouth of the cave, fear lest he might destroy his Ethel’s father, and perhaps his Ethel herself, by rash invectives, took the place of every other consideration, and he remained rooted to the spot, pale, and casting an amazed glance at the singular scene before him.

It was like a vast square in some underground city, whose limits were lost amid endless columns supporting the vaulted roof. These pillars glittered like crystal in the rays of countless torches borne by a multitude of men, armed with strange weapons, and scattered in confusion about the cave. From all these points of light and all these fearful figures straying among the shadows, it might have passed for one of the legendary gatherings described by ancient chroniclers, an assembly of wizards and demons, bearing stars for torches, and illuminating antique groves and ruined castles by night.

A prolonged shout arose.

“A stranger! Kill him! kill him!’’

A hundred arms were raised to strike Ordener down. He put his hand to his side in search of his sword. Noble youth! In his generous ardor he had forgotten that he was alone and unarmed.

“Stay! stay!” cried a voice, the voice of one whom Ordener recognized as Schumacker’s envoy.

He was a short, stout man, dressed in black, with a deceitful smile. He advanced toward Ordener, saying:

“Who are you?”

Ordener made no answer; he was threatened on every side, and there was not an inch of his breast uncovered by a sword-point or the mouth of a pistol.

“Are you afraid?” asked the little man, with a sneer.

“If your hand were upon my heart, instead of these swords,” coldly answered Ordener, “you would see that it beats no faster than your own, if indeed you have a heart.”

“Ah, ha!” said the little man; “so you defy us! Well, then let him die!’’ And he turned his back.

“Give me death,” returned Ordener;” it is the only thing that I would accept from you.”

“One moment, Mr. Hacket,” said an old man, with a thick beard, who stood leaning on a long musket. “ You are my guests, and I alone have the right to send this fellow to tell the dead what lie has seen.”

Mr. Hacket laughed.

"Faith, my dear Jonas, let it be as you please! It matters little to me who judges this spy, so long as he is condemned."

The old man turned to Ordener.

"Come, tell us who you are, since you are so boldly curious to know who we are."

Ordener was silent. Surrounded by the strange allies of that Schumacker for whom he would so willingly have shed his blood, he felt only an infinite longing to die.

"His worship will not answer," said the old man.

"When the fox is caught, he cries no more. Kill him!"

"My brave Jonas," rejoined Hacket, " let this man's death be Hans of Iceland's first exploit among you."

"Yes, yes!" cried many voices. Ordener, astounded, but still undaunted, looked about him for Hans of Iceland, with whom he had so valiantly disputed his life that very morning, and saw with increased surprise a man of colossal size, dressed in the garb of the mountaineers. This giant stared at Ordener with brutal stupidity, and called for an axe.

"You are not Hans of Iceland!" emphatically ex- claimed Ordener.

"Kill him! kill him!" cried Hacket, angrily.

Ordener saw that he must die. He put his hand in his bosom to draw out his Ethel's hair and give it one last kiss. As he did so, a paper fell from his belt.

"What is that paper?" asked Hacket. " Norbith, seize that paper."

Norbith was a young man, whose stern, dark features bore the stamp of true nobility. He picked up the paper and unfolded it. "Good God! "he exclaimed, " it is the passport of my poor friend, Christopher Nedlam, that unfortunate fellow who was beheaded not a week ago in Skongen market-place, for coining counterfeit money."

"Well;' said Hacket, in a disappointed tone, " you may keep the bit of paper. I thought it was something more important. Come, my dear Hans, despatch your man."

Young Norbith threw himself before Ordener, crying: " This man is under my protection. My head shall fall before you touch a hair of his. I will not suffer the safeconduct of my friend Christopher Nedlam to be violated."

Ordener, so miraculously preserved, hung his head and felt humiliated; for he remembered how contemptuously he had inwardly received Chaplain

Athanasius Munder’s touching prayer,” May the gift of the dying benefit the traveller!”

“Pooh! pooh!” said Hacket, “ you talk nonsense, good Norbith. The man is a spy; he must die.”

“Give me my axe,” repeated the giant.

“He shall not die!” cried Norbith. “ What would the spirit of my poor Nedlam say, whom they hung in such cowardly fashion? I tell you he shall not die; for Nedlam will not let him die!”

“As far as that goes,” said old Jonas, “ Norbith is right. Why should we kill this stranger, Mr. Hacket? He has Christopher Nedlam’s pass.”

“But he is a spy, a spy!” repeated Hacket.

The old man took his stand with the young one at Ordener’s side, and both said quietly:” He has the pass of Christopher Nedlam, who was hung at Skongen.”

Hacket saw that he must needs submit; for all the others began to murmur, and to say that this stranger should not die, as he had the safe-conduct of Nedlam the counterfeiter.

“Very well,” he hissed through his teeth with concentrated rage; “ then let him live. After all, it is your business, and not mine.”

“If he were the Devil himself I would not kill him,” said the triumphant Norbith.

With these words he turned to Ordener.

“Look here,” he added, “ you must be a good fellow as you have my poor friend Nedlam’s pass. We are the royal miners. We have rebelled to rid ourselves of the protectorate of the Crown. Mr. Haeket, here, says that we have taken up arms for a certain Count Schumacker; but I for one know nothing about him. Stranger, our cause is just. Hear me, and answer as if you were answering your patron saint. Will you join us?”

An idea flashed through Ordener’s mind.

“Yes,” replied he.

Norbith offered him a sword, which Ordener silently accepted.

“Brother.’’ said the youthful leader;” if you mean to betray us, begin by killing me.”

At this instant the sound of the horn rang through the arched galleries of the mine, and distant voices were heard exclaiming, “Here comes Kennybol!”

CHAPTER XXXII THE WILD-CAT IN THE THICKET.

There are thoughts as high as heaven.
Old Spanish Romance.

The soul sometimes has sudden inspirations, brilliant flashes whose extent can no more be expressed, whose depth can no more be sounded by an entire vol- ume of thoughts and reflections, than the brightness of a thousand torches can reproduce the intense, swift radiance of a flash of lightningr

We will not, therefore, try to analyze the overwhelming and secret impulse which upon young Norbith’s proposal led the noble son of the Norwegian viceroy to join a party of bandits who had risen in revolt to defend a proscribed man. It was doubtless a generous desire to fathom this dark scheme at any cost, mixed with a bitter loathing for life, a reckless indifference to the future; perhaps some vague doubt of Schumacker’s guilt, inspired by all the various incidents which struck the young man as equivocal and false, by a strange instinct for the truth, and above all by his love for Ethel. In short, it was certainly a secret sense of the help which a clear-sighted friend, in the midst of his blind partisans, might render Schumacker.

CHAPTER XXXIII TREACHERY AND VENGEANCE.

Is that the chief? His look alarms me; I dare not speak to him.
Maturin: Bertram.

On hearing the shouts which announced the arrival of the famous hunter Kennybol, Hacket sprang forward to meet him, leaving Ordener with the two other leaders.

“Here you are at last, my dear Kennybol! Come, let me present you to your much-dreaded commander, Hans of Iceland.”

At this name, Kennybol, pale, breathless, his hair standing on end, his face bathed in perspiration, and his hands stained with blood, started back.

“Hans of Iceland! “

“Come,” said Hacket, “ don’t be alarmed! He is here to help you. You must look upon him as a friend and comrade.”

Kennybol did not heed him.

“Hans of Iceland here!” he repeated.

“To be sure,” said Hacket, with ill-suppressed laughter; “ are you afraid of him?”

“What!” for the third time interrupted the hunter; “ do you really mean it, is Hans of Iceland here, in this mine?”

Hacket turned to the bystanders: “ Has our brave Kennybol lost his wits?”

Then, addressing Kennybol:” I see that it was your dread of Hans of Iceland which made you so late.”

Kennybol raised his hands to heaven.

“By Ethelreda, the holy Norwegian saint and martyr, it was not fear of Hans of Iceland, but Hans of Iceland himself, I swear, that delayed me so long.”

These words caused a murmur of surprise to run through the crowd of miners and mountaineers surrounding the two speakers, and clouded Hacket’s face as the sight and the rescue of Ordener had but a moment before.

“What! What do you mean?” he asked, dropping his voice.

"I mean, Mr. Hacket, that but for your confounded Hans of Iceland I should have been here before the owl's first hoot."

"Indeed! and what did he do to you?"

"Oh, do not ask me. I only hope that my beard may turn as white as an ermine's skin in a single day if I am ever caught again hunting a white bear, since I escaped this time with my life."

"Did you come near being eaten by a bear?"

Kennybol shrugged his shoulders contemptuously.

"A bear! a terrible foe that would be! Kennybol eaten by a bear! For what do you take me, Mr. Hacket?"

"Oh, pardon me!" said Hacket, with a smile.

"If you knew what had happened to me, good sir," interrupted the old hunter, in a low voice, "you would not persist in telling me that Hans of Iceland is here."

Hacket again seemed embarrassed. He seized Kennybol abruptly by the arm, as if he feared lest he should approach the spot where the giant's huge head now loomed up above those of the miners.

"My dear Kennybol," said he, solemnly," tell me, I entreat you, what caused your delay. You must understand that at this time anything may be of the utmost importance."

"That is true," said Kennybol, after a brief pause.

Then, yielding to Hacket's repeated requests, he told him how that very morning, aided by six comrades, he had pursued a white bear into the immediate vicinity of Walderhog cave, without noticing, in the excitement of the chase, that they were so near that dreadful place; how the growls of the bear at bay had attracted a little man, a monster, or demon, who, armed with a stone axe, had rushed upon them to defend the bear. The appearance of this devil, who could be no other than Hans, the demon of Iceland, had petrified all seven of them with terror. Finally, his six companions had fallen victims to the two monsters, and he, Kennybol, only owed his safety to speedy flight, assisted by his own nimbleness, Hans of Iceland's fatigue, and above all, by the protection of that blessed patron saint of hunters, Saint Sylvester.

"You see, Mr. Hacket," he concluded his tale, which was still somewhat incoherent from fright, and adorned with all the flowers of the mountain dialect, " you see that if I am late you should not blame me, and that it is impossible for the demon of Iceland, whom I left this morning with his bear wreaking their fury upon the corpses of my six poor friends on Walderhog heath, to be here now in the guise of a friend. I protest that it cannot be. I know him now, that fiend incarnate; I have seen him!”

Hacket, who had listened attentively, said gravely: “ My brave friend Kennybol, nothing is impossible to Hans or to the Devil; I knew all this before.”

The savage features of the old hunter from the mountains of Kiölen assumed an expression of extreme amazement and childlike credulity. “ What!” he exclaimed.

“Yes,” added Hacket, in whose face a more skilful observer might have read grim triumph;” I knew it all, except that you were the hero of this unfortunate adventure. Hans of Iceland told me the whole story on our way here.”

“Really!” said Kennybol; and he gazed at Hacket with respect and awe.

Hacket continued with the same perfect composure: “To be sure. But now calm yourself; I will present you to this dreadful Hans of Iceland.”

Kennybol uttered an exclamation of fright.

“Be calm, I say,” repeated Hacket. “ Consider him as your friend and leader; but be careful not to remind him in any way of what occurred this morning. Do you understand?”

Resistance was useless; but it was not without a severe mental struggle that he agreed to be presented to the demon. They advanced to the group where Ordener stood with Jonas and Norbith.

“May God guard you, good Jonas, dear Norbith!” said Kennybol.

“We need his protection, Kennybol,” said Jonas.

At this instant Kennybol’s eye met that of Ordener, who was trying to attract his attention.

“Ah! there you are, young man,” said he, going up to him eagerly and offering him his hard, wrinkled hand; “ welcome! It seems that your courage met with its reward.”

Ordener, who could not imagine how this mountaineer happened to understand him so well, was about to ask an explanation, when Norbith exclaimed: “ Then you know this stranger, Kennybol?”

“By my patron saint, I do! I love and esteem him. He is devoted, like ourselves, to the good cause which we all serve.”

And he cast another meaning look at Ordener, which the latter was on the point of answering, when Hacket, who had gone in search of his giant, whose company all the insurgents seemed to avoid, came up to our four friends, saying: “Kennybol, my valiant hunter, here is your leader, the famous Hans of Klipstadur!”

Kennybol glanced at the huge brigand with more surprise than terror, and whispered in Hacket’s ear:” Mr. Hacket, the Hans of Iceland whom I met this morning was a short man.”

Hacket answered in low tones: “ You forget, Kennybol; he is a demon!”

“True,” said the credulous hunter; “ I suppose he has changed his shape.”

And he turned aside with a shudder to cross himself secretly.

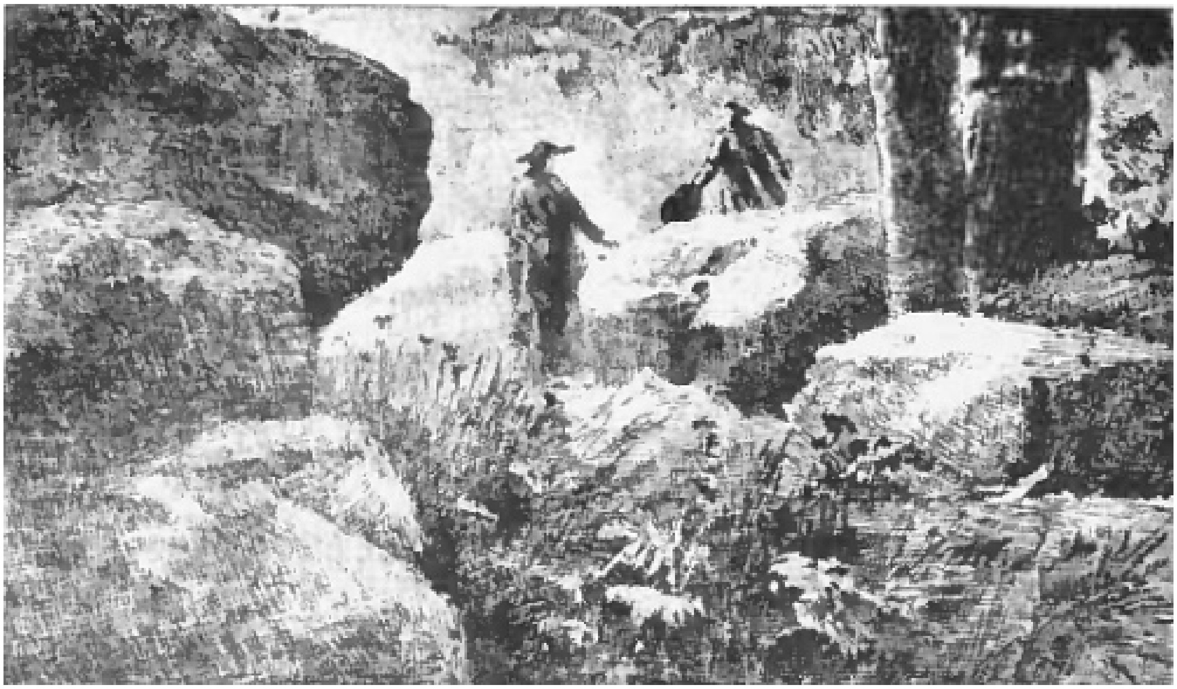

A short Man approached another Man

CHAPTER XXXIV THE BLACK STICK IN WAITING.

The mask approaches; it is Angolo himself. The rascal knows his business well; he must be sure of his facts.-

Lessing

In a dark grove of old oaks, whose dense leaves the pale light of dawn can scarcely penetrate, a short man approaches another man who is alone, and seems to be waiting for him. The following conversation begins in low tones:

“Your worship must excuse me for keeping you waiting; several things detained me.”

“Such as what? “

“The leader of the mountain men, Kennybol, did not reach the appointed place until midnight; and we were also disturbed by an unlooked-for witness.”

“Who? “

“A fellow who thrust himself like a fool into the mine in the midst of our secret meeting. At first I took him for a spy, and would have put him to death; but he turned out to be the bearer of a safe-conduct from some gallows-bird held in great respect by our miners, and they instantly took him under their protection. When I came to consider the matter, I made up my mind that he was probably a curious traveller or a learned fool. At any rate, I have taken all necessary precautions in regard to him.”

“Is everything else going well?”

“Very well. The miners from Guldsbrandsdal and the Färöe Islands, led by young Norbith and old Jonas, with the mountain men from Kiölen, under Kennybol, are probably on the march at this moment. Four miles from Blue Star, their comrades from Hubfallo and Suud-Moer will join them; those from Kongsberg and the iron-workers from Lake Miösen, who have already compelled the Wahlstrom garrison to retreat, as your lordship knows, will await them a few miles farther on; and finally, my dear and honored master, these combined forces will halt for the night some two miles away from Skongen, in the gorges of Black Pillar.”

“But how did they receive your Hans of Iceland?”

“With perfect confidence.”

“Would that I could avenge my son’s death on that monster! What a pity that he should escape us!”

“My noble lord, first use Hans of Iceland’s name to wreak your revenge upon Schumacker; then it will be time enough to think of vengeance against Hans himself.

The insurgents will march all day, and halt tonight in Black Pillar Pass, two miles from Skongen.”

“What! can you venture to let so large a force advance so close to Skongen? Musdœmon, take care!”

“You are suspicious, noble Count. Your worship may send a messenger at once to Colonel Vcethalin, whose regiment is probably at Skongen now; inform him that the rebel forces will encamp to-night in Black Pillar Pass, and have no misgivings. The place seems made purposely for ambuscades.”

“I understand you; but why, my dear fellow, did you muster the rebels in such numbers?”

“The greater the insurrection, sir, the greater will be Schumacker’s crime and your merit. Besides, it is important that it should be crushed at a single blow.”

“Very good; but why did you order them to halt so near Skongen?”

“Because it is the only spot in the mountains where all resistance is impossible. None will ever leave it alive but those whom we select to appear before the court.”

“Capital! Something tells me, Musdœmon, to finish this business quickly. If all looks well in this quarter, it looks stormy in another. You know that we have been making secret search at Copenhagen for the papers which we feared had fallen into the possession of Dispolsen? “

“Well, sir? “

“Well, I have just discovered that the scheming fellow had mysterious relations with that accursed astrologer, Cumbysulsum.”

“Who died recently? “

“Yes; and that the old sorcerer delivered certain papers to Schumacker’s agent before he died.”

“Damnation 1 He had letters of mine, a statement of our plot!”

“Your plot, Musdœmon!”

“A thousand pardons, noble Count! But why did your worship put yourself in the power of such a humbug as Cumbysulsum? the old traitor!”

“You see, Musdœmon, I am not a sceptic and unbeliever, like you. It is not without good reason, my dear fellow, that I have always put my trust in old Curnbysulsum’s magic skill.”

“I wish your worship had had as much doubt of his loyalty as you had trust in his skill. However, let us not take fright too soon, noble master. Dispolsen is dead, his papers are lost; in a few days we shall be safely rid of those whom they might benefit.”

“In any event, what charge could be brought against me?”

“Or me, protected as I am by your Grace?”

“Oh, yes, my dear fellow, of course you can count upon me; but let us bring this business to a head. I will send the messenger to the colonel. Come, my people are waiting for me behind those bushes, and we must return to Throndhjem, which the Mecklen- burger must have left ere now. Continue to serve me faithfully, and in spite of all the Cumbysulsums and Dispolsens upon earth, you can count on me in life and death!”

“I beg your Grace to believe- The Devil!”

Here they plunged into the thicket, among whose branches their voices gradually died away; and soon after, no sound was heard save the tread of their departing steeds.

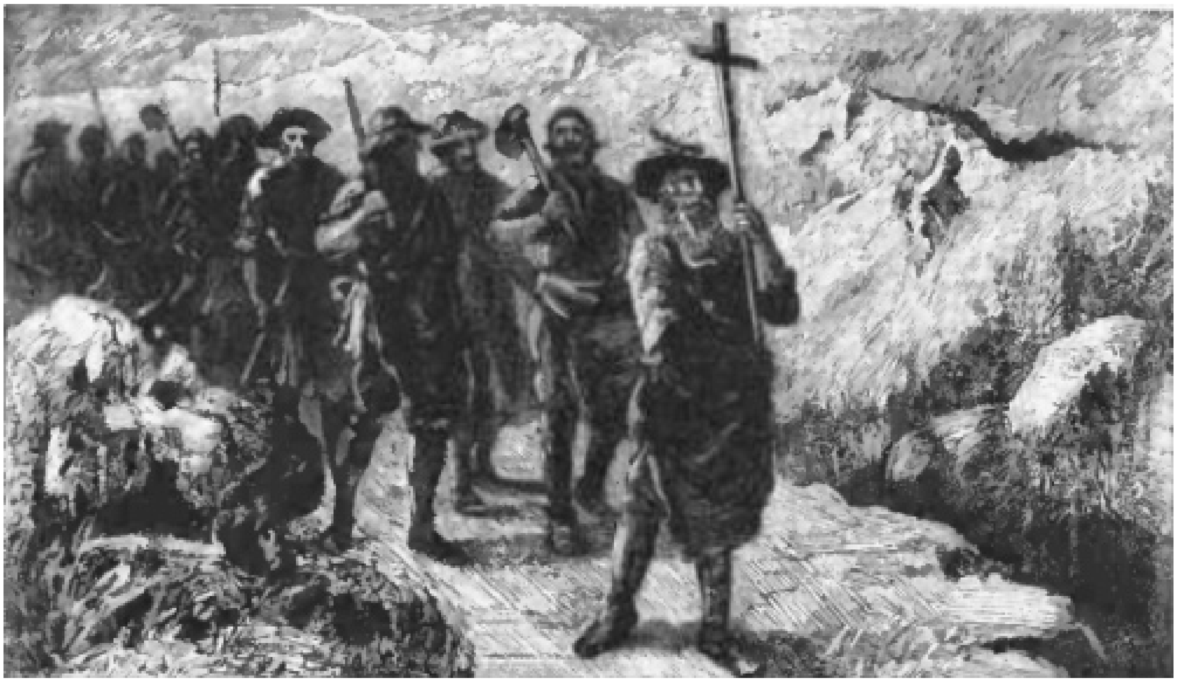

The Advance of the Rebels

CHAPTER XXXV THE FATHER OF THE FAMILY.

Beat the drums! They come, they come! They have all sworn, and all the same oath, never to return to Castile without the captive count, their lord.

They have his marble statue in a chariot, and are resolved never to turn back until they see the statue itself turn back. And in token that the first man who retraces his steps will be regarded as a traitor, they have all raised their right hand and taken an oath.

And they marched toward Arlançon as swiftly as the oxen which drag the chariot could go; they tarry no more than does the sun.

Burgos is deserted; only the women and children remain behind; and so too in the suburbs. They talk, as they go, of horses and falcons, and question whether they should free Castile from the tribute she pays Leon.

And before they enter Navarre, they meet upon the frontier. . . .

Old Spanish Romance.

While the preceding conversation was going on in one of the forests on the outskirts of Lake Miösen, the rebels, divided into three columns, left Apsyl-Corh lead-mine by the chief entrance, which opens, on a level with the ground, in a deep ravine.

Ordener, who, in spite of his desire for a closer acquaintance with Kennybol, had been placed under Norbith’s command, at first saw nothing but a long line of torches, whose beams, vying with the early light of dawn, were reflected back from hatchets, pitchforks, mattocks, clubs with iron heads, huge hammers, pickaxes, crowbars, and all the rude implements which could be borrowed from their daily toil, mingled with genuine weapons of warfare, such as muskets, pikes, swords, carbines, and guns, which showed that this revolt was a conspiracy. When the sun rose, and the glow of the torches was no more than smoke, he could better observe the aspect of this strange army, which advanced in disorder, with hoarse songs and fierce shouts, like a band of hungry wolves in pursuit of a dead body. It was divided into three parts. First came the mountaineers from Kiölen, under command of Kennybol, whom they all resembled in their dress of wild beasts’ skins, and in their bold, savage mien. Then followed the young miners led by Norbith, and the older ones under Jonas, with their broad-brimmed hats, loose trousers, bare arms, and blackened faces, gazing at the sun in mute surprise. Above this noisy band floated a confused sea of scarlet banners, bearing various mottoes, such as, “ Long live Schumacker!” “Let us free our Deliverer!” “Freedom for Miners!” “Liberty for Count

Griffenfeld!” “Death to Guldenlew!” “Death to all Oppressors!” “ Death to d’ Ahlefeld!” The rebels seemed to regard these standards rather in the light of a burden than an ornament, and they were passed frequently from hand to hand when the colorbearers were tired, or desired to mingle the discordant notes of their horns with the psalm-singing and shouts of their comrades.

The rear-guard of this strange army consisted of ten or a dozen carts drawn by reindeer and strong mules, doubtless meant to carry ammunition; and the vanguard, of the giant, escorted by Hacket, who marched alone, armed with a mace and an axe, followed at a considerable distance, with no small terror, by the men under command of Kennybol, who never took his eyes from him, as if anxious not to lose sight of his diabolical leader during the various transformations which he might be pleased to undergo.

This stream of insurgents poured down the mountainside with many confused noises, filling the pine woods with the sound of their horns. Their numbers were soon swelled by various reinforcements from Sund-Moer, Hubfallo, Kongsberg, and a troop of iron-workers from Lake Miösen, who presented a singular contrast to the rest of the rebels. They were tall, powerful men, armed with hammers and tongs, their broad leather aprons being their only shield, a huge wooden cross their only standard, as they marched soberly and rhythmically, with a regular tread more religious than military, their only war-song being Biblical psalms and canticles. They had no leader but their cross-bearer, who walked before them unarmed.

The rebel troop met not a single human being on their road. As they approached, the goat-herd drove his flocks into a cave, and the peasant forsook his village; for the inhabitant of the valley and plain is everywhere alike, he fears the bandit’s horn as much as the bowman’s blast.

Thus they traversed hills and forests, with here and there a small settlement, followed winding roads where traces of wild beasts were more frequent than the footprint of man, skirted lakes, crossed torrents, ravines, and marshes. Ordener recognized none of these places. Once only his eye, as he looked up, caught upon the horizon the dim, blue outline of a great sloping rock. He turned to one of his rude companions, and asked, “My friend, what is that rock to the south, on our right? “

“That is the Vulture’s Neck, Oëlmœ Cliff,” was the reply.

Ordener sighed heavily.

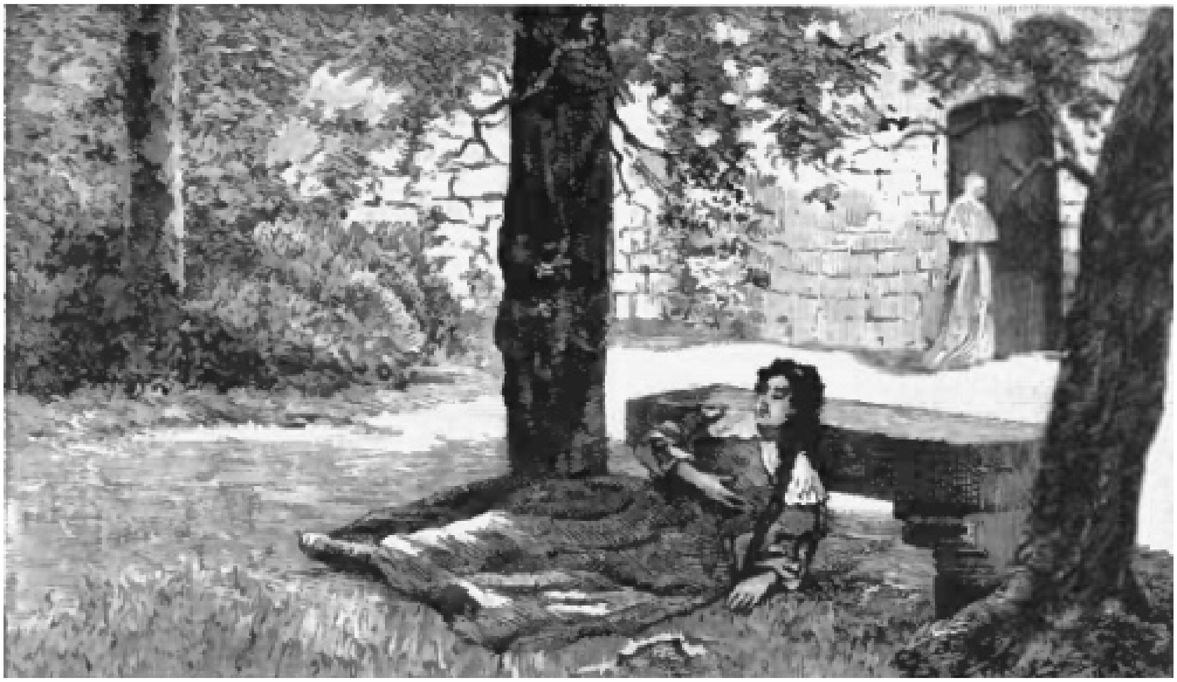

Ethel fell fainting on the Ground

CHAPTER XXXVI THEY JUDGED HIM AS THEMSELVES.

God keep and bless you, my daughter.
Régnier

Monkey, paroquets, combs, and ribbons, all were ready to receive Lieutenant Frederic. His mother had sent, at great expense, for the famous Scudéry's latest novel. By her order it had been richly bound, with silvergilt clasps, and placed, with the bottles of perfume and boxes of patches, upon the elegant toilet-table, with gilded feet, and richly inlaid, with which she had furnished her dear son Frederic's future sitting-room. When she had thus fulfilled the careful round of petty maternal cares which had for a moment caused her to forget her hate, she remembered that she had now nothing else to do but to injure Schumacker and Ethel. General Levin's departure left them at her mercy.

So many things had happened recently at Munkholm of which she could learn but little! Who was the serf, vassal, or peasant, who, if she was to credit Frederic's very ambiguous and embarrassed phrases, had won the love of the exchancellor's daughter? What were Baron Ordener's relations with the prisoners of Munkholm? What were the incomprehensible motives for Ordener's most peculiar absence at a time when both kingdoms were given over to preparations for his marriage to that Ulrica d'Ahlefeld whom he seemed to disdain? And lastly, what had occurred between Levin de Knud and Schumacker? The countess was lost in conjectures. She finally resolved, in order to clear up all these mysteries, to risk a descent upon Munkholm, a step to which she was counselled both by her curiosity as a woman and her interests as an enemy.

One evening, as Ethel, alone in the donjon garden, had just written, for the sixth time, with a diamond ring, some mysterious monogram upon the dusty window in the postern gate through which her Ordener had disappeared, it opened. The young girl started. It was the first time that this gate had been opened since it closed upon him.

A tall, pale woman, dressed in white, stood before her. She gave Ethel a smile as sweet as poisoned honey, and behind her mask of quiet friendliness there lurked an expression of hatred, spite, and involuntary admiration.

Ethel looked at her in astonishment, almost fear. Except her old nurse, who had died in her arms, this was the first woman she had seen within the gloomy walls of Muukholm.

“My child,” gently asked the stranger, “ are you the daughter of the prisoner of Muukholm?”

Ethel could not help turning away her head; she instinctively shrank from the stranger, and she felt as if there were venom in the breath which uttered such sweet tones. She answered:” I am Ethel Schumacker. My father tells me that in my cradle I was called Countess of Tönsberg and Princess of “Wollin.”

“Your father tells you so!” exclaimed the tall woman, with a sneer which she at once repressed. Then she added:” You have had many misfortunes!”

“Misfortune received me, at my birth, in its cruel arms;” replied the youthful captive; “ my noble father says that it will never leave me while I live.”

A smile flitted across the lips of the stranger, as she rejoined in a pitying tone:” And do you never murmur against those who flung you into this cell? Do you not curse the authors of your misery?”

“No, for fear that our curse might draw down upon their heads evils like those which they make us endure.”

“And,” continued the pale woman, with unmoved face, “do you know the authors of these evils of which you complain? “

Ethel considered a moment, and said: “ All that has happened to us is by the will of Heaven.”

“Does your father never speak to you of the king?”

“The king? I pray for him every morning and evening, although I do not know him.”

Ethel did not understand why the stranger bit her lip at this reply.

“Does your unhappy father never, in his anger, mention his relentless foes, General Arensdorf, Bishop Spolleyson, and Chancellor d’Ahlefeld?”

“I don’t know whom you mean.”

“And do you know the name of Levin de Knud?”

The recollection of the scene which had occurred but two days before, between Schumacker and the governor of Throndhjem, was so fresh in Ethel’s mind that she could not but be struck by the name of Levin de Knud.

“Levin de Knud?” said she;” I think that he is the man for whom my father feels so much esteem, almost affection.”

"What!" cried the tall woman.

"Yes," resumed the girl; " it was Levin de Knud whom my father defended so warmly, day before yesterday, against the governor of Throndhjem."

These words increased her hearer's surprise.

"Against the governor of Throndhjem! Do not trifle with me, girl. I am here in your interests. Your father took General Levin de Knud's part against the governor of Throndhjem, you say?"

"General! I thought he was a captain. But no; you are right. My father," added Ethel, "seemed to feel as much attachment for this General Levin de Knud as dislike for the governor of Throndhjem."

"Here is a strange mystery indeed!" thought the tall, pale woman, whose curiosity increased momentarily. "My dear child, what happened between your father and the governor?"

All these questions wearied poor Ethel, who looked fixedly at the tall woman, saying: " Am I a criminal, that you should cross-examine me thus?"

At these simple words the stranger seemed thunderstruck, as if she saw the reward of her skill slipping through her fingers. She replied, nevertheless, in a tremulous voice:" You would not speak to me so if you knew why and for whom I come."

"What: " said Ethel; " do you come from him? Do you bring me a message from him?" And all the blood in her body rushed to her fair face; her heart throbbed in her bosom with impatience and alarm.

"From whom?" asked the stranger.

The young girl hesitated as she was about to utter the adored name. She saw a flash of wicked joy gleam in the stranger's eye like a ray from hell. She said sadly:-

"You do not know the person whom I mean."

An expression of disappointment again appeared upon the stranger's apparently friendly face.

"Poor young girl " she cried;" what can I do to help you?"

Ethel did not hear her. Her thoughts were beyond the mountains of the North, in quest of the daring traveller. Her head sank upon her breast, and her hands were unconsciously clasped.

"Does your father hope to escape from this prison?"

This question, twice repeated by the stranger, brought Ethel to herself.

“Yes,” said she, and tears sparkled on her cheek.

The stranger’s eves flashed.

“He does! Tell me how; by what means; when!”

“He hopes to escape from this prison because he hopes ere long to die.”

There is sometimes a power in the very simplicity of a gentle young spirit which outwits the artitices of a heart grown old in wickedness. This thought seemed to occur to the great lady, for her expression suddenly changed, and laying her cold hand on Ethel’s arm, she said in a tone which was almost sincere: “ Tell me, have you heard that your father’s life is again threatened by a fresh judicial inquiry? That he is suspected of having stirred up a revolt among the miners of the North?”

The words “ revolt . “ and “inquiry” conveyed no clear idea to Ethel’s mind. She raised her great dark eyes to the stranger’s face as she asked:” What do you mean “

“That your father is conspiring against the State; that his crime is all but discovered; that this crime will be punished with death.”

“Death! crime!’’ cried the poor girl.

“Crime and death,” said the strange lady, seriously.

“My father! my noble father!” continued Ethel. “ Alas! he spends his days in hearing me read the Edda and the Gospel! He conspire! What has he done to you?”

“Do not look at me so fiercely. I tell you again I am not your enemy. Your father is suspected of a grave crime; I am here to warn you of it. Perhaps, instead of such a show of dislike, I might lay claim to your gratitude.”

This reproach touched Ethel. “ Oh, forgive me, noble lady, forgive me! What human being have I ever seen who was not an enemy? I have doubted you. You will forgive me, will you not?”

The stranger smiled.

“What, my girl! have you never met a friend until today?”

A hot blush mantled Ethel’s brow. She hesitated an instant.

“Yes. God knows the truth, we have found a friend, noble lady, one only!”

“One only!” said the great lady, hastily. “ His name, I implore. You do not know how important it is; it is for your father’s safety. Who is this friend?”

“I do not know,” said Ethel.

The stranger turned pale.

“Is it because I wish to serve you that you trifle with me? Consider that your father’s life is at stake. Tell me, who is this friend of whom you speak?”

“Heaven knows, noble lady, that I know nothing of him but his name, which is Ordener.”

Ethel uttered these words with that difficulty which we all feel in pronouncing before an indifferent person the sacred name which wakes within us every emotion of love.

“Ordener! Ordener! “repeated the stranger, with singular agitation, while her hands crumpled the white embroideries of her veil. “ And what is his father’s name? “she asked in a troubled voice.

“I do not know,” replied the girl. “ What are his family and his father to me? This Ordener, noble lady, is the most generous of men.”

Alas! the accent with which these words were spoken revealed Ethel’s secret to the sharp-sighted stranger.

She assumed an air of calm composure, and asked, without taking her eyes from the girl’s face: “ Have you heard of the approaching marriage of the viceroy’s son to the daughter of the present lord chancellor, d’Ahlefeld?”

She was obliged to repeat her question before Ethel’s mind could grasp an idea which did not interest her.

“I believe I have,” was her answer.

Her calmness, and her indifferent manner, seemed to surprise the stranger.

“Well, what do you think of this marriage?”

It was impossible to note the slightest change in Ethel’s large eyes as she replied:” Nothing, truly. May their union be a happy one!”

“Counts Guldenlcw and d’Ahlefeld, the fathers of the young couple, are both bitter enemies of your father.”

“May their marriage be blessed!” gently repeated Ethel.

“I have an idea,” continued the crafty stranger. “If your father’s life be really threatened, you might obtain his pardon through the viceroy’s son upon the occasion of this great marriage.”

“May the saints reward you for your kind thought for us, noble lady; but how should my petition reach the viceroy’s son?”

These words were spoken in such good faith that they drew a gesture of surprise from the stranger.

“What! do you not know him?”

“That powerful lord!” cried Ethel. “You forget that I have never been outside the walls of this fortress.”

“Truly,” muttered the tall woman between her teeth. “ What did that old fool of a Levin tell me? She does not know him. Still, that is impossible,” said she; then, raising her voice: “ You must have seen the viceroy’s son; he has been here.”

“That may be, noble lady; of all the men who have been here, I have never seen but one, my Ordener.”

“Your Ordener!” interrupted the stranger. She added, without seeming to notice Ethel’s blushes: “ Do you know a young man with noble face, elegant figure, grave and dignified bearing? His expression is gentle, yet firm; his complexion fresh as that of a maiden; his hair chestnut.”

“Oh! “cried poor Ethel, “that is he; it is my betrothed, my adored Ordener! Where did you meet him? He told you that he loved me, did he not? He told you that he has my whole heart. Alas! a poor prisoner has nothing but her love to give. My noble friend! It was but a week ago, I can see him still on this very spot, with his green mantle, beneath which beats so generous a heart, and that black plume, which waved so gracefully above his broad brow.”

She did not finish her sentence. The tall stranger tottered, turned pale, then red, and cried in her ears in tones of thunder: “Wretched girl, you love Ordener Guldenlew, the betrothed of Ulrica d’Ahlefeld, the son of your father’s deadly foe, the viceroy of Norway!” Ethel fell fainting on the ground.

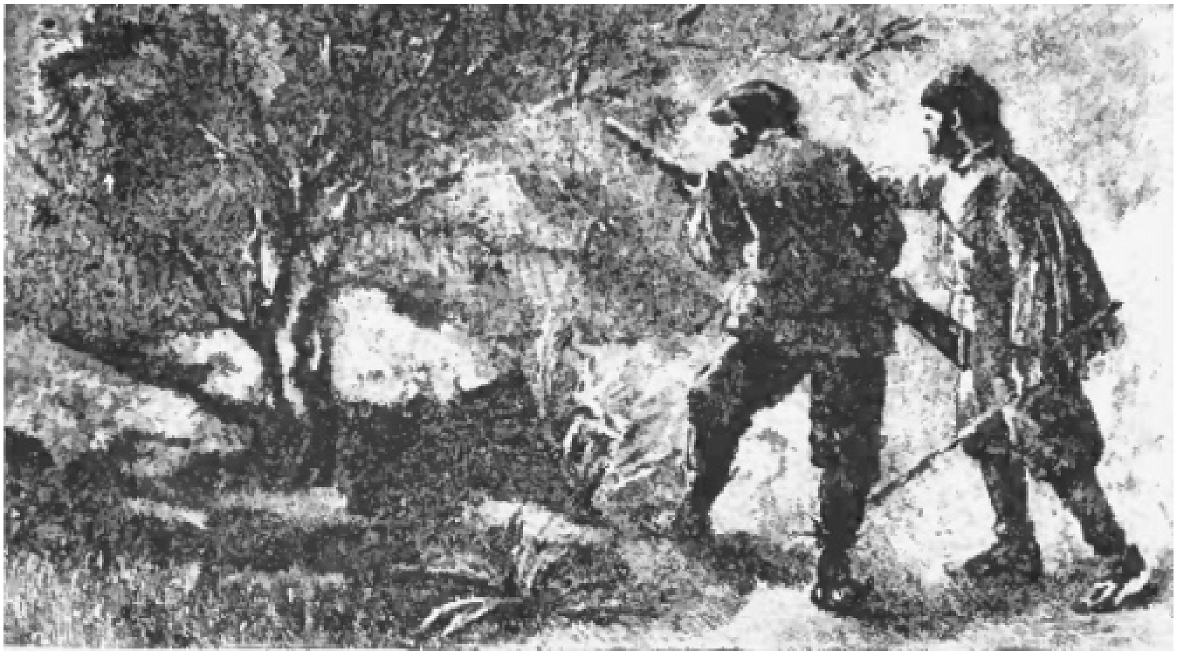

The Shot was fired

CHAPTER XXXVII THE VICTIM OF HIS OWN DEVICES.

Caupolican. Walk so cautiously that the earth itself may not catch your footfall. Redouble your precautions, friends. If we arrive unheard, I will answer for the victory.

Tucupel. Night veils all; fearful darkness covers the earth. We hear no sentinel; we have seen no spies.

Riago. Let us advance!

Tucupel. What do I hear! Are we discovered?

Lupe Da Vega: The Conquest of Arauco.

I say, Guldon Stayper, old fellow, the evening breeze is beginning to blow my hairy cap about my head rather vigorously."

These words were spoken by Kennybol, as his eyes wandered for a moment from the giant who marched at the head of the insurgents, and half turned toward a mountaineer whom the accident of a disorderly progress had placed beside him.

His friend shook his head and shifted his banner from one shoulder to the other, with a deep sigh of fatigue, as he answered:-

"Hum! I fancy, Captain, that in these confounded Black Pillar gorges, through which the wind rushes like a torrent let loose, we shall not be as warm tonight as if we were flames dancing on the hearth."

"We must make such rousing fires that the old owls will be scared from their nests among the rocks in their ruined palace. I can't endure owls. On that horrid night when I saw the fairy Ubfem she took the shape of an owl."

"By Saint Sylvester!" interrupted Guldon Stayper, turning his head, " the angel of the storm beats his wings most furiously! Take my advice, Captain Kennybol, and set fire to all the pine-trees on the mountain. It would be a fine sight to see an army warm itself with a whole forest."

"Heaven forbid, my dear Guldon! Think of the deer, and the gerfalcons, and the pheasants! Roast the game, if you will, but do not burn it alive." Old Guldon laughed:" Oh, Captain, you are the same devil of a Kennybol, the wolf of deer, the bear of wolves, and the buffalo of bears!"

"Are we far from Black Pillar?" asked a voice from the huntsmen.

"Comrade," replied Kennybol, " we shall enter the gorge at nightfall; we shall reach the Four Crosses directly."

There was a brief silence, during which nothing was heard but the tramp of many feet, the moaning of the wind, and the distant song of the regiment of iron-workers from Lake Miösen.

“Friend Guldon Stayper,” resumed Kennybol, when he had whistled an old hunting-song, “you have just passed a few days at Throndhjem, have you not?”

“Yes, Captain; my brother George, the fisherman, was ill, and I took his place in the boat for a short time, so that his poor family might not starve while he was ill.”

“Well, as you come from Throndhjem, did you happen to see this count, the prisoner Schumacker Gleffenhem what is his name, now? I mean that man in whose behalf we have rebelled against the royal protectorate, and whose arms I suppose you have on that big red flag.”

“It is heavy enough, I can tell you!” said Guldon. “Do you mean the prisoner in Munkholm fortress, the count, if you choose to call him so; and how do you suppose, Captain, that I should see him? I should have needed,” he added, lowering his voice, “ the eyes of that demon marching in front of us, though he does not leave a smell of brimstone behind him; of that Hans of Iceland, who can see through stone walls; or the ring of Queen Mab, who passes through keyholes. There is but one man among us now, I am sure, who ever saw the count, the prisoner to whom you refer.”

“But one? Ah! Mr. Hacket? But this Hacket is no longer with us; he left us to-day to return to

“I do not mean Mr. Hacket, Captain.”

“And who then?”

“That young man in the green mantle, with the black plume, who burst into our midst last night.’’

“Well?”

“Well!” said Guldon, drawing closer to Kennybol: “ he knows the count, this famous count, as well as I know you, Captain Kennybol.”

Kennybol looked at Guldon, winked his left eye, smacked his lips, and clapped his friend on the shoulder with that triumphant exclamation which so often escapes us when we are satisfied with our own penetration, “I thought as much!”

“Yes, Captain,” continued Guldon Stayper, changing his flame-colored banner to the other shoulder; “I assure you that the young man in green has seen Count I don’t know what you call him, the one for whom we are fighting in Munkholm keep; and he seemed to think no more of walking into that prison than you or I would of shooting in a royal park.”

“And how happen you to know this, brother Guldon?”

The old mountaineer seized Kennybol by the arm, and half opening his otter-skin waistcoat with a caution which was almost suspicious, he said, “Look there!”

“By my most holy patron saint!” exclaimed Keunybol; “ it glitters like diamonds!”

It was indeed a superb diamond buckle, which fastened Guldon Stayper’s rough belt.

“And they are real diamonds,” he replied, closing his waistcoat. “I am just as sure of it as I am that the moon is two days’ journey from the earth, and that my belt is made of buffalo leather.”

Kennybol’s lace clouded, and his expression changed from surprise to distress. He cast down his eyes, and said with savage sternness: “ Guldon Stayper, of Chol-Sœ village, in the Kiölen mountains, your father, Medprath Stayper, died at the age of one hundred and two, without reproach; for it was no crime to kill one of the king’s deer or elk by mistake. Guldon Stayper, fifty-seven good years have passed over your gray head, which cannot be called youth except for an owl. Guldon Stayper, old friend, I would rather for your sake that the diamonds in that buckle were grains of millet, if you did not come by them honestly, as honestly as a royal pheasant comes by a leaden bullet.”

As he pronounced this strange sermon, the mountaineer’s tone was both impressive and menacing.

“As truly as Captain Kennybol is the boldest hunter in Kiölen,” replied Guldon, unmoved, “ and as truly as these diamonds are diamonds, they are my lawful property.”

“Indeed!” said Kennybol, in accents which wavered between confidence and doubt.

“God and my patron saint know,” replied Guldon, “that one evening, just as I was pointing out the Throndhjem Spladgest to some sons of our good mother Norway, who were carrying thither the body of an officer found dead on Urchtal Sands, this was about a week ago, a young man stepped up to my boat. ‘ To Munkholm!’ says he to me. I was not at all anxious to obey. Captain; a free bird never likes to fly into the neighborhood of a cage. But the young gentleman had a haughty, lordly manner; he was followed by a servant leading two horses; he leaped into my boat with an air of authority; I took up my oars, that is to say, my brother’s oars. It was my good angel that willed me to do so. When we reached the fortress, my young passenger, after exchanging a few words with the officer on guard, flung me in payment as God hears me, he did, Captain this diamond buckle which I showed you, and which would have belonged to my brother George, and not to me, if at the time that the traveller Heaven help him! engaged me, the day’s work which I was doing for George had not been done. This is the truth, Captain Kennybol.”

“Very good.”

Little by little the captain’s features had cleared as much as their naturally hard and gloomy expression would permit, and he asked Guldon in -a softened voice:” And are you sure, old fellow, that this young man is the same who is now behind us with Norbith’s followers?”

“Sure! I could not mistake among a thousand faces the face of him who made my fortune; besides, it is the same cloak, the same black plume.”

“I believe you, Guldon!”

“And it is clear that he went there to see the famous prisoner; for if he were not bound on some very mysterious errand, he would never have rewarded so handsomely the boatman who rowed hirn over and besides, now that he has joined us

“You are right”

“And I imagine, Captain, that this young stranger may have far greater influence with the count whom we are about to set free than Mr. Hacket, who strikes me, by my soul! as only fit to mew like a wildcat.”

Kennybol nodded his head expressively.

“Comrade, you have said just what I meant to say. I should be much more inclined in this whole matter to obey that young gentleman than the envoy Hacket. Saint Sylvester and Saint Olaf help me! but if the Iceland demon be our commander, I believe, friend Guldon, that we owe it far less to that magpie Hacket than to this stranger.”

“Really, Captain?” inquired Guldon.

Kennybol opened his mouth to answer, when he felt a hand on his shoulder; it was Norbith.

“Kennybol, we are betrayed! Gormon Woëstrœm has just come from the South. The entire regiment of musketeers is marching against us. The Schleswig lancers are at Sparbo; three companies of Danish dragoons await the cavalry at Loevig. All along the road he saw as many green jackets as there were bushes. Let us hasten toward Skongen; let us not pause until we reach that point. There, at least, we can defend ourselves. One thing more; Gormon thinks that he saw the gleam of muskets among the briers as he came through the defiles of Black Pillar."

The young leader was pale and agitated; but his face and voice still showed courage and resolution.

"Impossible!" cried Kennybol.

"It is certain! certain!" said Norbith.

"But Mr. Hacket- "

"Is a traitor or a coward. Depend on what I say, friend Kennybol. "Where is this Hacket?"

At this moment old Jonas approached the two chiefs. By the deep discouragement stamped upon his features it was easily seen that he had learned the fatal news.

The eyes of the two elder men, Jonas and Kennybol, met, and they shook their heads with one accord.

"Well, Jonas! Well, Kenuybol! " said Norbith. But the aged leader of the Färöe miners slowly passed his hand across his wrinkled brow, and in a low voice answered the appealing look of the aged leader of the Kiölen mountaineers:" Yes, it is but too true; it is but too certain. Gormon Wöestrœm saw them."

"If it be so," said Kennybol," what is to be done?"

"What is to be done?" answered Jonas.

"I consider, friend Jonas, that we should do well to halt."

"And better still, brother Kennybol, to retreat."

"Halt! retreat!" exclaimed Norbith; "we must push forward."

The two elders looked at the young man in cold surprise.

"Push forward!" said Kennybol; " and how about the Munkholm musketeers?"

"And the Schleswig lancers? " added Jonas. ' And the Danish dragoons?" continued Kennybol.

Norbith stamped his foot.

"And the royal protectorate; and my mother dying of cold and hunger?"

"The devil, the royal protectorate!" said the miner Jonas, with a shudder.

"Never mind!" said Kennybol.

Jonas took Kennybol by the hand, saying:” Old fellow, you have not the honor to be a ward of our glorious sovereign, Christian IV. May the blessed king Olaf, in heaven, deliver us from the protectorate!”

“You had better trust to your sword for that benefit!” said Norbith, in a fierce tone.

“Bold words are easy to a young man, friend Norbith,” answered Kennybol; “ but consider that if we advance, all these green jackets

“I think that it would be useless for us to return to our mountains, like foxes running from wolves, for our names and our revolt are known; and if we needs must die, I prefer a musket-ball to the hangman’s rope.”

Jonas nodded assent.

“The devil! the protectorate for our brothers, the gallows lor us! Norbith may be right, after all.”

“Give me your hand, good Norbith,” said Kennybol; “ there is danger in either course. We may as well march straight to the edge of the precipice as fall over it, backwards.”

“Come on’. come on! “ cried old Jonas, striking his sword-hilt.

Norbith grasped them by the hand.

“Listen, brothers! Be bold, like me; I will be prudent, like you. Let us not pause until we reach Skongen; the garrison is weak, and we will overwhelm it. Let us pass, since we must, through the defiles of Black Pillar, but in utter silence. We must traverse them, even if they be guarded by the enemy.”

“I do not think that the musketeers have come so far as Ordals bridge, beyond Skongen; but it matters not. Silence!”

“Silence! so be it! “ repeated Kennybol.

“Now, Jonas,” said Norbith, “ let us return to our posts. Tomorrow we may be at Throndhjem in spite of musketeers, lancers, dragoons, and all the green jerkins of the South.”

The three chiefs parted. Soon the watchword, “Silence! “ passed from rank to rank, and the insurgents, a moment before so tumultuous, looked, in those waste places darkened by approaching night, like a band of mute ghosts roaming noiselessly through the winding paths of a cemetery.

But their road became narrower every moment, and seemed by degrees to dive between two walls of rock which grew steeper and steeper. As the red moon rose among a mass of cold clouds hovering about her with weird inconstancy, Kennybol turned to Guldon Stayper, saying, ““We are about to enter Black Pillar Pass. Silence!”

In fact, they already heard the roar of the torrent which follows every turn of the road between the two mountains, and they saw, to the south, the huge granite pyramid known as the Black Pillar, outlined against the gray sky and the surrounding snow-capped mountains; while the western horizon, veiled in mists, was bounded by the extreme verge of Sparbo forest, and by huge piles of rocks, terraced as if a stairway for giants.

The rebels, forced to stretch their columns over this crooked road compressed between two mountains, continned their march. They penetrated those dark valleys without lighting a torch, without uttering a sound. The very sound of their footsteps was unheard amid the deafening crash of waterfalls and the roar of a furious blast which bowed the Druidical woods, and drove the clouds in eddying whirls about tall peaks clad in snow and ice. Lost in the dark depths of the gorge, the light of the moon, which was veiled now and again, did not reach the heads of their pikes, and the white eagles flying overhead did not guess that so vast a multitude of men was troubling their solitude.

Once old Guldon Stayper touched Kennybol’s shoulder with the butt-end of his carbine, saying, “ Captain, Captain, something glimmers behind that tuft of holly and broom.”

“So it does,” replied the mountain chief;” it is the water of the stream reflecting the clouds.” And they passed on.

Again Guldon grasped his leader, quickly by the arm.

“Look!” he said;” are not those muskets, shining yonder in the shadow of that rock?” Kennybol shook his head; then, after looking attentively, he said, “ never fear, brother Guldon; it is a moonbeam falling on an icy peak.”

No further cause for alarm appeared, and the various bands, as they marched quietly through the winding gorge, insensibly forgot all the danger of their position.

After two hours of often painful progress, over the treetrunks and granite bowlders which blocked the road, the vanguard entered the mountainous group of pine-trees at the end of Black Pillar Pass, overhung by high, black, moss-grown cliffs.

Guldon Stayper approached Kennybol, declaring that he was delighted that they were at last almost out of this cursed cut-throat place, and that they must render thanks to Saint Sylvester that the Black Pillar had not been fatal to them.

Kennybol laughed, swearing that he had never shared such old-womanish fears; for with most men, when danger is over it ceases to exist, and they try to prove by their incredulity the courage which they perhaps failed to display before.

At this moment two small round lights, like two live coals, moving in the thick underwood, attracted his attention.

“By my soul’s salvation!” he whispered, pulling Guldon’s arm, “ see; those two blazing eyes must surely belong to the fiercest wildcat that ever mewed in a thicket.”

“You are right,” replied old Stayper; “ and if he were not marching in front of us, I should rather think that they were the wicked eyes of the demon of Ice “

“Hush!” cried Kennybol. Then, seizing his carbine, he added, “ Truly, it shall not be said that such fine game passed before Kennybol in vain.”

The shot was fired before Guldon Stayper, who threw himself upon the rash hunter, could prevent it. It was not the shrill cry of a wildcat that answered the dis- charge of the gun; it was the fearful howl of a tiger, followed by a burst of human laughter more frightful still.

No one heard the report as its dying echoes were prolonged from rock to rock; for the flash of the powder had no sooner lighted up the darkness, the fatal crack of the gun had no sooner burst upon the silence, than a thousand terrible voices rang out unexpectedly from mountain, valley, and forest; a shout of “ Long live the king! “ loud as the rolling thunder, swept over the heads of the rebels, close beside them, behind and before them, and the mur- derous light of a dreadful volley of musketry, bursting from every hand, and striking them down, at the same time disclosed, amid red clouds of smoke, a battalion behind every rock, and a soldier behind every tree.

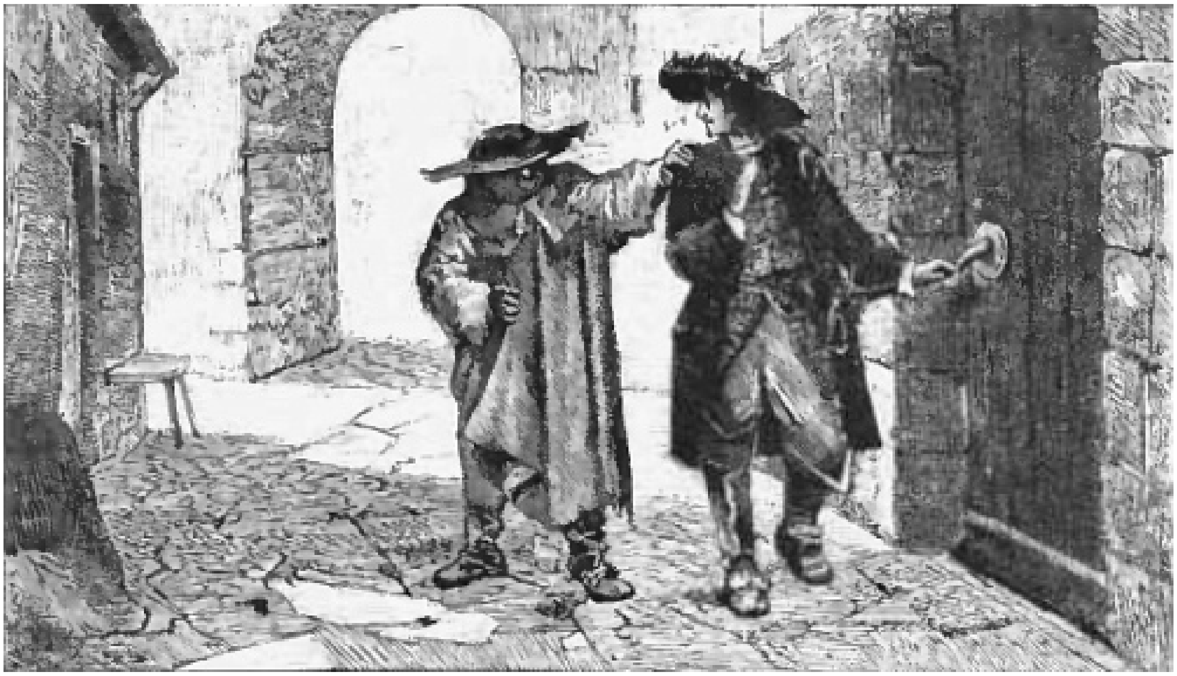

A heavy Hand was placed on his Shoulder

CHAPTER XXXVIII TILL DEATH US DOTH SEVER.

To arms! to arms! ye captains!
The Prisoner of Ochali.

We must now ask the reader to retrace with us the day which has just passed, and to return to Skongen, where, while the insurgents were leaving Apsyl-Corh lead-mine, the regiment of musketeers, which we saw on the march in an earlier chapter of this very truthful tale, had just arrived.

After giving a few orders in regard to billeting the soldiers under his command, Baron Vœthaün, colonel of the musketeers, was about to enter the house assigned to him, near the city gate, when a heavy hand was placed familiarly upon his shoulder. He turned and saw a short man, whose face was almost wholly hidden by a broad-brimmed straw hat. He had a bushy red beard, and was closely wrapped in the folds of a gray serge cloak, which, by the tattered cowl still hanging from it, seemed once to have been a hermit’s gown. His hands were covered with thick gloves.

“Well, my good man,” asked the colonel, sharply, “ what the deuce do you want?”

“Colonel of the Munkholm musketeers,” replied the fellow, with an odd look, “ follow me for a moment; I have news for you.”

At this singular request, the baron paused for a moment in silent surprise.

“Important news, Colonel!” repeated the man with the thick gloves.

This persistence decided Baron Vœthaün. At such a crisis, and with such a mission as his, no information was to be despised. “ So be it,” said he.

The little man preceded him, and as soon as they were outside the town, he stopped. “ Colonel, would you really like to destroy all the insurgents at a single blow?”

The colonel laughed, saying, “Why, that would not be a bad way to open the campaign.”

“Very well! Then station your men in ambush this very day, in Black Pillar Pass, two miles distant from the town; the rebels are to encamp there to-night. When you see their first fire blaze, fall upon them with your troops. Victory will be easy.”

“Excellent advice, my good man, and I thank you for it; but how did you learn all this?”

“If you knew me, Colonel, you would rather ask me how I could fail to know it.”

“Who are you, then?”

The man stamped his foot. “ I did not come here to answer such questions.”

“Fear nothing. Whoever you may be, the service which you have done us must be your safeguard. Perhaps you were one of the rebels?”

“I refused to join them.”

“Then why conceal your name, if you are a loyal subject of the king?”

“What is that to you?”

The colonel made another attempt to gain a little information as to this singular giver of advice. “ Tell me. is it true that the insurgents are under command of the famous Hans of Iceland?”

“Hans of Iceland!” repeated the little man, with peculiar emphasis.

The baron repeated his question. A burst of laughter, which might have passed for the roar of a wild beast, was the only answer which he could obtain. He ventured a few more questions as to the number and the leaders of the miners; the little man silenced him.

“Colonel of the Munkholm musketeers, I have told you all that I have to tell. Lie in wait today in Black Pillar Pass with your entire regiment, and you may destroy the whole rebel force.”

“You will not tell me who you are; you thus prevent the king from proving his gratitude; but it is only right that I should reward you for the service which you have done me.”

The colonel threw his purse at the small man’s feet.

“Keep your gold, Colonel,” said he;” I do not need it. And,” he added, pointing to a large bag which hung from his rope girdle, “ if you wish pay for killing these men, I have money enough, Colonel, to give you for their blood.”

Before the colonel could recover from the surprise caused by this mysterious being’s inexplicable words, he had vanished.

Baron Vœthaün slowly retraced his steps, wondering whether he should place any faith in the fellow’s news. As he entered his quarters, he was handed a letter, sealed with the lord chancellor’s arms. It contained a message from Count d’Ahlefeld, which the colonel found, with amazement that may be readily imagined, consisted of the same piece of news and the same advice just given him outside the city gate by the incomprehensible character with the straw hat and the thick gloves.

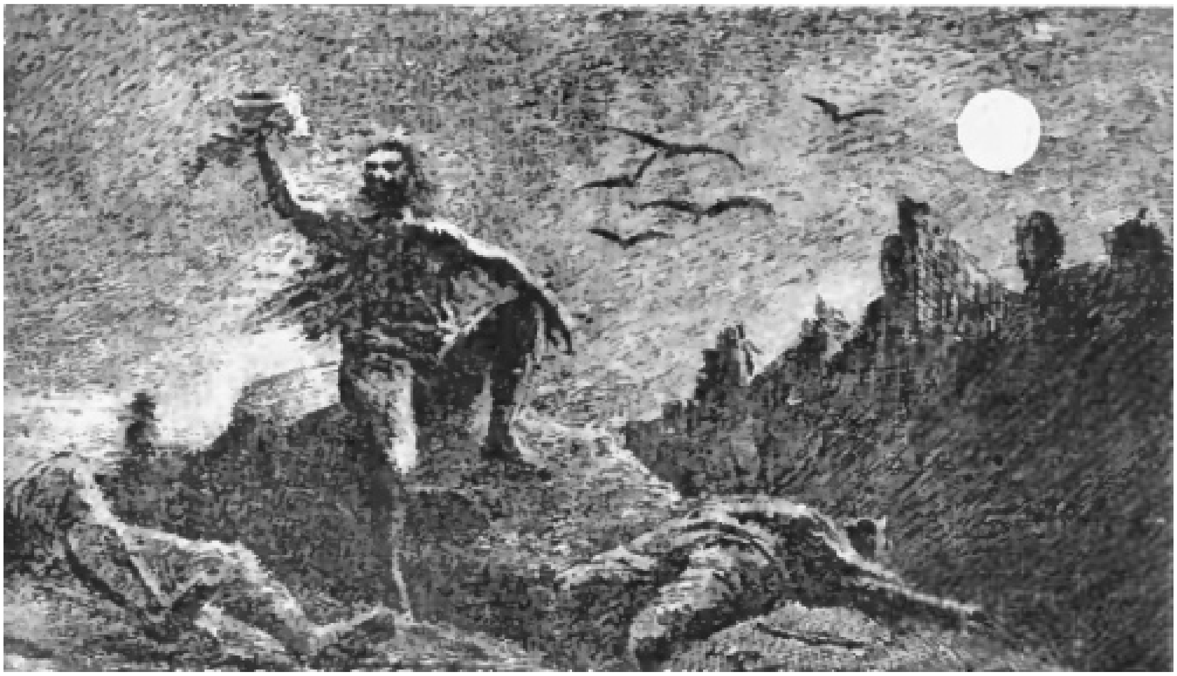

A man, seated on a Heap of Slain

CHAPTER XXXIX THE MONSTER IN HIS TRUE COLORS.

All must perish!
The sword cleaveth the helmet;
The strong armor is pierced by the lance;
Fire devoureth the dwelling of princes;
Engines break down the fences of the battle.
All must perish!
The race of Hengist is gone
The name of Horsa is no more!
Shrink not then from your doom, sons of the sword!
Let your blades drink blood like wine;
Feast ye in the banquet of slaughter,
By the light of the blazing halls!
Strong be your swords while your blood is warm,
And spare neither for pity nor fear,
For vengeance hath but an hour;
Strong hate itself shall expire!
I also must perish!
Walter Scott

We will not try to describe the fearful confusion which broke the already straggling ranks of the rebels, when the fatal defile suddenly revealed to them all its steep and bristling peaks, all its caverns peopled with unlooked-for foes. It would be hard to say whether the prolonged shout, made up of a thousand shrieks, which rose from the columns of men thus unexpectedly mowed down, was a yell of despair, of terror, or of rage. The dreadful fire vomited against them from every side by the now unmasked platoons of the royal troops, grew hotter every moment; and before another shot from their lines followed Kennybol’s unfortunate volley, they were wrapped in a stifling cloud of burning smoke, through which death flew blindly, where each man, shut off from his friends, could but dimly distinguish the musketeers, lancers, and dragoons, moving vaguely among the cliffs and upon the edge of the thickets, like demons in a redhot furnace.

The insurgents, thus scattered over a distance of a mile, upon a narrow, winding road, bordered on one side by a deep torrent, on the other by a rocky wall, which made it impossible for them to turn and fall back, were like a serpent destroyed by a blow on the back, when he has unwound all his spirals, and, though cut to pieces, still tries to turn and coil, striving to unite his separate fragments.

When their first surprise was past, a common despair seemed to animate all these men, naturally fierce and intrepid. Frantic with rage to be thus overwhelmed without the possibility of defence, the rebels uttered a simultaneous shout, a shout which in an instant drowned the clamor of their triumphant foes; and when the latter saw these men, without leaders, in dire disorder, almost destitute of weapons, climbing perpendicular cliffs, under a terrible fire, clinging with tooth and nail to the bushes growing on the verge of the precipice, brandishing hammers and pitchforks, the well-armed troops, well-drilled, securely posted as they were, although they had not yet lost a single man, could not resist a moment of involuntary panic.

Several times these barbarians clambered over a bridge of dead bodies, or upon the shoulders of their comrades planted against the rock like a living ladder, to the heights held by their assailants; but they had scarcely cried, “ Liberty!” had scarcely lifted their hatchets or their knotted clubs, they had scarcely showed their blackened faces, foaming with convulsive rage, ere they were hurled into the abyss, dragging with them such of their rash companions as they encountered in their fall, hanging to some bush or hugging some cliff.

The efforts of these unfortunates to fly and to defend themselves were fruitless. Every outlet was guarded; every accessible point swarmed with soldiers. The greater part of the luckless rebels bit the dust, perishing when they had shattered scythe or cutlass upon some granite fragment; some, folding their arms, their eyes fixed upon the ground, sat by the roadside, silently waiting for a ball to hurl them into the torrent below; those whom Hacket’s forethought had provided with, wretched muskets, fired a few chance shots at the summit of the cliffs and the mouth of the caves, from which a ceaseless rain of shot fell upon their heads. A tremendous uproar, in which the furious shouts of the rebel leaders and the quiet commands of the king’s officers were plainly distinguishable, was mingled with the intermittent and frequent din of musketry, while a bloody vapor rose and floated above the scene of carnage, veiling the face of the mountains in tremulous mists; and the stream, white with foam, flowed like an enemy between the two bodies of hostile men, bearing away upon its bosom its prey of corpses.

In the earlier stage of the action, or rather of the slaughter, the Kiölen mountaineers, under the brave and reckless Kennybol, were the greatest sufferers. It will be remembered that they formed the advance-guard of the rebel army, and that they had entered the pine wood at the head of the pass. The ill-fated Kennybol had no sooner fired his gun, than the forest, peopled as by magic with hostile sharpshooters, surrounded them with a ring of fire; while from a level height, commanded by a number of huge bowlders, an entire battalion of the Munkholm regiment, formed in a hollow square, battered them unceasingly with a fearful musketry. In this horrible emergency, Kennybol, distracted and aghast, gazed at the mysterious giant, his only hope of safety lying in some superhuman power such as that of Hans of Iceland; but, alas! the awful demon did not suddenly unfold broad wings and soar above the combatants, spitting forth fire and brimstone upon the musketeers; he did not grow and grow until he reached the clouds, and overthrow a mountain upon the foe, or stamp upon the earth and open a yawning gulf to swallow up the ambushed army. The dreadful Hans of Iceland shrank like Kennybol from the first volley of shot, and approaching him, with troubled countenance asked for a carbine, because, he said, in a very commonplace tone, at such a time his axe was quite as useless as any old woman’s spindle.

Kennybol, amazed, but still credulous, offered his own musket to the giant with a terror which almost made him forget his fear of the balls showering about him. Still expecting a miracle, he looked to see his fatal weapon become as big as a cannon in the hands of Hans of Iceland, or to see it change into a winged dragon darting fire from eyes, mouth, and nostrils. Nothing of the sort occurred, and the poor hunter’s astonishment reached its climax when he saw the demon load the gun with ordinary powder and shot, just as he himself might have done, take aim like himself, and fire, though with far less skill than he would have shown. He stared at him in stupid surprise, as this purely mechanical act was repeated again and again; and convinced at last that all hope of a miracle must be abandoned, he turned his thoughts to rescuing his companions and himself from their evil predicament by some human means. Already his poor old friend Guldon Stayper lay beside him, riddled with bullets; already his followers, terrified and unable to escape, surrounded on every hand, huddled together without a thought of defence, uttering distressing cries. Kennybol saw what an easy target this mass of men afforded the enemy’s guns, each discharge destroying a score of the insurgents. He ordered his unfortunate companions to scatter, to take refuge in the bushes along the road, much thicker and larger at this point than anywhere else in Black Pillar Pass, to hide in the underbrush, and to reply as best they could to the more and more murderous fire from the sharpshooters and the Munkholm battalion. The mountaineers, for the most part well armed, being all hunters, carried out their leader's order with a readiness which they might not have displayed at a less critical moment; for in the face of danger men usually lose their head, and obey willingly any one who has presence of mind and self-possession to act for all.

Still, this wise measure was far from insuring victory, or even safety. More mountaineers lay stretched upon the ground than still lived, and in spite of the example and encouragement offered them by their leader and the giant, several of them, leaning on their useless guns or prostrate with the wounded, obstinately persisted in waiting to be killed without taking the trouble to kill others in return. It may seem amazing that these men, in the habit of exposing their life every day in their expeditions over the glaciers in pursuit of wild beasts, should lose heart so soon; but let no one forget that in vulgar hearts courage is purely local. A man may laugh at shot and shell, and shiver in the dark or on the edge of a precipice; a man may face fierce animals daily, leap across fearful abysses, and yet run from a volley of artillery. Fearlessness is often only a habit; and one who has ceased to fear death under certain forms, dreads it none the less.

Kennybol, surrounded by heaps of dying friends, began himself to despair, although as yet he had received only a slight scratch on his left arm, and the diabolical giant still kept up his fire with the most comforting composure. All at once he saw an extraordinary confusion in the fatal battalion posted on the heights, which could not be caused by the slight damage inflicted by the very feeble resistance of his followers. He heard fearful shrieks of agony, the curses of the dying, exclamations of terror, rise from the victors.

Soon their fire slackened, the smoke cleared away, and he distinctly saw huge masses of granite falling upon the Munkholm musketeers from the top of the high cliff overlooking the level height upon which they were stationed. These bowlders succeeded one another with awful rapidity; they crashed one upon the other, and rebounded among the soldiers, who breaking their lines rushed in dire disorder down the hill, and fled in every direction.

At this unexpected aid, Kennybol turned; but the giant was still there! The mountaineer was dumfounded; for he supposed that Hans of Iceland had at last found his wings and taken his place upon the cliff, from which he overwhelmed the enemy. He looked up to the spot whence those fearful masses fell, and saw nothing. He could therefore only suppose that a party of rebels had succeeded in reaching this dangerous position, although he saw no glitter of weapons, and heard no shouts of triumph.

However, the fire from the plateau had wholly ceased; the trees hid the remnant of the royal troops, who were probably rallying their forces at the foot of the hill. The musketry from the sharpshooters also became less frequent. Kennybol, like a skilful leader, took advantage of this unexpected interval; he encouraged his men, and showed them, by the sombre light which reddened the scene of slaughter, the pile of corpses heaped upon the height, and the bowlders which still fell at intervals.

Then the mountaineers in their turn answered the enemy’s groans with shouts of victory. They formed in line, and although still harassed by sharpshooters scattered among the bushes, they resolved, filled with fresh courage, to force their way out of this ill-omened defile.

The column thus formed was about to move; Kennybol had already given the signal with his horn, amid loud cries of “ Liberty! liberty! No more protectorate!” when the notes of trumpet and drum sounding a charge were heard directly in front of them. Then the rest of the battalion from the height, strengthened by reinforcements of fresh troops, appeared within gunshot at a turn in the road, displaying a bristling line of pikes and bayonets upheld by rank upon rank as far as the eye could reach. Arriving thus unexpectedly in sight of Kennybol’s division, the troops halted, and a man, who seemed to be the commanding officer, stepped forward, waving a white flag and escorted by a trumpeter.

The unforeseen appearance of this troop did not dismay Kennybol. In time of danger there is a point where surprise and fear become impossible.

At the first sound of trumpet and drum the old fox of Kiölen halted his men. As the royal troops drew up before him in line of battle, he ordered every gun to be loaded, and formed his mountaineers in double ranks, so that they might not offer so broad a mark for the enemy’s fire. He placed himself at the head, the giant at his side. as in the heat of action, for he began to feel quite familiar with him, and observed that his eyes did not flame quite so brightly as a smithy's forge, and that his pretended claws were by no means as unlike ordinary human fingernails as was claimed for them.

When the officer in command of the musketeers stepped forward as if to surrender, and the sharpshooters ceased firing, although their loud shouts, ringing out on every hand, declared them still ambushed in the forests, he suspended his preparations for defence. Meantime, the officer with the white flag had reached the centre of the space between the two hostile columns; here he paused, and the trumpeter accompanying him blew three loud blasts. The officer then cried in a loud voice, distinctly heard by the mountaineers, in spite of the ever increasing tumult of the battle raging behind them in the mountain gorges: " In the king's name! The king graciously pardons all those rebels who throw down their arms and surrender their leaders to his Majesty's supreme justice!"

The bearer of the flag of truce had scarcely pronounced those words, when a shot was fired from a neighboring thicket. The officer staggered, took a few steps forward, raising his flag above his head, and fell, exclaiming: " Treason!"

No one knew whose hand had fired the fatal shot.

"Treason! Cowardly treason!" repeated the royal troops, with a thrill of indignation.

And a fearful volley of musketry overwhelmed the mountaineers.

"Treason!" replied the mountaineers in their turn, made furious as they saw their brothers fall.

And a general discharge answered the unexpected attack from the royal troops.

"At them, comrades! Death to those vile cowards! Death!" cried the officers of the musketeers.

And both parties rushed forward with drawn swords, the two contending columns meeting directly over the body of the unfortunate officer, with a fearful din of arms.

The broken ranks were soon inextricably confounded. Rebel chiefs, king's officers, soldiers, mountaineers, all pell-mell ran their heads together, seized one another, grappled like two bands of famished tigers meeting in the desert. Their long pikes, bayonets, and partisans were now useless; swords and hatchets alone gleamed above their heads, and many of the combatants, in their hand- to- hand struggle, could use no other weapon than their dagger or their teeth.

The same rage and fury inspired both mountaineers and musketeers; the common cry of “ Treason! Vengeance!” sprang from every mouth. The fray had reached a point when every heart was full of brutal ferocity, when men walked with utter indifference over heaps of wounded and dead, amid which the dying revive only to make one last attack on him who tramples them under foot.

At this moment a short man, whom several combatants, amid the smoke and streaming blood, took for a wild beast, in his dress of skins, flung himself into the thick of the carnage, with awful laughter and yells of joy. None knew whence he came, nor upon which side he fought; for his stone axe did not choose its victims, but smote alike the skull of a rebel and the head of a musketeer. He seemed, however, to prefer slaying the Munkholrn troops. All gave way before him; he rushed through the fray like a disembodied spirit; and his bloody axe whirled about him without a pause, scattering fragments of flesh, lacerated limbs, and shattered bones on every side.

He shrieked “Vengeance!” as did all the rest, and uttered strange words, the name of “ Gill “ recurring frequently. This fearful stranger seemed to regard the slaughter as a feast.

A mountaineer upon whom his murderous glance fell threw himself at the feet of the giant in whom Kennybol had placed such vain trust, crying:” Hans of Iceland, save me!”

“Hans of Iceland!” repeated the little man.

He approached the giant.

“Are you Hans of Iceland?” he asked.

The giant, by way of answer, raised his axe. The small man sprang back, and the blade, as it fell, was buried in the skull of the wretch who had implored his aid.

The unknown laughed aloud.

“Ho! ho! by Ingulf! I thought Hans of Iceland was more skilful”

“It is thus that Hans of Iceland saves those who pray to him for help!” said the giant.

“You are right.”

The two dreadful champions attacked each other madly.

Stone axe and steel axe met; they clashed so fiercely that both blades flew in fragments, with a myriad sparks.

Quicker than thought, the little man, finding himself disarmed, seized a heavy wooden club, dropped by some dying man, and evading the giant, who stooped to grasp him in his arms, dealt a furious blow with both hands on the broad brow of his colossal antagonist.

The giant uttered a stifled shriek, and fell. The little man trampled him under foot in triumph, foaming with joy, and exclaiming, “You bore a name too heavy for you!” and brandishing his victorious mace, he rushed in search of fresh victims.

The giant was not dead. The force of the blow had stunned him, and he dropped senseless, but soon opened his eyes, and gave faint signs of returning life. A musketeer, seeing him through the uproar, threw himself upon him, shouting, “ Hans of Iceland is taken! Victory!”

“Hans of Iceland is taken!” repeated every voice, whether in tones of triumph or distress.

The little man had vanished.

For some time the mountaineers had realized that they must perforce submit to superior numbers; for the Munkholm musketeers had been joined by the sharpshooters from the forest, and by detachments of lancers and foot dragoons, who poured in from deep gorges, where the surrender of many of the rebel leaders had put a stop to slaughter. Brave Kennybol, wounded early in the fight, was made a prisoner. Hans of Iceland’s capture deprived the mountaineers of such courage as they still possessed, and they threw down their arms.

When the first beams of the rising sun gilded the sharp peaks of lofty glaciers still half submerged in darkness, mournful peace and fearful silence reigned in Black Pillar Pass, broken only by feeble moans borne away by the chill breeze.

Black clouds of crows flocked to those fatal gorges from every quarter of the horizon; and a few poor goat-herds, who passed the cliffs at twilight, hastened home in terror, declaring that they had seen an animal with the face of a man in Black Pillar Pass, seated on a heap of slain, drinking their blood.

CHAPTER XL THE MOTLEY DRESS.

Let him who will, burn beneath these smouldering fires.
Brantome

“Open” the window, daughter; those panes are very dirty, and I would fain see the day.” “ See the day, father! It will soon be night.” “The sun still lies on the hills along the fjord. I long to breathe the free air through my prison bars. The sky is so clear!”

“Father, a storm is at hand.”

“A storm, Ethel! Where do you see it?”

“It is because the sky is clear, father, that I foresee a storm.”

The old man looked at his daughter in surprise.

“Had I reasoned thus in my youth, I should not be here.” Then he added in a firmer tone: “ What you say is correct, but it is not a common inference for one of your age. I do not understand why your youthful reasoning should be so like my aged experience.”

Ethel’s eyes fell, as if she were troubled by this serious and simple remark. She clasped her hands sadly, and a deep sigh heaved her breast.

“Daughter.” said the aged prisoner, “for some days you have looked pale, as if life had never warmed the blood in your veins. For several mornings you have approached me with red and swollen lids, with eyes that have wept and watched. I have passed several days in silence, Ethel, with no effort on your part to rouse me from my gloomy meditations on the past. You sit beside me more melancholy even than myself; and yet you are not, like your father, weighed down by the burden of a whole lifetime of empty inaction. Morning clouds vanish quickly. You are at that period of existence when you can choose in dreams a future independent of the present, be it what it may. What troubles you, my daughter? Thanks to your constant captivity, you are sheltered from all sudden calamity. “What error have you committed? I cannot think that you are grieving for me; you must by this time be accustomed to my incurable misfortunes. Hope, to be sure, can no longer be the subject of my discourse; but that is no reason why I should read despair in your eyes.”

As he spoke these words, the prisoner’s stern voice melted with paternal love. Ethel stood silently before him. All at once she turned away with an almost convulsive motion, fell upon her knees on the stone floor, and hid her face in her hands, as if to stifle the tears and sobs which burst from her.

Too much woe filled full the wretched girl’s heart. “What had she done to that fatal stranger, that she should reveal to her the secret that was eating away her very life? Alas! since she had known her Ordener’s true name, the poor child had not closed her eyes, nor had her soul known rest. Night brought her no alleviation, save that then she could weep freely and unseen. All was over! He was not hers, he who was hers by all her memories, by all her pangs, by all her prayers, he whose wife she had held herself to be upon the faith of her dreams. For the evening when Ordener had clasped her so tenderly in his arms was no more than a dream to her now. And in truth that sweet dream had been repeated nightly in her sleep. Was it a guilty love which she still cherished for that absent friend, struggle against it as she might? Her Ordener was betrothed to another! And who can tell what that virginal heart endured when the strange and unknown sentiment of jealousy found entrance there like a poisonous viper? When she tossed for long sleepless hours upon her fevered bed, picturing her Ordener, perhaps even then, in the arms of another, fairer, richer, nobler than herself? For, thought she, I was mad indeed to suppose that he would brave death for me. Ordener is the son of a viceroy, of a great lord, and I am nothing but a poor prisoner, nothing but the daughter of a proscribed and exiled man. He has left me, for he is free; and left me, no doubt, to wed his lovely betrothed, the daughter of a chancellor, a minister, a haughty count! Has my Ordener deceived me, then? Oh, God! who would have thought that such a voice was capable of deceit?

And the wretched Ethel wept and wept again, and saw her Ordener before her, the man whom she had made the unwitting divinity of her whole being, that Ordener adorned with all the splendor of his rank, advancing to the altar amid festal preparations, and gazing upon her rival with the smile that had once been her delight.

However, in spite of her unspeakable agony, she never for an instant forgot her filial affection. The weak girl made the most heroic efforts to conceal her distress from her unfortunate father; for there is nothing more painful than to repress all outward signs of grief, and tears unshed are far more bitter than those that flow. Several days had passed before the silent old man observed the change in his Ethel, and at his affectionate questions her long repressed grief had at last burst forth.

For some time he watched her emotion with a bitter smile and a shake of the head; but at last he said: “Ethel, you do not live among men; why do you weep?”

He had scarcely finished these words, when the sweet and noble girl rose. By a great effort she checked her tears, and dried her eyes with her scarf, saying: “ Father, forgive me; it was a momentary weakness.” And she looked at him with an attempt to smile.

She went to the back of the room, found the Edda, seated herself by her taciturn father, and opened the book at random; then, mastering her voice, she began to read. But her useless task was unheeded by her and by the old man, who waved his hand.

“Enough, enough, my daughter!”

She closed her book.

“Ethel,” added Schumacker, “ do you ever think of Ordener?”

The young girl started in confusion.

“Yes,” he continued, “ of that Ordener who went-”

“Father,” interrupted Ethel, “why should we trouble ourselves about him? I think as you do, that he left us, never to return.” “ Never to return, my daughter! I cannot have said such a, thing. On the contrary, I have a strange presentiment that he will come back.”

“That was not your opinion, father, when you spoke so distrustingly of the young man.”

“Did I speak distrustfully of him?”

“Yes, father, and I agree with you; I think that he deceived us.”

“That he deceived us, daughter! If I judged him thus, I acted like most men who condemn without proof. I have received nothing but professions of devotion from this Ordener.”

“And how do you know, father, that those cordial words did not hide treacherous thoughts?”

“Usually men disregard misfortune and disgrace. If this Ordener were not attached to me, he would not have visited my prison without a purpose.”

“Are you sure,” replied Ethel, feebly, “that he had no purpose in coming here?”

“What could it be? “ eagerly asked the old man.

Ethel was silent.

It was too great an effort for her to continue to accuse her beloved Ordener, whom she had formerly defended against her father.

“I am no longer Count Griffenfeld,” he resumed. “ I am no longer lord chancellor of Denmark and Norway, the favored dispenser of royal bounty, the all-powerful minister. I am a miserable prisoner of State, a proscribed man, to be shunned like one stricken with the plague. It shows courage even to mention my name without execration to the men whom I overwhelmed with honors and wealth , it shows devotion for a man to cross the threshold of this dungeon unless he be a jailer or an executioner; it shows heroism, my girl, for a man to cross it and call himself my friend. No; I will not be ungrateful, like the rest of humanity. That young man merits my gratitude, were it only for letting me see a kindly face and hear a consoling voice.”

Ethel listened in agony to these words, which would have charmed her a few days earlier, when this Ordener was still cherished as her Ordener. The old man, after a brief pause, resumed in a solemn tone: “ Listen to me, my daughter; for what I have to say to you is serious. I feel that I am fading slowly; my life is ebbing. Yes, daughter, my end is at hand.”

Ethel interrupted him with a stifled groan.

“Oh God, father, say not so! For mercy’s sake, spare your poor daughter! Alas! would you forsake me? What would become of me, alone in the world, if I were deprived of your protection?”

“The protection of a proscribed man! “ said her father, shaking his head. “However, that is the very thing of which I have been thinking. Yes, your future happiness occupies me even more than my past misfortunes; hear me, therefore, and do not interrupt me again. This Ordener does not deserve that you should judge him so severely, my daughter, and I had not hitherto thought that you felt such dislike to him His appearance is frank and noble, which proves nothing, truly; but I must say that he does not strike me as without merit, although it is enough that he has a human soul, for it to contain the seeds of every vice and every crime. There is no flame without smoke.”

The old man again paused, and fixing his eyes upon his daughter, added: “ Warned from within of approaching death, I have pondered much, Ethel , and if he return, as I hope he may, I shall make him your protector and husband.”

Ethel trembled and turned pale , at the very moment when her dream of happiness had fled forever, her father strove to realize it. The bitter reflection, “ I might have been happy!” revived all the violence of her despair. For some moments she was unable to speak, lest the burning tears which filled her eyes should flow afresh.

Her father waited for her answer.

“What!” she said at last in a faint voice, “ would you have chosen him for my husband, father, without knowing his birth, his family, his name?”

“I not only chose him, my daughter, I choose him still.”

The old man’s tone was almost imperious. Ethel sighed.

“I choose him for you, I say; and what is his birth to me? I do not care to know his family, since I know him. Think of it; he is the only anchor of salvation left to you. Fortunately, I believe that he does not feel the same aversion for you which you show for him.”

The poor girl raised her eyes to heaven.

“You hear me, Ethel! I repeat, what is his birth to me? He is doubtless of obscure rank, for those born in palaces are not taught to frequent prisons. Do not show such proud regret, my daughter; do not forget that Ethel Schumacker is no longer Princess of Wollin and Countess of Tönsberg. You have fallen lower than the point from which your father rose by his own efforts. Consider yourself happy if this man accept your hand, be his family what it may. If he be of humble birth, so much the better, my daughter; at least your days will be sheltered from the storms which have tormented your father. Far from the envy and hatred of men, under some unknown name, you will lead a modest existence, very different from mine, for its end will be better than its beginning.”

Ethel fell on her knees.

“Oh, father, have mercy!”

He opened his arms to her in amazement.

“What do you mean, my daughter!?”

“In Heaven’s name, do not describe a happiness which is not for me!”

“Ethel,” sternly answered the old man, “do not risk your whole life. I refused the hand of a princess of the blood royal, a princess of Holstein Augustenburg, do you hear that? and my pride was cruelly punished. You despise an obscure but loyal man; tremble lest yours be as sadly chastised.”

“Would to Heaven,” sighed Ethel, “that he were an obscure and loyal man!”

The old man rose, and paced the room in agitation. “ My daughter,” said he, “ your poor father implores and commands you. Do not let me die uncertain as to your future; promise me that you will accept this stranger as your husband."

"I will obey you always, father; but do not hope that he will return."

"I have weighed the probabilities, and I think from the tone in which Ordener uttered your name

"That he loves me!" bitterly interrupted Ethel. " Oh, no; do not believe it."

The father answered coldly:" I do not know whether, to use your girlish expression, he loves you; but I know that he will return."

"Give up that idea, father; besides, you would not wish him for your son-in-law if you knew who he is."

"Ethel, he shall be my son-in-law, be his name and rank what they may."

"Well!" she replied, "how if this young man, whom you regard as your solace, whom you consider as your daughter's support, be the son of one of your mortal foes, of the viceroy of Norway, Count Guldenlew?"

Schumacker started back.

"Heavens! what do you say? Ordener! that Ordener! It is impossible!"

The look of unutterable hatred which flashed from the old man's faded eyes froze Ethel's trembling heart, and she vainly repented the rash words which she had uttered.

The blow was struck. For a few moments Schumacker stood motionless, with folded arms; his whole body quivered as if laid upon live coals; his flaming eyes started from their sockets; and his gaze, riveted to the pavement, seemed as if it would pierce the stones. At last these words issued from his livid lips in a voice as faint as that of a man who dreams." Ordener! Yes, it must be so; Ordener Guldenlew! It is well. Come, Schumacker, old fool, open your arms to him; the loyal youth has come to stab you to the heart."

Suddenly he stamped upon the ground, and went on in tones of thunder: " So they send their whole infamous race to insult me in my disgrace and captivity! I have already seen a d'Ahlefeld; I almost smiled upon a Guldenlew! Monsters! Who would ever have thought that this Ordener possessed such a soul and bore such a name? Wretched me! Wretched he!"

Then he fell exhausted into his chair, and while his breast heaved with sighs, poor Ethel, trembling with fright, wept at his feet.

"Do not weep, my daughter," said he, in gloomy tones; " come, oh, come to my heart!"

And he clasped her in his arms.

Ethel knew not how to explain this caress at a moment of rage, but he resumed: “ At least, girl, you were more clear-sighted than your old father. You were not deceived by that serpent with gentle but venomous eyes. Come! let me thank you for the hatred which you have shown me that you feel for that contemptible Ordener.”

She shuddered at these praises, alas! so ill-deserved.

“Father; ‘ said she, “ be calm!”

“Promise me,” added Schumacker, “ that you will always retain the same feeling for the son of Guldeulew. Swear it!”

“God forbids us to swear, father.”

“Swear, swear, girl!” vehemently repeated Schumacker.

“Will you always retain the same feeling for Ordener Guldenlew?”

Ethel had scarcely strength to falter, “ Always.”

The old man drew her to his heart.

“It is well, my daughter! Let me at least bequeath to you my hate, if I cannot leave you the wealth and honors of which I was robbed. Listen! they deprived your old father of rank and glory; they dragged him in irons to the gallows, as if to stain him with every infamy and make him endure every torment. Wretches! Oh, may heaven and hell hear me, and may they be cursed in this life and cursed in their posterity!”

He was silent for a moment; then, embracing his poor daughter, terrified by his curses: “ But Ethel, my only glory and my only treasure, tell me, how was your instinct so much more skilful than mine? How did you discover that this traitor bears one of the abhorred names inscribed upon my heart in gall? How did you penetrate his secret?”

She was summoning all her strength to answer, when the door opened.

A man dressed in black, carrying in his hand an ebony wand, and wearing about his neck a chain of unpolished steel, appeared upon the threshold, escorted by halberdiers also dressed in black.

“What do you want?’’ asked the captive, sharply, and in astonishment.

The man, without replying or looking at him, unrolled a long parchment, to which was fastened by silken threads a seal of green wax, and read aloud: “ In the name of his

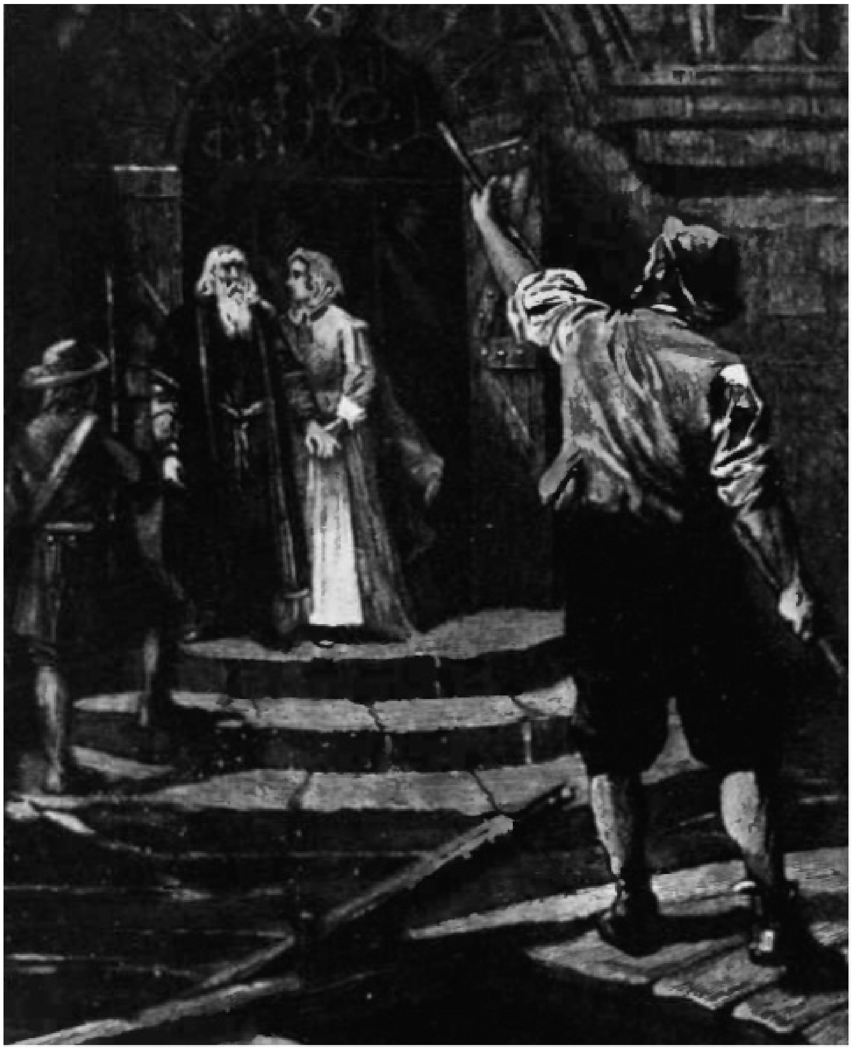

They followed their dismal Escort

Majesty, our most gracious sovereign and lord, Christian the king. Schumacker, prisoner of State in the royal fortress of Munkholm, and his daughter, are commanded to follow the bearer of the said command."

Schumacker repeated his question: " What do you want?"

The man in black, still immovable, prepared to re-read the document.

"That will do," said the old man.

Then, rising, he signed to the surprised and startled Ethel to follow with him this dismal escort.

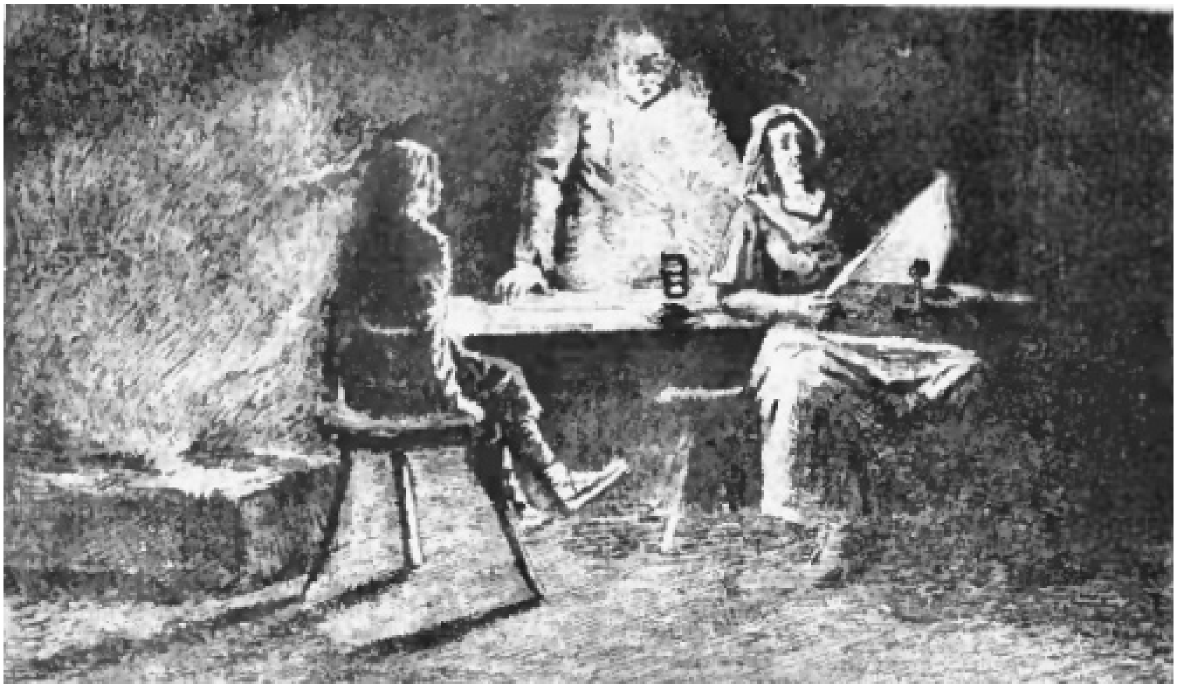

The Woman took the Parchment and read aloud

CHAPTER XLI LIKE MEETS LIKE AND SHUDDERS.

A doleful signal was given, an abject minister of justice knocked at his door and informed him that he was wanted.-

Joseph De Maistre

Night had fallen; a cold wind whistled around the Cursed Tower, and the doors of Vygla ruin rattled on their hinges, as if the same hand had shaken all of them at once.

The wild inhabitants of the tower, the hangman and his family, had gathered about the fire lighted in the middle of the room on the first floor, which cast a fitful glow upon their dark faces and scarlet garments. The children's features were fierce as their father's laughter and haggard as their mother's gaze. Their eyes, as well as those of Becky were fixed on Orugix, who, seated on a wooden stool, seemed to be recovering his breath, his feet covered with dust, showing that he had but just returned from some distant trip.

"Wife, listen; listen, children. I 've not been gone two whole days merely to bring back bad news. If I am not made executioner to the king before another month is out, I wish I may never tie another slip-noose or handle an axe again. Rejoice, my little wolf-cubs; your father may leave you the Copenhagen scaffold by way of an inheritance, after all."

"Nychol," asked Becky, " what has happened?"

"And you, my old gypsy," rejoined Nychol, with his boisterous laugh, " rejoice too! You can buy any number of blue glass necklaces to adorn your long, skinny neck. Our agreement will soon be up; but never fear, in a month, when you see me chief hangman of both kingdoms, you will not refuse to break another jug with me."

"What is it, what is it, father?" asked the children, the older of whom was playing with a bloody rack, while the little one amused himself by plucking alive a young bird which he had stolen from the nest.

"What is it, children?- Kill that bird, Haspar; it makes as much noise as a rusty saw; and besides, you should never be cruel. Kill it. What is it, you say? Nothing, a trifle, truly; nothing, dame Becky, save that within a week from this time ex-chancellor Schumacker, who is a prisoner at Muukholm, after looking me so closely in the face at Copenhagen, and the famous brigand of Iceland, Hans of Klipstadur, may perhaps both pass through my hands at once."

The red woman's wandering eye assumed an expression of surprised curiosity.

"Schumacker! Hans of Iceland! How is that, Nychol?"

"I'll tell you. all about it. Yesterday morning, on the road to Skongen, at Ordals bridge, I met the whole regiment of musketeers from Munkholm marching back to Throndhjem with a very victorious air. I questioned one of the soldiers, who condescended to answer, probably because he did not know why my jerkin and my cart were red. I learned that the musketeers were returning from Black Pillar Pass, where they had cut to pieces various bands of brigands, that is to say, insurgent miners. Now, you must know, gypsy Becky, that these rebels revolted in Schumacker's name, and were commanded by Hans of Iceland. You must know that his uprising renders Hans of Iceland guilty of the crime of insurrection against royal authority, and Schumacker guilty of high treason, which will naturally lead those two honorable gentlemen to the scaffold or the block. Add to these two superb executions, which cannot fail to bring me in at least fifteen gold ducats each, and to entitle me to the greatest honor in both kingdoms, several other though less important ones

"But do tell me," interrupted Becky, "has Hans of Iceland been captured?"

"Why do you interrupt your lord and master, miserable woman?" said the hangman. " Yes, to be sure, the famous, the impregnable Hans of Iceland is a prisoner, together with several other leaders of the brigands, his lieutenants, who will also bring me in twelve crowns apiece, to say nothing of the sale of their bodies. He was captured, I tell you; and I saw him, if you must know all the particulars, march by between a double file of soldiers."

The woman and children crowded eagerly about Orugix.

"What! did you really see him, father? " asked the children.

"Be quiet, boys. You shriek like a rogue protesting his innocence. I saw him; he is a giant. His hands were tied behind his back, and his forehead was bandaged. I suppose he was wounded in the head. But never fear, I will soon heal his hurt for him." Accompanying these brutal words with a brutal gesture, the hangman added: " There were four of his comrades behind him, prisoners too and wounded, like him, who were being taken, like him, to

Throndhjem, where they are to be tried with exchancellor Schumacker by a court of justice presided over by the lord mayor and the present chancellor.”

“Father, what did the other prisoners look like?”

“The first two were a couple of old men, one of whom wore a miner’s broad felt hat, and the other a mountaineer’s cap; both seemed utterly disheartened. Of the other two, one was a young miner, who marched along with head up, whistling; the other, do you remember, Becky, those travellers who came to this tower some ten days ago, on the night of that terrible storm?”

“As Satan remembers the day of his fall,” replied the woman.

“Did you notice a young man in company with that crazy old doctor with the big periwig, a young fellow, I say, who wore a great green cloak, and a cap with a black leather?”

“Yes, indeed; I can see him now, saying: Woman, we have plenty of gold!”

“Well, old woman, I hope I may never wring the neck of anything worse than a grouse, if the fourth prisoner was not that young man. His face, to be sure, was entirely hidden by his feather, his cap, his hair, and his cloak; besides, he hung his head. But it was the very same dress, the same boots, the same manner. I’ll swallow the stone gallows at Skongen at a single mouthful if it be not the same man! What do you say to that, Becky? Wouldn’t it be a joke if after I had given him something to sustain life he should also receive from me something to cut it short, and should exercise my skill after having tasted my hospitality?”

The hangman’s coarse laughter was loud and long; then he resumed: “ Come, make merry, all of you, and let us drink. Yes, Becky, give me a glass of that beer which scrapes a man’s throat as if he were drinking files, and let me drain it to my future advancement. Come, here’s to the health and prosperity of Nychol Orugix, executioner royal that is to be! I will confess, you old sinner, that I found it hard work to go to Nœs village to hang a contemptible clown for stealing cabbage and chicory. Still, when I thought it over, I felt that thirty-two escalins were not to be sneezed at, and that my hands would not be degraded by turning off mere thieves and riff-raff of that kind until after they had actually beheaded the noble count and echancellor, and the famous demon of Iceland.

I therefore resigned myself, while waiting for my certificate as hangman to the king, to despatch the poor wretch at Nœs village. And here,” he added, drawing a leather purse from his wallet, “ are the thirty-two escalins for you, old girl.”

At this moment three blasts from a horn were heard outside.

“Woman,” cried Orugix, “ those are the bowmen of the lord mayor.”

With these words he hurried downstairs.

An instant later he reappeared, carrying a large parch- ment, of which he had broken the seal.

“There,” said he to his wife, “ there’s what the lord mayor has sent me. Do you decipher it; for you can read Satan’s scrawl. Perhaps it is my promotion already; for since the court is to have a chancellor to preside over it and a chancellor as prisoner at the bar, it is only proper that the man who carries out the sentence should be an executioner royal.”

The woman took the parchment, and after studying it for some time, read aloud, while the children stared at her in stupid wonder: “ In the name of the Council of the province of Throndhjem, Nychol Orugix, hangman for the province, is hereby ordered to repair at once to Throndhjem, and to carry with him his best axe, block, and black hangings.”

“Is that all?” asked the hangman, in a dissatisfied tone.

“That is all,” replied Becky.

“Hangman for the province!” muttered Orugix.

He cast an angry glance at the official document, but at last exclaimed: “ Well, I must obey and be off. After all, they tell me to bring my best axe and the black hangings. Take care, Becky, that you rub off the spots of rust which have dimmed my axe, and see that the hangings are not stained with blood. We must not be discouraged; perhaps they mean to promote me in payment for this fine execution. So much the worse for the prisoners; they will not have the satisfaction of dying by the hand of an executioner royal.”

CHAPTER XLII THE SCHEMER OUTWITTED.

Elvira. “What has become of poor Sancho? He has not appeared in town?
Nuno. Sancho has doubtless contrived to find shelter.
Lope De Vega: The Best Alcalde is the. King.

D’Ahlefeld, dragging behind him an ample robe of black satin lined with ermine, his head and shoulders concealed by a large judicial wig, his breast covered with stars and decorations, among which were the collars of the Royal Orders of the Elephant and the Dannebrog, clad, in a word, in the complete costume of the lord chancellor of Denmark and Norway, paced with an anxious air up and clown the apartment of Countess d’Ahlefeld, who was alone with him at the moment.

“Come, it is nine o’clock; the court is about to open; it must not be kept waiting, for sentence must be pronounced to-night, so that it may be carried out by tomorrow morning at latest. The mayor assures me that the hangman will be here before dawn. Elphega. did you order the boat to take me to Munkholm?”

“My lord, it has been waiting for you at least half an hour,” replied the countess, rising from her seat.

“And is my litter at the door?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Good! So you say, Elphega,” added the count, clapping his hand to his head, “that there is a love affair between Ordener Guldenlew and Schumacker’s daughter?”

“A very serious one, I assure you,” replied the countess, with a smile of anger and contempt.

“Who would ever have imagined it? And yet I tell you that I suspected it.”

“And so did I,” said the countess. “ This is a trick played upon us by that confounded Levin.”

“Old scamp of a Mecklenburger!” muttered the chancellor; “ never fear, I’ll recommend you to Areusdorf. If I could only succeed in disgracing him! Ah! see here, Elphega, I have an inspiration.”

“What is it? “

"You know that the persons whom we are to try at Munkholm Castle are six in number, Schumacker, whom I hope I shall have no further cause to fear, tomorrow, at this hour; the colossal mountaineer, our false Hans of Iceland, who has sworn to sustain his character to the end, in the hope that Musdœmon, from whom he has already received large sums of money, will help him to escape, that Musdœmon really has the most devilish ideas! The other four prisoners are the three rebel chiefs, and a certain unknown character, who stumbled, no one knows how, into the midst of the assembly at Apsyl- Corh, and whom Musdœmon's precautions have thrown into our hands. Musdœmon thinks that the fellow is a spy of Levin de Knud. And indeed, when brought here a prisoner, his first words were to ask for the general; and when he learned of the Mecklenburger's absence, he seemed dumfounded. Moreover, he has refused to answer any of Musdœmon's questions."

"My dear lord," interrupted the countess, " why have you not questioned him yourself? "

"Really, Elphega, how could I, in the midst of all the business which has overwhelmed me since my arrival? I trusted the affair to Musdœmon, whom it interests as much as it does me. Besides, my dear, the fellow is not of the slightest consequence in himself; he is merely some poor vagabond. We can only turn him to account by representing him to be an agent of Levin de Knud, and as he was captured in the rebel ranks, it would go to prove a guilty connivance between Schumacker and the Mecklenburger, which will suffice to bring about, if not the arraignment, at least the disgrace, of that confounded Levin."

The countess meditated for a moment. " You are right, my lord. But how about this fatal passion of Baron Thorwick for Ethel Schumacker?"

The chancellor again rubbed his head. Then, shrugging his shoulders, he said: " See here, Elphega; neither you nor I are young novices, and we ought to understand men. When Schumacker has been condemned for high treason for the second time; when he has undergone an infamous death on the gallows; when his daughter, reduced to the lowest ranks of society, is forever publicly disgraced by her father's shame, do you suppose, Elphega, that Ordener Guldenlew will then recall for a single instant this childish flirtation which you call passion, judging it by the extravagant talk of a crazy girl, or that he will hesitate a single day between the dishonored daughter of a wretched criminal and the illustrious daughter of a great chancellor? We must judge others by ourselves; where do you find that the human heart is so constituted?”

“I trust that you may be right. But I think you will not disapprove of my request to the mayor that Schumacker’s daughter might be present at her father’s trial, and might be placed in the same gallery with me. I am curious to study the creature.”

“All that can throw light upon the affair is valuable,” said the chancellor, calmly. “ But tell me, does anybody know where Ordener is at present? “

“No one knows; he is the worthy pupil of that old Levin, a knight-errant like him. I believe that he is visiting Wardhus just now.”

“Well, well, our Ulrica will settle him. But come, I forget that the court is waiting for me.”

The countess detained the chancellor. “ One word more, my lord. I asked you yesterday, but your mind was full of other things, and I could not get an answer, where is my Frederic?”

“Frederic!” said the count, with a melancholy expression, and hiding his face with his hand.

“Yes, answer me; my Frederic? His regiment has returned to Throndhjem without him. Swear to me that Frederic was not in that horrible affair at Black Pillar Pass. Why do you change color at his name? I am in mortal terror.”

The chancellor’s features resumed their wonted composure. “ Make yourself easy, Elphega. I swear that he was not at Black Pillar Pass. Besides, the list of officers killed or wounded in that skirmish has been published.”

“Yes,” said the countess, growing calmer,” you reassure me. Only two officers were killed, Captain Lory and that young Baron Randmer, who played so many mad pranks with my poor Frederic at the Copenhagen balls. Oh, I have read and re-read the list, I assure you. But tell me, my lord, did my boy remain at Wahlstrom?”

“He did,” replied the count.

“Well, my friend,” said the mother, with a smile which she tried to render affectionate,” I have but one favor to ask of you, that is, to recall Frederic as soon as may be from that frightful region.”

The chancellor broke from her suppliant arms, saying, “ Madam, the court waits. Farewell. What you ask does not depend on my will.” And he quitted the room abruptly.

The countess was left in a sad and pensive mood. “ It does not depend upon his will!” said she;” and he has but to utter a word to restore my son to my arms! I always thought that man was genuinely bad.”

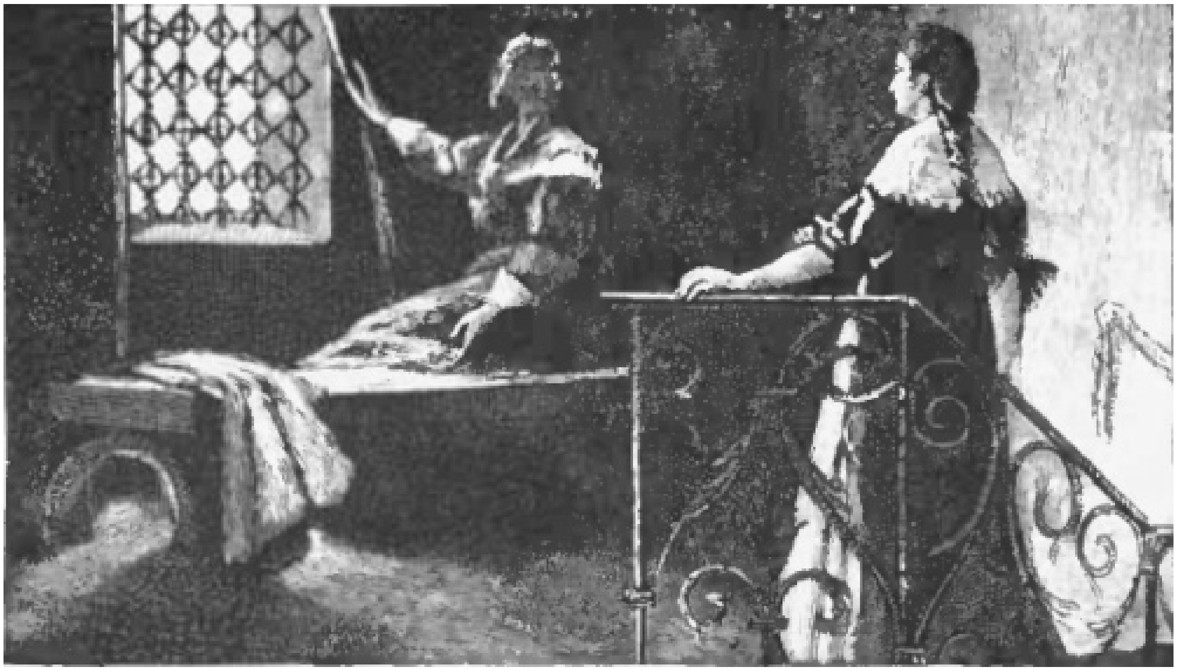

Ethel and the Countess at the Trial

CHAPTER XLIII GHASTLY TROPHIES.

Is it thus you treat a man in my position? Is it thus you forget the respect due to justice?-
Calderon: Louis Perez of Galicia.

The trembling Ethel, separated from her father by the guards upon leaving the Lion of Schleswig tower, was conducted through dim passages, hitherto unknown to her, to a small, dark cell, which was closed as soon as she had entered it. In the wall opposite the door was a large grated opening, through which came the light of links and torches. Before this opening was a bench, upon which sat a woman, veiled and dressed in black, who signed to her to be seated beside her. Ethel obeyed in silent dismay. She looked through the grated window and saw a solemn and imposing scene.

At the farther end of a room hung with black and dimly lighted by copper lamps suspended from the vaulted roof, was a black platform in the shape of a horseshoe, occupied by seven judges in black gowns, one of whom, placed in the centre upon a higher seat, wore on his breast glittering diamond chains and gold medals. The judge on his right differed from the others in the wearing of a white girdle and an ermine mantle, showing him to be the lord mayor of the province. To the right of the bench was a platform covered with a dais, upon which sat an old man, in bishop’s dress; to the left, a table covered with papers, behind which stood a short man with a huge wig, and enveloped in a long black gown.

Opposite the judges was a wooden bench, surrounded by halberdiers holding torches, whose light, reflected back from a forest of pikes, muskets, and partisans, shed a faint glimmer upon the tumultuous heads of a mob of spectators, crowded against the iron railing dividing them from the court-room.

Ethel looked at this spectacle as she might have beheld some waking dream; yet she was far from feeling indifferent to what was about to happen. A secret voice warned her to listen well, because a crisis in her life was at hand. Her heart was a prey to contending emotions; she longed to know instantly what interest she had in the scene before her, or never to know it at all. For some days, the idea that her Ordener was forever lost to her had inspired her with a desperate desire to be done with existence once for all, and to read the book of her fate at a single glance. Therefore, realizing that this was a decisive hour, she watched the sombre picture before her, not so much with aversion as with a sort of impatient melancholy joy.

She saw the president rise and proclaim in the king’s name that the court was opened.

She heard the short, dark man to the left of the bench read, in a low, rapid voice, a long discourse in which her father’s name, mixed with the words “conspiracy,” “revolt in the mines,” and “ high treason,” frequently recurred. Then she remembered what the dread stranger had told her, in the donjon garden, of the charges against her father; and she shuddered as she heard the man in the black robe conclude his speech with the word “ death,” pronounced with great emphasis. She turned in terror to the veiled lady, from whom she shrank with unaccountable fear.” Where are we? What does all this mean?” she timidly asked.

A gesture from her mysterious companion commanded her to be silent and attentive. She again turned her eyes to the court-room. The venerable bishop rose, and Ethel caught these words: “ In the name of omnipotent and most merciful God, I, Pamphilus-Luther, bishop of the royal province and town of Throndhjem, do greet the worthy court assembled here in the name of the king, our lord, under God.

“And I say, that having observed that the prisoners brought to this bar are men and Christians, and that they have no counsel, I declare to the worthy judges that it is my purpose to aid them with my poor strength in the cruel position in which it has pleased Heaven to place them.

“Praying that God will deign to strengthen my great weakness, and enlighten my great blindness, I, bishop of this royal diocese, greet this wise and worthy court.”

So saying, the bishop stepped from his episcopal throne, and took his seat upon the prisoners’ bench, amid a murmur of applause from the people.

The president then rose, and said in dry tones,” Halberdiers, command silence! My lord bishop, the court thanks your reverence, in the name of the prisoners. Inhabitants of the province of Throndhjem, pay good heed to the king’s justice; there can be no appeal from the sentence of the court. Bowmen, bring in the prisoners.”

There was an expectant and terrified hush; the heads of the crowd swayed to and fro in the darkness like the waves of a stormy sea, upon which the thunder is about to burst.

Soon Ethel heard a dull sound and a strange stir below her, in the gloomy aisles of the court; the audience moved aside with a thrill of impatient curiosity there was a noise of many feet; halberds and muskets gleamed, and six men, chained and surrounded by guards, entered the room bareheaded. Ethel had eyes for the first of the six alone, a white-headed old man in a black gown. It was her father.

She leaned, almost fainting, against the stone balustrade in front of her; everything swam before her in a confused cloud, and it seemed as if her heart were in her throat. She said in a feeble voice, “ God! help me!”

The veiled woman bent over her and gave her salts to smell, which roused her from her lethargy.

“Noble lady,” said she, reviving, “ for mercy’s sake, speak but one word to convince me that I am not the sport of spirits from hell.”

The stranger, deaf to her entreaty, again turned her head toward the court; and poor Ethel, who had somewhat recovered her strength, resigned herself to do the same in silence.

The president rose, and said in slow, solemn tones, “ Prisoners, you are brought before us that we may decide whether or not you are guilty of high treason, conspiracy, and armed rebellion against the authority of the king, our sovereign lord. Examine your consciences well, for the charge of leze-majesty rests upon your heads.”

At this moment a gleam of light fell upon the face of one of the six prisoners, a young man who held his head down, as if to veil his features with his long hair. Ethel started, and a cold sweat oozed from every pore. She thought she recognized- But no; it was a cruel illusion. The room was but dimly lighted, and men moved about it like shadows; the great polished ebony Christ hanging over the president’s chair was scarcely visible.

And yet that young man was wrapped in a mantle which at this distance seemed to be green; his disordered hair was chestnut, and the unexpected gleam which revealed his features- But no; it was not true. It could not be! It was some horrid delusion!

The prisoners were seated on the bench beside the bishop. Schumacker took his place at one end; he was separated from the chestnut-haired young man by his four companions in misfortune, who wore coarse clothes, and among whom was one of gigantic stature. The bishop sat at the other end of the bench.

Ethel saw the president turn to her father, saying in a stern voice: “Old man, tell us your name, and who you are.”

The old man raised his venerable head.

“Once,” he replied, looking steadily at the president, “ I was Count Griffenfeld and Tönsberg, Prince of Wollin, Prince of the Holy German Empire, Knight of the Royal Orders of the Elephant and the Dannebrog, Knight of the Golden Fleece in Germany and of the Garter in England, Prime Minister, Lord Rector of all our Universities, Lord High Chancellor of Denmark, and “

The president interrupted him: “ Prisoner, the court does not ask who you were, nor what your name once was, but who you are and what it now is.”

“Well,” answered the old man, quickly, “ my name is John Schumacker no; I am sixty-nine years old, and I am nothing but your former benefactor, Chancellor d’Ahlefeld.”

The president seemed confused.

“I recognized you, Count,” added the exchancellor, “and as I thought you did not know me, I took the liberty to remind your Grace that we are old acquaintances.”

“Schumacker,” said the president, in a voice trembling with concentrated fury, “do not trifle with the court.”

The aged prisoner again interrupted him: “We have changed places, noble Chancellor; I used to call you ‘d’Ahlefeld,’ and you addressed me as ‘Count.’”

“Prisoner,” replied the president, “you only injure your cause by recalling the infamous decree which already brands your name.”

“If that sentence entailed infamy on any one, Count d’Ahlefeld, it was not on me.”

The old man half rose as he spoke these words with great emphasis.

The president waved his hand.

“Sit down. Do not insult, in the presence of the court, the judges who condemned you, and the king who surrendered you to those judges. Recollect that his Majesty deigned to grant you your life, and confine yourself to defending it.”

Schumacker’s only answer was a shrug of the shoulders.

“Have you,” asked the president, “anything to say in regard to the charges preferred against you?”

Seeing that Schumacker was silent, the president repeated his question.

“Are you speaking to me?” said the exchancellor. “ I supposed, noble Count d’Ahlefeld, that you were speaking to yourself. Of what crime do you accuse me? Did I ever give a Judas kiss to a friend? Have I imprisoned, condemned, and dishonored a benefactor, robbed him to whom I owed everything? In truth, my lord chancellor, I know not why I am brought here. Doubtless it is to judge of your skill in lopping off innocent heads. Indeed, I shall not be sorry to see whether you find it as easy to ruin me as to ruin the kingdom, and whether a single comma will be a sufficient pretext for my death, as one letter of the alphabet was enough for you to bring on a war with Sweden.”

He had scarcely uttered this bitter jest, when the man seated at the table to the left of the bench arose.

“My lord president,” said he, bowing low,” my lord judges, I move that John Schumacker be forbidden to speak, if he continue to insult his Grace, the president of this worshipful court.”

The calm voice of the bishop answered: “Mr. Private Secretary, no prisoner can be deprived of the right to speak.”

“True, Reverend Bishop,” hastily exclaimed the president. “We propose to allow the defence the utmost liberty. I would merely advise the prisoner to moderate his expressions if he understands his own interest.”

Schumacker shook his head, and said coldly:” It seems that Count d’Ahlefeld is more sure of his game than he was in 1677.”

“Silence!” said the president; and instantly addressing the prisoner next to the old man, he asked his name.

A mountaineer of colossal stature, whose forehead was swathed in bandages, rose, saying, “ I am Hans, from Klipstadur, in Iceland.”

A shudder of horror ran through the crowd, and Schumacker, lifting his head, which had sunk upon his breast, cast a sudden glance at his dreadful neighbor, from whom all his other fellow-prisoners shrank.

“Hans of Iceland,” asked the president, when the confusion ceased, “ what have you to say for yourself?”

Ethel was as much startled as any of the spectators by the appearance of the famous brigand, who had so long played a prominent part in all her visions of alarm. She fixed her eyes with timid dread upon the monstrous giant, with whom her Ordener had possibly fought, whose victim he perhaps was. This idea again took possession of her soul in all its painful shapes. Thus, wholly absorbed by countless heart-rending emotions, she hardly heeded the coarse, blundering answer of this Hans of Iceland, whom she regarded almost as her Ordener's murderer. She only understood that the brigand declared himself to be the leader of the rebel forces.

"Was it of your own free will," asked the president, "or by the suggestion of others, that you took command of the insurgents?"

The brigand answered: ‘‘It was not of my own free will."

"Who persuaded you to commit such a crime?"

"A man named Hacket."

"Who was this Hacket?"

"An agent of Schumacker, whom he also called Count Griffenfeld."

The president turned to Schumacker:" Schumacker, do you know this Hacket?"

"You have forestalled me, Count d'Ahlefeld," rejoined the old man: - I was about to ask you the same question."

"John Schumaeker," said the president, - your hatred is ill advised. The court will put the proper value upon your system of defence."

The bishop then said, turning to the short man, who seemed to fill the office of recorder and prosecutor:- Mr. Private Secretary, is this Hacket one of your clients?"

"No. your reverence," replied the secretary.

"Does any one know what has become of him?"

"He was not captured; he has disappeared."

It seemed as if the private secretary tried to steady his voice as he said this.

"I rather think that he has vanished altogether," said Schumacker.

The bishop continued: -"Mr. Secretary, is any one in pursuit of this Hacket? Has any one a description of him?"

Before the private secretary could answer, one of the prisoners rose. He was a young miner, with a stern, proud face.

"He is easily described," said he, in a firm voice. "This contemtible Hacket, Schumacker's agent is a man of low stature, with an open countenance, like the mouth of hell Stay, Mr Bishop; his voice is very like that of the gentleman writing at the table over there, whom your reverence calls, I believe, ‘ private secretary.' And truly , if the room were not so dark, and the private secretary had less hair to hide his face, I could almost swear that he looked very much like the traitor Hacket."

"Our brother speaks truly," cried the prisoners on either side of the young miner.

"Indeed!" muttered Schumacker, with a look of triumph.

The secretary involuntarily started, whether from fear, or from the indignation which he felt at being compared to Hacket. The president, who himself seemed disturbed, hurriedly exclaimed: "Prisoners, remember that you are only to speak in answer to a question from the court; and do not insult the officers of the law by unworthy comparisons."

"But, Mr. President," said the bishop, " this is a mere matter of description. If the guilty Hacket has points of resemblance to your secretary, it may be useful to- "

The president cut him short.

"Hans of Iceland, you, who have had such frequent intercourse with Hacket, tell us, to satisfy the worthy bishop, whether the fellow really resembles our honorable private secretary."

"Not at all, sir." unhesitatingly answered the giant.

"You see, my lord bishop," added the president.

The bishop acknowledged his satisfaction by a bow, and the president, addressing another prisoner, pronounced the usual formula: "What is your name?"

"Wilfred Kennybol, from the Kiölen Mountains."

"Were you among the insurgents?"

"Yes, sir; the truth at all costs. I was captured in the cursed defile of Black Pillar. I was the chief of the mountaineers."

"Who urged you to the crime of rebellion?"

"Our brothers the miners complained of the royal protectorate; and that was very natural, was it not, your worship? If you had nothing but a mud hut and a couple of paltry fox-skins, you would not like to have them taken from you. The government would not listen to their petitions. Then, sir, they made up their minds to rebel, and begged us to help them. Such a slight favor could not be refused by brothers who say the same prayers and worship the same saints. That 's the whole story."

"Did nobody," said the president, " excite, encourage, and direct your insurrection? "

"There was a Mr. Hacket, who was forever talking to us about rescuing a count who was imprisoned at Munkholm, whose messenger he said he was.

We promised to do as he asked, because it was nothing to us to set one more captive free."

"Was not this count's name Schumacker or Griffenfeld, fellow?"

"Exactly so, your worship."

"Did you never see him?"

"No, sir; but if he be that old man who told you that he had so many names just now, I must confess-"

"What?" interrupted the president.

"That he has a very beautiful white beard, sir; almost as handsome a one as my sister Maase's husband's father, of the village of Surb; and he lived to be one hundred and twenty years old."

The darkness of the room prevented any one from seeing whether the president looked disappointed at the mountaineer's simple answer. He ordered the archers to produce certain scarlet flags.

"Wilfred Kennybol," he asked, " do you recognize these flags?"

"Yes, your Grace; they were given to us by Hacket in Count Schumacker's name. The count also distributed arms to the miners; for we did not need them, we mountaineers, who live by our gun and game-bag. And I myself, sir, such as you see me, trussed as I am like a miserable fowl to be roasted, have more than once, in one of our deep valleys, brought down an old eagle flying so high that it looked like a lark or a thrush."

"You hear, judges," remarked the private secretary; "the prisoner Schumacker distributed arms and banners to the rebels, through Hacket."

"Kennybol, asked the president, " have you anything more to say?"

"Nothing, your Grace, except that I do not deserve death. I only lent a hand in brotherly love to the miners, and I'll venture to say before all your worships that my bullet, old hunter as I am, never touched one of the king's deer."

The president, without answering this plea, cross-examined Kennybol's two companions; they were the leaders of the miners. The older of the two, who slated that his name was Jonas, repeated Kennybol's testimony in slightly different words. The other, the same young man who had noticed such a strong resemblance between the private secretary and the treacherous Hacket, called himself Norbith, and proudly avowed his share in the rebellion, but refused to reveal anything regarding Hacket and Schumacker, saying that he had sworn secrecy, and had forgotten everything but that oath. In vain the president tried threats and entreaties; the obstinate youth was not to be moved. Moreover, he insisted that he had not rebelled on Schumacker’s account, but simply because his old mother was cold and hungry. He did not deny that he might deserve to die; but he declared that it would be unjust to kill him, because in killing him they would also kill his poor mother, who had done nothing to merit punishment.

When Norbith ceased speaking, the private secretary briefly summed up the heavy charges against the prisoners, and more especially against Schumacker. He read some of the seditious mottoes on the flags, and showed how the general agreement of the answers of the exchancellor’s accomplices, and even the silence of Norbith bound by a fanatical oath, tended to inculpate him. “There now remains,” he said in close, “but a single prisoner to be examined, and we have strong reasons for thinking him the secret agent of the authority who has ill protected the peace of the province of Throndhjem. This authority has favored, if not by his guilty connivance, at least by his fatal negligence, the outbreak of the revolt which must destroy all these unhappy men, and restore Schumacker to the scaffold from which the king’s clemency so generously preserved him.”

Ethel, whose fears for Ordener were now converted into cruel apprehensions for her father, shuddered at these ominous words, and wept floods of tears when her father rose and said quietly: “Chancellor d’Ahlefeld, I admire your skill. Have you summoned the hangman?”

The unfortunate girl thought her cup of bitterness was full: she was mistaken.

The sixth prisoner now stood up. With a superb gesture he swept back the hair which covered his face, and replied to the president’s questions in a clear, firm voice: “ My name is Ordener Guldenlew, Baron Thorwick, Knight of the Dannebrog.”

An exclamation of surprise escaped the secretary:” The viceroy’s son!”

“The viceroy’s son!” repeated every voice, as if the words were taken up by countless echoes.

The president shrank back in his seat; the judges, hitherto motionless upon the bench, bent toward one another in confusion, like trees beaten by opposing winds. The commotion was even greater in the audience. The spectacors climbed upon stone cornices and iron rails; the entire assembly spoke through a single mouth; and the guards, forgetting to insist upon silence, added their ejaculations to the general uproar.

Only those accustomed to sudden emotions can imagine Ethel’s feelings. Who could describe that unwonted mixture of agonizing joy and delicious grief; that anxious expectation, which was alike fear and hope, and yet not quite either? He stood before her, but he could not see her. There was her beloved Ordener, her Ordener, whom she had believed dead, whom she knew was lost to her; her friend who had deceived her, and whom she adored with renewed adoration. He was there; yes, he was there. She was not the victim of a vain dream. Oh, it was really he, that Ordener, alas! whom she had seen in dreams more often than in reality. But did he appear within these gloomy precincts as an angel of deliverance, or a spirit of evil? Was she to hope in him, or to tremble for him? A thousand conjectures crowded upon her at once, and oppressed her mind like a flame choked by too much fuel; all the ideas and sensations which we have suggested Hashed through her brain as the son of the Norwegian viceroy pronounced his name. She was the first to recognize him, and before any one else had recognized him, she had fainted.

She soon recovered her senses for the second time, thanks to the attentions of her mysterious neighbor. “With pale cheeks, she again opened her eyes, in which the tears had been suddenly dried. She cast an eager glance at the young man still standing unmoved amid the general confusion; and after all agitation had ceased in the court and among the people, Ordener Guldenlew’s name still rang in her ears. With painful alarm she observed that he wore his arm in a sling, and that his wrists were chained; she noticed that his mantle was torn in several places, and that his faithful sword no longer hung at his side. Nothing escaped her solicitude, for the eye of a lover is like that of a mother. Her whole soul flew to the rescue of him whom she could not shield with her body; and, be it said to the glory and the shame of love, in that room, which contained her father and her father’s persecutors, Ethel saw but one man.

Silence was gradually restored. The president resumed his examination of the viceroy’s son. “ My lord Baron,” said he, in a tremulous voice.

“I am not ‘ my lord Baron ‘ here,” firmly answered Ordener. “ I am Ordener Guldenlew, just as he who was once Count Griffenfeld is John Schumacker here.”

The president hesitated for a moment, then went on: “ Well, Ordener Guldenlew, it is doubtless by some unlucky accident that you are brought before us. The rebels must have captured you while you were travelling, and forced you to join them, and it is probably in this way that you were found in their ranks."

The secretary rose: "Noble judges, the mere name of the viceroy's son is a sufficient plea for him. Baron Ordener Guldenlew cannot by any possibility be a rebel. Our illustrious president has given a clear explanation of his unfortunate arrest among the rebels. The noble prisoner's only error is in not sooner revealing his name. We request that he may be set free at once, abandoning all charges against him, and only regretting that he should have been seated upon a bench degraded by the criminal Schumacker and his accomplices."

"What would you do?" cried Ordener.

"The private secretary," said the president, " withdraws the charges against you."

"He is wrong," replied Ordener, in a loud, clear voice; " I alone of all here should be accused, judged, and condemned." He paused a moment, and added in a less resolute tone, " For I alone am guilty."

"You alone guilty!" exclaimed the president.

"You alone guilty!" repeated the secretary.

A fresh burst of astonishment was heard in the audience. The wretched Ethel shuddered; she did not reflect that this declaration from her lover would save her father. She thought only of her Ordener's death.

"Silence in the court! " said the president, possibly taking advantage of this brief tumult to collect his thoughts and recover his self-possession. " Ordener Gul- denlew," he resumed, " explain yourself."

The young man mused an instant, then sighed heavily, and uttered these words in a tone of calm submission: " Yes, I know that an infamous death awaits me; I know that my life might have been bright and fair. But God reads my heart; God alone! I am about to accomplish the most urgent duty of my life. I am about to sacrifice to it my blood, perhaps my honor; but I feel that I shall die without regret or remorse. Do not be surprised at my words, judges; there are mysteries in the soul and in the destiny of man which men cannot penetrate, and which are judged in heaven alone. Hear me, therefore, and act toward me as your conscience may dictate when you have pardoned these unfortunate men, and more especially the much injured Schumacker, who has already, in his long captivity, expiated many more crimes than any one man could ever commit. Yes, I am guilty, noble judges, and I alone. Schumacker is innocent; these other unhappy men were merely led astray. I am the author of the insurrection among the miners."

"You! " exclaimed the president and his private secretary, with a singular look upon their faces.

"I! and do not interrupt me again, gentlemen. I am in haste to finish; for by accusing myself I exonerate these poor prisoners. I excited the miners in Schumacker's name; I distributed those banners to the rebels: I sent them money and arms in the name of the prisoner of Munkholm. Hacket was my agent."

At the name of Hacket, the private secretary made a gesture of stupefied amazement.

Ordener continued: " I will not trespass on your time, gentlemen. I was captured among the miners, whom I persuaded to revolt. I alone did everything. Now judge me. If I have proved my guilt, I have also proved the innocence of Schumacker and the poor wretches whom you deem his accomplices."

The young man spoke these words, his eyes raised to heaven. Ethel, almost lifeless, scarcely breathed; but it seemed to her that Ordener, although he exculpated her father, pronounced his name most bitterly. The young man's language terrified and amazed her, although she could not comprehend it. Of all she heard, she grasped nothing but misery.

A sentiment of similar nature seemed to engross the president. He was scarcely able to believe his ears. Nevertheless, he asked the viceroy's son: "If you are indeed the sole author of this revolt, what was your object in instigating it?"

"I cannot tell you."

Ethel shivered when she heard the president reply in a somewhat angry tone: " Had you not an intrigue with Schumacker's daughter?"

But Ordener, though in chains, advanced toward the bench, and exclaimed, in accents of indignation: "Chan- cellor d'Ahlefeld, content yourself with my life, which I place in your hands; respect a noble and innocent girl. Do not a second time attempt to dishonor her."

Ethel, who felt the blood rise to her face, did not comprehend the meaning of the words, " a second time," upon which her defender laid such emphasis; but by the rage expressed in the president's features, it seemed that he understood them.

"Ordener Guldenlew, do not forget the respect due to the king's justice and the officers of the law. I reprimand you in the name of the court. I now summon you anew to declare your purpose in committing the crime of which you accuse yourself."

"I repeat that I cannot tell you."

"Was it not to deliver Schumacker?" inquired the secretary.

Ordener was silent.

"Do not persist in silence, prisoner," said the president; " it is proved that you have been in communication with Schumacker, and your confession of guilt rather implicates than exonerates the prisoner of Munkholm. You have paid frequent visits to Munkholm, and your motive was surely more than mere curiosity. Let this diamond buckle bear witness."

The president took from the table a diamond buckle.'

"Do you recognize it as your property?"'

"Yes. By what chance?"

"Well! One of the rebels gave it, before he died, to our private secretary, averring that he received it from you in payment for rowing you across from Throndhjem to Munkholm fortress. Now I ask you, judges, if such a price paid to a common sailor does not prove the importance laid by the prisoner, Ordener Guldeulew, upon his reaching that prison, which is the one where Schumacker was confined?"

"Ah! " exclaimed the prisoner Kennybol, " what your grace says is true; I recognize the buckle. It is the same story which our poor brother Guldon Stayper told me."

"Silence," said the president; " let Ordener Guldenlew answer."

"I will not deny," replied Ordener, " that I desired to see Schumacker. But this buckle has no significance. It is forbidden to enter the fort wearing diamonds. The sailor who rowed me across complained of his poverty during our passage. I flung him this buckle, which I was not allowed to wear."

"Pardon me, your Grace," interrupted the private secretary, " the rule does not include the viceroy's son. You could therefore

"I did not wish to give my name."

"Why not?" asked the president.

"I cannot tell you."

"Your relations with Schumacker and his daughter prove that the object of your conspiracy was to set them free."

Schumacker, who had hitherto shown no sign of attention save an occasional scornful shrug of the shoulders, rose:” To set me free! The object of this infernal plot was to compromise and ruin me, as it still is. Do you think that Ordener Guldenlew would confess his share in this crime unless he had been captured among the rebels?

Oh, I see that he inherits his father’s hatred of me! And as for the relations which you suppose exist between him and myself and my daughter, let him know, that accursed Guldenlew, that my daughter also inherits my loathing for him, for the whole race of Guldenlews and d’Ahlefelds!”

Ordener sighed deeply, while Ethel in her heart disclaimed her father’s assertion; and he fell back upon his bench, quivering with wrath.

“The court will decide for itself,” said the president.

Ordener, who, at Schumacker’s words, had silently cast down his eyes, seemed to awake:” Oh, hear me, noble judges! You are about to examine your consciences; do not forget that Ordener Gulclenlew is alone guilty; Schumacker is innocent. These other unfortunate men were deceived by my agent, Hacket. I did everything else.”

Kennybol interrupted him:” His worship says truly, judges, for it was he who undertook to bring Hans of Iceland to us; I only hope that name may not bring me ill luck. I know that it was this young man who ventured to seek him out in Walderhog cave, to persuade him to be our leader. He confided the secret of his undertaking to me in Surb village, at the house of my brother Braal. And for the rest, too, the young gentleman says truly; we were deceived by that confounded Hacket, whence it follows that we do not deserve death.”

“Mr. Secretary,” said the president, “ the hearing is ended. What are your conclusions?”

The secretary rose, bowed several times to the court, passed his finger under the folds of his lace band, without taking his eyes from the president’s face. At last he pronounced the following words in a dull, measured voice: “ Mr. President, most worthy judges! It is a true bill. Ordener Guldenlew, who has forever tarnished the glory of an illustrious name, has only succeeded in establishing his own guilt without proving the innocence of exchancellor Schumacker and his accomplices, Hans of Iceland, Wilfred Kennybol, Jonas, and Norbith. I require the court to declare the six prisoners guilty of the crime of high treason in the first degree.”

A vague murmur rose from the crowd. The president was about to dismiss the court, when the bishop asked for a brief hearing.

"Learned judges, it is proper that the prisoners' defence should be heard last. I could wish that they had a better advocate, for I am old and feeble, and have no other strength than that which proceeds from God. I am confounded at the secretary's severe sentence. There is no proof of my client Schumacker's crime. There is no evidence that he has had any direct share in the insurrection; and since my other client, Ordener Guldenlew, confesses that he made unlawful use of Schumacker's name, and moreover that he is the sole author of this damnable sedition, all evidence against Schumacker disappears; you should therefore acquit him. I recommend to your Christian indulgence the other prisoners, who were only led astray like the Good Shepherd's sheep; and even young Ordener Guldenlew, who has at least the merit, very great in the sight of God, of confessing his crime. Reflect, judges, that he is still at the age when a man may err, and even fall; but God does not refuse to support or to raise him up. Ordener Guldenlew bears scarce a fourth the burden of years which weigh down my head. Place in the balance of your judgment his youth and inexperience, and do not so soon deprive him of the life which the Lord has but lately given him."

The old man ceased, and took his place beside Ordener, who smiled; while at the invitation of the president, the judges rose from the bench, and silently crossed the threshold of the dread scene of their deliberations.

While a handful of men were deciding the fate of six fellow-beings within that terrible sanctuary, the prisoners remained motionless upon their seat between two files of halberdiers. Schumacker, his head on his breast, seemed absorbed in meditation. The giant stared to the right and left with stupid assurance; Jonas and Kennybol, with clasped hands, prayed in low tones, while their comrade, Norbith. stamped his foot or shook his chains with a convulsive start. Between him and the venerable bishop, who was reading the penitential psalms, sat Ordener, with folded arms and eyes lifted to heaven.

Behind them was the noise of the crowd, which swelled high when the judges left the room. The famous prisoner of Munkholm, the much-dreaded demon of Iceland, and above all the viceroy's son, were the objects of every thought, every speech, and every glance. The uproar, mingled with groans, laughter, and confused cries, rose and fell like a flame flickering in the wind.

Thus passed several hours of anxious expectation, so long that every one was astonished that they could be contained in a single night. From time to time a glance was cast toward the door of the anteroom; but there was nothing to be seen, save the two soldiers pacing to and fro with their glittering partisans before the fatal entrance, like two silent ghosts.

At last the lamps and torches began to burn dim, and the first pale rays of dawn were piercing the narrow windows of the room when the awful door opened. Profound silence instantly, and as if by magic, took the place of all the confusion; and the only sounds heard were the hurried breathing and the vague slight stir of the multitude in suspense.

The judges, proceeding slowly from the anteroom, resumed their places on the bench, the president at their head.

The private secretary, who had seemed absorbed in thought during their absence, bowed and said: "Mr. President, what sentence does the court, from whose decision there is no appeal, pronounce in the king's name? We are ready to hear it with religious respect,"

The judge, seated at the president's right hand, rose, holding a roll of parchment: " His Grace, our illustrious president, exhausted by the length of this session, has deigned to commission me, lord mayor of the province of Throndhjem, and the natural president of this worshipful court, to read in his stead the sentence pronounced in the name of the king. I am about to fulfil this honorable but painful duty, requesting the audience to hear the king's impeccable justice in silence."

The lord mayor's voice then assumed a grave and solemn intonation, and every heart beat faster.

"In the name of our revered master and lawful sovereign, King Christian, we, the judges of the Supreme Court of the province of Throndhjem, summoned to decide in the cases of John Schumacker, prisoner of the State; Wilfred Kennybol, native of the Kiölen Mountains; Jonas, royal miner; Norbith, royal miner; Hans of Klipstadur, in Iceland; and Ordener Guldenlew, Baron Thorwick, Knight of the Dannebrog, all accused of high treason and leze-majesty in the first degree (Hans of Iceland being moreover charged with the crimes of murder, arson, and robbery), do find:-

"I. That John Schumacker is not guilty;

"II. That Wilfred Kennybol, Jonas, and Norbith are guilty, but are recommended to mercy, because they were led astray;

"III. That Hans of Iceland is guilty of all the crimes laid to his charge;

“IV. That Ordener Guldeulew is guilty of high treason and leze-majesty in the first degree,”

The judge paused an instant as if to take breath. Ordener fixed upon him a look of celestial joy.

“John Schumacker,” resumed the judge, “ the court acquits you and remands you to prison;

“Kennybol, Jonas, and Norbith, the court commutes the penalty which you have incurred, to imprisonment for life, and a fine of one thousand crowns each;

“Hans of Klipstadur, murderer and incendiary, you will be taken this night to Munkholm parade-ground, and hanged by the neck until you are dead, dead, dead!

“Ordener Guldenlew, traitor, after having been stripped of your titles in presence of this court, you will be conducted this very night to the same place, with a lighted torch in your hand, and there your head shall be hewn off, your body burned, your ashes strewn to the winds, and your head exposed upon a stake. Let all withdraw. Such is the sentence rendered by the king’s justice.”

The lord mayor had scarcely ended these fatal words, when a shriek rang through the room. This shriek horrified the spectators even more than did the fearful terms of the death sentence; this shriek for a brief moment turned the calm and radiant face of the condemned Ordener pale.

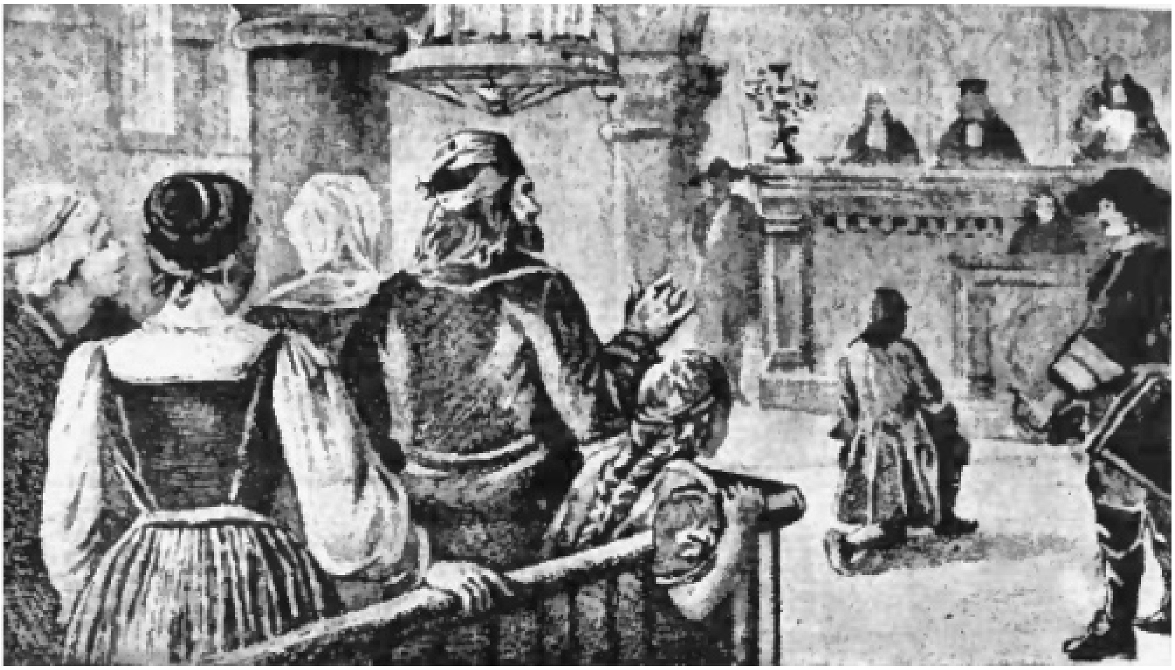

Ordener Guldenlew receiving his Sentence.

CHAPTER XLIV BROTHERLY LOVE.

Misfortune made them equals.-
Charles Nodier.

All was over now; Ordener’s work was done. He had saved the father of the woman he loved; he had saved her too by preserving her father to protect her. The young man’s noble plot to save Schumacker’s life had succeeded; nothing else mattered now; it only remained for him to die.

Let those who deem him guilty or foolish judge the generous Ordener now, as he judges himself in his own soul with holy rapture. For it had been his one thought, when he entered the rebel ranks, that if he could not prevent Schumacker from carrying out his guilty purpose, he might at least help him to escape punishment by drawing it upon his own head.

“Alas! “he thought, “ Schumacker is undoubtedly guilty; but embittered as he is by misfortune and imprisonment, his crime is excusable. He sighs to be set free; he struggles to acquire his liberty, even by rebellion. Besides, what would become of my Ethel if her father were taken from her; if she should lose him by the gallows, if fresh disgrace should blast his name, what would become of her, helpless and unprotected, alone in her cell or roaming through a world of foes?” This thought determined him to make the sacrifice, and he joyfully prepared for it. It is a lover’s greatest happiness to lay down his life, I do not say for the life, but for a smile or a tear, of the loved object.

He was accordingly captured with the rebels, was dragged before the judges assembled to condemn Schumacker, his generous falsehood was uttered, he was sentenced, he must die a cruel death, suffer shameful torments, leave behind him a stained name; but what cared the noble youth? He had saved his Ethel’s father.

He sat chained in a damp dungeon, where light and air never entered save through dark holes; beside him was a supply of food for the remnant of his existence, a loaf of black bread and a jug of water; an iron collar weighed down his neck; iron fetters were about his hands and feet. Every hour that passed robbed him of a greater portion of his life than a year would bear away from other mortals. He was lost in a delicious dream.

"Perhaps my memory will not die with me, at least in one human heart. Perhaps she will deign to shed a tear in return for the blood I so freely shed for her; perhaps she will sometimes heave a sigh for him who sacrificed his life for her; perhaps in her virgin thoughts the dim image of her friend may sometimes appear. And who knows what lies behind the veil of death? Who knows if our souls, freed from their material prison, may not sometimes return to watch over the souls of those they love, and hold mysterious communion with those sweet companions still prisoned in the flesh, and in secret bring them angelic comfort and heavenly bliss?"

And yet bitter reflections would sometimes mingle with these consoling meditations. The hatred which Schumacker had expressed for him at the very moment of his self-sacrifice oppressed him. The agonized shriek which he had heard at the same instant with his death sentence had moved him deeply; for he alone, of all the assembly, recognized that voice and understood that misery. And should he never again see his Ethel? Must his last moments be passed within the self-same walls that contained her, and he be still unable to touch her soft hand once more, once more to hear the gentle voice of her for whom he was about to die?

He had yielded thus to those vague, sad musings which are to the mind what sleep is to the body, when the hoarse creak of rusty bolts struck harshly on his ear, already attuned to the music of the sphere to which he was so soon to take his flight. The heavy iron door grated upon its hinges. The young prisoner rose calmly, almost gladly, for he thought that the executioner had come for him, and he had already cast aside his life like the cloak beneath his feet.

He was mistaken. A slender white figure stood upon the threshold, like a radiant vision. Ordener doubted his own eyes, and wondered if he were not already in heaven. It was she; it was his Ethel."

The girl fell into his fettered embrac; she covered his hands with tears, and dried them with her long black hair. Kissing his chains, she bruised her pure lips upon those infamous irons; she did not speak, but her whole heart seemed ready to burst forth in the first word which might break through her sobs.

He felt the most celestial joy which he had known since his birth. He gently pressed his Ethel to his breast, and the combined powers of earth and hell could not at that moment have loosed the arms which encircled her. The knowledge of his approaching death lent a certain solemnity to his rapture;

and he held his Ethel as close as if he had already taken possession of her for all eternity.

He did not ask this angel how she had gained access to him. She was there: could he waste a thought on anything else? Nor was he surprised. He never asked how this proscribed, feeble, lonely girl, in spite of triple doors of iron and triple ranks of soldiers, had contrived to open her own prison and that of her lover; it seemed to him quite simple; he had a perfect appreciation of the power of love.

Why speak with the voice when the soul can speak as readily? Why not allow the body to listen silently to the mysterious language of the spirit? Both were silent, because there are certain emotions which can find expression in silence only.

At last the young girl lifted her head from her lover's throbbing heart. "Ordener," said she, "I am here to save you;" and she uttered these words of hope with a pang.

Ordener smiled, and shook his head.

"To save me, Ethel! You deceive yourself; escape is impossible."

"Alas! I am but too well aware of that. This castle is crowded with soldiers, and every door is guarded by archers and jailers who never sleep." She added with an effort: " But I bring you another means of safety."

"No, no; your hope is vain. Do not delude yourself with idle fancies, Ethel; a few hours hence the axe will cruelly dispel them."

"Oh, do not say so, Ordener! You shall not die. Oh, spare me that dreadful thought! Or rather, no; let me behold it in all its horror, to give me strength to save you and sacrifice myself."

There was a strange expression in the young girl's voice.

Ordener gazed at her tenderly. "Sacrifice yourself! What do you mean?"

She hid her face in her hands, and sobbed almost inarticulately, "Oh, God!"

The struggle was brief; she overcame her emotion; her eyes sparkled, her lips wore a smile. She was as beautiful as an angel ascending from hell to heaven.

"Listen, my own Ordener: your scaffold shall never be reared. If you will but promise to marry Ulrica d'Ahlefeld, you may live."

"Ulrica d'Ahlefeld! That name from your lips, my Ethel!"

"Do not interrupt me,'' she continued, with the cairn of a martyr undergoing the last pang; "' I am sent here by Countess d'Ahlefeld. She promises to gain your pardon from the king, if in return you will agree to bestow your hand upon her daughter. I am here to obtain your oath to marry Ulrica and live for her. She chose me as her messenger because she thought that my voice might have some influence over you."

"Ethel," said the condemned man, in icy tones, " farewell! When you leave this cell, bid the hangman hasten his coming."

She rose, stood before him one moment, pale and trembling, then her knees gave way beneath her, and she sank to the stone floor with clasped hands.

"What have I done to him?" she muttered faintly.

Ordener silently fixed his eyes upon the flags.

"My lord," she said, dragging herself to him on her knees, " you do not answer me. Will you not speak to me once more? Then there is nothing left for me but to die."

A tear stood in the young man's eye.

"Ethel, you no longer love me."

"Oh, God!" cried the poor girl, clasping his knees. "No longer love you! You say that I no longer love yon, Ordener I did you really say those words?"

"You no longer love me, for you despise me."

He repented these cruel words as soon as he had uttered them; for Ethel's tone was heart-rending, as she threw her adored arms around his neck, and exclaimed in a voice broken by tears: "Forgive me, my beloved Ordener; forgive me as I forgive you. I despise you! Great heavens! Are you not my pride, my idol, my all? Tell me, was there aught in my words but deep love and ardent adoration? Alas! your stern language wounds me sorely, when I came here to save you, my idolized Ordener, by sacrificing my whole life for yours."

"Well," replied the young man, softened by her tears, and kissing them away, " was it not a want of esteem to suppose that I would buy my life by forsaking you, by basely renouncing my oaths, by sacrificing my love?" He added, fixing his eye on Ethel: "My love, for which I am about to shed my blood! "

Ethel uttered a deep groan as she answered: " Hear me, Ordener, before you judge me so rashly. Perhaps I have more strength than usually falls to the lot of a weak woman. From our lofty prison window I saw them build your scaffold on the parade. Ordener, you do not know what fearful agony it is to see the slow preparations for the death of one whose life is an indissoluble part of your own! Countess d'Ahlefeld, at whose side I sat when I heard the judge pronounce your death sentence, came to the cell to which I had returned with my father. She asked me if I would save you; she proposed this hateful means. Ordener, my poor happiness must perish; I must give you up, renounce you forever; yield to another my Ordener, poor lonely Ethel's only joy, or deliver you to the executioner. They bid me choose between my own misery and your death. I cannot hesitate."

He kissed this angel's hand with respectful worship.

"Neither do I hesitate, Ethel. You would not offer me life with Ulrica d'Ahlefeld's hand if you knew why I die."

"What? What secret mystery -"

"Let me keep this one secret from you, my beloved Ethel. I must die without letting you know whether you owe me gratitude or hatred for my death."

"You must die! Must you then die? Oh, God! it is but too true, and the scaffold stands ready even now; and no human power can save my Ordener, whom they will slay! Tell me, cast one look upon your slave, your wife, and tell me, promise me, beloved Ordener, that you will listen to me without anger. Are you very sure answer me as you would answer to God that you could not be happy with that woman, that Ulrica d'Ahlefeld? Are you very sure, Ordener? Perhaps she is, she surely is, handsome, amiable, virtuous. She is far superior to her for whom you perish. Do not turn away your head, dear friend, dear Ordener. You are so noble and so young to mount the scaffold. Think! you might live with her in some gay city where you would lose all memory of this fatal dungeon; your days would flow by peacefully, without a thought of me. I consent, you may drive me from your heart, erase my image from your thoughts, Ordener. Only live! Leave me here alone: let me be the one to die. And believe me, when I know that you are in the arms of another, you need not fear for me; I shall not suffer long."

She paused; her voice was drowned in tears. Still her grief-stricken countenance was radiant with her longing to win the ill-omened victory which must be her death.

Ordener said: " No more of this, Ethel. Let no name but yours and mine pass our lips at such a moment."

"Alas! alas!" she replied, " then you persist in dying?"

"I must. I shall go to the scaffold gladly for your sake; I should go to the altar with any other woman with horror and aversion. Say no more; you wound and distress me."

She wept, and murmured: "He will die, oh, God, a death of infamy!"

The condemned man answered with a smile: "Believe me, Ethel, there is less dishonor in my death than in such a life as you propose."

At this instant his eye, glancing away from his weeping Ethel, observed an old man in clerical dress standing in the shadow under the low, arched door. " What do you want? " said he, hastily.

"My lord, I came with the Countess d'Ahlefeld's messenger. You did not see me, and I waited silently until you should notice me."

In fact, Ordener had eyes for Ethel only; and she, at the sight of Ordener, had forgotten her companion.

"I am," continued the old man, " the minister whose duty it is "

"I understand," said the young man; " I am ready."

The minister advanced toward him.

"God is also ready to receive you, my son."

"Sir," said Ortdener, " your face is not unknown to mine; I must have seen you elsewhere."

The minister bowed. "I too recognize you, my son; we met in Vygla tower. We both proved upon that occasion the fallibility of human words. You promised me the pardon of twelve unhappy prisoners, and I put no faith in your promise, being unable to guess that you were the viceroy's son; and you, my lord, who reckoned upon your power and your rank when you made me that promise "

Ordener finished the thought which Athanasius Munder dared not put into words.

"Cannot now obtain pardon even for myself. You are right, sir. I had too little reverence for the future, it has punished me by showing me that its power is greater than mine."

The minister bent his head. "God is great!" said he.

Then he raised his kind eyes to Ordener, adding, "God is good!"

Ordener, who seemed preoccupied, exclaimed, after a brief pause:" Listen, sir; I will keep the promise which I made you in Vygla tower. When I am dead, go to Bergen, seek out my father, the viceroy of Norway, and tell him that the last favor which his son asks of him is to pardon your twelve protégés. He will grant it, I am sure."

A tear of emotion moistened the wrinkled cheek of Athanasius.

“My son, your soul must be filled with noble thoughts, if in the self-same hour you can reject your own pardon and generously implore that of others. For I heard your refusal; and although I blame such dangerous and inordinate affection, I was deeply touched by it. Now I ask myself, *unde scelus?* how could a man who approaches so near to the model of true justice soil his conscience with the crime for which you are condemned?”

“Father, I did not tell my secret to this angel; I cannot reveal it to you. But believe that I am not condemned for any crime of mine.”

“What? Explain yourself, my son!”

“Do not urge me,” firmly answered the young man. “ Let me take my secret with me to the grave.”

“This man cannot be guilty,” muttered the minister.

Then drawing from his breast a black crucifix, he placed it on a sort of altar rudely shaped from a granite slab resting against the damp prison wall. Beside the crucifix he laid a small lighted lamp which he had brought with him, and an open Bible. “My son, meditate and pray; I will return a few hours hence. Come,” he added, turning to Ethel, who during this conversation had preserved a solemn silence, “we must leave the prisoner. Our time has passed.”

She rose, calm and radiant; a divine spark flashed from her eyes as she said: “ Sir, I cannot go yet; you must first unite Ethel Schumacker to her husband, Ordener Guldenlew.”

She looked at Ordener.

“If you were still free, happy, and powerful, my Ordener, I should weep, and I should shrink from linking my fatal destiny with yours. But now that you need no longer dread the contagion of my misfortune; that you, like me, are a captive, disgraced and oppressed; now that you are about to die, I come to you, hoping that you will at least deign, Ordener, my lord and husband, to allow her who could never have shared your life, to be your companion in death; for you love me too much, do you not, to doubt for an instant that I shall die with you?”

The prisoner fell at her feet, and kissed the hem of her gown.

“You, old man,” she resumed, “ must take the place of family and parents. This cell shall be our temple, this stone our altar. Here is my ring; we kneel before God and before you. Bless us, and pronounce the sacred words which shall unite Ethel Schumacker and Ordener Guldenlew, her lord.”

And they knelt together before the priest, who regarded them with mingled astonishment and pity.

“How, my children! What would you do?”

“Father,” said the girl, “time presses. God and death wait for us.”

In this life we sometimes meet with irresistible powers, supreme wills to which we yield instantly as if they were more than human. The priest raised his eyes, sighing: “ May the Lord forgive me if I do wrong! You love each other; you have but little time to love on earth. I do not think I shall fail in my allegiance to God if I legalize your love.”

The sweet and solemn ceremony was performed. With the final blessing of the priest, they rose a wedded pair.

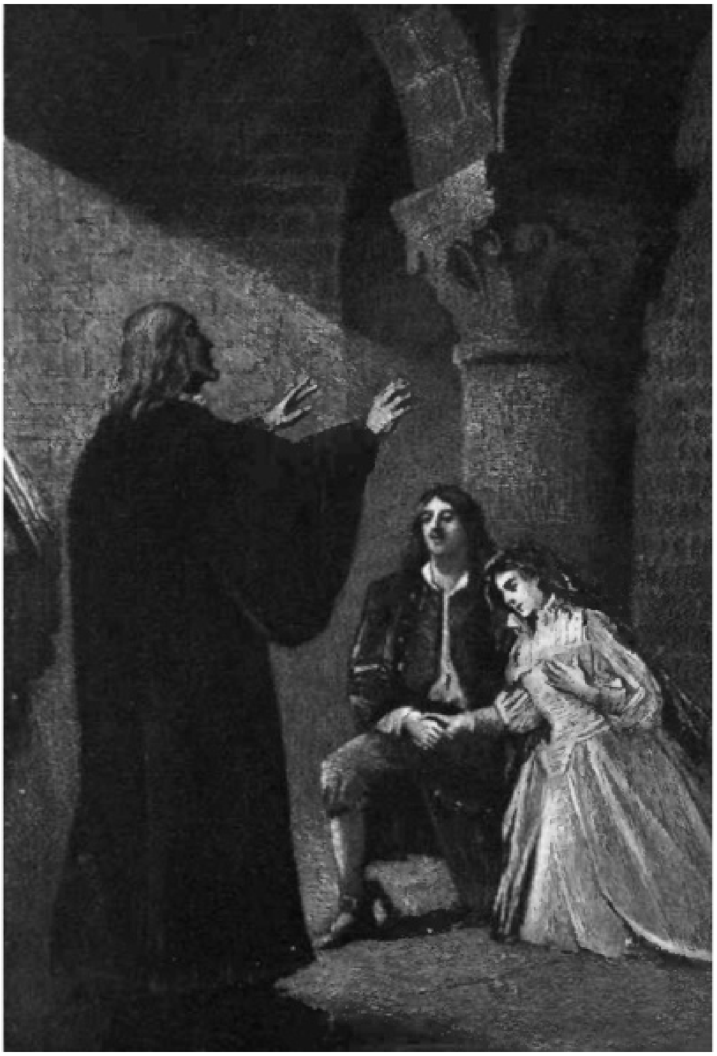

They rose a wedded Pair

The prisoner’s face beamed with painful joy; he seemed for the first time conscious of the bitterness of death, now that he realized the sweetness of life. The features of his companion were sublime in their expression of grandeur and simplicity; she still felt the modesty of a maiden, and already exulted as a young wife.

“Hear me, Ordener,” said she: “is it not fortunate that we must die, since we could never have been united in life? Do you know, love, what I will do? I will stand at the window of my cell, where I can see you mount the scaffold, so that our spirits may wing their flight to heaven together. If I should die before the axe falls, I will wait for you; for we are husband and wife, niy adored Ordener, and this night our coffin shall be our bridal bed.”

He pressed her to his throbbing heart, and could only utter these words, which for him summed up all human happiness: “Ethel, you are mine!”

“My children,” said the chaplain, in a broken voice, “say farewell; it is time.”

“Alas! “ cried Ethel.

All her angelic strength returned, and she knelt before the prisoner: “Farewell, my beloved Ordener! My lord, give me your blessing.”

The prisoner yielded to this touching request, then turned to take leave of the venerable Athanasius Munder. The old man was kneeling at his feet.

“What do you wish, father? “ he asked in surprise.

The old man gazed at him with sweet humility: “Your blessing, my son.”

“May Heaven bless you, and grant you all the happiness which your prayers call down upon your brother men!” replied Ordener, in touched and solemn tones.

Soon the sepulchral arches heard their last kisses and their last farewells; soon the rude bolts creaked noisily into place, and the iron door separated the youthful pair who were to die, only to meet again in eternity.

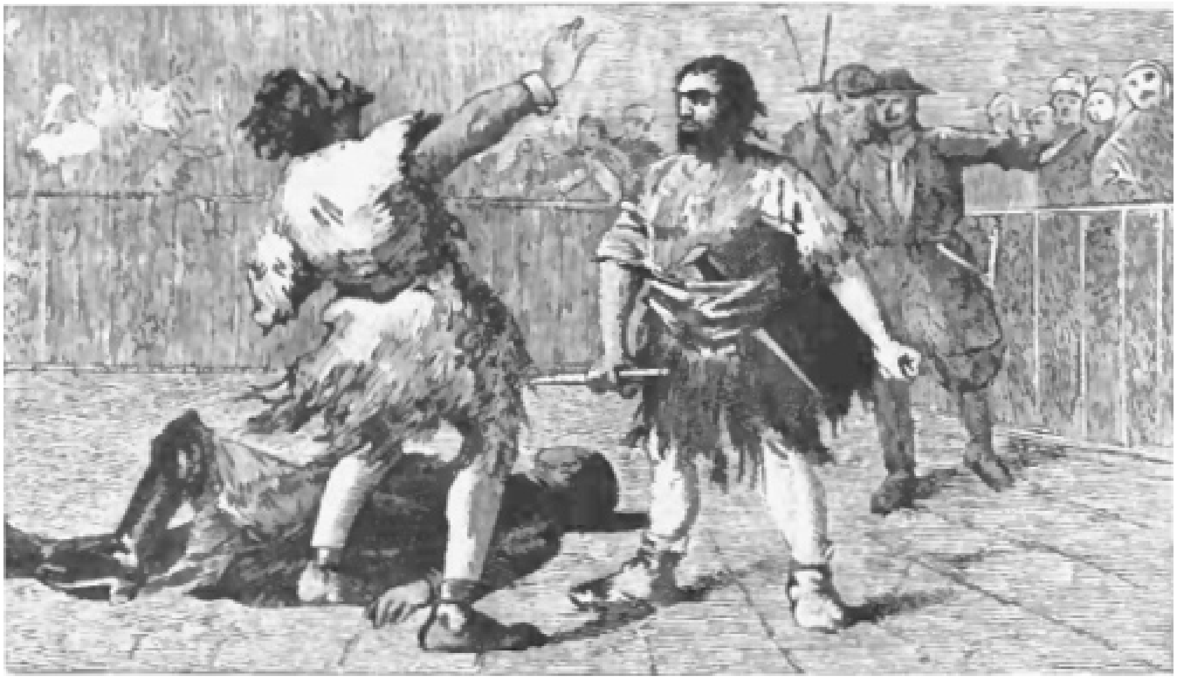

He plunged a Dagger in the Soldier’s Heart

CHAPTER XLV STRICT JUSTICE.

I will give two thousand crowns to any man who shall deliver over to me Louis Perez, dead or alive.-Calderon: Louis Perez of Galicia.

Baron Vœthaün, colonel of the Munkholm musketeers, which of the men who fought under your command at Black Pillar Pass took Hans of Iceland prisoner? Name him to the court, that he may receive the thousand crowns reward offered for the capture.”

The president of the court thus addressed the colonel of musketeers. The court was in session; for according to old Norwegian custom, a court from whose sentence there is no appeal cannot adjourn until the sentence has been carried out. Before the judges stood the giant, who had just been led in again, with the rope round his neck from which he was soon to hang.

The colonel, seated at the table with the private secretary, rose and bowed to the court and to the bishop, who had reascended his throne.

“My lord judges, the soldier who captured Hans of Iceland is present. His name is Toric-Belfast, second musketeer of my regiment.”

“Let him stand forth,” replied the president, “ and receive the promised reward.”

A young soldier in the Munkholm uniform stepped forward.

“You are Toric-Belfast?” asked the president.

“Yes, your worship.”

“It was you who took Hans of Iceland prisoner?”

“Yes, by the aid of Saint Beelzebub, I did, please your worship.”

A heavy bag of money was placed before the bench.

“Do you recognize this man as the famous Hans of Iceland?” added the president, pointing to the fettered giant.

“I am better acquainted with my Kitty’s pretty face than with that of Hans of Iceland; but I declare, by the halo of Saint Belphegor, that if Hans of Iceland be anywhere, it is in the shape of that big devil.”

“Advance, Toric-Belfast,” said the president. “Here are the thousand crowns offered by the lord mayor.”

The soldier hurried toward the bench, when a voice rose from the crowd: “Munkholm musketeer, you never captured Hans of Iceland.”

“By all the blessed devils!” cried the soldier, turning around, “I own nothing but my pipe and the moment of time in which I speak; but still I promise to give ten thousand gold crowns to the man who says that, if he can prove his words.”

And folding his arms, he cast an assured glance over the audience: “Well! let the man who spoke, show himself.”

“It is I!” said a small man, elbowing his way through the crowd.

The new-comer was wrapped in sealskin, like a Greenlander, his outlandish garb hanging stiffly about him. His beard was black; and thick hair of the same color, falling over his red eyebrows, concealed a hideous face. Neither his hands nor his arms were visible.

“Oh, it is you, is it?” said the soldier, with a loud laugh. “And who, then, do you say it was, my fine gentleman, that had the honor of capturing that infernal giant?”

The little man shook his head, and said with a malicious smile:” It was I.”

At this instant Baron Vœthaün fancied that he recognized the mysterious being who had warned him at Skongen of the arrival of the rebels; Chancellor d’ Ahlefeld thought he recognized his host at Arbar ruin; and the private secretary, a certain peasant from Oëlmœ, who wore a similar dress, and who had pointed out the lair of Hans of Iceland. But the three being separated, they could not impart to one another this fleeting impression, which the differences ot feature and costume, afterward observed, must have soon dissipated.

“Indeed! it was you, was it? “ ironically observed the soldier. “ If it were not for your Greenland seal’s costume, by the look which you cast at me, I should be tempted to take you for another ridiculous dwarf, who tried to pick a quarrel with me at the Spladgest, a fortnight or so ago. It was the very day that they brought in the body of Gill Stadt, the miner.” “ Gill Stadt! “ broke in the little man, with a shudder. “ Yes, Gill Stadt!” repeated the soldier, with an air of indifference, “ the rejected lover of a girl who was sweetheart to a comrade of mine, and for whose sake he died, like the fool that he was.”

The little man said in hollow tones: “Was there not also the body of an officer of your regiment at the Spladgest? “

“Exactly; I shall remember that day as long as I live. I forgot that it was the hour for the tattoo, and I was arrested when I got back to the fort. That officer was Captain Dispolsen.”

At this name the private secretary rose.

“These two fellows abuse the patience of the court. We beg the president to cut short this idle chatter.”

“By my Kitty’s good name ‘I ask nothing better,” said Toric-Belfast, “ provided your worships will give me the thousand crowns offered for the head of Hans, for it was I who took him prisoner.”

“You lie! “cried the little man.

The soldier clapped his hand to his sword: “It is very lucky for you, you rascal, that we are in the presence of the court, where a soldier, even a Munkholm musketeer, must never resort to force.”

“The reward,” coldly observed the little man, “belongs to me; for if it were not for me, you would never have won Hans of Iceland’s head.”

The indignant soldier swore that it was he who captured Hans of Iceland, when, wounded on the field of battle, he was just beginning to revive.

“Well,” said his opponent, “you may have captured him, but it was I who struck him down. If it had not been for me, you could never have taken him prisoner; therefore the thousand crowns are mine.”

“It is false,” replied the soldier. “ It was not you who struck him down; it was an evil spirit, clad in the skins of wild beasts.”

“It was I”

“No, no!”

The president ordered both parties to be silent; then, again asking Colonel Vœthaün whether it was really Toric- Belfast who brought Hans of Iceland into camp a prisoner, at his assent he declared that the prize belonged to the soldier.

The small man gnashed his teeth, and the musketeer greedily stretched out his hands for the sack. “ One moment!” cried the little man. “Mr. President, that money, according to the lord mayor’s proclamation, was to be given to him who took Hans of Iceland.”

“Well “ said the judge.

The little man turned to the giant: “That man is not Hans of Iceland.”

A murmur of surprise ran through the room. The president and private secretary moved uneasily in their chairs.

“No!” emphatically reiterated the small man, “ the money does not belong to the cursed musketeer of Munkholm, for that man is not Hans of Iceland.”

“Halberdiers,” said the president, “remove this madman; he has lost his senses.”

The bishop interposed: “ Will you allow me, most worthy President, to remark that you may, by refusing to hear this man, destroy the prisoner’s last chance? I demand that he be confronted with the stranger.”

“Reverend Bishop, the court will grant your request,” replied the president; and addressing the giant: “ You have declared yourself to be Hans of Iceland; do you persist in that statement?”

The prisoner answered: “I do; I am Hans of Iceland.”

“You hear, Bishop?”

The little man shouted in the same breath with the president: “You lie, mountaineer of Kiölen! you lie! Do not persist in bearing a name which must crush you; remember that it has been fatal to you already.”

“I am Hans from Klipstadur, in Iceland,” repeated the giant, his eye riveted on the private secretary.

The small man approached the Munkholm soldier, who, like the rest of the audience, had watched this scene with eager curiosity.

“Mountaineer of Kiölen,” he cried, “they say that Hans of Iceland drinks human blood. If you be he, drink. Here it is.”

And scarcely were the words out of his mouth, when, tossing his sealskin mantle over his shoulder, he plunged a dagger into the soldier’s heart, and flung his dead body at the giant’s feet.

A cry of fright and horror followed; the soldiers guarding the giant started back. The small man, swift as lightning, rushed upon the defenceless mountaineer, and with another blow of his dagger, laid him upon the first corpse. Then flinging off his cloak, his false hair, and black beard, he revealed his wiry limbs, hideously attired in the skins of wild beasts, and a face which inspired the beholders with even greater horror than did the bloody dagger which he brandished aloft, reeking with a double murder.

“Ha! judges, where is Hans of Iceland now?”

“Guards, seize that monster! “ cried the startled judge.

Hans hurled his dagger into the centre of the room.

“It is useless to me if there are no more Munkholm soldiers here.”

With these words, he yielded unresistingly to the halberdiers and bowmen who surrounded him, prepared to lay siege to him, as to a city. They chained the monster to the prisoner’s bench; and a litter bore away his victims, one of whom, the mountaineer, still breathed.

It is impossible to describe the various emotions of terror, astonishment, and indignation which, during this fearful scene, agitated the people, the guards, and the judges. When the brigand had taken his place, calm and unmoved, upon the fatal bench, a feeling of curiosity overcame every other impression, and breathless attention restored quiet.

The venerable bishop rose: “My lord judges”

The bandit interrupted him: “Bishop of Throndhjem, I am Hans of Iceland do not take the trouble to plead for me.”

The private secretary rose: “ Noble President -

The monster cut him short: “Private Secretary, I am Hans of Iceland; do not take the pains to accuse me.”

Then, his feet in a pool of blood, he ran his bold, fierce eye over the court, the bowmen, and the crowd; and it seemed as if each of them trembled witli fear at the glance of that one man, unarmed, chained, and alone.

“Listen, judges; expect no long speeches from me. I am the demon of Klipstadur. My mother was old Iceland, the land of volcanoes. Once that land was but one huge mountain; it was crushed by the hand of a giant, who fell from heaven, and rested on its highest peak. I need not speak of myself. I am a descendant of Ingulf the Destroyer, and I bear his spirit within me. I have committed more murders and kindled more fires than all of you put together ever uttered unjust sentences in your lives. I have secrets in common with Chancellor d’Ahlefeld. I could drink every drop of blood that flows in your veins with delight. It is my nature to hate mankind, my mission to harm them. Colonel of the Munkholin musketeers, it was I who warned you of the march of the miners through Black Pillar Pass, sure that you would kill numbers of men in those gorges; it was I who destroyed a whole battalion of your regiment by hurling granite bowlders upon their heads. I did it to avenge my son. Now, judges, my son is dead; I came here in search of death. The soul of Ingulf oppresses me, because I must bear it alone, and can never transmit it to an heir. I am tired of life, since it can no longer be an example and a lesson to a successor. I have drunk enough blood; my thirst is quenched. Now, here I am; you may drink mine.”

He was silent, and every voice repeated his awful words.

The bishop said: “My son, what was your object in committing so many crimes?”

The brigand laughed: “I’ faith, I swear, reverend Bishop it was not like your brother, the bishop of Borglum, with a view to enrich myself. There was something in me which drove me to it.” God does not always dwell in his ministers,” meekly replied the saintly old man. “ You would insult me, but I only wish I could defend you.”

Your reverence wastes his breath. Go ask your other brother, the bishop of Scalholt in Iceland, to defend me. By Ingulf! it is a strange thing that two bishops should protect me,- one in my cradle, the other at my tomb. Bishop, you are an old fool.

“My son, do you believe in God?”

“Why not? There must be a God for us to blaspheme.”

“Cease unhappy man! You are about to die, and will not kiss the feet of Christ-”

Hans of Iceland shrugged his shoulders.

“If I did so, it would be after the fashion of the constable of Roll, who pulled the king over as he kissed his foot.”

The bishop seated himself, deeply moved.

“Come, judges,” continued Hans of Iceland, “ why this delay? If I were in your place and you in mine, I would not keep you waiting so long for your death sentence.”

The court withdrew. After a brief deliberation they returned, and the president read aloud the sentence, which declared that Hans of Iceland was to be “ hung by the neck until he was dead, dead, dead.”

“That’s good,” said the brigand. “Chancellor d’Ahlefeld, I know enough about you to obtain a like sentence for you. But live, since you do naught but injure men. Oh, I am sure now that I shall not go to Nistheim! “ The private secretary ordered the guards who led him away to place him in the Lion of Schleswig tower, until a dungeon could be prepared for him in the quarters of the Munkholm regiment, where he might await his execution.

“In the quarters of the Munkholm musketeers!” repeated the monster, with a growl of pleasure.

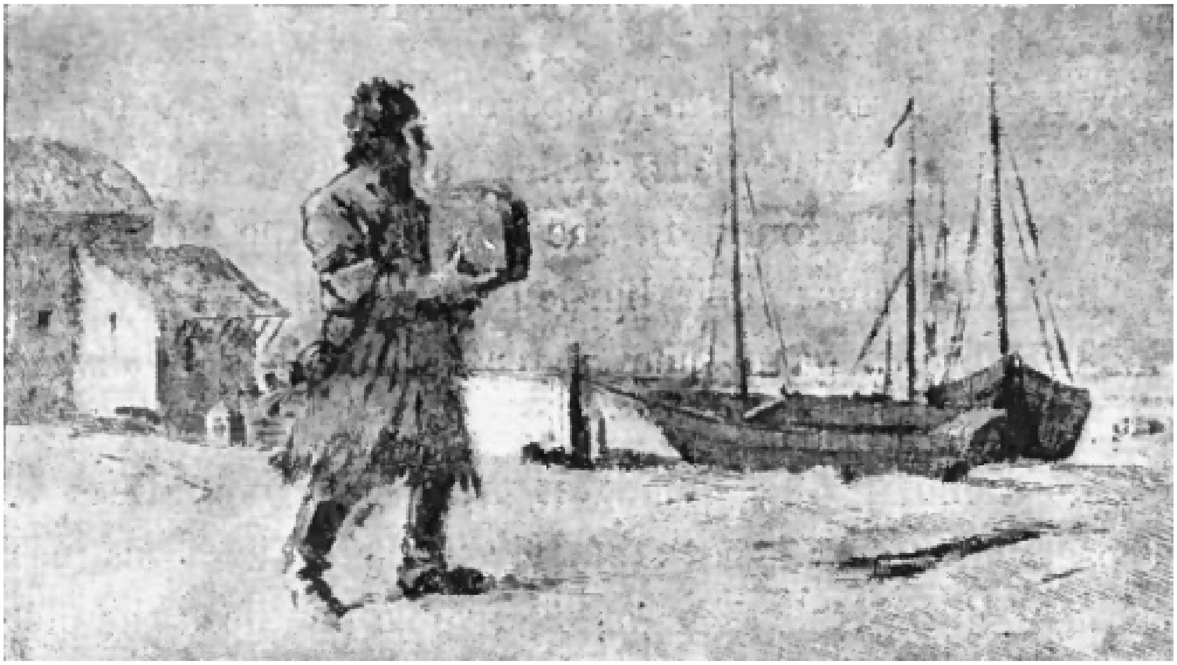

Oglypiglap taking the Box to the Bishop

CHAPTER XLVI THOUGH LOST TO SIGHT, TO MEMORY DEAR.

However, the corpse of Ponce de Leon, which had remained beside the fountain, having been disfigured by the sun, the Moors of Alpuxares took possession of it and bore it to Grenada.-
É. H.: The Captive of Ochali.

Before dawn of the day so many of whose events we have already traced, at the very hour when Ordener’s sentence was pronounced at Munkholm, the new keeper of the Throndhjem Spladgest, Benignus Spiagudry’s former assistant and present successor, Oglypiglap, was abruptly aroused from his mattress by a violent series of raps, which fairly shook the building. He rose reluc- tantly, took his copper lamp, whose dim light dazzled his drowsy eyes, and went, swearing at the dampness of the dead-house, to open to those who waked him so early from his sleep.

They were fishers from Sparbo, who carried upon a litter, strewed with reeds, rushes, and seaweed, a corpse which they had found in the waters of the lake.

They laid down their burden within the gloomy walls, and Oglypiglap gave them a receipt for it, so that they might claim their fee.

Left alone in the Spladgest, he began to undress the corpse, which was remarkable for its length and leanness. The first thing which caught his eye as he raised the cloth which covered it was a vast periwig.

“Why, really,” said he, “ this outlandish wig has passed through my hands before; it belonged to that young French dandy. . . . And,” he added, continuing his investigations, “ here are the high boots of poor postilion Cramner, who was killed by his horses, and- What the devil does this mean? the full black suit of Professor Syngramtax, that learned old fogy, who drowned himself not long ago! Who can this new-comer be that comes here clad in the cast-off apparel of all my ancient acquaintance?”

He examined the face of the dead by the light of his lamp, but in vain; the features, already decomposed, had lost their original shape and color. He felt in the pockets, and drew out some scraps of parchment soaked with water and stained with mud; he wiped them carefully on his leather apron, and succeeded in deciphering on one of them these disconnected and half-effaced phrases:” Rudbeck, Saxon the grammarian. Arngrimmsson, bishop of Holum.- There are but two counties in Norway, Larvig and Jarlsberg, and but one barony.- Silver mines exist only at Kongsberg; loadstone and asbestos, at Sund-Moer; amethyst, at Guldbrandsdal; chalcedony, agate, and jasper, at the Färöe Islands. At Noukahiva, in time of famine, men eat their wives and children.- Thormodr Torfusson; Isleif, bishop of Scalholt, first historian of Iceland. Mercury played at chess with the Moon, and won the seventy-second part of a day. Maëlstrom, whirlpool.- *Hirundo, hirudo.*- Cicero, chick pea; glory. The learned Frode. Odin consulted the head of Mimer, the wise. (Mahomet and his dove, Sertorius and his hind.) The more the soil- the less gypsum it contains “

“I can scarcely believe my eyes!” he cried, dropping the parchment; “ it is the writing of my old master, Beniguus Spiagudry!”

Then, examining the corpse afresh, he recognized the long lean hands, the scanty hair, and the whole build of the unfortunate man.

“They were not so much out of the way, after all,” thought he, shaking his head, “ who charged him with sacrilege and necromancy. The Devil carried him off to drown him in Lake Sparbo. What poor fools we mortals be! Who would ever have thought that Dr. Spiagudry, after taking so many people to board in his hostelry of the dead, would come here at last from afar to be cared for himself!”

The little Lapp philosopher lifted the body, to remove it to one of his six granite beds, when he found that something heavy was fastened about the unhappy Spiagudry’s neck by a leather cord.

“Probably the stone with which the Devil pitched him into the lake,” he muttered.

He was mistaken; it was a small iron box, upon which, on examining it closely, after wiping it carefully, he discovered a large shield-shaped padlock.

“Of course there is some deviltry in this box,” said he; “ the man was a sacrilegious sorcerer. I will hand it over to the bishop; it may contain an evil spirit.”

Then, taking it from the corpse, which he placed in the inner room, he hurried away to the bishop’s palace, muttering a prayer as he went, as a charm against the dreadful box under his arm.

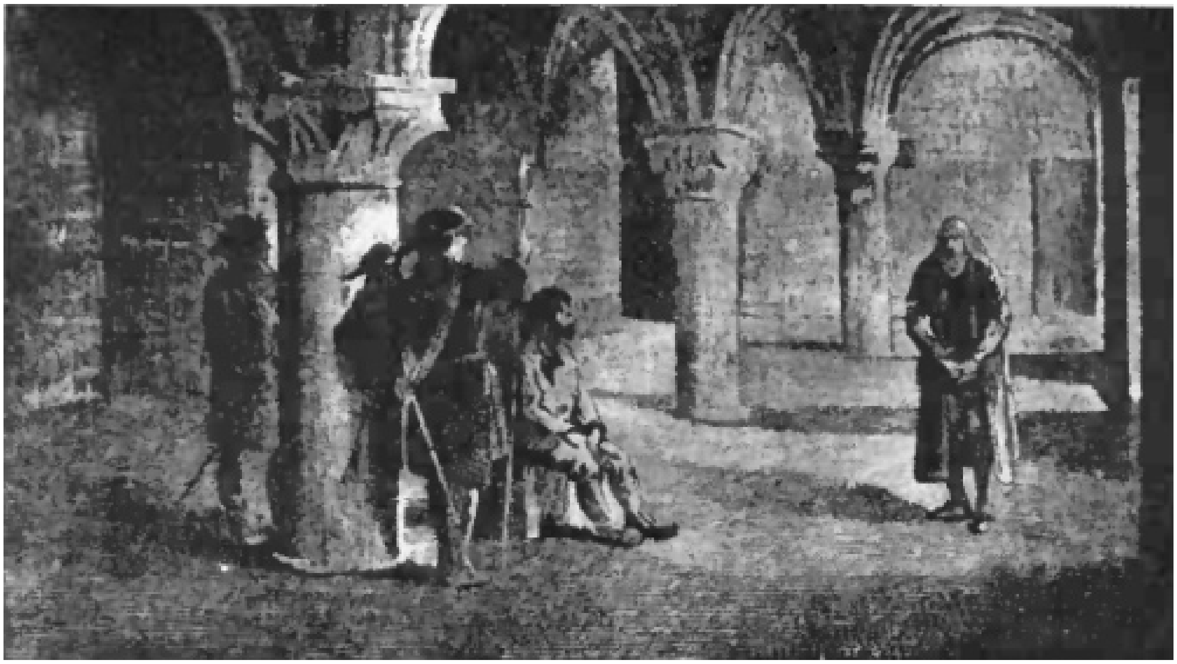

Schumacker and Hans of Iceland in Prison

CHAPTER XLVII

Is it a man or an infernal spirit that speaks thus? What mischievous spirit torments thee thus? Show me the relentless foe who inhabits thy heart.

Maturin.

Hans of Iceland and Schumacker were in the same cell in the Schleswig tower. The acquitted exchancellor paced slowly to and fro, his eyes heavy with bitter tears; the condemned brigand laughed at his chains, though surrounded by guards.

The two prisoners studied each other long and silently; it seemed as if both felt themselves and mutually recognized each other as enemies of mankind.

“Who are you?” at length asked the exchancellor.

“I will tell you my name,” replied the bandit, “to make you shun me. I am Hans of Iceland.”

Schumacker advanced toward him.

“Take my hand,” said he.

“Do you wish me to devour it?”

“Hans of Iceland,” rejoined Schumacker, “ I like you because you hate mankind.”

“And for that reason I hate you.”

“Hark ye, I hate men, as you do, because they have returned me evil for good.”

“You do not hate them as I do; I hate them because they have returned me good for evil.”

Schumacker shuddered at the monster’s expression. In vain he conquered his natural disposition; he could not sympathize with this fiend.

“Yes,” he exclaimed, “‘ I abhor men because they are false, ungrateful, cruel. I owe to them all the misery of my life.”

“So much the better! I owe them all the pleasure of mine.”

“What pleasure?”

“The pleasure of feeling their quivering flesh throb beneath my teeth, their hot blood moisten my parched throat; the rapture of crushing living beings against sharp rocks, and hearing the shriek of my victims mingle with the sound of their breaking limbs. These are the pleasures which I owe to men.”

Schumacker shrank in horror from the monster whom he had approached with something like pride in his resemblance to him. Pierced with shame, he hid his wrinkled face in his hands; for his eyes were full of tears of anger, not against mankind, but against himself. His great and noble heart began to revolt at the hatred he had so long cherished, when he saw it reflected in Hans of Iceland's heart as in a fearful mirror.

"Well," said the monster, with a sneer, "well, enemy of man, dare you boast your likeness to me?"

The old man shuddered." Oh, God! Rather than hate mankind as you do, let me love them."

Guards came to remove the monster to a more secure cell. Schumacker was left alone in his dungeon to dream; but he was no longer the enemy of mankind.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

Keep me, Lord, from the hands of the wicked;
Preserve me from the violent man;
Who have purposed to thrust aside my step.
The proud have hid a snare for me, and cords;
They have spread a net by the wayside;
They have set gins for me.
Psalms cxl. 4.

The fatal hour had come; the sun showed but half his disk above the horizon. The guards were doubled throughout Munkholm castle; before each door paced fierce, silent sentinels. The noises of the town seemed louder and more confused than usual as they ascended to the dark towers of the fortress, itself a prey to strange excitement. The mournful sound of muffled drums was heard in every courtyard; now and again cannon growled; the heavy bell in the donjon tolled slowly, with sullen, measured strokes; and from every direction boats loaded with people hastened toward the fearful rock.

A scaffold hung with black, around which an impatient mob swarmed in ever-increasing numbers, rose from the castle parade-ground in the centre of a hollow square of troops. Upon the scaffold a man clad in red serge walked up and down, now leaning upon the axe in his hand, and now fingering a billet and block upon the funeral platform. Close at hand a stake was prepared, before which several pitch torches burned. Between the scaffold and the stake was planted a post, from which hung the inscription:

“ORDENER GULDENLEW, TRAITOR.”

A black flag floated from the top of the Schleswig tower.

At this moment Ordener appeared before the judges, still assembled in the court-room. The bishop alone was absent; his office as counsel for the defence had ended.

The son of the viceroy was dressed in black, and wore upon his neck the collar of the Dannebrog. His face was pale but proud. He was alone; for he had been led forth to torture before Chaplain Athanasius Munder returned to his cell.

Ordener’s sacrifice was already inwardly accomplished. And yet Ethel’s husband still clung to life, and might perhaps have chosen another night than that of the tomb for his wedding night. He had prayed and dreamed many dreams in his dreary cell. Now he was beyond all prayers and all dreams. He was strong in the strength imparted by religion and by love.

The crowd, more deeply moved than the prisoner, eagerly gazed at him. His illustrious rank, his horrible fate, awakened universal envy and pity. Every spectator watched his punishment, without comprehending his crime. In every human heart lurks a strange feeling which urges its owner to behold the tortures of others as well as their pleasures. Men seek with awful avidity to read destruction upon the distorted features of one who is about to die, as if some revelation from heaven or from *** Hell or that death would cast it's shadow over him. They go to see how a man can look when all hope is fled all hope has fled -this being, full of strength and health, who breathes and lives like themselves, yet who in a few short moments will cease to breathe, to live. He has never injured them, and they pity him; but none will venture to help the unfortunate wretch, now on the verge of death, without being permitted the final gasp, and who is shortly to be struck off at a single blow- this life, which society cannot give, yet ruthlessly takes away, with all the pomp of judicial murder, tending only to inflame the imagination of the spectators.

Time, with its indefinite delays, condemns us all to death, yet it is a strange and grievous sight to watch the unfortunate being who knows his hour is nigh.

Ordener was brought into court that he might be stripped of his rank and honors, previous to mounting the scaffold.

The assembly was scarcely restored to calmness, when the president, commanding that a respectful silence should be maintained, ordered the condemned man to remain before him on bended knee, while he read in a clear, distinct tone the following words from the archives of the Knights of the Dannebrog:

"Christian, by the grace of Almighty God, King of Denmark, Norway, the Vandals and the Goths; Duke of Sleswig, Holstein, Storrmarie, and of Dytmarsa; Count of Oldenburg and of Delmenhurst; also on the proposition of the grand chancellor, created Count of Griffenfeld (here the president spoke so rapidly that the name was scarcely heard), Knight of the royal Order of the Dannebrog, founded by our illustrious ancestor, Saint Waldemar, in memory of the Dannebrog standard, which came direct from heaven to our blessed kingdom. It would be against the precepts of this Divine order if one of its knights were allowed to abuse with impunity the honor and holy laws, both of Church and State. “We order that any knight of the order, who has given his soul to the devil by means of felony or treachery, shall kneel in God’s presence, and in that position to be publicly censured by a judge, and then forever degraded of his rank as Knight of our royal Order of Dannebrog.”

Here the president closed the book.

“Ordener Guldenlew, Baron of Thorwick, Knight of Dannebrog, you have been guilty of high treason, a crime for which your head is to be severed, your body burned, and your ashes cast to the winds. Ordener Guldenlew, traitor, you have rendered yourself unworthy to rank amid the Knights of Dannebrog; therefore prepare yourself, for I am about to publicly degrade you in the name of the king.” Resting his hand on the book, the president was going to pronounce the fatal formula on Ordener, who still remained calm and unmoved, when a door to the right of the bench was thrown open, and an usher announced his reverence the Bishop of the Drontheimhus.

An officer of the Church entered and announced his reverence, the Bishop of Throndhjem. He entered hurriedly, accompanied by another ecclesiastic, on whose arm he leaned.

“Stop, Mr. President!” he exclaimed with a strength of which a man of his age seemed hardly capable.” Stop! Heaven be praised! I am in time.”

The audience listened with renewed interest, foreseeing some fresh development. The president turned angrily to the bishop:” Allow me to inform your reverence that your presence here is wholly unnecessary. The court is about to degrade from his rank the prisoner, who will suffer the penalty of his crime directly.”

“Forbear,” said the bishop, “ to lay hands on one who is pure in the sight of God. The prisoner is innocent.”

The cry of astonishment which burst from the spectators was only matched by the cry of terror uttered by the president and private secretary.

“Yes, tremble, judges!” resumed the bishop, before the president could recover his usual presence of mind; “ tremble! for you are about to shed innocent blood.”

As the president’s agitation died away, Ordener arose in consternation. The noble youth feared lest his generous ruse had been discovered, and proofs of Schumacker’s guilt had been found.

"Bishop," said the president, "in this affair crime seems to evade us, being transferred from one to another. Do not trust to any mere appearance. If Ordener Guldenlew be innocent, who, then, is guilty?"

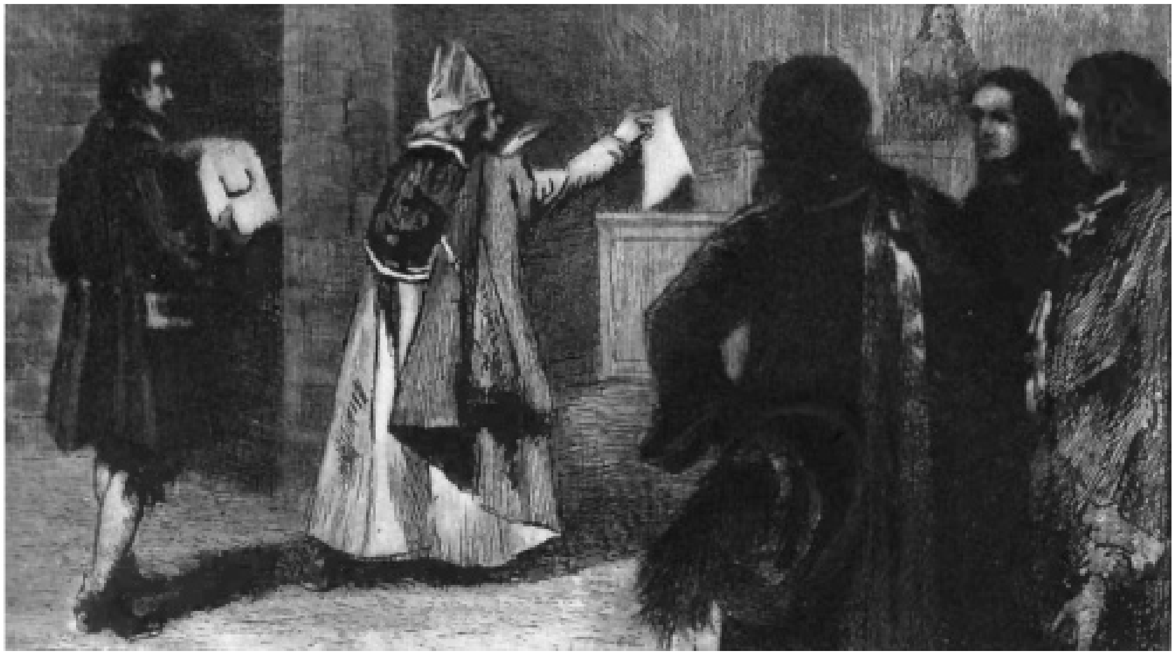

"Forbear," said the Bishop

"Your grace shall know," replied the bishop. Then showing the court an iron casket which a servant had brought in behind him: "Noble lords, you have judged in darkness; within this casket is the miraculous light which shall dissipate that darkness."

The president, private secretary, and Ordener, all seemed amazed at the sight of the mysterious casket.

The bishop added: " Noble judges, hear me. Today, as I returned to my palace, to rest from the fatigues of the night and to pray for the prisoners, I received this sealed iron box. The keeper of the Spladgest, I was told, brought it to the palace this morning to be given to me, declaring that it undoubtedly contained some Satanic charm, as he had found it on the body of the sacrilegious Benignus Spiagudry, which had just been fished out of Lake Sparbo."

Ordener listened more eagerly than ever. All the spec- tators were as still as death. The president and private secretary hung their heads guiltily. They seemed to have lost all their cunning and audacity. There is a moment in the life of every sinner when his power vanishes.

"After blessing this casket," continued the bishop, " we broke the seal, which, as you can still see, bears the ancient and now extinct arms of Griffenfeld. We did indeed find a devilish secret within. You shall judge for yourselves, venerable sirs. Lend me your most earnest attention, for human blood is at stake, and the Lord will hold you accountable for every drop that you may shed."

Then opening the terrible casket, he drew forth a slip of parchment, upon which was written the following testimony:-

I, Blaxtham Cumbysulsum. doctor, being about to die, do declare that of my own free will and pleasure I have placed in the hands of Captain Dispolsen, the agent, at Copenhagen, of the former Count Griffenfeld, the enclosed document, drawn up wholly by the hand of Turiaf Musdœmon. servant of the chancellor. Count d'Ahlefeld. to the end that the said captain may make such use of it as shall seem to him best: and I pray God to pardon my crimes.

Given under my hand and seal at Copenhagen, this eleventh day of January, 1699.

CUMBYSULSUM.

The private secretary shook like a leaf. He tried to speak, but could not. The bishop handed the parchment to the pale and agitated president.

"What do I see? " exclaimed the latter, as he unfolded the parchment. "A note to the noble Count d'Ahlefeld, upon the means of legally ridding himself of Schumacker! I- I swear, reverend Bishop- "

The paper dropped from his trembling fingers.

"Read it, read it, sir," said the bishop. " I doubt not that your unworthy servant has abused your name as he has that of the unfortunate Schumacker. Only see the result of your uncharitable aversion to your fallen predecessor. One of your followers has plotted his ruin in your name, doubtless hoping to make a merit of it to your Grace."

These words revived the president, as showing him that the suspicions of the bishop, who was acquainted with the entire contents of the casket, had not fallen upon him. Ordener also breathed more freely. He began to see that the innocence of Ethel's father might be made manifest at the same time with his own. He felt a deep surprise at the singular fate which had led him to pursue a fearful brigand to recover this casket, which his old guide, Benignus Spiagudry, bore about him all the time; that it was actually following him while he was seeking for it. He also reflected on the solemn lesson of the events which, after ruining him by means of this same fatal casket, now proved the instrument of his salvation.

The president, recovering himself, read with much show of indignation, in which the entire audience shared, a lengthy memorandum, in which Musdœcemon set forth all the details of the abominable scheme which we have seen him execute in the course of this story. Several times the private secretary attempted to rise and defend himself, but each time he was frowned down. At last the odious reading came to an end amid a murmur of universal horror.

“Halberdiers, seize that man!” said the president, pointing to the private secretary.

The wretch, speechless and almost lifeless, stepped from his place, and was cast into the criminal dock, followed by the hoots of the populace.

“Judges,” said the bishop, “ shudder and rejoice. The truth, which has just been brought home to your consciences, will now be even more strongly confirmed by the testimony of our honored brother, Athanasius Munder, chaplain to the prisons of this royal town.”

It was indeed Athanasius Munder who accompanied the bishop. He bowed to his superior in the Church and to the court, then at a sign from the president, proceeded as follows: “ What I am about to state is the truth. May Heaven punish me if I utter a word with any other object than to do my duty! From what I saw this morning in the cell of the viceroy’s son, I was led to think that the young man was not guilty, although your lordships had condemned him upon his own confession. Now, I was called, a few hours since, to give the last spiritual consolations to the unfortunate mountaineer so cruelly murdered before your very eyes, and whom you condemned, worthy sirs, as being Hans of Iceland. The dying man said to me: ‘ I am not Hans of Iceland; I am justly punished for having assumed his name. I was paid to play the part by the chancellor’s private secretary; he is called Musdœmon; and it was he who managed the whole revolt under the name of Hacket! I believe him to be the only guilty man in this whole matter.’ Then he asked me to give him my blessing, and advised me to make haste and repeat his last words to the court. God is my witness. May I save the shedding of innocent blood, and not cause that of the guilty to flow! “

He ceased, again bowing to his bishop and the judges.

"Your Grace sees," said the bishop to the president, " that one of my clients was not mistaken when he found so much resemblance between Hacket and your private secretary."

"Turiaf Musdœmon," said the president to the prisoner, " what have you to say in your defence?"

Musdœmon looked at his master with an expression which alarmed him. He had recovered his usual impudence, and after a brief pause, answered: Nothing, sir."

The president resumed in a weak and faltering voice: " Then you acknowledge yourself guilty of the crime with which you are charged? You confess yourself to be the author of a conspiracy alike against the State and against one John Schumacker?"

"I do, my lord," replied Musdœmon.

The bishop rose. " Mr. President, that there may be no shadow of doubt in this affair, will your grace ask the prisoner if he had any accomplices?"

"Accomplices? " repeated Musdœmon.

He hesitated a moment. The president wore a look of awful anxiety.

"No, my lord Bishop" he said at last.

The president's look of relief fell full upon him.

"No, I had no accomplices," repeated Musdœmon, still more emphatically. " I concocted this plot through affection for my master, who knew nothing of it, to destroy his enemy, Schumacker."

The eyes of prisoner and president met once more.

"Your grace," said the bishop, " must see that as Musdœmon had no accomplices, Baron Ordener Guldenlew must be innocent."

"Then why, worthy Bishop, did he confess his guilt?"

"Mr. President, why did that mountaineer persist that he was Hans of Iceland at the risk of his life? God alone knows our secret motives."

Ordener took up the word: "Judges, I can tell you my motive, now that the real criminal has been discovered. I accused myself falsely to save the former chancellor, Schumacker, whose death would have left his daughter without a protector."

The president bit his lip.

"We request the court," said the bishop, " to proclaim the innocence of our client, Ordener Guldeulew."

The president responded with a nod; and at the request of the lord mayor, they finished their examination of the terrible casket, which contained nothing more except Schumacker's titles of nobility, and a few letters from the Munkholm prisoner to Captain Dispolsen, bitter, but not criminal letters, which alarmed no one but Chancellor d'Ahlefeld.

The court then withdrew; and after a brief deliberation, while the curious crowd, gathered on the parade, waited with stubborn impatience to see the viceroy's son led forth to die, and the executioner nonchalantly paced the scaffold, the president pronounced in a scarcely audible voice the death sentence of Turiaf Musdœmon, the acquittal of Ordener Guldeulew, and the restoration of all his honors, titles, and privileges.

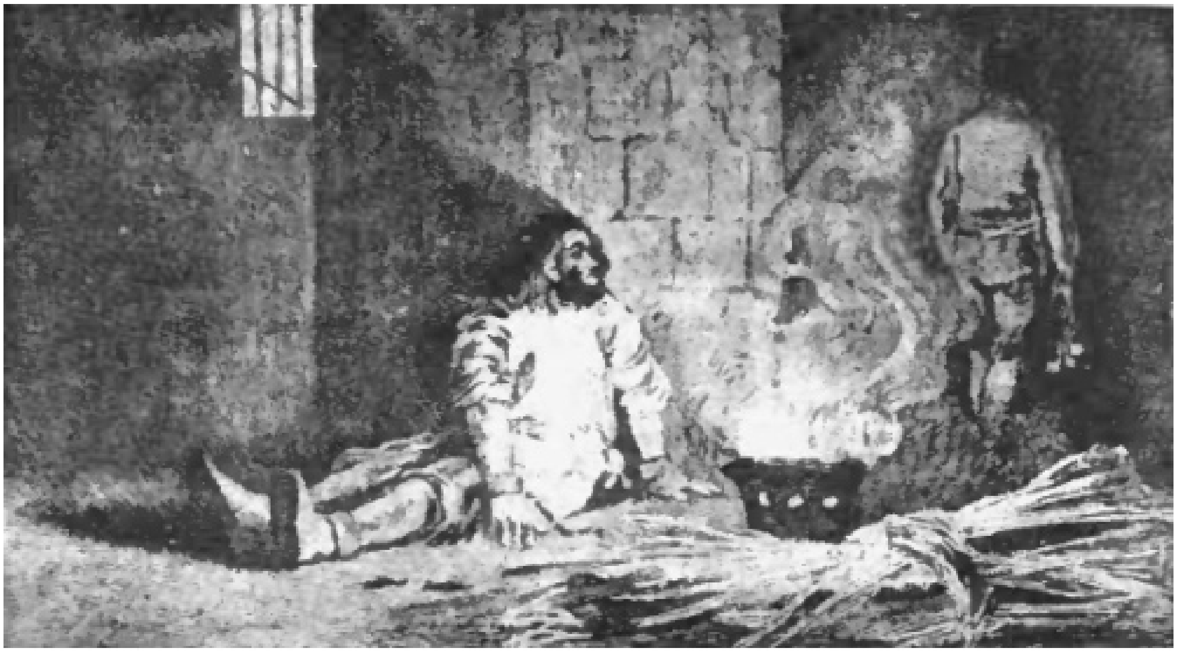

The Jailer gives Hans Straw and a Pan of live Coals ....

CHAPTER XLIX.

“What will you sell me your carcass for, my boy?
I would not give you, in faith, a broken toy.
Saint Michael and Satan (Old Miracle Play).

The remnant of the regiment of Munkholm musketeers had returned to their old quarters in the barracks, which stood in the centre of a vast, square courtyard within the fortress. At night-fall the doors of this building were barricaded, all the soldiers withdrawing into it. with the exception of the sentinels upon the various towers, and the handful of men on guard before the military prison adjoining the barracks. This, being the safest and best watched place of confinement in Muukholm, contained the two prisoners sentenced to be hanged on the following morning, Hans of Iceland and Musdœmon.

Hans of Iceland was alone in his cell. He was stretched upon the floor, chained, his head upon a stone; a feeble light filtered through a square grated opening, cut in the heavy oak door which divided his cell from the next room, where he heard his jailers laugh and swear, and heard the sound of the bottles which they drained, and the dice which they threw upon a drumhead. The monster silently writhed in the darkness, his limbs twitched convulsively, and he gnashed his teeth.

All at once he lifted his voice and called aloud. A turnkey appeared at the grating: “What do you want?” said he.

Hans of Iceland rose. “Mate, I am cold; my stone bed is hard and damp. Give me a bundle of straw to sleep on, and a little fire to warm myself.”

“It is only fair,” replied the turnkey, “ to give a little comfort to a poor devil who is going to be hung, even if he be the Iceland Devil. I will bring you what you want. Have you any money?”

“No,” replied the brigand.

“What! you, the most famous robber in Norway, and you have not a few scurvy gold ducats in your pouch?”

“No,” repeated the brigand.

“A few little crowns?”

“I tell you, no!”

“Not even a few paltry escalins?”

“No, no, nothing; not enough to buy a rat’s skin or a man’s soul.”

The turnkey shook his head:” That ‘s a different matter; you have no right to complain. Your cell is not so cold as the one you will have to sleep in tomorrow, and yet I’ll be bound you won’t notice the hardness of that bed.”

So saying, the jailer withdrew, followed by the curses of the monster, who continued to rattle his chains, which gave forth a hollow clang as if they were breaking slowly under repeated and violent jerks and pulls.

The door opened. A tall man, dressed in red serge, carrying a dark lantern, entered the cell, accompanied by the jailer who had refused the prisoner’s request. The latter at once became perfectly quiet.

“Hans of Iceland,” said the man in red, “ I am Nychol Orugix, executioner of the province of Throndhjem; tomorrow, at sunrise, I am to have the honor of hanging your Excellency upon a fine new gallows in Throndhjem market-place.”

“Are you very sure that you will hang me?” replied the brigand.

The executioner laughed. “I wish you were as sure to rise straight into heaven by Jacob’s ladder as you are to mount the scaffold by Nychol Orugix’s ladder.”

“Indeed?” said the monster, with a malicious grin.

“I tell you again, Sir Brigand, that I am hangman for the province.”

“If I were not myself I should like to be you,” replied the brigand.

“I can’t say the same for you,” rejoined the hangman; then rubbing his hands with a conceited and complacent smirk, he added: “My friend, you are right; ours is a fine trade. Ah: my hand knows the weight of a man’s head.”

“Have you often tasted blood?” asked the brigand.

“No; but I have often used the rack.”

“Have you ever devoured the entrails of a living child?”

“No; but I have crushed men’s bones in a vise; I have broken their limbs upon the wheel; I have dulled steel saws upon their skulls; I have torn their quivering flesh with red-hot pincers; I have burned the blood in their open veins by pouring in a stream of molten lead and boiling oil.”

“Yes,” said the brigand, with a thoughtful look, “you have your pleasures too.”

“In fact,” added the hangman, “Hans of Iceland though you be, I imagine that my hands have released more human souls than yours, to say nothing of your own, which you must render up tomorrow.”

"Always provided that I have one. Do you suppose, then, executioner of Throndhjem, that you can release the spirit of Ingulf from Hans of Iceland's mortal frame without its carrying off your own?"

The executioner laughed heartily. "Indeed, we shall see to-morrow.''

"We shall see," said the brigand.

"Well," said the executioner, "I did not come here to talk of your spirit, but only of your body. Hearken! your body by law belongs to me after your death; but the law gives you the right to sell it to me. Tell me what you will take for it?"

"What I will take for my corpse?" said the brigand.

"Yes, and be reasonable."

Hans of Iceland turned to his jailer: " Tell me, mate, how much do you ask for a bundle of straw and a handful of fire?"

The jailer reflected. "Two gold ducats."

"Well," said the brigand to the hangman, " you must give me two gold ducats for my corpse."

"Two gold ducats!" cried the hangman. " It is horribly dear. Two gold ducats for a wretched corpse! No, indeed! I'll give no such price."

"Then," quietly responded the monster, "you shall not have it."

"Then you will be thrown into the common sewer, instead of adorning the Royal Museum at Copenhagen or the collection of curiosities at Bergen."

"What do I care?"

"Long after your death, people will flock to look at your skeleton, saying, 'Those are the remains of the famous Hans of Iceland!' Your bones will be nicely polished, and strung on copper wire; you will be placed in a big glass case, and dusted carefully every day. Instead of these honors, consider what awaits you if you refuse to sell me your body; you will be left to rot in some charnelhouse, where you will be the prey of worms and other vermin."

"Well, I shall be like the living, who are perpetually preyed upon by their inferiors and devoured by their superiors."

"Two gold ducats!" muttered the hangman; "what an exorbitant price! If you will not come down in your terms, my dear fellow, we can never make a trade."

"It is my first and probably my last trade; I am bent on having it a good one."

“Consider that I may make you repent of your obstinacy. Tomorrow you will be in my power.”

“Do you think so?” These words were uttered with a look which escaped the hangman.

“Yes; and there is a certain way of tightening a slipknot but if you will only be reasonable, I will hang you in my best manner.”

“Little do I care what you do to my neck tomorrow,” replied the monster, with a mocking air.

“Come, won’t you be satisfied with two crowns? What can you do with the money?”

“Ask your comrade there,” said the brigand, pointing to the turnkey;” he charges me two gold ducats for a handful of straw and a fire.”

“Now by Saint Joseph’s saw,” said the hangman, angrily addressing the turnkey, “ it is shocking to make a man pay its weight in gold for a fire and a little worthless straw.”

“Two ducats!” the turnkey replied sourly; “ I’ve a good mind to make him pay four! It is you, Master Nychol, who act like a regular screw in refusing to give this poor prisoner two gold ducats for his corpse, when you can sell it for at least twenty to some learned old fogy or some doctor.”

“I never paid more than twenty escalins for a corpse in my life,” said the hangman.

“Yes,” replied the jailer,” for the body of some paltry thief, or some miserable Jew, that may be; but everybody knows that you can get whatever you choose to ask for Hans of Iceland’s body.”

Hans of Iceland shook his head.

“What business is it of yours?” said Orugix, curtly;

“do I interfere with your plunder, with the clothes and jewels that you steal from the prisoners, and the dirty water which you pour into their thin soup, and the torture to which you put them, to extort money from them? No, I never will give two gold ducats.”

“No straw and no fire for less than two gold ducats,” replied the obstinate jailer.’

“No corpse for less than two gold ducats,” repeated the unmoved brigand.

The hangman, after a brief pause, stamped his foot angrily, saying: “ Well, I ‘ve no time to waste with you. I am wanted elsewhere.” He drew from his waistcoat a leather bag, which he opened slowly and reluctantly.

“There, cursed demon of Iceland, there are your two ducats. Satan would never give you as much for your soul as I do for your body, I am sure.”

The brigand accepted the gold. The turnkey instantly held out his hand to take it.

“One instant, mate; first give me what I asked for.”

The jailer went out, and soon returned with a bundle of dry straw and a pan of live coals, which he placed beside the prisoner.

“That ‘s it,” said the brigand, giving him the two ducats; “ I’ll make a warm night of it. One word more,” he added in an ominous tone. “ Does not this prison adjoin the barracks of the Munkholm musketeers?”

“It does,” said the jailer.

“And which way is the wind?”

“From the east, I think.”

“Good,” said the brigand.

“What are you aiming at, comrade? “ asked the jailer.

“Oh, nothing,” replied the brigand.

“Farewell, comrade, until to-morrow morning early.”

“Yes, to-morrow,” repeated the brigand.

And the noise of the heavy door, as it closed, prevented the jailer and his companion from hearing the fierce, jeering laughter which accompanied these words.

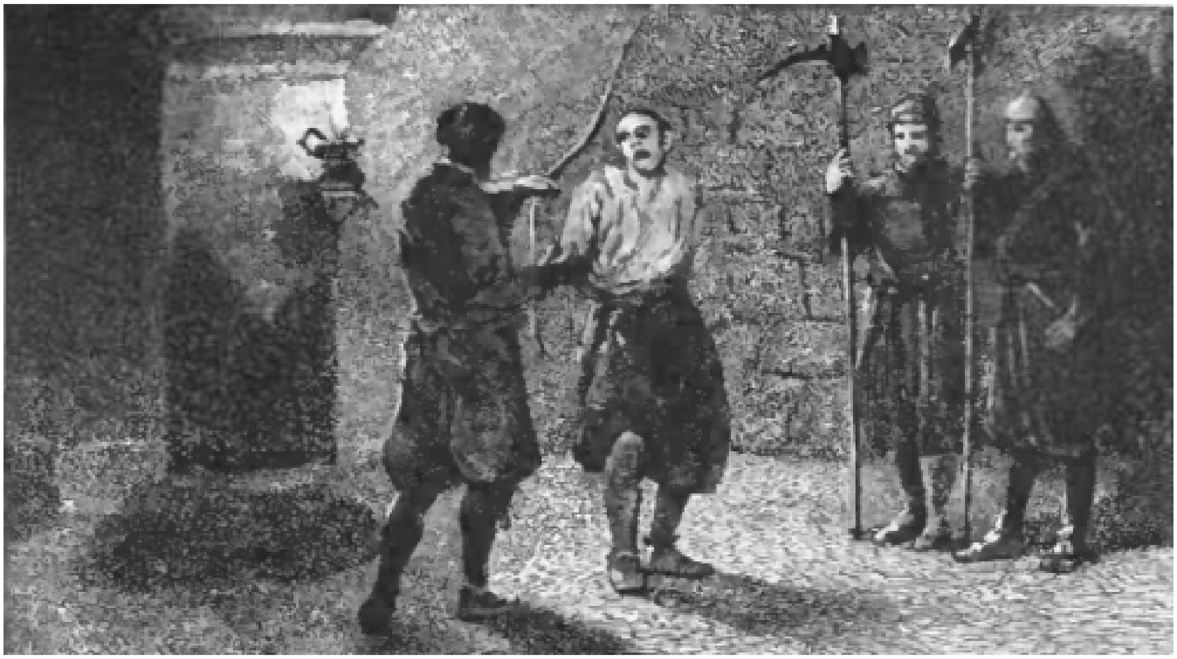

Musdæmon and his Brother, the Hangman

CHAPTER L

Do you hope to end with another crime?
Alex Soumet

Let us now take a look at the other cell in the military prison adjoining the barracks, which holds our old acquaintance, Turiaf Musdœmon.

It may seem surprising that Musdœmon, crafty and cowardly as he was, should so readily confess his crime to the court which condemned him, and so generously conceal the share of his ungrateful master, Chancellor d’Ahlefeld, in it.

However, Musdœmon had not experienced a change of heart. His noble frankness was perhaps the greatest proof of cunning which he could possibly have given. “When he saw his infernal intrigue so unexpectedly exposed, beyond all hope of denial, he was for an instant stunned and terrified. Conquering his alarm, his extreme shrewdness soon showed him that as it was impossible to destroy his chosen victims, he must bend all his energies to saving himself. Two plans at once presented themselves: the first, to throw all the blame upon Count d’Ahlefeld, who had so basely deserted him; the second, to assume the whole burden of the crime himself. A vulgar mind would have grasped at the former: Musdœmon chose the latter. The chancellor was chancellor, after all; besides, there was nothing in the papers which directly implicated him, although they contained overwhelming evidence against his secretary. Then, his master had given him several meaning looks: this was enough to confirm him in his purpose to suffer himself to be condemned, confident that Count d’Ahleteld would connive at his escape, though less from gratitude for past service than through his need for future aid.

He therefore paced his prison, which was dimly lighted by a wretched lamp, never doubting that the door would be thrown open during the night. He studied the architecture of the old stone cell, built by kings whose very names have almost vanished from the pages of history, and was much surprised to find a wooden plank, which echoed back his tread as if it covered some subterranean vault. He also observed a huge iron ring cemented into the arched roof, from which hung a fragment of rope. Time passed; and he listened impatiently to the clock on the tower as it slowly struck the hours, its mournful toll resounding through the silence of the night.

At last there was a footfall outside his cell; his heart-beat high with hope. The massive bolt creaked; the padlock dropped; and as the door opened, his face beamed with delight. It was the same character in scarlet robes whom we have just encountered in Hans of Iceland’s prison. He had a coil of hempen cord under his arm. and was accompanied by four halberdiers in black, armed with swords and partisans.

Musdœmon still wore the wig and gown of a magistrate. His dress seemed to impress the man in red, who bowed low as if accustomed to respect that garb, and said with some hesitation: “ Sir, is our business with jour worship?”

“Yes, yes,” hastily replied Musdœmon, confirmed in his hope of escape by this polite address, and failing to observe the bloody hue of the speaker’s garments.

“Your name,” said the man, his eyes fixed on a parchment which he had just unrolled, “ is Turiaf Musdœmon, I believe.”

“Just so. Do you come from the chancellor, my friend?”

“Yes, your worship.”

“Do not fail, when you have done your errand, to assure his Grace of my undying gratitude.”

The man in red looked at him in amazement. “ Your gratitude!”

“Yes, to be sure, my friend; for it will probably be out of my power to thank him in person very soon.”

“Probably,” dryly replied the man.

“And you must feel,” added Musdœmon, “ that I owe him a deep debt of gratitude for such a service.”

“By the cross of the repentant thief,” cried the man, with a coarse laugh, “ to hear you, one would think that the chancellor was doing something quite unusual for you!”

“Well, to be sure, it is no more than strict justice.”

“Strict justice! that is the word; but you acknowledge that it is justice. It is the first admission of the kind that 1 ever heard in the six-and-twenty years that I have followed my profession. Come, sir, we waste our time in idle talk; are you ready?”

“I am,” said the delighted Musdœmon, stepping to the door.

“Wait; wait a minute,” exclaimed the man in red, stooping to lay his coil of rope on the floor.

Musdœmon paused.

“What are you going to do with all that rope?”

“Your worship may well ask. I know that there is much more than I shall need; but when I began on this affair I thought there would be a great many more prisoners.”

“Come, make haste!” said Musdœmon.

“Your worship is in a wonderful hurry. Have you no last favor to ask?”

“None but the one I have already mentioned, that you will thank his Grace for me. For God’s sake, make haste!” added Musdœmon;” I long to get away from here. Have we a long journey before us?”

“A long journey!” replied the man in red, straightening himself, and measuring off a few lengths of rope. “ The journey will not tire your worship much; for we can make it without leaving this room.”

Musdœmon shuddered.

“What do you mean?”

“What do you mean yourself?” asked the man.

“Oh, God!” said Musdœmon, turning pale,” who are you?”

“I am the hangman.”

The poor wretch trembled like a dry leaf blown by the wind.

“Did you not come to help me to escape?” he feebly muttered.

The hangman laughed.” Yes, truly.” to help you to escape into the spirit-land, whence I warrant you will not be brought back.”

Musdœmon grovelled on the floor. “Mercy.” Have pity on me! Mercy!”

“I’faith,” coldly observed the hangman, “ ’tis the first time I was ever asked such a thing. Do you take me for the king?”

The unfortunate man dragged himself on his knees, trailing his gown in the dust, beating his head against the floor, and clasping the hangman’s feet with muffled groans and broken sobs.

“Come, be quiet!” said the hangman. “ I never before saw a black gown kneel to a red jerkin.” He kicked the suppliant aside, adding:” Pray to God and the saints, fellow; they will be more apt to hear you than I.”

Musdœmon. still knelt, his face buried in his hands, weeping bitterly.

Meantime, the hangman, standing on tiptoe, passed his rope through the ring in the ceiling; he let it hang until it reached the floor, then secured it by a double turn, and made a slip-knot in the end.

“I am ready,” said he, when these ominous preparations were over;” are you ready to lay down your life?”

“No!” said Musdu-mon, springing up; “no; it cannot be; There is some horrible mistake. Chancellor d’Ahlefeld is not so base; I am too necessary to him. It is impossible that it was for me he sent you. Let me escape; do not fear that the chancellor will be angry.”

“Did you not say,” replied the executioner, “ that you were Turiaf Musdœmon?”

The prisoner hesitated for an instant, then said suddenly:” No, no! my name is not Musdœmon; my name is Turiaf Orugix.”

“Orugix!” cried the executioner,” Orugix!”

He snatched off the periwig which concealed the prisoner’s face, and uttered an exclamation of surprise:” My brother!”

“Your brother!” replied the prisoner, with a mixture of shame and pleasure;” can you be”

“Nychol Orugix, hangman for the province of Throndhjem, at your service, brother Turiaf.”

The prisoner fell upon the executioner’s neck, calling him his brother, his beloved brother. This fraternal recognition would not have gratified any one who witnessed it. Turiaf lavished countless caresses upon Nychol with a forced and timid smile, while Nychol responded with a gloomy and embarrassed look. It was like a tiger fondling an elephant, while the monster’s ponderous foot is already planted upon its panting chest.

“What happiness, brother Nychol! I am glad indeed to see you.”

“And I am sorry for you, brother Turiaf.”

The prisoner pretended not to hear these words, and went on in trembling tones:” You have a wife and children, I suppose? You must take me to see my gentle sister, and let me kiss my dear nephews.”

“The Devil fly away with you!” muttered the hangman.

“I will be a second father to them. Hark ye, brother, I am powerful; I have great influence

The brother replied with a sinister expression: “I know that you had! At present, you had better be thinking of that which you have doubtless contrived to curry with the saints.”

All hope faded from the prisoner’s face.

“Good God! what does this mean, dear Nychol? I am safe, since I have found you. Think that the same mother bore us; that we played together as children. Remember, Nychol, you are my brother!"

"You never remembered it until now," replied the brutal Nychol.

"No, I cannot die by my brother's hand!"

"It is your own fault, Turiaf. It was you who ruined my career; who prevented me from becoming royal executioner at Copenhagen; who caused me to be sent into this miserable region as a petty provincial hangman. If you had not been a bad brother, you would have no cause to complain of that which distresses you so much now. I should not be in Throndhjem, and some one else would have to finish your business. Now, enough, brother, you must die."

Death is hideous to the wicked for the same reason that it is beautiful to the good; both must put off their humanity, but the just man is delivered from his body as from a prison, while the wicked man is torn from it as from a jail. At the last moment hell yawns before the sinful soul which has dreamed of annihilation. It knocks anxiously at the dark portals of death; and it is not annihilation that answers.

The prisoner rolled upon the floor and wrung his hands, with moans more heart-rending than the everlasting wail of the damned.

"God have mercy! Holy angels in heaven, if you exist, have pity upon me! Nychol, brother Nychol, in our mother's name, oh, let me live!"

The hangman held out his warrant.

"I cannot; the order is peremptory."

"That warrant is not for me," stammered the despairing prisoner; " it is for one Musdœmon. That is not I; I am Turiaf Orugix."

"You jest," said Nychol, shrugging his shoulders." I know perfectly well that it is meant for you. Besides," he added roughly, "yesterday you would not have been Turiaf Orugix to your brother; to-day he can only look upon you as Turiaf Musdœmon."

"Brother, brother!" groaned the wretch, "only wait until tomorrow! It is impossible that the chancellor could have given the order for my death; it is some frightful mistake. Count d'Ahlefeld loves me dearly. Dear Nychol, I implore you, spare my life! I shall soon be restored to favor, and I will do whatever you may ask"

"You can do me but one service, Turiaf," broke in the hangman. " I have lost two executions already upon which I counted the most, those of exchaucellor Schumacker and the viceroy's son. I am always unlucky. You and Hans of Iceland are all that are left. Your execution, being secret and by night, is worth at least twelve gold ducats to me. Let me hang you peaceably, that is the only favor I ask of you."

"Oh, God!" sighed the prisoner.

"It will be the first and last, in good sooth; but, in return. I promise that you shall not suffer. I will hang you like a brother; submit to your fate."

Musdœmon sprang to his feet; his nostrils were distended with rage; his livid lips quivered; his teeth chattered; his mouth foamed with despair.

"Satan! I saved that d'Ahlefeld; I have embraced my brother, and they murder me! And I must die this very night in a dark dungeon, where none can hear my curses: where I may not cry out against them from one end of the kingdom to the other; where I may not tear asunder the veil that hides their crimes! Was it for such a death that I have stained my entire life? Wretch!" he added, turning to his brother, "would you become a fratricide?"

"I am the executioner," answered the phlegmatic Nychol.

"No!" exclaimed the prisoner; and he flung himself headlong upon the executioner, his eyes darting flame and streaming with tears, like those of a bull at bay, "no, I will not die thus meekly; I have not lived like a poisonous serpent to die like a paltry worm trampled under foot! I will leave my life in my last sting; but it shall be mortal."

So saying, he grappled like a bitter foe with him whom he had just embraced as a brother: the fulsome, flattering Musdœmon now showed his true spirit. Despair stirred up the foul dregs of his soul; and after crawling prostrate like a tiger, like a tiger he sprang upon his enemy. It would have been hard to decide which of the two brothers was the most appalling, as they struggled, one with the brute ferocity of a wild beast, the other with the artful fury of a demon.

But the four halberdiers, hitherto passive spectators, did not remain motionless. They lent their aid to the executioner; and soon Musdceinon, whose rage was his only strength, was forced to quit his hold. He dashed himself against the wall, uttering inarticulate yells, and blunting his nails upon the stone.

"To die! Devils in hell, to die! My shrieks unheard outside this roof, my arms powerless to tear down these walls!"

He was seized, but offered no resistance; his useless efforts had exhausted him. He was stripped of his gown, and bound; at this moment a sealed packet fell from his bosom.

"What is that?" said the hangman.

An infernal light gleamed in the prisoner’s haggard eyes. He muttered:” How could I forget that? Look here, brother Nychol,” he added in an almost friendly tone; “these papers belong to the lord chancellor. Promise to give them to him, and you may do what you will with me.”

“Since you are quiet now, I promise to grant your last wish, although you have been a bad brother to me. I will see that the chancellor has the papers, on the honor of an Orugix.”

“Ask leave to hand them to him yourself,” replied the prisoner, smiling at the executioner, who, from his nature, had little understanding of smiles. “The pleasure which they will afford his Grace may lead him to confer some favor on you.”

“Really, brother?” said Orugix. “Thank you “Perhaps he will make me executioner royal after all, eh? Well, let us part good friends! I forgive you all the scratches which you gave me; forgive me for the hempen collar which I must give you.”

“The chancellor promised me a very different sort of collar,” said Musdœmon.

Then the halberdiers led him, bound, into the middle of the cell; the hangman placed the fatal noose round his neck.

“Are you ready, Turiaf?”

“One moment! one moment!” said the prisoner, whose terror had revived; “for mercy’s sake, brother, do not pull the rope until I tell you to do so!”

“I do not need to pull it,” answered the hangman.

A moment later he repeated his question: “Are you ready?”

“One moment more! Alas! must I die?”

“Turiaf, I have no time to waste.”

So saying, Orugix signed to the halberdiers to stand away from the prisoner.

“One word more, brother; do not forget to give the packet to Count d’Ahlefeld.”

“Never fear,” replied Nychol. He added for the third time: “ Come, are you ready”

The unfortunate man opened his lips, perhaps to plead for another brief delay, when the impatient hangman stooped and turned a brass button projecting from the floor.

The plank gave way beneath the victim; the poor wretch disappeared through a square trap-door with a dull twang from the rope, which was stretched suddenly and vibrated fearfully with the dying man’s final convulsions.

Nothing was seen but the rope swinging to and fro in the dark opening, through which came a cool breeze and a sound as of running water.

The halberdiers themselves shrank back, horror-stricken. The hangman approached the abyss, seized the rope, which still vibrated, and swung himself into the hole, pressing both feet against his victim’s shoulders; the fatal rope stretched to its utmost with a creak, and stood still. A stifled sob rose from the trap.

“All is over,” said the hangman, climbing back into the cell. “ Farewell, brother!”

He drew a cutlass from his belt. “Go feed the fishes in the fjord. Your body to the waves; your soul to the flames!”

With these words, he cut the taut rope. The fragment still fastened to the iron ring lashed the ceiling, while the deep, dark waters splashed high as the body fell, then swept on their underground course.

The hauguiau closed the trap as he had opened it; as he rose, he saw that the room was full of smoke.

“What is all this?” he asked the halberdiers. “Where does this smoke corne from?”

They knew no better than he. In surprise, they opened the door; the corridors were also filled with thick and nauseating snioke. A secret outlet led them, greatly terrified, to the square courtyard, where a fearful sight met their gaze.

A vast conflagration, fanned by a violent east wind, was consuming the military prison and the barracks. The flames, driven in eddying whirls, climbed stone walls, crowned burning roofs, leaped from gaping window-frames; and the black towers of Munkholm now shone in a red and ominous light, now vanished in a dense cloud of smoke.

A turnkey, who was escaping by the courtyard, told them hastily that the fire had broken out in the monster’s cell during the sleep of Hans of Iceland’s keepers, he having been imprudently allowed to have a fire and straw.

“How unlucky I am!” cried Orugix, when he heard this story; “now I suppose Hans of Iceland has slipped through my hands too. The rascal must have been burned; and I sha’n’t even get his body, for which I paid two ducats!”

Meantime, the unfortunate Munkholm musketeers, roused suddenly from their sleep by imminent death, crowded toward the door only to find it closely barred.

Their shrieks of anguish and despair were heard outside; they stood at the blazing windows, wringing their hands, or dashed themselves madly upon the flagging of the court, escaping one death to meet another. The victorious flames devoured the entire structure before the rest of the garrison could come to the rescue.

All help was vain. Luckily, the building stood by itself. The door was broken in with hatchets, but it was too late; for as it opened, the burning roof and floors gave way, and fell upon the unfortunate men with a loud crash.

The entire building disappeared in a whirlwind of fiery dust and burning smoke, which stifled the faint moans of the expiring men.

Next morning nothing was left in the courtyard but four high walls, black and smoking, around a horrid mass of smouldering ruins still devouring each other like wild beasts in a circus.

When the pile had cooled, it was searched. Beneath a heap of stones and iron beams, twisted out of shape by the flames, was found a mass of whitened bones and disfigured corpses; with some thirty soldiers, most of whom were crippled, this was all that remained of the crack regiment of Munkholm.

When the site of the prison was searched, and they reached the fatal cell where the fire had broken out, and where Hans of Iceland had been imprisoned, they found the remains of a human body close beside an iron pan and a heap of broken chains. It was curious that among these ashes there were two skulls, although there was but one skeleton.

CHAPTER LI

Saladin. Bravo, Ibrahim! you are indeed the messenger of good fortune; I thank you for your joyful tidings.
The Mameluke. Well, is that all?
Saladin. What did you expect?
The Mameluke. Nothing more for the messenger of good fortune.
Lessing: Nathan the Wise.

Pale and worn, Count d'Ahlefeld strode up and down his apartment; in his hand he crushed a bundle of letters which he had just read, while he stamped his foot on the smooth marble floor and the gold-fringed rugs.

At the other end of the room, in an attitude of deep respect, stood Nychol Orugix in his infamous scarlet dress, felt hat in hand.

"You have done me good service, Musdœmon," hissed the chancellor.

The hangman looked up timidly: "Is your Grace pleased?"

"What do you want here?" said the chancellor, turning upon him suddenly.

The hangman, proud that he had won a glance from the chancellor, smiled hopefully.

"What do I want, your Grace? The post of executioner at Copenhagen, if your Grace will deign to bestow so great a favor on me in return for the good news I have brought you."

The chancellor called to the two halberdiers on guard at his door: "Seize this rascal; he annoys rne by his impudence."

The guards led away the amazed and confounded Nychol, who ventured one word more: "My lord "

"You are no longer hangman for the province of Throndhjem; I deprive you of your office!" cried the chancellor, slamming the door.

The chancellor returned to his letters, angrily read and re-read them, maddened by his dishonor; for these were the letters which once passed between the countess and Musdœmon. This was Elphega's handwriting. He found that Ulrica was not his daughter; that, it might be, the Frederic whom he mourned was not his son. The unhappy count was punished through that same pride which had caused all his crimes. He cared not now if vengeance evaded him; all his ambitious dreams vanished, his past was blasted, his future dead. He had striven to destroy his enemies; he had only succeeded in losing his own reputation, his adviser, and even his marital and paternal rights.

But he must see once more the wretched woman who had betrayed him. He hastily crossed the spacious apartment, shaking the letters in his hand as if they were a thunderbolt. He threw open the door of Elphega’s room; he entered- The guilty wife had just unexpectedly learned from Colonel Vœthaün of her son Frederic’s tearful death. The poor mother was insane.

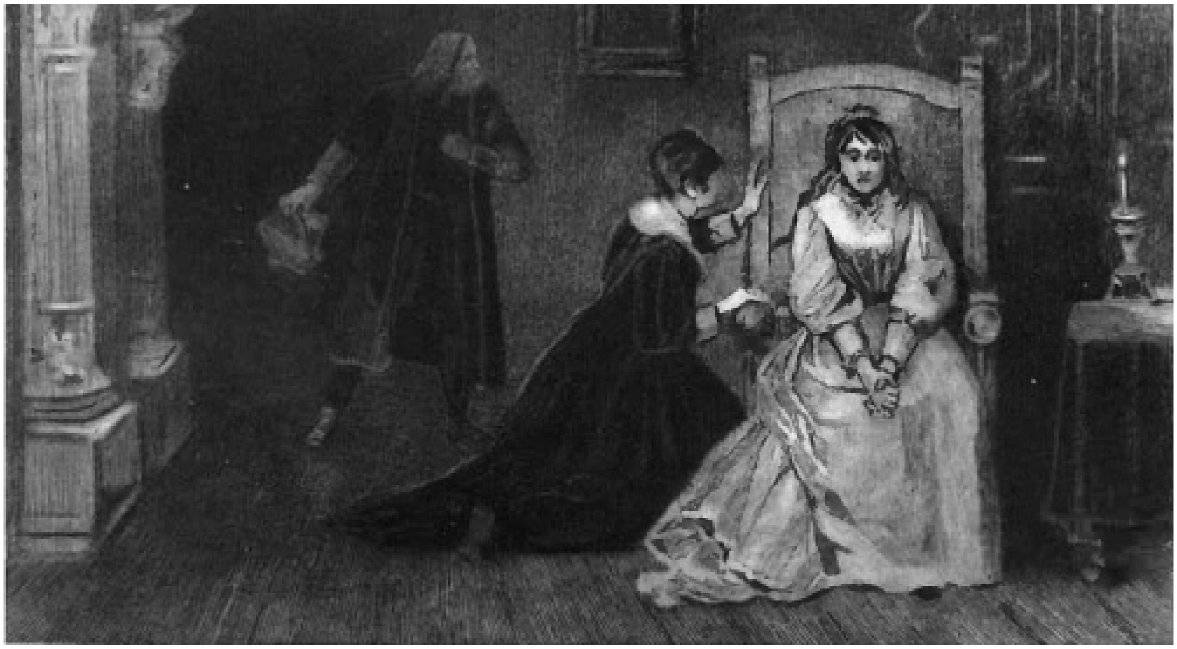

The poor Mother was insane

CONCLUSION.

What I said in jest, you took seriously.-
Old Spanish Romance (King Alfonso to Bernard).

For a fortnight the events which we have just related formed the sole topic of conversation in the town and province of Throndhjem, judged from the various standpoints of the various speakers. The people of the town, who had waited in vain to see seven successive executions, began to despair of ever having that pleasure; and purblind old women declared that, on the night of the lamentable fire at the barracks, they had seen Hans of Iceland fly up in the flames, laughing amid the blaze, as he dashed the burning roof of the building upon the Munkholm musketeers; when, after an absence which to his Ethel seemed an age, Ordener returned to the Lion of Schleswig tower, accompanied by General Levin de Knud and Chaplain Athanasius Munder.

Schumacker was walking in the garden, leaning on his daughter. The young couple found it hard not to rush into each other's arms; but they were forced to be content with a look. Schumacker affectionately grasped Ordener's hand, and greeted the two strangers in a friendly manner.

"Young man," said the aged captive, " may Heaven bless your return!"

"Sir," replied Ordener, " I have just arrived. Having seen my father at Bergen, I would now embrace my father at Munkholm."

"What do you mean? " asked the old man. in great surprise.

"That you must give me your daughter, noble sir."

"My daughter!" exclaimed the prisoner, turning to the confused and blushing Ethel.

"Yes, my lord, I love your Ethel. I have devoted my life to her; she is mine."

Schumacker's face clouded:" You are a brave and noble youth, my son. Although your father has done me much harm, I forgive him for your sake; and I should be glad to sanction this marriage. But there is an obstacle-"

"What is it, sir?" asked Ordener, anxiously.

"You love my daughter; but are you sure that she loves you?"

The two lovers cast at each other a rapid glance of mute amazement.

"Yes," continued the father. "I am sorry; for I love you, and would gladly call you son. But my daughter would never consent. She has recently confessed her aversion for you, and since your departure she is silent whenever I speak of you, and seems to avoid all thought of you as if you were odious to her. You must give up your love for her, Ordener. Never fear; love may be cured as well as hatred."

"My lord!" exclaimed the astonished Ordener.

"Father!" cried Ethel, clasping her hands.

"Do not be alarmed, my daughter," interrupted the old man; " I approve of this marriage, but you do not. I will never force your inclinations, Ethel. This last fortnight has wrought a great change in me; you are free to choose for yourself."

Athanasius Munder smiled. "She is not," he said.

"You are mistaken, dear father," added Ethel, taking courage; "I do not hate Ordener."

"What!" cried her father.

"I am" resumed Ethel. She hesitated.

Ordener knelt at the old man's feet.

"She is my wife, father! Forgive me as my other father has forgiven me, and bless your children."

Schumacker, surprised in his turn, blessed the young couple.

"I have cursed so many people in my lifetime," said he, "that I now seize every opportunity for blessing. But explain."

All was made clear to him. He wept with emotion, gratitude, and love.

"I thought myself wise; I am old, and I did not understand the heart of a young girl!"

"And so I am Mrs. Ordener Guldenlew!" said Ethel, with child-like delight.

"Ordener Guldenlew," rejoined old Schumacker, " you are a better man than I , for in the day of my prosperity I would never have stooped to wed the penniless and disgraced daughter of an unfortunate prisoner."

The general took the old man's hand, and offered him a roll of parchment, saying: "Do not speak thus, Count. Here are your titles, which the king long since sent you by Dispolsen; his Majesty now adds a free pardon. Such is the dowry of your daughter, Countess Danneskiold."

"Pardon! freedom!" repeated the enraptured Ethel.

"Countess Danneskiold!" added her father.

“Yes, Count,” continued the general; “your honors and estates are restored.”

“To whom do I owe all this?” asked the happy Schumacker.

“To General Levin de Knud,” answered Ordener.

“Levin de Knud! Did I not tell you, Governor, that Levin de Knud was the best of men? But why did he not bring me the good news himself? Where is he?”

Ordener pointed in surprise to the smiling, weeping general: “Here!”

The recognition of the two who had been comrades in the days of their youth and power was a touching one. Schumacker’s heart swelled. His acquaintance with Hans had destroyed his hatred of men; his acquaintance with Ordener and Levin taught him to love them.

The gloomy wedding in the cell was soon celebrated by brilliant festivities. Life smiled upon the young couple who had smiled at death. Count d’Ahlefeld saw that they were happy; this was his most cruel punishment.

Athanasius Munder shared their joy. He obtained the pardon of his twelve convicts, and Ordener added that of his former companions in misfortune, Jonas and Norbith, who returned, free and happy, to inform the appeased miners that the king released them from the protectorate.

Schumacker did not long enjoy the union of Ethel and Ordener. Liberty and happiness were too much for him; he went to enjoy a different happiness and a different freedom. He died that same year, 1699, his children accepting this blow as a warning that there is no perfect bliss in this world. He was buried in Veer Church, upon an estate in Jutland belonging to his son-in-law, and his tomb preserves all the titles of which captivity deprived him. From the marriage of Ordener and Ethel sprang the race of the counts of Danneskiold.

HAN D’ISLANDE

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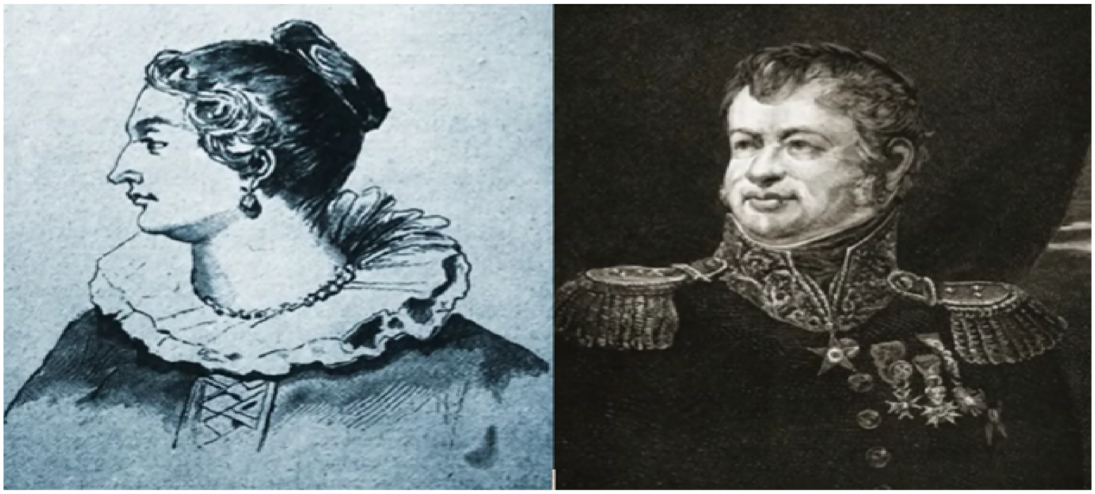

Les parents de Hugo

PREMIÈRE ÉDITION

L'auteur de cet ouvrage, depuis le jour où il en a écrit la première page, jusqu'au jour où il a pu tracer le bienheureux mot FIN au bas de la dernière, a été le jouet de la plus ridicule illusion. S'étant imaginé qu'une composition en quatre volumes valait la peine d'être méditée, il a perdu son temps à chercher une idée fondamentale, à la développer bien ou mal dans un plan bon ou mauvais, à disposer des scènes, à combiner des effets, à étudier des moeurs de son mieux; en un mot, il a pris son ouvrage au sérieux.

Ce n'est que tout à l'heure, au moment où, selon l'usage des auteurs de terminer par où le lecteur commence, il allait élaborer une longue préface, qui fût comme le bouclier de son oeuvre, et contînt, avec l'exposé des principes moraux et littéraires sur lesquels repose sa conception, un précis plus ou moins rapide des divers événements historiques qu'elle embrasse, et un tableau plus ou moins complet du pays qu'elle parcourt; ce n'est que tout à l'heure, disons-nous, qu'il s'est aperçu de sa méprise, qu'il a reconnu toute l'insignifiance et toute la frivolité du genre à propos duquel il avait si gravement noirci tant de papier, et qu'il a senti combien il s'était, pour ainsi dire, mystifié lui-même, en se persuadant que ce roman pourrait bien, jusqu'à un certain point, être une production littéraire, et que ces quatre volumes formaient un livre.

Il se résout donc sagement, après avoir fait amende honorable, à ne rien dire dans cette espèce de préface, que monsieur l'éditeur aura soin en conséquence d'imprimer en gros caractères. Il n'informera pas même le lecteur de son nom ou de ses prénoms, ni s'il est jeune ou vieux, marié ou célibataire, ni s'il a fait des élégies ou des fables, des odes ou des satires, ni s'il veut faire des tragédies, des drames ou des comédies, ni s'il jouit du patriciat littéraire dans quelque académie, ni s'il a une tribune dans un journal quelconque; toutes choses, cependant, fort intéressantes à savoir. Il se bornera seulement à faire remarquer que la partie pittoresque de son roman a été l'objet d'un soin particulier; qu'on y rencontre fréquemment des K, des Y, des H et des W, quoiqu'il n'ait jamais employé ces caractères romantiques qu'avec une extrême sobriété, témoin le nom historique de *Guldenlew*, que plusieurs chroniqueurs écrivent *Guldenloëwe*, ce qu'il n'a pas osé se permettre; qu'on y trouve également de nombreuses diphtongues variées avec beaucoup de goût et d'élégance; et qu'enfin tous les chapitres sont précédés d'épigraphes étranges et mystérieuses, qui ajoutent singulièrement à l'intérêt et donnent plus de physionomie à chaque partie de la composition.

Janvier 1823.

DEUXIÈME ÉDITION

On a affirmé à l'auteur de cet ouvrage qu'il était absolument nécessaire de consacrer spécialement quelques lignes d'avertissement, de préface ou d'introduction à cette seconde édition. Il a eu beau représenter que les quatre ou cinq malencontreuses pages vides qui escortaient la première édition, et dont le libraire s'est obstiné à déparer celle-ci, lui avaient déjà attiré les anathèmes de l'un de nos écrivains les plus honorables et les plus distingués [Footnote: M. C. Nodier. *Quotidienne* du 12 mars.], lequel l'avait accusé de prendre *le ton aigre-doux* de l'illustre Jedediah Cleishbotham, maître d'école et sacristain de la paroisse de Gandercleugh; il a eu beau alléguer que ce brillant et judicieux critique, de sévère pour la faute, deviendrait sans doute impitoyable pour la récidive; et présenter, en un mot, une foule d'autres raisons non moins bonnes pour se dispenser d'y tomber, il paraît qu'on lui en a opposé de meilleures, puisque le voici maintenant écrivant une seconde préface, après s'être tant repenti d'avoir écrit la première. Au moment d'exécuter cette détermination hardie, il conçut d'abord la pensée de placer en tête de cette seconde édition ce dont il n'avait pas osé charger la première, savoir *quelques vues générales et particulières sur le roman*. Méditant ce petit traité littéraire et didactique, il était encore dans cette mystérieuse ivresse de la composition, instant bien court, où l'auteur, croyant saisir une idéale perfection qu'il n'atteindra pas, est intimement ravi de son ouvrage à faire; il était, disons-nous, dans cette heure d'extase intérieure, où le travail est un délice, où la possession secrète de la muse semble bien plus douce que l'éclatante poursuite de la gloire, lorsqu'un de ses amis les plus sages est venu l'arracher brusquement à cette possession, à cette extase, à cette ivresse, en lui assurant que plusieurs hommes de lettres très hauts, très populaires et très puissants, trouvaient la dissertation qu'il préparait tout à fait méchante, insipide et fastidieuse; que le douloureux apostolat de la critique dont ils se sont chargés dans diverses feuilles publiques, leur imposant le devoir pénible de poursuivre impitoyablement le monstre du *romantisme* et du mauvais goût, ils s'occupaient, dans le moment même, de rédiger pour certains journaux impartiaux et éclairés une critique consciencieuse, raisonnée et surtout piquante de la susdite dissertation future. À ce terrible avis, le pauvre auteur

Obstipuit; steteruntque comae; et vox faucibus haesit;

c’est-à-dire qu’il n’a trouvé d’autre expédient que de laisser dans les limbes, d’où il se préparait à la tirer, cette dissertation, *vierge non encor née*, comme parle Jean-Baptiste Rousseau, sur laquelle grondait une si juste et si rude critique. Son ami lui conseilla de la remplacer tout simplement par une manière d’*avant-propos des éditeurs*, dans lequel il pourrait se faire dire très décemment, par ces messieurs, toutes les douceurs qui chatouillent si voluptueusement l’oreille d’un auteur; il lui en présenta même plusieurs modèles empruntés à quelques ouvrages très en faveur, les uns commençant par ces mots: *Le succès immense et populaire de cet ouvrage, etc.*; les autres par ceux-ci: *La célébrité européenne que vient d’acquérir ce roman, etc.*; ou: *Il est maintenant superflu de louer ce livre, puisque la voix universelle déclare toutes les louanges fort au-dessous de son mérite, etc., etc.* Quoique ces diverses formules, au dire du discret conseiller, ne fussent pas sans quelque vertu tentative, l’auteur de ce livre ne se sentit pas assez d’humilité et d’indifférence paternelle pour exposer son ouvrage au désenchantement et à l’exigence du lecteur qui aurait vu ces magnifiques apologies, ni assez d’effronterie pour imiter ces baladins des foires, qui montrent, comme appât à la curiosité du public, un crocodile peint sur une toile, derrière laquelle, après avoir payé, il ne trouve qu’un lézard. Il rejeta donc l’idée d’entonner ses propres louanges par la bouche complaisante de messieurs ses éditeurs. Son ami lui suggéra alors de donner pour passe-port à son vilain brigand islandais quelque chose qui pût le mettre à la mode et le faire sympathiser avec le siècle, soit plaisanteries fines contre les marquises, soit amers sarcasmes contre les prêtres, soit ingénieuses allusions contre les nonnes, les capucins, et autres monstres de l’ordre social. L’auteur n’eût pas mieux demandé; mais il ne lui semblait pas, à vrai dire, que les marquises et les capucins eussent un rapport très direct avec l’ouvrage qu’il publie. Il eût pu, à la vérité, emprunter d’autres couleurs sur la même palette, et jeter ici quelques bonnes pages bien philanthropiques, dans lesquelles — en côtoyant toutefois avec prudence un banc dangereux, caché sous les mers de la philosophie, qu’on nomme le banc du *tribunal correctionnel* — il eût avancé quelques-unes de ces vérités découvertes par nos sages pour la gloire de l’homme et la consolation du mourant; savoir, que l’homme n’est qu’une brute, que l’âme n’est qu’un peu de gaz plus ou moins dense, et que Dieu n’est rien; mais il a pensé que ces vérités incontestables étaient déjà bien triviales et bien usées, et qu’il ajouterait à peine une goutte d’eau à ce déluge de morales raisonnables, de religions athées, de maximes, de doctrines, de principes qui nous inondent pour notre bonheur, depuis trente ans, d’une si prodigieuse façon qu’on pourrait — s’il n’y avait irrévérence — leur appliquer les vers de Régnier sur une averse:

Des nuages en eau tombait un tel degoust,
Que les chiens altérés pouvaient boire debout.

Du reste, ces hautes matières ne se rattachaient pas encore très visiblement au sujet de cet ouvrage, et il eût été fort embarrassé de trouver une liaison qui l’y conduisit, quoique l’art des transitions soit singulièrement simplifié depuis que tant de grands hommes ont trouvé le secret de passer sans secousse d’une échoppe dans un palais, et d’échanger sans disparate le bonnet de *police* contre la couronne civique.

Reconnaissant donc qu’il ne saurait trouver dans son talent ni dans sa science, *par ses ailes ou par son bec*, comme dit l’ingénieuse poésie des Arabes, une préface intéressante pour les lecteurs, l’auteur de ceci s’est déterminé à ne leur offrir qu’un récit grave et naïf des améliorations apportées à cette seconde édition.

Il les préviendra d’abord que ce mot, *seconde édition*, est ici assez impropre, et que le titre de *première édition* est réellement celui qui convient à cette réimpression, attendu que les quatre liasses inégales de papier grisâtre maculé de noir et de blanc, dans lesquelles le public indulgent a bien voulu voir jusqu’ici les quatre volumes de *Han d’Islande*, avaient été tellement déshonorées d’incongruités typographiques par un imprimeur barbare, que le déplorable auteur, en parcourant sa méconnaissable production, était incessamment livré au supplice d’un père auquel on rendrait son enfant mutilé et tatoué par la main d’un iroquois du lac Ontario.

Ici, *l’esclavage* du suicide en remplaçait *l’usage*; ailleurs, Je manoeuvre typographe donnait à un *lien* une voix qui appartenait à un *lion*; plus loin il ôtait à la montagne du Dofre-Field ses *pics*, pour lui attribuer des *pieds*, on, lorsque les pêcheurs norvégiens s’attendaient à amarrer dans des *criques*, il poussait leur barque sur des *briques*. Pour ne pas fatiguer le lecteur, l’auteur passe sous silence tout ce que sa mémoire ulcérée lui rappelle d’outrages de ce genre:

Manet alto in pectore vulnus.

Il lui suffira de dire qu’il n’est pas d’image grotesque, de sens baroque, de pensée absurde, de figure incohérente, d’hiéroglyphe burlesque, que l’ignorance industrieusement stupide de ce prote logogriphique ne lui ait fait exprimer. Hélas! quiconque a fait imprimer douze lignes dans sa vie, ne fût-ce qu'une lettre de mariage ou d'enterrement, sentira l'amertume profonde d'une pareille douleur!

C'est donc avec le soin le plus scrupuleux qu'ont été revues les épreuves de cette nouvelle publication, et maintenant l'auteur ose croire, ainsi qu'un ou deux amis intimes, que ce roman restauré est digne de figurer parmi ces splendides écrits en présence desquels *les onze étoiles se prosternent, comme devant la lune et le soleil*[Alcoran].

Si messieurs les journalistes l'accusent de n'avoir pas fait de corrections, il prendra la liberté de leur envoyer les épreuves, noircies par un minutieux labeur, de ce livre régénéré; car on prétend qu'il y a parmi ces messieurs plus d'un Thomas l'incrédule.

Du reste, le lecteur bénévole pourra remarquer qu'on a rectifié plusieurs dates, ajouté quelques notes historiques, surtout enrichi un ou deux chapitres d'épigraphes nouvelles; en un mot, il trouvera à chaque page des changements dont l'importance extrême a été mesurée sur celle même de l'ouvrage.

Un impertinent conseiller désirait qu'il mît au bas des feuillets la traduction de toutes les phrases latines que le docte Spiagudry sème dans cet ouvrage, pour l'intelligence — ajoutait ce quidam — de ceux de messieurs les maçons, chaudronniers ou perruquiers qui rédigent certains journaux où pourrait être jugé par hasard *Han d'Islande*. On pense avec quelle indignation l'auteur a reçu cet insidieux avis. Il a instamment prié le mauvais plaisant d'apprendre que tous les journalistes, indistinctement, sont des soleils d'urbanité, de savoir et de bonne foi, et de ne pas lui faire l'injure de croire qu'il fût du nombre de ces citoyens ingrats, toujours prêts à adresser aux dictateurs du goût et du génie ce méchant vers d'un vieux poëte:

Tenez-vous dans vos peaux et ne jugez personne;

que pour lui, enfin, il était loin de penser que la *peau du lion* ne fût pas la peau véritable de ces populaires seigneurs.

Quelqu'un l'exhortait encore — car il doit tout dire ingénument à ses lecteurs — à placer son nom sur le titre de ce roman, jusqu'ici enfant abandonné d'un père inconnu. Il faut avouer qu'outre l'agrément de voir les sept ou huit caractères romains qui forment ce qu'on appelle son nom, ressortir en belles lettres noires sur de beau papier blanc, il y a bien un certain charme à le faire briller isolément sur le dos de la couverture imprimée, comme si l'ouvrage qu'il revêt, loin d'être le seul monument du génie de l'auteur, n'était que l'une des colonnes du temple imposant où doit s'élever un jour son immortalité, qu'un mince échantillon de son talent caché et de sa gloire inédite. Cela prouve qu'on a au moins l'intention d'être un jour un écrivain illustre et considérable. Il a fallu, pour triompher de cette tentation nouvelle, toute la crainte qu'a éprouvée l'auteur de ne pouvoir percer la foule de ces noircisseurs de papier, lesquels, même en rompant l'anonyme, gardent toujours l'*incognito*.

Quant à l'observation que plusieurs amateurs d'oreille délicate lui ont soumise touchant la rudesse sauvage de ses noms norvégiens, il la trouve tout à fait fondée; aussi se propose-t-il, dès qu'il sera nommé membre de la société royale de Stockholm ou de l'académie de Berghen, d'inviter messieurs les norvégiens à changer de langue, attendu que le vilain jargon dont ils ont la bizarrerie de se servir, blesse le tympan de nos parisiennes, et que leurs noms biscornus, aussi raboteux que leurs rochers, produisent sur la langue sensible qui les prononce l'effet que ferait sans doute leur huile d'ours et leur pain d'écorce sur les houppes nerveuses et sensitives de notre palais.

Il lui reste à remercier les huit où dix personnes qui ont eu la bonté de lire son ouvrage en entier, comme le constate le succès vraiment prodigieux qu'il a obtenu; il témoigne également toute sa gratitude à celles de ses jolies lectrices qui, lui assure-t-on, ont bien voulu se faire d'après son livre un certain idéal de l'auteur de *Han d'Islande*; il est infiniment flatté qu'elles veuillent bien lui accorder des cheveux rouges, une barbe crépue et des yeux hagards; il est confus qu'elles daignent lui faire l'honneur de croire qu'il ne coupe jamais ses ongles; mais il les supplie à genoux d'être bien convaincues qu'il ne pousse pas encore la férocité jusqu'à dévorer les petits enfants vivants; du reste, tous ces faits seront fixés lorsque sa renommée sera montée jusqu'au niveau de celles des auteurs de *Lolotte et Fanfan* ou de *Monsieur Botte*, hommes transcendants, jumeaux de génie et de goût, *Arcades ambo*; et qu'on placera en tête de ses oeuvres son portrait, *terribiles visu formæ*, et sa biographie, *domestica facta*. Il allait clore cette trop longue note, lorsque son libraire, au moment d'envoyer l'ouvrage aux journaux, est venu lui demander pour eux quelques petits articles de complaisance sur son propre ouvrage, ajoutant, pour dissiper tous les scrupules de l'auteur, *que son écriture ne serait pas compromise, et qu'il les recopierait lui-même*. Ce dernier trait lui a semblé touchant. Comme il paraît qu’en ce siècle tout lumineux chacun se fait un devoir d’éclairer son prochain sur ses qualités et perfections personnelles, chose dont nul n’est mieux instruit que leur propriétaire; comme, d’ailleurs, cette dernière tentation est assez forte; l’auteur croit, dans le cas où il y succomberait, devoir prévenir le public de ne jamais croire qu’à demi tout ce que les journaux lui diront de son ouvrage.

Avril 1823.

I

L'avez-vous vu? qui est-ce qui l'a vu? — Ce n'est pas moi. — Qui donc? — Je n'en sais rien.

STERNE, *Tristram Shandy*.

— Voilà où conduit l'amour, voisin Niels, cette pauvre Guth Stersen ne serait point là étendue sur cette grande pierre noire, comme une étoile de mer oubliée par la marée, si elle n'avait jamais songé qu'à reclouer la barque ou à raccommoder les filets de son père, notre vieux camarade. Que saint Usuph le pêcheur le console dans son affliction!

— Et son fiancé, reprit une voix aiguë et tremblotante, Gill Stadt, ce beau jeune homme que vous voyez tout à côté d'elle, n'y serait point, si, au lieu de faire l'amour à Guth et de chercher fortune dans ces maudites mines de Roeraas, il avait passé sa jeunesse à balancer le berceau de son jeune frère aux poutres enfumées de sa chaumière.

Le voisin Niels, à qui s'adressait le premier interlocuteur, interrompit: — Votre mémoire vieillit avec vous, mère Olly; Gill n'a jamais eu de frère, et c'est en cela que la douleur de la pauvre veuve Stadt doit être plus amère, car sa cabane est maintenant tout à fait déserte; si elle veut regarder le ciel pour se consoler, elle trouvera entre ses yeux et le ciel son vieux toit, où pend encore le berceau vide de son enfant, devenu grand jeune homme, et mort.

— Pauvre mère! reprit la vieille Olly, car pour le jeune homme, c'est sa faute; pourquoi se faire mineur à Roeraas?

— Je crois en effet, dit Niels, que ces infernales mines nous prennent un homme par ascalin de cuivre qu'elles nous donnent. Qu'en pensez-vous, compère Braal?

— Les mineurs sont des fous, repartit le pêcheur. Pour vivre, le poisson ne doit pas sortir de l'eau, l'homme ne doit pas entrer en terre.

— Mais, demanda un jeune homme dans la foule, si le travail des mines était nécessaire à Gill Stadt pour obtenir sa fiancée?…

— Il ne faut jamais exposer sa vie, interrompit Olly, pour des affections qui sont loin de la valoir et de la remplir. Le beau lit de noces en effet que Gill a gagné pour sa Guth.

— Cette jeune femme, demanda un autre curieux, s'est donc noyée en désespoir de la mort de ce jeune homme?

— Qui dit cela? s’écria d’une voix forte un soldat qui venait de fendre la presse. Cette jeune fille, que je connais bien, était en effet fiancée à un jeune mineur écrasé dernièrement par un éclat de rocher dans les galeries souterraines de Storwaadsgrube, près Roeraas; mais elle était aussi la maîtresse d’un de mes camarades; et comme avant-hier elle voulut s’introduire à Munckholm furtivement pour y célébrer avec son amant la mort de son fiancé, la barque qui la portait chavira sur un écueil, et elle s’est noyée.

Un bruit confus de voix s’éleva: — Impossible, seigneur soldat, criaient les vieilles femmes; les jeunes se taisaient; et le voisin Niels rappelait malignement au pêcheur Braal sa grave sentence: «Voilà où conduit l’amour!»

Le militaire allait se fâcher sérieusement contre ses contradicteurs femelles; il les avait déjà appelées *vieilles sorcières de la grotte de Quiragoth*, et elles n’étaient pas disposées à endurer patiemment une si grave insulte, quand une voix aigre et impérieuse, criant *paix, paix, radoteuses*! vint mettre fin au débat. Tout se tut, comme lorsque le cri subit d’un coq s’élève parmi les glapissements des poules.

Avant de raconter le reste de la scène, il n’est peut-être pas inutile de décrire le lieu où elle se passait; c’était — le lecteur l’a sans doute déjà deviné — dans, un de ces édifices lugubres que la pitié publique et la prévoyance sociale consacrent aux cadavres inconnus, dernier asile de morts qui la plupart ont vécu malheureux; où se pressent le curieux indifférent, l’observateur morose ou bienveillant, et souvent des amis, des parents éplorés, à qui une longue et insupportable inquiétude n’a plus laissé qu’une lamentable espérance. A l’époque déjà loin de nous, et dans le pays peu civilisé où j’ai transporté mon lecteur, on n’avait point encore imaginé, comme dans nos villes de boue et d’or, de faire de ces lieux de dépôt des monuments ingénieusement sinistres et élégamment funèbres. Le jour n’y descendait pas à travers une ouverture de forme tumulaire, le long d’une voûte artistement sculptée, sur des espèces de couches où l’on semble avoir voulu laisser aux morts quelques-unes des commodités de la vie, et où l’oreiller est marqué comme pour le sommeil. Si la porte du gardien s’entr’ouvrait, l’oeil, fatigué par des cadavres nus et hideux, n’avait pas, comme aujourd’hui, le plaisir de se reposer sur des meubles élégants et des enfants joyeux. La mort était là dans toute sa laideur, dans toute son horreur; et l’on n’avait point encore essayé de parer son squelette décharné de pompons et de rubans.

La salle où se trouvaient nos interlocuteurs était spacieuse et obscure, ce qui la faisait paraître plus spacieuse encore; elle ne recevait de jour que par la porte carrée et basse qui s’ouvrait sur le port de Drontheim, et une ouverture grossièrement pratiquée dans le plafond, d’où une lumière blanche et terne tombait avec la pluie, la grêle ou la neige, selon le temps, sur les cadavres couchés directement au-dessous. Cette salle était divisée dans sa largeur par une balustrade de fer à hauteur d’appui. Le public pénétrait dans la première partie par la porte carrée; on voyait dans la seconde six longues dalles de granit noir, disposées de front et parallèlement. Une petite porte latérale servait, dans chaque section, d’entrée au gardien et à son aide, dont le logement remplissait les derrières de l’édifice, adossé à la mer. Le mineur et sa fiancée occupaient deux des lits de granit; la décomposition s’annonçait dans le corps de la jeune fille par les larges taches bleues et pourprées qui couraient le long de ses membres sur la place des vaisseaux sanguins. Les traits de Gill paraissaient durs et sombres; mais son cadavre était si horriblement mutilé, qu’il était impossible de juger si sa beauté était aussi réelle que le disait la vieille Olly.

C’est devant ces restes défigurés qu’avait commencé, au milieu de la foule muette, la conversation dont nous avons été le fidèle interprète.

Un grand homme, sec et vieux, assis les bras croisés et la tête penchée sur un débris d’escabelle dans le coin le plus noir de la salle, n’avait paru y prêter aucune attention jusqu’au moment où il se leva subitement en criant: Paix, paix, radoteuses! et vint saisir le bras du soldat.

Tout le monde se tut; le soldat se retourna et partit d’un brusque éclat de rire à la vue de son singulier interrupteur, dont le visage hâve, les cheveux rares et sales, les longs doigts et le complet accoutrement de cuir de renne, justifiaient amplement un accueil aussi gai. Cependant un murmure s’élevait dans la foule des femmes, un moment interdites: — C’est le gardien du Spladgest [Nom de la morgue de Drontheim].

— Cet infernal concierge des morts! — Ce diabolique Spiagudry! — Ce maudit sorcier…

— Paix, radoteuses, paix! Si c’est aujourd’hui jour de sabbat, hâtez-vous d’aller retrouver vos balais; autrement ils s’envoleront tout seuls. Laissez en paix ce respectable descendant du dieu Thor.

Puis Spiagudry, s’efforçant de faire une grimace gracieuse, adressa la parole au soldat:

— Vous disiez, mon brave, que cette misérable femme…

— Le vieux drôle! murmura Olly; oui, nous sommes pour lui de *misérables femmes*, parce que nos corps, s’ils tombent en ses griffes, ne lui rapportent à la taxe que trente ascalins, tandis qu’il en reçoit quarante pour la méchante carcasse d’un homme.

— Silence, vieilles! répéta Spiagudry. En vérité, ces filles du diable sont comme leurs chaudières; lorsqu’elles s’échauffent, il faut qu’elles chantent. Dites-moi, vous, mon vaillant roi de l’épée, votre camarade, dont cette Guth était la maîtresse, va sans doute se tuer du désespoir de l’avoir perdue?…

Ici éclata l’explosion longtemps comprimée. — Entendez-vous le mécréant, le vieux païen? crièrent vingt voix aigres et discordantes; il voudrait voir un vivant de moins, à cause des quarante ascalins que lui rapporte un mort.

— Et quand cela serait? reprit le concierge du Spladgest, notre gracieux roi et maître Christiern V, que saint Hospice bénisse, ne se déclare-t-il pas le protecteur né de tous les ouvriers des mines, afin, lorsqu’ils meurent, d’enrichir son trésor royal de leurs chétives dépouilles?

— C’est faire beaucoup d’honneur au roi, répliqua le pêcheur Braal, que de comparer le trésor royal au coffre-fort de votre charnier, et lui à vous, voisin Spiagudry.

— Voisin! dit le concierge, choqué de tant de familiarité; votre voisin! dites plutôt votre hôte, car il se pourrait bien faire que quelque jour, mon cher citoyen de la barque, je vous prêtasse pour une huitaine de jours un de mes six lits de pierre. Au reste, ajouta-t-il en riant, si je parlais de la mort de ce soldat, c’était simplement pour voir se perpétuer l’usage du suicide dans les grandes et tragiques passions que ces dames ont coutume d’inspirer.

— Eh bien! grand cadavre gardien de cadavres, dit le militaire, où en veux-tu donc venir avec ta grimace aimable qui ressemble si bien au dernier éclat de rire d’un pendu?

— À merveille, mon vaillant! répondit Spiagudry, j’ai toujours pensé qu’il y avait plus de facultés spirituelles sous le casque du gendarme Thurn, qui vainquit le diable avec le sabre et la langue, que sous la mitre de l’évêque Isleif, qui a fait l’histoire d’Islande, ou sous le bonnet carré du professeur Shoenning, qui a décrit notre cathédrale.

— En ce cas, si tu m’en crois, mon vieux sac de cuir, tu laisseras là les revenus du charnier, et tu iras te vendre au cabinet de curiosités du vice-roi, à Berghen. Je te jure, par saint Belphégor, qu’on y paye au poids de l’or les animaux rares; mais dis, que veux-tu de moi?

— Quand les corps qu’on nous apporte ont été trouvés dans l’eau, nous sommes obligés de céder la moitié de la taxe aux pêcheurs. Je voulais donc vous prier, illustre héritier du gendarme Thurn, d’engager votre infortuné camarade à ne point se noyer, et à choisir quelque autre genre de mort; la chose doit lui être indifférente, et il ne voudrait pas faire tort en mourant au malheureux chrétien qui donnera l’hospitalité à son cadavre, si toutefois la perte de Guth le pousse à cet acte de désespoir.

— C’est ce qui vous trompe, mon charitable et hospitalier concierge, mon camarade n’aura point la satisfaction d’être reçu dans votre appétissante auberge à six lits. Croyez-vous qu’il ne se soit pas déjà consolé avec une autre valkyrie, de la mort de celle-là? Il y a, par ma barbe, bien longtemps qu’il était las de votre Guth.

À ces mots l’orage, que Spiagudry avait un moment détourné sur sa tête, revint fondre plus terrible que jamais sur le malencontreux soldat.

— Comment, misérable drôle, criaient les vieilles, c’est ainsi que vous nous oubliez! mais aimez donc maintenant ces vauriens-là!

Les jeunes se taisaient encore; quelques-unes même trouvaient, bien malgré elles, que ce mauvais sujet avait assez bonne mine.

— Oh! oh! dit le soldat, est-ce donc une répétition du sabbat? le supplice de Belzébuth est bien effroyable s’il est condamné à entendre de pareils choeurs une fois par semaine!

On ne sait comment cette nouvelle bourrasque se serait passée, si en ce moment l’attention générale n’eût été entièrement absorbée par un bruit venu du dehors. La rumeur s’accrut progressivement, et bientôt un essaim de petits garçons demi-nus, criant et courant autour d’une civière voilée et portée par deux hommes, entra tumultueusement dans le Spladgest.

— D’où vient cela? demanda le concierge aux porteurs.

— Des grèves d’Urchtal.

— Oglypiglap! cria Spiagudry.

Une des portes latérales s’ouvrit, un petit homme de race lapone, vêtu de cuir, se présenta, fit signe aux porteurs de le suivre; Spiagudry les accompagna, et la porte se referma avant que la multitude curieuse eût eu le temps de deviner, à la longueur du corps posé sur la civière, si c’était un homme ou une femme.

Ce sujet occupait encore toutes les conjectures, quand Spiagudry et son aide reparurent dans la seconde salle, portant un cadavre d’homme, qu’ils déposèrent sur l’une des couches de granit.

— Il y a longtemps que je n’avais touché d’aussi beaux habits, dit Oglypiglap; puis, hochant la tête et se haussant sur la pointe des pieds, il accrocha au-dessus du mort un élégant uniforme de capitaine. La tête du cadavre était défigurée et les autres membres couverts de sang; le concierge l’arrosa plusieurs fois avec un vieux seau à demi brisé.

— Par saint Belzébuth! cria le soldat, c’est un officier de mon régiment; voyons, serait-ce le capitaine Bollar… de douleur d’avoir perdu son oncle? Bah! il hérite. — Le baron Randmer? il a risqué hier sa terre au jeu, mais demain il la regagnera avec le château de son adversaire. — Serait-ce le capitaine Lory, dont le chien s’est noyé? ou le trésorier Stunck, dont la femme est infidèle? — Mais, vraiment, je ne vois point dans tout cela de motif pour se faire sauter la cervelle.

La foule croissait à chaque instant. En ce moment un jeune homme qui passait sur le port, voyant cette affluence de peuple, descendit de cheval, remit la bride aux mains du domestique qui le suivait, et entra dans le Spladgest. Il était vêtu d’un simple habit de voyage, armé d’un sabre et enveloppé d’un large manteau vert; une plume noire, attachée à son chapeau par une boucle de diamants, retombait sur sa noble figure et se balançait sur son front élevé, ombragé de longs cheveux châtains; ses bottines et ses éperons, souillés de boue, annonçaient qu’il venait de loin.

Lorsqu’il entra, un homme petit et trapu, enveloppé comme lui d’un manteau, et cachant ses mains sous des gants énormes, répondait au soldat:

— Et qui vous dit qu’il s’est tué? Cet homme ne s’est pas plus suicidé, j’en réponds, que le toit de votre cathédrale ne s’est incendié de lui-même.

Comme la bisaiguë fait deux blessures, cette phrase fit naître deux réponses.

— Notre cathédrale! dit Niels, on la couvre maintenant en cuivre.

C’est ce misérable Han qui, dit-on, y a mis le feu, pour faire travailler les mineurs, parmi lesquels se trouvait son protégé Gill Stadt, que vous voyez ici.

— Comment diable! s’écriait de son côté le soldat, m’oser soutenir à moi, second arquebusier de la garnison de Munckholm, que cet homme-là ne s’est pas brûlé la cervelle!

— Cet homme est mort assassiné, reprit froidement le petit homme.

— Mais écoutez donc l’oracle! Va, tes petits yeux gris ne voient pas plus clair que tes mains sous les gros gants dont tu les couvres au milieu de l’été.

Un éclair brilla dans les yeux du petit homme.

— Soldat! prie ton patron que ces mains-là ne laissent pas un jour leur empreinte sur ton visage.

— Oh! sortons! cria le soldat enflammé de colère. Puis, s’arrêtant tout à coup: Non, dit-il, car il ne faut point parler de duel devant des morts.

Le petit homme grommela quelques mots dans une langue étrangère et disparut.

Une voix s’éleva: — C’est aux grèves d’Urchtal qu’on l’a trouvé.

— Aux grèves d’Urchtal? dit le soldat; le capitaine Dispolsen a dû y débarquer ce matin, venant de Copenhague.

— Le capitaine Dispolsen n’est point encore arrivé à Munckholm, dit une autre voix.

— On dit que Han d’Islande erre actuellement sur ces plages, reprit un quatrième.

— En ce cas, il est possible que cet homme soit le capitaine, dit le soldat, si Han est le meurtrier; car chacun sait que l’islandais assassine d’une manière si diabolique, que ses victimes ont souvent l’apparence de suicidés.

— Quel homme est-ce donc que ce Han? demanda-t-on.

— C’est un géant, dit l’un.

— C’est un nain, dit l’autre.

— Personne ne l’a donc vu? reprit une voix.

— Ceux qui le voient pour la première fois le voient aussi pour la dernière.

— Chut! dit la vieille Olly; il n’y a, dit-on, que trois personnes qui aient jamais échangé des paroles humaines avec lui: ce réprouvé de Spiagudry, la veuve Stadt, et…. — mais il a eu malheureuse vie et malheureuse mort — ce pauvre Gill, que vous voyez ici. Chut!

— Chut! répéta-t-on de toutes parts.

— Maintenant, s’écria tout à coup le soldat, je suis sûr que c’est en effet le capitaine Dispolsen; je reconnais la chaîne d’acier que notre prisonnier, le vieux Schumacker, lui donna en don à son départ.

Le jeune homme à la plume noire rompit vivement le silence: — Vous êtes sûr que c’est le capitaine Dispolsen?

— Sûr, par les mérites de saint Belzébuth! dit le soldat.

Le jeune homme sortit brusquement.

— Fais avancer une barque pour Munckholm, dit-il à son domestique.

— Mais, seigneur, et le général?….

— Tu lui mèneras les chevaux. J’irai demain. Suis-je mon maître ou non? Allons, le jour baisse; et je suis pressé, une barque.

Le valet obéit et suivit quelque temps des yeux son jeune maître, qui s’éloignait du rivage.

II

Je m’assiérai près de vous, tandis que vous raconterez quelque histoire agréable pour tromper le temps.

MATURIN, *Bertram*.

Le lecteur sait déjà que nous sommes à Drontheim, l’une des quatre principales villes de la Norvège, bien qu’elle ne fût pas la résidence du vice-roi. À l’époque où cette histoire se passe — en 1699 — le royaume de Norvège était encore uni au Danemark et gouverné par des vice-rois, dont le séjour était Berghen, cité plus grande, plus méridionale et plus belle que Drontheim, en dépit du surnom de mauvais goût que lui donnait le célèbre amiral Tromp.

Drontheim offre un aspect agréable lorsqu’on y arrive par le golfe auquel cette ville donne son nom; le port assez large, quoique les vaisseaux n’y entrent pas aisément en tout temps, ne présentait toutefois alors que l’apparence d’un long canal, bordé à droite de navires danois et norvégiens, à gauche de navires étrangers, division prescrite par les ordonnances. On voit dans le fond la ville assise sur une plaine bien cultivée, et surmontée par les hautes aiguilles de sa cathédrale. Cette église, un des plus beaux morceaux de l’architecture gothique, comme on peut en juger par le livre du professeur Shoenning — si savamment cité par Spiagudry — qui la décrivit avant que de fréquents incendies ne l’eussent ravagée, portait sur sa flèche principale la croix épiscopale, signe distinctif de la cathédrale de l’évêché luthérien de Drontheim. Au-dessus de la ville, on aperçoit dans un lointain bleuâtre les cimes blanches et grêles des monts de Kole, pareilles aux fleurons aigus d’une couronne antique.

Au milieu du port, à une portée de canon du rivage, s’élève, sur une masse de rochers battus des flots, la solitaire forteresse de Munckholm, sombre prison qui renfermait alors un captif célèbre par l’éclat de ses longues prospérités et de ses rapides disgrâces.

Schumacker, né dans un rang obscur, avait été comblé des faveurs de son maître, puis précipité du fauteuil de grand-chancelier de Danemark et de Norvège sur le banc des traîtres, puis traîné sur l’échafaud, et de là jeté par grâce dans un cachot isolé à l’extrémité des deux royaumes. Ses créatures l’avaient renversé, sans qu’il eût droit de crier à l’ingratitude. Pouvait-il se plaindre de voir se briser sous ses pieds des échelons qu’il n’avait placés si haut que pour s’élever lui-même?

Celui qui avait fondé la noblesse en Danemark voyait, du fond de son exil, les grands qu’il avait faits se partager ses propres dignités. Le comte d’Ahlefeld, son mortel ennemi, était son successeur comme grand-chancelier; le général Arensdorf disposait, comme grand maréchal, des grades militaires; et l’évêque Spollyson exerçait la charge d’inspecteur des universités. Le seul de ses ennemis qui ne lui dût pas son élévation était le comte Ulric-Frédéric Guldenlew, fils naturel du roi Frédéric III, vice-roi de Norvège; c’était le plus généreux de tous.

C’est vers le triste rocher de Munckholm que s’avançait assez lentement la barque du jeune homme à la plume noire. Le soleil baissait rapidement derrière le château-fort isolé, dont la masse interceptait ses rayons, déjà si horizontaux que le paysan des collines lointaines et orientales de Larsynn pouvait voir se promener près de lui, sur les bruyères, l’ombre vague de la sentinelle placée sur le donjon le plus élevé de Munckholm.

III

Ah! mon coeur ne pouvait être plus sensiblement blessé!… Un jeune homme sans moeurs… il a osé la regarder! ses regards souillaient sa pureté. — Claudia! cette seule pensée me met hors de moi.

LESSING.

— Andrew, allez dire que dans une demi-heure on sonne le couvre-feu. Sorsyll relèvera Duckness à la grande herse, et Maldivius montera sur la plate-forme de la grosse tour. Qu’on veille attentivement du côté du donjon du Lion de Slesvig. Ne pas oublier à sept heures de tirer le canon pour qu’on lève la chaîne du port; — mais non, on attend encore le capitaine Dispolsen; il faut au contraire allumer le fanal et voir si celui de Walderhog est allumé, comme l’ordre en a été donné aujourd’hui. Surtout qu’on tienne des rafraîchissements prêts pour le capitaine. — Et, j’oubliais, — qu’on marque pour deux jours de cachot Toric-Belfast, second arquebusier du régiment; il a été absent toute la journée.

Ainsi parlait le sergent d’armes sous la voûte noire et enfumée du corps de garde de Munckholm, situé dans la tour basse qui domine la première porte du château.

Les soldats auxquels il s’adressait quittèrent le jeu ou le lit pour exécuter ses ordres; puis le silence se rétablit.

En ce moment, le bruit alternatif et mesuré des rames se fit entendre au dehors. — Voilà sans doute, enfin, le capitaine Dispolsen! dit le sergent en ouvrant la petite fenêtre grillée qui donne sur le golfe.

Une barque abordait en effet au bas de la porte de fer.

— Qui va là? cria le sergent d’une voix rauque.

— Ouvrez! répondit-on; paix et sûreté.

— On n’entre pas; avez-vous droit de passe?

— Oui.

— C’est ce que je vais vérifier; si vous mentez, par les mérites du saint mon patron, je vous ferai goûter l’eau du golfe.

Puis, refermant le guichet et se retournant, il ajouta: — Ce n’est point encore le capitaine!

Une lumière brilla derrière la porte de fer; les verrous rouillés crièrent; les barres se levèrent, elle s’ouvrit, et le sergent examina un parchemin que lui présentait le nouveau venu.

— Passez, dit-il. Arrêtez cependant, reprit-il brusquement, laissez en dehors la boucle de votre chapeau. On n’entre pas dans les prisons d’état avec des bijoux. Le règlement porte que «le roi et les membres de la famille du roi, — le vice-roi et les membres de la famille du vice-roi, l’évêque et les chefs de la garnison, sont seuls exceptés». Vous n’avez, n’est-ce pas, aucune de ces qualités?

Le jeune homme détacha, sans répondre, la boucle proscrite, et la jeta pour payement au pêcheur qui l’avait amené; celui-ci, craignant qu’il ne revînt sur sa générosité, se hâta de mettre un large espace de mer entre le bienfaiteur et le bienfait.

Tandis que le sergent, murmurant de l’imprudence de la chancellerie qui prodiguait ainsi les droits de passe, replaçait les lourds barreaux, et que le bruit lent de ses bottes fortes retentissait sur les degrés de l’escalier tournant du corps de garde, le jeune homme, après avoir rejeté son manteau sur son épaule, traversait rapidement la voûte noire de la tour basse, puis la longue place d’armes, puis le hangar de l’artillerie où gisaient quelques vieilles couleuvrines démontées que l’on peut voir aujourd’hui dans le musée de Copenhague, et dont le cri impérieux d’une sentinelle l’avertit de s’éloigner. Il parvint à la grande herse, qui fut levée à l’inspection de son parchemin. Là, suivi d’un soldat, il franchit, suivant la diagonale, sans hésiter et comme un habitué de ces lieux, une de ces quatre cours carrées qui flanquent la grande cour circulaire, du milieu de laquelle sort le vaste rocher rond où s’élevait alors le donjon, dit château du Lion de Slesvig, à cause de la détention que Rolf le Nain y fit jadis subir à son frère, Joatham le Lion, duc de Slesvig.

Notre intention n’est pas de donner ici une description du donjon de Munckholm, d’autant plus que le lecteur, enfermé dans une prison d’état, craindrait peut-être de ne pouvoir *se sauver au travers du jardin*. Ce serait à tort, car le château du Lion de Slesvig, destiné à des prisonniers de distinction, leur offrait, entre autres commodités, celle de se promener dans une espèce de jardin sauvage assez étendu, où des touffes de houx, quelques vieux ifs, quelques pins noirs, croissaient parmi les rochers autour de la haute prison, et dans un enclos de grands murs et d’énormes tours.

Arrivé au pied du rocher rond, le jeune homme gravit les degrés grossièrement taillés qui montent tortueusement jusqu’au pied de l’une des tours de l’enclos, laquelle, percée d’une poterne dans sa partie inférieure, servait d’entrée au donjon. Là, il sonna fortement d’un cor de cuivre que lui avait remis le gardien de la grande herse.-Ouvrez, ouvrez! cria vivement une voix de l’intérieur, c’est sans doute ce maudit capitaine!

La poterne qui s’ouvrit laissa voir au nouvel arrivant, dans l’intérieur d’une salle gothique faiblement éclairée, un jeune officier nonchalamment couché sur un amas de manteaux et de peaux de rennes, près d’une de ces lampes à trois becs que nos aïeux suspendaient aux rosaces de leurs plafonds, et qui, pour le moment, était posée à terre. La richesse élégante et même l’excessive recherche de ses vêtements contrastaient avec la nudité de la salle et la grossièreté des meubles; il tenait un livre entre ses mains et se détourna à demi vers le nouveau venu.

— C’est le capitaine? salut, capitaine! Vous ne vous doutiez guère que vous faisiez attendre un homme qui n’a point la satisfaction de vous connaître; mais notre connaissance sera bientôt faite, n’est-il pas vrai? Commencez par recevoir tous mes compliments de condoléance sur votre retour dans ce vénérable château. Pour peu que j’y séjourne encore, je vais devenir gai comme la chouette qu’on cloue à la porte des donjons pour servir d’épouvantail, et quand je retournerai à Copenhague pour les fêtes du mariage de ma soeur, du diable si quatre dames sur cent me reconnaissent! Dites-moi, les noeuds de ruban rose au bas du justaucorps sont-ils toujours de mode? a-t-on traduit quelques nouveaux romans de cette Française, la demoiselle Scudéry? Je tiens précisément la *Clélie*; je suppose qu’on la lit encore à Copenhague. C’est mon code de galanterie, maintenant que je soupire loin de tant de beaux yeux…. — car, tout beaux qu’ils sont, les yeux de notre jeune prisonnière, vous savez de qui je veux parler, ne me disent jamais rien. Ah! sans les ordres de mon père!… Il faut vous dire en confidence, capitaine, que mon père, n’en parlez pas, m’a chargé de… vous m’entendez, auprès de la fille de Schumacker; mais je perds toutes mes peines, cette jolie statue n’est pas une femme; elle pleure toujours et ne me regarde jamais.

Le jeune homme, qui n’avait pu encore interrompre l’extrême volubilité de l’officier, poussa un cri de surprise: — Comment! que dites-vous? chargé de séduire la fille de ce malheureux Schumacker!…

— Séduire, eh bien soit! si c’est ainsi que cela s’appelle à présent à Copenhague; mais j’en défierais le diable. Avant-hier, étant de garde, je mis exprès pour elle une superbe fraise française qui m’était envoyée de Paris même. Croiriez-vous qu’elle n’a pas levé seulement les yeux sur moi, quoique j’aie traversé trois ou quatre fois son appartement en faisant sonner mes éperons neufs, dont la molette est plus large qu’un ducat de Lombardie? — C’est la forme la plus nouvelle, n’est-ce pas?

— Dieu! Dieu! dit le jeune homme en se frappant le front! mais cela me confond!

— N’est-ce pas? reprit l’officier, se méprenant sur le sens de cette exclamation. Pas la moindre attention à moi! c’est incroyable, mais c’est pourtant vrai.

Le jeune homme se promenait, violemment agité, de long en large et à grands pas.

— Voulez-vous vous rafraîchir, capitaine Dispolsen? lui cria l’officier.

Le jeune homme se réveilla.

— Je ne suis point le capitaine Dispolsen.

— Comment! dit l’officier d’un ton sévère, et se levant sur son séant; et qui donc êtes-vous pour oser vous introduire ici, et à cette heure?

Le jeune homme déploya sa pancarte.

— Je veux voir le comte Griffenfeld;… je veux dire votre prisonnier.

— Le comte! le comte! murmura l’officier d’un air mécontent. — Mais en vérité cette pièce est en règle; voilà bien la signature du vice-chancelier Grummond de Knud: «Le porteur pourra visiter, à toute heure et en tout temps, toutes les prisons royales.» Grummond de Knud est frère du vieux général Levin de Knud, qui commande à Drontheim, et vous saurez que ce vieux général a élevé mon futur beau-frère.

— Merci de vos détails de famille, lieutenant. Ne pensez-vous pas que vous m’en avez déjà assez raconté?

— L’impertinent a raison, se dit le lieutenant en se mordant les lèvres. — Holà, huissier! huissier de la tour! Conduisez cet étranger à Schumacker, et ne grondez pas si j’ai décroché votre luminaire à trois becs et à une mèche. Je n’étais pas fâché d’examiner une pièce qui date sans doute de Sciold le Païen ou de Havar le Pourfendu; et d’ailleurs on ne suspend plus aux plafonds que des lustres en cristal.

Il dit, et pendant que le jeune homme et son conducteur traversaient le jardin désert du donjon, il reprit, martyr de la mode, le fil des aventures galantes de l’amazone Clélie et d’Horatius le Borgne.

IV

BENVOLIO

Où diable ce Roméo peut-il être? il n'est pas rentré chez lui cette nuit.

MERCUTIO

Il n'est pas rentré chez son père; j'ai parlé à son domestique.

SHAKESPEARE.

Cependant un homme et deux chevaux étaient entrés dans la cour du palais du gouverneur de Drontheim. Le cavalier avait quitté la selle en hochant la tête d'un air mécontent; il se préparait à conduire les deux montures à l'écurie, lorsqu'il se sentit saisir brusquement le bras, et une voix lui cria:

— Comment! vous voilà seul, Poël! Et votre maître? où est votre maître?

C'était le vieux général Levin de Knud, qui, de sa fenêtre, ayant vu le domestique du jeune homme et la selle vide, était descendu précipitamment et fixait sur le valet un regard plus inquiet encore que sa question.

— Excellence, dit Poël en s'inclinant profondément, mon maître n'est plus à Drontheim.

— Quoi! il y était donc? il est reparti sans voir son général, sans embrasser son vieil ami! et depuis quand?

— Il est arrivé ce soir et reparti ce soir.

— Ce soir! ce soir! mais où donc s'est-il arrêté? où est-il allé?

— Il a descendu au Spladgest, et s'est embarqué pour Munckholm.

— Ah! je le croyais aux antipodes. Mais que va-t-il faire à ce château? qu'allait-il faire au Spladgest? Voilà bien mon chevalier errant! C'est aussi un peu ma faute, pourquoi l'ai-je élevé ainsi? J'ai voulu qu'il fût libre en dépit de son rang.

— Aussi n'est-il point esclave des étiquettes, dit Poël.

— Non, mais il l'est de ses caprices. Allons, il va sans doute revenir. Songez à vous rafraîchir, Poël. — Dites-moi, et le visage du général prit une expression de sollicitude, dites-moi, Poël, avez-vous beaucoup couru à droite et à gauche?

— Mon général, nous sommes venus en droite ligne de Berghen. Mon maître était triste.

— Triste? que s'est-il donc passé entre lui et son père? Ce mariage lui déplaît-il?

— Je l'ignore. Mais on dit que sa sérénité l'exige.

— L'exige! vous dites, Poël, que le vice-roi l'exige! Mais pour qu'il l'exige, il faut qu'Ordener s'y refuse.

— Je l'ignore, excellence. Il paraît triste.

— Triste! savez-vous comment son père l'a reçu?

— La première fois, c'était dans le camp, près Berghen. Sa sérénité a dit: Je ne vous vois pas souvent, mon fils. — Tant mieux pour moi, mon seigneur et père, a répondu mon maître, si vous vous en apercevez. Puis il a donné à sa sérénité des détails sur ses courses du Nord; et sa sérénité a dit: C'est bien. Le lendemain, mon maître est revenu du palais, et a dit: On veut me marier; mais il faut que je voie mon second père, le général Levin. — J'ai sellé les chevaux, et nous voilà.

— Vrai, mon bon Poël, dit le général d'une voix altérée, il m'a appelé son second père?

— Oui, votre excellence.

— Malheur à moi si ce mariage le contrarie, car j'encourrai plutôt la disgrâce du roi que de m'y prêter. Mais cependant, la fille du grand-chancelier des deux royaumes!… À propos, Poël, Ordener sait-il que sa future belle-mère, la comtesse d'Ahlefeld, est ici incognito depuis hier, et que le comte y est attendu?

— Je l'ignore, mon général.

— Oh! se dit le vieux gouverneur, oui, il le sait, car pourquoi aurait-il battu en retraite dès son arrivée?

Ici le général, après avoir fait un signe de bienveillance à Poël, et salué la sentinelle qui lui présentait les armes, rentra inquiet dans l'hôtel d'où il venait de sortir inquiet.

V

On eût dit que toutes les passions avaient agité son coeur, et que toutes l’avaient abandonné; il ne lui restait rien que le coup d’oeil triste et perçant d’un homme consommé dans la connaissance des hommes, et qui voyait, d’un regard, où tendait chaque chose.

SCHILLER, *les Visions.*

Quand, après avoir fait parcourir à l’étranger les escaliers en spirale et les hautes salles du donjon du Lion de Slesvig, l’huissier lui ouvrit enfin la porte de l’appartement où se trouvait celui qu’il cherchait, la première parole qui frappa les oreilles du jeune homme fut encore celle-ci: — Est-ce enfin le capitaine Dispolsen?

Celui qui faisait cette question était un vieillard assis le dos tourné à la porte, les coudes appuyés sur une table de travail et le front appuyé sur ses mains. Il était revêtu d’une simarre de laine noire, et l’on apercevait, au-dessus d’un lit placé à une extrémité de la chambre, un écusson brisé autour duquel étaient suspendus les colliers rompus des ordres de l’Éléphant et de Dannebrog; une couronne de comte renversée était fixée au-dessous de l’écusson, et les deux fragments d’une main de justice liés en croix complétaient l’ensemble de ces bizarres ornements. — Le vieillard était Schumacker.

— Non, seigneur, répondit l’huissier; puis il dit à l’étranger: Voici le prisonnier; et, les laissant ensemble, il referma la porte, avant d’avoir pu entendre la voix aigre du vieillard, qui disait: Si ce n’est pas le capitaine, je ne veux voir personne.

L’étranger, à ces mots, resta debout près de la porte; et le prisonnier, se croyant seul, — car il ne s’était pas un moment détourné, — retomba dans sa silencieuse rêverie.

Tout à coup il s’écria: — Le capitaine m’a certainement abandonné et trahi! Les hommes…. les hommes sont comme ce glaçon qu’un Arabe prit pour un diamant; il le serra précieusement dans son havre-sac, et quand il le chercha, il ne trouva même plus un peu d’eau.

— Je ne suis pas de ces hommes, dit l’étranger.

Schumacker se leva brusquement. — Qui est ici? qui m’écoute? Est-ce quelque misérable suppôt de ce Guldenlew?

— Ne parlez point mal du vice-roi, seigneur comte.

— Seigneur comte! est-ce pour me flatter que vous m’appelez ainsi? Vous perdez vos peines; je ne suis plus puissant.

— Celui qui vous parle ne vous a jamais connu puissant, et n’en est pas moins votre ami.

— C’est qu’il espère encore quelque chose de moi; les souvenirs que l’on conserve aux malheureux se mesurent toujours aux espérances qui en restent.

— C’est moi qui devrais me plaindre, noble comte; car je me suis souvenu de vous, et vous m’avez oublié. Je suis Ordener.

Un éclair de joie passa dans les tristes yeux du vieillard, et un sourire qu’il ne put réprimer entr’ouvrit sa barbe blanche, comme le rayon qui perce un nuage.

— Ordener! soyez le bienvenu, voyageur Ordener. Mille voeux de bonheur au voyageur qui se souvient du prisonnier!

— Mais, demanda Ordener, vous, m’aviez donc oublié?

— Je vous avais oublié, dit Schumacker reprenant son air sombre, comme on oublie la brise qui nous rafraîchit et qui passe; heureux lorsqu’elle ne devient pas l’ouragan qui nous renverse.

— Comte de Griffenfeld, reprit le jeune homme, vous ne comptiez donc pas sur mon retour?

— Le vieux Schumacker n’y comptait pas; mais il y a ici une jeune fille qui me faisait remarquer aujourd’hui même qu’il y avait eu, le 8 mai dernier, un an que vous étiez absent.

Ordener tressaillit.

— Quoi, grand Dieu! serait-ce votre Éthel, noble comte?

— Et qui donc?

— Votre fille, seigneur, a daigné compter les mois depuis mon départ! Oh! combien j’ai passé de tristes journées! j’ai visité toute la Norvège, depuis Christiania jusqu’à Wardhus; mais c’est vers Drontheim que mes courses me ramenaient toujours.

— Usez de votre liberté, jeune homme, tant que vous en jouissez. — Mais dites-moi donc enfin qui vous êtes. Je voudrais, Ordener, vous connaître sous un autre nom. Le fils d’un de mes mortels ennemis s’appelle Ordener.

— Peut-être, seigneur comte, ce mortel ennemi a-t-il plus de bienveillance pour vous que vous n’en avez pour lui.

— Vous éludez ma question; mais gardez votre secret, j'apprendrais peut-être que le fruit qui désaltère est un poison qui me tuera.

— Comte! dit Ordener d'une voix irritée. Comte! reprit-il d'un ton de reproche et de pitié.

— Suis-je contraint de me fier à vous, répondit Schumacker, à vous qui prenez toujours en ma présence le parti de l'implacable Guldenlew?

— Le vice-roi, interrompit gravement le jeune homme, vient d'ordonner que vous seriez à l'avenir libre et sans gardes dans l'intérieur de tout le donjon du Lion de Slesvig. C'est une nouvelle que j'ai recueillie à Berghen, et que vous recevrez sans doute prochainement.

— C'est une faveur que je n'osais espérer, et je croyais n'avoir parlé de mon désir qu'à vous seul. Au surplus, on diminue le poids de mes fers à mesure que celui de mes années s'accroît, et, quand les infirmités m'auront rendu impotent, on me dira sans doute: Vous êtes libre. À ces mots le vieillard sourit amèrement; il continua:

— Et vous, jeune homme, avez-vous toujours vos folles idées d'indépendance?

— Si je n'avais point ces folles idées, je ne serais pas ici.

— Comment êtes-vous venu à Drontheim?

— Eh bien! à cheval.

— Comment êtes-vous venu à Munckholm?

— Sur une barque.

— Pauvre insensé! qui crois être libre, et qui passes d'un cheval dans une barque. Ce ne sont point tes membres qui exécutent tes volontés; c'est un animal, c'est la matière; et tu appelles cela des volontés!

— Je force des êtres à m'obéir.

— Prendre sur certains êtres le droit d'en être obéi, c'est donner à d'autres celui de vous commander. L'indépendance n'est que dans l'isolement.

— Vous n'aimez pas les hommes, noble comte?

Le vieillard se mit à rire tristement. — Je pleure d'être homme, et je ris de celui qui me console. — Vous le saurez, si vous l'ignorez encore, le malheur rend défiant comme la prospérité rend ingrat. Écoutez, puisque vous venez de Berghen, apprenez-moi quel vent favorable a soufflé sur le capitaine Dispolsen. Il faut qu'il lui soit arrivé quelque chose d'heureux, puisqu'il m'oublie.

Ordener devint sombre et embarrassé.

— Dispolsen, seigneur comte? C’est pour vous en parler que je suis venu dès aujourd’hui. — Je sais qu’il avait toute votre confiance.

— Vous le savez? interrompit le prisonnier avec inquiétude. Vous vous trompez. Nul être au monde n’a ma confiance. — Dispolsen tient, il est vrai, entre ses mains mes papiers, des papiers même très importants. C’est pour moi qu’il est allé à Copenhague, près du roi. J’avouerai même que je comptais plus sur lui que sur tout autre, car dans ma puissance je ne lui avais jamais rendu service.

— Eh bien! noble comte, je l’ai vu aujourd’hui….

— Votre trouble me dit le reste; il est traître.

— Il est mort.

— Mort!

Le prisonnier croisa ses bras et baissa la tête, puis relevant son oeil vers le jeune homme:

— Quand je vous disais qu’il lui était arrivé quelque chose d’heureux!

Puis son regard se tourna vers la muraille où étaient suspendus les signes de ses grandeurs détruites, et il fit un geste de la main comme pour éloigner le témoin d’une douleur qu’il s’efforçait de vaincre.

— Ce n’est pas lui que je plains; ce n’est qu’un homme de moins. — Ce n’est pas moi; qu’ai-je à perdre? Mais ma fille, ma fille infortunée! je serai la victime de cette infâme machination; et que deviendra-t-elle si on lui enlève son père?

Il se retourna vivement vers Ordener.

— Comment est-il mort? où l’avez-vous vu? Je l’ai vu au Spladgest; on — ne sait s’il est mort d’un suicide ou d’un assassinat.

— Voici maintenant l’important. S’il a été assassiné, je sais d’où le coup part; alors tout est perdu. Il m’apportait les preuves du complot qu’ils trament contre moi; ces preuves auraient pu me sauver et les perdre. Ils ont su les détruire! — Malheureuse Éthel!

— Seigneur comte, dit Ordener en saluant, je vous dirai demain s’il a été assassiné.

Schumacker, sans répondre, suivit Ordener qui sortait, d’un regard où se peignait le calme du désespoir, plus effrayant que le calme de la mort.

Ordener était dans l’antichambre solitaire du prisonnier, sans savoir de quel côté se diriger. La soirée était avancée et la salle obscure; il ouvrit une porte au hasard et se trouva dans un immense corridor, éclairé seulement par la lune, qui courait rapidement à travers de pâles nuées. Ses lueurs nébuleuses tombaient par intervalles sur les vitraux étroits et élevés, et dessinaient sur la muraille opposée comme une longue procession de fantômes, qui apparaissait et disparaissait simultanément dans les profondeurs de la galerie. Le jeune homme se signa lentement, et marcha vers une lumière rougeâtre qui brillait faiblement à l'extrémité du corridor.

Une porte était entr'ouverte; une jeune fille agenouillée dans un oratoire gothique, au pied d'un simple autel, récitait à demi-voix les litanies de la Vierge; oraison simple et sublime où l'âme qui s'élève vers la Mère des Sept-Douleurs ne la prie que de prier.

Cette jeune fille était vêtue de crêpe noir et de gaze blanche, comme pour faire deviner en quelque sorte, au premier aspect, que ses jours s'étaient enfuis jusqu'alors dans la tristesse et dans l'innocence. Même en cette attitude modeste, elle portait dans tout son être l'empreinte d'une nature singulière. Ses yeux et ses longs cheveux étaient noirs, beauté très rare dans le Nord; son regard élevé vers la voûte paraissait plutôt enflammé par l'extase qu'éteint par le recueillement. Enfin, on eût dit une vierge des rives de Chypre ou des campagnes de Tibur, revêtue des voiles fantastiques d'Ossian, et prosternée devant la croix de bois et l'autel de pierre de Jésus.

Ordener tressaillit et fut prêt à défaillir, car il reconnut celle qui priait.

Elle pria pour son père, pour le puissant tombé, pour le vieux captif abandonné, et elle récita à haute voix le psaume de la délivrance.

Elle pria encore pour un autre; mais Ordener n'entendit pas le nom de celui pour qui elle priait; il ne l'entendit pas, car elle ne le prononça pas; seulement elle récita le cantique de la sulamite, l'épouse qui attend l'époux, et le retour du bien-aimé.

Ordener s'éloigna dans la galerie; il respecta cette vierge qui s'entretenait avec le ciel; la prière est un grand mystère, et son coeur s'était rempli, malgré lui, d'un ravissement inconnu, mais profane.

La porte de l'oratoire se ferma doucement. Bientôt une lumière, et une femme blanche dans les ténèbres, vinrent de son côté. Il s'arrêta, car il éprouvait une des plus violentes émotions de la vie; il s'adossa à l'obscure muraille; son corps était faible, et les os de ses membres s'entre-choquaient dans leurs jointures, et, dans le silence de tout son être, les battements de son coeur retentissaient à son oreille.

Quand la jeune fille passa, elle entendit le froissement d'un manteau, et une haleine brusque et précipitée.

— Dieu! cria-t-elle.

Ordener s’élança; d’un bras il la soutint, de l’autre il chercha vainement à retenir la lampe, qu’elle avait laissée échapper, et qui s’éteignit.

— C’est moi, dit-il doucement.

— C’est Ordener! dit la jeune fille, car le dernier retentissement de cette voix, qu’elle n’avait pas entendue depuis un an, était encore dans son oreille.

Et la lune qui passait éclaira la joie de sa charmante figure; puis elle reprit, timide et confuse, et se dégageant des bras du jeune homme:

— C’est le seigneur Ordener.

— C’est lui, comtesse Éthel.

— Pourquoi m’appelez-vous comtesse?

— Pourquoi m’appelez-vous seigneur?

La jeune fille se tut et sourit; le jeune homme se tut et soupira.

Elle rompit la première le silence:

— Comment donc êtes-vous ici?

— Faites-moi merci, si ma présence vous afflige. J’étais venu pour parler au comte votre père.

— Ainsi, dit Éthel d’une voix altérée, vous n’êtes venu que pour mon père. Le jeune homme baissa la tête, car ces paroles lui semblaient bien injustes.

— Il y a sans doute déjà longtemps, continua la jeune fille d’un ton de reproche, il y a sans doute déjà longtemps que vous êtes à Drontheim? Votre absence de ce château n’a pu vous paraître longue, à vous.

Ordener, profondément blessé, ne répondit pas.

— Je vous approuve, dit la prisonnière d’une voix tremblante de douleur et de colère; mais, ajouta-t-elle d’un ton fier, j’espère, seigneur Ordener, que vous ne m’avez pas entendue prier?

— Comtesse, répondit enfin le jeune homme, je vous ai entendue.

— Ah! seigneur Ordener, il n’est point courtois d’écouter ainsi.

— Je ne vous ai pas écoutée, noble comtesse, dit faiblement Ordener; je vous ai entendue.

— J’ai prié pour mon père, reprit la jeune fille en le regardant fixement, et comme attendant une réponse à cette parole toute simple.

Ordener garda le silence.

— J’ai aussi prié, continua-t-elle, inquiète et paraissant attentive à l’effet que ces paroles allaient produire sur lui, j’ai aussi prié pour quelqu’un qui porte votre nom, pour le fils du vice-roi, du comte de Guldenlew. Car il faut prier pour tout le monde, même pour ses persécuteurs.

Et la jeune fille rougit, car elle pensait mentir; mais elle était piquée contre le jeune homme, et elle croyait l'avoir nommé pendant sa prière; elle ne l'avait nommé que dans son coeur.

— Ordener Guldenlew est bien malheureux, noble dame, si vous le comptez au nombre de vos persécuteurs; il est bien heureux cependant d'occuper une place dans vos prières.

— Oh! non, dit Éthel troublée et effrayée de l'air froid du jeune homme, non, je ne priais pas pour lui. J'ignore ce que j'ai fait, ce que je fais. Quant au fils du vice-roi, je le déteste, je ne le connais pas. Ne me regardez pas de cet oeil sévère; vous ai-je offensé? ne pouvez-vous rien pardonner à une pauvre prisonnière, vous qui passez vos jours près de quelque belle et noble dame libre et heureuse comme vous!

— Moi, comtesse! s'écria Ordener.

Éthel versait des larmes; le jeune homme se précipita à ses pieds.

— Ne m'avez-vous pas dit, continua-t-elle souriant à travers ses pleurs, que votre absence vous avait semblé courte?

— Qui, moi, comtesse?

— Ne m'appelez pas ainsi, dit-elle doucement, je ne suis plus comtesse pour personne, et surtout pour vous.

Le jeune homme se leva violemment, et ne put s'empêcher de la presser sur son coeur dans un ravissement convulsif.

— Eh bien! mon Éthel adorée, nomme-moi ton Ordener. — Dis-moi, — et il attacha un regard brûlant sur ses yeux mouillés de larmes, — dis-moi, tu m'aimes donc? Ce que dit la jeune fille ne fut pas entendu, car Ordener, hors de lui, avait ravi sur ses lèvres avec sa réponse cette première faveur, ce baiser sacré qui suffit aux yeux de Dieu pour changer deux amants en époux.

Tous deux restèrent sans paroles, parce qu'ils étaient dans un de ces moments solennels, si rares et si courts sur la terre, où l'âme semble éprouver quelque chose de la félicité des cieux. Ce sont des instants indéfinissables que ceux où deux âmes s'entretiennent ainsi dans un langage qui ne peut être compris que d'elles; alors tout ce qu'il y a d'humain se tait, et les deux êtres immatériels s'unissent mystérieusement pour la vie de ce monde et l'éternité de l'autre.

Éthel s’était lentement retirée des bras d’Ordener, et, aux lueurs de la lune, ils se regardaient avec ivresse; seulement, l’oeil de flamme du jeune homme respirait un mâle orgueil et un courage de lion, tandis que le regard demi-voilé de la jeune fille était empreint de cette pudeur, honte angélique, qui, dans le coeur d’une vierge, se mêle à toutes les joies de l’amour.

— Tout à l’heure, dans ce corridor, dit-elle enfin, vous m’évitiez donc, mon Ordener?

— Je ne vous évitais pas, j’étais comme le malheureux aveugle que l’on rend à la lumière après de longues années, et qui se détourne un moment du jour.

— C’est à moi plutôt que s’applique votre comparaison, car, durant votre absence, je n’ai eu d’autre bonheur que la présence d’un infortuné, de mon père. Je passais mes longues journées à le consoler, et, ajouta-t-elle en baissant les yeux, à vous espérer. Je lisais à mon père les fables de l’Edda, et quand je l’entendais douter des hommes, je lui lisais l’Évangile, pour qu’au moins il ne doutât pas du ciel; puis je lui parlais de vous, et il se taisait, ce qui prouve qu’il vous aime. Seulement, quand j’avais inutilement passé mes soirées à regarder de loin sur les routes les voyageurs qui arrivaient, et dans le port les vaisseaux qui abordaient, il secouait la tête avec un sourire amer, et je pleurais. Cette prison, où s’est jusqu’ici passée toute ma vie, m’était devenue odieuse, et pourtant mon père, qui, jusqu’à votre apparition, l’avait toujours remplie pour moi, y était encore; mais vous n’y étiez plus, et je désirais cette liberté que je ne connaissais pas.

Il y avait dans les yeux de la jeune fille, dans la naïveté de sa tendresse, dans la douce hésitation de ses épanchements, un charme que des paroles humaines n’exprimeraient pas. Ordener l’écoutait avec cette joie rêveuse d’un être qui serait enlevé au monde réel pour assister au monde idéal.

— Et moi, dit-il, maintenant je ne veux plus de cette liberté que vous ne partagez pas!

— Quoi, Ordener! reprit vivement Éthel, vous ne nous quitterez donc plus?

Cette expression rappela au jeune homme tout ce qu’il avait oublié.

— Mon Éthel, il faut que je vous quitte ce soir. Je vous reverrai demain, et demain je vous quitterai encore, jusqu’à ce que je revienne pour ne plus vous quitter.

— Hélas! interrompit douloureusement la jeune fille, absent encore!

— Je vous répète, ma bien-aimée Éthel, que je reviendrai bientôt vous arracher de cette prison ou m'y ensevelir avec vous.

— Prisonnière avec lui! dit-elle doucement. Ah! ne me trompez pas, faut-il que j'espère tant de bonheur?

— Quel serment te faut-il? que veux-tu de moi? s'écria Ordener; dis-moi, mon Éthel, n'es-tu pas mon épouse? — Et, transporté d'amour, il la serrait fortement contre sa poitrine.

— Je suis à toi, murmura-t-elle faiblement.

Ces deux coeurs nobles et purs battaient ainsi avec délices l'un contre l'autre, et n'en étaient que plus nobles et plus purs.

En ce moment un violent éclat de rire se fit entendre auprès d'eux. Un homme enveloppé d'un manteau découvrit une lanterne sourde qu'il y avait cachée, et dont la lumière éclaira subitement la figure effrayée et confuse d'Éthel et le visage étonné et fier d'Ordener.

— Courage! mon joli couple! courage! mais il me semble qu'après avoir cheminé si peu de temps dans le pays du Tendre, vous n'avez pas suivi tous les détours du ruisseau du Sentiment, et que vous avez dû prendre un chemin de traverse pour arriver si vite au hameau du Baiser.

Nos lecteurs ont sans doute reconnu le lieutenant admirateur de Mlle de Scudéry. Arraché de la lecture de la *Clélie* par le beffroi de minuit, que les deux amants n'avaient pas entendu, il était venu faire sa ronde nocturne dans le donjon. En passant à l'extrémité du corridor de l'orient, il avait recueilli quelques paroles et vu comme deux spectres se mouvoir dans la galerie à la clarté de la lune. Alors, naturellement curieux et hardi, il avait caché sa lanterne sous son manteau, et s'était avancé sur la pointe du pied près des deux fantômes, que son brusque éclat de rire venait d'arracher désagréablement à leur extase.

Éthel fit un mouvement pour fuir Ordener, puis, revenant à lui comme par instinct et pour lui demander protection, elle cacha sa tête brûlante dans le sein du jeune homme.

Celui-ci releva la sienne avec un orgueil de roi.

— Malheur, dit-il, malheur à celui qui vient de t'effrayer et de t'affliger, mon Éthel!

— Oui vraiment, dit le lieutenant, malheur à moi si j'avais eu la maladresse d'épouvanter la tendre Mandane!

— Seigneur lieutenant, dit Ordener d'un ton hautain, je vous engage à vous taire.

— Seigneur insolent, répliqua l’officier, je vous engage à vous taire.

— M’entendez-vous? reprit Ordener d’une voix tonnante; achetez votre pardon par le silence.

— *Tibi tua*, répondit le lieutenant, prenez vos avis pour vous, achetez votre pardon par le silence.

— Taisez-vous! s’écria Ordener avec une voix qui fit trembler les vitraux; et, déposant la tremblante jeune fille sur un des vieux fauteuils du corridor, il secoua énergiquement le bras de l’officier.

— Oh! paysan, dit le lieutenant, moitié riant, moitié irrité, vous ne remarquez pas que ce pourpoint que vous froissez si brutalement est du plus beau velours d’Abingdon.

Ordener le regarda fixement.

— Lieutenant, ma patience est plus courte que mon épée.

— Je vous entends, mon brave damoisel, dit le lieutenant avec un sourire ironique, vous voudriez bien que je vous fisse un tel honneur; mais savez-vous qui je suis? Non, non, s’il vous plaît, *prince contre prince, berger contre berger*, comme disait le beau Léandre.

— S’il faut dire aussi: lâche contre lâche! reprit Ordener, assurément je n’aurai point l’insigne honneur de me mesurer avec vous.

— Je me fâcherais, mon très honorable berger, si vous portiez seulement l’uniforme.

— Je n’en ai ni les galons ni les franges, lieutenant, mais j’en porte le sabre.

Le fier jeune homme, rejetant son manteau en arrière, avait mis sa toque sur sa tête et saisi la garde de son sabre, lorsque Éthel, réveillée par ce danger imminent, se précipita sur son bras et s’attacha à son cou avec un cri de terreur et de prière.

— Vous faites sagement, ma belle damoiselle, si vous ne voulez pas que le jouvencel soit puni de ses hardiesses, dit le lieutenant, qui, aux menaces d’Ordener, s’était mis en garde sans s’émouvoir; car Cyrus allait se brouiller avec Cambyse, pourvu toutefois que ce ne soit pas faire trop d’honneur à ce vassal que de le comparer à Cambyse.

— Au nom du ciel, seigneur Ordener, disait Éthel, que je ne sois pas la cause et le témoin d’un pareil malheur! — Puis, levant sur lui ses beaux yeux, elle ajouta: — Ordener, je t’en supplie!

Ordener repoussa lentement dans le fourreau la lame à demi tirée, et le lieutenant s’écria:

— Par ma foi, chevalier, — j’ignore si vous l’êtes, mais je vous en donne le titre parce que vous paraissez le mériter, moi et vous agissons suivant les lois de la bravoure, mais non suivant celles de la galanterie. La damoiselle a raison, des engagements comme celui que je vous crois digne de nouer avec moi ne doivent pas avoir des dames pour témoins, quoique, n’en déplaise à la charmante damoiselle, ils puissent avoir des dames pour cause. Nous ne pouvons donc ici convenablement parler que du *duellum remotum,* et, comme l’offensé, si vous voulez en fixer l’époque, le lieu et les armes, ma fine lame de Tolède ou mon poignard de Mérida seront à la disposition de votre hachoir sorti des forges d’Ashkreuth, ou de votre couteau de chasse trempé dans le lac de Sparbo.

Le *duel ajourné* que l’officier proposait à Ordener était en usage dans le Nord, d’où les savants prétendent que la coutume du duel est sortie. Les plus vaillants gentilshommes proposaient et acceptaient le *duellum remotum*. On le remettait à plusieurs mois, quelquefois à plusieurs années, et, durant cet intervalle, les adversaires ne devaient s’occuper ni en paroles ni en actions de l’affaire qui avait amené le défi. Ainsi, en amour, les deux rivaux s’abstenaient de voir leur maîtresse, afin que les choses restassent dans le même état; on se reposait à cet égard sur la loyauté des chevaliers; comme dans les anciens tournois, si les juges du camp, croyant la loi courtoise violée, jetaient leur bâton dans l’arène, à l’instant tous les combattants s’arrêtaient; mais, jusqu’à l’éclaircissement du doute, la gorge du vaincu restait à la même distance de l’épée du vainqueur.

— Eh bien! chevalier, dit Ordener après un moment de réflexion, un messager vous instruira du lieu.

— Soit, répondit le lieutenant; d’autant mieux que cela me donnera le temps d’assister aux cérémonies du mariage de ma soeur, car vous saurez que vous aurez l’honneur de vous battre avec le futur beau-frère d’un haut seigneur, du fils du vice-roi de Norvège, du baron Ordener Guldenlew, lequel, à l’occasion de cet illustre hyménée, comme dit Artamène, va être créé comte de Daneskiold, colonel et chevalier del’Éléphant; et moi-même, qui suis le fils du grand-chancelier des deux royaumes, je serai sans doute nommé capitaine.

— Fort bien, fort bien, lieutenant d’Ahlefeld, dit Ordener avec impatience, vous n’êtes point encore capitaine, ni le fils du vice-roi colonel; — et les sabres sont toujours des sabres.

— Et les rustres toujours des rustres, quoi qu’on fasse pour les élever jusqu’à soi, dit entre ses dents l’officier.

— Chevalier, continua Ordener, vous connaissez la loi courtoise. Vous n’entrerez plus dans ce donjon, et vous garderez le silence sur cette affaire.

— Pour le silence, rapportez-vous-en à moi, je serai aussi muet que Muce Scévole lorsqu’il eut le poing sur le brasier. Je n’entrerai non plus dans le donjon, ni moi, ni aucun argus de la garnison; car je viens de recevoir un ordre d’y laisser à l’avenir Schumacker sans gardes, ordre que j’étais chargé de lui communiquer ce soir; ce que j’aurais fait si je n’avais passé une partie de la soirée à essayer de nouvelles bottines de Cracovie. — Cet ordre, entre nous, est bien imprudent.

— Voulez-vous que je vous montre mes bottines?

Pendant cette conversation, Éthel, les voyant apaisés, et ne comprenant pas ce que c’était qu’un *duellum remotum*, avait disparu, après avoir dit doucement à l’oreille d’Ordener: À demain.

— Je voudrais, lieutenant d’Ahlefeld, que vous m’aidassiez à sortir du fort.

— Volontiers, dit l’officier, quoiqu’il soit un peu tard, ou plutôt de bien bonne heure. Mais comment trouverez-vous une barque?

— Cela me regarde, dit Ordener.

Alors, s’entretenant de bonne amitié, ils traversèrent le jardin, la cour circulaire, la cour carrée, sans qu’Ordener, conduit par l’officier de ronde, éprouvât d’obstacle; ils franchirent la grande herse, le hangar de l’artillerie, la place d’armes, et arrivèrent à la tour basse, dont la porte de fer s’ouvrit à la voix du lieutenant.

— Au revoir, lieutenant d’Ahlefeld! dit Ordener.

— Au revoir, répondit l’officier. Je déclare que vous êtes un brave champion, quoique j’ignore qui vous êtes, et si ceux de vos pairs que vous amènerez à notre rendez-vous auront qualité pour prendre le titre de parrains, et ne devront pas se borner au nom modeste d’assistants.

Ils se serrèrent la main; la porte de fer se referma, et le lieutenant retourna, en fredonnant un air de Lulli, admirer ses bottes polonaises et le roman français.

Ordener, resté seul sur le seuil, quitta ses vêtements, qu’il enveloppa de son manteau et attacha sur sa tête avec le ceinturon de son sabre; puis, mettant en pratique les principes d’indépendance de Schumacker, il s’élança dans l’eau froide et calme du golfe, et commença à nager au milieu de l’obscurité, vers le rivage, en se dirigeant du côté du Spladgest, destination où il était toujours à peu près sûr d’arriver, mort ou vif.

Les fatigues de la journée l’avaient épuisé; aussi n’aborda-t-il que très péniblement. Il se rhabilla à la hâte, et marcha vers le Spladgest qui se dessinait dans la place du port comme une masse noire; car depuis quelque temps la lune s’était entièrement voilée.

En approchant de cet édifice, il entendit comme un bruit de voix; une lumière faible sortait par l’ouverture supérieure. Étonné, il frappa violemment à la porte carrée; le bruit cessa, la lueur disparut. Il frappa de nouveau; la lumière en reparaissant lui laissa voir quelque chose de noir sortir par l’orifice supérieur et se blottir sur le toit plat du bâtiment. Ordener frappa une troisième fois avec le pommeau de son sabre, et cria: — Ouvrez, de par sa majesté le roi! ouvrez, de par sa sérénité le vice-roi!

La porte s’ouvrit enfin lentement, et Ordener se trouva face à face avec la longue figure pâle et maigre de Spiagudry, qui, les habits en désordre, l’oeil hagard, les cheveux hérissés, les mains ensanglantées, portait une lampe sépulcrale, dont la flamme tremblait encore moins visiblement que son grand corps.

VI

PIRRO

Jamais!

ANGELO.

Quoi! je crois que tu veux faire l’homme de bien. Misérable! si tu dis un seul mot…

PIRRO.

Mais, Angelo, je t’en conjure, pour l’amour de
Dieu…

ANGELO.

Laisse faire ce que tu ne peux empêcher.

PIRRO.

Ah! quand le diable vous tient par un cheveu, il faut lui abandonner toute la tête. Malheureux que je suis!

(*Émilia Galotti.*)

Une heure environ après que le jeune voyageur à la plume noire était sorti du Spladgest, la nuit étant tout à fait tombée et la foule entièrement écoulée, Oglypiglap avait fermé la porte extérieure de l’édifice funèbre, tandis que son maître Spiagudry arrosait pour la dernière fois les corps qui y étaient déposés. Puis tous deux s’étaient retirés dans leur très peu somptueux appartement, et tandis qu’Oglypiglap dormait sur son petit grabat, comme l’un des cadavres confiés à sa garde, le vénérable Spiagudry, assis devant une table de pierre couverte de vieux livres, de plantes desséchées et d’ossements décharnés, s’était plongé dans les graves études qui, bien que réellement fort innocentes, n’avaient pas peu contribué à lui donner parmi le peuple une réputation de sorcellerie et de diablerie, fâcheux apanage de la science à cette époque.

Il y avait plusieurs heures qu’il était absorbé dans ses méditations; et, prêt enfin à quitter ses livres pour son lit, il s’était arrêté à ce passage lugubre de Thormodus Torfoeus:

«Quand un homme allume sa lampe, la mort est chez lui avant qu’elle soit éteinte…»

— N’en déplaise au savant docteur, se dit-il à demi-voix, il n’en sera point ainsi chez moi ce soir. Et il prit sa lampe pour la souffler.

— Spiagudry! cria une voix qui sortait de la salle des cadavres.

Le vieux concierge trembla de tous ses membres. Ce n'est pas qu'il crût, comme tout autre peut-être à sa place, que les tristes hôtes du Spladgest s'insurgeaient contre leur gardien. Il était assez savant pour ne pas éprouver de ces terreurs imaginaires; et la sienne n'était si réelle que parce qu'il connaissait trop bien la voix qui l'appelait.

— Spiagudry! répéta violemment la voix, faudra-t-il, pour te faire entendre, que j'aille t'arracher les oreilles?

— Que saint Hospice ait pitié, non de mon âme, mais de mon corps! dit l'effrayé vieillard; et, d'un pas que la peur pressait et ralentissait à la fois, il se dirigea vers la seconde porte latérale, qu'il ouvrit. Nos lecteurs n'ont pas oublié que cette porte communiquait à la salle des morts.

La lampe qu'il portait éclaira alors un tableau bizarrement hideux. D'un côté, le corps maigre, long et légèrement voûté de Spiagudry; de l'autre, un homme petit, épais et trapu, vêtu de la tête aux pieds de peaux de toutes sortes d'animaux encore teintes, d'un sang desséché, et debout au pied du cadavre de Gill Stadt, qui, avec ceux de la jeune fille et du capitaine, occupait le fond de la scène. Ces trois muets témoins, ensevelis dans une sorte de pénombre, étaient les seuls qui pussent'voir, sans fuir d'épouvanté, les deux vivants dont l'entretien commençait.

Les traits du petit homme, que la lumière faisait vivement ressortir, avaient quelque chose d'extraordinairement sauvage. Sa barbe était rousse et touffue, et son front, caché sous un bonnet de peau d'élan, paraissait hérissé de cheveux de môme couleur; sa bouche était large, ses lèvres épaisses, ses dents blanches, aiguës et séparées; son nez, recourbé comme le bec de l'aigle; et son oeil gris bleu, extrêmement mobile, lançait sur Spiagudry un regard oblique, où la férocité du tigre n'était tempérée que par la malice du singe. Ce personnage singulier était armé d'un large sabre, d'un poignard sans fourreau, et d'une hache à tranchants de pierre, sur le long manche de laquelle il était appuyé; ses mains étaient couvertes de gros gants de peau de renard bleu;

— Ce vieux spectre m'a fait attendre bien longtemps, dit-il, se parlant à lui-même; et il poussa une espèce de rugissement comme une bête des bois.

Spiagudry aurait certainement pâli d'effroi, s'il eût pu pâlir.

— Sais-tu bien, poursuivit le petit homme en s'adressant à lui directement, que je viens des grèves d'Urchtal? Avais-tu donc envie, en me retardant, d'échanger ta couche de paille contre une de ces couches de pierre?

Le tremblement de Spiagudry redoubla; les deux seules dents qui lui restaient s'entre-choquèrent avec violence.

— Pardonnez, maître, dit-il en courbant l'arc de son grand corps jusqu'au niveau du petit homme, je dormais d'un profond sommeil.

— Veux-tu que je te fasse connaître un sommeil plus profond encore?

Spiagudry fit une grimace de terreur, qui seule pouvait être plus plaisante que ses grimaces de gaieté.

— Eh bien! qu'est-ce? continua le petit homme. Qu'as-tu? Est-ce que ma présence ne t'est pas agréable?

— Oh! mon maître et seigneur, répondit le vieux concierge, il n'est certainement pas pour moi 'de bon heur plus grand que la vue de votre excellence.

Et l'effort qu'il faisait pour donner à sa physionomie; effrayée une expression riante eût déridé tout autre que des morts.

— Vieux renard sans queue, mon excellence t'ordonne de me remettre les vêtements de Gill Stadt. En prononçant ce nom, le visage farouche et railleur du petit homme devint sombre et triste.

— Oh! maître, pardonnez, je ne les ai plus, dit Spiagudry; votre grâce sait que nous sommes obligés de livrer au fisc royal les dépouilles des ouvriers des mines, dont le roi hérite en sa qualité de leur tuteur né.

Le petit homme se tourna vers le cadavre, croisa les bras, et dit d'une voix sourde: — Il a raison. Ces misérables mineurs sont comme l'eider [Footnote: Oiseau qui donne l'edredon. Les paysana norvégiens lui construisent des nids, ou ils le suprennent et le plumet.]; on lui'fait son nid, on lui prend son duvet.

Puis soulevant le cadavre entre ses bras et l'étreignant fortement, il se mit à pousser des cris sauvages d'amour et de douleur, pareils aux grondements d'un ours qui caresse son petit. À ces sons inarticulés, se mêlaient, par intervalles, quelques mots d'un jargon étrange que Spiagudry ne comprenait pas.

11 laissa retomber le cadavre sur la pierre, et se tourna vers le gardien.

— Sais-tu, sorcier maudit, le nom du soldat né sous un mauvais astre qhi a eu le malheur d'être préféré à Gill par cette fille?

Et il poussa du pied les restes froids de Guth Stersen.

Spiagudry fit un signe négatif.

— Eh bien! par la hache d'Ingolphe, le chef de ma race, j'exterminerai tous les porteurs de cet uniforme; et il désignait les vêtements de l'officier. — Celui dont je veux la vengeance se trouvera dans le nombre. J'incendierai toute la forêt pour brûler l'arbuste vénéneux qu'elle renferme. Je l'ai juré du jour où Gill est mort; et je lui ai donné déjà un compagnon qui doit réjouir son cadavre. — O Gill! te voilà donc là sans force et sans vie, toi qui atteignais le phoque à la nage, le chamois à la course, toi qui étouffais l'ours des monts de Kolè à la lutte; te voilà immobile, toi qui parcourais le Drontheimhus depuis l'Orkel jusqu'au lac de Smiasen en un jour, toi qui gravissais les pics du Dofre-Field comme l'écureuil gravit le chêne; te voilà muet, Gill, toi qui, debout sur les sommets orageux de Kongsberg, chantais plus haut que le tonnerre. O Gill! c'est donc en vain que j'ai comblé pour toi les mines de Fa-roër; c'est en vain que j'ai incendié l'église cathédrale de Drontheim; toutes mes peines sont perdues, et je ne verrai pas se perpétuer en toi la race des enfants d'Islande, la descendance d'Ingolphe l'Exterminateur; tu n'hériteras pas de ma hache de pierre; et c'est toi au contraire qui me lègues ton crâne pour y boire désormais l'eau des mers et le sang des hommes.

À ces mots, saisissant la tête du cadavre:

— Spiagudry, dit-il, aide-moi. Et arrachant ses gants, il découvrit ses-larges mains, armées d'ongles longs, durs et retors comme ceux d'une bête fauve.

Spiagudry, qui le vit prêt à faire sauter avec son sabre le crâne du cadavre, s'écria avec un accent d'horreur qu'il ne put réprimer: — Juste Dieu! maître! un mort!

— Eh bien, répliqua traquillement le petit homme, aimes-tu mieux que cette lame s'aiguise ici sur un vivant?

— Oh! permettez-moi de supplier votre courtoisie… Comment votre excellence peut-elle profaner?… Votre grâce…. Seigneur, votre sérénité ne voudra pas….

— Finiras-tu? ai-je besoin de tous ces titres, squelette vivant, pour croire à ton profond respect pour mon sabre?

— Par saint Waldemar, par saint Usuph, au nom de saint Hospice, épargnez un mort!

— Aide-moi, et ne parle pas des saints au diable.

— Seigneur, poursuivit le suppliant Spiagudry, par votre illustre aïeul saint Ingolphe!…

— Ingolphe l’Exterminateur était un réprouvé comme moi.

— Au nom du ciel, dit le vieillard en se prosternant, c’est cette réprobation que je veux vous éviter.

L’impatience transporta le petit homme. Ses yeux gris et ternes brillèrent comme deux charbons ardents.

— Aide-moi! répéta-t-il en agitant son sabre.

Ces deux mots furent prononcés de la voix dont les prononcerait un lion, s’il parlait. Le concierge, tremblant et à demi mort, s’assit sur la pierre noire, et soutint de ses mains la tête froide et humide de Gill, tandis que le petit homme, à l’aide de son poignard et de son sabre, enlevait le crâne avec une dextérité singulière.

Quand cette opération fut terminée, il considéra quelque temps le crâne sanglant, en proférant des paroles étranges; puis il le remit à Spiagudry pour qu’il le dépouillât et le lavât, et dit en poussant une espèce de hurlement:

— Et moi, je n’aurai pas en mourant la consolation de penser qu’un héritier de l’âme d’Ingolphe boira dans mon crâne le sang des hommes et l’eau des mers.

Après une sinistre rêverie, il continua:

— L’ouragan est suivi de l’ouragan, l’avalanche entraîne l’avalanche, et moi je serai le dernier de ma race. Pourquoi Gill n’a-t-il pas haï comme moi tout ce qui porte la face humaine? Quel démon ennemi du démon d’Ingolphe l’a poussé sous ces fatales mines à la recherche d’un peu d’or?

Spiagudry, qui lui rapportait le crâne de Gill, l’interrompit.

— L’excellence a raison; l’or lui-même, dit Snorro Sturleson, s’achète souvent trop cher.

— Tu me rappelles, dit le petit homme, une commission dont il faut que je te charge; voici une boîte de fer que j’ai trouvée sur cet officier, dont tu n’as pas, comme tu le vois, toutes les dépouilles; elle est si solidement fermée, qu’elle doit renfermer de l’or, seule chose précieuse aux yeux des hommes; tu la remettras à la veuve Stadt, au hameau de Thoctree, pour lui payer son fils.

Il tira alors de son havresac de peau de renne un très petit coffre de fer. Spiagudry le reçut, et s’inclina.

— Remplis fidèlement mon ordre, dit le petit homme en lui lançant un regard perçant; songe que rien n’empêche deux démons de se revoir; je te crois encore plus lâche qu’avare, et tu me réponds de ce coffre.

— Oh! maître, sur mon âme.

— Non pas! sur tes os et sur ta chair.

En ce moment, la porte extérieure du Spladgest retentit d’un coup violent. Le petit homme s’étonna, Spiagudry chancela, et couvrit sa lampe de sa main.

— Qu’est-ce? s’écria le petit homme en grondant.

— Et toi, vieux misérable, comment trembleras-tu donc quand tu entendras la trompette du jugement dernier?

Un second coup plus fort se fit entendre.

— C’est quelque mort pressé d’entrer, dit le petit homme.

— Non, maître, murmura Spiagudry, on n’amène point de morts passé minuit.

— Mort ou vivant, il me chasse. — Toi, Spiagudry sois fidèle et muet. Je te jure, par l’esprit d’Ingolphe et le crâne de Gill, que tu passeras dans ton auberge de cadavres tout le régiment de Munckholm en revue.

Et le petit homme, attachant le crâne de Gill à sa ceinture et remettant ses gants, s’élança avec l’agilité d’un chamois, et à l’aide des épaules de Spiagudry, par l’ouverture supérieure, où il disparut.

Un troisième coup ébranla le Spladgest, et une voix du dehors ordonna d’ouvrir aux noms du roi et du vice-roi. Alors le vieux concierge, à la fois agité par deux terreurs différentes, dont on pourrait nommer l’une de *souvenir*, et l’autre d’*espérance*, s’achemina ver la porte carrée, et l’ouvrit.

VII

Cette joie à laquelle se réduit la félicité temporelle, elle s’est fatiguée à la poursuivre par des sentiers âpres et douloureux, sans avoir jamais pu l’atteindre.

(*Confessions de saint Augustin.*)

Rentré dans son cabinet après avoir quitté Poël, le gouverneur de Drontheim s’enfonça dans un large fauteuil, et ordonna, pour se distraire, à l’un de ses secrétaires de lui rendre compte des placets présentés au gouvernement.

Celui-ci, après s’être incliné, commença:

— «1° Le révérend docteur Anglyvius demande qu’il soit pourvu au remplacement du révérend docteur Foxtipp, directeur de la bibliothèque épiscopale, pour cause d’incapacité. L’exposant ignore qui pourra remplacer ledit docteur incapable; il fait seulement savoir que lui, docteur Anglyvius, a longtemps exercé les fonctions de bibliothéc….»

— Renvoyez ce drôle à l’évéque, interrompit le général.

— «2° Athanase Munder, prêtre, ministre des prisons, demande la grâce de douze condamnés pénitents, à l’occasion des glorieuses noces de sa courtoisie Ordener Guldenlew, baron de Thorvick, chevalier de Dannebrog, fils du vice-roi, avec noble dame Ulrique d’Ahlefeld, fille de sa grâce le comte grand-chancelier des deux royaumes.»

— Ajournez, dit le général. Je plains les condamnés.

— «3° Fauste-Prudens Destrombidès, sujet norvégien, poëte latin, demande à faire l’épithalame desdits nobles époux.»

— Ah! ah! le brave homme doit être vieux, car c’est le même qui en 1674 avait préparé un épithalame pour le mariage projeté entre Schumacker, alors comte de Griffenfeld, et la princesse Louise-Charlotte de Holstein-Augustenbourg, mariage qui n’eut pas lieu. — Je crains, ajouta le gouverneur entre ses dents, que Fauste-Prudens soit le poëte des mariages rompus.

— Ajournez la demande et poursuivez. On s’informera, à l’occasion dudit poëte, s’il n’y aurait pas un lit vacant à l’hôpital de Drontheim.

— «4° Les mineurs de Guldbranshal, des îles Faroër, du Sund-Moër, de Hubfallo, de Roeraas et de Kongsberg, demandent à être affranchis des charges de la tutelle royale.»

— Ces mineurs sont remuants. On dit même qu'ils commencent déjà à murmurer du long silence gardé sur leur requête. Qu'elle soit réservée pour un mûr examen.

— «5° Braal, pêcheur, déclare, en vertu de l'Odelsrecht [Footnote: *Odelsrecht*, loi singulière qui établissait parmi les paysans norvégiens dos sortes de *majorats*. Tout homme qui était contraint de se défaire de son patrimoine pouvait empêcher l'acquéreur de l'aliéner, en déclarant tous les dix ans à l'autorité qu'il était dans l'intention de le racheter.], qu'il persévère dans l'intention de racheter son patrimoine.

— «6° Les syndics de Noes, Loevig, Indal, Skongen, Stod, Sparbo et autres bourgs et villages du Drontheimhus septentrional, demandent que la tête du brigand, assassin et incendiaire Han, natif, dit-on, de Klipstadur en Islande, soit mise à prix. — S'oppose à la requête Nychol Orugix, bourreau du Drontheimhus, qui prétend que Han est sa propriété. — Appuie la requête Benignus Spiagudry, gardien du Spladgest, auquel doit revenir le cadavre.»

— Ce bandit est bien dangereux, dit le général, surtout lorsqu'on craint des troubles parmi les mineurs. Qu'on fasse proclamer sa tête au prix de mille écus royaux.

— «7° Benignus Spiagudry, médecin, antiquaire, sculpteur, minéralogiste, naturaliste, botaniste, légiste, chimiste, mécanicien, physicien, astronome, théologien, grammairien…»

— Eh mais, interrompit le général, est-ce que ce n'est pas le même Spiagudry que le gardien du Spladgest?

— Si vraiment, votre excellence, répondit le secrétaire — «… concierge, pour sa majesté, de l'établissement dit *Spladgest*, dans la royale ville de Drontheim, expose — que c'est lui, Benignus Spiagudry, qui a découvert que les étoiles appelées fixes n'étaient pas éclairées par l'astre appelé soleil; *item*, que le vrai nom d'Odin est *Frigge*, fils de *Fridulph*; *item*, que le lombric marin se nourrit de sable; *item*, que le bruit de la population éloigne les poissons des côtes de Norvège, en sorte que les moyens de subsistance diminuent en proportion de l'accroissement du peuple; *item*, que le golfe nommé Otte-Sund s'appelait autrefois *Limfiord* et n'a pris le nom d'*Otte-Sund* qu'après qu'Othon le Roux y eut jeté sa lance; *item*, expose que c'est par ses conseils et sous sa direction qu'on a fait d'une vieille statue de Freya la statue de la Justice qui orne la grande place de Drontheim; et qu’on a converti en diable, représentant le crime, le lion qui se trouvait sous les pieds de l’idole; *item*…

— Ah! faites-nous grâce de ses éminents services. Voyons, que demande-t-il?»

Le secrétaire tourna plusieurs feuillets, et poursuivit:

«…. Le très humble exposant croit pouvoir, en récompense de tant de travaux utiles aux sciences et aux belles-lettres, supplier son excellence d’augmenter la taxe de chaque cadavre mâle et femelle de dix ascalins, ce qui ne peut qu’être agréable aux morts en leur prouvant le cas qu’on fait de leurs personnes.»

Ici la porte du cabinet s’ouvrit, et l’huissier annonça à haute voix *la noble dame comtesse d’Ahlefeld*. En même temps, une grande dame, portant sur sa tête une petite couronne de comtesse, richement vêtue d’une robe de satin écarlate, bordée d’hermine et de franges d’or, entra, et, acceptant la main que le général lui offrait, vint s’asseoir près de son fauteuil.

La comtesse pouvait avoir cinquante ans. L’âge n’avait, en quelque sorte, rien eu à ajouter aux rides dont les soucis de l’orgueil et de l’ambition avaient depuis si longtemps creusé son visage. Elle attacha sur le vieux gouverneur son regard hautain et son sourire faux.

— Eh bien, seigneur général, votre élève se fait attendre. Il devait être ici avant le coucher du soleil.

— Il y serait, dame comtesse, s’il n’était, en arrivant, allé à Munckholm.

— Comment, à Munckholm! j’espère que ce n’est pas Schumacker qu’il cherche?

— Mais cela se pourrait.

— La première visite du baron de Thorvick aura été pour Schumacker!

— Pourquoi non, comtesse? Schumacker est malheureux.

— Comment, général! le fils du vice-roi est lié avec ce prisonnier d’état!

— Frédéric Guldenlew, en me chargeant de son fils, me pria, noble dame, de l’élever comme j’eusse élevé le mien. J’ai pensé que la connaissance de Schumacker serait utile à Ordener, qui est destiné à être aussi puissant un jour. J’ai en conséquence, avec l’autorisation du vice-roi, demandé à mon frère Grummond de Knud un droit d’entrée pour toutes les prisons, que j’ai donné à Ordener. — Il en use.

— Et depuis quand, noble général, le baron Ordener a-t-il fait cette utile connaissance?

— Depuis un peu plus d’un an, dame comtesse; il paraît que la société de Schumacker lui plut, car elle le fixa assez longtemps à Drontheim; et ce n’est qu’à regret et sur mon invitation expresse qu’il en partit l’année dernière pour visiter la Norvège.

— Et Schumacker sait-il que son consolateur est le fils d’un de ses plus grands ennemis?

— Il sait que c’est un ami, et cela lui suffit, comme à nous.

— Mais vous, seigneur général, dit la comtesse avec un coup d’oeil pénétrant, saviez-vous en tolérant, et même en formant cette liaison, que Schumacker avait une fille?

— Je le savais, noble comtesse.

— Et cette circonstance vous a semblé indifférente pour votre élève?

— L’élève de Levin de Knud, le fils de Frédéric Guldenlew est un homme loyal. Ordener connaît la barrière qui le séparé de la fille de Schumacker; il est incapable de séduire, sans but légitime, une fille, et surtout la fille d’un homme malheureux.

La noble comtesse d’Ahlefeld rougit et pâlit; elle tourna la tête, cherchant à éviter le regard calme du vieillard comme celui d’un accusateur.

— Enfin, balbutia-t-elle, cette liaison, général, me semble, souffrez que je le dise, singulière et imprudente. On dit que les mineurs et les peuplades du Nord menacent de se révolter, et que le nom de Schumacker est compromis dans cette affaire.

— Noble dame, vous m’étonnez! s’écria le gouverneur. Schumacker a jusqu’ici supporté tranquillement son malheur. Ce bruit est sans doute peu fondé.

La porte s’ouvrit en ce moment, et l’huissier annonça qu’un messager de sa grâce le grand-chancelier demandait à parler à la noble comtesse.

La comtesse se leva précipitamment, salua le gouverneur, et, tandis qu’il continuait l’examen des placets, se rendit en toute hâte à ses appartements, situés dans une aile du palais, en ordonnant qu’on y envoyât le messager.

Elle était depuis quelques moments assise sur un riche sopha, au milieu de ses femmes, quand le messager, entra. La comtesse en l’apercevant fit un mouvement de répugnance qu’elle cacha soudain sous un sourire bienveillant. L’extérieur du messager ne semblait pourtant pas repoussant au premier abord; c’était un homme plutôt petit que grand, et dont l’embonpoint annonçait tout autre chose qu’un messager. Cependant, quand on l’examinait, son visage paraissait ouvert jusqu’à l’impudence, et la gaieté de son regard avait quelque chose de diabolique et de sinistre. Il s’inclina profondément devant la comtesse, et lui présenta un paquet, scellé avec des fils de soie.

— Noble dame, dit-il, daignez me permettre d’oser déposer à vos pieds un précieux message de sa grâce, votre illustre époux, mon vénéré maître.

— Est-ce qu’il ne vient pas lui-même? et comment vous prend-il pour messager? demanda la comtesse.

— Des soins importants diffèrent l’arrivée de sa grâce, cette lettre est pour vous en informer, madame la comtesse; pour moi, je dois, d’après l’ordre de mon noble maître, jouir de l’insigne honneur d’un entretien particulier avec vous.

La comtesse pâlit; elle s’écria d’une voix tremblante:

— Moi! un entretien avec vous, Musdoemon?

— Si cela affligeait en rien la noble dame, son indigne serviteur serait au désespoir.

— M’affliger! non sans doute, reprit la comtesse s’efforçant de sourire; mais cet entretien est-il si nécessaire?

Le messager s’inclina jusqu’à terre.

— Absolument nécessaire! la lettre que l’illustre comtesse a daigné recevoir de mes mains doit en contenir l’injonction formelle.

C’était une chose singulière que de voir la fière comtesse d’Ahlefeld trembler et pâlir devant un serviteur qui lui rendait de si profonds respects. Elle ouvrit lentement le paquet et en lut le contenu. Après l’avoir relu:

— Allons, dit-elle à ses femmes d’une voix faible, qu’on nous laisse seuls.

— Daigne la noble dame, dit le messager fléchissant le genou, me pardonner la liberté que j’ose prendre et la peine que je parais lui causer.

— Croyez au contraire, repartit la comtesse avec un sourire forcé, que j’ai beaucoup de plaisir à vous voir.

Les femmes se retirèrent.

— Elphège, tu as donc oublié qu’il fut un temps où nos tête-à-tête ne te répugnaient pas?

C’était le messager qui parlait à la noble comtesse, et ces paroles étaient accompagnées d’un rire pareil à celui du diable lorsqu’au moment où le pacte expire il saisit l’âme qui s’est donnée à lui.

La puissante dame baissa sa tête humiliée.

— Que ne l’ai-je en effet oublié! murmura-t-elle.

— Pauvre folle! comment peux-tu rougir de choses que nul oeil humain n’a vues?

— Ce que les hommes ne voient pas, Dieu le voit.

— Dieu, faible femme! tu n’es pas digne d’avoir trompé ton mari, car il est moins crédule que toi.

— Vous insultez peu généreusement à mes remords, Musdoemon.

— Eh bien! si tu en as, Elphège, pourquoi leur insultes-tu toi-même chaque jour par des crimes nouveaux?

La comtesse d’Ahlefeld cacha sa tête dans ses mains; le messager poursuivit:

— Elphège, il faut choisir: ou le remords et plus de crimes, ou le crime et plus de remords. Fais comme moi, choisis le second parti, c’est le meilleur, le plus gai du moins.

— Puissiez-vous, dit la comtesse à voix basse, ne pas retrouver ces paroles dans l’éternité!

— Allons, ma chère, quittons la plaisanterie. Alors Musdoemon s’asseyant près de la comtesse, et passant ses bras autour de son cou:

— Elphège, dit-il, tâche de rester, par l’esprit du moins, ce que tu étais il y a vingt ans.

L’infortunée comtesse, esclave de son complice, tâcha de répondre à sa repoussante caresse. Il y avait dans cet embrassement adultère de deux êtres qui se méprisaient et s’exécraient mutuellement quelque chose de trop révoltant, même pour ces âmes dégradées. Les caresses illégitimes qui avaient fait leur joie, et que je ne sais quelle horrible convenance les forçait de se prodiguer encore, faisaient maintenant leur torture. Étrange et juste changement des affections coupables! leur crime était devenu leur supplice.

La comtesse, pour abréger ce tourment adultère, demanda enfin à son odieux amant, en s’arrachant de ses bras, de quel message verbal son époux l’avait chargé.

— D’Ahlefeld, dit Musdoemon, au moment de voir son pouvoir s’affermir par le mariage d’Ordener Guldenlew avec notre fille…

— Notre fille! s’écria la hautaine comtesse, et son regard fixé sur

Musdoemon reprit une expression d’orgueil et de dédain.

— Eh bien, dit froidement le messager, je crois qu’Ulrique peut m’appartenir au moins autant qu’à lui. Je disais donc que ce mariage ne satisfaisait pas entièrement ton mari, si Schumacker n’était en même temps tout à fait renversé. Du fond de sa prison, ce vieux favori est encore presque aussi redoutable que dans son palais. Il a à la cour des amis obscurs, mais puissants, peut-être parce qu’ils sont obscurs; et le roi, apprenant il y a un mois que les négociations du grand-chancelier avec le duc de Holstein-Ploen ne marchaient pas, s’est écrié avec impatience: — Griffenfeld à lui seul en savait plus qu’eux tous. — Un intrigant nommé Dispolsen, venu de Munckholm à Copenhague, a obtenu de lui plusieurs audiences secrètes, après lesquelles le roi a fait demander à la chancellerie, où ils sont déposés, les titres de noblesse et de propriété de Schumacker. On ignore à quoi Schumacker aspire; mais ne désirerait-il que la liberté, pour un prisonnier d’état c’est désirer le pouvoir. — Il faut donc qu’il meure, et qu’il meure judiciairement; c’est à lui forger un crime que nous travaillons. — Ton mari, Elphège, sous prétexte d’inspecter *incognito* provinces du Nord, va s’assurer par lui-même du résultat qu’ont eu nos menées parmi les mineurs, dont nous voulons provoquer, au nom de Schumacker, une insurrection qu’il sera facile ensuite d’étouffer. Ce qui nous inquiète, c’est la perte de plusieurs papiers importants relatifs à ce plan, et que nous avons tout lieu de croire au pouvoir de Dispolsen. Sachant donc qu’il était reparti de Copenhague pour Munckholm, rapportant à Schumacker ses parchemins, ses diplômes, et peut-être ces documents qui peuvent nous perdre ou au moins nous compromettre, nous avons aposté dans les gorges de Kole quelques fidèles, chargés de se défaire de lui, après l’avoir dépouillé de ses papiers. Mais si, comme on l’assure, Dispolsen est venu de Berghen par mer, nos peines seront perdues de ce côté-là. — Pourtant j’ai recueilli en arrivant je ne sais quels bruits d’un assassinat d’un capitaine nommé Dispolsen. — Nous verrons. — Nous sommes en attendant à la recherche d’un brigand fameux, Han, dit d’Islande, que nous voudrions mettre à la tête de la révolte des mines. Et toi, ma chère, quelles nouvelles d’ici me donneras-tu? Le joli oiseau de Munckholm a-t-il été pris dans sa cage? La fille du vieux ministre a-t-elle enfin été la proie de notre *falcofulvus*, de notre fils Frédéric?

La comtesse, retrouvant sa fierté, se récria encore:

— Notre fils!

— Ma foi, quel âge peut-il avoir? Vingt-quatre ans. Il y en a vingt-six que nous nous connaissons, Elphège.

— Dieu le sait, s’écria la comtesse, mon Frédéric est l’héritier légitime du grand-chancelier.

— Si Dieu le sait, répondit le messager en riant, le diable peut l’ignorer. Au reste, ton Frédéric n’est qu’un étourneau indigne de moi, et ce n’est pas la peine de nous quereller pour si peu de chose. Il n’est bon qu’à séduire une fille. Y est-il parvenu au moins?

— Pas encore, que je sache.

— Mais, Elphège, tâche donc de jouer un rôle moins passif dans nos affaires. Celui du comte et le mien sont, tu le vois, assez actifs. Je retourne dès demain vers ton mari. Pour toi, ne te borne pas, de grâce, à prier pour nos péchés, comme la madone que les Italiens invoquent en assassinant. — Il faut aussi qu’Ahlefeld songe à me récompenser un peu plus magnifiquement qu’il ne l’a fait jusqu’ici. Ma fortune est liée à la vôtre; mais je me lasse d’être le serviteur de l’époux, quand je suis l’amant de la femme, et de n’être que le gouverneur, le précepteur, le pédagogue, quand je suis presque le père.

En ce moment minuit sonna, et une des femmes entra, rappelant à la comtesse que, d’après la règle du palais, toutes les lumières devaient être éteintes à cette heure. La comtesse, heureuse de terminer un entretien pénible, rappela ses suivantes.

— Me permette la gracieuse comtesse, dit Musd?mon en se retirant, de conserver l’espérance de la revoir demain, et de déposer à ses pieds l’hommage de mon profond respect.

VIII

Il faut absolument que tu l'aies massacré; tu as le regard d'un meurtrier, un air sinistre et farouche.

SHAKESPEARE, *le Songe d'été*.

— En honneur, vieillard, dit Ordener à Spiagudry, je commençais à croire que c'étaient les cadavres logés dans cet édifice qui étaient chargés d'en ouvrir la porte.

— Pardonnez, seigneur, répondit le concierge ayant encore dans l'oreille les noms du roi et du vice-roi et répétant son excuse banale, je… je dormais profondément.

— En ce cas, il paraît que vos morts ne dorment pas, car c'étaient eux sans doute que j'entendais tout à l'heure causer distinctement.

Spiagudry se troubla.

— Vous avez, seigneur étranger, vous avez entendu?….

— Eh! mon Dieu, oui; mais qu'importe? je ne suis pas venu ici pour m'occuper de vos affaires, mais pour vous occuper des miennes. Entrons.

Spiagudry ne se souciait guère d'introduire le nouveau venu près du corps de Gill; mais ces dernières paroles le rassurèrent un peu, et d'ailleurs, pouvait-il résister?

Il laissa donc passer le jeune homme, et, refermant la porte:

— Benignus Spiagudry, dit-il, est à votre service pour tout ce qui concerne les sciences humaines. Cependant, si, comme votre visite nocturne semble l'annoncer, vous croyez parler à un sorcier, vous avez tort; *ne famam credas*; je ne suis qu'un savant. — Entrons, seigneur étranger, dans mon laboratoire.

— Non pas, dit Ordener, c'est à ces cadavres qu'il faut nous arrêter.

— À ces cadavres! s'écria Spiagudry, recommençant à trembler. Mais, seigneur, vous ne pouvez les voir.

— Comment, je ne puis voir des corps qui ne sont déposés là que pour être vus! Je vous répète que j'ai des renseignements à vous demander sur l'un d'eux; votre devoir est de me les donner. Obéissez de gré, vieillard, ou vous obéirez de force.

Spiagudry avait un profond respect pour les sabres, et il en voyait briller un au côté d'Ordener.

— *Nihil non arrogat armis*, murmura-t-il; et, fouillant dans le trousseau de ses clefs, il ouvrit la grille à hauteur d'appui, et introduisit l'étranger dans la seconde section de la salle.

— Montrez-moi les vêtements du capitaine, dit celui-ci.

En ce moment, un rayon de la lampe tomba sur la tête sanglante de Gill Stadt.

— Juste Dieu! s'écria Ordener, quelle abominable profanation!

— Grand saint Hospice, ayez pitié de moi! dit à voix basse le vieux concierge.

— Vieillard, poursuivit Ordener d'une voix menaçante, êtes-vous si loin de la tombe, pour violer le respect qu'on lui voue, et ne craignez-vous pas, malheureux, que les vivants ne vous apprennent ce que l'on doit aux morts?

— Oh! s'écria le pauvre concierge, grâce, ce n'est pas moi! Si vous saviez!…. Et il s'arrêta, car il se rappela ces mots du petit homme: Sois fidèle et muet.

— Avez-vous vu quelqu'un sortir par cette ouverture? demanda-t-il d'une voix éteinte.

— Oui. Est-ce ton complice?

— Non, c'est le coupable, le seul coupable! j'en, jure par toutes les réprobations infernales, par toutes les bénédictions célestes, par ce corps même si indignement profané! — Et il s'était prosterné sur la pierre devant Ordener.

Tout hideux qu'était Spiagudry, il y avait cependant dans son désespoir, dans ses protestations, un accent de vérité qui persuada le jeune homme.

— Vieillard, dit-il, relève-toi, et si tu n'as point outragé la mort, n'avilis point la vieillesse.

Le concierge se releva. Ordener continua:

— Quel est le coupable?

— Oh! silence, noble jeune seigneur, vous ignorez de qui vous parlez. Silence!

Et Spiagudry se répétait intérieurement: Sois fidèle et muet.

Ordener reprit froidement:

— Quel est le coupable? Je veux le connaître.

— Au nom du ciel, seigneur! ne parlez pas ainsi, taisez-vous, de peur….

— La peur ne me fera point taire et te fera parler.

— Excusez-moi, pardon, mon jeune maître! dit le désolé Spiagudry, je ne puis.

— Tu le peux, car je le veux. Tu nommeras le profanateur!

Spiagudry chercha encore à tergiverser.

— Eh bien! noble maître, le profanateur de ce cadavre est l’assassin de cet officier.

— Cet officier est donc mort assassiné? demanda Ordener, ramené par cette transition au but de sa recherche.

— Oui, sans doute, seigneur.

— Et par qui? par qui?

— Au nom de la sainte que votre mère invoquait en vous donnant le jour, ne cherchez pas à savoir ce nom, mon jeune maître, ne me forcez pas à le révéler.

— Si l’intérêt que j’ai à le savoir avait besoin d’être accru, vous y ajouteriez, vieillard, l’intérêt de la curiosité. Je vous commande de me nommer ce meurtrier.

— Eh bien, dit Spiagudry, remarquez ces profondes déchirures produites par des ongles longs et tranchants sur le corps de ce malheureux. Elles vous nomment l’assassin.

Et le vieillard montrait à Ordener de longues et fortes égratignures sur le cadavre nu et lavé.

— Comment? dit Ordener, est-ce quelque bête fauve?

— Non, mon jeune seigneur.

— Mais, à moins que ce ne soit le diable….

— Chut! prenez garde de trop bien deviner. N’avez-vous jamais entendu parler, poursuivit le concierge à voix basse, d’un homme ou d’un monstre à face humaine, dont les ongles sont aussi longs que ceux d’Astaroth qui nous a perdus, ou de l’Antéchrist qui nous perdra?

— Parlez plus clairement.

— Malheur! dit l’Apocalypse….

— C’est le nom de l’assassin que je vous demande.

— L’assassin… le nom?…. Seigneur, ayez pitié de moi, ayez pitié de vous.

— La seconde de ces prières détruirait la première, quand bien même des motifs graves ne me forceraient pas à t’arracher ce nom. N’abuse pas plus longtemps….

— Eh bien, vous le voulez, jeune homme, dit Spiagudry se redressant et d’une voix haute, ce meurtrier, ce profanateur est Han d’Islande.

Ce nom redoutable n’était pas ignoré d’Ordener.

— Comment! reprit-il, Han! cet exécrable bandit!

— Ne l’appelez pas bandit, car il vit toujours seul.

— Alors, misérable, comment le connaissez-vous? Quels crimes communs vous ont donc rapprochés?

— Oh! noble maître, daignez ne pas croire aux apparences. Le tronc de chêne est-il vénéneux parce que le serpent s’y abrite?

— Point de vaines paroles! un scélérat ne peut avoir d’ami qu’un complice.

— Je ne suis point son ami, et moins encore son complice; et si mes serments ne vous ont pas persuadé, seigneur, veuillez de grâce remarquer que cette profanation détestable m’expose, dans vingt-quatre heures, quand on viendra relever le corps de Gill Stadt, au supplice des sacrilèges, et me jette ainsi dans la plus effroyable inquiétude où innocent se soit jamais trouvé.

Ces considérations d’intérêt personnel firent encore plus sur Ordener que la voix suppliante du pauvre gardien, auquel elles avaient probablement inspiré en bonne partie sa pathétique, quoique inutile résistance au sacrilège du petit homme. Ordener parut méditer un moment, pendant lequel Spiagudry cherchait à lire sur son visage si ce repos déciderait la paix ou ramènerait la tempête.

Enfin il dit d’un ton sévère, mais calme:

— Vieillard, soyez véridique. Ayez-vous trouvé des papiers sur cet officier?

— Aucun, sur mon honneur.

— Savez-vous si Han d’Islande en a trouvé?

— Je vous jure par saint Hospice que je l’ignore.

— Vous l’ignorez? savez-vous où se cache ce Han d’Islande?

— Il ne se cache jamais, il erre toujours.

— Soit; mais enfin quelles sont ses retraites?

— Ce païen, répondit le vieillard à voix basse, a autant de retraites que l’île de Hitteren a de récifs, que l’étoile Sirius a de rayons.

— Je vous engage de nouveau, interrompit Ordener, à parler en termes positifs. Je vais vous donner l’exemple; écoutez. Vous êtes mystérieusement lié avec un brigand dont vous soutenez ne pas être le complice. Si vous le connaissez, vous devez savoir où il s’est maintenant retiré. — Ne m’interrompez pas. — Si vous n’êtes pas son complice, vous n’hésiterez pas à me conduire à sa recherche.

Spiagudry ne put contenir son effroi.

— Vous, noble seigneur, vous, grand Dieu! plein de jeunesse et de vie, provoquer, rechercher ce démoniaque! Quand Ingiald aux quatre bras combattit le géant Nyctolm, du moins avait-il quatre bras.

— Eh bien, dit Ordener en souriant, s'il faut quatre bras, ne serez-vous pas mon guide?

— Moi! votre guide! Comment pouvez-vous vous railler ainsi d'un pauvre vieillard qui a déjà presque besoin d'un guide lui-même?

— Écoutez, reprit Ordener, n'essayez pas vous-même de vous jouer de moi. Si cette profanation, dont je veux bien vous croire innocent, vous expose au châtiment des sacrilèges, vous ne pouvez rester ici. Il vous faut donc fuir. Je vous offre ma sauvegarde, mais à condition que vous me conduirez à la retraite du brigand. Soyez mon guide, je serai votre protecteur. Je dis plus; si j'atteins Han d'Islande, je l'amènerai ici mort ou vif. Vous pourrez prouver votre innocence, et je vous promets de vous faire rentrer dans votre emploi. Voilà, en attendant, plus d'écus royaux qu'il ne vous en rapporte par an.

Ordener, en gardant la bourse pour la fin, avait observé dans ses arguments la gradation voulue par les saines lois de la logique. Cependant ils étaient par eux-mêmes assez forts pour faire rêver Spiagudry. Il commença par prendre l'argent.

— Noble maître, vous avez raison, dit-il ensuite, et son?il, jusqu'alors indécis, se releva sur Ordener. Si je vous suis, je m'expose quelque jour à la vengeance du formidable Han. Si je reste, je tombe demain entre les mains du bourreau Orugix. — Quel est donc déjà le supplice des sacrilèges? N'importe. — Dans les deux cas, ma pauvre vie est en péril; mais comme, d'après la juste observation de S?mond-Sigfusson, autrement dit le Sage, *inter duo pericùla?qualia, minus imminens eligendum est,* je vous suis. — Oui, seigneur, je serai votre guide. Veuillez ne pas oublier toutefois que j'ai fait tout ce que j'ai pu pour vous détourner de votre aventureux dessein.

— Soit, dit Ordener. Vous serez donc mon guide. Vieillard, ajouta-t-il avec un regard expressif, je compte sur votre loyauté.

— Ah! maître, répondit le concierge, la foi de Spiagudry est aussi pure que l'or que vous venez de me donner si gracieusement.

— Qu'il n'en soit pas autrement, car je vous prouverais que le fer que je porte n'est pas de moins bon aloi que mon or. — Où pensez-vous que soit Han d'Islande?

— Mais, comme le midi du Drontheimhus est plein de troupes qu’on y a envoyées sur je ne sais quelle réquisition du grand-chancelier, Han doit s’être dirigé vers la grotte de Walderlong ou vers le lac de Smiasen. Notre route est par Skongen.

— Quand pouvez-vous me suivre?

— Après la journée qui commence, quand la nuit sera close et le Spladgest fermé, votre pauvre serviteur commencera près de vous les fonctions de guide, pour lesquelles il privera les morts de ses soins. Nous chercherons un moyen de cacher pendant tout le jour, aux yeux du peuple, la mutilation du mineur.

— Où vous trouverai-je ce soir?

— Sur la grande place de Drontheim, s’il convient au maitre, près la statue de la Justice, qui fut jadis Freya, et qui me protégera sans doute de son ombre en reconnaissance du beau diable que j’ai fait sculpter sous ses pieds.

Spiagudry allait peut-être répéter verbalement à Ordener les considérants de son placet au gouverneur, si celui-ci ne l’eût interrompu.

— Il suffit, vieillard, le traité est conclu.

— Conclu, répéta le concierge.

Il achevait ce mot, lorsqu’une espèce de grondement se fit entendre comme au-dessus d’eux. Le concierge tressaillit.

— Qu’est cela? dit-il.

— N’y a-t-il ici, dit Ordener également surpris, d’autre habitant vivant que vous?

— Vous me rappelez mon vicaire Oglypiglap, reprit Spiagudry rassuré par cette idée; c’est lui sans doute qui dort bruyamment. Un lapon qui dort, selon l’évêque Arngrim, fait autant de bruit qu’une femme qui veille.

En parlant ainsi, ils s’étaient rapprochés de la porte du Spladgest.

Spiagudry l’ouvrit doucement.

— Adieu, mon jeune seigneur, dit-il à Ordener, le ciel vous mette en joie. À ce soir. Si votre chemin vous conduit devant la croix de saint Hospice, daignez prier pour votre misérable serviteur Benignus Spiagudry.

Alors refermant en hâte la porte, autant de crainte d’être aperçu que pour garantir sa lampe des premières brises du matin, il revint près du cadavre de Gill, et s’occupa d’en tourner la tête de manière à en cacher la blessure.

Il avait fallu bien des raisons pour décider le timide concierge à accepter l'offre aventureuse de l'étranger. Dans les motifs de sa téméraire détermination entraient: 1° la crainte d'Ordener présent; 2° celle du bourreau Orugix; 3° une vieille haine pour Han d'Islande, haine qu'il osait à peine s'avouer à lui-même, tant la terreur la comprimait; 4° l'amour pour les sciences, auxquelles son voyage serait si utile; 5° la confiance en son esprit rusé, pour se dérober aux regards de Han; 6° un attrait tout spéculatif pour certain métal que renfermait la bourse du jeune aventurier, et dont paraissait aussi remplie la boîte de fer volée au capitaine et destinée à la veuve Stadt, message qui maintenant courait grand risque de ne jamais quitter le messager.

Une dernière raison enfin, c'était l'espérance bien ou mal fondée de rentrer tôt ou tard dans la place qu'il allait abandonner. Que lui importait d'ailleurs que le brigand tuât le voyageur ou le voyageur le brigand? A ce point de sa rêverie, il ne put s'empêcher de dire à haute voix:

— Cela me fera toujours un cadavre.

Un nouveau grondement se fit encore entendre, et le malheureux concierge frissonna.

— Ce ne sont vraiment point là les ronflements d'Oglypiglap, se dit-il; ce bruit vient du dehors.

Puis, après un moment de réflexion:

— Je suis bien simple de m'effrayer ainsi, c'est sans doute le dogue du port qui se réveille et qui aboie.

Alors il acheva de disposer les membres défigurés de Gill; puis, refermant toutes les portes, vint se délasser sur son grabat des fatigues de la nuit qui s'achevait, et prendre des forces pour celle qui se préparait.

IX

JULIETTE.

Ah! crois-tu que nous nous revoyions jamais?

ROMÉO.

Je n’en doute point; et toutes ces peines deviendront le doux entretien de nos jours à venir.

SHAKESPEARE.

Le fanal du château de Munckholm venait de s’éteindre, et, à sa place, le matelot entrant dans le golfe de Drontheim voyait le casque du soldat de garde briller de loin, comme une étoile mobile, aux rayons du soleil levant, quand Schumacker, appuyé sur le bras de sa fille, descendit comme de coutume dans le jardin circulaire qui environnait sa prison. Tous deux avaient eu une nuit agitée, le vieillard par l’insomnie, la jeune fille par des rêves délicieux. Ils se promenaient depuis quelque temps en silence, quand le vieux prisonnier attacha sur la belle jeune fille un regard triste et grave:

— Vous rougissez et souriez toute seule, Éthel; vous êtes heureuse, car vous ne rougissez pas du passé, et vous souriez à l’avenir.

Éthel rougit plus fort, et cessa de sourire.

— Mon seigneur et père, dit-elle, embarrassée et confuse, j’ai apporté le livre de l’Edda.

— Eh bien, lisez, ma fille, dit Schumacker; et il retomba dans sa rêverie.

Alors le sombre captif, assis sur un rocher noirâtre ombragé d’un sapin noir, écouta la douce voix de sa fille, sans entendre sa lecture, comme un voyageur altéré se plaît au murmure de la source où il puise la vie.

Éthel lui lut l’histoire de la bergère Allanga, qui refusa un roi jusqu’à ce qu’il eût prouvé qu’il était un guerrier. Le prince Regner Lodbrog n’obtint la bergère qu’en revenant vainqueur du brigand de Klipstadur, Ingolphe l’Exterminateur.

Soudain un bruit de pas et de feuillage froissé vint interrompre sa lecture et arracher Schumacker à sa méditation. Le lieutenant d’Ahlefeld sortit de derrière le rocher où ils étaient assis. Éthel baissa la tête en reconnaissant l’interrupteur éternel, et l’officier s’écria:

— Sur ma foi, ma belle damoiselle, le nom d’Ingolphe l’Exterminateur vient d’être prononcé par votre charmante bouche. Je l’ai entendu, et je présume que c’est en parlant de son petit-fils, Han d’Islande, que vous êtes remontée jusqu’à lui. Les damoiselles aiment beaucoup à parler des brigands. Sous ce rapport, on conte d’Ingolphe et de sa descendance des choses singulièrement agréables et effrayantes à entendre. L’exterminateur Ingolphe n’eut qu’un fils, né de la sorcière Thoarka; ce fils n’eut également qu’un fils, né de même d’une sorcière. Depuis quatre siècles, cette race s’est ainsi perpétuée pour la désolation de l’Islande, toujours par un seul rejeton, qui ne produit jamais qu’un rameau. C’est par cette série d’héritiers uniques que l’esprit infernal d’Ingolphe est arrivé de nos jours sain et entier au fameux Han d’Islande, qui avait sans doute tout à l’heure le bonheur d’occuper les virginales pensées de la damoiselle.

L’officier s’arrêta un moment. Éthel gardait le silence de l’embarras; Schumacker, celui de l’ennui. Enchanté de les trouver disposés sinon à répondre, du moins à écouter, il continua:

— Le brigand de Klipstadur n’a d’autre passion que la haine des hommes, d’autre soin que celui de leur nuire.

— Il est sage, interrompit brusquement le vieillard.

— Il vit toujours seul, reprit le lieutenant.

— Il est heureux, dit Schumacker.

Le lieutenant fut ravi de cette double interruption, qui semblait sceller un pacte de conversation.

— Nous préserve le dieu Mithra, s’écria-t-il, de ces sages et de ces heureux! Maudit soit le zéphyr malintentionné qui a apporté en Norvège le dernier des démons d’Islande. J’ai tort de dire malintentionné, car c’est, assure-t-on, à un évêque que nous devons le bonheur de posséder Han de Klipstadur. Si l’on en croit la tradition, quelques paysans islandais, ayant pris sur les montagnes de Bessestedt le petit Han encore enfant, voulurent le tuer, comme Astyage tua le lionceau de Bactriane; mais l’évêque de Scalholt s’y opposa, et prit l’oursin sous sa protection, espérant faire un chrétien du diable. Le bon évêque employa mille moyens pour développer cette intelligence infernale, oubliant que la ciguë ne s’était point changée en lys dans les serres chaudes de Babylone. Aussi le démoniaque adolescent le paya-t-il de ses soins en s’enfuyant une belle nuit sur un tronc d’arbre, à travers les mers, et en éclairant sa fuite de l’incendie du manoir épiscopal. Voilà, selon les vieilles fileuses du pays, comment s’est transporté en Norvège cet islandais, qui, grâce à son éducation, offre aujourd’hui toute la perfection du monstre. Depuis ce temps, les mines de Fa-roër comblées et trois cents ouvriers écrasés sous les décombres; le rocher pendant de Golyn précipité pendant la nuit sur le village qu'il dominait; le pont de Half-Broën croulant du haut des roches sous le passage des voyageurs; la cathédrale de Drontheim incendiée; les fanaux côtiers éteints durant les nuits orageuses, et une foule de crimes et de meurtres ensevelis dans les lacs de Sparbo ou de Smiasen, ou cachés sous les grottes de Walderhog et de Rylass, et dans les gorges du Dofre-Field, ont attesté la présence de cet Arimane incarné dans le Drontheimhus. Les vieilles prétendent qu'il lui pousse un poil de la barbe à chaque crime; en ce cas sa barbe doit être aussi touffue que celle du plus vénérable mage assyrien. La belle damoiselle saura cependant que le gouverneur a plus d'une fois essayé d'arrêter la crue extraordinaire de cette barbe.

Schumacker rompit encore le silence.

— Et tous les efforts pour s'emparer de cet homme, dit-il avec un regard de triomphe et un sourire ironique, ont été vains? J'en félicite la grande-chancellerie.

L'officier ne comprit pas le sarcasme de l'ex-grand-chancelier.

— Han a jusqu'ici été aussi imprenable qu'Horatius surnommé Coclès. Vieux soldats, jeunes miliciens, campagnards, montagnards, tout meurt ou tout fuit devant lui. C'est un démon qu'on ne saurait éviter ni atteindre; ce qui peut arriver de plus heureux à ceux qui le cherchent, c'est de ne pas le trouver.

— La gracieuse damoiselle est peut-être surprise, continua-t-il en s'asseyant familièrement près d'Éthel, qui se rapprocha de son père, de tout ce que je sais de curieux touchant cet être surnaturel. Ce n'est pas sans intention que j'ai recueilli ces singulières traditions. Il me semble, et je serais heureux que ma charmante damoiselle partageât mon avis, que les aventures de Han pourraient fournir un roman délicieux, dans le genre des sublimes écrits de la damoiselle Scudéry, l'*Artamène* ou la *Clélie,* dont je n'ai encore lu que six volumes, mais qui n'en est pas moins un chef-d'oeuvre à mes yeux. Il faudrait, par exemple, adoucir notre climat, orner nos traditions, modifier nos noms barbares. Ainsi Drontheim, qui deviendrai *Durtinianum,* verrait ses forêts se changer sous ma baguette magique, en des bosquets délicieux, arrosés de mille petits ruisseaux, bien autrement poétiques que nos vilains torrents. Nos cavernes noires et profondes feraient place à des grottes charmantes, tapissées de rocailles dorées et de coquillages d'azur. Dans l'une de ces grottes habiterait un célèbre enchanteur, Hannus de Thulé… — Car vous conviendrez que le nom de *Han d'Islande* ne flatte pas l'oreille. — Ce géant… — vous sentez qu'il serait absurde que le héros d'un tel ouvrage ne fût pas un géant — ce géant descendrait en droite ligne du dieu Mars. — Ingolphe l'Exterminateur ne présente rien à l'imagination — et de la magicienne Théonne… — ne trouvez-vous pas le nom de *Thoarka* heureusement altéré? — fille de la sibylle de Cumes. Hannus, après avoir été élevé par le grand-mage de Thulé, se serait enfin échappé du palais du pontife, sur un char attelé de deux dragons… — Il faudrait être un pauvre esprit pour conserver la mesquine tradition du tronc d'arbre. — Arrivé sous le ciel de Durtinianum, et séduit par ce pays charmant, il en aurait fait le lieu de sa résidence et le théâtre de ses crimes. Ce ne serait pas chose aisée que de faire une peinture agréable des brigandages de Han. On pourrait en adoucir l'horreur par quelque amour ingénieusement imaginé. La bergère Alcippe, en promenant un jour son agneau dans un bois de myrtes et d'oliviers, serait aperçue par le géant, qui céderait soudain au pouvoir de ses yeux. Mais Alcippe aimerait le beau Lycidas, officier des milices, en garnison dans son hameau. Le géant s'irriterait du bonheur du centurion, et le centurion des assiduités du géant. Vous concevez, aimable damoiselle, tout ce qu'une pareille imagination pourrait semer de charme dans les aventures de Hannus. Je parierais mes bottes de Cracovie contre une paire de patins qu'un tel sujet, traité par la damoiselle Scudéry, ferait raffoler toutes les daines de Copenhague.

Ce mot arracha Schumacker de la sombre rêverie où il était resté enseveli pendant la dépense inutile de bel esprit que venait de faire le lieutenant.

— Copenhague?-dit-il brusquement; seigneur officier, que s'est-il passé de nouveau à Copenhague?

— Rien, sur ma foi, que je sache, répondit le lieutenant, sinon le consentement donné par le roi au mariage important qui occupe en ce moment les deux royaumes.

— Comment! reprit Schumacker; quel mariage?

L'apparition d'un quatrième interlocuteur arrêta la réponse sur les lèvres du lieutenant.

Tous trois levèrent les yeux. Le visage sombre du prisonnier s'éclaircit, la physionomie frivole du lieutenant prit une expression de gravité, et la douce figure d'Éthel, pâle et confuse pendant le long soliloque de l'officier, se ranima de vie et de joie. Elle soupira profondément, comme si son coeur eût été allégé d’un poids insupportable, et son sourire triste et furtif s’élança au-devant du nouveau venu. — C’était Ordener.

Le vieillard, la jeune fille et l’officier étaient devant Ordener dans une position singulière, ils avaient chacun un secret commun avec lui; aussi se gênaient-ils réciproquement. Le retour d’Ordener au donjon ne surprit ni Schumacker ni Éthel, qui l’attendaient; mais il étonna le lieutenant, autant que la présence du lieutenant surprit Ordener, qui aurait pu craindre quelque indiscrétion de l’officier sur la scène de la veille, si le silence prescrit par la loi courtoise ne l’eût rassuré. Il ne pouvait donc que s’étonner de le voir paisiblement assis près des deux prisonniers.

Ces quatre personnages ne pouvaient rien se dire réunis, précisément parce qu’ils auraient eu beaucoup à se dire isolément. Aussi, hormis les regards d’intelligence et d’embarras, l’accueil que reçut Ordener fut-il absolument muet.

Le lieutenant partit d’un éclat de rire.

— Par la queue du manteau royal, mon cher nouveau-venu, voilà un silence qui ne ressemble pas mal à celui des sénateurs gaulois, quand le romain Brennus…. Je ne sais, en honneur, déjà plus qui était romain ou gaulois, des sénateurs ou du général. N’importe! puisque vous voilà, aidez-moi à instruire cet honorable vieillard de ce qui se passe de nouveau. J’allais, sans votre subite entrée en scène, l’entretenir du mariage illustre qui occupe en ce moment mèdes et persans.

— Quel mariage? dirent en même temps Ordener et Schumacker.

— À la coupe de vos vêtements, seigneur étranger, s’écria le lieutenant en frappant des mains, j’avais déjà pressenti que vous veniez de quelque autre monde. Voici une question qui change en certitude mon soupçon. Vous êtes sans doute débarqué hier sur les bords de la Nidder, dans un char-fée attelé de deux griffons ailés; car vous n’auriez pu parcourir la Norvège sans entendre parler du fameux mariage du fils du vice-roi avec la fille du grand-chancelier.

Schumacker se tourna vers le lieutenant.

— Quoi! Ordener Guldenlew épouse Ulrique d’Ahlefeld?

— Comme vous dites, répondit l’officier, et cela sera conclu avant que la mode des vertugadins à la française soit passée à Copenhague.

— Le fils de Frédéric doit avoir environ vingt-deux ans; car j’étais depuis une année dans la forteresse de Copenhague quand le bruit de sa naissance parvint jusqu’à moi. Qu’il se marie jeune, continua Schumacker avec un sourire amer; au moment de la disgrâce on ne lui reprochera pas du moins d'avoir ambitionné le chapeau de cardinal.

Le vieux favori faisait à ses propres malheurs une allusion que le lieutenant ne comprit pas.

— Non certes, dit-il en éclatant de rire. Le baron Ordener va recevoir le titre de comte, le collier de l'Éléphant et les aiguillettes de colonel, qui ne se concilient guère vraiment avec la barrette de cardinal.

— Tant mieux, répondit Schumacker. Puis, après une pause, il ajouta, secouant la tête comme s'il eût vu sa vengeance devant lui: — Quelque jour peut-être on lui fera un carcan du noble collier, on lui brisera sur le front sa couronne de comte, on lui battra les joues de ses aiguillettes de colonel. Ordener saisit la main du vieillard.

— Dans l'intérêt de votre haine, seigneur, ne maudissez pas le bonheur d'un ennemi avant de savoir si ce bonheur en est un pour lui.

— Eh! mais, dit le lieutenant, qu'importent au baron de Thorvick les anathèmes du bonhomme?

— Lieutenant! s'écria Ordener, ils lui importent plus que vous ne pensez…. — peut-être. — Et, poursuivit-il après un moment de silence, votre fameux mariage est moins certain que vous ne le croyez.

— *Fiat quod vis*, repartit le lieutenant avec une salutation ironique; le roi, le vice-roi et le grand-chancelier ont, il est vrai, tout disposé pour cette union; ils la désirent, ils la veulent; mais puisqu'elle déplaît au seigneur étranger, qu'importe le grand-chancelier, le vice-roi et le roi!

— Vous avez peut-être raison, dit Ordener d'un air sérieux.

— Oh! sur ma foi! — et le lieutenant se renversa sur le dos en éclatant de rire, — cela est trop plaisant. Je voudrais pour beaucoup que le baron de Thorvick fût ici pour entendre un devin aussi bien instruit des choses de ce monde décider de sa destinée. Mon docte prophète, croyez-moi, vous n'avez pas encore assez de barbe pour être bon sorcier.

— Seigneur lieutenant, répondit froidement Ordener, je ne pense pas qu'Ordener Guldenlew épouse une femme sans l'aimer.

— Eh! eh! voilà le livre des maximes. Et qui vous dit, seigneur du manteau vert, que le baron n'aime pas Ulrique d'Ahlefeld?

— Et, s'il vous plaît, à votre tour, qui vous dit qu'il l'aime?

Ici le lieutenant fut entraîné, comme il arrive souvent, par la chaleur de la conversation, à affirmer un fait dont il n'était pas sûr.

— Qui me dit qu’il l’aime? la question est amusante! J’en suis fâché pour votre divination; mais tout le monde sait que ce mariage n’est pas moins un mariage de passion que de convenance.

— Excepté moi, du moins, dit Ordener d’un ton grave.

— Excepté vous, soit; mais qu’importe! vous n’empêcherez pas que le fils du vice-roi ne soit amoureux de la fille du chancelier!

— Amoureux?

— Amoureux fou!

— Il faudrait en effet qu’il fût fou pour en être amoureux.

— Holà! n’oubliez pas de qui et à qui vous parlez. Ne dirait-on pas que le fils du comte vice-roi n’a pu s’éprendre d’une dame sans consulter ce rustaud?

En parlant ainsi, l’officier s’était levé. Éthel, qui vit le regard d’Ordener s’enflammer, se précipita devant lui.

— Oh! dit-elle, de grâce calmez-vous; n’écoutez pas ces injures; que nous importe que le fils du vice-roi aime la fille du chancelier? Cette douce main posée sur le coeur du jeune homme en apaisa la tempête; il abaissa sur son Éthel un regard enivré, et n’entendit plus le lieutenant qui, reprenant sa gaieté, s’écriait: — La damoiselle remplit avec une grâce infinie le rôle des dames sabines entre leurs pères et leurs maris. Mes paroles étaient peu mesurées; j’oubliais, poursuivit-il en s’adressant à Ordener, qu’il existait entre nous un lien de fraternité, et que nous ne pouvions plus nous provoquer.

— Chevalier, donnez-moi la main. Convenez-en, vous aviez aussi oublié que vous parliez du fils du vice-roi à son futur beau-frère, le lieutenant d’Ahlefeld.

À ce nom, Schumacker, qui avait tout observé jusque-là d’un oeil d’indifférence ou d’impatience, s’élança de son siège de pierre en poussant un cri terrible.

— D’Ahlefeld! un d’Ahlefeld devant moi! Serpent! comment n’ai-je pas reconnu dans le fils son exécrable père! Laissez-moi paisible dans mon cachot, je n’ai point été condamné au supplice de vous voir. Il ne me manque plus, comme il l’osait souhaiter tout à l’heure, que de voir le fils de Guldenlew près du fils d’Ahlefeld! — Traîtres! lâches! que ne viennent-ils eux-mêmes jouir de mes larmes de démence et de rage? Race! race abhorrée! fils d’Ahlefeld, laisse-moi!

L’officier, d’abord étourdi de la vivacité de ces imprécations, retrouva bientôt la colère et la parole.

— Silence! vieil insensé! auras-tu bientôt fini de me chanter les litanies des démons?

— Laisse, laisse-moi! poursuivit le vieillard, et emporte ma malédiction, pour toi et la misérable race de Guldenlew qui va s’allier à la tienne.

— Pardieu, s’écria l’officier furieux, tu me fais un double outrage!

Ordener arrêta le lieutenant, qui ne se connaissait plus.

— Respectez un vieillard dans votre ennemi, lieutenant; nous avons déjà des satisfactions à nous rendre, je vous ferai raison des offenses du prisonnier.

— Soit, dit le lieutenant, vous contractez une double dette; le combat sera à outrance, car j’aurai mon beau-frère et moi à venger. Songez qu’avec mon gant vous ramassez celui d’Ordener Guldenlew.

— Lieutenant d’Ahlefeld, répondit Ordener, vous embrassez le parti des absents avec une chaleur qui prouve de la générosité. N’y en aurait-il pas autant à prendre pitié d’un malheureux vieillard à qui l’adversité donne quelque droit d’être injuste?

D’Ahlefeld était de ces âmes chez qui on éveille une vertu avec une louange. Il serra la main d’Ordener, et s’approcha de Schumacker, qui, épuisé par son emportement même, était retombé sur le rocher dans les bras d’Éthel éplorée.

— Seigneur Schumacker, dit l’officier, vous avez abusé de votre vieillesse, et j’allais peut-être abuser de ma jeunesse, si vous n’aviez trouvé un champion. J’étais entré ce matin pour la dernière fois dans votre prison, car c’était pour vous dire que désormais vous pourriez rester, d’après l’ordre spécial du vice-roi, libre et sans gardes dans le donjon. Recevez cette bonne nouvelle de la bouche d’un ennemi.

— Retirez-vous, dit le vieux captif d’une voix sourde.

Le lieutenant s’inclina, et obéit, intérieurement satisfait d’avoir conquis le regard approbateur d’Ordener.

Schumacker resta quelque temps les bras croisés et la tête courbée, enseveli dans ses rêveries; tout à coup il releva son regard sur Ordener, debout et en silence devant lui.

— Eh bien? dit-il.

— Seigneur comte, Dispolsen est mort assassiné.

La tête du vieillard retomba sur sa poitrine. Ordener poursuivit:

— Son assassin est un brigand fameux, Han d'Islande.

— Han d'Islande! dit Schumacker.

— Han d'Islande! répéta Éthel.

— Il a dépouillé le capitaine, continua Ordener.

— Ainsi, dit le vieillard, vous n'avez point entendu parler d'un coffret de fer, scellé des armes de Griffenfeld?

— Non, seigneur.

Schumacker laissa tomber son front sur ses mains.

— Je vous le rapporterai, seigneur comte, fiez-vous à moi. Le meurtre a été commis hier matin. Han a fui vers le nord. J'ai un guide qui connaît ses retraites, j'ai souvent parcouru les monts du Drontheimhus. J'atteindrai le brigand. Éthel pâlit. Schumacker se leva; son regard avait quelque chose de joyeux, comme s'il comprenait encore la vertu chez les hommes.

— Noble Ordener, dit-il, adieu. — Et levant une main vers le ciel, il disparut derrière les broussailles.

Quand Ordener se retourna, il vit, sur le roc bruni par la mousse, Éthel pâle, comme une statue d'albâtre sur un piédestal noir.

— Juste Dieu, mon Éthel! dit-il se précipitant près d'elle et la soutenant dans ses bras, qu'avez-vous?

— Oh! répondit la tremblante jeune fille d'une voix qu'on entendait à peine, oh! si vous avez, non quelque amour, mais quelque pitié pour moi, seigneur, si vous ne me parliez pas hier tout à fait pour m'abuser, si ce n'est pas pour causer ma mort que vous avez daigné venir dans cette prison; seigneur Ordener, mon Ordener, renoncez, au nom du ciel, au nom des anges, renoncez à votre projet insensé! Ordener, mon bien-aimé Ordener! poursuivit-elle, — et ses larmes s'échappaient avec abondance, et sa tête s'était penchée sur le sein du jeune homme, — fais-moi ce sacrifice. Ne poursuis pas ce brigand, cet affreux démon, que tu veux combattre. Dans quel intérêt y vas-tu, Ordener? Dis-moi, quel intérêt peut t'être plus cher que celui de la malheureuse que tu nommais hier ta bien-aimée épouse?

Elle s'arrêta suffoquée par les sanglots. Ses deux bras étaient attachés par ses mains jointes au cou d'Ordener, sur les yeux duquel elle fixait ses yeux suppliants.

— Mon Éthel adorée, vous vous alarmez à tort. Dieu soutient les bonnes intentions, et l'intérêt pour lequel je m'expose n'est autre que le vôtre. Ce coffret de fer renferme….

Éthel l'interrompit.

— Mon intérêt! ai-je un autre intérêt que ta vie? Et si tu meurs, Ordener, que veux-tu que je devienne?

— Pourquoi penses-tu que je mourrai, Éthel?

— Ah! tu ne connais donc pas ce Han, ce brigand infernal? Sais-tu à quel monstre tu cours? Sais-tu qu'il commande à toutes les puissances des ténèbres? qu'il renverse des montagnes sur des villes? que son pas fait crouler les cavernes souterraines? que son souffle éteint les fanaux sur les rochers? Et crois-tu, Ordener, résister à ce géant aidé du démon, avec tes bras blancs et ta frêle épée?

— Et vos prières, Éthel, et l'idée que je combats pour vous? Sois-en sûre, mon Éthel, on t'a beaucoup exagéré la force et le pouvoir de ce brigand. C'est un homme comme nous, qui donne la mort jusqu'à ce qu'il la reçoive.

— Tu ne veux donc pas m'écouter? mes paroles ne sont donc rien pour toi? Que veux-tu, dis-moi, que je devienne si tu pars, si tu vas errer de périls en périls, exposant, pour je ne sais quel intérêt de la terre, tes jours qui sont à moi, les livrant à un monstre?

Ici les récits du lieutenant apparurent de nouveau à l'imagination d'Éthel, accrus de tout son amour et de toute sa terreur. Elle poursuivit, d'une voix entrecoupée par les sanglots:

— Je te l'assure, mon bien-aimé Ordener, ils t'ont trompé ceux qui t'ont dit que ce n'était qu'un homme. Tu dois me croire plus qu'eux, Ordener, tu sais que je ne voudrais pas te tromper. On a mille fois essayé de le combattre, il a détruit des bataillons entiers. Je voudrais seulement que d'autres te le disent, tu les croirais et tu n'irais pas.

Les prières de la pauvre Éthel auraient sans doute ébranlé l'aventureuse résolution d'Ordener, s'il n'eût été aussi avancé. Les paroles échappées la veille au désespoir de Schumacker revinrent à sa mémoire, et le raffermirent.

— Je pourrais, ma chère Éthel, vous dire que je n'irai pas, et n'en pas moins exécuter mon projet; mais je ne vous tromperai jamais, même pour vous rassurer. Je ne dois pas, je le répète, balancer entre vos larmes et vos intérêts. Il s'agit de votre fortune, de votre bonheur, de votre vie peut-être, de ta vie, mon Éthel.

Et il la pressait doucement dans ses bras.

— Et que me fait tout cela? reprit-elle éplorée. Mon ami, mon Ordener, ma joie, tu sais que tu es toute ma joie, ne me donne pas un malheur affreux et certain pour des malheurs légers et douteux. Que me font ma fortune, ma vie?

— Il s’agit aussi, Éthel, de la vie de votre père.

Elle s’arracha de ses bras.

— De mon père? répéta-t-elle à voix basse et en pâlissant.

— Oui, Éthel. Ce brigand, soudoyé sans doute par les ennemis du comte Griffenfeld, a en son pouvoir des papiers dont la perte compromet les jours, déjà si détestés, de votre père. Je veux lui reprendre ces papiers avec la vie.

Éthel resta quelques instants pâle et muette; ses larmes s’étaient taries, son sein gonflé respirait péniblement, elle regardait la terre d’un oeil terne et indifférent, de l’oeil dont le condamné la regarde au moment où la hache se lève derrière lui sur sa tête.

— De mon père! murmura-t-elle.

Puis elle tourna lentement les yeux sur Ordener.

— Ce que tu fais est inutile; mais fais-le.

Ordener l’attira sur son sein.

— Oh! noble fille, laisse ton coeur battre sur le mien. Généreuse amie! je reviendrai bientôt. Va, tu seras à moi; je veux être le sauveur de ton père, pour mériter de devenir son fils. Mon Éthel, ma bien-aimée Éthel!

Qui pourrait dire ce qui se passe dans un noble coeur qui se sent compris d’un noble coeur? Et si l’amour unit ces deux âmes pareilles d’un lien indestructible, qui pourrait peindre ces inexprimables délices? Il semble alors que l’on éprouve, réunis dans un court moment, tout le bonheur et toute la gloire de la vie, embellie du charme des généreux sacrifices.

— O mon Ordener, va, et, si tu ne reviens pas, la douleur sans espoir tue. J’aurai cette lente consolation. Ils se levèrent tous deux, et Ordener plaça sur son bras le bras d’Éthel, et dans sa main cette main adorée; ils traversèrent en silence les allées tortueuses du sombre jardin, et arrivèrent à regret à la porte de la tour qui servait d’issue. Là, Éthel, tirant de son sein de petits ciseaux d’or, coupa une boucle de ses beaux cheveux noirs.

— Reçois-la, Ordener; qu’elle t’accompagne, qu’elle soit plus heureuse que moi.

Ordener pressa religieusement sur ses lèvres ce présent de sa bien-aimée.

Elle poursuivit:

— Ordener, pense à moi, je prierai pour toi. Ma prière sera peut-être aussi puissante auprès de Dieu que tes armes devant le démon.

Ordener s’inclina devant cet ange. Son âme sentait trop pour que sa bouche pût parler. Ils restèrent quelque temps sur le coeur l’un de l’autre. Au moment de la quitter, peut-être pour jamais, Ordener jouissait, avec un triste ravissement, du bonheur de tenir une fois encore toute son Éthel entre ses bras. Enfin, déposant un chaste et long baiser sur le front décoloré de la douce jeune fille, il s’élança violemment sous la voûte obscure de l’escalier en spirale, qui lui apporta un moment après le mot si lugubre et si doux: Adieu!

X

Tu ne la croirais pas malheureuse, tout ce qui l'entoure annonce le bonheur. Elle porte des colliers d'or et des robes de pourpre. Lorsqu'elle sort, la foule de ses vassaux se prosterne sur son passage, et des pages obéissants étendent des tapis sous ses pieds. Mais on ne la voit point dans la retraite qui lui est chère: car alors elle pleure, et son mari ne l'entend pas. — Je suis cette malheureuse, l'épouse d'un homme honoré, d'un noble comte, la mère d'un enfant dont les sourires me poignardent.

MATURIN, *Bertram*.

La comtesse d'Ahlefeld venait de quitter l'insomnie de la nuit pour celle du jour. À demi couchée sur un sopha, elle rêvait aux arrière-goûts amers des jouissances impures, au crime qui use la vie par des joies sans bonheur et des douleurs sans consolation. Elle songeait à ce Musdoemon, que de coupables illusions lui avaient jadis peint si séduisant, si affreux maintenant qu'elle l'avait pénétré et qu'elle avait vu l'âme à travers le corps. La misérable pleurait, non d'avoir été trompée, mais de ne pouvoir plus l'être; de regret, non de repentir; aussi ses pleurs ne la soulageaient-ils pas. En ce moment sa porte s'ouvrit; elle essuya en hâte ses yeux, et se retourna irritée d'être surprise, car elle avait ordonné qu'on la laissât seule. Sa colère se changea à l'aspect de Musdoemon en un effroi qu'elle apaisa pourtant en le voyant accompagné de son fils Frédéric.

— Ma mère! s'écria le lieutenant, comment donc êtes-vous ici? Je vous croyais à Berghen. Est-ce que nos belles dames ont repris la mode de courir les champs?

La comtesse accueillit Frédéric avec des embrassements auxquels, comme tous les enfants gâtés, il répondit assez froidement. C'était peut-être la plus sensible des punitions pour cette malheureuse. Frédéric était son fils chéri, le seul être au monde pour lequel elle conservât une affection désintéressée; car souvent, dans une femme dégradée, même quand l'épouse a disparu, il reste encore quelque chose de la mère.

— Je vois, mon fils, qu'en apprenant ma présence à Drontheim, vous êtes accouru sur-le-champ pour me voir.

— Oh! mon Dieu non. Je m'ennuyais au fort, je suis venu dans la ville où j'ai rencontré Musdoemon, qui m'a conduit ici.

La pauvre mère soupira profondément.

— À propos, ma mère, continua Frédéric, je suis bien content de vous voir. Vous me direz si les noeuds de ruban rose au bas du justaucorps sont toujours de mode à Copenhague. Avez-vous songé à m'apporter une fiole de cette huile de Jouvence, qui blanchit la peau? Vous n'avez pas oublié, n'est-ce pas, le dernier roman traduit, ni les galons d'or vierge que je vous ai demandés pour ma casaque couleur de feu, ni ces petits peignes que l'on place maintenant sous la frisure pour soutenir les boucles, ni….

La malheureuse femme n'avait rien apporté à son fils, que le seul amour qu'elle eût au monde.

— Mon cher fils, j'ai été malade, et mes souffrances m'ont empêchée de songer à vos plaisirs.

— Vous avez été malade, ma mère? Eh bien, maintenant vous sentez-vous mieux? — À propos, comment va ma meute de chiens normands? Je parie qu'on aura négligé de baigner tous les soirs ma guenon dans l'eau de rose. Vous verrez que je trouverai mon perroquet de Bilbao mort à mon retour. — Quand je suis absent, personne ne songe à mes bêtes.

— Votre mère du moins songe à vous, mon fils, dit la mère, d'une voix altérée.

C'aurait été l'heure inexorable où l'ange exterminateur lancera les âmes pécheresses dans les châtiments éternels, qu'il aurait eu pitié des douleurs auxquelles était en ce moment livré le coeur de l'infortunée comtesse.

Musdoemon riait dans un coin de l'appartement.

— Seigneur Frédéric, dit-il, je vois que l'épée d'acier ne veut pas se rouiller dans le fourreau de fer. Vous ne vous souciez pas de perdre dans les tours de Munckholm les saines traditions des salons de Copenhague. Mais pourtant, daignez me le dire, à quoi bon cette huile de Jouvence, ces rubans roses et ces petits peignes; à quoi bon ces apprêts de siège, si la seule forteresse féminine que renferment les tours de Munckholm est imprenable?

— En honneur! elle l'est, répondit Frédéric en riant. Certes, si j'ai échoué, le général Schack y échouerait. Mais comment surprendre un fort où rien n'est à découvert, où tout est gardé sans relâche? Que faire contre des guimpes qui ne laissent voir que le cou, contre des manches qui cachent tout le bras, en sorte qu'il n'y a que le visage et les mains pour prouver que la jeune damoiselle n'est pas noire comme l'empereur de Mauritanie? Mon cher précepteur, vous seriez un écolier. Croyez-moi, le fort est inexpugnable quand la Pudeur y tient garnison.

— En vérité! dit Musdoemon. Mais ne forcerait-on pas la Pudeur à capituler, en lui faisant donner l'assaut par l'Amour, au lieu de se borner au blocus des Petits Soins?

— Peine perdue, mon cher; l'Amour s'est bien introduit dans la place, mais il y sert de renfort à la Pudeur.

— Ah! seigneur Frédéric, voilà du nouveau. Avec l'Amour pour vous….

— Et qui vous dit, Musdoemon, qu'il est pour moi?

— Et pour qui donc? s'écrièrent à la fois Musdoemon et la comtesse, qui jusqu'alors avait écouté en silence, mais à qui les paroles du lieutenant venaient de rappeler Ordener.

Frédéric allait répondre et préparait déjà un récit piquant de la scène nocturne de la veille, quand le silence prescrit par la loi courtoise lui revint à l'esprit et changea sa gaieté en embarras.

— Ma foi, dit-il, je ne sais pour qui… mais… quelque rustaud, peut-être… quelque vassal….

— Quelque soldat de la garnison? dit Musdoemon en éclatant de rire.

— Quoi, mon fils! s'écriait de son côté la comtesse, vous êtes sûr qu'elle aime un paysan, un vassal?

— Quel bonheur si vous en étiez sûr!

— Eh! sans doute, j'en suis sûr. Ce n'est point un soldat de la garnison, ajouta le lieutenant d'un air piqué. Mais je suis assez sûr de ce que je dis pour vous prier, ma mère, d'abréger mon très inutile exil dans ce maudit château.

Le visage de la comtesse s'était éclairci en apprenant la chute de la jeune fille. L'empressement d'Ordener Guldenlew à se rendre à Munckholm se présenta alors à son esprit sous des couleurs toutes différentes. Elle en fit les honneurs à son fils.

— Vous nous donnerez tout à l'heure, Frédéric, des détails sur les amours d'Éthel Schumacker; ils ne m'étonnent pas, fille de rustre ne peut aimer qu'un rustre. En attendant, ne maudissez pas ce château qui vous a procuré hier l'honneur de voir certain personnage faire les premières démarches pour vous connaître.

— Comment! ma mère, dit le lieutenant ouvrant les yeux, — quel personnage?

— Trêve de plaisanteries, mon fils. Personne ne vous a-t-il rendu visite hier? Vous voyez que je suis instruite.

— Ma foi, mieux que moi, ma mère. Du diable si j'ai vu hier autre visage que les mascarons placés sous les corniches de ces vieilles tours!

— Comment, Frédéric, vous n'avez vu personne?

— Personne, ma mère, en vérité!

Frédéric, en omettant son antagoniste du donjon, obéissait à la loi du silence; et d'ailleurs ce manant pouvait-il compter pour quelqu'un?

— Quoi! dit la mère, le fils du vice-roi n'est pas allé hier soir à Munckholm?

Le lieutenant éclata de rire.

— Le fils du vice-roi! En vérité, ma mère, vous rêvez ou vous raillez.

— Ni l'un ni l'autre, mon fils. Qui donc était hier de garde?

— Moi-même, ma mère.

— Et vous n'avez point vu le baron Ordener?

— Eh non, répéta le lieutenant.

— Mais songez, mon fils, qu'il a pu entrer incognito, que vous ne l'avez jamais vu, ayant été élevé à Copenhague tandis qu'on relevait à Drontheim; songez à ce qu'on dit de ses caprices, du vagabondage de ses idées. Êtes-vous sûr, mon fils, de n'avoir vu personne?

Frédéric hésita un instant.

— Non, s'écria-t-il, personne! je ne puis dire autre chose.

— En ce cas, reprit la comtesse, le baron n'est sans doute pas allé à Munckholm.

Musdoemon, d'abord surpris comme Frédéric, avait tout écouté attentivement. Il interrompit la comtesse.

— Noble dame, permettez. — Seigneur Frédéric, quel est, de grâce, le nom du vassal aimé de la fille de Schumacker?

Il répéta sa question; car Frédéric, qui depuis quelques moments était devenu pensif, ne l'avait pas entendue.

— Je l'ignore…. ou plutôt…. Oui, je l'ignore.

— Et comment, seigneur, savez-vous qu'elle aime un vassal?

— L'ai-je dit? un vassal? Eh bien! oui, un vassal.

L'embarras de la position du lieutenant s'accroissait. Cet interrogatoire, les idées qu'il faisait naître en lui, l'obligation de se taire, le jetaient dans un trouble dont il craignait de n'être plus maître.

— Par ma foi, sire Musdoemon, et vous, ma noble mère, si la manie d'interroger est à la mode, amusez-vous à vous interroger tous deux. Pour moi, je n'ai rien de plus à vous dire.

Et, ouvrant brusquement la porte, il disparut, les laissant plongés dans un abîme de conjectures. Il descendit précipitamment dans la cour, car il entendait la voix de Musdoemon qui le rappelait.

Il remonta à cheval, et se dirigea vers le port, d'où il voulait se rembarquer pour Munckholm, pensant y trouver peut-être encore l'étranger qui jetait dans de profondes réflexions l'un des plus frivoles cerveaux d'une des plus frivoles capitales.

— Si c'était Ordener Guldenlew! se disait-il; en ce cas ma pauvre Ulrique…. Mais non; il est impossible qu'on soit assez fou pour préférer la fille indigente d'un prisonnier d'état à la fille opulente d'un ministre tout-puissant. En tout cas, la fille de Schumacker pourrait n'être qu'une fantaisie, et rien n'empêche, quand on a une femme, d'avoir en même temps une maîtresse; cela même est de bon ton. Mais non, ce n'est pas Ordener. Le fils du vice-roi ne se vêtirait pas d'un justaucorps usé; et cette vieille plume noire sans boucle, battue du vent et de la pluie! et ce grand manteau dont on pourrait faire une tente! et ces cheveux en désordre, sans peignes et sans frisure! et ces bottines à éperons de fer, souillées de boue et de poussière! Vraiment ce ne peut être lui. Le baron de Thorvick est chevalier de Dannebrog; cet étranger ne porte aucune décoration d'honneur. Si j'étais chevalier de Dannebrog, il me semble que je coucherais avec le collier de l'ordre. Oh non! il ne connaît seulement pas la *Clélie*. Non, ce n'est pas le fils du vice roi.

XI

Si l’homme pouvait conserver encore la chaleur de l’âme quand l’expérience l’éclaire; s’il héritait du temps sans se courber sous son poids, il n’insulterait jamais aux vertus exaltées, dont le premier conseil est toujours le sacrifice de soi-même.

Mme DE STAËL. *De l’Allemagne*.

— Eh bien! qu’est-ce? Vous, Poël! qui vous a fait monter?

— Son excellence oublie qu’elle vient de m’en donner l’ordre.

— Oui? dit le général. — Ah! c’était pour que vous me donnassiez ce carton.

Poël remit au gouverneur le carton, que celui-ci aurait pu prendre lui-même, en étendant un peu le bras.

Son excellence replaça machinalement le carton sans l’ouvrir, puis elle feuilleta quelques papiers avec distraction.

— Poël, je voulais aussi vous demander…. Quelle heure est-il?

— Six heures du matin, répondit le valet au général, qui avait une horloge sous les yeux.

— Je voulais vous dire, Poël…. Qu’y a-t-il de nouveau dans le palais?

Le général continua sa revue des papiers, écrivant d’un air préoccupé quelques mots sur chacun d’eux.

— Rien, votre excellence, sinon que l’on attend encore mon noble maître, dont je vois que le général est inquiet.

Le général se leva de son grand bureau, et regarda Poël d’un air d’humeur.

— Vous avez de mauvais yeux, Poël. Moi, inquiet d’Ordener! Je sais le motif de son absence; je ne l’attends pas encore.

Le général Levin de Knud était tellement jaloux de son autorité, qu’elle lui eût semblé compromise, si un subalterne eût pu deviner une de ses secrètes pensées, et croire qu’Ordener avait agi sans son ordre.

— Poël, poursuivit-il, retirez-vous.

Le valet sortit.

— En vérité, s’écria le gouverneur resté seul, Ordener use et abuse. À force de plier la lame, on la brise. Me faire passer une nuit d’insomnie et d’impatience! exposer le général Levin aux sarcasmes d’une chancelière et aux conjectures d’un valet! et tout cela pour qu’un vieil ennemi ait les premiers embrassements qu’il doit à un vieil ami. Ordener! Ordener! les caprices tuent la liberté. Qu’il vienne, qu’il arrive maintenant, du diable si je ne l’accueille pas comme la poudre accueille le feu! Exposer le gouverneur de Drontheim aux conjectures d’un valet, aux sarcasmes d’une chancelière! Qu’il vienne!

Le général continuait d’apostiller les papiers sans les lire, tant sa mauvaise humeur le préoccupait.

— Mon général! mon noble père! s’écria une voix connue.

Ordener serrait dans ses bras le vieillard, qui ne songea pas même à réprimer un cri de joie.

— Ordener, mon brave Ordener! Pardieu! que je suis aisé!…. — La réflexion arriva au milieu de cette phrase. — Je suis aisé, seigneur baron, que vous sachiez maîtriser vos sentiments. Vous paraissez avoir du plaisir à me revoir; c’est sans doute pour vous mortifier que vous vous en êtes imposé la privation depuis vingt-quatre heures que vous êtes ici.

— Mon père, vous m’avez souvent dit qu’un ennemi malheureux devait passer avant un ami heureux. Je viens de Munckholm.

— Sans doute, dit le général, quand le malheur de l’ennemi est imminent. Mais l’avenir de Schumacker….

— Est plus menaçant que jamais. Noble général, une trame odieuse est ourdie contre cet infortuné. Des hommes nés ses amis veulent le perdre. Un homme né son ennemi saura le servir.

Le général, dont le visage s’était par degrés entièrement adouci, interrompit Ordener.

— Bien, mon cher Ordener. Mais que dis-tu là? Schumacker est sous ma sauvegarde. Quels hommes? quelles trames?

Ordener aurait été bien empêché de répondre clairement à cette question. Il n’avait que des lueurs très vagues, que des présomptions très incertaines sur la position de l’homme pour lequel il allait exposer sa vie. Bien des gens trouveront qu’il agissait follement; mais les âmes jeunes font ce qu’elles croient juste par instinct et non par calcul; et d’ailleurs, dans ce monde où la prudence est si aride et la sagesse si ironique, qui nie que la générosité soit folie? Tout est relatif sur la terre, où tout est borné; et la vertu serait une grande démence, si derrière les hommes il n’y avait Dieu. Ordener était dans l’âge où l’on croit et où l’on est cru. Il risquait ses jours de confiance. Le général accueillit de même des raisons qui n’auraient pas résisté à une discussion froide.

— Quelles trames? quels hommes? mon bon père. Dans quelques jours j’aurai tout éclairci; alors vous saurez tout ce que je saurai. Je vais repartir ce soir.

— Comment! s’écria le vieillard, tu ne me donneras encore que quelques heures! Mais où vas-tu? pourquoi pars-tu, mon cher fils?

— Vous m’avez quelquefois permis, mon noble père, de faire une action louable en secret.

— Oui, mon brave Ordener; mais tu pars sans trop savoir pourquoi, et tu sais quelle grande affaire te demande.

— Mon père m’a laissé un mois de réflexion, je le consacre aux intérêts d’un autre. Bonne action donne bon conseil. D’ailleurs à mon retour nous verrons.

— Quoi! reprit le général d’un ton de sollicitude, ce mariage te déplairait-il? on dit Ulrique d’Ahlefeld si belle! dis-moi, l’as-tu vue?

— Je crois qu’oui, dit Ordener; il me semble qu’elle est belle, en effet.

— Eh bien? reprit le gouverneur.

— Eh bien, dit Ordener, elle ne sera pas ma femme.

Ce mot froid et décisif frappa le général comme un coup violent. Les soupçons de l’orgueilleuse comtesse lui revinrent à l’esprit.

— Ordener, dit-il en hochant la tête, je devrais être sage, car j’ai été pécheur. Eh bien, je suis un vieux fou! Ordener! le prisonnier a une fille….

— Oh! s’écria le jeune homme, général, je voulais vous en parler. Je vous demande, mon père, votre protection pour cette faible et opprimée jeune fille.

— En vérité, dit gravement le gouverneur, tes instances sont vives.

Ordener revint un peu à lui.

— Et comment ne le seraient-elles pas pour une pauvre prisonnière à laquelle on veut arracher la vie, et, ce qui est bien plus précieux, l’honneur?

— La vie! l’honneur! mais c’est moi pourtant qui gouverne ici, et j’ignore toutes ces horreurs! Explique-toi.

— Mon noble père, la vie du prisonnier et de sa fille sans défense est menacée par un infernal complot.

— Mais ce que tu avances est grave; quelle preuve en as-tu?

— Le fils aîné d’une puissante famille est en ce moment à Munckholm; il y est pour séduire la comtesse Éthel. Il me l’a dit lui-même.

Le général recula de trois pas.

— Dieu, Dieu! pauvre jeune abandonnée! Ordener, Ordener! Éthel et Schumacker sont sous ma protection. Quel est le misérable? quelle est la famille?

Ordener s’approcha du général et lui serra la main.

— La famille d’Ahlefeld.

— D’Ahlefeld! dit le vieux gouverneur; oui, la chose est claire, le lieutenant Frédéric est encore en ce moment à Munckholm. Noble Ordener, on veut t’allier à cette race. Je conçois ta répugnance, noble Ordener!

Le vieillard, croisant les bras, resta quelques moments rêveur, puis il vint à Ordener et le serra sur sa poitrine.

— Jeune homme, tu peux partir; ta protection ne sera pas absente pour tes protégés; je leur reste. Oui, pars; tu fais bien de toute manière. Cette infernale comtesse d’Ahlefeld est ici, tu le sais peut-être?

— La noble dame comtesse d’Ahlefeld, dit la voix de l’huissier qui ouvrait la porte.

À ce nom Ordener recula machinalement vers le fond de la chambre, et la comtesse, entrant sans l’apercevoir, s’écria:

— Seigneur général, votre élève se joue de vous; il n’est point allé à Munckholm.

— En vérité! dit le général.

— Eh mon Dieu! mon fils Frédéric, qui sort du palais, était hier de garde au donjon, et n’a vu personne.

— Vraiment, noble dame? répéta le général.

— Ainsi, continua la comtesse en souriant d’un air de triomphe, général, n’attendez plus votre Ordener.

Le gouverneur resta grave et froid.

— Je ne l’attends plus en effet, dame comtesse.

— Général, dit la comtesse en se détournant, je croyais que nous étions seuls. Quel est?….

La comtesse attacha son regard scrutateur sur Ordener, qui s’inclina.

— Vraiment, poursuivit-elle, — je ne l’ai vu qu’une fois… — mais… sans ce costume, ce serait….

— Seigneur général, c’est le fils du vice-roi?

— Lui-même, noble dame, dit Ordener, s’inclinant de nouveau.

La comtesse sourit.

— En ce cas permettez-vous à une dame, qui doit bientôt être plus encore pour vous, de vous demander où vous êtes allé hier, seigneur comte.

— Seigneur comte! Je ne crois pas avoir eu le malheur de perdre déjà mon noble père, dame comtesse.

— Ce n’est certes point là ma pensée. Mieux vaut devenir comte en prenant une épouse qu’en perdant un père.

— L’un ne vaut guère mieux que l’autre, noble dame.

La comtesse, un peu interdite, prit cependant le parti d’éclater de rire.

— Allons, on m’avait dit vrai; sa courtoisie est un peu sauvage. Elle se familiarisera pourtant avec les présents des dames, quand Ulrique d’Ahlefeld lui passera au cou la chaîne de l’ordre de l’Éléphant.

— Véritable chaîne en effet! dit Ordener.

— Vous verrez, général Levin, reprit la comtesse, dont le rire devenait embarrassé, que votre intraitable élève ne voudra pas non plus tenir d’une dame son rang de colonel.

— Vous avez raison, dame comtesse, répliqua Ordener, un homme qui porte l’épée ne doit pas devoir ses aiguillettes à un jupon.

La physionomie de la grande dame se rembrunit tout à fait.

— Ho! ho! d’où vient donc le seigneur baron? Est-il bien vrai que sa courtoisie ne soit pas allée hier à Munckholm?

— Noble dame, je ne satisfais pas toujours à toutes les questions. — Mais, général, nous nous reverrons….

Puis, serrant la main du vieillard et saluant la comtesse, il sortit, laissant la dame stupéfaite de tout ce qu’elle ignorait, seule avec le gouverneur, indigné de tout ce qu’il savait.

XII

… L’homme qui est en ce moment assis près de lui, qui rompt avec lui son pain et boit à sa santé la coupe qu’ils ont partagée ensemble, sera le premier à l’assassiner.

SHAKESPEARE, *Timon d’Athènes*.

Que le lecteur se transporte maintenant sur la route de Drontheim à Skongen, route étroite et pierreuse qui côtoie le golfe de Drontheim jusqu’au hameau de Vygla, il ne tardera pas à entendre les pas de deux voyageurs qui sont sortis de la porte dite de Skongen à la chute du jour, et montent assez rapidement les collines étagées sur lesquelles serpente le chemin de Vygla.

Tous deux sont enveloppés de manteaux. L’un marche d’un pas jeune et ferme, le corps droit et la tête levée; l’extrémité d’un sabre dépasse le bord de son manteau, et, malgré l’obscurité de la nuit, on peut voir une plume se balancer au souffle du vent sur sa toque. L’autre est un peu plus grand que son compagnon, mais légèrement voûté; on voit sur son dos une bosse, formée sans doute par une besace que cache un grand manteau noir dont les bords profondément dentelés annoncent les bons et loyaux services. Il n’a d’autre arme qu’un long bâton dont il aide sa marche inégale et précipitée.

Si la nuit empêche le lecteur de distinguer les traits des deux voyageurs, il les reconnaîtra peut-être à la conversation que l’un d’eux entame après une heure de route silencieuse, et par conséquent ennuyeuse.

— Maître! mon jeune maître! nous sommes au point d’où l’on aperçoit à la fois la tour de Vygla et les clochers de Drontheim. Devant nous, à l’horizon, cette masse noire, c’est la tour; derrière nous; voici la cathédrale, dont les arcs-boutants, plus sombres encore que le ciel, se dessinent comme les côtes de la carcasse d’un mammouth.

— Vygla est-il loin de Skongen? demanda l’autre piéton.

— Nous avons l’Ordals à traverser, seigneur; nous ne serons pas à Skongen avant trois heures du matin.

— Quelle est l’heure qui sonne en ce moment?

— Juste Dieu, maître! vous me faites trembler. Oui, c’est la cloche de Drontheim, dont le vent nous apporte les sons. Cela annonce l’orage. Le souffle du nord-ouest amène les nuages.

— Les étoiles, en effet, ont toutes disparu derrière nous.

— Doublons le pas, mon noble seigneur, de grâce. L’orage arrive, et peut-être s’est-on déjà aperçu à la ville de la mutilation du cadavre de Gill et de ma fuite. Doublons le pas.

— Volontiers. Vieillard, votre fardeau paraît lourd; cédez-le-moi, je suis jeune et plus vigoureux que vous.

— Non, en vérité, noble maître; ce n’est point à l’aigle à porter l’écaille de la tortue. Je suis trop indigne que vous vous chargiez de ma besace.

— Mais, vieillard, si elle vous fatigue? Elle paraît pesante. Que contient-elle donc? Tout à l’heure vous avez bronché, cela a résonné comme du fer.

Le vieillard s’écarta brusquement du jeune homme.

— Cela a résonné, maître! oh non! vous vous êtes trompé. Elle ne contient rien… que des vivres, des habits. Non, elle ne me fatigue pas, seigneur.

La proposition bienveillante du jeune homme paraissait avoir causé à son vieux compagnon un effroi qu’il s’efforçait de dissimuler.

— Eh bien, répondit le jeune homme sans s’en apercevoir, si ce fardeau ne vous fatigue pas, gardez-le.

Le vieillard, tranquillisé, se hâta néanmoins de changer la conversation.

— Il est triste de suivre, la nuit, en fugitifs, une route qu’il serait si agréable, seigneur, de parcourir le jour en observateurs. On trouve sur les bords du golfe, à notre gauche, une profusion de pierres runiques, sur lesquelles on peut étudier des caractères tracés, suivant les traditions, par les dieux et les géants. À notre droite, derrière les rochers qui bordent le chemin, s’étend le marais salé de Sciold, qui communique sans doute avec la mer par quelque canal souterrain, puisque l’on y pêche le lombric marin, ce poisson singulier qui, d’après les découvertes de votre serviteur et guide, mange du sable. C’est dans la tour de Vygla, dont nous approchons, que le roi païen Vermond fit rôtir les mamelles de sainte Étheldera, cette glorieuse martyre, avec du bois de la vraie croix, apporté à Copenhague par Olaüs III, et conquis par le roi de Norvège. On dit que depuis on a essayé inutilement de faire une chapelle de cette tour maudite; toutes les croix qu’on y a placées successivement ont été consumées par le feu du ciel.

En ce moment un immense éclair couvrit le golfe, la colline, les rochers, la tour, et disparut avant que l’oeil des deux voyageurs eût pu discerner aucun de ces objets. Ils s’arrêtèrent spontanément, et l’éclair fut suivi presque immédiatement d’un coup de tonnerre violent, dont l’écho se prolongea de nuage en nuage dans le ciel, et de rocher en rocher sur la terre.

Ils levèrent les yeux. Toutes les étoiles étaient voilées, de grosses nues roulaient rapidement les unes sur les autres, et la tempête s’amassait comme une avalanche au-dessus de leurs têtes. Le grand vent sous lequel couraient toutes ces masses n’était point encore descendu jusqu’aux arbres, qu’aucun souffle n’agitait, et sur lesquels ne retentissait encore aucune goutte de pluie. On entendait en haut comme une rumeur orageuse qui, jointe à la rumeur du golfe, était le seul bruit qui s’élevât dans l’obscurité de la nuit, redoublée par les ténèbres de la tempête.

Ce tumultueux silence fut soudain interrompu, près des deux voyageurs, par une espèce de rugissement qui fit tressaillir le vieillard.

— Dieu tout-puissant! s’écria-t-il en serrant le bras du jeune homme, c’est le rire du diable dans l’orage, ou la voix de….

Un nouvel éclair, un nouveau coup de tonnerre lui coupèrent la parole. La tempête commença alors avec impétuosité, comme si elle eut attendu ce signal. Les deux voyageurs resserrèrent leurs manteaux pour se garantir à la fois de la pluie qui s’échappait des nuages par torrents, et de la poussière épaisse qu’un vent furieux enlevait par tourbillons à la terre encore sèche.

— Vieillard, dit le jeune homme, un éclair vient de me montrer la tour de Vygla sur notre droite; quittons la route et cherchons-y un abri.

— Un abri dans la Tour-Maudite! s’écria le vieillard, que saint Hospice nous protège! songez, jeune maître, que cette tour est déserte.

— Tant mieux! vieillard, nous n’attendrons pas à la porte.

— Songez quelle abomination l’a souillée!

— Eh bien! qu’elle se purifie en nous abritant. Allons, vieillard, suivez-moi. Je vous déclare qu’en une pareille nuit je tenterais l’hospitalité d’une caverne de voleurs. Alors, malgré les remontrances du vieillard, dont il avait saisi le bras, il se dirigea vers l’édifice, que les fréquentes lueurs des éclairs lui montraient à peu de distance. En approchant, ils aperçurent une lumière à l’une des meurtrières de la tour.

— Vous voyez, dit le jeune homme, que cette tour n’est pas déserte.

Vous voilà rassuré, sans doute.

— Dieu! bon Dieu! s’écria le vieillard, où me menez-vous, maître? Ne plaise à saint Hospice que j’entre dans cet oratoire du démon!

Ils étaient au bas de la tour. Le jeune voyageur frappa avec force à la porte neuve de cette ruine redoutée.

— Tranquillisez-vous, vieillard; quelque pieux cénobite sera venu sanctifier cette demeure profanée, en l'habitant.

— Non, disait son compagnon, je n'entrerai pas. Je réponds que nul ermite ne peut vivre ici, à moins qu'il n'ait pour chapelet une des sept chaînes de Belzébuth.

Cependant une lumière était descendue de meurtrière en meurtrière, et vint briller à travers la serrure de la porte.

— Tu viens bien tard, Nychol! cria une voix aigre; on dresse la potence à midi, et il ne faut que six heures pour venir de Skongen à Vygla. Est-ce qu'il y a eu surcroît de besogne?

Cette question tomba au moment où la porte s'ouvrait. La femme qui l'ouvrait, apercevant deux figures étrangères, au lieu de celle qu'elle attendait, poussa un cri d'effroi et de menace, et recula de trois pas. L'aspect de cette femme n'était pas lui-même très rassurant. Elle était grande, son bras élevait au-dessus de sa tête une lampe de fer dont son visage était fortement éclairé. Ses traits livides, sa figure sèche et anguleuse, avaient quelque chose de cadavéreux, et il s'échappait de ses yeux creux des rayons sinistres pareils à ceux d'une torche funèbre. Elle était vêtue depuis la ceinture d'un jupon de serge écarlate, qui ne laissait voir que ses pieds nus, et paraissait souillé de taches d'un autre rouge. Sa poitrine décharnée était à moitié couverte d'une veste d'homme de même couleur, dont les manches étaient coupées au coude. Le vent, entrant par la porte ouverte, agitait au-dessus de sa tête ses longs cheveux gris à peine retenus par une ficelle d'écorce, ce qui rendait plus sauvage encore l'expression de sa farouche physionomie.

— Bonne dame, dit le plus jeune des nouveaux-venus, la pluie tombe à flots, vous avez un toit et nous avons de l'or.

Son vieux compagnon le tirait par son manteau, et s'écriait à voix basse:

— O maître! que dites-vous là? Si ce n'est pas ici la maison du diable, c'est l'habitacle de quelque bandit. Notre or nous perdra, loin de nous protéger.

— Paix! dit le jeune homme; et tirant une bourse de sa veste, il la fit briller aux yeux de l'hôtesse, en répétant sa prière.

Celle-ci, revenue un peu de sa surprise, les considérait alternativement d'un oeil fixe et hagard.

— Étrangers! s'écria-t-elle enfin, comme n'ayant pas entendu leur voix, vos esprits gardiens vous ont-ils abandonnés? que venez-vous chercher parmi les habitants maudits de la Tour-Maudite? Étrangers! ce ne sont point des hommes qui vous ont indiqué ces ruines pour abri, car tous vous auraient dit: Mieux vaut l'éclair de la tempête que le foyer de la tour de Vygla. Le seul vivant qui puisse entrer ici n'entre dans aucune demeure des autres vivants, il ne quitte la solitude que pour la foule, il ne vit que pour la mort. Il n'a de place que dans les malédictions des hommes, il ne sert qu'à leurs vengeances, il n'existe que par leurs crimes. Et le plus vil scélérat, à l'heure du châtiment, se décharge sur lui du mépris universel, et se croit encore en droit d'y ajouter le sien. Étrangers! vous l'êtes, car votre pied n'a pas encore repoussé avec horreur le seuil de cette tour; ne troublez pas plus longtemps la louve et les louveteaux; regagnez le chemin où marchent tous les autres hommes, et, si vous ne voulez pas être fuis de vos frères, ne leur dites pas que votre visage ait été éclairé par la lampe des hôtes de la tour de Vygla.

À ces mots, indiquant la porte du geste, elle s'avança vers les deux voyageurs. Le vieux tremblait de tous ses membres, et regardait d'un air suppliant le jeune, lequel, n'ayant rien compris aux paroles de la grande femme, à cause de l'extrême volubilité de son débit, la croyait folle, et ne se sentait d'ailleurs nullement disposé à retourner sous la pluie, qui continuait de tomber à grand bruit.

— Par ma foi, notre bonne hôtesse, vous venez de nous peindre un personnage singulier, avec lequel je ne veux pas perdre l'occasion de faire connaissance.

— La connaissance avec lui, jeune homme, est bientôt faite, plus tôt terminée. Si votre démon vous y pousse, allez assassiner un vivant ou profaner un mort.

— Profaner un mort! répéta le vieillard d'une voix tremblante et se cachant dans l'ombre de son compagnon.

— Je ne comprends guère, dit celui-ci, vos moyens, au moins très indirects; il est plus court de rester ici. Il faudrait être fou pour continuer sa route par un pareil temps.

— Mais bien plus fou encore, murmura le vieillard, pour s'abriter contre un pareil temps dans un pareil lieu.

— Malheureux! s'écria la femme, ne frappez pas au seuil de celui qui ne sait ouvrir d'autre porte que celle du sépulcre.

— Dût la porte du sépulcre s'ouvrir en effet pour moi avec la vôtre, femme, il ne sera pas dit que j'aurai reculé devant une parole sinistre. Mon sabre me répond de tout. Allons, fermez la tour, car le vent est froid, et prenez cet or.

— Eh! que me fait votre or! reprit l’hôtesse; précieux dans vos mains, il deviendra dans les miennes plus vil que l’étain. Eh bien, restez donc pour de l’or. Il peut garantir des orages du ciel, il ne sauve pas du mépris des hommes. Restez; vous payez l’hospitalité plus cher qu’on ne paie un meurtre. Attendez-moi un instant ici, et donnez-moi votre or. Oui, c’est la première fois que les mains d’un homme entrent ici chargées d’or sans être souillées de sang.

Alors, après avoir déposé sa lampe et barricadé la porte, elle disparut sous la voûte d’un escalier noir, percé dans le fond de la salle.

Tandis que le vieillard frissonnait, et, invoquant, sous tous ses noms, le glorieux saint Hospice, maudissait de bon coeur, mais à voix basse, l’imprudence de son jeune compagnon, celui-ci prit la lumière, et se mit à parcourir la grande pièce circulaire où ils se trouvaient. Ce qu’il vit en approchant de la muraille le fit tressaillir, et le vieillard, qui l’avait suivi du regard, s’écria:

— Grand Dieu, maître! une potence?

Une grande potence était en effet appuyée au mur, et atteignait au cintre de la voûte haute et humide.

— Oui, dit le jeune homme et voici des scies de bois et de fer, des chaînes, des carcans; voici un chevalet et de grandes tenailles suspendues au-dessus.

— Grands saints du paradis! s’écria le vieillard, où sommes-nous?

Le jeune homme poursuivit froidement son examen.

— Ceci est un rouleau de corde de chanvre; voilà des fourneaux et des chaudières; cette partie de la muraille est tapissée de pinces et de scalpels; voici des fouets de cuir garnis de pointes d’acier, une hache, une masse.

— C’est donc ici le garde-meuble de l’enfer! interrompit le vieillard épouvanté de cette terrible énumération.

— Voici, continua l’autre, des siphons en cuivre, des roues à dents de bronze, une caisse de grands clous, un cric. En vérité, ce sont de sinistres ameublements. Il peut vous sembler fâcheux que mon impatience vous ait amené ici avec moi.

— Vraiment, vous en convenez!

Le vieillard était plus mort que vif.

— Ne vous effrayez pas; qu'importe le lieu où vous êtes? j'y suis avec vous.

— Belle défense! murmura le vieillard, chez qui une plus grande terreur affaiblissait la crainte et le respect pour son jeune compagnon; un sabre de trente pouces contre une potence de trente coudées!

La grande femme rouge reparut, et, reprenant la lampe de fer, fit signe aux voyageurs de la suivre. Ils montèrent avec précaution un escalier étroit et dégradé pratiqué dans l'épaisseur du mur de la tour. À chaque meurtrière, une bouffée de vent et de pluie venait menacer la flamme tremblante de la lampe, que l'hôtesse couvrait de ses mains longues et diaphanes. Ce ne fut pas sans avoir plus d'une fois trébuché sur des pierres roulantes, que l'imagination alarmée du vieillard prenait pour des os humains épars sur les degrés, qu'ils arrivèrent au premier étage de l'édifice, dans une salle ronde pareille à la salle inférieure. Au milieu, suivant l'usage gothique, brillait un vaste foyer, dont la fumée s'échappait par une ouverture percée dans le plafond, non sans obscurcir très sensiblement l'atmosphère de la salle, et dont la lumière, jointe à celle de la lampe de fer, avait été aperçue des deux voyageurs sur le chemin. Une broche, chargée de viande encore fraîche, tournait devant le feu. Le vieillard se détourna avec horreur.

— C'est à ce foyer exécrable, dit-il à son compagnon, que la braise de la vraie croix a consumé les membres d'une sainte.

Une table grossière était placée à quelque distance du foyer. La femme invita les voyageurs à s'y asseoir.

— Étrangers, dit-elle en plaçant la lampe devant eux, le souper sera bientôt prêt, et mon mari va sans doute se hâter d'arriver, de peur que l'esprit de minuit ne l'emporte en passant près de la Tour-Maudite.

Alors Ordener — car le lecteur a sans doute déjà deviné que c'était lui et son guide Benignus Spiagudry — put examiner à son aise le déguisement bizarre pour lequel ce dernier avait épuisé toutes les ressources de son imagination fécondée par la peur d'être reconnu et repris. Le pauvre concierge fugitif avait échangé ses habits de cuir de renne contre un vêtement noir complet, laissé jadis dans le Spladgest par un célèbre grammairien de Drontheim, qui s'était noyé du désespoir de n'avoir pu trouver pourquoi *Jupiter* donnait *Jovis* au génitif. Ses sabots de coudrier avaient fait place aux bottes fortes d'un postillon écrasé par ses chevaux, dans lesquelles ses jambes fluettes étaient tellement à l'aise qu'il n'aurait pu marcher sans le secours d'une demi-botte de foin. La vaste perruque d'un jeune et élégant voyageur français assassiné par des voleurs aux portes de Drontheim cachait sa calvitie, et flottait sur ses épaules pointues et inégales. L'un de ses yeux était couvert d'un emplâtre, et, grâce à un pot de fard qu'il avait trouvé dans les poches d'une vieille fille morte d'amour, ses joues pâles et creuses s'étaient revêtues d'un vermillon insolite, agrément auquel la pluie avait fait participer jusqu'à son menton. Avant de s'asseoir, il plaça soigneusement sous lui le paquet qu'il portait sur son dos, s'enveloppa de son vieux manteau, et, tandis qu'il absorbait toute l'attention de son compagnon, la sienne paraissait entièrement concentrée sur le rôti que surveillait l'hôtesse, et vers lequel il lançait de temps en temps des regards d'inquiétude et d'horreur. Sa bouche laissait par intervalles échapper des mots entrecoupés: — Chair humaine!… *horrendas epulas!*… — Anthropophages!… — Souper de Moloch!… — *Ne pueras coram populo Medea trucidet*… — Où sommes-nous? Atrée… — Druidesse… — Irmensul… Le diable a foudroyé Lycaon….

Enfin il s'écria:

— Juste ciel! Dieu merci! j'aperçois une queue!

Ordener, qui, l'ayant considéré et écouté attentivement, avait à peu près suivi le fil de ses idées, ne put s'empêcher de sourire.

— Cette queue n'a rien de rassurant. C'est peut-être un quartier du diable.

Spiagudry n'entendit pas cette plaisanterie; son regard s'était attaché au fond de la salle. Il tressaillit et se pencha à l'oreille d'Ordener.

— Maître, regardez, là, au fond, sur ce tas de paille, dans l'ombre….

— Eh bien? dit Ordener.

— Trois corps nus et immobiles, — trois cadavres d'enfants!

— On frappe à la porte de la tour, s'écria la femme rouge, accroupie près du foyer.

En effet, un coup suivi de deux autres plus forts s'était fait entendre dans le bruit de l'orage toujours croissant.

— C'est enfin lui! c'est Nychol!

Et, prenant la lampe, l'hôtesse descendit précipitamment.

Les deux voyageurs n'avaient pas encore repris leur conversation quand ils entendirent dans la salle basse un bruit confus de voix, au milieu duquel s'élevèrent enfin ces paroles prononcées avec un accent qui fit tressaillir et trembler Spiagudry:

— Femme, tais-toi, nous resterons. Le tonnerre entre sans qu’on lui ouvre la porte.

Spiagudry se serra contre Ordener.

— Maître! maître! dit-il faiblement, malheur à nous!

Un tumulte de pas se fit entendre dans l’escalier, puis deux hommes, revêtus d’habits religieux, entrèrent dans la salle, suivis de l’hôtesse effarée.

L’un de ces hommes était assez grand et portait l’habit noir et la chevelure ronde des ministres luthériens; l’autre, de petite taille, avait une robe d’ermite nouée d’une ceinture de corde. Le capuchon rabattu sur son visage ne laissait apercevoir que sa longue barbe noire, et ses mains étaient entièrement cachées sous les larges manches de sa robe.

À l’aspect de ces deux personnages pacifiques, Spiagudry sentit s’évanouir la terreur que la voix étrange de l’un d’eux lui avait causée.

— Ne vous alarmez pas, chère dame, disait le ministre à l’hôtesse, des prêtres chrétiens se rendent utiles à qui leur nuit; voudraient-ils nuire à qui leur est utile? Nous implorons humblement un abri. Si le révérend docteur qui m’accompagne vous a parlé durement tout à l’heure, il a eu tort d’oublier cette modération de la voix, recommandée par nos voeux; hélas! les plus saints peuvent faillir. J’étais égaré sur la route de Skongen à Drontheim, sans guide dans la nuit, sans asile dans la tempête. Ce révérend frère, que j’ai rencontré, éloigné comme moi de sa demeure, a daigné me permettre de venir avec lui vers la vôtre. Il m’avait vanté votre bonté hospitalière, chère dame; sans doute, il ne s’est pas trompé. Ne nous dites pas comme le mauvais pasteur: *Advena, cur intrus?* Accueillez-nous, digne hôtesse, et Dieu sauvera vos moissons de l’orage, Dieu donnera dans la tempète un abri à vos troupeaux, comme vous en aurez donné un aux voyageurs égarés!

— Vieillard, interrompit la femme d’une voix farouche, je n’ai ni moissons ni troupeaux.

— Eh bien! si vous êtes pauvres, Dieu bénit le pauvre avant le riche. Vous vieillirez avec votre époux, respectés, non pour vos biens, mais pour vos vertus; vos enfants croîtront, entourés de l’estime des hommes et seront ce qu’aura été leur père.

— Taisez-vous! cria l’hôtesse. C’est en restant ce que nous sommes que nos enfants vieilliront comme nous dans le mépris des hommes, transmis sur notre race de génération en génération. Taisez-vous, vieillard! La bénédiction se tourne en malédiction sur nos têtes.

— O ciel! reprit le ministre, qui donc êtes-vous? dans quels crimes passez-vous votre vie?

— Qu’appelez-vous crimes? qu’appelez-vous vertus? nous jouissons ici d’un privilège; nous ne pouvons avoir de vertus ni commettre de crimes.

— La raison de cette femme est égarée, dit le ministre se tournant vers le petit ermite, qui séchait sa robe de bure devant le foyer.

— Non, prêtre! répliqua la femme, sachez où vous êtes. J’aime mieux faire horreur que pitié. Je ne suis pas une insensée, mais la femme du….

Le retentissement prolongé de la porte de la tour sous un coup violent empêcha d’entendre le reste, au grand désappointement de Spiagudry et d’Ordener qui avaient prêté une attention muette à ce dialogue.

— Maudit soit, dit la femme rouge entre ses dents, le syndic haut-justicier de Skongen, qui nous a assigné pour demeure cette tour voisine de la route! peut-être n’est-ce pas encore Nychol.

Elle prit néanmoins la lampe.

— Après tout, si c’est encore un voyageur, qu’importe? le ruisseau peut couler où le torrent a passé. Les quatre voyageurs restés seuls s’entre-regardaient aux lueurs du foyer. Spiagudry, d’abord épouvanté par la voix de l’ermite, et rassuré ensuite par sa barbe noire, eût peut-être recommencé à trembler s’il eût vu de quel oeil perçant celui-ci l’observait en dessous de son capuchon.

Dans le silence général, le ministre hasarda une question:

— Frère ermite, je présume que vous êtes un des prêtres catholiques échappés à la dernière persécution, et que vous regagniez votre retraite lorsque, pour mon bonheur, je vous ai rencontré; pourriez-vous me dire où nous sommes?

La porte délabrée de l’escalier en ruine se rouvrit avant que le frère ermite eût répondu.

— Femme, vienne un orage, et il y aura foule pour s’asseoir à notre table exécrée et s’abriter sous notre toit maudit.

— Nychol, répondit la femme, je n’ai pu empêcher….

— Et qu’importent tous ces hôtes, pourvu qu’ils paient? l’or est tout aussi bien gagné en hébergeant un voyageur qu’en étranglant un brigand.

Celui qui parlait ainsi s’était arrêté devant la porte, où les quatre étrangers pouvaient le contempler à leur aise. C’était un homme de proportions colossales, vêtu, comme l’hôtesse, de serge rouge. Son énorme tête paraissait immédiatement posée sur ses larges épaules, ce qui contrastait avec le cou long et osseux de sa gracieuse épouse. Il avait le front bas, le nez camard, les sourcils épais; ses yeux, entourés d'une ligne de pourpre, brillaient comme du feu dans du sang. Le bas de son visage, entièrement rasé, laissait voir sa bouche grande et profonde, dont un rire hideux entr'ouvrait les lèvres noires comme les bords d'une plaie incurable. Deux touffes de barbe crépue, pendantes de ses joues sur son cou, donnaient à sa figure, vue de face, une forme carrée. Cet homme était coiffé d'un feutre gris, sur lequel ruisselait la pluie, et dont sa main n'avait seulement pas daigné toucher le bord à l'aspect des quatre voyageurs.

En l'apercevant, Benignus Spiagudry poussa un cri d'épouvante, et le ministre luthérien se détourna frappé de surprise et d'horreur, tandis que le maître du logis, qui l'avait reconnu, lui adressait la parole.

— Comment, vous voilà, seigneur ministre! En vérité, je ne croyais pas avoir l'amusement de revoir aujourd'hui votre air piteux et votre mine effarouchée.

Le prêtre réprima son premier mouvement de répugnance. Ses traits devinrent graves et sereins.

— Et moi, mon fils, je m'applaudis du hasard qui a amené le pasteur vers la brebis égarée, afin, sans doute, que la brebis revînt enfin au pasteur.

— Ah! par le gibet d'Aman, reprit l'autre en éclatant de rire, voilà la première fois que je m'entends comparer à une brebis. Croyez-moi, père, si vous voulez flatter le vautour, ne l'appelez pas pigeon.

— Celui par lequel le vautour devient colombe, console, mon fils, et ne flatte pas. Vous croyez que je vous crains, et je ne fais que vous plaindre.

— Il faut, en vérité, messire, que vous ayez bonne provision de pitié; j'aurais pensé que vous l'aviez épuisée tout entière sur ce pauvre diable, auquel vous montriez aujourd'hui votre croix pour lui cacher ma potence.

— Cet infortuné, répondit le prêtre, était moins à plaindre que vous; car il pleurait, et vous riez. Heureux qui reconnaît, au moment de l'expiation, combien le bras de l'homme est moins puissant que la parole de Dieu!

— Bien dit, père, reprit l'hôte avec une horrible et ironique gaieté. Celui qui pleure! Notre homme d'aujourd'hui, d'ailleurs, n'avait d'autre crime que d'aimer tellement le roi qu'il ne pouvait vivre sans faire le portrait de sa majesté sur des petites médailles de cuivre, qu'il dorait ensuite artistement pour les rendre plus dignes de la royale effigie. Notre gracieux souverain n'a pas été ingrat, et lui a donné en récompense de tant d'amour un beau cordon de chanvre, qui, pour l'instruction de mes dignes hôtes, lui a été conféré ce jour même sur la place publique de Skongen, par moi, grand-chancelier de l’ordre du Gibet, assisté de messire, ici présent, grand-aumônier dudit ordre.

— Malheureux! arrêtez, interrompit le prêtre. Comment celui qui châtie oublie-t-il le châtiment? Écoutez le tonnerre….

— Eh bien! qu’est-ce que le tonnerre? un éclat de rire de Satan.

— Grand Dieu! il vient d’assister à la mort, et il blasphème!

— Trêve aux sermons, vieux insensé, cria l’hôte d’une voix tonnante et presque irritée; sinon vous pourriez maudire l’ange des ténèbres qui nous a réunis deux fois en douze heures sur la même voiture et sous le même toit. Imitez votre camarade l’ermite, qui se tait, car il a bonne envie de retourner dans sa grotte de Lynrass. Je vous remercie, frère ermite, de la bénédiction que tous les matins, à votre passage sur la colline, je vous vois donner à la Tour-Maudite; mais, en vérité, jusqu’ici vous m’aviez semblé de haute taille, et cette barbe si noire m’avait paru blanche. Vous êtes bien cependant l’ermite de Lynrass, le seul ermite du Drontheimhus?

— Je suis en effet le seul, dit l’ermite d’une voix sourde.

— Nous sommes donc, reprit l’hôte, les deux solitaires de la province. — Holà! Bechlie, hâte un peu ce quartier d’agneau, car j’ai faim. J’ai été retardé, au village de Burlock, par ce maudit docteur Manryll, qui ne voulait me donner que douze ascalins du cadavre; on en donne quarante à cet infernal gardien du Spladgest, à Drontheim. — Hé, messire de la perruque, qu’avez-vous donc? vous allez tomber à la renverse. — À propos, Bechlie, as-tu terminé le squelette de l’empoisonneur Orgivius, ce fameux magicien? Il serait temps de l’envoyer au cabinet de curiosités de Berghen. As-tu dépêché l’un de tes petits marcassins au syndic de Loevig pour réclamer ce qu’il me doit? quatre doubles écus pour avoir fait bouillir une sorcière et deux alchimistes, et enlevé plusieurs chaînes des poutres de la salle de son tribunal, qu’elles déparaient; vingt ascalins pour avoir dépendu Ismaël Typhaine, juif dont s’était plaint le révérend évêque; et un écu pour avoir remis un bras de bois neuf à la potence de pierre du bourg?

— Le salaire, répondit la femme d’un voix aigre, est resté dans les mains du syndic, parce que ton fils avait oublié la cuiller de bois pour le recevoir, et qu’aucun valet du juge n’a voulu le lui remettre en main propre.

Le mari fronça le sourcil.

— Que leur cou me tombe entre les mains, ils verront si j’aurai besoin d’une cuiller de bois pour les toucher. Il faut pourtant ménager ce syndic.

C’est à lui qu’est renvoyée la requête du voleur Ivar, qui se plaint de ce que la question lui a été donnée, non par un tortionnaire, mais par moi, alléguant que, n’ayant pas encore été jugé, il n’est pas encore infâme. — À propos, femme, empêche donc tes petits de jouer avec mes tenailles et mes pinces;. ils ont dérangé tous mes instruments, si bien que je n’ai pu m’en servir aujourd’hui. — Où sont-ils, ces petits monstres? continua l’hôte en s’approchant du tas de paille où Spiagudry avait cru voir trois cadavres. Les voilà couchés là; ils dorment, malgré le bruit, comme trois dépendus.

À ces paroles, dont l’horreur contrastait avec la tranquillité effrayante et l’atroce gaieté de celui qui les prononçait, le lecteur a peut-etre dèja deviné quel est l’habitant de la tour de Vygla. Spiagudry, qui, dès son apparition, le reconnut pour l’avoir vu figurer souvent dans de sinistres cérémonies sur la place de Drontheim, se sentit près de défaillir d’épouvante, en songeant surtout au motif personnel qu’il avait depuis la veille pour craindre ce terrible fonctionnaire. Il se pencha vers Ordener, et lui dit d’une voix presque inarticulée:

— C’est Nychol Orugix, bourreau du Drontheimbus!

Ordener, d’abord frappé d’horreur, tressaillit et regretta la route et la tempête. Mais bientôt je ne sais quel sentiment de curiosité indéfinissable s’empara de lui, et, tout en plaignant l’embarras et l’épouvante de son vieux guide, il prêtait son attention entière aux paroles et à l’habitude de vie de l’être singulier qu’il avait sous les yeux, comme on écoute avidement le grondement d’une hyène ou le rugissement d’un tigre amené du désert dans nos villes. Le pauvre Benignus était loin d’avoir l’esprit assez libre pour faire de son côté des observations psychologiques. Caché derrière Ordener, il se ramassait dans son manteau, portait une main inquiète à son emplâtre, attirait sur son visage le derrière de sa perruque flottante, et ne respirait que par gros soupirs.

Cependant l’hôtesse avait servi sur un grand plat de terre le quartier d’agneau rôti, pourvu de sa queue rassurante. Le bourreau vint s’asseoir en face d’Ordener et de Spiagudry, entre les deux prêtres; et sa femme, après avoir chargé la table d’une cruche de bière miellée, d’un morceau de *rindebrod* [Footnote: Pain d’écorce dont se nourrit la classe indigente en Norvège.] et de cinq assiettes de bois, s’assit devant le feu, et s’occupa d’aiguiser les pinces ébréchées de son mari.

— Ça, révérend ministre, dit Orugix en riant, la brebis vous offre de l’agneau. Et vous, seigneur de la perruque, est-ce le vent qui a ainsi ramené votre coiffure sur votre visage?

— Le vent… seigneur, l’orage…. balbutia le tremblant Spiagudry.

— Allons, enhardissez-vous, mon vieux. Vous voyez que les seigneurs prêtres et moi nous sommes bons diables. Dites-nous qui vous êtes et quel est votre jeune compagnon le taciturne, et parlez un peu. Faisons connaissance. Si vos discours tiennent tout ce que promet votre vue, vous devez être bien amusant.

— Le maître plaisante, dit le concierge contractant ses lèvres, montrant ses dents et clignant son oeil pour avoir l’air de rire, je ne suis qu’un pauvre vieux.

— Oui, interrompit le jovial bourreau, quelque vieux savant, quelque vieux sorcier.

— Oh! seigneur maître, savant oui, sorcier non.

— Tant pis, un sorcier compléterait notre joyeux sanhédrin. — Seigneurs mes hôtes, buvons pour rendre la parole à ce vieux savant, qui va égayer notre souper. À la santé du pendu d’aujourd’hui, frère prédicateur! Eh bien! père ermite, vous refusez ma bière? L’ermite avait en effet tiré de dessous sa robe une grande gourde pleine d’une eau très claire, dont il remplit son verre.

— Parbleu! ermite de Lynrass, s’écria le bourreau, si vous ne goûtez pas de ma bière, je goûterai de cette eau que vous lui préférez.

— Soit, répondit l’ermite.

— Otez d’abord votre gant, révérend frère, répliqua le bourreau; on ne verse à boire qu’à main nue.

L’ermite fit un signe de refus.

— C’est un voeu, dit-il.

— Versez donc toujours, dit le bourreau.

À peine Orugix eut-il porté son verre à ses lèvres, qu’il le repoussa brusquement, tandis que l’ermite vidait le sien d’un trait.

— Par le calice de Jésus, révérend ermite, quelle est cette liqueur infernale? je n’en ai point bu de pareille, depuis le jour où je faillis me noyer dans ma navigation de Copenhague à Drontheim. En vérité, ermite, ce n’est pas de l’eau de la source de Lynrass; c’est de l’eau de mer.

— De l’eau de mer! répéta Spiagudry avec une épouvante qu’augmentait la vue du gant de l’ermite.

— Eh bien! dit le bourreau se tournant vers lui avec un éclat de rire, tout vous alarme donc ici, mon vieux Absalon, jusqu’à la boisson même d’un saint cénobite qui se mortifie?

— Hélas! non, maître. Mais de l’eau de mer…. Il n’y a qu’un homme….

— Allons, vous ne savez que dire, sire docteur; votre trouble parmi nous vient d’une mauvaise conscience ou du mépris.

Ces mots prononcés d’un ton d’humeur ramenèrent Spiagudry à la nécessité de dissimuler sa terreur. Pour amadouer son redoutable hôte, il appela à son secours sa vaste mémoire, et rallia le peu de présence d’esprit qui lui restait.

— Du mépris, moi, du mépris pour vous, seigneur maître! pour vous, dont la présence dans une province donne à cette province le *merum imperium* [Footnote: *Droit de sang*, d’avoir un bourreau.] pour vous, maître des hautes-oeuvres, exécuteur de la vindicte séculière, épée de la justice, bouclier de l’innocence! pour vous, qu’Aristote, livre six, chapitre dernier de ses *Politiques*, classe parmi les magistrats, et dont Paris de Puteo, dans son traité *de Syndico*, fixe le traitement à cinq écus d’or, comme l’atteste ce passage: *Quinque aureos manivolto*! pour vous, seigneur, dont les confrères à Cronstadt acquièrent la noblesse après trois cents têtes coupées! pour vous, dont les terribles mais honorables fonctions sont remplies avec orgueil, en Franconie par le plus nouveau marié, à Reutlingue par le plus jeune conseiller, à Stedien par le dernier bourgeois installé! Et ne sais-je pas encore, mon bon maître, que vos confrères ont en France droit de *havadium* sur chaque malade de Saint-Ladre, sur les pourceaux, et sur les gâteaux de la veille de l’épiphanie! Comment n’aurais-je pas un profond respect pour vous, quand l’abbé de Saint-Germain-des-Prés vous donne chaque année, à la Saint-Vincent, une tête de porc, et vous fait marcher en tête de sa procession!

Ici la verve érudite du concierge fut brusquement interrompue par le bourreau.

— C’est par ma foi la première nouvelle que j’en ai! Le docte abbé dont vous parlez, révérend, m’a jusqu’à présent fraudé de tous ces beaux droits que vous peignez d’une façon si séduisante. — Sires étrangers, poursuivit Orugix, sans m’arrêter à toutes les extravagances de ce vieux fou, il est vrai que j’ai manqué ma carrière. Je ne suis aujourd’hui que le pauvre bourreau d’une pauvre province. Eh bien! j’aurais dû certes faire un plus beau chemin que Stillison Dickoy, ce fameux bourreau de Moscovie. Croiriez-vous que je suis le même qui fut désigné, il y a vingt-quatre ans, pour l’exécution de Schumacker?

— De Schumacker, du comte de Griffenfeld! s’écria Ordener.

— Cela vous étonne, seigneur le muet. Eh bien! oui, de ce même Schumacker qu’un singulier hasard replace encore sous ma main, dans le cas où il plairait au roi de lever le sursis. — Vidons cette cruche, messieurs, et je vais vous conter comment il se fait qu’après avoir débuté avec tant d’éclat, je finisse si misérablement.

— J’étais, en 1676, valet de Rhum Stuald, bourreau royal de Copenhague. Lors de la condamnation du comte de Griffenfeld, mon maître étant tombé malade, je fus, grâce à mes protections, choisi pour le remplacer dans cette honorable exécution. Le 5 juin — je n’oublierai jamais ce jour, — dès cinq heures du matin, aidé du maître des basses oeuvres [Footnote: Charpentier des échafauds], je dressai sur la place de la citadelle un grand échafaud que nous tendîmes de noir, par respect pour le condamné. À huit heures la garde-noble entoura l’échafaud, et les hulans de Slesvig continrent la foule qui se pressait sur la place. Quel autre à ma place n’eût été enivré! Debout, et sabre en main, j’attendais sur l’estrade. Tous les regards étaient fixés sur moi; j’étais en ce moment le personnage le plus important des deux royaumes. Ma fortune, disais-je, est faite, car que pourraient sans moi tous ces grands seigneurs qui ont juré la perte du chancelier? Je me voyais déjà exécuteur royal en titre de la capitale; j’avais des valets, des privilèges… Écoutez! L’horloge du fort sonne dix heures. Le condamné sort de sa prison, traverse la place, monte à l’échafaud d’un pas ferme et d’un air tranquille. Je veux lui lier les cheveux; il me repousse, et se rend à lui-même ce dernier service. — Il y avait longtemps, dit-il en souriant au prieur de Saint-André, que je ne m’étais coiffé moi-même. Je lui offre le bandeau noir, il l’éloigné de ses yeux avec dédain, mais sans me marquer de mépris. — Mon ami, me dit-il, voilà peut-être la première fois qu’un espace de quelques pieds rassemble les deux officiers extrêmes de l’ordre judiciaire, le chancelier et le bourreau. Ces paroles sont restées gravées dans ma tête. Il refuse encore le coussin noir que je voulais mettre sous ses genoux, embrasse le prêtre, et s’agenouille, après avoir dit d’une voix forte qu’il mourait innocent. Alors je brisai d’un coup de masse l’écusson de ses armoiries, en criant, comme de coutume:

— Cela ne se fait pas sans une juste cause! Cet affront ébranla la fermeté du comte; il pâlit; mais il se hâta de dire: — Le roi me les a données, le roi peut me les ôter. Il appuya sa tête sur le billot, les yeux tournés vers l’est, et moi, je levai mon sabre des deux mains… Écoutez bien! — En ce moment un cri arrive jusqu'à moi: — Grâce, au nom du roi! grâce pour Schumacker! Je me retourne. C'était un aide de camp qui galopait vers l'échafaud en agitant un parchemin. Le comte se relève d'un air, non joyeux, mais seulement satisfait. Le parchemin lui est remis. — Juste Dieu! s'écrie-t-il, la prison perpétuelle! leur grâce est plus dure que la mort. — Il descend, abattu comme un voleur, de l'échafaud où il était monté serein. Pour moi, cela m'était égal. Je ne me doutais guère que le salut de cet homme était ma perte. Après avoir démoli l'échafaud, je rentre chez mon maître, encore plein d'espérances, quoiqu'un peu désappointé d'avoir perdu l'écu d'or, prix de la chute de la tête. Ce n'était pas tout. Le lendemain je reçois un ordre de départ et un diplôme d'exécuteur provincial pour le Drontheimhus! Bourreau de province, et de la dernière province de Norvège! Or sachez, messires, comment de petites causes amènent de grands effets. Les ennemis du comte, afin de se donner un air de clémence, avaient tout disposé pour que la grâce arrivât un moment après l'exécution. Il s'en fallut d'une minute; on s'en prit à ma lenteur, comme s'il eût été décent d'empêcher un personnage illustre de s'amuser quelques instants avant le dernier! comme si un exécuteur royal qui décapite un grand-chancelier pouvait le faire sans plus de dignité et de mesure qu'un bourreau de province qui pend un juif! À cela se joignit la malveillance. J'avais un frère, que même je crois avoir encore. Il était parvenu, en changeant de nom, dans la maison du nouveau chancelier, comte d'Ahlefeld. À Copenhague, ma présence importuna le misérable. Mon frère me méprise, parce que ce sera peut-être moi qui le pendrai un jour.

Ici le disert narrateur s'interrompit pour donner passage à sa gaieté, puis il continua:

— Vous voyez, chers hôtes, que j'ai pris mon parti. Ma foi, au diable l'ambition! j'exerce ici honnêtement mon métier; je vends mes cadavres, ou Bechlie en fait des squelettes, que m'achète le cabinet d'anatomie de Berghen. Je ris de tout, même de cette pauvre femelle qui a été bohémienne et que la solitude rend folle. Mes trois héritiers grandissent dans la crainte du diable et de la potence. Mon nom est l'épouvantail des petits enfants du Drontheimhus. Les syndics me fournissent une charrette et des habits rouges. La Tour-Maudite me garantit de la pluie comme ferait le palais de l'évêque. Les vieux prêtres que l'orage pousse chez moi me prêchent, les savants me flagornent. En somme, je suis aussi heureux qu'un autre, je bois, je mange, je pends, et je dors.

Le bourreau n’avait pas mené à fin ce long discours sans l’entremêler de bière et de bruyantes explosions de rire.

— Il tue, et il dort! murmura le ministre; l’infortuné!

— Que ce misérable est heureux! s’écria l’ermite.

— Oui, frère ermite, dit le bourreau, misérable comme vous, mais certes plus heureux. Tenez, le métier serait bon si l’on ne semblait prendre plaisir à en ruiner les bénéfices. Croiriez-vous que je ne sais quelles fameuses noces ont fourni à l’aumônier nouvellement nommé de Drontheim l’occasion de demander la grâce de douze condamnés qui m’appartiennent?

— Qui vous appartiennent! s’écria le ministre.

— Oui, sans doute, père. Sept d’entre eux devaient être fouettés, deux marqués sur la joue gauche, et trois pendus, ce qui fait en somme douze. — Oui, douze écus et trente ascalins, que je perds si la grâce est accordée. Comment trouvez-vous, sires étrangers, cet aumônier qui dispose ainsi de mon bien? Ce maudit prêtre s’appelle Athanase Munder. Oh! si je le tenais!

Le ministre se leva, et dit d’une voix égale et d’un air tranquille:

— Mon fils, c’est moi qui suis Athanase Munder.

À ce nom la colère s’alluma dans tous les traits d’Orugix, il s’élança brusquement de son siège. Puis son regard irrité rencontra le regard calme et bienveillant de l’aumônier, et il vint se rasseoir lentement, muet et confus.

Il se fit un moment de silence. Ordener, qui s’était levé de table, prêt à défendre le prêtre, le rompit le premier.

— Nychol Orugix, dit-il, voici treize écus pour vous dédommager de la grâce des condamnés.

— Hélas! interrompit le ministre, qui sait si je l’obtiendrai? Il faudrait que je pusse parler au fils du vice-roi, car cela dépend de son mariage avec la fille du chancelier.

— Seigneur aumônier, répondit le jeune homme d’une voix ferme, vous l’obtiendrez. Ordener Guldenlew ne recevra pas l’anneau nuptial, que les fers de vos protégés ne soient rompus.

— Jeune étranger, vous n’y pouvez rien; mais Dieu vous entende et vous récompense!

Cependant, les treize écus d’Ordener avaient achevé ce que le regard du prêtre avait commencé. Nychol, entièrement apaisé, reprit sa gaieté.

— Tenez, révérend aumônier, vous êtes un brave homme, digne de desservir la chapelle de Saint-Hilarion; j’en disais de vous plus que je n’en pensais. Vous marchez droit dans votre sentier, ce n’est pas votre faute s’il croise le mien. Mais celui auquel j’en veux, c’est le gardien des morts de Drontheim, ce vieux magicien, concierge du Spladgest. Quel est son nom déjà? Spliugry?… Spadugry?… Dites-moi, mon vieux docteur, vous qui êtes une Babel de science, vous qui connaissez tout, vous ne pourriez pas m’aider à trouver le nom de ce sorcier, votre confrère? Vous avez dû le rencontrer quelquefois, les jours de sabbat, chevauchant en l’air sur un balai?

Certes, si le pauvre Benignus avait pu s’enfuir en ce moment sur quelque monture aérienne de ce genre, le narrateur de cette histoire ne doute pas qu’il ne lui eût confié avec bien de la joie sa frêle machine épouvantée. Jamais l’amour de la vie ne s’était développé avec autant de force chez lui, que depuis qu’il percevait de tous ses organes l’imminence du danger. Tout ce qu’il voyait l’effrayait; les souvenirs de la Tour-Maudite, l’oeil hagard de la femme rouge, la voix, les gants et la boisson du mystérieux ermite, l’aventurière intrépidité de son jeune compagnon, et, par-dessus tout, le bourreau; ce bourreau dans le repaire duquel il tombait en fuyant, chargé d’un crime. Il tremblait si fort que tout mouvement volontaire était chez lui paralysé, surtout lorsqu’il vit la conversation se tourner sur lui, et qu’il entendit l’apostrophe du formidable Orugix. Comme il ne se souciait guère d’imiter l’héroïsme du prêtre, sa langue embarrassée se refusa assez longtemps à répondre.

— Eh bien! reprit le bourreau, savez-vous le nom de ce concierge du Spladgest? Est-ce que votre perruque vous rend sourd?

— Un peu, seigneur… — Mais, dit-il enfin, je ne sais pas ce nom, je vous jure.

— Il ne le sait pas? dit la voix redoutée de l’ermite. Il a tort d’en faire serment. Cet homme se nomme Benignus Spiagudry.

— Moi! moi! grand Dieu! s’écria le vieillard avec terreur.

Le bourreau éclata de rire.

— Et qui vous dit que c’est vous? c’est de ce païen de concierge que nous parlons. En vérité, ce pédagogue s’effraie de rien. Que serait-ce donc si ses grimaces si drôles avaient une cause sérieuse? Ce vieux fou serait amusant à pendre. — Ainsi, vénérable docteur, poursuivit le bourreau que les terreurs de Spiagudry égayaient, vous ne connaissez pas ce Benignus Spiagudry?

— Non, maître, dit le concierge un peu rassuré par son *incognito*, je ne le connais pas, je vous assure. Et puisqu'il a le malheur de vous déplaire, je serais, maître, bien fâché, vraiment, de connaître cet homme.

— Et vous, seigneur ermite, reprit Orugix, vous paraissez le connaître?

— Oui, vraiment, répondit l'ermite. C'est un homme grand, vieux, sec, chauve…

Spiagudry, justement alarmé de cette prosopographie, raffermit en hâte sa perruque.

— Il a, continua l'ermite, les mains longues comme celles d'un voleur qui n'a pas rencontré de voyageur depuis huit jours, le dos courbé…

Spiagudry se redressa de son mieux.

— Du reste, on pourrait le prendre pour un des cadavres qu'il garde, s'il n'avait les yeux aussi perçants. Spiagudry porta la main à son emplâtre protecteur.

— Merci, père, dit le bourreau à l'ermite; en quelque lieu que je le trouve, je reconnaîtrai maintenant le vieux juif.

Spiagudry, qui était très bon chrétien, révolté de cette intolérable injure, ne put réprimer une exclamation.

— Juif, maître!

Puis il s'arrêta tout court, tremblant d'en avoir trop dit.

— Eh bien, juif ou païen, qu'importé, s'il a des relations avec le diable, comme on le dit!

— Je le croirais volontiers, reprit l'ermite avec un sourire sardonique que son capuchon ne cachait pas entièrement, s'il n'était pas si poltron. Mais comment pourrait-il pactiser avec Satan? il est aussi lâche que méchant. Quand la peur le prend, il ne se connaît plus.

L'ermite parlait lentement, comme s'il eût composé sa voix; et la lenteur même de ses paroles leur donnait une expression singulière. |

— Il ne se connaît plus! répéta intérieurement Spiagudry.

— Je suis fâché qu'un méchant soit lâche, dit le bourreau; il ne vaut pas la peine d'être haï. Il faut combattre un serpent, on ne peut qu'écraser un lézard.

Spiagudry hasarda quelques paroles pour sa défense.

— Mais, seigneurs; êtes-vous sûrs que l'officier public dont vous parlez soit tel que vous le dites? A-t-il donc une réputation?…

— Une réputation! reprit l'ermite; la plus exécrable réputation de la province!

Benignus, désappointé, se tourna vers le bourreau.

— Seigneur maître, quels torts lui reprochez-vous? car je ne doute pas que votre haine ne soit légitime.

— Vous avez raison, vieillard, de n'en pas douter. Comme son commerce ressemble au mien, Spiagudry fait tout ce qu'il peut pour me nuire.

— Oh! maître, ne le croyez pas! Ou, s'il en est ainsi, c'est que cet homme ne vous a pas vu comme moi, entouré de votre gracieuse femme et de vos charmants enfants, admettant les étrangers au bonheur de votre foyer domestique. S'il eût joui, comme nous, de votre aimable hospitalité, maître, ce malheureux ne pourrait être votre ennemi.

Spiagudry achevait à peine cette adroite allocution, quand la grande femme, jusqu'alors muette, se leva, et dit d'une voix aigrement solennelle:

— La langue de la vipère n'est jamais plus venimeuse que lorsqu'elle est enduite de miel.

Puis elle se rassit, et continua de fourbir ses pinces, travail dont le bruit rauque et criard, remplissant les intervalles de la conversation, faisait, aux dépens des oreilles des quatre voyageurs, l'office des choeurs dans une tragédie grecque.

— Cette femme est folle, vraiment! se dit tout bas le concierge, ne pouvant s'expliquer autrement le mauvais effet de sa flatterie.

— Bechlie a raison, docteur aux blonds cheveux! s'écria le bourreau. Je vous tiens pour langue de vipère, si vous continuez de justifier plus longtemps ce Spiagudry.

— À Dieu ne plaise, maître! s'écria celui-ci; je ne le justifie nullement.

— À la bonne heure. Vous ignorez d'ailleurs jusqu'où il pousse l'insolence. Croiriez-vous que l'impudent a la témérité de me disputer la propriété de Han d'Islande?

— De Han d'Islande! dit brusquement l'ermite.

— Eh, oui. Vous connaissez ce fameux brigand?

— Oui, dit l'ermite.

— Eh bien, tout brigand revient au bourreau, n'est-il pas vrai? Que fait cet infernal Spiagudry? il demande qu'on mette à prix la tête de Han.

— Il demande qu'on mette à prix la tête de Han? interrompit l'ermite.

— Il en a l'audace; et cela uniquement pour que le corps lui revienne, et que je sois frustré de ma propriété.

— Voilà qui est infâme, maître Orugix; oser vous disputer un bien qui vous appartient si évidemment!

Ces mots étaient accompagnés du sourire malicieux qui effrayait Spiagudry.

— Le tour est d'autant plus noir, ermite, qu'il me faudrait une exécution comme celle de Han pour me tirer de mon obscurité, et me faire la fortune que ne m'a pas faite celle de Schumacker.

— En vérité, maître Nychol?

— Oui, frère ermite, le jour de l'arrestation de Han, venez me voir, et nous immolerons un pourceau gras à mon élévation future.

— Volontiers; mais savez-vous si je serai libre ce jour-là? D'ailleurs vous aviez tout à l'heure envoyé au diable l'ambition.

— Eh sans doute, père, quand je vois que, pour détruire mes espérances les mieux fondées, il suffit d'un Spiagudry et d'une requête de mise à prix.

— Ah! reprit l'ermite d'une voix étrange, Spiagudry a demandé la mise à prix!

Cette voix était pour le pauvre homme comme le regard du crapaud pour l'oiseau.

— Seigneurs, dit-il, pourquoi juger témérairement? Cela n'est pas sûr, peut-être est-ce un faux bruit.

— Un faux bruit! s'écria Orugix, la chose n'est que trop certaine. La demande des syndics est en ce moment à Drontheim, appuyée de la signature du concierge du Spladgest. On n'attend que la décision de son excellence le général gouverneur.

Le bourreau était si bien instruit, que Spiagudry n'osa poursuivre sa justification; il se contenta de maudire intérieurement, pour la centième fois, son jeune compagnon. Mais que devint-il lorsqu'il entendit l'ermite, qui depuis quelques moments paraissait méditer, s'écrier soudain d'un ton railleur:

— Maître Nychol, quel est donc le supplice des sacrilèges?

Ces paroles firent sur Spiagudry le même effet que si on lui avait arraché son emplâtre et sa perruque. Il attendit avec anxiété la réponse d'Orugix, qui acheva d'abord de vider son verre.

— Cela dépend du genre de sacrilège, répondit le bourreau.

— Si le sacrilège est la profanation d'un mort?

Pour le coup, le tremblant Benignus s'attendit à voir son nom sortir d'un moment à l'autre de la bouche de l'inexplicable ermite.

— Autrefois, dit froidement Orugix, on l’enterrait vivant avec le cadavre profané.

— Et maintenant?

— Maintenant on est plus doux.

— On est plus doux! dit Spiagudry, respirant à peine.

— Oui, reprit le bourreau de l’air satisfait et négligent d’un artiste qui parle de son art; on lui imprime d’abord, avec un fer chaud, une S sur le gras des jambes.

— Et ensuite? interrompit le vieux concierge, contre lequel il eût été difficile d’exécuter cette partie de la peine.

— Ensuite, dit le bourreau, on se contente de le pendre.

— Miséricorde! s’écria Spiagudry; de le pendre!

— Eh bien, qu’a-t-il? il me regarde de l’air dont le patient regarde le gibet.

— Je vois avec plaisir, disait l’ermite, que l’on est revenu à des principes d’humanité.

En ce moment, l’orage, qui avait cessé, permit d’entendre très distinctement au dehors le son clair et intermittent d’un cor.

— Nychol, dit la femme, on est à la poursuite de quelque malfaiteur, c’est le cor des archers.

— Le cor des archers! répéta chacun des interlocuteurs avec un accent différent, mais Spiagudry avec celui de la plus profonde terreur.

Ils achevaient à peine cette exclamation quand on frappa à la porte de la tour.

XIII

Il ne faut qu'un homme, un signal; les éléments d'une révolution sont tout prêts. Qui commencera? Dès qu'il y aura un point d'appui, tout s'ébranlera.

BONAPARTE.

Loevig est un gros bourg situé sur la rive septentrionale du golfe de Drontheim, et adossé à une chaîne basse de collines nues et bizarrement bariolées par diverses sortes de cultures, pareilles à de grands pans de mosaïque appuyés à l'horizon. L'aspect du bourg est triste; la cabane de bois et de jonc du pêcheur, la hutte conique bâtie de terre et de cailloux où le mineur invalide passe le peu de vieux jours que ses épargnes lui permettent de donner au soleil et au repos, la frêle charpente abandonnée que le chasseur de chamois revêt à son tour d'un toit de paille et de murs de peaux de bêtes, bordent des rues plus longues que le bourg, parce qu'elles sont étroites et tortueuses. Sur une place où l'on ne voit plus aujourd'hui que les vestiges d'une grosse tour, s'élevait alors l'ancienne forteresse bâtie par Horda le Fin-Archer, seigneur de Loevig et frère d'armes du roi païen Halfdan, et occupée en 1698 par le syndic du bourg, lequel en eût été l'habitant le mieux logé, sans la cigogne argentée qui venait tous les étés se percher à l'extrémité du clocher pointu de l'église, pareille à la perle blanche au sommet du bonnet aigu d'un mandarin.

Le matin même du jour où Ordener était arrivé à Drontheim, un personnage était débarqué, également incognito, à Loevig. Sa litière dorée, quoique sans armoiries, ses quatre grands laquais armés jusqu'aux dents, avaient soudain fait le sujet de toutes les conversations et de foutes les curiosités. L'hôte de la *Mouette d'or*, petite taverne où le grand personnage était descendu, avait pris lui-même un air mystérieux et répondait à toutes les questions: Je ne sais pas, d'un air qui voulait dire: Je sais tout, mais vous ne saurez rien. Les grands laquais étaient plus muets que des poissons, et plus sombres que les bouches d'une mine. Le syndic s'était d'abord renfermé dans sa tour, attendant dans sa dignité la première visite de l'étranger; mais bientôt les habitants l'avaient vu avec surprise se présenter deux fois inutilement à la *Mouette d'or*, et le soir épier un salut du voyageur appuyé sur sa fenêtre entrouverte. Les commères inféraient de là que le personnage avait fait connaître son haut rang au seigneur syndic. Elles se trompaient. Un messager expédié par l'étranger s'était présenté chez le syndic pour y faire viser son droit de passe, et le syndic avait remarqué sur le grand cachet de cire verte du paquet qu'il portait deux mains de justice croisées soutenant un manteau d'hermine surmonté d'une couronne de comte imposée à un écusson autour duquel pendaient les colliers de l'Éléphant et de Dannebrog. Cette observation avait suffi au syndic, qui désirait vivement obtenir de la grande chancellerie le haut syndicat du Drontheimhus. Mais il avait perdu ses avances, car le noble inconnu ne voulait voir personne.

Le second jour de l'arrivée de ce voyageur à Loevig tirait à sa fin, lorsque l'hôte entra dans sa chambre en disant, après une inclination profonde, que le messager attendu de sa courtoisie venait d'arriver.

— Eh bien, dit sa courtoisie, qu'il monte.

Un instant après, le messager entra, ferma soigneusement la porte, puis saluant jusqu'à terre l'étranger qui s'était à demi tourné vers lui, attendit dans un silence respectueux qu'il lui adressât la parole.

— Je vous espérais ce matin, dit celui-ci; qui donc vous a retenu?

— Les intérêts de votre grâce, seigneur comte; ai-je un autre souci?

— Que fait Elphège? que fait Frédéric?

— Ils sont bien portants.

— Bien! bien! interrompit le maître; n'avez-vous rien de plus intéressant à m'apprendre? Quoi de nouveau à Drontheim?

— Rien, sinon que le baron de Thorvick y est arrivé hier.

— Oui, je sais qu'il a voulu consulter ce vieux mecklembourgeois Levin sur le mariage projeté. Savez-vous quel a été le résultat de son entrevue avec le gouverneur?

— Aujourd'hui à midi, heure de mon départ, il n'avait point encore vu le général.

— Comment! arrivé de la veille! Vous m'étonnez, Musdoemon. Et avait-il vu la comtesse?

— Encore moins, seigneur.

— C'est donc vous qui l'avez vu?

— Non, mon noble maître; et d'ailleurs je ne le connais pas.

— Et comment, si personne ne l'a vu, savez-vous qu'il est à Drontheim?

— Par son domestique, qui est descendu hier au palais du gouverneur.

— Mais lui, est-il donc descendu ailleurs?

— Son domestique assure qu'en arrivant il s'est embarqué pour Munckholm, après être entré dans le Spladgest.

Le regard du comte s'enflamma.

— Pour Munckholm! pour la prison de Schumacker! en êtes-vous certain?

J'ai toujours pensé que cet honnête Levin était un traître. Pour Munckholm! Qui peut l'attirer là? va-t-il demander aussi des conseils à Schumacker? va-t-il?…

— Noble seigneur, interrompit Musdoemon, il n'est pas sûr qu'il y soit allé.

— Quoi! et que me disiez-vous donc? vous jouez-vous de moi?

— Pardon, votre grâce, je répétais au seigneur comte ce que disait le domestique du seigneur baron. Mais le seigneur Frédéric, qui était hier de garde au donjon, n'y a point vu le baron Ordener.

— Belle preuve! mon fils ne connaît pas le fils du vice-roi. Ordener a pu entrer au fort incognito.

— Oui, seigneur; mais le seigneur Frédéric affirme n'avoir vu personne.

Le comte parut se calmer.

— Cela est différent; mon fils l'affirme-t-il en effet?

— Il me l'a assuré à trois reprises; et l'intérêt du seigneur Frédéric est ici le même que celui de sa grâce.

Cette réflexion du messager rassura complètement le comte.

— Ah! dit-il, je comprends. Le baron, en arrivant, aura voulu se promener un peu sur le golfe, et le domestique se sera persuadé qu'il allait à Munckholm. En effet, qu'irait-il faire là? j'étais bien sot de m'alarmer. Cette nonchalance de mon gendre à voir le vieux Levin prouve au contraire que son affection pour lui n'est pas si vive que je le craignais. Vous ne croiriez pas, mon cher Musdoemon, poursuivit le comte avec un sourire, que je m'imaginais déjà Ordener amoureux d'Éthel Schumacker, et que je bâtissais un roman et une intrigue sur ce voyage à Munckholm. Mais, Dieu merci, Ordener est moins fou que moi. — À propos, mon cher, que devient cette jeune Danaé entre les mains de Frédéric?

Musdoemon avait conçu les mêmes alarmes que son maître touchant Éthel Schumacker, et les avait combattues sans pouvoir les vaincre aussi aisément. Cependant, charmé de voir son maître sourire, il se garda bien de troubler sa sécurité et chercha au contraire à l'accroître, afin d'accroître cette sérénité si précieuse dans les grands pour leurs favoris.

— Noble comte, votre fils a échoué près de la fille de Schumacker; mais il paraît qu'un autre a été plus heureux.

Le comte l’interrompit vivement.

— Un autre! quel autre?

— Eh! mais, je ne sais quel serf, paysan ou vassal…

— Dites-vous vrai? s’écria le comte, dont la figure dure et sombre était devenue radieuse.

— Le seigneur Frédéric me l’a affirmé, ainsi qu’à la noble comtesse.

Le comte se leva et se mit à parcourir la chambre en se frottant les mains.

— Musdcemon, mon cher Musdoemon, encore un effort et nous sommes au but. Le rejeton de l’arbre est flétri; il ne nous reste plus qu’à renverser le tronc. — Avez-vous encore quelque bonne nouvelle?

— Dispolsen a été assassiné.

Le visage du comte se dérida entièrement.

— Ah! vous verrez que nous marcherons de triomphe en triomphe. A-t-on ses papiers? a-t-on surtout ce coffre de fer?

— J’annonce avec peine à votre grâce que le meurtre n’a point été commis par les nôtres. Il a été tué et dépouillé sur les grèves d’Urchtal, et l’on attribue cet exploit à Han d’Islande.

— Han d’Islande! reprit le maître, dont le visage s’était rembruni; quoi! ce brigand célèbre que nous voulons mettre à la tête de nos révoltés!

— Lui-même, noble comte; et je crains, d’après ce que j’en ai entendu dire, que nous n’ayons de la peine à le trouver. En tout cas, je me suis assuré d’un chef qui prendra son nom et pourra le remplacer. C’est un farouche montagnard, haut et dur comme un chêne, féroce et hardi comme un loup dans un désert de neige; il est impossible que ce formidable géant ne ressemble pas à Han d’Islande.

— Ce Han d’Islande, demanda le comte, est donc de haute taille?

— C’est le bruit le plus populaire, votre grâce.

— J’admire toujours, mon cher Musdoemon, l’art avec lequel vous disposez vos plans. Quand éclate l’insurrection?

— Oh! très prochainement, votre grâce; en ce moment peut-être. La tutelle royale pèse depuis longtemps aux mineurs; tous saisissent avec joie l’idée d’un soulèvement. L’incendie commencera par Guldbranshal, s’étendra à Sund-Moër, gagnera Kongsberg. Deux mille mineurs peuvent être sur pied en trois jours. La révolte se fera au nom de Schumacker; c’est en ce nom que leur parlent nos émissaires. Les réserves du Midi et la garnison de Drontheim et de Skongen s’ébranleront; et vous serez ici justement pour étouffer la rébellion, nouveau et insigne service aux yeux du roi, et pour le délivrer de ce Schumacker si inquiétant pour son trône. Voilà sur quelles indestructibles bases s'élèvera l'édifice que couronnera le mariage de la noble dame Ulrique avec le baron de Thorvick.

L'entretien intime de deux scélérats n'est jamais long, parce que ce qu'il y a d'homme en eux s'effraie bien vite de ce qu'il y a d'infernal. Quand deux âmes perverses s'étalent réciproquement leur impudique nudité, leurs mutuelles laideurs les révoltent. Le crime fait horreur au crime même; et deux méchants qui conversent, avec tout le cynisme du tête-à-tête, de leurs passions, de leurs plaisirs, de leurs intérêts, se sont l'un à l'autre comme un effroyable miroir. Leur propre bassesse les humilie dans autrui, leur propre orgueil les confond, leur propre néant les épouvante; et ils ne peuvent se fuir, se désavouer eux-mêmes dans leur semblable; car chaque rapport odieux, chaque affreuse coïncidence, chaque hideuse parité trouve en eux une voix toujours infatigable qui la dénonce à leur oreille sans cesse fatiguée. Quelque secret que soit leur entretien, il a toujours deux insupportables témoins; — Dieu, qu'ils ne voient pas; et la conscience, qu'ils sentent.

Les conversations confidentielles de Musdoemon étaient d'autant plus fatigantes pour le comte qu'il mettait toujours sans ménagements son maître de moitié dans les crimes entrepris ou à entreprendre. Bien des courtisans croient adroit de sauver aux grands l'apparence des mauvaises actions; ils prennent sur eux la responsabilité du mal, et laissent même souvent à la pudeur du patron la consolation d'avoir semblé résister à un crime profitable. Musdoemon, par un raffinement d'adresse, suivait la marche contraire. Il voulait paraître conseiller rarement et toujours obéir. Il connaissait l'âme de son maître comme son maître connaissait la sienne; aussi ne se compromettait-il qu'en compromettant le comte. La tête que le comte aurait le plus volontiers fait tomber, après celle de Schumacker, c'était celle de Musdoemon; il le savait comme si son maître le lui eût dit, et son maître savait qu'il le savait.

Le comte avait appris ce qu'il voulait apprendre. Il était satisfait.

Il ne lui restait plus qu'à congédier Musdoemon.

— Musdoemon, dit-il avec un sourire gracieux, vous êtes le plus fidèle et le plus zélé de mes serviteurs. Tout va bien et je le dois à vos soins. Je vous fais secrétaire intime de la grande chancellerie.

Musdoemon s'inclina profondément.

— Ce n’est pas tout, poursuivit le comte, je vais demander pour vous une troisième, fois l’ordre de Dannebrog; mais je crains toujours que votre naissance, votre indigne parenté…

Musdoemon rougit, pâlit, et cacha les altérations de son visage en s’inclinant de nouveau.

— Allez, dit le comte lui présentant sa main à baiser, allez, seigneur secrétaire intime, rédiger votre *placeat*. Il trouvera peut-être le roi dans un moment de bonne humeur.

— Que sa majesté l’accorde ou non, je suis confus et fier des bontés de votre grâce.

— Dépêchez-vous, mon cher, car je suis pressé de partir. Il faut tâcher encore d’avoir des renseignements précis sur ce Han.

Musdoemon, après une troisième révérence, entr’ouvrit la porte.

— Ah! dit le comte, j’oubliais… En votre qualité nouvelle de secrétaire intime, vous écrirez à la chancellerie pour qu’on envoie sa destitution à ce syndic de Loevig, qui compromet son rang dans le canton par une foule de bassesses envers les étrangers qu’il ne connaît pas.

XIV

Le religieux qui visite à minuit le reliquaire,
Le chevalier qui dompte un coursier belliqueux,
Celui qui meurt au son redouté de la trompette,
Celui qui meurt au bruit pacifique des oraisons.
Sont l’objet de tes soins, prodigués également
À l’homme pieux, sous le casque ou sous la tonsure.

Hymne à saint Anselme.

— Oui, maître, nous devons en vérité un pèlerinage à la grotte de Lynrass. Eût-on cru que cet ermite, que je maudissais comme un esprit infernal, serait notre ange sauveur, et que la lance qui semblait nous menacer à tout moment nous servirait de pont pour franchir le précipice?

C’est en ces termes assez burlesquement figurés que Benignus Spiagudry faisait éclater aux oreilles d’Ordener sa joie, son admiration et sa reconnaissance pour l’ermite mystérieux. On devine que nos deux voyageurs sont sortis de la Tour-Maudite. Au point où nous les retrouvons, ils ont même déjà laissé assez loin derrière eux le hameau de Vygla et suivent péniblement une route montueuse, entrecoupée de mares ou embarrassée de grosses pierres que les torrents passagers de l’orage ont déposées sur la terre humide et visqueuse. Le jour ne paraît pas encore; seulement les buissons qui couronnent les rochers des deux côtés du chemin se détachent du ciel déjà blanchâtre comme des découpures noires, et l’oeil voit les objets, encore sans couleurs, reprendre par degrés leurs formes à cette lumière terne, et en quelque sorte épaisse, que le crépuscule du nord verse à travers les froids brouillards du matin.

Ordener gardait le silence, car depuis quelques instants il s’était doucement livré à ce demi-sommeil que le mouvement machinal de la marche permet quelquefois. Il n’avait pas dormi depuis la veille où il avait donné au repos, dans une barque de pêcheur amarrée au port de Drontheim, le peu d’heures qui avaient séparé sa sortie du Spladgest de son retour à Munckholm. Aussi, tandis que son corps s’avançait vers Skongen, son esprit s’était envolé au golfe de Drontheim, dans cette sombre prison, sous ces lugubres tours qui renfermaient le seul être auquel il pût dans le monde attacher l’idée d’espérance et de bonheur. Éveillé, le souvenir de son Éthel dominait toutes ses pensées; endormi, ce souvenir devenait comme une image fantastique qui illuminait tous ses rêves. Dans cette seconde vie du sommeil, où l'âme existe un moment seule, où l'être physique avec tous ses maux matériels semble s'être évanoui, il voyait cette vierge bien aimée, non plus belle, non plus pure, mais plus libre, plus heureuse, plus à lui. Seulement, sur la route de Skongen, l'oubli de son corps, l'engourdissement de ses facultés ne pouvaient être complets; car de temps en temps une fondrière, une pierre, une branche d'arbre, heurtant ses pieds, le rappelaient brusquement de l'idéal au réel. Il relevait alors la tête, entr'ouvrait ses yeux fatigués, et regrettait d'être retombé de son beau voyage céleste dans son pénible voyage terrestre, où rien ne le dédommageait de ses illusions enfuies que l'idée de sentir contre son coeur cette boucle de cheveux qui lui appartenait en attendant qu'Éthel tout entière fût à lui. Puis ce souvenir ramenait la charmante image fantastique, et il remontait mollement, non dans son rêve, mais dans sa vague et opiniâtre rêverie.

— Maître, répéta Spiagudry d'une voix plus forte, qui, jointe au choc d'un tronc d'arbre, réveilla Ordener, ne craignez rien. Les archers ont pris sur la droite avec l'ermite en sortant de la tour, et nous sommes assez loin d'eux pour pouvoir parler. Il est vrai que jusqu'ici le silence était prudent.

— Vraiment, dit Ordener en bâillant, vous poussez la prudence un peu loin. Il y a trois heures au moins que nous avons quitté la tour et les archers.

— Cela est vrai, seigneur; mais prudence ne nuit jamais. Voyez, si je m'étais nommé au moment où le chef de cette infernale escouade a demandé Benignus Spiagudry, d'une voix pareille à celle dont Saturne demandait son fils nouveau-né pour le dévorer; si, même, en ce moment terrible, je n'avais eu recours à une taciturnité prudente, où serais-je, mon noble maître?

— Ma foi, vieillard, je crois qu'en ce moment-là nul n'eût pu obtenir de vous votre nom, eût-on employé des tenailles pour vous l'arracher.

— Avais-je tort, maître? Si j'avais parlé, l'ermite, que saint Hospice et saint Usbald le solitaire bénissent! l'ermite n'aurait pas eu le temps de demander au chef des archers si son escouade n'était pas composée de soldats de la garnison de Munckholm, question insignifiante, faite uniquement pour gagner du temps. Avez-vous remarqué, jeune seigneur, après la réponse affirmative de ce stupide archer, avec quel sourire singulier l'ermite l'a invité à le suivre, en lui disant qu'il connaissait la retraite du fugitif Benignus Spiagudry?

Ici le concierge s’arrêta un moment comme pour prendre de l’élan, car il reprit soudain d’une voix larmoyante d’enthousiasme:

— Bon prêtre! digne et vertueux anachorète, pratiquant les principes de l’humanité chrétienne et de la charité évangélique! Et moi qui m’effrayais de ses dehors, assez sinistres à la vérité; mais ils cachent une si belle âme! Avez-vous encore remarqué, mon noble maître, qu’il y avait quelque chose de singulier dans l’accent dont il m’a dit: au revoir! en emmenant les archers? Dans un autre moment, cet accent m’eût alarmé; mais ce n’est pas la faute du pieux et excellent ermite. La solitude donne sans doute à la voix ce timbre étrange; car je connais, seigneur, — ici la voix de Benignus devint plus basse — je connais un autre solitaire, ce formidable vivant que… Mais non, par respect pour le vénérable ermite de Lynrass, je ne ferai pas cet odieux rapprochement. Les gants n’ont également rien d’extraordinaire, il fait assez froid pour qu’on en porte; et sa boisson salée ne m’étonne pas davantage. Les cénobites catholiques ont souvent des règles singulières; celle-là même, maître, se trouve indiquée dans ce vers du célèbre Urensius, religieux du mont Caucase:

Rivos despiciens, maris undam polat amaram.

Comment ne me suis-je pas rappelé ce vers dans cette maudite ruine de Vygla! un peu plus de mémoire m’aurait épargné de bien folles alarmes. Il est vrai qu’il est difficile, n’est-ce pas, seigneur, d’avoir ses idées nettes dans un pareil repaire, assis à la table d’un bourreau! d’un bourreau! d’un être voué au mépris et à l’exécration universelle, qui ne diffère de l’assassin que par la fréquence et l’impunité de ses meurtres, dont le coeur, à toute l’atrocité des plus affreux brigands, réunit la lâcheté que du moins leurs crimes aventureux ne leur permettent pas! d’un être qui offre à manger et verse à boire de la même main qui fait jouer des instruments de torture et crier les os des misérables entre les ais rapprochés d’un chevalet! Respirer le même air qu’un bourreau! Et le plus vil mendiant, si ce contact impur l’a souillé, abandonne avec horreur les derniers haillons qui protégeaient contre l’hiver ses maladies et ses nudités! Et le chancelier, après avoir scellé ses lettres d’office, les jette sous la table des sceaux, en signe de dégoût et de malédiction! Et en France, quand le bourreau est mort à son tour, les sergents de la prévôté aiment mieux payer une amende de quarante livres que de lui succéder! Et à Pesth, le condamné Chorchill, auquel on offrait sa grâce avec des lettres d’exécuteur, préféra le rôle de patient au métier de bourreau! N’est-il pas encore notoire, noble jeune seigneur, que Turmeryn, évêque de Maëstricht, fit purifier une église où était entré le bourreau, et que la czarine Petrowna se lavait le visage chaque fois qu'elle revenait d'une exécution? Vous savez également que les rois de France, pour honorer les gens de guerre, veulent qu'ils soient punis par leurs camarades, afin que ces nobles hommes, même lorsqu'ils sont criminels, ne deviennent pas infâmes par l'attouchement d'un bourreau. Et enfin, ce qui est décisif, dans la *Descente de saint Georges aux enfers*, par le savant Melasius Iturham, Caron ne donne-t-il pas au brigand Robin Hood le pas sur le bourreau Phlipcrass? — Vraiment, maître, si jamais je deviens puissant — ce que Dieu seul peut savoir — je supprime les bourreaux et je rétablis l'ancienne coutume et les vieux tarifs. Pour le meurtre d'un prince, on paiera, comme en 1150, quatorze cent quarante doubles écus royaux; pour le meurtre d'un comte, quatorze cent quarante écus simples; pour celui d'un baron, quatorze cent quarante bas écus; le meurtre d'un simple noble sera taxé à quatorze cent quarante ascalins; et celui d'un bourgeois….

— N'entends-je pas le pas d'un cheval qui vient à nous? interrompit Ordener.

Ils tournèrent la tête, et, comme le jour avait paru pendant le long soliloque scientifique de Spiagudry, ils purent distinguer en effet, à cent pas en arrière, un homme vêtu de noir, agitant un bras vers eux, et pressant de l'autre un de ces petits chevaux d'un blanc sale que l'on rencontre souvent, domptés ou sauvages, dans les montagnes basses de la Norvège.

— De grâce, maître, dit le peureux concierge, pressons le pas, cet homme noir m'a tout l'air d'un archer.

— Comment, vieillard, nous sommes deux, et nous fuirions devant un seul homme!

— Hélas! vingt éperviers fuient devant un hibou. Quelle gloire y a-t-il à attendre un officier de justice?

— Et qui vous dit que c'en est un? reprit Ordener, dont les yeux n'étaient pas troublés par la peur. Rassurez-vous, mon brave guide; je reconnais ce voyageur. — Arrêtons-nous.

Il fallut céder. Un moment après, le cavalier les aborda; et Spiagudry cessa de trembler en reconnaissant la figure grave et sereine de l'aumônier Athanase Munder.

Celui-ci les salua en souriant, et arrêta sa monture, en disant d'une voix que son essoufflement entrecoupait:

— Mes chers enfants, c’est pour vous que je reviens sur mes pas; et le Seigneur ne permettra sans doute pas que mon absence, prolongée dans une intention de charité, soit préjudiciable à ceux auxquels ma présence est utile.

— Seigneur ministre, répondit Ordener, nous serions heureux de pouvoir vous servir en quelque chose.

— C’est moi, au contraire, noble jeune homme, qui veux vous servir.

Daigneriez-vous me dire quel est le but de votre voyage?

— Révérend aumônier, je ne puis.

— Je désire qu’en effet, mon fils, il y ait de votre part impuissance et non défiance. Car alors malheur à moi! malheur à celui dont l’homme de bien se défie, même quand il ne l’a vu qu’une fois!

L’humilité et l’onction du prêtre touchèrent vivement Ordener.

— Tout ce que je puis vous dire, mon père, c’est que nous visitons les montagnes du nord.

— C’est ce que je pensais, mon fils, et voilà pourquoi je viens à vous. Il y a dans ces montagnes des bandes de mineurs et de chasseurs, souvent redoutables aux voyageurs.

— Eh bien?

— Eh bien, — je sais qu’il ne faut pas essayer de détourner de sa route un noble jeune homme qui va chercher un danger, — mais l’estime que j’ai conçue pour vous m’a inspiré un autre moyen de vous être utile. Le malheureux faux monnayeur auquel j’ai porté hier les dernières consolations de mon Dieu avait été mineur. Au moment de la mort, il m’a donné ce parchemin sur lequel son nom est écrit, disant que cette passe me préserverait de tout danger, si jamais je voyageais dans ces montagnes. Hélas! à quoi cela pourrait-il servir à un pauvre prêtre qui vivra et mourra avec des prisonniers, et qui d’ailleurs, *inter castra latronum*, ne doit chercher de défense que dans la patience et la prière, seules armes de Dieu! Si je n’ai pas refusé cette passe, c’est qu’il ne faut point affliger par un refus le coeur de celui qui, dans peu d’instants, n’aura plus rien à recevoir et à donner sur la terre. Le bon Dieu daignait m’inspirer, car aujourd’hui je puis vous apporter ce parchemin, afin qu’il vous accompagne dans les hasards de votre route, et que le don du mourant soit un bienfait pour le voyageur.

Ordener reçut avec attendrissement le présent du vieux prêtre.

— Seigneur aumônier, dit-il, Dieu veuille que votre désir soit exaucé! Merci. Pourtant, ajouta-t-il, mettant la main sur son sabre, je portais déjà mon droit de passe à mon côté.

— Jeune homme, dit le prêtre, peut-être ce frêle parchemin vous protégera-t-il mieux que votre épée de fer. Le regard d'un pénitent est plus puissant que le glaive même de l'archange. Adieu. Mes prisonniers m'attendent. Veuillez prier quelquefois pour eux et pour moi.

— Saint prêtre, reprit Ordener en souriant, je vous ai dit que vos condamnés auraient leur grâce; ils l'auront.

— Oh! ne parlez pas avec cette assurance, mon fils. Ne tentez pas le Seigneur. Un homme ne sait pas ce qui se passe dans le coeur d'un autre homme, et vous ignorez encore ce que décidera le fils du vice-roi. Peut-être, hélas! ne daignera-t-il jamais admettre devant lui un humble aumônier. Adieu, mon fils; que votre voyage soit béni, et que parfois il sorte de votre belle âme un souvenir pour le pauvre prêtre et une prière pour les pauvres prisonniers.

XV

Sois le bienvenu, Hugo; dis-moi, toi… as-tu jamais vu un orage aussi terrible?

MATURIN, *Bertram*.

Dans une salle attenante aux appartements du gouverneur de Drontheim, trois des secrétaires de son excellence venaient de s'asseoir devant une table noire, chargée de parchemins, de papier, de cachets et d'écritoires, et près de laquelle un quatrième tabouret resté vide annonçait qu'un des scribes était en retard. Ils étaient déjà depuis quelque temps méditant et écrivant chacun de leur côté, quand l'un d'eux s'écria:

— Savez-vous, Wapherney, que ce pauvre bibliothécaire Foxtipp va, dit-on, être renvoyé par l'évêque, grâce à la lettre de recommandation dont vous avez appuyé la requête du docteur Anglyvius?

— Que nous contez-vous là, Richard? dit vivement celui des deux autres secrétaires auquel ne s'adressait point Richard, Wapherney n'a pu écrire en faveur d'Anglyvius, car la pétition de cet homme a révolté le général quand je la lui ai lue.

— Vous me l'aviez dit, en effet, reprit Wapherney; mais j'ai trouvé sur la pétition le mot *tribuatur*, de la main de son excellence.

— En vérité! s'écria l'autre.

— Oui, mon cher; et plusieurs autres décisions de son excellence, dont vous m'aviez parlé, sont également changées dans les apostilles. Ainsi, sur la requête des mineurs, le général a écrit: *negetur*.

— Comment! mais je n'y comprends rien; le général craignait l'esprit turbulent de ces mineurs.

— Il a peut-être voulu les effrayer par la sévérité. Ce qui me le ferait croire, c'est que le placet de l'aumônier Munder pour les douze condamnés est également mis à néant.

Le secrétaire auquel Wapherney parlait se leva ici brusquement.

— Oh! pour le coup, je ne peux vous croire. Le gouverneur est trop bon et m'a montré trop de pitié envers ces condamnés pour….

— Eh bien, Arthur, reprit Wapherney, lisez vous-même.

Arthur prit le placet et vit le fatal signe de réprobation.

— Vraiment, dit-il, j'en crois à peine mes yeux. Je veux représenter le placet au général. Quel jour son excellence a-t-elle donc apostillé ces pièces?

— Mais, répondit Wapherney, je crois qu'il y a trois jours.

— Ç'a été, reprit Richard à voix basse, dans la matinée qui a précédé l'apparition si courte et la disparition si mystérieusement subite du baron Ordener.

— Tenez, s'écria vivement Wapherney avant qu'Arthur eût eu le temps de répondre, ne voilà-t-il pas encore un *tribuatur* sur la burlesque requête de ce Benignus Spiagudry!

Richard éclata de rire.

— N'est-ce pas ce vieux gardien de cadavres qui a également disparu d'une manière si singulière?

— Oui, reprit Arthur; on a trouvé dans son charnier un cadavre mutilé, en sorte que la justice le fait poursuivre comme sacrilège. Mais un petit lapon, qui le servait et qui est resté seul au Spladgest, pense, avec tout le peuple, que le diable l'a emporté comme sorcier.

— Voilà, dit Wapherney en riant, un personnage qui laisse une bonne réputation!

Il achevait à peine son éclat de rire quand le quatrième secrétaire entra.

— En honneur, Gustave, vous arrivez bien tard ce matin. Vous seriez-vous marié par hasard hier?

— Eh non! reprit Wapherney, c'est qu'il aura pris le chemin le plus long pour passer, avec son manteau neuf, sous les fenêtres de l'aimable Rosily.

— Wapherney, dit le nouveau venu, je voudrais que vous eussiez deviné. Mais la cause de mon retard est certes moins agréable; et je doute que mon manteau neuf ait produit quelque effet sur les personnages que je viens de visiter.

— D'où venez-vous donc? demanda Arthur.

— Du Spladgest.

— Dieu m'est témoin, s'écria Wapherney laissant tomber sa plume, que nous en parlions tout à l'heure! Mais si l'on peut en parler par passe-temps, je ne conçois pas comment on y entre.

— Et bien moins encore, dit Richard, comment on s'y arrête. Mais, mon cher Gustave, qu'y avez-vous donc vu?

— Oui, dit Gustave, vous êtes curieux, sinon de voir, du moins d'entendre; et vous seriez bien punis si je refusais de vous décrire ces horreurs, auxquelles vous frémiriez d'assister.

Les trois secrétaires pressèrent vivement Gustave, qui se fit un peu prier, quoique son désir de leur raconter ce qu'il avait vu ne fût pas intérieurement moins vif que leur envie de le savoir.

— Allons, Wapherney, vous pourrez transmettre mon récit à votre jeune soeur, qui aime tant les choses effrayantes. J'ai été entraîné dans le Spladgest par la foule qui s'y pressait. On vient d'y apporter les cadavres de trois soldats du régiment de Munckholm et de deux archers, trouvés hier à quatre lieues dans les gorges, au fond du précipice de Cascadthymore. Quelques spectateurs assurent que ces malheureux composaient l'escouade envoyée, il y a trois jours, dans la direction de Skongen, à la recherche du concierge fugitif du Spladgest. Si cela est vrai, on ne peut concevoir comment tant d'hommes armés ont pu être assassinés. La mutilation des corps paraît prouver qu'ils ont été précipités du haut des rochers. Cela fait dresser les cheveux.

— Quoi! Gustave, vous les avez vus? demanda vivement Wapherney.

— Je les ai encore devant les yeux.

— Et présume-t-on quels sont les auteurs de cet attentat?

— Quelques personnes pensaient que ce pouvait être une bande de mineurs, et assuraient qu'on avait entendu hier, dans les montagnes, les sons de la corne avec laquelle ils s'appellent.

— En vérité! dit Arthur.

— Oui; mais un vieux paysan a détruit cette conjecture en faisant observer qu'il n'y avait ni mines ni mineurs du côté de Cascadthymore.

— Et qui serait-ce donc?

— On ne sait; si les corps n'étaient entiers, on pourrait croire que ce sont quelques bêtes féroces, car ils portent sur leurs membres de longues et profondes égratignures. Il en est de même du cadavre d'un vieillard à barbe blanche qu'on a apporté au Spladgest avant-hier matin, à la suite de cet affreux orage qui vous a empêché, mon cher Léandre Wapherney, d'aller visiter, sur l'autre rive du golfe, votre Héro du coteau de Larsynn.

— Bien! bien! Gustave, dit Wapherney en riant; mais quel est ce vieillard?

— À sa haute taille, à sa longue barbe blanche, à un chapelet qu'il tient encore fortement serré entre ses mains, quoiqu'il ait été trouvé du reste absolument dépouillé, on a reconnu, dit-on, un certain ermite des environs; je crois qu'on l'appelle l'ermite de Lynrass. Il est évident que le pauvre homme a été également assassiné; mais dans quel but? On n'égorge plus maintenant pour opinion religieuse, et le vieil ermite ne possédait au monde que sa robe de bure et la bienveillance publique.

— Et vous dites, reprit Richard, que ce corps est déchiré, ainsi que ceux des soldats, comme par les ongles d'une bête féroce?

— Oui, mon cher; et un pêcheur affirmait avoir remarqué des traces pareilles sur le corps d'un officier trouvé, il y a plusieurs jours, assassiné, vers les grèves d'Urchtal.

— Cela est singulier, dit Arthur.

— Cela est effroyable, dit Richard.

— Allons, reprit Wapherney, silence et travail, car je crois que le général va bientôt venir. — Mon cher Gustave, je suis bien curieux de voir ces corps; si vous voulez, ce soir, en sortant, nous entrerons un moment au Spladgest.

XVI

Elle eût été si facilement heureuse! une simple cabane dans une vallée des Alpes, quelques occupations domestiques auraient suffi pour satisfaire ses modestes désirs et remplir sa douce vie; mais moi, l’ennemi de Dieu, je n’ai pas eu de repos que je n’aie brisé son coeur, que je n’aie fait tomber en ruine sa destinée. 11 faut qu’elle soit la victime de l’enfer.

GOETHE, *Faust*.

En 1675, c’est-à-dire vingt-quatre années avant l’époque où se passe cette histoire, hélas! ç’avait été une fête charmante pour tout le hameau de Thoctree, que le mariage de la douce Lucy Pelnyrh, et du beau, du grand, de l’excellent jeune homme Caroll Stadt. Il est vrai de dire qu’ils s’aimaient depuis longtemps; et comment tous les coeurs ne se seraient-ils pas intéressés aux deux jeunes amants le jour où tant d’ardents désirs, tant d’inquiètes espérances allaient enfin se changer en bonheur! Nés dans le même village, élevés dans les mêmes champs, bien souvent, dans leur enfance, Caroll s’était endormi après leurs jeux sur le sein de Lucy; bien souvent, dans leur adolescence, Lucy s’était, après leurs travaux, appuyée sur le bras de Caroll. Lucy était la plus timide et la plus jolie des filles du pays, Caroll le plus brave et le plus noble des garçons du canton; ils s’aimaient, et ils n’auraient pas mieux pu se rappeler le jour où ils avaient commencé d’aimer, que le jour où ils avaient commencé de vivre.

Mais leur mariage n’était pas venu comme leur amour, doucement et de lui-même. Il y avait eu des intérêts domestiques, des haines de famille, des parents, des obstacles; une année entière ils avaient été séparés, et Caroll avait bien souffert loin de sa Lucy, et Lucy avait bien pleuré loin de son Caroll, avant le jour bienheureux qui les réunissait, pour désormais ne plus souffrir et pleurer qu’ensemble.

C’était en la sauvant d’un grand péril que Caroll avait enfin obtenu sa Lucy. Un jour il avait entendu des cris dans un bois; c’était sa Lucy qu’un brigand, redouté de tous les montagnards, avait surprise et paraissait vouloir enlever. Caroll attaqua hardiment ce monstre à face humaine, auquel le singulier rugissement qu’il poussait comme une bête féroce avait fait donner le nom de *Han*. Oui, il attaqua celui que personne n’osait attaquer; mais l’amour lui donnait des forces de lion. Il délivra sa bien-aimée Lucy, la rendit à son père, et le père la lui donna.

Or tout le village fut joyeux le jour où l’on unit ces deux fiancés. Lucy, seule, paraissait sombre. Jamais pourtant elle n’avait attaché un regard plus tendre sur son cher Caroll; mais ce regard était aussi triste que tendre, et, dans la joie universelle, c’était un sujet d’étonnement. De moment en moment, plus le bonheur de son ami semblait croître, plus ses yeux exprimaient de douleur et d’amour. — O ma Lucy, lui dit Caroll après la sainte cérémonie, la présence de ce brigand, qui est un malheur pour toute la contrée, aura donc été un bonheur pour moi! — On remarqua qu’elle secoua la tête et ne répondit rien.

Le soir vint; on les laissa seuls dans leur chaumière neuve, et les danses et les jeux redoublèrent sur la place du village, pour célébrer la félicité des deux époux.

Le lendemain matin, Caroll Stadt avait disparu; quelques mots de sa main furent remis au père de Lucy Pelnyrh par un chasseur des monts de Kole, qui l’avait rencontré avant l’aube, errant sur les grèves du golfe. Le vieux Will Pelnyrh montra ce papier au pasteur et au syndic, et il ne resta de la fête de la veille que l’abattement et le morne désespoir de Lucy.

Cette catastrophe mystérieuse consterna tout le village, et l’on s’efforça vainement de l’expliquer. Des prières pour l’âme de Caroll furent dites dans la même église où, quelques jours auparavant, lui-même avait chanté des cantiques d’actions de grâces sur son bonheur. On ne sait ce qui retint à la vie la veuve Stadt. Au bout de neuf mois de solitude et de deuil, elle mit au monde un fils, et, le jour même, le village de Golyn fut écrasé par la chute du rocher pendant qui le dominait.

La naissance de ce fils ne dissipa point la douleur sombre de sa mère. Gill Stadt n’annonçait en rien qu’il dût ressembler à Caroll. Son enfance farouche semblait promettre une vie plus farouche encore. Quelquefois un petit homme sauvage — dans lequel des montagnards qui l’avaient vu de loin affirmaient reconnaître le fameux Han d’Islande — venait dans la cabane déserte de la veuve de Caroll, et ceux qui passaient alors près de là en entendaient sortir des plaintes de femme et des rugissements de tigre. L’homme emmenait le jeune Gill, et des mois s’écoulaient; puis il le rendait à sa mère, plus sombre et plus effrayant encore.

La veuve Stadt avait pour cet enfant un mélange d’horreur et de tendresse. Quelquefois elle le serrait dans ses bras de mère, comme le seul lien qui l’attachât encore à la vie; d’autres fois elle le repoussait avec épouvante en appelant Caroll, son cher Caroll. Nul être au monde ne savait ce qui bouleversait son coeur.

Gill avait passé sa vingt-troisième année; il vit Guth Stersen, et l'aima avec fureur. Guth Stersen était riche, et il était pauvre. Alors, il partit pour Roeraas afin de se faire mineur et de gagner de l'or. Depuis lors sa mère n'en avait plus entendu parler.

Une nuit, assise devant le rouet qui la nourrissait, elle veillait, avec sa lampe à demi éteinte, dans sa cabane, sous ces murs vieillis comme elle dans la solitude et le deuil, muets témoins de la mystérieuse nuit de ses noces. Inquiète, elle pensait à son fils, dont la présence, si vivement désirée, allait lui rappeler, et peut-être lui apporter bien des douleurs. Cette pauvre mère aimait son fils, tout ingrat qu'il était. Et comment ne l'aurait-elle pas aimé? elle avait tant souffert pour lui!

Elle se leva, alla prendre au fond d'une vieille armoire un crucifix rouillé dans la poussière. Un moment elle le considéra d'un oeil suppliant; puis tout à coup, le repoussant avec effroi: — Prier! cria-t-elle; est-ce que je puis prier? — Tu n'as plus à prier que l'enfer, malheureuse! c'est à l'enfer que tu appartiens.

Elle retombait dans sa sombre rêverie, lorsqu'on frappa à la porte.

C'était un événement rare chez la veuve Stadt; car, depuis longues années, grâce à ce que sa vie offrait d'extraordinaire, tout le village de Thoctree la croyait en commerce avec les esprits infernaux. Aussi nul n'approchait de sa cabane. Étranges superstitions de ce siècle et de ce pays d'ignorance! elle devait au malheur la même réputation de sorcellerie que le concierge du Spladgest devait à la science!

— Si c'était mon fils, si c'était Gill! s'écria-t-elle; et elle s'élança vers la porte.

Hélas! ce n'était pas son fils. C'était un petit ermite vêtu de bure, dont le capuchon rabattu ne laissait voir que la barbe noire.

— Saint homme, dit la veuve, que demandez-vous? Vous ne savez pas à quelle maison vous vous adressez.

— Si vraiment! répliqua l'ermite, d'une voix rauque et trop connue.

Et, arrachant ses gants, sa barbe noire et son capuchon, il découvrit un atroce visage, une barbe rousse et des mains armées d'ongles hideux.

— Oh! cria la veuve, et elle cacha sa tête dans ses mains.

— Eh bien! dit le petit homme, est-ce que, depuis vingt-quatre ans, tu ne t'es pas encore habituée à voir l'époux que tu dois contempler durant toute l’éternité?

Elle murmura avec épouvante: — L’éternité!

— Écoute, Lucy Pelnyrh, je t’apporte des nouvelles de ton fils.

— De mon fils! où est-il? pourquoi ne vient-il pas?

— Il ne peut.

— Mais vous avez de ses nouvelles. Je vous rends grâces. Hélas! vous pouvez donc m’apporter du bonheur!

— C’est le bonheur en effet que je t’apporte, dit l’homme d’une voix sourde; car tu es une faible femme, et je m’étonne que ton ventre ait pu porter un pareil fils. Réjouis-toi donc. Tu craignais que ton fils ne marchât sur ma trace; ne crains plus rien.

— Quoi! s’écria la mère avec ravissement, mon fils, mon bien-aimé Gill est donc changé?

L’ermite regardait sa joie avec un rire funeste.

— Oh! bien changé! dit-il.

— Et pourquoi n’est-il pas accouru dans mes bras? Où l’avez-vous vu? que faisait-il?

— Il dormait.

La veuve, dans l’excès de sa joie, ne remarquait ni le regard sinistre, ni l’air horriblement railleur du petit homme.

— Pourquoi ne l’avoir pas réveillé, ne lui avoir pas dit: Gill, viens voir ta mère?

— Son sommeil était profond.

— Oh! quand viendra-t-il? Apprenez-moi, je vous en supplie, si je le reverrai bientôt.

Le faux ermite tira de dessous sa robe une espèce de coupe d’une forme singulière.

— Eh bien! veuve, dit-il, bois au prochain retour de ton fils!

La veuve poussa un cri d’horreur. C’était un crâne humain. Elle fit un geste d’épouvante et ne put proférer une parole.

— Non, non! cria tout à coup l’homme avec une voix terrible, ne détourne pas les yeux, femme; regarde. Tu demandes à revoir ton fils? Regarde, te dis-je! car voilà tout ce qui en reste.

Et, aux lueurs de la lampe rougeâtre, il présentait aux lèvres pâles de la mère le crâne nu et desséché de son fils.

Trop de malheurs avaient passé sur cette âme pour qu’un malheur de plus la brisât. Elle éleva sur le farouche ermite un regard fixe et stupide.

— Oh! la mort! dit-elle faiblement; la mort! laissez-moi mourir.

— Meurs si tu veux! — Mais souviens-toi, Lucy Pelnyrh, du bois de Thoetree; souviens-toi du jour où le démon, en s'emparant de ton corps, a donné ton âme à l'enfer! Je suis le démon, Lucy, et tu es mon épouse éternelle! Maintenant, meurs, si tu veux.

C'était une croyance, dans ces contrées superstitieuses, que des esprits infernaux apparaissaient parfois parmi les hommes pour y vivre des vies de crime et de calamité. Entre autres fameux scélérats, Han d'Islande avait cette effrayante renommée. On croyait encore que la femme qui, par séduction ou par violence, était la proie d'un de ces démons à forme humaine, devenait irrévocablement par ce malheur sa compagne de damnation.

Les événements que l'ermite rappelait à la veuve parurent réveiller en elle ces idées.

— Hélas! dit-elle douloureusement, je ne puis donc échapper à l'existence! — Et qu'ai-je fait? car tu le sais, mon bien-aimé Caroll, je suis innocente. Le bras d'une jeune fille n'a point la force du bras d'un démon.

Elle poursuivit; ses regards étaient pleins de délire, et ses paroles incohérentes semblaient nées du tremblement convulsif de ses lèvres.

— Oui, Caroll, depuis ce jour je suis impure et innocente; et le démon me demande si je me le rappelle, cet horrible jour! — Mon Caroll, je ne t'ai point trompé; tu es venu trop tard; j'étais à lui avant d'être à toi, hélas! — Hélas! et je serai punie éternellement. Non, je ne vous rejoindrai pas, vous que je pleure. A quoi bon mourir? J'irai avec ce monstre, dans un monde qui lui ressemble, dans le monde des réprouvés! et qu'ai-je donc fait? Mes malheurs dans la vie seront mes crimes dans l'éternité.

Le petit ermite appuyait sur elle un regard de triomphe et d'autorité.

— Ah! s'écria-t-elle tout à coup en se tournant vers lui, ah! dites-moi, ceci n'est-il pas quelque rêve affreux que votre présence m'apporte? car, vous le savez, hélas! depuis le jour de ma perte, toutes les fatales nuits où votre esprit m'a visitée ont été marquées pour moi par d'impures apparitions, d'effrayants songes et des visions épouvantables.

— Femme, femme, reviens à la raison. Il est aussi vrai que tu es éveillée, qu'il est vrai que Gill est mort.

Le souvenir de ses anciennes infortunes avait comme effacé en cette mère celui de son nouveau malheur; ces paroles le lui rendirent.

— O mon fils! mon fils! dit-elle; et le son de sa voix aurait ému tout autre que l'être méchant qui l'écoutait. Non, il reviendra; il n'est pas mort; je ne puis croire qu'il est mort.

— Eh bien! va le demander aux rochers de Roeraas, qui l'ont écrasé, au golfe de Drontheim, qui l'a enseveli. La veuve tomba à genoux et cria avec effort:

— Dieu, grand Dieu!

— Tais-toi, servante de l'enfer!

La malheureuse se tut. Il poursuivit.

— Ne doute pas de la mort de ton fils. Il a été puni par où son père a failli. Il a laissé amollir son coeur de granit par un regard de femme. Moi, je t'ai possédée, mais je ne t'ai jamais aimée. Le malheur de ton Caroll est retombé sur lui. — Mon fils et le tien a été trompé par sa fiancée, par celle pour qui il est mort.

— Mort! reprit-elle, mort! Cela est donc vrai? — O Gill, tu étais né de mon malheur; tu avais été conçu dans l'épouvante et enfanté dans le deuil; ta bouche avait déchiré mon sein; enfant, jamais tes caresses n'avaient répondu à mes caresses, tes embrassements à mes embrassements; tu as toujours fui et repoussé ta mère, ta mère si seule et si abandonnée dans la vie! Tu ne cherchais à me faire oublier mes maux passés qu'en me créant de nouvelles douleurs; tu me délaissais pour le démon auteur de ton existence et de mon veuvage; jamais, durant de longues années, Gill, jamais une joie ne m'est venue de toi; et cependant aujourd'hui ta mort, mon fils, me semble la plus insupportable de mes afflictions, aujourd'hui ton souvenir me semble un souvenir d'enchantement et de consolation. Hélas!

Elle ne put continuer; elle cacha sa tête dans son voile de bure noire, et on l'entendait sangloter douloureusement.

— Faible femme! murmura l'ermite; puis il reprit d'une voix forte: — Dompte ta douleur, je me suis joué de la mienne. Écoute, Lucy Pelnyrh, pendant que tu pleures encore ton fils, j'ai déjà commencé à le venger. C'est pour un soldat de la garnison de Munckholm que sa fiancée l'a trompé. Tout le régiment périra par mes mains. — Vois, Lucy Pelnyrh. Il avait relevé les manches de sa robe, et montrait à la veuve ses bras difformes teints de sang.

— Oui, dit-il en poussant une sorte de rugissement, c'est aux grèves d'Urchtal, c'est aux gorges de Cascadthymore, que l'esprit de Gill doit se promener avec joie. — Allons, femme, ne vois-tu pas ce sang? Console-toi donc!

Puis tout à coup, comme frappé d'un souvenir, il s'interrompit:

— Veuve, ne t'a-t-on pas remis de ma part un coffre de fer? — Quoi! je t'ai envoyé de l'or et je t'apporte du sang, et tu pleures encore! Tu n'es donc pas de la race des hommes?

La veuve, absorbée dans son désespoir, gardait le silence.

— Allons! dit-il avec un rire farouche, muette et immobile! tu n'es donc pas non plus de la race des femmes, Lucy Pelnyrh! — Et il secouait son bras pour qu'elle l'écoutât. — Est-ce qu'un messager ne t'a pas apporté un coffre de fer scellé?

La veuve, lui accordant une attention passagère, fit un signe de tête négatif, et retomba dans sa morne rêverie.

— Ah! le misérable! cria le petit homme, le misérable infidèle!

Spiagudry, cet or te coûtera cher!

Et, dépouillant sa robe d'ermite, il s'élança hors de la cabane avec le grondement d'une hyène qui cherche un cadavre.

XVII

Seigneur, je peigne mes cheveux, je les peigne en pleurant, parce que vous me laissez seule, et que vous vous en allez dans les montagnes.

La, Dame au Comte, romance.

Éthel, cependant, avait déjà compté quatre jours longs et monotones depuis qu'elle errait seule dans le sombre jardin du donjon de Slesvig; seule dans l'oratoire, témoin de tant de pleurs et confident de tant de voeux; seule dans la longue galerie où, une fois, elle n'avait pas entendu sonner minuit. Son vieux père l'accompagnait quelquefois, mais elle n'en était pas moins seule, car le véritable compagnon de sa vie était absent.

Malheureuse jeune fille! Qu'avait fait cette âme jeune et pure pour être déjà livrée à tant d'infortune? Enlevée au monde, aux honneurs, aux richesses, aux joies de la jeunesse, aux triomphes de la beauté, elle était encore au berceau qu'elle était déjà dans un cachot; captive près d'un père captif, elle avait grandi en le voyant dépérir; et pour comble de douleurs, pour qu'elle n'ignorât aucun esclavage, l'amour était venu la trouver dans sa prison.

Encore si elle eût pu avoir son Ordener auprès d'elle, que lui eût fait la liberté? Eût-elle su seulement s'il existait un monde dont on la séparait? Et d'ailleurs, son monde, son ciel, n'eussent-ils pas été avec elle dans cet étroit donjon, sous ces noires tours hérissées de soldats, et vers lesquelles le passant n'en aurait pas moins jeté un regard de pitié?

Mais, hélas! pour la seconde fois, son Ordener était absent; et, au lieu de couler près de lui des heures bien courtes, mais toujours renaissantes, dans de saintes caresses et de chastes embrassements, elle passait les nuits et les jours à pleurer son absence et à prier pour ses dangers. Car une vierge n'a que sa prière et ses larmes.

Quelquefois elle enviait ses ailes à l'hirondelle libre qui venait lui demander quelque nourriture à travers les barreaux de sa prison. Quelquefois elle laissait fuir sa pensée sur le nuage qu'un vent rapide enfonçait dans le nord du ciel; puis tout à coup elle détournait sa tête et voilait ses yeux, comme si elle eût craint de voir apparaître le gigantesque brigand et commencer le combat inégal sur l'une des montagnes lointaines dont le sommet bleuâtre rampait à l'horizon ainsi qu'une nuée immobile.

Oh! qu’il est cruel d’aimer alors qu’on est séparé de l’être qu’on aime! Bien peu de coeurs ont connu cette douleur dans toute son étendue, parce que bien peu de coeurs ont connu l’amour dans toute sa profondeur. Alors, étranger en quelque sorte à sa propre existence, on se crée pour soi-même une solitude morne, un vide immense, et, pour l’être absent, je ne sais quel monde effrayant de périls, de monstres et de déceptions; les diverses facultés qui composaient notre nature se changent et se perdent en un désir infini de l’être qui nous manque; tout ce qui nous environne est hors de notre vie. Cependant on respire, on marche, on agit, mais sans la pensée. Comme une planète égarée qui aurait perdu son soleil, le corps se meut au hasard; l’âme est ailleurs.

XVIII

Sur un grand bouclier ces chefs impitoyables
Épouvantent l’enfer de serments effroyables;
Et près d’un taureau noir qu’ils viennent d’égorger,
Tous, la main dans le sang, jurent de se venger.

Les Sept Chefs devant Thèbes.

Les rivages de Norvège abondent en baies étroites, en criques, en récifs, en lagunes, en petits caps tellement multipliés qu’ils fatiguent la mémoire du voyageur et la patience du topographe. Autrefois, à en croire les discours populaires, chaque isthme avait son démon qui le hantait, chaque anse sa fée qui l’habitait, chaque promontoire son saint qui le protégeait; car la superstition mêle toutes les croyances pour se faire des terreurs. Sur la grève de Kelvel, à quelques milles au nord de la grotte de Walderhog, un seul endroit, disait-on, était libre de toute juridiction des esprits infernaux, intermédiaires ou célestes. C’était la clairière riveraine dominée par le rocher sur le sommet duquel on apercevait encore quelques vieilles ruines du manoir de Ralph ou Radulphe le Géant. Cette petite prairie sauvage, bordée au couchant par la mer, et étroitement encaissée dans des roches couvertes de bruyères, devait ce privilège au nom seul de cet ancien sire norvégien, son premier possesseur. Car quelle fée, quel diable, ou quel ange eût osé se faire l’hôte ou le patron du domaine autrefois occupé et protégé par Ralph le Géant?

Il est vrai que le nom seul du formidable Ralph suffisait pour imprimer un caractère effrayant à ces lieux déjà si sauvages. Mais, à tout prendre, un souvenir n’est pas si redoutable qu’un esprit; et jamais un pêcheur, attardé par le gros temps, en amarrant sa barque dans la crique de Ralph, n’avait vu le follet rire et danser, parmi des âmes, sur le haut d’un rocher, ni la fée parcourir les bruyères dans son char de phosphore traîné par des vers luisants, ni le saint remonter vers la lune après sa prière.

Si pourtant, la nuit qui suivit le grand orage, les houles de la mer et la violence du vent eussent permis à quelque marinier égaré d’aborder dans cette baie hospitalière, peut-être eût-il été frappé d’une superstitieuse épouvante en contemplant les trois hommes qui, cette nuit-là, s’étaient assis autour d’un grand feu, allumé au milieu de la clairière. Deux d’entre eux étaient couverts de grands chapeaux de feutre et des larges pantalons des mineurs royaux. Leurs bras étaient nus jusqu'à l'épaule, leurs pieds cachés dans des bottines fauves; une ceinture d'étoffe rouge soutenait leurs sabres recourbés et leurs longs pistolets. Tous deux portaient une trompe de corne suspendue à leur cou. L'un était vieux, l'autre était jeune; et l'épaisseur de la barbe du vieillard, la longueur des cheveux du jeune homme, ajoutaient quelque chose de sauvage à leurs physionomies, naturellement dures et sévères.

À son bonnet de peau d'ours, à sa casaque de cuir huilé, au mousquet fixé en bandoulière à son dos, à sa culotte courte et étroite, à ses genoux nus, à ses sandales d'écorce, à la hache étincelante qu'il portait à la main, il était facile de reconnaître, dans le compagnon des deux mineurs, un montagnard du nord de la Norvège.

Certes, celui qui eût aperçu de loin ces trois figures singulières, sur lesquelles le foyer, agité par les brises de mer, jetait des lueurs rouges et changeantes, eût pu être à bon droit effrayé, sans même croire aux spectres et aux démons; il lui eût suffi pour cela de croire aux voleurs et d'être un peu plus riche qu'un poëte.

Ces trois hommes tournaient souvent la tête vers le sentier perdu du bois qui aboutit à la clairière de Ralph, et d'après celles de leurs paroles que le vent n'emportait pas, ils semblaient attendre un quatrième personnage.

— Dites donc, Kennybol, savez-vous qu'à cette heure-ci nous n'attendrions pas aussi paisiblement cet envoyé du comte Griffenfeld dans la prairie voisine, la prairie du lutin Tulbytilbet, ou là-bas, dans la baie de Saint-Cuthbert?

— Ne parlez pas si haut, Jonas, répondit le montagnard au vieux mineur, béni soit Ralph Géant qui nous protège! Me préserve le ciel de remettre le pied dans la clairière de Tulbytilbet! L'autre jour j'y croyais cueillir de l'aubépine, et j'y ai cueilli de la mandragore, qui s'est mise à saigner et à crier, ce qui a failli me rendre fou.

Le jeune mineur se prit à rire.

— En vérité, Kennybol! je crois, moi, que le cri de la mandragore a bien produit tout son effet sur votre pauvre cerveau.

— Pauvre cerveau toi-même! dit le montagnard avec humeur; voyez, Jonas, il rit de la mandragore. Il rit comme un insensé qui joue avec une tête de mort.

— Hum! repartit Jonas. Qu’il aille donc à la grotte de Walderhog, où les têtes de ceux que Han, démon d’Islande, a assassinés, reviennent chaque nuit danser autour de son lit de feuilles sèches, en entre-choquant leurs dents pour l’endormir.

— Cela est vrai, dit le montagnard.

— Mais, reprit le jeune homme, le seigneur Hacket, que nous attendons, ne nous a-t-il pas promis que Han d’Islande se mettrait à la tête de notre insurrection?

— Il l’a promis, répondit Kennybol; et, avec l’aide de ce démon, nous sommes sûrs de vaincre toutes les casaques vertes de Drontheim et de Copenhague.

— Tant mieux! s’écria le vieux mineur; mais ce n’est pas moi qui me chargerai de faire la sentinelle la nuit près de lui.

En ce moment, le craquement des bruyères mortes sous des pas d’homme appela l’attention des interlocuteurs; ils se détournèrent, et un rayon du foyer leur fit reconnaître le nouveau venu.

— C’est lui! — c’est le seigneur Hacket! — Salut, seigneur Hacket; vous vous êtes fait attendre. — Voilà plus de trois quarts d’heure que nous sommes au rendez-vous.

Ce seigneur *Hacket* était un homme petit et gras, vêtu de noir, dont la figure joviale avait une expression sinistre.

— Bien, mes amis, dit-il; j’ai été retardé par mon ignorance du chemin et les précautions qu’il m’a fallu prendre. — J’ai quitté le comte Schumacker ce matin; voici trois bourses d’or qu’il m’a chargé de vous remettre.

Les deux vieillards se jetèrent sur l’or avec l’avidité commune, aux paysans de cette pauvre Norvège. Le jeune mineur repoussa la bourse que lui tendait Hacket.

— Gardez votre or, seigneur envoyé; je mentirais si je disais que je me révolte pour votre comte Schumacker; je me révolte pour affranchir les mineurs de la tutelle royale; je me révolte pour que le lit de ma mère n’ait plus une couverture déchiquetée comme les côtes de notre bon pays, la Norvège.

Loin de paraître déconcerté, le seigneur Hacket répondit en souriant:

— C’est donc à votre pauvre mère, mon cher Norbith, que j’enverrai cet argent, afin qu’elle ait deux couvertures neuves pour les bises de cet hiver.

Le jeune homme se rendit par un signe de tête, et l’envoyé, en orateur habile, se hâta d’ajouter:

— Mais gardez-vous de répéter ce que vous venez de dire inconsidérément, que ce n’est pas pour Schumacker, comte de Griffenfeld, que vous prenez les armes.

— Cependant…. cependant, murmurèrent les deux vieillards, nous savons bien qu’on opprime les mineurs, mais nous ne connaissons pas ce comte, ce prisonnier d’état.

— Comment! reprit vivement l’envoyé; pouvez-vous être ingrats à ce point! Vous gémissiez dans vos souterrains, privés d’air et de jour, dépouillés de toute propriété, esclaves de la plus onéreuse tutelle! Qui est venu à votre aide? qui a ranimé votre courage? qui vous a donné de l’or, des armes? N’est-ce pas mon illustre maître, le noble comte de Griffenfeld, plus esclave et plus infortuné encore que vous? Et maintenant, comblés de ses bienfaits, vous refuseriez de vous en servir pour conquérir sa liberté, en même temps que la vôtre?

— Vous avez raison, interrompit le jeune mineur, ce serait mal agir.

— Oui, seigneur Hacket, dirent les deux vieillards, nous combattrons pour le comte Schumacker.

— Courage, mes amis! levez-vous en son nom, portez le nom de votre bienfaiteur d’un bout de la Norvège à l’autre. Écoutez, tout seconde votre juste entreprise; vous allez être délivrés d’un formidable ennemi, le général Levin de Knud, qui gouverne la province. La puissance secrète de mon noble maître, le comte de Griffenfeld, va le faire rappeler momentanément à Berghen. — Allons, dites-moi, Kennybol, Jonas, et vous, mon cher Norbith, tous vos compagnons sont-ils prêts?

— Mes frères de Guldbranshal, dit Norbith, n’attendent que mon signal.

Demain, si vous voulez….

— Demain, soit. Il faut que les jeunes mineurs, dont vous êtes le chef, lèvent les premiers l’étendard. Et vous, mon brave Jonas?

— Six cents braves des îles Fa-roër, qui vivent depuis trois jours de chair de chamois et d’huile d’ours, dans la forêt de Bennallag, ne demandent qu’un coup de trompe de leur vieux capitaine Jonas, du bourg de Loevig.

— Fort bien. Et vous, Kennybol?

— Tous ceux qui portent une hache dans les gorges de Kole, et gravissent les rochers sans genouillères, sont prêts à se joindre à leurs frères les mineurs, quand ils auront besoin d'eux.

— Il suffit. Annoncez à vos compagnons, pour qu'ils ne doutent pas de vaincre, ajouta l'envoyé en haussant la voix, que Han d'Islande sera le chef.

— Cela est-il certain? demandèrent-ils tous trois ensemble et d'une voix où se mêlaient l'expression de la terreur et celle de l'espérance.

L'envoyé répondit:

— Je vous attendrai tous trois dans quatre jours, à pareille heure, avec vos colonnes réunies, dans la mine d'Apsyl-Corh, près le lac de Smiasen, sous la plaine de l'Étoile-Bleue. Han d'Islande m'accompagnera.

— Nous y serons, dirent les trois chefs. Et puisse Dieu ne pas abandonner ceux qu'aidera le démon!

— Ne craignez rien de la part de Dieu, dit Hacket en ricanant. — Écoutez, vous trouverez, dans les vieilles ruines de Crag, des enseignes pour vos troupes. — N'oubliez pas le cri: *Vive Schumacker! Sauvons Schumacker!* — Il faut que nous nous séparions; le jour ne va pas tarder à paraître. Mais auparavant, jurez le plus inviolable secret sur ce qui se passe entre nous.

Sans répondre une parole, les trois chefs s'ouvrirent la veine du bras gauche avec la pointe d'un sabre; ensuite, saisissant la main de l'envoyé, ils y laissèrent couler chacun quelques gouttes de sang.

— Vous avez notre sang, lui dirent-ils. Puis le jeune s'écria:

— Que tout mon sang s'écoule comme celui que je verse en ce moment; qu'un esprit malfaisant se joue de mes projets, comme l'ouragan d'une paille; que mon bras soit de plomb pour venger une injure; que les chauves-souris habitent mon sépulcre; que je sois, vivant, hanté par les morts; mort, profané par les vivants; que mes yeux se fondent en pleurs comme ceux d'une femme, si jamais je parle de ce qui a lieu, à cette heure, dans la clairière de Ralph le Géant. Daignent les bienheureux saints m'entendre!

— Amen, répétèrent les deux vieillards.

Alors ils se séparèrent, et il ne resta plus dans la clairière que le foyer à demi éteint dont les rayons mourants montaient par intervalles jusqu'au faîte des tours ruinées et solitaires de Ralph le Géant.

XIX

THÉODORE.

Tristan, fuyons par ici.

TRISTAN.

C’est une étrange disgrâce.

THÉODORE.

Nous aura-t-on reconnus?

TRISTAN.

Je l’ignore et j’en ai peur.

LOPE DE VEGA. *Le Chien du Jardinier.*

Benignus Spiagudry se rendait difficilement compte des motifs qui pouvaient pousser un jeune homme bien constitué et paraissant avoir encore de longues années de vie devant lui, tel que son compagnon de voyage, à se porter l’agresseur volontaire du redoutable Han d’Islande. Bien souvent, depuis qu’ils avaient commencé leur route, il avait abordé adroitement cette question; mais le jeune aventurier gardait, sur la cause de son voyage, un silence obstiné. Le pauvre homme n’avait pas été plus heureux dans toutes les autres curiosités que son singulier camarade devait naturellement lui inspirer. Une fois, il avait hasardé une question sur la famille et le nom de son jeune *maître*. — Appelez-moi Ordener, avait répondu celui-ci; et cette réponse peu satisfaisante était prononcée d’un ton qui interdisait la réplique. Il fallait donc se résigner; chacun a ses secrets; et le bon Spiagudry lui-même ne cachait-il pas soigneusement, dans sa besace et sous son manteau, certaine cassette mystérieuse sur laquelle toutes recherches lui eussent semblé fort déplacées et fort désagréables.

Ils avaient quitté Drontheim depuis quatre jours, sans avoir fait beaucoup de chemin, tant en raison du dégât causé dans les routes par l’orage, que de la multiplicité des voies de traverse et détours que le concierge fugitif croyait prudent de prendre pour éviter les lieux trop habités. Après avoir laissé Skongen à leur droite, vers le soir du quatrième jour ils atteignirent la rive du lac de Sparbo.

C’était un tableau sombre et magnifique que cette vaste nappe d’eau réfléchissant les derniers rayons du jour et les premières étoiles de la nuit dans un cadre de hauts rochers, de sapins noirs et de grands chênes.

L’aspect d’un lac, le soir, produit quelquefois, à une certaine distance, une singulière illusion d’optique; c’est comme si un abîme prodigieux, perçant le globe de part en part, laissait voir le ciel à travers la terre.

Ordener s’arrêta, contemplant ces vieilles forêts druidiques qui couvrent les rivages montueux du lac comme une chevelure, et les huttes crayeuses de Sparbo, répandues sur une pente ainsi qu’un troupeau épars de chèvres blanches. Il écoutait les bruits lointains des forges [Footnote: Les Eaux du lac de Sparbo sont renommées pour la trempe de l’acier.] mêlés au sourd mugissement des grands bois magiques, aux cris intermittents des oiseaux sauvages et à la grave harmonie des vagues. Au nord, un immense rocher de granit, encore éclairé par le soleil, s’élevait majestueusement au-dessus du petit hameau d’Oëlmoe, puis sa tête se courbait sous un amas de tours ruinées, comme si le géant eût été fatigué du fardeau.

Quand l’âme est triste, les spectacles mélancoliques lui plaisent; elle les rembrunit de toute sa tristesse. Qu’un malheureux soit jeté parmi les sauvages et hautes montagnes, près d’un sombre lac, d’une noire forêt, au moment où le jour va disparaître, il verra cette scène grave, cette nature sérieuse, en quelque sorte à travers un voile funèbre; il ne lui semblera pas que le soleil se couche, mais qu’il meurt.

Ordener rêvait, silencieux et immobile, quand son compagnon s’écria:

— À merveille, jeune seigneur! Il est beau de méditer ainsi devant le lac de Norvège qui renferme le plus de pleuronectes.

Cette observation et le geste qui l’accompagnait eussent fait sourire tout autre qu’un amant séparé de sa maîtresse pour ne la revoir peut-être plus. Le savant concierge poursuivit:

— Pourtant, souffrez que je vous enlève à votre docte contemplation pour vous faire remarquer que le jour décline, et qu’il faut nous hâter si nous voulons arriver au village d’Oëlmoe avant le crépuscule.

La remarque était juste. Ordener se remit en marche, et Spiagudry le suivit en continuant ses réflexions mal écoutées sur les phénomènes botaniques et physiologiques que le lac de Sparbo présente aux naturalistes.

— Seigneur Ordener, disait-il, si vous en croyiez votre dévoué guide, vous abandonneriez votre funeste entreprise; oui, seigneur, et vous vous fixeriez ici sur les bords de ce lac si curieux où nous pourrions nous livrer ensemble à une foule de doctes recherches, par exemple à celle de la *stella canora palustris*, plante singulière que beaucoup de savants croient fabuleuse, mais que l’évêque Arngrim affirme avoir vue et entendue sur les rives du Sparbo. Ajoutez à cela que nous aurions la satisfaction d'habiter le sol de l'Europe qui renferme le plus de gypse, et où les sicaires de la Thémis de Drontheim pénètrent le moins. — Cela ne vous sourit-il pas, mon jeune maître? Allons, renoncez à votre voyage insensé; car, sans vous offenser, votre entreprise est périlleuse sans profit, *periculum sine pecunia*, c'est-à-dire insensée, et conçue dans un moment où vous auriez mieux fait de penser à autre chose.

Ordener, qui ne prêtait aucune attention aux paroles du pauvre homme, n'entretenait la conversation que par ces monosyllabes insignifiants et distraits que les grands parleurs prennent pour des réponses. C'est ainsi qu'ils arrivèrent au hameau d'Oëlmoe, sur la place duquel un mouvement inusité se faisait en ce moment remarquer.

Les habitants, chasseurs, pêcheurs, forgerons, sortaient de toutes les cabanes et accouraient se grouper autour d'un tertre circulaire, occupé par quelques hommes, dont l'un sonnait du cor en agitant au-dessus de sa tête une petite bannière blanche et noire.

— C'est sans doute quelque charlatan, dit Spiagudry, *ambubaiarum collegia, pharmacopolae*, quelque misérable qui convertit l'or en plomb et les plaies en ulcères. Voyons; quelle invention de l'enfer va-t-il vendre à ces pauvres campagnards? Encore si ces imposteurs se bornaient aux rois, s'ils imitaient tous le danois Borch et le milanais Borri, ces alchimistes qui se jouèrent si complètement de notre Frédéric III [Footnote: Frédéric III fut la dupe de Borch ou Borrichius, chimiste danois, et surtout de Borri, charlatan milanais, qui se disait le favori de l'archange Michel. Cet imposteur, après avoir émerveillé de ses prétendus prodiges Strasbourg et Amsterdam, agrandit la sphère de son ambition et la témérité de ses mensonges; après avoir trompé le peuple, il osa tromper les rois. Il commença par la reine Christine à Hambourg, et termina par le roi Frédéric à Copenhague.]; mais il leur faut le denier du paysan non moins que le million du prince.

Spiagudry se trompait; en approchant du monticule, ils reconnurent, à sa robe noire et à son bonnet rond et aigu, un syndic environné de quelques archers. L'homme qui sonnait du cor était le crieur des édits.

Le gardien fugitif, troublé, murmura à voix basse:

— En vérité, seigneur Ordener, en entrant dans cette bourgade, je ne m'attendais guère à tomber sur un syndic. Me protège le grand saint Hospice! que va-t-il dire?

Son incertitude ne fut pas longue, car la voix glapissante du crieur des édits s'éleva tout à coup, religieusement écoutée par la petite foule des habitants d'Oëlmoe.

— «Au nom de sa majesté, et par ordre de son excellence le général Levin de Knud, gouverneur, le haut-syndic du Drontheimhus fait savoir à tous les habitants des villes, bourgs et bourgades de la province, que: — 1° la tête de Han, natif de Klipstadur, en Islande, assassin et incendiaire, est mise au prix de mille écus royaux.»

Un murmure vague éclata dans l'auditoire. Le crieur poursuivit:

— «2° La tête de Benignus Spiagudry, nécroman et sacrilège, ex-gardien du Spladgest de Drontheim, est mise au prix de quatre écus royaux;

«3° Cet édit sera publié dans toute la province, par les syndics des villes, bourgs et bourgades, qui en faciliteront l'exécution.»

Le syndic prit l'édit des mains du crieur, et ajouta d'une voix lugubre et solennelle:

— La vie de ces hommes est offerte à qui voudra la prendre.

Le lecteur se persuadera aisément que cette lecture ne fut pas écoutée sans quelque émotion par notre pauvre et malencontreux Spiagudry. Nul doute même que les signes extraordinaires d'effroi qui lui échappèrent en ce moment n'eussent appelé l'attention du groupe qui l'environnait, si elle n'eût été entièrement absorbée par la première partie de l'édit syndical.

— La tête de Han à prix! s'écria un vieux pêcheur qui était venu traînant ses filets humides. Ils feraient tout aussi bien, par saint Usulph, de mettre à prix également la tête de Belzébuth.

— Pour garder la proportion entre Han et Belzébuth, il faudrait, dit un chasseur, reconnaissable à sa veste de peau de chamois, qu'ils offrissent seulement quinze cents écus du chef cornu du dernier démon.

— Gloire soit à la sainte mère de Dieu! ajouta en roulant son fuseau une vieille dont le front chauve branlait. Je voudrais voir la tête de ce Han, afin de m'assurer que ses yeux sont deux charbons ardents, comme on le dit.

— Oui, sûrement, reprit une autre vieille, c'est seulement en la regardant qu'il a brûlé la cathédrale de Drontheim. Moi, je voudrais voir le monstre tout entier avec sa queue de serpent, son pied fourchu et ses grandes ailes de chauve-souris.

— Qui vous a fait ces contes, bonne mère? interrompit le chasseur d'un air de fatuité. J'ai vu, moi, ce Han d'Islande dans les gorges de Medsyhath;

c’est un homme fait comme nous, seulement il a la hauteur d’un peuplier de quarante ans.

— Vraiment? dit avec une expression singulière une voix dans la foule. Cette voix, qui fit tressaillir Spiagudry, était celle d’un petit homme dont le visage était caché sous un large feutre de mineur, et le corps couvert d’une natte de jonc et de poil de veau marin.

— Sur ma foi, reprit, avec un rire épais, un forgeron qui portait son grand marteau en bandoulière, qu’on offre pour sa tête mille ou dix mille écus royaux, qu’il ait quatre ou quarante brasses de hauteur, ce n’est pas moi qui me chargerai d’aller y voir.

— Ni moi, dit le pêcheur.

— Ni moi, ni moi, répétèrent toutes les voix.

— Celui pourtant qui en serait tenté, reprit le petit homme, trouvera Han d’Islande demain dans la ruine d’Arbar, près le Smiasen; après-demain dans la grotte de Walderhog.

— Brave homme, en êtes-vous sûr?

Cette question fut faite à la fois par Ordener, qui assistait à cette scène avec un intérêt facile à comprendre pour tout autre que Spiagudry, et par un autre petit homme, assez replet, vêtu de noir, d’un visage gai, et qui était sorti, aux premiers sons de la trompe du crieur, de la seule auberge que renfermât la bourgade.

Le petit homme au grand chapeau parut les considérer un instant tous deux, et répondit d’une voix sourde:

— Oui.

— Et comment le savez-vous pour pouvoir l’affirmer? demanda Ordener.

— Je sais où est Han d’Islande, comme je sais où est Benignus

Spiagudry; ni l’un ni l’autre ne sont loin d’ici en ce moment.

Toutes les terreurs se réveillèrent dans le pauvre concierge, osant à peine regarder le mystérieux petit homme, et se croyant mal caché sous sa perruque française; il se mit à tirer le manteau d’Ordener en disant à voix basse:

— Maître, seigneur, au nom du ciel, de grâce, par pitié, allons-nous-en, sortons de ce maudit faubourg de l’enfer!

Ordener, surpris comme lui, examinait attentivement le petit homme, qui, tournant le dos au jour, paraissait soigneux de cacher ses traits.

— Ce Benignus Spiagudry, s’écria le pêcheur, je l’ai vu au Spladgest de Drontheim. C’est un grand.

— C’est celui dont on offre quatre écus.

Le chasseur éclata de rire.

— Quatre écus! Ce n’est pas moi qui chasserai celui-là. On paie plus cher la peau d’un renard bleu.

Cette comparaison, qui dans tout autre temps eût fort désobligé le savant concierge, le rassura cette fois. Il allait néanmoins adresser une nouvelle prière à Ordener pour le décider à poursuivre leur chemin, quand celui-ci, sachant ce qu’il lui importait de savoir, le prévint, en sortant du rassemblement qui commençait à s’éclaircir.

Quoiqu’ils eussent, en arrivant au hameau d’Oëlmoe, l’intention d’y passer la nuit, ils le quittèrent tous deux, comme par une convention tacite, sans même s’interroger sur le motif de leur départ précipité. Celui d’Ordener était l’espérance de rencontrer plus tôt le brigand, celui de Spiagudry le désir de s’éloigner plus vite des archers.

Ordener avait l’esprit trop grave pour rire des mésaventures de son compagnon. Ce fut d’une voix affectueuse qu’il rompit le premier le silence.

— Vieillard, quelle est donc déjà cette ruine où l’on pourra trouver demain Han d’Islande, à ce qu’affirme ce petit homme qui paraît tout savoir?

— Je l’ignore…. Je l’ai mal entendu, noble maître, dit Spiagudry, qui en effet ne mentait pas.

— Il faudra donc, continua le jeune homme, se résigner à ne le rencontrer qu’après-demain à cette grotte de Walderhog?

— La grotte de Walderhog, seigneur! c’est en effet la demeure favorite de Han d’Islande.

— Prenons-en le chemin, dit Ordener.

— Tournons à gauche, derrière le rocher d’Oëlmoe; il faut moins de deux journées pour arriver à la caverne de Walderhog.

— Connaissez-vous, vieillard, reprit Ordener avec ménagement, ce singulier homme qui semble si bien vous connaître?

Cette question réveilla dans Spiagudry les craintes qui commençaient à s’affaiblir à mesure qu’ils s’éloignaient de la bourgade d’Oëlmoe.

— Non, vraiment, seigneur, répondit-il d’une voix presque tremblante.

Seulement, il a une voix bien étrange!

Ordener chercha à le rassurer.

— Ne craignez rien, vieillard; servez-moi bien, je vous protégerai de même. Si je reviens vainqueur de Han, je vous promets non-seulement votre grâce, mais encore l'abandon des mille écus royaux qui sont offerts par la justice.

L'honnête Benignus aimait extraordinairement la vie, mais il aimait l'or prodigieusement. Les promesses d'Ordener furent comme des paroles magiques; non-seulement elles bannirent toutes ses frayeurs, mais encore elles réveillèrent en lui cette sorte d'hilarité loquace, qui s'épanchait en longs discours, en gesticulations bizarres et en savantes citations.

— Seigneur Ordener, dit-il, quand je devrais subir à ce sujet une controverse avec Over-Bilseuth, autrement dit le Bavard, non, rien ne m'empêcherait de soutenir que vous êtes un sage et honorable jeune homme. Quoi de plus digne et de plus glorieux en effet, *quid cithara, tuba, vel campana dignius*, que d'exposer noblement sa vie pour délivrer son pays d'un monstre, d'un brigand, d'un démon, en qui tous les démons, les brigands et les monstres semblent réunis? — Qu'on ne m'aille pas dire qu'un sordide intérêt vous guide! le noble seigneur Ordener abandonne le salaire de son combat au compagnon de son voyage, au vieillard qui l'aura conduit seulement à un mille de la grotte de Walderhog; car, n'est-il pas vrai, jeune maître, que vous me permettrez d'attendre le résultat de votre illustre entreprise au hameau de Surb, situé à un mille du rivage de Walderhog, dans la forêt? Et quand votre éclatante victoire sera connue, seigneur, ce sera dans toute la Norvège une joie pareille à celle de Vermund le Proscrit, quand, du sommet de ce même rocher d'Oëlmoe que nous côtoyons maintenant, il aperçut le grand feu que son frère Hafdan avait allumé, en signe de délivrance, sur le donjon de Munckholm.

À ce nom, Ordener interrompit vivement:

— Quoi! du haut de ce rocher on aperçoit le donjon de Munckholm?

— Oui, seigneur, à douze milles au sud, entre les montagnes que nos pères nommaient les Escabelles de Frigga. À cette heure on doit voir parfaitement le phare du donjon.

— Vraiment! s'écria Ordener, qui s'élançait vers l'idée de revoir encore une fois le lieu où était tout son bonheur. Vieillard, il y a sans doute un sentier qui conduit au sommet de ce rocher?

— Oui, sans doute; un sentier qui prend naissance dans le bois où nous allons entrer, et s'élève, par sur pente assez douce, jusqu'à la tête nue du rocher, une laquelle il se continue en gradins taillés dans le roc par les compagnons de Vermund le Proscrit, au château duquel il aboutit. Ce sont ces ruines, que vous pouvez voir au clair de la lune.

— Eh bien, vieillard, vous allez m'indiquer le sentier; c'est dans ces ruines que nous passerons la nuit, dans ces ruines d'où l'on voit le donjon de Munckholm.

— Y pensez-vous, seigneur? dit Benignus. La fatigue de cette journée….

— Vieillard, j'aiderai votre marche; jamais mon pas ne fut plus ferme.

— Seigneur, les ronces qui obstruent ce sentier depuis si longtemps abandonné, les pierres dégradées, la nuit….

— Je marcherai le premier.

— Peut-être quelque bête malfaisante, quelque animal impur, quelque monstre hideux….

— Ce n'est pas pour éviter les monstres que j'ai entrepris ce voyage.

L'idée de s'arrêter si près d'Oëlmoe déplaisait fort à Spiagudry; celle de voir le phare de Munckholm, et peut-être la lumière de la fenêtre d'Éthel, enchantait et entraînait Ordener.

— Mon jeune maître, dit Spiagudry, abandonnez ce projet, croyez-moi; j'ai le pressentiment qu'il nous portera malheur.

Cette prière n'était rien, devant ce que désirait Ordener.

— Allons, dit-il avec impatience, songez que vous vous êtes engagé à me bien servir. Je veux que vous m'indiquiez ce sentier; où est-il?

— Nous allons y arriver tout à l'heure, dit le concierge forcé d'obéir.

En effet, le sentier s'offrit bientôt à eux; ils y entrèrent, mais Spiagudry remarqua, avec un étonnement mêlé d'effroi, que les hautes herbes étaient couchées et brisées, et que le vieux sentier de Vermund le Proscrit paraissait avoir été foulé récemment.

XX

LEONARDO.
Le roi vous demande.
HENRIQUE.
Comment cela?

LOPE DE VEGA. *La Fuerza lastimosa.*

Devant quelques papiers épars sur son bureau, parmi lesquels on distingue des lettres nouvellement ouvertes, le général Levin de Knud paraît rêver profondément. Un secrétaire debout près de lui semble attendre ses ordres. Le général tantôt frappe de ses éperons le riche tapis qui s'étend sous ses pieds, tantôt joue d'un air distrait avec la décoration de l'éléphant, suspendue à son cou par le collier de l'ordre. De temps en temps il ouvre la bouche pour parler, puis s'arrête et se frotte le front, et jette un nouveau coup d'oeil sur les dépêches décachetées qui couvrent la table.

— Comment diable!…. s'écrie-t-il enfin.

Cette exclamation concluante est suivie d'un instant de silence.

— Qui se serait jamais figuré, reprend-il, que ces démons de mineurs en viendraient là? Il faut nécessairement que de secrètes instigations les aient poussés à cette révolte. — Mais, savez-vous, Wapherney, que la chose est sérieuse? Savez-vous que cinq à six cents coquins des îles Fa-roër, commandés par un certain vieux bandit nommé Jonas, ont déjà déserté leurs mines? qu'un jeune fanatique, appelé Norbith, s'est également mis à la tête des mécontents de Guldbranshal? qu'à Sund-Moër, à Hubfallo, à Kongsberg, ces mauvaises têtes, qui n'attendaient qu'un signal, sont déjà peut-être soulevées? Savez-vous que les montagnards s'en mêlent, et qu'un des plus hardis renards de Kole, le vieux Kennybol, les commande? Savez-vous enfin que, d'après un bruit général dans le nord du Drontheimhus, s'il faut en croire les syndics qui m'écrivent, ce fameux scélérat dont nous avons fait mettre la tête à prix, le formidable Han, dirige en chef l'insurrection? Que direz-vous de tout cela, mon cher Wapherney? hem!

— Votre excellence, dit Wapherney, sait quelles mesures….

— Il y a encore dans cette déplorable affaire une circonstance que je ne puis m'expliquer; c'est que notre prisonnier Schumacker soit, comme on le prétend, l'auteur de la révolte. C'est ce qui semble n'étonner personne, et c'est enfin ce qui m'étonne le plus. Il me paraît difficile qu'un homme près duquel se plaisait mon loyal Ordener soit un traître. Cependant, les mineurs, assure-t-on, se lèvent en son nom; son nom est leur mot d'ordre, leur cri de ralliement; ils lui donnent même les titres dont le roi l'a privé. — Tout cela semble certain. — Mais comment se fait-il que la comtesse d'Ahlefeld connût déjà tous ces détails il y a six jours, au moment où les premiers symptômes réels de l'insurrection se manifestaient à peine dans les mines? — Cela est étrange. — N'importe, il faut pourvoir à tout. Donnez-moi mon sceau, Wapherney.

Le général écrivit trois lettres, les scella et les remit au secrétaire.

— Faites tenir ces messages au baron Voethaün, colonel des arquebusiers, actuellement en garnison à Munckholm, afin que son régiment marche en hâte aux révoltés. — Voici, pour le commandant de Munckholm, un ordre de veiller plus soigneusement que jamais sur l'ex-grand-chancelier. Il faudra que je voie et que j'interroge moi-même ce Schumacker. — Enfin, envoyez cette lettre à Skongen, au major Wolhm, qui y commande, afin qu'il dirige une partie de la garnison vers le foyer de l'insurrection. — Allez, Wapherney, et qu'on exécute promptement ces ordres.

Le secrétaire sortit, laissant le gouverneur plongé dans ses réflexions.

— Tout cela est fort inquiétant, pensait-il. Ces mineurs révoltés là-bas, cette intrigante chancelière ici, ce fou d'Ordener… on ne sait où! — Peut-être il voyage au milieu de tous ces bandits, laissant ici sous ma protection ce Schumacker, qui conspire contre l'état, et sa fille, pour la sûreté de laquelle j'ai eu la bonté d'éloigner la compagnie où se trouve ce Frédéric d'Ahlefeld, qu'Ordener accuse. — Eh mais, il me semble que cette compagnie pourra bien arrêter les premières colonnes des insurgés; elle est bien placée pour cela. Walhstrom, où elle tient garnison, est près du lac de Smiasen et de la ruine d'Arbar. C'est un des points que la révolte gagnera nécessairement.

À cet endroit de sa rêverie, le général fut interrompu par le bruit de la porte qui s'ouvrait.

— Eh bien, que voulez-vous, Gustave?

— Mon général, c'est un messager qui demande votre excellence.

— Allons! qu'est-ce encore? quelque désastre!…. Faites entrer ce messager.

Le messager, introduit, remit un paquet au gouverneur.

— Votre excellence, dit-il, c'est de la part de sa sérénité le vice-roi.

Le général ouvrit précipitamment la dépêche.

— Par saint Georges, s'écria-t-il avec un mouvement de surprise, je crois qu'ils sont tous fous! Ne voilà-t-il pas le vice-roi qui m'invite à me rendre près de lui, à Berghen? C'est, dit-il, pour une affaire pressante, d'après l'ordre du roi. — Voilà une affaire pressante qui choisit bien son moment. — «Le grand-chancelier, qui visite actuellement le Drontheimhus, suppléera à votre absence….» — C'est un suppléant auquel je ne me fie guère! — «L'évêque l'assistera….» — En vérité, Frédéric choisit là de bons gouverneurs pour un pays révolté; deux hommes de robe, un chancelier et un évêque! — Allons cependant, l'invitation est expresse, c'est l'ordre du roi. Il faut s'y rendre. Mais avant mon départ je veux voir Schumacker, et l'interroger. — Je sens bien qu'on veut m'engloutir dans un chaos d'intrigues, mais j'ai pour me diriger une boussole qui ne me trompe jamais, — c'est ma conscience.

XXI

Il semble que tout prenne une voix pour l’accuser de son crime.
Caïn, tragédie.

— Oui, seigneur comte, c’est aujourd’hui même, dans la ruine d’Arbar, que nous pourrons le rencontrer. Une foule de circonstances me font croire à la vérité de ce renseignement précieux, que j’ai recueilli hier soir par hasard, comme je vous l’ai conté, dans le village d’Oëlmoe.

— Sommes-nous loin de cette ruine d’Arbar?

— Mais c’est auprès du lac de Smiasen. Le guide m’a assuré que nous y serions avant le milieu du jour.

Ainsi s’entretenaient deux personnages à cheval et enveloppés de manteaux bruns, lesquels suivaient de grand matin une de ces mille routes sinueuses et étroites qui traversent en tous sens la forêt située entre les lacs de Smiasen et de Sparbo. Un guide des montagnes, muni de sa trompe et armé de sa hache, les précédait sur son petit cheval gris, et derrière eux marchaient quatre autres cavaliers armés jusqu’aux dents, vers lesquels ces deux personnages tournaient de temps en temps la tête, comme s’ils craignaient d’en être entendus.

— Si ce brigand islandais se trouve en effet dans la ruine d’Arbar, disait celui des deux interlocuteurs dont la monture se tenait respectueusement un peu en arrière de l’autre, c’est un grand point de gagné, car le difficile était de rencontrer cet être insaisissable.

— Vous croyez, Musdoemon? Et s’il allait rejeter nos offres?

— Impossible, votre grâce! de l’or et l’impunité, quel brigand résisterait à cela?

— Mais vous savez que ce brigand n’est pas un scélérat ordinaire. Ne le jugez donc pas à votre mesure; s’il refusait, comment rempliriez-vous la promesse que vous avez faite dans la nuit d’avant-hier aux trois chefs de l’insurrection?

— Eh bien, noble comte, dans ce cas, que je regarde comme impossible, si nous avons le bonheur de trouver notre homme, votre grâce a-t-elle oublié qu’un faux Han d’Islande m’attend dans deux jours à l’heure fixée, au lieu du rendez-vous assigné aux trois chefs, à l’Étoile-Bleue, endroit d’ailleurs assez voisin de la ruine d’Arbar?

— Vous avez raison, toujours raison, mon cher Musdoemon, dit le noble comte; et ils retombèrent tous deux dans leur cercle particulier de réflexions.

Musdoemon, dont l'intérêt était de tenir le maître en bonne humeur, fit, pour le distraire, une question au guide.

— Brave homme, quelle est cette espèce de croix de pierre dégradée qui s'élève là-haut, derrière ces jeunes chênes?

Le guide, homme au regard fixe, à la mine stupide, tourna la tête et la secoua à plusieurs reprises en disant:

— Oh! seigneur maître, c'est la plus vieille potence de Norvège; le saint roi Olaüs la fit construire pour un juge qui avait fait un pacte avec un brigand.

Musdoemon aperçut sur le visage de son patron une impression toute contraire à celle qu'il espérait des paroles simples du guide.

— Ce fut, poursuivit celui-ci, une histoire bien singulière, la bonne mère Osie me l'a contée; le brigand fut chargé de pendre le juge.

Le pauvre guide ne s'apercevait pas, dans sa naïveté, que l'aventure dont il voulait égayer ses voyageurs était presque un outrage pour eux. Musdoemon l'arrêta.

— Assez, assez, lui dit-il, nous connaissons cette histoire.

— L'insolent! murmura le comte, il connaît cette histoire! Ah!

Musdoemon, tu me paieras cher tes impudences.

— Sa grâce ne parle-t-elle pas? dit Musdoemon d'un air obséquieux.

— Je pensais aux moyens de vous faire enfin obtenir l'ordre de Dannebrog. Le mariage de ma fille Ulrique et du baron Ordener sera une bonne occasion.

Musdoemon se confondit en protestations et en remerciements.

— À propos, reprit sa grâce, parlons de nos affaires. Croyez-vous que l'ordre de rappel momentané que nous lui destinons soit parvenu au mecklembourgeois?

Le lecteur se rappelle peut-être que le comte avait l'habitude de désigner sous ce nom le général Levin de Knud, qui était en effet natif du Mecklembourg.

— Parlons de nos affaires! se dit intérieurement Musdoemon choqué; il paraît que mes affaires ne sont pas *nos affaires*. — Seigneur comte, répondit-il à haute voix, je pense que le messager du vice-roi doit être en ce moment à Drontheim, et qu'ainsi le général Levin n'est pas loin de son départ.

Le comte prit une voix affectueuse.

— Ce rappel, mon cher, est un de vos coups de maître; c'est une de vos intrigues les mieux conçues et les plus habilement exécutées.

— L'honneur en appartient à sa grâce autant qu'à moi, répliqua Musdoemon, soigneux, comme nous l'avons déjà dit, de mêler le comte à toutes ses machinations.

Le patron connaissait cette pensée secrète de son confident, mais il voulait paraître l'ignorer. Il se mit à sourire.

— Mon cher secrétaire intime, vous êtes toujours modeste; mais rien ne me fera méconnaître vos éminents services. La présence d'Elphège et l'absence du mecklembourgeois assurent mon triomphe à Drontheim. Me voici le chef de la province, et si Han d'Islande accepte le commandement des révoltés, que je veux lui offrir moi-même, c'est à moi que reviendra, aux yeux du roi, la gloire d'avoir apaisé cette inquiétante insurrection et pris ce formidable brigand.

Ils parlaient ainsi à voix basse, quand le guide se retourna.

— Mes seigneurs maîtres, dit-il, voici, à notre gauche, le monticule sur lequel Biord le Juste fit décapiter, aux yeux de son armée, Vellon à la langue double, ce traître qui avait éloigné les vrais défenseurs du roi et appelé l'ennemi dans le camp, pour paraître avoir seul sauvé les jours de Biord.

Tous ces souvenirs de la vieille Norvège ne semblèrent pas du goût de Musdoemon, car il interrompit brusquement le guide.

— Allons, allons, bonhomme, taisez-vous et continuez votre chemin sans vous détourner; que nous importe ce que des masures ruinées ou des arbres morts vous rappellent de sottes aventures? Vous importunez mon maître avec vos contes de vieilles femmes.

XXII

Voici l’heure où le lion rugit,
Où le loup hurle à la lune,
Tandis que le laboureur ronfle,
Épuisé de sa pénible tâche.
Maintenant les tisons consumés brillent dans le foyer;
  La chouette poussant son cri sinistre,
  Rappelle aux malheureux, couchés dans les douleurs,
  Le souvenir d’un drap funèbre.
  Voici le temps de la nuit
  Où les tombeaux, tous entr’ouverts,
  Laissent échapper chacun son spectre,
  Qui va errer dans les sentiers des cimetières.

SHAKESPEARE. *Le Songe d’été.*

Retournons sur nos pas. Nous avons laissé Ordener et Spiagudry gravissant avec assez de peine, au lever de la lune, la croupe du rocher courbé d’Oëlmoe. Ce rocher, chauve à l’origine de sa courbure, était appelé alors par les paysans norvégiens le Cou-de-Vautour, dénomination qui représente en effet assez bien la figure qu’offre de loin cette masse énorme de granit.

À mesure que nos voyageurs s’élevaient vers la partie nue du rocher, la forêt se changeait en bruyère. Les mousses succédaient aux herbes; les églantiers sauvages, les genêts, les houx, aux chênes et aux bouleaux; appauvrissement de végétation qui, sur les hautes montagnes, indique toujours la proximité du sommet, en annonçant l’amincissement graduel de la couche de terre dont ce qu’on pourrait appeler l’ossement du mont est revêtu.

— Seigneur Ordener, disait Spiagudry, dont l’esprit mobile était comme sans cesse entraîné dans un tourbillon d’idées diverses, cette pente est bien fatigante, et, pour vous avoir suivi, il faut tout le dévouement….

— Mais il me semble que je vois là, à droite, un magnifique *convolvulus*; je voudrais bien pouvoir l’examiner. Pourquoi ne fait-il pas grand jour? — Savez-vous que c’est une chose bien impertinente que d’évaluer un savant tel que moi quatre méchants écus? Il est vrai que le fameux Phèdre était esclave, et qu’Ésope, si nous en croyons le docte

Planude, fut vendu dans une foire comme une bête ou une chose. Et qui ne serait fier d'avoir un rapport quelconque avec le grand Ésope?

— Et avec le célèbre Han? ajouta Ordener en souriant.

— Par saint Hospice, répondit le concierge, ne prononcez pas ce nom ainsi; je me passerais bien, je vous jure, seigneur, de cette dernière conformité. Mais ne serait-ce pas une chose singulière, que le prix de sa tête revînt à Benignus Spiagudry, son compagnond'infortune? — Seigneur Ordener, vous êtes plus noble que Jason, qui ne donna pas la toison d'or au pilote d'Argo; et certes votre entreprise, dont je ne devine pas positivement le but, n'est pas moins périlleuse que celle de Jason.

— Mais, dit Ordener, puisque vous connaissez Han d'Islande, donnez-moi donc quelques détails sur lui. Vous m'avez déjà appris que ce n'est pas un géant, comme on le croit le plus communément.

Spiagudry l'interrompit.

— Arrêtez, maître! n'entendez-vous point un bruit de pas derrière nous?

— Oui, répondit tranquillement le jeune homme. Ne vous alarmez pas; c'est quelque bête fauve que notre approche effarouche, et qui se retire en froissant les halliers.

— Vous avez raison, mon jeune César; il y a si longtemps que ces bois n'ont vu d'êtres humains! Si l'on en juge à la pesanteur des pas, l'animal doit être gros. C'est un élan ou un renne; cette partie de la Norvège en est peuplée. On y trouve aussi des chatpards. J'en ai vu un, entre autres, qu'on avait amené à Copenhague; il était d'une grandeur monstrueuse. Il faut que je vous fasse la description de ce féroce animal.

— Mon cher guide, dit Ordener, j'aimerais mieux que vous me fissiez la description d'un autre monstre non moins féroce, de cet horrible Han.

— Baissez la voix, seigneur! Comme le jeune maître prononce paisiblement un tel nom! Vous ne savez pas…. — Dieu! seigneur, écoutez!

Spiagudry se rapprocha, en disant ces mots, d'Ordener, qui venait d'entendre en effet très distinctement un cri pareil à l'espèce de rugissement qui, si le lecteur se le rappelle, avait si fort effrayé le timide concierge dans cette soirée orageuse où ils avaient quitté Drontheim.

— Avez-vous entendu? murmura celui-ci, tout haletant de crainte.

— Sans doute, dit Ordener, et je ne vois pas pourquoi vous tremblez. C'est un hurlement de bête sauvage, peut-être tout simplement le cri d'un de ces chatpards dont vous parliez tout à l'heure. Comptiez-vous traverser à cette heure un pareil endroit sans être averti en rien de la présence des hôtes que vous troublez? Je vous proteste, vieillard, qu’ils sont plus effrayés encore que vous.

Spiagudry, en voyant le calme de son jeune compagnon, se rassura un peu.

— Allons, il pourrait bien se faire, seigneur, que vous eussiez encore raison. Mais ce cri de bête ressemble horriblement à une voix…. Vous avez été fâcheusement inspiré, souffrez que je vous le dise, seigneur, de vouloir monter à ce château de Vermund. Je crains qu’il ne nous arrive malheur sur le Cou-de-Vautour.

— Ne craignez rien tant que vous serez avec moi, répondit Ordener.

— Oh! rien ne vous alarme; mais, seigneur, il n’y a que le bienheureux saint Paul qui puisse prendre des vipères sans se blesser. — Vous n’avez seulement pas remarqué, quand nous sommes entrés dans ce maudit sentier, qu’il paraissait frayé depuis peu, et que les herbes foulées n’avaient même pas eu le temps de se relever depuis qu’on y avait passé.

— J’avoue que tout cela me frappe peu, et que le calme de mon esprit ne dépend pas du plus ou moins de courbure d’un brin d’herbe. Voici que nous allons quitter la bruyère; nous n’entendrons plus de pas ni de cris de bêtes; je ne vous dirai donc plus, mon brave guide, de rassembler votre courage, mais de ramasser vos forces, car le sentier, taillé dans le roc, sera sans doute plus difficile que celui-ci.

— Ce n’est pas, seigneur, qu’il soit plus escarpé, mais le savant voyageur Suckson conte qu’il est souvent embarrassé d’éclats de roches ou de lourdes pierres qu’on ne peut soulever et qu’il n’est pas aisé de franchir. Il y a entre autres, un peu au delà de la poterne de Malaër, dont nous approchons, un énorme bloc triangulaire de granit que j’ai toujours vivement désiré voir. Schoenning affirme y avoir retrouvé les trois caractères runiques primitifs.

Il y avait déjà quelque temps que les voyageurs gravissaient la roche nue; ils atteignirent une petite tour écroulée, à travers laquelle il fallait passer, et que Spiagudry fit remarquer à Ordener.

— C’est la poterne de Malaër, seigneur. Ce chemin creusé à vif présente plusieurs autres constructions curieuses, qui montrent quelles étaient les anciennes fortifications de nos manoirs norvégiens! Cette poterne, qui était toujours gardée par quatre hommes d’armes, était le premier ouvrage avancé du fort de Vermund. À propos de porte ou poterne, le moine Urensius fait une remarque singulière; le mot *janua*, qui vient de *Janus*, dont le temple avait des portes si célèbres, n’a-t-il pas engendré le mot *janissaire*, gardien de la porte du sultan? Il serait assez curieux que le nom du prince le plus doux de l’histoire eût passé aux soldats les plus féroces de la terre.

Au milieu de tout le fatras scientifique du concierge, ils avançaient assez péniblement sur des pierres roulantes et des cailloux tranchants, mêlés de ce gazon court et glissant qui croît quelquefois sur les rochers. Ordener oubliait la fatigue en songeant au bonheur de revoir ce Munckholm, si éloigné; tout à coup Spiagudry s’écria:

— Ah! je l’aperçois! cette seule vue me dédommage de toute ma peine.

Je la vois, seigneur, je la vois!

— Qui donc? dit Ordener, qui pensait en ce moment à son Éthel.

— Eh! seigneur, la pyramide triangulaire dont parle Schoenning! Je serai, avec le professeur Schoenning et l’évêque Isleif, le troisième savant qui aura eu le bonheur de l’examiner. Seulement il est fâcheux que ce ne soit qu’au clair de lune.

En approchant du fameux bloc, Spiagudry poussa un cri de douleur et d’épouvante à la fois. Ordener, surpris, s’informa avec intérêt du nouveau sujet de son émotion; mais le concierge archéologue fut quelque temps avant de pouvoir lui répondre.

— Vous croyiez, disait Ordener, que cette pierre barrait le chemin; vous devez, au contraire, reconnaître avec plaisir qu’elle le laisse parfaitement libre.

— Et c’est justement ce qui me désespère! dit Benignus d’une voix lamentable.

— Comment?

— Quoi! seigneur, reprit le concierge, ne voyez-vous pas que cette pyramide a été dérangée de sa position; que la base, qui était assise sur le sentier, est maintenant exposée à l’air, tandis que le bloc est précisément appuyé contre terre, sur la face où Schoenning avait découvert les caractères runiques primordiaux? — Je suis bien malheureux!

— C’est jouer de malheur, en effet, dit le jeune homme.

— Et ajoutez à cela, reprit vivement Spiagudry, que le dérangement de cette masse prouve ici la présence de quelque être surhumain. À moins que ce ne soit le diable, il n’y a en Norvège qu’un seul homme dont le bras puisse…

— Mon pauvre guide, vous revenez encore à vos terreurs paniques. Qui sait si cette pierre n’est pas ainsi depuis plus d’un siècle?

— Il y a cent cinquante ans, à la vérité, dit Spiagudry d’une voix plus calme, que le dernier observateur l’a étudiée. Mais il me semble qu’elle est fraîchement remuée; la place qu’elle occupait est encore humide. Voyez, seigneur.

Ordener, impatient d’arriver aux ruines, arracha son guide d’auprès de la pyramide merveilleuse, et parvint, par de sages paroles, à dissiper les nouvelles craintes que cet étrange déplacement avait inspirées au vieux savant.

— Écoutez, vieillard, vous pourrez vous fixer au bord de ce lac, et vous livrer à votre aise à vos importantes études, quand vous aurez reçu les mille écus royaux que vous rapportera la tête de Han.

— Vous avez raison, noble seigneur; mais ne parlez pas si légèrement d’une victoire bien douteuse. Il faut que je vous donne un conseil pour que vous vous rendiez plus aisément maître du monstre.

Ordener se rapprocha vivement de Spiagudry.

— Un conseil! lequel?

— Le brigand, dit celui-ci à voix basse et en jetant des regards inquiets autour de lui, le brigand porte à sa ceinture un crâne dans lequel il a coutume de boire. Ce crâne est le crâne de son fils, dont le cadavre est celui pour la profanation duquel je suis poursuivi.

— Haussez un peu la voix et ne craignez rien, je vous entends à peine.

Eh bien! ce crâne?

— C’est de ce crâne, dit Spiagudry en se penchant à l’oreille du jeune homme, qu’il faut tâcher de vous emparer. Le monstre y attache je ne sais quelles idées superstitieuses. Quand le crâne de son fils sera en votre pouvoir, vous ferez de lui tout ce que vous voudrez.

— Cela est bien, mon brave homme; mais comment s’emparer de ce crâne?

— Par la ruse, seigneur; pendant le sommeil du monstre, peut-être…

Ordener l’interrompit.

— Il suffit. Votre bon conseil ne peut me servir; je ne dois pas savoir si un ennemi dort. Je ne connais pour combattre que mon épée.

— Seigneur, seigneur! il n’est pas prouvé que l’archange Michel n’ait pas usé de ruse pour terrasser Satan.

Ici Spiagudry s’arrêta tout à coup, et étendit ses deux mains devant lui, en s’écriant d’une voix presque éteinte:

— O ciel! ô ciel! qu’est-ce que je vois là-bas? Voyez, maître, n’est-ce pas un petit homme qui marche dans ce même sentier devant nous?

— Ma foi, dit Ordener en levant les yeux, je ne vois rien.

— Rien, seigneur? — En effet, le sentier tourne, et il a disparu derrière ce rocher. — N’allons pas plus loin, seigneur, je vous en conjure.

— En vérité, si ce personnage prétendu a si vite disparu, cela n’annonce pas qu’il ait l’intention de nous attendre; et s’il fuit, ce n’est pas une raison pour nous de fuir.

— Veille sur nous, saint Hospice! dit Spiagudry, qui, dans toutes les occasions périlleuses, se souvenait de son patron favori.

— Vous aurez pris, ajouta Ordener, l’ombre mouvante d’une chouette effrayée pour un homme.

— J’ai pourtant bien cru voir un petit homme; il est vrai que le clair de lune produit souvent des illusions singulières. C’est à cette lumière que Baldan, sire de Merneugh, prit le rideau blanc de son lit pour l’ombre de sa mère; ce qui le décida à aller, le lendemain, déclarer son parricide aux juges de Christiania, qui allaient condamner le page innocent de la défunte. Ainsi, l’on peut dire que le clair de lune a sauvé la vie à ce page.

Personne n’oubliait mieux que Spiagudry le présent dans le passé. Un souvenir de sa vaste mémoire suffisait pour bannir toutes les impressions du moment. Aussi l’histoire de Baldan dissipa-t-elle sa frayeur. Il reprit d’une voix tranquille:

— Il est possible que le clair de lune m’ait trompé de même.

Cependant ils atteignaient le sommet du Cou-de-Vautour, et commençaient à revoir le faîte des ruines, que la courbure du rocher leur avait cachées pendant qu’ils montaient.

Que le lecteur ne s’étonne pas si nous rencontrons souvent des ruines à la cime des monts de Norvège. Quiconque a parcouru des montagnes en Europe n’aura pas manqué de remarquer fréquemment des restes de forts et de châteaux, suspendus à la crête des pics les plus élevés, comme d’anciens nids de vautours ou des aires d’aigles morts. En Norvège surtout, au siècle où nous nous sommes transportés, ces sortes de constructions aériennes étonnaient autant par leur variété que par leur nombre. C’étaient tantôt de longues murailles démantelées, se roulant en ceinture autour d’un roc; tantôt des tourelles grêles et aiguës surmontant la pointe d’un pic, comme une couronne; ou, sur la tête blanche d’une haute montagne, de grosses tours groupées autour d’un grand donjon, et présentant de loin l’aspect d’une vieille tiare. On voyait près des frêles arcades ogives d’un cloître gothique, les lourds piliers égyptiens d’une église saxonne; près de la citadelle à tours carrées d’un chef païen, la forteresse à créneaux d’un sire chrétien; près d’un château-fort ruiné par le temps, un monastère détruit par la guerre. Tous ces édifices, mélange d’architectures singulières et presque ignorées aujourd’hui, construits hardiment sur des lieux en apparence inaccessibles, n’y avaient plus laissé que des débris, pour rendre en quelque sorte à la fois témoignage de la puissance et du néant de l’homme. Peut-être s’était-il passé dans leur enceinte bien des choses plus dignes d’être racontées que tout ce qu’on raconte à la terre; mais les événements s’écoulent, les yeux qui les ont vus se ferment; les traditions s’éteignent avec les ans, comme un feu qu’on n’a point recueilli; et qui pourrait ensuite pénétrer le secret des siècles?

Le manoir de Vermund le Proscrit, où nos deux voyageurs arrivaient en ce moment, était un de ceux auxquels la superstition rattachait le plus d’histoires surprenantes et d’aventures miraculeuses. À ces murailles de cailloux noyés dans un ciment devenu plus dur que la pierre, on reconnaissait aisément qu’il avait été bâti vers le cinquième ou le sixième siècle. De ses cinq tours, une seulement était encore debout dans toute sa hauteur; les quatre autres, plus ou moins dégradées, et couvrant de leurs débris le sommet du rocher, étaient liées entre elles par des lignes de ruines, lesquelles indiquaient également les anciennes limites des cours dans l’enceinte du château. Il était très difficile de pénétrer dans cette enceinte, obstruée de pierres, de quartiers de rochers, et d’arbustes de toute espèce, qui, rampant de ruine en ruine, surmontaient de leurs touffes les murailles tombées, ou laissaient pendre jusque dans le précipice leurs longs bras flexibles. C’est à ces tresses de rameaux que venaient souvent, disait-on, se balancer, au clair de lune, des âmes bleuâtres, esprits coupables de ceux qui s’étaient volontairement noyés dans le Sparbo, ou que le farfadet du lac attachait le nuage qui devait le remmener au lever du soleil. Mystères effrayants, dont avaient été plus d’une fois témoins de hardis pêcheurs, quand, pour profiter du sommeil des chiens de mer, [Footnote: Les chiens de mer sont redoutés des pêcheurs, parce qu’ils effraient les poissons.] ils osaient la nuit pousser leur barque jusque sous le rocher d’Oëlmoe, qui s’arrondissait dans l’ombre, au-dessus de leur tête, comme l’arche rompue d’un pont gigantesque.

Nos deux aventuriers franchirent, non sans peine, la muraille du manoir, à travers une crevasse, car l’ancienne porte était encombrée de ruines. La seule tour qui, ainsi que nous l’avons dit, fût restée debout, était située à l’extrémité du rocher. C’était, dit Spiagudry à Ordener, celle du sommet de laquelle on apercevait le fanal de Munckholm. Ils s’y dirigèrent, quoique l’obscurité fût en ce moment complète. La lune était entièrement cachée par un gros nuage noir. Ils allaient gravir la brèche d’un autre mur, pour pénétrer dans ce qui avait été la seconde cour du château, quand Benignus s’arrêta tout court, et saisit brusquement le bras d’Ordener, d’une main qui tremblait si fort, que le jeune homme lui-même en était ébranlé.

— Quoi donc?… dit Ordener surpris.

Benignus, sans répondre, pressa son bras plus vivement encore, comme pour lui demander du silence.

— Mais…. reprit le jeune homme.

Une nouvelle pression, accompagnée d’un gros soupir mal étouffé, le décida à attendre patiemment que ce nouvel effroi fût passé.

Enfin Spiagudry, d’une voix oppressée:

— Eh bien! maître, qu’en dites-vous?

— De quoi? dit Ordener.

— Oui, seigneur, continua l’autre du même ton, vous vous repentez bien maintenant d’être monté ici!

— Non, en vérité, mon brave guide, j’espère bien monter plus haut encore. Pourquoi voulez-vous que je m’en repente?

— Comment, seigneur, vous n’avez donc point vu?…

— Vu! quoi?

— Vous n’avez point vu! répéta l’honnête concierge, avec un accès toujours croissant de terreur.

— Mais non vraiment! répondit Ordener d’un ton d’impatience; je n’ai rien vu, et je n’ai entendu que le bruit de vos dents que la peur faisait claquer violemment.

— Quoi! là, derrière ce mur, dans l’ombre, ces deux yeux flamboyants comme des comètes, qui se sont fixés sur nous. Vous ne les avez point vus?

— En honneur, non.

— Vous ne les avez point vus errer, monter, descendre et disparaître enfin dans les ruines?

— Je ne sais ce que vous voulez dire. Qu’importe, d’ailleurs?

— Comment! seigneur Ordener, savez-vous qu’il n’y a en Norvège qu’un seul homme dont les yeux rayonnent ainsi dans les ténèbres?

— Allons, qu’importe encore! Quel est donc cet homme aux yeux de chat? Est-ce Han, votre formidable islandais? Tant mieux, s’il est ici! cela nous épargnera le voyage de Walderhog.

Ce *tant mieux* n’était point du goût de Spiagudry, qui ne put s’empêcher de révéler sa pensée secrète par cette exclamation involontaire:

— Ah! seigneur, vous m’aviez promis de me laisser au village de Surb, à un mille du lieu du combat.

Le bon et noble Ordener comprit et sourit.

— Vous avez raison, vieillard; il serait injuste de vous mêler à mes dangers. Ne craignez donc rien. Vous voyez ce Han d’Islande partout. Est-ce qu’il ne peut pas y avoir dans ces ruines quelque chat sauvage, dont les yeux soient aussi brillants que ceux de cet homme!

Pour la cinquième fois, Spiagudry parvint à se rassurer, soit que l’explication d’Ordener lui parût en effet naturelle, soit que la tranquillité de son jeune compagnon eût quelque chose de contagieux.

— Ah! seigneur, sans vous je serais dix fois mort de peur en gravissant ces roches. — Il est vrai que, sans vous, je ne l’aurais pas tenté.

La lune, qui reparut, leur laissa voir l’entrée de la plus haute tour, au bas de laquelle ils étaient parvenus. Ils y pénétrèrent en soulevant un épais rideau de lierre, qui fit pleuvoir sur eux des lézards endormis et de vieux nids d’oiseaux funèbres. Le concierge ramassa deux cailloux qu’il choqua, en laissant tomber les étincelles sur un tas de feuilles mortes et de branches sèches recueillies par Ordener. En peu d’instants une flamme claire s’éleva; et, dissipant les ténèbres qui les entouraient, elle leur permit d’observer l’intérieur de la tour.

Il n’en restait plus que la muraille circulaire, qui était très épaisse et revêtue de lierre et de mousse. Les plafonds de ses quatre étages s’étaient successivement écroulés au rez-de-chaussée, où ils formaient un amas énorme de décombres. Un escalier étroit et sans rampe, rompu en plusieurs endroits, tournait en spirale sur la surface intérieure de la muraille, au sommet de laquelle il aboutissait. Aux premiers pétillements du feu, une nuée de chats-huants et d’orfraies s’envolèrent lourdement, avec des cris étonnés et lugubres, et de grandes chauves-souris vinrent par intervalles effleurer la flamme de leurs ailes couleur de cendre.

— Voici des hôtes qui ne nous reçoivent pas très gaiement, dit Ordener; mais n’allez pas vous effrayer encore.

— Moi, seigneur, reprit Spiagudry, en s’asseyant près du feu, moi craindre un hibou ou une chauve-souris! Je vivais avec des cadavres, et je ne craignais pas les vampires. Ah! je ne redoute que les vivants! Je ne suis pas brave, j’en conviens; mais je ne suis pas superstitieux. — Tenez, si vous m’en croyez, seigneur, rions de ces dames aux ailes noires et aux chants rauques, et songeons à souper.

Ordener ne songeait qu’à Munckholm.

— J’ai bien là quelques provisions, dit Spiagudry en tirant son havre-sac de dessous son manteau; mais, si votre appétit égale le mien, ce pain noir et ce fromage rance auront bientôt disparu. Je vois que nous serons obligés de rester encore fort loin des limites de la loi du roi français Philippe le Bel: *Nemo audeat comedere praeter duo fercula cum potagio*. Il doit bien y avoir au sommet de cette tour des nids de mouettes ou de faisans; mais comment y arriver par un escalier branlant qui ne pourrait tout au plus porter que des sylphes?

— Cependant, reprit Ordener, il faudra bien qu’il me porte; car je monterai certainement au faîte de cette tour.

— Quoi! maître, pour avoir des nids de mouettes?

— Ne faites pas, de grâce, cette imprudence. Il ne faut pas se tuer pour mieux souper. Songez d’ailleurs que vous pourriez vous tromper, et prendre des nids de chats-huants.

— C’est bien de vos nids que je m’embarrasse! Ne m’avez-vous pas dit que du haut de cette tour on apercevait le donjon de Munckholm?

— Cela est vrai, jeune maître; au sud. Je vois bien que le désir de fixer ce point important pour la science géographique a été le motif de ce fatigant voyage au château de Vermund. Mais daignez réfléchir, noble seigneur Ordener, que le devoir d’un savant zélé peut être quelquefois de braver la fatigue, mais jamais le danger. Je vous en supplie, ne tentez pas cette méchante ruine d’escalier sur laquelle un corbeau n’oserait se percher.

Benignus ne se souciait nullement de rester seul dans le bas de la tour. Comme il se levait pour prendre la main d’Ordener, son havre-sac, placé sur les pointes de ses genoux, tomba dans les pierres et rendit un son clair.

— Qu’est-ce donc qui résonne ainsi dans ce havre-sac? demanda Ordener.

Cette question sur un point si délicat pour Spiagudry, lui ôta l’envie de retenir son jeune compagnon.

— Allons, dit-il sans répondre à la question, puisque, malgré mes prières, vous vous obstinez à monter au haut de cette tour, prenez garde aux crevasses de l’escalier.

— Mais, reprit Ordener, qu’y a-t-il donc dans votre havre-sac, pour lui faire rendre, ce son métallique?

Cette insistance indiscrète déplut souverainement au vieux gardien qui maudit le questionneur du fond de l’âme.

— Eh! noble maître, répondit-il, comment pouvez-vous vous occuper d’un méchant plat à barbe de fer, qui retentit contre un caillou? — Puisque je ne puis vous fléchir, se hâta-t-il d’ajouter, ne tardez pas à redescendre, et ayez soin de vous tenir aux lierres qui tapissent la muraille. Vous verrez le fanal de Munckholm entre les deux Escabelles de Frigge, au midi.

Spiagudry n’aurait rien pu dire de plus adroit pour bannir toute autre idée de l’esprit du jeune homme. Ordener, se débarrassant de son manteau, s’élança vers l’escalier, sur lequel le concierge le suivit des yeux, jusqu’à ce qu’il ne le vît plus que glisser, comme une ombre vague, au plus haut de la muraille, à peine éclairée à son sommet par la lueur agitée du foyer et le reflet immobile de la lune.

Alors, se rasseyant et ramassant son havre-sac:

— Mon cher Benignus Spiagudry, dit-il, pendant que ce jeune lynx ne vous voit pas et que vous êtes seul, hâtez-vous de briser l’incommode enveloppe de fer qui vous empêche de prendre possession, *oculis et manu*, du trésor renfermé sans doute dans cette cassette. Quand il sera délivré de cette prison, il sera moins lourd à porter et plus aisé à cacher.

Déjà, armé d’une grosse pierre, il s’apprêtait à briser le couvercle du coffre, quand un rayon de lumière tombant sur le sceau de fer qui le fermait, arrêta tout à coup le concierge antiquaire.

— Par saint Willebrod le Numismate, je ne me trompe pas, s’écriait-il en frottant vivement le couvercle rouillé, ce sont bien là les armes de Griffenfeld. J’allais faire une grande folie de rompre ce sceau. Voilà peut-être le seul modèle qui reste de ces armoiries fameuses, brisées en 1676 par la main du bourreau. Diable! ne touchons pas à ce couvercle. Quelle que soit la valeur des objets qu’il cache, à moins que, contre toute probabilité, ce ne soient des monnaies de Palmyre ou des médailles carthaginoises, il est certainement plus précieux encore. Me voici donc seul propriétaire des armes maintenant abolies de Griffenfeld! Cachons soigneusement ce trésor. — Aussi bien je trouverai peut-être quelque secret pour ouvrir la cassette, sans commettre de vandalisme. Les armoiries de Griffenfeld! Oh oui! voilà bien la main de justice, la balance sur champ de gueules. Quel bonheur!

À chaque nouvelle découverte héraldique qu'il faisait en dérouillant le vieux cachet, il poussait un cri d'admiration ou une exclamation de contentement.

— Au moyen d'un dissolvant, j'ouvrirai la serrure sans briser le sceau. Ce sont sans doute les trésors de l'ex-chancelier. — Si quelqu'un, tenté par l'appât des quatre écus syndicaux, me reconnaît et m'arrête, il ne me sera pas difficile de me racheter. — Ainsi, cette bienheureuse cassette m'aura sauvé.

En parlant ainsi, son regard se leva machinalement.

— Tout à coup son visage grotesque passa en un clin d'oeil de l'expression d'une joie folle à celle d'une terreur stupide. Tous ses membres tremblèrent convulsivement. Ses yeux devinrent fixes, son front se rida, sa bouche demeura béante, et sa voix s'éteignit dans son gosier, comme une lumière qu'on souffle.

En face de lui, de l'autre côté du foyer, un petit homme était debout, les bras croisés. À ses vêtements de peaux ensanglantées, à sa hache de pierre, à sa barbe rousse, et à ce regard dévorant fixé sur lui, le malheureux concierge avait reconnu du premier coup d'oeil l'effrayant personnage dont il avait reçu la dernière visite au Spladgest de Drontheim.

— C'est moi! dit le petit homme d'un air terrible.

— Cette cassette t'aura sauvé, ajouta-t-il avec un affreux sourire ironique. Spiagudry! est-ce ici le chemin de Thoctree?

L'infortuné essaya d'articuler quelques paroles.

— Thoctree!… Seigneur… Mon seigneur maître… j'y allais…

— Tu allais à Walderhog, répondit l'autre d'une voix de tonnerre.

Spiagudry terrifié ramassa toutes ses forces pour faire un signe de tête négatif.

— Tu me conduisais un ennemi; merci! ce sera un vivant de moins. Ne crains rien, fidèle guide, il te suivra.

Le malheureux gardien voulut pousser un cri et put à peine faire entendre un murmure vague et confus.

— Pourquoi t'effraies-tu de ma présence? Tu me cherchais. — Écoute, ne crie pas, ou tu es mort.

Le petit homme agita sa hache de pierre au-dessus de la tête du concierge; il poursuivit, d’une voix qui sortait de sa poitrine comme le bruit d’un torrent sort d’une caverne:

— Tu m’as trahi.

— Non, votre grâce, non, excellence… dit enfin Benignus pouvant à peine articuler ces paroles suppliantes. L’autre fit entendre comme un rugissement sourd.

— Ah! tu voudrais me tromper encore! Ne l’espère plus. — Écoute, j’étais sur le toit du Spladgest quand tu as scellé ton pacte avec cet insensé; c’est moi dont tu as deux fois entendu la voix. C’est moi que tu as encore entendu dans l’orage sur la route; c’est moi que tu as retrouvé dans la tour de Vygla; c’est moi qui t’ai dit: Au revoir!

Le concierge épouvanté jeta un regard égaré autour de lui, comme pour appeler du secours. Le petit homme continua:

— Je ne voulais pas laisser échapper ces soldats qui te poursuivaient.

Ils étaient du régiment de Munckholm.

— Pour toi, je ne pouvais te perdre. — Spiagudry, c’est moi que tu as revu au village d’Oëlmoe sous ce feutre de mineur; c’est moi dont tu as entendu les pas et la voix, dont tu as reconnu les yeux en montant à ces ruines; c’est moi!

Hélas! l’infortuné n’en était que trop convaincu; il se roula à terre, aux pieds de son formidable juge, en s’écriant d’une voix déchirante et étouffée: — Grâce!

Le petit homme, les bras toujours croisés, attachait sur lui un regard de sang, plus ardent que la flamme du foyer.

— Demande ton salut à cette cassette dont tu l’attends, dit-il ironiquement.

— Grâce, seigneur! Grâce! répéta le mourant Spiagudry.

— Je t’avais recommandé d’être fidèle et muet, tu n’as pu être fidèle; à l’avenir je te proteste que tu seras muet.

Le concierge, entrevoyant l’horrible sens de ces paroles, poussa un long gémissement.

— Ne crains rien, dit l’homme, je ne te séparerai pas de ton trésor.

À ces mots, dénouant sa ceinture de cuir, il la passa dans l’anneau de la cassette, et la suspendit ainsi au cou de Spiagudry, qui fléchissait sous le poids.

— Allons! reprit l’autre, quel est le diable auquel tu désires donner ton âme? Hâte-toi de l’appeler, afin qu’un autre démon dont tu ne te soucierais pas ne s’en empare point avant lui.

Le désespéré vieillard, hors d’état de prononcer une parole, tomba aux genoux du petit homme, en faisant mille signes de prière et d’épouvante.

— Non, non! dit celui-ci; écoute, fidèle Spiagudry, ne te désole pas de laisser ainsi ton jeune compagnon sans guide. Je te promets qu’il ira où tu vas. Suis-moi, tu ne fais que lui montrer le chemin. — Allons!

À ces mots, saisissant le misérable dans ses bras de fer, il l’emporta hors de la tour comme un tigre emporte une longue couleuvre; et un moment après il s’éleva dans les ruines un grand cri, auquel se mêla un effroyable éclat de rire.

XXIII

Oui, l’on peut bien montrer à l’oeil éploré de l’amant fidèle l’objet éloigné de son idolâtrie. Mais, hélas! les scènes de l’attente, des adieux, les pensées, les souvenirs doux et amers, les rêves enchanteurs des êtres qui aiment! qui peut les rendre?

MATURIN. *Bertram.*

Cependant l’aventureux Ordener, après avoir vingt fois failli tomber dans sa périlleuse ascension, était parvenu sur le haut du mur épais et circulaire de la tour. À son arrivée inattendue, de noires chouettes centenaires, brusquement troublées dans leurs ruines, s’enfuirent d’un vol oblique, en tournant vers lui leur regard fixe, et des pierres roulantes, heurtées par son pied, tombèrent dans le gouffre en bondissant sur les saillies des rochers avec des bruits sourds et lointains.

En tout autre instant, Ordener eût longtemps laissé errer sa vue et sa rêverie sur la profondeur de l’abîme, accrue de la profondeur de la nuit. Son oeil, observant à l’horizon toutes ces grandes ombres, dont une lune nébuleuse blanchissait à peine les sombres contours, eût longtemps cherché à distinguer les vapeurs parmi les rochers et les montagnes parmi les nuages; son imagination eût animé toutes les formes gigantesques, toutes les apparences fantastiques que le clair de lune prête aux monts et aux brouillards. Il eût écouté de loin la plainte confuse du lac et des forêts, mêlée au sifflement aigu des herbes sèches que le vent tourmentait à ses pieds, entre les fentes des pierres; et son esprit eût donné un langage à toutes ces voix mortes que la nature matérielle élève pendant le sommeil de l’homme et le silence de la nuit. Mais, quoique cette scène agît à son insu sur son être entier, d’autres pensées le remplissaient. À peine son pied s’était-il posé sur le faîte de la muraille, que son oeil s’était tourné vers le sud du ciel, et qu’une joie indicible l’avait transporté en apercevant, au delà de l’angle de deux montagnes, un point lumineux rayonner à l’horizon comme une étoile rouge. — C’était le fanal de Munckholm.

Ceux-là ne sont pas destinés à goûter les vraies joies de la vie, qui ne comprendront pas le bonheur qu’éprouva le jeune homme. Tout son coeur se souleva de ravissement; son sein gonflé, palpitant avec force, respirait à peine. Immobile, l’oeil tendu, il contemplait l’astre de consolation et d’espérance. Il lui semblait que ce rayon de lumière, venant au sein de la nuit du séjour qui contenait toute sa félicité, lui apportait quelque chose de son Éthel. Ah! n'en doutons pas, à travers les temps et les espaces, les âmes ont quelquefois des correspondances mystérieuses. En vain le monde réel élève ses barrières entre deux êtres qui s'aiment; habitants de la vie idéale, ils s'apparaissent dans l'absence, ils s'unissent dans la mort. Que peuvent en effet les séparations corporelles, les distances physiques sur deux coeurs liés invinciblement par une même pensée et un commun désir? — Le véritable amour peut souffrir, mais non mourir.

Qui ne s'est point arrêté cent fois durant les nuits pluvieuses sous quelque fenêtre à peine éclairée? Qui n'a point passé et repassé devant une porte, erré avec délices autour d'une maison? Qui ne s'est point brusquement retourné de son chemin pour suivre, le soir, dans les détours d'une rue déserte, une robe flottante, un voile blanc tout à coup reconnu dans l'ombre? Celui qui ne connaît pas ces émotions peut dire qu'il n'a jamais aimé.

En présence du fanal lointain de Munckholm, Ordener méditait. À sa première joie avait succédé un contentement triste et ironique; mille sentiments divers se pressaient dans son âme tumultueuse. — Oui, se disait-il, il faut que l'homme gravisse longtemps et péniblement pour voir enfin un point de bonheur dans l'immense nuit. — Elle est donc là! elle dort, elle rêve, elle pense à moi, peut-être! — Mais qui lui dira que son Ordener est maintenant, triste et isolé, suspendu dans l'ombre au-dessus d'un abîme? son Ordener, qui n'a plus d'elle qu'une boucle de cheveux sur son sein, et une lueur vague à l'horizon! — Puis, laissant tomber un coup d'oeil sur les rayons rougeâtres du grand feu allumé dans la tour, qui s'échappaient au dehors à travers les crevasses de la muraille:

— Peut-être, murmura-t-il, de l'une des fenêtres de sa prison, jette-t-elle un regard indifférent sur la flamme lointaine de ce foyer.

Tout à coup un grand cri et un long éclat de rire se firent entendre, comme au-dessous de lui, sur le bord de l'abîme; il se détourna brusquement, et vit l'intérieur de la tour désert. Alors, inquiet pour le vieillard, il se hâta de descendre; mais à peine avait-il franchi quelques marches de l'escalier, qu'un bruit sourd, pareil à celui d'un corps pesant qui serait tombé dans les eaux profondes du lac, monta jusqu'à lui.

XXIV

Le comte don Sancho Diaz, seigneur de Saldana,
répandait d’amères larmes dans sa prison.
Plein de désespoir, il exhalait, ses plaintes dans
la solitude contre le roi Alphonse.

«O tristes moments, où mes cheveux blancs me rappellent combien d’années j’ai déjà passées dans cette prison horrible!»

Romances espagnoles.

Le soleil se couchait; ses rayons horizontaux dessinaient sur la simarre de laine de Schumacker et sur la robe de crêpe d’Éthel, l’ombre noire des barreaux de leur fenêtre. Tous deux étaient assis près de la haute croisée en ogive, le vieillard sur un grand fauteuil gothique, la jeune fille sur un tabouret, à ses pieds. Le prisonnier paraissait rêver dans sa position favorite et mélancolique. Son front chauve et ridé était appuyé sur ses mains et l’on ne voyait de son visage que sa barbe blanche qui pendait en désordre sur sa poitrine.

— Mon père, dit Éthel qui cherchait tous les moyens de le distraire, mon seigneur et père, j’ai fait cette nuit un songe d’heureux avenir. — Voyez, levez les yeux, mon noble père, regardez ce beau ciel.

— Je ne vois le ciel, répondit le vieillard, qu’à travers les barreaux de ma prison, comme je ne vois votre avenir, Éthel, qu’à travers mes malheurs.

Puis sa tête, un moment soulevée, retomba sur ses mains, et tous deux se turent.

— Mon seigneur et père, reprit la jeune fille un moment après et d’une voix timide, est-ce au seigneur Ordener que vous pensez?

— Ordener, dit le vieillard, comme cherchant à se rappeler de qui on lui parlait. — Ah! je sais qui vous voulez dire. Eh bien?

— Pensez-vous qu’il revienne bientôt, mon père? il y a longtemps déjà qu’il est parti. Voici le quatrième jour.

Le vieillard secoua tristement la tête.

— Je crois que, lorsque nous aurons compté la quatrième année depuis son départ, nous serons aussi près de son retour qu’aujourd’hui.

Éthel pâlit.

— Dieu! croyez-vous donc qu’il ne reviendra pas? Schumacker ne répondit point. La jeune fille répéta sa question avec un accent suppliant et inquiet.

— N’a-t-il donc pas promis qu’il reviendrait? dit brusquement le prisonnier.

— Oui, sans doute, seigneur! reprit Éthel empressée.

— Eh bien! comment pouvez-vous compter sur son retour? n’est-ce pas un homme? Je crois que le vautour pourra retourner au cadavre, mais je ne crois pas au retour du printemps dans l’année qui décline.

Éthel, voyant son père retomber dans ses mélancolies, se rassura; il y avait dans son coeur de vierge et d’enfant une voix qui démentait impérieusement la philosophie chagrine du vieillard.

— Mon père, dit-elle avec fermeté, le seigneur Ordener reviendra; ce n’est pas un homme comme les autres hommes.

— Qu’en savez-vous, jeune fille?

— Ce que vous en savez vous-même, mon seigneur et père.

— Je ne sais rien, dit le vieillard. J’ai entendu des paroles d’un homme qui annonçaient des actions d’un dieu.

Puis il ajouta, avec un rire amer:

— J’ai réfléchi sur cela, et j’ai vu que c’était trop beau pour y croire.

— Et moi, seigneur, j’y ai cru, précisément parce que c’était beau.

— Oh! jeune fille, si vous étiez ce que vous deviez être, comtesse de Tongsberg et princesse de Wollin, entourée, comme vous le seriez, d’une cour de beaux traîtres et d’adorateurs intéressés, cette crédulité serait d’un grand danger pour vous.

— Mon père et seigneur, ce n’est pas crédulité, c’est confiance.

— On s’aperçoit aisément, Éthel, qu’il y a du sang français dans vos veines.

Cette idée ramena le vieillard, par une transition imperceptible, à des souvenirs, et il continua avec une sorte de complaisance:

— Car ceux qui ont dégradé votre père plus qu’il n’avait été élevé, ne pourront empêcher que vous ne soyez fille de Charlotte, princesse de Tarente, et que l’une de vos aïeules ne soit Adèle ou Édèle, comtesse de Flandre, dont vous portez le nom.

Éthel pensait à toute autre chose.

— Mon père, vous jugez mal le noble Ordener.

— Noble, ma fille! quel sens donnez-vous à ce mot? J’ai fait des nobles qui ont été bien vils.

— Je ne veux point dire, seigneur, qu'il soit noble de la noblesse qui se donne.

— Est-ce donc que vous savez qu'il descend d'un *jarl* ou d'un *hersa*? [Footnote: Les anciens seigneurs en Norvège, avant que Griffenfeld fondât une noblesse régulière, portaient les titres de *hersa* (baron), ou *jarl* (comte). C'est de ce dernier mot qu'est formé le mot anglais *earl* (comte).]

— Je l'ignore comme vous, mon père. Il est peut-être, poursuivit-elle en baissant les yeux, le fils d'un serf ou d'un vassal. Hélas! on peint des couronnes et des lyres sur le velours d'un marchepied. Je veux dire seulement d'après vous, mon vénéré seigneur, qu'il est noble de coeur.

De tous les hommes qu'elle avait vus, Ordener était celui qu'Éthel connaissait le plus et le moins tout ensemble. Il était apparu dans sa destinée, pour ainsi dire, comme ces anges qui visitaient les premiers hommes, en s'enveloppant à la fois de clartés et de mystères. Leur seule présence révélait leur nature, et l'on adorait. Ainsi Ordener avait laissé voir à Éthel ce que les hommes cachent le plus, son coeur; il avait gardé le silence sur ce dont ils se vantent assez volontiers, sa patrie et sa famille; son regard avait suffi à Éthel, et elle avait eu foi en ses paroles. Elle l'aimait, elle lui avait donné sa vie, elle n'ignorait rien de son âme, et ne savait pas son nom.

— Noble de coeur! répéta le vieillard, noble de coeur! Cette noblesse est au-dessus de celle que donnent les rois; c'est Dieu qui la donne. Il la prodigue moins qu'eux.

Ici le prisonnier leva les yeux vers ses armoiries brisées, en ajoutant:

— Et il ne la reprend jamais.

— Aussi, mon père, dit la jeune fille, celui qui garde l'une se console-t-il aisément d'avoir perdu l'autre.

Cette parole fit tressaillir le père et lui rendit son courage. Il reprit d'une voix ferme:

— Vous avez raison, jeune fille. Mais vous ne savez pas que la disgrâce jugée injuste par le monde est quelquefois justifiée par notre intime conscience. Telle est notre misérable nature; une fois malheureux, il s'élève en nous-mêmes, pour nous reprocher des fautes et des erreurs, une foule de voix qui dormaient dans la prospérité.

— Ne parlez pas ainsi, mon illustre père, dit Éthel, profondément émue; car, à la voix altérée du vieillard, elle sentait qu'il avait laissé échapper le secret de l’une de ses douleurs. Elle leva ses yeux sur lui, et, baisant sa main froide et ridée, elle reprit doucement:

— Vous jugez bien sévèrement deux hommes nobles, le seigneur Ordener et vous, mon vénéré père.

— Vous décidez légèrement, Éthel. On dirait que vous ne savez pas que la vie est une chose grave.

— Ai-je donc mal fait, seigneur, de rendre justice au généreux Ordener?

Schumacker fronça le sourcil d’un air mécontent.

— Je ne puis vous approuver, ma fille, d’attacher ainsi votre admiration à un inconnu, que vous ne reverrez jamais sans doute.

— Oh! dit la jeune fille, sur laquelle ces paroles glacées tombaient comme un poids, ne croyez pas cela. Nous le reverrons. N’est-ce pas pour vous qu’il va affronter ce danger?

— Je me suis comme vous, je l’avoue, laissé prendre d’abord à ses promesses. Mais non, il n’ira pas, et alors il ne reviendra pas vers nous.

— Il ira, seigneur, il ira!

Le ton dont la jeune fille prononça ces mots était presque celui de l’offense. Elle se sentait outragée dans son Ordener. Hélas! elle était trop sûre dans son âme de ce qu’elle affirmait!

Le prisonnier reprit, sans paraître ému:

— Eh bien! s’il va combattre ce brigand, s’il se dévoue à ce danger, il en sera de même; il ne reviendra pas.

Pauvre Éthel! — combien une parole dite avec indifférence peut quelquefois froisser douloureusement la plaie secrète d’un coeur inquiet et déchiré! Elle baissa son visage pâle, pour dérober au regard froid de son père deux larmes qui s’échappaient malgré elle de ses paupières gonflées.

— O mon père! murmura-t-elle, au moment où vous parlez ainsi, peut-être ce noble infortuné meurt-il pour vous!

Le vieux ministre secoua la tête en signe de doute.

— Je ne le crois pas plus que je ne le désire; et d’ailleurs, où serait mon crime? J’aurais été ingrat envers ce jeune homme, comme tant d’autres l’ont été envers moi.

Un soupir profond fut la seule réponse d’Éthel; et Schumacker, se penchant vers son bureau, continua de déchirer d’un air distrait quelques feuillets des *Vies des Hommes illustres* de Plutarque, dont le volume, déjà lacéré en vingt endroits, et surchargé de notes, était devant lui.

Un moment après, le bruit de la porte qui s'ouvrait se fit entendre, et Schumacker, sans se détourner, cria sa défense habituelle: — Qu'on n'entre pas! laissez-moi; je ne veux pas qu'on entre.

— C'est son excellence le gouverneur, répondit la voix de l'huissier.

En effet, un vieillard, revêtu d'un grand habit de général, portant à son cou les colliers de l'éléphant, de dannebrog et de la toison d'or, s'avança vers Schumacker, qui se leva à demi, en répétant entre ses dents:

— Le gouverneur! le gouverneur! — Le général salua avec respect Éthel, qui, debout près de son père, le considérait d'un air inquiet et craintif.

Peut-être, avant d'aller plus loin, n'est-il pas inutile de rappeler en quelques mots les motifs de cette visite du général Levin à Munckholm. Le lecteur n'a pas oublié les fâcheuses nouvelles qui tourmentaient le vieux gouverneur, au chapitre XX de cette véritable histoire. En les recevant, la nécessité d'interroger Schumacker s'était d'abord présentée à l'esprit du général; mais il n'avait pu s'y décider sans, une extrême répugnance. L'idée d'aller tourmenter un infortuné prisonnier, déjà livré à tant de tourments, et qu'il avait vu si puissant, de scruter sévèrement les secrets du malheur, même coupable, déplaisait à son âme bonne et généreuse. Cependant le service du roi l'exigeait; il ne devait pas quitter Drontheim sans emporter les nouvelles lueurs qui pouvaient jaillir de l'interrogatoire de l'auteur apparent de l'insurrection des mineurs. C'était donc le soir qui devait précéder son départ qu'après un entretien long et confidentiel avec la comtesse d'Ahlefeld, le gouverneur s'était résigné à voir le captif. En se rendant au château, l'idée des intérêts de l'état, du parti que ses nombreux ennemis personnels pourraient tirer de ce qu'on nommerait sa négligence, et peut-être aussi d'astucieuses paroles de la grande-chancelière, avaient fermenté dans sa tête et l'avaient ramené à la fermeté. Il était donc monté au donjon du Lion de Slesvig avec des projets de sévérité; il se promettait d'être avec le conspirateur Schumacker comme s'il n'avait jamais connu le chancelier Griffenfeld, de dépouiller tous ses souvenirs et jusqu'à son caractère, et de parler en juge inflexible à cet ancien confrère de faveur et de puissance.

Cependant, à peine entré dans l'appartement de l'ex-chancelier, le visage, vénérable, quoique morose, du vieillard l'avait frappé; la figure douce, quoique fière, d'Éthel l'avait attendri; et le premier aspect des deux prisonniers avait déjà dissipé la moitié de sa sévérité.

Il s’avança vers le ministre tombé, et lui tendit involontairement la main en disant, sans s’apercevoir que l’autre ne répondait pas à sa politesse:

— Salut, comte de Griffenf… — C’était la surprise d’une vieille habitude. Il se reprit précipitamment:

— Seigneur Schumacker! — Puis il s’arrêta, tout satisfait et tout épuisé d’un tel effort.

Il se fit une pause. Le général cherchait dans sa tête quelles paroles assez sévères pourraient dignement répondre à la dureté de ce début.

— Eh bien, dit enfin Schumacker, vous êtes le gouverneur du

Drontheimhus?

Le général, un peu surpris de se voir questionné par celui qu’il venait interroger, fit un signe affirmatif.

— En ce cas, reprit le prisonnier, j’ai une plainte à vous faire.

— Une plainte! laquelle? laquelle? et le visage du noble Levin prenait une expression d’intérêt.

Schumacker continua d’un air d’humeur:

— Un ordre du vice-roi prescrit qu’on me laisse libre et tranquille dans ce donjon.

— Je connais cet ordre.

— Seigneur gouverneur, on se permet pourtant de m’importuner et de pénétrer dans ma prison.

— Qui donc? s’écria le général; nommez-moi celui qui ose…

— Vous, seigneur gouverneur.

Ces paroles, prononcées d’un ton hautain, blessèrent le général. Il répondit d’une voix presque irritée:

— Vous oubliez que mon pouvoir, lorsqu’il s’agit de servir le roi, ne connaît point de limites.

— Si ce n’est, dit Schumacker, celles du respect qu’on doit au malheur. Mais les hommes ne savent pas cela.

L’ex-grand-chancelier parlait ainsi, comme s’il se fût parlé à lui-même. Il fut entendu du gouverneur.

— Si vraiment, si vraiment! J’ai eu tort, comte de Griff…. seigneur Schumacker, veux-je dire; je devais vous laisser la colère, puisque j’ai la puissance.

Schumacker se tut un instant.

— Il y a, reprit-il pensif, dans votre visage et dans votre voix, seigneur gouverneur, quelque chose d’un homme que j’ai connu jadis. Il y a bien longtemps. Il n’y a que moi qui me souvienne de ce temps-là. C’était dans ma prospérité. C’était un certain Levin de Knud, du Mecklembourg. Avez-vous connu ce fou?

— Je l’ai connu, répliqua le général sans s’émouvoir.

— Ah! vous vous le rappelez. Je croyais qu’on ne se souvenait des hommes que dans l’adversité.

— N’était-ce pas un capitaine de la milice royale? poursuivit le gouverneur.

— Oui, un simple capitaine, bien que le roi l’aimât beaucoup. Mais il ne songeait qu’aux plaisirs et ne montrait pas d’ambition. C’était une tête singulièrement extravagante. Conçoit-on une pareille modération de désirs dans un favori?

— Mais cela peut se concevoir.

— Je l’aimais assez, ce Levin de Knud, parce qu’il ne m’inquiétait pas. Il était l’ami du roi comme d’un autre homme. On eût dit qu’il ne l’aimait que pour son plaisir particulier, et nullement pour sa fortune.

Le général voulut interrompre Schumacker; mais celui-ci continua avec quelque opiniâtreté, soit par esprit de contrariété, soit que le souvenir réveillé en lui lui plût en effet:

— Puisque vous avez connu ce capitaine Levin, seigneur gouverneur, vous savez sans doute qu’il eut un fils, lequel même est mort tout jeune. Mais vous souvenez-vous de ce qui se passa à la naissance de ce fils?

— Je me souviens bien plus de ce qui se passa à sa mort, dit le général, en cachant ses yeux de sa main et d’une voix altérée.

— Mais, poursuivit l’indifférent Schumacker, c’est un fait connu de peu de personnes, et qui vous peindra toute la bizarrerie de ce Levin. Le roi voulait tenir l’enfant sur les fonts de baptême; croiriez-vous que Levin refusa? Il fit bien plus encore; il choisit pour le parrain de son fils un vieux mendiant qui se traînait aux portes du palais. Je n’ai jamais pu comprendre le motif d’un pareil acte de démence.

— Je vais vous le dire, répondit le général. En choisissant un protecteur à l’âme de son fils, ce capitaine Levin pensait sans doute qu’un pauvre est plus puissant auprès de Dieu qu’un roi.

Schumacker réfléchit un instant et dit:

— Vous avez raison.

Le gouverneur voulut encore ramener la conversation au but de sa visite. Mais Schumacker l’arrêta.

— De grâce, s’il est vrai que ce Levin du Mecklembourg ne vous soit pas inconnu, laissez-moi parler de lui. De tous les hommes que j’ai vus dans mes temps de grandeur, c’est le seul dont le souvenir ne m’apporte ni dégoût ni horreur. S’il poussait la singularité jusqu’à la folie, il n’en était pas moins, par ses nobles qualités, un homme tel qu’il y en a bien peu.

— Je ne pense pas de même. Ce Levin n’avait rien de plus que les autres hommes. Il y en a beaucoup même qui valent mieux que lui.

Schumacker croisa les bras, en levant les yeux au ciel.

— Oui, voilà bien comme ils sont tous! On ne peut louer devant eux un homme digne de louange, qu’ils ne cherchent aussitôt à le noircir. Ils empoisonnent jusqu’au plaisir de louer justement. Il est cependant assez rare.

— Si vous me connaissiez, vous ne m’accuseriez pas de noirceur envers le gén… — c’est-à-dire, le capitaine Levin.

— Laissez-moi, laissez-moi, dit le prisonnier, pour la loyauté et la générosité il n’y a jamais eu deux hommes comme ce Levin de Knud, et dire le contraire, c’est à la fois le calomnier et louer démesurément cette exécrable race humaine!

— Je vous assure, reprit le gouverneur, cherchant à calmer la colère de Schumacker, que je n’ai eu contre Levin de Knud aucune intention perfide.

— Ne dites pas cela. Bien qu’il fût insensé, tous les hommes sont loin de lui ressembler. Ils sont faux, ingrats, envieux, calomniateurs. Savez-vous que Levin de Knud donnait aux hôpitaux de Copenhague plus de la moitié de son revenu?

— J’ignorais que vous en fussiez instruit.

— C’est cela! s’écria le vieillard d’un air triomphant. Il espérait pouvoir le flétrir en toute sûreté, dans la confiance que j’ignorais les bonnes actions de ce pauvre Levin!

— Mais non, mais non!

— Pensez-vous que je ne sais pas encore qu’il fit donner le régiment que le roi lui destinait, à un officier qui l’avait blessé en duel, lui, Levin de Knud, parce que, disait-il, l’autre était plus ancien que lui?

— Je croyais cependant cette action secrète.

— Dites-moi donc, seigneur gouverneur du Drontheimhus, est-ce que pour cela elle en est moins belle? Parce que Levin cachait ses vertus, est-ce une raison pour les nier? Oh! que les hommes sont bien les mêmes! Oser confondre avec eux le noble Levin, lui qui, n’ayant pu sauver un soldat convaincu d'avoir voulu l'assassiner, fit une pension à la veuve de son meurtrier!

— Eh! qui n'en eût pas fait autant? Ici Schumacker éclata.

— Qui? vous! moi! tous les hommes, seigneur gouverneur! Parce que vous portez le brillant costume de général et des plaques d'honneur sur votre poitrine, croyez-vous donc à votre mérite? Vous êtes général, et le malheureux Levin sera mort capitaine. Il est vrai que c'était un fou, et qu'il ne songeait pas à son avancement.

— S'il n'y a point songé lui-même, la bonté du roi y a songé pour lui.

— La bonté? dites la justice! si pourtant on peut dire la justice d'un roi. Eh bien! quelle insigne récompense lui a-t-on donnée?

— Sa majesté a payé Levin de Knud bien au delà de son mérite.

— À merveille! s'écria le vieux ministre en frappant des mains. Un loyal capitaine vient peut-être, après trente ans de service, d'être nommé major, et cette haute faveur vous porte ombrage, noble général? Un proverbe persan a raison de dire que le soleil couchant est jaloux de la lune qui se lève.

Schumacker était tellement irrité que le général put à peine faire entendre ces paroles: — Si vous m'interrompez sans cesse… vous m'empêchez de vous expliquer…

— Non, non! poursuivit l'autre, j'avais cru, seigneur général, saisir, au premier abord, quelques traits de ressemblance entre vous et le bon Levin; mais, allez! il n'en existe aucun.

— Mais, écoutez-moi…

— Vous écouter! pour que vous me disiez que Levin de Knud est indigne de quelque misérable récompense!

— Je vous jure que ce n'est pas…

— Vous en viendriez bientôt, je vous devine, vous autres hommes, à me soutenir qu'il est, comme vous tous, fourbe, hypocrite, méchant.

— En vérité, non.

— Que sais-je? peut-être qu'il a trahi un ami, persécuté un bienfaiteur, comme vous l'avez tous fait? — ou empoisonné son père, ou assassiné sa mère?

— Vous êtes dans une erreur… — Je suis loin de vouloir…

— Savez-vous que ce fut lui qui détermina le vice-chancelier Wind, ainsi que Scheel, Vinding et le justicier Lasson, trois de mes juges, à ne point opiner pour la peine de mort? Et vous voulez que je vous entende, de sang-froid, le calomnier! Oui, c’est ainsi qu’il a agi envers moi, et pourtant je lui avais toujours fait plutôt du mal que du bien; car je suis semblable à vous, vil et méchant.

Le noble Levin éprouvait, durant cet étrange entretien, une émotion singulière. Objet à la fois des outrages les plus directs et de la louange la plus sincère, il ne savait quelle contenance faire à d’aussi rudes compliments, à tant de flatteuses injures. Il était choqué et attendri. Tantôt il voulait s’emporter, tantôt remercier Schumacker. Présent et inconnu, il aimait à voir le farouche Schumacker défendre en lui, et contre lui, un ami et un absent; seulement, il eût voulu que son avocat mît un peu moins d’amertume et d’âcreté dans son panégyrique. Mais, au fond de l’âme, les éloges furieux donnés au capitaine Levin le touchaient plus que les injures adressées au gouverneur de Drontheim ne le blessaient. Attachant sur le favori disgracié son regard bienveillant, il prit le parti de lui laisser exhaler son indignation et sa reconnaissance. Celui-ci enfin, après une longue déclamation contre l’ingratitude humaine, tomba épuisé sur son fauteuil, dans les bras de la tremblante Éthel, en disant d’une voix douloureuse: — O hommes! que vous ai-je donc fait pour vous être fait connaître à moi?

Le général n’avait pas encore pu arriver au sujet important de sa descente à Munckholm. Toute sa répugnance à tourmenter le captif d’un interrogatoire lui était revenue; à sa pitié et à son attendrissement se joignaient deux raisons assez fortes; l’état d’agitation où était tombé Schumacker ne laissait pas espérer qu’il pût répondre d’une façon satisfaisante; et d’ailleurs, en envisageant l’affaire en elle-même, il ne semblait pas au confiant Levin qu’un pareil homme pût être un conspirateur. Néanmoins, comment partir de Drontheim sans avoir interrogé Schumacker? Cette nécessité fâcheuse de sa position de gouverneur vainquit une fois encore toutes ses hésitations, et ce fut ainsi qu’il commença, en adoucissant le plus possible l’accent de sa voix:

— Veuillez calmer un peu votre agitation, comte Schumacker.

C’était d’inspiration que le bon gouverneur avait trouvé cette qualification, comme pour concilier le respect dû au jugement de dégradation avec les égards réclamés par le malheur du dégradé, en unissant son titre nobiliaire à son nom roturier. Il continua:

— C’est un devoir pénible pour moi que de venir….

— Avant tout, interrompit le prisonnier, permettez-moi, seigneur gouverneur, de vous reparler d’une chose qui m’intéresse beaucoup plus que tout ce que votre excellence peut avoir à me dire. Vous m'avez assuré tout à l'heure qu'on avait récompensé ce fou de Levin de ses services. Je désirerais vivement savoir comment.

— Sa majesté, seigneur de Griffenfeld, a élevé Levin au rang de général, et depuis plus de vingt ans ce fou vieillit paisiblement, honoré de cette dignité militaire et de la bienveillance de son roi.

Schumacker baissa la tête:

— Oui, ce fou de Levin, auquel il importait si peu de vieillir capitaine, mourra général, et le sage Schumacker, qui comptait mourir grand-chancelier, vieillit prisonnier d'état.

En parlant ainsi, le captif couvrit son visage de ses mains, et de longs soupirs s'échappaient de sa vieille poitrine. Éthel, qui ne comprenait de l'entretien que ce qui attristait son père, chercha sur-le-champ à le distraire.

— Mon père, voyez donc là-bas, au nord, on voit briller une lumière que je n'ai pas remarquée les soirées précédentes.

En effet, la nuit, qui était tout à fait tombée, faisait ressortir à l'horizon une lumière faible et lointaine, qui semblait partir du sommet de quelque montagne éloignée. Mais l'oeil et l'esprit de Schumacker ne se dirigeaient pas incessamment comme ceux d'Éthel vers le nord; aussi ne répondit-il point. Le général seul fut frappé de l'observation de la jeune fille. — C'est peut-être, se dit-il en lui-même, un feu allumé par les révoltés; et cette idée lui rappelant avec force le but de sa présence, il adressa la parole au prisonnier:

— Seigneur Griffenfeld, je suis fâché de vous tourmenter; mais il faut que vous subissiez….

— J'entends, seigneur gouverneur, ce n'est pas assez de passer mes jours dans ce donjon, de vivre flétri et abandonné, de n'avoir plus à moi que des souvenirs amers de grandeur et de puissance; il faut encore que vous violiez ma solitude pour scruter mes douleurs et jouir de mon infortune. Puisque ce noble Levin de Knud, que plusieurs traits extérieurs de votre personne m'ont rappelé, est général comme vous, il eût été trop heureux pour moi qu'on lui donnât le poste que vous occupez; car ce n'est pas lui, je vous jure, seigneur gouverneur, qui fût venu tourmenter un infortuné dans sa prison.

Durant le cours de cet entretien bizarre, le général avait été plus d'une fois sur le point de se nommer afin de le faire cesser. Ce reproche indirect de Schumacker lui en ôta le pouvoir. Il s'accordait si bien avec ses sentiments intérieurs, qu’il lui inspira comme un sentiment de honte de lui-même. Il essaya néanmoins de répondre à la supposition accablante de Schumacker. Chose étrange! par la seule différence de leur caractère, ces deux hommes avaient changé réciproquement de position. Le juge était en quelque sorte réduit à se justifier devant l’accusé.

— Mais, dit le général, si le devoir l’y eût contraint, ne doutez pas que Levin de Knud….

— J’en doute, noble gouverneur! s’écria Schumacker; ne doutez pas vous-même qu’il n’eût rejeté, avec toute la généreuse indignation de son âme, l’emploi d’épier et d’accroître les tortures d’un malheureux captif! Allez, je le connais mieux que vous; en aucun cas il n’eût accepté les fonctions de bourreau. Maintenant, seigneur général, je vous écoute. Faites ce que vous appelez votre devoir. Que veut de moi votre excellence?

Et le vieux ministre attachait son regard fier sur le gouverneur. Toute la résolution de celui-ci était tombée. Ses premières répugnances s’étaient réveillées, et réveillées invincibles.

— Il a raison, se disait-il en lui-même; venir tourmenter un malheureux sur de simples soupçons! Qu’on en charge un autre que moi!

L’effet de ces réflexions fut prompt; il s’avança vers Schumacker étonné et lui serra la main. Puis, sortant précipitamment:

— Comte Schumacker, dit-il, conservez toujours la même estime à Levin de Knud.

XXV

LE LION.
Hoh!
THÉSÉE.
Bien rugi, lion!

SHAKESPEARE, *le Songe d’été*.

Le voyageur qui parcourt de nos jours les montagnes couvertes de neige dont le lac de Smiasen est entouré comme d’une ceinture blanche, ne trouve plus aucun vestige de ce que les norvégiens du dix-septième siècle appelaient la ruine d’Arbar. On n’a jamais pu savoir de quelle construction humaine, de quel genre d’édifice, provenait cette ruine, si l’on peut lui donner ce nom. En sortant de la forêt qui couvre la partie méridionale du lac, après avoir gravi une pente semée çà et là de pans de murs et de restes de tours, on arrive à une ouverture voûtée qui perce le flanc du mont. Cette ouverture, aujourd’hui entièrement obstruée par les éboulements de terre, était l’entrée d’une espèce de galerie creusée à vif dans le roc, laquelle traversait la montagne de part en part. Cette galerie, éclairée faiblement par des soupiraux coniques, pratiqués dans sa voûte de distance en distance, aboutissait à une sorte de salle oblongue et ovale, creusée à moitié dans la roche et terminée en une espèce de maçonnerie cyclopéenne. Autour de cette salle on observait, dans des niches profondes, des figures de granit grossièrement travaillées. Quelques-uns de ces simulacres mystérieux, tombés de leurs piédestaux, gisaient pêle-mêle sur les dalles, avec d’autres décombres informes couverts d’herbes et de mousses, à travers lesquels serpentaient le lézard, l’araignée, et tous les insectes hideux qui naissent de la terre et des ruines.

Le jour ne pénétrait dans ce lieu que par une porte opposée à la bouche de la galerie. Cette porte avait, vue d’un certain côté, la forme ogive, mais grossière, sans âge et sans date, et évidemment donnée à l’architecte par le hasard. On aurait pu donner à cette porte, bien qu’elle fût de plain-pied, le nom de fenêtre, car elle s’ouvrait sur un précipice immense; et l’on ne comprenait pas où pouvaient conduire trois ou quatre marches d’escalier suspendues sur l’abîme en dehors et au-dessous de cette singulière issue.

Cette salle était l’intérieur d’une espèce de tourelle gigantesque qui, de loin, vue du côté du précipice, semblait un des pitons de la montagne. Cette tourelle était isolée, et, comme on l’a déjà dit, nul ne savait à quel édifice elle avait appartenu. On apercevait seulement au-dessus, sur un plateau inaccessible au plus hardi chasseur, une masse qu’on pouvait prendre, à cause de l’éloignement, pour une roche courbée ou pour le débris d’une arcade colossale. — Cette tourelle et cette arcade écroulée étaient connues des paysans sous le nom de ruines d’Arbar. On ne savait pas plus l’origine du nom que l’origine du monument.

C’est sur une pierre située au milieu de cette salle elliptique, qu’un petit homme, vêtu de peaux de bêtes, et que nous avons déjà eu occasion de rencontrer plusieurs fois dans le cours de cet ouvrage, est assis. Il tourne le dos au jour, ou plutôt au vague crépuscule qui pénètre dans la sombre tourelle pendant le soleil éclatant de midi. Cette lueur, la plus forte qui puisse éclairer naturellement l’intérieur de la tourelle, ne suffit pas pour qu’on puisse distinguer de quelle nature est l’objet vers lequel le petit homme se tient courbé. On entend quelques gémissements sourds, et l’on pourrait juger qu’ils partent de ce corps, aux mouvements faibles qu’il semble faire de tout temps. Quelquefois le petit homme se redresse, et il porte à ses lèvres une sorte de coupe, dont la forme paraît être celle d’un crâne humain, pleine d’une liqueur fumante dont on ne peut voir la couleur, et qu’il savoure à longs traits.

Tout à coup il se lève brusquement.

— On marche dans la galerie, je crois; est-ce déjà le chancelier des deux royaumes?

Ces paroles sont suivies d’un éclat de rire horrible, qui se termine en rugissement sauvage, auquel répond soudain un hurlement parti de la galerie.

— Oh! oh! reprend l’hôte de la ruine d’Arbar, ce n’est pas un homme; mais c’est toujours un ennemi; c’est un loup.

En effet, un grand loup sort subitement de dessous la voûte de la galerie, s’arrête un moment, puis s’approche obliquement vers l’homme, le ventre à terre et fixant sur lui des yeux ardents qui étincellent dans l’ombre. Celui-ci, toujours debout et les bras croisés, le regarde.

— Ah! c’est le vieux loup au poil gris! le plus vieux loup des forêts du Smiasen. — Bonjour, loup; tes yeux brillent; tu es affamé, et l’odeur des cadavres t’attire. — Tu attireras aussi bientôt les loups affamés.

— Sois le bienvenu, loup de Smiasen; j’ai toujours eu envie de te rencontrer. Tu es si vieux qu’on dit que tu ne peux mourir. — On ne le dira plus demain.

L’animal répondit par un hurlement affreux, fit un soubresaut en arrière et s’élança d’un bond sur le petit homme.

Celui-ci ne recula point d’un pas. Aussi prompt que l’éclair, de son bras droit il étreignit le ventre du loup, qui, debout en face de lui, avait jeté ses deux pattes de devant sur ses épaules; de la main gauche, il garantit son visage de la gueule béante de son ennemi, en lui saisissant le gosier avec une telle force, que l’animal, contraint de lever la tête, put à peine articuler un cri de douleur.

— Loup de Smiasen, dit l’homme triomphant, tu déchires ma casaque, mais ta peau la remplacera.

Au moment où il mêlait à ces paroles de victoire quelques paroles d’un jargon bizarre, un effort convulsif du loup à l’agonie le fit trébucher contre les pierres qui parsemaient la salle. Ils tombèrent tous deux, et les rugissements de l’homme se confondirent avec les hurlements de la bête.

Obligé dans sa chute de lâcher le gosier du loup, le petit homme sentait déjà les dents tranchantes s’enfoncer dans son épaule, quand, en se roulant l’un sur l’autre, les deux combattants heurtèrent une énorme masse blanche velue qui gisait dans la partie la plus ténébreuse de la salle.

C’était un ours, qui se réveilla de son lourd sommeil en grondant.

À peine les yeux paresseux de ce nouveau personnage se furent-ils assez ouverts pour distinguer la lutte, qu’il se précipita avec fureur, non sur l’homme, mais sur le loup qui en ce moment triomphait à son tour, le saisit violemment de sa gueule par le milieu du corps, et dégagea ainsi le combattant à face humaine.

L’homme, loin de se montrer reconnaissant d’un si grand service, se releva tout ensanglanté, et, s’élançant sur l’ours, lui donna un vigoureux coup de pied dans le ventre, comme un maître à son chien lorsqu’il a commis quelque faute.

— Friend! qui est-ce qui t’appelle? De quoi te mêles-tu?

Ces mots étaient entrecoupés d’interjections furibondes et de grincements de dents.

— Va-t’en! ajouta-t-il en rugissant. L’ours, qui avait reçu à la fois un coup de pied de l’homme et un coup de dent du loup, fit entendre une sorte de murmure plaintif; puis, baissant sa lourde tête, il lâcha l’animal affamé, qui se jeta sur l’homme avec une rage nouvelle.

Pendant que la lutte continuait, l’ours rebuté retourna à la place où il dormait, s’assit gravement en laissant errer sur les deux ennemis furieux un regard indifférent, et garda le plus paisible silence, en passant alternativement chacune de ses pattes de devant sur l’extrémité de son museau blanc.

Mais le petit homme, au moment où le doyen des loups du Smiasen était revenu à la charge, avait saisi le mufle sanglant de la bête; puis, par un effort inouï de force et d’adresse, il était parvenu à emprisonner la gueule tout entière dans sa main. Le loup se débattait avec des élancements de rage et de douleur; une écume livide tombait de ses lèvres comprimées, et ses yeux, comme gonflés de colère, semblaient sortir de leur orbite. Des deux adversaires, celui dont les os étaient broyés par des dents aiguës, les chairs déchirées par des ongles brûlants, ce n’était pas l’homme, mais la bête féroce; celui dont le hurlement avait l’accent le plus sauvage, l’expression la plus farouche, ce n’était point la bête fauve, mais l’homme.

Enfin celui-ci, ramassant toutes ses forces épuisées par la longue résistance du vieux loup, serra le museau de ses deux mains avec une telle vigueur, que le sang jaillit des narines et de la gueule de l’animal; ses yeux de flamme s’éteignirent et se fermèrent à demi; il chancela et tomba inanimé aux pieds de son vainqueur. Le mouvement faible et continuel de sa queue et les tremblements convulsifs et intermittents qui couraient par tout son corps annonçaient seuls qu’il n’était pas encore tout à fait mort.

Tout à coup une dernière convulsion ébranla l’animal expirant, et les symptômes de vie cessèrent.

— Te voilà mort, loup cervier! dit le petit homme en le poussant du pied avec dédain; est-ce que tu croyais vieillir encore après m’avoir rencontré? Tu ne courras plus à pas sourds sur les neiges en suivant l’odeur et les traces de ta proie; te voilà toi-même bon pour les loups ou les vautours; tu as dévoré bien des voyageurs égarés autour du Smiasen durant ta longue vie de meurtre et de carnage; maintenant, tu es mort toi-même, tu ne mangeras plus d’hommes; c’est dommage.

Il s’arma d’une pierre tranchante, s’accroupit sur le corps chaud et palpitant du loup, rompit les jointures des membres, sépara la tête des épaules, fendit la peau dans toute sa longueur sur le ventre, la détacha comme on enlève une veste, et en un clin d’oeil le formidable loup du Smiasen n’offrit plus qu’une carcasse nue et ensanglantée. Il jeta cette dépouille sur ses épaules meurtries de morsures, en tournant au dehors le côté nu de la peau humide et tachée de longues veines de sang.

— Il faut bien, grommela-t-il entre ses dents, se vêtir de la peau des bêtes, celle de l’homme est trop mince pour préserver du froid. Pendant qu’il se parlait ainsi à lui-même, plus hideux encore sous son hideux trophée, l’ours, ennuyé sans doute de son inaction, s’était approché comme furtivement de l’autre objet couché dans l’ombre dont nous avons parlé au commencement de ce chapitre, et bientôt il s’éleva de cette partie ténébreuse de la salle un bruit de dents mêlé de soupirs d’agonie faibles et douloureux. Le petit homme se retourna.

— Friend! cria-t-il d’une voix menaçante; ah! misérable Friend! — Ici, viens ici!

Et ramassant une grosse pierre, il la jeta à la tête du monstre, qui, tout étourdi du choc, s’arracha lentement à son festin, et vint, en léchant ses lèvres rouges, tomber pantelant aux pieds du petit homme, vers lequel il élevait sa tête énorme en courbant son dos, comme pour demander grâce de son indiscrétion.

Alors, il se fit entre les deux monstres, car on peut bien donner ce nom à l’habitant de la ruine d’Arbar, un échange de grondements significatifs. Ceux de l’homme exprimaient l’empire et la colère, ceux de l’ours la prière et la soumission.

— Tiens, dit enfin l’homme, en montrant de son doigt crochu le cadavre écorché du loup, voici ta proie; laisse-moi la mienne.

L’ours, après avoir flairé le corps du loup, secoua la tête d’un air mécontent et tourna son regard vers l’homme qui paraissait son maître.

— J’entends, dit celui-ci, cela est déjà trop mort pour toi, tandis que l’autre palpite encore. — Tu es raffiné dans tes voluptés, Friend, autant qu’un homme; tu veux que ta nourriture vive encore au moment où tu la déchires; tu aimes à sentir la chair mourir sous ta dent; tu ne jouis que de ce qui souffre. Nous nous ressemblons; — car je ne suis pas homme, Friend, je suis au-dessus de cette espèce misérable, je suis une bête farouche comme toi. — Je voudrais que tu pusses parler, compagnon Friend, pour me dire si elle égale ma joie, la joie dont palpitent tes entrailles d’ours quand tu dévores des entrailles d’homme; mais non, je ne voudrais pas t’entendre parler, de peur que ta voix ne me rappelât la voix humaine. — Oui, gronde à mes pieds, de ce grondement qui fait tressaillir dans la montagne le chevrier égaré; il me plaît comme une voix amie, parce qu’il lui annonce un ennemi.

Lève, Friend, lève ta tête vers moi; lèche mes mains de cette langue qui a tant de fois bu le sang humain. — Tu as, ainsi que moi, les dents blanches; cependant ce n'est point notre faute si elles ne sont pas rouges comme une plaie nouvelle; mais le sang lave le sang. — J'ai vu plus d'une fois, du fond d'une caverne noire, les jeunes filles de Kole ou d'Oëlmoe laver leurs pieds nus dans l'eau des torrents, en chantant d'une voix douce; mais je préfère à ces voix mélodieuses et à ces figures satinées ta gueule velue et tes cris rauques; ils épouvantent l'homme.

En parlant ainsi, il s'était assis et abandonnait sa main aux caresses du monstre, qui, se roulant sur le dos à ses pieds, les lui prodiguait de mille manières, comme un épagneul qui déploie toutes ses gentillesses sur le sopha de sa maîtresse. Ce qui était encore plus étrange, c'est l'attention, intelligente avec laquelle il paraissait recueillir les paroles de son patron. Les monosyllabes bizarres dont celui-ci les entremêlait semblaient surtout compris de lui, et il manifestait cette compréhension en redressant subitement sa tête, ou en roulant quelques sons confus au fond de son gosier.

— Les hommes disent que je les fuis, reprit le petit homme, mais ce sont eux qui me fuient; ils font par crainte ce que je ferais par haine. Cependant tu sais, Friend, que je suis aise de rencontrer un homme quand j'ai faim ou soif.

Tout à coup, il aperçut dans les profondeurs de la galerie une lumière rougeâtre poindre et s'accroître par degrés, en colorant faiblement les vieux murs humides.

— En voici un justement. Quand on parle d'enfer, Satan montre sa corne. — Holà! Friend, ajouta-t-il en se tournant vers l'ours; holà, lève-toi!

L'animal se dressa sur-le-champ.

— Allons, il faut bien récompenser ton obéissance en satisfaisant ton appétit.

En parlant ainsi, l'homme se courba vers ce qui était couché à terre. On entendit comme un craquement d'os brisés par la hache; mais il ne s'y mêlait plus ni soupirs ni gémissements.

— Il paraît, murmura le petit homme, que nous ne sommes plus que deux qui vivons dans cette salle d'Arbar. — Tiens, ami Friend, achève ton festin commencé. Il jeta vers la porte extérieure dont nous avons parlé ce qu'il avait détaché de l'objet étendu à ses pieds. L'ours se précipita sur cette proie si avidement, que le coup d'oeil le plus rapide n'eût pu distinguer si ce lambeau n’avait pas en effet la forme d’un bras humain, revêtu d’un morceau d’étoffe verte de la nuance de l’uniforme des arquebusiers de Munckholm.

— Voici que l’on approche, dit le petit homme, l’oeil fixé sur la lumière qui croissait de plus en plus. — Compagnon Friend, laisse-moi seul un instant. — Hé! dehors!

Le monstre obéissant s’élança vers la porte, descendit à reculons les marches extérieures, et disparut, emportant dans sa gueule sa proie dégouttante, avec un hurlement de satisfaction.

Au même instant, un homme assez grand se présenta à l’issue de la galerie, dont les profondeurs sinueuses reflétaient encore une lumière vague. Il était enveloppé d’un long manteau brun, et portait une lanterne sourde, dont il dirigea le foyer lumineux droit au visage du petit homme.

Celui-ci, toujours assis sur sa pierre et les bras croisés, s’écria:

— Sois le mal venu, toi qui viens ici amené par une pensée et non par un instinct!

Mais l’étranger, sans répondre, paraissait le considérer attentivement.

— Regarde-moi, poursuivit-il en dressant la tête, tu n’auras peut-être pas dans une heure un souffle de voix pour te vanter de m’avoir vu. Le nouveau venu, en promenant sa lumière sur toute la personne du petit homme, paraissait plus surpris encore qu’effrayé.

— Eh bien, de quoi t’étonnes-tu? reprit le petit homme avec un rire pareil au bruit d’un crâne qu’on brise; j’ai des bras et des jambes ainsi que toi. Seulement mes membres ne seront pas, ainsi que les tiens, la pâture des chatpards et des corbeaux.

L’étranger répondit enfin d’une voix basse, quoique assurée, et comme s’il craignait seulement d’être entendu du dehors.

— Écoutez, je ne viens pas en ennemi, mais en ami.

L’autre l’interrompit:

— Pourquoi alors n’as-tu pas dépouillé ta forme d’homme?

— Mon intention est de vous rendre service, si vous êtes celui que je cherche.

— C’est-à-dire de tirer un service de moi. Homme, tu perds tes pas. Je ne sais rendre de service qu’à ceux qui sont las de la vie.

— À vos paroles, répondit l’étranger, je vous reconnais, bien pour l’homme qu’il me faut; mais votre taille… Han d’Islande est un géant; ce ne peut être vous.

— C’est la première fois qu’on en doute devant moi.

— Quoi! ce serait vous! — Et l’étranger se rapprochait du petit homme. — Mais on dit que Han d’Islande est d’une stature colossale?

— Ajoute ma renommée à ma taille, et tu me verras plus haut que l’Hécla.

— Vraiment! Répondez-moi, je vous prie; vous êtes bien Han, natif de Klipstadur, en Islande?

— Ce n’est point avec des paroles que je réponds à cette question, dit le petit homme en se levant; et le regard qu’il lança sur l’imprudent étranger le fit reculer de trois pas.

— Bornez-vous, de grâce, à la résoudre avec ce regard, répondit-il d’une voix presque suppliante et en jetant vers le seuil de la galerie un coup d’oeil où se peignait le regret de l’avoir franchi. Ce sont vos seuls intérêts qui me conduisent ici.

En entrant dans la salle, le nouveau-venu, n’ayant fait qu’entrevoir celui qu’il abordait, avait pu conserver quelque sang-froid; mais quand l’hôte d’Arbar se fut levé, avec son visage de tigre, ses membres ramassés, ses épaules sanglantes, à peine couvertes d’une peau encore fraîche, ses grandes mains armées d’ongles, et son regard flamboyant, l’aventureux étranger avait frémi, comme un voyageur ignorant, qui croit caresser une anguille et se sent piquer par une vipère.

— Mes intérêts? reprit le monstre. Viens-tu donc me donner avis qu’il y a quelque source à empoisonner, quelque village à incendier, ou quelque arquebusier de Munckholm à égorger?

— Peut-être. — Écoutez. Les mineurs de Norvège se révoltent. Vous savez combien de désastres amène une révolte.

— Oui, le meurtre, le viol, le sacrilège, l’incendie, le pillage.

— Je vous offre tout cela. Le petit homme se mit à rire.

— Je n’ai pas besoin que tu me l’offres pour le prendre.

Le ricanement féroce qui accompagnait ces paroles fit de nouveau tressaillir l’étranger. Il continua néanmoins:

— Je vous propose, au nom des mineurs, le commandement de l’insurrection.

Le petit homme resta un moment silencieux. Tout à coup sa physionomie sombre prit une expression de malice infernale.

— Est-ce bien en leur nom que tu me le proposes? dit-il.

Cette question sembla déconcerter le nouveau-venu; mais, sûr d’être inconnu de son redoutable interlocuteur, il se remit aisément.

— Pourquoi les mineurs se révoltent-ils? demanda celui-ci.

— Pour s’affranchir des charges de la tutelle royale.

— N’est-ce que pour cela? repartit l’autre avec le même ton railleur.

— Ils veulent aussi délivrer le prisonnier de Munckholm.

— Est-ce là le seul but de ce mouvement? répéta le petit homme avec cet accent qui déconcertait l’étranger.

— Je n’en connais point d’autre, balbutia ce dernier.

— Ah! tu n’en connais point d’autre! Ces paroles étaient prononcées du même ton ironique. L’étranger, pour dissiper l’embarras qu’elles lui causaient, s’empressa de tirer de dessous son manteau une grosse bourse qu’il jeta aux pieds du monstre.

— Voici les honoraires de votre commandement. Le petit homme repoussa le sac du pied.

— Je n’en veux pas. Crois-tu donc que si j’avais envie de ton or ou de ton sang, j’attendrais ta permission pour me satisfaire?

L’étranger fit un geste de surprise et presque d’effroi.

— C’était un présent dont les mineurs royaux m’avaient chargé pour vous.

— Je n’en veux pas, te dis-je. L’or ne me sert à rien. Les hommes vendent bien leur âme, mais ils ne vendent pas leur vie. On est forcé de la prendre.

— J’annoncerai donc aux chefs des mineurs que le redoutable Han d’Islande se borne à accepter leur commandement?

— Je ne l’accepte pas.

Ces mots, prononcés d’une voix brève, parurent frapper très désagréablement le prétendu envoyé des mineurs révoltés.

— Comment? dit-il,

— Non! répéta l’autre.

— Vous refusez de prendre part à une expédition qui vous présente tant d’avantages?

— Je puis bien piller les fermes, dévaster les hameaux, massacrer les paysans ou les soldats, tout seul.

— Mais songez qu’en acceptant l’offre des mineurs l’impunité vous est assurée.

— Est-ce encore au nom des mineurs que tu me promets l’impunité? demanda l’autre en riant.

— Je ne vous dissimulerai pas, répondit l’étranger d’un air mystérieux, que c’est au nom d’un puissant personnage qui s’intéresse à l’insurrection.

— Et ce puissant personnage, lui-même, est-il sûr de n’être pas pendu?

— Si vous le connaissiez, vous ne secoueriez pas ainsi la tête.

— Ah! — Eh bien! quel est-il donc?

— C’est ce que je ne puis vous dire.

Le petit homme s’avança, et frappa sur l’épaule de l’étranger, toujours avec le même rire sardonique.

— Veux-tu que je te le dise, moi?

Un mouvement échappa à l’homme au manteau; c’était à la fois de l’épouvante et de l’orgueil blessé. Il ne s’attendait pas plus à la brusque interpellation du monstre qu’à sa sauvage familiarité.

— Je me joue de toi, continua ce dernier. Tu ne sais pas que je sais tout. Ce puissant personnage, c’est le grand-chancelier de Danemark et de Norvège, et le grand-chancelier de Danemark et de Norvège, c’est toi.

C’était lui en effet. Arrivé à la ruine d’Arbar, vers laquelle nous l’avons laissé voyageant avec Musdoemon, il avait voulu ne s’en remettre qu’à lui-même du soin de séduire le brigand, dont il était loin de se croire connu et attendu. Jamais, par la suite, le comte d’Ahlefeld, malgré toute sa finesse et toute sa puissance, ne put découvrir par quel moyen Han d’Islande avait été si bien informé. Était-ce une trahison de Musdoemon? C’était Musdoemon, il est vrai, qui avait insinué au noble comte l’idée de se présenter en personne au brigand; mais quel intérêt pouvait-il tirer de cette perfidie? Le brigand avait-il saisi sur quelqu’une de ses victimes des papiers relatifs aux projets du grand-chancelier? Mais Frédéric d’Ahlefeld était, avec Musdoemon, le seul être vivant instruit du plan de son père, et, tout frivole qu’il était, il n’était pas assez insensé pour compromettre un pareil secret. D’ailleurs, il était en garnison à Munckholm, du moins le grand-chancelier le croyait. Ceux qui liront la suite de cette scène, sans être, plus que le comte d’Ahlefeld, à même de résoudre le problème, verront quelle probabilité on pouvait asseoir sur cette dernière hypothèse.

Une des qualités les plus éminentes du comte d’Ahlefeld, c’était la présence d’esprit. Quand il s’entendit si rudement nommer par le petit homme, il ne put réprimer un cri de surprise; mais en un clin d’oeil sa physionomie pâle et hautaine passa de l’expression de la crainte et de l’étonnement à celle du calme et de l’assurance.

— Eh bien, oui! dit-il, je veux être franc avec vous; je suis en effet le chancelier. Mais soyez franc aussi.

Un éclat de rire de l’autre l’interrompit.

— Est-ce que je me suis fait prier pour te dire mon nom et pour te dire le tien?

— Dites-moi avec la même sincérité comment vous avez su qui j’étais.

— Ne t’a-t-on donc pas dit que Han d’Islande voit à travers les montagnes?

Le comte voulut insister.

— Voyez en moi un ami.

— Ta main, comte d’Ahlefeld! dit le petit homme brutalement. Puis il regarda le ministre en face et s’écria: — Si nos deux âmes s’envolaient de nos corps en ce moment, je crois que Satan hésiterait avant de décider laquelle des deux est celle du monstre.

Le hautain seigneur se mordit les lèvres; mais, placé entre la crainte du brigand et la nécessité d’en faire son instrument, il ne manifesta pas son mécontentement.

— Ne vous jouez pas de vos intérêts; acceptez la direction de l’insurrection, et confiez-vous à ma reconnaissance.

— Chancelier de Norvège; tu comptes sur le succès de tes entreprises, comme une vieille femme qui songe à la robe qu’elle va se filer avec du chanvre dérobé, tandis que la griffe du chat embrouille sa quenouille.

— Encore une fois, réfléchissez avant de rejeter mes offres.

— Encore une fois, moi, brigand, je te dis à toi, grand-chancelier des deux royaumes: non!

— J’attendais une autre réponse, après l’éminent service que vous m’avez déjà rendu.

— Quel service? demanda le brigand.

— N’est-ce point par vous que le capitaine Dispolsen a été assassiné? répondit le chancelier.

— Cela se peut, comte d’Ahlefeld; je ne le connais pas. Quel est cet homme dont tu me parles?

— Quoi! est-ce que ce ne serait point dans vos mains par hasard que serait tombé le coffret de fer dont il était porteur?

Cette question parut fixer les souvenirs du brigand.

— Attendez, dit-il, je me rappelle en effet cet homme et sa cassette de fer. C’était aux grèves d’Urchtal.

— Du moins, reprit le chancelier, si vous pouviez me remettre cette cassette, ma reconnaissance serait sans bornes. Dites-moi, qu’est devenue cette cassette? car elle est en votre pouvoir.

Le noble ministre insistait si vivement sur cette demande que le brigand en parut frappé.

— Cette boîte de fer est donc d’une bien haute importance pour ta grâce, chancelier de Norvège?

— Oui.

— Quelle sera ma récompense si je te dis où tu la trouveras?

— Tout ce que vous pouvez désirer, mon cher Han d’Islande.

— Eh bien! je ne te le dirai pas.

— Allons, vous riez! Songez au service que vous me rendrez.

— J’y songe précisément.

— Je vous assurerai une fortune immense, je demanderai votre grâce au roi.

— Demande-moi plutôt la tienne, dit le brigand. Écoute-moi, grand-chancelier de Danemark et de Norvège, les tigres ne dévorent pas les hyènes. Je vais te laisser sortir vivant de ma présence, parce que tu es un méchant et que chaque instant de ta vie, chaque pensée de ton âme, enfante un malheur pour les hommes et un crime pour toi. Mais ne reviens plus, car je t’apprendrais que ma haine n’épargne personne, pas même les scélérats. Quant à ton capitaine, ne te flatte pas que ce soit pour toi que je l’ai assassiné; c’est son uniforme qui l’a condamné, ainsi que cet autre misérable, que je n’ai pas non plus égorgé pour te rendre service, je t’assure.

En parlant ainsi, il avait saisi le bras du noble comte et l’avait entraîné vers le corps couché dans l’ombre. Au moment où il achevait ses protestations, la lumière de la lanterne sourde tomba sur cet objet. C’était un cadavre déchiré et revêtu en effet d’un habit d’officier des arquebusiers de Munckholm. Le chancelier s’approcha avec un sentiment d’horreur. Tout à coup son regard s’arrêta sur le visage blême et sanglant du mort. Cette bouche bleue et entr’ouverte, ces cheveux hérissés, ces joues livides, ces yeux éteints, ne l’empêchèrent pas de le reconnaître. Il poussa un cri effrayant:

— Ciel! Frédéric! mon fils!

Qu’on n’en doute pas, les coeurs en apparence les plus desséchés et les plus endurcis recèlent toujours dans leur dernier repli quelque affection ignorée d’eux-mêmes, qui semble se cacher parmi des passions et des vices, comme un témoin mystérieux et un vengeur futur. On dirait qu’elle est là pour faire un jour connaître au crime la douleur. Elle attend son heure en silence. L’homme pervers la porte dans son sein et ne la sent pas, parce qu’aucune des afflictions ordinaires n’est assez forte pour pénétrer l’écorce épaisse d’égoïsme et de méchanceté dont elle est enveloppée; mais qu’une des rares et véritables douleurs de la vie se présente inattendue, elle plonge dans le gouffre de cette âme comme un glaive, et en touche le fond. Alors l’affection inconnue se dévoile, à l’infortuné méchant, d’autant plus violente qu’elle était plus ignorée, d’autant plus douloureuse qu’elle était moins sensible, parce que l’aiguillon du malheur a dû remuer le coeur bien plus profondément pour l’atteindre. La nature se réveille et se déchaîne; elle livre le misérable à des désolations inaccoutumées, à des supplices inouïs; il éprouve réunies en un instant toutes les souffrances dont il s’était joué durant tant d’années. Les tourments les plus opposés le déchirent à la fois. Son coeur, sur qui pèse une stupeur morne, se soulève en proie à des tortures convulsives. Il semble qu’il vienne d’entrevoir l’enfer dans sa vie, et qu’il se soit révélé à lui quelque chose de plus que le désespoir.

Le comte d’Ahlefeld aimait son fils sans le savoir. Nous disons son fils, parce qu’ignorant l’adultère de sa femme, Frédéric, l’héritier direct de son nom, avait ce titre à ses yeux. Le croyant toujours à Munckholm, il était bien loir de s’attendre à le retrouver dans la tourelle d’Arbar et à le retrouver mort! Cependant il était là, sanglant, décoloré; c’était lui, il n’en pouvait douter. On peut se figurer ce qui se passa en lui quand la certitude de l’aimer pénétra dans son âme inopinément avec la certitude de l’avoir perdu. Tous les sentiments que ces deux pages décrivent à peine fondirent sur son coeur ensemble comme des éclats de tonnerre. Foudroyé, en quelque sorte, par la surprise, l’épouvante et le désespoir, il se jeta en arrière et se tordit les bras, en répétant d’une voix lamentable:

— Mon fils! mon fils!

Le brigand se mit à rire; et ce fut une chose horrible que d’entendre ce rire se mêler aux gémissements d’un père devant le cadavre de son fils.

— Par mon aïeul Ingolphe! tu peux crier, comte d’Ahlefeld, tu ne le réveilleras pas.

Tout à coup son atroce visage se rembrunit, et il dit d’une voix sombre:

— Pleure ton fils, je venge le mien.

Un bruit de pas précipités dans la galerie l’interrompit; et au moment où il retournait la tête avec surprise, quatre hommes de haute taille, le sabre nu, s’élancèrent dans la salle; un cinquième, petit et replet, les suivait, portant une torche d’une main et une épée de l’autre. Il était enveloppé d’un manteau brun, pareil à celui du grand-chancelier.

— Seigneur! cria-t-il, nous vous avons entendu, nous accourons à votre secours.

Le lecteur a sans doute déjà reconnu Musdoemon et les quatre domestiques armés qui composaient la suite du comte.

Quand les rayons de la torche jetèrent leur lumière vive dans la salle, les cinq nouveaux-venus s’arrêtèrent frappés d’horreur; et c’était en effet un spectacle effrayant. D’un côté, les restes sanglants du loup; de l’autre, le cadavre défiguré du jeune officier; puis ce père aux yeux hagards, aux cris farouches, et près de lui l’épouvantable brigand, tournant vers les assaillants un visage hideux, où se peignait un étonnement intrépide.

En voyant ce renfort inattendu, l’idée de la vengeance s’empara du comte et le jeta du désespoir dans la rage.

— Mort à ce brigand! s’écria-t-il en tirant son épée. Il a assassiné mon fils! Mort! mort!

— Il a assassiné le seigneur Frédéric? dit Musdoemon, et la torche qu’il portait n’éclaira point la moindre altération sur son visage.

— Mort! mort! répéta le comte furieux.

Et ils s’élancèrent tous six sur le brigand. Celui-ci, surpris de cette brusque attaque, recula vers l’ouverture qui donnait sur le précipice, avec un rugissement féroce, qui annonçait plutôt la colère que la crainte.

Six épées étaient dirigées contre lui, et son regard était plus enflammé, et ses traits étaient plus menaçants qu’aucun de ceux des agresseurs. Il avait saisi sa hache de pierre, et, contraint par le nombre des assaillants à se borner à la défensive, il la faisait tourner dans sa main avec une telle rapidité, que le cercle de rotation le couvrait comme un bouclier. Une multitude d’étincelles jaillissaient avec un bruit clair de la pointe des épées, lorsqu’elles étaient heurtées par le tranchant de la hache; mais aucune lame ne touchait son corps. Toutefois, fatigué par son précédent combat avec le loup, il perdait insensiblement du terrain, et il se vit bientôt acculé à la porte ouverte sur l’abîme.

— Mes amis! cria le comte, du courage! jetons le monstre dans ce précipice.

— Avant que j'y tombe, les étoiles y tomberont, répliqua le brigand.

Cependant les agresseurs redoublèrent d'ardeur et d'audace en voyant le petit homme forcé de descendre une marche de l'escalier suspendu au-dessus du gouffre.

— Bien, poussons! reprit le grand-chancelier; il faudra bien qu'il tombe; encore un effort! — Misérable! tu as commis ton dernier crime. — Courage, compagnons!

Tandis que de sa main droite il continuait les terribles évolutions de sa hache, le brigand, sans répondre, prit de la gauche une trompe de corne suspendue à sa ceinture, et, la portant à ses lèvres, lui fit rendre à plusieurs reprises un son rauque et prolongé, auquel répondit soudain un rugissement parti de l'abîme.

Quelques instants après, au moment où le comte et ses satellites, serrant toujours le petit homme de près, s'applaudissaient de lui avoir fait descendre la seconde marche, la tête énorme d'un ours blanc parut au bout rompu de l'escalier. Frappés d'un étonnement mêlé d'effroi, les assaillants reculèrent.

L'ours acheva de gravir l'escalier lourdement en leur présentant sa gueule sanglante et ses dents acérées.

— Merci, mon brave Friend! cria le brigand.

Et profitant de la surprise des agresseurs, il se jeta sur le dos de son ours qui se mit à descendre à reculons, montrant toujours, sa tête menaçante aux ennemis de son maître.

Bientôt, revenus de leur première stupéfaction, ils purent voir l'ours, emportant le brigand hors de leur atteinte, descendre dans l'abîme, ainsi que sans doute il en était monté, en s'accrochant à de vieux troncs d'arbres et à des saillies de rochers. Ils voulurent faire rouler des quartiers de pierre sur lui; mais avant qu'ils eussent soulevé du sol une de ces vieilles masses de granit qui y dormaient depuis si longtemps, le brigand et son étrange monture avaient disparu dans une caverne.

XXVI

Non, non, ne rions plus. Voyez-vous, ce qui me paraissait si plaisanta aussi son côté sérieux, très sérieux, comme tout dans l’univers! Croyez-moi, ce mot hasard est un blasphème; rien sous le soleil n’arrive par hasard; et ne voyez-vous pas ici le but marqué par la providence?

LESSING. *Émilia Galotti.*

Oui, une raison profonde se dévoile souvent dans ce que les hommes nomment hasard. Il y a dans les événements comme une main mystérieuse qui leur marque, en quelque sorte, la voie et le but. On se récrie sur les caprices de la fortune, sur les bizarreries du sort, et tout à coup il sort de ce chaos des éclairs effrayants, ou des rayons merveilleux; et la sagesse humaine s’humilie devant les hautes leçons de la destinée.

Si, par exemple, quand Frédéric d’Ahlefeld étalait dans un salon somptueux, aux yeux des femmes de Copenhague, la magnificence de ses vêtements, la fatuité de son rang et la présomption de ses paroles; si quelque homme, instruit des choses de l’avenir, fût venu troubler la frivolité de ses pensées par de graves révélations; s’il lui eût dit qu’un jour ce brillant uniforme qui faisait son orgueil causerait sa perte; qu’un monstre à face humaine boirait son sang comme il buvait, lui, voluptueux insouciant, les vins de France et de Bohême; que ses cheveux, pour lesquels il n’avait pas assez d’essences et de parfums, balaieraient la poussière d’un antre de bêtes fauves; que ce bras, dont il offrait avec tant de grâce l’appui aux belles dames de Charlottenbourg, serait jeté à un ours comme un os de chevreuil à demi rongé; comment Frédéric eût-il répondu à ces lugubres prophéties? par un éclat de rire et une pirouette; et ce qu’il y a de plus effrayant, c’est que toutes les raisons humaines auraient approuvé l’insensé.

Examinons cette destinée de plus haut encore. — N’est-ce pas un mystère étrange que de voir le crime du comte et de la comtesse d’Ahlefeld retomber sur eux en châtiments? Ils ont ourdi une trame infâme contre la fille d’un captif; cette infortunée rencontre par hasard un protecteur qui juge nécessaire d’éloigner leur fils, chargé par eux d’exécuter leur abominable dessein. Ce fils, leur unique espérance, est envoyé loin du théâtre de sa séduction; et, à peine arrivé dans son nouveau séjour, un autre hasard vengeur lui fait rencontrer la mort. Ainsi c’est en voulant entraîner une jeune fille innocente et abhorrée dans le déshonneur, qu’ils ont poussé leur fils coupable et chéri dans le tombeau. C’est par leur faute que ces misérables sont devenus des malheureux.

XXVII

Ah! voilà notre belle comtesse! — Pardon, madame, si je ne puis aujourd’hui profiter de l’honneur de votre visite. Je suis en affaires. Une autre fois, chère comtesse, une autrefois; mais, pour aujourd’hui, je ne vous retiens pas plus longtemps ici.

Le prince à Orsina.

Le lendemain de sa visite à Munckholm, de grand matin, le gouverneur de Drontheim ordonna qu’on attelât sa voiture de voyage, espérant partir pendant que la comtesse d’Ahlefeld dormirait encore; mais nous avons déjà dit que le sommeil de la comtesse était léger.

Le général venait de signer les dernières recommandations qu’il adressait à l’évêque, aux mains duquel le gouvernement devait être remis par intérim. Il se levait, après avoir endossé sa redingote fourrée, pour sortir, quand l’huissier annonça la noble chancelière. Ce contre-temps déconcerta le vieux soldat, accoutumé à rire devant la mitraille de cent canons, mais non devant les artifices d’une femme. Il fit néanmoins d’assez bonne grâce ses adieux à la méchante comtesse, et ne laissa percer quelque humeur sur son visage que lorsqu’il la vit se pencher vers son oreille avec cet air astucieux qui voulait seulement paraître confidentiel.

— Eh bien, noble général, que vous a-t-il dit?

— Qui? Poël? il m’a dit que la voiture allait être prête.

— Je vous parle du prisonnier de Munckholm, général.

— Ah!

— A-t-il répondu à votre interrogatoire d’une manière satisfaisante?

— Mais… oui vraiment, dame comtesse, dit le gouverneur, dont on devine l’embarras.

— Avez-vous la preuve qu’il ait trempé dans le complot des mineurs?

Une exclamation échappa à Levin.

— Noble dame, il est innocent!

Il s’arrêta tout court, car il venait d’exprimer une conviction de son coeur, et non de son esprit.

— Il est innocent! répéta la comtesse d’un air consterné, quoique incrédule; car elle tremblait qu’en effet Schumacker n’eût démontré au général cette innocence qu’il était si important aux intérêts du grand-chancelier de noircir.

Le gouverneur avait eu le temps de réfléchir; il répondit à l'insistance de la grande-chancelière d'un ton de voix qui la rassura, parce qu'il décelait le doute et le trouble:

— Innocent… — Oui, — si vous voulez…

— Si je veux, seigneur général!

Et la méchante femme éclata de rire.

Ce rire blessa le gouverneur.

— Noble comtesse, dit-il, vous permettrez que je ne rende compte de mon entretien avec l'ex-grand-chancelier qu'au vice-roi.

Alors il salua profondément, et descendit dans la cour où l'attendait sa voiture.

— Oui, se disait la comtesse d'Ahlefeld rentrée dans ses appartements, pars, chevalier errant, que ton absence nous délivre du protecteur de nos ennemis. Va, ton départ est le signal du retour de mon Frédéric.

— Je vous demande un peu, oser envoyer le plus joli cavalier de Copenhague dans ces horribles montagnes! Heureusement il ne me sera pas difficile maintenant d'obtenir son rappel.

À cette pensée, elle s'adressa à sa suivante favorite.

— Ma chère Lisbeth, vous ferez venir de Berghen deux douzaines de ces petits peignes que nos élégants portent dans leurs cheveux; vous vous informerez du nouveau roman de la fameuse Scudéry, et vous veillerez à ce qu'on lave régulièrement tous les matins dans l'eau de rosé la guenon de mon cher Frédéric.

— Quoi! ma gracieuse maîtresse, demanda Lisbeth, est-ce que le seigneur Frédéric peut revenir?

— Oui, vraiment; et, pour qu'il ait quelque plaisir à me revoir, il faut faire tout ce qu'il demande; je veux lui ménager une surprise à son retour.

Pauvre mère!

XXVIII

… Bernard suit en courant les rives de l’Arlança. Il est semblable à un lion qui sort de son antre, cherchant les chasseurs, et déterminé à les vaincre ou à mourir.

Il est parti, l’espagnol vaillant et déterminé?

C’est d’un pas rapide, une grosse lance au poing, dans laquelle il met ses espérances, que Bernard suit les ruines de l’Arlança.

Romances espagnoles.

Ordener, descendu de la tour d’où il avait aperçu le fanal de Munckholm, s’était longtemps fatigué à chercher de tous côtés son pauvre guide Benignus Spiagudry. Longtemps il l’avait appelé, et l’écho brisé des ruines avait seul répondu. Surpris, mais non effrayé de cette inconcevable disparition, il l’avait attribuée à quelque terreur panique du craintif concierge, et, après s’être généreusement reproché de l’avoir quitté quelques instants, il s’était décidé à passer la nuit sur le rocher d’Oëlmoe pour lui donner le temps de revenir. Alors il prit quelque nourriture, et s’enveloppant de son manteau, il se coucha près du foyer qui s’éteignait, déposa un baiser sur la boucle de cheveux d’Éthel, et ne tarda pas à s’endormir; car on peut dormir avec un coeur inquiet, quand la conscience est tranquille.

Au soleil levant, il était debout, mais il ne retrouva de Spiagudry que sa besace et son manteau laissés dans la tour, ce qui semblait l’indice d’une fuite très précipitée. Alors, désespérant de le revoir, du moins sur le rocher d’Oëlmoe, il se détermina à partir sans lui, car c’était le lendemain qu’il fallait atteindre Han d’Islande à Walderhog.

On a appris dans les premiers chapitres de cet ouvrage qu’Ordener s’était de bonne heure accoutumé aux fatigues d’une vie errante et aventurière. Ayant déjà plusieurs fois parcouru le nord de la Norvège, il n’avait plus besoin de guide, maintenant qu’il savait où trouver le brigand. Il dirigea donc vers le nord-ouest son voyage solitaire, dans lequel il n’eut plus de Benignus Spiagudry pour lui dire combien de quartz ou de spath renfermait chaque colline, quelle tradition s’attachait à chaque masure, et si tel ou tel déchirement du sol provenait d’un courant du déluge ou de quelque ancienne commotion volcanique.

Il marcha un jour entier à travers ces montagnes qui, partant comme des côtes, de distance en distance, de la chaîne principale dont la Norvège est traversée dans sa longueur, s'étendent en s'abaissant graduellement jusqu'à la mer, où elles se plongent; de sorte que tous les rivages de ce pays ne présentent qu'une succession de promontoires et de golfes, et tout l'intérieur des terres qu'une suite de montagnes et de vallées, disposition singulière du sol, qui a fait comparer la Norvège à la grande arête d'un poisson.

Ce n'était point une chose commode que de voyager dans ce pays. Tantôt il fallait suivre pour chemin le lit pierreux d'un torrent desséché, tantôt franchir sur des ponts tremblants de troncs d'arbres les chemins mêmes, que des torrents nés de la veille venaient de choisir pour lits.

Au reste, Ordener cheminait quelquefois des heures entières sans être averti de la présence de l'homme dans ces lieux incultes autrement que par l'apparition intermittente et alternative des ailes d'un moulin à vent au sommet d'une colline, ou par le bruit d'une forge lointaine, dont la fumée se courbait au gré de l'air comme un panache noir.

De loin en loin il rencontrait un paysan monté sur un petit cheval au poil gris, à la tête basse, moins sauvage encore que son maître, ou un marchand de pelleteries assis dans son traîneau attelé de deux rennes, derrière lequel était attachée une longue corde, dont les noeuds nombreux, en bondissant sur les pierres de la route, étaient destinés à effrayer les loups.

Si alors Ordener demandait au marchand le chemin de la grotte de Walderhog: — Marchez toujours au nord-ouest, vous trouverez le village d'Hervalyn, vous franchirez la ravine de Dodlysax, et cette nuit vous pourrez atteindre Surb, qui n'est qu'à deux milles de Walderhog. — Ainsi répondait avec indifférence le commerçant nomade, instruit seulement des noms et de la position des lieux que son métier lui faisait parcourir.

Si Ordener adressait la même question au paysan, celui-ci, imbu profondément des traditions du pays et des contes du foyer, secouait plusieurs fois la tête et arrêtait sa monture grise en disant: — Walderhog! la caverne de Walderhog! les pierres y chantent, les os y dansent, et le démon d'Islande y habite; ce n'est sans doute point à la caverne de Walderhog que votre courtoisie veut aller?

— Si vraiment, répondait Ordener.

— C'est donc que votre courtoisie a perdu sa mère, ou que le feu a brûlé sa ferme, ou que le voisin lui a volé son cochon gras?

— Non, en vérité, reprenait le jeune homme.

— Alors, c’est qu’un magicien a jeté un sort sur l’esprit de sa courtoisie.

— Bonhomme, je vous demande le chemin de Walderhog.

— C’est à cette demande que je réponds, seigneur. Adieu donc. Toujours au nord! je sais bien comment vous irez, mais j’ignore comment vous reviendrez.

Et le paysan s’éloignait avec un signe de croix.

À la triste monotonie de cette route se joignait l’incommodité d’une pluie fine et pénétrante qui avait envahi le ciel vers le milieu du jour et accroissait les difficultés du chemin. Nul oiseau n’osait se hasarder dans l’air, et Ordener, glacé sous son manteau, ne voyait voler au-dessus de sa tête que l’autour, le gerfaut ou le faucon-pêcheur, qui, au bruit de son passage, s’envolait brusquement des roseaux d’un étang avec un poisson dans ses griffes.

Il était nuit close quand le jeune voyageur, après avoir franchi le bois de trembles et de bouleaux qui est adossé à la ravine de Dodlysax, arriva à ce hameau de Surb dans lequel Spiagudry, si le lecteur se le rappelle, voulait fixer son quartier général. L’odeur de goudron et la fumée de charbon de terre avertirent Ordener qu’il approchait d’une peuplade de pêcheurs. Il s’avança vers la première hutte que l’ombre lui permit de distinguer. L’entrée, basse et étroite, en était fermée, suivant l’usage norvégien, par une grande peau de poisson transparente, colorée en ce moment par la lumière rouge et tremblante d’un foyer allumé. Il frappa sur l’encadrement de bois de la porte, en criant:

— C’est un voyageur!

— Entrez, entrez, répondit une voix de l’intérieur.

Au même instant une main officieuse leva la peau de poisson, et Ordener fut introduit dans l’habitacle conique d’un pêcheur des côtes de Norvège. C’était une sorte de tente ronde de bois et de terre, au milieu de laquelle brillait un feu où la flamme pourpre de la tourbe se mariait à la clarté blanche du sapin. Près de ce feu le pêcheur, sa femme et deux enfants vêtus de haillons étaient assis devant une table chargée d’assiettes de bois et de vases de terre. Du côté opposé, parmi des filets et des rames, deux rennes endormis étaient couchés sur un lit de feuilles et de peaux, dont le prolongement semblait destiné à recevoir le sommeil des maîtres du logis et des hôtes qu’il plairait au ciel de leur amener. Ce n’était pas du premier coup d’oeil que l’on pouvait distinguer cette disposition intérieure de la hutte, car une fumée âcre et pesante qui s'échappait avec peine par une ouverture pratiquée à la sommité du cône enveloppait tous ces objets d'un voile épais et mobile.

À peine Ordener eut-il franchi le seuil, que le pêcheur et sa femme se levèrent et lui rendirent son salut d'un air ouvert et bienveillant. Les paysans norvégiens aiment les voyageurs, autant peut-être par le sentiment de curiosité, si vif chez eux, que par leur penchant naturel à l'hospitalité.

— Seigneur, dit le pêcheur, vous devez avoir faim et froid, voici du feu pour sécher votre manteau et d'excellent rindebrod pour apaiser votre appétit. Votre courtoisie daignera ensuite nous dire qui elle est, d'où elle vient, où elle va, et quelles sont les histoires que racontent les vieilles femmes de son pays.

— Oui, seigneur, ajouta la femme, et vous pourrez joindre à ce rindebrod excellent, comme le dit mon seigneur et mari, un morceau délicieux de stock-fish salé, assaisonné d'huile de baleine. — Asseyez-vous, seigneur étranger.

— Et si votre courtoisie n'aime pas la chère de saint Usulph, [Footnote: Patron des pêcheurs.] reprit l'homme, qu'elle veuille bien prendre patience un moment, je lui réponds qu'elle mangera un quartier de chevreuil merveilleux ou au moins une aile de faisan royal. Nous attendons le retour du plus fin chasseur qui soit dans les trois provinces. N'est-il pas vrai, ma bonne Maase?

Maase, nom que le pêcheur donnait à sa femme, est un mot norvégien qui signifie *mouette*. La femme n'en parut nullement choquée, soit que ce fût son nom véritable, soit que ce fût un surnom de tendresse.

— Le meilleur chasseur! je le crois, certes, répondit-elle avec emphase. C'est mon frère, le fameux Kennybol! Dieu bénisse ses courses! Il est venu passer quelques jours avec nous, et vous pourrez, seigneur étranger, boire dans la même tasse que lui quelques coups de cette bonne bière. C'est un voyageur comme vous.

— Grand merci, ma brave hôtesse, dit Ordener en souriant; mais je serai forcé de me contenter de votre appétissant stock-fish et d'un morceau de ce rindebrod. Je n'aurai pas le loisir d'attendre votre frère, le fameux chasseur. Il faut que je reparte sur-le-champ.

La bonne Maase, à la fois contrariée du prompt départ de l'étranger et flattée des éloges qu'il donnait à son stock-fish et à son frère, s'écria:

— Vous êtes bien bon, seigneur. Mais comment! vous allez nous quitter si tôt?

— Il le faut.

— Vous hasarder clans ces montagnes à cette heure et par un temps semblable?

— C’est pour une affaire importante. Ces réponses du jeune homme piquaient la curiosité native de ses hôtes autant qu’elles excitaient leur étonnement.

Le pêcheur se leva et dit:

— Vous êtes chez Christophe Buldus Braall, pêcheur, du hameau de Surb.

La femme ajouta:

— Maase Kennybol est sa femme et sa servante.

Quand les paysans norvégiens voulaient demander poliment son nom à un étranger, leur usage était de lui dire le leur.

Ordener répondit:

— Et moi, je suis un voyageur qui n’est sûr ni du nom qu’il porte, ni du chemin qu’il suit.

Cette réponse singulière ne parut pas satisfaire le pêcheur Braall.

— Par la couronne de Gormon le Vieux, dit-il, je croyais qu’il n’y avait en ce moment en Norvège qu’un seul homme qui ne fût pas sûr de son nom. C’est le noble baron de Thorvick, qui va s’appeler maintenant, assure-t-on, le comte de Danneskiold, à cause de son glorieux mariage avec la fille du chancelier. C’est du moins, ma bonne Maase, la plus fraîche nouvelle que j’aie apportée de Drontheim. — Je vous félicite, seigneur étranger, de cette conformité avec le fils du vice-roi, le grand comte Guldenlew.

— Puisque votre courtoisie, ajouta la femme avec un visage enflammé de curiosité, paraît ne pouvoir rien nous dire de ce qui lui touche, ne pourrait-elle pas nous apprendre quelque chose de ce qui se passe en ce moment; par exemple, de ce fameux mariage dont mon seigneur et mari a recueilli la nouvelle?

— Oui, reprit celui-ci d’un air important, c’est ce qu’il y a de plus nouveau. Avant un mois, le fils du vice-roi épouse la fille du grand-chancelier.

— J’en doute, dit Ordener.

— Vous en doutez, seigneur! Je puis vous affirmer, moi, que la chose est sûre. Je la tiens de bonne source. Celui qui m’en a fait part l’a appris du seigneur Poël, le domestique favori du noble baron de Thorvick, c’est-à-dire du noble comte de Danneskiold. Est-ce qu’un orage aurait troublé l’eau, depuis six jours? Cette grande union serait-elle rompue?

— Je le crois, répondit le jeune homme en souriant.

— S’il en est ainsi, seigneur, j’avais tort. Il ne faut pas allumer le feu pour frire le poisson avant que le filet ne se soit refermé sur lui. Mais cette rupture est-elle certaine? de qui en tenez-vous la nouvelle?

— De personne, dit Ordener. C’est moi qui arrange cela ainsi dans ma tête.

À ces mots naïfs, le pêcheur ne put s’empêcher de déroger à la courtoisie norvégienne par un long éclat de rire.

— Mille pardons, seigneur. Mais il est aisé de voir que vous êtes en effet un voyageur, et sans doute un étranger. Vous imaginez-vous donc que les événements suivront vos caprices, et que le temps se rembrunira ou s’éclaircira selon votre volonté?

Ici, le pêcheur, versé dans les affaires nationales, comme tous les pasyans norvégiens, se mit à expliquer à Ordener pour quelles raisons ce mariage ne pouvait manquer; il était nécessaire aux intérêts de la famille d’Ahlefeld; le vice-roi ne pouvait le refuser au roi, qui le désirait; on affirmait en outre qu’une passion véritable unissait les deux futurs époux. En un mot, le pêcheur Braall ne doutait pas que cette alliance n’eût lieu; il eût voulu être aussi sûr de tuer, le lendemain, le maudit chien de mer qui infestait l’étang de Master-Bick.

Ordener se sentait peu disposé à soutenir une conversation politique avec un aussi rude homme d’état, quand la survenue d’un nouveau personnage vint le tirer d’embarras.

— C’est lui, c’est mon frère! s’écria la vieille Maase.

Et il ne fallait rien moins que l’arrivée d’un frère pour l’arracher de l’admiration contemplative avec laquelle elle écoutait les longues paroles de son mari.

Celui-ci, pendant que les deux enfants se jetaient bruyamment au cou de leur oncle, lui tendit la main gravement.

— Sois le bienvenu, mon frère.

Puis, se tournant vers Ordener:

— Seigneur, c’est notre frère, le renommé chasseur Kennybol, des montagnes de Kole.

— Je vous salue tous cordialement, dit le montagnard en ôtant son bonnet de peau d’ours. Frère, je fais mauvaise chasse sur vos côtes, comme tu ferais sans doute mauvaise pêche dans nos montagnes. Je crois que je remplirais encore plutôt ma gibecière en cherchant des lutins et des follets dans les forêts brumeuses de la reine Mab. Soeur Maase, vous êtes la première mouette à laquelle j’ai pu dire bonjour de près aujourd’hui. Tenez, amis, Dieu vous maintienne en paix! c’est pour ce méchant coq de bruyère que le premier chasseur du Drontheimhus a couru les clairières jusqu’à cette heure et par ce temps.

En parlant ainsi, il tira de sa carnassière et déposa sur la table une gelinotte blanche, en affirmant que cette bête maigre n’était pas digne d’un coup de mousquet.

— Mais, ajouta-t-il entre ses dents, fidèle arquebuse de Kennybol, tu chasseras bientôt de plus gros gibier. Si tu n’abats plus des robes de chamois ou d’élan, tu auras à percer des casaques vertes et des justaucorps rouges.

Ces mots, à demi entendus, frappèrent la curieuse Maase.

— Hein! demanda-t-elle, que dites-vous donc là, mon bon frère?

— Je dis qu’il y a toujours un farfadet qui danse sous la langue des femmes.

— Tu as raison, frère Kennybol, s’écria le pêcheur. Ces filles d’Eve sont toutes curieuses comme leur mère. — Ne parlais-tu pas de casaques vertes?

— Frère Braall, répliqua le chasseur d’un air d’humeur, je ne confie mes secrets qu’à mon mousquet, parce que je suis sûr qu’il ne les répétera pas.

— On parle dans le village, poursuivit intrépidement le pêcheur, d’une révolte des mineurs. Frère, saurais-tu quelque chose de cela?

Le montagnard reprit son bonnet, et l’enfonça sur ses yeux en jetant un regard oblique sur l’étranger; puis il se baissa vers le pêcheur, et dit d’une voix brève et basse:

— Silence!

Celui-ci secoua la tête à plusieurs reprises.

— Frère Kennybol, le poisson a beau être muet, il n’en tombe pas moins dans la nasse.

Il se fit un moment de silence. Les deux frères se regardaient d’un air expressif; les enfants tiraient les plumes de la gelinotte déposée sur la table; la bonne femme écoutait ce qu’on ne disait pas; et Ordener observait.

— Si vous faites maigre chère aujourd’hui, dit tout à coup le chasseur, cherchant visiblement à changer de conversation, il n’en sera pas de même demain. Frère Braall, tu peux pêcher le roi des poissons, je te promets de l’huile d’ours pour l’assaisonner.

— De l’huile d’ours! s’écria Maase. Est-ce qu’on a vu un ours dans les environs? — Patrick, Regner, mes enfants, je vous défends de sortir de cette cabane. — Un ours!

— Tranquillisez-vous, soeur, vous n’aurez plus à le craindre demain.

Oui, c’est un ours en effet que j’ai aperçu à deux milles environ de Surb; un ours blanc. Il paraissait emporter un homme, ou un animal plutôt.

— Mais non, ce pouvait être un chevrier qu’il enlevait, car les chevriers se vêtissent de peaux de bêtes. — Au reste, l’éloignement ne m’a pas permis de distinguer. Ce qui m’a étonné, c’est qu’il portait sa proie sur son dos et non entre ses dents.

— Vraiment, frère?

— Oui, et il fallait que l’animal fût mort, car il ne faisait aucun mouvement pour se défendre.

— Mais, demanda judicieusement le pêcheur, s’il était mort, comment était-il soutenu sur le dos de l’ours?

— C’est ce que je n’ai pu comprendre. Au reste, il aura fait le dernier repas de l’ours. En entrant dans ce village je viens de prévenir six bons compagnons; et demain, soeur Maase, je vous apporterai la plus belle fourrure blanche qui ait jamais couru sur les neiges d’une montagne.

— Prenez garde, frère, dit la femme, vous avez remarqué en effet de singulières choses. Cet ours est peut-être le diable.

— Êtes-vous folle? interrompit le montagnard en riant; le diable se changer en ours! En chat, en singe, à la bonne heure, cela s’est vu; mais en ours! ah! par saint Eldon l’exorciseur, vous feriez pitié à un enfant ou à une vieille femme avec vos superstitions!

La pauvre femme baissa la tête.

— Frère, vous étiez mon seigneur avant que mon vénéré mari jetât les yeux sur moi, agissez comme votre ange gardien vous inspirera d’agir.

— Mais, demanda le pêcheur au montagnard, de quel côté as-tu donc rencontré cet ours?

— Dans la direction du Smiasen à Walderhog.

— Walderhog! dit la femme avec un signe de croix.

— Walderhog! répéta Ordener.

— Mais, mon frère, reprit le pêcheur, ce n’est pas toi, j’espère, qui te dirigeais vers cette grotte de Walderhog?

— Moi! Dieu m’en garde! C’était l’ours.

— Est-ce que vous irez le chercher là demain? interrompit Maase avec terreur.

— Non vraiment; comment voulez-vous, mes amis, qu’un ours même ose prendre pour retraite une caverne où…?

Il s’arrêta, et tous trois firent un signe de croix.

— Tu as raison, répondit le pêcheur, il y a un instinct qui avertit les bétes de ces choses-là.

— Mes bons hôtes, dit Ordener, qu’y a-t-il donc de si effrayant dans cette grotte de Walderhog?

Ils se regardèrent tous trois avec un étonnement stupide, comme s’ils ne comprenaient pas une pareille question.

— C’est là qu’est le tombeau du roi Walder? ajouta le jeune homme.

— Oui, reprit la femme, un tombeau de pierre qui chante.

— Et ce n’est pas tout, dit le pêcheur.

— Non, continua-t-elle, la nuit on y a vu danser les os des trépassés.

— Et ce n’est pas tout, dit le montagnard.

Tous se turent, comme s’ils n’osaient poursuivre.

— Eh bien, demanda Ordener, qu’y a-t-il donc encore de surnaturel?

— Jeune homme, dit gravement le montagnard, il ne faut pas parler si légèrement quand vous voyez frissonner un vieux loup gris tel que moi.

Le jeune homme répondit en souriant doucement:

— J’aurais pourtant voulu savoir tout ce qui se passe de merveilleux dans cette grotte de Walderhog; car c’est là précisément que je vais.

Ces mots pétrifièrent de terreur les trois auditeurs.

— À Walderhog! ciel! vous allez à Walderhog?

— Et il dit cela, reprit le pêcheur, comme on dirait: Je vais à Loevig vendre ma morue! ou à la clairière de Ralph pêcher le hareng! — A Walderhog, grand Dieu!

— Malheureux jeune homme! s’écriait la femme, vous êtes donc né sans ange gardien? aucun saint du ciel n’est donc votre patron? Hélas! cela est trop vrai, puisque vous paraissez ne savoir même, pas votre nom.

— Et quel motif, interrompit le montagnard, peut donc conduire votre courtoisie à cet effroyable lieu?

— J’ai quelque chose à demander à quelqu’un, répondit Ordener.

L’étonnement des trois hôtes redoublait avec leur curiosité.

— Écoutez, seigneur étranger; vous paraissez ne pas bien connaître ce pays; votre courtoisie se trompe sans doute, ce ne peut être à Walderhog qu’elle veut aller.

— D’ailleurs, ajouta le montagnard, si elle veut parler à quelque être humain, elle n’y trouverait personne.

— Que le démon, reprit la femme.

— Le démon! quel démon?

— Oui, continua-t-elle, celui pour qui chante le tombeau et dansent les trépassés.

— Vous ne savez donc pas, seigneur, dit le pêcheur en baissant la voix et en se rapprochant d’Ordener, vous ne savez donc pas que la grotte de Walderhog est la demeure ordinaire de….

La femme l’arrêta.

— Mon seigneur et mari, ne prononcez pas ce nom, il porte malheur.

— La demeure de qui? demanda Ordener.

— D’un Belzébuth incarné, dit Kennybol.

— En vérité, mes braves hôtes, je ne sais ce que vous voulez dire. On m’avait bien appris que Walderhog était habité par Han d’Islande.

Un triple cri d’effroi s’éleva dans la chaumière.

— Eh bien! — Vous le saviez! — C’est ce démon!

La femme baissa sa coiffe de bure en attestant tous les saints que ce n’était pas elle qui avait prononcé ce nom.

Quand le pêcheur fut un peu revenu de sa stupéfaction, il regarda fixement Ordener, comme s’il y avait en ce jeune homme quelque chose qu’il ne pouvait comprendre.

— Je croyais, seigneur voyageur, quand j’aurais dû vivre une vie encore plus longue que celle de mon père, qui est mort âgé de cent vingt ans, n’avoir jamais à indiquer le chemin de Walderhog à une créature humaine douée de sa raison et croyant en Dieu.

— Sans doute, s’écria Maase, mais sa courtoisie n’ira pas à cette grotte maudite; car, pour y mettre le pied, il faut vouloir faire un pacte avec le diable!

— J’irai, mes bons hôtes, et le plus grand service que vous pourrez me rendre sera de m’indiquer le plus court chemin.

— Le plus court pour aller où vous voulez aller, dit le pêcheur, c’est de vous précipiter du haut du rocher le plus voisin dans le torrent le plus proche.

— Est-ce donc arriver au même but, demanda Ordener d’une voix tranquille, que de préférer une mort stérile à un danger utile?

Braall secoua la tête, tandis que son frère attachait sur le jeune aventurier un regard scrutateur.

— Je comprends, s’écria tout à coup le pêcheur, vous voulez gagner les mille écus royaux que le haut syndic promet pour la tête de ce démon d’Islande.

Ordener sourit.

— Jeune seigneur, continua le pêcheur avec émotion, croyez-moi, renoncez à ce projet. Je suis pauvre et vieux, et je ne donnerais pas ce qui me reste de vie pour vos mille écus royaux, ne me restât-il qu’un jour.

L’oeil suppliant et compatissant de la femme épiait l’effet que produirait sur le jeune seigneur la prière de son mari. Ordener se hâta de répondre:

— C’est un intérêt plus grand qui me fait chercher ce brigand que vous appelez un démon; c’est pour d’autres que pour moi…

Le montagnard, qui n’avait pas quitté Ordener du regard, l’interrompit.

— Je vous comprends à mon tour, je sais pourquoi vous cherchez le démon islandais.

— Je veux le forcer à combattre, dit le jeune homme.

— C’est cela, dit Kennybol, vous êtes chargé de grands intérêts, n’est-ce pas?

— Je viens de le dire.

Le montagnard s’approcha du jeune homme d’un air d’intelligence, et ce ne fut pas sans un extrême étonnement qu’Ordener l’entendit lui dire à l’oreille, à demi-voix:

— C’est pour le comte Schumacker de Griffenfeld, n’est-il pas vrai?

— Brave homme, s’écria-t-il, comment savez-vous?…

Et en effet, il lui était difficile de s’expliquer comment un montagnard norvégien pouvait savoir un secret qu’il n’avait confié à personne, pas même au général Levin.

Kennybol se pencha vers lui.

— Je vous souhaite bon succès, reprit-il du même ton mystérieux; vous êtes un noble jeune homme de servir ainsi les opprimés.

La surprise d’Ordener était si grande qu’il trouvait à peine des paroles pour demander au montagnard comment il était instruit du but de son voyage.

— Silence, dit Kennybol en mettant son doigt sur la bouche, j’espère que vous obtiendrez de l’habitant de Walderhog ce que vous désirez; mon bras est dévoué, comme le vôtre, au prisonnier de Munckholm.

Puis élevant la voix, avant qu’Ordener eût pu répliquer:

— Frère, bonne soeur Maase, poursuivit-il, recevez ce respectable jeune homme comme un frère de plus. Allons, je crois que le souper est prêt.

— Quoi! interrompit Maase, vous avez sans doute décidé sa courtoisie à renoncer à son projet de visiter le démon?

— Soeur, priez pour qu’il ne lui arrive point de mal. C’est un noble et digne jeune homme. Allons, brave seigneur, prenez quelque nourriture et quelque repos avec nous. Demain je vous montrerai votre chemin, et nous irons à la recherche, vous de votre diable, et moi de mon ours.

XXIX

Compagnon, eh! compagnon, de quel compagnon es-tu donc né? de quel enfant des hommes es-tu provenu pour oser ainsi attaquer Fafnir?

Edda

Le premier rayon du soleil levant rougissait à peine la plus haute cime des rochers qui bordent la mer, lorsqu’un pêcheur, qui était venu avant l’aube jeter ses filets à quelques portées d’arquebuse du rivage, en face de l’entrée de la grotte de Walderhog, vit comme une figure enveloppée d’un manteau, ou d’un linceul, descendre le long des roches et disparaître sous la voûte formidable de la caverne. Frappé de terreur, il recommanda sa barque et son âme à saint Usuph, et courut raconter à sa famille effrayée qu’il avait aperçu l’un des spectres qui habitent le palais de Han d’Islande rentrer dans la grotte au lever du jour.

Ce spectre, l’entretien et l’effroi futur des longues veillées d’hiver, c’était Ordener, le noble fils du vice-roi de Norvège, qui, tandis que les deux royaumes le croyaient livré à de doux soins auprès de son altière fiancée, venait, seul et inconnu, exposer sa vie pour celle à qui il avait donné son coeur et son avenir, pour la fille d’un proscrit.

De tristes présages, de sinistres prédictions l’avaient accompagné à ce but de son voyage; il venait de quitter la famille du pêcheur, et en lui disant adieu la bonne Maase s’était mise en prières pour lui devant le seuil de sa porte. Le montagnard Kennybol et ses six compagnons, qui lui avaient indiqué le chemin, s’étaient séparés de lui à un demi-mille de Walderhog, et ces intrépides chasseurs, qui allaient en riant affronter un ours, avaient longtemps attaché un oeil d’épouvante sur le sentier que suivait l’aventureux voyageur.

Le jeune homme entra dans la grotte de Walderhog, comme on entre dans un port longtemps désiré. Il éprouvait une joie céleste en songeant qu’il allait accomplir l’objet de sa vie, et que dans quelques instants peut-être il aurait donné tout son sang pour son Éthel. Près d’attaquer un brigand redouté d’une province entière, un monstre, un démon peut-être, ce n’était point cette effrayante figure qui apparaissait à son imagination; il ne voyait que l’image de la douce vierge captive, priant pour lui sans doute devant l’autel de sa prison. S’il se fût dévoué pour toute autre qu’elle, il aurait pu songer un moment, pour les mépriser, aux périls qu’il venait chercher de si loin; mais est-ce qu’une réflexion trouve place dans un jeune coeur au moment où il bat de la double exaltation d’un beau dévouement et d’un noble amour?

Il s’avança, la tête haute, sous la voûte sonore dont les mille échos multipliaient le bruit de ses pas, sans même jeter un coup d’oeil sur les stalactites, sur les basaltes séculaires qui pendaient au-dessus de sa tête parmi des cônes de mousses, de lierre et de lichen; assemblages confus de formes bizarres, dont la crédulité superstitieuse des campagnards norvégiens avait fait plus d’une fois des foules de démons ou des processions de fantômes.

Il passa avec la même indifférence devant ce tombeau du roi Walder, auquel se rattachaient tant de traditions lugubres, et il n’entendit d’autre voix que les longs sifflements de la bise sous ces funèbres galeries.

Il continua sa marche sous de tortueuses arcades, éclairées faiblement par des crevasses à demi obstruées d’herbes et de bruyères. Son pied heurtait souvent je ne sais quelles ruines, qui roulaient sur le roc avec un son creux, et présentaient dans l’ombre à ses yeux des apparences de crânes brisés, ou de longues rangées de dents blanches et dépouillées jusqu’à leurs racines.

Mais aucune terreur ne montait jusqu’à son âme. Il s’étonnait seulement de n’avoir pas encore rencontré le formidable habitant de cette horrible grotte.

Il arriva dans une sorte de salle ronde, naturellement creusée dans le flanc du rocher. Là aboutissait la route souterraine qu’il avait suivie, et les parois de la salle n’offraient plus d’autre ouverture que de larges fentes, à travers lesquelles on apercevait les montagnes et les forêts extérieures.

Surpris d’avoir ainsi infructueusement parcouru toute la fatale caverne, il commença à désespérer de rencontrer le brigand. Un monument de forme singulière, situé au milieu de la salle souterraine, appela son attention. Trois pierres longues et massives, posées debout sur le sol, en soutenaient une quatrième, large et carrée, comme trois piliers portent un toit. Sous cette espèce de trépied gigantesque s’élevait une sorte d’autel, formé également d’un seul quartier de granit, et percé circulairement au milieu de sa face supérieure. Ordener reconnut une de ces colossales constructions druidiques qu’il avait souvent observées dans ses voyages en Norvège, et dont les modèles les plus étonnants peut-être sont, en France, les monuments de

Lokmariaker et de Carnac. Édifices étranges qui ont vieilli, posés sur la terre comme des tentes d'un jour, et où la solidité naît de la seule pesanteur.

Le jeune homme, livré à ses rêveries, s'appuya machinalement sur cet autel, dont la bouche de pierre était brunie, tant elle avait bu profondément le sang des victimes humaines.

Tout à coup il tressaillit; une voix, qui semblait sortir de la pierre, avait frappé son oreille:

— Jeune homme, c'est avec des pieds qui touchent au sépulcre que tu es venu dans ce lieu.

Il se leva brusquement, et sa main se jeta sur son sabre, tandis qu'un écho, faible comme la voix d'un mort, répétait distinctement dans les profondeurs de la grotte:

— Jeune homme, c'est avec des pieds qui touchent au sépulcre que tu es venu dans ce lieu.

En ce moment, une tête effroyable se leva de l'autre côté de l'autel druidique, avec des cheveux rouges et un rire atroce.

— Jeune homme, répéta-t-elle, oui, tu es venu dans ce lieu avec des pieds qui touchent au sépulcre.

— Et avec une main qui touche une épée, répondit le jeune homme sans s'émouvoir.

Le monstre sortit entièrement de dessous l'autel, et montra ses membres trapus et nerveux, ses vêtements sauvages et sanglants, ses mains crochues et sa lourde hache de pierre.

— C'est moi, dit-il avec un grondement de bête fauve.

— C'est moi, répondit Ordener.

— Je t'attendais.

— Je faisais plus, repartit l'intrépide jeune homme, je te cherchais.

Le brigand croisa les bras.

— Sais-tu qui je suis?

— Oui.

— Et tu n'as point de peur?

— Je n'en ai plus.

— Tu as donc éprouvé une crainte en venant ici?

Et le monstre balançait sa tête d'un air triomphant.

— Celle de ne pas te rencontrer.

— Tu me braves, et tes pas viennent de trébucher contre des cadavres humains!

— Demain, peut-être, ils trébucheront contre le tien.

Un tremblement de colère saisit le petit homme. Ordener, immobile, conservait son attitude calme et fière.

— Prends garde! murmura le brigand; je vais fondre sur toi, comme la grêle de Norvège sur un parasol.

— Je ne voudrais point d’autre bouclier contre toi.

On eût dit qu’il y avait dans le regard d’Ordener quelque chose qui dominait le monstre. Il se mit à arracher avec ses ongles les poils de son manteau, comme un tigre qui dévore l’herbe avant de s’élancer sur sa proie.

— Tu m’apprends ce que c’est que la pitié, dit-il.

— Et à moi, ce que c’est que le mépris.

— Enfant, ta voix est douce, ton visage est frais, comme la voix et le visage d’une jeune fille; — quelle mort veux-tu de moi?

— La tienne.

Le petit homme rit.

— Tu ne sais point que je suis un démon, que mon esprit est l’esprit d’Ingolphe l’Exterminateur.

— Je sais que tu es un brigand, que tu commets le meurtre pour de l’or.

— Tu te trompes, interrompit le monstre, c’est pour du sang.

— N’as-tu pas été payé par les d’Ahlefeld pour assassiner le capitaine Dispolsen?

— Que me dis-tu là? Quels sont ces noms?

— Tu ne connais pas le capitaine Dispolsen, que tu as assassiné sur la grève d’Urchtal?

— Cela se peut, mais je l’ai oublié, comme je t’aurai oublié dans trois jours.

— Tu ne connais pas le comte d’Ahlefeld, qui t’a payé pour enlever au capitaine un coffret de fer?

— D’Ahlefeld! Attends; oui, je le connais. J’ai bu hier le sang de son fils dans le crâne du mien.

Ordener frissonna d’horreur.

— Est-ce que tu n’étais pas content de ton salaire?

— Quel salaire? demanda le brigand.

— Écoute; ta vue me pèse; il faut en finir. Tu as dérobé, il y a huit jours, une cassette de fer à l’une de tes victimes, à un officier de Munckholm?

Ce mot fit tressaillir le brigand.

— Un officier de Munckholm! dit-il entre ses dents.

Puis il reprit, avec un mouvement de surprise:

— Serais-tu aussi un officier de Munckholm, toi?

— Non, dit Ordener.

— Tant pis!

Et les traits du brigand se rembrunirent.

— Écoute, reprit l’opiniâtre Ordener, où est cette cassette que tu as dérobée au capitaine?

Le petit homme parut méditer un instant.

— Par Ingolphe! voilà une méchante boîte de fer qui occupe bien des esprits. Je te réponds que l’on cherchera moins celle qui contiendra tes os, si jamais ils sont recueillis dans un cercueil.

Ces paroles, en montrant à Ordener que le brigand connaissait la cassette dont il lui parlait, lui rendirent l’espoir de la reconquérir.

— Dis-moi ce que tu as fait de cette cassette. Est-elle au pouvoir du comte d’Ahlefeld?

— Non.

— Tu mens, car tu ris.

— Crois ce que tu voudras. Que m’importe?

Le monstre avait en effet pris un air railleur qui inspirait de la défiance à Ordener. Il vit qu’il n’y avait plus rien à faire que de le mettre en fureur, ou de l’intimider, s’il était possible.

— Entends-moi, dit-il en élevant la voix, il faut que tu me donnes cette cassette.

L’autre répondit par un ricanement farouche.

— Il faut que tu me la donnes! répéta le jeune homme d’une voix tonnante.

— Est-ce que tu es accoutumé à donner des ordres aux buffles et aux ours? répliqua le monstre avec le même rire.

— J’en donnerais au démon dans l’enfer.

— C’est ce que tu seras à même de faire tout à l’heure.

Ordener tira son sabre, qui étincela dans l’ombre comme un éclair.

— Obéis!

— Allons, reprit l’autre en secouant sa hache, il ne tenait qu’à moi de briser tes os et de sucer ton sang quand tu es arrivé, mais je me suis contenu; j’étais curieux de voir le moineau franc fondre sur le vautour.

— Misérable, cria Ordener, défends-toi!

— C’est la première fois qu’on me le dit, murmura le brigand en grinçant des dents.

En parlant ainsi, il sauta sur l’autel de granit et se ramassa sur lui-même, comme le léopard qui attend le chasseur au haut d’un rocher pour se précipiter sur lui à l’improviste.

De là son oeil fixe plongeait sur le jeune homme et semblait chercher de quel côté il pourrait le mieux s’élancer sur lui. C’en était fait du noble Ordener, s’il eût attendu un instant. Mais il ne donna pas au brigand le temps de réfléchir, et se jeta impétueusement sur lui en lui portant la pointe de son sabre au visage.

Alors commença le combat le plus effrayant que l’imagination puisse se figurer. Le petit homme, debout sur l’autel, comme une statue sur son piédestal, semblait une des horribles idoles qui, dans les siècles barbares, avaient reçu dans ce même lieu des sacrifices impies et de sacrilèges offrandes.

Ses mouvements étaient si rapides que de quelque côté qu’Ordener l’attaquât, il rencontrait toujours la face du monstre et le tranchant de sa hache. Il aurait été mis en pièces dès les premiers chocs s’il n’avait eu l’heureuse inspiration de rouler son manteau autour de son bras gauche, en sorte que la plupart des coups de son furieux ennemi se perdaient dans ce bouclier flottant. Ils firent ainsi inutilement, pendant plusieurs minutes, des efforts inouïs pour se blesser l’un et l’autre. Les yeux gris et enflammés du petit homme sortaient de leur orbite. Surpris d’être si vigoureusement et si audacieusement combattu par un adversaire en apparence si faible, une rage sombre avait remplacé ses ricanements sauvages. L’atroce immobilité des traits du monstre, le calme intrépide de ceux d’Ordener contrastaient singulièrement avec la promptitude de leurs mouvements et la vivacité de leurs attaques.

On n’entendait d’autre bruit que le cliquetis des armes, les pas tumultueux du jeune homme, et la respiration pressée des deux combattants, quand le petit homme poussa un rugissement terrible. Le tranchant de sa hache venait de s’engager dans les plis du manteau. Il se roidit; il secoua furieusement son bras, et ne fit qu’embarrasser le manche avec le tranchant dans l’étoffe, qui, à chaque nouvel effort, se tordait de plus en plus à l’entour.

Le formidable brigand vit le fer du jeune homme s’appuyer sur sa poitrine.

— Écoute-moi encore une fois, dit Ordener triomphant; veux-tu me remettre ce coffre de fer que tu as lâchement volé?

Le petit homme garda un moment le silence, puis il dit au milieu d'un rugissement:

— Non, et sois maudit!

Ordener reprit, sans quitter son attitude victorieuse et menaçante:

— Réfléchis!

— Non; je t'ai dit que non, répéta le brigand.

Le noble jeune homme baissa son sabre.

— Eh bien! dit-il, dégage ta hache des plis de mon manteau, afin que nous puissions continuer.

Un rire dédaigneux fut la réponse du monstre.

— Enfant, tu fais le généreux, comme si j'en avais besoin!

Avant qu'Ordener surpris eût pu tourner la tête, il avait posé son pied sur l'épaule de son loyal vainqueur, et d'un bond il était à douze pas dans la salle.

D'un autre bond il était sur Ordener. Il s'était suspendu à lui tout entier, comme la panthère s'attache de la gueule et des griffes aux flancs du grand lion. Ses ongles s'enfonçaient dans les épaules du jeune homme; ses genoux noueux pressaient ses hanches, tandis que son affreux visage présentait aux yeux d'Ordener une bouche sanglante et des dents de bête fauve prêtes à le déchirer. Il ne parlait plus; aucune parole humaine ne s'échappait de son gosier pantelant; un mugissement sourd, entremêlé de cris rauques et ardents, exprimait seul sa rage. C'était quelque chose de plus hideux qu'une bête féroce, de plus monstrueux qu'un démon; c'était un homme auquel il ne restait rien d'humain.

Ordener avait chancelé sous l'assaut du petit homme, et serait tombé à ce choc inattendu, si l'un des larges piliers du monument druidique ne se fût trouvé derrière lui pour le soutenir. Il resta donc à demi renversé sur le dos, et haletant sous le poids de son formidable ennemi. Qu'on pense que tout ce que nous venons de décrire s'était passé en aussi peu de temps qu'il faut pour se le figurer, et l'on aura quelque idée de ce que présentait d'horrible ce moment de la lutte.

Nous l'avons dit, le noble jeune homme avait chancelé, mais il n'avait pas tremblé. Il se hâta de donner une pensée d'adieu à son Éthel. Cette pensée d'amour fut comme une prière; elle lui rendit des forces. Il enlaça le monstre de ses deux bras; puis, saisissant la lame de son sabre par le milieu, il lui appuya perpendiculairement la pointe sur l'épine du dos. Le brigand atteint poussa une clameur effrayante, et d'un soubresaut, qui ébranla Ordener, il se dégagea des bras de son intrépide adversaire et alla tomber à quelques pas en arrière, emportant dans ses dents un lambeau du manteau vert qu'il avait mordu dans sa fureur.

Il se releva, souple et agile comme un jeune chamois, et le combat recommença pour la troisième fois, d'une manière plus terrible encore. Le hasard avait jeté près du lieu où il se trouvait un amas de quartiers de rochers, entre lesquels les mousses et les ronces croissaient paisiblement depuis des siècles. Deux hommes de force ordinaire auraient à peine pu soulever la moindre de ces masses. Le brigand en saisit une de ses deux bras et l'éleva au-dessus de sa tête en la balançant vers Ordener. Son regard fut affreux dans ce moment. La pierre, lancée avec violence, traversa lourdement l'espace; le jeune homme n'eut que le temps de se détourner. Le quartier de granit s'était brisé en éclats au pied du mur souterrain avec un bruit épouvantable, que se renvoyèrent longtemps les échos profonds de la grotte.

Ordener étourdi avait à peine eu le temps de reprendre son sang-froid, qu'une seconde masse de pierre se balançait dans les mains du brigand. Irrité de se voir ainsi lapider lâchement, il s'élança vers le petit homme, le sabre haut, afin de changer de combat; mais le bloc formidable, parti comme un tonnerre, rencontra, en roulant dans l'atmosphère épaisse et sombre de la caverne, la lame frêle et nue sur son passage; elle tomba en éclats comme un morceau de verre, et le rire farouche du monstre remplit la voûte.

Ordener était désarmé.

— As-tu, cria le monstre, quelque chose à dire à Dieu ou au diable avant de mourir?

Et son oeil lançait des flammes, et tous ses muscles s'étaient roidis de rage et de joie, et il s'était précipité avec un frémissement d'impatience sur sa hache laissée à terre dans les plis du manteau. — Pauvre Éthel!

Tout à coup un rugissement lointain se fait entendre au dehors. Le monstre s'arrête. Le bruit redouble; des clameurs d'hommes se mêlent aux grondements plaintifs d'un ours. Le brigand écoute. Les cris douloureux continuent. Il saisit brusquement la hache et s'élance, non vers Ordener, mais vers l'une des crevasses dont nous avons parlé et qui donnaient passage au jour. Ordener, au comble de la surprise de se voir ainsi oublié, se dirige comme lui vers l'une de ces portes naturelles, et voit, dans une clairière assez voisine, un grand ours blanc réduit aux abois par sept chasseurs, parmi lesquels il croit même distinguer ce Kennybol dont les paroles l'avaient tant frappé la veille.

Il se retourne. Le brigand n'était plus dans la grotte, et il entend au dehors une voix effrayante qui criait:

— Friend! Friend! je suis à toi! me voici!

XXX

Pierre le bon enfant aux dés a tout perdu.

RÉGNIER.

Le régiment des arquebusiers de Munckholm est en marche à travers les défilés qui se trouvent entre Drontheim et Skongen. Tantôt il côtoie un torrent, et l’on voit la file des bayonnettes ramper dans les ravines comme un long serpent dont les écailles brillent au jour; tantôt il tourne en spirale à l’entour d’une montagne, qui ressemble alors à ces colonnes triomphales autour desquelles montent des bataillons de bronze.

Les soldats marchent, les armes basses et les manteaux déployés, d’un air d’humeur et d’ennui, parce que ces nobles hommes n’aiment que le combat ou le repos. Les grosses railleries, les vieux sarcasmes qui faisaient hier leurs délices ne les égayent pas aujourd’hui; l’air est froid, le ciel est brumeux. Il faut au moins, pour qu’un rire passager s’élève dans les rangs, qu’une cantinière se laisse tomber maladroitement du haut de son petit cheval barbe, ou qu’une marmite de fer-blanc roule de rocher en rocher jusqu’au fond d’un précipice.

C’est pour se distraire un moment de l’ennui de cette route que le lieutenant Randmer, jeune baron danois, aborda le vieux capitaine Lory, soldat de fortune. Le capitaine marchait, sombre et silencieux, d’un pas pesant, mais assuré; le lieutenant, leste et léger, faisait siffler une baguette qu’il avait arrachée aux broussailles dont le chemin était bordé.

— Eh bien, capitaine, qu’avez-vous donc? vous êtes triste.

— C’est qu’apparemment j’en ai sujet, répondit le vieil officier sans lever la tête.

— Allons, allons, point de chagrin; regardez-moi, suis-je triste? et pourtant je gage que j’en aurais au moins autant sujet que vous.

— J’en doute, baron Randmer; j’ai perdu mon seul bien, j’ai perdu toute ma richesse.

— Capitaine Lory, notre infortune est précisément la même. Il n’y a pas quinze jours que le lieutenant Alberick m’a gagné d’un coup de dé mon beau château de Randmer et ses dépendances. Je suis ruiné; me voit-on moins gai pour cela?

Le capitaine répondit d’une voix bien triste:

— Lieutenant, vous n’avez perdu que votre beau château; moi, j’ai perdu mon chien.

À cette réponse, la figure frivole du jeune homme resta indécise entre le rire et l’attendrissement.

— Capitaine, dit-il, consolez-vous; tenez, moi qui ai perdu mon château…

L’autre l’interrompit.

— Qu’est-ce que cela? D’ailleurs, vous regagnerez un autre château.

— Et vous retrouverez un autre chien.

Le vieillard secoua la tête.

— Je retrouverai un chien; je ne retrouverai pas mon pauvre Drake.

Il s’arrêta; de grosses larmes roulaient dans ses yeux et tombaient une à une sur son visage dur et rude.

— Je n’avais, continua-t-il, jamais aimé que lui; je n’ai connu ni père ni mère; que Dieu leur fasse paix, comme à mon pauvre Drake! — Lieutenant Randmer, il m’avait sauvé la vie dans la guerre de Poméranie; je l’appelai Drake pour faire honneur au fameux amiral. — Ce bon chien! il n’avait jamais changé pour moi, lui, selon ma fortune. Après le combat d’Oholfen, le grand général Schack l’avait flatté de la main en me disant: Vous avez là un bien beau chien, sergent Lory! — car à cette époque je n’étais encore que sergent.

— Ah! interrompit le jeune baron en agitant sa baguette, cela doit paraître singulier d’être sergent.

Le vieux soldat de fortune ne l’entendait pas; il paraissait, se parler à lui-même, et l’on entendait à peine quelques paroles inarticulées s’échapper de sa bouche.

— Ce pauvre Drake! être revenu tant de fois sain et sauf des brèches et des tranchées pour se noyer, comme un chat, dans le maudit golfe de Drontheim!

— Mon pauvre chien! mon brave ami! tu étais digne de mourir comme moi sur le champ de bataille.

— Brave capitaine, cria le lieutenant, comment pouvez-vous rester triste? nous nous battrons peut-être demain.

— Oui, répondit dédaigneusement le vieux capitaine, contre de fiers ennemis!

— Comment, ces brigands de mineurs! ces diables de montagnards!

— Des tailleurs de pierres, des voleurs de grands chemins! des gens qui ne sauront seulement pas former en bataille la tête de porc ou le coin de Gustave-Adolphe! voilà de belle canaille en face d’un homme tel que moi, qui ai fait toutes les guerres de Poméranie et de Holstein! les campagnes de Scanie et de Dalécarlie! qui ai combattu sous le glorieux général Schack, sous le vaillant comte de Guldenlew!

— Mais vous ne savez pas, interrompit Randmer, qu’on donne à ces bandes un redoutable chef, un géant fort et sauvage comme Goliath, un brigand qui ne boit que du sang humain, un démon qui porte en lui tout Satan.

— Qui donc? demanda l’autre.

— Eh! le fameux Han d’Islande!

— Brrr! je gage que ce formidable général ne sait seulement pas armer un mousquet en quatre mouvements ou charger une carabine à l’impériale!

Randmer éclata de rire.

— Oui, riez, poursuivit le capitaine. Il sera fort gai en effet de croiser de bons sabres avec de viles pioches, et de nobles piques avec des fourches à fumier! voilà de dignes ennemis! mon brave Drake n’aurait pas daigné leur mordre les jambes!

Le capitaine continuait de donner un cours énergique à son indignation, lorsqu’il fut interrompu par l’arrivée d’un officier qui accourait vers eux tout essoufflé.

— Capitaine Lory! mon cher Randmer!

— Eh bien? dirent-ils tous deux à la fois.

— Mes amis, je suis glacé d’horreur! — D’Ahlefeld! le lieutenant d’Ahlefeld! le fils du grand-chancelier! vous savez, mon cher baron Randmer, ce Frédéric… si élégant… si fat!…

— Oui, répondit le jeune baron, très élégant! Cependant, au dernier bal de Charlottenbourg, mon déguisement était d’un meilleur goût que le sien. — Mais que lui est-il donc arrivé?

— Je sais de qui vous voulez parler, disait en même temps Lory, c’est Frédéric d’Ahlefeld, le lieutenant de la troisième compagnie, qui a les revers bleus. Il fait assez négligemment son service.

— On ne s’en plaindra plus, capitaine Lory.

— Comment? dit Randmer.

— Il est en garnison à Walhstrom, continua froidement le vieux capitaine.

— Précisément, reprit l’autre, le colonel vient de recevoir un messager… Ce pauvre Frédéric!

— Mais qu’est-ce donc? capitaine Bollar, vous m’effrayez. Le vieux

Lory poursuivit:

— Brrr! notre fat aura manqué aux appels, comme à son ordinaire; le capitaine aura envoyé en prison le fils du grand-chancelier; et voilà, j’en suis sûr, le malheur qui vous décompose le visage.

Bollar lui frappa sur l’épaule.

— Capitaine Lory, le lieutenant d’Ahlefeld a été dévoré tout vivant.

Les deux capitaines se regardèrent fixement, et Randmer, un moment étonné, se mit tout à coup à rire aux éclats.

— Ah! ah! capitaine Bollar, je vois que vous êtes toujours mauvais plaisant. Mais je ne donnerai pas dans celle-là, je vous en préviens.

Et le lieutenant, croisant ses deux bras, donna un libre essor à toute sa gaieté, en jurant que ce qui l’amusait le plus, c’était la crédulité avec laquelle Lory accueillait les amusantes inventions de Bollar. Le conte, disait-il, était vraiment drôle, et c’était une idée tout à fait divertissante que de faire dévorer tout cru ce Frédéric qui avait de sa peau un soin si tendre et si ridicule.

— Randmer, dit gravement Bollar, vous êtes un fou. Je vous dis que d’Ahlefeld est mort. Je le tiens du colonel; — mort!

— Oh! qu’il joue bien son rôle! reprit le baron toujours en riant; qu’il est amusant!

Bollar haussa les épaules, et se tourna vers le vieux Lory, qui lui demanda avec sang-froid quelques détails.

— Oui vraiment, mon cher capitaine Bollar, ajouta le rieur inextinguible, contez-nous donc par qui ce pauvre diable a été ainsi mangé. A-t-il fait le déjeuner d’un loup, ou le souper d’un ours?

— Le colonel, dit Bollar, vient de recevoir en route une dépêche, qui l’instruit d’abord que la garnison de Walhstrom se replie vers nous, devant un parti considérable d’insurgés.

Le vieux Lory fronça le sourcil.

— Ensuite, poursuivit Bollar, que le lieutenant Frédéric d’Ahlefeld, ayant été, il y a trois jours, chasser dans les montagnes, du côté de la ruine d’Arbar, y a rencontré un monstre, qui l’a emporté dans sa caverne et l’a dévoré.

Ici le lieutenant Randmer redoubla ses joyeuses exclamations.

— Oh! oh! comme ce bon Lory croit aux contes d’enfants! C’est bien, gardez votre sérieux, mon cher Bollar. Vous êtes admirablement drôle. Mais vous ne nous direz pas quel est ce monstre, cet ogre, ce vampire qui a emporté et mangé le lieutenant comme un chevreau de six jours!

— Je ne vous le dirai pas, à vous, murmura Bollar avec impatience; mais je le dirai à Lory, qui n’est pas follement incrédule. — Mon cher Lory, le monstre qui a bu le sang de Frédéric, c’est Han d’Islande.

— Le colonel des brigands! s’écria le vieux officier.

— Eh bien, mon brave Lory, reprit le railleur Randmer, a-t-on besoin de savoir l’exercice à l’impériale, quand on fait si bien manoeuvrer sa mâchoire?

— Baron Randmer, dit Bollar, vous avez le même caractère que d’Ahlefeld; prenez garde d’avoir le même sort.

— J’affirme, s’écria le jeune homme, que ce qui m’amuse le plus, c’est le sérieux imperturbable du capitaine Bollar.

— Et moi, répliqua Bollar, ce qui m’effraie le plus, c’est la gaieté intarissable du lieutenant Randmer.

En ce moment un groupe d’officiers, qui paraissaient s’entretenir vivement, se rapprocha de nos trois interlocuteurs.

— Ah! pardieu, s’écria Randmer, il faut que je les amuse de l’invention de Bollar. — Camarades, ajouta-t-il en s’avançant vers eux, vous ne savez pas? ce pauvre Frédéric d’Ahlefeld vient d’être croqué tout vivant par le barbare Han d’Islande.

En achevant ces paroles, il ne put réprimer un éclat de rire, qui, à sa grande surprise, fut accueilli des nouveaux-venus presque avec des cris d’indignation.

— Comment! vous riez! — Je ne croyais pas que Randmer dût répéter de cette manière une semblable nouvelle. — Rire d’un pareil malheur!

— Quoi! dit Randmer troublé, est-ce que cela serait vrai?

— Eh! c’est vous qui nous le répétez! lui cria-t-on de toutes parts.

Est-ce que vous n’avez pas foi en vos paroles?

— Mais je croyais que c’était une plaisanterie de Bollar.

Un vieux officier prit la parole.

— La plaisanterie eût été de mauvais goût; mais ce n’en est malheureusement pas une. Le baron Voethaün, notre colonel, vient de recevoir cette fatale nouvelle.

— Une affreuse aventure! c’est effrayant! répétèrent une foule de voix.

— Nous allons donc, disait l’un, combattre des loups et des ours à face humaine!

— Nous recevrons des coups d’arquebuse, disait l’autre, sans savoir d’où ils partiront; nous serons tués un à un, comme de vieux faisans dans une volière.

— Cette mort de d’Ahlefeld, cria Bollar d’une voix solennelle, fait frissonner. Notre régiment est malheureux. La mort de Dispolsen, celle de ces pauvres soldats trouvés à Cascadthymore, celle de d’Ahlefeld, voilà trois tragiques événements en bien peu de temps.

Le jeune baron Randmer, qui était resté muet, sortit de sa rêverie.

— Cela est incroyable, dit-il; ce Frédéric qui dansait si bien!

Et après cette réflexion profonde, il retomba dans le silence, tandis que le capitaine Lory affirmait qu’il était très affligé de la mort du jeune lieutenant, et faisait remarquer au second arquebusier, Toric Belfast, que le cuivre de sa bandoulière était moins brillant qu’à l’ordinaire.

XXXI

«Chut! chut! voilà un homme qui descend de là-haut par le moyen d’une échelle.

………………………………….

— Oh oui, c’est un espion.

— Le ciel ne pouvait m’accorder une plus grande faveur que celle de pouvoir vous livrer… ma vie. Je suis à vous; mais dites-moi, de grâce, à qui appartient cette armée.

— Au comte de Barcelone.

— Quel comte?

…………………………..

— Qu’est-ce donc?

— Général, voilà un espion de l’ennemi.

— D’où viens-tu?

— Je venais ici, bien éloigné de songer à ce que je devais y trouver; je ne m’attendais pas à ce que je vois.»

LOPE DE VBGA. *La Fuerza lastimosa*.

Il y a quelque chose de sinistre et de désolé dans l’aspect d’une campagne rase et nue, quand le soleil a disparu, lorsqu’on est seul, qu’on marche en brisant du pied des tronçons de paille sèche, au cri monotone de la cigale, et qu’on voit de grands nuages déformés se coucher lentement sur l’horizon, comme des cadavres de fantômes.

Telle était l’impression qui se mêlait aux tristes pensées d’Ordener, le soir de son inutile rencontre avec le brigand d’Islande. Étourdi un moment de sa brusque disparition, il avait d’abord voulu le poursuivre; mais il s’était égaré dans les bruyères, et il avait erré toute la journée dans des terres de plus en plus incultes et sauvages, sans rencontrer trace d’homme. À la chute du jour, il se trouvait dans une plaine spacieuse, qui ne lui offrait de tous côtés qu’un horizon égal et circulaire, où rien ne promettait un abri au jeune voyageur exténué de fatigue et de besoin.

Encore si ses souffrances corporelles n’eussent pas été aggravées par les tristesses de son âme; mais c’en était fait! il avait atteint le terme de son voyage, sans en remplir le but. Il ne lui restait même plus ces folles illusions d’espérance qui l’avaient entraîné à la poursuite du brigand; et maintenant que rien ne soutenait plus son coeur, mille pensées décourageantes, qui n’y trouvaient point place la veille, venaient l’assaillir. Qu’allait-il faire? comment revenir vers Schumacker sans lui apporter le salut d’Éthel? de quelle effrayante nature étaient les malheurs que la conquête de la fatale cassette eût prévenus? Et son mariage, avec Ulrique d’Ahlefeld! S’il pouvait du moins enlever son Éthel à cette indigne captivité; s’il pouvait fuir avec elle, et emporter son bonheur dans quelque lointain exil!

Il s’enveloppa de son manteau et se coucha sur la terre. Le ciel était noir; une lueur orageuse apparaissait par intervalles dans les nues comme à travers un crêpe funèbre, et s’éteignait; un vent froid tournait sur la plaine. Le jeune homme songeait à peine à ces signes d’une tempête violente et prochaine; et d’ailleurs, quand il eût pu trouver un asile où fuir l’orage et se reposer de ses fatigues, en eût-il trouvé un où fuir son malheur et se reposer de ses pensées?

Tout à coup des sons confus de voix humaines arrivèrent à son oreille. Surpris, il se souleva sur le coude, et aperçut, à quelque distance de lui, comme des ombres se mouvoir dans l’obscurité. Il regarda; une lumière brilla au milieu du groupe mystérieux, et Ordener vit, avec un étonnement facile à concevoir, chacune de ces figures fantasmagoriques s’enfoncer successivement dans la terre. — Tout disparut.

Ordener était au-dessus des superstitions de son temps et de son pays. Son esprit grave et mûr ignorait ces crédulités vaines, ces terreurs étranges qui tourmentent l’enfance des peuples de même que l’enfance des hommes. Il y avait cependant dans cette apparition singulière quelque chose de surnaturel qui lui inspira une religieuse défiance de sa raison; car nul ne sait si les esprits des morts ne reviennent pas quelquefois sur la terre.

Il se leva, fit un signe de croix, et se dirigea vers le lieu où la vision avait disparu. De larges gouttes de pluie commençaient à tomber; son manteau se gonflait comme une voile, et la plume de sa toque, tourmentée par le vent, battait son visage.

Il s’arrêta tout à coup. — Un éclair venait de lui montrer devant ses pas une sorte de puits large et circulaire, où il se serait infailliblement précipité sans la lueur bienfaisante de l’orage. Il s’approcha du gouffre. Une lumière vague y brillait à une profondeur effrayante, et répandait une teinte rougeâtre sur l’extrémité inférieure de cet immense cylindre creusé dans les entrailles de la terre. Ce rayon, qui semblait un feu magique allumé par les gnomes, accroissait en quelque sorte l’incommensurable étendue des ténèbres que l’oeil était contraint de traverser pour l’atteindre.

L’intrépide jeune homme, penché sur l’abîme, écouta. Un bruit lointain de voix monta à son oreille. Il ne douta plus que les êtres qui avaient étrangement paru et disparu à ses yeux ne se fussent plongés dans ce gouffre, et il sentit un désir invincible, parce qu’il était sans doute dans sa destinée, d’y descendre après eux, dût-il suivre des spectres dans une des bouches de l’enfer. D’ailleurs, la tempête commençait avec fureur, et ce gouffre lui présentait un abri contre elle. Mais comment y descendre? quel chemin avaient pris ceux qu’il voulait suivre, si ce n’étaient pas des fantômes? — Un second éclair vint à son secours, et lui fit voir à ses pieds l’extrémité supérieure d’une échelle, qui se prolongeait dans les profondeurs du puits. C’était une forte solive verticale, que traversaient horizontalement, de distance en distance, de courtes barres de fer destinées à recevoir les pieds et les mains de ceux qui oseraient s’aventurer dans ce gouffre.

Ordener ne balança pas. Il se suspendit audacieusement à la formidable échelle, et s’enfonça dans l’abîme, sans savoir même si elle le conduirait jusqu’au fond, sans songer qu’il ne reverrait peut-être plus le soleil. Bientôt, dans les ténèbres qui couvraient sa tête, il ne distingua plus le ciel qu’aux éclairs bleuâtres qui l’illuminaient fréquemment. Bientôt la pluie abondante, qui battait la surface de la terre, n’arriva plus à lui qu’en rosée fine et vaporeuse. Bientôt le tourbillon de vent qui s’engouffrait impétueusement dans le puits se perdit au-dessus de lui en long sifflement. Il descendit, il descendit encore, et à peine paraissait-il s’être rapproché de la lumière souterraine. Il continua sans se décourager, en évitant seulement d’abaisser son regard dans le gouffre, de peur d’y être précipité par un étourdissement.

Cependant, l’air de plus en plus étouffé, le bruit de voix de plus en plus distinct, le reflet pourpre qui commençait à colorer la muraille circulaire du puits, l’avertirent enfin qu’il n’était pas loin du fond. Il descendit encore quelques échelons, et son regard put voir clairement, au bas de l’échelle, l’entrée d’un souterrain éclairée d’une lueur tremblante et rouge, tandis que son oreille était frappée par des paroles qui attirèrent toute son attention.

— Kennybol n’arrive pas, disait une voix du ton de l’impatience.

— Qui peut le retenir? répétait la même voix après un moment de silence.

— Nous l’ignorons, seigneur Hacket, répondait-on.

— Il a dû passer la nuit chez sa soeur Maase Braall, du village de Surb, ajoutait une autre voix.

— Vous le voyez, reprenait la première, je tiens, moi, tous mes engagements. Je devais vous amener Han d'Islande pour chef; je vous l'amène.

Un murmure, dont il était difficile de deviner le sens, répondit à ces paroles. La curiosité d'Ordener, déjà éveillée par le nom de ce Kennybol, qui lui avait tant causé de surprise la veille, redoubla au nom de Han d'Islande.

La même voix reprit:

— Mes amis, Jonas, Norbith, si Kennybol est en retard, qu'importe! nous sommes assez nombreux pour ne plus rien craindre; avez-vous trouvé vos enseignes dans les ruines de Crag?

— Oui, seigneur Hacket, répondirent plusieurs voix.

— Eh bien! levez l'étendard, il en est temps! Voici de l'or! voici votre invincible chef. Courage! marchez à la délivrance du noble Schumacker, de l'infortuné comte de Griffenfeld!

— Vive! vive Schumacker! répétèrent une foule de voix, et le nom de Schumacker se prolongea d'échos en échos dans les replis des voûtes souterraines.

Ordener, conduit de curiosité en curiosité, d'étonnement en étonnement, écoutait, respirant à peine. Il ne pouvait croire ni comprendre ce qu'il entendait. Schumacker mêlé à Kennybol, à Han d'Islande! Quel était ce drame ténébreux dont, spectateur ignoré, il entrevoyait une scène? De qui défendait-on les jours? de qui jouait-on la tête?

— Écoutez, reprit la même voix, vous voyez l'ami, le confident du noble comte de Griffenfeld. C'était la première fois qu'Ordener entendait cette voix. Elle poursuivit:

— …..Accordez-moi votre confiance, comme il m'accorde la sienne. Amis, tout vous favorise; vous arriverez à Drontheim sans rencontrer un ennemi.

— Seigneur Hacket, interrompit une voix, marchons. Peters m'a dit avoir vu dans les défilés tout le régiment de Munckholm en marche contre nous.

— Il vous a trompé, répondit l'autre avec autorité. Le gouvernement ignore encore votre révolte, et sa tranquillité est telle, que celui qui a repoussé vos justes plaintes, votre oppresseur, l'oppresseur de l'illustre et malheureux Schumacker, le général Levin de Knud a quitté Drontheim pour aller dans la capitale assister aux fêtes du fameux mariage de son élève Ordener Guldenlew avec Ulrique d’Ahlefeld.

Qu’on juge de l’émotion d’Ordener. Dans ce pays sauvage et désert, sous cette voûte mystérieuse, entendre des inconnus prononcer tous les noms qui l’intéressaient, et jusqu’au sien propre! Un doute affreux s’éleva dans son coeur. Serait-il vrai? était-ce en effet un agent du comte de Griffenfeld dont il entendait la voix? Quoi! Schumacker, ce vieillard vénérable, le noble père de sa noble Éthel, se révoltait contre le roi son seigneur, soudoyait des brigands, allumait une guerre civile! Et c’était pour cet hypocrite, pour ce rebelle, qu’il avait, lui, fils du vice-roi de Norvège, élève du général Levin, compromis son avenir, exposé sa vie! c’était pour lui qu’il avait cherché et combattu ce brigand islandais avec lequel Schumacker paraissait être d’intelligence, puisqu’il le plaçait à la tête de ces bandits! Qui sait même si cette cassette, pour laquelle lui, Ordener, avait été sur le point de donner son sang, ne contenait pas quelques-uns des indignes secrets de cette trame odieuse? Ou plutôt le vindicatif prisonnier de Munckholm ne s’était-il pas joué de lui? Peut-être il avait découvert son nom; peut-être, et combien cette pensée fut douloureuse pour le magnanime jeune homme! n’avait-il désiré, en le poussant à ce fatal voyage, que la perte du fils d’un ennemi?

Hélas! lorsqu’on a longtemps porté le nom d’un malheureux en vénération et en amour, quand dans le secret de sa pensée on a juré à son infortune un attachement inviolable, c’est un moment bien amer que celui où l’on reçoit son salaire d’ingratitude, où l’on sent que l’on est désenchanté de la générosité, et qu’il faut renoncer à ce bonheur si pur et si doux du dévouement. On a vieilli en un instant de la plus triste des vieillesses, on est devenu vieux d’expérience; et l’on a perdu la plus belle des illusions de la vie, qui n’a de beau que les illusions.

Telles étaient les désolantes pensées qui se pressaient confusément dans l’âme d’Ordener. Le noble jeune homme eût voulu mourir dans ce fatal moment; il lui semblait que toute la félicité de sa vie lui échappait. Il y avait bien dans les assertions de celui qui parlait comme envoyé de Griffenfeld des choses qui lui paraissaient mensongères ou douteuses; mais comme elles n’étaient destinées qu’à abuser de malheureux campagnards, Schumacker n’en était que plus coupable à ses yeux; et ce Schumacker était le père de son Éthel!

Ces réflexions agitèrent d’autant plus violemment son coeur qu’elles s’y précipitèrent toutes à la fois. Il chancela sur les barreaux qui le soutenaient, et continua d’écouter; car on attend parfois avec une impatience inexplicable et une affreuse avidité les malheurs que l’on redoute le plus.

— Oui, poursuivit la voix de l’envoyé, vous êtes commandés par le formidable Han d’Islande. Qui osera vous combattre? Votre cause est celle de vos femmes, de vos enfants indignement dépouillés de votre héritage; d’un noble infortuné, depuis vingt ans plongé injustement dans une infâme prison. Allons, Schumacker et la liberté vous attendent. Guerre aux tyrans!

— Guerre! répétèrent mille voix; et l’on entendit dans les détours du souterrain un long bruit d’armes se mêler aux sons rauques de la trompe des montagnes.

— Arrêtez! cria Ordener. — Il avait descendu précipitamment le reste de l’échelle. L’idée d’épargner un crime à Schumacker et tant de malheurs à son pays s’était emparée impérieusement de tout son être. Mais, au moment où il était apparu sur le seuil du souterrain, la crainte de perdre, par d’imprudentes déclamations, le père de son Éthel, et peut-être son Éthel elle-même, avait remplacé tout autre sentiment en lui; et il était resté là, pâle et jetant un regard étonné sur le tableau singulier qui s’offrait à sa vue.

C’était comme une immense place d’une ville souterraine, dont les limites se perdaient derrière une foule de piliers qui soutenaient les voûtes. Ces piliers brillaient comme des pilastres de cristal aux rayons d’un millier de torches que portait une multitude d’hommes bizarrement armés et répandus confusément dans les profondeurs de la place. On eût dit, à voir tous ces points lumineux et toutes ces figures effrayantes errer dans les ténèbres, une de ces assemblées fabuleuses dont parlent les vieilles chroniques, de sorciers et de démons qui portaient des étoiles pour flambeaux, et illuminaient la nuit les vieux bois et les châteaux écroulés.

Un long cri s’éleva.

— Un étranger! Mort! mort!

Cent bras étaient déjà levés sur Ordener. Il porta la main à son côté pour y chercher son sabre. — Noble jeune homme! dans son généreux élan il avait oublié qu’il était seul et désarmé.

— Attendez, attendez! cria une voix, la voix de celui en qui Ordener voyait l’envoyé de Schumacker.

C’était un petit homme gras, vêtu de noir, à l’oeil gai et faux. Il s’avança vers Ordener.

— Qui êtes-vous? lui dit-il.

Ordener ne répondit pas; il était saisi de toutes parts, et il n'y avait pas une place sur sa poitrine où ne s'appuyât la pointe d'une épée ou le canon d'un pistolet.

— Est-ce que tu as peur? demanda le petit homme avec un sourire.

— Si ta main était sur mon coeur au lieu de ces épées, dit froidement le jeune homme, tu verrais qu'il ne bat pas plus vite que le tien, en supposant que tu aies un coeur.

— Ah! ah! dit le petit homme, il fait le fier! eh bien! qu'il meure. — Et il tourna le dos.

— Donne-moi la mort, répliqua Ordener; c'est tout ce que je veux te devoir.

— Un instant, seigneur Hacket, dit un vieillard à barbe touffue, qui se tenait appuyé sur un long mousquet. Vous êtes ici chez moi, et j'ai seul le droit d'envoyer ce chrétien raconter aux morts ce qu'il a vu ici.

Le seigneur Hacket se mit à rire. — Ma foi, mon cher Jonas, comme il vous plaira! Peu m'importe que cet espion soit jugé par vous, pourvu qu'il soit condamné.

Le vieillard se tourna vers Ordener:

— Allons, dis-nous qui tu es, toi qui souhaitais si audacieusement de savoir qui nous sommes.

Ordener garda le silence. Entouré des étranges partisans de ce Schumacker, pour lequel il aurait si volontiers donné son sang, il n'éprouvait en ce moment qu'un désir infini de la mort.

— Sa courtoisie ne veut pas répondre, dit le vieillard. Quand le renard est pris, il ne crie plus. Tuez-le.

— Mon brave Jonas, reprit Hacket, que la mort de cet homme soit le premier exploit de Han d'Islande parmi vous.

— Oui, oui! crièrent une foule de voix.

Ordener étonné, mais toujours intrépide, chercha des yeux ce Han d'Islande, auquel il avait si vaillamment disputé sa vie le matin même, et vit, avec un redoublement de surprise, s'avancer vers lui un homme d'une stature colossale, vêtu du costume des montagnards. Ce géant fixa sur Ordener un regard atrocement stupide, et demanda une hache.

— Tu n'es pas Han d'Islande, dit Ordener avec force.

— Qu'il meure! qu'il meure! cria Hacket d'une voix furieuse.

Ordener vit qu'il fallait mourir. Il mit la main dans sa poitrine, afin d'en tirer les cheveux de son Éthel et de leur donner un dernier baiser. Ce mouvement fit tomber un papier de sa ceinture.

— Quel est ce papier? dit Hacket; Norbith, prenez ce papier.

Ce Norbith était un jeune homme dont les traits noirs et durs avaient une expression de noblesse. Il ramassa le papier et le déploya.

— Grand Dieu! s'écria-t-il, c'est la passe de mon pauvre ami Christophorus Nedlam, de ce malheureux camarade qu'ils ont exécuté, il n'y a pas huit jours, sur la place publique de Skongen, pour fausse monnaie.

— Eh bien! dit Hacket avec l'accent d'une attente trompée, gardez ce chiffon de papier. Je le croyais plus important. Vous, mon cher Han d'Islande, expédiez votre homme.

Le jeune Norbith se plaça devant Ordener, et s'écria:

— Cet homme est sous ma protection. Ma tête tombera avant qu'il tombe un cheveu de la sienne. Je ne souffrirai pas que le sauf-conduit de mon ami Christophorus Nedlam soit violé.

Ordener, si miraculeusement protégé, baissa la tête et s'humilia; car il se rappelait combien il avait dédaigneusement accueilli en lui-même le voeu touchant de l'aumônier Athanase Munder: — Puisse le don du mourant être un bienfait pour le voyageur!

— Bah! bah! dit Hacket, vous dites là des folies, mon brave Norbith.

Cet homme est un espion; il faut qu'il meure.

— Donnez-moi ma hache, répéta le géant.

— Il ne mourra pas! cria Norbith. Que dirait l'esprit de mon pauvre Nedlam, qu'ils ont indignement pendu? Je vous assure qu'il ne mourra pas; car Nedlam ne veut pas qu'il meure.

— En effet, dit le vieux Jonas, Norbith a raison. Comment voulez-vous qu'on tue cet étranger, seigneur Hacket? il a la passe de Christophorus Nedlam.

— Mais c'est un espion, c'est un espion, reprit Hacket.

Le vieillard se plaça près du jeune homme, devant Ordener, et tous deux dirent gravement:

— Il a la passe de Christophorus Nedlam, qui a été pendu à Skongen.

Hacket vit qu'il fallait céder; car tous les autres commençaient à murmurer, en disant que cet étranger ne pouvait mourir, puisqu'il portait le sauf-conduit de Nedlam le faux-monnayeur.

— Allons, dit-il entre ses dents avec une rage concentrée, qu'il vive donc. Au reste, c'est votre affaire.

— Ce serait le diable que je ne le tuerais point, dit Norbith triomphant.

En parlant ainsi, il se tourna vers Ordener.

— Écoute, poursuivit-il, tu dois être un bon frère, puisque tu as la passe de Nedlam, mon pauvre ami. Nous sommes les mineurs royaux. Nous nous révoltons pour qu'on nous délivre de la tutelle. Le seigneur Hacket, que tu vois, dit que nous prenons les armes pouf un certain comte Schumacker; mais moi je ne le connais pas. Étranger, notre cause est juste. Écoute, et réponds-moi comme si tu répondais à ton saint patron. Veux-tu être des nôtres?

Une idée passa dans l'esprit d'Ordener.

— Oui, répondit-il.

Norbith lui présenta un sabre, qu'il reçut en silence

— Frère, dit le jeune chef, si tu veux nous trahir, tu commenceras par me tuer.

En ce moment le son de la trompe retentit sous les arceaux de la mine, et l'on entendit des voix éloignées qui disaient: Voilà Kennybol.

XXXII

Il a des pensées dans la tête qui vont jusqu'aux cieux.
Romances espagnoles.

L'âme a quelquefois des inspirations subites, des illuminations soudaines, dont un volume entier de pensées et de réflexions n'exprimerait pas mieux l'étendue, ne sonderait pas plus la profondeur, que la clarté de mille flambeaux ne rendrait la lueur immense et rapide de l'éclair.

On n'essaiera donc pas d'analyser ici l'impulsion impérieuse et secrète qui, à la proposition du jeune Norbith, jeta le noble fils du vice-roi de Norvège parmi les bandits qui se révoltaient pour un proscrit. Ce fut tout à la fois, sans doute, un généreux désir d'approfondir, à tout prix, cette ténébreuse aventure, mêlé à un dégoût amer de la vie, à un insouciant désespoir de l'avenir; peut-être je ne sais quel doute de la culpabilité de Schumacker, inspiré par tout ce qu'offraient de louche et de faux les apparences diverses qui avaient frappé le jeune homme, par un instinct inconnu de la vérité, et surtout par son amour pour Éthel. Enfin, ce fut certainement une révélation intime du bien qu'un ami clairvoyant de Schumacker pourrait lui faire, au milieu de ses aveugles partisans.

XXXIII

Est-ce là le chef? ses regards m'effraient, je n'oserais lui parler.
MATURIN, *Bertram*.

Aux cris qui annonçaient le fameux chasseur Kennybol, Hacket s'élança précipitamment au-devant de lui, en laissant Ordener avec les deux autres chefs.

— Vous voila enfin, mon cher Kennybol! Venez que je vous présente à votre formidable chef, Han d'Islande.

À ce nom, Kennybol, qui arrivait pâle, haletant, les cheveux hérissés, le visage inondé de sueur et les mains teintes de sang, recula de trois pas.

— Han d'Islande!

— Allons, dit Hacket, rassurez-vous! il vient pour vous seconder. Ne voyez en lui qu'un ami, qu'un compagnon.

Kennybol ne l'entendait pas.

— Han d'Islande ici! répéta-t-il.

— Eh oui, dit Hacket, en réprimant un rire équivoque; allez-vous en avoir peur?

— Quoi! interrompit pour la troisième fois le chasseur, vous m'affirmez… Han d'Islande dans — cette mine!…

Hacket se tourna vers ceux qui l'entouraient:

— Est-ce que notre brave Kennybol est fou? Puis, s'adressant à Kennybol:

— Je vois que c'est la crainte de Han d'Islande qui vous a retardé.

Kennybol leva la main au ciel:

— Par Etheldera, la sainte martyre norvégienne, ce n'est pas la crainte de Han d'Islande, seigneur Hacket, mais bien Han d'Islande lui-même, je vous jure, qui m'a empêché d'être ici plus tôt.

Ces paroles firent éclater un murmure d'étonnement parmi la foule de montagnards et de mineurs qui entouraient les deux interlocuteurs, et jetèrent sur le front de Hacket le même nuage que l'aspect et le salut d'Ordener y avaient déjà fait naître un moment auparavant.

— Comment! que dites-vous? demanda-t-il en baissant la voix.

— Je dis, seigneur Hacket, que sans votre maudit Han l'Islandais j'aurais été ici avant le premier cri de la chouette.

— En vérité! Que vous a-t-il donc fait?

— Oh! ne me le demandez pas; je veux seulement que ma barbe blanchisse en un jour, comme le poil d’une hermine, si l’on me surprend de ma vie, puisqu’il est vrai que je vis encore, à la chasse d’un ours blanc.

— Est-ce que vous avez failli être dévoré par un ours? Kennybol haussa les épaules en signe de mépris:

— Un ours! voilà un redoutable ennemi! Kennybol dévoré par un ours!

Pour qui me prenez-vous, seigneur Hacket?

— Ah! pardon, dit Hacket en souriant.

— Si vous saviez ce qui m’est arrivé, mon brave seigneur, interrompit le vieux chasseur en baissant la voix, vous ne me répéteriez point que Han d’Islande est ici.

Hacket parut de nouveau un moment déconcerté. Il arrêta brusquement Kennybol par le bras, comme s’il craignait qu’il n’approchât davantage du point de la place souterraine où l’on apercevait, au-dessus des têtes des mineurs, la tête énorme du géant.

— Mon cher Kennybol, dit-il d’une voix presque solennelle, contez-moi, je vous prie, ce qui a causé votre retard. Vous sentez qu’au moment où nous sommes, tout peut être d’une haute importance.

— Cela est vrai, dit Kennybol après un moment de réflexion.

Alors, cédant aux instances réitérées de Hacket, il lui raconta comment il avait, le matin même, aidé de six compagnons, poussé un ours blanc jusqu’aux environs de la grotte de Walderhog, sans s’apercevoir, dans l’ardeur de la chasse, qu’il était si près de ce lieu redoutable; comment les plaintes de l’ours aux abois avaient attiré un petit homme, un monstre, un démon, qui, armé d’une hache de pierre, s’était jeté sur eux à la défense de l’ours. L’apparition de cette espèce de diable, qui ne pouvait être autre que Han, le démon islandais, les avait glacés tous sept de terreur; enfin, ses six malheureux camarades avaient été victimes des deux monstres, et lui, Kennybol, n’avait dû son salut qu’à une prompte fuite, qui n’avait pas été entravée, grâce à son agilité, à la fatigue de Han d’Islande, et, avant tout, à la protection du bienheureux patron des chasseurs, saint Sylvestre.

— Vous voyez, seigneur Hacket, dit-il en terminant son récit encore plein de son épouvante, et orné de toutes les fleurs de la rhétorique des montagnes, vous voyez que si je viens tard, ce n’est pas moi qu’il faut accuser, et qu’il est impossible que le démon d’Islande, que j’ai laissé ce matin avec son ours, s’acharnant sur les cadavres de mes six pauvres camarades dans la bruyère de Walderhog, soit maintenant, comme notre ami, dans cette mine d'Apsyl-Corh, à notre rendez-vous. Je vous proteste que cela ne se peut. Je le connais, à présent, ce démon incarné; je l'ai vu!

Hacket, qui avait tout écouté attentivement, prit la parole et dit d'une voix grave:

— Mon brave ami Kennybol, quand vous parlez de Han d'Islande ou de l'enfer, ne croyez rien impossible. Je savais tout ce que vous venez de me dire.

L'expression de l'extrême étonnement et de la plus naïve crédulité se peignit sur les traits sauvages du vieux chasseur des monts de Kole.

— Comment?

— … Oui, poursuivit Hacket, sur le visage duquel un observateur plus adroit eût peut-être démêlé quelque chose de triomphant et de sardonique, je savais tout, excepté pourtant que vous fussiez le héros de cette triste aventure. Han d'Islande me l'avait contée en me suivant ici.

— Vraiment! dit Kennybol; et son regard attaché sur Hacket venait de prendre un air de crainte et de respect.

Hacket continua avec le même sang-froid:

— Sans doute; mais maintenant, soyez tranquille, je vais vous conduire à ce formidable Han d'Islande.

Kennybol poussa un cri d'effroi.

— Soyez tranquille, vous dis-je, reprit Hacket. Voyez en lui votre chef et votre camarade; gardez-vous seulement de lui rappeler en rien ce qui s'est passé ce matin. Vous comprenez?

Il fallut céder, mais ce ne fut pas sans une vive répugnance intérieure qu'il consentit à se laisser présenter au démon. Ils s'avancèrent vers — le groupe où étaient Ordener, Jonas et Norbith.

— Mon bon Jonas, mon cher Norbith, dit Kennybol, que Dieu vous assiste!

— Nous, en avons besoin, Kennybol, dit Jonas. En ce moment le regard de Kennybol s'arrêta sur celui d'Ordener, qui cherchait le sien.

— Ah! vous voilà, jeune homme, dit-il en s'approchant vivement de lui et lui tendant sa main ridée et rude, soyez le bienvenu. Il paraît que votre hardiesse a eu bon succès?

Ordener, qui ne comprenait pas que ce montagnard parût le comprendre si bien, allait provoquer une explication, quand Norbith s'écria:

— Vous connaissez donc cet étranger, Kennybol?

— Par mon ange gardien, si je le connais! Je l'aime et je l'estime. Il est dévoué comme nous tous à la bonne cause que nous servons.

Et il lança vers Ordener un second regard d'intelligence, auquel celui-ci se préparait à répondre, lorsque Hacket, qui était allé chercher son géant, que tous ces bandits semblaient fuir avec effroi, les aborda tous quatre en disant:

— Mon brave chasseur Kennybol, voici votre chef, le fameux Han de Klipstadur!

Kennybol jeta sur le brigand gigantesque un coup d'oeil où il y avait plus de surprise encore que de crainte, et se pencha vers l'oreille de Hacket:

— Seigneur Hacket, le Han d'Islande que j'ai laissé ce matin à Walderhog était un petit homme.

Hacket lui répondit à voix basse:

— Vous oubliez, Kennybol! un démon!

— Il est vrai, dit le crédule chasseur, il aura changé de forme.

Et il se détourna en tremblant pour faire furtivement un signe de croix.

XXXIV

Le masque approche; c'est Angelo lui-même; le drôle entend bien son métier; il faut qu'il soit sûr de son fait.

LESSING.

C'est dans une sombre forêt de vieux chênes, où pénètre à peine le pâle crépuscule du matin, qu'un homme de petite taille en aborde un autre qui est seul, et qui paraît l'attendre. L'entretien suivant commence à voix basse:

— Daigne votre grâce me pardonner si je l'ai fait attendre! Plusieurs incidents m'ont retardé.

— Lesquels?

— Le chef des montagnards, Kennybol, n'est arrivé au rendez-vous qu'à minuit; et nous avons en revanche été troublés par un témoin inattendu.

— Qui donc?

— C'est un homme qui s'est jeté comme un fou dans la mine au milieu de notre sanhédrin. J'ai pensé d'abord que c'était un espion, et j'ai voulu le faire poignarder; mais il s'est trouvé porteur de la sauvegarde de je ne sais quel pendu fort respecté de nos mineurs, et ils l'ont pris sous leur protection. Je pense, en y réfléchissant, que ce n'est sans doute qu'un voyageur curieux ou un savant imbécile. En tout cas, j'ai disposé mes mesures à son égard.

— Tout va-t-il bien du reste?

— Fort bien. Les mineurs de Guldbranshal et de Fa-roër, commandés par le jeune Norbith et le vieux Jonas, les montagnards de Kole, conduits par Kennybol, doivent être en marche en ce moment. À quatre milles de l'Étoile-Bleue, leurs compagnons de Hubfallo et de Sund-Moër les joindront; ceux de Kongsberg et la troupe des forgerons du Smiasen, qui ont déjà forcé la garnison de Walhstrom de se retirer, comme le noble comte le sait, les attendent quelques milles plus loin. — Enfin, mon cher et honoré maître, toutes ces bandes réunies feront halte cette nuit à deux milles de Skongen, dans les gorges du Pilier-Noir.

— Mais votre Han d'Islande, comment l'ont-ils reçu?

— Avec une entière crédulité.

— Que ne puis-je venger la mort de mon fils sur ce monstre! Quel malheur qu'il nous ait échappé!

— Mon noble seigneur, usez d’abord du nom de Han d’Islande pour vous venger de Schumacker; vous aviserez ensuite au moyen de vous venger de Han lui-même. Les révoltés marcheront aujourd’hui tout le jour et feront halte ce soir, pour passer la nuit dans le défilé du Pilier-Noir, à deux milles de Skongen.

— Comment! vous laisseriez pénétrer si près de Skongen un rassemblement aussi considérable? — Musdoemon!…

— Un soupçon, noble comte! Que votre grâce daigne envoyer, à l’instant même, un messager au colonel Voethaün, dont le régiment doit être en ce moment à Skongen; informez-le que toutes les forces des insurgés seront campées cette nuit sans défiance dans le défilé du Pilier-Noir, qui semble avoir été créé exprès pour les embuscades.

— Je vous comprends; mais pourquoi, mon cher, avoir tout disposé de façon que les rebelles soient si nombreux?

— Plus l’insurrection sera formidable, seigneur, plus le crime de Schumacker et votre mérite seront grands. D’ailleurs il importe qu’elle soit entièrement éteinte d’un seul coup.

— Bien! mais pourquoi le lieu de la halte est-il si voisin de Skongen?

— Parce que, dans toutes les montagnes, c’est le seul où la défense soit impossible. Il ne sortira de là que ceux qui sont désignés pour figurer devant le tribunal.

— À merveille! — Quelque chose, Musdoemon, me dit de terminer promptement cette affaire. Si tout est rassurant de ce côté, tout est inquiétant de l’autre. Vous savez que nous avons fait faire à Copenhague des recherches secrètes sur les papiers qui pouvaient être tombés au pouvoir de ce Dispolsen?

— Eh bien, seigneur?

— Eh bien, je viens d’apprendre à l’instant que cet intrigant avait eu des rapports mystérieux avec ce maudit astrologue Cumbysulsum.

— Qui est mort dernièrement?

— Oui; et que le vieux sorcier avait en mourant remis à l’agent de Schumacker des papiers.

— Damnation! il avait des lettres de moi, un exposé de notre plan!

— De votre plan, Musdoemon!

— Mille pardons, noble comte! Mais aussi pourquoi votre grâce avait-elle été se livrer à ce charlatan de Cumbysulsum? le vieux traître!

— Écoutez, Musdoemon, je ne suis pas comme vous un être sans croyance et sans foi. — Ce n’est pas sans de justes raisons, mon cher, que j’ai toujours eu confiance dans la science magique du vieux Cumbysulsum.

— Que votre grâce n’a-t-elle eu autant de défiance de sa fidélité que de confiance en sa science? Au surplus, ne nous alarmons pas, mon noble maître, Dispolsen est mort, ses papiers sont perdus; dans quelques jours il ne sera plus question de ceux auxquels ils pourraient servir.

— En tout cas quelle accusation pourrait monter jusqu’à moi?

— Ou jusqu’à moi, protégé par votre grâce?

— Oh oui, mon cher, vous pouvez, certes, compter sur moi; mais hâtons, je vous prie, le dénoûment de tout ceci; je vais envoyer le messager au colonel. Venez, mes gens m’attendent derrière ces halliers, et il faut reprendre le chemin de Drontheim, que le mecklembourgeois a quitté sans doute. Allons, continuez à me bien servir, et, malgré tous les Cumbysulsum et les Dispolsen de la terre, comptez sur moi à la vie et à la mort!

— Je prie votre grâce de croire… Diable!

Ici ils s’enfoncèrent tous deux dans le bois, dans les détours duquel leurs voix s’éteignirent peu à peu; et bientôt après on n’y entendit plus que le bruit des pas des deux chevaux qui s’éloignaient.

XXXV

…. Battez, tambours! ils viennent!

…. Ils ont fait serment tous, et tous le même serment, de ne pas rentrer en Castille sans le comte prisonnier, leur seigneur.

Ils ont sa statue de pierre dans un chariot, et
sont résolus à ne retourner en arrière qu’en
voyant la statue s’en retourner elle-même.

Et en signe que celui qui ferait un pas en arrière serait regardé comme un traître, ils ont tous levé la main et prêté leur serment.

………………………………………

Et ils marchent vers Arlançon, aussi vite que peuvent aller les boeufs qui traînent le chariot; ils ne s’arrêtent pas plus que le soleil.

Burgos reste désert; seulement les femmes et les
enfants y sont demeurés; il en est ainsi dans les
environs.
Ils vont causant ensemble du cheval et du faucon,
et se demandant s’il faut affranchir la Castille
du tribut qu’elle paie à Léon.
Et avant d’entrer dans la Navarre, ils rencontrent
sur la frontière… —

Romances espagnoles.

Pendant que la conversation qu’on vient de lire avait lieu dans une des forêts qui avoisinent le Smiasen, les révoltés, divisés en trois colonnes, sortirent de la mine de plomb d’Apsyl-Corh, par l’entrée principale, qui s’ouvre de plain-pied sur un ravin profond. Ordener, qui, malgré son désir de se rapprocher de Kennybol, avait été rangé dans la bande de Norbith, ne vit d’abord qu’une longue procession de torches, dont les feux, luttant avec les premières lueurs du jour, se réfléchissaient sur des haches, des fourches, des pioches, des massues armées de pointes de fer, d’énormes marteaux, des pics, des leviers et toutes les armes grossières que la révolte peut emprunter au travail, mêlées à d’autres armes régulières, qui annonçaient que cette révolte était une conspiration, des mousquets, des piques, des sabres, des carabines et des arquebuses. Quand le soleil eut paru, et que la lumière des torches ne fut plus que de la fumée, il put mieux observer l’aspect de cette singulière armée, qui s’avançait en désordre, avec des chants rauques et des cris sauvages, pareille à un troupeau de loups affamés qui vont à la conquête d'un cadavre. Elle était partagée en trois divisions, ou plutôt en trois foules. D'abord marchaient les montagnards de Kole, commandés par Kennybol, auquel ils ressemblaient tous par leur costume de peaux de bêtes, et presque par leur mine farouche et hardie. Puis venaient les jeunes mineurs de Norbith et les vieux de Jonas, avec leurs grands feutres, leurs larges pantalons, leurs bras entièrement nus et leurs visages noirs, qui tournaient vers le soleil des yeux stupides. Au-dessus de ces bandes tumultueuses flottaient pêle-mêle des bannières couleur de feu, sur lesquelles on lisait différentes devises, telles que: Vive Schumacker! — Délivrons notre libérateur! — Liberté aux mineurs! Liberté au comte de Griffenfeld! — Mort à Guldenlew! — Mort aux oppresseurs! Mort à d'Ahlefeld! — Les rebelles paraissaient plutôt considérer ces enseignes comme des fardeaux que comme des ornements, et elles passaient de main en main quand les porte-étendards étaient fatigués ou voulaient mêler le son discordant de leur trompe aux psalmodies et aux vociférations de leurs camarades.

L'arrière-garde de cette étrange armée se composait de dix chariots traînés par des rennes et de grands ânes, destinés sans doute à porter les munitions; et l'avant-garde, du géant amené par Hacket, qui marchait seul, armé d'une massue et d'une hache, et bien loin duquel venaient, avec une sorte de terreur, les premiers rangs commandés par Kennybol, qui ne le quittait pas des yeux, comme pour pouvoir suivre son chef diabolique dans les diverses transfigurations qu'il lui plairait de subir.

Ce torrent de rebelles descendait ainsi avec une rumeur confuse et en remplissant les bois de pins du bruit de la trompe des montagnes du Drontheimhus septentrional. Il fut bientôt grossi par les diverses bandes de Sund-Moër, de Hubfallo, de Kongsberg, et la troupe des forgerons du Smiasen, qui présentait un contraste bizarre avec le reste des révoltés. C'étaient des hommes grands et forts, armés de pinces et de marteaux, ayant pour cuirasses de larges tabliers de cuir, ne portant pour enseigne qu'une haute croix de bois, qui marchaient gravement et en cadence, avec une régularité plus réligieuse encore que militaire sans autre chant de guerre que les psaumes et les cantiques de la bible. Ils n'avaient de chef que leur porte-croix, qui s'avançait sans armes à leur tête.

Tout ce ramas d'insurgés ne rencontrait pas un être humain sur son passage. À leur approche, le chevrier poussait son troupeau dans une caverne, et le paysan désertait son village; car l’habitant des plaines et des vallées est partout le même, il craint la trompe des bandits de même que le cor des archers.

Ils traversèrent ainsi des collines et des forêts semées de rares bourgades, suivirent des routes sinueuses où l’on voyait plus de traces de bêtes fauves que de pas d’hommes, côtoyèrent des lagunes, franchirent des torrents, des ravins, des marais. Ordener ne connaissait aucun de ces lieux. Une fois seulement, son regard, se levant, rencontra a l’horizon l’apparence lointaine et bleuâtre d’une grande roche courbée. Il se pencha vers un de ses grossiers compagnons de voyage:

— Ami, quel est ce rocher là-bas, au sud, à droite?

— C’est le Cou-de-Vautour, le rocher d’Oëlmoe, répondit l’autre.

Ordener soupira profondément.

XXXVI

Ma fille, Dieu vous garde et vous veuille bénir!

RÉGNIER.

Guenon, perroquets, peignes et rubans, tout était prêt chez la comtesse d’Ahlefeld pour recevoir le lieutenant Frédéric. Elle avait fait venir à grands frais le dernier roman de la fameuse Scudéry. On l’avait, par son ordre, revêtu d’une riche reliure à fermoirs de vermeil ciselé, et placé entre les flacons d’essence et les boîtes de mouches, sur l’élégante toilette à pieds dorés, ornée de mosaïque de bois, dont elle avait meublé le boudoir futur de son cher enfant Frédéric. Quand elle eut ainsi parcouru le cercle minutieux de ces petits soins maternels, qui l’avaient un moment distraite de la haine, elle songea qu’elle n’avait plus autre chose à faire que de nuire à Schumacker et à Éthel. Le départ du général Levin les lui livrait sans défense.

Il s’était passé depuis peu dans le donjon de Munckholm une foule de choses sur lesquelles elle n’avait pu obtenir que des données très vagues. — Quel était le serf, vassal ou paysan, qui, à en croire les paroles très ambiguës et très embarrassées de Frédéric, s’était fait aimer de la fille de l’ex-chancelier? — Quels étaient les rapports du baron Ordener avec les prisonniers de Munckholm? — Quels étaient les motifs incompréhensibles de l’absence si singulière d’Ordener, dans un moment où les deux royaumes n’étaient occupés que de son prochain mariage avec cette Ulrique d’Ahlefeld qu’il paraissait dédaigner? — Enfin, que s’était-il passé entre Levin de Knud et Schumacker? — L’esprit de la comtesse se perdait en conjectures. Elle résolut enfin, pour éclaircir tous ces mystères, de hasarder une descente à Munckholm, conseil que lui donnaient à la fois sa curiosité de femme et ses intérêts d’ennemie.

Un soir qu’Éthel, seule dans le jardin du donjon, venait de graver, pour la sixième fois, avec le diamant d’une bague, je ne sais quel chiffre mystérieux sur le pilier noir de la poterne qui avait vu disparaître son Ordener, cette porte s’ouvrit. La jeune fille tressaillit. C’était la première fois que cette poterne s’ouvrait, depuis qu’elle s’était refermée sur lui.

Une grande femme pâle, vêtue de blanc, était devant elle. Elle présentait à Éthel un sourire doux comme du miel empoisonné, et il y avait, derrière son regard paisible et bienveillant, comme une expression de haine, de dépit et d'admiration involontaire.

Éthel la considéra avec étonnement, presque avec crainte. Depuis sa vieille nourrice, qui était morte entre ses bras, c'était la première femme qu'elle voyait dans la sombre enceinte de Munckholm.

— Mon enfant, dit doucement l'étrangère, vous êtes la fille du prisonnier de Munckholm?

Éthel ne put s'empêcher de détourner la tête; quelque chose en elle ne sympathisait pas avec l'étrangère, et il lui semblait qu'il y avait du venin dans le souffle qui accompagnait cette douce voix. — Elle répondit:

— Je m'appelle Éthel Schumacker. Mon père dit qu'on me nommait, dans mon berceau, comtesse de Tongsberg et princesse de Wollin.

— Votre père vous dit cela! s'écria la grande femme avec un accent qu'elle réprima aussitôt. Puis elle ajouta: — Vous avez éprouvé bien des malheurs!

— Le malheur m'a reçue à ma naissance dans ses bras de fer, répondit la jeune prisonnière; mon noble père dit qu'il ne me quittera qu'à ma mort.

Un sourire passa sur les lèvres de l'étrangère, qui reprit du ton de la pitié:

— Et vous ne murmurez pas contre ceux qui ont jeté votre vie dans ce cachot? vous ne maudissez pas les auteurs de votre infortune?

— Non, de peur que notre malédiction n'attire sur eux des maux pareils à ceux qu'ils nous font souffrir.

— Et, continua la femme blanche avec un front impassible, connaissez-vous les auteurs de ces maux dont vous vous plaignez?

Éthel réfléchit un moment et dit:

— Tout s'est fait par la volonté du ciel.

— Votre père ne vous parle jamais du roi?

— Le roi? c'est celui pour lequel je prie matin et soir sans le connaître.

Éthel ne comprit pas pourquoi l'étrangère se mordit les lèvres à cette réponse.

— Votre malheureux père ne vous nomme jamais, dans sa colère, ses implacables ennemis, le général Arensdorf, l'évêque Spollyson, le chancelier d'Ahlefeld?

— J'ignore de qui vous me parlez.

— Et connaissez-vous le nom de Levin de Knud?

Le souvenir de la scène qui s'était passée la surveille entre le gouverneur de Drontheim et Schumacker était trop récent dans l'esprit d'Éthel, pour que le nom de Levin de Knud ne la frappât point.

— Levin de Knud? dit-elle; il me semble que c'est cet homme pour lequel mon père a tant d'estime et presque tant d'affection.

— Comment! s'écria la grande femme.

— Oui, reprit la jeune fille, c'est ce Levin de Knud que mon seigneur et père défendait si vivement avant-hier contre le gouverneur de Drontheim.

Ces paroles redoublèrent la surprise de l'autre:

— Contre le gouverneur de Drontheim! Ne vous jouez pas de moi, ma fille. Ce sont vos intérêts qui m'amènent. Votre père prenait contre le gouverneur de Drontheim le parti du général Levin de Knud!

— Du général! il me semble que c'était du capitaine… Mais non; vous avez raison. — Mon père, poursuivit Éthel, paraissait conserver autant d'attachement à ce général Levin de Knud qu'il témoignait de haine au gouverneur du Drontheimhus.

— Voilà encore un étrange mystère! dit en elle-même la grande femme pâle, dont la curiosité s'allumait de plus en plus. — Ma chère enfant, que s'est-il donc passé entre votre père et le gouverneur de Drontheim?

L'interrogatoire fatiguait la pauvre Éthel, qui regarda fixement la grande femme.

— Suis-je donc une criminelle pour que vous m'interrogiez ainsi?

À ce mot si simple, l'inconnue parut interdite, comme si elle sentait le fruit de son adresse lui échapper. Elle reprit néanmoins, d'une voix légèrement émue:

— Vous ne me parleriez pas ainsi si vous saviez pourquoi et pour qui je viens.

— Quoi! dit Éthel, viendriez-vous de sa part? m'apporteriez-vous un message de lui?

Et tout son sang rougissait son beau visage; et tout son coeur s'était soulevé dans son sein, gonflé d'impatience et d'inquiétude.

— … De qui? demanda l'autre.

La jeune fille s'arrêta au moment de prononcer le nom adoré. Elle avait vu luire dans l'oeil de l'étrangère un éclair de sombre joie qui semblait un rayon de l'enfer. Elle dit tristement:

— Vous ne savez pas de qui je veux parler. L'expression de l'attente trompée se peignit pour la seconde fois sur le visage bienveillant de l'autre.

— Pauvre jeune fille! s'écria-t-elle, que pourrais-je faire pour vous?

Éthel n’entendait pas. Sa pensée était derrière les montagnes du septentrion, à la suite de l’aventureux voyageur. Sa tête s’était baissée sur son sein, et ses mains s’étaient jointes comme d’elles-mêmes.

— Votre père espère-t-il sortir de cette prison? Cette question, que l’inconnue répéta deux fois, ramena Éthel à elle-même.

— Oui, dit-elle.

Et une larme roula dans ses yeux.

Ceux de l’étrangère s’étaient animés à cette réponse.

— Il l’espère, dites-moi! et comment? par quel moyen? quand?

— Il espère sortir de cette prison, parce qu’il espère sortir de la vie.

Il y a quelquefois dans la simplicité d’une âme douce et jeune une puissance qui se joue des ruses d’un coeur vieilli dans la méchanceté. Cette pensée parut agiter l’esprit de la grande femme, car l’expression de son visage changea tout à coup; et, posant sa main froide sur le bras d’Éthel:

— Écoutez-moi, dit-elle d’un ton qui était presque de la franchise; avez-vous entendu dire que les jours de votre père sont de nouveau menacés d’une enquête juridique? qu’il est soupçonné d’avoir fomenté une révolte parmi les mineurs du Nord?

Ces mots de révolte et d’enquête n’offraient pas d’idée claire à Éthel; elle leva son grand oeil noir sur l’inconnue:

— Que voulez-vous dire?

— Que votre père conspire contre l’état; que son crime est presque découvert; que ce crime entraîne la peine de mort.

— Mort! crime!… s’écria la pauvre enfant.

— Crime et mort, dit gravement la femme étrangère.

— Mon père! mon noble père! poursuivit Éthel.

Hélas! lui qui passe ses jours à m’entendre lire l’Edda et l’Évangile! lui, conspirer! Que vous a-t-il donc fait?

— Ne me regardez pas ainsi; je vous le répète, je suis loin d’être votre ennemie. Votre père est soupçonné d’un grand crime, je vous en avertis. Peut-être, au lieu de ces témoignages de haine, aurais-je droit à quelque reconnaissance.

Ce reproche toucha Éthel.

— Oh! pardon, noble dame! pardon! Jusqu’ici quel être humain avons-nous vu qui ne fût de nos ennemis? J’ai été défiante envers vous; vous me le pardonnez, n’est-ce pas?

L’étrangère sourit.

— Quoi! ma fille! est-ce que jusqu’à ce jour vous n’avez pas encore rencontré un ami?

Une vive rougeur enflamma les joues d’Éthel. Elle hésita un moment.

— Oui. — Dieu connaît la vérité. Nous avons trouvé un ami, noble dame.

Un seul!

— Un seul! dit précipitamment la grande femme. Nommez-le-moi, de grâce; vous ne savez pas combien il est important. C’est pour le salut de votre père. Quel est cet ami?

— Je l’ignore, dit Éthel. L’inconnue pâlit.

— Est-ce parce que je veux vous servir que vous vous jouez de moi? Songez qu’il s’agit des jours de votre père. Quel est, dites, quel est l’ami dont vous me parliez?

— Le ciel sait, noble dame, que je ne connais de lui que son nom, qui est Ordener.

Éthel dit ces mots avec cette peine que l’on éprouve à prononcer devant un indifférent le nom sacré qui réveille en nous tout ce qui aime.

— Ordener! Ordener! répéta l’inconnue avec une émotion étrange, tandis que ses mains froissaient vivement la blanche broderie de son voile. — Et quel est le nom de son père? demanda-t-elle d’une voix troublée.

— Je ne sais, répondit la jeune fille. Qu’importent sa famille et son père! Cet Ordener, noble dame, est le plus généreux des hommes.

Hélas! l’accent qui accompagnait cette parole avait livré tout le secret du coeur d’Éthel à la pénétration de l’étrangère.

L’étrangère prit un air calme et composé, et fit cette demande sans quitter la jeune fille du regard:

— Avez-vous entendu parler du prochain mariage du fils du vice-roi avec la fille du grand-chancelier actuel, d’Ahlefeld?

Il fallut recommencer cette question, pour ramener l’esprit d’Éthel à des idées qui ne semblaient point l’intéresser.

— Je crois que oui, fut toute sa réponse.

Sa tranquillité, son air indifférent parurent surprendre l’inconnue.

— Eh bien! que pensez-vous de ce mariage?

Il lui fut impossible d’apercevoir la moindre altération dans les grands yeux d’Éthel tandis qu’elle répondait:

— En vérité, rien. Puisse leur union être heureuse!

— Les comtes Guldenlew et d’Ahlefeld, pères des deux fiancés, sont deux grands ennemis de votre père.

— Puisse, répéta doucement Éthel, l’union de leurs enfants être heureuse!

— Il me vient une idée, poursuivit l’astucieuse inconnue. Si les jours de votre père sont menacés, vous pourriez, à l’occasion de ce grand mariage, faire obtenir sa grâce par le fils du comte vice-roi.

— Les saints vous récompenseront de tous vos bons soins pour nous, noble dame; mais comment faire parvenir ma prière jusqu’au fils du vice-roi?

Ces paroles étaient prononcées avec tant de bonne foi qu’elles arrachèrent à l’étrangère un geste d’étonnement.

— Quoi! est-ce que vous ne le connaissez pas?

— Ce puissant seigneur! s’écria Éthel; vous oubliez qu’aucun de mes regards n’a encore franchi l’enceinte de cette forteresse.

— Mais vraiment, murmura entre ses dents la grande femme, que me disait donc ce vieux fou de Levin? Elle ne le connaît pas. — Impossible cependant! dit-elle en élevant la voix; vous devez avoir vu le fils du vice-roi, il est venu ici.

— Cela se peut, noble dame; de tous les hommes qui sont venus ici je n’ai jamais vu que lui, mon Ordener.

— Votre Ordener! interrompit l’inconnue. — Elle continua, sans paraître s’apercevoir de la rougeur d’Éthel: — Connaissez-vous un jeune homme au visage noble, à la taille élégante, à la démarche grave et assurée? son oeil est doux et austère, son teint frais comme celui d’une jeune fille, ses cheveux châtains.

— Oh! s’écria la pauvre Éthel, c’est lui, c’est mon fiancé, mon adoré Ordener! Dites-moi, noble et chère dame, m’apportez-vous de ses nouvelles? Où l’avez-vous rencontré? Il vous a dit qu’il daignait m’aimer, n’est-il pas vrai? Il vous a dit qu’il avait tout mon amour. Hélas! une malheureuse prisonnière n’a que son amour au monde. Ce noble ami! Il n’y a pas huit jours, je le voyais encore à cette même place, avec son manteau vert, sous lequel bat un si généreux coeur, et cette plume noire qui se balançait avec tant de grâce sur son beau front.

Elle n’acheva pas. Elle vit la grande femme inconnue trembler, pâlir et rougir, et crier d’une voix foudroyante à ses oreilles:

— Malheureuse! tu aimes Ordener Guldenlew, le fiancé d'Ulrique d'Ahlefeld, le fils du mortel ennemi de ton père, du vice-roi de Norvège!

Éthel tomba évanouie.

XXXVII

CAUPOLICAN.

Marchez avec tant de précaution que la terre elle-même n’entende pas le bruit de vos pas… Redoublez de soins, mes amis… Si nous arrivons sans être entendus, je vous réponds de la victoire.

TUCAPEL.

La nuit a tout couvert de ses voiles; une obscurité effrayante enveloppe la terre. Nous n’entendons aucune sentinelle, nous n’avons point aperçu d’espions.

RINGO.

Avançons!

. . . .

TUCAPEL.

Qu’entends-je? serions-nous découverts?

LOPE DE VEGA, *l’Arauque dompté*.

— Dis-moi, Guldon Stayper, mon vieux camarade, sais-tu que la bise du soir commence à me rabattre vigoureusement les poils de mon bonnet sur le visage?

C’était Kennybol, qui, détachant un moment son regard du géant qui marchait en tête des révoltés, s’était tourné à demi vers l’un des montagnards que le hasard d’une course désordonnée avait placé près de lui.

Celui-ci secoua la tête, et changea d’épaule la bannière qu’il portait, avec un grand soupir de lassitude.

— Hum! je crois, notre capitaine, que dans ces maudites gorges du Pilier-Noir, où le vent se précipite comme un torrent, nous n’aurons pas tout à fait aussi chaud cette nuit qu’une flamme qui danse sur la braise.

— Il faudra faire de tels feux que les vieilles chouettes en soient éveillées au haut des rochers, dans leurs palais de ruines. Je n’aime pas les chouettes; dans cette horrible nuit où j’ai vu la fée Ubfem, elle avait la forme d’une chouette.

— Par saint Sylvestre! interrompit Guldon Stayper en détournant la tête, l’ange du vent nous donne de furieux coups d’ailes! — Si l’on m’en croit, capitaine Kennybol, on mettra le feu à tous les sapins d’une montagne.

D’ailleurs ce sera une belle chose à voir qu’une armée se chauffant avec une forêt.

— À Dieu ne plaise, mon cher Guldon! et les chevreuils! et les gerfauts! et les faisans! fais cuire le gibier, à merveille; mais ne le fais pas brûler.

Le vieux Guldon se mit à rire:

— Notre capitaine, tu es bien toujours le même démon Kennybol, le loup des chevreuils, l’ours des loups, et le buffle des ours!

— Sommes-nous encore loin du Pilier-Noir? demanda une voix parmi les chasseurs.

— Compagnon, répondit Kennybol, nous entreront dans les gorges à la nuit tombante; nous voici dans un instant aux Quatre-Croix. Il se fit un moment de silence, pendant lequel on n’entendit que le bruit multiplié des pas, le gémissement de la bise, et le chant éloigné de la bande des forgerons du lac Smiasen.

— Ami Guldon Stayper, reprit Kennybol après avoir sifflé l’air du chasseur Rollon, tu viens de passer quelques jours à Drontheim?

— Oui, notre capitaine; notre frère Georges Stayper le pêcheur était malade, et j’ai été le remplacer pendant quelque temps dans sa barque, afin que sa pauvre famille ne mourût pas de faim pendant qu’il serait mort de maladie.

— Et puisque tu arrives de Drontheim, as-tu eu occasion de voir ce comte, le prisonnier… Schumacker… Gleffenhem… quel est son nom déjà? cet homme enfin au nom duquel nous nous révoltons contre la tutelle royale, et dont tu portes sans doute les armoiries brodées sur cette grande bannière couleur de feu?

— Elle est bien lourde! dit Guldon. — Tu veux parler du prisonnier du château-fort de Munckholm, le comte?… enfin soit. Et comment veux-tu, notre brave capitaine, que je l’aie vu? il m’aurait fallu, ajouta-t-il en baissant la voix, les yeux de ce démon qui marche devant nous, sans pourtant laisser derrière lui l’odeur du soufre, de ce Han d’Islande qui voit à travers les murs, ou l’anneau de la fée Mab qui passe par le trou des serrures. — Il n’y a en ce moment parmi nous, j’en suis sûr, qu’un seul homme qui ait vu le comte… le prisonnier dont tu me parles.

— Un seul? Ah! le seigneur Hacket? Mais ce Hacket n’est plus parmi nous. Il nous a quittés cette nuit pour retourner…

— Ce n’est point le seigneur Hacket que je veux dire, notre capitaine.

— Et qui donc?

— Ce jeune homme au manteau vert, à la plume noire, qui est tombé au milieu de nous cette nuit.

— Eh bien?

— Eh bien! dit Guldon en se rapprochant de Kennybol, c’est celui-là qui connaît le comte… ce fameux comte, enfin, comme je te connais, notre capitaine Kennybol.

Kennybol regarda Guldon, cligna de l’oeil gauche en faisant claquer ses dents, et lui frappa sur l’épaule avec cette exclamation triomphale qui échappe à notre amour-propre, quand nous sommes contents de notre pénétration: — Je m’en doutais!

— Oui, notre capitaine, poursuivit Guldon Stayper en replaçant l’étendard couleur de feu sur l’épaule délassée, je te proteste que le jeune homme vert a vu le comte… — je ne sais comment tu l’appelles, celui donc pour qui nous allons nous battre. — dans le donjon même de Munckholm, et qu’il ne paraissait pas attacher moins d’importance à entrer dans cette prison, que toi ou moi à pénétrer dans un parc royal.

— Et comment sais-tu cela, notre frère Guldon?

Le vieux montagnard saisit le bras de Kennybol, puis, entr’ouvrant sa peau de loutre avec une précaution presque soupçonneuse: — Regarde! lui dit-il.

— Par mon très saint patron! s’écria Kennybol, cela brille comme du diamant!

C’était en effet une riche boucle de diamants, qui attachait le grossier ceinturon de Guldon Stayper.

— Et il est aussi vrai que c’est du diamant, repartit celui-ci en laissant tomber le pan de sa casaque, qu’il est vrai que la lune est à deux journées de marche de la terre, et que le cuir de mon ceinturon est du cuir de buffle mort.

Mais les traits de Kennybol s’étaient rembrunis, et avaient passé de l’étonnement à la sévérité. Il baissa les yeux vers la terre en disant avec une sorte de solennité sauvage:

— Guldon Stayper, du village de Chol-Soe, dans les montagnes de Kole, ton père, Medprath Stayper, est mort à cent deux ans, sans avoir rien à se reprocher, car ce ne sont pas des forfaitures que de tuer par mégarde un daim ou un élan du roi. — Guldon Stayper, tu as sur ta tête grise cinquante-sept bonnes années, ce qui n’est jeunesse que pour le hibou. — Guldon Stayper, notre camarade, j’aimerais mieux pour toi que les diamants de cette boucle fussent des grains de mil, si tu ne l’as pas acquise légitimement, aussi légitimement que le faisan royal acquiert la balle de plomb du mousquet.

En prononçant cette singulière admonestation, il y avait dans l’accent du chef montagnard à la fois de la menace et de l’onction.

— Aussi vrai que notre capitaine Kennybol est le plus hardi chasseur de Kole, répondit Guldon sans s’émouvoir, et que ces diamants sont des diamants, je les possède en légitime propriété.

— Vraiment! reprit Kennybol avec une inflexion de voix qui tenait le milieu entre la confiance et le doute.

— Dieu et mon patron béni savent, reprit Guldon, que c’était un soir, au moment où je venais d’indiquer le Spladgest de Drontheim à des enfants de notre bonne mère la Norvège, qui apportaient le corps d’un officier trouvé sur les grèves d’Urchtal. — Il y a de ceci huit jours environ. — Un jeune homme s’avança vers ma barque: — À Munckholm! me dit-il. Je m’en souciais peu, notre capitaine; un oiseau ne vole pas volontiers autour d’une cage. Cependant le jeune seigneur avait la mine haute et fière, il était suivi d’un domestique qui menait deux chevaux; il avait sauté dans ma barque d’un air d’autorité; je pris mes rames, — c’est-à-dire les rames de mon frère. C’était mon bon ange qui le voulait. En arrivant, le jeune passager, après avoir parlé au seigneur sergent, qui commandait sans doute le fort, m’a jeté pour paiement, et Dieu m’entend, notre capitaine, oui, cette boucle de diamants que je viens de te montrer, et qui eût dû appartenir à mon frère Georges, et non à moi, si, à l’heure où le voyageur, que le ciel assiste, m’a pris, la journée que je faisais pour Georges n’eût été finie. Cela est la vérité, capitaine Kennybol.

— Bien.

Peu à peu la physionomie du chef reprit autant de sérénité que son expression, naturellement sombre et dure, le lui permettait, et il demanda à Guldon, d’une voix radoucie:

— Et tu es sûr, notre vieux camarade, que ce jeune homme est le même qui est maintenant derrière nous avec ceux de Norbith?

— Sûr. Je n’oublierais pas, entre mille visages, le visage de celui qui a fait ma fortune. D’ailleurs, c’est le même manteau, la même plume noire.

— Je te crois, Guldon.

— Et il est clair qu’il allait voir le fameux prisonnier; car, si ce n’eût pas été pour quelque grand mystère, il n’eût point récompensé ainsi le batelier qui l’amenait; et d’ailleurs, maintenant qu’il se retrouve avec nous…

— Tu as raison.

— Et j’imagine, notre capitaine, que le jeune étranger est peut-être bien plus en crédit auprès du comte que nous allons délivrer, que le seigneur Hacket, qui ne me semble bon, sur mon âme, qu’à miauler comme un chat sauvage.

Kennybol fit un signe de tête expressif.

— Notre camarade, tu as dit ce que j’allais dire. Je serais, dans toute cette affaire, bien plus tenté d’obéir à ce jeune seigneur qu’à l’envoyé Hacket. Que saint Sylvestre et saint Olaüs me soient en aide; si le démon islandais nous commande, je pense, camarade Guldon, que nous le devons beaucoup moins au corbeau bavard Hacket, qu’à cet inconnu.

— Vrai, notre capitaine? demanda Guldon. Kennybol ouvrait la bouche pour répondre, quand il se sentit frapper sur l’épaule. C’était Norbith.

— Kennybol, nous sommes trahis! Gormon Woëstroem vient du sud. Tout le régiment des arquebusiers marche contre nous. Les hulans de Slesvig sont à Sparbo; trois compagnies de dragons danois attendent des chevaux au village de Loevig. Tout le long de la route, il a vu autant de casaques vertes que de buissons. Hâtons-nous de gagner Skongen; ne faisons point halte avant d’y être entrés. Là, du moins, nous pourrons nous défendre. Encore, Gormon croit-il avoir vu des mousquetons briller à travers les broussailles, en longeant les gorges du Pilier-Noir.

Le jeune chef était pâle, agité; cependant son regard et le son de sa voix annonçaient encore l’audace et la résolution.

— Impossible! s’écria Kennybol.

— Certain! certain! dit Norbith.

— Mais le seigneur Hacket…

— Est un traître ou un lâche. Sois sûr de ce que je dis, camarade

Kennybol. — Où est-il, ce Hacket?

En ce moment le vieux Jonas aborda les deux chefs. Au découragement profond empreint dans tous ses traits, il était facile de voir qu’il était instruit de la fatale nouvelle.

Les regards des deux vieillards, Jonas et Kennybol, se rencontrèrent, et tous deux se mirent à hocher la tête comme d’un mutuel accord.

— Eh bien! Jonas? Eh bien! Kennybol? dit Norbith.

Cependant le vieux chef des mineurs de Fa-roër avait passé lentement sa main sur son front ridé, et il répondait à voix basse au coup d’oeil du vieux chef des montagnards de Kole:

— Oui, cela est trop vrai, cela est trop sûr. C’est Gormon Woëstroem qui les a vus.

— Si la chose est ainsi, dit Kennybol, que faire?

— Que faire? répliqua Jonas.

— J’estime, camarade Jonas, que nous agirions sagement de nous arrêter.

— Et plus sagement encore, notre frère Kennybol, de reculer.

— S’arrêter! reculer! s’écria Norbith. Il faut avancer!

Les deux vieillards tournèrent vers le jeune homme un regard froid et surpris.

— Avancer! dit Kennybol. Et les arquebusiers de Munckholm!

— Et les hulans de Slesvig! ajouta Jonas.

— Et les dragons danois! reprit Kennybol. Norbith frappa la terre du pied.

— Et la tutelle royale! et ma mère, qui meurt de faim et de froid!

— Démons! la tutelle royale! dit le mineur Jonas, avec une sorte de frémissement.

— Qu’importe! dit le montagnard Kennybol. Jonas prit Kennybol par la main.

— Notre compagnon le chasseur, vous n’avez pas l’honneur d’être pupille de notre glorieux souverain Christiern IV. Puisse le saint roi Olaüs. qui est au ciel, nous délivrer de la tutelle!

— Demande ce bienfait à ton sabre! dit Norbith d’une voix farouche.

— Les paroles hardies coûtent peu à un jeune homme, camarade Norbith, répondit Kennybol, mais songez que si nous allons plus loin, toutes ces casaques vertes…

— Je songe que nous aurons beau rentrer dans nos montagnes, comme des renards devant les loups, on connaît nos noms et notre révolte; et, mourir pour mourir, j’aime mieux la balle d’une arquebuse que la corde d’un gibet.

Jonas remua la tête de haut en bas en signe d’adhésion.

— Diable! la tutelle pour nos frères! le gibet pour nous! Norbith pourrait bien avoir raison.

— Donne-moi la main, mon brave Norbith, dit Kennybol; il y a danger des deux côtés. Il vaut mieux marcher droit au précipice qu’y tomber à reculons.

— Allons! allons donc! s’écria le vieux Jonas, en faisant sonner le pommeau de son sabre.

Norbith leur serra vivement la main.

— Frères, écoutez! Soyez audacieux comme moi, je serai prudent comme vous. Ne nous arrêtons aujourd’hui qu’à Skongen; la garnison est faible et nous l’écraserons. Franchissons, puisqu’il le faut, les défilés du Pilier-Noir, mais dans un profond silence. Il faut les traverser, quand même ils seraient surveillés par l’ennemi.

— Je crois que les arquebusiers ne sont pas encore au pont de l’Ordals, avant Skongen. Mais, n’importe. Silence!

— Silence! soit, répéta Kennybol.

— Maintenant, Jonas, reprit Norbith, retournons tous deux à notre poste. Demain peut-être nous serons à Drontheim, malgré les arquebusiers, les hulans, les dragons et tous les justaucorps verts du midi.

Les trois chefs se quittèrent. Bientôt le mot d’ordre *silence!* passa de rang en rang, et cette bande de rebelles, un moment auparavant si tumultueuse, ne fut plus, dans ces déserts rembrunis par les approches de la nuit, que comme une troupe de fantômes muets, qui se promène sans bruit dans les sentiers tortueux d’un cimetière.

Cependant la route qu’ils suivaient se rétrécissait de moment en moment, et semblait s’enfoncer par degrés entre deux remparts de rochers qui devenaient de plus en plus escarpés. À l’instant où la lune rougeâtre se leva au milieu d’un amas froid de nuages qui déroulaient autour d’elle leurs formes bizarres avec une mobilité fantastique, Kennybol s’inclina vers Guldon Stayper:

— Nous allons entrer dans le défilé du Pilier-Noir. Silence!

En effet, on entendait déjà le bruit du torrent qui suit entre les deux montagnes tous les détours du chemin, et l’on voyait au midi l’énorme pyramide oblongue de granit, qu’on a nommée le Pilier-Noir, se dessiner sur le gris du ciel et sur la neige des montagnes environnantes; tandis que l’horizon de l’ouest, chargé de brouillards, était borné par l’extrémité de la forêt du Sparbo et par un long amphithéâtre de rochers, étagés comme un escalier de géants.

Les révoltés, contraints d’allonger leurs colonnes dans ces routes tortueuses étranglées entre deux montagnes, continuèrent leur marche. Ils pénétrèrent dans ces gorges profondes sans allumer de torches, sans pousser de clameurs. Le bruit même de leurs pas ne s’entendait point au milieu du fracas assourdissant des cascades et des rugissements d'un vent violent qui ployait les forêts druidiques et faisait tournoyer les nuées autour des pitons revêtus de glace et de neige. Perdue dans les sombres profondeurs du défilé, la lumière souvent voilée de la lune, ne descendait pas jusqu'aux fers de leurs piques, et les aigles blancs qui passaient par intervalles au-dessus de leurs têtes ne se doutaient pas qu'une aussi grande multitude d'hommes troublât en ce moment leurs solitudes.

Une fois le vieux Guldon Stayper toucha l'épaule de Kennybol de la crosse de sa carabine.

— Capitaine! notre capitaine! je vois quelque chose reluire derrière cette touffe de houx et de genêts.

— Je le vois également, répondit le chef montagnard; c'est l'eau du torrent qui réfléchit les nuages.

Et l'on passa outre.

Une autre fois Guldon arrêta brusquement son chef par le bras.

— Regarde, lui dit-il, ne sont-ce pas des mousquetons qui brillent là-haut dans l'ombre de ce rocher?

Kennybol secoua la tête, puis après un moment d'attention: — Rassure-toi, frère Guldon. C'est un rayon de la lune qui tombe sur un pic de glace.

Aucun sujet d'alarme ne se présenta plus autour d'eux, et les diverses bandes, paisiblement déroulées dans les sinuosités du défilé, oublièrent insensiblement tout ce que la position du lieu présentait de danger.

Après deux heures de marche souvent pénible, au milieu des troncs d'arbres et des quartiers de granit dont le chemin était obstrué, l'avant-garde entra dans le montueux bouquet de sapins qui termine la gorge du Pilier-Noir, et au-dessus duquel pendent de hauts rochers noirs et moussus.

Guldon Stayper se rapprocha de Kennybol, affirmant qu'il se félicitait d'être enfin sur le point de sortir de ce maudit coupe-gorge, et qu'il fallait rendre grâce à saint Silvestre de ce que le Pilier-Noir ne leur avait pas été fatal.

Kennybol se mit à rire, jurant qu'il n'avait jamais partagé ces terreurs de vieilles femmes; car pour la plupart des hommes, quand le péril est passé, il n'a point existé, et l'on cherche alors à prouver, par l'incrédulité que l'on montre, le courage qu'on n'aurait peut-être pas montré.

En ce moment, deux petites lueurs rondes, pareilles à deux charbons ardents, qui se mouvaient dans l'épaisseur du taillis, appelèrent son attention.

— Par le salut de mon âme! dit-il à voix basse, en secouant le bras de Guldon, voilà, certes, deux yeux de braise qui doivent appartenir au plus beau chatpard qui ait jamais miaulé dans un hallier.

— Tu as raison, répondit le vieux Stayper, et s’il ne marchait pas devant nous, je croirais plutôt que ce sont les yeux maudits du démon d’Isl…

— Chut! cria Kennybol.

Puis, saisissant sa carabine:

— En vérité, poursuivit-il, il ne sera pas dit qu’une aussi belle pièce aura passé impunément sous les yeux de Kennybol.

Le coup était parti avant que Guldon Stayper, qui s’était jeté sur le bras de l’imprudent chasseur, eût pu l’arrêter. — Ce ne fut pas la plainte aiguë d’un chat sauvage qui répondit à la bruyante détonation de la carabine, ce fut un affreux grondement de tigre, suivi d’un éclat de rire humain, plus affreux encore.

On n’entendit pas le retentissement du coup de feu se prolonger, et mourir d’écho en écho dans les profondeurs des montagnes; car à peine la lumière de la carabine eut-elle brillé dans la nuit, à peine le bruit fatal de la poudre eut-il éclaté dans le silence, qu’un millier de voix formidables s’élevèrent inattendues sur les monts, dans les gorges, dans les forêts; qu’un cri de *vive le Roi!* immense comme un tonnerre, roula sur la tête des rebelles, à leurs côtés, devant et derrière eux, et que la lueur meurtrière d’une mousqueterie terrible, éclatant de toutes parts, les frappant et les éclairant à la fois, leur fit voir, parmi les rouges tourbillons de fumée, un bataillon derrière chaque rocher, et un soldat derrière chaque arbre.

XXXVIII

Aux armes! aux armes! capitaines!

Le captif d’Ochali.

Qu’on veuille bien recommencer avec nous la journée qui vient de s’écouler, et se transporter à Skongen, où, tandis que les insurgés sortaient de la mine de plomb d’Apsyl-Corh, est entré le régiment des arquebusiers, que nous avons vu en marche au trentième chapitre de cette très véridique narration.

Après avoir donné quelques ordres pour le logement des soldats qu’il commandait, le baron Voethaün, colonel des arquebusiers, allait franchir le seuil de l’hôtel qui lui était destiné près de la porte de la ville, quand il sentit une main lourde se poser familièrement sur son épaule. Il se retourna.

C’était un homme de petite taille, dont un grand chapeau d’osier, qui couvrait ses traits, ne laissait apercevoir que la barbe rousse et touffue. Il était soigneusement enveloppé des plis d’une espèce de manteau de bure grise, qui, à un reste de capuchon qu’on y voyait pendre, paraissait avoir été une robe d’ermite, et ne laissait apercevoir que ses mains cachées sous de gros gants.

— Brave homme, demanda brusquement le colonel, que diable me voulez-vous?

— Colonel des arquebusiers de Munckholm, répondit l’homme avec une expression bizarre, suis-moi un instant, j’ai un avis à te donner.

À cette étrange invitation, le baron resta un moment surpris et muet.

— Un avis important, colonel, répéta l’homme aux gros gants.

Cette insistance détermina le baron Voethaün. Dans le moment de crise où se trouvait la province, et avec la mission qu’il remplissait, aucun renseignement n’était à dédaigner. — Allons, dit-il.

Le petit homme marcha devant lui, et dès qu’ils furent hors de la ville il s’arrêta: — Colonel, as-tu bonne envie d’exterminer d’un seul coup tous les révoltés?

Le colonel se prit à rire:

— Mais ce ne serait point mal commencer la campagne.

— Eh bien! fais placer dès aujourd’hui en embuscade tous tes soldats dans les gorges du Pilier-Noir, à deux milles de cette ville; les bandes y camperont cette nuit. Au premier feu que tu verras briller, fonds sur eux avec les tiens. La victoire sera aisée.

— Brave homme, l’avis est bon, et je vous en remercie. Mais comment savez-vous ce que vous me dites?

— Si tu me connaissais, colonel, tu me demanderais plutôt comment il se pourrait faire que je ne le susse point.

— Qui donc êtes-vous?

L’homme frappa du pied.

— Je ne suis point venu ici pour te dire cela.

— Ne craignez rien. Qui que vous soyez, le service que vous rendez sera votre sauvegarde. Peut-être étiez-vous du nombre des rebelles?

— J’ai refusé d’en être.

— Alors pourquoi taire votre nom, puisque vous êtes un fidèle sujet du roi?

— Que t’importe?

Le colonel voulut tirer encore quelques éclaircissements de ce singulier donneur d’avis.

— Dites-moi, est-il vrai que les brigands soient commandés par le fameux Han d’Islande?

— Han d’Islande! répéta le petit homme avec une inflexion de voix extraordinaire.

Le baron recommença sa question. Un éclat de rire, qui eût pu passer pour un rugissement, fut toute la réponse qu’il put obtenir. Il essaya plusieurs autres questions sur le nombre et les chefs des mineurs; le petit homme lui ferma la bouche.

— Colonel des arquebusiers de Munckholm, je t’ai dit tout ce que j’avais à te dire. Embusque-toi dès aujourd’hui dans le défilé du Pilier-Noir avec ton régiment entier, et tu pourras écraser tout ce troupeau d’hommes.

— Vous ne voulez pas me dévoiler qui vous êtes; ainsi vous vous privez de la reconnaissance du roi; mais il n’en est pas moins juste que le baron Voethaün vous témoigne sa gratitude du service que vous lui rendez.

Le colonel jeta sa bourse aux pieds du petit homme.

— Garde ton or, colonel, dit celui-ci. Je n’en ai pas besoin; et, ajouta-t-il, en montrant un gros sac suspendu à sa ceinture de corde, s’il te fallait un salaire pour tuer ces hommes, j’aurais encore, colonel, de l’or à te donner en paiement de leur sang.

Avant que le colonel fût revenu de l’étonnement où l’avaient jeté les inexplicables paroles de cet être mystérieux, il avait disparu.

Le baron Voethaün retourna lentement sur ses pas, en se demandant ce qu’on devait ajouter de foi aux avis de cet homme. Au moment où il rentrait dans son hôtel, on lui remit une lettre scellée des armes du grand-chancelier. C’était en effet un message du comte d’Ahlefeld, où le colonel retrouva, avec une surprise facile à concevoir, le même avis et le même conseil que venait de lui donner aux portes de la ville l’incompréhensible personnage au chapeau d’osier et aux gros gants.

XXXIX

Cent bannières flottaient sur les têtes des braves, des ruisseaux de sang coulaient de toutes parts, et la mort paraissait préférable à la fuite. Un barde saxon aurait appelé cette nuit la fête des épées; le cri des aigles fondant sur leur proie, ce bruit de guerre, aurait été plus flatteur à son oreille que les chants joyeux d’un festin de noces.

WALTER SCOTT. *Ivanhoë*.

On n’entreprendra pas de décrire ici l’épouvantable confusion qui rompit les colonnes déjà désordonnées des rebelles, quand le fatal défilé leur montra soudain toutes ses cimes hérissées, tous ses antres peuplés d’ennemis inattendus. Il eût été difficile de distinguer si le long cri, formé de mille cris, qui s’échappa de leurs rangs ainsi inopinément foudroyés, était un cri de désespoir, d’épouvante ou de rage. Le feu terrible que vomissaient sur eux de toutes parts les pelotons démasqués des troupes royales s’accroissait de moment en moment; et, avant qu’il fût parti de leurs lignes un autre coup de mousquet que le funeste coup de Kennybol, ils ne voyaient déjà plus autour d’eux qu’un nuage étouffant de fumée embrasée à travers lequel volait aveuglément la mort, où chacun d’eux, isolé, ne reconnaissait que soi-même, et distinguait à peine de loin les arquebusiers, les dragons, les hulans, qui se montraient confusément au front des rochers et sur la lisière des taillis, comme des diables dans une fournaise.

Toutes ces bandes, ainsi éparses dans une longueur d’environ un mille, sur un chemin étroit et tortueux, bordé d’un côté d’un torrent profond, de l’autre d’une muraille de rochers, ce qui leur ôtait toute facilité de se replier sur elles-mêmes, ressemblaient à ce serpent que l’on brise en le frappant sur le dos, lorsqu’il a déroulé tous ses anneaux, et dont les tronçons vivants se roulent longtemps dans leur écume, cherchant encore à se réunir.

Quand la première surprise fut passée, le même désespoir parut animer, comme une âme commune, tous ces hommes naturellement farouches et intrépides. Furieux de se voir ainsi écraser sans défense, cette foule de brigands poussa une clameur comme un seul corps, une clameur qui couvrit un moment tout le bruit des ennemis triomphants; et quand ceux-ci les virent sans chefs, sans ordre, presque sans armes, gravir, sous un feu terrible, des rochers à pic, s’attacher des dents et des poings à des ronces au-dessus des précipices, en agitant des marteaux et des fourches de fer, ces soldats si bien armés, si bien rangés, si sûrement postés, et qui n'avaient pas encore perdu un seul des leurs, ne purent se défendre d'un mouvement d'effroi involontaire.

Il y eut plusieurs fois de ces barbares qui parvinrent, tantôt sur des ponts de morts, tantôt en s'élevant sur les épaules de leurs camarades, appliqués aux pentes des rocs comme des échelles vivantes, jusqu'aux sommets occupés par les assaillants; mais à peine avaient-ils crié: Liberté! à peine avaient-ils élevé leurs haches ou leurs massues noueuses; à peine avaient-ils montré leurs noirs visages, tout écumants d'une rage convulsive, qu'ils étaient précipités dans l'abîme, entraînant avec eux ceux de leurs hasardeux compagnons qu'ils rencontraient dans leur chute suspendus à quelque buisson ou embrassant quelque pointe de roche.

Les efforts de ces infortunés pour fuir et pour se défendre étaient vains; toutes les issues du défilé étaient fermées; tous les points accessibles étaient hérissés de soldats. La plupart de ces malheureux rebelles expiraient en mordant le sable de la route, après avoir brisé leurs bisaiguës ou leurs coutelas sur quelque éclat de granit; quelques-uns, croisant les bras, l'oeil fixé à terre, s'asseyaient sur des pierres au bord du chemin, et là ils attendaient, en silence et immobiles, qu'une balle les jetât dans le torrent. Ceux d'entre eux que la prévoyance de Hacket avait armés de mauvaises arquebuses dirigeaient au hasard quelques coups perdus vers la crête des rochers, vers l'ouverture des cavernes d'où tombaient sans cesse sur eux de nouvelles pluies de balles. Une rumeur tumultueuse, où l'on distinguait les cris furieux des chefs et les commandements tranquilles des officiers, se mêlait incessamment au fracas intermittent et fréquent des décharges, tandis qu'une sanglante vapeur montait et fuyait au-dessus du lieu de carnage, jetant au front des montagnes de grandes lueurs tremblantes; et que le torrent, blanchi d'écume, passait comme un ennemi, entre ces deux troupes d'hommes ennemis, emportant avec lui sa proie de cadavres.

Mais, dès les premiers moments de l'action, ou plutôt de la boucherie, c'étaient les montagnards de Kole, commandés par le brave et imprudent Kennybol, qui avaient le plus souffert. On se souvient qu'ils formaient l'avant-garde de l'armée rebelle, et qu'ils étaient engagés dans le bois de pins qui termine le défilé. A peine le malencontreux Kennybol eut-il armé son arquebuse, que ce bois, peuplé soudain, en quelque sorte par magie, de tirailleurs ennemis, les enferma d'un cercle de feu; tandis que, du sommet d'une hauteur en esplanade dominée par quelques grandes roches penchées, un bataillon entier du régiment de Munckholm, formé en équerre, les foudroyait sans relâche d’une mousqueterie épouvantable. Dans cette horrible crise, Kennybol, éperdu, jeta les yeux vers le mystérieux géant, n’attendant plus de salut que d’un pouvoir surhumain, tel que celui de Han d’Islande; mais il ne vit point le formidable démon déployer soudain deux ailes immenses, et s’élever au-dessus des combattants en vomissant des flammes et des foudres sur les arquebusiers; il ne le vit point grandir tout à coup jusqu’aux nuages, et renverser une montagne sur les assaillants, ou frapper du pied la terre, et ouvrir un abîme sous le bataillon embusqué. Ce formidable Han d’Islande recula comme lui dès la première bordée d’arquebusades, et vint à lui d’un visage presque troublé, demandant une carabine, attendu, disait-il avec une voix assez ordinaire, qu’en un pareil moment sa hache lui était aussi inutile que la quenouille d’une vieille femme.

Kennybol, étonné, mais toujours aussi crédule, remit son propre mousqueton au géant avec un effroi qui lui faisait presque oublier la crainte des balles qui pleuvaient autour de lui. Espérant toujours un prodige, il s’attendit encore à voir son arme fatale devenir entre les mains de Han d’Islande aussi grosse qu’un canon, ou se métamorphoser en un dragon ailé lançant du feu par les yeux, la gueule et les narines. Il n’en fut rien, et l’étonnement du pauvre chasseur fut au comble quand il vit le démon charger comme lui la carabine de poudre et de plomb ordinaire, la mettre en joue à sa manière, et lâcher tout simplement son coup, sans même ajuster aussi bien que lui, Kennybol, aurait pu le faire. Il le regarda avec une morne stupeur répéter cette opération toute machinale plusieurs fois de suite; et, convaincu enfin qu’il fallait renoncer à un miracle, il songea à tirer ses compagnons et lui-même du mauvais pas où ils se trouvaient, par quelque moyen humain. Déjà son pauvre vieux camarade Guldon Stayper était tombé à ses côtés, criblé de blessures; déjà tous les montagnards, épouvantés et ne pouvant fuir, cernés de toutes parts, se serraient les uns contre les autres, sans songer à se défendre, avec de lamentables clameurs. Kennybol comprit et vit combien cet amas d’hommes donnait de sûreté aux coups de l’ennemi, dont chaque décharge lui enlevait une vingtaine des siens. Il ordonna à ses malheureux compagnons de s’éparpiller, de se jeter dans les taillis qui longent le chemin, beaucoup plus large en cet endroit que dans le reste de la gorge du Pilier-Noir, de se cacher sous les broussailles, et de riposter de leur mieux au feu de plus en plus meurtrier des tirailleurs et du bataillon. Les montagnards, pour la plupart bien armés, parce qu’ils étaient tous chasseurs, exécutèrent l’ordre de leur chef avec une soumission qu’il n’eût peut-être pas obtenue dans un moment moins critique; car, en face du danger, les hommes en général perdent la tête, et alors ils obéissent assez volontiers à celui qui se charge d’avoir du sang-froid et de la présence d’esprit pour tous.

Cette mesure sage était loin cependant d’être la victoire, ou seulement le salut. Il y avait déjà plus de montagnards étendus hors de combat qu’il n’en restait debout, et, malgré l’exemple et les encouragements de leur chef et du géant, plusieurs d’entre eux, s’appuyant sur leurs mousquets inutiles, ou s’étendant auprès des blessés, avaient pris obstinément le parti de recevoir la mort sans avoir la peine de la donner. On s’étonnera peut-être que ces hommes, accoutumés tous les jours à braver la mort en courant de glaciers en glaciers à la poursuite des bêtes féroces, eussent si tôt perdu courage; mais, qu’on ne s’y trompe pas, dans les coeurs vulgaires, le courage est local; on peut rire devant la mitraille, et trembler dans les ténèbres ou au bord d’un précipice; on peut affronter chaque jour les animaux farouches, franchir des abîmes d’un bond, et fuir devant une décharge d’artillerie. Il arrive souvent que l’intrépidité n’est qu’habitude, et que, pour avoir cessé de craindre la mort sous telle ou telle forme, on ne l’en redoute pas moins.

Kennybol, entouré des monceaux de ses frères expirants, commençait lui-même à désespérer, quoiqu’il n’eût encore reçu qu’une légère atteinte au bras gauche, et qu’il vît le diabolique géant continuer son office de mousquetaire avec l’impassibilité la plus rassurante. Tout à coup il aperçut, dans le fatal bataillon rangé sur la hauteur, se manifester une confusion extraordinaire, et qui ne pouvait être certainement causée par le peu de dommage que lui faisait éprouver le très faible feu de ses montagnards. Il entendit d’affreux cris de détresse, des imprécations de mourants, des paroles d’épouvante, s’élever de ce peloton victorieux. Bientôt la mousqueterie se ralentit, la fumée s’éclaircit, et il put voir distinctement d’énormes quartiers de granit tomber sur les arquebusiers de Munckholm du haut de la roche élevée qui dominait le plateau où ils étaient en bataille. Ces éclats de rocs se suivaient dans leur chute avec une horrible rapidité; on les entendait se briser à grand bruit les uns sur les autres, et rebondir parmi les soldats, qui, rompant leurs lignes, se hâtaient de descendre en désordre de la hauteur et fuyaient dans toutes les directions.

À ce secours inattendu, Kennybol tourna la tête; — le géant était pourtant encore là! Le montagnard resta interdit, car il avait pensé que Han d’Islande avait enfin pris son vol et s’était placé au haut de ce rocher d’où il écrasait l’ennemi. Il éleva les yeux vers le sommet d’où tombaient les formidables masses, et ne vit rien. Il ne pouvait donc supposer qu’une partie des rebelles étaient parvenus à ce redoutable poste, puisqu’on ne voyait point briller d’armes, puisqu’on n’entendait point de cris de triomphe.

Cependant le feu du plateau avait entièrement cessé; l’épaisseur des arbres cachait les débris du bataillon qui se ralliait sans doute au bas de la hauteur. La mousqueterie des tirailleurs était même devenue moins vive. Kennybol, en chef habile, profita de cet avantage bien inespéré; il ranima ses compagnons, et leur montra, à la sombre lueur qui rougissait toute cette scène de carnage, le monceau de cadavres entassés sur l’esplanade parmi les quartiers de rocs qui continuaient de tomber d’intervalle en intervalle. Alors les montagnards répondirent à leur tour par des clameurs de victoire aux gémissements de leurs ennemis; ils se formèrent en colonne, et, bien que toujours incommodés par les tirailleurs épars dans les halliers, ils résolurent, pleins comme d’un courage nouveau, de sortir de vive force de ce funeste défilé.

La colonne ainsi formée allait s’ébranler; déjà Kennybol donnait le signal avec sa trompe, au bruit des acclamations *Liberté! liberté! Plus de tutelle!* quand le son du tambour et du cor, sonnant la charge, se fit entendre devant eux; puis le reste du bataillon de l’esplanade, grossi de quelques renforts de soldats frais, déboucha à portée de carabine d’un tournant de la route, et montra aux montagnards un front hérissé de piques et de bayonnettes, soutenu de rangs nombreux dont l’oeil ne pouvait sonder la profondeur. Arrivé ainsi à l’improviste en vue de la colonne de Kennybol, le bataillon fit halte, et celui qui paraissait le commander agita une petite bannière blanche en s’avançant vers les montagnards, escorté d’un trompette.

L’apparition imprévue de cette troupe n’avait point déconcerté Kennybol. Il y a un point, dans le sentiment du danger, où la surprise et la crainte sont impossibles. Aux premiers bruits du cor et du tambour, le vieux renard de Kole avait arrêté ses compagnons. Au moment où le front du bataillon se déploya en bon ordre, il fit charger toutes les carabines et disposa ses montagnards deux par deux, afin de présenter moins de surface aux décharges de l’ennemi. Il se plaça lui-même en tête, à côté du géant, avec lequel, dans la chaleur de l’action, il commençait presque à se familiariser, ayant osé remarquer que ses yeux n’étaient pas précisément aussi flamboyants que la fournaise d’une forge, et que les prétendues griffes de ses mains ne s’éloignaient pas autant qu’on le disait de la forme des ongles humains.

Quand il vit le commandant des arquebusiers royaux s’avancer ainsi comme pour capituler, et le feu des tirailleurs s’éteindre tout à fait, bien que leurs cris d’appel, qui retentissaient de toutes parts, décelassent encore leur présence dans le bois, il suspendit un instant ses préparatifs de défense.

Cependant l’officier à la bannière blanche était parvenu au milieu de l’espace qui divisait les deux colonnes; il s’arrêta, et le trompette qui l’accompagnait sonna trois fois la sommation. Alors l’officier cria d’une voix forte, que les montagnards entendirent distinctement, malgré le fracas toujours croissant dont le combat remplissait derrière eux les gorges de la montagne:

— Au nom du roi! la grâce du roi est accordée à ceux des rebelles qui mettront bas les armes, et livreront leurs chefs à la souveraine justice de sa majesté!

Le parlementaire avait à peine prononcé ces paroles qu’un coup de feu partit d’un taillis voisin. L’officier frappé chancela; il fit quelques pas en élevant sa bannière, et tomba en s’écriant: — Trahison!

Nul ne sut de quelle main venait le coup fatal.

— Trahison! lâcheté! répéta le bataillon des arquebusiers avec des frémissements de rage.

Et une effroyable salve de mousqueterie foudroya les montagnards.

— Trahison! reprirent à leur tour les montagnards, furieux de voir leurs frères tomber à leurs côtés.

Et une décharge générale répondit à la bordée inattendue des soldats royaux.

— Sur eux! camarades! mort à ces lâches! Mort! crièrent les officiers des arquebusiers.

— Mort! mort! répétèrent les montagnards. Et les combattants des deux partis s’élancèrent les sabres nus, et les deux colonnes se rencontrèrent presque sur le corps du malheureux officier, avec un horrible bruit d’armes et de clameurs.

Les rangs enfoncés se mêlèrent. Chefs rebelles, officiers royaux, soldats, montagnards, tous, pêle-mêle, se heurtèrent, se saisirent, s’étreignirent, comme deux troupeaux de tigres affamés qui se joignent dans un désert. Les longues piques, les bayonnettes, les pertuisanes étaient devenues inutiles; les sabres et les haches brillaient seuls au-dessus des têtes; et beaucoup de combattants, luttant corps à corps, ne pouvaient même plus employer d'autres armes que le poignard ou les dents.

Une égale fureur, une pareille indignation animait les montagnards et les arquebusiers; le même cri *trahison! vengeance!* était vomi par toutes les bouches. La mêlée en était arrivée à ce point où la férocité entre dans tous les coeurs, où l'on préfère à sa vie la mort d'un ennemi que l'on ne connaît pas, où l'on marche avec indifférence sur des amas de blessés et de cadavres parmi lesquels le mourant se réveille, pour combattre encore de sa morsure celui qui le foule aux pieds.

C'est dans ce moment qu'un petit homme, que plusieurs combattants, à travers les fumées et les vapeurs du sang, prirent d'abord, à son vêtement de peaux de bêtes, pour un animal sauvage, se jeta au milieu du carnage, avec d'horribles rires et des hurlements de joie. Nul ne savait d'où il venait, ni pour quel parti il combattait, car sa hache de pierre ne choisissait pas ses victimes, et fendait également le crâne d'un rebelle et le ventre d'un soldat. Il paraissait néanmoins massacrer plus volontiers les arquebusiers de Munckholm. Tout s'écartait devant lui; il courait dans la mêlée comme un esprit; et sa hache sanglante tournoyait sans cesse autour de lui, faisant jaillir de tous côtés des lambeaux de chair, des membres rompus, des ossements fracassés. Il criait *vengeance!* comme tous les autres, et prononçait des paroles bizarres, parmi lesquelles le nom de Gill revenait souvent. Ce formidable inconnu était dans le carnage comme dans une fête.

Un montagnard sur lequel son regard meurtrier s'était arrêté vint tomber aux pieds du géant dans lequel Kennybol avait placé tant d'espérances déçues, en criant:

— Han d'Islande, sauve-moi!

— Han d'Islande! répéta le petit homme.

Il s'avança vers le géant.

— Est-ce que tu es Han d'Islande? dit-il.

Le géant pour réponse leva sa hache de fer. Le petit homme recula, et le tranchant, dans sa chute, s'enfonça dans le crâne même du malheureux qui implorait le secours du géant.

L'inconnu se mit à rire.

— Ho! ho! par Ingolfe! je croyais Han d'Islande plus adroit.

— C’est ainsi que Han d’Islande sauve qui l’implore! dit le géant.

— Tu as raison. Les deux formidables champions s’attaquèrent avec rage. La hache de fer et la hache de pierre se rencontrèrent; elles se heurtèrent si violemment, que les deux tranchants volèrent en éclats avec mille étincelles.

Plus prompt que la pensée, le petit homme désarmé saisit une lourde massue de bois, laissée à terre par un mourant, et, évitant le géant qui se courbait pour le saisir entre ses bras, il asséna, à mains jointes, un coup furieux de massue sur le large front de son colossal adversaire.

Le géant poussa un cri étouffé et tomba. Le petit homme triomphant le foula aux pieds, en écumant de joie.

— Tu portais un nom trop lourd pour toi, dit-il.

Et, agitant sa massue victorieuse, il alla chercher d’autres victimes.

Le géant n’était pas mort. La violence du coup l’avait étourdi, il était tombé presque sans vie. Il commençait à rouvrir les yeux et à faire quelques faibles mouvements, lorsqu’un arquebusier l’aperçut dans le tumulte, et se jeta sur lui en criant:

— Han d’Islande est pris! victoire!

— Han d’Islande est pris! répétèrent toutes les voix avec des accents de triomphe ou de détresse.

Le petit homme avait disparu.

Il y avait déjà quelque temps que les montagnards se sentaient succomber sous le nombre; car aux arquebusiers de Munckholm s’étaient joints les tirailleurs de la forêt, et des détachements de hulans et de dragons démontés, qui arrivaient de moment en moment de l’intérieur des gorges, où la reddition des principaux chefs rebelles avait arrêté le carnage. Le brave Kennybol, blessé au commencement de l’action, avait été fait prisonnier. La capture de Han d’Islande acheva d’abattre tout le reste du courage des montagnards. Ils mirent bas les armes.

Quand les premières blancheurs de l’aube éclairèrent la cime aiguë des hauts glaciers encore à demi submergés dans l’ombre, il n’y avait plus dans les défilés du Pilier-Noir qu’un morne repos, qu’un affreux silence parfois entremêlé de faibles plaintes dont se jouait le vent léger du matin. De noires nuées de corbeaux accouraient vers ces fatales gorges de tous les points du ciel; et quelques pauvres chevriers, ayant passé pendant le crépuscule sur la lisière des rochers, revinrent effrayés dans leurs cabanes, affirmant qu’ils avaient vu, dans le défilé du Pilier-Noir, une bête à face humaine, qui buvait du sang, assise sur des monceaux de morts.

XL

Brûle donc qui voudra sous ces feux couverts!

BRANTÔME.

— Ma fille, ouvrez cette fenêtre; ces vitraux sont bien sombres, je voudrais voir un peu le jour.

— Voyez le jour, mon père! la nuit approche à grands pas.

— Il y a encore des rayons de soleil sur les collines qui bordent le golfe. J'ai besoin de respirer cet air libre à travers les barreaux de mon cachot. — Le ciel est si pur!

— Mon père, un orage vient derrière l'horizon.

— Un orage, Éthel! où le voyez-vous?

— C'est parce que le ciel est pur; mon père, que j'attends un orage.

Le vieillard jeta un regard surpris sur la jeune fille.

— Si j'avais pensé cela dès ma jeunesse, je ne serais point ici. Puis il ajouta d'un ton moins ému:

— Ce que vous dites est juste, mais n'est pas de votre âge. Je ne comprends point comment il se fait que votre jeune raison ressemble à ma vieille expérience.

Éthel baissa les yeux, comme troublée par cette réflexion grave et simple. Ses deux mains se joignirent douloureusement, et un soupir profond souleva sa poitrine.

— Ma fille, dit le vieux captif, depuis quelques jours vous êtes pâle, comme si jamais la vie n'avait échauffé le sang de vos veines. Voilà plusieurs matins que vous m'abordez avec des paupières rouges et gonflées, avec des yeux qui ont pleuré et veillé. Voilà plusieurs journées, Éthel, que je passe dans le silence, sans que votre voix essaie de m'arracher à la sombre méditation de mon passé. Vous êtes auprès de moi plus triste que moi; et cependant vous n'avez pas, comme votre père, le fardeau de toute une vie de néant et de vide qui pèse sur votre âme. L'affliction entoure votre jeunesse, mais ne peut pénétrer jusqu'à votre coeur. Les nuages du matin se dissipent promptement. Vous êtes à cette époque de l'existence où l'on se choisit dans ses rêves un avenir indépendant du présent, quel qu'il soit. Qu'avez-vous donc, ma fille? Grâce à cette monotone captivité, vous êtes à l'abri des malheurs imprévus. Quelle faute avez-vous commise? — Je ne puis croire que ce soit sur moi que vous vous affligiez; vous devez être accoutumée à mon irrémédiable infortune. L'espérance, à la vérité, n'est plus dans mes discours; mais ce n'est pas un motif pour que je lise le désespoir dans vos yeux.

En parlant ainsi, la voix sévère du prisonnier s'était attendrie presque jusqu'à l'accent paternel. Éthel, muette, se tenait debout devant lui. Tout à coup, elle se détourna d'un mouvement presque convulsif, tomba à genoux sur la pierre, et cacha son visage dans ses mains, comme pour étouffer les larmes et les sanglots qui s'échappaient tumultueusement de son sein.

Trop de douleur gonflait le coeur de l'infortunée jeune fille. Qu'avait-elle donc fait à cette fatale étrangère, pour lui révéler le secret qui détruisait toute sa vie? Hélas! depuis que le nom de son Ordener lui était connu tout entier, la pauvre enfant n'avait pas encore pu livrer ses yeux au sommeil, ni son âme au repos. La nuit elle n'éprouvait d'autre soulagement que celui de pouvoir pleurer en liberté. C'en était donc fait! il n'était point à elle, celui qui lui appartenait par tous ses souvenirs, par toutes ses douleurs, par toutes ses prières, celui dont elle s'était crue l'épouse sur la foi de ses rêves. Car la soirée où Ordener l'avait si tendrement serrée dans ses bras n'était plus dans sa pensée que comme un songe. Et en effet, ce doux songe, chacune de ses nuits le lui avait rendu depuis. C'était donc une tendresse coupable que celle qu'elle conservait encore malgré elle à cet ami absent! Son Ordener était le fiancé d'une autre! Et qui peut dire ce qu'éprouva ce coeur virginal quand le sentiment étrange et inconnu de la jalousie vint s'y glisser comme une vipère? quand elle s'agita pendant les longues heures de l'insomnie sur son lit brûlant, se figurant son Ordener, peut-être en ce moment même, dans les bras d'une autre femme plus belle, plus riche et plus noble qu'elle? — Car, se disait-elle, j'étais bien folle de croire qu'il avait été chercher la mort pour moi. Ordener est le fils d'un vice-roi, d'un puissant seigneur, et moi, je ne suis rien qu'une pauvre prisonnière; rien, que l'enfant méprisée d'un proscrit. Il est parti, lui qui est libre! et parti, sans doute, pour aller épouser sa belle fiancée, la fille d'un chancelier, d'un ministre, d'un orgueilleux comte! — Mais il m'a donc trompée, mon Ordener? ô Dieu! qui m'eût dit que cette voix pût tromper?

Et la malheureuse Éthel pleurait et pleurait encore, et elle voyait devant ses yeux son Ordener, celui dont elle avait fait le dieu ignoré de tout son être, cet Ordener paré de l'éclat de son rang, marchant à l'autel au milieu d'une fête, et se tournant vers l'autre avec ce sourire qui était jadis sa joie.

Cependant, au sein de son inexprimable désolation, elle n’avait pas un moment oublié sa tendresse filiale. Cette faible fille avait fait les plus héroïques efforts pour dérober son malheur à son infortuné père; car c’est ce qu’il y a de plus douloureux dans la douleur que d’en comprimer l’explosion extérieure, et les larmes qu’on dévore sont bien plus amères que celles qu’on répand. Il avait fallu plusieurs jours pour que le silencieux vieillard s’aperçût du changement de son Éthel, et les questions presque affectueuses qu’il venait de lui adresser avaient enfin fait jaillir tout à coup ses larmes trop longtemps renfermées dans son coeur.

Le père regarda quelque temps sa fille pleurer avec un sourire amer, et en secouant la tête.

— Éthel, dit-il enfin, toi qui ne vis pas parmi les hommes, pourquoi pleures-tu?

Il achevait à peine ces paroles que la noble et douce fille se releva. Elle avait, par je ne sais quelle puissance, arrêté les larmes dans ses yeux, qu’elle essuyait avec son écharpe.

— Mon père, dit-elle avec force, mon seigneur et père, pardonnez-moi; c’était un moment de faiblesse.

Puis elle leva sur lui des regards qui s’efforçaient de sourire.

Elle alla au fond de la chambre chercher l’Edda, vint se rasseoir près de son père taciturne, et ouvrit le livre au hasard. Alors, calmant l’émotion de sa voix, elle se mit à lire; mais sa lecture inutile passait sans être écoutée, ni d’elle, ni du vieillard.

Celui-ci fit un geste de la main.

— Assez, assez, ma fille.

Elle ferma le livre.

— Éthel, ajouta Schumacker, songez-vous encore quelquefois à Ordener?

La jeune fille, interdite, tressaillit.

— Oui, continua-t-il; à cet Ordener, qui est parti….

— Mon seigneur et père, interrompit Éthel, pourquoi nous occuper de lui? Je pense, comme vous, qu’il est parti pour ne pas revenir.

— Pour ne pas revenir, ma fille! Je n’ai pu dire cela. Je ne sais quel pressentiment m’avertit au contraire qu’il reviendra.

— Telle n’était point votre pensée, mon noble père, quand vous me parliez avec tant de défiance de ce jeune homme.

— En ai-je donc parlé avec défiance?

— Oui, mon père, et je me range en cela de votre avis; je pense qu'il nous a trompés.

— Qu'il nous a trompés, ma fille! Si je l'ai jugé ainsi, j'ai agi comme tous les hommes qui condamnent sans preuve. Je n'ai reçu de cet Ordener que des témoignages de dévouement.

— Et savez-vous, mon vénérable père, si ces paroles cordiales ne cachaient pas des pensées perfides?

— D'ordinaire, les hommes ne s'empressent point autour du malheur et de la disgrâce. Si cet Ordener ne m'était point attaché, il ne serait pas ainsi venu dans ma prison sans but.

— Êtes-vous sûr, reprit Éthel d'une voix faible, qu'en venant ici il n'ait eu aucun but?

— Et lequel? demanda vivement le vieillard.

Éthel se tut.

L'effort était trop grand pour elle, de continuer à accuser le bien-aimé Ordener, qu'elle défendait autrefois contre son père.

— Je ne suis plus le comte de Griffenfeld, poursuivit celui-ci. Je ne suis plus le grand-chancelier de Danemark et de Norvège, le dispensateur favori des grâces royales, le tout-puissant ministre. Je suis un misérable prisonnier d'état, un proscrit, un pestiféré politique. C'est déjà du courage que de parler de moi sans exécration à tous ces hommes que j'ai comblés d'honneurs et de biens; c'est du dévouement que de franchir le seuil de ce cachot, si l'on n'est pas un geôlier ou un bourreau; c'est de l'héroïsme, ma fille, que de le franchir en se disant mon ami. — Non, je ne serai point ingrat comme toute cette race humaine. Ce jeune homme a mérité ma reconnaissance, ne fût-ce que pour m'avoir montré un visage bienveillant et fait entendre une voix consolatrice.

Éthel écoutait péniblement ce langage, qui l'eût ravie quelques jours plus tôt, lorsque cet Ordener était encore dans son coeur son Ordener. Le vieillard, après s'être arrêté un moment, reprit d'une voix solennelle:

— Écoutez-moi, ma fille, car ce que je vais vous dire est grave. Je me sens dépérir lentement; la vie se retire peu à peu de moi; oui, ma fille, ma fin approche.

Éthel l'interrompit par un gémissement étouffé.

— O Dieu, mon père, ne parlez pas ainsi! de grâce, épargnez votre pauvre fille! Hélas! est-ce que vous voulez l'abandonner aussi? Que deviendra-t-elle, seule au monde, quand votre protection lui manquera?

— La protection d’un proscrit! dit le père en remuant la tête. — Au reste, c’est à cela que j’ai pensé. Oui, votre bonheur futur m’occupe plus encore que mes malheurs passés. — Écoutez-moi donc, et ne m’interrompez plus. Cet Ordener ne mérite pas d’être jugé aussi sévèrement par vous, ma fille, et j’avais cru jusqu’ici que vous n’aviez point tant d’aversion pour lui. Ses dehors sont francs et nobles; ce qui ne prouve rien à la vérité, mais je dois dire qu’il ne me paraît pas peut-être sans quelques vertus, bien qu’il lui suffise de porter une âme d’homme pour renfermer en lui le germe de tous les vices et de tous les crimes. Toute flamme donne sa fumée.

Le vieillard s’arrêta encore une fois, et, fixant son regard sur sa fille, il ajouta:

— Averti intérieurement de l’approche de ma mort, j’ai médité sur lui et sur vous, Éthel; et s’il revient, comme j’en ai l’espérance, — je vous le donne pour protecteur et pour mari.

Éthel pâlit, trembla; c’était au moment où son rêve de bonheur venait de s’envoler pour jamais, que son père essayait de le réaliser. Cette pensée si amère: J’aurais donc pu être heureuse! vint rendre à son désespoir toute sa violence. Elle resta un moment sans pouvoir parler, de peur de laisser échapper les larmes brûlantes qui roulaient dans ses yeux.

Le père attendait.

— Quoi! dit-elle enfin d’une voix éteinte, vous me le destiniez pour mari, mon seigneur et père, sans connaître sa naissance, sa famille, son nom?

— Je ne vous le destinais point, ma fille, je vous le destine.

Le ton du vieillard était presque impérieux; Éthel soupira.

— … Je vous le destine, dis-je; et que m’importe sa naissance? je n’ai pas besoin de connaître sa famille, puisque je connais sa personne. Songez-y; c’est la seule ancre de salut qui vous reste. Je crois qu’il n’a heureusement pas pour vous la même répugnance que vous montrez pour lui.

La pauvre jeune fille leva les yeux au ciel.

— Vous m’entendez, Éthel; je le répète, que me fait sa naissance? Il est sans doute d’un rang obscur, car on n’enseigne pas à ceux qui naissent dans les palais à fréquenter les prisons. Oui, et ne manifestez pas d’orgueilleux regrets, ma fille; n’oubliez pas qu’Éthel Schumacker n’est plus princesse de Wollin et comtesse de Tongsberg; vous êtes redescendue plus bas que le point d’où votre père s’est élevé. Soyez donc heureuse si cet homme accepte votre main, quelle que soit sa famille. S’il est d’une humble naissance, tant mieux, ma fille; vos jours du moins seront à l’abri des orages qui ont tourmenté les jours de votre père. Vous coulerez, loin de l’envie et de la haine des hommes, sous quelque nom inconnu, une existence ignorée, bien différente de la mienne, car elle s’achèvera mieux qu’elle n’aura commencé.

Éthel était tombée à genoux devant le prisonnier.

— O mon père! grâce!

Il ouvrit ses bras avec surprise.

— Que voulez-vous dire, ma fille?

— Au nom du ciel, ne me peignez pas ce bonheur, il n’est pas fait pour moi!

— Éthel, reprit sévèrement le vieillard, ne vous jouez pas de toute votre vie. J’ai refusé la main d’une princesse de sang royal, d’une princesse de Holstein-Augustenbourg, entendez-vous cela? Et mon orgueil a été cruellement puni. Vous dédaignez celle d’un homme obscur, mais loyal; tremblez que le vôtre ne soit aussi tristement châtié.

— Plût au ciel, murmura Éthel, que ce fût un homme obscur et loyal!

Le vieillard se leva et fit quelques pas dans l’appartement avec agitation.

— Ma fille, dit-il, c’est votre pauvre père qui vous en prie et qui vous l’ordonne. Ne me laissez pas à ma mort une inquiétude sur votre avenir; promettez-moi d’accepter cet étranger pour époux.

— Je vous obéirai toujours, mon père, mais n’espérez pas son retour.

— J’ai pesé les probabilités, et je pense, d’après l’accent dont cet

Ordener prononçait votre nom….

— Qu’il m’aime! interrompit Éthel amèrement; oh! non, ne le croyez pas.

Le père répondit froidement:

— J’ignore si, pour employer votre expression de jeune fille, il vous aime; mais je sais qu’il reviendra.

— Abandonnez cette idée, mon noble père. D’ailleurs, vous ne voudriez peut-être pas qu’il fût votre gendre si vous le connaissiez.

— Éthel, il le sera, quels que soient son nom et son rang.

— Eh bien! reprit-elle, si ce jeune homme, en qui vous avez vu un consolateur, en qui vous voulez voir un soutien pour votre fille, monseigneur et père, si c’était le fils d’un de vos mortels ennemis, du vice-roi de Norvège, du comte de Guldenlew?

Schumacker recula de deux pas.

— Que dites-vous, grand Dieu! Ordener! cet Ordener. — Cela est impossible!….

L’indicible expression de haine qui venait de s’allumer dans les yeux ternes du vieillard glaça le coeur tremblant d’Éthel, qui se repentit vainement de la parole imprudente qu’elle venait de prononcer.

Le coup était porté. Schumacker resta quelques instants immobile et les bras croisés; tout son corps tressaillait comme s’il avait été sur un gril ardent; ses prunelles flamboyantes sortaient de leur orbite, et son regard, fixé sur les dalles de pierre, paraissait vouloir les enfoncer. Enfin quelques paroles sortirent de ses lèvres bleues, prononcées d’une voix aussi faible que celle d’un homme qui rêve.

— Ordener! — Oui, c’est cela, Ordener Guldenlew!

— C’est bien. Allons! Schumacker, vieux insensé, ouvre-lui donc tes bras, ce loyal jeune homme vient pour te poignarder.

Tout à coup il frappa le sol du pied, et sa voix devint tonnante.

— Ils m’ont donc envoyé toute leur infâme race pour m’insulter dans ma chute et dans ma captivité! j’avais déjà vu un d’Ahlefeld; j’ai presque souri à un Guldenlew! Les monstres! Qui eût dit cela de cet Ordener, qu’il portait une pareille âme et un pareil nom! Malheur à moi! malheur à lui! Puis il tomba anéanti sur son fauteuil, et tandis que sa poitrine oppressée se dégonflait par de longs soupirs, la pauvre Éthel, palpitante d’effroi, pleurait à ses pieds.

— Ne pleure pas, ma fille, dit-il d’une voix sinistre, viens, oh! viens sur mon coeur.

Et il la pressa dans ses bras.

Éthel ne savait comment s’expliquer cette caresse dans un moment de rage, lorsqu’il reprit:

— Du moins, jeune fille, tu as été plus clairvoyante que ton vieux père. Tu n’as point été trompée par le serpent aux yeux doux et venimeux. Viens, que je te remercie de la haine que tu m’as fait voir pour cet exécrable Ordener.

Elle frémit de cet éloge, hélas! si peu mérité.

— Mon seigneur et père, dit-elle, calmez-vous!

— Promets-moi, poursuivait Schumacker, de vouer toujours les mêmes sentiments au fils de Guldenlew; jure-le-moi.

— Dieu défend le serment, mon père.

— Jure-le, ma fille, répéta Schumacker avec véhémence. N’est-il pas vrai que tu conserveras toujours le même coeur pour cet Ordener Guldenlew?

Éthel n’eut pas de peine à répondre:

— Toujours.

Le vieillard l’attira sur sa poitrine.

— Bien, ma fille! que je te lègue au moins ma haine pour eux; si je ne puis te léguer les biens et les honneurs qu’ils m’ont ravis. Écoute, ils ont enlevé à ton vieux père son rang et sa gloire, ils l’ont traîné d’un échafaud dans les fers, comme pour le souiller de toutes les infamies en le faisant passer par tous les supplices. Les misérables! Et c’est à moi qu’ils devaient le pouvoir qu’ils ont tourné contre moi! Oh! que le ciel et l’enfer m’entendent, et qu’ils soient tous maudits dans leur existence, et maudits dans leur postérité!

Il se tut un moment; puis, embrassant sa pauvre fille, épouvantée de ses imprécations:

— Mais, mon Éthel, toi qui es ma seule gloire et mon seul bien, dis-moi, comment ton instinct a-t-il été plus habile que le mien? Comment as-tu découvert que ce traître portait l’un des noms abhorrés qui sont écrits au fond de mon coeur avec du fiel? Comment as-tu pénétré ce secret?

Elle rassemblait toutes ses forces pour répondre, quand la porte s’ouvrit.

Un homme vêtu de noir, portant à sa main une verge d’ébène et à son cou une chaîne d’acier bruni, parut sur le seuil, environné de hallebardiers également vêtus de noir.

— Que me veux-tu? demanda le captif avec aigreur et étonnement.

L’homme, sans lui répondre et sans le regarder, déroula un long parchemin, auquel pendait, à des fils de soie, un sceau de cire verte, et lut à haute voix:

— Au nom de sa majesté notre miséricordieux souverain et seigneur,

Christiern, roi,

Il est enjoint à Schumacker, prisonnier d’état dans la forteresse royale de Munckholm, et à sa fille, de suivre le porteur dudit ordre. —

Schumacker répéta sa question:

— Que me veux-tu?

L’homme noir, toujours impassible, se mit en devoir de recommencer sa lecture.

— Il suffit, dit le vieillard.

Alors, se levant, il fit signe à Éthel, surprise et épouvantée, de suivre avec lui cette lugubre escorte.

XLI

Un signal lugubre est donné, un ministre abject de la justice vient frapper à sa porte, et l’avertir qu’on a besoin de lui.

JOSEPH DE MAISTRE.

La nuit venait de tomber; un vent froid sifflait autour de la Tour-Maudite, et les portes de la ruine de Vygla tremblaient dans leurs gonds, comme si la même main les eût secouées toutes à la fois.

Les farouches habitants de la tour, le bourreau et sa famille, étaient réunis autour du foyer allumé au milieu de la salle du premier étage, qui jetait des rougeurs vacillantes sur leurs visages sombres et sur leurs vêtements d’écarlate. Il y avait dans les traits des enfants quelque chose de féroce comme le rire de leur père, et de hagard comme le regard de leur mère. Leurs yeux, ainsi que ceux de Bechlie, étaient tournés vers Orugix, qui, assis sur une escabelle de bois, paraissait reprendre haleine, et dont les pieds, couverts de poussière, annonçaient qu’il venait d’arriver de quelque lointaine expédition.

— Femme, écoute; écoutez, enfants. Ce n’est pas pour apporter de mauvaises nouvelles que j’ai été absent deux jours entiers. Si, avant un mois, je ne suis pas exécuteur royal, je veux ne savoir pas serrer un noeud coulant ou manier une hache. Réjouissez-vous, mes petits louveteaux, votre père vous laissera peut-être pour héritage l’échafaud même de Copenhague.

— Nychol, demanda Bechlie, qu’y a-t-il donc?

— Et toi, ma vieille bohémienne, reprit Nychol avec son rire pesant, réjouis-toi aussi! tu peux t’acheter des colliers de verre bleu pour orner ton cou de cigogne étranglée. Notre engagement expire bientôt; mais va, dans un mois, quand tu me verras le premier bourreau des deux royaumes, tu ne refuseras pas de casser une autre cruche avec moi.

— Qu’y a-t-il donc, qu’y a-t-il donc, mon père? demandèrent les enfants, dont l’aîné jouait avec un chevalet tout sanglant, tandis que le plus petit s’amusait à plumer vivant un petit oiseau qu’il avait pris à sa mère dans le nid même.

— Ce qu’il y a, mes enfants? — Tue donc cet oiseau, Haspar, il crie comme une mauvaise scie; et d’ailleurs il ne faut pas être cruel. Tue-le. — Ce qu’il y a? Rien, peu de chose vraiment, sinon, dame Bechlie, qu’avant huit jours d’ici l’ex-chancelier Schumacker, qui est prisonnier à

Munckholm, après avoir vu mon visage de si près à Copenhague, et le fameux brigand d'Islande Han de Klipstadur, me passeront peut-être tous deux à la fois par les mains.

L'oeil égaré de la femme rouge prit une expression d'étonnement et de curiosité.

— Schumacker! Han d'Islande! comment cela, Nychol?

— Voilà tout. J'ai rencontré hier matin, sur la route de Skongen, au pont de l'Ordals, tout le régiment des arquebusiers de Munckholm, qui s'en retournait à Drontheim d'un air très victorieux. J'ai questionné un des soldats, qui a daigné me répondre, parce qu'il ignorait sans doute pourquoi ma casaque et ma charrette sont rouges; j'ai appris que les arquebusiers revenaient des gorges du Pilier-Noir, où ils avaient mis en pièces des bandes de brigands, c'est-à-dire de mineurs insurgés. Or, tu sauras, Bechlie la bohémienne, que ces rebelles se révoltaient pour Schumacker, et étaient commandés par Han d'Islande. Tu sauras que cette levée de boucliers constitue pour Han d'Islande un bon crime d'insurrection contre l'autorité royale, et pour Schumacker un bon crime de haute trahison; ce qui amène tout naturellement ces deux honorables seigneurs à la potence ou au billot. Ajoute à ces deux superbes exécutions, qui ne peuvent manquer de me rapporter au moins quinze ducats d'or chacune, et de me faire le plus grand honneur dans les deux royaumes, celles, moins importantes, à la vérité, de quelques autres….

— Mais quoi! interrompit Bechlie, Han d'Islande a donc été pris?

— Pourquoi interrompez-vous votre seigneur et maître, femme de perdition? dit le bourreau. Oui, sans doute, ce fameux, cet imprenable Han d'Islande a été pris, avec quelques autres chefs de brigands, ses lieutenants, qui me rapporteront bien aussi chacun douze écus par tête, sans compter la vente des cadavres. Il a été pris, vous dis-je, et je l'ai vu, puisqu'il faut satisfaire entièrement votre curiosité, passer entre les rangs des soldats.

La femme et les enfants se rapprochèrent vivement d'Orugix.

— Quoi! tu l'as vu, père? demandèrent les enfants.

— Taisez-vous, enfants. Vous criez comme un coquin qui se dit innocent. Je l'ai vu. C'est une espèce de géant; il marchait les bras croisés, enchaînés derrière le dos, et le front bandé. C'est que, sans doute, il a été blessé à la tête. Mais, qu'il soit tranquille, avant peu je l'aurai guéri de cette blessure.

Après avoir mêlé à ces horribles paroles un horrible geste, le bourreau continua:

— Il y avait derrière lui quatre de ses compagnons, également prisonniers, blessés de même, et qu'on menait comme lui à Drontheim, où ils seront jugés, avec l'ex-grand-chancelier Schumacker, par un tribunal où siégera le haut-syndic, et que présidera le grand-chancelier actuel.

— Père, quel visage avaient les autres prisonniers?

— Les deux premiers étaient deux vieillards, dont l'un portait le feutre de mineur, et l'autre le bonnet de montagnard. Tous deux paraissaient désespérés. Des deux autres, l'un était un jeune mineur, qui marchait la tête haute, en sifflant; l'autre…. — Te souviens-tu, ma damnée Bechlie, de ces voyageurs qui sont entrés dans cette tour, il y a une dizaine de jours, la nuit de ce violent orage?

— Comme Satan se souvient du jour de sa chute, répondit la femme.

— Avais-tu remarqué parmi ces étrangers un jeune homme qui accompagnait ce vieux docteur fou à grande perruque? un jeune homme, te dis-je, vêtu d'un grand manteau vert et coiffé d'une toque à plume noire?

— En vérité, je crois l'avoir encore devant les yeux, me disant:

Femme, nous avons de l'or.

— Eh bien! la vieille, je veux n'avoir jamais étranglé que des coqs de bruyère, si le quatrième prisonnier n'est pas ce jeune homme. Sa figure m'était, à la vérité, entièrement cachée par sa plume, sa toque, ses cheveux et son manteau; d'ailleurs, il baissait la tête. Mais c'est bien le même vêtement, les mêmes bottines, le même air. Je veux avaler d'une bouchée le gibet de pierre de Skongen, si ce n'est pas le même homme! Que dis-tu de cela, Bechlie? Ne serait-il pas plaisant qu'après avoir reçu de moi de quoi soutenir sa vie, cet étranger en reçût également de quoi l'abréger, et qu'il exerçât mon habileté après avoir éprouvé mon hospitalité?

Le bourreau prolongea quelque temps son gros rire sinistre; puis il reprit:

— Allons, réjouissez-vous donc tous, et buvons; oui, Bechlie, donne-moi un verre de cette bière qui râpe le gosier comme si l'on buvait des limes, que je le vide à mon avancement futur. — Allons, honneur et santé au seigneur Nychol Orugix, exécuteur royal en perspective! — Je t'avouerai, vieille pécheresse, que j'ai eu de la peine à me rendre au bourg de Noes pour y pendre obscurément je ne sais quel ignoble voleur de choux et de chicorée. Cependant, en y réfléchissant, j'ai pensé que trente-deux ascalins n'étaient pas encore à dédaigner, et que mes mains ne se dégraderaient en exécutant de simples voleurs et autres canailles de ce genre que lorsqu'elles auraient décapité le noble comte ex-grand-chancelier et le fameux démon d'Islande. Je me suis donc résigné, en attendant mon diplôme de maître royal des hautes-oeuvres, à expédier le pauvre misérable du bourg de Noes; et voici, ajouta-t-il en tirant une bourse de cuir de son havresac, voici les trente-deux ascalins que je t'apporte, la vieille.

En ce moment, le bruit du cor se fit entendre à trois reprises différentes, en dehors de la tour.

— Femme, cria Orugix en se levant, ce sont les archers du haut-syndic.

À ces mots, il descendit en toute hâte.

Un instant après il reparut, portant un grand parchemin, dont il avait rompu le sceau.

— Tiens, dit-il à sa femme, voilà ce que le haut-syndic m'envoie. Déchiffre-moi cela, toi qui lirais le grimoire de Satan. Ce sont peut-être déjà mes lettres de promotion; car, puisque le tribunal aura un grand-chancelier pour président et un grand-chancelier pour accusé, il conviendrait que le bourreau qui exécutera son arrêt fût un bourreau royal.

La femme reçut le parchemin, et, après y avoir quelque temps promené ses yeux, elle lut à haute voix, tandis que les enfants jetaient sur elle un regard hébété et stupide:

— «Au nom du haut-syndic du Drontheimhus! — il est ordonné à Nychol

Orugix, bourreau de la province, de se transporter sur-le-champ à
Drontheim, et de se munir de la hache d'honneur, du billot et des
tentures noires.»

— C'est là tout? demanda le bourreau d'une voix mécontente.

— C'est là tout, répondit Bechlie.

— Bourreau de la province! murmura Orugix entre ses dents.

Il resta un moment jetant sur le parchemin syndical des regards d'humeur.

— Allons, dit-il enfin, il faut obéir et partir. Voici pourtant qu'on me demande la hache d'honneur et les tentures noires. — Tu auras soin, Bechlie, d'enlever les gouttes de rouille qui ont délustré ma hache, et de voir si la draperie n'est pas tachée en plusieurs endroits. En somme, il ne faut pas se décourager, ils ne veulent peut-être m'accorder d'avancement que comme salaire de cette belle exécution. Tant pis pour les condamnés, ils n'auront pas la satisfaction d'être mis à mort par un exécuteur royal.

XLII

ELVINE.

Qu’est devenu le pauvre Sanche? Il n’a point paru dans la ville.
NUNO.
Sanche aura su se mettre à couvert.
LOPE DE VEGA. *Le meilleur alcade est le roi.*

Le comte d’Ahlefeld, traînant une ample simarre de satin noir doublée d’hermine, la tête et les épaules cachées par une large perruque magistrale, et la poitrine chargée de plusieurs étoiles et décorations, parmi lesquelles on distinguait les colliers des ordres royaux de l’éléphant et de Dannebrog; revêtu, en un mot, du costume complet de grand-chancelier de Danemark et de Norvège, se promenait d’un air soucieux dans l’appartement de la comtesse d’Ahlefeld, seule avec lui en ce moment.

— Allons, il est neuf heures, le tribunal va entrer en séance; il ne faut pas le faire attendre, car il est nécessaire que l’arrêt soit rendu dans la nuit, afin qu’on l’exécute demain matin au plus tard. Le haut-syndic m’a assuré que le bourreau serait ici avant l’aube. — Elphége! avez-vous ordonné qu’on apprêtât la barque qui doit me transporter à Munckholm?

— Monseigneur, elle vous attend depuis une demi-heure au moins, répondit la comtesse en se soulevant sur son fauteuil.

— Et ma litière est-elle à la porte?

— Oui, monseigneur.

— Allons!…. — Vous dites donc, Elphége, ajouta le comte en se frappant le front, qu’il existe une intrigue amoureuse entre Ordener Guldenlew et la fille de Schumacker?

— Très amoureuse, je vous jure! répliqua la comtesse en souriant de colère et de dédain.

— Qui se fût imaginé cela? — Pourtant, je vous assure que je m’en étais déjà douté.

— Et moi aussi, dit la comtesse. — C’est un tour que ce maudit Levin nous a joué.

— Vieux scélérat de mecklembourgeois! murmura le chancelier; va, je te recommanderai à Arensdorf.

— Si je pouvais le faire disgracier! — Eh! mais, écoutez donc, Elphége, voici un trait de lumière.

— Quoi donc?

— Vous savez que les individus que nous allons juger dans le château de Munckholm sont au nombre de six: — Schumacker, que je ne redouterai plus, j'espère, demain à pareille heure; ce montagnard colosse, notre faux Han d'Islande, qui a juré de soutenir le rôle jusqu'à la fin, dans l'espérance que Musdoemon, dont il a déjà reçu de fortes sommes d'argent, le fera évader. — Ce Musdoemon a des idées vraiment diaboliques! — Les quatre autres accusés sont les trois chefs des rebelles, et un quidam qui s'est trouvé, on ne sait comment, au milieu du rassemblement d'Apsyl-Corh, et que les précautions prises par Musdoemon ont fait tomber dans nos mains. Musdoemon pense que cet homme est un espion de Levin de Knud. Et, en effet, en arrivant ici prisonnier, sa première parole a été pour demander le général; et quand il a appris l'absence du mecklembourgeois, il a paru consterné. Du reste, il n'a voulu répondre à aucune des questions que lui a adressées Musdoemon.

— Mon cher seigneur, interrompit la comtesse, pourquoi ne l'avez-vous pas interrogé vous-même?

— En vérité, Elphége, comment l'aurais-je pu au milieu de tous les soins qui m'accablent depuis mon arrivée? Je me suis reposé de cette affaire sur Musdoemon, qu'elle intéresse autant que moi. D'ailleurs, ma chère, cet homme n'est d'aucune importance par lui-même; c'est quelque pauvre vagabond. Nous n'en pourrons tirer parti qu'en le présentant comme un agent de Levin de Knud, et, comme il a été pris dans les rangs des rebelles, cela pourra prouver entre le mecklembourgeois et Schumacker une connivence coupable, qui suffira pour provoquer, sinon la mise en accusation, du moins la disgrâce du maudit Levin.

La comtesse parut méditer un moment.

— Vous avez raison, monseigneur. Mais cette fatale passion du baron Thorvick pour Éthel Schumacker….

Le chancelier se frotta le front de nouveau; puis tout à coup haussant les épaules:

— Écoutez, Elphége, nous ne sommes plus ni l'un ni l'autre jeunes et novices dans la vie, et pourtant nous ne connaissons pas les hommes! Quand Schumacker aura été une seconde fois flétri par un jugement de haute trahison, quand il aura subi sur l'échafaud une condamnation infamante, quand sa fille, retombée au-dessous des derniers rangs de la société, sera souillée à jamais publiquement de tout l'opprobre de son père, pensez-vous, Elphége, qu'alors Ordener Guldenlew se souvienne un seul instant de cette amourette d'enfance, que vous nommez passion, d'après les discours exaltés d'une jeune folle prisonnière, et qu'il balance un seul jour entre la fille déshonorée d'un misérable criminel et la fille illustre d'un glorieux chancelier? Il faut juger les hommes d'après soi, ma chère; où avez-vous vu que le coeur humain fût ainsi fait?

— Je souhaite que vous ayez encore raison. — Vous ne trouverez cependant pas inutile, n'est-il pas vrai, la demande que j'ai faite au syndic pour que la fille de Schumacker assiste au procès de son père, et soit placée dans la même tribune que moi? Je suis curieuse d'étudier cette créature.

— Tout ce qui peut nous éclairer sur cette affaire est précieux, dit le chancelier avec flegme. — Mais, dites-moi, sait-on où cet Ordener est en ce moment?

— Personne au monde ne le sait; c'est le digne élève de ce vieux Levin, un chevalier errant comme lui. Je crois qu'il visite en ce moment Ward-Hus.

— Bien, bien, notre Ulrique le fixera. Allons, j'oublie que le tribunal m'attend.

La comtesse arrêta le grand-chancelier.

— Encore un mot, monseigneur. — Je vous en ai parlé hier, mais votre esprit était occupé, et je n'ai pu obtenir de réponse. Où est mon Frédéric?

— Frédéric! dit le comte avec une expression lugubre, et en portant la main sur son visage.

— Oui; répondez-moi, mon Frédéric! Son régiment est de retour à Drontheim sans lui. Jurez-moi que Frédéric n'était pas dans cette horrible gorge du Pilier-Noir. Pourquoi votre figure a-t-elle changé au nom de Frédéric? Je suis dans une mortelle inquiétude.

Le chancelier reprit sa physionomie impassible.

— Elphége, tranquillisez-vous. Je vous jure qu'il n'était point dans le défilé du Pilier-Noir. D'ailleurs, on a publié la liste des officiers tués ou blessés dans cette rencontre.

— Oui, dit la comtesse calmée, vous me rassurez. Deux officiers seulement ont été tués, le capitaine Lory et le jeune baron Randmer, qui a fait tant de folies avec mon pauvre Frédéric dans les bals de Copenhague!

Oh! j’ai lu et relu la liste, je vous assure. Mais dites-moi, monseigneur, mon fils est donc resté à Walhstrom?

— Il y est resté, répondit le comte.

— Eh bien, cher ami, dit la mère avec un sourire qu’elle s’efforçait de rendre tendre, je ne vous demande qu’une grâce, c’est de faire revenir vite mon Frédéric de cet affreux pays.

Le chancelier se dégagea péniblement de ses bras suppliants.

— Madame, dit-il, le tribunal m’attend. Adieu, ce que vous me demandez ne dépend pas de moi.

Et il sortit brusquement.

La comtesse demeura sombre et pensive.

— Cela ne dépend pas de lui! se dit-elle; et il lui suffirait d’un mot pour me rendre mon fils! — Je l’ai toujours pensé, cet homme-là est vraiment méchant.

XLIII

Est-ce ainsi qu'on traite un homme de ma charge? est-ce ainsi qu'on perd le respect dû à la justice?

CALDERON. *Louis Perez de Galice*.

La tremblante Éthel, que les gardes ont séparée de son père à la sortie du donjon du Lion de Slesvig, a été conduite, à travers de ténébreux corridors, jusqu'alors inconnus d'elle, dans une sorte de cellule obscure, qu'on a refermée sur son entrée. Du côté de la cellule opposée à la porte est une grande ouverture grillée, à travers laquelle pénètre une lumière de torches et de flambeaux. Devant cette ouverture est une banquette sur laquelle est placée une femme voilée et vêtue de noir, qui lui fait signe de s'asseoir auprès d'elle. Elle obéit en silence et interdite.

Ses yeux se portent au delà de l'ouverture grillée. Un tableau sombre et imposant est devant elle.

À l'extrémité d'une salle, tendue de noir, et faiblement éclairée par des lampes de cuivre suspendues à la voûte, s'élève un tribunal noir arrondi en fer à cheval, occupé par sept juges vêtus de robes noires, dont l'un, placé au centre sur un siège plus élevé, porte sur sa poitrine des chaînes de diamants et des plaques d'or qui étincellent. Le juge assis à la droite de celui-ci se distingue des autres par une ceinture blanche et un manteau d'hermine, insigne du haut-syndic de la province. À droite du tribunal est une estrade couverte d'un dais, où siège un vieillard, revêtu d'habits pontificaux; à gauche, une table chargée de papiers, derrière laquelle se tient debout un homme de petite taille, coiffé d'une énorme perruque, et enveloppé des plis d'une longue robe noire.

On remarque, en face des juges, un banc de bois entouré de hallebardiers qui portent des torches, dont la lueur, réfléchie par une forêt de piques, de mousquets et de pertuisanes, répand de vagues rayons sur les têtes tumultueuses d'une foule de spectateurs, pressés contre la grille de fer qui les sépare du tribunal.

Éthel observait ce spectacle comme si elle eût assisté éveillée à un rêve; cependant elle était loin de se sentir indifférente à ce qui allait se passer sous ses yeux. Elle entendait en elle comme une voix intime qui l'avertissait d'être attentive, parce qu'elle touchait à l'une des crises de sa vie. Son coeur était en proie à deux agitations différentes en même temps; elle eût voulu savoir sur-le-champ en quoi elle était intéressée à la scène qu’elle contemplait, ou ne le savoir jamais. Depuis plusieurs jours, l’idée que son Ordener était perdu pour elle lui avait inspiré le désir désespéré d’en finir d’une fois avec l’existence, et de pouvoir lire d’un coup d’oeil tout le livre de sa destinée. C’est pourquoi, comprenant qu’elle entrait dans l’heure décisive de son sort, elle examina le tableau lugubre qui s’offrait à elle, moins avec répugnance qu’avec une sorte de joie impatiente et funèbre.

Elle vit le président se lever, en proclamant, au nom du roi, que l’audience de justice était ouverte.

Elle entendit le petit homme noir, placé à la gauche du tribunal, lire, d’une voix basse et rapide, un long discours où le nom de son père, mêlé aux mots de *conspiration*, de *révolte des mines*, de *haute-trahison*, revenait fréquemment. Alors elle se rappela ce que la fatale inconnue lui avait dit, dans le jardin du donjon, de l’accusation dont son père était menacé; et elle frémit quand elle entendit l’homme à la robe noire terminer son discours par le mot de *mort*, fortement articulé.

Épouvantée, elle se tourna vers la femme voilée, pour laquelle un sentiment qu’elle ne s’expliquait pas lui inspirait de la crainte:

— Où sommes-nous? qu’est-ce que tout ceci? demanda-t-elle timidement.

Un geste de sa mystérieuse compagne l’invita au silence et à l’attention. Elle reporta sa vue dans la salle du tribunal.

Le vieillard vénérable, en habits épiscopaux, venait de se lever; et Éthel recueillit ces paroles, qu’il prononça distinctement:

— Au nom du Dieu tout-puissant et miséricordieux, — moi, Pamphile-Éleuthère, évêque de la royale ville de Drontheim et de la royale province du Drontheimhus, je salue le respectable tribunal qui juge au nom du roi, notre seigneur après Dieu;

Et je dis — qu’ayant remarqué que les prisonniers amenés devant ce tribunal étaient des hommes et des chrétiens, et qu’ils n’avaient point de procureurs, je déclare aux respectables juges que mon intention est de les assister de mon faible secours, dans la cruelle position où le ciel les a voulu mettre;

Priant Dieu de daigner donner sa force à notre infirme faiblesse, et sa lumière à notre profonde cécité.

C’est ainsi que moi, évêque de ce royal diocèse, je salue le respectable et judicieux tribunal. —

Après avoir parlé ainsi, l’évêque descendit de son trône pontifical, et alla s’asseoir sur le banc de bois destiné aux accusés, tandis qu’un murmure d’approbation éclatait parmi le peuple.

Le président se leva, et dit d’une voix sèche:

— Hallebardiers, qu’on fasse silence! — Seigneur évêque, le tribunal remercie votre révérence, au nom des prisonniers. — Habitants du Drontheimhus, soyez attentifs à la haute justice du roi; le tribunal va juger sans appel. Archers, — qu’on amène les accusés.

Il se fit dans l’auditoire un silence d’attente et de terreur; seulement toutes les têtes s’agitèrent dans l’ombre, comme les sombres vagues d’une mer orageuse, sur laquelle le tonnerre s’apprête à gronder.

Bientôt Éthel entendit une rumeur sourde et un mouvement extraordinaire se prolonger au-dessous d’elle, dans les sinistres avenues de la salle; puis l’auditoire se rangea avec un frémissement d’impatience et de curiosité; des pas multipliés retentirent; des hallebardes et des mousquets brillèrent; et bientôt six hommes enchaînés et entourés de gardes pénétrèrent, la tête nue, dans l’enceinte du tribunal. Éthel ne vit que le premier de ces six prisonniers; c’était un vieillard à barbe blanche, vêtu d’une simarre noire; c’était son père.

Elle s’appuya défaillante sur la balustrade de pierre qui était devant sa banquette; les objets roulaient sous ses yeux comme dans un nuage confus, et il lui semblait que son coeur palpitait à son oreille. Elle-dit d’une voix faible:

— O Dieu, secourez-moi!

La femme voilée se pencha vers elle, et lui fit respirer des sels qui la réveillèrent de sa léthargie.

— Noble dame, dit-elle ranimée, de grâce, un mot de votre voix pour me convaincre que je ne suis pas ici le jouet des fantômes de l’enfer.

Mais l’inconnue, sourde à sa prière, avait retourné sa tête vers le tribunal; et la pauvre Éthel, qui avait retrouvé quelque force, se résigna à l’imiter en silence.

Le président s’était levé, et avait dit d’une voix lente et solennelle:

— Prisonniers, on vous amène devant nous pour que nous ayons à examiner si vous êtes coupables de haute-trahison, de conspiration, de révolte par les armes contre l’autorité du roi notre souverain seigneur Méditez maintenant dans vos consciences, car une accusation de lèse-majesté au premier chef pèse sur vos têtes.

En ce moment un rayon de lumière tomba sur le visage d'un des six accusés, d'un jeune homme qui tenait sa tête penchée sur sa poitrine, comme pour dérober ses traits sous les boucles pendantes de ses longs cheveux. Éthel tressaillit, et une sueur froide sortit de tous ses membres; elle avait cru reconnaître…. — Mais non, c'était une cruelle illusion; la salle était faiblement éclairée, et les hommes s'y mouvaient comme des ombres; à peine distinguait-on le grand christ d'ébène poli, placé au-dessus du fauteuil du président.

Cependant ce jeune homme était enveloppé d'un manteau qui de loin paraissait vert, ses cheveux en désordre avaient des reflets châtains, et le rayon inattendu qui avait dessiné ses traits…. Mais non, cela n'était pas, cela ne pouvait être! c'était une horrible illusion.

Les prisonniers étaient assis sur le banc où était descendu l'évêque. Schumacker s'était placé à l'une des extrémités; il était séparé du jeune homme aux cheveux châtains par ses quatre compagnons d'infortune, qui portaient des vêtements grossiers, et au nombre desquels on remarquait une espèce de géant. L'évêque siégeait à l'autre extrémité du banc.

Éthel vit le président se tourner vers son père.

— Vieillard, dit-il d'une voix sévère, dites-nous votre nom et qui vous êtes.

Le vieillard souleva sa tête vénérable.

— Autrefois, répondit-il en regardant fixement le président, on m'appelait comte de Griffenfeld et de Tongsberg, prince de Wollin, prince du Saint-Empire, chevalier de l'ordre royal de l'éléphant, chevalier de l'ordre royal de Dannebrog; chevalier de la toison d'or d'Allemagne et de la jarretière d'Angleterre, premier ministre, inspecteur général des universités, grand-chancelier de Danemark et de….

Le président l'interrompit.

— Accusé, le tribunal ne vous demande ni comment on vous a nommé, ni ce que vous avez été, mais comment on vous nomme, et ce que vous êtes.

— Eh bien, reprit vivement le vieillard, maintenant je m'appelle Jean Schumacker, j'ai soixante-neuf ans, et je ne suis rien, que votre ancien bienfaiteur, chancelier d'Ahlefeld.

Le président parut interdit.

— Je vous ai reconnu, seigneur comte, ajouta l'ex-chancelier, et comme j'ai cru voir qu'il n'en était pas de même à mon égard de votre côté, j'ai pris la liberté de rappeler à votre grâce que nous sommes de vieilles connaissances.

— Schumacker, dit le président d'un ton où l'on sentait l'accent de la colère concentrée, épargnez les moments du tribunal.

Le vieux captif l'interrompit encore:

— Nous avons changé de rôle, noble chancelier; autrefois c'était moi qui vous appelais simplement *d'Ahlefeld*, et vous qui me disiez *seigneur comte*.

— Accusé, répliqua le président, vous nuisez à votre cause en rappelant le jugement infamant dont vous êtes déjà flétri.

— Si ce jugement est infamant pour quelqu'un, comte d'Ahlefeld, ce n'est pas pour moi.

Le vieillard s'était levé à demi en prononçant ces paroles avec force.

Le président étendit la main vers lui.

— Asseyez-vous. N'insultez pas, devant un tribunal, et aux juges qui vous ont condamné, et au roi qui vous a donné ces juges. Rappelez-vous que sa majesté a daigné vous accorder la vie, et bornez-vous ici à vous défendre.

Schumacker ne répondit qu'en haussant les épaules.

— Avez-vous, demanda le président, quelques aveux à faire au tribunal touchant le crime capital dont vous êtes accusé?

Voyant que Schumacker gardait le silence, le président répéta sa question.

— Est-ce que c'est à moi que vous parlez? dit l'ex-grand-chancelier. Je croyais, noble comte d'Ahlefeld, que vous vous parliez à vous-même. De quel crime m'entretenez-vous? Est-ce que j'ai jamais donné le baiser d'Iscariote à un ami? Ai-je emprisonné, condamné, déshonoré un bienfaiteur? dépouillé celui à qui je devais tout? J'ignore, en vérité, seigneur chancelier actuel, pourquoi l'on m'amène ici. C'est sans doute pour juger de votre habileté à faire tomber des têtes innocentes. Je ne serai point fâché en effet de voir si vous saurez aussi bien me perdre que vous perdez le royaume, et s'il vous suffira d'une virgule pour causer ma mort, comme il vous a suffi d'une lettre de l'alphabet pour provoquer la guerre avec la Suède.[*]

[*] Il y avait eu en effet de très graves différends entre le Danemark et la Suède, parce que le comte d'Ahlefeld avait exigé, dans une négociation, qu'un traité entre les deux états donnât au roi de Danemark le titre de *rex*

Gothorum, ce qui semblait attribuer au monarque danois la souveraineté de la Gothie, province suédoise; tandis que les Suédois ne voulaient lui accorder que la qualité de *rex Gotorum*, dénomination vague qui équivalait à l'ancien titre des souverains danois, *roi des Gots*.

C'est à cette *h*, cause, non d'une guerre, mais de longues et
menaçantes négociations, que Schumacker faisait sans doute allusion.

À peine achevait-il cette raillerie amère, que l'homme placé devant la table à gauche du tribunal se leva.

— Seigneur président, dit-il, après s'être incliné profondément, seigneurs juges, je demande que la parole soit interdite à Jean Schumacker, s'il continue d'injurier ainsi sa grâce le président de ce respectable tribunal.

La voix calme de l'évêque s'éleva:

— Seigneur secrétaire intime, on ne peut interdire la parole à un accusé.

— Vous avez raison, révérend évêque, s'écria le président avec précipitation. Notre intention est de laisser le plus de liberté possible à la défense. — J'engage seulement l'accusé à modérer son langage, s'il comprend ses véritables intérêts.

Schumacker secoua la tête et dit froidement:

— Il parait que le comte d'Ahlefeld est plus sûr de son fait qu'en 1677.

— Taisez-vous, dit le président; et s'adressant sur-le-champ au prisonnier voisin du vieillard, il lui demanda quel était son nom. C'était un montagnard d'une taille colossale, dont le front était entouré de bandages, qui se leva en disant:

— Je suis Han, de Klipstadur, en Islande.

Un frémissement d'épouvante erra quelque temps dans la foule, et Schumacker, soulevant sa tête pensive déjà retombée sur sa poitrine, jeta un brusque regard sur son formidable voisin, dont tous les autres co-accusés se tenaient éloignés.

— Han d'Islande, demanda le président quand le trouble fut dissipé, qu'avez-vous à dire au tribunal?

De tous les spectateurs, Éthel n'avait pas été la moins frappée de la présence du brigand fameux qui, depuis si longtemps, lui apparaissait dans toutes ses terreurs. Elle attacha avec une avidité craintive son regard sur le géant monstrueux que son Ordener avait peut-être combattu, dont il avait peut-être été la victime. Cette idée se retourna dans son coeur sous toutes ses formes douloureuses. Aussi, entièrement absorbée par une foule d'émotions déchirantes, elle entendit à peine la réponse qu'adressait au président, dans un langage grossier et embarrassé, ce Han d'Islande, en qui elle voyait presque le meurtrier de son Ordener. Elle comprit seulement que le brigand se déclarait le chef des bandes rebelles.

— Est-ce de vous-même, demanda le président, ou par une instigation étrangère, que vous avez pris le commandement des insurgés?

Le brigand répondit:

— Ce n'est pas de moi-même.

— Qui vous a provoqué à ce crime?

— Un homme qui s'appelait Hacket.

— Quel était ce Hacket?

— Un agent de Schumacker, qu'il nommait aussi comte de Griffenfeld.

Le président s'adressa à Schumacker:

— Schumacker, connaissez-vous ce Hacket?

— Vous m'avez prévenu, comte d'Ahlefeld, repartit le vieillard; j'allais vous adresser la même question.

— Jean Schumacker, dit le président, vous êtes mal conseillé par votre haine. Le tribunal appréciera votre système de défense.

L'évêque prit la parole.

— Seigneur secrétaire intime, dit-il en se tournant vers l'homme de petite taille, qui paraissait faire les fonctions de greffier et d'accusateur, ce Hacket est-il parmi mes clients?

— Non, votre révérence, répondit le secrétaire.

— Sait-on ce qu'il est devenu?

— On n'a pu le saisir; il a disparu.

On eût dit qu'en parlant ainsi le seigneur secrétaire intime composait sa voix.

— Je crois plutôt qu'il s'est évanoui, dit Schumacker.

L'évêque continua:

— Seigneur secrétaire, fait-on poursuivre ce Hacket? A-t-on son signalement?

Avant que le secrétaire intime eût pu répondre, un des prisonniers se leva; c'était un jeune mineur d'un visage âpre et fier.

— Il serait aisé de l'avoir, dit-il d'une voix forte. Ce misérable Hacket, l'agent de Schumacker, est un homme de petite stature, d'une figure ouverte, mais ouverte comme une bouche de l'enfer. — Tenez, seigneur évêque, sa voix ressemble beaucoup à celle de ce seigneur qui écrit là sur cette table, et que votre révérence appelle, je crois, secrétaire intime. Et même, si cette salle était moins sombre, et que le seigneur secrétaire intime eût moins de cheveux pour lui cacher le visage, j’assurerais presque qu’il y a dans ses traits quelque ressemblance avec ceux du traître Hacket.

— Notre frère dit vrai, s’écrièrent les deux prisonniers voisins du jeune mineur.

— Vraiment! murmura Schumacker avec une expression de triomphe.

Cependant le secrétaire avait fait un mouvement involontaire, soit de crainte, soit de l’indignation qu’il ressentait d’être comparé à ce Hacket. Le président, qui lui-même avait paru troublé, se hâta d’élever la voix.

— Prisonniers, n’oubliez pas que vous ne devez parler que lorsque le tribunal vous interroge; et surtout n’outragez pas les ministres de la justice par d’indignes comparaisons.

— Cependant, seigneur président, dit l’évêque, ceci n’est qu’une question de signalement. Si le coupable Hacket offre quelques points de ressemblance avec le secrétaire, cela pourrait être utile.

Le président l’interrompit.

— Han d’Islande, vous qui avez eu tant de rapports avec Hacket, dites-nous, pour satisfaire le révérend évêque, si cet homme ressemble en effet à notre très honoré secrétaire intime.

— Nullement, seigneur, répondit le géant sans hésiter.

— Vous voyez, seigneur évêque, ajouta le président.

L’évêque prononça d’un signe de tête qu’il était satisfait; et le président, s’adressant à un autre accusé, prononça la formule usitée:

— Quel est votre nom?

— Wilfrid Kennybol, des montagnes de Kole.

— Étiez-vous parmi les insurgés?

— Oui, seigneur; la vérité vaut mieux que la vie. J’ai été pris dans les gorges maudites du Pilier-Noir. J’étais le chef des montagnards.

— Qui vous a poussé au crime de rébellion?

— Nos frères les mineurs se plaignaient de la tutelle royale, et cela était tout simple, n’est-ce pas, votre courtoisie? Vous n’auriez qu’une hutte de boue et deux mauvaises peaux de renard, que vous ne seriez pas fâché d’en être le maître. Le gouvernement n’a pas écouté leurs prières. Alors, seigneur, ils ont songé à se révolter, et nous ont priés de les aider. Un si petit service ne se refuse pas entre frères qui récitent les mêmes oraisons et chôment les mêmes saints. Voilà tout.

— Personne, dit le président, n'a-t-il éveillé, encouragé et dirigé votre insurrection?

— C'était un seigneur Hacket, qui nous parlait sans cesse de délivrer un comte prisonnier à Munckholm, dont il se disait l'envoyé. Nous le lui avons promis, parce qu'une liberté de plus ne nous coûtait rien.

— Ce comte ne s'appelait-il pas Schumacker ou Griffenfeld?

— Justement, votre courtoisie.

— Vous ne l'avez jamais vu?

— Non, seigneur; mais si c'est ce vieillard qui vous a dit tout à l'heure tant de noms, je ne puis faire autrement que de convenir….

— De quoi? interrompit le président.

— Qu'il a une bien belle barbe blanche, seigneur, presque aussi belle que celle du père du mari de ma soeur Maase, de la bourgade de Surb, lequel a vécu jusqu'à cent vingt ans.

L'ombre répandue dans la salle empêcha de voir si le président paraissait désappointé de la naïve réponse du montagnard. Il ordonna aux archers de déployer quelques bannières couleur de feu déposées devant le tribunal.

— Wilfrid Kennybol, dit-il, reconnaissez-vous ces bannières?

— Oui, votre courtoisie; elles nous ont été données par Hacket, au nom du comte Schumacker. Le comte fit distribuer aussi des armes aux mineurs; car nous n'en avions pas besoin, nous autres montagnards, qui vivons de la carabine et de la gibecière. Et moi, seigneur, tel que vous me voyez, attaché ici comme une méchante poule qu'on va rôtir, j'ai plus d'une fois, du fond de nos vallées, atteint de vieux aigles, lorsqu'au plus haut de leur vol ils ne semblaient que des alouettes ou des grives.

— Vous entendez, seigneurs juges, observa le secrétaire intime; l'accusé Schumacker a fait distribuer par Hacket des armes et des drapeaux aux rebelles.

— Kennybol, reprit le président, n'avez-vous plus rien à déclarer?

— Rien, votre courtoisie, sinon que je ne mérite pas la mort. Je n'ai fait que prêter assistance, en bon frère, aux mineurs, et j'ose affirmer à toutes vos courtoisies que le plomb de ma carabine, tout vieux chasseur que je suis, n'a jamais touché un daim du roi.

Le président, sans répondre à ce plaidoyer, interrogea les deux compagnons de Kennybol. C'étaient des chefs de mineurs. Le plus vieux, qui déclara se nommer Jonas, répéta, en d'autres termes, ce qu'avait avoué Kennybol. L'autre, qui était le jeune homme dont les yeux avaient saisi tant de ressemblance entre le secrétaire intime et le perfide Hacket, dit s’appeler Norbith, confessa fièrement sa part dans la révolte, mais refusa de rien révéler touchant Hacket et Schumacker. Il avait, disait-il, prêté serment de se taire, et ne se souvenait plus que de ce serment. Le président eut beau l’interroger par toutes les menaces et par toutes les prières, l’obstiné jeune homme resta inflexible. D’ailleurs il assurait ne point s’être révolté pour Schumacker, mais seulement parce que sa vieille mère avait faim et froid. Il ne niait point qu’il n’eût peut-être mérité la mort; mais il affirmait que l’on commettrait une injustice en le condamnant, parce qu’en le tuant on tuerait aussi sa pauvre mère, qui ne l’avait pas mérité.

Quand Norbith eut cessé de parler, le secrétaire intime résuma en peu de mots les charges accablantes qui pesaient jusqu’à ce moment sur les accusés, surtout sur Schumacker. Il lut quelques-unes des devises séditieuses inscrites sur les bannières, et fit ressortir contre l’ex-grand-chancelier l’unanimité des réponses de ses complices, et jusqu’au silence de ce jeune Norbith, lié par un serment fanatique. — Il ne reste plus, ajouta-t-il en terminant, qu’un accusé à interroger, et nous avons de hautes raisons de le croire agent secret de l’autorité qui a si mal veillé à la tranquillité du Drontheimhus. Cette autorité a favorisé, sinon par sa connivence coupable, du moins par sa fatale négligence, l’explosion de la révolte qui va perdre tous ces malheureux, et rendre à l’échafaud ce Schumacker, que la clémence du roi en avait si généreusement sauvé.

Éthel, qui de ses craintes pour Ordener était revenue, par une cruelle transition, à ses craintes pour son père, frémit à ce langage sinistre, et un torrent de larmes s’échappa de ses yeux, quand elle vit son père se lever, en disant d’une voix tranquille: — Chancelier d’Ahlefeld, j’admire tout ceci. Avez-vous eu la prévoyance de faire mander le bourreau?

L’infortunée crut en ce moment qu’elle épuisait sa dernière douleur; elle se trompait.

Le sixième accusé venait de se lever; noble et superbe, il avait écarté les cheveux qui couvraient son visage, et aux questions que le président lui avait adressées, il avait répondu d’une voix ferme et haute:

— Je m’appelle Ordener Guldenlew, baron de Thorvick, chevalier de Dannebrog.

Un cri de surprise échappa au secrétaire:

— Le fils du vice-roi!

— Le fils du vice-roi! répétèrent toutes les voix, comme si la salle eût eu en ce moment mille échos.

Le président avait reculé sur son siège; les juges, jusqu'alors immobiles dans le tribunal, se penchaient tumultueusement les uns vers les autres, ainsi que des arbres qui seraient battus à la fois de vents opposés. L'agitation était plus grande encore dans l'auditoire; les spectateurs montaient sur les corniches de pierre et les grilles de fer; la foule entière parlait comme d'une seule bouche; et les gardes, oubliant de réclamer le silence, mêlaient leurs paroles de surprise à la rumeur universelle.

Quelle âme assez accoutumée aux soudaines émotions de la vie pourrait concevoir ce qui se passa dans l'âme d'Éthel? Qui pourrait rendre ce mélange inouï de joie déchirante et de délicieuse douleur? cette attente inquiète, qui était à la fois de la crainte et de l'espérance, et n'en était cependant pas? — Il était devant elle, sans qu'elle fût devant lui! c'était lui qu'elle voyait et qui ne la voyait pas! c'était son bien-aimé Ordener, son Ordener, qu'elle avait cru mort, qu'elle savait perdu pour elle, son ami qui l'avait trompée et qu'elle adorait comme d'une adoration nouvelle. Il était là; oui, il était là. Un vain songe ne l'abusait pas; oh! c'était bien lui, cet Ordener, hélas! qu'elle avait rêvé plus souvent encore qu'elle ne l'avait vu.

— Mais apparaissait-il dans cette enceinte solennelle comme un ange sauveur ou comme un fatal génie? Devait-elle espérer en lui ou trembler pour lui? — Mille conjectures oppressaient à la fois sa pensée et l'étouffaient comme une flamme que trop d'aliment éteint; toutes les idées, toutes les sensations que nous venons d'indiquer parcoururent son esprit comme un éclair, au moment où le fils du vice-roi de Norvège prononça son nom. Elle fut la première à le reconnaître, et les autres ne l'avaient pas encore reconnu, qu'elle était évanouie.

Elle reprit bientôt ses sens, pour la seconde fois, grâce aux soins de sa mystérieuse voisine. Pâle, elle rouvrit ses yeux dans lesquels les larmes s'étaient subitement taries. Elle jeta avidement sur le jeune homme, toujours debout et calme dans le tumulte général, un de ces regards qui embrassent tout un être; et le trouble avait cessé dans le tribunal et le peuple, que le nom d'Ordener Guldenlew retentissait encore à son oreille. Elle remarqua avec une douloureuse inquiétude qu'il portait son bras en écharpe, et que ses mains étaient chargées de fers; elle remarqua que son manteau était déchiré en plusieurs endroits, que son sabre fidèle ne pendait plus à sa ceinture. Rien n'échappa à sa sollicitude; car l'oeil d'une amante ressemble à l’oeil d’une mère. Elle environna de toute son âme celui qu’elle ne pouvait couvrir de tout son corps; et, il faut le dire à la honte et à la gloire de l’amour, dans cette salle qui renfermait son père et les persécuteurs de son père, Éthel ne vit plus qu’un seul homme.

Le silence s’était rétabli peu à peu. Le président se mit en devoir de commencer l’interrogatoire du fils du vice-roi.

— Seigneur baron…. dit-il d’une voix tremblante.

— Je ne m’appelle point ici *seigneur baron*, répondit Ordener d’une voix ferme, je m’appelle Ordener Guldenlew, comme celui qui a été comte de Griffenfeld s’appelle Jean Schumacker.

Le président resta un moment comme interdit.

— Eh bien donc! reprit-il, Ordener Guldenlew, c’est sans doute par un hasard malheureux que vous êtes amené devant nous. Les rebelles vous auront pris voyageant, vous auront forcé de les suivre, et c’est ainsi, sans doute, que vous avez été trouvé dans leurs rangs.

Le secrétaire se leva:

— Nobles juges, le nom seul du fils du vice-roi de Norvège est un plaidoyer suffisant pour lui. Le baron Ordener Guldenlew ne peut être un rebelle. Notre illustre président a parfaitement expliqué sa fâcheuse arrestation parmi les rebelles. Le seul tort du noble prisonnier est de n’avoir pas dit plus tôt son nom. Nous demandons qu’il soit mis sur-le-champ en liberté, abandonnant toute accusation à son égard, et regrettant qu’il se soit assis sur le banc souillé par le criminel Schumacker et ses complices.

— Que faites-vous donc? s’écria Ordener.

— Le secrétaire intime, dit le président, se désiste de toute poursuite à votre égard.

— Il a tort, répliqua Ordener, d’une voix haute et sonore; je dois ici être seul accusé, seul jugé, et seul condamné. — Il s’arrêta un moment, et ajouta d’un accent moins ferme: — Car je suis seul coupable.

— Seul coupable! s’écria le président.

— Seul coupable! répéta le secrétaire intime.

Une nouvelle explosion de surprise se manifesta dans l’auditoire. La malheureuse Éthel frémit; elle ne songeait pas que cette déclaration de son amant sauvait son père. Elle avait devant les yeux la mort de son Ordener.

— Hallebardiers, qu’on fasse silence! dit le président, profitant peut-être du moment de rumeur pour rallier ses idées et reprendre sa présence d’esprit. — Ordener Guldenlew, reprit-il, expliquez-vous.

Le jeune homme resta, un instant rêveur, puis soupira avec effort, puis prononça ces paroles d’un ton calme et résigné:

— Oui, je sais qu’une mort infâme m’attend; je sais que la vie pourrait m’être belle et glorieuse. Mais Dieu lira au fond de mon coeur! à la vérité, Dieu seul! — Je vais accomplir le premier devoir de mon existence; je vais lui sacrifier mon sang, mon honneur peut-être; mais je sens que je mourrai sans remords et sans repentir. Ne vous étonnez pas de mes paroles, seigneurs juges; il y a dans l’âme et dans la destinée humaine des mystères que vous ne pouvez pénétrer et qui ne sont jugés qu’au ciel. Écoutez-moi donc; et agissez envers moi selon vos consciences, quand vous aurez absous ces infortunés, et surtout ce déplorable Schumacker, qui a déjà, dans sa captivité, expié bien plus de crimes qu’un homme n’en peut commettre. — Oui, je suis coupable, nobles juges, et seul coupable. Schumacker est innocent; ces autres malheureux ne sont qu’égarés. L’auteur de la rébellion des mineurs, c’est moi.

— Vous! s’écrièrent à la fois, et avec une expression étrange, le président et le secrétaire intime.

— Moi! et ne m’interrompez plus, seigneurs. Je suis pressé de terminer, car en m’accusant je justifie ces infortunés. C’est moi qui ai soulevé les mineurs au nom de Schumacker; c’est moi qui ai fait distribuer aux rebelles des bannières; qui leur ai envoyé, au nom du prisonnier de Munckholm, de l’or et des armes. Hacket était mon agent.

À ce nom de *Hacket*, le secrétaire intime fit un geste de stupeur. Ordener continua:

— J’épargne vos moments, seigneurs. J’ai été pris dans les rangs des mineurs, que j’avais poussés à la révolte. J’ai seul tout fait. Maintenant, jugez. Si j’ai prouvé mon crime, j’ai prouvé également l’innocence de Schumacker et celle des pauvres misérables que vous croyez ses complices.

Le jeune homme parlait ainsi, les yeux levés au ciel. Éthel, presque inanimée, respirait à peine; il lui semblait seulement qu’Ordener, tout en justifiant son père, prononçait bien amèrement son nom. Les discours du jeune homme l’étonnaient et l’épouvantaient, sans qu’elle pût les comprendre. Dans tout ce qui frappait ses sens, elle ne voyait clairement que le malheur.

Un sentiment du même genre paraissait préoccuper le président. On eût dit qu’il ne pouvait croire à ce qu’il entendait de ses oreilles. Il adressa néanmoins la parole au fils du vice-roi:

— Si vous êtes en effet l’unique auteur de cette révolte, dans quel but l’avez-vous excitée?

— Je ne puis le dire.

Un frisson saisit Éthel, lorsqu’elle entendit le président répliquer d’une voix presque irritée:

— N’aviez-vous point une intrigue avec la fille de Schumacker?

Mais Ordener, enchaîné, avait fait un pas vers le tribunal, et s’était écrié, avec l’accent de l’indignation:

— Chancelier d’Ahlefeld, contentez-vous de ma vie que je vous livre; respectez une noble et innocente fille. Ne tentez pas de la déshonorer une seconde fois.

La pauvre Éthel, qui avait senti son sang remonter à son visage, ne comprit pas ce que signifiaient ces mots, *une seconde fois*, sur lesquels son défenseur appuyait avec énergie; mais à la colère qui se peignait sur les traits du président, on eût dit qu’il les comprenait.

— Ordener Guldenlew, n’oubliez pas vous-même le respect que vous devez à la justice du roi et à ses suprêmes officiers. Je vous réprimande au nom du tribunal. — À présent, je vous somme de nouveau de me déclarer dans quel but vous avez commis le crime dont vous vous accusez.

— Je vous répète que je ne puis vous le dire.

— N’était-ce pas, reprit le secrétaire, pour délivrer Schumacker?

Ordener garda le silence.

— Ne soyez pas muet, accusé Ordener, dit le président; il est prouvé que vous entreteniez des intelligences avec Schumacker, et l’aveu de votre culpabilité accuse, plus qu’il ne justifie, le prisonnier de Munckholm. Vous alliez souvent à Munckholm, et certes vous attachiez à ces visites plus qu’un intérêt de curiosité ordinaire. Témoin cette boucle de diamants.

Le président prit sur le bureau, et montra à Ordener une boucle de brillants qui y était déposée.

— La reconnaissez-vous pour vous avoir appartenu?

— Oui. Par quel hasard?….

— Eh bien! un des rebelles l’a remise, avant d’expirer, à notre secrétaire intime, en déclarant qu’il l’avait reçue de vous en paiement, pour vous avoir transporté du port de Drontheim à la forteresse de Munckholm. Or, je vous le demande, seigneurs juges, un pareil salaire donné à un simple matelot n’annoncet-il pas quelle importance l’accusé Ordener Guldenlew attachait à parvenir jusqu’à cette prison, qui est celle de Schumacker?

— Ah! s'écria l'accusé Kennybol, ce que dit sa courtoisie est vrai, je reconnais la boucle; c'est l'histoire de notre pauvre frère Guldon Stayper.

— Silence, dit le président, laissez répondre Ordener Guldenlew.

— Je ne cacherai pas, repartit Ordener, que je désirais voir Schumacker. Mais cette boucle ne signifie rien. On ne peut entrer avec des diamants dans le fort; le matelot qui m'avait amené s'était plaint, dans la traversée, de sa misère; je lui ai jeté cette boucle, que je ne pouvais garder sur moi.

— Pardon, votre courtoisie, interrompit le secrétaire intime, le règlement excepte de cette mesure le fils du vice-roi. Vous pouviez donc….

— Je ne voulais pas me nommer.

— Pourquoi? demanda le président.

— C'est ce que je ne puis dire.

— Vos intelligences avec Schumacker et sa fille prouvent que le but de votre complot était de les délivrer.

Schumacker, qui, jusqu'alors, n'avait donné d'autre signe d'attention que de dédaigneux mouvements d'épaules, se leva:

— Me délivrer! Le but de cette infernale trame était de me compromettre et de me perdre, comme il l'est encore. Croyez-vous qu'Ordener Guldenlew eût avoué sa participation au crime, s'il n'eût été pris parmi les révoltés? Oh! je vois qu'il a hérité de la haine de son père pour moi. Et quant aux intelligences qu'on lui suppose avec moi et ma fille, qu'il sache, cet exécré Guldenlew, que ma fille a hérité aussi de ma haine pour lui, pour la race des Guldenlew et des d'Ahlefeld!

Ordener soupira profondément, tandis qu'Éthel désavouait tout bas son père, et que celui-ci retombait sur son banc, palpitant encore de colère.

— Le tribunal jugera, dit le président.

Ordener, qui, aux paroles de Schumacker, avait baissé les yeux en silence, parut se réveiller:

— Oh! nobles juges, écoutez. Vous allez descendre dans vos consciences; n'oubliez pas qu'Ordener Guldenlew est coupable seul; Schumacker est innocent. Ces autres infortunés ont été trompés par Hacket, qui était mon agent. J'ai fait tout le reste.

Kennybol l'interrompit:

— Sa courtoisie dit vrai, seigneurs juges; car c'est elle qui s'est chargée de nous amener le fameux Han d'Islande, dont je souhaite que le nom ne me porte pas malheur. Je sais que c'est ce jeune seigneur qui a osé l'aller trouver dans la caverne de Walderhog, pour lui proposer d'être notre chef. Il m’a confié le secret de son entreprise au hameau de Surb, chez mon frère Braall. Et, pour le reste encore, le jeune seigneur dit vrai; nous avons été abusés par ce Hacket maudit; d’où il suit que nous ne méritons pas la mort.

— Seigneur secrétaire intime, dit le président, les débats sont clos.

Quelles sont vos conclusions?

Le secrétaire se leva, salua plusieurs fois le tribunal, passa quelque temps la main entre les plis de son rabat de dentelle, sans quitter un moment des yeux les yeux du président. Enfin, il fit entendre ces paroles d’une voix sourde et lugubre:

— Seigneur président, respectables juges! l’accusation demeure victorieuse. Ordener Guldenlew, qui ternit à jamais la splendeur de son glorieux nom, n’a réussi qu’à prouver sa culpabilité sans démontrer l’innocence de l’ex-chancelier Schumacker, et de ses complices Han d’Islande, Wilfrid Kennybol, Jonas et Norbith. — Je demande à la justice du tribunal que les six accusés soient déclarés coupables du crime de haute-trahison et de lèse-majesté, au premier chef.

Un murmure vague s’éleva de la foule. Le président allait proclamer la formule de clôture, quand l’évêque réclama un moment d’attention.

— Doctes juges, il est convenable que la défense des accusés se fasse entendre la dernière. Je souhaiterais qu’elle eût un meilleur organe; car je suis vieux et faible, et je n’ai plus en moi d’autre force que celle qui me vient de Dieu. — Je m’étonne des sévères requêtes du secrétaire intime. Rien ici ne prouve le crime de mon client Schumacker. On ne peut établir contre lui aucune participation directe à l’insurrection des mineurs; et puisque mon autre client Ordener Guldenlew déclare avoir abusé du nom de Schumacker, et, de plus, être l’unique auteur de cette condamnable sédition, toutes les présomptions qui pesaient sur Schumacker s’évanouissent; vous devez donc l’absoudre. Je recommande à votre indulgence chrétienne les autres accusés, qui n’ont été qu’égarés, comme la brebis du bon pasteur; et même le jeune Ordener Guldenlew, qui a du moins le mérite, bien grand devant le Seigneur, de confesser son crime. Songez, seigneurs juges, qu’il est encore dans l’âge où l’homme peut faillir, et même tomber, sans que Dieu refuse de le soutenir ou de le relever. Ordener Guldenlew porte à peine le quart de ce fardeau de l’existence qui pèse déjà presque entier sur ma tête. Mettez dans la balance de vos jugements sa jeunesse et son inexpérience, et ne lui retirez pas si tôt cette vie que le Seigneur vient à peine de lui donner.

Le vieillard se tut et se plaça près d'Ordener, qui souriait; tandis qu'à l'invitation du président, les juges se levaient du tribunal, et passaient en silence le seuil de la formidable salle de leurs délibérations.

Pendant que quelques hommes décidaient de six destinées dans ce terrible sanctuaire, les accusés immobiles étaient restés assis sur leur banc entre deux rangs de hallebardiers. Schumacker, la tête sur sa poitrine, paraissait endormi dans une rêverie profonde; le géant promenait à droite et à gauche des regards où se peignait une assurance stupide; Jonas et Kennybol, les mains jointes, priaient à voix basse, tandis que leur camarade Norbith frappait par intervalles la terre du pied, ou secouait ses chaînes avec des tressaillements convulsifs. Entre lui et le vénérable évêque, qui lisait les psaumes de la pénitence, se tenait Ordener, les bras croisés et les yeux levés au ciel.

Derrière eux on entendait le bruit de la foule, qui avait impétueusement éclaté à la sortie des juges. C'était le fameux captif de Munckholm, c'était le redoutable démon d'Islande, c'était surtout le fils du vice-roi, qui occupaient toutes les pensées, toutes les paroles, tous les regards. La rumeur, mêlée de plaintes, de rires et de cris confus, qui s'échappait de l'auditoire, s'abaissait et s'élevait comme une flamme qui ondoie sous le vent.

Ainsi se passèrent plusieurs heures d'attente, si longues que chacun s'étonnait qu'elles fussent contenues dans la même nuit. De temps en temps on jetait un regard vers la porte de la chambre des délibérations; mais on n'y voyait rien, que les deux soldats qui se promenaient avec leurs pertuisanes étincelantes devant le seuil fatal, comme deux fantômes muets.

Enfin, les torches et les lampes commençaient à pâlir, et quelques rayons blancs de l'aube traversaient les vitraux étroits de la salle, quand la porte redoutable s'ouvrit. Un silence profond remplaça sur-le-champ, comme par magie, tout le tumulte du peuple, et l'on n'entendit plus que le bruit des respirations pressées et le mouvement vague et sourd de la foule en suspens.

Les juges, sortant à pas lents de la chambre des délibérations, reprirent place au tribunal, le président à leur tête.

Le secrétaire intime, qui avait paru absorbé dans ses réflexions pendant leur absence, s'inclina:

— Seigneur président, quel est l'arrêt que le tribunal, jugeant sans appel, a rendu au nom du roi? Nous sommes prêts à l'entendre avec un respect religieux. Le juge placé à droite du président se leva, tenant un parchemin dans ses mains:

— Sa grâce, notre glorieux président, fatigué par la longueur de cette audience, daigne nous charger, nous, haut-syndic du Drontheimhus, président naturel de ce tribunal respectable, de lire à sa place la sentence rendue au nom du roi. Nous allons remplir ce devoir honorable et pénible, rappelant à l'auditoire de se taire devant l'infaillible justice du roi.

Alors la voix du haut-syndic prit une inflexion solennelle et grave, et tous les coeurs palpitèrent.

— Au nom de notre vénéré maître et légitime seigneur Christiern, roi! — voici l'arrêt que nous, juges du haut tribunal du Drontheimhus, nous rendons dans nos consciences, touchant Jean Schumacker, prisonnier d'État; Wilfrid Kennybol, habitant des montagnes de Kole; Jonas, mineur royal; Norbith, mineur royal; Han, de Klipstadur, en Islande; et Ordener Guldenlew, baron de Thorvick, chevalier de Dannebrog; tous accusés des crimes de haute trahison et de lèse-majesté au premier chef; Han d'Islande étant de plus prévenu des crimes d'assassinat, d'incendie et de brigandage.

1° Jean Schumacker n'est point coupable;

2° Wilfrid Kennybol, Jonas et Norbith sont coupables; mais le tribunal les excuse, parce qu'ils ont été égarés;

3° Han d'Islande est coupable de tous les crimes qu'on lui impute;

4° Ordener Guldenlew est coupable de haute trahison et de lèse-majesté au premier chef.» Le juge s'arrêta un moment comme pour prendre haleine. Ordener attachait sur lui un regard plein d'une joie céleste.

— Jean Schumacker, continua le juge, le tribunal vous absout et vous renvoie dans votre prison.

Kennybol, Jonas et Norbith, le tribunal réduit la peine que vous avez encourue à une détention perpétuelle et à l'amende de mille écus royaux chacun.

Han, de Klipstadur, assassin et incendiaire, vous serez ce soir conduit sur la place d'armes de Munckholm, et pendu par le cou jusqu'à ce que mort s'ensuive.

Ordener Guldenlew, traître, après avoir été dégradé de vos titres devant ce tribunal, vous serez conduit ce soir au même lieu, avec un flambeau à la main, pour y avoir la tête tranchée, le corps brûlé, et pour que vos cendres soient jetées au vent et votre tête exposée sur la claie.

Retirez-vous tous. Tel est l'arrêt rendu par la justice du roi. —

À peine le haut-syndic avait-il achevé cette funèbre lecture, qu’on entendit dans la salle un cri. Ce cri glaça les assistants plus même que l’effrayant appareil de la sentence de mort; ce cri fit pâlir un moment le front serein et radieux d’Ordener condamné.

XLIV

C’était le malheur qui les rendait égaux.

CHARLES NODIER.

C’en est donc fait; tout va s’accomplir, ou plutôt tout est déjà accompli. Il a sauvé le père de celle qu’il aimait, il l’a sauvée elle-même, en lui conservant l’appui paternel. La noble conspiration du jeune homme pour la vie de Schumacker a réussi; maintenant le reste n’est rien; il n’a plus qu’à mourir.

Que ceux qui l’ont cru coupable ou insensé le jugent maintenant, ce généreux Ordener, comme il se juge lui-même dans son âme avec un saint ravissement. Car ce fut toujours sa pensée, en entrant dans les rangs des rebelles, que, s’il ne pouvait empêcher l’exécution du crime de Schumacker, il pourrait du moins en empêcher le châtiment, en l’appelant sur sa propre tête.

— Hélas! s’était-il dit, sans doute Schumacker est coupable; mais, aigri par sa captivité et son malheur, son crime est pardonnable. Il ne veut que sa délivrance; il la tente, même par la rébellion. — D’ailleurs, que deviendra mon Éthel si on lui enlève son père; si elle le perd par l’échafaud, si un nouvel opprobre vient flétrir sa vie, que deviendra-t-elle, sans soutien, sans secours, seule dans son cachot, ou errante dans un monde d’ennemis? Cette pensée l’avait déterminé à son sacrifice, et il s’y était préparé avec joie; car le plus grand bonheur d’un être qui aime est d’immoler son existence, je ne dis pas à l’existence, mais à un sourire, à une larme de l’être aimé.

Il a donc été pris parmi les rebelles, il a été traîné devant les juges qui devaient condamner Schumacker, il a commis son généreux mensonge, il a été condamné, il va mourir d’une mort cruelle, d’un supplice ignominieux, il va laisser une mémoire souillée; mais que lui importe au noble jeune homme? il a sauvé le père de son Éthel.

Il est maintenant assis sur ses chaînes dans un cachot humide, où la lumière et l’air ne pénètrent qu’à peine par de sombres soupiraux; près de lui est la nourriture du reste de son existence, un pain noir, une cruche pleine d’eau. Un collier de fer pèse sur son cou, des bracelets, des carcans de fer pressent ses mains et ses pieds. Chaque heure qui s’écoule lui emporte plus de vie qu’une année n’en enlève aux autres mortels. — Il rêve délicieusement.

— Peut-être mon souvenir ne périra-t-il pas avec moi, du moins dans un des coeurs qui battent parmi les hommes! peut-être daignera-t-elle me donner une larme pour mon sang! peut-être consacrera-t-elle quelquefois un regret à celui qui lui a dévoué sa vie! peut-être, dans ses rêveries virginales, aura-t-elle parfois présente la confuse image de son ami! Qui sait d'ailleurs ce qui est derrière la mort? Qui sait si les âmes délivrées de leur prison matérielle ne peuvent pas quelquefois revenir veiller sur les âmes qu'elles aiment, commercer mystérieusement avec ces douces compagnes encore captives, et leur apporter en secret quelque vertu des anges et quelque joie du ciel?

Toutefois des idées amères se mêlaient à ces consolantes méditations. La haine que Schumacker lui avait témoignée au moment même de son sacrifice oppressait son coeur. Le cri déchirant qu'il avait entendu en même temps que son arrêt de mort l'avait ébranlé profondément; car, seul dans l'auditoire, il avait reconnu cette voix et compris cette douleur. Et puis, ne la reverra-t-il donc plus, son Éthel? ses derniers moments se passeront-ils dans la prison même qui la renferme, sans qu'il puisse encore une fois toucher la douce main, entendre la douce voix de celle pour qui il va mourir?

Il abandonnait ainsi son âme à cette vague et triste rêverie, qui est à la pensée ce que le sommeil est à la vie, quand le cri rauque des vieux verrous rouillés heurta rudement son oreille, déjà en quelque sorte attentive aux concerts de l'autre sphère où il allait s'envoler. — C'était la lourde porte de fer de son cachot, qui s'ouvrait en grondant sur ses gonds. Le jeune condamné se leva tranquille et presque joyeux, car il pensa que c'était le bourreau qui venait le chercher, et il avait déjà dépouillé l'existence comme le manteau qu'il foulait à ses pieds.

Il fut trompé dans son attente; une figure blanche et svelte venait d'apparaître au seuil de son cachot, pareille à une vision lumineuse. Ordener douta de ses yeux, et se demanda s'il n'était pas déjà dans le ciel. C'était elle, c'était son Éthel.

La jeune fille était tombée dans ses bras enchaînés; elle couvrait les mains d'Ordener de larmes, qu'essuyaient les longues tresses noires de ses cheveux épars; baisant les fers du condamné, elle meurtrissait ses lèvres pures sur les infâmes carcans; elle ne parlait pas, mais tout son coeur semblait prêt à s'échapper dans la première parole qui passerait à travers ses sanglots.

Lui, il éprouvait la joie la plus céleste qu'il eût éprouvée depuis sa naissance. Il serrait doucement son Éthel sur sa poitrine, et les forces réunies de la terre et de l'enfer n'eussent pu en ce moment dénouer les deux bras dont il l'environnait. Le sentiment de sa mort prochaine mêlait quelque chose de solennel à son ravissement, et il s'emparait de son Éthel comme s'il en eût déjà pris possession pour l'éternité.

Il ne demanda pas à cet ange comment elle avait pu pénétrer jusqu'à lui. Elle était là, pouvait-il penser à autre chose? D'ailleurs il ne s'en étonnait pas. Il ne se demandait pas comment cette jeune fille proscrite, faible, isolée, avait pu, malgré les triples portes de fer, et les triples rangs de soldats, ouvrir sa propre prison et celle de son amant; cela lui semblait simple; il portait en lui la conscience intime de ce que peut l'amour.

À quoi bon se parler avec la voix quand on se peut parler avec l'âme? Pourquoi ne pas laisser les corps écouter en silence le langage mystérieux des intelligences? — Tous deux se taisaient, parce qu'il y a des émotions qu'on ne saurait exprimer qu'en se taisant.

Cependant la jeune fille souleva enfin sa tête appuyée sur le coeur tumultueux du jeune homme.

— Ordener, dit-elle, je viens te sauver; et elle prononça cette parole d'espérance avec une angoisse douloureuse.

Ordener secoua la tête en souriant.

— Me sauver, Éthel! tu t'abuses; la fuite est impossible.

— Hélas! je le sais trop. Ce château est peuplé de soldats, et toutes les portes qu'il faut traverser pour arriver ici sont gardées par des archers et des geôliers qui ne dorment pas. — Elle ajouta avec effort: Mais je t'apporte un autre moyen de salut.

— Va, ton espérance est vaine. Ne te berce pas de chimères, Éthel; dans quelques heures un coup de hache les dissiperait trop cruellement.

— Oh! n'achève pas! Ordener! tu ne mourras pas. Oh! dérobe-moi cette affreuse pensée, ou plutôt, oui, présente-la-moi dans toute son horreur, pour me donner la force d'accomplir ton salut et mon sacrifice.

Il y avait dans l'accent de la jeune fille une expression indéfinissable, Ordener la regarda doucement:

— Ton sacrifice! que veux-tu dire?

Elle cacha son visage dans ses mains, et sanglota en disant d'une voix inarticulée: — O Dieu!

Cet abattement fut de courte durée; elle se releva; ses yeux brillaient, sa bouche souriait. Elle était belle comme un ange qui remonte de l’enfer au ciel.

— Écoutez, mon Ordener, votre échafaud ne s’élèvera pas. Pour que vous viviez, il suffit que vous promettiez d’épouser Ulrique d’Ahlefeld.

— Ulrique d’Ahlefeld! ce nom dans ta bouche, mon Éthel!

— Ne m’interrompez pas, poursuivit-elle avec le calme d’une martyre qui subit sa dernière torture; je viens ici envoyée par la comtesse d’Ahlefeld. On vous promet d’obtenir votre grâce du roi, si l’on obtient en échange votre main pour la fille du grand-chancelier. Je viens ici vous demander le serment d’épouser Ulrique et de vivre pour elle. On m’a choisie pour messagère, parce qu’on a pensé que ma voix aurait quelque puissance sur vous.

— Éthel, dit le condamné d’une voix glacée, adieu; en sortant de ce cachot, dites qu’on fasse venir le bourreau.

Elle se leva, resta un moment devant lui debout, pâle et tremblante; puis ses genoux fléchirent, elle tomba à genoux sur la pierre en joignant les mains.

— Que lui ai-je fait? murmura-t-elle d’une voix éteinte.

Ordener, muet, fixait son regard sur la pierre.

— Seigneur, dit-elle, se traînant à genoux jusqu’à lui, vous ne me répondez pas? Vous ne voulez donc plus me parler? — Il ne me reste plus qu’à mourir.

Une larme roula dans les yeux du jeune homme.

— Éthel, vous ne m’aimez plus.

— O Dieu! s’écria la pauvre jeune fille, serrant dans ses bras les genoux du prisonnier, je ne l’aime plus! Tu dis que je ne t’aime plus, mon Ordener. Est-il bien vrai que tu as pu dire cela?

— Vous ne m’aimez plus, puisque vous me méprisez.

Il se repentit à l’instant même d’avoir prononcé cette parole cruelle; car l’accent d’Éthel fut déchirant, quand elle jeta ses bras adorés autour de son cou, en criant d’une voix étouffée par les larmes:

— Pardonne-moi, mon bien-aimé Ordener, pardonne-moi comme je te pardonne. Moi! te mépriser, grand Dieu! n’es-tu pas mon bien, mon orgueil, mon idolâtrie? — Dis-moi, est-ce qu’il y avait dans mes paroles autre chose qu’un profond amour, qu’une brûlante admiration pour toi? Hélas! ton langage sévère m’a fait bien du mal, quand je venais pour te sauver, mon Ordener adoré, en immolant tout mon être au tien.

— Eh bien, répondit le jeune homme radouci en essuyant les pleurs d’Éthel avec des baisers, n’était-ce pas me montrer peu d’estime que de me proposer de racheter ma vie par l’abandon de mon Éthel, par un lâche oubli de mes serments, par le sacrifice de mon amour? — Il ajouta, l’oeil fixé sur Éthel: — De mon amour, pour lequel je verse aujourd’hui tout mon sang. Un long gémissement précéda la réponse d’Éthel.

— Écoute-moi encore, mon Ordener, ne m’accuse pas si vite. J’ai peut-être plus de force qu’il n’appartient d’ordinaire à une pauvre femme. — Du haut de notre donjon on voit construire, dans la place d’Armes l’échafaud qui t’est destiné. Ordener! tu ne connais pas cette affreuse douleur de voir lentement se préparer la mort de celui qui porte avec lui notre vie! La comtesse d’Ahlefeld, près de laquelle j’étais quand j’ai entendu prononcer ton arrêt funèbre, est venue me trouver au donjon, où j’étais rentrée avec mon père. Elle m’a demandé si je voulais te sauver, elle m’a offert cet odieux moyen; mon Ordener, il fallait détruire ma pauvre destinée, renoncer à toi, te perdre pour jamais, donner à une autre cet Ordener, toute la félicité de la délaissée Éthel, ou te livrer au supplice; on me laissait le choix entre mon malheur et ta mort; je n’ai pas balancé.

Il baisa avec respect la main de cet ange.

— Je ne balance pas non plus, Éthel. Tu ne serais pas venue m’offrir la vie avec la main d’Ulrique d’Ahlefeld si tu avais su comment il se fait que je meurs.

— Quoi? Quel mystère?….

— Permets-moi d’avoir un secret pour toi, mon Éthel bien-aimée. Je veux mourir sans que tu saches si tu me dois de la reconnaissance ou de la haine pour ma mort.

— Tu veux mourir! Tu veux donc mourir! O Dieu! et cela est vrai, et l’échafaud se dresse en ce moment, et aucune puissance humaine ne peut délivrer mon Ordener qu’on va tuer! Dis-moi, jette un regard sur ton esclave, sur ta compagne, et promets-moi, bien-aimé Ordener, de m’entendre sans colère. Es-tu bien sûr, réponds à ton Éthel comme à Dieu, que tu ne pourrais mener une vie heureuse auprès de cette femme, de cette Ulrique d’Ahlefeld? en es-tu bien sûr, Ordener? Elle est peut-être, sans doute même, belle, douce, vertueuse; elle vaut mieux que celle pour qui tu péris. — Ne détourne pas la tête, cher ami, mon Ordener. Tu es si noble et si jeune pour monter sur un échafaud! Eh bien! tu irais vivre avec elle dans quelque brillante ville où tu ne penserais plus à ce funeste donjon; tu laisserais couler paisiblement tes jours sans t’informer de moi; j’y consens, tu me chasserais de ton coeur, même de ton souvenir, Ordener. Mais vis, laisse-moi ici seule, c’est à moi de mourir. Et, crois-moi, quand je te saurai dans les bras d’une autre, tu n’auras pas besoin de t’inquiéter de moi; je ne souffrirai pas longtemps.

Elle s’arrêta; sa voix se perdait dans les larmes. Cependant on lisait dans son regard désolé le désir douloureux de remporter la victoire fatale dont elle devait mourir.

Ordener lui dit:

— Éthel, ne me parle plus de cela. Qu’il ne sorte en ce moment de nos bouches d’autres noms que le tien et le mien.

— Ainsi, reprit-elle, hélas! hélas! tu veux donc mourir?

— Il le faut. J’irai avec joie à l’échafaud pour toi; j’irais avec horreur à l’autel pour toute autre femme. Ne m’en parle plus; tu m’affliges et tu m’offenses.

Elle pleurait en murmurant toujours: — Il va mourir, ô Dieu! et d’une mort infâme!

Le condamné répondit avec un sourire:

— Crois-moi, Éthel, il y a moins de déshonneur dans ma mort que dans la vie telle que tu me la proposes.

En ce moment, son regard, se détachant de son Éthel éplorée, aperçut un vieillard vêtu d’habits ecclésiastiques, qui se tenait debout dans l’ombre, sous la voûte basse de la porte:

— Que voulez-vous? dit-il brusquement.

— Seigneur, je suis venu avec l’envoyée de la comtesse d’Ahlefeld. Vous ne m’avez point aperçu, et j’attendais en silence que vos yeux tombassent sur moi.

En effet, Ordener n’avait vu que son Éthel, et celle-ci, voyant

Ordener, avait oublié son compagnon.

— Je suis, continua le vieillard, le ministre chargé….

— J’entends, dit le jeune homme. Je suis prêt.

Le ministre s’avança vers lui.

— Dieu est prêt aussi à vous recevoir, mon fils.

— Seigneur ministre, reprit Ordener, votre visage ne m’est pas inconnu. Je vous ai vu quelque part. Le ministre s’inclina.

— Je vous reconnais aussi, mon fils. C’était dans la tour de Vygla. Nous avons tous deux montré ce jour-là combien les paroles humaines ont peu de certitude. Vous m’avez promis la grâce de douze malheureux condamnés, et moi je n’ai point cru en votre promesse, ne pouvant deviner que vous fussiez ce que vous êtes, le fils du vice-roi; et vous, seigneur, qui comptiez sur votre puissance et sur votre rang, en me donnant cette assurance….

Ordener acheva la pensée qu’Athanase Munder n’osait compléter.

— Je ne puis aujourd’hui obtenir aucune grâce, pas même la mienne; vous avez raison, seigneur ministre. Je respectais trop peu l’avenir; il m’en a puni, en me montrant sa puissance supérieure à la mienne.

Le ministre baissa la tête.

— Dieu est fort, dit-il.

Puis il releva ses yeux bienveillants sur Ordener en ajoutant:

— Dieu est bon.

Ordener, qui paraissait préoccupé, s’écria, après un court silence:

— Écoutez, seigneur ministre, je veux tenir la promesse que je vous ai faite dans la tour de Vygla. Quand je serai mort, allez trouver à Berghen mon père, le vice-roi de Norvège, et dites-lui que la dernière grâce que lui demande son fils, c’est celle de vos douze protégés. Il vous l’accordera, j’en suis sûr.

Une larme d’attendrissement mouilla le visage vénérable d’Athanase.

— Mon fils, il faut que de nobles pensées remplissent votre âme, pour savoir, dans la même heure, rejeter avec courage votre propre grâce et solliciter avec bonté celle des autres. Car j’ai entendu vos refus; et, tout en blâmant le dangereux excès d’une passion humaine, j’en ai été profondément touché. Maintenant je me dis: *Unde scelus?* Comment se fait-il qu’un homme qui approche tant du vrai juste se soit souillé du crime pour lequel il est condamné?

— Mon père, je ne l’ai point dit à cet ange, je ne puis vous le dire.

Croyez seulement que la cause de ma condamnation n’est point un crime.

— Comment? expliquez-vous, mon fils.

— Ne me pressez pas, répondit le jeune homme avec fermeté. Laissez-moi emporter dans le tombeau le secret de ma mort.

— Ce jeune homme ne peut être coupable, murmura le ministre.

Alors il tira de son sein un crucifix noir, qu’il plaça sur une sorte d’autel grossièrement formé d’une dalle de granit adossée au mur humide de la prison. Près du crucifix il posa une petite lampe de fer allumée, qu'il avait apportée avec lui, et une bible ouverte.

— Mon fils, priez et méditez. Je reviendrai dans quelques heures. — Allons, ajouta-t-il, se tournant vers Éthel, qui, pendant tout l'entretien d'Ordener et d'Athanase, avait gardé le silence du recueillement, il faut quitter le prisonnier. Le temps s'écoule.

Elle se leva radieuse et tranquille; quelque chose de divin enflammait son regard:

— Seigneur ministre, je ne puis vous suivre encore. Il faut auparavant que vous ayez uni Éthel Schumacker à son époux Ordener Guldenlew.

Elle regarda Ordener:

— Si tu étais encore puissant, libre et glorieux, mon Ordener, je pleurerais et j'éloignerais ma fatale destinée de la tienne. — Mais maintenant que tu ne crains plus la contagion de mon malheur, que tu es ainsi que moi captif, flétri, opprimé, maintenant que tu vas mourir, je viens à toi, espérant que tu daigneras du moins, Ordener, mon seigneur, permettre à celle qui n'aurait pu être la compagne de ta vie, d'être la compagne de ta mort; car tu m'aimes assez, n'est-il pas vrai, pour n'avoir pas douté un instant que je n'expire en même temps que toi?

Le condamné tomba à ses pieds et baisa le bas de sa robe.

— Vous, vieillard, continua-t-elle, vous allez nous tenir lieu de
familles et de pères; ce cachot sera le temple; cette pierre, l'autel.
Voici mon anneau, nous sommes à genoux devant Dieu et devant vous.
Bénissez-nous et lisez les paroles saintes qui vont unir Éthel
Schumacker à Ordener Guldenlew, son seigneur.

Et ils s'étaient agenouillés ensemble devant le prêtre, qui les contemplait avec un étonnement mêlé de pitié.

— Comment, mes enfants! que faites-vous?

— Mon père, dit la jeune fille, le temps presse. Dieu et la mort nous attendent.

On rencontre quelquefois dans la vie des puissances irrésistibles, des volontés auxquelles on cède soudain comme si elles avaient quelque chose de plus que les volontés humaines. Le prêtre leva les yeux en soupirant.

— Que le Seigneur me pardonne si ma condescendance est coupable! Vous vous aimez, vous n'avez plus que bien peu de temps à vous aimer sur la terre; je ne crois pas manquer à nos saints devoirs en légitimant votre amour.

La douce et redoutable cérémonie s'accomplit. Ils se levèrent tous deux sous la dernière bénédiction du prêtre; ils étaient époux.

Le visage du condamné brillait d'une douloureuse joie; on eût dit qu'il commençait à sentir l'amertume de la mort, à présent qu'il essayait la félicité de la vie. Les traits de sa compagne étaient sublimes de grandeur et de simplicité; elle était encore modeste comme une jeune vierge, et déjà presque fière comme une jeune épouse.

— Écoute-moi, mon Ordener, dit-elle; n'est-il pas vrai que nous sommes maintenant heureux de mourir, puisque la vie ne pouvait nous réunir? Tu ne sais pas, ami, ce que je ferai, — je me placerai aux fenêtres du donjon de manière à te voir monter sur l'échafaud, afin que nos âmes s'envolent ensemble dans le ciel. Si j'expire avant que la hache ne tombe, je t'attendrai; car nous sommes époux, mon Ordener adoré, et ce soir le cercueil sera notre lit nuptial.

Il la pressa sur son coeur gonflé et ne put prononcer que ces mots, qui étaient l'idée de toute son existence:

— Éthel, tu es donc à moi!

— Mes enfants, dit la voix attendrie de l'aumônier, dites-vous adieu.

Il est temps.

— Hélas! s'écria Éthel.

Toute sa force d'ange lui revint, et elle se prosterna devant le condamné:

— Adieu! mon Ordener bien-aimé; mon seigneur, donnez-moi votre bénédiction.

Le prisonnier accomplit ce voeu touchant, puis il se retourna pour saluer le vénérable Athanase Munder. Le vieillard était également agenouillé devant lui.

— Qu'attendez-vous, mon père? demanda-t-il surpris.

Le vieillard le regarda d'un air humble et doux:

— Votre bénédiction, mon fils.

— Que le ciel vous bénisse et appelle sur vous toutes les félicités que vos prières appellent sur vos frères les autres hommes, répondit Ordener d'un accent ému et solennel.

Bientôt la voûte sépulcrale entendit les derniers adieux et les derniers baisers; bientôt les durs verrous se refermèrent bruyamment, et la porte de fer sépara les deux jeunes époux, qui allaient mourir après s’être donné rendez-vous dans l’éternité.

XLV

À qui me livrera Louis Perez, mort ou vif, Je lui donne deux mille écus.
CALDERON. *Louis Perez de Galice*.

— Baron Voethaün, colonel des arquebusiers de Munckholm, quel est celui des soldats qui ont combattu sous vos ordres au Pilier-Noir, qui a fait Han d'Islande prisonnier? Nommez-le au tribunal, afin qu'il reçoive les mille écus royaux promis pour cette capture.

Ainsi parle au colonel des arquebusiers le président du tribunal. Le tribunal est assemblé; car, selon l'usage ancien de Norvège, les juges qui prononcent sans appel doivent rester sur leurs sièges jusqu'à ce que l'arrêt qu'ils ont rendu soit exécuté. Devant eux est le géant, qu'on vient de ramener, portant à son cou la corde qui doit le porter à son tour dans quelques heures.

Le colonel, assis près de la table du secrétaire intime, se lève. Il salue le tribunal et l'évêque, qui est remonté sur son trône.

— Seigneurs juges, le soldat qui a pris Han d'Islande est dans cette enceinte. Il se nomme Toric Belfast, second arquebusier de mon régiment.

— Qu'il vienne donc, reprend le président, recevoir la récompense promise.

Un jeune soldat, en uniforme d'arquebusier de Munckholm, se présente.

— Vous êtes Toric Belfast? demande le président.

— Oui, votre grâce.

— C'est vous qui avez fait Han d'Islande prisonnier?

— Oui, avec l'aide de saint Belzébuth, s'il plaît à votre excellence.

On apporte sur le tribunal un sac pesant.

— Vous reconnaissez bien cet homme pour le fameux Han d'Islande? ajoute le président, montrant le géant enchaîné.

— Je connaissais mieux le minois de la jolie Cattie que celui de Han d'Islande; mais j'affirme, par la gloire de saint Belphégor, que, si Han d'Islande est quelque part, c'est sous la forme de ce grand démon.

— Approchez, Toric Belfast, reprit le président. Voici les mille écus promis par le haut-syndic.

Le soldat s'avançait précipitamment vers le tribunal, quand une voix s'éleva dans la foule:

— Arquebusier de Munckholm, ce n’est pas toi qui as pris Han d’Islande!

— Par tous les bienheureux diables, s’écria le soldat en se retournant, je n’ai en propriété que ma pipe et la minute où je parle, mais je promets de donner dix mille écus d’or à celui qui vient de dire cela, s’il peut prouver ce qu’il a dit.

Et, croisant les deux bras, il promenait un regard assuré sur l’auditoire.

— Eh bien! que celui qui vient de parler se montre donc!

— C’est moi! dit un petit homme qui fendait la presse pour pénétrer dans l’enceinte.

Ce nouveau personnage était enveloppé d’une natte de jonc et de poil de veau marin, vêtement des Groënlandais, qui tombait autour de lui comme le toit conique d’une hutte. Sa barbe était noire, et d’épais cheveux de même couleur, couvrant ses sourcils roux, cachaient son visage, dont tout ce qu’on distinguait était hideux. On ne voyait ni ses bras ni ses mains.

— Ah! c’est toi? dit le soldat avec un éclat de rire. Et qui donc, selon toi, mon beau sire, a eu l’honneur de prendre ce diabolique géant?

Le petit homme secoua la tête et dit avec une sorte de sourire malicieux:

— C’est moi!

En ce moment, le baron Voethaün crut reconnaître en cet homme singulier l’être mystérieux qui lui avait donné à Skongen l’avis de l’arrivée des rebelles; le chancelier d’Ahlefeld, l’hôte de la ruine d’Arbar; et le secrétaire intime, un certain paysan d’Oëlmoe, qui portait une natte pareille et lui avait si bien indiqué la retraite de Han d’Islande. Mais, séparés tous trois, ils ne purent se communiquer leur impression fugitive, que les différences de costume et de traits qu’ils remarquèrent ensuite eurent bientôt effacée.

— Vraiment, c’est toi! répondit le soldat ironiquement. — Sans ton costume de phoque du Groënland, au regard que tu me lances, je serais tenté de reconnaître en toi un autre nain grotesque, qui m’a de même cherché querelle dans le Spladgest, il y a environ quinze jours; — c’était le jour où on apporta le cadavre du mineur Gill Stadt.

— Gill Stadt! interrompit le petit homme en tressaillant.

— Oui, Gill Stadt, affirma le soldat avec indifférence, l’amoureux rebuté d’une fille qui était la maîtresse d’un de nos camarades, et pour laquelle il est mort comme un sot.

Le petit homme dit sourdement:

— N’y avait-il pas aussi au Spladgest le corps d’un officier de ton régiment?

— Précisément, je me rappellerai toute ma vie ce jour-là; j’ai oublié l’heure de la retraite dans le Spladgest, et j’ai failli être dégradé en rentrant au fort. Cet officier, c’était le capitaine Dispolsen.

À ce nom le secrétaire intime se leva.

— Ces deux individus abusent de la patience du tribunal. Nous prions le seigneur président d’abréger cet entretien inutile.

— Par l’honneur de ma Cattie, je ne demande pas mieux, dit Toric Belfast, pourvu que vos courtoisies m’adjugent les mille écus promis pour la tête de Han, car c’est moi qui l’ai fait prisonnier.

— Tu mens! s’écria le petit homme.

Le soldat chercha son sabre à son côté.

— Tu es bien heureux, drôle, que nous soyons devant la justice, en présence de laquelle un soldat, fût-il arquebusier de Munckholm, doit se tenir désarmé comme un vieux coq.

— C’est à moi, dit froidement le petit homme, qu’appartient le salaire, car sans moi on n’aurait pas la tête de Han d’Islande.

Le soldat furieux jura que c’était lui qui avait pris Han d’Islande lorsque, tombé sur le champ de bataille, il commençait à rouvrir les yeux.

— Eh bien, dit son adversaire, il se peut que ce soit toi qui l’aies pris, mais c’est moi qui l’ai terrassé; sans moi tu n’aurais pu l’emmener prisonnier; donc les mille écus m’appartiennent.

— Cela est faux, répliqua le soldat, ce n’est pas toi qui l’as terrassé, c’est un esprit vêtu de peaux de bêtes.

— C’est moi!

— Non, non.

Le président ordonna aux deux parties de se taire; puis, demandant de nouveau au colonel Voethaün si c’était bien Toric Belfast qui lui avait amené Han d’Islande prisonnier, sur la réponse affirmative, il déclara que la récompense appartenait au soldat.

Le petit homme grinça des dents, et l’arquebusier étendit avidement les mains pour recevoir le sac.

— Un instant! cria le petit homme. — Sire président, cette somme, d’après l’édit du haut-syndic, n’appartient qu’à celui qui livrera Han d’Islande.

— Eh bien? dirent les juges.

Le petit homme se tourna vers le géant:

— Cet homme n’est pas Han d’Islande.

Un murmure d’étonnement parcourut la salle. Le président et le secrétaire intime s’agitaient sur leurs sièges.

— Non, répéta avec force le petit homme, l’argent n’appartient pas à l’arquebusier maudit de Munckholm, car cet homme n’est point Han d’Islande.

— Hallebardiers, dit le président, qu’on emmène ce furieux, il a perdu la raison.

L’évêque éleva la voix:

— Me permette le respectable président de lui faire observer qu’on peut, en refusant d’entendre cet homme, briser la planche du salut sous les pieds du condamné ici présent. Je demande au contraire que la confrontation continue.

— Révérend évêque, le tribunal va vous satisfaire, répondit le président; et s’adressant au géant: — Vous avez déclaré être Han d’Islande; confirmez-vous devant la mort votre déclaration?

— Le condamné répondit: — Je la confirme, je suis Han d’Islande.

— Vous entendez, seigneur évêque?

Le petit homme criait en même temps que le président:

— Tu mens, montagnard de Kole! tu mens! Ne t’obstine pas à porter un nom qui t’écrase; souviens-toi qu’il t’a déjà été funeste.

— Je suis Han, de Klipstadur, en Islande, répéta le géant, l’oeil fixé sur le secrétaire intime.

Le petit homme s’approcha du soldat de Munckholm, qui, comme l’auditoire, observait cette scène avec curiosité.

— Montagnard de Kole, on dit que Han d’Islande boit du sang humain. Si tu l’es, bois-en. — En voici.

Et à peine ces paroles étaient-elles prononcées, qu’écartant son manteau de natte, il avait plongé un poignard dans le coeur de l’arquebusier, et jeté le cadavre aux pieds du géant.

Un cri d’effroi et d’horreur s’éleva; les soldats qui gardaient le géant reculèrent. Le petit homme, prompt comme le tonnerre, s’élança sur le montagnard découvert, et d’un nouveau coup de poignard il le fit tomber sur le corps du soldat. Alors, dépouillant sa natte de jonc, sa fausse chevelure et sa barbe noire, il dévoila ses membres nerveux, hideusement revêtus de peaux de bêtes, et un visage qui répandit plus d’horreur encore parmi les assistants que le poignard sanglant dont il élevait le fer dégouttant de deux meurtres.

— Hé! juges, où est Han d’Islande?

— Gardes, qu’on saisisse ce monstre! cria le président épouvanté.

Han jeta dans la salle son poignard.

— Il m’est inutile, s’il n’y a plus ici de soldats de Munckholm. En parlant ainsi, il se livra sans résistance aux hallebardiers et aux archers qui l’entouraient, se préparant à l’assiéger comme une ville. On enchaîna le monstre sur le banc des accusés, et une litière emporta ses deux victimes, dont l’une, le montagnard, respirait encore.

Il est impossible de peindre les divers mouvements de terreur, d’étonnement et d’indignation qui, pendant cette scène horrible, avaient agité le peuple, les gardes et les juges. Quand le brigand eut pris place, calme et impassible, sur le banc fatal, le sentiment de la curiosité imposa silence à toute autre impression, et l’attention rétablit la tranquillité.

L’évêque vénérable se leva:

— Seigneurs juges…. dit-il.

Le brigand l’interrompit:

— Évêque de Drontheim, je suis Han d’Islande; ne prends pas la peine de me défendre.

Le secrétaire intime se leva.

— Noble président….

Le monstre lui coupa la parole:

— Secrétaire intime, je suis Han d’Islande; ne prends pas le soin de m’accuser.

Alors, les pieds dans le sang, il promena son oeil farouche et hardi sur le tribunal, les archers et la foule, et l’on eût dit que tous ces hommes palpitaient d’épouvante sous le regard de cet homme désarmé, seul et enchaîné.

— Écoutez, juges, n’attendez pas de moi de longues paroles. Je suis le démon de Klipstadur. Ma mère est cette vieille Islande, l’île des volcans. Elle ne formait autrefois qu’une montagne, mais elle a été écrasée par la main d’un géant qui s’appuya sur sa cime en tombant du ciel. Je n’ai pas besoin de vous parler de moi; je suis le descendant d’Ingolphe l’Exterminateur, et je porte en moi son esprit. J’ai commis plus de meurtres et allumé plus d’incendies que vous n’avez à vous tous prononcé d’arrêts iniques dans votre vie. J’ai des secrets communs avec le chancelier d’Ahlefeld. — Je boirais tout le sang qui coule dans vos veines avec délices. Ma nature est de haïr les hommes, ma mission de leur nuire. Colonel des arquebusiers de Munckholm, c’est moi qui t’ai donné avis du passage des mineurs au Pilier-Noir, certain que tu tuerais un grand nombre d’hommes dans ces gorges; c’est moi qui ai écrasé un bataillon de ton régiment avec des quartiers de rochers; je vengeais mon fils. — Maintenant, juges, mon fils est mort; je viens ici chercher la mort. L’âme d’Ingolphe me pèse, parce que je la porte seul et que je ne pourrai la transmettre à aucun héritier. Je suis las de la vie, puisqu’elle ne peut plus être l’exemple et la leçon d’un successeur. J’ai assez bu de sang; je n’ai plus soif. À présent, me voici; vous pouvez boire le mien.

Il se tut, et toutes les voix répétèrent sourdement chacune de ses effroyables paroles.

L’évêque lui dit:

— Mon fils, dans quelle intention avez-vous donc commis tant de crimes?

Le brigand se mit à rire.

— Ma foi, je te jure, révérend évêque, que ce n’était pas, comme ton confrère l’évêque de Borglum, dans l’intention de m’enrichir. [Footnote: Quelques chroniqueurs affirment qu’en 1525 un évêque de Borglum se rendit fameux par divers brigandages. Il soudoyait des pirates, disent-ils, qui infestaient les côtes de-Norvège.] Quelque chose était en moi, qui me poussait.

— Dieu ne réside pas toujours dans tous ses ministres, répondit humblement le saint vieillard. Vous voulez m’insulter, je voudrais pouvoir vous défendre.

— Ta révérence perd son temps. Va demander à ton autre confrère l’évêque de Scalholt, en Islande. Par Ingolphe, ce sera une chose étrange que deux évêques aient pris soin de ma vie, l’un près de mon berceau, l’autre près de mon sépulcre. — Évêque, tu es un vieux fou.

— Mon fils, croyez-vous en Dieu?

— Pourquoi non? Je veux qu’il soit un Dieu pour pouvoir blasphémer.

— Arrêtez, malheureux! vous allez mourir, et vous ne baisez pas les pieds du Christ!

Han d’Islande haussa les épaules.

— Si je le faisais, ce serait à la manière du gendarme de Roll, qui fit tomber le roi en lui baisant le pied.

L’évêque se rassit, profondément ému.

— Allons, juges, poursuivit Han d’Islande, qu’attendez-vous? Si j’avais été à votre place et vous à la mienne, je ne vous aurais point fait attendre si longtemps votre arrêt de mort. Le tribunal se retira. Après une courte délibération, il rentra dans l’audience, et le président lut à haute voix une sentence qui, selon les formules, condamnait Han d’Islande *à être pendu par le cou jusqu’à ce que mort s’ensuivît*.

— Voilà qui est bien, dit le brigand. Chancelier d’Ahlefeld, j’en sais assez sur ton compte pour t’en faire obtenir autant. Mais vis, puisque tu fais du mal aux hommes. — Allons, je suis sûr maintenant de ne point aller dans le Nysthiem. [Footnote: Selon les croyances populaires, le Nysthiem était l’enfer de ceux qui mouraient de maladie ou de vieillesse.]

Le secrétaire intime ordonna aux gardes qui l’emmenaient de le déposer dans le donjon du Lion de Slesvig, pendant qu’on lui préparerait un cachot, pour y attendre son exécution, dans le quartier des arquebusiers de Munckholm.

— Dans le quartier des arquebusiers de Munckholm! répéta le monstre avec un grondement de joie.

XLVI

Cependant le cadavre de Ponce de Léon qui était resté auprès de la fontaine, ayant été défiguré par le soleil, les Maures des Alpuxares s’en emparèrent et le portèrent à Grenade.

E.H. *Le Captif d’Ochali*.

Cependant, avant l’aube du jour dans lequel nous sommes déjà assez avancés, à l’heure même où la sentence d’Ordener se prononçait à Munckholm, le nouveau gardien du Spladgest de Drontheim, l’ancien lieutenant et le successeur actuel de Benignus Spiagudry, Oglypiglap, avait été brusquement réveillé sur son grabat par le retentissement de la porte de l’édifice sous plusieurs coups violents. Il s’était levé à regret, avait pris sa lampe de cuivre dont la faible lumière blessait ses yeux endormis, et était allé, en jurant de l’humidité de la salle des morts, ouvrir à ceux qui l’arrachaient si tôt à son sommeil.

C’étaient des pêcheurs du lac de Sparbo, qui apportaient sur une litière couverte de joncs, d’algues et de limoselle des marais, un cadavre trouvé dans les eaux du lac.

Ils déposèrent leur fardeau dans l’intérieur de l’édifice funèbre, et Oglypiglap leur donna un reçu du mort afin qu’ils pussent réclamer leur salaire.

Resté seul dans le Spladgest, il commença à déshabiller le cadavre, qui était remarquable par sa longueur et sa maigreur. Le premier objet qui se présenta à ses yeux, quand il eut soulevé le voile dont il était enveloppé, fut une énorme perruque.

— En vérité, se dit-il, cette perruque de forme étrangère m’a déjà passé par les mains, c’était celle de ce jeune élégant français… Mais, continua-t-il en poursuivant ses opérations, voici les bottes fortes du pauvre postillon Cramner que ses chevaux ont écrasé, et… — que diable est-ce que cela signifie? — l’habit noir complet du professeur Syngramtax, ce vieux savant qui s’est noyé dernièrement. — Quel est donc ce nouveau venu qui m’arrive avec la dépouille de toutes mes vieilles connaissances?

Il promena sa lampe sur le visage du mort, mais inutilement; les traits, déjà décomposés, avaient perdu leur forme et leur couleur. Il fouilla dans les poches de l’habit, et en tira quelques vieux parchemins imprégnés d’eau et souillés de vase; il les essuya fortement avec son tablier de cuir, et parvint à lire sur l’un d’eux ces mots sans suite à demi effacés: « — Rudbeck. Saxon le grammairien. Arngrim, évêque de Holum. — Il n’y a en Norvège que deux comtés, Larvig et Jarlsberg, et une baronnie… — On ne trouve de mines d’argent qu’à Kongsberg; de l’aimant, des aspestes, qu’à Sundmoër; de l’améthyste, qu’à Guldbranshal; des calcédoines, des agates, du jaspe, qu’aux îles Fa-roër. — À Noukahiva, en temps de famine, les hommes mangent leurs femmes et leurs enfants. — Thormodus Thorfoeus; Isleif, évêque de Scalholt, premier historien islandais. — Mercure joua aux échecs avec la Lune, et lui gagna la soixante-douzième partie du jour. — Malstrom, gouffre. — *Hirundo, hirudo*. — Cicéron, pois chiche; gloire. — Frode le savant. — Odin consultait la tête de Mimer, sage. — (Mahomet et son pigeon, Sertorius et sa biche). — Plus le sol… moins il renferme de gypse…»

— Je ne puis en croire encore mes yeux! s’écria-t-il, laissant tomber le parchemin; c’est l’écriture de mon ancien maître, Benignus Spiagudry!

Alors, examinant de nouveau le cadavre, il reconnut les longues mains, les cheveux rares, et toute l’habitude du corps de l’infortuné.

— Ce n’est pas à tort, pensa-t-il en secouant la tête, qu’on a lancé contre lui une accusation de sacrilège et de nécromancie. Le diable l’a enlevé pour le noyer dans le Sparbo. — Ce que c’est que de nous! qui eût jamais pensé que le docteur Spiagudry, après avoir si longtemps gardé les autres dans cette hôtellerie des morts, viendrait un jour de loin s’y faire garder lui-même!

Le petit lapon philosophe soulevait le corps pour le porter sur l’une de ses six couches de granit, lorsqu’il s’aperçut que quelque chose de lourd était attaché par un lien de cuir au cou du malheureux Spiagudry.

— C’est sans doute la pierre avec laquelle le démon l’a précipité dans le lac, murmura-t-il.

Il se trompait; c’était une petite cassette de fer, sur laquelle, en la regardant de près, après l’avoir soigneusement essuyée, il remarqua un large fermoir en écusson.

— Il y a sans doute quelque diablerie dans cette boîte, se dit-il; cet homme était sacrilège et sorcier. Allons déposer cette cassette chez l’évêque, elle renferme peut-être un démon.

Alors, la détachant du cadavre, qu’il déposa dans la salle d’exposition, il sortit en toute hâte pour se rendre au palais épiscopal, murmurant en chemin quelques prières contre la redoutable boîte qu’il portait.

XLVII

Est-ce un homme ou un esprit infernal qui parle ainsi? Quel est donc l’esprit malfaisant qui te tourmente? Montre-moi l’ennemi implacable qui habite ton coeur.

MATURIN.

Han d’Islande et Schumacker sont dans la même salle du donjon de Slesvig. L’ex-chancelier absous se promène à pas lents, les yeux chargés de pleurs amers; le brigand condamné rit de ses chaînes, environné de gardes.

Les deux prisonniers s’observent longtemps en silence; on dirait qu’ils se sentent tous deux et se reconnaissent mutuellement ennemis des hommes.

— Qui es-tu? demande enfin l’ex-chancelier au brigand.

— Je te dirai mon nom, reprit l’autre, pour te faire fuir. Je suis Han d’Islande.

Schumacker s’avance vers lui:

— Prends ma main! dit-il.

— Est-ce que tu veux que je la dévore?

— Han d’Islande, reprend Schumacker, je t’aime parce que tu hais les hommes.

— Voilà pourquoi je te hais.

— Écoute, je hais les hommes, comme toi, parce que je leur ai fait du bien, et qu’ils m’ont fait du mal.

— Tu ne les hais pas comme moi; je les hais, moi, parce qu’ils m’ont fait du bien, et que je leur ai rendu du mal.

Schumacker frémit du regard du monstre. Il a beau vaincre sa nature, son âme ne peut sympathiser avec celle-là.

— Oui, s’écrie-t-il, j’exècre les hommes, parce qu’ils sont fourbes, ingrats, cruels. Je leur ai dû tout le malheur de ma vie.

— Tant mieux! — je leur ai dû, moi, tout le bonheur de la mienne.

— Quel bonheur?

— Le bonheur de sentir des chairs palpitantes frémir sous ma dent, un sang fumant réchauffer mon gosier altéré; la volupté de briser des êtres vivants contre des pointes de rochers, et d’entendre le cri de la victime se mêler au bruit des membres fracassés. Voilà les plaisirs que m’ont procurés les hommes.

Schumacker recula avec épouvante devant le monstre dont il s'était approché presque avec l'orgueil de lui ressembler. Pénétré de honte, il voila son visage vénérable de ses mains; car ses yeux étaient pleins de larmes d'indignation, non contre la race humaine, mais contre lui-même. Son coeur noble et grand commençait à s'effrayer de la haine qu'il portait aux hommes depuis si longtemps en la voyant reproduite dans le coeur de Han d'Islande comme par un miroir effrayant.

— Eh bien! dit le monstre en riant, ennemi des hommes, oses-tu te vanter d'être semblable à moi?

Le vieillard frissonna.

— O Dieu! plutôt que de les haïr comme toi, j'aimerais mieux les aimer.

Les gardes vinrent chercher le monstre, pour l'emmener dans un cachot plus sûr. Schumacker rêveur resta seul dans le donjon; mais il n'y restait plus d'ennemi des hommes.

XLVIII

…… Quand le méchant m’épie, Me ferez-vous tomber, Seigneur, entre ses mains? C’est lui qui sous mes pas a rompu vos chemins. Ne me châtiez point, car mon crime est son crime.

A. DE VIGNY.

L’heure fatale était arrivée; le soleil ne montrait plus que la moitié de son disque au-dessus de l’horizon. Les postes étaient doublés dans tout le château fort de Munckholm; devant chaque porte se promenaient des sentinelles silencieuses et farouches. La rumeur de la ville arrivait plus tumultueuse et plus bruyante aux sombres tours de la forteresse, livrée elle-même à une agitation extraordinaire. On entendait dans toutes les cours le bruit lugubre des tambours voilés de crêpes; le canon de la tour basse grondait par intervalles; la lourde cloche du donjon se balançait lentement avec des sons graves et prolongés, et, de tous les points du port, des embarcations chargées de peuple se pressaient vers le redoutable rocher. Un échafaud tendu de noir, autour duquel s’épaississait et se grossissait sans cesse une foule impatiente, s’élevait dans la place d’armes du château, au centre d’un carré de soldats. Sur l’échafaud se promenait un homme vêtu de serge rouge, tantôt s’appuyant sur une hache qu’il tenait à la main, tantôt remuant un billot et une claie que portait l’estrade funèbre. Près de là était préparé un bûcher devant lequel brûlaient quelques torches de résine. Entre l’échafaud et le bûcher, on avait planté un pieu auquel était suspendu un écriteau: *Ordener Guldenlew, traître*. — On apercevait, de la place d’Armes, flotter au haut du donjon de Slesvig un grand drapeau noir.

C’est dans ce moment que parut, devant le tribunal toujours assemblé dans la salle d’audience, Ordener condamné. L’évêque seulement était absent; son ministère de défenseur avait cessé.

Le fils du vice-roi était vêtu de noir, et portait à son cou le collier de Dannebrog. Son visage était pâle, mais fier. Il était seul; car on était venu le chercher pour le supplice avant que l’aumônier Athanase Munder fût revenu dans son cachot.

Ordener avait déjà consommé intérieurement son sacrifice. Cependant l’époux d’Éthel songeait encore avec quelque amertume à la vie, et eût peut-être voulu pouvoir choisir pour sa première nuit de noces une autre nuit que celle du tombeau. Il avait prié et surtout rêvé dans sa prison.

Maintenant il était debout devant le terme de toute prière et de tout rêve. Il se sentait fort de la force que donnent Dieu et l'amour. La foule, plus émue que le condamné, le considérait avec une attention avide. L'éclat de son rang, l'horreur de son sort, éveillaient toutes les envies et toutes les pitiés. Chacun assistait à son châtiment sans s'expliquer son crime. Il y a au fond des hommes un sentiment étrange qui les pousse, ainsi qu'à des plaisirs, au spectacle des supplices. Ils cherchent avec un horrible empressement à saisir la pensée de la destruction sur les traits décomposés de celui qui va mourir, comme si quelque révélation du ciel ou de l'enfer devait apparaître, en ce moment solennel, dans les yeux du misérable; comme pour voir quelle ombre jette l'aile de la mort planant sur une tête humaine; comme pour examiner ce qui reste d'un homme quand l'espérance l'a quitté. Cet être, plein de force et de santé, qui se meut, qui respire, qui vit, et qui, dans un moment, cessera de se mouvoir, de respirer, de vivre, environné d'êtres pareils à lui, auxquels il n'a rien fait, qui le plaignent tous, et dont nul ne le secourra; ce malheureux, mourant sans être moribond, courbé à la fois sous une puissance matérielle et sous un pouvoir invisible; cette vie que la société n'a pu donner, et qu'elle prend avec appareil, toute cette cérémonie imposante du meurtre judiciaire, ébranlent vivement les imaginations. Condamnés tous à mort avec des sursis indéfinis, c'est pour nous un objet de curiosité étrange et douloureuse, que l'infortuné qui sait précisément à quelle heure son sursis doit être levé.

On se souvient qu'avant d'aller à l'échafaud Ordener devait être amené devant le tribunal, pour être dégradé de ses titres et de ses honneurs. À peine le mouvement excité dans l'assemblée par son arrivée eut-il fait place au calme, que le président se fit apporter le livre héraldique des deux royaumes, et les statuts de l'ordre de Dannebrog.

Alors, ayant invité le condamné à mettre un genou en terre, il recommanda aux assistants le silence et le respect, ouvrit le livre des chevaliers de Dannebrog, et commença à lire d'une voix haute et sévère:

« — Christiern, par la grâce et miséricorde du Tout-Puissant, roi de Danemark et de Norvège, des Vandales et des Goths, duc de Slesvig, de Holstein, de Stormarie et de Dytmarse, comte d'Oldenbourg et de Delmenhurst, savoir faisons — qu'ayant rétabli, sur la proposition de notre grand-chancelier, comte de Griffenfeld (la voix du président passa si rapidement sur ce nom qu'on l'entendit à peine), l'ordre royal de Dannebrog, fondé par notre illustre aïeul saint Waldemar, «Sur ce que nous avons considéré que cet ordre vénérable ayant été créé en souvenir de l’étendard Dannebrog, envoyé du ciel à notre royaume béni,

«Ce serait mentir à la divine institution de l’ordre si quelqu’un des chevaliers pouvait impunément forfaire à l’honneur et aux saintes lois de l’église et de l’état, Nous ordonnons, à genoux devant Dieu, que quiconque, parmi les chevaliers de l’ordre, aura livré son âme au démon par quelque félonie ou trahison, après avoir été blâmé publiquement par un juge, sera à jamais dégradé du rang de chevalier de notre royal ordre de Dannebrog.» Le président referma le livre.

— Ordener Guldenlew, baron de Thorvick, chevalier de Dannebrog, vous vous êtes rendu coupable de haute trahison, crime pour lequel votre tête va être tranchée, votre corps brûlé, et votre cendre jetée au vent. — Ordener Guldenlew, traître, vous vous êtes rendu indigne de prendre rang parmi les chevaliers de Dannebrog. Je vous invite à vous humilier, car je vais vous dégrader publiquement au nom du roi.

Le président étendit la main sur le livre de l’ordre, et s’apprêtait à prononcer la formule fatale sur Ordener, calme et immobile, lorsqu’une porte latérale s’ouvrit à droite du tribunal. Un huissier ecclésiastique parut, annonçant sa révérence l’évêque de Drontheimhus.

C’était lui en effet. Il entra précipitamment dans la salle, accompagné d’un autre ecclésiastique qui le soutenait.

— Arrêtez! seigneur président, cria-t-il avec une force qui semblait n’être plus de son âge; arrêtez! — Le ciel soit béni! j’arrive à temps:

L’assemblée redoubla d’attention, prévoyant quelque nouvel événement.

Le président se tourna vers l’évêque avec humeur:

— Votre révérence me permettra de lui faire remarquer, que sa présence est inutile ici. Le tribunal va dégrader le condamné, qui touche au moment de subir sa peine.

— Gardez-vous, dit l’évêque, de toucher à celui qui est pur devant le Seigneur. Ce condamné est innocent. Rien ne peut se comparer au cri d’étonnement qui retentit dans l’auditoire, si ce n’est le cri d’épouvante que poussèrent le président et le secrétaire intime.

— Oui, tremblez, juges, poursuivit l’évêque avant que le président eût eu le temps de reprendre son sang-froid; tremblez! car vous alliez verser le sang innocent.

Pendant que l’émotion du président se calmait, Ordener s’était levé consterné. Le noble jeune homme craignait que sa généreuse ruse ne fût découverte, et qu’on n’eût trouvé des preuves de la culpabilité de Schumacker.

— Seigneur évêque, dit le président, dans cette affaire, le crime semble vouloir nous échapper, en passant de tête en tête. Ne vous fiez pas à quelque vaine apparence. Si Ordener Guldenlew est innocent, quel est donc alors le coupable?

— Votre grâce va le savoir, répondit l’évêque. — Puis, montrant au tribunal une cassette de fer qu’un serviteur portait derrière lui: — Nobles seigneurs, vous avez jugé dans les ténèbres; dans cette cassette est la lumière miraculeuse qui doit les dissiper.

Le président, le secrétaire intime et Ordener parurent frappés en même temps, à l’aspect de la mystérieuse cassette. L’évêque poursuivit:

— Nobles juges, écoutez-nous. Aujourd’hui, au moment où nous rentrions dans notre palais épiscopal, afin de nous reposer des fatigues de la nuit, et de prier pour les condamnés, on nous a remis cette boîte de fer scellée. Le gardien du Spladgest l’avait, nous a-t-on dit, apportée ce matin à notre palais pour qu’elle nous fût remise, affirmant qu’elle renfermait sans doute quelque mystère satanique, attendu qu’il l’avait trouvée sur le corps du sacrilège Benignus Spiagudry, dont on a retiré le cadavre du Sparbo.

L’attention d’Ordener redoubla. Tout l’auditoire se taisait religieusement. Le président et le secrétaire courbaient la tête comme deux condamnés. On eût dit qu’ils avaient tous deux oublié leur astuce et leur audace. Il y a un moment dans la vie du méchant où sa puissance s’en va.

— Après avoir béni cette cassette, continua l’évêque, nous en avons brisé le sceau, qui portait, comme vous pouvez le voir encore, les anciennes armoiries abolies de Griffenfeld. Nous y avons trouvé en effet un secret satanique. Vous allez en juger, vénérables seigneurs. Prêtez-nous toute votre attention; car il s’agit ici du sang des hommes, et le Seigneur en pèse chaque goutte.

Alors, ouvrant la formidable cassette, il en tira un parchemin au dos duquel était écrite l’attestation suivante:

«Moi, Blaxtham Cumbysulsum, docteur, je déclare, au moment de mourir, remettre au capitaine Dispolsen, procureur, à Copenhague, de l’ancien comte de Griffenfeld, la pièce suivante, entièrement écrite de la main de Turiaf Musdoemon, serviteur du chancelier comte d’Ahlefeld, afin que le susnommé capitaine en fasse l’usage qu’il lui plaira. — Et je prie

Dieu de me pardonner mes crimes. — À Copenhague, le onzième jour du mois de janvier mil six cent quatre-vingt-dix-neuf.

«CUMBYSULSUM.»

Le secrétaire intime tremblait d'un tremblement convulsif. Il voulut parler et ne le put. L'évêque cependant remettait le parchemin au président pâle et agité.

— Que vois-je? s'écria celui-ci en déployant le parchemin. — *Note au noble comte d'Ahlefeld, sur le moyen de se défaire juridiquement de Schumacker!*…. — Je vous jure, révérend évêque….

Le parchemin tomba des mains du président.

— Lisez, lisez, seigneur, poursuivit l'évêque. Je ne doute pas que votre indigne serviteur n'ait abusé de votre nom, comme il a abusé de celui du malheureux Schumacker. Voyez seulement ce qu'a produit votre haine peu charitable pour votre prédécesseur tombé. Un de vos courtisans a machiné en votre nom sa perte, espérant sans doute s'en faire un mérite auprès de votre grâce.

En montrant au président que les soupçons de l'évêque, qui connaissait tout le contenu de la cassette, ne tombaient pas sur lui, ces paroles le ranimèrent. Ordener respirait également. Il commençait à entrevoir que l'innocence du père de son Éthel allait éclater en même temps que la sienne propre. Il éprouvait un profond étonnement de cette destinée bizarre qui l'avait conduit à la poursuite d'un formidable brigand pour retrouver cette cassette, que son vieux guide Benignus Spiagudry portait sur lui; en sorte qu'elle le suivait pendant qu'il la cherchait. Il méditait aussi la grave leçon des événements qui, après l'avoir perdu par cette fatale cassette, le sauvaient par elle.

Le président, rappelant son sang-froid, lut alors, avec les signes d'une indignation que partageait tout l'auditoire, une longue note, où Musdoemon expliquait en détail l'abominable plan que nous lui avons vu suivre dans le cours de cette histoire. Plusieurs fois le secrétaire intime voulut se lever pour se défendre; mais à chaque fois la rumeur publique le repoussait sur son siège. Enfin l'odieuse lecture se termina au milieu d'un murmure d'horreur.

— Hallebardiers, qu'on saisisse cet homme! dit le président, désignant le secrétaire intime.

Le misérable, sans force et sans parole, descendit de son siège, et fut jeté sur le banc d'infamie, parmi les huées de la populace.

— Seigneurs juges, dit l'évêque, frémissez et réjouissez-vous. La vérité, qui vient d'être portée à vos consciences, va encore vous être confirmée par ce que l'aumônier des prisons de cette royale ville, notre honoré frère Athanase Munder, ici présent, va vous apprendre.

C'était en effet Athanase Munder qui accompagnait l'évêque. Il s'inclina devant son pasteur et devant le tribunal, puis, sur un signe du président, il s'exprima ainsi:

— Ce que je vais dire est la vérité. Me punisse le ciel si je profère ici une parole dans une intention autre que celle de bien faire! — J'avais, d'après ce que j'avais vu ce matin dans le cachot du fils du vice-roi, pensé en moi-même que ce jeune homme n'était point coupable, quoique vos seigneuries l'aient condamné sur ses aveux. Or, j'ai été appelé, il y a quelques heures, pour donner les derniers secours spirituels au malheureux montagnard qui a été si cruellement assassiné devant vous, et que vous aviez condamné, respectables seigneurs, comme étant Han d'Islande. Voici ce que m'a dit ce moribond: «Je ne suis point Han d'Islande; j'ai été bien puni d'avoir pris ce nom. Celui qui m'a payé pour jouer ce rôle est le secrétaire intime de la grande chancellerie; il se nomme Musdoemon, et il a machiné toute la révolte sous le nom de Hacket. Je crois qu'il est le seul coupable dans tout ceci.» Alors il m'a demandé ma bénédiction et recommandé de venir en toute hâte reporter ses dernières paroles au tribunal. Dieu est témoin de ce que je dis. Puisse-je sauver le sang de l'innocent, et ne point faire verser celui du coupable!

Il se tut, saluant de nouveau son évêque et les juges.

— Votre grâce voit, seigneur, dit l'évêque au président, que l'un de mes clients n'avait point saisi à tort tant de ressemblance entre ce Hacket et votre secrétaire intime.

— Turiaf Musdoemon; demanda le président au nouvel accusé, qu'avez-vous à alléguer pour votre défense?

Musdoemon leva sur son maître un regard qui l'effraya. Toute son assurance lui était revenue. Il répondit après un moment de silence:

— Rien, seigneur.

Le président reprit d'une voix altérée et faible:

— Vous vous avouez donc coupable du crime qui vous est imputé? Vous vous avouez auteur d'une conspiration tramée à la fois contre l'état et contre un individu nommé Schumacker.

— Oui, seigneur, répondit Musdoemon. L'évêque se leva.

— Seigneur président, pour qu'il ne reste aucun doute dans cette affaire, que votre grâce demande à l'accusé s'il a eu des complices.

— Des complices! répéta Musdoemon.

Il parut réfléchir un moment. Un horrible malaise se peignit sur le front du président.

— Non, seigneur évêque, dit-il enfin.

Le président jeta sur lui un regard soulagé qui rencontra le sien.

— Non, je n'ai point eu de complices, répéta Musdoemon avec plus de force. J'avais tramé tout ce complot par attachement pour mon maître, qui l'ignorait, pour perdre son ennemi Schumacker.

Les regards de l'accusé et du président se rencontrèrent encore.

— Votre grâce, reprit l'évêque, doit sentir que, puisque Musdoemon n'a point eu de complices, le baron Ordener Guldenlew ne peut être coupable.

— S'il ne l'était pas, révérend évêque, comment se serait-il avoué criminel?

— Seigneur président, comment ce montagnard s'est-il obstiné à se dire Han d'Islande au péril de sa tête? Dieu seul sait ce qui existe au fond des coeurs.

Ordener prit la parole.

— Seigneurs juges, je puis vous le dire, maintenant que le vrai coupable est découvert. Oui, je me suis faussement accusé, pour sauver l'ancien chancelier Schumacker, dont la mort eût laissé sa fille sans protecteur.

Le président se mordit les lèvres.

— Nous demandons au tribunal, dit l'évêque, que l'innocence de notre client Ordener soit proclamée par lui.

Le président répondit par un signe d'adhésion; et, sur la demande du haut-syndic, on acheva l'examen de la redoutable cassette, qui ne renfermait plus que le diplôme et les titres de Schumacker mêlés à quelques lettres du prisonnier de Munckholm au capitaine Dispolsen, lettres amères sans être coupables, et qui ne pouvaient effrayer que le chancelier d'Ahlefeld.

Bientôt le tribunal se retira, et après une courte délibération, tandis que les curieux rassemblés dans la place d'Armes attendaient avec une impatience opiniâtre le fils du vice-roi condamné, et que le bourreau se promenait nonchalamment sur l'échafaud, le président prononça, d'une voix presque éteinte, l'arrêt qui condamnait à mort Turiaf Musdoemon, et réhabilitait Ordener Guldenlew, le réintégrant dans tous ses honneurs, titres et privilèges.

XLIX

Combien me vendras-tu ta carcasse, mon drôle? Je n’en donnerais pas, en honneur, une obole.

Saint Michel à Satan. Mystère.

Ce qui restait du régiment des arquebusiers de Munckholm était rentré dans son ancienne caserne, bâtiment isolé au milieu d’une grande cour carrée dans l’enceinte du fort. À la nuit tombante, on barricada, suivant l’usage, les portes de cet édifice, où s’étaient retirés tous les soldats, à l’exception des sentinelles dispersées sur les tours et du peloton de garde devant la prison militaire adossée à la caserne. Cette prison, la plus sûre et la mieux surveillée de toutes les prisons de Munckholm, renfermait les deux condamnés qui devaient être pendus le lendemain matin, Han d’Islande et Musdoemon.

Han d’Islande est seul dans son cachot. Il est étendu sur la terre, enchaîné, la tête appuyée sur une pierre; quelque faible lumière vient jusqu’à lui à travers une ouverture quadrangulaire grillée, pratiquée dans l’épaisse porte de chêne qui sépare son cachot de la salle voisine, où il entend ses gardiens rire et blasphémer, au bruit des bouteilles qu’ils vident et des dés qu’ils roulent sur un tambour. Le monstre s’agite en silence dans l’ombre, ses bras se resserrent et s’écartent, ses genoux se contractent et se déploient, ses dents mordent ses fers.

Tout à coup il élève la voix, il appelle; un guichetier se présente à l’ouverture grillée.

— Que veux-tu? dit-il au brigand.

Han d’Islande se soulève.

— Compagnon, j’ai froid; mon lit de pierre est dur et humide; donne-moi une botte de paille pour dormir, et un peu de feu pour me réchauffer.

— Il est juste, reprend le guichetier, de procurer au moins ses aises à un pauvre diable qui va être pendu, fût-il le diable d’Islande. Je vais t’apporter ce que tu me demandes. — As-tu de l’argent?

— Non, répond le brigand.

— Quoi! toi, le plus fameux voleur de la Norvège, tu n’as pas dans ta sacoche quelques méchants ducats d’or?

— Non, répond le brigand.

— Quelques petits écus royaux?

— Non, te dis-je!

— Pas même quelques pauvres ascalins?

— Non, non, rien; pas de quoi acheter la peau d'un rat ou l'âme d'un homme.

Le guichetier hocha la tête:

— C'est différent; tu as tort de te plaindre; ta cellule n'est pas aussi froide que celle où tu dormiras demain, sans t'apercevoir, je te jure, de la dureté du lit.

Cela dit, le guichetier se retira, emportant une malédiction du monstre, qui continua de se mouvoir dans ses chaînes, dont les anneaux rendaient par intervalles des bruits faibles, comme s'ils se fussent lentement brisés sous des tiraillements violents et réitérés.

La porte de chêne s'ouvrit; un homme de haute taille, vêtu de serge rouge, et portant une lanterne sourde, entra dans le cachot, accompagné du guichetier qui avait repoussé la prière du prisonnier. Celui-ci cessa tout mouvement.

— Han d'Islande, dit l'homme vêtu de rouge, je suis Nychol Orugix, bourreau du Drontheimhus; je dois avoir demain, au lever du jour, l'honneur de pendre ton excellence par le cou à une belle potence neuve, sur la place publique de Drontheim.

— Es-tu bien sûr en effet de me pendre? répondit le brigand.

Le bourreau se mit à rire.

— Je voudrais que tu fusses aussi sûr de monter droit au ciel par l'échelle de Jacob, que tu es sûr de monter demain au gibet par l'échelle de Nychol Orugix.

— En vérité? dit le monstre avec un malicieux regard.

— Je te répète, seigneur brigand, que je suis le bourreau de la province.

— Si je n'étais moi, je voudrais être toi, reprit le brigand.

— Je ne t'en dirai pas autant, reprit le bourreau; puis, se frottant les mains d'un air vain et flatté: — Mon ami, tu as raison, c'est un bel état que le nôtre. Ah! ma main sait ce que pèse la tête d'un homme.

— As-tu quelquefois bu du sang? demanda le brigand.

— Non; mais j'ai souvent donné la question.

— As-tu quelquefois dévoré les entrailles d'un petit enfant vivant encore?

— Non; mais j'ai fait crier des os entre les ais d'un chevalet de fer; j'ai tordu des membres dans les rayons d'une roue; j'ai ébréché des scies d'acier sur des crânes dont j’enlevais les chevelures; j’ai tenaillé des chairs palpitantes, avec des pinces rougies devant un feu ardent; j’ai brûlé le sang dans des veines entr’ouvertes, en y versant des ruisseaux de plomb fondu et d’huile bouillante.

— Oui, dit le brigand pensif, tu as bien aussi tes plaisirs.

— En somme, continua le bourreau, quoique tu sois Han d’Islande, je crois qu’il s’est encore envolé plus d’âmes de mes mains que des tiennes, sans compter celle que tu rendras demain.

— En supposant que j’en aie une. — Crois-tu donc, bourreau du Drontheimhus, que tu pourrais faire partir l’esprit d’Ingolphe du corps de Han d’Islande, sans qu’il emportât le tien?

La réponse du bourreau commença par un éclat de rire.

— Ah, vraiment! nous verrons cela demain.

— Nous verrons, dit le brigand.

— Allons, dit le bourreau, je ne suis pas venu ici pour t’entretenir de ton esprit, mais seulement de ton corps. Écoute-moi! — Ton cadavre m’appartient de droit après ta mort; cependant la loi te laisse la faculté de me le vendre; dis-moi donc ce que tu en veux.

— Ce que je veux de mon cadavre? dit le brigand.

— Oui, et sois consciencieux.

Han d’Islande s’adressa au guichetier:

— Dis-moi, camarade, combien veux-tu me vendre une botte de paille et un peu de feu?

Le guichetier resta un moment rêveur:

— Deux ducats d’or, répondit-il.

— Eh bien, dit le brigand au bourreau, tu me donneras deux ducats d’or de mon cadavre.

— Deux ducats d’or! s’écria le bourreau. Cela est horriblement cher. Deux ducats d’or un méchant cadavre! Non, certes! je n’en donnerai pas ce prix.

— Alors, répondit tranquillement le monstre, tu ne l’auras pas!

— Tu seras jeté à la voirie, au lieu d’orner le musée royal de

Copenhague ou le cabinet de curiosités de Berghen.

— Que m’importe?

— Longtemps après ta mort, on viendrait en foule examiner ton squelette, en disant: *Ce sont les restes du fameux Han d’Islande!* on polirait tes os avec soin, on les rattacherait avec des chevilles de cuivre; on te placerait sous une grande cage de verre, dont on aurait soin chaque jour d'enlever la poussière. Au lieu de ces honneurs, songe à ce qui t'attend, si tu ne veux pas me vendre ton cadavre; on t'abandonnera à la pourriture dans quelque charnier, où tu seras à la fois la pâture des vers et la proie des vautours.

— Eh bien! je ressemblerai aux vivants qui sont sans cesse rongés par les petits et dévorés par les grands.

— Deux ducats d'or! répétait le bourreau entre ses dents; quelle prétention exorbitante! Si tu ne modères ton prix, mon cher Han d'Islande, nous ne pourrons traiter ensemble.

— C'est la première et probablement la dernière vente que je ferai de ma vie; je tiens à faire un marché avantageux.

— Songe que je puis te faire repentir de ton opiniâtreté. Demain tu seras en ma puissance.

— Crois-tu?

Ces mots étaient prononcés avec une expression qui échappa au bourreau.

— Oui, et il y a une manière de serrer le noeud coulant…. tandis que, si tu deviens raisonnable, je te pendrai mieux.

— Peu m'importe ce que tu feras demain de mon cou! répondit le monstre d'un air railleur.

— Allons, ne pourrais-tu te contenter de deux écus royaux? Qu'en feras-tu?

— Adresse-toi à ton camarade, dit le brigand en montrant le guichetier; il me demande deux ducats d'or pour un peu de paille et de feu.

— Aussi, dit le bourreau, apostrophant le guichetier avec humeur, par la scie de saint Joseph! il est révoltant de faire payer du feu et de la méchante paille au poids de l'or. Deux ducats! Le guichetier répliqua aigrement:

— Je suis bien bon de n'en pas exiger quatre! — C'est vous, maître Nychol, qui êtes aussi arabe que le chiffre 2, de refuser à ce pauvre prisonnier deux ducats d'or de son cadavre, que vous pourrez vendre au moins vingt ducats à quelque savant ou à quelque médecin.

— Je n'ai jamais payé un cadavre plus de quinze ascalins, dit le bourreau.

— Oui, repartit le guichetier, le cadavre d'un mauvais voleur ou d'un misérable juif, cela peut-être; mais chacun sait que vous tirerez ce que vous voudrez du corps de Han d'Islande.

Han d’Islande hocha la tête.

— De quoi vous mêlez-vous? dit Orugix brusquement; est-ce que je m’occupe, moi, de vos rapines, des vêtements, des bijoux que vous volez aux prisonniers, de l’eau sale que vous versez dans leur maigre bouillon, des tourments que vous leur faites éprouver pour tirer d’eux de l’argent? — Non! je ne donnerai point deux ducats d’or.

— Point de paille et point de feu, à moins de deux ducats d’or, répondit l’obstiné guichetier.

— Point de cadavre à moins de deux ducats d’or, répéta le brigand immobile.

Le bourreau, après un moment de silence, frappa la terre du pied:

— Allons, le temps me presse. Je suis appelé ailleurs. Il tira de sa veste un sac de cuir qu’il ouvrit lentement et comme à regret.

— Tiens, maudit démon d’Islande, voilà tes deux ducats. Satan ne donnerait certes pas de ton âme ce que je donne de ton corps.

Le brigand reçut les deux pièces d’or. Aussitôt le guichetier avança la main pour les reprendre.

— Un instant, compagnon, donne-moi d’abord ce que je t’ai demandé.

Le guichetier sortit, et revint un moment après, apportant une botte de paille fraîche et un réchaud plein de charbons ardents, qu’il plaça près du condamné.

— C’est cela, dit le brigand en lui remettant les deux ducats, je me chaufferai cette nuit. — Encore un mot, ajouta-t-il d’une voix sinistre: — Le cachot ne touche-t-il pas à la caserne des arquebusiers de Munckholm?

— Cela est vrai, repartit le guichetier.

— Et d’où vient le vent?

— De l’est, je crois.

— C’est bon, reprit le brigand.

— Où veux-tu donc en venir, camarade? demanda le guichetier.

— À rien, répondit le brigand.

— Adieu, camarade, à demain de bonne heure.

— Oui, à demain, répéta le brigand.

Et le bruit de la lourde porte, qui se refermait, empêcha le bourreau et son compagnon d’entendre le ricanement sauvage et goguenard, qui accompagnait ces paroles.

L

Espérais-tu finir par un autre trépas?

ALEX. SOUMET.

Jetons maintenant un regard dans l’autre cachot de la prison militaire adossée à la caserne des arquebusiers, qui renferme notre ancienne connaissance Turiaf Musdoemon.

On s’est peut-être étonné d’entendre ce Musdoemon, si profondément rusé, si profondément lâche, livrer avec tant de bonne foi le secret de son crime au tribunal qui l’a condamné, et cacher avec tant de générosité la part qu’y a prise son ingrat patron, le chancelier d’Ahlefeld. Qu’on se rassure cependant; Musdoemon n’était point converti. Cette généreuse bonne foi était peut-être la plus grande preuve d’adresse qu’il eût jamais donnée. Quand il avait vu toute son infernale intrigue si inopinément dévoilée et si invinciblement démontrée, il avait été un instant étourdi et épouvanté. Cette première impression passée, l’extrême justesse de son esprit lui fit sentir que, dans l’impuissance de perdre désormais ses victimes désignées, il ne devait plus songer qu’à se sauver. Deux partis à prendre se présentèrent à lui: se décharger de tout sur le comte d’Ahlefeld, qui l’abandonnait si lâchement, ou prendre sur lui tout le crime qu’il avait partagé avec le comte. Un esprit vulgaire se fût jeté sur le premier, Musdoemon choisit le second. Le chancelier était chancelier, d’ailleurs rien ne le compromettait directement dans ces papiers qui accablaient son secrétaire intime; puis il avait échangé quelques regards d’intelligence avec Musdoemon; il n’en fallut pas davantage pour déterminer celui-ci à se laisser condamner, certain que le comte d’Ahlefeld faciliterait son évasion, moins encore par reconnaissance pour le service passé que par besoin de ses services futurs.

Il se promenait donc dans sa prison, qu’éclairait à peine une lampe sépulcrale, ne doutant pas que la porte ne lui en fût ouverte dans la nuit. Il examinait la forme de ce vieux cachot de pierre, bâti par d’anciens rois dont l’histoire sait, à peine les noms, s’étonnant seulement qu’il eût un plancher de bois, sur lequel ses pas retentissaient profondément comme s’il eût couvert quelque cavité souterraine. Il remarquait un gros anneau de fer scellé dans la clef de la voûte en ogive, et auquel pendait un lambeau de vieille corde rompue. Et le temps s’écoulait, et il écoutait avec impatience l’horloge du donjon sonner lentement les heures, en traînant ses tintements lugubres dans le silence de la nuit. Enfin, un mouvement de pas se fit entendre en dehors du cachot; son coeur battit d'espérance. L'énorme serrure cria, les cadenas s'agitèrent, les chaînes tombèrent; et, quand la porte s'ouvrit, son front rayonna de joie.

C'était le personnage en habits d'écarlate que nous venons de voir dans le cachot de Han. Il portait sous son bras un rouleau de corde de chanvre, et était accompagné de quatre hallebardiers vêtus de noir et armés d'épées et de pertuisanes.

Musdoemon était encore en robe et en perruque de magistrat. Ce costume parut faire effet sur l'homme rouge. Il le salua comme accoutumé à le respecter.

— Seigneur, demanda-t-il au prisonnier avec quelque hésitation, est-ce à votre courtoisie que nous avons affaire?

— Oui, oui, répondit en hâte Musdoemon confirmé dans son espoir d'évasion par ce début poli, et ne remarquant point la couleur sanglante des vêtements de celui qui lui parlait.

— Vous vous nommez, dit l'homme, les yeux fixés sur un parchemin qu'il avait déployé, Turiaf Musdoemon.

— Précisément. Vous venez, mes amis, de la part du grand-chancelier?

— Oui, votre courtoisie.

— N'oubliez pas, quand vous aurez terminé votre mission, d'exprimer à sa grâce toute ma reconnaissance.

L'homme aux habits rouges leva sur lui un regard étonné.

— Votre…. reconnaissance!….

— Oui, sans doute, mes amis; car il me sera probablement impossible de la lui témoigner moi-même tout de suite.

— Probablement, répondit l'homme avec une expression ironique.

— Et vous sentez, poursuivit Musdoemon, que je ne dois pas me montrer ingrat pour un pareil service.

— Par la croix du bon larron, s'écria l'autre en riant lourdement, on dirait, à vous entendre, que le chancelier fait pour votre courtoisie tout autre chose.

— Sans doute, il ne me rend encore en ce moment qu'une justice rigoureuse!

— Rigoureuse, soit! — mais enfin vous convenez que c'est justice. C'est le premier aveu de ce genre que j'entends depuis vingt-six ans que j'exerce. Allons, seigneur, le temps se passe en paroles; êtes-vous prêt?

— Je le suis, dit Musdoemon joyeux, faisant un pas vers la porte.

— Attendez, attendez un moment, cria l'homme rouge, se baissant pour déposer à terre son rouleau de corde.

Musdoemon s'arrêta.

— Pourquoi donc toute cette corde?

— Votre courtoisie a raison de me faire cette question; j'en ai là en effet bien plus qu'il ne m'en faut; mais, au commencement de ce procès, je croyais avoir bien plus de condamnés.

En parlant ainsi l'homme dénouait son rouleau de corde.

— Allons, dépêchons, dit Musdoemon.

— Votre courtoisie est bien pressée. — Est-ce qu'elle n'a pas encore quelque prière?….

— Point d'autre que celle que je vous ai déjà adressée, de remercier pour moi sa grâce. — Pour Dieu, hâtons-nous, ajouta Musdoemon, je suis impatient de sortir d'ici. Avons-nous beaucoup de chemin à faire?

— De chemin! reprit l'homme au vêtement d'écarlate, se redressant et mesurant plusieurs brasses de corde déroulée. La route qui nous reste à faire ne fatiguera pas beaucoup votre courtoisie; car nous allons tout terminer sans mettre le pied hors d'ici.

Musdoemon tressaillit.

— Que voulez-vous dire?

— Que voulez-vous dire vous-même? demanda l'autre.

— O Dieu! dit Musdoemon, pâlissant comme s'il entrevoyait une lueur funèbre; qui êtes-vous?

— Je suis le bourreau.

Le misérable trembla ainsi qu'une feuille sèche que le vent secoue.

— Est-ce que vous ne venez pas pour me faire évader? murmura-t-il d'une voix éteinte.

Le bourreau partit d'un éclat de rire.

— Si fait vraiment! pour vous faire évader dans le pays des esprits, où je vous proteste qu'on ne pourra plus vous reprendre.

Musdoemon s'était prosterné la face contre terre.

— Grâce! ayez pitié de moi! Grâce!

— Sur ma foi, dit froidement le bourreau, c'est la première fois qu'on me fait une pareille demande.

— Est-ce que vous me prenez pour le roi?

L’infortuné se traînait à genoux, souillant sa robe dans la poussière, frappant le plancher de son front, un moment auparavant si radieux, et embrassant les pieds du bourreau avec des cris sourds et des sanglots étouffes.

— Allons, paix! reprit le bourreau. Je n’avais point encore vu la robe noire s’humilier devant ma veste rouge.

Il repoussa du pied le suppliant.

— Camarade, prie Dieu et les saints; ils t’écouteront mieux que moi.

Musdoemon resta agenouillé, le visage caché dans ses mains et pleurant amèrement. Cependant le bourreau, se haussant sur la pointe des pieds, avait passé la corde dans l’anneau de la voûte; il la laissa pendre jusque sur le plancher, puis l’arrêta par un double tour, puis prépara un noeud coulant à l’extrémité qui touchait à terre.

— J’ai fini, dit-il au condamné quand ces menaçants apprêts furent terminés; en as-tu fini de même avec la vie?

— Non, dit Musdoemon se levant, non, cela ne se peut! Vous commettez quelque horrible méprise. Le chancelier d’Ahlefeld n’est point assez infâme… Je lui suis trop nécessaire. Il est impossible que ce soit pour moi que l’on vous ait envoyé. Laissez-moi fuir, craignez d’encourir la colère du chancelier.

— Ne nous as-tu point déclaré, répliqua le bourreau, que tu étais

Turiaf Musdoemon?

Le prisonnier demeura un moment silencieux:

— Non, dit-il tout à coup, non, je ne me nomme point Musdoemon; je me nomme Turiaf Orugix.

— Orugix! s’écria le bourreau, Orugix!

Il arracha précipitamment la perruque qui cachait le visage du condamné, et poussa un cri de stupeur:

— Mon frère!

— Ton frère! répondit le condamné avec un étonnement mêlé de honte et de joie, serais-tu?…

— Nychol Orugix, bourreau du Drontheimhus, pour te servir, mon frère

Turiaf.

Le condamné se jeta au cou de l’exécuteur, en l’appelant son frère, son frère chéri. Cette reconnaissance fraternelle n’eût pas dilaté le coeur de celui qui en eût été témoin. Turiaf prodiguait à Nychol mille caresses avec un sourire affecté et craintif, auquel Nychol répondait par des regards sombres et embarrassés; on eût dit un tigre flattant un éléphant au moment où le pied pesant du monstre presse son ventre haletant.

— Quel bonheur, frère Nychol! — Je suis bien joyeux de te revoir.

— Et moi, j'en suis fâché pour toi, frère Turiaf. Le condamné feignait de ne point entendre, et poursuivait d'une voix tremblante:

— Tu as une femme et des enfants, sans doute? Tu me mèneras voir mon aimable soeur et embrasser mes charmants neveux.

— Signe de croix du démon! murmura le bourreau.

— Je veux être leur second père. Écoute, frère, je suis puissant, j'ai du crédit….

Le frère répondit d'un accent sinistre:

— Je sais que tu en avais! — À présent ne songe plus qu'à celui que tu as sans doute su te ménager près des saints.

Toute espérance disparut du front du condamné.

— O Dieu! que signifie ceci, cher Nychol? Je suis sauvé, puisque je te retrouve. — Songe que le même ventre nous a portés, que le même sein nous a nourris, que les mêmes jeux ont occupé notre enfance; souviens-toi, Nychol, que tu es mon frère!

— Jusqu'à cette heure, tu ne t'en étais pas souvenu, répondit le farouche Nychol.

— Non, je ne puis mourir de la main de mon frère!

— C'est ta faute, Turiaf. — C'est toi qui as rompu ma carrière; qui m'as empêché d'être exécuteur royal de Copenhague; qui m'as fait jeter, comme bourreau de province, dans ce misérable pays. Si tu n'avais point agi ainsi en mauvais frère, tu ne te plaindrais pas de ce qui te révolte aujourd'hui. Je ne serais point dans le Drontheimhus, et ce serait un autre qui ferait ton affaire.

— Nous en avons dit assez, mon frère, il faut mourir.

La mort est hideuse au méchant, par le même sentiment qui la rend belle à l'homme de bien; tous deux vont quitter ce qu'ils ont d'humain, mais le juste est délivré de son corps comme d'une prison, le méchant en est arraché comme d'une forteresse. Au dernier moment, l'enfer se révèle à l'âme perverse qui a rêvé le néant. Elle frappe avec inquiétude sur la sombre porte de la mort, et ce n'est pas le vide qui lui répond. Le condamné se roula sur le plancher en se tordant les bras avec une plainte plus déchirante que la lamentation éternelle d'un damné.

— Miséricorde de Dieu! Saints anges du ciel, si vous existez, ayez compassion de moi! Nychol, mon Nychol, au nom de notre mère commune, oh! laisse-moi vivre!

Le bourreau montra son parchemin.

— Je ne puis; l’ordre est précis.

— Cet ordre ne me concerne pas, balbutia le désespéré prisonnier; il regarde un certain Musdoemon, ce n’est pas moi; je suis Turiaf Orugix.

— Tu veux rire, dit Nychol en haussant les épaules. Je sais bien qu’il s’agit de toi. D’ailleurs, ajouta-t-il durement, tu n’aurais point été hier, pour ton frère, Turiaf Orugix; tu n’es pour lui aujourd’hui que Turiaf Musdoemon.

— Mon frère, mon frère! reprit le misérable, eh bien! attends jusqu’à demain! Il est impossible que le grand-chancelier ait donné l’ordre de ma mort. C’est un affreux malentendu. Le comte d’Ahlefeld m’aime beaucoup. Je t’en conjure, mon cher Nychol, la vie! — Je serai bientôt rentré en faveur, et je te rendrai tous les services….

— Tu ne peux plus m’en rendre qu’un, Turiaf, interrompit le bourreau. J’ai déjà perdu les deux exécutions sur lesquelles je comptais le plus, celles de l’ex-chancelier Schumacker et du fils du vice-roi. J’ai toujours du malheur. Il ne me reste plus que Han d’Islande et toi. Ton exécution, comme nocturne et secrète, me vaudra douze ducats d’or. Laisse-moi donc faire tranquillement, voilà le seul service que j’attends de toi.

— O Dieu! dit douloureusement le condamné.

— Ce sera le premier et le dernier, à la vérité; mais, en revanche, je te promets que tu ne souffriras point. Je te pendrai en frère. — Résigne-toi.

Musdoemon se leva; ses narines étaient gonflées de rage, ses lèvres vertes tremblaient, ses dents claquaient, sa bouche écumait de désespoir.

— Satan! — J’aurai sauvé ce d’Ahlefeld! j’aurai embrassé mon frère! et ils me tueront!, et il faudra mourir la nuit, dans un cachot obscur, sans que le monde puisse entendre mes malédictions, sans que ma voix puisse tonner, sur eux d’un bout du royaume à l’autre, sans que ma main puisse déchirer le voile de tous leurs crimes! Ce sera pour arriver à cette mort que j’aurai souillé toute ma vie! — Misérable! poursuivit-il, s’adressant à son frère, tu veux donc être fratricide?

— Je suis bourreau, répondit le flegmatique Nychol.

— Non! s’écria le condamné. Et il s’était jeté à corps perdu sur le bourreau, et ses yeux lançaient des flammes et répandaient des larmes, comme ceux d’un taureau aux abois. Non, je ne mourrai pas ainsi! Je n’aurai point vécu comme un serpent formidable pour mourir comme le misérable ver qu’on écrase! Je laisserai ma vie dans ma dernière morsure; mais elle sera mortelle.

En parlant ainsi, il étreignait en ennemi celui qu’il venait d’embrasser en frère. Le flatteur et caressant Musdoemon se montrait en ce moment ce qu’il était dans son essence. Le désespoir avait remué le fond de son âme ainsi qu’une lie, et après avoir rampé comme le tigre, il se redressait comme lui. Il eût été difficile de décider lequel des deux frères était le plus effroyable, dans ce moment où ils luttaient, l’un avec la stupide férocité d’une bête sauvage, l’autre avec la fureur rusée d’un démon.

Mais les quatre hallebardiers, jusqu’alors impassibles, n’étaient pas restés immobiles. Ils avaient prêté assistance au bourreau, et bientôt Musdoemon, qui n’avait d’autre force que sa rage, fut contraint de lâcher prise. Il alla se jeter à plat ventre contre la muraille, poussant des hurlements inarticulés et émoussant ses ongles sur la pierre.

— Mourir! démons de l’enfer! mourir sans que mes cris percent ces voûtes, sans que mes bras renversent ces murs!

On le saisit sans éprouver de résistance. Son effort inutile l’avait épuisé. On le dépouilla de sa robe pour le garrotter. En ce moment, un paquet cacheté tomba de ses vêtements.

— Qu’est cela? dit le bourreau.

Une espérance infernale luisait dans l’oeil hagard du condamné.

— Comment avais-je oublié cela? murmura-t-il. — Écoute, frère Nychol, ajouta-t-il d’une voix presque amicale; ces papiers appartiennent au grand-chancelier. Promets-moi de les lui remettre, et fais ensuite de moi ce que tu voudras.

— Puisque tu es tranquille maintenant, je te promets de remplir ta dernière intention, quoique tu viennes d’agir envers moi comme un mauvais frère. Ces papiers seront remis au chancelier, foi d’Orugix.

— Demande à les lui remettre toi-même, reprit le condamné en souriant au bourreau, qui, par sa nature, comprenait peu les sourires. Le plaisir qu’ils causeront à sa grâce te vaudra peut-être quelque faveur.

— Vrai, frère? dit Orugix. Merci. Peut-être le diplôme d’exécuteur royal, n’est-ce pas? Eh bien! quittons-nous bons amis. Je te pardonne les coups d’ongles que tu m’as donnés; pardonne-moi le collier de corde que tu vas recevoir de moi.

— Le chancelier m’avait promis un autre collier, répondit Musdoemon.

Alors les hallebardiers l’amenèrent garrotté au milieu du cachot; le bourreau lui passa le fatal noeud coulant autour du cou.

— Turiaf, es-tu prêt?

— Un instant! un instant! dit le condamné, auquel sa terreur était revenue; de grâce, mon frère, ne tire pas la corde avant que je ne te le dise.

— Je n’aurai pas besoin de tirer la corde, répondit le bourreau.

Une minute après il répéta sa question:

— Es-tu prêt?

— Encore un instant! hélas! il faut donc mourir!

— Turiaf, je n’ai pas le temps d’attendre.

En parlant ainsi, Orugix invitait les hallebardiers à s’éloigner du condamné.

— Un mot encore, frère! n’oublie pas de remettre le paquet au comte d’Ahlefeld.

— Sois tranquille, répliqua le frère. Il ajouta pour la troisième fois: — Allons, es-tu prêt?

L’infortuné ouvrait la bouche pour implorer peut-être encore une minute de vie, quand le bourreau impatient se baissa. Il tourna un bouton de cuivre qui sortait du plancher.

Le plancher se déroba sous le patient; le misérable disparut dans une trappe carrée, au bruit sourd de la corde qui se tendait soudainement avec d’effrayantes vibrations, causées en partie par les dernières convulsions du mourant. On ne vit plus que la corde qui s’agitait dans la sombre ouverture, d’où s’échappaient un vent frais et une rumeur pareille à celle de l’eau courante.

Les hallebardiers eux-mêmes reculèrent frappés d’horreur. Le bourreau s’approcha du gouffre, saisit de la main la corde qui vibrait toujours et se suspendit sur l’abîme, s’appuyant des deux pieds sur les épaules du patient. La fatale corde se tendit avec un son rauque et demeura immobile. Un soupir étouffé venait de sortir de la trappe.

— C’est bon, dit le bourreau remontant dans le cachot. Adieu, frère.

Il tira un coutelas de sa ceinture.

— Va nourrir les poissons du golfe. Que ton corps soit la proie de l’eau tandis que ton âme sera celle du feu.

À ces mots, il coupa la corde tendue. Ce qui en resta suspendu à l’anneau de fer revint fouetter la voûte, tandis qu’on entendait l’eau profonde et ténébreuse rejaillir de la chute du corps, puis continuer sa course souterraine vers le golfe.

Le bourreau referma la trappe comme il l'avait ouverte. Au moment où il se redressait, il vit le cachot plein de fumée.

— Qu'est-ce donc? demanda-t-il aux hallebardiers; d'où vient cette fumée?

Ils l'ignoraient comme lui. Surpris, ils ouvrirent la porte du cachot; les corridors de la prison étaient également inondés d'une fumée épaisse et nauséabonde. Une issue secrète les conduisit, alarmés, dans la cour carrée, où un spectacle effrayant les attendait.

Un immense incendie, accru par la violence du vent d'est, dévorait la prison militaire et la caserne des arquebusiers. La flamme, poussée en tourbillons, rampait autour des murs de pierre, couronnait les toits ardents, sortait comme d'une bouche des fenêtres dévorées; et les noires tours de Munckholm tantôt se rougissaient d'une clarté sinistre, tantôt disparaissaient dans d'épais nuages de fumée.

Un guichetier qui fuyait dans la cour leur apprit en peu de mots que le feu était parti, pendant le sommeil des gardiens de Han d'Islande, du cachot du monstre, auquel on avait eu l'imprudence de donner de la paille et du feu.

— J'ai bien du malheur! s'écria Orugix à ce récit; voilà encore sans doute Han d'Islande qui m'échappe. Le misérable aura été brûlé! et je n'aurai même plus son corps que j'ai payé deux ducats!

Cependant les malheureux arquebusiers de Munckholm, réveillés en sursaut par cette mort imminente, se pressaient en foule à la grande porte, embarrassée de funestes barricades; on entendait du dehors leurs clameurs d'angoisse et de détresse; on les voyait se tordre les bras aux fenêtres en feu ou se précipiter sur les dalles de la cour, évitant une mort dans une autre. La flamme victorieuse embrassait tout l'édifice, avant que le reste de la garnison eût eu le temps d'accourir. Tout secours était déjà inutile. Le bâtiment était heureusement isolé; on se borna à enfoncer à coups de hache la porte principale; mais ce fut trop tard, car au moment où elle s'ouvrait, toute la charpente embrasée du toit de la caserne s'écroula avec un long fracas sur les infortunés soldats, entraînant dans sa chute les combles et les étages incendiés. L'édifice entier disparut alors dans un tourbillon de poussière enflammée et de fumée ardente, où s'éteignaient quelques faibles clameurs.

Le lendemain matin il ne s’élevait plus dans la cour carrée que quatre hautes murailles noires et chaudes encore, entourant un horrible amas de décombres fumants qui continuaient à se dévorer les uns les autres, comme des bêtes dans un cirque. Quand toute cette ruine fut un peu refroidie, on en fouilla les profondeurs. Sous une couche de pierres, de poutres et de ferrures tordues par le feu, reposait un amas d’ossements blanchis et de cadavres défigurés; avec une trentaine de soldats, pour la plupart estropiés, c’était ce qui restait du beau régiment de Munckholm.

Lorsqu’en remuant les débris de la prison on arriva au cachot fatal d’où l’incendie était parti et que Han d’Islande avait habité, on y trouva les restes d’un corps humain, couché près d’un réchaud de fer, sur des chaînes rompues. On remarqua seulement que parmi ces cendres il y avait deux crânes, quoiqu’il n’y eût qu’un cadavre.

LI

SALADIN. Bravo, Ibrahim! tu es vraiment un messager de bonheur; je te remercie de ta bonne nouvelle.

LE MAMELOUCK. Eh bien! il n’en est que cela?

SALADIN. Qu’attends-tu?

LE MAMELOUCK. Il n’y a rien de plus pour le messager du bonheur?

LESSING, *Nathan le Sage*.

Pâle et défait, le comte d’Ahlefeld se promène à grands pas dans son appartement; il froisse dans ses mains un paquet de lettres qu’il vient de parcourir, et frappe du pied le marbre poli et les tapis à franges d’or.

À l’autre bout de l’appartement se tient debout, quoique dans l’attitude d’une prostration respectueuse, Nychol Orugix, vêtu de son infâme pourpre et son chapeau de feutre à la main.

— Tu m’as rendu service, Musdoemon, murmure le chancelier entre ses dents, resserrées par la colère. Le bourreau lève timidement son regard stupide:

— Sa grâce est contente?

— Que veux-tu, toi? dit le chancelier se détournant brusquement.

Le bourreau, fier d’avoir attiré un regard du chancelier, sourit d’espérance.

— Ce que je veux, votre grâce? La place d’exécuteur à Copenhague, si votre grâce daigne payer par cette haute faveur les bonnes nouvelles que je lui apporte.

Le chancelier appelle les deux hallebardiers de garde à la porte de son appartement.

— Qu’on saisisse ce drôle, qui a l’insolence de me narguer.

Les deux gardes entraînent Nychol stupéfait et consterné, qui hasarde encore une parole:

— Seigneur….

— Tu n’es plus bourreau du Drontheimhus! j’annule ton diplôme! reprend le chancelier poussant la porte avec violence.

Le chancelier ressaisit les lettres, les lit, les relit, avec rage, s’enivrant en quelque sorte de son déshonneur, car ces lettres sont l’ancienne correspondance de la comtesse avec Musdoemon. C’est l’écriture d’Elphége. Il y voit qu’Ulrique n’est pas sa fille, que ce Frédéric si regretté n’était peut-être pas son fils. Le malheureux comte est puni par le même orgueil qui a causé tous ses crimes. C’est peu d’avoir vu sa vengeance fuir de sa main; il voit tous ses rêves ambitieux s’évanouir, son passé flétri, son avenir mort. Il a voulu perdre ses ennemis; il n’a réussi qu’à perdre son crédit, son conseiller, et jusqu’à ses droits de mari et de père.

Il veut du moins voir une fois encore la misérable qui l’a trahi. Il traverse les grandes salles d’un pas rapide, secouant les lettres dans ses mains, comme s’il eût tenu la foudre. Il ouvre en furieux la porte de l’appartement d’Elphége. Il entre…

Cette coupable épouse venait d’apprendre subitement du colonel Voethaün l’horrible mort de son fils Frédéric. La pauvre mère était folle.

CONCLUSION

Ce que j'avais dit par plaisanterie, vous l'avez pris sérieusement.
Romances espagnoles. Le roi Alphonse à Bernard.

Depuis quinze jours, les événements que nous venons de raconter occupaient toutes les conversations de Drontheim et du Drontheimhus, jugés selon les diverses faces qu'ils avaient présentées au jour. La populace de la ville, qui s'était vainement attendue au spectacle de sept exécutions successives, commençait à désespérer de ce plaisir; et les vieilles femmes, à demi aveugles, racontaient encore qu'elles avaient vu, la nuit du déplorable embrasement de la caserne, Han d'Islande s'envoler dans une flamme, riant dans l'incendie, et poussant du pied la toiture brûlante de l'édifice sur les arquebusiers de Munckholm; lorsque, après une absence qui avait semblé bien longue à son Éthel, Ordener reparut dans le donjon du Lion de Slesvig, accompagné du général Levin de Knud et de l'aumônier Athanase Munder.

Schumacker se promenait en ce moment dans le jardin, appuyé sur sa fille. Les deux jeunes époux eurent bien de la peine à ne point tomber dans les bras l'un de l'autre; il fallut encore se contenter d'un regard. Schumacker serra affectueusement la main d'Ordener et salua d'un air de bienveillance les deux étrangers.

— Jeune homme, dit le vieux captif, que le ciel bénisse votre retour!

— Seigneur, répondit Ordener, j'arrive. Je viens de voir mon père de Berghen, je reviens embrasser mon père de Drontheim.

— Que voulez-vous dire? demanda le vieillard étonné.

— Que vous me donniez votre fille, noble seigneur.

— Ma fille! s'écria le prisonnier, se tournant vers Éthel rouge et tremblante.

— Oui, seigneur, j'aime votre Éthel; je lui ai consacré ma vie; elle est à moi.

Le front de Schumacker se rembrunit:

— Vous êtes un noble et digne jeune homme, mon fils; quoique votre père m'ait fait bien du mal, je le lui pardonne en votre faveur, et je verrais volontiers cette union. Mais il y a un obstacle.

— Lequel, seigneur? demanda Ordener presque inquiet.

— Vous aimez ma fille; mais êtes-vous sûr qu'elle vous aime?

Les deux amants se regardèrent, muets de surprise.

— Oui, poursuivit le père. J’en suis fâché; car je vous aime, moi, et j’aurais voulu vous appeler mon fils. C’est ma fille qui ne voudra pas. Elle m’a déclaré dernièrement son aversion pour vous. Depuis votre départ, elle se tait quand je lui parle de vous, et semble éviter votre pensée, comme si elle la gênait. Renoncez donc à votre amour, Ordener. Allez, on se guérit d’aimer comme de haïr.

— Seigneur… dit Ordener stupéfait.

— Mon père!… dit-Éthel joignant les mains.

— Ma fille, sois tranquille, interrompit le vieillard; ce mariage me plaît, mais il te déplaît. Je ne veux pas torturer ton coeur, Éthel. Depuis quinze jours je suis bien changé, va. Je ne forcerai pas ta répugnance pour Ordener. Tu es libre.

Athanase Munder souriait.

— Elle ne l’est pas, dit-il.

— Vous vous trompez, mon noble père, ajouta Éthel enhardie. Je ne hais pas Ordener.

— Comment! s’écria le père.

— Je suis… reprit Éthel. Elle s’arrêta. Ordener s’agenouilla devant le vieillard,

— Elle est ma femme, mon père! Pardonnez-moi comme mon autre père m’a déjà pardonné, et bénissez vos enfants.

Schumacker, étonné à son tour, bénit le jeune couple incliné devant lui.

— J’ai tant maudit dans ma vie, dit-il, que je saisis maintenant sans examen toutes les occasions de bénir. Mais à présent expliquez-moi….

On lui expliqua tout. Il pleurait d’attendrissement, de reconnaissance et d’amour.

— Je me croyais sage, je suis vieux, et je n’ai pas compris le coeur d’une jeune fille!

— Je m’appelle donc Ordener Guldenlew! disait Éthel avec une joie enfantine.

— Ordener Guldenlew, reprit le vieux Schumacker, vous valez mieux que moi; car, dans ma prospérité, je ne serais certes pas descendu de mon rang pour m’unir à la fille pauvre et dégradée d’un malheureux proscrit.

Le général prit la main du prisonnier et lui remit un rouleau de parchemins:

— Seigneur comte, ne parlez pas ainsi. Voici vos titres que le roi vous avait déjà renvoyés par Dispolsen. Sa majesté vient d’y joindre le don de votre grâce et de votre liberté. Telle est la dot de la comtesse de Danneskiold, votre fille.

— Grâce! liberté! répéta Éthel ravie.

— Comtesse de Danneskiold! ajouta le père.

— Oui, comte, continua le général, vous rentrez dans tous vos honneurs, tous vos biens vous sont rendus!

— À qui dois-je tout cela? demanda l'heureux Schumacker.

— Au général Levin de Knud, répondit Ordener.

— Levin de Knud! Je vous le disais bien, général gouverneur, Levin de Knud est le meilleur des hommes. Mais pourquoi n'est-il pas venu lui-même m'apporter mon bonheur? où est-il?

Ordener montra avec étonnement le général qui souriait et pleurait:

— Le voici!

Ce fut une scène touchante que la reconnaissance de ces deux vieux compagnons de puissance et de jeunesse. Le coeur de Schumacker se dilatait enfin. En connaissant Han d'Islande, il avait cessé de haïr les hommes; en connaissant Ordener et Levin, il se prenait à les aimer.

Bientôt de belles et douces fêtes solennisèrent le sombre hymen du cachot. La vie commença à sourire aux deux jeunes époux qui avaient su sourire à la mort. Le comte d'Ahlefeld les vit heureux; ce fut sa plus cruelle punition.

Athanase Munder eut aussi sa joie. Il obtint la grâce de ses douze condamnés, et Ordener y ajouta celle de ses anciens confrères d'infortune, Kennybol, Jonas et Norbith, qui retournèrent libres et joyeux annoncer, aux mineurs pacifiés que le roi les délivrait de la tutelle.

Schumacker ne jouit pas longtemps de l'union d'Éthel et d'Ordener; la liberté et le bonheur avaient trop ébranlé son âme; elle alla jouir d'un autre bonheur et d'une autre liberté. Il mourut dans la même année 1699, et ce chagrin vint frapper ses enfants, comme pour leur apprendre qu'il n'est point de félicité parfaite sur la terre. On l'inhuma dans l'église de Veer, terre que son gendre possédait dans le Jutland, et le tombeau lui conserva tous les titres que la captivité lui avait enlevés. De l'alliance d'Ordener et d'Éthel naquit la famille des comtes de Danneskiold.

THE LAST DAY OF A CONDEMNED MAN

Translated by Eugenia De B.

Published in 1829 by editor Charles Gosselin, this novel is a political indictment for the abolition of the death penalty. Hugo met several times with the spectacle of the guillotine and he strove to portray its cold-blooded evil in this short work of fiction. The novel recounts the thoughts of a man condemned to die, who writes down his thoughts and fears while waiting for execution. He does not betray his name to the reader or what he has done, though he vaguely hints that he has killed someone.

The boarding school on Rue Margeritte that Hugo attended

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The original French text of this novel can be accessed via this link.

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PREFACE TO THE 1832 EDITION

At the head of the earlier editions of this work, published at first without the name of the author, there was nothing but the following lines.

"There are two ways of accounting for the existence of this work. Either there really has been found a bundle of yellow, ragged, papers, on which were inscribed, exactly as they came, the last thoughts of a wretched being; or else there has been a man, a dreamer, occupied in observing nature for the advantage of art, a philosopher, a poet, who, having been seized with these forcible ideas, could not rest until he had given them the tangible form of a volume. Of these two explanations, the reader will choose that which he prefers."

As is seen, at the time when this book was first published, the author did not deem fit to give publicity to the full extent of his thoughts. He preferred waiting to see whether the work would be fully understood. It has been. The author may now, therefore, unmask the political and social ideas, which he wished to render popular under this harmless literary guise. He avows openly, that *The Last Day of a Condemned* is only a pleading, direct or indirect, as is preferred, for the abolition of the penalty of death. His design herein and what he would wish posterity to see in his work, if its attention should ever be given to so slight a production, is, not to make out the special defense of any particular criminal, such defense being transitory as it is easy; he would plead generally and permanently for all accused persons, present and future; it is the great point of human right, stated and pleaded before society at large, that highest judicial court; it is the sombre and fatal question which breathes obscurely in the depths of each capital offense, under the triple envelopes of pathos in which legal eloquence wraps them; it is the question of life and death, I say, laid bare, denuded and despoiled of the sonorous twistings of the bar, revealed in daylight, and placed where it should be seen; in its true and hideous position, not in the law courts, but on the scaffold, not among the judges, but with the executioner!

This is what he has desired to effect. If futurity should award him the glory of having succeeded, which he dares not hope, he desires no other crown.

He proclaims and repeats it, then, in the name of all accused persons, innocent or guilty, before all courts, all juries, and ail judges. And in order that his pleading should be as universal as his cause, he has been careful, while writing *The Last Day of a Condemned*, to omit anything of a special, individual, contingent, relative, or modifiable nature, as also any episode, anecdote, known event, or real name, keeping to the limit (if "limit" it may be termed!) of pleading the cause of any condemned prisoner whatever, executed at any time, for any offense. Happy if, with no other aid than his thoughts, he has mined sufficiently into the subject to make a heart bleed, under the *œs triplex* of a magistrate! Happy if he could render merciful those who consider themselves just! Happy if, penetrating sufficiently deep within the judge, he has sometimes reached the man.

Three years ago, when this book first appeared, some people thought it was worth while to dispute the authorship! Some asserted that it was an English book, and others that it was an American book. What a singular mania there is for seeking the origin of matters at a great distance; trying to trace from the source of the Nile, the streamlet which washes one's street. Alas! this work is neither English, neither American nor Chinese. The author found the idea of *The Last Day of a Condemned*, not in a book, for he is not accustomed to seek his ideas so far afield, but where you all might find it, where perhaps you may all have found it, (for who is there that has not reflected and had reveries of *The Last Day of a Condemned*,) there, on the public walk, on the *Place de Grève.*

It was there, while passing casually during an execution, that this forcible idea occurred to him; and, since then, after those funereal Thursdays of the Court of Cassation, which send forth through Paris the intelligence of an approaching execution, the hoarse voices of the spectators going to the *Grève*, as they hurried past his windows, filled his mind with the prolonged misery of the person about to suffer, which he pictured to himself from hour to hour, according to what he conceived was its actual progress. It was a torture which commenced from daybreak and lasted, like that of the miserable being who was tortured at the same moment, until *four o'clock*. Then only, when once the *ponens caput expiravit* was announced by the heavy toll of the clock bell, he breathed. again freely, and regained comparative peace of mind. Finally, one day, he thinks it was after the execution of Ulbach, he commenced writing this work; and since then he has felt relieved. When one of those public crimes, called legal executions, are committed, his conscience now acquits him of participation therein.

All this, however, is not sufficient; it is well to be freed from self-accusation, but it would be still better to endeavor to save human life.

Also, he does not know any aim more elevated, more holy, than that of seeking the abolition of capital punishment; with sincere devotion he joins the wishes and efforts of those philanthropic men of all nations, who have labored, of late years, to throw down patibulary tree, the only tree which revolution fails to uproot! It is with pleasure that he takes his turn, to give his feeble stroke, after the all-powerful blow which, sixty-seven years ago, Beccaria gave to the ancient gibbet which had been standing during so many centuries of Christianity.

We have just said that the scaffold is the only edifice which revolutions do not demolish. It is rare indeed that revolutions are temperate in spilling blood; and although they are sent to prune, to lop, to reform society, the punishment of death is a branch which they have never removed!

We own, however, if any revolution ever appeared to us capable and worthy of abolishing capital punishment, it was the revolution of July. It seemed, indeed, as if it belonged to the merciful popular rising of modern times to erase the barbarous enactments of Louis XI., of Richelieu, and of Robespierre, and to inscribe at the head of the code the inviolability of human life! 1830 was worthy of breaking the axe of ‘93.

At one time we really hoped for it. In August, 1830, there seemed so much generosity afloat, such a spirit of gentleness and civilization in the multitude, that we almost fancied the punishment of death was abolished, by a tacit and unanimous consent, with the rest of the evils which had oppressed us. For some weeks confiding and credulous, we had faith in the inviolability of life, for the future, as in the inviolability of liberty.

And, indeed, two months had scarcely passed, when an attempt was made to resolve into a legal reality the sublime Utopia of Cæsar Bonesana.

Unfortunately this attempt was awkward, imperfect, almost hypocritical; and made in a different spirit from the general interest.

It was in the month of October, 1830, as may be remembered;some days after France had been startled by the proposition to bury Napoleon under the column, that the question of capital punishment was brought before the Chamber, and discussed with much talent, energy, and apparent feeling.

During two days, there was a continued succession of impressive eloquence on this momentous subject.

And what was the subject? — to abolish the punishment of death?

Yes, and No!

Here is the truth:

Four men of the world, four persons well known in society, had attempted, in the higher range of politics, one of those daring strokes which Bacon calls *crimes*, and which Machiavel calls *enterprises*. Well! crime or enterprise, — the law, brutal for all, would punish it by death; and the four unfortunates were prisoners, legal captives guarded by three hundred tri-colored cockades, under the fine ogives at Vincennes. What was now to be done? You understand the impossibility of sending to the *Grève*, in a common cart, ignobly bound with coarse ropes, seated back to back with that functionary who must not be named, — four men of our own rank,-”four men of the world!”

Still, if there had even been a mahogany guillotine!

Well, to settle the matter, they need only abolish the punishment of death!

And thereupon the Chamber set to work!

Notice, gentlemen, that only yesterday they had treated this abolition as Utopian, as a theory, a dream, a poetic folly. This was not the first time that an endeavor had been made to draw their attention to the cart, the coarse ropes, and the fatal machine. How strange it is, that these hideous details suddenly acquired such sudden force in their minds!

Bah! they had good reason to be excited, it was not on account of the general good that they sought to abolish capital punishment; but for their own sakes, — as Deputies, who might become Ministers. And thus an alloy of egotism alters and destroys the fairest social combinations. It is the dark vein in marble, which, crossing everywhere, comes forth at each moment unexpectedly under the chisel!

It is surely unnecessary for us to declare that we were not among those who desired the death of the four ministers. When once they were imprisoned, the indignant anger we had felt at their attempt, changed with us as with every one else, into profound pity. We reflected on the prejudices of education of some among them; on the ill-developed head of their chief, fanatic and obstinate relapse of the conspiracies of 1804, whitened before its time, in the damp cells of state prisons; on the fatal necessity of their common position; the impossibility of their placing a drag on that rapid slope, down which monarchy rushed blindly on the 8th of August, 1829; on the influence of personal intercourse with royalty over them, which we had hitherto underrated; and finally we reflected, above all, on the dignity which one among them spread, like a purple mantle, over their misfortunes! We were among those who sincerely wished their lives saved, and would have readily lent our aid to that effect. If a scaffold had been raised for them in Paris, we feel quite certain — and if it be an illusion, we would preserve it — that there would have been an insurrection to pull it down; and we should have been of the rioters. Here I must add that, in each social crisis, of all scaffolds, the political one is the most abominable, the most fatal, the most mischievous, the most necessary to extirpate.

In revolutionary times, beware of the first head that falls. It excites the sanguinary appetite of the mob.

We therefore agreed thoroughly with those who wished to spare the four minister, both as a matter of feeling, and of political reasoning. But we should have liked better that the Chamber had chosen another occasion for proposing the abolition of capital punishment.

If they had suggested this desirable change, not with reference to those four ministers, fallen from the Tuileries to Vincennes, but in the instance of the first highwayman — in the case of one of those wretches to whom you neither give word nor look, and from whom you drink as they pass. Miserable beings, who, during their ragged infancy, ran barefoot in the mud of the crossings; shivering in winter near the quays, or seeking to warm themselves from the kitchens of M. Véfour, where you happen to be dining; scratching out, here and there, a crust of bread from the heaps of filth, and wiping it before eating; scraping in the gutter all day, with a rusty nail, in the hopes of finding a farthing; having no other amusement than the gratuitous sight of the king’s fête, and the executions — that other gratuitous sight: poor devils! whom hunger forces to theft, and theft to all the rest; children disinherited by their step-mother, the world; who are adopted by the house of correction, in their twelfth year, by the galleys at eighteen, and by the guillotine at forty! Unfortunate beings, whom, by means of a school and a workshop, you might have rendered good, moral, useful; and with whom you now know not what to do; flinging them away like a useless burthen, sometimes into the red antheaps of Toulon, sometimes into the silent cemetery of Clamart; cutting off life after taking away liberty. If it had been in the instance of one of these miteasts that you had proposed to abolish the punishment of death, oh! then your councils would have indeed been noble, great, holy, majestic! It has ever belonged to those who are truly great and truly powerful, to protect the lowly and weak. Were the august fathers of Trent assisting the heretics to repent in the name of the entrails of God, *per viscera Dei*, because they hoped for their conversion, *quoniam sancta synodis sperat hœrelicorum conversionem*, no assembly of men has ever presented to the world a spectacle more sublime, more illustrious and more merciful. How grand would be a council of Brahmins, advocating the cause of the Pariah! And with us the cause of the Pariah is the cause of the people. In abolishing the penalty of death, for sake of the people, and without waiting until you were personally interested in the question, you would have done more than a political work, you would have conferred a social benefit.

Instead of this, you have not yet even completed a political act, while seeking to abolish it, not for the abolition's sake, but to save four unfortunate ministers, caught with their hands in the sack of *coups d'etat.*

What has happened? As you were not sincere, the people were distrustful; when they suspected the cause of your change, they became angry at the question altogether; and, strange to say, they declared in favor of that condign punishment, the weight of which presses entirely on themselves.

Immediately after the famous discussion in the Chamber, orders were given to respite, indefinitely, all executions. This was apparently a great step gained; the opponents of punishment by death breathed again; but the illusion was of short duration. The trial of the ministers was ended. I know not what judgment was rendered.

The four lives were spared, and the fortress of Ham was selected as a medium between death and liberty. These different arrangements once completed, all fear was banished from the minds of the ruling statesmen; and along with fear, humanity was also banished. There was no further question of abolishing capital punishment; and, when they no longer wished to prove to the contrary, Utopia became again Utopia, theory was theory, and poetry, poetry.

There were still in the prisons, however, some unfortunate condemned wretches, who, having been allowed during five or six months to walk about the prison-yards and breathe the fresh air, felt tranquil for the future, sure of life, mistaking their reprieve for pardon. But wait.

There had indeed been a reprieve of six months for these hapless captives, whose sufferings were thus gratuitously aggravated, by making them cling again to life; then, without reason, without necessity, without well knowing why, the respites were all revoked and all these human beings were launched into eternity.

Let us add, that never were executions accompanied by more atrocious circumstances, than since that revocation of the reprieve of July. Never have the anecdotes of the *Grève* been more revolting, or more effectual to prove the execration of capital punishment.

We will cite here two or three examples of the horrors which have attended recent executions. We must shock the nerves of the wives of king's council. A wife is sometimes a conscience.

In the South, towards the close of last September, the following circumstance occurred; I think it was at Pamiers. Towards the end of September the officers went to a man in prison, whom they found quietly playing at cards, and gave him notice that he was to die in two hours. The wretched creature was horror-struck; for, during the six months he had been forgotten, he had no longer thought on death; he was confessed, bound, his hair cut off, he was placed in the fatal cart, and taken to the place of execution; the executioner took him from the priest; laid him down and on the see-saw, put him *in the oven*, to use slang, and then let loose the axe. The heavy triangle of iron slowly detached itself, falling by jerks down the slides, until, horrible to relate, it gashed the man, but without killing him! The poor creature uttered a frightful cry. The disconcerted executioner hauled up the axe, and let it slide down again. A second time, the neck of the malefactor was cut, without being severed. Again he shrieked, the crowd joining him. The executioner raised the axe a third time, hoping to do better at the third stroke, but, no! The third stroke only started a third stream of blood on the prisoner's neck, but the head did not fall. Let us cut short these fearful details. Five times the axe was raised and let fall, and after the fifth stroke, the condemned was still shrieking for mercy. The indignant populace began in justice to stone the executioner, who hid himself beneath the guillotine, away behind the gendarmes' horses; but we have not yet finished. The hapless culprit seeing he was left alone on the scaffold, raised himself on the plank, and there standing, frightful, streaming with blood, he demanded with feeble cries that some one would unbind him. The populace, full of pity, were on the point of forcing the gendarmes to help the hapless wretch, who had five times undergone his sentence. At this moment the servant of the executioner, a youth under twenty, mounted on the scaffold, told the sufferer to turn round, that he might unbind him; then, taking advantage of the posture of the dying man, who had yielded himself without any mistrust, sprang, on him, and slowly cut through the neck with a knife! All this happened; all this was seen. Yes.

According to law, a judge was obliged to be present at this execution; by a sign he could have stopped all. Why was he leaning back in his carriage then, this man, while they massacred another man? What was he doing, this punisher of assassins, while they thus assassinated, in open daylight, his fellow-creature?

And the judge was not tried for this; nor was the executioner tried for it; and no tribunal inquired into this monstrous violation of all law on one of God's creatures!

In the seventeenth century, that epoch of barbarity in the criminal code, under Richelieu, under Christophe Fouquet, when Monsieur de Chalais was put to death at Nantes, by an awkward soldier, who, instead of a sword-stroke, gave him thirty-four strokes of a cooper's adze,[2] thus at least it seemed irregular to the parliament of Paris; there was an inquest and a trial; and, although Richelieu and Fouquet were not punished the soldier was. An injustice doubtless, but in which there was some show of justice.

In the modern instance, nothing was done; the thing took place after July, in times of civilization and march of intellect, a year after the celebrated lamentation of the Chamber on the penalty of death. The circumstance attracted no attention; the Paris papers published it as an anecdote, and no one cared about it. It was only known that the guillotine had been put out of order by some one who wished to annoy the executioner. A dismissed servant of the executioner, to revenge himself, had taken this method of action.

It was only imagination. Let us continue.

At Dijon, only three months ago, they brought to the scaffold a woman — a woman! This time again, the axe of the guillotine failed of its effect, and the head was not quite detached. Then the executioner's servants pulled the feet of the woman; and, amidst the yells of the populace, thus fulfilled the law!

At Paris, we have come back to the time of secret executions; since July they no longer dare to decapitate in the *Grève*; as they are afraid, as they are cowardly, here is what they do, They took lately from the Bicêtre prison, a man, under sentence of death, named Désamdrieux, I think; they put him in a sort of panier on two wheels, closed on every side, bolted and padlocked; then with a gendarme in front, and another at the back, without noise or crowd, they proceeded to the deserted barrier Saint-Jacques. It was eight in the morning when they arrived, with but little light. There was a newly erected guillotine, and, for spectators, some dozens of little boys, grouped on the heaps of stones around the unexpected machine. Quickly they withdrew the man from the basket; and, without giving him time to breathe, they furtively, secretly, shamefully, deprived him of life! And that is called a public and solemn act of high justice! Infamous derision!

How then do the law-givers understand the word civilization? To what point have we attained? Justice reduced to stratagems and frauds! The law reduced to expedient! Monstrous!

A man condemned to death, it would seem, was greatly to be feared, since they put an end to him in this traitorous fashion!

Let us be just, however; the execution was not quite secret. In the morning people hawked and sold, as usual, the sentence of death through the streets. It appears, there are people who live by such sales. The crime of a hapless fellow-creature, its punishment, his torture, his agony, forms their stock in trade; a paper that they sell for a penny. Can one conceive anything more hideous than this coin, verdigrised in blood? Who can it be that picks it up?

Here are enough of facts; here are too many. Is not all this horrible?

What can be alleged in favor of punishment by death?

I put this question seriously. I ask it that it may be answered; I ask it of legislators, and not of literary gossips. I know there are people who take the excellence of punishment by death for a text of paradoxes, like any other theme; there are others who only advocate capital punishment because they hate so-and-so who attack it. It is for them almost a literary question, a question of persons, and proper names; these are the envious, who do not find more fault with good lawyers than with good artists. The Joseph Grippas are no more wanting to the Filangieri, than the Torregiani to the Michael-Angelos, and the Scuderies to the Corneilles.

It is not to these that I address myself; but to men of law properly so called — to logicians, to reasoners; to those who love the penalty of death, for its beauty, its goodness, its grace!

See, let them give their reasons.

Those who judge and condemn, say that punishment by death is necessary, first — because it is requisite to remove from the social community a member which has already injured it, and might injure it again. If this be all, perpetual imprisonment would suffice. What is the use of inflicting death? You argue that a prisoner may escape from jail — keep watch more strictly! If you do not believe in the solidity of iron bars, how do you venture to have menageries?

Let there be no executioner where the jailer can be sufficient.

But, they answer: “Society must avenge itself, society must punish.” Neither one nor the other: vengeance is an individual act, and punishment belongs to God.

Society is between the two; punishment is above its power, retaliation beneath it. Society should not punish, to avenge itself; it should correct, to ameliorate others!

Their third and last reason remains, the theory of example. “We must make examples. By the sight of the fate inflicted on criminals, we must shock those who might otherwise be tempted to imitate them!” Well; in the first place we deny, the power of the example. We deny, that the sight of executions produces the desired effect. Far from edifying the common people, it demoralizes and ruins their feeling, injuring every virtue; proofs of this abound and would encumber our argument if we chose to cite them. We will allude to only one fact, amongst a thousand, because it is of recent occurrence. It happened only ten days back from the present moment, viz., on the 5th of March, the last day of the Carnival. At St. Poi, immediately after the execution of an incendiary named Louis Camus, a group of masqueraders came and danced round the still reeking scaffold! Make then your fine examples! Mardi-Gras will turn them into jest!

If, notwithstanding all experience, you still hold to the theory of example, then give us back the Sixteenth Century; be in reality formidable; restore to us a variety of suffering; restore us, Farinacci; restore us the sworn torturers; restore us the gibbet, the wheel, the block, the rack, the thumb-screw, the live-burial vault, the burning cauldron; restore us in the streets of Paris, as the most open shop among the rest, the hideous stall of the executioner, constantly full of human flesh; give us back Montfaucon, its caves of bones, its beams, its crooks, its chains, its rows of skeletons; give us back, in its permanence and power, that gigantic outhouse of the Paris executioner! This indeed would be wholesale example, this would be punishment by death, well understood; this would be a system of execution in some proportion — which, while it is horrible, is also terrible!

Or better, do as in England. In England, land of commerce, they capture a smuggler on the coast near Dover, and use him *for an example — far an example* they leave him swinging on the gibbet; but as the weather might destroy the corpse, they wrap it carefully in canvas soaked in tar, in order not to have to renew it too often. Oh, land of economy! Tar the hanged ones!

However there is still some logic in that. It is the most human way of using the theory of example.

But do you seriously suppose you are making an example, when you take the life of a poor wretch, in the most deserted part of the exterior boulevards? On the *Grève* in open daylight it might be so, but at the barrier Saint-Jacques, at eight o'clock in the morning — can it be that that is an example? An example for whom? For the trees of the boulevard apparently.

Do not you see then, that your public executions are done in private? That fear is with the execution, and not among the multitude? One is sometimes tempted to believe, that the advocates for capital punishment have not thoroughly considered in what it consists. But place in the scales, against any crime whatever, this exorbitant right, which society arrogates to itself, of taking away that which it did not bestow; that most irreparable of evils!

The alternatives are these: first, the man you destroy is without family, relations, or friends, in the world. In this case, he has received neither education nor instruction; no care has been bestowed either on his mind or heart; then, by what right would you kill this miserable orphan? You punish him because his infancy trailed on the ground, without stem, or support; you make him pay the penalty of the isolated position in which you left him! you make a crime of his misfortune! No one taught him to know what he was doing; this man lived in ignorance; the fault was in his destiny, not himself. You destroy one who is innocent.

Or, secondly; the man has a family; and then do you think the fatal stroke wounds him alone? that his father, his mother, or his children will not suffer by it? No, in killing him, you vitally injure all his family. And thus again you punish the innocent.

Blind and ill-directed penalty; which, on whatever side it tums, strikes the innocent!

Imprison for life this culprit who has a family; in his cell he can still work for those who belong to him. But how can he help them from the depth of the tomb? And can you reflect without shuddering, on what will become of those little boys, of those little girls, from whom you take away their father, their support? Do you not feel that in fifteen years the one may be in the galleys, the other in the dancing halls?

In the colonies, when a slave is condemned to public execution, there are a thousand francs of indemnity paid to the proprietor of the man! What, you compensate a master, and you do not indemnify a family? In this country, do you not take the man from those who possess him? Is he not, by a much more sacred tie than master and slave, the property of his father, the wealth of his wife, the fortune of his children?

We have already proved your law guilty of assassination; now we have convicted it of robbery!

And then another consideration. Do you consider the soul of this man? Do you know in what state it is, that you dismiss it so hastily?

This may be called sentimental reasoning, by some disdainful logicians, who draw their arguments only from their minds. I often prefer the reasonings of the heart; and certainly the two should always go together. Reason is on our side, feeling is on our side, and experience is on our side. In those States where punishment by death is abolished, the mass of capital crime has yearly a progressive decrease. Let this fact have its weight.

I do not advocate, however, a sudden and complete abolition of the penalty of death, such as was so heedlessly attempted in the Chamber of Deputies. On the contrary, I desire every precaution, every experiment, every suggestion of prudence; besides, in addition to this gradual change, I would have the whole penal code examined, and reformed; and time is a great ingredient requisite to make such a work complete. But independently of a partial abolition of death in cases of forgery, incendiarism, minor thefts, et cætera, I would wish that, from the present time, in all the greater offenses, the Judge should be obliged to propose the following question to the Jury: *“Has the accused acted from Passion or from Interest?”* And in case the Jury decide “the accused acted from Passion,” then there should be no sentence of death.

Let not the opposite party deceive themselves; this question of the penalty of death gains ground every day. Before long, the world will unanimously solve it on the side of mercy. During the past century, punishments have become gradually milder; the rack has disappeared, the wheel has disappeared; and now the guillotine is shaken.

This mistaken punishment will leave France, we hope; and, please God, it will depart limping, for we itch to give it some good kicks.

It must ask hospitality of some barbarous people, — not of Turkey, which is becoming civilized, not of the savages, for they will not have it;[3] but let it descend some steps of the ladder of civilization, and seek refuge in Spain, or in Russia!

In the early ages, the social edifice rested on three columns, the priest, the king and the headsman. It is a long time since a voice exclaimed, *“The gods have departed!”* Lately another voice has cried, *“The kings have departed!”* It is now full time that a third voice shall be raised to say, *“The executioner must go!”*

Thus the barbarous usages of the olden times fall one by one; thus Providence completes modern regeneration.

To those who regret the gods, we say, “God remains!” To those who regret the Kings, we say, “Our Country remains!” But to those who could regret the Executioner we can say nothing.

Let it not be supposed that social order will depart with the scaffold; the social building will not fall from wanting this hideous keystone. Civilization is nothing but a series of transformations. For what then do I ask your aid? The civilization of penal laws. The gentle laws of Christ will penetrate at last into the Code, and shine through its enactments. We shall look on crime as a disease, and its physicians shall displace the judges, its hospitals displace the galleys. Liberty and health shall be alike. We shall pour balm and oil where we formerly applied iron and fire; evil will be treated in charity, instead of in anger. This change will be simple and sublime. The Cross shall displace the Gibbet. That is all.

15 March, 1832.

FIRST PAPER

BICETRE PRISON

Condemned to death!

These five weeks have I dwelt with this idea, — always alone with it, always frozen by its presence, always bent under its weight.

Formerly (for it seems to me rather years than weeks since I was free) I was a being like any other; every day, every hour, every minute had its idea. My mind, youthful and rich, was full of fancies, which it developed successively, without order or aim, but weaving inexhaustible arabesques on the poor and coarse web of life. Sometimes it was of youthful beauties, sometimes of unbounded possessions, then of battles gained, next of theatres full of sound and light, and then again the young beauties, and shadowy walks at night beneath spreading chestnut-trees. There was a perpetual revel in my imagination: I might think on what I chose, — I was free.

But now, — I am a Captive! Bodily in irons in a dungeon, and mentally imprisoned in one idea, — one horrible, one hideous, one unconquerable ideal I have only one thought, one conviction, one certitude, —

Condemned to death!

Whatever I do, that frightful thought is always here, like a spectre, beside me, — solitary and jealous, banishing all else, haunting me for ever, and shaking me with its two icy hands whenever I wish to turn my head away or to close my eyes. It glides into all forms in which my mind seeks to shun it; mixes itself, like a horrible chant, with all the words which are addressed to me; presses against me even to the odious gratings of my prison. It haunts me while awake, spies on my convulsive slumbers, and re-appears, a vivid incubus, in my dreams!

I have just started from a troubled sleep in which I was pursued by this thought, and I made an effort to say to myself, “Oh, it was but a dream!”

Well, even before my heavy eyes could read the fatal truth in the dreadful reality which surrounds me, — on the damp and reeking dungeon-walls, in the pale rays of my night-lamp, in the rough material of my prison-garb, on the sombre visage of the sentry, whose cap gleams through the grating of the door, — it seems to me that already a voice has murmured in my ear, —

“Condemned to death!”

SECOND PAPER

Five weeks have now elapsed since I was tried, — found guilty, — sentenced.

Let me endeavour to recall the circumstances which attended that fatal day.

It was a beautiful morning at the close of August. My trial had already lasted three days; my name and accusation had collected each morning a knot of spectators, who crowded the benches of the Court, as ravens surrounded a corpse. During three days all the assembly of judges, witnesses, lawyers, and officers had passed and repassed as a phantasmagoria before my troubled vision.

The two first nights, through uneasiness and terror, I had been unable to sleep; on the third I had slept, from fatigue and exhaustion. I had left the jury deliberating at midnight, and was taken back to the heap of straw in my prison, where I instantly fell into a profound sleep, — the sleep of forgetfulness. These were the first hours of repose I had obtained after long watchfulness.

I was buried in this oblivion when they sent to have me awakened, and my sound slumber was not broken by the heavy step and iron shoes of the jailor, by the clanking of his keys, or the rusty grating of the lock; to rouse me from my lethargy it required his harsh voice in my ear, his rough hand on my arm.

“Come,” shouted he, “rise directly!

I opened my eyes, and started from my straw bed: it was already daylight. At this moment, through the high and narrow window of my cell, I saw on the ceiling of the next corridor (the only firmament I was allowed to see) that yellow reflection by which eyes accustomed to the darkness of a prison recognize sunshine. And oh, how I love sunshine!

“It is a fine day!” said I to the jailor.

He remained a moment without answering me, as if uncertain whether it was worth while to expend a word; then, as if with an effort, he coolly murmured, “Very likely.”

I remained motionless, my senses half sleeping, with smiling lips, and my eyes fixed on that soft golden reflection which reverberated on the ceiling.

“What a lovely day!” I repeated.

“Yes,” answered the jailor; “they are waiting for you.”

These few words, like a web which stops the flight of an insect, flung me back into the reality of my position. I pictured to myself instantly, as in a flash of lightning, that sombre Court of Justice, the Bench of Judges, in their robes of sanguine hue, the three rows of stupid looking witnesses, two gendarmes at the extremity of my bench; black robes waving, and the heads of the crowd clustering in the depth of the shadow, while I fancied that I felt upon me the fixed look of the twelve jurymen, who had sat up while I slept.

I rose: my teeth chattered, my hands trembled, my limbs were so weak that at the first step I had nearly fallen; however, I followed the jailor slowly.

Two gendarmes waited for me at the door-way of the cell; they replaced fetters, to which I as in a dream.

We traversed an interior court, and the balmy air of morning reanimated me. I raised my head: the sky was cloudless, and the warm rays of the sun (partially intercepted by the tall chimneys) traced brilliant angles of light on the high and sombre walls the prison. It was indeed a delicious day.

We ascended a winding staircase; we passed a corridor, then another, then a third, and then a low door was opened. A current of hot air, laden with noise, rushed from it; it was the breath of the crowd in the Court of Justice which I then entered.

On my appearance the hall resounded with clank of arms and the hum of voices; benches were moved noisily; and while I crossed that long chamber between two masses of people who were walled in by soldiers, I painfully felt myself the centre of attraction to all those fixed and gaping looks.

At this moment I perceived that I was without fetters, but I could not recall where or when they had been removed.

At length I reached my place at the bar, and there was a deep silence. The instant that the tumult ceased in the crowd, it ceased also in my ideas: a sudden clearness of perception came to me, and I at once understood plainly, what until then I could not discover in my confused state of mind, that *the decisive moment was come!* was brought there my *sentence!*

Explain it who can: from the manner in which this idea came to my mind, it caused me no terror! The windows were open; the air, and the sounds of the City came freely through them; the room was as light as for a wedding; the cheerful rays of the sun traced here and there the luminous forms of the windows, sometimes lengthened on the flooring, spreading on a table, sometimes broken by the angles of the walls; and from the brilliant square of each window the rays fell through the air in dancing golden beams.

The Judges at the extreme of the hall bore a satisfied appearance, probably from the anticipation of their labours being soon completed. The face of the President, softly lighted by a reflected sunbeam, had a calm and amiable expression; and a young counsel conversed almost gaily with a handsome woman who was placed near him.

The Jury alone looked wan and exhausted, but this was apparently from the fatigue of having sat up all night. Nothing in their countenances indicated men who would pass sentence of death.

Opposite to me a window stood wide open. I heard laughter in the Market for Flowers beneath; and on the sill of the window a graceful plant, illumined by sunshine, played in the breeze.

How could any sinister idea be formed amongst so many soothing sensations? Surrounded by air and sunshine, I could think of nought save freedom. Hope shone within me, as the day shone around me; and I awaited my sentence with confidence, as one daily calculates on liberty and life.

In the meantime my counsel arrived; after taking his place he leaned towards me with a smile.

“I have hopes!” said he.

“Oh, surely!” I replied in the same light tone.

“Yes,” returned he; “I know nothing as yet of the verdict, but they have doubtless acquitted you of premeditation, and then it will be only *hard labour for life!”*

“What do you mean, sir?” replied I indignantly; “ I would prefer death!”

Then the President, who had only waited for my counsel, desired me to rise. The soldiers carried arms; and, like an electric movement, all the assembly rose at the same instant. The Recorder, placed at a table below the Tribunal, read the verdict, which the Jury pronounced during my absence.

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A sickly chill passed over my frame; I leaned against the wall to avoid falling.

“Counsel, have you anything to say why this sentence should not be passed?” demanded the President.

I felt that *I* had much to urge, but I had not the power, — my tongue was cleaving to my mouth.

My counsel then rose. His endeavour appeared to be, to mitigate the verdict of the Jury, and to substitute the punishment of hard labour for life, — by naming which he had rendered me so indignant! This indignation must again have been powerful within me to conquer the thousand emotions which distracted my thoughts. I wished to repeat aloud what I had already said to him, but my breath failed, and I could only grasp him by the arm, crying with convulsive strength, “No!”

The Attorney-General replied against my counsel’s arguments, and I listened to him with a stupid satisfaction. The Judges then left the Court; soon returned, and the President read my sentence.

“Condemned to death” cried the crowd; and as I was led away the assembly pressed on my steps with avidity, while I walked on, confused, and nearly in unconsciousness. A revolution had taken place within me. Until that sentence of Death I had felt myself breathe, palpitate, exist, like other beings. Now I felt clearly that a barrier existed between me and the world. Nothing appeared to me under the same aspect as hitherto. Those large and luminous windows, that fair sunshine, that pure sky, — all was pale and ghastly, the colour of a winding sheet. Those men, women, and children who pressed on my path seemed to me like phantoms.

At the foot of the stairs a black and dirty prison-cart was waiting; as I entered it, I looked by chance around.

“The Condemned Prisoner!” shouted the people, running towards the cart.

Through the cloud which seemed to me to interpose between me and all things, I distinguished two young girls who gazed at me with eager eyes.

“Well,” said the youngest, clasping her hands, *“it will take place in six weeks.”*

THIRD PAPER

Condemned to death!

Well, why not? I remember once reading, “All mankind are condemned to death, with indefinite respites.” How then is my position altered?

Since my sentence was pronounced, how many are dead who calculated a long life! How many are gone before me, who, young, free, and in good health, had fully intended to be present at my execution! How many, between this and then, perhaps, who now walk and breathe in the fresh air any where they please, will die before me!

And then, what has life for me, that I should regret? In truth, only the dull twilight and black bread of a prison, a portion of meagre soup from the trough of the convicts; to be treated rudely, — *I*, who have been education; to be brutalized by turnkeys without feeling; not to see a human being who thinks me worthy of a word, or whom I could address; incessantly to shudder at what I have done, and what may be done to me, — these are nearly the only advantages of which the executioner can deprive me!

Ah! still it is horrible.

FOURTH PAPER

The black cart brought me here to this hideous Bicêntre Prison.

Seen from afar, the appearance of that edifice is rather majestic. It spreads to the horizon in front of a hill, and at a distance retains something of splendour, — the look of a Royal Palace. But as you approach it, the Palace changes to a ruin, and the dilapidated gables shock the sight. There is a mixture of poverty and disgrace soiling its royal facades; without glass or shutters to the windows, but massive crossed-bars of iron instead, against which is pressed, here and there, the ghastly face of a felon or a mad-man.

FIFTH PAPER

When I arrived here the hand of force was laid on me, and numerous precautions were taken: neither knife nor fork was allowed for my repasts; and a strait-waistcoat — a species of sack made of sail-cloth — imprisoned my arms. I had sued to annul my sentence, so the jailors might have for six or weeks their responsibility; and it was requisite to keep me safe and healthful for the Guillotine!

For first few days I was treated with a degree of attention which was horrible to me, — the civilities of a turnkey breath of a scaffold. Luckily, at the end of some days habit resumed its influence; they mixed me with the other prisoners in a general brutality, and made no more of those unusual distinctions of politeness which continually kept the executioner in my memory.

This was not the only amelioration. My youth, my docility, the cares of the Chaplain of the prison; and above all some words in Latin which I addressed to the keeper, who did not understand them, procured for me a walk once a week with the other prisoners, and removed the strait-waistcoat with which! was paralyzed. After considerable hesitation they have also given me pens, paper, ink, and a night-lamp. Every Sunday after Mass I am allowed to walk in the Prison-court at the hour of recreation; there I talk with the prisoners, which is inevitable. They make boon companions, these wretches. They tell me their adventures, — enough to mortify one; but I know they are proud of them. They also try to teach me their mystic idioms, — an odious phraseology grafted on the general language, like a hideous excrescence; yet sometimes it has a singular energy, a frightful picturesqueness. To be hung is called “marrying the widow,” as though the rope of the gallows were the widow of all who had been executed! At every instant mysterious, fantastic words occur, base and hideous, derived one knows not whence; they resemble crawling reptiles. On hearing this language spoken, the effect is like the shaking of dusty rags before you.

These men at least pity me, and they alone do so. The jailors, the turnkeys, — and I am not angry with them — gossip and laugh, and speak of me in my presence as of a mere animal.

SIXTH PAPER

I said to myself, “As I have the means of writing, why should I not do it? But of what shall I write? Placed between four walls of cold and bare stone, without freedom for my steps, without horizon for my eyes, my sole occupation mechanically to watch the progress of that square of light which the grating of my door marks on the sombre wall opposite, and, as I said before, ever alone with one idea, — an idea of crime, punishment, death, — can I have anything to *say*, I who have no more to *do* in this world; and what shall I find in this dry and empty brain which is worthy the trouble of being written?

“Why not? If all around me is monotonous and hueless, is there not within me a tempest, a struggle, a tragedy? This fixed idea which possesses me, does it not take every hour, every minute a new form, becoming more hideous as the time approaches? Why should I not try to describe for myself all the violent and unknown feelings I experience in my outcast situation? Certainly the material is plentiful; and, however shortened my life may be, there will still be sufficient in the anguish, the terrors, the tortures, which will fill it from this hour until my last, to exhaust my pen and ink! Besides, the only means to decrease my suffering in this anguish will be to observe it closely; and to describe it will give me an occupation. And then, what I write may not be without its use. This journal of my sufferings, hour by hour, minute by minute, torment after torment, if I have strength to carry it on to the moment when it will be *physically* impossible for me to continue, — this history necessarily unfinished, yet as complete as possible, of my sensations, may it not give a grand and deep lesson? Will not there be in this process of agonizing thought, in this ever increasing progress of pain, in this intellectual dissection of a condemned man, more than one lesson for those who condemned? Perhaps the perusal may render them less heedless, when throwing a human life into what they call ‘the scale of justice.’ Perhaps they have never reflected on the slow succession of tortures conveyed in the expeditious formula of a sentence of death. Have they ever paused on the important idea, that in the man whose days they shorten there is an immortal spirit which had calculated on life, a soul which is not prepared for death? No! they see nothing but the execution, and doubtless think that for the condemned there is nothing anterior or subsequent!”

These sheets shall undeceive them. Published, perchance, some day, they will call their attention a few moments to the suffering of the mind; for it is this which they do not consider. They triumph in the power of being able to destroy the body, almost without making it suffer. What an inferior consideration is this! What is mere physical pain compared to that of the mind? A day will come, and perhaps these memoirs, the last revelations of a solitary wretch, will have contributed —

That is, unless after my death the wind carries away these sheets of paper into the muddy court, or unless they melt with rain when pasted to the broken window of a turnkey.

SEVENTH PAPER

Suppose that what I write might one day be useful to others, — might make the Judge pause in his decision, and might save the wretched (innocent or guilty) from the agony to which I am condemned, — why should I do it? What matters it? When my life has been taken, what will it be to me if they take the lives of others? Have I really thought of such folly? — to throw down the scaffold which I had fatally mounted!

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What! sunshine, spring, fields full of flowers and birds, the clouds, trees, nature, liberty, life, — these are to be mine no more!

Ah, it is myself I must try to save! Is it really true that this cannot be, that I must die soon, — to-morrow, today perhaps; is it all thus? Oh, heavens! what a dreadful idea, — of destroying myself against the prison wall!

EIGHTH PAPER

Let me consider what time generally elapses between the condemnation and the execution of a prisoner.

Three days of delay, after sentence is pronounced, for the prisoner’s final plea to annul it.

The plea forgotten for a week in a Court of Assize, before it is sent to the Minister; a fortnight forgotten at the Minister’s, who does not even know that there are such papers, although he is supposed to transmit them, after examination, to the “Cour de Cassation.”

Then classification, numbering, registering; the guillotine-list is loaded, and none must go before their turn! A fortnight more waiting; then the Court assembles, rejects twenty pleas together, and sends all back to the Minister, who sends them back to the Attorney-General, who sends them back to the executioner; this would take three more days.

On the morning of the fourth day the Deputies of the Attorney-General and Recorder prepare the order of execution; and the following morning, from day-break, is heard the noise of erecting the scaffold, and in the cross-streets a commotion of hoarse voices.

Altogether *six* weeks. The young girl’s calculation was right! I have now been at least five weeks (perhaps six, for I dare not reckon) in this fatal prison; nay, I think I have been even three days more.

NINTH PAPER

I have just made my will; what was the use of this? I have to pay my expenses, and all I possess will scarcely suffice. A forced death is expensive.

I leave a mother, I leave a wife, I leave a child, — a little girl of three years old, gentle, delicate, with large black eyes and chestnut hair. She was two years and one month old when I saw her the last time.

Thus after my death there will be three women without son, without husband, without father, — three orphans in different degrees; three widows by act of law.

I admit that I am justly punished; but these innocent creatures, what have they done? No matter; they will be dishonoured, they will be ruined; and this is justice!

It is not much on account of my poor old mother that I feel thus wretched; she is so advanced in years, she will not survive the blow; or if she still linger a short time, her feelings are so blunted that she will suffer but little.

Nor is it for my wife that I feel the most. She is already in miserable health, and weak in intellect; her reason will give way, in which case her spirit will not suffer while the mind slumbers as in death.

But my daughter, my child, my poor little Mary, who is laughing, playing, singing, at this moment, and who dreams of no evil! Ah, it is the thought of her which unmans me!

TENTH PAPER

Here is the description of my prison; eight feet square; four walls of granite, with a flagged pavement; on one side a kind of nook by way of alcove, in which is thrown a bundle or straw, where the prisoner is supposed to rest and sleep, dressed, winter, as in summer, in slight linen clothing. Over my head, instead of curtains, a thick canopy of cobwebs, hanging like tattered pennons. For the rest, no windows, not even a ventilator; and only one door, where iron hides the wood. I mistake; towards the top of the door there is a sort of window, or rather an opening of nine inches square, crossed by a grating, and which the turnkey can close at night. Outside, there is a long corridor lighted and aired by means of narrow ventilators high in the wall. It is divided into compartments of masonry, which communicate by a series of doors; each of these compartments serves as an antechamber to a dungeon, like mine. In these dungeons are confined felons condemned by the Governor of the Prison to hard labour. The three first cells are kept for prisoners under sentence of death, as being nearest to the goal, therefore most convenient for the jailor. These dungeons are the only remains of the ancient Bicentre Castle, such as it was built in the fifteenth century by the Cardinal of Winchester, he who caused Jeanne of Arc to be burned. I overheard this description from some persons who came to my den yesterday, to gratify their curiosity, and who stared at me from a distance as at a wild beast in a menagerie. The turnkey received five francs for the exhibition.

I have omitted to say that night and day there is a sentry on guard outside the door of my cell; and I never raise my eyes towards the square grating without encountering his eyes, open, and fixed on me.

ELEVENTH PAPER

As there is no appearance of daylight, what is to be done during the night? It occurred to me that I would arise and examine, by my lamp, the wails of my cell. They are covered with writings, with drawings, fantastic figures, and names which mix with and efface each other. It would appear that each prisoner had wished to leave behind him some trace here at least. Pencil, chalk, charcoal, — black, white, grey letters; sometimes deep carvings upon the stone. If my mind were at ease, I could take an interest in this strange book, which is developed page by page, to my eyes, on each stone of this dungeon. I should like to recompose these fragments of thought; to trace a character for each name; to give sense and life to these mutilated inscriptions, — these dismembered phrases.

Above where I sleep there are two flaming hearts, pierced with an arrow; and beneath is written "Amour pour la vie." Poor wretch! it was not a long engagement.

Beyond this, a three-sided cocked hat, with a small figure coarsely done beneath, and the words, "Vive l'Empereur!"

On the opposite wall is the name of "Papavoine." The capital *P* is worked in arabesques and embellished with care. A verse of a popular drinking-song.

A Cap of Liberty, cut rather deeply into the stone, with the words beneath of "Bories, La République!"

Poor young man! he was one of the four subaltern officers of La Rochelle. How horrible is the idea of their (fancied) political necessity, to give the frightful reality of the guillotine for an opinion, a reverie, an abstraction! — And I! *I* have complained of its severity!-I who have really committed crime —

Ah, what have I seen! I can go no farther in my research! I have just discovered, drawn with chalk in the corner of the wall, that dreadful image, the representation of that scaffold, which even at this moment is perhaps being put up for my execution! The lamp had nearly fallen out of my trembling hands!

TWELFTH PAPER

I returned precipitately to sit on my straw bed; my head sunk on my knees. After a time, my childish fear was dissipated, and a wild curiosity forced me to continue the examination of my walls.

Besides the name of Papavoine, I tore away an enormous cobweb, thick with dust, and filling the angle of the wall. Under this web there were four or five names perfectly legible, among others of which nothing remained but a smear on the wall, — DAUTAN, 1815. POULAIN, 1818. JEAN MARTIN, 1821. CASTAING, 1823.

As I read these names, frightful recollections crowded on me. *Dautan* was the man who cut his brother in quarters, and who went at night to Paris and threw the head into a fountain, and the body into a sewer. *Poulain* assassinated his wife. *Jean Martin* shot his father with a pistol as the old man opened a window. And *Castaing* was the physician who poisoned his friend; and while attending the illness he had caused, instead of antidote, gave him more poison. Then, next to these names, was Papavoine, the horrible madman who stabbed children to death in his phrenzy.

“These,” I exclaimed, as a shudder passed over me, “these, then, have been my predecessors in this cell. Here, on the same pavement where I am, they conceived their last thoughts, — these fearful homicides! Within these walls, in this narrow square, their last steps turned and returned, like those of a caged wild-beast. They succeeded each other at short intervals; it seems that this dungeon does not remain empty. They have left the place warm, — and it is to me they have left it. In my turn I shall join them in the felons’ cemetery of Clamart, where the grass grows so well!”

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I am neither visionary nor superstitious, but it is probable these ideas caused in my brain a feverish excitement; for, whilst I thus wandered, all at once these five fatal names appeared as though written in flames on the dark wall; noises, louder and louder, burst on my ears; a dull red light filled my eyes, and it seemed to me that my cell became full of men, — strangers to me. Each bore his severed head in his left hand, and carried it by the mouth, for the hair had been removed; each raised his right band at me, *except the parricide*.

I shut my eyes in horror, and then I saw all even more distinctly than before!

Dream, vision, or reality, I should have gone mad if a sudden impression had not recalled me in time. I was near fainting, when I felt something cold crawling over my naked foot. It was the bloated spider, whom I had disturbed. This recalled my wandering senses. Those dreadful spectres, then, were only the fumes of an empty and convulsed brain. The sepulchre is a prison from whence none escape. The door of the tomb opens not inwards!

THIRTEENTH PAPER

I have lately witnessed a hideous sight. As soon as it was day, the prison was full of noise, I heard heavy doors open and shut; the grating of locks and bolts; the clanking of bunches of keys; the stairs creaking from top to bottom with quick steps; and voices calling and answering from the opposite extremes of the long corridors. My neighbours in the dungeons, the felons at hard labour, were more gay than usual. All in the prison seemed laughing, singing, running, or dancing; I-alone silent in this uproar, alone motionless in this tumult — listened in astonishment.

A jailor passed; I ventured to call and ask him "if there were a Fête in the Prison."

"A Fête, if you choose to call it so," answered he; "this is the day that they fetter the galley-slaves who are to set off tomorrow for Toulon. Would you like to see them? It would amuse you."

For a solitary recluse, indeed, a spectacle of any kind was an event of interest, however odious it might be; and I accepted the "amusement."

The jailor, after taking the usual precautions to secure me, conducted me into a little empty cell, without a vestige of furniture, and only a grated window, — but still a real window, against which one could lean, and through which one could actually perceive the sky! "Here," said he, "you will see and hear all that happens. You will be 'alone in your box,' like the King!"

He then went out, closing on me locks, bolts, and bars.

The window looked into a square and rather wide court, on every side of which was a large six-storied stone edifice. Nothing could seem more wretched, naked, and miserable to the eye than this quadruple façade, pierced by a multitude of grated windows, against which were pressed a crowd of thin and wan faces, placed one above the other, like the stones of a wall; and all, as it were, framed in the intercrossings of iron bars. They were prisoners, spectators of the ceremony, until their turn came to be the actors.

All looked in silence into the still empty court; among these faded and dull countenances there shone, here and there, some eyes which gleamed like sparks of fire.

At twelve o’clock, a large gateway in the court was opened. A cart, escorted by soldiers, rolled heavily into the court, with a rattling of irons. It was the Convict-guard with the chains.

At the same instant, as if this sound awaked all the noise of the prison, the spectators of the windows, who had hitherto been silent and motionless, burst into cries of joy, songs, menaces, and imprecations, mixed with hoarse laughter. It was like witnessing a masque of Demons; each visage bore a grimace, every hand was thrust through the bars, their voices yelled, their eyes flashed, and I was startled to see so many gleams amidst these ashes. Meanwhile the galley-sergeants quietly began their work. One mounted on the cart, and threw to his comrades the fetters, the iron collars, and the linen clothing; while others stretched long chains to the end of the court and the Captain tried each link by striking it on the pavement, — all of which took place under the mocking raillery of the prisoners, and the loud laughter of the convicts for whom they were being prepared.

When all was ready, two or three low doors poured forth into the court a collection of hideous, yelling, ragged men; these were the galley-convicts.

Their entry caused increased pleasure at the windows. Some of them, being ‘great names’ among their comrades, were saluted with applause and acclamation, which they received with a sort of proud modesty. Several wore a kind of hat of prison straw, plaited by themselves, and formed into some fantastic shape; these men were always the most applauded.

One in particular excited transports of enthusiasm, — a youth of seventeen, with quite a girlish face. In his prison he had made himself a straw dress, which enveloped him from head to foot; and he entered the court, jumping a somerset with the agility of a serpent. He was a mountebank condemned for theft, and there was a furious clapping of hands, and a volley of cheers, for him.

At length the names were called in alphabetical order, and they went to stand two and two, companions by similar initials; so that even if a convict had a friend, most likely their chains would divide them from suffering together.

Whilst they were exchanging their worn-out prison-garments for the thin and coarse clothing of the galleys, the weather, which had been hitherto un. certain, became suddenly cold and cloudy, and a heavy shower chilled their thin forms, and saturated their vesture.

A dull silence succeeded to their noisy bravadoes; they shivered, their teeth chattered, and their limbs shook in the wet clothes.

One convict only, an old man, retained a sort of gaiety. He exclaimed laughing, while wiping away the rain, and shaking his fist at the skies, “This was not in the playbill!”

When they had put on their miserable vestments, they were taken in bands of twenty or thirty to the corner of the court where the long chains were extended. At every interval of two feet in these chains were fastened short transverse chains, and at the extremity of each of the latter was attached a square iron collar, which opened by means of a hinge in the centre and closed by an iron bolt, which is riveted, for the whole journey, on the convict’s neck. The convicts were ordered to sit down in the mud on the inundated pavement; the iron collars were fitted on them, and two prison-blacksmiths, with portable anvils, riveted the hard, unheated metal with heavy iron hammers.

This was a frightful operation, and even the most hardy turned pale! Each stroke of the hammer, aimed on the anvil resting on their backs, makes the whole form yield; the failure of its aim, or the least movement of the head, might launch them into eternity.

When this operation was finished, the convicts rose simultaneously. The five gangs joined hands, so as to form an immense circle, and thus ran round and round in the court with a rapidity that the eye could hardly follow. They sung some couplets, in their own idiom, to a melody which was sometimes plaintive, sometimes furious, often interrupted by hoarse cries and broken laughter, like delirious ravings, while the chains, clanking together in cadence, formed an accompaniment to a song more harsh than their own noise. A large trough was now brought in; the guards, striking the convicts to make them discontinue their dance, took them to the trough, in which was swimming I know not what sort of herbs in some smoking and dirty-looking liquid. Having partaken of it, they threw the remainder on the pavement, with their black bread, and began again to, dance and sing. This is a liberty which is allowed to them on the day they are fettered and the succeeding night.

I gazed on this strange spectacle with such eager and breathless attention, that I totally forgot my own misery. The deepest pity filled my heart, and their laughter made me weep.

Suddenly, in the midst of a profound reverie into which I had fallen, I observed the yelling circle had stopped, and was silent. Then every eye was turned to the window which I occupied. “The Condemned! the Condemned!” shouted they, pointing their fingers at me; and their bursts of laughter were redoubled.

I was thunderstruck. I know not where they knew me, or how I was recognized.

“Good day! good night? cried they, with their mocking sneer. One of the youngest, condemned to the Galleys for life, turned his shining, leaden face on me, with a look of envy, saying, “He is lucky! he is to be *clipped!* Good-bye, Comrade!”

I cannot describe what passed within me. I was indeed their “comrade?’ The Scaffold is Sister to the Galleys. Nay, I was even lower than they were; the convicts had done me an honour. I shuddered: yes! their “comrade!” I remained at the window, motionless, as if paralyzed; but when I saw the five gangs advance, rushing towards me with phrases of disgusting cordiality; when I heard the horrible din of their chains, their clamours, their steps at the foot of my wall, it seemed to me that this knot of demons were scaling my cell! I uttered a shriek; I threw myself against the door violently, but there was no means of flight. I knocked, I called with mad fury. Then I thought I heard, still nearer, the horrid voices of the convicts. I thought I saw their hideous heads appearing on a level with the window; I uttered another shriek of anguish, and fainted.

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FOURTEENTH PAPER

When my consciousness returned it was night; I was lying on a truckle bed; a lamp which swung from the ceiling enabled me to see a line of beds similar to mine, and I therefore judged that I had been taken to the Infirmary. I remained a few moments awake, but without thought or recollection, totally engrossed by the happiness of being again in a bed. Certainly, in former days, this prison-hospital bed would have made me shrink with disgust; but I am no longer the same individual. The sheets were brown, and coarse to the touch, the blanket thin and ragged, and there was but one straw mattress.

No matter! I could stretch my limbs at their ease between these coarse sheets; and under this blanket, thin as it was, I felt the gradual decrease of that horrible chill in the marrow of my bones, to which I had lately been accustomed. — I slept again.

A loud noise awakened me at daylight. The noise came from without; my bed was beside the window, and I sat up to see from what it arose. The window looked into the large Court of the Bicêtre, which was full of people. Two lines of veterans had difficulty in keeping the crowd away from a narrow passage across the Court. Between this double rank of soldiers, five long wagons, loaded with men, were driven slowly jolting at each stone; it was the departure of the convicts.

These wagons were open, and each gang occupied one. The convicts, in consequence of their iron collars being attached to the centre chain, are obliged to sit back to back, their feet hanging over the sides of the wagon; the centre chain stretched the whole length of the cart, and on its unfastened end the Sergeant stood with his loaded musket. There was a continual clanking of the prisoners' chains, and at each plunge of the wagon their heads and pendant limbs were jolted violently. A quick penetrating rain chilled the air, and made their wet slight vesture cling to their shivering forms. Their long beards and short hair streamed with wet; their complexions were saturnine; they were shivering, and grinding their teeth with mingled rage and cold. But they had no power of moving; once riveted to that chain, each becomes a mere fraction of that hideous whole which is called the Gang. Intellect must abdicate, — the fetters condemn it to death; and the mere animal must not even hunger but at certain hours. Thus fixed, the greater part half clad, with bare heads, and no rest for their feet, they begin their journey of twenty-five days; the same sort of wagons, the same portion of dress being used in scorching July as in the cold rains of November. One would almost think that man wishes Heaven to take part in his office of executioner.

Between the crowd and the convicts a horrible dialogue was maintained, — abuse on one side, bravadoes on the other, imprecations from both; but at a sign from the Captain I saw the sticks of the Guard raining indiscriminate blows into the wagon, on heads or shoulders, and all returned to that kind of eternal calm which is called “order.” But their eyes were full of vengeance, and their powerless hands were clenched on their knees.

The five wagons, escorted by mounted gendarmes and guards on foot, passed slowly under the high arched door of the Bicêtre. The crowd followed them: all vanished like a phantasmagoria, and by degrees the sounds diminished of the heavy wheels, clanking fetters, and the yells of the multitude uttering maledictions on the journey of the convicts. And such was their happy beginning!

What a proposition my counsel made! The Galleys! I was right to prefer death; rather the Scaffold than what I had seen!

FIFTEENTH PAPER

Unfortunately I was not ill; therefore the next day I was obliged to leave the Infirmary to return to my dungeon.

Not ill? No truly, I am young, healthful, and strong; the blood flows freely in my veins; my limbs obey my will; I am robust in mind and body, constituted for a long life. Yes, all this is true; and yet, nevertheless, I have an illness, a fatal illness, — an illness given by the hand of man!

Since I came out of the Infirmary a vivid idea has occupied me, — a thought which affects me to madness; namely, that I might have escaped, had they left me there! Those Physicians, those Charity Sisters seemed to take an interest in me. “To die so young! and by such a death? One would have imagined they pitied me by their pressing round my bed. Bah! it was curiosity! I have no chance now! My plea will be rejected, because all was legal; the witnesses gave correct evidence, the counsel pleaded well, the Judges decided carefully. I do not reckon upon it, unless — No! folly; there is no hope. The plea is a cord which holds you suspended over an abyss, and which you feel giving way at each instant until it breaks. It is as if the axe of the Guillotine took six weeks to fall.

If I could obtain my pardon! — pardon! From whom, for what, and by what means? It is impossible that I should be pardoned. They say *an example is requisite*.

SIXTEENTH PAPER

During the few hours I passed at the Infirmary, I seated myself at a window in the sunshine (for the afternoon had become fine), and I enjoyed all the sun which the gratings of the window would allow me.

I sat thus, my heavy and fevered head within my hands, my elbows on my knees, my feet on the bar of the chair; for dejection had made me stoop, and sink within myself, as if I had neither bone nor muscular power.

The stifling air of the prison oppressed me more than ever; I still fancied the noise from the convicts' chains rung in my ears; I was almost overcome. I wished that some guardian spirit would take pity on me, and send even a little bird to sing there, opposite, on the edge of the roof.

I know not if it were a spirit of good or evil which granted my wish; but almost at the moment I uttered it, I heard beneath my window a voice, — not that of a bird, but far better — the pure, fresh, *velvet* voice of a young girl of fifteen!

I raised my head with a start; I listened with avidity to the song she sung. It was a slow and plaintive air, — a sad yet beautiful melody. As I gathered the sense of the words, I cannot describe my pain and disappointment, while the stanzas of prison-dialect marred the sweet music.

I heard no more. I could listen to no more. The meaning, half-hidden, half-evident, of this horrible lament, — the struggle between the felon and the police; the thief he meets and despatches for his wife; his dreadful explanation to her: "I have sweated an oak" ("I have assassinated a man"); the wife who goes to Versailles with a petition, and the King indignantly exclaiming that he "will make the guilty man dance where there is no floor!"-and all this sung to the sweetest air, and by the sweetest voice that ever soothed human ear! I was shocked, disgusted, overcome. It was a repulsive idea that all these monstrous words proceeded from a fresh rosy mouth: it was like the slime of a snail over a rosebud!

I cannot express what I felt; I was at once pained and gratified. The idiom of crime, a language at once sanguinary and grotesque, united to the voice of a young girl, that graceful transition from the voice of childhood to the voice of woman, — all these deformities of words delightfully sung, cadenced, rounded!

Ah, how infamous is a prison! It contains a venom which assails all within its pestilential reach. Everything withers there, even the song of a girl of fifteen!

If you find a bird within its courts, it has mud on its wing. If you gather a beauteous flower there, it exhales poison!

SEVENTEENTH PAPER

Whilst I was writing, my lamp faded, daylight appeared, and the clock of the chapel struck six.

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What can be the meaning of what has since happened? The turnkey on duty came into my cell; he took off his cap, bowed to me, apologized for disturbing me, and making an effort to soften his rough voice, inquired what I wished to have for my breakfast —

A shudder has come over me. *Is it to take place to-day?*

EIGHTEENTH PAPER

I feel that it *is* for to-day!

The Governor of the prison himself came to visit me. He asked me how he could serve or accommodate me; he expressed a hope that I had no complaint to make respecting him or his subordinates; and he inquired with interest regarding my health, and how I had passed the night. On leaving me, he called me “Sir!”

Oh, it surely is for to-day!

NINETEENTH PAPER

The Governor of the prison thinks I have no cause of complaint against him or his jailors. He is right, and it would be wrong of me to complain; they have done their duty, they have kept me safe; and then they have been complaisant at my arrival and departure. Ought I not to be satisfied?

This Governor, with his benign smile, his soft words, his eye which flatters and spies, his coarse heavy hands, — he is the incarnation of a prison!

Ah, hapless creature! what will become of me? What will they do with me?

TWENTIETH PAPER

Lo! I am calm. All is finished-quite finished! I am relieved from the dreadful anxiety into which I was thrown by the Governor's visit; for I confess I still felt hope. Now, thank Heaven! hope is gone.

Let me record what has happened. At half-past six the door of my cell was opened; an old man with white hair entered, dressed in a brown great-coat.

He unfastened it, and beneath I saw the black cassock and bands of a priest. He was not the usual Chaplain to the prison, and I thought this appeared ominous. He seated himself opposite to me, with a quiet smile; then shook his head, and raised his eyes to heaven. I understood him.

"My son!" said he, "are you prepared?"

I answered, in a low tone, "I am not prepared — but I am ready."

Then my sight became troubled; a chill damp pervaded my frame. I felt the veins on my temples swelling, and a confused murmur in my ears.

Whilst I vacillated on my chair as though asleep, the old man continued speaking, — at least, so it appeared to me, for I think I remember seeing his lips move, and his hand raised.

The door opened again; the noise of the lock roused me from my reverie, and the Priest from his discourse. A person dressed in black entered, accompanied by the Governor of the prison, and bowed profoundly to me; he carried a roll of paper.

"Sir," said he, with a courteous smile, "I have the honour to bring you a message from the Attorney-General."

The first agitation was over; all my presence of mind returned, and I answered in a firm tone, "Read on, Sir."

He then read a long. technically-expressed paper, the purport of which was the rejection of my plea. "The execution will be to-day," added he; "we shall leave this for the Conciergerie Prison at half-past seven. My dear Sir, will you have the extreme goodness to accompany me at that hour?"

For some instants I had no longer listened to him; for while his eyes were fixed on the paper the Governor was occupied talking to the Priest; and I looked at the door which they had left half open!...Ah, hapless me! Four sentinels in the corridor. Again I was asked when I would be ready to go.

“When you please,” I said; “at your own time.”

“I shall have the honour of coming for you, then, in half an hour,” said he, bowing; and all the party withdrew.

Oh for some means of escaping, Good heavens! any means whatever! I *must* make my escape! I must! Immediately! By the doors, by the windows, by the roof! Even though in the struggle I should destroy myself!

Oh, rage! demons! malediction! It would take months to pierce this wall with efficient tools. And I have not one nail, nor one hour!

TWENTY-FIRST PAPER

CONCIERGERIE PRISON.

Here I am transferred, then. Let me record the details. At half-past seven the messenger again presented himself at the threshold of my dungeon. “Sir,” said he, “I wait for you.”

Alas! and I saw that four others did the same! I rose, and advanced one step. It appeared to me I could not make a second. My head was so heavy, and my limbs so feeble; but I made an effort to conquer my weakness, and assumed an appearance of firmness.

Prior to leaving the cell, I gave it a final look; I had almost become attached to it. Besides, I left it empty and open, which gives, so strange an appearance to a dungeon.

It will not be long untenanted. The turnkeys said they expected some one this evening, — a prisoner who was then being tried at the Court of Assizes.

At the turn of the corridor the Chaplain rejoined us; he had just breakfasted.

At the threshold of the goal, the Governor took me by the hand; he had reinforced my escort by four veterans.

By the door of the Infirmary a dying old man exclaimed, “Good-bye, we shall soon meet again!”

We arrived in the courtyard, where I could breathe again freely, and this refreshed me greatly; but we did not walk long in the open air. The carriage was stationed in the first court. It was the same which had brought me there, — a sort of oblong van, divided into two sections by a transverse grating of close wire. Each section had a door; one in the front, one in the back of the cart; the whole so dirty, so black, so dusty, that the hearse for paupers is a state carriage by comparison! Before I buried myself in this moving tomb, I cast a look round the yard, — one of those despairing looks which seem to ask a miracle. The court was already encumbered with spectators. Like the day when the convicts departed, there was a slight, chilling shower of the season; it is raining still, and doubtless there will be rain all the day, — which will last when I am no morel We entered the van. The messenger and a gendarme, in the front compartment, the Priest, myself, and a gendarme in the other, with four mounted gendarmes around the carriage. As I entered it, an old grey-eyed woman who stood near exclaimed, “I like seeing this, even better than seeing the galley convicts!”

I can conceive this. It is a spectacle more easily taken in at one view. Nothing divides the attention; there is but one man, and on this isolated being there is as much misery heaped as on all the other convicts together. The van passed with a dull noise under the gateway, and the heavy doors of the Bicêtre were closed after us. I felt myself moving, but in stupor, like a man fallen into a lethargy, who can neither move nor cry out, and who fancies he feels that he is being buried alive. I listened vaguely to the peals of bells on the collars of the post-horses which drew the van, the iron wheels grating over various substances in the road, the cracking whips of the postillion, the galloping of the gendarmes round the carriage, all seemed like a whirlwind which bore me away.

My mind was so stupefied with grief that I only conceived ideas as in a dream. I saw the blue towers of Nôtre Dame in the distance. “Those who will be on the tower with the flag will see my execution well,” said I to myself, smiling stupidly.

I think it was at that moment that the Priest addressed me again; I patiently let him speak. I had already In my ears the noise of the wheels, the galloping horses, and the postillion’s whip; therefore it was only one more incomprehensible noise. I listened in silence to that flow of monotonous words, which deadened my thoughts, like the murmur of a brook; and they passed before my torpid mind, always varied yet always the same, like the crooked elms we passed by the roadside. The short and jerking voice of the messenger in the front of the van suddenly aroused me.

“Well, Chaplain,” said he, in almost a gay tone, “what news have you today?”

The Chaplain, who spoke to me without ceasing, and who was deafened by the carriage, made no answer.

“Well, well! How the van rattles; one can hardly hear oneself. What was I saying to you, Chaplain! Oh, aye! — do you know the great news of Paris to-day?”

I started as if he were speaking to me.

“No,” said the priest, who had at last heard him, “I have not had time to read the papers this morning: I shall see them this evening. When I am occupied in this way all day, I order my servant to keep the papers, and I read them on my return.”

“Bah!” replied the other, “it is impossible that you have not heard what I mean. The news of Paris — the news of this morning.”

It was now my turn to speak; and I said, “I know what you mean.”

The Messenger looked at me. “You? really! and pray what is your opinion about it?”

“You are inquisitive,” said I.

“How so, sir?” replied he. “Every one should have a political opinion: I esteem you too much to suppose that you are without one. As to myself, I am quite in favour of re-establishing the National Guard. I was a serjeant in my company; and, faith! it was very agreeable to—”

I interrupted him by saying, “I did not think this was the subject in question.’’

“What did you suppose, then? You professed to know the news.”

“I spoke of something else with which Paris is also occupied to-day.”

The fool did not understand, and his curiosity was awakened.

“More news! Where the deuce could .you learn news. What is it, my dear sir? Do you know what it is, Chaplain? Do let me hear all about it, I beg. I like news, you see, to relate to the President; it amuses him.”

He looked from one to the other, and obtained no answer.

“Well,” said he, “what are you thinking of?”

“I am thinking,” said I, “that I shall be past thinking, this evening.”

“Oh, that’s it,” returned he. “Come, come, you are too sad. Mr. Castaing conversed on the day of his execution.”

Then, after a pause, he continued: “I accompanied Mr. Papavoine on his last day. He wore his otter-skin cap, and smoked his cigar. As for the young men of La Rochelle, they only spoke among themselves, but still they spoke. As for you, I really think you are too pensive, young man.”

“Young man?” I repeated. “I am older than you; every quarter of an hour which passes makes me a year older.”

He turned round, looked at me some minutes with stupid astonishment, and then began to titter.

“Come, you are joking; older than I am? why, I might be your grandfather.”

“I have no wish to jest,” I answered gravely. He opened his snuff-box.

“Here, my good sir, don’t be angry. Take a pinch of snuff, and don’t bear malice.”

“Do not fear,” said I; “I shall not have long to bear it against you.” At this moment the snuff-box which he extended to me came against the grating which separated us. A jolt caused it to strike rather violently, and it fell, wide open, under the feet of the gendarme.

“Curse the grating!” said the messenger; then turning to me, he added, “Now, am I not unlucky? I have lost all my snuff!”

“I lose more than you,” said I.

As he tried to pick up his snuff, he muttered between his teeth, “More than I! that’s very easily said. No more snuff until I reach Paris! It’s terrible.”

The Chaplain then addressed him with some words of consolation; and I know not if I were pre-occupied, but it seemed to be to be part of the exhortation of which the commencement had been addressed to me.

By degrees conversation increased between the Chaplain and the officer; and I became again lost in thought. The vas was stopped for a minute before the toll-gate, and the inspector examined it. Had it contained a sheep or an ox which was going to be slaughtered, they would have required some money; but a human head pays no duty!

We passed through the gates, and the carriage trotted quickly through those old and crooked streets of the Faubourg St. Marceau and the city, which twist and cross each other like the many paths of an ant-hill. On the pavement of these narrow streets the rolling of the wheels became so noisy and rapid that I could hear no other sound, though I saw that people exclaimed, as the van passed, and bands of children followed its track. I fancied also I occasionally saw in the cross-streets ragged men displaying in their hands a bundle of printed papers, their mouths open as if vociferating something, while the passers stopped to purchase.

Half-past eight struck by the palace clock as we arrived in the court of the Conciergerie Prison. The sight of its wide staircase, its dark chapel, its sombre gates, made me shudder; and when the carriage stopped, I fancied the beatings of my heart stopped also.

But I collected my strength; the door was opened; with the rapidity of lightning I jumped from the moving prison, and passed between two lines of soldiers; already there was a crowd formed on my path.

TWENTY-SECOND PAPER

All my resolution abandoned me when I reached the low doors, private stairs, and interior corridors, which are only entered by the condemned. The Officer still accompanied me: the Priest had left me for a couple of hours-perchance to read the papers!

I was then taken to the Governor, into whose charge the Officer gave me. They made an exchange. The Director told him to wait a moment, as he had some “game” for him to take back in the Van to the Bicêtre. No doubt it was the man condemned to-day. He is to sleep to-night on the bundle of straw which I have not had time to wear out.

“Oh, very well,” said the Officer to the Governor, “I will wait with pleasure; we can make out the two papers together, and it will be very convenient.”

They then placed me in a small room adjoining the Governor’s office, and left me, locked in, alone.

I know not of what I was thinking, or how long I had been there, when a sudden and loud burst of laughter in my ear dispersed my reverie.

I raised my eyes with a start. I was no longer alone in the cell; a man was beside me. He was about fifty-five years old, middle-sized, wrinkled; stooping, and bald: with a sinister cast in his grey eyes, and a bitter sneer on his countenance; he was dirty, half clothed, ragged, disgusting.

We looked at each other steadfastly for some moments; he prolonging his bitter laugh, while I felt half astonished, half alarmed.

“Who are you?” said I to him at last. “That is a funny question,” said he. “I am a *friauche.”*

“A friauche?” said I; “what does that mean?”

This question redoubled his merriment.

“Why,” cried he, in the midst of a shout of laughter, “it means that they will play the same game with my head in six weeks hence, as they will with thine in six hours! Ha! ha! ha! thou seem’st to understand now!”

And truly I was pale, and my hair stood on end. This, then, was the other condemned prisoner, the one just sentenced, whom they expected at the Bicêtre; the heir of my cell.

He continued: “Never mind! Here’s *my* history. I am son of a famous thief; it is a pity that they gave him one day a hempen cravat; it was during the ‘reign of the Gallows by the grace of Heaven.’ At six years of age I had neither father nor mother; in summer I turned somersets in the dust on the high-road, that carriage-travellers might throw me money; in winter I walked with naked feet in the mud, in ragged clothes, and blowing on my purple hands to excite pity. At nine years old I began to use my fingers; at times I emptied a pocket or a reticule; at ten years old I was a pilferer: then I made acquaintances, and at seventeen I became a thief. I broke into a shop, I robbed the till; I was taken and sent to the Galleys. What a hard life that was! Sleeping on bare boards, drinking plain water, eating black bread, dragging a stupid fetter which was of no use; sun-strokes and whip-strokes: and then all the heads are kept shaved, and I had such fine chestnut hair! Never mind! I served my time; fifteen years. That wears one famously!

“I was two-and-thirty years old; one fine morning they gave me a map of the road, a passport, and sixty-six francs, which I had amassed in my fifteen years at the Galleys, working sixteen hours a-day, thirty days a-month, twelve months a-year. Never mind! I wished to be an honest man with my sixty-six francs; and I had finer sentiments under my rags than you might find beneath the cassock of a priest. But deuce take the passport! It was yellow, and they had written upon it *‘Freed convict.’* I was obliged to show this at every village, and to present it every week to the mayors of the towns through which I was ordered to pass. A fine recommendation! a galley-convict! I frightened all the folk, and little children ran away, and people locked their doors. No one would give me work; I expended the last of my sixty-six francs, — and then-one must live. I showed my arms, fit for labour; the people shut their doors.

I offered my day’s work for fifteen sous, for ten sous, for five sous! and no one would have me. What could be done? One day being hungry, I knocked my elbow through a baker’s window; I seized on a loaf, and the baker seized on me. I did not eat the loaf, yet I was condemned to the Galleys for life, with three letters branded on my shoulder; I’ll show them to you if you like. They call that sort of justice *the relapse*. So here I was, a returned horse. I was brought back to Toulon, — this time among the Green-caps (galley-slaves for life); so now I decided to escape. I had *only* three walls to pierce, two chains to break, and I had one nail! I escaped. They fired the signal gun; for we convicts are, like the Cardinals of Rome, dressed in red, and they fire cannons when we depart! Their powder went to the sparrows! This time, no yellow passport, but then no money either. I met some comrades in the neighbourhood who had also served their time or broken their chains. Their captain proposed to me to join the band. They killed on the highways. I acceded, and I began to kill to live. Sometimes we attacked a Diligence, sometimes it was a post-chaise, sometimes a grazier on horseback. We took the money, we let the horses go, and buried the bodies under a tree, taking care that their feet did not appear; and then we danced on the graves, so that the ground might not seem fresh broken.

I grew old this way, hiding in the ,bushes, sleeping in the air, hunted from wood to wood, but at least free and my own master. Everything has an end, and this like the rest; the gendarmes one night caught us at our tricks; my comrades escaped; but I, the oldest, remained under the claw of these cats in cocked hats. They brought me here. I had already mounted all the steps of the justice-ladder, except one. Whether I had now taken a handkerchief or a life was all the same for me. There was but one ‘relapse’ to give me, — the executioner. My business has been short: faith, I began to grow old and good for nothing. My father *married the widow* (was hanged); I am going to retire to the Abbey of Mont-à-Regret (the Guillotine); that’s all, comrade!”

I remained stupefied during the recital. He laughed louder than at the beginning, and tried to take my hand. I drew back in horror.

“Friend,” cried he, “you don’t seem game. Don’t be foolish on the scaffold: d’ ye see? There is one bad moment to pass on the board, but that’s so soon done. I should like to be there to show you the step! Faith, I’ve a great mind not to plead, if they will finish me with you to-day. The same Priest will serve us both. You see I’m a good fellow, eh? I say, shall we be friends?”

Again he advanced a step nearer to me.

“Sir,” I answered, repulsing him, “I decline it.”

Fresh bursts of laughter at my answer.

“Ha, ha, ha! Sir, you must be a Marquis.”

I interrupted him, “My friend, I require reflection: leave me in peace.”

The gravity of my tone rendered him instantly thoughtful. He shook his grey and nearly bald head, while he murmured between his teeth, “I understand now, — the Priest!”

After a few minutes’ silence, he said to me, almost timidly, —

“Sir, you are a Marquis; that is all very well; but you have on such a nice great-coat, which will not be of much use to you. The Executioner will take it. Give it to me, and I will sell it for tobacco.”

I took off my great-coat, and gave it to him. He began to clap his hands with childish joy; then looking at my shirt-sleeves, and seeing that I shivered, he added, “You are cold, Sir; put on this; it rains, and you will be wet through; besides, you ought to go decently on the wagon!”

While saying this, he took off his coarse, grey woollen jacket, and put my arms into it, which I allowed him to do unconsciously. I then leaned against the wall, and I cannot describe the effect this man had on me. He was examining the coat which I had given him, and uttered each moment an exclamation of delight. “The pockets are quite new! The collar is not in the least worn! It will bring me at least fifteen francs. What luck! I shall have tobacco during all my six weeks.”

The door opened again. They were come to conduct me to the room where the condemned finally await their execution; and the guard was also come to take the other prisoner to the Bicêtre. He placed himself, laughingly, amongst them, and said to the gendarmes, —

“I say, don’t make a mistake! We have changed skins, the gentleman and I; don’t take me in his place. That won’t suit me at all, now that I can have tobacco for six weeks!”

TWENTY-THIRD PAPER

That old scoundrel! he took my great-coat from me, for I did not give it to him; and then he left me this rag, his odious jacket. For whom shall I be taken?

It was not from indifference, or from charity, that I let him take it. No; but because he was stronger than I! If I had refused, he would have beaten me with those great coarse hands. Charity, indeed! I was full of bad feeling; I should like to have strangled him with my own hands, the old thief! — to have trampled him under my feet.

I feel my heart full of rage and bitterness, and my nature turned to gall: the approach of violent death renders one wicked.

TWENTY-FOURTH PAPER

They brought me into an empty cell. I asked for a table, a chair, and writing materials. When all these were brought, I asked for a bed. The turnkey eyed me with astonishment, and seemed mentally to say, “What will be the use of it?” However they made up a chaff bed in the corner. But at the same time a gendarme came to install himself in what was called my chamber. Are they afraid that I would strangle myself with the mattress?

TWENTY-FIFTH PAPER

It is ten o’clock.

Oh, my poor little girl! In six hours more thy Father will be dead, — something to be dragged about the tables of lecturing rooms; a head to be cast by one party, a trunk to be dissected by another; then all to be thrown together into a bier, and despatched to the felons’ burial-ground. This is what they are going to do with thy Father; yet none of them hate me, all pity me, and all could save me! They are going to kill me, Mary, to kill me in cold blood, — a ceremonial for the general good. Poor little girl! thy Father, who loved thee so well, thy Father who kissed thy little white neck, who passed his hands so fondly through the ringlets of thy silken hair, who danced thee on his knee, and every evening joined thy two little hands to pray to God!

Who will do all this for thee in future? Who now will love thee? My darling child, what wilt thou do for my presents, pretty play things, and kisses? Ah, unfortunate Orphan! What wilt thou do for food and raiment?

If the Jury had seen thee, my pretty little Mary, they would have understood it was wrong to kill the Father of a child three years old.

And when she grows up, what will become of her? Her Father will be one of the disgraces of Paris. She will blush for me and at hearing my name; she will be despised, rejected, reviled, on account of him who loved her with all the tenderness of his heart. Oh, my little Mary, whom I so idolized! can it be true that thou wilt encounter shame and horror through me?

Oh! can it be true that I shall die before the close of day? Those distant shouts which I hear, that mass of animated spectators who are already hastening to the Quays, those gendarmes preparing in their barracks, — is it all for me? Yes, I — myself am going to die? — this actual self which is here, which lives, moves, breathes, — this self which I touch and can feel!

TWENTY-SIXTH PAPER

If I even knew how it is built, and in what way one dies upon it; but it is horrible I do not know this.

The very name of it is frightful, and I cannot understand how I have hitherto been able to write and utter it. The idea I attach to this hateful name is vague, undefined, and therefore more sinister. I construct and demolish in my mind continually its hideous scaffolding.

I dare not ask a question about it; yet it is dreadful not to know what it is, and how to act. I fancy there is a sort of hollow, and that you are laid on your face, and —

Ah, my hair will be white before my head falls!

TWENTY-SEVENTH PAPER

I had a glimpse of *it* once. I was passing by the Grève in a carriage, about eleven o’clock, one morning, when a crowd impeded our progress. I looked out of the window; a dense throng of men, women, and children filled the place and the neighbouring streets. Above the crowd I saw a kind of frame of red wood, which three men were building. I turned away my head with disgust. Close to the carriage there was a woman who said to a child, “Now, look! the axe slides badly; they are going to grease the slide with a candle-end.”

They are probably doing the same now. Eleven o’clock has just struck. No doubt they are greasing the slide.

Oh, unhappy creature! this time l shall not turn away, my head.

TWENTY-EIGHTH PAPER

Oh for a pardon! My reprieve! Perhaps I shall be pardoned. The King has no dislike to me. I wish to see my lawyer! He was right, and I should prefer the galleys. Five years of the galleys, — nay, twenty years, or even the galleys for life. Yes, and to be branded with letters! But it would let me have a reprieve of my life! A galley-slave can move, come and go, and see the sunshine.

Oh! I must see my lawyer; he shall discover some new plea to urge in mitigation of my sentence.

How can I thus write when every point of his eloquence has already failed, and been unanswerably refuted!

TWENTY-NINTH PAPER

The Priest returned, he has white hair, a very gentle look, a good and respectable countenance, and is a charitable man. This morning I saw him empty his purse into the hands of the prisoners. Whence is it then that his voice causes no emotion, and he does not ever seem affected by his own theme? Whence is it that he had as yet said nothing which has won on my intellect or my heart?

This morning I was bewildered; I scarcely heard what he said; his words seemed to me useless, and I remained indifferent; they glided away like those drops of rain off the window-panes of my cell.

Nevertheless, when he came just now to my room, his appearance did me good. Amongst all mankind he is the only one who is still a brother for me, I reflected; and I felt an ardent thirst for good and consoling words.

When he was seated on the chair, and I on the bed, he said to me,-”My son,—”

This word opened my heart. He continued:

“My son, do you believe in God?”

“Oh, yes, Father!” I answered him.

“Do you believe in the holy Catholic, Apostolic, and Roman Church?”

“Willingly,” said I.

“My son,” returned he “you have an air of doubt.”

Then he began to speak. He spoke a long time; he uttered a quantity of words. Then, when he had finished, he rose, and looked at me for the first time since the beginning of his discourse, and said “Well?”

I protest I had listened to him with avidity at first, then with attention, then with consideration.

I also rose and said, “Sir, leave me for a time, I beg of you.”

He asked. “When shall I return?”

“I will let you know, Sir.”

Then he withdrew in silence, but shaking his head as though inwardly exclaiming, “An Unbeliever.”

No! low as I have fallen, I am not an unbeliever. God is my witness that I believe in Him. But how did that old man address me? Nothing to be felt, nothing to affect me, nothing to draw forth tears, nothing which sprung from his heart to enter into mine, — nothing which was addressed from himself to myself.

On the contrary, there was something vague, inaccentuated, applicable to any case and to none in particular: emphatic where it should have been profound, flat where it ought to have been simple; a species of sentimental sermon and theological elegy. Now and then a quotation in Latin; here and there the names of Saint Augustine and Saint Gregory, and others of the Calendar. And throughout he had the air of reciting a lesson which he had already twenty times repeated; seeming to go over a theme almost obliterated in his memory from being so long known; but not one look in his eyes, not one accent in his voice, to indicate that *he* was interested!

And how could it be otherwise? This Priest is the head Chaplain of the Prison; his calling is to console and exhort, — that is, he lives by it. Condemned felons are the spring of his eloquence; he receives their confession, and prays with them, because he keeps his place by it. He had advanced in years in conducting men to death from his youth, he has grown accustomed to that which makes others shudder. The dungeon and scaffold are every-day matters with him.

He receives notice the preceding evening that he will have to attend some one the following day, at a certain hour. He asks, “Is it for the Galleys or an execution?” and he asks no more respecting them, but comes next day as a matter of course.

Oh that they would bring me, instead o! this man, some young curate, some aged Priest, taken by chance from the nearest parish! Let them find him at his devotional studies, and without warning, say to him, “There is a man who is going to die, and it is reserved for you to console him. You must be there when they bind his hands; you must take a place in the fatal cart, with your crucifix, and conceal the executioner from him. You must pass with him through that horrible crowd which is thirsting for his execution; you must embrace him at the foot of the scaffold, and you must remain there until his soul has flown!”

When they have said this, let them bring him hither, agitated, palpitating, all shuddering from head to foot. Let me throw myself into his arms; then kneel at his feet, and he will weep, and we will weep together; and he will be eloquent, and I shall be consoled, and my heart will unburthen itself into his heart, — and I shall receive the blessed hope of Redemption, and he will *take my Soul!*

THIRTIETH PAPER

But that old man, what is he to me? What am I to him? Another individual of an unhappy class, a shadow of which he has seen so many; another unit to add to his list of executions.

I have been wrong, perhaps, not to attend to him more; it is he who is good, while I am the reverse. Alas! it was not my fault. The thought of my violent death has spoiled and hardened all within me.

They have just brought me food, as if I could possibly wish for it! I even tried to eat, but the first mouthful fell untasted from my lips.

THIRTY-FIRST PAPER

Since then a strange circumstance happened. They came to relieve my good old gendarme, with whom, ungrateful egotist that I am, I did not even shake hands. Another took his place; a man with a low forehead, heavy features, and stupid contenance. Beyond this I paid no attention, but seated myself at the table, my forehead resting on my hands, and my mind troubled by thought. A light touch on my shoulder made me look round. It was the new gendarme, with whom I was alone, and who addressed me pretty nearly in these terms: —

"Criminal, have you a kind heart?" "No!" answered I, impatiently. The abruptness of my answer seemed to disconcert him. Nevertheless, he began again, hesitatingly, —

"People are not wicked for the pleasure of being so?"

"Why not?" answered I. "If you have nothing but that to say to me, leave me in peace. What is your aim?"

"I beg your pardon, Criminal," he returned; "I will only say two words, which are these: If you could cause the happiness of a poor man, and that it cost you nothing, would you not do so?"

I answered gravely, "Surely, you cannot allude to me as having power to confer happiness?"

He lowered his voice and assumed a mysterious air, which ill-suited with his idiotic countenance.

"Yes, Criminal, yes, — happiness! fortune!" whispered he; "all this can come to me through you. Listen here, I am a poor gendarme; the service is heavy, the pay is light; my horse is my own, and ruins me. So I put into the lottery as a counterbalance. Hitherto I have only missed by not having the right numbers. I am always very near them. If I buy seventy-six, number seventy-seven comes up a prize. Have a little patience, if you please; I have almost done. Well, here is a lucky opportunity for me. It appears, Criminal, begging your pardon, that you are to be executed to-day. It is a certain fact that the dead who are destroyed that way see the lottery before it is drawn on earth. Promise that your spirit shall appear to me tomorrow evening, to give me three numbers, — three good ones, eh? What trouble will it be to you? and I am not afraid of ghosts. Be easy on that point. Here's my address: Popincourt Barracks, staircase A, No. 26, at the end of the corridor.

You will know me again, won’t you? Come even to-night, if it suits you better.”

I would have disdained to reply to such an imbecile, if a mad hope had not crossed my mind. In my desperate position there are moments when one fancies that a chain may be broken by a hair.

“Listen,” said I to him, acting my part as well as a dying wretch could. “I can indeed render thee richer than the King. I can make thee gain millions, on one condition.”

He opened his stupid eyes.

“What, what? I will do anything to please you, Criminal.”

“Then instead of three numbers I promise to tell you four. Change coats with me.”

“Oh, is that all?” cried he, undoing the first hooks of his uniform cheerfully.

I rose from my chair; I watched all his movements with a beating heart. I already fancied the doors opening before the uniform of a gendarme; and then the prison — the street — the town — left far behind me! But suddenly he turned round with indecision, and asked, —

“I say, — it is not to go out of this?”

I saw that all was lost; nevertheless, I tried one last effort, useless as it was foolish.

“Yes, it is,” said I to him; “but as thy fortune will be made—”

He interrupted me.

“Oh, law, no! on account of my numbers! To make them good, you must be dead, you know!”

I sat down again, silent, and more desponding, from all the hope that I had conceived.

THIRTY-SECOND PAPER

I shut my eyes, covered them with my hands, and sought to forget the present in the past. In a rapid reverie, the recollections of childhood and youth came back one by one, soft, calm, smiling, like islands of flowers on the black gulf of confused thoughts which whirled through my brain.

I was again a child, — a laughing, healthy schoolboy, playing, running, shouting with my brothers, in the broad green walks of the old garden where my first years were passed.

And then, four years later, behold me there again, still a child, but a passionate dreamer. And there is a young girl in the garden, — a little Spaniard, with large eyes and long hair, her dark polished skin, her rosy lips and cheeks, the Andalusian of fourteen, named *Pepa*. Our mothers had told us to “go and run together;” we had talked instead. 0nly the year before, we used to play and quarrel and dispute together. I tyrannized over Pepita for the best apple in the orchard; I beat her for a bird’s nest. She cried; I scolded her, and we went to complain of each other to our mothers. But now — she was leaning on my arm, and I felt proud and softened. We walked slowly, and we spoke low. I gathered for her some flowers, and our hands trembled on meeting. She spoke to me of the birds, of the sky above us, of the crimson sunset behind the trees; or else of her school-fellows, her gown and ribbons. We talked in innocence, but we both blushed. The child had grown into a young girl. After we had walked for some time, I made her sit down on a bank; she was smiling. I was serious.

“Sit down there,” said she, “there is still daylight; let us read something. Have you a book?”

I happened to have a favourite volume with me. I drew near her, and opened it by chance. She leaned her shoulder against mine, and we began to read the same page. Before turning the leaf, she was always obliged to wait for me. My mind was less quick than hers. “Have you finished?” she would ask, when I had only just commenced. ‘then our heads leaned together, our hair mixed, our breath gradually mingled, and at last our lips met.

When we again thought of continuing our reading it was starlight. I shall remember that evening all my life!

Oh, heaven! All *my* life!

THIRTY-THIRD PAPER

The clock had just struck some hour, — I do not know which. I do not hear the strokes plainly. I seem to have the peal of an organ in’ my ears. It is the confusion of my last thoughts. At this final day, when I look back over the events of life, I recall my crime with horror; but I wish to have still longer to repent of it. I felt more remorse after my condemnation; since then it: seems as if there were no space but for thoughts of death. But now, oh, how I wish to repent me thoroughly! When I had lingered for a minute on what had passed in my life, and then came back to the thought of its approaching termination, I shuddered as at something new. My happy childhood, my fair youth, — a golden web with its end stained. If any read my history, after so many years of innocence and happiness, they will not believe in this execrable year, which began by a crime, and will close by an execution. It would appear impossible.

And nevertheless, oh, — imperfection of human laws and human nature!-I was not ill-disposed.

THIRTY-FOURTH PAPER

Oh! to die in a few hours, and to think that a year ago, on the same day, I was innocent and at liberty, enjoying autumnal walks, wandering beneath the trees! To think that in this same moment there are in the houses around me, men coming and going, laughing and talking, reading newspapers, thinking of business; shopkeepers selling their wares, young girls preparing their ball-dresses for the evening; mothers playing with their children!

THIRTY-FIFTH PAPER

I remember once, when a child, going alone to see the belfry of Nôtre-Dame. I was already giddy from having ascended the dark winding staircase, from having crossed the slight open gallery which unites the two towers, and from having seen Paris beneath my feet; and I entered the cage of stone and woodwork where the great bell is hung. I advanced with trembling steps over the ill-joined planks, examining at a distance that bell, so famous amongst the children and common people in Paris; and it was not without terror that I observed the slated pent-houses, which surrounded the belfry with inclined planes, were just on a level with my feet. Through the openings I saw, in a bird’s-eye view, the street beneath, and the passengers diminished to the size of ants.

Suddenly the enormous bell resounded; its deep vibration shook the air, making the heavy tower rock, and the flooring start from the beams. The noise had nearly upset me. I tottered, ready to fall, and seemed on the point of slipping over the pent-houses. In an agony of terror I lay down on the planks, pressing them closely with both my arms, — speechless, breathless, with this formidable sound in my ears, while beneath my eyes was the precipice, a profound abyss, where so many quiet and envied passengers were walking.

Well, it appears to me as if I were again in that belfry; my senses seem again giddy and dazzled; the booming of that bell seems to press on my brain, and around me I no longer see that tranquil and even life which I had quitted (where other men walk still) except from a distance, and beyond a terrible abyss.

THIRTY-SIXTH PAPER

It is a quarter past one o’clock. The following are my sensations at present: a violent pain in my head, my frame chilled, my forehead burning. Every time that I rise, or bend forward, it seems to me that there is a fluid floating in my head, which makes my brain beat violently against the bone.

I have convulsive startings, and from time to time my pen falls from my hand as if by a galvanic shock. My eyes ache and burn, and I suffer greatly in all my limbs.

In two hours and three-quarters hence, *all will be cured.*

THIRTY-SEVENTH PAPER

They say that it is nothing, — that one does not suffer; that it is an easy death. Ah! then, what do they call this agony of six weeks, — this summing-up in one day? What, then, is the anguish of this irreparable day, which is passing so slowly and yet so fast? What is this ladder of tortures which terminates in the scaffold? Are they not the same convulsions whether life is taken away drop by drop, or intellect extinguished thought by thought?

THIRTY-EIGHTH PAPER

It is singular that my mind so often reverts to the King. Whatever I do, there is a voice within me which says, —

"There is, in this same town, at this same hour, and not far from hence, in another Palace, a man who also has guards to all his gates; a man alone, like thee, in the crowd, — with this difference, that he is as high as thou art low. His entire life is glory, grandeur, delight. All around him is love, respect, veneration; the loudest voices become low in speaking to him, and the proudest heads are bent. At this moment he is holding a Council of Ministers, where all coincide with his opinions; or else he thinks of the Chase to-morrow, or the Ball for this evening, feeling certain that the Fête will come, and leaving to others the trouble of his pleasures.

"Well, this man is of flesh and blood like thee! And in order that at this instant the scaffold Should fall, and thou be restored to life, liberty, fortune, family, it would only be requisite for him to write his name at the foot of a piece of paper; or even that his carriage should meet thy fatal cart! And he is good, too, and perhaps would be glad to do it; and yet it will not be done!"

THIRTY-NINTH PAPER

Well then, let me have courage with death, — let me handle this horrid idea, let me face it boldly. I will ask what it is, know what it demands, turn it in every sense, fathom the enigma, and look before-hand into the tomb.

*****

I have speculated upon Death and Eternity until my mind seems bewildered by its own horrible fantasies. My ideas wander. Oh, for a Priest, — a Priest who could instruct met I must have a Priest, and a crucifix to embrace. Alas! here is the same Priest again!

FORTIETH PAPER

After a time, I begged of him to let me sleep. I threw myself on the bed. I had a fulness of blood in my head which made me sleep, — my last sleep on earth. I had a horrible dream, from which I awoke in terror, shuddering and in agony.

The Chaplain was seated at the foot of my bed, reading prayers.

“Have I slept long?” I inquired of him.

“My son,” said he, “you have slept an hour. They have brought your child, who is waiting in the next room; I would not allow them to awaken you.”

“Oh,” cried I, “my darling child! Let them bring in my idolized child!”

FORTY-FIRST PAPER

My child looked rosy and happy, and her large eyes were bright. Oh, she is so pretty! I drew her towards me; I raised her in my arms, and placing her on my knees, kissed her dear hair. I asked, “Why is her Mother not with her?” And I learnt that she was very ill, and my poor old mother also.

Mary looked at me with astonishment. Caressed, embraced, devoured with kisses, she submitted quietly; but, from time to time, cast an uneasy look towards her Nurse, who was crying in the corner.

At length I was able to speak. “Mary,” I exclaimed. “My own little Mary!” and I pressed her violently against my breast, which was heaving with sobs. She uttered a little cry, and then said, “Oh, you hurt me, sir.”

“Sir!” It is nearly a year since she has seen me, poor child! She has forgotten me, face, words, voice; and then who could know me with this beard, this dress, and this pallor?

What! already effaced from that memory, — the only one where I wished to survive! What! already, no longer a Father, am I condemned to hear no more that word, so soft in the language of children that it cannot remain in the language of men, “Papa?”

And yet to have heard it from that sweet mouth, once more, — only once more, — that is all that I would have asked in payment for the forty years of life they will take from me.

“Listen, Mary,” said I to her; joining her two little hands in mine. “Do you not know me?”

She looked at me with her bright beautiful eyes and answered,-”Oh, no, indeed.”

“Look at me well,” I repeated. “What! dost thou not know who I am?”

“Yes, sir,” she answered. “You are a gentleman.”

Alas! while loving one being on earth, loving with all your deep affection, having that being before you, who sees and looks at you, speaks and answers you, and yet knows you not! You wish for consolation but from this one being, who is the only one that does not know that you require it because you are going to die

“Mary,” I continued, “hast thou a papa?”

“Yes, sir,” said the child.

“Well, then, dearest, where is he?”

She raised her large eyes in astonishment: —

‘‘Ah, then you don’t know, sir? Papa is dead.”

Here she began to cry: I nearly let the little angel fall

“Dead!” I exclaimed: “Mary, knowest thou what it is to be dead?”

“Yes, sir,” she answered. “He is in earth and in Heaven;” and she continued of her own accord, “I pray to God for him morning and evening at mamma’s knees.”

I kissed her on her forehead. “Mary, say to me thy prayer.”

“I could not, sir; a prayer you do not say in the middle of the day. Come to-night to my house, and you shall hear me say it.”

This was enough. I interrupted her.

“Darling Mary, it is I who am thy papa.”

“You!” returned she.

I added, “Wouldst thou like me for thy papa?”

The child turned away. “No, sir; my papa was much prettier.”

I covered her with kisses and tears. She tried to escape from my arms, crying, —

“Sir, you hurt me with your beard.” Then I replaced her on my knees, devouring her with my eyes, and continued, —

“Mary, canst thou read?”

“Yes,” she answered, “I can read very well. Mamma makes me read my letters.”

“Well, then, read a little to me,” said I, pointing to a printed paper which she held crumpled in one of her dimpled hands.

She shook her pretty head, saying, —

“Oh, dear me! I can only read fables.”

“But try, my darling. Come, open your paper.”

She unfolded the paper, and began to spell with her finger, “S E N — sen, — TENCE — tence, — *Sentence.*” I snatched it from her hands. It was my own sentence of death she was reading to me!

Her nurse had bought the paper for a penny. To me it had cost more.

No words can convey what I felt; my violence had alarmed the child, who was ready to cry.

Suddenly she said to me, —

“Do give me back my paper; I want to play with it!”

I restored her to her nurse.

“Take her hence!” and I fell back in my chair, gloomy, desolate, in despair! Now they may come: I care for nothing more; the last fibre of my heart is broken,

FORTY-SECOND PAPER

The Priest is kind; so is the jailor: tears came in their eyes when I sent away my child.

It is done. Now I must fortify myself, and think firmly of the Executioner, the cart, the gendarmes, the crowd in the street and the windows.

I have still an hour to familiarize myself with these ideas. All the people will laugh and clap their hands, and applaud; yet among those men, now free, unknown to jailors, and who run with joy to an execution, — in that throng there is more than one man destined to follow me sooner or later, on the scaffold.

More than one who is here to-day on my account, will come hereafter on his own.

FORTY-THIRD PAPER

My little Mary. She is gone away to play; she will look at the crowd from the coach window, and already she thinks no more of the “Gentleman.” Perhaps I may still have time to write a few pages for her, so that she may read them hereafter, and weep, in fifteen years hence, the sorrows of to-day. Yes, she shall know my history from myself, and why the name I leave her is tarnished.

FORTY-FOURTH PAPER

MY HISTORY

[NOTE. The pages which immediately followed this have not been found. Perhaps, as the next chapter seems to indicate, the Condemned had not time to write his history, as it was so late when he thought of it.]

FORTY-FIFTH PAPER

From a Chamber of the Town Hall.

The Town Hall. Yes, I am here; the execrable journey is over. The place of execution is before me, and beneath the window, a horrible throng, laughing and yelling, while they await my appearance. My efforts at composure were vain; when above the heads of the crowd I saw the frightful scaffold, my heart failed. I expressed a wish to make my last declaration; so they brought me in here, and have sent for some law-officer to receive it. I am now waiting for him; so there is thus much gained. Here is what occurred, on my removal from the Conciergerie.

At three o'clock they came to tell me it was time. I trembled as if I had thought of any thing else during the last six hours, six weeks, six months. It produced on me the effect of something quite unexpected. They made me cross corridors, and descend stairs, they pushed me through a low door into a sombre room, narrow, arched, and scarcely lighted by a day of rain and fog. A chair was in the centre, on which I seated myself at their desire. Some persons were standing near the door; and beside the Priest and gendarmes, there were three men. The first of these, the tallest and oldest, was stout, with a red countenance. This was HE.

This was the Executioner, — the servant of the Guillotine; the others were his own servants. When I was seated, these walked quietly behind me; then suddenly I felt the cold of steel in my hair, and heard the grating action of scissors. My hair, cut carelessly, fell in heavy locks on my shoulders, and the executioner removed them gently with his coarse hand.

The parties in the room spoke in subdued tones. There was a heavy dull sound from without, which I fancied at first was caused by the river; but a shout of laughter soon proved to me it came from the crowd.

A young man near the window, who was writing with a pencil, in his pocketbook, asked one of the turnkeys, what was the name of the present operation? He was answered "The Toilet of the Condemned." From this I gathered that he was preparing the Report for to-morrow's newspaper. One of the servants then removed my waistcoat, and the other one taking my hands, placed them behind me, and I felt the knots of a cord rolled slowly round my wrists; at the same time the other took off my cravat. My linen, — the only remains of former times, — being of the finest quality, caused him a sort of hesitation for a moment; but at length he began to cut off the collar.

At this dreadful precaution, and the sensation of the steel touching my neck, a tremor passed over me, and a stifled groan escaped; the man’s hand trembled.

“Sir,” said he, “I beg your pardon; I fear I’ve hurt you.”

The people shouted louder in the street. A tall red-faced man offered a handkerchief, steeped in vinegar, for me to inhale.

“Thank you,” said I to him, in the firmest tone I could summon, “it is needless; I am recovered.”

Then one man stooped down and fastened a small cord to my ankles, which restricted my steps; and this was again tied to the cord around my wrists; finally, the tall man threw my jacket over my shoulders, and tied the sleeves in front. All was now completed.

Then the Priest drew near with his Crucifix.

“Come, my son,” said he.

The man raised me by my arms; and I walked, but my steps were weak and tottering. At this moment the folding doors were thrown open. A furious clamour, a chill breeze, and a strong white light reached me in the shade. From the extreme of the dark chamber I saw through the rain a thousand yelling heads of the expectant mass. On the right of the doorway, a range of mounted gendarmes; in front, a detachment of soldiers; on the left, the back of the cart, with a ladder. A hideous picture, with the appropriate frame of a prison-door.

It was for this dream moment that I had reserved my courage. I advanced a few steps, and appeared on the threshold.

“There he is! there he is!” bellowed the crowd. “He’s come out at last!” and the nearest to me clapped their hands. Much as a king might be loved, there could not be more greeting for him.

The tall man first ascended the cart. “Good morning, *Mr. Sampson!*” cried the children hanging by the lamp-posts. One of his servants next followed. “*Bravo, Tuesday!* cried out the children, as the two placed themselves on the front seat.

It was now my turn, and I mounted with a firm step.

“He goes well to it!” said a woman beside the gendarmes.

This atrocious commendation gave me courage. The Priest took his seat beside me. They had placed me on the hindmost seat, my back towards the house. I shuddered at that last attention. There is a mixture of humanity in it.

I wished to look around me, — gendarmes before and behind: then crowd! crowd! crowd! A sea of heads in the street. The officer gave the word, and the procession moved on, as if pushed forward by a yell from the populace.

“Hats off! hats off!” cried a thousand voices together, as if for the King. Then I laughed horribly also myself, and said to the Priest, “Their hats-my head.”

We passed a street which was full of public-houses, in which the windows were filled with spectators, seeming to enjoy their good places, particularly the women.

There were also people letting out tables, chairs, and carts; and these dealers in human life shouted out, “Who wishes for places?”

A strange rage seized me against these wretches, and I longed to shout out to them, “Do you wish for mine?”

The procession still advanced. At each step the crowd in the rear dispersed; and I saw, with my wandering eyes, that they collected again farther on, to have another view. I know not how it was, that notwithstanding the fog and the small white rain which crossed the air like gossamer, nothing which passed around escaped me; every detail brought its torture; words fail to convey my emotions. My great dread was lest I should faint. Last vanity! Then I endeavoured to confuse myself into being blind and deaf to all, except to the Priest, whose words I scarcely heard amidst the tumult. I took the Crucifix and kissed it.

“Have mercy on me,” said I. “O my God!”

And I strove to engross myself with this thought.

But every shake of the cart disturbed me; and then I became excessively chilled, as the rain had penetrated my clothes, and my head was bare.

“Are you trembling with cold, my son?” demanded the Priest.

“Yes,” answered I. “Alas! not only from cold.”

At the turn to the Bridge, the women expressed pity at my being so young. We approached the fatal Quay. My hearing and sight seemed about to fail me. All those voices, all those heads at the windows, at doors, at shop fronts, on lamp-posts; these thirsting and cruel spectators; this crowd where all knew me, and I knew none; this road paved and welled with human visages, — I was confounded, stupefied, senseless. There is something insupportable in the weight of so many looks being fixed upon one. I could scarcely maintain my place on the seat, and lent no further attention to the Priest. In the tumult which surrounded me, I no longer distinguished exclamations of pity from those of satisfaction, or the sounds of laughter from those of complaint. All formed together a noise in my ears like sounding brass.

My eyes read mechanically the signs over the shops.

Once I felt a painful curiosity to look round on that which we were approaching.

It was the last mental bravado, and the body would not aid it; for my neck remained paralyzed, and I could not turn it.

And the cart went on, on. The shops passed away; the signs succeeded each other, — written, painted, gilt; and the populace laughed while they tramped through the mud; and I yielded my mind, as persons do in sleeping. Suddenly this series of shops ended as we turned into the square; the voice of the mob became still more loud, yelling and joyous; the cart stopped suddenly, and I had nearly fallen on my face. The Priest held me up.

“Courage!” murmured he.

They next brought a ladder to th6 back of my cart. I leaned on the arm of the Priest and descended. I made one step, and turned round to advance another, but I had not the power; beyond the lamp I saw something startling....

Oh, it was THE REALITY!

I stopped as if staggered by a blow.

“I have a last declaration to make,” cried I, feebly.

And then they brought me up here. I asked them to let me write my last wishes; and they unbound my hands; but the cord is here, ready to be replaced.

FORTY-SIXTH PAPER

A Judge, a Commissioner, a Magistrate, — I know not what was his rank, — has just been here.

I intreated him to procure my pardon; I begged it with clasped hands, and dragging myself on my knees at his feet.

He asked, with a fatal smile, if that were all I had to say to him?

“My pardon, my pardon!” I repeated. “Oh, for mercy’s sake, five minutes more! Who knows, my pardon may come. It is so horrible at my age to die in this manner. Reprieves have frequently arrived even at the last moment! And to whom would they show mercy, sir, if not to me?”

That detestable Executioner! He came in to tell the Judge that the execution was ordered for a certain hour, which hour was at hand, and that he was answerable for the event.

“Oh, for mercy’s sake! Five minutes to wait for my pardon,” cried I, “or I will defend myself!”

The Judge and the Executioner went out. I am alone, — at least with only two gendarmes present.

That horrible throng, with its hyena cry! Who knows but that I shall escape from it, that I shall be saved? If my pardon, — it is impossible but that they will pardon me! Hark! I hear some one coming upstairs!

FOUR O’CLOCK.

LE DERNIER JOUR D’UN CONDAMNE

TABLE DES MATIERES

Préface de 1832
UNE COMÉDIE A PROPOS D’UNE TRAGÉDIE
PERSONNAGES
LE DERNIER JOUR D’UN CONDAMNÉ
II
III
IV
V
VI
VII
VIII
IX
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XI
XII
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Préface de 1832

Il n’y avait en tête des premières éditions de cet ouvrage, publié d’abord sans nom d’auteur, que les quelques lignes qu’on va lire:

“Il y a deux manières de se rendre compte de l’existence de ce livre. Ou il y a eu, en effet, une liasse de papiers jaunes et inégaux sur lesquels on a trouvé, enregistrées une à une, les dernières pensées d’un misérable; ou il s’est rencontré un homme, un rêveur occupé à observer la nature au profit de l’art, un philosophe, un poète, que sais-je? dont cette idée a été la fantaisie, qui l’a prise ou plutôt s’est laissé prendre par elle, et n’a pu s’en débarrasser qu’en la jetant dans un livre.”

“De ces deux explications, le lecteur choisira celle qu’il voudra.”

Comme on le voit, à l’époque où ce livre fut publié, l’auteur ne jugea pas à propos de dire dès lors toute sa pensée. Il aima mieux attendre qu’elle fût comprise et voir si elle le serait. Elle l’a été. L’auteur aujourd’hui peut démasquer l’idée politique, l’idée sociale, qu’il avait voulu populariser sous cette innocente et candide forme littéraire. Il déclare donc, ou plutôt il avoue hautement que Le Dernier Jour d’un Condamné n’est autre chose qu’un plaidoyer, direct ou indirect, comme on voudra, pour l’abolition de la peine de mort. Ce qu’il a eu dessein de faire, ce qu’il voudrait que la postérité vît dans son oeuvre, si jamais elle s’occupe de si peu, ce n’est pas la défense spéciale, et toujours facile, et toujours transitoire, de tel ou tel criminel choisi, de tel ou tel accusé d’élection; c’est la plaidoirie générale et permanente pour tous les accusés présents et à venir; c’est le grand point de droit de l’humanité allégué et plaidé à toute voix devant la société, qui est la grande cour de cassation; c’est cette suprême fin de non-recevoir, abhorrescere a sanguine, construite à tout jamais en avant de tous les procès criminels; c’est la sombre et fatale question qui palpite obscurément au fond de toutes les causes capitales sous les triples épaisseurs de pathos dont l’enveloppe la rhétorique sanglante des gens du roi; c’est la question de vie et de mort, dis-je, déshabillée, dénudée, dépouillée des entortillages sonores du parquet, brutalement mise au jour, et posée où il faut qu’on la voie, où il faut qu’elle soit, où elle est réellement, dans son vrai milieu, dans son milieu horrible, non au tribunal, mais à l’échafaud, non chez le juge, mais chez le bourreau.

Voilà ce qu'il a voulu faire. Si l'avenir lui décernait un jour la gloire de l'avoir fait, ce qu'il n'ose espérer, il ne voudrait pas d'autre couronne.

Il le déclare donc, et il le répète, il occupe, au nom de tous les accusés possibles, innocents ou coupables, devant toutes les cours, tous les prétoires, tous les jurys, toutes les justices. Ce livre est adressé à quiconque juge. Et pour que le plaidoyer soit aussi vaste que la cause, il a dû, et c'est pour cela que Le Dernier Jour d'un Condamné est ainsi fait, élaguer de toutes parts dans son sujet le contingent, l'accident, le particulier, le spécial, le relatif, le modifiable, l'épisode, l'anecdote, l'événement, le nom propre, et se borner (si c'est là se borner) à plaider la cause d'un condamné quelconque, exécuté un jour quelconque, pour un crime quelconque. Heureux si, sans autre outil que sa pensée, il a fouillé assez avant pour faire saigner un coeur sous l'oes triplex du magistrat! heureux s'il a rendu pitoyables ceux qui se croient justes! heureux si, à force de creuser dans le juge, il a réussi quelquefois à y retrouver un homme!

Il y a trois ans, quand ce livre parut, quelques personnes imaginèrent que cela valait la peine d'en contester l'idée à l'auteur. Les uns supposèrent un livre anglais, les autres un livre américain. Singulière manie de chercher à mille lieues les origines des choses, et de faire couler des sources du Nil le ruisseau qui lave votre rue! Hélas! il n'y a en ceci ni livre anglais, ni livre américain, ni livre chinois. L'auteur a pris l'idée du Dernier Jour d'un Condamné, non dans un livre, il n'a pas l'habitude d'aller chercher ses idées si loin, mais là où vous pouviez tous la prendre, où vous l'aviez prise peut-être (car qui n'a fait ou rêvé dans son esprit Le Dernier Jour d'un Condamné?), tout bonnement sur la place publique, sur la place de Grève.

C'est là qu'un jour en passant il a ramassé cette idée fatale, gisante dans une mare de sang sous les rouges moignons de la guillotine.

Depuis, chaque fois qu'au gré des funèbres jeudis de la cour de cassation, il arrivait un de ces jours où le cri d'un arrêt de mort se fait dans Paris, chaque fois que l'auteur entendait passer sous ses fenêtres ces hurlements enroués qui ameutent des spectateurs pour la Grève, chaque fois, la douloureuse idée lui revenait, s'emparait de lui, lui emplissait la tête de gendarmes, de bourreaux et de foule, lui expliquait heure par heure les dernières souffrances du misérable agonisant, — en ce moment on le confesse, en ce moment on lui coupe les cheveux, en ce moment on lui lie les mains, — le sommait, lui pauvre poète, de dire tout cela à la société, qui fait ses affaires pendant que cette chose monstrueuse s'accomplit, le pressait, le poussait, le secouait, lui arrachait ses vers de l'esprit, s'il était en train d'en faire, et les tuait à peine ébauchés, barrait tous ses travaux, se mettait en travers de tout, l'investissait, l'obsédait, l'assiégeait. C'était un supplice, un supplice qui commençait avec le jour, et qui durait, comme celui du misérable qu'on torturait au même moment, jusqu'à quatre heures. Alors seulement, une fois le ponens caput expiravit crié par la voix sinistre de l'horloge, l'auteur respirait et retrouvait quelque liberté d'esprit. Un jour enfin, c'était, à ce qu'il croit, le lendemain de l'exécution d'Ulbach, il se mit à écrire ce livre. Depuis lors il a été soulagé. Quand un de ces crimes publics, qu'on nomme exécutions judiciaires, a été commis, sa conscience lui a dit qu'il n'en était plus solidaire; et il n'a plus senti à son front cette goutte de sang qui rejaillit de la Grève sur la tête de tous les membres de la communauté sociale.

Toutefois, cela ne suffit pas. Se laver les mains est bien, empêcher le sang de couler serait mieux.

Aussi ne connaîtrait-il pas de but plus élevé, plus saint, plus auguste que celui-là: concourir à l'abolition de la peine de mort. Aussi est-ce du fond du coeur qu'il adhère aux voeux et aux efforts des hommes généreux de toutes les nations qui travaillent depuis plusieurs années à jeter bas l'arbre patibulaire, le seul arbre que les révolutions ne déracinent pas. C'est avec joie qu'il vient à son tour, lui chétif, donner son coup de cognée, et élargir de son mieux l'entaille que Beccaria a faite, il y a soixante-six ans, au vieux gibet dressé depuis tant de siècles sur la chrétienté.

Nous venons de dire que l'échafaud est le seul édifice que les révolutions ne démolissent pas. Il est rare, en effet, que les révolutions soient sobres de sang humain, et, venues qu'elles sont pour émonder, pour ébrancher, pour étêter la société, la peine de mort est une des serpes dont elles se dessaisissent le plus malaisément.

Nous l'avouerons cependant, si jamais révolution nous parut digne et capable d'abolir la peine de mort, c'est la révolution de juillet. Il semble, en effet, qu'il appartenait au mouvement populaire le plus clément des temps modernes de raturer la pénalité barbare de Louis XI, de Richelieu et de Robespierre, et d'inscrire au front de la loi l'inviolabilité de la vie humaine. 1830 méritait de briser le couperet de 93.

Nous l'avons espéré un moment. En août 1830, il y avait tant de générosité dans l'air, un tel esprit de douceur et de civilisation flottait dans les masses, on se sentait le coeur si bien épanoui par l'approche d'un bel avenir, qu’il nous sembla que la peine de mort était abolie de droit, d’emblée, d’un consentement tacite et unanime, comme le reste des choses mauvaises qui nous avaient gênés. Le peuple venait de faire un feu de joie des guenilles de l’ancien régime. Celle-là était la guenille sanglante. Nous la crûmes dans le tas. Nous la crûmes brûlée comme les autres. Et pendant quelques semaines, confiant et crédule, nous eûmes foi pour l’avenir à l’inviolabilité de la vie, comme à l’inviolabilité de la liberté.

Et en effet deux mois s’étaient à peine écoulés qu’une tentative fut faite pour résoudre en réalité légale l’utopie sublime de César Bonesana.

Malheureusement, cette tentative fut gauche, maladroite, presque hypocrite, et faite dans un autre intérêt que l’intérêt général.

Au mois d’octobre 1830, on se le rappelle, quelques jours après avoir écarté par l’ordre du jour la proposition d’ensevelir Napoléon sous la colonne, la Chambre tout entière se mit à pleurer et à bramer. La question de la peine de mort fut mise sur le tapis, nous allons dire quelques lignes plus bas à quelle occasion; et alors il sembla que toutes ces entrailles de législateurs étaient prises d’une subite et merveilleuse miséricorde. Ce fut à qui parlerait, à qui gémirait, à qui lèverait les mains au ciel. La peine de mort, grand Dieu! quelle horreur! Tel vieux procureur général, blanchi dans la robe rouge, qui avait mangé toute sa vie le pain trempé de sang des réquisitoires, se composa tout à coup un air piteux et attesta les dieux qu’il était indigné de la guillotine. Pendant deux jours la tribune ne désemplit pas de harangueurs en pleureuses. Ce fut une lamentation, une myriologie, un concert de psaumes lugubres, un Super flumina Babylonis, un Stabat mater dolorosa, une grande symphonie en ut, avec choeurs, exécutée par tout cet orchestre d’orateurs qui garnit les premiers bancs de la Chambre, et rend de si beaux sons dans les grands jours. Tel vint avec sa basse, tel avec son fausset. Rien n’y manqua. La chose fut on ne peut plus pathétique et pitoyable. La séance de nuit surtout fut tendre, paterne et déchirante comme un cinquième acte de Lachaussée. Le bon public, qui n’y comprenait rien, avait les larmes aux yeux. [Note: Nous ne prétendons pas envelopper dans le même dédain tout ce qui a été dit à cette occasion à la Chambre. Il s’est bien prononcé çà et là quelques belles et dignes paroles. Nous avons applaudi, comme tout le monde, au discours grave et simple de M. de Lafayette et, dans une autre nuance, à la remarquable improvisation de M. Villemain.]

De quoi s’agissait-il donc? d’abolir la peine de mort?

Oui et non.

Voici le fait:

Quatre hommes du monde, quatre hommes comme il faut, de ces hommes qu’on a pu rencontrer dans un salon, et avec qui peut-être on a échangé quelques paroles polies; quatre de ces hommes, dis-je, avaient tenté, dans les hautes régions politiques, un de ces coups hardis que Bacon appelle crimes, et que Machiavel appelle entreprises. Or, crime ou entreprise, la loi, brutale pour tous, punit cela de mort. Et les quatre malheureux étaient là, prisonniers, captifs de la loi, gardés par trois cents cocardes tricolores sous les belles ogives de Vincennes. Que faire et comment faire? Vous comprenez qu’il est impossible d’envoyer à la Grève, dans une charrette, ignoblement liés avec de grosses cordes, dos à dos avec ce fonctionnaire qu’il ne faut pas seulement nommer, quatre hommes comme vous et moi, quatre hommes du monde? Encore s’il y avait une guillotine en acajou!

Hé! il n’y a qu’à abolir la peine de mort!

Et là-dessus, la Chambre se met en besogne.

Remarquez, messieurs, qu’hier encore vous traitiez cette abolition d’utopie, de théorie, de rêve, de folie, de poésie. Remarquez que ce n’est pas la première fois qu’on cherche à appeler votre attention sur la charrette, sur les grosses cordes et sur l’horrible machine écarlate, et qu’il est étrange que ce hideux attirail vous saute ainsi aux yeux tout à coup.

Bah! c’est bien de cela qu’il s’agit! Ce n’est pas à cause de vous, peuple, que nous abolissons la peine de mort, mais à cause de nous, députés qui pouvons être ministres. Nous ne voulons pas que la mécanique de Guillotin morde les hautes classes. Nous la brisons. Tant mieux si cela arrange tout le monde, mais nous n’avons songé qu’à nous. Ucalégon brûle. Éteignons le feu. Vite, supprimons le bourreau, biffons le code.

Et c’est ainsi qu’un alliage d’égoïsme altère et dénature les plus belles combinaisons sociales. C’est la veine noire dans le marbre blanc; elle circule partout, et apparaît à tout moment à l’improviste sous le ciseau. Votre statue est à refaire.

Certes, il n’est pas besoin que nous le déclarions ici, nous ne sommes pas de ceux qui réclamaient les têtes des quatre ministres. Une fois ces infortunés arrêtés, la colère indignée que nous avait inspirée leur attentat s’est changée, chez nous comme chez tout le monde, en une profonde pitié. Nous avons songé aux préjugés d’éducation de quelques-uns d’entre eux, au cerveau peu développé de leur chef, relaps fanatique et obstiné des conspirations de 1804, blanchi avant l'âge sous l'ombre humide des prisons d'État, aux nécessités fatales de leur position commune, à l'impossibilité d'enrayer sur cette pente rapide où la monarchie s'était lancée elle-même à toute bride le 8 août 1829, à l'influence trop peu calculée par nous jusqu'alors de la personne royale, surtout à la dignité que l'un d'entre eux répandait comme un manteau de pourpre sur leur malheur. Nous sommes de ceux qui leur souhaitaient bien sincèrement la vie sauve, et qui étaient prêts à se dévouer pour cela. Si jamais, par impossible, leur échafaud eût été dressé un jour en Grève, nous ne doutons pas, et si c'est une illusion nous voulons la conserver, nous ne doutons pas qu'il n'y eût eu une émeute pour le renverser, et celui qui écrit ces lignes eût été de cette sainte émeute. Car, il faut bien le dire aussi, dans les crises sociales, de tous les échafauds, l'échafaud politique est le plus abominable, le plus funeste, le plus vénéneux, le plus nécessaire à extirper. Cette espèce de guillotine-là prend racine dans le pavé, et en peu de temps repousse de bouture sur tous les points du sol.

En temps de révolution, prenez garde à la première tête qui tombe.

Elle met le peuple en appétit.

Nous étions donc personnellement d'accord avec ceux qui voulaient épargner les quatre ministres, et d'accord de toutes manières, par les raisons sentimentales comme par les raisons politiques. Seulement, nous eussions mieux aimé que la Chambre choisît une autre occasion pour proposer l'abolition de la peine de mort.

Si on l'avait proposée, cette souhaitable abolition, non à propos de quatre ministres tombés des Tuileries à Vincennes, mais à propos du premier voleur de grands chemins venu, à propos d'un de ces misérables que vous regardez à peine quand ils passent près de vous dans la rue, auxquels vous ne parlez pas, dont vous évitez instinctivement le coudoiement poudreux; malheureux dont l'enfance déguenillée a couru pieds nus dans la boue des carrefours, grelottant l'hiver au rebord des quais, se chauffant au soupirail des cuisines de M. Véfour chez qui vous dînez, déterrant çà et là une croûte de pain dans un tas d'ordures et l'essuyant avant de la manger, grattant tout le jour le ruisseau avec un clou pour y trouver un liard, n'ayant d'autre amusement que le spectacle gratis de la fête du roi et les exécutions en Grève, cet autre spectacle gratis; pauvres diables, que la faim pousse au vol, et le vol au reste; enfants déshérités d'une société marâtre, que la maison de force prend à douze ans, le bagne à dix-huit, l’échafaud à quarante; infortunés qu’avec une école et un atelier vous auriez pu rendre bons, moraux, utiles, et dont vous ne savez que faire, les versant, comme un fardeau inutile, tantôt dans la rouge fourmilière de Toulon, tantôt dans le muet enclos de Clamart, leur retranchant la vie après leur avoir ôté la liberté; si c’eût été à propos d’un de ces hommes que vous eussiez proposé d’abolir la peine de mort, oh! alors, votre séance eût été vraiment digne, grande, sainte, majestueuse, vénérable. Depuis les augustes pères de Trente invitant les hérétiques au concile au nom des entrailles de Dieu, per viscera Dei, parce qu’on espère leur conversion, quoniam sancta synodus sperat hoereticorum conversionem, jamais assemblée d’hommes n’aurait présenté au monde spectacle plus sublime, plus illustre et plus miséricordieux. Il a toujours appartenu à ceux qui sont vraiment forts et vraiment grands d’avoir souci du faible et du petit. Un conseil de brahmanes serait beau prenant en main la cause du paria. Et ici, la cause du paria, c’était la cause du peuple. En abolissant la peine de mort, à cause de lui et sans attendre que vous fussiez intéressés dans la question, vous faisiez plus qu’une oeuvre politique, vous faisiez une oeuvre sociale.

Tandis que vous n’avez pas même fait une oeuvre politique en essayant de l’abolir, non pour l’abolir, mais pour sauver quatre malheureux ministres pris la main dans le sac des coups d’État!

Qu’est-il arrivé? c’est que, comme vous n’étiez pas sincères, on a été défiant. Quand le peuple a vu qu’on voulait lui donner le change, il s’est fâché contre toute la question en masse, et, chose remarquable! il a pris fait et cause pour cette peine de mort dont il supporte pourtant tout le poids. C’est votre maladresse qui l’a amené là. En abordant la question de biais et sans franchise, vous l’avez compromise pour longtemps. Vous jouiez une comédie. On l’a sifflée.

Cette farce pourtant, quelques esprits avaient eu la bonté de la prendre au sérieux. Immédiatement après la fameuse séance, ordre avait été donné aux procureurs généraux, par un garde des sceaux honnête homme, de suspendre indéfiniment toutes exécutions capitales. C’était en apparence un grand pas. Les adversaires de la peine de mort respirèrent. Mais leur illusion fut de courte durée.

Le procès des ministres fut mené à fin. Je ne sais quel arrêt fut rendu. Les quatre vies furent épargnées. Ham fut choisi comme juste milieu entre la mort et la liberté. Ces divers arrangements une fois faits, toute peur s’évanouit dans l’esprit des hommes d’État dirigeants, et, avec la peur, l’humanité s’en alla. Il ne fut plus question d’abolir le supplice capital; et une fois qu’on n’eut plus besoin d’elle, l’utopie redevint utopie, la théorie, théorie, la poésie, poésie!

Il y avait pourtant toujours dans les prisons quelques malheureux condamnés vulgaires qui se promenaient dans les préaux depuis cinq ou six mois, respirant l’air, tranquilles désormais, sûrs de vivre, prenant leur sursis pour leur grâce. Mais attendez.

Le bourreau, à vrai dire, avait eu grand’peur. Le jour où il avait entendu nos faiseurs de lois parler humanité, philanthropie, progrès, il s’était cru perdu. Il s’était caché, le misérable, il s’était blotti sous sa guillotine, mal à l’aise au soleil de juillet comme un oiseau de nuit en plein jour, tâchant de se faire oublier, se bouchant les oreilles et n’osant souffler. On ne le voyait plus depuis six mois. Il ne donnait plus signe de vie. Peu à peu cependant il s’était rassuré dans ses ténèbres. Il avait écouté du côté des Chambres et n’avait plus entendu prononcer son nom. Plus de ces grands mots sonores dont il avait eu si grande frayeur. Plus de commentaires déclamatoires du Traité des Délits et des Peines. On s’occupait de toute autre chose, de quelque grave intérêt social, d’un chemin vicinal, d’une subvention pour l’Opéra-Comique, ou d’une saignée de cent mille francs sur un budget apoplectique de quinze cents millions. Personne ne songeait plus à lui, coupe-tête. Ce que voyant, l’homme se tranquillise, il met sa tête hors de son trou, et regarde de tous côtés; il fait un pas, puis deux, comme je ne sais plus quelle souris de La Fontaine, puis il se hasarde à sortir tout à fait de dessous son échafaudage, puis il saute dessus, le raccommode, le restaure, le fourbit, le caresse, le fait jouer, le fait reluire, se remet à suifer la vieille mécanique rouillée que l’oisiveté détraquait; tout à coup il se retourne, saisit au hasard par les cheveux dans la première prison venue un de ces infortunés qui comptaient sur la vie, le tire à lui, le dépouille, l’attache, le boucle, et voilà les exécutions qui recommencent.

Tout cela est affreux, mais c’est de l’histoire.

Oui, il y a eu un sursis de six mois accordé à de malheureux captifs, dont on a gratuitement aggravé la peine de cette façon en les faisant reprendre à la vie; puis, sans raison, sans nécessité, sans trop savoir pourquoi, pour le plaisir, on a un beau matin révoqué le sursis et l’on a remis froidement toutes ces créatures humaines en coupe réglée. Eh! mon Dieu! je vous le demande, qu’est-ce que cela nous faisait à tous que ces hommes vécussent? Est-ce qu’il n’y a pas en France assez d’air à respirer pour tout le monde?

Pour qu’un jour un misérable commis de la chancellerie, à qui cela était égal, se soit levé de sa chaise en disant: — Allons! personne ne songe plus à l’abolition de la peine de mort. Il est temps de se remettre à guillotiner! — il faut qu’il se soit passé dans le coeur de cet homme-là quelque chose de bien monstrueux.

Du reste, disons-le, jamais les exécutions n’ont été accompagnées de circonstances plus atroces que depuis cette révocation du sursis de juillet, jamais l’anecdote de la Grève n’a été plus révoltante et n’a mieux prouvé l’exécration de la peine de mort. Ce redoublement d’horreur est le juste châtiment des hommes qui ont remis le code du sang en vigueur. Qu’ils soient punis par leur oeuvre. C’est bien fait.

Il faut citer ici deux ou trois exemples de ce que certaines exécutions ont eu d’épouvantable et d’impie. Il faut donner mal aux nerfs aux femmes des procureurs du roi. Une femme, c’est quelquefois une conscience.

Dans le midi, vers la fin du mois de septembre dernier, nous n’avons pas bien présents à l’esprit le lieu, le jour, ni le nom du condamné, mais nous les retrouverons si l’on conteste le fait, et nous croyons que c’est à Pamiers; vers la fin de septembre donc, on vient trouver un homme dans sa prison, où il jouait tranquillement aux cartes: on lui signifie qu’il faut mourir dans deux heures, ce qui le fait trembler de tous ses membres, car, depuis six mois qu’on l’oubliait, il ne comptait plus sur la mort; on le rase, on le tond, on le garrotte, on le confesse; puis on le brouette entre quatre gendarmes, et à travers la foule, au lieu de l’exécution. Jusqu’ici rien que de simple. C’est comme cela que cela se fait. Arrivé à l’échafaud, le bourreau le prend au prêtre, l’emporte, le ficelle sur la bascule, l’enfourne, je me sers ici du mot d’argot, puis il lâche le couperet. Le lourd triangle de fer se détache avec peine, tombe en cahotant dans ses rainures, et, voici l’horrible qui commence, entaille l’homme sans le tuer. L’homme pousse un cri affreux. Le bourreau, déconcerté, relève le couperet et le laisse retomber. Le couperet mord le cou du patient une seconde fois, mais ne le tranche pas. Le patient hurle, la foule aussi. Le bourreau rehisse encore le couperet, espérant mieux du troisième coup. Point. Le troisième coup fait jaillir un troisième ruisseau de sang de la nuque du condamné, mais ne fait pas tomber la tête. Abrégeons. Le couteau remonta et retomba cinq fois, cinq fois il entama le condamné, cinq fois le condamné hurla sous le coup et secoua sa tête vivante en criant grâce! Le peuple indigné prit des pierres et se mit dans sa justice à lapider le misérable bourreau. Le bourreau s'enfuit sous la guillotine et s'y tapit derrière les chevaux des gendarmes. Mais vous n'êtes pas au bout. Le supplicié, se voyant seul sur l'échafaud, s'était redressé sur la planche, et là, debout, effroyable, ruisselant de sang, soutenant sa tête à demi coupée qui pendait sur son épaule, il demandait avec de faibles cris qu'on vînt le détacher. La foule, pleine de pitié, était sur le point de forcer les gendarmes et de venir à l'aide du malheureux qui avait subi cinq fois son arrêt de mort. C'est en ce moment-là qu'un valet du bourreau, jeune homme de vingt ans monte sur l'échafaud, dit au patient de se tourner pour qu'il le délie, et, profitant de la posture du mourant qui se livrait à lui sans défiance, saute sur son dos et se met à lui couper péniblement ce qui lui restait de cou avec je ne sais quel couteau de boucher. Cela s'est fait. Cela s'est vu. Oui.

Aux termes de la loi, un juge a dû assister à cette exécution. D'un signe il pouvait tout arrêter. Que faisait-il donc au fond de sa voiture, cet homme pendant qu'on massacrait un homme? Que faisait ce punisseur d'assassins, pendant qu'on assassinait en plein jour, sous ses yeux, sous le souffle de ses chevaux, sous la vitre de sa portière?

Et le juge n'a pas été mis en jugement! et le bourreau n'a pas été mis en jugement! Et aucun tribunal ne s'est enquis de cette monstrueuse extermination de toutes les lois sur la personne sacrée d'une créature de Dieu!

Au dix-septième siècle, à l'époque de barbarie du code criminel, sous Richelieu, sous Christophe Fouquet, quand M. de Chalais fut mis à mort devant le Bouffay de Nantes par un soldat maladroit qui, au lieu d'un coup d'épée, lui donna trente-quatre coups [Note: La Porte dit vingt-deux, mais Aubery dit trente-quatre. M. de Chalais cria jusqu'au vingtième.] d'une doloire de tonnelier, du moins cela parut-il irrégulier au parlement de Paris: il y eut enquête et procès, et si Richelieu ne fut pas puni, si Christophe Fouquet ne fut pas puni, le soldat le fut. Injustice sans doute, mais au fond de laquelle il y avait de la justice.

Ici, rien. La chose a eu lieu après juillet, dans un temps de douces moeurs et de progrès, un an après la célèbre lamentation de la Chambre sur la peine de mort. Eh bien! le fait a passé absolument inaperçu. Les journaux de Paris l'ont publié comme une anecdote. Personne n'a été inquiété. On a su seulement que la guillotine avait été disloquée exprès par quelqu'un qui voulait nuire à l’exécuteur des hautes oeuvres. C’était un valet du bourreau, chassé par son maître, qui, pour se venger, lui avait fait cette malice.

Ce n’était qu’une espièglerie. Continuons.

À Dijon, il y a trois mois, on a mené au supplice une femme. (Une femme!) Cette fois encore, le couteau du docteur Guillotin a mal fait son service. La tête n’a pas été tout à fait coupée. Alors les valets de l’exécuteur se sont attelés aux pieds de la femme, et à travers les hurlements de la malheureuse, et à force de tiraillements et de soubresauts, ils lui ont séparé la tête du corps par arrachement.

À Paris, nous revenons au temps des exécutions secrètes. Comme on n’ose plus décapiter en Grève depuis juillet, comme on a peur, comme on est lâche, voici ce qu’on fait. On a pris dernièrement à Bicêtre un homme, un condamné à mort, un nommé Désandrieux, je crois; on l’a mis dans une espèce de panier traîné sur deux roues, clos de toutes parts, cadenassé et verrouillé; puis, un gendarme en tête, un gendarme en queue, à petit bruit et sans foule, on a été déposer le paquet à la barrière déserte de Saint-Jacques. Arrivés là, il était huit heures du matin, à peine jour, il y avait une guillotine toute fraîche dressée et pour public quelque douzaine de petits garçons groupés sur les tas de pierres voisins autour de la machine inattendue; vite, on a tiré l’homme du panier, et, sans lui donner le temps de respirer, furtivement, sournoisement, honteusement, on lui a escamoté sa tête. Cela s’appelle un acte public et solennel de haute justice. Infâme dérision!

Comment donc les gens du roi comprennent-ils le mot civilisation? Où en sommes-nous? La justice ravalée aux stratagèmes et aux supercheries! la loi aux expédients! monstrueux!

C’est donc une chose bien redoutable qu’un condamné à mort, pour que la société le prenne en traître de cette façon!

Soyons juste pourtant, l’exécution n’a pas été tout à fait secrète. Le matin on a crié et vendu comme de coutume l’arrêt de mort dans les carrefours de Paris. Il paraît qu’il y a des gens qui vivent de cette vente. Vous entendez? du crime d’un infortuné, de son châtiment, de ses tortures, de son agonie, on fait une denrée, un papier qu’on vend un sou. Concevez-vous rien de plus hideux que ce sou, vert de grisé dans le sang? Qui est-ce donc qui le ramasse?

Voilà assez de faits. En voilà trop. Est-ce que tout cela n’est pas horrible?

Qu’avez-vous à alléguer pour la peine de mort?

Nous faisons cette question sérieusement: nous la faisons pour qu'on y réponde: nous la faisons aux criminalistes, et non aux lettrés bavards. Nous savons qu'il y a des gens qui prennent l'excellence de la peine de mort pour texte à paradoxe comme tout autre thème. Il y en a d'autres qui n'aiment la peine de mort que parce qu'ils haïssent tel ou tel qui l'attaque. C'est pour eux une question quasi littéraire, une question de personnes, une question de noms propres. Ceux-là sont les envieux, qui ne font pas plus faute aux bons jurisconsultes qu'aux grands artistes. Les Joseph Grippa ne manquent pas plus aux Filangieri que les Torregiani aux Michel-Ange et les Scudéry aux Corneille.

Ce n'est pas à eux que nous nous adressons, mais aux hommes de loi proprement dits, aux dialecticiens, aux raisonneurs, à ceux qui aiment la peine de mort pour la peine de mort, pour sa beauté, pour sa bonté, pour sa grâce.

Voyons, qu'ils donnent leurs raisons.

Ceux qui jugent et qui condamnent disent la peine de mort nécessaire. D'abord, — parce qu'il importe de retrancher de la communauté sociale un membre qui lui a déjà nui et qui pourrait lui nuire encore. — S'il ne s'agissait que de cela, la prison perpétuelle suffirait. À quoi bon la mort? Vous objectez qu'on peut s'échapper d'une prison? faites mieux votre ronde. Si vous ne croyez pas à la solidité des barreaux de fer, comment osez-vous avoir des ménageries?

Pas de bourreau où le geôlier suffit.

Mais, reprend-on, — il faut que la société se venge, que la société punisse. — Ni l'un, ni l'autre. Se venger est de l'individu, punir est de Dieu.

La société est entre deux. Le châtiment est au-dessus d'elle, la vengeance au-dessous. Rien de si grand et de si petit ne lui sied. Elle ne doit pas "punir pour se venger"; elle doit corriger pour améliorer. Transformez de cette façon la formule des criminalistes, nous la comprenons et nous y adhérons.

Reste la troisième et dernière raison, la théorie de l'exemple. — Il faut faire des exemples! il faut épouvanter par le spectacle du sort réservé aux criminels ceux qui seraient tentés de les imiter! Voilà bien à peu près textuellement la phrase éternelle dont tous les réquisitoires des cinq cents parquets de France ne sont que des variations plus ou moins sonores. Eh bien! nous nions d'abord qu'il y ait exemple. Nous nions que le spectacle des supplices produise l'effet qu'on en attend. Loin d'édifier le peuple, il le démoralise, et ruine en lui toute sensibilité, partant toute vertu. Les preuves abondent, et encombreraient notre raisonnement si nous voulions en citer. Nous signalerons pourtant un fait entre mille, parce qu'il est le plus récent. Au moment où nous écrivons, il n'a que dix jours de date. Il est du 5 mars, dernier jour du carnaval. À Saint-Pol, immédiatement après l'exécution d'un incendiaire nommé Louis Camus, une troupe de masques est venue danser autour de l'échafaud encore fumant. Faites donc des exemples! le mardi gras vous rit au nez.

Que si, malgré l'expérience, vous tenez à votre théorie routinière de l'exemple, alors rendez-nous le seizième siècle, soyez vraiment formidables, rendez-nous la variété des supplices, rendez-nous Farinacci, rendez-nous les tourmenteurs-jurés, rendez-nous le gibet, la roue, le bûcher, l'estrapade, l'essorillement, l'écartèlement, la fosse à enfouir vif, la cuve à bouillir vif; rendez-nous, dans tous les carrefours de Paris, comme une boutique de plus ouverte parmi les autres, le hideux étal du bourreau, sans cesse garni de chair fraîche. Rendez-nous Montfaucon, ses seize piliers de pierre, ses brutes assises, ses caves à ossements, ses poutres, ses crocs, ses chaînes, ses brochettes de squelettes, son éminence de plâtre tachetée de corbeaux, ses potences succursales, et l'odeur du cadavre que par le vent du nord-est il répand à larges bouffées sur tout le faubourg du Temple. Rendez-nous dans sa permanence et dans sa puissance ce gigantesque appentis du bourreau de Paris. À la bonne heure! Voilà de l'exemple en grand. Voilà de la peine de mort bien comprise. Voilà un système de supplices qui a quelque proportion. Voilà qui est horrible, mais qui est terrible.

Ou bien faites comme en Angleterre. En Angleterre, pays de commerce, on prend un contrebandier sur la côte de Douvres, on le pend pour l'exemple, pour l'exemple on le laisse accroché au gibet; mais, comme les intempéries de l'air pourraient détériorer le cadavre, on l'enveloppe soigneusement d'une toile enduite de goudron, afin d'avoir à le renouveler moins souvent. Ô terre d'économie! goudronner les pendus!

Cela pourtant a encore quelque logique. C'est la façon la plus humaine de comprendre la théorie de l'exemple.

Mais vous, est-ce bien sérieusement que vous croyez faire un exemple quand vous égorgillez misérablement un pauvre homme dans le recoin le plus désert des boulevards extérieurs? En Grève, en plein jour, passe encore; mais à la barrière Saint-Jacques! mais à huit heures du matin! Qui est-ce qui passe là? Qui est-ce qui va là? Qui est-ce qui sait que vous tuez un homme là? Qui est-ce qui se doute que vous faites un exemple là? Un exemple pour qui? Pour les arbres du boulevard, apparemment.

Ne voyez-vous donc pas que vos exécutions publiques se font en tapinois? Ne voyez-vous donc pas que vous vous cachez? Que vous avez peur et honte de votre oeuvre? Que vous balbutiez ridiculement votre discite justitiam moniti? Qu'au fond vous êtes ébranlés, interdits, inquiets, peu certains d'avoir raison, gagnés par le doute général, coupant des têtes par routine et sans trop savoir ce que vous faites? Ne sentez-vous pas au fond du coeur que vous avez tout au moins perdu le sentiment moral et social de la mission de sang que vos prédécesseurs, les vieux parlementaires, accomplissaient avec une conscience si tranquille? La nuit, ne retournez-vous pas plus souvent qu'eux la tête sur votre oreiller? D'autres avant vous ont ordonné des exécutions capitales, mais ils s'estimaient dans le droit, dans le juste, dans le bien. Jouvenel des Ursins se croyait un juge; Élie de Thorrette se croyait un juge; Laubardemont, La Reynie et Laffemas eux-mêmes se croyaient des juges; vous, dans votre for intérieur, vous n'êtes pas bien sûrs de ne pas être des assassins!

Vous quittez la Grève pour la barrière Saint-Jacques, la foule pour la solitude, le jour pour le crépuscule. Vous ne faites plus fermement ce que vous faites. Vous vous cachez, vous dis-je!

Toutes les raisons pour la peine de mort, les voilà donc démolies. Voilà tous les syllogismes de parquets mis à néant. Tous ces copeaux de réquisitoires, les voilà balayés et réduits en cendres. Le moindre attouchement de la logique dissout tous les mauvais raisonnements.

Que les gens du roi ne viennent donc plus nous demander des têtes, à nous jurés, à nous hommes, en nous adjurant d'une voix caressante au nom de la société à protéger, de la vindicte publique à assurer, des exemples à faire. Rhétorique, ampoule, et néant que tout cela! un coup d'épingle dans ces hyperboles, et vous les désenflez. Au fond de ce doucereux verbiage, vous ne trouvez que dureté de coeur, cruauté, barbarie, envie de prouver son zèle, nécessité de gagner ses honoraires. Taisez-vous, mandarins! Sous la patte de velours du juge on sent les ongles du bourreau.

Il est difficile de songer de sang-froid à ce que c'est qu'un procureur royal criminel. C'est un homme qui gagne sa vie à envoyer les autres à l'échafaud. C'est le pourvoyeur titulaire des places de Grève. Du reste, c'est un monsieur qui a des prétentions au style et aux lettres, qui est beau parleur ou croit l'être, qui récite au besoin un vers latin ou deux avant de conclure à la mort, qui cherche à faire de l'effet, qui intéresse son amour-propre, ô misère! là où d'autres ont leur vie engagée, qui a ses modèles à lui, ses types désespérants à atteindre, ses classiques, son Bellart, son Marchangy, comme tel poète a Racine et tel autre Boileau. Dans le débat, il tire du côté de la guillotine, c'est son rôle, c'est son état. Son réquisitoire, c'est son oeuvre littéraire, il le fleurit de métaphores, il le parfume de citations, il faut que cela soit beau à l'audience, que cela plaise aux dames. Il a son bagage de lieux communs encore très neufs pour la province, ses élégances d'élocution, ses recherches, ses raffinements d'écrivain. Il hait le mot propre presque autant que nos poètes tragiques de l'école de Delille. N'ayez pas peur qu'il appelle les choses par leur nom. Fi donc! Il a pour toute idée dont la nudité vous révolterait des déguisements complets d'épithètes et d'adjectifs. Il rend M. Samson présentable. Il gaze le couperet. Il estompe la bascule. Il entortille le panier rouge dans une périphrase. On ne sait plus ce que c'est. C'est douceâtre et décent. Vous le représentez-vous, la nuit, dans son cabinet, élaborant à loisir et de son mieux cette harangue qui fera dresser un échafaud dans six semaines? Le voyez-vous suant sang et eau pour emboîter la tête d'un accusé dans le plus fatal article du code? Le voyez-vous scier avec une loi mal faite le cou d'un misérable? Remarquez-vous comme il fait infuser dans un gâchis de tropes et de synecdoches deux ou trois textes vénéneux pour en exprimer et en extraire à grand-peine la mort d'un homme? N'est-il pas vrai que, tandis qu'il écrit, sous sa table, dans l'ombre, il a probablement le bourreau accroupi à ses pieds, et qu'il arrête de temps en temps sa plume pour lui dire, comme le maître à son chien: — Paix là! paix là! tu vas avoir ton os!

Du reste, dans la vie privée, cet homme du roi peut être un honnête homme, bon père, bon fils, bon mari, bon ami, comme disent toutes les épitaphes du Père-Lachaise.

Espérons que le jour est prochain où la loi abolira ces fonctions funèbres. L'air seul de notre civilisation doit dans un temps donné user la peine de mort.

On est parfois tenté de croire que les défenseurs de la peine de mort n'ont pas bien réfléchi à ce que c'est. Mais pesez donc un peu à la balance de quelque crime que ce soit ce droit exorbitant que la société s'arroge d'ôter ce qu'elle n'a pas donné, cette peine, la plus irréparable des peines irréparables!

De deux choses l'une:

Ou l’homme que vous frappez est sans famille, sans parents, sans adhérents dans ce monde. Et dans ce cas, il n’a reçu ni éducation, ni instruction, ni soins pour son esprit, ni soins pour son coeur; et alors de quel droit tuez-vous ce misérable orphelin? Vous le punissez de ce que son enfance a rampé sur le sol sans tige et sans tuteur! Vous lui imputez à forfait l’isolement où vous l’avez laissé! De son malheur vous faites son crime! Personne ne lui a appris à savoir ce qu’il faisait. Cet homme ignore. Sa faute est à sa destinée, non à lui. Vous frappez un innocent.

Ou cet homme a une famille; et alors croyez-vous que le coup dont vous l’égorgez ne blesse que lui seul? que son père, que sa mère, que ses enfants, n’en saigneront pas? Non. En le tuant, vous décapitez toute sa famille. Et ici encore vous frappez des innocents.

Gauche et aveugle pénalité, qui, de quelque côté qu’elle se tourne, frappe l’innocent!

Cet homme, ce coupable qui a une famille, séquestrez-le. Dans sa prison, il pourra travailler encore pour les siens. Mais comment les fera-t-il vivre du fond de son tombeau? Et songez-vous sans frissonner à ce que deviendront ces petits garçons, ces petites filles, auxquelles vous ôtez leur père, c’est-à-dire leur pain? Est-ce que vous comptez sur cette famille pour approvisionner dans quinze ans, eux le bagne, elles le musico? Oh! les pauvres innocents!

Aux colonies, quand un arrêt de mort tue un esclave, il y a mille francs d’indemnité pour le propriétaire de l’homme. Quoi! vous dédommagez le maître, et vous n’indemnisez pas la famille! Ici aussi ne prenez-vous pas un homme à ceux qui le possèdent? N’est-il pas, à un titre bien autrement sacré que l’esclave vis-à-vis du maître, la propriété de son père, le bien de sa femme, la chose de ses enfants?

Nous avons déjà convaincu votre loi d’assassinat. La voici convaincue de vol.

Autre chose encore. L’âme de cet homme, y songez-vous? Savez-vous dans quel état elle se trouve? Osez-vous bien l’expédier si lestement? Autrefois du moins, quelque foi circulait dans le peuple; au moment suprême, le souffle religieux qui était dans l’air pouvait amollir le plus endurci; un patient était en même temps un pénitent; la religion lui ouvrait un monde au moment où la société lui en fermait un autre; toute âme avait conscience de Dieu; l’échafaud n’était qu’une frontière du ciel. Mais quelle espérance mettez-vous sur l’échafaud maintenant que la grosse foule ne croit plus? maintenant que toutes les religions sont attaquées du dry-rot, comme ces vieux vaisseaux qui pourrissent dans nos ports, et qui jadis peut-être ont découvert des mondes? maintenant que les petits enfants se moquent de Dieu? De quel droit lancez-vous dans quelque chose dont vous doutez vous-mêmes les âmes obscures de vos condamnés, ces âmes telles que Voltaire et M. Pigault-Lebrun les ont faites? Vous les livrez à votre aumônier de prison, excellent vieillard sans doute; mais croit-il et fait-il croire? Ne grossoie-t-il pas comme une corvée son oeuvre sublime? Est-ce que vous le prenez pour un prêtre, ce bonhomme qui coudoie le bourreau dans la charrette? Un écrivain plein d'âme et de talent l'a dit avant nous: C'est une horrible chose de conserver le bourreau après avoir ôté le confesseur!

Ce ne sont là, sans doute, que des "raisons sentimentales", comme disent quelques dédaigneux qui ne prennent leur logique que dans leur tête. À nos yeux, ce sont les meilleures. Nous préférons souvent les raisons du sentiment aux raisons de la raison. D'ailleurs les deux séries se tiennent toujours, ne l'oublions pas. Le Traité des Délits est greffé sur l'Esprit des Lois. Montesquieu a engendré Beccaria.

La raison est pour nous, le sentiment est pour nous, l'expérience est aussi pour nous. Dans les états modèles, où la peine de mort est abolie, la masse des crimes capitaux suit d'année en année une baisse progressive. Pesez ceci.

Nous ne demandons cependant pas pour le moment une brusque et complète abolition de la peine de mort, comme celle où s'était si étourdiment engagée la Chambre des députés. Nous désirons, au contraire, tous les essais, toutes les précautions, tous les tâtonnements de la prudence. D'ailleurs, nous ne voulons pas seulement l'abolition de la peine de mort, nous voulons un remaniement complet de la pénalité sous toutes ses formes, du haut en bas, depuis le verrou jusqu'au couperet, et le temps est un des ingrédients qui doivent entrer dans une pareille oeuvre pour qu'elle soit bien faite. Nous comptons développer ailleurs, sur cette matière, le système d'idées que nous croyons applicable. Mais, indépendamment des abolitions partielles pour le cas de fausse monnaie, d'incendie, de vols qualifiés, etc., nous demandons que dès à présent, dans toutes les affaires capitales, le président soit tenu de poser au jury cette question: L'accusé a-t-il agi par passion ou par intérêt? et que, dans le cas où le jury répondrait: L'accusé a agi par passion, il n'y ait pas condamnation à mort. Ceci nous épargnerait du moins quelques exécutions révoltantes. Ulbach et Debacker seraient sauvés. On ne guillotinerait plus Othello.

Au reste, qu’on ne s’y trompe pas, cette question de la peine de mort mûrit tous les jours. Avant peu, la société entière la résoudra comme nous.

Que les criminalistes les plus entêtés y fassent attention, depuis un siècle la peine de mort va s’amoindrissant. Elle se fait presque douce. Signe de décrépitude. Signe de faiblesse. Signe de mort prochaine. La torture a disparu. La roue a disparu. La potence a disparu. Chose étrange! la guillotine elle-même est un progrès.

M. Guillotin était un philanthrope.

Oui, l’horrible Thémis dentue et vorace de Farinace et de Vouglans, de Delancre et d’Isaac Loisel, de d’Oppède et de Machault, dépérit. Elle maigrit. Elle se meurt.

Voilà déjà la Grève qui n’en veut plus. La Grève se réhabilite. La vieille buveuse de sang s’est bien conduite en juillet. Elle veut mener désormais meilleure vie et rester digne de sa dernière belle action. Elle qui s’était prostituée depuis trois siècles à tous les échafauds, la pudeur la prend. Elle a honte de son ancien métier. Elle veut perdre son vilain nom. Elle répudie le bourreau. Elle lave son pavé.

À l’heure qu’il est, la peine de mort est déjà hors de Paris. Or, disons-le bien ici, sortir de Paris c’est sortir de la civilisation.

Tous les symptômes sont pour nous. Il semble aussi qu’elle se rebute et qu’elle rechigne, cette hideuse machine, ou plutôt ce monstre fait de bois et de fer qui est à Guillotin ce que Galatée est à Pygmalion. Vues d’un certain côté, les effroyables exécutions que nous avons détaillées plus haut sont d’excellents signes. La guillotine hésite. Elle en est à manquer son coup. Tout le vieil échafaudage de la peine de mort se détraque.

L’infâme machine partira de France, nous y comptons, et, s’il plaît à Dieu, elle partira en boitant, car nous tâcherons de lui porter de rudes coups.

Qu’elle aille demander l’hospitalité ailleurs, à quelque peuple barbare, non à la Turquie, qui se civilise, non aux sauvages, qui ne voudraient pas d’elle [Le “parlement” d’Otahiti vient d’abolir la peine de mort.]; mais qu’elle descende quelques échelons encore de l’échelle de la civilisation, qu’elle aille en Espagne ou en Russie.

L’édifice social du passé reposait sur trois colonnes, le prêtre, le roi, le bourreau. Il y a déjà longtemps qu’une voix a dit: Les dieux s’en vont! Dernièrement une autre voix s’est élevée et a crié: Les rois s’en vont! Il est temps maintenant qu’une troisième voix s’élève et dise: Le bourreau s’en va!

Ainsi l’ancienne société sera tombée pierre à pierre; ainsi la providence aura complété l’écroulement du passé.

À ceux qui ont regretté les dieux, on a pu dire: Dieu reste. À ceux qui regrettent les rois, on peut dire: la patrie reste. À ceux qui regretteraient le bourreau, on n’a rien à dire.

Et l’ordre ne disparaîtra pas avec le bourreau; ne le croyez point. La voûte de la société future ne croulera pas pour n’avoir point cette clef hideuse. La civilisation n’est autre chose qu’une série de transformations successives. À quoi donc allez-vous assister? à la transformation de la pénalité. La douce loi du Christ pénétrera enfin le code et rayonnera à travers. On regardera le crime comme une maladie, et cette maladie aura ses médecins qui remplaceront vos juges, ses hôpitaux qui remplaceront vos bagnes. La liberté et la santé se ressembleront. On versera le baume et l’huile où l’on appliquait le fer et le feu. On traitera par la charité ce mal qu’on traitait par la colère. Ce sera simple et sublime. La croix substituée au gibet. Voilà tout.

15 mars 1832.

UNE COMÉDIE A PROPOS D'UNE TRAGÉDIE

[Note: Nous avons cru devoir réimprimer ici l'espèce de préface en dialogue qu'on va lire, et qui accompagnait la quatrième édition du Dernier Jour d'un condamné. Il faut se rappeler, en la lisant, au milieu de quelles objections politiques, morales et littéraires les premières éditions de ce livre furent publiées. (Édition de 1832).]

PERSONNAGES

MADAME DE BLINVAL.
LE CHEVALIER. ERGASTE.
UN POÈTE ÉLÉGIAQUE.
UN PHILOSOPHE.
UN GROS MONSIEUR.
UN MONSIEUR MAIGRE.
DES FEMMES.
UN LAQUAIS.

Un salon.

UN POÈTE ÉLÉGIAQUE, lisant.

[…]
Le lendemain, des pas traversaient la forêt,
Un chien le long du fleuve en aboyant errait;
Et quand la bachelette en larmes
Revint s'asseoir, le coeur rempli d'alarmes,
Sur la tant vieille tour de l'antique châtel,
Elle entendit les flots gémir, la triste Isaure,
Mais plus n'entendit la mandore Du gentil ménestrel!

TOUT L'AUDITOIRE.

Bravo! charmant! ravissant!

On bat des mains.

MADAME DE BLINVAL.

Il y a dans cette fin un mystère indéfinissable qui tire les larmes des yeux.

LE POÈTE ÉLÉGIAQUE, modestement.

La catastrophe est voilée.

LE CHEVALIER, hochant la tête.

Mandore, ménestrel, c'est du romantique, ça!

LE POÈTE ÉLÉGIAQUE.

Oui, monsieur, mais du romantique raisonnable, du vrai romantique. Que voulez-vous? Il faut bien faire quelques concessions.

LE CHEVALIER.

Des concessions! des concessions! c'est comme cela qu'on perd le goût. Je donnerais tous les vers romantiques seulement pour ce quatrain:

De par le Pinde et par Cythère,
Gentil-Bernard est averti
Que l'Art d'Aimer doit samedi
Venir souper chez l'Art de Plaire.

Voilà la vraie poésie! L'Art d'Aimer qui soupe samedi chez l'Art de Plaire! à la bonne heure! Mais aujourd'hui c'est la mandore, le ménestrel. On ne fait plus de poésies fugitives. Si j'étais poète, je ferais des poésies fugitives: mais je ne suis pas poète, moi.

LE POÈTE ÉLÉGIAQUE.

Cependant, les élégies…

LE CHEVALIER.

Poésies fugitives, monsieur. (Bas à Mme de Blinval) Et puis, châtel n'est pas français; on dit castel.

QUELQU'UN, au poète élégiaque.

Une observation, monsieur. Vous dites l'antique châtel, pourquoi pas le gothique!

LE POÈTE ÉLÉGIAQUE.

Gothique ne se dit pas en vers.

LE QUELQU'UN.

Ah! c'est différent.

LE POÈTE ÉLÉGIAQUE, poursuivant.

Voyez-vous bien, monsieur, il faut se borner. Je ne suis pas de ceux qui veulent désorganiser le vers français, et nous ramener à l'époque des Ronsard et des Brébeuf. Je suis romantique, mais modéré. C'est comme pour les émotions. Je les veux douces, rêveuses, mélancoliques, mais jamais de sang, jamais d'horreurs. Voiler les catastrophes. Je sais qu'il y a des gens, des fous, des imaginations en délire qui… Tenez, mesdames, avez-vous lu le nouveau roman?

LES DAMES.

Quel roman?

LE POÈTE ÉLÉGIAQUE.

Le Dernier Jour…

UN GROS MONSIEUR.

Assez, monsieur! je sais ce que vous voulez dire. Le titre seul me fait mal aux nerfs.

MADAME DE BLINVAL.

Et à moi aussi. C'est un livre affreux. Je l'ai là.

LES DAMES.

Voyons, voyons.

On se passe le livre de main en main.

QUELQU'UN, lisant.

Le Dernier jour d'un…

LE GROS MONSIEUR.

Grâce, madame!

MADAME DE BLINVAL.

En effet, c'est un livre abominable, un livre qui donne le cauchemar, un livre qui rend malade.

UNE FEMME, bas.

Il faudra que je lise cela.

LE GROS MONSIEUR.

Il faut convenir que les moeurs vont se dépravant de jour en jour. Mon Dieu, l'horrible idée! développer, creuser, analyser, l'une après l'autre et sans en passer une seule, toutes les souffrances physiques, toutes les tortures morales que doit éprouver un homme condamné à mort, le jour de l'exécution! Cela n'est-il pas atroce? Comprenez-vous, mesdames, qu'il se soit trouvé un écrivain pour cette idée, et un public pour cet écrivain?

LE CHEVALIER.

Voilà en effet qui est souverainement impertinent.

MADAME DE BLINVAL.

Qu'est-ce que c'est que l'auteur?

LE GROS MONSIEUR.

Il n'y avait pas de nom à la première édition.

LE POÈTE ÉLÉGIAQUE.

C’est le même qui a déjà fait deux autres romans… ma foi, j’ai oublié les titres. Le premier commence à la Morgue et finit à la Grève. À chaque chapitre, il y a un ogre qui mange un enfant.

LE GROS MONSIEUR.

Vous avez lu cela, monsieur?

LE POÈTE ÉLÉGIAQUE.

Oui, monsieur: la scène se passe en Islande.

LE GROS MONSIEUR.

En Islande, c’est épouvantable!

LE POÈTE ÉLÉGIAQUE.

Il a fait en outre des odes, des ballades, je ne sais quoi, où il y a des monstres qui ont des corps bleus.

LE CHEVALIER, riant.

Corbleu! cela doit faire un furieux vers.

LE POÈTE ÉLÉGIAQUE.

Il a publié aussi un drame, — on appelle cela un drame, — où l’on trouve ce beau vers:

Demain vingt-cinq juin mil six cent cinquante sept.

QUELQU’UN

Ah, ce vers!

LE POÈTE ÉLÉGIAQUE.

Cela peut s’écrire en chiffres, voyez-vous, mesdames:

Demain, 25 juin 1657.

Il rit. On rit.

LE CHEVALIER.

C’est une chose particulière que la poésie d’à présent.

LE GROS MONSIEUR.

Ah çà! il ne sait pas versifier, cet homme-là! Comment donc s’appelle-t-il déjà?

LE POÈTE ÉLÉGIAQUE.

Il a un nom aussi difficile à retenir qu’à prononcer. Il y a du goth, du visigoth, de l’ostrogoth dedans.

Il rit.

MADAME DE BLINVAL.

C’est un vilain homme.

LE GROS MONSIEUR.

Un abominable homme.

UNE JEUNE FEMME.

Quelqu'un qui le connaît m'a dit…

LE GROS MONSIEUR.

Vous connaissez quelqu'un qui le connaît?

LA JEUNE FEMME.

Oui, et qui dit que c'est un homme doux, simple, qui vit dans la retraite et passe ses journées à jouer avec ses petits enfants.

LE POÈTE.

Et ses nuits à rêver des oeuvres de ténèbres. — C'est singulier; voilà un vers que j'ai fait tout naturellement. Mais c'est qu'il y est, le vers:

Et ses nuits à rêver des oeuvres de ténèbres.

Avec une bonne césure. Il n'y a plus que l'autre rime à trouver. Pardieu! funèbres.

MADAME DE BLINVAL.

Quidquid tentabat dicere, versus erat.

LE GROS MONSIEUR.

Vous disiez donc que l'auteur en question a des petits enfants.

Impossible, madame. Quand on a fait cet ouvrage-là! un roman atroce!

QUELQU'UN.

Mais, ce roman, dans quel but l'a-t-il fait?

LE POÈTE ÉLÉGIAQUE.

Est-ce que je sais, moi?

UN PHILOSOPHE.

À ce qu'il paraît, dans le but de concourir à l'abolition de la peine de mort.

LE GROS MONSIEUR.

Une horreur, vous dis-je!

LE CHEVALIER.

Ah ça! c'est donc un duel avec le bourreau?

LE POÈTE ÉLÉGIAQUE.

Il en veut terriblement à la guillotine.

UN MONSIEUR MAIGRE.

Je vois cela d'ici. Des déclamations.

LE GROS MONSIEUR.

Point. Il y a à peine deux pages sur ce texte de la peine de mort. Tout le reste, ce sont des sensations.

LE PHILOSOPHE.

Voilà le tort. Le sujet méritait le raisonnement. Un drame, un roman ne prouve rien. Et puis, j’ai lu le livre, et il est mauvais.

LE POÈTE ÉLÉGIAQUE.

Détestable! Est-ce que c’est là de l’art? C’est passer les bornes, c’est casser les vitres. Encore, ce criminel, si je le connaissais? mais point. Qu’a-t-il fait? on n’en sait rien. C’est peut-être un fort mauvais drôle. On n’a pas le droit de m’intéresser à quelqu’un que je ne connais pas.

LE GROS MONSIEUR.

On n’a pas le droit de faire éprouver à son lecteur des souffrances physiques. Quand je vois des tragédies, on se tue, eh bien! cela ne me fait rien. Mais ce roman, il vous fait dresser les cheveux sur la tête, il vous fait venir la chair de poule, il vous donne de mauvais rêves. J’ai été deux jours au lit pour l’avoir lu.

LE PHILOSOPHE.

Ajoutez à cela que c’est un livre froid et compassé.

LE POÈTE.

Un livre!… un livre!…

LE PHILOSOPHE.

Oui. — Et comme vous disiez tout à l’heure, monsieur, ce n’est point là de véritable esthétique. Je ne m’intéresse pas à une abstraction, à une entité pure. Je ne vois point là une personnalité qui s’adéquate avec la mienne. Et puis le style n’est ni simple ni clair. Il sent l’archaïsme. C’est bien là ce que vous disiez, n’est-ce pas?

LE POÈTE.

Sans doute, sans doute. Il ne faut pas de personnalités.

LE PHILOSOPHE.

Le condamné n’est pas intéressant.

LE POÈTE.

Comment intéresserait-il? il a un crime et pas de remords. J’eusse fait tout le contraire. J’eusse conté l’histoire de mon condamné. Né de parents honnêtes. Une bonne éducation. De l’amour. De la jalousie. Un crime qui n’en soit pas un. Et puis des remords, des remords, beaucoup de remords. Mais les lois humaines sont implacables: il faut qu’il meure. Et là j’aurais traité ma question de la peine de mort. À la bonne heure!

MADAME DE BLINVAL.

Ah! Ah!

LE PHILOSOPHE.

Pardon. Le livre, comme l'entend monsieur, ne prouverait rien. La particularité ne régit pas la généralité.

LE POÈTE.

Eh bien! mieux encore; pourquoi n'avoir pas choisi pour héros, par exemple… Malesherbes, le vertueux Malesherbes? son dernier jour, son supplice? Oh! alors, beau et noble spectacle! J'eusse pleuré, j'eusse frémi, j'eusse voulu monter sur l'échafaud avec lui.

LE PHILOSOPHE.

Pas moi.

LE CHEVALIER.

Ni moi. C'était un révolutionnaire, au fond, que votre M. de Malesherbes.

LE PHILOSOPHE.

L'échafaud de Malesherbes ne prouve rien contre la peine de mort en général.

LE GROS MONSIEUR.

La peine de mort! à quoi bon s'occuper de cela? Qu'est-ce que cela vous fait, la peine de mort? Il faut que cet auteur soit bien mal né de venir nous donner le cauchemar à ce sujet avec son livre!

MADAME DE BLINVAL.

Ah! oui, un bien mauvais coeur!

LE GROS MONSIEUR.

Il nous force à regarder dans les prisons, dans les bagnes, dans Bicêtre. C'est fort désagréable. On sait bien que ce sont des cloaques. Mais qu'importe à la société?

MADAME DE BLINVAL.

Ceux qui ont fait les lois n'étaient pas des enfants.

LE PHILOSOPHE.

Ah! cependant! en présentant les choses avec vérité…

LE MONSIEUR MAIGRE.

Eh! c'est justement ce qui manque, la vérité. Que voulez-vous qu'un poète sache sur de pareilles matières? Il faudrait être au moins procureur du roi. Tenez: j'ai lu dans une citation qu'un journal fait de ce livre, que le condamné ne dit rien quand on lui lit son arrêt de mort; eh bien, moi, j'ai vu un condamné qui, dans ce moment-là, a poussé un grand cri. — Vous voyez.

LE PHILOSOPHE.

Permettez…

LE MONSIEUR MAIGRE.

Tenez, messieurs, la guillotine, la Grève, c’est de mauvais goût. Et la preuve, c’est qu’il paraît que c’est un livre qui corrompt le goût, et vous rend incapable d’émotions pures, fraîches, naïves. Quand donc se lèveront les défenseurs de la saine littérature? Je voudrais être, et mes réquisitoires m’en donneraient peut-être le droit, membre de l’académie française… — Voilà justement monsieur Ergaste, qui en est. Que pense-t-il du Dernier Jour d’un Condamné?

ERGASTE.

Ma foi, monsieur, je ne l’ai lu ni ne le lirai. Je dînais hier chez Mme de Sénange, et la marquise de Morival en a parlé au duc de Melcour. On dit qu’il y a des personnalités contre la magistrature, et surtout contre le président d’Alimont. L’abbé de Floricour aussi était indigné. Il paraît qu’il y a un chapitre contre la religion, et un chapitre contre la monarchie. Si j’étais procureur du roi!…

LE CHEVALIER.

Ah bien oui, procureur du roi! et la charte! et la liberté de la presse! Cependant, un poète qui veut supprimer la peine de mort, vous conviendrez que c’est odieux. Ah! ah! dans l’ancien régime, quelqu’un qui se serait permis de publier un roman contre la torture!… Mais depuis la prise de la Bastille, on peut tout écrire. Les livres font un mal affreux.

LE GROS MONSIEUR.

Affreux. On était tranquille, on ne pensait à rien. Il se coupait bien de temps en temps en France une tête par-ci par-là, deux tout au plus par semaine. Tout cela sans bruit, sans scandale. Ils ne disaient rien. Personne n’y songeait. Pas du tout, voilà un livre… — un livre qui vous donne un mal de tête horrible!

LE MONSIEUR MAIGRE.

Le moyen qu’un juré condamne après l’avoir lu!

ERGASTE.

Cela trouble les consciences.

MADAME DE BLINVAL.

Ah! les livres! les livres! Qui eût dit cela d’un roman?

LE POÈTE.

Il est certain que les livres sont bien souvent un poison subversif de l’ordre social.

LE MONSIEUR MAIGRE.

Sans compter la langue, que messieurs les romantiques révolutionnent aussi.

LE POÈTE.

Distinguons, monsieur; il y a romantiques et romantiques.

LE MONSIEUR MAIGRE.

Le mauvais goût, le mauvais goût.

ERGASTE.

Vous avez raison. Le mauvais goût.

LE MONSIEUR MAIGRE.

Il n’y a rien à répondre à cela.

LE PHILOSOPHE, appuyé au fauteuil d’une dame.

Ils disent là des choses qu’on ne dit même plus rue Mouffetard.

ERGASTE.

Ah! l’abominable livre!

MADAME DE BLINVAL.

Hé! ne le jetez pas au feu. Il est à la loueuse.

LE CHEVALIER.

Parlez-moi de notre temps. Comme tout s’est dépravé depuis, le goût et les moeurs! Vous souvient-il de notre temps, madame de Blinval?

MADAME DE BLINVAL.

Non, monsieur, il ne m’en souvient pas.

LE CHEVALIER.

Nous étions le peuple le plus doux, le plus gai, le plus spirituel. Toujours de belles fêtes, de jolis vers. C’était charmant. Y a-t-il rien de plus galant que le madrigal de M. de La Harpe sur le grand bal que Mme la maréchale de Mailly donna en mil sept cent… l’année de l’exécution de Damiens?

LE GROS MONSIEUR, soupirant.

Heureux temps! Maintenant les moeurs sont horribles, et les livres aussi. C’est le beau vers de Boileau:

Et la chute des arts suit la décadence des moeurs.

LE PHILOSOPHE, bas au poète.

Soupe-t-on dans cette maison?

LE POÈTE ÉLÉGIAQUE.

Oui, tout à l’heure.

LE MONSIEUR MAIGRE.

Maintenant on veut abolir la peine de mort, et pour cela on fait des romans cruels, immoraux et de mauvais goût, Le Dernier jour d'un Condamné, que sais-je?

LE GROS MONSIEUR.

Tenez, mon cher, ne parlons plus de ce livre atroce; et, puisque je vous rencontre, dites-moi, que faites-vous de cet homme dont nous avons rejeté le pourvoi depuis trois semaines?

LE MONSIEUR MAIGRE.

Ah! un peu de patience! je suis en congé ici. Laissez-moi respirer. À mon retour. Si cela tarde trop pourtant, j'écrirai à mon substitut…

UN LAQUAIS, entrant.

Madame est servie.

PREFACE DE 1829

Il y a deux manières de se rendre compte de l'existence de ce livre. Ou il y a eu, en effet, une liasse de papiers jaunes et inégaux sur lesquels on a trouvé, enregistrées une à une, les dernières pensées d'un misérable; ou il s'est rencontré un homme, un rêveur occupé à observer la nature au profit de l'art, un philosophe, un poète, que sais-je? dont cette idée a été la fantaisie, qui l'a prise ou plutôt s'est laissé prendre par elle, et n'a pu s'en débarrasser qu'en la jetant dans un livre. De ces deux explications, le lecteur choisira celle qu'il voudra.

Avant-propos de la première édition de 1829 parue sans nom d'auteur, et datée de 18..

LE DERNIER JOUR D’UN CONDAMNÉ

I

Bicêtre

Condamné à mort!

Voilà cinq semaines que j’habite avec cette pensée, toujours seul avec elle, toujours glacé de sa présence, toujours courbé sous son poids!

Autrefois, car il me semble qu’il y a plutôt des années que des semaines, j’étais un homme comme un autre homme. Chaque jour, chaque heure, chaque minute avait son idée. Mon esprit, jeune et riche, était plein de fantaisies. Il s’amusait à me les dérouler les unes après les autres, sans ordre et sans fin, brodant d’inépuisables arabesques cette rude et mince étoffe de la vie. C’étaient des jeunes filles, de splendides chapes d’évêque, des batailles gagnées, des théâtres pleins de bruit et de lumière, et puis encore des jeunes filles et de sombres promenades la nuit sous les larges bras des marronniers. C’était toujours fête dans mon imagination. Je pouvais penser à ce que je voulais, j’étais libre.

Maintenant je suis captif. Mon corps est aux fers dans un cachot, mon esprit est en prison dans une idée. Une horrible, une sanglante, une implacable idée! Je n’ai plus qu’une pensée, qu’une conviction, qu’une certitude: condamné à mort!

Quoi que je fasse, elle est toujours là, cette pensée infernale, comme un spectre de plomb à mes côtés, seule et jalouse, chassant toute distraction, face à face avec moi misérable, et me secouant de ses deux mains de glace quand je veux détourner la tête ou fermer les yeux. Elle se glisse sous toutes les formes où mon esprit voudrait la fuir, se mêle comme un refrain horrible à toutes les paroles qu’on m’adresse, se colle avec moi aux grilles hideuses de mon cachot; m’obsède éveillé, épie mon sommeil convulsif, et reparaît dans mes rêves sous la forme d’un couteau.

Je viens de m’éveiller en sursaut, poursuivi par elle et me disant: — Ah! ce n’est qu’un rêve! — Hé bien! avant même que mes yeux lourds aient eu le temps de s’entr’ouvrir assez pour voir cette fatale pensée écrite dans l’horrible réalité qui m’entoure, sur la dalle mouillée et suante de ma cellule, dans les rayons pâles de ma lampe de nuit, dans la trame grossière de la toile de mes vêtements, sur la sombre figure du soldat de garde dont la giberne reluit à travers la grille du cachot, il me semble que déjà une voix a murmuré à mon oreille: — Condamné à mort!

II

C’était par une belle matinée d’août.

Il y avait trois jours que mon procès était entamé; trois jours que mon nom et mon crime ralliaient chaque matin une nuée de spectateurs, qui venaient s’abattre sur les bancs de la salle d’audience comme des corbeaux autour d’un cadavre; trois jours que toute cette fantasmagorie des juges, des témoins, des avocats, des procureurs du roi, passait et repassait devant moi, tantôt grotesque, tantôt sanglante, toujours sombre et fatale. Les deux premières nuits, d’inquiétude et de terreur, je n’en avais pu dormir; la troisième, j’en avais dormi d’ennui et de fatigue. À minuit, j’avais laissé les jurés délibérant. On m’avait ramené sur la paille de mon cachot, et j’étais tombé sur-le-champ dans un sommeil profond, dans un sommeil d’oubli. C’étaient les premières heures de repos depuis bien des jours.

J’étais encore au plus profond de ce profond sommeil lorsqu’on vint me réveiller. Cette fois il ne suffit point du pas lourd et des souliers ferrés du guichetier, du cliquetis de son noeud de clefs, du grincement rauque des verrous; il fallut pour me tirer de ma léthargie sa rude voix à mon oreille et sa main rude sur mon bras. — Levez-vous donc! — J’ouvris les yeux, je me dressai effaré sur mon séant. En ce moment, par l’étroite et haute fenêtre de ma cellule, je vis au plafond du corridor voisin, seul ciel qu’il me fût donné d’entrevoir ce reflet jaune où des yeux habitués aux ténèbres d’une prison savent si bien reconnaître le soleil. J’aime le soleil.

— Il fait beau, dis-je au guichetier.

Il resta un moment sans me répondre, comme ne sachant si cela valait la peine de dépenser une parole; puis avec quelque effort il murmura brusquement:

— C’est possible.

Je demeurais immobile, l’esprit à demi endormi, la bouche souriante, l’oeil fixé sur cette douce réverbération dorée qui diaprait le plafond.

— Voilà une belle journée, répétai-je.

— Oui, me répondit l’homme, on vous attend.

Ce peu de mots, comme le fil qui rompt le vol de l’insecte, me rejeta violemment dans la réalité. Je revis soudain, comme dans la lumière d’un éclair, la sombre salle des assises, le fer à cheval des juges chargés de haillons ensanglantés, les trois rangs de témoins aux faces stupides, les deux gendarmes aux deux bouts de mon banc, et les robes noires s’agiter, et les têtes de la foule fourmiller au fond dans l’ombre, et s’arrêter sur moi le regard fixe de ces douze jurés, qui avaient veillé pendant que je dormais!

Je me levai; mes dents claquaient, mes mains tremblaient et ne savaient où trouver mes vêtements, mes jambes étaient faibles. Au premier pas que je fis, je trébuchai comme un portefaix trop chargé. Cependant je suivis le geôlier.

Les deux gendarmes m’attendaient au seuil de la cellule. On me remit les menottes. Cela avait une petite serrure compliquée qu’ils fermèrent avec soin. Je laissai faire; c’était une machine sur une machine.

Nous traversâmes une cour intérieure. L’air vif du matin me ranima. Je levai la tête. Le ciel était bleu, et les rayons chauds du soleil, découpés par les longues cheminées, traçaient de grands angles de lumière au faîte des murs hauts et sombres de la prison. Il faisait beau en effet.

Nous montâmes un escalier tournant en vis; nous passâmes un corridor, puis un autre, puis un troisième; puis une porte basse s’ouvrit. Un air chaud, mêlé de bruit, vint me frapper au visage; c’était le souffle de la foule dans la salle des assises. J’entrai.

Il y eut à mon apparition une rumeur d’armes et de voix. Les banquettes se déplacèrent bruyamment, les cloisons craquèrent; et, pendant que je traversais la longue salle entre deux masses de peuple murées de soldats, il me semblait que j’étais le centre auquel se rattachaient les fils qui faisaient mouvoir toutes ces faces béantes et penchées.

En cet instant je m’aperçus que j’étais sans fers; mais je ne pus me rappeler où ni quand on me les avait ôtés.

Alors il se fit un grand silence. J’étais parvenu à ma place. Au moment où le tumulte cessa dans la foule, il cessa aussi dans mes idées. Je compris tout à coup clairement ce que je n’avais fait qu’entrevoir confusément jusqu’alors, que le moment décisif était venu, et que j’étais là pour entendre ma sentence.

L’explique qui pourra, de la manière dont cette idée me vint elle ne me causa pas de terreur. Les fenêtres étaient ouvertes; l’air et le bruit de la ville arrivaient librement du dehors; la salle était claire comme pour une noce; les gais rayons du soleil traçaient çà et là la figure lumineuse des croisées, tantôt allongée sur le plancher, tantôt développée sur les tables, tantôt brisée à l’angle des murs; et de ces losanges éclatants aux fenêtres chaque rayon découpait dans l’air un grand prisme de poussière d’or.

Les juges, au fond de la salle, avaient l’air satisfait, probablement de la joie d’avoir bientôt fini. Le visage du président, doucement éclairé par le reflet d’une vitre, avait quelque chose de calme et de bon; et un jeune assesseur causait presque gaiement en chiffonnant son rabat avec une jolie dame en chapeau rose, placée par faveur derrière lui.

Les jurés seuls paraissaient blêmes et abattus, mais c’était apparemment de fatigue d’avoir veillé toute la nuit. Quelques-uns bâillaient. Rien, dans leur contenance, n’annonçait des hommes qui viennent de porter une sentence de mort; et sur les figures de ces bons bourgeois je ne devinais qu’une grande envie de dormir.

En face de moi une fenêtre était toute grande ouverte. J’entendais rire sur le quai des marchandes de fleurs; et, au bord de la croisée, une jolie petite plante jaune, toute pénétrée d’un rayon de soleil, jouait avec le vent dans une fente de la pierre.

Comment une idée sinistre aurait-elle pu poindre parmi tant de gracieuses sensations? Inondé d’air et de soleil, il me fut impossible de penser à autre chose qu’à la liberté; l’espérance vint rayonner en moi comme le jour autour de moi; et, confiant, j’attendis ma sentence comme on attend la délivrance et la vie.

Cependant mon avocat arriva. On l’attendait. Il venait de déjeuner copieusement et de bon appétit. Parvenu à sa place, il se pencha vers moi avec un sourire.

— J’espère, me dit-il.

— N’est-ce pas? répondis-je, léger et souriant aussi.

— Oui, reprit-il; je ne sais rien encore de leur déclaration, mais ils auront sans doute écarté la préméditation, et alors ce ne sera que les travaux forcés à perpétuité.

— Que dites-vous là, monsieur? répliquai-je indigné; plutôt cent fois la mort!

Oui, la mort! — Et d’ailleurs, me répétait je ne sais quelle voix intérieure, qu’est-ce que je risque à dire cela? A-t-on jamais prononcé sentence de mort autrement qu’à minuit, aux flambeaux, dans une salle sombre et noire, et par une froide nuit de pluie et d’hiver? Mais au mois d’août, à huit heures du matin, un si beau jour, ces bons jurés, c’est impossible! Et mes yeux revenaient se fixer sur la jolie fleur jaune au soleil.

Tout à coup le président, qui n’attendait que l’avocat, m’invita à me lever. La troupe porta les armes; comme par un mouvement électrique, toute l’assemblée fut debout au même instant. Une figure insignifiante et nulle, placée à une table au-dessous du tribunal, c’était, je pense, le greffier, prit la parole, et lut le verdict que les jurés avaient prononcé en mon absence. Une sueur froide sortit de tous mes membres; je m’appuyai au mur pour ne pas tomber.

— Avocat, avez-vous quelque chose à dire sur l’application de la peine? demanda le président.

J’aurais eu, moi, tout à dire, mais rien ne me vint. Ma langue resta collée à mon palais.

Le défenseur se leva.

Je compris qu’il cherchait à atténuer la déclaration du jury, et à mettre dessous, au lieu de la peine qu’elle provoquait, l’autre peine, celle que j’avais été si blessé de lui voir espérer.

Il fallut que l’indignation fût bien forte, pour se faire jour à travers les mille émotions qui se disputaient ma pensée. Je voulus répéter à haute voix ce que je lui avais déjà dit: Plutôt cent fois la mort! Mais l’haleine me manqua et je ne pus que l’arrêter rudement par le bras, en criant avec une force convulsive: Non!

Le procureur général combattit l’avocat, et je l’écoutai avec une satisfaction stupide. Puis les juges sortirent, puis ils rentrèrent, et le président me lut mon arrêt.

— Condamné à mort! dit la foule; et, tandis qu’on m’emmenait, tout ce peuple se rua sur mes pas avec le fracas d’un édifice qui se démolit. Moi je marchais, ivre et stupéfait. Une révolution venait de se faire en moi. Jusqu’à l’arrêt de mort, je m’étais senti respirer, palpiter, vivre dans le même milieu que les autres hommes; maintenant je distinguais clairement comme une clôture entre le monde et moi. Rien ne m’apparaissait plus sous le même aspect qu’auparavant. Ces larges fenêtres lumineuses, ce beau soleil, ce ciel pur, cette jolie fleur, tout cela était blanc et pâle, de la couleur d’un linceul. Ces hommes, ces femmes, ces enfants qui se pressaient sur mon passage, je leur trouvais des airs de fantômes.

Au bas de l’escalier, une noire et sale voiture grillée m’attendait. Au moment d’y monter, je regardai au hasard dans la place. — Un condamné à mort! criaient les passants en courant vers la voiture.

À travers le nuage qui me semblait s’être interposé entre les choses et moi, je distinguai deux jeunes filles qui me suivaient avec des yeux avides; — Bon, dit la plus jeune en battant des mains, ce sera dans six semaines!

III

Condamné à mort!

Eh bien, pourquoi non? Les hommes, je me rappelle l'avoir lu dans je ne sais quel livre où il n'y avait que cela de bon, les hommes sont tous condamnés à mort avec des sursis indéfinis. Qu'y a-t-il donc de si changé à ma situation?

Depuis l'heure où mon arrêt m'a été prononcé, combien sont morts qui s'arrangeaient pour une longue vie! Combien m'ont devancé qui, jeunes, libres et sains, comptaient bien aller voir tel jour tomber ma tête en place de Grève! Combien d'ici là peut-être qui marchent et respirent au grand air, entrent et sortent à leur gré, et qui me devanceront encore!

Et puis, qu'est-ce que la vie a donc de si regrettable pour moi? En vérité, le jour sombre et le pain noir du cachot, la portion de bouillon maigre puisée au baquet des galériens, être rudoyé, moi qui suis raffiné par l'éducation, être brutalisé des guichetiers et des gardes-chiourme, ne pas voir un être humain qui me croie digne d'une parole et à qui je le rende, sans cesse tressaillir et de ce que j'ai fait et de ce qu'on me fera; voilà à peu près les seuls biens que puisse m'enlever le bourreau.

Ah! n'importe, c'est horrible!

IV

La voiture noire me transporta ici, dans ce hideux Bicêtre.

Vu de loin, cet édifice a quelque majesté. Il se déroule à l’horizon, au front d’une colline, et à distance garde quelque chose de son ancienne splendeur, un air de château de roi. Mais à mesure que vous approchez, le palais devient masure. Les pignons dégradés blessent l’oeil. Je ne sais quoi de honteux et d’appauvri salit ces royales façades; on dirait que les murs ont une lèpre. Plus de vitres, plus de glaces aux fenêtres; mais de massifs barreaux de fer entre-croisés, auxquels se colle ça et là quelque hâve figure d’un galérien ou d’un fou.

C’est la vie vue de près.

V

À peine arrivé, des mains de fer s’emparèrent de moi. On multiplia les précautions; point de couteau, point de fourchette pour mes repas; la camisole de force, une espèce de sac de toile à voilure, emprisonna mes bras; on répondait de ma vie. Je m’étais pourvu en cassation. On pouvait avoir pour six ou sept semaines cette affaire onéreuse, et il importait de me conserver sain et sauf à la place de Grève.

Les premiers jours on me traita avec une douceur qui m’était horrible. Les égards d’un guichetier sentent l’échafaud. Par bonheur, au bout de peu de jours, l’habitude reprit le dessus; ils me confondirent avec les autres prisonniers dans une commune brutalité, et n’eurent plus de ces distinctions inaccoutumées de politesse qui me remettaient sans cesse le bourreau sous les yeux. Ce ne fut pas la seule amélioration. Ma jeunesse, ma docilité, les soins de l’aumônier de la prison, et surtout quelques mots en latin que j’adressai au concierge, qui ne les comprit pas, m’ouvrirent la promenade une fois par semaine avec les autres détenus, et firent disparaître la camisole où j’étais paralysé. Après bien des hésitations, on m’a aussi donné de l’encre, du papier, des plumes, et une lampe de nuit.

Tous les dimanches, après la messe, on me lâche dans le préau, à l’heure de la récréation. Là, je cause avec les détenus; il le faut bien. Ils sont bonnes gens, les misérables. Ils me content leurs tours, ce serait à faire horreur; mais je sais qu’ils se vantent. Ils m’apprennent à parler argot, à rouscailler bigorne, comme ils disent. C’est toute une langue entée sur la langue générale comme une espèce d’excroissance hideuse, comme une verrue. Quelquefois une énergie singulière, un pittoresque effrayant: il y a du raisiné sur le trimar (du sang sur le chemin), épouser la veuve (être pendu), comme si la corde du gibet était veuve de tous les pendus. La tête d’un voleur a deux noms: la sorbonne, quand elle médite, raisonne et conseille le crime; la tronche, quand le bourreau la coupe. Quelquefois de l’esprit de vaudeville: un cachemire d’osier (une hotte de chiffonnier), la menteuse (la langue); et puis partout, à chaque instant, des mots bizarres, mystérieux, laids et sordides, venus on ne sait d’où: le taule (le bourreau), la cône (la mort), la placarde (la place des exécutions). On dirait des crapauds et des araignées. Quand on entend parler cette langue, cela fait l’effet de quelque chose de sale et de poudreux, d’une liasse de haillons que l’on secouerait devant vous.

Du moins ces hommes-là me plaignent, ils sont les seuls. Les geôliers, les guichetiers, les porte-clefs, — je ne leur en veux pas — causent et rient, et parlent de moi, devant moi, comme d’une chose.

VI

Je me suis dit:

— Puisque j’ai le moyen d’écrire, pourquoi ne le ferais-je pas? Mais quoi écrire? Pris entre quatre murailles de pierre nue et froide, sans liberté pour mes pas, sans horizon pour mes yeux, pour unique distraction machinalement occupé tout le jour à suivre la marche lente de ce carré blanchâtre que le judas de ma porte découpe vis-à-vis sur le mur sombre, et, comme je le disais tout à l’heure, seul à seul avec une idée, une idée de crime et de châtiment, de meurtre et de mort! Est-ce que je puis avoir quelque chose à dire, moi qui n’ai plus rien à faire dans ce monde? Et que trouverai-je dans ce cerveau flétri et vide qui vaille la peine d’être écrit?

Pourquoi non? Si tout, autour de moi, est monotone et décoloré, n’y a-t-il pas en moi une tempête, une lutte, une tragédie? Cette idée fixe qui me possède ne se présente-t-elle pas à moi à chaque heure, à chaque instant, sous une nouvelle forme, toujours plus hideuse et plus ensanglantée à mesure que le terme approche? Pourquoi n’essayerais-je pas de me dire à moi-même tout ce que j’éprouve de violent et d’inconnu dans la situation abandonnée où me voilà? Certes, la matière est riche; et, si abrégée que soit ma vie, il y aura bien encore dans les angoisses, dans les terreurs, dans les tortures qui la rempliront, de cette heure à la dernière, de quoi user cette plume et tarir cet encrier. — D’ailleurs ces angoisses, le seul moyen d’en moins souffrir, c’est de les observer, et les peindre m’en distraira.

Et puis, ce que j’écrirai ainsi ne sera peut-être pas inutile. Ce journal de mes souffrances, heure par heure, minute par minute, supplice par supplice, si j’ai la force de le mener jusqu’au moment où il me sera physiquement impossible de continuer, cette histoire, nécessairement inachevée, mais aussi complète que possible, de mes sensations, ne portera-t-elle point avec elle un grand et profond enseignement? N’y aurait-il pas dans ce procès-verbal de la pensée agonisante, dans cette progression toujours croissante de douleurs, dans cette espèce d’autopsie intellectuelle d’un condamné, plus d’une leçon pour ceux qui condamnent? Peut-être cette lecture leur rendra-t-elle la main moins légère, quand il s’agira quelque autre fois de jeter une tête qui pense, une tête d’homme, dans ce qu’ils appellent la balance de la justice? Peut-être n’ont-ils jamais réfléchi, les malheureux, à cette lente succession de tortures que renferme la formule expéditive d’un arrêt de mort? Se sont-ils jamais seulement arrêtés à cette idée poignante que dans l’homme qu’ils retranchent il y a une intelligence, une intelligence qui avait compté sur la vie, une âme qui ne s’est point disposée pour la mort? Non. Ils ne voient dans tout cela que la chute verticale d’un couteau triangulaire, et pensent sans doute que, pour le condamné, il n’y a rien avant, rien après.

Ces feuilles les détromperont. Publiées peut-être un jour, elles arrêteront quelques moments leur esprit sur les souffrances de l’esprit; car ce sont celles-là qu’ils ne soupçonnent pas. Ils sont triomphants de pouvoir tuer sans presque faire souffrir le corps. Eh! c’est bien de cela qu’il s’agit! Qu’est-ce que la douleur physique près de la douleur morale! Horreur et pitié, des lois faites ainsi! Un jour viendra, et peut-être ces Mémoires, derniers confidents d’un misérable, y auront-ils contribué…

À moins qu’après ma mort le vent ne joue dans le préau avec ces morceaux de papier souillés de boue, ou qu’ils n’aillent pourrir à la pluie, collés en étoiles à la vitre cassée d’un guichetier.

VII

Que ce que j’écris ici puisse être un jour utile à d’autres, que cela arrête le juge prêt à juger, que cela sauve des malheureux, innocents ou coupables, de l’agonie à laquelle je suis condamné, pourquoi? à quoi bon? qu’importe? Quand ma tête aura été coupée, qu’est-ce que cela me fait qu’on en coupe d’autres? Est-ce que vraiment j’ai pu penser ces folies? Jeter bas l’échafaud après que j’y aurai monté! je vous demande un peu ce qui m’en reviendra.

Quoi! le soleil, le printemps, les champs pleins de fleurs, les oiseaux qui s’éveillent le matin, les nuages, les arbres, la nature, la liberté, la vie, tout cela n’est plus à moi?

Ah! c’est moi qu’il faudrait sauver! — Est-il bien vrai que cela ne se peut, qu’il faudra mourir demain, aujourd’hui peut-être, que cela est ainsi? Ô Dieu! l’horrible idée à se briser la tête au mur de son cachot!

VIII

Comptons ce qui me reste.

Trois jours de délai après l’arrêt prononcé pour le pourvoi en cassation.

Huit jours d’oubli au parquet de la cour d’assises, après quoi les pièces, comme ils disent, sont envoyées au ministre.

Quinze jours d’attente chez le ministre, qui ne sait seulement pas qu’elles existent, et qui, cependant, est supposé les transmettre, après examen, à la cour de cassation.

Là, classement, numérotage, enregistrement; car la guillotine est encombrée, et chacun ne doit passer qu’à son tour.

Quinze jours pour veiller à ce qu’il ne vous soit pas fait de passe-droit.

Enfin la cour s’assemble, d’ordinaire un jeudi, rejette vingt pourvois en masse, et renvoie le tout au ministre, qui renvoie au procureur général, qui renvoie au bourreau. Trois jours.

Le matin du quatrième jour, le substitut du procureur général se dit, en mettant sa cravate: — Il faut pourtant que cette affaire finisse. — Alors, si le substitut du greffier n’a pas quelque déjeuner d’amis qui l’en empêche, l’ordre d’exécution est minuté, rédigé, mis au net, expédié, et le lendemain dès l’aube on entend dans la place de Grève clouer une charpente, et dans les carrefours hurler à pleine voix des crieurs enroués.

En tout six semaines. La petite fille avait raison.

Or, voilà cinq semaines au moins, six peut-être, je n’ose compter, que je suis dans ce cabanon de Bicêtre, et il me semble qu’il y a trois jours, c’était jeudi.

IX

Je viens de faire mon testament.

À quoi bon? Je suis condamné aux frais, et tout ce que j'ai y suffira à peine. La guillotine, c'est fort cher.

Je laisse une mère, je laisse une femme, je laisse un enfant.

Une petite fille de trois ans, douce, rose, frêle, avec de grands yeux noirs et de longs cheveux châtains.

Elle avait deux ans et un mois quand je l'ai vue pour la dernière fois.

Ainsi, après ma mort, trois femmes sans fils, sans mari, sans père; trois orphelines de différente espèce; trois veuves du fait de la loi.

J'admets que je sois justement puni; ces innocentes, qu'ont-elles fait? N'importe; on les déshonore, on les ruine; c'est la justice.

Ce n'est pas que ma pauvre vieille mère m'inquiète; elle a soixante-quatre ans, elle mourra du coup. Ou si elle va quelques jours encore, pourvu que jusqu'au dernier moment elle ait un peu de cendre chaude dans sa chaufferette, elle ne dira rien.

Ma femme ne m'inquiète pas non plus; elle est déjà d'une mauvaise santé et d'un esprit faible, elle mourra aussi.

À moins qu'elle ne devienne folle. On dit que cela fait vivre; mais du moins, l'intelligence ne souffre pas; elle dort, elle est comme morte.

Mais ma fille, mon enfant, ma pauvre petite Marie, qui rit, qui joue, qui chante à cette heure, et ne pense à rien, c'est celle-là qui me fait mal!

X

Voici ce que c'est que mon cachot:

Huit pieds carrés; quatre murailles de pierre de taille qui s'appuient à angle droit sur un pavé de dalles exhaussé d'un degré au-dessus du corridor extérieur.

À droite de la porte, en entrant, une espèce d'enfoncement qui fait la dérision d'une alcôve. On y jette une botte de paille où le prisonnier est censé reposer et dormir, vêtu d'un pantalon de toile et d'une veste de coutil, hiver comme été.

Au-dessus de ma tête, en guise de ciel, une noire voûte en ogive — c'est ainsi que cela s'appelle — à laquelle d'épaisses toiles d'araignée pendent comme des haillons.

Du reste, pas de fenêtres, pas même de soupirail; une porte où le fer cache le bois.

Je me trompe; au centre de la porte, vers le haut, une ouverture de neuf pouces carrés, coupée d'une grille en croix, et que le guichetier peut fermer la nuit.

Au dehors, un assez long corridor, éclairé, aéré au moyen de soupiraux étroits au haut du mur, et divisé en compartiments de maçonnerie qui communiquent entre eux par une série de portes cintrées et basses; chacun de ces compartiments sert en quelque sorte d'antichambre à un cachot pareil au mien. C'est dans ces cachots que l'on met les forçats condamnés par le directeur de la prison à des peines de discipline. Les trois premiers cabanons sont réservés aux condamnés à mort, parce qu'étant plus voisins de la geôle, ils sont plus commodes pour le geôlier.

Ces cachots sont tout ce qui reste de l'ancien château de Bicêtre tel qu'il fut bâti, dans le quinzième siècle, par le cardinal de Winchester, le même qui fit brûler Jeanne d'Arc. J'ai entendu dire cela à des curieux qui sont venus me voir l'autre jour dans ma loge, et qui me regardaient à distance comme une bête de la ménagerie. Le guichetier a eu cent sous.

J'oubliais de dire qu'il y a nuit et jour un factionnaire de garde à la porte de mon cachot, et que mes yeux ne peuvent se lever vers la lucarne carrée sans rencontrer ses deux yeux fixes toujours ouverts.

Du reste, on suppose qu'il y a de l'air et du jour dans cette boîte de pierre.

XI

Puisque le jour ne paraît pas encore, que faire de la nuit? Il m’est venu une idée. Je me suis levé et j’ai promené ma lampe sur les quatre murs de ma cellule. Ils sont couverts d’écritures, de dessins, de figures bizarres, de noms qui se mêlent et s’effacent les uns les autres. Il semble que chaque condamné ait voulu laisser trace, ici du moins. C’est du crayon, de la craie, du charbon, des lettres noires, blanches, grises, souvent de profondes entailles dans la pierre, çà et là des caractères rouilles qu’on dirait écrits avec du sang. Certes, si j’avais l’esprit plus libre, je prendrais intérêt à ce livre étrange qui se développe page à page à mes yeux sur chaque pierre de ce cachot. J’aimerais à recomposer un tout de ces fragments de pensée, épars sur la dalle; à retrouver chaque homme sous chaque nom; à rendre le sens et la vie à ces inscriptions mutilées, à ces phrases démembrées, à ces mots tronqués, corps sans tête, comme ceux qui les ont écrits.

À la hauteur de mon chevet, il y a deux coeurs enflammés, percés d’une flèche, et au-dessus: Amour pour la vie. Le malheureux ne prenait pas un long engagement.

À côté, une espèce de chapeau à trois cornes avec une petite figure grossièrement dessinée au-dessus, et ces mots: Vive l’empereur!

Encore des coeurs enflammés, avec cette inscription, caractéristique dans une prison: J’aime et j’adore Mathieu Danvin. JACQUES.

Sur le mur opposé on lit ce mot: Papavoine. Le P majuscule est brodé d’arabesques et enjolivé avec soin.

Un couplet d’une chanson obscène.

Un bonnet de liberté sculpté assez profondément dans la pierre, avec ceci dessous: — Bories. — La République. C’était un des quatre sous-officiers de La Rochelle. Pauvre jeune homme! Que leurs prétendues nécessités politiques sont hideuses! Pour une idée, pour une rêverie, pour une abstraction, cette horrible réalité qu’on appelle la guillotine! Et moi qui me plaignais, moi, misérable qui ai commis un véritable crime, qui ai versé du sang!

Je n’irai pas plus loin dans ma recherche. — Je viens de voir, crayonnée en blanc au coin du mur, une image épouvantable, la figure de cet échafaud qui, à l’heure qu’il est, se dresse peut-être pour moi. — La lampe a failli me tomber des mains.

XII

Je suis revenu m’asseoir précipitamment sur ma paille, la tête dans les genoux. Puis mon effroi d’enfant s’est dissipé, et une étrange curiosité m’a repris de continuer la lecture de mon mur.

À côté du nom de Papavoine j’ai arraché une énorme toile d’araignée, tout épaissie par la poussière et tendue à l’angle de la muraille. Sous cette toile il y avait quatre ou cinq noms parfaitement lisibles, parmi d’autres dont il ne reste rien qu’une tache sur le mur. — DAUTUN, 1815. — POULAIN, 1818. — JEAN MARTIN, 1821. — CASTAING, 1823. J’ai lu ces noms, et de lugubres souvenirs me sont venus. Dautun, celui qui a coupé son frère en quartiers, et qui allait la nuit dans Paris jetant la tête dans une fontaine, et le tronc dans un égout; Poulain, celui qui a assassiné sa femme; Jean Martin, celui qui a tiré un coup de pistolet à son père au moment où le vieillard ouvrait une fenêtre; Castaing, ce médecin qui a empoisonné son ami, et qui, le soignant dans cette dernière maladie qu’il lui avait faite, au lieu de remède lui redonnait du poison; et auprès de ceux-là, Papavoine, l’horrible fou qui tuait les enfants à coups de couteau sur la tête!

Voilà, me disais-je, et un frisson de fièvre me montait dans les reins, voilà quels ont été avant moi les hôtes de cette cellule. C’est ici, sur la même dalle où je suis, qu’ils ont pensé leurs dernières pensées, ces hommes de meurtre et de sang! C’est autour de ce mur, dans ce carré étroit, que leurs derniers pas ont tourné comme ceux d’une bête fauve. Ils se sont succédé à de courts intervalles; il paraît que ce cachot ne désemplit pas. Ils ont laissé la place chaude, et c’est à moi qu’ils l’ont laissée. J’irai à mon tour les rejoindre au cimetière de Clamart, où l’herbe pousse si bien!

Je ne suis ni visionnaire, ni superstitieux, il est probable que ces idées me donnaient un accès de fièvre; mais, pendant que je rêvais ainsi, il m’a semblé tout à coup que ces noms fatals étaient écrits avec du feu sur le mur noir; un tintement de plus en plus précipité a éclaté dans mes oreilles; une lueur rousse a rempli mes yeux; et puis il m’a paru que le cachot était plein d’hommes, d’hommes étranges qui portaient leur tête dans leur main gauche, et la portaient par la bouche, parce qu’il n’y avait pas de chevelure. Tous me montraient le poing, excepté le parricide.

J’ai fermé les yeux avec horreur, alors j’ai tout vu plus distinctement.

Rêve, vision ou réalité, je serais devenu fou, si une impression brusque ne m’eût réveillé à temps.

J’étais près de tomber à la renverse lorsque j’ai senti se traîner sur mon pied nu un ventre froid et des pattes velues; c’était l’araignée que j’avais dérangée et qui s’enfuyait.

Cela m’a dépossédé. — Ô les épouvantables spectres! — Non, c’était une fumée, une imagination de mon cerveau vide et convulsif. Chimère à la Macbeth! Les morts sont morts, ceux-là surtout. Ils sont bien cadenassés dans le sépulcre. Ce n’est pas là une prison dont on s’évade. Comment se fait-il donc que j’aie eu peur ainsi?

La porte du tombeau ne s’ouvre pas en dedans.

XIII

J’ai vu, ces jours passés, une chose hideuse.

Il était à peine jour, et la prison était pleine de bruit. On entendait ouvrir et fermer les lourdes portes, grincer les verrous et les cadenas de fer, carillonner les trousseaux de clefs entre-choqués à la ceinture des geôliers, trembler les escaliers du haut en bas sous des pas précipités, et des voix s’appeler et se répondre des deux bouts des longs corridors. Mes voisins de cachot, les forçats en punition, étaient plus gais qu’à l’ordinaire. Tout Bicêtre semblait rire, chanter, courir, danser.

Moi, seul muet dans ce vacarme, seul immobile dans ce tumulte, étonné et attentif, j’écoutais.

Un geôlier passa.

Je me hasardai à l’appeler et à lui demander si c’était fête dans la prison.

— Fête si l’on veut! me répondit-il. C’est aujourd’hui qu’on ferre les forçats qui doivent partir demain pour Toulon. Voulez-vous voir? cela vous amusera.

C’était en effet, pour un reclus solitaire, une bonne fortune qu’un spectacle, si odieux qu’il fût. J’acceptai l’amusement.

Le guichetier prit les précautions d’usage pour s’assurer de moi, puis me conduisit dans une petite cellule vide, et absolument démeublée, qui avait une fenêtre grillée, mais une véritable fenêtre à hauteur d’appui, et à travers laquelle on apercevait réellement le ciel.

— Tenez, me dit-il, d’ici vous verrez et vous entendrez. Vous serez seul dans votre loge, comme le roi.

Puis il sortit et referma sur moi serrures, cadenas et verrous.

La fenêtre donnait sur une cour carrée assez vaste, et autour de laquelle s’élevait des quatre côtés, comme une muraille, un grand bâtiment de pierre de taille à six étages. Rien de plus dégradé, de plus nu, de plus misérable à l’oeil que cette quadruple façade percée d’une multitude de fenêtres grillées auxquelles se tenaient collés, du bas en haut, une foule de visages maigres et blêmes, pressés les uns au-dessus des autres, comme les pierres d’un mur, et tous pour ainsi dire encadrés dans les entre-croisements des barreaux de fer. C’étaient les prisonniers, spectateurs de la cérémonie en attendant leur jour d’être acteurs. On eût dit des âmes en peine aux soupiraux du purgatoire qui donnent sur l’enfer.

Tous regardaient en silence la cour vide encore. Ils attendaient. Parmi ces figures éteintes et mornes, ça et là brillaient quelques yeux perçants et vifs comme des points de feu.

Le carré de prisons qui enveloppe la cour ne se referme pas sur lui-même. Un des quatre pans de l'édifice (celui qui regarde le levant) est coupé vers son milieu, et ne se rattache au pan voisin que par une grille de fer. Cette grille s'ouvre sur une seconde cour, plus petite que la première, et, comme elle, bloquée de murs et de pignons noirâtres.

Tout autour de la cour principale, des bancs de pierre s'adossent à la muraille. Au milieu se dresse une tige de fer courbée, destinée à porter une lanterne.

Midi sonna. Une grande porte cochère, cachée sous un enfoncement, s'ouvrit brusquement. Une charrette, escortée d'espèces de soldats sales et honteux, en uniformes bleus, à épaulettes rouges et à bandoulières jaunes, entra lourdement dans la cour avec un bruit de ferraille. C'était la chiourme et les chaînes.

Au même instant, comme si ce bruit réveillait tout le bruit de la prison, les spectateurs des fenêtres, jusqu'alors silencieux et immobiles, éclatèrent en cris de joie, en chansons, en menaces, en imprécations mêlées d'éclats de rire poignants à entendre. On eût cru voir des masques de démons. Sur chaque visage parut une grimace, tous les poings sortirent des barreaux, toutes les voix hurlèrent, tous les yeux flamboyèrent, et je fus épouvanté de voir tant d'étincelles reparaître dans cette cendre.

Cependant les argousins, parmi lesquels on distinguait, à leurs vêtements propres et à leur effroi, quelques curieux venus de Paris, les argousins se mirent tranquillement à leur besogne. L'un d'eux monta sur la charrette, et jeta à ses camarades les chaînes, les colliers de voyage, et les liasses de pantalons de toile. Alors ils se dépecèrent le travail; les uns allèrent étendre dans un coin de la cour les longues chaînes qu'ils nommaient dans leur argot les ficelles; les autres déployèrent sur le pavé les taffetas, les chemises et les pantalons; tandis que les plus sagaces examinaient un à un, sous l'oeil de leur capitaine, petit vieillard trapu, les carcans de fer, qu'ils éprouvaient ensuite en les faisant étinceler sur le pavé. Le tout aux acclamations railleuses des prisonniers, dont la voix n'était dominée que par les rires bruyants des forçats pour qui cela se préparait, et qu'on voyait relégués aux croisées de la vieille prison qui donne sur la petite cour.

Quand ces apprêts furent terminés, un monsieur brodé en argent, qu'on appelait monsieur l'inspecteur donna un ordre au directeur de la prison; et un moment après voilà que deux ou trois portes basses vomirent presque en même temps, et comme par bouffées, dans la cour, des nuées d'hommes hideux, hurlants et déguenillés. C'étaient les forçats.

À leur entrée, redoublement de joie aux fenêtres. Quelques-uns d'entre eux, les grands noms du bagne, furent salués d'acclamations et d'applaudissements qu'ils recevaient avec une sorte de modestie fière. La plupart avaient des espèces de chapeaux tressés de leurs propres mains, avec la paille du cachot, et toujours d'une forme étrange, afin que dans les villes où l'on passerait le chapeau fît remarquer la tête. Ceux-là étaient plus applaudis encore. Un, surtout, excita des transports d'enthousiasme; un jeune homme de dix-sept ans, qui avait un visage de jeune fille. Il sortait du cachot, où il était au secret depuis huit jours; de sa botte de paille il s'était fait un vêtement qui l'enveloppait de la tête aux pieds, et il entra dans la cour en faisant la roue sur lui-même avec l'agilité d'un serpent. C'était un baladin condamné pour vol. Il y eut une rage de battements de mains et de cris de joie. Les galériens y répondaient, et c'était une chose effrayante que cet échange de gaietés entre les forçats en titre et les forçats aspirants. La société avait beau; être là, représentée par les geôliers et les curieux épouvantés, le crime la narguait en face, et de ce châtiment horrible faisait une fête de famille.

À mesure qu'ils arrivaient, on les poussait, entre deux haies de gardes-chiourme, dans la petite cour grillée, où la visite des médecins les attendait. C'est là que tous tentaient un dernier effort pour éviter le voyage, alléguant quelque excuse de santé, les yeux malades, la jambe boiteuse, la main mutilée. Mais presque toujours on les trouvait bons pour le bagne; et alors chacun se résignait avec insouciance, oubliant en peu de minutes sa prétendue infirmité de toute la vie.

La grille de la petite cour se rouvrit. Un gardien fit l'appel par ordre alphabétique; et alors ils sortirent un à un, et chaque forçat s'alla ranger debout dans un coin de la grande cour, près d'un compagnon donné par le hasard de sa lettre initiale. Ainsi chacun se voit réduit à lui-même; chacun porte sa chaîne pour soi, côte à côte avec un inconnu; et si par hasard un forçat a un ami, la chaîne l'en sépare. Dernière des misères.

Quand il y en eut à peu près une trentaine de sortis, on referma la grille. Un argousin les aligna avec son bâton, jeta devant chacun d'eux une chemise, une veste et un pantalon de grosse toile, puis fit un signe, et tous commencèrent à se déshabiller. Un incident inattendu vint, comme à point nommé, changer cette humiliation en torture.

Jusqu'alors le temps avait été assez beau, et, si la bise d'octobre refroidissait l'air, de temps en temps aussi elle ouvrait ça et là dans les brumes grises du ciel une crevasse par où tombait un rayon de soleil. Mais à peine les forçats se furent-ils dépouillés de leurs haillons de prison, au moment où ils s'offraient nus et debout à la visite soupçonneuse des gardiens, et aux regards curieux des étrangers qui tournaient autour d'eux, pour examiner leurs épaules, le ciel devint noir, une froide averse d'automne éclata brusquement, et se déchargea à torrents dans la cour carrée, sur les têtes découvertes, sur les membres nus des galériens, sur leurs misérables sayons étalés sur le pavé.

En un clin d'oeil le préau se vida de tout ce qui n'était pas argousin ou galérien. Les curieux de Paris allèrent s'abriter sous les auvents des portes.

Cependant la pluie tombait à flots. On ne voyait plus dans la cour que les forçats nus et ruisselants sur le pavé noyé. Un silence morne avait succédé à leurs bruyantes bravades. Ils grelottaient, leurs dents claquaient; leurs jambes maigries, leurs genoux noueux s'entre-choquaient; et c'était pitié de les voir appliquer sur leurs membres bleus ces chemises trempées, ces vestes, ces pantalons dégouttant de pluie. La nudité eût été meilleure.

Un seul, un vieux, avait conservé quelque gaieté. Il s'écria, en s'essuyant avec sa chemise mouillée, que cela n'était pas dans le programme; puis se prit à rire en montrant le poing au ciel.

Quand ils eurent revêtu les habits de route, on les mena par bandes de vingt ou trente à l'autre coin du préau, où les cordons allongés à terre les attendaient. Ces cordons sont de longues et fortes chaînes coupées transversalement de deux en deux pieds par d'autres chaînes plus courtes, à l'extrémité desquelles se rattache un carcan carré, qui s'ouvre au moyen d'une charnière pratiquée à l'un des angles et se ferme à l'angle opposé par un boulon de fer, rivé pour tout le voyage sur le cou du galérien. Quand ces cordons sont développés à terre, ils figurent assez bien la grande arête d'un poisson.

On fit asseoir les galériens dans la boue, sur les pavés inondés; on leur essaya les colliers; puis deux forgerons de la chiourme, armés d'enclumes portatives, les leur rivèrent à froid à grands coups de masses de fer. C'est un moment affreux, où les plus hardis pâlissent. Chaque coup de marteau, asséné sur l’enclume appuyée à leur dos, fait rebondir le menton du patient; le moindre mouvement d’avant en arrière lui ferait sauter le crâne comme une coquille de noix.

Après cette opération, ils devinrent sombres. On n’entendait plus que le grelottement des chaînes, et par intervalles un cri et le bruit sourd du bâton des gardes-chiourme sur les membres des récalcitrants. Il y en eut qui pleurèrent; les vieux frissonnaient et se mordaient les lèvres. Je regardai avec terreur tous ces profils sinistres dans leurs cadres de fer.

Ainsi, après la visite des médecins, la visite des geôliers; après la visite des geôliers, le ferrage. Trois actes à ce spectacle.

Un rayon de soleil reparut. On eût dit qu’il mettait le feu à tous ces cerveaux. Les forçats se levèrent à la fois, comme par un mouvement convulsif. Les cinq cordons se rattachèrent par les mains, et tout à coup se formèrent en ronde immense autour de la branche de la lanterne. Ils tournaient à fatiguer les yeux. Ils chantaient une chanson du bagne, une romance d’argot, sur un air tantôt plaintif, tantôt furieux et gai; on entendait par intervalles des cris grêles, des éclats de rire déchirés et haletants se mêler aux mystérieuses paroles; puis des acclamations furibondes; et les chaînes qui s’entre-choquaient en cadence servaient d’orchestre à ce chant plus rauque que leur bruit. Si je cherchais une image du sabbat, je ne la voudrais ni meilleure ni pire.

On apporta dans le préau un large baquet. Les gardes-chiourme rompirent la danse des forçats à coups de bâton, et les conduisirent à ce baquet, dans lequel on voyait nager je ne sais quelles herbes dans je ne sais quel liquide fumant et sale. Ils mangèrent.

Puis, ayant mangé, ils jetèrent sur le pavé ce qui restait de leur soupe et de leur pain bis, et se remirent à danser et à chanter. Il paraît qu’on leur laisse cette liberté le jour du ferrage et la nuit qui le suit.

J’observais ce spectacle étrange avec une curiosité si avide, si palpitante, si attentive, que je m’étais oublié moi-même. Un profond sentiment de pitié me remuait jusqu’aux entrailles, et leurs rires me faisaient pleurer.

Tout à coup, à travers la rêverie profonde où j’étais tombé, je vis la ronde hurlante s’arrêter et se taire. Puis tous les yeux se tournèrent vers la fenêtre que j’occupais. — Le condamné! le condamné! crièrent-ils tous en me montrant du doigt; et les explosions de joie redoublèrent.

Je restai pétrifié.

J’ignore d’où ils me connaissaient et comment ils m’avaient reconnu.

— Bonjour! bonsoir! me crièrent-ils avec leur ricanement atroce. Un des plus jeunes, condamné aux galères perpétuelles, face luisante et plombée, me regarda d’un air d’envie en disant: — Il est heureux! il sera rogné! Adieu, camarade!

Je ne puis dire ce qui se passait en moi. J’étais leur camarade en effet. La Grève est soeur de Toulon. J’étais même placé plus bas qu’eux; ils me faisaient honneur. Je frissonnai.

Oui, leur camarade! Et quelques jours plus tard, j’aurais pu aussi, moi, être un spectacle pour eux.

J’étais demeuré à la fenêtre, immobile, perclus, paralysé. Mais quand je vis les cinq cordons s’avancer, se ruer vers moi avec des paroles d’une infernale cordialité; quand j’entendis le tumultueux fracas de leurs chaînes, de leurs clameurs, de leurs pas, au pied du mur, il me sembla que cette nuée de démons escaladait ma misérable cellule; je poussai un cri, je me jetai sur la porte d’une violence à la briser; mais pas moyen de fuir; les verrous étaient tirés en dehors. Je heurtai, j’appelai avec rage. Puis il me sembla entendre de plus près encore les effrayantes voix des forçats. Je crus voir leurs têtes hideuses paraître déjà au bord de ma fenêtre, je poussai un second cri d’angoisse, et je tombai évanoui.

XIV

Quand je revins à moi, il était nuit. J’étais couché dans un grabat; une lanterne qui vacillait au plafond me fit voir d’autres grabats alignés des deux côtés du mien. Je compris qu’on m’avait transporté à l’infirmerie.

Je restai quelques instants éveillé, mais sans pensée et sans souvenir, tout entier au bonheur d’être dans un lit. Certes, en d’autres temps, ce lit d’hôpital et de prison m’eût fait reculer de dégoût et de pitié; mais je n’étais plus le même homme. Les draps étaient gris et rudes au toucher, la couverture maigre et trouée; on sentait la paillasse à travers le matelas; qu’importe! mes membres pouvaient se déroidir à l’aise entre ces draps grossiers; sous cette couverture, si mince qu’elle fût, je sentais se dissiper peu à peu cet horrible froid de la moelle des os dont j’avais pris l’habitude. — Je me rendormis.

Un grand bruit me réveilla; il faisait petit jour. Ce bruit venait du dehors; mon lit était à côté de la fenêtre, je me levai sur mon séant pour voir ce que c’était.

La fenêtre donnait sur la grande cour de Bicêtre. Cette cour était pleine de monde; deux haies de vétérans avaient peine à maintenir libre, au milieu de cette foule, un étroit chemin qui traversait la cour. Entre ce double rang de soldats cheminaient lentement, cahotées à chaque pavé, cinq longues charrettes chargées d’hommes; c’étaient les forçats qui partaient.

Ces charrettes étaient découvertes. Chaque cordon en occupait une. Les forçats étaient assis de côté sur chacun des bords, adossés les uns aux autres, séparés par la chaîne commune, qui se développait dans la longueur du chariot, et sur l’extrémité de laquelle un argousin debout, fusil chargé, tenait le pied. On entendait bruire leurs fers, et, à chaque secousse de la voiture, on voyait sauter leurs têtes et ballotter leurs jambes pendantes.

Une pluie fine et pénétrante glaçait l’air, et collait sur leurs genoux leurs pantalons de toile, de gris devenus noirs. Leurs longues barbes, leurs cheveux courts ruisselaient; leurs visages étaient violets; on les voyait grelotter, et leurs dents grinçaient de rage et de froid. Du reste, pas de mouvements possibles. Une fois rivé à cette chaîne, on n’est plus qu’une fraction de ce tout hideux qu’on appelle le cordon, et qui se meut comme un seul homme. L’intelligence doit abdiquer, le carcan du bagne la condamne à mort; et quant à l’animal lui-même, il ne doit plus avoir de besoins et d’appétits qu’à heures fixes. Ainsi, immobiles, la plupart demi-nus, têtes découvertes et pieds pendants, ils commençaient leur voyage de vingt-cinq jours, chargés sur les mêmes charrettes, vêtus des mêmes vêtements pour le soleil à plomb de juillet et pour les froides pluies de novembre. On dirait que les hommes veulent mettre le ciel de moitié dans leur office de bourreaux.

Il s’était établi entre la foule et les charrettes je ne sais quel horrible dialogue; injures d’un côté, bravades de l’autre, imprécations des deux parts; mais, à un signe du capitaine, je vis les coups de bâton pleuvoir au hasard dans les charrettes, sur les épaules ou sur les têtes, et tout rentra dans cette espèce de calme extérieur qu’on appelle l’ordre. Mais les yeux étaient pleins de vengeance, et les poings des misérables se crispaient sur leurs genoux.

Les cinq charrettes, escortées de gendarmes à cheval et d’argousins à pied, disparurent successivement sous la haute porte cintrée de Bicêtre; une sixième les suivit, dans laquelle ballottaient pêle-mêle les chaudières, les gamelles de cuivre et les chaînes de rechange. Quelques gardes-chiourme qui s’étaient attardés à la cantine sortirent en courant pour rejoindre leur escouade. La foule s’écoula. Tout ce spectacle s’évanouit comme une fantasmagorie. On entendit s’affaiblir par degrés dans l’air le bruit lourd des roues et des pieds des chevaux sur la route pavée de Fontainebleau, le claquement des fouets, le cliquetis des chaînes, et les hurlements du peuple qui souhaitait malheur au voyage des galériens.

Et c’est là pour eux le commencement!

Que me disait-il donc, l’avocat? Les galères! Ah! oui, plutôt mille fois la mort, plutôt l’échafaud que le bagne, plutôt le néant que l’enfer; plutôt livrer mon cou au couteau de Guillotin qu’au carcan de la chiourme! Les galères, juste ciel!

XV

Malheureusement je n’étais pas malade. Le lendemain il fallut sortir de l’infirmerie. Le cachot me reprit.

Pas malade! en effet, je suis jeune, sain et fort. Le sang coule librement dans mes veines; tous mes membres obéissent à tous mes caprices; je suis robuste de corps et d’esprit, constitué pour une longue vie; oui, tout cela est vrai; et cependant j’ai une maladie, une maladie mortelle, une maladie faite de la main des hommes.

Depuis que je suis sorti de l’infirmerie, il m’est venu une idée poignante, une idée à me rendre fou, c’est que j’aurais peut-être pu m’évader si l’on m’y avait laissé. Ces médecins, ces soeurs de charité, semblaient prendre intérêt à moi. Mourir si jeune et d’une telle mort! On eût dit qu’ils me plaignaient, tant ils étaient empressés autour de mon chevet. Bah! curiosité! Et puis, ces gens qui guérissent vous guérissent bien d’une fièvre, mais non d’une sentence de mort. Et pourtant cela leur serait si facile! une porte ouverte! Qu’est-ce que cela leur ferait?

Plus de chance maintenant! Mon pourvoi sera rejeté, parce que tout est en règle; les témoins ont bien témoigné, les plaideurs ont bien plaidé, les juges ont bien jugé. Je n’y compte pas, à moins que… Non, folie! plus d’espérance! Le pourvoi, c’est une corde qui vous tient suspendu au-dessus de l’abîme, et qu’on entend craquer à chaque instant, jusqu’à ce qu’elle se casse. C’est comme si le couteau de la guillotine mettait six semaines à tomber.

Si j’avais ma grâce? — Avoir ma grâce! Et par qui? et pourquoi? et comment? Il est impossible qu’on me fasse grâce. L’exemple! comme ils disent.

Je n’ai plus que trois pas à faire: Bicêtre, la Conciergerie, la

Grève.

XVI

Pendant le peu d’heures que j’ai passées à l’infirmerie, je m’étais assis près d’une fenêtre, au soleil — il avait reparu — ou du moins recevant du soleil tout ce que les grilles de la croisée m’en laissaient.

J’étais là, ma tête pesante et embrassée dans mes deux mains, qui en avaient plus qu’elles n’en pouvaient porter, mes coudes sur mes genoux, les pieds sur les barreaux de ma chaise; car l’abattement fait que je me courbe et me replie sur moi-même comme si je n’avais plus ni os dans les membres ni muscles dans la chair.

L’odeur étouffée de la prison me suffoquait plus que jamais, j’avais encore dans l’oreille tout ce bruit de chaînes des galériens, j’éprouvais une grande lassitude de Bicêtre. Il me semblait que le bon Dieu devrait bien avoir pitié de moi et m’envoyer au moins un petit oiseau pour chanter là, en face, au bord du toit.

Je ne sais si ce fut le bon Dieu ou le démon qui m’exauça; mais presque au même moment j’entendis s’élever sous ma fenêtre une voix, non celle d’un oiseau, mais bien mieux: la voix pure, fraîche, veloutée d’une jeune fille de quinze ans. Je levai la tête comme en sursaut, j’écoutai avidement la chanson qu’elle chantait. C’était un air lent et langoureux, une espèce de roucoulement triste et lamentable; voici les paroles:

C’est dans la rue du Mail Où j’ai été coltigé,
Maluré, Par trois coquins de railles,
Lirlonfa malurette, Sur mes -sique ‘ont foncé,
Lirlonfa maluré.

Je ne saurais dire combien fut amer mon désappointement. La voix continua:

Sur mes sique’ ont foncé,
Maluré. Ils m’ont mis la tartouve,
Lirlonfa malurette, Grand Meudon est aboulé,
Lirlonfa maluré. Dans mon trimin rencontre,
Lirlonfa malurette, Un peigre du quartier
Lirlonfa maluré.
Un peigre du quartier
Maluré. — Va-t’en dire à ma largue,
Lirlonfa malurette,

Que je suis enfourraillé,
Lirlonfa maluré. Ma largue tout en colère,
Lirlonfa malurette,
M’dit: Qu’as-tu donc morfillé?
Lirlonfa maluré.
M’dit: Qu’as-tu donc morfillé?
Maluré. — J’ai fait suer un chêne,
Lirlonfa malurette, Son auberg j’ai enganté,
Lirlonfa maluré, Son auberg et sa toquante,
Lirlonfa malurette, Et ses attach’s de cés,
Lirlonfa maluré.
Et ses attach’s de cés,
Maluré. Ma largu’ part pour Versailles,
Lirlonfa malurette, Aux pieds d’ sa majesté,
Lirlonfa maluré. Elle lui fonce un babillard,
Lirlonfa malurette, Pour m’ faire défourrailler
Lirlonfa maluré.
Pour m’faire défourrailler
Maluré. — Ah! si j’en défourraille,
Lirlonfa malurette, Ma largue j’entiferai,
Lirlonfa maluré.
J’ li ferai porter fontange,
Lirlonfa malurette,
Et souliers galuchés, Lirlonfa maluré.
Et souliers galuchés,
Maluré. Mais grand dabe qui s’fâche,
Lirlonfa malurette,
Dit: — Par mon caloquet,
Lirlonfa maluré,
J’ li ferai danser une danse,
Lirlonfa malurette, Où il n’y a pas de plancher
Lirlonfa maluré.

Je n’en ai pas entendu et n’aurais pu en entendre davantage. Le sens à demi compris et à demi caché de cette horrible complainte; cette lutte du brigand avec le guet, ce voleur qu’il rencontre et qu’il dépêche à sa femme, cet épouvantable message: J’ai assassiné un homme et je suis arrêté, j’ai fait suer un chêne et je suis enfourraillé; cette femme qui court à Versailles avec un placet, et cette Majesté qui s’indigne et menace le coupable de lui faire danser la danse où il n’y a pas de plancher; et tout cela chanté sur l’air le plus doux et par la plus douce voix qui ait jamais endormi l’oreille humaine!… J’en suis resté navré, glacé, anéanti. C’était une chose repoussante que toutes ces monstrueuses paroles sortant de cette bouche vermeille et fraîche. On eût dit la bave d’une limace sur une rose.

Je ne saurais rendre ce que j’éprouvais; j’étais à la fois blessé et caressé. Le patois de la caverne et du bagne, cette langue ensanglantée et grotesque, ce hideux argot, marié à une voix de jeune fille, gracieuse transition de la voix d’enfant à la voix de femme! tous ces mots difformes et mal faits, chantés, cadencés, perlés!

Ah! qu’une prison est quelque chose d’infâme! Il y a un venin qui y salit tout. Tout s’y flétrit, même la chanson d’une fille de quinze ans! Vous y trouvez un oiseau, il a de la boue sur son aile; vous y cueillez une jolie fleur, vous la respirez; elle pue.

XVII

Oh! si je m’évadais, comme je courrais à travers champs!

Non, il ne faudrait pas courir. Cela fait regarder et soupçonner. Au contraire, marcher lentement, tête levée, en chantant. Tâcher d’avoir quelque vieux sarrau bleu à dessins rouges. Cela déguise bien. Tous les maraîchers des environs en portent.

Je sais auprès d’Arcueil un fourré d’arbres à côté d’un marais, où, étant au collège, je venais avec mes camarades pêcher des grenouilles tous les jeudis. C’est là que je me cacherais jusqu’au soir.

La nuit tombée, je reprendrais ma course. J’irais à Vincennes. Non, la rivière m’empêcherait. J’irais à Arpajon. — Il aurait mieux valu prendre du côté de Saint-Germain, et aller au Havre, et m’embarquer pour l’Angleterre. — N’importe! j’arrive à Longjumeau. Un gendarme passe; il me demande mon passeport… Je suis perdu!

Ah! malheureux rêveur, brise donc d’abord le mur épais de trois pieds qui t’emprisonne! La mort! la mort!

Quand je pense que je suis venu tout enfant, ici, à Bicêtre, voir le grand puits et les fous!

XVIII

Pendant que j’écrivais tout ceci, ma lampe a pâli, le jour est venu, l’horloge de la chapelle a sonné six heures. —

Qu’est-ce que cela veut dire? Le guichetier de garde vient d’entrer dans mon cachot, il a ôté sa casquette, m’a salué, s’est excusé de me déranger et m’a demandé, en adoucissant de son mieux sa rude voix, ce que je désirais à déjeuner…

Il m’a pris un frisson. — Est-ce que ce serait pour aujourd’hui?

XIX

C’est pour aujourd’hui!

Le directeur de la prison lui-même vient de me rendre visite. Il m’a demandé en quoi il pourrait m’être agréable ou utile, a exprimé le désir que je n’eusse pas à me plaindre de lui ou de ses subordonnés, s’est informé avec intérêt de ma santé et de la façon dont j’avais passé la nuit; en me quittant, il m’a appelé monsieur!

C’est pour aujourd’hui!

XX

Il ne croit pas, ce geôlier, que j'aie à me plaindre de lui et de ses sous-geôliers. Il a raison. Ce serait mal à moi de me plaindre; ils ont fait leur métier, ils m'ont bien gardé; et puis ils ont été polis à l'arrivée et au départ. Ne dois-je pas être content?

Ce bon geôlier, avec son sourire bénin, ses paroles caressantes, son oeil qui flatte et qui espionne, ses grosses et larges mains, c'est la prison incarnée, c'est Bicêtre qui s'est fait homme. Tout est prison autour de moi; je retrouve la prison sous toutes les formes, sous la forme humaine comme sous la forme de grille ou de verrou. Ce mur, c'est de la prison en pierre; cette porte, c'est de la prison en bois; ces guichetiers, c'est de la prison en chair et en os. La prison est une espèce d'être horrible, complet, indivisible, moitié maison, moitié homme. Je suis sa proie; elle me couve, elle m'enlace de tous ses replis. Elle m'enferme dans ses murailles de granit, me cadenasse sous ses serrures de fer, et me surveille avec ses yeux de geôlier.

Ah! misérable! que vais-je devenir? qu'est-ce qu'ils vont faire de moi?

XXI

Je suis calme maintenant. Tout est fini, bien fini. Je suis sorti de l'horrible anxiété où m'avait jeté la visite du directeur. Car, je l'avoue, j'espérais encore. — Maintenant, Dieu merci, je n'espère plus.

Voici ce qui vient de se passer:

Au moment où six heures et demie sonnaient, — non, c'était l'avant-quart — la porte de mon cachot s'est rouverte. Un vieillard à tête blanche, vêtu d'une redingote brune, est entré. Il a entr'ouvert sa redingote. J'ai vu une soutane, un rabat. C'était un prêtre.

Ce prêtre n'était pas l'aumônier de la prison. Cela était sinistre.

Il s'est assis en face de moi avec un sourire bienveillant; puis a secoué la tête et levé les yeux au ciel, c'est-à-dire à la voûte du cachot. Je l'ai compris.

— Mon fils, m'a-t-il dit, êtes-vous préparé?

Je lui ai répondu d'une voix faible:

— Je ne suis pas préparé, mais je suis prêt.

Cependant ma vue s'est troublée, une sueur glacée est sortie à la fois de tous mes membres, j'ai senti mes tempes se gonfler, et j'avais les oreilles pleines de bourdonnements.

Pendant que je vacillais sur ma chaise comme endormi, le bon vieillard parlait. C'est du moins ce qu'il m'a semblé, et je crois me souvenir que j'ai vu ses lèvres remuer, ses mains s'agiter, ses yeux reluire.

La porte s'est rouverte une seconde fois. Le bruit des verrous nous a arrachés, moi à ma stupeur, lui à son discours. Une espèce de monsieur, en habit noir, accompagné du directeur de la prison, s'est présenté, et m'a salué profondément. Cet homme avait sur le visage quelque chose de la tristesse officielle des employés des pompes funèbres. Il tenait un rouleau de papier à la main.

— Monsieur, m'a-t-il dit avec un sourire de courtoisie, je suis huissier près la cour royale de Paris. J'ai l'honneur de vous apporter un message de la part de monsieur le procureur général.

La première secousse était passée. Toute ma présence d'esprit m'était revenue.

— C'est monsieur le procureur général, lui ai-je répondu, qui a demandé si instamment ma tête? Bien de l'honneur pour moi qu'il m'écrive. J'espère que ma mort lui va faire grand plaisir; car il me serait dur de penser qu'il l'a sollicitée avec tant d'ardeur et qu'elle lui était indifférente.

J'ai dit tout cela, et j'ai repris d'une voix ferme:

— Lisez, monsieur!

Il s'est mis à me lire un long texte, en chantant à la fin de chaque ligne et en hésitant au milieu de chaque mot. C'était le rejet de mon pourvoi.

— L'arrêt sera exécuté aujourd'hui en place de Grève, a-t-il ajouté quand il a eu terminé, sans lever les yeux de dessus son papier timbré. Nous partons à sept heures et demie précises pour la Conciergerie. Mon cher monsieur aurez-vous l'extrême bonté de me suivre?

Depuis quelques instants je ne l'écoutais plus. Le directeur causait avec le prêtre; lui avait l'oeil fixé sur son papier; je regardais la porte, qui était restée entrouverte… — Ah! misérable! quatre fusiliers dans le corridor!

L'huissier a répété sa question, en me regardant cette fois.

— Quand vous voudrez, lui ai-je répondu. À votre aise!

Il m'a salué en disant:

— J'aurai l'honneur de venir vous chercher dans une demi-heure.

Alors ils m'ont laissé seul.

Un moyen de fuir, mon Dieu! un moyen quelconque! Il faut que je m'évade! il le faut! sur-le-champ! par les portes, par les fenêtres, par la charpente du toit! quand même je devrais laisser de ma chair après les poutres!

Ô rage! démons! malédiction! Il faudrait des mois pour percer ce mur avec de bons outils, et je n'ai ni un clou, ni une heure!

XXII

De la Conciergerie.

Me voici transféré, comme dit le procès-verbal.

Mais le voyage vaut la peine d’être conté.

Sept heures et demie sonnaient lorsque l’huissier s’est présenté de nouveau au seuil de mon cachot. — Monsieur, m’a-t-il dit, je vous attends. — Hélas! lui et d’autres!

Je me suis levé, j’ai fait un pas; il m’a semblé que je n’en pourrais faire un second, tant ma tête était lourde et mes jambes faibles. Cependant je me suis remis et j’ai continué d’une allure assez ferme. Avant de sortir du cabanon, j’y ai promené un dernier coup d’oeil. — Je l’aimais, mon cachot. — Puis, je l’ai laissé vide et ouvert; ce qui donne à un cachot un air singulier.

Au reste, il ne le sera pas longtemps. Ce soir on y attend quelqu’un, disaient les porte-clefs, un condamné que la cour d’assises est en train de faire à l’heure qu’il est.

Au détour du corridor l’aumônier nous a rejoints. Il venait de déjeuner.

Au sortir de la geôle, le directeur m’a pris affectueusement la main, et a renforcé mon escorte de quatre vétérans.

Devant la porte de l’infirmerie, un vieillard moribond m’a crié: Au revoir!

Nous sommes arrivés dans la cour. J’ai respiré; cela m’a fait du bien.

Nous n’avons pas marché longtemps à l’air. Une voiture attelée de chevaux de poste stationnait dans la première cour; c’est la même voiture qui m’avait amené; une espèce de cabriolet oblong, divisé en deux sections par une grille transversale de fil de fer si épaisse qu’on la dirait tricotée. Les deux sections ont chacune une porte, l’une devant, l’autre derrière la carriole. Le tout si sale, si noir si poudreux, que le corbillard des pauvres est un carrosse du sacre en comparaison.

Avant de m’ensevelir dans cette tombe à deux roues, j’ai jeté un regard dans la cour, un de ces regards désespérés devant lesquels il semble que les murs devraient crouler. La cour, espèce de petite place plantée d’arbres, était plus encombrée encore de spectateurs que pour les galériens. Déjà la foule!

Comme le jour du départ de la chaîne, il tombait une pluie de la saison, une pluie fine et glacée qui tombe encore à l’heure où j’écris, qui tombera sans doute toute la journée, qui durera plus que moi.

Les chemins étaient effondrés, la cour pleine de fange et d’eau. J’ai eu plaisir à voir cette foule dans cette boue.

Nous sommes montés, l’huissier et un gendarme, dans le compartiment de devant; le prêtre, moi et un gendarme dans l’autre. Quatre gendarmes à cheval autour de la voiture. Ainsi, sans le postillon, huit hommes pour un homme.

Pendant que je montais, il y avait une vieille aux yeux gris qui disait: — J’aime encore mieux cela que la chaîne.

Je conçois. C’est un spectacle qu’on embrasse plus aisément d’un coup d’oeil, c’est plus tôt vu. C’est tout aussi beau et plus commode. Rien ne vous distrait. Il n’y a qu’un homme, et sur cet homme seul autant de misère que sur tous les forçats à la fois. Seulement cela est moins éparpillé; c’est une liqueur concentrée, bien plus savoureuse.

La voiture s’est ébranlée. Elle a fait un bruit sourd en passant sous la voûte de la grande porte, puis a débouché dans l’avenue, et les lourds battants de Bicêtre se sont refermés derrière elle. Je me sentais emporté avec stupeur, comme un homme tombé en léthargie qui ne peut ni remuer ni crier et qui entend qu’on l’enterre. J’écoutais vaguement les paquets de sonnettes pendus au cou des chevaux de poste sonner en cadence et comme par hoquets, les roues ferrées bruire sur le pavé ou cogner la caisse en changeant d’ornière, le galop sonore des gendarmes autour de la carriole, le fouet claquant du postillon. Tout cela me semblait comme un tourbillon qui m’emportait.

À travers le grillage d’un judas percé en face de moi, mes yeux s’étaient fixés machinalement sur l’inscription gravée en grosses lettres au-dessus de la grande porte de Bicêtre: HOSPICE DE LA VIEILLESSE.

— Tiens, me disais-je, il paraît qu’il y a des gens qui vieillissent, là.

Et, comme on fait entre la veille et le sommeil, je retournais cette idée en tous sens dans mon esprit engourdi de douleur. Tout à coup la carriole, en passant de l’avenue dans la grande route, a changé le point de vue de la lucarne. Les tours de Notre-Dame sont venues s’y encadrer, bleues et à demi effacées dans la brume de Paris. Sur-le-champ le point de vue de mon esprit a changé aussi. J’étais devenu machine comme la voiture. À l’idée de

Bicêtre a succédé l’idée des tours de Notre-Dame. — Ceux qui seront sur la tour où est le drapeau verront bien, me suis-je dit en souriant stupidement.

Je crois que c’est à ce moment-là que le prêtre s’est remis à me parler. Je l’ai laissé dire patiemment. J’avais déjà dans l’oreille le bruit des roues, le galop des chevaux, le fouet du postillon. C’était un bruit de plus.

J’écoutais en silence cette chute de paroles monotones qui assoupissaient ma pensée comme le murmure d’une fontaine, et qui passaient devant moi, toujours diverses et toujours les mêmes, comme les ormeaux tordus de la grande route, lorsque la voix brève et saccadée de l’huissier, placé sur le devant, est venue subitement me secouer.

— Eh bien! monsieur l’abbé, disait-il avec un accent presque gai, qu’est-ce que vous savez de nouveau?

C’est vers le prêtre qu’il se retournait en parlant ainsi.

L’aumônier, qui me parlait sans relâche, et que la voiture assourdissait, n’a pas répondu.

— Hé! hé! a repris l’huissier en haussant la voix pour avoir le dessus sur le bruit des roues; infernale voiture!

Infernale! En effet. Il a continué:

— Sans doute, c’est le cahot; on ne s’entend pas. Qu’est-ce que je voulais donc dire? Faites-moi le plaisir de m’apprendre ce que je voulais dire, monsieur l’abbé! — Ah! savez-vous la grande nouvelle de Paris, aujourd’hui?

J’ai tressailli, comme s’il parlait de moi.

— Non, a dit le prêtre, qui avait enfin entendu, je n’ai pas eu le temps de lire les journaux ce matin. Je verrai cela ce soir. Quand je suis occupé comme cela toute la journée, je recommande au portier de me garder mes journaux, et je les lis en rentrant.

— Bah! a repris l’huissier, il est impossible que vous ne sachiez pas cela. La nouvelle de Paris! la nouvelle de ce matin!

J’ai pris la parole.

— Je crois la savoir.

L’huissier m’a regardé.

— Vous! vraiment! En ce cas, qu’en dites-vous?

— Vous êtes curieux! lui ai-je dit.

— Pourquoi, monsieur? a répliqué l’huissier. Chacun a son opinion politique. Je vous estime trop pour croire que vous n’avez pas la vôtre.

Quant à moi, je suis tout à fait d'avis du rétablissement de la garde nationale. J'étais sergent de ma compagnie, et, ma foi, c'était fort agréable.

Je l'ai interrompu.

— Je ne croyais pas que ce fût de cela qu'il s'agissait.

— Et de quoi donc? Vous disiez savoir la nouvelle…

— Je parlais d'une autre, dont Paris s'occupe aussi aujourd'hui.

L'imbécile n'a pas compris; sa curiosité s'est éveillée.

— Une autre nouvelle? Où diable avez-vous pu apprendre des nouvelles? Laquelle, de grâce, mon cher monsieur? Savez-vous ce que c'est, monsieur l'abbé? êtes-vous plus au courant que moi? Mettez-moi au fait, je vous prie. De quoi s'agit-il? — Voyez-vous, j'aime les nouvelles. Je les conte à monsieur le président, et cela l'amuse.

Et mille billevesées. Il se tournait tour à tour vers le prêtre et vers moi, et je ne répondais qu'en haussant les épaules.

— Eh bien! m'a-t-il dit, à quoi pensez-vous donc?

— Je pense, ai-je répondu, que je ne penserai plus ce soir.

— Ah! c'est cela! a-t-il répliqué. Allons, vous êtes trop triste! M. Castaing causait.

Puis, après un silence:

— J'ai conduit M. Papavoine; il avait sa casquette de loutre et fumait son cigare. Quant aux jeunes gens de La Rochelle, ils ne parlaient qu'entre eux. Mais ils parlaient.

Il a fait encore une pause, et a poursuivi:

— Des fous! des enthousiastes! Ils avaient l'air de mépriser tout le monde. Pour ce qui est de vous, je vous trouve vraiment bien pensif, jeune homme.

— Jeune homme! lui ai-je dit, je suis plus vieux que vous; chaque quart d'heure qui s'écoule me vieillit d'une année.

Il s'est retourné, m'a regardé quelques minutes avec un étonnement inepte, puis s'est mis à ricaner lourdement.

— Allons, vous voulez rire, plus vieux que moi! je serais votre grand-père.

— Je ne veux pas rire, lui ai-je répondu gravement.

Il a ouvert sa tabatière.

— Tenez, cher monsieur, ne vous fâchez pas; une prise de tabac, et ne me gardez pas rancune.

— N'ayez pas peur; je n'aurai pas longtemps à vous la garder.

En ce moment sa tabatière, qu'il me tendait, a rencontré le grillage qui nous séparait. Un cahot a fait qu'elle l'a heurté assez violemment et est tombée tout ouverte sous les pieds du gendarme.

— Maudit grillage! s'est écrié l'huissier.

Il s'est tourné vers moi.

— Eh bien! ne suis-je pas malheureux? tout mon tabac est perdu!

— Je perds plus que vous, ai-je répondu en souriant.

Il a essayé de ramasser son tabac, en grommelant entre ses dents:

— Plus que moi! cela est facile à dire. Pas de tabac jusqu'à Paris! c'est terrible!

L'aumônier alors lui a adressé quelques paroles de consolation, et je ne sais si j'étais préoccupé, mais il m'a semblé que c'était la suite de l'exhortation dont j'avais eu le commencement. Peu à peu la conversation s'est engagée entre le prêtre et l'huissier; je les ai laissés parler de leur côté, et je me suis mis à penser du mien.

En abordant la barrière, j'étais toujours préoccupé sans doute, mais

Paris m'a paru faire un plus grand bruit qu'à l'ordinaire.

La voiture s'est arrêtée un moment devant l'octroi. Les douaniers de ville l'ont inspectée. Si c'eût été un mouton ou un boeuf qu'on eût mené à la boucherie, il aurait fallu leur jeter une bourse d'argent; mais une tête humaine ne paie pas de droit. Nous avons passé.

Le boulevard franchi, la carriole s'est enfoncée au grand trot dans ces vieilles rues tortueuses du faubourg Saint-Marceau et de la Cité, qui serpentent et s'entrecoupent comme les mille chemins d'une fourmilière. Sur le pavé de ces rues étroites le roulement de la voiture est devenu si bruyant et si rapide, que je n'entendais plus rien du bruit extérieur. Quand je jetais les yeux par la petite lucarne carrée, il me semblait que le flot des passants s'arrêtait pour regarder la voiture, et que des bandes d'enfants couraient sur sa trace. Il m'a semblé aussi voir de temps en temps dans les carrefours ça et là un homme ou une vieille en haillons, quelquefois les deux ensemble, tenant en main une liasse de feuilles imprimées que les passants se disputaient, en ouvrant la bouche comme pour un grand cri.

Huit heures et demie sonnaient à l'horloge du Palais au moment où nous sommes arrivés dans la cour de la Conciergerie. La vue de ce grand escalier, de cette noire chapelle, de ces guichets sinistres, m'a glacé. Quand la voiture s'est arrêtée, j'ai cru que les battements de mon coeur allaient s'arrêter aussi.

J’ai recueilli mes forces; la porte s’est ouverte avec la rapidité de l’éclair; j’ai sauté à bas du cachot roulant, et je me suis enfoncé à grands pas sous la voûte entre deux haies de soldats. Il s’était déjà formé une foule sur mon passage.

XXIII

Tant que j’ai marché dans les galeries publiques du Palais de Justice, je me suis senti presque libre et à l’aise; mais toute ma résolution m’a abandonné quand on a ouvert devant moi des portes basses, des escaliers secrets, des couloirs intérieurs, de longs corridors étouffés et sourds, où il n’entre que ceux qui condamnent ou ceux qui sont condamnés.

L’huissier m’accompagnait toujours. Le prêtre m’avait quitté pour revenir dans deux heures; il avait ses affaires.

On m’a conduit au cabinet du directeur, entre les mains duquel l’huissier m’a remis. C’était un échange. Le directeur l’a prié d’attendre un instant, lui annonçant qu’il allait avoir du gibier à lui remettre, afin qu’il le conduisît sur-le-champ à Bicêtre par le retour de la carriole. Sans doute le condamné d’aujourd’hui, celui qui doit coucher ce soir sur la botte de paille que je n’ai pas eu le temps d’user.

— C’est bon, a dit l’huissier au directeur, je vais attendre un moment; nous ferons les deux procès-verbaux à la fois, cela s’arrange bien.

En attendant, on m’a déposé dans un petit cabinet attenant à celui du directeur. Là on m’a laissé seul, bien verrouillé.

Je ne sais à quoi je pensais, ni depuis combien de temps j’étais là, quand un brusque et violent éclat de rire à mon oreille m’a réveillé de ma rêverie.

J’ai levé les yeux en tressaillant. Je n’étais plus seul dans la cellule. Un homme s’y trouvait avec moi, un homme d’environ cinquante-cinq ans, de moyenne taille; ridé, voûté, grisonnant; à membres trapus; avec un regard louche dans des yeux gris, un rire amer sur le visage; sale, en guenilles, demi-nu, repoussant à voir.

Il paraît que la porte s’était ouverte, l’avait vomi, puis s’était refermée sans que je m’en fusse aperçu. Si la mort pouvait venir ainsi!

Nous nous sommes regardés quelques secondes fixement, l’homme et moi; lui, prolongeant son rire qui ressemblait à un râle; moi, demi-étonné, demi-effrayé.

— Qui êtes-vous? lui ai-je dit enfin.

— Drôle de demande! a-t-il répondu. Un friauche.

— Un friauche! Qu’est-ce que cela veut dire?

Cette question a redoublé sa gaieté.

— Cela veut dire, s’est-il écrié au milieu d’un éclat de rire, que le taule jouera au panier avec ma sorbonne dans six semaines, comme il va faire avec ta tronche dans six heures. — Ha! ha! il paraît que tu comprends maintenant.

En effet, j’étais pâle, et mes cheveux se dressaient. C’était l’autre condamné, le condamné du jour, celui qu’on attendait à Bicêtre, mon héritier.

Il a continué:

— Que veux-tu? voilà mon histoire à moi. Je suis fils d’un bon peigre; c’est dommage que Charlot [Note: Le bourreau.] ait pris la peine un jour de lui attacher sa cravate. C’était quand régnait la potence, par la grâce de Dieu. À six ans, je n’avais plus ni père ni mère; l’été, je faisais la roue dans la poussière au bord des routes, pour qu’on me jetât un sou par la portière des chaises de poste; l’hiver, j’allais pieds nus dans la boue en soufflant dans mes doigts tout rouges; on voyait mes cuisses à travers mon pantalon. À neuf ans, j’ai commencé à me servir de mes louches [Note: Mes mains.], de temps en temps je vidais une fouillouse [Note: une poche.], je filais une pelure [Note: Je volais un manteau.]; à dix ans, j’étais un marlou [Note: Un filou.]. Puis j’ai fait des connaissances; à dix-sept, j’étais un grinche [Note: Un voleur.]. Je forçais une boutanche, je faussais une tournante. [Note: Je forçais une boutique, je faussais une clef.] On m’a pris. J’avais l’âge, on m’a envoyé ramer dans la petite marine [Note: Les galères.]. Le bagne, c’est dur; coucher sur une planche, boire de l’eau claire, manger du pain noir, traîner un imbécile de boulet qui ne sert à rien; des coups de bâton et des coups de soleil. Avec cela on est tondu, et moi qui avais de beaux cheveux châtains!… N’importe! j’ai fait mon temps. Quinze ans, cela s’arrache! J’avais trente-deux ans. Un beau matin on me donna une feuille de route et soixante-six francs que je m’étais amassés dans mes quinze ans de galères, en travaillant seize heures par jour, trente jours par mois, et douze mois par année. C’est égal, je voulais être honnête homme avec mes soixante-six francs, et j’avais de plus beaux sentiments sous mes guenilles qu’il n’y en a sous une serpillière de ratichon [Notes: Une soutane d’abbé.]. Mais que les diables soient avec le passeport! Il était jaune, et on avait écrit dessus forçat libéré. Il fallait montrer cela partout où je passais et le présenter tous les huit jours au maire du village où l’on me forçait de tapiquer [Note: Habiter.]. La belle recommandation! un galérien! Je faisais peur, et les petits enfants se sauvaient, et l’on fermait les portes. Personne ne voulait me donner d’ouvrage. Je mangeai mes soixante-six francs. Et puis il fallut vivre. Je montrai mes bras bons au travail, on ferma les portes. J’offris ma journée pour quinze sous, pour dix sous, pour cinq sous. Point. Que faire? Un jour, j’avais faim, je donnai un coup de coude dans le carreau d’un boulanger; j’empoignai un pain, et le boulanger m’empoigna; je ne mangeai pas le pain, et j’eus les galères à perpétuité, avec trois lettres de feu sur l’épaule. — Je te montrerai, si tu veux. — On appelle cette justice-là la récidive. Me voilà donc cheval de retour [Note: Ramené au bagne.]. On me remit à Toulon; cette fois avec les bonnets verts [Note: Les condamnés à perpétuité.]. Il fallait m’évader. Pour cela, je n’avais que trois murs à percer, deux chaînes à couper, et j’avais un clou. Je m’évadai. On tira le canon d’alerte; car, nous autres, nous sommes comme les cardinaux de Rome, habillés de rouge, et on tire le canon quand nous partons. Leur poudre alla aux moineaux. Cette fois, pas de passeport jaune, mais pas d’argent non plus. Je rencontrai des camarades qui avaient aussi fait leur temps ou cassé leur ficelle. Leur coire [Note: Leur chef.] me proposa d’être des leurs; on faisait la grande soûlasse sur le trimar [Note: On assassinait sur les grands chemins.]. J’acceptai, et je me mis à tuer pour vivre. C’était tantôt une diligence, tantôt une chaise de poste, tantôt un marchand de boeufs à cheval. On prenait l’argent, on laissait aller au hasard la bête ou la voiture, et l’on enterrait l’homme sous un arbre, en ayant soin que les pieds ne sortissent pas; et puis on dansait sur la fosse, pour que la terre ne parût pas fraîchement remuée. J’ai vieilli comme cela, gîtant dans les broussailles, dormant aux belles étoiles, traqué de bois en bois, mais du moins libre et à moi. Tout a une fin, et autant celle-là qu’une autre. Les marchands de lacets [Note: Les gendarmes.], une belle nuit, nous ont pris au collet. Mes fanandels [Note: Camarades.] se sont sauvés; mais moi, le plus vieux, je suis resté sous la griffe de ces chats à chapeaux galonnés. On m’a amené ici. J’avais déjà passé par tous les échelons de l’échelle, excepté un. Avoir volé un mouchoir ou tué un homme, c’était tout un pour moi désormais; il y avait encore une récidive à m’appliquer. Je n’avais plus qu’à passer par le faucheur [Note: Le bourreau.]. Mon affaire a été courte. Ma foi, je commençais à vieillir et à n’être plus bon à rien. Mon père a épousé la veuve [Note: A été pendu.], moi je me retire à l’abbaye de Mont’-à-Regret [Note: La guillotine.]. — Voilà, camarade.

J’étais resté stupide en l’écoutant. Il s’est remis à rire plus haut encore qu’en commençant, et a voulu me prendre la main. J’ai reculé avec horreur.

— L’ami, m’a-t-il dit, tu n’as pas l’air brave. Ne va pas faire le singe devant la carline [Note: Le poltron devant la mort.]. Vois-tu, il y a un mauvais moment à passer sur la placarde [Note: Place de Grève.]; mais cela est sitôt fait! Je voudrais être là pour te montrer la culbute. Mille dieux! j’ai envie de ne pas me pourvoir, si l’on veut me faucher aujourd’hui avec toi. Le même prêtre nous servira à tous deux; ça m’est égal d’avoir tes restes. Tu vois que je suis un bon garçon. Hein! dis, veux-tu? d’amitié!

Il a encore fait un pas pour s’approcher de moi.

— Monsieur, lui ai-je répondu en le repoussant, je vous remercie.

Nouveaux éclats de rire à ma réponse.

— Ah! ah! monsieur, vousailles [Note: Vous.] êtes un marquis! c’est un marquis!

Je l’ai interrompu:

— Mon ami, j’ai besoin de me recueillir, laissez-moi.

La gravité de ma parole l’a rendu pensif tout à coup. Il a remué sa tête grise et presque chauve; puis, creusant avec ses ongles sa poitrine velue, qui s’offrait nue sous sa chemise ouverte:

— Je comprends, a-t-il murmuré entre ses dents; au fait, le sanglier

[Note: Le prêtre.]!…

Puis, après quelques minutes de silence:

— Tenez, m’a-t-il dit presque timidement, vous êtes un marquis, c’est fort bien; mais vous avez là une belle redingote qui ne vous servira plus à grand’chose! Le taule la prendra. Donnez-la-moi, je la vendrai pour avoir du tabac.

J’ai ôté ma redingote et je la lui ai donnée. Il s’est mis à battre des mains avec une joie d’enfant. Puis, voyant que j’étais en chemise et que je grelottais:

— Vous avez froid, monsieur, mettez ceci; il pleut, et vous seriez mouillé; et puis il faut être décemment sur la charrette.

En parlant ainsi, il ôtait sa grosse veste de laine grise et la passait dans mes bras. Je le laissais faire.

Alors j’ai été m’appuyer contre le mur, et je ne saurais dire quel effet me faisait cet homme. Il s’était mis à examiner la redingote que je lui avais donnée, et poussait à chaque instant des cris de joie.

— Les poches sont toutes neuves! le collet n’est pas usé! J’en aurai au moins quinze francs. Quel bonheur! du tabac pour mes six semaines!

La porte s’est rouverte. On venait nous chercher tous deux; moi, pour me conduire à la chambre où les condamnés attendent l’heure; lui, pour le mener à Bicêtre. Il s’est placé en riant au milieu du piquet qui devait l’emmener, et il disait aux gendarmes:

— Ah ça! ne vous trompez pas; nous avons changé de pelure, monsieur et moi; mais ne me prenez pas à sa place. Diable! cela ne m’arrangerait pas, maintenant que j’ai de quoi avoir du tabac!

XXIV

Ce vieux scélérat, il m’a pris ma redingote, car je ne la lui ai pas donnée, et puis il m’a laissé cette guenille, sa veste infâme. De qui vais-je avoir l’air?

Je ne lui ai pas laissé prendre ma redingote par insouciance ou par charité. Non; mais parce qu’il était plus fort que moi. Si j’avais refusé, il m’aurait battu avec ses gros poings.

Ah bien oui, charité! j’étais plein de mauvais sentiments. J’aurais voulu pouvoir l’étrangler de mes mains, le vieux voleur! pouvoir le piler sous mes pieds!

Je me sens le coeur plein de rage et d’amertume. Je crois que la poche au fiel a crevé. La mort rend méchant.

XXV

Ils m’ont amené dans une cellule où il n’y a que les quatre murs, avec beaucoup de barreaux à la fenêtre et beaucoup de verrous à la porte, cela va sans dire.

J’ai demandé une table, une chaise, et ce qu’il faut pour écrire. On m’a apporté tout cela.

Puis j’ai demandé un lit. Le guichetier m’a regardé de ce regard étonné qui semble dire: — À quoi bon?

Cependant ils ont dressé un lit de sangle dans le coin. Mais en même temps un gendarme est venu s’installer dans ce qu’ils appellent ma chambre. Est-ce qu’ils ont peur que je ne m’étrangle avec le matelas?

XXVI

Il est dix heures.

Ô ma pauvre petite fille! encore six heures, et je serai mort! Je serai quelque chose d'immonde qui traînera sur la table froide des amphithéâtres; une tête qu'on moulera d'un côté, un tronc qu'on disséquera de l'autre; puis de ce qui restera, on en mettra plein une bière, et le tout ira à Clamart.

Voilà ce qu'ils vont faire de ton père, ces hommes dont aucun ne me hait, qui tous me plaignent et tous pourraient me sauver. Ils vont me tuer. Comprends-tu cela, Marie? Me tuer de sang-froid, en cérémonie, pour le bien de la chose! Ah! grand Dieu!

Pauvre petite! ton père, qui t'aimait tant, ton père qui baisait ton petit cou blanc et parfumé, qui passait la main sans cesse dans les boucles de tes cheveux comme sur de la soie, qui prenait ton joli visage rond dans sa main, qui te faisait sauter sur ses genoux, et le soir joignait tes deux petites mains pour prier Dieu!

Qui est-ce qui te fera tout cela maintenant? Qui est-ce qui t'aimera? Tous les enfants de ton âge auront des pères, excepté toi. Comment te déshabitueras-tu, mon enfant, du Jour de l'An, des étrennes, des beaux joujoux, des bonbons et des baisers? — Comment te déshabitueras-tu, malheureuse orpheline, de boire et de manger?

Oh! si ces jurés l'avaient vue, au moins, ma jolie petite Marie, ils auraient compris qu'il ne faut pas tuer le père d'un enfant de trois ans.

Et quand elle sera grande, si elle va jusque-là, que deviendra-t-elle? Son père sera un des souvenirs du peuple de Paris. Elle rougira de moi et de mon nom; elle sera méprisée, repoussée, vile à cause de moi, de moi qui l'aime de toutes les tendresses de mon coeur. Ô ma petite Marie bien-aimée! Est-il bien vrai que tu auras honte et horreur de moi?

Misérable! quel crime j'ai commis, et quel crime je fais commettre à la société!

Oh! est-il bien vrai que je vais mourir avant la fin du jour? Est-il bien vrai que c'est moi? Ce bruit sourd de cris que j'entends au dehors, ce flot de peuple joyeux qui déjà se hâte sur les quais, ces gendarmes qui s'apprêtent dans leurs casernes, ce prêtre en robe noire, cet autre homme aux mains rouges, c'est pour moi! c'est moi qui vais mourir! moi, le même qui est ici, qui vit, qui se meut, qui respire, qui est assis à cette table, laquelle ressemble à une autre table, et pourrait aussi bien être ailleurs; moi, enfin, ce moi que je touche et que je sens, et dont le vêtement fait les plis que voilà!

XXVII

Encore si je savais comment cela est fait et de quelle façon on meurt là-dessus! mais, c'est horrible, je ne le sais pas.

Le nom de la chose est effroyable, et je ne comprends point comment j'ai pu jusqu'à présent l'écrire et le prononcer.

La combinaison de ces dix lettres, leur aspect, leur physionomie est bien faite pour réveiller une idée épouvantable, et le médecin de malheur qui a inventé la chose avait un nom prédestiné.

L'image que j'y attache, à ce mot hideux, est vague, indéterminée, et d'autant plus sinistre. Chaque syllabe est comme une pièce de la machine. J'en construis et j'en démolis sans cesse dans mon esprit la monstrueuse charpente.

Je n'ose faire une question là-dessus, mais il est affreux de ne savoir ce que c'est, ni comment s'y prendre. Il paraît qu'il y a une bascule et qu'on vous couche sur le ventre… — Ah! mes cheveux blanchiront avant que ma tête ne tombe!

XXVIII

Je l’ai cependant entrevue une fois.

Je passais sur la place de Grève, en voiture, un jour, vers onze heures du matin. Tout à coup la voiture s’arrêta.

Il y avait foule sur la place. Je mis la tête à la portière. Une populace encombrait la Grève et le quai, et des femmes, des hommes, des enfants étaient debout sur le parapet. Au-dessus des têtes, on voyait une espèce d’estrade en bois rouge que trois hommes échafaudaient.

Un condamné devait être exécuté le jour même, et l’on bâtissait la machine. Je détournai la tête avant d’avoir vu. À côté de la voiture, il y avait une femme qui disait à un enfant:

— Tiens, regarde! le couteau coule mal, ils vont graisser la rainure avec un bout de chandelle.

C’est probablement là qu’ils en sont aujourd’hui. Onze heures viennent de sonner. Ils graissent sans doute la rainure.

Ah! cette fois, malheureux, je ne détournerai pas la tête.

XXIX

Ô ma grâce! ma grâce! on me fera peut-être grâce. Le roi ne m’en veut pas. Qu’on aille chercher mon avocat! vite l’avocat! Je veux bien des galères. Cinq ans de galères, et que tout soit dit — ou vingt ans — ou à perpétuité avec le fer rouge. Mais grâce de la vie!

Un forçat, cela marche encore, cela va et vient, cela voit le soleil.

XXX

Le prêtre est revenu.

Il a des cheveux blancs, l’air très doux, une bonne et respectable figure; c’est en effet un homme excellent et charitable. Ce matin, je l’ai vu vider sa bourse dans les mains des prisonniers. D’où vient que sa voix n’a rien qui émeuve et qui soit ému? D’où vient qu’il ne m’a rien dit encore qui m’ait pris par l’intelligence ou par le coeur?

Ce matin, j’étais égaré. J’ai à peine entendu ce qu’il m’a dit. Cependant ses paroles m’ont semblé inutiles, et je suis resté indifférent; elles ont glissé comme cette pluie froide sur cette vitre glacée.

Cependant, quand il est rentré tout à l’heure près de moi, sa vue m’a fait du bien. C’est parmi tous ces hommes le seul qui soit encore homme pour moi, me suis-je dit. Et il m’a pris une ardente soif de bonnes et consolantes paroles.

Nous nous sommes assis, lui sur la chaise, moi sur le lit. Il m’a dit: — Mon fils… Ce mot m’a ouvert le coeur. Il a continué:

— Mon fils, croyez-vous en Dieu?

— Oui, mon père, lui ai-je répondu.

— Croyez-vous en la sainte église catholique, apostolique et romaine?

— Volontiers, lui ai-je dit.

— Mon fils, a-t-il repris, vous avez l’air de douter.

Alors il s’est mis à parler. Il a parlé longtemps; il a dit beaucoup de paroles; puis, quand il a cru avoir fini, il s’est levé et m’a regardé pour la première fois depuis le commencement de son discours, en m’interrogeant:

— Eh bien?

Je proteste que je l’avais écouté avec avidité d’abord, puis avec attention, puis avec dévouement. Je me suis levé aussi.

— Monsieur, lui ai-je répondu, laissez-moi seul, je vous prie.

Il m’a demandé:

— Quand reviendrai-je?

— Je vous le ferai savoir.

Alors il est sorti sans rien dire, mais en hochant la tête, comme se disant à lui-même:

— Un impie!

Non, si bas que je sois tombé, je ne suis pas un impie, et Dieu m’est témoin que je crois en lui. Mais que m’a-t-il dit, ce vieillard? rien de senti, rien d’attendri, rien de pleuré, rien d’arraché de l’âme, rien qui vînt de son coeur pour aller au mien, rien qui fût de lui à moi. Au contraire, je ne sais quoi de vague, d’inaccentué, d’applicable à tout et à tous; emphatique où il eût été besoin de profondeur, plat où il eût fallu être simple; une espèce de sermon sentimental et d’élégie théologique. Ça et là, une citation latine en latin. Saint Augustin, Saint Grégoire, que sais-je? Et puis, il avait l’air de réciter une leçon déjà vingt fois récitée, de repasser un thème, oblitéré dans sa mémoire à force d’être su. Pas un regard dans l’oeil, pas un accent dans la voix, pas un geste dans les mains.

Et comment en serait-il autrement? Ce prêtre est l’aumônier en titre de la prison. Son état est de consoler et d’exhorter, et il vit de cela. Les forçats, les patients sont du ressort de son éloquence. Il les confesse et les assiste, parce qu’il a sa place à faire. Il a vieilli à mener des hommes mourir. Depuis longtemps il est habitué à ce qui fait frissonner les autres; ses cheveux, bien poudrés à blanc, ne se dressent plus; le bagne et l’échafaud sont de tous les jours pour lui. Il est blasé. Probablement il a son cahier; telle page les galériens, telle page les condamnés à mort. On l’avertit la veille qu’il y aura quelqu’un à consoler le lendemain à telle heure; il demande ce que c’est, galérien ou supplicié, et relit la page; et puis il vient. De cette façon, il advient que ceux qui vont à Toulon et ceux qui vont à la Grève sont un lieu commun pour lui, et qu’il est un lieu commun pour eux.

Oh! qu’on m’aille donc, au lieu de cela, chercher quelque jeune vicaire, quelque vieux curé, au hasard, dans la première paroisse venue; qu’on le prenne au coin de son feu, lisant son livre et ne s’attendant à rien, et qu’on lui dise:

— Il y a un homme qui va mourir, et il faut que ce soit vous qui le consoliez. Il faut que vous soyez là quand on lui liera les mains, là quand on lui coupera les cheveux; que vous montiez dans sa charrette avec votre crucifix pour lui cacher le bourreau; que vous soyez cahoté avec lui par le pavé jusqu’à la Grève; que vous traversiez avec lui l’horrible foule buveuse de sang; que vous l’embrassiez au pied de l’échafaud, et que vous restiez jusqu’à ce que la tête soit ici et le corps là.

Alors, qu’on me l’amène, tout palpitant, tout frissonnant de la tête aux pieds; qu’on me jette entre ses bras, à ses genoux; et il pleurera, et nous pleurerons, et il sera éloquent, et je serai consolé, et mon coeur se dégonflera dans le sien, et il prendra mon âme, et je prendrai son Dieu.

Mais, ce bon vieillard, qu’est-il pour moi? que suis-je pour lui? Un individu de l’espèce malheureuse, une ombre comme il en a déjà tant vu, une unité à ajouter au chiffre des exécutions.

J’ai peut-être tort de le repousser ainsi; c’est lui qui est bon et moi qui suis mauvais. Hélas! ce n’est pas ma faute. C’est mon souffle de condamné qui gâte et flétrit tout.

On vient de m’apporter de la nourriture; ils ont cru que je devais avoir besoin. Une table délicate et recherchée, un poulet, il me semble, et autre chose encore. Eh bien! j’ai essayé de manger; mais, à la première bouchée, tout est tombé de ma bouche, tant cela m’a paru amer et fétide!

XXXI

Il vient d’entrer un monsieur, le chapeau sur la tête, qui m’a à peine regardé, puis a ouvert un pied-de-roi et s’est mis à mesurer de bas en haut les pierres du mur, parlant d’une voix très haute pour dire tantôt: c’est cela; tantôt: ce n’est pas cela.

J’ai demandé au gendarme qui c’était. Il paraît que c’est une espèce de sous-architecte employé à la prison.

De son côté, sa curiosité s’est éveillée sur mon compte. Il a échangé quelques demi-mots avec le porte-clefs qui l’accompagnait; puis a fixé un instant les yeux sur moi, a secoué la tête d’un air insouciant, et s’est remis à parler à haute voix et à prendre des mesures.

Sa besogne finie, il s’est approché de moi en me disant avec sa voix éclatante:

— Mon bon ami, dans six mois cette prison sera beaucoup mieux.

Et son geste semblait ajouter:

— Vous n’en jouirez pas, c’est dommage.

Il souriait presque. J’ai cru voir le moment où il allait me railler doucement, comme on plaisante une jeune mariée le soir de ses noces.

Mon gendarme, vieux soldat à chevrons, s’est chargé de la réponse.

— Monsieur, lui a-t-il dit, on ne parle pas si haut dans la chambre d’un mort.

L’architecte s’en est allé.

Moi, j’étais là, comme une des pierres qu’il mesurait.

XXXII

Et puis, il m’est arrivé une chose ridicule.

On est venu relever mon bon vieux gendarme, auquel, ingrat égoïste que je suis, je n’ai seulement pas serré la main. Un autre l’a remplacé, homme à front déprimé, des yeux de boeuf, une figure inepte.

Au reste, je n’y avais fait aucune attention. Je tournais le dos à la porte, assis devant la table; je tâchais de rafraîchir mon front avec ma main, et mes pensées troublaient mon esprit.

Un léger coup, frappé sur mon épaule, m’a fait tourner la tête.

C’était le nouveau gendarme, avec qui j’étais seul.

Voici à peu près de quelle façon il m’a adressé la parole.

— Criminel, avez-vous bon coeur?

— Non, lui ai-je dit.

La brusquerie de ma réponse a paru le déconcerter. Cependant il a repris en hésitant:

— On n’est pas méchant pour le plaisir de l’être.

— Pourquoi non? ai-je répliqué. Si vous n’avez que cela à me dire, laissez-moi. Où voulez-vous en venir?

— Pardon, mon criminel, a-t-il répondu. Deux mots seulement. Voici. Si vous pouviez faire le bonheur d’un pauvre homme, et que cela ne vous coûtât rien, est-ce que vous ne le feriez pas?

J’ai haussé les épaules.

— Est-ce que vous arrivez de Charenton? Vous choisissez un singulier vase pour y puiser du bonheur. Moi, faire le bonheur de quelqu’un!

Il a baissé la voix et pris un air mystérieux, ce qui n’allait pas à sa figure idiote.

— Oui, criminel, oui bonheur, oui fortune. Tout cela me sera venu de vous. Voici. Je suis un pauvre gendarme. Le service est lourd, la paye est légère; mon cheval est à moi et me ruine. Or, je mets à la loterie pour contre-balancer. Il faut bien avoir une industrie. Jusqu’ici il ne m’a manqué pour gagner que d’avoir de bons numéros. J’en cherche partout de sûrs; je tombe toujours à côté. Je mets le 76; il sort le 77. J’ai beau les nourrir, ils ne viennent pas…

— Un peu de patience, s’il vous plaît; je suis à la fin.

— Or, voici une belle occasion pour moi. Il paraît, pardon, criminel, que vous passez aujourd’hui. Il est certain que les morts qu’on fait périr comme cela voient la loterie d’avance. Promettez-moi de venir demain soir, qu’est-ce que cela vous fait? me donner trois numéros, trois bons. Hein? — Je n’ai pas peur des revenants, soyez tranquille. — Voici mon adresse: Caserne Popincourt, escalier A, n°26, au fond du corridor. Vous me reconnaîtrez bien, n’est-ce pas? — Venez même ce soir, si cela vous est plus commode.

J’aurais dédaigné de lui répondre, à cet imbécile, si une espérance folle ne m’avait traversé l’esprit. Dans la position désespérée où je suis, on croit par moments qu’on briserait une chaîne avec un cheveu.

— Écoute, lui ai-je dit en faisant le comédien autant que le peut faire celui qui va mourir, je puis en effet te rendre plus riche que le roi, te faire gagner des millions. À une condition.

Il ouvrait des yeux stupides.

— Laquelle? laquelle? tout pour vous plaire, mon criminel.

— Au lieu de trois numéros, je t’en promets quatre. Change d’habits avec moi.

— Si ce n’est que cela! s’est-il écrié en défaisant les premières agrafes de son uniforme.

Je m’étais levé de ma chaise. J’observais tous ses mouvements, mon coeur palpitait. Je voyais déjà les portes s’ouvrir devant l’uniforme de gendarme, et la place, et la rue, et le Palais de Justice derrière moi!

Mais il s’est retourné d’un air indécis.

— Ah ça! ce n’est pas pour sortir d’ici?

J’ai compris que tout était perdu. Cependant j’ai tenté un dernier effort, bien inutile et bien insensé!

— Si fait, lui ai-je dit, mais ta fortune est faite… Il m’a interrompu.

— Ah bien non! tiens! et mes numéros! Pour qu’ils soient bons, il faut que vous soyez mort.

Je me suis rassis, muet et plus désespéré de toute l’espérance que j’avais eue.

XXXIII

J’ai fermé les yeux, et j’ai mis les mains dessus, et j’ai tâché d’oublier, d’oublier le présent dans le passé. Tandis que je rêve, les souvenirs de mon enfance et de ma jeunesse me reviennent un à un, doux, calmes, riants, comme des îles de fleurs sur ce gouffre de pensées noires et confuses qui tourbillonnent dans mon cerveau.

Je me revois enfant, écolier rieur et frais, jouant, courant, criant avec mes frères dans la grande allée verte de ce jardin sauvage où ont coulé mes premières années, ancien enclos de religieuses que domine de sa tête de plomb le sombre dôme du Val-de-Grâce.

Et puis, quatre ans plus tard, m’y voilà encore, toujours enfant, mais déjà rêveur et passionné. Il y a une jeune fille dans le solitaire jardin.

La petite Espagnole, avec ses grands yeux et ses grands cheveux, sa peau brune et dorée, ses lèvres rouges et ses joues roses, l’Andalouse de quatorze ans, Pepa.

Nos mères nous ont dit d’aller courir ensemble: nous sommes venus nous promener.

On nous a dit de jouer, et nous causons, enfants du même âge, non du même sexe.

Pourtant, il n’y a encore qu’un an, nous courions, nous luttions ensemble. Je disputais à Pepita la plus belle pomme du pommier; je la frappais pour un nid d’oiseau. Elle pleurait; je disais: C’est bien fait! et nous allions tous deux nous plaindre ensemble à nos mères, qui nous donnaient tort tout haut et raison tout bas.

Maintenant elle s’appuie sur mon bras et je suis tout fier et tout ému. Nous marchons lentement, nous parlons bas. Elle laisse tomber son mouchoir; je le lui ramasse. Nos mains tremblent en se touchant. Elle me parle des petits oiseaux, de l’étoile qu’on voit là-bas, du couchant vermeil derrière les arbres, ou bien de ses amies de pension, de sa robe et de ses rubans. Nous disons des choses innocentes, et nous rougissons tous deux. La petite fille est devenue jeune fille.

Ce soir-là — c’était un soir d’été — , nous étions sous les marronniers, au fond du jardin. Après un de ces longs silences qui remplissaient nos promenades, elle quitta tout à coup mon bras, et me dit: Courons!

Je la vois encore; elle était tout en noir, en deuil de sa grand’mère. Il lui passa par la tête une idée d’enfant, Pepa redevint Pépita, elle me dit: Courons!

Et elle se mit à courir devant moi avec sa taille fine comme le corset d’une abeille et ses petits pieds qui relevaient sa robe jusqu’à mi-jambe. Je la poursuivis, elle fuyait; le vent de sa course soulevait par moments sa pèlerine noire, et me laissait voir son dos brun et frais.

J’étais hors de moi. Je l’atteignis près du vieux puisard en ruine; je la pris par la ceinture, du droit de victoire, et je la fis asseoir sur un banc de gazon; elle ne résista pas. Elle était essoufflée et riait. Moi, j’étais sérieux, et je regardais ses prunelles noires à travers ses cils noirs.

— Asseyez-vous là, me dit-elle. Il fait encore grand jour, lisons quelque chose. Avez-vous un livre?

J’avais sur moi le tome second des Voyages de Spallanzani. J’ouvris au hasard, je me rapprochai d’elle, elle appuya son épaule à mon épaule, et nous nous mîmes à lire chacun de notre côté, tout bas, la même page. Avant de tourner le feuillet, elle était toujours obligée de m’attendre. Mon esprit allait moins vite que le sien.

— Avez-vous fini? me disait-elle, que j’avais à peine commencé.

Cependant nos têtes se touchaient, nos cheveux se mêlaient, nos haleines peu à peu se rapprochèrent, et nos bouches tout à coup.

Quand nous voulûmes continuer notre lecture, le ciel était étoilé.

— Oh! maman, maman, dit-elle en rentrant, si tu savais comme nous avons couru!

Moi, je gardais le silence.

— Tu ne dis rien, me dit ma mère, tu as l’air triste.

J’avais le paradis dans le coeur.

C’est une soirée que je me rappellerai toute ma vie.

Toute ma vie!

XXXIV

Une heure vient de sonner. Je ne sais laquelle: j’entends mal le marteau de l’horloge. Il me semble que j’ai un bruit d’orgue dans les oreilles; ce sont mes dernières pensées qui bourdonnent.

À ce moment suprême où je me recueille dans mes souvenirs, j’y retrouve mon crime avec horreur; mais je voudrais me repentir davantage encore. J’avais plus de remords avant ma condamnation; depuis, il semble qu’il n’y ait plus de place que pour les pensées de mort. Pourtant, je voudrais bien me repentir beaucoup.

Quand j’ai rêvé une minute à ce qu’il y a de passé dans ma vie, et que j’en reviens au coup de hache qui doit la terminer tout à l’heure, je frissonne comme d’une chose nouvelle. Ma belle enfance! ma belle jeunesse! étoffe dorée dont l’extrémité est sanglante. Entre alors et à présent il y a une rivière de sang; le sang de l’autre et le mien.

Si on lit un jour mon histoire, après tant d’années d’innocence et de bonheur, on ne voudra pas croire à cette année exécrable, qui s’ouvre par un crime et se clôt par un supplice; elle aura l’air dépareillée.

Et pourtant, misérables lois et misérables hommes, je n’étais pas un méchant!

Oh! mourir dans quelques heures, et penser qu’il y a un an, à pareil jour, j’étais libre et pur, que je faisais mes promenades d’automne, que j’errais sous les arbres, et que je marchais dans les feuilles!

XXXV

En ce moment même, il y a tout auprès de moi, dans ces maisons qui font cercle autour du Palais et de la Grève, et partout dans Paris, des hommes qui vont et viennent, causent et rient, lisent le journal, pensent à leurs affaires; des marchands qui vendent; des jeunes filles qui préparent leurs robes de bal pour ce soir; des mères qui jouent avec leurs enfants!

XXXVI

Je me souviens qu’un jour, étant enfant, j’allai voir le bourdon de Notre-Dame.

J’étais déjà étourdi d’avoir monté le sombre escalier en colimaçon, d’avoir parcouru la frêle galerie qui lie les deux tours, d’avoir eu Paris sous les pieds, quand j’entrai dans la cage de pierre et de charpente où pend le bourdon avec son battant, qui pèse un millier.

J’avançai en tremblant sur les planches mal jointes, regardant à distance cette cloche si fameuse parmi les enfants et le peuple de Paris, et ne remarquant pas sans effroi que les auvents couverts d’ardoises qui entourent le clocher de leurs plans inclinés étaient au niveau de mes pieds. Dans les intervalles, je voyais, en quelque sorte à vol d’oiseau, la place du Parvis-Notre-Dame, et les passants comme des fourmis.

Tout à coup l’énorme cloche tinta; une vibration profonde remua l’air, fit osciller la lourde tour. Le plancher sautait sur les poutres. Le bruit faillit me renverser; je chancelai, prêt à tomber, prêt à glisser sur les auvents d’ardoises en pente. De terreur, je me couchai sur les planches, les serrant étroitement de mes deux bras, sans parole, sans haleine, avec ce formidable tintement dans les oreilles, et, sous les yeux, ce précipice, cette place profonde où se croisaient tant de passants paisibles et enviés.

Eh bien! il me semble que je suis encore dans la tour du bourdon. C’est tout ensemble un étourdissement et un éblouissement. Il y a comme un bruit de cloche qui ébranle les cavités de mon cerveau, et autour de moi je n’aperçois plus cette vie plane et tranquille que j’ai quittée, et où les autres hommes cheminent encore, que de loin et à travers les crevasses d’un abîme.

XXXVII

L’Hôtel de Ville est un édifice sinistre.

Avec son toit aigu et roide, son clocheton bizarre, son grand cadran blanc, ses étages à petites colonnes, ses mille croisées, ses escaliers usés par les pas, ses deux arches à droite et à gauche, il est là, de plain-pied avec la Grève; sombre, lugubre, la face toute rongée de vieillesse, et si noir qu’il est noir au soleil.

Les jours d’exécution, il vomit des gendarmes de toutes ses portes, et regarde le condamné avec toutes ses fenêtres.

Et le soir, son cadran, qui a marqué l’heure, reste lumineux sur sa façade ténébreuse.

XXXVIII

Il est une heure et quart.

Voici ce que j’éprouve maintenant:

Une violente douleur de tête. Les reins froids, le front brûlant. Chaque fois que je me lève ou que je me penche, il me semble qu’il y a un liquide qui flotte dans mon cerveau, et qui fait battre ma cervelle contre les parois du crâne.

J’ai des tressaillements convulsifs, et de temps en temps la plume tombe de mes mains comme par une secousse galvanique.

Les yeux me cuisent comme si j’étais dans la fumée.

J’ai mal dans les coudes.

Encore deux heures et quarante-cinq minutes, et je serai guéri.

XXXIX

Ils disent que ce n’est rien, qu’on ne souffre pas, que c’est une fin douce, que la mort de cette façon est bien simplifiée.

Eh! qu’est-ce donc que cette agonie de six semaines et ce râle de tout un jour? Qu’est-ce que les angoisses de cette journée irréparable, qui s’écoule si lentement et si vite? Qu’est-ce que cette échelle de tortures qui aboutit à l’échafaud?

Apparemment ce n’est pas là souffrir.

Ne sont-ce pas les mêmes convulsions, que le sang s’épuise goutte à goutte, ou que l’intelligence s’éteigne pensée à pensée?

Et puis, on ne souffre pas, en sont-ils sûrs? Qui le leur a dit? Conte-t-on que jamais une tête coupée se soit dressée sanglante au bord du panier et qu’elle ait crié au peuple: Cela ne fait pas de mal!

Y a-t-il des morts de leur façon qui soient venus les remercier et leur dire: C’est bien inventé. Tenez-vous-en là. La mécanique est bonne.

Est-ce Robespierre? Est-ce Louis XVI?…

Non, rien! moins qu’une minute, moins qu’une seconde, et la chose est faite. — Se sont-ils jamais mis, seulement en pensée, à la place de celui qui est là, au moment où le lourd tranchant qui tombe mord la chair, rompt les nerfs, brise les vertèbres… Mais quoi! une demi-seconde! la douleur est escamotée…

Horreur!

XL

Il est singulier que je pense sans cesse au roi. J’ai beau faire, beau secouer la tête, j’ai une voix dans l’oreille qui me dit toujours:

— Il y a dans cette même ville, à cette même heure, et pas bien loin d’ici, dans un autre palais, un homme qui a aussi des gardes à toutes ses portes, un homme unique comme toi dans le peuple, avec cette différence qu’il est aussi haut que tu es bas. Sa vie entière, minute par minute, n’est que gloire, grandeur, délices, enivrement. Tout est autour de lui amour, respect, vénération. Les voix les plus hautes deviennent basses en lui parlant et les fronts les plus fiers ploient. Il n’a que de la soie et de l’or sous les yeux. À cette heure, il tient quelque conseil de ministres où tous sont de son avis, ou bien songe à la chasse de demain, au bal de ce soir, sûr que la fête viendra à l’heure, et laissant à d’autres le travail de ses plaisirs. Eh bien! cet homme est de chair et d’os comme toi!

— Et pour qu’à l’instant même l’horrible échafaud s’écroulât, pour que tout te fût rendu, vie, liberté, fortune, famille, il suffirait qu’il écrivît avec cette plume les sept lettres de son nom au bas d’un morceau de papier, ou même que son carrosse rencontrât ta charrette!

— Et il est bon, et il ne demanderait pas mieux peut-être, et il n’en sera rien!

XLI

Eh bien donc! ayons courage avec la mort, prenons cette horrible idée à deux mains, et considérons-la en face. Demandons-lui compte de ce qu’elle est, sachons ce qu’elle nous veut, retournons-la en tous sens, épelons l’énigme, et regardons d’avance dans le tombeau.

Il me semble que, dès que mes yeux seront fermés, je verrai une grande clarté et des abîmes de lumière où mon esprit roulera sans fin. Il me semble que le ciel sera lumineux de sa propre essence, que les astres y feront des taches obscures, et qu’au lieu d’être comme pour les yeux vivants des paillettes d’or sur du velours noir, ils sembleront des points noirs sur du drap d’or.

Ou bien, misérable que je suis, ce sera peut-être un gouffre hideux, profond, dont les parois seront tapissées de ténèbres, et où je tomberai sans cesse en voyant des formes remuer dans l’ombre.

Ou bien, en m’éveillant après le coup, je me trouverai peut-être sur quelque surface plane et humide, rampant dans l’obscurité et tournant sur moi-même comme une tête qui roule. Il me semble qu’il y aura un grand vent qui me poussera, et que je serai heurté ça et là par d’autres têtes roulantes. Il y aura par places des mares et des ruisseaux d’un liquide inconnu et tiède; tout sera noir. Quand mes yeux, dans leur rotation, seront tournés en haut, ils ne verront qu’un ciel d’ombre, dont les couches épaisses pèseront sur eux, et au loin dans le fond de grandes arches de fumée plus noires que les ténèbres. Ils verront aussi voltiger dans la nuit de petites étincelles rouges, qui, en s’approchant, deviendront des oiseaux de feu. Et ce sera ainsi toute l’éternité.

Il se peut bien aussi qu’à certaines dates les morts de la Grève se rassemblent par de noires nuits d’hiver sur la place qui est à eux. Ce sera une foule pâle et sanglante, et je n’y manquerai pas. Il n’y aura pas de lune, et l’on parlera à voix basse. L’Hôtel de Ville sera là, avec sa façade vermoulue, son toit déchiqueté, et son cadran qui aura été sans pitié pour tous. Il y aura sur la place une guillotine de l’enfer où un démon exécutera un bourreau; ce sera à quatre heures du matin. À notre tour nous ferons foule autour.

Il est probable que cela est ainsi. Mais si ces morts-là reviennent, sous quelle forme reviennent-ils? Que gardent-ils de leur corps incomplet et mutilé? Que choisissent-ils? Est-ce la tête ou le tronc qui est spectre?

Hélas! qu'est-ce que la mort fait avec notre âme? quelle nature lui laisse-t-elle? qu'a-t-elle à lui prendre ou à lui donner? où la met-elle? lui prête-t-elle quelquefois des yeux de chair pour regarder sur la terre et pleurer?

Ah! un prêtre! un prêtre qui sache cela! Je veux un prêtre, et un crucifix à baiser!

Mon Dieu, toujours le même!

XLII

Je l’ai prié de me laisser dormir, et je me suis jeté sur le lit.

En effet, j’avais un flot de sang dans la tête, qui m’a fait dormir. C’est mon dernier sommeil, de cette espèce.

J’ai fait un rêve.

J’ai rêvé que c’était la nuit. Il me semblait que j’étais dans mon cabinet avec deux ou trois de mes amis, je ne sais plus lesquels.

Ma femme était couchée dans la chambre à coucher, à côté, et dormait avec son enfant.

Nous parlions à voix basse, mes amis et moi, et ce que nous disions nous effrayait.

Tout à coup il me sembla entendre un bruit quelque part dans les autres pièces de l’appartement; un bruit faible, étrange, indéterminé.

Mes amis avaient entendu comme moi. Nous écoutâmes; c’était comme une serrure qu’on ouvre sourdement, comme un verrou qu’on scie à petit bruit.

Il y avait quelque chose qui nous glaçait; nous avions peur. Nous pensâmes que peut-être c’étaient des voleurs qui s’étaient introduits chez moi, à cette heure si avancée de la nuit.

Nous résolûmes d’aller voir. Je me levai, je pris la bougie. Mes amis me suivaient, un à un.

Nous traversâmes la chambre à coucher, à côté. Ma femme dormait avec son enfant.

Puis nous arrivâmes dans le salon. Rien. Les portraits étaient immobiles dans leurs cadres d’or sur la tenture rouge. Il me sembla que la porte du salon à la salle à manger n’était point à sa place ordinaire.

Nous entrâmes dans la salle à manger; nous en fîmes le tour. Je marchais le premier. La porte sur l’escalier était bien fermée, les fenêtres aussi. Arrivé près du poêle, je vis que l’armoire au linge était ouverte, et que la porte de cette armoire était tirée sur l’angle du mur, comme pour le cacher.

Cela me surprit. Nous pensâmes qu’il y avait quelqu’un derrière la porte.

Je portai la main à cette porte pour refermer l’armoire; elle résista. Étonné, je tirai plus fort, elle céda brusquement, et nous découvrîmes une petite vieille, les mains pendantes, les yeux fermés, immobile, debout, et comme collée dans l’angle du mur.

Cela avait quelque chose de hideux, et mes cheveux se dressent d’y penser.

Je demandai à la vieille:

— Que faites-vous là?

Elle ne répondit pas.

Je lui demandai:

— Qui êtes-vous?

Elle ne répondit pas, ne bougea pas, et resta les yeux fermés.

Mes amis dirent:

— C’est sans doute la complice de ceux qui sont entrés avec de mauvaises pensées; ils se sont échappés en nous entendant venir; elle n’aura pu fuir, et s’est cachée là.

Je l’ai interrogée de nouveau; elle est demeurée sans voix, sans mouvement, sans regard.

Un de nous l’a poussée à terre, elle est tombée.

Elle est tombée tout d’une pièce, comme un morceau de bois, comme une chose morte.

Nous l’avons remuée du pied, puis deux de nous l’ont relevée et de nouveau appuyée au mur. Elle n’a donné aucun signe de vie. On lui a crié dans l’oreille, elle est restée muette comme si elle était sourde.

Cependant, nous perdions patience, et il y avait de la colère dans notre terreur. Un de nous m’a dit:

— Mettez-lui la bougie sous le menton.

Je lui ai mis la mèche enflammée sous le menton. Alors elle a ouvert un oeil à demi, un oeil vide, terne, affreux, et qui ne regardait pas.

J’ai ôté la flamme et j’ai dit:

— Ah! enfin! répondras-tu, vieille sorcière? Qui es-tu?

L’oeil s’est refermé comme de lui-même.

— Pour le coup, c’est trop fort, ont dit les autres. Encore la bougie! encore! il faudra bien qu’elle parle.

J’ai replacé la lumière sous le menton de la vieille.

Alors, elle a ouvert ses deux yeux lentement, nous a regardés tous les uns après les autres, puis, se baissant brusquement, a soufflé la bougie avec un souffle glacé. Au même moment j’ai senti trois dents aiguës s’imprimer sur ma main dans les ténèbres.

Je me suis réveillé, frissonnant et baigné d’une sueur froide.

Le bon aumônier était assis au pied de mon lit, et lisait des prières.

— Ai-je dormi longtemps? lui ai-je demandé.

— Mon fils, m’a-t-il dit, vous avez dormi une heure. On vous a amené votre enfant. Elle est là dans la pièce voisine qui vous attend. Je n’ai pas voulu qu’on vous éveillât.

— Oh! ai-je crié. Ma fille! qu’on m’amène ma fille!

XLIII

Elle est fraîche, elle est rose, elle a de grands yeux, elle est belle!

On lui a mis une petite robe qui lui va bien.

Je l’ai prise, je l’ai enlevée dans mes bras, je l’ai assise sur mes genoux, je l’ai baisée sur ses cheveux.

Pourquoi pas avec sa mère? — Sa mère est malade, sa grand’mère aussi. C’est bien.

Elle me regardait d’un air étonné. Caressée, embrassée, dévorée de baisers et se laissant faire, mais jetant de temps en temps un coup d’oeil inquiet sur sa bonne, qui pleurait dans le coin.

Enfin j’ai pu parler.

— Marie! ai-je dit, ma petite Marie!

Je la serrais violemment contre ma poitrine enflée de sanglots. Elle a poussé un petit cri.

— Oh! vous me faites du mal, monsieur, m’a-t-elle dit.

Monsieur! il y a bientôt un an qu’elle ne m’a vu, la pauvre enfant. Elle m’a oublié, visage, parole, accent; et puis, qui me reconnaîtrait avec cette barbe, ces habits et cette pâleur? Quoi! déjà effacé de cette mémoire, la seule où j’eusse voulu vivre! Quoi! déjà plus père! être condamné à ne plus entendre ce mot, ce mot de la langue des enfants, si doux qu’il ne peut rester dans celle des hommes: papa!

Et pourtant l’entendre de cette bouche, encore une fois, une seule fois, voilà tout ce que j’eusse demandé pour les quarante ans de vie qu’on me prend.

— Écoute, Marie, lui ai-je dit en joignant ses deux petites mains dans les miennes, est-ce que tu ne me connais point?

Elle m’a regardé avec ses beaux yeux, et a répondu:

— Ah bien non!

— Regarde bien, ai-je répété. Comment, tu ne sais pas qui je suis?

— Si, a-t-elle dit. Un monsieur.

Hélas! n’aimer ardemment qu’un seul être au monde, l’aimer avec tout son amour, et l’avoir devant soi, qui vous voit et vous regarde, vous parle et vous répond et ne vous connaît pas! Ne vouloir de consolation que de lui, et qu’il soit le seul qui ne sache pas qu’il vous en faut parce que vous allez mourir!

— Marie, ai-je repris, as-tu un papa?

— Oui, monsieur, a dit l'enfant.

— Eh bien, où est-il?

Elle a levé ses grands yeux étonnés.

— Ah! vous ne savez donc pas? il est mort.

Puis elle a crié; j'avais failli la laisser tomber.

— Mort! disais-je. Marie, sais-tu ce que c'est qu'être mort?

— Oui, monsieur, a-t-elle répondu. Il est dans la terre et dans le ciel.

Elle a continué d'elle-même:

— Je prie le bon Dieu pour lui matin et soir sur les genoux de maman.

Je l'ai baisée au front.

— Marie, dis-moi ta prière.

— Je ne peux pas, monsieur. Une prière, cela ne se dit pas dans le jour. Venez ce soir dans ma maison; je la dirai.

C'était assez de cela. Je l'ai interrompue.

— Marie, c'est moi qui suis ton papa.

— Ah! m'a-t-elle dit.

J'ai ajouté: — Veux-tu que je sois ton papa? L'enfant s'est détournée.

— Non, mon papa était bien plus beau.

Je l'ai couverte de baisers et de larmes. Elle a cherché à se dégager de mes bras en criant:

— Vous me faites mal avec votre barbe.

Alors, je l'ai replacée sur mes genoux, en la couvant des yeux, et puis je l'ai questionnée.

— Marie, sais-tu lire?

— Oui, a-t-elle répondu. Je sais bien lire. Maman me fait lire mes lettres.

— Voyons, lis un peu, lui ai-je dit en lui montrant un papier qu'elle tenait chiffonné dans une de ses petites mains.

Elle a hoché sa jolie tête.

— Ah bien! je ne sais lire que des fables.

— Essaie toujours. Voyons, lis.

Elle a déployé le papier, et s'est mise à épeler avec son doigt:

— A, R, ar, R, Ê, T, rêt, ARRÊT…

Je lui ai arraché cela des mains. C'est ma sentence de mort qu'elle me lisait. Sa bonne avait eu le papier pour un sou. Il me coûtait plus cher, à moi.

Il n’y a pas de paroles pour ce que j’éprouvais. Ma violence l’avait effrayée; elle pleurait presque. Tout à coup elle m’a dit:

— Rendez-moi donc mon papier; tiens! c’est pour jouer.

Je l’ai remise à sa bonne.

— Emportez-la.

Et je suis retombé sur ma chaise, sombre, désert, désespéré. À présent ils devraient venir; je ne tiens plus à rien; la dernière fibre de mon coeur est brisée. Je suis bon pour ce qu’ils vont faire.

XLIV

Le prêtre est bon, le geôlier aussi. Je crois qu'ils ont versé une larme quand j'ai dit qu'on m'emportât mon enfant.

C'est fait. Maintenant il faut que je me roidisse en moi-même, et que je pense fermement au bourreau, à la charrette, aux gendarmes, à la foule sur le pont, à la foule sur le quai, à la foule aux fenêtres, et à ce qu'il y aura exprès pour moi sur cette lugubre place de Grève, qui pourrait être pavée des têtes qu'elle a vu tomber.

Je crois que j'ai encore une heure pour m'habituer à tout cela.

XLV

Tout ce peuple rira, battra des mains, applaudira. Et parmi tous ces hommes, libres et inconnus des geôliers, qui courent pleins de joie à une exécution, dans cette foule de têtes qui couvrira la place, il y aura plus d'une tête prédestinée qui suivra la mienne tôt ou tard dans le panier rouge. Plus d'un qui y vient pour moi y viendra pour soi.

Pour ces êtres fatals il y a sur un certain point de la place de Grève un lieu fatal, un centre d'attraction, un piège. Ils tournent autour jusqu'à ce qu'ils y soient.

XLVI

Ma petite Marie! — On l’a remmenée jouer; elle regarde la foule par la portière du fiacre, et ne pense déjà plus à ce monsieur.

Peut-être aurais-je encore le temps d’écrire quelques pages pour elle, afin qu’elle les lise un jour, et qu’elle pleure dans quinze ans pour aujourd’hui.

Oui, il faut qu’elle sache par moi mon histoire, et pourquoi le nom que je lui laisse est sanglant.

XLVII

MON HISTOIRE.

Note de l’éditeur. — On n’a pu encore retrouver les feuillets qui se rattachaient à celui-ci. Peut-être, comme ceux qui suivent semblent l’indiquer, le condamné n’a-t-il pas eu le temps de les écrire. Il était tard quand cette pensée lui est venue.

XLVIII

D’une chambre de l’Hôtel de Ville.

De l’Hôtel de Ville!… — Ainsi j’y suis. Le trajet exécrable est fait. La place est là, et au-dessous de la fenêtre l’horrible peuple qui aboie, et m’attend, et rit.

J’ai eu beau me roidir, beau me crisper, le coeur m’a failli. Quand j’ai vu au-dessus des têtes ces deux bras rouges avec leur triangle noir au bout, dressés entre les deux lanternes du quai, le coeur m’a failli. J’ai demandé à faire une dernière déclaration. On m’a déposé ici, et l’on est allé chercher quelque procureur du roi. Je l’attends, c’est toujours cela de gagné.

Voici.

Trois heures sonnaient, on est venu m’avertir qu’il était temps. J’ai tremblé, comme si j’eusse pensé à autre chose depuis six heures, depuis six semaines, depuis six mois. Cela m’a fait l’effet de quelque chose d’inattendu.

Ils m’ont fait traverser leurs corridors et descendre leurs escaliers. Ils m’ont poussé entre deux guichets du rez-de-chaussée, salle sombre, étroite, voûtée, à peine éclairée d’un jour de pluie et de brouillard. Une chaise était au milieu. Ils m’ont dit de m’asseoir; je me suis assis.

Il y avait près de la porte et le long des murs quelques personnes debout, outre le prêtre et les gendarmes, et il y avait aussi trois hommes.

Le premier, le plus grand, le plus vieux, était gras et avait la face rouge. Il portait une redingote et un chapeau à trois cornes déformé. C’était lui.

C’était le bourreau, le valet de la guillotine. Les deux autres étaient ses valets, à lui.

À peine assis, les deux autres se sont approchés de moi, par derrière, comme des chats; puis tout à coup j’ai senti un froid d’acier dans mes cheveux, et les ciseaux ont grincé à mes oreilles.

Mes cheveux, coupés au hasard, tombaient par mèches sur mes épaules, et l’homme au chapeau à trois cornes les époussetait doucement avec sa grosse main.

Autour, on parlait à voix basse.

Il y avait un grand bruit au dehors, comme un frémissement qui ondulait dans l’air. J’ai cru d’abord que c’était la rivière; mais, à des rires qui éclataient, j’ai reconnu que c’était la foule.

Un jeune homme, près de la fenêtre, qui écrivait, avec un crayon, sur un portefeuille, a demandé à un des guichetiers comment s'appelait ce qu'on faisait là.

— La toilette du condamné, a répondu l'autre.

J'ai compris que cela serait demain dans le journal.

Tout à coup l'un des valets m'a enlevé ma veste, et l'autre a pris mes deux mains qui pendaient, les a ramenées derrière mon dos, et j'ai senti les noeuds d'une corde se rouler lentement autour de mes poignets rapprochés. En même temps, l'autre détachait ma cravate. Ma chemise de batiste, seul lambeau qui me restât du moi d'autrefois, l'a fait en quelque sorte hésiter un moment; puis il s'est mis à en couper le col.

À cette précaution horrible, au saisissement de l'acier qui touchait mon cou, mes coudes ont tressailli, et j'ai laissé échapper un rugissement étouffé. La main de l'exécuteur a tremblé.

— Monsieur, m'a-t-il dit, pardon! Est-ce que je vous ai fait mal?

Ces bourreaux sont des hommes très doux. La foule hurlait plus haut au dehors. Le gros homme au visage bourgeonné m'a offert à respirer un mouchoir imbibé de vinaigre.

— Merci, lui ai-je dit de la voix la plus forte que j'ai pu, c'est inutile; je me trouve bien.

Alors l'un d'eux s'est baissé et m'a lié les deux pieds, au moyen d'une corde fine et lâche, qui ne me laissait à faire que de petits pas. Cette corde est venue se rattacher à celle de mes mains.

Puis le gros homme a jeté la veste sur mon dos, et a noué les manches ensemble sous mon menton. Ce qu'il y avait à faire là était fait.

Alors le prêtre s'est approché avec son crucifix.

— Allons, mon fils, m'a-t-il dit.

Les valets m'ont pris sous les aisselles. Je me suis levé, j'ai marché. Mes pas étaient mous et fléchissaient comme si j'avais eu deux genoux à chaque jambe.

En ce moment la porte extérieure s'est ouverte à deux battants. Une clameur furieuse et l'air froid et la lumière blanche ont fait irruption jusqu'à moi dans l'ombre. Du fond du sombre guichet, j'ai vu brusquement tout à la fois, à travers la pluie, les mille têtes hurlantes du peuple entassées pêle-mêle sur la rampe du grand escalier du Palais; à droite, de plain-pied avec le seuil, un rang de chevaux de gendarmes, dont la porte basse ne me découvrait que les pieds de devant et les poitrails; en face, un détachement de soldats en bataille; à gauche, l'arrière d'une charrette, auquel s'appuyait une roide échelle. Tableau hideux, bien encadré dans une porte de prison.

C'est pour ce moment redouté que j'avais gardé mon courage. J'ai fait trois pas, et j'ai paru sur le seuil du guichet.

— Le voilà! le voilà! a crié la foule. Il sort! enfin!

Et les plus près de moi battaient des mains. Si fort qu'on aime un roi, ce serait moins de fête.

C'était une charrette ordinaire, avec un cheval étique, et un charretier en sarrau bleu à dessins rouges, comme ceux des maraîchers des environs de Bicêtre.

Le gros homme en chapeau à trois cornes est monté le premier.

— Bonjour, monsieur Samson! criaient des enfants pendus à des grilles.

Un valet l'a suivi.

— Bravo, Mardi! ont crié de nouveau les enfants.

Ils se sont assis tous deux sur la banquette de devant.

C'était mon tour. J'ai monté d'une allure assez ferme.

— Il va bien! a dit une femme à côté des gendarmes.

Cet atroce éloge m'a donné du courage. Le prêtre est venu se placer auprès de moi. On m'avait assis sur la banquette de derrière, le dos tourné au cheval. J'ai frémi de cette dernière attention.

Ils mettent de l'humanité là dedans.

J'ai voulu regarder autour de moi. Gendarmes devant, gendarmes derrière; puis de la foule, de la foule, et de la foule; une mer de têtes sur la place.

Un piquet de gendarmerie à cheval m'attendait à la porte de la grille du Palais.

L'officier a donné l'ordre. La charrette et son cortège se sont mis en mouvement, comme poussés en avant par un hurlement de la populace.

On a franchi la grille. Au moment où la charrette a tourné vers le Pont-au-Change, la place a éclaté en bruit, du pavé aux toits, et les ponts et les quais ont répondu à faire un tremblement de terre.

C'est là que le piquet qui attendait s'est rallié à l'escorte.

— Chapeaux bas! chapeaux bas! criaient mille bouches ensemble.

Comme pour le roi.

Alors j'ai ri horriblement aussi, moi, et j'ai dit au prêtre:

— Eux les chapeaux, moi la tête.

On allait au pas.

Le quai aux Fleurs embaumait; c’est jour de marché. Les marchandes ont quitté leurs bouquets pour moi.

Vis-à-vis, un peu avant la tour carrée qui fait le coin du Palais, il y a des cabarets, dont les entresols étaient pleins de spectateurs heureux de leurs belles places, surtout des femmes. La journée doit être bonne pour les cabaretiers.

On louait des tables, des chaises, des échafaudages, des charrettes. Tout pliait de spectateurs. Des marchands de sang humain criaient à tue-tête:

— Qui veut des places?

Une rage m’a pris contre ce peuple. J’ai eu envie de leur crier:

— Qui veut la mienne?

Cependant la charrette avançait. À chaque pas qu’elle faisait, la foule se démolissait derrière elle, et je la voyais de mes yeux égarés qui s’allait reformer plus loin sur d’autres points de mon passage.

En entrant sur le Pont-au-Change, j’ai par hasard jeté les yeux à ma droite en arrière. Mon regard s’est arrêté sur l’autre quai, au-dessus des maisons, à une tour noire, isolée, hérissée de sculptures, au sommet de laquelle je voyais deux monstres de pierre assis de profil. Je ne sais pourquoi j’ai demandé au prêtre ce que c’était que cette tour.

— Saint-Jacques-la-Boucherie, a répondu le bourreau.

J’ignore comment cela se faisait; dans la brume, et malgré la pluie fine et blanche qui rayait l’air comme un réseau de fils d’araignée, rien de ce qui se passait autour de moi ne m’a échappé. Chacun de ces détails m’apportait sa torture. Les mots manquent aux émotions.

Vers le milieu de ce Pont-au-Change, si large et si encombré que nous cheminions à grand’peine, l’horreur m’a pris violemment. J’ai craint de défaillir, dernière vanité! Alors je me suis étourdi moi-même pour être aveugle et pour être sourd à tout, excepté au prêtre, dont j’entendais à peine les paroles, entrecoupées de rumeurs.

J’ai pris le crucifix et je l’ai baisé.

— Ayez pitié de moi, ai-je dit, ô mon Dieu! Et j’ai tâché de m’abîmer dans cette pensée.

Mais chaque cahot de la dure charrette me secouait. Puis tout à coup je me suis senti un grand froid. La pluie avait traversé mes vêtements, et mouillait la peau de ma tête à travers mes cheveux coupés et courts.

— Vous tremblez de froid, mon fils? m’a demandé le prêtre.

— Oui, ai-je répondu.

Hélas! pas seulement de froid.

Au détour du pont, des femmes m’ont plaint d’être si jeune.

Nous avons pris le fatal quai. Je commençais à ne plus voir, à ne plus entendre. Toutes ces voix, toutes ces têtes aux fenêtres, aux portes, aux grilles des boutiques, aux branches des lanternes; ces spectateurs avides et cruels; cette foule où tous me connaissent et où je ne connais personne; cette route pavée et murée de visages humains… J’étais ivre, stupide, insensé. C’est une chose insupportable que le poids de tant de regards appuyés sur vous.

Je vacillais donc sur le banc, ne prêtant même plus d’attention au prêtre et au crucifix.

Dans le tumulte qui m’enveloppait, je ne distinguais plus les cris de pitié des cris de joie, les rires des plaintes, les voix du bruit; tout cela était une rumeur qui résonnait dans ma tête comme dans un écho de cuivre.

Mes yeux lisaient machinalement les enseignes des boutiques.

Une fois l’étrange curiosité me prit de tourner la tête et de regarder vers quoi j’avançais. C’était une dernière bravade de l’intelligence. Mais le corps ne voulut pas; ma nuque resta paralysée et d’avance comme morte.

J’entrevis seulement de côté, à ma gauche, au-delà de la rivière, la tour de Notre-Dame, qui, vue de là, cache l’autre. C’est celle où est le drapeau. Il y avait beaucoup de monde, et qui devait bien voir.

Et la charrette allait, allait, et les boutiques passaient, et les enseignes se succédaient, écrites, peintes, dorées, et la populace riait et trépignait dans la boue, et je me laissais aller, comme à leurs rêves ceux qui sont endormis.

Tout à coup la série des boutiques qui occupait mes yeux s’est coupée à l’angle d’une place; la voix de la foule est devenue plus vaste, plus glapissante, plus joyeuse encore; la charrette s’est arrêtée subitement, et j’ai failli tomber la face sur les planches. Le prêtre m’a soutenu. — Courage! a-t-il murmuré. Alors on a apporté une échelle à l’arrière de la charrette; il m’a donné le bras, je suis descendu, puis j’ai fait un pas, puis je me suis retourné pour en faire un autre, et je n’ai pu. Entre les deux lanternes du quai j’avais vu une chose sinistre.

Oh! c’était la réalité!

Je me suis arrêté, comme chancelant déjà du coup.

— J’ai une dernière déclaration à faire! ai-je crié faiblement.

On m’a monté ici.

J’ai demandé qu’on me laissât écrire mes dernières volontés. Ils m’ont délié les mains, mais la corde est ici, toute prête, et le reste est en bas.

XLIX

Un juge, un commissaire, un magistrat, je ne sais de quelle espèce, vient de venir. Je lui ai demandé ma grâce en joignant les deux mains et en me traînant sur les deux genoux. Il m’a répondu, en souriant fatalement, si c’est là tout ce que j’avais à lui dire.

— Ma grâce! ma grâce! ai-je répété, ou, par pitié, cinq minutes encore!

Qui sait? elle viendra peut-être! Cela est si horrible, à mon âge, de mourir ainsi! Des grâces qui arrivent au dernier moment, on l’a vu souvent. Et à qui fera-t-on grâce, monsieur, si ce n’est à moi?

Cet exécrable bourreau! il s’est approché du juge pour lui dire que l’exécution devait être faite à une certaine heure, que cette heure approchait, qu’il était responsable, que d’ailleurs il pleut et que cela risque de se rouiller.

— Eh, par pitié! une minute pour attendre ma grâce! ou je me défends, je mords!

Le juge et le bourreau sont sortis. Je suis seul. Seul avec deux gendarmes.

Oh! l’horrible peuple avec ses cris d’hyène! — Qui sait si je ne lui échapperai pas? si je ne serai pas sauvé? si ma grâce?… Il est impossible qu’on ne me fasse pas grâce!

Ah! les misérables! il me semble qu’on monte l’escalier…

QUATRE HEURES.

THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE-DAME

Translated by Isabel F. Hapgood

First published in 1831, this is one of Hugo's most famous works. He began writing *Notre-Dame de Paris* in 1829. The agreement with his original publisher Gosselin was that the novel should be finished that same year, but Hugo was constantly delayed by other projects. By the summer of 1830, Gosselin demanded Hugo to complete the book by February 1831. Beginning in September 1830, Hugo worked continually on the project and finished it six months later.

The novel begins on Epiphany (6 January), 1482, the day of the 'Feast of Fools' in Paris. Quasimodo, the deformed hunchback bell-ringer of Notre Dame, is introduced by his crowning as King of Fools. The novel also concerns Esmeralda, a beautiful, kind and generous Gypsy, who captures the hearts of many admirers, including Captain Phoebus and a poor street poet, Pierre Gringoire, but especially Quasimodo.

The enormous popularity of the novel in France spurred a historical preservation movement and strongly encouraged the revival of Gothic architecture. Ultimately the novel also encouraged major renovations at Notre-Dame in the 19th century, which were led by Eugène Viollet-le-Duc. Much of the cathedral's present appearance is a result of this renovation.

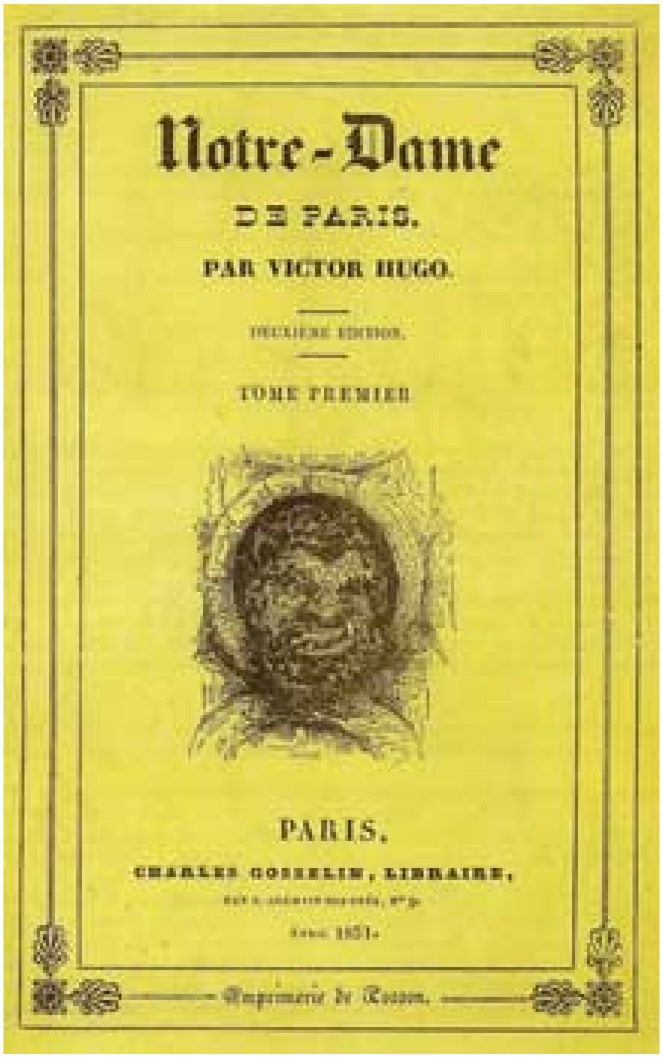

Notre-Dame

DE PARIS.

PAR VICTOR HUGO.

DEUXIÈME ÉDITION.

TOME PREMIER

PARIS,

CHARLES GOSSELIN, LIBRAIRE,

1831.

Imprimerie de Cosson.

The first edition printing

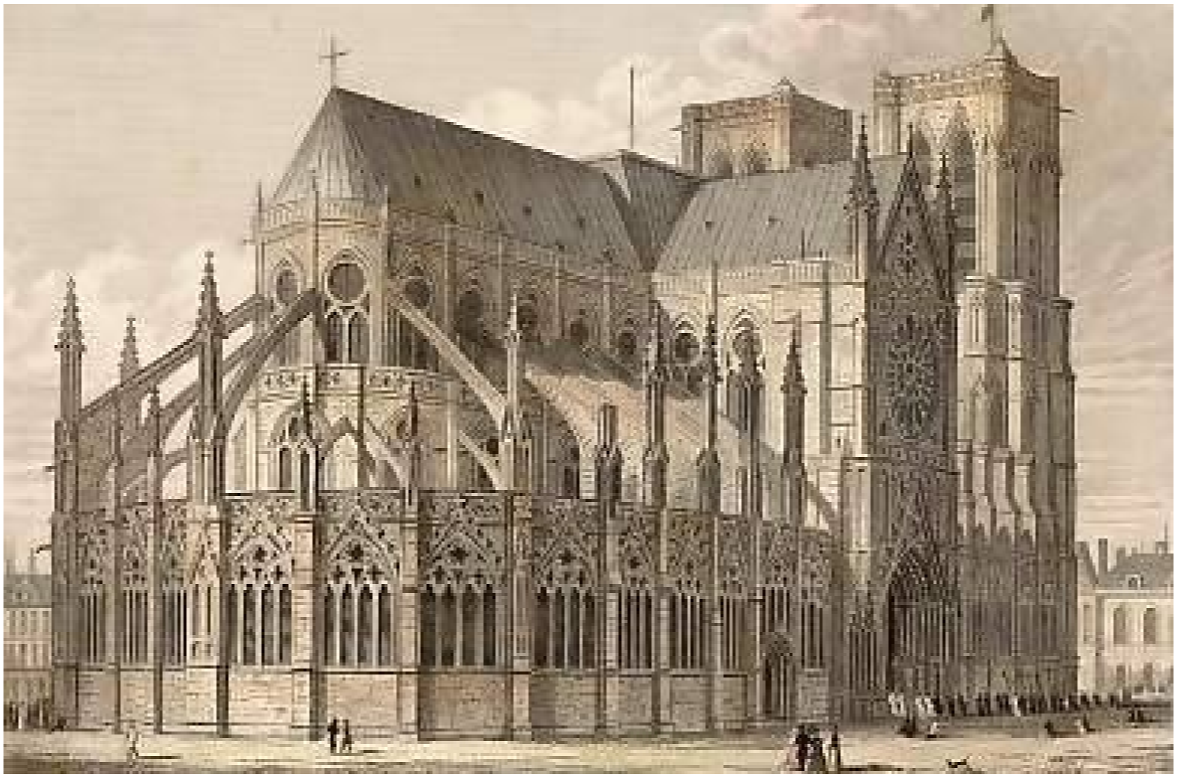

Notre-Dame, at the time of publication

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The original French text of this novel can be accessed via this link.

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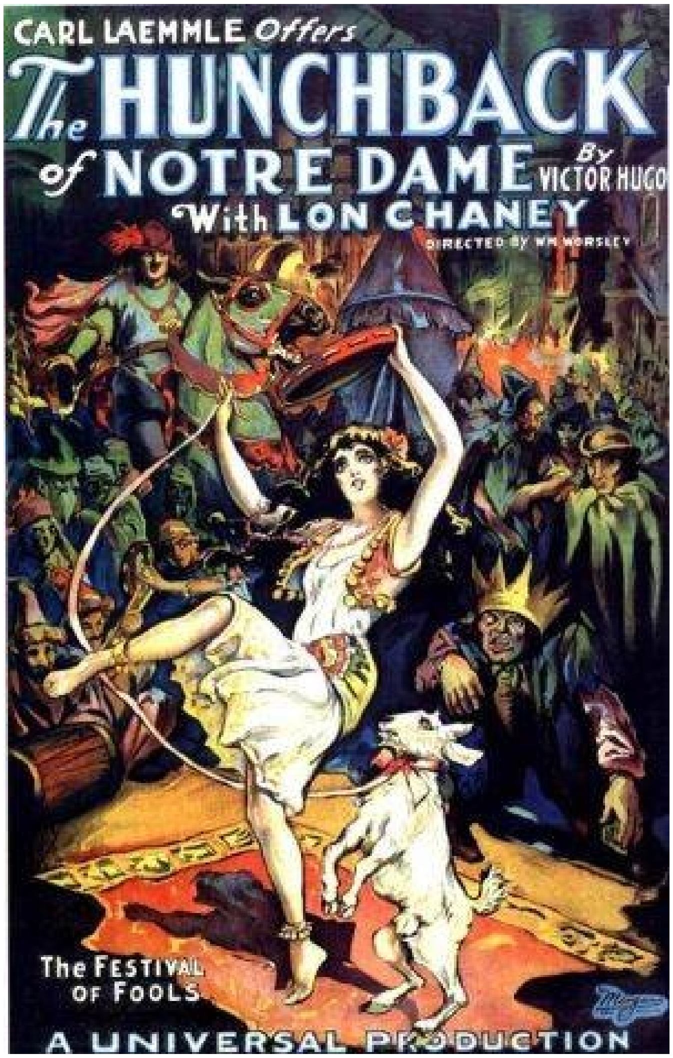
CARL LAEMMLE Offers
The HUNCHBACK
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By VICTOR HUGO
With LON CHANEY
DIRECTED BY WM WORSLEY
The FESTIVAL OF FOOLS
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The 1923 US movie adaptation

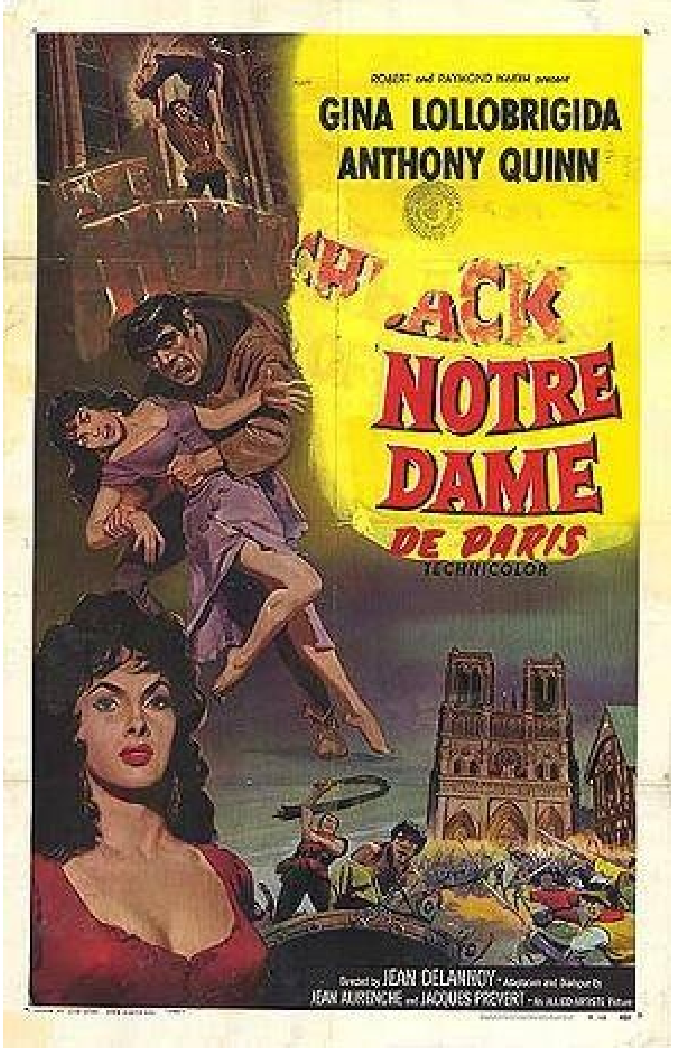
ROBERT and RAYMOND HAKIM present
GINA LOLLOBRIGIDA
ANTHONY QUINN
ACK
NOTRE DAME
DE PARIS
TECHNICOLOR
Directed by JEAN DELANNOY • Adaptation and Dialogue by
JEAN AURENCHE and JACQUES PREVERT • An ALLIED ARTISTS Picture

The 1956 film version

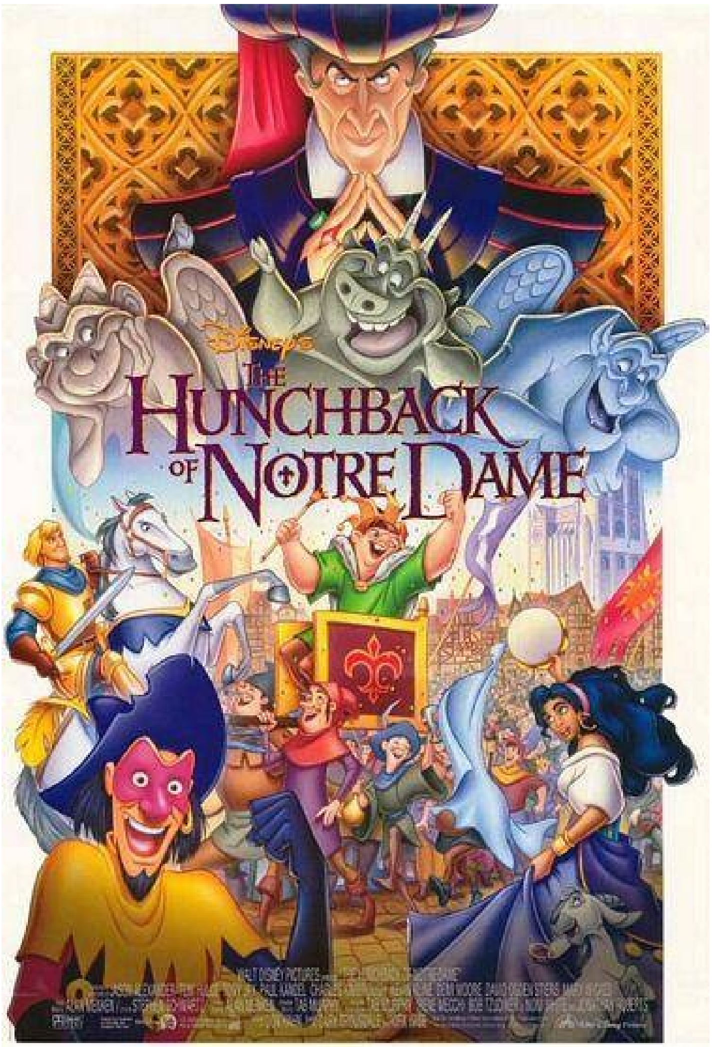
Disney's
The Hunchback of Notre Dame

The 1996 Disney film based on the novel

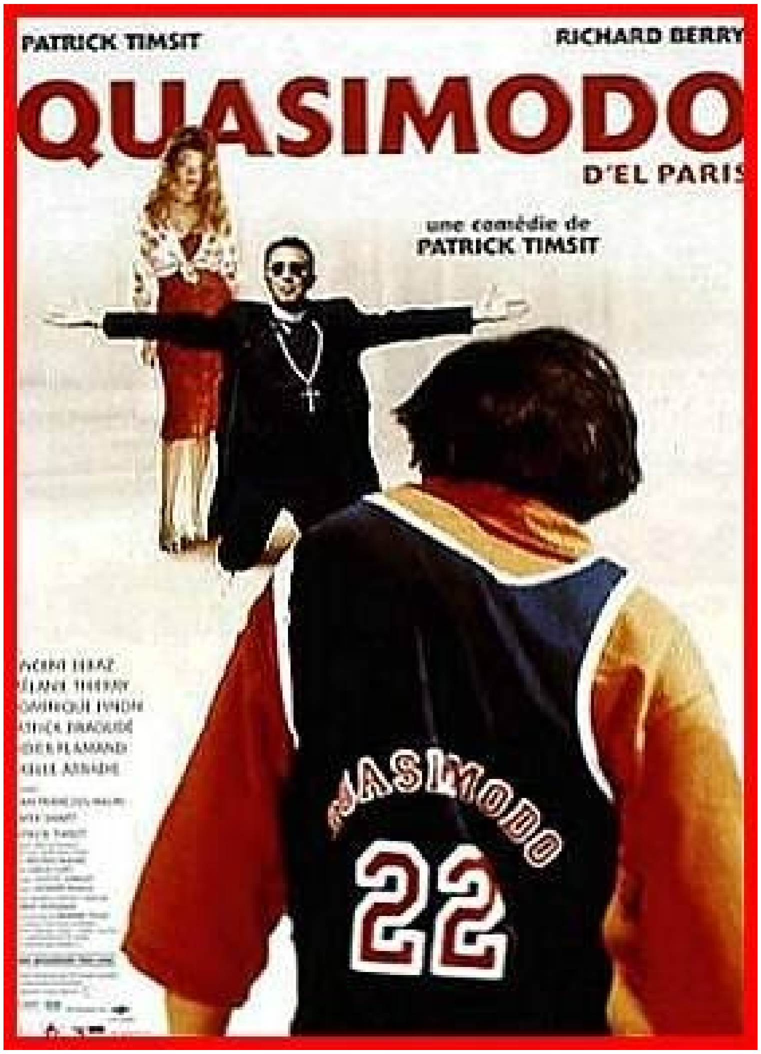
PATRICK TIMSIT
RICHARD BERRY
QUASIMODO
D'EL PARIS
une comédie de
PATRICK TIMSIT
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A modern-day French parody, 1999

PREFACE.

A few years ago, while visiting or, rather, rummaging about Notre-Dame, the author of this book found, in an obscure nook of one of the towers, the following word, engraved by hand upon the wall:—

ANArKH.

These Greek capitals, black with age, and quite deeply graven in the stone, with I know not what signs peculiar to Gothic caligraphy imprinted upon their forms and upon their attitudes, as though with the purpose of revealing that it had been a hand of the Middle Ages which had inscribed them there, and especially the fatal and melancholy meaning contained in them, struck the author deeply.

He questioned himself; he sought to divine who could have been that soul in torment which had not been willing to quit this world without leaving this stigma of crime or unhappiness upon the brow of the ancient church.

Afterwards, the wall was whitewashed or scraped down, I know not which, and the inscription disappeared. For it is thus that people have been in the habit of proceeding with the marvellous churches of the Middle Ages for the last two hundred years. Mutilations come to them from every quarter, from within as well as from without. The priest whitewashes them, the archdeacon scrapes them down; then the populace arrives and demolishes them.

Thus, with the exception of the fragile memory which the author of this book here consecrates to it, there remains to-day nothing whatever of the mysterious word engraved within the gloomy tower of Notre-Dame, —nothing of the destiny which it so sadly summed up. The man who wrote that word upon the wall disappeared from the midst of the generations of man many centuries ago; the word, in its turn, has been effaced from the wall of the church; the church will, perhaps, itself soon disappear from the face of the earth.

It is upon this word that this book is founded.

March, 1831.

VOLUME I.

BOOK FIRST.

CHAPTER I. THE GRAND HALL.

Three hundred and forty-eight years, six months, and nineteen days ago to-day, the Parisians awoke to the sound of all the bells in the triple circuit of the city, the university, and the town ringing a full peal.

The sixth of January, 1482, is not, however, a day of which history has preserved the memory. There was nothing notable in the event which thus set the bells and the bourgeois of Paris in a ferment from early morning. It was neither an assault by the Picards nor the Burgundians, nor a hunt led along in procession, nor a revolt of scholars in the town of Laas, nor an entry of “our much dread lord, monsieur the king,” nor even a pretty hanging of male and female thieves by the courts of Paris. Neither was it the arrival, so frequent in the fifteenth century, of some plumed and bedizened embassy. It was barely two days since the last cavalcade of that nature, that of the Flemish ambassadors charged with concluding the marriage between the dauphin and Marguerite of Flanders, had made its entry into Paris, to the great annoyance of M. le Cardinal de Bourbon, who, for the sake of pleasing the king, had been obliged to assume an amiable mien towards this whole rustic rabble of Flemish burgomasters, and to regale them at his Hôtel de Bourbon, with a very “pretty morality, allegorical satire, and farce,” while a driving rain drenched the magnificent tapestries at his door.

What put the “whole population of Paris in commotion,” as Jehan de Troyes expresses it, on the sixth of January, was the double solemnity, united from time immemorial, of the Epiphany and the Feast of Fools.

On that day, there was to be a bonfire on the Place de Grève, a maypole at the Chapelle de Braque, and a mystery at the Palais de Justice. It had been cried, to the sound of the trumpet, the preceding evening at all the cross roads, by the provost’s men, clad in handsome, short, sleeveless coats of violet camelot, with large white crosses upon their breasts.

So the crowd of citizens, male and female, having closed their houses and shops, thronged from every direction, at early morn, towards some one of the three spots designated.

Each had made his choice; one, the bonfire; another, the maypole; another, the mystery play. It must be stated, in honor of the good sense of the loungers of Paris, that the greater part of this crowd directed their steps towards the bonfire, which was quite in season, or towards the mystery play, which was to be presented in the grand hall of the Palais de Justice (the courts of law), which was well roofed and walled; and that the curious left the poor, scantily flowered maypole to shiver all alone beneath the sky of January, in the cemetery of the Chapel of Braque.

The populace thronged the avenues of the law courts in particular, because they knew that the Flemish ambassadors, who had arrived two days previously, intended to be present at the representation of the mystery, and at the election of the Pope of the Fools, which was also to take place in the grand hall.

It was no easy matter on that day, to force one's way into that grand hall, although it was then reputed to be the largest covered enclosure in the world (it is true that Sauval had not yet measured the grand hall of the Château of Montargis). The palace place, encumbered with people, offered to the curious gazers at the windows the aspect of a sea; into which five or six streets, like so many mouths of rivers, discharged every moment fresh floods of heads. The waves of this crowd, augmented incessantly, dashed against the angles of the houses which projected here and there, like so many promontories, into the irregular basin of the place. In the centre of the lofty Gothic* façade of the palace, the grand staircase, incessantly ascended and descended by a double current, which, after parting on the intermediate landing-place, flowed in broad waves along its lateral slopes, — the grand staircase, I say, trickled incessantly into the place, like a cascade into a lake. The cries, the laughter, the trampling of those thousands of feet, produced a great noise and a great clamor. From time to time, this noise and clamor redoubled; the current which drove the crowd towards the grand staircase flowed backwards, became troubled, formed whirlpools. This was produced by the buffet of an archer, or the horse of one of the provost's sergeants, which kicked to restore order; an admirable tradition which the provostship has bequeathed to the constablery, the constablery to the *maréchaussée*, the *maréchaussée* to our *gendarmeri* of Paris.

* The word Gothic, in the sense in which it is generally employed, is wholly unsuitable, but wholly consecrated. Hence we accept it and we adopt it, like all the rest of the world, to characterize the architecture of the second half of the Middle Ages, where the ogive is the principle which succeeds the architecture of the first period, of which the semi-circle is the father.

Thousands of good, calm, bourgeois faces thronged the windows, the doors, the dormer windows, the roofs, gazing at the palace, gazing at the populace, and asking nothing more; for many Parisians content themselves with the spectacle of the spectators, and a wall behind which something is going on becomes at once, for us, a very curious thing indeed.

If it could be granted to us, the men of 1830, to mingle in thought with those Parisians of the fifteenth century, and to enter with them, jostled, elbowed, pulled about, into that immense hall of the palace, which was so cramped on that sixth of January, 1482, the spectacle would not be devoid of either interest or charm, and we should have about us only things that were so old that they would seem new.

With the reader’s consent, we will endeavor to retrace in thought, the impression which he would have experienced in company with us on crossing the threshold of that grand hall, in the midst of that tumultuous crowd in surcoats, short, sleeveless jackets, and doublets.

And, first of all, there is a buzzing in the ears, a dazzlement in the eyes. Above our heads is a double ogive vault, panelled with wood carving, painted azure, and sown with golden fleurs-de-lis; beneath our feet a pavement of black and white marble, alternating. A few paces distant, an enormous pillar, then another, then another; seven pillars in all, down the length of the hall, sustaining the spring of the arches of the double vault, in the centre of its width. Around four of the pillars, stalls of merchants, all sparkling with glass and tinsel; around the last three, benches of oak, worn and polished by the trunk hose of the litigants, and the robes of the attorneys. Around the hall, along the lofty wall, between the doors, between the windows, between the pillars, the interminable row of all the kings of France, from Pharamond down: the lazy kings, with pendent arms and downcast eyes; the valiant and combative kings, with heads and arms raised boldly heavenward. Then in the long, pointed windows, glass of a thousand hues; at the wide entrances to the hall, rich doors, finely sculptured; and all, the vaults, pillars, walls, jambs, panelling, doors, statues, covered from top to bottom with a splendid blue and gold illumination, which, a trifle tarnished at the epoch when we behold it, had almost entirely disappeared beneath dust and spiders in the year of grace, 1549, when du Breul still admired it from tradition.

Let the reader picture to himself now, this immense, oblong hall, illuminated by the pallid light of a January day, invaded by a motley and noisy throng which drifts along the walls, and eddies round the seven pillars, and he will have a confused idea of the whole effect of the picture, whose curious details we shall make an effort to indicate with more precision.

It is certain, that if Ravaillac had not assassinated Henri IV., there would have been no documents in the trial of Ravaillac deposited in the clerk's office of the Palais de Justice, no accomplices interested in causing the said documents to disappear; hence, no incendiaries obliged, for lack of better means, to burn the clerk's office in order to burn the documents, and to burn the Palais de Justice in order to burn the clerk's office; consequently, in short, no conflagration in 1618. The old Palais would be standing still, with its ancient grand hall; I should be able to say to the reader, "Go and look at it," and we should thus both escape the necessity, — I of making, and he of reading, a description of it, such as it is. Which demonstrates a new truth: that great events have incalculable results.

It is true that it may be quite possible, in the first place, that Ravaillac had no accomplices; and in the second, that if he had any, they were in no way connected with the fire of 1618. Two other very plausible explanations exist: First, the great flaming star, a foot broad, and a cubit high, which fell from heaven, as every one knows, upon the law courts, after midnight on the seventh of March; second, Théophile's quatrain, —

> "Sure, 'twas but a sorry game
> When at Paris, Dame Justice,
> Through having eaten too much spice,
> Set the palace all aflame."

Whatever may be thought of this triple explanation, political, physical, and poetical, of the burning of the law courts in 1618, the unfortunate fact of the fire is certain. Very little to-day remains, thanks to this catastrophe, — thanks, above all, to the successive restorations which have completed what it spared, — very little remains of that first dwelling of the kings of France, — of that elder palace of the Louvre, already so old in the time of Philip the Handsome, that they sought there for the traces of the magnificent buildings erected by King Robert and described by Helgaldus. Nearly everything has disappeared. What has become of the chamber of the chancellery, where Saint Louis consummated his marriage? the garden where he administered justice, "clad in a coat of camelot, a surcoat of linsey-woolsey, without sleeves, and a sur-mantle of black sandal, as he lay upon the carpet with Joinville?” Where is the chamber of the Emperor Sigismond? and that of Charles IV.? that of Jean the Landless? Where is the staircase, from which Charles VI. promulgated his edict of pardon? the slab where Marcel cut the throats of Robert de Clermont and the Marshal of Champagne, in the presence of the dauphin? the wicket where the bulls of Pope Benedict were torn, and whence those who had brought them departed decked out, in derision, in copes and mitres, and making an apology through all Paris? and the grand hall, with its gilding, its azure, its statues, its pointed arches, its pillars, its immense vault, all fretted with carvings? and the gilded chamber? and the stone lion, which stood at the door, with lowered head and tail between his legs, like the lions on the throne of Solomon, in the humiliated attitude which befits force in the presence of justice? and the beautiful doors? and the stained glass? and the chased ironwork, which drove Biscornette to despair? and the delicate woodwork of Hancy? What has time, what have men done with these marvels? What have they given us in return for all this Gallic history, for all this Gothic art? The heavy flattened arches of M. de Brosse, that awkward architect of the Saint-Gervais portal. So much for art; and, as for history, we have the gossiping reminiscences of the great pillar, still ringing with the tattle of the Patru.

It is not much. Let us return to the veritable grand hall of the veritable old palace. The two extremities of this gigantic parallelogram were occupied, the one by the famous marble table, so long, so broad, and so thick that, as the ancient land rolls — in a style that would have given Gargantua an appetite — say, “such a slice of marble as was never beheld in the world”; the other by the chapel where Louis XI. had himself sculptured on his knees before the Virgin, and whither he caused to be brought, without heeding the two gaps thus made in the row of royal statues, the statues of Charlemagne and of Saint Louis, two saints whom he supposed to be great in favor in heaven, as kings of France. This chapel, quite new, having been built only six years, was entirely in that charming taste of delicate architecture, of marvellous sculpture, of fine and deep chasing, which marks with us the end of the Gothic era, and which is perpetuated to about the middle of the sixteenth century in the fairylike fancies of the Renaissance. The little open-work rose window, pierced above the portal, was, in particular, a masterpiece of lightness and grace; one would have pronounced it a star of lace.

In the middle of the hall, opposite the great door, a platform of gold brocade, placed against the wall, a special entrance to which had been effected through a window in the corridor of the gold chamber, had been erected for the Flemish emissaries and the other great personages invited to the presentation of the mystery play.

It was upon the marble table that the mystery was to be enacted, as usual. It had been arranged for the purpose, early in the morning; its rich slabs of marble, all scratched by the heels of law clerks, supported a cage of carpenter's work of considerable height, the upper surface of which, within view of the whole hall, was to serve as the theatre, and whose interior, masked by tapestries, was to take the place of dressing-rooms for the personages of the piece. A ladder, naively placed on the outside, was to serve as means of communication between the dressing-room and the stage, and lend its rude rungs to entrances as well as to exits. There was no personage, however unexpected, no sudden change, no theatrical effect, which was not obliged to mount that ladder. Innocent and venerable infancy of art and contrivances!

Four of the bailiff of the palace's sergeants, perfunctory guardians of all the pleasures of the people, on days of festival as well as on days of execution, stood at the four corners of the marble table.

The piece was only to begin with the twelfth stroke of the great palace clock sounding midday. It was very late, no doubt, for a theatrical representation, but they had been obliged to fix the hour to suit the convenience of the ambassadors.

Now, this whole multitude had been waiting since morning. A goodly number of curious, good people had been shivering since daybreak before the grand staircase of the palace; some even affirmed that they had passed the night across the threshold of the great door, in order to make sure that they should be the first to pass in. The crowd grew more dense every moment, and, like water, which rises above its normal level, began to mount along the walls, to swell around the pillars, to spread out on the entablatures, on the cornices, on the window-sills, on all the salient points of the architecture, on all the reliefs of the sculpture. Hence, discomfort, impatience, weariness, the liberty of a day of cynicism and folly, the quarrels which break forth for all sorts of causes — a pointed elbow, an iron-shod shoe, the fatigue of long waiting — had already, long before the hour appointed for the arrival of the ambassadors, imparted a harsh and bitter accent to the clamor of these people who were shut in, fitted into each other, pressed, trampled upon, stifled. Nothing was to be heard but imprecations on the Flemish, the provost of the merchants, the Cardinal de Bourbon, the bailiff of the courts, Madame Marguerite of Austria, the sergeants with their rods, the cold, the heat, the bad weather, the Bishop of Paris, the Pope of the Fools, the pillars, the statues, that closed door, that open window; all to the vast amusement of a band of scholars and lackeys scattered through the mass, who mingled with all this discontent their teasing remarks, and their malicious suggestions, and pricked the general bad temper with a pin, so to speak.

Among the rest there was a group of those merry imps, who, after smashing the glass in a window, had seated themselves hardily on the entablature, and from that point despatched their gaze and their railleries both within and without, upon the throng in the hall, and the throng upon the Place. It was easy to see, from their parodied gestures, their ringing laughter, the bantering appeals which they exchanged with their comrades, from one end of the hall to the other, that these young clerks did not share the weariness and fatigue of the rest of the spectators, and that they understood very well the art of extracting, for their own private diversion from that which they had under their eyes, a spectacle which made them await the other with patience.

“Upon my soul, so it’s you, ‘Joannes Frollo de Molendino!’” cried one of them, to a sort of little, light-haired imp, with a well-favored and malign countenance, clinging to the acanthus leaves of a capital; “you are well named John of the Mill, for your two arms and your two legs have the air of four wings fluttering on the breeze. How long have you been here?”

“By the mercy of the devil,” retorted Joannes Frollo, “these four hours and more; and I hope that they will be reckoned to my credit in purgatory. I heard the eight singers of the King of Sicily intone the first verse of seven o’clock mass in the Sainte-Chapelle.”

“Fine singers!” replied the other, “with voices even more pointed than their caps! Before founding a mass for Monsieur Saint John, the king should have inquired whether Monsieur Saint John likes Latin droned out in a Provençal accent.”

“He did it for the sake of employing those accursed singers of the King of Sicily!” cried an old woman sharply from among the crowd beneath the window. “I just put it to you! A thousand *livres parisi* for a mass! and out of the tax on sea fish in the markets of Paris, to boot!”

“Peace, old crone,” said a tall, grave person, stopping up his nose on the side towards the fishwife; “a mass had to be founded. Would you wish the king to fall ill again?”

“Bravely spoken, Sire Gilles Lecornu, master furrier of king’s robes!” cried the little student, clinging to the capital.

A shout of laughter from all the students greeted the unlucky name of the poor furrier of the king’s robes.

“Lecornu! Gilles Lecornu!” said some.

“*Cornutus et hirsutus,* horned and hairy,” another went on.

“He! of course,” continued the small imp on the capital, “What are they laughing at? An honorable man is Gilles Lecornu, brother of Master Jehan Lecornu, provost of the king’s house, son of Master Mahiet Lecornu, first porter of the Bois de Vincennes, — all bourgeois of Paris, all married, from father to son.”

The gayety redoubled. The big furrier, without uttering a word in reply, tried to escape all the eyes riveted upon him from all sides; but he perspired and panted in vain; like a wedge entering the wood, his efforts served only to bury still more deeply in the shoulders of his neighbors, his large, apoplectic face, purple with spite and rage.

At length one of these, as fat, short, and venerable as himself, came to his rescue.

“Abomination! scholars addressing a bourgeois in that fashion in my day would have been flogged with a fagot, which would have afterwards been used to burn them.”

The whole band burst into laughter.

“Holà hé! who is scolding so? Who is that screech owl of evil fortune?”

“Hold, I know him” said one of them; “’tis Master Andry Musnier.”

“Because he is one of the four sworn booksellers of the university!” said the other.

“Everything goes by fours in that shop,” cried a third; “the four nations, the four faculties, the four feasts, the four procurators, the four electors, the four booksellers.”

“Well,” began Jean Frollo once more, “we must play the devil with them.”*

* *Faire le diable a quatre*.

“Musnier, we’ll burn your books.”

“Musnier, we’ll beat your lackeys.”

“Musnier, we’ll kiss your wife.”

“That fine, big Mademoiselle Oudarde.”

“Who is as fresh and as gay as though she were a widow.”

“Devil take you!” growled Master Andry Musnier.

“Master Andry,” pursued Jean Jehan, still clinging to his capital, “hold your tongue, or I’ll drop on your head!”

Master Andry raised his eyes, seemed to measure in an instant the height of the pillar, the weight of the scamp, mentally multiplied that weight by the square of the velocity and remained silent.

Jehan, master of the field of battle, pursued triumphantly:

“That’s what I’ll do, even if I am the brother of an archdeacon!”

“Fine gentry are our people of the university, not to have caused our privileges to be respected on such a day as this! However, there is a maypole and a bonfire in the town; a mystery, Pope of the Fools, and Flemish ambassadors in the city; and, at the university, nothing!”

“Nevertheless, the Place Maubert is sufficiently large!” interposed one of the clerks established on the window-sill.

“Down with the rector, the electors, and the procurators!” cried Joannes.

“We must have a bonfire this evening in the Champ-Gaillard,” went on the other, “made of Master Andry’s books.”

“And the desks of the scribes!” added his neighbor.

“And the beadles’ wands!”

“And the spittoons of the deans!”

“And the cupboards of the procurators!”

“And the hutches of the electors!”

“And the stools of the rector!”

“Down with them!” put in little Jehan, as counterpoint; “down with Master Andry, the beadles and the scribes; the theologians, the doctors and the decretists; the procurators, the electors and the rector!”

“The end of the world has come!,’ muttered Master Andry, stopping up his ears.

“By the way, there’s the rector! see, he is passing through the Place,” cried one of those in the window.

Each rivalled his neighbor in his haste to turn towards the Place.

“Is it really our venerable rector, Master Thibaut?” demanded Jehan Frollo du Moulin, who, as he was clinging to one of the inner pillars, could not see what was going on outside.

“Yes, yes,” replied all the others, “it is really he, Master Thibaut, the rector.”

It was, in fact, the rector and all the dignitaries of the university, who were marching in procession in front of the embassy, and at that moment traversing the Place. The students crowded into the window, saluted them as they passed with sarcasms and ironical applause. The rector, who was walking at the head of his company, had to support the first broadside; it was severe.

“Good day, monsieur le recteur! Holà hé! good day there!”

“How does he manage to be here, the old gambler? Has he abandoned his dice?”

“How he trots along on his mule! her ears are not so long as his!”

“Holà hé! good day, monsieur le recteur Thibaut! *Tybalde aleator*! Old fool! old gambler!”

“God preserve you! Did you throw double six often last night?”

“Oh! what a decrepit face, livid and haggard and drawn with the love of gambling and of dice!”

“Where are you bound for in that fashion, Thibaut, *Tybalde ad dados*, with your back turned to the university, and trotting towards the town?”

“He is on his way, no doubt, to seek a lodging in the Rue Thibautodé?”* cried Jehan du M. Moulin.

* *Thibaut au des*, — Thibaut of the dice.

The entire band repeated this quip in a voice of thunder, clapping their hands furiously.

“You are going to seek a lodging in the Rue Thibautodé, are you not, monsieur le recteur, gamester on the side of the devil?”

Then came the turns of the other dignitaries.

“Down with the beadles! down with the mace-bearers!”

“Tell me, Robin Pouissepain, who is that yonder?”

“He is Gilbert de Suilly, *Gilbertus de Soliaco*, the chancellor of the College of Autun.”

"Hold on, here's my shoe; you are better placed than I, fling it in his face."

"*Saturnalitias mittimus ecce nuces*."

"Down with the six theologians, with their white surplices!"

"Are those the theologians? I thought they were the white geese given by Sainte-Geneviève to the city, for the fief of Roogny."

"Down with the doctors!"

"Down with the cardinal disputations, and quibblers!"

"My cap to you, Chancellor of Sainte-Geneviève! You have done me a wrong. 'Tis true; he gave my place in the nation of Normandy to little Ascanio Falzapada, who comes from the province of Bourges, since he is an Italian."

"That is an injustice," said all the scholars. "Down with the Chancellor of Sainte-Geneviève!"

"Ho hé! Master Joachim de Ladehors! Ho hé! Louis Dahuille! Ho he Lambert Hoctement!"

"May the devil stifle the procurator of the German nation!"

"And the chaplains of the Sainte-Chapelle, with their gray *amices; cum tunices grisis*!"

"*Seu de pellibus grisis fourratis*!"

"Holà hé! Masters of Arts! All the beautiful black copes! all the fine red copes!"

"They make a fine tail for the rector."

"One would say that he was a Doge of Venice on his way to his bridal with the sea."

"Say, Jehan! here are the canons of Sainte-Geneviève!"

"To the deuce with the whole set of canons!"

"Abbé Claude Choart! Doctor Claude Choart! Are you in search of Marie la Giffarde?"

"She is in the Rue de Glatigny."

"She is making the bed of the king of the debauchees. She is paying her four deniers* *quatuor denarios*."

* An old French coin, equal to the two hundred and fortieth part of a pound.

"*Aut unum bombum*."

"Would you like to have her pay you in the face?"

“Comrades! Master Simon Sanguin, the Elector of Picardy, with his wife on the crupper!”

“*Post equitem seclet atra eura* — behind the horseman sits black care.”

“Courage, Master Simon!”

“Good day, Mister Elector!”

“Good night, Madame Electress!”

“How happy they are to see all that!” sighed Joannes de Molendino, still perched in the foliage of his capital.

Meanwhile, the sworn bookseller of the university, Master Andry Musnier, was inclining his ear to the furrier of the king’s robes, Master Gilles Lecornu.

“I tell you, sir, that the end of the world has come. No one has ever beheld such outbreaks among the students! It is the accursed inventions of this century that are ruining everything, — artilleries, bombards, and, above all, printing, that other German pest. No more manuscripts, no more books! printing will kill bookselling. It is the end of the world that is drawing nigh.”

“I see that plainly, from the progress of velvet stuffs,” said the fur-merchant.

At this moment, midday sounded.

“Ha!” exclaimed the entire crowd, in one voice.

The scholars held their peace. Then a great hurly-burly ensued; a vast movement of feet, hands, and heads; a general outbreak of coughs and handkerchiefs; each one arranged himself, assumed his post, raised himself up, and grouped himself. Then came a great silence; all necks remained outstretched, all mouths remained open, all glances were directed towards the marble table. Nothing made its appearance there. The bailiff’s four sergeants were still there, stiff, motionless, as painted statues. All eyes turned to the estrade reserved for the Flemish envoys. The door remained closed, the platform empty. This crowd had been waiting since daybreak for three things: noonday, the embassy from Flanders, the mystery play. Noonday alone had arrived on time.

On this occasion, it was too much.

They waited one, two, three, five minutes, a quarter of an hour; nothing came. The dais remained empty, the theatre dumb. In the meantime, wrath had succeeded to impatience. Irritated words circulated in a low tone, still, it is true. “The mystery! the mystery!” they murmured, in hollow voices.

Heads began to ferment. A tempest, which was only rumbling in the distance as yet, was floating on the surface of this crowd. It was Jehan du Moulin who struck the first spark from it.

“The mystery, and to the devil with the Flemings!” he exclaimed at the full force of his lungs, twining like a serpent around his pillar.

The crowd clapped their hands.

“The mystery!” it repeated, “and may all the devils take Flanders!”

“We must have the mystery instantly,” resumed the student; “or else, my advice is that we should hang the bailiff of the courts, by way of a morality and a comedy.”

“Well said,” cried the people, “and let us begin the hanging with his sergeants.”

A grand acclamation followed. The four poor fellows began to turn pale, and to exchange glances. The crowd hurled itself towards them, and they already beheld the frail wooden railing, which separated them from it, giving way and bending before the pressure of the throng.

It was a critical moment.

“To the sack, to the sack!” rose the cry on all sides.

At that moment, the tapestry of the dressing-room, which we have described above, was raised, and afforded passage to a personage, the mere sight of whom suddenly stopped the crowd, and changed its wrath into curiosity as by enchantment.

“Silence! silence!”

The personage, but little reassured, and trembling in every limb, advanced to the edge of the marble table with a vast amount of bows, which, in proportion as he drew nearer, more and more resembled genuflections.

In the meanwhile, tranquillity had gradually been restored. All that remained was that slight murmur which always rises above the silence of a crowd.

“Messieurs the bourgeois,” said he, “and mesdemoiselles the *bourgeoises*, we shall have the honor of declaiming and representing, before his eminence, monsieur the cardinal, a very beautiful morality which has for its title, ‘The Good Judgment of Madame the Virgin Mary.’ I am to play Jupiter. His eminence is, at this moment, escorting the very honorable embassy of the Duke of Austria; which is detained, at present, listening to the harangue of monsieur the rector of the university, at the gate Baudets. As soon as his illustrious eminence, the cardinal, arrives, we will begin.”

It is certain, that nothing less than the intervention of Jupiter was required to save the four unfortunate sergeants of the bailiff of the courts. If we had the happiness of having invented this very veracious tale, and of being, in consequence, responsible for it before our Lady Criticism, it is not against us that the classic precept, *Nec deus intersit*, could be invoked. Moreover, the costume of Seigneur Jupiter, was very handsome, and contributed not a little towards calming the crowd, by attracting all its attention. Jupiter was clad in a coat of mail, covered with black velvet, with gilt nails; and had it not been for the rouge, and the huge red beard, each of which covered one-half of his face, — had it not been for the roll of gilded cardboard, spangled, and all bristling with strips of tinsel, which he held in his hand, and in which the eyes of the initiated easily recognized thunderbolts, — had not his feet been flesh-colored, and banded with ribbons in Greek fashion, he might have borne comparison, so far as the severity of his mien was concerned, with a Breton archer from the guard of Monsieur de Berry.

CHAPTER II. PIERRE GRINGOIRE.

Nevertheless, as be harangued them, the satisfaction and admiration unanimously excited by his costume were dissipated by his words; and when he reached that untoward conclusion: “As soon as his illustrious eminence, the cardinal, arrives, we will begin,” his voice was drowned in a thunder of hooting.

“Begin instantly! The mystery! the mystery immediately!” shrieked the people. And above all the voices, that of Johannes de Molendino was audible, piercing the uproar like the fife’s derisive serenade: “Commence instantly!” yelped the scholar.

“Down with Jupiter and the Cardinal de Bourbon!” vociferated Robin Poussepain and the other clerks perched in the window.

“The morality this very instant!” repeated the crowd; “this very instant! the sack and the rope for the comedians, and the cardinal!”

Poor Jupiter, haggard, frightened, pale beneath his rouge, dropped his thunderbolt, took his cap in his hand; then he bowed and trembled and stammered: “His eminence — the ambassadors — Madame Marguerite of Flanders — .” He did not know what to say. In truth, he was afraid of being hung.

Hung by the populace for waiting, hung by the cardinal for not having waited, he saw between the two dilemmas only an abyss; that is to say, a gallows.

Luckily, some one came to rescue him from his embarrassment, and assume the responsibility.

An individual who was standing beyond the railing, in the free space around the marble table, and whom no one had yet caught sight of, since his long, thin body was completely sheltered from every visual ray by the diameter of the pillar against which he was leaning; this individual, we say, tall, gaunt, pallid, blond, still young, although already wrinkled about the brow and cheeks, with brilliant eyes and a smiling mouth, clad in garments of black serge, worn and shining with age, approached the marble table, and made a sign to the poor sufferer. But the other was so confused that he did not see him. The new comer advanced another step.

“Jupiter,” said he, “my dear Jupiter!”

The other did not hear.

At last, the tall blond, driven out of patience, shrieked almost in his face, —

“Michel Giborne!”

“Who calls me?” said Jupiter, as though awakened with a start.

“I,” replied the person clad in black.

“Ah!” said Jupiter.

“Begin at once,” went on the other. “Satisfy the populace; I undertake to appease the bailiff, who will appease monsieur the cardinal.”

Jupiter breathed once more.

“Messeigneurs the bourgeois,” he cried, at the top of his lungs to the crowd, which continued to hoot him, “we are going to begin at once.”

“*Evoe Jupiter! Plaudite cives*! All hail, Jupiter! Applaud, citizens!” shouted the scholars.

“Noel! Noel! good, good,” shouted the people.

The hand clapping was deafening, and Jupiter had already withdrawn under his tapestry, while the hall still trembled with acclamations.

In the meanwhile, the personage who had so magically turned the tempest into dead calm, as our old and dear Corneille puts it, had modestly retreated to the half-shadow of his pillar, and would, no doubt, have remained invisible there, motionless, and mute as before, had he not been plucked by the sleeve by two young women, who, standing in the front row of the spectators, had noticed his colloquy with Michel Giborne-Jupiter.

“Master,” said one of them, making him a sign to approach. “Hold your tongue, my dear Liénarde,” said her neighbor, pretty, fresh, and very brave, in consequence of being dressed up in her best attire. “He is not a clerk, he is a layman; you must not say master to him, but messire.”

“Messire,” said Liénarde.

The stranger approached the railing.

“What would you have of me, damsels?” he asked, with alacrity.

“Oh! nothing,” replied Liénarde, in great confusion; “it is my neighbor, Gisquette la Gencienne, who wishes to speak with you.”

“Not so,” replied Gisquette, blushing; “it was Liénarde who called you master; I only told her to say messire.”

The two young girls dropped their eyes. The man, who asked nothing better than to enter into conversation, looked at them with a smile.

“So you have nothing to say to me, damsels?”

“Oh! nothing at all,” replied Gisquette.

“Nothing,” said Liénarde.

The tall, light-haired young man retreated a step; but the two curious maidens had no mind to let slip their prize.

“Messire,” said Gisquette, with the impetuosity of an open sluice, or of a woman who has made up her mind, “do you know that soldier who is to play the part of Madame the Virgin in the mystery?”

“You mean the part of Jupiter?” replied the stranger.

“Hé! yes,” said Liénarde, “isn’t she stupid? So you know Jupiter?”

“Michel Giborne?” replied the unknown; “yes, madam.”

“He has a fine beard!” said Liénarde.

“Will what they are about to say here be fine?” inquired Gisquette, timidly.

“Very fine, mademoiselle,” replied the unknown, without the slightest hesitation.

“What is it to be?” said Liénarde.

“‘The Good Judgment of Madame the Virgin,’ — a morality, if you please, damsel.”

“Ah! that makes a difference,” responded Liénarde.

A brief silence ensued — broken by the stranger.

“It is a perfectly new morality, and one which has never yet been played.”

“Then it is not the same one,” said Gisquette, “that was given two years ago, on the day of the entrance of monsieur the legate, and where three handsome maids played the parts—”

“Of sirens,” said Liénarde.

“And all naked,” added the young man.

Liénarde lowered her eyes modestly. Gisquette glanced at her and did the same. He continued, with a smile, —

“It was a very pleasant thing to see. To-day it is a morality made expressly for Madame the Demoiselle of Flanders.”

“Will they sing shepherd songs?” inquired Gisquette.

“Fie!” said the stranger, “in a morality? you must not confound styles. If it were a farce, well and good.”

“That is a pity,” resumed Gisquette. “That day, at the Ponceau Fountain, there were wild men and women, who fought and assumed many aspects, as they sang little motets and bergerettes.”

“That which is suitable for a legate,” returned the stranger, with a good deal of dryness, “is not suitable for a princess.”

“And beside them,” resumed Liénarde, “played many brass instruments, making great melodies.”

“And for the refreshment of the passers-by,” continued Gisquette, “the fountain spouted through three mouths, wine, milk, and hippocrass, of which every one drank who wished.”

“And a little below the Ponceau, at the Trinity,” pursued Liénarde, “there was a passion performed, and without any speaking.”

“How well I remember that!” exclaimed Gisquette; “God on the cross, and the two thieves on the right and the left.” Here the young gossips, growing warm at the memory of the entrance of monsieur the legate, both began to talk at once.

“And, further on, at the Painters’ Gate, there were other personages, very richly clad.”

“And at the fountain of Saint-Innocent, that huntsman, who was chasing a hind with great clamor of dogs and hunting-horns.”

“And, at the Paris slaughter-houses, stages, representing the fortress of Dieppe!”

“And when the legate passed, you remember, Gisquette? they made the assault, and the English all had their throats cut.”

“And against the gate of the Châtelet, there were very fine personages!”

“And on the Port au Change, which was all draped above!”

“And when the legate passed, they let fly on the bridge more than two hundred sorts of birds; wasn’t it beautiful, Liénarde?”

“It will be better to-day,” finally resumed their interlocutor, who seemed to listen to them with impatience.

“Do you promise us that this mystery will be fine?” said Gisquette.

“Without doubt,” he replied; then he added, with a certain emphasis,—“I am the author of it, damsels.”

“Truly?” said the young girls, quite taken aback.

“Truly!” replied the poet, bridling a little; “that is, to say, there are two of us; Jehan Marchand, who has sawed the planks and erected the framework of the theatre and the woodwork; and I, who have made the piece. My name is Pierre Gringoire.”

The author of the “Cid” could not have said “Pierre Corneille” with more pride.

Our readers have been able to observe, that a certain amount of time must have already elapsed from the moment when Jupiter had retired beneath the tapestry to the instant when the author of the new morality had thus abruptly revealed himself to the innocent admiration of Gisquette and Liénarde. Remarkable fact: that whole crowd, so tumultuous but a few moments before, now waited amiably on the word of the comedian; which proves the eternal truth, still experienced every day in our theatres, that the best means of making the public wait patiently is to assure them that one is about to begin instantly.

However, scholar Johannes had not fallen asleep.

“Holà hé!” he shouted suddenly, in the midst of the peaceable waiting which had followed the tumult. “Jupiter, Madame the Virgin, buffoons of the devil! are you jeering at us? The piece! the piece! commence or we will commence again!”

This was all that was needed.

The music of high and low instruments immediately became audible from the interior of the stage; the tapestry was raised; four personages, in motley attire and painted faces, emerged from it, climbed the steep ladder of the theatre, and, arrived upon the upper platform, arranged themselves in a line before the public, whom they saluted with profound reverences; then the symphony ceased.

The mystery was about to begin.

The four personages, after having reaped a rich reward of applause for their reverences, began, in the midst of profound silence, a prologue, which we gladly spare the reader. Moreover, as happens in our own day, the public was more occupied with the costumes that the actors wore than with the roles that they were enacting; and, in truth, they were right. All four were dressed in parti-colored robes of yellow and white, which were distinguished from each other only by the nature of the stuff; the first was of gold and silver brocade; the second, of silk; the third, of wool; the fourth, of linen. The first of these personages carried in his right hand a sword; the second, two golden keys; the third, a pair of scales; the fourth, a spade: and, in order to aid sluggish minds which would not have seen clearly through the transparency of these attributes, there was to be read, in large, black letters, on the hem of the robe of brocade, MY NAME IS NOBILITY; on the hem of the silken robe, MY NAME IS CLERGY; on the hem of the woolen robe, MY NAME IS MERCHANDISE; on the hem of the linen robe, MY NAME IS LABOR. The sex of the two male characters was briefly indicated to every judicious spectator, by their shorter robes, and by the cap which they wore on their heads; while the two female characters, less briefly clad, were covered with hoods.

Much ill-will would also have been required, not to comprehend, through the medium of the poetry of the prologue, that Labor was wedded to Merchandise, and Clergy to Nobility, and that the two happy couples possessed in common a magnificent golden dolphin, which they desired to adjudge to the fairest only. So they were roaming about the world seeking and searching for this beauty, and, after having successively rejected the Queen of Golconda, the Princess of Trebizonde, the daughter of the Grand Khan of Tartary, etc., Labor and Clergy, Nobility and Merchandise, had come to rest upon the marble table of the Palais de Justice, and to utter, in the presence of the honest audience, as many sentences and maxims as could then be dispensed at the Faculty of Arts, at examinations, sophisms, determinances, figures, and acts, where the masters took their degrees.

All this was, in fact, very fine.

Nevertheless, in that throng, upon which the four allegories vied with each other in pouring out floods of metaphors, there was no ear more attentive, no heart that palpitated more, not an eye was more haggard, no neck more outstretched, than the eye, the ear, the neck, and the heart of the author, of the poet, of that brave Pierre Gringoire, who had not been able to resist, a moment before, the joy of telling his name to two pretty girls. He had retreated a few paces from them, behind his pillar, and there he listened, looked, enjoyed. The amiable applause which had greeted the beginning of his prologue was still echoing in his bosom, and he was completely absorbed in that species of ecstatic contemplation with which an author beholds his ideas fall, one by one, from the mouth of the actor into the vast silence of the audience. Worthy Pierre Gringoire!

It pains us to say it, but this first ecstasy was speedily disturbed. Hardly had Gringoire raised this intoxicating cup of joy and triumph to his lips, when a drop of bitterness was mingled with it.

A tattered mendicant, who could not collect any coins, lost as he was in the midst of the crowd, and who had not probably found sufficient indemnity in the pockets of his neighbors, had hit upon the idea of perching himself upon some conspicuous point, in order to attract looks and alms. He had, accordingly, hoisted himself, during the first verses of the prologue, with the aid of the pillars of the reserve gallery, to the cornice which ran round the balustrade at its lower edge; and there he had seated himself, soliciting the attention and the pity of the multitude, with his rags and a hideous sore which covered his right arm. However, he uttered not a word.

The silence which he preserved allowed the prologue to proceed without hindrance, and no perceptible disorder would have ensued, if ill-luck had not willed that the scholar Joannes should catch sight, from the heights of his pillar, of the mendicant and his grimaces. A wild fit of laughter took possession of the young scamp, who, without caring that he was interrupting the spectacle, and disturbing the universal composure, shouted boldly, —

“Look! see that sickly creature asking alms!”

Any one who has thrown a stone into a frog pond, or fired a shot into a covey of birds, can form an idea of the effect produced by these incongruous words, in the midst of the general attention. It made Gringoire shudder as though it had been an electric shock. The prologue stopped short, and all heads turned tumultuously towards the beggar, who, far from being disconcerted by this, saw, in this incident, a good opportunity for reaping his harvest, and who began to whine in a doleful way, half closing his eyes the while,— “Charity, please!”

“Well — upon my soul,” resumed Joannes, “it’s Clopin Trouillefou! Holà he, my friend, did your sore bother you on the leg, that you have transferred it to your arm?” So saying, with the dexterity of a monkey, he flung a bit of silver into the gray felt hat which the beggar held in his ailing arm. The mendicant received both the alms and the sarcasm without wincing, and continued, in lamentable tones, —

“Charity, please!”

This episode considerably distracted the attention of the audience; and a goodly number of spectators, among them Robin Poussepain, and all the clerks at their head, gayly applauded this eccentric duet, which the scholar, with his shrill voice, and the mendicant had just improvised in the middle of the prologue.

Gringoire was highly displeased. On recovering from his first stupefaction, he bestirred himself to shout, to the four personages on the stage, “Go on! What the devil! — go on!” — without even deigning to cast a glance of disdain upon the two interrupters.

At that moment, he felt some one pluck at the hem of his surtout; he turned round, and not without ill-humor, and found considerable difficulty in smiling; but he was obliged to do so, nevertheless. It was the pretty arm of Gisquette la Gencienne, which, passed through the railing, was soliciting his attention in this manner.

“Monsieur,” said the young girl, “are they going to continue?”

“Of course,” replied Gringoire, a good deal shocked by the question.

“In that case, messire,” she resumed, “would you have the courtesy to explain to me—”

“What they are about to say?” interrupted Gringoire. “Well, listen.”

“No,” said Gisquette, “but what they have said so far.”

Gringoire started, like a man whose wound has been probed to the quick.

“A plague on the stupid and dull-witted little girl!” he muttered, between his teeth.

From that moment forth, Gisquette was nothing to him.

In the meantime, the actors had obeyed his injunction, and the public, seeing that they were beginning to speak again, began once more to listen, not without having lost many beauties in the sort of soldered joint which was formed between the two portions of the piece thus abruptly cut short. Gringoire commented on it bitterly to himself. Nevertheless, tranquillity was gradually restored, the scholar held his peace, the mendicant counted over some coins in his hat, and the piece resumed the upper hand.

It was, in fact, a very fine work, and one which, as it seems to us, might be put to use to-day, by the aid of a little rearrangement. The exposition, rather long and rather empty, that is to say, according to the rules, was simple; and Gringoire, in the candid sanctuary of his own conscience, admired its clearness. As the reader may surmise, the four allegorical personages were somewhat weary with having traversed the three sections of the world, without having found suitable opportunity for getting rid of their golden dolphin. Thereupon a eulogy of the marvellous fish, with a thousand delicate allusions to the young betrothed of Marguerite of Flanders, then sadly cloistered in at Amboise, and without a suspicion that Labor and Clergy, Nobility and Merchandise had just made the circuit of the world in his behalf. The said dauphin was then young, was handsome, was stout, and, above all (magnificent origin of all royal virtues), he was the son of the Lion of France. I declare that this bold metaphor is admirable, and that the natural history of the theatre, on a day of allegory and royal marriage songs, is not in the least startled by a dolphin who is the son of a lion. It is precisely these rare and Pindaric mixtures which prove the poet’s enthusiasm. Nevertheless, in order to play the part of critic also, the poet might have developed this beautiful idea in something less than two hundred lines. It is true that the mystery was to last from noon until four o’clock, in accordance with the orders of monsieur the provost, and that it was necessary to say something. Besides, the people listened patiently.

All at once, in the very middle of a quarrel between Mademoiselle Merchandise and Madame Nobility, at the moment when Monsieur Labor was giving utterance to this wonderful line, —

In forest ne’er was seen a more triumphant beast;

the door of the reserved gallery which had hitherto remained so inopportunely closed, opened still more inopportunely; and the ringing voice of the usher announced abruptly, “His eminence, Monseigneur the Cardinal de Bourbon.”

CHAPTER III. MONSIEUR THE CARDINAL.

Poor Gringoire! the din of all the great double petards of the Saint-Jean, the discharge of twenty arquebuses on supports, the detonation of that famous serpentine of the Tower of Billy, which, during the siege of Paris, on Sunday, the twenty-sixth of September, 1465, killed seven Burgundians at one blow, the explosion of all the powder stored at the gate of the Temple, would have rent his ears less rudely at that solemn and dramatic moment, than these few words, which fell from the lips of the usher, “His eminence, Monseigneur the Cardinal de Bourbon.”

It is not that Pierre Gringoire either feared or disdained monsieur the cardinal. He had neither the weakness nor the audacity for that. A true eclectic, as it would be expressed nowadays, Gringoire was one of those firm and lofty, moderate and calm spirits, which always know how to bear themselves amid all circumstances (*stare in dimidio rerum*), and who are full of reason and of liberal philosophy, while still setting store by cardinals. A rare, precious, and never interrupted race of philosophers to whom wisdom, like another Ariadne, seems to have given a clew of thread which they have been walking along unwinding since the beginning of the world, through the labyrinth of human affairs. One finds them in all ages, ever the same; that is to say, always according to all times. And, without reckoning our Pierre Gringoire, who may represent them in the fifteenth century if we succeed in bestowing upon him the distinction which he deserves, it certainly was their spirit which animated Father du Breul, when he wrote, in the sixteenth, these naively sublime words, worthy of all centuries: “I am a Parisian by nation, and a Parrhisian in language, for *parrhisia* in Greek signifies liberty of speech; of which I have made use even towards messeigneurs the cardinals, uncle and brother to Monsieur the Prince de Conty, always with respect to their greatness, and without offending any one of their suite, which is much to say.”

There was then neither hatred for the cardinal, nor disdain for his presence, in the disagreeable impression produced upon Pierre Gringoire. Quite the contrary; our poet had too much good sense and too threadbare a coat, not to attach particular importance to having the numerous allusions in his prologue, and, in particular, the glorification of the dauphin, son of the Lion of France, fall upon the most eminent ear. But it is not interest which predominates in the noble nature of poets. I suppose that the entity of the poet may be represented by the number ten; it is certain that a chemist on analyzing and pharmacopolizing it, as Rabelais says, would find it composed of one part interest to nine parts of self-esteem.

Now, at the moment when the door had opened to admit the cardinal, the nine parts of self-esteem in Gringoire, swollen and expanded by the breath of popular admiration, were in a state of prodigious augmentation, beneath which disappeared, as though stifled, that imperceptible molecule of which we have just remarked upon in the constitution of poets; a precious ingredient, by the way, a ballast of reality and humanity, without which they would not touch the earth. Gringoire enjoyed seeing, feeling, fingering, so to speak an entire assembly (of knaves, it is true, but what matters that?) stupefied, petrified, and as though asphyxiated in the presence of the incommensurable tirades which welled up every instant from all parts of his bridal song. I affirm that he shared the general beatitude, and that, quite the reverse of La Fontaine, who, at the presentation of his comedy of the “Florentine,” asked, “Who is the ill-bred lout who made that rhapsody?” Gringoire would gladly have inquired of his neighbor, “Whose masterpiece is this?”

The reader can now judge of the effect produced upon him by the abrupt and unseasonable arrival of the cardinal.

That which he had to fear was only too fully realized. The entrance of his eminence upset the audience. All heads turned towards the gallery. It was no longer possible to hear one’s self. “The cardinal! The cardinal!” repeated all mouths. The unhappy prologue stopped short for the second time.

The cardinal halted for a moment on the threshold of the estrade. While he was sending a rather indifferent glance around the audience, the tumult redoubled. Each person wished to get a better view of him. Each man vied with the other in thrusting his head over his neighbor’s shoulder.

He was, in fact, an exalted personage, the sight of whom was well worth any other comedy. Charles, Cardinal de Bourbon, Archbishop and Comte of Lyon, Primate of the Gauls, was allied both to Louis XI., through his brother, Pierre, Seigneur de Beaujeu, who had married the king’s eldest daughter, and to Charles the Bold through his mother, Agnes of Burgundy. Now, the dominating trait, the peculiar and distinctive trait of the character of the Primate of the Gauls, was the spirit of the courtier, and devotion to the powers that be. The reader can form an idea of the numberless embarrassments which this double relationship had caused him, and of all the temporal reefs among which his spiritual bark had been forced to tack, in order not to suffer shipwreck on either Louis or Charles, that Scylla and that Charybdis which had devoured the Duc de Nemours and the Constable de Saint-Pol. Thanks to Heaven's mercy, he had made the voyage successfully, and had reached home without hindrance. But although he was in port, and precisely because he was in port, he never recalled without disquiet the varied haps of his political career, so long uneasy and laborious. Thus, he was in the habit of saying that the year 1476 had been "white and black" for him — meaning thereby, that in the course of that year he had lost his mother, the Duchesse de la Bourbonnais, and his cousin, the Duke of Burgundy, and that one grief had consoled him for the other.

Nevertheless, he was a fine man; he led a joyous cardinal's life, liked to enliven himself with the royal vintage of Challuau, did not hate Richarde la Garmoise and Thomasse la Saillarde, bestowed alms on pretty girls rather than on old women, — and for all these reasons was very agreeable to the populace of Paris. He never went about otherwise than surrounded by a small court of bishops and abbés of high lineage, gallant, jovial, and given to carousing on occasion; and more than once the good and devout women of Saint Germain d' Auxerre, when passing at night beneath the brightly illuminated windows of Bourbon, had been scandalized to hear the same voices which had intoned vespers for them during the day carolling, to the clinking of glasses, the bacchic proverb of Benedict XII., that pope who had added a third crown to the Tiara — *Bibamus papaliter*.

It was this justly acquired popularity, no doubt, which preserved him on his entrance from any bad reception at the hands of the mob, which had been so displeased but a moment before, and very little disposed to respect a cardinal on the very day when it was to elect a pope. But the Parisians cherish little rancor; and then, having forced the beginning of the play by their authority, the good bourgeois had got the upper hand of the cardinal, and this triumph was sufficient for them. Moreover, the Cardinal de Bourbon was a handsome man, — he wore a fine scarlet robe, which he carried off very well, — that is to say, he had all the women on his side, and, consequently, the best half of the audience. Assuredly, it would be injustice and bad taste to hoot a cardinal for having come late to the spectacle, when he is a handsome man, and when he wears his scarlet robe well.

He entered, then, bowed to those present with the hereditary smile of the great for the people, and directed his course slowly towards his scarlet velvet arm-chair, with the air of thinking of something quite different. His cortege — what we should nowadays call his staff — of bishops and abbés invaded the estrade in his train, not without causing redoubled tumult and curiosity among the audience. Each man vied with his neighbor in pointing them out and naming them, in seeing who should recognize at least one of them: this one, the Bishop of Marseilles (Alaudet, if my memory serves me right); — this one, the primicier of Saint-Denis; — this one, Robert de Lespinasse, Abbé of Saint-Germain des Prés, that libertine brother of a mistress of Louis XI.; all with many errors and absurdities. As for the scholars, they swore. This was their day, their feast of fools, their saturnalia, the annual orgy of the corporation of Law clerks and of the school. There was no turpitude which was not sacred on that day. And then there were gay gossips in the crowd — Simone Quatrelivres, Agnes la Gadine, and Rabine Piédebou. Was it not the least that one could do to swear at one's ease and revile the name of God a little, on so fine a day, in such good company as dignitaries of the church and loose women? So they did not abstain; and, in the midst of the uproar, there was a frightful concert of blasphemies and enormities of all the unbridled tongues, the tongues of clerks and students restrained during the rest of the year, by the fear of the hot iron of Saint Louis. Poor Saint Louis! how they set him at defiance in his own court of law! Each one of them selected from the new-comers on the platform, a black, gray, white, or violet cassock as his target. Joannes Frollo de Molendin, in his quality of brother to an archdeacon, boldly attacked the scarlet; he sang in deafening tones, with his impudent eyes fastened on the cardinal, "*Cappa repleta mero*!"

All these details which we here lay bare for the edification of the reader, were so covered by the general uproar, that they were lost in it before reaching the reserved platforms; moreover, they would have moved the cardinal but little, so much a part of the customs were the liberties of that day. Moreover, he had another cause for solicitude, and his mien as wholly preoccupied with it, which entered the estrade the same time as himself; this was the embassy from Flanders.

Not that he was a profound politician, nor was he borrowing trouble about the possible consequences of the marriage of his cousin Marguerite de Bourgoyne to his cousin Charles, Dauphin de Vienne; nor as to how long the good understanding which had been patched up between the Duke of Austria and the King of France would last; nor how the King of England would take this disdain of his daughter. All that troubled him but little; and he gave a warm reception every evening to the wine of the royal vintage of Chaillot, without a suspicion that several flasks of that same wine (somewhat revised and corrected, it is true, by Doctor Coictier), cordially offered to Edward IV. by Louis XI., would, some fine morning, rid Louis XI. of Edward IV. “The much honored embassy of Monsieur the Duke of Austria,” brought the cardinal none of these cares, but it troubled him in another direction. It was, in fact, somewhat hard, and we have already hinted at it on the second page of this book, — for him, Charles de Bourbon, to be obliged to feast and receive cordially no one knows what bourgeois; — for him, a cardinal, to receive aldermen; — for him, a Frenchman, and a jolly companion, to receive Flemish beer-drinkers, — and that in public! This was, certainly, one of the most irksome grimaces that he had ever executed for the good pleasure of the king.

So he turned toward the door, and with the best grace in the world (so well had he trained himself to it), when the usher announced, in a sonorous voice, “Messieurs the Envoys of Monsieur the Duke of Austria.” It is useless to add that the whole hall did the same.

Then arrived, two by two, with a gravity which made a contrast in the midst of the frisky ecclesiastical escort of Charles de Bourbon, the eight and forty ambassadors of Maximilian of Austria, having at their head the reverend Father in God, Jehan, Abbot of Saint-Bertin, Chancellor of the Golden Fleece, and Jacques de Goy, Sieur Dauby, Grand Bailiff of Ghent. A deep silence settled over the assembly, accompanied by stifled laughter at the preposterous names and all the bourgeois designations which each of these personages transmitted with imperturbable gravity to the usher, who then tossed names and titles pell-mell and mutilated to the crowd below. There were Master Loys Roelof, alderman of the city of Louvain; Messire Clays d’Etuelde, alderman of Brussels; Messire Paul de Baeust, Sieur de Voirmizelle, President of Flanders; Master Jehan Coleghens, burgomaster of the city of Antwerp; Master George de la Moere, first alderman of the kuere of the city of Ghent; Master Gheldolf van der Hage, first alderman of the *parchous* of the said town; and the Sieur de Bierbecque, and Jehan Pinnock, and Jehan Dymaerzelle, etc., etc., etc.; bailiffs, aldermen, burgomasters; burgomasters, aldermen, bailiffs — all stiff, affectedly grave, formal, dressed out in velvet and damask, hooded with caps of black velvet, with great tufts of Cyprus gold thread; good Flemish heads, after all, severe and worthy faces, of the family which Rembrandt makes to stand out so strong and grave from the black background of his “Night Patrol “; personages all of whom bore, written on their brows, that Maximilian of Austria had done well in “trusting implicitly,” as the manifest ran, “in their sense, valor, experience, loyalty, and good wisdom.”

There was one exception, however. It was a subtle, intelligent, crafty-looking face, a sort of combined monkey and diplomat phiz, before whom the cardinal made three steps and a profound bow, and whose name, nevertheless, was only, “Guillaume Rym, counsellor and pensioner of the City of Ghent.”

Few persons were then aware who Guillaume Rym was. A rare genius who in a time of revolution would have made a brilliant appearance on the surface of events, but who in the fifteenth century was reduced to cavernous intrigues, and to “living in mines,” as the Duc de Saint-Simon expresses it. Nevertheless, he was appreciated by the “miner” of Europe; he plotted familiarly with Louis XI., and often lent a hand to the king’s secret jobs. All which things were quite unknown to that throng, who were amazed at the cardinal’s politeness to that frail figure of a Flemish bailiff.

CHAPTER IV. MASTER JACQUES COPPENOLE.

While the pensioner of Ghent and his eminence were exchanging very low bows and a few words in voices still lower, a man of lofty stature, with a large face and broad shoulders, presented himself, in order to enter abreast with Guillaume Rym; one would have pronounced him a bull-dog by the side of a fox. His felt doublet and leather jerkin made a spot on the velvet and silk which surrounded him. Presuming that he was some groom who had stolen in, the usher stopped him.

“Hold, my friend, you cannot pass!”

The man in the leather jerkin shouldered him aside.

“What does this knave want with me?” said he, in stentorian tones, which rendered the entire hall attentive to this strange colloquy. “Don’t you see that I am one of them?”

“Your name?” demanded the usher.

“Jacques Coppenole.”

“Your titles?”

“Hosier at the sign of the ‘Three Little Chains,’ of Ghent.”

The usher recoiled. One might bring one’s self to announce aldermen and burgomasters, but a hosier was too much. The cardinal was on thorns. All the people were staring and listening. For two days his eminence had been exerting his utmost efforts to lick these Flemish bears into shape, and to render them a little more presentable to the public, and this freak was startling. But Guillaume Rym, with his polished smile, approached the usher.

“Announce Master Jacques Coppenole, clerk of the aldermen of the city of Ghent,” he whispered, very low.

“Usher,” interposed the cardinal, aloud, “announce Master Jacques Coppenole, clerk of the aldermen of the illustrious city of Ghent.”

This was a mistake. Guillaume Rym alone might have conjured away the difficulty, but Coppenole had heard the cardinal.

“No, cross of God?” he exclaimed, in his voice of thunder, “Jacques Coppenole, hosier. Do you hear, usher? Nothing more, nothing less. Cross of God! hosier; that's fine enough. Monsieur the Archduke has more than once sought his *gant** in my hose."

* Got the first idea of a timing.

Laughter and applause burst forth. A jest is always understood in Paris, and, consequently, always applauded.

Let us add that Coppenole was of the people, and that the auditors which surrounded him were also of the people. Thus the communication between him and them had been prompt, electric, and, so to speak, on a level. The haughty air of the Flemish hosier, by humiliating the courtiers, had touched in all these plebeian souls that latent sentiment of dignity still vague and indistinct in the fifteenth century.

This hosier was an equal, who had just held his own before monsieur the cardinal. A very sweet reflection to poor fellows habituated to respect and obedience towards the underlings of the sergeants of the bailiff of Sainte-Geneviève, the cardinal's train-bearer.

Coppenole proudly saluted his eminence, who returned the salute of the all-powerful bourgeois feared by Louis XI. Then, while Guillaume Rym, a "sage and malicious man," as Philippe de Comines puts it, watched them both with a smile of raillery and superiority, each sought his place, the cardinal quite abashed and troubled, Coppenole tranquil and haughty, and thinking, no doubt, that his title of hosier was as good as any other, after all, and that Marie of Burgundy, mother to that Marguerite whom Coppenole was to-day bestowing in marriage, would have been less afraid of the cardinal than of the hosier; for it is not a cardinal who would have stirred up a revolt among the men of Ghent against the favorites of the daughter of Charles the Bold; it is not a cardinal who could have fortified the populace with a word against her tears and prayers, when the Maid of Flanders came to supplicate her people in their behalf, even at the very foot of the scaffold; while the hosier had only to raise his leather elbow, in order to cause to fall your two heads, most illustrious seigneurs, Guy d'Hymbercourt and Chancellor Guillaume Hugonet.

Nevertheless, all was over for the poor cardinal, and he was obliged to quaff to the dregs the bitter cup of being in such b.ad company.

The reader has, probably, not forgotten the impudent beggar who had been clinging fast to the fringes of the cardinal's gallery ever since the beginning of the prologue. The arrival of the illustrious guests had by no means caused him to relax his hold, and, while the prelates and ambassadors were packing themselves into the stalls — like genuine Flemish herrings — he settled himself at his ease, and boldly crossed his legs on the architrave. The insolence of this proceeding was extraordinary, yet no one noticed it at first, the attention of all being directed elsewhere. He, on his side, perceived nothing that was going on in the hall; he wagged his head with the unconcern of a Neapolitan, repeating from time to time, amid the clamor, as from a mechanical habit, “Charity, please!” And, assuredly, he was, out of all those present, the only one who had not deigned to turn his head at the altercation between Coppenole and the usher. Now, chance ordained that the master hosier of Ghent, with whom the people were already in lively sympathy, and upon whom all eyes were riveted — should come and seat himself in the front row of the gallery, directly above the mendicant; and people were not a little amazed to see the Flemish ambassador, on concluding his inspection of the knave thus placed beneath his eyes, bestow a friendly tap on that ragged shoulder. The beggar turned round; there was surprise, recognition, a lighting up of the two countenances, and so forth; then, without paying the slightest heed in the world to the spectators, the hosier and the wretched being began to converse in a low tone, holding each other’s hands, in the meantime, while the rags of Clopin Trouillefou, spread out upon the cloth of gold of the dais, produced the effect of a caterpillar on an orange.

The novelty of this singular scene excited such a murmur of mirth and gayety in the hall, that the cardinal was not slow to perceive it; he half bent forward, and, as from the point where he was placed he could catch only an imperfect view of Trouillerfou’s ignominious doublet, he very naturally imagined that the mendicant was asking alms, and, disgusted with his audacity, he exclaimed: “Bailiff of the Courts, toss me that knave into the river!”

“Cross of God! monseigneur the cardinal,” said Coppenole, without quitting Clopin’s hand, “he’s a friend of mine.”

“Good! good!” shouted the populace. From that moment, Master Coppenole enjoyed in Paris as in Ghent, “great favor with the people; for men of that sort do enjoy it,” says Philippe de Comines, “when they are thus disorderly.” The cardinal bit his lips. He bent towards his neighbor, the Abbé of Saint Geneviéve, and said to him in a low tone,— “Fine ambassadors monsieur the archduke sends here, to announce to us Madame Marguerite!”

“Your eminence,” replied the abbé, “wastes your politeness on these Flemish swine. *Margaritas ante porcos*, pearls before swine.”

“Say rather,” retorted the cardinal, with a smile, “*Porcos ante Margaritam*, swine before the pearl.”

The whole little court in cassocks went into ecstacies over this play upon words. The cardinal felt a little relieved; he was quits with Coppenole, he also had had his jest applauded.

Now, will those of our readers who possess the power of generalizing an image or an idea, as the expression runs in the style of to-day, permit us to ask them if they have formed a very clear conception of the spectacle presented at this moment, upon which we have arrested their attention, by the vast parallelogram of the grand hall of the palace.

In the middle of the hall, backed against the western wall, a large and magnificent gallery draped with cloth of gold, into which enter in procession, through a small, arched door, grave personages, announced successively by the shrill voice of an usher. On the front benches were already a number of venerable figures, muffled in ermine, velvet, and scarlet. Around the dais — which remains silent and dignified — below, opposite, everywhere, a great crowd and a great murmur. Thousands of glances directed by the people on each face upon the dais, a thousand whispers over each name. Certainly, the spectacle is curious, and well deserves the attention of the spectators. But yonder, quite at the end, what is that sort of trestle work with four motley puppets upon it, and more below? Who is that man beside the trestle, with a black doublet and a pale face? Alas! my dear reader, it is Pierre Gringoire and his prologue.

We have all forgotten him completely.

This is precisely what he feared.

From the moment of the cardinal’s entrance, Gringoire had never ceased to tremble for the safety of his prologue. At first he had enjoined the actors, who had stopped in suspense, to continue, and to raise their voices; then, perceiving that no one was listening, he had stopped them; and, during the entire quarter of an hour that the interruption lasted, he had not ceased to stamp, to flounce about, to appeal to Gisquette and Liénarde, and to urge his neighbors to the continuance of the prologue; all in vain. No one quitted the cardinal, the embassy, and the gallery — sole centre of this vast circle of visual rays. We must also believe, and we say it with regret, that the prologue had begun slightly to weary the audience at the moment when his eminence had arrived, and created a diversion in so terrible a fashion. After all, on the gallery as well as on the marble table, the spectacle was the same: the conflict of Labor and Clergy, of Nobility and Merchandise. And many people preferred to see them alive, breathing, moving, elbowing each other in flesh and blood, in this Flemish embassy, in this Episcopal court, under the cardinal's robe, under Coppenole's jerkin, than painted, decked out, talking in verse, and, so to speak, stuffed beneath the yellow amid white tunics in which Gringoire had so ridiculously clothed them.

Nevertheless, when our poet beheld quiet reestablished to some extent, he devised a stratagem which might have redeemed all.

"Monsieur," he said, turning towards one of his neighbors, a fine, big man, with a patient face, "suppose we begin again."

"What?" said his neighbor.

"Hé! the Mystery," said Gringoire.

"As you like," returned his neighbor.

This semi-approbation sufficed for Gringoire, and, conducting his own affairs, he began to shout, confounding himself with the crowd as much as possible: "Begin the mystery again! begin again!"

"The devil!" said Joannes de Molendino, "what are they jabbering down yonder, at the end of the hall?" (for Gringoire was making noise enough for four.) "Say, comrades, isn't that mystery finished? They want to begin it all over again. That's not fair!"

"No, no!" shouted all the scholars. "Down with the mystery! Down with it!"

But Gringoire had multiplied himself, and only shouted the more vigorously: "Begin again! begin again!"

These clamors attracted the attention of the cardinal.

"Monsieur Bailiff of the Courts," said he to a tall, black man, placed a few paces from him, "are those knaves in a holy-water vessel, that they make such a hellish noise?"

The bailiff of the courts was a sort of amphibious magistrate, a sort of bat of the judicial order, related to both the rat and the bird, the judge and the soldier.

He approached his eminence, and not without a good deal of fear of the latter's displeasure, he awkwardly explained to him the seeming disrespect of the audience: that noonday had arrived before his eminence, and that the comedians had been forced to begin without waiting for his eminence.

The cardinal burst into a laugh.

“On my faith, the rector of the university ought to have done the same. What say you, Master Guillaume Rym?”

“Monseigneur,” replied Guillaume Rym, “let us be content with having escaped half of the comedy. There is at least that much gained.”

“Can these rascals continue their farce?” asked the bailiff.

“Continue, continue,” said the cardinal, “it’s all the same to me. I’ll read my breviary in the meantime.”

The bailiff advanced to the edge of the estrade, and cried, after having invoked silence by a wave of the hand, —

“Bourgeois, rustics, and citizens, in order to satisfy those who wish the play to begin again, and those who wish it to end, his eminence orders that it be continued.”

Both parties were forced to resign themselves. But the public and the author long cherished a grudge against the cardinal.

So the personages on the stage took up their parts, and Gringoire hoped that the rest of his work, at least, would be listened to. This hope was speedily dispelled like his other illusions; silence had indeed, been restored in the audience, after a fashion; but Gringoire had not observed that at the moment when the cardinal gave the order to continue, the gallery was far from full, and that after the Flemish envoys there had arrived new personages forming part of the cortege, whose names and ranks, shouted out in the midst of his dialogue by the intermittent cry of the usher, produced considerable ravages in it. Let the reader imagine the effect in the midst of a theatrical piece, of the yelping of an usher, flinging in between two rhymes, and often in the middle of a line, parentheses like the following, —

“Master Jacques Charmolue, procurator to the king in the Ecclesiastical Courts!”

“Jehan de Harlay, equerry guardian of the office of chevalier of the night watch of the city of Paris!”

“Messire Galiot de Genoilhac, chevalier, seigneur de Brussac, master of the king’s artillery!”

“Master Dreux-Raguier, surveyor of the woods and forests of the king our sovereign, in the land of France, Champagne and Brie!”

“Messire Louis de Graville, chevalier, councillor, and chamberlain of the king, admiral of France, keeper of the Forest of Vincennes!”

“Master Denis le Mercier, guardian of the house of the blind at Paris!” etc., etc., etc.

This was becoming unbearable.

This strange accompaniment, which rendered it difficult to follow the piece, made Gringoire all the more indignant because he could not conceal from himself the fact that the interest was continually increasing, and that all his work required was a chance of being heard.

It was, in fact, difficult to imagine a more ingenious and more dramatic composition. The four personages of the prologue were bewailing themselves in their mortal embarrassment, when Venus in person, (*vera incessa patuit dea*) presented herself to them, clad in a fine robe bearing the heraldic device of the ship of the city of Paris. She had come herself to claim the dolphin promised to the most beautiful. Jupiter, whose thunder could be heard rumbling in the dressing-room, supported her claim, and Venus was on the point of carrying it off, — that is to say, without allegory, of marrying monsieur the dauphin, when a young child clad in white damask, and holding in her hand a daisy (a transparent personification of Mademoiselle Marguerite of Flanders) came to contest it with Venus.

Theatrical effect and change.

After a dispute, Venus, Marguerite, and the assistants agreed to submit to the good judgment of time holy Virgin. There was another good part, that of the king of Mesopotamia; but through so many interruptions, it was difficult to make out what end he served. All these persons had ascended by the ladder to the stage.

But all was over; none of these beauties had been felt nor understood. On the entrance of the cardinal, one would have said that an invisible magic thread had suddenly drawn all glances from the marble table to the gallery, from the southern to the western extremity of the hall. Nothing could disenchant the audience; all eyes remained fixed there, and the new-comers and their accursed names, and their faces, and their costumes, afforded a continual diversion. This was very distressing. With the exception of Gisquette and Liénarde, who turned round from time to time when Gringoire plucked them by the sleeve; with the exception of the big, patient neighbor, no one listened, no one looked at the poor, deserted morality full face. Gringoire saw only profiles.

With what bitterness did he behold his whole erection of glory and of poetry crumble away bit by bit! And to think that these people had been upon the point of instituting a revolt against the bailiff through impatience to hear his work! now that they had it they did not care for it. This same representation which had been begun amid so unanimous an acclamation! Eternal flood and ebb of popular favor! To think that they had been on the point of hanging the bailiff's sergeant! What would he not have given to be still at that hour of honey!

But the usher's brutal monologue came to an end; every one had arrived, and Gringoire breathed freely once more; the actors continued bravely. But Master Coppenole, the hosier, must needs rise of a sudden, and Gringoire was forced to listen to him deliver, amid universal attention, the following abominable harangue.

"Messieurs the bourgeois and squires of Paris, I don't know, cross of God! what we are doing here. I certainly do see yonder in the corner on that stage, some people who appear to be fighting. I don't know whether that is what you call a "mystery," but it is not amusing; they quarrel with their tongues and nothing more. I have been waiting for the first blow this quarter of an hour; nothing comes; they are cowards who only scratch each other with insults. You ought to send for the fighters of London or Rotterdam; and, I can tell you! you would have had blows of the fist that could be heard in the Place; but these men excite our pity. They ought at least, to give us a moorish dance, or some other mummer! That is not what was told me; I was promised a feast of fools, with the election of a pope. We have our pope of fools at Ghent also; we're not behindhand in that, cross of God! But this is the way we manage it; we collect a crowd like this one here, then each person in turn passes his head through a hole, and makes a grimace at the rest; time one who makes the ugliest, is elected pope by general acclamation; that's the way it is. It is very diverting. Would you like to make your pope after the fashion of my country? At all events, it will be less wearisome than to listen to chatterers. If they wish to come and make their grimaces through the hole, they can join the game. What say you, Messieurs les bourgeois? You have here enough grotesque specimens of both sexes, to allow of laughing in Flemish fashion, and there are enough of us ugly in countenance to hope for a fine grinning match."

Gringoire would have liked to retort; stupefaction, rage, indignation, deprived him of words. Moreover, the suggestion of the popular hosier was received with such enthusiasm by these bourgeois who were flattered at being called "squires," that all resistance was useless. There was nothing to be done but to allow one’s self to drift with the torrent. Gringoire hid his face between his two hands, not being so fortunate as to have a mantle with which to veil his head, like Agamemnon of Timantis.

CHAPTER V. QUASIMODO.

In the twinkling of an eye, all was ready to execute Coppenole’s idea. Bourgeois, scholars and law clerks all set to work. The little chapel situated opposite the marble table was selected for the scene of the grinning match. A pane broken in the pretty rose window above the door, left free a circle of stone through which it was agreed that the competitors should thrust their heads. In order to reach it, it was only necessary to mount upon a couple of hogsheads, which had been produced from I know not where, and perched one upon the other, after a fashion. It was settled that each candidate, man or woman (for it was possible to choose a female pope), should, for the sake of leaving the impression of his grimace fresh and complete, cover his face and remain concealed in the chapel until the moment of his appearance. In less than an instant, the chapel was crowded with competitors, upon whom the door was then closed.

Coppenole, from his post, ordered all, directed all, arranged all. During the uproar, the cardinal, no less abashed than Gringoire, had retired with all his suite, under the pretext of business and vespers, without the crowd which his arrival had so deeply stirred being in the least moved by his departure. Guillaume Rym was the only one who noticed his eminence’s discomfiture. The attention of the populace, like the sun, pursued its revolution; having set out from one end of the hall, and halted for a space in the middle, it had now reached the other end. The marble table, the brocaded gallery had each had their day; it was now the turn of the chapel of Louis XI. Henceforth, the field was open to all folly. There was no one there now, but the Flemings and the rabble.

The grimaces began. The first face which appeared at the aperture, with eyelids turned up to the reds, a mouth open like a maw, and a brow wrinkled like our hussar boots of the Empire, evoked such an inextinguishable peal of laughter that Homer would have taken all these louts for gods. Nevertheless, the grand hall was anything but Olympus, and Gringoire’s poor Jupiter knew it better than any one else. A second and third grimace followed, then another and another; and the laughter and transports of delight went on increasing. There was in this spectacle, a peculiar power of intoxication and fascination, of which it would be difficult to convey to the reader of our day and our salons any idea.

Let the reader picture to himself a series of visages presenting successively all geometrical forms, from the triangle to the trapezium, from the cone to the polyhedron; all human expressions, from wrath to lewdness; all ages, from the wrinkles of the new-born babe to the wrinkles of the aged and dying; all religious phantasmagories, from Faun to Beelzebub; all animal profiles, from the maw to the beak, from the jowl to the muzzle. Let the reader imagine all these grotesque figures of the Pont Neuf, those nightmares petrified beneath the hand of Germain Pilon, assuming life and breath, and coming in turn to stare you in the face with burning eyes; all the masks of the Carnival of Venice passing in succession before your glass, — in a word, a human kaleidoscope.

The orgy grew more and more Flemish. Teniers could have given but a very imperfect idea of it. Let the reader picture to himself in bacchanal form, Salvator Rosa's battle. There were no longer either scholars or ambassadors or bourgeois or men or women; there was no longer any Clopin Trouillefou, nor Gilles Lecornu, nor Marie Quatrelivres, nor Robin Poussepain. All was universal license. The grand hall was no longer anything but a vast furnace of effrontry and joviality, where every mouth was a cry, every individual a posture; everything shouted and howled. The strange visages which came, in turn, to gnash their teeth in the rose window, were like so many brands cast into the brazier; and from the whole of this effervescing crowd, there escaped, as from a furnace, a sharp, piercing, stinging noise, hissing like the wings of a gnat.

"Ho hé! curse it!"

"Just look at that face!"

"It's not good for anything."

"Guillemette Maugerepuis, just look at that bull's muzzle; it only lacks the horns. It can't be your husband."

"Another!"

"Belly of the pope! what sort of a grimace is that?"

"Hola hé! that's cheating. One must show only one's face."

"That damned Perrette Callebotte! she's capable of that!"

"Good! Good!"

"I'm stifling!"

"There's a fellow whose ears won't go through!" Etc., etc.

But we must do justice to our friend Jehan. In the midst of this witches' sabbath, he was still to be seen on the top of his pillar, like the cabin-boy on the topmast. He floundered about with incredible fury. His mouth was wide open, and from it there escaped a cry which no one heard, not that it was covered by the general clamor, great as that was but because it attained, no doubt, the limit of perceptible sharp sounds, the thousand vibrations of Sauveur, or the eight thousand of Biot.

As for Gringoire, the first moment of depression having passed, he had regained his composure. He had hardened himself against adversity.— “Continue!” he had said for the third time, to his comedians, speaking machines; then as he was marching with great strides in front of the marble table, a fancy seized him to go and appear in his turn at the aperture of the chapel, were it only for the pleasure of making a grimace at that ungrateful populace.— “But no, that would not be worthy of us; no, vengeance! let us combat until the end,” he repeated to himself; “the power of poetry over people is great; I will bring them back. We shall see which will carry the day, grimaces or polite literature.”

Alas! he had been left the sole spectator of his piece. It was far worse than it had been a little while before. He no longer beheld anything but backs.

I am mistaken. The big, patient man, whom he had already consulted in a critical moment, had remained with his face turned towards the stage. As for Gisquette and Liénarde, they had deserted him long ago.

Gringoire was touched to the heart by the fidelity of his only spectator. He approached him and addressed him, shaking his arm slightly; for the good man was leaning on the balustrade and dozing a little.

“Monsieur,” said Gringoire, “I thank you!”

“Monsieur,” replied the big man with a yawn, “for what?”

“I see what wearies you,” resumed the poet; “’tis all this noise which prevents your hearing comfortably. But be at ease! your name shall descend to posterity! Your name, if you please?”

“Renauld Chateau, guardian of the seals of the Châtelet of Paris, at your service.”

“Monsieur, you are the only representative of the muses here,” said Gringoire.

“You are too kind, sir,” said the guardian of the seals at the Châtelet.

“You are the only one,” resumed Gringoire, “who has listened to the piece decorously. What do you think of it?”

"He! he!" replied the fat magistrate, half aroused, "it's tolerably jolly, that's a fact."

Gringoire was forced to content himself with this eulogy; for a thunder of applause, mingled with a prodigious acclamation, cut their conversation short. The Pope of the Fools had been elected.

"Noel! Noel! Noel!"* shouted the people on all sides. That was, in fact, a marvellous grimace which was beaming at that moment through the aperture in the rose window. After all the pentagonal, hexagonal, and whimsical faces, which had succeeded each other at that hole without realizing the ideal of the grotesque which their imaginations, excited by the orgy, had constructed, nothing less was needed to win their suffrages than the sublime grimace which had just dazzled the assembly. Master Coppenole himself applauded, and Clopin Trouillefou, who had been among the competitors (and God knows what intensity of ugliness his visage could attain), confessed himself conquered: We will do the same. We shall not try to give the reader an idea of that tetrahedral nose, that horseshoe mouth; that little left eye obstructed with a red, bushy, bristling eyebrow, while the right eye disappeared entirely beneath an enormous wart; of those teeth in disarray, broken here and there, like the embattled parapet of a fortress; of that callous lip, upon which one of these teeth encroached, like the tusk of an elephant; of that forked chin; and above all, of the expression spread over the whole; of that mixture of malice, amazement, and sadness. Let the reader dream of this whole, if he can.

* The ancient French hurrah.

The acclamation was unanimous; people rushed towards the chapel. They made the lucky Pope of the Fools come forth in triumph. But it was then that surprise and admiration attained their highest pitch; the grimace was his face.

Or rather, his whole person was a grimace. A huge head, bristling with red hair; between his shoulders an enormous hump, a counterpart perceptible in front; a system of thighs and legs so strangely astray that they could touch each other only at the knees, and, viewed from the front, resembled the crescents of two scythes joined by the handles; large feet, monstrous hands; and, with all this deformity, an indescribable and redoubtable air of vigor, agility, and courage, — strange exception to the eternal rule which wills that force as well as beauty shall be the result of harmony. Such was the pope whom the fools had just chosen for themselves.

One would have pronounced him a giant who had been broken and badly put together again.

When this species of cyclops appeared on the threshold of the chapel, motionless, squat, and almost as broad as he was tall; squared on the base, as a great man says; with his doublet half red, half violet, sown with silver bells, and, above all, in the perfection of his ugliness, the populace recognized him on the instant, and shouted with one voice, —

"'Tis Quasimodo, the bellringer! 'tis Quasimodo, the hunchback of Notre-Dame! Quasimodo, the one-eyed! Quasimodo, the bandy-legged! Noel! Noel!"

It will be seen that the poor fellow had a choice of surnames.

"Let the women with child beware!" shouted the scholars.

"Or those who wish to be," resumed Joannes.

The women did, in fact, hide their faces.

"Oh! the horrible monkey!" said one of them.

"As wicked as he is ugly," retorted another.

"He's the devil," added a third.

"I have the misfortune to live near Notre-Dame; I hear him prowling round the eaves by night."

"With the cats."

"He's always on our roofs."

"He throws spells down our chimneys."

"The other evening, he came and made a grimace at me through my attic window. I thought that it was a man. Such a fright as I had!"

"I'm sure that he goes to the witches' sabbath. Once he left a broom on my leads."

"Oh! what a displeasing hunchback's face!"

"Oh! what an ill-favored soul!"

"Whew!"

The men, on the contrary, were delighted and applauded. Quasimodo, the object of the tumult, still stood on the threshold of the chapel, sombre and grave, and allowed them to admire him.

One scholar (Robin Poussepain, I think), came and laughed in his face, and too close. Quasimodo contented himself with taking him by the girdle, and hurling him ten paces off amid the crowd; all without uttering a word.

Master Coppenole, in amazement, approached him.

"Cross of God! Holy Father! you possess the handsomest ugliness that I have ever beheld in my life. You would deserve to be pope at Rome, as well as at Paris."

So saying, he placed his hand gayly on his shoulder. Quasimodo did not stir. Coppenole went on, —

"You are a rogue with whom I have a fancy for carousing, were it to cost me a new dozen of twelve livres of Tours. How does it strike you?"

Quasimodo made no reply.

"Cross of God!" said the hosier, "are you deaf?"

He was, in truth, deaf.

Nevertheless, he began to grow impatient with Coppenole's behavior, and suddenly turned towards him with so formidable a gnashing of teeth, that the Flemish giant recoiled, like a bull-dog before a cat.

Then there was created around that strange personage, a circle of terror and respect, whose radius was at least fifteen geometrical feet. An old woman explained to Coppenole that Quasimodo was deaf.

"Deaf!" said the hosier, with his great Flemish laugh. "Cross of God! He's a perfect pope!"

"He! I recognize him," exclaimed Jehan, who had, at last, descended from his capital, in order to see Quasimodo at closer quarters, "he's the bellringer of my brother, the archdeacon. Good-day, Quasimodo!"

"What a devil of a man!" said Robin Poussepain still all bruised with his fall. "He shows himself; he's a hunchback. He walks; he's bandy-legged. He looks at you; he's one-eyed. You speak to him; he's deaf. And what does this Polyphemus do with his tongue?"

"He speaks when he chooses," said the old woman; "he became deaf through ringing the bells. He is not dumb."

"That he lacks," remarks Jehan.

"And he has one eye too many," added Robin Poussepain.

"Not at all," said Jehan wisely. "A one-eyed man is far less complete than a blind man. He knows what he lacks."

In the meantime, all the beggars, all the lackeys, all the cutpurses, joined with the scholars, had gone in procession to seek, in the cupboard of the law clerks' company, the cardboard tiara, and the derisive robe of the Pope of the Fools. Quasimodo allowed them to array him in them without wincing, and with a sort of proud docility. Then they made him seat himself on a motley litter. Twelve officers of the fraternity of fools raised him on their shoulders; and a sort of bitter and disdainful joy lighted up the morose face of the cyclops, when he beheld beneath his deformed feet all those heads of handsome, straight, well-made men. Then the ragged and howling procession set out on its march, according to custom, around the inner galleries of the Courts, before making the circuit of the streets and squares.

CHAPTER VI. ESMERALDA.

We are delighted to be able to inform the reader, that during the whole of this scene, Gringoire and his piece had stood firm. His actors, spurred on by him, had not ceased to spout his comedy, and he had not ceased to listen to it. He had made up his mind about the tumult, and was determined to proceed to the end, not giving up the hope of a return of attention on the part of the public. This gleam of hope acquired fresh life, when he saw Quasimodo, Coppenole, and the deafening escort of the pope of the procession of fools quit the hall amid great uproar. The throng rushed eagerly after them. “Good,” he said to himself, “there go all the mischief-makers.” Unfortunately, all the mischief-makers constituted the entire audience. In the twinkling of an eye, the grand hall was empty.

To tell the truth, a few spectators still remained, some scattered, others in groups around the pillars, women, old men, or children, who had had enough of the uproar and tumult. Some scholars were still perched astride of the window-sills, engaged in gazing into the Place.

“Well,” thought Gringoire, “here are still as many as are required to hear the end of my mystery. They are few in number, but it is a choice audience, a lettered audience.”

An instant later, a symphony which had been intended to produce the greatest effect on the arrival of the Virgin, was lacking. Gringoire perceived that his music had been carried off by the procession of the Pope of the Fools. “Skip it,” said he, stoically.

He approached a group of bourgeois, who seemed to him to be discussing his piece. This is the fragment of conversation which he caught,—

“You know, Master Cheneteau, the Hôtel de Navarre, which belonged to Monsieur de Nemours?”

“Yes, opposite the Chapelle de Braque.”

“Well, the treasury has just let it to Guillaume Alixandre, historian, for six hivres, eight sols, parisian, a year.”

“How rents are going up!”

“Come,” said Gringoire to himself, with a sigh, “the others are listening.”

“Comrades,” suddenly shouted one of the young scamps from the window, “La Esmeralda! La Esmeralda in the Place!”

This word produced a magical effect. Every one who was left in the hall flew to the windows, climbing the walls in order to see, and repeating, “La Esmeralda! La Esmeralda?” At the same time, a great sound of applause was heard from without.

“What’s the meaning of this, of the Esmeralda?” said Gringoire, wringing his hands in despair. “Ah, good heavens! it seems to be the turn of the windows now.”

He returned towards the marble table, and saw that the representation had been interrupted. It was precisely at the instant when Jupiter should have appeared with his thunder. But Jupiter was standing motionless at the foot of the stage.

“Michel Giborne!” cried the irritated poet, “what are you doing there? Is that your part? Come up!”

“Alas!” said Jupiter, “a scholar has just seized the ladder.”

Gringoire looked. It was but too true. All communication between his plot and its solution was intercepted.

“The rascal,” he murmured. “And why did he take that ladder?”

“In order to go and see the Esmeralda,” replied Jupiter piteously. “He said, ‘Come, here’s a ladder that’s of no use!’ and he took it.”

This was the last blow. Gringoire received it with resignation.

“May the devil fly away with you!” he said to the comedian, “and if I get my pay, you shall receive yours.”

Then he beat a retreat, with drooping head, but the last in the field, like a general who has fought well.

And as he descended the winding stairs of the courts: “A fine rabble of asses and dolts these Parisians!” he muttered between his teeth; “they come to hear a mystery and don’t listen to it at all! They are engrossed by every one, by Chopin Trouillefou, by the cardinal, by Coppenole, by Quasimodo, by the devil! but by Madame the Virgin Mary, not at all. If I had known, I’d have given you Virgin Mary; you ninnies! And I! to come to see faces and behold only backs! to be a poet, and to reap the success of an apothecary! It is true that Homerus begged through the Greek towns, and that Naso died in exile among the Muscovites. But may the devil flay me if I understand what they mean with their Esmeralda! What is that word, in the first place?— ’tis Egyptian!”

BOOK SECOND.

CHAPTER I. FROM CHARYBDIS TO SCYLLA.

Night comes on early in January. The streets were already dark when Gringoire issued forth from the Courts. This gloom pleased him; he was in haste to reach some obscure and deserted alley, in order there to meditate at his ease, and in order that the philosopher might place the first dressing upon the wound of the poet. Philosophy, moreover, was his sole refuge, for he did not know where he was to lodge for the night. After the brilliant failure of his first theatrical venture, he dared not return to the lodging which he occupied in the Rue Grenier-sur-l'Eau, opposite to the Port-au-Foin, having depended upon receiving from monsieur the provost for his epithalamium, the wherewithal to pay Master Guillaume Doulx-Sire, farmer of the taxes on cloven-footed animals in Paris, the rent which he owed him, that is to say, twelve sols parisian; twelve times the value of all that he possessed in the world, including his trunk-hose, his shirt, and his cap. After reflecting a moment, temporarily sheltered beneath the little wicket of the prison of the treasurer of the Sainte-Chappelle, as to the shelter which he would select for the night, having all the pavements of Paris to choose from, he remembered to have noticed the week previously in the Rue de la Savaterie, at the door of a councillor of the parliament, a stepping stone for mounting a mule, and to have said to himself that that stone would furnish, on occasion, a very excellent pillow for a mendicant or a poet. He thanked Providence for having sent this happy idea to him; but, as he was preparing to cross the Place, in order to reach the tortuous labyrinth of the city, where meander all those old sister streets, the Rues de la Barillerie, de la Vielle-Draperie, de la Savaterie, de la Juiverie, etc., still extant to-day, with their nine-story houses, he saw the procession of the Pope of the Fools, which was also emerging from the court house, and rushing across the courtyard, with great cries, a great flashing of torches, and the music which belonged to him, Gringoire. This sight revived the pain of his self-love; he fled. In the bitterness of his dramatic misadventure, everything which reminded him of the festival of that day irritated his wound and made it bleed.

He was on the point of turning to the Pont Saint-Michel; children were running about here and there with fire lances and rockets.

“Pest on firework candles!” said Gringoire; and he fell back on the Pont au Change. To the house at the head of the bridge there had been affixed three small banners, representing the king, the dauphin, and Marguerite of Flanders, and six little pennons on which were portrayed the Duke of Austria, the Cardinal de Bourbon, M. de Beaujeu, and Madame Jeanne de France, and Monsieur the Bastard of Bourbon, and I know not whom else; all being illuminated with torches. The rabble were admiring.

“Happy painter, Jehan Fourbault!” said Gringoire with a deep sigh; and he turned his back upon the bannerets and pennons. A street opened before him; he thought it so dark and deserted that he hoped to there escape from all the rumors as well as from all the gleams of the festival. At the end of a few moments his foot came in contact with an obstacle; he stumbled and fell. It was the May truss, which the clerks of the clerks’ law court had deposited that morning at the door of a president of the parliament, in honor of the solemnity of the day. Gringoire bore this new disaster heroically; he picked himself up, and reached the water’s edge. After leaving behind him the civic Tournelle* and the criminal tower, and skirted the great walls of the king’s garden, on that unpaved strand where the mud reached to his ankles, he reached the western point of the city, and considered for some time the islet of the Passeur-aux-Vaches, which has disappeared beneath the bronze horse of the Pont Neuf. The islet appeared to him in the shadow like a black mass, beyond the narrow strip of whitish water which separated him from it. One could divine by the ray of a tiny light the sort of hut in the form of a beehive where the ferryman of cows took refuge at night.

* A chamber of the ancient parliament of Paris.

“Happy ferryman!” thought Gringoire; “you do not dream of glory, and you do not make marriage songs! What matters it to you, if kings and Duchesses of Burgundy marry? You know no other daisies (*marguerites*) than those which your April greensward gives your cows to browse upon; while I, a poet, am hooted, and shiver, and owe twelve sous, and the soles of my shoes are so transparent, that they might serve as glasses for your lantern! Thanks, ferryman, your cabin rests my eyes, and makes me forget Paris!”

He was roused from his almost lyric ecstacy, by a big double Saint-Jean cracker, which suddenly went off from the happy cabin. It was the cow ferryman, who was taking his part in the rejoicings of the day, and letting off fireworks.

This cracker made Gringoire’s skin bristle up all over.

“Accursed festival!” he exclaimed, “wilt thou pursue me everywhere? Oh! good God! even to the ferryman’s!”

Then he looked at the Seine at his feet, and a horrible temptation took possession of him:

“Oh!” said he, “I would gladly drown myself, were the water not so cold!”

Then a desperate resolution occurred to him. It was, since he could not escape from the Pope of the Fools, from Jehan Fourbault’s bannerets, from May trusses, from squibs and crackers, to go to the Place de Grève.

“At least,” he said to himself, “I shall there have a firebrand of joy wherewith to warm myself, and I can sup on some crumbs of the three great armorial bearings of royal sugar which have been erected on the public refreshment-stall of the city.”

CHAPTER II. THE PLACE DE GREVE.

There remains to-day but a very imperceptible vestige of the Place de Grève, such as it existed then; it consists in the charming little turret, which occupies the angle north of the Place, and which, already enshrouded in the ignoble plaster which fills with paste the delicate lines of its sculpture, would soon have disappeared, perhaps submerged by that flood of new houses which so rapidly devours all the ancient façades of Paris.

The persons who, like ourselves, never cross the Place de Grève without casting a glance of pity and sympathy on that poor turret strangled between two hovels of the time of Louis XV., can easily reconstruct in their minds the aggregate of edifices to which it belonged, and find again entire in it the ancient Gothic place of the fifteenth century.

It was then, as it is to-day, an irregular trapezoid, bordered on one side by the quay, and on the other three by a series of lofty, narrow, and gloomy houses. By day, one could admire the variety of its edifices, all sculptured in stone or wood, and already presenting complete specimens of the different domestic architectures of the Middle Ages, running back from the fifteenth to the eleventh century, from the casement which had begun to dethrone the arch, to the Roman semicircle, which had been supplanted by the ogive, and which still occupies, below it, the first story of that ancient house de la Tour Roland, at the corner of the Place upon the Seine, on the side of the street with the Tannerie. At night, one could distinguish nothing of all that mass of buildings, except the black indentation of the roofs, unrolling their chain of acute angles round the place; for one of the radical differences between the cities of that time, and the cities of the present day, lay in the façades which looked upon the places and streets, and which were then gables. For the last two centuries the houses have been turned round.

In the centre of the eastern side of the Place, rose a heavy and hybrid construction, formed of three buildings placed in juxtaposition. It was called by three names which explain its history, its destination, and its architecture: “The House of the Dauphin,” because Charles V., when Dauphin, had inhabited it; “The Marchandise,” because it had served as town hall; and “The Pillared House” (*domus ad piloria*), because of a series of large pillars which sustained the three stories. The city found there all that is required for a city like Paris; a chapel in which to pray to God; a *plaidoyer*, or pleading room, in which to hold hearings, and to repel, at need, the King’s people; and under the roof, an *arsenac* full of artillery. For the bourgeois of Paris were aware that it is not sufficient to pray in every conjuncture, and to plead for the franchises of the city, and they had always in reserve, in the garret of the town hall, a few good rusty arquebuses. The Grève had then that sinister aspect which it preserves to-day from the execrable ideas which it awakens, and from the sombre town hall of Dominique Bocador, which has replaced the Pillared House. It must be admitted that a permanent gibbet and a pillory, “a justice and a ladder,” as they were called in that day, erected side by side in the centre of the pavement, contributed not a little to cause eyes to be turned away from that fatal place, where so many beings full of life and health have agonized; where, fifty years later, that fever of Saint Vallier was destined to have its birth, that terror of the scaffold, the most monstrous of all maladies because it comes not from God, but from man.

It is a consoling idea (let us remark in passing), to think that the death penalty, which three hundred years ago still encumbered with its iron wheels, its stone gibbets, and all its paraphernalia of torture, permanent and riveted to the pavement, the Grève, the Halles, the Place Dauphine, the Cross du Trahoir, the Marché aux Pourceaux, that hideous Montfauçon, the barrier des Sergents, the Place aux Chats, the Porte Saint-Denis, Champeaux, the Porte Baudets, the Porte Saint Jacques, without reckoning the innumerable ladders of the provosts, the bishop of the chapters, of the abbots, of the priors, who had the decree of life and death, — without reckoning the judicial drownings in the river Seine; it is consoling to-day, after having lost successively all the pieces of its armor, its luxury of torment, its penalty of imagination and fancy, its torture for which it reconstructed every five years a leather bed at the Grand Châtelet, that ancient suzerain of feudal society almost expunged from our laws and our cities, hunted from code to code, chased from place to place, has no longer, in our immense Paris, any more than a dishonored corner of the Grève, — than a miserable guillotine, furtive, uneasy, shameful, which seems always afraid of being caught in the act, so quickly does it disappear after having dealt its blow.

CHAPTER III. KISSES FOR BLOWS.

When Pierre Gringoire arrived on the Place de Grève, he was paralyzed. He had directed his course across the Pont aux Meuniers, in order to avoid the rabble on the Pont au Change, and the pennons of Jehan Fourbault; but the wheels of all the bishop’s mills had splashed him as he passed, and his doublet was drenched; it seemed to him besides, that the failure of his piece had rendered him still more sensible to cold than usual. Hence he made haste to draw near the bonfire, which was burning magnificently in the middle of the Place. But a considerable crowd formed a circle around it.

“Accursed Parisians!” he said to himself (for Gringoire, like a true dramatic poet, was subject to monologues) “there they are obstructing my fire! Nevertheless, I am greatly in need of a chimney corner; my shoes drink in the water, and all those cursed mills wept upon me! That devil of a Bishop of Paris, with his mills! I’d just like to know what use a bishop can make of a mill! Does he expect to become a miller instead of a bishop? If only my malediction is needed for that, I bestow it upon him! and his cathedral, and his mills! Just see if those boobies will put themselves out! Move aside! I’d like to know what they are doing there! They are warming themselves, much pleasure may it give them! They are watching a hundred fagots burn; a fine spectacle!”

On looking more closely, he perceived that the circle was much larger than was required simply for the purpose of getting warm at the king’s fire, and that this concourse of people had not been attracted solely by the beauty of the hundred fagots which were burning.

In a vast space left free between the crowd and the fire, a young girl was dancing.

Whether this young girl was a human being, a fairy, or an angel, is what Gringoire, sceptical philosopher and ironical poet that he was, could not decide at the first moment, so fascinated was he by this dazzling vision.

She was not tall, though she seemed so, so boldly did her slender form dart about. She was swarthy of complexion, but one divined that, by day, her skin must possess that beautiful golden tone of the Andalusians and the Roman women. Her little foot, too, was Andalusian, for it was both pinched and at ease in its graceful shoe. She danced, she turned, she whirled rapidly about on an old Persian rug, spread negligently under her feet; and each time that her radiant face passed before you, as she whirled, her great black eyes darted a flash of lightning at you.

All around her, all glances were riveted, all mouths open; and, in fact, when she danced thus, to the humming of the Basque tambourine, which her two pure, rounded arms raised above her head, slender, frail and vivacious as a wasp, with her corsage of gold without a fold, her variegated gown puffing out, her bare shoulders, her delicate limbs, which her petticoat revealed at times, her black hair, her eyes of flame, she was a supernatural creature.

“In truth,” said Gringoire to himself, “she is a salamander, she is a nymph, she is a goddess, she is a bacchante of the Menelean Mount!”

At that moment, one of the salamander’s braids of hair became unfastened, and a piece of yellow copper which was attached to it, rolled to the ground.

“Hé, no!” said he, “she is a gypsy!”

All illusions had disappeared.

She began her dance once more; she took from the ground two swords, whose points she rested against her brow, and which she made to turn in one direction, while she turned in the other; it was a purely gypsy effect. But, disenchanted though Gringoire was, the whole effect of this picture was not without its charm and its magic; the bonfire illuminated, with a red flaring light, which trembled, all alive, over the circle of faces in the crowd, on the brow of the young girl, and at the background of the Place cast a pallid reflection, on one side upon the ancient, black, and wrinkled façade of the House of Pillars, on the other, upon the old stone gibbet.

Among the thousands of visages which that light tinged with scarlet, there was one which seemed, even more than all the others, absorbed in contemplation of the dancer. It was the face of a man, austere, calm, and sombre. This man, whose costume was concealed by the crowd which surrounded him, did not appear to be more than five and thirty years of age; nevertheless, he was bald; he had merely a few tufts of thin, gray hair on his temples; his broad, high forehead had begun to be furrowed with wrinkles, but his deep-set eyes sparkled with extraordinary youthfulness, an ardent life, a profound passion. He kept them fixed incessantly on the gypsy, and, while the giddy young girl of sixteen danced and whirled, for the pleasure of all, his revery seemed to become more and more sombre. From time to time, a smile and a sigh met upon his lips, but the smile was more melancholy than the sigh.

The young girl, stopped at length, breathless, and the people applauded her lovingly.

“Djali!” said the gypsy.

Then Gringoire saw come up to her, a pretty little white goat, alert, wide-awake, glossy, with gilded horns, gilded hoofs, and gilded collar, which he had not hitherto perceived, and which had remained lying curled up on one corner of the carpet watching his mistress dance.

“Djali!” said the dancer, “it is your turn.”

And, seating herself, she gracefully presented her tambourine to the goat.

“Djali,” she continued, “what month is this?”

The goat lifted its fore foot, and struck one blow upon the tambourine. It was the first month in the year, in fact.

“Djali,” pursued the young girl, turning her tambourine round, “what day of the month is this?”

Djali raised his little gilt hoof, and struck six blows on the tambourine.

“Djali,” pursued the Egyptian, with still another movement of the tambourine, “what hour of the day is it?”

Djali struck seven blows. At that moment, the clock of the Pillar House rang out seven.

The people were amazed.

“There’s sorcery at the bottom of it,” said a sinister voice in the crowd. It was that of the bald man, who never removed his eyes from the gypsy.

She shuddered and turned round; but applause broke forth and drowned the morose exclamation.

It even effaced it so completely from her mind, that she continued to question her goat.

“Djali, what does Master Guichard Grand-Remy, captain of the pistoliers of the town do, at the procession of Candlemas?”

Djali reared himself on his hind legs, and began to bleat, marching along with so much dainty gravity, that the entire circle of spectators burst into a laugh at this parody of the interested devoutness of the captain of pistoliers.

“Djali,” resumed the young girl, emboldened by her growing success, “how preaches Master Jacques Charmolue, procurator to the king in the ecclesiastical court?”

The goat seated himself on his hind quarters, and began to bleat, waving his fore feet in so strange a manner, that, with the exception of the bad French, and worse Latin, Jacques Charmolue was there complete, —gesture, accent, and attitude.

And the crowd applauded louder than ever.

“Sacrilege! profanation!” resumed the voice of the bald man.

The gypsy turned round once more.

“Ah!” said she, “’tis that villanous man!” Then, thrusting her under lip out beyond the upper, she made a little pout, which appeared to be familiar to her, executed a pirouette on her heel, and set about collecting in her tambourine the gifts of the multitude.

Big blanks, little blanks, targes* and eagle liards showered into it.

* A blank: an old French coin; six blanks were worth two sous and a half; targe, an ancient coin of Burgundy, a farthing.

All at once, she passed in front of Gringoire. Gringoire put his hand so recklessly into his pocket that she halted. “The devil!” said the poet, finding at the bottom of his pocket the reality, that is, to say, a void. In the meantime, the pretty girl stood there, gazing at him with her big eyes, and holding out her tambourine to him and waiting. Gringoire broke into a violent perspiration.

If he had all Peru in his pocket, he would certainly have given it to the dancer; but Gringoire had not Peru, and, moreover, America had not yet been discovered.

Happily, an unexpected incident came to his rescue.

“Will you take yourself off, you Egyptian grasshopper?” cried a sharp voice, which proceeded from the darkest corner of the Place.

The young girl turned round in affright. It was no longer the voice of the bald man; it was the voice of a woman, bigoted and malicious.

However, this cry, which alarmed the gypsy, delighted a troop of children who were prowling about there.

“It is the recluse of the Tour-Roland,” they exclaimed, with wild laughter, “it is the sacked nun who is scolding! Hasn’t she supped? Let’s carry her the remains of the city refreshments!”

All rushed towards the Pillar House.

In the meanwhile, Gringoire had taken advantage of the dancer’s embarrassment, to disappear. The children’s shouts had reminded him that he, also, had not supped, so he ran to the public buffet. But the little rascals had better legs than he; when he arrived, they had stripped the table. There remained not so much as a miserable *camichon* at five sous the pound. Nothing remained upon the wall but slender fleurs-de-lis, mingled with rose bushes, painted in 1434 by Mathieu Biterne. It was a meagre supper.

It is an unpleasant thing to go to bed without supper, it is a still less pleasant thing not to sup and not to know where one is to sleep. That was Gringoire's condition. No supper, no shelter; he saw himself pressed on all sides by necessity, and he found necessity very crabbed. He had long ago discovered the truth, that Jupiter created men during a fit of misanthropy, and that during a wise man's whole life, his destiny holds his philosophy in a state of siege. As for himself, he had never seen the blockade so complete; he heard his stomach sounding a parley, and he considered it very much out of place that evil destiny should capture his philosophy by famine.

This melancholy revery was absorbing him more and more, when a song, quaint but full of sweetness, suddenly tore him from it. It was the young gypsy who was singing.

Her voice was like her dancing, like her beauty. It was indefinable and charming; something pure and sonorous, aerial, winged, so to speak. There were continual outbursts, melodies, unexpected cadences, then simple phrases strewn with aerial and hissing notes; then floods of scales which would have put a nightingale to rout, but in which harmony was always present; then soft modulations of octaves which rose and fell, like the bosom of the young singer. Her beautiful face followed, with singular mobility, all the caprices of her song, from the wildest inspiration to the chastest dignity. One would have pronounced her now a mad creature, now a queen.

The words which she sang were in a tongue unknown to Gringoire, and which seemed to him to be unknown to herself, so little relation did the expression which she imparted to her song bear to the sense of the words. Thus, these four lines, in her mouth, were madly gay, —

Un cofre de gran riqueza
Hallaron dentro un pilar,
Dentro del, nuevas banderas
Con figuras de espantar.*

* A coffer of great richness
In a pillar's heart they found,
Within it lay new banners,

With figures to astound.

And an instant afterwards, at the accents which she imparted to this stanza, —

Alarabes de cavallo
Sin poderse menear,
Con espadas, y los cuellos,
Ballestas de buen echar,

Gringoire felt the tears start to his eyes. Nevertheless, her song breathed joy, most of all, and she seemed to sing like a bird, from serenity and heedlessness.

The gypsy’s song had disturbed Gringoire’s revery as the swan disturbs the water. He listened in a sort of rapture, and forgetfulness of everything. It was the first moment in the course of many hours when he did not feel that he suffered.

The moment was brief.

The same woman’s voice, which had interrupted the gypsy’s dance, interrupted her song.

“Will you hold your tongue, you cricket of hell?” it cried, still from the same obscure corner of the place.

The poor “cricket” stopped short. Gringoire covered up his ears.

“Oh!” he exclaimed, “accursed saw with missing teeth, which comes to break the lyre!”

Meanwhile, the other spectators murmured like himself; “To the devil with the sacked nun!” said some of them. And the old invisible kill-joy might have had occasion to repent of her aggressions against the gypsy had their attention not been diverted at this moment by the procession of the Pope of the Fools, which, after having traversed many streets and squares, debouched on the Place de Grève, with all its torches and all its uproar.

This procession, which our readers have seen set out from the Palais de Justice, had organized on the way, and had been recruited by all the knaves, idle thieves, and unemployed vagabonds in Paris; so that it presented a very respectable aspect when it arrived at the Grève.

First came Egypt. The Duke of Egypt headed it, on horseback, with his counts on foot holding his bridle and stirrups for him; behind them, the male and female Egyptians, pell-mell, with their little children crying on their shoulders; all — duke, counts, and populace — in rags and tatters. Then came the Kingdom of Argot; that is to say, all the thieves of France, arranged according to the order of their dignity; the minor people walking first. Thus defiled by fours, with the divers insignia of their grades, in that strange faculty, most of them lame, some cripples, others one-armed, shop clerks, pilgrim, *hubins*, bootblacks, thimble-riggers, street arabs, beggars, the blear-eyed beggars, thieves, the weakly, vagabonds, merchants, sham soldiers, goldsmiths, passed masters of pickpockets, isolated thieves. A catalogue that would weary Homer. In the centre of the conclave of the passed masters of pickpockets, one had some difficulty in distinguishing the King of Argot, the grand coësre, so called, crouching in a little cart drawn by two big dogs. After the kingdom of the Argotiers, came the Empire of Galilee. Guillaume Rousseau, Emperor of the Empire of Galilee, marched majestically in his robe of purple, spotted with wine, preceded by buffoons wrestling and executing military dances; surrounded by his macebearers, his pickpockets and clerks of the chamber of accounts. Last of all came the corporation of law clerks, with its maypoles crowned with flowers, its black robes, its music worthy of the orgy, and its large candles of yellow wax. In the centre of this crowd, the grand officers of the Brotherhood of Fools bore on their shoulders a litter more loaded down with candles than the reliquary of Sainte-Geneviève in time of pest; and on this litter shone resplendent, with crosier, cope, and mitre, the new Pope of the Fools, the bellringer of Notre-Dame, Quasimodo the hunchback.

Each section of this grotesque procession had its own music. The Egyptians made their drums and African tambourines resound. The slang men, not a very musical race, still clung to the goat’s horn trumpet and the Gothic rubebbe of the twelfth century. The Empire of Galilee was not much more advanced; among its music one could hardly distinguish some miserable rebec, from the infancy of the art, still imprisoned in the *re-la-mi*. But it was around the Pope of the Fools that all the musical riches of the epoch were displayed in a magnificent discord. It was nothing but soprano rebecs, counter-tenor rebecs, and tenor rebecs, not to reckon the flutes and brass instruments. Alas! our readers will remember that this was Gringoire’s orchestra.

It is difficult to convey an idea of the degree of proud and blissful expansion to which the sad and hideous visage of Quasimodo had attained during the transit from the Palais de Justice, to the Place de Grève. It was the first enjoyment of self-love that he had ever experienced. Down to that day, he had known only humiliation, disdain for his condition, disgust for his person. Hence, deaf though he was, he enjoyed, like a veritable pope, the acclamations of that throng, which he hated because he felt that he was hated by it. What mattered it that his people consisted of a pack of fools, cripples, thieves, and beggars? it was still a people and he was its sovereign. And he accepted seriously all this ironical applause, all this derisive respect, with which the crowd mingled, it must be admitted, a good deal of very real fear. For the hunchback was robust; for the bandy-legged fellow was agile; for the deaf man was malicious: three qualities which temper ridicule.

We are far from believing, however, that the new Pope of the Fools understood both the sentiments which he felt and the sentiments which he inspired. The spirit which was lodged in this failure of a body had, necessarily, something incomplete and deaf about it. Thus, what he felt at the moment was to him, absolutely vague, indistinct, and confused. Only joy made itself felt, only pride dominated. Around that sombre and unhappy face, there hung a radiance.

It was, then, not without surprise and alarm, that at the very moment when Quasimodo was passing the Pillar House, in that semi-intoxicated state, a man was seen to dart from the crowd, and to tear from his hands, with a gesture of anger, his crosier of gilded wood, the emblem of his mock popeship.

This man, this rash individual, was the man with the bald brow, who, a moment earlier, standing with the gypsy’s group had chilled the poor girl with his words of menace and of hatred. He was dressed in an ecclesiastical costume. At the moment when he stood forth from the crowd, Gringoire, who had not noticed him up to that time, recognized him: “Hold!” he said, with an exclamation of astonishment. “Eh! ’tis my master in Hermes, Dom Claude Frollo, the archdeacon! What the devil does he want of that old one-eyed fellow? He’ll get himself devoured!”

A cry of terror arose, in fact. The formidable Quasimodo had hurled himself from the litter, and the women turned aside their eyes in order not to see him tear the archdeacon asunder.

He made one bound as far as the priest, looked at him, and fell upon his knees.

The priest tore off his tiara, broke his crozier, and rent his tinsel cope.

Quasimodo remained on his knees, with head bent and hands clasped. Then there was established between them a strange dialogue of signs and gestures, for neither of them spoke. The priest, erect on his feet, irritated, threatening, imperious; Quasimodo, prostrate, humble, suppliant. And, nevertheless, it is certain that Quasimodo could have crushed the priest with his thumb.

At length the archdeacon, giving Quasimodo's powerful shoulder a rough shake, made him a sign to rise and follow him.

Quasimodo rose.

Then the Brotherhood of Fools, their first stupor having passed off, wished to defend their pope, so abruptly dethroned. The Egyptians, the men of slang, and all the fraternity of law clerks, gathered howling round the priest.

Quasimodo placed himself in front of the priest, set in play the muscles of his athletic fists, and glared upon the assailants with the snarl of an angry tiger.

The priest resumed his sombre gravity, made a sign to Quasimodo, and retired in silence.

Quasimodo walked in front of him, scattering the crowd as he passed.

When they had traversed the populace and the Place, the cloud of curious and idle were minded to follow them. Quasimodo then constituted himself the rearguard, and followed the archdeacon, walking backwards, squat, surly, monstrous, bristling, gathering up his limbs, licking his boar's tusks, growling like a wild beast, and imparting to the crowd immense vibrations, with a look or a gesture.

Both were allowed to plunge into a dark and narrow street, where no one dared to venture after them; so thoroughly did the mere chimera of Quasimodo gnashing his teeth bar the entrance.

"Here's a marvellous thing," said Gringoire; "but where the deuce shall I find some supper?"

CHAPTER IV. THE INCONVENIENCES OF FOLLOWING A PRETTY WOMAN THROUGH THE STREETS IN THE EVENING.

Gringoire set out to follow the gypsy at all hazards. He had seen her, accompanied by her goat, take to the Rue de la Coutellerie; he took the Rue de la Coutellerie.

“Why not?” he said to himself.

Gringoire, a practical philosopher of the streets of Paris, had noticed that nothing is more propitious to revery than following a pretty woman without knowing whither she is going. There was in this voluntary abdication of his freewill, in this fancy submitting itself to another fancy, which suspects it not, a mixture of fantastic independence and blind obedience, something indescribable, intermediate between slavery and liberty, which pleased Gringoire, — a spirit essentially compound, undecided, and complex, holding the extremities of all extremes, incessantly suspended between all human propensities, and neutralizing one by the other. He was fond of comparing himself to Mahomet’s coffin, attracted in two different directions by two loadstones, and hesitating eternally between the heights and the depths, between the vault and the pavement, between fall and ascent, between zenith and nadir.

If Gringoire had lived in our day, what a fine middle course he would hold between classicism and romanticism!

But he was not sufficiently primitive to live three hundred years, and ’tis a pity. His absence is a void which is but too sensibly felt to-day.

Moreover, for the purpose of thus following passers-by (and especially female passers-by) in the streets, which Gringoire was fond of doing, there is no better disposition than ignorance of where one is going to sleep.

So he walked along, very thoughtfully, behind the young girl, who hastened her pace and made her goat trot as she saw the bourgeois returning home and the taverns — the only shops which had been open that day — closing.

“After all,” he half thought to himself, “she must lodge somewhere; gypsies have kindly hearts. Who knows?—”

And in the points of suspense which he placed after this reticence in his mind, there lay I know not what flattering ideas.

Meanwhile, from time to time, as he passed the last groups of bourgeois closing their doors, he caught some scraps of their conversation, which broke the thread of his pleasant hypotheses.

Now it was two old men accosting each other.

“Do you know that it is cold, Master Thibaut Fernicle?” (Gringoire had been aware of this since the beginning of the winter.)

“Yes, indeed, Master Boniface Disome! Are we going to have a winter such as we had three years ago, in ‘80, when wood cost eight sous the measure?”

“Bah! that’s nothing, Master Thibaut, compared with the winter of 1407, when it froze from St. Martin’s Day until Candlemas! and so cold that the pen of the registrar of the parliament froze every three words, in the Grand Chamber! which interrupted the registration of justice.”

Further on there were two female neighbors at their windows, holding candles, which the fog caused to sputter.

“Has your husband told you about the mishap, Mademoiselle la Boudraque?”

“No. What is it, Mademoiselle Turquant?”

“The horse of M. Gilles Godin, the notary at the Châtelet, took fright at the Flemings and their procession, and overturned Master Philippe Avrillot, lay monk of the Célestins.”

“Really?”

“Actually.”

“A bourgeois horse! ’tis rather too much! If it had been a cavalry horse, well and good!”

And the windows were closed. But Gringoire had lost the thread of his ideas, nevertheless.

Fortunately, he speedily found it again, and he knotted it together without difficulty, thanks to the gypsy, thanks to Djali, who still walked in front of him; two fine, delicate, and charming creatures, whose tiny feet, beautiful forms, and graceful manners he was engaged in admiring, almost confusing them in his contemplation; believing them to be both young girls, from their intelligence and good friendship; regarding them both as goats, — so far as the lightness, agility, and dexterity of their walk were concerned.

But the streets were becoming blacker and more deserted every moment. The curfew had sounded long ago, and it was only at rare intervals now that they encountered a passer-by in the street, or a light in the windows. Gringoire had become involved, in his pursuit of the gypsy, in that inextricable labyrinth of alleys, squares, and closed courts which surround the ancient sepulchre of the Saints-Innocents, and which resembles a ball of thread tangled by a cat. “Here are streets which possess but little logic!” said Gringoire, lost in the thousands of circuits which returned upon themselves incessantly, but where the young girl pursued a road which seemed familiar to her, without hesitation and with a step which became ever more rapid. As for him, he would have been utterly ignorant of his situation had he not espied, in passing, at the turn of a street, the octagonal mass of the pillory of the fish markets, the open-work summit of which threw its black, fretted outlines clearly upon a window which was still lighted in the Rue Verdelet.

The young girl’s attention had been attracted to him for the last few moments; she had repeatedly turned her head towards him with uneasiness; she had even once come to a standstill, and taking advantage of a ray of light which escaped from a half-open bakery to survey him intently, from head to foot, then, having cast this glance, Gringoire had seen her make that little pout which he had already noticed, after which she passed on.

This little pout had furnished Gringoire with food for thought. There was certainly both disdain and mockery in that graceful grimace. So he dropped his head, began to count the paving-stones, and to follow the young girl at a little greater distance, when, at the turn of a street, which had caused him to lose sight of her, he heard her utter a piercing cry.

He hastened his steps.

The street was full of shadows. Nevertheless, a twist of tow soaked in oil, which burned in a cage at the feet of the Holy Virgin at the street corner, permitted Gringoire to make out the gypsy struggling in the arms of two men, who were endeavoring to stifle her cries. The poor little goat, in great alarm, lowered his horns and bleated.

“Help! gentlemen of the watch!” shouted Gringoire, and advanced bravely. One of the men who held the young girl turned towards him. It was the formidable visage of Quasimodo.

Gringoire did not take to flight, but neither did he advance another step.

Quasimodo came up to him, tossed him four paces away on the pavement with a backward turn of the hand, and plunged rapidly into the gloom, bearing the young girl folded across one arm like a silken scarf. His companion followed him, and the poor goat ran after them all, bleating plaintively.

“Murder! murder!” shrieked the unhappy gypsy.

“Halt, rascals, and yield me that wench!” suddenly shouted in a voice of thunder, a cavalier who appeared suddenly from a neighboring square.

It was a captain of the king’s archers, armed from head to foot, with his sword in his hand.

He tore the gypsy from the arms of the dazed Quasimodo, threw her across his saddle, and at the moment when the terrible hunchback, recovering from his surprise, rushed upon him to regain his prey, fifteen or sixteen archers, who followed their captain closely, made their appearance, with their two-edged swords in their fists. It was a squad of the king’s police, which was making the rounds, by order of Messire Robert d’Estouteville, guard of the provostship of Paris.

Quasimodo was surrounded, seized, garroted; he roared, he foamed at the mouth, he bit; and had it been broad daylight, there is no doubt that his face alone, rendered more hideous by wrath, would have put the entire squad to flight. But by night he was deprived of his most formidable weapon, his ugliness.

His companion had disappeared during the struggle.

The gypsy gracefully raised herself upright upon the officer’s saddle, placed both hands upon the young man’s shoulders, and gazed fixedly at him for several seconds, as though enchanted with his good looks and with the aid which he had just rendered her. Then breaking silence first, she said to him, making her sweet voice still sweeter than usual, —

“What is your name, monsieur le gendarme?”

“Captain Phoebus de Châteaupers, at your service, my beauty!” replied the officer, drawing himself up.

“Thanks,” said she.

And while Captain Phoebus was turning up his moustache in Burgundian fashion, she slipped from the horse, like an arrow falling to earth, and fled.

A flash of lightning would have vanished less quickly.

“Nombrill of the Pope!” said the captain, causing Quasimodo’s straps to be drawn tighter, “I should have preferred to keep the wench.”

“What would you have, captain?” said one gendarme. “The warbler has fled, and the bat remains.”

CHAPTER V. RESULT OF THE DANGERS.

Gringoire, thoroughly stunned by his fall, remained on the pavement in front of the Holy Virgin at the street corner. Little by little, he regained his senses; at first, for several minutes, he was floating in a sort of half-somnolent revery, which was not without its charm, in which aeriel figures of the gypsy and her goat were coupled with Quasimodo's heavy fist. This state lasted but a short time. A decidedly vivid sensation of cold in the part of his body which was in contact with the pavement, suddenly aroused him and caused his spirit to return to the surface.

"Whence comes this chill?" he said abruptly, to himself. He then perceived that he was lying half in the middle of the gutter.

"That devil of a hunchbacked cyclops!" he muttered between his teeth; and he tried to rise. But he was too much dazed and bruised; he was forced to remain where he was. Moreover, his hand was tolerably free; he stopped up his nose and resigned himself.

"The mud of Paris," he said to himself — for decidedly he thought that he was sure that the gutter would prove his refuge for the night; and what can one do in a refuge, except dream?— "the mud of Paris is particularly stinking; it must contain a great deal of volatile and nitric salts. That, moreover, is the opinion of Master Nicholas Flamel, and of the alchemists —"

The word "alchemists" suddenly suggested to his mind the idea of Archdeacon Claude Frollo. He recalled the violent scene which he had just witnessed in part; that the gypsy was struggling with two men, that Quasimodo had a companion; and the morose and haughty face of the archdeacon passed confusedly through his memory. "That would be strange!" he said to himself. And on that fact and that basis he began to construct a fantastic edifice of hypothesis, that card-castle of philosophers; then, suddenly returning once more to reality, "Come! I'm freezing!" he ejaculated.

The place was, in fact, becoming less and less tenable. Each molecule of the gutter bore away a molecule of heat radiating from Gringoire's loins, and the equilibrium between the temperature of his body and the temperature of the brook, began to be established in rough fashion.

Quite a different annoyance suddenly assailed him. A group of children, those little bare-footed savages who have always roamed the pavements of Paris under the eternal name of *gamins*, and who, when we were also children ourselves, threw stones at all of us in the afternoon, when we came out of school, because our trousers were not torn — a swarm of these young scamps rushed towards the square where Gringoire lay, with shouts and laughter which seemed to pay but little heed to the sleep of the neighbors. They were dragging after them some sort of hideous sack; and the noise of their wooden shoes alone would have roused the dead. Gringoire who was not quite dead yet, half raised himself.

"Ohé, Hennequin Dandéche! Ohè, Jehan Pincebourde!" they shouted in deafening tones, "old Eustache Moubon, the merchant at the corner, has just died. We've got his straw pallet, we're going to have a bonfire out of it. It's the turn of the Flemish to-day!"

And behold, they flung the pallet directly upon Gringoire, beside whom they had arrived, without espying him. At the same time, one of them took a handful of straw and set off to light it at the wick of the good Virgin.

"S'death!" growled Gringoire, "am I going to be too warm now?"

It was a critical moment. He was caught between fire and water; he made a superhuman effort, the effort of a counterfeiter of money who is on the point of being boiled, and who seeks to escape. He rose to his feet, flung aside the straw pallet upon the street urchins, and fled.

"Holy Virgin!" shrieked the children; "'tis the merchant's ghost!"

And they fled in their turn.

The straw mattress remained master of the field. Belleforet, Father Le Juge, and Corrozet affirm that it was picked up on the morrow, with great pomp, by the clergy of the quarter, and borne to the treasury of the church of Saint Opportune, where the sacristan, even as late as 1789, earned a tolerably handsome revenue out of the great miracle of the Statue of the Virgin at the corner of the Rue Mauconseil, which had, by its mere presence, on the memorable night between the sixth and seventh of January, 1482, exorcised the defunct Eustache Moubon, who, in order to play a trick on the devil, had at his death maliciously concealed his soul in his straw pallet.

CHAPTER VI. THE BROKEN JUG.

After having run for some time at the top of his speed, without knowing whither, knocking his head against many a street corner, leaping many a gutter, traversing many an alley, many a court, many a square, seeking flight and passage through all the meanderings of the ancient passages of the Halles, exploring in his panic terror what the fine Latin of the maps calls *tota via, cheminum et viaria*, our poet suddenly halted for lack of breath in the first place, and in the second, because he had been collared, after a fashion, by a dilemma which had just occurred to his mind. “It strikes me, Master Pierre Gringoire,” he said to himself, placing his finger to his brow, “that you are running like a madman. The little scamps are no less afraid of you than you are of them. It strikes me, I say, that you heard the clatter of their wooden shoes fleeing southward, while you were fleeing northward. Now, one of two things, either they have taken flight, and the pallet, which they must have forgotten in their terror, is precisely that hospitable bed in search of which you have been running ever since morning, and which madame the Virgin miraculously sends you, in order to recompense you for having made a morality in her honor, accompanied by triumphs and mummeries; or the children have not taken flight, and in that case they have put the brand to the pallet, and that is precisely the good fire which you need to cheer, dry, and warm you. In either case, good fire or good bed, that straw pallet is a gift from heaven. The blessed Virgin Marie who stands at the corner of the Rue Mauconseil, could only have made Eustache Moubon die for that express purpose; and it is folly on your part to flee thus zigzag, like a Picard before a Frenchman, leaving behind you what you seek before you; and you are a fool!”

Then he retraced his steps, and feeling his way and searching, with his nose to the wind and his ears on the alert, he tried to find the blessed pallet again, but in vain. There was nothing to be found but intersections of houses, closed courts, and crossings of streets, in the midst of which he hesitated and doubted incessantly, being more perplexed and entangled in this medley of streets than he would have been even in the labyrinth of the Hôtel des Tournelles. At length he lost patience, and exclaimed solemnly: “Cursed be cross roads! ’tis the devil who has made them in the shape of his pitchfork!”

This exclamation afforded him a little solace, and a sort of reddish reflection which he caught sight of at that moment, at the extremity of a long and narrow lane, completed the elevation of his moral tone. “God be praised!” said he, “There it is yonder! There is my pallet burning.” And comparing himself to the pilot who suffers shipwreck by night, “*Salve*,” he added piously, “*salve, maris stella*!”

Did he address this fragment of litany to the Holy Virgin, or to the pallet? We are utterly unable to say.

He had taken but a few steps in the long street, which sloped downwards, was unpaved, and more and more muddy and steep, when he noticed a very singular thing. It was not deserted; here and there along its extent crawled certain vague and formless masses, all directing their course towards the light which flickered at the end of the street, like those heavy insects which drag along by night, from blade to blade of grass, towards the shepherd’s fire.

Nothing renders one so adventurous as not being able to feel the place where one’s pocket is situated. Gringoire continued to advance, and had soon joined that one of the forms which dragged along most indolently, behind the others. On drawing near, he perceived that it was nothing else than a wretched legless cripple in a bowl, who was hopping along on his two hands like a wounded field-spider which has but two legs left. At the moment when he passed close to this species of spider with a human countenance, it raised towards him a lamentable voice: “*La buona mancia, signor! la buona mancia*!”*

* Alms.

“Deuce take you,” said Gringoire, “and me with you, if I know what you mean!”

And he passed on.

He overtook another of these itinerant masses, and examined it. It was an impotent man, both halt and crippled, and halt and crippled to such a degree that the complicated system of crutches and wooden legs which sustained him, gave him the air of a mason’s scaffolding on the march. Gringoire, who liked noble and classical comparisons, compared him in thought to the living tripod of Vulcan.

This living tripod saluted him as he passed, but stopping his hat on a level with Gringoire’s chin, like a shaving dish, while he shouted in the latter’s ears: “*Senor cabellero, para comprar un pedaso de pan*!”*

* Give me the means to buy a bit of bread, sir.

“It appears,” said Gringoire, “that this one can also talk; but ’tis a rude language, and he is more fortunate than I if he understands it.” Then, smiting his brow, in a sudden transition of ideas: “By the way, what the deuce did they mean this morning with their Esmeralda?”

He was minded to augment his pace, but for the third time something barred his way. This something or, rather, some one was a blind man, a little blind fellow with a bearded, Jewish face, who, rowing away in the space about him with a stick, and towed by a large dog, droned through his nose with a Hungarian accent: “*Facitote caritatem*!”

“Well, now,” said Gringoire, “here’s one at last who speaks a Christian tongue. I must have a very charitable aspect, since they ask alms of me in the present lean condition of my purse. My friend,” and he turned towards the blind man, “I sold my last shirt last week; that is to say, since you understand only the language of Cicero: *Vendidi hebdomade nuper transita meam ultimam chemisan*.”

That said, he turned his back upon the blind man, and pursued his way. But the blind man began to increase his stride at the same time; and, behold! the cripple and the legless man, in his bowl, came up on their side in great haste, and with great clamor of bowl and crutches, upon the pavement. Then all three, jostling each other at poor Gringoire’s heels, began to sing their song to him, —

“*Caritatem*!” chanted the blind man.

“*La buona mancia*!” chanted the cripple in the bowl.

And the lame man took up the musical phrase by repeating: “*Un pedaso de pan*!”

Gringoire stopped up his ears. “Oh, tower of Babel!” he exclaimed.

He set out to run. The blind man ran! The lame man ran! The cripple in the bowl ran!

And then, in proportion as he plunged deeper into the street, cripples in bowls, blind men and lame men, swarmed about him, and men with one arm, and with one eye, and the leprous with their sores, some emerging from little streets adjacent, some from the air-holes of cellars, howling, bellowing, yelping, all limping and halting, all flinging themselves towards the light, and humped up in the mire, like snails after a shower.

Gringoire, still followed by his three persecutors, and not knowing very well what was to become of him, marched along in terror among them, turning out for the lame, stepping over the cripples in bowls, with his feet imbedded in that ant-hill of lame men, like the English captain who got caught in the quicksand of a swarm of crabs.

The idea occurred to him of making an effort to retrace his steps. But it was too late. This whole legion had closed in behind him, and his three beggars held him fast. So he proceeded, impelled both by this irresistible flood, by fear, and by a vertigo which converted all this into a sort of horrible dream.

At last he reached the end of the street. It opened upon an immense place, where a thousand scattered lights flickered in the confused mists of night. Gringoire flew thither, hoping to escape, by the swiftness of his legs, from the three infirm spectres who had clutched him.

"*Onde vas, hombre*?" (Where are you going, my man?) cried the cripple, flinging away his crutches, and running after him with the best legs that ever traced a geometrical step upon the pavements of Paris.

In the meantime the legless man, erect upon his feet, crowned Gringoire with his heavy iron bowl, and the blind man glared in his face with flaming eyes!

"Where am I?" said the terrified poet.

"In the Court of Miracles," replied a fourth spectre, who had accosted them.

"Upon my soul," resumed Gringoire, "I certainly do behold the blind who see, and the lame who walk, but where is the Saviour?"

They replied by a burst of sinister laughter.

The poor poet cast his eyes about him. It was, in truth, that redoubtable Cour des Miracles, whither an honest man had never penetrated at such an hour; the magic circle where the officers of the Châtelet and the sergeants of the provostship, who ventured thither, disappeared in morsels; a city of thieves, a hideous wart on the face of Paris; a sewer, from which escaped every morning, and whither returned every night to crouch, that stream of vices, of mendicancy and vagabondage which always overflows in the streets of capitals; a monstrous hive, to which returned at nightfall, with their booty, all the drones of the social order; a lying hospital where the bohemian, the disfrocked monk, the ruined scholar, the ne'er-do-wells of all nations, Spaniards, Italians, Germans, — of all religions, Jews, Christians, Mahometans, idolaters, covered with painted sores, beggars by day, were transformed by night into brigands; an immense dressing-room, in a word, where, at that epoch, the actors of that eternal comedy, which theft, prostitution, and murder play upon the pavements of Paris, dressed and undressed.

It was a vast place, irregular and badly paved, like all the squares of Paris at that date. Fires, around which swarmed strange groups, blazed here and there. Every one was going, coming, and shouting. Shrill laughter was to be heard, the wailing of children, the voices of women. The hands and heads of this throng, black against the luminous background, outlined against it a thousand eccentric gestures. At times, upon the ground, where trembled the light of the fires, mingled with large, indefinite shadows, one could behold a dog passing, which resembled a man, a man who resembled a dog. The limits of races and species seemed effaced in this city, as in a pandemonium. Men, women, beasts, age, sex, health, maladies, all seemed to be in common among these people; all went together, they mingled, confounded, superposed; each one there participated in all.

The poor and flickering flames of the fire permitted Gringoire to distinguish, amid his trouble, all around the immense place, a hideous frame of ancient houses, whose wormeaten, shrivelled, stunted façades, each pierced with one or two lighted attic windows, seemed to him, in the darkness, like enormous heads of old women, ranged in a circle, monstrous and crabbed, winking as they looked on at the Witches' Sabbath.

It was like a new world, unknown, unheard of, misshapen, creeping, swarming, fantastic.

Gringoire, more and more terrified, clutched by the three beggars as by three pairs of tongs, dazed by a throng of other faces which frothed and yelped around him, unhappy Gringoire endeavored to summon his presence of mind, in order to recall whether it was a Saturday. But his efforts were vain; the thread of his memory and of his thought was broken; and, doubting everything, wavering between what he saw and what he felt, he put to himself this unanswerable question, —

"If I exist, does this exist? if this exists, do I exist?"

At that moment, a distinct cry arose in the buzzing throng which surrounded him, "Let's take him to the king! let's take him to the king!"

"Holy Virgin!" murmured Gringoire, "the king here must be a ram."

"To the king! to the king!" repeated all voices.

They dragged him off. Each vied with the other in laying his claws upon him. But the three beggars did not loose their hold and tore him from the rest, howling, “He belongs to us!”

The poet’s already sickly doublet yielded its last sigh in this struggle.

While traversing the horrible place, his vertigo vanished. After taking a few steps, the sentiment of reality returned to him. He began to become accustomed to the atmosphere of the place. At the first moment there had arisen from his poet’s head, or, simply and prosaically, from his empty stomach, a mist, a vapor, so to speak, which, spreading between objects and himself, permitted him to catch a glimpse of them only in the incoherent fog of nightmare, — in those shadows of dreams which distort every outline, agglomerating objects into unwieldy groups, dilating things into chimeras, and men into phantoms. Little by little, this hallucination was succeeded by a less bewildered and exaggerating view. Reality made its way to the light around him, struck his eyes, struck his feet, and demolished, bit by bit, all that frightful poetry with which he had, at first, believed himself to be surrounded. He was forced to perceive that he was not walking in the Styx, but in mud, that he was elbowed not by demons, but by thieves; that it was not his soul which was in question, but his life (since he lacked that precious conciliator, which places itself so effectually between the bandit and the honest man — a purse). In short, on examining the orgy more closely, and with more coolness, he fell from the witches’ sabbath to the dram-shop.

The Cour des Miracles was, in fact, merely a dram-shop; but a brigand’s dram-shop, reddened quite as much with blood as with wine.

The spectacle which presented itself to his eyes, when his ragged escort finally deposited him at the end of his trip, was not fitted to bear him back to poetry, even to the poetry of hell. It was more than ever the prosaic and brutal reality of the tavern. Were we not in the fifteenth century, we would say that Gringoire had descended from Michael Angelo to Callot.

Around a great fire which burned on a large, circular flagstone, the flames of which had heated red-hot the legs of a tripod, which was empty for the moment, some wormeaten tables were placed, here and there, haphazard, no lackey of a geometrical turn having deigned to adjust their parallelism, or to see to it that they did not make too unusual angles. Upon these tables gleamed several dripping pots of wine and beer, and round these pots were grouped many bacchic visages, purple with the fire and the wine. There was a man with a huge belly and a jovial face, noisily kissing a woman of the town, thickset and brawny. There was a sort of sham soldier, a “naquois,” as the slang expression runs, who was whistling as he undid the bandages from his fictitious wound, and removing the numbness from his sound and vigorous knee, which had been swathed since morning in a thousand ligatures. On the other hand, there was a wretched fellow, preparing with celandine and beef’s blood, his “leg of God,” for the next day. Two tables further on, a palmer, with his pilgrim’s costume complete, was practising the lament of the Holy Queen, not forgetting the drone and the nasal drawl. Further on, a young scamp was taking a lesson in epilepsy from an old pretender, who was instructing him in the art of foaming at the mouth, by chewing a morsel of soap. Beside him, a man with the dropsy was getting rid of his swelling, and making four or five female thieves, who were disputing at the same table, over a child who had been stolen that evening, hold their noses. All circumstances which, two centuries later, “seemed so ridiculous to the court,” as Sauval says, “that they served as a pastime to the king, and as an introduction to the royal ballet of Night, divided into four parts and danced on the theatre of the Petit-Bourbon.” “Never,” adds an eye witness of 1653, “have the sudden metamorphoses of the Court of Miracles been more happily presented. Benserade prepared us for it by some very gallant verses.”

Loud laughter everywhere, and obscene songs. Each one held his own course, carping and swearing, without listening to his neighbor. Pots clinked, and quarrels sprang up at the shock of the pots, and the broken pots made rents in the rags.

A big dog, seated on his tail, gazed at the fire. Some children were mingled in this orgy. The stolen child wept and cried. Another, a big boy four years of age, seated with legs dangling, upon a bench that was too high for him, before a table that reached to his chin, and uttering not a word. A third, gravely spreading out upon the table with his finger, the melted tallow which dripped from a candle. Last of all, a little fellow crouching in the mud, almost lost in a cauldron, which he was scraping with a tile, and from which he was evoking a sound that would have made Stradivarius swoon.

Near the fire was a hogshead, and on the hogshead a beggar. This was the king on his throne.

The three who had Gringoire in their clutches led him in front of this hogshead, and the entire bacchanal rout fell silent for a moment, with the exception of the cauldron inhabited by the child.

Gringoire dared neither breathe nor raise his eyes.

"*Hombre, quita tu sombrero*!" said one of the three knaves, in whose grasp he was, and, before he had comprehended the meaning, the other had snatched his hat — a wretched headgear, it is true, but still good on a sunny day or when there was but little rain. Gringoire sighed.

Meanwhile the king addressed him, from the summit of his cask, —

"Who is this rogue?"

Gringoire shuddered. That voice, although accentuated by menace, recalled to him another voice, which, that very morning, had dealt the deathblow to his mystery, by drawling, nasally, in the midst of the audience, "Charity, please!" He raised his head. It was indeed Clopin Trouillefou.

Clopin Trouillefou, arrayed in his royal insignia, wore neither one rag more nor one rag less. The sore upon his arm had already disappeared. He held in his hand one of those whips made of thongs of white leather, which police sergeants then used to repress the crowd, and which were called *boullayes*. On his head he wore a sort of headgear, bound round and closed at the top. But it was difficult to make out whether it was a child's cap or a king's crown, the two things bore so strong a resemblance to each other.

Meanwhile Gringoire, without knowing why, had regained some hope, on recognizing in the King of the Cour des Miracles his accursed mendicant of the Grand Hall.

"Master," stammered he; "monseigneur — sire — how ought I to address you?" he said at length, having reached the culminating point of his crescendo, and knowing neither how to mount higher, nor to descend again.

"Monseigneur, his majesty, or comrade, call me what you please. But make haste. What have you to say in your own defence?"

"In your own defence?" thought Gringoire, "that displeases me." He resumed, stuttering, "I am he, who this morning—"

"By the devil's claws!" interrupted Clopin, "your name, knave, and nothing more. Listen. You are in the presence of three powerful sovereigns: myself, Clopin Trouillefou, King of Thunes, successor to the Grand Coësre, supreme suzerain of the Realm of Argot; Mathias Hunyadi Spicali, Duke of Egypt and of Bohemia, the old yellow fellow whom you see yonder, with a dish clout round his head; Guillaume Rousseau, Emperor of Galilee, that fat fellow who is not listening to us but caressing a wench. We are your judges. You have entered the Kingdom of Argot, without being an *argotier*; you have violated the privileges of our city. You must be punished unless you are a *capon*, a *franc-mitou* or a *rifodé*; that is to say, in the slang of honest folks, — a thief, a beggar, or a vagabond. Are you anything of that sort? Justify yourself; announce your titles."

"Alas!" said Gringoire, "I have not that honor. I am the author—"

"That is sufficient," resumed Trouillefou, without permitting him to finish. "You are going to be hanged. 'Tis a very simple matter, gentlemen and honest bourgeois! as you treat our people in your abode, so we treat you in ours! The law which you apply to vagabonds, vagabonds apply to you. 'Tis your fault if it is harsh. One really must behold the grimace of an honest man above the hempen collar now and then; that renders the thing honorable. Come, friend, divide your rags gayly among these damsels. I am going to have you hanged to amuse the vagabonds, and you are to give them your purse to drink your health. If you have any mummery to go through with, there's a very good God the Father in that mortar yonder, in stone, which we stole from Saint-Pierre aux Boeufs. You have four minutes in which to fling your soul at his head."

The harangue was formidable.

"Well said, upon my soul! Clopin Trouillefou preaches like the Holy Father the Pope!" exclaimed the Emperor of Galilee, smashing his pot in order to prop up his table.

"Messeigneurs, emperors, and kings," said Gringoire coolly (for I know not how, firmness had returned to him, and he spoke with resolution), "don't think of such a thing; my name is Pierre Gringoire. I am the poet whose morality was presented this morning in the grand hall of the Courts."

"Ah! so it was you, master!" said Clopin. "I was there, *xête Dieu*! Well! comrade, is that any reason, because you bored us to death this morning, that you should not be hung this evening?"

"I shall find difficulty in getting out of it," said Gringoire to himself. Nevertheless, he made one more effort: "I don't see why poets are not classed with vagabonds," said he. "Vagabond, Aesopus certainly was; Homerus was a beggar; Mercurius was a thief—"

Clopin interrupted him: "I believe that you are trying to blarney us with your jargon. Zounds! let yourself be hung, and don't kick up such a row over it!"

"Pardon me, monseigneur, the King of Thunes," replied Gringoire, disputing the ground foot by foot. "It is worth trouble — One moment! — Listen to me — You are not going to condemn me without having heard me" —

His unlucky voice was, in fact, drowned in the uproar which rose around him. The little boy scraped away at his cauldron with more spirit than ever; and, to crown all, an old woman had just placed on the tripod a frying-pan of grease, which hissed away on the fire with a noise similar to the cry of a troop of children in pursuit of a masker.

In the meantime, Clopin Trouillefou appeared to hold a momentary conference with the Duke of Egypt, and the Emperor of Galilee, who was completely drunk. Then he shouted shrilly: “Silence!” and, as the cauldron and the frying-pan did not heed him, and continued their duet, he jumped down from his hogshead, gave a kick to the boiler, which rolled ten paces away bearing the child with it, a kick to the frying-pan, which upset in the fire with all its grease, and gravely remounted his throne, without troubling himself about the stifled tears of the child, or the grumbling of the old woman, whose supper was wasting away in a fine white flame.

Trouillefou made a sign, and the duke, the emperor, and the passed masters of pickpockets, and the isolated robbers, came and ranged themselves around him in a horseshoe, of which Gringoire, still roughly held by the body, formed the centre. It was a semicircle of rags, tatters, tinsel, pitchforks, axes, legs staggering with intoxication, huge, bare arms, faces sordid, dull, and stupid. In the midst of this Round Table of beggary, Clopin Trouillefou, — as the doge of this senate, as the king of this peerage, as the pope of this conclave, — dominated; first by virtue of the height of his hogshead, and next by virtue of an indescribable, haughty, fierce, and formidable air, which caused his eyes to flash, and corrected in his savage profile the bestial type of the race of vagabonds. One would have pronounced him a boar amid a herd of swine.

“Listen,” said he to Gringoire, fondling his misshapen chin with his horny hand; “I don’t see why you should not be hung. It is true that it appears to be repugnant to you; and it is very natural, for you bourgeois are not accustomed to it. You form for yourselves a great idea of the thing. After all, we don’t wish you any harm. Here is a means of extricating yourself from your predicament for the moment. Will you become one of us?”

The reader can judge of the effect which this proposition produced upon Gringoire, who beheld life slipping away from him, and who was beginning to lose his hold upon it. He clutched at it again with energy.

“Certainly I will, and right heartily,” said he.

"Do you consent," resumed Clopin, "to enroll yourself among the people of the knife?"

"Of the knife, precisely," responded Gringoire.

"You recognize yourself as a member of the free bourgeoisie?"* added the King of Thunes.

* A high-toned sharper.

"Of the free bourgeoisie."

"Subject of the Kingdom of Argot?"

"Of the Kingdom of Argot*."

* Thieves.

"A vagabond?"

"A vagabond."

"In your soul?"

"In my soul."

"I must call your attention to the fact," continued the king, "that you will be hung all the same."

"The devil!" said the poet.

"Only," continued Clopin imperturbably, "you will be hung later on, with more ceremony, at the expense of the good city of Paris, on a handsome stone gibbet, and by honest men. That is a consolation."

"Just so," responded Gringoire.

"There are other advantages. In your quality of a high-toned sharper, you will not have to pay the taxes on mud, or the poor, or lanterns, to which the bourgeois of Paris are subject."

"So be it," said the poet. "I agree. I am a vagabond, a thief, a sharper, a man of the knife, anything you please; and I am all that already, monsieur, King of Thunes, for I am a philosopher; *et omnia in philosophia, omnes in philosopho continentur,* — all things are contained in philosophy, all men in the philosopher, as you know."

The King of Thunes scowled.

"What do you take me for, my friend? What Hungarian Jew patter are you jabbering at us? I don't know Hebrew. One isn't a Jew because one is a bandit. I don't even steal any longer. I'm above that; I kill. Cut-throat, yes; cutpurse, no."

Gringoire tried to slip in some excuse between these curt words, which wrath rendered more and more jerky.

"I ask your pardon, monseigneur. It is not Hebrew; 'tis Latin."

“I tell you,” resumed Clopin angrily, “that I’m not a Jew, and that I’ll have you hung, belly of the synagogue, like that little shopkeeper of Judea, who is by your side, and whom I entertain strong hopes of seeing nailed to a counter one of these days, like the counterfeit coin that he is!”

So saying, he pointed his finger at the little, bearded Hungarian Jew who had accosted Gringoire with his *facitote caritatem*, and who, understanding no other language beheld with surprise the King of Thunes’s ill-humor overflow upon him.

At length Monsieur Clopin calmed down.

“So you will be a vagabond, you knave?” he said to our poet.

“Of course,” replied the poet.

“Willing is not all,” said the surly Clopin; “good will doesn’t put one onion the more into the soup, and ’tis good for nothing except to go to Paradise with; now, Paradise and the thieves’ band are two different things. In order to be received among the thieves,* you must prove that you are good for something, and for that purpose, you must search the manikin.”

* L’argot.

“I’ll search anything you like,” said Gringoire.

Clopin made a sign. Several thieves detached themselves from the circle, and returned a moment later. They brought two thick posts, terminated at their lower extremities in spreading timber supports, which made them stand readily upon the ground; to the upper extremity of the two posts they fitted a cross-beam, and the whole constituted a very pretty portable gibbet, which Gringoire had the satisfaction of beholding rise before him, in a twinkling. Nothing was lacking, not even the rope, which swung gracefully over the cross-beam.

“What are they going to do?” Gringoire asked himself with some uneasiness. A sound of bells, which he heard at that moment, put an end to his anxiety; it was a stuffed manikin, which the vagabonds were suspending by the neck from the rope, a sort of scarecrow dressed in red, and so hung with mule-bells and larger bells, that one might have tricked out thirty Castilian mules with them. These thousand tiny bells quivered for some time with the vibration of the rope, then gradually died away, and finally became silent when the manikin had been brought into a state of immobility by that law of the pendulum which has dethroned the water clock and the hour-glass. Then Clopin, pointing out to Gringoire a rickety old stool placed beneath the manikin,— “Climb up there.”

“Death of the devil!” objected Gringoire; “I shall break my neck. Your stool limps like one of Martial’s distiches; it has one hexameter leg and one pentameter leg.”

“Climb!” repeated Clopin.

Gringoire mounted the stool, and succeeded, not without some oscillations of head and arms, in regaining his centre of gravity.

“Now,” went on the King of Thunes, “twist your right foot round your left leg, and rise on the tip of your left foot.”

“Monseigneur,” said Gringoire, “so you absolutely insist on my breaking some one of my limbs?”

Clopin tossed his head.

“Hark ye, my friend, you talk too much. Here’s the gist of the matter in two words: you are to rise on tiptoe, as I tell you; in that way you will be able to reach the pocket of the manikin, you will rummage it, you will pull out the purse that is there, — and if you do all this without our hearing the sound of a bell, all is well: you shall be a vagabond. All we shall then have to do, will be to thrash you soundly for the space of a week.”

“*Ventre-Dieu*! I will be careful,” said Gringoire. “And suppose I do make the bells sound?”

“Then you will be hanged. Do you understand?”

“I don’t understand at all,” replied Gringoire.

“Listen, once more. You are to search the manikin, and take away its purse; if a single bell stirs during the operation, you will be hung. Do you understand that?”

“Good,” said Gringoire; “I understand that. And then?”

“If you succeed in removing the purse without our hearing the bells, you are a vagabond, and you will be thrashed for eight consecutive days. You understand now, no doubt?”

“No, monseigneur; I no longer understand. Where is the advantage to me? hanged in one case, cudgelled in the other?”

“And a vagabond,” resumed Clopin, “and a vagabond; is that nothing? It is for your interest that we should beat you, in order to harden you to blows.”

“Many thanks,” replied the poet.

“Come, make haste,” said the king, stamping upon his cask, which resounded like a huge drum! “Search the manikin, and let there be an end to this! I warn you for the last time, that if I hear a single bell, you will take the place of the manikin.”

The band of thieves applauded Clopin’s words, and arranged themselves in a circle round the gibbet, with a laugh so pitiless that Gringoire perceived that he amused them too much not to have everything to fear from them. No hope was left for him, accordingly, unless it were the slight chance of succeeding in the formidable operation which was imposed upon him; he decided to risk it, but it was not without first having addressed a fervent prayer to the manikin he was about to plunder, and who would have been easier to move to pity than the vagabonds. These myriad bells, with their little copper tongues, seemed to him like the mouths of so many asps, open and ready to sting and to hiss.

“Oh!” he said, in a very low voice, “is it possible that my life depends on the slightest vibration of the least of these bells? Oh!” he added, with clasped hands, “bells, do not ring, hand-bells do not clang, mule-bells do not quiver!”

He made one more attempt upon Trouillefou.

“And if there should come a gust of wind?”

“You will be hanged,” replied the other, without hesitation.

Perceiving that no respite, nor reprieve, nor subterfuge was possible, he bravely decided upon his course of action; he wound his right foot round his left leg, raised himself on his left foot, and stretched out his arm: but at the moment when his hand touched the manikin, his body, which was now supported upon one leg only, wavered on the stool which had but three; he made an involuntary effort to support himself by the manikin, lost his balance, and fell heavily to the ground, deafened by the fatal vibration of the thousand bells of the manikin, which, yielding to the impulse imparted by his hand, described first a rotary motion, and then swayed majestically between the two posts.

“Malediction!” he cried as he fell, and remained as though dead, with his face to the earth.

Meanwhile, he heard the dreadful peal above his head, the diabolical laughter of the vagabonds, and the voice of Trouillefou saying, —

“Pick me up that knave, and hang him without ceremony.” He rose. They had already detached the manikin to make room for him.

The thieves made him mount the stool, Clopin came to him, passed the rope about his neck, and, tapping him on the shoulder, —

"Adieu, my friend. You can't escape now, even if you digested with the pope's guts."

The word "Mercy!" died away upon Gringoire's lips. He cast his eyes about him; but there was no hope: all were laughing.

"Bellevigne de l'Etoile," said the King of Thunes to an enormous vagabond, who stepped out from the ranks, "climb upon the cross beam."

Bellevigne de l'Etoile nimbly mounted the transverse beam, and in another minute, Gringoire, on raising his eyes, beheld him, with terror, seated upon the beam above his head.

"Now," resumed Clopin Trouillefou, "as soon as I clap my hands, you, Andry the Red, will fling the stool to the ground with a blow of your knee; you, François Chante-Prune, will cling to the feet of the rascal; and you, Bellevigne, will fling yourself on his shoulders; and all three at once, do you hear?"

Gringoire shuddered.

"Are you ready?" said Clopin Trouillefou to the three thieves, who held themselves in readiness to fall upon Gringoire. A moment of horrible suspense ensued for the poor victim, during which Clopin tranquilly thrust into the fire with the tip of his foot, some bits of vine shoots which the flame had not caught. "Are you ready?" he repeated, and opened his hands to clap. One second more and all would have been over.

But he paused, as though struck by a sudden thought.

"One moment!" said he; "I forgot! It is our custom not to hang a man without inquiring whether there is any woman who wants him. Comrade, this is your last resource. You must wed either a female vagabond or the noose."

This law of the vagabonds, singular as it may strike the reader, remains to-day written out at length, in ancient English legislation. (See *Burington's Observations*.)

Gringoire breathed again. This was the second time that he had returned to life within an hour. So he did not dare to trust to it too implicitly.

"Holà!" cried Clopin, mounted once more upon his cask, "holà! women, females, is there among you, from the sorceress to her cat, a wench who wants this rascal? Holà, Colette la Charonne! Elisabeth Trouvain! Simone Jodouyne! Marie Piédebou! Thonne la Longue! Bérarde Fanouel! Michelle Genaille! Claude Ronge-oreille! Mathurine Girorou! — Holà! Isabeau-la-Thierrye! Come and see! A man for nothing! Who wants him?"

Gringoire, no doubt, was not very appetizing in this miserable condition. The female vagabonds did not seem to be much affected by the proposition. The unhappy wretch heard them answer: “No! no! hang him; there’ll be the more fun for us all!”

Nevertheless, three emerged from the throng and came to smell of him. The first was a big wench, with a square face. She examined the philosopher’s deplorable doublet attentively. His garment was worn, and more full of holes than a stove for roasting chestnuts. The girl made a wry face. “Old rag!” she muttered, and addressing Gringoire, “Let’s see your cloak!” “I have lost it,” replied Gringoire. “Your hat?” “They took it away from me.” “Your shoes?” “They have hardly any soles left.” “Your purse?” “Alas!” stammered Gringoire, “I have not even a sou.” “Let them hang you, then, and say ‘Thank you!’” retorted the vagabond wench, turning her back on him.

The second, — old, black, wrinkled, hideous, with an ugliness conspicuous even in the Cour des Miracles, trotted round Gringoire. He almost trembled lest she should want him. But she mumbled between her teeth, “He’s too thin,” and went off.

The third was a young girl, quite fresh, and not too ugly. “Save me!” said the poor fellow to her, in a low tone. She gazed at him for a moment with an air of pity, then dropped her eyes, made a plait in her petticoat, and remained in indecision. He followed all these movements with his eyes; it was the last gleam of hope. “No,” said the young girl, at length, “no! Guillaume Longuejoue would beat me.” She retreated into the crowd.

“You are unlucky, comrade,” said Clopin.

Then rising to his feet, upon his hogshead. “No one wants him,” he exclaimed, imitating the accent of an auctioneer, to the great delight of all; “no one wants him? once, twice, three times!” and, turning towards the gibbet with a sign of his hand, “Gone!”

Bellevigne de l’Etoile, Andry the Red, François Chante-Prune, stepped up to Gringoire.

At that moment a cry arose among the thieves: “La Esmeralda! La Esmeralda!”

Gringoire shuddered, and turned towards the side whence the clamor proceeded.

The crowd opened, and gave passage to a pure and dazzling form.

It was the gypsy.

“La Esmeralda!” said Gringoire, stupefied in the midst of his emotions, by the abrupt manner in which that magic word knotted together all his reminiscences of the day.

This rare creature seemed, even in the Cour des Miracles, to exercise her sway of charm and beauty. The vagabonds, male and female, ranged themselves gently along her path, and their brutal faces beamed beneath her glance.

She approached the victim with her light step. Her pretty Djali followed her. Gringoire was more dead than alive. She examined him for a moment in silence.

“You are going to hang this man?” she said gravely, to Clopin.

“Yes, sister,” replied the King of Thunes, “unless you will take him for your husband.”

She made her pretty little pout with her under lip. “I’ll take him,” said she.

Gringoire firmly believed that he had been in a dream ever since morning, and that this was the continuation of it.

The change was, in fact, violent, though a gratifying one. They undid the noose, and made the poet step down from the stool. His emotion was so lively that he was obliged to sit down.

The Duke of Egypt brought an earthenware crock, without uttering a word. The gypsy offered it to Gringoire: “Fling it on the ground,” said she.

The crock broke into four pieces.

“Brother,” then said the Duke of Egypt, laying his hands upon their foreheads, “she is your wife; sister, he is your husband for four years. Go.”

CHAPTER VII. A BRIDAL NIGHT.

A few moments later our poet found himself in a tiny arched chamber, very cosy, very warm, seated at a table which appeared to ask nothing better than to make some loans from a larder hanging near by, having a good bed in prospect, and alone with a pretty girl. The adventure smacked of enchantment. He began seriously to take himself for a personage in a fairy tale; he cast his eyes about him from time to time to time, as though to see if the chariot of fire, harnessed to two-winged chimeras, which alone could have so rapidly transported him from Tartarus to Paradise, were still there. At times, also, he fixed his eyes obstinately upon the holes in his doublet, in order to cling to reality, and not lose the ground from under his feet completely. His reason, tossed about in imaginary space, now hung only by this thread.

The young girl did not appear to pay any attention to him; she went and came, displaced a stool, talked to her goat, and indulged in a pout now and then. At last she came and seated herself near the table, and Gringoire was able to scrutinize her at his ease.

You have been a child, reader, and you would, perhaps, be very happy to be one still. It is quite certain that you have not, more than once (and for my part, I have passed whole days, the best employed of my life, at it) followed from thicket to thicket, by the side of running water, on a sunny day, a beautiful green or blue dragon-fly, breaking its flight in abrupt angles, and kissing the tips of all the branches. You recollect with what amorous curiosity your thought and your gaze were riveted upon this little whirlwind, hissing and humming with wings of purple and azure, in the midst of which floated an imperceptible body, veiled by the very rapidity of its movement. The aerial being which was dimly outlined amid this quivering of wings, appeared to you chimerical, imaginary, impossible to touch, impossible to see. But when, at length, the dragon-fly alighted on the tip of a reed, and, holding your breath the while, you were able to examine the long, gauze wings, the long enamel robe, the two globes of crystal, what astonishment you felt, and what fear lest you should again behold the form disappear into a shade, and the creature into a chimera! Recall these impressions, and you will readily appreciate what Gringoire felt on contemplating, beneath her visible and palpable form, that Esmeralda of whom, up to that time, he had only caught a glimpse, amidst a whirlwind of dance, song, and tumult.

Sinking deeper and deeper into his revery: “So this,” he said to himself, following her vaguely with his eyes, “is la Esmeralda! a celestial creature! a street dancer! so much, and so little! ’Twas she who dealt the death-blow to my mystery this morning, ’tis she who saves my life this evening! My evil genius! My good angel! A pretty woman, on my word! and who must needs love me madly to have taken me in that fashion. By the way,” said he, rising suddenly, with that sentiment of the true which formed the foundation of his character and his philosophy, “I don’t know very well how it happens, but I am her husband!”

With this idea in his head and in his eyes, he stepped up to the young girl in a manner so military and so gallant that she drew back.

“What do you want of me?” said she.

“Can you ask me, adorable Esmeralda?” replied Gringoire, with so passionate an accent that he was himself astonished at it on hearing himself speak.

The gypsy opened her great eyes. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“What!” resumed Gringoire, growing warmer and warmer, and supposing that, after all, he had to deal merely with a virtue of the Cour des Miracles; “am I not thine, sweet friend, art thou not mine?”

And, quite ingenuously, he clasped her waist.

The gypsy’s corsage slipped through his hands like the skin of an eel. She bounded from one end of the tiny room to the other, stooped down, and raised herself again, with a little poniard in her hand, before Gringoire had even had time to see whence the poniard came; proud and angry, with swelling lips and inflated nostrils, her cheeks as red as an api apple,* and her eyes darting lightnings. At the same time, the white goat placed itself in front of her, and presented to Gringoire a hostile front, bristling with two pretty horns, gilded and very sharp. All this took place in the twinkling of an eye.

* A small dessert apple, bright red on one side and
greenish-white on the other.

The dragon-fly had turned into a wasp, and asked nothing better than to sting.

Our philosopher was speechless, and turned his astonished eyes from the goat to the young girl. “Holy Virgin!” he said at last, when surprise permitted him to speak, “here are two hearty dames!”

The gypsy broke the silence on her side.

“You must be a very bold knave!”

“Pardon, mademoiselle,” said Gringoire, with a smile. “But why did you take me for your husband?”

“Should I have allowed you to be hanged?”

“So,” said the poet, somewhat disappointed in his amorous hopes. “You had no other idea in marrying me than to save me from the gibbet?”

“And what other idea did you suppose that I had?”

Gringoire bit his lips. “Come,” said he, “I am not yet so triumphant in Cupido, as I thought. But then, what was the good of breaking that poor jug?”

Meanwhile Esmeralda’s dagger and the goat’s horns were still upon the defensive.

“Mademoiselle Esmeralda,” said the poet, “let us come to terms. I am not a clerk of the court, and I shall not go to law with you for thus carrying a dagger in Paris, in the teeth of the ordinances and prohibitions of M. the Provost. Nevertheless, you are not ignorant of the fact that Noel Lescrivain was condemned, a week ago, to pay ten Parisian sous, for having carried a cutlass. But this is no affair of mine, and I will come to the point. I swear to you, upon my share of Paradise, not to approach you without your leave and permission, but do give me some supper.”

The truth is, Gringoire was, like M. Despreaux, “not very voluptuous.” He did not belong to that chevalier and musketeer species, who take young girls by assault. In the matter of love, as in all other affairs, he willingly assented to temporizing and adjusting terms; and a good supper, and an amiable tête-a-tête appeared to him, especially when he was hungry, an excellent interlude between the prologue and the catastrophe of a love adventure.

The gypsy did not reply. She made her disdainful little grimace, drew up her head like a bird, then burst out laughing, and the tiny poniard disappeared as it had come, without Gringoire being able to see where the wasp concealed its sting.

A moment later, there stood upon the table a loaf of rye bread, a slice of bacon, some wrinkled apples and a jug of beer. Gringoire began to eat eagerly. One would have said, to hear the furious clashing of his iron fork and his earthenware plate, that all his love had turned to appetite.

The young girl seated opposite him, watched him in silence, visibly preoccupied with another thought, at which she smiled from time to time, while her soft hand caressed the intelligent head of the goat, gently pressed between her knees.

A candle of yellow wax illuminated this scene of voracity and revery.

Meanwhile, the first cravings of his stomach having been stilled, Gringoire felt some false shame at perceiving that nothing remained but one apple.

“You do not eat, Mademoiselle Esmeralda?”

She replied by a negative sign of the head, and her pensive glance fixed itself upon the vault of the ceiling.

“What the deuce is she thinking of?” thought Gringoire, staring at what she was gazing at; “’tis impossible that it can be that stone dwarf carved in the keystone of that arch, which thus absorbs her attention. What the deuce! I can bear the comparison!”

He raised his voice, “Mademoiselle!”

She seemed not to hear him.

He repeated, still more loudly, “Mademoiselle Esmeralda!”

Trouble wasted. The young girl’s mind was elsewhere, and Gringoire’s voice had not the power to recall it. Fortunately, the goat interfered. She began to pull her mistress gently by the sleeve.

“What dost thou want, Djali?” said the gypsy, hastily, as though suddenly awakened.

“She is hungry,” said Gringoire, charmed to enter into conversation. Esmeralda began to crumble some bread, which Djali ate gracefully from the hollow of her hand.

Moreover, Gringoire did not give her time to resume her revery. He hazarded a delicate question.

“So you don’t want me for your husband?”

The young girl looked at him intently, and said, “No.”

“For your lover?” went on Gringoire.

She pouted, and replied, “No.”

“For your friend?” pursued Gringoire.

She gazed fixedly at him again, and said, after a momentary reflection, “Perhaps.”

This “perhaps,” so dear to philosophers, emboldened Gringoire.

“Do you know what friendship is?” he asked.

“Yes,” replied the gypsy; “it is to be brother and sister; two souls which touch without mingling, two fingers on one hand.”

“And love?” pursued Gringoire.

“Oh! love!” said she, and her voice trembled, and her eye beamed. “That is to be two and to be but one. A man and a woman mingled into one angel. It is heaven.”

The street dancer had a beauty as she spoke thus, that struck Gringoire singularly, and seemed to him in perfect keeping with the almost oriental exaltation of her words. Her pure, red lips half smiled; her serene and candid brow became troubled, at intervals, under her thoughts, like a mirror under the breath; and from beneath her long, drooping, black eyelashes, there escaped a sort of ineffable light, which gave to her profile that ideal serenity which Raphael found at the mystic point of intersection of virginity, maternity, and divinity.

Nevertheless, Gringoire continued, —

“What must one be then, in order to please you?”

“A man.”

“And I—” said he, “what, then, am I?”

“A man has a hemlet on his head, a sword in his hand, and golden spurs on his heels.”

“Good,” said Gringoire, “without a horse, no man. Do you love any one?”

“As a lover?—”

“Yes.”

She remained thoughtful for a moment, then said with a peculiar expression: “That I shall know soon.”

“Why not this evening?” resumed the poet tenderly. “Why not me?”

She cast a grave glance upon him and said, —

“I can never love a man who cannot protect me.”

Gringoire colored, and took the hint. It was evident that the young girl was alluding to the slight assistance which he had rendered her in the critical situation in which she had found herself two hours previously. This memory, effaced by his own adventures of the evening, now recurred to him. He smote his brow.

“By the way, mademoiselle, I ought to have begun there. Pardon my foolish absence of mind. How did you contrive to escape from the claws of Quasimodo?”

This question made the gypsy shudder.

“Oh! the horrible hunchback,” said she, hiding her face in her hands. And she shuddered as though with violent cold.

“Horrible, in truth,” said Gringoire, who clung to his idea; “but how did you manage to escape him?”

La Esmeralda smiled, sighed, and remained silent.

“Do you know why he followed you?” began Gringoire again, seeking to return to his question by a circuitous route.

“I don’t know,” said the young girl, and she added hastily, “but you were following me also, why were you following me?”

“In good faith,” responded Gringoire, “I don’t know either.”

Silence ensued. Gringoire slashed the table with his knife. The young girl smiled and seemed to be gazing through the wall at something. All at once she began to sing in a barely articulate voice, —

Quando las pintadas aves,
Mudas estan, y la tierra — *

* When the gay-plumaged birds grow weary, and the earth —

She broke off abruptly, and began to caress Djali.

“That’s a pretty animal of yours,” said Gringoire.

“She is my sister,” she answered.

“Why are you called ‘la Esmeralda?’” asked the poet.

“I do not know.”

“But why?”

She drew from her bosom a sort of little oblong bag, suspended from her neck by a string of adrézarach beads. This bag exhaled a strong odor of camphor. It was covered with green silk, and bore in its centre a large piece of green glass, in imitation of an emerald.

“Perhaps it is because of this,” said she.

Gringoire was on the point of taking the bag in his hand. She drew back.

“Don’t touch it! It is an amulet. You would injure the charm or the charm would injure you.”

The poet’s curiosity was more and more aroused.

“Who gave it to you?”

She laid one finger on her mouth and concealed the amulet in her bosom. He tried a few more questions, but she hardly replied.

“What is the meaning of the words, ‘la Esmeralda?’”

“I don’t know,” said she.

"To what language do they belong?"

"They are Egyptian, I think."

"I suspected as much," said Gringoire, "you are not a native of France?"

"I don't know."

"Are your parents alive?"

She began to sing, to an ancient air, —

Mon père est oiseau,
Ma mère est oiselle.
Je passe l'eau sans nacelle,
Je passe l'eau sans bateau,
Ma mère est oiselle,
*Mon père est oiseau.**

* My father is a bird, my mother is a bird. I cross the water without a barque, I cross the water without a boat. My mother is a bird, my father is a bird.

"Good," said Gringoire. "At what age did you come to France?"

"When I was very young."

"And when to Paris?"

"Last year. At the moment when we were entering the papal gate I saw a reed warbler flit through the air, that was at the end of August; I said, it will be a hard winter."

"So it was," said Gringoire, delighted at this beginning of a conversation. "I passed it in blowing my fingers. So you have the gift of prophecy?"

She retired into her laconics again.

"Is that man whom you call the Duke of Egypt, the chief of your tribe?"

"Yes."

"But it was he who married us," remarked the poet timidly.

She made her customary pretty grimace.

"I don't even know your name."

"My name? If you want it, here it is, — Pierre Gringoire."

"I know a prettier one," said she.

"Naughty girl!" retorted the poet. "Never mind, you shall not provoke me. Wait, perhaps you will love me more when you know me better; and then, you have told me your story with so much confidence, that I owe you a little of mine. You must know, then, that my name is Pierre Gringoire, and that I am a son of the farmer of the notary's office of Gonesse. My father was hung by the Burgundians, and my mother disembowelled by the

Picards, at the siege of Paris, twenty years ago. At six years of age, therefore, I was an orphan, without a sole to my foot except the pavements of Paris. I do not know how I passed the interval from six to sixteen. A fruit dealer gave me a plum here, a baker flung me a crust there; in the evening I got myself taken up by the watch, who threw me into prison, and there I found a bundle of straw. All this did not prevent my growing up and growing thin, as you see. In the winter I warmed myself in the sun, under the porch of the Hôtel de Sens, and I thought it very ridiculous that the fire on Saint John's Day was reserved for the dog days. At sixteen, I wished to choose a calling. I tried all in succession. I became a soldier; but I was not brave enough. I became a monk; but I was not sufficiently devout; and then I'm a bad hand at drinking. In despair, I became an apprentice of the woodcutters, but I was not strong enough; I had more of an inclination to become a schoolmaster; 'tis true that I did not know how to read, but that's no reason. I perceived at the end of a certain time, that I lacked something in every direction; and seeing that I was good for nothing, of my own free will I became a poet and rhymester. That is a trade which one can always adopt when one is a vagabond, and it's better than stealing, as some young brigands of my acquaintance advised me to do. One day I met by luck, Dom Claude Frollo, the reverend archdeacon of Notre-Dame. He took an interest in me, and it is to him that I to-day owe it that I am a veritable man of letters, who knows Latin from the *de Officiis* of Cicero to the mortuology of the Celestine Fathers, and a barbarian neither in scholastics, nor in politics, nor in rhythmics, that sophism of sophisms. I am the author of the Mystery which was presented to-day with great triumph and a great concourse of populace, in the grand hall of the Palais de Justice. I have also made a book which will contain six hundred pages, on the wonderful comet of 1465, which sent one man mad. I have enjoyed still other successes. Being somewhat of an artillery carpenter, I lent a hand to Jean Mangue's great bombard, which burst, as you know, on the day when it was tested, on the Pont de Charenton, and killed four and twenty curious spectators. You see that I am not a bad match in marriage. I know a great many sorts of very engaging tricks, which I will teach your goat; for example, to mimic the Bishop of Paris, that cursed Pharisee whose mill wheels splash passers-by the whole length of the Pont aux Meuniers. And then my mystery will bring me in a great deal of coined money, if they will only pay me. And finally, I am at your orders, I and my wits, and my science and my letters, ready to live with you, damsel, as it shall please you, chastely or joyously; husband and wife, if you see fit; brother and sister, if you think that better.”

Gringoire ceased, awaiting the effect of his harangue on the young girl. Her eyes were fixed on the ground.

“‘Phoebus,’” she said in a low voice. Then, turning towards the poet, “‘Phoebus’, — what does that mean?”

Gringoire, without exactly understanding what the connection could be between his address and this question, was not sorry to display his erudition. Assuming an air of importance, he replied, —

“It is a Latin word which means ‘sun.’”

“Sun!” she repeated.

“It is the name of a handsome archer, who was a god,” added Gringoire.

“A god!” repeated the gypsy, and there was something pensive and passionate in her tone.

At that moment, one of her bracelets became unfastened and fell. Gringoire stooped quickly to pick it up; when he straightened up, the young girl and the goat had disappeared. He heard the sound of a bolt. It was a little door, communicating, no doubt, with a neighboring cell, which was being fastened on the outside.

“Has she left me a bed, at least?” said our philosopher.

He made the tour of his cell. There was no piece of furniture adapted to sleeping purposes, except a tolerably long wooden coffer; and its cover was carved, to boot; which afforded Gringoire, when he stretched himself out upon it, a sensation somewhat similar to that which Micromégas would feel if he were to lie down on the Alps.

“Come!” said he, adjusting himself as well as possible, “I must resign myself. But here’s a strange nuptial night. ’Tis a pity. There was something innocent and antediluvian about that broken crock, which quite pleased me.”

BOOK THIRD.

CHAPTER I. NOTRE-DAME.

The church of Notre-Dame de Paris is still no doubt, a majestic and sublime edifice. But, beautiful as it has been preserved in growing old, it is difficult not to sigh, not to wax indignant, before the numberless degradations and mutilations which time and men have both caused the venerable monument to suffer, without respect for Charlemagne, who laid its first stone, or for Philip Augustus, who laid the last.

On the face of this aged queen of our cathedrals, by the side of a wrinkle, one always finds a scar. *Tempus edax, homo edacior**; which I should be glad to translate thus: time is blind, man is stupid.

* Time is a devourer; man, more so.

If we had leisure to examine with the reader, one by one, the diverse traces of destruction imprinted upon the old church, time's share would be the least, the share of men the most, especially the men of art, since there have been individuals who assumed the title of architects during the last two centuries.

And, in the first place, to cite only a few leading examples, there certainly are few finer architectural pages than this façade, where, successively and at once, the three portals hollowed out in an arch; the broidered and dentated cordon of the eight and twenty royal niches; the immense central rose window, flanked by its two lateral windows, like a priest by his deacon and subdeacon; the frail and lofty gallery of trefoil arcades, which supports a heavy platform above its fine, slender columns; and lastly, the two black and massive towers with their slate penthouses, harmonious parts of a magnificent whole, superposed in five gigantic stories; — develop themselves before the eye, in a mass and without confusion, with their innumerable details of statuary, carving, and sculpture, joined powerfully to the tranquil grandeur of the whole; a vast symphony in stone, so to speak; the colossal work of one man and one people, all together one and complex, like the Iliads and the Romanceros, whose sister it is; prodigious product of the grouping together of all the forces of an epoch, where, upon each stone, one sees the fancy of the workman disciplined by the genius of the artist start forth in a hundred fashions; a sort of human creation, in a word, powerful and fecund as the divine creation of which it seems to have stolen the double character, — variety, eternity.

And what we here say of the façade must be said of the entire church; and what we say of the cathedral church of Paris, must be said of all the churches of Christendom in the Middle Ages. All things are in place in that art, self-created, logical, and well proportioned. To measure the great toe of the foot is to measure the giant.

Let us return to the façade of Notre-Dame, as it still appears to us, when we go piously to admire the grave and puissant cathedral, which inspires terror, so its chronicles assert: *quoe mole sua terrorem incutit spectantibus*.

Three important things are to-day lacking in that façade: in the first place, the staircase of eleven steps which formerly raised it above the soil; next, the lower series of statues which occupied the niches of the three portals; and lastly the upper series, of the twenty-eight most ancient kings of France, which garnished the gallery of the first story, beginning with Childebert, and ending with Phillip Augustus, holding in his hand "the imperial apple."

Time has caused the staircase to disappear, by raising the soil of the city with a slow and irresistible progress; but, while thus causing the eleven steps which added to the majestic height of the edifice, to be devoured, one by one, by the rising tide of the pavements of Paris, — time has bestowed upon the church perhaps more than it has taken away, for it is time which has spread over the façade that sombre hue of the centuries which makes the old age of monuments the period of their beauty.

But who has thrown down the two rows of statues? who has left the niches empty? who has cut, in the very middle of the central portal, that new and bastard arch? who has dared to frame therein that commonplace and heavy door of carved wood, à la Louis XV., beside the arabesques of Biscornette? The men, the architects, the artists of our day.

And if we enter the interior of the edifice, who has overthrown that colossus of Saint Christopher, proverbial for magnitude among statues, as the grand hall of the Palais de Justice was among halls, as the spire of Strasbourg among spires? And those myriads of statues, which peopled all the spaces between the columns of the nave and the choir, kneeling, standing, equestrian, men, women, children, kings, bishops, gendarmes, in stone, in marble, in gold, in silver, in copper, in wax even, — who has brutally swept them away? It is not time.

And who substituted for the ancient gothic altar, splendidly encumbered with shrines and reliquaries, that heavy marble sarcophagus, with angels' heads and clouds, which seems a specimen pillaged from the Val-de-Grâce or the Invalides? Who stupidly sealed that heavy anachronism of stone in the Carlovingian pavement of Hercandus? Was it not Louis XIV., fulfilling the request of Louis XIII.?

And who put the cold, white panes in the place of those windows, "high in color," which caused the astonished eyes of our fathers to hesitate between the rose of the grand portal and the arches of the apse? And what would a sub-chanter of the sixteenth century say, on beholding the beautiful yellow wash, with which our archiepiscopal vandals have desmeared their cathedral? He would remember that it was the color with which the hangman smeared "accursed" edifices; he would recall the Hôtel du Petit-Bourbon, all smeared thus, on account of the constable's treason. "Yellow, after all, of so good a quality," said Sauval, "and so well recommended, that more than a century has not yet caused it to lose its color." He would think that the sacred place had become infamous, and would flee.

And if we ascend the cathedral, without mentioning a thousand barbarisms of every sort, — what has become of that charming little bell tower, which rested upon the point of intersection of the cross-roofs, and which, no less frail and no less bold than its neighbor (also destroyed), the spire of the Sainte-Chapelle, buried itself in the sky, farther forward than the towers, slender, pointed, sonorous, carved in open work. An architect of good taste amputated it (1787), and considered it sufficient to mask the wound with that large, leaden plaster, which resembles a pot cover.

'Tis thus that the marvellous art of the Middle Ages has been treated in nearly every country, especially in France. One can distinguish on its ruins three sorts of lesions, all three of which cut into it at different depths; first, time, which has insensibly notched its surface here and there, and gnawed it everywhere; next, political and religious revolution, which, blind and wrathful by nature, have flung themselves tumultuously upon it, torn its rich garment of carving and sculpture, burst its rose windows, broken its necklace of arabesques and tiny figures, torn out its statues, sometimes because of their mitres, sometimes because of their crowns; lastly, fashions, even more grotesque and foolish, which, since the anarchical and splendid deviations of the Renaissance, have followed each other in the necessary decadence of architecture. Fashions have wrought more harm than revolutions. They have cut to the quick; they have attacked the very bone and framework of art; they have cut, slashed, disorganized, killed the edifice, in form as in the symbol, in its consistency as well as in its beauty. And then they have made it over; a presumption of which neither time nor revolutions at least have been guilty. They have audaciously adjusted, in the name of “good taste,” upon the wounds of gothic architecture, their miserable gewgaws of a day, their ribbons of marble, their pompons of metal, a veritable leprosy of egg-shaped ornaments, volutes, whorls, draperies, garlands, fringes, stone flames, bronze clouds, pudgy cupids, chubby-cheeked cherubim, which begin to devour the face of art in the oratory of Catherine de Medicis, and cause it to expire, two centuries later, tortured and grimacing, in the boudoir of the Dubarry.

Thus, to sum up the points which we have just indicated, three sorts of ravages to-day disfigure Gothic architecture. Wrinkles and warts on the epidermis; this is the work of time. Deeds of violence, brutalities, contusions, fractures; this is the work of the revolutions from Luther to Mirabeau. Mutilations, amputations, dislocation of the joints, “restorations”; this is the Greek, Roman, and barbarian work of professors according to Vitruvius and Vignole. This magnificent art produced by the Vandals has been slain by the academies. The centuries, the revolutions, which at least devastate with impartiality and grandeur, have been joined by a cloud of school architects, licensed, sworn, and bound by oath; defacing with the discernment and choice of bad taste, substituting the *chicorées* of Louis XV. for the Gothic lace, for the greater glory of the Parthenon. It is the kick of the ass at the dying lion. It is the old oak crowning itself, and which, to heap the measure full, is stung, bitten, and gnawed by caterpillars.

How far it is from the epoch when Robert Cenalis, comparing Notre-Dame de Paris to the famous temple of Diana at Ephesus, *so much lauded by the ancient pagans*, which Erostatus *has* immortalized, found the Gallic temple “more excellent in length, breadth, height, and structure.”*

* *Histoire Gallicane,* liv. II. Periode III. fo. 130, p. 1.

Notre-Dame is not, moreover, what can be called a complete, definite, classified monument. It is no longer a Romanesque church; nor is it a Gothic church. This edifice is not a type. Notre-Dame de Paris has not, like the Abbey of Tournus, the grave and massive frame, the large and round vault, the glacial bareness, the majestic simplicity of the edifices which have the rounded arch for their progenitor. It is not, like the Cathedral of Bourges, the magnificent, light, multiform, tufted, bristling efflorescent product of the pointed arch. Impossible to class it in that ancient family of sombre, mysterious churches, low and crushed as it were by the round arch, almost Egyptian, with the exception of the ceiling; all hieroglyphics, all sacerdotal, all symbolical, more loaded in their ornaments, with lozenges and zigzags, than with flowers, with flowers than with animals, with animals than with men; the work of the architect less than of the bishop; first transformation of art, all impressed with theocratic and military discipline, taking root in the Lower Empire, and stopping with the time of William the Conqueror. Impossible to place our Cathedral in that other family of lofty, aerial churches, rich in painted windows and sculpture; pointed in form, bold in attitude; communal and bourgeois as political symbols; free, capricious, lawless, as a work of art; second transformation of architecture, no longer hieroglyphic, immovable and sacerdotal, but artistic, progressive, and popular, which begins at the return from the crusades, and ends with Louis IX. Notre-Dame de Paris is not of pure Romanesque, like the first; nor of pure Arabian race, like the second.

It is an edifice of the transition period. The Saxon architect completed the erection of the first pillars of the nave, when the pointed arch, which dates from the Crusade, arrived and placed itself as a conqueror upon the large Romanesque capitals which should support only round arches. The pointed arch, mistress since that time, constructed the rest of the church. Nevertheless, timid and inexperienced at the start, it sweeps out, grows larger, restrains itself, and dares no longer dart upwards in spires and lancet windows, as it did later on, in so many marvellous cathedrals. One would say that it were conscious of the vicinity of the heavy Romanesque pillars.

However, these edifices of the transition from the Romanesque to the Gothic, are no less precious for study than the pure types. They express a shade of the art which would be lost without them. It is the graft of the pointed upon the round arch.

Notre-Dame de Paris is, in particular, a curious specimen of this variety. Each face, each stone of the venerable monument, is a page not only of the history of the country, but of the history of science and art as well. Thus, in order to indicate here only the principal details, while the little Red Door almost attains to the limits of the Gothic delicacy of the fifteenth century, the pillars of the nave, by their size and weight, go back to the Carlovingian Abbey of Saint-Germain des Prés. One would suppose that six centuries separated these pillars from that door. There is no one, not even the hermetics, who does not find in the symbols of the grand portal a satisfactory compendium of their science, of which the Church of Saint-Jacques de la Boucherie was so complete a hieroglyph. Thus, the Roman abbey, the philosophers' church, the Gothic art, Saxon art, the heavy, round pillar, which recalls Gregory VII., the hermetic symbolism, with which Nicolas Flamel played the prelude to Luther, papal unity, schism, Saint-Germain des Prés, Saint-Jacques de la Boucherie, — all are mingled, combined, amalgamated in Notre-Dame. This central mother church is, among the ancient churches of Paris, a sort of chimera; it has the head of one, the limbs of another, the haunches of another, something of all.

We repeat it, these hybrid constructions are not the least interesting for the artist, for the antiquarian, for the historian. They make one feel to what a degree architecture is a primitive thing, by demonstrating (what is also demonstrated by the cyclopean vestiges, the pyramids of Egypt, the gigantic Hindoo pagodas) that the greatest products of architecture are less the works of individuals than of society; rather the offspring of a nation's effort, than the inspired flash of a man of genius; the deposit left by a whole people; the heaps accumulated by centuries; the residue of successive evaporations of human society, — in a word, species of formations. Each wave of time contributes its alluvium, each race deposits its layer on the monument, each individual brings his stone. Thus do the beavers, thus do the bees, thus do men. The great symbol of architecture, Babel, is a hive.

Great edifices, like great mountains, are the work of centuries. Art often undergoes a transformation while they are pending, *pendent opera interrupta*; they proceed quietly in accordance with the transformed art. The new art takes the monument where it finds it, incrusts itself there, assimilates it to itself, develops it according to its fancy, and finishes it if it can. The thing is accomplished without trouble, without effort, without reaction, — following a natural and tranquil law. It is a graft which shoots up, a sap which circulates, a vegetation which starts forth anew. Certainly there is matter here for many large volumes, and often the universal history of humanity in the successive engrafting of many arts at many levels, upon the same monument. The man, the artist, the individual, is effaced in these great masses, which lack the name of their author; human intelligence is there summed up and totalized. Time is the architect, the nation is the builder.

Not to consider here anything except the Christian architecture of Europe, that younger sister of the great masonries of the Orient, it appears to the eyes as an immense formation divided into three well-defined zones, which are superposed, the one upon the other: the Romanesque zone*, the Gothic zone, the zone of the Renaissance, which we would gladly call the Greco-Roman zone. The Roman layer, which is the most ancient and deepest, is occupied by the round arch, which reappears, supported by the Greek column, in the modern and upper layer of the Renaissance. The pointed arch is found between the two. The edifices which belong exclusively to any one of these three layers are perfectly distinct, uniform, and complete. There is the Abbey of Jumiéges, there is the Cathedral of Reims, there is the Sainte-Croix of Orleans. But the three zones mingle and amalgamate along the edges, like the colors in the solar spectrum. Hence, complex monuments, edifices of gradation and transition. One is Roman at the base, Gothic in the middle, Greco-Roman at the top. It is because it was six hundred years in building. This variety is rare. The donjon keep of d'Etampes is a specimen of it. But monuments of two formations are more frequent. There is Notre-Dame de Paris, a pointed-arch edifice, which is imbedded by its pillars in that Roman zone, in which are plunged the portal of Saint-Denis, and the nave of Saint-Germain des Prés. There is the charming, half-Gothic chapter-house of Bocherville, where the Roman layer extends half way up. There is the cathedral of Rouen, which would be entirely Gothic if it did not bathe the tip of its central spire in the zone of the Renaissance.**

* This is the same which is called, according to locality, climate, and races, Lombard, Saxon, or Byzantine. There are four sister and parallel architectures, each having its special character, but derived from the same origin, the round arch.

Facies non omnibus una,
No diversa tamen, qualem, etc.

Their faces not all alike, nor yet different, but such as the faces of sisters ought to be.

** This portion of the spire, which was of woodwork, is precisely that which was consumed by lightning, in 1823.

However, all these shades, all these differences, do not affect the surfaces of edifices only. It is art which has changed its skin. The very constitution of the Christian church is not attacked by it. There is always the same internal woodwork, the same logical arrangement of parts. Whatever may be the carved and embroidered envelope of a cathedral, one always finds beneath it — in the state of a germ, and of a rudiment at the least — the Roman basilica. It is eternally developed upon the soil according to the same law. There are, invariably, two naves, which intersect in a cross, and whose upper portion, rounded into an apse, forms the choir; there are always the side aisles, for interior processions, for chapels, — a sort of lateral walks or promenades where the principal nave discharges itself through the spaces between the pillars. That settled, the number of chapels, doors, bell towers, and pinnacles are modified to infinity, according to the fancy of the century, the people, and art. The service of religion once assured and provided for, architecture does what she pleases. Statues, stained glass, rose windows, arabesques, denticulations, capitals, bas-reliefs, — she combines all these imaginings according to the arrangement which best suits her. Hence, the prodigious exterior variety of these edifices, at whose foundation dwells so much order and unity. The trunk of a tree is immovable; the foliage is capricious.

CHAPTER II. A BIRD’S-EYE VIEW OF PARIS.

We have just attempted to restore, for the reader’s benefit, that admirable church of Notre-Dame de Paris. We have briefly pointed out the greater part of the beauties which it possessed in the fifteenth century, and which it lacks to-day; but we have omitted the principal thing, — the view of Paris which was then to be obtained from the summits of its towers.

That was, in fact, — when, after having long groped one’s way up the dark spiral which perpendicularly pierces the thick wall of the belfries, one emerged, at last abruptly, upon one of the lofty platforms inundated with light and air, — that was, in fact, a fine picture which spread out, on all sides at once, before the eye; a spectacle *sui generis*, of which those of our readers who have had the good fortune to see a Gothic city entire, complete, homogeneous, — a few of which still remain, Nuremberg in Bavaria and Vittoria in Spain, — can readily form an idea; or even smaller specimens, provided that they are well preserved, — Vitré in Brittany, Nordhausen in Prussia.

The Paris of three hundred and fifty years ago — the Paris of the fifteenth century — was already a gigantic city. We Parisians generally make a mistake as to the ground which we think that we have gained, since Paris has not increased much over one-third since the time of Louis XI. It has certainly lost more in beauty than it has gained in size.

Paris had its birth, as the reader knows, in that old island of the City which has the form of a cradle. The strand of that island was its first boundary wall, the Seine its first moat. Paris remained for many centuries in its island state, with two bridges, one on the north, the other on the south; and two bridge heads, which were at the same time its gates and its fortresses, — the Grand-Châtelet on the right bank, the Petit-Châtelet on the left. Then, from the date of the kings of the first race, Paris, being too cribbed and confined in its island, and unable to return thither, crossed the water. Then, beyond the Grand, beyond the Petit-Châtelet, a first circle of walls and towers began to infringe upon the country on the two sides of the Seine. Some vestiges of this ancient enclosure still remained in the last century; to-day, only the memory of it is left, and here and there a tradition, the Baudets or Baudoyer gate, “Porte Bagauda”.

Little by little, the tide of houses, always thrust from the heart of the city outwards, overflows, devours, wears away, and effaces this wall. Philip Augustus makes a new dike for it. He imprisons Paris in a circular chain of great towers, both lofty and solid. For the period of more than a century, the houses press upon each other, accumulate, and raise their level in this basin, like water in a reservoir. They begin to deepen; they pile story upon story; they mount upon each other; they gush forth at the top, like all laterally compressed growth, and there is a rivalry as to which shall thrust its head above its neighbors, for the sake of getting a little air. The street glows narrower and deeper, every space is overwhelmed and disappears. The houses finally leap the wall of Philip Augustus, and scatter joyfully over the plain, without order, and all askew, like runaways. There they plant themselves squarely, cut themselves gardens from the fields, and take their ease. Beginning with 1367, the city spreads to such an extent into the suburbs, that a new wall becomes necessary, particularly on the right bank; Charles V. builds it. But a city like Paris is perpetually growing. It is only such cities that become capitals. They are funnels, into which all the geographical, political, moral, and intellectual water-sheds of a country, all the natural slopes of a people, pour; wells of civilization, so to speak, and also sewers, where commerce, industry, intelligence, population, — all that is sap, all that is life, all that is the soul of a nation, filters and amasses unceasingly, drop by drop, century by century.

So Charles V.'s wall suffered the fate of that of Philip Augustus. At the end of the fifteenth century, the Faubourg strides across it, passes beyond it, and runs farther. In the sixteenth, it seems to retreat visibly, and to bury itself deeper and deeper in the old city, so thick had the new city already become outside of it. Thus, beginning with the fifteenth century, where our story finds us, Paris had already outgrown the three concentric circles of walls which, from the time of Julian the Apostate, existed, so to speak, in germ in the Grand-Châtelet and the Petit-Châtelet. The mighty city had cracked, in succession, its four enclosures of walls, like a child grown too large for his garments of last year. Under Louis XI., this sea of houses was seen to be pierced at intervals by several groups of ruined towers, from the ancient wall, like the summits of hills in an inundation, — like archipelagos of the old Paris submerged beneath the new. Since that time Paris has undergone yet another transformation, unfortunately for our eyes; but it has passed only one more wall, that of Louis XV., that miserable wall of mud and spittle, worthy of the king who built it, worthy of the poet who sung it, —

*Le mur murant Paris rend Paris murmurant.**

* The wall walling Paris makes Paris murmur.

In the fifteenth century, Paris was still divided into three wholly distinct and separate towns, each having its own physiognomy, its own specialty, its manners, customs, privileges, and history: the City, the University, the Town. The City, which occupied the island, was the most ancient, the smallest, and the mother of the other two, crowded in between them like (may we be pardoned the comparison) a little old woman between two large and handsome maidens. The University covered the left bank of the Seine, from the Tournelle to the Tour de Nesle, points which correspond in the Paris of to-day, the one to the wine market, the other to the mint. Its wall included a large part of that plain where Julian had built his hot baths. The hill of Sainte-Geneviève was enclosed in it. The culminating point of this sweep of walls was the Papal gate, that is to say, near the present site of the Pantheon. The Town, which was the largest of the three fragments of Paris, held the right bank. Its quay, broken or interrupted in many places, ran along the Seine, from the Tour de Billy to the Tour du Bois; that is to say, from the place where the granary stands to-day, to the present site of the Tuileries. These four points, where the Seine intersected the wall of the capital, the Tournelle and the Tour de Nesle on the right, the Tour de Billy and the Tour du Bois on the left, were called pre-eminently, “the four towers of Paris.” The Town encroached still more extensively upon the fields than the University. The culminating point of the Town wall (that of Charles V.) was at the gates of Saint-Denis and Saint-Martin, whose situation has not been changed.

As we have just said, each of these three great divisions of Paris was a town, but too special a town to be complete, a city which could not get along without the other two. Hence three entirely distinct aspects: churches abounded in the City; palaces, in the Town; and colleges, in the University. Neglecting here the originalities, of secondary importance in old Paris, and the capricious regulations regarding the public highways, we will say, from a general point of view, taking only masses and the whole group, in this chaos of communal jurisdictions, that the island belonged to the bishop, the right bank to the provost of the merchants, the left bank to the Rector; over all ruled the provost of Paris, a royal not a municipal official. The City had

Notre-Dame; the Town, the Louvre and the Hôtel de Ville; the University, the Sorbonne. The Town had the markets (Halles); the city, the Hospital; the University, the Pré-aux-Clercs. Offences committed by the scholars on the left bank were tried in the law courts on the island, and were punished on the right bank at Montfauçon; unless the rector, feeling the university to be strong and the king weak, intervened; for it was the students' privilege to be hanged on their own grounds.

The greater part of these privileges, it may be noted in passing, and there were some even better than the above, had been extorted from the kings by revolts and mutinies. It is the course of things from time immemorial; the king only lets go when the people tear away. There is an old charter which puts the matter naively: apropos of fidelity: *Civibus fidelitas in reges, quoe tamen aliquoties seditionibus interrypta, multa peperit privileyia*.

In the fifteenth century, the Seine bathed five islands within the walls of Paris: Louviers island, where there were then trees, and where there is no longer anything but wood; l'ile aux Vaches, and l'ile Notre-Dame, both deserted, with the exception of one house, both fiefs of the bishop — in the seventeenth century, a single island was formed out of these two, which was built upon and named l'ile Saint-Louis — , lastly the City, and at its point, the little islet of the cow tender, which was afterwards engulfed beneath the platform of the Pont-Neuf. The City then had five bridges: three on the right, the Pont Notre-Dame, and the Pont au Change, of stone, the Pont aux Meuniers, of wood; two on the left, the Petit Pont, of stone, the Pont Saint-Michel, of wood; all loaded with houses.

The University had six gates, built by Philip Augustus; there were, beginning with la Tournelle, the Porte Saint-Victor, the Porte Bordelle, the Porte Papale, the Porte Saint-Jacques, the Porte Saint-Michel, the Porte Saint-Germain. The Town had six gates, built by Charles V.; beginning with the Tour de Billy they were: the Porte Saint-Antoine, the Porte du Temple, the Porte Saint-Martin, the Porte Saint-Denis, the Porte Montmartre, the Porte Saint-Honoré. All these gates were strong, and also handsome, which does not detract from strength. A large, deep moat, with a brisk current during the high water of winter, bathed the base of the wall round Paris; the Seine furnished the water. At night, the gates were shut, the river was barred at both ends of the city with huge iron chains, and Paris slept tranquilly.

From a bird's-eye view, these three burgs, the City, the Town, and the University, each presented to the eye an inextricable skein of eccentrically tangled streets. Nevertheless, at first sight, one recognized the fact that these three fragments formed but one body. One immediately perceived three long parallel streets, unbroken, undisturbed, traversing, almost in a straight line, all three cities, from one end to the other; from North to South, perpendicularly, to the Seine, which bound them together, mingled them, infused them in each other, poured and transfused the people incessantly, from one to the other, and made one out of the three. The first of these streets ran from the Porte Saint-Martin: it was called the Rue Saint-Jacques in the University, Rue de la Juiverie in the City, Rue Saint-Martin in the Town; it crossed the water twice, under the name of the Petit Pont and the Pont Notre-Dame. The second, which was called the Rue de la Harpe on the left bank, Rue de la Barillerié in the island, Rue Saint-Denis on the right bank, Pont Saint-Michel on one arm of the Seine, Pont au Change on the other, ran from the Porte Saint-Michel in the University, to the Porte Saint-Denis in the Town. However, under all these names, there were but two streets, parent streets, generating streets, — the two arteries of Paris. All the other veins of the triple city either derived their supply from them or emptied into them.

Independently of these two principal streets, piercing Paris diametrically in its whole breadth, from side to side, common to the entire capital, the City and the University had also each its own great special street, which ran lengthwise by them, parallel to the Seine, cutting, as it passed, at right angles, the two arterial thoroughfares. Thus, in the Town, one descended in a straight line from the Porte Saint-Antoine to the Porte Saint-Honoré; in the University from the Porte Saint-Victor to the Porte Saint-Germain. These two great thoroughfares intersected by the two first, formed the canvas upon which reposed, knotted and crowded together on every hand, the labyrinthine network of the streets of Paris. In the incomprehensible plan of these streets, one distinguished likewise, on looking attentively, two clusters of great streets, like magnified sheaves of grain, one in the University, the other in the Town, which spread out gradually from the bridges to the gates.

Some traces of this geometrical plan still exist to-day.

Now, what aspect did this whole present, when, as viewed from the summit of the towers of Notre-Dame, in 1482? That we shall try to describe.

For the spectator who arrived, panting, upon that pinnacle, it was first a dazzling confusing view of roofs, chimneys, streets, bridges, places, spires, bell towers. Everything struck your eye at once: the carved gable, the pointed roof, the turrets suspended at the angles of the walls; the stone pyramids of the eleventh century, the slate obelisks of the fifteenth; the round, bare tower of the donjon keep; the square and fretted tower of the church; the great and the little, the massive and the aerial. The eye was, for a long time, wholly lost in this labyrinth, where there was nothing which did not possess its originality, its reason, its genius, its beauty, — nothing which did not proceed from art; beginning with the smallest house, with its painted and carved front, with external beams, elliptical door, with projecting stories, to the royal Louvre, which then had a colonnade of towers. But these are the principal masses which were then to be distinguished when the eye began to accustom itself to this tumult of edifices.

In the first place, the City.— “The island of the City,” as Sauval says, who, in spite of his confused medley, sometimes has such happy turns of expression,— “the island of the city is made like a great ship, stuck in the mud and run aground in the current, near the centre of the Seine.”

We have just explained that, in the fifteenth century, this ship was anchored to the two banks of the river by five bridges. This form of a ship had also struck the heraldic scribes; for it is from that, and not from the siege by the Normans, that the ship which blazons the old shield of Paris, comes, according to Favyn and Pasquier. For him who understands how to decipher them, armorial bearings are algebra, armorial bearings have a tongue. The whole history of the second half of the Middle Ages is written in armorial bearings, — the first half is in the symbolism of the Roman churches. They are the hieroglyphics of feudalism, succeeding those of theocracy.

Thus the City first presented itself to the eye, with its stern to the east, and its prow to the west. Turning towards the prow, one had before one an innumerable flock of ancient roofs, over which arched broadly the lead-covered apse of the Sainte-Chapelle, like an elephant’s haunches loaded with its tower. Only here, this tower was the most audacious, the most open, the most ornamented spire of cabinet-maker’s work that ever let the sky peep through its cone of lace. In front of Notre-Dame, and very near at hand, three streets opened into the cathedral square, — a fine square, lined with ancient houses. Over the south side of this place bent the wrinkled and sullen façade of the Hôtel Dieu, and its roof, which seemed covered with warts and pustules. Then, on the right and the left, to east and west, within that wall of the City, which was yet so contracted, rose the bell towers of its one and twenty churches, of every date, of every form, of every size, from the low and wormeaten belfry of Saint-Denis du Pas (*Carcer Glaueini*) to the slender needles of Saint-Pierre aux Boeufs and Saint-Landry.

Behind Notre-Dame, the cloister and its Gothic galleries spread out towards the north; on the south, the half-Roman palace of the bishop; on the east, the desert point of the Terrain. In this throng of houses the eye also distinguished, by the lofty open-work mitres of stone which then crowned the roof itself, even the most elevated windows of the palace, the Hôtel given by the city, under Charles VI., to Juvénal des Ursins; a little farther on, the pitch-covered sheds of the Palus Market; in still another quarter the new apse of Saint-Germain le Vieux, lengthened in 1458, with a bit of the Rue aux Febves; and then, in places, a square crowded with people; a pillory, erected at the corner of a street; a fine fragment of the pavement of Philip Augustus, a magnificent flagging, grooved for the horses' feet, in the middle of the road, and so badly replaced in the sixteenth century by the miserable cobblestones, called the "pavement of the League;" a deserted back courtyard, with one of those diaphanous staircase turrets, such as were erected in the fifteenth century, one of which is still to be seen in the Rue des Bourdonnais. Lastly, at the right of the Sainte-Chapelle, towards the west, the Palais de Justice rested its group of towers at the edge of the water. The thickets of the king's gardens, which covered the western point of the City, masked the Island du Passeur. As for the water, from the summit of the towers of Notre-Dame one hardly saw it, on either side of the City; the Seine was hidden by bridges, the bridges by houses.

And when the glance passed these bridges, whose roofs were visibly green, rendered mouldy before their time by the vapors from the water, if it was directed to the left, towards the University, the first edifice which struck it was a large, low sheaf of towers, the Petit-Chàtelet, whose yawning gate devoured the end of the Petit-Pont. Then, if your view ran along the bank, from east to west, from the Tournelle to the Tour de Nesle, there was a long cordon of houses, with carved beams, stained-glass windows, each story projecting over that beneath it, an interminable zigzag of bourgeois gables, frequently interrupted by the mouth of a street, and from time to time also by the front or angle of a huge stone mansion, planted at its ease, with courts and gardens, wings and detached buildings, amid this populace of crowded and narrow houses, like a grand gentleman among a throng of rustics. There were five or six of these mansions on the quay, from the house of Lorraine, which shared with the Bernardins the grand enclosure adjoining the Tournelle, to the Hôtel de Nesle, whose principal tower ended Paris, and whose pointed roofs were in a position, during three months of the year, to encroach, with their black triangles, upon the scarlet disk of the setting sun.

This side of the Seine was, however, the least mercantile of the two. Students furnished more of a crowd and more noise there than artisans, and there was not, properly speaking, any quay, except from the Pont Saint-Michel to the Tour de Nesle. The rest of the bank of the Seine was now a naked strand, the same as beyond the Bernardins; again, a throng of houses, standing with their feet in the water, as between the two bridges.

There was a great uproar of laundresses; they screamed, and talked, and sang from morning till night along the beach, and beat a great deal of linen there, just as in our day. This is not the least of the gayeties of Paris.

The University presented a dense mass to the eye. From one end to the other, it was homogeneous and compact. The thousand roofs, dense, angular, clinging to each other, composed, nearly all, of the same geometrical element, offered, when viewed from above, the aspect of a crystallization of the same substance.

The capricious ravine of streets did not cut this block of houses into too disproportionate slices. The forty-two colleges were scattered about in a fairly equal manner, and there were some everywhere. The amusingly varied crests of these beautiful edifices were the product of the same art as the simple roofs which they overshot, and were, actually, only a multiplication of the square or the cube of the same geometrical figure. Hence they complicated the whole effect, without disturbing it; completed, without overloading it. Geometry is harmony. Some fine mansions here and there made magnificent outlines against the picturesque attics of the left bank. The house of Nevers, the house of Rome, the house of Reims, which have disappeared; the Hôtel de Cluny, which still exists, for the consolation of the artist, and whose tower was so stupidly deprived of its crown a few years ago. Close to Cluny, that Roman palace, with fine round arches, were once the hot baths of Julian. There were a great many abbeys, of a beauty more devout, of a grandeur more solemn than the mansions, but not less beautiful, not less grand. Those which first caught the eye were the Bernardins, with their three bell towers; Sainte-Geneviève, whose square tower, which still exists, makes us regret the rest; the Sorbonne, half college, half monastery, of which so admirable a nave survives; the fine quadrilateral cloister of the Mathurins; its neighbor, the cloister of Saint-Benoit, within whose walls they have had time to cobble up a theatre, between the seventh and eighth editions of this book; the Cordeliers, with their three enormous adjacent gables; the Augustins, whose graceful spire formed, after the Tour de Nesle, the second denticulation on this side of Paris, starting from the west. The colleges, which are, in fact, the intermediate ring between the cloister and the world, hold the middle position in the monumental series between the Hôtels and the abbeys, with a severity full of elegance, sculpture less giddy than the palaces, an architecture less severe than the convents. Unfortunately, hardly anything remains of these monuments, where Gothic art combined with so just a balance, richness and economy. The churches (and they were numerous and splendid in the University, and they were graded there also in all the ages of architecture, from the round arches of Saint-Julian to the pointed arches of Saint-Séverin), the churches dominated the whole; and, like one harmony more in this mass of harmonies, they pierced in quick succession the multiple open work of the gables with slashed spires, with open-work bell towers, with slender pinnacles, whose line was also only a magnificent exaggeration of the acute angle of the roofs.

The ground of the University was hilly; Mount Sainte-Geneviève formed an enormous mound to the south; and it was a sight to see from the summit of Notre-Dame how that throng of narrow and tortuous streets (to-day the Latin Quarter), those bunches of houses which, spread out in every direction from the top of this eminence, precipitated themselves in disorder, and almost perpendicularly down its flanks, nearly to the water's edge, having the air, some of falling, others of clambering up again, and all of holding to one another. A continual flux of a thousand black points which passed each other on the pavements made everything move before the eyes; it was the populace seen thus from aloft and afar.

Lastly, in the intervals of these roofs, of these spires, of these accidents of numberless edifices, which bent and writhed, and jagged in so eccentric a manner the extreme line of the University, one caught a glimpse, here and there, of a great expanse of moss-grown wall, a thick, round tower, a crenellated city gate, shadowing forth the fortress; it was the wall of Philip Augustus. Beyond, the fields gleamed green; beyond, fled the roads, along which were scattered a few more suburban houses, which became more infrequent as they became more distant. Some of these faubourgs were important: there were, first, starting from la Tournelle, the Bourg Saint-Victor, with its one arch bridge over the Bièvre, its abbey where one could read the epitaph of Louis le Gros, *epitaphium Ludovici Grossi*, and its church with an octagonal spire, flanked with four little bell towers of the eleventh century (a similar one can be seen at Etampes; it is not yet destroyed); next, the Bourg Saint-Marceau, which already had three churches and one convent; then, leaving the mill of the Gobelins and its four white walls on the left, there was the Faubourg Saint-Jacques with the beautiful carved cross in its square; the church of Saint-Jacques du Haut-Pas, which was then Gothic, pointed, charming; Saint-Magloire, a fine nave of the fourteenth century, which Napoleon turned into a hayloft; Notre-Dame des Champs, where there were Byzantine mosaics; lastly, after having left behind, full in the country, the Monastery des Chartreux, a rich edifice contemporary with the Palais de Justice, with its little garden divided into compartments, and the haunted ruins of Vauvert, the eye fell, to the west, upon the three Roman spires of Saint-Germain des Prés. The Bourg Saint-Germain, already a large community, formed fifteen or twenty streets in the rear; the pointed bell tower of Saint-Sulpice marked one corner of the town. Close beside it one descried the quadrilateral enclosure of the fair of Saint-Germain, where the market is situated to-day; then the abbot’s pillory, a pretty little round tower, well capped with a leaden cone; the brickyard was further on, and the Rue du Four, which led to the common bakehouse, and the mill on its hillock, and the lazar house, a tiny house, isolated and half seen.

But that which attracted the eye most of all, and fixed it for a long time on that point, was the abbey itself. It is certain that this monastery, which had a grand air, both as a church and as a seignory; that abbatial palace, where the bishops of Paris counted themselves happy if they could pass the night; that refectory, upon which the architect had bestowed the air, the beauty, and the rose window of a cathedral; that elegant chapel of the Virgin; that monumental dormitory; those vast gardens; that portcullis; that drawbridge; that envelope of battlements which notched to the eye the verdure of the surrounding meadows; those courtyards, where gleamed men at arms, intermingled with golden copes; — the whole grouped and clustered about three lofty spires, with round arches, well planted upon a Gothic apse, made a magnificent figure against the horizon.

When, at length, after having contemplated the University for a long time, you turned towards the right bank, towards the Town, the character of the spectacle was abruptly altered. The Town, in fact much larger than the University, was also less of a unit. At the first glance, one saw that it was divided into many masses, singularly distinct. First, to the eastward, in that part of the town which still takes its name from the marsh where Camulogènes entangled Caesar, was a pile of palaces. The block extended to the very water's edge. Four almost contiguous Hôtels, Jouy, Sens, Barbeau, the house of the Queen, mirrored their slate peaks, broken with slender turrets, in the Seine.

These four edifices filled the space from the Rue des Nonaindières, to the abbey of the Celestins, whose spire gracefully relieved their line of gables and battlements. A few miserable, greenish hovels, hanging over the water in front of these sumptuous Hôtels, did not prevent one from seeing the fine angles of their façades, their large, square windows with stone mullions, their pointed porches overloaded with statues, the vivid outlines of their walls, always clear cut, and all those charming accidents of architecture, which cause Gothic art to have the air of beginning its combinations afresh with every monument.

Behind these palaces, extended in all directions, now broken, fenced in, battlemented like a citadel, now veiled by great trees like a Carthusian convent, the immense and multiform enclosure of that miraculous Hôtel de Saint-Pol, where the King of France possessed the means of lodging superbly two and twenty princes of the rank of the dauphin and the Duke of Burgundy, with their domestics and their suites, without counting the great lords, and the emperor when he came to view Paris, and the lions, who had their separate Hôtel at the royal Hôtel. Let us say here that a prince's apartment was then composed of never less than eleven large rooms, from the chamber of state to the oratory, not to mention the galleries, baths, vapor-baths, and other "superfluous places," with which each apartment was provided; not to mention the private gardens for each of the king's guests; not to mention the kitchens, the cellars, the domestic offices, the general refectories of the house, the poultry-yards, where there were twenty-two general laboratories, from the bakehouses to the wine-cellars; games of a thousand sorts, malls, tennis, and riding at the ring; aviaries, fishponds, menageries, stables, barns, libraries, arsenals and foundries. This was what a king's palace, a Louvre, a Hôtel de Saint-Pol was then. A city within a city.

From the tower where we are placed, the Hôtel Saint-Pol, almost half hidden by the four great houses of which we have just spoken, was still very considerable and very marvellous to see. One could there distinguish, very well, though cleverly united with the principal building by long galleries, decked with painted glass and slender columns, the three Hôtels which Charles V. had amalgamated with his palace: the Hôtel du Petit-Muce, with the airy balustrade, which formed a graceful border to its roof; the Hôtel of the Abbe de Saint-Maur, having the vanity of a stronghold, a great tower, machicolations, loopholes, iron gratings, and over the large Saxon door, the armorial bearings of the abbé, between the two mortises of the drawbridge; the Hôtel of the Comte d' Etampes, whose donjon keep, ruined at its summit, was rounded and notched like a cock's comb; here and there, three or four ancient oaks, forming a tuft together like enormous cauliflowers; gambols of swans, in the clear water of the fishponds, all in folds of light and shade; many courtyards of which one beheld picturesque bits; the Hôtel of the Lions, with its low, pointed arches on short, Saxon pillars, its iron gratings and its perpetual roar; shooting up above the whole, the scale-ornamented spire of the Ave-Maria; on the left, the house of the Provost of Paris, flanked by four small towers, delicately grooved, in the middle; at the extremity, the Hôtel Saint-Pol, properly speaking, with its multiplied façades, its successive enrichments from the time of Charles V., the hybrid excrescences, with which the fancy of the architects had loaded it during the last two centuries, with all the apses of its chapels, all the gables of its galleries, a thousand weathercocks for the four winds, and its two lofty contiguous towers, whose conical roof, surrounded by battlements at its base, looked like those pointed caps which have their edges turned up.

Continuing to mount the stories of this amphitheatre of palaces spread out afar upon the ground, after crossing a deep ravine hollowed out of the roofs in the Town, which marked the passage of the Rue Saint-Antoine, the eye reached the house of Angoulême, a vast construction of many epochs, where there were perfectly new and very white parts, which melted no better into the whole than a red patch on a blue doublet. Nevertheless, the remarkably pointed and lofty roof of the modern palace, bristling with carved eaves, covered with sheets of lead, where coiled a thousand fantastic arabesques of sparkling incrustations of gilded bronze, that roof, so curiously damascened, darted upwards gracefully from the midst of the brown ruins of the ancient edifice; whose huge and ancient towers, rounded by age like casks, sinking together with old age, and rending themselves from top to bottom, resembled great bellies unbuttoned. Behind rose the forest of spires of the Palais des Tournelles. Not a view in the world, either at Chambord or at the Alhambra, is more magic, more aerial, more enchanting, than that thicket of spires, tiny bell towers, chimneys, weather-vanes, winding staircases, lanterns through which the daylight makes its way, which seem cut out at a blow, pavilions, spindle-shaped turrets, or, as they were then called, “tournelles,” all differing in form, in height, and attitude. One would have pronounced it a gigantic stone chess-board.

To the right of the Tournelles, that truss of enormous towers, black as ink, running into each other and tied, as it were, by a circular moat; that donjon keep, much more pierced with loopholes than with windows; that drawbridge, always raised; that portcullis, always lowered, — is the Bastille. Those sorts of black beaks which project from between the battlements, and which you take from a distance to be cave spouts, are cannons.

Beneath them, at the foot of the formidable edifice, behold the Porte Sainte-Antoine, buried between its two towers.

Beyond the Tournelles, as far as the wall of Charles V., spread out, with rich compartments of verdure and of flowers, a velvet carpet of cultivated land and royal parks, in the midst of which one recognized, by its labyrinth of trees and alleys, the famous Daedalus garden which Louis XI. had given to Coictier. The doctor’s observatory rose above the labyrinth like a great isolated column, with a tiny house for a capital. Terrible astrologies took place in that laboratory.

There to-day is the Place Royale.

As we have just said, the quarter of the palace, of which we have just endeavored to give the reader some idea by indicating only the chief points, filled the angle which Charles V.’s wall made with the Seine on the east. The centre of the Town was occupied by a pile of houses for the populace. It was there, in fact, that the three bridges disgorged upon the right bank, and bridges lead to the building of houses rather than palaces. That congregation of bourgeois habitations, pressed together like the cells in a hive, had a beauty of its own. It is with the roofs of a capital as with the waves of the sea, — they are grand. First the streets, crossed and entangled, forming a hundred amusing figures in the block; around the market-place, it was like a star with a thousand rays.

The Rues Saint-Denis and Saint-Martin, with their innumerable ramifications, rose one after the other, like trees intertwining their branches; and then the tortuous lines, the Rues de la Plâtrerie, de la Verrerie, de la Tixeranderie, etc., meandered over all. There were also fine edifices which pierced the petrified undulations of that sea of gables. At the head of the Pont aux Changeurs, behind which one beheld the Seine foaming beneath the wheels of the Pont aux Meuniers, there was the Chalelet, no longer a Roman tower, as under Julian the Apostate, but a feudal tower of the thirteenth century, and of a stone so hard that the pickaxe could not break away so much as the thickness of the fist in a space of three hours; there was the rich square bell tower of Saint-Jacques de la Boucherie, with its angles all frothing with carvings, already admirable, although it was not finished in the fifteenth century. (It lacked, in particular, the four monsters, which, still perched to-day on the corners of its roof, have the air of so many sphinxes who are propounding to new Paris the riddle of the ancient Paris. Rault, the sculptor, only placed them in position in 1526, and received twenty francs for his pains.) There was the Maison-aux-Piliers, the Pillar House, opening upon that Place de Grève of which we have given the reader some idea; there was Saint-Gervais, which a front “in good taste” has since spoiled; Saint-Méry, whose ancient pointed arches were still almost round arches; Saint-Jean, whose magnificent spire was proverbial; there were twenty other monuments, which did not disdain to bury their wonders in that chaos of black, deep, narrow streets. Add the crosses of carved stone, more lavishly scattered through the squares than even the gibbets; the cemetery of the Innocents, whose architectural wall could be seen in the distance above the roofs; the pillory of the Markets, whose top was visible between two chimneys of the Rue de la Cossonnerie; the ladder of the Croix-du-Trahoir, in its square always black with people; the circular buildings of the wheat mart; the fragments of Philip Augustus’s ancient wall, which could be made out here and there, drowned among the houses, its towers gnawed by ivy, its gates in ruins, with crumbling and deformed stretches of wall; the quay with its thousand shops, and its bloody knacker’s yards; the Seine encumbered with boats, from the Port au Foin to Port-l’Evêque, and you will have a confused picture of what the central trapezium of the Town was like in 1482.

With these two quarters, one of Hôtels, the other of houses, the third feature of aspect presented by the city was a long zone of abbeys, which bordered it in nearly the whole of its circumference, from the rising to the setting sun, and, behind the circle of fortifications which hemmed in Paris, formed a second interior enclosure of convents and chapels. Thus, immediately adjoining the park des Tournelles, between the Rue Saint-Antoine and the Vielle Rue du Temple, there stood Sainte-Catherine, with its immense cultivated lands, which were terminated only by the wall of Paris. Between the old and the new Rue du Temple, there was the Temple, a sinister group of towers, lofty, erect, and isolated in the middle of a vast, battlemented enclosure. Between the Rue Neuve-du-Temple and the Rue Saint-Martin, there was the Abbey of Saint-Martin, in the midst of its gardens, a superb fortified church, whose girdle of towers, whose diadem of bell towers, yielded in force and splendor only to Saint-Germain des Prés. Between the Rue Saint-Martin and the Rue Saint-Denis, spread the enclosure of the Trinité.

Lastly, between the Rue Saint-Denis, and the Rue Montorgueil, stood the Filles-Dieu. On one side, the rotting roofs and unpaved enclosure of the Cour des Miracles could be descried. It was the sole profane ring which was linked to that devout chain of convents.

Finally, the fourth compartment, which stretched itself out in the agglomeration of the roofs on the right bank, and which occupied the western angle of the enclosure, and the banks of the river down stream, was a fresh cluster of palaces and Hôtels pressed close about the base of the Louvre. The old Louvre of Philip Augustus, that immense edifice whose great tower rallied about it three and twenty chief towers, not to reckon the lesser towers, seemed from a distance to be enshrined in the Gothic roofs of the Hôtel d’Alençon, and the Petit-Bourbon. This hydra of towers, giant guardian of Paris, with its four and twenty heads, always erect, with its monstrous haunches, loaded or scaled with slates, and all streaming with metallic reflections, terminated with wonderful effect the configuration of the Town towards the west.

Thus an immense block, which the Romans called *iusula*, or island, of bourgeois houses, flanked on the right and the left by two blocks of palaces, crowned, the one by the Louvre, the other by the Tournelles, bordered on the north by a long girdle of abbeys and cultivated enclosures, all amalgamated and melted together in one view; upon these thousands of edifices, whose tiled and slated roofs outlined upon each other so many fantastic chains, the bell towers, tattooed, fluted, and ornamented with twisted bands, of the four and forty churches on the right bank; myriads of cross streets; for boundary on one side, an enclosure of lofty walls with square towers (that of the University had round towers); on the other, the Seine, cut by bridges, and bearing on its bosom a multitude of boats; behold the Town of Paris in the fifteenth century.

Beyond the walls, several suburban villages pressed close about the gates, but less numerous and more scattered than those of the University. Behind the Bastille there were twenty hovels clustered round the curious sculptures of the Croix-Faubin and the flying buttresses of the Abbey of Saint-Antoine des Champs; then Popincourt, lost amid wheat fields; then la Courtille, a merry village of wine-shops; the hamlet of Saint-Laurent with its church whose bell tower, from afar, seemed to add itself to the pointed towers of the Porte Saint-Martin; the Faubourg Saint-Denis, with the vast enclosure of Saint-Ladre; beyond the Montmartre Gate, the Grange-Batelière, encircled with white walls; behind it, with its chalky slopes, Montmartre, which had then almost as many churches as windmills, and which has kept only the windmills, for society no longer demands anything but bread for the body. Lastly, beyond the Louvre, the Faubourg Saint-Honoré, already considerable at that time, could be seen stretching away into the fields, and Petit-Bretagne gleaming green, and the Marché aux Pourceaux spreading abroad, in whose centre swelled the horrible apparatus used for boiling counterfeiters. Between la Courtille and Saint-Laurent, your eye had already noticed, on the summit of an eminence crouching amid desert plains, a sort of edifice which resembled from a distance a ruined colonnade, mounted upon a basement with its foundation laid bare. This was neither a Parthenon, nor a temple of the Olympian Jupiter. It was Montfauçon.

Now, if the enumeration of so many edifices, summary as we have endeavored to make it, has not shattered in the reader’s mind the general image of old Paris, as we have constructed it, we will recapitulate it in a few words. In the centre, the island of the City, resembling as to form an enormous tortoise, and throwing out its bridges with tiles for scales; like legs from beneath its gray shell of roofs. On the left, the monolithic trapezium, firm, dense, bristling, of the University; on the right, the vast semicircle of the Town, much more intermixed with gardens and monuments. The three blocks, city, university, and town, marbled with innumerable streets. Across all, the Seine, “foster-mother Seine,” as says Father Du Breul, blocked with islands, bridges, and boats. All about an immense plain, patched with a thousand sorts of cultivated plots, sown with fine villages. On the left, Issy, Vanvres, Vaugirarde, Montrouge, Gentilly, with its round tower and its square tower, etc.; on the right, twenty others, from Conflans to Ville-l’Evêque. On the horizon, a border of hills arranged in a circle like the rim of the basin. Finally, far away to the east, Vincennes, and its seven quadrangular towers to the south, Bicêtre and its pointed turrets; to the north, Saint-Denis and its spire; to the west, Saint Cloud and its donjon keep. Such was the Paris which the ravens, who lived in 1482, beheld from the summits of the towers of Notre-Dame.

Nevertheless, Voltaire said of this city, that “before Louis XIV., it possessed but four fine monuments”: the dome of the Sorbonne, the Val-de-Grâce, the modern Louvre, and I know not what the fourth was — the Luxembourg, perhaps. Fortunately, Voltaire was the author of “Candide” in spite of this, and in spite of this, he is, among all the men who have followed each other in the long series of humanity, the one who has best possessed the diabolical laugh. Moreover, this proves that one can be a fine genius, and yet understand nothing of an art to which one does not belong. Did not Moliere imagine that he was doing Raphael and Michael-Angelo a very great honor, by calling them “those Mignards of their age?”

Let us return to Paris and to the fifteenth century.

It was not then merely a handsome city; it was a homogeneous city, an architectural and historical product of the Middle Ages, a chronicle in stone. It was a city formed of two layers only; the Romanesque layer and the Gothic layer; for the Roman layer had disappeared long before, with the exception of the Hot Baths of Julian, where it still pierced through the thick crust of the Middle Ages. As for the Celtic layer, no specimens were any longer to be found, even when sinking wells.

Fifty years later, when the Renaissance began to mingle with this unity which was so severe and yet so varied, the dazzling luxury of its fantasies and systems, its debasements of Roman round arches, Greek columns, and Gothic bases, its sculpture which was so tender and so ideal, its peculiar taste for arabesques and acanthus leaves, its architectural paganism, contemporary with Luther, Paris, was perhaps, still more beautiful, although less harmonious to the eye, and to the thought.

But this splendid moment lasted only for a short time; the Renaissance was not impartial; it did not content itself with building, it wished to destroy; it is true that it required the room. Thus Gothic Paris was complete only for a moment. Saint-Jacques de la Boucherie had barely been completed when the demolition of the old Louvre was begun.

After that, the great city became more disfigured every day. Gothic Paris, beneath which Roman Paris was effaced, was effaced in its turn; but can any one say what Paris has replaced it?

There is the Paris of Catherine de Medicis at the Tuileries;* — the Paris of Henri II., at the Hôtel de Ville, two edifices still in fine taste; — the Paris of Henri IV., at the Place Royale: façades of brick with stone corners, and slated roofs, tri-colored houses; — the Paris of Louis XIII., at the Val-de-Grace: a crushed and squat architecture, with vaults like basket-handles, and something indescribably pot-bellied in the column, and thickset in the dome; — the Paris of Louis XIV., in the Invalides: grand, rich, gilded, cold; — the Paris of Louis XV., in Saint-Sulpice: volutes, knots of ribbon, clouds, vermicelli and chiccory leaves, all in stone; — the Paris of Louis XVI., in the Pantheon: Saint Peter of Rome, badly copied (the edifice is awkwardly heaped together, which has not amended its lines); — the Paris of the Republic, in the School of Medicine: a poor Greek and Roman taste, which resembles the Coliseum or the Parthenon as the constitution of the year III., resembles the laws of Minos, — it is called in architecture, "the Messidor"** taste; — the Paris of Napoleon in the Place Vendome: this one is sublime, a column of bronze made of cannons; — the Paris of the Restoration, at the Bourse: a very white colonnade supporting a very smooth frieze; the whole is square and cost twenty millions.

* We have seen with sorrow mingled with indignation, that it is the intention to increase, to recast, to make over, that is to say, to destroy this admirable palace. The architects of our day have too heavy a hand to touch these delicate works of the Renaissance. We still cherish a hope that they will not dare. Moreover, this demolition of the Tuileries now, would be not only a brutal deed of violence, which would make a drunken vandal blush — it would be an act of treason. The Tuileries is not simply a masterpiece of the art of the sixteenth

century, it is a page of the history of the nineteenth. This palace no longer belongs to the king, but to the people. Let us leave it as it is. Our revolution has twice set its seal upon its front. On one of its two façades, there are the cannon-balls of the 10th of August; on the other, the balls of the 29th of July. It is sacred. Paris, April 1, 1831. (Note to the fifth edition.)

** The tenth month of the French republican calendar, from the 19th of June to the 18th of July.

To each of these characteristic monuments there is attached by a similarity of taste, fashion, and attitude, a certain number of houses scattered about in different quarters and which the eyes of the connoisseur easily distinguishes and furnishes with a date. When one knows how to look, one finds the spirit of a century, and the physiognomy of a king, even in the knocker on a door.

The Paris of the present day has then, no general physiognomy. It is a collection of specimens of many centuries, and the finest have disappeared. The capital grows only in houses, and what houses! At the rate at which Paris is now proceeding, it will renew itself every fifty years.

Thus the historical significance of its architecture is being effaced every day. Monuments are becoming rarer and rarer, and one seems to see them gradually engulfed, by the flood of houses. Our fathers had a Paris of stone; our sons will have one of plaster.

So far as the modern monuments of new Paris are concerned, we would gladly be excused from mentioning them. It is not that we do not admire them as they deserve. The Sainte-Geneviève of M. Soufflot is certainly the finest Savoy cake that has ever been made in stone. The Palace of the Legion of Honor is also a very distinguished bit of pastry. The dome of the wheat market is an English jockey cap, on a grand scale. The towers of Saint-Sulpice are two huge clarinets, and the form is as good as any other; the telegraph, contorted and grimacing, forms an admirable accident upon their roofs. Saint-Roch has a door which, for magnificence, is comparable only to that of Saint-Thomas d’Aquin. It has, also, a crucifixion in high relief, in a cellar, with a sun of gilded wood. These things are fairly marvellous. The lantern of the labyrinth of the Jardin des Plantes is also very ingenious.

As for the Palace of the Bourse, which is Greek as to its colonnade, Roman in the round arches of its doors and windows, of the Renaissance by virtue of its flattened vault, it is indubitably a very correct and very pure monument; the proof is that it is crowned with an attic, such as was never seen in Athens, a beautiful, straight line, gracefully broken here and there by stovepipes. Let us add that if it is according to rule that the architecture of a building should be adapted to its purpose in such a manner that this purpose shall be immediately apparent from the mere aspect of the building, one cannot be too much amazed at a structure which might be indifferently — the palace of a king, a chamber of communes, a town-hall, a college, a riding-school, an academy, a warehouse, a court-house, a museum, a barracks, a sepulchre, a temple, or a theatre. However, it is an Exchange. An edifice ought to be, moreover, suitable to the climate. This one is evidently constructed expressly for our cold and rainy skies. It has a roof almost as flat as roofs in the East, which involves sweeping the roof in winter, when it snows; and of course roofs are made to be swept. As for its purpose, of which we just spoke, it fulfils it to a marvel; it is a bourse in France as it would have been a temple in Greece. It is true that the architect was at a good deal of trouble to conceal the clock face, which would have destroyed the purity of the fine lines of the façade; but, on the other hand, we have that colonnade which circles round the edifice and under which, on days of high religious ceremony, the theories of the stock-brokers and the courtiers of commerce can be developed so majestically.

These are very superb structures. Let us add a quantity of fine, amusing, and varied streets, like the Rue de Rivoli, and I do not despair of Paris presenting to the eye, when viewed from a balloon, that richness of line, that opulence of detail, that diversity of aspect, that grandiose something in the simple, and unexpected in the beautiful, which characterizes a checker-board.

However, admirable as the Paris of to-day may seem to you, reconstruct the Paris of the fifteenth century, call it up before you in thought; look at the sky athwart that surprising forest of spires, towers, and belfries; spread out in the centre of the city, tear away at the point of the islands, fold at the arches of the bridges, the Seine, with its broad green and yellow expanses, more variable than the skin of a serpent; project clearly against an azure horizon the Gothic profile of this ancient Paris. Make its contour float in a winter’s mist which clings to its numerous chimneys; drown it in profound night and watch the odd play of lights and shadows in that sombre labyrinth of edifices; cast upon it a ray of light which shall vaguely outline it and cause to emerge from the fog the great heads of the towers; or take that black silhouette again, enliven with shadow the thousand acute angles of the spires and gables, and make it start out more toothed than a shark's jaw against a copper-colored western sky, — and then compare.

And if you wish to receive of the ancient city an impression with which the modern one can no longer furnish you, climb — on the morning of some grand festival, beneath the rising sun of Easter or of Pentecost — climb upon some elevated point, whence you command the entire capital; and be present at the wakening of the chimes. Behold, at a signal given from heaven, for it is the sun which gives it, all those churches quiver simultaneously. First come scattered strokes, running from one church to another, as when musicians give warning that they are about to begin. Then, all at once, behold! — for it seems at times, as though the ear also possessed a sight of its own, — behold, rising from each bell tower, something like a column of sound, a cloud of harmony. First, the vibration of each bell mounts straight upwards, pure and, so to speak, isolated from the others, into the splendid morning sky; then, little by little, as they swell they melt together, mingle, are lost in each other, and amalgamate in a magnificent concert. It is no longer anything but a mass of sonorous vibrations incessantly sent forth from the numerous belfries; floats, undulates, bounds, whirls over the city, and prolongs far beyond the horizon the deafening circle of its oscillations.

Nevertheless, this sea of harmony is not a chaos; great and profound as it is, it has not lost its transparency; you behold the windings of each group of notes which escapes from the belfries. You can follow the dialogue, by turns grave and shrill, of the treble and the bass; you can see the octaves leap from one tower to another; you watch them spring forth, winged, light, and whistling, from the silver bell, to fall, broken and limping from the bell of wood; you admire in their midst the rich gamut which incessantly ascends and re-ascends the seven bells of Saint-Eustache; you see light and rapid notes running across it, executing three or four luminous zigzags, and vanishing like flashes of lightning. Yonder is the Abbey of Saint-Martin, a shrill, cracked singer; here the gruff and gloomy voice of the Bastille; at the other end, the great tower of the Louvre, with its bass. The royal chime of the palace scatters on all sides, and without relaxation, resplendent trills, upon which fall, at regular intervals, the heavy strokes from the belfry of Notre-Dame, which makes them sparkle like the anvil under the hammer. At intervals you behold the passage of sounds of all forms which come from the triple peal of Saint-Germaine des Prés. Then, again, from time to time, this mass of sublime noises opens and gives passage to the beats of the Ave Maria, which bursts forth and sparkles like an aigrette of stars. Below, in the very depths of the concert, you confusedly distinguish the interior chanting of the churches, which exhales through the vibrating pores of their vaulted roofs.

Assuredly, this is an opera which it is worth the trouble of listening to. Ordinarily, the noise which escapes from Paris by day is the city speaking; by night, it is the city breathing; in this case, it is the city singing. Lend an ear, then, to this concert of bell towers; spread over all the murmur of half a million men, the eternal plaint of the river, the infinite breathings of the wind, the grave and distant quartette of the four forests arranged upon the hills, on the horizon, like immense stacks of organ pipes; extinguish, as in a half shade, all that is too hoarse and too shrill about the central chime, and say whether you know anything in the world more rich and joyful, more golden, more dazzling, than this tumult of bells and chimes; — than this furnace of music, — than these ten thousand brazen voices chanting simultaneously in the flutes of stone, three hundred feet high, — than this city which is no longer anything but an orchestra, — than this symphony which produces the noise of a tempest.

BOOK FOURTH.

CHAPTER I. GOOD SOULS.

Sixteen years previous to the epoch when this story takes place, one fine morning, on Quasimodo Sunday, a living creature had been deposited, after mass, in the church of Notre-Dame, on the wooden bed securely fixed in the vestibule on the left, opposite that great image of Saint Christopher, which the figure of Messire Antoine des Essarts, chevalier, carved in stone, had been gazing at on his knees since 1413, when they took it into their heads to overthrow the saint and the faithful follower. Upon this bed of wood it was customary to expose foundlings for public charity. Whoever cared to take them did so. In front of the wooden bed was a copper basin for alms.

The sort of living being which lay upon that plank on the morning of Quasimodo, in the year of the Lord, 1467, appeared to excite to a high degree, the curiosity of the numerous group which had congregated about the wooden bed. The group was formed for the most part of the fair sex. Hardly any one was there except old women.

In the first row, and among those who were most bent over the bed, four were noticeable, who, from their gray *cagoule*, a sort of cassock, were recognizable as attached to some devout sisterhood. I do not see why history has not transmitted to posterity the names of these four discreet and venerable damsels. They were Agnes la Herme, Jehanne de la Tarme, Henriette la Gaultière, Gauchère la Violette, all four widows, all four dames of the Chapel Etienne Haudry, who had quitted their house with the permission of their mistress, and in conformity with the statutes of Pierre d’Ailly, in order to come and hear the sermon.

However, if these good Haudriettes were, for the moment, complying with the statutes of Pierre d’Ailly, they certainly violated with joy those of Michel de Brache, and the Cardinal of Pisa, which so inhumanly enjoined silence upon them.

“What is this, sister?” said Agnes to Gauchère, gazing at the little creature exposed, which was screaming and writhing on the wooden bed, terrified by so many glances.

“What is to become of us,” said Jehanne, “if that is the way children are made now?”

“I’m not learned in the matter of children,” resumed Agnes, “but it must be a sin to look at this one.”

“’Tis not a child, Agnes.”

“’Tis an abortion of a monkey,” remarked Gauchère.

“’Tis a miracle,” interposed Henriette la Gaultière.

“Then,” remarked Agnes, “it is the third since the Sunday of the *Loetare*: for, in less than a week, we had the miracle of the mocker of pilgrims divinely punished by Notre-Dame d’Aubervilliers, and that was the second miracle within a month.”

“This pretended foundling is a real monster of abomination,” resumed Jehanne.

“He yells loud enough to deafen a chanter,” continued Gauchère. “Hold your tongue, you little howler!”

“To think that Monsieur of Reims sent this enormity to Monsieur of Paris,” added la Gaultière, clasping her hands.

“I imagine,” said Agnes la Herme, “that it is a beast, an animal, — the fruit of — a Jew and a sow; something not Christian, in short, which ought to be thrown into the fire or into the water.”

“I really hope,” resumed la Gaultière, “that nobody will apply for it.”

“Ah, good heavens!” exclaimed Agnes; “those poor nurses yonder in the foundling asylum, which forms the lower end of the lane as you go to the river, just beside Monseigneur the bishop! what if this little monster were to be carried to them to suckle? I’d rather give suck to a vampire.”

“How innocent that poor la Herme is!” resumed Jehanne; “don’t you see, sister, that this little monster is at least four years old, and that he would have less appetite for your breast than for a turnspit.”

The “little monster” we should find it difficult ourselves to describe him otherwise, was, in fact, not a new-born child. It was a very angular and very lively little mass, imprisoned in its linen sack, stamped with the cipher of Messire Guillaume Chartier, then bishop of Paris, with a head projecting. That head was deformed enough; one beheld only a forest of red hair, one eye, a mouth, and teeth. The eye wept, the mouth cried, and the teeth seemed to ask only to be allowed to bite. The whole struggled in the sack, to the great consternation of the crowd, which increased and was renewed incessantly around it.

Dame Aloise de Gondelaurier, a rich and noble woman, who held by the hand a pretty girl about five or six years of age, and dragged a long veil about, suspended to the golden horn of her headdress, halted as she passed the wooden bed, and gazed for a moment at the wretched creature, while her charming little daughter, Fleur-de-Lys de Gondelaurier, spelled out with her tiny, pretty finger, the permanent inscription attached to the wooden bed: “Foundlings.”

“Really,” said the dame, turning away in disgust, “I thought that they only exposed children here.”

She turned her back, throwing into the basin a silver florin, which rang among the liards, and made the poor goodwives of the chapel of Etienne Haudry open their eyes.

A moment later, the grave and learned Robert Mistricolle, the king’s protonotary, passed, with an enormous missal under one arm and his wife on the other (Damoiselle Guillemette la Mairesse), having thus by his side his two regulators, — spiritual and temporal.

“Foundling!” he said, after examining the object; “found, apparently, on the banks of the river Phlegethon.”

“One can only see one eye,” observed Damoiselle Guillemette; “there is a wart on the other.”

“It’s not a wart,” returned Master Robert Mistricolle, “it is an egg which contains another demon exactly similar, who bears another little egg which contains another devil, and so on.”

“How do you know that?” asked Guillemette la Mairesse.

“I know it pertinently,” replied the protonotary.

“Monsieur le protonotare,” asked Gauchère, “what do you prognosticate of this pretended foundling?”

“The greatest misfortunes,” replied Mistricolle.

“Ah! good heavens!” said an old woman among the spectators, “and that besides our having had a considerable pestilence last year, and that they say that the English are going to disembark in a company at Harfleur.”

“Perhaps that will prevent the queen from coming to Paris in the month of September,” interposed another; “trade is so bad already.”

“My opinion is,” exclaimed Jehanne de la Tarme, “that it would be better for the louts of Paris, if this little magician were put to bed on a fagot than on a plank.”

“A fine, flaming fagot,” added the old woman.

“It would be more prudent,” said Mistricolle.

For several minutes, a young priest had been listening to the reasoning of the Haudriettes and the sentences of the notary. He had a severe face, with a large brow, a profound glance. He thrust the crowd silently aside, scrutinized the “little magician,” and stretched out his hand upon him. It was high time, for all the devotees were already licking their chops over the “fine, flaming fagot.”

“I adopt this child,” said the priest.

He took it in his cassock and carried it off. The spectators followed him with frightened glances. A moment later, he had disappeared through the “Red Door,” which then led from the church to the cloister.

When the first surprise was over, Jehanne de la Tarme bent down to the ear of la Gaultière, —

“I told you so, sister, — that young clerk, Monsieur Claude Frollo, is a sorcerer.”

CHAPTER II. CLAUDE FROLLO.

In fact, Claude Frollo was no common person.

He belonged to one of those middle-class families which were called indifferently, in the impertinent language of the last century, the high *bourgeoise* or the petty nobility. This family had inherited from the brothers Paclet the fief of Tirechappe, which was dependent upon the Bishop of Paris, and whose twenty-one houses had been in the thirteenth century the object of so many suits before the official. As possessor of this fief, Claude Frollo was one of the twenty-seven seigneurs keeping claim to a manor in fee in Paris and its suburbs; and for a long time, his name was to be seen inscribed in this quality, between the Hôtel de Tancarville, belonging to Master François Le Rez, and the college of Tours, in the records deposited at Saint Martin des Champs.

Claude Frollo had been destined from infancy, by his parents, to the ecclesiastical profession. He had been taught to read in Latin; he had been trained to keep his eyes on the ground and to speak low. While still a child, his father had cloistered him in the college of Torchi in the University. There it was that he had grown up, on the missal and the lexicon.

Moreover, he was a sad, grave, serious child, who studied ardently, and learned quickly; he never uttered a loud cry in recreation hour, mixed but little in the bacchanals of the Rue du Fouarre, did not know what it was to *dare alapas et capillos laniare,* and had cut no figure in that revolt of 1463, which the annalists register gravely, under the title of “The sixth trouble of the University.” He seldom rallied the poor students of Montaigu on the *cappettes* from which they derived their name, or the bursars of the college of Dormans on their shaved tonsure, and their surtout parti-colored of bluish-green, blue, and violet cloth, *azurini coloris et bruni,* as says the charter of the Cardinal des Quatre-Couronnes.

On the other hand, he was assiduous at the great and the small schools of the Rue Saint Jean de Beauvais. The first pupil whom the Abbé de Saint Pierre de Val, at the moment of beginning his reading on canon law, always perceived, glued to a pillar of the school Saint-Vendregesile, opposite his rostrum, was Claude Frollo, armed with his horn ink-bottle, biting his pen, scribbling on his threadbare knee, and, in winter, blowing on his fingers. The first auditor whom Messire Miles d’Isliers, doctor in decretals, saw arrive every Monday morning, all breathless, at the opening of the gates of the school of the Chef-Saint-Denis, was Claude Frollo. Thus, at sixteen years of age, the young clerk might have held his own, in mystical theology, against a father of the church; in canonical theology, against a father of the councils; in scholastic theology, against a doctor of Sorbonne.

Theology conquered, he had plunged into decretals. From the "Master of Sentences," he had passed to the "Capitularies of Charlemagne;" and he had devoured in succession, in his appetite for science, decretals upon decretals, those of Theodore, Bishop of Hispalus; those of Bouchard, Bishop of Worms; those of Yves, Bishop of Chartres; next the decretal of Gratian, which succeeded the capitularies of Charlemagne; then the collection of Gregory IX.; then the Epistle of *Superspecula*, of Honorius III. He rendered clear and familiar to himself that vast and tumultuous period of civil law and canon law in conflict and at strife with each other, in the chaos of the Middle Ages, — a period which Bishop Theodore opens in 618, and which Pope Gregory closes in 1227.

Decretals digested, he flung himself upon medicine, on the liberal arts. He studied the science of herbs, the science of unguents; he became an expert in fevers and in contusions, in sprains and abcesses. Jacques d' Espars would have received him as a physician; Richard Hellain, as a surgeon. He also passed through all the degrees of licentiate, master, and doctor of arts. He studied the languages, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, a triple sanctuary then very little frequented. His was a veritable fever for acquiring and hoarding, in the matter of science. At the age of eighteen, he had made his way through the four faculties; it seemed to the young man that life had but one sole object: learning.

It was towards this epoch, that the excessive heat of the summer of 1466 caused that grand outburst of the plague which carried off more than forty thousand souls in the vicomty of Paris, and among others, as Jean de Troyes states, "Master Arnoul, astrologer to the king, who was a very fine man, both wise and pleasant." The rumor spread in the University that the Rue Tirechappe was especially devastated by the malady. It was there that Claude's parents resided, in the midst of their fief. The young scholar rushed in great alarm to the paternal mansion. When he entered it, he found that both father and mother had died on the preceding day. A very young brother of his, who was in swaddling clothes, was still alive and crying abandoned in his cradle. This was all that remained to Claude of his family;

the young man took the child under his arm and went off in a pensive mood. Up to that moment, he had lived only in science; he now began to live in life.

This catastrophe was a crisis in Claude's existence. Orphaned, the eldest, head of the family at the age of nineteen, he felt himself rudely recalled from the reveries of school to the realities of this world. Then, moved with pity, he was seized with passion and devotion towards that child, his brother; a sweet and strange thing was a human affection to him, who had hitherto loved his books alone.

This affection developed to a singular point; in a soul so new, it was like a first love. Separated since infancy from his parents, whom he had hardly known; cloistered and immured, as it were, in his books; eager above all things to study and to learn; exclusively attentive up to that time, to his intelligence which broadened in science, to his imagination, which expanded in letters, — the poor scholar had not yet had time to feel the place of his heart.

This young brother, without mother or father, this little child which had fallen abruptly from heaven into his arms, made a new man of him. He perceived that there was something else in the world besides the speculations of the Sorbonne, and the verses of Homer; that man needed affections; that life without tenderness and without love was only a set of dry, shrieking, and rending wheels. Only, he imagined, for he was at the age when illusions are as yet replaced only by illusions, that the affections of blood and family were the sole ones necessary, and that a little brother to love sufficed to fill an entire existence.

He threw himself, therefore, into the love for his little Jehan with the passion of a character already profound, ardent, concentrated; that poor frail creature, pretty, fair-haired, rosy, and curly, — that orphan with another orphan for his only support, touched him to the bottom of his heart; and grave thinker as he was, he set to meditating upon Jehan with an infinite compassion. He kept watch and ward over him as over something very fragile, and very worthy of care. He was more than a brother to the child; he became a mother to him.

Little Jehan had lost his mother while he was still at the breast; Claude gave him to a nurse. Besides the fief of Tirechappe, he had inherited from his father the fief of Moulin, which was a dependency of the square tower of Gentilly; it was a mill on a hill, near the château of Winchestre (Bicêtre).

There was a miller's wife there who was nursing a fine child; it was not far from the university, and Claude carried the little Jehan to her in his own arms.

From that time forth, feeling that he had a burden to bear, he took life very seriously. The thought of his little brother became not only his recreation, but the object of his studies. He resolved to consecrate himself entirely to a future for which he was responsible in the sight of God, and never to have any other wife, any other child than the happiness and fortune of his brother. Therefore, he attached himself more closely than ever to the clerical profession. His merits, his learning, his quality of immediate vassal of the Bishop of Paris, threw the doors of the church wide open to him. At the age of twenty, by special dispensation of the Holy See, he was a priest, and served as the youngest of the chaplains of Notre-Dame the altar which is called, because of the late mass which is said there, *altare pigrorum*.

There, plunged more deeply than ever in his dear books, which he quitted only to run for an hour to the fief of Moulin, this mixture of learning and austerity, so rare at his age, had promptly acquired for him the respect and admiration of the monastery. From the cloister, his reputation as a learned man had passed to the people, among whom it had changed a little, a frequent occurrence at that time, into reputation as a sorcerer.

It was at the moment when he was returning, on Quasimodo day, from saying his mass at the Altar of the Lazy, which was by the side of the door leading to the nave on the right, near the image of the Virgin, that his attention had been attracted by the group of old women chattering around the bed for foundlings.

Then it was that he approached the unhappy little creature, which was so hated and so menaced. That distress, that deformity, that abandonment, the thought of his young brother, the idea which suddenly occurred to him, that if he were to die, his dear little Jehan might also be flung miserably on the plank for foundlings, — all this had gone to his heart simultaneously; a great pity had moved in him, and he had carried off the child.

When he removed the child from the sack, he found it greatly deformed, in very sooth. The poor little wretch had a wart on his left eye, his head placed directly on his shoulders, his spinal column was crooked, his breast bone prominent, and his legs bowed; but he appeared to be lively; and although it was impossible to say in what language he lisped, his cry indicated considerable force and health. Claude's compassion increased at the sight of this ugliness; and he made a vow in his heart to rear the child for the love of his brother, in order that, whatever might be the future faults of the little Jehan, he should have beside him that charity done for his sake. It was a sort of investment of good works, which he was effecting in the name of his young brother; it was a stock of good works which he wished to amass in advance for him, in case the little rogue should some day find himself short of that coin, the only sort which is received at the toll-bar of paradise.

He baptized his adopted child, and gave him the name of Quasimodo, either because he desired thereby to mark the day, when he had found him, or because he wished to designate by that name to what a degree the poor little creature was incomplete, and hardly sketched out. In fact, Quasimodo, blind, hunchbacked, knock-kneed, was only an “almost.”

CHAPTER III. *IMMANIS PECORIS CUSTOS, IMMANIOR IPSE*.

Now, in 1482, Quasimodo had grown up. He had become a few years previously the bellringer of Notre-Dame, thanks to his father by adoption, Claude Frollo, — who had become archdeacon of Josas, thanks to his suzerain, Messire Louis de Beaumont, — who had become Bishop of Paris, at the death of Guillaume Chartier in 1472, thanks to his patron, Olivier Le Daim, barber to Louis XI., king by the grace of God.

So Quasimodo was the ringer of the chimes of Notre-Dame.

In the course of time there had been formed a certain peculiarly intimate bond which united the ringer to the church. Separated forever from the world, by the double fatality of his unknown birth and his natural deformity, imprisoned from his infancy in that impassable double circle, the poor wretch had grown used to seeing nothing in this world beyond the religious walls which had received him under their shadow. Notre-Dame had been to him successively, as he grew up and developed, the egg, the nest, the house, the country, the universe.

There was certainly a sort of mysterious and pre-existing harmony between this creature and this church. When, still a little fellow, he had dragged himself tortuously and by jerks beneath the shadows of its vaults, he seemed, with his human face and his bestial limbs, the natural reptile of that humid and sombre pavement, upon which the shadow of the Romanesque capitals cast so many strange forms.

Later on, the first time that he caught hold, mechanically, of the ropes to the towers, and hung suspended from them, and set the bell to clanging, it produced upon his adopted father, Claude, the effect of a child whose tongue is unloosed and who begins to speak.

It is thus that, little by little, developing always in sympathy with the cathedral, living there, sleeping there, hardly ever leaving it, subject every hour to the mysterious impress, he came to resemble it, he incrusted himself in it, so to speak, and became an integral part of it. His salient angles fitted into the retreating angles of the cathedral (if we may be allowed this figure of speech), and he seemed not only its inhabitant but more than that, its natural tenant. One might almost say that he had assumed its form, as the snail takes on the form of its shell. It was his dwelling, his hole, his envelope. There existed between him and the old church so profound an instinctive sympathy, so many magnetic affinities, so many material affinities, that he adhered to it somewhat as a tortoise adheres to its shell. The rough and wrinkled cathedral was his shell.

It is useless to warn the reader not to take literally all the similes which we are obliged to employ here to express the singular, symmetrical, direct, almost consubstantial union of a man and an edifice. It is equally unnecessary to state to what a degree that whole cathedral was familiar to him, after so long and so intimate a cohabitation. That dwelling was peculiar to him. It had no depths to which Quasimodo had not penetrated, no height which he had not scaled. He often climbed many stones up the front, aided solely by the uneven points of the carving. The towers, on whose exterior surface he was frequently seen clambering, like a lizard gliding along a perpendicular wall, those two gigantic twins, so lofty, so menacing, so formidable, possessed for him neither vertigo, nor terror, nor shocks of amazement.

To see them so gentle under his hand, so easy to scale, one would have said that he had tamed them. By dint of leaping, climbing, gambolling amid the abysses of the gigantic cathedral he had become, in some sort, a monkey and a goat, like the Calabrian child who swims before he walks, and plays with the sea while still a babe.

Moreover, it was not his body alone which seemed fashioned after the Cathedral, but his mind also. In what condition was that mind? What bent had it contracted, what form had it assumed beneath that knotted envelope, in that savage life? This it would be hard to determine. Quasimodo had been born one-eyed, hunchbacked, lame. It was with great difficulty, and by dint of great patience that Claude Frollo had succeeded in teaching him to talk. But a fatality was attached to the poor foundling. Bellringer of Notre-Dame at the age of fourteen, a new infirmity had come to complete his misfortunes: the bells had broken the drums of his ears; he had become deaf. The only gate which nature had left wide open for him had been abruptly closed, and forever.

In closing, it had cut off the only ray of joy and of light which still made its way into the soul of Quasimodo. His soul fell into profound night. The wretched being’s misery became as incurable and as complete as his deformity. Let us add that his deafness rendered him to some extent dumb.

For, in order not to make others laugh, the very moment that he found himself to be deaf, he resolved upon a silence which he only broke when he was alone. He voluntarily tied that tongue which Claude Frollo had taken so much pains to unloose. Hence, it came about, that when necessity constrained him to speak, his tongue was torpid, awkward, and like a door whose hinges have grown rusty.

If now we were to try to penetrate to the soul of Quasimodo through that thick, hard rind; if we could sound the depths of that badly constructed organism; if it were granted to us to look with a torch behind those non-transparent organs to explore the shadowy interior of that opaque creature, to elucidate his obscure corners, his absurd no-thoroughfares, and suddenly to cast a vivid light upon the soul enchained at the extremity of that cave, we should, no doubt, find the unhappy Psyche in some poor, cramped, and ricketty attitude, like those prisoners beneath the Leads of Venice, who grew old bent double in a stone box which was both too low and too short for them.

It is certain that the mind becomes atrophied in a defective body. Quasimodo was barely conscious of a soul cast in his own image, moving blindly within him. The impressions of objects underwent a considerable refraction before reaching his mind. His brain was a peculiar medium; the ideas which passed through it issued forth completely distorted. The reflection which resulted from this refraction was, necessarily, divergent and perverted.

Hence a thousand optical illusions, a thousand aberrations of judgment, a thousand deviations, in which his thought strayed, now mad, now idiotic.

The first effect of this fatal organization was to trouble the glance which he cast upon things. He received hardly any immediate perception of them. The external world seemed much farther away to him than it does to us.

The second effect of his misfortune was to render him malicious.

He was malicious, in fact, because he was savage; he was savage because he was ugly. There was logic in his nature, as there is in ours.

His strength, so extraordinarily developed, was a cause of still greater malevolence: “*Malus puer robustus*,” says Hobbes.

This justice must, however be rendered to him. Malevolence was not, perhaps, innate in him. From his very first steps among men, he had felt himself, later on he had seen himself, spewed out, blasted, rejected. Human words were, for him, always a raillery or a malediction. As he grew up, he had found nothing but hatred around him. He had caught the general malevolence. He had picked up the weapon with which he had been wounded.

After all, he turned his face towards men only with reluctance; his cathedral was sufficient for him. It was peopled with marble figures, — kings, saints, bishops, — who at least did not burst out laughing in his face, and who gazed upon him only with tranquillity and kindliness. The other statues, those of the monsters and demons, cherished no hatred for him, Quasimodo. He resembled them too much for that. They seemed rather, to be scoffing at other men. The saints were his friends, and blessed him; the monsters were his friends and guarded him. So he held long communion with them. He sometimes passed whole hours crouching before one of these statues, in solitary conversation with it. If any one came, he fled like a lover surprised in his serenade.

And the cathedral was not only society for him, but the universe, and all nature beside. He dreamed of no other hedgerows than the painted windows, always in flower; no other shade than that of the foliage of stone which spread out, loaded with birds, in the tufts of the Saxon capitals; of no other mountains than the colossal towers of the church; of no other ocean than Paris, roaring at their bases.

What he loved above all else in the maternal edifice, that which aroused his soul, and made it open its poor wings, which it kept so miserably folded in its cavern, that which sometimes rendered him even happy, was the bells. He loved them, fondled them, talked to them, understood them. From the chime in the spire, over the intersection of the aisles and nave, to the great bell of the front, he cherished a tenderness for them all. The central spire and the two towers were to him as three great cages, whose birds, reared by himself, sang for him alone. Yet it was these very bells which had made him deaf; but mothers often love best that child which has caused them the most suffering.

It is true that their voice was the only one which he could still hear. On this score, the big bell was his beloved. It was she whom he preferred out of all that family of noisy girls which bustled above him, on festival days. This bell was named Marie. She was alone in the southern tower, with her sister Jacqueline, a bell of lesser size, shut up in a smaller cage beside hers. This Jacqueline was so called from the name of the wife of Jean Montagu, who had given it to the church, which had not prevented his going and figuring without his head at Montfauçon. In the second tower there were six other bells, and, finally, six smaller ones inhabited the belfry over the crossing, with the wooden bell, which rang only between after dinner on Good Friday and the morning of the day before Easter. So Quasimodo had fifteen bells in his seraglio; but big Marie was his favorite.

No idea can be formed of his delight on days when the grand peal was sounded. At the moment when the archdeacon dismissed him, and said, “Go!” he mounted the spiral staircase of the clock tower faster than any one else could have descended it. He entered perfectly breathless into the aerial chamber of the great bell; he gazed at her a moment, devoutly and lovingly; then he gently addressed her and patted her with his hand, like a good horse, which is about to set out on a long journey. He pitied her for the trouble that she was about to suffer. After these first caresses, he shouted to his assistants, placed in the lower story of the tower, to begin. They grasped the ropes, the wheel creaked, the enormous capsule of metal started slowly into motion. Quasimodo followed it with his glance and trembled. The first shock of the clapper and the brazen wall made the framework upon which it was mounted quiver. Quasimodo vibrated with the bell.

“Vah!” he cried, with a senseless burst of laughter. However, the movement of the bass was accelerated, and, in proportion as it described a wider angle, Quasimodo’s eye opened also more and more widely, phosphoric and flaming. At length the grand peal began; the whole tower trembled; woodwork, leads, cut stones, all groaned at once, from the piles of the foundation to the trefoils of its summit. Then Quasimodo boiled and frothed; he went and came; he trembled from head to foot with the tower. The bell, furious, running riot, presented to the two walls of the tower alternately its brazen throat, whence escaped that tempestuous breath, which is audible leagues away. Quasimodo stationed himself in front of this open throat; he crouched and rose with the oscillations of the bell, breathed in this overwhelming breath, gazed by turns at the deep place, which swarmed with people, two hundred feet below him, and at that enormous, brazen tongue which came, second after second, to howl in his ear.

It was the only speech which he understood, the only sound which broke for him the universal silence. He swelled out in it as a bird does in the sun. All of a sudden, the frenzy of the bell seized upon him; his look became extraordinary; he lay in wait for the great bell as it passed, as a spider lies in wait for a fly, and flung himself abruptly upon it, with might and main.

Then, suspended above the abyss, borne to and fro by the formidable swinging of the bell, he seized the brazen monster by the ear-laps, pressed it between both knees, spurred it on with his heels, and redoubled the fury of the peal with the whole shock and weight of his body. Meanwhile, the tower trembled; he shrieked and gnashed his teeth, his red hair rose erect, his breast heaving like a bellows, his eye flashed flames, the monstrous bell neighed, panting, beneath him; and then it was no longer the great bell of Notre-Dame nor Quasimodo: it was a dream, a whirlwind, a tempest, dizziness mounted astride of noise; a spirit clinging to a flying crupper, a strange centaur, half man, half bell; a sort of horrible Astolphus, borne away upon a prodigious hippogriff of living bronze.

The presence of this extraordinary being caused, as it were, a breath of life to circulate throughout the entire cathedral. It seemed as though there escaped from him, at least according to the growing superstitions of the crowd, a mysterious emanation which animated all the stones of Notre-Dame, and made the deep bowels of the ancient church to palpitate. It sufficed for people to know that he was there, to make them believe that they beheld the thousand statues of the galleries and the fronts in motion. And the cathedral did indeed seem a docile and obedient creature beneath his hand; it waited on his will to raise its great voice; it was possessed and filled with Quasimodo, as with a familiar spirit. One would have said that he made the immense edifice breathe. He was everywhere about it; in fact, he multiplied himself on all points of the structure. Now one perceived with affright at the very top of one of the towers, a fantastic dwarf climbing, writhing, crawling on all fours, descending outside above the abyss, leaping from projection to projection, and going to ransack the belly of some sculptured gorgon; it was Quasimodo dislodging the crows. Again, in some obscure corner of the church one came in contact with a sort of living chimera, crouching and scowling; it was Quasimodo engaged in thought. Sometimes one caught sight, upon a bell tower, of an enormous head and a bundle of disordered limbs swinging furiously at the end of a rope; it was Quasimodo ringing vespers or the Angelus. Often at night a hideous form was seen wandering along the frail balustrade of carved lacework, which crowns the towers and borders the circumference of the apse; again it was the hunchback of Notre-Dame. Then, said the women of the neighborhood, the whole church took on something fantastic, supernatural, horrible; eyes and mouths were opened, here and there; one heard the dogs, the monsters, and the gargoyles of stone, which keep watch night and day, with outstretched neck and open jaws, around the monstrous cathedral, barking. And, if it was a Christmas Eve, while the great bell, which seemed to emit the death rattle, summoned the faithful to the midnight mass, such an air was spread over the sombre façade that one would have declared that the grand portal was devouring the throng, and that the rose window was watching it. And all this came from Quasimodo. Egypt would have taken him for the god of this temple; the Middle Ages believed him to be its demon: he was in fact its soul.

To such an extent was this disease that for those who know that Quasimodo has existed, Notre-Dame is to-day deserted, inanimate, dead. One feels that something has disappeared from it. That immense body is empty; it is a skeleton; the spirit has quitted it, one sees its place and that is all. It is like a skull which still has holes for the eyes, but no longer sight.

CHAPTER IV. THE DOG AND HIS MASTER.

Nevertheless, there was one human creature whom Quasimodo excepted from his malice and from his hatred for others, and whom he loved even more, perhaps, than his cathedral: this was Claude Frollo.

The matter was simple; Claude Frollo had taken him in, had adopted him, had nourished him, had reared him. When a little lad, it was between Claude Frollo's legs that he was accustomed to seek refuge, when the dogs and the children barked after him. Claude Frollo had taught him to talk, to read, to write. Claude Frollo had finally made him the bellringer. Now, to give the big bell in marriage to Quasimodo was to give Juliet to Romeo.

Hence Quasimodo's gratitude was profound, passionate, boundless; and although the visage of his adopted father was often clouded or severe, although his speech was habitually curt, harsh, imperious, that gratitude never wavered for a single moment. The archdeacon had in Quasimodo the most submissive slave, the most docile lackey, the most vigilant of dogs. When the poor bellringer became deaf, there had been established between him and Claude Frollo, a language of signs, mysterious and understood by themselves alone. In this manner the archdeacon was the sole human being with whom Quasimodo had preserved communication. He was in sympathy with but two things in this world: Notre-Dame and Claude Frollo.

There is nothing which can be compared with the empire of the archdeacon over the bellringer; with the attachment of the bellringer for the archdeacon. A sign from Claude and the idea of giving him pleasure would have sufficed to make Quasimodo hurl himself headlong from the summit of Notre-Dame. It was a remarkable thing — all that physical strength which had reached in Quasimodo such an extraordinary development, and which was placed by him blindly at the disposition of another. There was in it, no doubt, filial devotion, domestic attachment; there was also the fascination of one spirit by another spirit. It was a poor, awkward, and clumsy organization, which stood with lowered head and supplicating eyes before a lofty and profound, a powerful and superior intellect. Lastly, and above all, it was gratitude. Gratitude so pushed to its extremest limit, that we do not know to what to compare it. This virtue is not one of those of which the finest examples are to be met with among men. We will say then, that Quasimodo loved the archdeacon as never a dog, never a horse, never an elephant loved his master.

CHAPTER V. MORE ABOUT CLAUDE FROLLO.

In 1482, Quasimodo was about twenty years of age; Claude Frollo, about thirty-six. One had grown up, the other had grown old.

Claude Frollo was no longer the simple scholar of the college of Torch, the tender protector of a little child, the young and dreamy philosopher who knew many things and was ignorant of many. He was a priest, austere, grave, morose; one charged with souls; monsieur the archdeacon of Josas, the bishop's second acolyte, having charge of the two deaneries of Montlhéry, and Châteaufort, and one hundred and seventy-four country curacies. He was an imposing and sombre personage, before whom the choir boys in alb and in jacket trembled, as well as the machicots*, and the brothers of Saint-Augustine and the matutinal clerks of Notre-Dame, when he passed slowly beneath the lofty arches of the choir, majestic, thoughtful, with arms folded and his head so bent upon his breast that all one saw of his face was his large, bald brow.

* An official of Notre-Dame, lower than a beneficed clergyman, higher than simple paid chanters.

Dom Claude Frollo had, however, abandoned neither science nor the education of his young brother, those two occupations of his life. But as time went on, some bitterness had been mingled with these things which were so sweet. In the long run, says Paul Diacre, the best lard turns rancid. Little Jehan Frollo, surnamed (*du Moulin*) “of the Mill” because of the place where he had been reared, had not grown up in the direction which Claude would have liked to impose upon him. The big brother counted upon a pious, docile, learned, and honorable pupil. But the little brother, like those young trees which deceive the gardener's hopes and turn obstinately to the quarter whence they receive sun and air, the little brother did not grow and did not multiply, but only put forth fine bushy and luxuriant branches on the side of laziness, ignorance, and debauchery. He was a regular devil, and a very disorderly one, who made Dom Claude scowl; but very droll and very subtle, which made the big brother smile.

Claude had confided him to that same college of Torchi where he had passed his early years in study and meditation; and it was a grief to him that this sanctuary, formerly edified by the name of Frollo, should to-day be scandalized by it. He sometimes preached Jehan very long and severe sermons, which the latter intrepidly endured. After all, the young scapegrace had a good heart, as can be seen in all comedies. But the sermon over, he none the less tranquilly resumed his course of seditions and enormities. Now it was a *bejaune* or yellow beak (as they called the new arrivals at the university), whom he had been mauling by way of welcome; a precious tradition which has been carefully preserved to our own day. Again, he had set in movement a band of scholars, who had flung themselves upon a wine-shop in classic fashion, quasi *classico excitati*, had then beaten the tavern-keeper "with offensive cudgels," and joyously pillaged the tavern, even to smashing in the hogsheads of wine in the cellar. And then it was a fine report in Latin, which the sub-monitor of Torchi carried piteously to Dom Claude with this dolorous marginal comment, — *Rixa; prima causa vinum optimum potatum*. Finally, it was said, a thing quite horrible in a boy of sixteen, that his debauchery often extended as far as the Rue de Glatigny.

Claude, saddened and discouraged in his human affections, by all this, had flung himself eagerly into the arms of learning, that sister which, at least does not laugh in your face, and which always pays you, though in money that is sometimes a little hollow, for the attention which you have paid to her. Hence, he became more and more learned, and, at the same time, as a natural consequence, more and more rigid as a priest, more and more sad as a man. There are for each of us several parallelisms between our intelligence, our habits, and our character, which develop without a break, and break only in the great disturbances of life.

As Claude Frollo had passed through nearly the entire circle of human learning — positive, exterior, and permissible — since his youth, he was obliged, unless he came to a halt, *ubi defuit orbis*, to proceed further and seek other aliments for the insatiable activity of his intelligence. The antique symbol of the serpent biting its tail is, above all, applicable to science. It would appear that Claude Frollo had experienced this. Many grave persons affirm that, after having exhausted the *fas* of human learning, he had dared to penetrate into the *nefas*. He had, they said, tasted in succession all the apples of the tree of knowledge, and, whether from hunger or disgust, had ended by tasting the forbidden fruit. He had taken his place by turns, as the reader has seen, in the conferences of the theologians in Sorbonne, — in the assemblies of the doctors of art, after the manner of Saint-Hilaire, — in the disputes of the decretalists, after the manner of Saint-Martin, — in the congregations of physicians at the holy water font of Notre-Dame, *ad cupam Nostroe-Dominoe*. All the dishes permitted and approved, which those four great kitchens called the four faculties could elaborate and serve to the understanding, he had devoured, and had been satiated with them before his hunger was appeased. Then he had penetrated further, lower, beneath all that finished, material, limited knowledge; he had, perhaps, risked his soul, and had seated himself in the cavern at that mysterious table of the alchemists, of the astrologers, of the hermetics, of which Averroès, Gillaume de Paris, and Nicolas Flamel hold the end in the Middle Ages; and which extends in the East, by the light of the seven-branched candlestick, to Solomon, Pythagoras, and Zoroaster.

That is, at least, what was supposed, whether rightly or not. It is certain that the archdeacon often visited the cemetery of the Saints-Innocents, where, it is true, his father and mother had been buried, with other victims of the plague of 1466; but that he appeared far less devout before the cross of their grave than before the strange figures with which the tomb of Nicolas Flamel and Claude Pernelle, erected just beside it, was loaded.

It is certain that he had frequently been seen to pass along the Rue des Lombards, and furtively enter a little house which formed the corner of the Rue des Ecrivans and the Rue Marivault. It was the house which Nicolas Flamel had built, where he had died about 1417, and which, constantly deserted since that time, had already begun to fall in ruins, — so greatly had the hermetics and the alchemists of all countries wasted away the walls, merely by carving their names upon them. Some neighbors even affirm that they had once seen, through an air-hole, Archdeacon Claude excavating, turning over, digging up the earth in the two cellars, whose supports had been daubed with numberless couplets and hieroglyphics by Nicolas Flamel himself. It was supposed that Flamel had buried the philosopher’s stone in the cellar; and the alchemists, for the space of two centuries, from Magistri to Father Pacifique, never ceased to worry the soil until the house, so cruelly ransacked and turned over, ended by falling into dust beneath their feet.

Again, it is certain that the archdeacon had been seized with a singular passion for the symbolical door of Notre-Dame, that page of a conjuring book written in stone, by Bishop Guillaume de Paris, who has, no doubt, been damned for having affixed so infernal a frontispiece to the sacred poem chanted by the rest of the edifice. Archdeacon Claude had the credit also of having fathomed the mystery of the colossus of Saint Christopher, and of that lofty, enigmatical statue which then stood at the entrance of the vestibule, and which the people, in derision, called “Monsieur Legris.” But, what every one might have noticed was the interminable hours which he often employed, seated upon the parapet of the area in front of the church, in contemplating the sculptures of the front; examining now the foolish virgins with their lamps reversed, now the wise virgins with their lamps upright; again, calculating the angle of vision of that raven which belongs to the left front, and which is looking at a mysterious point inside the church, where is concealed the philosopher’s stone, if it be not in the cellar of Nicolas Flamel.

It was, let us remark in passing, a singular fate for the Church of Notre-Dame at that epoch to be so beloved, in two different degrees, and with so much devotion, by two beings so dissimilar as Claude and Quasimodo. Beloved by one, a sort of instinctive and savage half-man, for its beauty, for its stature, for the harmonies which emanated from its magnificent ensemble; beloved by the other, a learned and passionate imagination, for its myth, for the sense which it contains, for the symbolism scattered beneath the sculptures of its front, — like the first text underneath the second in a palimpsest, — in a word, for the enigma which it is eternally propounding to the understanding.

Furthermore, it is certain that the archdeacon had established himself in that one of the two towers which looks upon the Grève, just beside the frame for the bells, a very secret little cell, into which no one, not even the bishop, entered without his leave, it was said. This tiny cell had formerly been made almost at the summit of the tower, among the ravens’ nests, by Bishop Hugo de Besançon* who had wrought sorcery there in his day. What that cell contained, no one knew; but from the strand of the Terrain, at night, there was often seen to appear, disappear, and reappear at brief and regular intervals, at a little dormer window opening upon the back of the tower, a certain red, intermittent, singular light which seemed to follow the panting breaths of a bellows, and to proceed from a flame, rather than from a light. In the darkness, at that height, it produced a singular effect; and the goodwives said: “There’s the archdeacon blowing! hell is sparkling up yonder!”

* Hugo II. de Bisuncio, 1326-1332.

There were no great proofs of sorcery in that, after all, but there was still enough smoke to warrant a surmise of fire, and the archdeacon bore a tolerably formidable reputation. We ought to mention however, that the sciences of Egypt, that necromancy and magic, even the whitest, even the most innocent, had no more envenomed enemy, no more pitiless denunciator before the gentlemen of the officialty of Notre-Dame. Whether this was sincere horror, or the game played by the thief who shouts, “stop thief!” at all events, it did not prevent the archdeacon from being considered by the learned heads of the chapter, as a soul who had ventured into the vestibule of hell, who was lost in the caves of the cabal, groping amid the shadows of the occult sciences. Neither were the people deceived thereby; with any one who possessed any sagacity, Quasimodo passed for the demon; Claude Frollo, for the sorcerer. It was evident that the bellringer was to serve the archdeacon for a given time, at the end of which he would carry away the latter’s soul, by way of payment. Thus the archdeacon, in spite of the excessive austerity of his life, was in bad odor among all pious souls; and there was no devout nose so inexperienced that it could not smell him out to be a magician.

And if, as he grew older, abysses had formed in his science, they had also formed in his heart. That at least, is what one had grounds for believing on scrutinizing that face upon which the soul was only seen to shine through a sombre cloud. Whence that large, bald brow? that head forever bent? that breast always heaving with sighs? What secret thought caused his mouth to smile with so much bitterness, at the same moment that his scowling brows approached each other like two bulls on the point of fighting? Why was what hair he had left already gray? What was that internal fire which sometimes broke forth in his glance, to such a degree that his eye resembled a hole pierced in the wall of a furnace?

These symptoms of a violent moral preoccupation, had acquired an especially high degree of intensity at the epoch when this story takes place. More than once a choir-boy had fled in terror at finding him alone in the church, so strange and dazzling was his look. More than once, in the choir, at the hour of the offices, his neighbor in the stalls had heard him mingle with the plain song, *ad omnem tonum*, unintelligible parentheses. More than once the laundress of the Terrain charged “with washing the chapter” had observed, not without affright, the marks of nails and clenched fingers on the surplice of monsieur the archdeacon of Josas.

However, he redoubled his severity, and had never been more exemplary. By profession as well as by character, he had always held himself aloof from women; he seemed to hate them more than ever. The mere rustling of a silken petticoat caused his hood to fall over his eyes. Upon this score he was so jealous of austerity and reserve, that when the Dame de Beaujeu, the king’s daughter, came to visit the cloister of Notre-Dame, in the month of December, 1481, he gravely opposed her entrance, reminding the bishop of the statute of the Black Book, dating from the vigil of Saint-Barthélemy, 1334, which interdicts access to the cloister to “any woman whatever, old or young, mistress or maid.” Upon which the bishop had been constrained to recite to him the ordinance of Legate Odo, which excepts certain great dames, *aliquoe magnates mulieres, quoe sine scandalo vitari non possunt*. And again the archdeacon had protested, objecting that the ordinance of the legate, which dated back to 1207, was anterior by a hundred and twenty-seven years to the Black Book, and consequently was abrogated in fact by it. And he had refused to appear before the princess.

It was also noticed that his horror for Bohemian women and gypsies had seemed to redouble for some time past. He had petitioned the bishop for an edict which expressly forbade the Bohemian women to come and dance and beat their tambourines on the place of the Parvis; and for about the same length of time, he had been ransacking the mouldy placards of the officialty, in order to collect the cases of sorcerers and witches condemned to fire or the rope, for complicity in crimes with rams, sows, or goats.

CHAPTER VI. UNPOPULARITY.

The archdeacon and the bellringer, as we have already said, were but little loved by the populace great and small, in the vicinity of the cathedral. When Claude and Quasimodo went out together, which frequently happened, and when they were seen traversing in company, the valet behind the master, the cold, narrow, and gloomy streets of the block of Notre-Dame, more than one evil word, more than one ironical quaver, more than one insulting jest greeted them on their way, unless Claude Frollo, which was rarely the case, walked with head upright and raised, showing his severe and almost august brow to the dumbfounded jeerers.

Both were in their quarter like "the poets" of whom Régnier speaks, —

"All sorts of persons run after poets,
As warblers fly shrieking after owls."

Sometimes a mischievous child risked his skin and bones for the ineffable pleasure of driving a pin into Quasimodo's hump. Again, a young girl, more bold and saucy than was fitting, brushed the priest's black robe, singing in his face the sardonic ditty, "niche, niche, the devil is caught." Sometimes a group of squalid old crones, squatting in a file under the shadow of the steps to a porch, scolded noisily as the archdeacon and the bellringer passed, and tossed them this encouraging welcome, with a curse: "Hum! there's a fellow whose soul is made like the other one's body!" Or a band of schoolboys and street urchins, playing hop-scotch, rose in a body and saluted him classically, with some cry in Latin: "*Eia! eia! Claudius cum claudo*!"

But the insult generally passed unnoticed both by the priest and the bellringer. Quasimodo was too deaf to hear all these gracious things, and Claude was too dreamy.

BOOK FIFTH.

CHAPTER I. *ABBAS BEATI MARTINI*.

Dom Claude’s fame had spread far and wide. It procured for him, at about the epoch when he refused to see Madame de Beaujeu, a visit which he long remembered.

It was in the evening. He had just retired, after the office, to his canon’s cell in the cloister of Notre-Dame. This cell, with the exception, possibly, of some glass phials, relegated to a corner, and filled with a decidedly equivocal powder, which strongly resembled the alchemist’s “powder of projection,” presented nothing strange or mysterious. There were, indeed, here and there, some inscriptions on the walls, but they were pure sentences of learning and piety, extracted from good authors. The archdeacon had just seated himself, by the light of a three-jetted copper lamp, before a vast coffer crammed with manuscripts. He had rested his elbow upon the open volume of *Honorius d’Autun*, *De predestinatione et libero arbitrio,* and he was turning over, in deep meditation, the leaves of a printed folio which he had just brought, the sole product of the press which his cell contained. In the midst of his revery there came a knock at his door. “Who’s there?” cried the learned man, in the gracious tone of a famished dog, disturbed over his bone.

A voice without replied, “Your friend, Jacques Coictier.” He went to open the door.

It was, in fact, the king’s physician; a person about fifty years of age, whose harsh physiognomy was modified only by a crafty eye. Another man accompanied him. Both wore long slate-colored robes, furred with minever, girded and closed, with caps of the same stuff and hue. Their hands were concealed by their sleeves, their feet by their robes, their eyes by their caps.

“God help me, messieurs!” said the archdeacon, showing them in; “I was not expecting distinguished visitors at such an hour.” And while speaking in this courteous fashion he cast an uneasy and scrutinizing glance from the physician to his companion.

“’Tis never too late to come and pay a visit to so considerable a learned man as Dom Claude Frollo de Tirechappe,” replied Doctor Coictier, whose Franche-Comté accent made all his phrases drag along with the majesty of a train-robe.

There then ensued between the physician and the archdeacon one of those congratulatory prologues which, in accordance with custom, at that epoch preceded all conversations between learned men, and which did not prevent them from detesting each other in the most cordial manner in the world. However, it is the same nowadays; every wise man's mouth complimenting another wise man is a vase of honeyed gall.

Claude Frollo's felicitations to Jacques Coictier bore reference principally to the temporal advantages which the worthy physician had found means to extract, in the course of his much envied career, from each malady of the king, an operation of alchemy much better and more certain than the pursuit of the philosopher's stone.

"In truth, Monsieur le Docteur Coictier, I felt great joy on learning of the bishopric given your nephew, my reverend seigneur Pierre Verse. Is he not Bishop of Amiens?"

"Yes, monsieur Archdeacon; it is a grace and mercy of God."

"Do you know that you made a great figure on Christmas Day at the bead of your company of the chamber of accounts, Monsieur President?"

"Vice-President, Dom Claude. Alas! nothing more."

"How is your superb house in the Rue Saint-André des Arcs coming on? 'Tis a Louvre. I love greatly the apricot tree which is carved on the door, with this play of words: 'A L'ABRI-COTIER — Sheltered from reefs.'"

"Alas! Master Claude, all that masonry costeth me dear. In proportion as the house is erected, I am ruined."

"Ho! have you not your revenues from the jail, and the bailiwick of the Palais, and the rents of all the houses, sheds, stalls, and booths of the enclosure? 'Tis a fine breast to suck."

"My castellany of Poissy has brought me in nothing this year."

"But your tolls of Triel, of Saint-James, of Saint-Germainen-Laye are always good."

"Six score livres, and not even Parisian livres at that."

"You have your office of counsellor to the king. That is fixed."

"Yes, brother Claude; but that accursed seigneury of Poligny, which people make so much noise about, is worth not sixty gold crowns, year out and year in."

In the compliments which Dom Claude addressed to Jacques Coictier, there was that sardonical, biting, and covertly mocking accent, and the sad cruel smile of a superior and unhappy man who toys for a moment, by way of distraction, with the dense prosperity of a vulgar man. The other did not perceive it.

"Upon my soul," said Claude at length, pressing his hand, "I am glad to see you and in such good health."

"Thanks, Master Claude."

"By the way," exclaimed Dom Claude, "how is your royal patient?"

"He payeth not sufficiently his physician," replied the doctor, casting a side glance at his companion.

"Think you so, Gossip Coictier," said the latter.

These words, uttered in a tone of surprise and reproach, drew upon this unknown personage the attention of the archdeacon which, to tell the truth, had not been diverted from him a single moment since the stranger had set foot across the threshold of his cell. It had even required all the thousand reasons which he had for handling tenderly Doctor Jacques Coictier, the all-powerful physician of King Louis XI., to induce him to receive the latter thus accompanied. Hence, there was nothing very cordial in his manner when Jacques Coictier said to him, —

"By the way, Dom Claude, I bring you a colleague who has desired to see you on account of your reputation."

"Monsieur belongs to science?" asked the archdeacon, fixing his piercing eye upon Coictier's companion. He found beneath the brows of the stranger a glance no less piercing or less distrustful than his own.

He was, so far as the feeble light of the lamp permitted one to judge, an old man about sixty years of age and of medium stature, who appeared somewhat sickly and broken in health. His profile, although of a very ordinary outline, had something powerful and severe about it; his eyes sparkled beneath a very deep superciliary arch, like a light in the depths of a cave; and beneath his cap which was well drawn down and fell upon his nose, one recognized the broad expanse of a brow of genius.

He took it upon himself to reply to the archdeacon's question, —

"Reverend master," he said in a grave tone, "your renown has reached my ears, and I wish to consult you. I am but a poor provincial gentleman, who removeth his shoes before entering the dwellings of the learned. You must know my name. I am called Gossip Tourangeau."

"Strange name for a gentleman," said the archdeacon to himself.

Nevertheless, he had a feeling that he was in the presence of a strong and earnest character. The instinct of his own lofty intellect made him recognize an intellect no less lofty under Gossip Tourangeau's furred cap, and as he gazed at the solemn face, the ironical smile which Jacques Coictier's presence called forth on his gloomy face, gradually disappeared as twilight fades on the horizon of night. Stern and silent, he had resumed his seat in his great armchair; his elbow rested as usual, on the table, and his brow on his hand. After a few moments of reflection, he motioned his visitors to be seated, and, turning to Gossip Tourangeau he said, —

"You come to consult me, master, and upon what science?"

"Your reverence," replied Tourangeau, "I am ill, very ill. You are said to be great AEsculapius, and I am come to ask your advice in medicine."

"Medicine!" said the archdeacon, tossing his head. He seemed to meditate for a moment, and then resumed: "Gossip Tourangeau, since that is your name, turn your head, you will find my reply already written on the wall."

Gossip Tourangeau obeyed, and read this inscription engraved above his head: "Medicine is the daughter of dreams. — JAMBLIQUE."

Meanwhile, Doctor Jacques Coictier had heard his companion's question with a displeasure which Dom Claude's response had but redoubled. He bent down to the ear of Gossip Tourangeau, and said to him, softly enough not to be heard by the archdeacon: "I warned you that he was mad. You insisted on seeing him."

"'Tis very possible that he is right, madman as he is, Doctor Jacques," replied his comrade in the same low tone, and with a bitter smile.

"As you please," replied Coictier dryly. Then, addressing the archdeacon: "You are clever at your trade, Dom Claude, and you are no more at a loss over Hippocrates than a monkey is over a nut. Medicine a dream! I suspect that the pharmacopolists and the master physicians would insist upon stoning you if they were here. So you deny the influence of philtres upon the blood, and unguents on the skin! You deny that eternal pharmacy of flowers and metals, which is called the world, made expressly for that eternal invalid called man!"

"I deny," said Dom Claude coldly, "neither pharmacy nor the invalid. I reject the physician."

"Then it is not true," resumed Coictier hotly, "that gout is an internal eruption; that a wound caused by artillery is to be cured by the application of a young mouse roasted; that young blood, properly injected, restores youth to aged veins; it is not true that two and two make four, and that emprostathonos follows opistathonos.”

The archdeacon replied without perturbation: “There are certain things of which I think in a certain fashion.”

Coictier became crimson with anger.

“There, there, my good Coictier, let us not get angry,” said Gossip Tourangeau. “Monsieur the archdeacon is our friend.”

Coictier calmed down, muttering in a low tone, —

“After all, he’s mad.”

“*Pasque-dieu*, Master Claude,” resumed Gossip Tourangeau, after a silence, “You embarrass me greatly. I had two things to consult you upon, one touching my health and the other touching my star.”

“Monsieur,” returned the archdeacon, “if that be your motive, you would have done as well not to put yourself out of breath climbing my staircase. I do not believe in Medicine. I do not believe in Astrology.”

“Indeed!” said the man, with surprise.

Coictier gave a forced laugh.

“You see that he is mad,” he said, in a low tone, to Gossip Tourangeau. “He does not believe in astrology.”

“The idea of imagining,” pursued Dom Claude, “that every ray of a star is a thread which is fastened to the head of a man!”

“And what then, do you believe in?” exclaimed Gossip Tourangeau.

The archdeacon hesitated for a moment, then he allowed a gloomy smile to escape, which seemed to give the lie to his response: “*Credo in Deum*.”

“*Dominum nostrum*,” added Gossip Tourangeau, making the sign of the cross.

“Amen,” said Coictier.

“Reverend master,” resumed Tourangeau, “I am charmed in soul to see you in such a religious frame of mind. But have you reached the point, great savant as you are, of no longer believing in science?”

“No,” said the archdeacon, grasping the arm of Gossip Tourangeau, and a ray of enthusiasm lighted up his gloomy eyes, “no, I do not reject science. I have not crawled so long, flat on my belly, with my nails in the earth, through the innumerable ramifications of its caverns, without perceiving far in front of me, at the end of the obscure gallery, a light, a flame, a something, the reflection, no doubt, of the dazzling central laboratory where the patient and the wise have found out God.”

“And in short,” interrupted Tourangeau, “what do you hold to be true and certain?”

“Alchemy.”

Coictier exclaimed, “Pardieu, Dom Claude, alchemy has its use, no doubt, but why blaspheme medicine and astrology?”

“Naught is your science of man, naught is your science of the stars,” said the archdeacon, commandingly.

“That’s driving Epidaurus and Chaldea very fast,” replied the physician with a grin.

“Listen, Messire Jacques. This is said in good faith. I am not the king’s physician, and his majesty has not given me the Garden of Daedalus in which to observe the constellations. Don’t get angry, but listen to me. What truth have you deduced, I will not say from medicine, which is too foolish a thing, but from astrology? Cite to me the virtues of the vertical boustrophedon, the treasures of the number ziruph and those of the number zephirod!”

“Will you deny,” said Coictier, “the sympathetic force of the collar bone, and the cabalistics which are derived from it?”

“An error, Messire Jacques! None of your formulas end in reality. Alchemy on the other hand has its discoveries. Will you contest results like this? Ice confined beneath the earth for a thousand years is transformed into rock crystals. Lead is the ancestor of all metals. For gold is not a metal, gold is light. Lead requires only four periods of two hundred years each, to pass in succession from the state of lead, to the state of red arsenic, from red arsenic to tin, from tin to silver. Are not these facts? But to believe in the collar bone, in the full line and in the stars, is as ridiculous as to believe with the inhabitants of Grand-Cathay that the golden oriole turns into a mole, and that grains of wheat turn into fish of the carp species.”

“I have studied hermetic science!” exclaimed Coictier, “and I affirm—”

The fiery archdeacon did not allow him to finish: “And I have studied medicine, astrology, and hermetics. Here alone is the truth.” (As he spoke thus, he took from the top of the coffer a phial filled with the powder which we have mentioned above), “here alone is light! Hippocrates is a dream; Urania is a dream; Hermes, a thought. Gold is the sun; to make gold is to be God. Herein lies the one and only science. I have sounded the depths of medicine and astrology, I tell you! Naught, nothingness! The human body, shadows! the planets, shadows!”

And he fell back in his armchair in a commanding and inspired attitude. Gossip Touraugeau watched him in silence. Coictier tried to grin, shrugged his shoulders imperceptibly, and repeated in a low voice, —

“A madman!”

“And,” said Tourangeau suddenly, “the wondrous result, — have you attained it, have you made gold?”

“If I had made it,” replied the archdeacon, articulating his words slowly, like a man who is reflecting, “the king of France would be named Claude and not Louis.”

The stranger frowned.

“What am I saying?” resumed Dom Claude, with a smile of disdain. “What would the throne of France be to me when I could rebuild the empire of the Orient?”

“Very good!” said the stranger.

“Oh, the poor fool!” murmured Coictier.

The archdeacon went on, appearing to reply now only to his thoughts, —

“But no, I am still crawling; I am scratching my face and knees against the pebbles of the subterranean pathway. I catch a glimpse, I do not contemplate! I do not read, I spell out!”

“And when you know how to read!” demanded the stranger, “will you make gold?”

“Who doubts it?” said the archdeacon.

“In that case Our Lady knows that I am greatly in need of money, and I should much desire to read in your books. Tell me, reverend master, is your science inimical or displeasing to Our Lady?”

“Whose archdeacon I am?” Dom Claude contented himself with replying, with tranquil hauteur.

“That is true, my master. Well! will it please you to initiate me? Let me spell with you.”

Claude assumed the majestic and pontifical attitude of a Samuel.

“Old man, it requires longer years than remain to you, to undertake this voyage across mysterious things. Your head is very gray! One comes forth from the cavern only with white hair, but only those with dark hair enter it. Science alone knows well how to hollow, wither, and dry up human faces; she needs not to have old age bring her faces already furrowed. Nevertheless, if the desire possesses you of putting yourself under discipline at your age, and of deciphering the formidable alphabet of the sages, come to me; ’tis well, I will make the effort. I will not tell you, poor old man, to go and visit the sepulchral chambers of the pyramids, of which ancient Herodotus speaks, nor the brick tower of Babylon, nor the immense white marble sanctuary of the Indian temple of Eklinga. I, no more than yourself, have seen the Chaldean masonry works constructed according to the sacred form of the Sikra, nor the temple of Solomon, which is destroyed, nor the stone doors of the sepulchre of the kings of Israel, which are broken. We will content ourselves with the fragments of the book of Hermes which we have here. I will explain to you the statue of Saint Christopher, the symbol of the sower, and that of the two angels which are on the front of the Sainte-Chapelle, and one of which holds in his hands a vase, the other, a cloud—”

Here Jacques Coictier, who had been unhorsed by the archdeacon’s impetuous replies, regained his saddle, and interrupted him with the triumphant tone of one learned man correcting another,— “*Erras amice Claudi*. The symbol is not the number. You take Orpheus for Hermes.”

“’Tis you who are in error,” replied the archdeacon, gravely. “Daedalus is the base; Orpheus is the wall; Hermes is the edifice, — that is all. You shall come when you will,” he continued, turning to Tourangeau, “I will show you the little parcels of gold which remained at the bottom of Nicholas Flamel’s alembic, and you shall compare them with the gold of Guillaume de Paris. I will teach you the secret virtues of the Greek word, *peristera*. But, first of all, I will make you read, one after the other, the marble letters of the alphabet, the granite pages of the book. We shall go to the portal of Bishop Guillaume and of Saint-Jean le Rond at the Sainte-Chapelle, then to the house of Nicholas Flamel, Rue Manvault, to his tomb, which is at the Saints-Innocents, to his two hospitals, Rue de Montmorency. I will make you read the hieroglyphics which cover the four great iron cramps on the portal of the hospital Saint-Gervais, and of the Rue de la Ferronnerie. We will spell out in company, also, the façade of Saint-Come, of Sainte-Geneviève-des-Ardents, of Saint Martin, of Saint-Jacques de la Boucherie — .”

For a long time, Gossip Tourangeau, intelligent as was his glance, had appeared not to understand Dom Claude. He interrupted.

“*Pasque-dieu*! what are your books, then?”

“Here is one of them,” said the archdeacon.

And opening the window of his cell he pointed out with his finger the immense church of Notre-Dame, which, outlining against the starry sky the black silhouette of its two towers, its stone flanks, its monstrous haunches, seemed an enormous two-headed sphinx, seated in the middle of the city.

The archdeacon gazed at the gigantic edifice for some time in silence, then extending his right hand, with a sigh, towards the printed book which lay open on the table, and his left towards Notre-Dame, and turning a sad glance from the book to the church,— "Alas," he said, "this will kill that."

Coictier, who had eagerly approached the book, could not repress an exclamation. "Hé, but now, what is there so formidable in this: 'GLOSSA IN EPISTOLAS D. PAULI, *Norimbergoe, Antonius Koburger*, 1474.' This is not new. 'Tis a book of Pierre Lombard, the Master of Sentences. Is it because it is printed?"

"You have said it," replied Claude, who seemed absorbed in a profound meditation, and stood resting, his forefinger bent backward on the folio which had come from the famous press of Nuremberg. Then he added these mysterious words: "Alas! alas! small things come at the end of great things; a tooth triumphs over a mass. The Nile rat kills the crocodile, the swordfish kills the whale, the book will kill the edifice."

The curfew of the cloister sounded at the moment when Master Jacques was repeating to his companion in low tones, his eternal refrain, "He is mad!" To which his companion this time replied, "I believe that he is."

It was the hour when no stranger could remain in the cloister. The two visitors withdrew. "Master," said Gossip Tourangeau, as he took leave of the archdeacon, "I love wise men and great minds, and I hold you in singular esteem. Come to-morrow to the Palace des Tournelles, and inquire for the Abbé de Sainte-Martin, of Tours."

The archdeacon returned to his chamber dumbfounded, comprehending at last who Gossip Tourangeau was, and recalling that passage of the register of Sainte-Martin, of Tours: — *Abbas beati Martini, SCILICET REX FRANCIAE, est canonicus de consuetudine et habet parvam proebendam quam habet sanctus Venantius, et debet sedere in sede thesaurarii*.

It is asserted that after that epoch the archdeacon had frequent conferences with Louis XI., when his majesty came to Paris, and that Dom Claude's influence quite overshadowed that of Olivier le Daim and Jacques Coictier, who, as was his habit, rudely took the king to task on that account.

CHAPTER II. THIS WILL KILL THAT.

Our lady readers will pardon us if we pause for a moment to seek what could have been the thought concealed beneath those enigmatic words of the archdeacon: “This will kill that. The book will kill the edifice.”

To our mind, this thought had two faces. In the first place, it was a priestly thought. It was the affright of the priest in the presence of a new agent, the printing press. It was the terror and dazzled amazement of the men of the sanctuary, in the presence of the luminous press of Gutenberg. It was the pulpit and the manuscript taking the alarm at the printed word: something similar to the stupor of a sparrow which should behold the angel Legion unfold his six million wings. It was the cry of the prophet who already hears emancipated humanity roaring and swarming; who beholds in the future, intelligence sapping faith, opinion dethroning belief, the world shaking off Rome. It was the prognostication of the philosopher who sees human thought, volatilized by the press, evaporating from the theocratic recipient. It was the terror of the soldier who examines the brazen battering ram, and says:— “The tower will crumble.” It signified that one power was about to succeed another power. It meant, “The press will kill the church.”

But underlying this thought, the first and most simple one, no doubt, there was in our opinion another, newer one, a corollary of the first, less easy to perceive and more easy to contest, a view as philosophical and belonging no longer to the priest alone but to the savant and the artist. It was a presentiment that human thought, in changing its form, was about to change its mode of expression; that the dominant idea of each generation would no longer be written with the same matter, and in the same manner; that the book of stone, so solid and so durable, was about to make way for the book of paper, more solid and still more durable. In this connection the archdeacon’s vague formula had a second sense. It meant, “Printing will kill architecture.”

In fact, from the origin of things down to the fifteenth century of the Christian era, inclusive, architecture is the great book of humanity, the principal expression of man in his different stages of development, either as a force or as an intelligence.

When the memory of the first races felt itself overloaded, when the mass of reminiscences of the human race became so heavy and so confused that speech naked and flying, ran the risk of losing them on the way, men transcribed them on the soil in a manner which was at once the most visible, most durable, and most natural. They sealed each tradition beneath a monument.

The first monuments were simple masses of rock, “which the iron had not touched,” as Moses says. Architecture began like all writing. It was first an alphabet. Men planted a stone upright, it was a letter, and each letter was a hieroglyph, and upon each hieroglyph rested a group of ideas, like the capital on the column. This is what the earliest races did everywhere, at the same moment, on the surface of the entire world. We find the “standing stones” of the Celts in Asian Siberia; in the pampas of America.

Later on, they made words; they placed stone upon stone, they coupled those syllables of granite, and attempted some combinations. The Celtic dolmen and cromlech, the Etruscan tumulus, the Hebrew galgal, are words. Some, especially the tumulus, are proper names. Sometimes even, when men had a great deal of stone, and a vast plain, they wrote a phrase. The immense pile of Karnac is a complete sentence.

At last they made books. Traditions had brought forth symbols, beneath which they disappeared like the trunk of a tree beneath its foliage; all these symbols in which humanity placed faith continued to grow, to multiply, to intersect, to become more and more complicated; the first monuments no longer sufficed to contain them, they were overflowing in every part; these monuments hardly expressed now the primitive tradition, simple like themselves, naked and prone upon the earth. The symbol felt the need of expansion in the edifice. Then architecture was developed in proportion with human thought; it became a giant with a thousand heads and a thousand arms, and fixed all this floating symbolism in an eternal, visible, palpable form. While Daedalus, who is force, measured; while Orpheus, who is intelligence, sang; — the pillar, which is a letter; the arcade, which is a syllable; the pyramid, which is a word, — all set in movement at once by a law of geometry and by a law of poetry, grouped themselves, combined, amalgamated, descended, ascended, placed themselves side by side on the soil, ranged themselves in stories in the sky, until they had written under the dictation of the general idea of an epoch, those marvellous books which were also marvellous edifices: the Pagoda of Eklinga, the Rhamseion of Egypt, the Temple of Solomon.

The generating idea, the word, was not only at the foundation of all these edifices, but also in the form. The temple of Solomon, for example, was not alone the binding of the holy book; it was the holy book itself. On each one of its concentric walls, the priests could read the word translated and manifested to the eye, and thus they followed its transformations from sanctuary to sanctuary, until they seized it in its last tabernacle, under its most concrete form, which still belonged to architecture: the arch. Thus the word was enclosed in an edifice, but its image was upon its envelope, like the human form on the coffin of a mummy.

And not only the form of edifices, but the sites selected for them, revealed the thought which they represented, according as the symbol to be expressed was graceful or grave. Greece crowned her mountains with a temple harmonious to the eye; India disembowelled hers, to chisel therein those monstrous subterranean pagodas, borne up by gigantic rows of granite elephants.

Thus, during the first six thousand years of the world, from the most immemorial pagoda of Hindustan, to the cathedral of Cologne, architecture was the great handwriting of the human race. And this is so true, that not only every religious symbol, but every human thought, has its page and its monument in that immense book.

All civilization begins in theocracy and ends in democracy. This law of liberty following unity is written in architecture. For, let us insist upon this point, masonry must not be thought to be powerful only in erecting the temple and in expressing the myth and sacerdotal symbolism; in inscribing in hieroglyphs upon its pages of stone the mysterious tables of the law. If it were thus, — as there comes in all human society a moment when the sacred symbol is worn out and becomes obliterated under freedom of thought, when man escapes from the priest, when the excrescence of philosophies and systems devour the face of religion, — architecture could not reproduce this new state of human thought; its leaves, so crowded on the face, would be empty on the back; its work would be mutilated; its book would be incomplete. But no.

Let us take as an example the Middle Ages, where we see more clearly because it is nearer to us. During its first period, while theocracy is organizing Europe, while the Vatican is rallying and reclassing about itself the elements of a Rome made from the Rome which lies in ruins around the Capitol, while Christianity is seeking all the stages of society amid the rubbish of anterior civilization, and rebuilding with its ruins a new hierarchic universe, the keystone to whose vault is the priest — one first hears a dull echo from that chaos, and then, little by little, one sees, arising from beneath the breath of Christianity, from beneath the hand of the barbarians, from the fragments of the dead Greek and Roman architectures, that mysterious Romanesque architecture, sister of the theocratic masonry of Egypt and of India, inalterable emblem of pure catholicism, unchangeable hieroglyph of the papal unity. All the thought of that day is written, in fact, in this sombre, Romanesque style. One feels everywhere in it authority, unity, the impenetrable, the absolute, Gregory VII.; always the priest, never the man; everywhere caste, never the people.

But the Crusades arrive. They are a great popular movement, and every great popular movement, whatever may be its cause and object, always sets free the spirit of liberty from its final precipitate. New things spring into life every day. Here opens the stormy period of the Jacqueries, Pragueries, and Leagues. Authority wavers, unity is divided. Feudalism demands to share with theocracy, while awaiting the inevitable arrival of the people, who will assume the part of the lion: *Quia nominor leo*. Seignory pierces through sacerdotalism; the commonality, through seignory. The face of Europe is changed. Well! the face of architecture is changed also. Like civilization, it has turned a page, and the new spirit of the time finds her ready to write at its dictation. It returns from the crusades with the pointed arch, like the nations with liberty.

Then, while Rome is undergoing gradual dismemberment, Romanesque architecture dies. The hieroglyph deserts the cathedral, and betakes itself to blazoning the donjon keep, in order to lend prestige to feudalism. The cathedral itself, that edifice formerly so dogmatic, invaded henceforth by the bourgeoisie, by the community, by liberty, escapes the priest and falls into the power of the artist. The artist builds it after his own fashion. Farewell to mystery, myth, law. Fancy and caprice, welcome. Provided the priest has his basilica and his altar, he has nothing to say. The four walls belong to the artist. The architectural book belongs no longer to the priest, to religion, to Rome; it is the property of poetry, of imagination, of the people. Hence the rapid and innumerable transformations of that architecture which owns but three centuries, so striking after the stagnant immobility of the Romanesque architecture, which owns six or seven. Nevertheless, art marches on with giant strides. Popular genius amid originality accomplish the task which the bishops formerly fulfilled. Each race writes its line upon the book, as it passes; it erases the ancient Romanesque hieroglyphs on the frontispieces of cathedrals, and at the most one only sees dogma cropping out here and there, beneath the new symbol which it has deposited. The popular drapery hardly permits the religious skeleton to be suspected. One cannot even form an idea of the liberties which the architects then take, even toward the Church. There are capitals knitted of nuns and monks, shamelessly coupled, as on the hall of chimney pieces in the Palais de Justice, in Paris. There is Noah's adventure carved to the last detail, as under the great portal of Bourges. There is a bacchanalian monk, with ass's ears and glass in hand, laughing in the face of a whole community, as on the lavatory of the Abbey of Bocherville. There exists at that epoch, for thought written in stone, a privilege exactly comparable to our present liberty of the press. It is the liberty of architecture.

This liberty goes very far. Sometimes a portal, a façade, an entire church, presents a symbolical sense absolutely foreign to worship, or even hostile to the Church. In the thirteenth century, Guillaume de Paris, and Nicholas Flamel, in the fifteenth, wrote such seditious pages. Saint-Jacques de la Boucherie was a whole church of the opposition.

Thought was then free only in this manner; hence it never wrote itself out completely except on the books called edifices. Thought, under the form of edifice, could have beheld itself burned in the public square by the hands of the executioner, in its manuscript form, if it had been sufficiently imprudent to risk itself thus; thought, as the door of a church, would have been a spectator of the punishment of thought as a book. Having thus only this resource, masonry, in order to make its way to the light, flung itself upon it from all quarters. Hence the immense quantity of cathedrals which have covered Europe — a number so prodigious that one can hardly believe it even after having verified it. All the material forces, all the intellectual forces of society converged towards the same point: architecture. In this manner, under the pretext of building churches to God, art was developed in its magnificent proportions.

Then whoever was born a poet became an architect. Genius, scattered in the masses, repressed in every quarter under feudalism as under a *testudo* of brazen bucklers, finding no issue except in the direction of architecture, — gushed forth through that art, and its Iliads assumed the form of cathedrals. All other arts obeyed, and placed themselves under the discipline of architecture. They were the workmen of the great work. The architect, the poet, the master, summed up in his person the sculpture which carved his façades, painting which illuminated his windows, music which set his bells to pealing, and breathed into his organs. There was nothing down to poor poetry, — properly speaking, that which persisted in vegetating in manuscripts, — which was not forced, in order to make something of itself, to come and frame itself in the edifice in the shape of a hymn or of prose; the same part, after all, which the tragedies of AEschylus had played in the sacerdotal festivals of Greece; Genesis, in the temple of Solomon.

Thus, down to the time of Gutenberg, architecture is the principal writing, the universal writing. In that granite book, begun by the Orient, continued by Greek and Roman antiquity, the Middle Ages wrote the last page. Moreover, this phenomenon of an architecture of the people following an architecture of caste, which we have just been observing in the Middle Ages, is reproduced with every analogous movement in the human intelligence at the other great epochs of history. Thus, in order to enunciate here only summarily, a law which it would require volumes to develop: in the high Orient, the cradle of primitive times, after Hindoo architecture came Phoenician architecture, that opulent mother of Arabian architecture; in antiquity, after Egyptian architecture, of which Etruscan style and cyclopean monuments are but one variety, came Greek architecture (of which the Roman style is only a continuation), surcharged with the Carthaginian dome; in modern times, after Romanesque architecture came Gothic architecture. And by separating there three series into their component parts, we shall find in the three eldest sisters, Hindoo architecture, Egyptian architecture, Romanesque architecture, the same symbol; that is to say, theocracy, caste, unity, dogma, myth, God: and for the three younger sisters, Phoenician architecture, Greek architecture, Gothic architecture, whatever, nevertheless, may be the diversity of form inherent in their nature, the same signification also; that is to say, liberty, the people, man.

In the Hindu, Egyptian, or Romanesque architecture, one feels the priest, nothing but the priest, whether he calls himself Brahmin, Magian, or Pope. It is not the same in the architectures of the people. They are richer and less sacred. In the Phoenician, one feels the merchant; in the Greek, the republican; in the Gothic, the citizen.

The general characteristics of all theocratic architecture are immutability, horror of progress, the preservation of traditional lines, the consecration of the primitive types, the constant bending of all the forms of men and of nature to the incomprehensible caprices of the symbol. These are dark books, which the initiated alone understand how to decipher. Moreover, every form, every deformity even, has there a sense which renders it inviolable. Do not ask of Hindoo, Egyptian, Romanesque masonry to reform their design, or to improve their statuary. Every attempt at perfecting is an impiety to them. In these architectures it seems as though the rigidity of the dogma had spread over the stone like a sort of second petrifaction. The general characteristics of popular masonry, on the contrary, are progress, originality, opulence, perpetual movement. They are already sufficiently detached from religion to think of their beauty, to take care of it, to correct without relaxation their parure of statues or arabesques. They are of the age. They have something human, which they mingle incessantly with the divine symbol under which they still produce. Hence, edifices comprehensible to every soul, to every intelligence, to every imagination, symbolical still, but as easy to understand as nature. Between theocratic architecture and this there is the difference that lies between a sacred language and a vulgar language, between hieroglyphics and art, between Solomon and Phidias.

If the reader will sum up what we have hitherto briefly, very briefly, indicated, neglecting a thousand proofs and also a thousand objections of detail, he will be led to this: that architecture was, down to the fifteenth century, the chief register of humanity; that in that interval not a thought which is in any degree complicated made its appearance in the world, which has not been worked into an edifice; that every popular idea, and every religious law, has had its monumental records; that the human race has, in short, had no important thought which it has not written in stone. And why? Because every thought, either philosophical or religious, is interested in perpetuating itself; because the idea which has moved one generation wishes to move others also, and leave a trace. Now, what a precarious immortality is that of the manuscript! How much more solid, durable, unyielding, is a book of stone! In order to destroy the written word, a torch and a Turk are sufficient. To demolish the constructed word, a social revolution, a terrestrial revolution are required. The barbarians passed over the Coliseum; the deluge, perhaps, passed over the Pyramids.

In the fifteenth century everything changes.

Human thought discovers a mode of perpetuating itself, not only more durable and more resisting than architecture, but still more simple and easy. Architecture is dethroned. Gutenberg’s letters of lead are about to supersede Orpheus’s letters of stone.

The book is about to kill the edifice.

The invention of printing is the greatest event in history. It is the mother of revolution. It is the mode of expression of humanity which is totally renewed; it is human thought stripping off one form and donning another; it is the complete and definitive change of skin of that symbolical serpent which since the days of Adam has represented intelligence.

In its printed form, thought is more imperishable than ever; it is volatile, irresistible, indestructible. It is mingled with the air. In the days of architecture it made a mountain of itself, and took powerful possession of a century and a place. Now it converts itself into a flock of birds, scatters itself to the four winds, and occupies all points of air and space at once.

We repeat, who does not perceive that in this form it is far more indelible? It was solid, it has become alive. It passes from duration in time to immortality. One can demolish a mass; how can one extirpate ubiquity? If a flood comes, the mountains will have long disappeared beneath the waves, while the birds will still be flying about; and if a single ark floats on the surface of the cataclysm, they will alight upon it, will float with it, will be present with it at the ebbing of the waters; and the new world which emerges from this chaos will behold, on its awakening, the thought of the world which has been submerged soaring above it, winged and living.

And when one observes that this mode of expression is not only the most conservative, but also the most simple, the most convenient, the most practicable for all; when one reflects that it does not drag after it bulky baggage, and does not set in motion a heavy apparatus; when one compares thought forced, in order to transform itself into an edifice, to put in motion four or five other arts and tons of gold, a whole mountain of stones, a whole forest of timber-work, a whole nation of workmen; when one compares it to the thought which becomes a book, and for which a little paper, a little ink, and a pen suffice, — how can one be surprised that human intelligence should have quitted architecture for printing? Cut the primitive bed of a river abruptly with a canal hollowed out below its level, and the river will desert its bed.

Behold how, beginning with the discovery of printing, architecture withers away little by little, becomes lifeless and bare. How one feels the water sinking, the sap departing, the thought of the times and of the people withdrawing from it! The chill is almost imperceptible in the fifteenth century; the press is, as yet, too weak, and, at the most, draws from powerful architecture a superabundance of life. But practically beginning with the sixteenth century, the malady of architecture is visible; it is no longer the expression of society; it becomes classic art in a miserable manner; from being Gallic, European, indigenous, it becomes Greek and Roman; from being true and modern, it becomes pseudo-classic. It is this decadence which is called the Renaissance. A magnificent decadence, however, for the ancient Gothic genius, that sun which sets behind the gigantic press of Mayence, still penetrates for a while longer with its rays that whole hybrid pile of Latin arcades and Corinthian columns.

It is that setting sun which we mistake for the dawn.

Nevertheless, from the moment when architecture is no longer anything but an art like any other; as soon as it is no longer the total art, the sovereign art, the tyrant art, — it has no longer the power to retain the other arts. So they emancipate themselves, break the yoke of the architect, and take themselves off, each one in its own direction. Each one of them gains by this divorce. Isolation aggrandizes everything. Sculpture becomes statuary, the image trade becomes painting, the canon becomes music. One would pronounce it an empire dismembered at the death of its Alexander, and whose provinces become kingdoms.

Hence Raphael, Michael Angelo, Jean Goujon, Palestrina, those splendors of the dazzling sixteenth century.

Thought emancipates itself in all directions at the same time as the arts. The arch-heretics of the Middle Ages had already made large incisions into Catholicism. The sixteenth century breaks religious unity. Before the invention of printing, reform would have been merely a schism; printing converted it into a revolution. Take away the press; heresy is enervated. Whether it be Providence or Fate, Gutenburg is the precursor of Luther.

Nevertheless, when the sun of the Middle Ages is completely set, when the Gothic genius is forever extinct upon the horizon, architecture grows dim, loses its color, becomes more and more effaced. The printed book, the gnawing worm of the edifice, sucks and devours it. It becomes bare, denuded of its foliage, and grows visibly emaciated. It is petty, it is poor, it is nothing. It no longer expresses anything, not even the memory of the art of another time. Reduced to itself, abandoned by the other arts, because human thought is abandoning it, it summons bunglers in place of artists. Glass replaces the painted windows. The stone-cutter succeeds the sculptor. Farewell all sap, all originality, all life, all intelligence. It drags along, a lamentable workshop mendicant, from copy to copy. Michael Angelo, who, no doubt, felt even in the sixteenth century that it was dying, had a last idea, an idea of despair. That Titan of art piled the Pantheon on the Parthenon, and made Saint-Peter's at Rome. A great work, which deserved to remain unique, the last originality of architecture, the signature of a giant artist at the bottom of the colossal register of stone which was closed forever. With Michael Angelo dead, what does this miserable architecture, which survived itself in the state of a spectre, do? It takes Saint-Peter in Rome, copies it and parodies it. It is a mania. It is a pity. Each century has its Saint-Peter's of Rome; in the seventeenth century, the Val-de-Grâce; in the eighteenth, Sainte-Geneviève. Each country has its Saint-Peter's of Rome. London has one; Petersburg has another; Paris has two or three. The insignificant testament, the last dotage of a decrepit grand art falling back into infancy before it dies.

If, in place of the characteristic monuments which we have just described, we examine the general aspect of art from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, we notice the same phenomena of decay and phthisis. Beginning with François II., the architectural form of the edifice effaces itself more and more, and allows the geometrical form, like the bony structure of an emaciated invalid, to become prominent. The fine lines of art give way to the cold and inexorable lines of geometry. An edifice is no longer an edifice; it is a polyhedron. Meanwhile, architecture is tormented in her struggles to conceal this nudity. Look at the Greek pediment inscribed upon the Roman pediment, and vice versa. It is still the Pantheon on the Parthenon: Saint-Peter's of Rome. Here are the brick houses of Henri IV., with their stone corners; the Place Royale, the Place Dauphine. Here are the churches of Louis XIII., heavy, squat, thickset, crowded together, loaded with a dome like a hump. Here is the Mazarin architecture, the wretched Italian pasticcio of the Four Nations. Here are the palaces of Louis XIV., long barracks for courtiers, stiff, cold, tiresome. Here, finally, is Louis XV., with chiccory leaves and vermicelli, and all the warts, and all the fungi, which disfigure that decrepit, toothless, and coquettish old architecture.

From François II. to Louis XV., the evil has increased in geometrical progression. Art has no longer anything but skin upon its bones. It is miserably perishing.

Meanwhile what becomes of printing? All the life which is leaving architecture comes to it. In proportion as architecture ebbs, printing swells and grows. That capital of forces which human thought had been expending in edifices, it henceforth expends in books. Thus, from the sixteenth century onward, the press, raised to the level of decaying architecture, contends with it and kills it. In the seventeenth century it is already sufficiently the sovereign, sufficiently triumphant, sufficiently established in its victory, to give to the world the feast of a great literary century. In the eighteenth, having reposed for a long time at the Court of Louis XIV., it seizes again the old sword of Luther, puts it into the hand of Voltaire, and rushes impetuously to the attack of that ancient Europe, whose architectural expression it has already killed. At the moment when the eighteenth century comes to an end, it has destroyed everything. In the nineteenth, it begins to reconstruct.

Now, we ask, which of the three arts has really represented human thought for the last three centuries? which translates it? which expresses not only its literary and scholastic vagaries, but its vast, profound, universal movement? which constantly superposes itself, without a break, without a gap, upon the human race, which walks a monster with a thousand legs? — Architecture or printing?

It is printing. Let the reader make no mistake; architecture is dead; irretrievably slain by the printed book, — slain because it endures for a shorter time, — slain because it costs more. Every cathedral represents millions. Let the reader now imagine what an investment of funds it would require to rewrite the architectural book; to cause thousands of edifices to swarm once more upon the soil; to return to those epochs when the throng of monuments was such, according to the statement of an eye witness, “that one would have said that the world in shaking itself, had cast off its old garments in order to cover itself with a white vesture of churches.” *Erat enim ut si mundus, ipse excutiendo semet, rejecta vetustate, candida ecclesiarum vestem indueret*. (GLABER RADOLPHUS.)

A book is so soon made, costs so little, and can go so far! How can it surprise us that all human thought flows in this channel? This does not mean that architecture will not still have a fine monument, an isolated masterpiece, here and there. We may still have from time to time, under the reign of printing, a column made I suppose, by a whole army from melted cannon, as we had under the reign of architecture, Iliads and Romanceros, Mahabâhrata, and Nibelungen Lieds, made by a whole people, with rhapsodies piled up and melted together. The great accident of an architect of genius may happen in the twentieth century, like that of Dante in the thirteenth. But architecture will no longer be the social art, the collective art, the dominating art. The grand poem, the grand edifice, the grand work of humanity will no longer be built: it will be printed.

And henceforth, if architecture should arise again accidentally, it will no longer be mistress. It will be subservient to the law of literature, which formerly received the law from it. The respective positions of the two arts will be inverted. It is certain that in architectural epochs, the poems, rare it is true, resemble the monuments. In India, Vyasa is branching, strange, impenetrable as a pagoda. In Egyptian Orient, poetry has like the edifices, grandeur and tranquillity of line; in antique Greece, beauty, serenity, calm; in Christian Europe, the Catholic majesty, the popular naivete, the rich and luxuriant vegetation of an epoch of renewal. The Bible resembles the Pyramids; the Iliad, the Parthenon; Homer, Phidias. Dante in the thirteenth century is the last Romanesque church; Shakespeare in the sixteenth, the last Gothic cathedral.

Thus, to sum up what we have hitherto said, in a fashion which is necessarily incomplete and mutilated, the human race has two books, two registers, two testaments: masonry and printing; the Bible of stone and the Bible of paper. No doubt, when one contemplates these two Bibles, laid so broadly open in the centuries, it is permissible to regret the visible majesty of the writing of granite, those gigantic alphabets formulated in colonnades, in pylons, in obelisks, those sorts of human mountains which cover the world and the past, from the pyramid to the bell tower, from Cheops to Strasburg. The past must be reread upon these pages of marble. This book, written by architecture, must be admired and perused incessantly; but the grandeur of the edifice which printing erects in its turn must not be denied.

That edifice is colossal. Some compiler of statistics has calculated, that if all the volumes which have issued from the press since Gutenberg's day were to be piled one upon another, they would fill the space between the earth and the moon; but it is not that sort of grandeur of which we wished to speak. Nevertheless, when one tries to collect in one's mind a comprehensive image of the total products of printing down to our own days, does not that total appear to us like an immense construction, resting upon the entire world, at which humanity toils without relaxation, and whose monstrous crest is lost in the profound mists of the future? It is the anthill of intelligence. It is the hive whither come all imaginations, those golden bees, with their honey.

The edifice has a thousand stories. Here and there one beholds on its staircases the gloomy caverns of science which pierce its interior. Everywhere upon its surface, art causes its arabesques, rosettes, and laces to thrive luxuriantly before the eyes. There, every individual work, however capricious and isolated it may seem, has its place and its projection. Harmony results from the whole. From the cathedral of Shakespeare to the mosque of Byron, a thousand tiny bell towers are piled pell-mell above this metropolis of universal thought. At its base are written some ancient titles of humanity which architecture had not registered. To the left of the entrance has been fixed the ancient bas-relief, in white marble, of Homer; to the right, the polyglot Bible rears its seven heads. The hydra of the Romancero and some other hybrid forms, the Vedas and the Nibelungen bristle further on.

Nevertheless, the prodigious edifice still remains incomplete. The press, that giant machine, which incessantly pumps all the intellectual sap of society, belches forth without pause fresh materials for its work. The whole human race is on the scaffoldings. Each mind is a mason. The humblest fills his hole, or places his stone. Retif dè le Bretonne brings his hod of plaster. Every day a new course rises. Independently of the original and individual contribution of each writer, there are collective contingents. The eighteenth century gives the *Encyclopedia*, the revolution gives the *Moniteur*. Assuredly, it is a construction which increases and piles up in endless spirals; there also are confusion of tongues, incessant activity, indefatigable labor, eager competition of all humanity, refuge promised to intelligence, a new Flood against an overflow of barbarians. It is the second tower of Babel of the human race.

BOOK SIXTH.

CHAPTER I. AN IMPARTIAL GLANCE AT THE ANCIENT MAGISTRACY.

A very happy personage in the year of grace 1482, was the noble gentleman Robert d’Estouteville, chevalier, Sieur de Beyne, Baron d’Ivry and Saint Andry en la Marche, counsellor and chamberlain to the king, and guard of the provostship of Paris. It was already nearly seventeen years since he had received from the king, on November 7, 1465, the comet year,* that fine charge of the provostship of Paris, which was reputed rather a seigneury than an office. *Dignitas*, says Joannes Loemnoeus, *quoe cum non exigua potestate politiam concernente, atque proerogativis multis et juribus conjuncta est*. A marvellous thing in ‘82 was a gentleman bearing the king’s commission, and whose letters of institution ran back to the epoch of the marriage of the natural daughter of Louis XI. with Monsieur the Bastard of Bourbon.

* This comet against which Pope Calixtus, uncle of Borgia,
ordered public prayers, is the same which reappeared in 1835.

The same day on which Robert d’Estouteville took the place of Jacques de Villiers in the provostship of Paris, Master Jehan Dauvet replaced Messire Helye de Thorrettes in the first presidency of the Court of Parliament, Jehan Jouvenel des Ursins supplanted Pierre de Morvilliers in the office of chancellor of France, Regnault des Dormans ousted Pierre Puy from the charge of master of requests in ordinary of the king’s household. Now, upon how many heads had the presidency, the chancellorship, the mastership passed since Robert d’Estouteville had held the provostship of Paris. It had been “granted to him for safekeeping,” as the letters patent said; and certainly he kept it well. He had clung to it, he had incorporated himself with it, he had so identified himself with it that he had escaped that fury for change which possessed Louis XI., a tormenting and industrious king, whose policy it was to maintain the elasticity of his power by frequent appointments and revocations. More than this; the brave chevalier had obtained the reversion of the office for his son, and for two years already, the name of the noble man Jacques d’Estouteville, equerry, had figured beside his at the head of the register of the salary list of the provostship of Paris. A rare and notable favor indeed! It is true that Robert d’Estouteville was a good soldier, that he had loyally raised his pennon against “the league of public good,” and that he had presented to the queen a very marvellous stag in confectionery on the day of her entrance to Paris in 14... Moreover, he possessed the good friendship of Messire Tristan l’Hermite, provost of the marshals of the king’s household. Hence a very sweet and pleasant existence was that of Messire Robert. In the first place, very good wages, to which were attached, and from which hung, like extra bunches of grapes on his vine, the revenues of the civil and criminal registries of the provostship, plus the civil and criminal revenues of the tribunals of Embas of the Châtelet, without reckoning some little toll from the bridges of Mantes and of Corbeil, and the profits on the craft of Shagreen-makers of Paris, on the corders of firewood and the measurers of salt. Add to this the pleasure of displaying himself in rides about the city, and of making his fine military costume, which you may still admire sculptured on his tomb in the abbey of Valmont in Normandy, and his morion, all embossed at Montlhéry, stand out a contrast against the parti-colored red and tawny robes of the aldermen and police. And then, was it nothing to wield absolute supremacy over the sergeants of the police, the porter and watch of the Châtelet, the two auditors of the Châtelet, *auditores castelleti*, the sixteen commissioners of the sixteen quarters, the jailer of the Châtelet, the four enfeoffed sergeants, the hundred and twenty mounted sergeants, with maces, the chevalier of the watch with his watch, his sub-watch, his counter-watch and his rear-watch? Was it nothing to exercise high and low justice, the right to interrogate, to hang and to draw, without reckoning petty jurisdiction in the first resort (*in prima instantia*, as the charters say), on that viscomty of Paris, so nobly appanaged with seven noble bailiwicks? Can anything sweeter be imagined than rendering judgments and decisions, as Messire Robert d’Estouteville daily did in the Grand Châtelet, under the large and flattened arches of Philip Augustus? and going, as he was wont to do every evening, to that charming house situated in the Rue Galilee, in the enclosure of the royal palace, which he held in right of his wife, Madame Ambroise de Lore, to repose after the fatigue of having sent some poor wretch to pass the night in “that little cell of the Rue de Escorcherie, which the provosts and aldermen of Paris used to make their prison; the same being eleven feet long, seven feet and four inches wide, and eleven feet high?”*

* Comptes du domaine, 1383.

And not only had Messire Robert d’Estouteville his special court as provost and vicomte of Paris; but in addition he had a share, both for eye and tooth, in the grand court of the king. There was no head in the least elevated which had not passed through his hands before it came to the headsman. It was he who went to seek M. de Nemours at the Bastille Saint Antoine, in order to conduct him to the Halles; and to conduct to the Grève M. de Saint-Pol, who clamored and resisted, to the great joy of the provost, who did not love monsieur the constable.

Here, assuredly, is more than sufficient to render a life happy and illustrious, and to deserve some day a notable page in that interesting history of the provosts of Paris, where one learns that Oudard de Villeneuve had a house in the Rue des Boucheries, that Guillaume de Hangest purchased the great and the little Savoy, that Guillaume Thiboust gave the nuns of Sainte-Geneviève his houses in the Rue Clopin, that Hugues Aubriot lived in the Hôtel du Pore-Epic, and other domestic facts.

Nevertheless, with so many reasons for taking life patiently and joyously, Messire Robert d’Estouteville woke up on the morning of the seventh of January, 1482, in a very surly and peevish mood. Whence came this ill temper? He could not have told himself. Was it because the sky was gray? or was the buckle of his old belt of Montlhéry badly fastened, so that it confined his provostal portliness too closely? had he beheld ribald fellows, marching in bands of four, beneath his window, and setting him at defiance, in doublets but no shirts, hats without crowns, with wallet and bottle at their side? Was it a vague presentiment of the three hundred and seventy livres, sixteen sous, eight farthings, which the future King Charles VII. was to cut off from the provostship in the following year? The reader can take his choice; we, for our part, are much inclined to believe that he was in a bad humor, simply because he was in a bad humor.

Moreover, it was the day after a festival, a tiresome day for every one, and above all for the magistrate who is charged with sweeping away all the filth, properly and figuratively speaking, which a festival day produces in Paris. And then he had to hold a sitting at the Grand Châtelet. Now, we have noticed that judges in general so arrange matters that their day of audience shall also be their day of bad humor, so that they may always have some one upon whom to vent it conveniently, in the name of the king, law, and justice.

However, the audience had begun without him. His lieutenants, civil, criminal, and private, were doing his work, according to usage; and from eight o’clock in the morning, some scores of bourgeois and *bourgeoises*, heaped and crowded into an obscure corner of the audience chamber of Embas du Châtelet, between a stout oaken barrier and the wall, had been gazing blissfully at the varied and cheerful spectacle of civil and criminal justice dispensed by Master Florian Barbedienne, auditor of the Châtelet, lieutenant of monsieur the provost, in a somewhat confused and utterly haphazard manner.

The hall was small, low, vaulted. A table studded with fleurs-de-lis stood at one end, with a large arm-chair of carved oak, which belonged to the provost and was empty, and a stool on the left for the auditor, Master Florian. Below sat the clerk of the court, scribbling; opposite was the populace; and in front of the door, and in front of the table were many sergeants of the provostship in sleeveless jackets of violet camlet, with white crosses. Two sergeants of the Parloir-aux-Bourgeois, clothed in their jackets of Toussaint, half red, half blue, were posted as sentinels before a low, closed door, which was visible at the extremity of the hall, behind the table. A single pointed window, narrowly encased in the thick wall, illuminated with a pale ray of January sun two grotesque figures, — the capricious demon of stone carved as a tail-piece in the keystone of the vaulted ceiling, and the judge seated at the end of the hall on the fleurs-de-lis.

Imagine, in fact, at the provost’s table, leaning upon his elbows between two bundles of documents of cases, with his foot on the train of his robe of plain brown cloth, his face buried in his hood of white lamb’s skin, of which his brows seemed to be of a piece, red, crabbed, winking, bearing majestically the load of fat on his cheeks which met under his chin, Master Florian Barbedienne, auditor of the Châtelet.

Now, the auditor was deaf. A slight defect in an auditor. Master Florian delivered judgment, none the less, without appeal and very suitably. It is certainly quite sufficient for a judge to have the air of listening; and the venerable auditor fulfilled this condition, the sole one in justice, all the better because his attention could not be distracted by any noise.

Moreover, he had in the audience, a pitiless censor of his deeds and gestures, in the person of our friend Jehan Frollo du Moulin, that little student of yesterday, that “stroller,” whom one was sure of encountering all over Paris, anywhere except before the rostrums of the professors.

“Stay,” he said in a low tone to his companion, Robin Poussepain, who was grinning at his side, while he was making his comments on the scenes which were being unfolded before his eyes, “yonder is Jehanneton du Buisson. The beautiful daughter of the lazy dog at the Marché-Neuf! — Upon my soul, he is condemning her, the old rascal! he has no more eyes than ears. Fifteen sous, four farthings, parisian, for having worn two rosaries! ’Tis somewhat dear. *Lex duri carminis*. Who’s that? Robin Chief-de-Ville, hauberkmaker. For having been passed and received master of the said trade! That’s his entrance money. He! two gentlemen among these knaves! Aiglet de Soins, Hutin de Mailly Two equerries, *Corpus Christi*! Ah! they have been playing at dice. When shall I see our rector here? A hundred livres parisian, fine to the king! That Barbedienne strikes like a deaf man, — as he is! I’ll be my brother the archdeacon, if that keeps me from gaming; gaming by day, gaming by night, living at play, dying at play, and gaming away my soul after my shirt. Holy Virgin, what damsels! One after the other my lambs. Ambroise Lécuyere, Isabeau la Paynette, Bérarde Gironin! I know them all, by Heavens! A fine! a fine! That’s what will teach you to wear gilded girdles! ten sous parisis! you coquettes! Oh! the old snout of a judge! deaf and imbecile! Oh! Florian the dolt! Oh! Barbedienne the blockhead! There he is at the table! He’s eating the plaintiff, he’s eating the suits, he eats, he chews, he crams, he fills himself. Fines, lost goods, taxes, expenses, loyal charges, salaries, damages, and interests, gehenna, prison, and jail, and fetters with expenses are Christmas spice cake and marchpanes of Saint-John to him! Look at him, the pig! — Come! Good! Another amorous woman! Thibaud-la-Thibaude, neither more nor less! For having come from the Rue Glatigny! What fellow is this? Gieffroy Mabonne, gendarme bearing the crossbow. He has cursed the name of the Father. A fine for la Thibaude! A fine for Gieffroy! A fine for them both! The deaf old fool! he must have mixed up the two cases! Ten to one that he makes the wench pay for the oath and the gendarme for the amour! Attention, Robin Poussepain! What are they going to bring in? Here are many sergeants! By Jupiter! all the bloodhounds of the pack are there. It must be the great beast of the hunt — a wild boar. And ’tis one, Robin, ’tis one. And a fine one too! *Hercle*! ’tis our prince of yesterday, our Pope of the Fools, our bellringer, our one-eyed man, our hunchback, our grimace! ’Tis Quasimodo!”

It was he indeed.

It was Quasimodo, bound, encircled, roped, pinioned, and under good guard. The squad of policemen who surrounded him was assisted by the chevalier of the watch in person, wearing the arms of France embroidered on his breast, and the arms of the city on his back. There was nothing, however, about Quasimodo, except his deformity, which could justify the display of halberds and arquebuses; he was gloomy, silent, and tranquil. Only now and then did his single eye cast a sly and wrathful glance upon the bonds with which he was loaded.

He cast the same glance about him, but it was so dull and sleepy that the women only pointed him out to each other in derision.

Meanwhile Master Florian, the auditor, turned over attentively the document in the complaint entered against Quasimodo, which the clerk handed him, and, having thus glanced at it, appeared to reflect for a moment. Thanks to this precaution, which he always was careful to take at the moment when on the point of beginning an examination, he knew beforehand the names, titles, and misdeeds of the accused, made cut and dried responses to questions foreseen, and succeeded in extricating himself from all the windings of the interrogation without allowing his deafness to be too apparent. The written charges were to him what the dog is to the blind man. If his deafness did happen to betray him here and there, by some incoherent apostrophe or some unintelligible question, it passed for profundity with some, and for imbecility with others. In neither case did the honor of the magistracy sustain any injury; for it is far better that a judge should be reputed imbecile or profound than deaf. Hence he took great care to conceal his deafness from the eyes of all, and he generally succeeded so well that he had reached the point of deluding himself, which is, by the way, easier than is supposed. All hunchbacks walk with their heads held high, all stutterers harangue, all deaf people speak low. As for him, he believed, at the most, that his ear was a little refractory. It was the sole concession which he made on this point to public opinion, in his moments of frankness and examination of his conscience.

Having, then, thoroughly ruminated Quasimodo’s affair, he threw back his head and half closed his eyes, for the sake of more majesty and impartiality, so that, at that moment, he was both deaf and blind. A double condition, without which no judge is perfect. It was in this magisterial attitude that he began the examination.

“Your name?”

Now this was a case which had not been “provided for by law,” where a deaf man should be obliged to question a deaf man.

Quasimodo, whom nothing warned that a question had been addressed to him, continued to stare intently at the judge, and made no reply. The judge, being deaf, and being in no way warned of the deafness of the accused, thought that the latter had answered, as all accused do in general, and therefore he pursued, with his mechanical and stupid self-possession, —

“Very well. And your age?”

Again Quasimodo made no reply to this question. The judge supposed that it had been replied to, and continued, —

“Now, your profession?”

Still the same silence. The spectators had begun, meanwhile, to whisper together, and to exchange glances.

“That will do,” went on the imperturbable auditor, when he supposed that the accused had finished his third reply. “You are accused before us, *primo*, of nocturnal disturbance; *secundo*, of a dishonorable act of violence upon the person of a foolish woman, *in proejudicium meretricis; tertio*, of rebellion and disloyalty towards the archers of the police of our lord, the king. Explain yourself upon all these points. — Clerk, have you written down what the prisoner has said thus far?”

At this unlucky question, a burst of laughter rose from the clerk’s table caught by the audience, so violent, so wild, so contagious, so universal, that the two deaf men were forced to perceive it. Quasimodo turned round, shrugging his hump with disdain, while Master Florian, equally astonished, and supposing that the laughter of the spectators had been provoked by some irreverent reply from the accused, rendered visible to him by that shrug of the shoulders, apostrophized him indignantly, —

“You have uttered a reply, knave, which deserves the halter. Do you know to whom you are speaking?”

This sally was not fitted to arrest the explosion of general merriment. It struck all as so whimsical, and so ridiculous, that the wild laughter even attacked the sergeants of the Parloi-aux-Bourgeois, a sort of pikemen, whose stupidity was part of their uniform. Quasimodo alone preserved his seriousness, for the good reason that he understood nothing of what was going on around him. The judge, more and more irritated, thought it his duty to continue in the same tone, hoping thereby to strike the accused with a terror which should react upon the audience, and bring it back to respect.

“So this is as much as to say, perverse and thieving knave that you are, that you permit yourself to be lacking in respect towards the Auditor of the Châtelet, to the magistrate committed to the popular police of Paris, charged with searching out crimes, delinquencies, and evil conduct; with controlling all trades, and interdicting monopoly; with maintaining the pavements; with debarring the hucksters of chickens, poultry, and water-fowl; of superintending the measuring of fagots and other sorts of wood; of purging the city of mud, and the air of contagious maladies; in a word, with attending continually to public affairs, without wages or hope of salary! Do you know that I am called Florian Barbedienne, actual lieutenant to monsieur the provost, and, moreover, commissioner, inquisitor, controller, and examiner, with equal power in provostship, bailiwick, preservation, and inferior court of judicature?—”

There is no reason why a deaf man talking to a deaf man should stop. God knows where and when Master Florian would have landed, when thus launched at full speed in lofty eloquence, if the low door at the extreme end of the room had not suddenly opened, and given entrance to the provost in person. At his entrance Master Florian did not stop short, but, making a half-turn on his heels, and aiming at the provost the harangue with which he had been withering Quasimodo a moment before, —

“Monseigneur,” said he, “I demand such penalty as you shall deem fitting against the prisoner here present, for grave and aggravated offence against the court.”

And he seated himself, utterly breathless, wiping away the great drops of sweat which fell from his brow and drenched, like tears, the parchments spread out before him. Messire Robert d’Estouteville frowned and made a gesture so imperious and significant to Quasimodo, that the deaf man in some measure understood it.

The provost addressed him with severity, “What have you done that you have been brought hither, knave?”

The poor fellow, supposing that the provost was asking his name, broke the silence which he habitually preserved, and replied, in a harsh and guttural voice, “Quasimodo.”

The reply matched the question so little that the wild laugh began to circulate once more, and Messire Robert exclaimed, red with wrath, —

“Are you mocking me also, you arrant knave?”

“Bellringer of Notre-Dame,” replied Quasimodo, supposing that what was required of him was to explain to the judge who he was.

“Bellringer!” interpolated the provost, who had waked up early enough to be in a sufficiently bad temper, as we have said, not to require to have his fury inflamed by such strange responses. “Bellringer! I’ll play you a chime of rods on your back through the squares of Paris! Do you hear, knave?”

“If it is my age that you wish to know,” said Quasimodo, “I think that I shall be twenty at Saint Martin’s day.”

This was too much; the provost could no longer restrain himself.

“Ah! you are scoffing at the provostship, wretch! Messieurs the sergeants of the mace, you will take me this knave to the pillory of the Grève, you will flog him, and turn him for an hour. He shall pay me for it, *tête Dieu*! And I order that the present judgment shall be cried, with the assistance of four sworn trumpeters, in the seven castellanies of the viscomty of Paris.”

The clerk set to work incontinently to draw up the account of the sentence.

“*Ventre Dieu*! ’tis well adjudged!” cried the little scholar, Jehan Frollo du Moulin, from his corner.

The provost turned and fixed his flashing eyes once more on Quasimodo. “I believe the knave said ‘*Ventre Dieu*’ Clerk, add twelve deniers Parisian for the oath, and let the vestry of Saint Eustache have the half of it; I have a particular devotion for Saint Eustache.”

In a few minutes the sentence was drawn up. Its tenor was simple and brief. The customs of the provostship and the viscomty had not yet been worked over by President Thibaut Baillet, and by Roger Barmne, the king’s advocate; they had not been obstructed, at that time, by that lofty hedge of quibbles and procedures, which the two jurisconsults planted there at the beginning of the sixteenth century. All was clear, expeditious, explicit. One went straight to the point then, and at the end of every path there was immediately visible, without thickets and without turnings; the wheel, the gibbet, or the pillory. One at least knew whither one was going.

The clerk presented the sentence to the provost, who affixed his seal to it, and departed to pursue his round of the audience hall, in a frame of mind which seemed destined to fill all the jails in Paris that day. Jehan Frollo and Robin Poussepain laughed in their sleeves. Quasimodo gazed on the whole with an indifferent and astonished air.

However, at the moment when Master Florian Barbedienne was reading the sentence in his turn, before signing it, the clerk felt himself moved with pity for the poor wretch of a prisoner, and, in the hope of obtaining some mitigation of the penalty, he approached as near the auditor's ear as possible, and said, pointing to Quasimodo, "That man is deaf."

He hoped that this community of infirmity would awaken Master Florian's interest in behalf of the condemned man. But, in the first place, we have already observed that Master Florian did not care to have his deafness noticed. In the next place, he was so hard of hearing That he did not catch a single word of what the clerk said to him; nevertheless, he wished to have the appearance of hearing, and replied, "Ah! ah! that is different; I did not know that. An hour more of the pillory, in that case."

And he signed the sentence thus modified.

"'Tis well done," said Robin Poussepain, who cherished a grudge against Quasimodo. "That will teach him to handle people roughly."

CHAPTER II. THE RAT-HOLE.

The reader must permit us to take him back to the Place de Grève, which we quitted yesterday with Gringoire, in order to follow la Esmeralda.

It is ten o'clock in the morning; everything is indicative of the day after a festival. The pavement is covered with rubbish; ribbons, rags, feathers from tufts of plumes, drops of wax from the torches, crumbs of the public feast. A goodly number of bourgeois are "sauntering," as we say, here and there, turning over with their feet the extinct brands of the bonfire, going into raptures in front of the Pillar House, over the memory of the fine hangings of the day before, and to-day staring at the nails that secured them a last pleasure. The venders of cider and beer are rolling their barrels among the groups. Some busy passers-by come and go. The merchants converse and call to each other from the thresholds of their shops. The festival, the ambassadors, Coppenole, the Pope of the Fools, are in all mouths; they vie with each other, each trying to criticise it best and laugh the most. And, meanwhile, four mounted sergeants, who have just posted themselves at the four sides of the pillory, have already concentrated around themselves a goodly proportion of the populace scattered on the Place, who condemn themselves to immobility and fatigue in the hope of a small execution.

If the reader, after having contemplated this lively and noisy scene which is being enacted in all parts of the Place, will now transfer his gaze towards that ancient demi-Gothic, demi-Romanesque house of the Tour-Roland, which forms the corner on the quay to the west, he will observe, at the angle of the façade, a large public breviary, with rich illuminations, protected from the rain by a little penthouse, and from thieves by a small grating, which, however, permits of the leaves being turned. Beside this breviary is a narrow, arched window, closed by two iron bars in the form of a cross, and looking on the square; the only opening which admits a small quantity of light and air to a little cell without a door, constructed on the ground-floor, in the thickness of the walls of the old house, and filled with a peace all the more profound, with a silence all the more gloomy, because a public place, the most populous and most noisy in Paris swarms and shrieks around it.

This little cell had been celebrated in Paris for nearly three centuries, ever since Madame Rolande de la Tour-Roland, in mourning for her father who died in the Crusades, had caused it to be hollowed out in the wall of her own house, in order to immure herself there forever, keeping of all her palace only this lodging whose door was walled up, and whose window stood open, winter and summer, giving all the rest to the poor and to God. The afflicted damsel had, in fact, waited twenty years for death in this premature tomb, praying night and day for the soul of her father, sleeping in ashes, without even a stone for a pillow, clothed in a black sack, and subsisting on the bread and water which the compassion of the passers-by led them to deposit on the ledge of her window, thus receiving charity after having bestowed it. At her death, at the moment when she was passing to the other sepulchre, she had bequeathed this one in perpetuity to afflicted women, mothers, widows, or maidens, who should wish to pray much for others or for themselves, and who should desire to inter themselves alive in a great grief or a great penance. The poor of her day had made her a fine funeral, with tears and benedictions; but, to their great regret, the pious maid had not been canonized, for lack of influence. Those among them who were a little inclined to impiety, had hoped that the matter might be accomplished in Paradise more easily than at Rome, and had frankly besought God, instead of the pope, in behalf of the deceased. The majority had contented themselves with holding the memory of Rolande sacred, and converting her rags into relics. The city, on its side, had founded in honor of the damoiselle, a public breviary, which had been fastened near the window of the cell, in order that passers-by might halt there from time to time, were it only to pray; that prayer might remind them of alms, and that the poor recluses, heiresses of Madame Rolande’s vault, might not die outright of hunger and forgetfulness.

Moreover, this sort of tomb was not so very rare a thing in the cities of the Middle Ages. One often encountered in the most frequented street, in the most crowded and noisy market, in the very middle, under the feet of the horses, under the wheels of the carts, as it were, a cellar, a well, a tiny walled and grated cabin, at the bottom of which a human being prayed night and day, voluntarily devoted to some eternal lamentation, to some great expiation. And all the reflections which that strange spectacle would awaken in us to-day; that horrible cell, a sort of intermediary link between a house and the tomb, the cemetery and the city; that living being cut off from the human community, and thenceforth reckoned among the dead; that lamp consuming its last drop of oil in the darkness; that remnant of life flickering in the grave; that breath, that voice, that eternal prayer in a box of stone;

that face forever turned towards the other world; that eye already illuminated with another sun; that ear pressed to the walls of a tomb; that soul a prisoner in that body; that body a prisoner in that dungeon cell, and beneath that double envelope of flesh and granite, the murmur of that soul in pain; — nothing of all this was perceived by the crowd. The piety of that age, not very subtle nor much given to reasoning, did not see so many facets in an act of religion. It took the thing in the block, honored, venerated, hallowed the sacrifice at need, but did not analyze the sufferings, and felt but moderate pity for them. It brought some pittance to the miserable penitent from time to time, looked through the hole to see whether he were still living, forgot his name, hardly knew how many years ago he had begun to die, and to the stranger, who questioned them about the living skeleton who was perishing in that cellar, the neighbors replied simply, “It is the recluse.”

Everything was then viewed without metaphysics, without exaggeration, without magnifying glass, with the naked eye. The microscope had not yet been invented, either for things of matter or for things of the mind.

Moreover, although people were but little surprised by it, the examples of this sort of cloistration in the hearts of cities were in truth frequent, as we have just said. There were in Paris a considerable number of these cells, for praying to God and doing penance; they were nearly all occupied. It is true that the clergy did not like to have them empty, since that implied lukewarmness in believers, and that lepers were put into them when there were no penitents on hand. Besides the cell on the Grève, there was one at Montfauçon, one at the Charnier des Innocents, another I hardly know where, — at the Clichon House, I think; others still at many spots where traces of them are found in traditions, in default of memorials. The University had also its own. On Mount Sainte-Geneviève a sort of Job of the Middle Ages, for the space of thirty years, chanted the seven penitential psalms on a dunghill at the bottom of a cistern, beginning anew when he had finished, singing loudest at night, *magna voce per umbras*, and to-day, the antiquary fancies that he hears his voice as he enters the Rue du Puits-qui-parle — the street of the “Speaking Well.”

To confine ourselves to the cell in the Tour-Roland, we must say that it had never lacked recluses. After the death of Madame Roland, it had stood vacant for a year or two, though rarely. Many women had come thither to mourn, until their death, for relatives, lovers, faults. Parisian malice, which thrusts its finger into everything, even into things which concern it the least, affirmed that it had beheld but few widows there.

In accordance with the fashion of the epoch, a Latin inscription on the wall indicated to the learned passer-by the pious purpose of this cell. The custom was retained until the middle of the sixteenth century of explaining an edifice by a brief device inscribed above the door. Thus, one still reads in France, above the wicket of the prison in the seignorial mansion of Tourville, *Sileto et spera*; in Ireland, beneath the armorial bearings which surmount the grand door to Fortescue Castle, *Forte scutum, salus ducum*; in England, over the principal entrance to the hospitable mansion of the Earls Cowper: *Tuum est*. At that time every edifice was a thought.

As there was no door to the walled cell of the Tour-Roland, these two words had been carved in large Roman capitals over the window, —

TU, ORA.

And this caused the people, whose good sense does not perceive so much refinement in things, and likes to translate *Ludovico Magno* by “Porte Saint-Denis,” to give to this dark, gloomy, damp cavity, the name of “The Rat-Hole.” An explanation less sublime, perhaps, than the other; but, on the other hand, more picturesque.

CHAPTER III. HISTORY OF A LEAVENED CAKE OF MAIZE.

At the epoch of this history, the cell in the Tour-Roland was occupied. If the reader desires to know by whom, he has only to lend an ear to the conversation of three worthy gossips, who, at the moment when we have directed his attention to the Rat-Hole, were directing their steps towards the same spot, coming up along the water's edge from the Châtelet, towards the Grève.

Two of these women were dressed like good *bourgeoises* of Paris. Their fine white ruffs; their petticoats of linsey-woolsey, striped red and blue; their white knitted stockings, with clocks embroidered in colors, well drawn upon their legs; the square-toed shoes of tawny leather with black soles, and, above all, their headgear, that sort of tinsel horn, loaded down with ribbons and laces, which the women of Champagne still wear, in company with the grenadiers of the imperial guard of Russia, announced that they belonged to that class wives which holds the middle ground between what the lackeys call a woman and what they term a lady. They wore neither rings nor gold crosses, and it was easy to see that, in their ease, this did not proceed from poverty, but simply from fear of being fined. Their companion was attired in very much the same manner; but there was that indescribable something about her dress and bearing which suggested the wife of a provincial notary. One could see, by the way in which her girdle rose above her hips, that she had not been long in Paris. — Add to this a plaited tucker, knots of ribbon on her shoes — and that the stripes of her petticoat ran horizontally instead of vertically, and a thousand other enormities which shocked good taste.

The two first walked with that step peculiar to Parisian ladies, showing Paris to women from the country. The provincial held by the hand a big boy, who held in his a large, flat cake.

We regret to be obliged to add, that, owing to the rigor of the season, he was using his tongue as a handkerchief.

The child was making them drag him along, *non passibus Cequis*, as Virgil says, and stumbling at every moment, to the great indignation of his mother. It is true that he was looking at his cake more than at the pavement.

Some serious motive, no doubt, prevented his biting it (the cake), for he contented himself with gazing tenderly at it. But the mother should have rather taken charge of the cake. It was cruel to make a Tantalus of the chubby-checked boy.

Meanwhile, the three demoiselles (for the name of dames was then reserved for noble women) were all talking at once.

"Let us make haste, Demoiselle Mahiette," said the youngest of the three, who was also the largest, to the provincial, "I greatly fear that we shall arrive too late; they told us at the Châtelet that they were going to take him directly to the pillory."

"Ah, bah! what are you saying, Demoiselle Oudarde Musnier?" interposed the other Parisienne. "There are two hours yet to the pillory. We have time enough. Have you ever seen any one pilloried, my dear Mahiette?"

"Yes," said the provincial, "at Reims."

"Ah, bah! What is your pillory at Reims? A miserable cage into which only peasants are turned. A great affair, truly!"

"Only peasants!" said Mahiette, "at the cloth market in Reims! We have seen very fine criminals there, who have killed their father and mother! Peasants! For what do you take us, Gervaise?"

It is certain that the provincial was on the point of taking offence, for the honor of her pillory. Fortunately, that discreet damoiselle, Oudarde Musnier, turned the conversation in time.

"By the way, Damoiselle Mahiette, what say you to our Flemish Ambassadors? Have you as fine ones at Reims?"

"I admit," replied Mahiette, "that it is only in Paris that such Flemings can be seen."

"Did you see among the embassy, that big ambassador who is a hosier?" asked Oudarde.

"Yes," said Mahiette. "He has the eye of a Saturn."

"And the big fellow whose face resembles a bare belly?" resumed Gervaise. "And the little one, with small eyes framed in red eyelids, pared down and slashed up like a thistle head?"

"'Tis their horses that are worth seeing," said Oudarde, "caparisoned as they are after the fashion of their country!"

"Ah my dear," interrupted provincial Mahiette, assuming in her turn an air of superiority, "what would you say then, if you had seen in '61, at the consecration at Reims, eighteen years ago, the horses of the princes and of the king's company? Housings and caparisons of all sorts; some of damask cloth, of fine cloth of gold, furred with sables; others of velvet, furred with ermine; others all embellished with goldsmith's work and large bells of gold and silver! And what money that had cost! And what handsome boy pages rode upon them!"

"That," replied Oudarde dryly, "does not prevent the Flemings having very fine horses, and having had a superb supper yesterday with monsieur, the provost of the merchants, at the Hôtel-de-Ville, where they were served with comfits and hippocras, and spices, and other singularities."

"What are you saying, neighbor!" exclaimed Gervaise. "It was with monsieur the cardinal, at the Petit Bourbon that they supped."

"Not at all. At the Hôtel-de-Ville.

"Yes, indeed. At the Petit Bourbon!"

"It was at the Hôtel-de-Ville," retorted Oudarde sharply, "and Dr. Scourable addressed them a harangue in Latin, which pleased them greatly. My husband, who is sworn bookseller told me."

"It was at the Petit Bourbon," replied Gervaise, with no less spirit, "and this is what monsieur the cardinal's procurator presented to them: twelve double quarts of hippocras, white, claret, and red; twenty-four boxes of double Lyons marchpane, gilded; as many torches, worth two livres a piece; and six demi-queues* of Beaune wine, white and claret, the best that could be found. I have it from my husband, who is a cinquantenier**, at the Parloir-aux Bourgeois, and who was this morning comparing the Flemish ambassadors with those of Prester John and the Emperor of Trebizond, who came from Mesopotamia to Paris, under the last king, and who wore rings in their ears."

* A Queue was a cask which held a hogshead and a half.

** A captain of fifty men.

"So true is it that they supped at the Hôtel-de-Ville," replied Oudarde but little affected by this catalogue, "that such a triumph of viands and comfits has never been seen."

"I tell you that they were served by Le Sec, sergeant of the city, at the Hôtel du Petit-Bourbon, and that that is where you are mistaken."

"At the Hôtel-de-Ville, I tell you!"

“At the Petit-Bourbon, my dear! and they had illuminated with magic glasses the word hope, which is written on the grand portal.”

“At the Hôtel-de-Ville! At the Hôtel-de-Ville! And Husson-le-Voir played the flute!”

“I tell you, no!”

“I tell you, yes!”

“I say, no!”

Plump and worthy Oudarde was preparing to retort, and the quarrel might, perhaps, have proceeded to a pulling of caps, had not Mahiette suddenly exclaimed,— “Look at those people assembled yonder at the end of the bridge! There is something in their midst that they are looking at!”

“In sooth,” said Gervaise, “I hear the sounds of a tambourine. I believe ’tis the little Esmeralda, who plays her mummeries with her goat. Eh, be quick, Mahiette! redouble your pace and drag along your boy. You are come hither to visit the curiosities of Paris. You saw the Flemings yesterday; you must see the gypsy to-day.”

“The gypsy!” said Mahiette, suddenly retracing her steps, and clasping her son’s arm forcibly. “God preserve me from it! She would steal my child from me! Come, Eustache!”

And she set out on a run along the quay towards the Grève, until she had left the bridge far behind her. In the meanwhile, the child whom she was dragging after her fell upon his knees; she halted breathless. Oudarde and Gervaise rejoined her.

“That gypsy steal your child from you!” said Gervaise. “That’s a singular freak of yours!”

Mahiette shook her head with a pensive air.

“The singular point is,” observed Oudarde, “that *la sachette* has the same idea about the Egyptian woman.”

“What is *la sachette*?” asked Mahiette.

“Hé!” said Oudarde, “Sister Gudule.”

“And who is Sister Gudule?” persisted Mahiette.

“You are certainly ignorant of all but your Reims, not to know that!” replied Oudarde. “’Tis the recluse of the Rat-Hole.”

“What!” demanded Mahiette, “that poor woman to whom we are carrying this cake?”

Oudarde nodded affirmatively.

“Precisely. You will see her presently at her window on the Grève. She has the same opinion as yourself of these vagabonds of Egypt, who play the tambourine and tell fortunes to the public. No one knows whence comes her horror of the gypsies and Egyptians. But you, Mahiette — why do you run so at the mere sight of them?”

“Oh!” said Mahiette, seizing her child’s round head in both hands, “I don’t want that to happen to me which happened to Paquette la Chantefleurie.”

“Oh! you must tell us that story, my good Mahiette,” said Gervaise, taking her arm.

“Gladly,” replied Mahiette, “but you must be ignorant of all but your Paris not to know that! I will tell you then (but ’tis not necessary for us to halt that I may tell you the tale), that Paquette la Chantefleurie was a pretty maid of eighteen when I was one myself, that is to say, eighteen years ago, and ’tis her own fault if she is not to-day, like me, a good, plump, fresh mother of six and thirty, with a husband and a son. However, after the age of fourteen, it was too late! Well, she was the daughter of Guybertant, minstrel of the barges at Reims, the same who had played before King Charles VII., at his coronation, when he descended our river Vesle from Sillery to Muison, when Madame the Maid of Orleans was also in the boat. The old father died when Paquette was still a mere child; she had then no one but her mother, the sister of M. Pradon, master-brazier and coppersmith in Paris, Rue Farm-Garlin, who died last year. You see she was of good family. The mother was a good simple woman, unfortunately, and she taught Paquette nothing but a bit of embroidery and toy-making which did not prevent the little one from growing very large and remaining very poor. They both dwelt at Reims, on the river front, Rue de Folle-Peine. Mark this: For I believe it was this which brought misfortune to Paquette. In ‘61, the year of the coronation of our King Louis XI. whom God preserve! Paquette was so gay and so pretty that she was called everywhere by no other name than “la Chantefleurie” — blossoming song. Poor girl! She had handsome teeth, she was fond of laughing and displaying them. Now, a maid who loves to laugh is on the road to weeping; handsome teeth ruin handsome eyes. So she was la Chantefleurie. She and her mother earned a precarious living; they had been very destitute since the death of the minstrel; their embroidery did not bring them in more than six farthings a week, which does not amount to quite two eagle liards. Where were the days when

Father Guybertant had earned twelve sous parisian, in a single coronation, with a song? One winter (it was in that same year of ‘61), when the two women had neither fagots nor firewood, it was very cold, which gave la Chantefleurie such a fine color that the men called her Paquette!* and many called her Pàquerette!** and she was ruined. — Eustache, just let me see you bite that cake if you dare! — We immediately perceived that she was ruined, one Sunday when she came to church with a gold cross about her neck. At fourteen years of age! do you see? First it was the young Vicomte de Cormontreuil, who has his bell tower three leagues distant from Reims; then Messire Henri de Triancourt, equerry to the King; then less than that, Chiart de Beaulion, sergeant-at-arms; then, still descending, Guery Aubergeon, carver to the King; then, Mace de Frépus, barber to monsieur the dauphin; then, Thévenin le Moine, King’s cook; then, the men growing continually younger and less noble, she fell to Guillaume Racine, minstrel of the hurdy gurdy and to Thierry de Mer, lamplighter. Then, poor Chantefleurie, she belonged to every one: she had reached the last sou of her gold piece. What shall I say to you, my damoiselles? At the coronation, in the same year, ‘61, ’twas she who made the bed of the king of the debauchees! In the same year!”

* Ox-eye daisy.

** Easter daisy.

Mahiette sighed, and wiped away a tear which trickled from her eyes.

“This is no very extraordinary history,” said Gervaise, “and in the whole of it I see nothing of any Egyptian women or children.”

“Patience!” resumed Mahiette, “you will see one child. — In ‘66, ‘twill be sixteen years ago this month, at Sainte-Paule’s day, Paquette was brought to bed of a little girl. The unhappy creature! it was a great joy to her; she had long wished for a child. Her mother, good woman, who had never known what to do except to shut her eyes, her mother was dead. Paquette had no longer any one to love in the world or any one to love her. La Chantefleurie had been a poor creature during the five years since her fall. She was alone, alone in this life, fingers were pointed at her, she was hooted at in the streets, beaten by the sergeants, jeered at by the little boys in rags. And then, twenty had arrived: and twenty is an old age for amorous women. Folly began to bring her in no more than her trade of embroidery in former days; for every wrinkle that came, a crown fled; winter became hard to her once more, wood became rare again in her brazier, and bread in her cupboard. She could no longer work because, in becoming voluptuous, she had grown lazy; and she suffered much more because, in growing lazy, she had become voluptuous. At least, that is the way in which monsieur the cure of Saint-Remy explains why these women are colder and hungrier than other poor women, when they are old."

"Yes," remarked Gervaise, "but the gypsies?"

"One moment, Gervaise!" said Oudarde, whose attention was less impatient. "What would be left for the end if all were in the beginning? Continue, Mahiette, I entreat you. That poor Chantefleurie!"

Mahiette went on.

"So she was very sad, very miserable, and furrowed her cheeks with tears. But in the midst of her shame, her folly, her debauchery, it seemed to her that she should be less wild, less shameful, less dissipated, if there were something or some one in the world whom she could love, and who could love her. It was necessary that it should be a child, because only a child could be sufficiently innocent for that. She had recognized this fact after having tried to love a thief, the only man who wanted her; but after a short time, she perceived that the thief despised her. Those women of love require either a lover or a child to fill their hearts. Otherwise, they are very unhappy. As she could not have a lover, she turned wholly towards a desire for a child, and as she had not ceased to be pious, she made her constant prayer to the good God for it. So the good God took pity on her, and gave her a little daughter. I will not speak to you of her joy; it was a fury of tears, and caresses, and kisses. She nursed her child herself, made swaddling-bands for it out of her coverlet, the only one which she had on her bed, and no longer felt either cold or hunger. She became beautiful once more, in consequence of it. An old maid makes a young mother. Gallantry claimed her once more; men came to see la Chantefleurie; she found customers again for her merchandise, and out of all these horrors she made baby clothes, caps and bibs, bodices with shoulder-straps of lace, and tiny bonnets of satin, without even thinking of buying herself another coverlet. — Master Eustache, I have already told you not to eat that cake. — It is certain that little Agnes, that was the child's name, a baptismal name, for it was a long time since la Chantefleurie had had any surname — it is certain that that little one was more swathed in ribbons and embroideries than a dauphiness of Dauphiny! Among other things, she had a pair of little shoes, the like of which King Louis XI. certainly never had! Her mother had stitched and embroidered them herself; she had lavished on them all the delicacies of her art of embroideress, and all the embellishments of a robe for the good Virgin. They certainly were the two prettiest little pink shoes that could be seen. They were no longer than my thumb, and one had to see the child's little feet come out of them, in order to believe that they had been able to get into them. 'Tis true that those little feet were so small, so pretty, so rosy! rosier than the satin of the shoes! When you have children, Oudarde, you will find that there is nothing prettier than those little hands and feet."

"I ask no better," said Oudarde with a sigh, "but I am waiting until it shall suit the good pleasure of M. Andry Musnier."

"However, Paquette's child had more that was pretty about it besides its feet. I saw her when she was only four months old; she was a love! She had eyes larger than her mouth, and the most charming black hair, which already curled. She would have been a magnificent brunette at the age of sixteen! Her mother became more crazy over her every day. She kissed her, caressed her, tickled her, washed her, decked her out, devoured her! She lost her head over her, she thanked God for her. Her pretty, little rosy feet above all were an endless source of wonderment, they were a delirium of joy! She was always pressing her lips to them, and she could never recover from her amazement at their smallness. She put them into the tiny shoes, took them out, admired them, marvelled at them, looked at the light through them, was curious to see them try to walk on her bed, and would gladly have passed her life on her knees, putting on and taking off the shoes from those feet, as though they had been those of an Infant Jesus."

"The tale is fair and good," said Gervaise in a low tone; "but where do gypsies come into all that?"

"Here," replied Mahiette. "One day there arrived in Reims a very queer sort of people. They were beggars and vagabonds who were roaming over the country, led by their duke and their counts. They were browned by exposure to the sun, they had closely curling hair, and silver rings in their ears. The women were still uglier than the men. They had blacker faces, which were always uncovered, a miserable frock on their bodies, an old cloth woven of cords bound upon their shoulder, and their hair hanging like the tail of a horse. The children who scrambled between their legs would have frightened as many monkeys. A band of excommunicates. All these persons came direct from lower Egypt to Reims through Poland. The Pope had confessed them, it was said, and had prescribed to them as penance to roam through the world for seven years, without sleeping in a bed; and so they were called penancers, and smelt horribly. It appears that they had formerly been Saracens, which was why they believed in Jupiter, and claimed ten livres of Tournay from all archbishops, bishops, and mitred abbots with croziers. A bull from the Pope empowered them to do that. They came to Reims to tell fortunes in the name of the King of Algiers, and the Emperor of Germany. You can readily imagine that no more was needed to cause the entrance to the town to be forbidden them. Then the whole band camped with good grace outside the gate of Braine, on that hill where stands a mill, beside the cavities of the ancient chalk pits. And everybody in Reims vied with his neighbor in going to see them. They looked at your hand, and told you marvellous prophecies; they were equal to predicting to Judas that he would become Pope. Nevertheless, ugly rumors were in circulation in regard to them; about children stolen, purses cut, and human flesh devoured. The wise people said to the foolish: “Don’t go there!” and then went themselves on the sly. It was an infatuation. The fact is, that they said things fit to astonish a cardinal. Mothers triumphed greatly over their little ones after the Egyptians had read in their hands all sorts of marvels written in pagan and in Turkish. One had an emperor; another, a pope; another, a captain. Poor Chantefleurie was seized with curiosity; she wished to know about herself, and whether her pretty little Agnes would not become some day Empress of Armenia, or something else. So she carried her to the Egyptians; and the Egyptian women fell to admiring the child, and to caressing it, and to kissing it with their black mouths, and to marvelling over its little band, alas! to the great joy of the mother. They were especially enthusiastic over her pretty feet and shoes. The child was not yet a year old. She already lisped a little, laughed at her mother like a little mad thing, was plump and quite round, and possessed a thousand charming little gestures of the angels of paradise.

“She was very much frightened by the Egyptians, and wept. But her mother kissed her more warmly and went away enchanted with the good fortune which the soothsayers had foretold for her Agnes. She was to be a beauty, virtuous, a queen. So she returned to her attic in the Rue Folle-Peine, very proud of bearing with her a queen. The next day she took advantage of a moment when the child was asleep on her bed, (for they always slept together), gently left the door a little way open, and ran to tell a neighbor in the Rue de la Séchesserie, that the day would come when her daughter Agnes would be served at table by the King of England and the Archduke of Ethiopia, and a hundred other marvels. On her return, hearing no cries on the staircase, she said to herself: ‘Good! the child is still asleep!’ She found her door wider open than she had left it, but she entered, poor mother, and ran to the bed. — The child was no longer there, the place was empty. Nothing remained of the child, but one of her pretty little shoes. She flew out of the room, dashed down the stairs, and began to beat her head against the wall, crying: ‘My child! who has my child? Who has taken my child?’ The street was deserted, the house isolated; no one could tell her anything about it. She went about the town, searched all the streets, ran hither and thither the whole day long, wild, beside herself, terrible, snuffing at doors and windows like a wild beast which has lost its young. She was breathless, dishevelled, frightful to see, and there was a fire in her eyes which dried her tears. She stopped the passers-by and cried: ‘My daughter! my daughter! my pretty little daughter! If any one will give me back my daughter, I will be his servant, the servant of his dog, and he shall eat my heart if he will.’ She met M. le Curé of Saint-Remy, and said to him: ‘Monsieur, I will till the earth with my finger-nails, but give me back my child!’ It was heartrending, Oudarde; and IL saw a very hard man, Master Ponce Lacabre, the procurator, weep. Ah! poor mother! In the evening she returned home. During her absence, a neighbor had seen two gypsies ascend up to it with a bundle in their arms, then descend again, after closing the door. After their departure, something like the cries of a child were heard in Paquette’s room. The mother, burst into shrieks of laughter, ascended the stairs as though on wings, and entered. — A frightful thing to tell, Oudarde! Instead of her pretty little Agnes, so rosy and so fresh, who was a gift of the good God, a sort of hideous little monster, lame, one-eyed, deformed, was crawling and squalling over the floor. She hid her eyes in horror. ‘Oh!’ said she, ‘have the witches transformed my daughter into this horrible animal?’ They hastened to carry away the little club-foot; he would have driven her mad. It was the monstrous child of some gypsy woman, who had given herself to the devil. He appeared to be about four years old, and talked a language which was no human tongue; there were words in it which were impossible. La Chantefleurie flung herself upon the little shoe, all that remained to her of all that she loved. She remained so long motionless over it, mute, and without breath, that they thought she was dead. Suddenly she trembled all over, covered her relic with furious kisses, and burst out sobbing as though her heart were broken. I assure you that we were all weeping also. She said: ‘Oh, my little daughter! my pretty little daughter! where art thou?’ — and it wrung your very heart. I weep still when I think of it. Our children are the marrow of our bones, you see. — My poor Eustache! thou art so fair! — If you only knew how nice he is! yesterday he said to me: ‘I want to be a gendarme, that I do.’ Oh! my Eustache! if I were to lose thee! — All at once la Chantefleurie rose, and set out to run through Reims, screaming: ‘To the gypsies’ camp! to the gypsies’ camp! Police, to burn the witches!’ The gypsies were gone. It was pitch dark. They could not be followed. On the morrow, two leagues from Reims, on a heath between Gueux and Tilloy, the remains of a large fire were found, some ribbons which had belonged to Paquette’s child, drops of blood, and the dung of a ram. The night just past had been a Saturday. There was no longer any doubt that the Egyptians had held their Sabbath on that heath, and that they had devoured the child in company with Beelzebub, as the practice is among the Mahometans. When La Chantefleurie learned these horrible things, she did not weep, she moved her lips as though to speak, but could not. On the morrow, her hair was gray. On the second day, she had disappeared.

“’Tis in truth, a frightful tale,” said Oudarde, “and one which would make even a Burgundian weep.”

“I am no longer surprised,” added Gervaise, “that fear of the gypsies should spur you on so sharply.”

“And you did all the better,” resumed Oudarde, “to flee with your Eustache just now, since these also are gypsies from Poland.”

“No,” said Gervais, “’tis said that they come from Spain and Catalonia.”

“Catalonia? ’tis possible,” replied Oudarde. “Pologne, Catalogue, Valogne, I always confound those three provinces, One thing is certain, that they are gypsies.”

“Who certainly,” added Gervaise, “have teeth long enough to eat little children. I should not be surprised if la Sméralda ate a little of them also, though she pretends to be dainty. Her white goat knows tricks that are too malicious for there not to be some impiety underneath it all.”

Mahiette walked on in silence. She was absorbed in that revery which is, in some sort, the continuation of a mournful tale, and which ends only after having communicated the emotion, from vibration to vibration, even to the very last fibres of the heart. Nevertheless, Gervaise addressed her, “And did they ever learn what became of la Chantefleurie?” Mahiette made no reply. Gervaise repeated her question, and shook her arm, calling her by name. Mahiette appeared to awaken from her thoughts.

“What became of la Chantefleurie?” she said, repeating mechanically the words whose impression was still fresh in her ear; then, ma king an effort to recall her attention to the meaning of her words, “Ah!” she continued briskly, “no one ever found out.”

She added, after a pause, —

“Some said that she had been seen to quit Reims at nightfall by the Fléchembault gate; others, at daybreak, by the old Basée gate. A poor man found her gold cross hanging on the stone cross in the field where the fair is held. It was that ornament which had wrought her ruin, in ‘61. It was a gift from the handsome Vicomte de Cormontreuil, her first lover. Paquette had never been willing to part with it, wretched as she had been. She had clung to it as to life itself. So, when we saw that cross abandoned, we all thought that she was dead. Nevertheless, there were people of the Cabaret les Vantes, who said that they had seen her pass along the road to Paris, walking on the pebbles with her bare feet. But, in that case, she must have gone out through the Porte de Vesle, and all this does not agree. Or, to speak more truly, I believe that she actually did depart by the Porte de Vesle, but departed from this world.”

“I do not understand you,” said Gervaise.

“La Vesle,” replied Mahiette, with a melancholy smile, “is the river.”

“Poor Chantefleurie!” said Oudarde, with a shiver,— “drowned!”

“Drowned!” resumed Mahiette, “who could have told good Father Guybertant, when he passed under the bridge of Tingueux with the current, singing in his barge, that one day his dear little Paquette would also pass beneath that bridge, but without song or boat.

“And the little shoe?” asked Gervaise.

“Disappeared with the mother,” replied Mahiette.

“Poor little shoe!” said Oudarde.

Oudarde, a big and tender woman, would have been well pleased to sigh in company with Mahiette. But Gervaise, more curious, had not finished her questions.

“And the monster?” she said suddenly, to Mahiette.

“What monster?” inquired the latter.

“The little gypsy monster left by the sorceresses in Chantefleurie’s chamber, in exchange for her daughter. What did you do with it? I hope you drowned it also.”

“No.” replied Mahiette.

“What? You burned it then? In sooth, that is more just. A witch child!”

“Neither the one nor the other, Gervaise. Monseigneur the archbishop interested himself in the child of Egypt, exorcised it, blessed it, removed the devil carefully from its body, and sent it to Paris, to be exposed on the wooden bed at Notre-Dame, as a foundling.”

“Those bishops!” grumbled Gervaise, “because they are learned, they do nothing like anybody else. I just put it to you, Oudarde, the idea of placing the devil among the foundlings! For that little monster was assuredly the devil. Well, Mahiette, what did they do with it in Paris? I am quite sure that no charitable person wanted it.”

“I do not know,” replied the Rémoise, “’twas just at that time that my husband bought the office of notary, at Bern, two leagues from the town, and we were no longer occupied with that story; besides, in front of Bern, stand the two hills of Cernay, which hide the towers of the cathedral in Reims from view.”

While chatting thus, the three worthy *bourgeoises* had arrived at the Place de Grève. In their absorption, they had passed the public breviary of the Tour-Roland without stopping, and took their way mechanically towards the pillory around which the throng was growing more dense with every moment. It is probable that the spectacle which at that moment attracted all looks in that direction, would have made them forget completely the Rat-Hole, and the halt which they intended to make there, if big Eustache, six years of age, whom Mahiette was dragging along by the hand, had not abruptly recalled the object to them: “Mother,” said he, as though some instinct warned him that the Rat-Hole was behind him, “can I eat the cake now?”

If Eustache had been more adroit, that is to say, less greedy, he would have continued to wait, and would only have hazarded that simple question, “Mother, can I eat the cake, now?” on their return to the University, to Master Andry Musnier’s, Rue Madame la Valence, when he had the two arms of the Seine and the five bridges of the city between the Rat-Hole and the cake.

This question, highly imprudent at the moment when Eustache put it, aroused Mahiette's attention.

"By the way," she exclaimed, "we are forgetting the recluse! Show me the Rat-Hole, that I may carry her her cake."

"Immediately," said Oudarde, "'tis a charity."

But this did not suit Eustache.

"Stop! my cake!" said he, rubbing both ears alternatively with his shoulders, which, in such cases, is the supreme sign of discontent.

The three women retraced their steps, and, on arriving in the vicinity of the Tour-Roland, Oudarde said to the other two, —

"We must not all three gaze into the hole at once, for fear of alarming the recluse. Do you two pretend to read the *Dominus* in the breviary, while I thrust my nose into the aperture; the recluse knows me a little. I will give you warning when you can approach."

She proceeded alone to the window. At the moment when she looked in, a profound pity was depicted on all her features, and her frank, gay visage altered its expression and color as abruptly as though it had passed from a ray of sunlight to a ray of moonlight; her eye became humid; her mouth contracted, like that of a person on the point of weeping. A moment later, she laid her finger on her lips, and made a sign to Mahiette to draw near and look.

Mahiette, much touched, stepped up in silence, on tiptoe, as though approaching the bedside of a dying person.

It was, in fact, a melancholy spectacle which presented itself to the eyes of the two women, as they gazed through the grating of the Rat-Hole, neither stirring nor breathing.

The cell was small, broader than it was long, with an arched ceiling, and viewed from within, it bore a considerable resemblance to the interior of a huge bishop's mitre. On the bare flagstones which formed the floor, in one corner, a woman was sitting, or rather, crouching. Her chin rested on her knees, which her crossed arms pressed forcibly to her breast. Thus doubled up, clad in a brown sack, which enveloped her entirely in large folds, her long, gray hair pulled over in front, falling over her face and along her legs nearly to her feet, she presented, at the first glance, only a strange form outlined against the dark background of the cell, a sort of dusky triangle, which the ray of daylight falling through the opening, cut roughly into two shades, the one sombre, the other illuminated. It was one of those spectres, half light, half shadow, such as one beholds in dreams and in the extraordinary work of Goya, pale, motionless, sinister, crouching over a tomb, or leaning against the grating of a prison cell.

It was neither a woman, nor a man, nor a living being, nor a definite form; it was a figure, a sort of vision, in which the real and the fantastic intersected each other, like darkness and day. It was with difficulty that one distinguished, beneath her hair which spread to the ground, a gaunt and severe profile; her dress barely allowed the extremity of a bare foot to escape, which contracted on the hard, cold pavement. The little of human form of which one caught a sight beneath this envelope of mourning, caused a shudder.

That figure, which one might have supposed to be riveted to the flagstones, appeared to possess neither movement, nor thought, nor breath. Lying, in January, in that thin, linen sack, lying on a granite floor, without fire, in the gloom of a cell whose oblique air-hole allowed only the cold breeze, but never the sun, to enter from without, she did not appear to suffer or even to think. One would have said that she had turned to stone with the cell, ice with the season. Her hands were clasped, her eyes fixed. At first sight one took her for a spectre; at the second, for a statue.

Nevertheless, at intervals, her blue lips half opened to admit a breath, and trembled, but as dead and as mechanical as the leaves which the wind sweeps aside.

Nevertheless, from her dull eyes there escaped a look, an ineffable look, a profound, lugubrious, imperturbable look, incessantly fixed upon a corner of the cell which could not be seen from without; a gaze which seemed to fix all the sombre thoughts of that soul in distress upon some mysterious object.

Such was the creature who had received, from her habitation, the name of the “recluse”; and, from her garment, the name of “the sacked nun.”

The three women, for Gervaise had rejoined Mahiette and Oudarde, gazed through the window. Their heads intercepted the feeble light in the cell, without the wretched being whom they thus deprived of it seeming to pay any attention to them. “Do not let us trouble her,” said Oudarde, in a low voice, “she is in her ecstasy; she is praying.”

Meanwhile, Mahiette was gazing with ever-increasing anxiety at that wan, withered, dishevelled head, and her eyes filled with tears. “This is very singular,” she murmured.

She thrust her head through the bars, and succeeded in casting a glance at the corner where the gaze of the unhappy woman was immovably riveted.

When she withdrew her head from the window, her countenance was inundated with tears.

“What do you call that woman?” she asked Oudarde.

Oudarde replied, —

“We call her Sister Gudule.”

“And I,” returned Mahiette, “call her Paquette la Chantefleurie.”

Then, laying her finger on her lips, she motioned to the astounded Oudarde to thrust her head through the window and look.

Oudarde looked and beheld, in the corner where the eyes of the recluse were fixed in that sombre ecstasy, a tiny shoe of pink satin, embroidered with a thousand fanciful designs in gold and silver.

Gervaise looked after Oudarde, and then the three women, gazing upon the unhappy mother, began to weep.

But neither their looks nor their tears disturbed the recluse. Her hands remained clasped; her lips mute; her eyes fixed; and that little shoe, thus gazed at, broke the heart of any one who knew her history.

The three women had not yet uttered a single word; they dared not speak, even in a low voice. This deep silence, this deep grief, this profound oblivion in which everything had disappeared except one thing, produced upon them the effect of the grand altar at Christmas or Easter. They remained silent, they meditated, they were ready to kneel. It seemed to them that they were ready to enter a church on the day of Tenebrae.

At length Gervaise, the most curious of the three, and consequently the least sensitive, tried to make the recluse speak:

“Sister! Sister Gudule!”

She repeated this call three times, raising her voice each time. The recluse did not move; not a word, not a glance, not a sigh, not a sign of life.

Oudarde, in her turn, in a sweeter, more caressing voice,— “Sister!” said she, “Sister Sainte-Gudule!”

The same silence; the same immobility.

“A singular woman!” exclaimed Gervaise, “and one not to be moved by a catapult!”

“Perchance she is deaf,” said Oudarde.

“Perhaps she is blind,” added Gervaise.

“Dead, perchance,” returned Mahiette.

It is certain that if the soul had not already quitted this inert, sluggish, lethargic body, it had at least retreated and concealed itself in depths whither the perceptions of the exterior organs no longer penetrated.

“Then we must leave the cake on the window,” said Oudarde; “some scamp will take it. What shall we do to rouse her?”

Eustache, who, up to that moment had been diverted by a little carriage drawn by a large dog, which had just passed, suddenly perceived that his three conductresses were gazing at something through the window, and, curiosity taking possession of him in his turn, he climbed upon a stone post, elevated himself on tiptoe, and applied his fat, red face to the opening, shouting, “Mother, let me see too!”

At the sound of this clear, fresh, ringing child’s voice, the recluse trembled; she turned her head with the sharp, abrupt movement of a steel spring, her long, fleshless hands cast aside the hair from her brow, and she fixed upon the child, bitter, astonished, desperate eyes. This glance was but a lightning flash.

“Oh my God!” she suddenly exclaimed, hiding her head on her knees, and it seemed as though her hoarse voice tore her chest as it passed from it, “do not show me those of others!”

“Good day, madam,” said the child, gravely.

Nevertheless, this shock had, so to speak, awakened the recluse. A long shiver traversed her frame from head to foot; her teeth chattered; she half raised her head and said, pressing her elbows against her hips, and clasping her feet in her hands as though to warm them, —

“Oh, how cold it is!”

“Poor woman!” said Oudarde, with great compassion, “would you like a little fire?”

She shook her head in token of refusal.

“Well,” resumed Oudarde, presenting her with a flagon; “here is some hippocras which will warm you; drink it.”

Again she shook her head, looked at Oudarde fixedly and replied, “Water.”

Oudarde persisted,— “No, sister, that is no beverage for January. You must drink a little hippocras and eat this leavened cake of maize, which we have baked for you.”

She refused the cake which Mahiette offered to her, and said, “Black bread.”

“Come,” said Gervaise, seized in her turn with an impulse of charity, and unfastening her woolen cloak, “here is a cloak which is a little warmer than yours.”

She refused the cloak as she had refused the flagon and the cake, and replied, “A sack.”

“But,” resumed the good Oudarde, “you must have perceived to some extent, that yesterday was a festival.”

“I do perceive it,” said the recluse; “’tis two days now since I have had any water in my crock.”

She added, after a silence, “’Tis a festival, I am forgotten. People do well. Why should the world think of me, when I do not think of it? Cold charcoal makes cold ashes.”

And as though fatigued with having said so much, she dropped her head on her knees again. The simple and charitable Oudarde, who fancied that she understood from her last words that she was complaining of the cold, replied innocently, “Then you would like a little fire?”

“Fire!” said the sacked nun, with a strange accent; “and will you also make a little for the poor little one who has been beneath the sod for these fifteen years?”

Every limb was trembling, her voice quivered, her eyes flashed, she had raised herself upon her knees; suddenly she extended her thin, white hand towards the child, who was regarding her with a look of astonishment. “Take away that child!” she cried. “The Egyptian woman is about to pass by.”

Then she fell face downward on the earth, and her forehead struck the stone, with the sound of one stone against another stone. The three women thought her dead. A moment later, however, she moved, and they beheld her drag herself, on her knees and elbows, to the corner where the little shoe was. Then they dared not look; they no longer saw her; but they heard a thousand kisses and a thousand sighs, mingled with heartrending cries, and dull blows like those of a head in contact with a wall. Then, after one of these blows, so violent that all three of them staggered, they heard no more.

“Can she have killed herself?” said Gervaise, venturing to pass her head through the air-hole. “Sister! Sister Gudule!”

“Sister Gudule!” repeated Oudarde.

“Ah! good heavens! she no longer moves!” resumed Gervaise; “is she dead? Gudule! Gudule!”

Mahiette, choked to such a point that she could not speak, made an effort. “Wait,” said she. Then bending towards the window, “Paquette!” she said, “Paquette le Chantefleurie!”

A child who innocently blows upon the badly ignited fuse of a bomb, and makes it explode in his face, is no more terrified than was Mahiette at the effect of that name, abruptly launched into the cell of Sister Gudule.

The recluse trembled all over, rose erect on her bare feet, and leaped at the window with eyes so glaring that Mahiette and Oudarde, and the other woman and the child recoiled even to the parapet of the quay.

Meanwhile, the sinister face of the recluse appeared pressed to the grating of the air-hole. “Oh! oh!” she cried, with an appalling laugh; “’tis the Egyptian who is calling me!”

At that moment, a scene which was passing at the pillory caught her wild eye. Her brow contracted with horror, she stretched her two skeleton arms from her cell, and shrieked in a voice which resembled a death-rattle, “So ’tis thou once more, daughter of Egypt! ’Tis thou who callest me, stealer of children! Well! Be thou accursed! accursed! accursed! accursed!”

CHAPTER IV. A TEAR FOR A DROP OF WATER.

These words were, so to speak, the point of union of two scenes, which had, up to that time, been developed in parallel lines at the same moment, each on its particular theatre; one, that which the reader has just perused, in the Rat-Hole; the other, which he is about to read, on the ladder of the pillory. The first had for witnesses only the three women with whom the reader has just made acquaintance; the second had for spectators all the public which we have seen above, collecting on the Place de Grève, around the pillory and the gibbet.

That crowd which the four sergeants posted at nine o’clock in the morning at the four corners of the pillory had inspired with the hope of some sort of an execution, no doubt, not a hanging, but a whipping, a cropping of ears, something, in short, — that crowd had increased so rapidly that the four policemen, too closely besieged, had had occasion to “press” it, as the expression then ran, more than once, by sound blows of their whips, and the haunches of their horses.

This populace, disciplined to waiting for public executions, did not manifest very much impatience. It amused itself with watching the pillory, a very simple sort of monument, composed of a cube of masonry about six feet high and hollow in the interior. A very steep staircase, of unhewn stone, which was called by distinction “the ladder,” led to the upper platform, upon which was visible a horizontal wheel of solid oak. The victim was bound upon this wheel, on his knees, with his hands behind his back. A wooden shaft, which set in motion a capstan concealed in the interior of the little edifice, imparted a rotatory motion to the wheel, which always maintained its horizontal position, and in this manner presented the face of the condemned man to all quarters of the square in succession. This was what was called “turning” a criminal.

As the reader perceives, the pillory of the Grève was far from presenting all the recreations of the pillory of the Halles. Nothing architectural, nothing monumental. No roof to the iron cross, no octagonal lantern, no frail, slender columns spreading out on the edge of the roof into capitals of acanthus leaves and flowers, no waterspouts of chimeras and monsters, on carved woodwork, no fine sculpture, deeply sunk in the stone.

They were forced to content themselves with those four stretches of rubble work, backed with sandstone, and a wretched stone gibbet, meagre and bare, on one side.

The entertainment would have been but a poor one for lovers of Gothic architecture. It is true that nothing was ever less curious on the score of architecture than the worthy gapers of the Middle Ages, and that they cared very little for the beauty of a pillory.

The victim finally arrived, bound to the tail of a cart, and when he had been hoisted upon the platform, where he could be seen from all points of the Place, bound with cords and straps upon the wheel of the pillory, a prodigious hoot, mingled with laughter and acclamations, burst forth upon the Place. They had recognized Quasimodo.

It was he, in fact. The change was singular. Pilloried on the very place where, on the day before, he had been saluted, acclaimed, and proclaimed Pope and Prince of Fools, in the cortege of the Duke of Egypt, the King of Thunes, and the Emperor of Galilee! One thing is certain, and that is, that there was not a soul in the crowd, not even himself, though in turn triumphant and the sufferer, who set forth this combination clearly in his thought. Gringoire and his philosophy were missing at this spectacle.

Soon Michel Noiret, sworn trumpeter to the king, our lord, imposed silence on the louts, and proclaimed the sentence, in accordance with the order and command of monsieur the provost. Then he withdrew behind the cart, with his men in livery surcoats.

Quasimodo, impassible, did not wince. All resistance had been rendered impossible to him by what was then called, in the style of the criminal chancellery, “the vehemence and firmness of the bonds” which means that the thongs and chains probably cut into his flesh; moreover, it is a tradition of jail and wardens, which has not been lost, and which the handcuffs still preciously preserve among us, a civilized, gentle, humane people (the galleys and the guillotine in parentheses).

He had allowed himself to be led, pushed, carried, lifted, bound, and bound again. Nothing was to be seen upon his countenance but the astonishment of a savage or an idiot. He was known to be deaf; one might have pronounced him to be blind.

They placed him on his knees on the circular plank; he made no resistance. They removed his shirt and doublet as far as his girdle; he allowed them to have their way. They entangled him under a fresh system of thongs and buckles; he allowed them to bind and buckle him. Only from time to time he snorted noisily, like a calf whose head is hanging and bumping over the edge of a butcher's cart.

"The dolt," said Jehan Frollo of the Mill, to his friend Robin Poussepain (for the two students had followed the culprit, as was to have been expected), "he understands no more than a cockchafer shut up in a box!"

There was wild laughter among the crowd when they beheld Quasimodo's hump, his camel's breast, his callous and hairy shoulders laid bare. During this gayety, a man in the livery of the city, short of stature and robust of mien, mounted the platform and placed himself near the victim. His name speedily circulated among the spectators. It was Master Pierrat Torterue, official torturer to the Châtelet.

He began by depositing on an angle of the pillory a black hour-glass, the upper lobe of which was filled with red sand, which it allowed to glide into the lower receptacle; then he removed his parti-colored surtout, and there became visible, suspended from his right hand, a thin and tapering whip of long, white, shining, knotted, plaited thongs, armed with metal nails. With his left hand, he negligently folded back his shirt around his right arm, to the very armpit.

In the meantime, Jehan Frollo, elevating his curly blonde head above the crowd (he had mounted upon the shoulders of Robin Poussepain for the purpose), shouted: "Come and look, gentle ladies and men! they are going to peremptorily flagellate Master Quasimodo, the bellringer of my brother, monsieur the archdeacon of Josas, a knave of oriental architecture, who has a back like a dome, and legs like twisted columns!"

And the crowd burst into a laugh, especially the boys and young girls.

At length the torturer stamped his foot. The wheel began to turn. Quasimodo wavered beneath his bonds. The amazement which was suddenly depicted upon his deformed face caused the bursts of laughter to redouble around him.

All at once, at the moment when the wheel in its revolution presented to Master Pierrat, the humped back of Quasimodo, Master Pierrat raised his arm; the fine thongs whistled sharply through the air, like a handful of adders, and fell with fury upon the wretch's shoulders.

Quasimodo leaped as though awakened with a start. He began to understand. He writhed in his bonds; a violent contraction of surprise and pain distorted the muscles of his face, but he uttered not a single sigh. He merely turned his head backward, to the right, then to the left, balancing it as a bull does who has been stung in the flanks by a gadfly.

A second blow followed the first, then a third, and another and another, and still others. The wheel did not cease to turn, nor the blows to rain down.

Soon the blood burst forth, and could be seen trickling in a thousand threads down the hunchback's black shoulders; and the slender thongs, in their rotatory motion which rent the air, sprinkled drops of it upon the crowd.

Quasimodo had resumed, to all appearance, his first imperturbability. He had at first tried, in a quiet way and without much outward movement, to break his bonds. His eye had been seen to light up, his muscles to stiffen, his members to concentrate their force, and the straps to stretch. The effort was powerful, prodigious, desperate; but the provost's seasoned bonds resisted. They cracked, and that was all. Quasimodo fell back exhausted. Amazement gave way, on his features, to a sentiment of profound and bitter discouragement. He closed his single eye, allowed his head to droop upon his breast, and feigned death.

From that moment forth, he stirred no more. Nothing could force a movement from him. Neither his blood, which did not cease to flow, nor the blows which redoubled in fury, nor the wrath of the torturer, who grew excited himself and intoxicated with the execution, nor the sound of the horrible thongs, more sharp and whistling than the claws of scorpions.

At length a bailiff from the Châtelet clad in black, mounted on a black horse, who had been stationed beside the ladder since the beginning of the execution, extended his ebony wand towards the hour-glass. The torturer stopped. The wheel stopped. Quasimodo's eye opened slowly.

The scourging was finished. Two lackeys of the official torturer bathed the bleeding shoulders of the patient, anointed them with some unguent which immediately closed all the wounds, and threw upon his back a sort of yellow vestment, in cut like a chasuble. In the meanwhile, Pierrat Torterue allowed the thongs, red and gorged with blood, to drip upon the pavement.

All was not over for Quasimodo. He had still to undergo that hour of pillory which Master Florian Barbedienne had so judiciously added to the sentence of Messire Robert d'Estouteville; all to the greater glory of the old physiological and psychological play upon words of Jean de Cumène, *Surdus absurdus*: a deaf man is absurd.

So the hour-glass was turned over once more, and they left the hunchback fastened to the plank, in order that justice might be accomplished to the very end.

The populace, especially in the Middle Ages, is in society what the child is in the family. As long as it remains in its state of primitive ignorance, of moral and intellectual minority, it can be said of it as of the child, —

’Tis the pitiless age.

We have already shown that Quasimodo was generally hated, for more than one good reason, it is true. There was hardly a spectator in that crowd who had not or who did not believe that he had reason to complain of the malevolent hunchback of Notre-Dame. The joy at seeing him appear thus in the pillory had been universal; and the harsh punishment which he had just suffered, and the pitiful condition in which it had left him, far from softening the populace had rendered its hatred more malicious by arming it with a touch of mirth.

Hence, the “public prosecution” satisfied, as the bigwigs of the law still express it in their jargon, the turn came of a thousand private vengeances. Here, as in the Grand Hall, the women rendered themselves particularly prominent. All cherished some rancor against him, some for his malice, others for his ugliness. The latter were the most furious.

“Oh! mask of Antichrist!” said one.

“Rider on a broom handle!” cried another.

“What a fine tragic grimace,” howled a third, “and who would make him Pope of the Fools if to-day were yesterday?”

“’Tis well,” struck in an old woman. “This is the grimace of the pillory. When shall we have that of the gibbet?”

“When will you be coiffed with your big bell a hundred feet under ground, cursed bellringer?”

“But ’tis the devil who rings the Angelus!”

“Oh! the deaf man! the one-eyed creature! the hunch-back! the monster!”

“A face to make a woman miscarry better than all the drugs and medicines!”

And the two scholars, Jehan du Moulin, and Robin Poussepain, sang at the top of their lungs, the ancient refrain, —

“*Une hart*
Pour le pendard!
Un fagot
Pour le magot!”*

* A rope for the gallows bird! A fagot for the ape.

A thousand other insults rained down upon him, and hoots and imprecations, and laughter, and now and then, stones.

Quasimodo was deaf but his sight was clear, and the public fury was no less energetically depicted on their visages than in their words. Moreover, the blows from the stones explained the bursts of laughter.

At first he held his ground. But little by little that patience which had borne up under the lash of the torturer, yielded and gave way before all these stings of insects. The bull of the Asturias who has been but little moved by the attacks of the picador grows irritated with the dogs and banderilleras.

He first cast around a slow glance of hatred upon the crowd. But bound as he was, his glance was powerless to drive away those flies which were stinging his wound. Then he moved in his bonds, and his furious exertions made the ancient wheel of the pillory shriek on its axle. All this only increased the derision and hooting.

Then the wretched man, unable to break his collar, like that of a chained wild beast, became tranquil once more; only at intervals a sigh of rage heaved the hollows of his chest. There was neither shame nor redness on his face. He was too far from the state of society, and too near the state of nature to know what shame was. Moreover, with such a degree of deformity, is infamy a thing that can be felt? But wrath, hatred, despair, slowly lowered over that hideous visage a cloud which grew ever more and more sombre, ever more and more charged with electricity, which burst forth in a thousand lightning flashes from the eye of the cyclops.

Nevertheless, that cloud cleared away for a moment, at the passage of a mule which traversed the crowd, bearing a priest. As far away as he could see that mule and that priest, the poor victim’s visage grew gentler. The fury which had contracted it was followed by a strange smile full of ineffable sweetness, gentleness, and tenderness. In proportion as the priest approached, that smile became more clear, more distinct, more radiant. It was like the arrival of a Saviour, which the unhappy man was greeting. But as soon as the mule was near enough to the pillory to allow of its rider recognizing the victim, the priest dropped his eyes, beat a hasty retreat, spurred on rigorously, as though in haste to rid himself of humiliating appeals, and not at all desirous of being saluted and recognized by a poor fellow in such a predicament.

This priest was Archdeacon Dom Claude Frollo.

The cloud descended more blackly than ever upon Quasimodo’s brow. The smile was still mingled with it for a time, but was bitter, discouraged, profoundly sad.

Time passed on. He had been there at least an hour and a half, lacerated, maltreated, mocked incessantly, and almost stoned.

All at once he moved again in his chains with redoubled despair, which made the whole framework that bore him tremble, and, breaking the silence which he had obstinately preserved hitherto, he cried in a hoarse and furious voice, which resembled a bark rather than a human cry, and which was drowned in the noise of the hoots— “Drink!”

This exclamation of distress, far from exciting compassion, only added amusement to the good Parisian populace who surrounded the ladder, and who, it must be confessed, taken in the mass and as a multitude, was then no less cruel and brutal than that horrible tribe of robbers among whom we have already conducted the reader, and which was simply the lower stratum of the populace. Not a voice was raised around the unhappy victim, except to jeer at his thirst. It is certain that at that moment he was more grotesque and repulsive than pitiable, with his face purple and dripping, his eye wild, his mouth foaming with rage and pain, and his tongue lolling half out. It must also be stated that if a charitable soul of a bourgeois or *bourgeoise,* in the rabble, had attempted to carry a glass of water to that wretched creature in torment, there reigned around the infamous steps of the pillory such a prejudice of shame and ignominy, that it would have sufficed to repulse the good Samaritan.

At the expiration of a few moments, Quasimodo cast a desperate glance upon the crowd, and repeated in a voice still more heartrending: “Drink!”

And all began to laugh.

“Drink this!” cried Robin Poussepain, throwing in his face a sponge which had been soaked in the gutter. “There, you deaf villain, I’m your debtor.”

A woman hurled a stone at his head, —

“That will teach you to wake us up at night with your peal of a dammed soul.”

“He, good, my son!” howled a cripple, making an effort to reach him with his crutch, “will you cast any more spells on us from the top of the towers of Notre-Dame?”

“Here’s a drinking cup!” chimed in a man, flinging a broken jug at his breast. “’Twas you that made my wife, simply because she passed near you, give birth to a child with two heads!”

“And my cat bring forth a kitten with six paws!” yelped an old crone, launching a brick at him.

“Drink!” repeated Quasimodo panting, and for the third time.

At that moment he beheld the crowd give way. A young girl, fantastically dressed, emerged from the throng. She was accompanied by a little white goat with gilded horns, and carried a tambourine in her hand.

Quasimodo’s eyes sparkled. It was the gypsy whom he had attempted to carry off on the preceding night, a misdeed for which he was dimly conscious that he was being punished at that very moment; which was not in the least the case, since he was being chastised only for the misfortune of being deaf, and of having been judged by a deaf man. He doubted not that she had come to wreak her vengeance also, and to deal her blow like the rest.

He beheld her, in fact, mount the ladder rapidly. Wrath and spite suffocate him. He would have liked to make the pillory crumble into ruins, and if the lightning of his eye could have dealt death, the gypsy would have been reduced to powder before she reached the platform.

She approached, without uttering a syllable, the victim who writhed in a vain effort to escape her, and detaching a gourd from her girdle, she raised it gently to the parched lips of the miserable man.

Then, from that eye which had been, up to that moment, so dry and burning, a big tear was seen to fall, and roll slowly down that deformed visage so long contracted with despair. It was the first, in all probability, that the unfortunate man had ever shed.

Meanwhile, he had forgotten to drink. The gypsy made her little pout, from impatience, and pressed the spout to the tusked month of Quasimodo, with a smile.

He drank with deep draughts. His thirst was burning.

When he had finished, the wretch protruded his black lips, no doubt, with the object of kissing the beautiful hand which had just succoured him. But the young girl, who was, perhaps, somewhat distrustful, and who remembered the violent attempt of the night, withdrew her hand with the frightened gesture of a child who is afraid of being bitten by a beast.

Then the poor deaf man fixed on her a look full of reproach and inexpressible sadness.

It would have been a touching spectacle anywhere, — this beautiful, fresh, pure, and charming girl, who was at the same time so weak, thus hastening to the relief of so much misery, deformity, and malevolence. On the pillory, the spectacle was sublime.

The very populace were captivated by it, and began to clap their hands, crying, —

“Noel! Noel!”

It was at that moment that the recluse caught sight, from the window of her bole, of the gypsy on the pillory, and hurled at her her sinister imprecation, —

“Accursed be thou, daughter of Egypt! Accursed! accursed!”

CHAPTER V. END OF THE STORY OF THE CAKE.

La Esmeralda turned pale and descended from the pillory, staggering as she went. The voice of the recluse still pursued her, —

“Descend! descend! Thief of Egypt! thou shalt ascend it once more!”

“The sacked nun is in one of her tantrums,” muttered the populace; and that was the end of it. For that sort of woman was feared; which rendered them sacred. People did not then willingly attack one who prayed day and night.

The hour had arrived for removing Quasimodo. He was unbound, the crowd dispersed.

Near the Grand Pont, Mahiette, who was returning with her two companions, suddenly halted, —

“By the way, Eustache! what did you do with that cake?”

“Mother,” said the child, “while you were talking with that lady in the bole, a big dog took a bite of my cake, and then I bit it also.”

“What, sir, did you eat the whole of it?” she went on.

“Mother, it was the dog. I told him, but he would not listen to me. Then I bit into it, also.”

“’Tis a terrible child!” said the mother, smiling and scolding at one and the same time. “Do you see, Oudarde? He already eats all the fruit from the cherry-tree in our orchard of Charlerange. So his grandfather says that he will be a captain. Just let me catch you at it again, Master Eustache. Come along, you greedy fellow!”

End of Volume 1.

VOLUME II.

CHAPTER I. THE DANGER OF CONFIDING ONE’S SECRET TO A GOAT.

Many weeks had elapsed.

The first of March had arrived. The sun, which Dubartas, that classic ancestor of periphrase, had not yet dubbed the “Grand-duke of Candles,” was none the less radiant and joyous on that account. It was one of those spring days which possesses so much sweetness and beauty, that all Paris turns out into the squares and promenades and celebrates them as though they were Sundays. In those days of brilliancy, warmth, and serenity, there is a certain hour above all others, when the façade of Notre-Dame should be admired. It is the moment when the sun, already declining towards the west, looks the cathedral almost full in the face. Its rays, growing more and more horizontal, withdraw slowly from the pavement of the square, and mount up the perpendicular façade, whose thousand bosses in high relief they cause to start out from the shadows, while the great central rose window flames like the eye of a cyclops, inflamed with the reflections of the forge.

This was the hour.

Opposite the lofty cathedral, reddened by the setting sun, on the stone balcony built above the porch of a rich Gothic house, which formed the angle of the square and the Rue du Parvis, several young girls were laughing and chatting with every sort of grace and mirth. From the length of the veil which fell from their pointed coif, twined with pearls, to their heels, from the fineness of the embroidered chemisette which covered their shoulders and allowed a glimpse, according to the pleasing custom of the time, of the swell of their fair virgin bosoms, from the opulence of their under-petticoats still more precious than their overdress (marvellous refinement), from the gauze, the silk, the velvet, with which all this was composed, and, above all, from the whiteness of their hands, which certified to their leisure and idleness, it was easy to divine they were noble and wealthy heiresses. They were, in fact, Damoiselle Fleur-de-Lys de Gondelaurier and her companions, Diane de Christeuil, Amelotte de Montmichel, Colombe de Gaillefontaine, and the little de Champchevrier maiden; all damsels of good birth, assembled at that moment at the house of the dame widow de Gondelaurier, on account of Monseigneur de Beaujeu and Madame his wife, who were to come to Paris in the month of April, there to choose maids of honor for the Dauphiness Marguerite, who was to be received in Picardy from the hands of the Flemings. Now, all the squires for twenty leagues around were intriguing for this favor for their daughters, and a goodly number of the latter had been already brought or sent to Paris. These four maidens had been confided to the discreet and venerable charge of Madame Aloise de Gondelaurier, widow of a former commander of the king's cross-bowmen, who had retired with her only daughter to her house in the Place du Parvis, Notre-Dame, in Paris.

The balcony on which these young girls stood opened from a chamber richly tapestried in fawn-colored Flanders leather, stamped with golden foliage. The beams, which cut the ceiling in parallel lines, diverted the eye with a thousand eccentric painted and gilded carvings. Splendid enamels gleamed here and there on carved chests; a boar's head in faience crowned a magnificent dresser, whose two shelves announced that the mistress of the house was the wife or widow of a knight banneret. At the end of the room, by the side of a lofty chimney blazoned with arms from top to bottom, in a rich red velvet arm-chair, sat Dame de Gondelaurier, whose five and fifty years were written upon her garments no less distinctly than upon her face.

Beside her stood a young man of imposing mien, although partaking somewhat of vanity and bravado — one of those handsome fellows whom all women agree to admire, although grave men learned in physiognomy shrug their shoulders at them. This young man wore the garb of a captain of the king's unattached archers, which bears far too much resemblance to the costume of Jupiter, which the reader has already been enabled to admire in the first book of this history, for us to inflict upon him a second description.

The damoiselles were seated, a part in the chamber, a part in the balcony, some on square cushions of Utrecht velvet with golden corners, others on stools of oak carved in flowers and figures. Each of them held on her knee a section of a great needlework tapestry, on which they were working in company, while one end of it lay upon the rush mat which covered the floor.

They were chatting together in that whispering tone and with the half-stifled laughs peculiar to an assembly of young girls in whose midst there is a young man. The young man whose presence served to set in play all these feminine self-conceits, appeared to pay very little heed to the matter, and, while these pretty damsels were vying with one another to attract his attention, he seemed to be chiefly absorbed in polishing the buckle of his sword belt with his doeskin glove. From time to time, the old lady addressed him in a very low tone, and he replied as well as he was able, with a sort of awkward and constrained politeness.

From the smiles and significant gestures of Dame Aloise, from the glances which she threw towards her daughter, Fleur-de-Lys, as she spoke low to the captain, it was easy to see that there was here a question of some betrothal concluded, some marriage near at hand no doubt, between the young man and Fleur-de-Lys. From the embarrassed coldness of the officer, it was easy to see that on his side, at least, love had no longer any part in the matter. His whole air was expressive of constraint and weariness, which our lieutenants of the garrison would to-day translate admirably as, “What a beastly bore!”

The poor dame, very much infatuated with her daughter, like any other silly mother, did not perceive the officer’s lack of enthusiasm, and strove in low tones to call his attention to the infinite grace with which Fleur-de-Lys used her needle or wound her skein.

“Come, little cousin,” she said to him, plucking him by the sleeve, in order to speak in his ear, “Look at her, do! see her stoop.”

“Yes, truly,” replied the young man, and fell back into his glacial and absent-minded silence.

A moment later, he was obliged to bend down again, and Dame Aloise said to him, —

“Have you ever beheld a more gay and charming face than that of your betrothed? Can one be more white and blonde? are not her hands perfect? and that neck — does it not assume all the curves of the swan in ravishing fashion? How I envy you at times! and how happy you are to be a man, naughty libertine that you are! Is not my Fleur-de-Lys adorably beautiful, and are you not desperately in love with her?”

“Of course,” he replied, still thinking of something else.

“But do say something,” said Madame Aloise, suddenly giving his shoulder a push; “you have grown very timid.”

We can assure our readers that timidity was neither the captain’s virtue nor his defect. But he made an effort to do what was demanded of him.

“Fair cousin,” he said, approaching Fleur-de-Lys, “what is the subject of this tapestry work which you are fashioning?” “Fair cousin,” responded Fleur-de-Lys, in an offended tone, “I have already told you three times. ’Tis the grotto of Neptune.”

It was evident that Fleur-de-Lys saw much more clearly than her mother through the captain’s cold and absent-minded manner. He felt the necessity of making some conversation.

“And for whom is this Neptunerie destined?”

“For the Abbey of Saint-Antoine des Champs,” answered Fleur-de-Lys, without raising her eyes.

The captain took up a corner of the tapestry.

“Who, my fair cousin, is this big gendarme, who is puffing out his cheeks to their full extent and blowing a trumpet?”

“’Tis Triton,” she replied.

There was a rather pettish intonation in Fleur-de-Lys’s — laconic words. The young man understood that it was indispensable that he should whisper something in her ear, a commonplace, a gallant compliment, no matter what. Accordingly he bent down, but he could find nothing in his imagination more tender and personal than this, —

“Why does your mother always wear that surcoat with armorial designs, like our grandmothers of the time of Charles VII.? Tell her, fair cousin, that ’tis no longer the fashion, and that the hinge (gond) and the laurel (laurier) embroidered on her robe give her the air of a walking mantlepiece. In truth, people no longer sit thus on their banners, I assure you.”

Fleur-de-Lys raised her beautiful eyes, full of reproach, “Is that all of which you can assure me?” she said, in a low voice.

In the meantime, Dame Aloise, delighted to see them thus bending towards each other and whispering, said as she toyed with the clasps of her prayer-book, —

“Touching picture of love!”

The captain, more and more embarrassed, fell back upon the subject of the tapestry,—”’Tis, in sooth, a charming work!” he exclaimed.

Whereupon Colombe de Gaillefontaine, another beautiful blonde, with a white skin, dressed to the neck in blue damask, ventured a timid remark which she addressed to Fleur-de-Lys, in the hope that the handsome captain would reply to it, “My dear Gondelaurier, have you seen the tapestries of the Hôtel de la Roche-Guyon?”

“Is not that the hotel in which is enclosed the garden of the Lingère du Louvre?” asked Diane de Christeuil with a laugh; for she had handsome teeth, and consequently laughed on every occasion.

“And where there is that big, old tower of the ancient wall of Paris,” added Amelotte de Montmichel, a pretty fresh and curly-headed brunette, who had a habit of sighing just as the other laughed, without knowing why.

“My dear Colombe,” interpolated Dame Aloise, “do you not mean the hotel which belonged to Monsieur de Bacqueville, in the reign of King Charles VI.? there are indeed many superb high warp tapestries there.”

“Charles VI.! Charles VI.!” muttered the young captain, twirling his moustache. “Good heavens! what old things the good dame does remember!”

Madame de Gondelaurier continued, “Fine tapestries, in truth. A work so esteemed that it passes as unrivalled.”

At that moment Bérangère de Champchevrier, a slender little maid of seven years, who was peering into the square through the trefoils of the balcony, exclaimed, “Oh! look, fair Godmother Fleur-de-Lys, at that pretty dancer who is dancing on the pavement and playing the tambourine in the midst of the loutish bourgeois!”

The sonorous vibration of a tambourine was, in fact, audible. “Some gypsy from Bohemia,” said Fleur-de-Lys, turning carelessly toward the square.

“Look! look!” exclaimed her lively companions; and they all ran to the edge of the balcony, while Fleur-de-Lys, rendered thoughtful by the coldness of her betrothed, followed them slowly, and the latter, relieved by this incident, which put an end to an embarrassing conversation, retreated to the farther end of the room, with the satisfied air of a soldier released from duty. Nevertheless, the fair Fleur-de-Lys’s was a charming and noble service, and such it had formerly appeared to him; but the captain had gradually become blase’; the prospect of a speedy marriage cooled him more every day. Moreover, he was of a fickle disposition, and, must we say it, rather vulgar in taste. Although of very noble birth, he had contracted in his official harness more than one habit of the common trooper. The tavern and its accompaniments pleased him. He was only at his ease amid gross language, military gallantries, facile beauties, and successes yet more easy. He had, nevertheless, received from his family some education and some politeness of manner; but he had been thrown on the world too young, he had been in garrison at too early an age, and every day the polish of a gentleman became more and more effaced by the rough friction of his gendarme’s cross-belt. While still continuing to visit her from time to time, from a remnant of common respect, he felt doubly embarrassed with Fleur-de-Lys; in the first place, because, in consequence of having scattered his love in all sorts of places, he had reserved very little for her; in the next place, because, amid so many stiff, formal, and decent ladies, he was in constant fear lest his mouth, habituated to oaths, should suddenly take the bit in its teeth, and break out into the language of the tavern. The effect can be imagined!

Moreover, all this was mingled in him, with great pretentions to elegance, toilet, and a fine appearance. Let the reader reconcile these things as best he can. I am simply the historian.

He had remained, therefore, for several minutes, leaning in silence against the carved jamb of the chimney, and thinking or not thinking, when Fleur-de-Lys suddenly turned and addressed him. After all, the poor young girl was pouting against the dictates of her heart.

“Fair cousin, did you not speak to us of a little Bohemian whom you saved a couple of months ago, while making the patrol with the watch at night, from the hands of a dozen robbers?”

“I believe so, fair cousin,” said the captain.

“Well,” she resumed, “perchance ’tis that same gypsy girl who is dancing yonder, on the church square. Come and see if you recognize her, fair Cousin Phoebus.”

A secret desire for reconciliation was apparent in this gentle invitation which she gave him to approach her, and in the care which she took to call him by name. Captain Phoebus de Châteaupers (for it is he whom the reader has had before his eyes since the beginning of this chapter) slowly approached the balcony. “Stay,” said Fleur-de-Lys, laying her hand tenderly on Phoebus’s arm; “look at that little girl yonder, dancing in that circle. Is she your Bohemian?”

Phoebus looked, and said, —

“Yes, I recognize her by her goat.”

“Oh! in fact, what a pretty little goat!” said Amelotte, clasping her hands in admiration.

“Are his horns of real gold?” inquired Bérangère.

Without moving from her arm-chair, Dame Aloise interposed, “Is she not one of those gypsy girls who arrived last year by the Gibard gate?”

“Madame my mother,” said Fleur-de-Lys gently, “that gate is now called the Porte d’Enfer.”

Mademoiselle de Gondelaurier knew how her mother’s antiquated mode of speech shocked the captain. In fact, he began to sneer, and muttered between his teeth: “Porte Gibard! Porte Gibard! ’Tis enough to make King Charles VI. pass by.”

“Godmother!” exclaimed Bérangère, whose eyes, incessantly in motion, had suddenly been raised to the summit of the towers of Notre-Dame, “who is that black man up yonder?”

All the young girls raised their eyes. A man was, in truth, leaning on the balustrade which surmounted the northern tower, looking on the Grève. He was a priest. His costume could be plainly discerned, and his face resting on both his hands. But he stirred no more than if he had been a statue. His eyes, intently fixed, gazed into the Place.

It was something like the immobility of a bird of prey, who has just discovered a nest of sparrows, and is gazing at it.

“’Tis monsieur the archdeacon of Josas,” said Fleur-de-Lys.

“You have good eyes if you can recognize him from here,” said the Gaillefontaine.

“How he is staring at the little dancer!” went on Diane de Christeuil.

“Let the gypsy beware!” said Fleur-de-Lys, “for he loves not Egypt.”

“’Tis a great shame for that man to look upon her thus,” added Amelotte de Montmichel, “for she dances delightfully.”

“Fair cousin Phoebus,” said Fleur-de-Lys suddenly, “Since you know this little gypsy, make her a sign to come up here. It will amuse us.”

“Oh, yes!” exclaimed all the young girls, clapping their hands.

“Why! ’tis not worth while,” replied Phoebus. “She has forgotten me, no doubt, and I know not so much as her name. Nevertheless, as you wish it, young ladies, I will make the trial.” And leaning over the balustrade of the balcony, he began to shout, “Little one!”

The dancer was not beating her tambourine at the moment. She turned her head towards the point whence this call proceeded, her brilliant eyes rested on Phoebus, and she stopped short.

“Little one!” repeated the captain; and he beckoned her to approach.

The young girl looked at him again, then she blushed as though a flame had mounted into her cheeks, and, taking her tambourine under her arm, she made her way through the astonished spectators towards the door of the house where Phoebus was calling her, with slow, tottering steps, and with the troubled look of a bird which is yielding to the fascination of a serpent.

A moment later, the tapestry portière was raised, and the gypsy appeared on the threshold of the chamber, blushing, confused, breathless, her large eyes drooping, and not daring to advance another step.

Bérangère clapped her hands.

Meanwhile, the dancer remained motionless upon the threshold. Her appearance had produced a singular effect upon these young girls. It is certain that a vague and indistinct desire to please the handsome officer animated them all, that his splendid uniform was the target of all their coquetries, and that from the moment he presented himself, there existed among them a secret, suppressed rivalry, which they hardly acknowledged even to themselves, but which broke forth, none the less, every instant, in their gestures and remarks. Nevertheless, as they were all very nearly equal in beauty, they contended with equal arms, and each could hope for the victory. — The arrival of the gypsy suddenly destroyed this equilibrium. Her beauty was so rare, that, at the moment when she appeared at the entrance of the apartment, it seemed as though she diffused a sort of light which was peculiar to herself. In that narrow chamber, surrounded by that sombre frame of hangings and woodwork, she was incomparably more beautiful and more radiant than on the public square. She was like a torch which has suddenly been brought from broad daylight into the dark. The noble damsels were dazzled by her in spite of themselves. Each one felt herself, in some sort, wounded in her beauty. Hence, their battle front (may we be allowed the expression,) was immediately altered, although they exchanged not a single word. But they understood each other perfectly. Women's instincts comprehend and respond to each other more quickly than the intelligences of men. An enemy had just arrived; all felt it — all rallied together. One drop of wine is sufficient to tinge a glass of water red; to diffuse a certain degree of ill temper throughout a whole assembly of pretty women, the arrival of a prettier woman suffices, especially when there is but one man present.

Hence the welcome accorded to the gypsy was marvellously glacial. They surveyed her from head to foot, then exchanged glances, and all was said; they understood each other. Meanwhile, the young girl was waiting to be spoken to, in such emotion that she dared not raise her eyelids.

The captain was the first to break the silence. “Upon my word,” said he, in his tone of intrepid fatuity, “here is a charming creature! What think you of her, fair cousin?”

This remark, which a more delicate admirer would have uttered in a lower tone, at least was not of a nature to dissipate the feminine jealousies which were on the alert before the gypsy.

Fleur-de-Lys replied to the captain with a bland affectation of disdain;—“Not bad.”

The others whispered.

At length, Madame Aloise, who was not the less jealous because she was so for her daughter, addressed the dancer,— “Approach, little one.”

“Approach, little one!” repeated, with comical dignity, little Bérangère, who would have reached about as high as her hips.

The gypsy advanced towards the noble dame.

“Fair child,” said Phoebus, with emphasis, taking several steps towards her, “I do not know whether I have the supreme honor of being recognized by you.”

She interrupted him, with a smile and a look full of infinite sweetness, —

“Oh! yes,” said she.

“She has a good memory,” remarked Fleur-de-Lys.

“Come, now,” resumed Phoebus, “you escaped nimbly the other evening. Did I frighten you!”

“Oh! no,” said the gypsy.

There was in the intonation of that “Oh! no,” uttered after that “Oh! yes,” an ineffable something which wounded Fleur-de-Lys.

“You left me in your stead, my beauty,” pursued the captain, whose tongue was unloosed when speaking to a girl out of the street, “a crabbed knave, one-eyed and hunchbacked, the bishop’s bellringer, I believe. I have been told that by birth he is the bastard of an archdeacon and a devil. He has a pleasant name: he is called *Quatre-Temps* (Ember Days), *Paques-Fleuries* (Palm Sunday), Mardi-Gras (Shrove Tuesday), I know not what! The name of some festival when the bells are pealed! So he took the liberty of carrying you off, as though you were made for beadles! ’Tis too much. What the devil did that screech-owl want with you? Hey, tell me!”

“I do not know,” she replied.

“The inconceivable impudence! A bellringer carrying off a wench, like a vicomte! a lout poaching on the game of gentlemen! that is a rare piece of assurance. However, he paid dearly for it. Master Pierrat Torterue is the harshest groom that ever curried a knave; and I can tell you, if it will be agreeable to you, that your bellringer's hide got a thorough dressing at his hands."

"Poor man!" said the gypsy, in whom these words revived the memory of the pillory.

The captain burst out laughing.

"Corne-de-boeuf! here's pity as well placed as a feather in a pig's tail! May I have as big a belly as a pope, if—"

He stopped short. "Pardon me, ladies; I believe that I was on the point of saying something foolish."

"Fie, sir" said la Gaillefontaine.

"He talks to that creature in her own tongue!" added Fleur-de-Lys, in a low tone, her irritation increasing every moment. This irritation was not diminished when she beheld the captain, enchanted with the gypsy, and, most of all, with himself, execute a pirouette on his heel, repeating with coarse, naïve, and soldierly gallantry, —

"A handsome wench, upon my soul!"

"Rather savagely dressed," said Diane de Christeuil, laughing to show her fine teeth.

This remark was a flash of light to the others. Not being able to impugn her beauty, they attacked her costume.

"That is true," said la Montmichel; "what makes you run about the streets thus, without guimpe or ruff?"

"That petticoat is so short that it makes one tremble," added la Gaillefontaine.

"My dear," continued Fleur-de-Lys, with decided sharpness, "You will get yourself taken up by the sumptuary police for your gilded girdle."

"Little one, little one;" resumed la Christeuil, with an implacable smile, "if you were to put respectable sleeves upon your arms they would get less sunburned."

It was, in truth, a spectacle worthy of a more intelligent spectator than Phoebus, to see how these beautiful maidens, with their envenomed and angry tongues, wound, serpent-like, and glided and writhed around the street dancer. They were cruel and graceful; they searched and rummaged maliciously in her poor and silly toilet of spangles and tinsel. There was no end to their laughter, irony, and humiliation. Sarcasms rained down upon the gypsy, and haughty condescension and malevolent looks. One would have thought they were young Roman dames thrusting golden pins into the breast of a beautiful slave. One would have pronounced them elegant grayhounds, circling, with inflated nostrils, round a poor woodland fawn, whom the glance of their master forbade them to devour.

After all, what was a miserable dancer on the public squares in the presence of these high-born maidens? They seemed to take no heed of her presence, and talked of her aloud, to her face, as of something unclean, abject, and yet, at the same time, passably pretty.

The gypsy was not insensible to these pin-pricks. From time to time a flush of shame, a flash of anger inflamed her eyes or her cheeks; with disdain she made that little grimace with which the reader is already familiar, but she remained motionless; she fixed on Phoebus a sad, sweet, resigned look. There was also happiness and tenderness in that gaze. One would have said that she endured for fear of being expelled.

Phoebus laughed, and took the gypsy’s part with a mixture of impertinence and pity.

“Let them talk, little one!” he repeated, jingling his golden spurs. “No doubt your toilet is a little extravagant and wild, but what difference does that make with such a charming damsel as yourself?”

“Good gracious!” exclaimed the blonde Gaillefontaine, drawing up her swan-like throat, with a bitter smile. “I see that messieurs the archers of the king’s police easily take fire at the handsome eyes of gypsies!”

“Why not?” said Phoebus.

At this reply uttered carelessly by the captain, like a stray stone, whose fall one does not even watch, Colombe began to laugh, as well as Diane, Amelotte, and Fleur-de-Lys, into whose eyes at the same time a tear started.

The gypsy, who had dropped her eyes on the floor at the words of Colombe de Gaillefontaine, raised them beaming with joy and pride and fixed them once more on Phoebus. She was very beautiful at that moment.

The old dame, who was watching this scene, felt offended, without understanding why.

“Holy Virgin!” she suddenly exclaimed, “what is it moving about my legs? Ah! the villanous beast!”

It was the goat, who had just arrived, in search of his mistress, and who, in dashing towards the latter, had begun by entangling his horns in the pile of stuffs which the noble dame’s garments heaped up on her feet when she was seated.

This created a diversion. The gypsy disentangled his horns without uttering a word.

“Oh! here’s the little goat with golden hoofs!” exclaimed Bérangère, dancing with joy.

The gypsy crouched down on her knees and leaned her cheek against the fondling head of the goat. One would have said that she was asking pardon for having quitted it thus.

Meanwhile, Diane had bent down to Colombe’s ear.

“Ah! good heavens! why did not I think of that sooner? ’Tis the gypsy with the goat. They say she is a sorceress, and that her goat executes very miraculous tricks.”

“Well!” said Colombe, “the goat must now amuse us in its turn, and perform a miracle for us.”

Diane and Colombe eagerly addressed the gypsy.

“Little one, make your goat perform a miracle.”

“I do not know what you mean,” replied the dancer.

“A miracle, a piece of magic, a bit of sorcery, in short.”

“I do not understand.” And she fell to caressing the pretty animal, repeating, “Djali! Djali!”

At that moment Fleur-de-Lys noticed a little bag of embroidered leather suspended from the neck of the goat,— “What is that?” she asked of the gypsy.

The gypsy raised her large eyes upon her and replied gravely,— “That is my secret.”

“I should really like to know what your secret is,” thought Fleur-de-Lys.

Meanwhile, the good dame had risen angrily,— “Come now, gypsy, if neither you nor your goat can dance for us, what are you doing here?”

The gypsy walked slowly towards the door, without making any reply. But the nearer she approached it, the more her pace slackened. An irresistible magnet seemed to hold her. Suddenly she turned her eyes, wet with tears, towards Phoebus, and halted.

“True God!” exclaimed the captain, “that’s not the way to depart. Come back and dance something for us. By the way, my sweet love, what is your name?”

“La Esmeralda,” said the dancer, never taking her eyes from him.

At this strange name, a burst of wild laughter broke from the young girls.

“Here’s a terrible name for a young lady,” said Diane.

“You see well enough,” retorted Amelotte, “that she is an enchantress.”

“My dear,” exclaimed Dame Aloise solemnly, “your parents did not commit the sin of giving you that name at the baptismal font.”

In the meantime, several minutes previously, Bérangère had coaxed the goat into a corner of the room with a marchpane cake, without any one having noticed her. In an instant they had become good friends. The curious child had detached the bag from the goat’s neck, had opened it, and had emptied out its contents on the rush matting; it was an alphabet, each letter of which was separately inscribed on a tiny block of boxwood. Hardly had these playthings been spread out on the matting, when the child, with surprise, beheld the goat (one of whose “miracles” this was no doubt), draw out certain letters with its golden hoof, and arrange them, with gentle pushes, in a certain order. In a moment they constituted a word, which the goat seemed to have been trained to write, so little hesitation did it show in forming it, and Bérangère suddenly exclaimed, clasping her hands in admiration, —

“Godmother Fleur-de-Lys, see what the goat has just done!”

Fleur-de-Lys ran up and trembled. The letters arranged upon the floor formed this word, —

PHOEBUS.

“Was it the goat who wrote that?” she inquired in a changed voice.

“Yes, godmother,” replied Bérangêre.

It was impossible to doubt it; the child did not know how to write.

“This is the secret!” thought Fleur-de-Lys.

Meanwhile, at the child’s exclamation, all had hastened up, the mother, the young girls, the gypsy, and the officer.

The gypsy beheld the piece of folly which the goat had committed. She turned red, then pale, and began to tremble like a culprit before the captain, who gazed at her with a smile of satisfaction and amazement.

“Phoebus!” whispered the young girls, stupefied: “’tis the captain’s name!”

“You have a marvellous memory!” said Fleur-de-Lys, to the petrified gypsy. Then, bursting into sobs: “Oh!” she stammered mournfully, hiding her face in both her beautiful hands, “she is a magician!” And she heard another and a still more bitter voice at the bottom of her heart, saying,— “She is a rival!”

She fell fainting.

“My daughter! my daughter!” cried the terrified mother. “Begone, you gypsy of hell!”

In a twinkling, La Esmeralda gathered up the unlucky letters, made a sign to Djali, and went out through one door, while Fleur-de-Lys was being carried out through the other.

Captain Phoebus, on being left alone, hesitated for a moment between the two doors, then he followed the gypsy.

CHAPTER II. A PRIEST AND A PHILOSOPHER ARE TWO DIFFERENT THINGS.

The priest whom the young girls had observed at the top of the North tower, leaning over the Place and so attentive to the dance of the gypsy, was, in fact, Archdeacon Claude Frollo.

Our readers have not forgotten the mysterious cell which the archdeacon had reserved for himself in that tower. (I do not know, by the way be it said, whether it be not the same, the interior of which can be seen to-day through a little square window, opening to the east at the height of a man above the platform from which the towers spring; a bare and dilapidated den, whose badly plastered walls are ornamented here and there, at the present day, with some wretched yellow engravings representing the façades of cathedrals. I presume that this hole is jointly inhabited by bats and spiders, and that, consequently, it wages a double war of extermination on the flies).

Every day, an hour before sunset, the archdeacon ascended the staircase to the tower, and shut himself up in this cell, where he sometimes passed whole nights. That day, at the moment when, standing before the low door of his retreat, he was fitting into the lock the complicated little key which he always carried about him in the purse suspended to his side, a sound of tambourine and castanets had reached his ear. These sounds came from the Place du Parvis. The cell, as we have already said, had only one window opening upon the rear of the church. Claude Frollo had hastily withdrawn the key, and an instant later, he was on the top of the tower, in the gloomy and pensive attitude in which the maidens had seen him.

There he stood, grave, motionless, absorbed in one look and one thought. All Paris lay at his feet, with the thousand spires of its edifices and its circular horizon of gentle hills — with its river winding under its bridges, and its people moving to and fro through its streets, — with the clouds of its smoke, — with the mountainous chain of its roofs which presses Notre-Dame in its doubled folds; but out of all the city, the archdeacon gazed at one corner only of the pavement, the Place du Parvis; in all that throng at but one figure, — the gypsy.

It would have been difficult to say what was the nature of this look, and whence proceeded the flame that flashed from it. It was a fixed gaze, which was, nevertheless, full of trouble and tumult. And, from the profound immobility of his whole body, barely agitated at intervals by an involuntary shiver, as a tree is moved by the wind; from the stiffness of his elbows, more marble than the balustrade on which they leaned; or the sight of the petrified smile which contracted his face, — one would have said that nothing living was left about Claude Frollo except his eyes.

The gypsy was dancing; she was twirling her tambourine on the tip of her finger, and tossing it into the air as she danced Provençal sarabands; agile, light, joyous, and unconscious of the formidable gaze which descended perpendicularly upon her head.

The crowd was swarming around her; from time to time, a man accoutred in red and yellow made them form into a circle, and then returned, seated himself on a chair a few paces from the dancer, and took the goat's head on his knees. This man seemed to be the gypsy's companion. Claude Frollo could not distinguish his features from his elevated post.

From the moment when the archdeacon caught sight of this stranger, his attention seemed divided between him and the dancer, and his face became more and more gloomy. All at once he rose upright, and a quiver ran through his whole body: "Who is that man?" he muttered between his teeth: "I have always seen her alone before!"

Then he plunged down beneath the tortuous vault of the spiral staircase, and once more descended. As he passed the door of the bell chamber, which was ajar, he saw something which struck him; he beheld Quasimodo, who, leaning through an opening of one of those slate penthouses which resemble enormous blinds, appeared also to be gazing at the Place. He was engaged in so profound a contemplation, that he did not notice the passage of his adopted father. His savage eye had a singular expression; it was a charmed, tender look. "This is strange!" murmured Claude. "Is it the gypsy at whom he is thus gazing?" He continued his descent. At the end of a few minutes, the anxious archdeacon entered upon the Place from the door at the base of the tower.

"What has become of the gypsy girl?" he said, mingling with the group of spectators which the sound of the tambourine had collected.

“I know not,” replied one of his neighbors, “I think that she has gone to make some of her fandangoes in the house opposite, whither they have called her.”

In the place of the gypsy, on the carpet, whose arabesques had seemed to vanish but a moment previously by the capricious figures of her dance, the archdeacon no longer beheld any one but the red and yellow man, who, in order to earn a few testers in his turn, was walking round the circle, with his elbows on his hips, his head thrown back, his face red, his neck outstretched, with a chair between his teeth. To the chair he had fastened a cat, which a neighbor had lent, and which was spitting in great affright.

“Notre-Dame!” exclaimed the archdeacon, at the moment when the juggler, perspiring heavily, passed in front of him with his pyramid of chair and his cat, “What is Master Pierre Gringoire doing here?”

The harsh voice of the archdeacon threw the poor fellow into such a commotion that he lost his equilibrium, together with his whole edifice, and the chair and the cat tumbled pell-mell upon the heads of the spectators, in the midst of inextinguishable hootings.

It is probable that Master Pierre Gringoire (for it was indeed he) would have had a sorry account to settle with the neighbor who owned the cat, and all the bruised and scratched faces which surrounded him, if he had not hastened to profit by the tumult to take refuge in the church, whither Claude Frollo had made him a sign to follow him.

The cathedral was already dark and deserted; the side-aisles were full of shadows, and the lamps of the chapels began to shine out like stars, so black had the vaulted ceiling become. Only the great rose window of the façade, whose thousand colors were steeped in a ray of horizontal sunlight, glittered in the gloom like a mass of diamonds, and threw its dazzling reflection to the other end of the nave.

When they had advanced a few paces, Dom Claude placed his back against a pillar, and gazed intently at Gringoire. The gaze was not the one which Gringoire feared, ashamed as he was of having been caught by a grave and learned person in the costume of a buffoon. There was nothing mocking or ironical in the priest’s glance, it was serious, tranquil, piercing. The archdeacon was the first to break the silence.

“Come now, Master Pierre. You are to explain many things to me. And first of all, how comes it that you have not been seen for two months, and that now one finds you in the public squares, in a fine equipment in truth! Motley red and yellow, like a Caudebec apple?”

“Messire,” said Gringoire, piteously, “it is, in fact, an amazing accoutrement. You see me no more comfortable in it than a cat coiffed with a calabash. ’Tis very ill done, I am conscious, to expose messieurs the sergeants of the watch to the liability of cudgelling beneath this cassock the humerus of a Pythagorean philosopher. But what would you have, my reverend master? ’tis the fault of my ancient jerkin, which abandoned me in cowardly wise, at the beginning of the winter, under the pretext that it was falling into tatters, and that it required repose in the basket of a rag-picker. What is one to do? Civilization has not yet arrived at the point where one can go stark naked, as ancient Diogenes wished. Add that a very cold wind was blowing, and ’tis not in the month of January that one can successfully attempt to make humanity take this new step. This garment presented itself, I took it, and I left my ancient black smock, which, for a hermetic like myself, was far from being hermetically closed. Behold me then, in the garments of a stage-player, like Saint Genest. What would you have? ’tis an eclipse. Apollo himself tended the flocks of Admetus.”

“’Tis a fine profession that you are engaged in!” replied the archdeacon.

“I agree, my master, that ’tis better to philosophize and poetize, to blow the flame in the furnace, or to receive it from carry cats on a shield. So, when you addressed me, I was as foolish as an ass before a turnspit. But what would you have, messire? One must eat every day, and the finest Alexandrine verses are not worth a bit of Brie cheese. Now, I made for Madame Marguerite of Flanders, that famous epithalamium, as you know, and the city will not pay me, under the pretext that it was not excellent; as though one could give a tragedy of Sophocles for four crowns! Hence, I was on the point of dying with hunger. Happily, I found that I was rather strong in the jaw; so I said to this jaw, — perform some feats of strength and of equilibrium: nourish thyself. *Ale te ipsam*. A pack of beggars who have become my good friends, have taught me twenty sorts of herculean feats, and now I give to my teeth every evening the bread which they have earned during the day by the sweat of my brow. After all, concede, I grant that it is a sad employment for my intellectual faculties, and that man is not made to pass his life in beating the tambourine and biting chairs. But, reverend master, it is not sufficient to pass one’s life, one must earn the means for life.”

Dom Claude listened in silence. All at once his deep-set eye assumed so sagacious and penetrating an expression, that Gringoire felt himself, so to speak, searched to the bottom of the soul by that glance.

"Very good, Master Pierre; but how comes it that you are now in company with that gypsy dancer?"

"In faith!" said Gringoire, "'tis because she is my wife and I am her husband."

The priest's gloomy eyes flashed into flame.

"Have you done that, you wretch!" he cried, seizing Gringoire's arm with fury; "have you been so abandoned by God as to raise your hand against that girl?"

"On my chance of paradise, monseigneur," replied Gringoire, trembling in every limb, "I swear to you that I have never touched her, if that is what disturbs you."

"Then why do you talk of husband and wife?" said the priest. Gringoire made haste to relate to him as succinctly as possible, all that the reader already knows, his adventure in the Court of Miracles and the broken-crock marriage. It appeared, moreover, that this marriage had led to no results whatever, and that each evening the gypsy girl cheated him of his nuptial right as on the first day. "'Tis a mortification," he said in conclusion, "but that is because I have had the misfortune to wed a virgin."

"What do you mean?" demanded the archdeacon, who had been gradually appeased by this recital.

"'Tis very difficult to explain," replied the poet. "It is a superstition. My wife is, according to what an old thief, who is called among us the Duke of Egypt, has told me, a foundling or a lost child, which is the same thing. She wears on her neck an amulet which, it is affirmed, will cause her to meet her parents some day, but which will lose its virtue if the young girl loses hers. Hence it follows that both of us remain very virtuous."

"So," resumed Claude, whose brow cleared more and more, "you believe, Master Pierre, that this creature has not been approached by any man?"

"What would you have a man do, Dom Claude, as against a superstition? She has got that in her head. I assuredly esteem as a rarity this nunlike prudery which is preserved untamed amid those Bohemian girls who are so easily brought into subjection. But she has three things to protect her: the Duke of Egypt, who has taken her under his safeguard, reckoning, perchance, on selling her to some gay abbé; all his tribe, who hold her in singular veneration, like a Notre-Dame; and a certain tiny poignard, which the buxom dame always wears about her, in some nook, in spite of the ordinances of the provost, and which one causes to fly out into her hands by squeezing her waist. ’Tis a proud wasp, I can tell you!”

The archdeacon pressed Gringoire with questions.

La Esmeralda, in the judgment of Gringoire, was an inoffensive and charming creature, pretty, with the exception of a pout which was peculiar to her; a naïve and passionate damsel, ignorant of everything and enthusiastic about everything; not yet aware of the difference between a man and a woman, even in her dreams; made like that; wild especially over dancing, noise, the open air; a sort of woman bee, with invisible wings on her feet, and living in a whirlwind. She owed this nature to the wandering life which she had always led. Gringoire had succeeded in learning that, while a mere child, she had traversed Spain and Catalonia, even to Sicily; he believed that she had even been taken by the caravan of Zingari, of which she formed a part, to the kingdom of Algiers, a country situated in Achaia, which country adjoins, on one side Albania and Greece; on the other, the Sicilian Sea, which is the road to Constantinople. The Bohemians, said Gringoire, were vassals of the King of Algiers, in his quality of chief of the White Moors. One thing is certain, that la Esmeralda had come to France while still very young, by way of Hungary. From all these countries the young girl had brought back fragments of queer jargons, songs, and strange ideas, which made her language as motley as her costume, half Parisian, half African. However, the people of the quarters which she frequented loved her for her gayety, her daintiness, her lively manners, her dances, and her songs. She believed herself to be hated, in all the city, by but two persons, of whom she often spoke in terror: the sacked nun of the Tour-Roland, a villanous recluse who cherished some secret grudge against these gypsies, and who cursed the poor dancer every time that the latter passed before her window; and a priest, who never met her without casting at her looks and words which frightened her.

The mention of this last circumstance disturbed the archdeacon greatly, though Gringoire paid no attention to his perturbation; to such an extent had two months sufficed to cause the heedless poet to forget the singular details of the evening on which he had met the gypsy, and the presence of the archdeacon in it all. Otherwise, the little dancer feared nothing; she did not tell fortunes, which protected her against those trials for magic which were so frequently instituted against gypsy women. And then, Gringoire held the position of her brother, if not of her husband. After all, the philosopher endured this sort of platonic marriage very patiently. It meant a shelter and bread at least. Every morning, he set out from the lair of the thieves, generally with the gypsy; he helped her make her collections of targes* and little blanks** in the squares; each evening he returned to the same roof with her, allowed her to bolt herself into her little chamber, and slept the sleep of the just. A very sweet existence, taking it all in all, he said, and well adapted to revery. And then, on his soul and conscience, the philosopher was not very sure that he was madly in love with the gypsy. He loved her goat almost as dearly. It was a charming animal, gentle, intelligent, clever; a learned goat. Nothing was more common in the Middle Ages than these learned animals, which amazed people greatly, and often led their instructors to the stake. But the witchcraft of the goat with the golden hoofs was a very innocent species of magic. Gringoire explained them to the archdeacon, whom these details seemed to interest deeply. In the majority of cases, it was sufficient to present the tambourine to the goat in such or such a manner, in order to obtain from him the trick desired. He had been trained to this by the gypsy, who possessed, in these delicate arts, so rare a talent that two months had sufficed to teach the goat to write, with movable letters, the word “Phoebus.”

* An ancient Burgundian coin.

** An ancient French coin.

“‘Phoebus!’” said the priest; “why ‘Phoebus’?”

“I know not,” replied Gringoire. “Perhaps it is a word which she believes to be endowed with some magic and secret virtue. She often repeats it in a low tone when she thinks that she is alone.”

“Are you sure,” persisted Claude, with his penetrating glance, “that it is only a word and not a name?”

“The name of whom?” said the poet.

“How should I know?” said the priest.

“This is what I imagine, messire. These Bohemians are something like Guebrs, and adore the sun. Hence, Phoebus.”

“That does not seem so clear to me as to you, Master Pierre.”

“After all, that does not concern me. Let her mumble her Phoebus at her pleasure. One thing is certain, that Djali loves me almost as much as he does her.”

“Who is Djali?”

“The goat.”

The archdeacon dropped his chin into his hand, and appeared to reflect for a moment. All at once he turned abruptly to Gringoire once more.

“And do you swear to me that you have not touched her?”

“Whom?” said Gringoire; “the goat?”

“No, that woman.”

“My wife? I swear to you that I have not.”

“You are often alone with her?”

“A good hour every evening.”

Porn Claude frowned.

“Oh! oh! *Solus cum sola non cogitabuntur orare Pater Noster*.”

“Upon my soul, I could say the *Pater*, and the *Ave Maria*, and the *Credo in Deum patrem omnipotentem* without her paying any more attention to me than a chicken to a church.”

“Swear to me, by the body of your mother,” repeated the archdeacon violently, “that you have not touched that creature with even the tip of your finger.”

“I will also swear it by the head of my father, for the two things have more affinity between them. But, my reverend master, permit me a question in my turn.”

“Speak, sir.”

“What concern is it of yours?”

The archdeacon’s pale face became as crimson as the cheek of a young girl. He remained for a moment without answering; then, with visible embarrassment, —

“Listen, Master Pierre Gringoire. You are not yet damned, so far as I know. I take an interest in you, and wish you well. Now the least contact with that Egyptian of the demon would make you the vassal of Satan. You know that ’tis always the body which ruins the soul. Woe to you if you approach that woman! That is all.”

“I tried once,” said Gringoire, scratching his ear; “it was the first day: but I got stung.”

“You were so audacious, Master Pierre?” and the priest’s brow clouded over again.

“On another occasion,” continued the poet, with a smile, “I peeped through the keyhole, before going to bed, and I beheld the most delicious dame in her shift that ever made a bed creak under her bare foot.”

“Go to the devil!” cried the priest, with a terrible look; and, giving the amazed Gringoire a push on the shoulders, he plunged, with long strides, under the gloomiest arcades of the cathedral.

CHAPTER III. THE BELLS.

After the morning in the pillory, the neighbors of Notre-Dame thought they noticed that Quasimodo’s ardor for ringing had grown cool. Formerly, there had been peals for every occasion, long morning serenades, which lasted from prime to compline; peals from the belfry for a high mass, rich scales drawn over the smaller bells for a wedding, for a christening, and mingling in the air like a rich embroidery of all sorts of charming sounds. The old church, all vibrating and sonorous, was in a perpetual joy of bells. One was constantly conscious of the presence of a spirit of noise and caprice, who sang through all those mouths of brass. Now that spirit seemed to have departed; the cathedral seemed gloomy, and gladly remained silent; festivals and funerals had the simple peal, dry and bare, demanded by the ritual, nothing more. Of the double noise which constitutes a church, the organ within, the bell without, the organ alone remained. One would have said that there was no longer a musician in the belfry. Quasimodo was always there, nevertheless; what, then, had happened to him? Was it that the shame and despair of the pillory still lingered in the bottom of his heart, that the lashes of his tormentor’s whip reverberated unendingly in his soul, and that the sadness of such treatment had wholly extinguished in him even his passion for the bells? or was it that Marie had a rival in the heart of the bellringer of Notre-Dame, and that the great bell and her fourteen sisters were neglected for something more amiable and more beautiful?

It chanced that, in the year of grace 1482, Annunciation Day fell on Tuesday, the twenty-fifth of March. That day the air was so pure and light that Quasimodo felt some returning affection for his bells. He therefore ascended the northern tower while the beadle below was opening wide the doors of the church, which were then enormous panels of stout wood, covered with leather, bordered with nails of gilded iron, and framed in carvings “very artistically elaborated.”

On arriving in the lofty bell chamber, Quasimodo gazed for some time at the six bells and shook his head sadly, as though groaning over some foreign element which had interposed itself in his heart between them and him. But when he had set them to swinging, when he felt that cluster of bells moving under his hand, when he saw, for he did not hear it, the palpitating octave ascend and descend that sonorous scale, like a bird hopping from branch to branch; when the demon Music, that demon who shakes a sparkling bundle of strette, trills and arpeggios, had taken possession of the poor deaf man, he became happy once more, he forgot everything, and his heart expanding, made his face beam.

He went and came, he beat his hands together, he ran from rope to rope, he animated the six singers with voice and gesture, like the leader of an orchestra who is urging on intelligent musicians.

“Go on,” said he, “go on, go on, Gabrielle, pour out all thy noise into the Place, ’tis a festival to-day. No laziness, Thibauld; thou art relaxing; go on, go on, then, art thou rusted, thou sluggard? That is well! quick! quick! let not thy clapper be seen! Make them all deaf like me. That’s it, Thibauld, bravely done! Guillaume! Guillaume! thou art the largest, and Pasquier is the smallest, and Pasquier does best. Let us wager that those who hear him will understand him better than they understand thee. Good! good! my Gabrielle, stoutly, more stoutly! Eli! what are you doing up aloft there, you two Moineaux (sparrows)? I do not see you making the least little shred of noise. What is the meaning of those beaks of copper which seem to be gaping when they should sing? Come, work now, ’tis the Feast of the Annunciation. The sun is fine, the chime must be fine also. Poor Guillaume! thou art all out of breath, my big fellow!”

He was wholly absorbed in spurring on his bells, all six of which vied with each other in leaping and shaking their shining haunches, like a noisy team of Spanish mules, pricked on here and there by the apostrophes of the muleteer.

All at once, on letting his glance fall between the large slate scales which cover the perpendicular wall of the bell tower at a certain height, he beheld on the square a young girl, fantastically dressed, stop, spread out on the ground a carpet, on which a small goat took up its post, and a group of spectators collect around her. This sight suddenly changed the course of his ideas, and congealed his enthusiasm as a breath of air congeals melted rosin. He halted, turned his back to the bells, and crouched down behind the projecting roof of slate, fixing upon the dancer that dreamy, sweet, and tender look which had already astonished the archdeacon on one occasion. Meanwhile, the forgotten bells died away abruptly and all together, to the great disappointment of the lovers of bell ringing, who were listening in good faith to the peal from above the Pont du Change, and who went away dumbfounded, like a dog who has been offered a bone and given a stone.

CHAPTER IV. *ANArKH*.

It chanced that upon a fine morning in this same month of March, I think it was on Saturday the 29th, Saint Eustache’s day, our young friend the student, Jehan Frollo du Moulin, perceived, as he was dressing himself, that his breeches, which contained his purse, gave out no metallic ring. “Poor purse,” he said, drawing it from his fob, “what! not the smallest parisis! how cruelly the dice, beer-pots, and Venus have depleted thee! How empty, wrinkled, limp, thou art! Thou resemblest the throat of a fury! I ask you, Messer Cicero, and Messer Seneca, copies of whom, all dog’s-eared, I behold scattered on the floor, what profits it me to know, better than any governor of the mint, or any Jew on the Pont aux Changeurs, that a golden crown stamped with a crown is worth thirty-five unzains of twenty-five sous, and eight deniers parisis apiece, and that a crown stamped with a crescent is worth thirty-six unzains of twenty-six sous, six deniers tournois apiece, if I have not a single wretched black liard to risk on the double-six! Oh! Consul Cicero! this is no calamity from which one extricates one’s self with periphrases, *quemadmodum*, and *verum enim vero*!”

He dressed himself sadly. An idea had occurred to him as he laced his boots, but he rejected it at first; nevertheless, it returned, and he put on his waistcoat wrong side out, an evident sign of violent internal combat. At last he dashed his cap roughly on the floor, and exclaimed: “So much the worse! Let come of it what may. I am going to my brother! I shall catch a sermon, but I shall catch a crown.”

Then he hastily donned his long jacket with furred half-sleeves, picked up his cap, and went out like a man driven to desperation.

He descended the Rue de la Harpe toward the City. As he passed the Rue de la Huchette, the odor of those admirable spits, which were incessantly turning, tickled his olfactory apparatus, and he bestowed a loving glance toward the Cyclopean roast, which one day drew from the Franciscan friar, Calatagirone, this pathetic exclamation: *Veramente, queste rotisserie sono cosa stupenda*!* But Jehan had not the wherewithal to buy a breakfast, and he plunged, with a profound sigh, under the gateway of the Petit-Châtelet, that enormous double trefoil of massive towers which guarded the entrance to the City.

* Truly, these roastings are a stupendous thing!

He did not even take the trouble to cast a stone in passing, as was the usage, at the miserable statue of that Périnet Leclerc who had delivered up the Paris of Charles VI. to the English, a crime which his effigy, its face battered with stones and soiled with mud, expiated for three centuries at the corner of the Rue de la Harpe and the Rue de Buci, as in an eternal pillory.

The Petit-Pont traversed, the Rue Neuve-Sainte-Geneviève crossed, Jehan de Molendino found himself in front of Notre-Dame. Then indecision seized upon him once more, and he paced for several minutes round the statue of M. Legris, repeating to himself with anguish: "The sermon is sure, the crown is doubtful."

He stopped a beadle who emerged from the cloister,— "Where is monsieur the archdeacon of Josas?"

"I believe that he is in his secret cell in the tower," said the beadle; "I should advise you not to disturb him there, unless you come from some one like the pope or monsieur the king."

Jehan clapped his hands.

"*Bécliable*! here's a magnificent chance to see the famous sorcery cell!"

This reflection having brought him to a decision, he plunged resolutely into the small black doorway, and began the ascent of the spiral of Saint-Gilles, which leads to the upper stories of the tower. "I am going to see," he said to himself on the way. "By the ravens of the Holy Virgin! it must needs be a curious thing, that cell which my reverend brother hides so secretly! 'Tis said that he lights up the kitchens of hell there, and that he cooks the philosopher's stone there over a hot fire. *Bédieu*! I care no more for the philosopher's stone than for a pebble, and I would rather find over his furnace an omelette of Easter eggs and bacon, than the biggest philosopher's stone in the world."'

On arriving at the gallery of slender columns, he took breath for a moment, and swore against the interminable staircase by I know not how many million cartloads of devils; then he resumed his ascent through the narrow door of the north tower, now closed to the public. Several moments after passing the bell chamber, he came upon a little landing-place, built in a lateral niche, and under the vault of a low, pointed door, whose enormous lock and strong iron bars he was enabled to see through a loophole pierced in the opposite circular wall of the staircase. Persons desirous of visiting this door at the present day will recognize it by this inscription engraved in white letters on the black wall: “J’ADORE CORALIE, 1823. SIGNE UGENE.” “Signé” stands in the text.

“Ugh!” said the scholar; “’tis here, no doubt.”

The key was in the lock, the door was very close to him; he gave it a gentle push and thrust his head through the opening.

The reader cannot have failed to turn over the admirable works of Rembrandt, that Shakespeare of painting. Amid so many marvellous engravings, there is one etching in particular, which is supposed to represent Doctor Faust, and which it is impossible to contemplate without being dazzled. It represents a gloomy cell; in the centre is a table loaded with hideous objects; skulls, spheres, alembics, compasses, hieroglyphic parchments. The doctor is before this table clad in his large coat and covered to the very eyebrows with his furred cap. He is visible only to his waist. He has half risen from his immense arm-chair, his clenched fists rest on the table, and he is gazing with curiosity and terror at a large luminous circle, formed of magic letters, which gleams from the wall beyond, like the solar spectrum in a dark chamber. This cabalistic sun seems to tremble before the eye, and fills the wan cell with its mysterious radiance. It is horrible and it is beautiful.

Something very similar to Faust’s cell presented itself to Jehan’s view, when he ventured his head through the half-open door. It also was a gloomy and sparsely lighted retreat. There also stood a large arm-chair and a large table, compasses, alembics, skeletons of animals suspended from the ceiling, a globe rolling on the floor, hippocephali mingled promiscuously with drinking cups, in which quivered leaves of gold, skulls placed upon vellum checkered with figures and characters, huge manuscripts piled up wide open, without mercy on the cracking corners of the parchment; in short, all the rubbish of science, and everywhere on this confusion dust and spiders’ webs; but there was no circle of luminous letters, no doctor in an ecstasy contemplating the flaming vision, as the eagle gazes upon the sun.

Nevertheless, the cell was not deserted. A man was seated in the arm-chair, and bending over the table. Jehan, to whom his back was turned, could see only his shoulders and the back of his skull; but he had no difficulty in recognizing that bald head, which nature had provided with an eternal tonsure, as though desirous of marking, by this external symbol, the archdeacon’s irresistible clerical vocation.

Jehan accordingly recognized his brother; but the door had been opened so softly, that nothing warned Dom Claude of his presence. The inquisitive scholar took advantage of this circumstance to examine the cell for a few moments at his leisure. A large furnace, which he had not at first observed, stood to the left of the arm-chair, beneath the window. The ray of light which penetrated through this aperture made its way through a spider's circular web, which tastefully inscribed its delicate rose in the arch of the window, and in the centre of which the insect architect hung motionless, like the hub of this wheel of lace. Upon the furnace were accumulated in disorder, all sorts of vases, earthenware bottles, glass retorts, and mattresses of charcoal. Jehan observed, with a sigh, that there was no frying-pan. "How cold the kitchen utensils are!" he said to himself.

In fact, there was no fire in the furnace, and it seemed as though none had been lighted for a long time. A glass mask, which Jehan noticed among the utensils of alchemy, and which served no doubt, to protect the archdeacon's face when he was working over some substance to be dreaded, lay in one corner covered with dust and apparently forgotten. Beside it lay a pair of bellows no less dusty, the upper side of which bore this inscription incrusted in copper letters: SPIRA SPERA.

Other inscriptions were written, in accordance with the fashion of the hermetics, in great numbers on the walls; some traced with ink, others engraved with a metal point. There were, moreover, Gothic letters, Hebrew letters, Greek letters, and Roman letters, pell-mell; the inscriptions overflowed at haphazard, on top of each other, the more recent effacing the more ancient, and all entangled with each other, like the branches in a thicket, like pikes in an affray. It was, in fact, a strangely confused mingling of all human philosophies, all reveries, all human wisdom. Here and there one shone out from among the rest like a banner among lance heads. Generally, it was a brief Greek or Roman device, such as the Middle Ages knew so well how to formulate. — *Unde? Inde? — Homo homini monstrurn-Ast'ra, castra, nomen, numen. — Meya Bibklov, ueya xaxov. — Sapere aude. Fiat ubi vult* — etc.; sometimes a word devoid of all apparent sense, *Avayxoqpayia*, which possibly contained a bitter allusion to the regime of the cloister; sometimes a simple maxim of clerical discipline formulated in a regular hexameter *Coelestem dominum terrestrem dicite dominum*. There was also Hebrew jargon, of which Jehan, who as yet knew but little Greek, understood nothing; and all were traversed in every direction by stars, by figures of men or animals, and by intersecting triangles; and this contributed not a little to make the scrawled wall of the cell resemble a sheet of paper over which a monkey had drawn back and forth a pen filled with ink.

The whole chamber, moreover, presented a general aspect of abandonment and dilapidation; and the bad state of the utensils induced the supposition that their owner had long been distracted from his labors by other preoccupations. Meanwhile, this master, bent over a vast manuscript, ornamented with fantastical illustrations, appeared to be tormented by an idea which incessantly mingled with his meditations. That at least was Jehan’s idea, when he heard him exclaim, with the thoughtful breaks of a dreamer thinking aloud, —

“Yes, Manou said it, and Zoroaster taught it! the sun is born from fire, the moon from the sun; fire is the soul of the universe; its elementary atoms pour forth and flow incessantly upon the world through infinite channels! At the point where these currents intersect each other in the heavens, they produce light; at their points of intersection on earth, they produce gold. Light, gold; the same thing! From fire to the concrete state. The difference between the visible and the palpable, between the fluid and the solid in the same substance, between water and ice, nothing more. These are no dreams; it is the general law of nature. But what is one to do in order to extract from science the secret of this general law? What! this light which inundates my hand is gold! These same atoms dilated in accordance with a certain law need only be condensed in accordance with another law. How is it to be done? Some have fancied by burying a ray of sunlight, Averroës, — yes, ’tis Averroës, — Averroës buried one under the first pillar on the left of the sanctuary of the Koran, in the great Mahometan mosque of Cordova; but the vault cannot be opened for the purpose of ascertaining whether the operation has succeeded, until after the lapse of eight thousand years.

“The devil!” said Jehan, to himself, “’tis a long while to wait for a crown!”

“Others have thought,” continued the dreamy archdeacon, “that it would be better worth while to operate upon a ray of Sirius. But ’tis exceeding hard to obtain this ray pure, because of the simultaneous presence of other stars whose rays mingle with it. Flamel esteemed it more simple to operate upon terrestrial fire. Flamel! there’s predestination in the name! *Flamma*! yes, fire. All lies there. The diamond is contained in the carbon, gold is in the fire. But how to extract it? Magistri affirms that there are certain feminine names, which possess a charm so sweet and mysterious, that it suffices to pronounce them during the operation. Let us read what Manon says on the matter: ‘Where women are honored, the divinities are rejoiced; where they are despised, it is useless to pray to God. The mouth of a woman is constantly pure; it is a running water, it is a ray of sunlight. The name of a woman should be agreeable, sweet, fanciful; it should end in long vowels, and resemble words of benediction.’ Yes, the sage is right; in truth, Maria, Sophia, la Esmeral — Damnation! always that thought!”

And he closed the book violently.

He passed his hand over his brow, as though to brush away the idea which assailed him; then he took from the table a nail and a small hammer, whose handle was curiously painted with cabalistic letters.

“For some time,” he said with a bitter smile, “I have failed in all my experiments! one fixed idea possesses me, and sears my brain like fire. I have not even been able to discover the secret of Cassiodorus, whose lamp burned without wick and without oil. A simple matter, nevertheless—”

“The deuce!” muttered Jehan in his beard.

“Hence,” continued the priest, “one wretched thought is sufficient to render a man weak and beside himself! Oh! how Claude Pernelle would laugh at me. She who could not turn Nicholas Flamel aside, for one moment, from his pursuit of the great work! What! I hold in my hand the magic hammer of Zéchiélé! at every blow dealt by the formidable rabbi, from the depths of his cell, upon this nail, that one of his enemies whom he had condemned, were he a thousand leagues away, was buried a cubit deep in the earth which swallowed him. The King of France himself, in consequence of once having inconsiderately knocked at the door of the thermaturgist, sank to the knees through the pavement of his own Paris. This took place three centuries ago. Well! I possess the hammer and the nail, and in my hands they are utensils no more formidable than a club in the hands of a maker of edge tools. And yet all that is required is to find the magic word which Zéchiélé pronounced when he struck his nail.”

“What nonsense!” thought Jehan.

“Let us see, let us try!” resumed the archdeacon briskly. “Were I to succeed, I should behold the blue spark flash from the head of the nail. Emen-Hétan! Emen-Hétan! That’s not it. Sigéani! Sigéani! May this nail open the tomb to any one who bears the name of Phoebus! A curse upon it! Always and eternally the same idea!”

And he flung away the hammer in a rage. Then he sank down so deeply on the arm-chair and the table, that Jehan lost him from view behind the great pile of manuscripts. For the space of several minutes, all that he saw was his fist convulsively clenched on a book. Suddenly, Dom Claude sprang up, seized a compass and engraved in silence upon the wall in capital letters, this Greek word

ANArKH.

“My brother is mad,” said Jehan to himself; “it would have been far more simple to write *Fatum*, every one is not obliged to know Greek.”

The archdeacon returned and seated himself in his armchair, and placed his head on both his hands, as a sick man does, whose head is heavy and burning.

The student watched his brother with surprise. He did not know, he who wore his heart on his sleeve, he who observed only the good old law of Nature in the world, he who allowed his passions to follow their inclinations, and in whom the lake of great emotions was always dry, so freely did he let it off each day by fresh drains, — he did not know with what fury the sea of human passions ferments and boils when all egress is denied to it, how it accumulates, how it swells, how it overflows, how it hollows out the heart; how it breaks in inward sobs, and dull convulsions, until it has rent its dikes and burst its bed. The austere and glacial envelope of Claude Frollo, that cold surface of steep and inaccessible virtue, had always deceived Jehan. The merry scholar had never dreamed that there was boiling lava, furious and profound, beneath the snowy brow of AEtna.

We do not know whether he suddenly became conscious of these things; but, giddy as he was, he understood that he had seen what he ought not to have seen, that he had just surprised the soul of his elder brother in one of its most secret altitudes, and that Claude must not be allowed to know it. Seeing that the archdeacon had fallen back into his former immobility, he withdrew his head very softly, and made some noise with his feet outside the door, like a person who has just arrived and is giving warning of his approach.

“Enter!” cried the archdeacon, from the interior of his cell; “I was expecting you. I left the door unlocked expressly; enter Master Jacques!”

The scholar entered boldly. The archdeacon, who was very much embarrassed by such a visit in such a place, trembled in his arm-chair. “What! ’tis you, Jehan?”

“’Tis a J, all the same,” said the scholar, with his ruddy, merry, and audacious face.

Dom Claude’s visage had resumed its severe expression.

“What are you come for?”

“Brother,” replied the scholar, making an effort to assume a decent, pitiful, and modest mien, and twirling his cap in his hands with an innocent air; “I am come to ask of you—”

“What?”

“A little lecture on morality, of which I stand greatly in need,” Jehan did not dare to add aloud,— “and a little money of which I am in still greater need.” This last member of his phrase remained unuttered.

“Monsieur,” said the archdeacon, in a cold tone, “I am greatly displeased with you.”

“Alas!” sighed the scholar.

Dom Claude made his arm-chair describe a quarter circle, and gazed intently at Jehan.

“I am very glad to see you.”

This was a formidable exordium. Jehan braced himself for a rough encounter.

“Jehan, complaints are brought me about you every day. What affray was that in which you bruised with a cudgel a little vicomte, Albert de Ramonchamp?”

“Oh!” said Jehan, “a vast thing that! A malicious page amused himself by splashing the scholars, by making his horse gallop through the mire!”

“Who,” pursued the archdeacon, “is that Mahiet Fargel, whose gown you have torn? *Tunicam dechiraverunt*, saith the complaint.”

“Ah bah! a wretched cap of a Montaigu! Isn’t that it?”

“The complaint says *tunicam* and not *cappettam*. Do you know Latin?”

Jehan did not reply.

“Yes,” pursued the priest shaking his head, “that is the state of learning and letters at the present day. The Latin tongue is hardly understood, Syriac is unknown, Greek so odious that ’tis accounted no ignorance in the most learned to skip a Greek word without reading it, and to say, ‘*Groecum est non legitur*.’”

The scholar raised his eyes boldly. “Monsieur my brother, doth it please you that I shall explain in good French vernacular that Greek word which is written yonder on the wall?”

“What word?”

“‘*ANArKH*.”

A slight flush spread over the cheeks of the priest with their high bones, like the puff of smoke which announces on the outside the secret commotions of a volcano. The student hardly noticed it.

“Well, Jehan,” stammered the elder brother with an effort, “What is the meaning of yonder word?”

“FATE.”

Dom Claude turned pale again, and the scholar pursued carelessly.

“And that word below it, graved by the same hand, ‘*Ayáyvela*, signifies ‘impurity.’ You see that people do know their Greek.”

And the archdeacon remained silent. This Greek lesson had rendered him thoughtful.

Master Jehan, who possessed all the artful ways of a spoiled child, judged that the moment was a favorable one in which to risk his request. Accordingly, he assumed an extremely soft tone and began, —

“My good brother, do you hate me to such a degree as to look savagely upon me because of a few mischievous cuffs and blows distributed in a fair war to a pack of lads and brats, *quibusdam marmosetis*? You see, good Brother Claude, that people know their Latin.”

But all this caressing hypocrisy did not have its usual effect on the severe elder brother. Cerberus did not bite at the honey cake. The archdeacon’s brow did not lose a single wrinkle.

“What are you driving at?” he said dryly.

“Well, in point of fact, this!” replied Jehan bravely, “I stand in need of money.”

At this audacious declaration, the archdeacon’s visage assumed a thoroughly pedagogical and paternal expression.

“You know, Monsieur Jehan, that our fief of Tirechappe, putting the direct taxes and the rents of the nine and twenty houses in a block, yields only nine and thirty livres, eleven sous, six deniers, Parisian. It is one half more than in the time of the brothers Paclet, but it is not much.”

“I need money,” said Jehan stoically.

"You know that the official has decided that our twenty-one houses should he moved full into the fief of the Bishopric, and that we could redeem this homage only by paying the reverend bishop two marks of silver gilt of the price of six livres parisis. Now, these two marks I have not yet been able to get together. You know it."

"I know that I stand in need of money," repeated Jehan for the third time.

"And what are you going to do with it?"

This question caused a flash of hope to gleam before Jehan's eyes. He resumed his dainty, caressing air.

"Stay, dear Brother Claude, I should not come to you, with any evil motive. There is no intention of cutting a dash in the taverns with your unzains, and of strutting about the streets of Paris in a caparison of gold brocade, with a lackey, *cum meo laquasio*. No, brother, 'tis for a good work."

"What good work?" demanded Claude, somewhat surprised.

"Two of my friends wish to purchase an outfit for the infant of a poor Haudriette widow. It is a charity. It will cost three forms, and I should like to contribute to it."

"What are names of your two friends?"

"Pierre l'Assommeur and Baptiste Croque-Oison*."

* Peter the Slaughterer; and Baptist Crack-Gosling.

"Hum," said the archdeacon; "those are names as fit for a good work as a catapult for the chief altar."

It is certain that Jehan had made a very bad choice of names for his two friends. He realized it too late.

"And then," pursued the sagacious Claude, "what sort of an infant's outfit is it that is to cost three forms, and that for the child of a Haudriette? Since when have the Haudriette widows taken to having babes in swaddling-clothes?"

Jehan broke the ice once more.

"Eh, well! yes! I need money in order to go and see Isabeau la Thierrye to-night; in the Val-d' Amour!"

"Impure wretch!" exclaimed the priest.

"*Avayveia*!" said Jehan.

This quotation, which the scholar borrowed with malice, perchance, from the wall of the cell, produced a singular effect on the archdeacon. He bit his lips and his wrath was drowned in a crimson flush.

"Begone," he said to Jehan. "I am expecting some one."

The scholar made one more effort.

"Brother Claude, give me at least one little parisis to buy something to eat."

"How far have you gone in the Decretals of Gratian?" demanded Dom Claude.

"I have lost my copy books.

"Where are you in your Latin humanities?"

"My copy of Horace has been stolen."

"Where are you in Aristotle?"

"I' faith! brother what father of the church is it, who says that the errors of heretics have always had for their lurking place the thickets of Aristotle's metaphysics? A plague on Aristotle! I care not to tear my religion on his metaphysics."

"Young man," resumed the archdeacon, "at the king's last entry, there was a young gentleman, named Philippe de Comines, who wore embroidered on the housings of his horse this device, upon which I counsel you to meditate: *Qui non laborat, non manducet*."

The scholar remained silent for a moment, with his finger in his ear, his eyes on the ground, and a discomfited mien.

All at once he turned round to Claude with the agile quickness of a wagtail.

"So, my good brother, you refuse me a sou parisis, wherewith to buy a crust at a baker's shop?"

"*Qui non laborat, non manducet*."

At this response of the inflexible archdeacon, Jehan hid his head in his hands, like a woman sobbing, and exclaimed with an expression of despair: "*Otototototoi*."

"What is the meaning of this, sir?" demanded Claude, surprised at this freak.

"What indeed!" said the scholar; and he lifted to Claude his impudent eyes into which he had just thrust his fists in order to communicate to them the redness of tears; "'tis Greek! 'tis an anapaest of AEschylus which expresses grief perfectly."

And here he burst into a laugh so droll and violent that it made the archdeacon smile. It was Claude's fault, in fact: why had he so spoiled that child?

“Oh! good Brother Claude,” resumed Jehan, emboldened by this smile, “look at my worn out boots. Is there a cothurnus in the world more tragic than these boots, whose soles are hanging out their tongues?”

The archdeacon promptly returned to his original severity.

“I will send you some new boots, but no money.”

“Only a poor little parisis, brother,” continued the suppliant Jehan. “I will learn Gratian by heart, I will believe firmly in God, I will be a regular Pythagoras of science and virtue. But one little parisis, in mercy! Would you have famine bite me with its jaws which are gaping in front of me, blacker, deeper, and more noisome than a Tartarus or the nose of a monk?”

Dom Claude shook his wrinkled head: “*Qui non laborat*—”

Jehan did not allow him to finish.

“Well,” he exclaimed, “to the devil then! Long live joy! I will live in the tavern, I will fight, I will break pots and I will go and see the wenches.” And thereupon, he hurled his cap at the wall, and snapped his fingers like castanets.

The archdeacon surveyed him with a gloomy air.

“Jehan, you have no soul.”

“In that case, according to Epicurius, I lack a something made of another something which has no name.”

“Jehan, you must think seriously of amending your ways.”

“Oh, come now,” cried the student, gazing in turn at his brother and the alembics on the furnace, “everything is preposterous here, both ideas and bottles!”

“Jehan, you are on a very slippery downward road. Do you know whither you are going?”

“To the wine-shop,” said Jehan.

“The wine-shop leads to the pillory.”

“’Tis as good a lantern as any other, and perchance with that one, Diogenes would have found his man.”

“The pillory leads to the gallows.”

“The gallows is a balance which has a man at one end and the whole earth at the other. ’Tis fine to be the man.”

“The gallows leads to hell.”

“’Tis a big fire.”.

“Jehan, Jehan, the end will be bad.”

“The beginning will have been good.”

At that moment, the sound of a footstep was heard on the staircase.

“Silence!” said the archdeacon, laying his finger on his mouth, “here is Master Jacques. Listen, Jehan,” he added, in a low voice; “have a care never to speak of what you shall have seen or heard here. Hide yourself quickly under the furnace, and do not breathe.”

The scholar concealed himself; just then a happy idea occurred to him.

“By the way, Brother Claude, a form for not breathing.”

“Silence! I promise.”

“You must give it to me.”

“Take it, then!” said the archdeacon angrily, flinging his purse at him.

Jehan darted under the furnace again, and the door opened.

CHAPTER V. THE TWO MEN CLOTHED IN BLACK.

The personage who entered wore a black gown and a gloomy mien. The first point which struck the eye of our Jehan (who, as the reader will readily surmise, had ensconced himself in his nook in such a manner as to enable him to see and hear everything at his good pleasure) was the perfect sadness of the garments and the visage of this new-corner. There was, nevertheless, some sweetness diffused over that face, but it was the sweetness of a cat or a judge, an affected, treacherous sweetness. He was very gray and wrinkled, and not far from his sixtieth year, his eyes blinked, his eyebrows were white, his lip pendulous, and his hands large. When Jehan saw that it was only this, that is to say, no doubt a physician or a magistrate, and that this man had a nose very far from his mouth, a sign of stupidity, he nestled down in his hole, in despair at being obliged to pass an indefinite time in such an uncomfortable attitude, and in such bad company.

The archdeacon, in the meantime, had not even risen to receive this personage. He had made the latter a sign to seat himself on a stool near the door, and, after several moments of a silence which appeared to be a continuation of a preceding meditation, he said to him in a rather patronizing way, “Good day, Master Jacques.”

“Greeting, master,” replied the man in black.

There was in the two ways in which “Master Jacques” was pronounced on the one hand, and the “master” by preeminence on the other, the difference between monseigneur and monsieur, between *domine* and *domne*. It was evidently the meeting of a teacher and a disciple.

“Well!” resumed the archdeacon, after a fresh silence which Master Jacques took good care not to disturb, “how are you succeeding?”

“Alas! master,” said the other, with a sad smile, “I am still seeking the stone. Plenty of ashes. But not a spark of gold.”

Dom Claude made a gesture of impatience. “I am not talking to you of that, Master Jacques Charmolue, but of the trial of your magician. Is it not Marc Cenaine that you call him? the butler of the Court of Accounts? Does he confess his witchcraft? Have you been successful with the torture?”

“Alas! no,” replied Master Jacques, still with his sad smile; “we have not that consolation. That man is a stone. We might have him boiled in the Marché aux Pourceaux, before he would say anything. Nevertheless, we are sparing nothing for the sake of getting at the truth; he is already thoroughly dislocated, we are applying all the herbs of Saint John’s day; as saith the old comedian Plautus, —

‘Advorsum stimulos, laminas, crucesque, compedesque,
Nerros, catenas, carceres, numellas, pedicas, boias.’

Nothing answers; that man is terrible. I am at my wit’s end over him.”

“You have found nothing new in his house?”

“I’ faith, yes,” said Master Jacques, fumbling in his pouch; “this parchment. There are words in it which we cannot comprehend. The criminal advocate, Monsieur Philippe Lheulier, nevertheless, knows a little Hebrew, which he learned in that matter of the Jews of the Rue Kantersten, at Brussels.”

So saying, Master Jacques unrolled a parchment. “Give it here,” said the archdeacon. And casting his eyes upon this writing: “Pure magic, Master Jacques!” he exclaimed. “‘Emen-Hétan!’ ’Tis the cry of the vampires when they arrive at the witches’ sabbath. *Per ipsum, et cum ipso, et in ipso*! ’Tis the command which chains the devil in hell. *Hax, pax, max*! that refers to medicine. A formula against the bite of mad dogs. Master Jacques! you are procurator to the king in the Ecclesiastical Courts: this parchment is abominable.”

“We will put the man to the torture once more. Here again,” added Master Jacques, fumbling afresh in his pouch, “is something that we have found at Marc Cenaine’s house.”

It was a vessel belonging to the same family as those which covered Dom Claude’s furnace.

“Ah!” said the archdeacon, “a crucible for alchemy.”

“I will confess to you,” continued Master Jacques, with his timid and awkward smile, “that I have tried it over the furnace, but I have succeeded no better than with my own.”

The archdeacon began an examination of the vessel. “What has he engraved on his crucible? *Och! och*! the word which expels fleas! That Marc Cenaine is an ignoramus! I verily believe that you will never make gold with this! ’Tis good to set in your bedroom in summer and that is all!”

“Since we are talking about errors,” said the king’s procurator, “I have just been studying the figures on the portal below before ascending hither; is your reverence quite sure that the opening of the work of physics is there portrayed on the side towards the Hôtel-Dieu, and that among the seven nude figures which stand at the feet of Notre-Dame, that which has wings on his heels is Mercurius?”

“Yes,” replied the priest; “’tis Augustin Nypho who writes it, that Italian doctor who had a bearded demon who acquainted him with all things. However, we will descend, and I will explain it to you with the text before us.”

“Thanks, master,” said Charmolue, bowing to the earth. “By the way, I was on the point of forgetting. When doth it please you that I shall apprehend the little sorceress?”

“What sorceress?”

“That gypsy girl you know, who comes every day to dance on the church square, in spite of the official’s prohibition! She hath a demoniac goat with horns of the devil, which reads, which writes, which knows mathematics like Picatrix, and which would suffice to hang all Bohemia. The prosecution is all ready; ‘twill soon be finished, I assure you! A pretty creature, on my soul, that dancer! The handsomest black eyes! Two Egyptian carbuncles! When shall we begin?”

The archdeacon was excessively pale.

“I will tell you that hereafter,” he stammered, in a voice that was barely articulate; then he resumed with an effort, “Busy yourself with Marc Cenaine.”

“Be at ease,” said Charmolue with a smile; “I’ll buckle him down again for you on the leather bed when I get home. But ’tis a devil of a man; he wearies even Pierrat Torterue himself, who hath hands larger than my own. As that good Plautus saith, —

‘*Nudus vinctus, centum pondo,*
es quando pendes per pedes.’

The torture of the wheel and axle! ’Tis the most effectual! He shall taste it!”

Dom Claude seemed absorbed in gloomy abstraction. He turned to Charmolue, —

“Master Pierrat — Master Jacques, I mean, busy yourself with Marc Cenaine.”

"Yes, yes, Dom Claude. Poor man! he will have suffered like Mummol. What an idea to go to the witches' sabbath! a butler of the Court of Accounts, who ought to know Charlemagne's text; *Stryga vel masea*! — In the matter of the little girl, — Smelarda, as they call her, — I will await your orders. Ah! as we pass through the portal, you will explain to me also the meaning of the gardener painted in relief, which one sees as one enters the church. Is it not the Sower? Hé! master, of what are you thinking, pray?"

Dom Claude, buried in his own thoughts, no longer listened to him. Charmolue, following the direction of his glance, perceived that it was fixed mechanically on the great spider's web which draped the window. At that moment, a bewildered fly which was seeking the March sun, flung itself through the net and became entangled there. On the agitation of his web, the enormous spider made an abrupt move from his central cell, then with one bound, rushed upon the fly, which he folded together with his fore antennae, while his hideous proboscis dug into the victim's bead. "Poor fly!" said the king's procurator in the ecclesiastical court; and he raised his hand to save it. The archdeacon, as though roused with a start, withheld his arm with convulsive violence.

"Master Jacques," he cried, "let fate take its course!" The procurator wheeled round in affright; it seemed to him that pincers of iron had clutched his arm. The priest's eye was staring, wild, flaming, and remained riveted on the horrible little group of the spider and the fly.

"Oh, yes!" continued the priest, in a voice which seemed to proceed from the depths of his being, "behold here a symbol of all. She flies, she is joyous, she is just born; she seeks the spring, the open air, liberty: oh, yes! but let her come in contact with the fatal network, and the spider issues from it, the hideous spider! Poor dancer! poor, predestined fly! Let things take their course, Master Jacques, 'tis fate! Alas! Claude, thou art the spider! Claude, thou art the fly also! Thou wert flying towards learning, light, the sun. Thou hadst no other care than to reach the open air, the full daylight of eternal truth; but in precipitating thyself towards the dazzling window which opens upon the other world, — upon the world of brightness, intelligence, and science — blind fly! senseless, learned man! thou hast not perceived that subtle spider's web, stretched by destiny betwixt the light and thee — thou hast flung thyself headlong into it, and now thou art struggling with head broken and mangled wings between the iron antennae of fate! Master Jacques! Master Jacques! let the spider work its will!”

“I assure you,” said Charmolue, who was gazing at him without comprehending him, “that I will not touch it. But release my arm, master, for pity’s sake! You have a hand like a pair of pincers.”

The archdeacon did not hear him. “Oh, madman!” he went on, without removing his gaze from the window. “And even couldst thou have broken through that formidable web, with thy gnat’s wings, thou believest that thou couldst have reached the light? Alas! that pane of glass which is further on, that transparent obstacle, that wall of crystal, harder than brass, which separates all philosophies from the truth, how wouldst thou have overcome it? Oh, vanity of science! how many wise men come flying from afar, to dash their heads against thee! How many systems vainly fling themselves buzzing against that eternal pane!”

He became silent. These last ideas, which had gradually led him back from himself to science, appeared to have calmed him. Jacques Charmolue recalled him wholly to a sense of reality by addressing to him this question: “Come, now, master, when will you come to aid me in making gold? I am impatient to succeed.”

The archdeacon shook his head, with a bitter smile. “Master Jacques read Michel Psellus’ ‘*Dialogus de Energia et Operatione Daemonum*.’ What we are doing is not wholly innocent.”

“Speak lower, master! I have my suspicions of it,” said Jacques Charmolue. “But one must practise a bit of hermetic science when one is only procurator of the king in the ecclesiastical court, at thirty crowns tournois a year. Only speak low.”

At that moment the sound of jaws in the act of mastication, which proceeded from beneath the furnace, struck Charmolue’s uneasy ear.

“What’s that?” he inquired.

It was the scholar, who, ill at ease, and greatly bored in his hiding-place, had succeeded in discovering there a stale crust and a triangle of mouldy cheese, and had set to devouring the whole without ceremony, by way of consolation and breakfast. As he was very hungry, he made a great deal of noise, and he accented each mouthful strongly, which startled and alarmed the procurator.

“’Tis a cat of mine,” said the archdeacon, quickly, “who is regaling herself under there with a mouse.”

This explanation satisfied Charmolue.

“In fact, master,” he replied, with a respectful smile, “all great philosophers have their familiar animal. You know what Servius saith: ‘*Nullus enim locus sine genio est*, — for there is no place that hath not its spirit.’”

But Dom Claude, who stood in terror of some new freak on the part of Jehan, reminded his worthy disciple that they had some figures on the façade to study together, and the two quitted the cell, to the accompaniment of a great “ouf!” from the scholar, who began to seriously fear that his knee would acquire the imprint of his chin.

CHAPTER VI. THE EFFECT WHICH SEVEN OATHS IN THE OPEN AIR CAN PRODUCE.

“*Te Deum Laudamus*!” exclaimed Master Jehan, creeping out from his hole, “the screech-owls have departed. Och! och! Hax! pax! max! fleas! mad dogs! the devil! I have had enough of their conversation! My head is humming like a bell tower. And mouldy cheese to boot! Come on! Let us descend, take the big brother’s purse and convert all these coins into bottles!”

He cast a glance of tenderness and admiration into the interior of the precious pouch, readjusted his toilet, rubbed up his boots, dusted his poor half sleeves, all gray with ashes, whistled an air, indulged in a sportive pirouette, looked about to see whether there were not something more in the cell to take, gathered up here and there on the furnace some amulet in glass which might serve to bestow, in the guise of a trinket, on Isabeau la Thierrye, finally pushed open the door which his brother had left unfastened, as a last indulgence, and which he, in his turn, left open as a last piece of malice, and descended the circular staircase, skipping like a bird.

In the midst of the gloom of the spiral staircase, he elbowed something which drew aside with a growl; he took it for granted that it was Quasimodo, and it struck him as so droll that he descended the remainder of the staircase holding his sides with laughter. On emerging upon the Place, he laughed yet more heartily.

He stamped his foot when he found himself on the ground once again. “Oh!” said he, “good and honorable pavement of Paris, cursed staircase, fit to put the angels of Jacob’s ladder out of breath! What was I thinking of to thrust myself into that stone gimlet which pierces the sky; all for the sake of eating bearded cheese, and looking at the bell-towers of Paris through a hole in the wall!”

He advanced a few paces, and caught sight of the two screech owls, that is to say, Dom Claude and Master Jacques Charmolue, absorbed in contemplation before a carving on the façade. He approached them on tiptoe, and heard the archdeacon say in a low tone to Charmolue: “’Twas Guillaume de Paris who caused a Job to be carved upon this stone of the hue of lapis-lazuli, gilded on the edges. Job represents the philosopher’s stone, which must also be tried and martyrized in order to become perfect, as saith Raymond Lulle: *Sub conservatione formoe speciftoe salva anima*."

"That makes no difference to me," said Jehan, "'tis I who have the purse."

At that moment he heard a powerful and sonorous voice articulate behind him a formidable series of oaths. "*Sang Dieu! Ventre-.Dieu! Bédieu! Corps de Dieu! Nombril de Belzebuth! Nom d'un pape! Come et tonnerre*."

"Upon my soul!" exclaimed Jehan, "that can only be my friend, Captain Phoebus!"

This name of Phoebus reached the ears of the archdeacon at the moment when he was explaining to the king's procurator the dragon which is hiding its tail in a bath, from which issue smoke and the head of a king. Dom Claude started, interrupted himself and, to the great amazement of Charmolue, turned round and beheld his brother Jehan accosting a tall officer at the door of the Gondelaurier mansion.

It was, in fact, Captain Phoebus de Châteaupers. He was backed up against a corner of the house of his betrothed and swearing like a heathen.

"By my faith! Captain Phoebus," said Jehan, taking him by the hand, "you are cursing with admirable vigor."

"Horns and thunder!" replied the captain.

"Horns and thunder yourself!" replied the student. "Come now, fair captain, whence comes this overflow of fine words?"

"Pardon me, good comrade Jehan," exclaimed Phoebus, shaking his hand, "a horse going at a gallop cannot halt short. Now, I was swearing at a hard gallop. I have just been with those prudes, and when I come forth, I always find my throat full of curses, I must spit them out or strangle, *ventre et tonnerre*!"

"Will you come and drink?" asked the scholar.

This proposition calmed the captain.

"I'm willing, but I have no money."

"But I have!"

"Bah! let's see it!"

Jehan spread out the purse before the captain's eyes, with dignity and simplicity. Meanwhile, the archdeacon, who had abandoned the dumbfounded Charmolue where he stood, had approached them and halted a few paces distant, watching them without their noticing him, so deeply were they absorbed in contemplation of the purse.

Phoebus exclaimed: “A purse in your pocket, Jehan! ’tis the moon in a bucket of water, one sees it there but ’tis not there. There is nothing but its shadow. Pardieu! let us wager that these are pebbles!”

Jehan replied coldly: “Here are the pebbles wherewith I pave my fob!”

And without adding another word, he emptied the purse on a neighboring post, with the air of a Roman saving his country.

“True God!” muttered Phoebus, “targes, big-blanks, little blanks, mailles,* every two worth one of Tournay, farthings of Paris, real eagle liards! ’Tis dazzling!”

* An ancient copper coin, the forty-fourth part of a sou or the twelfth part of a farthing.

Jehan remained dignified and immovable. Several liards had rolled into the mud; the captain in his enthusiasm stooped to pick them up. Jehan restrained him.

“Fye, Captain Phoebus de Châteaupers!”

Phoebus counted the coins, and turning towards Jehan with solemnity, “Do you know, Jehan, that there are three and twenty sous parisis! whom have you plundered to-night, in the Street Cut-Weazand?”

Jehan flung back his blonde and curly head, and said, half-closing his eyes disdainfully, —

“We have a brother who is an archdeacon and a fool.”

“*Corne de Dieu*!” exclaimed Phoebus, “the worthy man!”

“Let us go and drink,” said Jehan.

“Where shall we go?” said Phoebus; “‘To Eve’s Apple.’”

“No, captain, to ‘Ancient Science.’ An old woman sawing a basket handle*; ’tis a rebus, and I like that.”

* *Une vielle qui scie une anse*.

“A plague on rebuses, Jehan! the wine is better at ‘Eve’s Apple’; and then, beside the door there is a vine in the sun which cheers me while I am drinking.”

“Well! here goes for Eve and her apple,” said the student, and taking Phoebus’s arm. “By the way, my dear captain, you just mentioned the Rue Coupe-Gueule* That is a very bad form of speech; people are no longer so barbarous. They say, Coupe-Gorge**.”

* Cut-Weazand Street.

** Cut-Throat Street.

The two friends set out towards “Eve’s Apple.” It is unnecessary to mention that they had first gathered up the money, and that the archdeacon followed them.

The archdeacon followed them, gloomy and haggard. Was this the Phoebus whose accursed name had been mingled with all his thoughts ever since his interview with Gringoire? He did not know it, but it was at least a Phoebus, and that magic name sufficed to make the archdeacon follow the two heedless comrades with the stealthy tread of a wolf, listening to their words and observing their slightest gestures with anxious attention. Moreover, nothing was easier than to hear everything they said, as they talked loudly, not in the least concerned that the passers-by were taken into their confidence. They talked of duels, wenches, wine pots, and folly.

At the turning of a street, the sound of a tambourine reached them from a neighboring square. Dom Claude heard the officer say to the scholar, —

“Thunder! Let us hasten our steps!”

“Why, Phoebus?”

“I’m afraid lest the Bohemian should see me.”

“What Bohemian?”

“The little girl with the goat.”

“La Smeralda?”

“That’s it, Jehan. I always forget her devil of a name. Let us make haste, she will recognize me. I don’t want to have that girl accost me in the street.”

“Do you know her, Phoebus?”

Here the archdeacon saw Phoebus sneer, bend down to Jehan’s ear, and say a few words to him in a low voice; then Phoebus burst into a laugh, and shook his head with a triumphant air.

“Truly?” said Jehan.

“Upon my soul!” said Phoebus.

“This evening?”

“This evening.”

“Are you sure that she will come?”

“Are you a fool, Jehan? Does one doubt such things?”

“Captain Phoebus, you are a happy gendarme!”

The archdeacon heard the whole of this conversation. His teeth chattered; a visible shiver ran through his whole body. He halted for a moment, leaned against a post like a drunken man, then followed the two merry knaves.

At the moment when he overtook them once more, they had changed their conversation. He heard them singing at the top of their lungs the ancient refrain, —

Les enfants des Petits-Carreaux
*Se font pendre cornme des veaux**.

* The children of the Petits Carreaux let themselves be hung like calves.

CHAPTER VII. THE MYSTERIOUS MONK.

The illustrious wine shop of “Eve’s Apple” was situated in the University, at the corner of the Rue de la Rondelle and the Rue de la Bâtonnier. It was a very spacious and very low hail on the ground floor, with a vaulted ceiling whose central spring rested upon a huge pillar of wood painted yellow; tables everywhere, shining pewter jugs hanging on the walls, always a large number of drinkers, a plenty of wenches, a window on the street, a vine at the door, and over the door a flaring piece of sheet-iron, painted with an apple and a woman, rusted by the rain and turning with the wind on an iron pin. This species of weather-vane which looked upon the pavement was the signboard.

Night was falling; the square was dark; the wine-shop, full of candles, flamed afar like a forge in the gloom; the noise of glasses and feasting, of oaths and quarrels, which escaped through the broken panes, was audible. Through the mist which the warmth of the room spread over the window in front, a hundred confused figures could be seen swarming, and from time to time a burst of noisy laughter broke forth from it. The passers-by who were going about their business, slipped past this tumultuous window without glancing at it. Only at intervals did some little ragged boy raise himself on tiptoe as far as the ledge, and hurl into the drinking-shop, that ancient, jeering hoot, with which drunken men were then pursued: “Aux Houls, saouls, saouls, saouls!”

Nevertheless, one man paced imperturbably back and forth in front of the tavern, gazing at it incessantly, and going no further from it than a pikernan from his sentry-box. He was enveloped in a mantle to his very nose. This mantle he had just purchased of the old-clothes man, in the vicinity of the “Eve’s Apple,” no doubt to protect himself from the cold of the March evening, possibly also, to conceal his costume. From time to time he paused in front of the dim window with its leaden lattice, listened, looked, and stamped his foot.

At length the door of the dram-shop opened. This was what he appeared to be waiting for. Two boon companions came forth. The ray of light which escaped from the door crimsoned for a moment their jovial faces.

The man in the mantle went and stationed himself on the watch under a porch on the other side of the street.

“*Corne et tonnerre*!” said one of the comrades. “Seven o’clock is on the point of striking. ’Tis the hour of my appointed meeting.”

“I tell you,” repeated his companion, with a thick tongue, “that I don’t live in the Rue des Mauvaises Paroles, *indignus qui inter mala verba habitat*. I have a lodging in the Rue Jean-Pain-Mollet, *in vico Johannis Pain-Mollet*. You are more horned than a unicorn if you assert the contrary. Every one knows that he who once mounts astride a bear is never after afraid; but you have a nose turned to dainties like Saint-Jacques of the hospital.”

“Jehan, my friend, you are drunk,” said the other.

The other replied staggering, “It pleases you to say so, Phoebus; but it hath been proved that Plato had the profile of a hound.”

The reader has, no doubt, already recognized our two brave friends, the captain and the scholar. It appears that the man who was lying in wait for them had also recognized them, for he slowly followed all the zigzags that the scholar caused the captain to make, who being a more hardened drinker had retained all his self-possession. By listening to them attentively, the man in the mantle could catch in its entirety the following interesting conversation, —

“*Corbacque*! Do try to walk straight, master bachelor; you know that I must leave you. Here it is seven o’clock. I have an appointment with a woman.”

“Leave me then! I see stars and lances of fire. You are like the Chateau de Dampmartin, which is bursting with laughter.”

“By the warts of my grandmother, Jehan, you are raving with too much rabidness. By the way, Jehan, have you any money left?”

“Monsieur Rector, there is no mistake; the little butcher’s shop, *parva boucheria*.”

“Jehau! my friend Jehan! You know that I made an appointment with that little girl at the end of the Pont Saint-Michel, and I can only take her to the Falourdel’s, the old crone of the bridge, and that I must pay for a chamber. The old witch with a white moustache would not trust me. Jehan! for pity’s sake! Have we drunk up the whole of the curé’s purse? Have you not a single parisis left?”

“The consciousness of having spent the other hours well is a just and savory condiment for the table.”

“Belly and guts! a truce to your whimsical nonsense! Tell me, Jehan of the devil! have you any money left? Give it to me, *bédieu*! or I will search you, were you as leprous as Job, and as scabby as Caesar!”

“Monsieur, the Rue Galiache is a street which hath at one end the Rue de la Verrerie, and at the other the Rue de la Tixeranderie.”

“Well, yes! my good friend Jehan, my poor comrade, the Rue Galiache is good, very good. But in the name of heaven collect your wits. I must have a sou parisis, and the appointment is for seven o’clock.”

“Silence for the rondo, and attention to the refrain, —

“*Quand les rats mangeront les cas,*
Le roi sera seigneur d’Arras;
Quand la mer, qui est grande et le(e
Sera a la Saint-Jean gele(e,
On verra, par-dessus la glace,
*Sortir ceux d’Arras de leur place**.”

* When the rats eat the cats, the king will be lord of Arras;
when the sea which is great and wide, is frozen over at St. John’s tide,
men will see across the ice, those who dwell in Arras quit their place.

“Well, scholar of Antichrist, may you be strangled with the entrails of your mother!” exclaimed Phoebus, and he gave the drunken scholar a rough push; the latter slipped against the wall, and slid flabbily to the pavement of Philip Augustus. A remnant of fraternal pity, which never abandons the heart of a drinker, prompted Phoebus to roll Jehan with his foot upon one of those pillows of the poor, which Providence keeps in readiness at the corner of all the street posts of Paris, and which the rich blight with the name of “a rubbish-heap.” The captain adjusted Jehan’s head upon an inclined plane of cabbage-stumps, and on the very instant, the scholar fell to snoring in a magnificent bass. Meanwhile, all malice was not extinguished in the captain’s heart. “So much the worse if the devil’s cart picks you up on its passage!” he said to the poor, sleeping clerk; and he strode off.

The man in the mantle, who had not ceased to follow him, halted for a moment before the prostrate scholar, as though agitated by indecision; then, uttering a profound sigh, he also strode off in pursuit of the captain.

We, like them, will leave Jehan to slumber beneath the open sky, and will follow them also, if it pleases the reader.

On emerging into the Rue Saint-André-des-Arcs, Captain Phoebus perceived that some one was following him. On glancing sideways by chance, he perceived a sort of shadow crawling after him along the walls. He halted, it halted; he resumed his march, it resumed its march. This disturbed him not overmuch. “Ah, bah!” he said to himself, “I have not a sou.”

He paused in front of the College d’Autun. It was at this college that he had sketched out what he called his studies, and, through a scholar’s teasing habit which still lingered in him, he never passed the façade without inflicting on the statue of Cardinal Pierre Bertrand, sculptured to the right of the portal, the affront of which Priapus complains so bitterly in the satire of Horace, *Olim truncus eram ficulnus*. He had done this with so much unrelenting animosity that the inscription, *Eduensis episcopus*, had become almost effaced. Therefore, he halted before the statue according to his wont. The street was utterly deserted. At the moment when he was coolly retying his shoulder knots, with his nose in the air, he saw the shadow approaching him with slow steps, so slow that he had ample time to observe that this shadow wore a cloak and a hat. On arriving near him, it halted and remained more motionless than the statue of Cardinal Bertrand. Meanwhile, it riveted upon Phoebus two intent eyes, full of that vague light which issues in the night time from the pupils of a cat.

The captain was brave, and would have cared very little for a highwayman, with a rapier in his hand. But this walking statue, this petrified man, froze his blood. There were then in circulation, strange stories of a surly monk, a nocturnal prowler about the streets of Paris, and they recurred confusedly to his memory. He remained for several minutes in stupefaction, and finally broke the silence with a forced laugh.

“Monsieur, if you are a robber, as I hope you are, you produce upon me the effect of a heron attacking a nutshell. I am the son of a ruined family, my dear fellow. Try your hand near by here. In the chapel of this college there is some wood of the true cross set in silver.”

The hand of the shadow emerged from beneath its mantle and descended upon the arm of Phoebus with the grip of an eagle’s talon; at the same time the shadow spoke, —

“Captain Phoebus de Châteaupers!”

“What, the devil!” said Phoebus, “you know my name!”

“I know not your name alone,” continued the man in the mantle, with his sepulchral voice. “You have a rendezvous this evening.”

“Yes,” replied Phoebus in amazement.

"At seven o'clock."

"In a quarter of an hour."

"At la Falourdel's."

"Precisely."

"The lewd hag of the Pont Saint-Michel."

"Of Saint Michel the archangel, as the Pater Noster saith."

"Impious wretch!" muttered the spectre. "With a woman?"

"*Confiteor*, — I confess — ."

"Who is called — ?"

"La Smeralda," said Phoebus, gayly. All his heedlessness had gradually returned.

At this name, the shadow's grasp shook the arm of Phoebus in a fury.

"Captain Phoebus de Châteaupers, thou liest!"

Any one who could have beheld at that moment the captain's inflamed countenance, his leap backwards, so violent that he disengaged himself from the grip which held him, the proud air with which he clapped his hand on his swordhilt, and, in the presence of this wrath the gloomy immobility of the man in the cloak, — any one who could have beheld this would have been frightened. There was in it a touch of the combat of Don Juan and the statue.

"Christ and Satan!" exclaimed the captain. "That is a word which rarely strikes the ear of a Châteaupers! Thou wilt not dare repeat it."

"Thou liest!" said the shadow coldly.

The captain gnashed his teeth. Surly monk, phantom, superstitions, — he had forgotten all at that moment. He no longer beheld anything but a man, and an insult.

"Ah! this is well!" he stammered, in a voice stifled with rage. He drew his sword, then stammering, for anger as well as fear makes a man tremble: "Here! On the spot! Come on! Swords! Swords! Blood on the pavement!"

But the other never stirred. When he beheld his adversary on guard and ready to parry, —

"Captain Phoebus," he said, and his tone vibrated with bitterness, "you forget your appointment."

The rages of men like Phoebus are milk-soups, whose ebullition is calmed by a drop of cold water. This simple remark caused the sword which glittered in the captain's hand to be lowered.

“Captain,” pursued the man, “to-morrow, the day after to-morrow, a month hence, ten years hence, you will find me ready to cut your throat; but go first to your rendezvous.”

“In sooth,” said Phoebus, as though seeking to capitulate with himself, “these are two charming things to be encountered in a rendezvous, — a sword and a wench; but I do not see why I should miss the one for the sake of the other, when I can have both.”

He replaced his sword in its scabbard.

“Go to your rendezvous,” said the man.

“Monsieur,” replied Phoebus with some embarrassment, “many thanks for your courtesy. In fact, there will be ample time to-morrow for us to chop up father Adam’s doublet into slashes and buttonholes. I am obliged to you for allowing me to pass one more agreeable quarter of an hour. I certainly did hope to put you in the gutter, and still arrive in time for the fair one, especially as it has a better appearance to make the women wait a little in such cases. But you strike me as having the air of a gallant man, and it is safer to defer our affair until to-morrow. So I will betake myself to my rendezvous; it is for seven o’clock, as you know.” Here Phoebus scratched his ear. “Ah. *Corne Dieu*! I had forgotten! I haven’t a sou to discharge the price of the garret, and the old crone will insist on being paid in advance. She distrusts me.”

“Here is the wherewithal to pay.”

Phoebus felt the stranger’s cold hand slip into his a large piece of money. He could not refrain from taking the money and pressing the hand.

“*Vrai Dieu*!” he exclaimed, “you are a good fellow!”

“One condition,” said the man. “Prove to me that I have been wrong and that you were speaking the truth. Hide me in some corner whence I can see whether this woman is really the one whose name you uttered.”

“Oh!” replied Phoebus, “’tis all one to me. We will take, the Sainte-Marthe chamber; you can look at your ease from the kennel hard by.”

“Come then,” said the shadow.

“At your service,” said the captain, “I know not whether you are Messer Diavolus in person; but let us be good friends for this evening; to-morrow I will repay you all my debts, both of purse and sword.”

They set out again at a rapid pace. At the expiration of a few minutes, the sound of the river announced to them that they were on the Pont Saint-Michel, then loaded with houses.

“I will first show you the way,” said Phoebus to his companion, “I will then go in search of the fair one who is awaiting me near the Petit-Châtelet.”

His companion made no reply; he had not uttered a word since they had been walking side by side. Phoebus halted before a low door, and knocked roughly; a light made its appearance through the cracks of the door.

“Who is there?” cried a toothless voice.

“*Corps-Dieu! Tête-Dieu! Ventre-Dieu*!” replied the captain.

The door opened instantly, and allowed the new-corners to see an old woman and an old lamp, both of which trembled. The old woman was bent double, clad in tatters, with a shaking head, pierced with two small eyes, and coiffed with a dish clout; wrinkled everywhere, on hands and face and neck; her lips retreated under her gums, and about her mouth she had tufts of white hairs which gave her the whiskered look of a cat.

The interior of the den was no less dilapitated than she; there were chalk walls, blackened beams in the ceiling, a dismantled chimney-piece, spiders’ webs in all the corners, in the middle a staggering herd of tables and lame stools, a dirty child among the ashes, and at the back a staircase, or rather, a wooden ladder, which ended in a trap door in the ceiling.

On entering this lair, Phoebus’s mysterious companion raised his mantle to his very eyes. Meanwhile, the captain, swearing like a Saracen, hastened to “make the sun shine in a crown” as saith our admirable Régnier.

“The Sainte-Marthe chamber,” said he.

The old woman addressed him as monseigneur, and shut up the crown in a drawer. It was the coin which the man in the black mantle had given to Phoebus. While her back was turned, the bushy-headed and ragged little boy who was playing in the ashes, adroitly approached the drawer, abstracted the crown, and put in its place a dry leaf which he had plucked from a fagot.

The old crone made a sign to the two gentlemen, as she called them, to follow her, and mounted the ladder in advance of them. On arriving at the upper story, she set her lamp on a coffer, and, Phoebus, like a frequent visitor of the house, opened a door which opened on a dark hole. “Enter here, my dear fellow,” he said to his companion. The man in the mantle obeyed without a word in reply, the door closed upon him; he heard Phoebus bolt it, and a moment later descend the stairs again with the aged hag. The light had disappeared.

CHAPTER VIII. THE UTILITY OF WINDOWS WHICH OPEN ON THE RIVER.

Claude Frollo (for we presume that the reader, more intelligent than Phoebus, has seen in this whole adventure no other surly monk than the archdeacon), Claude Frollo groped about for several moments in the dark lair into which the captain had bolted him. It was one of those nooks which architects sometimes reserve at the point of junction between the roof and the supporting wall. A vertical section of this kennel, as Phoebus had so justly styled it, would have made a triangle. Moreover, there was neither window nor air-hole, and the slope of the roof prevented one from standing upright. Accordingly, Claude crouched down in the dust, and the plaster which cracked beneath him; his head was on fire; rummaging around him with his hands, he found on the floor a bit of broken glass, which he pressed to his brow, and whose cool-ness afforded him some relief.

What was taking place at that moment in the gloomy soul of the archdeacon? God and himself could alone know.

In what order was he arranging in his mind la Esmeralda, Phoebus, Jacques Charmolue, his young brother so beloved, yet abandoned by him in the mire, his archdeacon’s cassock, his reputation perhaps dragged to la Falourdel’s, all these adventures, all these images? I cannot say. But it is certain that these ideas formed in his mind a horrible group.

He had been waiting a quarter of an hour; it seemed to him that he had grown a century older. All at once he heard the creaking of the boards of the stairway; some one was ascending. The trapdoor opened once more; a light reappeared. There was a tolerably large crack in the worm-eaten door of his den; he put his face to it. In this manner he could see all that went on in the adjoining room. The cat-faced old crone was the first to emerge from the trap-door, lamp in hand; then Phoebus, twirling his moustache, then a third person, that beautiful and graceful figure, la Esmeralda. The priest beheld her rise from below like a dazzling apparition. Claude trembled, a cloud spread over his eyes, his pulses beat violently, everything rustled and whirled around him; he no longer saw nor heard anything.

When he recovered himself, Phoebus and Esmeralda were alone seated on the wooden coffer beside the lamp which made these two youthful figures and a miserable pallet at the end of the attic stand out plainly before the archdeacon’s eyes.

Beside the pallet was a window, whose panes broken like a spider’s web upon which rain has fallen, allowed a view, through its rent meshes, of a corner of the sky, and the moon lying far away on an eiderdown bed of soft clouds.

The young girl was blushing, confused, palpitating. Her long, drooping lashes shaded her crimson cheeks. The officer, to whom she dared not lift her eyes, was radiant. Mechanically, and with a charmingly unconscious gesture, she traced with the tip of her finger incoherent lines on the bench, and watched her finger. Her foot was not visible. The little goat was nestling upon it.

The captain was very gallantly clad; he had tufts of embroidery at his neck and wrists; a great elegance at that day.

It was not without difficulty that Dom Claude managed to hear what they were saying, through the humming of the blood, which was boiling in his temples.

(A conversation between lovers is a very commonplace affair. It is a perpetual “I love you.” A musical phrase which is very insipid and very bald for indifferent listeners, when it is not ornamented with some *fioriture*; but Claude was not an indifferent listener.)

“Oh!” said the young girl, without raising her eyes, “do not despise me, monseigneur Phoebus. I feel that what I am doing is not right.”

“Despise you, my pretty child!” replied the officer with an air of superior and distinguished gallantry, “despise you, *tête-Dieu*! and why?”

“For having followed you!”

“On that point, my beauty, we don’t agree. I ought not to despise you, but to hate you.”

The young girl looked at him in affright: “Hate me! what have I done?”

“For having required so much urging.”

“Alas!” said she, “’tis because I am breaking a vow. I shall not find my parents! The amulet will lose its virtue. But what matters it? What need have I of father or mother now?”

So saying, she fixed upon the captain her great black eyes, moist with joy and tenderness.

“Devil take me if I understand you!” exclaimed Phoebus. La Esmeralda remained silent for a moment, then a tear dropped from her eyes, a sigh from her lips, and she said,— “Oh! monseigneur, I love you.”

Such a perfume of chastity, such a charm of virtue surrounded the young girl, that Phoebus did not feel completely at his ease beside her. But this remark emboldened him: “You love me!” he said with rapture, and he threw his arm round the gypsy’s waist. He had only been waiting for this opportunity.

The priest saw it, and tested with the tip of his finger the point of a poniard which he wore concealed in his breast.

“Phoebus,” continued the Bohemian, gently releasing her waist from the captain’s tenacious hands, “You are good, you are generous, you are handsome; you saved me, me who am only a poor child lost in Bohemia. I had long been dreaming of an officer who should save my life. ’Twas of you that I was dreaming, before I knew you, my Phoebus; the officer of my dream had a beautiful uniform like yours, a grand look, a sword; your name is Phoebus; ’tis a beautiful name. I love your name; I love your sword. Draw your sword, Phoebus, that I may see it.”

“Child!” said the captain, and he unsheathed his sword with a smile.

The gypsy looked at the hilt, the blade; examined the cipher on the guard with adorable curiosity, and kissed the sword, saying, —

“You are the sword of a brave man. I love my captain.” Phoebus again profited by the opportunity to impress upon her beautiful bent neck a kiss which made the young girl straighten herself up as scarlet as a poppy. The priest gnashed his teeth over it in the dark.

“Phoebus,” resumed the gypsy, “let me talk to you. Pray walk a little, that I may see you at full height, and that I may hear your spurs jingle. How handsome you are!”

The captain rose to please her, chiding her with a smile of satisfaction, —

“What a child you are! By the way, my charmer, have you seen me in my archer’s ceremonial doublet?”

“Alas! no,” she replied.

“It is very handsome!”

Phoebus returned and seated himself beside her, but much closer than before.

“Listen, my dear—”

The gypsy gave him several little taps with her pretty hand on his mouth, with a childish mirth and grace and gayety.

“No, no, I will not listen to you. Do you love me? I want you to tell me whether you love me.”

“Do I love thee, angel of my life!” exclaimed the captain, half kneeling. “My body, my blood, my soul, all are thine; all are for thee. I love thee, and I have never loved any one but thee.”

The captain had repeated this phrase so many times, in many similar conjunctures, that he delivered it all in one breath, without committing a single mistake. At this passionate declaration, the gypsy raised to the dirty ceiling which served for the skies a glance full of angelic happiness.

“Oh!” she murmured, “this is the moment when one should die!”

Phoebus found “the moment” favorable for robbing her of another kiss, which went to torture the unhappy archdeacon in his nook. “Die!” exclaimed the amorous captain, “What are you saying, my lovely angel? ’Tis a time for living, or Jupiter is only a scamp! Die at the beginning of so sweet a thing! *Corne-de-boeuf*, what a jest! It is not that. Listen, my dear Similar, Esmenarda — Pardon! you have so prodigiously Saracen a name that I never can get it straight. ’Tis a thicket which stops me short.”

“Good heavens!” said the poor girl, “and I thought my name pretty because of its singularity! But since it displeases you, I would that I were called Goton.”

“Ah! do not weep for such a trifle, my graceful maid! ’tis a name to which one must get accustomed, that is all. When I once know it by heart, all will go smoothly. Listen then, my dear Similar; I adore you passionately. I love you so that ’tis simply miraculous. I know a girl who is bursting with rage over it—”

The jealous girl interrupted him: “Who?”

“What matters that to us?” said Phoebus; “do you love me?”

“Oh!” — said she.

“Well! that is all. You shall see how I love you also. May the great devil Neptunus spear me if I do not make you the happiest woman in the world. We will have a pretty little house somewhere. I will make my archers parade before your windows. They are all mounted, and set at defiance those of Captain Mignon. There are *voulgiers*, *cranequiniers* and hand *couleveiniers**. I will take you to the great sights of the Parisians at the storehouse of Rully. Eighty thousand armed men, thirty thousand white harnesses, short coats or coats of mail; the sixty-seven banners of the trades; the standards of the parliaments, of the chamber of accounts, of the treasury of the generals, of the aides of the mint; a devilish fine array, in short! I will conduct you to see the lions of the Hôtel du Roi, which are wild beasts. All women love that."

* Varieties of the crossbow.

For several moments the young girl, absorbed in her charming thoughts, was dreaming to the sound of his voice, without listening to the sense of his words.

"Oh! how happy you will be!" continued the captain, and at the same time he gently unbuckled the gypsy's girdle.

"What are you doing?" she said quickly. This "act of violence" had roused her from her revery.

"Nothing," replied Phoebus, "I was only saying that you must abandon all this garb of folly, and the street corner when you are with me."

"When I am with you, Phoebus!" said the young girl tenderly.

She became pensive and silent once more.

The captain, emboldened by her gentleness, clasped her waist without resistance; then began softly to unlace the poor child's corsage, and disarranged her tucker to such an extent that the panting priest beheld the gypsy's beautiful shoulder emerge from the gauze, as round and brown as the moon rising through the mists of the horizon.

The young girl allowed Phoebus to have his way. She did not appear to perceive it. The eye of the bold captain flashed.

Suddenly she turned towards him, —

"Phoebus," she said, with an expression of infinite love, "instruct me in thy religion."

"My religion!" exclaimed the captain, bursting with laughter, "I instruct you in my religion! *Corne et tonnerre*! What do you want with my religion?"

"In order that we may be married," she replied.

The captain's face assumed an expression of mingled surprise and disdain, of carelessness and libertine passion.

"Ah, bah!" said he, "do people marry?"

The Bohemian turned pale, and her head drooped sadly on her breast.

"My beautiful love," resumed Phoebus, tenderly, "what nonsense is this? A great thing is marriage, truly! one is none the less loving for not having spit Latin into a priest's shop!"

While speaking thus in his softest voice, he approached extremely near the gypsy; his caressing hands resumed their place around her supple and delicate waist, his eye flashed more and more, and everything announced that Monsieur Phoebus was on the verge of one of those moments when Jupiter himself commits so many follies that Homer is obliged to summon a cloud to his rescue.

But Dom Claude saw everything. The door was made of thoroughly rotten cask staves, which left large apertures for the passage of his hawklike gaze. This brown-skinned, broad-shouldered priest, hitherto condemned to the austere virginity of the cloister, was quivering and boiling in the presence of this night scene of love and voluptuousness. This young and beautiful girl given over in disarray to the ardent young man, made melted lead flow in his-veins; his eyes darted with sensual jealousy beneath all those loosened pins. Any one who could, at that moment, have seen the face of the unhappy man glued to the wormeaten bars, would have thought that he beheld the face of a tiger glaring from the depths of a cage at some jackal devouring a gazelle. His eye shone like a candle through the cracks of the door.

All at once, Phoebus, with a rapid gesture, removed the gypsy’s gorgerette. The poor child, who had remained pale and dreamy, awoke with a start; she recoiled hastily from the enterprising officer, and, casting a glance at her bare neck and shoulders, red, confused, mute with shame, she crossed her two beautiful arms on her breast to conceal it. Had it not been for the flame which burned in her cheeks, at the sight of her so silent and motionless, one would have declared her a statue of Modesty. Her eyes were lowered.

But the captain’s gesture had revealed the mysterious amulet which she wore about her neck.

“What is that?” he said, seizing this pretext to approach once more the beautiful creature whom he had just alarmed.

“Don’t touch it!” she replied, quickly, “’tis my guardian. It will make me find my family again, if I remain worthy to do so. Oh, leave me, monsieur le capitaine! My mother! My poor mother! My mother! Where art thou? Come to my rescue! Have pity, Monsieur Phoebus, give me back my gorgerette!”

Phoebus retreated amid said in a cold tone, —

“Oh, mademoiselle! I see plainly that you do not love me!”

“I do not love him!” exclaimed the unhappy child, and at the same time she clung to the captain, whom she drew to a seat beside her. “I do not love thee, my Phoebus? What art thou saying, wicked man, to break my heart? Oh, take me! take all! do what you will with me, I am thine. What matters to me the amulet! What matters to me my mother! ’Tis thou who art my mother since I love thee! Phoebus, my beloved Phoebus, dost thou see me? ’Tis I. Look at me; ’tis the little one whom thou wilt surely not repulse, who comes, who comes herself to seek thee. My soul, my life, my body, my person, all is one thing — which is thine, my captain. Well, no! We will not marry, since that displeases thee; and then, what am I? a miserable girl of the gutters; whilst thou, my Phoebus, art a gentleman. A fine thing, truly! A dancer wed an officer! I was mad. No, Phoebus, no; I will be thy mistress, thy amusement, thy pleasure, when thou wilt; a girl who shall belong to thee. I was only made for that, soiled, despised, dishonored, but what matters it? — beloved. I shall be the proudest and the most joyous of women. And when I grow old or ugly, Phoebus, when I am no longer good to love you, you will suffer me to serve you still. Others will embroider scarfs for you; ’tis I, the servant, who will care for them. You will let me polish your spurs, brush your doublet, dust your riding-boots. You will have that pity, will you not, Phoebus? Meanwhile, take me! here, Phoebus, all this belongs to thee, only love me! We gypsies need only air and love.”

So saying, she threw her arms round the officer’s neck; she looked up at him, supplicatingly, with a beautiful smile, and all in tears. Her delicate neck rubbed against his cloth doublet with its rough embroideries. She writhed on her knees, her beautiful body half naked. The intoxicated captain pressed his ardent lips to those lovely African shoulders. The young girl, her eyes bent on the ceiling, as she leaned backwards, quivered, all palpitating, beneath this kiss.

All at once, above Phoebus’s head she beheld another head; a green, livid, convulsed face, with the look of a lost soul; near this face was a hand grasping a poniard. — It was the face and hand of the priest; he had broken the door and he was there. Phoebus could not see him. The young girl remained motionless, frozen with terror, dumb, beneath that terrible apparition, like a dove which should raise its head at the moment when the hawk is gazing into her nest with its round eyes.

She could not even utter a cry. She saw the poniard descend upon Phoebus, and rise again, reeking.

“Maledictions!” said the captain, and fell.

She fainted.

At the moment when her eyes closed, when all feeling vanished in her, she thought that she felt a touch of fire imprinted upon her lips, a kiss more burning than the red-hot iron of the executioner.

When she recovered her senses, she was surrounded by soldiers of the watch they were carrying away the captain, bathed in his blood the priest had disappeared; the window at the back of the room which opened on the river was wide open; they picked up a cloak which they supposed to belong to the officer and she heard them saying around her,

“’Tis a sorceress who has stabbed a captain.”

BOOK EIGHTH.

CHAPTER I. THE CROWN CHANGED INTO A DRY LEAF.

Gringoire and the entire Court of Miracles were suffering mortal anxiety. For a whole month they had not known what had become of la Esmeralda, which greatly pained the Duke of Egypt and his friends the vagabonds, nor what had become of the goat, which redoubled Gringoire’s grief. One evening the gypsy had disappeared, and since that time had given no signs of life. All search had proved fruitless. Some tormenting bootblacks had told Gringoire about meeting her that same evening near the Pont Saint-Michel, going off with an officer; but this husband, after the fashion of Bohemia, was an incredulous philosopher, and besides, he, better than any one else, knew to what a point his wife was virginal. He had been able to form a judgment as to the unconquerable modesty resulting from the combined virtues of the amulet and the gypsy, and he had mathematically calculated the resistance of that chastity to the second power. Accordingly, he was at ease on that score.

Still he could not understand this disappearance. It was a profound sorrow. He would have grown thin over it, had that been possible. He had forgotten everything, even his literary tastes, even his great work, *De figuris regularibus et irregularibus*, which it was his intention to have printed with the first money which he should procure (for he had raved over printing, ever since he had seen the “Didascalon” of Hugues de Saint Victor, printed with the celebrated characters of Vindelin de Spire).

One day, as he was passing sadly before the criminal Tournelle, he perceived a considerable crowd at one of the gates of the Palais de Justice.

“What is this?” he inquired of a young man who was coming out.

“I know not, sir,” replied the young man. “’Tis said that they are trying a woman who hath assassinated a gendarme. It appears that there is sorcery at the bottom of it, the archbishop and the official have intervened in the case, and my brother, who is the archdeacon of Josas, can think of nothing else. Now, I wished to speak with him, but I have not been able to reach him because of the throng, which vexes me greatly, as I stand in need of money.”

“Alas! sir,” said Gringoire, “I would that I could lend you some, but, my breeches are worn to holes, and ’tis not crowns which have done it.”

He dared not tell the young man that he was acquainted with his brother the archdeacon, to whom he had not returned after the scene in the church; a negligence which embarrassed him.

The scholar went his way, and Gringoire set out to follow the crowd which was mounting the staircase of the great chamber. In his opinion, there was nothing like the spectacle of a criminal process for dissipating melancholy, so exhilaratingly stupid are judges as a rule. The populace which he had joined walked and elbowed in silence. After a slow and tiresome march through a long, gloomy corridor, which wound through the court-house like the intestinal canal of the ancient edifice, he arrived near a low door, opening upon a hall which his lofty stature permitted him to survey with a glance over the waving heads of the rabble.

The hall was vast and gloomy, which latter fact made it appear still more spacious. The day was declining; the long, pointed windows permitted only a pale ray of light to enter, which was extinguished before it reached the vaulted ceiling, an enormous trellis-work of sculptured beams, whose thousand figures seemed to move confusedly in the shadows, many candles were already lighted here and there on tables, and beaming on the heads of clerks buried in masses of documents. The anterior portion of the ball was occupied by the crowd; on the right and left were magistrates and tables; at the end, upon a platform, a number of judges, whose rear rank sank into the shadows, sinister and motionless faces. The walls were sown with innumerable fleurs-de-lis. A large figure of Christ might be vaguely descried above the judges, and everywhere there were pikes and halberds, upon whose points the reflection of the candles placed tips of fire.

“Monsieur,” Gringoire inquired of one of his neighbors, “who are all those persons ranged yonder, like prelates in council?”

“Monsieur,” replied the neighbor, “those on the right are the counsellors of the grand chamber; those on the left, the councillors of inquiry; the masters in black gowns, the messires in red.”

“Who is that big red fellow, yonder above them, who is sweating?” pursued Gringoire.

“It is monsieur the president.”

“And those sheep behind him?” continued Gringoire, who as we have seen, did not love the magistracy, which arose, possibly, from the grudge which he cherished against the Palais de Justice since his dramatic misadventure.

“They are messieurs the masters of requests of the king’s household.”

“And that boar in front of him?”

“He is monsieur the clerk of the Court of Parliament.”

“And that crocodile on the right?”

“Master Philippe Lheulier, advocate extraordinary of the king.”

“And that big, black tom-cat on the left?”

“Master Jacques Charmolue, procurator of the king in the Ecclesiastical Court, with the gentlemen of the officialty.”

“Come now, monsieur,” said Gringoire, “pray what are all those fine fellows doing yonder?”

“They are judging.”

“Judging whom? I do not see the accused.”

“’Tis a woman, sir. You cannot see her. She has her back turned to us, and she is hidden from us by the crowd. Stay, yonder she is, where you see a group of partisans.”

“Who is the woman?” asked Gringoire. “Do you know her name?”

“No, monsieur, I have but just arrived. I merely assume that there is some sorcery about it, since the official is present at the trial.”

“Come!” said our philosopher, “we are going to see all these magistrates devour human flesh. ’Tis as good a spectacle as any other.”

“Monsieur,” remarked his neighbor, “think you not, that Master Jacques Charmolue has a very sweet air?”

“Hum!” replied Gringoire. “I distrust a sweetness which hath pinched nostrils and thin lips.”

Here the bystanders imposed silence upon the two chatterers. They were listening to an important deposition.

“Messeigneurs,” said an old woman in the middle of the hall, whose form was so concealed beneath her garments that one would have pronounced her a walking heap of rags; “Messeigneurs, the thing is as true as that I am la Falourdel, established these forty years at the Pont Saint Michel, and paying regularly my rents, lord’s dues, and quit rents; at the gate opposite the house of Tassin-Caillart, the dyer, which is on the side up the river — a poor old woman now, but a pretty maid in former days, my lords. Some one said to me lately, ‘La Falourdel, don’t use your spinning-wheel too much in the evening; the devil is fond of combing the distaffs of old women with his horns. ’Tis certain that the surly monk who was round about the temple last year, now prowls in the City. Take care, La Falourdel, that he doth not knock at your door.’ One evening I was spinning on my wheel, there comes a knock at my door; I ask who it is. They swear. I open. Two men enter. A man in black and a handsome officer. Of the black man nothing could be seen but his eyes, two coals of fire. All the rest was hat and cloak. They say to me,— ‘The Sainte-Marthe chamber.’— ’Tis my upper chamber, my lords, my cleanest. They give me a crown. I put the crown in my drawer, and I say: ‘This shall go to buy tripe at the slaughter-house of la Gloriette to-morrow.’ We go up stairs. On arriving at the upper chamber, and while my back is turned, the black man disappears. That dazed me a bit. The officer, who was as handsome as a great lord, goes down stairs again with me. He goes out. In about the time it takes to spin a quarter of a handful of flax, he returns with a beautiful young girl, a doll who would have shone like the sun had she been coiffed. She had with her a goat; a big billy-goat, whether black or white, I no longer remember. That set me to thinking. The girl does not concern me, but the goat! I love not those beasts, they have a beard and horns. They are so like a man. And then, they smack of the witches, sabbath. However, I say nothing. I had the crown. That is right, is it not, Monsieur Judge? I show the captain and the wench to the upper chamber, and I leave them alone; that is to say, with the goat. I go down and set to spinning again — I must inform you that my house has a ground floor and story above. I know not why I fell to thinking of the surly monk whom the goat had put into my head again, and then the beautiful girl was rather strangely decked out. All at once, I hear a cry upstairs, and something falls on the floor and the window opens. I run to mine which is beneath it, and I behold a black mass pass before my eyes and fall into the water. It was a phantom clad like a priest. It was a moonlight night. I saw him quite plainly. He was swimming in the direction of the city. Then, all of a tremble, I call the watch. The gentlemen of the police enter, and not knowing just at the first moment what the matter was, and being merry, they beat me. I explain to them. We go up stairs, and what do we find? my poor chamber all blood, the captain stretched out at full length with a dagger in his neck, the girl pretending to be dead, and the goat all in a fright. ‘Pretty work!’ I say, ‘I shall have to wash that floor for more than a fortnight. It will have to be scraped; it will be a terrible job.’ They carried off the officer, poor young man, and the wench with her bosom all bare. But wait, the worst is that on the next day, when I wanted to take the crown to buy tripe, I found a dead leaf in its place.”

The old woman ceased. A murmur of horror ran through the audience.

“That phantom, that goat, — all smacks of magic,” said one of Gringoire’s neighbors.

“And that dry leaf!” added another.

“No doubt about it,” joined in a third, “she is a witch who has dealings with the surly monk, for the purpose of plundering officers.”

Gringoire himself was not disinclined to regard this as altogether alarming and probable.

“Goody Falourdel,” said the president majestically, “have you nothing more to communicate to the court?”

“No, monseigneur,” replied the crone, “except that the report has described my house as a hovel and stinking; which is an outrageous fashion of speaking. The houses on the bridge are not imposing, because there are such multitudes of people; but, nevertheless, the butchers continue to dwell there, who are wealthy folk, and married to very proper and handsome women.”

The magistrate who had reminded Gringoire of a crocodile rose, —

“Silence!” said he. “I pray the gentlemen not to lose sight of the fact that a dagger was found on the person of the accused. Goody Falourdel, have you brought that leaf into which the crown which the demon gave you was transformed?

“Yes, monseigneur,” she replied; “I found it again. Here it is.”

A bailiff banded the dead leaf to the crocodile, who made a doleful shake of the head, and passed it on to the president, who gave it to the procurator of the king in the ecclesiastical court, and thus it made the circuit of the hail.

“It is a birch leaf,” said Master Jacques Charmolue. “A fresh proof of magic.”

A counsellor took up the word.

“Witness, two men went upstairs together in your house: the black man, whom you first saw disappear and afterwards swimming in the Seine, with his priestly garments, and the officer. Which of the two handed you the crown?” The old woman pondered for a moment and then said,— “The officer.”

A murmur ran through the crowd.

“Ah!” thought Gringoire, “this makes some doubt in my mind.”

But Master Philippe Lheulier, advocate extraordinary to the king, interposed once more.

“I will recall to these gentlemen, that in the deposition taken at his bedside, the assassinated officer, while declaring that he had a vague idea when the black man accosted him that the latter might be the surly monk, added that the phantom had pressed him eagerly to go and make acquaintance with the accused; and upon his, the captain’s, remarking that he had no money, he had given him the crown which the said officer paid to la Falourdel. Hence, that crown is the money of hell.”

This conclusive observation appeared to dissipate all the doubts of Gringoire and the other sceptics in the audience.

“You have the documents, gentlemen,” added the king’s advocate, as he took his seat; “you can consult the testimony of Phoebus de Châteaupers.”

At that name, the accused sprang up, her head rose above the throng. Gringoire with horror recognized la Esmeralda.

She was pale; her tresses, formerly so gracefully braided and spangled with sequins, hung in disorder; her lips were blue, her hollow eyes were terrible. Alas!

“Phoebus!” she said, in bewilderment; “where is he? O messeigneurs! before you kill me, tell me, for pity sake, whether he still lives?”

“Hold your tongue, woman,” replied the president, “that is no affair of ours.”

“Oh! for mercy’s sake, tell me if he is alive!” she repeated, clasping her beautiful emaciated hands; and the sound of her chains in contact with her dress, was heard.

“Well!” said the king’s advocate roughly, “he is dying. Are you satisfied?”

The unhappy girl fell back on her criminal’s seat, speechless, tearless, white as a wax figure.

The president bent down to a man at his feet, who wore a gold cap and a black gown, a chain on his neck and a wand in his hand.

“Bailiff, bring in the second accused.”

All eyes turned towards a small door, which opened, and, to the great agitation of Gringoire, gave passage to a pretty goat with horns and hoofs of gold. The elegant beast halted for a moment on the threshold, stretching out its neck as though, perched on the summit of a rock, it had before its eyes an immense horizon. Suddenly it caught sight of the gypsy girl, and leaping over the table and the head of a clerk, in two bounds it was at her knees; then it rolled gracefully on its mistress's feet, soliciting a word or a caress; but the accused remained motionless, and poor Djali himself obtained not a glance.

"Eh, why— 'tis my villanous beast," said old Falourdel, "I recognize the two perfectly!"

Jacques Charmolue interfered.

"If the gentlemen please, we will proceed to the examination of the goat." He was, in fact, the second criminal. Nothing more simple in those days than a suit of sorcery instituted against an animal. We find, among others in the accounts of the provost's office for 1466, a curious detail concerning the expenses of the trial of Gillet-Soulart and his sow, "executed for their demerits," at Corbeil. Everything is there, the cost of the pens in which to place the sow, the five hundred bundles of brushwood purchased at the port of Morsant, the three pints of wine and the bread, the last repast of the victim fraternally shared by the executioner, down to the eleven days of guard and food for the sow, at eight deniers parisis each. Sometimes, they went even further than animals. The capitularies of Charlemagne and of Louis le Débonnaire impose severe penalties on fiery phantoms which presume to appear in the air.

Meanwhile the procurator had exclaimed: "If the demon which possesses this goat, and which has resisted all exorcisms, persists in its deeds of witchcraft, if it alarms the court with them, we warn it that we shall be forced to put in requisition against it the gallows or the stake. Gringoire broke out into a cold perspiration. Charmolue took from the table the gypsy's tambourine, and presenting it to the goat, in a certain manner, asked the latter, —

"What o'clock is it?"

The goat looked at it with an intelligent eye, raised its gilded hoof, and struck seven blows.

It was, in fact, seven o'clock. A movement of terror ran through the crowd.

Gringoire could not endure it.

"He is destroying himself!" he cried aloud; "You see well that he does not know what he is doing."

"Silence among the louts at the end of the hail!" said the bailiff sharply.

Jacques Charmolue, by the aid of the same manoeuvres of the tambourine, made the goat perform many other tricks connected with the date of the day, the month of the year, etc., which the reader has already witnessed. And, by virtue of an optical illusion peculiar to judicial proceedings, these same spectators who had, probably, more than once applauded in the public square Djali's innocent magic were terrified by it beneath the roof of the Palais de Justice. The goat was undoubtedly the devil.

It was far worse when the procurator of the king, having emptied upon a floor a certain bag filled with movable letters, which Djali wore round his neck, they beheld the goat extract with his hoof from the scattered alphabet the fatal name of Phoebus. The witchcraft of which the captain had been the victim appeared irresistibly demonstrated, and in the eyes of all, the gypsy, that ravishing dancer, who had so often dazzled the passers-by with her grace, was no longer anything but a frightful vampire.

However, she betrayed no sign of life; neither Djali's graceful evolutions, nor the menaces of the court, nor the suppressed imprecations of the spectators any longer reached her mind.

In order to arouse her, a police officer was obliged to shake her unmercifully, and the president had to raise his voice,— "Girl, you are of the Bohemian race, addicted to deeds of witchcraft. You, in complicity with the bewitched goat implicated in this suit, during the night of the twenty-ninth of March last, murdered and stabbed, in concert with the powers of darkness, by the aid of charms and underhand practices, a captain of the king's arches of the watch, Phoebus de Châteaupers. Do you persist in denying it?"

"Horror!" exclaimed the young girl, hiding her face in her hands. "My Phoebus! Oh, this is hell!"

"Do you persist in your denial?" demanded the president coldly.

"Do I deny it?" she said with terrible accents; and she rose with flashing eyes.

The president continued squarely, —

"Then how do you explain the facts laid to your charge?"

She replied in a broken voice, —

"I have already told you. I do not know. 'Twas a priest, a priest whom I do not know; an infernal priest who pursues me!"

"That is it," retorted the judge; "the surly monk."

“Oh, gentlemen! have mercy! I am but a poor girl—”

“Of Egypt,” said the judge.

Master Jacques Charmolue interposed sweetly, —

“In view of the sad obstinacy of the accused, I demand the application of the torture.”

“Granted,” said the president.

The unhappy girl quivered in every limb. But she rose at the command of the men with partisans, and walked with a tolerably firm step, preceded by Charmolue and the priests of the officiality, between two rows of halberds, towards a medium-sized door which suddenly opened and closed again behind her, and which produced upon the grief-stricken Gringoire the effect of a horrible mouth which had just devoured her.

When she disappeared, they heard a plaintive bleating; it was the little goat mourning.

The sitting of the court was suspended. A counsellor having remarked that the gentlemen were fatigued, and that it would be a long time to wait until the torture was at an end, the president replied that a magistrate must know how to sacrifice himself to his duty.

“What an annoying and vexatious hussy,” said an aged judge, “to get herself put to the question when one has not supped!”

CHAPTER II. CONTINUATION OF THE CROWN WHICH WAS CHANGED INTO A DRY LEAF.

After ascending and descending several steps in the corridors, which were so dark that they were lighted by lamps at mid-day, La Esmeralda, still surrounded by her lugubrious escort, was thrust by the police into a gloomy chamber. This chamber, circular in form, occupied the ground floor of one of those great towers, which, even in our own century, still pierce through the layer of modern edifices with which modern Paris has covered ancient Paris. There were no windows to this cellar; no other opening than the entrance, which was low, and closed by an enormous iron door. Nevertheless, light was not lacking; a furnace had been constructed in the thickness of the wall; a large fire was lighted there, which filled the vault with its crimson reflections and deprived a miserable candle, which stood in one corner, of all radiance. The iron grating which served to close the oven, being raised at that moment, allowed only a view at the mouth of the flaming vent-hole in the dark wall, the lower extremity of its bars, like a row of black and pointed teeth, set flat apart; which made the furnace resemble one of those mouths of dragons which spout forth flames in ancient legends. By the light which escaped from it, the prisoner beheld, all about the room, frightful instruments whose use she did not understand. In the centre lay a leather mattress, placed almost flat upon the ground, over which hung a strap provided with a buckle, attached to a brass ring in the mouth of a flat-nosed monster carved in the keystone of the vault. Tongs, pincers, large ploughshares, filled the interior of the furnace, and glowed in a confused heap on the coals. The sanguine light of the furnace illuminated in the chamber only a confused mass of horrible things.

This Tartarus was called simply, The Question Chamber.

On the bed, in a negligent attitude, sat Pierrat Torterue, the official torturer. His underlings, two gnomes with square faces, leather aprons, and linen breeches, were moving the iron instruments on the coals.

In vain did the poor girl summon up her courage; on entering this chamber she was stricken with horror.

The sergeants of the bailiff of the courts drew up in line on one side, the priests of the officiality on the other. A clerk, inkhorn, and a table were in one corner.

Master Jacques Charmolue approached the gypsy with a very sweet smile.

“My dear child,” said he, “do you still persist in your denial?”

“Yes,” she replied, in a dying voice.

“In that case,” replied Charmolue, “it will be very painful for us to have to question you more urgently than we should like. Pray take the trouble to seat yourself on this bed. Master Pierrat, make room for mademoiselle, and close the door.”

Pierrat rose with a growl.

“If I shut the door,” he muttered, “my fire will go out.”

“Well, my dear fellow,” replied Charmolue, “leave it open then.”

Meanwhile, la Esmeralda had remained standing. That leather bed on which so many unhappy wretches had writhed, frightened her. Terror chilled the very marrow of her bones; she stood there bewildered and stupefied. At a sign from Charmolue, the two assistants took her and placed her in a sitting posture on the bed. They did her no harm; but when these men touched her, when that leather touched her, she felt all her blood retreat to her heart. She cast a frightened look around the chamber. It seemed to her as though she beheld advancing from all quarters towards her, with the intention of crawling up her body and biting and pinching her, all those hideous implements of torture, which as compared to the instruments of all sorts she had hitherto seen, were like what bats, centipedes, and spiders are among insects and birds.

“Where is the physician?” asked Charmolue.

“Here,” replied a black gown whom she had not before noticed.

She shuddered.

“Mademoiselle,” resumed the caressing voice of the procucrator of the Ecclesiastical court, “for the third time, do you persist in denying the deeds of which you are accused?”

This time she could only make a sign with her head.

“You persist?” said Jacques Charmolue. “Then it grieves me deeply, but I must fulfil my office.”

“Monsieur le Procureur du Roi,” said Pierrat abruptly, “How shall we begin?”

Charmolue hesitated for a moment with the ambiguous grimace of a poet in search of a rhyme.

“With the boot,” he said at last.

The unfortunate girl felt herself so utterly abandoned by God and men, that her head fell upon her breast like an inert thing which has no power in itself.

The tormentor and the physician approached her simultaneously. At the same time, the two assistants began to fumble among their hideous arsenal.

At the clanking of their frightful irons, the unhappy child quivered like a dead frog which is being galvanized. “Oh!” she murmured, so low that no one heard her; “Oh, my Phoebus!” Then she fell back once more into her immobility and her marble silence. This spectacle would have rent any other heart than those of her judges. One would have pronounced her a poor sinful soul, being tortured by Satan beneath the scarlet wicket of hell. The miserable body which that frightful swarm of saws, wheels, and racks were about to clasp in their clutches, the being who was about to be manipulated by the harsh hands of executioners and pincers, was that gentle, white, fragile creature, a poor grain of millet which human justice was handing over to the terrible mills of torture to grind. Meanwhile, the callous hands of Pierrat Torterue’s assistants had bared that charming leg, that tiny foot, which had so often amazed the passers-by with their delicacy and beauty, in the squares of Paris.

“’Tis a shame!” muttered the tormentor, glancing at these graceful and delicate forms.

Had the archdeacon been present, he certainly would have recalled at that moment his symbol of the spider and the fly. Soon the unfortunate girl, through a mist which spread before her eyes, beheld the boot approach; she soon beheld her foot encased between iron plates disappear in the frightful apparatus. Then terror restored her strength.

“Take that off!” she cried angrily; and drawing herself up, with her hair all dishevelled: “Mercy!”

She darted from the bed to fling herself at the feet of the king’s procurator, but her leg was fast in the heavy block of oak and iron, and she sank down upon the boot, more crushed than a bee with a lump of lead on its wing.

At a sign from Charmolue, she was replaced on the bed, and two coarse hands adjusted to her delicate waist the strap which hung from the ceiling.

“For the last time, do you confess the facts in the case?” demanded Charmolue, with his imperturbable benignity.

“I am innocent.”

“Then, mademoiselle, how do you explain the circumstance laid to your charge?”

“Alas, monseigneur, I do not know.”

“So you deny them?”

“All!”

“Proceed,” said Charmolue to Pierrat.

Pierrat turned the handle of the screw-jack, the boot was contracted, and the unhappy girl uttered one of those horrible cries which have no orthography in any human language.

“Stop!” said Charmolue to Pierrat. “Do you confess?” he said to the gypsy.

“All!” cried the wretched girl. “I confess! I confess! Mercy!”

She had not calculated her strength when she faced the torture. Poor child, whose life up to that time had been so joyous, so pleasant, so sweet, the first pain had conquered her!

“Humanity forces me to tell you,” remarked the king’s procurator, “that in confessing, it is death that you must expect.”

“I certainly hope so!” said she. And she fell back upon the leather bed, dying, doubled up, allowing herself to hang suspended from the strap buckled round her waist.

“Come, fair one, hold up a little,” said Master Pierrat, raising her. “You have the air of the lamb of the Golden Fleece which hangs from Monsieur de Bourgogne’s neck.”

Jacques Charmolue raised his voice,

“Clerk, write. Young Bohemian maid, you confess your participation in the feasts, witches’ sabbaths, and witchcrafts of hell, with ghosts, hags, and vampires? Answer.”

“Yes,” she said, so low that her words were lost in her breathing.

“You confess to having seen the ram which Beelzebub causes to appear in the clouds to call together the witches’ sabbath, and which is beheld by socerers alone?”

“Yes.”

“You confess to having adored the heads of Bophomet, those abominable idols of the Templars?”

"Yes."

"To having had habitual dealings with the devil under the form of a goat familiar, joined with you in the suit?"

"Yes."

"Lastly, you avow and confess to having, with the aid of the demon, and of the phantom vulgarly known as the surly monk, on the night of the twenty-ninth of March last, murdered and assassinated a captain named Phoebus de Châteaupers?"

She raised her large, staring eyes to the magistrate, and replied, as though mechanically, without convulsion or agitation, —

"Yes."

It was evident that everything within her was broken.

"Write, clerk," said Charmolue. And, addressing the torturers, "Release the prisoner, and take her back to the court."

When the prisoner had been "unbooted," the procurator of the ecclesiastical court examined her foot, which was still swollen with pain. "Come," said he, "there's no great harm done. You shrieked in good season. You could still dance, my beauty!"

Then he turned to his acolytes of the officiality,— "Behold justice enlightened at last! This is a solace, gentlemen! Madamoiselle will bear us witness that we have acted with all possible gentleness."

CHAPTER III. END OF THE CROWN WHICH WAS TURNED INTO A DRY LEAF.

When she re-entered the audience hall, pale and limping, she was received with a general murmur of pleasure. On the part of the audience there was the feeling of impatience gratified which one experiences at the theatre at the end of the last entr’acte of the comedy, when the curtain rises and the conclusion is about to begin. On the part of the judges, it was the hope of getting their suppers sooner.

The little goat also bleated with joy. He tried to run towards his mistress, but they had tied him to the bench.

Night was fully set in. The candles, whose number had not been increased, cast so little light, that the walls of the hall could not be seen. The shadows there enveloped all objects in a sort of mist. A few apathetic faces of judges alone could be dimly discerned. Opposite them, at the extremity of the long hail, they could see a vaguely white point standing out against the sombre background. This was the accused.

She had dragged herself to her place. When Charmolue had installed himself in a magisterial manner in his own, he seated himself, then rose and said, without exhibiting too much self-complacency at his success,— “The accused has confessed all.”

“Bohemian girl,” the president continued, “have you avowed all your deeds of magic, prostitution, and assassination on Phoebus de Châteaupers.”

Her heart contracted. She was heard to sob amid the darkness.

“Anything you like,” she replied feebly, “but kill me quickly!”

“Monsieur, procurator of the king in the ecclesiastical courts,” said the president, “the chamber is ready to hear you in your charge.”

Master Charmolue exhibited an alarming note book, and began to read, with many gestures and the exaggerated accentuation of the pleader, an oration in Latin, wherein all the proofs of the suit were piled up in Ciceronian periphrases, flanked with quotations from Plautus, his favorite comic author. We regret that we are not able to offer to our readers this remarkable piece. The orator pronounced it with marvellous action. Before he had finished the exordium, the perspiration was starting from his brow, and his eyes from his bead.

All at once, in the middle of a fine period, he interrupted himself, and his glance, ordinarily so gentle and even stupid, became menacing.

"Gentlemen," he exclaimed (this time in French, for it was not in his copy book), "Satan is so mixed up in this affair, that here he is present at our debates, and making sport of their majesty. Behold!"

So saying, he pointed to the little goat, who, on seeing Charmolue gesticulating, had, in point of fact, thought it appropriate to do the same, and had seated himself on his haunches, reproducing to the best of his ability, with his forepaws and his bearded head the pathetic pantomine of the king's procurator in the ecclesiastical court. This was, if the reader remembers, one of his prettiest accomplishments. This incident, this last proof, produced a great effect. The goat's hoofs were tied, and the king's procurator resumed the thread of his eloquence.

It was very long, but the peroration was admirable. Here is the concluding phrase; let the reader add the hoarse voice and the breathless gestures of Master Charmolue,

"*Ideo, domni, coram stryga demonstrata, crimine patente, intentione criminis existente, in nornine sanctoe ecclesioe Nostroe-Domince Parisiensis quoe est in saisina habendi omnimodam altam et bassam justitiam in illa hac intemerata Civitatis insula, tenore proesentium declaremus nos requirere, primo, aliquamdam pecuniariam indemnitatem; secundo, amendationem honorabilem ante portalium maximum Nostroe-Dominoe, ecclesioe cathedralis; tertio, sententiani in virtute cujus ista styrga cum sua capella, seu in trivio vulgariter dicto* la Grève, *seu in insula exeunte in fluvio Secanoe, juxta pointam juardini regalis, executatoe sint*!"*

* The substance of this exordium is contained in the president's sentence.

He put on his cap again and seated himself.

"Eheu!" sighed the broken-hearted Gringoire, "*bassa latinitas* — bastard latin!"

Another man in a black gown rose near the accused; he was her lawyer. — The judges, who were fasting, began to grumble.

"Advocate, be brief," said the president.

"Monsieur the President," replied the advocate, "since the defendant has confessed the crime, I have only one word to say to these gentlemen. Here is a text from the Salic law; 'If a witch hath eaten a man, and if she be convicted of it, she shall pay a fine of eight thousand deniers, which amount to two hundred sous of gold.’ May it please the chamber to condemn my client to the fine?”

“An abrogated text,” said the advocate extraordinary of the king.

“Nego, I deny it,” replied the advocate.

“Put it to the vote!” said one of the councillors; “the crime is manifest, and it is late.”

They proceeded to take a vote without leaving the room. The judges signified their assent without giving their reasons, they were in a hurry. Their capped heads were seen uncovering one after the other, in the gloom, at the lugubrious question addressed to them by the president in a low voice. The poor accused had the appearance of looking at them, but her troubled eye no longer saw.

Then the clerk began to write; then he handed a long parch-ment to the president.

Then the unhappy girl heard the people moving, the pikes clashing, and a freezing voice saying to her,— “Bohemian wench, on the day when it shall seem good to our lord the king, at the hour of noon, you will be taken in a tumbrel, in your shift, with bare feet, and a rope about your neck, before the grand portal of Notre-Dame, and you will there make an apology with a wax torch of the weight of two pounds in your hand, and thence you will be conducted to the Place de Grève, where you will be hanged and strangled on the town gibbet; and likewise your goat; and you will pay to the official three lions of gold, in reparation of the crimes by you committed and by you confessed, of sorcery and magic, debauchery and murder, upon the person of the Sieur Phoebus de Châteaupers. May God have mercy on your soul!”

“Oh! ’tis a dream!” she murmured; and she felt rough hands bearing her away.

CHAPTER IV. *LASCIATE OGNI SPERANZA* — LEAVE ALL HOPE BEHIND, YE WHO

ENTER HERE.

In the Middle Ages, when an edifice was complete, there was almost as much of it in the earth as above it. Unless built upon piles, like Notre-Dame, a palace, a fortress, a church, had always a double bottom. In cathedrals, it was, in some sort, another subterranean cathedral, low, dark, mysterious, blind, and mute, under the upper nave which was overflowing with light and reverberating with organs and bells day and night. Sometimes it was a sepulchre. In palaces, in fortresses, it was a prison, sometimes a sepulchre also, sometimes both together. These mighty buildings, whose mode of formation and vegetation we have elsewhere explained, had not simply foundations, but, so to speak, roots which ran branching through the soil in chambers, galleries, and staircases, like the construction above. Thus churches, palaces, fortresses, had the earth half way up their bodies. The cellars of an edifice formed another edifice, into which one descended instead of ascending, and which extended its subterranean grounds under the external piles of the monument, like those forests and mountains which are reversed in the mirror-like waters of a lake, beneath the forests and mountains of the banks.

At the fortress of Saint-Antoine, at the Palais de Justice of Paris, at the Louvre, these subterranean edifices were prisons. The stories of these prisons, as they sank into the soil, grew constantly narrower and more gloomy. They were so many zones, where the shades of horror were graduated. Dante could never imagine anything better for his hell. These tunnels of cells usually terminated in a sack of a lowest dungeon, with a vat-like bottom, where Dante placed Satan, where society placed those condemned to death. A miserable human existence, once interred there; farewell light, air, life, *ogni speranza* — every hope; it only came forth to the scaffold or the stake. Sometimes it rotted there; human justice called this “forgetting.” Between men and himself, the condemned man felt a pile of stones and jailers weighing down upon his head; and the entire prison, the massive bastille was nothing more than an enormous, complicated lock, which barred him off from the rest of the world.

It was in a sloping cavity of this description, in the *oubliettes* excavated by Saint-Louis, in the *inpace* of the Tournelle, that la Esmeralda had been placed on being condemned to death, through fear of her escape, no doubt, with the colossal court-house over her head. Poor fly, who could not have lifted even one of its blocks of stone!

Assuredly, Providence and society had been equally unjust; such an excess of unhappiness and of torture was not necessary to break so frail a creature.

There she lay, lost in the shadows, buried, hidden, immured. Any one who could have beheld her in this state, after having seen her laugh and dance in the sun, would have shuddered. Cold as night, cold as death, not a breath of air in her tresses, not a human sound in her ear, no longer a ray of light in her eyes; snapped in twain, crushed with chains, crouching beside a jug and a loaf, on a little straw, in a pool of water, which was formed under her by the sweating of the prison walls; without motion, almost without breath, she had no longer the power to suffer; Phoebus, the sun, midday, the open air, the streets of Paris, the dances with applause, the sweet babblings of love with the officer; then the priest, the old crone, the poignard, the blood, the torture, the gibbet; all this did, indeed, pass before her mind, sometimes as a charming and golden vision, sometimes as a hideous nightmare; but it was no longer anything but a vague and horrible struggle, lost in the gloom, or distant music played up above ground, and which was no longer audible at the depth where the unhappy girl had fallen.

Since she had been there, she had neither waked nor slept. In that misfortune, in that cell, she could no longer distinguish her waking hours from slumber, dreams from reality, any more than day from night. All this was mixed, broken, floating, disseminated confusedly in her thought. She no longer felt, she no longer knew, she no longer thought; at the most, she only dreamed. Never had a living creature been thrust more deeply into nothingness.

Thus benumbed, frozen, petrified, she had barely noticed on two or three occasions, the sound of a trap door opening somewhere above her, without even permitting the passage of a little light, and through which a hand had tossed her a bit of black bread. Nevertheless, this periodical visit of the jailer was the sole communication which was left her with mankind.

A single thing still mechanically occupied her ear; above her head, the dampness was filtering through the mouldy stones of the vault, and a drop of water dropped from them at regular intervals. She listened stupidly to the noise made by this drop of water as it fell into the pool beside her.

This drop of water falling from time to time into that pool, was the only movement which still went on around her, the only clock which marked the time, the only noise which reached her of all the noise made on the surface of the earth.

To tell the whole, however, she also felt, from time to time, in that cesspool of mire and darkness, something cold passing over her foot or her arm, and she shuddered.

How long had she been there? She did not know. She had a recollection of a sentence of death pronounced somewhere, against some one, then of having been herself carried away, and of waking up in darkness and silence, chilled to the heart. She had dragged herself along on her hands. Then iron rings that cut her ankles, and chains had rattled. She had recognized the fact that all around her was wall, that below her there was a pavement covered with moisture and a truss of straw; but neither lamp nor air-hole. Then she had seated herself on that straw and, sometimes, for the sake of changing her attitude, on the last stone step in her dungeon. For a while she had tried to count the black minutes measured off for her by the drop of water; but that melancholy labor of an ailing brain had broken off of itself in her head, and had left her in stupor.

At length, one day, or one night, (for midnight and midday were of the same color in that sepulchre), she heard above her a louder noise than was usually made by the turnkey when he brought her bread and jug of water. She raised her head, and beheld a ray of reddish light passing through the crevices in the sort of trapdoor contrived in the roof of the *inpace*.

At the same time, the heavy lock creaked, the trap grated on its rusty hinges, turned, and she beheld a lantern, a hand, and the lower portions of the bodies of two men, the door being too low to admit of her seeing their heads. The light pained her so acutely that she shut her eyes.

When she opened them again the door was closed, the lantern was deposited on one of the steps of the staircase; a man alone stood before her. A monk’s black cloak fell to his feet, a cowl of the same color concealed his face. Nothing was visible of his person, neither face nor hands. It was a long, black shroud standing erect, and beneath which something could be felt moving. She gazed fixedly for several minutes at this sort of spectre. But neither he nor she spoke. One would have pronounced them two statues confronting each other. Two things only seemed alive in that cavern; the wick of the lantern, which sputtered on account of the dampness of the atmosphere, and the drop of water from the roof, which cut this irregular sputtering with its monotonous splash, and made the light of the lantern quiver in concentric waves on the oily water of the pool.

At last the prisoner broke the silence.

“Who are you?”

“A priest.”

The words, the accent, the sound of his voice made her tremble.

The priest continued, in a hollow voice, —

“Are you prepared?”

“For what?”

“To die.”

“Oh!” said she, “will it be soon?”

“To-morrow.”

Her head, which had been raised with joy, fell back upon her breast.

“’Tis very far away yet!” she murmured; “why could they not have done it to-day?”

“Then you are very unhappy?” asked the priest, after a silence.

“I am very cold,” she replied.

She took her feet in her hands, a gesture habitual with unhappy wretches who are cold, as we have already seen in the case of the recluse of the Tour-Roland, and her teeth chattered.

The priest appeared to cast his eyes around the dungeon from beneath his cowl.

“Without light! without fire! in the water! it is horrible!”

“Yes,” she replied, with the bewildered air which unhappiness had given her. “The day belongs to every one, why do they give me only night?”

“Do you know,” resumed the priest, after a fresh silence, “why you are here?”

“I thought I knew once,” she said, passing her thin fingers over her eyelids, as though to aid her memory, “but I know no longer.”

All at once she began to weep like a child.

“I should like to get away from here, sir. I am cold, I am afraid, and there are creatures which crawl over my body.”

“Well, follow me.”

So saying, the priest took her arm. The unhappy girl was frozen to her very soul. Yet that hand produced an impression of cold upon her.

“Oh!” she murmured, “’tis the icy hand of death. Who are you?”

The priest threw back his cowl; she looked. It was the sinister visage which had so long pursued her; that demon’s head which had appeared at la Falourdel’s, above the head of her adored Phoebus; that eye which she last had seen glittering beside a dagger.

This apparition, always so fatal for her, and which had thus driven her on from misfortune to misfortune, even to torture, roused her from her stupor. It seemed to her that the sort of veil which had lain thick upon her memory was rent away. All the details of her melancholy adventure, from the nocturnal scene at la Falourdel’s to her condemnation to the Tournelle, recurred to her memory, no longer vague and confused as heretofore, but distinct, harsh, clear, palpitating, terrible. These souvenirs, half effaced and almost obliterated by excess of suffering, were revived by the sombre figure which stood before her, as the approach of fire causes letters traced upon white paper with invisible ink, to start out perfectly fresh. It seemed to her that all the wounds of her heart opened and bled simultaneously.

“Hah!” she cried, with her hands on her eyes, and a convulsive trembling, “’tis the priest!”

Then she dropped her arms in discouragement, and remained seated, with lowered head, eyes fixed on the ground, mute and still trembling.

The priest gazed at her with the eye of a hawk which has long been soaring in a circle from the heights of heaven over a poor lark cowering in the wheat, and has long been silently contracting the formidable circles of his flight, and has suddenly swooped down upon his prey like a flash of lightning, and holds it panting in his talons.

She began to murmur in a low voice, —

“Finish! finish! the last blow!” and she drew her head down in terror between her shoulders, like the lamb awaiting the blow of the butcher’s axe.

“So I inspire you with horror?” he said at length.

She made no reply.

“Do I inspire you with horror?” he repeated.

Her lips contracted, as though with a smile.

“Yes,” said she, “the headsman scoffs at the condemned. Here he has been pursuing me, threatening me, terrifying me for months! Had it not been for him, my God, how happy it should have been! It was he who cast me into this abyss! Oh heavens! it was he who killed him! my Phoebus!”

Here, bursting into sobs, and raising her eyes to the priest, —

“Oh! wretch, who are you? What have I done to you? Do you then, hate me so? Alas! what have you against me?”

“I love thee!” cried the priest.

Her tears suddenly ceased, she gazed at him with the look of an idiot. He had fallen on his knees and was devouring her with eyes of flame.

“Dost thou understand? I love thee!” he cried again.

“What love!” said the unhappy girl with a shudder.

He resumed, —

“The love of a damned soul.”

Both remained silent for several minutes, crushed beneath the weight of their emotions; he maddened, she stupefied.

“Listen,” said the priest at last, and a singular calm had come over him; “you shall know all I am about to tell you that which I have hitherto hardly dared to say to myself, when furtively interrogating my conscience at those deep hours of the night when it is so dark that it seems as though God no longer saw us. Listen. Before I knew you, young girl, I was happy.”

“So was I!” she sighed feebly.

“Do not interrupt me. Yes, I was happy, at least I believed myself to be so. I was pure, my soul was filled with limpid light. No head was raised more proudly and more radiantly than mine. Priests consulted me on chastity; doctors, on doctrines. Yes, science was all in all to me; it was a sister to me, and a sister sufficed. Not but that with age other ideas came to me. More than once my flesh had been moved as a woman’s form passed by. That force of sex and blood which, in the madness of youth, I had imagined that I had stifled forever had, more than once, convulsively raised the chain of iron vows which bind me, a miserable wretch, to the cold stones of the altar. But fasting, prayer, study, the mortifications of the cloister, rendered my soul mistress of my body once more, and then I avoided women. Moreover, I had but to open a book, and all the impure mists of my brain vanished before the splendors of science. In a few moments, I felt the gross things of earth flee far away, and I found myself once more calm, quieted, and serene, in the presence of the tranquil radiance of eternal truth. As long as the demon sent to attack me only vague shadows of women who passed occasionally before my eyes in church, in the streets, in the fields, and who hardly recurred to my dreams, I easily vanquished him. Alas! if the victory has not remained with me, it is the fault of God, who has not created man and the demon of equal force. Listen. One day—"

Here the priest paused, and the prisoner heard sighs of anguish break from his breast with a sound of the death rattle.

He resumed, —

"One day I was leaning on the window of my cell. What book was I reading then? Oh! all that is a whirlwind in my head. I was reading. The window opened upon a Square. I heard a sound of tambourine and music. Annoyed at being thus disturbed in my revery, I glanced into the Square. What I beheld, others saw beside myself, and yet it was not a spectacle made for human eyes. There, in the middle of the pavement, — it was midday, the sun was shining brightly, — a creature was dancing. A creature so beautiful that God would have preferred her to the Virgin and have chosen her for his mother and have wished to be born of her if she had been in existence when he was made man! Her eyes were black and splendid; in the midst of her black locks, some hairs through which the sun shone glistened like threads of gold. Her feet disappeared in their movements like the spokes of a rapidly turning wheel. Around her head, in her black tresses, there were disks of metal, which glittered in the sun, and formed a coronet of stars on her brow. Her dress thick set with spangles, blue, and dotted with a thousand sparks, gleamed like a summer night. Her brown, supple arms twined and untwined around her waist, like two scarfs. The form of her body was surprisingly beautiful. Oh! what a resplendent figure stood out, like something luminous even in the sunlight! Alas, young girl, it was thou! Surprised, intoxicated, charmed, I allowed myself to gaze upon thee. I looked so long that I suddenly shuddered with terror; I felt that fate was seizing hold of me."

The priest paused for a moment, overcome with emotion. Then he continued, —

"Already half fascinated, I tried to cling fast to something and hold myself back from falling. I recalled the snares which Satan had already set for me. The creature before my eyes possessed that superhuman beauty which can come only from heaven or hell. It was no simple girl made with a little of our earth, and dimly lighted within by the vacillating ray of a woman's soul. It was an angel! but of shadows and flame, and not of light.

At the moment when I was meditating thus, I beheld beside you a goat, a beast of witches, which smiled as it gazed at me. The midday sun gave him golden horns. Then I perceived the snare of the demon, and I no longer doubted that you had come from hell and that you had come thence for my perdition. I believed it."

Here the priest looked the prisoner full in the face, and added, coldly, —

"I believe it still. Nevertheless, the charm operated little by little; your dancing whirled through my brain; I felt the mysterious spell working within me. All that should have awakened was lulled to sleep; and like those who die in the snow, I felt pleasure in allowing this sleep to draw on. All at once, you began to sing. What could I do, unhappy wretch? Your song was still more charming than your dancing. I tried to flee. Impossible. I was nailed, rooted to the spot. It seemed to me that the marble of the pavement had risen to my knees. I was forced to remain until the end. My feet were like ice, my head was on fire. At last you took pity on me, you ceased to sing, you disappeared. The reflection of the dazzling vision, the reverberation of the enchanting music disappeared by degrees from my eyes and my ears. Then I fell back into the embrasure of the window, more rigid, more feeble than a statue torn from its base. The vesper bell roused me. I drew myself up; I fled; but alas! something within me had fallen never to rise again, something had come upon me from which I could not flee."

He made another pause and went on, —

"Yes, dating from that day, there was within me a man whom I did not know. I tried to make use of all my remedies. The cloister, the altar, work, books, — follies! Oh, how hollow does science sound when one in despair dashes against it a head full of passions! Do you know, young girl, what I saw thenceforth between my book and me? You, your shade, the image of the luminous apparition which had one day crossed the space before me. But this image had no longer the same color; it was sombre, funereal, gloomy as the black circle which long pursues the vision of the imprudent man who has gazed intently at the sun.

"Unable to rid myself of it, since I heard your song humming ever in my head, beheld your feet dancing always on my breviary, felt even at night, in my dreams, your form in contact with my own, I desired to see you again, to touch you, to know who you were, to see whether I should really find you like the ideal image which I had retained of you, to shatter my dream, perchance, with reality. At all events, I hoped that a new impression would efface the first, and the first had become insupportable. I sought you. I saw you once more. Calamity! When I had seen you twice, I wanted to see you a thousand times, I wanted to see you always. Then — how stop myself on that slope of hell? — then I no longer belonged to myself. The other end of the thread which the demon had attached to my wings he had fastened to his foot. I became vagrant and wandering like yourself. I waited for you under porches, I stood on the lookout for you at the street corners, I watched for you from the summit of my tower. Every evening I returned to myself more charmed, more despairing, more bewitched, more lost!

“I had learned who you were; an Egyptian, Bohemian, gypsy, zingara. How could I doubt the magic? Listen. I hoped that a trial would free me from the charm. A witch enchanted Bruno d’Ast; he had her burned, and was cured. I knew it. I wanted to try the remedy. First I tried to have you forbidden the square in front of Notre-Dame, hoping to forget you if you returned no more. You paid no heed to it. You returned. Then the idea of abducting you occurred to me. One night I made the attempt. There were two of us. We already had you in our power, when that miserable officer came up. He delivered you. Thus did he begin your unhappiness, mine, and his own. Finally, no longer knowing what to do, and what was to become of me, I denounced you to the official.

“I thought that I should be cured like Bruno d’Ast. I also had a confused idea that a trial would deliver you into my hands; that, as a prisoner I should hold you, I should have you; that there you could not escape from me; that you had already possessed me a sufficiently long time to give me the right to possess you in my turn. When one does wrong, one must do it thoroughly. ’Tis madness to halt midway in the monstrous! The extreme of crime has its deliriums of joy. A priest and a witch can mingle in delight upon the truss of straw in a dungeon!

“Accordingly, I denounced you. It was then that I terrified you when we met. The plot which I was weaving against you, the storm which I was heaping up above your head, burst from me in threats and lightning glances. Still, I hesitated. My project had its terrible sides which made me shrink back.

“Perhaps I might have renounced it; perhaps my hideous thought would have withered in my brain, without bearing fruit. I thought that it would always depend upon me to follow up or discontinue this prosecution. But every evil thought is inexorable, and insists on becoming a deed; but where

I believed myself to be all powerful, fate was more powerful than I. Alas! ’tis fate which has seized you and delivered you to the terrible wheels of the machine which I had constructed doubly. Listen. I am nearing the end.

“One day, — again the sun was shining brilliantly — I behold man pass me uttering your name and laughing, who carries sensuality in his eyes. Damnation! I followed him; you know the rest.”

He ceased.

The young girl could find but one word:

“Oh, my Phoebus!”

“Not that name!” said the priest, grasping her arm violently. “Utter not that name! Oh! miserable wretches that we are, ’tis that name which has ruined us! or, rather we have ruined each other by the inexplicable play of fate! you are suffering, are you not? you are cold; the night makes you blind, the dungeon envelops you; but perhaps you still have some light in the bottom of your soul, were it only your childish love for that empty man who played with your heart, while I bear the dungeon within me; within me there is winter, ice, despair; I have night in my soul.

“Do you know what I have suffered? I was present at your trial. I was seated on the official’s bench. Yes, under one of the priests’ cowls, there were the contortions of the damned. When you were brought in, I was there; when you were questioned, I was there. — Den of wolves! — It was my crime, it was my gallows that I beheld being slowly reared over your head. I was there for every witness, every proof, every plea; I could count each of your steps in the painful path; I was still there when that ferocious beast — oh! I had not foreseen torture! Listen. I followed you to that chamber of anguish. I beheld you stripped and handled, half naked, by the infamous hands of the tormentor. I beheld your foot, that foot which I would have given an empire to kiss and die, that foot, beneath which to have had my head crushed I should have felt such rapture, — I beheld it encased in that horrible boot, which converts the limbs of a living being into one bloody clod. Oh, wretch! while I looked on at that, I held beneath my shroud a dagger, with which I lacerated my breast. When you uttered that cry, I plunged it into my flesh; at a second cry, it would have entered my heart. Look! I believe that it still bleeds.”

He opened his cassock. His breast was in fact, mangled as by the claw of a tiger, and on his side he had a large and badly healed wound.

The prisoner recoiled with horror.

“Oh!” said the priest, “young girl, have pity upon me! You think yourself unhappy; alas! alas! you know not what unhappiness is. Oh! to love a woman! to be a priest! to be hated! to love with all the fury of one’s soul; to feel that one would give for the least of her smiles, one’s blood, one’s vitals, one’s fame, one’s salvation, one’s immortality and eternity, this life and the other; to regret that one is not a king, emperor, archangel, God, in order that one might place a greater slave beneath her feet; to clasp her night and day in one’s dreams and one’s thoughts, and to behold her in love with the trappings of a soldier and to have nothing to offer her but a priest’s dirty cassock, which will inspire her with fear and disgust! To be present with one’s jealousy and one’s rage, while she lavishes on a miserable, blustering imbecile, treasures of love and beauty! To behold that body whose form burns you, that bosom which possesses so much sweetness, that flesh palpitate and blush beneath the kisses of another! Oh heaven! to love her foot, her arm, her shoulder, to think of her blue veins, of her brown skin, until one writhes for whole nights together on the pavement of one’s cell, and to behold all those caresses which one has dreamed of, end in torture! To have succeeded only in stretching her upon the leather bed! Oh! these are the veritable pincers, reddened in the fires of hell. Oh! blessed is he who is sawn between two planks, or torn in pieces by four horses! Do you know what that torture is, which is imposed upon you for long nights by your burning arteries, your bursting heart, your breaking head, your teeth-knawed hands; mad tormentors which turn you incessantly, as upon a red-hot gridiron, to a thought of love, of jealousy, and of despair! Young girl, mercy! a truce for a moment! a few ashes on these live coals! Wipe away, I beseech you, the perspiration which trickles in great drops from my brow! Child! torture me with one hand, but caress me with the other! Have pity, young girl! Have pity upon me!”

The priest writhed on the wet pavement, beating his head against the corners of the stone steps. The young girl gazed at him, and listened to him.

When he ceased, exhausted and panting, she repeated in a low voice, —

“Oh my Phoebus!”

The priest dragged himself towards her on his knees.

“I beseech you,” he cried, “if you have any heart, do not repulse me! Oh! I love you! I am a wretch! When you utter that name, unhappy girl, it is as though you crushed all the fibres of my heart between your teeth. Mercy! If you come from hell I will go thither with you. I have done everything to that end. The hell where you are, shall he paradise; the sight of you is more charming than that of God! Oh! speak! you will have none of me? I should have thought the mountains would be shaken in their foundations on the day when a woman would repulse such a love. Oh! if you only would! Oh! how happy we might be. We would flee — I would help you to flee, — we would go somewhere, we would seek that spot on earth, where the sun is brightest, the sky the bluest, where the trees are most luxuriant. We would love each other, we would pour our two souls into each other, and we would have a thirst for ourselves which we would quench in common and incessantly at that fountain of inexhaustible love."

She interrupted with a terrible and thrilling laugh.

"Look, father, you have blood on your fingers!"

The priest remained for several moments as though petrified, with his eyes fixed upon his hand.

"Well, yes!" he resumed at last, with strange gentleness, "insult me, scoff at me, overwhelm me with scorn! but come, come. Let us make haste. It is to be to-morrow, I tell you. The gibbet on the Grève, you know it? it stands always ready. It is horrible! to see you ride in that tumbrel! Oh mercy! Until now I have never felt the power of my love for you. — Oh! follow me. You shall take your time to love me after I have saved you. You shall hate me as long as you will. But come. To-morrow! to-morrow! the gallows! your execution! Oh! save yourself! spare me!"

He seized her arm, he was beside himself, he tried to drag her away.

She fixed her eye intently on him.

"What has become of my Phoebus?"

"Ah!" said the priest, releasing her arm, "you are pitiless."

"What has become of Phoebus?" she repeated coldly.

"He is dead!" cried the priest.

"Dead!" said she, still icy and motionless "then why do you talk to me of living?"

He was not listening to her.

"Oh! yes," said he, as though speaking to himself, "he certainly must be dead. The blade pierced deeply. I believe I touched his heart with the point. Oh! my very soul was at the end of the dagger!"

The young girl flung herself upon him like a raging tigress, and pushed him upon the steps of the staircase with supernatural force.

"Begone, monster! Begone, assassin! Leave me to die! May the blood of both of us make an eternal stain upon your brow! Be thine, priest! Never! never! Nothing shall unite us! not hell itself! Go, accursed man! Never!"

The priest had stumbled on the stairs. He silently disentangled his feet from the folds of his robe, picked up his lantern again, and slowly began the ascent of the steps which led to the door; he opened the door and passed through it.

All at once, the young girl beheld his head reappear; it wore a frightful expression, and he cried, hoarse with rage and despair, —

"I tell you he is dead!"

She fell face downwards upon the floor, and there was no longer any sound audible in the cell than the sob of the drop of water which made the pool palpitate amid the darkness.

CHAPTER V. THE MOTHER.

I do not believe that there is anything sweeter in the world than the ideas which awake in a mother’s heart at the sight of her child’s tiny shoe; especially if it is a shoe for festivals, for Sunday, for baptism, the shoe embroidered to the very sole, a shoe in which the infant has not yet taken a step. That shoe has so much grace and daintiness, it is so impossible for it to walk, that it seems to the mother as though she saw her child. She smiles upon it, she kisses it, she talks to it; she asks herself whether there can actually be a foot so tiny; and if the child be absent, the pretty shoe suffices to place the sweet and fragile creature before her eyes. She thinks she sees it, she does see it, complete, living, joyous, with its delicate hands, its round head, its pure lips, its serene eyes whose white is blue. If it is in winter, it is yonder, crawling on the carpet, it is laboriously climbing upon an ottoman, and the mother trembles lest it should approach the fire. If it is summer time, it crawls about the yard, in the garden, plucks up the grass between the paving-stones, gazes innocently at the big dogs, the big horses, without fear, plays with the shells, with the flowers, and makes the gardener grumble because he finds sand in the flower-beds and earth in the paths. Everything laughs, and shines and plays around it, like it, even the breath of air and the ray of sun which vie with each other in disporting among the silky ringlets of its hair. The shoe shows all this to the mother, and makes her heart melt as fire melts wax.

But when the child is lost, these thousand images of joy, of charms, of tenderness, which throng around the little shoe, become so many horrible things. The pretty broidered shoe is no longer anything but an instrument of torture which eternally crushes the heart of the mother. It is always the same fibre which vibrates, the tenderest and most sensitive; but instead of an angel caressing it, it is a demon who is wrenching at it.

One May morning, when the sun was rising on one of those dark blue skies against which Garofolo loves to place his Descents from the Cross, the recluse of the Tour-Roland heard a sound of wheels, of horses and irons in the Place de Grève. She was somewhat aroused by it, knotted her hair upon her ears in order to deafen herself, and resumed her contemplation, on her knees, of the inanimate object which she had adored for fifteen years. This little shoe was the universe to her, as we have already said. Her thought was shut up in it, and was destined never more to quit it except at death. The sombre cave of the Tour-Roland alone knew how many bitter imprecations, touching complaints, prayers and sobs she had wafted to heaven in connection with that charming bauble of rose-colored satin. Never was more despair bestowed upon a prettier and more graceful thing.

It seemed as though her grief were breaking forth more violently than usual; and she could be heard outside lamenting in a loud and monotonous voice which rent the heart.

“Oh my daughter!” she said, “my daughter, my poor, dear little child, so I shall never see thee more! It is over! It always seems to me that it happened yesterday! My God! my God! it would have been better not to give her to me than to take her away so soon. Did you not know that our children are part of ourselves, and that a mother who has lost her child no longer believes in God? Ah! wretch that I am to have gone out that day! Lord! Lord! to have taken her from me thus; you could never have looked at me with her, when I was joyously warming her at my fire, when she laughed as she suckled, when I made her tiny feet creep up my breast to my lips? Oh! if you had looked at that, my God, you would have taken pity on my joy; you would not have taken from me the only love which lingered, in my heart! Was I then, Lord, so miserable a creature, that you could not look at me before condemning me? — Alas! Alas! here is the shoe; where is the foot? where is the rest? Where is the child? My daughter! my daughter! what did they do with thee? Lord, give her back to me. My knees have been worn for fifteen years in praying to thee, my God! Is not that enough? Give her back to me one day, one hour, one minute; one minute, Lord! and then cast me to the demon for all eternity! Oh! if I only knew where the skirt of your garment trails, I would cling to it with both hands, and you would be obliged to give me back my child! Have you no pity on her pretty little shoe? Could you condemn a poor mother to this torture for fifteen years? Good Virgin! good Virgin of heaven! my infant Jesus has been taken from me, has been stolen from me; they devoured her on a heath, they drank her blood, they cracked her bones! Good Virgin, have pity upon me. My daughter, I want my daughter! What is it to me that she is in paradise? I do not want your angel, I want my child! I am a lioness, I want my whelp. Oh! I will writhe on the earth, I will break the stones with my forehead, and I will damn myself, and I will curse you, Lord, if you keep my child from me! you see plainly that my arms are all bitten, Lord! Has the good God no mercy? — Oh! give me only salt and black bread, only let me have my daughter to warm me like a sun! Alas! Lord my God. Alas! Lord my God, I am only a vile sinner; but my daughter made me pious. I was full of religion for the love of her, and I beheld you through her smile as through an opening into heaven. Oh! if I could only once, just once more, a single time, put this shoe on her pretty little pink foot, I would die blessing you, good Virgin. Ah! fifteen years! she will be grown up now! — Unhappy child! what! it is really true then I shall never see her more, not even in heaven, for I shall not go there myself. Oh! what misery to think that here is her shoe, and that that is all!"

The unhappy woman flung herself upon that shoe; her consolation and her despair for so many years, and her vitals were rent with sobs as on the first day; because, for a mother who has lost her child, it is always the first day. That grief never grows old. The mourning garments may grow white and threadbare, the heart remains dark.

At that moment, the fresh and joyous cries of children passed in front of the cell. Every time that children crossed her vision or struck her ear, the poor mother flung herself into the darkest corner of her sepulchre, and one would have said, that she sought to plunge her head into the stone in order not to hear them. This time, on the contrary, she drew herself upright with a start, and listened eagerly. One of the little boys had just said, —

"They are going to hang a gypsy to-day."

With the abrupt leap of that spider which we have seen fling itself upon a fly at the trembling of its web, she rushed to her air-hole, which opened as the reader knows, on the Place de Grève. A ladder had, in fact, been raised up against the permanent gibbet, and the hangman's assistant was busying himself with adjusting the chains which had been rusted by the rain. There were some people standing about.

The laughing group of children was already far away. The sacked nun sought with her eyes some passer-by whom she might question. All at once, beside her cell, she perceived a priest making a pretext of reading the public breviary, but who was much less occupied with the "lectern of latticed iron," than with the gallows, toward which he cast a fierce and gloomy glance from time to time. She recognized monsieur the archdeacon of Josas, a holy man.

"Father," she inquired, "whom are they about to hang yonder?"

The priest looked at her and made no reply; she repeated her question. Then he said, —

“I know not.”

“Some children said that it was a gypsy,” went on the recluse.

“I believe so,” said the priest.

Then Paquette la Chantefleurie burst into hyena-like laughter.

“Sister,” said the archdeacon, “do you then hate the gypsies heartily?”

“Do I hate them!” exclaimed the recluse, “they are vampires, stealers of children! They devoured my little daughter, my child, my only child! I have no longer any heart, they devoured it!”

She was frightful. The priest looked at her coldly.

“There is one in particular whom I hate, and whom I have cursed,” she resumed; “it is a young one, of the age which my daughter would be if her mother had not eaten my daughter. Every time that that young viper passes in front of my cell, she sets my blood in a ferment.”

“Well, sister, rejoice,” said the priest, icy as a sepulchral statue; “that is the one whom you are about to see die.”

His head fell upon his bosom and he moved slowly away.

The recluse writhed her arms with joy.

“I predicted it for her, that she would ascend thither! Thanks, priest!” she cried.

And she began to pace up and down with long strides before the grating of her window, her hair dishevelled, her eyes flashing, with her shoulder striking against the wall, with the wild air of a female wolf in a cage, who has long been famished, and who feels the hour for her repast drawing near.

CHAPTER VI. THREE HUMAN HEARTS DIFFERENTLY CONSTRUCTED.

Phoebus was not dead, however. Men of that stamp die hard. When Master Philippe Lheulier, advocate extraordinary of the king, had said to poor Esmeralda; “He is dying,” it was an error or a jest. When the archdeacon had repeated to the condemned girl; “He is dead,” the fact is that he knew nothing about it, but that he believed it, that he counted on it, that he did not doubt it, that he devoutly hoped it. It would have been too hard for him to give favorable news of his rival to the woman whom he loved. Any man would have done the same in his place.

It was not that Phoebus’s wound had not been serious, but it had not been as much so as the archdeacon believed. The physician, to whom the soldiers of the watch had carried him at the first moment, had feared for his life during the space of a week, and had even told him so in Latin. But youth had gained the upper hand; and, as frequently happens, in spite of prognostications and diagnoses, nature had amused herself by saving the sick man under the physician’s very nose. It was while he was still lying on the leech’s pallet that he had submitted to the interrogations of Philippe Lheulier and the official inquisitors, which had annoyed him greatly. Hence, one fine morning, feeling himself better, he had left his golden spurs with the leech as payment, and had slipped away. This had not, however, interfered with the progress of the affair. Justice, at that epoch, troubled itself very little about the clearness and definiteness of a criminal suit. Provided that the accused was hung, that was all that was necessary. Now the judge had plenty of proofs against la Esmeralda. They had supposed Phoebus to be dead, and that was the end of the matter.

Phoebus, on his side, had not fled far. He had simply rejoined his company in garrison at Queue-en-Brie, in the Isle-de-France, a few stages from Paris.

After all, it did not please him in the least to appear in this suit. He had a vague feeling that he should play a ridiculous figure in it. On the whole, he did not know what to think of the whole affair. Superstitious, and not given to devoutness, like every soldier who is only a soldier, when he came to question himself about this adventure, he did not feel assured as to the goat, as to the singular fashion in which he had met La Esmeralda, as to the no less strange manner in which she had allowed him to divine her love, as to her character as a gypsy, and lastly, as to the surly monk. He perceived in all these incidents much more magic than love, probably a sorceress, perhaps the devil; a comedy, in short, or to speak in the language of that day, a very disagreeable mystery, in which he played a very awkward part, the role of blows and derision. The captain was quite put out of countenance about it; he experienced that sort of shame which our La Fontaine has so admirably defined, —

Ashamed as a fox who has been caught by a fowl.

Moreover, he hoped that the affair would not get noised abroad, that his name would hardly be pronounced in it, and that in any case it would not go beyond the courts of the Tournelle. In this he was not mistaken, there was then no “Gazette des Tribunaux;” and as not a week passed which had not its counterfeiter to boil, or its witch to hang, or its heretic to burn, at some one of the innumerable justices of Paris, people were so accustomed to seeing in all the squares the ancient feudal Themis, bare armed, with sleeves stripped up, performing her duty at the gibbets, the ladders, and the pillories, that they hardly paid any heed to it. Fashionable society of that day hardly knew the name of the victim who passed by at the corner of the street, and it was the populace at the most who regaled themselves with this coarse fare. An execution was an habitual incident of the public highways, like the braising-pan of the baker or the slaughter-house of the knacker. The executioner was only a sort of butcher of a little deeper dye than the rest.

Hence Phoebus’s mind was soon at ease on the score of the enchantress Esmeralda, or Similar, as he called her, concerning the blow from the dagger of the Bohemian or of the surly monk (it mattered little which to him), and as to the issue of the trial. But as soon as his heart was vacant in that direction, Fleur-de-Lys returned to it. Captain Phoebus’s heart, like the physics of that day, abhorred a vacuum.

Queue-en-Brie was a very insipid place to stay at then, a village of farriers, and cow-girls with chapped hands, a long line of poor dwellings and thatched cottages, which borders the grand road on both sides for half a league; a tail (queue), in short, as its name imports.

Fleur-de-Lys was his last passion but one, a pretty girl, a charming dowry; accordingly, one fine morning, quite cured, and assuming that, after the lapse of two months, the Bohemian affair must be completely finished and forgotten, the amorous cavalier arrived on a prancing horse at the door of the Gondelaurier mansion.

He paid no attention to a tolerably numerous rabble which had assembled in the Place du Parvis, before the portal of Notre-Dame; he remembered that it was the month of May; he supposed that it was some procession, some Pentecost, some festival, hitched his horse to the ring at the door, and gayly ascended the stairs to his beautiful betrothed.

She was alone with her mother.

The scene of the witch, her goat, her cursed alphabet, and Phoebus's long absences, still weighed on Fleur-de-Lys's heart. Nevertheless, when she beheld her captain enter, she thought him so handsome, his doublet so new, his baldrick so shining, and his air so impassioned, that she blushed with pleasure. The noble damsel herself was more charming than ever. Her magnificent blond hair was plaited in a ravishing manner, she was dressed entirely in that sky blue which becomes fair people so well, a bit of coquetry which she had learned from Colombe, and her eyes were swimming in that languor of love which becomes them still better.

Phoebus, who had seen nothing in the line of beauty, since he left the village maids of Queue-en-Brie, was intoxicated with Fleur-de-Lys, which imparted to our officer so eager and gallant an air, that his peace was immediately made. Madame de Gondelaurier herself, still maternally seated in her big arm-chair, had not the heart to scold him. As for Fleur-de-Lys's reproaches, they expired in tender cooings.

The young girl was seated near the window still embroidering her grotto of Neptune. The captain was leaning over the back of her chair, and she was addressing her caressing reproaches to him in a low voice.

"What has become of you these two long months, wicked man?"

"I swear to you," replied Phoebus, somewhat embarrassed by the question, "that you are beautiful enough to set an archbishop to dreaming."

She could not repress a smile.

"Good, good, sir. Let my beauty alone and answer my question. A fine beauty, in sooth!"

"Well, my dear cousin, I was recalled to the garrison.

"And where is that, if you please? and why did not you come to say farewell?"

"At Queue-en-Brie."

Phoebus was delighted with the first question, which helped him to avoid the second.

“But that is quite close by, monsieur. Why did you not come to see me a single time?”

Here Phoebus was rather seriously embarrassed.

“Because — the service — and then, charming cousin, I have been ill.”

“Ill!” she repeated in alarm.

“Yes, wounded!”

“Wounded!”

She poor child was completely upset.

“Oh! do not be frightened at that,” said Phoebus, carelessly, “it was nothing. A quarrel, a sword cut; what is that to you?”

“What is that to me?” exclaimed Fleur-de-Lys, raising her beautiful eyes filled with tears. “Oh! you do not say what you think when you speak thus. What sword cut was that? I wish to know all.”

“Well, my dear fair one, I had a falling out with Mahè Fédy, you know? the lieutenant of Saint-Germain-en-Laye, and we ripped open a few inches of skin for each other. That is all.”

The mendacious captain was perfectly well aware that an affair of honor always makes a man stand well in the eyes of a woman. In fact, Fleur-de-Lys looked him full in the face, all agitated with fear, pleasure, and admiration. Still, she was not completely reassured.

“Provided that you are wholly cured, my Phoebus!” said she. “I do not know your Mahè Fédy, but he is a villanous man. And whence arose this quarrel?”

Here Phoebus, whose imagination was endowed with but mediocre power of creation, began to find himself in a quandary as to a means of extricating himself for his prowess.

“Oh! how do I know? — a mere nothing, a horse, a remark! Fair cousin,” he exclaimed, for the sake of changing the conversation, “what noise is this in the Cathedral Square?”

He approached the window.

“Oh! *Mon Dieu*, fair cousin, how many people there are on the Place!”

“I know not,” said Fleur-de-Lys; “it appears that a witch is to do penance this morning before the church, and thereafter to be hung.”

The captain was so thoroughly persuaded that la Esmeralda’s affair was concluded, that he was but little disturbed by Fleur-de-Lys’s words. Still, he asked her one or two questions.

“What is the name of this witch?”

“I do not know,” she replied.

“And what is she said to have done?”

She shrugged her white shoulders.

“I know not.”

“Oh, *mon Dieu* Jesus!” said her mother; “there are so many witches nowadays that I dare say they burn them without knowing their names. One might as well seek the name of every cloud in the sky. After all, one may be tranquil. The good God keeps his register.” Here the venerable dame rose and came to the window. “Good Lord! you are right, Phoebus,” said she. “The rabble is indeed great. There are people on all the roofs, blessed be God! Do you know, Phoebus, this reminds me of my best days. The entrance of King Charles VII., when, also, there were many people. I no longer remember in what year that was. When I speak of this to you, it produces upon you the effect, — does it not? — the effect of something very old, and upon me of something very young. Oh! the crowd was far finer than at the present day. They even stood upon the machicolations of the Porte Sainte-Antoine. The king had the queen on a pillion, and after their highnesses came all the ladies mounted behind all the lords. I remember that they laughed loudly, because beside Amanyon de Garlande, who was very short of stature, there rode the Sire Matefelon, a chevalier of gigantic size, who had killed heaps of English. It was very fine. A procession of all the gentlemen of France, with their oriflammes waving red before the eye. There were some with pennons and some with banners. How can I tell? the Sire de Calm with a pennon; Jean de Châteaumorant with a banner; the Sire de Courcy with a banner, and a more ample one than any of the others except the Duc de Bourbon. Alas! ’tis a sad thing to think that all that has existed and exists no longer!”

The two lovers were not listening to the venerable dowager. Phoebus had returned and was leaning on the back of his betrothed’s chair, a charming post whence his libertine glance plunged into all the openings of Fleur-de-Lys’s gorget. This gorget gaped so conveniently, and allowed him to see so many exquisite things and to divine so many more, that Phoebus, dazzled by this skin with its gleams of satin, said to himself, “How can any one love anything but a fair skin?”

Both were silent. The young girl raised sweet, enraptured eyes to him from time to time, and their hair mingled in a ray of spring sunshine.

"Phoebus," said Fleur-de-Lys suddenly, in a low voice, "we are to be married three months hence; swear to me that you have never loved any other woman than myself."

"I swear it, fair angel!" replied Phoebus, and his passionate glances aided the sincere tone of his voice in convincing Fleur-de-Lys.

Meanwhile, the good mother, charmed to see the betrothed pair on terms of such perfect understanding, had just quitted the apartment to attend to some domestic matter; Phoebus observed it, and this so emboldened the adventurous captain that very strange ideas mounted to his brain. Fleur-de-Lys loved him, he was her betrothed; she was alone with him; his former taste for her had re-awakened, not with all its fresh-ness but with all its ardor; after all, there is no great harm in tasting one's wheat while it is still in the blade; I do not know whether these ideas passed through his mind, but one thing is certain, that Fleur-de-Lys was suddenly alarmed by the expression of his glance. She looked round and saw that her mother was no longer there.

"Good heavens!" said she, blushing and uneasy, "how very warm I am?"

"I think, in fact," replied Phoebus, "that it cannot be far from midday. The sun is troublesome. We need only lower the curtains."

"No, no," exclaimed the poor little thing, "on the contrary, I need air."

And like a fawn who feels the breath of the pack of hounds, she rose, ran to the window, opened it, and rushed upon the balcony.

Phoebus, much discomfited, followed her.

The Place du Parvis Notre-Dame, upon which the balcony looked, as the reader knows, presented at that moment a singular and sinister spectacle which caused the fright of the timid Fleur-de-Lys to change its nature.

An immense crowd, which overflowed into all the neighboring streets, encumbered the Place, properly speaking. The little wall, breast high, which surrounded the Place, would not have sufficed to keep it free had it not been lined with a thick hedge of sergeants and hackbuteers, culverines in hand. Thanks to this thicket of pikes and arquebuses, the Parvis was empty. Its entrance was guarded by a force of halberdiers with the armorial bearings of the bishop. The large doors of the church were closed, and formed a contrast with the innumerable windows on the Place, which, open to their very gables, allowed a view of thousands of heads heaped up almost like the piles of bullets in a park of artillery.

The surface of this rabble was dingy, dirty, earthy. The spectacle which it was expecting was evidently one of the sort which possess the privilege of bringing out and calling together the vilest among the populace. Nothing is so hideous as the noise which was made by that swarm of yellow caps and dirty heads. In that throng there were more laughs than cries, more women than men.

From time to time, a sharp and vibrating voice pierced the general clamor.

"Ohé! Mahiet Baliffre! Is she to be hung yonder?"

"Fool! t'is here that she is to make her apology in her shift! the good God is going to cough Latin in her face! That is always done here, at midday. If 'tis the gallows that you wish, go to the Grève."

"I will go there, afterwards."

"Tell me, la Boucanbry? Is it true that she has refused a confessor?"

"It appears so, La Bechaigne."

"You see what a pagan she is!"

"'Tis the custom, monsieur. The bailiff of the courts is bound to deliver the malefactor ready judged for execution if he be a layman, to the provost of Paris; if a clerk, to the official of the bishopric."

"Thank you, sir."

"Oh, God!" said Fleur-de-Lys, "the poor creature!"

This thought filled with sadness the glance which she cast upon the populace. The captain, much more occupied with her than with that pack of the rabble, was amorously rumpling her girdle behind. She turned round, entreating and smiling.

"Please let me alone, Phoebus! If my mother were to return, she would see your hand!"

At that moment, midday rang slowly out from the clock of Notre-Dame. A murmur of satisfaction broke out in the crowd. The last vibration of the twelfth stroke had hardly died away when all heads surged like the waves beneath a squall, and an immense shout went up from the pavement, the windows, and the roofs,

"There she is!"

Fleur-de-Lys pressed her hands to her eyes, that she might not see.

"Charming girl," said Phoebus, "do you wish to withdraw?"

“No,” she replied; and she opened through curiosity, the eyes which she had closed through fear.

A tumbrel drawn by a stout Norman horse, and all surrounded by cavalry in violet livery with white crosses, had just debouched upon the Place through the Rue Saint-Pierre-aux-Boeufs. The sergeants of the watch were clearing a passage for it through the crowd, by stout blows from their clubs. Beside the cart rode several officers of justice and police, recognizable by their black costume and their awkwardness in the saddle. Master Jacques Charmolue paraded at their head.

In the fatal cart sat a young girl with her arms tied behind her back, and with no priest beside her. She was in her shift; her long black hair (the fashion then was to cut it off only at the foot of the gallows) fell in disorder upon her half-bared throat and shoulders.

Athwart that waving hair, more glossy than the plumage of a raven, a thick, rough, gray rope was visible, twisted and knotted, chafing her delicate collar-bones and twining round the charming neck of the poor girl, like an earthworm round a flower. Beneath that rope glittered a tiny amulet ornamented with bits of green glass, which had been left to her no doubt, because nothing is refused to those who are about to die. The spectators in the windows could see in the bottom of the cart her naked legs which she strove to hide beneath her, as by a final feminine instinct. At her feet lay a little goat, bound. The condemned girl held together with her teeth her imperfectly fastened shift. One would have said that she suffered still more in her misery from being thus exposed almost naked to the eyes of all. Alas! modesty is not made for such shocks.

“Jesus!” said Fleur-de-Lys hastily to the captain. “Look fair cousin, ’tis that wretched Bohemian with the goat.”

So saying, she turned to Phoebus. His eyes were fixed on the tumbrel. He was very pale.

“What Bohemian with the goat?” he stammered.

“What!” resumed Fleur-de-Lys, “do you not remember?”

Phoebus interrupted her.

“I do not know what you mean.”

He made a step to re-enter the room, but Fleur-de-Lys, whose jealousy, previously so vividly aroused by this same gypsy, had just been re-awakened, Fleur-de-Lys gave him a look full of penetration and distrust.

She vaguely recalled at that moment having heard of a captain mixed up in the trial of that witch.

“What is the matter with you?” she said to Phoebus, “one would say, that this woman had disturbed you.”

Phoebus forced a sneer, —

“Me! Not the least in the world! Ah! yes, certainly!”

“Remain, then!” she continued imperiously, “and let us see the end.”

The unlucky captain was obliged to remain. He was somewhat reassured by the fact that the condemned girl never removed her eyes from the bottom of the cart. It was but too surely la Esmeralda. In this last stage of opprobrium and misfortune, she was still beautiful; her great black eyes appeared still larger, because of the emaciation of her cheeks; her pale profile was pure and sublime. She resembled what she had been, in the same degree that a virgin by Masaccio, resembles a virgin of Raphael, — weaker, thinner, more delicate.

Moreover, there was nothing in her which was not shaken in some sort, and which with the exception of her modesty, she did not let go at will, so profoundly had she been broken by stupor and despair. Her body bounded at every jolt of the tumbrel like a dead or broken thing; her gaze was dull and imbecile. A tear was still visible in her eyes, but motionless and frozen, so to speak.

Meanwhile, the lugubrious cavalcade has traversed the crowd amid cries of joy and curious attitudes. But as a faithful historian, we must state that on beholding her so beautiful, so depressed, many were moved with pity, even among the hardest of them.

The tumbrel had entered the Parvis.

It halted before the central portal. The escort ranged themselves in line on both sides. The crowd became silent, and, in the midst of this silence full of anxiety and solemnity, the two leaves of the grand door swung back, as of themselves, on their hinges, which gave a creak like the sound of a fife. Then there became visible in all its length, the deep, gloomy church, hung in black, sparely lighted with a few candles gleaming afar off on the principal altar, opened in the midst of the Place which was dazzling with light, like the mouth of a cavern. At the very extremity, in the gloom of the apse, a gigantic silver cross was visible against a black drapery which hung from the vault to the pavement. The whole nave was deserted. But a few heads of priests could be seen moving confusedly in the distant choir stalls, and, at the moment when the great door opened, there escaped from the church a loud, solemn, and monotonous chanting, which cast over the head of the condemned girl, in gusts, fragments of melancholy psalms, —

“*Non timebo millia populi circumdantis me: exsurge, Domine; salvum me fac, Deus*!”

“*Salvum me fac, Deus, quoniam intraverunt aquoe usque ad animam meam*.

“*Infixus sum in limo profundi; et non est substantia*.”

At the same time, another voice, separate from the choir, intoned upon the steps of the chief altar, this melancholy offertory,— “*Qui verbum meum audit, et credit ei qui misit me, habet vitam oeternam et in judicium non venit; sed transit a morte im vitam**.”

* “He that heareth my word and believeth on Him that sent me, hath eternal life, and hath not come into condemnation; but is passed from death to life.”

This chant, which a few old men buried in the gloom sang from afar over that beautiful creature, full of youth and life, caressed by the warm air of spring, inundated with sunlight was the mass for the dead.

The people listened devoutly.

The unhappy girl seemed to lose her sight and her consciousness in the obscure interior of the church. Her white lips moved as though in prayer, and the headsman’s assistant who approached to assist her to alight from the cart, heard her repeating this word in a low tone,— “Phoebus.”

They untied her hands, made her alight, accompanied by her goat, which had also been unbound, and which bleated with joy at finding itself free: and they made her walk barefoot on the hard pavement to the foot of the steps leading to the door. The rope about her neck trailed behind her. One would have said it was a serpent following her.

Then the chanting in the church ceased. A great golden cross and a row of wax candles began to move through the gloom. The halberds of the motley beadles clanked; and, a few moments later, a long procession of priests in chasubles, and deacons in dalmatics, marched gravely towards the condemned girl, as they drawled their song, spread out before her view and that of the crowd. But her glance rested on the one who marched at the head, immediately after the cross-bearer.

“Oh!” she said in a low voice, and with a shudder, “’tis he again! the priest!”

It was in fact, the archdeacon. On his left he had the sub-chanter, on his right, the chanter, armed with his official wand. He advanced with head thrown back, his eyes fixed and wide open, intoning in a strong voice, —

“*De ventre inferi clamavi, et exaudisti vocem meam*.

“*Et projecisti me in profundum in corde mans, et flumem circumdedit me**.”

* “Out of the belly of hell cried I, and thou heardest
my voice. For thou hadst cast me into the deep in the midst of the seas,
and the floods compassed me about.”

At the moment when he made his appearance in the full daylight beneath the lofty arched portal, enveloped in an ample cope of silver barred with a black cross, he was so pale that more than one person in the crowd thought that one of the marble bishops who knelt on the sepulchral stones of the choir had risen and was come to receive upon the brink of the tomb, the woman who was about to die.

She, no less pale, no less like a statue, had hardly noticed that they had placed in her hand a heavy, lighted candle of yellow wax; she had not heard the yelping voice of the clerk reading the fatal contents of the apology; when they told her to respond with Amen, she responded Amen. She only recovered life and force when she beheld the priest make a sign to her guards to withdraw, and himself advance alone towards her.

Then she felt her blood boil in her head, and a remnant of indignation flashed up in that soul already benumbed and cold.

The archdeacon approached her slowly; even in that extremity, she beheld him cast an eye sparkling with sensuality, jealousy, and desire, over her exposed form. Then he said aloud, —

“Young girl, have you asked God’s pardon for your faults and shortcomings?”

He bent down to her ear, and added (the spectators supposed that he was receiving her last confession): “Will you have me? I can still save you!”

She looked intently at him: “Begone, demon, or I will denounce you!”

He gave vent to a horrible smile: “You will not be believed. You will only add a scandal to a crime. Reply quickly! Will you have me?”

“What have you done with my Phoebus?”

“He is dead!” said the priest.

At that moment the wretched archdeacon raised his head mechanically and beheld at the other end of the Place, in the balcony of the Gondelaurier mansion, the captain standing beside Fleur-de-Lys. He staggered, passed his hand across his eyes, looked again, muttered a curse, and all his features were violently contorted.

“Well, die then!” he hissed between his teeth. “No one shall have you.” Then, raising his hand over the gypsy, he exclaimed in a funereal voice:—“*I nunc, anima anceps, et sit tibi Deus misenicors*!”*

* “Go now, soul, trembling in the balance, and God have mercy upon thee.”

This was the dread formula with which it was the custom to conclude these gloomy ceremonies. It was the signal agreed upon between the priest and the executioner.

The crowd knelt.

“*Kyrie eleison*,”* said the priests, who had remained beneath the arch of the portal.

* “Lord have mercy upon us.”

“*Kyrie eleison*,” repeated the throng in that murmur which runs over all heads, like the waves of a troubled sea.

“Amen,” said the archdeacon.

He turned his back on the condemned girl, his head sank upon his breast once more, he crossed his hands and rejoined his escort of priests, and a moment later he was seen to disappear, with the cross, the candles, and the copes, beneath the misty arches of the cathedral, and his sonorous voice was extinguished by degrees in the choir, as he chanted this verse of despair, —

“*Omnes gurgites tui et fluctus tui super me transierunt*.”*

* “All thy waves and thy billows have gone over me.”

At the same time, the intermittent clash of the iron butts of the beadles’ halberds, gradually dying away among the columns of the nave, produced the effect of a clock hammer striking the last hour of the condemned.

The doors of Notre-Dame remained open, allowing a view of the empty desolate church, draped in mourning, without candles, and without voices.

The condemned girl remained motionless in her place, waiting to be disposed of. One of the sergeants of police was obliged to notify Master Charmolue of the fact, as the latter, during this entire scene, had been engaged in studying the bas-relief of the grand portal which represents, according to some, the sacrifice of Abraham; according to others, the philosopher’s alchemical operation: the sun being figured forth by the angel; the fire, by the fagot; the artisan, by Abraham.

There was considerable difficulty in drawing him away from that contemplation, but at length he turned round; and, at a signal which he gave, two men clad in yellow, the executioner's assistants, approached the gypsy to bind her hands once more.

The unhappy creature, at the moment of mounting once again the fatal cart, and proceeding to her last halting-place, was seized, possibly, with some poignant clinging to life. She raised her dry, red eyes to heaven, to the sun, to the silvery clouds, cut here and there by a blue trapezium or triangle; then she lowered them to objects around her, to the earth, the throng, the houses; all at once, while the yellow man was binding her elbows, she uttered a terrible cry, a cry of joy. Yonder, on that balcony, at the corner of the Place, she had just caught sight of him, of her friend, her lord, Phoebus, the other apparition of her life!

The judge had lied! the priest had lied! it was certainly he, she could not doubt it; he was there, handsome, alive, dressed in his brilliant uniform, his plume on his head, his sword by his side!

"Phoebus!" she cried, "my Phoebus!"

And she tried to stretch towards him arms trembling with love and rapture, but they were bound.

Then she saw the captain frown, a beautiful young girl who was leaning against him gazed at him with disdainful lips and irritated eyes; then Phoebus uttered some words which did not reach her, and both disappeared precipitately behind the window opening upon the balcony, which closed after them.

"Phoebus!" she cried wildly, "can it be you believe it?" A monstrous thought had just presented itself to her. She remembered that she had been condemned to death for murder committed on the person of Phoebus de Châteaupers.

She had borne up until that moment. But this last blow was too harsh. She fell lifeless on the pavement.

"Come," said Charmolue, "carry her to the cart, and make an end of it."

No one had yet observed in the gallery of the statues of the kings, carved directly above the arches of the portal, a strange spectator, who had, up to that time, observed everything with such impassiveness, with a neck so strained, a visage so hideous that, in his motley accoutrement of red and violet, he might have been taken for one of those stone monsters through whose mouths the long gutters of the cathedral have discharged their waters for six hundred years. This spectator had missed nothing that had taken place since midday in front of the portal of Notre-Dame. And at the very beginning he had securely fastened to one of the small columns a large knotted rope, one end of which trailed on the flight of steps below. This being done, he began to look on tranquilly, whistling from time to time when a blackbird flitted past. Suddenly, at the moment when the superintendent's assistants were preparing to execute Charmolue's phlegmatic order, he threw his leg over the balustrade of the gallery, seized the rope with his feet, his knees and his hands; then he was seen to glide down the façade, as a drop of rain slips down a window-pane, rush to the two executioners with the swiftness of a cat which has fallen from a roof, knock them down with two enormous fists, pick up the gypsy with one hand, as a child would her doll, and dash back into the church with a single bound, lifting the young girl above his head and crying in a formidable voice, —

"Sanctuary!"

This was done with such rapidity, that had it taken place at night, the whole of it could have been seen in the space of a single flash of lightning.

"Sanctuary! Sanctuary!" repeated the crowd; and the clapping of ten thousand hands made Quasimodo's single eye sparkle with joy and pride.

This shock restored the condemned girl to her senses. She raised her eyelids, looked at Quasimodo, then closed them again suddenly, as though terrified by her deliverer.

Charmolue was stupefied, as well as the executioners and the entire escort. In fact, within the bounds of Notre-Dame, the condemned girl could not be touched. The cathedral was a place of refuge. All temporal jurisdiction expired upon its threshold.

Quasimodo had halted beneath the great portal, his huge feet seemed as solid on the pavement of the church as the heavy Roman pillars. His great, bushy head sat low between his shoulders, like the heads of lions, who also have a mane and no neck. He held the young girl, who was quivering all over, suspended from his horny hands like a white drapery; but he carried her with as much care as though he feared to break her or blight her. One would have said that he felt that she was a delicate, exquisite, precious thing, made for other hands than his. There were moments when he looked as if not daring to touch her, even with his breath. Then, all at once, he would press her forcibly in his arms, against his angular bosom, like his own possession, his treasure, as the mother of that child would have done. His gnome's eye, fastened upon her, inundated her with tenderness, sadness, and pity, and was suddenly raised filled with lightnings. Then the women laughed and wept, the crowd stamped with enthusiasm, for, at that moment Quasimodo had a beauty of his own. He was handsome; he, that orphan, that foundling, that outcast, he felt himself august and strong, he gazed in the face of that society from which he was banished, and in which he had so powerfully intervened, of that human justice from which he had wrenched its prey, of all those tigers whose jaws were forced to remain empty, of those policemen, those judges, those executioners, of all that force of the king which he, the meanest of creatures, had just broken, with the force of God.

And then, it was touching to behold this protection which had fallen from a being so hideous upon a being so unhappy, a creature condemned to death saved by Quasimodo. They were two extremes of natural and social wretchedness, coming into contact and aiding each other.

Meanwhile, after several moments of triumph, Quasimodo had plunged abruptly into the church with his burden. The populace, fond of all prowess, sought him with their eyes, beneath the gloomy nave, regretting that he had so speedily disappeared from their acclamations. All at once, he was seen to re-appear at one of the extremities of the gallery of the kings of France; he traversed it, running like a madman, raising his conquest high in his arms and shouting: “Sanctuary!” The crowd broke forth into fresh applause. The gallery passed, he plunged once more into the interior of the church. A moment later, he re-appeared upon the upper platform, with the gypsy still in his arms, still running madly, still crying, “Sanctuary!” and the throng applauded. Finally, he made his appearance for the third time upon the summit of the tower where hung the great bell; from that point he seemed to be showing to the entire city the girl whom he had saved, and his voice of thunder, that voice which was so rarely heard, and which he never heard himself, repeated thrice with frenzy, even to the clouds: “Sanctuary! Sanctuary! Sanctuary!”

“Noel! Noel!” shouted the populace in its turn; and that immense acclamation flew to astonish the crowd assembled at the Grève on the other bank, and the recluse who was still waiting with her eyes riveted on the gibbet.

BOOK NINTH.

CHAPTER I. DELIRIUM.

Claude Frollo was no longer in Notre-Dame when his adopted son so abruptly cut the fatal web in which the archdeacon and the gypsy were entangled. On returning to the sacristy he had torn off his alb, cope, and stole, had flung all into the hands of the stupefied beadle, had made his escape through the private door of the cloister, had ordered a boatman of the Terrain to transport him to the left bank of the Seine, and had plunged into the hilly streets of the University, not knowing whither he was going, encountering at every step groups of men and women who were hurrying joyously towards the Pont Saint-Michel, in the hope of still arriving in time to see the witch hung there, — pale, wild, more troubled, more blind and more fierce than a night bird let loose and pursued by a troop of children in broad daylight. He no longer knew where he was, what he thought, or whether he were dreaming. He went forward, walking, running, taking any street at haphazard, making no choice, only urged ever onward away from the Grève, the horrible Grève, which he felt confusedly, to be behind him.

In this manner he skirted Mount Sainte-Geneviève, and finally emerged from the town by the Porte Saint-Victor. He continued his flight as long as he could see, when he turned round, the turreted enclosure of the University, and the rare houses of the suburb; but, when, at length, a rise of ground had completely concealed from him that odious Paris, when he could believe himself to be a hundred leagues distant from it, in the fields, in the desert, he halted, and it seemed to him that he breathed more freely.

Then frightful ideas thronged his mind. Once more he could see clearly into his soul, and he shuddered. He thought of that unhappy girl who had destroyed him, and whom he had destroyed. He cast a haggard eye over the double, tortuous way which fate had caused their two destinies to pursue up to their point of intersection, where it had dashed them against each other without mercy. He meditated on the folly of eternal vows, on the vanity of chastity, of science, of religion, of virtue, on the uselessness of God. He plunged to his heart’s content in evil thoughts, and in proportion as he sank deeper, he felt a Satanic laugh burst forth within him.

And as he thus sifted his soul to the bottom, when he perceived how large a space nature had prepared there for the passions, he sneered still more bitterly. He stirred up in the depths of his heart all his hatred, all his malevolence; and, with the cold glance of a physician who examines a patient, he recognized the fact that this malevolence was nothing but vitiated love; that love, that source of every virtue in man, turned to horrible things in the heart of a priest, and that a man constituted like himself, in making himself a priest, made himself a demon. Then he laughed frightfully, and suddenly became pale again, when he considered the most sinister side of his fatal passion, of that corrosive, venomous malignant, implacable love, which had ended only in the gibbet for one of them and in hell for the other; condemnation for her, damnation for him.

And then his laughter came again, when he reflected that Phoebus was alive; that after all, the captain lived, was gay and happy, had handsomer doublets than ever, and a new mistress whom he was conducting to see the old one hanged. His sneer redoubled its bitterness when he reflected that out of the living beings whose death he had desired, the gypsy, the only creature whom he did not hate, was the only one who had not escaped him.

Then from the captain, his thought passed to the people, and there came to him a jealousy of an unprecedented sort. He reflected that the people also, the entire populace, had had before their eyes the woman whom he loved exposed almost naked. He writhed his arms with agony as he thought that the woman whose form, caught by him alone in the darkness would have been supreme happiness, had been delivered up in broad daylight at full noonday, to a whole people, clad as for a night of voluptuousness. He wept with rage over all these mysteries of love, profaned, soiled, laid bare, withered forever. He wept with rage as he pictured to himself how many impure looks had been gratified at the sight of that badly fastened shift, and that this beautiful girl, this virgin lily, this cup of modesty and delight, to which he would have dared to place his lips only trembling, had just been transformed into a sort of public bowl, whereat the vilest populace of Paris, thieves, beggars, lackeys, had come to quaff in common an audacious, impure, and depraved pleasure.

And when he sought to picture to himself the happiness which he might have found upon earth, if she had not been a gypsy, and if he had not been a priest, if Phoebus had not existed and if she had loved him; when he pictured to himself that a life of serenity and love would have been possible to him also, even to him; that there were at that very moment, here and there upon the earth, happy couples spending the hours in sweet converse beneath orange trees, on the banks of brooks, in the presence of a setting sun, of a starry night; and that if God had so willed, he might have formed with her one of those blessed couples, — his heart melted in tenderness and despair.

Oh! she! still she! It was this fixed idea which returned incessantly, which tortured him, which ate into his brain, and rent his vitals. He did not regret, he did not repent; all that he had done he was ready to do again; he preferred to behold her in the hands of the executioner rather than in the arms of the captain. But he suffered; he suffered so that at intervals he tore out handfuls of his hair to see whether it were not turning white.

Among other moments there came one, when it occurred to him that it was perhaps the very minute when the hideous chain which he had seen that morning, was pressing its iron noose closer about that frail and graceful neck. This thought caused the perspiration to start from every pore.

There was another moment when, while laughing diabolically at himself, he represented to himself la Esmeralda as he had seen her on that first day, lively, careless, joyous, gayly attired, dancing, winged, harmonious, and la Esmeralda of the last day, in her scanty shift, with a rope about her neck, mounting slowly with her bare feet, the angular ladder of the gallows; he figured to himself this double picture in such a manner that he gave vent to a terrible cry.

While this hurricane of despair overturned, broke, tore up, bent, uprooted everything in his soul, he gazed at nature around him. At his feet, some chickens were searching the thickets and pecking, enamelled beetles ran about in the sun; overhead, some groups of dappled gray clouds were floating across the blue sky; on the horizon, the spire of the Abbey Saint-Victor pierced the ridge of the hill with its slate obelisk; and the miller of the Copeaue hillock was whistling as he watched the laborious wings of his mill turning. All this active, organized, tranquil life, recurring around him under a thousand forms, hurt him. He resumed his flight.

He sped thus across the fields until evening. This flight from nature, life, himself, man, God, everything, lasted all day long. Sometimes he flung himself face downward on the earth, and tore up the young blades of wheat with his nails. Sometimes he halted in the deserted street of a village, and his thoughts were so intolerable that he grasped his head in both hands and tried to tear it from his shoulders in order to dash it upon the pavement.

Towards the hour of sunset, he examined himself again, and found himself nearly mad. The tempest which had raged within him ever since the instant when he had lost the hope and the will to save the gypsy, — that tempest had not left in his conscience a single healthy idea, a single thought which maintained its upright position. His reason lay there almost entirely destroyed. There remained but two distinct images in his mind, la Esmeralda and the gallows; all the rest was blank. Those two images united, presented to him a frightful group; and the more he concentrated what attention and thought was left to him, the more he beheld them grow, in accordance with a fantastic progression, the one in grace, in charm, in beauty, in light, the other in deformity and horror; so that at last la Esmeralda appeared to him like a star, the gibbet like an enormous, fleshless arm.

One remarkable fact is, that during the whole of this torture, the idea of dying did not seriously occur to him. The wretch was made so. He clung to life. Perhaps he really saw hell beyond it.

Meanwhile, the day continued to decline. The living being which still existed in him reflected vaguely on retracing its steps. He believed himself to be far away from Paris; on taking his bearings, he perceived that he had only circled the enclosure of the University. The spire of Saint-Sulpice, and the three lofty needles of Saint Germain-des-Prés, rose above the horizon on his right. He turned his steps in that direction. When he heard the brisk challenge of the men-at-arms of the abbey, around the crenelated, circumscribing wall of Saint-Germain, he turned aside, took a path which presented itself between the abbey and the lazar-house of the bourg, and at the expiration of a few minutes found himself on the verge of the Pré-aux-Clercs. This meadow was celebrated by reason of the brawls which went on there night and day; it was the hydra of the poor monks of Saint-Germain: *quod mouachis Sancti-Germaini pratensis hydra fuit, clericis nova semper dissidiorum capita suscitantibus*. The archdeacon was afraid of meeting some one there; he feared every human countenance; he had just avoided the University and the Bourg Saint-Germain; he wished to re-enter the streets as late as possible. He skirted the Pré-aux-Clercs, took the deserted path which separated it from the Dieu-Neuf, and at last reached the water's edge. There Dom Claude found a boatman, who, for a few farthings in Parisian coinage, rowed him up the Seine as far as the point of the city, and landed him on that tongue of abandoned land where the reader has already beheld Gringoire dreaming, and which was prolonged beyond the king's gardens, parallel to the Ile du Passeur-aux-Vaches.

The monotonous rocking of the boat and the ripple of the water had, in some sort, quieted the unhappy Claude. When the boatman had taken his departure, he remained standing stupidly on the strand, staring straight before him and perceiving objects only through magnifying oscillations which rendered everything a sort of phantasmagoria to him. The fatigue of a great grief not infrequently produces this effect on the mind.

The sun had set behind the lofty Tour-de-Nesle. It was the twilight hour. The sky was white, the water of the river was white. Between these two white expanses, the left bank of the Seine, on which his eyes were fixed, projected its gloomy mass and, rendered ever thinner and thinner by perspective, it plunged into the gloom of the horizon like a black spire. It was loaded with houses, of which only the obscure outline could be distinguished, sharply brought out in shadows against the light background of the sky and the water. Here and there windows began to gleam, like the holes in a brazier. That immense black obelisk thus isolated between the two white expanses of the sky and the river, which was very broad at this point, produced upon Dom Claude a singular effect, comparable to that which would be experienced by a man who, reclining on his back at the foot of the tower of Strasburg, should gaze at the enormous spire plunging into the shadows of the twilight above his head. Only, in this case, it was Claude who was erect and the obelisk which was lying down; but, as the river, reflecting the sky, prolonged the abyss below him, the immense promontory seemed to be as boldly launched into space as any cathedral spire; and the impression was the same. This impression had even one stronger and more profound point about it, that it was indeed the tower of Strasbourg, but the tower of Strasbourg two leagues in height; something unheard of, gigantic, immeasurable; an edifice such as no human eye has ever seen; a tower of Babel. The chimneys of the houses, the battlements of the walls, the faceted gables of the roofs, the spire of the Augustines, the tower of Nesle, all these projections which broke the profile of the colossal obelisk added to the illusion by displaying in eccentric fashion to the eye the indentations of a luxuriant and fantastic sculpture.

Claude, in the state of hallucination in which he found himself, believed that he saw, that he saw with his actual eyes, the bell tower of hell; the thousand lights scattered over the whole height of the terrible tower seemed to him so many porches of the immense interior furnace; the voices and noises which escaped from it seemed so many shrieks, so many death groans. Then he became alarmed, he put his hands on his ears that he might no longer hear, turned his back that he might no longer see, and fled from the frightful vision with hasty strides.

But the vision was in himself.

When he re-entered the streets, the passers-by elbowing each other by the light of the shop-fronts, produced upon him the effect of a constant going and coming of spectres about him. There were strange noises in his ears; extraordinary fancies disturbed his brain. He saw neither houses, nor pavements, nor chariots, nor men and women, but a chaos of indeterminate objects whose edges melted into each other. At the corner of the Rue de la Barillerie, there was a grocer's shop whose porch was garnished all about, according to immemorial custom, with hoops of tin from which hung a circle of wooden candles, which came in contact with each other in the wind, and rattled like castanets. He thought he heard a cluster of skeletons at Montfauçon clashing together in the gloom.

"Oh!" he muttered, "the night breeze dashes them against each other, and mingles the noise of their chains with the rattle of their bones! Perhaps she is there among them!"

In his state of frenzy, he knew not whither he was going. After a few strides he found himself on the Pont Saint-Michel. There was a light in the window of a ground-floor room; he approached. Through a cracked window he beheld a mean chamber which recalled some confused memory to his mind. In that room, badly lighted by a meagre lamp, there was a fresh, light-haired young man, with a merry face, who amid loud bursts of laughter was embracing a very audaciously attired young girl; and near the lamp sat an old crone spinning and singing in a quavering voice. As the young man did not laugh constantly, fragments of the old woman's ditty reached the priest; it was something unintelligible yet frightful, —

"*Grève, aboie, Grève, grouille!*
File, file, ma quenouille,
File sa corde au bourreau,
Qui siffle dans le pre au,
Grève, aboie, Grève, grouille!

"*La belle corde de chanvre!*
Semez d'Issy jusqu'á Vanvre
Du chanvre et non pas du bleu.

Le voleur n'a pas vole
La belle corde de chanvre.

"Grève, grouille, Grève, aboie!
Pour voir la fille de joie,
Prendre au gibet chassieux,
Les fenêtres sont des yeux.
Grève, grouille, Grève, aboie!"*

* Bark, Grève, grumble, Grève! Spin, spin, my distaff, spin her rope for the hangman, who is whistling in the meadow. What a beautiful hempen rope! Sow hemp, not wheat, from Issy to Vanvre. The thief hath not stolen the beautiful hempen rope. Grumble, Grève, bark, Grève! To see the dissolute wench hang on the blear-eyed gibbet, windows are eyes.

Thereupon the young man laughed and caressed the wench. The crone was la Falourdel; the girl was a courtesan; the young man was his brother Jehan.

He continued to gaze. That spectacle was as good as any other.

He saw Jehan go to a window at the end of the room, open it, cast a glance on the quay, where in the distance blazed a thousand lighted casements, and he heard him say as he closed the sash, —

"'Pon my soul! How dark it is; the people are lighting their candles, and the good God his stars."

Then Jehan came back to the hag, smashed a bottle standing on the table, exclaiming, —

"Already empty, *cor-boeuf*! and I have no more money! Isabeau, my dear, I shall not be satisfied with Jupiter until he has changed your two white nipples into two black bottles, where I may suck wine of Beaune day and night."

This fine pleasantry made the courtesan laugh, and Jehan left the room.

Dom Claude had barely time to fling himself on the ground in order that he might not be met, stared in the face and recognized by his brother. Luckily, the street was dark, and the scholar was tipsy. Nevertheless, he caught sight of the archdeacon prone upon the earth in the mud.

"Oh! oh!" said he; "here's a fellow who has been leading a jolly life, to-day."

He stirred up Dom Claude with his foot, and the latter held his breath.

“Dead drunk,” resumed Jehan. “Come, he’s full. A regular leech detached from a hogshead. He’s bald,” he added, bending down, “’tis an old man! *Fortunate senex*!”

Then Dom Claude heard him retreat, saying, —

“’Tis all the same, reason is a fine thing, and my brother the archdeacon is very happy in that he is wise and has money.”

Then the archdeacon rose to his feet, and ran without halting, towards Notre-Dame, whose enormous towers he beheld rising above the houses through the gloom.

At the instant when he arrived, panting, on the Place du Parvis, he shrank back and dared not raise his eyes to the fatal edifice.

“Oh!” he said, in a low voice, “is it really true that such a thing took place here, to-day, this very morning?”

Still, he ventured to glance at the church. The front was sombre; the sky behind was glittering with stars. The crescent of the moon, in her flight upward from the horizon, had paused at the moment, on the summit of the light hand tower, and seemed to have perched itself, like a luminous bird, on the edge of the balustrade, cut out in black trefoils.

The cloister door was shut; but the archdeacon always carried with him the key of the tower in which his laboratory was situated. He made use of it to enter the church.

In the church he found the gloom and silence of a cavern. By the deep shadows which fell in broad sheets from all directions, he recognized the fact that the hangings for the ceremony of the morning had not yet been removed. The great silver cross shone from the depths of the gloom, powdered with some sparkling points, like the milky way of that sepulchral night. The long windows of the choir showed the upper extremities of their arches above the black draperies, and their painted panes, traversed by a ray of moonlight had no longer any hues but the doubtful colors of night, a sort of violet, white and blue, whose tint is found only on the faces of the dead. The archdeacon, on perceiving these wan spots all around the choir, thought he beheld the mitres of damned bishops. He shut his eyes, and when he opened them again, he thought they were a circle of pale visages gazing at him.

He started to flee across the church. Then it seemed to him that the church also was shaking, moving, becoming endued with animation, that it was alive; that each of the great columns was turning into an enormous paw, which was beating the earth with its big stone spatula, and that the gigantic cathedral was no longer anything but a sort of prodigious elephant, which was breathing and marching with its pillars for feet, its two towers for trunks and the immense black cloth for its housings.

This fever or madness had reached such a degree of intensity that the external world was no longer anything more for the unhappy man than a sort of Apocalypse, — visible, palpable, terrible.

For one moment, he was relieved. As he plunged into the side aisles, he perceived a reddish light behind a cluster of pillars. He ran towards it as to a star. It was the poor lamp which lighted the public breviary of Notre-Dame night and day, beneath its iron grating. He flung himself eagerly upon the holy book in the hope of finding some consolation, or some encouragement there. The hook lay open at this passage of Job, over which his staring eye glanced, —

“And a spirit passed before my face, and I heard a small voice, and the hair of my flesh stood up.”

On reading these gloomy words, he felt that which a blind man feels when he feels himself pricked by the staff which he has picked up. His knees gave way beneath him, and he sank upon the pavement, thinking of her who had died that day. He felt so many monstrous vapors pass and discharge themselves in his brain, that it seemed to him that his head had become one of the chimneys of hell.

It would appear that he remained a long time in this attitude, no longer thinking, overwhelmed and passive beneath the hand of the demon. At length some strength returned to him; it occurred to him to take refuge in his tower beside his faithful Quasimodo. He rose; and, as he was afraid, he took the lamp from the breviary to light his way. It was a sacrilege; but he had got beyond heeding such a trifle now.

He slowly climbed the stairs of the towers, filled with a secret fright which must have been communicated to the rare passers-by in the Place du Parvis by the mysterious light of his lamp, mounting so late from loophole to loophole of the bell tower.

All at once, he felt a freshness on his face, and found himself at the door of the highest gallery. The air was cold; the sky was filled with hurrying clouds, whose large, white flakes drifted one upon another like the breaking up of river ice after the winter. The crescent of the moon, stranded in the midst of the clouds, seemed a celestial vessel caught in the ice-cakes of the air.

He lowered his gaze, and contemplated for a moment, through the railing of slender columns which unites the two towers, far away, through a gauze of mists and smoke, the silent throng of the roofs of Paris, pointed, innumerable, crowded and small like the waves of a tranquil sea on a summer night.

The moon cast a feeble ray, which imparted to earth and heaven an ashy hue.

At that moment the clock raised its shrill, cracked voice. Midnight rang out. The priest thought of midday; twelve o'clock had come back again.

"Oh!" he said in a very low tone, "she must be cold now."

All at once, a gust of wind extinguished his lamp, and almost at the same instant, he beheld a shade, a whiteness, a form, a woman, appear from the opposite angle of the tower. He started. Beside this woman was a little goat, which mingled its bleat with the last bleat of the clock.

He had strength enough to look. It was she.

She was pale, she was gloomy. Her hair fell over her shoulders as in the morning; but there was no longer a rope on her neck, her hands were no longer bound; she was free, she was dead.

She was dressed in white and had a white veil on her head.

She came towards him, slowly, with her gaze fixed on the sky. The supernatural goat followed her. He felt as though made of stone and too heavy to flee. At every step which she took in advance, he took one backwards, and that was all. In this way he retreated once more beneath the gloomy arch of the stairway. He was chilled by the thought that she might enter there also; had she done so, he would have died of terror.

She did arrive, in fact, in front of the door to the stairway, and paused there for several minutes, stared intently into the darkness, but without appearing to see the priest, and passed on. She seemed taller to him than when she had been alive; he saw the moon through her white robe; he heard her breath.

When she had passed on, he began to descend the staircase again, with the slowness which he had observed in the spectre, believing himself to be a spectre too, haggard, with hair on end, his extinguished lamp still in his hand; and as he descended the spiral steps, he distinctly heard in his ear a voice laughing and repeating, —

“A spirit passed before my face, and I heard a small voice, and the hair of my flesh stood up.”

CHAPTER II. HUNCHBACKED, ONE EYED, LAME.

Every city during the Middle Ages, and every city in France down to the time of Louis XII. had its places of asylum. These sanctuaries, in the midst of the deluge of penal and barbarous jurisdictions which inundated the city, were a species of islands which rose above the level of human justice. Every criminal who landed there was safe. There were in every suburb almost as many places of asylum as gallows. It was the abuse of impunity by the side of the abuse of punishment; two bad things which strove to correct each other. The palaces of the king, the hotels of the princes, and especially churches, possessed the right of asylum. Sometimes a whole city which stood in need of being repeopled was temporarily created a place of refuge. Louis XI. made all Paris a refuge in 1467.

His foot once within the asylum, the criminal was sacred; but he must beware of leaving it; one step outside the sanctuary, and he fell back into the flood. The wheel, the gibbet, the strappado, kept good guard around the place of refuge, and lay in watch incessantly for their prey, like sharks around a vessel. Hence, condemned men were to be seen whose hair had grown white in a cloister, on the steps of a palace, in the enclosure of an abbey, beneath the porch of a church; in this manner the asylum was a prison as much as any other. It sometimes happened that a solemn decree of parliament violated the asylum and restored the condemned man to the executioner; but this was of rare occurrence. Parliaments were afraid of the bishops, and when there was friction between these two robes, the gown had but a poor chance against the cassock. Sometimes, however, as in the affair of the assassins of Petit-Jean, the headsman of Paris, and in that of Emery Rousseau, the murderer of Jean Valleret, justice overleaped the church and passed on to the execution of its sentences; but unless by virtue of a decree of Parliament, woe to him who violated a place of asylum with armed force! The reader knows the manner of death of Robert de Clermont, Marshal of France, and of Jean de Châlons, Marshal of Champagne; and yet the question was only of a certain Perrin Marc, the clerk of a money-changer, a miserable assassin; but the two marshals had broken the doors of St. Méry. Therein lay the enormity.

Such respect was cherished for places of refuge that, according to tradition, animals even felt it at times. Aymoire relates that a stag, being chased by Dagobert, having taken refuge near the tomb of Saint-Denis, the pack of hounds stopped short and barked.

Churches generally had a small apartment prepared for the reception of supplicants. In 1407, Nicolas Flamel caused to be built on the vaults of Saint-Jacques de la Boucherie, a chamber which cost him four livres six sous, sixteen farthings, parisis.

At Notre-Dame it was a tiny cell situated on the roof of the side aisle, beneath the flying buttresses, precisely at the spot where the wife of the present janitor of the towers has made for herself a garden, which is to the hanging gardens of Babylon what a lettuce is to a palm-tree, what a porter's wife is to a Semiramis.

It was here that Quasimodo had deposited la Esmeralda, after his wild and triumphant course. As long as that course lasted, the young girl had been unable to recover her senses, half unconscious, half awake, no longer feeling anything, except that she was mounting through the air, floating in it, flying in it, that something was raising her above the earth. From time to time she heard the loud laughter, the noisy voice of Quasimodo in her ear; she half opened her eyes; then below her she confusedly beheld Paris checkered with its thousand roofs of slate and tiles, like a red and blue mosaic, above her head the frightful and joyous face of Quasimodo. Then her eyelids drooped again; she thought that all was over, that they had executed her during her swoon, and that the misshapen spirit which had presided over her destiny, had laid hold of her and was bearing her away. She dared not look at him, and she surrendered herself to her fate. But when the bellringer, dishevelled and panting, had deposited her in the cell of refuge, when she felt his huge hands gently detaching the cord which bruised her arms, she felt that sort of shock which awakens with a start the passengers of a vessel which runs aground in the middle of a dark night. Her thoughts awoke also, and returned to her one by one. She saw that she was in Notre-Dame; she remembered having been torn from the hands of the executioner; that Phoebus was alive, that Phoebus loved her no longer; and as these two ideas, one of which shed so much bitterness over the other, presented themselves simultaneously to the poor condemned girl; she turned to Quasimodo, who was standing in front of her, and who terrified her; she said to him,— "Why have you saved me?"

He gazed at her with anxiety, as though seeking to divine what she was saying to him. She repeated her question. Then he gave her a profoundly sorrowful glance and fled. She was astonished.

A few moments later he returned, bearing a package which he cast at her feet. It was clothing which some charitable women had left on the threshold of the church for her.

Then she dropped her eyes upon herself and saw that she was almost naked, and blushed. Life had returned.

Quasimodo appeared to experience something of this modesty. He covered his eyes with his large hand and retired once more, but slowly.

She made haste to dress herself. The robe was a white one with a white veil, — the garb of a novice of the Hôtel-Dien.

She had barely finished when she beheld Quasimodo returning. He carried a basket under one arm and a mattress under the other. In the basket there was a bottle, bread, and some provisions. He set the basket on the floor and said, “Eat!” He spread the mattress on the flagging and said, “Sleep.”

It was his own repast, it was his own bed, which the bellringer had gone in search of.

The gypsy raised her eyes to thank him, but she could not articulate a word. She dropped her head with a quiver of terror.

Then he said to her. —

“I frighten you. I am very ugly, am I not? Do not look at me; only listen to me. During the day you will remain here; at night you can walk all over the church. But do not leave the church either by day or by night. You would be lost. They would kill you, and I should die.”

She was touched and raised her head to answer him. He had disappeared. She found herself alone once more, meditating upon the singular words of this almost monstrous being, and struck by the sound of his voice, which was so hoarse yet so gentle.

Then she examined her cell. It was a chamber about six feet square, with a small window and a door on the slightly sloping plane of the roof formed of flat stones. Many gutters with the figures of animals seemed to be bending down around her, and stretching their necks in order to stare at her through the window. Over the edge of her roof she perceived the tops of thousands of chimneys which caused the smoke of all the fires in Paris to rise beneath her eyes. A sad sight for the poor gypsy, a foundling, condemned to death, an unhappy creature, without country, without family, without a hearthstone.

At the moment when the thought of her isolation thus appeared to her more poignant than ever, she felt a bearded and hairy head glide between her hands, upon her knees. She started (everything alarmed her now) and looked. It was the poor goat, the agile Djali, which had made its escape after her, at the moment when Quasimodo had put to flight Charmolue's brigade, and which had been lavishing caresses on her feet for nearly an hour past, without being able to win a glance. The gypsy covered him with kisses.

"Oh! Djali!" she said, "how I have forgotten thee! And so thou still thinkest of me! Oh! thou art not an ingrate!"

At the same time, as though an invisible hand had lifted the weight which had repressed her tears in her heart for so long, she began to weep, and, in proportion as her tears flowed, she felt all that was most acrid and bitter in her grief depart with them.

Evening came, she thought the night so beautiful that she made the circuit of the elevated gallery which surrounds the church. It afforded her some relief, so calm did the earth appear when viewed from that height.

CHAPTER III. DEAF.

On the following morning, she perceived on awaking, that she had been asleep. This singular thing astonished her. She had been so long unaccustomed to sleep! A joyous ray of the rising sun entered through her window and touched her face. At the same time with the sun, she beheld at that window an object which frightened her, the unfortunate face of Quasimodo. She involuntarily closed her eyes again, but in vain; she fancied that she still saw through the rosy lids that gnome's mask, one-eyed and gap-toothed. Then, while she still kept her eyes closed, she heard a rough voice saying, very gently, —

"Be not afraid. I am your friend. I came to watch you sleep. It does not hurt you if I come to see you sleep, does it? What difference does it make to you if I am here when your eyes are closed! Now I am going. Stay, I have placed myself behind the wall. You can open your eyes again."

There was something more plaintive than these words, and that was the accent in which they were uttered. The gypsy, much touched, opened her eyes. He was, in fact, no longer at the window. She approached the opening, and beheld the poor hunchback crouching in an angle of the wall, in a sad and resigned attitude. She made an effort to surmount the repugnance with which he inspired her. "Come," she said to him gently. From the movement of the gypsy's lips, Quasimodo thought that she was driving him away; then he rose and retired limping, slowly, with drooping head, without even daring to raise to the young girl his gaze full of despair. "Do come," she cried, but he continued to retreat. Then she darted from her cell, ran to him, and grasped his arm. On feeling her touch him, Quasimodo trembled in every limb. He raised his suppliant eye, and seeing that she was leading him back to her quarters, his whole face beamed with joy and tenderness. She tried to make him enter the cell; but he persisted in remaining on the threshold. "No, no," said he; "the owl enters not the nest of the lark."

Then she crouched down gracefully on her couch, with her goat asleep at her feet. Both remained motionless for several moments, considering in silence, she so much grace, he so much ugliness. Every moment she discovered some fresh deformity in Quasimodo. Her glance travelled from his knock knees to his humped back, from his humped back to his only eye. She could not comprehend the existence of a being so awkwardly fashioned. Yet there was so much sadness and so much gentleness spread over all this, that she began to become reconciled to it.

He was the first to break the silence. “So you were telling me to return?”

She made an affirmative sign of the head, and said, “Yes.”

He understood the motion of the head. “Alas!” he said, as though hesitating whether to finish, “I am — I am deaf.”

“Poor man!” exclaimed the Bohemian, with an expression of kindly pity.

He began to smile sadly.

“You think that that was all that I lacked, do you not? Yes, I am deaf, that is the way I am made. ’Tis horrible, is it not? You are so beautiful!”

There lay in the accents of the wretched man so profound a consciousness of his misery, that she had not the strength to say a word. Besides, he would not have heard her. He went on, —

“Never have I seen my ugliness as at the present moment. When I compare myself to you, I feel a very great pity for myself, poor unhappy monster that I am! Tell me, I must look to you like a beast. You, you are a ray of sunshine, a drop of dew, the song of a bird! I am something frightful, neither man nor animal, I know not what, harder, more trampled under foot, and more unshapely than a pebble stone!”

Then he began to laugh, and that laugh was the most heartbreaking thing in the world. He continued, —

“Yes, I am deaf; but you shall talk to me by gestures, by signs. I have a master who talks with me in that way. And then, I shall very soon know your wish from the movement of your lips, from your look.”

“Well!” she interposed with a smile, “tell me why you saved me.”

He watched her attentively while she was speaking.

“I understand,” he replied. “You ask me why I saved you. You have forgotten a wretch who tried to abduct you one night, a wretch to whom you rendered succor on the following day on their infamous pillory. A drop of water and a little pity, — that is more than I can repay with my life. You have forgotten that wretch; but he remembers it.”

She listened to him with profound tenderness. A tear swam in the eye of the bellringer, but did not fall. He seemed to make it a sort of point of honor to retain it.

“Listen,” he resumed, when he was no longer afraid that the tear would escape; “our towers here are very high, a man who should fall from them would be dead before touching the pavement; when it shall please you to have me fall, you will not have to utter even a word, a glance will suffice.”

Then he rose. Unhappy as was the Bohemian, this eccentric being still aroused some compassion in her. She made him a sign to remain.

“No, no,” said he; “I must not remain too long. I am not at my ease. It is out of pity that you do not turn away your eyes. I shall go to some place where I can see you without your seeing me: it will be better so.”

He drew from his pocket a little metal whistle.

“Here,” said he, “when you have need of me, when you wish me to come, when you will not feel too ranch horror at the sight of me, use this whistle. I can hear this sound.”

He laid the whistle on the floor and fled.

CHAPTER IV. EARTHENWARE AND CRYSTAL.

Day followed day. Calm gradually returned to the soul of la Esmeralda. Excess of grief, like excess of joy is a violent thing which lasts but a short time. The heart of man cannot remain long in one extremity. The gypsy had suffered so much, that nothing was left her but astonishment. With security, hope had returned to her. She was outside the pale of society, outside the pale of life, but she had a vague feeling that it might not be impossible to return to it. She was like a dead person, who should hold in reserve the key to her tomb.

She felt the terrible images which had so long persecuted her, gradually departing. All the hideous phantoms, Pierrat Torterue, Jacques Charmolue, were effaced from her mind, all, even the priest.

And then, Phoebus was alive; she was sure of it, she had seen him. To her the fact of Phoebus being alive was everything. After the series of fatal shocks which had overturned everything within her, she had found but one thing intact in her soul, one sentiment, — her love for the captain. Love is like a tree; it sprouts forth of itself, sends its roots out deeply through our whole being, and often continues to flourish greenly over a heart in ruins.

And the inexplicable point about it is that the more blind is this passion, the more tenacious it is. It is never more solid than when it has no reason in it.

La Esmeralda did not think of the captain without bitterness, no doubt. No doubt it was terrible that he also should have been deceived; that he should have believed that impossible thing, that he could have conceived of a stab dealt by her who would have given a thousand lives for him. But, after all, she must not be too angry with him for it; had she not confessed her crime? had she not yielded, weak woman that she was, to torture? The fault was entirely hers. She should have allowed her finger nails to be torn out rather than such a word to be wrenched from her. In short, if she could but see Phoebus once more, for a single minute, only one word would be required, one look, in order to undeceive him, to bring him back. She did not doubt it. She was astonished also at many singular things, at the accident of Phoebus’s presence on the day of the penance, at the young girl with whom he had been. She was his sister, no doubt. An unreasonable explanation, but she contented herself with it, because she needed to believe that Phoebus still loved her, and loved her alone. Had he not sworn it to her? What more was needed, simple and credulous as she was? And then, in this matter, were not appearances much more against her than against him? Accordingly, she waited. She hoped.

Let us add that the church, that vast church, which surrounded her on every side, which guarded her, which saved her, was itself a sovereign tranquillizer. The solemn lines of that architecture, the religious attitude of all the objects which surrounded the young girl, the serene and pious thoughts which emanated, so to speak, from all the pores of that stone, acted upon her without her being aware of it. The edifice had also sounds fraught with such benediction and such majesty, that they soothed this ailing soul. The monotonous chanting of the celebrants, the responses of the people to the priest, sometimes inarticulate, sometimes thunderous, the harmonious trembling of the painted windows, the organ, bursting forth like a hundred trumpets, the three belfries, humming like hives of huge bees, that whole orchestra on which bounded a gigantic scale, ascending, descending incessantly from the voice of a throng to that of one bell, dulled her memory, her imagination, her grief. The bells, in particular, lulled her. It was something like a powerful magnetism which those vast instruments shed over her in great waves.

Thus every sunrise found her more calm, breathing better, less pale. In proportion as her inward wounds closed, her grace and beauty blossomed once more on her countenance, but more thoughtful, more reposeful. Her former character also returned to her, somewhat even of her gayety, her pretty pout, her love for her goat, her love for singing, her modesty. She took care to dress herself in the morning in the corner of her cell for fear some inhabitants of the neighboring attics might see her through the window.

When the thought of Phoebus left her time, the gypsy sometimes thought of Quasimodo. He was the sole bond, the sole connection, the sole communication which remained to her with men, with the living. Unfortunate girl! she was more outside the world than Quasimodo. She understood not in the least the strange friend whom chance had given her. She often reproached herself for not feeling a gratitude which should close her eyes, but decidedly, she could not accustom herself to the poor bellringer. He was too ugly.

She had left the whistle which he had given her lying on the ground. This did not prevent Quasimodo from making his appearance from time to time during the first few days. She did her best not to turn aside with too much repugnance when he came to bring her her basket of provisions or her jug of water, but he always perceived the slightest movement of this sort, and then he withdrew sadly.

Once he came at the moment when she was caressing Djali. He stood pensively for several minutes before this graceful group of the goat and the gypsy; at last he said, shaking his heavy and ill-formed head, —

"My misfortune is that I still resemble a man too much. I should like to be wholly a beast like that goat."

She gazed at him in amazement.

He replied to the glance, —

"Oh! I well know why," and he went away.

On another occasion he presented himself at the door of the cell (which he never entered) at the moment when la Esmeralda was singing an old Spanish ballad, the words of which she did not understand, but which had lingered in her ear because the gypsy women had lulled her to sleep with it when she was a little child. At the sight of that villanous form which made its appearance so abruptly in the middle of her song, the young girl paused with an involuntary gesture of alarm. The unhappy bellringer fell upon his knees on the threshold, and clasped his large, misshapen hands with a suppliant air. "Oh!" he said, sorrowfully, "continue, I implore you, and do not drive me away." She did not wish to pain him, and resumed her lay, trembling all over. By degrees, however, her terror disappeared, and she yielded herself wholly to the slow and melancholy air which she was singing. He remained on his knees with hands clasped, as in prayer, attentive, hardly breathing, his gaze riveted upon the gypsy's brilliant eyes.

On another occasion, he came to her with an awkward and timid air. "Listen," he said, with an effort; "I have something to say to you." She made him a sign that she was listening. Then he began to sigh, half opened his lips, appeared for a moment to be on the point of speaking, then he looked at her again, shook his head, and withdrew slowly, with his brow in his hand, leaving the gypsy stupefied. Among the grotesque personages sculptured on the wall, there was one to whom he was particularly attached, and with which he often seemed to exchange fraternal glances. Once the gypsy heard him saying to it, —

“Oh! why am not I of stone, like you!”

At last, one morning, la Esmeralda had advanced to the edge of the roof, and was looking into the Place over the pointed roof of Saint-Jean le Rond. Quasimodo was standing behind her. He had placed himself in that position in order to spare the young girl, as far as possible, the displeasure of seeing him. All at once the gypsy started, a tear and a flash of joy gleamed simultaneously in her eyes, she knelt on the brink of the roof and extended her arms towards the Place with anguish, exclaiming: “Phoebus! come! come! a word, a single word in the name of heaven! Phoebus! Phoebus!” Her voice, her face, her gesture, her whole person bore the heartrending expression of a shipwrecked man who is making a signal of distress to the joyous vessel which is passing afar off in a ray of sunlight on the horizon.

Quasimodo leaned over the Place, and saw that the object of this tender and agonizing prayer was a young man, a captain, a handsome cavalier all glittering with arms and decorations, prancing across the end of the Place, and saluting with his plume a beautiful lady who was smiling at him from her balcony. However, the officer did not hear the unhappy girl calling him; he was too far away.

But the poor deaf man heard. A profound sigh heaved his breast; he turned round; his heart was swollen with all the tears which he was swallowing; his convulsively-clenched fists struck against his head, and when he withdrew them there was a bunch of red hair in each hand.

The gypsy paid no heed to him. He said in a low voice as he gnashed his teeth, —

“Damnation! That is what one should be like! ’Tis only necessary to be handsome on the outside!”

Meanwhile, she remained kneeling, and cried with extraor-dinary agitation,— “Oh! there he is alighting from his horse! He is about to enter that house! — Phoebus! — He does not hear me! Phoebus! — How wicked that woman is to speak to him at the same time with me! Phoebus! Phoebus!”

The deaf man gazed at her. He understood this pantomime. The poor bellringer’s eye filled with tears, but he let none fall. All at once he pulled her gently by the border of her sleeve. She turned round. He had assumed a tranquil air; he said to her, —

“Would you like to have me bring him to you?”

She uttered a cry of joy.

“Oh! go! hasten! run! quick! that captain! that captain! bring him to me! I will love you for it!”

She clasped his knees. He could not refrain from shaking his head sadly.

“I will bring him to you,” he said, in a weak voice. Then he turned his head and plunged down the staircase with great strides, stifling with sobs.

When he reached the Place, he no longer saw anything except the handsome horse hitched at the door of the Gondelaurier house; the captain had just entered there.

He raised his eyes to the roof of the church. La Esmeralda was there in the same spot, in the same attitude. He made her a sad sign with his head; then he planted his back against one of the stone posts of the Gondelaurier porch, determined to wait until the captain should come forth.

In the Gondelaurier house it was one of those gala days which precede a wedding. Quasimodo beheld many people enter, but no one come out. He cast a glance towards the roof from time to time; the gypsy did not stir any more than himself. A groom came and unhitched the horse and led it to the stable of the house.

The entire day passed thus, Quasimodo at his post, la Esmeralda on the roof, Phoebus, no doubt, at the feet of Fleur-de-Lys.

At length night came, a moonless night, a dark night. Quasimodo fixed his gaze in vain upon la Esmeralda; soon she was no more than a whiteness amid the twilight; then nothing. All was effaced, all was black.

Quasimodo beheld the front windows from top to bottom of the Gondelaurier mansion illuminated; he saw the other casements in the Place lighted one by one, he also saw them extinguished to the very last, for he remained the whole evening at his post. The officer did not come forth. When the last passers-by had returned home, when the windows of all the other houses were extinguished, Quasimodo was left entirely alone, entirely in the dark. There were at that time no lamps in the square before Notre-Dame.

Meanwhile, the windows of the Gondelaurier mansion remained lighted, even after midnight. Quasimodo, motionless and attentive, beheld a throng of lively, dancing shadows pass athwart the many-colored painted panes. Had he not been deaf, he would have heard more and more distinctly, in proportion as the noise of sleeping Paris died away, a sound of feasting, laughter, and music in the Gondelaurier mansion.

Towards one o’clock in the morning, the guests began to take their leave. Quasimodo, shrouded in darkness watched them all pass out through the porch illuminated with torches. None of them was the captain.

He was filled with sad thoughts; at times he looked upwards into the air, like a person who is weary of waiting. Great black clouds, heavy, torn, split, hung like crape hammocks beneath the starry dome of night. One would have pronounced them spiders’ webs of the vault of heaven.

In one of these moments he suddenly beheld the long window on the balcony, whose stone balustrade projected above his head, open mysteriously. The frail glass door gave passage to two persons, and closed noiselessly behind them; it was a man and a woman.

It was not without difficulty that Quasimodo succeeded in recognizing in the man the handsome captain, in the woman the young lady whom he had seen welcome the officer in the morning from that very balcony. The place was perfectly dark, and a double crimson curtain which had fallen across the door the very moment it closed again, allowed no light to reach the balcony from the apartment.

The young man and the young girl, so far as our deaf man could judge, without hearing a single one of their words, appeared to abandon themselves to a very tender tête-a-tête. The young girl seemed to have allowed the officer to make a girdle for her of his arm, and gently repulsed a kiss.

Quasimodo looked on from below at this scene which was all the more pleasing to witness because it was not meant to be seen. He contemplated with bitterness that beauty, that happiness. After all, nature was not dumb in the poor fellow, and his human sensibility, all maliciously contorted as it was, quivered no less than any other. He thought of the miserable portion which Providence had allotted to him; that woman and the pleasure of love, would pass forever before his eyes, and that he should never do anything but behold the felicity of others. But that which rent his heart most in this sight, that which mingled indignation with his anger, was the thought of what the gypsy would suffer could she behold it. It is true that the night was very dark, that la Esmeralda, if she had remained at her post (and he had no doubt of this), was very far away, and that it was all that he himself could do to distinguish the lovers on the balcony. This consoled him.

Meanwhile, their conversation grew more and more animated. The young lady appeared to be entreating the officer to ask nothing more of her. Of all this Quasimodo could distinguish only the beautiful clasped hands, the smiles mingled with tears, the young girl’s glances directed to the stars, the eyes of the captain lowered ardently upon her.

Fortunately, for the young girl was beginning to resist but feebly, the door of the balcony suddenly opened once more and an old dame appeared; the beauty seemed confused, the officer assumed an air of displeasure, and all three withdrew.

A moment later, a horse was champing his bit under the porch, and the brilliant officer, enveloped in his night cloak, passed rapidly before Quasimodo.

The bellringer allowed him to turn the corner of the street, then he ran after him with his ape-like agility, shouting: “Hey there! captain!”

The captain halted.

“What wants this knave with me?” he said, catching sight through the gloom of that hipshot form which ran limping after him.

Meanwhile, Quasimodo had caught up with him, and had boldly grasped his horse’s bridle: “Follow me, captain; there is one here who desires to speak with you!

“*Cornemahom*!” grumbled Phoebus, “here’s a villanous; ruffled bird which I fancy I have seen somewhere. Holà master, will you let my horse’s bridle alone?”

“Captain,” replied the deaf man, “do you not ask me who it is?”

“I tell you to release my horse,” retorted Phoebus, impatiently. “What means the knave by clinging to the bridle of my steed? Do you take my horse for a gallows?”

Quasimodo, far from releasing the bridle, prepared to force him to retrace his steps. Unable to comprehend the captain’s resistance, he hastened to say to him, —

“Come, captain, ’tis a woman who is waiting for you.” He added with an effort: “A woman who loves you.”

“A rare rascal!” said the captain, “who thinks me obliged to go to all the women who love me! or who say they do. And what if, by chance, she should resemble you, you face of a screech-owl? Tell the woman who has sent you that I am about to marry, and that she may go to the devil!”

“Listen,” exclaimed Quasimodo, thinking to overcome his hesitation with a word, “come, monseigneur! ’tis the gypsy whom you know!”

This word did, indeed, produce a great effect on Phoebus, but not of the kind which the deaf man expected. It will be remembered that our gallant officer had retired with Fleur-de-Lys several moments before Quasimodo had rescued the condemned girl from the hands of Charmolue. Afterwards, in all his visits to the Gondelaurier mansion he had taken care not to mention that woman, the memory of whom was, after all, painful to him; and on her side, Fleur-de-Lys had not deemed it politic to tell him that the gypsy was alive. Hence Phoebus believed poor “Similar” to be dead, and that a month or two had elapsed since her death. Let us add that for the last few moments the captain had been reflecting on the profound darkness of the night, the supernatural ugliness, the sepulchral voice of the strange messenger; that it was past midnight; that the street was deserted, as on the evening when the surly monk had accosted him; and that his horse snorted as it looked at Quasimodo.

“The gypsy!” he exclaimed, almost frightened. “Look here, do you come from the other world?”

And he laid his hand on the hilt of his dagger.

“Quick, quick,” said the deaf man, endeavoring to drag the horse along; “this way!”

Phoebus dealt him a vigorous kick in the breast.

Quasimodo’s eye flashed. He made a motion to fling himself on the captain. Then he drew himself up stiffly and said, —

“Oh! how happy you are to have some one who loves you!”

He emphasized the words “some one,” and loosing the horse’s bridle, —

“Begone!”

Phoebus spurred on in all haste, swearing. Quasimodo watched him disappear in the shades of the street.

“Oh!” said the poor deaf man, in a very low voice; “to refuse that!”

He re-entered Notre-Dame, lighted his lamp and climbed to the tower again. The gypsy was still in the same place, as he had supposed.

She flew to meet him as far off as she could see him. “Alone!” she cried, clasping her beautiful hands sorrowfully.

“I could not find him,” said Quasimodo coldly.

“You should have waited all night,” she said angrily.

He saw her gesture of wrath, and understood the reproach.

“I will lie in wait for him better another time,” he said, dropping his head.

“Begone!” she said to him.

He left her. She was displeased with him. He preferred to have her abuse him rather than to have afflicted her. He had kept all the pain to himself.

From that day forth, the gypsy no longer saw him. He ceased to come to her cell. At the most she occasionally caught a glimpse at the summit of the towers, of the bellringer’s face turned sadly to her. But as soon as she perceived him, he disappeared.

We must admit that she was not much grieved by this voluntary absence on the part of the poor hunchback. At the bottom of her heart she was grateful to him for it. Moreover, Quasimodo did not deceive himself on this point.

She no longer saw him, but she felt the presence of a good genius about her. Her provisions were replenished by an invisible hand during her slumbers. One morning she found a cage of birds on her window. There was a piece of sculpture above her window which frightened her. She had shown this more than once in Quasimodo’s presence. One morning, for all these things happened at night, she no longer saw it, it had been broken. The person who had climbed up to that carving must have risked his life.

Sometimes, in the evening, she heard a voice, concealed beneath the wind screen of the bell tower, singing a sad, strange song, as though to lull her to sleep. The lines were unrhymed, such as a deaf person can make.

Ne regarde pas la figure,
Jeune fille, regarde le coeur.
Le coeur d’un beau jeune homme est souvent difforme.
Il y a des coeurs ou l’amour ne se conserve pas.

Jeune fille, le sapin n’est pas beau,
N’est pas beau comme le peuplier,
Mais il garde son feuillage l’hiver.

Hélas! a quoi bon dire cela?
Ce qui n’est pas beau a tort d’être;
La beauté n’aime que la beauté,
Avril tourne le dos a Janvier.

La beauté est parfaite,
La beauté peut tout,
La beauté est la seule chose qui n'existe pàs a demi.

Le corbeau ne vole que le jour,
Le hibou ne vole que la nuit,
Le cygne vole la nuit et le jour.*

* Look not at the face, young girl, look at the heart. The heart of a handsome young man is often deformed. There are hearts in which love does not keep. Young girl, the pine is not beautiful; it is not beautiful like the poplar, but it keeps its foliage in winter. Alas! What is the use of saying that? That which is not beautiful has no right to exist; beauty loves only beauty; April turns her back on January. Beauty is perfect, beauty can do all things, beauty is the only thing which does not exist by halves. The raven flies only by day, the owl flies only by night, the swan flies by day and by night.

One morning, on awaking, she saw on her window two vases filled with flowers. One was a very beautiful and very brilliant but cracked vase of glass. It had allowed the water with which it had been filled to escape, and the flowers which it contained were withered. The other was an earthenware pot, coarse and common, but which had preserved all its water, and its flowers remained fresh and crimson.

I know not whether it was done intentionally, but La Esmeralda took the faded nosegay and wore it all day long upon her breast.

That day she did not hear the voice singing in the tower.

She troubled herself very little about it. She passed her days in caressing Djali, in watching the door of the Gondelaurier house, in talking to herself about Phoebus, and in crumbling up her bread for the swallows.

She had entirely ceased to see or hear Quasimodo. The poor bellringer seemed to have disappeared from the church. One night, nevertheless, when she was not asleep, but was thinking of her handsome captain, she heard something breathing near her cell. She rose in alarm, and saw by the light of the moon, a shapeless mass lying across her door on the outside. It was Quasimodo asleep there upon the stones.

CHAPTER V. THE KEY TO THE RED DOOR.

In the meantime, public minor had informed the archdeacon of the miraculous manner in which the gypsy had been saved. When he learned it, he knew not what his sensations were. He had reconciled himself to la Esmeralda’s death. In that matter he was tranquil; he had reached the bottom of personal suffering. The human heart (Dora Claude had meditated upon these matters) can contain only a certain quantity of despair. When the sponge is saturated, the sea may pass over it without causing a single drop more to enter it.

Now, with la Esmeralda dead, the sponge was soaked, all was at an end on this earth for Dom Claude. But to feel that she was alive, and Phoebus also, meant that tortures, shocks, alternatives, life, were beginning again. And Claude was weary of all this.

When he heard this news, he shut himself in his cell in the cloister. He appeared neither at the meetings of the chapter nor at the services. He closed his door against all, even against the bishop. He remained thus immured for several weeks. He was believed to be ill. And so he was, in fact.

What did he do while thus shut up? With what thoughts was the unfortunate man contending? Was he giving final battle to his formidable passion? Was he concocting a final plan of death for her and of perdition for himself?

His Jehan, his cherished brother, his spoiled child, came once to his door, knocked, swore, entreated, gave his name half a score of times. Claude did not open.

He passed whole days with his face close to the panes of his window. From that window, situated in the cloister, he could see la Esmeralda’s chamber. He often saw herself with her goat, sometimes with Quasimodo. He remarked the little attentions of the ugly deaf man, his obedience, his delicate and submissive ways with the gypsy. He recalled, for he had a good memory, and memory is the tormentor of the jealous, he recalled the singular look of the bellringer, bent on the dancer upon a certain evening. He asked himself what motive could have impelled Quasimodo to save her. He was the witness of a thousand little scenes between the gypsy and the deaf man, the pantomime of which, viewed from afar and commented on by his passion, appeared very tender to him. He distrusted the capriciousness of women. Then he felt a jealousy which he could never have believed possible awakening within him, a jealousy which made him redden with shame and indignation: “One might condone the captain, but this one!” This thought upset him.

His nights were frightful. As soon as he learned that the gypsy was alive, the cold ideas of spectre and tomb which had persecuted him for a whole day vanished, and the flesh returned to goad him. He turned and twisted on his couch at the thought that the dark-skinned maiden was so near him.

Every night his delirious imagination represented la Esmeralda to him in all the attitudes which had caused his blood to boil most. He beheld her outstretched upon the poniarded captain, her eyes closed, her beautiful bare throat covered with Phoebus’s blood, at that moment of bliss when the archdeacon had imprinted on her pale lips that kiss whose burn the unhappy girl, though half dead, had felt. He beheld her, again, stripped by the savage hands of the torturers, allowing them to bare and to enclose in the boot with its iron screw, her tiny foot, her delicate rounded leg, her white and supple knee. Again he beheld that ivory knee which alone remained outside of Torterue’s horrible apparatus. Lastly, he pictured the young girl in her shift, with the rope about her neck, shoulders bare, feet bare, almost nude, as he had seen her on that last day. These images of voluptuousness made him clench his fists, and a shiver run along his spine.

One night, among others, they heated so cruelly his virgin and priestly blood, that he bit his pillow, leaped from his bed, flung on a surplice over his shirt, and left his cell, lamp in hand, half naked, wild, his eyes aflame.

He knew where to find the key to the red door, which connected the cloister with the church, and he always had about him, as the reader knows, the key of the staircase leading to the towers.

CHAPTER VI. CONTINUATION OF THE KEY TO THE RED DOOR.

That night, la Esmeralda had fallen asleep in her cell, full of oblivion, of hope, and of sweet thoughts. She had already been asleep for some time, dreaming as always, of Phoebus, when it seemed to her that she heard a noise near her. She slept lightly and uneasily, the sleep of a bird; a mere nothing waked her. She opened her eyes. The night was very dark. Nevertheless, she saw a figure gazing at her through the window; a lamp lighted up this apparition. The moment that the figure saw that la Esmeralda had perceived it, it blew out the lamp. But the young girl had had time to catch a glimpse of it; her eyes closed again with terror.

“Oh!” she said in a faint voice, “the priest!”

All her past unhappiness came back to her like a flash of lightning. She fell back on her bed, chilled.

A moment later she felt a touch along her body which made her shudder so that she straightened herself up in a sitting posture, wide awake and furious.

The priest had just slipped in beside her. He encircled her with both arms.

She tried to scream and could not.

“Begone, monster! begone assassin!” she said, in a voice which was low and trembling with wrath and terror.

“Mercy! mercy!” murmured the priest, pressing his lips to her shoulder.

She seized his bald head by its remnant of hair and tried to thrust aside his kisses as though they had been bites.

“Mercy!” repeated the unfortunate man. “If you but knew what my love for you is! ’Tis fire, melted lead, a thousand daggers in my heart.”

She stopped his two arms with superhuman force.

“Let me go,” she said, “or I will spit in your face!”

He released her. “Vilify me, strike me, be malicious! Do what you will! But have mercy! love me!”

Then she struck him with the fury of a child. She made her beautiful hands stiff to bruise his face. “Begone, demon!”

“Love me! love mepity!” cried the poor priest returning her blows with caresses.

All at once she felt him stronger than herself.

“There must be an end to this!” he said, gnashing his teeth.

She was conquered, palpitating in his arms, and in his power. She felt a wanton hand straying over her. She made a last effort, and began to cry: “Help! Help! A vampire! a vampire!”

Nothing came. Djali alone was awake and bleating with anguish.

“Hush!” said the panting priest.

All at once, as she struggled and crawled on the floor, the gypsy’s hand came in contact with something cold and metal-lic-it was Quasimodo’s whistle. She seized it with a convulsive hope, raised it to her lips and blew with all the strength that she had left. The whistle gave a clear, piercing sound.

“What is that?” said the priest.

Almost at the same instant he felt himself raised by a vigorous arm. The cell was dark; he could not distinguish clearly who it was that held him thus; but he heard teeth chattering with rage, and there was just sufficient light scattered among the gloom to allow him to see above his head the blade of a large knife.

The priest fancied that he perceived the form of Quasimodo. He assumed that it could be no one but he. He remembered to have stumbled, as he entered, over a bundle which was stretched across the door on the outside. But, as the newcomer did not utter a word, he knew not what to think. He flung himself on the arm which held the knife, crying: “Quasimodo!” He forgot, at that moment of distress, that Quasimodo was deaf.

In a twinkling, the priest was overthrown and a leaden knee rested on his breast.

From the angular imprint of that knee he recognized Quasimodo; but what was to be done? how could he make the other recognize him? the darkness rendered the deaf man blind.

He was lost. The young girl, pitiless as an enraged tigress, did not intervene to save him. The knife was approaching his head; the moment was critical. All at once, his adversary seemed stricken with hesitation.

“No blood on her!” he said in a dull voice.

It was, in fact, Quasimodo’s voice.

Then the priest felt a large hand dragging him feet first out of the cell; it was there that he was to die. Fortunately for him, the moon had risen a few moments before.

When they had passed through the door of the cell, its pale rays fell upon the priest's countenance. Quasimodo looked him full in the face, a trembling seized him, and he released the priest and shrank back.

The gypsy, who had advanced to the threshold of her cell, beheld with surprise their roles abruptly changed. It was now the priest who menaced, Quasimodo who was the suppliant.

The priest, who was overwhelming the deaf man with gestures of wrath and reproach, made the latter a violent sign to retire.

The deaf man dropped his head, then he came and knelt at the gypsy's door,— "Monseigneur," he said, in a grave and resigned voice, "you shall do all that you please afterwards, but kill me first."

So saying, he presented his knife to the priest. The priest, beside himself, was about to seize it. But the young girl was quicker than be; she wrenched the knife from Quasimodo's hands and burst into a frantic laugh,— "Approach," she said to the priest.

She held the blade high. The priest remained undecided.

She would certainly have struck him.

Then she added with a pitiless expression, well aware that she was about to pierce the priest's heart with thousands of red-hot irons, —

"Ah! I know that Phoebus is not dead!"

The priest overturned Quasimodo on the floor with a kick, and, quivering with rage, darted back under the vault of the staircase.

When he was gone, Quasimodo picked up the whistle which had just saved the gypsy.

"It was getting rusty," he said, as he handed it back to her; then he left her alone.

The young girl, deeply agitated by this violent scene, fell back exhausted on her bed, and began to sob and weep. Her horizon was becoming gloomy once more.

The priest had groped his way back to his cell.

It was settled. Dom Claude was jealous of Quasimodo!

He repeated with a thoughtful air his fatal words: "No one shall have her."

BOOK TENTH.

CHAPTER I. GRINGOIRE HAS MANY GOOD IDEAS IN SUCCESSION. — RUE DES BERNARDINS.

As soon as Pierre Gringoire had seen how this whole affair was turning, and that there would decidedly be the rope, hanging, and other disagreeable things for the principal personages in this comedy, he had not cared to identify himself with the matter further. The outcasts with whom he had remained, reflecting that, after all, it was the best company in Paris, — the outcasts had continued to interest themselves in behalf of the gypsy. He had thought it very simple on the part of people who had, like herself, nothing else in prospect but Charmolue and Torterue, and who, unlike himself, did not gallop through the regions of imagination between the wings of Pegasus. From their remarks, he had learned that his wife of the broken crock had taken refuge in Notre-Dame, and he was very glad of it. But he felt no temptation to go and see her there. He meditated occasionally on the little goat, and that was all. Moreover, he was busy executing feats of strength during the day for his living, and at night he was engaged in composing a memorial against the Bishop of Paris, for he remembered having been drenched by the wheels of his mills, and he cherished a grudge against him for it. He also occupied himself with annotating the fine work of Baudry-le-Rouge, Bishop of Noyon and Tournay, *De Cupa Petrarum*, which had given him a violent passion for architecture, an inclination which had replaced in his heart his passion for hermeticism, of which it was, moreover, only a natural corollary, since there is an intimate relation between hermeticism and masonry. Gringoire had passed from the love of an idea to the love of the form of that idea.

One day he had halted near Saint Germain-l'Auxerrois, at the corner of a mansion called “For-l'Evêque” (the Bishop's Tribunal), which stood opposite another called “For-le-Roi” (the King's Tribunal). At this For-l'Evêque, there was a charming chapel of the fourteenth century, whose apse was on the street. Gringoire was devoutly examining its exterior sculptures. He was in one of those moments of egotistical, exclusive, supreme, enjoyment when the artist beholds nothing in the world but art, and the world in art. All at once he feels a hand laid gravely on his shoulder.

He turns round. It was his old friend, his former master, monsieur the archdeacon.

He was stupefied. It was a long time since he had seen the archdeacon, and Dom Claude was one of those solemn and impassioned men, a meeting with whom always upsets the equilibrium of a sceptical philosopher.

The archdeacon maintained silence for several minutes, during which Gringoire had time to observe him. He found Dom Claude greatly changed; pale as a winter's morning, with hollow eyes, and hair almost white. The priest broke the silence at length, by saying, in a tranquil but glacial tone,—

"How do you do, Master Pierre?"

"My health?" replied Gringoire. "Eh! eh! one can say both one thing and another on that score. Still, it is good, on the whole. I take not too much of anything. You know, master, that the secret of keeping well, according to Hippocrates; *id est: cibi, potus, somni, venus, omnia moderata sint*."

"So you have no care, Master Pierre?" resumed the archdeacon, gazing intently at Gringoire.

"None, i' faith!"

"And what are you doing now?"

"You see, master. I am examining the chiselling of these stones, and the manner in which yonder bas-relief is thrown out."

The priest began to smile with that bitter smile which raises only one corner of the mouth.

"And that amuses you?"

"'Tis paradise!" exclaimed Gringoire. And leaning over the sculptures with the fascinated air of a demonstrator of living phenomena: "Do you not think, for instance, that yon metamorphosis in bas-relief is executed with much adroitness, delicacy and patience? Observe that slender column. Around what capital have you seen foliage more tender and better caressed by the chisel. Here are three raised bosses of Jean Maillevin. They are not the finest works of this great master. Nevertheless, the naivete, the sweetness of the faces, the gayety of the attitudes and draperies, and that inexplicable charm which is mingled with all the defects, render the little figures very diverting and delicate, perchance, even too much so. You think that it is not diverting?"

"Yes, certainly!" said the priest.

“And if you were to see the interior of the chapel!” resumed the poet, with his garrulous enthusiasm. “Carvings everywhere. ’Tis as thickly clustered as the head of a cabbage! The apse is of a very devout, and so peculiar a fashion that I have never beheld anything like it elsewhere!”

Dom Claude interrupted him, —

“You are happy, then?”

Gringoire replied warmly; —

“On my honor, yes! First I loved women, then animals. Now I love stones. They are quite as amusing as women and animals, and less treacherous.”

The priest laid his hand on his brow. It was his habitual gesture.

“Really?”

“Stay!” said Gringoire, “one has one’s pleasures!” He took the arm of the priest, who let him have his way, and made him enter the staircase turret of For-l’Evêque. “Here is a staircase! every time that I see it I am happy. It is of the simplest and rarest manner of steps in Paris. All the steps are bevelled underneath. Its beauty and simplicity consist in the interspacing of both, being a foot or more wide, which are interlaced, interlocked, fitted together, enchained enchased, interlined one upon another, and bite into each other in a manner that is truly firm and graceful.”

“And you desire nothing?”

“No.”

“And you regret nothing?”

“Neither regret nor desire. I have arranged my mode of life.”

“What men arrange,” said Claude, “things disarrange.”

“I am a Pyrrhonian philosopher,” replied Gringoire, “and I hold all things in equilibrium.”

“And how do you earn your living?”

“I still make epics and tragedies now and then; but that which brings me in most is the industry with which you are acquainted, master; carrying pyramids of chairs in my teeth.”

“The trade is but a rough one for a philosopher.”

“’Tis still equilibrium,” said Gringoire. “When one has an idea, one encounters it in everything.”

“I know that,” replied the archdeacon.

After a silence, the priest resumed, —

“You are, nevertheless, tolerably poor?”

"Poor, yes; unhappy, no."

At that moment, a trampling of horses was heard, and our two interlocutors beheld defiling at the end of the street, a company of the king's unattached archers, their lances borne high, an officer at their head. The cavalcade was brilliant, and its march resounded on the pavement.

"How you gaze at that officer!" said Gringoire, to the archdeacon.

"Because I think I recognize him."

"What do you call him?"

"I think," said Claude, "that his name is Phoebus de Châteaupers."

"Phoebus! A curious name! There is also a Phoebus, Comte de Foix. I remember having known a wench who swore only by the name of Phoebus."

"Come away from here," said the priest. "I have something to say to you."

From the moment of that troop's passing, some agitation had pierced through the archdeacon's glacial envelope. He walked on. Gringoire followed him, being accustomed to obey him, like all who had once approached that man so full of ascendency. They reached in silence the Rue des Bernardins, which was nearly deserted. Here Dom Claude paused.

"What have you to say to me, master?" Gringoire asked him.

"Do you not think that the dress of those cavaliers whom we have just seen is far handsomer than yours and mine?"

Gringoire tossed his head.

"I' faith! I love better my red and yellow jerkin, than those scales of iron and steel. A fine pleasure to produce, when you walk, the same noise as the Quay of Old Iron, in an earthquake!"

"So, Gringoire, you have never cherished envy for those handsome fellows in their military doublets?"

"Envy for what, monsieur the archdeacon? their strength, their armor, their discipline? Better philosophy and independence in rags. I prefer to be the head of a fly rather than the tail of a lion."

"That is singular," said the priest dreamily. "Yet a handsome uniform is a beautiful thing."

Gringoire, perceiving that he was in a pensive mood, quitted him to go and admire the porch of a neighboring house. He came back clapping his hands.

"If you were less engrossed with the fine clothes of men of war, monsieur the archdeacon, I would entreat you to come and see this door. I have always said that the house of the Sieur Aubry had the most superb entrance in the world."

"Pierre Gringoire," said the archdeacon, "What have you done with that little gypsy dancer?"

"La Esmeralda? You change the conversation very abruptly."

"Was she not your wife?"

"Yes, by virtue of a broken crock. We were to have four years of it. By the way," added Gringoire, looking at the archdeacon in a half bantering way, "are you still thinking of her?"

"And you think of her no longer?"

"Very little. I have so many things. Good heavens, how pretty that little goat was!"

"Had she not saved your life?"

"'Tis true, pardieu!"

"Well, what has become of her? What have you done with her?"

"I cannot tell you. I believe that they have hanged her."

"You believe so?"

"I am not sure. When I saw that they wanted to hang people, I retired from the game."

"That is all you know of it?"

"Wait a bit. I was told that she had taken refuge in Notre-Dame, and that she was safe there, and I am delighted to hear it, and I have not been able to discover whether the goat was saved with her, and that is all I know."

"I will tell you more," cried Dom Claude; and his voice, hitherto low, slow, and almost indistinct, turned to thunder. "She has in fact, taken refuge in Notre-Dame. But in three days justice will reclaim her, and she will be hanged on the Grève. There is a decree of parliament."

"That's annoying," said Gringoire.

The priest, in an instant, became cold and calm again.

"And who the devil," resumed the poet, "has amused himself with soliciting a decree of reintegration? Why couldn't they leave parliament in peace? What harm does it do if a poor girl takes shelter under the flying buttresses of Notre-Dame, beside the swallows' nests?"

"There are satans in this world," remarked the archdeacon.

"'Tis devilish badly done," observed Gringoire.

The archdeacon resumed after a silence, —

“So, she saved your life?”

“Among my good friends the outcasts. A little more or a little less and I should have been hanged. They would have been sorry for it to-day.”

“Would not you like to do something for her?”

“I ask nothing better, Dom Claude; but what if I entangle myself in some villanous affair?”

“What matters it?”

“Bah! what matters it? You are good, master, that you are! I have two great works already begun.”

The priest smote his brow. In spite of the calm which he affected, a violent gesture betrayed his internal convulsions from time to time.

“How is she to be saved?”

Gringoire said to him; “Master, I will reply to you; *Il padelt,* which means in Turkish, ‘God is our hope.’”

“How is she to be saved?” repeated Claude dreamily.

Gringoire smote his brow in his turn.

“Listen, master. I have imagination; I will devise expedients for you. What if one were to ask her pardon from the king?”

“Of Louis XI.! A pardon!”

“Why not?”

“To take the tiger’s bone from him!”

Gringoire began to seek fresh expedients.

“Well, stay! Shall I address to the midwives a request accompanied by the declaration that the girl is with child!”

This made the priest’s hollow eye flash.

“With child! knave! do you know anything of this?”

Gringoire was alarmed by his air. He hastened to say, “Oh, no, not I! Our marriage was a real *forismaritagium*. I stayed outside. But one might obtain a respite, all the same.”

“Madness! Infamy! Hold your tongue!”

“You do wrong to get angry,” muttered Gringoire. “One obtains a respite; that does no harm to any one, and allows the midwives, who are poor women, to earn forty deniers parisis.”

The priest was not listening to him!

“But she must leave that place, nevertheless!” he murmured, “the decree is to be executed within three days. Moreover, there will be no decree; that

Quasimodo! Women have very depraved tastes!” He raised his voice: “Master Pierre, I have reflected well; there is but one means of safety for her.”

“What? I see none myself.”

“Listen, Master Pierre, remember that you owe your life to her. I will tell you my idea frankly. The church is watched night and day; only those are allowed to come out, who have been seen to enter. Hence you can enter. You will come. I will lead you to her. You will change clothes with her. She will take your doublet; you will take her petticoat.”

“So far, it goes well,” remarked the philosopher, “and then?”

“And then? she will go forth in your garments; you will remain with hers. You will be hanged, perhaps, but she will be saved.”

Gringoire scratched his ear, with a very serious air. “Stay!” said he, “that is an idea which would never have occurred to me unaided.”

At Dom Claude’s proposition, the open and benign face of the poet had abruptly clouded over, like a smiling Italian landscape, when an unlucky squall comes up and dashes a cloud across the sun.

“Well! Gringoire, what say you to the means?”

“I say, master, that I shall not be hanged, perchance, but that I shall be hanged indubitably.

“That concerns us not.”

“The deuce!” said Gringoire.

“She has saved your life. ’Tis a debt that you are discharging.”

“There are a great many others which I do not discharge.”

“Master Pierre, it is absolutely necessary.”

The archdeacon spoke imperiously.

“Listen, Dom Claude,” replied the poet in utter consternation. “You cling to that idea, and you are wrong. I do not see why I should get myself hanged in some one else’s place.”

“What have you, then, which attaches you so strongly to life?”

“Oh! a thousand reasons!”

“What reasons, if you please?”

“What? The air, the sky, the morning, the evening, the moonlight, my good friends the thieves, our jeers with the old hags of go-betweens, the fine architecture of Paris to study, three great books to make, one of them being against the bishops and his mills; and how can I tell all? Anaxagoras said that he was in the world to admire the sun. And then, from morning till night, I have the happiness of passing all my days with a man of genius, who is myself, which is very agreeable.”

“A head fit for a mule bell!” muttered the archdeacon. “Oh! tell me who preserved for you that life which you render so charming to yourself? To whom do you owe it that you breathe that air, behold that sky, and can still amuse your lark’s mind with your whimsical nonsense and madness? Where would you be, had it not been for her? Do you then desire that she through whom you are alive, should die? that she should die, that beautiful, sweet, adorable creature, who is necessary to the light of the world and more divine than God, while you, half wise, and half fool, a vain sketch of something, a sort of vegetable, which thinks that it walks, and thinks that it thinks, you will continue to live with the life which you have stolen from her, as useless as a candle in broad daylight? Come, have a little pity, Gringoire; be generous in your turn; it was she who set the example.”

The priest was vehement. Gringoire listened to him at first with an undecided air, then he became touched, and wound up with a grimace which made his pallid face resemble that of a new-born infant with an attack of the colic.

“You are pathetic!” said he, wiping away a tear. “Well! I will think about it. That’s a queer idea of yours. — After all,” he continued after a pause, “who knows? perhaps they will not hang me. He who becomes betrothed does not always marry. When they find me in that little lodging so grotesquely muffled in petticoat and coif, perchance they will burst with laughter. And then, if they do hang me, — well! the halter is as good a death as any. ’Tis a death worthy of a sage who has wavered all his life; a death which is neither flesh nor fish, like the mind of a veritable sceptic; a death all stamped with Pyrrhonism and hesitation, which holds the middle station betwixt heaven and earth, which leaves you in suspense. ’Tis a philosopher’s death, and I was destined thereto, perchance. It is magnificent to die as one has lived.”

The priest interrupted him: “Is it agreed.”

“What is death, after all?” pursued Gringoire with exaltation. “A disagreeable moment, a toll-gate, the passage of little to nothingness. Some one having asked Cercidas, the Megalopolitan, if he were willing to die: ‘Why not?’ he replied; ‘for after my death I shall see those great men, Pythagoras among the philosophers, Hecataeus among historians, Homer among poets, Olympus among musicians.’”

The archdeacon gave him his hand: “It is settled, then? You will come to-morrow?”

This gesture recalled Gringoire to reality.

“Ah! i’ faith no!” he said in the tone of a man just waking up. “Be hanged! ’tis too absurd. I will not.”

“Farewell, then!” and the archdeacon added between his teeth: “I’ll find you again!”

“I do not want that devil of a man to find me,” thought Gringoire; and he ran after Dom Claude. “Stay, monsieur the archdeacon, no ill-feeling between old friends! You take an interest in that girl, my wife, I mean, and ’tis well. You have devised a scheme to get her out of Notre-Dame, but your way is extremely disagreeable to me, Gringoire. If I had only another one myself! I beg to say that a luminous inspiration has just occurred to me. If I possessed an expedient for extricating her from a dilemma, without compromising my own neck to the extent of a single running knot, what would you say to it? Will not that suffice you? Is it absolutely necessary that I should be hanged, in order that you may be content?”

The priest tore out the buttons of his cassock with impatience: “Stream of words! What is your plan?”

“Yes,” resumed Gringoire, talking to himself and touching his nose with his forefinger in sign of meditation,— “that’s it! — The thieves are brave fellows! — The tribe of Egypt love her! — They will rise at the first word! — Nothing easier! — A sudden stroke. — Under cover of the disorder, they will easily carry her off! — Beginning to-morrow evening. They will ask nothing better.

“The plan! speak,” cried the archdeacon shaking him.

Gringoire turned majestically towards him: “Leave me! You see that I am composing.” He meditated for a few moments more, then began to clap his hands over his thought, crying: “Admirable! success is sure!”

“The plan!” repeated Claude in wrath.

Gringoire was radiant.

“Come, that I may tell you that very softly. ’Tis a truly gallant counter-plot, which will extricate us all from the matter. Pardieu, it must be admitted that I am no fool.”

He broke off.

“Oh, by the way! is the little goat with the wench?”

“Yes. The devil take you!”

“They would have hanged it also, would they not?”

“What is that to me?”

“Yes, they would have hanged it. They hanged a sow last month. The headsman loveth that; he eats the beast afterwards. Take my pretty Djali! Poor little lamb!”

“Malediction!” exclaimed Dom Claude. “You are the executioner. What means of safety have you found, knave? Must your idea be extracted with the forceps?”

“Very fine, master, this is it.”

Gringoire bent his head to the archdeacon’s head and spoke to him in a very low voice, casting an uneasy glance the while from one end to the other of the street, though no one was passing. When he had finished, Dom Claude took his hand and said coldly: “’Tis well. Farewell until to-morrow.”

“Until to-morrow,” repeated Gringoire. And, while the archdeacon was disappearing in one direction, he set off in the other, saying to himself in a low voice: “Here’s a grand affair, Monsieur Pierre Gringoire. Never mind! ’Tis not written that because one is of small account one should take fright at a great enterprise. Bitou carried a great bull on his shoulders; the water-wagtails, the warblers, and the buntings traverse the ocean.”

CHAPTER II. TURN VAGABOND.

On re-entering the cloister, the archdeacon found at the door of his cell his brother Jehan du Moulin, who was waiting for him, and who had beguiled the tedium of waiting by drawing on the wall with a bit of charcoal, a profile of his elder brother, enriched with a monstrous nose.

Dom Claude hardly looked at his brother; his thoughts were elsewhere. That merry scamp's face whose beaming had so often restored serenity to the priest's sombre physiognomy, was now powerless to melt the gloom which grew more dense every day over that corrupted, mephitic, and stagnant soul.

"Brother," said Jehan timidly, "I am come to see you."

The archdeacon did not even raise his eyes.

"What then?"

"Brother," resumed the hypocrite, "you are so good to me, and you give me such wise counsels that I always return to you."

"What next?"

"Alas! brother, you were perfectly right when you said to me,— "Jehan! Jehan! *cessat doctorum doctrina, discipulorum disciplina*. Jehan, be wise, Jehan, be learned, Jehan, pass not the night outside of the college without lawful occasion and due leave of the master. Cudgel not the Picards: *noli, Joannes, verberare Picardos*. Rot not like an unlettered ass, *quasi asinus illitteratus*, on the straw seats of the school. Jehan, allow yourself to be punished at the discretion of the master. Jehan go every evening to chapel, and sing there an anthem with verse and orison to Madame the glorious Virgin Mary." — Alas! what excellent advice was that!"

"And then?"

"Brother, you behold a culprit, a criminal, a wretch, a libertine, a man of enormities! My dear brother, Jehan hath made of your counsels straw and dung to trample under foot. I have been well chastised for it, and God is extraordinarily just. As long as I had money, I feasted, I lead a mad and joyous life. Oh! how ugly and crabbed behind is debauch which is so charming in front! Now I have no longer a blank; I have sold my napery, my shirt and my towels; no more merry life! The beautiful candle is extinguished and I have henceforth, only a wretched tallow dip which smokes in my nose. The wenches jeer at me. I drink water. — I am overwhelmed with remorse and with creditors.

“The rest?” said the archdeacon.

“Alas! my very dear brother, I should like to settle down to a better life. I come to you full of contrition, I am penitent. I make my confession. I beat my breast violently. You are quite right in wishing that I should some day become a licentiate and sub-monitor in the college of Torchi. At the present moment I feel a magnificent vocation for that profession. But I have no more ink and I must buy some; I have no more paper, I have no more books, and I must buy some. For this purpose, I am greatly in need of a little money, and I come to you, brother, with my heart full of contrition.”

“Is that all?”

“Yes,” said the scholar. “A little money.”

“I have none.”

Then the scholar said, with an air which was both grave and resolute: “Well, brother, I am sorry to be obliged to tell you that very fine offers and propositions are being made to me in another quarter. You will not give me any money? No. In that case I shall become a professional vagabond.”

As he uttered these monstrous words, he assumed the mien of Ajax, expecting to see the lightnings descend upon his head.

The archdeacon said coldly to him,— “Become a vagabond.”

Jehan made him a deep bow, and descended the cloister stairs, whistling.

At the moment when he was passing through the courtyard of the cloister, beneath his brother’s window, he heard that window open, raised his eyes and beheld the archdeacon’s severe head emerge.

“Go to the devil!” said Dom Claude; “here is the last money which you will get from me?”

At the same time, the priest flung Jehan a purse, which gave the scholar a big bump on the forehead, and with which Jehan retreated, both vexed and content, like a dog who had been stoned with marrow bones.

CHAPTER III. LONG LIVE MIRTH.

The reader has probably not forgotten that a part of the Cour de Miracles was enclosed by the ancient wall which surrounded the city, a goodly number of whose towers had begun, even at that epoch, to fall to ruin. One of these towers had been converted into a pleasure resort by the vagabonds. There was a drain-shop in the underground story, and the rest in the upper stories. This was the most lively, and consequently the most hideous, point of the whole outcast den. It was a sort of monstrous hive, which buzzed there night and day. At night, when the remainder of the beggar horde slept, when there was no longer a window lighted in the dingy façades of the Place, when not a cry was any longer to be heard proceeding from those innumerable families, those ant-hills of thieves, of wenches, and stolen or bastard children, the merry tower was still recognizable by the noise which it made, by the scarlet light which, flashing simultaneously from the air-holes, the windows, the fissures in the cracked walls, escaped, so to speak, from its every pore.

The cellar then, was the dram-shop. The descent to it was through a low door and by a staircase as steep as a classic Alexandrine. Over the door, by way of a sign there hung a marvellous daub, representing new sons and dead chickens,* with this, pun below: *Aux sonneurs pour les trépassés*, — The wringers for the dead.

* *Sols neufs: poulets tués*.

One evening when the curfew was sounding from all the belfries in Paris, the sergeants of the watch might have observed, had it been granted to them to enter the formidable Court of Miracles, that more tumult than usual was in progress in the vagabonds' tavern, that more drinking was being done, and louder swearing. Outside in the Place, there, were many groups conversing in low tones, as when some great plan is being framed, and here and there a knave crouching down engaged in sharpening a villanous iron blade on a paving-stone.

Meanwhile, in the tavern itself, wine and gaming offered such a powerful diversion to the ideas which occupied the vagabonds' lair that evening, that it would have been difficult to divine from the remarks of the drinkers, what was the matter in hand. They merely wore a gayer air than was their wont, and some weapon could be seen glittering between the legs of each of them, — a sickle, an axe, a big two-edged sword or the hook of an old hackbut.

The room, circular in form, was very spacious; but the tables were so thickly set and the drinkers so numerous, that all that the tavern contained, men, women, benches, beer-jugs, all that were drinking, all that were sleeping, all that were playing, the well, the lame, seemed piled up pell-mell, with as much order and harmony as a heap of oyster shells. There were a few tallow dips lighted on the tables; but the real luminary of this tavern, that which played the part in this dram-shop of the chandelier of an opera house, was the fire. This cellar was so damp that the fire was never allowed to go out, even in midsummer; an immense chimney with a sculptured mantel, all bristling with heavy iron andirons and cooking utensils, with one of those huge fires of mixed wood and peat which at night, in village streets make the reflection of forge windows stand out so red on the opposite walls. A big dog gravely seated in the ashes was turning a spit loaded with meat before the coals.

Great as was the confusion, after the first glance one could distinguish in that multitude, three principal groups which thronged around three personages already known to the reader. One of these personages, fantastically accoutred in many an oriental rag, was Mathias Hungadi Spicali, Duke of Egypt and Bohemia. The knave was seated on a table with his legs crossed, and in a loud voice was bestowing his knowledge of magic, both black and white, on many a gaping face which surrounded him. Another rabble pressed close around our old friend, the valiant King of Thunes, armed to the teeth. Clopin Trouillefou, with a very serious air and in a low voice, was regulating the distribution of an enormous cask of arms, which stood wide open in front of him and from whence poured out in profusion, axes, swords, bassinets, coats of mail, broadswords, lance-heads, arrows, and viretons,* like apples and grapes from a horn of plenty. Every one took something from the cask, one a morion, another a long, straight sword, another a dagger with a cross — shaped hilt. The very children were arming themselves, and there were even cripples in bowls who, in armor and cuirass, made their way between the legs of the drinkers, like great beetles.

* An arrow with a pyramidal head of iron and copper spiral wings, by which a rotatory motion was communicated.

Finally, a third audience, the most noisy, the most jovial, and the most numerous, encumbered benches and tables, in the midst of which harangued and swore a flute-like voice, which escaped from beneath a heavy armor, complete from casque to spurs. The individual who had thus screwed a whole outfit upon his body, was so hidden by his warlike accoutrements that nothing was to be seen of his person save an impertinent, red, snub nose, a rosy mouth, and bold eyes. His belt was full of daggers and poniards, a huge sword on his hip, a rusted cross-bow at his left, and a vast jug of wine in front of him, without reckoning on his right, a fat wench with her bosom uncovered. All mouths around him were laughing, cursing, and drinking.

Add twenty secondary groups, the waiters, male and female, running with jugs on their heads, gamblers squatting over taws, merelles,* dice, vachettes, the ardent game of tringlet, quarrels in one corner, kisses in another, and the reader will have some idea of this whole picture, over which flickered the light of a great, flaming fire, which made a thousand huge and grotesque shadows dance over the walls of the drinking shop.

* A game played on a checker-board containing three concentric sets of squares, with small stones. The game consisted in getting three stones in a row.

As for the noise, it was like the inside of a bell at full peal.

The dripping-pan, where crackled a rain of grease, filled with its continual sputtering the intervals of these thousand dialogues, which intermingled from one end of the apartment to the other.

In the midst of this uproar, at the extremity of the tavern, on the bench inside the chimney, sat a philosopher meditating with his feet in the ashes and his eyes on the brands. It was Pierre Gringoire.

“Be quick! make haste, arm yourselves! we set out on the march in an hour!” said Clopin Trouillefou to his thieves.

A wench was humming, —

“*Bonsoir mon père et ma mere,*
Les derniers couvrent le feu.”*

* Good night, father and mother, the last cover up the fire.

Two card players were disputing, —

“Knave!” cried the reddest faced of the two, shaking his fist at the other; “I’ll mark you with the club. You can take the place of Mistigri in the pack of cards of monseigneur the king.”

“Ugh!” roared a Norman, recognizable by his nasal accent; “we are packed in here like the saints of Caillouville!”

“My sons,” the Duke of Egypt was saying to his audience, in a falsetto voice, “sorceresses in France go to the witches’ sabbath without broomsticks, or grease, or steed, merely by means of some magic words. The witches of Italy always have a buck waiting for them at their door. All are bound to go out through the chimney.”

The voice of the young scamp armed from head to foot, dominated the uproar.

“Hurrah! hurrah!” he was shouting. “My first day in armor! Outcast! I am an outcast. Give me something to drink. My friends, my name is Jehan Frollo du Moulin, and I am a gentleman. My opinion is that if God were a *gendarme*, he would turn robber. Brothers, we are about to set out on a fine expedition. Lay siege to the church, burst in the doors, drag out the beautiful girl, save her from the judges, save her from the priests, dismantle the cloister, burn the bishop in his palace — all this we will do in less time than it takes for a burgomaster to eat a spoonful of soup. Our cause is just, we will plunder Notre-Dame and that will be the end of it. We will hang Quasimodo. Do you know Quasimodo, ladies? Have you seen him make himself breathless on the big bell on a grand Pentecost festival! *Corne du Père*! ’tis very fine! One would say he was a devil mounted on a man. Listen to me, my friends; I am a vagabond to the bottom of my heart, I am a member of the slang thief gang in my soul, I was born an independent thief. I have been rich, and I have devoured all my property. My mother wanted to make an officer of me; my father, a sub-deacon; my aunt, a councillor of inquests; my grandmother, prothonotary to the king; my great aunt, a treasurer of the short robe, — and I have made myself an outcast. I said this to my father, who spit his curse in my face; to my mother, who set to weeping and chattering, poor old lady, like yonder fagot on the and-irons. Long live mirth! I am a real Bicêtre. Waitress, my dear, more wine. I have still the wherewithal to pay. I want no more Surène wine. It distresses my throat. I’d as lief, *corboeuf*! gargle my throat with a basket.”

Meanwhile, the rabble applauded with shouts of laughter; and seeing that the tumult was increasing around him, the scholar cried, — .

“Oh! what a fine noise! *Populi debacchantis populosa debacchatio*!” Then he began to sing, his eye swimming in ecstasy, in the tone of a canon intoning vespers, *Quoe cantica! quoe organa! quoe cantilenoe! quoe* *meloclioe hic sine fine decantantur! Sonant melliflua hymnorum organa, suavissima angelorum melodia, cantica canticorum mira*! He broke off: “Tavern-keeper of the devil, give me some supper!”

There was a moment of partial silence, during which the sharp voice of the Duke of Egypt rose, as he gave instructions to his Bohemians.

“The weasel is called Adrune; the fox, Blue-foot, or the Racer of the Woods; the wolf, Gray-foot, or Gold-foot; the bear the Old Man, or Grandfather. The cap of a gnome confers invisibility, and causes one to behold invisible things. Every toad that is baptized must be clad in red or black velvet, a bell on its neck, a bell on its feet. The godfather holds its head, the godmother its hinder parts. ’Tis the demon Sidragasum who hath the power to make wenches dance stark naked.”

“By the mass!” interrupted Jehan, “I should like to be the demon Sidragasum.”

Meanwhile, the vagabonds continued to arm themselves and whisper at the other end of the dram-shop.

“That poor Esmeralda!” said a Bohemian. “She is our sister. She must be taken away from there.”

“Is she still at Notre-Dame?” went on a merchant with the appearance of a Jew.

“Yes, pardieu!”

“Well! comrades!” exclaimed the merchant, “to Notre-Dame! So much the better, since there are in the chapel of Saints Féréol and Ferrution two statues, the one of John the Baptist, the other of Saint-Antoine, of solid gold, weighing together seven marks of gold and fifteen estellins; and the pedestals are of silver-gilt, of seventeen marks, five ounces. I know that; I am a goldsmith.”

Here they served Jehan with his supper. As he threw himself back on the bosom of the wench beside him, he exclaimed, —

“By Saint Voult-de-Lucques, whom people call Saint Goguelu, I am perfectly happy. I have before me a fool who gazes at me with the smooth face of an archduke. Here is one on my left whose teeth are so long that they hide his chin. And then, I am like the Marshal de Gié at the siege of Pontoise, I have my right resting on a hillock. *Ventre-Mahom*! Comrade! you have the air of a merchant of tennis-balls; and you come and sit yourself beside me! I am a nobleman, my friend! Trade is incompatible with nobility. Get out of that! Hola hé! You others, don’t fight! What, Baptiste

Croque-Oison, you who have such a fine nose are going to risk it against the big fists of that lout! Fool! *Non cuiquam datum est habere nasum* — not every one is favored with a nose. You are really divine, Jacqueline Ronge-Oreille! ’tis a pity that you have no hair! Holà! my name is Jehan Frollo, and my brother is an archdeacon. May the devil fly off with him! All that I tell you is the truth. In turning vagabond, I have gladly renounced the half of a house situated in paradise, which my brother had promised me. *Dimidiam domum in paradiso*. I quote the text. I have a fief in the Rue Tirechappe, and all the women are in love with me, as true as Saint Eloy was an excellent goldsmith, and that the five trades of the good city of Paris are the tanners, the tawers, the makers of cross-belts, the purse-makers, and the sweaters, and that Saint Laurent was burnt with eggshells. I swear to you, comrades.

“*Que je ne beuvrai de piment,*
*Devant un an, si je cy ment.**

* That I will drink no spiced and honeyed wine for a year,
if I am lying now.

“’Tis moonlight, my charmer; see yonder through the window how the wind is tearing the clouds to tatters! Even thus will I do to your gorget. — Wenches, wipe the children’s noses and snuff the candles. — Christ and Mahom! What am I eating here, Jupiter? Ohé! innkeeper! the hair which is not on the heads of your hussies one finds in your omelettes. Old woman! I like bald omelettes. May the devil confound you! — A fine hostelry of Beelzebub, where the hussies comb their heads with the forks!

“Et je n’ai moi,
Par la sang-Dieu!
Ni foi, ni loi,
Ni feu, ni lieu,
Ni roi,
Ni Dieu.”*

* And by the blood of God, I have neither faith nor law, nor
fire nor dwelling-place, nor king nor God.

In the meantime, Clopin Trouillefou had finished the distribution of arms. He approached Gringoire, who appeared to be plunged in a profound revery, with his feet on an andiron.

“Friend Pierre,” said the King of Thunes, “what the devil are you thinking about?”

Gringoire turned to him with a melancholy smile.

"I love the fire, my dear lord. Not for the trivial reason that fire warms the feet or cooks our soup, but because it has sparks. Sometimes I pass whole hours in watching the sparks. I discover a thousand things in those stars which are sprinkled over the black background of the hearth. Those stars are also worlds."

"Thunder, if I understand you!" said the outcast. "Do you know what o'clock it is?"

"I do not know," replied Gringoire.

Clopin approached the Duke of Egypt.

"Comrade Mathias, the time we have chosen is not a good one. King Louis XI. is said to be in Paris."

"Another reason for snatching our sister from his claws," replied the old Bohemian.

"You speak like a man, Mathias," said the King of Thunes. "Moreover, we will act promptly. No resistance is to be feared in the church. The canons are hares, and we are in force. The people of the parliament will be well balked to-morrow when they come to seek her! Guts of the pope I don't want them to hang the pretty girl!"

Chopin quitted the dram-shop.

Meanwhile, Jehan was shouting in a hoarse voice:

"I eat, I drink, I am drunk, I am Jupiter! Eh! Pierre, the Slaughterer, if you look at me like that again, I'll fillip the dust off your nose for you."

Gringoire, torn from his meditations, began to watch the wild and noisy scene which surrounded him, muttering between his teeth: "*Luxuriosa res vinum et tumultuosa ebrietas*. Alas! what good reason I have not to drink, and how excellently spoke Saint-Benoit: '*Vinum apostatare facit etiam sapientes!*'"

At that moment, Clopin returned and shouted in a voice of thunder: "Midnight!"

At this word, which produced the effect of the call to boot and saddle on a regiment at a halt, all the outcasts, men, women, children, rushed in a mass from the tavern, with great noise of arms and old iron implements.

The moon was obscured.

The Cour des Miracles was entirely dark. There was not a single light. One could make out there a throng of men and women conversing in low tones. They could be heard buzzing, and a gleam of all sorts of weapons was visible in the darkness. Clopin mounted a large stone.

“To your ranks, Argot!”* he cried. “Fall into line, Egypt! Form ranks, Galilee!”

* Men of the brotherhood of slang: thieves.

A movement began in the darkness. The immense multitude appeared to form in a column. After a few minutes, the King of Thunes raised his voice once more, —

“Now, silence to march through Paris! The password is, ‘Little sword in pocket!’ The torches will not be lighted till we reach Notre-Dame! Forward, march!”

Ten minutes later, the cavaliers of the watch fled in terror before a long procession of black and silent men which was descending towards the Pont an Change, through the tortuous streets which pierce the close-built neighborhood of the markets in every direction.

CHAPTER IV. AN AWKWARD FRIEND.

That night, Quasimodo did not sleep. He had just made his last round of the church. He had not noticed, that at the moment when he was closing the doors, the archdeacon had passed close to him and betrayed some displeasure on seeing him bolting and barring with care the enormous iron locks which gave to their large leaves the solidity of a wall. Dom Claude's air was even more preoccupied than usual. Moreover, since the nocturnal adventure in the cell, he had constantly abused Quasimodo, but in vain did he ill treat, and even beat him occasionally, nothing disturbed the submission, patience, the devoted resignation of the faithful bellringer. He endured everything on the part of the archdeacon, insults, threats, blows, without murmuring a complaint. At the most, he gazed uneasily after Dom Claude when the latter ascended the staircase of the tower; but the archdeacon had abstained from presenting himself again before the gypsy's eyes.

On that night, accordingly, Quasimodo, after having cast a glance at his poor bells which he so neglected now, Jacqueline, Marie, and Thibauld, mounted to the summit of the Northern tower, and there setting his dark lanturn, well closed, upon the leads, he began to gaze at Paris. The night, as we have already said, was very dark. Paris which, so to speak was not lighted at that epoch, presented to the eye a confused collection of black masses, cut here and there by the whitish curve of the Seine. Quasimodo no longer saw any light with the exception of one window in a distant edifice, whose vague and sombre profile was outlined well above the roofs, in the direction of the Porte Sainte-Antoine. There also, there was some one awake.

As the only eye of the bellringer peered into that horizon of mist and night, he felt within him an inexpressible uneasiness. For several days he had been upon his guard. He had perceived men of sinister mien, who never took their eyes from the young girl's asylum, prowling constantly about the church. He fancied that some plot might be in process of formation against the unhappy refugee. He imagined that there existed a popular hatred against her, as against himself, and that it was very possible that something might happen soon. Hence he remained upon his tower on the watch, "dreaming in his dream-place," as Rabelais says, with his eye directed alternately on the cell and on Paris, keeping faithful guard, like a good dog, with a thousand suspicions in his mind.

All at once, while he was scrutinizing the great city with that eye which nature, by a sort of compensation, had made so piercing that it could almost supply the other organs which Quasimodo lacked, it seemed to him that there was something singular about the Quay de la Vieille-Pelleterie, that there was a movement at that point, that the line of the parapet, standing out blackly against the whiteness of the water was not straight and tranquil, like that of the other quays, but that it undulated to the eye, like the waves of a river, or like the heads of a crowd in motion.

This struck him as strange. He redoubled his attention. The movement seemed to be advancing towards the City. There was no light. It lasted for some time on the quay; then it gradually ceased, as though that which was passing were entering the interior of the island; then it stopped altogether, and the line of the quay became straight and motionless again.

At the moment when Quasimodo was lost in conjectures, it seemed to him that the movement had re-appeared in the Rue du Parvis, which is prolonged into the city perpendicularly to the façade of Notre-Dame. At length, dense as was the darkness, he beheld the head of a column debouch from that street, and in an instant a crowd — of which nothing could be distinguished in the gloom except that it was a crowd — spread over the Place.

This spectacle had a terror of its own. It is probable that this singular procession, which seemed so desirous of concealing itself under profound darkness, maintained a silence no less profound. Nevertheless, some noise must have escaped it, were it only a trampling. But this noise did not even reach our deaf man, and this great multitude, of which he saw hardly anything, and of which he heard nothing, though it was marching and moving so near him, produced upon him the effect of a rabble of dead men, mute, impalpable, lost in a smoke. It seemed to him, that he beheld advancing towards him a fog of men, and that he saw shadows moving in the shadow.

Then his fears returned to him, the idea of an attempt against the gypsy presented itself once more to his mind. He was conscious, in a confused way, that a violent crisis was approaching. At that critical moment he took counsel with himself, with better and prompter reasoning than one would have expected from so badly organized a brain. Ought he to awaken the gypsy? to make her escape? Whither? The streets were invested, the church backed on the river. No boat, no issue! — There was but one thing to be done; to allow himself to be killed on the threshold of Notre-Dame, to resist at least until succor arrived, if it should arrive, and not to trouble la Esmeralda's sleep. This resolution once taken, he set to examining the enemy with more tranquillity.

The throng seemed to increase every moment in the church square. Only, he presumed that it must be making very little noise, since the windows on the Place remained closed. All at once, a flame flashed up, and in an instant seven or eight lighted torches passed over the heads of the crowd, shaking their tufts of flame in the deep shade. Quasimodo then beheld distinctly surging in the Parvis a frightful herd of men and women in rags, armed with scythes, pikes, billhooks and partisans, whose thousand points glittered. Here and there black pitchforks formed horns to the hideous faces. He vaguely recalled this populace, and thought that he recognized all the heads who had saluted him as Pope of the Fools some months previously. One man who held a torch in one hand and a club in the other, mounted a stone post and seemed to be haranguing them. At the same time the strange army executed several evolutions, as though it were taking up its post around the church. Quasimodo picked up his lantern and descended to the platform between the towers, in order to get a nearer view, and to spy out a means of defence.

Clopin Trouillefou, on arriving in front of the lofty portal of Notre-Dame had, in fact, ranged his troops in order of battle. Although he expected no resistance, he wished, like a prudent general, to preserve an order which would permit him to face, at need, a sudden attack of the watch or the police. He had accordingly stationed his brigade in such a manner that, viewed from above and from a distance, one would have pronounced it the Roman triangle of the battle of Ecnomus, the boar's head of Alexander or the famous wedge of Gustavus Adolphus. The base of this triangle rested on the back of the Place in such a manner as to bar the entrance of the Rue du Parvis; one of its sides faced Hôtel-Dieu, the other the Rue Saint-Pierre-aux-Boeufs. Clopin Trouillefou had placed himself at the apex with the Duke of Egypt, our friend Jehan, and the most daring of the scavengers.

An enterprise like that which the vagabonds were now undertaking against Notre-Dame was not a very rare thing in the cities of the Middle Ages. What we now call the "police" did not exist then. In populous cities, especially in capitals, there existed no single, central, regulating power. Feudalism had constructed these great communities in a singular manner. A city was an assembly of a thousand seigneuries, which divided it into compartments of all shapes and sizes. Hence, a thousand conflicting establishments of police; that is to say, no police at all. In Paris, for example, independently of the hundred and forty-one lords who laid claim to a manor, there were five and twenty who laid claim to a manor and to administering justice, from the Bishop of Paris, who had five hundred streets, to the Prior of Notre-Dame des Champs, who had four. All these feudal justices recognized the suzerain authority of the king only in name. All possessed the right of control over the roads. All were at home. Louis XI., that indefatigable worker, who so largely began the demolition of the feudal edifice, continued by Richelieu and Louis XIV. for the profit of royalty, and finished by Mirabeau for the benefit of the people, — Louis XI. had certainly made an effort to break this network of seignories which covered Paris, by throwing violently across them all two or three troops of general police. Thus, in 1465, an order to the inhabitants to light candles in their windows at nightfall, and to shut up their dogs under penalty of death; in the same year, an order to close the streets in the evening with iron chains, and a prohibition to wear daggers or weapons of offence in the streets at night. But in a very short time, all these efforts at communal legislation fell into abeyance. The bourgeois permitted the wind to blow out their candles in the windows, and their dogs to stray; the iron chains were stretched only in a state of siege; the prohibition to wear daggers wrought no other changes than from the name of the Rue Coupe-Gueule to the name of the Rue-Coupe-Gorge* which is an evident progress. The old scaffolding of feudal jurisdictions remained standing; an immense aggregation of bailiwicks and seignories crossing each other all over the city, interfering with each other, entangled in one another, enmeshing each other, trespassing on each other; a useless thicket of watches, sub-watches and counter-watches, over which, with armed force, passed brigandage, rapine, and sedition. Hence, in this disorder, deeds of violence on the part of the populace directed against a palace, a hotel, or house in the most thickly populated quarters, were not unheard-of occurrences. In the majority of such cases, the neighbors did not meddle with the matter unless the pillaging extended to themselves. They stopped up their ears to the musket shots, closed their shutters, barricaded their doors, allowed the matter to be concluded with or without the watch, and the next day it was said in Paris, “Etienne Barbette was broken open last night. The Marshal de Clermont was seized last night, etc.” Hence, not only the royal habitations, the Louvre, the Palace, the Bastille, the Tournelles, but simply seignorial residences, the Petit-Bourbon, the Hôtel de Sens, the Hôtel d’ Angoulême, etc., had battlements on their walls, and machicolations over their doors. Churches were guarded by their sanctity. Some, among the number Notre-Dame, were fortified. The Abbey of Saint-German-des-Pres was castellated like a baronial mansion, and more brass expended about it in bombards than in bells. Its fortress was still to be seen in 1610. To-day, barely its church remains.

* Cut-throat. Coupe-gueule being the vulgar word for cut-weazand.

Let us return to Notre-Dame.

When the first arrangements were completed, and we must say, to the honor of vagabond discipline, that Clopin’s orders were executed in silence, and with admirable precision, the worthy chief of the band, mounted on the parapet of the church square, and raised his hoarse and surly voice, turning towards Notre-Dame, and brandishing his torch whose light, tossed by the wind, and veiled every moment by its own smoke, made the reddish façade of the church appear and disappear before the eye.

“To you, Louis de Beaumont, bishop of Paris, counsellor in the Court of Parliament, I, Clopin Trouillefou, king of Thunes, grand Coësre, prince of Argot, bishop of fools, I say: Our sister, falsely condemned for magic, hath taken refuge in your church, you owe her asylum and safety. Now the Court of Parliament wishes to seize her once more there, and you consent to it; so that she would be hanged to-morrow in the Grève, if God and the outcasts were not here. If your church is sacred, so is our sister; if our sister is not sacred, neither is your church. That is why we call upon you to return the girl if you wish to save your church, or we will take possession of the girl again and pillage the church, which will be a good thing. In token of which I here plant my banner, and may God preserve you, bishop of Paris.”

Quasimodo could not, unfortunately, hear these words uttered with a sort of sombre and savage majesty. A vagabond presented his banner to Clopin, who planted it solemnly between two paving-stones. It was a pitchfork from whose points hung a bleeding quarter of carrion meat.

That done, the King of Thunes turned round and cast his eyes over his army, a fierce multitude whose glances flashed almost equally with their pikes. After a momentary pause,— “Forward, my Sons!” he cried; “to work, locksmiths!”

Thirty bold men, square shouldered, and with pick-lock faces, stepped from the ranks, with hammers, pincers, and bars of iron on their shoulders. They betook themselves to the principal door of the church, ascended the steps, and were soon to be seen squatting under the arch, working at the door with pincers and levers; a throng of vagabonds followed them to help or look on. The eleven steps before the portal were covered with them.

But the door stood firm. “The devil! ’tis hard and obstinate!” said one. “It is old, and its gristles have become bony,” said another. “Courage, comrades!” resumed Clopin. “I wager my head against a dipper that you will have opened the door, rescued the girl, and despoiled the chief altar before a single beadle is awake. Stay! I think I hear the lock breaking up.”

Clopin was interrupted by a frightful uproar which re-sounded behind him at that moment. He wheeled round. An enormous beam had just fallen from above; it had crushed a dozen vagabonds on the pavement with the sound of a cannon, breaking in addition, legs here and there in the crowd of beggars, who sprang aside with cries of terror. In a twinkling, the narrow precincts of the church parvis were cleared. The locksmiths, although protected by the deep vaults of the portal, abandoned the door and Clopin himself retired to a respectful distance from the church.

“I had a narrow escape!” cried Jehan. “I felt the wind, of it, *tête-de-boeuf*! but Pierre the Slaughterer is slaughtered!”

It is impossible to describe the astonishment mingled with fright which fell upon the ruffians in company with this beam.

They remained for several minutes with their eyes in the air, more dismayed by that piece of wood than by the king’s twenty thousand archers.

“Satan!” muttered the Duke of Egypt, “this smacks of magic!”

“’Tis the moon which threw this log at us,” said Andry the Red.

“Call the moon the friend of the Virgin, after that!” went on Francois Chanteprune.

“A thousand popes!” exclaimed Clopin, “you are all fools!” But he did not know how to explain the fall of the beam.

Meanwhile, nothing could be distinguished on the façade, to whose summit the light of the torches did not reach. The heavy beam lay in the middle of the enclosure, and groans were heard from the poor wretches who had received its first shock, and who had been almost cut in twain, on the angle of the stone steps.

The King of Thunes, his first amazement passed, finally found an explanation which appeared plausible to his companions.

“Throat of God! are the canons defending themselves? To the sack, then! to the sack!”

“To the sack!” repeated the rabble, with a furious hurrah. A discharge of crossbows and hackbuts against the front of the church followed.

At this detonation, the peaceable inhabitants of the surrounding houses woke up; many windows were seen to open, and nightcaps and hands holding candles appeared at the casements.

“Fire at the windows,” shouted Clopin. The windows were immediately closed, and the poor bourgeois, who had hardly had time to cast a frightened glance on this scene of gleams and tumult, returned, perspiring with fear to their wives, asking themselves whether the witches’ sabbath was now being held in the parvis of Notre-Dame, or whether there was an assault of Burgundians, as in ‘64. Then the husbands thought of theft; the wives, of rape; and all trembled.

“To the sack!” repeated the thieves’ crew; but they dared not approach. They stared at the beam, they stared at the church. The beam did not stir, the edifice preserved its calm and deserted air; but something chilled the outcasts.

“To work, locksmiths!” shouted Trouillefou. “Let the door be forced!”

No one took a step.

“Beard and belly!” said Clopin, “here be men afraid of a beam.”

An old locksmith addressed him —

“Captain, ’tis not the beam which bothers us, ’tis the door, which is all covered with iron bars. Our pincers are powerless against it.”

“What more do you want to break it in?” demanded Clopin.

“Ah! we ought to have a battering ram.”

The King of Thunes ran boldly to the formidable beam, and placed his foot upon it: “Here is one!” he exclaimed; “’tis the canons who send it to you.” And, making a mocking salute in the direction of the church, “Thanks, canons!”

This piece of bravado produced its effects, — the spell of the beam was broken. The vagabonds recovered their courage; soon the heavy joist, raised like a feather by two hundred vigorous arms, was flung with fury against the great door which they had tried to batter down. At the sight of that long beam, in the half-light which the infrequent torches of the brigands spread over the Place, thus borne by that crowd of men who dashed it at a run against the church, one would have thought that he beheld a monstrous beast with a thousand feet attacking with lowered head the giant of stone.

At the shock of the beam, the half metallic door sounded like an immense drum; it was not burst in, but the whole cathedral trembled, and the deepest cavities of the edifice were heard to echo.

At the same moment, a shower of large stones began to fall from the top of the façade on the assailants.

“The devil!” cried Jehan, “are the towers shaking their balustrades down on our heads?”

But the impulse had been given, the King of Thunes had set the example. Evidently, the bishop was defending himself, and they only battered the door with the more rage, in spite of the stones which cracked skulls right and left.

It was remarkable that all these stones fell one by one; but they followed each other closely. The thieves always felt two at a time, one on their legs and one on their heads. There were few which did not deal their blow, and a large layer of dead and wounded lay bleeding and panting beneath the feet of the assailants who, now grown furious, replaced each other without intermission. The long beam continued to belabor the door, at regular intervals, like the clapper of a bell, the stones to rain down, the door to groan.

The reader has no doubt divined that this unexpected resistance which had exasperated the outcasts came from Quasimodo.

Chance had, unfortunately, favored the brave deaf man.

When he had descended to the platform between the towers, his ideas were all in confusion. He had run up and down along the gallery for several minutes like a madman, surveying from above, the compact mass of vagabonds ready to hurl itself on the church, demanding the safety of the gypsy from the devil or from God. The thought had occurred to him of ascending to the southern belfry and sounding the alarm, but before he could have set the bell in motion, before Marie’s voice could have uttered a single clamor, was there not time to burst in the door of the church ten times over? It was precisely the moment when the locksmiths were advancing upon it with their tools. What was to be done?

All at once, he remembered that some masons had been at work all day repairing the wall, the timber-work, and the roof of the south tower. This was a flash of light. The wall was of stone, the roof of lead, the timber-work of wood. (That prodigious timber-work, so dense that it was called “the forest.”)

Quasimodo hastened to that tower. The lower chambers were, in fact, full of materials. There were piles of rough blocks of stone, sheets of lead in rolls, bundles of laths, heavy beams already notched with the saw, heaps of plaster.

Time was pressing, The pikes and hammers were at work below. With a strength which the sense of danger increased tenfold, he seized one of the beams — the longest and heaviest; he pushed it out through a loophole, then, grasping it again outside of the tower, he made it slide along the angle of the balustrade which surrounds the platform, and let it fly into the abyss. The enormous timber, during that fall of a hundred and sixty feet, scraping the wall, breaking the carvings, turned many times on its centre, like the arm of a windmill flying off alone through space. At last it reached the ground, the horrible cry arose, and the black beam, as it rebounded from the pavement, resembled a serpent leaping.

Quasimodo beheld the outcasts scatter at the fall of the beam, like ashes at the breath of a child. He took advantage of their fright, and while they were fixing a superstitious glance on the club which had fallen from heaven, and while they were putting out the eyes of the stone saints on the front with a discharge of arrows and buckshot, Quasimodo was silently piling up plaster, stones, and rough blocks of stone, even the sacks of tools belonging to the masons, on the edge of the balustrade from which the beam had already been hurled.

Thus, as soon as they began to batter the grand door, the shower of rough blocks of stone began to fall, and it seemed to them that the church itself was being demolished over their heads.

Any one who could have beheld Quasimodo at that moment would have been frightened. Independently of the projectiles which he had piled upon the balustrade, he had collected a heap of stones on the platform itself. As fast as the blocks on the exterior edge were exhausted, he drew on the heap. Then he stooped and rose, stooped and rose again with incredible activity. His huge gnome’s head bent over the balustrade, then an enormous stone fell, then another, then another. From time to time, he followed a fine stone with his eye, and when it did good execution, he said, “Hum!”

Meanwhile, the beggars did not grow discouraged. The thick door on which they were venting their fury had already trembled more than twenty times beneath the weight of their oaken battering-ram, multiplied by the strength of a hundred men. The panels cracked, the carved work flew into splinters, the hinges, at every blow, leaped from their pins, the planks yawned, the wood crumbled to powder, ground between the iron sheathing. Fortunately for Quasimodo, there was more iron than wood.

Nevertheless, he felt that the great door was yielding. Although he did not hear it, every blow of the ram reverberated simultaneously in the vaults of the church and within it. From above he beheld the vagabonds, filled with triumph and rage, shaking their fists at the gloomy façade; and both on the gypsy’s account and his own he envied the wings of the owls which flitted away above his head in flocks.

His shower of stone blocks was not sufficient to repel the assailants.

At this moment of anguish, he noticed, a little lower down than the balustrade whence he was crushing the thieves, two long stone gutters which discharged immediately over the great door; the internal orifice of these gutters terminated on the pavement of the platform. An idea occurred to him; he ran in search of a fagot in his bellringer’s den, placed on this fagot a great many bundles of laths, and many rolls of lead, munitions which he had not employed so far, and having arranged this pile in front of the hole to the two gutters, he set it on fire with his lantern.

During this time, since the stones no longer fell, the outcasts ceased to gaze into the air. The bandits, panting like a pack of hounds who are forcing a boar into his lair, pressed tumultuously round the great door, all disfigured by the battering ram, but still standing. They were waiting with a quiver for the great blow which should split it open. They vied with each other in pressing as close as possible, in order to dash among the first, when it should open, into that opulent cathedral, a vast reservoir where the wealth of three centuries had been piled up. They reminded each other with roars of exultation and greedy lust, of the beautiful silver crosses, the fine copes of brocade, the beautiful tombs of silver gilt, the great magnificences of the choir, the dazzling festivals, the Christmasses sparkling with torches, the Easters sparkling with sunshine, — all those splendid solemneties wherein chandeliers, ciboriums, tabernacles, and reliquaries, studded the altars with a crust of gold and diamonds. Certainly, at that fine moment, thieves and pseudo sufferers, doctors in stealing, and vagabonds, were thinking much less of delivering the gypsy than of pillaging Notre-Dame. We could even easily believe that for a goodly number among them la Esmeralda was only a pretext, if thieves needed pretexts.

All at once, at the moment when they were grouping themselves round the ram for a last effort, each one holding his breath and stiffening his muscles in order to communicate all his force to the decisive blow, a howl more frightful still than that which had burst forth and expired beneath the beam, rose among them. Those who did not cry out, those who were still alive, looked. Two streams of melted lead were falling from the summit of the edifice into the thickest of the rabble. That sea of men had just sunk down beneath the boiling metal, which had made, at the two points where it fell, two black and smoking holes in the crowd, such as hot water would make in snow. Dying men, half consumed and groaning with anguish, could be seen writhing there. Around these two principal streams there were drops of that horrible rain, which scattered over the assailants and entered their skulls like gimlets of fire. It was a heavy fire which overwhelmed these wretches with a thousand hailstones.

The outcry was heartrending. They fled pell-mell, hurling the beam upon the bodies, the boldest as well as the most timid, and the parvis was cleared a second time.

All eyes were raised to the top of the church. They beheld there an extraordinary sight. On the crest of the highest gallery, higher than the central rose window, there was a great flame rising between the two towers with whirlwinds of sparks, a vast, disordered, and furious flame, a tongue of which was borne into the smoke by the wind, from time to time. Below that fire, below the gloomy balustrade with its trefoils showing darkly against its glare, two spouts with monster throats were vomiting forth unceasingly that burning rain, whose silvery stream stood out against the shadows of the lower façade. As they approached the earth, these two jets of liquid lead spread out in sheaves, like water springing from the thousand holes of a watering-pot. Above the flame, the enormous towers, two sides of each of which were visible in sharp outline, the one wholly black, the other wholly red, seemed still more vast with all the immensity of the shadow which they cast even to the sky.

Their innumerable sculptures of demons and dragons assumed a lugubrious aspect. The restless light of the flame made them move to the eye. There were griffins which had the air of laughing, gargoyles which one fancied one heard yelping, salamanders which puffed at the fire, tarasques* which sneezed in the smoke. And among the monsters thus roused from their sleep of stone by this flame, by this noise, there was one who walked about, and who was seen, from time to time, to pass across the glowing face of the pile, like a bat in front of a candle.

* The representation of a monstrous animal solemnly drawn about in Tarascon and other French towns.

Without doubt, this strange beacon light would awaken far away, the woodcutter of the hills of Bicêtre, terrified to behold the gigantic shadow of the towers of Notre-Dame quivering over his heaths.

A terrified silence ensued among the outcasts, during which nothing was heard, but the cries of alarm of the canons shut up in their cloister, and more uneasy than horses in a burning stable, the furtive sound of windows hastily opened and still more hastily closed, the internal hurly-burly of the houses and of the Hôtel-Dieu, the wind in the flame, the last death-rattle of the dying, and the continued crackling of the rain of lead upon the pavement.

In the meanwhile, the principal vagabonds had retired beneath the porch of the Gondelaurier mansion, and were holding a council of war.

The Duke of Egypt, seated on a stone post, contemplated the phantasmagorical bonfire, glowing at a height of two hundred feet in the air, with religious terror. Clopin Trouillefou bit his huge fists with rage.

“Impossible to get in!” he muttered between his teeth.

“An old, enchanted church!” grumbled the aged Bohemian, Mathias Hungadi Spicali.

“By the Pope’s whiskers!” went on a sham soldier, who had once been in service, “here are church gutters spitting melted lead at you better than the machicolations of Lectoure.”

“Do you see that demon passing and repassing in front of the fire?” exclaimed the Duke of Egypt.

“Pardieu, ’tis that damned bellringer, ’tis Quasimodo,” said Clopin.

The Bohemian tossed his head. “I tell you, that ’tis the spirit Sabnac, the grand marquis, the demon of fortifications. He has the form of an armed soldier, the head of a lion. Sometimes he rides a hideous horse. He changes men into stones, of which he builds towers. He commands fifty legions ’Tis he indeed; I recognize him. Sometimes he is clad in a handsome golden robe, figured after the Turkish fashion.”

“Where is Bellevigne de l’Etoile?” demanded Clopin.

“He is dead.”

Andry the Red laughed in an idiotic way: “Notre-Dame is making work for the hospital,” said he.

“Is there, then, no way of forcing this door,” exclaimed the King of Thunes, stamping his foot.

The Duke of Egypt pointed sadly to the two streams of boiling lead which did not cease to streak the black facade, like two long distaffs of phosphorus.

“Churches have been known to defend themselves thus all by themselves,” he remarked with a sigh. “Saint-Sophia at Constantinople, forty years ago, hurled to the earth three times in succession, the crescent of Mahom, by shaking her domes, which are her heads. Guillaume de Paris, who built this one was a magician.”

“Must we then retreat in pitiful fashion, like highwaymen?” said Clopin. “Must we leave our sister here, whom those hooded wolves will hang to-morrow.”

“And the sacristy, where there are wagon-loads of gold!” added a vagabond, whose name, we regret to say, we do not know.

“Beard of Mahom!” cried Trouillefou.

“Let us make another trial,” resumed the vagabond.

Mathias Hungadi shook his head.

“We shall never get in by the door. We must find the defect in the armor of the old fairy; a hole, a false postern, some joint or other.”

“Who will go with me?” said Clopin. “I shall go at it again. By the way, where is the little scholar Jehan, who is so encased in iron?”

“He is dead, no doubt,” some one replied; “we no longer hear his laugh.”

The King of Thunes frowned: “So much the worse. There was a brave heart under that ironmongery. And Master Pierre Gringoire?”

“Captain Clopin,” said Andry the Red, “he slipped away before we reached the Pont-aux-Changeurs.”

Clopin stamped his foot. “Gueule-Dieu! ’twas he who pushed us on hither, and he has deserted us in the very middle of the job! Cowardly chatterer, with a slipper for a helmet!”

"Captain Clopin," said Andry the Red, who was gazing down Rue du Parvis, "yonder is the little scholar."

"Praised be Pluto!" said Clopin. "But what the devil is he dragging after him?"

It was, in fact, Jehan, who was running as fast as his heavy outfit of a Paladin, and a long ladder which trailed on the pavement, would permit, more breathless than an ant harnessed to a blade of grass twenty times longer than itself.

"Victory! *Te Deum*!" cried the scholar. "Here is the ladder of the longshoremen of Port Saint-Landry."

Clopin approached him.

"Child, what do you mean to do, *corne-dieu*! with this ladder?"

"I have it," replied Jehan, panting. "I knew where it was under the shed of the lieutenant's house. There's a wench there whom I know, who thinks me as handsome as Cupido. I made use of her to get the ladder, and I have the ladder, *Pasque-Mahom*! The poor girl came to open the door to me in her shift."

"Yes," said Clopin, "but what are you going to do with that ladder?"

Jehan gazed at him with a malicious, knowing look, and cracked his fingers like castanets. At that moment he was sublime. On his head he wore one of those overloaded helmets of the fifteenth century, which frightened the enemy with their fanciful crests. His bristled with ten iron beaks, so that Jehan could have disputed with Nestor's Homeric vessel the redoubtable title of *dexeubolos*.

"What do I mean to do with it, august king of Thunes? Do you see that row of statues which have such idiotic expressions, yonder, above the three portals?"

"Yes. Well?"

"'Tis the gallery of the kings of France."

"What is that to me?" said Clopin.

"Wait! At the end of that gallery there is a door which is never fastened otherwise than with a latch, and with this ladder I ascend, and I am in the church."

"Child let me be the first to ascend."

"No, comrade, the ladder is mine. Come, you shall be the second."

"May Beelzebub strangle you!" said surly Clopin, "I won't be second to anybody."

“Then find a ladder, Clopin!”

Jehan set out on a run across the Place, dragging his ladder and shouting: “Follow me, lads!”

In an instant the ladder was raised, and propped against the balustrade of the lower gallery, above one of the lateral doors. The throng of vagabonds, uttering loud acclamations, crowded to its foot to ascend. But Jehan maintained his right, and was the first to set foot on the rungs. The passage was tolerably long. The gallery of the kings of France is to-day about sixty feet above the pavement. The eleven steps of the flight before the door, made it still higher. Jehan mounted slowly, a good deal incommoded by his heavy armor, holding his crossbow in one hand, and clinging to a rung with the other. When he reached the middle of the ladder, he cast a melancholy glance at the poor dead outcasts, with which the steps were strewn. “Alas!” said he, “here is a heap of bodies worthy of the fifth book of the Iliad!” Then he continued his ascent. The vagabonds followed him. There was one on every rung. At the sight of this line of cuirassed backs, undulating as they rose through the gloom, one would have pronounced it a serpent with steel scales, which was raising itself erect in front of the church. Jehan who formed the head, and who was whistling, completed the illusion.

The scholar finally reached the balcony of the gallery, and climbed over it nimbly, to the applause of the whole vagabond tribe. Thus master of the citadel, he uttered a shout of joy, and suddenly halted, petrified. He had just caught sight of Quasimodo concealed in the dark, with flashing eye, behind one of the statues of the kings.

Before a second assailant could gain a foothold on the gallery, the formidable hunchback leaped to the head of the ladder, without uttering a word, seized the ends of the two uprights with his powerful hands, raised them, pushed them out from the wall, balanced the long and pliant ladder, loaded with vagabonds from top to bottom for a moment, in the midst of shrieks of anguish, then suddenly, with superhuman force, hurled this cluster of men backward into the Place. There was a moment when even the most resolute trembled. The ladder, launched backwards, remained erect and standing for an instant, and seemed to hesitate, then wavered, then suddenly, describing a frightful arc of a circle eighty feet in radius, crashed upon the pavement with its load of ruffians, more rapidly than a drawbridge when its chains break. There arose an immense imprecation, then all was still, and a few mutilated wretches were seen, crawling over the heap of dead.

A sound of wrath and grief followed the first cries of triumph among the besiegers. Quasimodo, impassive, with both elbows propped on the balustrade, looked on. He had the air of an old, bushy-headed king at his window.

As for Jehan Frollo, he was in a critical position. He found himself in the gallery with the formidable bellringer, alone, separated from his companions by a vertical wall eighty feet high. While Quasimodo was dealing with the ladder, the scholar had run to the postern which he believed to be open. It was not. The deaf man had closed it behind him when he entered the gallery. Jehan had then concealed himself behind a stone king, not daring to breathe, and fixing upon the monstrous hunchback a frightened gaze, like the man, who, when courting the wife of the guardian of a menagerie, went one evening to a love rendezvous, mistook the wall which he was to climb, and suddenly found himself face to face with a white bear.

For the first few moments, the deaf man paid no heed to him; but at last he turned his head, and suddenly straightened up. He had just caught sight of the scholar.

Jehan prepared himself for a rough shock, but the deaf man remained motionless; only he had turned towards the scholar and was looking at him.

“Ho ho!” said Jehan, “what do you mean by staring at me with that solitary and melancholy eye?”

As he spoke thus, the young scamp stealthily adjusted his crossbow.

“Quasimodo!” he cried, “I am going to change your surname: you shall be called the blind man.”

The shot sped. The feathered vireton* whizzed and entered the hunchback’s left arm. Quasimodo appeared no more moved by it than by a scratch to King Pharamond. He laid his hand on the arrow, tore it from his arm, and tranquilly broke it across his big knee; then he let the two pieces drop on the floor, rather than threw them down. But Jehan had no opportunity to fire a second time. The arrow broken, Quasimodo breathing heavily, bounded like a grasshopper, and he fell upon the scholar, whose armor was flattened against the wall by the blow.

* An arrow with a pyramidal head of iron and copper spiral wings by which a rotatory motion was communicated.

Then in that gloom, wherein wavered the light of the torches, a terrible thing was seen.

Quasimodo had grasped with his left hand the two arms of Jehan, who did not offer any resistance, so thoroughly did he feel that he was lost. With his right hand, the deaf man detached one by one, in silence, with sinister slowness, all the pieces of his armor, the sword, the daggers, the helmet, the cuirass, the leg pieces. One would have said that it was a monkey taking the shell from a nut. Quasimodo flung the scholar's iron shell at his feet, piece by piece. When the scholar beheld himself disarmed, stripped, weak, and naked in those terrible hands, he made no attempt to speak to the deaf man, but began to laugh audaciously in his face, and to sing with his intrepid heedlessness of a child of sixteen, the then popular ditty: —

"Elle est bien habillée,
La ville de Cambrai;
*Marafin l'a pillée..."**

* The city of Cambrai is well dressed. Marafin plundered it.

He did not finish. Quasimodo was seen on the parapet of the gallery, holding the scholar by the feet with one hand and whirling him over the abyss like a sling; then a sound like that of a bony structure in contact with a wall was heard, and something was seen to fall which halted a third of the way down in its fall, on a projection in the architecture. It was a dead body which remained hanging there, bent double, its loins broken, its skull empty.

A cry of horror rose among the vagabonds.

"Vengeance!" shouted Clopin. "To the sack!" replied the multitude. "Assault! assault!"

There came a tremendous howl, in which were mingled all tongues, all dialects, all accents. The death of the poor scholar imparted a furious ardor to that crowd. It was seized with shame, and the wrath of having been held so long in check before a church by a hunchback. Rage found ladders, multiplied the torches, and, at the expiration of a few minutes, Quasimodo, in despair, beheld that terrible ant heap mount on all sides to the assault of Notre-Dame. Those who had no ladders had knotted ropes; those who had no ropes climbed by the projections of the carvings. They hung from each other's rags. There were no means of resisting that rising tide of frightful faces; rage made these fierce countenances ruddy; their clayey brows were dripping with sweat; their eyes darted lightnings; all these grimaces, all these horrors laid siege to Quasimodo. One would have said that some other church had despatched to the assault of Notre-Dame its gorgons, its dogs, its drées, its demons, its most fantastic sculptures. It was like a layer of living monsters on the stone monsters of the façade.

Meanwhile, the Place was studded with a thousand torches. This scene of confusion, till now hid in darkness, was suddenly flooded with light. The parvis was resplendent, and cast a radiance on the sky; the bonfire lighted on the lofty platform was still burning, and illuminated the city far away. The enormous silhouette of the two towers, projected afar on the roofs of Paris, and formed a large notch of black in this light. The city seemed to be aroused. Alarm bells wailed in the distance. The vagabonds howled, panted, swore, climbed; and Quasimodo, powerless against so many enemies, shuddering for the gypsy, beholding the furious faces approaching ever nearer and nearer to his gallery, entreated heaven for a miracle, and wrung his arms in despair.

CHAPTER V. THE RETREAT IN WHICH MONSIEUR LOUIS OF FRANCE SAYS HIS PRAYERS.

The reader has not, perhaps, forgotten that one moment before catching sight of the nocturnal band of vagabonds, Quasimodo, as he inspected Paris from the heights of his bell tower, perceived only one light burning, which gleamed like a star from a window on the topmost story of a lofty edifice beside the Porte Saint-Antoine. This edifice was the Bastille. That star was the candle of Louis XI. King Louis XI. had, in fact, been two days in Paris. He was to take his departure on the next day but one for his citadel of Montilz-les-Tours. He made but seldom and brief appearance in his good city of Paris, since there he did not feel about him enough pitfalls, gibbets, and Scotch archers.

He had come, that day, to sleep at the Bastille. The great chamber five toises* square, which he had at the Louvre, with its huge chimney-piece loaded with twelve great beasts and thirteen great prophets, and his grand bed, eleven feet by twelve, pleased him but little. He felt himself lost amid all this grandeur. This good bourgeois king preferred the Bastille with a tiny chamber and couch. And then, the Bastille was stronger than the Louvre.

* An ancient long measure in France, containing six feet
and nearly five inches English measure.

This little chamber, which the king reserved for himself in the famous state prison, was also tolerably spacious and occupied the topmost story of a turret rising from the donjon keep. It was circular in form, carpeted with mats of shining straw, ceiled with beams, enriched with fleurs-de-lis of gilded metal with interjoists in color; wainscoated with rich woods sown with rosettes of white metal, and with others painted a fine, bright green, made of orpiment and fine indigo.

There was only one window, a long pointed casement, latticed with brass wire and bars of iron, further darkened by fine colored panes with the arms of the king and of the queen, each pane being worth two and twenty sols.

There was but one entrance, a modern door, with a fiat arch, garnished with a piece of tapestry on the inside, and on the outside by one of those porches of Irish wood, frail edifices of cabinet-work curiously wrought, numbers of which were still to be seen in old houses a hundred and fifty years ago. “Although they disfigure and embarrass the places,” says Sauvel in despair, “our old people are still unwilling to get rid of them, and keep them in spite of everybody.”

In this chamber, nothing was to be found of what furnishes ordinary apartments, neither benches, nor trestles, nor forms, nor common stools in the form of a chest, nor fine stools sustained by pillars and counter-pillars, at four sols a piece. Only one easy arm-chair, very magnificent, was to be seen; the wood was painted with roses on a red ground, the seat was of ruby Cordovan leather, ornamented with long silken fringes, and studded with a thousand golden nails. The loneliness of this chair made it apparent that only one person had a right to sit down in this apartment. Beside the chair, and quite close to the window, there was a table covered with a cloth with a pattern of birds. On this table stood an inkhorn spotted with ink, some parchments, several pens, and a large goblet of chased silver. A little further on was a brazier, a praying stool in crimson velvet, relieved with small bosses of gold. Finally, at the extreme end of the room, a simple bed of scarlet and yellow damask, without either tinsel or lace; having only an ordinary fringe. This bed, famous for having borne the sleep or the sleeplessness of Louis XI., was still to be seen two hundred years ago, at the house of a councillor of state, where it was seen by old Madame Pilou, celebrated in *Cyrus* under the name “Arricidie” and of “la Morale Vivante”.

Such was the chamber which was called “the retreat where Monsieur Louis de France says his prayers.”

At the moment when we have introduced the reader into it, this retreat was very dark. The curfew bell had sounded an hour before; night was come, and there was only one flickering wax candle set on the table to light five persons variously grouped in the chamber.

The first on which the light fell was a seigneur superbly clad in breeches and jerkin of scarlet striped with silver, and a loose coat with half sleeves of cloth of gold with black figures. This splendid costume, on which the light played, seemed glazed with flame on every fold. The man who wore it had his armorial bearings embroidered on his breast in vivid colors; a chevron accompanied by a deer passant. The shield was flanked, on the right by an olive branch, on the left by a deer’s antlers. This man wore in his girdle a rich dagger whose hilt, of silver gilt, was chased in the form of a helmet, and surmounted by a count’s coronet. He had a forbidding air, a proud mien, and a head held high. At the first glance one read arrogance on his visage; at the second, craft.

He was standing bareheaded, a long roll of parchment in his hand, behind the arm-chair in which was seated, his body ungracefully doubled up, his knees crossed, his elbow on the table, a very badly accoutred personage. Let the reader imagine in fact, on the rich seat of Cordova leather, two crooked knees, two thin thighs, poorly clad in black worsted tricot, a body enveloped in a cloak of fustian, with fur trimming of which more leather than hair was visible; lastly, to crown all, a greasy old hat of the worst sort of black cloth, bordered with a circular string of leaden figures. This, in company with a dirty skull-cap, which hardly allowed a hair to escape, was all that distinguished the seated personage. He held his head so bent upon his breast, that nothing was to be seen of his face thus thrown into shadow, except the tip of his nose, upon which fell a ray of light, and which must have been long. From the thinness of his wrinkled hand, one divined that he was an old man. It was Louis XI. At some distance behind them, two men dressed in garments of Flemish style were conversing, who were not sufficiently lost in the shadow to prevent any one who had been present at the performance of Gringoire's mystery from recognizing in them two of the principal Flemish envoys, Guillaume Rym, the sagacious pensioner of Ghent, and Jacques Coppenole, the popular hosier. The reader will remember that these men were mixed up in the secret politics of Louis XI. Finally, quite at the end of the room, near the door, in the dark, stood, motionless as a statue, a vigorous man with thickset limbs, a military harness, with a surcoat of armorial bearings, whose square face pierced with staring eyes, slit with an immense mouth, his ears concealed by two large screens of flat hair, had something about it both of the dog and the tiger.

All were uncovered except the king.

The gentleman who stood near the king was reading him a sort of long memorial to which his majesty seemed to be listening attentively. The two Flemings were whispering together.

"Cross of God!" grumbled Coppenole, "I am tired of standing; is there no chair here?"

Rym replied by a negative gesture, accompanied by a discreet smile.

"Croix-Dieu!" resumed Coppenole, thoroughly unhappy at being obliged to lower his voice thus, "I should like to sit down on the floor, with my legs crossed, like a hosier, as I do in my shop."

"Take good care that you do not, Master Jacques."

"Ouais! Master Guillaume! can one only remain here on his feet?"

"Or on his knees," said Rym.

At that moment the king's voice was uplifted. They held their peace.

"Fifty sols for the robes of our valets, and twelve livres for the mantles of the clerks of our crown! That's it! Pour out gold by the ton! Are you mad, Olivier?"

As he spoke thus, the old man raised his head. The golden shells of the collar of Saint-Michael could be seen gleaming on his neck. The candle fully illuminated his gaunt and morose profile. He tore the papers from the other's hand.

"You are ruining us!" he cried, casting his hollow eyes over the scroll. "What is all this? What need have we of so prodigious a household? Two chaplains at ten livres a month each, and, a chapel clerk at one hundred sols! A valet-de-chambre at ninety livres a year. Four head cooks at six score livres a year each! A spit-cook, an herb-cook, a sauce-cook, a butler, two sumpter-horse lackeys, at ten livres a month each! Two scullions at eight livres! A groom of the stables and his two aids at four and twenty livres a month! A porter, a pastry-cook, a baker, two carters, each sixty livres a year! And the farrier six score livres! And the master of the chamber of our funds, twelve hundred livres! And the comptroller five hundred. And how do I know what else? 'Tis ruinous. The wages of our servants are putting France to the pillage! All the ingots of the Louvre will melt before such a fire of expenses! We shall have to sell our plate! And next year, if God and our Lady (here he raised his hat) lend us life, we shall drink our potions from a pewter pot!"

So saying, he cast a glance at the silver goblet which gleamed upon the table. He coughed and continued, —

"Master Olivier, the princes who reign over great lordships, like kings and emperors, should not allow sumptuousness in their houses; for the fire spreads thence through the province. Hence, Master Olivier, consider this said once for all. Our expenditure increases every year. The thing displease us. How, *pasque-Dieu*! when in '79 it did not exceed six and thirty thousand livres, did it attain in '80, forty-three thousand six hundred and nineteen livres? I have the figures in my head. In '81, sixty-six thousand six hundred and eighty livres, and this year, by the faith of my body, it will reach eighty thousand livres! Doubled in four years! Monstrous!”

He paused breathless, then resumed energetically, —

“I behold around me only people who fatten on my leanness! you suck crowns from me at every pore.”

All remained silent. This was one of those fits of wrath which are allowed to take their course. He continued, —

“’Tis like that request in Latin from the gentlemen of France, that we should re-establish what they call the grand charges of the Crown! Charges in very deed! Charges which crush! Ah! gentlemen! you say that we are not a king to reign *dapifero nullo, buticulario nullo*! We will let you see, *pasque-Dieu*! whether we are not a king!”

Here he smiled, in the consciousness of his power; this softened his bad humor, and he turned towards the Flemings, —

“Do you see, Gossip Guillaume? the grand warden of the keys, the grand butler, the grand chamberlain, the grand seneschal are not worth the smallest valet. Remember this, Gossip Coppenole. They serve no purpose, as they stand thus useless round the king; they produce upon me the effect of the four Evangelists who surround the face of the big clock of the palace, and which Philippe Brille has just set in order afresh. They are gilt, but they do not indicate the hour; and the hands can get on without them.”

He remained in thought for a moment, then added, shaking his aged head, —

“Ho! ho! by our Lady, I am not Philippe Brille, and I shall not gild the great vassals anew. Continue, Olivier.”

The person whom he designated by this name, took the papers into his hands again, and began to read aloud, —

“To Adam Tenon, clerk of the warden of the seals of the provostship of Paris; for the silver, making, and engraving of said seals, which have been made new because the others preceding, by reason of their antiquity and their worn condition, could no longer be successfully used, twelve livres parisis.

“To Guillaume Frère, the sum of four livres, four sols parisis, for his trouble and salary, for having nourished and fed the doves in the two dove-cots of the Hôtel des Tournelles, during the months of January, February, and March of this year; and for this he hath given seven sextiers of barley.

“To a gray friar for confessing a criminal, four sols parisis.”

The king listened in silence. From time to time he coughed; then he raised the goblet to his lips and drank a draught with a grimace.

"During this year there have been made by the ordinance of justice, to the sound of the trumpet, through the squares of Paris, fifty-six proclamations. Account to be regulated.

"For having searched and ransacked in certain places, in Paris as well as elsewhere, for money said to be there concealed; but nothing hath been found: forty-five livres parisis."

"Bury a crown to unearth a sou!" said the king.

"For having set in the Hôtel des Tournelles six panes of white glass in the place where the iron cage is, thirteen sols; for having made and delivered by command of the king, on the day of the musters, four shields with the escutcheons of the said seigneur, encircled with garlands of roses all about, six livres; for two new sleeves to the king's old doublet, twenty sols; for a box of grease to grease the boots of the king, fifteen deniers; a stable newly made to lodge the king's black pigs, thirty livres parisis; many partitions, planks, and trap-doors, for the safekeeping of the lions at Saint-Paul, twenty-two livres."

"These be dear beasts," said Louis XI. "It matters not; it is a fine magnificence in a king. There is a great red lion whom I love for his pleasant ways. Have you seen him, Master Guillaume? Princes must have these terrific animals; for we kings must have lions for our dogs and tigers for our cats. The great befits a crown. In the days of the pagans of Jupiter, when the people offered the temples a hundred oxen and a hundred sheep, the emperors gave a hundred lions and a hundred eagles. This was wild and very fine. The kings of France have always had roarings round their throne. Nevertheless, people must do me this justice, that I spend still less money on it than they did, and that I possess a greater modesty of lions, bears, elephants, and leopards. — Go on, Master Olivier. We wished to say thus much to our Flemish friends."

Guillaume Rym bowed low, while Coppenole, with his surly mien, had the air of one of the bears of which his majesty was speaking. The king paid no heed. He had just dipped his lips into the goblet, and he spat out the beverage, saying: "Foh! what a disagreeable potion!" The man who was reading continued: —

"For feeding a rascally footpad, locked up these six months in the little cell of the flayer, until it should be determined what to do with him, six livres, four sols.”

“What’s that?” interrupted the king; “feed what ought to be hanged! *Pasque-Dieu*! I will give not a sou more for that nourishment. Olivier, come to an understanding about the matter with Monsieur d’Estouteville, and prepare me this very evening the wedding of the gallant and the gallows. Resume.”

Olivier made a mark with his thumb against the article of the “rascally foot soldier,” and passed on.

“To Henriet Cousin, master executor of the high works of justice in Paris, the sum of sixty sols parisis, to him assessed and ordained by monseigneur the provost of Paris, for having bought, by order of the said sieur the provost, a great broad sword, serving to execute and decapitate persons who are by justice condemned for their demerits, and he hath caused the same to be garnished with a sheath and with all things thereto appertaining; and hath likewise caused to be repointed and set in order the old sword, which had become broken and notched in executing justice on Messire Louis de Luxembourg, as will more fully appear.”

The king interrupted: “That suffices. I allow the sum with great good will. Those are expenses which I do not begrudge. I have never regretted that money. Continue.”

“For having made over a great cage...”

“Ah!” said the king, grasping the arms of his chair in both hands, “I knew well that I came hither to this Bastille for some purpose. Hold, Master Olivier; I desire to see that cage myself. You shall read me the cost while I am examining it. Messieurs Flemings, come and see this; ’tis curious.”

Then he rose, leaned on the arm of his interlocutor, made a sign to the sort of mute who stood before the door to precede him, to the two Flemings to follow him, and quitted the room.

The royal company was recruited, at the door of the retreat, by men of arms, all loaded down with iron, and by slender pages bearing flambeaux. It marched for some time through the interior of the gloomy donjon, pierced with staircases and corridors even in the very thickness of the walls. The captain of the Bastille marched at their head, and caused the wickets to be opened before the bent and aged king, who coughed as he walked.

At each wicket, all heads were obliged to stoop, except that of the old man bent double with age. “Hum,” said he between his gums, for he had no longer any teeth, “we are already quite prepared for the door of the sepulchre. For a low door, a bent passer.”

At length, after having passed a final wicket, so loaded with locks that a quarter of an hour was required to open it, they entered a vast and lofty vaulted hall, in the centre of which they could distinguish by the light of the torches, a huge cubic mass of masonry, iron, and wood. The interior was hollow. It was one of those famous cages of prisoners of state, which were called “the little daughters of the king.” In its walls there were two or three little windows so closely trellised with stout iron bars; that the glass was not visible. The door was a large flat slab of stone, as on tombs; the sort of door which serves for entrance only. Only here, the occupant was alive.

The king began to walk slowly round the little edifice, examining it carefully, while Master Olivier, who followed him, read aloud the note.

“For having made a great cage of wood of solid beams, timbers and wall-plates, measuring nine feet in length by eight in breadth, and of the height of seven feet between the partitions, smoothed and clamped with great bolts of iron, which has been placed in a chamber situated in one of the towers of the Bastille Saint-Antoine, in which cage is placed and detained, by command of the king our lord, a prisoner who formerly inhabited an old, decrepit, and ruined cage. There have been employed in making the said new cage, ninety-six horizontal beams, and fifty-two upright joists, ten wall plates three toises long; there have been occupied nineteen carpenters to hew, work, and fit all the said wood in the courtyard of the Bastille during twenty days.”

“Very fine heart of oak,” said the king, striking the woodwork with his fist.

“There have been used in this cage,” continued the other, “two hundred and twenty great bolts of iron, of nine feet, and of eight, the rest of medium length, with the rowels, caps and counterbands appertaining to the said bolts; weighing, the said iron in all, three thousand, seven hundred and thirty-five pounds; beside eight great squares of iron, serving to attach the said cage in place with clamps and nails weighing in all two hundred and eighteen pounds, not reckoning the iron of the trellises for the windows of the chamber wherein the cage hath been placed, the bars of iron for the door of the cage and other things.”

“’Tis a great deal of iron,” said the king, “to contain the light of a spirit.”

“The whole amounts to three hundred and seventeen livres, five sols, seven deniers.”

“*Pasque-Dieu*!” exclaimed the king.

At this oath, which was the favorite of Louis XI., some one seemed to awaken in the interior of the cage; the sound of chains was heard, grating on the floor, and a feeble voice, which seemed to issue from the tomb was uplifted. “Sire! sire! mercy!” The one who spoke thus could not be seen.

“Three hundred and seventeen livres, five sols, seven deniers,” repeated Louis XI. The lamentable voice which had proceeded from the cage had frozen all present, even Master Olivier himself. The king alone wore the air of not having heard. At his order, Master Olivier resumed his reading, and his majesty coldly continued his inspection of the cage.

“In addition to this there hath been paid to a mason who hath made the holes wherein to place the gratings of the windows, and the floor of the chamber where the cage is, because that floor could not support this cage by reason of its weight, twenty-seven livres fourteen sols parisis.”

The voice began to moan again.

“Mercy, sire! I swear to you that ’twas Monsieur the Cardinal d’Angers and not I, who was guilty of treason.”

“The mason is bold!” said the king. “Continue, Olivier.” Olivier continued, —

“To a joiner for window frames, bedstead, hollow stool, and other things, twenty livres, two sols parisis.”

The voice also continued.

“Alas, sire! will you not listen to me? I protest to you that ’twas not I who wrote the matter to Monseigneur do Guyenne, but Monsieur le Cardinal Balue.”

“The joiner is dear,” quoth the king. “Is that all?”

“No, sire. To a glazier, for the windows of the said chamber, forty-six sols, eight deniers parisis.”

“Have mercy, sire! Is it not enough to have given all my goods to my judges, my plate to Monsieur de Torcy, my library to Master Pierre Doriolle, my tapestry to the governor of the Roussillon? I am innocent. I have been shivering in an iron cage for fourteen years. Have mercy, sire! You will find your reward in heaven.”

“Master Olivier,” said the king, “the total?”

“Three hundred sixty-seven livres, eight sols, three deniers parisis.

“Notre-Dame!” cried the king. “This is an outrageous cage!”

He tore the book from Master Olivier’s hands, and set to reckoning it himself upon his fingers, examining the paper and the cage alternately. Meanwhile, the prisoner could be heard sobbing. This was lugubrious in the darkness, and their faces turned pale as they looked at each other.

“Fourteen years, sire! Fourteen years now! since the month of April, 1469. In the name of the Holy Mother of God, sire, listen to me! During all this time you have enjoyed the heat of the sun. Shall I, frail creature, never more behold the day? Mercy, sire! Be pitiful! Clemency is a fine, royal virtue, which turns aside the currents of wrath. Does your majesty believe that in the hour of death it will be a great cause of content for a king never to have left any offence unpunished? Besides, sire, I did not betray your majesty, ’twas Monsieur d’Angers; and I have on my foot a very heavy chain, and a great ball of iron at the end, much heavier than it should be in reason. Eh! sire! Have pity on me!”

“Olivier,” cried the king, throwing back his head, “I observe that they charge me twenty sols a hogshead for plaster, while it is worth but twelve. You will refer back this account.”

He turned his back on the cage, and set out to leave the room. The miserable prisoner divined from the removal of the torches and the noise, that the king was taking his departure.

“Sire! sire!” he cried in despair.

The door closed again. He no longer saw anything, and heard only the hoarse voice of the turnkey, singing in his ears this ditty, —

“*Maître Jean Balue,*
A perdu la vue
De ses évêchés.
Monsieur de Verdun.
N’en a plus pas un;
Tous sont dépêchés.”*

* Master Jean Balue has lost sight of his bishoprics.

Monsieur of Verdun has no longer one; all have been killed off.

The king reascended in silence to his retreat, and his suite followed him, terrified by the last groans of the condemned man. All at once his majesty turned to the Governor of the Bastille, —

“By the way,” said he, “was there not some one in that cage?”

“Pardieu, yes sire!” replied the governor, astounded by the question.

“And who was it?”

“Monsieur the Bishop of Verdun.”

The king knew this better than any one else. But it was a mania of his.

“Ah!” said he, with the innocent air of thinking of it for the first time, “Guillaume de Harancourt, the friend of Monsieur the Cardinal Balue. A good devil of a bishop!”

At the expiration of a few moments, the door of the retreat had opened again, then closed upon the five personages whom the reader has seen at the beginning of this chapter, and who resumed their places, their whispered conversations, and their attitudes.

During the king’s absence, several despatches had been placed on his table, and he broke the seals himself. Then he began to read them promptly, one after the other, made a sign to Master Olivier who appeared to exercise the office of minister, to take a pen, and without communicating to him the contents of the despatches, he began to dictate in a low voice, the replies which the latter wrote, on his knees, in an inconvenient attitude before the table.

Guillaume Rym was on the watch.

The king spoke so low that the Flemings heard nothing of his dictation, except some isolated and rather unintelligible scraps, such as, —

“To maintain the fertile places by commerce, and the sterile by manufactures.... — To show the English lords our four bombards, London, Brabant, Bourg-en-Bresse, Saint-Omer.... — Artillery is the cause of war being made more judiciously now.... — To Monsieur de Bressuire, our friend.... — Armies cannot be maintained without tribute, etc.”

Once he raised his voice, —

“*Pasque Dieu*! Monsieur the King of Sicily seals his letters with yellow wax, like a king of France. Perhaps we are in the wrong to permit him so to do. My fair cousin of Burgundy granted no armorial bearings with a field of gules. The grandeur of houses is assured by the integrity of prerogatives. Note this, friend Olivier.”

Again, —

“Oh! oh!” said he, “What a long message! What doth our brother the emperor claim?” And running his eye over the missive and breaking his reading with interjection: “Surely! the Germans are so great and powerful, that it is hardly credible — But let us not forget the old proverb: ‘The finest county is Flanders; the finest duchy, Milan; the finest kingdom, France.’ Is it not so, Messieurs Flemings?”

This time Coppenole bowed in company with Guillaume Rym. The hosier’s patriotism was tickled.

The last despatch made Louis XI. frown.

“What is this?” he said, “Complaints and fault finding against our garrisons in Picardy! Olivier, write with diligence to M. the Marshal de Rouault: — That discipline is relaxed. That the gendarmes of the unattached troops, the feudal nobles, the free archers, and the Swiss inflict infinite evils on the rustics. — That the military, not content with what they find in the houses of the rustics, constrain them with violent blows of cudgel or of lash to go and get wine, spices, and other unreasonable things in the town. — That monsieur the king knows this. That we undertake to guard our people against inconveniences, larcenies and pillage. — That such is our will, by our Lady! — That in addition, it suits us not that any fiddler, barber, or any soldier varlet should be clad like a prince, in velvet, cloth of silk, and rings of gold. — That these vanities are hateful to God. — That we, who are gentlemen, content ourselves with a doublet of cloth at sixteen sols the ell, of Paris. — That messieurs the camp-followers can very well come down to that, also. — Command and ordain. — To Monsieur de Rouault, our friend. — Good.”

He dictated this letter aloud, in a firm tone, and in jerks. At the moment when he finished it, the door opened and gave passage to a new personage, who precipitated himself into the chamber, crying in affright, —

“Sire! sire! there is a sedition of the populace in Paris!” Louis XI.’s grave face contracted; but all that was visible of his emotion passed away like a flash of lightning. He controlled himself and said with tranquil severity, —

“Gossip Jacques, you enter very abruptly!”

“Sire! sire! there is a revolt!” repeated Gossip Jacques breathlessly.

The king, who had risen, grasped him roughly by the arm, and said in his ear, in such a manner as to be heard by him alone, with concentrated rage and a sidelong glance at the Flemings, —

“Hold your tongue! or speak low!”

The new comer understood, and began in a low tone to give a very terrified account, to which the king listened calmly, while Guillaume Rym called Coppenole’s attention to the face and dress of the new arrival, to his furred cowl, (*caputia fourrata*), his short cape, (*epitogia curta*), his robe of black velvet, which bespoke a president of the court of accounts.

Hardly had this personage given the king some explanations, when Louis XI. exclaimed, bursting into a laugh, —

“In truth? Speak aloud, Gossip Coictier! What call is there for you to talk so low? Our Lady knoweth that we conceal nothing from our good friends the Flemings.”

“But sire...”

“Speak loud!”

Gossip Coictier was struck dumb with surprise.

“So,” resumed the king,— “speak sir, — there is a commotion among the louts in our good city of Paris?”

“Yes, sire.”

“And which is moving you say, against monsieur the bailiff of the Palais-de-Justice?”

“So it appears,” said the gossip, who still stammered, utterly astounded by the abrupt and inexplicable change which had just taken place in the king’s thoughts.

Louis XI. continued: “Where did the watch meet the rabble?”

“Marching from the Grand Truanderie, towards the Pont-aux-Changeurs. I met it myself as I was on my way hither to obey your majesty’s commands. I heard some of them shouting: ‘Down with the bailiff of the palace!’”

“And what complaints have they against the bailiff?”

“Ah!” said Gossip Jacques, “because he is their lord.”

“Really?”

“Yes, sire. They are knaves from the Cour-des-Miracles. They have been complaining this long while, of the bailiff, whose vassals they are. They do not wish to recognize him either as judge or as voyer?”*

* One in charge of the highways.

“Yes, certainly!” retorted the king with a smile of satis-faction which he strove in vain to disguise.

“In all their petitions to the Parliament, they claim to have but two masters. Your majesty and their God, who is the devil, I believe.”

“Eh! eh!” said the king.

He rubbed his hands, he laughed with that inward mirth which makes the countenance beam; he was unable to dissimulate his joy, although he endeavored at moments to compose himself. No one understood it in the least, not even Master Olivier. He remained silent for a moment, with a thoughtful but contented air.

“Are they in force?” he suddenly inquired.

“Yes, assuredly, sire,” replied Gossip Jacques.

“How many?”

“Six thousand at the least.”

The king could not refrain from saying: “Good!” he went on, —

“Are they armed?”

“With scythes, pikes, hackbuts, pickaxes. All sorts of very violent weapons.”

The king did not appear in the least disturbed by this list. Jacques considered it his duty to add, —

“If your majesty does not send prompt succor to the bailiff, he is lost.”

“We will send,” said the king with an air of false seriousness. “It is well. Assuredly we will send. Monsieur the bailiff is our friend. Six thousand! They are desperate scamps! Their audacity is marvellous, and we are greatly enraged at it. But we have only a few people about us to-night. To-morrow morning will be time enough.”

Gossip Jacques exclaimed, “Instantly, sire! there will be time to sack the bailiwick a score of times, to violate the seignory, to hang the bailiff. For God’s sake, sire! send before to-morrow morning.”

The king looked him full in the face. “I have told you to-morrow morning.”

It was one Of those looks to which one does not reply. After a silence, Louis XI. raised his voice once more, —

“You should know that, Gossip Jacques. What was—”

He corrected himself. “What is the bailiff’s feudal jurisdiction?”

“Sire, the bailiff of the palace has the Rue Calendre as far as the Rue de l’Herberie, the Place Saint-Michel, and the localities vulgarly known as the Mureaux, situated near the church of Notre-Dame des Champs (here Louis XI. raised the brim of his hat), which hotels number thirteen, plus the Cour des Miracles, plus the Maladerie, called the Banlieue, plus the whole highway which begins at that Maladerie and ends at the Porte Sainte-Jacques. Of these divers places he is voyer, high, middle, and low, justiciary, full seigneur.”

“Bless me!” said the king, scratching his left ear with his right hand, “that makes a goodly bit of my city! Ah! monsieur the bailiff was king of all that.”

This time he did not correct himself. He continued dreamily, and as though speaking to himself, —

“Very fine, monsieur the bailiff! You had there between your teeth a pretty slice of our Paris.”

All at once he broke out explosively, “*Pasque-Dieu*! What people are those who claim to be voyers, justiciaries, lords and masters in our domains? who have their tollgates at the end of every field? their gallows and their hangman at every cross-road among our people? So that as the Greek believed that he had as many gods as there were fountains, and the Persian as many as he beheld stars, the Frenchman counts as many kings as he sees gibbets! Pardieu! ’tis an evil thing, and the confusion of it displeases me. I should greatly like to know whether it be the mercy of God that there should be in Paris any other lord than the king, any other judge than our parliament, any other emperor than ourselves in this empire! By the faith of my soul! the day must certainly come when there shall exist in France but one king, one lord, one judge, one headsman, as there is in paradise but one God!”

He lifted his cap again, and continued, still dreamily, with the air and accent of a hunter who is cheering on his pack of hounds: “Good, my people! bravely done! break these false lords! do your duty! at them! have at them! pillage them! take them! sack them!... Ah! you want to be kings, messeigneurs? On, my people on!”

Here he interrupted himself abruptly, bit his lips as though to take back his thought which had already half escaped, bent his piercing eyes in turn on each of the five persons who surrounded him, and suddenly grasping his hat with both hands and staring full at it, he said to it: “Oh! I would burn you if you knew what there was in my head.”

Then casting about him once more the cautious and uneasy glance of the fox re-entering his hole, —

“No matter! we will succor monsieur the bailiff. Unfortunately, we have but few troops here at the present moment, against so great a populace. We must wait until to-morrow. The order will be transmitted to the City and every one who is caught will be immediately hung.”

“By the way, sire,” said Gossip Coictier, “I had forgotten that in the first agitation, the watch have seized two laggards of the band. If your majesty desires to see these men, they are here.”

“If I desire to see them!” cried the king. “What! *Pasque-Dieu*! You forget a thing like that! Run quick, you, Olivier! Go, seek them!”

Master Olivier quitted the room and returned a moment later with the two prisoners, surrounded by archers of the guard. The first had a coarse, idiotic, drunken and astonished face. He was clothed in rags, and walked with one knee bent and dragging his leg. The second had a pallid and smiling countenance, with which the reader is already acquainted.

The king surveyed them for a moment without uttering a word, then addressing the first one abruptly, —

“What’s your name?”

“Gieffroy Pincebourde.”

“Your trade.”

“Outcast.”

“What were you going to do in this damnable sedition?” The outcast stared at the king, and swung his arms with a stupid air.

He had one of those awkwardly shaped heads where intelligence is about as much at its ease as a light beneath an extinguisher.

“I know not,” said he. “They went, I went.”

“Were you not going to outrageously attack and pillage your lord, the bailiff of the palace?”

“I know that they were going to take something from some one. That is all.”

A soldier pointed out to the king a billhook which he had seized on the person of the vagabond.

“Do you recognize this weapon?” demanded the king.

“Yes; ’tis my billhook; I am a vine-dresser.”

“And do you recognize this man as your companion?” added Louis XI., pointing to the other prisoner.

“No, I do not know him.”

“That will do,” said the king, making a sign with his finger to the silent personage who stood motionless beside the door, to whom we have already called the reader’s attention.

“Gossip Tristan, here is a man for you.”

Tristan l’Hermite bowed. He gave an order in a low voice to two archers, who led away the poor vagabond.

In the meantime, the king had approached the second prisoner, who was perspiring in great drops: “Your name?”

“Sire, Pierre Gringoire.”

“Your trade?”

“Philosopher, sire.”

“How do you permit yourself, knave, to go and besiege our friend, monsieur the bailiff of the palace, and what have you to say concerning this popular agitation?”

“Sire, I had nothing to do with it.”

“Come, now! you wanton wretch, were not you apprehended by the watch in that bad company?”

“No, sire, there is a mistake. ’Tis a fatality. I make tragedies. Sire, I entreat your majesty to listen to me. I am a poet. ’Tis the melancholy way of men of my profession to roam the streets by night. I was passing there. It was mere chance. I was unjustly arrested; I am innocent of this civil tempest. Your majesty sees that the vagabond did not recognize me. I conjure your majesty—”

“Hold your tongue!” said the king, between two swallows of his ptisan. “You split our head!”

Tristan l’Hermite advanced and pointing to Gringoire, —

“Sire, can this one be hanged also?”

This was the first word that he had uttered.

“Phew!” replied the king, “I see no objection.”

“I see a great many!” said Gringoire.

At that moment, our philosopher was greener than an olive. He perceived from the king’s cold and indifferent mien that there was no other resource than something very pathetic, and he flung himself at the feet of Louis XI., exclaiming, with gestures of despair: —

“Sire! will your majesty deign to hear me. Sire! break not in thunder over so small a thing as myself. God’s great lightning doth not bombard a lettuce. Sire, you are an august and, very puissant monarch; have pity on a poor man who is honest, and who would find it more difficult to stir up a revolt than a cake of ice would to give out a spark! Very gracious sire, kindness is the virtue of a lion and a king. Alas! rigor only frightens minds; the impetuous gusts of the north wind do not make the traveller lay aside his cloak; the sun, bestowing his rays little by little, warms him in such ways that it will make him strip to his shirt. Sire, you are the sun. I protest to you, my sovereign lord and master, that I am not an outcast, thief, and disorderly fellow. Revolt and brigandage belong not to the outfit of Apollo. I am not the man to fling myself into those clouds which break out into seditious clamor. I am your majesty's faithful vassal. That same jealousy which a husband cherisheth for the honor of his wife, the resentment which the son hath for the love of his father, a good vassal should feel for the glory of his king; he should pine away for the zeal of this house, for the aggrandizement of his service. Every other passion which should transport him would be but madness. These, sire, are my maxims of state: then do not judge me to be a seditious and thieving rascal because my garment is worn at the elbows. If you will grant me mercy, sire, I will wear it out on the knees in praying to God for you night and morning! Alas! I am not extremely rich, 'tis true. I am even rather poor. But not vicious on that account. It is not my fault. Every one knoweth that great wealth is not to be drawn from literature, and that those who are best posted in good books do not always have a great fire in winter. The advocate's trade taketh all the grain, and leaveth only straw to the other scientific professions. There are forty very excellent proverbs anent the hole-ridden cloak of the philosopher. Oh, sire! clemency is the only light which can enlighten the interior of so great a soul. Clemency beareth the torch before all the other virtues. Without it they are but blind men groping after God in the dark. Compassion, which is the same thing as clemency, causeth the love of subjects, which is the most powerful bodyguard to a prince. What matters it to your majesty, who dazzles all faces, if there is one poor man more on earth, a poor innocent philosopher spluttering amid the shadows of calamity, with an empty pocket which resounds against his hollow belly? Moreover, sire, I am a man of letters. Great kings make a pearl for their crowns by protecting letters. Hercules did not disdain the title of Musagetes. Mathias Corvin favored Jean de Monroyal, the ornament of mathematics. Now, 'tis an ill way to protect letters to hang men of letters. What a stain on Alexander if he had hung Aristoteles! This act would not be a little patch on the face of his reputation to embellish it, but a very malignant ulcer to disfigure it. Sire! I made a very proper epithalamium for Mademoiselle of Flanders and Monseigneur the very august Dauphin. That is not a firebrand of rebellion. Your majesty sees that I am not a scribbler of no reputation, that I have studied excellently well, and that I possess much natural eloquence. Have mercy upon me, sire! In so doing you will perform a gallant deed to our Lady, and I swear to you that I am greatly terrified at the idea of being hanged!”

So saying, the unhappy Gringoire kissed the king’s slippers, and Guillaume Rym said to Coppenole in a low tone: “He doth well to drag himself on the earth. Kings are like the Jupiter of Crete, they have ears only in their feet.” And without troubling himself about the Jupiter of Crete, the hosier replied with a heavy smile, and his eyes fixed on Gringoire: “Oh! that’s it exactly! I seem to hear Chancellor Hugonet craving mercy of me.”

When Gringoire paused at last, quite out of breath, he raised his head tremblingly towards the king, who was engaged in scratching a spot on the knee of his breeches with his finger-nail; then his majesty began to drink from the goblet of ptisan. But he uttered not a word, and this silence tortured Gringoire. At last the king looked at him. “Here is a terrible bawler!” said, he. Then, turning to Tristan l’Hermite, “Bali! let him go!”

Gringoire fell backwards, quite thunderstruck with joy.

“At liberty!” growled Tristan “Doth not your majesty wish to have him detained a little while in a cage?”

“Gossip,” retorted Louis XI., “think you that ’tis for birds of this feather that we cause to be made cages at three hundred and sixty-seven livres, eight sous, three deniers apiece? Release him at once, the wanton (Louis XI. was fond of this word which formed, with *Pasque-Dieu*, the foundation of his joviality), and put him out with a buffet.”

“Ugh!” cried Gringoire, “what a great king is here!”

And for fear of a counter order, he rushed towards the door, which Tristan opened for him with a very bad grace. The soldiers left the room with him, pushing him before them with stout thwacks, which Gringoire bore like a true stoical philosopher.

The king’s good humor since the revolt against the bailiff had been announced to him, made itself apparent in every way. This unwonted clemency was no small sign of it. Tristan l’Hermite in his corner wore the surly look of a dog who has had a bone snatched away from him.

Meanwhile, the king thrummed gayly with his fingers on the arm of his chair, the March of Pont-Audemer. He was a dissembling prince, but one who understood far better how to hide his troubles than his joys. These external manifestations of joy at any good news sometimes proceeded to very great lengths thus, on the death, of Charles the Bold, to the point of vowing silver balustrades to Saint Martin of Tours; on his advent to the throne, so far as forgetting to order his father's obsequies.

"Hé! sire!" suddenly exclaimed Jacques Coictier, "what has become of the acute attack of illness for which your majesty had me summoned?"

"Oh!" said the king, "I really suffer greatly, my gossip. There is a hissing in my ear and fiery rakes rack my chest."

Coictier took the king's hand, and begun to feel of his pulse with a knowing air.

"Look, Coppenole," said Rym, in a low voice. "Behold him between Coictier and Tristan. They are his whole court. A physician for himself, a headsman for others."

As he felt the king's pulse, Coictier assumed an air of greater and greater alarm. Louis XI. watched him with some anxiety. Coictier grew visibly more gloomy. The brave man had no other farm than the king's bad health. He speculated on it to the best of his ability.

"Oh! oh!" he murmured at length, "this is serious indeed."

"Is it not?" said the king, uneasily.

"*Pulsus creber, anhelans, crepitans, irregularis*," continued the leech.

"*Pasque-Dieu*!"

"This may carry off its man in less than three days."

"Our Lady!" exclaimed the king. "And the remedy, gossip?"

"I am meditating upon that, sire."

He made Louis XI. put out his tongue, shook his head, made a grimace, and in the very midst of these affectations, —

"Pardieu, sire," he suddenly said, "I must tell you that there is a receivership of the royal prerogatives vacant, and that I have a nephew."

"I give the receivership to your nephew, Gossip Jacques," replied the king; "but draw this fire from my breast."

"Since your majesty is so clement," replied the leech, "you will not refuse to aid me a little in building my house, Rue Saint-André-des-Arcs."

"Heugh!" said the king.

"I am at the end of my finances," pursued the doctor; "and it would really be a pity that the house should not have a roof; not on account of the house, which is simple and thoroughly bourgeois, but because of the paintings of Jehan Fourbault, which adorn its wainscoating. There is a Diana flying in the air, but so excellent, so tender, so delicate, of so ingenuous an action, her hair so well coiffed and adorned with a crescent, her flesh so white, that she leads into temptation those who regard her too curiously. There is also a Ceres. She is another very fair divinity. She is seated on sheaves of wheat and crowned with a gallant garland of wheat ears interlaced with salsify and other flowers. Never were seen more amorous eyes, more rounded limbs, a nobler air, or a more gracefully flowing skirt. She is one of the most innocent and most perfect beauties whom the brush has ever produced.”

“Executioner!” grumbled Louis XI., “what are you driving at?”

“I must have a roof for these paintings, sire, and, although ’tis but a small matter, I have no more money.”

“How much doth your roof cost?”

“Why a roof of copper, embellished and gilt, two thousand livres at the most.”

“Ah, assassin!” cried the king, “He never draws out one of my teeth which is not a diamond.”

“Am I to have my roof?” said Coictier.

“Yes; and go to the devil, but cure me.”

Jacques Coictier bowed low and said, —

“Sire, it is a repellent which will save you. We will apply to your loins the great defensive composed of cerate, Armenian bole, white of egg, oil, and vinegar. You will continue your ptisan and we will answer for your majesty.”

A burning candle does not attract one gnat alone. Master Olivier, perceiving the king to be in a liberal mood, and judging the moment to be propitious, approached in his turn.

“Sire—”

“What is it now?” said Louis XI. “Sire, your majesty knoweth that Simon Radin is dead?”

“Well?”

“He was councillor to the king in the matter of the courts of the treasury.”

“Well?”

“Sire, his place is vacant.”

As he spoke thus, Master Olivier’s haughty face quitted its arrogant expression for a lowly one. It is the only change which ever takes place in a courtier’s visage. The king looked him well in the face and said in a dry tone,— “I understand.”

He resumed,

“Master Olivier, the Marshal de Boucicaut was wont to say, ‘There’s no master save the king, there are no fishes save in the sea.’ I see that you agree with Monsieur de Boucicaut. Now listen to this; we have a good memory. In ‘68 we made you valet of our chamber: in ‘69, guardian of the fortress of the bridge of Saint-Cloud, at a hundred livres of Tournay in wages (you wanted them of Paris). In November, ‘73, by letters given to Gergeole, we instituted you keeper of the Wood of Vincennes, in the place of Gilbert Acle, equerry; in ‘75, gruyer* of the forest of Rouvray-lez-Saint-Cloud, in the place of Jacques le Maire; in ‘78, we graciously settled on you, by letters patent sealed doubly with green wax, an income of ten livres parisis, for you and your wife, on the Place of the Merchants, situated at the School Saint-Germain; in ‘79, we made you gruyer of the forest of Senart, in place of that poor Jehan Daiz; then captain of the Château of Loches; then governor of Saint-Quentin; then captain of the bridge of Meulan, of which you cause yourself to be called comte. Out of the five sols fine paid by every barber who shaves on a festival day, there are three sols for you and we have the rest. We have been good enough to change your name of Le Mauvais (The Evil), which resembled your face too closely. In ‘76, we granted you, to the great displeasure of our nobility, armorial bearings of a thousand colors, which give you the breast of a peacock. *Pasque-Dieu*! Are not you surfeited? Is not the draught of fishes sufficiently fine and miraculous? Are you not afraid that one salmon more will make your boat sink? Pride will be your ruin, gossip. Ruin and disgrace always press hard on the heels of pride. Consider this and hold your tongue.”

* A lord having a right on the woods of his vassals.

These words, uttered with severity, made Master Olivier’s face revert to its insolence.

“Good!” he muttered, almost aloud, “’tis easy to see that the king is ill to-day; he giveth all to the leech.”

Louis XI. far from being irritated by this petulant insult, resumed with some gentleness, “Stay, I was forgetting that I made you my ambassador to Madame Marie, at Ghent. Yes, gentlemen,” added the king turning to the Flemings, “this man hath been an ambassador. There, my gossip,” he pursued, addressing Master Olivier, “let us not get angry; we are old friends. ’Tis very late. We have terminated our labors. Shave me.”

Our readers have not, without doubt, waited until the present moment to recognize in Master Olivier that terrible Figaro whom Providence, the great maker of dramas, mingled so artistically in the long and bloody comedy of the reign of Louis XI. We will not here undertake to develop that singular figure. This barber of the king had three names. At court he was politely called Olivier le Daim (the Deer); among the people Olivier the Devil. His real name was Olivier le Mauvais.

Accordingly, Olivier le Mauvais remained motionless, sulking at the king, and glancing askance at Jacques Coictier.

“Yes, yes, the physician!” he said between his teeth.

“Ah, yes, the physician!” retorted Louis XI., with singular good humor; “the physician has more credit than you. ’Tis very simple; he has taken hold upon us by the whole body, and you hold us only by the chin. Come, my poor barber, all will come right. What would you say and what would become of your office if I were a king like Chilperic, whose gesture consisted in holding his beard in one hand? Come, gossip mine, fulfil your office, shave me. Go get what you need therefor.”

Olivier perceiving that the king had made up his mind to laugh, and that there was no way of even annoying him, went off grumbling to execute his orders.

The king rose, approached the window, and suddenly opening it with extraordinary agitation, —

“Oh! yes!” he exclaimed, clapping his hands, “yonder is a redness in the sky over the City. ’Tis the bailiff burning. It can be nothing else but that. Ah! my good people! here you are aiding me at last in tearing down the rights of lordship!”

Then turning towards the Flemings: “Come, look at this, gentlemen. Is it not a fire which gloweth yonder?”

The two men of Ghent drew near.

“A great fire,” said Guillaume Rym.

“Oh!” exclaimed Coppenole, whose eyes suddenly flashed, “that reminds me of the burning of the house of the Seigneur d’Hymbercourt. There must be a goodly revolt yonder.”

“You think so, Master Coppenole?” And Louis XI.’s glance was almost as joyous as that of the hosier. “Will it not be difficult to resist?”

“Cross of God! Sire! Your majesty will damage many companies of men of war thereon.”

“Ah! I! ’tis different,” returned the king. “If I willed.” The hosier replied hardily, —

“If this revolt be what I suppose, sire, you might will in vain.”

“Gossip,” said Louis XI., “with the two companies of my unattached troops and one discharge of a serpentine, short work is made of a populace of louts.”

The hosier, in spite of the signs made to him by Guillaume Rym, appeared determined to hold his own against the king.

“Sire, the Swiss were also louts. Monsieur the Duke of Burgundy was a great gentleman, and he turned up his nose at that rabble rout. At the battle of Grandson, sire, he cried: ‘Men of the cannon! Fire on the villains!’ and he swore by Saint-George. But Advoyer Scharnachtal hurled himself on the handsome duke with his battle-club and his people, and when the glittering Burgundian army came in contact with these peasants in bull hides, it flew in pieces like a pane of glass at the blow of a pebble. Many lords were then slain by low-born knaves; and Monsieur de Château-Guyon, the greatest seigneur in Burgundy, was found dead, with his gray horse, in a little marsh meadow.”

“Friend,” returned the king, “you are speaking of a battle. The question here is of a mutiny. And I will gain the upper hand of it as soon as it shall please me to frown.”

The other replied indifferently, —

“That may be, sire; in that case, ’tis because the people’s hour hath not yet come.”

Guillaume Rym considered it incumbent on him to intervene, —

“Master Coppenole, you are speaking to a puissant king.”

“I know it,” replied the hosier, gravely.

“Let him speak, Monsieur Rym, my friend,” said the king; “I love this frankness of speech. My father, Charles the Seventh, was accustomed to say that the truth was ailing; I thought her dead, and that she had found no confessor. Master Coppenole undeceiveth me.”

Then, laying his hand familiarly on Coppenole’s shoulder, —

“You were saying, Master Jacques?”

“I say, sire, that you may possibly be in the right, that the hour of the people may not yet have come with you.”

Louis XI. gazed at him with his penetrating eye, —

“And when will that hour come, master?”

"You will hear it strike."

"On what clock, if you please?"

Coppenole, with his tranquil and rustic countenance, made the king approach the window.

"Listen, sire! There is here a donjon keep, a belfry, cannons, bourgeois, soldiers; when the belfry shall hum, when the cannons shall roar, when the donjon shall fall in ruins amid great noise, when bourgeois and soldiers shall howl and slay each other, the hour will strike."

Louis's face grew sombre and dreamy. He remained silent for a moment, then he gently patted with his hand the thick wall of the donjon, as one strokes the haunches of a steed.

"Oh! no!" said he. "You will not crumble so easily, will you, my good Bastille?"

And turning with an abrupt gesture towards the sturdy Fleming, —

"Have you never seen a revolt, Master Jacques?"

"I have made them," said the hosier.

"How do you set to work to make a revolt?" said the king.

"Ah!" replied Coppenole, "'tis not very difficult. There are a hundred ways. In the first place, there must be discontent in the city. The thing is not uncommon. And then, the character of the inhabitants. Those of Ghent are easy to stir into revolt. They always love the prince's son; the prince, never. Well! One morning, I will suppose, some one enters my shop, and says to me: 'Father Coppenole, there is this and there is that, the Demoiselle of Flanders wishes to save her ministers, the grand bailiff is doubling the impost on shagreen, or something else,' — what you will. I leave my work as it stands, I come out of my hosier's stall, and I shout: 'To the sack?' There is always some smashed cask at hand. I mount it, and I say aloud, in the first words that occur to me, what I have on my heart; and when one is of the people, sire, one always has something on the heart: Then people troop up, they shout, they ring the alarm bell, they arm the louts with what they take from the soldiers, the market people join in, and they set out. And it will always be thus, so long as there are lords in the seignories, bourgeois in the bourgs, and peasants in the country."

"And against whom do you thus rebel?" inquired the king; "against your bailiffs? against your lords?"

"Sometimes; that depends. Against the duke, also, sometimes."

Louis XI. returned and seated himself, saying, with a smile, —

“Ah! here they have only got as far as the bailiffs.”

At that instant Olivier le Daim returned. He was followed by two pages, who bore the king’s toilet articles; but what struck Louis XI. was that he was also accompanied by the provost of Paris and the chevalier of the watch, who appeared to be in consternation. The spiteful barber also wore an air of consternation, which was one of contentment beneath, however. It was he who spoke first.

“Sire, I ask your majesty’s pardon for the calamitous news which I bring.”

The king turned quickly and grazed the mat on the floor with the feet of his chair, —

“What does this mean?”

“Sire,” resumed Olivier le Daim, with the malicious air of a man who rejoices that he is about to deal a violent blow, “’tis not against the bailiff of the courts that this popular sedition is directed.”

“Against whom, then?”

“Against you, sire?’

The aged king rose erect and straight as a young man, —

“Explain yourself, Olivier! And guard your head well, gossip; for I swear to you by the cross of Saint-Lô that, if you lie to us at this hour, the sword which severed the head of Monsieur de Luxembourg is not so notched that it cannot yet sever yours!”

The oath was formidable; Louis XI. had only sworn twice in the course of his life by the cross of Saint-Lô.

Olivier opened his mouth to reply.

“Sire—”

“On your knees!” interrupted the king violently. “Tristan, have an eye to this man.”

Olivier knelt down and said coldly, —

“Sire, a sorceress was condemned to death by your court of parliament. She took refuge in Notre-Dame. The people are trying to take her from thence by main force. Monsieur the provost and monsieur the chevalier of the watch, who have just come from the riot, are here to give me the lie if this is not the truth. The populace is besieging Notre-Dame.”

“Yes, indeed!” said the king in a low voice, all pale and trembling with wrath. “Notre-Dame! They lay siege to our Lady, my good mistress in her cathedral! — Rise, Olivier. You are right. I give you Simon Radin’s charge.

You are right. ’Tis I whom they are attacking. The witch is under the protection of this church, the church is under my protection. And I thought that they were acting against the bailiff! ’Tis against myself!”

Then, rendered young by fury, he began to walk up and down with long strides. He no longer laughed, he was terrible, he went and came; the fox was changed into a hyaena. He seemed suffocated to such a degree that he could not speak; his lips moved, and his fleshless fists were clenched. All at once he raised his head, his hollow eye appeared full of light, and his voice burst forth like a clarion: “Down with them, Tristan! A heavy hand for these rascals! Go, Tristan, my friend! slay! slay!”

This eruption having passed, he returned to his seat, and said with cold and concentrated wrath, —

“Here, Tristan! There are here with us in the Bastille the fifty lances of the Vicomte de Gif, which makes three hundred horse: you will take them. There is also the company of our unattached archers of Monsieur de Châteaupers: you will take it. You are provost of the marshals; you have the men of your provostship: you will take them. At the Hôtel Saint-Pol you will find forty archers of monsieur the dauphin’s new guard: you will take them. And, with all these, you will hasten to Notre-Dame. Ah! messieurs, louts of Paris, do you fling yourselves thus against the crown of France, the sanctity of Notre-Dame, and the peace of this commonwealth! Exterminate, Tristan! exterminate! and let not a single one escape, except it be for Montfauçon.”

Tristan bowed. “’Tis well, sire.”

He added, after a silence, “And what shall I do with the sorceress?”

This question caused the king to meditate.

“Ah!” said he, “the sorceress! Monsieur d’Estouteville, what did the people wish to do with her?”

“Sire,” replied the provost of Paris, “I imagine that since the populace has come to tear her from her asylum in Notre-Dame, ’tis because that impunity wounds them, and they desire to hang her.”

The king appeared to reflect deeply: then, addressing Tristan l’Hermite, “Well! gossip, exterminate the people and hang the sorceress.”

“That’s it,” said Rym in a low tone to Coppenole, “punish the people for willing a thing, and then do what they wish.”

“Enough, sire,” replied Tristan. “If the sorceress is still in Notre-Dame, must she be seized in spite of the sanctuary?”

“*Pasque-Dieu*! the sanctuary!” said the king, scratching his ear. “But the woman must be hung, nevertheless.”

Here, as though seized with a sudden idea, he flung himself on his knees before his chair, took off his hat, placed it on the seat, and gazing devoutly at one of the leaden amulets which loaded it down, “Oh!” said he, with clasped hands, “our Lady of Paris, my gracious patroness, pardon me. I will only do it this once. This criminal must be punished. I assure you, madame the virgin, my good mistress, that she is a sorceress who is not worthy of your amiable protection. You know, madame, that many very pious princes have overstepped the privileges of the churches for the glory of God and the necessities of the State. Saint Hugues, bishop of England, permitted King Edward to hang a witch in his church. Saint-Louis of France, my master, transgressed, with the same object, the church of Monsieur Saint-Paul; and Monsieur Alphonse, son of the king of Jerusalem, the very church of the Holy Sepulchre. Pardon me, then, for this once. Our Lady of Paris, I will never do so again, and I will give you a fine statue of silver, like the one which I gave last year to Our Lady of Ecouys. So be it.”

He made the sign of the cross, rose, donned his hat once more, and said to Tristan, —

“Be diligent, gossip. Take Monsieur Châteaupers with you. You will cause the tocsin to be sounded. You will crush the populace. You will seize the witch. ’Tis said. And I mean the business of the execution to be done by you. You will render me an account of it. Come, Olivier, I shall not go to bed this night. Shave me.”

Tristan l’Hermite bowed and departed. Then the king, dismissing Rym and Coppenole with a gesture, —

“God guard you, messieurs, my good friends the Flemings. Go, take a little repose. The night advances, and we are nearer the morning than the evening.”

Both retired and gained their apartments under the guidance of the captain of the Bastille. Coppenole said to Guillaume Rym, —

“Hum! I have had enough of that coughing king! I have seen Charles of Burgundy drunk, and he was less malignant than Louis XI. when ailing.”

“Master Jacques,” replied Rym, “’tis because wine renders kings less cruel than does barley water.”

CHAPTER VI. LITTLE SWORD IN POCKET.

On emerging from the Bastille, Gringoire descended the Rue Saint-Antoine with the swiftness of a runaway horse. On arriving at the Baudoyer gate, he walked straight to the stone cross which rose in the middle of that place, as though he were able to distinguish in the darkness the figure of a man clad and cloaked in black, who was seated on the steps of the cross.

“Is it you, master?” said Gringoire.

The personage in black rose.

“Death and passion! You make me boil, Gringoire. The man on the tower of Saint-Gervais has just cried half-past one o’clock in the morning.”

“Oh,” retorted Gringoire, “’tis no fault of mine, but of the watch and the king. I have just had a narrow escape. I always just miss being hung. ’Tis my predestination.”

“You lack everything,” said the other. “But come quickly. Have you the password?”

“Fancy, master, I have seen the king. I come from him. He wears fustian breeches. ’Tis an adventure.”

“Oh! distaff of words! what is your adventure to me! Have you the password of the outcasts?”

“I have it. Be at ease. ‘Little sword in pocket.’”

“Good. Otherwise, we could not make our way as far as the church. The outcasts bar the streets. Fortunately, it appears that they have encountered resistance. We may still arrive in time.”

“Yes, master, but how are we to get into Notre-Dame?”

“I have the key to the tower.”

“And how are we to get out again?”

“Behind the cloister there is a little door which opens on the Terrain and the water. I have taken the key to it, and I moored a boat there this morning.”

“I have had a beautiful escape from being hung!” Gringoire repeated.

“Eh, quick! come!” said the other.

Both descended towards the city with long strides.

CHAPTER VII. CHATEAUPERS TO THE RESCUE.

The reader will, perhaps, recall the critical situation in which we left Quasimodo. The brave deaf man, assailed on all sides, had lost, if not all courage, at least all hope of saving, not himself (he was not thinking of himself), but the gypsy. He ran distractedly along the gallery. Notre-Dame was on the point of being taken by storm by the outcasts. All at once, a great galloping of horses filled the neighboring streets, and, with a long file of torches and a thick column of cavaliers, with free reins and lances in rest, these furious sounds debouched on the Place like a hurricane, —

“France! France! cut down the louts! Châteaupers to the rescue! Provostship! Provostship!”

The frightened vagabonds wheeled round.

Quasimodo who did not hear, saw the naked swords, the torches, the irons of the pikes, all that cavalry, at the head of which he recognized Captain Phoebus; he beheld the confusion of the outcasts, the terror of some, the disturbance among the bravest of them, and from this unexpected succor he recovered so much strength, that he hurled from the church the first assailants who were already climbing into the gallery.

It was, in fact, the king’s troops who had arrived. The vagabonds behaved bravely. They defended themselves like desperate men. Caught on the flank, by the Rue Saint-Pierre-aux-Boeufs, and in the rear through the Rue du Parvis, driven to bay against Notre-Dame, which they still assailed and Quasimodo defended, at the same time besiegers and besieged, they were in the singular situation in which Comte Henri Harcourt, *Taurinum obsessor idem et obsessus*, as his epitaph says, found himself later on, at the famous siege of Turin, in 1640, between Prince Thomas of Savoy, whom he was besieging, and the Marquis de Leganez, who was blockading him.

The battle was frightful. There was a dog’s tooth for wolf’s flesh, as P. Mathieu says. The king’s cavaliers, in whose midst Phoebus de Châteaupers bore himself valiantly, gave no quarter, and the slash of the sword disposed of those who escaped the thrust of the lance. The outcasts, badly armed foamed and bit with rage. Men, women, children, hurled themselves on the cruppers and the breasts of the horses, and hung there like cats, with teeth, finger nails and toe nails. Others struck the archers’ in the face with their torches. Others thrust iron hooks into the necks of the cavaliers and dragged them down. They slashed in pieces those who fell.

One was noticed who had a large, glittering scythe, and who, for a long time, mowed the legs of the horses. He was frightful. He was singing a ditty, with a nasal intonation, he swung and drew back his scythe incessantly. At every blow he traced around him a great circle of severed limbs. He advanced thus into the very thickest of the cavalry, with the tranquil slowness, the lolling of the head and the regular breathing of a harvester attacking a field of wheat. It was Chopin Trouillefou. A shot from an arquebus laid him low.

In the meantime, windows had been opened again. The neighbors hearing the war cries of the king’s troops, had mingled in the affray, and bullets rained upon the outcasts from every story. The Parvis was filled with a thick smoke, which the musketry streaked with flame. Through it one could confusedly distinguish the front of Notre-Dame, and the decrepit Hôtel-Dieu with some wan invalids gazing down from the heights of its roof all checkered with dormer windows.

At length the vagabonds gave way. Weariness, the lack of good weapons, the fright of this surprise, the musketry from the windows, the valiant attack of the king’s troops, all overwhelmed them. They forced the line of assailants, and fled in every direction, leaving the Parvis encumbered with dead.

When Quasimodo, who had not ceased to fight for a moment, beheld this rout, he fell on his knees and raised his hands to heaven; then, intoxicated with joy, he ran, he ascended with the swiftness of a bird to that cell, the approaches to which he had so intrepidly defended. He had but one thought now; it was to kneel before her whom he had just saved for the second time.

When he entered the cell, he found it empty.

BOOK ELEVENTH.

CHAPTER I. THE LITTLE SHOE.

La Esmeralda was sleeping at the moment when the outcasts assailed the church.

Soon the ever-increasing uproar around the edifice, and the uneasy bleating of her goat which had been awakened, had roused her from her slumbers. She had sat up, she had listened, she had looked; then, terrified by the light and noise, she had rushed from her cell to see. The aspect of the Place, the vision which was moving in it, the disorder of that nocturnal assault, that hideous crowd, leaping like a cloud of frogs, half seen in the gloom, the croaking of that hoarse multitude, those few red torches running and crossing each other in the darkness like the meteors which streak the misty surfaces of marshes, this whole scene produced upon her the effect of a mysterious battle between the phantoms of the witches' sabbath and the stone monsters of the church. Imbued from her very infancy with the superstitions of the Bohemian tribe, her first thought was that she had caught the strange beings peculiar to the night, in their deeds of witchcraft. Then she ran in terror to cower in her cell, asking of her pallet some less terrible nightmare.

But little by little the first vapors of terror had been dissipated; from the constantly increasing noise, and from many other signs of reality, she felt herself besieged not by spectres, but by human beings. Then her fear, though it did not increase, changed its character. She had dreamed of the possibility of a popular mutiny to tear her from her asylum. The idea of once more recovering life, hope, Phoebus, who was ever present in her future, the extreme helplessness of her condition, flight cut off, no support, her abandonment, her isolation, — these thoughts and a thousand others overwhelmed her. She fell upon her knees, with her head on her bed, her hands clasped over her head, full of anxiety and tremors, and, although a gypsy, an idolater, and a pagan, she began to entreat with sobs, mercy from the good Christian God, and to pray to our Lady, her hostess. For even if one believes in nothing, there are moments in life when one is always of the religion of the temple which is nearest at hand.

She remained thus prostrate for a very long time, trembling in truth, more than praying, chilled by the ever-closer breath of that furious multitude, understanding nothing of this outburst, ignorant of what was being plotted, what was being done, what they wanted, but foreseeing a terrible issue.

In the midst of this anguish, she heard some one walking near her. She turned round. Two men, one of whom carried a lantern, had just entered her cell. She uttered a feeble cry.

“Fear nothing,” said a voice which was not unknown to her, “it is I.”

“Who are you?” she asked.

“Pierre Gringoire.”

This name reassured her. She raised her eyes once more, and recognized the poet in very fact. But there stood beside him a black figure veiled from head to foot, which struck her by its silence.

“Oh!” continued Gringoire in a tone of reproach, “Djali recognized me before you!”

The little goat had not, in fact, waited for Gringoire to announce his name. No sooner had he entered than it rubbed itself gently against his knees, covering the poet with caresses and with white hairs, for it was shedding its hair. Gringoire returned the caresses.

“Who is this with you?” said the gypsy, in a low voice.

“Be at ease,” replied Gringoire. “’Tis one of my friends.” Then the philosopher setting his lantern on the ground, crouched upon the stones, and exclaimed enthusiastically, as he pressed Djali in his arms, —

“Oh! ’tis a graceful beast, more considerable no doubt, for it’s neatness than for its size, but ingenious, subtle, and lettered as a grammarian! Let us see, my Djali, hast thou forgotten any of thy pretty tricks? How does Master Jacques Charmolue?...”

The man in black did not allow him to finish. He approached Gringoire and shook him roughly by the shoulder.

Gringoire rose.

“’Tis true,” said he: “I forgot that we are in haste. But that is no reason master, for getting furious with people in this manner. My dear and lovely child, your life is in danger, and Djali’s also. They want to hang you again. We are your friends, and we have come to save you. Follow us.”

“Is it true?” she exclaimed in dismay.

“Yes, perfectly true. Come quickly!”

“I am willing,” she stammered. “But why does not your friend speak?”

“Ah!” said Gringoire, “’tis because his father and mother were fantastic people who made him of a taciturn temperament.”

She was obliged to content herself with this explanation. Gringoire took her by the hand; his companion picked up the lantern and walked on in front. Fear stunned the young girl. She allowed herself to be led away. The goat followed them, frisking, so joyous at seeing Gringoire again that it made him stumble every moment by thrusting its horns between his legs.

"Such is life," said the philosopher, every time that he came near falling down; "'tis often our best friends who cause us to be overthrown."

They rapidly descended the staircase of the towers, crossed the church, full of shadows and solitude, and all reverberating with uproar, which formed a frightful contrast, and emerged into the courtyard of the cloister by the red door. The cloister was deserted; the canons had fled to the bishop's palace in order to pray together; the courtyard was empty, a few frightened lackeys were crouching in dark corners. They directed their steps towards the door which opened from this court upon the Terrain. The man in black opened it with a key which he had about him. Our readers are aware that the Terrain was a tongue of land enclosed by walls on the side of the City and belonging to the chapter of Notre-Dame, which terminated the island on the east, behind the church. They found this enclosure perfectly deserted. There was here less tumult in the air. The roar of the outcasts' assault reached them more confusedly and less clamorously. The fresh breeze which follows the current of a stream, rustled the leaves of the only tree planted on the point of the Terrain, with a noise that was already perceptible. But they were still very close to danger. The nearest edifices to them were the bishop's palace and the church. It was plainly evident that there was great internal commotion in the bishop's palace. Its shadowy mass was all furrowed with lights which flitted from window to window; as, when one has just burned paper, there remains a sombre edifice of ashes in which bright sparks run a thousand eccentric courses. Beside them, the enormous towers of Notre-Dame, thus viewed from behind, with the long nave above which they rise cut out in black against the red and vast light which filled the Parvis, resembled two gigantic andirons of some cyclopean fire-grate.

What was to be seen of Paris on all sides wavered before the eye in a gloom mingled with light. Rembrandt has such backgrounds to his pictures.

The man with the lantern walked straight to the point of the Terrain. There, at the very brink of the water, stood the wormeaten remains of a fence of posts latticed with laths, whereon a low vine spread out a few thin branches like the fingers of an outspread hand. Behind, in the shadow cast by this trellis, a little boat lay concealed. The man made a sign to Gringoire and his companion to enter. The goat followed them. The man was the last to step in. Then he cut the boat's moorings, pushed it from the shore with a long boat-hook, and, seizing two oars, seated himself in the bow, rowing with all his might towards midstream. The Seine is very rapid at this point, and he had a good deal of trouble in leaving the point of the island.

Gringoire's first care on entering the boat was to place the goat on his knees. He took a position in the stern; and the young girl, whom the stranger inspired with an indefinable uneasiness, seated herself close to the poet.

When our philosopher felt the boat sway, he clapped his hands and kissed Djali between the horns.

"Oh!" said he, "now we are safe, all four of us."

He added with the air of a profound thinker, "One is indebted sometimes to fortune, sometimes to ruse, for the happy issue of great enterprises."

The boat made its way slowly towards the right shore. The young girl watched the unknown man with secret terror. He had carefully turned off the light of his dark lantern. A glimpse could be caught of him in the obscurity, in the bow of the boat, like a spectre. His cowl, which was still lowered, formed a sort of mask; and every time that he spread his arms, upon which hung large black sleeves, as he rowed, one would have said they were two huge bat's wings. Moreover, he had not yet uttered a word or breathed a syllable. No other noise was heard in the boat than the splashing of the oars, mingled with the rippling of the water along her sides.

"On my soul!" exclaimed Gringoire suddenly, "we are as cheerful and joyous as young owls! We preserve the silence of Pythagoreans or fishes! *Pasque-Dieu*! my friends, I should greatly like to have some one speak to me. The human voice is music to the human ear. 'Tis not I who say that, but Didymus of Alexandria, and they are illustrious words. Assuredly, Didymus of Alexandria is no mediocre philosopher. — One word, my lovely child! say but one word to me, I entreat you. By the way, you had a droll and peculiar little pout; do you still make it? Do you know, my dear, that parliament hath full jurisdiction over all places of asylum, and that you were running a great risk in your little chamber at Notre-Dame? Alas! the little bird trochylus maketh its nest in the jaws of the crocodile. — Master, here is the moon re-appearing. If only they do not perceive us. We are doing a laudable thing in saving mademoiselle, and yet we should be hung by order of the king if we were caught. Alas! human actions are taken by two handles. That is branded with disgrace in one which is crowned in another. He admires Cicero who blames Catiline. Is it not so, master? What say you to this philosophy? I possess philosophy by instinct, by nature, *ut apes geometriam*. — Come! no one answers me. What unpleasant moods you two are in! I must do all the talking alone. That is what we call a monologue in tragedy. — *Pasque-Dieu*! I must inform you that I have just seen the king, Louis XI., and that I have caught this oath from him, — *Pasque-Dieu*! They are still making a hearty howl in the city.— 'Tis a villanous, malicious old king. He is all swathed in furs. He still owes me the money for my epithalamium, and he came within a nick of hanging me this evening, which would have been very inconvenient to me. — He is niggardly towards men of merit. He ought to read the four books of Salvien of Cologne, *Adversits Avaritiam*. In truth! 'Tis a paltry king in his ways with men of letters, and one who commits very barbarous cruelties. He is a sponge, to soak money raised from the people. His saving is like the spleen which swelleth with the leanness of all the other members. Hence complaints against the hardness of the times become murmurs against the prince. Under this gentle and pious sire, the gallows crack with the hung, the blocks rot with blood, the prisons burst like over full bellies. This king hath one hand which grasps, and one which hangs. He is the procurator of Dame Tax and Monsieur Gibbet. The great are despoiled of their dignities, and the little incessantly overwhelmed with fresh oppressions. He is an exorbitant prince. I love not this monarch. And you, master?"

The man in black let the garrulous poet chatter on. He continued to struggle against the violent and narrow current, which separates the prow of the City and the stem of the island of Notre-Dame, which we call to-day the Isle St. Louis.

"By the way, master!" continued Gringoire suddenly. "At the moment when we arrived on the Parvis, through the enraged outcasts, did your reverence observe that poor little devil whose skull your deaf man was just cracking on the railing of the gallery of the kings? I am near sighted and I could not recognize him. Do you know who he could be?"

The stranger answered not a word. But he suddenly ceased rowing, his arms fell as though broken, his head sank on his breast, and la Esmeralda heard him sigh convulsively. She shuddered. She had heard such sighs before.

The boat, abandoned to itself, floated for several minutes with the stream. But the man in black finally recovered himself, seized the oars once more and began to row against the current. He doubled the point of the Isle of Notre Dame, and made for the landing-place of the Port an Foin.

"Ah!" said Gringoire, "yonder is the Barbeau mansion. — Stay, master, look: that group of black roofs which make such singular angles yonder, above that heap of black, fibrous grimy, dirty clouds, where the moon is completely crushed and spread out like the yolk of an egg whose shell is broken.— 'Tis a fine mansion. There is a chapel crowned with a small vault full of very well carved enrichments. Above, you can see the bell tower, very delicately pierced. There is also a pleasant garden, which consists of a pond, an aviary, an echo, a mall, a labyrinth, a house for wild beasts, and a quantity of leafy alleys very agreeable to Venus. There is also a rascal of a tree which is called 'the lewd,' because it favored the pleasures of a famous princess and a constable of France, who was a gallant and a wit. — Alas! we poor philosophers are to a constable as a plot of cabbages or a radish bed to the garden of the Louvre. What matters it, after all? human life, for the great as well as for us, is a mixture of good and evil. Pain is always by the side of joy, the spondee by the dactyl. — Master, I must relate to you the history of the Barbeau mansion. It ends in tragic fashion. It was in 1319, in the reign of Philippe V., the longest reign of the kings of France. The moral of the story is that the temptations of the flesh are pernicious and malignant. Let us not rest our glance too long on our neighbor's wife, however gratified our senses may be by her beauty. Fornication is a very libertine thought. Adultery is a prying into the pleasures of others — Ohé! the noise yonder is redoubling!"

The tumult around Notre-Dame was, in fact, increasing. They listened. Cries of victory were heard with tolerable distinctness. All at once, a hundred torches, the light of which glittered upon the helmets of men at arms, spread over the church at all heights, on the towers, on the galleries, on the flying buttresses. These torches seemed to be in search of something; and soon distant clamors reached the fugitives distinctly:— "The gypsy! the sorceress! death to the gypsy!"

The unhappy girl dropped her head upon her hands, and the unknown began to row furiously towards the shore. Meanwhile our philosopher reflected. He clasped the goat in his arms, and gently drew away from the gypsy, who pressed closer and closer to him, as though to the only asylum which remained to her.

It is certain that Gringoire was enduring cruel perplexity. He was thinking that the goat also, “according to existing law,” would be hung if recaptured; which would be a great pity, poor Djali! that he had thus two condemned creatures attached to him; that his companion asked no better than to take charge of the gypsy. A violent combat began between his thoughts, in which, like the Jupiter of the Iliad, he weighed in turn the gypsy and the goat; and he looked at them alternately with eyes moist with tears, saying between his teeth:

“But I cannot save you both!”

A shock informed them that the boat had reached the land at last. The uproar still filled the city. The unknown rose, approached the gypsy, and endeavored to take her arm to assist her to alight. She repulsed him and clung to the sleeve of Gringoire, who, in his turn, absorbed in the goat, almost repulsed her. Then she sprang alone from the boat. She was so troubled that she did not know what she did or whither she was going. Thus she remained for a moment, stunned, watching the water flow past; when she gradually returned to her senses, she found herself alone on the wharf with the unknown. It appears that Gringoire had taken advantage of the moment of debarcation to slip away with the goat into the block of houses of the Rue Grenier-sur-l’Eau.

The poor gypsy shivered when she beheld herself alone with this man. She tried to speak, to cry out, to call Gringoire; her tongue was dumb in her mouth, and no sound left her lips. All at once she felt the stranger’s hand on hers. It was a strong, cold hand. Her teeth chattered, she turned paler than the ray of moonlight which illuminated her. The man spoke not a word. He began to ascend towards the Place de Grève, holding her by the hand.

At that moment, she had a vague feeling that destiny is an irresistible force. She had no more resistance left in her, she allowed herself to be dragged along, running while he walked. At this spot the quay ascended. But it seemed to her as though she were descending a slope.

She gazed about her on all sides. Not a single passer-by. The quay was absolutely deserted. She heard no sound, she felt no people moving save in the tumultuous and glowing city, from which she was separated only by an arm of the Seine, and whence her name reached her, mingled with cries of

"Death!" The rest of Paris was spread around her in great blocks of shadows.

Meanwhile, the stranger continued to drag her along with the same silence and the same rapidity. She had no recollection of any of the places where she was walking. As she passed before a lighted window, she made an effort, drew up suddenly, and cried out, "Help!"

The bourgeois who was standing at the window opened it, appeared there in his shirt with his lamp, stared at the quay with a stupid air, uttered some words which she did not understand, and closed his shutter again. It was her last gleam of hope extinguished.

The man in black did not utter a syllable; he held her firmly, and set out again at a quicker pace. She no longer resisted, but followed him, completely broken.

From time to time she called together a little strength, and said, in a voice broken by the unevenness of the pavement and the breathlessness of their flight, "Who are you? Who are you?" He made no reply.

They arrived thus, still keeping along the quay, at a tolerably spacious square. It was the Grève. In the middle, a sort of black, erect cross was visible; it was the gallows. She recognized all this, and saw where she was.

The man halted, turned towards her and raised his cowl.

"Oh!" she stammered, almost petrified, "I knew well that it was he again!"

It was the priest. He looked like the ghost of himself; that is an effect of the moonlight, it seems as though one beheld only the spectres of things in that light.

"Listen!" he said to her; and she shuddered at the sound of that fatal voice which she had not heard for a long time. He continued speaking with those brief and panting jerks, which betoken deep internal convulsions. "Listen! we are here. I am going to speak to you. This is the Grève. This is an extreme point. Destiny gives us to one another. I am going to decide as to your life; you will decide as to my soul. Here is a place, here is a night beyond which one sees nothing. Then listen to me. I am going to tell you...In the first place, speak not to me of your Phoebus. (As he spoke thus he paced to and fro, like a man who cannot remain in one place, and dragged her after him.) Do not speak to me of him. Do you see? If you utter that name, I know not what I shall do, but it will be terrible."

Then, like a body which recovers its centre of gravity, he became motionless once more, but his words betrayed no less agitation. His voice grew lower and lower.

“Do not turn your head aside thus. Listen to me. It is a serious matter. In the first place, here is what has happened. — All this will not be laughed at. I swear it to you. — What was I saying? Remind me! Oh! — There is a decree of Parliament which gives you back to the scaffold. I have just rescued you from their hands. But they are pursuing you. Look!”

He extended his arm toward the City. The search seemed, in fact, to be still in progress there. The uproar drew nearer; the tower of the lieutenant’s house, situated opposite the Grève, was full of clamors and light, and soldiers could be seen running on the opposite quay with torches and these cries, “The gypsy! Where is the gypsy! Death! Death!”

“You see that they are in pursuit of you, and that I am not lying to you. I love you. — Do not open your mouth; refrain from speaking to me rather, if it be only to tell me that you hate me. I have made up my mind not to hear that again. — I have just saved you. — Let me finish first. I can save you wholly. I have prepared everything. It is yours at will. If you wish, I can do it.”

He broke off violently. “No, that is not what I should say!”

As he went with hurried step and made her hurry also, for he did not release her, he walked straight to the gallows, and pointed to it with his finger, —

“Choose between us two,” he said, coldly.

She tore herself from his hands and fell at the foot of the gibbet, embracing that funereal support, then she half turned her beautiful head, and looked at the priest over her shoulder. One would have said that she was a Holy Virgin at the foot of the cross. The priest remained motionless, his finger still raised toward the gibbet, preserving his attitude like a statue. At length the gypsy said to him, —

“It causes me less horror than you do.”

Then he allowed his arm to sink slowly, and gazed at the pavement in profound dejection.

“If these stones could speak,” he murmured, “yes, they would say that a * very unhappy man stands here.”

He went on. The young girl, kneeling before the gallows, enveloped in her long flowing hair, let him speak on without interruption. He now had a gentle and plaintive accent which contrasted sadly with the haughty harshness of his features.

"I love you. Oh! how true that is! So nothing comes of that fire which burns my heart! Alas! young girl, night and day — yes, night and day I tell you, — it is torture. Oh! I suffer too much, my poor child. 'Tis a thing deserving of compassion, I assure you. You see that I speak gently to you. I really wish that you should no longer cherish this horror of me. — After all, if a man loves a woman, 'tis not his fault! — Oh, my God! — What! So you will never pardon me? You will always hate me? All is over then. It is that which renders me evil, do you see? and horrible to myself. — You will not even look at me! You are thinking of something else, perchance, while I stand here and talk to you, shuddering on the brink of eternity for both of us! Above all things, do not speak to me of the officer! — I would cast myself at your knees, I would kiss not your feet, but the earth which is under your feet; I would sob like a child, I would tear from my breast not words, but my very heart and vitals, to tell you that I love you; — all would be useless, all! — And yet you have nothing in your heart but what is tender and merciful. You are radiant with the most beautiful mildness; you are wholly sweet, good, pitiful, and charming. Alas! You cherish no ill will for any one but me alone! Oh! what a fatality!"

He hid his face in his hands. The young girl heard him weeping. It was for the first time. Thus erect and shaken by sobs, he was more miserable and more suppliant than when on his knees. He wept thus for a considerable time.

"Come!" he said, these first tears passed, "I have no more words. I had, however, thought well as to what you would say. Now I tremble and shiver and break down at the decisive moment, I feel conscious of something supreme enveloping us, and I stammer. Oh! I shall fall upon the pavement if you do not take pity on me, pity on yourself. Do not condemn us both. If you only knew how much I love you! What a heart is mine! Oh! what desertion of all virtue! What desperate abandonment of myself! A doctor, I mock at science; a gentleman, I tarnish my own name; a priest, I make of the missal a pillow of sensuality, I spit in the face of my God! all this for thee, enchantress! to be more worthy of thy hell! And you will not have the apostate! Oh! let me tell you all! more still, something more horrible, oh! Yet more horrible!...."

As he uttered these last words, his air became utterly distracted. He was silent for a moment, and resumed, as though speaking to himself, and in a strong voice, —

“Cain, what hast thou done with thy brother?”

There was another silence, and he went on —

“What have I done with him, Lord? I received him, I reared him, I nourished him, I loved him, I idolized him, and I have slain him! Yes, Lord, they have just dashed his head before my eyes on the stone of thine house, and it is because of me, because of this woman, because of her.”

His eye was wild. His voice grew ever weaker; he repeated many times, yet, mechanically, at tolerably long intervals, like a bell prolonging its last vibration: “Because of her. — Because of her.”

Then his tongue no longer articulated any perceptible sound; but his lips still moved. All at once he sank together, like something crumbling, and lay motionless on the earth, with his head on his knees.

A touch from the young girl, as she drew her foot from under him, brought him to himself. He passed his hand slowly over his hollow cheeks, and gazed for several moments at his fingers, which were wet, “What!” he murmured, “I have wept!”

And turning suddenly to the gypsy with unspeakable anguish, —

“Alas! you have looked coldly on at my tears! Child, do you know that those tears are of lava? Is it indeed true? Nothing touches when it comes from the man whom one does not love. If you were to see me die, you would laugh. Oh! I do not wish to see you die! One word! A single word of pardon! Say not that you love me, say only that you will do it; that will suffice; I will save you. If not — oh! the hour is passing. I entreat you by all that is sacred, do not wait until I shall have turned to stone again, like that gibbet which also claims you! Reflect that I hold the destinies of both of us in my hand, that I am mad, — it is terrible, — that I may let all go to destruction, and that there is beneath us a bottomless abyss, unhappy girl, whither my fall will follow yours to all eternity! One word of kindness! Say one word! only one word!”

She opened her mouth to answer him. He flung himself on his knees to receive with adoration the word, possibly a tender one, which was on the point of issuing from her lips. She said to him, “You are an assassin!”

The priest clasped her in his arms with fury, and began to laugh with an abominable laugh.

“Well, yes, an assassin!” he said, “and I will have you. You will not have me for your slave, you shall have me for your master. I will have you! I have a den, whither I will drag you. You will follow me, you will be obliged to follow me, or I will deliver you up! You must die, my beauty, or be mine! belong to the priest! belong to the apostate! belong to the assassin! this very night, do you hear? Come! joy; kiss me, mad girl! The tomb or my bed!”

His eyes sparkled with impurity and rage. His lewd lips reddened the young girl’s neck. She struggled in his arms. He covered her with furious kisses.

“Do not bite me, monster!” she cried. “Oh! the foul, odious monk! leave me! I will tear out thy ugly gray hair and fling it in thy face by the handful!”

He reddened, turned pale, then released her and gazed at her with a gloomy air. She thought herself victorious, and continued, —

“I tell you that I belong to my Phoebus, that ’tis Phoebus whom I love, that ’tis Phoebus who is handsome! you are old, priest! you are ugly! Begone!”

He gave vent to a horrible cry, like the wretch to whom a hot iron is applied. “Die, then!” he said, gnashing his teeth. She saw his terrible look and tried to fly. He caught her once more, he shook her, he flung her on the ground, and walked with rapid strides towards the corner of the Tour-Roland, dragging her after him along the pavement by her beautiful hands.

On arriving there, he turned to her, —

“For the last time, will you be mine?”

She replied with emphasis, —

“No!”

Then he cried in a loud voice, —

“Gudule! Gudule! here is the gypsy! take your vengeance!”

The young girl felt herself seized suddenly by the elbow. She looked. A fleshless arm was stretched from an opening in the wall, and held her like a hand of iron.

“Hold her well,” said the priest; “’tis the gypsy escaped. Release her not. I will go in search of the sergeants. You shall see her hanged.”

A guttural laugh replied from the interior of the wall to these bloody words— “Hah! hah! hah!” — The gypsy watched the priest retire in the direction of the Pont Notre-Dame. A cavalcade was heard in that direction.

The young girl had recognized the spiteful recluse. Panting with terror, she tried to disengage herself. She writhed, she made many starts of agony and despair, but the other held her with incredible strength. The lean and bony fingers which bruised her, clenched on her flesh and met around it. One would have said that this hand was riveted to her arm. It was more than a chain, more than a fetter, more than a ring of iron, it was a living pair of pincers endowed with intelligence, which emerged from the wall.

She fell back against the wall exhausted, and then the fear of death took possession of her. She thought of the beauty of life, of youth, of the view of heaven, the aspects of nature, of her love for Phoebus, of all that was vanishing and all that was approaching, of the priest who was denouncing her, of the headsman who was to come, of the gallows which was there. Then she felt terror mount to the very roots of her hair and she heard the mocking laugh of the recluse, saying to her in a very low tone: “Hah! hah! hah! you are going to be hanged!”

She turned a dying look towards the window, and she beheld the fierce face of the sacked nun through the bars.

“What have I done to you?” she said, almost lifeless.

The recluse did not reply, but began to mumble with a singsong irritated, mocking intonation: “Daughter of Egypt! daughter of Egypt! daughter of Egypt!”

The unhappy Esmeralda dropped her head beneath her flowing hair, comprehending that it was no human being she had to deal with.

All at once the recluse exclaimed, as though the gypsy’s question had taken all this time to reach her brain,—”’What have you done to me?’ you say! Ah! what have you done to me, gypsy! Well! listen. — I had a child! you see! I had a child! a child, I tell you! — a pretty little girl! — my Agnes!” she went on wildly, kissing something in the dark.— “Well! do you see, daughter of Egypt? they took my child from me; they stole my child; they ate my child. That is what you have done to me.”

The young girl replied like a lamb, —

“Alas! perchance I was not born then!”

“Oh! yes!” returned the recluse, “you must have been born. You were among them. She would be the same age as you! so! — I have been here fifteen years; fifteen years have I suffered; fifteen years have I prayed; fifteen years have I beat my head against these four walls — I tell you that ’twas the gypsies who stole her from me, do you hear that? and who ate her with their teeth. — Have you a heart? imagine a child playing, a child sucking; a child sleeping. It is so innocent a thing! — Well! that, that is what they took from me, what they killed. The good God knows it well! To-day, it is my turn; I am going to eat the gypsy. — Oh! I would bite you well, if the bars did not prevent me! My head is too large! — Poor little one! while she was asleep! And if they woke her up when they took her, in vain she might cry; I was not there! — Ah! gypsy mothers, you devoured my child! come see your own."

Then she began to laugh or to gnash her teeth, for the two things resembled each other in that furious face. The day was beginning to dawn. An ashy gleam dimly lighted this scene, and the gallows grew more and more distinct in the square. On the other side, in the direction of the bridge of Notre-Dame, the poor condemned girl fancied that she heard the sound of cavalry approaching.

"Madam," she cried, clasping her hands and falling on her knees, dishevelled, distracted, mad with fright; "madam! have pity! They are coming. I have done nothing to you. Would you wish to see me die in this horrible fashion before your very eyes? You are pitiful, I am sure. It is too frightful. Let me make my escape. Release me! Mercy. I do not wish to die like that!"

"Give me back my child!" said the recluse.

"Mercy! Mercy!"

"Give me back my child!"

"Release me, in the name of heaven!"

"Give me back my child!"

Again the young girl fell; exhausted, broken, and having already the glassy eye of a person in the grave.

"Alas!" she faltered, "you seek your child, I seek my parents."

"Give me back my little Agnes!" pursued Gudule. "You do not know where she is? Then die! — I will tell you. I was a woman of the town, I had a child, they took my child. It was the gypsies. You see plainly that you must die. When your mother, the gypsy, comes to reclaim you, I shall say to her: 'Mother, look at that gibbet! — Or, give me back my child. Do you know where she is, my little daughter? Stay! I will show you. Here is her shoe, all that is left me of her. Do you know where its mate is? If you know, tell me, and if it is only at the other end of the world, I will crawl to it on my knees."

As she spoke thus, with her other arm extended through the window, she showed the gypsy the little embroidered shoe. It was already light enough to distinguish its shape and its colors.

"Let me see that shoe," said the gypsy, quivering. "God! God!"

And at the same time, with her hand which was at liberty, she quickly opened the little bag ornamented with green glass, which she wore about her neck.

"Go on, go on!" grumbled Gudule, "search your demon's amulet!"

All at once, she stopped short, trembled in every limb, and cried in a voice which proceeded from the very depths of her being: "My daughter!"

The gypsy had just drawn from the bag a little shoe absolutely similar to the other. To this little shoe was attached a parchment on which was inscribed this charm, —

Quand le parell retrouveras
Ta mere te tendras les bras.*

* When thou shalt find its mate, thy mother will stretch out her arms to thee.

Quicker than a flash of lightning, the recluse had laid the two shoes together, had read the parchment and had put close to the bars of the window her face beaming with celestial joy as she cried, —

"My daughter! my daughter!"

"My mother!" said the gypsy.

Here we are unequal to the task of depicting the scene. The wall and the iron bars were between them. "Oh! the wall!" cried the recluse. "Oh! to see her and not to embrace her! Your hand! your hand!"

The young girl passed her arm through the opening; the recluse threw herself on that hand, pressed her lips to it and there remained, buried in that kiss, giving no other sign of life than a sob which heaved her breast from time to time. In the meanwhile, she wept in torrents, in silence, in the dark, like a rain at night. The poor mother poured out in floods upon that adored hand the dark and deep well of tears, which lay within her, and into which her grief had filtered, drop by drop, for fifteen years.

All at once she rose, flung aside her long gray hair from her brow, and without uttering a word, began to shake the bars of her cage cell, with both hands, more furiously than a lioness. The bars held firm. Then she went to seek in the corner of her cell a huge paving stone, which served her as a pillow, and launched it against them with such violence that one of the bars broke, emitting thousands of sparks. A second blow completely shattered the old iron cross which barricaded the window. Then with her two hands, she finished breaking and removing the rusted stumps of the bars. There are moments when woman’s hands possess superhuman strength.

A passage broken, less than a minute was required for her to seize her daughter by the middle of her body, and draw her into her cell. “Come let me draw you out of the abyss,” she murmured.

When her daughter was inside the cell, she laid her gently on the ground, then raised her up again, and bearing her in her arms as though she were still only her little Agnes, she walked to and fro in her little room, intoxicated, frantic, joyous, crying out, singing, kissing her daughter, talking to her, bursting into laughter, melting into tears, all at once and with vehemence.

“My daughter! my daughter!” she said. “I have my daughter! here she is! The good God has given her back to me! Ha you! come all of you! Is there any one there to see that I have my daughter? Lord Jesus, how beautiful she is! You have made me wait fifteen years, my good God, but it was in order to give her back to me beautiful. — Then the gypsies did not eat her! Who said so? My little daughter! my little daughter! Kiss me. Those good gypsies! I love the gypsies! — It is really you! That was what made my heart leap every time that you passed by. And I took that for hatred! Forgive me, my Agnes, forgive me. You thought me very malicious, did you not? I love you. Have you still the little mark on your neck? Let us see. She still has it. Oh! you are beautiful! It was I who gave you those big eyes, mademoiselle. Kiss me. I love you. It is nothing to me that other mothers have children; I scorn them now. They have only to come and see. Here is mine. See her neck, her eyes, her hair, her hands. Find me anything as beautiful as that! Oh! I promise you she will have lovers, that she will! I have wept for fifteen years. All my beauty has departed and has fallen to her. Kiss me.”

She addressed to her a thousand other extravagant remarks, whose accent constituted their sole beauty, disarranged the poor girl’s garments even to the point of making her blush, smoothed her silky hair with her hand, kissed her foot, her knee, her brow, her eyes, was in raptures over everything. The young girl let her have her way, repeating at intervals and very low and with infinite tenderness, “My mother!”

“Do you see, my little girl,” resumed the recluse, interspersing her words with kisses, “I shall love you dearly? We will go away from here. We are going to be very happy. I have inherited something in Reims, in our country.

You know Reims? Ah! no, you do not know it; you were too small! If you only knew how pretty you were at the age of four months! Tiny feet that people came even from Epernay, which is seven leagues away, to see! We shall have a field, a house. I will put you to sleep in my bed. My God! my God! who would believe this? I have my daughter!”

“Oh, my mother!” said the young girl, at length finding strength to speak in her emotion, “the gypsy woman told me so. There was a good gypsy of our band who died last year, and who always cared for me like a nurse. It was she who placed this little bag about my neck. She always said to me: ‘Little one, guard this jewel well! ’Tis a treasure. It will cause thee to find thy mother once again. Thou wearest thy mother about thy neck.’ — The gypsy predicted it!”

The sacked nun again pressed her daughter in her arms.

“Come, let me kiss you! You say that prettily. When we are in the country, we will place these little shoes on an infant Jesus in the church. We certainly owe that to the good, holy Virgin. What a pretty voice you have! When you spoke to me just now, it was music! Ah! my Lord God! I have found my child again! But is this story credible? Nothing will kill one — or I should have died of joy.”

And then she began to clap her hands again and to laugh and to cry out: “We are going to be so happy!”

At that moment, the cell resounded with the clang of arms and a galloping of horses which seemed to be coming from the Pont Notre-Dame, amid advancing farther and farther along the quay. The gypsy threw herself with anguish into the arms of the sacked nun.

“Save me! save me! mother! they are coming!”

“Oh, heaven! what are you saying? I had forgotten! They are in pursuit of you! What have you done?”

“I know not,” replied the unhappy child; “but I am condemned to die.”

“To die!” said Gudule, staggering as though struck by lightning; “to die!” she repeated slowly, gazing at her daughter with staring eyes.

“Yes, mother,” replied the frightened young girl, “they want to kill me. They are coming to seize me. That gallows is for me! Save me! save me! They are coming! Save me!”

The recluse remained for several moments motionless and petrified, then she moved her head in sign of doubt, and suddenly giving vent to a burst of laughter, but with that terrible laugh which had come back to her, —

“Ho! ho! no! ’tis a dream of which you are telling me. Ah, yes! I lost her, that lasted fifteen years, and then I found her again, and that lasted a minute! And they would take her from me again! And now, when she is beautiful, when she is grown up, when she speaks to me, when she loves me; it is now that they would come to devour her, before my very eyes, and I her mother! Oh! no! these things are not possible. The good God does not permit such things as that.”

Here the cavalcade appeared to halt, and a voice was heard to say in the distance, —

“This way, Messire Tristan! The priest says that we shall find her at the Rat-Hole.” The noise of the horses began again.

The recluse sprang to her feet with a shriek of despair. “Fly! fly! my child! All comes back to me. You are right. It is your death! Horror! Maledictions! Fly!”

She thrust her head through the window, and withdrew it again hastily.

“Remain,” she said, in a low, curt, and lugubrious tone, as she pressed the hand of the gypsy, who was more dead than alive. “Remain! Do not breathe! There are soldiers everywhere. You cannot get out. It is too light.”

Her eyes were dry and burning. She remained silent for a moment; but she paced the cell hurriedly, and halted now and then to pluck out handfuls of her gray hairs, which she afterwards tore with her teeth.

Suddenly she said: “They draw near. I will speak with them. Hide yourself in this corner. They will not see you. I will tell them that you have made your escape. That I released you, i’ faith!”

She set her daughter (down for she was still carrying her), in one corner of the cell which was not visible from without. She made her crouch down, arranged her carefully so that neither foot nor hand projected from the shadow, untied her black hair which she spread over her white robe to conceal it, placed in front of her her jug and her paving stone, the only articles of furniture which she possessed, imagining that this jug and stone would hide her. And when this was finished she became more tranquil, and knelt down to pray. The day, which was only dawning, still left many shadows in the Rat-Hole.

At that moment, the voice of the priest, that infernal voice, passed very close to the cell, crying, —

“This way, Captain Phoebus de Châteaupers.”

At that name, at that voice, la Esmeralda, crouching in her corner, made a movement.

“Do not stir!” said Gudule.

She had barely finished when a tumult of men, swords, and horses halted around the cell. The mother rose quickly and went to post herself before her window, in order to stop it up. She beheld a large troop of armed men, both horse and foot, drawn up on the Grève.

The commander dismounted, and came toward her.

“Old woman!” said this man, who had an atrocious face, “we are in search of a witch to hang her; we were told that you had her.”

The poor mother assumed as indifferent an air as she could, and replied, —

“I know not what you mean.”

The other resumed, “*Tête Dieu*! What was it that frightened archdeacon said? Where is he?”

“Monseigneur,” said a soldier, “he has disappeared.”

“Come, now, old madwoman,” began the commander again, “do not lie. A sorceress was given in charge to you. What have you done with her?”

The recluse did not wish to deny all, for fear of awakening suspicion, and replied in a sincere and surly tone, —

“If you are speaking of a big young girl who was put into my hands a while ago, I will tell you that she bit me, and that I released her. There! Leave me in peace.”

The commander made a grimace of disappointment. “Don’t lie to me, old spectre!” said he. “My name is Tristan l’Hermite, and I am the king’s gossip. Tristan the Hermit, do you hear?” He added, as he glanced at the Place de Grève around him, “’Tis a name which has an echo here.”

“You might be Satan the Hermit,” replied Gudule, who was regaining hope, “but I should have nothing else to say to you, and I should never be afraid of you.”

“*Tête-Dieu*,” said Tristan, “here is a crone! Ah! So the witch girl hath fled! And in which direction did she go?” Gudule replied in a careless tone, —

“Through the Rue du Mouton, I believe.”

Tristan turned his head and made a sign to his troop to prepare to set out on the march again. The recluse breathed freely once more.

“Monseigneur,” suddenly said an archer, “ask the old elf why the bars of her window are broken in this manner.”

This question brought anguish again to the heart of the miserable mother. Nevertheless, she did not lose all presence of mind.

“They have always been thus,” she stammered.

“Bah!” retorted the archer, “only yesterday they still formed a fine black cross, which inspired devotion.”

Tristan east a sidelong glance at the recluse.

“I think the old dame is getting confused!”

The unfortunate woman felt that all depended on her self-possession, and, although with death in her soul, she began to grin. Mothers possess such strength.

“Bah!” said she, “the man is drunk. ’Tis more than a year since the tail of a stone cart dashed against my window and broke in the grating. And how I cursed the carter, too.”

“’Tis true,” said another archer, “I was there.”

Always and everywhere people are to be found who have seen everything. This unexpected testimony from the archer re-encouraged the recluse, whom this interrogatory was forcing to cross an abyss on the edge of a knife. But she was condemned to a perpetual alternative of hope and alarm.

“If it was a cart which did it,” retorted the first soldier, “the stumps of the bars should be thrust inwards, while they actually are pushed outwards.”

“Ho! ho!” said Tristan to the soldier, “you have the nose of an inquisitor of the Châtelet. Reply to what he says, old woman.”

“Good heavens!” she exclaimed, driven to bay, and in a voice that was full of tears in despite of her efforts, “I swear to you, monseigneur, that ’twas a cart which broke those bars. You hear the man who saw it. And then, what has that to do with your gypsy?”

“Hum!” growled Tristan.

“The devil!” went on the soldier, flattered by the provost’s praise, “these fractures of the iron are perfectly fresh.”

Tristan tossed his head. She turned pale.

“How long ago, say you, did the cart do it?”

“A month, a fortnight, perhaps, monseigheur, I know not.”

“She first said more than a year,” observed the soldier.

“That is suspicious,” said the provost.

“Monseigneur!” she cried, still pressed against the opening, and trembling lest suspicion should lead them to thrust their heads through and look into her cell; “monseigneur, I swear to you that ’twas a cart which broke this grating. I swear it to you by the angels of paradise. If it was not a cart, may I be eternally damned, and I reject God!”

“You put a great deal of heat into that oath;” said Tristan, with his inquisitorial glance.

The poor woman felt her assurance vanishing more and more. She had reached the point of blundering, and she comprehended with terror that she was saying what she ought not to have said.

Here another soldier came up, crying, —

“Monsieur, the old hag lies. The sorceress did not flee through the Rue de Mouton. The street chain has remained stretched all night, and the chain guard has seen no one pass.”

Tristan, whose face became more sinister with every moment, addressed the recluse, —

“What have you to say to that?”

She tried to make head against this new incident,

“That I do not know, monseigneur; that I may have been mistaken. I believe, in fact, that she crossed the water.”

“That is in the opposite direction,” said the provost, “and it is not very likely that she would wish to re-enter the city, where she was being pursued. You are lying, old woman.”

“And then,” added the first soldier, “there is no boat either on this side of the stream or on the other.”

“She swam across,” replied the recluse, defending her ground foot by foot.

“Do women swim?” said the soldier.

“*Tête Dieu*! old woman! You are lying!” repeated Tristan angrily. “I have a good mind to abandon that sorceress and take you. A quarter of an hour of torture will, perchance, draw the truth from your throat. Come! You are to follow us.”

She seized on these words with avidity.

“As you please, monseigneur. Do it. Do it. Torture. I am willing. Take me away. Quick, quick! let us set out at once! — During that time,” she said to herself, “my daughter will make her escape.”

"'S death!" said the provost, "what an appetite for the rack! I understand not this madwoman at all."

An old, gray-haired sergeant of the guard stepped out of the ranks, and addressing the provost, —

"Mad in sooth, monseigneur. If she released the gypsy, it was not her fault, for she loves not the gypsies. I have been of the watch these fifteen years, and I hear her every evening cursing the Bohemian women with endless imprecations. If the one of whom we are in pursuit is, as I suppose, the little dancer with the goat, she detests that one above all the rest."

Gudule made an effort and said, —

"That one above all."

The unanimous testimony of the men of the watch confirmed the old sergeant's words to the provost. Tristan l'Hermite, in despair at extracting anything from the recluse, turned his back on her, and with unspeakable anxiety she beheld him direct his course slowly towards his horse.

"Come!" he said, between his teeth, "March on! let us set out again on the quest. I shall not sleep until that gypsy is hanged."

But he still hesitated for some time before mounting his horse. Gudule palpitated between life and death, as she beheld him cast about the Place that uneasy look of a hunting dog which instinctively feels that the lair of the beast is close to him, and is loath to go away. At length he shook his head and leaped into his saddle. Gudule's horribly compressed heart now dilated, and she said in a low voice, as she cast a glance at her daughter, whom she had not ventured to look at while they were there, "Saved!"

The poor child had remained all this time in her corner, without breathing, without moving, with the idea of death before her. She had lost nothing of the scene between Gudule and Tristan, and the anguish of her mother had found its echo in her heart. She had heard all the successive snappings of the thread by which she hung suspended over the gulf; twenty times she had fancied that she saw it break, and at last she began to breathe again and to feel her foot on firm ground. At that moment she heard a voice saying to the provost: "*Corboeuf*! Monsieur le Prevôt, 'tis no affair of mine, a man of arms, to hang witches. The rabble of the populace is suppressed. I leave you to attend to the matter alone. You will allow me to rejoin my company, who are waiting for their captain."

The voice was that of Phoebus de Châteaupers; that which took place within her was ineffable. He was there, her friend, her protector, her support, her refuge, her Phoebus. She rose, and before her mother could prevent her, she had rushed to the window, crying, —

“Phoebus! aid me, my Phoebus!”

Phoebus was no longer there. He had just turned the corner of the Rue de la Coutellerie at a gallop. But Tristan had not yet taken his departure.

The recluse rushed upon her daughter with a roar of agony. She dragged her violently back, digging her nails into her neck. A tigress mother does not stand on trifles. But it was too late. Tristan had seen.

“Hé! hé!” he exclaimed with a laugh which laid bare all his teeth and made his face resemble the muzzle of a wolf, “two mice in the trap!”

“I suspected as much,” said the soldier.

Tristan clapped him on the shoulder, —

“You are a good cat! Come!” he added, “where is Henriet Cousin?”

A man who had neither the garments nor the air of a soldier, stepped from the ranks. He wore a costume half gray, half brown, flat hair, leather sleeves, and carried a bundle of ropes in his huge hand. This man always attended Tristan, who always attended Louis XI. “Friend,” said Tristan l’Hermite, “I presume that this is the sorceress of whom we are in search. You will hang me this one. Have you your ladder?”

“There is one yonder, under the shed of the Pillar-House,” replied the man. “Is it on this justice that the thing is to be done?” he added, pointing to the stone gibbet.

“Yes.”

“Ho, hé!” continued the man with a huge laugh, which was still more brutal than that of the provost, “we shall not have far to go.”

“Make haste!” said Tristan, “you shall laugh afterwards.”

In the meantime, the recluse had not uttered another word since Tristan had seen her daughter and all hope was lost. She had flung the poor gypsy, half dead, into the corner of the cellar, and had placed herself once more at the window with both hands resting on the angle of the sill like two claws. In this attitude she was seen to cast upon all those soldiers her glance which had become wild and frantic once more. At the moment when Rennet Cousin approached her cell, she showed him so savage a face that he shrank back.

“Monseigneur,” he said, returning to the provost, “which am I to take?”

“The young one.”

“So much the better, for the old one seemeth difficult.”

“Poor little dancer with the goat!” said the old sergeant of the watch.

Rennet Cousin approached the window again. The mother’s eyes made his own droop. He said with a good deal of timidity, —

“Madam” —

She interrupted him in a very low but furious voice, —

“What do you ask?”

“It is not you,” he said, “it is the other.”

“What other?”

“The young one.”

She began to shake her head, crying, —

“There is no one! there is no one! there is no one!”

“Yes, there is!” retorted the hangman, “and you know it well. Let me take the young one. I have no wish to harm you.”

She said, with a strange sneer, —

“Ah! so you have no wish to harm me!”

“Let me have the other, madam; ’tis monsieur the provost who wills it.”

She repeated with a look of madness, —

“There is no one here.”

“I tell you that there is!” replied the executioner. “We have all seen that there are two of you.”

“Look then!” said the recluse, with a sneer. “Thrust your head through the window.”

The executioner observed the mother’s finger-nails and dared not.

“Make haste!” shouted Tristan, who had just ranged his troops in a circle round the Rat-Hole, and who sat on his horse beside the gallows.

Rennet returned once more to the provost in great embarrassment. He had flung his rope on the ground, and was twisting his hat between his hands with an awkward air.

“Monseigneur,” he asked, “where am I to enter?”

“By the door.”

“There is none.”

“By the window.”

“’Tis too small.”

“Make it larger,” said Tristan angrily. “Have you not pickaxes?”

The mother still looked on steadfastly from the depths of her cavern. She no longer hoped for anything, she no longer knew what she wished, except that she did not wish them to take her daughter.

Rennet Cousin went in search of the chest of tools for the night man, under the shed of the Pillar-House. He drew from it also the double ladder, which he immediately set up against the gallows. Five or six of the provost’s men armed themselves with picks and crowbars, and Tristan betook himself, in company with them, towards the window.

“Old woman,” said the provost, in a severe tone, “deliver up to us that girl quietly.”

She looked at him like one who does not understand.

“*Tête Dieu*!” continued Tristan, “why do you try to prevent this sorceress being hung as it pleases the king?”

The wretched woman began to laugh in her wild way.

“Why? She is my daughter.”

The tone in which she pronounced these words made even Henriet Cousin shudder.

“I am sorry for that,” said the provost, “but it is the king’s good pleasure.”

She cried, redoubling her terrible laugh, —

“What is your king to me? I tell you that she is my daughter!”

“Pierce the wall,” said Tristan.

In order to make a sufficiently wide opening, it sufficed to dislodge one course of stone below the window. When the mother heard the picks and crowbars mining her fortress, she uttered a terrible cry; then she began to stride about her cell with frightful swiftness, a wild beasts’ habit which her cage had imparted to her. She no longer said anything, but her eyes flamed. The soldiers were chilled to the very soul.

All at once she seized her paving stone, laughed, and hurled it with both fists upon the workmen. The stone, badly flung (for her hands trembled), touched no one, and fell short under the feet of Tristan’s horse. She gnashed her teeth.

In the meantime, although the sun had not yet risen, it was broad daylight; a beautiful rose color enlivened the ancient, decayed chimneys of the Pillar-House. It was the hour when the earliest windows of the great city open joyously on the roofs. Some workmen, a few fruit-sellers on their way to the markets on their asses, began to traverse the Grève; they halted for a moment before this group of soldiers clustered round the Rat-Hole, stared at it with an air of astonishment and passed on.

The recluse had gone and seated herself by her daughter, covering her with her body, in front of her, with staring eyes, listening to the poor child, who did not stir, but who kept murmuring in a low voice, these words only, “Phoebus! Phoebus!” In proportion as the work of the demolishers seemed to advance, the mother mechanically retreated, and pressed the young girl closer and closer to the wall. All at once, the recluse beheld the stone (for she was standing guard and never took her eyes from it), move, and she heard Tristan’s voice encouraging the workers. Then she aroused from the depression into which she had fallen during the last few moments, cried out, and as she spoke, her voice now rent the ear like a saw, then stammered as though all kind of maledictions were pressing to her lips to burst forth at once.

“Ho! ho! ho! Why this is terrible! You are ruffians! Are you really going to take my daughter? Oh! the cowards! Oh! the hangman lackeys! the wretched, blackguard assassins! Help! help! fire! Will they take my child from me like this? Who is it then who is called the good God?”

Then, addressing Tristan, foaming at the mouth, with wild eyes, all bristling and on all fours like a female panther, —

“Draw near and take my daughter! Do not you understand that this woman tells you that she is my daughter? Do you know what it is to have a child? Eh! lynx, have you never lain with your female? have you never had a cub? and if you have little ones, when they howl have you nothing in your vitals that moves?”

“Throw down the stone,” said Tristan; “it no longer holds.”

The crowbars raised the heavy course. It was, as we have said, the mother’s last bulwark.

She threw herself upon it, she tried to hold it back; she scratched the stone with her nails, but the massive block, set in movement by six men, escaped her and glided gently to the ground along the iron levers.

The mother, perceiving an entrance effected, fell down in front of the opening, barricading the breach with her body, beating the pavement with her head, and shrieking with a voice rendered so hoarse by fatigue that it was hardly audible, —

“Help! fire! fire!”

“Now take the wench,” said Tristan, still impassive.

The mother gazed at the soldiers in such formidable fashion that they were more inclined to retreat than to advance.

“Come, now,” repeated the provost. “Here you, Rennet Cousin!”

No one took a step.

The provost swore, —

“*Tête de Christ*! my men of war! afraid of a woman!”

“Monseigneur,” said Rennet, “do you call that a woman?”

“She has the mane of a lion,” said another.

“Come!” repeated the provost, “the gap is wide enough. Enter three abreast, as at the breach of Pontoise. Let us make an end of it, death of Mahom! I will make two pieces of the first man who draws back!”

Placed between the provost and the mother, both threatening, the soldiers hesitated for a moment, then took their resolution, and advanced towards the Rat-Hole.

When the recluse saw this, she rose abruptly on her knees, flung aside her hair from her face, then let her thin flayed hands fall by her side. Then great tears fell, one by one, from her eyes; they flowed down her cheeks through a furrow, like a torrent through a bed which it has hollowed for itself.

At the same time she began to speak, but in a voice so supplicating, so gentle, so submissive, so heartrending, that more than one old convict-warder around Tristan who must have devoured human flesh wiped his eyes.

“Messeigneurs! messieurs the sergeants, one word. There is one thing which I must say to you. She is my daughter, do you see? my dear little daughter whom I had lost! Listen. It is quite a history. Consider that I knew the sergeants very well. They were always good to me in the days when the little boys threw stones at me, because I led a life of pleasure. Do you see? You will leave me my child when you know! I was a poor woman of the town. It was the Bohemians who stole her from me. And I kept her shoe for fifteen years. Stay, here it is. That was the kind of foot which she had. At Reims! La Chantefleurie! Rue Folle-Peine! Perchance, you knew about that. It was I. In your youth, then, there was a merry time, when one passed good hours. You will take pity on me, will you not, gentlemen? The gypsies stole her from me; they hid her from me for fifteen years. I thought her dead. Fancy, my good friends, believed her to be dead. I have passed fifteen years here in this cellar, without a fire in winter. It is hard. The poor, dear little shoe! I have cried so much that the good God has heard me. This night he has given my daughter back to me. It is a miracle of the good God. She was not dead. You will not take her from me, I am sure. If it were myself, I would say nothing; but she, a child of sixteen! Leave her time to see the sun! What has she done to you? nothing at all. Nor have I. If you did but know that she is all I have, that I am old, that she is a blessing which the Holy Virgin has sent to me! And then, you are all so good! You did not know that she was my daughter; but now you do know it. Oh! I love her! Monsieur, the grand provost. I would prefer a stab in my own vitals to a scratch on her finger! You have the air of such a good lord! What I have told you explains the matter, does it not? Oh! if you have had a mother, monsiegneur! you are the captain, leave me my child! Consider that I pray you on my knees, as one prays to Jesus Christ! I ask nothing of any one; I am from Reims, gentlemen; I own a little field inherited from my uncle, Mahiet Pradon. I am no beggar. I wish nothing, but I do want my child! oh! I want to keep my child! The good God, who is the master, has not given her back to me for nothing! The king! you say the king! It would not cause him much pleasure to have my little daughter killed! And then, the king is good! she is my daughter! she is my own daughter! She belongs not to the king! she is not yours! I want to go away! we want to go away! and when two women pass, one a mother and the other a daughter, one lets them go! Let us pass! we belong in Reims. Oh! you are very good, messieurs the sergeants, I love you all. You will not take my dear little one, it is impossible! It is utterly impossible, is it not? My child, my child!”

We will not try to give an idea of her gestures, her tone, of the tears which she swallowed as she spoke, of the hands which she clasped and then wrung, of the heart-breaking smiles, of the swimming glances, of the groans, the sighs, the miserable and affecting cries which she mingled with her disordered, wild, and incoherent words. When she became silent Tristan l’Hermite frowned, but it was to conceal a tear which welled up in his tiger’s eye. He conquered this weakness, however, and said in a curt tone, —

“The king wills it.”

Then he bent down to the ear of Rennet Cousin, and said to him in a very low tone, —

“Make an end of it quickly!” Possibly, the redoubtable provost felt his heart also failing him.

The executioner and the sergeants entered the cell. The mother offered no resistance, only she dragged herself towards her daughter and threw herself bodily upon her. The gypsy beheld the soldiers approach. The horror of death reanimated her, —

“Mother!” she shrieked, in a tone of indescribable distress, “Mother! they are coming! defend me!”

“Yes, my love, I am defending you!” replied the mother, in a dying voice; and clasping her closely in her arms, she covered her with kisses. The two lying thus on the earth, the mother upon the daughter, presented a spectacle worthy of pity.

Rennet Cousin grasped the young girl by the middle of her body, beneath her beautiful shoulders. When she felt that hand, she cried, “Heuh!” and fainted. The executioner who was shedding large tears upon her, drop by drop, was about to bear her away in his arms. He tried to detach the mother, who had, so to speak, knotted her hands around her daughter’s waist; but she clung so strongly to her child, that it was impossible to separate them. Then Rennet Cousin dragged the young girl outside the cell, and the mother after her. The mother’s eyes were also closed.

At that moment, the sun rose, and there was already on the Place a fairly numerous assembly of people who looked on from a distance at what was being thus dragged along the pavement to the gibbet. For that was Provost Tristan’s way at executions. He had a passion for preventing the approach of the curious.

There was no one at the windows. Only at a distance, at the summit of that one of the towers of Notre-Dame which commands the Grève, two men outlined in black against the light morning sky, and who seemed to be looking on, were visible.

Rennet Cousin paused at the foot of the fatal ladder, with that which he was dragging, and, barely breathing, with so much pity did the thing inspire him, he passed the rope around the lovely neck of the young girl. The unfortunate child felt the horrible touch of the hemp. She raised her eyelids, and saw the fleshless arm of the stone gallows extended above her head. Then she shook herself and shrieked in a loud and heartrending voice: “No! no! I will not!” Her mother, whose head was buried and concealed in her daughter’s garments, said not a word; only her whole body could be seen to quiver, and she was heard to redouble her kisses on her child. The executioner took advantage of this moment to hastily loose the arms with which she clasped the condemned girl. Either through exhaustion or despair, she let him have his way. Then he took the young girl on his shoulder, from which the charming creature hung, gracefully bent over his large head. Then he set his foot on the ladder in order to ascend.

At that moment, the mother who was crouching on the pavement, opened her eyes wide. Without uttering a cry, she raised herself erect with a terrible expression; then she flung herself upon the hand of the executioner, like a beast on its prey, and bit it. It was done like a flash of lightning. The headsman howled with pain. Those near by rushed up. With difficulty they withdrew his bleeding hand from the mother’s teeth. She preserved a profound silence. They thrust her back with much brutality, and noticed that her head fell heavily on the pavement. They raised her, she fell back again. She was dead.

The executioner, who had not loosed his hold on the young girl, began to ascend the ladder once more.

CHAPTER II. THE BEAUTIFUL CREATURE CLAD IN WHITE. (Dante.)

When Quasimodo saw that the cell was empty, that the gypsy was no longer there, that while he had been defending her she had been abducted, he grasped his hair with both hands and stamped with surprise and pain; then he set out to run through the entire church seeking his Bohemian, howling strange cries to all the corners of the walls, strewing his red hair on the pavement. It was just at the moment when the king’s archers were making their victorious entrance into Notre-Dame, also in search of the gypsy. Quasimodo, poor, deaf fellow, aided them in their fatal intentions, without suspecting it; he thought that the outcasts were the gypsy’s enemies. He himself conducted Tristan l’Hermite to all possible hiding-places, opened to him the secret doors, the double bottoms of the altars, the rear sacristries. If the unfortunate girl had still been there, it would have been he himself who would have delivered her up.

When the fatigue of finding nothing had disheartened Tristan, who was not easily discouraged, Quasimodo continued the search alone. He made the tour of the church twenty times, length and breadth, up and down, ascending and descending, running, calling, shouting, peeping, rummaging, ransacking, thrusting his head into every hole, pushing a torch under every vault, despairing, mad. A male who has lost his female is no more roaring nor more haggard.

At last when he was sure, perfectly sure that she was no longer there, that all was at an end, that she had been snatched from him, he slowly mounted the staircase to the towers, that staircase which he had ascended with so much eagerness and triumph on the day when he had saved her. He passed those same places once more with drooping head, voiceless, tearless, almost breathless. The church was again deserted, and had fallen back into its silence. The archers had quitted it to track the sorceress in the city. Quasimodo, left alone in that vast Notre-Dame, so besieged and tumultuous but a short time before, once more betook himself to the cell where the gypsy had slept for so many weeks under his guardianship.

As he approached it, he fancied that he might, perhaps, find her there. When, at the turn of the gallery which opens on the roof of the side aisles, he perceived the tiny cell with its little window and its little door crouching beneath a great flying buttress like a bird's nest under a branch, the poor man's heart failed him, and he leaned against a pillar to keep from falling. He imagined that she might have returned thither, that some good genius had, no doubt, brought her back, that this chamber was too tranquil, too safe, too charming for her not to be there, and he dared not take another step for fear of destroying his illusion. "Yes," he said to himself, "perchance she is sleeping, or praying. I must not disturb her."

At length he summoned up courage, advanced on tiptoe, looked, entered. Empty. The cell was still empty. The unhappy deaf man walked slowly round it, lifted the bed and looked beneath it, as though she might be concealed between the pavement and the mattress, then he shook his head and remained stupefied. All at once, he crushed his torch under his foot, and, without uttering a word, without giving vent to a sigh, he flung himself at full speed, head foremost against the wall, and fell fainting on the floor.

When he recovered his senses, he threw himself on the bed and rolling about, he kissed frantically the place where the young girl had slept and which was still warm; he remained there for several moments as motionless as though he were about to expire; then he rose, dripping with perspiration, panting, mad, and began to beat his head against the wall with the frightful regularity of the clapper of his bells, and the resolution of a man determined to kill himself. At length he fell a second time, exhausted; he dragged himself on his knees outside the cell, and crouched down facing the door, in an attitude of astonishment.

He remained thus for more than an hour without making a movement, with his eye fixed on the deserted cell, more gloomy, and more pensive than a mother seated between an empty cradle and a full coffin. He uttered not a word; only at long intervals, a sob heaved his body violently, but it was a tearless sob, like summer lightning which makes no noise.

It appears to have been then, that, seeking at the bottom of his lonely thoughts for the unexpected abductor of the gypsy, he thought of the archdeacon. He remembered that Dom Claude alone possessed a key to the staircase leading to the cell; he recalled his nocturnal attempts on the young girl, in the first of which he, Quasimodo, had assisted, the second of which he had prevented. He recalled a thousand details, and soon he no longer doubted that the archdeacon had taken the gypsy. Nevertheless, such was his respect for the priest, such his gratitude, his devotion, his love for this man had taken such deep root in his heart, that they resisted, even at this moment, the talons of jealousy and despair.

He reflected that the archdeacon had done this thing, and the wrath of blood and death which it would have evoked in him against any other person, turned in the poor deaf man, from the moment when Claude Frollo was in question, into an increase of grief and sorrow.

At the moment when his thought was thus fixed upon the priest, while the daybreak was whitening the flying buttresses, he perceived on the highest story of Notre-Dame, at the angle formed by the external balustrade as it makes the turn of the chancel, a figure walking. This figure was coming towards him. He recognized it. It was the archdeacon.

Claude was walking with a slow, grave step. He did not look before him as he walked, he was directing his course towards the northern tower, but his face was turned aside towards the right bank of the Seine, and he held his head high, as though trying to see something over the roofs. The owl often assumes this oblique attitude. It flies towards one point and looks towards another. In this manner the priest passed above Quasimodo without seeing him.

The deaf man, who had been petrified by this sudden apparition, beheld him disappear through the door of the staircase to the north tower. The reader is aware that this is the tower from which the Hôtel-de-Ville is visible. Quasimodo rose and followed the archdeacon.

Quasimodo ascended the tower staircase for the sake of ascending it, for the sake of seeing why the priest was ascending it. Moreover, the poor bellringer did not know what he (Quasimodo) should do, what he should say, what he wished. He was full of fury and full of fear. The archdeacon and the gypsy had come into conflict in his heart.

When he reached the summit of the tower, before emerging from the shadow of the staircase and stepping upon the platform, he cautiously examined the position of the priest. The priest’s back was turned to him. There is an openwork balustrade which surrounds the platform of the bell tower. The priest, whose eyes looked down upon the town, was resting his breast on that one of the four sides of the balustrades which looks upon the Pont Notre-Dame.

Quasimodo, advancing with the tread of a wolf behind him, went to see what he was gazing at thus.

The priest's attention was so absorbed elsewhere that he did not hear the deaf man walking behind him.

Paris is a magnificent and charming spectacle, and especially at that day, viewed from the top of the towers of Notre-Dame, in the fresh light of a summer dawn. The day might have been in July. The sky was perfectly serene. Some tardy stars were fading away at various points, and there was a very brilliant one in the east, in the brightest part of the heavens. The sun was about to appear; Paris was beginning to move. A very white and very pure light brought out vividly to the eye all the outlines that its thousands of houses present to the east. The giant shadow of the towers leaped from roof to roof, from one end of the great city to the other. There were several quarters from which were already heard voices and noisy sounds. Here the stroke of a bell, there the stroke of a hammer, beyond, the complicated clatter of a cart in motion.

Already several columns of smoke were being belched forth from the chimneys scattered over the whole surface of roofs, as through the fissures of an immense sulphurous crater. The river, which ruffles its waters against the arches of so many bridges, against the points of so many islands, was wavering with silvery folds. Around the city, outside the ramparts, sight was lost in a great circle of fleecy vapors through which one confusedly distinguished the indefinite line of the plains, and the graceful swell of the heights. All sorts of floating sounds were dispersed over this half-awakened city. Towards the east, the morning breeze chased a few soft white bits of wool torn from the misty fleece of the hills.

In the Parvis, some good women, who had their milk jugs in their hands, were pointing out to each other, with astonishment, the singular dilapidation of the great door of Notre-Dame, and the two solidified streams of lead in the crevices of the stone. This was all that remained of the tempest of the night. The bonfire lighted between the towers by Quasimodo had died out. Tristan had already cleared up the Place, and had the dead thrown into the Seine. Kings like Louis XI. are careful to clean the pavement quickly after a massacre.

Outside the balustrade of the tower, directly under the point where the priest had paused, there was one of those fantastically carved stone gutters with which Gothic edifices bristle, and, in a crevice of that gutter, two pretty wallflowers in blossom, shaken out and vivified, as it were, by the breath of air, made frolicsome salutations to each other. Above the towers, on high, far away in the depths of the sky, the cries of little birds were heard.

But the priest was not listening to, was not looking at, anything of all this. He was one of the men for whom there are no mornings, no birds, no flowers. In that immense horizon, which assumed so many aspects about him, his contemplation was concentrated on a single point.

Quasimodo was burning to ask him what he had done with the gypsy; but the archdeacon seemed to be out of the world at that moment. He was evidently in one of those violent moments of life when one would not feel the earth crumble. He remained motionless and silent, with his eyes steadily fixed on a certain point; and there was something so terrible about this silence and immobility that the savage bellringer shuddered before it and dared not come in contact with it. Only, and this was also one way of interrogating the archdeacon, he followed the direction of his vision, and in this way the glance of the unhappy deaf man fell upon the Place de Grève.

Thus he saw what the priest was looking at. The ladder was erected near the permanent gallows. There were some people and many soldiers in the Place. A man was dragging a white thing, from which hung something black, along the pavement. This man halted at the foot of the gallows.

Here something took place which Quasimodo could not see very clearly. It was not because his only eye had not preserved its long range, but there was a group of soldiers which prevented his seeing everything. Moreover, at that moment the sun appeared, and such a flood of light overflowed the horizon that one would have said that all the points in Paris, spires, chimneys, gables, had simultaneously taken fire.

Meanwhile, the man began to mount the ladder. Then Quasimodo saw him again distinctly. He was carrying a woman on his shoulder, a young girl dressed in white; that young girl had a noose about her neck. Quasimodo recognized her.

It was she.

The man reached the top of the ladder. There he arranged the noose. Here the priest, in order to see the better, knelt upon the balustrade.

All at once the man kicked away the ladder abruptly, and Quasimodo, who had not breathed for several moments, beheld the unhappy child dangling at the end of the rope two fathoms above the pavement, with the man squatting on her shoulders. The rope made several gyrations on itself, and Quasimodo beheld horrible convulsions run along the gypsy’s body.

The priest, on his side, with outstretched neck and eyes starting from his head, contemplated this horrible group of the man and the young girl, — the spider and the fly.

At the moment when it was most horrible, the laugh of a demon, a laugh which one can only give vent to when one is no longer human, burst forth on the priest's livid face.

Quasimodo did not hear that laugh, but he saw it.

The bellringer retreated several paces behind the archdeacon, and suddenly hurling himself upon him with fury, with his huge hands he pushed him by the back over into the abyss over which Dom Claude was leaning.

The priest shrieked: "Damnation!" and fell.

The spout, above which he had stood, arrested him in his fall. He clung to it with desperate hands, and, at the moment when he opened his mouth to utter a second cry, he beheld the formidable and avenging face of Quasimodo thrust over the edge of the balustrade above his head.

Then he was silent.

The abyss was there below him. A fall of more than two hundred feet and the pavement.

In this terrible situation, the archdeacon said not a word, uttered not a groan. He merely writhed upon the spout, with incredible efforts to climb up again; but his hands had no hold on the granite, his feet slid along the blackened wall without catching fast. People who have ascended the towers of Notre-Dame know that there is a swell of the stone immediately beneath the balustrade. It was on this retreating angle that miserable archdeacon exhausted himself. He had not to deal with a perpendicular wall, but with one which sloped away beneath him.

Quasimodo had but to stretch out his hand in order to draw him from the gulf; but he did not even look at him. He was looking at the Grève. He was looking at the gallows. He was looking at the gypsy.

The deaf man was leaning, with his elbows on the balustrade, at the spot where the archdeacon had been a moment before, and there, never detaching his gaze from the only object which existed for him in the world at that moment, he remained motionless and mute, like a man struck by lightning, and a long stream of tears flowed in silence from that eye which, up to that time, had never shed but one tear.

Meanwhile, the archdeacon was panting. His bald brow was dripping with perspiration, his nails were bleeding against the stones, his knees were flayed by the wall.

He heard his cassock, which was caught on the spout, crack and rip at every jerk that he gave it. To complete his misfortune, this spout ended in a leaden pipe which bent under the weight of his body. The archdeacon felt this pipe slowly giving way. The miserable man said to himself that, when his hands should be worn out with fatigue, when his cassock should tear asunder, when the lead should give way, he would be obliged to fall, and terror seized upon his very vitals. Now and then he glanced wildly at a sort of narrow shelf formed, ten feet lower down, by projections of the sculpture, and he prayed heaven, from the depths of his distressed soul, that he might be allowed to finish his life, were it to last two centuries, on that space two feet square. Once, he glanced below him into the Place, into the abyss; the head which he raised again had its eyes closed and its hair standing erect.

There was something frightful in the silence of these two men. While the archdeacon agonized in this terrible fashion a few feet below him, Quasimodo wept and gazed at the Grève.

The archdeacon, seeing that all his exertions served only to weaken the fragile support which remained to him, decided to remain quiet. There he hung, embracing the gutter, hardly breathing, no longer stirring, making no longer any other movements than that mechanical convulsion of the stomach, which one experiences in dreams when one fancies himself falling. His fixed eyes were wide open with a stare. He lost ground little by little, nevertheless, his fingers slipped along the spout; he became more and more conscious of the feebleness of his arms and the weight of his body. The curve of the lead which sustained him inclined more and more each instant towards the abyss.

He beheld below him, a frightful thing, the roof of Saint-Jean le Rond, as small as a card folded in two. He gazed at the impressive carvings, one by one, of the tower, suspended like himself over the precipice, but without terror for themselves or pity for him. All was stone around him; before his eyes, gaping monsters; below, quite at the bottom, in the Place, the pavement; above his head, Quasimodo weeping.

In the Parvis there were several groups of curious good people, who were tranquilly seeking to divine who the madman could be who was amusing himself in so strange a manner. The priest heard them saying, for their voices reached him, clear and shrill: “Why, he will break his neck!”

Quasimodo wept.

At last the archdeacon, foaming with rage and despair, understood that all was in vain. Nevertheless, he collected all the strength which remained to him for a final effort. He stiffened himself upon the spout, pushed against the wall with both his knees, clung to a crevice in the stones with his hands, and succeeded in climbing back with one foot, perhaps; but this effort made the leaden beak on which he rested bend abruptly. His cassock burst open at the same time. Then, feeling everything give way beneath him, with nothing but his stiffened and failing hands to support him, the unfortunate man closed his eyes and let go of the spout. He fell.

Quasimodo watched him fall.

A fall from such a height is seldom perpendicular. The archdeacon, launched into space, fell at first head foremost, with outspread hands; then he whirled over and over many times; the wind blew him upon the roof of a house, where the unfortunate man began to break up. Nevertheless, he was not dead when he reached there. The bellringer saw him still endeavor to cling to a gable with his nails; but the surface sloped too much, and he had no more strength. He slid rapidly along the roof like a loosened tile, and dashed upon the pavement. There he no longer moved.

Then Quasimodo raised his eyes to the gypsy, whose body he beheld hanging from the gibbet, quivering far away beneath her white robe with the last shudderings of anguish, then he dropped them on the archdeacon, stretched out at the base of the tower, and no longer retaining the human form, and he said, with a sob which heaved his deep chest,— “Oh! all that I have ever loved!”

CHAPTER III. THE MARRIAGE OF PHOEBUS.

Towards evening on that day, when the judiciary officers of the bishop came to pick up from the pavement of the Parvis the dislocated corpse of the archdeacon, Quasimodo had disappeared.

A great many rumors were in circulation with regard to this adventure. No one doubted but that the day had come when, in accordance with their compact, Quasimodo, that is to say, the devil, was to carry off Claude Frollo, that is to say, the sorcerer. It was presumed that he had broken the body when taking the soul, like monkeys who break the shell to get at the nut.

This is why the archdeacon was not interred in consecrated earth.

Louis XI. died a year later, in the month of August, 1483.

As for Pierre Gringoire, he succeeded in saving the goat, and he won success in tragedy. It appears that, after having tasted astrology, philosophy, architecture, hermetics, — all vanities, he returned to tragedy, vainest pursuit of all. This is what he called “coming to a tragic end.” This is what is to be read, on the subject of his dramatic triumphs, in 1483, in the accounts of the “Ordinary:” “To Jehan Marchand and Pierre Gringoire, carpenter and composer, who have made and composed the mystery made at the Chãtelet of Paris, at the entry of Monsieur the Legate, and have ordered the personages, clothed and dressed the same, as in the said mystery was required; and likewise, for having made the scaffoldings thereto necessary; and for this deed, — one hundred livres.”

Phoebus de Châteaupers also came to a tragic end. He married.

CHAPTER IV. THE MARRIAGE OF QUASIMODO.

We have just said that Quasimodo disappeared from Notre-Dame on the day of the gypsy’s and of the archdeacon’s death. He was not seen again, in fact; no one knew what had become of him.

During the night which followed the execution of la Esmeralda, the night men had detached her body from the gibbet, and had carried it, according to custom, to the cellar of Montfauçon.

Montfauçon was, as Sauval says, “the most ancient and the most superb gibbet in the kingdom.” Between the faubourgs of the Temple and Saint Martin, about a hundred and sixty toises from the walls of Paris, a few bow shots from La Courtille, there was to be seen on the crest of a gentle, almost imperceptible eminence, but sufficiently elevated to be seen for several leagues round about, an edifice of strange form, bearing considerable resemblance to a Celtic cromlech, and where also human sacrifices were offered.

Let the reader picture to himself, crowning a limestone hillock, an oblong mass of masonry fifteen feet in height, thirty wide, forty long, with a gate, an external railing and a platform; on this platform sixteen enormous pillars of rough hewn stone, thirty feet in height, arranged in a colonnade round three of the four sides of the mass which support them, bound together at their summits by heavy beams, whence hung chains at intervals; on all these chains, skeletons; in the vicinity, on the plain, a stone cross and two gibbets of secondary importance, which seemed to have sprung up as shoots around the central gallows; above all this, in the sky, a perpetual flock of crows; that was Montfauçon.

At the end of the fifteenth century, the formidable gibbet which dated from 1328, was already very much dilapidated; the beams were wormeaten, the chains rusted, the pillars green with mould; the layers of hewn stone were all cracked at their joints, and grass was growing on that platform which no feet touched. The monument made a horrible profile against the sky; especially at night when there was a little moonlight on those white skulls, or when the breeze of evening brushed the chains and the skeletons, and swayed all these in the darkness. The presence of this gibbet sufficed to render gloomy all the surrounding places.

The mass of masonry which served as foundation to the odious edifice was hollow. A huge cellar had been constructed there, closed by an old iron grating, which was out of order, into which were cast not only the human remains, which were taken from the chains of Montfauçon, but also the bodies of all the unfortunates executed on the other permanent gibbets of Paris. To that deep charnel-house, where so many human remains and so many crimes have rotted in company, many great ones of this world, many innocent people, have contributed their bones, from Enguerrand de Marigni, the first victim, and a just man, to Admiral de Coligni, who was its last, and who was also a just man.

As for the mysterious disappearance of Quasimodo, this is all that we have been able to discover.

About eighteen months or two years after the events which terminate this story, when search was made in that cavern for the body of Olivier le Daim, who had been hanged two days previously, and to whom Charles VIII. had granted the favor of being buried in Saint Laurent, in better company, they found among all those hideous carcasses two skeletons, one of which held the other in its embrace. One of these skeletons, which was that of a woman, still had a few strips of a garment which had once been white, and around her neck was to be seen a string of adrézarach beads with a little silk bag ornamented with green glass, which was open and empty. These objects were of so little value that the executioner had probably not cared for them. The other, which held this one in a close embrace, was the skeleton of a man. It was noticed that his spinal column was crooked, his head seated on his shoulder blades, and that one leg was shorter than the other. Moreover, there was no fracture of the vertebrae at the nape of the neck, and it was evident that he had not been hanged. Hence, the man to whom it had belonged had come thither and had died there. When they tried to detach the skeleton which he held in his embrace, he fell to dust.

NOTE ADDED TO THE DEFINITIVE EDITION.

It is by mistake that this edition was announced as augmented by many new chapters. The word should have been unpublished. In fact, if by new, newly made is to be understood, the chapters added to this edition are not new. They were written at the same time as the rest of the work; they date from the same epoch, and sprang from the same thought, they have always formed a part of the manuscript of “Notre-Dame-de-Paris.” Moreover, the author cannot comprehend how fresh developments could be added to a work of this character after its completion. This is not to be done at will. According to his idea, a romance is born in a manner that is, in some sort, necessary, with all its chapters; a drama is born with all its scenes. Think not that there is anything arbitrary in the numbers of parts of which that whole, that mysterious microcosm which you call a drama or a romance, is composed. Grafting and soldering take badly on works of this nature, which should gush forth in a single stream and so remain. The thing once done, do not change your mind, do not touch it up. The book once published, the sex of the work, whether virile or not, has been recognized and proclaimed; when the child has once uttered his first cry he is born, there he is, he is made so, neither father nor mother can do anything, he belongs to the air and to the sun, let him live or die, such as he is. Has your book been a failure? So much the worse. Add no chapters to an unsuccessful book. Is it incomplete? You should have completed it when you conceived it. Is your tree crooked? You cannot straighten it up. Is your romance consumptive? Is your romance not capable of living? You cannot supply it with the breath which it lacks. Has your drama been born lame? Take my advice, and do not provide it with a wooden leg.

Hence the author attaches particular importance to the public knowing for a certainty that the chapters here added have not been made expressly for this reprint. They were not published in the preceding editions of the book for a very simple reason. At the time when “Notre-Dame-de-Paris” was printed the first time, the manuscript of these three chapters had been mislaid. It was necessary to rewrite them or to dispense with them. The author considered that the only two of these chapters which were in the least important, owing to their extent, were chapters on art and history which in no way interfered with the groundwork of the drama and the romance, that the public would not notice their loss, and that he, the author, would alone be in possession of the secret. He decided to omit them, and then, if the whole truth must be confessed, his indolence shrunk from the task of rewriting the three lost chapters. He would have found it a shorter matter to make a new romance.

Now the chapters have been found, and he avails himself of the first opportunity to restore them to their place.

This now, is his entire work, such as he dreamed it, such as he made it, good or bad, durable or fragile, but such as he wishes it.

These recovered chapters will possess no doubt, but little value in the eyes of persons, otherwise very judicious, who have sought in "Notre-Dame-de-Paris" only the drama, the romance. But there are perchance, other readers, who have not found it useless to study the aesthetic and philosophic thought concealed in this book, and who have taken pleasure, while reading "Notre-Dame-de-Paris," in unravelling beneath the romance something else than the romance, and in following (may we be pardoned these rather ambitious expressions), the system of the historian and the aim of the artist through the creation of the poet.

For such people especially, the chapters added to this edition will complete "Notre-Dame-de-Paris," if we admit that "Notre-Dame-de-Paris" was worth the trouble of completing.

In one of these chapters on the present decadence of architecture, and on the death (in his mind almost inevitable) of that king of arts, the author expresses and develops an opinion unfortunately well rooted in him, and well thought out. But he feels it necessary to say here that he earnestly desires that the future may, some day, put him in the wrong. He knows that art in all its forms has everything to hope from the new generations whose genius, still in the germ, can be heard gushing forth in our studios. The grain is in the furrow, the harvest will certainly be fine. He merely fears, and the reason may be seen in the second volume of this edition, that the sap may have been withdrawn from that ancient soil of architecture which has been for so many centuries the best field for art.

Nevertheless, there are to-day in the artistic youth so much life, power, and, so to speak, predestination, that in our schools of architecture in particular, at the present time, the professors, who are detestable, produce, not only unconsciously but even in spite of themselves, excellent pupils; quite the reverse of that potter mentioned by Horace, who dreamed amphorae and produced pots. *Currit rota, urcens exit.*

But, in any case, whatever may be the future of architecture, in whatever manner our young architects may one day solve the question of their art, let us, while waiting for new monument, preserve the ancient monuments. Let us, if possible, inspire the nation with a love for national architecture. That, the author declares, is one of the principal aims of this book; it is one of the principal aims of his life.

“Notre-Dame-de-Paris” has, perhaps opened some true perspectives on the art of the Middle Ages, on that marvellous art which up to the present time has been unknown to some, and, what is worse, misknown by others. But the author is far from regarding as accomplished, the task which he has voluntarily imposed on himself. He has already pleaded on more than one occasion, the cause of our ancient architecture, he has already loudly denounced many profanations, many demolitions, many impieties. He will not grow weary. He has promised himself to recur frequently to this subject. He will return to it. He will be as indefatigable in defending our historical edifices as our iconoclasts of the schools and academies are eager in attacking them; for it is a grievous thing to see into what hands the architecture of the Middle Ages has fallen, and in what a manner the botchers of plaster of the present day treat the ruin of this grand art, it is even a shame for us intelligent men who see them at work and content ourselves with hooting them. And we are not speaking here merely of what goes on in the provinces, but of what is done in Paris at our very doors, beneath our windows, in the great city, in the lettered city, in the city of the press, of word, of thought. We cannot resist the impulse to point out, in concluding this note, some of the acts of vandalism which are every day planned, debated, begun, continued, and successfully completed under the eyes of the artistic public of Paris, face to face with criticism, which is disconcerted by so much audacity. An archbishop’s palace has just been demolished, an edifice in poor taste, no great harm is done; but in a block with the archiepiscopal palace a bishop’s palace has been demolished, a rare fragment of the fourteenth century, which the demolishing architect could not distinguish from the rest. He has torn up the wheat with the tares; ’tis all the same. They are talking of razing the admirable chapel of Vincennes, in order to make, with its stones, some fortification, which Daumesnil did not need, however. While the Palais Bourbon, that wretched edifice, is being repaired at great expense, gusts of wind and equinoctial storms are allowed to destroy the magnificent painted windows of the Sainte-Chapelle. For the last few days there has been a scaffolding on the tower of Saint Jacques de la Boucherie; and one of these mornings the pick will be laid to it. A mason has been found to build a little white house between the venerable towers of the Palais de-Justice. Another has been found willing to prune away Saint-Germain-des-Pres, the feudal abbey with three bell towers. Another will be found, no doubt, capable of pulling down Saint-Germain l'Auxerrois. All these masons claim to be architects, are paid by the prefecture or from the petty budget, and wear green coats. All the harm which false taste can inflict on good taste, they accomplish. While we write, deplorable spectacle! one of them holds possession of the Tuileries, one of them is giving Philibert Delorme a scar across the middle of his face; and it is not, assuredly, one of the least of the scandals of our time to see with what effrontery the heavy architecture of this gentleman is being flattened over one of the most delicate façades of the Renaissance!

PARIS, October 20, 1832.

NOTRE-DAME DE PARIS

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PRÉFACE

Il y a quelques années qu'en visitant, ou, pour mieux dire, en furetant Notre-Dame, l'auteur de ce livre trouva, dans un recoin obscur de l'une des tours ce mot, gravé à la main sur le mur:

ΑΝΑΓΚΗ.

Ces majuscules grecques, noires de vétusté et assez profondément entaillées dans la pierre, je ne sais quels signes propres à la calligraphie gothique empreints dans leurs formes et dans leurs attitudes, comme pour révéler que c'était une main du moyen âge qui les avait écrites là, surtout le sens lugubre et fatal qu'elles renferment, frappèrent vivement l'auteur.

Il se demanda, il chercha à deviner quelle pouvait être l'âme en peine qui n'avait pas voulu quitter ce monde sans laisser ce stigmate de crime ou de malheur au front de la vieille église.

Depuis, on a badigeonné ou gratté (je ne sais plus lequel) le mur, et l'inscription a disparu. Car c'est ainsi qu'on agit depuis tantôt deux cents ans avec les merveilleuses églises du moyen âge. Les mutilations leur viennent de toutes parts, du dedans comme du dehors. Le prêtre les badigeonne, l'architecte les gratte, puis le peuple survient, qui les démolit.

Ainsi, hormis le fragile souvenir que lui consacre ici l'auteur de ce livre, il ne reste plus rien aujourd'hui du mot mystérieux gravé dans la sombre tour de Notre-Dame, rien de la destinée inconnue qu'il résumait si mélancoliquement. L'homme qui a écrit ce mot sur ce mur s'est effacé, il y a plusieurs siècles, du milieu des générations, le mot s'est à son tour effacé du mur de l'église, l'église elle-même s'effacera bientôt peut-être de la terre.

C'est sur ce mot qu'on a fait ce livre.

Février 1831.

NOTE AJOUTÉE À L'ÉDITION DÉFINITIVE
(1832)

C'est par erreur qu'on a annoncé cette édition comme devant être augmentée de plusieurs chapitres *nouveaux*. Il fallait dire *inédits*. En effet, si par nouveaux on entend *nouvellement faits,* les chapitres ajoutés à cette édition ne sont pas *nouveaux*. Ils ont été écrits en même temps que le reste de l'ouvrage, ils datent de la même époque et sont venus de la même pensée, ils ont toujours fait partie du manuscrit de *Notre-Dame de Paris*. Il y a plus, l'auteur ne comprendrait pas qu'on ajoutât après coup des développements nouveaux à un ouvrage de ce genre. Cela ne se fait pas à volonté. Un roman, selon lui, naît, d'une façon en quelque sorte nécessaire, avec tous ses chapitres; un drame naît avec toutes ses scènes. Ne croyez pas qu'il y ait rien d'arbitraire dans le nombre de parties dont se compose ce tout, ce mystérieux microcosme que vous appelez drame ou roman. La greffe ou la soudure prennent mal sur des œuvres de cette nature, qui doivent jaillir d'un seul jet et rester telles quelles. Une fois la chose faite, ne vous ravisez pas, n'y retouchez plus. Une fois que le livre est publié, une fois que le sexe de l'œuvre, virile ou non, a été reconnu et proclamé, une fois que l'enfant a poussé son premier cri, il est né, le voilà, il est ainsi fait, père ni mère n'y peuvent plus rien, il appartient à l'air et au soleil, laissez-le vivre ou mourir comme il est. Votre livre est-il manqué? tant pis. N'ajoutez pas de chapitres à un livre manqué. Il est incomplet? il fallait le compléter en l'engendrant. Votre arbre est noué? Vous ne le redresserez pas. Votre roman est phtisique? votre roman n'est pas viable? Vous ne lui rendrez pas le souffle qui lui manque. Votre drame est né boiteux? Croyez-moi, ne lui mettez pas de jambe de bois.

L'auteur attache donc un prix particulier à ce que le public sache bien que les chapitres ajoutés ici n'ont pas été faits exprès pour cette réimpression. S'ils n'ont pas été publiés dans les précédentes éditions du livre, c'est par une raison bien simple. À l'époque où *Notre-Dame de Paris* s'imprimait pour la première fois, le dossier qui contenait ces trois chapitres s'égara. Il fallait ou les récrire ou s'en passer. L'auteur considéra que les deux seuls de ces chapitres qui eussent quelque importance par leur étendue, étaient des chapitres d'art et d'histoire qui n'entamaient en rien le fond du drame et du roman, que le public ne s’apercevrait pas de leur disparition, et qu’il serait seul, lui auteur, dans le secret de cette lacune. Il prit le parti de passer outre. Et puis, s’il faut tout avouer, sa paresse recula devant la tâche de récrire trois chapitres perdus. Il eût trouvé plus court de faire un nouveau roman.

Aujourd’hui, les chapitres se sont retrouvés, et il saisit la première occasion de les remettre à leur place.

Voici donc maintenant son œuvre entière, telle qu’il l’a rêvée, telle qu’il l’a faite, bonne ou mauvaise, durable ou fragile, mais telle qu’il la veut.

Sans doute ces chapitres retrouvés auront peu de valeur aux yeux des personnes, d’ailleurs fort judicieuses, qui n’ont cherché dans *Notre-Dame de Paris* que le drame, que le roman. Mais il est peut-être d’autres lecteurs qui n’ont pas trouvé inutile d’étudier la pensée d’esthétique et de philosophie cachée dans ce livre, qui ont bien voulu, en lisant *Notre-Dame de Paris,* se plaire à démêler sous le roman autre chose que le roman, et à suivre, qu’on nous passe ces expressions un peu ambitieuses, le système de l’historien et le but de l’artiste à travers la création telle quelle du poète.

C’est pour ceux-là surtout que les chapitres ajoutés à cette édition compléteront *Notre-Dame de Paris,* en admettant que *Notre-Dame de Paris* vaille la peine d’être complétée.

L’auteur exprime et développe dans un de ces chapitres, sur la décadence actuelle de l’architecture et sur la mort, selon lui aujourd’hui presque inévitable, de cet art-roi, une opinion malheureusement bien enracinée chez lui et bien réfléchie. Mais il sent le besoin de dire ici qu’il désire vivement que l’avenir lui donne tort un jour. Il sait que l’art, sous toutes ses formes, peut tout espérer des nouvelles générations dont on entend sourdre dans nos ateliers le génie encore en germe. Le grain est dans le sillon, la moisson certainement sera belle. Il craint seulement, et l’on pourra voir pourquoi au tome second de cette édition, que la sève ne se soit retirée de ce vieux sol de l’architecture qui a été pendant tant de siècles le meilleur terrain de l’art.

Cependant il y a aujourd’hui dans la jeunesse artiste tant de vie, de puissance et pour ainsi dire de prédestination, que, dans nos écoles d’architecture en particulier, à l’heure qu’il est, les professeurs, qui sont détestables, l’ont, non seulement à leur insu, mais même tout à fait malgré eux, des élèves qui sont excellents; tout au rebours de ce potier dont parle Horace, lequel méditait des amphores et produisait des marmites. *Currit rota, urceus exit.*

Mais dans tous les cas, quel que soit l’avenir de l’architecture, de quelque façon que nos jeunes architectes résolvent un jour la question de leur art, en attendant les monuments nouveaux, conservons les monuments anciens. Inspirons, s’il est possible, à la nation l’amour de l’architecture nationale. C’est là, l’auteur le déclare, un des buts principaux de ce livre; c’est là un des buts principaux de sa vie.

Notre-Dame de Paris a peut-être ouvert quelques perspectives vraies sur l’art du moyen âge, sur cet art merveilleux jusqu’à présent inconnu des uns, et ce qui est pis encore, méconnu des autres. Mais l’auteur est bien loin de considérer comme accomplie la tâche qu’il s’est volontairement imposée. Il a déjà plaidé dans plus d’une occasion la cause de notre vieillie architecture, il a déjà dénoncé à haute voix bien des profanations, bien des démolitions, bien des impiétés. Il ne se lassera pas. Il s’est engagé à revenir souvent sur ce sujet, il y reviendra. Il sera aussi infatigable à défendre nos édifices historiques que nos iconoclastes d’écoles et d’académies sont acharnés à les attaquer. Car c’est une chose affligeante de voir en quelles mains l’architecture du moyen âge est tombée et de quelle façon les gâcheurs de plâtre d’à présent traitent la ruine de ce grand art. C’est même une honte pour nous autres, hommes intelligents qui les voyons faire et qui nous contentons de les huer. Et l’on ne parle pas ici seulement de ce qui se passe en province, mais de ce qui se fait à Paris, à notre porte, sous nos fenêtres, dans la grande ville, dans la ville lettrée, dans la cité de la presse, de la parole, de la pensée. Nous ne pouvons résister au besoin de signaler, pour terminer cette note, quelques-uns de ces actes de vandalisme qui tous les jours sont projetés, débattus, commencés, continués et menés paisiblement à bien sous nos yeux, sous les yeux du public artiste de Paris, face à face avec la critique, que tant d’audace déconcerte. On vient de démolir l’archevêché, édifice d’un pauvre goût, le mal n’est pas grand; mais tout en bloc avec l’archevêché on a démoli l’évêché, rare débris du quatorzième siècle, que l’architecte démolisseur n’a pas su distinguer du reste. Il a arraché l’épi avec l’ivraie; c’est égal. On parle de raser l’admirable chapelle de Vincennes, pour faire avec les pierres je ne sais quelle fortification, dont Daumesnil n’avait pourtant pas eu besoin. Tandis qu’on répare à grands frais et qu’on restaure le palais Bourbon, cette masure, on laisse effondrer par les coups de vent de l’équinoxe les vitraux magnifiques de la Sainte-Chapelle. Il y a, depuis quelques jours, un échafaudage sur la tour de Saint-Jacques-de-la-Boucherie; et un de ces matins la pioche s’y mettra. Il s’est trouvé un maçon pour bâtir une maisonnette blanche entre les vénérables tours du Palais de Justice. Il s’en est trouvé un autre pour châtrer Saint-Germain-des-Prés, la féodale abbaye aux trois clochers. Il s’en trouvera un autre, n’en doutez pas, pour jeter bas Saint-Germain-l’Auxerrois. Tous ces maçons-là se prétendent architectes, sont payés par la préfecture ou par les menus, et ont des habits verts. Tout le mal que le faux goût peut faire au vrai goût, ils le font. À l’heure où nous écrivons, spectacle déplorable! l’un d’eux tient les Tuileries, l’un d’eux balafre Philibert Delorme au beau milieu du visage, et ce n’est pas, certes, un des médiocres scandales de notre temps de voir avec quelle effronterie la lourde architecture de ce monsieur vient s’épater tout au travers d’une des plus délicates façades de la renaissance!

Paris, 20 octobre 1832.

LIVRE PREMIER

I

LA GRAND’SALLE

Il y a aujourd’hui trois cent quarante-huit ans six mois et dix-neuf jours que les Parisiens s’éveillèrent au bruit de toutes les cloches sonnant à grande volée dans la triple enceinte de la Cité, de l’Université et de la Ville.

Ce n’est cependant pas un jour dont l’histoire ait gardé souvenir que le 6 janvier 1482. Rien de notable dans l’événement qui mettait ainsi en branle, dès le matin, les cloches et les bourgeois de Paris. Ce n’était ni un assaut de Picards ou de Bourguignons, ni une châsse menée en procession, ni une révolte d’écoliers dans la vigne de Laas, ni une *entrée de notre dit très redouté seigneur monsieur le roi*, ni même une belle pendaison de larrons et de larronnesses à la Justice de Paris. Ce n’était pas non plus la survenue, si fréquente au quinzième siècle, de quelque ambassade chamarrée et empanachée. Il y avait à peine deux jours que la dernière cavalcade de ce genre, celle des ambassadeurs flamands chargés de conclure le mariage entre le dauphin et Marguerite de Flandre, avait fait son entrée à Paris, au grand ennui de M. le cardinal de Bourbon, qui, pour plaire au roi, avait dû faire bonne mine à toute cette rustique cohue de bourgmestres flamands, et les régaler, en son hôtel de Bourbon, d’une *moult belle moralité, sotie et farce*, tandis qu’une pluie battante inondait à sa porte ses magnifiques tapisseries.

Le 6 janvier, ce qui *mettoit en émotion tout le populaire de Paris*, comme dit Jehan de Troyes, c’était la double solennité, réunie depuis un temps immémorial, du jour des Rois et de la Fête des Fous.

Ce jour-là, il devait y avoir feu de joie à la Grève, plantation de mai à la chapelle de Braque et mystère au Palais de Justice. Le cri en avait été fait la veille à son de trompe dans les carrefours, par les gens de M. le prévôt, en beaux hoquetons de camelot violet, avec de grandes croix blanches sur la poitrine.

La foule des bourgeois et des bourgeoises s’acheminait donc de toutes parts dès le matin, maisons et boutiques fermées, vers l’un des trois endroits désignés. Chacun avait pris parti, qui pour le feu de joie, qui pour le mai, qui pour le mystère. Il faut dire, à l’éloge de l’antique bon sens des badauds de Paris, que la plus grande partie de cette foule se dirigeait vers le feu de joie, lequel était tout à fait de saison, ou vers le mystère, qui devait être représenté dans la grand-salle du Palais bien couverte et bien close, et que les curieux s'accordaient à laisser le pauvre mai mal fleuri grelotter tout seul sous le ciel de janvier dans le cimetière de la chapelle de Braque.

Le peuple affluait surtout dans les avenues du Palais de Justice, parce qu'on savait que les ambassadeurs flamands, arrivés de la surveille, se proposaient d'assister à la représentation du mystère et à l'élection du pape des fous, laquelle devait se faire également dans la grand-salle.

Ce n'était pas chose aisée de pénétrer ce jour-là dans cette grand-salle, réputée cependant alors la plus grande enceinte couverte qui fût au monde (il est vrai que Sauval n'avait pas encore mesuré la grande salle du château de Montargis). La place du Palais, encombrée de peuple, offrait aux curieux des fenêtres l'aspect d'une mer, dans laquelle cinq ou six rues, comme autant d'embouchures de fleuves, dégorgeaient à chaque instant de nouveaux flots de têtes. Les ondes de cette foule, sans cesse grossies, se heurtaient aux angles des maisons qui s'avançaient çà et là, comme autant de promontoires, dans le bassin irrégulier de la place. Au centre de la haute façade gothique du Palais, le grand escalier, sans relâche remonté et descendu par un double courant qui, après s'être brisé sous le perron intermédiaire, s'épandait à larges vagues sur ses deux pentes latérales, le grand escalier, dis-je, ruisselait incessamment dans la place comme une cascade dans un lac. Les cris, les rires, le trépignement de ces mille pieds faisaient un grand bruit et une grande clameur. De temps en temps cette clameur et ce bruit redoublaient, le courant qui poussait toute cette foule vers le grand escalier rebroussait, se troublait, tourbillonnait. C'était une bourrade d'un archer ou le cheval d'un sergent de la prévôté qui ruait pour rétablir l'ordre; admirable tradition que la prévôté a léguée à la connétablie, la connétablie à la maréchaussée, et la maréchaussée à notre gendarmerie de Paris.

Aux portes, aux fenêtres, aux lucarnes, sur les toits, fourmillaient des milliers de bonnes figures bourgeoises, calmes et honnêtes, regardant le palais, regardant la cohue, et n'en demandant pas davantage; car bien des gens à Paris se contentent du spectacle des spectateurs, et c'est déjà pour nous une chose très curieuse qu'une muraille derrière laquelle il se passe quelque chose.

S'il pouvait nous être donné à nous, hommes de 1830, de nous mêler en pensée à ces Parisiens du quinzième siècle et d'entrer avec eux, tiraillés, coudoyés, culbutés, dans cette immense salle du Palais, si étroite le 6 janvier 1482, le spectacle ne serait ni sans intérêt ni sans charme, et nous n’aurions autour de nous que des choses si vieilles qu’elles nous sembleraient toutes neuves.

Si le lecteur y consent, nous essaierons de retrouver par la pensée l’impression qu’il eût éprouvée avec nous en franchissant le seuil de cette grand-salle au milieu de cette cohue en surcot, en hoqueton et en cotte-hardie.

Et d’abord, bourdonnement dans les oreilles, éblouissement dans les yeux. Au-dessus de nos têtes une double voûte en ogive, lambrissée en sculptures de bois, peinte d’azur, fleurdelysée en or; sous nos pieds, un pavé alternatif de marbre blanc et noir. À quelques pas de nous, un énorme pilier, puis un autre, puis un autre; en tout sept piliers dans la longueur de la salle, soutenant au milieu de sa largeur les retombées de la double voûte. Autour des quatre premiers piliers, des boutiques de marchands, tout étincelantes de verre et de clinquants; autour des trois derniers, des bancs de bois de chêne, usés et polis par le haut-de-chausses des plaideurs et la robe des procureurs. À l’entour de la salle, le long de la haute muraille, entre les portes, entre les croisées, entre les piliers, l’interminable rangée des statues de tous les rois de France depuis Pharamond; les rois fainéants, les bras pendants et les yeux baissés; les rois vaillants et bataillards, la tête et les mains hardiment levées au ciel. Puis, aux longues fenêtres ogives, des vitraux de mille couleurs; aux larges issues de la salle, de riches portes finement sculptées; et le tout, voûtes, piliers, murailles, chambranles, lambris, portes, statues, recouvert du haut en bas d’une splendide enluminure bleu et or, qui, déjà un peu ternie à l’époque où nous la voyons, avait presque entièrement disparu sous la poussière et les toiles d’araignée en l’an de grâce 1549, où Du Breul l’admirait encore par tradition.

Qu’on se représente maintenant cette immense salle oblongue, éclairée de la clarté blafarde d’un jour de janvier, envahie par une foule bariolée et bruyante qui dérive le long des murs et tournoie autour des sept piliers, et l’on aura déjà une idée confuse de l’ensemble du tableau dont nous allons essayer d’indiquer plus précisément les curieux détails.

Il est certain que, si Ravaillac n’avait point assassiné Henri IV, il n’y aurait point eu de pièces du procès de Ravaillac déposées au greffe du Palais de Justice; point de complices intéressés à faire disparaître lesdites pièces; partant, point d’incendiaires obligés, faute de meilleur moyen, à brûler le greffe pour brûler les pièces, et à brûler le Palais de Justice pour brûler le greffe; par conséquent enfin, point d'incendie de 1618. Le vieux Palais serait encore debout avec sa vieille grand-salle; je pourrais dire au lecteur: Allez la voir; et nous serions ainsi dispensés tous deux, moi d'en faire, lui d'en lire une description telle quelle. — Ce qui prouve cette vérité neuve: que les grands événements ont des suites incalculables.

Il est vrai qu'il serait fort possible d'abord que Ravaillac n'eût pas de complices, ensuite que ses complices, si par hasard il en avait, ne fussent pour rien dans l'incendie de 1618. Il en existe deux autres explications très plausibles. Premièrement, la grande étoile enflammée, large d'un pied, haute d'une coudée, qui tomba, comme chacun sait, du ciel sur le Palais, le 7 mars après minuit. Deuxièmement, le quatrain de Théophile:

Certes, ce fut un triste jeu
Quand à Paris dame Justice,
Pour avoir mangé trop d'épice,
Se mit tout le palais en feu.

Quoi qu'on pense de cette triple explication politique, physique, poétique, de l'incendie du Palais de Justice en 1618, le fait malheureusement certain, c'est l'incendie. Il reste bien peu de chose aujourd'hui, grâce à cette catastrophe, grâce surtout aux diverses restaurations successives qui ont achevé ce qu'elle avait épargné, il reste bien peu de chose de cette première demeure des rois de France, de ce palais aîné du Louvre, déjà si vieux du temps de Philippe le Bel qu'on y cherchait les traces des magnifiques bâtiments élevés par le roi Robert et décrits par Helgaldus. Presque tout a disparu. Qu'est devenue la chambre de la chancellerie où saint Louis *consomma son mariage*? le jardin où il rendait la justice, «vêtu d'une cotte de camelot, d'un surcot de tiretaine sans manches, et d'un manteau pardessus de sandal noir, couché sur des tapis, avec Joinville»? Où est la chambre de l'empereur Sigismond? celle de Charles IV? celle de Jean sans Terre? Où est l'escalier d'où Charles VI promulgua son édit de grâce? la dalle où Marcel égorgea, en présence du dauphin, Robert de Clermont et le maréchal de Champagne? le guichet où furent lacérées les bulles de l'antipape Bénédict, et d'où repartirent ceux qui les avaient apportées, chapés et mitrés en dérision, et faisant amende honorable par tout Paris? et la grand-salle, avec sa dorure, son azur, ses ogives, ses statues, ses piliers, son immense voûte toute déchiquetée de sculptures? et la chambre dorée? et le lion de pierre qui se tenait à la porte, la tête baissée, la queue entre les jambes, comme les lions du trône de Salomon, dans l'attitude humiliée qui convient à la force devant la justice? et les belles portes? et les beaux vitraux? et les ferrures ciselées qui décourageaient Biscornette? et les délicates menuiseries de Du Hancy?... Qu'a fait le temps, qu'ont fait les hommes de ces merveilles? Que nous a-t-on donné pour tout cela, pour toute cette histoire gauloise, pour tout cet art gothique? les lourds cintres surbaissés de M. de Brosse, ce gauche architecte du portail Saint-Gervais, voilà pour l'art; et quant à l'histoire, nous avons les souvenirs bavards du gros pilier, encore tout retentissant des commérages des Patrus.

Ce n'est pas grand-chose. — Revenons à la véritable grand-salle du véritable vieux Palais.

Les deux extrémités de ce gigantesque parallélogramme étaient occupées, l'une par la fameuse table de marbre, si longue, si large et si épaisse que jamais on ne vit, disent les vieux papiers terriers, dans un style qui eût donné appétit à Gargantua, *pareille tranche de marbre au monde*; l'autre, par la chapelle où Louis XI s'était fait sculpter à genoux devant la Vierge, et où il avait fait transporter, sans se soucier de laisser deux niches vides dans la file des statues royales, les statues de Charlemagne et de saint Louis, deux saints qu'il supposait fort en crédit au ciel comme rois de France. Cette chapelle, neuve encore, bâtie à peine depuis six ans, était toute dans ce goût charmant d'architecture délicate, de sculpture merveilleuse, de fine et profonde ciselure qui marque chez nous la fin de l'ère gothique et se perpétue jusque vers le milieu du seizième siècle dans les fantaisies féeriques de la renaissance. La petite rosace à jour percée au-dessus du portail était en particulier un chef-d'œuvre de ténuité et de grâce; on eût dit une étoile de dentelle.

Au milieu de la salle, vis-à-vis la grande porte, une estrade de brocart d'or, adossée au mur, et dans laquelle était pratiquée une entrée particulière au moyen d'une fenêtre du couloir de la chambre dorée, avait été élevée pour les envoyés flamands et les autres gros personnages conviés à la représentation du mystère.

C'est sur la table de marbre que devait, selon l'usage, être représenté le mystère. Elle avait été disposée pour cela dès le matin; sa riche planche de marbre, toute rayée par les talons de la basoche, supportait une cage de charpente assez élevée, dont la surface supérieure, accessible aux regards de toute la salle, devait servir de théâtre, et dont l'intérieur, masqué par des tapisseries, devait tenir lieu de vestiaire aux personnages de la pièce. Une échelle, naïvement placée en dehors, devait établir la communication entre la scène et le vestiaire, et prêter ses roides échelons aux entrées comme aux sorties. Il n’y avait pas de personnage si imprévu, pas de péripétie, pas de coup de théâtre qui ne fût tenu de monter par cette échelle. Innocente et vénérable enfance de l’art et des machines!

Quatre sergents du bailli du Palais, gardiens obligés de tous les plaisirs du peuple les jours de fête comme les jours d’exécution, se tenaient debout aux quatre coins de la table de marbre.

Ce n’était qu’au douzième coup de midi sonnant à la grande horloge du Palais que la pièce devait commencer. C’était bien tard sans doute pour une représentation théâtrale; mais il avait fallu prendre l’heure des ambassadeurs.

Or toute cette multitude attendait depuis le matin. Bon nombre de ces honnêtes curieux grelottaient dès le point du jour devant le grand degré du Palais; quelques-uns même affirmaient avoir passé la nuit en travers de la grande porte pour être sûrs d’entrer les premiers. La foule s’épaississait à tout moment, et, comme une eau qui dépasse son niveau, commençait à monter le long des murs, à s’enfler autour des piliers, à déborder sur les entablements, sur les corniches, sur les appuis des fenêtres, sur toutes les saillies de l’architecture, sur tous les reliefs de la sculpture. Aussi la gêne, l’impatience, l’ennui, la liberté d’un jour de cynisme et de folie, les querelles qui éclataient à tout propos pour un coude pointu ou un soulier ferré, la fatigue d’une longue attente, donnaient-elles déjà, bien avant l’heure où les ambassadeurs devaient arriver, un accent aigre et amer à la clameur de ce peuple enfermé, emboîté, pressé, foulé, étouffé. On n’entendait que plaintes et imprécations contre les Flamands, le prévôt des marchands, le cardinal de Bourbon, le bailli du Palais, madame Marguerite d’Autriche, les sergents à verge, le froid, le chaud, le mauvais temps, l’évêque de Paris, le pape des fous, les piliers, les statues, cette porte fermée, cette fenêtre ouverte; le tout au grand amusement des bandes d’écoliers et de laquais disséminées dans la masse, qui mêlaient à tout ce mécontentement leurs taquineries et leurs malices, et piquaient, pour ainsi dire, à coups d’épingle la mauvaise humeur générale.

Il y avait entre autres un groupe de ces joyeux démons qui, après avoir défoncé le vitrage d’une fenêtre, s’était hardiment assis sur l’entablement, et de là plongeait tour à tour ses regards et ses railleries au dedans et au dehors, dans la foule de la salle et dans la foule de la place. À leurs gestes de parodie, à leurs rires éclatants, aux appels goguenards qu'ils échangeaient d'un bout à l'autre de la salle avec leurs camarades, il était aisé de juger que ces jeunes clercs ne partageaient pas l'ennui et la fatigue du reste des assistants, et qu'ils savaient fort bien, pour leur plaisir particulier, extraire de ce qu'ils avaient sous les yeux un spectacle qui leur faisait attendre patiemment l'autre.

— Sur mon âme, c'est vous, *Joannes Frollo de Molendino*! criait l'un d'eux à une espèce de petit diable blond, à jolie et maligne figure, accroché aux acanthes d'un chapiteau; vous êtes bien nommé Jehan du Moulin, car vos deux bras et vos deux jambes ont l'air de quatre ailes qui vont au vent. — Depuis combien de temps êtes-vous ici?

«Par la miséricorde du diable, répondit *Joannes Frollo,* voilà plus de quatre heures, et j'espère bien qu'elles me seront comptées sur mon temps de purgatoire. J'ai entendu les huit chantres du roi de Sicile entonner le premier verset de la haute messe de sept heures dans la Sainte-Chapelle.

— De beaux chantres, reprit l'autre, et qui ont la voix encore plus pointue que leur bonnet! Avant de fonder une messe à monsieur saint Jean, le roi aurait bien dû s'informer si monsieur saint Jean aime le latin psalmodié avec accent provençal.

— C'est pour employer ces maudits chantres du roi de Sicile qu'il a fait cela! cria aigrement une vieille femme dans la foule au bas de la fenêtre. Je vous demande un peu! mille livres parisis pour une messe! et sur la ferme du poisson de mer des halles de Paris, encore!

— Paix! vieille, reprit un gros et grave personnage qui se bouchait le nez à côté de la marchande de poisson; il fallait bien fonder une messe. Vouliez-vous pas que le roi retombât malade?

— Bravement parlé, sire Gilles Lecornu, maître pelletier-fourreur des robes du roi!» cria le petit écolier cramponné au chapiteau.

Un éclat de rire de tous les écoliers accueillit le nom malencontreux du pauvre pelletier-fourreur des robes du roi.

«Lecornu! Gilles Lecornu! disaient les uns.

— *Cornutus et hirsutus*, reprenait un autre.

— Hé! sans doute, continuait le petit démon du chapiteau. Qu'ont-ils à rire? Honorable homme Gilles Lecornu, frère de maître Jehan Lecornu, prévôt de l'hôtel du roi, fils de maître Mahiet Lecornu, premier portier du bois de Vincennes, tous bourgeois de Paris, tous mariés de père en fils!»

La gaieté redoubla. Le gros pelletier-fourreur, sans répondre un mot, s'efforçait de se dérober aux regards fixés sur lui de tous côtés; mais il suait et soufflait en vain: comme un coin qui s'enfonce dans le bois, les efforts qu'il faisait ne servaient qu'à emboîter plus solidement dans les épaules de ses voisins sa large face apoplectique, pourpre de dépit et de colère.

Enfin un de ceux-ci, gros, court et vénérable comme lui, vint à son secours.

«Abomination! des écoliers qui parlent de la sorte à un bourgeois! de mon temps on les eût fustigés avec un fagot dont on les eût brûlés ensuite.»

La bande entière éclata.

«Holàhée! qui chante cette gamme? quel est le chat-huant de malheur?

— Tiens, je le reconnais, dit l'un; c'est maître Andry Musnier.

— Parce qu'il est un des quatre libraires jurés de l'Université! dit l'autre.

— Tout est par quatre dans cette boutique, cria un troisième: les quatre nations, les quatre facultés, les quatre fêtes, les quatre procureurs, les quatre électeurs, les quatre libraires.

— Eh bien, reprit Jehan Frollo, il faut leur faire le diable à quatre.

— Musnier, nous brûlerons tes livres.

— Musnier, nous battrons ton laquais.

— Musnier, nous chiffonnerons ta femme.

— La bonne grosse mademoiselle Oudarde.

— Qui est aussi fraîche et aussi gaie que si elle était veuve.

— Que le diable vous emporte! grommela maître Andry Musnier.

— Maître Andry, reprit Jehan, toujours pendu à son chapiteau, tais-toi, ou je te tombe sur la tête!»

Maître Andry leva les yeux, parut mesurer un instant la hauteur du pilier, la pesanteur du drôle, multiplia mentalement cette pesanteur par le carré de la vitesse, et se tut.

Jehan, maître du champ de bataille, poursuivit avec triomphe:

«C'est que je le ferais, quoique je sois frère d'un archidiacre!

— Beaux sires, que nos gens de l'Université! n'avoir seulement pas fait respecter nos privilèges dans un jour comme celui-ci! Enfin, il y a mai et feu de joie à la Ville; mystère, pape des fous et ambassadeurs flamands à la Cité; et à l'Université, rien!

— Cependant la place Maubert est assez grande! reprit un des clercs cantonnés sur la table de la fenêtre.

— À bas le recteur, les électeurs et les procureurs! cria Joannes.

— Il faudra faire, un feu de joie ce soir dans le Champ-Gaillard, poursuivit l’autre, avec les livres de maître Andry.

— Et les pupitres des scribes! dit son voisin.

— Et les verges des bedeaux!

— Et les crachoirs des doyens!

— Et les buffets des procureurs!

— Et les huches des électeurs!

— Et les escabeaux du recteur!

— À bas! reprit le petit Jehan en faux-bourdon; à bas maître Andry, les bedeaux et les scribes; les théologiens, les médecins et les décrétistes; les procureurs, les électeurs et le recteur!

— C’est donc la fin du monde! murmura maître Andry en se bouchant les oreilles.

— À propos, le recteur! le voici qui passe dans la place», cria un de ceux de la fenêtre.

Ce fut à qui se retournerait vers la place.

«Est-ce que c’est vraiment notre vénérable recteur maître Thibaut? demanda Jehan Frollo du Moulin, qui, s’étant accroché à un pilier de l’intérieur, ne pouvait voir ce qui se passait au dehors.

— Oui, oui, répondirent tous les autres, c’est lui, c’est bien lui, maître Thibaut le recteur.»

C’était en effet le recteur et tous les dignitaires de l’Université qui se rendaient processionnellement au-devant de l’ambassade et traversaient en ce moment la place du Palais. Les écoliers, pressés à la fenêtre, les accueillirent au passage avec des sarcasmes et des applaudissements ironiques. Le recteur, qui marchait en tête de sa compagnie, essuya la première bordée; elle fut rude.

«Bonjour, monsieur le recteur! Holàhée! bonjour donc!

— Comment fait-il pour être ici, le vieux joueur? Il a donc quitté ses dés?

— Comme il trotte sur sa mule! elle a les oreilles moins longues que lui.

— Holàhée! bonjour, monsieur le recteur Thibaut! *Tybalde aleator*! vieil imbécile! vieux joueur!

— Dieu vous garde! avez-vous fait souvent double-six cette nuit?

— Oh! la caduque figure, plombée, tirée et battue pour l’amour du jeu et des dés!

— Où allez-vous comme cela, *Tybalde ad dados*, tournant le dos à l'Université et trottant vers la Ville?

— Il va sans doute chercher un logis rue Thibautodé», cria Jehan du Moulin.

Toute la bande répéta le quolibet avec une voix de tonnerre et des battements de mains furieux.

«Vous allez chercher logis rue Thibautodé, n'est-ce pas, monsieur le recteur, joueur de la partie du diable?»

Puis ce fut le tour des autres dignitaires.

«À bas les bedeaux! à bas les massiers!

— Dis donc, Robin Poussepain, qu'est-ce que c'est donc que celui-là?

— C'est Gilbert de Suilly, *Gilbertus de Soliaco*, le chancelier du collège d'Autun.

— Tiens, voici mon soulier: tu es mieux placé que moi; jette-le-lui par la figure.

— *Saturnalitias mittimus ecce nuces*.

— À bas les six théologiens avec leurs surplis blancs!

— Ce sont là les théologiens? Je croyais que c'étaient les six oies blanches données par Sainte-Geneviève à la ville, pour le fief de Roogny.

— À bas les médecins!

— À bas les disputations cardinales et quodlibétaires!

— À toi ma coiffe, chancelier de Sainte-Geneviève! tu m'as fait un passe-droit. — C'est vrai cela! il a donné ma place dans la nation de Normandie au petit Ascanio Falzaspada, qui est de la province de Bourges, puisqu'il est Italien.

— C'est une injustice, dirent tous les écoliers. À bas le chancelier de Sainte-Geneviève!

— Ho hé! maître Joachim de Ladehors! Ho hé! Louis Dahuille! Ho hé! Lambert Hoctement!

— Que le diable étouffe le procureur de la nation d'Allemagne!

— Et les chapelains de la Sainte-Chapelle, avec leurs aumusses grises; *cum tunicis grisis*!

— *Seu de pellibus grisis fourratis*!

— Holàhée! les maîtres ès arts! Toutes les belles chapes noires! toutes les belles chapes rouges!

— Cela fait une belle queue au recteur.

— On dirait un duc de Venise qui va aux épousailles de la mer.

— Dis donc, Jehan! les chanoines de Sainte-Geneviève!

— Au diable la chanoinerie!

— Abbé Claude Choart! docteur Claude Choart! Est-ce que vous cherchez Marie la Giffarde?

— Elle est rue de Glatigny.

— Elle fait le lit du roi des ribauds.

— Elle paie ses quatre deniers; *quatuor denarios*.

— *Aut unum bombum*.

— Voulez-vous qu'elle vous paie au nez?

— Camarades! maître Simon Sanguin, l'électeur de Picardie, qui a sa femme en croupe.

— *Post equitem sedet atra cura*.

— Hardi, maître Simon!

— Bonjour, monsieur l'électeur!

— Bonne nuit, madame l'électrice!

— Sont-ils heureux de voir tout cela», disait en soupirant *Joannes de Molendino*, toujours perché dans les feuillages de son chapiteau.

Cependant le libraire juré de l'Université, maître Andry Musnier, se penchait à l'oreille du pelletier-fourreur des robes du roi, maître Gilles Lecornu.

«Je vous le dis, monsieur, c'est la fin du monde. On n'a jamais vu pareils débordements de l'écolerie. Ce sont les maudites inventions du siècle qui perdent tout. Les artilleries, les serpentines, les bombardes, et surtout l'impression, cette autre peste d'Allemagne. Plus de manuscrits, plus de livres! L'impression tue la librairie. C'est la fin du monde qui vient.

— Je m'en aperçois bien aux progrès des étoles de velours», dit le marchand fourreur.

En ce moment midi sonna.

«Ha!...» dit toute la foule d'une seule voix. Les écoliers se turent. Puis il se fit un grand remue-ménage, un grand mouvement de pieds et de têtes, une grande détonation générale de toux et de mouchoirs; chacun s'arrangea, se posta, se haussa, se groupa; puis un grand silence; tous les cous restèrent tendus, toutes les bouches ouvertes, tous les regards tournés vers la table de marbre. Rien n'y parut. Les quatre sergents du bailli étaient toujours là, roides et immobiles comme quatre statues peintes. Tous les yeux se tournèrent vers l'estrade réservée aux envoyés flamands. La porte restait fermée, et l’estrade vide. Cette foule attendait depuis le matin trois choses: midi, l’ambassade de Flandre, le mystère. Midi seul était arrivé à l’heure.

Pour le coup c’était trop fort.

On attendit une, deux, trois, cinq minutes, un quart d’heure; rien ne venait. L’estrade demeurait déserte, le théâtre muet. Cependant à l’impatience avait succédé la colère. Les paroles irritées circulaient, à voix basse encore, il est vrai. «Le mystère! le mystère!» murmurait-on sourdement. Les têtes fermentaient. Une tempête, qui ne faisait encore que gronder, flottait à la surface de cette foule. Ce fut Jehan du Moulin qui en tira la première étincelle.

«Le mystère, et au diable les Flamands!» s’écria-t-il de toute la force de ses poumons, en se tordant comme un serpent autour de son chapiteau.

La foule battit des mains.

«Le mystère, répéta-t-elle, et la Flandre à tous les diables!

— Il nous faut le mystère, sur-le-champ, reprit l’écolier; ou m’est avis que nous pendions le bailli du Palais, en guise de comédie et de moralité.

— Bien dit, cria le peuple, et entamons la pendaison par ses sergents.»

Une grande acclamation suivit. Les quatre pauvres diables commençaient à pâlir et à s’entre-regarder. La multitude s’ébranlait vers eux, et ils voyaient déjà la frêle balustrade de bois qui les en séparait ployer et faire ventre sous la pression de la foule.

Le moment était critique.

«À sac! à sac!» criait-on de toutes parts.

En cet instant, la tapisserie du vestiaire que nous avons décrit plus haut se souleva, et donna passage à un personnage dont la seule vue arrêta subitement la foule, et changea comme par enchantement sa colère en curiosité.

«Silence! silence!»

Le personnage, fort peu rassuré et tremblant de tous ses membres, s’avança jusqu’au bord de la table de marbre, avec force révérences qui, à mesure qu’il approchait, ressemblaient de plus en plus à des génuflexions.

Cependant le calme s’était peu à peu rétabli. Il ne restait plus que cette légère rumeur qui se dégage toujours du silence de la foule.

«Messieurs les bourgeois, dit-il, et mesdemoiselles les bourgeoises, nous devons avoir l’honneur de déclamer et représenter devant son éminence Monsieur le cardinal une très belle moralité, qui a nom: *Le bon jugement de madame la vierge Marie*. C’est moi qui fais Jupiter. Son Éminence accompagne en ce moment l’ambassade très honorable de monsieur le duc d’Autriche; laquelle est retenue, à l’heure qu’il est, à écouter la harangue de monsieur le recteur de l’Université, à la porte Baudets. Dès que l’éminentissime cardinal sera arrivé, nous commencerons.»

Il est certain qu’il ne fallait rien moins que l’intervention de Jupiter pour sauver les quatre malheureux sergents du bailli du Palais. Si nous avions le bonheur d’avoir inventé cette très véridique histoire, et par conséquent d’en être responsable par-devant Notre-Dame la Critique, ce n’est pas contre nous qu’on pourrait invoquer en ce moment le précepte classique: *Nec deus intersit*. Du reste, le costume du seigneur Jupiter était fort beau, et n’avait pas peu contribué à calmer la foule en attirant toute son attention. Jupiter était vêtu d’une brigandine couverte de velours noir, à clous dorés; il était coiffé d’un bicoquet garni de boutons d’argent dorés; et, n’était le rouge et la grosse barbe qui couvraient chacun une moitié de son visage, n’était le rouleau de carton doré, semé de passequilles et tout hérissé de lanières de clinquant qu’il portait à la main et dans lequel des yeux exercés reconnaissaient aisément la foudre, n’était ses pieds couleur de chair et enrubannés à la grecque, il eût pu supporter la comparaison, pour la sévérité de sa tenue, avec un archer breton du corps de monsieur de Berry.

II

PIERRE GRINGOIRE

Cependant, tandis qu'il haranguait, la satisfaction, l'admiration unanimement excitées par son costume se dissipaient à ses paroles; et quand il arriva à cette conclusion malencontreuse: «Dès que l'éminentissime cardinal sera arrivé, nous commencerons», sa voix se perdit dans un tonnerre de huées.

«Commencez tout de suite! Le mystère! le mystère tout de suite! criait le peuple. Et l'on entendait par-dessus toutes les voix celle de *Johannes de Molendino*, qui perçait la rumeur comme le fifre dans un charivari de Nîmes: — Commencez tout de suite! glapissait l'écolier.

— À bas Jupiter et le cardinal de Bourbon! vociféraient Robin Poussepain et les autres clercs juchés dans la croisée.

— Tout de suite la moralité! répétait la foule. Sur-le-champ! tout de suite! Le sac et la corde aux comédiens et au cardinal!»

Le pauvre Jupiter, hagard, effaré, pâle sous son rouge, laissa tomber sa foudre, prit à la main son bicoquet; puis il saluait et tremblait en balbutiant: Son Éminence... les ambassadeurs... Madame Marguerite de Flandre... Il ne savait que dire. Au fond, il avait peur d'être pendu.

Pendu par la populace pour attendre, pendu par le cardinal pour n'avoir pas attendu, il ne voyait des deux côtés qu'un abîme, c'est-à-dire une potence.

Heureusement quelqu'un vint le tirer d'embarras et assumer la responsabilité.

Un individu qui se tenait en deçà de la balustrade dans l'espace laissé libre autour de la table de marbre, et que personne n'avait encore aperçu, tant sa longue et mince personne était complètement abritée de tout rayon visuel par le diamètre du pilier auquel il était adossé, cet individu, disons-nous, grand, maigre, blême, blond, jeune encore, quoique déjà ridé au front et aux joues, avec des yeux brillants et une bouche souriante, vêtu d'une serge noire, râpée et lustrée de vieillesse, s'approcha de la table de marbre et fit un signe au pauvre patient. Mais l'autre, interdit, ne voyait pas.

Le nouveau venu fit un pas de plus: «Jupiter! dit-il, mon cher Jupiter!»

L'autre n'entendait point.

Enfin le grand blond, impatienté, lui cria presque sous le nez:

«Michel Giborne!

— Qui m’appelle? dit Jupiter, comme éveillé en sursaut.

— Moi, répondit le personnage vêtu de noir.

— Ah! dit Jupiter.

— Commencez tout de suite, reprit l’autre. Satisfaites le populaire. Je me charge d’apaiser monsieur le bailli, qui apaisera monsieur le cardinal.»

Jupiter respira.

«Messeigneurs les bourgeois, cria-t-il de toute la force de ses poumons à la foule qui continuait de le huer, nous allons commencer tout de suite.

— *Evoe, Jupiter! Plaudite, cives*! crièrent les écoliers.

— Noël! Noël!» cria le peuple.

Ce fut un battement de mains assourdissant, et Jupiter était déjà rentré sous sa tapisserie que la salle tremblait encore d’acclamations.

Cependant le personnage inconnu qui avait si magiquement changé *la tempête en bonace*, comme dit notre vieux et cher Corneille, était modestement rentré dans la pénombre de son pilier, et y serait sans doute resté invisible, immobile et muet comme auparavant, s’il n’en eût été tiré par deux jeunes femmes qui, placées au premier rang des spectateurs, avaient remarqué son colloque avec Michel Giborne-Jupiter.

«Maître, dit l’une d’elles en lui faisant signe de s’approcher...

— Taisez-vous donc, ma chère Liénarde, dit sa voisine, jolie, fraîche, et toute brave à force d’être endimanchée. Ce n’est pas un clerc, c’est un laïque; il ne faut pas dire *maître*, mais bien *messire*.

— Messire», dit Liénarde.

L’inconnu s’approcha de la balustrade.

«Que voulez-vous de moi, mesdamoiselles? demanda-t-il avec empressement.

— Oh! rien, dit Liénarde toute confuse, c’est ma voisine Gisquette la Gencienne qui veut vous parler.

— Non pas, reprit Gisquette en rougissant; c’est Liénarde qui vous a dit: Maître; je lui ai dit qu’on disait: Messire.»

Les deux jeunes filles baissaient les yeux. L’autre, qui ne demandait pas mieux que de lier conversation, les regardait en souriant:

«Vous n’avez donc rien à me dire, mesdamoiselles?

— Oh! rien du tout, répondit Gisquette.

— Rien», dit Liénarde.

Le grand jeune homme blond fit un pas pour se retirer. Mais les deux curieuses n'avaient pas envie de lâcher prise.

«Messire, dit vivement Gisquette avec l'impétuosité d'une écluse qui s'ouvre ou d'une femme qui prend son parti, vous connaissez donc ce soldat qui va jouer le rôle de madame la Vierge dans le mystère?

— Vous voulez dire le rôle de Jupiter? reprit l'anonyme.

— Hé! oui, dit Liénarde, est-elle bête! Vous connaissez donc Jupiter?

— Michel Giborne? répondit l'anonyme; oui, madame.

— Il a une fière barbe! dit Liénarde.

— Cela sera-t-il beau, ce qu'ils vont dire là-dessus? demanda timidement Gisquette.

— Très beau, madamoiselle, répondit l'anonyme sans la moindre hésitation.

— Qu'est-ce que ce sera? dit Liénarde.

— *Le bon jugement de madame la Vierge*, moralité, s'il vous plaît, madamoiselle.

— Ah! c'est différent», reprit Liénarde.

Un court silence suivit. L'inconnu le rompit:

«C'est une moralité toute neuve, et qui n'a pas encore servi.

— Ce n'est donc pas la même, dit Gisquette, que celle qu'on a donnée il y a deux ans, le jour de l'entrée de monsieur le légat, et où il y avait trois belles filles faisant personnages...

— De sirènes, dit Liénarde.

— Et toutes nues», ajouta le jeune homme.

Liénarde baissa pudiquement les yeux. Gisquette la regarda, et en fit autant. Il poursuivit en souriant:

«C'était chose bien plaisante à voir. Aujourd'hui c'est une moralité faite exprès pour madame la demoiselle de Flandre.

— Chantera-t-on des bergerettes? demanda Gisquette.

— Fi! dit l'inconnu, dans une moralité! Il ne faut pas confondre les genres. Si c'était une sotie, à la bonne heure.

— C'est dommage, reprit Gisquette. Ce jour-là il y avait à la fontaine du Ponceau des hommes et des femmes sauvages qui se combattaient et faisaient plusieurs contenances en chantant de petits motets et des bergerettes.

— Ce qui convient pour un légat, dit assez sèchement l'inconnu, ne convient pas pour une princesse.

— Et près d’eux, reprit Liénarde, joutaient plusieurs bas instruments qui rendaient de grandes mélodies.

— Et pour rafraîchir les passants, continua Gisquette, la fontaine jetait par trois bouches, vin, lait et hypocras, dont buvait qui voulait.

— Et un peu au-dessous du Ponceau, poursuivit Liénarde, à la Trinité, il y avait une passion par personnages, et sans parler.

— Si je m’en souviens! s’écria Gisquette: Dieu en la croix, et les deux larrons à droite et à gauche!»

Ici les jeunes commères, s’échauffant au souvenir de l’entrée de monsieur le légat, se mirent à parler à la fois.

«Et plus avant, à la porte-aux-Peintres, il y avait d’autres personnes très richement habillées.

— Et à la fontaine Saint-Innocent, ce chasseur qui poursuivait une biche avec grand bruit de chiens et de trompes de chasse!

— Et à la boucherie de Paris, ces échafauds qui figuraient la bastille de Dieppe!

— Et quand le légat passa, tu sais, Gisquette, on donna l’assaut, et les Anglais eurent tous les gorges coupées.

— Et contre la porte du Châtelet, il y avait de très beaux personnages!

— Et sur le Pont-au-Change, qui était tout tendu par-dessus!

— Et quand le légat passa, on laissa voler sur le pont plus de deux cents douzaines de toutes sortes d’oiseaux; c’était très beau, Liénarde.

— Ce sera plus beau aujourd’hui, reprit enfin leur interlocuteur, qui semblait les écouter avec impatience.

— Vous nous promettez que ce mystère sera beau? dit Gisquette.

— Sans doute, répondit-il; puis il ajouta avec une certaine emphase: — Mesdamoiselles, c’est moi qui en suis l’auteur.

— Vraiment? dirent les jeunes filles, tout ébahies.

— Vraiment! répondit le poète en se rengorgeant légèrement; c’est-à-dire nous sommes deux: Jehan Marchand, qui a scié les planches, et dressé la charpente du théâtre et toute la boiserie, et moi qui ai fait la pièce. — Je m’appelle Pierre Gringoire.»

L’auteur du Cid n’eût pas dit avec plus de fierté: *Pierre Corneille*.

Nos lecteurs ont pu observer qu’il avait déjà dû s’écouler un certain temps depuis le moment où Jupiter était rentré sous la tapisserie jusqu’à l’instant où l’auteur de la moralité nouvelle s’était révélé ainsi brusquement à l’admiration naïve de Gisquette et de Liénarde. Chose remarquable: toute cette foule, quelques minutes auparavant si tumultueuse, attendait maintenant avec mansuétude, sur la foi du comédien; ce qui prouve cette vérité éternelle et tous les jours encore éprouvée dans nos théâtres, que le meilleur moyen de faire attendre patiemment le public, c'est de lui affirmer qu'on va commencer tout de suite.

Toutefois l'écolier Joannes ne s'endormait pas.

«Holàhée! cria-t-il tout à coup au milieu de la paisible attente qui avait succédé au trouble, Jupiter, madame la Vierge, bateleurs du diable! vous gaussez-vous? la pièce! la pièce! Commencez, ou nous recommençons.»

Il n'en fallut pas davantage.

Une musique de hauts et bas instruments se fit entendre de l'intérieur de l'échafaudage; la tapisserie se souleva; quatre personnages bariolés et fardés en sortirent, grimpèrent la roide échelle du théâtre, et, parvenus sur la plate-forme supérieure, se rangèrent en ligne devant le public, qu'ils saluèrent profondément; alors la symphonie se tut. C'était le mystère qui commençait.

Les quatre personnages, après avoir largement recueilli le paiement de leurs révérences en applaudissements, entamèrent, au milieu d'un religieux silence, un prologue dont nous faisons volontiers grâce au lecteur. Du reste, ce qui arrive encore de nos jours, le public s'occupait encore plus des costumes qu'ils portaient que du rôle qu'ils débitaient; et en vérité c'était justice. Ils étaient vêtus tous quatre de robes mi-parties jaune et blanc, qui ne se distinguaient entre elles que par la nature de l'étole; la première était en brocart, or et argent, la deuxième en soie, la troisième en laine, la quatrième en toile. Le premier des personnages portait en main droite une épée, le second deux clefs d'or, le troisième une balance, le quatrième une bêche; et pour aider les intelligences paresseuses qui n'auraient pas vu clair à travers la transparence de ces attributs, on pouvait lire en grosses lettres noires brodées: au bas de la robe de brocart, JE M'APPELLE NOBLESSE; au bas de la robe de soie, JE M'APPELLE CLERGÉ; au bas de la robe de laine, JE M'APPELLE MARCHANDISE; au bas de la robe de toile, JE M'APPELLE LABOUR. Le sexe des deux allégories mâles était clairement indiqué à tout spectateur judicieux par leurs robes moins longues et par la cramignole qu'elles portaient en tête, tandis que les deux allégories femelles, moins court-vêtues, étaient coiffées d'un chaperon.

Il eût fallu aussi beaucoup de mauvaise volonté pour ne pas comprendre, à travers la poésie du prologue, que Labour était marié à Marchandise et

Clergé à Noblesse, et que les deux heureux couples possédaient en commun un magnifique dauphin d’or, qu’ils prétendaient n’adjuger qu’à la plus belle. Ils allaient donc par le monde cherchant et quêtant cette beauté, et après avoir successivement rejeté la reine de Golconde, la princesse de Trébizonde, la fille du Grand-Khan de Tartarie, etc., etc., Labour et Clergé, Noblesse et Marchandise étaient venus se reposer sur la table de marbre du Palais de Justice, en débitant devant l’honnête auditoire autant de sentences et de maximes qu’on en pouvait alors dépenser à la Faculté des arts aux examens, sophismes, déterminances, figures et actes où les maîtres prenaient leurs bonnets de licence.

Tout cela était en effet très beau.

Cependant, dans cette foule sur laquelle les quatre allégories versaient à qui mieux mieux des flots de métaphores, il n’y avait pas une oreille plus attentive, pas un cœur plus palpitant, pas un œil plus hagard, pas un cou plus tendu, que l’œil, l’oreille, le cou et le cœur de l’auteur, du poète, de ce brave Pierre Gringoire, qui n’avait pu résister, le moment d’auparavant, à la joie de dire son nom à deux jolies filles. Il était retourné à quelques pas d’elles, derrière son pilier, et là, il écoutait, il regardait, il savourait. Les bienveillants applaudissements qui avaient accueilli le début de son prologue retentissaient encore dans ses entrailles, et il était complètement absorbé dans cette espèce de contemplation extatique avec laquelle un auteur voit ses idées tomber une à une de la bouche de l’acteur dans le silence d’un vaste auditoire. Digne Pierre Gringoire!

Il nous en coûte de le dire, mais cette première extase fut bien vite troublée. À peine Gringoire avait-il approché ses lèvres de cette coupe enivrante de joie et de triomphe, qu’une goutte d’amertume vint s’y mêler.

Un mendiant déguenillé, qui ne pouvait faire recette, perdu qu’il était au milieu de la foule, et qui n’avait sans doute pas trouvé suffisante indemnité dans les poches de ses voisins, avait imaginé de se jucher sur quelque point en évidence, pour attirer les regards et les aumônes. Il s’était donc hissé pendant les premiers vers du prologue, à l’aide des piliers de l’estrade réservée, jusqu’à la corniche qui en bordait la balustrade à sa partie inférieure, et là, il s’était assis, sollicitant l’attention et la pitié de la multitude avec ses haillons et une plaie hideuse qui couvrait son bras droit. Du reste il ne proférait pas une parole.

Le silence qu’il gardait laissait aller le prologue sans encombre, et aucun désordre sensible ne serait survenu, si le malheur n’eût voulu que l’écolier

Joannes avisât, du haut de son pilier, le mendiant et ses simagrées. Un fou rire s'empara du jeune drôle, qui, sans se soucier d'interrompre le spectacle et de troubler le recueillement universel, s'écria gaillardement: «Tiens! ce malingreux qui demande l'aumône!»

Quiconque a jeté une pierre dans une mare à grenouilles ou tiré un coup de fusil dans une volée d'oiseaux, peut se faire une idée de l'effet que produisirent ces paroles incongrues, au milieu de l'attention générale. Gringoire en tressaillit comme d'une secousse électrique. Le prologue resta court, et toutes les têtes se retournèrent en tumulte vers le mendiant, qui, loin de se déconcerter, vit dans cet incident une bonne occasion de récolte, et se mit à dire d'un air dolent, en fermant ses yeux à demi: «La charité, s'il vous plaît!

— Eh mais, sur mon âme, reprit Joannes, c'est Clopin Trouillefou. Holàhée! l'ami, ta plaie te gênait donc à la jambe, que tu l'as mise sur ton bras?»

En parlant ainsi, il jetait avec une adresse de singe un petit-blanc dans le feutre gras que le mendiant tendait de son bras malade. Le mendiant reçut sans broncher l'aumône et le sarcasme, et continua d'un accent lamentable: «La charité, s'il vous plaît!»

Cet épisode avait considérablement distrait l'auditoire, et bon nombre de spectateurs, Robin Poussepain et tous les clercs en tête, applaudissaient gaiement à ce duo bizarre que venaient d'improviser, au milieu du prologue, l'écolier avec sa voix criarde et le mendiant avec son imperturbable psalmodie.

Gringoire était fort mécontent. Revenu de sa première stupéfaction, il s'évertuait à crier aux quatre personnages en scène: «Continuez! que diable, continuez!» sans même daigner jeter un regard de dédain sur les deux interrupteurs.

En ce moment, il se sentit tirer par le bord de son surtout; il se retourna, non sans quelque humeur, et eut assez de peine à sourire. Il le fallait pourtant. C'était le joli bras de Gisquette la Gencienne, qui, passé à travers la balustrade, sollicitait de cette façon son attention.

«Monsieur, dit la jeune fille, est-ce qu'ils vont continuer?

— Sans doute, répondit Gringoire, assez choqué de la question.

— En ce cas, messire, reprit-elle, auriez-vous la courtoisie de m'expliquer...

— Ce qu'ils vont dire? interrompit Gringoire. Eh bien, écoutez!

— Non, dit Gisquette, mais ce qu’ils ont dit jusqu’à présent.»

Gringoire fit un soubresaut, comme un homme dont on toucherait la plaie à vif.

«Peste de la petite fille sotte et bouchée!» dit-il entre ses dents.

À dater de ce moment-là, Gisquette fut perdue dans son esprit.

Cependant, les acteurs avaient obéi à son injonction, et le public, voyant qu’ils se remettaient à parler, s’était remis à écouter, non sans avoir perdu force beautés, dans l’espèce de soudure qui se fit entre les deux parties de la pièce ainsi brusquement coupée. Gringoire en faisait tout bas l’amère réflexion. Pourtant la tranquillité s’était rétablie peu à peu, l’écolier se taisait, le mendiant comptait quelque monnaie dans son chapeau, et la pièce avait repris le dessus.

C’était en réalité un fort bel ouvrage, et dont il nous semble qu’on pourrait encore fort bien tirer parti aujourd’hui, moyennant quelques arrangements. L’exposition, un peu longue et un peu vide, c’est-à-dire dans les règles, était simple, et Gringoire, dans le candide sanctuaire de son for intérieur, en admirait la clarté. Comme on s’en doute bien, les quatre personnages allégoriques étaient un peu fatigués d’avoir parcouru les trois parties du monde sans trouver à se défaire convenablement de leur dauphin d’or. Là-dessus, éloge du poisson merveilleux, avec mille allusions délicates au jeune fiancé de Marguerite de Flandre, alors fort tristement reclus à Amboise, et ne se doutant guère que Labour et Clergé, Noblesse et Marchandise venaient de faire le tour du monde pour lui. Le susdit dauphin donc était jeune, était beau, était fort, et surtout (magnifique origine de toutes les vertus royales!) il était fils du lion de France. Je déclare que cette métaphore hardie est admirable, et que l’histoire naturelle du théâtre, un jour d’allégorie et d’épithalame royal, ne s’effarouche aucunement d’un dauphin fils d’un lion. Ce sont justement ces rares et pindariques mélanges qui prouvent l’enthousiasme. Néanmoins, pour faire aussi la part de la critique, le poète aurait pu développer cette belle idée en moins de deux cents vers. Il est vrai que le mystère devait durer depuis midi jusqu’à quatre heures, d’après l’ordonnance de monsieur le prévôt, et qu’il faut bien dire quelque chose. D’ailleurs, on écoutait patiemment.

Tout à coup, au beau milieu d’une querelle entre mademoiselle Marchandise et madame Noblesse, au moment où maître Labour prononçait ce vers mirifique:

Onc ne vis dans les bois bête plus triomphante!

la porte de l’estrade réservée, qui était jusque-là restée si mal à propos fermée, s’ouvrit plus mal à propos encore; et la voix retentissante de l’huissier annonça brusquement: *Son Éminence monseigneur le cardinal de Bourbon*.

III

MONSIEUR LE CARDINAL

Pauvre Gringoire! le fracas de tous les gros doubles pétards de la Saint-Jean, la décharge de vingt arquebuses à croc, la détonation de cette fameuse serpentine de la Tour de Billy, qui, lors du siège de Paris, le dimanche 29 septembre 1465, tua sept Bourguignons d’un coup, l’explosion de toute la poudre à canon emmagasinée à la porte du Temple, lui eût moins rudement déchiré les oreilles, en ce moment solennel et dramatique, que ce peu de paroles tombées de la bouche d’un huissier: *Son Éminence monseigneur le cardinal de Bourbon*.

Ce n’est pas que Pierre Gringoire craignît monsieur le cardinal ou le dédaignât. Il n’avait ni cette faiblesse ni cette outrecuidance. Véritable éclectique, comme on dirait aujourd’hui, Gringoire était de ces esprits élevés et fermes, modérés et calmes, qui savent toujours se tenir au milieu de tout (*stare in dimidio rerum*), et qui sont pleins de raison et de libérale philosophie, tout en faisant état des cardinaux. Race précieuse et jamais interrompue de philosophes auxquels la sagesse, comme une autre Ariane, semble avoir donné une pelote de fil qu’ils s’en vont dévidant depuis le commencement du monde à travers le labyrinthe des choses humaines. On les retrouve dans tous les temps, toujours les mêmes, c’est-à-dire toujours selon tous les temps. Et sans compter notre Pierre Gringoire, qui les représenterait au quinzième siècle si nous parvenions à lui rendre l’illustration qu’il mérite, certainement c’est leur esprit qui animait le père Du Breul lorsqu’il écrivait dans le seizième ces paroles naïvement sublimes, dignes de tous les siècles: «Ie suis parisien de nation et parrhisian de parler, puisque *parrhisia* en grec signifie liberté de parler: de laquelle i’ai vsé mesme enuers messeigneurs les cardinaux, oncle et frère de monseigneur le prince de Conty: toutes fois avec respect de leur grandeur, et sans offenser personne de leur suitte, qui est beaucoup»

Il n’y avait donc ni haine du cardinal, ni dédain de sa présence, dans l’impression désagréable qu’elle fit à Pierre Gringoire. Bien au contraire; notre poète avait trop de bon sens et une souquenille trop râpée pour ne pas attacher un prix particulier à ce que mainte allusion de son prologue, et en particulier la glorification du dauphin fils du lion de France, fût recueillie par une oreille éminentissime. Mais ce n’est pas l’intérêt qui domine dans la noble nature des poètes. Je suppose que l’entité du poète soit représentée par le nombre dix, il est certain qu’un chimiste, en l’analysant et pharmacopolisant, comme dit Rabelais, la trouverait composée d’une partie d’intérêt contre neuf parties d’amour-propre. Or, au moment où la porte s’était ouverte pour le cardinal, les neuf parties d’amour-propre de Gringoire, gonflées et tuméfiées au souffle de l’admiration populaire, étaient dans un état d’accroissement prodigieux, sous lequel disparaissait comme étouffée cette imperceptible molécule d’intérêt que nous distinguions tout à l’heure dans la constitution des poètes; ingrédient précieux du reste, lest de réalité et d’humanité sans lequel ils ne toucheraient pas la terre. Gringoire jouissait de sentir, de voir, de palper pour ainsi dire une assemblée entière, de marauds il est vrai, mais qu’importe, stupéfiée, pétrifiée, et comme asphyxiée devant les incommensurables tirades qui surgissaient à chaque instant de toutes les parties de son épithalame. J’affirme qu’il partageait lui-même la béatitude générale, et qu’au rebours de La Fontaine, qui, à la représentation de sa comédie du Florentin, demandait: *Quel est le malotru qui a fait cette rapsodie?* Gringoire eût volontiers demandé à son voisin: *De qui est ce chef-d’œuvre?* On peut juger maintenant quel effet produisit sur lui la brusque et intempestive survenue du cardinal.

Ce qu’il pouvait craindre ne se réalisa que trop. L’entrée de son éminence bouleversa l’auditoire. Toutes les têtes se tournèrent vers l’estrade. Ce fut à ne plus s’entendre. «Le cardinal! Le cardinal!» répétèrent toutes les bouches. Le malheureux prologue resta court une seconde fois.

Le cardinal s’arrêta un moment sur le seuil de l’estrade. Tandis qu’il promenait un regard assez indifférent sur l’auditoire, le tumulte redoublait. Chacun voulait le mieux voir. C’était à qui mettrait sa tête sur les épaules de son voisin.

C’était en effet un haut personnage et dont le spectacle valait bien toute autre comédie. Charles, cardinal de Bourbon, archevêque et comte de Lyon, primat des Gaules, était à la fois allié à Louis XI par son frère, Pierre, seigneur de Beaujeu, qui avait épousé la fille aînée du roi, et allié à Charles le Téméraire par sa mère Agnès de Bourgogne. Or le trait dominant, le trait caractéristique et distinctif du caractère du primat des Gaules, c’était l’esprit de courtisan et la dévotion aux puissances. On peut juger des embarras sans nombre que lui avait valus cette double parenté, et de tous les écueils temporels entre lesquels sa barque spirituelle avait dû louvoyer, pour ne se briser ni à Louis, ni à Charles, cette Charybde et cette Scylla qui avaient dévoré le duc de Nemours et le connétable de Saint-Pol. Grâce au ciel, il s'était assez bien tiré de la traversée, et était arrivé à Rome sans encombre. Mais, quoiqu'il fût au port, et précisément parce qu'il était au port, il ne se rappelait jamais sans inquiétude les chances diverses de sa vie politique, si longtemps alarmée et laborieuse. Aussi avait-il coutume de dire que l'année 1476 avait été pour lui *noire et blanche*; entendant par là qu'il avait perdu dans cette même année sa mère la duchesse de Bourbonnais et son cousin le duc de Bourgogne, et qu'un deuil l'avait consolé de l'autre.

Du reste, c'était un bon homme. Il menait joyeuse vie de cardinal, s'égayait volontiers avec du cru royal de Challuau, ne haïssait pas Richarde la Garmoise et Thomasse la Saillarde, faisait l'aumône aux jolies filles plutôt qu'aux vieilles femmes, et pour toutes ces raisons était fort agréable au *populaire* de Paris. Il ne marchait qu'entouré d'une petite cour d'évêques et d'abbés de hautes lignées, galants, grivois et faisant ripaille au besoin; et plus d'une fois les braves dévotes de Saint-Germain d'Auxerre, en passant le soir sous les fenêtres illuminées du logis de Bourbon, avaient été scandalisées d'entendre les mêmes voix qui leur avaient chanté vêpres dans la journée, psalmodier au bruit des verres le proverbe bachique de Benoît XII, ce pape qui avait ajouté une troisième couronne à la tiare: «*Bibamus papaliter*.»

Ce fut sans doute cette popularité, acquise à si juste titre, qui le préserva, à son entrée, de tout mauvais accueil de la part de la cohue, si mécontente le moment d'auparavant, et fort peu disposée au respect d'un cardinal le jour même où elle allait élire un pape. Mais les Parisiens ont peu de rancune; et puis, en faisant commencer la représentation d'autorité, les bons bourgeois l'avaient emporté sur le cardinal, et ce triomphe leur suffisait. D'ailleurs monsieur le cardinal de Bourbon était bel homme, il avait une fort belle robe rouge qu'il portait fort bien; c'est dire qu'il avait pour lui toutes les femmes, et par conséquent la meilleure moitié de l'auditoire. Certainement il y aurait injustice et mauvais goût à huer un cardinal pour s'être fait attendre au spectacle, lorsqu'il est bel homme et qu'il porte bien sa robe rouge.

Il entra donc, salua l'assistance avec ce sourire héréditaire des grands pour le peuple, et se dirigea à pas lents vers son fauteuil de velours écarlate, en ayant l'air de songer à tout autre chose. Son cortège, ce que nous appellerions aujourd’hui son état-major d’évêques et d’abbés, fit irruption à sa suite dans l’estrade, non sans redoublement de tumulte et de curiosité au parterre. C’était à qui se les montrerait, se les nommerait, à qui en connaîtrait au moins un; qui, monsieur l’évêque de Marseille, Alaudet, si j’ai bonne mémoire; qui, le primicier de Saint-Denis; qui, Robert de Lespinasse, abbé de Saint-Germain-des-Prés, ce frère libertin d’une maîtresse de Louis XI: le tout avec force méprises et cacophonies. Quant aux écoliers, ils juraient. C’était leur jour, leur fête des fous, leur saturnale, l’orgie annuelle de la basoche et de l’école. Pas de turpitude qui ne fût de droit ce jour-là et chose sacrée. Et puis il y avait de folles commères dans la foule, Simone Quatrelivres, Agnès la Gadine, Robine Piédebou. N’était-ce pas le moins qu’on pût jurer à son aise et maugréer un peu le nom de Dieu, un si beau jour, en si bonne compagnie de gens d’église et de filles de joie? Aussi ne s’en faisaient-ils faute; et, au milieu du brouhaha, c’était un effrayant charivari de blasphèmes et d’énormités que celui de toutes ces langues échappées, langues de clercs et d’écoliers contenues le reste de l’année par la crainte du fer chaud de saint Louis. Pauvre saint Louis, quelle nargue ils lui faisaient dans son propre palais de justice! Chacun d’eux, dans les nouveaux venus de l’estrade, avait pris à partie une soutane noire, ou grise, ou blanche, ou violette. Quant à Joannes Frollo de Molendino, en sa qualité de frère d’un archidiacre, c’était à la rouge qu’il s’était hardiment attaqué, et il chantait à tue-tête, en fixant ses yeux effrontés sur le cardinal: *Cappa repleta mero*!

Tous ces détails, que nous mettons ici à nu pour l’édification du lecteur, étaient tellement couverts par la rumeur générale qu’ils s’y effaçaient avant d’arriver jusqu’à l’estrade réservée. D’ailleurs le cardinal s’en fût peu ému, tant les libertés de ce jour-là étaient dans les mœurs. Il avait du reste, et sa mine en était toute préoccupée, un autre souci qui le suivait de près et qui entra presque en même temps que lui dans l’estrade. C’était l’ambassade de Flandre.

Non qu’il fût profond politique, et qu’il se fît une affaire des suites possibles du mariage de madame sa cousine Marguerite de Bourgogne avec monsieur son cousin Charles, dauphin de Vienne; combien durerait la bonne intelligence plâtrée du duc d’Autriche et du roi de France, comment le roi d’Angleterre prendrait ce dédain de sa fille, cela l’inquiétait peu, et il fêtait chaque soir le vin du cru royal de Chaillot, sans se douter que quelques flacons de ce même vin (un peu revu et corrigé, il est vrai, par le médecin

Coictier), cordialement offerts à Édouard IV par Louis XI, débarrasseraient un beau matin Louis XI d'Édouard IV. *La moult honorée ambassade de monsieur le duc d'Autriche* n'apportait au cardinal aucun de ces soucis, mais elle l'importunait par un autre côté. Il était en effet un peu dur, et nous en avons déjà dit un mot à la deuxième page de ce livre, d'être obligé de faire fête et bon accueil, lui Charles de Bourbon, à je ne sais quels bourgeois; lui cardinal, à des échevins; lui Français, joyeux convive, à des Flamands buveurs de bière; et cela en public. C'était là, certes, une des plus fastidieuses grimaces qu'il eût jamais faites pour le bon plaisir du roi.

Il se tourna donc vers la porte, et de la meilleure grâce du monde (tant il s'y étudiait), quand l'huissier annonça d'une voix sonore: *Messieurs les envoyés de* monsieur *le duc d'Autriche*. Il est inutile de dire que la salle entière en fit autant.

Alors arrivèrent, deux par deux, avec une gravité qui faisait contraste au milieu du pétulant cortège ecclésiastique de Charles de Bourbon, les quarante-huit ambassadeurs de Maximilien d'Autriche, ayant en tête révérend père en Dieu, Jehan, abbé de Saint-Bertin, chancelier de la Toison d'or, et Jacques de Goy, sieur Dauby, haut bailli de Gand. Il se fit dans l'assemblée un grand silence accompagné de rires étouffés pour écouter tous les noms saugrenus et toutes les qualifications bourgeoises que chacun de ces personnages transmettait imperturbablement à l'huissier, qui jetait ensuite noms et qualités pêle-mêle et tout estropiés à travers la foule. C'était maître Loys Roelof, échevin de la ville de Louvain; messire Clays d'Etuelde, échevin de Bruxelles; messire Paul de Baeust, sieur de Voirmizelle, président de Flandre; maître Jehan Coleghens, bourgmestre de la ville d'Anvers; maître George de la Moere, premier échevin de la kuere de la ville de Gand; maître Gheldolf van der Hage, premier échevin des parchons de ladite ville; et le sieur de Bierbecque, et Jehan Pinnock, et Jehan Dymaerzelle, etc., etc., etc., baillis, échevins, bourgmestres; bourgmestres, échevins, baillis; tous roides, gourmés, empesés, endimanchés de velours et de damas, encapuchonnés de cramignoles de velours noir à grosses houppes de fil d'or de Chypre; bonnes têtes flamandes après tout, figures dignes et sévères, de la famille de celles que Rembrandt fait saillir si fortes et si graves sur le fond noir de sa *Ronde de nuit*; personnages qui portaient tous écrit sur le front que Maximilien d'Autriche avait eu raison de se *confier à plain*, comme disait son manifeste, *en leur sens, vaillance, expérience, loyaultez et bonnes preudomies*.

Un excepté pourtant. C’était un visage fin, intelligent, rusé, une espèce de museau de singe et de diplomate, au-devant duquel le cardinal fit trois pas et une profonde révérence, et qui ne s’appelait pourtant que *Guillaume Rym, conseiller et pensionnaire de la ville de Gand*.

Peu de personnes savaient alors ce que c’était que Guillaume Rym. Rare génie qui dans un temps de révolution eût paru avec éclat à la surface des événements, mais qui au quinzième siècle était réduit aux caverneuses intrigues et à vivre *dans les sapes*, comme dit le duc de Saint-Simon. Du reste, il était apprécié du premier *sapeur* de l’Europe, il machinait familièrement avec Louis XI, et mettait souvent la main aux secrètes besognes du roi. Toutes choses fort ignorées de cette foule qu’émerveillaient les politesses du cardinal à cette chétive figure de bailli flamand.

IV

MAÎTRE JACQUES COPPENOLE

Pendant que le pensionnaire de Gand et l'éminence échangeaient une révérence fort basse et quelques paroles à voix plus basse encore, un homme à haute stature, à large face, à puissantes épaules, se présentait pour entrer de front avec Guillaume Rym: on eût dit un dogue auprès d'un renard. Son bicoquet de feutre et sa veste de cuir faisaient tache au milieu du velours et de la soie qui l'entouraient. Présumant que c'était quelque palefrenier fourvoyé, l'huissier l'arrêta.

«Hé, l'ami! on ne passe pas.»

L'homme à veste de cuir le repoussa de l'épaule.

«Que me veut ce drôle? dit-il avec un éclat de voix qui rendit la salle entière attentive à cet étrange colloque. Tu ne vois pas que j'en suis?

— Votre nom? demanda l'huissier.

— Jacques Coppenole.

— Vos qualités?

— Chaussetier, à l'enseigne des *Trois Chaînettes,* à Gand.»

L'huissier recula. Annoncer des échevins et des bourgmestres, passe; mais un chaussetier, c'était dur. Le cardinal était sur les épines. Tout le peuple écoutait et regardait. Voilà deux jours que son Éminence s'évertuait à lécher ces ours flamands pour les rendre un peu plus présentables en public, et l'incartade était rude. Cependant Guillaume Rym, avec son fin sourire, s'approcha de l'huissier:

«Annoncez maître Jacques Coppenole, clerc des échevins de la ville de Gand, lui souffla-t-il très bas.

— Huissier, reprit le cardinal à haute voix, annoncez maître Jacques Coppenole, clerc des échevins de l'illustre ville de Gand.»

Ce fut une faute. Guillaume Rym tout seul eût escamoté la difficulté; mais Coppenole avait entendu le cardinal.

«Non, croix-Dieu! s'écria-t-il avec sa voix de tonnerre, Jacques Coppenole, chaussetier. Entends-tu, l'huissier? Rien de plus, rien de moins. Croix-Dieu! chaussetier, c'est assez beau. Monsieur l'archiduc a plus d'une fois cherché son gant dans mes chausses.»

Les rires et les applaudissements éclatèrent. Un quolibet est tout de suite compris à Paris, et par conséquent toujours applaudi.

Ajoutons que Coppenole était du peuple, et que ce public qui l'entourait était du peuple. Aussi la communication entre eux et lui avait été prompte, électrique, et pour ainsi dire de plain-pied. L'altière algarade du chaussetier flamand, en humiliant les gens de cour, avait remué dans toutes les âmes plébéiennes je ne sais quel sentiment de dignité encore vague et indistinct au quinzième siècle. C'était un égal que ce chaussetier, qui venait de tenir tête à monsieur le cardinal! réflexion bien douce à de pauvres diables qui étaient habitués à respect et obéissance envers les valets des sergents du bailli de l'abbé de Sainte-Geneviève, caudataire du cardinal.

Coppenole salua fièrement son Éminence, qui rendit son salut au tout-puissant bourgeois redouté de Louis XI. Puis, tandis que Guillaume Rym, sage homme et malicieux, comme dit Philippe de Comines, les suivait tous deux d'un sourire de raillerie et de supériorité, ils gagnèrent chacun leur place, le cardinal tout décontenancé et soucieux, Coppenole tranquille et hautain, et songeant sans doute qu'après tout son titre de chaussetier en valait bien un autre, et que Marie de Bourgogne, mère de cette Marguerite que Coppenole mariait aujourd'hui, l'eût moins redouté cardinal que chaussetier: car ce n'est pas un cardinal qui eût ameuté les Gantois contre les favoris de la fille de Charles le Téméraire; ce n'est pas un cardinal qui eût fortifié la foule avec une parole contre ses larmes et ses prières, quand la demoiselle de Flandre vint supplier son peuple pour eux jusqu'au pied de leur échafaud; tandis que le chaussetier n'avait eu qu'à lever son coude de cuir pour faire tomber vos deux têtes, illustrissimes seigneurs, Guy d'Hymbercourt, chancelier Guillaume Hugonet!

Cependant tout n'était pas fini pour ce pauvre cardinal, et il devait boire jusqu'à la lie le calice d'être en si mauvaise compagnie.

Le lecteur n'a peut-être pas oublié l'effronté mendiant qui était venu se cramponner, dès le commencement du prologue, aux franges de l'estrade cardinale. L'arrivée des illustres conviés ne lui avait nullement fait lâcher prise, et tandis que prélats et ambassadeurs s'encaquaient, en vrais harengs flamands, dans les stalles de la tribune, lui s'était mis à l'aise, et avait bravement croisé ses jambes sur l'architrave. L'insolence était rare, et personne ne s'en était aperçu au premier moment, l'attention étant tournée ailleurs. Lui, de son côté, ne s'apercevait de rien dans la salle; il balançait sa tête avec une insouciance de napolitain, répétant de temps en temps dans la rumeur, comme par une machinale habitude: «La charité, s’il vous plaît!» Et certes il était, dans toute l’assistance, le seul probablement qui n’eût pas daigné tourner la tête à l’altercation de Coppenole et de l’huissier. Or, le hasard voulut que le maître chaussetier de Gand, avec qui le peuple sympathisait déjà si vivement et sur qui tous les yeux étaient fixés, vînt précisément s’asseoir au premier rang de l’estrade au-dessus du mendiant; et l’on ne fut pas médiocrement étonné de voir l’ambassadeur flamand, inspection faite du drôle placé sous ses yeux, frapper amicalement sur cette épaule couverte de haillons. Le mendiant se retourna; il y eut surprise, reconnaissance, épanouissement des deux visages, etc.; puis, sans se soucier le moins du monde des spectateurs, le chaussetier et le malingreux se mirent à causer à voix basse, en se tenant les mains dans les mains, tandis que les guenilles de Clopin Trouillefou étalées sur le drap d’or de l’estrade faisaient l’effet d’une chenille sur une orange.

La nouveauté de cette scène singulière excita une telle rumeur de folie et de gaieté dans la salle que le cardinal ne tarda pas à s’en apercevoir; il se pencha à demi, et ne pouvant, du point où il était placé, qu’entrevoir fort imparfaitement la casaque ignominieuse de Trouillefou, il se figura assez naturellement que le mendiant demandait l’aumône, et, révolté de l’audace, il s’écria: «Monsieur le bailli du Palais, jetez-moi ce drôle à la rivière!

— Croix-Dieu! monseigneur le cardinal, dit Coppenole sans quitter la main de Clopin, c’est un de mes amis.

— Noël! Noël!» cria la cohue. À dater de ce moment, maître Coppenole eut à Paris, comme à Gand, *grand crédit avec le peuple; car gens de telle taille l’y ont*, dit Philippe de Comines, *quand ils sont ainsi désordonnés*.

Le cardinal se mordit les lèvres. Il se pencha vers son voisin l’abbé de Sainte-Geneviève, et lui dit à demi-voix:

«Plaisants ambassadeurs que nous envoie là monsieur l’archiduc pour nous annoncer madame Marguerite!

— Votre Éminence, répondit l’abbé, perd ses politesses avec ces groins flamands. *Margaritas ante porcos*.

— Dites plutôt, répondit le cardinal avec un sourire: *Porcos ante Margaritam*.»

Toute la petite cour en soutane s’extasia sur le jeu de mots. Le cardinal se sentit un peu soulagé; il était maintenant quitte avec Coppenole, il avait eu aussi son quolibet applaudi.

Maintenant, que ceux de nos lecteurs qui ont la puissance de généraliser une image et une idée, comme on dit dans le style d’aujourd’hui, nous permettent de leur demander s’ils se figurent bien nettement le spectacle qu’offrait, au moment où nous arrêtons leur attention, le vaste parallélogramme de la grand-salle du Palais. Au milieu de la salle, adossée au mur occidental, une large et magnifique estrade de brocart d’or, dans laquelle entrent processionnellement, par une petite porte ogive, de graves personnages successivement annoncés par la voix criarde d’un huissier. Sur les premiers bancs, déjà force vénérables figures, embéguinées d’hermine, de velours et d’écarlate. Autour de l’estrade, qui demeure silencieuse et digne, en bas, en face, partout, grande foule et grande rumeur. Mille regards du peuple sur chaque visage de l’estrade, mille chuchotements sur chaque nom. Certes, le spectacle est curieux et mérite bien l’attention des spectateurs. Mais là-bas, tout au bout, qu’est-ce donc que cette espèce de tréteau avec quatre pantins bariolés dessus et quatre autres en bas? Qu’est-ce donc, à côté du tréteau, que cet homme à souquenille noire et à pâle figure? Hélas! mon cher lecteur, c’est Pierre Gringoire et son prologue.

Nous l’avions tous profondément oublié.

Voilà précisément ce qu’il craignait.

Du moment où le cardinal était entré, Gringoire n’avait cessé de s’agiter pour le salut de son prologue. Il avait d’abord enjoint aux acteurs, restés en suspens, de continuer et de hausser la voix; puis, voyant que personne n’écoutait, il les avait arrêtés, et depuis près d’un quart d’heure que l’interruption durait, il n’avait cessé de frapper du pied, de se démener, d’interpeller Gisquette et Liénarde, d’encourager ses voisins à la poursuite du prologue; le tout en vain. Nul ne bougeait du cardinal, de l’ambassade et de l’estrade, unique centre de ce vaste cercle de rayons visuels. Il faut croire aussi, et nous le disons à regret, que le prologue commençait à gêner légèrement l’auditoire, au moment où son Éminence était venue y faire diversion d’une si terrible façon. Après tout, à l’estrade comme à la table de marbre, c’était toujours le même spectacle: le conflit de Labour et de Clergé, de Noblesse et de Marchandise. Et beaucoup de gens aimaient mieux les voir tout bonnement, vivant, respirant, agissant, se coudoyant, en chair et en os, dans cette ambassade flamande, dans cette cour épiscopale, sous la robe du cardinal, sous la veste de Coppenole, que fardés, attifés, parlant en vers, et pour ainsi dire empaillés sous les tuniques jaunes et blanches dont les avait affublés Gringoire.

Pourtant quand notre poète vit le calme un peu rétabli, il imagina un stratagème qui eût tout sauvé.

«Monsieur, dit-il en se tournant vers un de ses voisins, brave et gros homme à figure patiente, si l'on recommençait?

— Quoi? dit le voisin.

— Hé! le mystère, dit Gringoire.

— Comme il vous plaira», repartit le voisin.

Cette demi-approbation suffit à Gringoire, et faisant ses affaires lui-même, il commença à crier, en se confondant le plus possible avec la foule: «Recommencez le mystère! recommencez!

— Diable! dit Joannes de Molendino, qu'est-ce qu'ils chantent donc là-bas, au bout? (Car Gringoire faisait du bruit comme quatre.) Dites donc, camarades! est-ce que le mystère n'est pas fini? Ils veulent le recommencer. Ce n'est pas juste.

— Non! non! crièrent tous les écoliers. À bas le mystère! à bas!»

Mais Gringoire se multipliait et n'en criait que plus fort: «Recommencez! recommencez!»

Ces clameurs attirèrent l'attention du cardinal.

«Monsieur le bailli du Palais, dit-il à un grand homme noir placé à quelques pas de lui, est-ce que ces drôles sont dans un bénitier, qu'ils font ce bruit d'enfer?»

Le bailli du Palais était une espèce de magistrat amphibie, une sorte de chauve-souris de l'ordre judiciaire, tenant à la fois du rat et de l'oiseau, du juge et du soldat. Il s'approcha de son Éminence, et, non sans redouter fort son mécontentement, il lui expliqua en balbutiant l'incongruité populaire: que midi était arrivé avant son Éminence, et que les comédiens avaient été forcés de commencer sans attendre son Éminence.

Le cardinal éclata de rire.

«Sur ma foi, monsieur le recteur de l'Université aurait bien dû en faire autant. Qu'en dites-vous, maître Guillaume Rym?

— Monseigneur, répondit Guillaume Rym, contentons-nous d'avoir échappé à la moitié de la comédie. C'est toujours cela de gagné.

— Ces coquins peuvent-ils continuer leur farce? demanda le bailli.

— Continuez, continuez, dit le cardinal; cela m'est égal. Pendant ce temps-là, je vais lire mon bréviaire.»

Le bailli s'avança au bord de l'estrade, et cria, après avoir fait faire silence d'un geste de la main:

«Bourgeois, manants et habitants, pour satisfaire ceux qui veulent qu'on recommence et ceux qui veulent qu'on finisse, son éminence ordonne que l'on continue.»

Il fallut bien se résigner des deux parts. Cependant l'auteur et le public en gardèrent longtemps rancune au cardinal.

Les personnages en scène reprirent donc leur glose, et Gringoire espéra que du moins le reste de son œuvre serait écouté. Cette espérance ne tarda pas à être déçue comme ses autres illusions; le silence s'était bien en effet rétabli tellement quellement dans l'auditoire; mais Gringoire n'avait pas remarqué que, au moment où le cardinal avait donné l'ordre de continuer, l'estrade était loin d'être remplie, et qu'après les envoyés flamands étaient survenus de nouveaux personnages faisant partie du cortège dont les noms et qualités, lancés tout au travers de son dialogue par le cri intermittent de l'huissier, y produisaient un ravage considérable. Qu'on se figure en effet, au milieu d'une pièce de théâtre, le glapissement d'un huissier jetant, entre deux rimes et souvent entre deux hémistiches, des parenthèses comme celles-ci:

Maître Jacques Charmolue, procureur du roi en cour d'église!

Jehan de Harlay, écuyer, garde de l'office de chevalier du guet de nuit de la ville de Paris!

Messire Galiot de Genoilhac, chevalier, seigneur de Brussac, maître de l'artillerie du roi!

Maître Dreux-Raguier, enquesteur des eaux et forêts du roi notre sire, ès pays de France, Champagne et Brie!

Messire Louis de Graville, chevalier, conseiller et chambellan du roi, amiral de France, concierge du bois de Vincennes!

Maître Denis Le Mercier, garde de la maison des aveugles de Paris! — Etc., etc., etc.

Cela devenait insoutenable.

Cet étrange accompagnement, qui rendait la pièce difficile à suivre, indignait d'autant plus Gringoire qu'il ne pouvait se dissimuler que l'intérêt allait toujours croissant et qu'il ne manquait à son ouvrage que d'être écouté. Il était en effet difficile d'imaginer une contexture plus ingénieuse et plus dramatique. Les quatre personnages du prologue se lamentaient dans leur mortel embarras, lorsque Vénus en personne, *vera incessu patuit dea*, s'était présentée à eux, vêtue d'une belle cotte-hardie armoriée au navire de la ville de Paris. Elle venait elle-même réclamer le dauphin promis à la plus belle. Jupiter, dont on entendait la foudre gronder dans le vestiaire, l’appuyait, et la déesse allait l’emporter, c’est-à-dire, sans figure, épouser monsieur le dauphin, lorsqu’une jeune enfant, vêtue de damas blanc et tenant en main une marguerite (diaphane personnification de mademoiselle de Flandre), était venue lutter avec Vénus. Coup de théâtre et péripétie. Après controverse, Vénus, Marguerite et la cantonade étaient convenues de s’en remettre au bon jugement de la sainte Vierge. Il y avait encore un beau rôle, celui de dom Pèdre, roi de Mésopotamie. Mais, à travers tant d’interruptions, il était difficile de démêler à quoi il servait. Tout cela était monté par l’échelle.

Mais c’en était fait. Aucune de ces beautés n’était sentie, ni comprise. À l’entrée du cardinal on eût dit qu’un fil invisible et magique avait subitement tiré tous les regards de la table de marbre à l’estrade, de l’extrémité méridionale de la salle au côté occidental. Rien ne pouvait désensorceler l’auditoire. Tous les yeux restaient fixés là, et les nouveaux arrivants, et leurs noms maudits, et leurs visages, et leurs costumes étaient une diversion continuelle. C’était désolant. Excepté Gisquette et Liénarde, qui se détournaient de temps en temps quand Gringoire les tirait par la manche, excepté le gros voisin patient, personne n’écoutait, personne ne regardait en face la pauvre moralité abandonnée. Gringoire ne voyait plus que des profils.

Avec quelle amertume il voyait s’écrouler pièce à pièce tout son échafaudage de gloire et de poésie! Et songer que ce peuple avait été sur le point de se rebeller contre monsieur le bailli, par impatience d’entendre son ouvrage! maintenant qu’on l’avait, on ne s’en souciait. Cette même représentation qui avait commencé dans une si unanime acclamation! Éternel flux et reflux de la faveur populaire! Penser qu’on avait failli pendre les sergents du bailli! Que n’eût-il pas donné pour en être encore à cette heure de miel!

Le brutal monologue de l’huissier cessa pourtant. Tout le monde était arrivé, et Gringoire respira. Les acteurs continuaient bravement. Mais ne voilà-t-il pas que maître Coppenole, le chaussetier, se lève tout à coup, et que Gringoire lui entend prononcer, au milieu de l’attention universelle, cette abominable harangue:

«Messieurs les bourgeois et hobereaux de Paris, je ne sais, croix-Dieu! pas ce que nous faisons ici. Je vois bien là-bas dans ce coin, sur ce tréteau, des gens qui ont l’air de vouloir se battre. J’ignore si c’est là ce que vous appelez un mystère; mais ce n’est pas amusant. Ils se querellent de la langue, et rien de plus. Voilà un quart d’heure que j’attends le premier coup. Rien ne vient. Ce sont des lâches, qui ne s’égratignent qu’avec des injures. Il fallait faire venir des lutteurs de Londres ou de Rotterdam; et, à la bonne heure! vous auriez eu des coups de poing qu’on aurait entendus de la place. Mais ceux-là font pitié. Ils devraient nous donner au moins une danse morisque, ou quelque autre momerie! Ce n’est pas là ce qu’on m’avait dit. On m’avait promis une fête des fous, avec élection du pape. Nous avons aussi notre pape des fous à Gand, et en cela nous ne sommes pas en arrière, croix-Dieu! Mais voici comme nous faisons. On se rassemble une cohue, comme ici. Puis chacun à son tour va passer sa tête par un trou et fait une grimace aux autres. Celui qui fait la plus laide, à l’acclamation de tous, est élu pape. Voilà. C’est fort divertissant. Voulez-vous que nous fassions votre pape à la mode de mon pays? Ce sera toujours moins fastidieux que d’écouter ces bavards. S’ils veulent venir faire leur grimace à la lucarne, ils seront du jeu. Qu’en dites-vous, messieurs les bourgeois? Il y a ici un suffisamment grotesque échantillon des deux sexes pour qu’on rie à la flamande, et nous sommes assez de laids visages pour espérer une belle grimace.»

Gringoire eût voulu répondre. La stupéfaction, la colère, l’indignation lui ôtèrent la parole. D’ailleurs la motion du chaussetier populaire fut accueillie avec un tel enthousiasme par ces bourgeois flattés d’être appelés *hobereaux*, que toute résistance était inutile. Il n’y avait plus qu’à se laisser aller au torrent. Gringoire cacha son visage de ses deux mains, n’ayant pas le bonheur d’avoir un manteau pour se voiler la tête comme l’Agamemnon de Timanthe.

V

QUASIMODO

En un clin d’œil tout fut prêt pour exécuter l’idée de Coppenole. Bourgeois, écoliers et basochiens s’étaient mis à l’œuvre. La petite chapelle située en face de la table de marbre fut choisie pour le théâtre des grimaces. Une vitre brisée à la jolie rosace au-dessus de la porte laissa libre un cercle de pierre par lequel il fut convenu que les concurrents passeraient la tête. Il suffisait, pour y atteindre, de grimper sur deux tonneaux, qu’on avait pris je ne sais où et juchés l’un sur l’autre tant bien que mal. Il fut réglé que chaque candidat, homme ou femme (car on pouvait faire une papesse), pour laisser vierge et entière l’impression de sa grimace, se couvrirait le visage et se tiendrait caché dans la chapelle jusqu’au moment de faire apparition. En moins d’un instant la chapelle fut remplie de concurrents, sur lesquels la porte se referma.

Coppenole de sa place ordonnait tout, dirigeait tout, arrangeait tout. Pendant le brouhaha, le cardinal, non moins décontenancé que Gringoire, s’était, sous un prétexte d’affaires et de vêpres, retiré avec toute sa suite, sans que cette foule, que son arrivée avait remuée si vivement, se fût le moindrement émue à son départ. Guillaume Rym fut le seul qui remarqua la déroute de son éminence. L’attention populaire, comme le soleil, poursuivait sa révolution; partie d’un bout de la salle, après s’être arrêtée quelque temps au milieu, elle était maintenant à l’autre bout. La table de marbre, l’estrade de brocart avaient eu leur moment; c’était le tour de la chapelle de Louis XI. Le champ était désormais libre à toute folie. Il n’y avait plus que des flamands et de la canaille.

Les grimaces commencèrent. La première figure qui apparut à la lucarne, avec des paupières retournées au rouge, une bouche ouverte en gueule et un front plissé comme nos bottes à la hussarde de l’empire, fit éclater un rire tellement inextinguible qu’Homère eût pris tous ces manants pour des dieux. Cependant la grand-salle n’était rien moins qu’un Olympe, et le pauvre Jupiter de Gringoire le savait mieux que personne. Une seconde, une troisième grimace succédèrent, puis une autre, puis une autre, et toujours les rires et les trépignements de joie redoublaient. Il y avait dans ce spectacle je ne sais quel vertige particulier, je ne sais quelle puissance d’enivrement et de fascination dont il serait difficile de donner une idée au lecteur de nos jours et de nos salons. Qu’on se figure une série de visages présentant successivement toutes les formes géométriques, depuis le triangle jusqu’au trapèze, depuis le cône jusqu’au polyèdre; toutes les expressions humaines, depuis la colère jusqu’à la luxure; tous les âges, depuis les rides du nouveau-né jusqu’aux rides de la vieille moribonde; toutes les fantasmagories religieuses, depuis Faune jusqu’à Belzébuth; tous les profils animaux, depuis la gueule jusqu’au bec, depuis la hure jusqu’au museau. Qu’on se représente tous les mascarons du Pont-Neuf, ces cauchemars pétrifiés sous la main de Germain Pilon, prenant vie et souffle, et venant tour à tour vous regarder en face avec des yeux ardents; tous les masques du carnaval de Venise se succédant à votre lorgnette; en un mot, un kaléidoscope humain.

L’orgie devenait de plus en plus flamande. Teniers n’en donnerait qu’une bien imparfaite idée. Qu’on se figure en bacchanale la bataille de Salvator Rosa. Il n’y avait plus ni écoliers, ni ambassadeurs, ni bourgeois, ni hommes, ni femmes; plus de Clopin Trouillefou, de Gilles Lecornu, de Marie Quatrelivres, de Robin Poussepain. Tout s’effaçait dans la licence commune. La grand-salle n’était plus qu’une vaste fournaise d’effronterie et de jovialité où chaque bouche était un cri, chaque œil un éclair, chaque face une grimace, chaque individu une posture. Le tout criait et hurlait. Les visages étranges qui venaient tour à tour grincer des dents à la rosace étaient comme autant de brandons jetés dans le brasier. Et de toute cette foule effervescente s’échappait, comme la vapeur de la fournaise, une rumeur aigre, aiguë, acérée, sifflante comme les ailes d’un moucheron.

«Ho hé! malédiction!

— Vois donc cette figure!

— Elle ne vaut rien.

— À une autre!

— Guillemette Maugerepuis, regarde donc ce mufle de taureau, il ne lui manque que des cornes. Ce n’est pas ton mari?

— Une autre!

— Ventre du pape! qu’est-ce que cette grimace-là?

— Holà hé! c’est tricher. On ne doit montrer que son visage.

— Cette damnée Perrette Callebotte! elle est capable de cela.

— Noël! Noël!

— J’étouffe!

— En voilà un dont les oreilles ne peuvent passer!»

Etc., etc.

Il faut rendre pourtant justice à notre ami Jehan. Au milieu de ce sabbat, on le distinguait encore au haut de son pilier, comme un mousse dans le hunier. Il se démenait avec une incroyable furie. Sa bouche était toute grande ouverte, et il s'en échappait un cri que l'on n'entendait pas, non qu'il fût couvert par la clameur générale, si intense qu'elle fût, mais parce qu'il atteignait sans doute la limite des sons aigus, perceptibles, les douze mille vibrations de Sauveur ou les huit mille de Biot.

Quant à Gringoire, le premier mouvement d'abattement passé, il avait repris contenance. Il s'était roidi contre l'adversité. «Continuez!» avait-il dit pour la troisième fois à ses comédiens, machines parlantes. Puis se promenant à grands pas devant la table de marbre, il lui prenait des fantaisies d'aller apparaître à son tour à la lucarne de la chapelle, ne fût-ce que pour avoir le plaisir de faire la grimace à ce peuple ingrat. «Mais non, cela ne serait pas digne de nous; pas de vengeance! luttons jusqu'à la fin, se répétait-il. Le pouvoir de la poésie est grand sur le peuple; je les ramènerai. Nous verrons qui l'emportera, des grimaces ou des belles-lettres.»

Hélas! il était resté le seul spectateur de sa pièce.

C'était bien pis que tout à l'heure. Il ne voyait plus que des dos.

Je me trompe. Le gros homme patient, qu'il avait déjà consulté dans un moment critique, était resté tourné vers le théâtre. Quant à Gisquette et à Liénarde, elles avaient déserté depuis longtemps.

Gringoire fut touché au fond du cœur de la fidélité de son unique spectateur. Il s'approcha de lui, et lui adressa la parole en lui secouant légèrement le bras; car le brave homme s'était appuyé à la balustrade et dormait un peu.

«Monsieur, dit Gringoire, je vous remercie.

— Monsieur, répondit le gros homme avec un bâillement, de quoi?

— Je vois ce qui vous ennuie, reprit le poète, c'est tout ce bruit qui vous empêche d'entendre à votre aise. Mais soyez tranquille: votre nom passera à la postérité. Votre nom, s'il vous plaît?

— Renault Château, garde du scel du Châtelet de Paris, pour vous servir.

— Monsieur, vous êtes ici le seul représentant des muses, dit Gringoire.

— Vous êtes trop honnête, monsieur, répondit le garde du scel du Châtelet.

— Vous êtes le seul, reprit Gringoire, qui ayez convenablement écouté la pièce. Comment la trouvez-vous?

— Hé! hé! répondit le gros magistrat à demi réveillé, assez gaillarde en effet.»

Il fallut que Gringoire se contentât de cet éloge, car un tonnerre d’applaudissements, mêlé à une prodigieuse acclamation, vint couper court à leur conversation. Le pape des fous était élu.

«Noël! Noël! Noël!» criait le peuple de toutes parts.

C’était une merveilleuse grimace, en effet, que celle qui rayonnait en ce moment au trou de la rosace. Après toutes les figures pentagones, hexagones et hétéroclites qui s’étaient succédé à cette lucarne sans réaliser cet idéal du grotesque qui s’était construit dans les imaginations exaltées par l’orgie, il ne fallait rien moins, pour enlever les suffrages, que la grimace sublime qui venait d’éblouir l’assemblée. Maître Coppenole lui-même applaudit; et Clopin Trouillefou, qui avait concouru, et Dieu sait quelle intensité de laideur son visage pouvait atteindre, s’avoua vaincu. Nous ferons de même. Nous n’essaierons pas de donner au lecteur une idée de ce nez tétraèdre, de cette bouche en fer à cheval, de ce petit œil gauche obstrué d’un sourcil roux en broussailles tandis que l’œil droit disparaissait entièrement sous une énorme verrue, de ces dents désordonnées, ébréchées çà et là, comme les créneaux d’une forteresse, de cette lèvre calleuse sur laquelle une de ces dents empiétait comme la défense d’un éléphant, de ce menton fourchu, et surtout de la physionomie répandue sur tout cela, de ce mélange de malice, d’étonnement et de tristesse. Qu’on rêve, si l’on peut, cet ensemble.

L’acclamation fut unanime. On se précipita vers la chapelle. On en fit sortir en triomphe le bienheureux pape des fous. Mais c’est alors que la surprise et l’admiration furent à leur comble. La grimace était son visage.

Ou plutôt toute sa personne était une grimace. Une grosse tête hérissée de cheveux roux; entre les deux épaules une bosse énorme dont le contre-coup se faisait sentir par devant; un système de cuisses et de jambes si étrangement fourvoyées qu’elles ne pouvaient se toucher que par les genoux, et, vues de face, ressemblaient à deux croissants de faucilles qui se rejoignent par la poignée; de larges pieds, des mains monstrueuses; et, avec toute cette difformité, je ne sais quelle allure redoutable de vigueur, d’agilité et de courage; étrange exception à la règle éternelle qui veut que la force, comme la beauté, résulte de l’harmonie. Tel était le pape que les fous venaient de se donner.

On eût dit un géant brisé et mal ressoudé.

Quand cette espèce de cyclope parut sur le seuil de la chapelle, immobile, trapu, et presque aussi large que haut, *carré par la base*, comme dit un grand homme, à son surtout mi-parti rouge et violet, semé de campanilles d’argent, et surtout à la perfection de sa laideur, la populace le reconnut sur-le-champ, et s’écria d’une voix:

«C’est Quasimodo, le sonneur de cloches! c’est Quasimodo, le bossu de Notre-Dame! Quasimodo le borgne! Quasimodo le bancal! Noël! Noël!»

On voit que le pauvre diable avait des surnoms à choisir.

«Gare les femmes grosses! criaient les écoliers.

— Ou qui ont envie de l’être», reprenait Joannes.

Les femmes en effet se cachaient le visage.

«Oh! le vilain singe, disait l’une.

— Aussi méchant que laid, reprenait une autre.

— C’est le diable, ajoutait une troisième.

— J’ai le malheur de demeurer auprès de Notre-Dame; toute la nuit je l’entends rôder dans la gouttière.

— Avec les chats.

— Il est toujours sur nos toits.

— Il nous jette des sorts par les cheminées.

— L’autre soir, il est venu me faire la grimace à ma lucarne. Je croyais que c’était un homme. J’ai eu une peur!

— Je suis sûre qu’il va au sabbat. Une fois, il a laissé un balai sur mes plombs.

— Oh! la déplaisante face de bossu!

— Oh! la vilaine âme!

— Buah!»

Les hommes au contraire étaient ravis, et applaudissaient.

Quasimodo, objet du tumulte, se tenait toujours sur la porte de la chapelle, debout, sombre et grave, se laissant admirer.

Un écolier, Robin Poussepain, je crois, vint lui rire sous le nez, et trop près. Quasimodo se contenta de le prendre par la ceinture, et de le jeter à dix pas à travers la foule. Le tout sans dire un mot.

Maître Coppenole, émerveillé, s’approcha de lui.

«Croix-Dieu! Saint-Père! tu as bien la plus belle laideur que j'aie vue de ma vie. Tu mériterais la papauté à Rome comme à Paris.»

En parlant ainsi, il lui mettait la main gaiement sur l'épaule. Quasimodo ne bougea pas. Coppenole poursuivit.

«Tu es un drôle avec qui j'ai démangeaison de ripailler, dût-il m'en coûter un douzain neuf de douze tournois. Que t'en semble?»

Quasimodo ne répondit pas.

«Croix-Dieu! dit le chaussetier, est-ce que tu es sourd?»

Il était sourd en effet.

Cependant il commençait à s'impatienter des façons de Coppenole, et se tourna tout à coup vers lui avec un grincement de dents si formidable que le géant flamand recula, comme un bouledogue devant un chat.

Alors il se fit autour de l'étrange personnage un cercle de terreur et de respect qui avait au moins quinze pas géométriques de rayon. Une vieille femme expliqua à maître Coppenole que Quasimodo était sourd.

«Sourd! dit le chaussetier avec son gros rire flamand. Croix-Dieu! c'est un pape accompli.

— Hé! je le reconnais, s'écria Jehan, qui était enfin descendu de son chapiteau pour voir Quasimodo de plus près, c'est le sonneur de cloches de mon frère l'archidiacre. — Bonjour, Quasimodo!

— Diable d'homme! dit Robin Poussepain, encore tout contus de sa chute. Il paraît: c'est un bossu. Il marche: c'est un bancal. Il vous regarde: c'est un borgne. Vous lui parlez: c'est un sourd. — Ah çà, que fait-il de sa langue, ce Polyphème?

— Il parle quand il veut, dit la vieille. Il est devenu sourd à sonner les cloches. Il n'est pas muet.

— Cela lui manque, observa Jehan.

— Et il a un œil de trop, ajouta Robin Poussepain.

— Non pas, dit judicieusement Jehan. Un borgne est bien plus incomplet qu'un aveugle. Il sait ce qui lui manque.»

Cependant tous les mendiants, tous les laquais, tous les coupe-bourses, réunis aux écoliers, avaient été chercher processionnellement, dans l'armoire de la basoche, la tiare de carton et la simarre dérisoire du pape des fous. Quasimodo s'en laissa revêtir sans sourciller et avec une sorte de docilité orgueilleuse. Puis on le fit asseoir sur un brancard bariolé. Douze officiers de la confrérie des fous l'enlevèrent sur leurs épaules; et une espèce de joie amère et dédaigneuse vint s'épanouir sur la face morose du cyclope, quand il vit sous ses pieds difformes toutes ces têtes d'hommes beaux, droits et bien faits. Puis la procession hurlante et déguenillée se mit en marche pour faire, selon l'usage, la tournée intérieure des galeries du Palais, avant la promenade des rues et des carrefours.

VI

LA ESMERALDA

Nous sommes ravi d'avoir à apprendre à nos lecteurs que pendant toute cette scène Gringoire et sa pièce avaient tenu bon. Ses acteurs, talonnés par lui, n'avaient pas discontinué de débiter sa comédie, et lui n'avait pas discontinué de l'écouter. Il avait pris son parti du vacarme, et était déterminé à aller jusqu'au bout, ne désespérant pas d'un retour d'attention de la part du public. Cette lueur d'espérance se ranima quand il vit Quasimodo, Coppenole et le cortège assourdissant du pape des fous sortir à grand bruit de la salle. La foule se précipita avidement à leur suite. Bon, se dit-il, voilà tous les brouillons qui s'en vont. — Malheureusement, tous les brouillons c'était le public. En un clin d'œil la grand-salle fut vide.

À vrai dire, il restait encore quelques spectateurs, les uns épars, les autres groupés autour des piliers, femmes, vieillards ou enfants, en ayant assez du brouhaha et du tumulte. Quelques écoliers étaient demeurés à cheval sur l'entablement des fenêtres et regardaient dans la place.

«Eh bien, pensa Gringoire, en voilà encore autant qu'il en faut pour entendre la fin de mon mystère. Ils sont peu, mais c'est un public d'élite, un public lettré.»

Au bout d'un instant, une symphonie qui devait produire le plus grand effet à l'arrivée de la sainte Vierge, manqua. Gringoire s'aperçut que sa musique avait été emmenée par la procession du pape des fous. «Passez outre», dit-il stoïquement.

Il s'approcha d'un groupe de bourgeois qui lui fit l'effet de s'entretenir de sa pièce. Voici le lambeau de conversation qu'il saisit:

«Vous savez, maître Cheneteau, l'hôtel de Navarre, qui était à M. de Nemours?

— Oui, vis-à-vis la chapelle de Braque.

— Eh bien, le fisc vient de le louer à Guillaume Alixandre, historieur, pour six livres huit sols parisis par an.

— Comme les loyers renchérissent!

— Allons! se dit Gringoire en soupirant, les autres écoutent.

— Camarades, cria tout à coup un de ces jeunes drôles des croisées, *la Esmeralda! la Esmeralda* dans la place!»

Ce mot produisit un effet magique. Tout ce qui restait dans la salle se précipita aux fenêtres, grimpant aux murailles pour voir, et répétant: *la Esmeralda! la Esmeralda!*

En même temps on entendait au dehors un grand bruit d'applaudissements.

«Qu'est-ce que cela veut dire, la Esmeralda? dit Gringoire en joignant les mains avec désolation. Ah! mon Dieu! il paraît que c'est le tour des fenêtres maintenant.»

Il se retourna vers la table de marbre, et vit que la représentation était interrompue. C'était précisément l'instant où Jupiter devait paraître avec sa foudre. Or Jupiter se tenait immobile au bas du théâtre.

«Michel Giborne! cria le poète irrité, que fais-tu là? est-ce ton rôle? monte donc!

— Hélas, dit Jupiter, un écolier vient de prendre l'échelle.»

Gringoire regarda. La chose n'était que trop vraie. Toute communication était interceptée entre son nœud et son dénouement.

«Le drôle! murmura-t-il. Et pourquoi a-t-il pris cette échelle?

— Pour aller voir la Esmeralda, répondit piteusement Jupiter. Il a dit: Tiens, voilà une échelle qui ne sert pas! et il l'a prise.»

C'était le dernier coup. Gringoire le reçut avec résignation.

«Que le diable vous emporte! dit-il aux comédiens, et si je suis payé vous le serez.»

Alors il fit retraite, la tête basse, mais le dernier, comme un général qui s'est bien battu.

Et tout en descendant les tortueux escaliers du Palais: «Belle cohue d'ânes et de butors que ces Parisiens! grommelait-il entre ses dents; ils viennent pour entendre un mystère, et n'en écoutent rien! Ils se sont occupés de tout le monde, de Clopin Trouillefou, du cardinal, de Coppenole, de Quasimodo, du diable! mais de madame la Vierge Marie, point. Si j'avais su, je vous en aurais donné, des Vierges Marie, badauds! Et moi! venir pour voir des visages, et ne voir que des dos! être poète, et avoir le succès d'un apothicaire! Il est vrai qu'Homerus a mendié par les bourgades grecques, et que Nason mourut en exil chez les Moscovites. Mais je veux que le diable m'écorche si je comprends ce qu'ils veulent dire avec leur Esmeralda! Qu'est-ce que c'est que ce mot-là d'abord? c'est de l'égyptiaque!»

LIVRE DEUXIÈME

I

DE CHARYBDE EN SCYLLA

La nuit arrive de bonne heure en janvier. Les rues étaient déjà sombres quand Gringoire sortit du Palais. Cette nuit tombée lui plut; il lui tardait d'aborder quelque ruelle obscure et déserte pour y méditer à son aise et pour que le philosophe posât le premier appareil sur la blessure du poète. La philosophie était du reste son seul refuge, car il ne savait où loger. Après l'éclatant avortement de son coup d'essai théâtral, il n'osait rentrer dans le logis qu'il occupait, rue Grenier-sur-l'Eau, vis-à-vis le Port-au-Foin, ayant compté sur ce que M. le prévôt devait lui donner de son épithalame pour payer à maître Guillaume Doulx-Sire, fermier de la coutume du pied-fourché de Paris, les six mois de loyer qu'il lui devait, c'est-à-dire douze sols parisis; douze fois la valeur de ce qu'il possédait au monde, y compris son haut-de-chausses, sa chemise et son bicoquet. Après avoir un moment réfléchi, provisoirement abrité sous le petit guichet de la prison du trésorier de la Sainte-Chapelle, au gîte qu'il élirait pour la nuit, ayant tous les pavés de Paris à son choix, il se souvint d'avoir avisé, la semaine précédente, rue de la Savaterie, à la porte d'un conseiller au parlement, un marche-pied à monter sur mule, et de s'être dit que cette pierre serait, dans l'occasion, un fort excellent oreiller pour un mendiant ou pour un poète. Il remercia la providence de lui avoir envoyé cette bonne idée; mais, comme il se préparait à traverser la place du Palais pour gagner le tortueux labyrinthe de la Cité, où serpentent toutes ces vieilles sœurs, les rues de la Barillerie, de la Vieille-Draperie, de la Savaterie, de la Juiverie, etc., encore debout aujourd'hui avec leurs maisons à neuf étages, il vit la procession du pape des fous qui sortait aussi du Palais et se ruait au travers de la cour, avec grands cris, grande clarté de torches et sa musique, à lui Gringoire. Cette vue raviva les écorchures de son amour-propre; il s'enfuit. Dans l'amertume de sa mésaventure dramatique, tout ce qui lui rappelait la fête du jour l'aigrissait et faisait saigner sa plaie.

Il voulut prendre le pont Saint-Michel, des enfants y couraient çà et là avec des lances à feu et des fusées.

«Peste soit des chandelles d'artifice!» dit Gringoire, et il se rabattit sur le Pont-au-Change. On avait attaché aux maisons de la tête du pont trois drapels représentant le roi, le dauphin et Marguerite de Flandre, et six petits drapelets où étaient *pourtraicts* le duc d'Autriche, le cardinal de Bourbon, et M. de Beaujeu, et madame Jeanne de France, et M. le bâtard de Bourbon, et je ne sais qui encore; le tout éclairé de torches. La cohue admirait.

«Heureux peintre Jehan Fourbault!» dit Gringoire avec un gros soupir, et il tourna le dos aux drapels et drapelets. Une rue était devant lui; il la trouva si noire et si abandonnée qu'il espéra y échapper à tous les retentissements comme à tous les rayonnements de la fête. Il s'y enfonça. Au bout de quelques instants, son pied heurta un obstacle; il trébucha et tomba. C'était la botte de mai, que les clercs de la basoche avaient déposée le matin à la porte d'un président au parlement, en l'honneur de la solennité du jour. Gringoire supporta héroïquement cette nouvelle rencontre. Il se releva et gagna le bord de l'eau. Après avoir laissé derrière lui la tournelle civile et la tour criminelle, et longé le grand mur des jardins du roi, sur cette grève non pavée où la boue lui venait à la cheville, il arriva à la pointe occidentale de la Cité, et considéra quelque temps l'îlot du Passeur-aux-Vaches, qui a disparu depuis sous le cheval de bronze et le Pont-Neuf. L'îlot lui apparaissait dans l'ombre comme une masse noire au delà de l'étroit cours d'eau blanchâtre qui l'en séparait. On y devinait, au rayonnement d'une petite lumière, l'espèce de hutte en forme de ruche où le passeur aux vaches s'abritait la nuit.

«Heureux passeur aux vaches! pensa Gringoire; tu ne songes pas à la gloire et tu ne fais pas d'épithalames! Que t'importent les rois qui se marient et les duchesses de Bourgogne! Tu ne connais d'autres marguerites que celles que ta pelouse d'avril donne à brouter à tes vaches! Et moi, poète, je suis hué, et je grelotte, et je dois douze sous, et ma semelle est si transparente qu'elle pourrait servir de vitre à ta lanterne. Merci! passeur aux vaches! ta cabane repose ma vue, et me fait oublier Paris!»

Il fut réveillé de son extase presque lyrique par un gros double pétard de la Saint-Jean, qui partit brusquement de la bienheureuse cabane. C'était le passeur aux vaches qui prenait sa part des réjouissances du jour et se tirait un feu d'artifice.

Ce pétard fit hérisser l'épiderme de Gringoire.

«Maudite fête! s'écria-t-il, me poursuivras-tu partout? Oh! mon Dieu! jusque chez le passeur aux vaches!»

Puis il regarda la Seine à ses pieds, et une horrible tentation le prit:

«Oh! dit-il, que volontiers je me noierais, si l'eau n'était pas si froide!»

Alors il lui vint une résolution désespérée. C’était, puisqu’il ne pouvait échapper au pape des fous, aux drapelets de Jehan Fourbault, aux bottes de mai, aux lances à feu et aux pétards, de s’enfoncer hardiment au cœur même de la fête, et d’aller à la place de Grève.

«Au moins, pensa-t-il, j’y aurai peut-être un tison du feu de joie pour me réchauffer, et j’y pourrai souper avec quelque miette des trois grandes armoiries de sucre royal qu’on a dû y dresser sur le buffet public de la ville.»

II

LA PLACE DE GRÈVE

Il ne reste aujourd’hui qu’un bien imperceptible vestige de la place de Grève telle qu’elle existait alors. C’est la charmante tourelle qui occupe l’angle nord de la place, et qui, déjà ensevelie sous l’ignoble badigeonnage qui empâte les vives arêtes de ses sculptures, aura bientôt disparu peut-être, submergée par cette crue de maisons neuves qui dévore si rapidement toutes les vieilles façades de Paris.

Les personnes qui, comme nous, ne passent jamais sur la place de Grève sans donner un regard de pitié et de sympathie à cette pauvre tourelle étranglée entre deux masures du temps de Louis XV, peuvent reconstruire aisément dans leur pensée l’ensemble d’édifices auquel elle appartenait, et y retrouver entière la vieille place gothique du quinzième siècle.

C’était, comme aujourd’hui, un trapèze irrégulier bordé d’un côté par le quai, et des trois autres par une série de maisons hautes, étroites et sombres. Le jour, on pouvait admirer la variété de ses édifices, tous sculptés en pierre ou en bois, et présentant déjà de complets échantillons des diverses architectures domestiques du moyen âge, en remontant du quinzième au onzième siècle, depuis la croisée qui commençait à détrôner l’ogive, jusqu’au plein cintre roman qui avait été supplanté par l’ogive, et qui occupait encore, au-dessous d’elle, le premier étage de cette ancienne maison de la Tour-Roland, angle de la place sur la Seine, du côté de la rue de la Tannerie. La nuit, on ne distinguait de cette masse d’édifices que la dentelure noire des toits déroulant autour de la place leur chaîne d’angles aigus. Car c’est une des différences radicales des villes d’alors et des villes d’à présent, qu’aujourd’hui ce sont les façades qui regardent les places et les rues, et qu’alors c’étaient les pignons. Depuis deux siècles, les maisons se sont retournées.

Au centre, du côté oriental de la place, s’élevait une lourde et hybride construction formée de trois logis juxtaposés. On l’appelait de trois noms qui expliquent son histoire, sa destination et son architecture: la *Maison-au-Dauphin,* parce que Charles V, dauphin, l’avait habitée; la *Marchandise*, parce qu’elle servait d’Hôtel de Ville; la *Maison-aux-Piliers* (domus ad piloria), à cause d’une suite de gros piliers qui soutenaient ses trois étages.

La ville trouvait là tout ce qu’il faut à une bonne ville comme Paris: une chapelle, pour prier Dieu; un *plaidoyer*, pour tenir audience et rembarrer au besoin les gens du roi; et, dans les combles, un *arsenac* plein d’artillerie. Car les bourgeois de Paris savent qu’il ne suffit pas en toute conjoncture de prier et de plaider pour les franchises de la Cité, et ils ont toujours en réserve dans un grenier de l’Hôtel de Ville quelque bonne arquebuse rouillée.

La Grève avait dès lors cet aspect sinistre que lui conservent encore aujourd’hui l’idée exécrable qu’elle réveille et le sombre Hôtel de Ville de Dominique Boccador, qui a remplacé la Maison-aux-Piliers. Il faut dire qu’un gibet et un pilori permanents, une justice et une échelle, comme on disait alors, dressés côte à côte au milieu du pavé, ne contribuaient pas peu à faire détourner les yeux de cette place fatale, où tant d’êtres pleins de santé et de vie ont agonisé; où devait naître cinquante ans plus tard cette *fièvre de Saint-Vallier*, cette maladie de la terreur de l’échafaud, la plus monstrueuse de toutes les maladies, parce qu’elle ne vient pas de Dieu, mais de l’homme.

C’est une idée consolante, disons-le en passant, de songer que la peine de mort, qui, il y a trois cents ans, encombrait encore de ses roues de fer, de ses gibets de pierre, de tout son attirail de supplices permanent et scellé dans le pavé, la Grève, les Halles, la place Dauphine, la Croix-du-Trahoir, le Marché-aux-Pourceaux, ce hideux Montfaucon, la barrière des Sergents, la Place-aux-Chats, la porte Saint-Denis, Champeaux, la porte Baudets, la porte Saint-Jacques, sans compter les innombrables échelles des prévôts, de l’évêque, des chapitres, des abbés, des prieurs ayant justice; sans compter les noyades juridiques en rivière de Seine; il est consolant qu’aujourd’hui, après avoir perdu successivement toutes les pièces de son armure, son luxe de supplices, sa pénalité d’imagination et de fantaisie, sa torture à laquelle elle refaisait tous les cinq ans un lit de cuir au Grand-Châtelet, cette vieille suzeraine de la société féodale, presque mise hors de nos lois et de nos villes, traquée de code en code, chassée de place en place, n’ait plus dans notre immense Paris qu’un coin déshonoré de la Grève, qu’une misérable guillotine, furtive, inquiète, honteuse, qui semble toujours craindre d’être prise en flagrant délit, tant elle disparaît vite après avoir fait son coup!

III

«BESOS PARA GOLPES»

Lorsque Pierre Gringoire arriva sur la place de Grève, il était transi. Il avait pris par le Pont-aux-Meuniers pour éviter la cohue du Pont-au-Change et les drapelets de Jehan Fourbault; mais les roues de tous les moulins de l'évêque l'avaient éclaboussé au passage, et sa souquenille était trempée. Il lui semblait en outre que la chute de sa pièce le rendait plus frileux encore. Aussi se hâta-t-il de s'approcher du feu de joie qui brûlait magnifiquement au milieu de la place. Mais une foule considérable faisait cercle à l'entour.

«Damnés Parisiens! se dit-il à lui-même, car Gringoire en vrai poète dramatique était sujet aux monologues, les voilà qui m'obstruent le feu! Pourtant j'ai bon besoin d'un coin de cheminée. Mes souliers boivent, et tous ces maudits moulins qui ont pleuré sur moi! Diable d'évêque de Paris avec ses moulins! Je voudrais bien savoir ce qu'un évêque peut faire d'un moulin! est-ce qu'il s'attend à devenir d'évêque meunier? S'il ne lui faut que ma malédiction pour cela, je la lui donne, et à sa cathédrale, et à ses moulins! Voyez un peu s'ils se dérangeront, ces badauds! Je vous demande ce qu'ils font là! Ils se chauffent; beau plaisir! Ils regardent brûler un cent de bourrées; beau spectacle!»

En examinant de plus près, il s'aperçut que le cercle était beaucoup plus grand qu'il ne fallait pour se chauffer au feu du roi, et que cette affluence de spectateurs n'était pas uniquement attirée par la beauté du cent de bourrées qui brûlait.

Dans un vaste espace laissé libre entre la foule et le feu, une jeune fille dansait.

Si cette jeune fille était un être humain, ou une fée, ou un ange, c'est ce que Gringoire, tout philosophe sceptique, tout poète ironique qu'il était, ne put décider dans le premier moment, tant il fut fasciné par cette éblouissante vision.

Elle n'était pas grande, mais elle le semblait, tant sa fine taille s'élançait hardiment. Elle était brune, mais on devinait que le jour sa peau devait avoir ce beau reflet doré des Andalouses et des Romaines. Son petit pied aussi était andalou, car il était tout ensemble à l'étroit et à l'aise dans sa gracieuse chaussure. Elle dansait, elle tournait, elle tourbillonnait sur un vieux tapis de Perse, jeté négligemment sous ses pieds; et chaque fois qu'en tournoyant sa rayonnante figure passait devant vous, ses grands yeux noirs vous jetaient un éclair.

Autour d'elle tous les regards étaient fixes, toutes les bouches ouvertes; et en effet, tandis qu'elle dansait ainsi, au bourdonnement du tambour de basque que ses deux bras ronds et purs élevaient au-dessus de sa tête, mince, frêle et vive comme une guêpe, avec son corsage d'or sans pli, sa robe bariolée qui se gonflait, avec ses épaules nues, ses jambes fines que sa jupe découvrait par moments, ses cheveux noirs, ses yeux de flamme, c'était une surnaturelle créature.

«En vérité, pensa Gringoire, c'est une salamandre, c'est une nymphe, c'est une déesse, c'est une bacchante du mont Ménaléen!»

En ce moment une des nattes de la chevelure de la «salamandre» se détacha, et une pièce de cuivre jaune qui y était attachée roula à terre.

«Hé non! dit-il, c'est une bohémienne.»

Toute illusion avait disparu.

Elle se remit à danser. Elle prit à terre deux épées dont elle appuya la pointe sur son front et qu'elle fit tourner dans un sens tandis qu'elle tournait dans l'autre. C'était en effet tout bonnement une bohémienne. Mais quelque désenchanté que fût Gringoire, l'ensemble de ce tableau n'était pas sans prestige et sans magie; le feu de joie l'éclairait d'une lumière crue et rouge qui tremblait toute vive sur le cercle des visages de la foule, sur le front brun de la jeune fille, et au fond de la place jetait un blême reflet mêlé aux vacillations de leurs ombres, d'un côté sur la vieille façade noire et ridée de la Maison-aux-Piliers, de l'autre sur les bras de pierre du gibet.

Parmi les mille visages que cette lueur teignait d'écarlate, il y en avait un qui semblait plus encore que tous les autres absorbé dans la contemplation de la danseuse. C'était une figure d'homme, austère, calme et sombre. Cet homme, dont le costume était caché par la foule qui l'entourait, ne paraissait pas avoir plus de trente-cinq ans; cependant il était chauve; à peine avait-il aux tempes quelques touffes de cheveux rares et déjà gris; son front large et haut commençait à se creuser de rides; mais dans ses yeux enfoncés éclatait une jeunesse extraordinaire, une vie ardente, une passion profonde. Il les tenait sans cesse attachés sur la bohémienne, et tandis que la folle jeune fille de seize ans dansait et voltigeait au plaisir de tous, sa rêverie, à lui, semblait devenir de plus en plus sombre. De temps en temps un sourire et un soupir se rencontraient sur ses lèvres, mais le sourire était plus douloureux que le soupir.

La jeune fille, essoufflée, s’arrêta enfin, et le peuple l’applaudit avec amour.

«Djali», dit la bohémienne.

Alors Gringoire vit arriver une jolie petite chèvre blanche, alerte, éveillée, lustrée, avec des cornes dorées, avec des pieds dorés, avec un collier doré, qu’il n’avait pas encore aperçue, et qui était restée jusque-là accroupie sur un coin du tapis et regardant danser sa maîtresse.

«Djali, dit la danseuse, à votre tour.»

Et s’asseyant, elle présenta gracieusement à la chèvre son tambour de basque.

«Djali, continua-t-elle, à quel mois sommes-nous de l’année?»

La chèvre leva son pied de devant et frappa un coup sur le tambour. On était en effet au premier mois. La foule applaudit.

«Djali, reprit la jeune fille en tournant son tambour de basque d’un autre côté, à quel jour du mois sommes-nous?»

Djali leva son petit pied d’or et frappa six coups sur le tambour.

«Djali, poursuivit l’égyptienne toujours avec un nouveau manège du tambour, à quelle heure du jour sommes-nous?»

Djali frappa sept coups. Au même moment l’horloge de la Maison-aux-Piliers sonna sept heures.

Le peuple était émerveillé.

«Il y a de la sorcellerie là-dessous», dit une voix sinistre dans la foule. C’était celle de l’homme chauve qui ne quittait pas la bohémienne des yeux.

Elle tressaillit, se détourna; mais les applaudissements éclatèrent et couvrirent la morose exclamation.

Ils l’effacèrent même si complètement dans son esprit qu’elle continua d’interpeller sa chèvre.

«Djali, comment fait maître Guichard Grand-Remy, capitaine des pistoliers de la ville, à la procession de la Chandeleur?»

Djali se dressa sur ses pattes de derrière et se mit à bêler, en marchant avec une si gentille gravité que le cercle entier des spectateurs éclata de rire à cette parodie de la dévotion intéressée du capitaine des pistoliers.

«Djali, reprit la jeune fille enhardie par le succès croissant, comment prêche maître Jacques Charmolue, procureur du roi en cour d’église?»

La chèvre prit séance sur son derrière, et se mit à bêler, en agitant ses pattes de devant d'une si étrange façon que, hormis le mauvais français et le mauvais latin, geste, accent, attitude, tout Jacques Charmolue y était.

Et la foule d'applaudir de plus belle.

«Sacrilège! profanation!» reprit la voix de l'homme chauve.

La bohémienne se retourna encore une fois.

«Ah! dit-elle, c'est ce vilain homme!» puis, allongeant sa lèvre inférieure au delà de la lèvre supérieure, elle fit une petite moue qui paraissait lui être familière, pirouetta sur le talon, et se mit à recueillir dans un tambour de basque les dons de la multitude.

Les grands-blancs, les petits-blancs, les targes, les liards-à-l'aigle pleuvaient. Tout à coup elle passa devant Gringoire. Gringoire mit si étourdiment la main à sa poche qu'elle s'arrêta. «Diable!» dit le poète en trouvant au fond de sa poche la réalité, c'est-à-dire le vide. Cependant la jolie fille était là, le regardant avec ses grands yeux, lui tendant son tambour, et attendant. Gringoire suait à grosses gouttes. S'il avait eu le Pérou dans sa poche, certainement il l'eût donné à la danseuse; mais Gringoire n'avait pas le Pérou, et d'ailleurs l'Amérique n'était pas encore découverte.

Heureusement un incident inattendu vint à son secours.

«T'en iras-tu, sauterelle d'Égypte?» cria une voix aigre qui partait du coin le plus sombre de la place.

La jeune fille se retourna effrayée. Ce n'était plus la voix de l'homme chauve; c'était une voix de femme, une voix dévote et méchante.

Du reste, ce cri, qui fit peur à la bohémienne, mit en joie une troupe d'enfants qui rôdait par là.

«C'est la recluse de la Tour-Roland, s'écrièrent-ils avec des rires désordonnés, c'est la sachette qui gronde! Est-ce qu'elle n'a pas soupé? portons-lui quelque reste du buffet de ville!»

Tous se précipitèrent vers la Maison-aux-Piliers.

Cependant Gringoire avait profité du trouble de la danseuse pour s'éclipser. La clameur des enfants lui rappela que lui aussi n'avait pas soupé. Il courut donc au buffet. Mais les petits drôles avaient de meilleures jambes que lui; quand il arriva, ils avaient fait table rase. Il ne restait même pas un misérable camichon à cinq sols la livre. Il n'y avait plus sur le mur que les sveltes fleurs de lys, entremêlées de rosiers, peintes en 1434 par Mathieu Biterne. C'était un maigre souper.

C’est une chose importune de se coucher sans souper; c’est une chose moins riante encore de ne pas souper et de ne savoir où coucher. Gringoire en était là. Pas de pain, pas de gîte; il se voyait pressé de toutes parts par la nécessité, et il trouvait la nécessité fort bourrue. Il avait depuis longtemps découvert cette vérité, que Jupiter a créé les hommes dans un accès de misanthropie, et que, pendant toute la vie du sage, sa destinée tient en état de siège sa philosophie. Quant à lui, il n’avait jamais vu le blocus si complet; il entendait son estomac battre la chamade, et il trouvait très déplacé que le mauvais destin prît sa philosophie par la famine.

Cette mélancolique rêverie l’absorbait de plus en plus, lorsqu’un chant bizarre, quoique plein de douceur, vint brusquement l’en arracher. C’était la jeune égyptienne qui chantait.

Il en était de sa voix comme de sa danse, comme de sa beauté. C’était indéfinissable et charmant; quelque chose de pur, de sonore, d’aérien, d’ailé, pour ainsi dire. C’étaient de continuels épanouissements, des mélodies, des cadences inattendues, puis des phrases simples semées de notes acérées et sifflantes, puis des sauts de gammes qui eussent dérouté un rossignol, mais où l’harmonie se retrouvait toujours, puis de molles ondulations d’octaves qui s’élevaient et s’abaissaient comme le sein de la jeune chanteuse. Son beau visage suivait avec une mobilité singulière tous les caprices de sa chanson, depuis l’inspiration la plus échevelée jusqu’à la plus chaste dignité. On eût dit tantôt une folle, tantôt une reine.

Les paroles qu’elle chantait étaient d’une langue inconnue à Gringoire, et qui paraissait lui être inconnue à elle-même, tant l’expression qu’elle donnait au chant se rapportait peu au sens des paroles. Ainsi ces quatre vers dans sa bouche étaient d’une gaieté folle:

Un cofre de gran riqueza
Hallaron dentro un pilar,
Dentro del, nuevas banderas
Con figuras de espantar.

Et un instant après, à l’accent qu’elle donnait à cette stance:

Alarabes de cavallo
Sin poderse menear,
Con espadas, y los cuellos,
Ballestas de buen echar.

Gringoire se sentait venir les larmes aux yeux. Cependant son chant respirait surtout la joie, et elle semblait chanter, comme l’oiseau, par sérénité et par insouciance.

La chanson de la bohémienne avait troublé la rêverie de Gringoire, mais comme le cygne trouble l'eau. Il l'écoutait avec une sorte de ravissement et d'oubli de toute chose. C'était depuis plusieurs heures le premier moment où il ne se sentît pas souffrir.

Ce moment fut court.

La même voix de femme qui avait interrompu la danse de la bohémienne vint interrompre son chant.

«Te tairas-tu, cigale d'enfer?» cria-t-elle, toujours du même coin obscur de la place.

La pauvre *cigale* s'arrêta court. Gringoire se boucha les oreilles.

«Oh! s'écria-t-il, maudite scie ébréchée, qui vient briser la lyre!»

Cependant les autres spectateurs murmuraient comme lui: «Au diable la sachette!» disait plus d'un. Et la vieille trouble-fête invisible eût pu avoir à se repentir de ses agressions contre la bohémienne, s'ils n'eussent été distraits en ce moment même par la procession du pape des fous, qui, après avoir parcouru force rues et carrefours, débouchait dans la place de Grève, avec toutes ses torches et toute sa rumeur.

Cette procession, que nos lecteurs ont vue partir du Palais, s'était organisée chemin faisant, et recrutée de tout ce qu'il y avait à Paris de marauds, de voleurs oisifs, et de vagabonds disponibles; aussi présentait-elle un aspect respectable lorsqu'elle arriva en Grève.

D'abord marchait l'Égypte. Le duc d'Égypte, en tête, à cheval, avec ses comtes à pied, lui tenant la bride et l'étrier; derrière eux, les égyptiens et les égyptiennes pêle-mêle avec leurs petits enfants criant sur leurs épaules; tous, duc, comtes, menu peuple, en haillons et en oripeaux. Puis c'était le royaume d'argot: c'est-à-dire tous les voleurs de France, échelonnés par ordre de dignité; les moindres passant les premiers. Ainsi défilaient quatre par quatre, avec les divers insignes de leurs grades dans cette étrange faculté, la plupart éclopés, ceux-ci boiteux, ceux-là manchots, les courtauds de boutanche, les coquillarts, les hubins, les sabouleux, les calots, les francs-mitoux, les polissons, les piètres, les capons, les malingreux, les rifodés, les marcandiers, les narquois, les orphelins, les archisuppôts, les cagoux; dénombrement à fatiguer Homère. Au centre du conclave des cagoux et des archisuppôts, on avait peine à distinguer le roi de l'argot, le grand coësre, accroupi dans une petite charrette traînée par deux grands chiens. Après le royaume des argotiers, venait l'empire de Galilée.

Guillaume Rousseau, empereur de l’empire de Galilée, marchait majestueusement dans sa robe de pourpre tachée de vin, précédé de baladins s’entre-battant et dansant des pyrrhiques, entouré de ses massiers, de ses suppôts, et des clercs de la chambre des comptes. Enfin venait la basoche, avec ses mais couronnés de fleurs, ses robes noires, sa musique digne du sabbat, et ses grosses chandelles de cire jaune. Au centre de cette foule, les grands officiers de la confrérie des fous portaient sur leurs épaules un brancard plus surchargé de cierges que la châsse de Sainte-Geneviève en temps de peste. Et sur ce brancard resplendissait, crossé, chapé et mitré, le nouveau pape des fous, le sonneur de cloches de Notre-Dame, Quasimodo le Bossu.

Chacune des sections de cette procession grotesque avait sa musique particulière. Les égyptiens faisaient détonner leurs balafos et leurs tambourins d’Afrique. Les argotiers, race fort peu musicale, en étaient encore à la viole, au cornet à bouquin et à la gothique rubebbe du douzième siècle. L’empire de Galilée n’était guère plus avancé; à peine distinguait-on dans sa musique quelque misérable rebec de l’enfance de l’art, encore emprisonné dans le *ré-la-mi*. Mais c’est autour du pape des fous que se déployaient, dans une cacophonie magnifique, toutes les richesses musicales de l’époque. Ce n’étaient que dessus de rebec, hautes-contre de rebec, tailles de rebec, sans compter les flûtes et les cuivres. Hélas! nos lecteurs se souviennent que c’était l’orchestre de Gringoire.

Il est difficile de donner une idée du degré d’épanouissement orgueilleux et béat où le triste et hideux visage de Quasimodo était parvenu dans le trajet du Palais à la Grève. C’était la première jouissance d’amour-propre qu’il eût jamais éprouvée. Il n’avait connu jusque-là que l’humiliation, le dédain pour sa condition, le dégoût pour sa personne. Aussi, tout sourd qu’il était, savourait-il en véritable pape les acclamations de cette foule qu’il haïssait pour s’en sentir haï. Que son peuple fût un ramas de fous, de perclus, de voleurs, de mendiants, qu’importe! c’était toujours un peuple, et lui un souverain. Et il prenait au sérieux tous ces applaudissements ironiques, tous ces respects dérisoires, auxquels nous devons dire qu’il se mêlait pourtant dans la foule un peu de crainte fort réelle. Car le bossu était robuste; car le bancal était agile; car le sourd était méchant: trois qualités qui tempèrent le ridicule.

Du reste, que le nouveau pape des fous se rendît compte à lui-même des sentiments qu’il éprouvait et des sentiments qu’il inspirait, c’est ce que nous sommes loin de croire. L’esprit qui était logé dans ce corps manqué avait nécessairement lui-même quelque chose d’incomplet et de sourd. Aussi, ce qu’il ressentait en ce moment était-il pour lui absolument vague, indistinct et confus. Seulement la joie perçait, l’orgueil dominait. Autour de cette sombre et malheureuse figure, il y avait rayonnement.

Ce ne fut donc pas sans surprise et sans effroi que l’on vit tout à coup, au moment où Quasimodo, dans cette demi-ivresse, passait triomphalement devant la Maison-aux-Piliers, un homme s’élancer de la foule et lui arracher des mains, avec un geste de colère, sa crosse de bois doré, insigne de sa folle papauté.

Cet homme, ce téméraire, c’était le personnage au front chauve qui, le moment auparavant, mêlé au groupe de la bohémienne, avait glacé la pauvre fille de ses paroles de menace et de haine. Il était revêtu du costume ecclésiastique. Au moment où il sortit de la foule, Gringoire, qui ne l’avait point remarqué jusqu’alors, le reconnut: «Tiens! dit-il, avec un cri d’étonnement, c’est mon maître en Hermès, dom Claude Frollo, l’archidiacre! Que diable veut-il à ce vilain borgne? Il va se faire dévorer.»

Un cri de terreur s’éleva en effet. Le formidable Quasimodo s’était précipité à bas du brancard, et les femmes détournaient les yeux pour ne pas le voir déchirer l’archidiacre. Il fit un bond jusqu’au prêtre, le regarda, et tomba à genoux.

Le prêtre lui arracha sa tiare, lui brisa sa crosse, lui lacéra sa chape de clinquant.

Quasimodo resta à genoux, baissa la tête et joignit les mains.

Puis il s’établit entre eux un étrange dialogue de signes et de gestes, car ni l’un ni l’autre ne parlait. Le prêtre, debout, irrité, menaçant, impérieux; Quasimodo, prosterné, humble, suppliant. Et cependant il est certain que Quasimodo eût pu écraser le prêtre avec le pouce.

Enfin l’archidiacre, secouant rudement la puissante épaule de Quasimodo, lui fit signe de se lever et de le suivre.

Quasimodo se leva.

Alors la confrérie des fous, la première stupeur passée, voulut défendre son pape si brusquement détrôné. Les égyptiens, les argotiers et toute la basoche vinrent japper autour du prêtre.

Quasimodo se plaça devant le prêtre, fit jouer les muscles de ses poings athlétiques, et regarda les assaillants avec le grincement de dents d’un tigre fâché.

Le prêtre reprit sa gravité sombre, fit un signe à Quasimodo, et se retira en silence.

Quasimodo marchait devant lui, éparpillant la foule à son passage.

Quand ils eurent traversé la populace et la place, la nuée des curieux et des oisifs voulut les suivre. Quasimodo prit alors l’arrière-garde, et suivit l’archidiacre à reculons, trapu, hargneux, monstrueux, hérissé, ramassant ses membres, léchant ses défenses de sanglier, grondant comme une bête fauve, et imprimant d’immenses oscillations à la foule avec un geste ou un regard.

On les laissa s’enfoncer tous deux dans une rue étroite et ténébreuse, où nul n’osa se risquer après eux; tant la seule chimère de Quasimodo grinçant des dents en barrait bien l’entrée.

«Voilà qui est merveilleux, dit Gringoire; mais où diable trouverai-je à souper?»

IV

LES INCONVÉNIENTS DE SUIVRE UNE JOLIE FEMME LE SOIR DANS LES RUES

Gringoire, à tout hasard, s'était mis à suivre la bohémienne. Il lui avait vu prendre, avec sa chèvre, la rue de la Coutellerie; il avait pris la rue de la Coutellerie.

«Pourquoi pas?» s'était-il dit.

Gringoire, philosophe pratique des rues de Paris, avait remarqué que rien n'est propice à la rêverie comme de suivre une jolie femme sans savoir où elle va. Il y a dans cette abdication volontaire de son libre arbitre, dans cette fantaisie qui se soumet à une autre fantaisie, laquelle ne s'en doute pas, un mélange d'indépendance fantasque et d'obéissance aveugle, je ne sais quoi d'intermédiaire entre l'esclavage et la liberté qui plaisait à Gringoire, esprit essentiellement mixte, indécis et complexe, tenant le bout de tous les extrêmes, incessamment suspendu entre toutes les propensions humaines, et les neutralisant l'une par l'autre. Il se comparait lui-même volontiers au tombeau de Mahomet, attiré en sens inverse par deux pierres d'aimant, et qui hésite éternellement entre le haut et le bas, entre la voûte et le pavé, entre la chute et l'ascension, entre le zénith et le nadir.

Si Gringoire vivait de nos jours, quel beau milieu il tiendrait entre le classique et le romantique!

Mais il n'était pas assez primitif pour vivre trois cents ans, et c'est dommage. Son absence est un vide qui ne se fait que trop sentir aujourd'hui.

Du reste, pour suivre ainsi dans les rues les passants (et surtout les passantes), ce que Gringoire faisait volontiers, il n'y a pas de meilleure disposition que de ne savoir où coucher.

Il marchait donc tout pensif derrière la jeune fille qui hâtait le pas et faisait trotter sa jolie chèvre en voyant rentrer les bourgeois et se fermer les tavernes, seules boutiques qui eussent été ouvertes ce jour-là.

«Après tout, pensait-il à peu près, il faut bien qu'elle loge quelque part; les bohémiennes ont bon cœur. — Qui sait?...»

Et il y avait dans les points suspensifs dont il faisait suivre cette réticence dans son esprit je ne sais quelles idées assez gracieuses.

Cependant de temps en temps, en passant devant les derniers groupes de bourgeois fermant leurs portes, il attrapait quelque lambeau de leurs conversations qui venait rompre l’enchaînement de ses riantes hypothèses.

Tantôt c’étaient deux vieillards qui s’accostaient.

«Maître Thibaut Fernicle, savez-vous qu’il fait froid?

(Gringoire savait cela depuis le commencement de l’hiver.)

— Oui, bien, maître Boniface Disome! Est-ce que nous allons avoir un hiver comme il y a trois ans, en 80, que le bois coûtait huit sols le moule?

— Bah! ce n’est rien, maître Thibaut, près de l’hiver de 1407, qu’il gela depuis la Saint-Martin jusqu’à la Chandeleur! et avec une telle furie que la plume du greffier du parlement gelait, dans la grand-chambre, de trois mots en trois mots! ce qui interrompit l’enregistrement de la justice.»

Plus loin, c’étaient des voisines à leur fenêtre avec des chandelles que le brouillard faisait grésiller.

«Votre mari vous a-t-il conté le malheur, madamoiselle La Boudraque?

— Non. Qu’est-ce que c’est donc, madamoiselle Turquant?

— Le cheval de M. Gilles Godin, le notaire au Châtelet, qui s’est effarouché des Flamands et de leur procession, et qui a renversé maître Philippot Avrillot, oblat des Célestins.

— En vérité?

— Bellement.

— Un cheval bourgeois! c’est un peu fort. Si c’était un cheval de cavalerie, à la bonne heure!»

Et les fenêtres se refermaient. Mais Gringoire n’en avait pas moins perdu le fil de ses idées.

Heureusement il le retrouvait vite et le renouait sans peine, grâce à la bohémienne, grâce à Djali, qui marchaient toujours devant lui; deux fines, délicates et charmantes créatures, dont il admirait les petits pieds, les jolies formes, les gracieuses manières, les confondant presque dans sa contemplation; pour l’intelligence et la bonne amitié, les croyant toutes deux jeunes filles; pour la légèreté, l’agilité, la dextérité de la marche, les trouvant chèvres toutes deux.

Les rues cependant devenaient à tout moment plus noires et plus désertes. Le couvre-feu était sonné depuis longtemps, et l’on commençait à ne plus rencontrer qu’à de rares intervalles un passant sur le pavé, une lumière aux fenêtres. Gringoire s’était engagé, à la suite de l’égyptienne, dans ce dédale inextricable de ruelles, de carrefours et de culs-de-sac, qui environne l’ancien sépulcre des Saints-Innocents, et qui ressemble à un écheveau de fil brouillé par un chat. «Voilà des rues qui ont bien peu de logique!» disait Gringoire, perdu dans ces mille circuits qui revenaient sans cesse sur eux-mêmes, mais où la jeune fille suivait un chemin qui lui paraissait bien connu, sans hésiter et d’un pas de plus en plus rapide. Quant à lui, il eût parfaitement ignoré où il était, s’il n’eût aperçu en passant, au détour d’une rue, la masse octogone du pilori des halles, dont le sommet à jour détachait vivement sa découpure noire sur une fenêtre encore éclairée de la rue Verdelet.

Depuis quelques instants, il avait attiré l’attention de la jeune fille; elle avait à plusieurs reprises tourné la tête vers lui avec inquiétude; elle s’était même une fois arrêtée tout court, avait profité d’un rayon de lumière qui s’échappait d’une boulangerie entr’ouverte pour le regarder fixement du haut en bas; puis, ce coup d’œil jeté, Gringoire lui avait vu faire cette petite moue qu’il avait déjà remarquée, et elle avait passé outre.

Cette petite moue donna à penser à Gringoire. Il y avait certainement du dédain et de la moquerie dans cette gracieuse grimace. Aussi commençait-il à baisser la tête, à compter les pavés, et à suivre la jeune fille d’un peu plus loin, lorsque, au tournant d’une rue qui venait de la lui faire perdre de vue, il l’entendit pousser un cri perçant.

Il hâta le pas.

La rue était pleine de ténèbres. Pourtant une étoupe imbibée d’huile, qui brûlait dans une cage de fer aux pieds de la Sainte-Vierge du coin de la rue, permit à Gringoire de distinguer la bohémienne se débattant dans les bras de deux hommes qui s’efforçaient d’étouffer ses cris. La pauvre petite chèvre, tout effarée, baissait les cornes et bêlait.

«À nous, messieurs du guet», cria Gringoire, et il s’avança bravement. L’un des hommes qui tenaient la jeune fille se tourna vers lui. C’était la formidable figure de Quasimodo.

Gringoire ne prit pas la fuite, mais il ne fit point un pas de plus.

Quasimodo vint à lui, le jeta à quatre pas sur le pavé d’un revers de la main, et s’enfonça rapidement dans l’ombre, emportant la jeune fille ployée sur un de ses bras comme une écharpe de soie. Son compagnon le suivait, et la pauvre chèvre courait après tous, avec son bêlement plaintif.

«Au meurtre! au meurtre! criait la malheureuse bohémienne.

— Halte-là, misérables, et lâchez-moi cette ribaude!» dit tout à coup d’une voix de tonnerre un cavalier qui déboucha brusquement du carrefour voisin.

C’était un capitaine des archers de l’ordonnance du roi armé de pied en cap, et l’espadon à la main.

Il arracha la bohémienne des bras de Quasimodo stupéfait, la mit en travers sur sa selle, et, au moment où le redoutable bossu, revenu de sa surprise, se précipitait sur lui pour reprendre sa proie, quinze ou seize archers, qui suivaient de près leur capitaine, parurent l’estramaçon au poing. C’était une escouade de l’ordonnance du roi qui faisait le contre-guet, par ordre de messire Robert d’Estouteville, garde de la prévôté de Paris.

Quasimodo fut enveloppé, saisi, garrotté. Il rugissait, il écumait, il mordait, et, s’il eût fait grand jour, nul doute que son visage seul, rendu plus hideux encore par la colère, n’eût mis en fuite toute l’escouade. Mais la nuit il était désarmé de son arme la plus redoutable, de sa laideur.

Son compagnon avait disparu dans la lutte.

La bohémienne se dressa gracieusement sur la selle de l’officier, elle appuya ses deux mains sur les deux épaules du jeune homme, et le regarda fixement quelques secondes, comme ravie de sa bonne mine et du bon secours qu’il venait de lui porter. Puis, rompant le silence la première, elle lui dit, en faisant plus douce encore sa douce voix:

«Comment vous appelez-vous, monsieur le gendarme?

— Le capitaine Phoebus de Châteaupers, pour vous servir, ma belle! répondit l’officier en se redressant.

— Merci», dit-elle.

Et, pendant que le capitaine Phoebus retroussait sa moustache à la bourguignonne, elle se laissa glisser à bas du cheval, comme une flèche qui tombe à terre, et s’enfuit.

Un éclair se fût évanoui moins vite.

«Nombril du pape! dit le capitaine en faisant resserrer les courroies de Quasimodo, j’eusse aimé mieux garder la ribaude.

— Que voulez-vous, capitaine? dit un gendarme, la fauvette s’est envolée, la chauve-souris est restée.»

V

SUITE DES INCONVÉNIENTS

Gringoire, tout étourdi de sa chute, était resté sur le pavé devant la bonne Vierge du coin de la rue. Peu à peu, il reprit ses sens; il fut d'abord quelques minutes flottant dans une espèce de rêverie à demi somnolente qui n'était pas sans douceur, où les aériennes figures de la bohémienne et de la chèvre se mariaient à la pesanteur du poing de Quasimodo. Cet état dura peu. Une assez vive impression de froid à la partie de son corps qui se trouvait en contact avec le pavé le réveilla tout à coup, et fit revenir son esprit à la surface. «D'où me vient donc cette fraîcheur?» se dit-il brusquement. Il s'aperçut alors qu'il était un peu dans le milieu du ruisseau.

«Diable de cyclope bossu!» grommela-t-il entre ses dents, et il voulut se lever. Mais il était trop étourdi et trop meurtri. Force lui fut de rester en place. Il avait du reste la main assez libre; il se boucha le nez, et se résigna.

«La boue de Paris, pensa-t-il (car il croyait bien être sûr que décidément le ruisseau serait son gîte,

Et que faire en un gîte à moins que l'on ne songe?),

la boue de Paris est particulièrement puante. Elle doit renfermer beaucoup de sel volatil et nitreux. C'est, du reste, l'opinion de maître Nicolas Flamel et des hermétiques...»

Le mot d'*hermétiques* amena subitement l'idée de l'archidiacre Claude Frollo dans son esprit. Il se rappela la scène violente qu'il venait d'entrevoir, que la bohémienne se débattait entre deux hommes, que Quasimodo avait un compagnon, et la figure morose et hautaine de l'archidiacre passa confusément dans son souvenir. «Cela serait étrange!» pensa-t-il. Et il se mit à échafauder, avec cette donnée et sur cette base, le fantasque édifice des hypothèses, ce château de cartes des philosophes. Puis soudain, revenant encore une fois à la réalité: «Ah çà! je gèle!» s'écria-t-il.

La place, en effet, devenait de moins en moins tenable. Chaque molécule de l'eau du ruisseau enlevait une molécule de calorique rayonnant aux reins de Gringoire, et l'équilibre entre la température de son corps et la température du ruisseau commençait à s'établir d'une rude façon.

Un ennui d'une toute autre nature vint tout à coup l'assaillir.

Un groupe d’enfants, de ces petits sauvages va-nu-pieds qui ont de tout temps battu le pavé de Paris sous le nom éternel de *gamins*, et qui, lorsque nous étions enfants aussi, nous ont jeté des pierres à tous le soir au sortir de classe, parce que nos pantalons n’étaient pas déchirés, un essaim de ces jeunes drôles accourait vers le carrefour où gisait Gringoire, avec des rires et des cris qui paraissaient se soucier fort peu du sommeil des voisins. Ils traînaient après eux je ne sais quel sac informe; et le bruit seul de leurs sabots eût réveillé un mort. Gringoire, qui ne l’était pas encore tout à fait, se souleva à demi.

«Ohé, Hennequin Dandèche! ohé, Jehan Pincebourde! criaient-ils à tue-tête; le vieux Eustache Moubon, le marchand feron du coin, vient de mourir. Nous avons sa paillasse, nous allons en faire un feu de joie. C’est aujourd’hui les flamands!»

Et voilà qu’ils jetèrent la paillasse précisément sur Gringoire, près duquel ils étaient arrivés sans le voir. En même temps, un d’eux prit une poignée de paille qu’il alla allumer à la mèche de la bonne Vierge.

«Mort-Christ! grommela Gringoire, est-ce que je vais avoir trop chaud maintenant?»

Le moment était critique. Il allait être pris entre le feu et l’eau; il fit un effort surnaturel, un effort de faux monnayeur qu’on va bouillir et qui tâche de s’échapper. Il se leva debout, rejeta la paillasse sur les gamins, et s’enfuit.

«Sainte Vierge! crièrent les enfants; le marchand feron qui revient!»

Et ils s’enfuirent de leur côté.

La paillasse resta maîtresse du champ de bataille. Belle-forêt, le père Le Juge et Corrozet assurent que le lendemain elle fut ramassée avec grande pompe par le clergé du quartier et portée au trésor de l’église Sainte-Opportune, où le sacristain se fit jusqu’en 1789 un assez beau revenu avec le grand miracle de la statue de la Vierge du coin de la rue Mauconseil, qui avait, par sa seule présence, dans la mémorable nuit du 6 au 7 janvier 1482, exorcisé défunt Eustache Moubon, lequel, pour faire niche au diable, avait, en mourant, malicieusement caché son âme dans sa paillasse.

VI

LA CRUCHE CASSÉE

Après avoir couru à toutes jambes pendant quelque temps, sans savoir où, donnant de la tête à maint coin de rue, enjambant maint ruisseau, traversant mainte ruelle, maint cul-de-sac, maint carrefour, cherchant fuite et passage à travers tous les méandres du vieux pavé des Halles, explorant dans sa peur panique ce que le beau latin des chartes appelle *tota via, cheminum et viaria*, notre poète s’arrêta tout à coup, d’essoufflement d’abord, puis saisi en quelque sorte au collet par un dilemme qui venait de surgir dans son esprit. «Il me semble, maître Pierre Gringoire, se dit-il à lui-même en appuyant son doigt sur son front, que vous courez là comme un écervelé. Les petits drôles n’ont pas eu moins peur de vous que vous d’eux. Il me semble, vous dis-je, que vous avez entendu le bruit de leurs sabots qui s’enfuyait au midi, pendant que vous vous enfuyiez au septentrion. Or, de deux choses l’une: ou ils ont pris la fuite; et alors la paillasse qu’ils ont dû oublier dans leur terreur est précisément ce lit hospitalier après lequel vous courez depuis ce matin, et que madame la Vierge vous envoie miraculeusement pour vous récompenser d’avoir fait en son honneur une moralité accompagnée de triomphes et momeries; ou les enfants n’ont pas pris la fuite, et dans ce cas ils ont mis le brandon à la paillasse, et c’est là justement l’excellent feu dont vous avez besoin pour vous réjouir, sécher et réchauffer. Dans les deux cas, bon feu ou bon lit, la paillasse est un présent du ciel. La benoîte vierge Marie, qui est au coin de la rue Mauconseil, n’a peut-être fait mourir Eustache Moubon que pour cela; et c’est folie à vous de vous enfuir ainsi sur traîne-boyau, comme un Picard devant un Français, laissant derrière vous ce que vous cherchez devant; et vous êtes un sot!»

Alors il revint sur ses pas, et s’orientant et furetant, le nez au vent et l’oreille aux aguets, il s’efforça de retrouver la bienheureuse paillasse. Mais en vain. Ce n’étaient qu’intersections de maisons, culs-de-sac, pattes-d’oie, au milieu desquels il hésitait et doutait sans cesse, plus empêché et plus englué dans cet enchevêtrement de ruelles noires qu’il ne l’eût été dans le dédalus même de l’hôtel des Tournelles. Enfin il perdit patience, et s’écria solennellement: «Maudits soient les carrefours! c’est le diable qui les a faits à l’image de sa fourche.»

Cette exclamation le soulagea un peu, et une espèce de reflet rougeâtre qu'il aperçut en ce moment au bout d'une longue et étroite ruelle, acheva de relever son moral. «Dieu soit loué! dit-il, c'est là-bas! Voilà ma paillasse qui brûle.» Et se comparant au nocher qui sombre dans la nuit: «*Salve*, ajouta-t-il pieusement, *salve, maris stella*!»

Adressait-il ce fragment de litanie à la sainte Vierge ou à la paillasse? c'est ce que nous ignorons parfaitement.

À peine avait-il fait quelques pas dans la longue ruelle, laquelle était en pente, non pavée, et de plus en plus boueuse et inclinée, qu'il remarqua quelque chose d'assez singulier. Elle n'était pas déserte. Çà et là, dans sa longueur, rampaient je ne sais quelles masses vagues et informes, se dirigeant toutes vers la lueur qui vacillait au bout de la rue, comme ces lourds insectes qui se traînent la nuit de brin d'herbe en brin d'herbe vers un feu de pâtre.

Rien ne rend aventureux comme de ne pas sentir la place de son gousset. Gringoire continua de s'avancer, et eut bientôt rejoint celle de ces larves qui se traînait le plus paresseusement à la suite des autres. En s'en approchant, il vit que ce n'était rien autre chose qu'un misérable cul-de-jatte qui sautelait sur ses deux mains, comme un faucheux blessé qui n'a plus que deux pattes. Au moment où il passa près de cette espèce d'araignée à face humaine, elle éleva vers lui une voix lamentable: «*La buona mancia, signor! la buona mancia*!

— Que le diable t'emporte, dit Gringoire, et moi avec toi, si je sais ce que tu veux dire!»

Et il passa outre.

Il rejoignit une autre de ces masses ambulantes, et l'examina. C'était un perclus, à la fois boiteux et manchot, et si manchot et si boiteux que le système compliqué de béquilles et de jambes de bois qui le soutenait lui donnait l'air d'un échafaudage de maçons en marche. Gringoire, qui avait les comparaisons nobles et classiques, le compara dans sa pensée au trépied vivant de Vulcain.

Ce trépied vivant le salua au passage, mais en arrêtant son chapeau à la hauteur du menton de Gringoire, comme un plat à barbe, et en lui criant aux oreilles: «*Señor caballero, para comprar un pedaso de pan*!

— Il paraît, dit Gringoire, que celui-là parle aussi; mais c'est une rude langue, et il est plus heureux que moi s'il la comprend.»

Puis se frappant le front par une subite transition d'idée: «À propos, que diable voulaient-ils dire ce matin avec leur *Esmeralda*?»

Il voulut doubler le pas; mais pour la troisième fois quelque chose lui barra le chemin. Ce quelque chose, ou plutôt ce quelqu'un, c'était un aveugle, un petit aveugle à face juive et barbue, qui, ramant dans l'espace autour de lui avec un bâton, et remorqué par un gros chien, lui nasilla avec un accent hongrois: «*Facitote caritatem*!

— À la bonne heure! dit Pierre Gringoire, en voilà un enfin qui parle un langage chrétien. Il faut que j'aie la mine bien aumônière pour qu'on me demande ainsi la charité dans l'état de maigreur où est ma bourse. Mon ami (et il se tournait vers l'aveugle), j'ai vendu la semaine passée ma dernière chemise; c'est-à-dire, puisque vous ne comprenez que la langue de Cicero: *Vendidi hebdomade nuper transita meam ultimam chemisam*.»

Cela dit, il tourna le dos à l'aveugle, et poursuivit son chemin; mais l'aveugle se mit à allonger le pas en même temps que lui, et voilà que le perclus, voilà que le cul-de-jatte surviennent de leur côté avec grande hâte et grand bruit d'écuelle et de béquilles sur le pavé. Puis, tous trois, s'entre-culbutant aux trousses du pauvre Gringoire, se mirent à lui chanter leur chanson:

«Caritatem! chantait l'aveugle.

— *La buona mancia!*» chantait le cul-de-jatte.

Et le boiteux relevait la phrase musicale en répétant: «*Un pedaso de pan!*»

Gringoire se boucha les oreilles. «Ô tour de Babel!» s'écria-t-il.

Il se mit à courir. L'aveugle courut. Le boiteux courut. Le cul-de-jatte courut.

Et puis, à mesure qu'il s'enfonçait dans la rue, culs-de-jatte, aveugles, boiteux, pullulaient autour de lui, et des manchots, et des borgnes, et des lépreux avec leurs plaies, qui sortant des maisons, qui des petites rues adjacentes, qui des soupiraux des caves, hurlant, beuglant, glapissant, tous clopin-clopant, cahin-caha, se ruant vers la lumière, et vautrés dans la fange comme des limaces après la pluie.

Gringoire, toujours suivi par ses trois persécuteurs, et ne sachant trop ce que cela allait devenir, marchait effaré au milieu des autres, tournant les boiteux, enjambant les culs-de-jatte, les pieds empêtrés dans cette fourmilière d'éclopés, comme ce capitaine anglais qui s'enlisa dans un troupeau de crabes.

L’idée lui vint d’essayer de retourner sur ses pas. Mais il était trop tard. Toute cette légion s’était refermée derrière lui, et ses trois mendiants le tenaient. Il continua donc, poussé à la fois par ce flot irrésistible, par la peur et par un vertige qui lui faisait de tout cela une sorte de rêve horrible.

Enfin, il atteignit l’extrémité de la rue. Elle débouchait sur une place immense, où mille lumières éparses vacillaient dans le brouillard confus de la nuit. Gringoire s’y jeta, espérant échapper par la vitesse de ses jambes aux trois spectres infirmes qui s’étaient cramponnés à lui.

«*Ondè vas, hombre*!» cria le perclus jetant là ses béquilles, et courant après lui avec les deux meilleures jambes qui eussent jamais tracé un pas géométrique sur le pavé de Paris.

Cependant le cul-de-jatte, debout sur ses pieds, coiffait Gringoire de sa lourde jatte ferrée, et l’aveugle le regardait en face avec des yeux flamboyants.

«Où suis-je? dit le poète terrifié.

— Dans la Cour des Miracles, répondit un quatrième spectre qui les avait accostés.

— Sur mon âme, reprit Gringoire, je vois bien les aveugles qui regardent et les boiteux qui courent; mais où est le Sauveur?»

Ils répondirent par un éclat de rire sinistre.

Le pauvre poète jeta les yeux autour de lui. Il était en effet dans cette redoutable Cour des Miracles, où jamais honnête homme n’avait pénétré à pareille heure; cercle magique où les officiers du Châtelet et les sergents de la prévôté qui s’y aventuraient disparaissaient en miettes; cité des voleurs, hideuse verrue à la face de Paris; égout d’où s’échappait chaque matin, et où revenait croupir chaque nuit ce ruisseau de vices, de mendicité et de vagabondage toujours débordé dans les rues des capitales; ruche monstrueuse où rentraient le soir avec leur butin tous les frelons de l’ordre social; hôpital menteur où le bohémien, le moine défroqué, l’écolier perdu, les vauriens de toutes les nations, espagnols, italiens, allemands, de toutes les religions, juifs, chrétiens, mahométans, idolâtres, couverts de plaies fardées, mendiants le jour, se transfiguraient la nuit en brigands; immense vestiaire, en un mot, où s’habillaient et se déshabillaient à cette époque tous les acteurs de cette comédie éternelle que le vol, la prostitution et le meurtre jouent sur le pavé de Paris.

C’était une vaste place, irrégulière et mal pavée, comme toutes les places de Paris alors. Des feux, autour desquels fourmillaient des groupes étranges, y brillaient çà et là. Tout cela allait, venait, criait. On entendait des rires aigus, des vagissements d'enfants, des voix de femmes. Les mains, les têtes de cette foule, noires sur le fond lumineux, y découpaient mille gestes bizarres. Par moments, sur le sol, où tremblait la clarté des feux, mêlée à de grandes ombres indéfinies, on pouvait voir passer un chien qui ressemblait à un homme, un homme qui ressemblait à un chien. Les limites des races et des espèces semblaient s'effacer dans cette cité comme dans un pandémonium. Hommes, femmes, bêtes, âge, sexe, santé, maladie, tout semblait être en commun parmi ce peuple; tout allait ensemble, mêlé, confondu, superposé; chacun y participait de tout.

Le rayonnement chancelant et pauvre des feux permettait à Gringoire de distinguer, à travers son trouble, tout à l'entour de l'immense place, un hideux encadrement de vieilles maisons dont les façades vermoulues, ratatinées, rabougries, percées chacune d'une ou deux lucarnes éclairées, lui semblaient dans l'ombre d'énormes têtes de vieilles femmes, rangées en cercle, monstrueuses et rechignées, qui regardaient le sabbat en clignant des yeux.

C'était comme un nouveau monde, inconnu, inouï, difforme, reptile, fourmillant, fantastique.

Gringoire, de plus en plus effaré, pris par les trois mendiants comme par trois tenailles, assourdi d'une foule d'autres visages qui moutonnaient et aboyaient autour de lui, le malencontreux Gringoire tâchait de rallier sa présence d'esprit pour se rappeler si l'on était à un samedi. Mais ses efforts étaient vains; le fil de sa mémoire et de sa pensée était rompu; et doutant de tout, flottant de ce qu'il voyait à ce qu'il sentait, il se posait cette insoluble question: «Si je suis, cela est-il? si cela est, suis-je?»

En ce moment, un cri distinct s'éleva dans la cohue bourdonnante qui l'enveloppait: «Menons-le au roi! menons-le au roi!

— Sainte Vierge! murmura Gringoire, le roi d'ici, ce doit être un bouc.

— Au roi! au roi!» répétèrent toutes les voix.

On l'entraîna. Ce fut à qui mettrait la griffe sur lui. Mais les trois mendiants ne lâchaient pas prise, et l'arrachaient aux autres en hurlant: «Il est à nous!»

Le pourpoint déjà malade du poète rendit le dernier soupir dans cette lutte.

En traversant l'horrible place, son vertige se dissipa. Au bout de quelques pas, le sentiment de la réalité lui était revenu. Il commençait à se faire à l’atmosphère du lieu. Dans le premier moment, de sa tête de poète, ou peut-être, tout simplement et tout prosaïquement, de son estomac vide, il s’était élevé une fumée, une vapeur pour ainsi dire, qui, se répandant entre les objets et lui, ne les lui avait laissé entrevoir que dans la brume incohérente du cauchemar, dans ces ténèbres des rêves qui font trembler tous les contours, grimacer toutes les formes, s’agglomérer les objets en groupes démesurés, dilatant les choses en chimères et les hommes en fantômes. Peu à peu à cette hallucination succéda un regard moins égaré et moins grossissant. Le réel se faisait jour autour de lui, lui heurtait les yeux, lui heurtait les pieds, et démolissait pièce à pièce toute l’effroyable poésie dont il s’était cru d’abord entouré. Il fallut bien s’apercevoir qu’il ne marchait pas dans le Styx, mais dans la boue, qu’il n’était pas coudoyé par des démons, mais par des voleurs; qu’il n’y allait pas de son âme, mais tout bonnement de sa vie (puisqu’il lui manquait ce précieux conciliateur qui se place si efficacement entre le bandit et l’honnête homme: la bourse). Enfin, en examinant l’orgie de plus près et avec plus de sang-froid, il tomba du sabbat au cabaret.

La Cour des Miracles n’était en effet qu’un cabaret, mais un cabaret de brigands, tout aussi rouge de sang que de vin.

Le spectacle qui s’offrit à ses yeux, quand son escorte en guenilles le déposa enfin au terme de sa course, n’était pas propre à le ramener à la poésie, fût-ce même à la poésie de l’enfer. C’était plus que jamais la prosaïque et brutale réalité de la taverne. Si nous n’étions pas au quinzième siècle, nous dirions que Gringoire était descendu de Michel-Ange à Callot.

Autour d’un grand feu qui brûlait sur une large dalle ronde, et qui pénétrait de ses flammes les tiges rougies d’un trépied vide pour le moment, quelques tables vermoulues étaient dressées, çà et là, au hasard, sans que le moindre laquais géomètre eût daigné ajuster leur parallélisme ou veiller à ce qu’au moins elles ne se coupassent pas à des angles trop inusités. Sur ces tables reluisaient quelques pots ruisselants de vin et de cervoise, et autour de ces pots se groupaient force visages bachiques, empourprés de feu et de vin. C’était un homme à gros ventre et à joviale figure qui embrassait bruyamment une fille de joie, épaisse et charnue. C’était une espèce de faux soldat, un narquois, comme on disait en argot, qui défaisait en sifflant les bandages de sa fausse blessure, et qui dégourdissait son genou sain et vigoureux, emmailloté depuis le matin dans mille ligatures. Au rebours, c’était un malingreux qui préparait avec de l’éclaire et du sang de bœuf sa *jambe de Dieu* du lendemain. Deux tables plus loin, un coquillart, avec son costume complet de pèlerin, épelait la complainte de Sainte-Reine, sans oublier la psalmodie et le nasillement. Ailleurs un jeune hubin prenait leçon d'épilepsie d'un vieux sabouleux qui lui enseignait l'art d'écumer en mâchant un morceau de savon. À côté, un hydropique se dégonflait, et faisait boucher le nez à quatre ou cinq larronnesses qui se disputaient à la même table un enfant volé dans la soirée. Toutes circonstances qui, deux siècles plus tard, *semblèrent si ridicules à la cour,* comme dit Sauval, *qu'elles servirent de passe-temps au roi et d'entrée au ballet royal de La Nuit, divisé en quatre parties et dansé sur le théâtre du Petit-Bourbon*. «Jamais, ajoute un témoin oculaire de 1653, les subites métamorphoses de la Cour des Miracles n'ont été plus heureusement représentées. Benserade nous y prépara par des vers assez galants.»

Le gros rire éclatait partout, et la chanson obscène. Chacun tirait à soi, glosant et jurant sans écouter le voisin. Les pots trinquaient, et les querelles naissaient au choc des pots, et les pots ébréchés faisaient déchirer les haillons.

Un gros chien, assis sur sa queue, regardait le feu. Quelques enfants étaient mêlés à cette orgie. L'enfant volé, qui pleurait et criait. Un autre, gros garçon de quatre ans, assis les jambes pendantes sur un banc trop élevé, ayant de la table jusqu'au menton, et ne disant mot. Un troisième étalant gravement avec son doigt sur la table le suif en fusion qui coulait d'une chandelle. Un dernier, petit, accroupi dans la boue, presque perdu dans un chaudron qu'il raclait avec une tuile et dont il tirait un son à faire évanouir Stradivarius.

Un tonneau était près du feu, et un mendiant sur le tonneau. C'était le roi sur son trône.

Les trois qui avaient Gringoire l'amenèrent devant ce tonneau, et toute la bacchanale fit un moment silence, excepté le chaudron habité par l'enfant.

Gringoire n'osait souffler ni lever les yeux.

«*Hombre, quita ta sombrero*», dit l'un des trois drôles à qui il était; et avant qu'il eût compris ce que cela voulait dire, l'autre lui avait pris son chapeau. Misérable bicoquet, il est vrai, mais bon encore un jour de soleil ou un jour de pluie. Gringoire soupira.

Cependant le roi, du haut de sa futaille, lui adressa la parole.

«Qu'est-ce que c'est que ce maraud?»

Gringoire tressaillit. Cette voix, quoique accentuée par la menace, lui rappela une autre voix qui le matin même avait porté le premier coup à son mystère en nasillant au milieu de l’auditoire: *La charité, s’il vous plaît!* Il leva la tête. C’était en effet Clopin Trouillefou.

Clopin Trouillefou, revêtu de ses insignes royaux, n’avait pas un haillon de plus ni de moins. Sa plaie au bras avait déjà disparu. Il portait à la main un de ces fouets à lanières de cuir blanc dont se servaient alors les sergents à verge pour serrer la foule, et que l’on appelait *boullayes*. Il avait sur la tête une espèce de coiffure cerclée et fermée par le haut; mais il était difficile de distinguer si c’était un bourrelet d’enfant ou une couronne de roi, tant les deux choses se ressemblent.

Cependant Gringoire, sans savoir pourquoi, avait repris quelque espoir en reconnaissant dans le roi de la Cour des Miracles son maudit mendiant de la grand-salle.

«Maître, balbutia-t-il... Monseigneur... Sire... Comment dois-je vous appeler? dit-il enfin, arrivé au point culminant de son crescendo, et ne sachant plus comment monter ni redescendre.

— Monseigneur, Sa Majesté, ou camarade, appelle-moi comme tu voudras. Mais dépêche. Qu’as-tu à dire pour ta défense?»

Pour ta défense! pensa Gringoire, ceci me déplaît. Il reprit en bégayant: «Je suis celui qui ce matin...

— Par les ongles du diable! interrompit Clopin, ton nom, maraud, et rien de plus. Écoute. Tu es devant trois puissants souverains: moi, Clopin Trouillefou, roi de Thunes, successeur du grand coësre, suzerain suprême du royaume de l’argot; Mathias Hungadi Spicali, duc d’Égypte et de Bohême, ce vieux jaune que tu vois là avec un torchon autour de la tête; Guillaume Rousseau, empereur de Galilée, ce gros qui ne nous écoute pas et qui caresse une ribaude. Nous sommes tes juges. Tu es entré dans le royaume d’argot sans être argotier, tu as violé les privilèges de notre ville. Tu dois être puni, à moins que tu ne sois capon, franc-mitou ou rifodé, c’est-à-dire, dans l’argot des honnêtes gens, voleur, mendiant ou vagabond. Es-tu quelque chose comme cela? Justifie-toi. Décline tes qualités.

— Hélas! dit Gringoire, je n’ai pas cet honneur. Je suis l’auteur...

— Cela suffit, reprit Trouillefou sans le laisser achever. Tu vas être pendu. Chose toute simple, messieurs les honnêtes bourgeois! comme vous traitez les nôtres chez vous, nous traitons les vôtres chez nous. La loi que vous faites aux truands, les truands vous la font. C’est votre faute si elle est méchante. Il faut bien qu'on voie de temps en temps une grimace d'honnête homme au-dessus du collier de chanvre; cela rend la chose honorable. Allons, l'ami, partage gaiement tes guenilles à ces demoiselles. Je vais te faire pendre pour amuser les truands, et tu leur donneras ta bourse pour boire. Si tu as quelque momerie à faire, il y a là-bas dans l'égrugeoir un très bon Dieu-le-Père en pierre que nous avons volé à Saint-Pierre-aux-Bœufs. Tu as quatre minutes pour lui jeter ton âme à la tête.»

La harangue était formidable.

«Bien dit, sur mon âme! Clopin Trouillefou prêche comme un saint-père le pape, s'écria l'empereur de Galilée en cassant son pot pour étayer sa table.

— Messeigneurs les empereurs et rois, dit Gringoire avec sang-froid (car je ne sais comment la fermeté lui était revenue, et il parlait résolument), vous n'y pensez pas. Je m'appelle Pierre Gringoire, je suis le poète dont on a représenté ce matin une moralité dans la grand-salle du Palais.

— Ah! c'est toi, maître! dit Clopin. J'y étais, par la tête-Dieu! Eh bien! camarade, est-ce une raison, parce que tu nous as ennuyés ce matin, pour ne pas être pendu ce soir?»

J'aurai de la peine à m'en tirer, pensa Gringoire. Il tenta pourtant encore un effort. «Je ne vois pas pourquoi, dit-il, les poètes ne sont pas rangés parmi les truands. Vagabond, Aesopus le fut; mendiant, Homerus le fut; voleur, Mercurius l'était...»

Clopin l'interrompit: «Je crois que tu veux nous matagraboliser avec ton grimoire. Pardieu, laisse-toi pendre, et pas tant de façons!

— Pardon, monseigneur le roi de Thunes, répliqua Gringoire, disputant le terrain pied à pied. Cela en vaut la peine... Un moment!... Écoutez-moi... vous ne me condamnerez pas sans m'entendre...»

Sa malheureuse voix, en effet, était couverte par le vacarme qui se faisait autour de lui. Le petit garçon raclait son chaudron avec plus de verve que jamais; et pour comble, une vieille femme venait de poser sur le trépied ardent une poêle pleine de graisse, qui glapissait au feu avec un bruit pareil aux cris d'une troupe d'enfants qui poursuit un masque.

Cependant Clopin Trouillefou parut conférer un moment avec le duc d'Égypte et l'empereur de Galilée, lequel était complètement ivre. Puis il cria aigrement: «Silence donc!» et, comme le chaudron et la poêle à frire ne l'écoutaient pas et continuaient leur duo, il sauta à bas de son tonneau, donna un coup de pied dans le chaudron, qui roula à dix pas avec l'enfant, un coup de pied dans la poêle, dont toute la graisse se renversa dans le feu, et il remonta gravement sur son trône, sans se soucier des pleurs étouffés de l’enfant, ni des grognements de la vieille, dont le souper s’en allait en belle flamme blanche.

Trouillefou fit un signe, et le duc, et l’empereur, et les archisuppôts et les cagoux vinrent se ranger autour de lui en un fer-à-cheval, dont Gringoire, toujours rudement appréhendé au corps, occupait le centre. C’était un demi-cercle de haillons, de guenilles, de clinquant, de fourches, de haches, de jambes avinées, de gros bras nus, de figures sordides, éteintes et hébétées. Au milieu de cette table ronde de la gueuserie, Clopin Trouillefou, comme le doge de ce sénat, comme le roi de cette pairie, comme le pape de ce conclave, dominait, d’abord de toute la hauteur de son tonneau, puis de je ne sais quel air hautain, farouche et formidable qui faisait pétiller sa prunelle et corrigeait dans son sauvage profil le type bestial de la race truande. On eût dit une hure parmi des groins.

«Écoute, dit-il à Gringoire en caressant son menton difforme avec sa main calleuse, je ne vois pas pourquoi tu ne serais pas pendu. Il est vrai que cela a l’air de te répugner; et c’est tout simple, vous autres bourgeois, vous n’y êtes pas habitués, vous vous faites de la chose une grosse idée. Après tout, nous ne te voulons pas de mal, voici un moyen de te tirer d’affaire pour le moment, veux-tu être des nôtres?»

On peut juger de l’effet que fit cette proposition sur Gringoire, qui voyait la vie lui échapper, et commençait à lâcher prise. Il s’y rattacha énergiquement.

«Je le veux, certes, bellement, dit-il.

— Tu consens, reprit Clopin, à t’enrôler parmi les gens de la petite flambe?

— De la petite flambe. Précisément, répondit Gringoire.

— Tu te reconnais membre de la franche bourgeoisie? reprit le roi de Thunes.

— De la franche bourgeoisie.

— Sujet du royaume d’argot?

— Du royaume d’argot.

— Truand?

— Truand.

— Dans l’âme?

— Dans l’âme.

— Je te fais remarquer, reprit le roi, que tu n’en seras pas moins pendu pour cela.

— Diable! dit le poète.

— Seulement, continua Clopin, imperturbable, tu seras pendu plus tard, avec plus de cérémonie, aux frais de la bonne ville de Paris, à un beau gibet de pierre, et par les honnêtes gens. C’est une consolation.

— Comme vous dites, répondit Gringoire.

— Il y a d’autres avantages. En qualité de franc-bourgeois, tu n’auras à payer ni boues, ni pauvres, ni lanternes, à quoi sont sujets les bourgeois de Paris.

— Ainsi soit-il, dit le poète. Je consens. Je suis truand, argotier, franc-bourgeois, petite flambe, tout ce que vous voudrez. Et j’étais tout cela d’avance, monsieur le roi de Thunes, car je suis philosophe; *et omnia in philosophia, omnes in philosopho continentur*, comme vous savez.»

Le roi de Thunes fronça le sourcil.

«Pour qui me prends-tu, l’ami? Quel argot de juif de Hongrie nous chantes-tu là? Je ne sais pas l’hébreu. Pour être bandit on n’est pas juif. Je ne vole même plus, je suis au-dessus de cela, je tue. Coupe-gorge, oui; coupe-bourse, non.»

Gringoire tâcha de glisser quelque excuse à travers ces brèves paroles que la colère saccadait de plus en plus. «Je vous demande pardon, monseigneur. Ce n’est pas de l’hébreu, c’est du latin.

— Je te dis, reprit Clopin avec emportement, que je ne suis pas juif, et que je te ferai pendre, ventre de synagogue! ainsi que ce petit marcandier de Judée qui est auprès de toi et que j’espère bien voir clouer un jour sur un comptoir, comme une pièce de fausse monnaie qu’il est!»

En parlant ainsi, il désignait du doigt le petit juif hongrois barbu, qui avait accosté Gringoire de son *facitote caritatem*, et qui, ne comprenant pas d’autre langue, regardait avec surprise la mauvaise humeur du roi de Thunes déborder sur lui.

Enfin monseigneur Clopin se calma.

«Maraud! dit-il à notre poète, tu veux donc être truand?

— Sans doute, répondit le poète.

— Ce n’est pas le tout de vouloir, dit le bourru Clopin. La bonne volonté ne met pas un oignon de plus dans la soupe, et n’est bonne que pour aller en paradis; or, paradis et argot sont deux. Pour être reçu dans l’argot, il faut que tu prouves que tu es bon à quelque chose, et pour cela que tu fouilles le mannequin.

— Je fouillerai, dit Gringoire, tout ce qu'il vous plaira.»

Clopin fit un signe. Quelques argotiers se détachèrent du cercle et revinrent un moment après. Ils apportaient deux poteaux terminés à leur extrémité inférieure par deux spatules en charpente, qui leur faisaient prendre aisément pied sur le sol. À l'extrémité supérieure des deux poteaux ils adaptèrent une solive transversale, et le tout constitua une fort jolie potence portative, que Gringoire eut la satisfaction de voir se dresser devant lui en un clin d'œil. Rien n'y manquait, pas même la corde qui se balançait gracieusement au-dessous de la traverse.

«Où veulent-ils en venir?» se demanda Gringoire avec quelque inquiétude. Un bruit de sonnettes qu'il entendit au même moment mit fin à son anxiété. C'était un mannequin que les truands suspendaient par le cou à la corde, espèce d'épouvantail aux oiseaux, vêtu de rouge, et tellement chargé de grelots et de clochettes qu'on eût pu en harnacher trente mules castillanes. Ces mille sonnettes frissonnèrent quelque temps aux oscillations de la corde, puis s'éteignirent peu à peu, et se turent enfin, quand le mannequin eut été ramené à l'immobilité par cette loi du pendule qui a détrôné la clepsydre et le sablier.

Alors Clopin, indiquant à Gringoire un vieil escabeau chancelant placé au-dessous du mannequin: «Monte là-dessus.

— Mort-diable! objecta Gringoire, je vais me rompre le cou. Votre escabelle boite comme un distique de Martial; elle a un pied hexamètre et un pied pentamètre.

— Monte», reprit Clopin.

Gringoire monta sur l'escabeau, et parvint, non sans quelques oscillations de la tête et des bras, à y retrouver son centre de gravité.

«Maintenant, poursuivit le roi de Thunes, tourne ton pied droit autour de ta jambe gauche et dresse-toi sur la pointe du pied gauche.

— Monseigneur, dit Gringoire, vous tenez donc absolument à ce que je me casse quelque membre?»

Clopin hocha la tête.

«Écoute, l'ami, tu parles trop, voilà en deux mots de quoi il s'agit. Tu vas te dresser sur la pointe du pied, comme je te le dis; de cette façon tu pourras atteindre jusqu'à la poche du mannequin; tu y fouilleras; tu en tireras une bourse qui s'y trouve; et si tu fais tout cela sans qu'on entende le bruit d'une sonnette, c'est bien; tu seras truand. Nous n'aurons plus qu'à te rouer de coups pendant huit jours.

— Ventre-Dieu! je n'aurais garde, dit Gringoire. Et si je fais chanter les sonnettes?

— Alors tu seras pendu. Comprends-tu?

— Je ne comprends pas du tout, répondit Gringoire.

— Écoute encore une fois. Tu vas fouiller le mannequin et lui prendre sa bourse; si une seule sonnette bouge dans l'opération, tu seras pendu. Comprends-tu cela?

— Bien, dit Gringoire; je comprends cela. Après?

— Si tu parviens à enlever la bourse sans qu'on entende les grelots, tu es truand, et tu seras roué de coups pendant huit jours consécutifs. Tu comprends sans doute, maintenant?

— Non, monseigneur, je ne comprends plus. Où est mon avantage? pendu dans un cas, battu dans l'autre...

— Et truand? reprit Clopin, et truand? n'est-ce rien? C'est dans ton intérêt que nous te battrons, afin de t'endurcir aux coups.

— Grand merci, répondit le poète.

— Allons, dépêchons, dit le roi en frappant du pied sur son tonneau qui résonna comme une grosse caisse. Fouille le mannequin, et que cela finisse. Je t'avertis une dernière fois que si j'entends un seul grelot, tu prendras la place du mannequin.»

La bande des argotiers applaudit aux paroles de Clopin, et se rangea circulairement autour de la potence, avec un rire tellement impitoyable que Gringoire vit qu'il les amusait trop pour n'avoir pas tout à craindre d'eux. Il ne lui restait donc plus d'espoir, si ce n'est la frêle chance de réussir dans la redoutable opération qui lui était imposée. Il se décida à la risquer, mais ce ne fut pas sans avoir adressé d'abord une fervente prière au mannequin qu'il allait dévaliser et qui eût été plus facile à attendrir que les truands. Cette myriade de sonnettes avec leurs petites langues de cuivre lui semblaient autant de gueules d'aspics ouvertes, prêtes à mordre et à siffler.

«Oh! disait-il tout bas, est-il possible que ma vie dépende de la moindre des vibrations du moindre de ces grelots! Oh! ajoutait-il les mains jointes, sonnettes, ne sonnez pas! clochettes, ne clochez pas! grelots, ne grelottez pas!»

Il tenta encore un effort sur Trouillefou.

«Et s'il survient un coup de vent? lui demanda-t-il.

— Tu seras pendu», répondit l’autre sans hésiter.

Voyant qu’il n’y avait ni répit, ni sursis, ni faux-fuyant possible, il prit bravement son parti. Il tourna son pied droit autour de son pied gauche, se dressa sur son pied gauche, et étendit le bras; mais, au moment où il touchait le mannequin, son corps qui n’avait plus qu’un pied chancela sur l’escabeau qui n’en avait que trois; il voulut machinalement s’appuyer au mannequin, perdit l’équilibre, et tomba lourdement sur la terre, tout assourdi par la fatale vibration des mille sonnettes du mannequin, qui, cédant à l’impulsion de sa main, décrivit d’abord une rotation sur lui-même, puis se balança majestueusement entre les deux poteaux.

«Malédiction!» cria-t-il en tombant, et il resta comme mort la face contre terre.

Cependant il entendait le redoutable carillon au-dessus de sa tête, et le rire diabolique des truands, et la voix de Trouillefou, qui disait: «Relevez-moi le drôle, et pendez-le-moi rudement.»

Il se leva. On avait déjà décroché le mannequin pour lui faire place.

Les argotiers le firent monter sur l’escabeau. Clopin vint à lui, lui passa la corde au cou, et lui frappant sur l’épaule: «Adieu, l’ami! Tu ne peux plus échapper maintenant, quand même tu digérerais avec les boyaux du pape.»

Le mot *grâce* expira sur les lèvres de Gringoire. Il promena ses regards autour de lui. Mais aucun espoir: tous riaient.

«Bellevigne de l’Étoile, dit le roi de Thunes à un énorme truand qui sortit des rangs, grimpe sur la traverse.»

Bellevigne de l’Étoile monta lestement sur la solive transversale, et au bout d’un instant Gringoire, en levant les yeux, le vit avec terreur accroupi sur la traverse au-dessus de sa tête.

«Maintenant, reprit Clopin Trouillefou, dès que je frapperai des mains, Andry le Rouge, tu jetteras l’escabelle à terre d’un coup de genou; François Chante-Prune, tu te pendras aux pieds du maraud; et toi, Bellevigne, tu te jetteras sur ses épaules; et tous trois à la fois, entendez-vous?»

Gringoire frissonna.

«Y êtes-vous?» dit Clopin Trouillefou aux trois argotiers prêts à se précipiter sur Gringoire comme trois araignées sur une mouche. Le pauvre patient eut un moment d’attente horrible, pendant que Clopin repoussait tranquillement du bout du pied dans le feu quelques brins de sarment que la flamme n’avait pas gagnés. «Y êtes-vous?» répéta-t-il, et il ouvrit ses mains pour frapper. Une seconde de plus, c’en était fait.

Mais il s’arrêta, comme averti par une idée subite. «Un instant! dit-il; j’oubliais!... Il est d’usage que nous ne pendions pas un homme sans demander s’il y a une femme qui en veut. Camarade, c’est ta dernière ressource. Il faut que tu épouses une truande ou la corde.»

Cette loi bohémienne, si bizarre qu’elle puisse sembler au lecteur, est aujourd’hui encore écrite tout au long dans la vieille législation anglaise. Voyez *Burington’s Observations*.

Gringoire respira. C’était la seconde fois qu’il revenait à la vie depuis une demi-heure. Aussi n’osait-il trop s’y fier.

«Holà! cria Clopin remonté sur sa futaille, holà! femmes, femelles, y a-t-il parmi vous, depuis la sorcière jusqu’à sa chatte, une ribaude qui veuille de ce ribaud? Holà, Colette la Charonne! Élisabeth Trouvain! Simone Jodouyne! Marie Piédebou! Thonne la Longue! Bérarde Fanouel! Michelle Genaille! Claude Ronge-Oreille! Mathurine Girorou! Holà! Isabeau la Thierrye! Venez et voyez! un homme pour rien! qui en veut?»

Gringoire, dans ce misérable état, était sans doute peu appétissant. Les truandes se montrèrent médiocrement touchées de la proposition. Le malheureux les entendit répondre: «Non! non! pendez-le, il y aura du plaisir pour toutes.»

Trois cependant sortirent de la foule et vinrent le flairer. La première était une grosse fille à face carrée. Elle examina attentivement le pourpoint déplorable du philosophe. La souquenille était usée et plus trouée qu’une poêle à griller des châtaignes. La fille fit la grimace. «Vieux drapeau!» grommela-t-elle, et s’adressant à Gringoire: «Voyons ta cape? — Je l’ai perdue, dit Gringoire. — Ton chapeau? On me l’a pris. — Tes souliers? — Ils commencent à n’avoir plus de semelles. — Ta bourse? — Hélas! bégaya Gringoire, je n’ai pas un denier parisis. — Laisse-toi pendre, et dis merci!» répliqua la truande en lui tournant le dos.

La seconde, vieille, noire, ridée, hideuse, d’une laideur à faire tache dans la Cour des Miracles, tourna autour de Gringoire. Il tremblait presque qu’elle ne voulût de lui. Mais elle dit entre ses dents: «Il est trop maigre!» et s’éloigna.

La troisième était une jeune fille, assez fraîche, et pas trop laide. «Sauvez-moi!» lui dit à voix basse le pauvre diable. Elle le considéra un moment d’un air de pitié, puis baissa les yeux, fit un pli à sa jupe, et resta indécise. Il suivait des yeux tous ses mouvements; c’était la dernière lueur d’espoir. «Non, dit enfin la jeune fille, non! Guillaume Longuejoue me battrait.» Elle rentra dans la foule.

«Camarade, dit Clopin, tu as du malheur.»

Puis, se levant debout sur son tonneau: «Personne n’en veut? cria-t-il en contrefaisant l’accent d’un huissier priseur, à la grande gaieté de tous; personne n’en veut? une fois, deux fois, trois fois!» Et se tournant vers la potence avec un signe de tête: «Adjugé!»

Bellevigne de l’Étoile, Andry le Rouge, François Chante-Prune se rapprochèrent de Gringoire.

En ce moment un cri s’éleva parmi les argotiers: «*La Esmeralda! la Esmeralda!*»

Gringoire tressaillit, et se tourna du côté d’où venait la clameur. La foule s’ouvrit, et donna passage à une pure et éblouissante figure.

C’était la bohémienne.

«La Esmeralda!» dit Gringoire, stupéfait, au milieu de ses émotions, de la brusque manière dont ce mot magique nouait tous les souvenirs de sa journée.

Cette rare créature paraissait exercer jusque dans la Cour des Miracles son empire de charme et de beauté. Argotiers et argotières se rangeaient doucement à son passage, et leurs brutales figures s’épanouissaient à son regard.

Elle s’approcha du patient avec son pas léger. Sa jolie Djali la suivait. Gringoire était plus mort que vif. Elle le considéra un moment en silence.

«Vous allez pendre cet homme? dit-elle gravement à Clopin.

— Oui, sœur, répondit le roi de Thunes, à moins que tu ne le prennes pour mari.»

Elle fit sa jolie petite moue de la lèvre inférieure.

«Je le prends», dit-elle.

Gringoire ici crut fermement qu’il n’avait fait qu’un rêve depuis le matin, et que ceci en était la suite.

La péripétie en effet, quoique gracieuse, était violente.

On détacha le nœud coulant, on fit descendre le poète de l’escabeau. Il fut obligé de s’asseoir, tant la commotion était vive.

Le duc d’Égypte, sans prononcer une parole, apporta une cruche d’argile. La bohémienne la présenta à Gringoire. «Jetez-la à terre», lui dit-elle.

La cruche se brisa en quatre morceaux.

«Frère, dit alors le duc d’Égypte en leur imposant les mains sur le front, elle est ta femme; sœur, il est ton mari. Pour quatre ans. Allez.»

VII

UNE NUIT DE NOCES

Au bout de quelques instants, notre poète se trouva dans une petite chambre voûtée en ogive, bien close, bien chaude, assis devant une table qui ne paraissait pas demander mieux que de faire quelques emprunts à un garde-manger suspendu tout auprès, ayant un bon lit en perspective, et tête à tête avec une jolie fille. L'aventure tenait de l'enchantement. Il commençait à se prendre sérieusement pour un personnage de conte de fées; de temps en temps il jetait les yeux autour de lui comme pour chercher si le char de feu attelé de deux chimères ailées, qui avait seul pu le transporter si rapidement du tartare au paradis, était encore là. Par moments aussi il attachait obstinément son regard aux trous de son pourpoint, afin de se cramponner à la réalité et de ne pas perdre terre tout à fait. Sa raison, ballottée dans les espaces imaginaires, ne tenait plus qu'à ce fil.

La jeune fille ne paraissait faire aucune attention à lui; elle allait, venait, dérangeait quelque escabelle, causait avec sa chèvre, faisait sa moue çà et là. Enfin elle vint s'asseoir près de la table, et Gringoire put la considérer à l'aise.

Vous avez été enfant, lecteur, et vous êtes peut-être assez heureux pour l'être encore. Il n'est pas que vous n'ayez plus d'une fois (et pour mon compte j'y ai passé des journées entières, les mieux employées de ma vie) suivi de broussaille en broussaille, au bord d'une eau vive, par un jour de soleil, quelque belle demoiselle verte ou bleue, brisant son vol à angles brusques et baisant le bout de toutes les branches. Vous vous rappelez avec quelle curiosité amoureuse votre pensée et votre regard s'attachaient à ce petit tourbillon sifflant et bourdonnant, d'ailes de pourpre et d'azur, au milieu duquel flottait une forme insaisissable voilée par la rapidité même de son mouvement. L'être aérien qui se dessinait confusément à travers ce frémissement d'ailes vous paraissait chimérique, imaginaire, impossible à toucher, impossible à voir. Mais lorsque enfin la demoiselle se reposait à la pointe d'un roseau et que vous pouviez examiner, en retenant votre souffle, les longues ailes de gaze, la longue robe d'émail, les deux globes de cristal, quel étonnement n'éprouviez-vous pas et quelle peur de voir de nouveau la forme s'en aller en ombre et l'être en chimère! Rappelez-vous ces impressions, et vous vous rendrez aisément compte de ce que ressentait Gringoire en contemplant sous sa forme visible et palpable cette Esmeralda qu’il n’avait entrevue jusque-là qu’à travers un tourbillon de danse, de chant et de tumulte.

Enfoncé de plus en plus dans sa rêverie, «Voilà donc, se disait-il en la suivant vaguement des yeux, ce que c’est que *la Esmeralda*! une céleste créature! une danseuse des rues! tant et si peu! C’est elle qui a donné le coup de grâce à mon mystère ce matin, c’est elle qui me sauve la vie ce soir. Mon mauvais génie! mon bon ange! — Une jolie femme, sur ma parole! — et qui doit m’aimer à la folie pour m’avoir pris de la sorte. — À propos, dit-il en se levant tout à coup avec ce sentiment du vrai qui faisait le fond de son caractère et de sa philosophie, je ne sais trop comment cela se fait, mais je suis son mari!»

Cette idée en tête et dans les yeux, il s’approcha de la jeune fille d’une façon si militaire et si galante qu’elle recula.

«Que me voulez-vous donc? dit-elle.

— Pouvez-vous me le demander, adorable Esmeralda?» répondit Gringoire avec un accent si passionné qu’il en était étonné lui-même en s’entendant parler.

L’égyptienne ouvrit ses grands yeux. «Je ne sais pas ce que vous voulez dire.

— Eh quoi! reprit Gringoire, s’échauffant de plus en plus, et songeant qu’il n’avait affaire après tout qu’à une vertu de la Cour des Miracles, ne suis-je pas à toi, douce amie? n’es-tu pas à moi?»

Et, tout ingénument, il lui prit la taille.

Le corsage de la bohémienne glissa dans ses mains comme la robe d’une anguille. Elle sauta d’un bond à l’autre bout de la cellule, se baissa, et se redressa, avec un petit poignard à la main, avant que Gringoire eût eu seulement le temps de voir d’où ce poignard sortait; irritée et fière, les lèvres gonflées, les narines ouvertes, les joues rouges comme une pomme d’api, les prunelles rayonnantes d’éclairs. En même temps, la chevrette blanche se plaça devant elle, et présenta à Gringoire un front de bataille, hérissé de deux cornes jolies, dorées et fort pointues. Tout cela se fit en un clin d’œil.

La demoiselle se faisait guêpe et ne demandait pas mieux que de piquer.

Notre philosophe resta interdit, promenant tour à tour de la chèvre à la jeune fille des regards hébétés.

«Sainte Vierge! dit-il enfin quand la surprise lui permit de parler, voilà deux luronnes!»

La bohémienne rompit le silence de son côté.

«Il faut que tu sois un drôle bien hardi!

— Pardon, mademoiselle, dit Gringoire en souriant. Mais pourquoi donc m'avez-vous pris pour mari?

— Fallait-il te laisser pendre?

— Ainsi, reprit le poète un peu désappointé dans ses espérances amoureuses, vous n'avez eu d'autre pensée en m'épousant que de me sauver du gibet?

— Et quelle autre pensée veux-tu que j'aie eue?»

Gringoire se mordit les lèvres. «Allons, dit-il, je suis pas encore si triomphant en Cupido que je croyais. Mais alors, à quoi bon avoir cassé cette pauvre cruche?»

Cependant le poignard de la Esmeralda et les cornes de la chèvre étaient toujours sur la défensive.

«Mademoiselle Esmeralda, dit le poète, capitulons. Je ne suis pas clerc-greffier au Châtelet, et ne vous chicanerai pas de porter ainsi une dague dans Paris à la barbe des ordonnances et prohibitions de M. le prévôt. Vous n'ignorez pas pourtant que Noël Lescripvain a été condamné il y a huit jours en dix sols parisis pour avoir porté un braquemard. Or ce n'est pas mon affaire, et je viens au fait. Je vous jure sur ma part de paradis de ne pas vous approcher sans votre congé et permission; mais donnez-moi à souper.»

Au fond, Gringoire, comme M. Despréaux, était «très peu voluptueux». Il n'était pas de cette espèce chevalière et mousquetaire qui prend les jeunes filles d'assaut. En matière d'amour, comme en toute autre affaire, il était volontiers pour les temporisations et les moyens termes; et un bon souper, en tête à tête aimable, lui paraissait, surtout quand il avait faim, un entr'acte excellent entre le prologue et le dénoûment d'une aventure d'amour.

L'égyptienne ne répondit pas. Elle fit sa petite moue dédaigneuse, dressa la tête comme un oiseau, puis éclata de rire, et le poignard mignon disparut comme il était venu, sans que Gringoire pût voir où l'abeille cachait son aiguillon.

Un moment après, il y avait sur la table un pain de seigle, une tranche de lard, quelques pommes ridées et un broc de cervoise. Gringoire se mit à manger avec emportement. À entendre le cliquetis furieux de sa fourchette de fer et de son assiette de faïence, on eût dit que tout son amour s'était tourné en appétit.

La jeune fille assise devant lui le regardait faire en silence, visiblement préoccupée d'une autre pensée à laquelle elle souriait de temps en temps, tandis que sa douce main caressait la tête intelligente de la chèvre mollement pressée entre ses genoux.

Une chandelle de cire jaune éclairait cette scène de voracité et de rêverie.

Cependant, les premiers bêlements de son estomac apaisés, Gringoire sentit quelque fausse honte de voir qu'il ne restait plus qu'une pomme. «Vous ne mangez pas, mademoiselle Esmeralda?»

Elle répondit par un signe de tête négatif, et son regard pensif alla se fixer à la voûte de la cellule.

«De quoi diable est-elle occupée?» pensa Gringoire, et regardant ce qu'elle regardait: «Il est impossible que ce soit la grimace de ce nain de pierre sculpté dans la clef de voûte qui absorbe ainsi son attention. Que diable! je puis soutenir la comparaison!»

Il haussa la voix: «Mademoiselle!»

Elle ne paraissait pas l'entendre.

Il reprit plus haut encore: «Mademoiselle Esmeralda!»

Peine perdue. L'esprit de la jeune fille était ailleurs, et la voix de Gringoire n'avait pas la puissance de le rappeler. Heureusement la chèvre s'en mêla. Elle se mit à tirer doucement sa maîtresse par la manche: «Que veux-tu, Djali? dit vivement l'égyptienne, comme réveillée en sursaut.

— Elle a faim,» dit Gringoire, charmé d'entamer la conversation.

La Esmeralda se mit à émietter du pain, que Djali mangeait gracieusement dans le creux de sa main.

Du reste, Gringoire ne lui laissa pas le temps de reprendre sa rêverie. Il hasarda une question délicate.

«Vous ne voulez donc pas de moi pour votre mari?»

La jeune fille le regarda fixement, et dit: «Non.

— Pour votre amant?» reprit Gringoire.

Elle fit sa moue, et répondit: «Non.

— Pour votre ami?» poursuivit Gringoire.

Elle le regarda encore fixement, et dit après un moment de réflexion: «Peut-être.»

Ce *peut-être*, si cher aux philosophes, enhardit Gringoire.

«Savez-vous ce que c'est que l'amitié? demanda-t-il.

— Oui, répondit l’égyptienne. C’est être frère et sœur, deux âmes qui se touchent sans se confondre, les deux doigts de la main.

— Et l’amour? poursuivit Gringoire.

— Oh! l’amour! dit-elle, et sa voix tremblait, et son œil rayonnait. C’est être deux et n’être qu’un. Un homme et une femme qui se fondent en un ange. C’est le ciel.»

La danseuse des rues était, en parlant ainsi, d’une beauté qui frappait singulièrement Gringoire, et lui semblait en rapport parfait avec l’exaltation presque orientale de ses paroles. Ses lèvres roses et pures souriaient à demi; son front candide et serein devenait trouble par moments sous sa pensée, comme un miroir sous une haleine; et de ses longs cils noirs baissés s’échappait une sorte de lumière ineffable qui donnait à son profil cette suavité idéale que Raphaël retrouva depuis au point d’intersection mystique de la virginité, de la maternité et de la divinité.

Gringoire n’en poursuivit pas moins.

«Comment faut-il donc être pour vous plaire?

— Il faut être homme.

— Et moi, dit-il, qu’est-ce que je suis donc?

— Un homme a le casque en tête, l’épée au poing et des éperons d’or aux talons.

— Bon, dit Gringoire, sans le cheval point d’homme. — Aimez-vous quelqu’un?

— D’amour?

— D’amour.»

Elle resta un moment pensive, puis elle dit avec une expression particulière: «Je saurai cela bientôt.

— Pourquoi pas ce soir? reprit alors tendrement le poète. Pourquoi pas moi?»

Elle lui jeta un coup d’œil grave.

«Je ne pourrai aimer qu’un homme qui pourra me protéger.»

Gringoire rougit et se le tint pour dit. Il était évident que la jeune fille faisait allusion au peu d’appui qu’il lui avait prêté dans la circonstance critique où elle s’était trouvée deux heures auparavant. Ce souvenir, effacé par ses autres aventures de la soirée, lui revint. Il se frappa le front.

«À propos, mademoiselle, j’aurais dû commencer par là. Pardonnez-moi mes folles distractions. Comment donc avez-vous fait pour échapper aux griffes de Quasimodo?»

Cette question fit tressaillir la bohémienne.

«Oh! l’horrible bossu! dit-elle en se cachant le visage dans ses mains; et elle frissonnait comme dans un grand froid.

— Horrible en effet! dit Gringoire qui ne lâchait pas son idée; mais comment avez-vous pu lui échapper?»

La Esmeralda sourit, soupira, et garda le silence.

«Savez-vous pourquoi il vous avait suivie? reprit Gringoire, tâchant de revenir à sa question par un détour.

— Je ne sais pas», dit la jeune fille. Et elle ajouta vivement: «Mais vous qui me suiviez aussi, pourquoi me suiviez-vous?

— En bonne foi, répondit Gringoire, je ne sais pas non plus.»

Il y eut un silence. Gringoire tailladait la table avec son couteau. La jeune fille souriait et semblait regarder quelque chose à travers le mur. Tout à coup elle se prit à chanter d’une voix à peine articulée:

Quando las pintadas aves
Mudas están, y la tierra...

Elle s’interrompit brusquement, et se mit à caresser Djali.

«Vous avez là une jolie bête, dit Gringoire.

— C’est ma sœur, répondit-elle.

— Pourquoi vous appelle-t-on *la Esmeralda*? demanda le poète.

— Je n’en sais rien.

— Mais encore?»

Elle tira de son sein une espèce de petit sachet oblong suspendu à son cou par une chaîne de grains d’adrézarach. Ce sachet exhalait une forte odeur de camphre. Il était recouvert de soie verte, et portait à son centre une grosse verroterie verte, imitant l’émeraude.

«C’est peut-être à cause de cela», dit-elle.

Gringoire voulut prendre le sachet. Elle recula. «N’y touchez pas. C’est une amulette; tu ferais mal au charme, ou le charme à toi.»

La curiosité du poète était de plus en plus éveillée.

«Qui vous l’a donnée?»

Elle mit un doigt sur sa bouche et cacha l’amulette dans son sein. Il essaya d’autres questions, mais elle répondait à peine.

«Que veut dire ce mot: *la Esmeralda*?

— Je ne sais pas, dit-elle.

— À quelle langue appartient-il?

— C’est de l’égyptien, je crois.

— Je m’en étais douté, dit Gringoire, vous n’êtes pas de France?

— Je n’en sais rien.

— Avez-vous vos parents?»

Elle se mit à chanter sur un vieil air:

Mon père est oiseau,
Ma mère est oiselle,
Je passe l’eau sans nacelle,
Je passe l’eau sans bateau,
Ma mère est oiselle.
Mon père est oiseau.

«C’est bon, dit Gringoire. À quel âge êtes-vous venue en France?

— Toute petite.

— À Paris?

— L’an dernier. Au moment où nous entrions par la porte Papale, j’ai vu filer en l’air la fauvette de roseaux; c’était à la fin d’août; j’ai dit: L’hiver sera rude.

— Il l’a été, dit Gringoire, ravi de ce commencement de conversation; je l’ai passé à souffler dans mes doigts. Vous avez donc le don de prophétie?»

Elle retomba dans son laconisme.

«Non.

— Cet homme que vous nommez le duc d’Égypte, c’est le chef de votre tribu?

— Oui.

— C’est pourtant lui qui nous a mariés», observa timidement le poète.

Elle fit sa jolie grimace habituelle. «Je ne sais seulement pas ton nom.

— Mon nom? si vous le voulez, le voici: Pierre Gringoire.

— J’en sais un plus beau, dit-elle.

— Mauvaise! reprit le poète. N’importe, vous ne m’irriterez pas. Tenez, vous m’aimerez peut-être en me connaissant mieux; et puis vous m’avez conté votre histoire avec tant de confiance que je vous dois un peu la mienne. Vous saurez donc que je m’appelle Pierre Gringoire, et que je suis fils du fermier du tabellionage de Gonesse. Mon père a été pendu par les Bourguignons et ma mère éventrée par les Picards, lors du siège de Paris, il y a vingt ans. À six ans donc, j’étais orphelin, n’ayant pour semelle à mes pieds que le pavé de Paris. Je ne sais comment j’ai franchi l’intervalle de six ans à seize. Une fruitière me donnait une prune par-ci, un talmellier me jetait une croûte par-là; le soir je me faisais ramasser par les onze-vingts qui me mettaient en prison, et je trouvais là une botte de paille. Tout cela ne m'a pas empêché de grandir et de maigrir, comme vous voyez. L'hiver, je me chauffais au soleil, sous le porche de l'hôtel de Sens, et je trouvais fort ridicule que le feu de la Saint-Jean fût réservé pour la canicule. À seize ans, j'ai voulu prendre un état. Successivement j'ai tâté de tout. Je me suis fait soldat; mais je n'étais pas assez brave. Je me suis fait moine; mais je n'étais pas assez dévot. Et puis, je bois mal. De désespoir, j'entrai apprenti parmi les charpentiers de la grande cognée; mais je n'étais pas assez fort. J'avais plus de penchant pour être maître d'école; il est vrai que je ne savais pas lire; mais ce n'est pas une raison. Je m'aperçus au bout d'un certain temps qu'il me manquait quelque chose pour tout; et voyant que je n'étais bon à rien, je me fis de mon plein gré poète et compositeur de rythmes. C'est un état qu'on peut toujours prendre quand on est vagabond, et cela vaut mieux que de voler, comme me le conseillaient quelques jeunes fils brigandiniers de mes amis. Je rencontrai par bonheur un beau jour dom Claude Frollo, le révérend archidiacre de Notre-Dame. Il prit intérêt à moi, et c'est à lui que je dois d'être aujourd'hui un véritable lettré, sachant le latin depuis les Offices de Cicero jusqu'au Mortuologe des pères célestins, et n'étant barbare ni en scolastique, ni en poétique, ni en rythmique, ni même en hermétique, cette sophie des sophies. C'est moi qui suis l'auteur du mystère qu'on a représenté aujourd'hui avec grand triomphe et grand concours de populace en pleine grand-salle du Palais. J'ai fait aussi un livre qui aura six cents pages sur la comète prodigieuse de 1465 dont un homme devint fou. J'ai eu encore d'autres succès. Étant un peu menuisier d'artillerie, j'ai travaillé à cette grosse bombarde de Jean Maugue, que vous savez qui a crevé au pont de Charenton le jour où l'on en a fait l'essai, et tué vingt-quatre curieux. Vous voyez que je ne suis pas un méchant parti de mariage. Je sais bien des façons de tours fort avenants que j'enseignerai à votre chèvre; par exemple, à contrefaire l'évêque de Paris, ce maudit pharisien dont les moulins éclaboussent les passants tout le long du Pont-aux-Meuniers. Et puis, mon mystère me rapportera beaucoup d'argent monnayé, si l'on me le paie. Enfin, je suis à vos ordres, moi, et mon esprit, et ma science, et mes lettres, prêt à vivre avec vous, damoiselle, comme il vous plaira, chastement ou joyeusement, mari et femme, si vous le trouvez bon, frère et sœur, si vous le trouvez mieux.»

Gringoire se tut, attendant l'effet de sa harangue sur la jeune fille. Elle avait les yeux fixés à terre.

«*Phoebus*», disait-elle à mi-voix. Puis se tournant vers le poète: «*Phoebus*, qu’est-ce que cela veut dire?

Gringoire, sans trop comprendre quel rapport il pouvait y avoir entre son allocution et cette question, ne fut pas fâché de faire briller son érudition. Il répondit en se rengorgeant:

«C’est un mot latin qui veut dire *soleil*.

— Soleil! reprit-elle.

— C’est le nom d’un très bel archer, qui était dieu, ajouta Gringoire.

— Dieu!» répéta l’égyptienne. Et il y avait dans son accent quelque chose de pensif et de passionné.

En ce moment, un de ses bracelets se détacha et tomba. Gringoire se baissa vivement pour le ramasser. Quand il se releva, la jeune fille et la chèvre avaient disparu. Il entendit le bruit d’un verrou. C’était une petite porte communiquant sans doute à une cellule voisine, qui se fermait en dehors.

«M’a-t-elle au moins laissé un lit?» dit notre philosophe.

Il fit le tour de la cellule. Il n’y avait de meuble propre au sommeil qu’un assez long coffre de bois, et encore le couvercle en était-il sculpté, ce qui procura à Gringoire, quand il s’y étendit, une sensation à peu près pareille à celle qu’éprouverait Micromégas en se couchant tout de son long sur les Alpes.

«Allons, dit-il en s’y accommodant de son mieux. Il faut se résigner. Mais voilà une étrange nuit de noces. C’est dommage. Il y avait dans ce mariage à la cruche cassée quelque chose de naïf et d’antédiluvien qui me plaisait.»

LIVRE TROISIÈME

I

NOTRE-DAME

Sans doute, c’est encore aujourd’hui un majestueux et sublime édifice que l’église de Notre-Dame de Paris. Mais, si belle qu’elle se soit conservée en vieillissant, il est difficile de ne pas soupirer, de ne pas s’indigner devant les dégradations, les mutilations sans nombre que simultanément le temps et les hommes ont fait subir au vénérable monument, sans respect pour Charlemagne qui en avait posé la première pierre, pour Philippe-Auguste qui en avait posé la dernière.

Sur la face de cette vieille reine de nos cathédrales, à côté d’une ride on trouve toujours une cicatrice. *Tempus edax, homo edacior*. Ce que je traduirais volontiers ainsi: le temps est aveugle, l’homme est stupide.

Si nous avions le loisir d’examiner une à une avec le lecteur les diverses traces de destruction imprimées à l’antique église, la part du temps serait la moindre, la pire celle des hommes, surtout des hommes de l’art. Il faut bien que je dise *des hommes de l’art*, puisqu’il y a eu des individus qui ont pris la qualité d’architectes dans les deux siècles derniers.

Et d’abord, pour ne citer que quelques exemples capitaux, il est, à coup sûr, peu de plus belles pages architecturales que cette façade où, successivement et à la fois, les trois portails creusés en ogive, le cordon brodé et dentelé des vingt-huit niches royales, l’immense rosace centrale flanquée de ses deux fenêtres latérales comme le prêtre du diacre et du sous-diacre, la haute et frêle galerie d’arcades à trèfle qui porte une lourde plate-forme sur ses fines colonnettes, enfin les deux noires et massives tours avec leurs auvents d’ardoise, parties harmonieuses d’un tout magnifique, superposées en cinq étages gigantesques, se développent à l’œil, en foule et sans trouble, avec leurs innombrables détails de statuaire, de sculpture et de ciselure, ralliés puissamment à la tranquille grandeur de l’ensemble; vaste symphonie en pierre, pour ainsi dire; œuvre colossale d’un homme et d’un peuple, tout ensemble une et complexe comme les Iliades et les Romanceros dont elle est sœur; produit prodigieux de la cotisation de toutes les forces d’une époque, où sur chaque pierre on voit saillir en cent façons la fantaisie de l’ouvrier disciplinée par le génie de l’artiste; sorte de création humaine, en un mot, puissante et féconde comme la création divine dont elle semble avoir dérobé le double caractère: variété, éternité.

Et ce que nous disons ici de la façade, il faut le dire de l'église entière; et ce que nous disons de l'église cathédrale de Paris, il faut le dire de toutes les églises de la chrétienté au moyen âge. Tout se tient dans cet art venu de lui-même, logique et bien proportionné. Mesurer l'orteil du pied, c'est mesurer le géant.

Revenons à la façade de Notre-Dame, telle qu'elle nous apparaît encore à présent, quand nous allons pieusement admirer la grave et puissante cathédrale, qui terrifie, au dire de ses chroniqueurs: *quæ mole sua terrorem incutit spectantibus*.

Trois choses importantes manquent aujourd'hui à cette façade. D'abord le degré de onze marches qui l'exhaussait jadis au-dessus du sol; ensuite la série inférieure de statues qui occupait les niches des trois portails, et la série supérieure des vingt-huit plus anciens rois de France, qui garnissait la galerie du premier étage, à partir de Childebert jusqu'à Philippe-Auguste, tenant en main «la pomme impériale».

Le degré, c'est le temps qui l'a fait disparaître en élevant d'un progrès irrésistible et lent le niveau du sol de la Cité. Mais, tout en faisant dévorer une à une, par cette marée montante du pavé de Paris, les onze marches qui ajoutaient à la hauteur majestueuse de l'édifice, le temps a rendu à l'église plus peut-être qu'il ne lui a ôté, car c'est le temps qui a répandu sur la façade cette sombre couleur des siècles qui fait de la vieillesse des monuments l'âge de leur beauté.

Mais qui a jeté bas les deux rangs de statues? qui a laissé les niches vides? qui a taillé au beau milieu du portail central cette ogive neuve et bâtarde? qui a osé y encadrer cette fade et lourde porte de bois sculpté à la Louis XV à côté des arabesques de Biscornette? Les hommes; les architectes, les artistes de nos jours.

Et si nous entrons dans l'intérieur de l'édifice, qui a renversé ce colosse de saint Christophe, proverbial parmi les statues au même titre que la grand-salle du Palais parmi les halles, que la flèche de Strasbourg parmi les clochers? Et ces myriades de statues qui peuplaient tous les entre-colonnements de la nef et du chœur, à genoux, en pied, équestres, hommes, femmes, enfants, rois, évêques, gendarmes, en pierre, en marbre, en or, en argent, en cuivre, en cire même, qui les a brutalement balayées? Ce n'est pas le temps.

Et qui a substitué au vieil autel gothique, splendidement encombré de châsses et de reliquaires ce lourd sarcophage de marbre à têtes d’anges et à nuages, lequel semble un échantillon dépareillé du Val-de-Grâce ou des Invalides? Qui a bêtement scellé ce lourd anachronisme de pierre dans le pavé carlovingien de Hercandus? N’est-ce pas Louis XIV accomplissant le vœu de Louis XIII?

Et qui a mis de froides vitres blanches à la place de ces vitraux «hauts en couleur» qui faisaient hésiter l’œil émerveillé de nos pères entre la rose du grand portail et les ogives de l’abside? Et que dirait un sous-chantre du seizième siècle, en voyant le beau badigeonnage jaune dont nos vandales archevêques ont barbouillé leur cathédrale? Il se souviendrait que c’était la couleur dont le bourreau brossait les édifices *scélérés*; il se rappellerait l’hôtel du Petit-Bourbon, tout englué de jaune aussi pour la trahison du connétable, «jaune après tout de si bonne trempe, dit Sauval, et si bien recommandé, que plus d’un siècle n’a pu encore lui faire perdre sa couleur». Il croirait que le lieu saint est devenu infâme, et s’enfuirait.

Et si nous montons sur la cathédrale, sans nous arrêter à mille barbaries de tout genre, qu’a-t-on fait de ce charmant petit clocher qui s’appuyait sur le point d’intersection de la croisée, et qui, non moins frêle et non moins hardi que sa voisine la flèche (détruite aussi) de la Sainte-Chapelle, s’enfonçait dans le ciel plus avant que les tours, élancé, aigu, sonore, découpé à jour? Un architecte de bon goût (1787) l’a amputé et a cru qu’il suffisait de masquer la plaie avec ce large emplâtre de plomb qui ressemble au couvercle d’une marmite.

C’est ainsi que l’art merveilleux du moyen âge a été traité presque en tout pays, surtout en France. On peut distinguer sur sa ruine trois sortes de lésions qui toutes trois l’entament à différentes profondeurs: le temps d’abord, qui a insensiblement ébréché çà et là et rouillé partout sa surface; ensuite, les révolutions politiques et religieuses, lesquelles, aveugles et colères de leur nature, se sont ruées en tumulte sur lui, ont déchiré son riche habillement de sculptures et de ciselures, crevé ses rosaces, brisé ses colliers d’arabesques et de figurines, arraché ses statues, tantôt pour leur mitre, tantôt pour leur couronne; enfin, les modes, de plus en plus grotesques et sottes, qui depuis les anarchiques et splendides déviations de la renaissance, se sont succédé dans la décadence nécessaire de l’architecture. Les modes ont fait plus de mal que les révolutions. Elles ont tranché dans le vif, elles ont attaqué la charpente osseuse de l’art, elles ont coupé, taillé, désorganisé, tué l'édifice, dans la forme comme dans le symbole, dans sa logique comme dans sa beauté. Et puis, elles ont refait; prétention que n'avaient eue du moins ni le temps, ni les révolutions. Elles ont effrontément ajusté, de par *le bon goût*, sur les blessures de l'architecture gothique, leurs misérables colifichets d'un jour, leurs rubans de marbre, leurs pompons de métal, véritable lèpre d'oves, de volutes, d'entournements, de draperies, de guirlandes, de franges, de flammes de pierre, de nuages de bronze, d'amours replets, de chérubins bouffis, qui commence à dévorer la face de l'art dans l'oratoire de Catherine de Médicis, et le fait expirer, deux siècles après, tourmenté et grimaçant, dans le boudoir de la Dubarry.

Ainsi, pour résumer les points que nous venons d'indiquer, trois sortes de ravages défigurent aujourd'hui l'architecture gothique. Rides et verrues à l'épiderme, c'est l'œuvre du temps; voies de fait, brutalités, contusions, fractures, c'est l'œuvre des révolutions depuis Luther jusqu'à Mirabeau. Mutilations, amputations, dislocation de la membrure, *restaurations*, c'est le travail grec, romain et barbare des professeurs selon Vitruve et Vignole. Cet art magnifique que les vandales avaient produit, les académies l'ont tué. Aux siècles, aux révolutions qui dévastent du moins avec impartialité et grandeur, est venue s'adjoindre la nuée des architectes d'école, patentés, jurés et assermentés, dégradant avec le discernement et le choix du mauvais goût, substituant les chicorées de Louis XV aux dentelles gothiques pour la plus grande gloire du Parthénon. C'est le coup de pied de l'âne au lion mourant. C'est le vieux chêne qui se couronne, et qui, pour comble, est piqué, mordu, déchiqueté par les chenilles.

Qu'il y a loin de là à l'époque où Robert Cenalis, comparant Notre-Dame de Paris à ce fameux temple de Diane à Éphèse, *tant réclamé par les anciens païens*, qui a immortalisé Érostrate, trouvait la cathédrale gauloise «plus excellente en longueur, largeur, hauteur et structure»!

Notre-Dame de Paris n'est point du reste ce qu'on peut appeler un monument complet, défini, classé. Ce n'est plus une église romane, ce n'est pas encore une église gothique. Cet édifice n'est pas un type. Notre-Dame de Paris n'a point, comme l'abbaye de Tournus, la grave et massive carrure, la ronde et large voûte, la nudité glaciale, la majestueuse simplicité des édifices qui ont le plein cintre pour générateur. Elle n'est pas, comme la cathédrale de Bourges, le produit magnifique, léger, multiforme, touffu, hérissé, efflorescent de l'ogive. Impossible de la ranger dans cette antique famille d’églises sombres, mystérieuses, basses et comme écrasées par le plein cintre; presque égyptiennes au plafond près; toutes hiéroglyphiques, toutes sacerdotales, toutes symboliques; plus chargées dans leurs ornements de losanges et de zigzags que de fleurs, de fleurs que d’animaux, d’animaux que d’hommes; œuvre de l’architecte moins que de l’évêque; première transformation de l’art, tout empreinte de discipline théocratique et militaire, qui prend racine dans le bas-empire et s’arrête à Guillaume le Conquérant. Impossible de placer notre cathédrale dans cette autre famille d’églises hautes, aériennes, riches de vitraux et de sculptures; aiguës de formes, hardies d’attitudes; communales et bourgeoises comme symboles politiques libres, capricieuses, effrénées, comme œuvre d’art; seconde transformation de l’architecture, non plus hiéroglyphique, immuable et sacerdotale, mais artiste, progressive et populaire, qui commence au retour des croisades et finit à Louis XI. Notre-Dame de Paris n’est pas de pure race romaine comme les premières, ni de pure race arabe comme les secondes.

C’est un édifice de la transition. L’architecte saxon achevait de dresser les premiers piliers de la nef, lorsque l’ogive qui arrivait de la croisade est venue se poser en conquérante sur ces larges chapiteaux romans qui ne devaient porter que des pleins cintres. L’ogive, maîtresse dès lors, a construit le reste de l’église. Cependant, inexpérimentée et timide à son début, elle s’évase, s’élargit, se contient, et n’ose s’élancer encore en flèches et en lancettes comme elle l’a fait plus tard dans tant de merveilleuses cathédrales. On dirait qu’elle se ressent du voisinage des lourds piliers romans.

D’ailleurs, ces édifices de la transition du roman au gothique ne sont pas moins précieux à étudier que les types purs. Ils expriment une nuance de l’art qui serait perdue sans eux. C’est la greffe de l’ogive sur le plein cintre.

Notre-Dame de Paris est en particulier un curieux échantillon de cette variété. Chaque face, chaque pierre du vénérable monument est une page non seulement de l’histoire du pays, mais encore de l’histoire de la science et de l’art. Ainsi, pour n’indiquer ici que les détails principaux, tandis que la petite Porte-Rouge atteint presque aux limites des délicatesses gothiques du quinzième siècle, les piliers de la nef, par leur volume et leur gravité, reculent jusqu’à l’abbaye carlovingienne de Saint-Germain-des-Prés. On croirait qu’il y a six siècles entre cette porte et ces piliers. Il n’est pas jusqu’aux hermétiques qui ne trouvent dans les symboles du grand portail un abrégé satisfaisant de leur science, dont l’église de Saint-Jacques-de-la-Boucherie était un hiéroglyphe si complet. Ainsi, l’abbaye romane, l’église philosophale, l’art gothique, l’art saxon, le lourd pilier rond qui rappelle Grégoire VII, le symbolisme hermétique par lequel Nicolas Flamel préludait à Luther, l’unité papale, le schisme, Saint-Germain-des-Prés, Saint-Jacques-de-la-Boucherie, tout est fondu, combiné, amalgamé dans Notre-Dame. Cette église centrale et génératrice est parmi les vieilles églises de Paris une sorte de chimère; elle a la tête de l’une, les membres de celle-là, la croupe de l’autre; quelque chose de toutes.

Nous le répétons, ces constructions hybrides ne sont pas les moins intéressantes pour l’artiste, pour l’antiquaire, pour l’historien. Elles font sentir à quel point l’architecture est chose primitive, en ce qu’elles démontrent, ce que démontrent aussi les vestiges cyclopéens, les pyramides d’Égypte, les gigantesques pagodes hindoues, que les plus grands produits de l’architecture sont moins des œuvres individuelles que des œuvres sociales; plutôt l’enfantement des peuples en travail que le jet des hommes de génie; le dépôt que laisse une nation; les entassements que font les siècles; le résidu des évaporations successives de la société humaine; en un mot, des espèces de formations. Chaque flot du temps superpose son alluvion, chaque race dépose sa couche sur le monument, chaque individu apporte sa pierre. Ainsi font les castors, ainsi font les abeilles, ainsi font les hommes. Le grand symbole de l’architecture, Babel, est une ruche.

Les grands édifices, comme les grandes montagnes, sont l’ouvrage des siècles. Souvent l’art se transforme qu’ils pendent encore: *pendent opera interrupta*; ils se continuent paisiblement selon l’art transformé. L’art nouveau prend le monument où il le trouve, s’y incruste, se l’assimile, le développe à sa fantaisie et l’achève s’il peut. La chose s’accomplit sans trouble, sans effort, sans réaction, suivant une loi naturelle et tranquille. C’est une greffe qui survient, une sève qui circule, une végétation qui reprend. Certes, il y a matière à bien gros livres, et souvent histoire universelle de l’humanité, dans ces soudures successives de plusieurs arts à plusieurs hauteurs sur le même monument. L’homme, l’artiste, l’individu s’effacent sur ces grandes masses sans nom d’auteur; l’intelligence humaine s’y résume et s’y totalise. Le temps est l’architecte, le peuple est le maçon.

À n’envisager ici que l’architecture européenne chrétienne, cette sœur puînée des grandes maçonneries de l’Orient, elle apparaît aux yeux comme une immense formation divisée en trois zones bien tranchées qui se superposent: la zone romane, la zone gothique, la zone de la renaissance, que nous appellerions volontiers gréco-romaine. La couche romane, qui est la plus ancienne et la plus profonde, est occupée par le plein cintre, qui reparaît porté par la colonne grecque dans la couche moderne et supérieure de la renaissance. L'ogive est entre deux. Les édifices qui appartiennent exclusivement à l'une de ces trois couches sont parfaitement distincts, uns et complets. C'est l'abbaye de Jumièges, c'est la cathédrale de Reims, c'est Sainte-Croix d'Orléans. Mais les trois zones se mêlent et s'amalgament par les bords, comme les couleurs dans le spectre solaire. De là les monuments complexes, les édifices de nuance et de transition. L'un est roman par les pieds, gothique au milieu, gréco-romain par la tête. C'est qu'on a mis six cents ans à le bâtir. Cette variété est rare. Le donjon d'Étampes en est un échantillon. Mais les monuments de deux formations sont plus fréquents. C'est Notre-Dame de Paris, édifice ogival, qui s'enfonce par ses premiers piliers dans cette zone romane où sont plongés le portail de Saint-Denis et la nef de Saint-Germain-des-Prés. C'est la charmante salle capitulaire demi-gothique de Bocherville à laquelle la couche romane vient jusqu'à mi-corps. C'est la cathédrale de Rouen qui serait entièrement gothique si elle ne baignait pas l'extrémité de sa flèche centrale dans la zone de la renaissance.

Du reste, toutes ces nuances, toutes ces différences n'affectent que la surface des édifices. C'est l'art qui a changé de peau. La constitution même de l'église chrétienne n'en est pas attaquée. C'est toujours la même charpente intérieure, la même disposition logique des parties. Quelle que soit l'enveloppe sculptée et brodée d'une cathédrale, on retrouve toujours dessous, au moins à l'état de germe et de rudiment, la basilique romaine. Elle se développe éternellement sur le sol selon la même loi. Ce sont imperturbablement deux nefs qui s'entrecoupent en croix, et dont l'extrémité supérieure arrondie en abside forme le chœur; ce sont toujours des bas-côtés, pour les processions intérieures, pour les chapelles, sortes de promenoirs latéraux où la nef principale se dégorge par les entre-colonnements. Cela posé, le nombre des chapelles, des portails, des clochers, des aiguilles, se modifie à l'infini, suivant la fantaisie du siècle, du peuple, de l'art. Le service du culte une fois pourvu et assuré, l'architecture fait ce que bon lui semble. Statues, vitraux, rosaces, arabesques, dentelures, chapiteaux, bas-reliefs, elle combine toutes ces imaginations selon le logarithme qui lui convient. De là la prodigieuse variété extérieure de ces édifices au fond desquels réside tant d’ordre et d’unité. Le tronc de l’arbre est immuable, la végétation est capricieuse.

II

PARIS À VOL D’OISEAU

Nous venons d’essayer de réparer pour le lecteur cette admirable église de Notre-Dame de Paris. Nous avons indiqué sommairement la plupart des beautés qu’elle avait au quinzième siècle et qui lui manquent aujourd’hui; mais nous avons omis la principale, c’est la vue du Paris qu’on découvrait alors du haut de ses tours.

C’était en effet, quand, après avoir tâtonné longtemps dans la ténébreuse spirale qui perce perpendiculairement l’épaisse muraille des clochers, on débouchait enfin brusquement sur l’une des deux hautes plates-formes, inondées de jour et d’air, c’était un beau tableau que celui qui se déroulait à la fois de toutes parts sous vos yeux; un spectacle *sui generis*, dont peuvent aisément se faire une idée ceux de nos lecteurs qui ont eu le bonheur de voir une ville gothique entière, complète, homogène, comme il en reste encore quelques-unes, Nuremberg en Bavière, Vittoria en Espagne; ou même de plus petits échantillons, pourvu qu’ils soient bien conservés, Vitré en Bretagne, Nordhausen en Prusse.

Le Paris d’il y a trois cent cinquante ans, le Paris du quinzième siècle était déjà une ville géante. Nous nous trompons en général, nous autres Parisiens, sur le terrain que nous croyons avoir gagné depuis. Paris, depuis Louis XI, ne s’est pas accru de beaucoup plus d’un tiers. Il a, certes, bien plus perdu en beauté qu’il n’a gagné en grandeur.

Paris est né, comme on sait, dans cette vieille île de la Cité qui a la forme d’un berceau. La grève de cette île fut sa première enceinte, la Seine son premier fossé. Paris demeura plusieurs siècles à l’état d’île, avec deux ponts, l’un au nord, l’autre au midi, et deux têtes de pont, qui étaient à la fois ses portes et ses forteresses, le Grand-Châtelet sur la rive droite, le Petit-Châtelet sur la rive gauche. Puis, dès les rois de la première race, trop à l’étroit dans son île, et ne pouvant plus s’y retourner, Paris passa l’eau. Alors, au delà du Grand, au delà du Petit-Châtelet, une première enceinte de murailles et de tours commença à entamer la campagne des deux côtés de la Seine. De cette ancienne clôture il restait encore au siècle dernier quelques vestiges; aujourd’hui il n’en reste que le souvenir, et çà et là une tradition, la porte Baudets ou Baudoyer, *porta Bagauda*. Peu à peu, le flot des maisons, toujours poussé du cœur de la ville au dehors, déborde, ronge, use et efface cette enceinte. Philippe-Auguste lui fait une nouvelle digue. Il emprisonne Paris dans une chaîne circulaire de grosses tours, hautes et solides. Pendant plus d'un siècle, les maisons se pressent, s'accumulent et haussent leur niveau dans ce bassin comme l'eau dans un réservoir. Elles commencent à devenir profondes, elles mettent étages sur étages, elles montent les unes sur les autres, elles jaillissent en hauteur comme toute sève comprimée, et c'est à qui passera la tête par-dessus ses voisines pour avoir un peu d'air. La rue de plus en plus se creuse et se rétrécit; toute place se comble et disparaît. Les maisons enfin sautent par-dessus le mur de Philippe-Auguste, et s'éparpillent joyeusement dans la plaine sans ordre et tout de travers, comme des échappées. Là, elles se carrent, se taillent des jardins dans les champs, prennent leurs aises. Dès 1367, la ville se répand tellement dans le faubourg qu'il faut une nouvelle clôture, surtout sur la rive droite. Charles V la bâtit. Mais une ville comme Paris est dans une crue perpétuelle. Il n'y a que ces villes-là qui deviennent capitales. Ce sont des entonnoirs où viennent aboutir tous les versants géographiques, politiques, moraux, intellectuels d'un pays, toutes les pentes naturelles d'un peuple; des puits de civilisation, pour ainsi dire, et aussi des égouts, où commerce, industrie, intelligence, population, tout ce qui est sève, tout ce qui est vie, tout ce qui est âme dans une nation, filtre et s'amasse sans cesse goutte à goutte, siècle à siècle. L'enceinte de Charles V a donc le sort de l'enceinte de Philippe-Auguste. Dès la fin du quinzième siècle, elle est enjambée, dépassée, et le faubourg court plus loin. Au seizième, il semble qu'elle recule à vue d'œil et s'enfonce de plus en plus dans la vieille ville, tant une ville neuve s'épaissit déjà au dehors. Ainsi, dès le quinzième siècle, pour nous arrêter là, Paris avait déjà usé les trois cercles concentriques de murailles qui, du temps de Julien l'Apostat, étaient, pour ainsi dire, en germe dans le Grand-Châtelet et le Petit-Châtelet. La puissante ville avait fait craquer successivement ses quatre ceintures de murs, comme un enfant qui grandit et qui crève ses vêtements de l'an passé. Sous Louis XI, on voyait, par places, percer, dans cette mer de maisons, quelques groupes de tours en ruine des anciennes enceintes, comme les pitons des collines dans une inondation, comme des archipels du vieux Paris submergé sous le nouveau.

Depuis lors, Paris s'est encore transformé, malheureusement pour nos yeux; mais il n'a franchi qu'une enceinte de plus, celle de Louis XV, ce misérable mur de boue et de crachat, digne du roi qui l’a bâti, digne du poète qui l’a chanté:

Le mur murant Paris rend Paris murmurant.

Au quinzième siècle, Paris était encore divisé en trois villes tout à fait distinctes et séparées, ayant chacune leur physionomie, leur spécialité, leurs mœurs, leurs coutumes, leurs privilèges, leur histoire: la Cité, l’Université, la Ville. La Cité, qui occupait l’île, était la plus ancienne, la moindre, et la mère des deux autres, resserrée entre elles, qu’on nous passe la comparaison, comme une petite vieille entre deux grandes belles filles. L’Université couvrait la rive gauche de la Seine, depuis la Tournelle jusqu’à la tour de Nesle, points qui correspondent dans le Paris d’aujourd’hui l’un à la Halle aux vins, l’autre à la Monnaie. Son enceinte échancrait assez largement cette campagne où Julien avait bâti ses thermes. La montagne de Sainte-Geneviève y était renfermée. Le point culminant de cette courbe de murailles était la porte Papale, c’est-à-dire à peu près l’emplacement actuel du Panthéon. La Ville, qui était le plus grand des trois morceaux de Paris, avait la rive droite. Son quai, rompu toutefois ou interrompu en plusieurs endroits, courait le long de la Seine, de la tour de Billy à la tour du Bois, c’est-à-dire de l’endroit où est aujourd’hui le Grenier d’abondance à l’endroit où sont aujourd’hui les Tuileries. Ces quatre points où la Seine coupait l’enceinte de la capitale, la Tournelle et la tour de Nesle à gauche, la tour de Billy et la tour du Bois à droite, s’appelaient par excellence *les quatre tours de Paris*. La Ville entrait dans les terres plus profondément encore que l’Université. Le point culminant de la clôture de la Ville (celle de Charles V) était aux portes Saint-Denis et Saint-Martin dont l’emplacement n’a pas changé.

Comme nous venons de le dire, chacune de ces trois grandes divisions de Paris était une ville, mais une ville trop spéciale pour être complète, une ville qui ne pouvait se passer des deux autres. Aussi trois aspects parfaitement à part. Dans la Cité abondaient les églises, dans la Ville les palais, dans l’Université les collèges. Pour négliger ici les originalités secondaires du vieux Paris et les caprices du droit de voirie, nous dirons, d’un point de vue général, en ne prenant que les ensembles et les masses dans le chaos des juridictions communales, que l’île était à l’évêque, la rive droite au prévôt des marchands, la rive gauche au recteur. Le prévôt de Paris, officier royal et non municipal, sur le tout. La Cité avait Notre-Dame, la Ville le Louvre et l’Hôtel de Ville, l’Université la Sorbonne. La Ville avait les Halles, la Cité l'Hôtel-Dieu, l'Université le Pré-aux-Clercs. Le délit que les écoliers commettaient sur la rive gauche, dans leur Pré-aux-Clercs, on le jugeait dans l'île, au Palais de Justice, et on le punissait sur la rive droite, à Montfaucon. À moins que le recteur, sentant l'Université forte et le roi faible, n'intervînt; car c'était un privilège des écoliers d'être pendus chez eux.

(La plupart de ces privilèges, pour le noter en passant, et il y en avait de meilleurs que celui-ci, avaient été extorqués aux rois par révoltes et mutineries. C'est la marche immémoriale. Le roi ne lâche que quand le peuple arrache, il y a une vieille charte qui dit la chose naïvement, à propos de fidélité: *Civibus fidelitas in reges, quæ famen aliquoties seditionibus interrupta, multa peperit privilegia*.)

Au quinzième siècle, la Seine baignait cinq îles dans l'enceinte de Paris: l'île Louviers, où il y avait alors des arbres et où il n'y a plus que du bois; l'île aux Vaches et l'île Notre-Dame, toutes deux désertes, à une masure près, toutes deux fiefs de l'évêque (au dix-septième siècle, de ces deux îles on en a fait une, qu'on a bâtie, et que nous appelons l'île Saint-Louis); enfin la Cité, et à sa pointe l'îlot du passeur aux vaches qui s'est abîmé depuis sous le terre-plein du Pont-Neuf. La Cité alors avait cinq ponts; trois à droite, le pont Notre-Dame et le Pont-au-Change, en pierre, le Pont-aux-Meuniers, en bois; deux à gauche, le Petit-Pont, en pierre, le Pont-Saint-Michel, en bois: tous chargés de maisons. L'Université avait six portes bâties par Philippe-Auguste: c'étaient, à partir de la Tournelle, la porte Saint-Victor, la porte Bordelle, la porte Papale, la porte Saint-Jacques, la porte Saint-Michel, la porte Saint-Germain. La Ville avait six portes bâties par Charles V; c'étaient, à partir de la tour de Billy, la porte Saint-Antoine, la porte du Temple, la porte Saint-Martin, la porte Saint-Denis, la porte Montmartre, la porte Saint-Honoré. Toutes ces portes étaient fortes, et belles aussi, ce qui ne gâte pas la force. Un fossé large, profond, à courant vif dans les crues d'hiver, lavait le pied des murailles tout autour de Paris; la Seine fournissait l'eau. La nuit on fermait les portes, on barrait la rivière aux deux bouts de la ville avec de grosses chaînes de fer, et Paris dormait tranquille.

Vus à vol d'oiseau, ces trois bourgs, la Cité, l'Université, la Ville, présentaient chacun à l'œil un tricot inextricable de rues bizarrement brouillées. Cependant, au premier aspect, on reconnaissait que ces trois fragments de cité formaient un seul corps. On voyait tout de suite deux longues rues parallèles sans rupture, sans perturbation, presque en ligne droite, qui traversaient à la fois les trois villes d'un bout à l'autre, du midi au nord, perpendiculairement à la Seine, les liaient, les mêlaient, infusaient, versaient, transvasaient sans relâche le peuple de l'une dans les murs de l'autre, et des trois n'en faisaient qu'une. La première de ces deux rues allait de la porte Saint-Jacques à la porte Saint-Martin; elle s'appelait rue Saint-Jacques dans l'Université, rue de la Juiverie dans la Cité, rue Saint-Martin dans la Ville; elle passait l'eau deux fois sous le nom de Petit-Pont et de pont Notre-Dame. La seconde, qui s'appelait rue de la Harpe sur la rive gauche, rue de la Barillerie dans l'île, rue Saint-Denis sur la rive droite, pont Saint-Michel sur un bras de la Seine, Pont-au-Change sur l'autre, allait de la porte Saint-Michel dans l'Université à la porte Saint-Denis dans la Ville. Du reste, sous tant de noms divers, ce n'étaient toujours que deux rues, mais les deux rues mères, les deux rues génératrices, les deux artères de Paris. Toutes les autres veines de la triple ville venaient y puiser où s'y dégorger.

Indépendamment de ces deux rues principales, diamétrales, perçant Paris de part en part dans sa largeur, communes à la capitale entière, la Ville et l'Université avaient chacune leur grande rue particulière, qui courait dans le sens de leur longueur, parallèlement à la Seine, et en passant coupait à angle droit les deux rues *artérielles*. Ainsi dans la Ville on descendait en droite ligne de la porte Saint-Antoine à la porte Saint-Honoré; dans l'Université, de la porte Saint-Victor à la porte Saint-Germain. Ces deux grandes voies, croisées avec les deux premières, formaient le canevas sur lequel reposait, noué et serré en tous sens, le réseau dédaléen des rues de Paris. Dans le dessin inintelligible de ce réseau on distinguait en outre, en examinant avec attention, comme deux gerbes élargies l'une dans l'Université, l'autre dans la Ville, deux trousseaux de grosses rues qui allaient s'épanouissant des ponts aux portes.

Quelque chose de ce plan géométral subsiste encore aujourd'hui.

Maintenant, sous quel aspect cet ensemble se présentait-il vu du haut des tours de Notre-Dame, en 1482? C'est ce que nous allons tâcher de dire.

Pour le spectateur qui arrivait essoufflé sur ce faîte, c'était d'abord un éblouissement de toits, de cheminées, de rues, de ponts, de places, de flèches, de clochers. Tout vous prenait aux yeux à la fois, le pignon taillé, la toiture aiguë, la tourelle suspendue aux angles des murs, la pyramide de pierre du onzième siècle, l'obélisque d'ardoise du quinzième, la tour ronde et nue du donjon, la tour carrée et brodée de l'église, le grand, le petit, le massif, l’aérien. Le regard se perdait longtemps à toute profondeur dans ce labyrinthe, où il n’y avait rien qui n’eût son originalité, sa raison, son génie, sa beauté, rien qui ne vînt de l’art, depuis la moindre maison à devanture peinte et sculptée, à charpente extérieure, à porte surbaissée, à étages en surplomb, jusqu’au royal Louvre, qui avait alors une colonnade de tours. Mais voici les principales masses qu’on distinguait lorsque l’œil commençait à se faire à ce tumulte d’édifices.

D’abord la Cité. L’île de la Cité, comme dit Sauval, qui à travers son fatras a quelquefois de ces bonnes fortunes de style, *l’île de la Cité est faite comme un grand navire enfoncé dans la vase et échoué au fil de l’eau vers le milieu de la Seine*. Nous venons d’expliquer qu’au quinzième siècle ce navire était amarré aux deux rives du fleuve par cinq ponts. Cette forme de vaisseau avait aussi frappé les scribes héraldiques; car c’est de là, et non du siège des normands, que vient, selon Favyn et Pasquier, le navire qui blasonne le vieil écusson de Paris. Pour qui sait le déchiffrer, le blason est une algèbre, le blason est une langue. L’histoire entière de la seconde moitié du moyen âge est écrite dans le blason, comme l’histoire de la première moitié dans le symbolisme des églises romanes. Ce sont les hiéroglyphes de la féodalité après ceux de la théocratie.

La Cité donc s’offrait d’abord aux yeux avec sa poupe au levant et sa proue au couchant. Tourné vers la proue, on avait devant soi un innombrable troupeau de vieux toits sur lesquels s’arrondissait largement le chevet plombé de la Sainte-Chapelle, pareil à une croupe d’éléphant chargée de sa tour. Seulement, ici, cette tour était la flèche la plus hardie, la plus ouvrée, la plus menuisée, la plus déchiquetée qui ait jamais laissé voir le ciel à travers son cône de dentelle. Devant Notre-Dame, au plus près, trois rues se dégorgeaient dans le parvis, belle place à vieilles maisons. Sur le côté sud de cette place se penchait la façade ridée et rechignée de l’Hôtel-Dieu et son toit qui semble couvert de pustules et de verrues. Puis, à droite, à gauche, à l’orient, à l’occident, dans cette enceinte si étroite pourtant de la Cité se dressaient les clochers de ses vingt-une églises, de toute date, de toute forme, de toute grandeur, depuis la basse et vermoulue campanule romane de Saint-Denys-du-Pas, *carcer Glaucini*, jusqu’aux fines aiguilles de Saint-Pierre-aux-Bœufs et de Saint-Landry. Derrière Notre-Dame se déroulaient, au nord, le cloître avec ses galeries gothiques; au sud, le palais demi-roman de l’évêque; au levant, la pointe déserte du Terrain. Dans cet entassement de maisons l’œil distinguait encore, à ces hautes mitres de pierre percées à jour qui couronnaient alors sur le toit même les fenêtres les plus élevées des palais, l'Hôtel donné par la ville, sous Charles VI, à Juvénal des Ursins; un peu plus loin, les baraques goudronnées du Marché-Palus; ailleurs encore l'abside neuve de Saint-Germain-le-Vieux, rallongée en 1458 avec un bout de la rue aux Febves; et puis, par places, un carrefour encombré de peuple, un pilori dressé à un coin de rue, un beau morceau de pavé de Philippe-Auguste, magnifique dallage rayé pour les pieds des chevaux au milieu de la voie et si mal remplacé au seizième siècle par le misérable cailloutage dit *pavé de la Ligue*, une arrière-cour déserte avec une de ces diaphanes tourelles de l'escalier comme on en faisait au quinzième siècle, comme on en voit encore une rue des Bourdonnais. Enfin, à droite de la Sainte-Chapelle, vers le couchant, le Palais de Justice asseyait au bord de l'eau son groupe de tours. Les futaies des jardins du roi, qui couvraient la pointe occidentale de la Cité, masquaient l'îlot du passeur. Quant à l'eau, du haut des tours de Notre-Dame, on ne la voyait guère des deux côtés de la Cité. La Seine disparaissait sous les ponts, les ponts sous les maisons.

Et quand le regard passait ces ponts, dont les toits verdissaient à l'œil, moisis avant l'âge par les vapeurs de l'eau, s'il se dirigeait à gauche vers l'Université, le premier édifice qui le frappait, c'était une grosse et basse gerbe de tours, le Petit-Châtelet, dont le porche béant dévorait le bout du Petit-Pont, puis, si votre vue parcourait la vue du levant au couchant, de la Tournelle à la tour de Nesle c'était un long cordon de maisons à solives sculptées, à vitres de couleur, surplombant d'étage en étage sur le pavé un interminable zigzag de pignons bourgeois, coupé fréquemment par la bouche d'une rue, et de temps en temps aussi par la face ou par le coude d'un grand hôtel de pierre, se carrant à son aise, cours et jardins, ailes et corps de logis, parmi cette populace de maisons serrées et étriquées, comme un grand seigneur dans un tas de manants, il y avait cinq ou six de ces hôtels sur le quai, depuis le logis de Lorraine qui partageait avec les Bernardins le grand enclos voisin de la Tournelle, jusqu'à l'hôtel de Nesle, dont la tour principale bornait Paris, et dont les toits pointus étaient en possession pendant trois mois de l'année d'échancrer de leurs triangles noirs le disque écarlate du soleil couchant.

Ce côté de la Seine du reste était le moins marchand des deux, les écoliers y faisaient plus de bruit et de foule que les artisans, et il n'y avait, à proprement parler, de quai que du pont Saint-Michel à la tour de Nesle. Le reste du bord de la Seine était tantôt une grève nue, comme au delà des

Bernardins, tantôt un entassement de maisons qui avaient le pied dans l’eau, comme entre les deux ponts. Il y avait grand vacarme de blanchisseuses, elles criaient, parlaient, chantaient du matin au soir le long du bord, et y battaient fort le linge, comme de nos jours. Ce n’est pas la moindre gaieté de Paris.

L’Université faisait un bloc à l’œil. D’un bout à l’autre c’était un tout homogène et compact. Ces mille toits, drus, anguleux, adhérents, composés presque tous du même élément géométrique, offraient, vus de haut, l’aspect d’une cristallisation de la même substance. Le capricieux ravin des rues ne coupait pas ce pâté de maisons en tranches trop disproportionnées. Les quarante-deux collèges y étaient disséminés d’une manière assez égale, et il y en avait partout; les faîtes variés et amusants de ces beaux édifices étaient le produit du même art que les simples toits qu’ils dépassaient, et n’étaient en définitive qu’une multiplication au carré ou au cube de la même figure géométrique, ils compliquaient donc l’ensemble sans le troubler, le complétaient sans le charger. La géométrie est une harmonie. Quelques beaux hôtels faisaient aussi çà et là de magnifiques saillies sur les greniers pittoresques de la rive gauche, le logis de Nevers, le logis de Rome, le logis de Reims qui ont disparu; l’hôtel de Cluny, qui subsiste encore pour la consolation de l’artiste, et dont on a si bêtement découronné la tour il y a quelques années. Près de Cluny, ce palais romain, à belles arches cintrées, c’étaient les Thermes de Julien. Il y avait aussi force abbayes d’une beauté plus dévote, d’une grandeur plus grave que les hôtels, mais non moins belles, non moins grandes. Celles qui éveillaient d’abord l’œil, c’étaient les Bernardins avec leurs trois clochers; Sainte-Geneviève, dont la tour carrée, qui existe encore, fait tant regretter le reste; la Sorbonne, moitié collège, moitié monastère dont il survit une si admirable nef, le beau cloître quadrilatéral des Mathurins; son voisin le cloître de Saint-Benoît, dans les murs duquel on a eu le temps de bâcler un théâtre entre la septième et la huitième édition de ce livre; les Cordeliers, avec leurs trois énormes pignons juxtaposés; les Augustins, dont la gracieuse aiguille faisait, après la tour de Nesle, la deuxième dentelure de ce côté de Paris, à partir de l’occident. Les collèges, qui sont en effet l’anneau intermédiaire du cloître au monde, tenaient le milieu dans la série monumentale entre les hôtels et les abbayes, avec une sévérité pleine d’élégance, une sculpture moins évaporée que les palais, une architecture moins sérieuse que les couvents. Il ne reste malheureusement presque rien de ces monuments où l’art gothique entrecoupait avec tant de précision la richesse et l’économie. Les églises (et elles étaient nombreuses et splendides dans l’Université, et elles s’échelonnaient là aussi dans tous les âges de l’architecture depuis les pleins cintres de Saint-Julien jusqu’aux ogives de Saint-Séverin), les églises dominaient le tout, et, comme une harmonie de plus dans cette masse d’harmonie, elles perçaient à chaque instant la découpure multiple des pignons de flèches tailladées, de clochers à jour, d’aiguilles déliées dont la ligne n’était aussi qu’une magnifique exagération de l’angle aigu des toits.

Le sol de l’Université était montueux. La montagne Sainte-Geneviève y faisait au sud-est une ampoule énorme, et c’était une chose à voir du haut de Notre-Dame que cette foule de rues étroites et tortues (aujourd’hui *le pays latin*), ces grappes de maisons qui, répandues en tous sens du sommet de cette éminence, se précipitaient en désordre et presque à pic sur ses flancs jusqu’au bord de l’eau, ayant l’air, les unes de tomber, les autres de regrimper, toutes de se retenir les unes aux autres. Un flux continuel de mille points noirs qui s’entrecroisaient sur le pavé faisait tout remuer aux yeux. C’était le peuple, vu ainsi de haut et de loin.

Enfin, dans les intervalles de ces toits, de ces flèches, de ces accidents d’édifices sans nombre qui pliaient, tordaient et dentelaient d’une manière si bizarre la ligne extrême de l’Université, on entrevoyait, d’espace en espace, un gros pan de mur moussu, une épaisse tour ronde, une porte de ville crénelée, figurant la forteresse: c’était la clôture de Philippe-Auguste. Au delà verdoyaient les prés, au delà s’enfuyaient les routes, le long desquelles traînaient encore quelques maisons de faubourg, d’autant plus rares qu’elles s’éloignaient plus. Quelques-uns de ces faubourgs avaient de l’importance. C’était d’abord, à partir de la Tournelle, le bourg Saint-Victor, avec son pont d’une arche sur la Bièvre, son abbaye, où on lisait l’épitaphe de Louis le Gros, *epitaphium Ludovici Grossi*, et son église à flèche octogone flanquée de quatre clochetons du onzième siècle (on en peut voir une pareille à Étampes; elle n’est pas encore abattue); puis le bourg Saint-Marceau, qui avait déjà trois églises et un couvent. Puis, en laissant à gauche le moulin des Gobelins et ses quatre murs blancs, c’était le faubourg Saint-Jacques avec la belle croix sculptée de son carrefour, l’église de Saint-Jacques du Haut-Pas, qui était alors gothique, pointue et charmante, Saint-Magloire, belle nef du quatorzième siècle, dont Napoléon fit un grenier à foin, Notre-Dame-des-Champs où il y avait des mosaïques byzantines. Enfin, après avoir laissé en plein champ le monastère des Chartreux, riche édifice contemporain du Palais de Justice, avec ses petits jardins à compartiments et les ruines mal hantées de Vauvert, l'œil tombait à l'occident sur les trois aiguilles romanes de Saint-Germain-des-Prés. Le bourg Saint-Germain, déjà une grosse commune, faisait quinze ou vingt rues derrière. Le clocher aigu de Saint-Sulpice marquait un des coins du bourg. Tout à côté on distinguait l'enceinte quadrilatérale de la foire Saint-Germain, où est aujourd'hui le marché; puis le pilori de l'abbé, jolie petite tour ronde bien coiffée d'un cône de plomb. La tuilerie était plus loin, et la rue du Four, qui menait au four banal, et le moulin sur sa butte, et la maladrerie, maisonnette isolée et mal vue. Mais ce qui attirait surtout le regard, et le fixait longtemps sur ce point, c'était l'abbaye elle-même. Il est certain que ce monastère, qui avait une grande mine et comme église et comme seigneurie, ce palais abbatial, où les évêques de Paris s'estimaient heureux de coucher une nuit, ce réfectoire auquel l'architecte avait donné l'air, la beauté et la splendide rosace d'une cathédrale, cette élégante chapelle de la Vierge, ce dortoir monumental, ces vastes jardins, cette herse, ce pont-levis, cette enveloppe de créneaux qui entaillait aux yeux la verdure des prés d'alentour, ces cours où reluisaient des hommes d'armes mêlés à des chapes d'or, le tout groupé et rallié autour des trois hautes flèches à plein cintre bien assises sur une abside gothique, faisaient une magnifique figure à l'horizon.

Quand enfin, après avoir longtemps considéré l'Université, vous vous tourniez vers la rive droite, vers la Ville, le spectacle changeait brusquement de caractère. La Ville, en effet, beaucoup plus grande que l'Université, était aussi moins une. Au premier aspect, on la voyait se diviser en plusieurs masses singulièrement distinctes. D'abord, au levant, dans cette partie de la Ville qui reçoit encore aujourd'hui son nom du marais où Camulogène embourba César, c'était un entassement de palais. Le pâté venait jusqu'au bord de l'eau. Quatre hôtels presque adhérents, Jouy, Sens, Barbeau, le logis de la Reine, miraient dans la Seine leurs combles d'ardoise coupés de sveltes tourelles. Ces quatre édifices emplissaient l'espace de la rue des Nonaindières à l'abbaye des Célestins, dont l'aiguille relevait gracieusement leur ligne de pignons et de créneaux. Quelques masures verdâtres penchées sur l'eau devant ces somptueux hôtels n'empêchaient pas de voir les beaux angles de leurs façades, leurs larges fenêtres carrées à croisées de pierre, leurs porches ogives surchargés de statues, les vives arêtes de leurs murs toujours nettement coupés, et tous ces charmants hasards d’architecture qui font que l’art gothique a l’air de recommencer ses combinaisons à chaque monument. Derrière ces palais, courait dans toutes les directions, tantôt refendue, palissadée et crénelée comme une citadelle, tantôt voilée de grands arbres comme une chartreuse, l’enceinte immense et multiforme de ce miraculeux hôtel de Saint-Pol, où le roi de France avait de quoi loger superbement vingt-deux princes de la qualité du Dauphin et du duc de Bourgogne avec leurs domestiques et leurs suites, sans compter les grands seigneurs, et l’empereur quand il venait voir Paris, et les lions, qui avaient leur hôtel à part dans l’hôtel royal. Disons ici qu’un appartement de prince ne se composait pas alors de moins de onze salles, depuis la chambre de parade jusqu’au priez-Dieu, sans parler des galeries, des bains, des étuves et autres «lieux superflus» dont chaque appartement était pourvu; sans parler des jardins particuliers de chaque hôte du roi; sans parler des cuisines, des celliers, des offices, des réfectoires généraux de la maison; des basses-cours où il y avait vingt-deux laboratoires généraux depuis la fourille jusqu’à l’échansonnerie; des jeux de mille sortes, le mail, la paume, la bague; des volières, des poissonneries, des ménageries, des écuries, des étables; des bibliothèques, des arsenaux et des fonderies. Voilà ce que c’était alors qu’un palais de roi, un Louvre, un hôtel Saint-Pol. Une cité dans la cité.

De la tour où nous nous sommes placés, l’hôtel Saint-Pol, presque à demi caché par les quatre grands logis dont nous venons de parler, était encore fort considérable et fort merveilleux à voir. On y distinguait très bien, quoique habilement soudés au bâtiment principal par de longues galeries à vitraux et à colonnettes, les trois hôtels que Charles V avait amalgamés à son palais, l’hôtel du Petit-Muce, avec la balustrade en dentelle qui ourlait gracieusement son toit; l’hôtel de l’abbé de Saint-Maur, ayant le relief d’un château fort, une grosse tour, des mâchicoulis, des meurtrières, des moineaux de fer, et sur la large porte saxonne l’écusson de l’abbé entre les deux entailles du pont-levis; l’hôtel du comte d’Étampes dont le donjon ruiné à son sommet s’arrondissait aux yeux, ébréché comme une crête de coq; çà et là, trois ou quatre vieux chênes faisant touffe ensemble comme d’énormes choux-fleurs, des ébats de cygnes dans les claires eaux des viviers, toutes plissées d’ombre et de lumière; force cours dont on voyait des bouts pittoresques; l’hôtel des Lions avec ses ogives basses sur de courts piliers saxons, ses herses de fer et son rugissement perpétuel; tout à travers cet ensemble la flèche écaillée de l’Ave Maria; à gauche, le logis du prévôt de Paris flanqué de quatre tourelles finement évidées; au milieu, au fond, l’hôtel Saint-Pol proprement dit avec ses façades multipliées, ses enrichissements successifs depuis Charles V, les excroissances hybrides dont la fantaisie des architectes l’avait chargé depuis deux siècles, avec toutes les absides de ses chapelles, tous les pignons de ses galeries, mille girouettes aux quatre vents, et ses deux hautes tours contiguës dont le toit conique, entouré de créneaux à sa base, avait l’air de ces chapeaux pointus dont le bord est relevé.

En continuant de monter les étages de cet amphithéâtre de palais développé au loin sur le sol, après avoir franchi un ravin profond creusé dans les toits de la Ville, lequel marquait le passage de la rue Saint-Antoine, l’œil, et nous nous bornons toujours aux principaux monuments, arrivait au logis d’Angoulême, vaste construction de plusieurs époques où il y avait des parties toutes neuves et très blanches, qui ne se fondaient guère mieux dans l’ensemble qu’une pièce rouge à un pourpoint bleu. Cependant le toit singulièrement aigu et élevé du palais moderne, hérissé de gouttières ciselées, couvert de lames de plomb où se roulaient en mille arabesques fantasques d’étincelantes incrustations de cuivre doré, ce toit si curieusement damasquiné s’élançait avec grâce du milieu des brunes ruines de l’ancien édifice, dont les vieilles grosses tours, bombées par l’âge comme des futailles s’affaissant sur elles-mêmes de vétusté et se déchirant du haut en bas, ressemblaient à de gros ventres déboutonnés. Derrière, s’élevait la forêt d’aiguilles du palais des Tournelles. Pas de coup d’œil au monde, ni à Chambord, ni à l’Alhambra, plus magique, plus aérien, plus prestigieux que cette futaie de flèches, de clochetons, de cheminées, de girouettes, de spirales, de vis, de lanternes trouées par le jour qui semblaient frappées à l’emporte-pièce, de pavillons, de tourelles en fuseaux, ou, comme on disait alors, de tournelles, toutes diverses de formes, de hauteur et d’attitude. On eût dit un gigantesque échiquier de pierre.

À droite des Tournelles, cette botte d’énormes tours d’un noir d’encre, entrant les unes dans les autres, et ficelées pour ainsi dire par un fossé circulaire, ce donjon beaucoup plus percé de meurtrières que de fenêtres, ce pont-levis toujours dressé, cette herse toujours tombée, c’est la Bastille. Ces espèces de becs noirs qui sortent d’entre les créneaux, et que vous prenez de loin pour des gouttières, ce sont des canons.

Sous leur boulet, au pied du formidable édifice, voici la porte Saint-Antoine, enfouie entre ses deux tours.

Au delà des Tournelles, jusqu'à la muraille de Charles V, se déroulait avec de riches compartiments de verdure et de fleurs un tapis velouté de cultures et de parcs royaux, au milieu desquels on reconnaissait, à son labyrinthe d'arbres et d'allées, le fameux jardin Dédalus que Louis XI avait donné à Coictier. L'observatoire du docteur s'élevait au-dessus du dédale comme une grosse colonne isolée ayant une maisonnette pour chapiteau, il s'est fait dans cette officine de terribles astrologies.

Là est aujourd'hui la place Royale.

Comme nous venons de le dire, le quartier de palais dont nous avons tâché de donner quelque idée au lecteur, en n'indiquant néanmoins que les sommités, emplissait l'angle que l'enceinte de Charles V faisait avec la Seine à l'orient. Le centre de la Ville était occupé par un monceau de maisons à peuple. C'était là en effet que se dégorgeaient les trois ponts de la Cité sur la rive droite, et les ponts font des maisons avant des palais. Cet amas d'habitations bourgeoises, pressées comme les alvéoles dans la ruche, avait sa beauté. Il en est des toits d'une capitale comme des vagues d'une mer, cela est grand. D'abord les rues, croisées et brouillées, faisaient dans le bloc cent figures amusantes. Autour des Halles, c'était comme une étoile à mille raies. Les rues Saint-Denis et Saint-Martin, avec leurs innombrables ramifications, montaient l'une après l'autre comme deux gros arbres qui mêlent leurs branches. Et puis, des lignes tortues, les rues de la Plâtrerie, de la Verrerie, de la Tixeranderie, etc., serpentaient sur le tout. Il y avait aussi de beaux édifices qui perçaient l'ondulation pétrifiée de cette mer de pignons. C'était, à la tête du Pont-aux-Changeurs derrière lequel on voyait mousser la Seine sous les roues du Pont-aux-Meuniers, c'était le Châtelet, non plus tour romaine comme sous Julien l'Apostat, mais tour féodale du treizième siècle, et d'une pierre si dure que le pic en trois heures n'en levait pas l'épaisseur du poing. C'était le riche clocher carré de Saint-Jacques-de-la-Boucherie, avec ses angles tout émoussés de sculptures, déjà admirable, quoiqu'il ne fût pas achevé au quinzième siècle. Il lui manquait en particulier ces quatre monstres qui, aujourd'hui encore, perchés aux encoignures de son toit, ont l'air de quatre sphinx qui donnent à deviner au nouveau Paris l'énigme de l'ancien; Rault, le sculpteur, ne les posa qu'en 1526, et il eut vingt francs pour sa peine. C'était la Maison-aux-Piliers, ouverte sur cette place de Grève dont nous avons donné quelque idée au lecteur. C'était Saint-Gervais, qu'un portail *de bon goût* a gâté depuis; Saint-Méry dont les vieilles ogives étaient presque encore des pleins cintres;

Saint-Jean dont la magnifique aiguille était proverbiale; c'étaient vingt autres monuments qui ne dédaignaient pas d'enfouir leurs merveilles dans ce chaos de rues noires, étroites et profondes. Ajoutez les croix de pierre sculptées plus prodiguées encore dans les carrefours que les gibets; le cimetière des Innocents dont on apercevait au loin par-dessus les toits l'enceinte architecturale; le pilori des Halles, dont on voyait le faîte entre deux cheminées de la rue de la Cossonnerie; l'échelle de la Croix-du-Trahoir dans son carrefour toujours noir de peuple; les masures circulaires de la Halle au blé; les tronçons de l'ancienne clôture de Philippe-Auguste qu'on distinguait çà et là, noyés dans les maisons, tours rongées de lierre, portes ruinées, pans de murs croulants et déformés; le quai avec ses mille boutiques et ses écorcheries saignantes; la Seine chargée de bateaux du Port-au-Foin au For-l'Évêque; et vous aurez une image confuse de ce qu'était en 1482 le trapèze central de la Ville.

Avec ces deux quartiers, l'un d'hôtels, l'autre de maisons, le troisième élément de l'aspect qu'offrait la Ville, c'était une longue zone d'abbayes qui la bordait dans presque tout son pourtour, du levant au couchant, et en arrière de l'enceinte de fortifications qui fermait Paris lui faisait une seconde enceinte intérieure de couvents et de chapelles. Ainsi, immédiatement à côté du parc des Tournelles, entre la rue Saint-Antoine et la vieille rue du Temple, il y avait Sainte-Catherine avec son immense culture, qui n'était bornée que par la muraille de Paris. Entre la vieille et la nouvelle rue du Temple, il y avait le Temple, sinistre faisceau de tours, haut, debout et isolé au milieu d'un vaste enclos crénelé. Entre la rue Neuve-du-Temple et la rue Saint-Martin, c'était l'abbaye de Saint-Martin, au milieu de ses jardins, superbe église fortifiée, dont la ceinture de tours, dont la tiare de clochers, ne le cédaient en force et en splendeur qu'à Saint-Germain-des-Prés. Entre les deux rues Saint-Martin et Saint-Denis, se développait l'enclos de la Trinité. Enfin, entre la rue Saint-Denis et la rue Montorgueil, les Filles-Dieu. À côté, on distinguait les toits pourris et l'enceinte dépavée de la Cour des Miracles. C'était le seul anneau profane qui se mêlât à cette dévote chaîne de couvents.

Enfin, le quatrième compartiment qui se dessinait de lui-même dans l'agglomération des toits de la rive droite, et qui occupait l'angle occidental de la clôture et le bord de l'eau en aval, c'était un nouveau nœud de palais et d'hôtels serrés aux pieds du Louvre. Le vieux Louvre de Philippe-Auguste, cet édifice démesuré dont la grosse tour ralliait vingt-trois maîtresses tours autour d'elle, sans compter les tourelles, semblait de loin enchâssé dans les combles gothiques de l'hôtel d'Alençon et du Petit-Bourbon. Cette hydre de tours, gardienne géante de Paris, avec ses vingt-quatre têtes toujours dressées, avec ses croupes monstrueuses, plombées ou écaillées d'ardoises, et toutes ruisselantes de reflets métalliques, terminait d'une manière surprenante la configuration de la Ville au couchant.

Ainsi, un immense pâté, ce que les Romains appelaient *insula*, de maisons bourgeoises, flanqué à droite et à gauche de deux blocs de palais couronnés l'un par le Louvre, l'autre par les Tournelles, bordé au nord d'une longue ceinture d'abbayes et d'enclos cultivés, le tout amalgamé et fondu au regard; sur ces mille édifices, dont les toits de tuiles et d'ardoises découpaient les uns sur les autres tant de chaînes bizarres, les clochers tatoués, gaufrés et guillochés des quarante-quatre églises de la rive droite; des myriades de rues au travers; pour limite d'un côté une clôture de hautes murailles à tours carrées (celle de l'Université était à tours rondes); de l'autre, la Seine coupée de ponts et charriant force bateaux: voilà la Ville au quinzième siècle.

Au delà des murailles, quelques faubourgs se pressaient aux portes, mais moins nombreux et plus épars que ceux de l'Université. C'étaient, derrière la Bastille, vingt masures pelotonnées autour des curieuses sculptures de la Croix-Faubin et des arcs-boutants de l'abbaye Saint-Antoine des Champs; puis Popincourt, perdu dans les blés; puis la Courtille, joyeux village de cabarets; le bourg Saint-Laurent avec son église dont le clocher de loin semblait s'ajouter aux tours pointues de la porte Saint-Martin; le faubourg Saint-Denis avec le vaste enclos de Saint-Ladre; hors de la porte Montmartre, la Grange-Batelière ceinte de murailles blanches; derrière elle, avec ses pentes de craie, Montmartre qui avait alors presque autant d'églises que de moulins, et qui n'a gardé que les moulins, car la société ne demande plus maintenant que le pain du corps. Enfin, au delà du Louvre on voyait s'allonger dans les prés le faubourg Saint-Honoré, déjà fort considérable alors, et verdoyer la Petite-Bretagne, et se dérouler le Marché-aux-Pourceaux, au centre duquel s'arrondissait l'horrible fourneau à bouillir les faux-monnayeurs. Entre la Courtille et Saint-Laurent votre œil avait déjà remarqué au couronnement d'une hauteur accroupie sur des plaines désertes une espèce d'édifice qui ressemblait de loin à une colonnade en ruine debout sur un soubassement déchaussé. Ce n'était ni un Parthénon, ni un temple de Jupiter Olympien. C'était Montfaucon.

Maintenant, si le dénombrement de tant d'édifices, quelque sommaire que nous l'ayons voulu faire, n'a pas pulvérisé, à mesure que nous la construisions, dans l'esprit du lecteur, l'image générale du vieux Paris, nous la résumerons en quelques mots. Au centre, l'île de la Cité, ressemblant par sa forme à une énorme tortue et faisant sortir ses ponts écaillés de tuiles comme des pattes, de dessous sa grise carapace de toits. À gauche, le trapèze monolithe, ferme, dense, serré, hérissé, de l'Université. À droite, le vaste demi-cercle de la Ville beaucoup plus mêlé de jardins et de monuments. Les trois blocs, Cité, Université, Ville, marbrés de rues sans nombre. Tout au travers, la Seine, la «nourricière Seine», comme dit le père Du Breul, obstruée d'îles, de ponts et de bateaux. Tout autour, une plaine immense, rapiécée de mille sortes de cultures, semée de beaux villages; à gauche, Issy, Vanvres, Vaugirard, Montrouge, Gentilly avec sa tour ronde et sa tour carrée, etc.; à droite, vingt autres depuis Conflans jusqu'à la Ville-l'Évêque. À l'horizon, un ourlet de collines disposées en cercle comme le rebord du bassin. Enfin, au loin, à l'orient, Vincennes et ses sept tours quadrangulaires; au sud, Bicêtre et ses tourelles pointues; au septentrion, Saint-Denis et son aiguille; à l'occident, Saint-Cloud et son donjon. Voilà le Paris que voyaient du haut des tours de Notre-Dame les corbeaux qui vivaient en 1482.

C'est pourtant de cette ville que Voltaire a dit qu'*avant Louis XIV elle ne possédait que quatre beaux monuments*: le dôme de la Sorbonne, le Val-de-Grâce, le Louvre moderne, et je ne sais plus le quatrième, le Luxembourg peut-être. Heureusement Voltaire n'en a pas moins fait *Candide*, et n'en est pas moins de tous les hommes qui se sont succédé dans la longue série de l'humanité celui qui a le mieux eu le rire diabolique. Cela prouve d'ailleurs qu'on peut être un beau génie et ne rien comprendre à un art dont on n'est pas. Molière ne croyait-il pas faire beaucoup d'honneur à Raphaël et à Michel-Ange en les appelant *ces Mignards de leur âge*?

Revenons à Paris et au quinzième siècle.

Ce n'était pas alors seulement une belle ville; c'était une ville homogène, un produit architectural et historique du moyen âge, une chronique de pierre. C'était une cité formée de deux couches seulement, la couche romane et la couche gothique, car la couche romaine avait disparu depuis longtemps, excepté aux Thermes de Julien où elle perçait encore la croûte épaisse du moyen âge. Quant à la couche celtique, on n'en trouvait même plus d'échantillons en creusant des puits.

Cinquante ans plus tard, lorsque la renaissance vint mêler à cette unité si sévère et pourtant si variée le luxe éblouissant de ses fantaisies et de ses systèmes, ses débauches de pleins cintres romains, de colonnes grecques et de surbaissements gothiques, sa sculpture si tendre et si idéale, son goût particulier d'arabesques et d'acanthes, son paganisme architectural contemporain de Luther, Paris fut peut-être plus beau encore, quoique moins harmonieux à l'œil et à la pensée. Mais ce splendide moment dura peu. La renaissance ne fut pas impartiale; elle ne se contenta pas d'édifier, elle voulut jeter bas. Il est vrai qu'elle avait besoin de place. Aussi le Paris gothique ne fut-il complet qu'une minute. On achevait à peine Saint-Jacques-de-la-Boucherie qu'on commençait la démolition du vieux Louvre.

Depuis, la grande ville a été se déformant de jour en jour. Le Paris gothique sous lequel s'effaçait le Paris roman s'est effacé à son tour. Mais peut-on dire quel Paris l'a remplacé?

Il y a le Paris de Catherine de Médicis, aux Tuileries, le Paris de Henri II, à l'Hôtel de Ville, deux édifices encore d'un grand goût; le Paris de Henri IV, à la place Royale: façades de briques à coins de pierre et à toits d'ardoise, des maisons tricolores; le Paris de Louis XIII, au Val-de-Grâce: une architecture écrasée et trapue, des voûtes en anses de panier, je ne sais quoi de ventru dans la colonne et de bossu dans le dôme; le Paris de Louis XIV, aux Invalides: grand, riche, doré et froid; le Paris de Louis XV, à Saint-Sulpice: des volutes, des nœuds de rubans, des nuages, des vermicelles et des chicorées, le tout en pierre; le Paris de Louis XVI, au Panthéon: Saint-Pierre de Rome mal copié (l'édifice s'est tassé gauchement, ce qui n'en a pas raccommodé les lignes); le Paris de la République, à l'École de médecine: un pauvre goût grec et romain qui ressemble au Colisée ou au Parthénon comme la constitution de l'an III aux lois de Minos, on l'appelle en architecture *le goût messidor*; le Paris de Napoléon, à la place Vendôme: celui-là est sublime, une colonne de bronze faite avec des canons; le Paris de la Restauration, à la Bourse: une colonnade fort blanche supportant une frise fort lisse, le tout est carré et a coûté vingt millions.

À chacun de ces monuments caractéristiques se rattache par une similitude de goût, de façon et d'attitude, une certaine quantité de maisons éparses dans divers quartiers et que l'œil du connaisseur distingue et date aisément. Quand on sait voir, on retrouve l'esprit d'un siècle et la physionomie d'un roi jusque dans un marteau de porte.

Le Paris actuel n’a donc aucune physionomie générale. C’est une collection d’échantillons de plusieurs siècles, et les plus beaux ont disparu. La capitale ne s’accroît qu’en maisons, et quelles maisons! Du train dont va Paris, il se renouvellera tous les cinquante ans. Aussi la signification historique de son architecture s’efface-t-elle tous les jours. Les monuments y deviennent de plus en plus rares, et il semble qu’on les voie s’engloutir peu à peu, noyés dans les maisons. Nos pères avaient un Paris de pierre; nos fils auront un Paris de plâtre.

Quant aux monuments modernes du Paris neuf, nous nous dispenserons volontiers d’en parler. Ce n’est pas que nous ne les admirions comme il convient. La Sainte-Geneviève de M. Soufflot est certainement le plus beau gâteau de Savoie qu’on ait jamais fait en pierre. Le palais de la Légion d’honneur est aussi un morceau de pâtisserie fort distingué. Le dôme de la Halle au blé est une casquette de jockey anglais sur une grande échelle. Les tours Saint-Sulpice sont deux grosses clarinettes, et c’est une forme comme une autre; le télégraphe, tortu et grimaçant, fait un aimable accident sur leur toiture. Saint-Roch a un portail qui n’est comparable pour la magnificence qu’à Saint-Thomas d’Aquin. Il a aussi un calvaire en ronde-bosse dans une cave et un soleil de bois doré. Ce sont là des choses tout à fait merveilleuses. La lanterne du labyrinthe du Jardin des Plantes est aussi fort ingénieuse. Quant au palais de la Bourse, qui est grec par sa colonnade, romain par le plein cintre de ses portes et fenêtres, de la renaissance par sa grande voûte surbaissée, c’est indubitablement un monument très correct et très pur. La preuve, c’est qu’il est couronné d’un attique comme on n’en voyait pas à Athènes, belle ligne droite, gracieusement coupée çà et là par des tuyaux de poêle. Ajoutons que, s’il est de règle que l’architecture d’un édifice soit adaptée à sa destination de telle façon que cette destination se dénonce d’elle-même au seul aspect de l’édifice, on ne saurait trop s’émerveiller d’un monument qui peut être indifféremment un palais de roi, une chambre des communes, un hôtel de ville, un collège, un manège, une académie, un entrepôt, un tribunal, un musée, une caserne, un sépulcre, un temple, un théâtre. En attendant, c’est une Bourse. Un monument doit en outre être approprié au climat. Celui-ci est évidemment construit exprès pour notre ciel froid et pluvieux. Il a un toit presque plat comme en Orient, ce qui fait que l’hiver, quand il neige, on balaye le toit, et il est certain qu’un toit est fait pour être balayé. Quant à cette destination dont nous parlions tout à l’heure, il la remplit à merveille; il est Bourse en France, comme il eût été temple en Grèce. Il est vrai que l’architecte a eu assez de peine à cacher le cadran de l’horloge qui eût détruit la pureté des belles lignes de la façade; mais en revanche on a cette colonnade qui circule autour du monument, et sous laquelle, dans les grands jours de solennité religieuse, peut se développer majestueusement la théorie des agents de change et des courtiers de commerce.

Ce sont là sans aucun doute de très superbes monuments. Joignons-y force belles rues, amusantes et variées comme la rue de Rivoli, et je ne désespère pas que Paris vu à vol de ballon ne présente un jour aux yeux cette richesse de lignes, cette opulence de détails, cette diversité d’aspects, ce je ne sais quoi de grandiose dans le simple et d’inattendu dans le beau qui caractérise un damier.

Toutefois, si admirable que vous semble le Paris d’à présent, refaites le Paris du quinzième siècle, reconstruisez-le dans votre pensée, regardez le jour à travers cette haie surprenante d’aiguilles, de tours et de clochers, répandez au milieu de l’immense ville, déchirez à la pointe des îles, plissez aux arches des ponts la Seine avec ses larges flaques vertes et jaunes, plus changeante qu’une robe de serpent, détachez nettement sur un horizon d’azur le profil gothique de ce vieux Paris, faites-en flotter le contour dans une brume d’hiver qui s’accroche à ses nombreuses cheminées; noyez-le dans une nuit profonde, et regardez le jeu bizarre des ténèbres et des lumières dans ce sombre labyrinthe d’édifices; jetez-y un rayon de lune qui le dessine vaguement, et fasse sortir du brouillard les grandes têtes des tours; ou reprenez cette noire silhouette, ravivez d’ombre les mille angles aigus des flèches et des pignons, et faites-la saillir, plus dentelée qu’une mâchoire de requin, sur le ciel de cuivre du couchant. — Et puis, comparez.

Et si vous voulez recevoir de la vieille ville une impression que la moderne ne saurait plus vous donner, montez, un matin de grande fête, au soleil levant de Pâques ou de la Pentecôte, montez sur quelque point élevé d’où vous dominiez la capitale entière, et assistez à l’éveil des carillons. Voyez à un signal parti du ciel, car c’est le soleil qui le donne, ces mille églises tressaillir à la fois. Ce sont d’abord des tintements épars, allant d’une église à l’autre, comme lorsque des musiciens s’avertissent qu’on va commencer; puis tout à coup voyez, car il semble qu’en certains instants l’oreille aussi a sa vue, voyez s’élever au même moment de chaque clocher comme une colonne de bruit, comme une fumée d’harmonie. D’abord, la vibration de chaque cloche monte droite, pure et pour ainsi dire isolée des autres, dans le ciel splendide du matin. Puis, peu à peu, en grossissant elles se fondent, elles se mêlent, elles s’effacent l’une dans l’autre, elles s’amalgament dans un magnifique concert. Ce n’est plus qu’une masse de vibrations sonores qui se dégage sans cesse des innombrables clochers, qui flotte, ondule, bondit, tourbillonne sur la ville, et prolonge bien au delà de l’horizon le cercle assourdissant de ses oscillations. Cependant cette mer d’harmonie n’est point un chaos. Si grosse et si profonde qu’elle soit, elle n’a point perdu sa transparence. Vous y voyez serpenter à part chaque groupe de notes qui s’échappe des sonneries; vous y pouvez suivre le dialogue, tour à tour grave et criard, de la crécelle et du bourdon; vous y voyez sauter les octaves d’un clocher à l’autre; vous les regardez s’élancer ailées, légères et sifflantes de la cloche d’argent, tomber cassées et boiteuses de la cloche de bois; vous admirez au milieu d’elles la riche gamme qui descend et remonte sans cesse les sept cloches de Saint-Eustache; vous voyez courir tout au travers des notes claires et rapides qui font trois ou quatre zigzags lumineux et s’évanouissent comme des éclairs. Là-bas, c’est l’abbaye Saint-Martin, chanteuse aigre et fêlée; ici, la voix sinistre et bourrue de la Bastille; à l’autre bout, la grosse Tour du Louvre, avec sa basse-taille. Le royal carillon du Palais jette sans relâche de tous côtés des trilles resplendissants sur lesquels tombent à temps égaux les lourdes couppetées du beffroi de Notre-Dame, qui les font étinceler comme l’enclume sous le marteau. Par intervalles vous voyez passer des sons de toute forme qui viennent de la triple volée de Saint-Germain-des-Prés. Puis encore de temps en temps cette masse de bruits sublimes s’entr’ouvre et donne passage à la strette de l’Ave-Maria qui éclate et pétille comme une aigrette d’étoiles. Au-dessous, au plus profond du concert, vous distinguez confusément le chant intérieur des églises qui transpire à travers les pores vibrants de leurs voûtes. — Certes, c’est là un opéra qui vaut la peine d’être écouté. D’ordinaire, la rumeur qui s’échappe de Paris le jour, c’est la ville qui parle; la nuit, c’est la ville qui respire: ici, c’est la ville qui chante. Prêtez donc l’oreille à ce tutti des clochers, répandez sur l’ensemble le murmure d’un demi-million d’hommes, la plainte éternelle du fleuve, les souffles infinis du vent, le quatuor grave et lointain des quatre forêts disposées sur les collines de l’horizon comme d’immenses buffets d’orgue, éteignez-y ainsi que dans une demi-teinte tout ce que le carillon central aurait de trop rauque et de trop aigu, et dites si vous connaissez au monde quelque chose de plus riche, de plus joyeux, de plus doré, de plus éblouissant que ce tumulte de cloches et de sonneries; que cette fournaise de musique; que ces dix mille voix d’airain chantant à la fois dans des flûtes de pierre hautes de trois cents pieds; que cette cité qui n’est plus qu’un orchestre; que cette symphonie qui fait le bruit d’une tempête.

LIVRE QUATRIÈME

I

LES BONNES ÂMES

Il y avait seize ans à l’époque où se passe cette histoire que, par un beau matin de dimanche de la Quasimodo, une créature vivante avait été déposée après la messe dans l’église de Notre-Dame, sur le bois de lit scellé dans le parvis à main gauche, vis-à-vis ce *grand image* de saint Christophe que la figure sculptée en pierre de messire Antoine des Essarts, chevalier, regardait à genoux depuis 1413, lorsqu’on s’est avisé de jeter bas et le saint et le fidèle. C’est sur ce bois de lit qu’il était d’usage d’exposer les enfants trouvés à la charité publique. Les prenait là qui voulait. Devant le bois de lit était un bassin de cuivre pour les aumônes.

L’espèce d’être vivant qui gisait sur cette planche le matin de la Quasimodo en l’an du Seigneur 1467 paraissait exciter à un haut degré la curiosité du groupe assez considérable qui s’était amassé autour du bois de lit. Le groupe était formé en grande partie de personnes du beau sexe. Ce n’étaient presque que des vieilles femmes.

Au premier rang et les plus inclinées sur le lit, on en remarquait quatre qu’à leur cagoule grise, sorte de soutane, on devinait attachées à quelque confrérie dévote. Je ne vois point pourquoi l’histoire ne transmettrait pas à la postérité les noms de ces quatre discrètes et vénérables demoiselles. C’étaient Agnès la Herme, Jehanne de la Tarme, Henriette la Gaultière, Gauchère la Violette, toutes quatre veuves, toutes quatre bonnes-femmes de la chapelle Étienne-Haudry, sorties de leur maison, avec la permission de leur maîtresse et conformément aux statuts de Pierre d’Ailly, pour venir entendre le sermon.

Du reste, si ces braves haudriettes observaient pour le moment les statuts de Pierre d’Ailly, elles violaient, certes, à cœur joie, ceux de Michel de Brache et du cardinal de Pise qui leur prescrivaient si inhumainement le silence.

«Qu’est-ce que c’est que cela, ma sœur? disait Agnès Gauchère, en considérant la petite créature exposée qui glapissait et se tordait sur le lit de bois, tout effrayée de tant de regards.

— Qu’est-ce que nous allons devenir, disait Jehanne, si c’est comme cela qu’ils font les enfants à présent?

— Je ne me connais pas en enfants, reprenait Agnès, mais ce doit être un péché de regarder celui-ci.

— Ce n’est pas un enfant, Agnès.

— C’est un singe manqué, observait Gauchère.

— C’est un miracle, reprenait Henriette la Gaultière.

— Alors, remarquait Agnès, c’est le troisième depuis le dimanche du *Lætare*. Car il n’y a pas huit jours que nous avons eu le miracle du moqueur de pèlerins puni divinement par Notre-Dame d’Aubervilliers, et c’était le second miracle du mois.

— C’est un vrai monstre d’abomination que ce soi-disant enfant trouvé, reprenait Jehanne.

— Il braille à faire sourd un chantre, poursuivait Gauchère. — Tais-toi donc, petit hurleur!

— Dire que c’est M. de Reims qui envoie cette énormité à M. de Paris! ajoutait la Gaultière en joignant les mains.

— J’imagine, disait Agnès la Herme, que c’est une bête, un animal, le produit d’un juif avec une truie; quelque chose enfin qui n’est pas chrétien et qu’il faut jeter à l’eau ou au feu.

— J’espère bien, reprenait la Gaultière, qu’il ne sera postulé par personne.

— Ah mon Dieu! s’écriait Agnès, ces pauvres nourrices qui sont là dans le logis des enfants trouvés qui fait le bas de la ruelle en descendant la rivière, tout à côté de monseigneur l’évêque, si on allait leur apporter ce petit monstre à allaiter! J’aimerais mieux donner à téter à un vampire.

— Est-elle innocente, cette pauvre la Herme! reprenait Jehanne. Vous ne voyez pas, ma sœur, que ce petit monstre a au moins quatre ans et qu’il aurait moins appétit de votre tétin que d’un tourne-broche.»

En effet, ce n’était pas un nouveau-né que «ce petit monstre». (Nous serions fort empêché nous-même de le qualifier autrement.) C’était une petite masse fort anguleuse et fort remuante, emprisonnée dans un sac de toile imprimé au chiffre de messire Guillaume Chartier, pour lors évêque de Paris, avec une tête qui sortait. Cette tête était chose assez difforme. On n’y voyait qu’une forêt de cheveux roux, un œil, une bouche et des dents. L’œil pleurait, la bouche criait, et les dents ne paraissaient demander qu’à mordre.

Le tout se débattait dans le sac, au grand ébahissement de la foule qui grossissait et se renouvelait sans cesse à l’entour.

Dame Aloïse de Gondelaurier, une femme riche et noble qui tenait une jolie fille d’environ six ans à la main et qui traînait un long voile à la corne d’or de sa coiffe, s’arrêta en passant devant le lit, et considéra un moment la malheureuse créature, pendant que sa charmante petite fille Fleur-de-Lys de Gondelaurier, toute vêtue de soie et de velours, épelait avec son joli doigt l’écriteau permanent accroché au bois de lit: ENFANTS TROUVÉS.

«En vérité, dit la dame en se détournant avec dégoût, je croyais qu’on n’exposait ici que des enfants.»

Elle tourna le dos, en jetant dans le bassin un florin d’argent qui retentit parmi les liards et fit ouvrir de grands yeux aux pauvres bonnes-femmes de la chapelle Étienne-Haudry.

Un moment après, le grave et savant Robert Mistricolle, protonotaire du roi, passa avec un énorme missel sous un bras et sa femme sous l’autre (damoiselle Guillemette la Mairesse), ayant de la sorte à ses côtés ses deux régulateurs spirituel et temporel.

«Enfant trouvé! dit-il après avoir examiné l’objet. Trouvé apparemment sur le parapet du fleuve Phlégéto!

— On ne lui voit qu’un œil, observa demoiselle Guillemette. Il a sur l’autre une verrue.

— Ce n’est pas une verrue, reprit maître Robert Mistricolle. C’est un œuf qui renferme un autre démon tout pareil, lequel porte un autre petit œuf qui contient un autre diable, et ainsi de suite.

— Comment savez-vous cela? demanda Guillemette la Mairesse.

— Je le sais pertinemment, répondit le protonotaire.

— Monsieur le protonotaire, demanda Gauchère, que pronostiquez-vous de ce prétendu enfant trouvé?

— Les plus grands malheurs, répondit Mistricolle.

— Ah! mon Dieu! dit une vieille dans l’auditoire, avec cela qu’il y a eu une considérable pestilence l’an passé et qu’on dit que les Anglais vont débarquer en compagnie à Harefleu.

— Cela empêchera peut-être la reine de venir à Paris au mois de septembre, reprit une autre. La marchandise va déjà si mal!

— Je suis d’avis, s’écria Jehanne de la Tarme, qu’il vaudrait mieux pour les manants de Paris que ce petit magicien-là fût couché sur un fagot que sur une planche.

— Un beau fagot flambant! ajouta la vieille.

— Cela serait plus prudent», dit Mistricolle.

Depuis quelques moments un jeune prêtre écoutait le raisonnement des haudriettes et les sentences du protonotaire. C’était une figure sévère, un front large, un regard profond. Il écarta silencieusement la foule, examina le *petit magicien*, et étendit la main sur lui. Il était temps. Car toutes les dévotes se léchaient déjà les barbes du *beau fagot flambant*.

«J’adopte cet enfant», dit le prêtre.

Il le prit dans sa soutane, et l’emporta. L’assistance le suivit d’un œil effaré. Un moment après, il avait disparu par la Porte-Rouge qui conduisait alors de l’église au cloître.

Quand la première surprise fut passée, Jehanne de la Tarme se pencha à l’oreille de la Gaultière:

«Je vous avais bien dit, ma sœur, que ce jeune clerc monsieur Claude Frollo est un sorcier.»

II

CLAUDE FROLLO

En effet, Claude Frollo n'était pas un personnage vulgaire.

Il appartenait à une de ces familles moyennes qu'on appelait indifféremment dans le langage impertinent du siècle dernier haute bourgeoisie ou petite noblesse. Cette famille avait hérité des frères Paclet le fief de Tirechappe, qui relevait de l'évêque de Paris, et dont les vingt-une maisons avaient été au treizième siècle l'objet de tant de plaidoiries par-devant l'official. Comme possesseur de ce fief Claude Frollo était un des *sept vingt-un* seigneurs prétendant censive dans Paris et ses faubourgs; et l'on a pu voir longtemps son nom inscrit en cette qualité, entre l'hôtel de Tancarville, appartenant à maître François Le Rez, et le collège de Tours, dans le cartulaire déposé à Saint-Martin-des-Champs.

Claude Frollo avait été destiné dès l'enfance par ses parents à l'état ecclésiastique. On lui avait appris à lire dans du latin. Il avait été élevé à baisser les yeux et à parler bas. Tout enfant, son père l'avait cloîtré au collège de Torchi en l'Université. C'est là qu'il avait grandi, sur le missel et le Lexicon.

C'était d'ailleurs un enfant triste, grave, sérieux, qui étudiait ardemment et apprenait vite. Il ne jetait pas grand cri dans les récréations, se mêlait peu aux bacchanales de la rue du Fouarre, ne savait ce que c'était que *dare alapas et capillos laniare*, et n'avait fait aucune figure dans cette mutinerie de 1463 que les annalistes enregistrent gravement sous le titre de: «Sixième trouble de l'Université». Il lui arrivait rarement de railler les pauvres écoliers de Montagu pour les *cappettes* dont ils tiraient leur nom, ou les boursiers du Collège de Dormans pour leur tonsure rase et leur surtout tri-parti de drap pers, bleu et violet, *azurini coloris et bruni*, comme dit la charte du cardinal des Quatre-Couronnes.

En revanche, il était assidu aux grandes et petites écoles de la rue Saint-Jean-de-Beauvais. Le premier écolier que l'abbé de Saint-Pierre de Val, au moment de commencer sa lecture de droit canon, apercevait toujours collé vis-à-vis de sa chaire à un pilier de l'école Saint-Vendregesile, c'était Claude Frollo, armé de son écritoire de corne, mâchant sa plume, griffonnant sur son genou usé, et l'hiver soufflant dans ses doigts. Le premier auditeur que messire Miles d’Isliers, docteur en Décret, voyait arriver chaque lundi matin, tout essoufflé, à l’ouverture des portes de l’école du Chef-Saint-Denis, c’était Claude Frollo. Aussi, à seize ans, le jeune clerc eût pu tenir tête, en théologie mystique à un père de l’église, en théologie canonique à un père des conciles, en théologie scolastique à un docteur de Sorbonne.

La théologie dépassée, il s’était précipité dans le Décret. Du *Maître des Sentences*, il était tombé aux *Capitulaires de Charlemagne*. Et successivement il avait dévoré, dans son appétit de science, décrétales sur décrétales, celles de Théodore, évêque d’Hispale, celles de Bouchard, évêque de Worms, celles d’Yves, évêque de Chartres; puis le Décret de Gratien qui succéda aux Capitulaires de Charlemagne; puis le recueil de Grégoire IX; puis l’épître *Super specula* d’Honorius III. Il se fit claire, il se fit familière cette vaste et tumultueuse période du droit civil et du droit canon en lutte et en travail dans le chaos du moyen âge, période que l’évêque Théodore ouvre en 618 et que ferme en 1227 le pape Grégoire.

Le Décret digéré, il se jeta sur la médecine, et sur les arts libéraux. Il étudia la science des herbes, la science des onguents. Il devint expert aux fièvres et aux contusions, aux navrures et aux apostumes. Jacques d’Espars l’eût reçu médecin physicien, Richard Hellain, médecin chirurgien. Il parcourut également tous les degrés de licence, maîtrise et doctorerie des arts. Il étudia les langues, le latin, le grec, l’hébreu, triple sanctuaire alors bien peu fréquenté. C’était une véritable fièvre d’acquérir et de thésauriser en fait de science. À dix-huit ans, les quatre facultés y avaient passé. Il semblait au jeune homme que la vie avait un but unique: savoir.

Ce fut vers cette époque environ que l’été excessif de 1466 fit éclater cette grande peste qui enleva plus de quarante mille créatures dans la vicomté de Paris, et entre autres, dit Jean de Troyes, «maître Arnoul, astrologien du roi, qui était fort homme de bien, sage et plaisant». Le bruit se répandit dans l’Université que la rue Tirechappe était en particulier dévastée par la maladie. C’est là que résidaient, au milieu de leur fief, les parents de Claude. Le jeune écolier courut fort alarmé à la maison paternelle. Quand il y entra, son père et sa mère étaient morts de la veille. Un tout jeune frère qu’il avait au maillot vivait encore et criait abandonné dans son berceau. C’était tout ce qui restait à Claude de sa famille. Le jeune homme prit l’enfant sous son bras, et sortit pensif. Jusque-là il n’avait vécu que dans la science, il commençait à vivre dans la vie.

Cette catastrophe fut une crise dans l’existence de Claude. Orphelin, aîné, chef de famille à dix-neuf ans, il se sentit rudement rappelé des rêveries de l’école aux réalités de ce monde. Alors, ému de pitié, il se prit de passion et de dévouement pour cet enfant, son frère; chose étrange et douce qu’une affection humaine à lui qui n’avait encore aimé que des livres.

Cette affection se développa à un point singulier. Dans une âme aussi neuve, ce fut comme un premier amour. Séparé depuis l’enfance de ses parents, qu’il avait à peine connus, cloîtré et comme muré dans ses livres, avide avant tout d’étudier et d’apprendre, exclusivement attentif jusqu’alors à son intelligence qui se dilatait dans la science, à son imagination qui grandissait dans les lettres, le pauvre écolier n’avait pas encore eu le temps de sentir la place de son cœur. Ce jeune frère sans père ni mère, ce petit enfant, qui lui tombait brusquement du ciel sur les bras, fit de lui un homme nouveau. Il s’aperçut qu’il y avait autre chose dans le monde que les spéculations de la Sorbonne et les vers d’Homerus, que l’homme avait besoin d’affections, que la vie sans tendresse et sans amour n’était qu’un rouage sec, criard et déchirant; seulement il se figura, car il était dans l’âge où les illusions ne sont encore remplacées que par des illusions, que les affections de sang et de famille étaient les seules nécessaires, et qu’un petit frère à aimer suffisait pour remplir toute une existence.

Il se jeta donc dans l’amour de son petit Jehan avec la passion d’un caractère déjà profond, ardent, concentré. Cette pauvre frêle créature, jolie, blonde, rose et frisée, cet orphelin sans autre appui qu’un orphelin, le remuait jusqu’au fond des entrailles; et, grave penseur qu’il était, il se mit à réfléchir sur Jehan avec une miséricorde infinie. Il en prit souci et soin comme de quelque chose de très fragile et de très recommandé. Il fut à l’enfant plus qu’un frère, il lui devint une mère.

Le petit Jehan avait perdu sa mère, qu’il tétait encore. Claude le mit en nourrice. Outre le fief de Tirechappe, il avait eu en héritage de son père le fief du Moulin, qui relevait de la tour carrée de Gentilly. C’était un moulin sur une colline, près du château de Winchestre (Bicêtre). Il y avait la meunière qui nourrissait un bel enfant; ce n’était pas loin de l’Université. Claude lui porta lui-même son petit Jehan.

Dès lors, se sentant un fardeau à traîner, il prit la vie très au sérieux. La pensée de son petit frère devint non seulement la récréation, mais encore le but de ses études, il résolut de se consacrer tout entier à un avenir dont il répondait devant Dieu, et de n’avoir jamais d’autre épouse, d’autre enfant que le bonheur et la fortune de son frère. Il se rattacha donc plus que jamais à sa vocation cléricale. Son mérite, sa science, sa qualité de vassal immédiat de l’évêque de Paris, lui ouvraient toutes grandes les portes de l’église. À vingt ans, par dispense spéciale du saint-siège, il était prêtre, et desservait, comme le plus jeune des chapelains de Notre-Dame, l’autel qu’on appelle, à cause de la messe tardive qui s’y dit, *altare pigrorum*.

Là, plus que jamais plongé dans ses chers livres qu’il ne quittait que pour courir une heure au fief du Moulin, ce mélange de savoir et d’austérité, si rare à son âge, l’avait rendu promptement le respect et l’admiration du cloître. Du cloître, sa réputation de savant avait été au peuple, où elle avait un peu tourné, chose fréquente alors, au renom de sorcier.

C’est au moment où il revenait, le jour de la Quasimodo, de dire sa messe des paresseux à leur autel, qui était à côté de la porte du chœur tendant à la nef, à droite, proche l’image de la Vierge, que son attention avait été éveillée par le groupe de vieilles glapissant autour du lit des enfants-trouvés.

C’est alors qu’il s’était approché de la malheureuse petite créature si haïe et si menacée. Cette détresse, cette difformité, cet abandon, la pensée de son jeune frère, la chimère qui frappa tout à coup son esprit que, s’il mourait, son cher petit Jehan pourrait bien aussi, lui, être jeté misérablement sur la planche des enfants-trouvés, tout cela lui était venu au cœur à la fois, une grande pitié s’était remuée en lui, et il avait emporté l’enfant.

Quand il tira cet enfant du sac, il le trouva bien difforme en effet. Le pauvre petit diable avait une verrue sur l’œil gauche, la tête dans les épaules, la colonne vertébrale arquée, le sternum proéminent, les jambes torses; mais il paraissait vivace; et quoiqu’il fût impossible de savoir quelle langue il bégayait, son cri annonçait quelque force et quelque santé. La compassion de Claude s’accrut de cette laideur; et il fit vœu dans son cœur d’élever cet enfant pour l’amour de son frère, afin que, quelles que fussent dans l’avenir les fautes du petit Jehan, il eût par-devers lui cette charité, faite à son intention. C’était une sorte de placement de bonnes œuvres qu’il effectuait sur la tête de son jeune frère; c’était une pacotille de bonnes actions qu’il voulait lui amasser d’avance, pour le cas où le petit drôle un jour se trouverait à court de cette monnaie, la seule qui soit reçue au péage du paradis.

Il baptisa son enfant adoptif, et le nomma *Quasimodo*, soit qu’il voulût marquer par là le jour où il l’avait trouvé, soit qu’il voulût caractériser par ce nom à quel point la pauvre petite créature était incomplète et à peine ébauchée. En effet, Quasimodo, borgne, bossu, cagneux, n’était guère qu’un *à peu près*.

III

«IMMANIS PECORIS CUSTOS IMMANIOR IPSE»

Or, en 1482, Quasimodo avait grandi. Il était devenu, depuis plusieurs années, sonneur de cloches de Notre-Dame, grâce à son père adoptif Claude Frollo, lequel était devenu archidiacre de Josas, grâce à son suzerain messire Louis de Beaumont, lequel était devenu évêque de Paris en 1472, à la mort de Guillaume Chartier, grâce à son patron Olivier le Daim, barbier du roi Louis XI par la grâce de Dieu.

Quasimodo était donc carillonneur de Notre-Dame.

Avec le temps, il s'était formé je ne sais quel lien intime qui unissait le sonneur à l'église. Séparé à jamais du monde par la double fatalité de sa naissance inconnue et de sa nature difforme, emprisonné dès l'enfance dans ce double cercle infranchissable, le pauvre malheureux s'était accoutumé à ne rien voir dans ce monde au delà des religieuses murailles qui l'avaient recueilli à leur ombre. Notre-Dame avait été successivement pour lui, selon qu'il grandissait et se développait, l'œuf, le nid, la maison, la patrie, l'univers.

Et il est sûr qu'il y avait une sorte d'harmonie mystérieuse et préexistante entre cette créature et cet édifice. Lorsque, tout petit encore, il se traînait tortueusement et par soubresauts sous les ténèbres de ses voûtes, il semblait, avec sa face humaine et sa membrure bestiale, le reptile naturel de cette dalle humide et sombre sur laquelle l'ombre des chapiteaux romans projetait tant de formes bizarres.

Plus tard, la première fois qu'il s'accrocha machinalement à la corde des tours, et qu'il s'y pendit, et qu'il mit la cloche en branle, cela fit à Claude, son père adoptif, l'effet d'un enfant dont la langue se délie et qui commence à parler.

C'est ainsi que peu à peu, se développant toujours dans le sens de la cathédrale, y vivant, y dormant, n'en sortant presque jamais, en subissant à toute heure la pression mystérieuse, il arriva à lui ressembler, à s'y incruster, pour ainsi dire, à en faire partie intégrante. Ses angles saillants s'emboîtaient, qu'on nous passe cette figure, aux angles rentrants de l'édifice, et il en semblait, non seulement l'habitant, mais encore le contenu naturel. On pourrait presque dire qu'il en avait pris la forme, comme le colimaçon prend la forme de sa coquille. C’était sa demeure, son trou, son enveloppe. Il y avait entre la vieille église et lui une sympathie instinctive si profonde, tant d’affinités magnétiques, tant d’affinités matérielles, qu’il y adhérait en quelque sorte comme la tortue à son écaille. La rugueuse cathédrale était sa carapace.

Il est inutile d’avertir le lecteur de ne pas prendre au pied de la lettre les figures que nous sommes obligé d’employer ici pour exprimer cet accouplement singulier, symétrique, immédiat, presque co-substantiel, d’un homme et d’un édifice. Il est inutile de dire également à quel point il s’était faite familière toute la cathédrale dans une si longue et si intime cohabitation. Cette demeure lui était propre. Elle n’avait pas de profondeur que Quasimodo n’eût pénétrée, pas de hauteur qu’il n’eût escaladée, il lui arrivait bien des fois de gravir la façade à plusieurs élévations en s’aidant seulement des aspérités de la sculpture. Les tours, sur la surface extérieure desquelles on le voyait souvent ramper comme un lézard qui glisse sur un mur à pic, ces deux géantes jumelles, si hautes, si menaçantes, si redoutables, n’avaient pour lui ni vertige, ni terreur, ni secousses d’étourdissement; à les voir si douces sous sa main, si faciles à escalader, on eût dit qu’il les avait apprivoisées. À force de sauter, de grimper, de s’ébattre au milieu des abîmes de la gigantesque cathédrale, il était devenu en quelque façon singe et chamois, comme l’enfant calabrais qui nage avant de marcher, et joue, tout petit, avec la mer.

Du reste, non seulement son corps semblait s’être façonné selon la cathédrale, mais encore son esprit. Dans quel état était cette âme, quel pli avait-elle contracté, quelle forme avait-elle prise sous cette enveloppe nouée, dans cette vie sauvage, c’est ce qu’il serait difficile de déterminer. Quasimodo était né borgne, bossu, boiteux. C’est à grande peine et à grande patience que Claude Frollo était parvenu à lui apprendre à parler. Mais une fatalité était attachée au pauvre enfant trouvé. Sonneur de Notre-Dame à quatorze ans, une nouvelle infirmité était venue le parfaire; les cloches lui avaient brisé le tympan; il était devenu sourd. La seule porte que la nature lui eût laissée toute grande ouverte sur le monde s’était brusquement fermée à jamais.

En se fermant, elle intercepta l’unique rayon de joie et de lumière qui pénétrât encore dans l’âme de Quasimodo. Cette âme tomba dans une nuit profonde. La mélancolie du misérable devint incurable et complète comme sa difformité. Ajoutons que sa surdité le rendit en quelque façon muet. Car, pour ne pas donner à rire aux autres, du moment où il se vit sourd, il se détermina résolument à un silence qu'il ne rompait guère que lorsqu'il était seul. Il lia volontairement cette langue que Claude Frollo avait eu tant de peine à délier. De là il advenait que, quand la nécessité le contraignait de parler, sa langue était engourdie, maladroite, et comme une porte dont les gonds sont rouillés.

Si maintenant nous essayions de pénétrer jusqu'à l'âme de Quasimodo à travers cette écorce épaisse et dure; si nous pouvions sonder les profondeurs de cette organisation mal faite; s'il nous était donné de regarder avec un flambeau derrière ces organes sans transparence, d'explorer l'intérieur ténébreux de cette créature opaque, d'en élucider les recoins obscurs, les culs-de-sac absurdes, et de jeter tout à coup une vive lumière sur la psyché enchaînée au fond de cet antre, nous trouverions sans doute la malheureuse dans quelque attitude pauvre, rabougrie et rachitique comme ces prisonniers des plombs de Venise qui vieillissaient ployés en deux dans une boîte de pierre trop basse et trop courte.

Il est certain que l'esprit s'atrophie dans un corps manqué. Quasimodo sentait à peine se mouvoir aveuglément au dedans de lui une âme faite à son image. Les impressions des objets subissaient une réfraction considérable avant d'arriver à sa pensée. Son cerveau était un milieu particulier: les idées qui le traversaient en sortaient toutes tordues. La réflexion qui provenait de cette réfraction était nécessairement divergente et déviée.

De là mille illusions d'optique, mille aberrations de jugement, mille écarts où divaguait sa pensée, tantôt folle, tantôt idiote.

Le premier effet de cette fatale organisation, c'était de troubler le regard qu'il jetait sur les choses. Il n'en recevait presque aucune perception immédiate. Le monde extérieur lui semblait beaucoup plus loin qu'à nous.

Le second effet de son malheur, c'était de le rendre méchant.

Il était méchant en effet, parce qu'il était sauvage; il était sauvage parce qu'il était laid, il y avait une logique dans sa nature comme dans la nôtre.

Sa force, si extraordinairement développée, était une cause de plus de méchanceté. *Malus puer robustus*, dit Hobbes.

D'ailleurs, il faut lui rendre cette justice, la méchanceté n'était peut-être pas innée en lui. Dès ses premiers pas parmi les hommes, il s'était senti, puis il s'était vu conspué, flétri, repoussé. La parole humaine pour lui, c'était toujours une raillerie ou une malédiction. En grandissant il n'avait trouvé que la haine autour de lui. Il l’avait prise. Il avait gagné la méchanceté générale. Il avait ramassé l’arme dont on l’avait blessé.

Après tout, il ne tournait qu’à regret sa face du côté des hommes. Sa cathédrale lui suffisait. Elle était peuplée de figures de marbre, rois, saints, évêques, qui du moins ne lui éclataient pas de rire au nez et n’avaient pour lui qu’un regard tranquille et bienveillant. Les autres statues, celles des monstres et des démons, n’avaient pas de haine pour lui Quasimodo. Il leur ressemblait trop pour cela. Elles raillaient bien plutôt les autres hommes. Les saints étaient ses amis, et le bénissaient; les monstres étaient ses amis, et le gardaient. Aussi avait-il de longs épanchements avec eux. Aussi passait-il quelquefois des heures entières, accroupi devant une de ces statues, à causer solitairement avec elle. Si quelqu’un survenait, il s’enfuyait comme un amant surpris dans sa sérénade.

Et la cathédrale ne lui était pas seulement la société, mais encore l’univers, mais encore toute la nature. Il ne rêvait pas d’autres espaliers que les vitraux toujours en fleur, d’autre ombrage que celui de ces feuillages de pierre qui s’épanouissent chargés d’oiseaux dans la touffe des chapiteaux saxons, d’autres montagnes que les tours colossales de l’église, d’autre océan que Paris qui bruissait à leurs pieds.

Ce qu’il aimait avant tout dans l’édifice maternel, ce qui réveillait son âme et lui faisait ouvrir ses pauvres ailes qu’elle tenait si misérablement reployées dans sa caverne, ce qui le rendait parfois heureux, c’étaient les cloches. Il les aimait, les caressait, leur parlait, les comprenait. Depuis le carillon de l’aiguille de la croisée jusqu’à la grosse cloche du portail, il les avait toutes en tendresse. Le clocher de la croisée, les deux tours, étaient pour lui comme trois grandes cages dont les oiseaux, élevés par lui, ne chantaient que pour lui. C’étaient pourtant ces mêmes cloches qui l’avaient rendu sourd, mais les mères aiment souvent le mieux l’enfant qui les a fait le plus souffrir.

Il est vrai que leur voix était la seule qu’il pût entendre encore. À ce titre, la grosse cloche était sa bien-aimée. C’est elle qu’il préférait dans cette famille de filles bruyantes qui se trémoussait autour de lui, les jours de fête. Cette grande cloche s’appelait Marie. Elle était seule dans la tour méridionale avec sa sœur Jacqueline, cloche de moindre taille, enfermée dans une cage moins grande à côté de la sienne. Cette Jacqueline était ainsi nommée du nom de la femme de Jean de Montagu, lequel l’avait donnée à l’église, ce qui ne l’avait pas empêché d’aller figurer sans tête à

Montfaucon. Dans la deuxième tour il y avait six autres cloches, et enfin les six plus petites habitaient le clocher sur la croisée avec la cloche de bois qu'on ne sonnait que depuis l'après-dîner du jeudi absolu, jusqu'au matin de la vigile de Pâques. Quasimodo avait donc quinze cloches dans son sérail, mais la grosse Marie était la favorite.

On ne saurait se faire une idée de sa joie les jours de grande volée. Au moment où l'archidiacre l'avait lâché et lui avait dit: Allez! il montait la vis du clocher plus vite qu'un autre ne l'eût descendue. Il entrait tout essoufflé dans la chambre aérienne de la grosse cloche; il la considérait un moment avec recueillement et amour; puis il lui adressait doucement la parole, il la flattait de la main, comme un bon cheval qui va faire une longue course. Il la plaignait de la peine qu'elle allait avoir. Après ces premières caresses, il criait à ses aides, placés à l'étage inférieur de la tour, de commencer. Ceux-ci se pendaient aux câbles, le cabestan criait, et l'énorme capsule de métal s'ébranlait lentement. Quasimodo, palpitant, la suivait du regard. Le premier choc du battant et de la paroi d'airain faisait frissonner la charpente sur laquelle il était monté. Quasimodo vibrait avec la cloche. Vah! criait-il avec un éclat de rire insensé. Cependant le mouvement du bourdon s'accélérait, et à mesure qu'il parcourait un angle plus ouvert, l'œil de Quasimodo s'ouvrait aussi de plus en plus phosphorique et flamboyant. Enfin la grande volée commençait, toute la tour tremblait, charpentes, plombs, pierres de taille, tout grondait à la fois, depuis les pilotis de la fondation jusqu'aux trèfles du couronnement. Quasimodo alors bouillait à grosse écume; il allait, venait; il tremblait avec la tour de la tête aux pieds. La cloche, déchaînée et furieuse, présentait alternativement aux deux parois de la tour sa gueule de bronze d'où s'échappait ce souffle de tempête qu'on entend à quatre lieues. Quasimodo se plaçait devant cette gueule ouverte; il s'accroupissait, se relevait avec les retours de la cloche, aspirait ce souffle renversant, regardait tour à tour la place profonde qui fourmillait à deux cents pieds au-dessous de lui et l'énorme langue de cuivre qui venait de seconde en seconde lui hurler dans l'oreille. C'était la seule parole qu'il entendît, le seul son qui troublât pour lui le silence universel. Il s'y dilatait comme un oiseau au soleil. Tout à coup la frénésie de la cloche le gagnait; son regard devenait extraordinaire; il attendait le bourdon au passage, comme l'araignée attend la mouche, et se jetait brusquement sur lui à corps perdu. Alors, suspendu sur l'abîme, lancé dans le balancement formidable de la cloche, il saisissait le monstre d'airain aux oreillettes, l'étreignait de ses deux genoux, l’éperonnait de ses deux talons, et redoublait de tout le choc et de tout le poids de son corps la furie de la volée. Cependant la tour vacillait; lui, criait et grinçait des dents, ses cheveux roux se hérissaient, sa poitrine faisait le bruit d’un soufflet de forge, son œil jetait des flammes, la cloche monstrueuse hennissait toute haletante sous lui, et alors ce n’était plus ni le bourdon de Notre-Dame ni Quasimodo, c’était un rêve, un tourbillon, une tempête; le vertige à cheval sur le bruit; un esprit cramponné à une croupe volante; un étrange centaure moitié homme, moitié cloche; une espèce d’Astolphe horrible emporté sur un prodigieux hippogriffe de bronze vivant.

La présence de cet être extraordinaire faisait circuler dans toute la cathédrale je ne sais quel souffle de vie. Il semblait qu’il s’échappât de lui, du moins au dire des superstitions grossissantes de la foule, une émanation mystérieuse qui animait toutes les pierres de Notre-Dame et faisait palpiter les profondes entrailles de la vieille église. Il suffisait qu’on le sût là pour que l’on crût voir vivre et remuer les mille statues des galeries et des portails. Et de fait, la cathédrale semblait une créature docile et obéissante sous sa main; elle attendait sa volonté pour élever sa grosse voix; elle était possédée et remplie de Quasimodo comme d’un génie familier. On eût dit qu’il faisait respirer l’immense édifice. Il y était partout en effet, il se multipliait sur tous les points du monument. Tantôt on apercevait avec effroi au plus haut d’une des tours un nain bizarre qui grimpait, serpentait, rampait à quatre pattes, descendait en dehors sur l’abîme, sautelait de saillie en saillie, et allait fouiller dans le ventre de quelque gorgone sculptée; c’était Quasimodo dénichant des corbeaux. Tantôt on se heurtait dans un coin obscur de l’église à une sorte de chimère vivante, accroupie et renfrognée; c’était Quasimodo pensant. Tantôt on avisait sous un clocher une tête énorme et un paquet de membres désordonnés se balançant avec fureur au bout d’une corde; c’était Quasimodo sonnant les vêpres ou l’angélus. Souvent, la nuit, on voyait errer une forme hideuse sur la frêle balustrade découpée en dentelle qui couronne les tours et borde le pourtour de l’abside; c’était encore le bossu de Notre-Dame. Alors, disaient les voisines, toute l’église prenait quelque chose de fantastique, de surnaturel, d’horrible; des yeux et des bouches s’y ouvraient çà et là; on entendait aboyer les chiens, les guivres, les tarasques de pierre qui veillent jour et nuit, le cou tendu et la gueule ouverte, autour de la monstrueuse cathédrale; et si c’était une nuit de Noël, tandis que la grosse cloche qui semblait râler appelait les fidèles à la messe ardente de minuit, il y avait un tel air répandu sur la sombre façade qu'on eût dit que le grand portail dévorait la foule et que la rosace la regardait. Et tout cela venait de Quasimodo. L'Égypte l'eût pris pour le dieu de ce temple; le moyen âge l'en croyait le démon; il en était l'âme.

À tel point que pour ceux qui savent que Quasimodo a existé, Notre-Dame est aujourd'hui déserte, inanimée, morte. On sent qu'il y a quelque chose de disparu. Ce corps immense est vide; c'est un squelette; l'esprit l'a quitté, on en voit la place, et voilà tout. C'est comme un crâne où il y a encore des trous pour les yeux, mais plus de regard.

IV

LE CHIEN ET SON MAÎTRE

Il y avait pourtant une créature humaine que Quasimodo exceptait de sa malice et de sa haine pour les autres, et qu'il aimait autant, plus peut-être que sa cathédrale; c'était Claude Frollo.

La chose était simple. Claude Frollo l'avait recueilli, l'avait adopté, l'avait nourri, l'avait élevé. Tout petit, c'est dans les jambes de Claude Frollo qu'il avait coutume de se réfugier quand les chiens et les enfants aboyaient après lui. Claude Frollo lui avait appris à parler, à lire, à écrire. Claude Frollo enfin l'avait fait sonneur de cloches. Or, donner la grosse cloche en mariage à Quasimodo, c'était donner Juliette à Roméo.

Aussi la reconnaissance de Quasimodo était-elle profonde, passionnée, sans borne; et quoique le visage de son père adoptif fût souvent brumeux et sévère, quoique sa parole fût habituellement brève, dure, impérieuse, jamais cette reconnaissance ne s'était démentie un seul instant. L'archidiacre avait en Quasimodo l'esclave le plus soumis, le valet le plus docile, le dogue le plus vigilant. Quand le pauvre sonneur de cloches était devenu sourd, il s'était établi entre lui et Claude Frollo une langue de signes, mystérieuse et comprise d'eux seuls. De cette façon l'archidiacre était le seul être humain avec lequel Quasimodo eût conservé communication. Il n'était en rapport dans ce monde qu'avec deux choses, Notre-Dame et Claude Frollo.

Rien de comparable à l'empire de l'archidiacre sur le sonneur, à l'attachement du sonneur pour l'archidiacre. Il eût suffi d'un signe de Claude et de l'idée de lui faire plaisir pour que Quasimodo se précipitât du haut des tours de Notre-Dame. C'était une chose remarquable que toute cette force physique, arrivée chez Quasimodo à un développement si extraordinaire, et mise aveuglément par lui à la disposition d'un autre. Il y avait là sans doute dévouement filial, attachement domestique; il y avait aussi fascination d'un esprit par un autre esprit. C'était une pauvre, gauche et maladroite organisation qui se tenait la tête basse et les yeux suppliants devant une intelligence haute et profonde, puissante et supérieure. Enfin et par-dessus tout, c'était reconnaissance. Reconnaissance tellement poussée à sa limite extrême que nous ne saurions à quoi la comparer. Cette vertu n'est pas de celles dont les plus beaux exemples sont parmi les hommes. Nous dirons donc que Quasimodo aimait l’archidiacre comme jamais chien, jamais cheval, jamais éléphant n’a aimé son maître.

V

SUITE DE CLAUDE FROLLO

En 1482, Quasimodo avait environ vingt ans, Claude Frollo environ trente-six: l’un avait grandi, l’autre avait vieilli.

Claude Frollo n’était plus le simple écolier du collège Torchi, le tendre protecteur d’un petit enfant, le jeune et rêveur philosophe qui savait beaucoup de choses et qui en ignorait beaucoup. C’était un prêtre austère, grave, morose; un chargé d’âmes; monsieur l’archidiacre de Josas, le second acolyte de l’évêque, ayant sur les bras les deux décanats de Montlhéry et de Châteaufort et cent soixante-quatorze curés ruraux. C’était un personnage imposant et sombre devant lequel tremblaient les enfants de chœur en aube et en jaquette, les machicots, les confrères de Saint-Augustin, les clercs matutinels de Notre-Dame, quand il passait lentement sous les hautes ogives du chœur, majestueux, pensif, les bras croisés et la tête tellement ployée sur la poitrine qu’on ne voyait de sa face que son grand front chauve.

Dom Claude Frollo n’avait abandonné du reste ni la science, ni l’éducation de son jeune frère, ces deux occupations de sa vie. Mais avec le temps il s’était mêlé quelque amertume à ces choses si douces. À la longue, dit Paul Diacre, le meilleur lard rancit. Le petit Jehan Frollo, surnommé *du Moulin* à cause du lieu où il avait été nourri, n’avait pas grandi dans la direction que Claude avait voulu lui imprimer. Le grand frère comptait sur un élève pieux, docile, docte, honorable. Or le petit frère, comme ces jeunes arbres qui trompent l’effort du jardinier et se tournent opiniâtrement du côté d’où leur viennent l’air et le soleil, le petit frère ne croissait et ne multipliait, ne poussait de belles branches touffues et luxuriantes que du côté de la paresse, de l’ignorance et de la débauche. C’était un vrai diable, fort désordonné, ce qui faisait froncer le sourcil à dom Claude, mais fort drôle et fort subtil, ce qui faisait sourire le grand frère. Claude l’avait confié à ce même collège de Torchi où il avait passé ses premières années dans l’étude et le recueillement; et c’était une douleur pour lui que ce sanctuaire autrefois édifié du nom de Frollo en fût scandalisé aujourd’hui. Il en faisait quelquefois à Jehan de fort sévères et de fort longs sermons, que celui-ci essuyait intrépidement. Après tout, le jeune vaurien avait bon cœur, comme cela se voit dans toutes les comédies. Mais, le sermon passé, il n’en reprenait pas moins tranquillement le cours de ses séditions et de ses énormités. Tantôt c’était un *béjaune* (on appelait ainsi les nouveaux débarqués à l’Université) qu’il avait houspillé pour sa bienvenue; tradition précieuse qui s’est soigneusement perpétuée jusqu’à nos jours. Tantôt il avait donné le branle à une bande d’écoliers, lesquels étaient classiquement jetés sur un cabaret, *quasi classico excitati*, puis avaient battu le tavernier «avec bâtons offensifs», et joyeusement pillé la taverne jusqu’à effondrer les muids de vin dans la cave. Et puis, c’était un beau rapport en latin que le sous-moniteur de Torchi apportait piteusement à dom Claude avec cette douloureuse émargination: *Rixa; prima causa vinum optimum potatum*. Enfin on disait, horreur dans un enfant de seize ans, que ses débordements allaient souventes fois jusqu’à la rue de Glatigny.

De tout cela, Claude, contristé et découragé dans ses affections humaines, s’était jeté avec plus d’emportement dans les bras de la science, cette sœur qui du moins ne vous rit pas au nez et vous paie toujours, bien qu’en monnaie quelquefois un peu creuse, les soins qu’on lui a rendus. Il devint donc de plus en plus savant, et en même temps, par une conséquence naturelle, de plus en plus rigide comme prêtre, de plus en plus triste comme homme. Il y a, pour chacun de nous, de certains parallélismes entre notre intelligence, nos mœurs et notre caractère, qui se développent sans discontinuité, et ne se rompent qu’aux grandes perturbations de la vie.

Comme Claude Frollo avait parcouru dès sa jeunesse le cercle presque entier des connaissances humaines positives, extérieures et licites, force lui fut, à moins de s’arrêter *ubi defuit orbis*, force lui fut d’aller plus loin et de chercher d’autres aliments à l’activité insatiable de son intelligence. L’antique symbole du serpent qui se mord la queue convient surtout à la science. Il paraît que Claude Frollo l’avait éprouvé. Plusieurs personnes graves affirmaient qu’après avoir épuisé le *fas* du savoir humain, il avait osé pénétrer dans le *nefas*. Il avait, disait-on, goûté successivement toutes les pommes de l’arbre de l’intelligence, et, faim ou dégoût, il avait fini par mordre au fruit défendu. Il avait pris place tour à tour, comme nos lecteurs l’ont vu, aux conférences des théologiens en Sorbonne, aux assemblées des artiens à l’image Saint-Hilaire, aux disputes des décrétistes à l’image Saint-Martin, aux congrégations des médecins au bénitier de Notre-Dame, *ad cupam Nostræ Dominæ*; tous les mets permis et approuvés que ces quatre grandes cuisines, appelées les quatre facultés, pouvaient élaborer et servir à une intelligence, il les avait dévorés et la satiété lui en était venue avant que sa faim fût apaisée; alors il avait creusé plus avant, plus bas, dessous toute cette science finie, matérielle, limitée; il avait risqué peut-être son âme, et s'était assis dans la caverne à cette table mystérieuse des alchimistes, des astrologues, des hermétiques, dont Averroès, Guillaume de Paris et Nicolas Flamel tiennent le bout dans le moyen âge, et qui se prolonge dans l'Orient, aux clartés du chandelier à sept branches, jusqu'à Salomon, Pythagore et Zoroastre.

C'était du moins ce que l'on supposait, à tort ou à raison.

Il est certain que l'archidiacre visitait souvent le cimetière des Saints-Innocents où son père et sa mère avaient été enterrés, il est vrai, avec les autres victimes de la peste de 1466; mais qu'il paraissait beaucoup moins dévot à la croix de leur fosse qu'aux figures étranges dont était chargé le tombeau de Nicolas Flamel et de Claude Pernelle, construit tout à côté.

Il est certain qu'on l'avait vu souvent longer la rue des Lombards et entrer furtivement dans une petite maison qui faisait le coin de la rue des Écrivains et de la rue Marivault. C'était la maison que Nicolas Flamel avait bâtie, où il était mort vers 1417, et qui, toujours déserte depuis lors, commençait déjà à tomber en ruine, tant les hermétiques et les souffleurs de tous les pays en avaient usé les murs rien qu'en y gravant leurs noms. Quelques voisins même affirmaient avoir vu une fois par un soupirail l'archidiacre Claude creusant, remuant et bêchant la terre dans ces deux caves dont les jambes étrières avaient été barbouillées de vers et d'hiéroglyphes sans nombre par Nicolas Flamel lui-même. On supposait que Flamel avait enfoui la pierre philosophale dans ces caves, et les alchimistes, pendant deux siècles, depuis Magistri jusqu'au père Pacifique, n'ont cessé d'en tourmenter le sol que lorsque la maison, si cruellement fouillée et retournée, a fini par s'en aller en poussière sous leurs pieds.

Il est certain encore que l'archidiacre s'était épris d'une passion singulière pour le portail symbolique de Notre-Dame, cette page de grimoire écrite en pierre par l'évêque Guillaume de Paris, lequel a sans doute été damné pour avoir attaché un si infernal frontispice au saint poème que chante éternellement le reste de l'édifice. L'archidiacre Claude passait aussi pour avoir approfondi le colosse de saint Christophe et cette longue statue énigmatique qui se dressait alors à l'entrée du parvis et que le peuple appelait dans ses dérisions *Monsieur Legris*. Mais, ce que tout le monde avait pu remarquer, c'étaient les interminables heures qu'il employait souvent, assis sur le parapet du parvis, à contempler les sculptures du portail, examinant tantôt les vierges folles avec leurs lampes renversées, tantôt les vierges sages avec leurs lampes droites; d'autres fois calculant l'angle du regard de ce corbeau qui tient au portail de gauche et qui regarde dans l'église un point mystérieux où est certainement cachée la pierre philosophale, si elle n'est pas dans la cave de Nicolas Flamel. C'était, disons-le en passant, une destinée singulière pour l'église Notre-Dame à cette époque que d'être ainsi aimée à deux degrés différents et avec tant de dévotion par deux êtres aussi dissemblables que Claude et Quasimodo; aimée par l'un, sorte de demi-homme instinctif et sauvage, pour sa beauté, pour sa stature, pour les harmonies qui se dégagent de son magnifique ensemble; aimée par l'autre, imagination savante et passionnée, pour sa signification, pour son mythe, pour le sens qu'elle renferme, pour le symbole épars sous les sculptures de sa façade comme le premier texte sous le second dans un palimpseste; en un mot, pour l'énigme qu'elle propose éternellement à l'intelligence.

Il est certain enfin que l'archidiacre s'était accommodé, dans celle des deux tours qui regarde sur la Grève, tout à côté de la cage aux cloches, une petite cellule fort secrète où nul n'entrait, pas même l'évêque, disait-on, sans son congé. Cette cellule avait été jadis pratiquée presque au sommet de la tour, parmi les nids de corbeaux, par l'évêque Hugo de Besançon, qui y avait maléficié dans son temps. Ce que renfermait cette cellule, nul ne le savait; mais on avait vu souvent, des grèves du Terrain, la nuit, à une petite lucarne qu'elle avait sur le derrière de la tour, paraître, disparaître et reparaître à intervalles courts et égaux une clarté rouge, intermittente, bizarre, qui semblait suivre les aspirations haletantes d'un soufflet et venir plutôt d'une flamme que d'une lumière. Dans l'ombre, à cette hauteur, cela faisait un effet singulier et les bonnes femmes disaient: Voilà l'archidiacre qui souffle, l'enfer pétille là-haut.

Il n'y avait pas dans tout cela après tout grandes preuves de sorcellerie; mais c'était bien toujours autant de fumée qu'il en fallait pour supposer du feu; et l'archidiacre avait un renom assez formidable. Nous devons dire pourtant que les sciences d'Égypte, que la nécromancie, que la magie, même la plus blanche et la plus innocente, n'avaient pas d'ennemi plus acharné, pas de dénonciateur plus impitoyable par-devant messieurs de l'officialité de Notre-Dame. Que ce fût sincère horreur ou jeu joué du larron qui crie: *au voleur*! cela n'empêchait pas l'archidiacre d'être considéré par les doctes têtes du chapitre comme une âme aventurée dans le vestibule de l'enfer, perdue dans les antres de la cabale, tâtonnant dans les ténèbres des sciences occultes. Le peuple ne s'y méprenait pas non plus; chez quiconque avait un peu de sagacité, Quasimodo passait pour le démon, Claude Frollo pour le sorcier. Il était évident que le sonneur devait servir l'archidiacre pendant un temps donné au bout duquel il emporterait son âme en guise de paiement. Aussi l'archidiacre était-il, malgré l'austérité excessive de sa vie, en mauvaise odeur parmi les bonnes âmes; et il n'y avait pas nez de dévote si inexpérimentée qui ne le flairât magicien.

Et si, en vieillissant, il s'était formé des abîmes dans sa science, il s'en était aussi formé dans son cœur. C'est du moins ce qu'on était fondé à croire en examinant cette figure sur laquelle on ne voyait reluire son âme qu'à travers un sombre nuage. D'où lui venait ce front chauve, cette tête toujours penchée, cette poitrine toujours soulevée de soupirs? Quelle secrète pensée faisait sourire sa bouche avec tant d'amertume au même moment où ses sourcils froncés se rapprochaient comme deux taureaux qui vont lutter? Pourquoi son reste de cheveux étaient-ils déjà gris? Quel était ce feu intérieur qui éclatait parfois dans son regard, au point que son œil ressemblait à un trou percé dans la paroi d'une fournaise?

Ces symptômes d'une violente préoccupation morale avaient surtout acquis un haut degré d'intensité à l'époque où se passe cette histoire. Plus d'une fois un enfant de chœur s'était enfui effrayé de le trouver seul dans l'église, tant son regard était étrange et éclatant. Plus d'une fois, dans le chœur, à l'heure des offices, son voisin de stalle l'avait entendu mêler au plain-chant *ad omnem tonum* des parenthèses inintelligibles. Plus d'une fois la buandière du Terrain, chargée de «laver le chapitre», avait observé, non sans effroi, des marques d'ongles et de doigts crispés dans le surplis de monsieur l'archidiacre de Josas.

D'ailleurs, il redoublait de sévérité et n'avait jamais été plus exemplaire. Par état comme par caractère il s'était toujours tenu éloigné des femmes; il semblait les haïr plus que jamais. Le seul frémissement d'une cotte-hardie de soie faisait tomber son capuchon sur ses yeux. Il était sur ce point tellement jaloux d'austérité et de réserve que lorsque la dame de Beaujeu, fille du roi, vint au mois de décembre 1481 visiter le cloître de Notre-Dame, il s'opposa gravement à son entrée, rappelant à l'évêque le statut du Livre Noir, daté de la vigile Saint-Barthélemy 1334, qui interdit l'accès du cloître à toute femme «quelconque, vieille ou jeune, maîtresse ou chambrière». Sur quoi l’évêque avait été contraint de lui citer l’ordonnance du légat Odo qui excepte certaines grandes dames, *aliquæ magnates mulieres, quæ sine scandalo evitari non possunt*. Et encore l’archidiacre protesta-t-il, objectant que l’ordonnance du légat, laquelle remontait à 1207, était antérieure de cent vingt-sept ans au Livre Noir, et par conséquent abrogée de fait par lui. Et il avait refusé de paraître devant la princesse.

On remarquait en outre que son horreur pour les égyptiennes et les zingari semblait redoubler depuis quelque temps. Il avait sollicité de l’évêque un édit qui fît expresse défense aux bohémiennes de venir danser et tambouriner sur la place du parvis, et il compulsait depuis le même temps les archives moisies de l’official, afin de réunir les cas de sorciers et de sorcières condamnés au feu ou à la corde pour complicité de maléfices avec des boucs, des truies ou des chèvres.

VI

IMPOPULARITÉ

L’archidiacre et le sonneur, nous l’avons déjà dit, étaient médiocrement aimés du gros et menu peuple des environs de la cathédrale. Quand Claude et Quasimodo sortaient ensemble, ce qui arrivait maintes fois, et qu’on les voyait traverser de compagnie, le valet suivant le maître, les rues fraîches, étroites et sombres du pâté Notre-Dame, plus d’une mauvaise parole, plus d’un fredon ironique, plus d’un quolibet insultant les harcelait au passage, à moins que Claude Frollo, ce qui arrivait rarement, ne marchât la tête droite et levée, montrant son front sévère et presque auguste aux goguenards interdits.

Tous deux étaient dans leur quartier comme les «poètes» dont parle Régnier.

Toutes sortes de gens vont après les poètes.
Comme après les hiboux vont criant les fauvettes.

Tantôt c’était un marmot sournois qui risquait sa peau et ses os pour avoir le plaisir ineffable d’enfoncer une épingle dans la bosse de Quasimodo. Tantôt une belle jeune fille, gaillarde et plus effrontée qu’il n’aurait fallu, frôlait la robe noire du prêtre en lui chantant sous le nez la chanson sardonique: *niche, niche, le diable est pris*. Quelquefois un groupe squalide de vieilles, échelonné et accroupi dans l’ombre sur les degrés d’un porche, bougonnait avec bruit au passage de l’archidiacre et du carillonneur, et leur jetait en maugréant cette encourageante bienvenue: «Hum! en voici un qui a l’âme faite comme l’autre a le corps!» Ou bien c’était une bande d’écoliers et de pousse-cailloux jouant aux merelles qui se levait en masse et les saluait classiquement de quelque huée en latin: *Eia! eia! Claudius cum claudo*!

Mais le plus souvent, l’injure passait inaperçue du prêtre et du sonneur. Pour entendre toutes ces gracieuses choses, Quasimodo était trop sourd et Claude trop rêveur.

LIVRE CINQUIÈME

I

«ABBAS BEATI MARTINI»

La renommée de dom Claude s'était étendue au loin. Elle lui valut, à peu près vers l'époque où il refusa de voir madame de Beaujeu, une visite dont il garda longtemps le souvenir.

C'était un soir. Il venait de se retirer après l'office dans sa cellule canonicale du cloître Notre-Dame. Celle-ci, hormis peut-être quelques fioles de verre reléguées dans un coin, et pleines d'une poudre assez équivoque qui ressemblait fort à de la poudre de projection, n'offrait rien d'étrange ni de mystérieux. Il y avait bien çà et là quelques inscriptions sur le mur, mais c'étaient de pures sentences de science ou de piété extraites des bons auteurs. L'archidiacre venait de s'asseoir à la clarté d'un trois-becs de cuivre devant un vaste bahut chargé de manuscrits. Il avait appuyé son coude sur le livre tout grand ouvert d'Honorius d'Autun, *De prædestinatione et libero arbitrio*, et il feuilletait avec une réflexion profonde un in-folio imprimé qu'il venait d'apporter, le seul produit de la presse que renfermât sa cellule. Au milieu de sa rêverie, on frappa à sa porte. «Qui est là?» cria le savant du ton gracieux d'un dogue affamé qu'on dérange de son os. Une voix répondit du dehors. «Votre ami, Jacques Coictier.» Il alla ouvrir.

C'était en effet le médecin du roi; un personnage d'une cinquantaine d'années dont la physionomie dure n'était corrigée que par un regard rusé. Un autre homme l'accompagnait. Tous deux portaient une longue robe couleur ardoise fourrée de petit-gris, ceinturonnée et fermée, avec le bonnet de même étoffe et de même couleur. Leurs mains disparaissaient sous leurs manches, leurs pieds sous leurs robes, leurs yeux sous leurs bonnets.

«Dieu me soit en aide, messires! dit l'archidiacre en les introduisant, je ne m'attendais pas à si honorable visite à pareille heure.» Et tout en parlant de cette façon courtoise, il promenait du médecin à son compagnon un regard inquiet et scrutateur.

«Il n'est jamais trop tard pour venir visiter un savant aussi considérable que dom Claude Frollo de Tirechappe,» répondit le docteur Coictier, dont l'accent franc-comtois faisait traîner toutes ses phrases avec la majesté d'une robe à queue.

Alors commença entre le médecin et l’archidiacre un de ces prologues congratulateurs qui précédaient à cette époque, selon l’usage, toute conversation entre savants et qui ne les empêchaient pas de se détester le plus cordialement du monde. Au reste, il en est encore de même aujourd’hui, toute bouche de savant qui complimente un autre savant est un vase de fiel emmiellé.

Les félicitations de Claude Frollo à Jacques Coictier avaient trait surtout aux nombreux avantages temporels que le digne médecin avait su extraire, dans le cours de sa carrière si enviée, de chaque maladie du roi, opération d’une alchimie meilleure et plus certaine que la poursuite de la pierre philosophale.

«En vérité! monsieur le docteur Coictier, j’ai eu grande joie d’apprendre l’évêché de votre neveu, mon révérend seigneur Pierre Versé. N’est-il pas évêque d’Amiens?

— Oui, monsieur l’archidiacre; c’est une grâce et miséricorde de Dieu.

— Savez-vous que vous aviez bien grande mine, le jour de Noël, à la tête de votre compagnie de la chambre des Comptes, monsieur le président?

— Vice-président, dom Claude. Hélas! rien de plus.

— Où en est votre superbe maison de la rue Saint-André-des-Arcs? C’est un Louvre. J’aime fort l’abricotier qui est sculpté sur la porte avec ce jeu de mots qui est plaisant: À L’ABRI-COTIER.

— Hélas! maître Claude, toute cette maçonnerie me coûte gros. À mesure que la maison s’édifie, je me ruine.

— Ho! n’avez-vous pas vos revenus de la Geôle et du bailliage du Palais, et la rente de toutes les maisons, étaux, loges, échoppes de la Clôture? C’est traire une belle mamelle.

— Ma châtellenie de Poissy ne m’a rien rapporté cette année.

— Mais vos péages de Triel, de Saint-James, de Saint-Germain-en-Laye, sont toujours bons.

— Six-vingt livres, pas même parisis.

— Vous avez votre office de conseiller du roi. C’est fixe cela.

— Oui, confrère Claude, mais cette maudite seigneurie de Poligny, dont on fait bruit, ne me vaut pas soixante écus d’or, bon an, mal an.»

Il y avait dans les compliments que dom Claude adressait à Jacques Coictier cet accent sardonique, aigre et sourdement railleur, ce sourire triste et cruel d’un homme supérieur et malheureux qui joue un moment par distraction avec l'épaisse prospérité d'un homme vulgaire. L'autre ne s'en apercevait pas.

«Sur mon âme, dit enfin Claude en lui serrant la main, je suis aise de vous voir en si grande santé.

— Merci, maître Claude.

— À propos, s'écria dom Claude, comment va votre royal malade?

— Il ne paye pas assez son médecin, répondit le docteur en jetant un regard de côté à son compagnon.

— Vous trouvez, compère Coictier?» dit le compagnon.

Cette parole, prononcée du ton de la surprise et du reproche, ramena sur ce personnage inconnu l'attention de l'archidiacre qui, à vrai dire, ne s'en était pas complètement détournée un seul moment depuis que cet étranger avait franchi le seuil de la cellule. Il avait même fallu les mille raisons qu'il avait de ménager le docteur Jacques Coictier, le tout-puissant médecin du roi Louis XI, pour qu'il le reçût ainsi accompagné. Aussi sa mine n'eut-elle rien de bien cordial quand Jacques Coictier lui dit:

«À propos, dom Claude, je vous amène un confrère qui vous a voulu voir sur votre renommée.

— Monsieur est de la science?» demanda l'archidiacre en fixant sur le compagnon de Coictier son œil pénétrant. Il ne trouva pas sous les sourcils de l'inconnu un regard moins perçant et moins défiant que le sien.

C'était, autant que la faible clarté de la lampe permettait d'en juger, un vieillard d'environ soixante ans et de moyenne taille, qui paraissait assez malade et cassé. Son profil, quoique d'une ligne très bourgeoise, avait quelque chose de puissant et de sévère, sa prunelle étincelait sous une arcade sourcilière très profonde comme une lumière au fond d'un antre; et sous le bonnet rabattu qui lui tombait sur le nez on sentait tourner les larges plans d'un front de génie.

Il se chargea de répondre lui-même à la question de l'archidiacre.

«Révérend maître, dit-il d'une voix grave, votre renom est venu jusqu'à moi, et j'ai voulu vous consulter. Je ne suis qu'un pauvre gentilhomme de province qui ôte ses souliers avant d'entrer chez les savants. Il faut que vous sachiez mon nom. Je m'appelle le compère Tourangeau.

— Singulier nom pour un gentilhomme!» pensa l'archidiacre. Cependant il se sentait devant quelque chose de fort et de sérieux. L'instinct de sa haute intelligence lui en faisait deviner une non moins haute sous le bonnet fourré du compère Tourangeau; et en considérant cette grave figure, le rictus ironique que la présence de Jacques Coictier avait fait éclore sur son visage morose s'évanouit peu à peu comme le crépuscule à un horizon de nuit. Il s'était rassis morne et silencieux sur son grand fauteuil, son coude avait repris sa place accoutumée sur la table, et son front sur sa main. Après quelques moments de méditation, il fit signe aux deux visiteurs de s'asseoir, et adressa la parole au compère Tourangeau.

«Vous venez me consulter, maître, et sur quelle science?

— Révérend, répondit le compère Tourangeau, je suis malade, très malade. On vous dit grand Esculape, et je suis venu vous demander un conseil de médecine.

— Médecine!» dit l'archidiacre en hochant la tête. Il sembla se recueillir un instant et reprit: «Compère Tourangeau, puisque c'est votre nom, tournez la tête. Vous trouverez ma réponse tout écrite sur le mur.»

Le compère Tourangeau obéit, et lut au-dessus de sa tête cette inscription gravée sur la muraille: «*La médecine est fille des songes*. — JAMBLIQUE.»

Cependant le docteur Jacques Coictier avait entendu la question de son compagnon avec un dépit que la réponse de dom Claude avait redoublé. Il se pencha à l'oreille du compère Tourangeau et lui dit, assez bas pour ne pas être entendu de l'archidiacre: «Je vous avais prévenu que c'était un fou. Vous l'avez voulu voir!

— C'est qu'il se pourrait fort bien qu'il eût raison, ce fou, docteur Jacques! répondit le compère du même ton, et avec un sourire amer.

— Comme il vous plaira!» répliqua Coictier sèchement. Puis s'adressant à l'archidiacre: «Vous êtes preste en besogne, dom Claude, et vous n'êtes guère plus empêché d'Hippocrate qu'un singe d'une noisette. La médecine un songe! Je doute que les pharmacopoles et les maîtres-mires se tinssent de vous lapider s'ils étaient là. Donc vous niez l'influence des philtres sur le sang, des onguents sur la chair! Vous niez cette éternelle pharmacie de fleurs et de métaux qu'on appelle le monde, faite exprès pour cet éternel malade qu'on appelle l'homme!

— Je ne nie, dit froidement dom Claude, ni la pharmacie ni le malade. Je nie le médecin.

— Donc il n'est pas vrai, reprit Coictier avec chaleur, que la goutte soit une dartre en dedans, qu'on guérisse une plaie d'artillerie par l'application d'une souris rôtie, qu'un jeune sang convenablement infusé rende la jeunesse à de vieilles veines; il n’est pas vrai que deux et deux font quatre, et que l’emprosthotonos succède à l’opisthotonos!»

L’archidiacre répondit sans s’émouvoir: «Il y a certaines choses dont je pense d’une certaine façon.»

Coictier devint rouge de colère.

«Là, là, mon bon Coictier, ne nous fâchons pas, dit le compère Tourangeau. Monsieur l’archidiacre est notre ami.»

Coictier se calma en grommelant à demi-voix: «Après tout, c’est un fou!

— Pasquedieu, maître Claude, reprit le compère Tourangeau après un silence, vous me gênez fort. J’avais deux consultations à requérir de vous, l’une touchant ma santé, l’autre touchant mon étoile.

— Monsieur, repartit l’archidiacre, si c’est là votre pensée, vous auriez aussi bien fait de ne pas vous essouffler aux degrés de mon escalier. Je ne crois pas à la médecine. Je ne crois pas à l’astrologie.

— En vérité!» dit le compère avec surprise.

Coictier riait d’un rire forcé.

«Vous voyez bien qu’il est fou, dit-il tout bas au compère Tourangeau. Il ne croit pas à l’astrologie!

— Le moyen d’imaginer, poursuivit dom Claude, que chaque rayon d’étoile est un fil qui tient à la tête d’un homme!

— Et à quoi croyez-vous donc?» s’écria le compère Tourangeau.

L’archidiacre resta un moment indécis, puis il laissa échapper un sombre sourire qui semblait démentir sa réponse: «*Credo in Deum*.

— *Dominum nostrum*, ajouta le compère Tourangeau avec un signe de croix.

— Amen, dit Coictier.

— Révérend maître, reprit le compère, je suis charmé dans l’âme de vous voir en si bonne religion. Mais, grand savant que vous êtes, l’êtes-vous donc à ce point de ne plus croire à la science?

— Non, dit l’archidiacre en saisissant le bras du compère Tourangeau, et un éclair d’enthousiasme se ralluma dans sa terne prunelle, non, je ne nie pas la science. Je n’ai pas rampé si longtemps à plat ventre et les ongles dans la terre à travers les innombrables embranchements de la caverne sans apercevoir, au loin devant moi, au bout de l’obscure galerie, une lumière, une flamme, quelque chose, le reflet sans doute de l’éblouissant laboratoire central où les patients et les sages ont surpris Dieu.

— Et enfin, interrompit le Tourangeau, quelle chose tenez-vous vraie et certaine?

— L’alchimie.»

Coictier se récria: «Pardieu, dom Claude, l’alchimie a sa raison sans doute, mais pourquoi blasphémer la médecine et l’astrologie?

— Néant, votre science de l’homme! néant, votre science du ciel! dit l’archidiacre avec empire.

— C’est mener grand train Épidaurus et la Chaldée, répliqua le médecin en ricanant.

— Écoutez, messire Jacques. Ceci est dit de bonne foi. Je ne suis pas médecin du roi, et Sa Majesté ne m’a pas donné le jardin Dédalus pour y observer les constellations. — Ne vous fâchez pas et écoutez-moi. — Quelle vérité avez-vous tirée, je ne dis pas de la médecine, qui est chose par trop folle, mais de l’astrologie? Citez-moi les vertus du boustrophédon vertical, les trouvailles du nombre ziruph et du nombre zephirod.

— Nierez-vous, dit Coictier, la force sympathique de la clavicule et que la cabalistique en dérive?

— Erreur, messire Jacques! aucune de vos formules n’aboutit à la réalité. Tandis que l’alchimie a ses découvertes. Contesterez-vous des résultats comme ceux-ci? La glace enfermée sous terre pendant mille ans se transforme en cristal de roche. — Le plomb est l’aïeul de tous les métaux. (Car l’or n’est pas un métal, l’or est la lumière.) — Il ne faut au plomb que quatre périodes de deux cents ans chacune pour passer successivement de l’état de plomb à l’état d’arsenic rouge, de l’arsenic rouge à l’étain, de l’étain à l’argent. — Sont-ce là des faits? Mais croire à la clavicule, à la ligne pleine et aux étoiles, c’est aussi ridicule que de croire, avec les habitants du Grand-Cathay, que le loriot se change en taupe et les grains de blé en poisson du genre cyprin!

— J’ai étudié l’hermétique, s’écria Coictier, et j’affirme...»

Le fougueux archidiacre ne le laissa pas achever. «Et moi j’ai étudié la médecine, l’astrologie et l’hermétique. Ici seulement est la vérité (en parlant ainsi il avait pris sur le bahut une fiole pleine de cette poudre dont nous avons parlé plus haut), ici seulement est la lumière! Hippocratès, c’est un rêve, Urania, c’est un rêve, Hermès, c’est une pensée. L’or, c’est le soleil, faire de l’or, c’est être Dieu. Voilà l’unique science. J’ai sondé la médecine et l’astrologie, vous dis-je! Néant, néant. Le corps humain, ténèbres; les astres, ténèbres!»

Et il retomba sur son fauteuil dans une attitude puissante et inspirée. Le compère Tourangeau l’observait en silence. Coictier s’efforçait de ricaner, haussait imperceptiblement les épaules, et répétait à voix basse: Un fou!

«Et, dit tout à coup le Tourangeau, le but mirifique, l’avez-vous touché? avez-vous fait de l’or?

— Si j’en avais fait, répondit l’archidiacre en articulant lentement ses paroles comme un homme qui réfléchit, le roi de France s’appellerait Claude et non Louis.»

Le compère fronça le sourcil.

«Qu’est-ce que je dis là? reprit dom Claude avec un sourire de dédain. Que me ferait le trône de France quand je pourrais rebâtir l’empire d’Orient!

— À la bonne heure! dit le compère.

— Oh! le pauvre fou!» murmura Coictier.

L’archidiacre poursuivit, paraissant ne plus répondre qu’à ses pensées:

«Mais non, je rampe encore; je m’écorche la face et les genoux aux cailloux de la voie souterraine. J’entrevois, je ne contemple pas! je ne lis pas, j’épelle!

— Et quand vous saurez lire, demanda le compère, ferez-vous de l’or?

— Qui en doute? dit l’archidiacre.

— En ce cas, Notre-Dame sait que j’ai grande nécessité d’argent, et je voudrais bien apprendre à lire dans vos livres. Dites-moi, révérend maître, votre science est-elle pas ennemie ou déplaisante à Notre-Dame?»

À cette question du compère, dom Claude se contenta de répondre avec une tranquille hauteur: «De qui suis-je archidiacre?

— Cela est vrai, mon maître. Eh bien! vous plairait-il m’initier? Faites-moi épeler avec vous.»

Claude prit l’attitude majestueuse et pontificale d’un Samuel.

«Vieillard, il faut de plus longues années qu’il ne vous en reste pour entreprendre ce voyage à travers les choses mystérieuses. Votre tête est bien grise! On ne sort de la caverne qu’avec des cheveux blancs, mais on n’y entre qu’avec des cheveux noirs. La science sait bien toute seule creuser, flétrir et dessécher les faces humaines; elle n’a pas besoin que la vieillesse lui apporte des visages tout ridés. Si cependant l’envie vous possède de vous mettre en discipline à votre âge et de déchiffrer l’alphabet redoutable des sages, venez à moi, c’est bien, j’essaierai. Je ne vous dirai pas, à vous pauvre vieux, d’aller visiter les chambres sépulcrales des pyramides dont parle l’ancien Hérodotus, ni la tour de briques de Babylone, ni l’immense sanctuaire de marbre blanc du temple indien d’Eklinga. Je n’ai pas vu plus que vous les maçonneries chaldéennes construites suivant la forme sacrée du Sikra, ni le temple de Salomon qui est détruit, ni les portes de pierre du sépulcre des rois d’Israël qui sont brisées. Nous nous contenterons des fragments du livre d’Hermès que nous avons ici. Je vous expliquerai la statue de saint Christophe, le symbole du Semeur, et celui des deux anges qui sont au portail de la Sainte-Chapelle, et dont l’un a sa main dans un vase et l’autre dans une nuée...»

Ici, Jacques Coictier, que les répliques fougueuses de l’archidiacre avaient désarçonné, se remit en selle, et l’interrompit du ton triomphant d’un savant qui en redresse un autre: «*Erras, amice Claudi*.» Le symbole n’est pas le nombre. Vous prenez Orpheus pour Hermès.

— C’est vous qui errez, répliqua gravement l’archidiacre. Dédalus, c’est le soubassement; Orpheus, c’est la muraille; Hermès, c’est l’édifice. C’est le tout. — Vous viendrez quand vous voudrez, poursuivit-il en se tournant vers le Tourangeau, je vous montrerai les parcelles d’or restées au fond du creuset de Nicolas Flamel, et vous les comparerez à l’or de Guillaume de Paris. Je vous apprendrai les vertus secrètes du mot grec *peristera*. Mais avant tout, je vous ferai lire l’une après l’autre les lettres de marbre de l’alphabet, les pages de granit du livre. Nous irons du portail de l’évêque Guillaume et de Saint-Jean-le-Rond à la Sainte-Chapelle, puis à la maison de Nicolas Flamel, rue Marivault, à son tombeau, qui est aux Saints-Innocents, à ses deux hôpitaux rue de Montmorency. Je vous ferai lire les hiéroglyphes dont sont couverts les quatre gros chenets de fer du portail de l’hôpital Saint-Gervais et de la rue de la Ferronnerie. Nous épellerons encore ensemble les façades de Saint-Côme, de Sainte-Geneviève-des-Ardents, de Saint-Martin, de Saint-Jacques-de-la-Boucherie...»

Il y avait déjà longtemps que le Tourangeau, si intelligent que fût son regard, paraissait ne plus comprendre dom Claude. Il l’interrompit.

«Pasquedieu! qu’est-ce que c’est donc que vos livres?

— En voici un», dit l’archidiacre.

Et ouvrant la fenêtre de la cellule, il désigna du doigt l’immense église de Notre-Dame, qui, découpant sur un ciel étoilé la silhouette noire de ses deux tours, de ses côtes de pierre et de sa croupe monstrueuse, semblait un énorme sphinx à deux têtes assis au milieu de la ville.

L’archidiacre considéra quelque temps en silence le gigantesque édifice, puis étendant avec un soupir sa main droite vers le livre imprimé qui était ouvert sur sa table et sa main gauche vers Notre-Dame, et promenant un triste regard du livre à l’église:

«Hélas! dit-il, ceci tuera cela.»

Coictier qui s’était approché du livre avec empressement ne put s’empêcher de s’écrier: «Hé mais! qu’y a-t-il donc de si redoutable en ceci: GLOSSA IN EPISTOLAS D. PAULI. *Norimbergæ, Antonius Koburger, 1474.* Ce n’est pas nouveau. C’est un livre de Pierre Lombard, le Maître des Sentences. Est-ce parce qu’il est imprimé?

— Vous l’avez dit», répondit Claude, qui semblait absorbé dans une profonde méditation et se tenait debout, appuyant son index reployé sur l’in-folio sorti des presses fameuses de Nuremberg. Puis il ajouta ces paroles mystérieuses: «Hélas! hélas! les petites choses viennent à bout des grandes; une dent triomphe d’une masse. Le rat du Nil tue le crocodile, l’espadon tue la baleine, le livre tuera l’édifice!»

Le couvre-feu du cloître sonna au moment où le docteur Jacques répétait tout bas à son compagnon son éternel refrain: «*Il est fou*.» À quoi le compagnon répondit cette fois: «Je crois que oui.»

C’était l’heure où aucun étranger ne pouvait rester dans le cloître. Les deux visiteurs se retirèrent. «Maître, dit le compère Tourangeau, en prenant congé de l’archidiacre, j’aime les savants et les grands esprits, et je vous tiens en estime singulière. Venez demain au palais des Tournelles, et demandez l’abbé de Saint-Martin de Tours.»

L’archidiacre rentra chez lui stupéfait, comprenant enfin quel personnage c’était que le compère Tourangeau, et se rappelant ce passage du cartulaire de Saint-Martin de Tours: *Abbas beati Martini*, SCILICET REX FRANCIÆ, *est canonicus de consuetudine et habet parvam præbendam quam habet sanctus Venantius et debet sedere in sede thesaurarii*.

On affirmait que depuis cette époque l’archidiacre avait de fréquentes conférences avec Louis XI, quand Sa Majesté venait à Paris, et que le crédit de dom Claude faisait ombre à Olivier le Daim et à Jacques Coictier, lequel, selon sa manière, en rudoyait fort le roi.

II

CECI TUERA CELA

Nos lectrices nous pardonneront de nous arrêter un moment pour chercher quelle pouvait être la pensée qui se dérobait sous ces paroles énigmatiques de l’archidiacre: *Ceci tuera cela. Le livre tuera l’édifice*.

À notre sens, cette pensée avait deux faces. C’était d’abord une pensée de prêtre. C’était l’effroi du sacerdoce devant un agent nouveau, l’imprimerie. C’était l’épouvante et l’éblouissement de l’homme du sanctuaire devant la presse lumineuse de Gutenberg. C’était la chaire et le manuscrit, la parole parlée et la parole écrite, s’alarmant de la parole imprimée; quelque chose de pareil à la stupeur d’un passereau qui verrait l’ange Légion ouvrir ses six millions d’ailes. C’était le cri du prophète qui entend déjà bruire et fourmiller l’humanité émancipée, qui voit dans l’avenir l’intelligence saper la foi, l’opinion détrôner la croyance, le monde secouer Rome. Pronostic du philosophe qui voit la pensée humaine, volatilisée par la presse, s’évaporer du récipient théocratique. Terreur du soldat qui examine le bélier d’airain et qui dit: La tour croulera. Cela signifiait qu’une puissance allait succéder à une autre puissance. Cela voulait dire: La presse tuera l’église.

Mais sous cette pensée, la première et la plus simple sans doute, il y en avait à notre avis une autre, plus neuve, un corollaire de la première moins facile à apercevoir et plus facile à contester, une vue, tout aussi philosophique, non plus du prêtre seulement, mais du savant et de l’artiste. C’était pressentiment que la pensée humaine en changeant de forme allait changer de mode d’expression, que l’idée capitale de chaque génération ne s’écrirait plus avec la même matière et de la même façon, que le livre de pierre, si solide et si durable, allait faire place au livre de papier, plus solide et plus durable encore. Sous ce rapport, la vague formule de l’archidiacre avait un second sens; elle signifiait qu’un art allait détrôner un autre art. Elle voulait dire: L’imprimerie tuera l’architecture.

En effet, depuis l’origine des choses jusqu’au quinzième siècle de l’ère chrétienne inclusivement, l’architecture est le grand livre de l’humanité, l’expression principale de l’homme à ses divers états de développement soit comme force, soit comme intelligence.

Quand la mémoire des premières races se sentit surchargée, quand le bagage des souvenirs du genre humain devint si lourd et si confus que la parole, nue et volante, risqua d’en perdre en chemin, on les transcrivit sur le sol de la façon la plus visible, la plus durable et la plus naturelle à la fois. On scella chaque tradition sous un monument.

Les premiers monuments furent de simples quartiers de roche *que le fer n’avait pas touchés*, dit Moïse. L’architecture commença comme toute écriture. Elle fut d’abord alphabet. On plantait une pierre debout, et c’était une lettre, et chaque lettre était un hiéroglyphe, et sur chaque hiéroglyphe reposait un groupe d’idées comme le chapiteau sur la colonne. Ainsi firent les premières races, partout, au même moment, sur la surface du monde entier. On retrouve la *pierre levée* des Celtes dans la Sibérie d’Asie, dans les pampas d’Amérique.

Plus tard on fit des mots. On superposa la pierre à la pierre, on accoupla ces syllabes de granit, le verbe essaya quelques combinaisons. Le dolmen et le cromlech celtes, le tumulus étrusque, le galgal hébreu, sont des mots. Quelques-uns, le tumulus surtout, sont des noms propres. Quelquefois même, quand on avait beaucoup de pierre et une vaste plage, on écrivait une phrase. L’immense entassement de Karnac est déjà une formule tout entière.

Enfin on fit des livres. Les traditions avaient enfanté des symboles, sous lesquels elles disparaissaient comme le tronc de l’arbre sous son feuillage; tous ces symboles, auxquels l’humanité avait foi, allaient croissant, se multipliant, se croisant, se compliquant de plus en plus; les premiers monuments ne suffisaient plus à les contenir; ils en étaient débordés de toutes parts; à peine ces monuments exprimaient-ils encore la tradition primitive, comme eux simple, nue et gisante sur le sol. Le symbole avait besoin de s’épanouir dans l’édifice. L’architecture alors se développa avec la pensée humaine; elle devint géante à mille têtes et à mille bras, et fixa sous une forme éternelle, visible, palpable, tout ce symbolisme flottant. Tandis que Dédale, qui est la force, mesurait, tandis qu’Orphée, qui est l’intelligence, chantait, le pilier qui est une lettre, l’arcade qui est une syllabe, la pyramide qui est un mot, mis en mouvement à la fois par une loi de géométrie et par une loi de poésie, se groupaient, se combinaient, s’amalgamaient, descendaient, montaient, se juxtaposaient sur le sol, s’étageaient dans le ciel, jusqu’à ce qu’ils eussent écrit, sous la dictée de l’idée générale d’une époque, ces livres merveilleux qui étaient aussi de merveilleux édifices: la pagode d’Eklinga, le Rhamseïon d’Égypte, le temple de Salomon.

L’idée mère, le verbe, n’était pas seulement au fond de tous ces édifices, mais encore dans la forme. Le temple de Salomon, par exemple, n’était point simplement la reliure du livre saint, il était le livre saint lui-même. Sur chacune de ses enceintes concentriques les prêtres pouvaient lire le verbe traduit et manifesté aux yeux, et ils suivaient ainsi ses transformations de sanctuaire en sanctuaire jusqu’à ce qu’ils le saisissent dans son dernier tabernacle sous sa forme la plus concrète qui était encore de l’architecture: l’arche. Ainsi le verbe était enfermé dans l’édifice, mais son image était sur son enveloppe comme la figure humaine sur le cercueil d’une momie.

Et non seulement la forme des édifices mais encore l’emplacement qu’ils se choisissaient révélait la pensée qu’ils représentaient. Selon que le symbole à exprimer était gracieux ou sombre, la Grèce couronnait ses montagnes d’un temple harmonieux à l’œil, l’Inde éventrait les siennes pour y ciseler ces difformes pagodes souterraines portées par de gigantesques rangées d’éléphants de granit.

Ainsi, durant les six mille premières années du monde, depuis la pagode la plus immémoriale de l’Hindoustan jusqu’à la cathédrale de Cologne, l’architecture a été la grande écriture du genre humain. Et cela est tellement vrai que non seulement tout symbole religieux, mais encore toute pensée humaine a sa page dans ce livre immense et son monument.

Toute civilisation commence par la théocratie et finit par la démocratie. Cette loi de la liberté succédant à l’unité est écrite dans l’architecture. Car, insistons sur ce point, il ne faut pas croire que la maçonnerie ne soit puissante qu’à édifier le temple, qu’à exprimer le mythe et le symbolisme sacerdotal, qu’à transcrire en hiéroglyphes sur ses pages de pierre les tables mystérieuses de la loi. S’il en était ainsi, comme il arrive dans toute société humaine un moment où le symbole sacré s’use et s’oblitère sous la libre pensée, où l’homme se dérobe au prêtre, où l’excroissance des philosophies et des systèmes ronge la face de la religion, l’architecture ne pourrait reproduire ce nouvel état de l’esprit humain, ses feuillets, chargés au recto, seraient vides au verso, son œuvre serait tronquée, son livre serait incomplet. Mais non.

Prenons pour exemple le moyen âge, où nous voyons plus clair parce qu’il est plus près de nous. Durant sa première période, tandis que la théocratie organise l’Europe, tandis que le Vatican rallie et reclasse autour de lui les éléments d’une Rome faite avec la Rome qui gît écroulée autour du Capitole, tandis que le christianisme s’en va recherchant dans les décombres de la civilisation antérieure tous les étages de la société et rebâtit avec ces ruines un nouvel univers hiérarchique dont le sacerdoce est la clef de voûte, on entend sourdre d’abord dans ce chaos, puis on voit peu à peu sous le souffle du christianisme, sous la main des barbares, surgir des déblais des architectures mortes, grecque et romaine, cette mystérieuse architecture romane, sœur des maçonneries théocratiques de l’Égypte et de l’Inde, emblème inaltérable du catholicisme pur, immuable hiéroglyphe de l’unité papale. Toute la pensée d’alors est écrite en effet dans ce sombre style roman. On y sent partout l’autorité, l’unité, l’impénétrable, l’absolu, Grégoire VII; partout le prêtre, jamais l’homme; partout la caste, jamais le peuple. Mais les croisades arrivent. C’est un grand mouvement populaire; et tout grand mouvement populaire, quels qu’en soient la cause et le but, dégage toujours de son dernier précipité l’esprit de liberté. Des nouveautés vont se faire jour. Voici que s’ouvre la période orageuse des Jacqueries, des Pragueries et des Ligues. L’autorité s’ébranle, l’unité se bifurque. La féodalité demande à partager avec la théocratie, en attendant le peuple qui surviendra inévitablement et qui se fera, comme toujours, la part du lion. *Quia nominor leo*. La seigneurie perce donc sous le sacerdoce, la commune sous la seigneurie. La face de l’Europe est changée. Eh bien! la face de l’architecture est changée aussi. Comme la civilisation, elle a tourné la page, et l’esprit nouveau des temps la trouve prête à écrire sous sa dictée. Elle est revenue des croisades avec l’ogive, comme les nations avec la liberté. Alors, tandis que Rome se démembre peu à peu, l’architecture romane meurt. L’hiéroglyphe déserte la cathédrale et s’en va blasonner le donjon pour faire un prestige à la féodalité. La cathédrale elle-même, cet édifice autrefois si dogmatique, envahie désormais par la bourgeoisie, par la commune, par la liberté, échappe au prêtre et tombe au pouvoir de l’artiste. L’artiste la bâtit à sa guise. Adieu le mystère, le mythe, la loi. Voici la fantaisie et le caprice. Pourvu que le prêtre ait sa basilique et son autel, il n’a rien à dire. Les quatre murs sont à l’artiste. Le livre architectural n’appartient plus au sacerdoce, à la religion, à Rome; il est à l’imagination, à la poésie, au peuple. De là les transformations rapides et innombrables de cette architecture qui n’a que trois siècles, si frappantes après l’immobilité stagnante de l’architecture romane qui en a six ou sept. L’art cependant marche à pas de géant. Le génie et l’originalité populaires font la besogne que faisaient les évêques. Chaque race écrit en passant sa ligne sur le livre; elle rature les vieux hiéroglyphes romans sur le frontispice des cathédrales, et c'est tout au plus si l'on voit encore le dogme percer çà et là sous le nouveau symbole qu'elle y dépose. La draperie populaire laisse à peine deviner l'ossement religieux. On ne saurait se faire une idée des licences que prennent alors les architectes, même envers l'église. Ce sont des chapiteaux tricotés de moines et de nonnes honteusement accouplés, comme à la salle des Cheminées du Palais de Justice à Paris. C'est l'aventure de Noé sculptée *en toutes lettres* comme sous le grand portail de Bourges. C'est un moine bachique à oreilles d'âne et le verre en main riant au nez de toute une communauté, comme sur le lavabo de l'abbaye de Bocherville. Il existe à cette époque, pour la pensée écrite en pierre, un privilège tout à fait comparable à notre liberté actuelle de la presse. C'est la liberté de l'architecture.

Cette liberté va très loin. Quelquefois un portail, une façade, une église tout entière présente un sens symbolique absolument étranger au culte, ou même hostile à l'église. Dès le treizième siècle Guillaume de Paris, Nicolas Flamel au quinzième, ont écrit de ces pages séditieuses. Saint-Jacques-de-la-Boucherie était toute une église d'opposition.

La pensée alors n'était libre que de cette façon, aussi ne s'écrivait-elle tout entière que sur ces livres qu'on appelait édifices. Sans cette forme édifice, elle se serait vue brûler en place publique par la main du bourreau sous la forme manuscrit, si elle avait été assez imprudente pour s'y risquer. La pensée portail d'église eût assisté au supplice de la pensée livre. Aussi n'ayant que cette voie, la maçonnerie, pour se faire jour, elle s'y précipitait de toutes parts. De là l'immense quantité de cathédrales qui ont couvert l'Europe, nombre si prodigieux qu'on y croit à peine, même après l'avoir vérifié. Toutes les forces matérielles, toutes les forces intellectuelles de la société convergèrent au même point: l'architecture. De cette manière, sous prétexte de bâtir des églises à Dieu, l'art se développait dans des proportions magnifiques.

Alors, quiconque naissait poète se faisait architecte. Le génie épars dans les masses, comprimé de toutes parts sous la féodalité comme sous une *testudo* de boucliers d'airain, ne trouvant issue que du côté de l'architecture, débouchait par cet art, et ses Iliades prenaient la forme de cathédrales. Tous les autres arts obéissaient et se mettaient en discipline sous l'architecture. C'étaient les ouvriers du grand œuvre. L'architecte, le poète, le maître totalisait en sa personne la sculpture qui lui ciselait ses façades, la peinture qui lui enluminait ses vitraux, la musique qui mettait sa cloche en branle et soufflait dans ses orgues. Il n’y avait pas jusqu’à la pauvre poésie proprement dite, celle qui s’obstinait à végéter dans les manuscrits, qui ne fût obligée pour être quelque chose de venir s’encadrer dans l’édifice sous la forme d’hymne ou de *prose*; le même rôle, après tout, qu’avaient joué les tragédies d’Eschyle dans les fêtes sacerdotales de la Grèce, la Genèse dans le temple de Salomon.

Ainsi, jusqu’à Gutenberg, l’architecture est l’écriture principale, l’écriture universelle. Ce livre granitique commencé par l’Orient, continué par l’antiquité grecque et romaine, le moyen âge en a écrit la dernière page. Du reste, ce phénomène d’une architecture de peuple succédant à une architecture de caste que nous venons d’observer dans le moyen âge, se reproduit avec tout mouvement analogue dans l’intelligence humaine aux autres grandes époques de l’histoire. Ainsi, pour n’énoncer ici que sommairement une loi qui demanderait à être développée en des volumes, dans le haut Orient, berceau des temps primitifs, après l’architecture hindoue, l’architecture phénicienne, cette mère opulente de l’architecture arabe; dans l’antiquité, après l’architecture égyptienne dont le style étrusque et les monuments cyclopéens ne sont qu’une variété, l’architecture grecque, dont le style romain n’est qu’un prolongement surchargé du dôme carthaginois; dans les temps modernes, après l’architecture romane, l’architecture gothique. Et en dédoublant ces trois séries, on retrouvera sur les trois sœurs aînées, l’architecture hindoue, l’architecture égyptienne, l’architecture romane, le même symbole: c’est-à-dire la théocratie, la caste, l’unité, le dogme, le mythe, Dieu; et pour les trois sœurs cadettes, l’architecture phénicienne, l’architecture grecque, l’architecture gothique, quelle que soit du reste la diversité de forme inhérente à leur nature, la même signification aussi: c’est-à-dire la liberté, le peuple, l’homme.

Qu’il s’appelle bramine, mage ou pape, dans les maçonneries hindoue, égyptienne ou romane, on sent toujours le prêtre, rien que le prêtre. Il n’en est pas de même dans les architectures de peuple. Elles sont plus riches et moins saintes. Dans la phénicienne, on sent le marchand; dans la grecque, le républicain; dans la gothique, le bourgeois.

Les caractères généraux de toute architecture théocratique sont l’immutabilité, l’horreur du progrès, la conservation des lignes traditionnelles, la consécration des types primitifs, le pli constant de toutes les formes de l’homme et de la nature aux caprices incompréhensibles du symbole. Ce sont des livres ténébreux que les initiés seuls savent déchiffrer. Du reste, toute forme, toute difformité même y a un sens qui la fait inviolable. Ne demandez pas aux maçonneries hindoue, égyptienne, romane, qu’elles réforment leur dessin ou améliorent leur statuaire. Tout perfectionnement leur est impiété. Dans ces architectures, il semble que la roideur du dogme se soit répandue sur la pierre comme une seconde pétrification. — Les caractères généraux des maçonneries populaires au contraire sont la variété, le progrès, l’originalité, l’opulence, le mouvement perpétuel. Elles sont déjà assez détachées de la religion pour songer à leur beauté, pour la soigner, pour corriger sans relâche leur parure de statues ou d’arabesques. Elles sont du siècle. Elles ont quelque chose d’humain qu’elles mêlent sans cesse au symbole divin sous lequel elles se produisent encore. De là des édifices pénétrables à toute âme, à toute intelligence, à toute imagination, symboliques encore, mais faciles à comprendre comme la nature. Entre l’architecture théocratique et celle-ci, il y a la différence d’une langue sacrée à une langue vulgaire, de l’hiéroglyphe à l’art, de Salomon à Phidias.

Si l’on résume ce que nous avons indiqué jusqu’ici très sommairement en négligeant mille preuves et aussi mille objections de détail, on est amené à ceci: que l’architecture a été jusqu’au quinzième siècle le registre principal de l’humanité, que dans cet intervalle il n’est pas apparu dans le monde une pensée un peu compliquée qui ne se soit faite édifice, que toute idée populaire comme toute loi religieuse a eu ses monuments; que le genre humain enfin n’a rien pensé d’important qu’il ne l’ait écrit en pierre. Et pourquoi? C’est que toute pensée, soit religieuse, soit philosophique, est intéressée à se perpétuer, c’est que l’idée qui a remué une génération veut en remuer d’autres, et laisser trace. Or quelle immortalité précaire que celle du manuscrit! Qu’un édifice est un livre bien autrement solide, durable, et résistant! Pour détruire la parole écrite il suffit d’une torche et d’un turc. Pour démolir la parole construite, il faut une révolution sociale, une révolution terrestre. Les barbares ont passé sur le Colisée, le déluge peut-être sur les Pyramides.

Au quinzième siècle tout change.

La pensée humaine découvre un moyen de se perpétuer non seulement plus durable et plus résistant que l’architecture, mais encore plus simple et plus facile. L’architecture est détrônée. Aux lettres de pierre d’Orphée vont succéder les lettres de plomb de Gutenberg.

Le livre va tuer l’édifice.

L’invention de l’imprimerie est le plus grand événement de l’histoire. C’est la révolution mère. C’est le mode d’expression de l’humanité qui se renouvelle totalement, c’est la pensée humaine qui dépouille une forme et en revêt une autre, c’est le complet et définitif changement de peau de ce serpent symbolique qui, depuis Adam, représente l’intelligence.

Sous la forme imprimerie, la pensée est plus impérissable que jamais; elle est volatile, insaisissable, indestructible. Elle se mêle à l’air. Du temps de l’architecture, elle se faisait montagne et s’emparait puissamment d’un siècle et d’un lieu. Maintenant elle se fait troupe d’oiseaux, s’éparpille aux quatre vents, et occupe à la fois tous les points de l’air et de l’espace.

Nous le répétons, qui ne voit que de cette façon elle est bien plus indélébile? De solide qu’elle était elle devient vivace. Elle passe de la durée à l’immortalité. On peut démolir une masse, comment extirper l’ubiquité? Vienne un déluge, la montagne aura disparu depuis longtemps sous les flots que les oiseaux voleront encore; et, qu’une seule arche flotte à la surface du cataclysme, ils s’y poseront, surnageront avec elle, assisteront avec elle à la décrue des eaux, et le nouveau monde qui sortira de ce chaos verra en s’éveillant planer au-dessus de lui, ailée et vivante, la pensée du monde englouti.

Et quand on observe que ce mode d’expression est non seulement le plus conservateur, mais encore le plus simple, le plus commode, le plus praticable à tous, lorsqu’on songe qu’il ne traîne pas un gros bagage et ne remue pas un lourd attirail, quand on compare la pensée obligée pour se traduire en un édifice de mettre en mouvement quatre ou cinq autres arts et des tonnes d’or, toute une montagne de pierres, toute une forêt de charpentes, tout un peuple d’ouvriers, quand on la compare à la pensée qui se fait livre, et à qui il suffit d’un peu de papier, d’un peu d’encre et d’une plume, comment s’étonner que l’intelligence humaine ait quitté l’architecture pour l’imprimerie? Coupez brusquement le lit primitif d’un fleuve d’un canal creusé au-dessous de son niveau, le fleuve désertera son lit.

Aussi voyez comme à partir de la découverte de l’imprimerie l’architecture se dessèche peu à peu, s’atrophie et se dénude. Comme on sent que l’eau baisse, que la sève s’en va, que la pensée des temps et des peuples se retire d’elle! Le refroidissement est à peu près insensible au quinzième siècle, la presse est trop débile encore, et soutire tout au plus à la puissante architecture une surabondance de vie. Mais, dès le seizième siècle, la maladie de l’architecture est visible; elle n’exprime déjà plus essentiellement la société; elle se fait misérablement art classique; de gauloise, d’européenne, d’indigène, elle devient grecque et romaine, de vraie et de moderne, pseudo-antique. C’est cette décadence qu’on appelle renaissance. Décadence magnifique pourtant, car le vieux génie gothique, ce soleil qui se couche derrière la gigantesque presse de Mayence, pénètre encore quelque temps de ses derniers rayons tout cet entassement hybride d’arcades latines et de colonnades corinthiennes.

C’est ce soleil couchant que nous prenons pour une aurore.

Cependant, du moment où l’architecture n’est plus qu’un art comme un autre, dès qu’elle n’est plus l’art total, l’art souverain, l’art tyran, elle n’a plus la force de retenir les autres arts. Ils s’émancipent donc, brisent le joug de l’architecte, et s’en vont chacun de leur côté. Chacun d’eux gagne à ce divorce. L’isolement grandit tout. La sculpture devient statuaire, l’imagerie devient peinture, le canon devient musique. On dirait un empire qui se démembre à la mort de son Alexandre et dont les provinces se font royaumes.

De là Raphaël, Michel-Ange, Jean Goujon, Palestrina, ces splendeurs de l’éblouissant seizième siècle.

En même temps que les arts, la pensée s’émancipe de tous côtés. Les hérésiarques du moyen âge avaient déjà fait de larges entailles au catholicisme. Le seizième siècle brise l’unité religieuse. Avant l’imprimerie, la réforme n’eût été qu’un schisme, l’imprimerie la fait révolution. Otez la presse, l’hérésie est énervée. Que ce soit fatal ou providentiel, Gutenberg est le précurseur de Luther.

Cependant, quand le soleil du moyen âge est tout à fait couché, quand le génie gothique s’est à jamais éteint à l’horizon de l’art, l’architecture va se ternissant, se décolorant, s’effaçant de plus en plus. Le livre imprimé, ce ver rongeur de l’édifice, la suce et la dévore. Elle se dépouille, elle s’effeuille, elle maigrit à vue d’œil. Elle est mesquine, elle est pauvre, elle est nulle. Elle n’exprime plus rien, pas même le souvenir de l’art d’un autre temps. Réduite à elle-même, abandonnée des autres arts parce que la pensée humaine l’abandonne, elle appelle des manœuvres à défaut d’artistes. La vitre remplace le vitrail. Le tailleur de pierre succède au sculpteur. Adieu toute sève, toute originalité, toute vie, toute intelligence. Elle se traîne, lamentable mendiante d'atelier, de copie en copie. Michel-Ange, qui dès le seizième siècle la sentait sans doute mourir, avait eu une dernière idée, une idée de désespoir. Ce titan de l'art avait entassé le Panthéon sur le Parthénon, et fait Saint-Pierre de Rome. Grande œuvre qui méritait de rester unique, dernière originalité de l'architecture, signature d'un artiste géant au bas du colossal registre de pierre qui se fermait. Michel-Ange mort, que fait cette misérable architecture qui se survivait à elle-même à l'état de spectre et d'ombre? Elle prend Saint-Pierre de Rome, et le calque, et le parodie. C'est une manie. C'est une pitié. Chaque siècle a son Saint-Pierre de Rome; au dix-septième siècle le Val-de-Grâce, au dix-huitième Sainte-Geneviève. Chaque pays a son Saint-Pierre de Rome. Londres a le sien. Pétersbourg a le sien. Paris en a deux ou trois. Testament insignifiant, dernier radotage d'un grand art décrépit qui retombe en enfance avant de mourir.

Si, au lieu de monuments caractéristiques comme ceux dont nous venons de parler nous examinons l'aspect général de l'art du seizième au dix-huitième siècle, nous remarquons les mêmes phénomènes de décroissance et d'étisie. À partir de François II, la forme architecturale de l'édifice s'efface de plus en plus et laisse saillir la forme géométrique, comme la charpente osseuse d'un malade amaigri. Les belles lignes de l'art font place aux froides et inexorables lignes du géomètre. Un édifice n'est plus un édifice, c'est un polyèdre. L'architecture cependant se tourmente pour cacher cette nudité. Voici le fronton grec qui s'inscrit dans le fronton romain et réciproquement. C'est toujours le Panthéon dans le Parthénon, Saint-Pierre de Rome. Voici les maisons de brique de Henri IV à coins de pierre; la place Royale, la place Dauphine. Voici les églises de Louis XIII, lourdes, trapues, surbaissées, ramassées, chargées d'un dôme comme d'une bosse. Voici l'architecture mazarine, le mauvais pasticcio italien des Quatre-Nations. Voici les palais de Louis XIV, longues casernes à courtisans, roides, glaciales, ennuyeuses. Voici enfin Louis XV, avec les chicorées et les vermicelles, et toutes les verrues et tous les fungus qui défigurent cette vieille architecture caduque, édentée et coquette. De François II à Louis XV, le mal a crû en progression géométrique. L'art n'a plus que la peau sur les os. Il agonise misérablement.

Cependant, que devient l'imprimerie? Toute cette vie qui s'en va de l'architecture vient chez elle. À mesure que l'architecture baisse, l'imprimerie s'enfle et grossit. Ce capital de forces que la pensée humaine dépensait en édifices, elle le dépense désormais en livres. Aussi dès le seizième siècle la presse, grandie au niveau de l’architecture décroissante, lutte avec elle et la tue. Au dix-septième, elle est déjà assez souveraine, assez triomphante, assez assise dans sa victoire pour donner au monde la fête d’un grand siècle littéraire. Au dix-huitième, longtemps reposée à la cour de Louis XIV, elle ressaisit la vieille épée de Luther, en arme Voltaire, et court, tumultueuse, à l’attaque de cette ancienne Europe dont elle a déjà tué l’expression architecturale. Au moment où le dix-huitième siècle s’achève, elle a tout détruit. Au dix-neuvième, elle va reconstruire.

Or, nous le demandons maintenant, lequel des deux arts représente réellement depuis trois siècles la pensée humaine? lequel la traduit? lequel exprime, non pas seulement ses manies littéraires et scolastiques, mais son vaste, profond, universel mouvement? Lequel se superpose constamment, sans rupture et sans lacune, au genre humain qui marche, monstre à mille pieds? L’architecture ou l’imprimerie?

L’imprimerie. Qu’on ne s’y trompe pas, l’architecture est morte, morte sans retour, tuée par le livre imprimé, tuée parce qu’elle dure moins, tuée parce qu’elle coûte plus cher. Toute cathédrale est un milliard. Qu’on se représente maintenant quelle mise de fonds il faudrait pour récrire le livre architectural; pour faire fourmiller de nouveau sur le sol des milliers d’édifices; pour revenir à ces époques où la foule des monuments était telle qu’au dire d’un témoin oculaire «on eût dit que le monde en se secouant avait rejeté ses vieux habillements pour se couvrir d’un blanc vêtement d’églises». *Erat enim ut si mundus, ipse excutiendo semet, rejecta vetustate, candidam ecclesiarum vestem indueret* (GLABER RADULPHUS).

Un livre est si tôt fait, coûte si peu, et peut aller si loin! Comment s’étonner que toute la pensée humaine s’écoule par cette pente? Ce n’est pas à dire que l’architecture n’aura pas encore çà et là un beau monument, un chef-d’œuvre isolé. On pourra bien encore avoir de temps en temps, sous le règne de l’imprimerie, une colonne faite, je suppose, par toute une armée, avec des canons amalgamés, comme on avait, sous le règne de l’architecture, des Iliades et des Romanceros, des Mahabâhrata et des Niebelungen, faits par tout un peuple avec des rapsodies amoncelées et fondues. Le grand accident d’un architecte de génie pourra survenir au vingtième siècle, comme celui de Dante au treizième. Mais l’architecture ne sera plus l’art social, l’art collectif, l’art dominant. Le grand poème, le grand édifice, le grand œuvre de l’humanité ne se bâtira plus, il s’imprimera.

Et désormais, si l’architecture se relève accidentellement, elle ne sera plus maîtresse. Elle subira la loi de la littérature qui la recevait d’elle autrefois. Les positions respectives des deux arts seront interverties. Il est certain que dans l’époque architecturale les poèmes, rares, il est vrai, ressemblent aux monuments. Dans l’Inde, Vyasa est touffu, étrange, impénétrable comme une pagode. Dans l’orient égyptien, la poésie a, comme les édifices, la grandeur et la tranquillité des lignes; dans la Grèce antique, la beauté, la sérénité, le calme; dans l’Europe chrétienne, la majesté catholique, la naïveté populaire, la riche et luxuriante végétation d’une époque de renouvellement. La Bible ressemble aux Pyramides, l’Iliade au Parthénon, Homère à Phidias. Dante au treizième siècle, c’est la dernière église romane; Shakespeare au seizième, la dernière cathédrale gothique.

Ainsi, pour résumer ce que nous avons dit jusqu’ici d’une façon nécessairement incomplète et tronquée, le genre humain a deux livres, deux registres, deux testaments, la maçonnerie et l’imprimerie, la bible de pierre et la bible de papier. Sans doute, quand on contemple ces deux bibles si largement ouvertes dans les siècles, il est permis de regretter la majesté visible de l’écriture de granit, ces gigantesques alphabets formulés en colonnades, en pylônes, en obélisques, ces espèces de montagnes humaines qui couvrent le monde et le passé depuis la pyramide jusqu’au clocher, de Chéops à Strasbourg. Il faut relire le passé sur ces pages de marbre. Il faut admirer et refeuilleter sans cesse le livre écrit par l’architecture; mais il ne faut pas nier la grandeur de l’édifice qu’élève à son tour l’imprimerie.

Cet édifice est colossal. Je ne sais quel faiseur de statistique a calculé qu’en superposant l’un à l’autre tous les volumes sortis de la presse depuis Gutenberg on comblerait l’intervalle de la terre à la lune; mais ce n’est pas de cette sorte de grandeur que nous voulons parler. Cependant, quand on cherche à recueillir dans sa pensée une image totale de l’ensemble des produits de l’imprimerie jusqu’à nos jours, cet ensemble ne nous apparaît-il pas comme une immense construction, appuyée sur le monde entier, à laquelle l’humanité travaille sans relâche, et dont la tête monstrueuse se perd dans les brumes profondes de l’avenir? C’est la fourmilière des intelligences. C’est la ruche où toutes les imaginations, ces abeilles dorées, arrivent avec leur miel. L’édifice a mille étages. Çà et là, on voit déboucher sur ses rampes les cavernes ténébreuses de la science qui s’entrecoupent dans ses entrailles. Partout sur sa surface l’art fait luxurier à l’œil ses arabesques, ses rosaces et ses dentelles. Là chaque œuvre individuelle, si capricieuse et si isolée qu’elle semble, a sa place et sa saillie. L’harmonie résulte du tout. Depuis la cathédrale de Shakespeare jusqu’à la mosquée de Byron, mille clochetons s’encombrent pêle-mêle sur cette métropole de la pensée universelle. À sa base, on a récrit quelques anciens titres de l’humanité que l’architecture n’avait pas enregistrés. À gauche de l’entrée, on a scellé le vieux bas-relief en marbre blanc d’Homère, à droite la Bible polyglotte dresse ses sept têtes. L’hydre du Romancero se hérisse plus loin, et quelques autres formes hybrides, les Védas et les Niebelungen. Du reste le prodigieux édifice demeure toujours inachevé. La presse, cette machine géante, qui pompe sans relâche toute la sève intellectuelle de la société, vomit incessamment de nouveaux matériaux pour son œuvre. Le genre humain tout entier est sur l’échafaudage. Chaque esprit est maçon. Le plus humble bouche son trou ou met sa pierre. Rétif de la Bretonne apporte sa hottée de plâtras. Tous les jours une nouvelle assise s’élève. Indépendamment du versement original et individuel de chaque écrivain, il y a des contingents collectifs. Le dix-huitième siècle donne *l’Encyclopédie*, la révolution donne le *Moniteur*. Certes, c’est là aussi une construction qui grandit et s’amoncelle en spirales sans fin; là aussi il y a confusion des langues, activité incessante, labeur infatigable, concours acharné de l’humanité tout entière, refuge promis à l’intelligence contre un nouveau déluge, contre une submersion de barbares. C’est la seconde tour de Babel du genre humain.

LIVRE SIXIÈME

I

COUP D’ŒIL IMPARTIAL SUR L’ANCIENNE MAGISTRATURE

C’était un fort heureux personnage, en l’an de grâce 1482, que noble homme Robert d’Estouteville, chevalier, sieur de Beyne, baron d’Yvri et Saint-Andry en la Marche, conseiller et chambellan du roi, et garde de la prévôté de Paris. Il y avait déjà près de dix-sept ans qu’il avait reçu du roi, le 7 novembre 1465, l’année de la comète, cette belle charge de prévôt de Paris, qui était réputée plutôt seigneurie qu’office, *dignitas*, dit Joannes Loemnœus, *quæ cum non exigua potestate politiam concernente, atque prærogativis multis et juribus conjuncta est*. La chose était merveilleuse en 82 qu’un gentilhomme ayant commission du roi et dont les lettres d’institution remontaient à l’époque du mariage de la fille naturelle de Louis XI avec monsieur le bâtard de Bourbon. Le même jour où Robert d’Estouteville avait remplacé Jacques de Villiers dans la prévôté de Paris, maître Jean Dauvet remplaçait messire Hélye de Thorrettes dans la première présidence de la cour de parlement, Jean Jouvenel des Ursins supplantait Pierre de Morvilliers dans l’office de chancelier de France, Regnault des Dormans désappointait Pierre Puy de la charge de maître des requêtes ordinaires de l’hôtel du roi. Or, sur combien de têtes la présidence, la chancellerie et la maîtrise s’étaient-elles promenées depuis que Robert d’Estouteville avait la prévôté de Paris! Elle lui avait été *baillée en garde*, disaient les lettres patentes; et certes, il la gardait bien. Il s’y était cramponné, il s’y était incorporé, il s’y était identifié. Si bien qu’il avait échappé à cette furie de changement qui possédait Louis XI, roi défiant, taquin et travailleur qui tenait à entretenir, par des institutions et des révocations fréquentes, l’élasticité de son pouvoir. Il y a plus, le brave chevalier avait obtenu pour son fils la survivance de sa charge, et il y avait déjà deux ans que le nom de noble homme Jacques d’Estouteville, écuyer, figurait à côté du sien en tête du registre de l’ordinaire de la prévôté de Paris. Rare, certes, et insigne faveur! Il est vrai que Robert d’Estouteville était un bon soldat, qu’il avait loyalement levé le pennon contre *la ligue du bien public*, et qu’il avait offert à la reine un très merveilleux cerf en confitures le jour de son entrée à Paris en 14... Il avait de plus la bonne amitié de messire Tristan l’Hermite, prévôt des maréchaux de l’hôtel du roi.

C’était donc une très douce et plaisante existence que celle de messire Robert. D’abord, de fort bons gages, auxquels se rattachaient et pendaient, comme des grappes de plus à sa vigne, les revenus des greffes civil et criminel de la prévôté, plus les revenus civils et criminels des auditoires d’Embas du Châtelet, sans compter quelque petit péage au pont de Mantes et de Corbeil, et les profits du tru sur l’esgrin de Paris, sur les mouleurs de bûches et les mesureurs de sel. Ajoutez à cela le plaisir d’étaler dans les chevauchées de la ville et de faire ressortir sur les robes mi-parties rouge et tanné des échevins et des quarteniers son bel habit de guerre que vous pouvez encore admirer aujourd’hui sculpté sur son tombeau à l’abbaye de Valmont en Normandie, et son morion tout bosselé à Montlhéry. Et puis, n’était-ce rien que d’avoir toute suprématie sur les sergents de la douzaine, le concierge et guette du Châtelet, les deux auditeurs du Châtelet, *auditores Castelleti*, les seize commissaires des seize quartiers, le geôlier du Châtelet, les quatre sergents fieffés, les cent vingt sergents à cheval, les cent vingt sergents à verge, le chevalier du guet avec son guet, son sous-guet, son contre-guet et son arrière-guet? N’était-ce rien que d’exercer haute et basse justice, droit de tourner, de pendre et de traîner, sans compter la menue juridiction en premier ressort, *in prima instantia*, comme disent les chartes, sur cette vicomté de Paris, si glorieusement apanagée de sept nobles bailliages? Peut-on rien imaginer de plus suave que de rendre arrêts et jugements, comme faisait quotidiennement messire Robert d’Estouteville, dans le Grand-Châtelet, sous les ogives larges et écrasées de Philippe-Auguste? et d’aller, comme il avait coutume chaque soir, en cette charmante maison sise rue Galilée dans le pourpris du Palais-Royal, qu’il tenait du chef de sa femme, madame Ambroise de Loré, se reposer de la fatigue d’avoir envoyé quelque pauvre diable passer la nuit de son côté dans «cette petite logette de la rue de l’Escorcherie, en laquelle les prévôts et échevins de Paris voulaient faire leur prison; contenant icelle onze pieds de long, sept pieds et quatre pouces de lez et onze pieds de haut»?

Et non seulement messire Robert d’Estouteville avait sa justice particulière de prévôt et vicomte de Paris, mais encore il avait part, coup d’œil et coup de dent dans la grande justice du roi. Il n’y avait pas de tête un peu haute qui ne lui eût passé par les mains avant d’échoir au bourreau. C’est lui qui avait été quérir à la Bastille Saint-Antoine pour le mener aux Halles, M. de Nemours, pour le mener en Grève M. de Saint-Pol, lequel rechignait et se récriait, à la grande joie de M. le prévôt qui n’aimait pas M. le connétable.

En voilà, certes, plus qu’il n’en fallait pour faire une vie heureuse et illustre, et pour mériter un jour une page notable dans cette intéressante histoire des prévôts de Paris, où l’on apprend que Oudard de Villeneuve avait une maison rue des Boucheries, que Guillaume de Hangest acheta la grande et petite Savoie, que Guillaume Thiboust donna aux religieuses de Sainte-Geneviève ses maisons de la rue Clopin, que Hugues Aubriot demeurait à l’hôtel du Porc-épic, et autres faits domestiques.

Toutefois, avec tant de motifs de prendre la vie en patience et en joie, messire Robert d’Estouteville s’était éveillé le matin du 7 janvier 1482 fort bourru et de massacrante humeur. D’où venait cette humeur? c’est ce qu’il n’aurait pu dire lui-même. Était-ce que le ciel était gris? que la boucle de son vieux ceinturon de Montlhéry était mal serrée, et sanglait trop militairement son embonpoint de prévôt? qu’il avait vu passer dans la rue sous sa fenêtre des ribauds lui faisant nargue, allant quatre de bande, pourpoint sans chemise, chapeau sans fond, bissac et bouteille au côté? Était-ce pressentiment vague des trois cent soixante-dix livres seize sols huit deniers que le futur roi Charles VIII devait l’année suivante retrancher des revenus de la prévôté? Le lecteur peut choisir; quant à nous, nous inclinerions à croire tout simplement qu’il était de mauvaise humeur, parce qu’il était de mauvaise humeur.

D’ailleurs, c’était un lendemain de fête, jour d’ennui pour tout le monde, et surtout pour le magistrat chargé de balayer toutes les ordures, au propre et au figuré, que fait une fête à Paris. Et puis, il devait tenir séance au Grand-Châtelet. Or, nous avons remarqué que les juges s’arrangent en général de manière à ce que leur jour d’audience soit aussi leur jour d’humeur, afin d’avoir toujours quelqu’un sur qui s’en décharger commodément, de par le roi, la loi et justice.

Cependant l’audience avait commencé sans lui. Ses lieutenants au civil, au criminel et au particulier faisaient sa besogne, selon l’usage; et dès huit heures du matin, quelques dizaines de bourgeois et de bourgeoises entassés et foulés dans un coin obscur de l’auditoire d’Embas du Châtelet, entre une forte barrière de chêne et le mur, assistaient avec béatitude au spectacle varié et réjouissant de la justice civile et criminelle rendue par maître Florian Barbedienne, auditeur au Châtelet, lieutenant de M. le prévôt, un peu pêle-mêle, et tout à fait au hasard.

La salle était petite, basse, voûtée. Une table fleurdelysée était au fond, avec un grand fauteuil de bois de chêne sculpté, qui était au prévôt et vide, et un escabeau à gauche pour l'auditeur, maître Florian. Au-dessous se tenait le greffier, griffonnant. En face était le peuple; et devant la porte et devant la table force sergents de la prévôté, en hoquetons de camelot violet à croix blanches. Deux sergents du Parloir-aux-Bourgeois, vêtus de leurs jaquettes de la Toussaint, mi-parties rouge et bleu, faisaient sentinelle devant une porte basse fermée qu'on apercevait au fond derrière la table. Une seule fenêtre ogive, étroitement encaissée dans l'épaisse muraille, éclairait d'un rayon blême de janvier deux grotesques figures, le capricieux démon de pierre sculpté en cul-de-lampe dans la clef de la voûte, et le juge assis au fond de la salle sur les fleurs de lys.

En effet, figurez-vous à la table prévôtale, entre deux liasses de procès, accroupi sur ses coudes, le pied sur la queue de sa robe de drap brun plain, la face dans sa fourrure d'agneau blanc, dont ses sourcils semblaient détachés, rouge, revêche, clignant de l'œil, portant avec majesté la graisse de ses joues, lesquelles se rejoignaient sous son menton, maître Florian Barbedienne, auditeur au Châtelet.

Or l'auditeur était sourd. Léger défaut pour un auditeur. Maître Florian n'en jugeait pas moins sans appel et très congrûment. Il est certain qu'il suffit qu'un juge ait l'air d'écouter; et le vénérable auditeur remplissait d'autant mieux cette condition, la seule essentielle en bonne justice, que son attention ne pouvait être distraite par aucun bruit.

Du reste, il avait dans l'auditoire un impitoyable contrôleur de ses faits et gestes dans la personne de notre ami Jehan Frollo du Moulin, ce petit écolier d'hier, ce *piéton* qu'on était toujours sûr de rencontrer partout dans Paris, excepté devant la chaire des professeurs.

«Tiens, disait-il tout bas à son compagnon Robin Poussepain qui ricanait à côté de lui, tandis qu'il commentait les scènes qui se déroulaient sous leurs yeux, voilà Jehanneton du Buisson. La belle fille du Cagnard au Marché-Neuf! Sur mon âme, il la condamne, le vieux! il n'a donc pas plus d'yeux que d'oreilles. Quinze sols quatre deniers parisis, pour avoir porté deux patenôtres! C'est un peu cher. *Lex duri carminis*. — Qu'est celui-là? Robin Chief-de-Ville, haubergier! — Pour avoir été passé et reçu maître audit métier? — C'est son denier d'entrée. — Hé! deux gentilshommes parmi ces marauds! Aiglet de Soins, Hutin de Mailly. Deux écuyers, *corpus Christ*! Ah! ils ont joué aux dés. Quand verrai-je ici notre recteur? Cent livres parisis d’amende envers le roi! Le Barbedienne frappe comme un sourd, — qu’il est! — Je veux être mon frère l’archidiacre si cela m’empêche de jouer, de jouer le jour, de jouer la nuit, de vivre au jeu, de mourir au jeu et de jouer mon âme après ma chemise! — Sainte Vierge, que de filles! l’une après l’autre, mes brebis! Ambroise Lécuyère! Isabeau la Paynette! Bérarde Gironin! Je les connais toutes, par Dieu! À l’amende! à l’amende! Voilà qui vous apprendra à porter des ceintures dorées! dix sols parisis! coquettes! Oh! le vieux museau de juge, sourd et imbécile! Oh! Florian le lourdaud! Oh! Barbedienne le butor! le voilà à table! il mange du plaideur, il mange du procès, il mange, il mâche, il se gave, il s’emplit. Amendes, épaves, taxes, frais, loyaux coûts, salaires, dommages et intérêts, gehenne, prison et geôle et ceps avec dépens, lui sont camichons de Noël et massepains de la Saint-Jean! Regarde-le, le porc! — Allons! bon! encore une femme amoureuse! Thibaud la Thibaude, ni plus, ni moins! — Pour être sortie de la rue Glatigny! — Quel est ce fils? Gieffroy Mabonne, gendarme cranequinier à main. Il a maugréé le nom du Père. À l’amende, la Thibaude! à l’amende, le Gieffroy! à l’amende tous les deux! Le vieux sourd! il a dû brouiller les deux affaires! Dix contre un qu’il fait payer le juron à la fille et l’amour au gendarme! — Attention, Robin Poussepain! Que vont-ils introduire? Voilà bien des sergents! Par Jupiter! tous les lévriers de la meute y sont. Ce doit être la grosse pièce de la chasse. Un sanglier — C’en est un, Robin! c’en est un. — Et un beau encore! — *Hercle*! c’est notre prince d’hier, notre pape des fous, notre sonneur de cloches, notre borgne, notre bossu, notre grimace! C’est Quasimodo!...»

Ce n’était rien moins.

C’était Quasimodo, sanglé, cerclé, ficelé, garrotté et sous bonne garde. L’escouade de sergents qui l’environnait était assistée du chevalier du guet en personne, portant brodées les armes de France sur la poitrine et les armes de la ville sur le dos. Il n’y avait rien du reste dans Quasimodo, à part sa difformité, qui pût justifier cet appareil de hallebardes et d’arquebuses. Il était sombre, silencieux et tranquille. À peine son œil unique jetait-il de temps à autre sur les liens qui le chargeaient un regard sournois et colère.

Il promena ce même regard autour de lui, mais si éteint et si endormi que les femmes ne se le montraient du doigt que pour en rire.

Cependant maître Florian l’auditeur feuilleta avec attention le dossier de la plainte dressée contre Quasimodo, que lui présenta le greffier, et, ce coup d’œil jeté, parut se recueillir un instant. Grâce à cette précaution qu’il avait toujours soin de prendre au moment de procéder à un interrogatoire, il savait d’avance les noms, qualités, délits du prévenu, faisait des répliques prévues à des réponses prévues, et parvenait à se tirer de toutes les sinuosités de l’interrogatoire, sans trop laisser deviner sa surdité. Le dossier du procès était pour lui le chien de l’aveugle. S’il arrivait par hasard que son infirmité se trahît çà et là par quelque apostrophe incohérente ou quelque question inintelligible, cela passait pour profondeur parmi les uns, et pour imbécillité parmi les autres. Dans les deux cas, l’honneur de la magistrature ne recevait aucune atteinte; car il vaut encore mieux qu’un juge soit réputé imbécile ou profond, que sourd. Il mettait donc grand soin à dissimuler sa surdité aux yeux de tous, et il y réussissait d’ordinaire si bien qu’il était arrivé à se faire illusion à lui-même. Ce qui est du reste plus facile qu’on ne le croit. Tous les bossus vont tête haute, tous les bègues pérorent, tous les sourds parlent bas. Quant à lui, il se croyait tout au plus l’oreille un peu rebelle. C’était la seule concession qu’il fît sur ce point à l’opinion publique, dans ses moments de franchise et d’examen de conscience.

Ayant donc bien ruminé l’affaire de Quasimodo, il renversa sa tête en arrière et ferma les yeux à demi, pour plus de majesté et d’impartialité, si bien qu’il était tout à la fois en ce moment sourd et aveugle. Double condition sans laquelle il n’est pas de juge parfait. C’est dans cette magistrale attitude qu’il commença l’interrogatoire.

«Votre nom?»

Or, voici un cas qui n’avait pas été «prévu par la loi», celui où un sourd aurait à interroger un sourd.

Quasimodo, que rien n’avertissait de la question à lui adressée, continua de regarder le juge fixement et ne répondit pas. Le juge, sourd et que rien n’avertissait de la surdité de l’accusé, crut qu’il avait répondu, comme faisaient en général tous les accusés, et poursuivit avec son aplomb mécanique et stupide.

«C’est bien. Votre âge?»

Quasimodo ne répondit pas davantage à cette question. Le juge la crut satisfaite, et continua.

«Maintenant, votre état?»

Toujours même silence. L’auditoire cependant commençait à chuchoter et à s’entre-regarder.

«Il suffit, reprit l’imperturbable auditeur quand il supposa que l’accusé avait consommé sa troisième réponse. Vous êtes accusé, par-devant nous: *primo*, de trouble nocturne; *secundo*, de voie de fait déshonnête sur la personne d’une femme folle, *in præjudicium meretricis*; *tertio*, de rébellion et déloyauté envers les archers de l’ordonnance du roi notre sire. Expliquez-vous sur tous ces points. — Greffier, avez-vous écrit ce que l’accusé a dit jusqu’ici?»

À cette question malencontreuse, un éclat de rire s’éleva, du greffe à l’auditoire, si violent, si fou, si contagieux, si universel que force fut bien aux deux sourds de s’en apercevoir. Quasimodo se retourna en haussant sa bosse, avec dédain, tandis que maître Florian, étonné comme lui et supposant que le rire des spectateurs avait été provoqué par quelque réplique irrévérente de l’accusé, rendue visible pour lui par ce haussement d’épaules, l’apostropha avec indignation.

«Vous avez fait là, drôle, une réponse qui mériterait la hart! Savez-vous à qui vous parlez?»

Cette sortie n’était pas propre à arrêter l’explosion de la gaieté générale. Elle parut à tous si hétéroclite et si cornue que le fou rire gagna jusqu’aux sergents du Parloir-aux-Bourgeois, espèce de valets de pique chez qui la stupidité était d’uniforme. Quasimodo seul conserva son sérieux, par la bonne raison qu’il ne comprenait rien à ce qui se passait autour de lui. Le juge, de plus en plus irrité, crut devoir continuer sur le même ton, espérant par là frapper l’accusé d’une terreur qui réagirait sur l’auditoire et le ramènerait au respect.

«C’est donc à dire, maître pervers et rapinier que vous êtes, que vous vous permettez de manquer à l’auditeur du Châtelet, au magistrat commis à la police populaire de Paris, chargé de faire recherche des crimes, délits et mauvais trains, de contrôler tous métiers et interdire le monopole, d’entretenir les pavés, d’empêcher les regrattiers de poulailles, volailles et sauvagine, de faire mesurer la bûche et autres sortes de bois, de purger la ville des boues et l’air des maladies contagieuses, de vaquer continuellement au fait du public, en un mot, sans gages ni espérances de salaire! Savez-vous que je m’appelle Florian Barbedienne, propre lieutenant de M. le prévôt, et de plus commissaire, enquesteur, contrerolleur et examinateur avec égal pouvoir en prévôté, bailliage, conservation et présidial!...»

Il n’y a pas de raison pour qu’un sourd qui parle à un sourd s’arrête. Dieu sait où et quand aurait pris terre maître Florian, ainsi lancé à toutes rames dans la haute éloquence, si la porte basse du fond ne s’était ouverte tout à coup et n’avait donné passage à M. le prévôt en personne.

À son entrée, maître Florian ne resta pas court, mais faisant un demi-tour sur ses talons, et pointant brusquement sur le prévôt la harangue dont il foudroyait Quasimodo le moment d’auparavant: «Monseigneur, dit-il, je requiers telle peine qu’il vous plaira contre l’accusé ci-présent, pour grave et mirifique manquement à justice.»

Et il se rassit tout essoufflé, essuyant de grosses gouttes de sueur qui tombaient de son front et trempaient comme larmes les parchemins étalés devant lui. Messire Robert d’Estouteville fronça le sourcil et fit à Quasimodo un geste d’attention tellement impérieux et significatif, que le sourd en comprit quelque chose.

Le prévôt lui adressa la parole avec sévérité: «Qu’est-ce que tu as donc fait pour être ici, maraud?»

Le pauvre diable, supposant que le prévôt lui demandait son nom, rompit le silence qu’il gardait habituellement, et répondit avec une voix rauque et gutturale: «Quasimodo.»

La réponse coïncidait si peu avec la question, que le fou rire recommença à circuler, et que messire Robert s’écria, rouge de colère: «Te railles-tu aussi de moi, drôle fieffé?

— Sonneur de cloches à Notre-Dame, répondit Quasimodo, croyant qu’il s’agissait d’expliquer au juge qui il était.

— Sonneur de cloches! reprit le prévôt, qui s’était éveillé le matin d’assez mauvaise humeur, comme nous l’avons dit, pour que sa fureur n’eût pas besoin d’être attisée par de si étranges réponses. Sonneur de cloches! Je te ferai faire sur le dos un carillon de houssines par les carrefours de Paris. Entends-tu, maraud?

— Si c’est mon âge que vous voulez savoir, dit Quasimodo, je crois que j’aurai vingt ans à la Saint-Martin.»

Pour le coup, c’était trop fort; le prévôt n’y put tenir.

«Ah! tu nargues la prévôté, misérable! Messieurs les sergents à verge, vous me mènerez ce drôle au pilori de la Grève, vous le battrez et vous le tournerez une heure. Il me le paiera, tête-Dieu! et je veux qu’il soit fait un cri du présent jugement, avec assistance de quatre trompettes-jurés, dans les sept châtellenies de la vicomté de Paris.»

Le greffier se mit à rédiger incontinent le jugement.

«Ventre-Dieu! que voilà qui est bien jugé!» s’écria de son coin le petit écolier Jehan Frollo du Moulin.

Le prévôt se retourna et fixa de nouveau sur Quasimodo ses yeux étincelants. — Je crois que le drôle a dit *ventre-Dieu*! Greffier, ajoutez douze deniers parisis d’amende pour jurement, et que la fabrique de Saint-Eustache en aura la moitié. J’ai une dévotion particulière à Saint-Eustache.

En quelques minutes, le jugement fut dressé. La teneur en était simple et brève. La coutume de la prévôté et vicomté de Paris n’avait pas encore été travaillée par le président Thibaut Baillet et par Roger Barmne, l’avocat du roi. Elle n’était pas obstruée alors par cette haute futaie de chicanes et de procédures que ces deux jurisconsultes y plantèrent au commencement du seizième siècle. Tout y était clair, expéditif, explicite. On y cheminait droit au but, et l’on apercevait tout de suite au bout de chaque sentier, sans broussailles et sans détour, la roue, le gibet ou le pilori. On savait du moins où l’on allait.

Le greffier présenta la sentence au prévôt, qui y apposa son sceau, et sortit pour continuer sa tournée dans les auditoires, avec une disposition d’esprit qui dut peupler ce jour-là toutes les geôles de Paris. Jehan Frollo et Robin Poussepain riaient sous cape. Quasimodo regardait le tout d’un air indifférent et étonné.

Cependant le greffier, au moment où maître Florian Barbedienne lisait à son tour le jugement pour le signer, se sentit ému de pitié pour le pauvre diable de condamné, et, dans l’espoir d’obtenir quelque diminution de peine, il s’approcha le plus près qu’il put de l’oreille de l’auditeur et lui dit en lui montrant Quasimodo: «Cet homme est sourd.»

Il espérait que cette communauté d’infirmité éveillerait l’intérêt de maître Florian en faveur du condamné. Mais d’abord, nous avons déjà observé que maître Florian ne se souciait pas qu’on s’aperçût de sa surdité. Ensuite, il avait l’oreille si dure qu’il n’entendit pas un mot de ce que lui dit le greffier; pourtant, il voulut avoir l’air d’entendre, et répondit: «Ah! ah! c’est différent. Je ne savais pas cela. Une heure de pilori de plus, en ce cas.»

Et il signa la sentence ainsi modifiée.

«C’est bien fait, dit Robin Poussepain qui gardait une dent à Quasimodo, cela lui apprendra à rudoyer les gens.»

II

LE TROU AUX RATS

Que le lecteur nous permette de le ramener à la place de Grève, que nous avons quittée hier avec Gringoire pour suivre la Esmeralda.

Il est dix heures du matin. Tout y sent le lendemain de fête. Le pavé est couvert de débris, rubans, chiffons, plumes des panaches, gouttes de cire des flambeaux, miettes de la ripaille publique. Bon nombre de bourgeois *flânent*, comme nous disons, çà et là, remuant du pied les tisons éteints du feu de joie, s'extasiant devant la Maison-aux-Piliers, au souvenir des belles tentures de la veille, et regardant aujourd'hui les clous, dernier plaisir. Les vendeurs de cidre et de cervoise roulent leur barrique à travers les groupes. Quelques passants affairés vont et viennent. Les marchands causent et s'appellent du seuil des boutiques. La fête, les ambassadeurs, Coppenole, le pape des fous, sont dans toutes les bouches. C'est à qui glosera le mieux et rira le plus. Et cependant, quatre sergents à cheval qui viennent de se poster aux quatre côtés du pilori ont déjà concentré autour d'eux une bonne portion du *populaire* épars sur la place, qui se condamne à l'immobilité et à l'ennui dans l'espoir d'une petite exécution.

Si maintenant le lecteur, après avoir contemplé cette scène vive et criarde qui se joue sur tous les points de la place, porte ses regards vers cette antique maison demi-gothique, demi-romane, de la Tour-Roland qui fait le coin du quai au couchant, il pourra remarquer à l'angle de la façade un gros bréviaire public à riches enluminures, garanti de la pluie par un petit auvent, et des voleurs par un grillage qui permet toutefois de le feuilleter. À côté de ce bréviaire est une étroite lucarne ogive, fermée de deux barreaux de fer en croix, donnant sur la place, seule ouverture qui laisse arriver un peu d'air et de jour à une petite cellule sans porte pratiquée au rez-de-chaussée dans l'épaisseur du mur de la vieille maison, et pleine d'une paix d'autant plus profonde, d'un silence d'autant plus morne qu'une place publique, la plus populeuse et la plus bruyante de Paris, fourmille et glapit à l'entour.

Cette cellule était célèbre dans Paris depuis près de trois siècles que madame Rolande de la Tour-Roland, en deuil de son père mort à la croisade, l'avait fait creuser dans la muraille de sa propre maison pour s'y enfermer à jamais, ne gardant de son palais que ce logis dont la porte était murée et la lucarne ouverte, hiver comme été, donnant tout le reste aux pauvres et à Dieu. La désolée demoiselle avait en effet attendu vingt ans la mort dans cette tombe anticipée, priant nuit et jour pour l’âme de son père, dormant dans la cendre, sans même avoir une pierre pour oreiller, vêtue d’un sac noir, et ne vivant que de ce que la pitié des passants déposait de pain et d’eau sur le rebord de sa lucarne, recevant ainsi la charité après l’avoir faite. À sa mort, au moment de passer dans l’autre sépulcre, elle avait légué à perpétuité celui-ci aux femmes affligées, mères, veuves ou filles, qui auraient beaucoup à prier pour autrui ou pour elles, et qui voudraient s’enterrer vives dans une grande douleur ou dans une grande pénitence. Les pauvres de son temps lui avaient fait de belles funérailles de larmes et de bénédictions; mais, à leur grand regret, la pieuse fille n’avait pu être canonisée sainte, faute de protections. Ceux d’entre eux qui étaient un peu impies avaient espéré que la chose se ferait en paradis plus aisément qu’à Rome, et avaient tout bonnement prié Dieu pour la défunte, à défaut du pape. La plupart s’étaient contentés de tenir la mémoire de Rolande pour sacrée et de faire reliques de ses haillons. La ville, de son côté, avait fondé, à l’intention de la demoiselle, un bréviaire public qu’on avait scellé près de la lucarne de la cellule, afin que les passants s’y arrêtassent de temps à autre, ne fût-ce que pour prier, que la prière fît songer à l’aumône, et que les pauvres recluses, héritières du caveau de madame Rolande, n’y mourussent pas tout à fait de faim et d’oubli.

Ce n’était pas du reste chose très rare dans les villes du moyen âge que cette espèce de tombeaux. On rencontrait souvent, dans la rue la plus fréquentée, dans le marché le plus bariolé et le plus assourdissant, tout au beau milieu, sous les pieds des chevaux, sous la roue des charrettes en quelque sorte, une cave, un puits, un cabanon muré et grillé, au fond duquel priait jour et nuit un être humain, volontairement dévoué à quelque lamentation éternelle, à quelque grande expiation. Et toutes les réflexions qu’éveillerait en nous aujourd’hui cet étrange spectacle, cette horrible cellule, sorte d’anneau intermédiaire de la maison et de la tombe, du cimetière et de la cité, ce vivant retranché de la communauté humaine et compté désormais chez les morts, cette lampe consumant sa dernière goutte d’huile dans l’ombre, ce reste de vie vacillant dans une fosse, ce souffle, cette voix, cette prière éternelle dans une boîte de pierre, cette face à jamais tournée vers l’autre monde, cet œil déjà illuminé d’un autre soleil, cette oreille collée aux parois de la tombe, cette âme prisonnière dans ce corps, ce corps prisonnier dans ce cachot, et sous cette double enveloppe de chair et de granit le bourdonnement de cette âme en peine, rien de tout cela n’était perçu par la foule. La piété peu raisonneuse et peu subtile de ce temps-là ne voyait pas tant de facettes à un acte de religion. Elle prenait la chose en bloc, et honorait, vénérait, sanctifiait au besoin le sacrifice, mais n’en analysait pas les souffrances et s’en apitoyait médiocrement. Elle apportait de temps en temps quelque pitance au misérable pénitent, regardait par le trou s’il vivait encore, ignorait son nom, savait à peine depuis combien d’années il avait commencé à mourir, et à l’étranger qui les questionnait sur le squelette vivant qui pourrissait dans cette cave, les voisins répondaient simplement, si c’était un homme: «C’est le reclus»; si c’était une femme: «C’est la recluse».

On voyait tout ainsi alors, sans métaphysique, sans exagération, sans verre grossissant, à l’œil nu. Le microscope n’avait pas encore été inventé, ni pour les choses de la matière, ni pour les choses de l’esprit.

D’ailleurs, bien qu’on s’en émerveillât peu, les exemples de cette espèce de claustration au sein des villes étaient, en vérité, fréquents, comme nous le disions tout à l’heure. Il y avait dans Paris assez bon nombre de ces cellules à prier Dieu et à faire pénitence; elles étaient presque toutes occupées. Il est vrai que le clergé ne se souciait pas de les laisser vides, ce qui impliquait tiédeur dans les croyants, et qu’on y mettait des lépreux quand on n’avait pas de pénitents. Outre la logette de la Grève, il y en avait une à Montfaucon, une au charnier des Innocents, une autre je ne sais plus où, au logis Clichon, je crois. D’autres encore à beaucoup d’endroits où l’on en retrouve la trace dans les traditions, à défaut des monuments. L’Université avait aussi la sienne. Sur la montagne Sainte-Geneviève une espèce de Job du moyen âge chanta pendant trente ans les sept Psaumes de la pénitence sur un fumier, au fond d’une citerne, recommençant quand il avait fini, psalmodiant plus haut la nuit, *magna voce per umbras*, et aujourd’hui l’antiquaire croit entendre encore sa voix en entrant dans la rue du *Puits-qui-parle*.

Pour nous en tenir à la loge de la Tour-Roland, nous devons dire qu’elle n’avait jamais chômé de recluses. Depuis la mort de madame Rolande, elle avait été rarement une année ou deux vacante. Maintes femmes étaient venues y pleurer, jusqu’à la mort, des parents, des amants, des fautes. La malice parisienne qui se mêle de tout, même des choses qui la regardent le moins, prétendait qu’on y avait vu peu de veuves.

Selon la mode de l’époque, une légende latine, inscrite sur le mur, indiquait au passant lettré la destination pieuse de cette cellule. L’usage s’est conservé jusqu’au milieu du seizième siècle d’expliquer un édifice par une brève devise écrite au-dessus de la porte. Ainsi on lit encore en France au-dessus du guichet de la prison de la maison seigneuriale de Tourville: *Sileto et spera*; en Irlande, sous l’écusson qui surmonte la grande porte du château de Fortescue: *Forte scutum, salus ducum*; en Angleterre, sur l’entrée principale du manoir hospitalier des comtes Cowper: *Tuum est*. C’est qu’alors tout édifice était une pensée.

Comme il n’y avait pas de porte à la cellule murée de la Tour-Roland, on avait gravé en grosses lettres romanes au-dessus de la fenêtre ces deux mots:

TU, ORA.

Ce qui fait que le peuple, dont le bon sens ne voit pas tant de finesse dans les choses et traduit volontiers *Ludovico Magno* par *Porte Saint-Denis*, avait donné à cette cavité noire, sombre et humide, le nom de *Trou aux Rats*. Explication moins sublime peut-être que l’autre, mais en revanche plus pittoresque.

III

HISTOIRE D’UNE GALETTE AU LEVAIN DE MAÏS

À l’époque où se passe cette histoire, la cellule de la Tour-Roland était occupée. Si le lecteur désire savoir par qui, il n’a qu’à écouter la conversation de trois braves commères qui, au moment où nous avons arrêté son attention sur le Trou aux Rats, se dirigeaient précisément du même côté en remontant du Châtelet vers la Grève, le long de l’eau.

Deux de ces femmes étaient vêtues en bonnes bourgeoises de Paris. Leur fine gorgerette blanche, leur jupe de tiretaine rayée rouge et bleue, leurs chausses de tricot blanc, à coins brodés en couleur, bien tirées sur la jambe, leurs souliers carrés de cuir fauve à semelles noires et surtout leur coiffure, cette espèce de corne de clinquant surchargée de rubans et de dentelles que les champenoises portent encore, concurremment avec les grenadiers de la garde impériale russe, annonçaient qu’elles appartenaient à cette classe de riches marchandes qui tient le milieu entre ce que les laquais appellent *une femme* et ce qu’ils appellent *une dame*. Elles ne portaient ni bagues, ni croix d’or, et il était aisé de voir que ce n’était pas chez elles pauvreté, mais tout ingénument peur de l’amende. Leur compagne était attifée à peu près de la même manière, mais il y avait dans sa mise et dans sa tournure ce je ne sais quoi qui sent la femme de notaire de province. On voyait à la manière dont sa ceinture lui remontait au-dessus des hanches qu’elle n’était pas depuis longtemps à Paris. Ajoutez à cela une gorgerette plissée, des nœuds de rubans sur les souliers, que les raies de la jupe étaient dans la largeur et non dans la longueur, et mille autres énormités dont s’indignait le bon goût.

Les deux premières marchaient de ce pas particulier aux Parisiennes qui font voir Paris à des provinciales. La provinciale tenait à sa main un gros garçon qui tenait à la sienne une grosse galette.

Nous sommes fâché d’avoir à ajouter que, vu la rigueur de la saison, il faisait de sa langue son mouchoir.

L’enfant se faisait traîner, *non passibus æquis*, comme dit Virgile, et trébuchait à chaque moment, au grand récri de sa mère. Il est vrai qu’il regardait plus la galette que le pavé. Sans doute quelque grave motif l’empêchait d’y mordre (à la galette), car il se contentait de la considérer tendrement. Mais la mère eût dû se charger de la galette. Il y avait cruauté à faire un Tantale du gros joufflu.

Cependant les trois damoiselles (car le nom de *dames* était réservé alors aux femmes nobles) parlaient à la fois.

«Dépêchons-nous, damoiselle Mahiette, disait la plus jeune des trois, qui était aussi la plus grosse, à la provinciale. J’ai grand-peur que nous n’arrivions trop tard. On nous disait au Châtelet qu’on allait le mener tout de suite au pilori.

— Ah bah! que dites-vous donc là, damoiselle Oudarde Musnier? reprenait l’autre Parisienne. Il restera deux heures au pilori. Nous avons le temps. Avez-vous jamais vu pilorier, ma chère Mahiette?

— Oui, dit la provinciale, à Reims.

— Ah! bah! qu’est-ce que c’est que ça, votre pilori de Reims? Une méchante cage où l’on ne tourne que des paysans. Voilà grand-chose!

— Que des paysans! dit Mahiette, au Marché-aux-Draps à Reims! Nous y avons vu de fort beaux criminels, et qui avaient tué père et mère! Des paysans! pour qui nous prenez-vous, Gervaise?»

Il est certain que la provinciale était sur le point de se fâcher, pour l’honneur de son pilori. Heureusement la discrète damoiselle Oudarde Musnier détourna à temps la conversation.

«À propos, damoiselle Mahiette, que dites-vous de nos ambassadeurs flamands? en avez-vous d’aussi beaux à Reims?

— J’avoue, répondit Mahiette, qu’il n’y a que Paris pour voir des Flamands comme ceux-là.

— Avez-vous vu dans l’ambassade ce grand ambassadeur qui est chaussetier? demanda Oudarde.

— Oui, dit Mahiette. Il a l’air d’un Saturne.

— Et ce gros dont la figure ressemble à un ventre nu? reprit Gervaise. Et ce petit qui a de petits yeux bordés d’une paupière rouge, ébarbillonnée et déchiquetée comme une tête de chardon?

— Ce sont leurs chevaux qui sont beaux à voir, dit Oudarde, vêtus comme ils sont à la mode de leur pays!

— Ah! ma chère, interrompit la provinciale Mahiette, prenant à son tour un air de supériorité, qu’est-ce que vous diriez donc si vous aviez vu, en 61, au sacre de Reims, il y a dix-huit ans, les chevaux des princes et de la compagnie du roi! Des houssures et caparaçons de toutes sortes; les uns de drap de Damas, de fin drap d’or, fourrés de martres zibelines; les autres, de velours, fourrés de pennes d’hermine; les autres, tout chargés d’orfèvrerie et de grosses campanes d’or et d’argent! Et la finance que cela avait coûté! Et les beaux enfants pages qui étaient dessus!

— Cela n’empêche pas, répliqua sèchement demoiselle Oudarde, que les Flamands ont de fort beaux chevaux et qu’ils ont fait hier un souper superbe chez M. le prévôt des marchands, à l’Hôtel de Ville, où on leur a servi des dragées, de l’hypocras, des épices, et autres singularités.

— Que dites-vous là, ma voisine? s’écria Gervaise. C’est chez M. le cardinal, au Petit-Bourbon, que les flamands ont soupé.

— Non pas. À l’Hôtel de Ville!

— Si fait. Au Petit-Bourbon!

— C’est si bien à l’Hôtel de Ville, reprit Oudarde avec aigreur, que le docteur Scourable leur a fait une harangue en latin, dont ils sont demeurés fort satisfaits. C’est mon mari, qui est libraire-juré, qui me l’a dit.

— C’est si bien au Petit-Bourbon, répondit Gervaise non moins vivement, que voici ce que leur a présenté le procureur de M. le cardinal: douze doubles quarts d’hypocras blanc, clairet et vermeil; vingt-quatre layettes de massepain double de Lyon doré; autant de torches de deux livres pièce, et six demi-queues de vin de Beaune, blanc et clairet, le meilleur qu’on ait pu trouver. J’espère que cela est positif. Je le tiens de mon mari, qui est cinquantenier au Parloir-aux-Bourgeois, et qui faisait ce matin la comparaison des ambassadeurs flamands avec ceux du Prêtre-Jean et de l’empereur de Trébisonde qui sont venus de Mésopotamie à Paris sous le dernier roi, et qui avaient des anneaux aux oreilles.

— Il est si vrai qu’ils ont soupé à l’Hôtel de Ville, répliqua Oudarde peu émue de cet étalage, qu’on n’a jamais vu un tel triomphe de viandes et de dragées.

— Je vous dis, moi, qu’ils ont été servis par Le Sec, sergent de la ville, à l’hôtel du Petit-Bourbon, et que c’est là ce qui vous trompe.

— À l’Hôtel de Ville, vous dis-je!

— Au Petit-Bourbon, ma chère! si bien qu’on avait illuminé en verres magiques le mot *Espérance* qui est écrit sur le grand portail.

— À l’Hôtel de Ville! à l’Hôtel de Ville! Même que Husson le Voir jouait de la flûte!

— Je vous dis que non!

— Je vous dis que si!

— Je vous dis que non!»

La bonne grosse Oudarde se préparait à répliquer, et la querelle en fût peut-être venue aux coiffes, si Mahiette ne se fût écriée tout à coup: «Voyez donc ces gens qui se sont attroupés là-bas au bout du pont! Il y a au milieu d'eux quelque chose qu'ils regardent.

— En vérité, dit Gervaise, j'entends tambouriner. Je crois que c'est la petite Smeralda qui fait ses momeries avec sa chèvre. Eh vite, Mahiette! doublez le pas et traînez votre garçon. Vous êtes venue ici pour visiter les curiosités de Paris. Vous avez vu hier les flamands; il faut voir aujourd'hui l'égyptienne.

— L'égyptienne! dit Mahiette en rebroussant brusquement chemin, et en serrant avec force le bras de son fils. Dieu m'en garde! elle me volerait mon enfant! — Viens, Eustache!»

Et elle se mit à courir sur le quai vers la Grève, jusqu'à ce qu'elle eût laissé le pont bien loin derrière elle. Cependant l'enfant, qu'elle traînait, tomba sur les genoux; elle s'arrêta essoufflée. Oudarde et Gervaise la rejoignirent.

«Cette égyptienne vous voler votre enfant? dit Gervaise. Vous avez là une singulière fantaisie.»

Mahiette hochait la tête d'un air pensif.

«Ce qui est singulier, observa Oudarde, c'est que la sachette a la même idée des égyptiennes.

— Qu'est-ce que c'est que la sachette? dit Mahiette.

— Hé! dit Oudarde, sœur Gudule.

— Qu'est-ce que c'est, reprit Mahiette, que sœur Gudule?

— Vous êtes bien de votre Reims, de ne pas savoir cela! répondit Oudarde. C'est la recluse du Trou aux Rats.

— Comment! demanda Mahiette, cette pauvre femme à qui nous portons cette galette?»

Oudarde fit un signe de tête affirmatif.

«Précisément. Vous allez la voir tout à l'heure à sa lucarne sur la Grève. Elle a le même regard que vous sur ces vagabonds d'Égypte qui tambourinent et disent la bonne aventure au public. On ne sait pas d'où lui vient cette horreur des zingari et des égyptiens. Mais vous, Mahiette, pourquoi donc vous sauvez-vous ainsi, rien qu'à les voir?

— Oh! dit Mahiette en saisissant entre ses deux mains la tête ronde de son enfant, je ne veux pas qu'il m'arrive ce qui est arrivé à Paquette la Chantefleurie.

— Ah! voilà une histoire que vous allez nous conter, ma bonne Mahiette, dit Gervaise en lui prenant le bras.

— Je veux bien, répondit Mahiette, mais il faut que vous soyez bien de votre Paris pour ne pas savoir cela! Je vous dirai donc — mais il n'est pas besoin de nous arrêter pour conter la chose — que Paquette la Chantefleurie était une jolie fille de dix-huit ans quand j'en étais une aussi, c'est-à-dire il y a dix-huit ans, et que c'est sa faute si elle n'est pas aujourd'hui, comme moi, une bonne grosse fraîche mère de trente-six ans, avec un homme et un garçon. Au reste, dès l'âge de quatorze ans, il n'était plus temps! — C'était donc la fille de Guybertaut, ménestrel de bateaux à Reims, le même qui avait joué devant le roi Charles VII, à son sacre, quand il descendit notre rivière de Vesle depuis Sillery jusqu'à Muison, que même madame la Pucelle était dans le bateau. Le vieux père mourut, que Paquette était encore tout enfant; elle n'avait donc plus que sa mère, sœur de M. Mathieu Pradon, maître dinandinier et chaudronnier à Paris, rue Parin-Garlin, lequel est mort l'an passé. Vous voyez qu'elle était de famille. La mère était une bonne femme, par malheur, et n'apprit rien à Paquette qu'un peu de doreloterie et de bimbeloterie qui n'empêchait pas la petite de devenir fort grande et de rester fort pauvre. Elles demeuraient toutes deux à Reims le long de la rivière, rue de Folle-Peine. Notez ceci; je crois que c'est là ce qui porta malheur à Paquette. En 61, l'année du sacre de notre roi Louis onzième que Dieu garde, Paquette était si gaie et si jolie qu'on ne l'appelait partout que la Chantefleurie. Pauvre fille! — Elle avait de jolies dents, elle aimait à rire pour les faire voir. Or, fille qui aime à rire s'achemine à pleurer; les belles dents perdent les beaux yeux. C'était donc la Chantefleurie. Elle et sa mère gagnaient durement leur vie. Elles étaient bien déchues depuis la mort du ménétrier. Leur doreloterie ne leur rapportait guère plus de six deniers par semaine, ce qui ne fait pas tout à fait deux liards-à-l'aigle. Où était le temps que le père Guybertaut gagnait douze sols parisis dans un seul sacre avec une chanson? Un hiver — c'était en cette même année 61, — que les deux femmes n'avaient ni bûches ni fagots, et qu'il faisait très froid, cela donna de si belles couleurs à la Chantefleurie, que les hommes l'appelaient: Paquette! que plusieurs l'appelèrent Pâquerette! et qu'elle se perdit. — Eustache! que je te voie mordre dans la galette! — Nous vîmes tout de suite qu'elle était perdue, un dimanche qu'elle vint à l'église avec une croix d'or au cou. — À quatorze ans! voyez-vous cela! — Ce fut d'abord le jeune vicomte de Cormontreuil, qui a son clocher à trois quarts de lieue de Reims;

puis, messire Henri de Triancourt, chevaucheur du roi; puis, moins que cela, Chiart de Beaulion, sergent d'armes; puis, en descendant toujours, Guery Aubergeon, valet tranchant du roi; puis, Macé de Frépus, barbier de M. le Dauphin; puis, Thévenin le Moine, queux-le-roi; puis, toujours ainsi de moins jeune en moins noble, elle tomba à Guillaume Racine, ménestrel de vielle, et à Thierry de Mer, lanternier. Alors, pauvre Chantefleurie, elle fut toute à tous. Elle était arrivée au dernier sol de sa pièce d'or. Que vous dirai-je, mesdamoiselles? Au sacre, dans la même année 61, c'est elle qui fit le lit du roi des ribauds! — Dans la même année!»

Mahiette soupira, et essuya une larme qui roulait dans ses yeux.

«Voilà une histoire qui n'est pas très extraordinaire, dit Gervaise, et je ne vois pas en tout cela d'égyptiens ni d'enfants.

— Patience! reprit Mahiette; d'enfant, vous allez en voir un. — En 66, il y aura seize ans ce mois-ci à la Sainte-Paule, Paquette accoucha d'une petite fille. La malheureuse! elle eut une grande joie. Elle désirait un enfant depuis longtemps. Sa mère, bonne femme qui n'avait jamais su que fermer les yeux, sa mère était morte. Paquette n'avait plus rien à aimer au monde, plus rien qui l'aimât. Depuis cinq ans qu'elle avait failli, c'était une pauvre créature que la Chantefleurie. Elle était seule, seule dans cette vie, montrée au doigt, criée par les rues, battue des sergents, moquée des petits garçons en guenilles. Et puis, les vingt ans étaient venus; et vingt ans, c'est la vieillesse pour les femmes amoureuses. La folie commençait à ne pas lui rapporter plus que la doreloterie autrefois; pour une ride qui venait, un écu s'en allait; l'hiver lui redevenait dur, le bois se faisait derechef rare dans son cendrier et le pain dans sa huche. Elle ne pouvait plus travailler, parce qu'en devenant voluptueuse elle était devenue paresseuse, et elle souffrait beaucoup plus, parce qu'en devenant paresseuse elle était devenue voluptueuse. C'est du moins comme cela que M. le curé de Saint-Remy explique pourquoi ces femmes-là ont plus froid et plus faim que d'autres pauvresses quand elles sont vieilles.

— Oui, observa Gervaise, mais les égyptiens?

— Un moment donc, Gervaise! dit Oudarde dont l'attention était moins impatiente. Qu'est-ce qu'il y aurait à la fin si tout était au commencement? Continuez, Mahiette, je vous prie. Cette pauvre Chantefleurie!»

Mahiette poursuivit.

«Elle était donc bien triste, bien misérable, et creusait ses joues avec ses larmes. Mais dans sa honte, dans sa folie et dans son abandon, il lui semblait qu'elle serait moins honteuse, moins folle et moins abandonnée, s'il y avait quelque chose au monde ou quelqu'un qu'elle pût aimer et qui pût l'aimer. Il fallait que ce fût un enfant, parce qu'un enfant seul pouvait être assez innocent pour cela. — Elle avait reconnu ceci après avoir essayé d'aimer un voleur, le seul homme qui pût vouloir d'elle; mais au bout de peu de temps elle s'était aperçue que le voleur la méprisait. — À ces femmes d'amour il faut un amant ou un enfant pour leur remplir le cœur. Autrement elles sont bien malheureuses. — Ne pouvant avoir d'amant, elle se tourna toute au désir d'un enfant, et comme elle n'avait pas cessé d'être pieuse, elle en fit son éternelle prière au bon Dieu. Le bon Dieu eut donc pitié d'elle, et lui donna une petite fille. Sa joie, je ne vous en parle pas. Ce fut une furie de larmes, de caresses et de baisers. Elle allaita elle-même son enfant, lui fit des langes avec sa couverture, la seule qu'elle eût sur son lit, et ne sentit plus ni le froid ni la faim. Elle en redevint belle. Vieille fille fait jeune mère. La galanterie reprit, on revint voir la Chantefleurie, elle retrouva chalands pour sa marchandise, et de toutes ces horreurs elle fit des layettes, béguins et baverolles, des brassières de dentelle et des petits bonnets de satin, sans même songer à se racheter une couverture. — Monsieur Eustache, je vous ai déjà dit de ne pas manger la galette. — Il est sûr que la petite Agnès — c'était le nom de l'enfant, nom de baptême, car de nom de famille, il y a longtemps que la Chantefleurie n'en avait plus, — il est certain que cette petite était plus emmaillottée de rubans et de broderies qu'une dauphine du Dauphiné! Elle avait entre autres une paire de petits souliers! que le roi Louis XI n'en a certainement pas eu de pareils! Sa mère les lui avait cousus et brodés elle-même, elle y avait mis toutes ses finesses de dorelotière et toutes les passequilles d'une robe de bonne Vierge. C'étaient bien les deux plus mignons souliers roses qu'on pût voir. Ils étaient longs tout au plus comme mon pouce, et il fallait en voir sortir les petits pieds de l'enfant pour croire qu'ils avaient pu y entrer. Il est vrai que ces petits pieds étaient si petits, si jolis, si roses! plus roses que le satin des souliers! — Quand vous aurez des enfants, Oudarde, vous saurez que rien n'est plus joli que ces petits pieds et ces petites mains-là.

— Je ne demande pas mieux, dit Oudarde, en soupirant, mais j'attends que ce soit le bon plaisir de monsieur Andry Musnier.

— Au reste, reprit Mahiette, l'enfant de Paquette n'avait pas que les pieds de joli. Je l'ai vue quand elle n'avait que quatre mois. C'était un amour! Elle avait les yeux plus grands que la bouche. Et les plus charmants fins cheveux noirs, qui frisaient déjà. Cela aurait fait une fière brune, à seize ans! Sa mère en devenait de plus en plus folle tous les jours. Elle la caressait, la baisait, la chatouillait, la lavait, l’attifait, la mangeait! Elle en perdait la tête, elle en remerciait Dieu. Ses jolis pieds roses surtout, c’était un ébahissement sans fin, c’était un délire de joie! elle y avait toujours les lèvres collées et ne pouvait revenir de leur petitesse. Elle les mettait dans les petits souliers, les retirait, les admirait, s’en émerveillait, regardait le jour au travers, s’apitoyait de les essayer à la marche sur son lit, et eût volontiers passé sa vie à genoux, à chausser et à déchausser ces pieds-là comme ceux d’un enfant-Jésus.

— Le conte est bel et bon, dit à mi-voix la Gervaise, mais où est l’Égypte dans tout cela?

— Voici, répliqua Mahiette. Il arriva un jour à Reims des espèces de cavaliers fort singuliers. C’étaient des gueux et des truands qui cheminaient dans le pays, conduits par leur duc et par leurs comtes. Ils étaient basanés, avaient les cheveux tout frisés, et des anneaux d’argent aux oreilles. Les femmes étaient encore plus laides que les hommes. Elles avaient le visage plus noir et toujours découvert, un méchant roquet sur le corps, un vieux drap tissu de cordes lié sur l’épaule, et la chevelure en queue de cheval. Les enfants qui se vautraient dans leurs jambes auraient fait peur à des singes. Une bande d’excommuniés. Tout cela venait en droite ligne de la basse Égypte à Reims par la Pologne. Le pape les avait confessés, à ce qu’on disait, et leur avait donné pour pénitence d’aller sept ans de suite par le monde, sans coucher dans des lits. Aussi ils s’appelaient Penanciers et puaient. Il paraît qu’ils avaient été autrefois sarrasins, ce qui fait qu’ils croyaient à Jupiter, et qu’ils réclamaient dix livres tournois de tous archevêques, évêques et abbés crossés et mitrés. C’est une bulle du pape qui leur valait cela. Ils venaient à Reims dire la bonne aventure au nom du roi d’Alger et de l’empereur d’Allemagne. Vous pensez bien qu’il n’en fallut pas davantage pour qu’on leur interdît l’entrée de la ville. Alors toute la bande campa de bonne grâce près de la porte de Braine, sur cette butte où il y a un moulin, à côté des trous des anciennes crayères. Et ce fut dans Reims à qui les irait voir. Ils vous regardaient dans la main et vous disaient des prophéties merveilleuses. Ils étaient de force à prédire à Judas qu’il serait pape. Il courait cependant sur eux de méchants bruits d’enfants volés et de bourses coupées et de chair humaine mangée. Les gens sages disaient aux fous: N’y allez pas, et y allaient de leur côté en cachette. C’était donc un emportement. Le fait est qu'ils disaient des choses à étonner un cardinal. Les mères faisaient grand triomphe de leurs enfants depuis que les égyptiennes leur avaient lu dans la main toutes sortes de miracles écrits en païen et en turc. L'une avait un empereur, l'autre un pape, l'autre un capitaine. La pauvre Chantefleurie fut prise de curiosité. Elle voulut savoir ce qu'elle avait, et si sa jolie petite Agnès ne serait pas un jour impératrice d'Arménie ou d'autre chose. Elle la porta donc aux égyptiens; et les égyptiennes d'admirer l'enfant, de la caresser, de la baiser avec leurs bouches noires, et de s'émerveiller sur sa petite main. Hélas! à la grande joie de la mère. Elles firent fête surtout aux jolis pieds et aux jolis souliers. L'enfant n'avait pas encore un an. Elle bégayait déjà, riait à sa mère comme une petite folle, était grasse et toute ronde, et avait mille charmants petits gestes des anges du paradis. Elle fut très effarouchée des égyptiennes, et pleura. Mais la mère la baisa plus fort et s'en alla ravie de la bonne aventure que les devineresses avaient dite à son Agnès. Ce devait être une beauté, une vertu, une reine. Elle retourna donc dans son galetas de la rue Folle-Peine, toute fière d'y rapporter une reine. Le lendemain, elle profita d'un moment où l'enfant dormait sur son lit, car elle la couchait toujours avec elle, laissa tout doucement la porte entr'ouverte, et courut raconter à une voisine de la rue de la Séchesserie qu'il viendrait un jour où sa fille Agnès serait servie à table par le roi d'Angleterre et l'archiduc d'Éthiopie, et cent autres surprises. À son retour, n'entendant pas de cris en montant son escalier, elle se dit: «Bon! l'enfant dort toujours.» Elle trouva sa porte plus grande ouverte qu'elle ne l'avait laissée, elle entra pourtant, la pauvre mère, et courut au lit... — L'enfant n'y était plus, la place était vide. Il n'y avait plus rien de l'enfant, sinon un de ses jolis petits souliers. Elle s'élança hors de la chambre, se jeta au bas de l'escalier, et se mit à battre les murailles avec sa tête en criant: «Mon enfant! qui a mon enfant? qui m'a pris mon enfant?» La rue était déserte, la maison isolée; personne ne put lui rien dire. Elle alla par la ville, elle fureta toutes les rues, courut çà et là la journée entière, folle, égarée, terrible, flairant aux portes et aux fenêtres comme une bête farouche qui a perdu ses petits. Elle était haletante, échevelée, effrayante à voir, et elle avait dans les yeux un feu qui séchait ses larmes. Elle arrêtait les passants et criait: «Ma fille! ma fille! ma jolie petite fille! Celui qui me rendra ma fille, je serai sa servante, la servante de son chien, et il me mangera le cœur, s'il veut.» — Elle rencontra M. le curé de Saint-Remy, et lui dit: «Monsieur le curé, je labourerai la terre avec mes ongles, mais rendez-moi mon enfant!» C’était déchirant, Oudarde; et j’ai vu un homme bien dur, maître Ponce Lacabre, le procureur, qui pleurait. «Ah! la pauvre mère!» Le soir, elle rentra chez elle. Pendant son absence, une voisine avait vu deux égyptiennes y monter en cachette avec un paquet dans leurs bras, puis redescendre après avoir refermé la porte, et s’enfuir en hâte. Depuis leur départ, on entendait chez Paquette des espèces de cris d’enfant. La mère rit aux éclats, monta l’escalier comme avec des ailes, enfonça sa porte comme avec un canon d’artillerie, et entra... — Une chose affreuse, Oudarde! Au lieu de sa gentille petite Agnès, si vermeille et si fraîche, qui était un don du bon Dieu, une façon de petit monstre, hideux, boiteux, borgne, contrefait, se traînait en piaillant sur le carreau. Elle cacha ses yeux avec horreur. «Oh! dit-elle, est-ce que les sorcières auraient métamorphosé ma fille en cet animal effroyable?» On se hâta d’emporter le petit pied-bot. Il l’aurait rendue folle. C’était un monstrueux enfant de quelque égyptienne donnée au diable. Il paraissait avoir quatre ans environ, et parlait une langue qui n’était point une langue humaine; c’étaient des mots qui ne sont pas possibles. — La Chantefleurie s’était jetée sur le petit soulier, tout ce qui lui restait de tout ce qu’elle avait aimé. Elle y demeura si longtemps immobile, muette, sans souffle, qu’on crut qu’elle y était morte. Tout à coup elle trembla de tout son corps, couvrit sa relique de baisers furieux, et se dégorgea en sanglots comme si son cœur venait de crever. Je vous assure que nous pleurions toutes aussi. Elle disait: «Oh! ma petite fille! ma jolie petite fille! où es-tu?» Et cela vous tordait les entrailles. Je pleure encore d’y songer. Nos enfants, voyez-vous, c’est la moelle de nos os. — Mon pauvre Eustache! tu es si beau, toi! Si vous saviez comme il est gentil! Hier il me disait: Je veux être gendarme, moi. Ô mon Eustache! si je te perdais! — La Chantefleurie se leva tout à coup et se mit à courir dans Reims en criant: «Au camp des égyptiens! au camp des égyptiens! Des sergents pour brûler les sorcières!» Les égyptiens étaient partis. — Il faisait nuit noire. On ne put les poursuivre. Le lendemain, à deux lieues de Reims, dans une bruyère entre Gueux et Tilloy, on trouva les restes d’un grand feu, quelques rubans qui avaient appartenu à l’enfant de Paquette, des gouttes de sang, et des crottins de bouc. La nuit qui venait de s’écouler était précisément celle d’un samedi. On ne douta plus que les égyptiens n’eussent fait le sabbat dans cette bruyère, et qu’ils n’eussent dévoré l’enfant en compagnie de Belzébuth, comme cela se pratique chez les mahométans. Quand la Chantefleurie apprit ces choses horribles, elle ne pleura pas, elle remua les lèvres comme pour parler, mais ne put. Le lendemain, ses cheveux étaient gris. Le surlendemain, elle avait disparu.

— Voilà, en effet, une effroyable histoire, dit Oudarde, et qui ferait pleurer un Bourguignon!

— Je ne m’étonne plus, ajouta Gervaise, que la peur des égyptiens vous talonne si fort!

— Et vous avez d’autant mieux fait, reprit Oudarde, de vous sauver tout à l’heure avec votre Eustache, que ceux-ci aussi sont des égyptiens de Pologne.

— Non pas, dit Gervaise. On dit qu’ils viennent d’Espagne et de Catalogne.

— Catalogne? c’est possible, répondit Oudarde. Pologne, Catalogne, Valogne, je confonds toujours ces trois provinces-là. Ce qui est sûr, c’est que ce sont des égyptiens.

— Et qui ont certainement, ajouta Gervaise, les dents assez longues pour manger des petits enfants. Et je ne serais pas surprise que la Smeralda en mangeât aussi un peu, tout en faisant la petite bouche. Sa chèvre blanche a des tours trop malicieux pour qu’il n’y ait pas quelque libertinage là-dessous.»

Mahiette marchait silencieusement. Elle était absorbée dans cette rêverie qui est en quelque sorte le prolongement d’un récit douloureux, et qui ne s’arrête qu’après en avoir propagé l’ébranlement, de vibration en vibration, jusqu’aux dernières fibres du cœur. Cependant Gervaise lui adressa la parole: «Et l’on n’a pu savoir ce qu’est devenue la Chantefleurie?» Mahiette ne répondit pas. Gervaise répéta sa question en lui secouant le bras et en l’appelant par son nom. Mahiette parut se réveiller de ses pensées.

«Ce qu’est devenue la Chantefleurie?» dit-elle en répétant machinalement les paroles dont l’impression était toute fraîche dans son oreille; puis faisant effort pour ramener son attention au sens de ces paroles: «Ah! reprit-elle vivement, on ne l’a jamais su.»

Elle ajouta après une pause:

«Les uns ont dit l’avoir vue sortir de Reims à la brune par la porte Fléchembault; les autres, au point du jour, par la vieille porte Basée. Un pauvre a trouvé sa croix d’or accrochée à la croix de pierre dans la culture où se fait la foire. C’est ce joyau qui l’avait perdue, en 61. C’était un don du beau vicomte de Cormontreuil, son premier amant. Paquette n’avait jamais voulu s’en défaire, si misérable qu’elle eût été. Elle y tenait comme à la vie.

Aussi, quand nous vîmes l’abandon de cette croix, nous pensâmes toutes qu’elle était morte. Cependant il y a des gens du Cabaret-les-Vantes qui dirent l’avoir vue passer sur le chemin de Paris, marchant pieds nus sur les cailloux. Mais il faudrait alors qu’elle fût sortie par la porte de Vesle, et tout cela n’est pas d’accord. Ou, pour mieux dire, je crois bien qu’elle est sortie en effet par la porte de Vesle, mais sortie de ce monde.

— Je ne vous comprends pas, dit Gervaise.

— La Vesle, répondit Mahiette avec un sourire mélancolique, c’est la rivière.

— Pauvre Chantefleurie! dit Oudarde en frissonnant, noyée!

— Noyée! reprit Mahiette, et qui eût dit au bon père Guybertaut quand il passait sous le pont de Tinqueux au fil de l’eau, en chantant dans sa barque, qu’un jour sa chère petite Paquette passerait aussi sous ce pont-là, mais sans chanson et sans bateau?

— Et le petit soulier? demanda Gervaise.

— Disparu avec la mère, répondit Mahiette.

— Pauvre petit soulier!» dit Oudarde.

Oudarde, grosse et sensible femme, se serait fort bien satisfaite à soupirer de compagnie avec Mahiette. Mais Gervaise, plus curieuse, n’était pas au bout de ses questions.

«Et le monstre? dit-elle tout à coup à Mahiette.

— Quel monstre? demanda celle-ci.

— Le petit monstre égyptien laissé par les sorcières chez la Chantefleurie en échange de sa fille! Qu’en avez-vous fait? J’espère bien que vous l’avez noyé aussi.

— Non pas, répondit Mahiette.

— Comment! brûlé alors? Au fait, c’est plus juste. Un enfant sorcier!

— Ni l’un ni l’autre, Gervaise. Monsieur l’archevêque s’est intéressé à l’enfant d’Égypte, l’a exorcisé, l’a béni, lui a ôté bien soigneusement le diable du corps, et l’a envoyé à Paris pour être exposé sur le lit de bois, à Notre-Dame, comme enfant trouvé.

— Ces évêques! dit Gervaise en grommelant, parce qu’ils sont savants, ils ne font rien comme les autres. Je vous demande un peu, Oudarde, mettre le diable aux enfants trouvés! car c’était bien sûr le diable que ce petit monstre. — Hé bien, Mahiette, qu’est-ce qu’on en a fait à Paris? Je compte bien que pas une personne charitable n’en a voulu.

— Je ne sais pas, répondit la Rémoise. C’est justement dans ce temps-là que mon mari a acheté le tabellionage de Beru, à deux lieues de la ville, et nous ne nous sommes plus occupés de cette histoire; avec cela que devant Beru il y a les deux buttes de Cernay, qui vous font perdre de vue les clochers de la cathédrale de Reims.»

Tout en parlant ainsi, les trois dignes bourgeoises étaient arrivées à la place de Grève. Dans leur préoccupation, elles avaient passé sans s’y arrêter devant le bréviaire public de la Tour-Roland, et se dirigeaient machinalement vers le pilori autour duquel la foule grossissait à chaque instant. Il est probable que le spectacle qui y attirait en ce moment tous les regards leur eût fait complètement oublier le Trou aux Rats et la station qu’elles s’étaient proposé d’y faire, si le gros Eustache de six ans que Mahiette traînait à sa main ne leur en eût rappelé brusquement l’objet: «Mère, dit-il, comme si quelque instinct l’avertissait que le Trou aux Rats était derrière lui, à présent puis-je manger le gâteau?»

Si Eustache eût été plus adroit, c’est-à-dire moins gourmand, il aurait encore attendu, et ce n’est qu’au retour, dans l’Université, au logis, chez maître Andry Musnier, rue Madame-la-Valence, lorsqu’il y aurait eu les deux bras de la Seine et les cinq ponts de la Cité entre le Trou aux Rats et la galette, qu’il eût hasardé cette question timide: «Mère, à présent, puis-je manger le gâteau?»

Cette même question, imprudente au moment où Eustache la fit, réveilla l’attention de Mahiette.

«À propos, s’écria-t-elle, nous oublions la recluse! Montrez-moi donc votre Trou aux Rats, que je lui porte son gâteau.

— Tout de suite, dit Oudarde. C’est une charité.»

Ce n’était pas là le compte d’Eustache.

«Tiens, ma galette!» dit-il en heurtant alternativement ses deux épaules de ses deux oreilles, ce qui est en pareil cas le signe suprême du mécontentement.

Les trois femmes revinrent sur leurs pas, et, arrivées près de la maison de la Tour-Roland, Oudarde dit aux deux autres: «Il ne faut pas regarder toutes trois à la fois dans le trou, de peur d’effaroucher la sachette. Faites semblant, vous deux, de lire *dominus* dans le bréviaire, pendant que je mettrai le nez à la lucarne. La sachette me connaît un peu. Je vous avertirai quand vous pourrez venir.»

Elle alla seule à la lucarne. Au moment où sa vue y pénétra, une profonde pitié se peignit sur tous ses traits, et sa gaie et franche physionomie changea aussi brusquement d’expression et de couleur que si elle eût passé d’un rayon de soleil à un rayon de lune. Son œil devint humide, sa bouche se contracta comme lorsqu’on va pleurer. Un moment après, elle mit un doigt sur ses lèvres et fit signe à Mahiette de venir voir.

Mahiette vint, émue, en silence et sur la pointe des pieds, comme lorsqu’on approche du lit d’un mourant.

C’était en effet un triste spectacle que celui qui s’offrait aux yeux des deux femmes, pendant qu’elles regardaient sans bouger ni souffler à la lucarne grillée du Trou aux Rats.

La cellule était étroite, plus large que profonde, voûtée en ogive, et vue à l’intérieur ressemblait assez à l’alvéole d’une grande mitre d’évêque. Sur la dalle nue qui en formait le sol, dans un angle, une femme était assise ou plutôt accroupie. Son menton était appuyé sur ses genoux, que ses deux bras croisés serraient fortement contre sa poitrine. Ainsi ramassée sur elle-même, vêtue d’un sac brun qui l’enveloppait tout entière à larges plis, ses longs cheveux gris rabattus par devant tombant sur son visage le long de ses jambes jusqu’à ses pieds, elle ne présentait au premier aspect qu’une forme étrange, découpée sur le fond ténébreux de la cellule, une espèce de triangle noirâtre, que le rayon de jour venant de la lucarne tranchait crûment en deux nuances, l’une sombre, l’autre éclairée. C’était un de ces spectres mi-partis d’ombre et de lumière, comme on en voit dans les rêves et dans l’œuvre extraordinaire de Goya, pâles, immobiles, sinistres, accroupis sur une tombe ou adossés à la grille d’un cachot. Ce n’était ni une femme, ni un homme, ni un être vivant, ni une forme définie; c’était une figure; une sorte de vision sur laquelle s’entrecoupaient le réel et le fantastique, comme l’ombre et le jour. À peine sous ses cheveux répandus jusqu’à terre distinguait-on un profil amaigri et sévère; à peine sa robe laissait-elle passer l’extrémité d’un pied nu qui se crispait sur le pavé rigide et gelé. Le peu de forme humaine qu’on entrevoyait sous cette enveloppe de deuil faisait frissonner.

Cette figure, qu’on eût crue scellée dans la dalle, paraissait n’avoir ni mouvement, ni pensée, ni haleine. Sous ce mince sac de toile, en janvier, gisante à nu sur un pavé de granit, sans feu, dans l’ombre d’un cachot dont le soupirail oblique ne laissait arriver du dehors que la bise et jamais le soleil, elle ne semblait pas souffrir, pas même sentir. On eût dit qu’elle s’était faite pierre avec le cachot, glace avec la saison. Ses mains étaient jointes, ses yeux étaient fixes. À la première vue on la prenait pour un spectre, à la seconde pour une statue.

Cependant par intervalles ses lèvres bleues s'entrouvraient à un souffle, et tremblaient, mais aussi mortes et aussi machinales que des feuilles qui s'écartent au vent.

Cependant de ses yeux mornes s'échappait un regard, un regard ineffable, un regard profond, lugubre, imperturbable, incessamment fixé à un angle de la cellule qu'on ne pouvait voir du dehors; un regard qui semblait rattacher toutes les sombres pensées de cette âme en détresse à je ne sais quel objet mystérieux.

Telle était la créature qui recevait de son habitacle le nom de *recluse*, et de son vêtement le nom de *sachette*.

Les trois femmes, car Gervaise s'était réunie à Mahiette et à Oudarde, regardaient par la lucarne. Leur tête interceptait le faible jour du cachot, sans que la misérable qu'elles en privaient ainsi parût faire attention à elles. «Ne la troublons pas, dit Oudarde à voix basse, elle est dans son extase, elle prie.»

Cependant Mahiette considérait avec une anxiété toujours croissante cette tête hâve, flétrie, échevelée, et ses yeux se remplissaient de larmes. «Voilà qui serait bien singulier», murmurait-elle.

Elle passa sa tête à travers les barreaux du soupirail, et parvint à faire arriver son regard jusque dans l'angle où le regard de la malheureuse était invariablement attaché.

Quand elle retira sa tête de la lucarne, son visage était inondé de larmes.

«Comment appelez-vous cette femme?» demanda-t-elle à Oudarde.

Oudarde répondit:

«Nous la nommons sœur Gudule.

— Et moi, reprit Mahiette, je l'appelle Paquette la Chantefleurie.»

Alors, mettant un doigt sur sa bouche, elle fit signe à Oudarde stupéfaite de passer sa tête par la lucarne et de regarder.

Oudarde regarda, et vit, dans l'angle où l'œil de la recluse était fixé avec cette sombre extase, un petit soulier de satin rose, brodé de mille passequilles d'or et d'argent.

Gervaise regarda après Oudarde, et alors les trois femmes, considérant la malheureuse mère, se mirent à pleurer.

Ni leurs regards cependant, ni leurs larmes n'avaient distrait la recluse. Ses mains restaient jointes, ses lèvres muettes, ses yeux fixes, et, pour qui savait son histoire, ce petit soulier regardé ainsi fendait le cœur. Les trois femmes n’avaient pas encore proféré une parole; elles n’osaient parler, même à voix basse. Ce grand silence, cette grande douleur, ce grand oubli où tout avait disparu hors une chose, leur faisaient l’effet d’un maître-autel de Pâques ou de Noël. Elles se taisaient, elles se recueillaient, elles étaient prêtes à s’agenouiller. Il leur semblait qu’elles venaient d’entrer dans une église le jour de Ténèbres.

Enfin Gervaise, la plus curieuse des trois, et par conséquent la moins sensible, essaya de faire parler la recluse:

«Sœur! sœur Gudule!»

Elle répéta cet appel jusqu’à trois fois, en haussant la voix à chaque fois. La recluse ne bougea pas. Pas un mot, pas un regard, pas un soupir, pas un signe de vie.

Oudarde à son tour, d’une voix plus douce et plus caressante: «Sœur! dit-elle, sœur Sainte-Gudule!»

Même silence, même immobilité.

«Une singulière femme! s’écria Gervaise, et qui ne serait pas émue d’une bombarde!

— Elle est peut-être sourde, dit Oudarde en soupirant.

— Peut-être aveugle, ajouta Gervaise.

— Peut-être morte», reprit Mahiette.

Il est certain que si l’âme n’avait pas encore quitté ce corps inerte, endormi, léthargique, du moins s’y était-elle retirée et cachée à des profondeurs où les perceptions des organes extérieurs n’arrivaient plus.

«Il faudra donc, dit Oudarde, laisser le gâteau sur la lucarne. Quelque fils le prendra. Comment faire pour la réveiller?»

Eustache, qui jusqu’à ce moment avait été distrait par une petite voiture traînée par un gros chien, laquelle venait de passer, s’aperçut tout à coup que ses trois conductrices regardaient quelque chose à la lucarne, et, la curiosité le prenant à son tour, il monta sur une borne, se dressa sur la pointe des pieds et appliqua son gros visage vermeil à l’ouverture en criant: «Mère, voyons donc que je voie!»

À cette voix d’enfant, claire, fraîche, sonore, la recluse tressaillit. Elle tourna la tête avec le mouvement sec et brusque d’un ressort d’acier, ses deux longues mains décharnées vinrent écarter ses cheveux sur son front, et elle fixa sur l’enfant des yeux étonnés, amers, désespérés. Ce regard ne fut qu’un éclair.

«Ô mon Dieu! cria-t-elle tout à coup en cachant sa tête dans ses genoux, et il semblait que sa voix rauque déchirait sa poitrine en passant, au moins ne me montrez pas ceux des autres!

— Bonjour, madame», dit l'enfant avec gravité.

Cependant cette secousse avait pour ainsi dire réveillé la recluse. Un long frisson parcourut tout son corps de la tête aux pieds, ses dents claquèrent, elle releva à demi sa tête et dit en serrant ses coudes contre ses hanches et en prenant ses pieds dans ses mains comme pour les réchauffer:

«Oh! le grand froid!

— Pauvre femme, dit Oudarde en grande pitié, voulez-vous un peu de feu?»

Elle secoua la tête en signe de refus.

«Eh bien, reprit Oudarde en lui présentant un flacon, voici de l'hypocras qui vous réchauffera. Buvez.»

Elle secoua de nouveau la tête, regarda Oudarde fixement et répondit: «De l'eau.»

Oudarde insista. «Non, sœur, ce n'est pas là une boisson de janvier. Il faut boire un peu d'hypocras et manger cette galette au levain de maïs que nous avons cuite pour vous.»

Elle repoussa le gâteau que Mahiette lui présentait et dit: «Du pain noir.

— Allons, dit Gervaise prise à son tour de charité, et défaisant son roquet de laine, voici un surtout un peu plus chaud que le vôtre. Mettez ceci sur vos épaules.»

Elle refusa le surtout comme le flacon et le gâteau, et répondit: «Un sac.

— Mais il faut bien, reprit la bonne Oudarde, que vous vous aperceviez un peu que c'était hier fête.

— Je m'en aperçois, dit la recluse. Voilà deux jours que je n'ai plus d'eau dans ma cruche.»

Elle ajouta après un silence: «C'est fête, on m'oublie. On fait bien. Pourquoi le monde songerait-il à moi qui ne songe pas à lui? À charbon éteint cendre froide.»

Et comme fatiguée d'en avoir tant dit, elle laissa retomber sa tête sur ses genoux. La simple et charitable Oudarde qui crut comprendre à ses dernières paroles qu'elle se plaignait encore du froid, lui répondit naïvement: «Alors, voulez-vous un peu de feu?

— Du feu! dit la sachette avec un accent étrange; et en ferez-vous aussi un peu à la pauvre petite qui est sous terre depuis quinze ans?»

Tous ses membres tremblèrent, sa parole vibrait, ses yeux brillaient, elle s'était levée sur les genoux. Elle étendit tout à coup sa main blanche et maigre vers l'enfant qui la regardait avec un regard étonné: «Emportez cet enfant! cria-t-elle. L'égyptienne va passer!»

Alors elle tomba la face contre terre, et son front frappa la dalle avec le bruit d'une pierre sur une pierre. Les trois femmes la crurent morte. Un moment après pourtant, elle remua, et elles la virent se traîner sur les genoux et sur les coudes jusqu'à l'angle où était le petit soulier. Alors elles n'osèrent regarder, elles ne la virent plus, mais elles entendirent mille baisers et mille soupirs mêlés à des cris déchirants et à des coups sourds comme ceux d'une tête qui heurte une muraille. Puis, après un de ces coups, tellement violent qu'elles en chancelèrent toutes les trois, elles n'entendirent plus rien.

«Se serait-elle tuée? dit Gervaise en se risquant à passer sa tête au soupirail. — Sœur! sœur Gudule!

— Sœur Gudule! répéta Oudarde.

— Ah, mon Dieu! elle ne bouge plus! reprit Gervaise, est-ce qu'elle est morte? — Gudule! Gudule!»

Mahiette, suffoquée jusque-là à ne pouvoir parler, fit un effort. «Attendez», dit-elle. Puis se penchant vers la lucarne: «Paquette! dit-elle, Paquette la Chantefleurie.»

Un enfant qui souffle ingénument sur la mèche mal allumée d'un pétard et se le fait éclater dans les yeux, n'est pas plus épouvanté que ne le fut Mahiette, à l'effet de ce nom brusquement lancé dans la cellule de sœur Gudule.

La recluse tressaillit de tout son corps, se leva debout sur ses pieds nus, et sauta à la lucarne avec des yeux si flamboyants que Mahiette et Oudarde et l'autre femme et l'enfant reculèrent jusqu'au parapet du quai.

Cependant la sinistre figure de la recluse apparut collée à la grille du soupirail. «Oh! oh! criait-elle avec un rire effrayant, c'est l'égyptienne qui m'appelle!»

En ce moment une scène qui se passait au pilori arrêta son œil hagard. Son front se plissa d'horreur, elle étendit hors de sa loge ses deux bras de squelette, et s'écria avec une voix qui ressemblait à un râle: «C'est donc encore toi, fille d'Égypte! c'est toi qui m'appelles, voleuse d'enfants! Eh bien! maudite sois-tu! maudite! maudite! maudite!»

IV

UNE LARME POUR UNE GOUTTE D’EAU

Ces paroles étaient, pour ainsi dire, le point de jonction de deux scènes qui s’étaient jusque-là développées parallèlement dans le même moment, chacune sur son théâtre particulier, l’une, celle qu’on vient de lire, dans le Trou aux Rats, l’autre, qu’on va lire, sur l’échelle du pilori. La première n’avait eu pour témoins que les trois femmes avec lesquelles le lecteur vient de faire connaissance; la seconde avait eu pour spectateurs tout le public que nous avons vu plus haut s’amasser sur la place de Grève, autour du pilori et du gibet.

Cette foule, à laquelle les quatre sergents, qui s’étaient postés dès neuf heures du matin aux quatre coins du pilori, avaient fait espérer une exécution telle quelle, non pas sans doute une pendaison, mais un fouet, un essorillement, quelque chose enfin, cette foule s’était si rapidement accrue que les quatre sergents, investis de trop près, avaient eu plus d’une fois besoin de la *serrer*, comme on disait alors à grands coups de boullaye et de croupe de cheval.

Cette populace, disciplinée à l’attente des exécutions publiques, ne manifestait pas trop d’impatience. Elle se divertissait à regarder le pilori, espèce de monument fort simple composé d’un cube de maçonnerie de quelque dix pieds de haut, creux à l’intérieur. Un degré fort roide en pierre brute qu’on appelait par excellence *l’échelle* conduisait à la plate-forme supérieure, sur laquelle on apercevait une roue horizontale en bois de chêne plein. On liait le patient sur cette roue, à genoux et les bras derrière le dos. Une tige en charpente, que mettait en mouvement un cabestan caché dans l’intérieur du petit édifice, imprimait une rotation à la roue, toujours maintenue dans le plan horizontal, et présentait de cette façon la face du condamné successivement à tous les points de la place. C’est ce qu’on appelait *tourner* un criminel.

Comme on voit, le pilori de la Grève était loin d’offrir toutes les récréations du pilori des Halles. Rien d’architectural. Rien de monumental. Pas de toit à croix de fer, pas de lanterne octogone, pas de frêles colonnettes allant s’épanouir au bord du toit en chapiteaux d’acanthes et de fleurs, pas de gouttières chimériques et monstrueuses, pas de charpente ciselée, pas de fine sculpture profondément fouillée dans la pierre.

Il fallait se contenter de ces quatre pans de moellon avec deux contre-cœurs de grès, et d'un méchant gibet de pierre, maigre et nu, à côté.

Le régal eût été mesquin pour des amateurs d'architecture gothique. Il est vrai que rien n'était moins curieux de monuments que les braves badauds du moyen âge, et qu'ils se souciaient médiocrement de la beauté d'un pilori.

Le patient arriva enfin lié au cul d'une charrette, et quand il eut été hissé sur la plate-forme, quand on put le voir de tous les points de la place ficelé à cordes et à courroies sur la roue du pilori, une huée prodigieuse mêlée de rires et d'acclamations, éclata dans la place. On avait reconnu Quasimodo.

C'était lui en effet. Le retour était étrange. Pilorié sur cette même place où la veille il avait été salué, acclamé et conclamé pape et prince des fous, en cortège du duc d'Égypte, du roi de Thunes et de l'empereur de Galilée. Ce qu'il y a de certain, c'est qu'il n'y avait pas un esprit dans la foule, pas même lui, tour à tour le triomphant et le patient, qui dégageât nettement ce rapprochement dans sa pensée. Gringoire et sa philosophie manquaient à ce spectacle.

Bientôt Michel Noiret, trompette-juré du roi notre sire, fit faire silence aux manants et cria l'arrêt, suivant l'ordonnance et commandement de M. le prévôt. Puis il se replia derrière la charrette avec ses gens en hoquetons de livrée.

Quasimodo, impassible, ne sourcillait pas. Toute résistance lui était rendue impossible par ce qu'on appelait alors, en style de chancellerie criminelle, *la véhémence et la fermeté des attaches*, ce qui veut dire que les lanières et les chaînettes lui entraient probablement dans la chair. C'est au reste une tradition de geôle et de chiourme qui ne s'est pas perdue, et que les menottes conservent encore précieusement parmi nous, peuple civilisé, doux, humain (le bagne et la guillotine entre parenthèses).

Il s'était laissé mener et pousser, porter, jucher, lier et relier. On ne pouvait rien deviner sur sa physionomie qu'un étonnement de sauvage ou d'idiot. On le savait sourd, on l'eût dit aveugle.

On le mit à genoux sur la planche circulaire, il s'y laissa mettre. On le dépouilla de chemise et de pourpoint jusqu'à la ceinture, il se laissa faire. On l'enchevêtra sous un nouveau système de courroies et d'ardillons, il se laissa boucler et ficeler. Seulement de temps à autre il soufflait bruyamment, comme un veau dont la tête pend et ballotte au rebord de la charrette du boucher.

«Le butor, dit Jehan Frollo du Moulin à son ami Robin Poussepain (car les deux écoliers avaient suivi le patient comme de raison), il ne comprend pas plus qu'un hanneton enfermé dans une boîte!»

Ce fut un fou rire dans la foule quand on vit à nu la bosse de Quasimodo, sa poitrine de chameau, ses épaules calleuses et velues. Pendant toute cette gaieté, un homme à la livrée de la ville, de courte taille et de robuste mine, monta sur la plate-forme et vint se placer près du patient. Son nom circula bien vite dans l'assistance. C'était maître Pierrat Torterue, tourmenteur-juré du Châtelet.

Il commença par déposer sur un angle du pilori un sablier noir dont la capsule supérieure était pleine de sable rouge qu'elle laissait fuir dans le récipient inférieur, puisa il ôta son surtout mi-parti, et l'on vit pendre à sa main droite un fouet mince et effilé de longues lanières blanches, luisantes, noueuses, tressées, armées d'ongles de métal. De la main gauche il repliait négligemment sa chemise autour de son bras droit jusqu'à l'aisselle.

Cependant Jehan Frollo criait en élevant sa tête blonde et frisée au-dessus de la foule (il était monté pour cela sur les épaules de Robin Poussepain): «Venez voir, messieurs, mesdames! voici qu'on va flageller péremptoirement maître Quasimodo, le sonneur de mon frère monsieur l'archidiacre de Josas, un drôle d'architecture orientale, qui a le dos en dôme et les jambes en colonnes torses!»

Et la foule de rire, surtout les enfants et les jeunes filles.

Enfin le tourmenteur frappa du pied. La roue se mit à tourner. Quasimodo chancela sous ses liens. La stupeur qui se peignit brusquement sur son visage difforme fit redoubler à l'entour les éclats de rire.

Tout à coup, au moment où la roue dans sa révolution présenta à maître Pierrat le dos montueux de Quasimodo, maître Pierrat leva le bras, les fines lanières sifflèrent aigrement dans l'air comme une poignée de couleuvres, et retombèrent avec furie sur les épaules du misérable.

Quasimodo sauta sur lui-même, comme réveillé en sursaut. Il commençait à comprendre. Il se tordit dans ses liens; une violente contraction de surprise et de douleur décomposa les muscles de sa face; mais il ne jeta pas un soupir. Seulement il tourna la tête en arrière, à droite, puis à gauche, en la balançant comme fait un taureau piqué au flanc par un taon.

Un second coup suivit le premier, puis un troisième, et un autre, et un autre, et toujours. La roue ne cessait pas de tourner ni les coups de pleuvoir. Bientôt le sang jaillit, on le vit ruisseler par mille filets sur les noires épaules du bossu, et les grêles lanières, dans leur rotation qui déchirait l’air, l’éparpillaient en gouttes dans la foule.

Quasimodo avait repris, en apparence du moins, son impassibilité première. Il avait essayé d’abord sourdement et sans grande secousse extérieure de rompre ses liens. On avait vu son œil s’allumer, ses muscles se roidir, ses membres se ramasser, et les courroies et les chaînettes se tendre. L’effort était puissant, prodigieux, désespéré; mais les vieilles gênes de la prévôté résistèrent. Elles craquèrent, et voilà tout. Quasimodo retomba épuisé. La stupeur fit place sur ses traits à un sentiment d’amer et profond découragement. Il ferma son œil unique, laissa tomber sa tête sur sa poitrine et fit le mort.

Dès lors il ne bougea plus. Rien ne put lui arracher un mouvement. Ni son sang qui ne cessait de couler, ni les coups qui redoublaient de furie, ni la colère du tourmenteur qui s’excitait lui-même et s’enivrait de l’exécution, ni le bruit des horribles lanières plus acérées et plus sifflantes que des pattes de bigailles.

Enfin un huissier du Châtelet vêtu de noir, monté sur un cheval noir, en station à côté de l’échelle depuis le commencement de l’exécution, étendit sa baguette d’ébène vers le sablier. Le tourmenteur s’arrêta. La roue s’arrêta. L’œil de Quasimodo se rouvrit lentement.

La flagellation était finie. Deux valets du tourmenteur-juré lavèrent les épaules saignantes du patient, les frottèrent de je ne sais quel onguent qui ferma sur-le-champ toutes les plaies, et lui jetèrent sur le dos une sorte de pagne jaune taillé en chasuble. Cependant Pierrat Torterue faisait dégoutter sur le pavé les lanières rouges et gorgées de sang.

Tout n’était pas fini pour Quasimodo. Il lui restait encore à subir cette heure de pilori que maître Florian Barbedienne avait si judicieusement ajoutée à la sentence de messire Robert d’Estouteville; le tout à la plus grande gloire du vieux jeu de mots physiologique et psychologique de Jean de Cumène: *Surdus absurdus*.

On retourna donc le sablier, et on laissa le bossu attaché sur la planche pour que justice fût faite jusqu’au bout.

Le peuple, au moyen âge surtout, est dans la société ce qu’est l’enfant dans la famille. Tant qu’il reste dans cet état d’ignorance première, de minorité morale et intellectuelle, on peut dire de lui comme de l'enfant:

Cet âge est sans pitié.

Nous avons déjà fait voir que Quasimodo était généralement haï, pour plus d'une bonne raison, il est vrai. Il y avait à peine un spectateur dans cette foule qui n'eût ou ne crût avoir sujet de se plaindre du mauvais bossu de Notre-Dame. La joie avait été universelle de le voir paraître au pilori; et la rude exécution qu'il venait de subir et la piteuse posture où elle l'avait laissé, loin d'attendrir la populace, avaient rendu sa haine plus méchante en l'armant d'une pointe de gaieté.

Aussi, une fois la *vindicte publique* satisfaite, comme jargonnent encore aujourd'hui les bonnets carrés, ce fut le tour des mille vengeances particulières. Ici comme dans la grand-salle, les femmes surtout éclataient. Toutes lui gardaient quelque rancune, les unes de sa malice, les autres de sa laideur. Les dernières étaient les plus furieuses.

«Oh! masque de l'Antéchrist! disait l'une.

— Chevaucheur de manche à balai! criait l'autre.

— La belle grimace tragique, hurlait une troisième, et qui te ferait pape des fous, si c'était aujourd'hui hier!

— C'est bon, reprenait une vieille. Voilà la grimace du pilori. À quand celle du gibet?

— Quand seras-tu coiffé de ta grosse cloche à cent pieds sous terre, maudit sonneur?

— C'est pourtant ce diable qui sonne l'angélus!

— Oh! le sourd! le borgne! le bossu! le monstre!

— Figure à faire avorter une grossesse mieux que toutes médecines et pharmaques!»

Et les deux écoliers, Jehan du Moulin, Robin Poussepain, chantaient à tue-tête le vieux refrain populaire:

Une hart
Pour le pendard!
Un fagot
Pour le magot!

Mille autres injures pleuvaient, et les huées, et les imprécations, et les rires, et les pierres çà et là.

Quasimodo était sourd, mais il voyait clair, et la fureur publique n'était pas moins énergiquement peinte sur les visages que dans les paroles. D'ailleurs les coups de pierre expliquaient les éclats de rire.

Il tint bon d’abord. Mais peu à peu cette patience, qui s’était roidie sous le fouet du tourmenteur, fléchit et lâcha pied à toutes ces piqûres d’insectes. Le bœuf des Asturies, qui s’est peu ému des attaques du picador, s’irrite des chiens et des banderilles.

Il promena d’abord lentement un regard de menace sur la foule. Mais garrotté comme il l’était, son regard fut impuissant à chasser ces mouches qui mordaient sa plaie. Alors il s’agita dans ses entraves, et ses soubresauts furieux firent crier sur ses ais la vieille roue du pilori. De tout cela, les dérisions et les huées s’accrurent.

Alors le misérable, ne pouvant briser son collier de bête fauve enchaînée, redevint tranquille. Seulement par intervalles un soupir de rage soulevait toutes les cavités de sa poitrine. Il n’y avait sur son visage ni honte, ni rougeur. Il était trop loin de l’état de société et trop près de l’état de nature pour savoir ce que c’est que la honte. D’ailleurs, à ce point de difformité, l’infamie est-elle chose sensible? Mais la colère, la haine, le désespoir abaissaient lentement sur ce visage hideux un nuage de plus en plus sombre, de plus en plus chargé d’une électricité qui éclatait en mille éclairs dans l’œil du cyclope.

Cependant ce nuage s’éclaircit un moment, au passage d’une mule qui traversait la foule et qui portait un prêtre. Du plus loin qu’il aperçut cette mule et ce prêtre, le visage du pauvre patient s’adoucit. À la fureur qui le contractait succéda un sourire étrange, plein d’une douceur, d’une mansuétude, d’une tendresse ineffables. À mesure que le prêtre approchait, ce sourire devenait plus net, plus distinct, plus radieux. C’était comme la venue d’un sauveur que le malheureux saluait. Toutefois, au moment où la mule fut assez près du pilori pour que son cavalier pût reconnaître le patient, le prêtre baissa les yeux, rebroussa brusquement chemin, piqua des deux, comme s’il avait eu hâte de se débarrasser de réclamations humiliantes et fort peu de souci d’être salué et reconnu d’un pauvre diable en pareille posture.

Ce prêtre était l’archidiacre dom Claude Frollo.

Le nuage retomba plus sombre sur le front de Quasimodo. Le sourire s’y mêla encore quelque temps, mais amer, découragé, profondément triste.

Le temps s’écoulait. Il était là depuis une heure et demie au moins, déchiré, maltraité, moqué sans relâche, et presque lapidé.

Tout à coup il s’agita de nouveau dans ses chaînes avec un redoublement de désespoir dont trembla toute la charpente qui le portait, et, rompant le silence qu'il avait obstinément gardé jusqu'alors, il cria avec une voix rauque et furieuse qui ressemblait plutôt à un aboiement qu'à un cri humain et qui couvrit le bruit des huées: «À boire!»

Cette exclamation de détresse, loin d'émouvoir les compassions, fut un surcroît d'amusement au bon populaire parisien qui entourait l'échelle, et qui, il faut le dire, pris en masse et comme multitude, n'était alors guère moins cruel et moins abruti que cette horrible tribu des truands chez laquelle nous avons déjà mené le lecteur, et qui était tout simplement la couche la plus inférieure du peuple. Pas une voix ne s'éleva autour du malheureux patient, si ce n'est pour lui faire raillerie de sa soif. Il est certain qu'en ce moment il était grotesque et repoussant plus encore que pitoyable, avec sa face empourprée et ruisselante, son œil égaré, sa bouche écumante de colère et de souffrance, et sa langue à demi tirée. Il faut dire encore que, se fût-il trouvé dans la cohue quelque bonne âme charitable de bourgeois ou de bourgeoise qui eût été tentée d'apporter un verre d'eau à cette misérable créature en peine, il régnait autour des marches infâmes du pilori un tel préjugé de honte et d'ignominie qu'il eût suffi pour repousser le bon Samaritain.

Au bout de quelques minutes, Quasimodo promena sur la foule un regard désespéré, et répéta d'une voix plus déchirante encore: «À boire!»

Et tous de rire.

«Bois ceci! criait Robin Poussepain en lui jetant par la face une éponge traînée dans le ruisseau. Tiens, vilain sourd! je suis ton débiteur.»

Une femme lui lançait une pierre à la tête: «Voilà qui t'apprendra à nous réveiller la nuit avec ton carillon de damné.

— Hé bien! fils, hurlait un perclus en faisant effort pour l'atteindre de sa béquille, nous jetteras-tu encore des sorts du haut des tours de Notre-Dame?

— Voici une écuelle pour boire! reprenait un homme en lui décochant dans la poitrine une cruche cassée. C'est toi qui, rien qu'en passant devant elle, as fait accoucher ma femme d'un enfant à deux têtes!

— Et ma chatte d'un chat à six pattes! glapissait une vieille en lui lançant une tuile.

— À boire!» répéta pour la troisième fois Quasimodo pantelant.

En ce moment, il vit s'écarter la populace. Une jeune fille bizarrement vêtue sortit de la foule. Elle était accompagnée d'une petite chèvre blanche à cornes dorées et portait un tambour de basque à la main.

L’œil de Quasimodo étincela. C’était la bohémienne qu’il avait essayé d’enlever la nuit précédente, algarade pour laquelle il sentait confusément qu’on le châtiait en cet instant même; ce qui du reste n’était pas le moins du monde, puisqu’il n’était puni que du malheur d’être sourd et d’avoir été jugé par un sourd. Il ne douta pas qu’elle ne vînt se venger aussi, et lui donner son coup comme tous les autres.

Il la vit en effet monter rapidement l’échelle. La colère et le dépit le suffoquaient. Il eût voulu pouvoir faire crouler le pilori, et si l’éclair de son œil eût pu foudroyer, l’égyptienne eût été mise en poudre avant d’arriver sur la plate-forme.

Elle s’approcha, sans dire une parole, du patient qui se tordait vainement pour lui échapper, et, détachant une gourde de sa ceinture, elle la porta doucement aux lèvres arides du misérable.

Alors, dans cet œil jusque-là si sec et si brûlé, on vit rouler une grosse larme qui tomba lentement le long de ce visage difforme et longtemps contracté par le désespoir. C’était la première peut-être que l’infortuné eût jamais versée.

Cependant il oubliait de boire. L’égyptienne fit sa petite moue avec impatience, et appuya en souriant le goulot à la bouche dentue de Quasimodo.

Il but à longs traits. Sa soif était ardente.

Quand il eut fini, le misérable allongea ses lèvres noires, sans doute pour baiser la belle main qui venait de l’assister. Mais la jeune fille, qui n’était pas sans défiance peut-être et se souvenait de la violente tentative de la nuit, retira sa main avec le geste effrayé d’un enfant qui craint d’être mordu par une bête.

Alors le pauvre sourd fixa sur elle un regard plein de reproche et d’une tristesse inexprimable.

C’eût été partout un spectacle touchant que cette belle fille, fraîche, pure, charmante, et si faible en même temps, ainsi pieusement accourue au secours de tant de misère, de difformité et de méchanceté. Sur un pilori, ce spectacle était sublime.

Tout ce peuple lui-même en fut saisi et se mit à battre des mains en criant: «Noël! Noël!»

C’est dans ce moment que la recluse aperçut, de la lucarne de son trou, l’égyptienne sur le pilori et lui jeta son imprécation sinistre: «Maudite sois-tu, fille d’Égypte! maudite! maudite!»

V

FIN DE L’HISTOIRE DE LA GALETTE

La Esmeralda pâlit, et descendit du pilori en chancelant. La voix de la recluse la poursuivit encore: «Descends! descends! larronnesse d’Égypte, tu y remonteras!

— La sachette est dans ses lubies», dit le peuple en murmurant; et il n’en fut rien de plus. Car ces sortes de femmes étaient redoutées, ce qui les faisait sacrées. On ne s’attaquait pas volontiers alors à qui priait jour et nuit.

L’heure était venue de remmener Quasimodo. On le détacha, et la foule se dispersa.

Près du Grand-Pont, Mahiette, qui s’en revenait avec ses deux compagnes, s’arrêta brusquement: «À propos, Eustache! qu’as-tu fait de la galette?

— Mère, dit l’enfant, pendant que vous parliez avec cette dame qui était dans le trou, il y avait un gros chien qui a mordu dans ma galette. Alors j’en ai mangé aussi.

— Comment, monsieur, reprit-elle, vous avez tout mangé?

— Mère, c’est le chien. Je lui ai dit, il ne m’a pas écouté. Alors j’ai mordu aussi, tiens!

— C’est un enfant terrible, dit la mère souriant et grondant à la fois. Voyez-vous, Oudarde, il mange déjà à lui seul tout le cerisier de notre clos de Charlerange. Aussi son grand-père dit que ce sera un capitaine. — Que je vous y reprenne, monsieur Eustache. — Va, gros lion!»

LIVRE SEPTIÈME

I

DU DANGER DE CONFIER SON SECRET À UNE CHÈVRE

Plusieurs semaines s'étaient écoulées.

On était aux premiers jours de mars. Le soleil, que Dubartas, ce classique ancêtre de la périphrase, n'avait pas encore nommé *le grand-duc des chandelles*, n'en était pas moins joyeux et rayonnant pour cela. C'était une de ces journées de printemps qui ont tant de douceur et de beauté que tout Paris, répandu dans les places et les promenades, les fête comme des dimanches. Dans ces jours de clarté, de chaleur et de sérénité, il y a une certaine heure surtout où il faut admirer le portail de Notre-Dame. C'est le moment où le soleil, déjà incliné vers le couchant, regarde presque en face la cathédrale. Ses rayons, de plus en plus horizontaux, se retirent lentement du pavé de la place, et remontent le long de la façade à pic dont ils font saillir les mille rondes-bosses sur leur ombre, tandis que la grande rose centrale flamboie comme un œil de cyclope enflammé des réverbérations de la forge.

On était à cette heure-là.

Vis-à-vis la haute cathédrale rougie par le couchant, sur le balcon de pierre pratiqué au-dessus du porche d'une riche maison gothique qui faisait l'angle de la place et de la rue du Parvis, quelques belles jeunes filles riaient et devisaient avec toute sorte de grâce et de folie. À la longueur du voile qui tombait, du sommet de leur coiffe pointue enroulée de perles, jusqu'à leurs talons, à la finesse de la chemisette brodée qui couvrait leurs épaules en laissant voir, selon la mode engageante d'alors, la naissance de leurs belles gorges de vierges, à l'opulence de leurs jupes de dessous, plus précieuses encore que leur surtout (recherche merveilleuse!), à la gaze, à la soie, au velours dont tout cela était étoffé, et surtout à la blancheur de leurs mains qui les attestait oisives et paresseuses, il était aisé de deviner de nobles et riches héritières. C'était en effet damoiselle Fleur-de-Lys de Gondelaurier et ses compagnes, Diane de Christeuil, Amelotte de Montmichel, Colombe de Gaillefontaine, et la petite de Champchevrier; toutes filles de bonne maison, réunies en ce moment chez la dame veuve de Gondelaurier, à cause de monseigneur de Beaujeu et de madame sa femme, qui devaient venir au mois d'avril à Paris, et y choisir des accompagneresses d'honneur pour madame la Dauphine Marguerite, lorsqu’on l’irait recevoir en Picardie des mains des flamands. Or, tous les hobereaux de trente lieues à la ronde briguaient cette faveur pour leurs filles, et bon nombre d’entre eux les avaient déjà amenées ou envoyées à Paris. Celles-ci avaient été confiées par leurs parents à la garde discrète et vénérable de madame Aloïse de Gondelaurier, veuve d’un ancien maître des arbalétriers du roi, retirée avec sa fille unique, en sa maison de la place du parvis Notre-Dame, à Paris.

Le balcon où étaient ces jeunes filles s’ouvrait sur une chambre richement tapissée d’un cuir de Flandre de couleur fauve imprimé à rinceaux d’or. Les solives qui rayaient parallèlement le plafond amusaient l’œil par mille bizarres sculptures peintes et dorées. Sur des bahuts ciselés, de splendides émaux chatoyaient çà et là; une hure de sanglier en faïence couronnait un dressoir magnifique dont les deux degrés annonçaient que la maîtresse du logis était femme ou veuve d’un chevalier banneret. Au fond, à côté d’une haute cheminée armoriée et blasonnée du haut en bas, était assise, dans un riche fauteuil de velours rouge, la dame de Gondelaurier, dont les cinquante-cinq ans n’étaient pas moins écrits sur son vêtement que sur son visage.

À côté d’elle se tenait debout un jeune homme d’assez fière mine, quoique un peu vaine et bravache, un de ces beaux garçons dont toutes les femmes tombent d’accord, bien que les hommes graves et physionomistes en haussent les épaules. Ce jeune cavalier portait le brillant habit de capitaine des archers de l’ordonnance du roi, lequel ressemble beaucoup trop au costume de Jupiter, qu’on a déjà pu admirer au premier livre de cette histoire, pour que nous en fatiguions le lecteur d’une seconde description.

Les damoiselles étaient assises, partie dans la chambre, partie sur le balcon, les unes sur des carreaux de velours d’Utrecht à cornières d’or, les autres sur des escabeaux de bois de chêne sculptés à fleurs et à figures. Chacune d’elles tenait sur ses genoux un pan d’une grande tapisserie à l’aiguille, à laquelle elles travaillaient en commun, et dont un bon bout traînait sur la natte qui recouvrait le plancher.

Elles causaient entre elles avec cette voix chuchotante et ces demi-rires étouffés d’un conciliabule de jeunes filles au milieu desquelles il y a un jeune homme. Le jeune homme, dont la présence suffisait pour mettre en jeu tous ces amours-propres féminins, paraissait, lui, s’en soucier médiocrement; et tandis que c’était parmi les belles à qui attirerait son attention, il paraissait surtout occupé à fourbir avec son gant de peau de daim l'ardillon de son ceinturon.

De temps en temps la vieille dame lui adressait la parole tout bas, et il lui répondait de son mieux avec une sorte de politesse gauche et contrainte. Aux sourires, aux petits signes d'intelligence de madame Aloïse, aux clins d'yeux qu'elle détachait vers sa fille Fleur-de-Lys, en parlant bas au capitaine, il était facile de voir qu'il s'agissait de quelque fiançaille consommée, de quelque mariage prochain sans doute entre le jeune homme et Fleur-de-Lys. Et à la froideur embarrassée de l'officier, il était facile de voir que, de son côté du moins, il ne s'agissait plus d'amour. Toute sa mine exprimait une pensée de gêne et d'ennui que nos sous-lieutenants de garnison traduiraient admirablement aujourd'hui par: Quelle chienne de corvée!

La bonne dame, fort entêtée de sa fille, comme une pauvre mère qu'elle était, ne s'apercevait pas du peu d'enthousiasme de l'officier, et s'évertuait à lui faire remarquer tout bas les perfections infinies avec lesquelles Fleur-de-Lys piquait son aiguille ou dévidait son écheveau.

«Tenez, petit cousin, lui disait-elle en le tirant par la manche pour lui parler à l'oreille. Regardez-la donc! la voilà qui se baisse.

— En effet», répondait le jeune homme; et il retombait dans son silence distrait et glacial.

Un moment après, il fallait se pencher de nouveau, et dame Aloïse lui disait:

«Avez-vous jamais vu figure plus avenante et plus égayée que votre accordée? Est-on plus blanche et plus blonde? ne sont-ce pas là des mains accomplies? et ce cou-là, ne prend-il pas, à ravir, toutes les façons d'un cygne? Que je vous envie par moments! et que vous êtes heureux d'être homme, vilain libertin que vous êtes! N'est-ce pas que ma Fleur-de-Lys est belle par adoration et que vous en êtes éperdu?

— Sans doute, répondait-il tout en pensant à autre chose.

— Mais parlez-lui donc, dit tout à coup madame Aloïse en le poussant par l'épaule. Dites-lui donc quelque chose. Vous êtes devenu bien timide.»

Nous pouvons affirmer à nos lecteurs que la timidité n'était ni la vertu ni le défaut du capitaine. Il essaya pourtant de faire ce qu'on lui demandait.

«Belle cousine, dit-il en s'approchant de Fleur-de-Lys, quel est le sujet de cet ouvrage de tapisserie que vous façonnez?

— Beau cousin, répondit Fleur-de-Lys avec un accent de dépit, je vous l’ai déjà dit trois fois. C’est la grotte de Neptunus.»

Il était évident que Fleur-de-Lys voyait beaucoup plus clair que sa mère aux manières froides et distraites du capitaine. Il sentit la nécessité de faire quelque conversation.

«Et pour qui toute cette neptunerie? demanda-t-il.

— Pour l’abbaye Saint-Antoine des Champs», dit Fleur-de-Lys sans lever les yeux.

Le capitaine prit un coin de la tapisserie:

«Qu’est-ce que c’est, ma belle cousine, que ce gros gendarme qui souffle à pleines joues dans une trompette?

— C’est Trito», répondit-elle.

Il y avait toujours une intonation un peu boudeuse dans les brèves paroles de Fleur-de-Lys. Le jeune homme comprit qu’il était indispensable de lui dire quelque chose à l’oreille, une fadaise, une galanterie, n’importe quoi. Il se pencha donc, mais il ne put rien trouver dans son imagination de plus tendre et de plus intime que ceci: «Pourquoi votre mère porte-t-elle toujours une cotte-hardie armoriée comme nos grand-mères du temps de Charles VII? Dites-lui donc, belle cousine, que ce n’est plus l’élégance d’à présent, et que son gond et son laurier brodés en blason sur sa robe lui donnent l’air d’un manteau de cheminée qui marche. En vérité, on ne s’assied plus ainsi sur sa bannière, je vous jure.»

Fleur-de-Lys leva sur lui ses beaux yeux pleins de reproche: «Est-ce là tout ce que vous me jurez?» dit-elle à voix basse.

Cependant la bonne dame Aloïse, ravie de les voir ainsi penchés et chuchotant, disait en jouant avec les fermoirs de son livre d’heures: «Touchant tableau d’amour!»

Le capitaine, de plus en plus gêné, se rabattit sur la tapisserie: «C’est vraiment un charmant travail!» s’écria-t-il.

À ce propos, Colombe de Gaillefontaine, une autre belle blonde à peau blanche, bien colletée de damas bleu, hasarda timidement une parole qu’elle adressa à Fleur-de-Lys, dans l’espoir que le beau capitaine y répondrait: «Ma chère Gondelaurier, avez-vous vu les tapisseries de l’hôtel de la Roche-Guyon?

— N’est-ce pas l’hôtel où est enclos le jardin de la Lingère du Louvre? demanda en riant Diane de Christeuil, qui avait de belles dents et par conséquent riait à tout propos.

— Et où il y a cette grosse vieille tour de l’ancienne muraille de Paris, ajouta Amelotte de Montmichel, jolie brune bouclée et fraîche, qui avait l’habitude de soupirer comme l’autre riait, sans savoir pourquoi.

— Ma chère Colombe, reprit dame Aloïse, voulez-vous pas parler de l’hôtel qui était à monsieur de Bacqueville, sous le roi Charles VI? il y a en effet de bien superbes tapisseries de haute lice.

— Charles VI! le roi Charles VI! grommela le jeune capitaine en retroussant sa moustache. Mon Dieu! que la bonne dame a souvenir de vieilles choses!»

Madame de Gondelaurier poursuivait: «Belles tapisseries, en vérité. Un travail si estimé qu’il passe pour singulier!»

En ce moment, Bérangère de Champchevrier, svelte petite fille de sept ans, qui regardait dans la place par les trèfles du balcon, s’écria: «Oh! voyez, belle marraine Fleur-de-Lys, la jolie danseuse qui danse là sur le pavé, et qui tambourine au milieu des bourgeois manants!»

En effet, on entendait le frissonnement sonore d’un tambour de basque.

«Quelque égyptienne de Bohême, dit Fleur-de-Lys en se détournant nonchalamment vers la place.

— Voyons! voyons!» crièrent ses vives compagnes; et elles coururent toutes au bord du balcon, tandis que Fleur-de-Lys, rêveuse de la froideur de son fiancé, les suivait lentement et que celui-ci, soulagé par cet incident qui coupait court à une conversation embarrassée, s’en revenait au fond de l’appartement de l’air satisfait d’un soldat relevé de service. C’était pourtant un charmant et gentil service que celui de la belle Fleur-de-Lys, et il lui avait paru tel autrefois; mais le capitaine s’était blasé peu à peu; la perspective d’un mariage prochain le refroidissait davantage de jour en jour. D’ailleurs, il était d’humeur inconstante et, faut-il le dire? de goût un peu vulgaire. Quoique de fort noble naissance, il avait contracté sous le harnois plus d’une habitude de soudard. La taverne lui plaisait, et ce qui s’ensuit. Il n’était à l’aise que parmi les gros mots, les galanteries militaires, les faciles beautés et les faciles succès. Il avait pourtant reçu de sa famille quelque éducation et quelques manières; mais il avait trop jeune couru le pays, trop jeune tenu garnison, et tous les jours le vernis du gentilhomme s’effaçait au dur frottement de son baudrier de gendarme. Tout en la visitant encore de temps en temps, par un reste de respect humain, il se sentait doublement gêné chez Fleur-de-Lys; d’abord, parce qu’à force de disperser son amour dans toutes sortes de lieux il en avait fort peu réservé pour elle; ensuite, parce qu’au milieu de tant de belles dames roides, épinglées et décentes, il tremblait sans cesse que sa bouche habituée aux jurons ne prît tout d’un coup le mors aux dents et ne s’échappât en propos de taverne. Qu’on se figure le bel effet!

Du reste, tout cela se mêlait chez lui à de grandes prétentions d’élégance, de toilette et de belle mine. Qu’on arrange ces choses comme on pourra. Je ne suis qu’historien.

Il se tenait donc depuis quelques moments, pensant ou ne pensant pas, appuyé en silence au chambranle sculpté de la cheminée, quand Fleur-de-Lys, se tournant soudain, lui adressa la parole. Après tout, la pauvre jeune fille ne le boudait qu’à son cœur défendant.

«Beau cousin, ne nous avez-vous pas parlé d’une petite bohémienne que vous avez sauvée, il y a deux mois, en faisant le contre-guet la nuit, des mains d’une douzaine de voleurs?

— Je crois que oui, belle cousine, dit le capitaine.

— Eh bien, reprit-elle, c’est peut-être cette bohémienne qui danse là dans le parvis. Venez voir si vous la reconnaissez, beau cousin Phoebus.»

Il perçait un secret désir de réconciliation dans cette douce invitation qu’elle lui adressait de venir près d’elle, et dans ce soin de l’appeler par son nom. Le capitaine Phoebus de Châteaupers (car c’est lui que le lecteur a sous les yeux depuis le commencement de ce chapitre) s’approcha à pas lents du balcon. «Tenez, lui dit Fleur-de-Lys en posant tendrement sa main sur le bras de Phoebus, regardez cette petite qui danse là dans ce rond. Est-ce votre bohémienne?»

Phoebus regarda, et dit:

«Oui, je la reconnais à sa chèvre.

— Oh! la jolie petite chèvre en effet! dit Amelotte en joignant les mains d’admiration.

— Est-ce que ses cornes sont en or de vrai?» demanda Bérangère.

Sans bouger de son fauteuil, dame Aloïse prit la parole: «N’est-ce pas une de ces bohémiennes qui sont arrivées l’an passé par la porte Gibard?

— Madame ma mère, dit doucement Fleur-de-Lys, cette porte s’appelle aujourd’hui porte d’Enfer.»

Mademoiselle de Gondelaurier savait à quel point le capitaine était choqué des façons de parler surannées de sa mère. En effet, il commençait à ricaner en disant entre ses dents: «Porte Gibard! porte Gibard! C’est pour faire passer le roi Charles VI!»

«Marraine, s’écria Bérangère dont les yeux sans cesse en mouvement s’étaient levés tout à coup vers le sommet des tours de Notre-Dame, qu’est-ce que c’est que cet homme noir qui est là haut?»

Toutes les jeunes filles levèrent les yeux. Un homme en effet était accoudé sur la balustrade culminante de la tour septentrionale, donnant sur la Grève. C’était un prêtre. On distinguait nettement son costume, et son visage appuyé sur ses deux mains. Du reste, il ne bougeait non plus qu’une statue. Son œil fixe plongeait dans la place.

C’était quelque chose de l’immobilité d’un milan qui vient de découvrir un nid de moineaux et qui le regarde.

«C’est monsieur l’archidiacre de Josas, dit Fleur-de-Lys.

— Vous avez de bons yeux si vous le reconnaissez d’ici! observa la Gaillefontaine.

— Comme il regarde la petite danseuse! reprit Diane de Christeuil.

— Gare à l’égyptienne! dit Fleur-de-Lys, car il n’aime pas l’Égypte.

— C’est bien dommage que cet homme la regarde ainsi, ajouta Amelotte de Montmichel, car elle danse à éblouir.

— Beau cousin Phoebus, dit tout à coup Fleur-de-Lys, puisque vous connaissez cette petite bohémienne, faites-lui donc signe de monter. Cela nous amusera.

— Oh oui! s’écrièrent toutes les jeunes filles en battant des mains.

— Mais c’est une folie, répondit Phoebus. Elle m’a sans doute oublié, et je ne sais seulement pas son nom. Cependant, puisque vous le souhaitez, mesdamoiselles, je vais essayer.» Et se penchant à la balustrade du balcon, il se mit à crier: «Petite!»

La danseuse ne tambourinait pas en ce moment. Elle tourna la tête vers le point d’où lui venait cet appel, son regard brillant se fixa sur Phoebus, et elle s’arrêta tout court.

«Petite!» répéta le capitaine; et il lui fit signe du doigt de venir.

La jeune fille le regarda encore, puis elle rougit comme si une flamme lui était montée dans les joues, et, prenant son tambourin sous son bras, elle se dirigea, à travers les spectateurs ébahis, vers la porte de la maison où Phoebus l’appelait, à pas lents, chancelante, et avec le regard troublé d’un oiseau qui cède à la fascination d’un serpent.

Un moment après, la portière de tapisserie se souleva, et la bohémienne parut sur le seuil de la chambre, rouge, interdite, essoufflée, ses grands yeux baissés, et n’osant faire un pas de plus.

Bérangère battit des mains.

Cependant la danseuse restait immobile sur le seuil de la porte. Son apparition avait produit sur ce groupe de jeunes filles un effet singulier. Il est certain qu’un vague et indistinct désir de plaire au bel officier les animait toutes à la fois, que le splendide uniforme était le point de mire de toutes leurs coquetteries, et que, depuis qu’il était présent, il y avait entre elles une certaine rivalité secrète, sourde, qu’elles s’avouaient à peine à elles-mêmes, et qui n’en éclatait pas moins à chaque instant dans leurs gestes et leurs propos. Néanmoins, comme elles étaient toutes à peu près dans la même mesure de beauté, elles luttaient à armes égales, et chacune pouvait espérer la victoire. L’arrivée de la bohémienne rompit brusquement cet équilibre. Elle était d’une beauté si rare qu’au moment où elle parut à l’entrée de l’appartement il sembla qu’elle y répandait une sorte de lumière qui lui était propre. Dans cette chambre resserrée, sous ce sombre encadrement de tentures et de boiseries, elle était incomparablement plus belle et plus rayonnante que dans la place publique. C’était comme un flambeau qu’on venait d’apporter du grand jour dans l’ombre. Les nobles damoiselles en furent malgré elles éblouies. Chacune se sentit en quelque sorte blessée dans sa beauté. Aussi leur front de bataille, qu’on nous passe l’expression, changea-t-il sur-le-champ, sans qu’elles se disent un seul mot. Mais elles s’entendaient à merveille. Les instincts de femmes se comprennent et se répondent plus vite que les intelligences d’hommes. Il venait de leur arriver une ennemie: toutes le sentaient, toutes se ralliaient. Il suffit d’une goutte de vin pour rougir tout un verre d’eau; pour teindre d’une certaine humeur toute une assemblée de jolies femmes, il suffit de la survenue d’une femme plus jolie, — surtout lorsqu’il n’y a qu’un homme.

Aussi l’accueil fait à la bohémienne fut-il merveilleusement glacial. Elles la considérèrent du haut en bas, puis s’entre-regardèrent, et tout fut dit. Elles s’étaient comprises. Cependant la jeune fille attendait qu’on lui parlât, tellement émue qu’elle n’osait lever les paupières.

Le capitaine rompit le silence le premier. «Sur ma parole, dit-il avec son ton d’intrépide fatuité, voilà une charmante créature! Qu’en pensez-vous, belle cousine?»

Cette observation, qu’un admirateur plus délicat eût du moins faite à voix basse, n’était pas de nature à dissiper les jalousies féminines qui se tenaient en observation devant la bohémienne.

Fleur-de-Lys répondit au capitaine avec une doucereuse affectation de dédain: «Pas mal.»

Les autres chuchotaient.

Enfin, madame Aloïse, qui n'était pas la moins jalouse, parce qu'elle l'était pour sa fille, adressa la parole à la danseuse: «Approchez, petite.

— Approchez, petite!» répéta avec une dignité comique Bérangère, qui lui fût venue à la hanche.

L'égyptienne s'avança vers la noble dame.

«Belle enfant, dit Phoebus avec emphase en faisant de son côté quelques pas vers elle, je ne sais si j'ai le suprême bonheur d'être reconnu de vous...»

Elle l'interrompit en levant sur lui un sourire et un regard pleins d'une douceur infinie:

«Oh! oui, dit-elle.

— Elle a bonne mémoire, observa Fleur-de-Lys.

— Or çà, reprit Phoebus, vous vous êtes bien prestement échappée l'autre soir. Est-ce que je vous fais peur?

— Oh! non», dit la bohémienne.

Il y avait, dans l'accent dont cet *oh! non*, fut prononcé à la suite de cet *oh! oui*, quelque chose d'ineffable dont Fleur-de-Lys fut blessée.

«Vous m'avez laissé en votre lieu, ma belle, poursuivit le capitaine dont la langue se déliait en parlant à une fille des rues, un assez rechigné drôle, borgne et bossu, le sonneur de cloches de l'évêque, à ce que je crois. On m'a dit qu'il était bâtard d'un archidiacre et diable de naissance. Il a un plaisant nom, il s'appelle Quatre-Temps, Pâques-Fleuries, Mardi-Gras, je ne sais plus! Un nom de fête carillonnée, enfin! Il se permettait donc de vous enlever, comme si vous étiez faite pour des bedeaux! cela est fort. Que diable vous voulait-il donc, ce chat-huant? Hein, dites!

— Je ne sais, répondit-elle.

— Conçoit-on l'insolence! un sonneur de cloches enlever une fille, comme un vicomte! un manant braconner sur le gibier des gentilshommes! Voilà qui est rare. Au demeurant, il l'a payé cher. Maître Pierrat Torterue est le plus rude palefrenier qui ait jamais étrillé un maraud, et je vous dirai, si cela peut vous être agréable, que le cuir de votre sonneur lui a galamment passé par les mains.

— Pauvre homme!» dit la bohémienne chez qui ces paroles ravivaient le souvenir de la scène du pilori.

Le capitaine éclata de rire. «Corne-de-bœuf! voilà de la pitié aussi bien placée qu'une plume au cul d'un porc! Je veux être ventru comme un pape, si...»

Il s'arrêta tout court. «Pardon, mesdames! je crois que j'allais lâcher quelque sottise.

— Fi, monsieur! dit la Gaillefontaine.

— Il parle sa langue à cette créature!» ajouta à demi-voix Fleur-de-Lys, dont le dépit croissait de moment en moment. Ce dépit ne diminua point quand elle vit le capitaine, enchanté de la bohémienne et surtout de lui-même, pirouetter sur le talon en répétant avec une grosse galanterie naïve et soldatesque: «Une belle fille, sur mon âme!

— Assez sauvagement vêtue», dit Diane de Christeuil, avec son rire de belles dents.

Cette réflexion fut un trait de lumière pour les autres. Elle leur fit voir le côté attaquable de l'égyptienne. Ne pouvant mordre sur sa beauté, elles se jetèrent sur son costume.

«Mais cela est vrai, petite, dit la Montmichel, où as-tu pris de courir ainsi par les rues sans guimpe ni gorgerette?

— Voilà une jupe courte à faire trembler, ajouta la Gaillefontaine.

— Ma chère, poursuivit assez aigrement Fleur-de-Lys, vous vous ferez ramasser par les sergents de la douzaine pour votre ceinture dorée.

— Petite, petite, reprit la Christeuil avec un sourire implacable, si tu mettais honnêtement une manche sur ton bras, il serait moins brûlé par le soleil.»

C'était vraiment un spectacle digne d'un spectateur plus intelligent que Phoebus, de voir comme ces belles filles, avec leurs langues envenimées et irritées, serpentaient, glissaient et se tordaient autour de la danseuse des rues. Elles étaient cruelles et gracieuses. Elles fouillaient, elles furetaient malignement de la parole dans sa pauvre et folle toilette de paillettes et d'oripeaux. C'étaient des rires, des ironies, des humiliations sans fin. Les sarcasmes pleuvaient sur l'égyptienne, et la bienveillance hautaine, et les regards méchants. On eût cru voir de ces jeunes dames romaines qui s'amusaient à enfoncer des épingles d'or dans le sein d'une belle esclave. On eût dit d'élégantes levrettes chasseresses tournant, les narines ouvertes, les yeux ardents, autour d'une pauvre biche des bois que le regard du maître leur interdit de dévorer.

Qu’était-ce, après tout, devant ces filles de grande maison, qu’une misérable danseuse de place publique! Elles ne semblaient tenir aucun compte de sa présence, et parlaient d’elle, devant elle, à elle-même, à haute voix, comme de quelque chose d’assez malpropre, d’assez abject et d’assez joli.

La bohémienne n’était pas insensible à ces piqûres d’épingle. De temps en temps une pourpre de honte, un éclair de colère enflammait ses yeux ou ses joues; une parole dédaigneuse semblait hésiter sur ses lèvres; elle faisait avec mépris cette petite grimace que le lecteur lui connaît; mais elle se taisait. Immobile, elle attachait sur Phoebus un regard résigné, triste et doux. Il y avait aussi du bonheur et de la tendresse dans ce regard. On eût dit qu’elle se contenait, de peur d’être chassée.

Phoebus, lui, riait, et prenait le parti de la bohémienne avec un mélange d’impertinence et de pitié.

«Laissez-les dire, petite! répétait-il en faisant sonner ses éperons d’or, sans doute, votre toilette est un peu extravagante et farouche; mais, charmante fille comme vous êtes, qu’est-ce que cela fait?

— Mon Dieu! s’écria la blonde Gaillefontaine, en redressant son cou de cygne avec un sourire amer, je vois que messieurs les archers de l’ordonnance du roi prennent aisément feu aux beaux yeux égyptiens.

— Pourquoi non?» dit Phoebus.

À cette réponse, nonchalamment jetée par le capitaine comme une pierre perdue qu’on ne regarde même pas tomber, Colombe se prit à rire, et Diane, et Amelotte, et Fleur-de-Lys, à qui il vint en même temps une larme dans les yeux.

La bohémienne, qui avait baissé à terre son regard aux paroles de Colombe de Gaillefontaine, le releva rayonnant de joie et de fierté, et le fixa de nouveau sur Phoebus. Elle était bien belle en ce moment.

La vieille dame, qui observait cette scène, se sentait offensée et ne comprenait pas.

«Sainte Vierge! cria-t-elle tout à coup, qu’ai-je donc là qui me remue dans les jambes? Ahi! la vilaine bête!»

C’était la chèvre qui venait d’arriver à la recherche de sa maîtresse, et qui, en se précipitant vers elle, avait commencé par embarrasser ses cornes dans le monceau d’étoffe que les vêtements de la noble dame entassaient sur ses pieds quand elle était assise.

Ce fut une diversion. La bohémienne, sans dire une parole, la dégagea.

«Oh! voilà la petite chevrette qui a des pattes d’or!» s’écria Bérangère en sautant de joie.

La bohémienne s’accroupit à genoux, et appuya contre sa joue la tête caressante de la chèvre. On eût dit qu’elle lui demandait pardon de l’avoir quittée ainsi.

Cependant Diane s’était penchée à l’oreille de Colombe.

«Eh! mon Dieu! comment n’y ai-je pas songé plus tôt? C’est la bohémienne à la chèvre. On la dit sorcière, et que sa chèvre fait des momeries très miraculeuses.

— Eh bien, dit Colombe, il faut que la chèvre nous divertisse à son tour, et nous fasse un miracle.»

Diane et Colombe s’adressèrent vivement à l’égyptienne.

«Petite, fais donc faire un miracle à ta chèvre.

— Je ne sais ce que vous voulez dire, répondit la danseuse.

— Un miracle, une magie, une sorcellerie enfin.

— Je ne sais.» Et elle se remit à caresser la jolie bête en répétant: «Djali! Djali!»

En ce moment Fleur-de-Lys remarqua un sachet de cuir brodé suspendu au cou de la chèvre. «Qu’est-ce que cela?» demanda-t-elle à l’égyptienne.

L’égyptienne leva ses grands yeux vers elle, et lui répondit gravement: «C’est mon secret.

— Je voudrais bien savoir ce que c’est que ton secret», pensa Fleur-de-Lys.

Cependant la bonne dame s’était levée avec humeur. «Or çà, la bohémienne, si toi ni ta chèvre n’avez rien à nous danser, que faites-vous céans?»

La bohémienne, sans répondre, se dirigea lentement vers la porte. Mais plus elle en approchait, plus son pas se ralentissait. Un invincible aimant semblait la retenir. Tout à coup elle tourna ses yeux humides de larmes sur Phoebus, et s’arrêta.

«Vrai Dieu! s’écria le capitaine, on ne s’en va pas ainsi. Revenez, et dansez-nous quelque chose. À propos, belle d’amour, comment vous appelez-vous?

— La Esmeralda», dit la danseuse sans le quitter du regard.

À ce nom étrange, un fou rire éclata parmi les jeunes filles.

«Voilà, dit Diane, un terrible nom pour une demoiselle!

— Vous voyez bien, reprit Amelotte, que c’est une charmeresse.

— Ma chère, s’écria solennellement dame Aloïse, vos parents ne vous ont pas pêché ce nom-là dans le bénitier du baptême.»

Cependant, depuis quelques minutes, sans qu’on fît attention à elle, Bérangère avait attiré la chèvre dans un coin de la chambre avec un massepain. En un instant, elles avaient été toutes deux bonnes amies. La curieuse enfant avait détaché le sachet suspendu au cou de la chèvre, l’avait ouvert, et avait vidé sur la natte ce qu’il contenait. C’était un alphabet dont chaque lettre était inscrite séparément sur une petite tablette de buis. À peine ces joujoux furent-ils étalés sur la natte que l’enfant vit avec surprise la chèvre, dont c’était là sans doute un des *miracles*, tirer certaines lettres avec sa patte d’or et les disposer, en les poussant doucement, dans un ordre particulier. Au bout d’un instant, cela fit un mot que la chèvre semblait exercée à écrire, tant elle hésita peu à le former, et Bérangère s’écria tout à coup en joignant les mains avec admiration:

«Marraine Fleur-de-Lys, voyez donc ce que la chèvre vient de faire!»

Fleur-de-Lys accourut et tressaillit. Les lettres disposées sur le plancher formaient ce mot:

PHŒBUS.

«C’est la chèvre qui a écrit cela? demanda-t-elle d’une voix altérée.

— Oui, marraine», répondit Bérangère.

Il était impossible d’en douter; l’enfant ne savait pas écrire.

«Voilà le secret!» pensa Fleur-de-Lys.

Cependant, au cri de l’enfant, tout le monde était accouru, et la mère, et les jeunes filles, et la bohémienne, et l’officier.

La bohémienne vit la sottise que venait de faire la chèvre. Elle devint rouge, puis pâle, et se mit à trembler comme une coupable devant le capitaine, qui la regardait avec un sourire de satisfaction et d’étonnement.

«*Phoebus*! chuchotaient les jeunes filles stupéfaites, c’est le nom du capitaine!

— Vous avez une merveilleuse mémoire!» dit Fleur-de-Lys à la bohémienne pétrifiée. Puis éclatant en sanglots: «Oh! balbutia-t-elle douloureusement en se cachant le visage de ses deux belles mains, c’est une magicienne!» Et elle entendait une voix plus amère encore lui dire au fond du cœur: «C’est une rivale!»

Elle tomba évanouie.

«Ma fille! ma fille! cria la mère effrayée. Va-t’en, bohémienne de l’enfer!»

La Esmeralda ramassa en un clin d’œil les malencontreuses lettres, fit signe à Djali, et sortit par une porte, tandis qu’on emportait Fleur-de-Lys par l’autre.

Le capitaine Phoebus, resté seul, hésita un moment entre les deux portes; puis il suivit la bohémienne.

II

QU’UN PRÊTRE ET UN PHILOSOPHE SONT DEUX

Le prêtre que les jeunes filles avaient remarqué au haut de la tour septentrionale penché sur la place et si attentif à la danse de la bohémienne, c’était en effet l’archidiacre Claude Frollo.

Nos lecteurs n’ont pas oublié la cellule mystérieuse que l’archidiacre s’était réservée dans cette tour. (Je ne sais, pour le dire en passant, si ce n’est pas la même dont on peut voir encore aujourd’hui l’intérieur par une petite lucarne carrée, ouverte au levant à hauteur d’homme, sur la plate-forme d’où s’élancent les tours: un bouge, à présent nu, vide et délabré, dont les murs mal plâtrés sont *ornés* çà et là, à l’heure qu’il est, de quelques méchantes gravures jaunes représentant des façades de cathédrales. Je présume que ce trou est habité concurremment par les chauves-souris et les araignées, et que par conséquent il s’y fait aux mouches une double guerre d’extermination.)

Tous les jours, une heure avant le coucher du soleil, l’archidiacre montait l’escalier de la tour, et s’enfermait dans cette cellule, où il passait quelquefois des nuits entières. Ce jour-là, au moment où, parvenu devant la porte basse du réduit, il mettait dans la serrure la petite clef compliquée qu’il portait toujours sur lui dans l’escarcelle pendue à son côté, un bruit de tambourin et de castagnettes était arrivé à son oreille. Ce bruit venait de la place du Parvis. La cellule, nous l’avons déjà dit, n’avait qu’une lucarne donnant sur la croupe de l’église. Claude Frollo avait repris précipitamment la clef, et un instant après il était sur le sommet de la tour, dans l’attitude sombre et recueillie où les damoiselles l’avaient aperçu.

Il était là, grave, immobile, absorbé dans un regard et dans une pensée. Tout Paris était sous ses pieds, avec les mille flèches de ses édifices et son circulaire horizon de molles collines, avec son fleuve qui serpente sous ses ponts et son peuple qui ondule dans ses rues, avec le nuage de ses fumées, avec la chaîne montueuse de ses toits qui presse Notre-Dame de ses mailles redoublées. Mais dans toute cette ville, l’archidiacre ne regardait qu’un point du pavé, la place du Parvis; dans toute cette foule, qu’une figure, la bohémienne.

Il eût été difficile de dire de quelle nature était ce regard, et d'où venait la flamme qui en jaillissait. C'était un regard fixe, et pourtant plein de trouble et de tumulte. Et à l'immobilité profonde de tout son corps, à peine agité par intervalles d'un frisson machinal, comme un arbre au vent, à la roideur de ses coudes plus marbre que la rampe où ils s'appuyaient, à voir le sourire pétrifié qui contractait son visage, on eût dit qu'il n'y avait plus dans Claude Frollo que les yeux de vivant.

La bohémienne dansait. Elle faisait tourner son tambourin à la pointe de son doigt, et le jetait en l'air en dansant des sarabandes provençales; agile, légère, joyeuse et ne sentant pas le poids du regard redoutable qui tombait à plomb sur sa tête.

La foule fourmillait autour d'elle; de temps en temps, un homme accoutré d'une casaque jaune et rouge faisait faire le cercle, puis revenait s'asseoir sur une chaise à quelques pas de la danseuse, et prenait la tête de la chèvre sur ses genoux. Cet homme semblait être le compagnon de la bohémienne. Claude Frollo, du point élevé où il était placé, ne pouvait distinguer ses traits.

Du moment où l'archidiacre eut aperçu cet inconnu, son attention sembla se partager entre la danseuse et lui, et son visage devint de plus en plus sombre. Tout à coup il se redressa, et un tremblement parcourut tout son corps: «Qu'est-ce que c'est que cet homme? dit-il entre ses dents, je l'avais toujours vue seule!»

Alors il se replongea sous la voûte tortueuse de l'escalier en spirale, et redescendit. En passant devant la porte de la sonnerie qui était entr'ouverte, il vit une chose qui le frappa, il vit Quasimodo qui, penché à une ouverture de ces auvents d'ardoises qui ressemblent à d'énormes jalousies, regardait aussi lui, dans la place. Il était en proie à une contemplation si profonde qu'il ne prit pas garde au passage de son père adoptif. Son œil sauvage avait une expression singulière. C'était un regard charmé et doux. «Voilà qui est étrange! murmura Claude. Est-ce que c'est l'égyptienne qu'il regarde ainsi?» Il continua de descendre. Au bout de quelques minutes, le soucieux archidiacre sortit dans la place par la porte qui est au bas de la tour.

«Qu'est donc devenue la bohémienne? dit-il en se mêlant au groupe de spectateurs que le tambourin avait amassés.

— Je ne sais, répondit un de ses voisins, elle vient de disparaître. Je crois qu'elle est allée faire quelque fandangue dans la maison en face, où ils l'ont appelée.»

À la place de l'égyptienne, sur ce même tapis dont les arabesques s'effaçaient le moment d'auparavant sous le dessin capricieux de sa danse, l'archidiacre ne vit plus que l'homme rouge et jaune, qui, pour gagner à son tour quelques testons, se promenait autour du cercle, les coudes sur les hanches, la tête renversée, la face rouge, le cou tendu, avec une chaise entre les dents. Sur cette chaise, il avait attaché un chat qu'une voisine avait prêté et qui jurait fort effrayé.

«Notre-Dame! s'écria l'archidiacre au moment où le saltimbanque, suant à grosses gouttes, passa devant lui avec sa pyramide de chaise et de chat, que fait là maître Pierre Gringoire?»

La voix sévère de l'archidiacre frappa le pauvre diable d'une telle commotion qu'il perdit l'équilibre avec tout son édifice, et que la chaise et le chat tombèrent pêle-mêle sur la tête des assistants, au milieu d'une huée inextinguible.

Il est probable que maître Pierre Gringoire (car c'était bien lui) aurait eu un fâcheux compte à solder avec la voisine au chat, et toutes les faces contuses et égratignées qui l'entouraient, s'il ne se fût hâté de profiter du tumulte pour se réfugier dans l'église, où Claude Frollo lui avait fait signe de le suivre.

La cathédrale était déjà obscure et déserte. Les contre-nefs étaient pleines de ténèbres, et les lampes des chapelles commençaient à s'étoiler, tant les voûtes devenaient noires. Seulement la grande rose de la façade, dont les mille couleurs étaient trempées d'un rayon de soleil horizontal, reluisait dans l'ombre comme un fouillis de diamants et répercutait à l'autre bout de la nef son spectre éblouissant.

Quand ils eurent fait quelques pas, dom Claude s'adossa à un pilier et regarda Gringoire fixement. Ce regard n'était pas celui que Gringoire craignait, honteux qu'il était d'avoir été surpris par une personne grave et docte dans ce costume de baladin. Le coup d'œil du prêtre n'avait rien de moqueur et d'ironique; il était sérieux, tranquille et perçant. L'archidiacre rompit le silence le premier.

«Venez çà, maître Pierre. Vous m'allez expliquer bien des choses. Et d'abord, d'où vient qu'on ne vous a pas vu depuis tantôt deux mois et qu'on vous retrouve dans les carrefours, en bel équipage, vraiment! mi-parti de jaune et de rouge comme une pomme de Caudebec?

— Messire, dit piteusement Gringoire, c'est en effet un prodigieux accoutrement, et vous m'en voyez plus penaud qu'un chat coiffé d'une calebasse. C’est bien mal fait, je le sens, d’exposer messieurs les sergents du guet à bâtonner sous cette casaque l’humérus d’un philosophe pythagoricien. Mais que voulez-vous, mon révérend maître? la faute en est à mon ancien justaucorps qui m’a lâchement abandonné au commencement de l’hiver, sous prétexte qu’il tombait en loques et qu’il avait besoin de s’aller reposer dans la hotte du chiffonnier. Que faire? la civilisation n’en est pas encore arrivée au point que l’on puisse aller tout nu, comme le voulait l’ancien Diogénès. Ajoutez qu’il ventait un vent très froid, et ce n’est pas au mois de janvier qu’on peut essayer avec succès de faire faire ce nouveau pas à l’humanité. Cette casaque s’est présentée. Je l’ai prise, et j’ai laissé là ma vieille souquenille noire, laquelle, pour un hermétique comme moi, était fort peu hermétiquement close. Me voilà donc en habit d’histrion, comme saint Genest. Que voulez-vous? c’est une éclipse. Apollo a bien gardé les gorrines chez Admétès.

— Vous faites là un beau métier! reprit l’archidiacre.

— Je conviens, mon maître, qu’il vaut mieux philosopher et poétiser, souffler la flamme dans le fourneau ou la recevoir du ciel, que de porter des chats sur le pavois. Aussi quand vous m’avez apostrophé ai-je été aussi sot qu’un âne devant un tourne-broche. Mais que voulez-vous, messire? il faut vivre tous les jours, et les plus beaux vers alexandrins ne valent pas sous la dent un morceau de fromage de Brie. Or, j’ai fait pour Madame Marguerite de Flandre ce fameux épithalame que vous savez, et la ville ne me le paie pas, sous prétexte qu’il n’était pas excellent, comme si l’on pouvait donner pour quatre écus une tragédie de Sophoclès. J’allais donc mourir de faim. Heureusement je me suis trouvé un peu fort du côté de la mâchoire, et je lui ai dit à cette mâchoire: «Fais des tours de force et d’équilibre, nourris-toi toi-même. *Ale te ipsam*.» Un tas de gueux, qui sont devenus mes bons amis, m’ont appris vingt sortes de tours herculéens, et maintenant je donne tous les soirs à mes dents le pain qu’elles ont gagné dans la journée à la sueur de mon front. Après tout, *concedo*, je concède que c’est un triste emploi de mes facultés intellectuelles, et que l’homme n’est pas fait pour passer sa vie à tambouriner et à mordre des chaises. Mais, révérend maître, il ne suffit pas de passer sa vie, il faut la gagner.»

Dom Claude écoutait en silence. Tout à coup son œil enfoncé prit une telle expression sagace et pénétrante que Gringoire se sentit pour ainsi dire fouillé jusqu’au fond de l’âme par ce regard.

«Fort bien, maître Pierre, mais d’où vient que vous êtes maintenant en compagnie de cette danseuse d’Égypte?

— Ma foi! dit Gringoire, c’est qu’elle est ma femme et que je suis son mari.»

L’œil ténébreux du prêtre s’enflamma.

«Aurais-tu fait cela, misérable? cria-t-il en saisissant avec fureur le bras de Gringoire; aurais-tu été assez abandonné de Dieu pour porter la main sur cette fille?

— Sur ma part de paradis, monseigneur, répondit Gringoire tremblant de tous ses membres, je vous jure que je ne l’ai jamais touchée, si c’est là ce qui vous inquiète.

— Et que parles-tu donc de mari et de femme?» dit le prêtre.

Gringoire se hâta de lui conter le plus succinctement possible tout ce que le lecteur sait déjà, son aventure de la Cour des Miracles et son mariage au pot cassé. Il paraît du reste que ce mariage n’avait eu encore aucun résultat, et que chaque soir la bohémienne lui escamotait sa nuit de noces comme le premier jour. «C’est un déboire, dit-il en terminant, mais cela tient à ce que j’ai eu le malheur d’épouser une vierge.

— Que voulez-vous dire? demanda l’archidiacre, qui s’était apaisé par degrés à ce récit.

— C’est assez difficile à expliquer, répondit le poète. C’est une superstition. Ma femme est, à ce que m’a dit un vieux peigre qu’on appelle chez nous le duc d’Égypte, un enfant trouvé, ou perdu, ce qui est la même chose. Elle porte au cou une amulette qui, assure-t-on, lui fera un jour rencontrer ses parents, mais qui perdrait sa vertu si la jeune fille perdait la sienne. Il suit de là que nous demeurons tous deux très vertueux.

— Donc, reprit Claude dont le front s’éclaircissait de plus en plus, vous croyez, maître Pierre, que cette créature n’a été approchée d’aucun homme?

— Que voulez-vous, dom Claude, qu’un homme fasse à une superstition? Elle a cela dans la tête. J’estime que c’est à coup sûr une rareté que cette pruderie de nonne qui se conserve farouche au milieu de ces filles bohèmes si facilement apprivoisées. Mais elle a pour se protéger trois choses: le duc d’Égypte qui l’a prise sous sa sauvegarde, comptant peut-être la vendre à quelque damp abbé; toute sa tribu qui la tient en vénération singulière, comme une Notre-Dame; et un certain poignard mignon que la luronne porte toujours sur elle dans quelque coin, malgré les ordonnances du prévôt, et qu’on lui fait sortir aux mains en lui pressant la taille. C’est une fière guêpe, allez!»

L’archidiacre serra Gringoire de questions.

La Esmeralda était, au jugement de Gringoire, une créature inoffensive et charmante, jolie, à cela près d’une moue qui lui était particulière; une fille naïve et passionnée, ignorante de tout, et enthousiaste de tout; ne sachant pas encore la différence d’une femme à un homme, même en rêve; faite comme cela; folle surtout de danse, de bruit, de grand air; une espèce de femme abeille, ayant des ailes invisibles aux pieds, et vivant dans un tourbillon. Elle devait cette nature à la vie errante qu’elle avait toujours menée. Gringoire était parvenu à savoir que, tout enfant, elle avait parcouru l’Espagne et la Catalogne, jusqu’en Sicile; il croyait même qu’elle avait été emmenée, par la caravane de zingari dont elle faisait partie, dans le royaume d’Alger, pays situé en Achaïe, laquelle Achaïe touche d’un côté à la petite Albanie et à la Grèce, de l’autre à la mer des Siciles, qui est le chemin de Constantinople. Les bohèmes, disait Gringoire, étaient vassaux du roi d’Alger, en sa qualité de chef de la nation des Maures blancs. Ce qui était certain, c’est que la Esmeralda était venue en France très jeune encore par la Hongrie. De tous ces pays, la jeune fille avait rapporté des lambeaux de jargons bizarres, des chants et des idées étrangères, qui faisaient de son langage quelque chose d’aussi bigarré que son costume moitié parisien, moitié africain. Du reste, le peuple des quartiers qu’elle fréquentait l’aimait pour sa gaieté, pour sa gentillesse, pour ses vives allures, pour ses danses et pour ses chansons. Dans toute la ville, elle ne se croyait haïe que de deux personnes, dont elle parlait souvent avec effroi: la sachette de la Tour-Roland, une vilaine recluse qui avait on ne sait quelle rancune aux égyptiennes, et qui maudissait la pauvre danseuse chaque fois qu’elle passait devant sa lucarne; et un prêtre qui ne la rencontrait jamais sans lui jeter des regards et des paroles qui lui faisaient peur. Cette dernière circonstance troubla fort l’archidiacre, sans que Gringoire fît grande attention à ce trouble; tant il avait suffi de deux mois pour faire oublier à l’insouciant poète les détails singuliers de cette soirée où il avait fait la rencontre de l’égyptienne, et la présence de l’archidiacre dans tout cela. Au demeurant, la petite danseuse ne craignait rien; elle ne disait pas la bonne aventure, ce qui la mettait à l’abri de ces procès de magie si fréquemment intentés aux bohémiennes. Et puis, Gringoire lui tenait lieu de frère, sinon de mari. Après tout, le philosophe supportait très patiemment cette espèce de mariage platonique. C'était toujours un gîte et du pain. Chaque matin, il partait de la truanderie, le plus souvent avec l'égyptienne, il l'aidait à faire dans les carrefours sa récolte de targes et de petits-blancs; chaque soir il rentrait avec elle sous le même toit, la laissait se verrouiller dans sa logette, et s'endormait du sommeil du juste. Existence fort douce, à tout prendre, disait-il, et fort propice à la rêverie. Et puis, en son âme et conscience, le philosophe n'était pas très sûr d'être éperdument amoureux de la bohémienne. Il aimait presque autant la chèvre. C'était une charmante bête, douce, intelligente, spirituelle, une chèvre savante. Rien de plus commun au moyen âge que ces animaux savants dont on s'émerveillait fort et qui menaient fréquemment leurs instructeurs au fagot. Pourtant les sorcelleries de la chèvre aux pattes dorées étaient de bien innocentes malices. Gringoire les expliqua à l'archidiacre que ces détails paraissaient vivement intéresser. Il suffisait, dans la plupart des cas, de présenter le tambourin à la chèvre de telle ou telle façon pour obtenir d'elle la momerie qu'on souhaitait. Elle avait été dressée à cela par la bohémienne, qui avait à ces finesses un talent si rare qu'il lui avait suffi de deux mois pour enseigner à la chèvre à écrire avec des lettres mobiles le mot *Phoebus*.

«*Phoebus*! dit le prêtre; pourquoi *Phoebus*?

— Je ne sais, répondit Gringoire. C'est peut-être un mot qu'elle croit doué de quelque vertu magique et secrète. Elle le répète souvent à demi-voix quand elle se croit seule.

— Êtes-vous sûr, reprit Claude avec son regard pénétrant, que ce n'est qu'un mot et que ce n'est pas un nom?

— Nom de qui? dit le poète.

— Que sais-je? dit le prêtre.

— Voilà ce que j'imagine, messire. Ces bohèmes sont un peu guèbres et adorent le soleil. De là Phoebus.

— Cela ne me semble pas si clair qu'à vous, maître Pierre.

— Au demeurant, cela ne m'importe. Qu'elle marmotte son Phoebus à son aise. Ce qui est sûr, c'est que Djali m'aime déjà presque autant qu'elle.

— Qu'est-ce que cette Djali?

— C'est la chèvre.»

L'archidiacre posa son menton sur sa main, et parut un moment rêveur. Tout à coup il se retourna brusquement vers Gringoire.

«Et tu me jures que tu ne lui as pas touché?

— À qui? dit Gringoire, à la chèvre?

— Non, à cette femme.

— À ma femme! Je vous jure que non.

— Et tu es souvent seul avec elle?

— Tous les soirs, une bonne heure.»

Dom Claude fronça le sourcil.

«Oh! oh! *solus cum sola non cogitabuntur orare Pater noster*.

— Sur mon âme, je pourrais dire le *Pater*, et *l'Ave Maria*, et le Credo *in Deum patrem omnipotentem*, sans qu'elle fît plus d'attention à moi qu'une poule à une église.

— Jure-moi par le ventre de ta mère, répéta l'archidiacre avec violence, que tu n'as pas touché à cette créature du bout du doigt.

— Je le jurerais aussi par la tête de mon père, car les deux choses ont plus d'un rapport. Mais, mon révérend maître, permettez-moi à mon tour une question.

— Parlez, monsieur.

— Qu'est-ce que cela vous fait?»

La pâle figure de l'archidiacre devint rouge comme la joue d'une jeune fille. Il resta un moment sans répondre, puis avec un embarras visible:

«Écoutez, maître Pierre Gringoire. Vous n'êtes pas encore damné, que je sache. Je m'intéresse à vous et vous veux du bien. Or le moindre contact avec cette égyptienne du démon vous ferait vassal de Satanas. Vous savez que c'est toujours le corps qui perd l'âme. Malheur à vous si vous approchez cette femme! Voilà tout.

— J'ai essayé une fois, dit Gringoire en se grattant l'oreille. C'était le premier jour, mais je me suis piqué.

— Vous avez eu cette effronterie, maître Pierre?»

Et le front du prêtre se rembrunit.

«Une autre fois, continua le poète en souriant, j'ai regardé avant de me coucher par le trou de sa serrure, et j'ai bien vu la plus délicieuse dame en chemise qui ait jamais fait crier la sangle d'un lit sous son pied nu.

— Va-t'en au diable!» cria le prêtre avec un regard terrible, et, poussant par les épaules Gringoire émerveillé, il s'enfonça à grands pas sous les plus sombres arcades de la cathédrale.

III

LES CLOCHES

Depuis la matinée du pilori, les voisins de Notre-Dame avaient cru remarquer que l’ardeur carillonneuse de Quasimodo s’était fort refroidie. Auparavant c’étaient des sonneries à tout propos, de longues aubades qui duraient de prime à complies, des volées de beffroi pour une grand-messe, de riches gammes promenées sur les clochettes pour un mariage, pour un baptême, et s’entremêlant dans l’air comme une broderie de toutes sortes de sons charmants. La vieille église, toute vibrante et toute sonore, était dans une perpétuelle joie de cloches. On y sentait sans cesse la présence d’un esprit de bruit et de caprice qui chantait par toutes ces bouches de cuivre. Maintenant cet esprit semblait avoir disparu; la cathédrale paraissait morne et gardait volontiers le silence. Les fêtes et les enterrements avaient leur simple sonnerie, sèche et nue, ce que le rituel exigeait, rien de plus. Du double bruit que fait une église, l’orgue au dedans, la cloche au dehors, il ne restait que l’orgue. On eût dit qu’il n’y avait plus de musicien dans les clochers. Quasimodo y était toujours pourtant. Que s’était-il donc passé en lui? Était-ce que la honte et le désespoir du pilori duraient encore au fond de son cœur, que les coups de fouet du tourmenteur se répercutaient sans fin dans son âme, et que la tristesse d’un pareil traitement avait tout éteint chez lui, jusqu’à sa passion pour les cloches? ou bien, était-ce que Marie avait une rivale dans le cœur du sonneur de Notre-Dame, et que la grosse cloche et ses quatorze sœurs étaient négligées pour quelque chose de plus aimable et de plus beau?

Il arriva que, dans cette gracieuse année 1482, l’Annonciation tomba un mardi 25 mars. Ce jour-là, l’air était si pur et si léger que Quasimodo se sentit revenir quelque amour de ses cloches. Il monta donc dans la tour septentrionale, tandis qu’en bas le bedeau ouvrait toutes larges les portes de l’église, lesquelles étaient alors d’énormes panneaux de fort bois couverts de cuir, bordés de clous de fer doré et encadrés de sculptures «fort artificiellement élabourées».

Parvenu dans la haute cage de la sonnerie, Quasimodo considéra quelque temps avec un triste hochement de tête les six campaniles, comme s’il gémissait de quelque chose d’étranger qui s’était interposé dans son cœur entre elles et lui. Mais quand il les eut mises en branle, quand il sentit cette grappe de cloches remuer sous sa main, quand il vit, car il ne l’entendait pas, l’octave palpitante monter et descendre sur cette échelle sonore comme un oiseau qui saute de branche en branche, quand le diable musique, ce démon qui secoue un trousseau étincelant de strettes, de trilles et d’arpèges, se fut emparé du pauvre sourd, alors il redevint heureux, il oublia tout, et son cœur qui se dilatait fit épanouir son visage.

Il allait et venait, il frappait des mains, il courait d’une corde à l’autre, il animait les six chanteurs de la voix et du geste, comme un chef d’orchestre qui éperonne des virtuoses intelligents.

«Va, disait-il, va, Gabrielle. Verse tout ton bruit dans la place. C’est aujourd’hui fête. — Thibauld, pas de paresse. Tu te ralentis. Va, va donc! est-ce que tu t’es rouillé, fainéant? — C’est bien! Vite! vite! qu’on ne voie pas le battant. Rends-les tous sourds comme moi. C’est cela, Thibauld, bravement! — Guillaume! Guillaume! tu es le plus gros, et Pasquier est le plus petit, et Pasquier va le mieux. Gageons que ceux qui entendent l’entendent mieux que toi. — Bien! bien! ma Gabrielle, fort! plus fort! — Hé! que faites-vous donc là-haut tous deux, les Moineaux? je ne vous vois pas faire le plus petit bruit. — Qu’est-ce que c’est que ces becs de cuivre-là qui ont l’air de bâiller quand il faut chanter? Çà, qu’on travaille! C’est l’Annonciation. Il y a un beau soleil. Il faut un beau carillon. — Pauvre Guillaume! te voilà tout essoufflé, mon gros!»

Il était tout occupé d’aiguillonner ses cloches, qui sautaient toutes les six à qui mieux mieux et secouaient leurs croupes luisantes comme un bruyant attelage de mules espagnoles piqué çà et là par les apostrophes du sagal.

Tout à coup, en laissant tomber son regard entre les larges écailles ardoisées qui recouvrent à une certaine hauteur le mur à pic du clocher, il vit dans la place une jeune fille bizarrement accoutrée, qui s’arrêtait, qui développait à terre un tapis où une petite chèvre venait se poser, et un groupe de spectateurs qui s’arrondissait à l’entour. Cette vue changea subitement le cours de ses idées, et figea son enthousiasme musical comme un souffle d’air fige une résine en fusion. Il s’arrêta, tourna le dos au carillon, et s’accroupit derrière l’auvent d’ardoise, en fixant sur la danseuse ce regard rêveur, tendre et doux, qui avait déjà une fois étonné l’archidiacre. Cependant les cloches oubliées s’éteignirent brusquement toutes à la fois, au grand désappointement des amateurs de sonnerie, lesquels écoutaient de bonne foi le carillon de dessus le Pont-au-Change, et s’en allèrent stupéfaits comme un chien à qui l’on a montré un os et à qui l’on donne une pierre.

IV

ΑΝΑΓΚΗ

Il advint que par une belle matinée de ce même mois de mars, je crois que c’était le samedi 29, jour de saint Eustache, notre jeune ami l’écolier Jehan Frollo du Moulin s’aperçut en s’habillant que ses grègues qui contenaient sa bourse ne rendaient aucun son métallique. «Pauvre bourse! dit-il en la tirant de son gousset, quoi! pas le moindre petit parisis! comme les dés, les pots de bière et Vénus t’ont cruellement éventrée! comme te voilà vide, ridée et flasque! Tu ressembles à la gorge d’une furie! Je vous le demande, messer Cicero et messer Seneca, dont je vois les exemplaires tout racornis épars sur le carreau, que me sert de savoir, mieux qu’un général des monnaies ou qu’un juif du Pont-aux-Changeurs, qu’un écu d’or à la couronne vaut trente-cinq unzains de vingt-cinq sous huit deniers parisis chaque, et qu’un écu au croissant vaut trente-six unzains de vingt-six sous et six deniers tournois pièce, si je n’ai pas un misérable liard noir à risquer sur le double-six! Oh! consul Cicero! ce n’est pas là une calamité dont on se tire avec des périphrases, des *quemadmodum* et des *verum enim vero*!»

Il s’habilla tristement. Une pensée lui était venue tout en ficelant ses bottines, mais il la repoussa d’abord; cependant elle revint, et il mit son gilet à l’envers, signe évident d’un violent combat intérieur. Enfin il jeta rudement son bonnet à terre et s’écria: «Tant pis! il en sera ce qu’il pourra. Je vais aller chez mon frère. J’attraperai un sermon, mais j’attraperai un écu.»

Alors il endossa précipitamment sa casaque à mahoîtres fourrées, ramassa son bonnet et sortit en désespéré.

Il descendit la rue de la Harpe vers la Cité. En passant devant la rue de la Huchette, l’odeur de ces admirables broches qui tournaient incessamment vint chatouiller son appareil olfactif, et il donna un regard d’amour à la cyclopéenne rôtisserie qui arracha un jour au cordelier Calatagirone cette pathétique exclamation: *Veramente, queste rotisserie sono cosa stupenda*! Mais Jehan n’avait pas de quoi déjeuner, et il s’enfonça avec un profond soupir sous le porche du Petit-Châtelet, énorme double-trèfle de tours massives qui gardait l’entrée de la Cité.

Il ne prit pas même le temps de jeter une pierre en passant, comme c’était l’usage, à la misérable statue de ce Périnet Leclerc qui avait livré le Paris de Charles VI aux Anglais, crime que son effigie, la face écrasée de pierres et souillée de boue, a expié pendant trois siècles au coin des rues de la Harpe et de Bussy, comme à un pilori éternel.

Le Petit-Pont traversé, la rue Neuve-Sainte-Geneviève enjambée, Jehan de Molendino se trouva devant Notre-Dame. Alors son indécision le reprit, et il se promena quelques instants autour de la statue de M. Legris, en se répétant avec angoisse: «Le sermon est sûr, l’écu est douteux!»

Il arrêta un bedeau qui sortait du cloître. «Où est monsieur l’archidiacre de Josas?

— Je crois qu’il est dans sa cachette de la tour, dit le bedeau, et je ne vous conseille pas de l’y déranger, à moins que vous ne veniez de la part de quelqu’un comme le pape ou monsieur le roi.»

Jehan frappa dans ses mains.

«Bédiable! voilà une magnifique occasion de voir la fameuse logette aux sorcelleries!»

Déterminé par cette réflexion, il s’enfonça résolument sous la petite porte noire, et se mit à monter la vis de Saint-Gilles qui mène aux étages supérieurs de la tour. «Je vais voir! se disait-il chemin faisant. Par les corbignolles de la sainte Vierge! ce doit être chose curieuse que cette cellule que mon révérend frère cache comme son pudendum! On dit qu’il y allume des cuisines d’enfer, et qu’il y fait cuire à gros feu la pierre philosophale. Bédieu! je me soucie de la pierre philosophale comme d’un caillou, et j’aimerais mieux trouver sur son fourneau une omelette d’œufs de Pâques au lard que la plus grosse pierre philosophale du monde!»

Parvenu sur la galerie des colonnettes, il souffla un moment, et jura contre l’interminable escalier par je ne sais combien de millions de charretées de diables, puis il reprit son ascension par l’étroite porte de la tour septentrionale aujourd’hui interdite au public. Quelques moments après avoir dépassé la cage des cloches, il rencontra un petit palier pratiqué dans un renfoncement latéral et sous la voûte une basse porte ogive dont une meurtrière, percée en face dans la paroi circulaire de l’escalier, lui permit d’observer l’énorme serrure et la puissante armature de fer. Les personnes qui seraient curieuses aujourd’hui de visiter cette porte la reconnaîtront à cette inscription, gravée en lettres blanches dans la muraille noire: J’ADORE CORALIE, 1829. SIGNÉ UGÈNE. *Signé* est dans le texte.

«Ouf! dit l’écolier; c’est sans doute ici.»

La clef était dans la serrure. La porte était tout contre. Il la poussa mollement, et passa sa tête par l’entrouverture.

Le lecteur n’est pas sans avoir feuilleté l’œuvre admirable de Rembrandt, ce Shakespeare de la peinture. Parmi tant de merveilleuses gravures, il y a en particulier une eau-forte qui représente, à ce qu’on suppose, le docteur Faust, et qu’il est impossible de contempler sans éblouissement. C’est une sombre cellule. Au milieu est une table chargée d’objets hideux, têtes de mort, sphères, alambics, compas, parchemins hiéroglyphiques. Le docteur est devant cette table, vêtu de sa grosse houppelande et coiffé jusqu’aux sourcils de son bonnet fourré. On ne le voit qu’à mi-corps. Il est à demi levé de son immense fauteuil, ses poings crispés s’appuient sur la table, et il considère avec curiosité et terreur un grand cercle lumineux, formé de lettres magiques, qui brille sur le mur du fond comme le spectre solaire dans la chambre noire. Ce soleil cabalistique semble trembler à l’œil et remplit la blafarde cellule de son rayonnement mystérieux. C’est horrible et c’est beau.

Quelque chose d’assez semblable à la cellule de Faust s’offrit à la vue de Jehan quand il eut hasardé sa tête par la porte entre-bâillée. C’était de même un réduit sombre et à peine éclairé. Il y avait aussi un grand fauteuil et une grande table, des compas, des alambics, des squelettes d’animaux pendus au plafond, une sphère roulant sur le pavé, des hippocéphales pêle-mêle avec des bocaux où tremblaient des feuilles d’or, des têtes de mort posées sur des vélins bigarrés de figures et de caractères, de gros manuscrits empilés tout ouverts sans pitié pour les angles cassants du parchemin, enfin, toutes les ordures de la science, et partout, sur ce fouillis, de la poussière et des toiles d’araignée; mais il n’y avait point de cercle de lettres lumineuses, point de docteur en extase contemplant la flamboyante vision comme l’aigle regarde son soleil.

Pourtant la cellule n’était point déserte. Un homme était assis dans le fauteuil et courbé sur la table. Jehan, auquel il tournait le dos, ne pouvait voir que ses épaules et le derrière de son crâne; mais il n’eut pas de peine à reconnaître cette tête chauve à laquelle la nature avait fait une tonsure éternelle, comme si elle avait voulu marquer par un symbole extérieur l’irrésistible vocation cléricale de l’archidiacre.

Jehan reconnut donc son frère. Mais la porte s’était ouverte si doucement que rien n’avait averti dom Claude de sa présence. Le curieux écolier en profita pour examiner quelques instants à loisir la cellule. Un large fourneau, qu'il n'avait pas remarqué au premier abord, était à gauche du fauteuil, au-dessous de la lucarne. Le rayon de jour qui pénétrait par cette ouverture traversait une ronde toile d'araignée, qui inscrivait avec goût sa rosace délicate dans l'ogive de la lucarne, et au centre de laquelle l'insecte architecte se tenait immobile comme le moyeu de cette roue de dentelle. Sur le fourneau étaient accumulés en désordre toutes sortes de vases, des fioles de grès, des cornues de verre, des matras de charbon. Jehan observa en soupirant qu'il n'y avait pas un poêlon. «Elle est fraîche, la batterie de cuisine!» pensa-t-il.

Du reste, il n'y avait pas de feu dans le fourneau, et il paraissait même qu'on n'en avait pas allumé depuis longtemps. Un masque de verre, que Jehan remarqua parmi les ustensiles d'alchimie, et qui servait sans doute à préserver le visage de l'archidiacre lorsqu'il élaborait quelque substance redoutable, était dans un coin, couvert de poussière, et comme oublié. À côté gisait un soufflet non moins poudreux, et dont la feuille supérieure portait cette légende incrustée en lettres de cuivre: SPIRA, SPERA.

D'autres légendes étaient écrites, selon la mode des hermétiques, en grand nombre sur les murs; les unes tracées à l'encre, les autres gravées avec une pointe de métal. Du reste, lettres gothiques, lettres hébraïques, lettres grecques et lettres romaines pêle-mêle, les inscriptions débordant au hasard, celles-ci sur celles-là, les plus fraîches effaçant les plus anciennes, et toutes s'enchevêtrant les unes dans les autres comme les branches d'une broussaille, comme les piques d'une mêlée. C'était, en effet, une assez confuse mêlée de toutes les philosophies, de toutes les rêveries, de toutes les sagesses humaines. Il y en avait une çà et là qui brillait sur les autres comme un drapeau parmi les fers de lance. C'était, la plupart du temps, une brève devise latine ou grecque, comme les formulait si bien le moyen âge: *Unde? inde*? — *Homo homini monstrum*. — *Astra, castra, nomen, numen*. — Μέγα βιβλίον, μέγα κακόν. — *Sapere aude*. — *Flat ubi vult*, — etc.; quelquefois un mot dénué de tout sens apparent: Αναγκοφαγία, ce qui cachait peut-être une allusion amère au régime du cloître; quelquefois une simple maxime de discipline cléricale formulée en un hexamètre réglementaire: *Coelestem dominum, terrestrem dicito domnum*. Il y avait aussi *passim* des grimoires hébraïques, auxquels Jehan, déjà fort peu grec, ne comprenait rien, et le tout était traversé à tout propos par des étoiles, des figures d'hommes ou d'animaux et des triangles qui s'intersectaient, ce qui ne contribuait pas peu à faire ressembler la muraille barbouillée de la cellule à une feuille de papier sur laquelle un singe aurait promené une plume chargée d’encre.

L’ensemble de la logette, du reste, présentait un aspect général d’abandon et de délabrement; et le mauvais état des ustensiles laissait supposer que le maître était déjà depuis assez longtemps distrait de ses travaux par d’autres préoccupations.

Ce maître cependant, penché sur un vaste manuscrit orné de peintures bizarres, paraissait tourmenté par une idée qui venait sans cesse se mêler à ses méditations. C’est du moins ce que Jehan jugea en l’entendant s’écrier, avec les intermittences pensives d’un songe-creux qui rêve tout haut:

«Oui, Manou le dit, et Zoroastre l’enseignait, le soleil naît du feu, la lune du soleil. Le feu est l’âme du grand tout. Ses atomes élémentaires s’épanchent et ruissellent incessamment sur le monde par courants infinis. Aux points où ces courants s’entrecoupent dans le ciel, ils produisent la lumière; à leurs points d’intersection dans la terre, ils produisent l’or. — La lumière, l’or, même chose. Du feu à l’état concret. — La différence du visible au palpable, du fluide au solide pour la même substance, de la vapeur d’eau à la glace, rien de plus. — Ce ne sont point là des rêves, c’est la loi générale de la nature. — Mais comment faire pour soutirer dans la science le secret de cette loi générale? Quoi! cette lumière qui inonde ma main, c’est de l’or! ces mêmes atomes dilatés selon une certaine loi, il ne s’agit que de les condenser selon une certaine autre loi! — Comment faire? — Quelques-uns ont imaginé d’enfouir un rayon du soleil. — Averroës, — oui, c’est Averroës, — Averroës en a enterré un sous le premier pilier de gauche du sanctuaire du koran, dans la grande mahomerie de Cordoue; mais on ne pourra ouvrir le caveau pour voir si l’opération a réussi que dans huit mille ans.

— Diable! dit Jehan à part lui, voilà qui est longtemps attendre un écu!

— ... D’autres ont pensé, continua l’archidiacre rêveur, qu’il valait mieux opérer sur un rayon de Sirius. Mais il est bien malaisé d’avoir ce rayon pur, à cause de la présence simultanée des autres étoiles qui viennent s’y mêler. Flamel estime qu’il est plus simple d’opérer sur le feu terrestre. Flamel! quel nom de prédestiné, *Flamma*! — Oui, le feu. Voilà tout. — Le diamant est dans le charbon, l’or est dans le feu. — Mais comment l’en tirer? — Magistri affirme qu’il y a certains noms de femme d’un charme si doux et si mystérieux qu’il suffit de les prononcer pendant l’opération... —

Lisons ce qu’en dit Manou: «Où les femmes sont honorées, les divinités sont réjouies; où elles sont méprisées, il est inutile de prier Dieu. — La bouche d’une femme est constamment pure; c’est une eau courante, c’est un rayon de soleil. — Le nom d’une femme doit être agréable, doux, imaginaire; finir par des voyelles longues, et ressembler à des mots de bénédiction.» — ... Oui, le sage a raison; en effet, la Maria, la Sophia, la Esmeral... — Damnation! toujours cette pensée!»

Et il ferma le livre avec violence.

Il passa la main sur son front, comme pour chasser l’idée qui l’obsédait. Puis il prit sur la table un clou et un petit marteau dont le manche était curieusement peint de lettres cabalistiques.

«Depuis quelque temps, dit-il avec un sourire amer, j’échoue dans toutes mes expériences! L’idée fixe me possède, et me flétrit le cerveau comme un trèfle de feu. Je n’ai seulement pu retrouver le secret de Cassiodore, dont la lampe brûlait sans mèche et sans huile. Chose simple pourtant!

— Peste! dit Jehan dans sa barbe.

— ... Il suffit donc, continua le prêtre, d’une seule misérable pensée pour rendre un homme faible et fou! Oh! que Claude Pernelle rirait de moi, elle qui n’a pu détourner un moment Nicolas Flamel de la poursuite du grand œuvre! Quoi! je tiens dans ma main le marteau magique de Zéchiélé! à chaque coup que le redoutable rabbin, du fond de sa cellule, frappait sur ce clou avec ce marteau, celui de ses ennemis qu’il avait condamné, eût-il été à deux mille lieues, s’enfonçait d’une coudée dans la terre qui le dévorait. Le roi de France lui-même, pour avoir un soir heurté inconsidérément à la porte du thaumaturge, entra dans son pavé de Paris jusqu’aux genoux. — Ceci s’est passé il n’y a pas trois siècles. — Eh bien! j’ai le marteau et le clou, et ce ne sont pas outils plus formidables dans mes mains qu’un hutin aux mains d’un taillandier. — Pourtant il ne s’agit que de retrouver le mot magique que prononçait Zéchiélé, en frappant sur son clou.

— Bagatelle! pensa Jehan.

— Voyons, essayons, reprit vivement l’archidiacre. Si je réussis, je verrai l’étincelle bleue jaillir de la tête du clou. — Emen-hétan! Emen-hétan! — Ce n’est pas cela. — Sigéani! Sigéani! — Que ce clou ouvre la tombe à quiconque porte le nom de Phoebus!... — Malédiction! toujours, encore, éternellement la même idée!»

Et il jeta le marteau avec colère. Puis il s’affaissa tellement sur le fauteuil et sur la table, que Jehan le perdit de vue derrière l’énorme dossier. Pendant quelques minutes, il ne vit plus que son poing convulsif crispé sur un livre. Tout à coup dom Claude se leva, prit un compas, et grava en silence sur la muraille en lettres capitales ce mot grec:

[GREEK: ANANKÊ]

«Mon frère est fou, dit Jehan en lui-même; il eût été bien plus simple d'écrire *Fatum*. Tout le monde n'est pas obligé de savoir le grec.»

L'archidiacre vint se rasseoir dans son fauteuil, et posa sa tête sur ses deux mains, comme fait un malade dont le front est lourd et brûlant.

L'écolier observait son frère avec surprise. Il ne savait pas, lui qui mettait son cœur en plein air, lui qui n'observait de loi au monde que la bonne loi de nature, lui qui laissait s'écouler ses passions par ses penchants, et chez qui le lac des grandes émotions était toujours à sec, tant il y pratiquait largement chaque matin de nouvelles rigoles, il ne savait pas avec quelle furie cette mer des passions humaines fermente et bouillonne lorsqu'on lui refuse toute issue, comme elle s'amasse, comme elle s'enfle, comme elle déborde, comme elle creuse le cœur, comme elle éclate en sanglots intérieurs et en sourdes convulsions, jusqu'à ce qu'elle ait déchiré ses digues et crevé son lit. L'enveloppe austère et glaciale de Claude Frollo, cette froide surface de vertu escarpée et inaccessible, avait toujours trompé Jehan. Le joyeux écolier n'avait jamais songé à ce qu'il y a de lave bouillante, furieuse et profonde sous le front de neige de l'Etna.

Nous ne savons s'il se rendit compte subitement de ces idées, mais, tout évaporé qu'il était, il comprit qu'il avait vu ce qu'il n'aurait pas dû voir, qu'il venait de surprendre l'âme de son frère aîné dans une de ses plus secrètes attitudes, et qu'il ne fallait pas que Claude s'en aperçût. Voyant que l'archidiacre était retombé dans son immobilité première, il retira sa tête très doucement, et fit quelque bruit de pas derrière la porte, comme quelqu'un qui arrive et qui avertit de son arrivée.

«Entrez! cria l'archidiacre de l'intérieur de la cellule, je vous attendais. J'ai laissé exprès la clef à la porte. Entrez, maître Jacques.»

L'écolier entra hardiment. L'archidiacre, qu'une pareille visite gênait fort en pareil lieu, tressaillit sur son fauteuil.

«Quoi! c'est vous, Jehan?

— C'est toujours un J, dit l'écolier avec sa face rouge, effrontée et joyeuse.»

Le visage de dom Claude avait repris son expression sévère.

«Que venez-vous faire ici?

— Mon frère, répondit l’écolier en s’efforçant d’atteindre à une mine décente, piteuse et modeste, et en tournant son bicoquet dans ses mains avec un air d’innocence, je venais vous demander...

— Quoi?

— Un peu de morale dont j’ai grand besoin.» Jehan n’osa ajouter tout haut: «Et un peu d’argent dont j’ai plus grand besoin encore.» Ce dernier membre de sa phrase resta inédit.

«Monsieur, dit l’archidiacre d’un ton froid, je suis très mécontent de vous.

— Hélas!» soupira l’écolier.

Dom Claude fit décrire un quart de cercle à son fauteuil, et regarda Jehan fixement. «Je suis bien aise de vous voir.»

C’était un exorde redoutable. Jehan se prépara à un rude choc.

«Jehan, on m’apporte tous les jours des doléances de vous. Qu’est-ce que c’est que cette batterie où vous avez contus de bastonnade un petit vicomte Albert de Ramonchamp?...

— Oh! dit Jehan, grand-chose! un méchant page qui s’amusait à escailbotter les écoliers en faisant courir son cheval dans les boues!

— Qu’est-ce que c’est, reprit l’archidiacre, que ce Mahiet Fargel, dont vous avez déchiré la robe? *Tunicam dechiraverunt*, dit la plainte.

— Ah bah! une mauvaise cappette de Montaigu! voilà-t-il pas!

— La plainte dit *tunicam* et non *cappettam*. Savez-vous le latin?»

Jehan ne répondit pas.

«Oui! poursuivit le prêtre en secouant la tête, voilà où en sont les études et les lettres maintenant. La langue latine est à peine entendue, la syriaque inconnue, la grecque tellement odieuse que ce n’est pas ignorance aux plus savants de sauter un mot grec sans le lire, et qu’on dit: *Græcum est, non legitur*.»

L’écolier releva résolument les yeux. «Monsieur mon frère, vous plaît-il que je vous explique en bon parler français ce mot grec qui est écrit là sur le mur?

— Quel mot?

— ΑΝΑΓΚΗ.»

Une légère rougeur vint s’épanouir sur les jaunes pommettes de l’archidiacre, comme la bouffée de fumée qui annonce au dehors les secrètes commotions d’un volcan. L’écolier le remarqua à peine.

«Eh, Jehan, balbutia le frère aîné avec effort, qu'est-ce que ce mot veut dire?

— FATALITÉ.»

Dom Claude redevint pâle, et l'écolier poursuivit avec insouciance:

«Et ce mot qui est au-dessous, gravé par la même main, Αναγνεία, signifie *impureté*. Vous voyez qu'on sait son grec.»

L'archidiacre demeurait silencieux. Cette leçon de grec l'avait rendu rêveur. Le petit Jehan, qui avait toutes les finesses d'un enfant gâté, jugea le moment favorable pour hasarder sa requête. Il prit donc une voix extrêmement douce, et commença:

«Mon bon frère, est-ce que vous m'avez en haine à ce point de me faire farouche mine pour quelques méchantes gifles et pugnalades distribuées en bonne guerre à je ne sais quels garçons et marmousets, *quibusdam mormosetis?* — Vous voyez, bon frère Claude, qu'on sait son latin.»

Mais toute cette caressante hypocrisie n'eut point sur le sévère grand frère son effet accoutumé. Cerbère ne mordit pas au gâteau de miel. Le front de l'archidiacre ne se dérida pas d'un pli.

«Où voulez-vous en venir? dit-il d'un ton sec.

— Eh bien, au fait! voici! répondit bravement Jehan. J'ai besoin d'argent.»

À cette déclaration effrontée, la physionomie de l'archidiacre prit tout à fait l'expression pédagogique et paternelle.

«Vous savez, monsieur Jehan, que notre fief de Tirechappe ne rapporte, en mettant en bloc le cens et les rentes des vingt-une maisons, que trente-neuf livres onze sous six deniers parisis. C'est moitié plus que du temps des frères Paclet, mais ce n'est pas beaucoup.

— J'ai besoin d'argent, dit stoïquement Jehan.

— Vous savez que l'official a décidé que nos vingt-une maisons mouvaient en plein fief de l'évêché, et que nous ne pourrions racheter cet hommage qu'en payant au révérend évêque deux marcs d'argent doré du prix de six livres parisis. Or, ces deux marcs, je n'ai encore pu les amasser. Vous le savez.

— Je sais que j'ai besoin d'argent, répéta Jehan pour la troisième fois.

— Et qu'en voulez-vous faire?»

Cette question fit briller une lueur d'espoir aux yeux de Jehan. Il reprit sa mine chatte et doucereuse.

«Tenez, cher frère Claude, je ne m’adresserais pas à vous en mauvaise intention. Il ne s’agit pas de faire le beau dans les tavernes avec vos unzains et de me promener dans les rues de Paris en caparaçon de brocart d’or, avec mon laquais, *cum meo laquasio*. Non, mon frère, c’est pour une bonne œuvre.

— Quelle bonne œuvre? demanda Claude un peu surpris.

— Il y a deux de mes amis qui voudraient acheter une layette à l’enfant d’une pauvre veuve haudriette. C’est une charité. Cela coûtera trois florins, et je voudrais mettre le mien.

— Comment s’appellent vos deux amis?

— Pierre l’Assommeur et Baptiste Croque-Oison.

— Hum! dit l’archidiacre, voilà des noms qui vont à une bonne œuvre comme une bombarde sur un maître-autel.»

Il est certain que Jehan avait très mal choisi ses deux noms d’amis. Il le sentit trop tard.

«Et puis, poursuivit le sagace Claude, qu’est-ce que c’est qu’une layette qui doit coûter trois florins? et cela pour l’enfant d’une haudriette? Depuis quand les veuves haudriettes ont-elles des marmots au maillot?»

Jehan rompit la glace encore une fois. «Eh bien, oui! j’ai besoin d’argent pour aller voir ce soir Isabeau la Thierrye au Val-d’Amour!

— Misérable impur! s’écria le prêtre.

— “Αναγνεία, dit Jehan.

Cette citation, que l’écolier empruntait, peut-être avec malice, à la muraille de la cellule, fit sur le prêtre un effet singulier. Il se mordit les lèvres, et sa colère s’éteignit dans la rougeur.

«Allez-vous-en, dit-il alors à Jehan. J’attends quelqu’un.»

L’écolier tenta encore un effort.

«Frère Claude, donnez-moi au moins un petit parisis pour manger.

— Où en êtes-vous des décrétales de Gratien? demanda dom Claude.

— J’ai perdu mes cahiers.

— Où en êtes-vous des humanités latines?

— On m’a volé mon exemplaire d’Horatius.

— Où en êtes-vous d’Aristoteles?

— Ma foi! frère, quel est donc ce père de l’église qui dit que les erreurs des hérétiques ont de tout temps eu pour repaire les broussailles de la métaphysique d’Aristoteles? Foin d’Aristoteles! je ne veux pas déchirer ma religion à sa métaphysique.

— Jeune homme, reprit l’archidiacre, il y avait à la dernière entrée du roi un gentilhomme appelé Philippe de Comines, qui portait brodée sur la houssure de son cheval sa devise, que je vous conseille de méditer: *Qui non laborat non manducet*.»

L’écolier resta un moment silencieux, le doigt à l’oreille, l’œil fixé à terre, et la mine fâchée. Tout à coup il se retourna vers Claude avec la vive prestesse d’un hoche-queue.

«Ainsi, bon frère, vous me refusez un sou parisis pour acheter une croûte chez un talmellier?

— *Qui non laborat non manducet.*

À cette réponse de l’inflexible archidiacre, Jehan cacha sa tête dans ses mains, comme une femme qui sanglote, et s’écria avec une expression de désespoir: Ὀτοτοτοτοτοῖ!

«Qu’est-ce que cela veut dire, monsieur? demanda Claude surpris de cette incartade.

— Eh bien quoi! dit l’écolier, et il relevait sur Claude des yeux effrontés dans lesquels il venait d’enfoncer ses poings pour leur donner la rougeur des larmes, c’est du grec! c’est un anapeste d’Eschyles qui exprime parfaitement la douleur.»

Et ici, il partit d’un éclat de rire si bouffon et si violent qu’il en fit sourire l’archidiacre. C’était la faute de Claude en effet! pourquoi avait-il tant gâté cet enfant?

«Oh! bon frère Claude, reprit Jehan enhardi par ce sourire, voyez mes brodequins percés. Y a-t-il cothurne plus tragique au monde que des bottines dont la semelle tire la langue?»

L’archidiacre était promptement revenu à sa sévérité première. «Je vous enverrai des bottines neuves. Mais point d’argent.

— Rien qu’un pauvre petit parisis, frère, poursuivit le suppliant Jehan. J’apprendrai Gratien par cœur, je croirai bien en Dieu, je serai un véritable Pythagoras de science et de vertu. Mais un petit parisis, par grâce! Voulez-vous que la famine me morde avec sa gueule qui est là, béante, devant moi, plus noire, plus puante, plus profonde qu’un tartare ou que le nez d’un moine?»

Dom Claude hocha son chef ridé. «*Qui non laborat...*»

Jehan ne le laissa pas achever.

«Eh bien, cria-t-il, au diable! Vive la joie! Je m’entavernerai, je me battrai, je casserai les pots et j’irai voir les filles!»

Et sur ce, il jeta son bonnet au mur et fit claquer ses doigts comme des castagnettes.

L’archidiacre le regarda d’un air sombre.

«Jehan, vous n’avez point d’âme.

— En ce cas, selon Epicurius, je manque d’un je ne sais quoi fait de quelque chose qui n’a pas de nom.

— Jehan, il faut songer sérieusement à vous corriger.

— Ah çà, cria l’écolier en regardant tour à tour son frère et les alambics du fourneau, tout est donc cornu ici, les idées et les bouteilles!

— Jehan, vous êtes sur une pente bien glissante. Savez-vous où vous allez?

— Au cabaret, dit Jehan.

— Le cabaret mène au pilori.

— C’est une lanterne comme une autre, et c’est peut-être avec celle-là que Diogénès eût trouvé son homme.

— Le pilori mène à la potence.

— La potence est une balance qui a un homme à un bout et toute la terre à l’autre. Il est beau d’être l’homme.

— La potence mène à l’enfer.

— C’est un gros feu.

— Jehan, Jehan, la fin sera mauvaise.

— Le commencement aura été bon.»

En ce moment le bruit d’un pas se fit entendre dans l’escalier.

«Silence! dit l’archidiacre en mettant un doigt sur sa bouche, voici maître Jacques. Écoutez, Jehan, ajouta-t-il à voix basse, gardez-vous de parler jamais de ce que vous aurez vu et entendu ici. Cachez-vous vite sous ce fourneau, et ne soufflez pas.»

L’écolier se blottit sous le fourneau. Là, il lui vint une idée féconde.

«À propos, frère Claude, un florin pour que je ne souffle pas.

— Silence! je vous le promets.

— Il faut me le donner.

— Prends donc!» dit l’archidiacre en lui jetant avec colère son escarcelle.

Jehan se renfonça sous le fourneau, et la porte s’ouvrit.

V

LES DEUX HOMMES VÊTUS DE NOIR

Le personnage qui entra avait une robe noire et la mine sombre. Ce qui frappa au premier coup d'œil notre ami Jehan (qui, comme on s'en doute bien, s'était arrangé dans son coin de manière à pouvoir tout voir et tout entendre selon son bon plaisir), c'était la parfaite tristesse du vêtement et du visage de ce nouveau venu. Il y avait pourtant quelque douceur répandue sur cette figure, mais une douceur de chat ou de juge, une douceur doucereuse. Il était fort gris, ridé, touchait aux soixante ans, clignait des yeux, avait le sourcil blanc, la lèvre pendante et de grosses mains. Quand Jehan vit que ce n'était que cela, c'est-à-dire sans doute un médecin ou un magistrat, et que cet homme avait le nez très loin de la bouche, signe de bêtise, il se rencoigna dans son trou, désespéré d'avoir à passer un temps indéfini en si gênante posture et en si mauvaise compagnie.

L'archidiacre cependant ne s'était pas même levé pour ce personnage. Il lui avait fait signe de s'asseoir sur un escabeau voisin de la porte, et, après quelques moments d'un silence qui semblait continuer une méditation antérieure, il lui avait dit avec quelque protection: «Bonjour, maître Jacques.

— Salut, maître!» avait répondu l'homme noir.

Il y avait dans les deux manières dont fut prononcé d'une part ce *maître Jacques*, de l'autre ce *maître* par excellence, la différence du monseigneur au monsieur, du *domine* au *domne*. C'était évidemment l'abord du docteur et du disciple.

«Eh bien, reprit l'archidiacre après un nouveau silence que maître Jacques se garda bien de troubler, réussissez-vous?

— Hélas, mon maître, dit l'autre avec un sourire triste, je souffle toujours. De la cendre tant que j'en veux. Mais pas une étincelle d'or.»

Dom Claude fit un geste d'impatience. «Je ne vous parle pas de cela, maître Jacques Charmolue, mais du procès de votre magicien. N'est-ce pas Marc Cenaine que vous le nommez, le sommelier de la Cour des comptes? Avoue-t-il sa magie? La question vous a-t-elle réussi?

— Hélas non, répondit maître Jacques, toujours avec son sourire triste. Nous n'avons pas cette consolation. Cet homme est un caillou. Nous le ferons bouillir au Marché-aux-Pourceaux, avant qu'il ait rien dit. Cependant nous n'épargnons rien pour arriver à la vérité. Il est déjà tout disloqué. Nous y mettons toutes les herbes de la Saint-Jean, comme dit le vieux comique Plautus,

Advorsum stimulos, laminas, crucesque, compedesque.
Nervos, catenas, carceres, numellas, pedicas, boias.

Rien n'y fait. Cet homme est terrible. J'y perds mon latin.

— Vous n'avez rien trouvé de nouveau dans sa maison?

— Si fait, dit maître Jacques en fouillant dans son escarcelle, ce parchemin. Il y a des mots dessus que nous ne comprenons pas. Monsieur l'avocat criminel Philippe Lheulier sait pourtant un peu d'hébreu qu'il a appris dans l'affaire des juifs de la rue Kantersten à Bruxelles.»

En parlant ainsi, maître Jacques déroulait un parchemin.

«Donnez», dit l'archidiacre. Et jetant les yeux sur cette pancarte: «Pure magie, maître Jacques! s'écria-t-il. *Emen-hétan*! c'est le cri des stryges quand elles arrivent au sabbat. *Per ipsum, et cum ipso, et in ipso!* c'est le commandement qui recadenasse le diable en enfer. *Hax, pax, max*! ceci est de la médecine. Une formule contre la morsure des chiens enragés. Maître Jacques! vous êtes procureur du roi en cour d'église, ce parchemin est abominable.

— Nous remettrons l'homme à la question. Voici encore, ajouta maître Jacques en fouillant de nouveau dans sa sacoche, ce que nous avons trouvé chez Marc Cenaine.»

C'était un vase de la famille de ceux qui couvraient le fourneau de dom Claude. «Ah! dit l'archidiacre, un creuset d'alchimie.

— Je vous avouerai, reprit maître Jacques avec son sourire timide et gauche, que je l'ai essayé sur le fourneau, mais je n'ai pas mieux réussi qu'avec le mien.»

L'archidiacre se mit à examiner le vase. «Qu'a-t-il gravé sur son creuset? *Och! och!* le mot qui chasse les puces! Ce Marc Cenaine est ignorant! Je le crois bien, que vous ne ferez pas d'or avec ceci! c'est bon à mettre dans votre alcôve l'été, et voilà tout!

— Puisque nous en sommes aux erreurs, dit le procureur du roi, je viens d'étudier le portail d'en bas avant de monter; votre révérence est-elle bien sûre que l'ouverture de l'ouvrage de physique y est figurée du côté de l'Hôtel-Dieu, et que, dans les sept figures nues qui sont aux pieds de Notre-Dame, celle qui a des ailes aux talons est Mercurius?

— Oui, répondit le prêtre. C’est Augustin Nypho qui l’écrit, ce docteur italien qui avait un démon barbu lequel lui apprenait toute chose. Au reste, nous allons descendre, et je vous expliquerai cela sur le texte.

— Merci, mon maître, dit Charmolue en s’inclinant jusqu’à terre. — À propos, j’oubliais! quand vous plaît-il que je fasse appréhender la petite magicienne?

— Quelle magicienne?

— Cette bohémienne que vous savez bien, qui vient tous les jours baller sur le parvis malgré la défense de l’official! Elle a une chèvre possédée qui a des cornes du diable, qui lit, qui écrit, qui sait la mathématique comme Picatrix, et qui suffirait à faire pendre toute la Bohême. Le procès est tout prêt. Il sera bientôt fait, allez! Une jolie créature, sur mon âme, que cette danseuse! les plus beaux yeux noirs! deux escarboucles d’Égypte. Quand commençons-nous?»

L’archidiacre était excessivement pâle.

«Je vous dirai cela», balbutia-t-il d’une voix à peine articulée. Puis il reprit avec effort: «Occupez-vous de Marc Cenaine.

— Soyez tranquille, dit en souriant Charmolue. Je vais le faire reboucler sur le lit de cuir en rentrant. Mais c’est un diable d’homme. Il fatigue Pierrat Torterue lui-même, qui a les mains plus grosses que moi. Comme dit ce bon Plautus,

Nudus vinctus, centum pondo, es quando pendes per pedes.

La question au treuil! c’est ce que nous avons de mieux. Il y passera.»

Dom Claude semblait plongé dans une sombre distraction. Il se tourna vers Charmolue.

«Maître Pierrat... maître Jacques, veux-je dire, occupez-vous de Marc Cenaine!

— Oui, oui, dom Claude. Pauvre homme! il aura souffert comme Mummol. Quelle idée aussi, d’aller au sabbat! un sommelier de la Cour des comptes, qui devrait connaître le texte de Charlemagne, *Stryga vel masca*! — Quant à la petite, — Smelarda, comme ils l’appellent, — j’attendrai vos ordres. — Ah! en passant sous le portail, vous m’expliquerez aussi ce que veut dire le jardinier de plate peinture qu’on voit en entrant dans l’église. N’est-ce pas le Semeur? — Hé! maître, à quoi pensez-vous donc?»

Dom Claude, abîmé en lui-même, ne l’écoutait plus. Charmolue, en suivant la direction de son regard, vit qu’il s’était fixé machinalement à la grande toile d’araignée qui tapissait la lucarne. En ce moment, une mouche étourdie qui cherchait le soleil de mars vint se jeter à travers ce filet et s'y englua. À l'ébranlement de sa toile, l'énorme araignée fit un mouvement brusque hors de sa cellule centrale, puis d'un bond elle se précipita sur la mouche, qu'elle plia en deux avec ses antennes de devant, tandis que sa trompe hideuse lui fouillait la tête. «Pauvre mouche!» dit le procureur du roi en cour d'église, et il leva la main pour la sauver. L'archidiacre, comme réveillé en sursaut, lui retint le bras avec une violence convulsive.

«Maître Jacques, cria-t-il, laissez faire la fatalité!»

Le procureur se retourna effaré. Il lui semblait qu'une pince de fer lui avait pris le bras. L'œil du prêtre était fixe, hagard, flamboyant, et restait attaché au petit groupe horrible de la mouche et de l'araignée.

«Oh! oui, continua le prêtre avec une voix qu'on eût dit venir de ses entrailles, voilà un symbole de tout. Elle vole, elle est joyeuse, elle vient de naître; elle cherche le printemps, le grand air, la liberté; oh! oui, mais qu'elle se heurte à la rosace fatale, l'araignée en sort, l'araignée hideuse! Pauvre danseuse! pauvre mouche prédestinée! Maître Jacques, laissez faire! c'est la fatalité! — Hélas! Claude, tu es l'araignée. Claude, tu es la mouche aussi! Tu volais à la science, à la lumière, au soleil, tu n'avais souci que d'arriver au grand air, au grand jour de la vérité éternelle; mais, en te précipitant vers la lucarne éblouissante qui donne sur l'autre monde, sur le monde de la clarté, de l'intelligence et de la science, mouche aveugle, docteur insensé, tu n'as pas vu cette subtile toile d'araignée tendue par le destin entre la lumière et toi, tu t'y es jeté à corps perdu, misérable fou, et maintenant tu te débats, la tête brisée et les ailes arrachées, entre les antennes de fer de la fatalité! — Maître Jacques! maître Jacques! laissez faire l'araignée.

— Je vous assure, dit Charmolue qui le regardait sans comprendre, que je n'y toucherai pas. Mais lâchez-moi le bras, maître, de grâce! vous avez une main de tenaille.»

L'archidiacre ne l'entendait pas. «Oh! insensé! reprit-il sans quitter la lucarne des yeux. Et quand tu l'aurais pu rompre, cette toile redoutable, avec tes ailes de moucheron, tu crois que tu aurais pu atteindre à la lumière! Hélas! cette vitre qui est plus loin, cet obstacle transparent, cette muraille de cristal plus dur que l'airain qui sépare toutes les philosophies de la vérité, comment l'aurais-tu franchie? Ô vanité de la science! que de sages viennent de bien loin en voletant s'y briser le front! que de systèmes pêle-mêle se heurtent en bourdonnant à cette vitre éternelle!»

Il se tut. Ces dernières idées, qui l’avaient insensiblement ramené de lui-même à la science, paraissaient l’avoir calmé. Jacques Charmolue le fit tout à fait revenir au sentiment de la réalité, en lui adressant cette question: «Or çà, mon maître, quand viendrez-vous m’aider à faire de l’or? Il me tarde de réussir.»

L’archidiacre hocha la tête avec un sourire amer. «Maître Jacques, lisez Michel Psellus, *Dialogus de energia et operatione dæmonum*. Ce que nous faisons n’est pas tout à fait innocent.

— Plus bas, maître! je m’en doute, dit Charmolue. Mais il faut bien faire un peu d’hermétique quand on n’est que procureur du roi en cour d’église, à trente écus tournois par an. Seulement parlons bas.»

En ce moment un bruit de mâchoire et de mastication qui partait de dessous le fourneau vint frapper l’oreille inquiète de Charmolue.

«Qu’est cela?» demanda-t-il.

C’était l’écolier qui, fort gêné et fort ennuyé dans sa cachette, était parvenu à y découvrir une vieille croûte et un triangle de fromage moisi, et s’était mis à manger le tout sans façon, en guise de consolation et de déjeuner. Comme il avait grand-faim, il faisait grand bruit, et il accentuait fortement chaque bouchée, ce qui avait donné l’éveil et l’alarme au procureur.

«C’est un mien chat, dit vivement l’archidiacre, qui se régale là-dessous de quelque souris.»

Cette explication satisfit Charmolue.

«En effet, maître, répondit-il avec un sourire respectueux, tous les grands philosophes ont eu leur bête familière. Vous savez ce que dit Servius: *Nullus enim locus sine genio est*.»

Cependant dom Claude, qui craignait quelque nouvelle algarade de Jehan, rappela à son digne disciple qu’ils avaient quelques figures du portail à étudier ensemble, et tous deux sortirent de la cellule, au grand *ouf*! de l’écolier, qui commençait à craindre sérieusement que son genou ne prît l’empreinte de son menton.

VI

EFFET QUE PEUVENT PRODUIRE SEPT JURONS EN PLEIN AIR

«*Te Deum laudamus*! s'écria maître Jehan en sortant de son trou, voilà les deux chats-huants partis. Och! och! Hax! pax! max! les puces! les chiens enragés! le diable! j'en ai assez de leur conversation! La tête me bourdonne comme un clocher. Du fromage moisi par-dessus le marché! Sus! descendons, prenons l'escarcelle du grand frère, et convertissons toutes ces monnaies en bouteilles!»

Il jeta un coup d'œil de tendresse et d'admiration dans l'intérieur de la précieuse escarcelle, rajusta sa toilette, frotta ses bottines, épousseta ses pauvres manches-mahoîtres toutes grises de cendre, siffla un air, pirouetta une gambade, examina s'il ne restait pas quelque chose à prendre dans la cellule, grapilla çà et là sur le fourneau quelque amulette de verroterie bonne à donner en guise de bijou à Isabeau la Thierrye, enfin ouvrit la porte, que son frère avait laissée ouverte par une dernière indulgence, et qu'il laissa ouverte à son tour par une dernière malice, et descendit l'escalier circulaire en sautillant comme un oiseau.

Au milieu des ténèbres de la vis il coudoya quelque chose qui se rangea en grognant, il présuma que c'était Quasimodo, et cela lui parut si drôle qu'il descendit le reste de l'escalier en se tenant les côtes de rire. En débouchant sur la place, il riait encore.

Il frappa du pied quand il se retrouva à terre. «Oh! dit-il, bon et honorable pavé de Paris! maudit escalier à essouffler les anges de l'échelle Jacob! À quoi pensais-je de m'aller fourrer dans cette vrille de pierre qui perce le ciel, le tout pour manger du fromage barbu, et pour voir les clochers de Paris par une lucarne!»

Il fit quelques pas, et aperçut les deux chats-huants, c'est-à-dire dom Claude et maître Jacques Charmolue, en contemplation devant une sculpture du portail. Il s'approcha d'eux sur la pointe des pieds, et entendit l'archidiacre qui disait tout bas à Charmolue: «C'est Guillaume de Paris qui a fait graver un Job sur cette pierre couleur lapis-lazuli, dorée par les bords. Job figure sur la pierre philosophale, qui doit être éprouvée et martyrisée aussi pour devenir parfaite, comme dit Raymond Lulle: *Sub conservatione formæ specificæ salva anima*.»

«Cela m’est bien égal, dit Jehan, c’est moi qui ai la bourse.»

En ce moment il entendit une voix forte et sonore articuler derrière lui une série formidable de jurons. «Sang-Dieu! ventre-Dieu! bédieu! corps de Dieu! nombril de Belzébuth! nom d’un pape! corne et tonnerre!

— Sur mon âme, s’écria Jehan, ce ne peut-être que mon ami le capitaine Phoebus!»

Ce nom de Phoebus arriva aux oreilles de l’archidiacre au moment où il expliquait au procureur du roi le dragon qui cache sa queue dans un bain d’où sort de la fumée et une tête de roi. Dom Claude tressaillit, s’interrompit, à la grande stupeur de Charmolue, se retourna, et vit son frère Jehan qui abordait un grand officier à la porte du logis Gondelaurier.

C’était en effet monsieur le capitaine Phoebus de Châteaupers. Il était adossé à l’angle de la maison de sa fiancée, et il jurait comme un païen.

«Ma foi, capitaine Phoebus, dit Jehan en lui prenant la main, vous sacrez avec une verve admirable.

— Corne et tonnerre! répondit le capitaine.

— Corne et tonnerre vous-même! répliqua l’écolier. Or çà, gentil capitaine, d’où vous vient ce débordement de belles paroles?

— Pardon, bon camarade Jehan, s’écria Phoebus en lui secouant la main, cheval lancé ne s’arrête pas court. Or, je jurais au grand galop. Je viens de chez ces bégueules, et quand j’en sors, j’ai toujours la gorge pleine de jurements; il faut que je les crache, ou j’étoufferais, ventre et tonnerre!

— Voulez-vous venir boire?» demanda l’écolier.

Cette proposition calma le capitaine.

«Je veux bien, mais je n’ai pas d’argent.

— J’en ai, moi!

— Bah! voyons?»

Jehan étala l’escarcelle aux yeux du capitaine, avec majesté et simplicité. Cependant l’archidiacre, qui avait laissé là Charmolue ébahi, était venu jusqu’à eux et s’était arrêté à quelques pas, les observant tous deux sans qu’ils prissent garde à lui, tant la contemplation de l’escarcelle les absorbait.

Phoebus s’écria: «Une bourse dans votre poche, Jehan, c’est la lune dans un seau d’eau. On l’y voit, mais elle n’y est pas. Il n’y en a que l’ombre. Pardieu! gageons que ce sont des cailloux!»

Jehan répondit froidement: «Voilà les cailloux dont je cailloute mon gousset.»

Et, sans ajouter une parole, il vida l’escarcelle sur une borne voisine, de l’air d’un Romain sauvant la patrie.

«Vrai Dieu! grommela Phoebus, des targes, des grands-blancs, des petits-blancs, des mailles d’un tournois les deux, des deniers parisis, de vrais liards-à-l’aigle! C’est éblouissant!»

Jehan demeurait digne et impassible. Quelques liards avaient roulé dans la boue; le capitaine, dans son enthousiasme, se baissa pour les ramasser. Jehan le retint:

«Fi, capitaine Phoebus de Châteaupers!»

Phoebus compta la monnaie et se tournant avec solennité vers Jehan: «Savez-vous, Jehan, qu’il y a vingt-trois sous parisis! Qui avez-vous donc dévalisé cette nuit, rue Coupe-Gueule?»

Jehan rejeta en arrière sa tête blonde et bouclée, et dit en fermant à demi des yeux dédaigneux: «On a un frère archidiacre et imbécile.

— Corne de Dieu! s’écria Phoebus, le digne homme!

— Allons boire, dit Jehan.

— Où irons-nous? dit Phoebus. *À La Pomme d’Ève?*

— Non, capitaine. Allons à *La Vieille Science*. Une vieille qui scie une anse. C’est un rébus. J’aime cela.

— Foin des rébus, Jehan! le vin est meilleur à *La Pomme d’Ève*. Et puis, à côté de la porte il y a une vigne au soleil qui m’égaie quand je bois.

— Eh bien! va pour Ève et sa pomme», dit l’écolier; et prenant le bras de Phoebus: «À propos, mon cher capitaine, vous avez dit tout à l’heure la rue Coupe-Gueule. C’est fort mal parler. On n’est plus si barbare à présent. On dit la rue Coupe-Gorge.»

Les deux amis se mirent en route vers *La Pomme d’Ève*. Il est inutile de dire qu’ils avaient d’abord ramassé l’argent et que l’archidiacre les suivait.

L’archidiacre les suivait, sombre et hagard. Était-ce là le Phoebus dont le nom maudit, depuis son entrevue avec Gringoire, se mêlait à toutes ses pensées? il ne le savait, mais, enfin, c’était un Phoebus, et ce nom magique suffisait pour que l’archidiacre suivît à pas de loup les deux insouciants compagnons, écoutant leurs paroles et observant leurs moindres gestes avec une anxiété attentive. Du reste, rien de plus facile que d’entendre tout ce qu’ils disaient, tant ils parlaient haut, fort peu gênés de mettre les passants de moitié dans leurs confidences. Ils parlaient duels, filles, cruches, folies.

Au détour d’une rue, le bruit d’un tambour de basque leur vint d’un carrefour voisin. Dom Claude entendit l’officier qui disait à l’écolier:

«Tonnerre! doublons le pas.

— Pourquoi, Phoebus?

— J’ai peur que la bohémienne ne me voie.

— Quelle bohémienne?

— La petite qui a une chèvre.

— La Smeralda?

— Justement, Jehan. J’oublie toujours son diable de nom. Dépêchons, elle me reconnaîtrait. Je ne veux pas que cette fille m’accoste dans la rue.

— Est-ce que vous la connaissez, Phoebus?»

Ici l’archidiacre vit Phoebus ricaner, se pencher à l’oreille de Jehan, et lui dire quelques mots tout bas. Puis Phoebus éclata de rire et secoua la tête d’un air triomphant.

«En vérité? dit Jehan.

— Sur mon âme! dit Phoebus.

— Ce soir?

— Ce soir.

— Êtes-vous sûr qu’elle viendra?

— Mais êtes-vous fou, Jehan? est-ce qu’on doute de ces choses-là?

— Capitaine Phoebus, vous êtes un heureux gendarme!»

L’archidiacre entendit toute cette conversation. Ses dents claquèrent. Un frisson, visible aux yeux, parcourut tout son corps. Il s’arrêta un moment, s’appuya à une borne comme un homme ivre, puis il reprit la piste des deux joyeux drôles.

Au moment où il les rejoignit, ils avaient changé de conversation. Il les entendit chanter à tue-tête le vieux refrain:

Les enfants des Petits-Carreaux
Se font pendre comme des veaux.

VII

LE MOINE BOURRU

L’illustre cabaret de *La Pomme d’Ève* était situé dans l’Université, au coin de la rue de la Rondelle et de la rue du Bâtonnier. C’était une salle au rez-de-chaussée, assez vaste et fort basse, avec une voûte dont la retombée centrale s’appuyait sur un gros pilier de bois peint en jaune; des tables partout, de luisants brocs d’étain accrochés au mur, toujours force buveurs, des filles à foison, un vitrage sur la rue, une vigne à la porte, et au-dessus de cette porte une criarde planche de tôle, enluminée d’une pomme et d’une femme, rouillée par la pluie et tournant au vent sur une broche de fer. Cette façon de girouette qui regardait le pavé était l’enseigne.

La nuit tombait. Le carrefour était noir. Le cabaret plein de chandelles flamboyait de loin comme une forge dans l’ombre. On entendait le bruit des verres, des ripailles, des jurements, des querelles qui s’échappait par les carreaux cassés. À travers la brume que la chaleur de la salle répandait sur la devanture vitrée, on voyait fourmiller cent figures confuses, et de temps en temps un éclat de rire sonore s’en détachait. Les passants qui allaient à leurs affaires longeaient sans y jeter les yeux cette vitre tumultueuse. Seulement, par intervalles, quelque petit garçon en guenilles se haussait sur la pointe des pieds jusqu’à l’appui de la devanture et jetait dans le cabaret la vieille huée goguenarde dont on poursuivait alors les ivrognes: «Aux Houls, saouls, saouls, saouls!»

Un homme cependant se promenait imperturbablement devant la bruyante taverne, y regardant sans cesse, et ne s’en écartant pas plus qu’un piquier de sa guérite. Il avait un manteau jusqu’au nez. Ce manteau, il venait de l’acheter au fripier qui avoisinait *La Pomme d’Ève*, sans doute pour se garantir du froid des soirées de mars, peut-être pour cacher son costume. De temps en temps il s’arrêtait devant le vitrage trouble à mailles de plomb, il écoutait, regardait, et frappait du pied.

Enfin la porte du cabaret s’ouvrit. C’est ce qu’il paraissait attendre. Deux buveurs en sortirent. Le rayon de lumière qui s’échappa de la porte empourpra un moment leurs joviales figures. L’homme au manteau s’alla mettre en observation sous un porche de l’autre côté de la rue.

«Corne et tonnerre! dit l’un des deux buveurs. Sept heures vont toquer. C’est l’heure de mon rendez-vous.

— Je vous dis, reprenait son compagnon avec une langue épaisse, que je ne demeure pas rue des Mauvaises-Paroles, *indignus qui inter mala verba habitat*. J’ai logis rue Jean-Pain-Mollet, *in vico Johannis-Pain-Mollet*. — Vous êtes plus cornu qu’un unicorne, si vous dites le contraire. Chacun sait que qui monte une fois sur un ours n’a jamais peur, mais vous avez le nez tourné à la friandise, comme Saint-Jacques de l’Hôpital.

— Jehan, mon ami, vous êtes ivre», disait l’autre.

L’autre répondit en chancelant: «Cela vous plaît à dire, Phoebus, mais il est prouvé que Platon avait le profil d’un chien de chasse.»

Le lecteur a sans doute déjà reconnu nos deux braves amis, le capitaine et l’écolier. Il paraît que l’homme qui les guettait dans l’ombre les avait reconnus aussi, car il suivait à pas lents tous les zigzags que l’écolier faisait faire au capitaine, lequel, buveur plus aguerri, avait conservé tout son sang-froid. En les écoutant attentivement, l’homme au manteau put saisir dans son entier l’intéressante conversation que voici:

«Corbacque! tâchez donc de marcher droit, monsieur le bachelier. Vous savez qu’il faut que je vous quitte. Voilà sept heures. J’ai rendez-vous avec une femme.

— Laissez-moi donc, vous! Je vois des étoiles et des lances de feu. Vous êtes comme le château de Dampmartin qui crève de rire.

— Par les verrues de ma grand-mère, Jehan, c’est déraisonner avec trop d’acharnement. — À propos, Jehan, est-ce qu’il ne vous reste plus d’argent?

— Monsieur le recteur, il n’y a pas de faute, la petite boucherie, *parva boucheria*.

— Jehan, mon ami Jehan! vous savez que j’ai donné rendez-vous à cette petite au bout du pont Saint-Michel, que je ne puis la mener que chez la Falourdel, la vilotière du pont, et qu’il faudra payer la chambre. La vieille ribaude à moustaches blanches ne me fera pas crédit. Jehan! de grâce! est-ce que nous avons bu toute l’escarcelle du curé? est-ce qu’il ne vous reste plus un parisis?

— La conscience d’avoir bien dépensé les autres heures est un juste et savoureux condiment de table.

— Ventre et boyaux! trêve aux billevesées! Dites-moi, Jehan du diable, vous reste-t-il quelque monnaie? Donnez, bédieu! ou je vais vous fouiller, fussiez-vous lépreux comme Job et galeux comme César!

— Monsieur, la rue Galiache est une rue qui a un bout rue de la Verrerie, et l’autre rue de la Tixeranderie.

— Eh bien oui, mon bon ami Jehan, mon pauvre camarade; la rue Galiache, c’est bien, c’est très bien. Mais, au nom du ciel, revenez à vous. Il ne me faut qu’un sou parisis, et c’est pour sept heures.

— Silence à la ronde, et attention au refrain:

Quand les rats mangeront les cas.
Le loi sera seigneur d’Arras;
Quand la mer, qui est grande et lée,
Sera à la Saint-Jean gelée,
On verra, par-dessus la glace,
Sortir ceux d’Arras de leur place.

— Eh bien, écolier de l’Antechrist, puisses-tu être étranglé avec les tripes de ta mère!» s’écria Phoebus, et il poussa rudement l’écolier ivre, lequel glissa contre le mur et tomba mollement sur le pavé de Philippe-Auguste. Par un reste de cette pitié fraternelle qui n’abandonne jamais le cœur d’un buveur, Phoebus roula Jehan avec le pied sur un de ces oreillers du pauvre que la providence tient prêts au coin de toutes les bornes de Paris, et que les riches flétrissent dédaigneusement du nom de *tas d’ordures*. Le capitaine arrangea la tête de Jehan sur un plan incliné de trognons de choux, et à l’instant même l’écolier se mit à ronfler avec une basse-taille magnifique. Cependant toute rancune n’était pas éteinte au cœur du capitaine. «Tant pis si la charrette du diable te ramasse en passant!» dit-il au pauvre clerc endormi, et il s’éloigna.

L’homme au manteau, qui n’avait cessé de le suivre, s’arrêta un moment devant l’écolier gisant, comme si une indécision l’agitait; puis, poussant un profond soupir, il s’éloigna aussi à la suite du capitaine.

Nous laisserons, comme eux, Jehan dormir sous le regard bienveillant de la belle étoile, et nous les suivrons aussi, s’il plaît au lecteur.

En débouchant dans la rue Saint-André-des-Arcs, le capitaine Phoebus s’aperçut que quelqu’un le suivait. Il vit, en détournant par hasard les yeux, une espèce d’ombre qui rampait derrière lui le long des murs. Il s’arrêta, elle s’arrêta. Il se remit en marche, l’ombre se remit en marche. Cela ne l’inquiéta que fort médiocrement. «Ah bah! se dit-il en lui-même, je n’ai pas le sou.»

Devant la façade du collège d’Autun il fit halte. C’est à ce collège qu’il avait ébauché ce qu’il appelait ses études, et, par une habitude d’écolier taquin qui lui était restée, il ne passait jamais devant la façade sans faire subir à la statut du cardinal Pierre Bertrand, sculptée à droite du portail, l’espèce d’affront dont se plaint si amèrement Priape dans la satire d’Horace *Olim truncus eram ficulnus*. Il y avait mis tant d’acharnement que l’inscription *Eduensis episcopus* en était presque effacée. Il s’arrêta donc devant la statue comme à son ordinaire. La rue était tout à fait déserte. Au moment où il renouait nonchalamment ses aiguillettes, le nez au vent, il vit l’ombre qui s’approchait de lui à pas lents, si lents qu’il eut tout le temps d’observer que cette ombre avait un manteau et un chapeau. Arrivée près de lui, elle s’arrêta et demeura plus immobile que la statue du cardinal Bertrand. Cependant elle attachait sur Phoebus deux yeux fixes pleins de cette lumière vague qui sort la nuit de la prunelle d’un chat.

Le capitaine était brave et se serait fort peu soucié d’un larron l’estoc au poing. Mais cette statue qui marchait, cet homme pétrifié le glacèrent. Il courait alors par le monde je ne sais quelles histoires du moine bourru, rôdeur nocturne des rues de Paris, qui lui revinrent confusément en mémoire. Il resta quelques minutes stupéfait, et rompit enfin le silence, en s’efforçant de rire.

«Monsieur, si vous êtes un voleur, comme je l’espère, vous me faites l’effet d’un héron qui s’attaque à une coquille de noix. Je suis un fils de famille ruiné, mon cher. Adressez-vous à côté. Il y a dans la chapelle de ce collège du bois de la vraie croix, qui est dans de l’argenterie.»

La main de l’ombre sortit de dessous son manteau et s’abattit sur le bras de Phoebus avec la pesanteur d’une serre d’aigle. En même temps l’ombre parla: «Capitaine Phoebus de Châteaupers!

— Comment diable! dit Phoebus, vous savez mon nom!

— Je ne sais pas seulement votre nom, reprit l’homme au manteau avec sa voix de sépulcre. Vous avez un rendez-vous ce soir.

— Oui, répondit Phoebus stupéfait.

— À sept heures.

— Dans un quart d’heure.

— Chez la Falourdel.

— Précisément.

— La vilotière du pont Saint-Michel.

— De saint Michel archange, comme dit la patenôtre.

— Impie! grommela le spectre. — Avec une femme?

— *Confiteor*.

— Qui s’appelle...

— La Smeralda», dit Phoebus allègrement. Toute son insouciance lui était revenue par degrés.

À ce nom, la serre de l’ombre secoua avec fureur le bras de Phoebus.

«Capitaine Phoebus de Châteaupers, tu mens!»

Qui eût pu voir en ce moment le visage enflammé du capitaine, le bond qu’il fit en arrière, si violent qu’il se dégagea de la tenaille qui l’avait saisi, la fière mine dont il jeta sa main à la garde de son épée, et devant cette colère la morne immobilité de l’homme au manteau, qui eût vu cela eût été effrayé. C’était quelque chose du combat de don Juan et de la statue.

«Christ et Satan! cria le capitaine. Voilà une parole qui s’attaque rarement à l’oreille d’un Châteaupers! tu n’oserais pas la répéter.

— Tu mens!» dit l’ombre froidement.

Le capitaine grinça des dents. Moine bourru, fantôme, superstitions, il avait tout oublié en ce moment. Il ne voyait plus qu’un homme et qu’une insulte.

«Ah! voilà qui va bien!» balbutia-t-il d’une voix étouffée de rage. Il tira son épée, puis bégayant, car la colère fait trembler comme la peur: «Ici! tout de suite! sus! les épées! les épées! du sang sur ces pavés!»

Cependant l’autre ne bougeait. Quand il vit son adversaire en garde et prêt à se fendre: «Capitaine Phoebus, dit-il, et son accent vibrait avec amertume, vous oubliez votre rendez-vous.»

Les emportements des hommes comme Phoebus sont des soupes au lait dont une goutte d’eau froide affaisse l’ébullition. Cette simple parole fit baisser l’épée qui étincelait à la main du capitaine.

«Capitaine, poursuivit l’homme, demain, après-demain, dans un mois, dans dix ans, vous me retrouverez prêt à vous couper la gorge; mais allez d’abord à votre rendez-vous.

— En effet, dit Phoebus, comme s’il cherchait à capituler avec lui-même, ce sont deux choses charmantes à rencontrer en un rendez-vous qu’une épée et qu’une fille; mais je ne vois pas pourquoi je manquerais l’une pour l’autre, quand je puis avoir les deux.»

Il remit l’épée au fourreau.

«Allez à votre rendez-vous, reprit l’inconnu.

— Monsieur, répondit Phoebus avec quelque embarras, grand merci de votre courtoisie. Au fait il sera toujours temps demain de nous découper à taillades et boutonnières le pourpoint du père Adam. Je vous sais gré de me permettre de passer encore un quart d’heure agréable. J’espérais bien vous coucher dans le ruisseau et arriver encore à temps pour la belle, d’autant mieux qu’il est de bon air de faire attendre un peu les femmes en pareil cas. Mais vous m’avez l’air d’un gaillard, et il est plus sûr de remettre la partie à demain. Je vais donc à mon rendez-vous. C’est pour sept heures, comme vous savez.» Ici Phoebus se gratta l’oreille. «Ah! corne-Dieu! j’oubliais! je n’ai pas un sou pour acquitter le truage du galetas, et la vieille matrulle voudra être payée d’avance. Elle se défie de moi.

— Voici de quoi payer.»

Phoebus sentit la main froide de l’inconnu glisser dans la sienne une large pièce de monnaie. Il ne put s’empêcher de prendre cet argent et de serrer cette main.

«Vrai Dieu! s’écria-t-il, vous êtes un bon enfant!

— Une condition, dit l’homme. Prouvez-moi que j’ai eu tort et que vous disiez vrai. Cachez-moi dans quelque coin d’où je puisse voir si cette femme est vraiment celle dont vous avez dit le nom.

— Oh! répondit Phoebus, cela m’est bien égal. Nous prendrons la chambre à Sainte-Marthe. Vous pourrez voir à votre aise du chenil qui est à côté.

— Venez donc, reprit l’ombre.

— À votre service, dit le capitaine. Je ne sais si vous n’êtes pas messer Diabolus en propre personne. Mais soyons bons amis ce soir. Demain je vous paierai toutes mes dettes, de la bourse et de l’épée.»

Ils se remirent à marcher rapidement. Au bout de quelques minutes, le bruit de la rivière leur annonça qu’ils étaient sur le pont Saint-Michel, alors chargé de maisons. «Je vais d’abord vous introduire, dit Phoebus à son compagnon; j’irai ensuite chercher la belle qui doit m’attendre près du Petit-Châtelet.»

Le compagnon ne répondit rien. Depuis qu’ils marchaient côte à côte, il, n’avait dit mot. Phoebus s’arrêta devant une porte basse et heurta rudement. Une lumière parut aux fentes de la porte.

«Qui est là? cria une voix édentée.

— Corps-Dieu! tête-Dieu! ventre-Dieu!» répondit le capitaine.

La porte s’ouvrit sur-le-champ, et laissa voir aux arrivants une vieille femme et une vieille lampe qui tremblaient toutes deux. La vieille était pliée en deux, vêtue de guenilles, branlante du chef, percée à petits yeux, coiffée d’un torchon, ridée partout, aux mains, à la face, au cou; ses lèvres rentraient sous ses gencives, et elle avait tout autour de la bouche des pinceaux de poils blancs qui lui donnaient la mine embabouinée d'un chat.

L'intérieur du bouge n'était pas moins délabré qu'elle. C'étaient des murs de craie, des solives noires au plafond, une cheminée démantelée, des toiles d'araignée à tous les coins, au milieu un troupeau chancelant de tables et d'escabelles boiteuses, un enfant sale dans les cendres, et dans le fond un escalier ou plutôt une échelle de bois qui aboutissait à une trappe au plafond.

En pénétrant dans ce repaire, le mystérieux compagnon de Phoebus haussa son manteau jusqu'à ses yeux. Cependant le capitaine, tout en jurant comme un sarrasin, se hâta de *faire dans un écu reluire le soleil*, comme dit notre admirable Régnier.

«La chambre à Sainte-Marthe», dit-il.

La vieille le traita de monseigneur, et serra l'écu dans un tiroir. C'était la pièce que l'homme au manteau noir avait donnée à Phoebus. Pendant qu'elle tournait le dos, le petit garçon chevelu et déguenillé qui jouait dans les cendres s'approcha adroitement du tiroir, y prit l'écu, et mit à la place une feuille sèche qu'il avait arrachée d'un fagot.

La vieille fit signe aux deux gentilshommes, comme elle les nommait, de la suivre, et monta l'échelle devant eux. Parvenue à l'étage supérieur, elle posa sa lampe sur un coffre, et Phoebus, en habitué de la maison, ouvrit une porte qui donnait sur un bouge obscur. «Entrez là, mon cher», dit-il à son compagnon. L'homme au manteau obéit sans répondre une parole. La porte retomba sur lui. Il entendit Phoebus la refermer au verrou, et un moment après redescendre l'escalier avec la vieille. La lumière avait disparu.

VIII

UTILITÉ DES FENÊTRES QUI DONNENT SUR LA RIVIÈRE

Claude Frollo (car nous présumons que le lecteur, plus intelligent que Phoebus, n’a vu dans toute cette aventure d’autre moine bourru que l’archidiacre), Claude Frollo tâtonna quelques instants dans le réduit ténébreux où le capitaine l’avait verrouillé. C’était un de ces recoins comme les architectes en réservent quelquefois au point de jonction du toit et du mur d’appui. La coupe verticale de ce chenil, comme l’avait si bien nommé Phoebus, eût donné un triangle. Du reste il n’y avait ni fenêtre ni lucarne, et le plan incliné du toit empêchait qu’on s’y tînt debout. Claude s’accroupit donc dans la poussière et dans les plâtras qui s’écrasaient sous lui. Sa tête était brûlante. En furetant autour de lui avec ses mains il trouva à terre un morceau de vitre cassée qu’il appuya sur son front et dont la fraîcheur le soulagea un peu.

Que se passait-il en ce moment dans l’âme obscure de l’archidiacre? lui et Dieu seul l’ont pu savoir.

Selon quel ordre fatal disposait-il dans sa pensée la Esmeralda, Phoebus, Jacques Charmolue, son jeune frère si aimé abandonné par lui dans la boue, sa soutane d’archidiacre, sa réputation peut-être, traînée chez la Falourdel, toutes ces images, toutes ces aventures? Je ne pourrais le dire. Mais il est certain que ces idées formaient dans son esprit un groupe horrible.

Il attendait depuis un quart d’heure; il lui semblait avoir vieilli d’un siècle. Tout à coup il entendit craquer les ais de l’escalier de bois. Quelqu’un montait. La trappe se rouvrit, une lumière reparut. Il y avait à la porte vermoulue de son bouge une fente assez large, il y colla son visage. De cette façon il pouvait voir tout ce qui se passait dans la chambre voisine. La vieille à face de chat sortit d’abord de la trappe, sa lampe à la main, puis Phoebus retroussant sa moustache, puis une troisième personne, cette belle et gracieuse figure, la Esmeralda. Le prêtre la vit sortir de terre comme une éblouissante apparition. Claude trembla, un nuage se répandit sur ses yeux, ses artères battirent avec force, tout bruissait et tournait autour de lui. Il ne vit et n’entendit plus rien.

Quand il revint à lui, Phoebus et la Esmeralda étaient seuls, assis sur le coffre de bois à côté de la lampe qui faisait saillir aux yeux de l’archidiacre ces deux jeunes figures, et un misérable grabat au fond du galetas.

À côté du grabat il y avait une fenêtre dont le vitrail, défoncé comme une toile d'araignée sur laquelle la pluie a tombé, laissait voir à travers ses mailles rompues un coin du ciel et la lune couchée au loin sur un édredon de molles nuées.

La jeune fille était rouge, interdite, palpitante. Ses longs cils baissés ombrageaient ses joues de pourpre. L'officier, sur lequel elle n'osait lever les yeux, rayonnait. Machinalement, et avec un geste charmant de gaucherie, elle traçait du bout du doigt sur le banc des lignes incohérentes, et elle regardait son doigt. On ne voyait pas son pied, la petite chèvre était accroupie dessus.

Le capitaine était mis fort galamment; il avait au col et aux poignets des touffes de doreloterie: grande élégance d'alors.

Dom Claude ne parvint pas sans peine à entendre ce qu'ils se disaient, à travers le bourdonnement de son sang qui bouillait dans ses tempes.

(Chose assez banale qu'une causerie d'amoureux. C'est un *je vous aime* perpétuel. Phrase musicale fort nue et fort insipide pour les indifférents qui écoutent, quand elle n'est pas ornée de quelque *fioriture*. Mais Claude n'écoutait pas en indifférent.)

«Oh! disait la jeune fille sans lever les yeux, ne me méprisez pas, monseigneur Phoebus. Je sens que ce que je fais est mal.

— Vous mépriser, belle enfant! répondait l'officier d'un air de galanterie supérieure et distinguée, vous mépriser, tête-Dieu! et pourquoi?

— Pour vous avoir suivi.

— Sur ce propos, ma belle, nous ne nous entendons pas. Je ne devrais pas vous mépriser, mais vous haïr.»

La jeune fille le regarda avec effroi: «Me haïr! qu'ai-je donc fait?

— Pour vous être tant fait prier.

— Hélas! dit-elle... c'est que je manque à un vœu... Je ne retrouverai pas mes parents... l'amulette perdra sa vertu. — Mais qu'importe? qu'ai-je besoin de père et de mère à présent?»

En parlant ainsi, elle fixait sur le capitaine ses grands yeux noirs humides de joie et de tendresse.

«Du diable si je vous comprends!» s'écria Phoebus.

La Esmeralda resta un moment silencieuse, puis une larme sortit de ses yeux, un soupir de ses lèvres, et elle dit: «Oh! monseigneur, je vous aime.»

Il y avait autour de la jeune fille un tel parfum de chasteté, un tel charme de vertu que Phoebus ne se sentait pas complètement à l'aise auprès d'elle. Cependant cette parole l'enhardit. «Vous m'aimez!» dit-il avec transport, et il jeta son bras autour de la taille de l'égyptienne. Il n'attendait que cette occasion.

Le prêtre le vit, et essaya du bout du doigt la pointe d'un poignard qu'il tenait caché dans sa poitrine.

«Phoebus, poursuivit la bohémienne en détachant doucement de sa ceinture les mains tenaces du capitaine, vous êtes bon, vous êtes généreux, vous êtes beau. Vous m'avez sauvée, moi qui ne suis qu'une pauvre enfant perdue en Bohême. Il y a longtemps que je rêve d'un officier qui me sauve la vie. C'était de vous que je rêvais avant de vous connaître, mon Phoebus. Mon rêve avait une belle livrée comme vous, une grande mine, une épée. Vous vous appelez Phoebus, c'est un beau nom. J'aime votre nom, j'aime votre épée. Tirez donc votre épée, Phoebus, que je la voie.

— Enfant!» dit le capitaine, et il dégaina sa rapière en souriant.

L'égyptienne regarda la poignée, la lame, examina avec une curiosité adorable le chiffre de la garde, et baisa l'épée en lui disant: «Vous êtes l'épée d'un brave. J'aime mon capitaine.»

Phoebus profita encore de l'occasion pour déposer sur son beau cou ployé un baiser qui fit redresser la jeune fille écarlate comme une cerise. Le prêtre en grinça des dents dans ses ténèbres.

«Phoebus, reprit l'égyptienne, laissez-moi vous parler. Marchez donc un peu, que je vous voie tout grand et que j'entende sonner vos éperons. Comme vous êtes beau!»

Le capitaine se leva pour lui complaire, en la grondant avec un sourire de satisfaction: «Mais êtes-vous enfant! — À propos, charmante, m'avez-vous vu en hoqueton de cérémonie?

— Hélas! non, répondit-elle.

— C'est cela qui est beau!»

Phoebus vint se rasseoir près d'elle, mais beaucoup plus près qu'auparavant.

«Écoutez, ma chère...»

L'égyptienne lui donna quelques petits coups de sa jolie main sur la bouche avec un enfantillage plein de folie, de grâce et de gaieté. «Non, non, je ne vous écouterai pas. M'aimez-vous? Je veux que vous me disiez si vous m'aimez.

— Si je t’aime, ange de ma vie! s’écria le capitaine en s’agenouillant à demi. Mon corps, mon sang, mon âme, tout est à toi, tout est pour toi. Je t’aime, et n’ai jamais aimé que toi.»

Le capitaine avait tant de fois répété cette phrase, en mainte conjoncture pareille, qu’il la débita tout d’une haleine sans faire une seule faute de mémoire. À cette déclaration passionnée, l’égyptienne leva au sale plafond qui tenait lieu de ciel un regard plein d’un bonheur angélique. «Oh! murmura-t-elle, voilà le moment où l’on devrait mourir!»

Phoebus trouva «le moment» bon pour lui dérober un nouveau baiser qui alla torturer dans son coin le misérable archidiacre.

«Mourir! s’écria l’amoureux capitaine. Qu’est-ce que vous dites donc là, bel ange? C’est le cas de vivre, ou Jupiter n’est qu’un polisson! Mourir au commencement d’une si douce chose! corne-de-bœuf, quelle plaisanterie! — Ce n’est pas cela. — Écoutez, ma chère Similar... Esmenarda... Pardon, mais vous avez un nom si prodigieusement sarrazin que je ne puis m’en dépêtrer. C’est une broussaille qui m’arrête tout court.

— Mon Dieu, dit la pauvre fille, moi qui croyais ce nom joli pour sa singularité! Mais puisqu’il vous déplaît, je voudrais m’appeler Goton.

— Ah! ne pleurons pas pour si peu, ma gracieuse! c’est un nom auquel il faut s’accoutumer, voilà tout. Une fois que je le saurai par cœur, cela ira tout seul. — Écoutez donc, ma chère Similar, je vous adore à la passion. Je vous aime vraiment que c’est miraculeux. Je sais une petite qui en crève de rage...»

La jalouse fille l’interrompit: «Qui donc?

— Qu’est-ce que cela nous fait? dit Phoebus. M’aimez-vous?

— Oh! dit-elle.

— Eh bien! c’est tout. Vous verrez comme je vous aime aussi. Je veux que le grand diable Neptunus m’enfourche si je ne vous rends pas la plus heureuse créature du monde. Nous aurons une jolie petite logette quelque part. Je ferai parader mes archers sous vos fenêtres. Ils sont tous à cheval et font la nargue à ceux du capitaine Mignon. Il y a des voulgiers, des cranequiniers et des coulevriniers à main. Je vous conduirai aux grandes monstres des Parisiens à la grange de Rully. C’est très magnifique. Quatre-vingt mille têtes armées; trente mille harnois blancs, jaques ou brigandines; les soixante-sept bannières des métiers; les étendards du parlement, de la chambre des comptes, du trésor des généraux, des aides des monnaies; un arroi du diable enfin! Je vous mènerai voir les lions de l'Hôtel du Roi qui sont des bêtes fauves. Toutes les femmes aiment cela.»

Depuis quelques instants la jeune fille, absorbée dans ses charmantes pensées, rêvait au son de sa voix sans écouter le sens de ses paroles.

«Oh! vous serez heureuse! continua le capitaine, et en même temps il déboucla doucement la ceinture de l'égyptienne.

— Que faites-vous donc? dit-elle vivement. Cette *voie de fait* l'avait arrachée à sa rêverie.

— Rien, répondit Phoebus. Je disais seulement qu'il faudrait quitter toute cette toilette de folie et de coin de rue quand vous serez avec moi.

— Quand je serai avec toi, mon Phoebus!» dit la jeune fille tendrement.

Elle redevint pensive et silencieuse.

Le capitaine, enhardi par sa douceur, lui prit la taille sans qu'elle résistât, puis se mit à délacer à petit bruit le corsage de la pauvre enfant, et dérangea si fort sa gorgerette que le prêtre haletant vit sortir de la gaze la belle épaule nue de la bohémienne, ronde et brune, comme la lune qui se lève dans la brume à l'horizon.

La jeune fille laissait faire Phoebus. Elle ne paraissait pas s'en apercevoir. L'œil du hardi capitaine étincelait.

Tout à coup elle se tourna vers lui:

«Phoebus, dit-elle avec une expression d'amour infinie, instruis-moi dans ta religion.

— Ma religion! s'écria le capitaine éclatant de rire. Moi, vous instruire dans ma religion! Corne et tonnerre! qu'est-ce que vous voulez faire de ma religion?

— C'est pour nous marier», répondit-elle.

La figure du capitaine prit une expression mélangée de surprise, de dédain, d'insouciance et de passion libertine.

«Ah bah! dit-il, est-ce qu'on se marie?»

La bohémienne devint pâle et laissa tristement retomber sa tête sur sa poitrine.

«Belle amoureuse, reprit tendrement Phoebus, qu'est-ce que c'est que ces folies-là? Grand-chose que le mariage! est-on moins bien aimant pour n'avoir pas craché du latin dans la boutique d'un prêtre?»

En parlant ainsi de sa voix la plus douce, il s'approchait extrêmement près de l'égyptienne, ses mains caressantes avaient repris leur poste autour de cette taille si fine et si souple, son œil s'allumait de plus en plus, et tout annonçait que monsieur Phoebus touchait évidemment à l’un de ces moments où Jupiter lui-même fait tant de sottises que le bon Homère est obligé d’appeler un nuage à son secours.

Dom Claude cependant voyait tout. La porte était faite de douves de poinçon toutes pourries, qui laissaient entre elles de larges passages à son regard d’oiseau de proie. Ce prêtre à peau brune et à larges épaules, jusque-là condamné à l’austère virginité du cloître, frissonnait et bouillait devant cette scène d’amour, de nuit et de volupté. La jeune et belle fille livrée en désordre à cet ardent jeune homme lui faisait couler du plomb fondu dans les veines. Il se passait en lui des mouvements extraordinaires. Son œil plongeait avec une jalousie lascive sous toutes ces épingles défaites. Qui eût pu voir en ce moment la figure du malheureux collée aux barreaux vermoulus eût cru voir une face de tigre regardant du fond d’une cage quelque chacal qui dévore une gazelle. Sa prunelle éclatait comme une chandelle à travers les fentes de la porte.

Tout à coup, Phoebus enleva d’un geste rapide la gorgerette de l’égyptienne. La pauvre enfant, qui était restée pâle et rêveuse, se réveilla comme en sursaut. Elle s’éloigna brusquement de l’entreprenant officier, et jetant un regard sur sa gorge et ses épaulés nues, rouge et confuse et muette de honte, elle croisa ses deux beaux bras sur son sein pour le cacher. Sans la flamme qui embrasait ses joues, à la voir ainsi silencieuse et immobile, on eût dit une statue de la pudeur. Ses yeux restaient baissés.

Cependant le geste du capitaine avait mis à découvert l’amulette mystérieuse qu’elle portait au cou. «Qu’est-ce que cela? dit-il en saisissant ce prétexte pour se rapprocher de la belle créature qu’il venait d’effaroucher.

— N’y touchez pas! répondit-elle vivement, c’est ma gardienne. C’est elle qui me fera retrouver ma famille si j’en reste digne. Oh! laissez-moi, monsieur le capitaine! Ma mère! ma pauvre mère! ma mère! où es-tu? à mon secours! Grâce, monsieur Phoebus! rendez-moi ma gorgerette!»

Phoebus recula et dit d’un ton froid:

«Oh! mademoiselle! que je vois bien que vous ne m’aimez pas!

— Je ne t’aime pas! s’écria la pauvre malheureuse enfant, et en même temps elle se pendit au capitaine qu’elle fit asseoir près d’elle. Je ne t’aime pas, mon Phoebus! Qu’est-ce que tu dis là, méchant, pour me déchirer le cœur? Oh! va! prends-moi, prends tout! fais ce que tu voudras de moi. Je suis à toi. Que m’importe l’amulette! que m’importe ma mère! c’est toi qui es ma mère, puisque je t'aime! Phoebus, mon Phoebus bien-aimé, me vois-tu? c'est moi, regarde-moi. C'est cette petite que tu veux bien ne pas repousser, qui vient, qui vient elle-même te chercher. Mon âme, ma vie, mon corps, ma personne, tout cela est une chose qui est à vous, mon capitaine. Eh bien, non! ne nous marions pas, cela t'ennuie. Et puis, qu'est-ce que je suis, moi? une misérable fille du ruisseau, tandis que toi, mon Phoebus, tu es gentilhomme. Belle chose vraiment! une danseuse épouser un officier! j'étais folle. Non, Phoebus, non, je serai ta maîtresse, ton amusement, ton plaisir, quand tu voudras, une fille qui sera à toi, je ne suis faite que pour cela, souillée, méprisée, déshonorée, mais qu'importe! aimée. Je serai la plus fière et la plus joyeuse des femmes. Et quand je serai vieille ou laide, Phoebus, quand je ne serai plus bonne pour vous aimer, monseigneur, vous me souffrirez encore pour vous servir. D'autres vous broderont des écharpes. C'est moi la servante, qui en aurai soin. Vous me laisserez fourbir vos éperons, brosser votre hoqueton, épousseter vos bottes de cheval. N'est-ce pas mon Phoebus, que vous aurez cette pitié? En attendant, prends-moi! tiens, Phoebus, tout cela t'appartient, aime-moi seulement! Nous autres égyptiennes, il ne nous faut que cela, de l'air et de l'amour.»

En parlant ainsi, elle jetait ses bras autour du cou de l'officier, elle le regardait du bas en haut suppliante et avec un beau sourire tout en pleurs, sa gorge délicate se frottait au pourpoint de drap et aux rudes broderies. Elle tordait sur ses genoux son beau corps demi-nu. Le capitaine, enivré, colla ses lèvres ardentes à ces belles épaules africaines. La jeune fille, les yeux perdus au plafond, renversée en arrière, frémissait toute palpitante sous ce baiser.

Tout à coup, au-dessus de la tête de Phoebus, elle vit une autre tête, une figure livide, verte, convulsive, avec un regard de damné. Près de cette figure il y avait une main qui tenait un poignard. C'était la figure et la main du prêtre. Il avait brisé la porte et il était là. Phoebus ne pouvait le voir. La jeune fille resta immobile, glacée, muette sous l'épouvantable apparition, comme une colombe qui lèverait la tête au moment où l'orfraie regarde dans son nid avec ses yeux ronds.

Elle ne put même pousser un cri. Elle vit le poignard s'abaisser sur Phoebus et se relever fumant. «Malédiction! dit le capitaine, et il tomba.»

Elle s'évanouit.

Au moment où ses yeux se fermaient, où tout sentiment se dispersait en elle, elle crut sentir s’imprimer sur ses lèvres un attouchement de feu, un baiser plus brûlant que le fer rouge du bourreau.

Quand elle reprit ses sens, elle était entourée de soldats du guet, on emportait le capitaine baigné dans son sang, le prêtre avait disparu, la fenêtre du fond de la chambre, qui donnait sur la rivière, était toute grande ouverte, on ramassait un manteau qu’on supposait appartenir à l’officier, et elle entendait dire autour d’elle: «C’est une sorcière qui a poignardé un capitaine.»

LIVRE HUITIÈME

I

L’ÉCU CHANGÉ EN FEUILLE SÈCHE

Gringoire et toute la Cour des Miracles étaient dans une mortelle inquiétude. On ne savait depuis un grand mois ce qu’était devenue la Esmeralda, ce qui contristait fort le duc d’Égypte et ses amis les truands, ni ce qu’était devenue sa chèvre, ce qui redoublait la douleur de Gringoire. Un soir, l’égyptienne avait disparu, et depuis lors n’avait plus donné signe de vie. Toutes recherches avaient été inutiles. Quelques sabouleux taquins disaient à Gringoire l’avoir rencontrée ce soir-là aux environs du pont Saint-Michel s’en allant avec un officier; mais ce mari à la mode de Bohême était un philosophe incrédule, et d’ailleurs il savait mieux que personne à quel point sa femme était vierge. Il avait pu juger quelle pudeur inexpugnable résultait des deux vertus combinées de l’amulette et de l’égyptienne, et il avait mathématiquement calculé la résistance de cette chasteté à la seconde puissance. Il était donc tranquille de ce côté.

Aussi ne pouvait-il s’expliquer cette disparition. C’était un chagrin profond. Il en eût maigri, si la chose eût été possible. Il en avait tout oublié, jusqu’à ses goûts littéraires, jusqu’à son grand ouvrage *De figuris regularibus et irregularibus*, qu’il comptait faire imprimer au premier argent qu’il aurait. (Car il radotait d’imprimerie, depuis qu’il avait vu le *Didascalon* de Hugues de Saint-Victor imprimé avec les célèbres caractères de Vindelin de Spire.)

Un jour qu’il passait tristement devant la Tournelle criminelle, il aperçut quelque foule à l’une des portes du Palais de Justice.

«Qu’est cela? demanda-t-il à un jeune homme qui en sortait.

— Je ne sais pas, monsieur, répondit le jeune homme. On dit qu’on juge une femme qui a assassiné un gendarme. Comme il paraît qu’il y a de la sorcellerie là-dessous, l’évêque et l’official sont intervenus dans la cause, et mon frère, qui est archidiacre de Josas, y passe sa vie. Or, je voulais lui parler, mais je n’ai pu arriver jusqu’à lui à cause de la foule, ce qui me contrarie fort, car j’ai besoin d’argent.

— Hélas, monsieur, dit Gringoire, je voudrais pouvoir vous en prêter; mais si mes grègues sont trouées, ce n’est pas par les écus.»

Il n’osa pas dire au jeune homme qu’il connaissait son frère l’archidiacre, vers lequel il n’était pas retourné depuis la scène de l’église, négligence qui l’embarrassait.

L’écolier passa son chemin, et Gringoire se mit à suivre la foule qui montait l’escalier de la grand’chambre. Il estimait qu’il n’est rien de tel que le spectacle d’un procès criminel pour dissiper la mélancolie, tant les juges sont ordinairement d’une bêtise réjouissante. Le peuple auquel il s’était mêlé marchait et se coudoyait en silence. Après un lent et insipide piétinement sous un long couloir sombre, qui serpentait dans le palais comme le canal intestinal du vieil édifice, il parvint auprès d’une porte basse qui débouchait sur une salle que sa haute taille lui permit d’explorer du regard par-dessus les têtes ondoyantes de la cohue.

La salle était vaste et sombre, ce qui la faisait paraître plus vaste encore. Le jour tombait; les longues fenêtres ogives ne laissaient plus pénétrer qu’un pâle rayon qui s’éteignait avant d’atteindre jusqu’à la voûte, énorme treillis de charpentes sculptées, dont les mille figures semblaient remuer confusément dans l’ombre. Il y avait déjà plusieurs chandelles allumées çà et là sur des tables et rayonnant sur des têtes de greffiers affaissés dans des paperasses. La partie antérieure de la salle était occupée par la foule; à droite et à gauche il y avait des hommes de robe à des tables; au fond, sur une estrade, force juges dont les dernières rangées s’enfonçaient dans les ténèbres; faces immobiles et sinistres. Les murs étaient semés de fleurs de lys sans nombre. On distinguait vaguement un grand christ au-dessus des juges, et partout des piques et des hallebardes au bout desquelles la lumière des chandelles mettait des pointes de feu.

«Monsieur, demanda Gringoire à l’un de ses voisins, qu’est-ce que c’est donc que toutes ces personnes rangées là-bas comme prélats en concile?

— Monsieur, dit le voisin, ce sont les conseillers de la grand’chambre à droite, et les conseillers des enquêtes à gauche; les maîtres en robes noires, et les messires en robes rouges.

— Là, au-dessus d’eux, reprit Gringoire, qu’est-ce que c’est que ce gros rouge qui sue?

— C’est monsieur le président.

— Et ces moutons derrière lui?» poursuivit Gringoire, lequel, nous l’avons déjà dit, n’aimait pas la magistrature. Ce qui tenait peut-être à la rancune qu’il gardait au Palais de Justice depuis sa mésaventure dramatique.

«Ce sont messieurs les maîtres des requêtes de l’Hôtel du Roi.

— Et devant lui, ce sanglier?

— C’est monsieur le greffier de la cour de parlement.

— Et à droite, ce crocodile?

— Maître Philippe Lheulier, avocat du roi extraordinaire.

— Et à gauche, ce gros chat noir?

— Maître Jacques Charmolue, procureur du roi en cour d’église, avec messieurs de l’officialité.

— Or çà, monsieur, dit Gringoire, que font donc tous ces braves gens-là?

— Ils jugent.

— Ils jugent qui? je ne vois pas d’accusé.

— C’est une femme, monsieur. Vous ne pouvez la voir. Elle nous tourne le dos, et elle nous est cachée par la foule. Tenez, elle est là où vous voyez un groupe de pertuisanes.

— Qu’est-ce que cette femme? demanda Gringoire. Savez-vous son nom?

— Non, monsieur. Je ne fais que d’arriver. Je présume seulement qu’il y a de la sorcellerie, parce que l’official assiste au procès.

— Allons! dit notre philosophe, nous allons voir tous ces gens de robe manger de la chair humaine. C’est un spectacle comme un autre.

— Monsieur, observa le voisin, est-ce que vous ne trouvez pas que maître Jacques Charmolue a l’air très doux?

— Hum! répondit Gringoire. Je me méfie d’une douceur qui a les narines pincées et les lèvres minces.»

Ici les voisins imposèrent silence aux deux causeurs. On écoutait une déposition importante.

«Messeigneurs, disait, au milieu de la salle, une vieille dont le visage disparaissait tellement sous ses vêtements qu’on eût dit un monceau de guenilles qui marchait, messeigneurs, la chose est aussi vraie qu’il est vrai que c’est moi qui suis la Falourdel, établie depuis quarante ans au pont Saint-Michel, et payant exactement rentes, lods et censives, la porte vis-à-vis la maison de Tassin-Caillart, le teinturier, qui est du côté d’amont l’eau. — Une pauvre vieille à présent, une jolie fille autrefois, messeigneurs! On me disait depuis quelques jours: La Falourdel, ne filez pas trop votre rouet le soir, le diable aime peigner avec ses cornes la quenouille des vieilles femmes. Il est sûr que le moine bourru, qui était l’an passé du côté du

Temple, rôde maintenant dans la Cité. La Falourdel, prenez garde qu'il ne cogne à votre porte. — Un soir, je filais mon rouet, on cogne à ma porte. Je demande qui. On jure. J'ouvre. Deux hommes entrent. Un noir avec un bel officier. On ne voyait que les yeux du noir, deux braises. Tout le reste était manteau et chapeau. Voilà qu'ils me disent: «La chambre à Sainte-Marthe.» — C'est ma chambre d'en haut, messeigneurs, ma plus propre. Ils me donnent un écu. Je serre l'écu dans mon tiroir, et je dis: «Ce sera pour acheter demain des tripes à l'écorcherie de la Gloriette.» — Nous montons. Arrivés à la chambre d'en haut, pendant que je tournais le dos, l'homme noir disparaît. Cela m'ébahit un peu. L'officier, qui était beau comme un grand seigneur, redescend avec moi. Il sort. Le temps de filer un quart d'écheveau, il rentre avec une belle jeune fille, une poupée qui eût brillé comme un soleil si elle eût été coiffée. Elle avait avec elle un bouc, un grand bouc, noir ou blanc, je ne sais plus. Voilà qui me fait songer. La fille, cela ne me regarde pas, mais le bouc!... Je n'aime pas ces bêtes-là, elles ont une barbe et des cornes. Cela ressemble à un homme. Et puis, cela sent le samedi. Cependant, je ne dis rien. J'avais l'écu. C'est juste, n'est-ce pas, monsieur le juge? Je fais monter la fille et le capitaine à la chambre d'en haut, et je les laisse seuls, c'est-à-dire avec le bouc. Je descends et je me remets à filer. — Il faut vous dire que ma maison a un rez-de-chaussée et un premier, elle donne par derrière sur la rivière, comme les autres maisons du pont, et la fenêtre du rez-de-chaussée et la fenêtre du premier s'ouvrent sur l'eau. — J'étais donc en train de filer. Je ne sais pourquoi je pensais à ce moine bourru que le bouc m'avait remis en tête, et puis la belle fille était un peu farouchement attifée. — Tout à coup, j'entends un cri en haut, et choir quelque chose sur le carreau, et que la fenêtre s'ouvre. Je cours à la mienne qui est au-dessous, et je vois passer devant mes yeux une masse noire qui tombe dans l'eau. C'était un fantôme habillé en prêtre. Il faisait clair de lune. Je l'ai très bien vu. Il nageait du côté de la Cité. Alors, toute tremblante, j'appelle le guet. Ces messieurs de la douzaine entrent, et même dans le premier moment, ne sachant pas de quoi il s'agissait, comme ils étaient en joie, ils m'ont battue. Je leur ai expliqué. Nous montons, et qu'est-ce que nous trouvons? ma pauvre chambre tout en sang, le capitaine étendu de son long avec un poignard dans le cou, la fille faisant la morte, et le bouc tout effarouché. — Bon, dis-je, j'en aurai pour plus de quinze jours à laver le plancher. Il faudra gratter, ce sera terrible. — On a emporté l'officier, pauvre jeune homme! et la fille toute débraillée. — Attendez. Le pire, c’est que le lendemain, quand j’ai voulu prendre l’écu pour acheter les tripes, j’ai trouvé une feuille sèche à la place.»

La vieille se tut. Un murmure d’horreur circula dans l’auditoire. «Ce fantôme, ce bouc, tout cela sent la magie, dit un voisin de Gringoire. — Et cette feuille sèche! ajouta un autre. — Nul doute, reprit un troisième, c’est une sorcière qui a des commerces avec le moine bourru pour dévaliser les officiers.» Gringoire lui-même n’était pas éloigné de trouver tout cet ensemble effrayant et vraisemblable.

«Femme Falourdel, dit monsieur le président avec majesté, n’avez-vous rien de plus à dire à la justice?

— Non, monseigneur, répondit la vieille, sinon que dans le rapport on a traité ma maison de masure tortue et puante, ce qui est outrageusement parler. Les maisons du pont n’ont pas grande mine, parce qu’il y a foison de peuple, mais néanmoins les bouchers ne laissent pas d’y demeurer, qui sont gens riches et mariés à de belles femmes fort propres.»

Le magistrat qui avait fait à Gringoire l’effet d’un crocodile se leva. «Paix! dit-il. Je prie messieurs de ne pas perdre de vue qu’on a trouvé un poignard sur l’accusée. Femme Falourdel, avez-vous apporté cette feuille sèche en laquelle s’est transformé l’écu que le démon vous avait donné?

— Oui, monseigneur, répondit-elle, je l’ai retrouvée. La voici.»

Un huissier transmit la feuille morte au crocodile qui fit un signe de tête lugubre et la passa au président qui la renvoya au procureur du roi en cour d’église, de façon qu’elle fit le tour de la salle. «C’est une feuille de bouleau, dit maître Jacques Charmolue. Nouvelle preuve de la magie.»

Un conseiller prit la parole.

«Témoin, deux hommes sont montés en même temps chez vous. L’homme noir, que vous avez vu d’abord disparaître, puis nager en Seine avec des habits de prêtre, et l’officier. — Lequel des deux vous a remis l’écu?»

La vieille réfléchit un moment et dit: «C’est l’officier.» Une rumeur parcourut la foule. «Ah! pensa Gringoire, voilà qui fait hésiter ma conviction.»

Cependant maître Philippe Lheulier, l’avocat extraordinaire du roi, intervint de nouveau. «Je rappelle à messieurs que, dans sa déposition écrite à son chevet, l’officier assassiné, en déclarant qu’il avait eu vaguement la pensée, au moment où l’homme noir l’avait accosté, que ce pourrait fort bien être le moine bourru, ajoutait que le fantôme l’avait vivement pressé de s’aller accointer avec l’accusée, et sur l’observation de lui, capitaine, qu’il était sans argent, lui avait donné l’écu dont ledit officier a payé la Falourdel. Donc l’écu est une monnaie de l’enfer.»

Cette observation concluante parut dissiper tous les doutes de Gringoire et des autres sceptiques de l’auditoire.

«Messieurs ont le dossier des pièces, ajouta l’avocat du loi en s’asseyant, ils peuvent consulter le dire de Phoebus de Châteaupers.»

À ce nom l’accusée se leva. Sa tête dépassa la foule. Gringoire épouvanté reconnut la Esmeralda.

Elle était pâle; ses cheveux, autrefois si gracieusement nattés et pailletés de sequins, tombaient en désordre; ses lèvres étaient bleues; ses yeux creux effrayaient. Hélas!

«Phoebus! dit-elle avec égarement, où est-il? Ô messeigneurs! avant de me tuer, par grâce, dites-moi s’il vit encore!

— Taisez-vous, femme, répondit le président. Ce n’est pas là notre affaire.

— Oh! par pitié, dites-moi s’il est vivant! reprit-elle en joignant ses belles mains amaigries; et l’on entendait ses chaînes frissonner le long de sa robe.

— Eh bien! dit sèchement l’avocat du roi, il se meurt. — Êtes-vous contente?»

La malheureuse retomba sur sa sellette, sans voix, sans larmes, blanche comme une figure de cire.

Le président se baissa vers un homme placé à ses pieds, qui avait un bonnet d’or et une robe noire, une chaîne au cou et une verge à la main.

«Huissier, introduisez la seconde accusée.»

Tous les yeux se tournèrent vers une petite porte qui s’ouvrit, et, à la grande palpitation de Gringoire, donna passage à une jolie chèvre aux cornes et aux pieds d’or. L’élégante bête s’arrêta un moment sur le seuil, tendant le cou, comme si, dressée à la pointe d’une roche, elle eût eu sous les yeux un immense horizon. Tout à coup elle aperçut la bohémienne, et, sautant par-dessus la table et la tête d’un greffier, en deux bonds elle fut à ses genoux. Puis elle se roula gracieusement sur les pieds de sa maîtresse, sollicitant un mot ou une caresse; mais l’accusée resta immobile, et la pauvre Djali elle-même n’eut pas un regard.

«Eh mais... c’est ma vilaine bête, dit la vieille Falourdel, et je les reconnais bellement toutes deux!»

Jacques Charmolue intervint. «S’il plaît à messieurs, nous procéderons à l’interrogatoire de la chèvre.»

C’était en effet la seconde accusée. Rien de plus simple alors qu’un procès de sorcellerie intenté à un animal. On trouve, entre autres, dans les comptes de la prévôté pour 1466, un curieux détail des frais du procès de Gillet-Soulart et de sa truie, *exécutés pour leurs démérites*, à Corbeil. Tout y est, le coût des fosses pour mettre la truie, les cinq cents bourrées de cotrets pris sur le port de Morsant, les trois pintes de vin et le pain, dernier repas du patient fraternellement partagé par le bourreau, jusqu’aux onze jours de garde et de nourriture de la truie à huit deniers parisis chaque. Quelquefois même on allait plus loin que les bêtes. Les capitulaires de Charlemagne et de Louis le Débonnaire infligent de graves peines aux fantômes enflammés qui se permettraient de paraître dans l’air.

Cependant le procureur en cour d’église s’était écrié: «Si le démon qui possède cette chèvre et qui a résisté à tous les exorcismes persiste dans ses maléfices, s’il en épouvante la cour, nous le prévenons que nous serons forcés de requérir contre lui le gibet ou le bûcher.»

Gringoire eut la sueur froide. Charmolue prit sur une table le tambour de basque de la bohémienne, et, le présentant d’une certaine façon à la chèvre, il lui demanda:

«Quelle heure est-il?»

La chèvre le regarda d’un œil intelligent, leva son pied doré et frappa sept coups. Il était en effet sept heures. Un mouvement de terreur parcourut la foule.

Gringoire n’y put tenir.

«Elle se perd! cria-t-il tout haut. Vous voyez bien qu’elle ne sait ce qu’elle fait.

— Silence aux manants du bout de la salle!» dit aigrement l’huissier.

Jacques Charmolue, à l’aide des mêmes manœuvres du tambourin, fit faire à la chèvre plusieurs autres momeries, sur la date du jour, le mois de l’année, etc., dont le lecteur a déjà été témoin. Et, par une illusion d’optique propre aux débats judiciaires, ces mêmes spectateurs, qui peut-être avaient plus d’une fois applaudi dans le carrefour aux innocentes malices de Djali, en furent effrayés sous les voûtes du Palais de Justice. La chèvre était décidément le diable.

Ce fut bien pis encore, quand, le procureur du roi ayant vidé sur le carreau un certain sac de cuir plein de lettres mobiles que Djali avait au cou, on vit la chèvre extraire avec sa patte de l’alphabet épars ce nom fatal: *Phoebus*. Les sortilèges dont le capitaine avait été victime parurent irrésistiblement démontrés, et, aux yeux de tous, la bohémienne, cette ravissante danseuse qui avait tant de fois ébloui les passants de sa grâce, ne fut plus qu’une effroyable stryge.

Du reste, elle ne donnait aucun signe de vie. Ni les gracieuses évolutions de Djali, ni les menaces du parquet, ni les sourdes imprécations de l’auditoire, rien n’arrivait plus à sa pensée.

Il fallut, pour la réveiller, qu’un sergent la secouât sans pitié et que le président élevât solennellement la voix:

«Fille, vous êtes de race bohème, adonnée aux maléfices. Vous avez, de complicité avec la chèvre ensorcelée impliquée au procès, dans la nuit du 29 mars dernier, meurtri et poignardé, de concert avec les puissances de ténèbres, à l’aide de charmes et de pratiques, un capitaine des archers de l’ordonnance du roi, Phoebus de Châteaupers. Persistez-vous à nier?

— Horreur! cria la jeune fille en cachant son visage de ses mains. Mon Phoebus! Oh! c’est l’enfer!

— Persistez-vous à nier? demanda froidement le président.

— Si je le nie!» dit-elle d’un accent terrible, et elle s’était levée et son œil étincelait.

Le président continua carrément:

«Alors comment expliquez-vous les faits à votre charge?»

Elle répondit d’une voix entrecoupée:

«Je l’ai déjà dit. Je ne sais pas. C’est un prêtre. Un prêtre que je ne connais pas. Un prêtre infernal qui me poursuit!

— C’est cela, reprit le juge. Le moine bourru.

— Ô messeigneurs! ayez pitié! je ne suis qu’une pauvre fille...

— D’Égypte», dit le jugea.

Maître Jacques Charmolue prit la parole avec douceur:

«Attendu l’obstination douloureuse de l’accusée, je requiers l’application de la question.

— Accordé», dit le président.

La malheureuse frémit de tout son corps. Elle se leva pourtant à l’ordre des pertuisaniers, et marcha d’un pas assez ferme, précédée de Charmolue et des prêtres de l’officialité, entre deux rangs de hallebardes, vers une porte bâtarde qui s’ouvrit subitement et se referma sur elle, ce qui fit au triste Gringoire l’effet d’une gueule horrible qui venait de la dévorer.

Quand elle disparut, on entendit un bêlement plaintif. C’était la petite chèvre qui pleurait.

L’audience fut suspendue. Un conseiller ayant fait observer que messieurs étaient fatigués et que ce serait bien long d’attendre jusqu’à la fin de la torture, le président répondit qu’un magistrat doit savoir se sacrifier à son devoir.

«La fâcheuse et déplaisante drôlesse, dit un vieux juge, qui se fait donner la question quand on n’a pas soupé!»

II

SUITE DE L’ÉCU CHANGÉ EN FEUILLE SÈCHE

Après quelques degrés montés et descendus dans des couloirs si sombres qu’on les éclairait de lampes en plein jour, la Esmeralda, toujours entourée de son lugubre cortège, fut poussée par les sergents du palais dans une chambre sinistre. Cette chambre, de forme ronde, occupait le rez-de-chaussée de l’une de ces grosses tours qui percent encore, dans notre siècle, la couche d’édifices modernes dont le nouveau Paris a recouvert l’ancien. Pas de fenêtre à ce caveau, pas d’autre ouverture que l’entrée, basse et battue d’une énorme porte de fer. La clarté cependant n’y manquait point. Un four était pratiqué dans l’épaisseur du mur. Un gros feu y était allumé, qui remplissait le caveau de ses rouges réverbérations, et dépouillait de tout rayonnement une misérable chandelle posée dans un coin. La herse de fer qui servait à fermer le four, levée en ce moment, ne laissait voir, à l’orifice du soupirail flamboyant sur le mur ténébreux, que l’extrémité inférieure de ses barreaux, comme une rangée de dents noires, aiguës et espacées, ce qui faisait ressembler la fournaise à l’une de ces bouches de dragons qui jettent des flammes dans les légendes. À la lumière qui s’en échappait, la prisonnière vit tout autour de la chambre des instruments effroyables dont elle ne comprenait pas l’usage. Au milieu gisait un matelas de cuir presque posé à terre, sur lequel pendait une courroie à boucle, rattachée à un anneau de cuivre que mordait un monstre camard sculpté dans la clef de la voûte. Des tenailles, des pinces, de larges fers de charrue, encombraient l’intérieur du four et rougissaient pêle-mêle sur la braise. La sanglante lueur de la fournaise n’éclairait dans toute la chambre qu’un fouillis de choses horribles.

Ce tartare s’appelait simplement *la chambre de la question*.

Sur le lit était nonchalamment assis Pierrat Torterue, le tourmenteur-juré. Ses valets, deux gnomes à face carrée, à tablier de cuir, à brayes de toile, remuaient la ferraille sur les charbons.

La pauvre fille avait eu beau recueillir son courage. En pénétrant dans cette chambre, elle eut horreur.

Les sergents du bailli du Palais se rangèrent d’un côté, les prêtres de l’officialité de l’autre. Un greffier, une écritoire et une table étaient dans un coin. Maître Jacques Charmolue s’approcha de l’égyptienne avec un sourire très doux.

«Ma chère enfant, dit-il, vous persistez donc à nier?

— Oui, répondit-elle d’une voix déjà éteinte.

— En ce cas, reprit Charmolue, il sera bien douloureux pour nous de vous questionner avec plus d’instance que nous ne le voudrions. — Veuillez prendre la peine de vous asseoir sur ce lit. — Maître Pierrat, faites place à madamoiselle, et fermez la porte.»

Pierrat se leva avec un grognement.

«Si je ferme la porte, murmura-t-il, mon feu va s’éteindre.

— Eh bien, mon cher, repartit Charmolue, laissez-la ouverte.»

Cependant la Esmeralda restait debout. Ce lit de cuir, où s’étaient tordus tant de misérables, l’épouvantait. La terreur lui glaçait la moelle des os. Elle était là, effarée et stupide. À un signe de Charmolue, les deux valets la prirent et la posèrent assise sur le lit. Ils ne lui firent aucun mal, mais quand ces hommes la touchèrent, quand ce cuir la toucha, elle sentit tout son sang refluer vers son cœur. Elle jeta un regard égaré autour de la chambre. Il lui sembla voir se mouvoir et marcher de toutes parts vers elle, pour lui grimper le long du corps et la mordre et la pincer, tous ces difformes outils de la torture, qui étaient, parmi les instruments de tout genre qu’elle avait vus jusqu’alors, ce que sont les chauves-souris, les mille-pieds et les araignées parmi les insectes et les oiseaux.

«Où est le médecin? demanda Charmolue.

— Ici», répondit une robe noire qu’elle n’avait pas encore aperçue.

Elle frissonna.

«Mademoiselle, reprit la voix caressante du procureur en cour d’église, pour la troisième fois persistez-vous à nier les faits dont vous êtes accusée?»

Cette fois elle ne put que faire un signe de tête. La voix lui manqua.

«Vous persistez? dit Jacques Charmolue. Alors, j’en suis désespéré, mais il faut que je remplisse le devoir de mon office.

— Monsieur le procureur du roi, dit brusquement Pierrat, par où commencerons-nous?»

Charmolue hésita un moment avec la grimace ambiguë d’un poète qui cherche une rime.

«Par le brodequin», dit-il enfin.

L’infortunée se sentit si profondément abandonnée de Dieu et des hommes que sa tête tomba sur sa poitrine comme une chose inerte qui n’a pas de force en soi.

Le tourmenteur et le médecin s’approchèrent d’elle à la fois. En même temps, les deux valets se mirent à fouiller dans leur hideux arsenal.

Au cliquetis de ces affreuses ferrailles, la malheureuse enfant tressaillit comme une grenouille morte qu’on galvanise. «Oh! murmura-t-elle, si bas que nul ne l’entendit, ô mon Phoebus!» Puis elle se replongea dans son immobilité et dans son silence de marbre. Ce spectacle eût déchiré tout autre cœur que des cœurs de juges. On eût dit une pauvre âme pécheresse questionnée par Satan sous l’écarlate guichet de l’enfer. Le misérable corps auquel allait se cramponner cette effroyable fourmilière de scies, de roues et de chevalets, l’être qu’allaient manier ces âpres mains de bourreaux et de tenailles, c’était donc cette douce, blanche et fragile créature. Pauvre grain de mil que la justice humaine donnait à moudre aux épouvantables meules de la torture!

Cependant les mains calleuses des valets de Pierrat Torterue avaient brutalement mis à nu cette jambe charmante, ce petit pied qui avaient tant de fois émerveillé les passants de leur gentillesse et de leur beauté dans les carrefours de Paris.

«C’est dommage!» grommela le tourmenteur en considérant ces formes si gracieuses et si délicates. Si l’archidiacre eût été présent, certes, il se fût souvenu en ce moment de son symbole de l’araignée et de la mouche.

Bientôt la malheureuse vit, à travers un nuage qui se répandait sur ses yeux, approcher le *brodequin*, bientôt elle vit son pied emboîté entre les ais ferrés disparaître sous l’effrayant appareil. Alors la terreur lui rendit de la force. «Ôtez-moi cela!» cria-t-elle avec emportement. Et, se dressant tout échevelée: «Grâce!»

Elle s’élança hors du lit pour se jeter aux pieds du procureur du roi, mais sa jambe était prise dans le lourd bloc de chêne et de ferrures, et elle s’affaissa sur le brodequin, plus brisée qu’une abeille qui aurait un plomb sur l’aile.

À un signe de Charmolue, on la replaça sur le lit, et deux grosses mains assujettirent à sa fine ceinture la courroie qui pendait de la voûte.

«Une dernière fois, avouez-vous les faits de la cause?» demanda Charmolue avec son imperturbable bénignité.

— Je suis innocente.

— Alors, madamoiselle, comment expliquez-vous les circonstances à votre charge?

— Hélas, monseigneur! je ne sais.

— Vous niez donc?

— Tout!

— Faites», dit Charmolue à Pierrat.

Pierrat tourna la poignée du cric, le brodequin se resserra, et la malheureuse poussa un de ces horribles cris qui n'ont d'orthographe dans aucune langue humaine.

«Arrêtez, dit Charmolue à Pierrat. — Avouez-vous? dit-il à l'égyptienne.

— Tout! cria la misérable fille. J'avoue! j'avoue! grâce!»

Elle n'avait pas calculé ses forces en affrontant la question. Pauvre enfant dont la vie jusqu'alors avait été si joyeuse, si suave, si douce, la première douleur l'avait vaincue.

«L'humanité m'oblige à vous dire, observa le procureur du roi, qu'en avouant c'est la mort que vous devez attendre.

— Je l'espère bien», dit-elle. Et elle retomba sur le lit de cuir, mourante, pliée en deux, se laissant pendre à la courroie bouclée sur sa poitrine.

«Sus, ma belle, soutenez-vous un peu, dit maître Pierrat en la relevant. Vous avez l'air du mouton d'or qui est au cou de monsieur de Bourgogne.»

Jacques Charmolue éleva la voix.

«Greffier, écrivez. — Jeune fille bohème, vous avouez votre participation aux agapes, sabbats et maléfices de l'enfer, avec les larves, les masques et les stryges? Répondez.

— Oui, dit-elle, si bas que sa parole se perdait dans son souffle.

— Vous avouez avoir vu le bélier que Belzébuth fait paraître dans les nuées pour rassembler le sabbat, et qui n'est vu que des sorciers?

— Oui.

— Vous confessez avoir adoré les têtes de Bophomet, ces abominables idoles des templiers?

— Oui.

— Avoir eu commerce habituel avec le diable sous la forme d'une chèvre familière, jointe au procès?

— Oui.

— Enfin, vous avouez et confessez avoir, à l'aide du démon, et du fantôme vulgairement appelé le moine bourru, dans la nuit du vingt-neuvième mars dernier, meurtri et assassiné un capitaine nommé Phoebus de Châteaupers?»

Elle leva sur le magistrat ses grands yeux fixes, et répondit comme machinalement, sans convulsion et sans secousse: «Oui.» Il était évident que tout était brisé en elle.

«Écrivez, greffier», dit Charmolue. Et s’adressant aux tortionnaires: «Qu’on détache la prisonnière, et qu’on la ramène à l’audience.»

Quand la prisonnière fut *déchaussée*, le procureur en cour d’église examina son pied encore engourdi par la douleur.

«Allons! dit-il, il n’y a pas grand mal. Vous avez crié à temps. Vous pourriez encore danser, la belle!»

Puis il se tourna vers ses acolytes de l’officialité. «Voilà enfin la justice éclairée! Cela soulage, messieurs! Mademoiselle nous rendra ce témoignage, que nous avons agi avec toute la douceur possible.»

III

FIN DE L'ÉCU CHANGÉ EN FEUILLE SÈCHE

Quand elle rentra, pâle et boitant, dans la salle d'audience, un murmure général de plaisir l'accueillit. De la part de l'auditoire, c'était ce sentiment d'impatience satisfaite qu'on éprouve au théâtre à l'expiration du dernier entracte de la comédie, lorsque la toile se relève et que la fin va commencer. De la part des juges, c'était espoir de bientôt souper. La petite chèvre aussi bêla de joie. Elle voulut courir vers sa maîtresse, mais on l'avait attachée au banc.

La nuit était tout à fait venue. Les chandelles, dont on n'avait pas augmenté le nombre, jetaient si peu de lumière qu'on ne voyait pas les murs de la salle. Les ténèbres y enveloppaient tous les objets d'une sorte de brume. Quelques faces apathiques de juges y ressortaient à peine. Vis-à-vis d'eux, à l'extrémité de la longue salle, ils pouvaient voir un point de blancheur vague se détacher sur le fond sombre. C'était l'accusée.

Elle s'était traînée à sa place. Quand Charmolue se fut installé magistralement à la sienne, il s'assit, puis se releva, et dit, sans laisser percer trop de vanité de son succès: «L'accusée a tout avoué.

— Fille bohème, reprit le président, vous avez avoué tous vos faits de magie, de prostitution et d'assassinat sur Phoebus de Châteaupers?»

Son cœur se serra. On l'entendit sangloter dans l'ombre.

«Tout ce que vous voudrez, répondit-elle faiblement, mais tuez-moi vite!

— Monsieur le procureur du roi en cour d'église, dit le président, la chambre est prête à vous entendre en vos réquisitions.»

Maître Charmolue exhiba un effrayant cahier, et se mit à lire avec force gestes et l'accentuation exagérée de la plaidoirie une oraison en latin où toutes les preuves du procès s'échafaudaient sur des périphrases cicéroniennes flanquées de citations de Plaute, son comique favori. Nous regrettons de ne pouvoir offrir à nos lecteurs ce morceau remarquable. L'orateur le débitait avec une action merveilleuse. Il n'avait pas achevé l'exorde, que déjà la sueur lui sortait du front et les yeux de la tête.

Tout à coup, au beau milieu d'une période, il s'interrompit, et son regard, d'ordinaire assez doux et même assez bête, devint foudroyant.

«Messieurs, s’écria-t-il (cette fois en français, car ce n’était pas dans le cahier), Satan est tellement mêlé dans cette affaire que le voilà qui assiste à nos débats et fait singerie de leur majesté. Voyez!»

En parlant ainsi, il désignait de la main la petite chèvre, qui, voyant gesticuler Charmolue, avait cru en effet qu’il était à propos d’en faire autant, et s’était assise sur le derrière, reproduisant de son mieux, avec ses pattes de devant et sa tête barbue, la pantomime pathétique du procureur du roi en cour d’église. C’était, si l’on s’en souvient, un de ses plus gentils talents. Cet incident, cette dernière *preuve*, fit grand effet. On lia les pattes à la chèvre, et le procureur du roi reprit le fil de son éloquence.

Cela fut très long, mais la péroraison était admirable. En voici la dernière phrase; qu’on y ajoute la voix enrouée et le geste essoufflé de maître Charmolue:

«*Ideo, Domni, coram stryga demonstrata, crimine patente, intentione criminis existente, in nomine sanctæ ecclesiæ Nostræ-Dominæ Parisiensis, quæ est in saisina habendi omnimodam altam et bassam justitiam in illa hac intemerata Civitatis insula, tenore præsentium declaramus nos requirere, primo, aliquandam pecuniarium indemnitatem; secundo, amendationem honorabilem ante portalium maximum Nostræ-Dominæ, ecclesia cathedralis; tertio, sententiam in virtute cujus ista stryga cum sua capella, seu in trivio vulgariter dicto la Grève, seu in insula exeunte in fluvio Sequanæ, juxta pointam jardini regalis, executatæ sint*!»

Il remit son bonnet, et se rassit.

«*Eheu*! soupira Gringoire navré, *bassa latinitas*!»

Un autre homme en robe noire se leva près de l’accusée. C’était son avocat. Les juges, à jeun, commencèrent à murmurer.

«Avocat, soyez bref, dit le président.

— Monsieur le président, répondit l’avocat, puisque la défenderesse a confessé le crime, je n’ai plus qu’un mot à dire à messieurs. Voici un texte de la loi salique: «Si une stryge a mangé un homme, et qu’elle en soit convaincue, elle paiera une amende de huit mille deniers, qui font deux cents sous d’or.» Plaise à la chambre condamner ma cliente à l’amende.

— Texte abrogé, dit l’avocat du roi extraordinaire.

— *Nego*, répliqua l’avocat.

— Aux voix! dit un conseiller; le crime est patent, et il est tard.»

On alla aux voix sans quitter la salle. Les juges *opinèrent du bonnet*, ils étaient pressés. On voyait leurs têtes chaperonnées se découvrir l’une après l’autre dans l’ombre à la question lugubre que leur adressait tout bas le président. La pauvre accusée avait l’air de les regarder, mais son œil trouble ne voyait plus.

Puis le greffier se mit à écrire; puis il passa au président un long parchemin.

Alors la malheureuse entendit le peuple se remuer, les piques s’entre-choquer et une voix glaciale qui disait:

«Fille bohème, le jour qu’il plaira au roi notre sire, à l’heure de midi, vous serez menée dans un tombereau, en chemise, pieds nus, la corde au cou, devant le grand portail de Notre-Dame, et y ferez amende honorable avec une torche de cire du poids de deux livres à la main, et de là serez menée en place de Grève, où vous serez pendue et étranglée au gibet de la ville; et cette votre chèvre pareillement; et paierez à l’official trois lions d’or, en réparation des crimes, par vous commis et par vous confessés, de sorcellerie, de magie, de luxure et de meurtre sur la personne du sieur Phoebus de Châteaupers, Dieu ait votre âme!

— Oh! c’est un rêve!» murmura-t-elle, et elle sentit de rudes mains qui l’emportaient.

IV

«LASCIATE OGNI SPERANZAI»

Au moyen âge, quand un édifice était complet, il y en avait presque autant dans la terre que dehors. À moins d’être bâtis sur pilotis, comme Notre-Dame, un palais, une forteresse, une église avaient toujours un double fond. Dans les cathédrales, c’était en quelque sorte une autre cathédrale souterraine, basse, obscure, mystérieuse, aveugle et muette, sous la nef supérieure qui regorgeait de lumière et retentissait d’orgues et de cloches jour et nuit; quelquefois c’était un sépulcre. Dans les palais, dans les bastilles, c’était une prison, quelquefois aussi un sépulcre, quelquefois les deux ensemble. Ces puissantes bâtisses, dont nous avons expliqué ailleurs le mode de formation et de *végétation*, n’avaient pas simplement des fondations, mais, pour ainsi dire, des racines qui s’allaient ramifiant dans le sol en chambres, en galeries, en escaliers comme la construction d’en haut. Ainsi, églises, palais, bastilles avaient de la terre à mi-corps. Les caves d’un édifice étaient un autre édifice où l’on descendait au lieu de monter, et qui appliquait ses étages souterrains sous le monceau d’étages extérieurs du monument, comme ces forêts et ces montagnes qui se renversent dans l’eau miroitante d’un lac au-dessous des forêts et des montagnes du bord.

À la bastille Saint-Antoine, au Palais de Justice de Paris, au Louvre, ces édifices souterrains étaient des prisons. Les étages de ces prisons, en s’enfonçant dans le sol, allaient se rétrécissant et s’assombrissant. C’étaient autant de zones où s’échelonnaient les nuances de l’horreur. Dante n’a rien pu trouver de mieux pour son enfer. Ces entonnoirs de cachots aboutissaient d’ordinaire à un cul de basse-fosse à fond de cuve où Dante a mis Satan, où la société mettait le condamné à mort. Une fois une misérable existence enterrée là, adieu le jour, l’air, la vie, *ogni speranza*. Elle n’en sortait que pour le gibet ou le bûcher. Quelquefois elle y pourrissait. La justice humaine appelait cela oublier. Entre les hommes et lui, le condamné sentait peser sur sa tête un entassement de pierres et de geôliers, et la prison tout entière, la massive bastille n’était plus qu’une énorme serrure compliquée qui le cadenassait hors du monde vivant.

C’est dans un fond de cuve de ce genre, dans les oubliettes creusées par saint Louis, dans *l’in-pace* de la Tournelle, qu’on avait, de peur d’évasion sans doute, déposé la Esmeralda condamnée au gibet, avec le colossal Palais de Justice sur la tête. Pauvre mouche qui n’eût pu remuer le moindre de ses moellons!

Certes, la providence et la société avaient été également injustes, un tel luxe de malheur et de torture n’était pas nécessaire pour briser une si frêle créature.

Elle était là, perdue dans les ténèbres, ensevelie, enfouie, murée. Qui l’eût pu voir en cet état, après l’avoir vue rire et danser au soleil, eût frémi. Froide comme la nuit, froide comme la mort, plus un souffle d’air dans ses cheveux, plus un bruit humain à son oreille, plus une lueur de jour dans ses yeux, brisée en deux, écrasée de chaînes, accroupie près d’une cruche et d’un pain sur un peu de paille dans la mare d’eau qui se formait sous elle des suintements du cachot, sans mouvement, presque sans haleine, elle n’en était même plus à souffrir. Phoebus, le soleil, midi, le grand air, les rues de Paris, les danses aux applaudissements, les doux babillages d’amour avec l’officier, puis le prêtre, la matrulle, le poignard, le sang, la torture, le gibet, tout cela repassait bien encore dans son esprit, tantôt comme une vision chantante et dorée, tantôt comme un cauchemar difforme; mais ce n’était plus qu’une lutte horrible et vague qui se perdait dans les ténèbres, ou qu’une musique lointaine qui se jouait là-haut sur la terre, et qu’on n’entendait plus à la profondeur où la malheureuse était tombée.

Depuis qu’elle était là, elle ne veillait ni ne dormait. Dans cette infortune, dans ce cachot, elle ne pouvait pas plus distinguer la veille du sommeil, le rêve de la réalité, que le jour de la nuit. Tout cela était mêlé, brisé, flottant, répandu confusément dans sa pensée. Elle ne sentait plus, elle ne savait plus, elle ne pensait plus. Tout au plus elle songeait. Jamais créature vivante n’avait été engagée si avant dans le néant.

Ainsi engourdie, gelée, pétrifiée, à peine avait-elle remarqué deux ou trois fois le bruit d’une trappe qui s’était ouverte quelque part au-dessus d’elle, sans même laisser passer un peu de lumière, et par laquelle une main lui avait jeté une croûte de pain noir. C’était pourtant l’unique communication qui lui restât avec les hommes, la visite périodique du geôlier.

Une seule chose occupait encore machinalement son oreille: au-dessus de sa tête l’humidité filtrait à travers les pierres moisies de la voûte, et à intervalles égaux une goutte d’eau s’en détachait. Elle écoutait stupidement le bruit que faisait cette goutte d’eau en tombant dans la mare à côté d’elle.

Cette goutte d’eau tombant dans cette mare, c’était là le seul mouvement qui remuât encore autour d’elle, la seule horloge qui marquât le temps, le seul bruit qui vînt jusqu’à elle de tout le bruit qui se fait sur la surface de la terre.

Pour tout dire, elle sentait aussi de temps en temps, dans ce cloaque de fange et de ténèbres, quelque chose de froid qui lui passait çà et là sur le pied ou sur le bras, et elle frissonnait.

Depuis combien de temps y était-elle, elle ne le savait. Elle avait souvenir d’un arrêt de mort prononcé quelque part contre quelqu’un, puis qu’on l’avait emportée, elle, et qu’elle s’était réveillée dans la nuit et dans le silence, glacée. Elle s’était traînée sur les mains, alors des anneaux de fer lui avaient coupé la cheville du pied, et des chaînes avaient sonné. Elle avait reconnu que tout était muraille autour d’elle, qu’il y avait au-dessous d’elle une dalle couverte d’eau et une botte de paille. Mais ni lampe, ni soupirail. Alors, elle s’était assise sur cette paille, et quelquefois, pour changer de posture, sur la dernière marche d’un degré de pierre qu’il y avait dans son cachot.

Un moment, elle avait essayé de compter les noires minutes que lui mesurait la goutte d’eau, mais bientôt ce triste travail d’un cerveau malade s’était rompu de lui-même dans sa tête et l’avait laissée dans la stupeur.

Un jour enfin ou une nuit (car minuit et midi avaient même couleur dans ce sépulcre), elle entendit au-dessus d’elle un bruit plus fort que celui que faisait d’ordinaire le guichetier quand il lui apportait son pain et sa cruche. Elle leva la tête, et vit un rayon rougeâtre passer à travers les fentes de l’espèce de porte ou de trappe pratiquée dans la voûte de *l’in-pace*. En même temps la lourde ferrure cria, la trappe grinça sur ses gonds rouillés, tourna, et elle vit une lanterne, une main et la partie inférieure du corps de deux hommes, la porte étant trop basse pour qu’elle pût apercevoir leurs têtes. La lumière la blessa si vivement qu’elle ferma les yeux.

Quand elle les rouvrit, la porte était refermée, le falot était posé sur un degré de l’escalier, un homme, seul, était debout devant elle. Une cagoule noire lui tombait jusqu’aux pieds, un caffardum de même couleur lui cachait le visage. On ne voyait rien de sa personne, ni sa face ni ses mains. C’était un long suaire noir qui se tenait debout, et sous lequel on sentait remuer quelque chose. Elle regarda fixement quelques minutes cette espèce de spectre. Cependant, elle ni lui ne parlaient. On eût dit deux statues qui se confrontaient. Deux choses seulement semblaient vivre dans le caveau; la mèche de la lanterne qui pétillait à cause de l’humidité de l’atmosphère, et la goutte d’eau de la voûte qui coupait cette crépitation irrégulière de son clapotement monotone et faisait trembler la lumière de la lanterne en moires concentriques sur l’eau huileuse de la mare.

Enfin la prisonnière rompit le silence:

«Qui êtes-vous?

— Un prêtre.»

Le mot, l’accent, le son de voix, la firent tressaillir.

Le prêtre poursuivit en articulant sourdement:

«Êtes-vous préparée?

— À quoi?

— À mourir.

— Oh! dit-elle, sera-ce bientôt?

— Demain.»

Sa tête, qui s’était levée avec joie, revint frapper sa poitrine. «C’est encore bien long! murmura-t-elle; qu’est-ce que cela leur faisait, aujourd’hui?

— Vous êtes donc très malheureuse? demanda le prêtre après un silence.

— J’ai bien froid», répondit-elle.

Elle prit ses pieds avec ses mains, geste habituel aux malheureux qui ont froid et que nous avons déjà vu faire à la recluse de la Tour-Roland, et ses dents claquaient.

Le prêtre parut promener de dessous son capuchon ses yeux dans le cachot.

«Sans lumière! sans feu! dans l’eau! c’est horrible!

— Oui, répondit-elle avec l’air étonné que le malheur lui avait donné. Le jour est à tout le monde. Pourquoi ne me donne-t-on que la nuit?

— Savez-vous, reprit le prêtre après un nouveau silence, pourquoi vous êtes ici?

— Je crois que je l’ai su, dit-elle en passant ses doigts maigres sur ses sourcils comme pour aider sa mémoire, mais je ne le sais plus.»

Tout à coup elle se mit à pleurer comme un enfant.

«Je voudrais sortir d’ici, monsieur. J’ai froid, j’ai peur, et il y a des bêtes qui me montent le long du corps.

— Eh bien, suivez-moi.»

En parlant ainsi, le prêtre lui prit le bras. La malheureuse était gelée jusque dans les entrailles, cependant cette main lui fit une impression de froid.

«Oh! murmura-t-elle, c’est la main glacée de la mort. — Qui êtes-vous donc?»

Le prêtre releva son capuchon. Elle regarda. C’était ce visage sinistre qui la poursuivait depuis si longtemps, cette tête de démon qui lui était apparue chez la Falourdel au-dessus de la tête adorée de son Phoebus, cet œil qu’elle avait vu pour la dernière fois briller près d’un poignard.

Cette apparition, toujours si fatale pour elle, et qui l’avait ainsi poussée de malheur en malheur jusqu’au supplice, la tira de son engourdissement. Il lui sembla que l’espèce de voile qui s’était épaissi sur sa mémoire se déchirait. Tous les détails de sa lugubre aventure, depuis la scène nocturne chez la Falourdel jusqu’à sa condamnation à la Tournelle, lui revinrent à la fois dans l’esprit, non pas vagues et confus comme jusqu’alors, mais distincts, crus, tranchés, palpitants, terribles. Ces souvenirs à demi effacés, et presque oblitérés par l’excès de la souffrance, la sombre figure qu’elle avait devant elle les raviva, comme l’approche du feu fait ressortir toutes fraîches sur le papier blanc les lettres invisibles qu’on y a tracées avec de l’encre sympathique. Il lui sembla que toutes les plaies de son cœur se rouvraient et saignaient à la fois.

«Hah! cria-t-elle, les mains sur ses yeux et avec un tremblement convulsif, c’est le prêtre!»

Puis elle laissa tomber ses bras découragés, et resta assise, la tête baissée, l’œil fixé à terre, muette, et continuant de trembler.

Le prêtre la regardait de l’œil d’un milan qui a longtemps plané en rond du plus haut du ciel autour d’une pauvre alouette tapie dans les blés, qui a longtemps rétréci en silence les cercles formidables de son vol, et tout à coup s’est abattu sur sa proie comme la flèche de l’éclair, et la tient pantelante dans sa griffe.

Elle se mit à murmurer tout bas:

«Achevez! achevez! le dernier coup!» Et elle enfonçait sa tête avec terreur entre ses épaules, comme la brebis qui attend le coup de massue du boucher.

«Je vous fais donc horreur?» dit-il enfin.

Elle ne répondit pas.

«Est-ce que je vous fais horreur?» répéta-t-il.

Ses lèvres se contractèrent comme si elle souriait.

«Oui, dit-elle, le bourreau raille le condamné. Voilà des mois qu’il me poursuit, qu’il me menace, qu’il m’épouvante! Sans lui, mon Dieu, que j’étais heureuse! C’est lui qui m’a jetée dans cet abîme! Ô ciel! c’est lui qui a tué... c’est lui qui l’a tué! mon Phoebus!»

Ici, éclatant en sanglots et levant les yeux sur le prêtre:

«Oh! misérable! qui êtes-vous? que vous ai-je fait? vous me haïssez donc bien? Hélas! qu’avez-vous contre moi?

— Je t’aime!» cria le prêtre.

Ses larmes s’arrêtèrent subitement. Elle le regarda avec un regard d’idiot. Lui était tombé à genoux et la couvait d’un œil de flamme.

«Entends-tu? je t’aime! cria-t-il encore.

— Quel amour!» dit la malheureuse en frémissant.

Il reprit:

«L’amour d’un damné.»

Tous deux restèrent quelques minutes silencieux, écrasés sous la pesanteur de leurs émotions, lui insensé, elle stupide.

«Écoute, dit enfin le prêtre, et un calme singulier lui était revenu. Tu vas tout savoir. Je vais te dire ce que jusqu’ici j’ai à peine osé me dire à moi-même, lorsque j’interrogeais furtivement ma conscience à ces heures profondes de la nuit où il y a tant de ténèbres qu’il semble que Dieu ne nous voit plus. Écoute. Avant de te rencontrer, jeune fille, j’étais heureux...

— Et moi! soupira-t-elle faiblement.

— Ne m’interromps pas. — Oui, j’étais heureux, je croyais l’être du moins. J’étais pur, j’avais l’âme pleine d’une clarté limpide. Pas de tête qui s’élevât plus fière et plus radieuse que la mienne. Les prêtres me consultaient sur la chasteté, les docteurs sur la doctrine. Oui, la science était tout pour moi. C’était une sœur, et une sœur me suffisait. Ce n’est pas qu’avec l’âge il ne me fût venu d’autres idées. Plus d’une fois ma chair s’était émue au passage d’une forme de femme. Cette force du sexe et du sang de l’homme que, fol adolescent, j’avais cru étouffer pour la vie, avait plus d’une fois soulevé convulsivement la chaîne des vœux de fer qui me scellent, misérable, aux froides pierres de l’autel. Mais le jeûne, la prière, l’étude, les macérations du cloître, avaient refait l’âme maîtresse du corps. Et puis, j’évitais les femmes. D’ailleurs, je n’avais qu’à ouvrir un livre pour que toutes les impures fumées de mon cerveau s’évanouissent devant la splendeur de la science. En peu de minutes, je sentais fuir au loin les choses épaisses de la terre, et je me retrouvais calme, ébloui et serein en présence du rayonnement tranquille de la vérité éternelle. Tant que le démon n'envoya pour m'attaquer que de vagues ombres de femmes qui passaient éparses sous mes yeux, dans l'église, dans les rues, dans les prés, et qui revenaient à peine dans mes songes, je le vainquis aisément. Hélas! si la victoire ne m'est pas restée, la faute en est à Dieu, qui n'a pas fait l'homme et le démon de force égale. — Écoute. Un jour...»

Ici le prêtre s'arrêta, et la prisonnière entendit sortir de sa poitrine des soupirs qui faisaient un bruit de râle et d'arrachement.

Il reprit:

«...Un jour, j'étais appuyé à la fenêtre de ma cellule... — Quel livre lisais-je donc? Oh! tout cela est un tourbillon dans ma tête. — Je lisais. La fenêtre donnait sur une place. J'entends un bruit de tambour et de musique. Fâché d'être ainsi troublé dans ma rêverie, je regarde dans la place. Ce que je vis, il y en avait d'autres que moi qui le voyaient, et pourtant ce n'était pas un spectacle fait pour des yeux humains. Là, au milieu du pavé, — il était midi, — un grand soleil, — une créature dansait. Une créature si belle que Dieu l'eût préférée à la Vierge, et l'eût choisie pour sa mère, et eût voulu naître d'elle si elle eût existé quand il se fit homme! Ses yeux étaient noirs et splendides, au milieu de sa chevelure noire quelques cheveux que pénétrait le soleil blondissaient comme des fils d'or. Ses pieds disparaissaient dans leur mouvement comme les rayons d'une roue qui tourne rapidement. Autour de sa tête, dans ses nattes noires, il y avait des plaques de métal qui pétillaient au soleil et faisaient à son front une couronne d'étoiles. Sa robe semée de paillettes scintillait bleue et piquée de mille étincelles comme une nuit d'été. Ses bras souples et bruns se nouaient et se dénouaient autour de sa taille comme deux écharpes. La forme de son corps était surprenante de beauté. Oh! la resplendissante figure qui se détachait comme quelque chose de lumineux dans la lumière même du soleil!... — Hélas! jeune fille, c'était toi. — Surpris, enivré, charmé, je me laissai aller à te regarder. Je te regardai tant que tout à coup je frissonnai d'épouvante, je sentis que le sort me saisissait.»

Le prêtre, oppressé, s'arrêta encore un moment. Puis il continua.

«Déjà à demi fasciné, j'essayai de me cramponner à quelque chose et de me retenir dans ma chute. Je me rappelai les embûches que Satan m'avait déjà tendues. La créature qui était sous mes yeux avait cette beauté surhumaine qui ne peut venir que du ciel ou de l'enfer. Ce n'était pas là une simple fille faite avec un peu de notre terre, et pauvrement éclairée à l’intérieur par le vacillant rayon d’une âme de femme. C’était un ange! mais de ténèbres, mais de flamme et non de lumière. Au moment où je pensais cela, je vis près de toi une chèvre, une bête du sabbat, qui me regardait en riant. Le soleil de midi lui faisait des cornes de feu. Alors j’entrevis le piège du démon, et je ne doutai plus que tu ne vinsses de l’enfer et que tu n’en vinsses pour ma perdition. Je le crus.»

Ici le prêtre regarda en face la prisonnière et ajouta froidement:

«Je le crois encore. — Cependant le charme opérait peu à peu, ta danse me tournoyait dans le cerveau, je sentais le mystérieux maléfice s’accomplir en moi, tout ce qui aurait dû veiller s’endormait dans mon âme, et comme ceux qui meurent dans la neige je trouvais du plaisir à laisser venir ce sommeil. Tout à coup, tu te mis à chanter. Que pouvais-je faire, misérable? Ton chant était plus charmant encore que ta danse. Je voulus fuir. Impossible. J’étais cloué, j’étais enraciné dans le sol. Il me semblait que le marbre de la dalle m’était monté jusqu’aux genoux. Il fallut rester jusqu’au bout. Mes pieds étaient de glace, ma tête bouillonnait. Enfin, tu eus peut-être pitié de moi, tu cessas de chanter, tu disparus. Le reflet de l’éblouissante vision, le retentissement de la musique enchanteresse s’évanouirent par degrés dans mes yeux et dans mes oreilles. Alors je tombai dans l’encoignure de la fenêtre, plus raide et plus faible qu’une statue descellée. La cloche de vêpres me réveilla. Je me relevai, je m’enfuis, mais, hélas! il y avait en moi quelque chose de tombé qui ne pouvait se relever, quelque chose de survenu que je ne pouvais fuir.»

Il fit encore une pause, et poursuivit:

«Oui, à dater de ce jour, il y eut en moi un homme que je ne connaissais pas. Je voulus user de tous mes remèdes, le cloître, l’autel, le travail, les livres. Folie! Oh! que la science sonne creux quand on y vient heurter avec désespoir une tête pleine de passions! Sais-tu, jeune fille, ce que je voyais toujours désormais entre le livre et moi? Toi, ton ombre, l’image de l’apparition lumineuse qui avait un jour traversé l’espace devant moi. Mais cette image n’avait plus la même couleur; elle était sombre, funèbre, ténébreuse comme le cercle noir qui poursuit longtemps la vue de l’imprudent qui a regardé fixement le soleil.

«Ne pouvant m’en débarrasser, entendant toujours ta chanson bourdonner dans ma tête, voyant toujours tes pieds danser sur mon bréviaire, sentant toujours la nuit en songe ta forme glisser sur ma chair, je voulus te revoir, te toucher, savoir qui tu étais, voir si je te retrouverais bien pareille à l’image idéale qui m’était restée de toi, briser peut-être mon rêve avec la réalité. En tout cas, j’espérais qu’une impression nouvelle effacerait la première, et la première m’était devenue insupportable. Je te cherchai. Je te revis. Malheur! Quand je t’eus vue deux fois, je voulus te voir mille, je voulus te voir toujours. Alors, — comment enrayer sur cette pente de l’enfer? — alors je ne m’appartins plus. L’autre bout du fil que le démon m’avait attaché aux ailes, il l’avait noué à ton pied. Je devins vague et errant comme toi. Je t’attendais sous les porches, je t’épiais au coin des rues, je te guettais du haut de ma tour. Chaque soir, je rentrais en moi-même plus charmé, plus désespéré, plus ensorcelé, plus perdu!

«J’avais su qui tu étais, égyptienne, bohémienne, gitane, zingara, comment douter de la magie? Écoute. J’espérai qu’un procès me débarrasserait du charme. Une sorcière avait enchanté Bruno d’Ast, il la fit brûler et fut guéri. Je le savais. Je voulus essayer du remède. J’essayai d’abord de te faire interdire le parvis Notre-Dame, espérant t’oublier si tu ne revenais plus. Tu n’en tins compte. Tu revins. Puis il me vint l’idée de t’enlever. Une nuit je le tentai. Nous étions deux. Nous te tenions déjà, quand ce misérable officier survint. Il te délivra. Il commençait ainsi ton malheur, le mien et le sien. Enfin, ne sachant plus que faire et que devenir, je te dénonçai à l’official. Je pensais que je serais guéri, comme Bruno d’Ast. Je pensais aussi confusément qu’un procès te livrerait à moi, que dans une prison je te tiendrais, je t’aurais, que là tu ne pourrais m’échapper, que tu me possédais depuis assez longtemps pour que je te possédasse aussi à mon tour. Quand on fait le mal, il faut faire tout le mal. Démence de s’arrêter à un milieu dans le monstrueux! L’extrémité du crime a des délires de joie. Un prêtre et une sorcière peuvent s’y fondre en délices sur la botte de paille d’un cachot!

«Je te dénonçai donc. C’est alors que je t’épouvantais dans mes rencontres. Le complot que je tramais contre toi, l’orage que j’amoncelais sur ta tête s’échappait de moi en menaces et en éclairs. Cependant j’hésitais encore. Mon projet avait des côtés effroyables qui me faisaient reculer.

«Peut-être y aurais-je renoncé, peut-être ma hideuse pensée se serait-elle desséchée dans mon cerveau sans porter son fruit. Je croyais qu’il dépendrait toujours de moi de suivre ou de rompre ce procès. Mais toute mauvaise pensée est inexorable et veut devenir un fait; mais là où je me croyais tout-puissant, la fatalité était plus puissante que moi. Hélas! hélas!

c’est elle qui t’a prise et qui t’a livrée au rouage terrible de la machine que j’avais ténébreusement construite! — Écoute. Je touche à la fin.

«Un jour, — par un autre beau soleil, — je vois passer devant moi un homme qui prononce ton nom et qui rit et qui a la luxure dans les yeux. Damnation! je l’ai suivi. Tu sais le reste.»

Il se tut.

La jeune fille ne put trouver qu’une parole:

«Ô mon Phoebus!

— Pas ce nom! dit le prêtre en lui saisissant le brai avec violence. Ne prononce pas ce nom! Oh! misérables que nous sommes, c’est ce nom qui nous a perdus! Ou plutôt nous nous sommes tous perdus les uns les autres par l’inexplicable jeu de la fatalité! — Tu souffres, n’est-ce pas? tu as froid, la nuit te fait aveugle, le cachot t’enveloppe, mais peut-être as-tu encore quelque lumière au fond de toi, ne fût-ce que ton amour d’enfant pour cet homme vide qui jouait avec ton cœur! Tandis que moi, je porte le cachot au dedans de moi, au dedans de moi est l’hiver, la glace, le désespoir, j’ai la nuit dans l’âme. Sais-tu tout ce que j’ai souffert? J’ai assisté à ton procès. J’étais assis sur le banc de l’official. Oui, sous l’un de ces capuces de prêtre, il y avait les contorsions d’un damné. Quand on t’a amenée, j’étais là; quand on t’a interrogée, j’étais là. — Caverne de loups! — C’était mon crime, c’était mon gibet que je voyais se dresser lentement sur ton front. À chaque témoin, à chaque preuve, à chaque plaidoirie, j’étais là; j’ai pu compter chacun de tes pas dans la voie douloureuse; j’étais là encore quand cette bête féroce... — Oh! je n’avais pas prévu la torture! — Écoute. Je t’ai suivie dans la chambre de douleur. Je t’ai vu déshabiller et manier demi-nue par les mains infâmes du tourmenteur. J’ai vu ton pied, ce pied où j’eusse voulu pour un empire déposer un seul baiser et mourir, ce pied sous lequel je sentirais avec tant de délices s’écraser ma tête, je l’ai vu enserrer dans l’horrible brodequin qui fait des membres d’un être vivant une boue sanglante. Oh! misérable! pendant que je voyais cela, j’avais sous mon suaire un poignard dont je me labourais la poitrine. Au cri que tu as poussé, je l’ai enfoncé dans ma chair; à un second cri, il m’entrait dans le cœur! Regarde. Je crois que cela saigne encore.»

Il ouvrit sa soutane. Sa poitrine en effet était déchirée comme par une griffe de tigre, et il avait au flanc une plaie allez large et mal fermée.

La prisonnière recula d’horreur.

«Oh! dit le prêtre, jeune fille, aie pitié de moi! Tu te crois malheureuse, hélas! hélas! tu ne sais pas ce que c'est que le malheur. Oh! aimer une femme! être prêtre! être haï! l'aimer de toutes les fureurs de son âme, sentir qu'on donnerait pour le moindre de ses sourires son sang, ses entrailles, sa renommée, son salut, l'immortalité et l'éternité, cette vie et l'autre; regretter de ne pas être roi, génie, empereur, archange, dieu, pour lui mettre un plus grand esclave sous les pieds; l'étreindre nuit et jour de ses rêves et de ses pensées; et la voir amoureuse d'une livrée de soldat! et n'avoir à lui offrir qu'une sale soutane de prêtre dont elle aura peur et dégoût! Être présent, avec sa jalousie et sa rage, tandis qu'elle prodigue à un misérable fanfaron imbécile des trésors d'amour et de beauté! Voir ce corps dont la forme vous brûle, ce sein qui a tant de douceur, cette chair palpiter et rougir sous les baisers d'un autre! Ô ciel! aimer son pied, son bras, son épaule, songer à ses veines bleues, à sa peau brune, jusqu'à s'en tordre des nuits entières sur le pavé de sa cellule, et voir toutes les caresses qu'on a rêvées pour elle aboutir à la torture! N'avoir réussi qu'à la coucher sur le lit de cuir! Oh! ce sont là les véritables tenailles rougies au feu de l'enfer! Oh! bienheureux celui qu'on scie entre deux planches, et qu'on écartèle à quatre chevaux! — Sais-tu ce que c'est que ce supplice que vous font subir, durant les longues nuits, vos artères qui bouillonnent, votre cœur qui crève, votre tête qui rompt, vos dents qui mordent vos mains; tourmenteurs acharnés qui vous retournent sans relâche, comme sur un gril ardent, sur une pensée d'amour, de jalousie et de désespoir! Jeune fille, grâce! trêve un moment! un peu de cendre sur cette braise! Essuie, je t'en conjure, la sueur qui ruisselle à grosses gouttes de mon front! Enfant! torture-moi d'une main, mais caresse-moi de l'autre! Aie pitié, jeune fille! aie pitié de moi!»

Le prêtre se roulait dans l'eau de la dalle et se martelait le crâne aux angles des marches de pierre. La jeune fille l'écoutait, le regardait.

Quand il se tut, épuisé et haletant, elle répéta à demi-voix:

«Ô mon Phoebus!»

Le prêtre se traîna vers elle à deux genoux.

«Je t'en supplie, cria-t-il, si tu as des entrailles, ne me repousse pas! Oh! je t'aime! je suis un misérable! Quand tu dis ce nom, malheureuse, c'est comme si tu broyais entre tes dents toutes les fibres de mon cœur! Grâce! si tu viens de l'enfer, j'y vais avec toi. J'ai tout fait pour cela. L'enfer où tu seras, c'est mon paradis, ta vue est plus charmante que celle de Dieu! Oh! dis! tu ne veux donc pas de moi? Le jour où une femme repousserait un pareil amour, j’aurais cru que les montagnes remueraient. Oh! si tu voulais!... Oh! que nous pourrions être heureux! Nous fuirions, — je te ferais fuir, — nous irions quelque part, nous chercherions l’endroit sur la terre où il y a le plus de soleil, le plus d’arbres, le plus de ciel bleu. Nous nous aimerions, nous verserions nos deux âmes l’une dans l’autre, et nous aurions une soif inextinguible de nous-mêmes que nous étancherions en commun et sans cesse à cette coupe d’intarissable amour!»

Elle l’interrompit avec un rire terrible et éclatant.

«Regardez donc, mon père! vous avez du sang après les ongles!»

Le prêtre demeura quelques instants comme pétrifié, l’œil fixé sur sa main.

«Eh bien, oui! reprit-il enfin avec une douceur étrange, outrage-moi, raille-moi, accable-moi! mais viens, viens. Hâtons-nous. C’est pour demain, te dis-je. Le gibet de la Grève, tu sais? il est toujours prêt. C’est horrible! te voir marcher dans ce tombereau! Oh! grâce! — Je n’avais jamais senti comme à présent à quel point je t’aimais. Oh! suis-moi. Tu prendras le temps de m’aimer après que je t’aurai sauvée. Tu me haïras aussi longtemps que tu voudras. Mais viens. Demain! demain! le gibet! ton supplice! Oh! sauve-toi! épargne-moi!»

Il lui prit le bras, il était égaré, il voulut l’entraîner.

Elle attacha sur lui son œil fixe.

«Qu’est devenu mon Phoebus?

— Ah! dit le prêtre en lui lâchant le bras, vous êtes sans pitié!

— Qu’est devenu Phoebus? répéta-t-elle froidement.

— Il est mort! cria le prêtre.

— Mort! dit-elle toujours glaciale et immobile; alors que me parlez-vous de vivre?»

Lui ne l’écoutait pas.

«Oh! oui, disait-il comme se parlant à lui-même, il doit être bien mort. La lame est entrée très avant. Je crois que j’ai touché le cœur avec la pointe. Oh! je vivais jusqu’au bout du poignard!»

La jeune fille se jeta sur lui comme une tigresse furieuse, et le poussa sur les marches de l’escalier avec une force surnaturelle.

«Va-t’en, monstre! va-t’en, assassin! laisse-moi mourir! Que notre sang à tous deux te fasse au front une tache éternelle! Être à toi, prêtre! jamais! jamais! Rien ne nous réunira, pas même l’enfer! Va, maudit! jamais!»

Le prêtre avait trébuché à l’escalier. Il dégagea en silence ses pieds des plis de sa robe, reprit sa lanterne, et se mit à monter lentement les marches qui menaient à la porte; il rouvrit cette porte, et sortit.

Tout à coup la jeune fille vit reparaître sa tête, elle avait une expression épouvantable, et il lui cria avec un râle de rage et de désespoir:

«Je te dis qu’il est mort!»

Elle tomba la face contre terre; et l’on n’entendit plus dans le cachot d’autre bruit que le soupir de la goutte d’eau qui faisait palpiter la mare dans les ténèbres.

V

LA MÈRE

Je ne crois pas qu'il y ait rien au monde de plus riant que les idées qui s'éveillent dans le cœur d'une mère à la vue du petit soulier de son enfant. Surtout si c'est le soulier de fête, des dimanches, du baptême, le soulier brodé jusque sous la semelle, un soulier avec lequel l'enfant n'a pas encore fait un pas. Ce soulier-là a tant de grâce et de petitesse, il lui est si impossible de marcher, que c'est pour la mère comme si elle voyait son enfant. Elle lui sourit, elle le baise, elle lui parle. Elle se demande s'il se peut en effet qu'un pied soit si petit; et, l'enfant fût-il absent, il suffit du joli soulier pour lui remettre sous les yeux la douce et fragile créature. Elle croit le voir, elle le voit, tout entier, vivant, joyeux, avec ses mains délicates, sa tête ronde, ses lèvres pures, ses yeux sereins dont le blanc est bleu. Si c'est l'hiver, il est là, il rampe sur le tapis, il escalade laborieusement un tabouret, et la mère tremble qu'il n'approche du feu. Si c'est l'été, il se traîne dans la cour, dans le jardin, arrache l'herbe d'entre les pavés, regarde naïvement les grands chiens, les grands chevaux, sans peur, joue avec les coquillages, avec les fleurs, et fait gronder le jardinier qui trouve le sable dans les plates-bandes et la terre dans les allées. Tout rit, tout brille, tout joue autour de lui comme lui, jusqu'au souffle d'air et au rayon de soleil qui s'ébattent à l'envi dans les boucles follettes de ses cheveux. Le soulier montre tout cela à la mère et lui fait fondre le cœur comme le feu une cire.

Mais quand l'enfant est perdu, ces mille images de joie, de charme, de tendresse qui se pressent autour du petit soulier deviennent autant de choses horribles. Le joli soulier brodé n'est plus qu'un instrument de torture qui broie éternellement le cœur de la mère. C'est toujours la même fibre qui vibre, la fibre la plus profonde et la plus sensible; mais au lieu d'un ange qui la caresse, c'est un démon qui la pince.

Un matin, tandis que le soleil de mai se levait dans un de ces ciels bleu foncé où le Garofalo aime à placer ses descentes de croix, la recluse de la Tour-Roland entendit un bruit de roues, de chevaux et de ferrailles dans la place de Grève. Elle s'en éveilla peu, noua ses cheveux sur ses oreilles pour s'assourdir, et se remit à contempler à genoux l'objet inanimé qu'elle adorait ainsi depuis quinze ans. Ce petit soulier, nous l'avons déjà dit, était pour elle l’univers. Sa pensée y était enfermée, et n’en devait plus sortir qu’à la mort. Ce qu’elle avait jeté vers le ciel d’imprécations amères, de plaintes touchantes, de prières et de sanglots, à propos de ce charmant hochet de satin rose, la sombre cave de la Tour-Roland seule l’a su. Jamais plus de désespoir n’a été répandu sur une chose plus gentille et plus gracieuse.

Ce matin-là, il semblait que sa douleur s’échappait plus violente encore qu’à l’ordinaire, et on l’entendait du dehors se lamenter avec une voix haute et monotone qui navrait le cœur.

«Ô ma fille! disait-elle, ma fille! ma pauvre chère petite enfant! je ne te verrai donc plus. C’est donc fini! Il me semble toujours que cela s’est fait hier! Mon Dieu, mon Dieu, pour me la reprendre si vite, il valait mieux ne pas me la donner. Vous ne savez donc pas que nos enfants tiennent à notre ventre, et qu’une mère qui a perdu son enfant ne croit plus en Dieu? — Ah! misérable que je suis, d’être sortie ce jour-là! — Seigneur! Seigneur! pour me l’ôter ainsi, vous ne m’aviez donc jamais regardée avec elle, lorsque je la réchauffais toute joyeuse à mon feu, lorsqu’elle me riait en me tétant, lorsque je faisais monter ses petits pieds sur ma poitrine jusqu’à mes lèvres? Oh! si vous aviez regardé cela, mon Dieu, vous auriez eu pitié de ma joie, vous ne m’auriez pas ôté le seul amour qui me restât dans le cœur! Étais-je donc une si misérable créature, Seigneur, que vous ne pussiez me regarder avant de me condamner? — Hélas! hélas! voilà le soulier; le pied, où est-il? où est le reste? où est l’enfant? Ma fille, ma fille! qu’ont-ils fait de toi? Seigneur, rendez-la-moi. Mes genoux se sont écorchés quinze ans à vous prier, mon Dieu, est-ce que ce n’est pas assez? Rendez-la-moi, un jour, une heure, une minute, une minute, Seigneur! et jetez-moi ensuite au démon pour l’éternité! Oh! si je savais où traîne un pan de votre robe, je m’y cramponnerais de mes deux mains, et il faudrait bien que vous me rendissiez mon enfant! Son joli petit soulier, est-ce que vous n’en avez pas pitié, Seigneur? Pouvez-vous condamner une pauvre mère à ce supplice de quinze ans? Bonne Vierge! bonne Vierge du ciel! mon enfant-Jésus à moi, on me l’a pris, on me l’a volé, on l’a mangé sur une bruyère, on a bu son sang, on a mâché ses os! Bonne Vierge, ayez pitié de moi! Ma fille! il me faut ma fille! Qu’est-ce que cela me fait, qu’elle soit dans le paradis? je ne veux pas de votre ange, je veux mon enfant! Je suis une lionne, je veux mon lionceau. — Oh! je me tordrai sur la terre, et je briserai la pierre avec mon front, et je me damnerai, et je vous maudirai, Seigneur, si vous me gardez mon enfant! vous voyez bien que j'ai les bras tout mordus, Seigneur! est-ce que le bon Dieu n'a pas de pitié? — Oh! ne me donnez que du sel et du pain noir, pourvu que j'aie ma fille et qu'elle me réchauffe comme un soleil! Hélas! Dieu mon Seigneur, je ne suis qu'une vile pécheresse; mais ma fille me rendait pieuse. J'étais pleine de religion pour l'amour d'elle; et je vous voyais à travers son sourire comme par une ouverture du ciel. — Oh! que je puisse seulement une fois, encore une fois, une seule fois, chausser ce soulier à son joli petit pied rose, et je meurs, bonne Vierge, en vous bénissant! — Ah! quinze ans! elle serait grande maintenant! — Malheureuse enfant! quoi! c'est donc bien vrai, je ne la reverrai plus, pas même dans le ciel! car, moi, je n'irai pas. Oh quelle misère! dire que voilà son soulier, et que c'est tout!»

La malheureuse s'était jetée sur ce soulier, sa consolation et son désespoir depuis tant d'années, et ses entrailles se déchiraient en sanglots comme le premier jour. Car pour une mère qui a perdu son enfant, c'est toujours le premier jour. Cette douleur-là ne vieillit pas. Les habits de deuil ont beau s'user et blanchir: le cœur reste noir.

En ce moment, de fraîches et joyeuses voix d'enfants passèrent devant la cellule. Toutes les fois que des enfants frappaient sa vue ou son oreille, la pauvre mère se précipitait dans l'angle le plus sombre de son sépulcre, et l'on eût dit qu'elle cherchait à plonger sa tête dans la pierre pour ne pas les entendre. Cette fois, au contraire, elle se dressa comme en sursaut, et écouta avidement. Un des petits garçons venait de dire: «C'est qu'on va pendre une égyptienne aujourd'hui.»

Avec le brusque soubresaut de cette araignée que nous avons vue se jeter sur une mouche au tremblement de sa toile, elle courut à sa lucarne, qui donnait, comme on sait, sur la place de Grève. En effet, une échelle était dressée près du gibet permanent, et le maître des basses-œuvres s'occupait d'en rajuster les chaînes rouillées par la pluie. Il y avait quelque peuple alentour.

Le groupe rieur des enfants était déjà loin. La sachette chercha des yeux un passant qu'elle pût interroger. Elle avisa, tout à côté de sa loge, un prêtre qui faisait semblant de lire dans le bréviaire public, mais qui était beaucoup moins occupé du *lettrain de fer treillissé* que du gibet, vers lequel il jetait de temps à autre un sombre et farouche coup d'œil. Elle reconnut monsieur l'archidiacre de Josas, un saint homme.

«Mon père, demanda-t-elle, qui va-t-on pendre là?»

Le prêtre la regarda et ne répondit pas; elle répéta sa question. Alors il dit: «Je ne sais pas.

— Il y avait là des enfants qui disaient que c’était une égyptienne, reprit la recluse.

— Je crois qu’oui», dit le prêtre.

Alors Paquette la Chantefleurie éclata d’un rire d’hyène.

«Ma sœur, dit l’archidiacre, vous haïssez donc bien les égyptiennes?

— Si je les hais? s’écria la recluse; ce sont des stryges! des voleuses d’enfants! Elles m’ont dévoré ma petite fille! mon enfant, mon unique enfant! Je n’ai plus de cœur. Elles me l’ont mangé!»

Elle était effrayante. Le prêtre la regardait froidement.

«Il y en a une surtout que je hais, et que j’ai maudite, reprit-elle; c’en est une jeune, qui a l’âge que ma fille aurait, si sa mère ne m’avait pas mangé ma fille. Chaque fois que cette jeune vipère passe devant ma cellule, elle me bouleverse le sang!

— Eh bien! ma sœur, réjouissez-vous, dit le prêtre, glacial comme une statue de sépulcre, c’est celle-là que vous allez voir mourir.»

Sa tête tomba sur sa poitrine, et il s’éloigna lentement.

La recluse se tordit les bras de joie.

«Je le lui avait prédit, qu’elle y monterait! Merci, prêtre!» cria-t-elle.

Et elle se mit à se promener à grands pas devant les barreaux de sa lucarne, échevelée, l’œil flamboyant, heurtant le mur de son épaule, avec l’air fauve d’une louve en cage qui a faim depuis longtemps et qui sent approcher l’heure du repas.

VI

TROIS CŒURS D'HOMME FAITS DIFFÉREMMENT

Phoebus, cependant, n'était pas mort. Les hommes de cette espèce ont la vie dure. Quand maître Philippe Lheulier, avocat extraordinaire du roi, avait dit à la pauvre Esmeralda: *Il se meurt*, c'était par erreur ou par plaisanterie. Quand l'archidiacre avait répété à la condamnée: *Il est mort*, le fait est qu'il n'en savait rien, mais qu'il le croyait, qu'il y comptait, qu'il n'en doutait pas, qu'il l'espérait bien. Il lui eût été par trop dur de donner à la femme qu'il aimait de bonnes nouvelles de son rival. Tout homme à sa place en eût fait autant.

Ce n'est pas que la blessure de Phoebus n'eût été grave, mais elle l'avait été moins que l'archidiacre ne s'en flattait. Le maître-myrrhe, chez lequel les soldats du guet l'avaient transporté dans le premier moment, avait craint huit jours pour sa vie, et le lui avait même dit en latin. Toutefois, la jeunesse avait repris le dessus; et, chose qui arrive souvent, nonobstant pronostics et diagnostics, la nature s'était amusée à sauver le malade à la barbe du médecin. C'est tandis qu'il gisait encore sur le grabat du maître-myrrhe qu'il avait subi les premiers interrogatoires de Philippe Lheulier et des enquêteurs de l'official, ce qui l'avait fort ennuyé. Aussi, un beau matin, se sentant mieux, il avait laissé ses éperons d'or en paiement au pharmacopole, et s'était esquivé. Cela, du reste, n'avait apporté aucun trouble à l'instruction de l'affaire. La justice d'alors se souciait fort peu de la netteté et de la propreté d'un procès au criminel. Pourvu que l'accusé fût pendu, c'est tout ce qu'il lui fallait. Or, les juges avaient assez de preuves contre la Esmeralda. Ils avaient cru Phoebus mort, et tout avait été dit.

Phoebus, de son côté, n'avait pas fait une grande fuite. Il était allé tout simplement rejoindre sa compagnie, en garnison à Queue-en-Brie, dans l'Ile-de-france, à quelques relais de Paris.

Après tout, il ne lui agréait nullement de comparaître en personne dans ce procès. Il sentait vaguement qu'il y ferait une mine ridicule. Au fond, il ne savait trop que penser de toute l'affaire. Indévot et superstitieux, comme tout soldat qui n'est que soldat, quand il se questionnait sur cette aventure, il n'était pas rassuré sur la chèvre, sur la façon bizarre dont il avait fait rencontre de la Esmeralda, sur la manière non moins étrange dont elle lui avait laissé deviner son amour, sur sa qualité d’égyptienne, enfin sur le moine bourru. Il entrevoyait dans cette histoire beaucoup plus de magie que d’amour, probablement une sorcière, peut-être le diable; une comédie enfin, ou, pour parler le langage d’alors, un mystère très désagréable où il jouait un rôle fort gauche, le rôle des coups et des risées. Le capitaine en était tout penaud. Il éprouvait cette espèce de honte que notre La Fontaine a définie si admirablement:

Honteux comme un renard qu’une poule aurait pris.

Il espérait d’ailleurs que l’affaire ne s’ébruiterait pas, que son nom, lui absent, y serait à peine prononcé et en tout cas ne retentirait pas au delà du plaid de la Tournelle. En cela il ne se trompait point, il n’y avait pas alors de *Gazette des Tribunaux* et comme il ne se passait guère de semaine qui n’eût son faux-monnayeur bouilli, ou sa sorcière pendue, ou son hérétique brûlé à l’une des innombrables *justices* de Paris, on était tellement habitué à voir dans tous les carrefours la vieille Thémis féodale, bras nus et manches retroussées, faire sa besogne aux fourches, aux échelles et aux piloris, qu’on n’y prenait presque pas garde. Le beau monde de ce temps-là savait à peine le nom du patient qui passait au coin de la rue, et la populace tout au plus se régalait de ce mets grossier. Une exécution était un incident habituel de la voie publique, comme la braisière du talmellier ou la tuerie de l’écorcheur. Le bourreau n’était qu’une espèce de boucher un peu plus foncé qu’un autre.

Phoebus se mit donc assez promptement l’esprit en repos sur la charmeresse Esmeralda, ou Similar, comme il disait, sur le coup de poignard de la bohémienne ou du moine bourru (peu lui importait), et sur l’issue du procès. Mais dès que son cœur fut vacant de ce côté, l’image de Fleur-de-Lys y revint. Le cœur du capitaine Phoebus, comme la physique d’alors, avait horreur du vide.

C’était d’ailleurs un séjour fort insipide que Queue-en-Brie, un village de maréchaux ferrants et de vachères aux mains gercées, un long cordon de masures et de chaumières qui ourle la grande route des deux côtés pendant une demi-lieue; une *queue* enfin.

Fleur-de-Lys était son avant-dernière passion, une jolie fille, une charmante dot; donc un beau matin, tout à fait guéri, et présumant bien qu’après deux mois l’affaire de la bohémienne devait être finie et oubliée, l’amoureux cavalier arriva en piaffant à la porte du logis Gondelaurier.

Il ne fit pas attention à une cohue assez nombreuse qui s’amassait dans la place du parvis, devant le portail de Notre-Dame; il se souvint qu’on était au mois de mai, il supposa quelque procession, quelque Pentecôte, quelque fête, attacha son cheval à l’anneau du porche, et monta joyeusement chez sa belle fiancée.

Elle était seule avec sa mère.

Fleur-de-Lys avait toujours sur le cœur la scène de la sorcière, sa chèvre, son alphabet maudit, et les longues absences de Phoebus. Cependant, quand elle vit entrer son capitaine, elle lui trouva si bonne mine, un hoqueton si neuf, un baudrier si luisant et un air si passionné qu’elle rougit de plaisir. La noble damoiselle était elle-même plus charmante que jamais. Ses magnifiques cheveux blonds étaient nattés à ravir, elle était toute vêtue de ce bleu de ciel qui va si bien aux blanches, coquetterie que lui avait enseignée Colombe, et avait l’œil noyé dans cette langueur d’amour qui leur va mieux encore.

Phoebus, qui n’avait rien vu en fait de beauté depuis les margotons de Queue-en-Brie, fut enivré de Fleur-de-Lys, ce qui donna à notre officier une manière si empressée et si galante que sa paix fut tout de suite faite. Madame de Gondelaurier elle-même, toujours maternellement assise dans son grand fauteuil, n’eut pas la force de le bougonner. Quant aux reproches de Fleur-de-Lys, ils expirèrent en tendres roucoulements.

La jeune fille était assise près de la fenêtre, brodant toujours sa grotte de Neptunus. Le capitaine se tenait appuyé au dossier de sa chaise, et elle lui adressait à demi-voix ses caressantes gronderies.

«Qu’est-ce que vous êtes donc devenu depuis deux grands mois, méchant?

— Je vous jure, répondait Phoebus, un peu gêné de la question, que vous êtes belle à faire rêver un archevêque.»

Elle ne pouvait s’empêcher de sourire.

«C’est bon, c’est bon, monsieur. Laissez là ma beauté, et répondez-moi. Belle beauté, vraiment!

— Eh bien! chère cousine, j’ai été rappelé à tenir garnison.

— Et où cela, s’il vous plaît? et pourquoi n’êtes-vous pas venu me dire adieu?

— À Queue-en-Brie.»

Phoebus était enchanté que la première question l’aidât à esquiver la seconde.

«Mais c’est tout près, monsieur. Comment n’être pas venu me voir une seule fois?»

Ici Phoebus fut assez sérieusement embarrassé.

«C’est que... le service... et puis, charmante cousine, j’ai été malade.

— Malade! reprit-elle effrayée.

— Oui... blessé.

— Blessé!»

La pauvre enfant était toute bouleversée.

«Oh! ne vous effarouchez pas de cela, dit négligemment Phoebus, ce n’est rien. Une querelle, un coup d’épée; qu’est-ce que cela vous fait?

— Qu’est-ce que cela me fait? s’écria Fleur-de-Lys en levant ses beaux yeux pleins de larmes. Oh! vous ne dites pas ce que vous pensez en disant cela. Qu’est-ce que ce coup d’épée? Je veux tout savoir.

— Eh bien! chère belle, j’ai eu noise avec Mahé Fédy, vous savez? le lieutenant de Saint-Germain-en-Laye, et nous nous sommes décousu chacun quelques pouces de la peau. Voilà tout.»

Le menteur capitaine savait fort bien qu’une affaire d’honneur fait toujours ressortir un homme aux yeux d’une femme. En effet, Fleur-de-Lys le regardait en face tout émue de peur, de plaisir et d’admiration. Elle n’était cependant pas complètement rassurée.

«Pourvu que vous soyez bien tout à fait guéri, mon Phoebus! dit-elle. Je ne connais pas votre Mahé Fédy, mais c’est un vilain homme. Et d’où venait cette querelle?»

Ici Phoebus, dont l’imagination n’était que fort médiocrement créatrice, commença à ne savoir plus comment se tirer de sa prouesse.

«Oh! que sais-je?... un rien, un cheval, un propos! Belle cousine, s’écria-t-il pour changer de conversation, qu’est-ce que c’est donc que ce bruit dans le Parvis?»

Il s’approcha de la fenêtre. «Oh! mon Dieu, belle cousine, voilà bien du monde sur la place!

— Je ne sais pas, dit Fleur-de-Lys; il paraît qu’il y a une sorcière qui va faire amende honorable ce matin devant l’église pour être pendue après.»

Le capitaine croyait si bien l’affaire de la Esmeralda terminée qu’il s’émut fort peu des paroles de Fleur-de-Lys. Il lui fit cependant une ou deux questions.

«Comment s’appelle cette sorcière?

— Je ne sais pas, répondit-elle.

— Et que dit-on qu'elle ait fait?»

Elle haussa encore cette fois ses blanches épaules.

«Je ne sais pas.

— Oh! mon Dieu Jésus! dit la mère, il y a tant de sorciers maintenant, qu'on les brûle, je crois, sans savoir leurs noms. Autant vaudrait chercher à savoir le nom de chaque nuée du ciel. Après tout, on peut être tranquille. Le bon Dieu tient son registre.» Ici la vénérable dame se leva et vint à la fenêtre. «Seigneur! dit-elle, vous avez raison, Phoebus. Voilà une grande cohue de populaire. Il y en a, béni soit Dieu! jusque sur les toits. — Savez-vous, Phoebus? cela me rappelle mon beau temps. L'entrée du roi Charles VII, où il y avait tant de monde aussi. — Je ne sais plus en quelle année. — Quand je vous parle de cela, n'est-ce pas? cela vous fait l'effet de quelque chose de vieux, et à moi de quelque chose de jeune. — Oh! c'était un bien plus beau peuple qu'à présent. Il y en avait jusque sur les mâchicoulis de la porte Saint-Antoine. Le roi avait la reine en croupe, et après leurs altesses venaient toutes les dames en croupe de tous les seigneurs. Je me rappelle qu'on riait fort, parce qu'à côté d'Amanyon de Garlande, qui était fort bref de taille, il y avait le sire Matefelon, un chevalier de stature gigantale, qui avait tué des Anglais à tas. C'était bien beau. Une procession de tous les gentilshommes de France avec leurs oriflammes qui rougeoyaient à l'œil. Il y avait ceux à pennon et ceux à bannière. Que sais-je, moi? le sire de Calan, à pennon; Jean de Châteaumorant, à bannière; le sire de Coucy, à bannière, et plus étoffément que nul des autres, excepté le duc de Bourbon... — Hélas! que c'est une chose triste de penser que tout cela a existé et qu'il n'en est plus rien!»

Les deux amoureux n'écoutaient pas la respectable douairière. Phoebus était revenu s'accouder au dossier de la chaise de sa fiancée, poste charmant d'où son regard libertin s'enfonçait dans toutes les ouvertures de la collerette de Fleur-de-Lys. Cette gorgerette bâillait si à propos, et lui laissait voir tant de choses exquises et lui en laissait deviner tant d'autres, que Phoebus, ébloui de cette peau à reflet de satin, se disait en lui-même: «Comment peut-on aimer autre chose qu'une blanche?»

Tous deux gardaient le silence. La jeune fille levait de temps en temps sur lui des yeux ravis et doux, et leurs cheveux se mêlaient dans un rayon du soleil de printemps.

«Phoebus, dit tout à coup Fleur-de-Lys à voix basse, nous devons nous marier dans trois mois, jurez-moi que vous n'avez jamais aimé d'autre femme que moi.

— Je vous le jure, bel ange!» répondit Phoebus, et son regard passionné se joignait pour convaincre Fleur-de-Lys à l’accent sincère de sa voix. Il se croyait peut-être lui-même en ce moment.

Cependant la bonne mère, charmée de voir les fiancés en si parfaite intelligence, venait de sortir de l’appartement pour vaquer à quelque détail domestique. Phoebus s’en aperçut, et cette solitude enhardit tellement l’aventureux capitaine qu’il lui monta au cerveau des idées fort étranges. Fleur-de-Lys l’aimait, il était son fiancé, elle était seule avec lui, son ancien goût pour elle s’était réveillé, non dans toute sa fraîcheur, mais dans toute son ardeur; après tout, ce n’est pas grand crime de manger un peu son blé en herbe; je ne sais si ces pensées lui passèrent dans l’esprit, mais ce qui est certain, c’est que Fleur-de-Lys fut tout à coup effrayée de l’expression de son regard. Elle regarda autour d’elle, et ne vit plus sa mère.

«Mon Dieu! dit-elle rouge et inquiète, j’ai bien chaud!

— Je crois en effet, répondit Phoebus, qu’il n’est pas loin de midi. Le soleil est gênant. Il n’y a qu’à fermer les rideaux.

— Non, non, cria la pauvre petite, j’ai besoin d’air au contraire.»

Et comme une biche qui sent le souffle de la meute, elle se leva, courut à la fenêtre, l’ouvrit, et se précipita sur le balcon.

Phoebus, assez contrarié, l’y suivit.

La place du Parvis Notre-Dame, sur laquelle le balcon donnait, comme on sait, présentait en ce moment un spectacle sinistre et singulier qui fit brusquement changer de nature à l’effroi de la timide Fleur-de-Lys.

Une foule immense, qui refluait dans toutes les rues adjacentes, encombrait la place proprement dite. La petite muraille à hauteur d’appui qui entourait le Parvis n’eût pas suffi à le maintenir libre, si elle n’eût été doublée d’une haie épaisse de sergents des onze-vingts et de hacquebutiers, la coulevrine au poing. Grâce à ce taillis de piques et d’arquebuses, le Parvis était vide. L’entrée en était gardée par un gros de hallebardiers aux armes de l’évêque. Les larges portes de l’église étaient fermées, ce qui contrastait avec les innombrables fenêtres de la place, lesquelles, ouvertes jusque sur les pignons, laissaient voir des milliers de têtes entassées à peu près comme les piles de boulets dans un parc d’artillerie.

La surface de cette cohue était grise, sale et terreuse. Le spectacle qu’elle attendait était évidemment de ceux qui ont le privilège d’extraire et d’appeler ce qu’il y a de plus immonde dans la population. Rien de hideux comme le bruit qui s’échappait de ce fourmillement de coiffes jaunes et de chevelures sordides. Dans cette foule, il y avait plus de rires que de cris, plus de femmes que d’hommes.

De temps en temps quelque voix aigre et vibrante perçait la rumeur générale.

«Ohé! Mahiet Baliffre! est-ce qu’on va la pendre là?

— Imbécile! c’est ici l’amende honorable, en chemise! le bon Dieu va lui tousser du latin dans la figure! Cela se fait toujours ici, à midi. Si c’est la potence que tu veux, va-t’en à la Grève.

— J’irai après.»

«Dites donc, la Boucandry? est-il vrai qu’elle ait refusé un confesseur?

— Il paraît que oui, la Bechaigne.

— Voyez-vous, la païenne!»

«Monsieur, c’est l’usage. Le bailli du Palais est tenu de livrer le malfaiteur tout jugé, pour l’exécution, si c’est un laïc, au prévôt de Paris; si c’est un clerc, à l’official de l’évêché.

— Je vous remercie, monsieur.»

«Oh! mon Dieu! disait Fleur-de-Lys, la pauvre créature!»

Cette pensée remplissait de douleur le regard qu’elle promenait sur la populace. Le capitaine, beaucoup plus occupé d’elle que de cet amas de quenaille, chiffonnait amoureusement sa ceinture par derrière. Elle se retourna suppliante et souriant.

«De grâce, laissez-moi, Phoebus! si ma mère rentrait, elle verrait votre main!»

En ce moment midi sonna lentement à l’horloge de Notre-Dame. Un murmure de satisfaction éclata dans la foule. La dernière vibration du douzième coup s’éteignait à peine que toutes les têtes moutonnèrent comme les vagues sous un coup de vent, et qu’une immense clameur s’éleva du des fenêtres et des toits: «La voilà!»

Fleur-de-Lys mit ses mains sur ses yeux pour ne pas voir.

«Charmante, lui dit Phoebus, voulez-vous rentrer?

— Non», répondit-elle; et ces yeux qu’elle venait de fermer par crainte, elle les rouvrit par curiosité.

Un tombereau traîné d’un fort limonier normand et tout enveloppé de cavalerie en livrée violette à croix blanches, venait de déboucher sur la place par la rue Saint-Pierre-aux-Bœufs. Les sergents du guet lui frayaient passage dans le peuple à grands coups de boullayes. À côté du tombereau quelques officiers de justice et de police, reconnaissables à leur costume noir et à leur gauche façon de se tenir en selle. Maître Jacques Charmolue paradait à leur tête.

Dans la fatale voiture, une jeune fille était assise, les bras liés derrière le dos, sans prêtre à côté d'elle. Elle était en chemise, ses longs cheveux noirs (la mode alors était de ne les couper qu'au pied du gibet) tombaient épars sur sa gorge et sur ses épaules à demi découvertes.

À travers cette ondoyante chevelure, plus luisante qu'un plumage de corbeau, on voyait se tordre et se nouer une grosse corde grise et rugueuse qui écorchait ses fragiles clavicules et se roulait autour du cou charmant de la pauvre fille comme un ver de terre sur une fleur. Sous cette corde brillait une petite amulette ornée de verroteries vertes qu'on lui avait laissée sans doute parce qu'on ne refuse plus rien à ceux qui vont mourir. Les spectateurs placés aux fenêtres pouvaient apercevoir au fond du tombereau ses jambes nues qu'elle tâchait de dérober sous elle comme par un dernier instinct de femme. À ses pieds il y avait une petite chèvre garrottée. La condamnée retenait avec ses dents sa chemise mal attachée. On eût dit qu'elle souffrait encore dans sa misère d'être ainsi livrée presque nue à tous les yeux. Hélas! ce n'est pas pour de pareils frémissements que la pudeur est faite.

«Jésus! dit vivement Fleur-de-Lys au capitaine. Regardez donc, beau cousin! c'est cette vilaine bohémienne à la chèvre!»

En parlant ainsi elle se retourna vers Phoebus. Il avait les yeux fixés sur le tombereau. Il était très pâle.

«Quelle bohémienne à la chèvre? dit-il en balbutiant.

— Comment! reprit Fleur-de-Lys; est-ce que vous ne vous souvenez pas?...»

Phoebus l'interrompit.

«Je ne sais pas ce que vous voulez dire.»

Il fit un pas pour rentrer. Mais Fleur-de-Lys, dont la jalousie, naguère si vivement remuée par cette même égyptienne, venait de se réveiller, Fleur-de-Lys lui jeta un coup d'œil plein de pénétration et de défiance. Elle se rappelait vaguement en ce moment avoir ouï parler d'un capitaine mêlé au procès de cette sorcière.

«Qu'avez-vous? dit-elle à Phoebus, on dirait que cette femme vous a troublé.»

Phoebus s'efforça de ricaner.

«Moi! pas le moins du monde! Ah bien oui!

— Alors restez, reprit-elle impérieusement, et voyons jusqu’à la fin.»

Force fut au malencontreux capitaine de demeurer. Ce qui le rassurait un peu, c’est que la condamnée ne détachait pas son regard du plancher de son tombereau. Ce n’était que trop véritablement la Esmeralda. Sur ce dernier échelon de l’opprobre et du malheur, elle était toujours belle, ses grands yeux noirs paraissaient encore plus grands à cause de l’appauvrissement de ses joues, son profil livide était pur et sublime. Elle ressemblait à ce qu’elle avait été comme une Vierge du Masaccio ressemble à une Vierge de Raphaël: plus faible, plus mince, plus maigre.

Du reste, il n’y avait rien en elle qui ne ballottât en quelque sorte, et que, hormis sa pudeur, elle ne laissât aller au hasard, tant elle avait été profondément rompue par la stupeur et le désespoir. Son corps rebondissait à tous les cahots du tombereau comme une chose morte ou brisée. Son regard était morne et fou. On voyait encore une larme dans sa prunelle, mais immobile et pour ainsi dire gelée.

Cependant la lugubre cavalcade avait traversé la foule au milieu des cris de joie et des attitudes curieuses. Nous devons dire toutefois, pour être fidèle historien, qu’en la voyant si belle et si accablée, beaucoup s’étaient émus de pitié, et des plus durs.

Le tombereau était entré dans le Parvis.

Devant le portail central, il s’arrêta. L’escorte se rangea en bataille des deux côtés. La foule fit silence, et au milieu de ce silence plein de solennité et d’anxiété les deux battants de la grande porte tournèrent, comme d’eux-mêmes, sur leurs gonds qui grincèrent avec un bruit de fifre. Alors on vit dans toute sa longueur la profonde église, sombre, tendue de deuil, à peine éclairée de quelques cierges scintillant au loin sur le maître-autel, ouverte comme une gueule de taverne au milieu de la place éblouissante de lumière. Tout au fond, dans l’ombre de l’abside, on entrevoyait une gigantesque croix d’argent, développée sur un drap noir qui tombait de la voûte au pavé. Toute la nef était déserte. Cependant on voyait remuer confusément quelques têtes de prêtres dans les stalles lointaines du chœur, et au moment où la grande porte s’ouvrit il s’échappa de l’église un chant grave, éclatant et monotone qui jetait comme par bouffées sur la tête de la condamnée des fragments de psaumes lugubres.

«...Non timebo millia populi circumdantis me; exsurge, Domine; salvum me fac, Deus!

«...Salvum me fac, Deus, quoniam intraverunt aquæ usque ad animam meam.

«...Infixus sum in limo profundi; et non est substantia.»

En même temps une autre voix, isolée du chœur, entonnait sur le degré du maître-autel ce mélancolique offertoire:

«Qui verbum meum audit, et credit ei qui misit me, habet vitam æternam et in judicium non venit; sed transit a morte in vitam.»

Ce chant que quelques vieillards perdus dans leurs ténèbres chantaient de loin sur cette belle créature, pleine de jeunesse et de vie, caressée par l'air tiède du printemps, inondée de soleil, c'était la messe des morts.

Le peuple écoutait avec recueillement.

La malheureuse, effarée, semblait perdre sa vue et sa pensée dans les obscures entrailles de l'église. Ses lèvres blanches remuaient comme si elles priaient, et quand le valet du bourreau s'approcha d'elle pour l'aider à descendre du tombereau, il l'entendit qui répétait à voix basse ce mot: Phoebus.

On lui délia les mains, on la fit descendre accompagnée de sa chèvre qu'on avait déliée aussi, et qui bêlait de joie de se sentir libre, et on la fit marcher pieds nus sur le dur pavé jusqu'au bas des marches du portail. La corde qu'elle avait au cou traînait derrière elle. On eût dit un serpent qui la suivait.

Alors le chant s'interrompit dans l'église. Une grande croix d'or et une file de cierges se mirent en mouvement dans l'ombre. On entendit sonner la hallebarde des suisses bariolés, et quelques moments après une longue procession de prêtres en chasubles et de diacres en dalmatiques, qui venait gravement et en psalmodiant vers la condamnée, se développa à sa vue et aux yeux de la foule. Mais son regard s'arrêta à celui qui marchait en tête, immédiatement après le porte-croix.

«Oh! dit-elle tout bas en frissonnant, c'est encore lui! le prêtre!»

C'était en effet l'archidiacre. Il avait à sa gauche le sous-chantre et à sa droite le chantre armé du bâton de son office. Il avançait, la tête renversée en arrière, les yeux fixes ouverts, en chantant d'une voix forte:

«De ventre inferi clamavi, et exaudisti vocem meam.

«Et projecisti me in profundum in corde maris, et flumen circumdedit me.»

Au moment où il parut au grand jour sous le haut portail en ogive, enveloppé d'une vaste chape d'argent barrée d'une croix noire, il était si pâle que plus d’un pensa dans la foule que c’était un des évêques de marbre, agenouillés sur les pierres sépulcrales du chœur, qui s’était levé et qui venait recevoir au seuil de la tombe celle qui allait mourir.

Elle, non moins pâle et non moins statue, elle s’était à peine aperçue qu’on lui avait mis en main un lourd cierge de cire jaune allumé; elle n’avait pas écouté la voix glapissante du greffier lisant la fatale teneur de l’amende honorable; quand on lui avait dit de répondre *Amen*, elle avait répondu Amen. Il fallut, pour lui rendre quelque vie et quelque force, qu’elle vit le prêtre faire signe à ses gardiens de s’éloigner et s’avancer seul vers elle.

Alors elle sentit son sang bouillonner dans sa tête, et un reste d’indignation se ralluma dans cette âme déjà engourdie et froide.

L’archidiacre s’approcha d’elle lentement. Même en cette extrémité, elle le vit promener sur sa nudité un œil étincelant de luxure, de jalousie et de désir. Puis il lui dit à haute voix: «Jeune fille, avez-vous demandé à Dieu pardon de vos fautes et de vos manquements?» Il se pencha à son oreille, et ajouta (les spectateurs croyaient qu’il recevait sa dernière confession): «Veux-tu de moi? je puis encore te sauver!»

Elle le regarda fixement: «Va-t’en, démon! ou je te dénonce.»

Il se prit à sourire d’un sourire horrible. «On ne te croira pas. — Tu ne feras qu’ajouter un scandale à un crime. — Réponds vite! veux-tu de moi?

— Qu’as-tu fait de mon Phoebus?

— Il est mort», dit le prêtre.

En ce moment le misérable archidiacre leva la tête machinalement, et vit à l’autre bout de la place, au balcon du logis Gondelaurier, le capitaine debout près de Fleur-de-Lys. Il chancela, passa la main sur ses yeux, regarda encore, murmura une malédiction, et tous ses traits se contractèrent violemment.

«Eh bien! meurs, toi! dit-il entre ses dents. Personne ne t’aura.»

Alors levant la main sur l’égyptienne, il s’écria d’une voix funèbre: «*I nunc, anima anceps, et sit tibi Deus misericors*!»

C’était la redoutable formule dont on avait coutume de clore ces sombres cérémonies. C’était le signal convenu du prêtre au bourreau.

Le peuple s’agenouilla.

«*Kyrie Eleison*, dirent les prêtres restés sous l’ogive du portail.

— *Kyrie Eleison*, répéta la foule avec ce murmure qui court sur toutes les têtes comme le clapotement d’une mer agitée.

— *Amen*», dit l’archidiacre.

Il tourna le dos à la condamnée, sa tête retomba sur sa poitrine, ses mains se croisèrent, il rejoignit son cortège de prêtres, et un moment après on le vit disparaître, avec la croix, les cierges et les chapes, sous les arceaux brumeux de la cathédrale; et sa voix sonore s’éteignit par degrés dans le chœur en chantant ce verset de désespoir:

«*...Omnes gurgites tui et fluctus tui super me transierunt!*»

En même temps le retentissement intermittent de la hampe ferrée des hallebardes des suisses, mourant peu à peu sous les entre-colonnements de la nef, faisait l’effet d’un marteau d’horloge sonnant la dernière heure de la condamnée.

Cependant les portes de Notre-Dame étaient restées ouvertes, laissant voir l’église vide, désolée, en deuil, sans cierges et sans voix.

La condamnée demeurait immobile à sa place, attendant qu’on disposât d’elle. Il fallut qu’un des sergents à verge en avertît maître Charmolue, qui, pendant toute cette scène, s’était mis à étudier le bas-relief du grand portail qui représente, selon les uns, le sacrifice d’Abraham, selon les autres, l’opération philosophale, figurant le soleil par l’ange, le feu par le fagot, l’artisan par Abraham.

On eut assez de peine à l’arracher à cette contemplation, mais enfin il se retourna, et à un signe qu’il fit deux hommes vêtus de jaune, les valets du bourreau, s’approchèrent de l’égyptienne pour lui rattacher les mains.

La malheureuse, au moment de remonter dans le tombereau fatal et de s’acheminer vers sa dernière station, fut prise peut-être de quelque déchirant regret de la vie. Elle leva ses yeux rouges et secs vers le ciel, vers le soleil, vers les nuages d’argent coupés çà et là de trapèzes et de triangles bleus, puis elle les abaissa autour d’elle, sur la terre, sur la foule, sur les maisons... Tout à coup, tandis que l’homme jaune lui liait les coudes, elle poussa un cri terrible, un cri de joie. À ce balcon, là-bas, à l’angle de la place, elle venait de l’apercevoir, lui, son ami, son seigneur, Phoebus, l’autre apparition de sa vie!

Le juge avait menti! le prêtre avait menti! c’était bien lui, elle n’en pouvait douter, il était là, beau, vivant, revêtu de son éclatante livrée, la plume en tête, l’épée au côté!

«Phoebus! cria-t-elle, mon Phoebus!»

Et elle voulut tendre vers lui ses bras tremblants d’amour et de ravissement, mais ils étaient attachés. Alors elle vit le capitaine froncer le sourcil, une belle jeune fille qui s'appuyait sur lui le regarder avec une lèvre dédaigneuse et des yeux irrités, puis Phoebus prononça quelques mots qui ne vinrent pas jusqu'à elle, et tous deux s'éclipsèrent précipitamment derrière le vitrail du balcon qui se referma.

«Phoebus! cria-t-elle éperdue, est-ce que tu le crois?»

Une pensée monstrueuse venait de lui apparaître. Elle se souvenait qu'elle avait été condamnée pour meurtre sur la personne de Phoebus de Châteaupers.

Elle avait tout supporté jusque-là. Mais ce dernier coup était trop rude. Elle tomba sans mouvement sur le pavé.

«Allons, dit Charmolue, portez-la dans le tombereau, et finissons!»

Personne n'avait encore remarqué, dans la galerie des statues des rois, sculptés immédiatement au-dessus des ogives du portail, un spectateur étrange qui avait tout examiné jusqu'alors avec une telle impassibilité, avec un cou si tendu, avec un visage si difforme, que, sans son accoutrement mi-parti rouge et violet, on eût pu le prendre pour un de ces monstres de pierre par la gueule desquels se dégorgent depuis six cents ans les longues gouttières de la cathédrale. Ce spectateur n'avait rien perdu de ce qui s'était passé depuis midi devant le portail de Notre-Dame. Et dès les premiers instants, sans que personne songeât à l'observer, il avait fortement attaché à l'une des colonnettes de la galerie une grosse corde à nœuds, dont le bout allait traîner en bas sur le perron. Cela fait, il s'était mis à regarder tranquillement, et à siffler de temps en temps quand un merle passait devant lui.

Tout à coup, au moment où les valets du maître des œuvres se disposaient à exécuter l'ordre flegmatique de Charmolue, il enjamba la balustrade de la galerie, saisit la corde des pieds, des genoux et des mains, puis on le vit couler sur la façade, comme une goutte de pluie qui glisse le long d'une vitre, courir vers les deux bourreaux avec la vitesse d'un chat tombé d'un toit, les terrasser sous deux poings énormes, enlever l'égyptienne d'une main, comme un enfant sa poupée, et d'un seul élan rebondir jusque dans l'église, en élevant la jeune fille au-dessus de sa tête, et en criant d'une voix formidable: «Asile!»

Cela se fit avec une telle rapidité que si c'eût été la nuit, on eût pu tout voir à la lumière d'un seul éclair.

«Asile! asile!» répéta la foule, et dix mille battements de mains firent étinceler de joie et de fierté l'œil unique de Quasimodo.

Cette secousse fit revenir à elle la condamnée. Elle souleva sa paupière, regarda Quasimodo, puis la referma subitement, comme épouvantée de son sauveur.

Charmolue resta stupéfait, et les bourreaux, et toute l'escorte. En effet, dans l'enceinte de Notre-Dame, la condamnée était inviolable. La cathédrale était un lieu de refuge. Toute justice humaine expirait sur le seuil.

Quasimodo s'était arrêté sous le grand portail. Ses larges pieds semblaient aussi solides sur le pavé de l'église que les lourds piliers romans. Sa grosse tête chevelue s'enfonçait dans ses épaules comme celle des lions qui eux aussi ont une crinière et pas de cou. Il tenait la jeune fille toute palpitante suspendue à ses mains calleuses comme une draperie blanche; mais il la portait avec tant de précaution qu'il paraissait craindre de la briser ou de la faner. On eût dit qu'il sentait que c'était une chose délicate, exquise et précieuse, faite pour d'autres mains que les siennes. Par moments, il avait l'air de n'oser la toucher, même du souffle. Puis, tout à coup, il la serrait avec étreinte dans ses bras, sur sa poitrine anguleuse, comme son bien, comme son trésor, comme eût fait la mère de cette enfant; son œil de gnome, abaissé sur elle, l'inondait de tendresse, de douleur et de pitié, et se relevait subitement plein d'éclairs. Alors les femmes riaient et pleuraient, la foule trépignait d'enthousiasme, car en ce moment-là Quasimodo avait vraiment sa beauté. Il était beau, lui, cet orphelin, cet enfant trouvé, ce rebut, il se sentait auguste et fort, il regardait en face cette société dont il était banni, et dans laquelle il intervenait si puissamment, cette justice humaine à laquelle il avait arraché sa proie, tous ces tigres forcés de mâcher à vide, ces sbires, ces juges, ces bourreaux, toute cette force du roi qu'il venait de briser, lui infime, avec la force de Dieu.

Et puis c'était une chose touchante que cette protection tombée d'un être si difforme sur un être si malheureux, qu'une condamnée à mort sauvée par Quasimodo. C'étaient les deux misères extrêmes de la nature et de la société qui se touchaient et qui s'entraidaient.

Cependant, après quelques minutes de triomphe, Quasimodo s'était brusquement enfoncé dans l'église avec son fardeau. Le peuple, amoureux de toute prouesse, le cherchait des yeux sous la sombre nef, regrettant qu'il se fût si vite dérobé à ses acclamations. Tout à coup on le vit reparaître à l'une des extrémités de la galerie des rois de France, il la traversa en courant comme un insensé, en élevant sa conquête dans ses bras, et en criant: «Asile!» La foule éclata de nouveau en applaudissements. La galerie parcourue, il se replongea dans l'intérieur de l'église. Un moment après il reparut sur la plate-forme supérieure, toujours l'égyptienne dans ses bras, toujours courant avec folie, toujours criant: «Asile!» Et la foule applaudissait. Enfin, il fit une troisième apparition sur le sommet de la tour du bourdon; de là il sembla montrer avec orgueil à toute la ville celle qu'il avait sauvée, et sa voix tonnante, cette voix qu'on entendait si rarement et qu'il n'entendait jamais, répéta trois fois avec frénésie jusque dans les nuages: «Asile! asile! asile!

— Noël! Noël!» criait le peuple de son côté, et cette immense acclamation allait étonner sur l'autre rive la foule de la Grève et la recluse qui attendait toujours, l'œil fixé sur le gibet.

LIVRE NEUVIÈME

I

FIÈVRE

Claude Frollo n'était plus dans Notre-Dame pendant que son fils adoptif tranchait si brusquement le nœud fatal où le malheureux archidiacre avait pris l'égyptienne et s'était pris lui-même. Rentré dans la sacristie, il avait arraché l'aube, la chape et l'étole, avait tout jeté aux mains du bedeau stupéfait, s'était échappé par la porte dérobée du cloître, avait ordonné à un batelier du Terrain de le transporter sur la rive gauche de la Seine, et s'était enfoncé dans les rues montueuses de l'Université, ne sachant où il allait, rencontrant à chaque pas des bandes d'hommes et de femmes qui se pressaient joyeusement vers le pont Saint-Michel dans l'espoir *d'arriver encore à temps* pour voir pendre la sorcière, pâle, égaré, plus troublé, plus aveugle et plus farouche qu'un oiseau de nuit lâché et poursuivi par une troupe d'enfants en plein jour. Il ne savait plus où il était, ce qu'il pensait, si il rêvait. Il allait, il marchait, il courait, prenant toute rue au hasard, ne choisissant pas, seulement toujours poussé en avant par la Grève, par l'horrible Grève qu'il sentait confusément derrière lui.

Il longea ainsi la montagne Sainte-Geneviève, et sortit enfin de la ville par la porte Saint-Victor. Il continua de s'enfuir, tant qu'il put voir en se retournant l'enceinte de tours de l'Université et les rares maisons du faubourg; mais lorsque enfin un pli du terrain lui eut dérobé en entier cet odieux Paris, quand il put s'en croire à cent lieues, dans les champs, dans un désert, il s'arrêta, et il lui sembla qu'il respirait.

Alors des idées affreuses se pressèrent dans son esprit. Il revit clair dans son âme, et frissonna. Il songea à cette malheureuse fille qui l'avait perdu et qu'il avait perdue. Il promena un œil hagard sur la double voie tortueuse que la fatalité avait fait suivre à leurs deux destinées, jusqu'au point d'intersection où elle les avait impitoyablement brisées l'une contre l'autre. Il pensa à la folie des vœux éternels, à la vanité de la chasteté, de la science, de la religion, de la vertu, à l'inutilité de Dieu. Il s'enfonça à cœur joie dans les mauvaises pensées, et, à mesure qu'il y plongeait plus avant, il sentait éclater en lui-même un rire de Satan.

Et en creusant ainsi son âme, quand il vit quelle large place la nature y avait préparée aux passions, il ricana plus amèrement encore. Il remua au fond de son cœur toute sa haine, toute sa méchanceté, et il reconnut, avec le froid coup d’œil d’un médecin qui examine un malade, que cette haine, que cette méchanceté n’étaient que de l’amour vicié; que l’amour, cette source de toute vertu chez l’homme, tournait en choses horribles dans un cœur de prêtre, et qu’un homme constitué comme lui, en se faisant prêtre, se faisait démon. Alors il rit affreusement, et tout à coup il redevint pâle en considérant le côté le plus sinistre de sa fatale passion, de cet amour corrosif, venimeux, haineux, implacable, qui n’avait abouti qu’au gibet pour l’une, à l’enfer pour l’autre: elle condamnée, lui damné.

Et puis le rire lui revint, en songeant que Phoebus était vivant; qu’après tout le capitaine vivait, était allègre et content, avait de plus beaux hoquetons que jamais et une nouvelle maîtresse qu’il menait voir pendre l’ancienne. Son ricanement redoubla quand il réfléchit que, des êtres vivants dont il avait voulu la mort, l’égyptienne, la seule créature qu’il ne hait pas, était la seule qu’il n’eût pas manquée.

Alors du capitaine sa pensée passa au peuple, et il lui vint une jalousie d’une espèce inouïe. Il songea que le peuple aussi, le peuple tout entier, avait eu sous les yeux la femme qu’il aimait, en chemise, presque nue. Il se tordit les bras en pensant que cette femme, dont la forme entrevue dans l’ombre par lui seul lui eût été le bonheur suprême, avait été livrée en plein jour, en plein midi, à tout un peuple, vêtue comme pour une nuit de volupté. Il pleura de rage sur tous ces mystères d’amour profanés, souillés, dénudés, flétris à jamais. Il pleura de rage en se figurant combien de regards immondes avaient trouvé leur compte à cette chemise mal nouée; et que cette belle fille, ce lys vierge, cette coupe de pudeur et de délices dont il n’eût osé approcher ses lèvres qu’en tremblant, venait d’être transformée en une sorte de gamelle publique, où la plus vile populace de Paris, les voleurs, les mendiants, les laquais étaient venus boire en commun un plaisir effronté, impur et dépravé.

Et quand il cherchait à se faire une idée du bonheur qu’il eût put trouver sur la terre si elle n’eût pas été bohémienne et s’il n’eût pas été prêtre, si Phoebus n’eût pas existé et si elle l’eût aimé; quand il se figurait qu’une vie de sérénité et d’amour lui eût été possible aussi à lui, qu’il y avait en ce même moment çà et là sur la terre des couples heureux, perdus en longues causeries sous les orangers, au bord des ruisseaux, en présence d’un soleil couchant, d’une nuit étoilée; et que, si Dieu l’eût voulu, il eût pu faire avec elle un de ces couples de bénédiction, son cœur se fondait en tendresse et en désespoir.

Oh! elle! c’est elle! c’est cette idée fixe qui revenait sans cesse, qui le torturait, qui lui mordait la cervelle et lui déchiquetait les entrailles. Il ne regrettait pas, il ne se repentait pas; tout ce qu’il avait fait, il était prêt à le faire encore; il aimait mieux la voir aux mains du bourreau qu’aux bras du capitaine, mais il souffrait; il souffrait tant que par instants il s’arrachait des poignées de cheveux pour voir s’ils ne blanchissaient pas.

Il y eut un moment entre autres où il lui vint à l’esprit que c’était là peut-être la minute où la hideuse chaîne qu’il avait vue le matin resserrait son nœud de fer autour de ce cou si frêle et si gracieux. Cette pensée lui fit jaillir la sueur de tous les pores.

Il y eut un autre moment où, tout en riant diaboliquement sur lui-même, il se représenta à la fois la Esmeralda comme il l’avait vue le premier jour, vive, insouciante, joyeuse, parée, dansante, ailée, harmonieuse, et la Esmeralda du dernier jour, en chemise, et la corde au cou, montant lentement, avec ses pieds nus, l’échelle anguleuse du gibet; il se figura ce double tableau d’une telle façon qu’il poussa un cri terrible.

Tandis que cet ouragan de désespoir bouleversait, brisait, arrachait, courbait, déracinait tout dans son âme, il regarda la nature autour de lui. À ses pieds, quelques poules fouillaient les broussailles en becquetant, les scarabées d’émail couraient au soleil, au-dessus de sa tête quelques croupes de nuées gris pommelé fuyaient dans un ciel bleu, à l’horizon la flèche de l’abbaye Saint-Victor perçait la courbe du coteau de son obélisque d’ardoise, et le meunier de la butte Copeaux regardait en sifflant tourner les ailes travailleuses de son moulin. Toute cette vie active, organisée, tranquille, reproduite autour de lui sous mille formes, lui fit mal. Il recommença à fuir.

Il courut ainsi à travers champs jusqu’au soir. Cette fuite de la nature, de la vie, de lui-même, de l’homme, de Dieu, de tout, dura tout le jour. Quelquefois il se jetait la face contre terre, et il arrachait avec ses ongles les jeunes blés. Quelquefois il s’arrêtait dans une rue de village déserte, et ses pensées étaient si insupportables qu’il prenait sa tête à deux mains et tâchait de l’arracher de ses épaules pour la briser sur le pavé.

Vers l’heure où le soleil déclinait, il s’examina de nouveau, et il se trouva presque fou. La tempête qui durait en lui depuis l’instant où il avait perdu l’espoir et la volonté de sauver l’égyptienne, cette tempête n’avait pas laissé dans sa conscience une seule idée saine, une seule pensée debout. Sa raison y gisait, à peu près entièrement détruite. Il n'avait plus que deux images distinctes dans l'esprit: la Esmeralda et la potence. Tout le reste était noir. Ces deux images rapprochées lui présentaient un groupe effroyable, et plus il y fixait ce qui lui restait d'attention et de pensée, plus il les voyait croître, selon une progression fantastique, l'une en grâce, en charme, en beauté, en lumière, l'autre en horreur; de sorte qu'à la fin la Esmeralda lui apparaissait comme une étoile, le gibet comme un énorme bras décharné.

Une chose remarquable, c'est que pendant toute cette torture il ne lui vint pas l'idée sérieuse de mourir. Le misérable était ainsi fait. Il tenait à la vie. Peut-être voyait-il réellement l'enfer derrière.

Cependant le jour continuait de baisser. L'être vivant qui existait encore en lui songea confusément au retour. Il se croyait loin de Paris; mais, en s'orientant, il s'aperçut qu'il n'avait fait que tourner l'enceinte de l'Université. La flèche de Saint-Sulpice et les trois hautes aiguilles de Saint-Germain-des-Prés dépassaient l'horizon à sa droite. Il se dirigea de ce côté. Quand il entendit le qui-vive des hommes d'armes de l'abbé autour de la circonvallation crénelée de Saint-Germain, il se détourna, prit un sentier qui s'offrit à lui entre le moulin de l'abbaye et la maladrerie du bourg, et au bout de quelques instants se trouva sur la lisière du Pré-aux-Clercs. Ce pré était célèbre par les tumultes qui s'y faisaient jour et nuit; c'était *l'hydre* des pauvres moines de Saint-Germain, *quod monachis Sancti-Germani pratensis hydra fuit, clericis nova semper dissidiorum capita suscitantibus*. L'archidiacre craignit d'y rencontrer quelqu'un; il avait peur de tout visage humain; il venait d'éviter l'Université, le bourg Saint-Germain, il voulait ne rentrer dans les rues que le plus tard possible. Il longea le Pré-aux-Clercs, prit le sentier désert qui le séparait du Dieu-Neuf, et arriva enfin au bord de l'eau. Là, dom Claude trouva un batelier qui, pour quelques deniers parisis, lui fit remonter la Seine jusqu'à la pointe de la Cité, et le déposa sur cette langue de terre abandonnée où le lecteur a déjà vu rêver Gringoire, et qui se prolongeait au delà des jardins du roi, parallèlement à l'île du Passeur-aux-Vaches.

Le bercement monotone du bateau et le bruissement de l'eau avaient en quelque sorte engourdi le malheureux Claude. Quand le batelier se fut éloigné, il resta stupidement debout sur la grève, regardant devant lui et ne percevant plus les objets qu'à travers des oscillations grossissantes qui lui faisaient de tout une sorte de fantasmagorie. Il n’est pas rare que la fatigue d’une grande douleur produise cet effet sur l’esprit.

Le soleil était couché derrière la haute Tour de Nesle. C’était l’instant du crépuscule. Le ciel était blanc, l’eau de la rivière était blanche. Entre ces deux blancheurs, la rive gauche de la Seine, sur laquelle il avait les yeux fixés, projetait sa masse sombre, et, de plus en plus amincie par la perspective, s’enfonçait dans les brumes de l’horizon comme une flèche noire. Elle était chargée de maisons, dont on ne distinguait que la silhouette obscure, vivement relevée en ténèbres sur le fond clair du ciel et de l’eau. Çà et là des fenêtres commençaient à y scintiller comme des trous de braise. Cet immense obélisque noir ainsi isolé entre les deux nappes blanches du ciel et de la rivière, fort large en cet endroit, fit à dom Claude un effet singulier, comparable à ce qu’éprouverait un homme qui, couché à terre sur le dos au pied du clocher de Strasbourg, regarderait l’énorme aiguille s’enfoncer au-dessus de sa tête dans les pénombres du crépuscule. Seulement ici c’était Claude qui était debout et l’obélisque qui était couché; mais comme la rivière, en reflétant le ciel, prolongeait l’abîme au-dessous de lui, l’immense promontoire semblait aussi hardiment élancé dans le vide que toute flèche de cathédrale; et l’impression était la même. Cette impression avait même cela d’étrange et de plus profond, que c’était bien le clocher de Strasbourg, mais le clocher de Strasbourg haut de deux lieues, quelque chose d’inouï, de gigantesque, d’incommensurable, un édifice comme nul œil humain n’en a vu, une tour de Babel. Les cheminées des maisons, les créneaux des murailles, les pignons taillés des toits, la flèche des Augustins, la Tour de Nesle, toutes ces saillies qui ébréchaient le profil du colossal obélisque, ajoutaient à l’illusion en jouant bizarrement à l’œil les découpures d’une sculpture touffue et fantastique.

Claude, dans l’état d’hallucination où il se trouvait, crut voir, voir de ses yeux vivants, le clocher de l’enfer; les mille lumières répandues sur toute la hauteur de l’épouvantable tour lui parurent autant de porches de l’immense fournaise intérieure; les voix et les rumeurs qui s’en échappaient, autant de cris, autant de râles. Alors il eut peur, il mit ses mains sur ses oreilles pour ne plus entendre, tourna le dos pour ne plus voir, et s’éloigna à grands pas de l’effroyable vision.

Mais la vision était en lui.

Quand il rentra dans les rues, les passants qui se coudoyaient aux lueurs des devantures de boutiques lui faisaient l’effet d’une éternelle allée et venue de spectres autour de lui. Il avait des fracas étranges dans l’oreille. Des fantaisies extraordinaires lui troublaient l’esprit. Il ne voyait ni les maisons, ni le pavé, ni les chariots, ni les hommes et les femmes, mais un chaos d’objets indéterminés qui se fondaient par les bords les uns dans les autres. Au coin de la rue de la Barillerie, il y avait une boutique d’épicerie, dont l’auvent était, selon l’usage immémorial, garni dans son pourtour de ces cerceaux de fer-blanc auxquels pend un cercle de chandelles de bois qui s’entre-choquent au vent en claquant comme des castagnettes. Il crut entendre s’entre-heurter dans l’ombre le trousseau de squelettes de Montfaucon.

«Oh! murmura-t-il, le vent de la nuit les chasse les uns contre les autres, et mêle le bruit de leurs chaînes au bruit de leurs os! Elle est peut-être là, parmi eux!»

Éperdu, il ne sut où il allait. Au bout de quelques pas, il se trouva sur le pont Saint-Michel. Il y avait une lumière à une fenêtre d’un rez-de-chaussée. Il s’approcha. À travers un vitrage fêlé, il vit une salle sordide, qui réveilla un souvenir confus dans son esprit. Dans cette salle, mal éclairée d’une lampe maigre, il y avait un jeune homme blond et frais, à figure joyeuse, qui embrassait, avec de grands éclats de rire, une jeune fille fort effrontément parée. Et, près de la lampe, il y avait une vieille femme qui filait et qui chantait d’une voix chevrotante. Comme le jeune homme ne riait pas toujours, la chanson de la vieille arrivait par lambeaux jusqu’au prêtre. C’était quelque chose d’inintelligible et d’affreux.

Grève, aboye, Grève, grouille!
File, file, ma quenouille,
File sa corde au bourreau
Qui siffle dans le préau.
Grève, aboye, Grève, grouille!
La belle corde de chanvre!
Semez d’Issy jusqu’à Vanvre
Du chanvre et non pas du blé.
Le voleur n’a pas volé
La belle corde de chanvre!
Grève, grouille, Grève, aboye!
Pour voir la fille de joie
Pendre au gibet chassieux,
Les fenêtres sont des yeux.

Grève, grouille, Grève, aboye!

Là-dessus le jeune homme riait et caressait la fille. La vieille, c'était la Falourdel; la fille, c'était une fille publique; le jeune homme, c'était son jeune frère Jehan.

Il continua de regarder. Autant ce spectacle qu'un autre.

Il vit Jehan aller à une fenêtre qui était au fond de la salle, l'ouvrir, jeter un coup d'œil sur le quai où brillaient au loin mille croisées éclairées, et il l'entendit dire en refermant la fenêtre: «Sur mon âme! voilà qu'il se fait nuit. Les bourgeois allument leurs chandelles et le bon Dieu ses étoiles.»

Puis, Jehan revint vers la ribaude, et cassa une bouteille qui était sur une table, en s'écriant:

«Déjà vide, corbœuf! et je n'ai plus d'argent! Isabeau, ma mie, je ne serai content de Jupiter que lorsqu'il aura changé vos deux tétins blancs en deux noires bouteilles, où je téterai du vin de Beaune jour et nuit.»

Cette belle plaisanterie fit rire la fille de joie, et Jehan sortit.

Dom Claude n'eut que le temps de se jeter à terre pour ne pas être rencontré, regardé en face, et reconnu par son frère. Heureusement la rue était sombre, et l'écolier était ivre. Il avisa cependant l'archidiacre couché sur le pavé dans la boue.

«Oh! oh! dit-il, en voilà un qui a mené joyeuse vie aujourd'hui.»

Il remua du pied dom Claude, qui retenait son souffle.

«Ivre-mort, reprit Jehan. Allons, il est plein. Une vraie sangsue détachée d'un tonneau. Il est chauve, ajouta-t-il en se baissant; c'est un vieillard! *Fortunate senex*!»

Puis dom Claude l'entendit s'éloigner en disant:

«C'est égal, la raison est une belle chose, et mon frère l'archidiacre est bien heureux d'être sage et d'avoir de l'argent.»

L'archidiacre alors se releva, et courut tout d'une haleine vers Notre-Dame, dont il voyait les tours énormes surgir dans l'ombre au-dessus des maisons.

À l'instant où il arriva tout haletant sur la place du Parvis, il recula et n'osa lever les yeux sur le funeste édifice. «Oh! dit-il à voix basse, est-il donc bien vrai qu'une telle chose se soit passée ici, aujourd'hui, ce matin même!»

Cependant il se hasarda à regarder l'église. La façade était sombre. Le ciel derrière étincelait d'étoiles. Le croissant de la lune, qui venait de s'envoler de l'horizon, était arrêté en ce moment au sommet de la tour de droite, et semblait s’être perché, comme un oiseau lumineux, au bord de la balustrade découpée en trèfles noirs.

La porte du cloître était fermée. Mais l’archidiacre avait toujours sur lui la clef de la tour où était son laboratoire. Il s’en servit pour pénétrer dans l’église.

Il trouva dans l’église une obscurité et un silence de caverne. Aux grandes ombres qui tombaient de toutes parts à larges pans, il reconnut que les tentures de la cérémonie du matin n’avaient pas encore été enlevées. La grande croix d’argent scintillait au fond des ténèbres, saupoudrée de quelques points étincelants, comme la voie lactée de cette nuit de sépulcre. Les longues fenêtres du chœur montraient au-dessus de la draperie noire l’extrémité supérieure de leurs ogives, dont les vitraux, traversés d’un rayon de lune, n’avaient plus que les couleurs douteuses de la nuit, une espèce de violet, de blanc et de bleu dont on ne retrouve la teinte que sur la face des morts. L’archidiacre, en apercevant tout autour du chœur ces blêmes pointes d’ogives, crut voir des mitres d’évêques damnés. Il ferma les yeux, et quand il les rouvrit, il crut que c’était un cercle de visages pâles qui le regardaient.

Il se mit à fuir à travers l’église. Alors il lui sembla que l’église aussi s’ébranlait, remuait, s’animait, vivait, que chaque grosse colonne devenait une patte énorme qui battait le sol de sa large spatule de pierre, et que la gigantesque cathédrale n’était plus qu’une sorte d’éléphant prodigieux qui soufflait et marchait avec ses piliers pour pieds, ses deux tours pour trompes et l’immense drap noir pour caparaçon.

Ainsi la fièvre ou la folie était arrivée à un tel degré d’intensité que le monde extérieur n’était plus pour l’infortuné qu’une sorte d’apocalypse visible, palpable, effrayante.

Il fut un moment soulagé. En s’enfonçant sous les bas côtés, il aperçut, derrière un massif de piliers, une lueur rougeâtre. Il y courut comme à une étoile. C’était la pauvre lampe qui éclairait jour et nuit le bréviaire public de Notre-Dame sous son treillis de fer. Il se jeta avidement sur le saint livre, dans l’espoir d’y trouver quelque consolation ou quelque encouragement. Le livre était ouvert à ce passage de Job, sur lequel son œil fixe se promena: «Et un esprit passa devant ma face, et j’entendis un petit souffle, et le poil de ma chair se hérissa.»

À cette lecture lugubre, il éprouva ce qu’éprouve l’aveugle qui se sent piquer par le bâton qu’il a ramassé. Ses genoux se dérobèrent sous lui, et il s’affaissa sur le pavé, songeant à celle qui était morte dans le jour. Il sentait passer et se dégorger dans son cerveau tant de fumées monstrueuses qu'il lui semblait que sa tête était devenue une des cheminées de l'enfer.

Il paraît qu'il resta longtemps dans cette attitude, ne pensant plus, abîmé et passif sous la main du démon. Enfin, quelque force lui revint, il songea à s'aller réfugier dans la tour près de son fidèle Quasimodo. Il se leva, et, comme il avait peur, il prit pour s'éclairer la lampe du bréviaire. C'était un sacrilège; mais il n'en était plus à regarder à si peu de chose.

Il gravit lentement l'escalier des tours, plein d'un secret effroi que devait propager jusqu'aux rares passants du Parvis la mystérieuse lumière de sa lampe montant si tard de meurtrière en meurtrière au haut du clocher.

Tout à coup il sentit quelque fraîcheur sur son visage et se trouva sous la porte de la plus haute galerie. L'air était froid; le ciel charriait des nuages dont les larges lames blanches débordaient les unes sur les autres en s'écrasant par les angles, et figuraient une débâcle de fleuve en hiver. Le croissant de la lune, échoué au milieu des nuées, semblait un navire céleste pris dans ces glaçons de l'air.

Il baissa la vue et contempla un instant, entre la grille de colonnettes qui unit les deux tours, au loin, à travers une gaze de brumes et de fumées, la foule silencieuse des toits de Paris, aigus, innombrables, pressés et petits comme les flots d'une mer tranquille dans une nuit d'été.

La lune jetait un faible rayon qui donnait au ciel et à la terre une teinte de cendre.

En ce moment l'horloge éleva sa voix grêle et fêlée. Minuit sonna. Le prêtre pensa à midi. C'étaient les douze heures qui revenaient.

«Oh! se dit-il tout bas, elle doit être froide à présent!»

Tout à coup un coup de vent éteignit sa lampe, et presque en même temps il vit paraître, à l'angle opposé de la tour, une ombre, une blancheur, une forme, une femme. Il tressaillit. À côté de cette femme, il y avait une petite chèvre, qui mêlait son bêlement au dernier bêlement de l'horloge.

Il eut la force de regarder. C'était elle.

Elle était pâle, elle était sombre. Ses cheveux tombaient sur ses épaules comme le matin. Mais plus de corde au cou, plus de mains attachées. Elle était libre, elle était morte.

Elle était vêtue de blanc et avait un voile blanc sur la tête.

Elle venait vers lui, lentement, en regardant le ciel. La chèvre surnaturelle la suivait. Il se sentait de pierre et trop lourd pour fuir. À chaque pas qu'elle faisait en avant, il en faisait un en arrière, et c'était tout.

Il rentra ainsi sous la voûte obscure de l’escalier. Il était glacé de l’idée qu’elle allait peut-être y entrer aussi; si elle l’eût fait, il serait mort de terreur.

Elle arriva en effet devant la porte de l’escalier, s’y arrêta quelques instants, regarda fixement dans l’ombre, mais sans paraître y voir le prêtre, et passa. Elle lui parut plus grande que lorsqu’elle vivait; il vit la lune à travers sa robe blanche; il entendit son souffle.

Quand elle fut passée, il se mit à redescendre l’escalier, avec la lenteur qu’il avait vue au spectre, se croyant spectre lui-même, hagard, les cheveux tout droits, sa lampe éteinte toujours à la main; et, tout en descendant les degrés en spirale, il entendait distinctement dans son oreille une voix qui riait et qui répétait:

«...Un esprit passa devant ma face, et j’entendis un petit souffle, et le poil de ma chair se hérissa.»

II

BOSSU, BORGNE, BOITEUX

Toute ville au moyen âge, et, jusqu’à Louis XII, toute ville en France avait ses lieux d’asile. Ces lieux d’asile, au milieu du déluge de lois pénales et de juridictions barbares qui inondaient la cité, étaient des espèces d’îles qui s’élevaient au-dessus du niveau de la justice humaine. Tout criminel qui y abordait était sauvé. Il y avait dans une banlieue presque autant de lieux d’asile que de lieux patibulaires. C’était l’abus de l’impunité à côté de l’abus des supplices, deux choses mauvaises qui tâchaient de se corriger l’une par l’autre. Les palais du roi, les hôtels des princes, les églises surtout avaient droit d’asile. Quelquefois d’une ville tout entière qu’on avait besoin de repeupler on faisait temporairement un lieu de refuge. Louis XI fit Paris asile en 1467.

Une fois le pied dans l’asile, le criminel était sacré; mais il fallait qu’il se gardât d’en sortir. Un pas hors du sanctuaire, il retombait dans le flot. La roue, le gibet, l’estrapade faisaient bonne garde à l’entour du lieu de refuge, et guettaient sans cesse leur proie comme les requins autour du vaisseau. On a vu des condamnés qui blanchissaient ainsi dans un cloître, sur l’escalier d’un palais, dans la culture d’une abbaye, sous un porche d’église; de cette façon l’asile était une prison comme une autre. Il arrivait quelquefois qu’un arrêt solennel du parlement violait le refuge et restituait le condamné au bourreau; mais la chose était rare. Les parlements s’effarouchaient des évêques, et, quand ces deux robes-là en venaient à se froisser, la simarre n’avait pas beau jeu avec la soutane. Parfois cependant, comme dans l’affaire des assassins de Petit-Jean, bourreau de Paris, et dans celle d’Emery Rousseau, meurtrier de Jean Valleret, la justice sautait par-dessus l’église et passait outre à l’exécution de ses sentences; mais, à moins d’un arrêt du parlement, malheur à qui violait à main armée un lieu d’asile! On sait quelle fut la mort de Robert de Clermont, maréchal de France, et de Jean de Châlons, maréchal de Champagne; et pourtant il ne s’agissait que d’un certain Perrin Marc, garçon d’un changeur, un misérable assassin; mais les deux maréchaux avaient brisé les portes de Saint-Méry. Là était l’énormité.

Il y avait autour des refuges un tel respect, qu’au dire de la tradition, il prenait parfois jusqu’aux animaux. Aymoin conte qu’un cerf, chassé par Dagobert, s’étant réfugié près du tombeau de saint Denys, la meute s’arrêta tout court en aboyant.

Les églises avaient d’ordinaire une logette préparée pour recevoir les suppliants. En 1407, Nicolas Flamel leur fit bâtir, sur les voûtes de Saint-Jacques-de-la-Boucherie, une chambre qui lui coûta quatre livres six sols seize deniers parisis.

À Notre-Dame, c’était une cellule établie sur les combles des bas côtés sous les arcs-boutants, en regard du cloître, précisément à l’endroit où la femme du concierge actuel des tours s’est pratiqué un jardin, qui est aux jardins suspendus de Babylone ce qu’une laitue est à un palmier, ce qu’une portière est à Sémiramis.

C’est là qu’après sa course effrénée et triomphale sur les tours et les galeries, Quasimodo avait déposé la Esmeralda. Tant que cette course avait duré, la jeune fille n’avait pu reprendre ses sens, à demi assoupie, à demi éveillée, ne sentant plus rien sinon qu’elle montait dans l’air, qu’elle y flottait, qu’elle y volait, que quelque chose l’enlevait au-dessus de la terre. De temps en temps, elle entendait le rire éclatant, la voix bruyante de Quasimodo à son oreille; elle entrouvrait ses yeux; alors au-dessous d’elle elle voyait confusément Paris marqueté de ses mille toits d’ardoises et de tuiles comme une mosaïque rouge et bleue, au-dessus de sa tête la face effrayante et joyeuse de Quasimodo. Alors sa paupière retombait; elle croyait que tout était fini, qu’on l’avait exécutée pendant son évanouissement, et que le difforme esprit qui avait présidé à sa destinée l’avait reprise et l’emportait. Elle n’osait le regarder et se laissait aller.

Mais quand le sonneur de cloches échevelé et haletant l’eut déposée dans la cellule du refuge, quand elle sentit ses grosses mains détacher doucement la corde qui lui meurtrissait les bras, elle éprouva cette espèce de secousse qui réveille en sursaut les passagers d’un navire qui touche au milieu d’une nuit obscure. Ses pensées se réveillèrent aussi, et lui revinrent une à une. Elle vit qu’elle était dans Notre-Dame, elle se souvint d’avoir été arrachée des mains du bourreau, que Phoebus était vivant, que Phoebus ne l’aimait plus; et ces deux idées, dont l’une répandait tant d’amertume sur l’autre, se présentant ensemble à la pauvre condamnée se tourna vers Quasimodo qui se tenait debout devant elle, et qui lui faisait peur. Elle lui dit: «Pourquoi m’avez-vous sauvée?»

Il la regarda avec anxiété comme cherchant à deviner ce qu’elle lui disait. Elle répéta sa question. Alors il lui jeta un coup d’œil profondément triste, et s’enfuit.

Elle resta étonnée.

Quelques moments après il revint, apportant un paquet qu’il jeta à ses pieds. C’étaient des vêtements que des femmes charitables avaient déposés pour elle au seuil de l’église. Alors elle abaissa ses yeux sur elle-même, se vit presque nue, et rougit. La vie revenait.

Quasimodo parut éprouver quelque chose de cette pudeur. Il voila son regard de sa large main et s’éloigna encore une fois, mais à pas lents.

Elle se hâta de se vêtir. C’était une robe blanche avec un voile blanc. Un habit de novice de l’Hôtel-Dieu.

Elle achevait à peine qu’elle vit revenir Quasimodo. Il portait un panier sous un bras et un matelas sous l’autre. Il y avait dans le panier une bouteille, du pain, et quelques provisions. Il posa le panier à terre, et dit: «Mangez.» Il étendit le matelas sur la dalle, et dit: «Dormez.»

C’était son propre repas, c’était son propre lit que le sonneur de cloches avait été chercher.

L’égyptienne leva les yeux sur lui pour le remercier; mais elle ne put articuler un mot. Le pauvre diable était vraiment horrible. Elle baissa la tête avec un tressaillement d’effroi.

Alors il lui dit: «Je vous fais peur. Je suis bien laid, n’est-ce pas? Ne me regardez point. Écoutez-moi seulement. — Le jour, vous resterez ici; la nuit, vous pouvez vous promener par toute l’église. Mais ne sortez de l’église ni jour ni nuit. Vous seriez perdue. On vous tuerait et je mourrais.»

Émue, elle leva la tête pour lui répondre. Il avait disparu. Elle se retrouva seule, rêvant aux paroles singulières de cet être presque monstrueux, et frappée du son de sa voix qui était si rauque et pourtant si douce.

Puis, elle examina sa cellule. C’était une chambre de quelque six pieds carrés, avec une petite lucarne et une porte sur le plan légèrement incliné du toit en pierres plates. Plusieurs gouttières à figures d’animaux semblaient se pencher autour d’elle et tendre le cou pour la voir par la lucarne. Au bord de son toit, elle apercevait le haut de mille cheminées qui faisaient monter sous ses yeux les fumées de tous les feux de Paris. Triste spectacle pour la pauvre égyptienne, enfant trouvée, condamnée à mort, malheureuse créature, sans patrie, sans famille, sans foyer.

Au moment où la pensée de son isolement lui apparaissait ainsi, plus poignante que jamais, elle sentit une tête velue et barbue se glisser dans ses mains, sur ses genoux. Elle tressaillit (tout l’effrayait maintenant), et regarda. C’était la pauvre chèvre, l’agile Djali, qui s’était échappée à sa suite, au moment où Quasimodo avait dispersé la brigade de Charmolue, et qui se répandait en caresses à ses pieds depuis près d’une heure, sans pouvoir obtenir un regard. L’égyptienne la couvrit de baisers. «Oh! Djali, disait-elle, comme je t’ai oubliée! Tu songes donc toujours à moi! Oh! tu n’es pas ingrate, toi!» En même temps, comme si une main invisible eût soulevé le poids qui comprimait ses larmes dans son cœur depuis si longtemps, elle se mit à pleurer; et à mesure que ses larmes coulaient, elle sentait s’en aller avec elles ce qu’il y avait de plus âcre et de plus amer dans sa douleur.

Le soir venu, elle trouva la nuit si belle, la lune si douce, qu’elle fit le tour de la galerie élevée qui enveloppe l’église. Elle en éprouva quelque soulagement, tant la terre lui parut calme, vue de cette hauteur.

III

SOURD

Le lendemain matin, elle s’aperçut en s’éveillant qu’elle avait dormi. Cette chose singulière l’étonna. Il y avait si longtemps qu’elle était déshabituée du sommeil. Un joyeux rayon du soleil levant entrait par sa lucarne et lui venait frapper le visage. En même temps que le soleil, elle vit à cette lucarne un objet qui l’effraya, la malheureuse figure de Quasimodo. Involontairement elle referma les yeux, mais en vain; elle croyait toujours voir à travers sa paupière rose ce masque de gnome, borgne et brèche-dent. Alors, tenant toujours ses yeux fermés, elle entendit une rude voix qui disait très doucement:

«N’ayez pas peur. Je suis votre ami. J’étais venu vous voir dormir, cela ne vous fait pas de mal, n’est-ce pas, que je vienne vous voir dormir? Qu’est-ce que cela vous fait que je sois là quand vous avez les yeux fermés? Maintenant je vais m’en aller. Tenez, je me suis mis derrière le mur. Vous pouvez rouvrir les yeux.»

Il y avait quelque chose de plus plaintif encore que ces paroles, c’était l’accent dont elles étaient prononcées. L’égyptienne touchée ouvrit les yeux. Il n’était plus en effet à la lucarne. Elle alla à cette lucarne, et vit le pauvre bossu blotti à un angle de mur, dans une attitude douloureuse et résignée. Elle fit un effort pour surmonter la répugnance qu’il lui inspirait. «Venez», lui dit-elle doucement. Au mouvement des lèvres de l’égyptienne, Quasimodo crut qu’elle le chassait; alors il se leva et se retira en boitant, lentement, la tête baissée, sans même oser lever sur la jeune fille son regard plein de désespoir. «Venez donc», cria-t-elle. Mais il continuait de s’éloigner. Alors elle se jeta hors de sa cellule, courut à lui, et lui prit le bras. En se sentant touché par elle, Quasimodo trembla de tous ses membres. Il releva son œil suppliant, et, voyant qu’elle le ramenait près d’elle, toute sa face rayonna de joie et de tendresse. Elle voulut le faire entrer dans sa cellule, mais il s’obstina à rester sur le seuil. «Non, non, dit-il, le hibou n’entre pas dans le nid de l’alouette.»

Alors elle s’accroupit gracieusement sur sa couchette avec sa chèvre endormie à ses pieds. Tous deux restèrent quelques instants immobiles, considérant en silence, lui tant de grâce, elle tant de laideur. À chaque moment, elle découvrait en Quasimodo quelque difformité de plus. Son regard se promenait des genoux cagneux au dos bossu, du dos bossu à l'œil unique. Elle ne pouvait comprendre qu'un être si gauchement ébauché existât. Cependant il y avait sur tout cela tant de tristesse et de douceur répandues qu'elle commençait à s'y faire.

Il rompit le premier ce silence. «Vous me disiez donc de revenir?»

Elle fit un signe de tête affirmatif, en disant: «Oui.»

Il comprit le signe de tête. «Hélas! dit-il comme hésitant à achever, c'est que... je suis sourd.»

«Pauvre homme!» s'écria la bohémienne avec une expression de bienveillante pitié.

Il se mit à sourire douloureusement. «Vous trouvez qu'il ne me manquait que cela, n'est-ce pas? Oui, je suis sourd. C'est comme cela que je suis fait. C'est horrible, n'est-il pas vrai? Vous êtes si belle, vous!»

Il y avait dans l'accent du misérable un sentiment si profond de sa misère qu'elle n'eut pas la force de dire une parole. D'ailleurs il ne l'aurait pas entendue. Il poursuivit.

«Jamais je n'ai vu ma laideur comme à présent. Quand je me compare à vous, j'ai bien pitié de moi, pauvre malheureux monstre que je suis! Je dois vous faire l'effet d'une bête, dites. — Vous, vous êtes un rayon de soleil, une goutte de rosée, un chant d'oiseau! — Moi, je suis quelque chose d'affreux, ni homme, ni animal, un je ne sais quoi plus dur, plus foulé aux pieds et plus difforme qu'un caillou!»

Alors il se mit à rire, et ce rire était ce qu'il y a de plus déchirant au monde. Il continua:

«Oui, je suis sourd. Mais vous me parlerez par gestes, par signes. J'ai un maître qui cause avec moi de cette façon. Et puis, je saurai bien vite votre volonté au mouvement de vos lèvres, à votre regard.

— Eh bien! reprit-elle en souriant, dites-moi pourquoi vous m'avez sauvée.»

Il la regarda attentivement tandis qu'elle parlait.

«J'ai compris, répondit-il. Vous me demandez pourquoi je vous ai sauvée. Vous avez oublié un misérable qui a tenté de vous enlever une nuit, un misérable à qui le lendemain même vous avez porté secours sur leur infâme pilori. Une goutte d'eau et un peu de pitié, voilà plus que je n'en paierai avec ma vie. Vous avez oublié ce misérable; lui, il s'est souvenu.»

Elle l’écoutait avec un attendrissement profond. Une larme roulait dans l’œil du sonneur, mais elle n’en tomba pas. Il parut mettre une sorte de point d’honneur à la dévorer.

«Écoutez, reprit-il quand il ne craignit plus que cette larme s’échappât, nous avons là des tours bien hautes, un homme qui en tomberait serait mort avant de toucher le pavé; quand il vous plaira que j’en tombe, vous n’aurez pas même un mot à dire, un coup d’œil suffira.»

Alors il se leva. Cet être bizarre, si malheureuse que fût la bohémienne, éveillait encore quelque compassion en elle. Elle lui fit signe de rester.

«Non, non, dit-il. Je ne dois pas rester trop longtemps. Je ne suis pas à mon aise quand vous me regardez. C’est par pitié que vous ne détournez pas les yeux. Je vais quelque part d’où je vous verrai sans que vous me voyiez. Ce sera mieux.»

Il tira de sa poche un petit sifflet de métal. «Tenez, dit-il, quand vous aurez besoin de moi, quand vous voudrez que je vienne, quand vous n’aurez pas trop d’horreur à me voir, vous sifflerez avec ceci. J’entends ce bruit-là.»

Il déposa le sifflet à terre et s’enfuit.

IV

GRÈS ET CRISTAL

Le calme revenait peu à peu dans l’âme de la Esmeralda. L’excès de la douleur, comme l’excès de la joie, est une chose violente qui dure peu. Le cœur de l’homme ne peut rester longtemps dans une extrémité. La bohémienne avait tant souffert qu’il ne lui en restait plus que l’étonnement.

Avec la sécurité l’espérance lui était revenue. Elle était hors de la société, hors de la vie, mais elle sentait vaguement qu’il ne serait peut-être pas impossible d’y rentrer. Elle était comme une morte qui tiendrait en réserve une clé de son tombeau.

Elle sentait s’éloigner d’elle peu à peu les images terribles qui l’avaient si longtemps obsédée. Tous les fantômes hideux, Pierrat Torterue, Jacques Charmolue, s’effaçaient dans son esprit, tous, le prêtre lui-même.

Et puis, Phoebus vivait, elle en était sûre, elle l’avait vu. La vie de Phoebus, c’était tout. Après la série de secousses fatales qui avaient tout fait écrouler en elle, elle n’avait retrouvé debout dans son âme qu’une chose, qu’un sentiment, son amour pour le capitaine. C’est que l’amour est comme un arbre, il pousse de lui-même, jette profondément ses racines dans tout notre être, et continue souvent de verdoyer sur un cœur en ruines.

Et ce qu’il y a d’inexplicable, c’est que plus cette passion est aveugle, plus elle est tenace. Elle n’est jamais plus solide que lorsqu’elle n’a pas de raison en elle.

Sans doute la Esmeralda ne songeait pas au capitaine sans amertume. Sans doute il était affreux qu’il eût été trompé aussi lui, qu’il eût cru cette chose impossible, qu’il eût pu comprendre un coup de poignard venu de celle qui eût donné mille vies pour lui. Mais enfin, il ne fallait pas trop lui en vouloir: n’avait-elle pas avoué *son crime*? n’avait-elle pas cédé, faible femme, à la torture? Toute la faute était à elle. Elle aurait dû se laisser arracher les ongles plutôt qu’une telle parole. Enfin, qu’elle revît Phoebus une seule fois, une seule minute, il ne faudrait qu’un mot, qu’un regard pour le détromper, pour le ramener. Elle n’en doutait pas. Elle s’étourdissait aussi sur beaucoup de choses singulières, sur le hasard de la présence de Phoebus le jour de l’amende honorable, sur la jeune fille avec laquelle il était. C’était sa sœur sans doute. Explication déraisonnable, mais dont elle se contentait, parce qu’elle avait besoin de croire que Phoebus l’aimait toujours et n’aimait qu’elle. Ne lui avait-il pas juré? Que lui fallait-il de plus, naïve et crédule qu’elle était? Et puis, dans cette affaire, les apparences n’étaient-elles pas bien plutôt contre elle que contre lui? Elle attendait donc. Elle espérait.

Ajoutons que l’église, cette vaste église qui l’enveloppait toutes parts, qui la gardait, qui la sauvait, était elle-même un souverain calmant. Les lignes solennelles de cette architecture, l’attitude religieuse de tous les objets qui entouraient la jeune fille, les pensées pieuses et sereines qui se dégageaient, pour ainsi dire, de tous les pores de cette pierre, agissaient sur elle à son insu. L’édifice avait aussi des bruits d’une telle bénédiction et d’une telle majesté qu’ils assoupissaient cette âme malade. Le chant monotone des officiants, les réponses du peuple aux prêtres, quelquefois inarticulées, quelquefois tonnantes, l’harmonieux tressaillement des vitraux, l’orgue éclatant comme cent trompettes, les trois clochers bourdonnant comme des ruches de grosses abeilles, tout cet orchestre sur lequel bondissait une gamme gigantesque montant et descendant sans cesse d’une foule à un clocher, assourdissait sa mémoire, son imagination, sa douleur. Les cloches surtout la berçaient. C’était comme un magnétisme puissant que ces vastes appareils répandaient sur elle à larges flots.

Aussi chaque soleil levant la trouvait plus apaisée, respirant mieux, moins pâle. À mesure que ses plaies se fermaient, sa grâce et sa beauté refleurissaient sur son visage, mais plus recueillies et plus reposées. Son ancien caractère lui revenait aussi, quelque chose même de sa gaieté, sa jolie moue, son amour de sa chèvre, son goût de chanter, sa pudeur. Elle avait soin de s’habiller le matin dans l’angle de sa logette, de peur que quelque habitant des greniers voisins ne la vît par la lucarne.

Quand la pensée de Phoebus lui en laissait le temps, l’égyptienne songeait quelquefois à Quasimodo. C’était le seul lien, le seul rapport, la seule communication qui lui restât avec les hommes, avec les vivants. La malheureuse! elle était plus hors du monde que Quasimodo! Elle ne comprenait rien à l’étrange ami que le hasard lui avait donné. Souvent elle se reprochait de ne pas avoir une reconnaissance qui fermât les yeux, mais décidément elle ne pouvait s’accoutumer au pauvre sonneur. Il était trop laid.

Elle avait laissé à terre le sifflet qu’il lui avait donné. Cela n’empêcha pas Quasimodo de reparaître de temps en temps les premiers jours. Elle faisait son possible pour ne pas se détourner avec trop de répugnance quand il venait lui apporter le panier de provisions ou la cruche d'eau, mais il s'apercevait toujours du moindre mouvement de ce genre, et alors il s'en allait tristement.

Une fois, il survint au moment où elle caressait Djali. Il resta quelques moments pensif devant ce groupe gracieux de la chèvre et de l'égyptienne. Enfin il dit en secouant sa tête lourde et mal faite: «Mon malheur, c'est que je ressemble encore trop à l'homme. Je voudrais être tout à fait une bête, comme cette chèvre.»

Elle leva sur lui un regard étonné.

Il répondit à ce regard: «Oh! je sais bien pourquoi.» Et il s'en alla.

Une autre fois, il se présenta à la porte de la cellule (où il n'entrait jamais) au moment où la Esmeralda chantait une vieille ballade espagnole, dont elle ne comprenait pas les paroles, mais qui était restée dans son oreille parce que les bohémiennes l'en avaient bercée tout enfant. À la vue de cette vilaine figure qui survenait brusquement au milieu de sa chanson, la jeune fille s'interrompit avec un geste d'effroi involontaire. Le malheureux sonneur tomba à genoux sur le seuil de la porte et joignit d'un air suppliant ses grosses mains informes. «Oh! dit-il douloureusement, je vous en conjure, continuez et ne me chassez pas.» Elle ne voulut pas l'affliger, et, toute tremblante, reprit sa romance. Par degrés cependant son effroi se dissipa, et elle se laissa aller tout entière à l'impression de l'air mélancolique et traînant qu'elle chantait. Lui, était resté à genoux, les mains jointes, comme en prière, attentif, respirant à peine, son regard fixé sur les prunelles brillantes de la bohémienne. On eût dit qu'il entendait sa chanson dans ses yeux.

Une autre fois encore, il vint à elle d'un air gauche et timide. «Écoutez-moi, dit-il avec effort, j'ai quelque chose à vous dire.» Elle lui fit signe qu'elle l'écoutait. Alors il se mit à soupirer, entr'ouvrit ses lèvres, parut un moment prêt à parler, puis il la regarda, fit un mouvement de tête négatif, et se retira lentement, son front dans la main, laissant l'égyptienne stupéfaite.

Parmi les personnages grotesques sculptés dans le mur, il y en avait un qu'il affectionnait particulièrement, et avec lequel il semblait souvent échanger des regards fraternels. Une fois l'égyptienne l'entendit qui lui disait: «Oh! que ne suis-je de pierre comme toi!»

Un jour enfin, un matin, la Esmeralda s'était avancée jusqu'au bord du toit et regardait dans la place par-dessus la toiture aiguë de Saint-Jean-le-

Rond. Quasimodo était là, derrière elle. Il se plaçait ainsi de lui-même, afin d’épargner le plus possible à la jeune fille le déplaisir de le voir. Tout à coup la bohémienne tressaillit, une larme et un éclair de joie brillèrent à la fois dans ses yeux, elle s’agenouilla au bord du toit et tendit ses bras avec angoisse vers la place en criant: «Phoebus! viens! viens! un mot, un seul mot, au nom du ciel! Phoebus! Phoebus!» Sa voix, son visage, son geste, toute sa personne avaient l’expression déchirante d’un naufragé qui fait le signal de détresse au joyeux navire qui passe au loin dans un rayon de soleil à l’horizon.

Quasimodo se pencha sur la place, et vit que l’objet de cette tendre et délirante prière était un jeune homme, un capitaine, un beau cavalier tout reluisant d’armes et de parures, qui passait en caracolant au fond de la place, et saluait du panache une belle dame souriant à son balcon. Du reste, l’officier n’entendait pas la malheureuse qui l’appelait. Il était trop loin.

Mais le pauvre sourd entendait, lui. Un soupir profond souleva sa poitrine. Il se retourna. Son cœur était gonflé de toutes les larmes qu’il dévorait; ses deux poings convulsifs se heurtèrent sur sa tête, et quand il les retira il avait à chaque main une poignée de cheveux roux.

L’égyptienne ne faisait aucune attention à lui. Il disait à voix basse en grinçant des dents: «Damnation! Voilà donc comme il faut être! il n’est besoin que d’être beau en dessus!»

Cependant elle était restée à genoux et criait avec agitation extraordinaire:

«Oh! le voilà qui descend de cheval! — Il va entrer dans cette maison! — Phoebus! — Il ne m’entend pas! — Phoebus! — Que cette femme est méchante de lui parler en même temps que moi! — Phoebus! Phoebus!»

Le sourd la regardait. Il comprenait cette pantomime. L’œil du pauvre sonneur se remplissait de larmes, mais il n’en laissait couler aucune. Tout à coup il la tira doucement par le bord de sa manche. Elle se retourna. Il avait pris un air tranquille. Il lui dit:

«Voulez-vous que je vous l’aille chercher?»

Elle poussa un cri de joie. «Oh! va! allez! cours! vite! ce capitaine! ce capitaine! amenez-le-moi! je t’aimerai!»

Elle embrassait ses genoux. Il ne put s’empêcher de secouer la tête douloureusement.

«Je vais vous l’amener», dit-il d’une voix faible. Puis il tourna la tête et se précipita à grands pas sous l’escalier, étouffé de sanglots.

Quand il arriva sur la place, il ne vit plus rien que le beau cheval attaché à la porte du logis Gondelaurier. Le capitaine venait d'y entrer.

Il leva son regard vers le toit de l'église. La Esmeralda y était toujours à la même place, dans la même posture. Il lui fit un triste signe de tête. Puis il s'adossa à l'une des bornes du porche Gondelaurier, déterminé à attendre que le capitaine sortît.

C'était, dans le logis Gondelaurier, un de ces jours de gala qui précèdent les noces. Quasimodo vit entrer beaucoup de monde et ne vit sortir personne. De temps en temps il regardait vers le toit. L'égyptienne ne bougeait pas plus que lui. Un palefrenier vint détacher le cheval, et le fit entrer à l'écurie du logis.

La journée entière se passa ainsi, Quasimodo sur la borne, la Esmeralda sur le toit, Phoebus sans doute aux pieds de Fleur-de-Lys.

Enfin la nuit vint; une nuit sans lune, une nuit obscure. Quasimodo eut beau fixer son regard sur la Esmeralda. Bientôt ce ne fut plus qu'une blancheur dans le crépuscule; puis rien. Tout s'effaça, tout était noir.

Quasimodo vit s'illuminer du haut en bas de la façade les fenêtres du logis Gondelaurier. Il vit s'allumer l'une après l'autre les autres croisées de la place; il les vit aussi s'éteindre jusqu'à la dernière. Car il resta toute la soirée à son poste. L'officier ne sortait pas. Quand les derniers passants furent rentrés chez eux, quand toutes les croisées des autres maisons furent éteintes, Quasimodo demeura tout à fait seul, tout à fait dans l'ombre. Il n'y avait pas alors de luminaire dans le Parvis de Notre-Dame.

Cependant les fenêtres du logis Gondelaurier étaient restées éclairées, même après minuit. Quasimodo immobile et attentif voyait passer sur les vitraux de mille couleurs une foule d'ombres vives et dansantes. S'il n'eût pas été sourd, à mesure que la rumeur de Paris endormi s'éteignait, il eût entendu de plus en plus distinctement, dans l'intérieur du logis Gondelaurier, un bruit de fête, de rires et de musiques.

Vers une heure du matin, les conviés commencèrent à se retirer. Quasimodo enveloppé de ténèbres les regardait tous sous le porche éclairé de flambeaux. Aucun n'était le capitaine.

Il était plein de pensées tristes. Par moments il regardait en l'air, comme ceux qui s'ennuient. De grands nuages noirs, lourds, déchirés, crevassés, pendaient comme des hamacs de crêpe sous le cintre étoilé de la nuit. On eût dit les toiles d'araignée de la voûte du ciel.

Dans un de ces moments, il vit tout à coup s'ouvrir mystérieusement la porte-fenêtre du balcon dont la balustrade de pierre se découpait au-dessus de sa tête. La frêle porte de vitre donna passage à deux personnes derrière lesquelles elle se referma sans bruit. C'était un homme et une femme. Ce ne fut pas sans peine que Quasimodo parvint à reconnaître dans l'homme le beau capitaine, dans la femme la jeune dame qu'il avait vue le matin souhaiter la bienvenue à l'officier, du haut de ce même balcon. La place était parfaitement obscure, et un double rideau cramoisi qui était retombé derrière la porte au moment où elle s'était refermée ne laissait guère arriver sur le balcon la lumière de l'appartement.

Le jeune homme et la jeune fille, autant qu'en pouvait juger notre sourd qui n'entendait pas une de leurs paroles, paraissaient s'abandonner à un fort tendre tête-à-tête. La jeune fille semblait avoir permis à l'officier de lui faire une ceinture de son bras, et résistait doucement à un baiser.

Quasimodo assistait d'en bas à cette scène d'autant plus gracieuse à voir qu'elle n'était pas faite pour être vue. Il contemplait ce bonheur, cette beauté avec amertume. Après tout, la nature n'était pas muette chez le pauvre diable, et sa colonne vertébrale, toute méchamment tordue qu'elle était, n'était pas moins frémissante qu'une autre. Il songeait à la misérable part que la providence lui avait faite, que la femme, l'amour, la volupté lui passeraient éternellement sous les yeux, et qu'il ne ferait jamais que voir la félicité des autres. Mais ce qui le déchirait le plus dans ce spectacle, ce qui mêlait de l'indignation à son dépit, c'était de penser à ce que devait souffrir l'égyptienne si elle voyait. Il est vrai que la nuit était bien noire, que la Esmeralda, si elle était restée à sa place (et il n'en doutait pas), était fort loin, et que c'était tout au plus s'il pouvait distinguer lui-même les amoureux du balcon. Cela le consolait.

Cependant leur entretien devenait de plus en plus animé. La jeune dame paraissait supplier l'officier de ne rien lui demander de plus. Quasimodo ne distinguait de tout cela que les belles mains jointes, les sourires mêlés de larmes, les regards levés aux étoiles de la jeune fille, les yeux du capitaine ardemment abaissés sur elle.

Heureusement, car la jeune fille commençait à ne plus lutter que faiblement, la porte du balcon se rouvrit subitement, une vieille dame parut, la belle sembla confuse, l'officier prit un air dépité, et tous trois rentrèrent.

Un moment après, un cheval piaffa sous le porche et le brillant officier, enveloppé de son manteau de nuit, passa rapidement devant Quasimodo.

Le sonneur lui laissa doubler l’angle de la rue, puis il se mit à courir après lui avec son agilité de singe, en criant: «Hé! le capitaine!»

Le capitaine s’arrêta.

«Que me veut ce maraud?» dit-il en avisant dans l’ombre cette espèce de figure déhanchée qui accourait vers lui en cahotant.

Quasimodo cependant était arrivé à lui, et avait pris hardiment la bride de son cheval: «Suivez-moi, capitaine, il y a ici quelqu’un qui veut vous parler.

— Cornemahom! grommela Phoebus, voilà un vilain oiseau ébouriffé qu’il me semble avoir vu quelque part. — Holà! maître, veux-tu bien laisser la bride de mon cheval?

— Capitaine, répondit le sourd, ne me demandez-vous pas qui?

— Je te dis de lâcher mon cheval, repartit Phoebus impatienté. Que veut ce drôle qui se pend au chanfrein de mon destrier? Est-ce que tu prends mon cheval pour une potence?»

Quasimodo, loin de quitter la bride du cheval, se disposait à lui faire rebrousser chemin. Ne pouvant s’expliquer la résistance du capitaine, il se hâta de lui dire:

«Venez, capitaine, c’est une femme qui vous attend.» Il ajouta avec effort: «Une femme qui vous aime.

— Rare faquin! dit le capitaine, qui me croit obligé d’aller chez toutes les femmes qui m’aiment! ou qui le disent! — Et si par hasard elle te ressemble, face de chat-huant? — Dis à celle qui t’envoie que je vais me marier, et qu’elle aille au diable!

— Écoutez, s’écria Quasimodo croyant vaincre d’un mot son hésitation, venez, monseigneur! c’est l’égyptienne que vous savez!»

Ce mot fit en effet une grande impression sur Phoebus, mais non celle que le sourd en attendait. On se rappelle que notre galant officier s’était retiré avec Fleur-de-Lys quelques moments avant que Quasimodo sauvât la condamnée des mains de Charmolue. Depuis, dans toutes ses visites au logis Gondelaurier, il s’était bien gardé de reparler de cette femme dont le souvenir, après tout, lui était pénible; et de son côté Fleur-de-Lys n’avait pas jugé politique de lui dire que l’égyptienne vivait. Phoebus croyait donc la pauvre *Similar* morte, et qu’il y avait déjà un ou deux mois de cela. Ajoutons que depuis quelques instants le capitaine songeait à l’obscurité profonde de la nuit, à la laideur surnaturelle, à la voix sépulcrale de l’étrange messager, que minuit était passé, que la rue était déserte comme le soir où le moine bourru l’avait accosté, et que son cheval soufflait en regardant Quasimodo.

«L’égyptienne! s’écria-t-il presque effrayé. Or çà, viens-tu de l’autre monde?»

Et il mit sa main sur la poignée de sa dague.

«Vite, vite, dit le sourd cherchant à entraîner le cheval. Par ici!»

Phoebus lui asséna un vigoureux coup de botte dans la poitrine.

L’œil de Quasimodo étincela. Il fit un mouvement pour se jeter sur le capitaine. Puis il dit en se roidissant: «Oh! que vous êtes heureux qu’il y ait quelqu’un qui vous aime!»

Il appuya sur le mot *quelqu’un*, et lâchant la bride du cheval:

«Allez-vous-en!»

Phoebus piqua des deux en jurant. Quasimodo le regarda s’enfoncer dans le brouillard de la rue.

«Oh! disait tout bas le pauvre sourd, refuser cela!»

Il rentra dans Notre-Dame, alluma sa lampe et remonta dans la tour. Comme il l’avait pensé, la bohémienne était toujours à la même place.

Du plus loin qu’elle l’aperçut, elle courut à lui.

«Seul! s’écria-t-elle en joignant douloureusement ses belles mains.

— Je n’ai pu le retrouver, dit froidement Quasimodo.

— Il fallait l’attendre toute la nuit!» reprit-elle avec emportement.

Il vit son geste de colère et comprit le reproche.

«Je le guetterai mieux une autre fois, dit-il en baissant la tête.

— Va-t’en!» lui dit-elle.

Il la quitta. Elle était mécontente de lui. Il avait mieux aimé être maltraité par elle que de l’affliger. Il avait gardé toute la douleur pour lui.

À dater de ce jour, l’égyptienne ne le vit plus. Il cessa de venir à sa cellule. Tout au plus entrevoyait-elle quelquefois au sommet d’une tour la figure du sonneur mélancoliquement fixée sur elle. Mais dès qu’elle l’apercevait, il disparaissait.

Nous devons dire qu’elle était peu affligée de cette absence volontaire du pauvre bossu. Au fond du cœur, elle lui en savait gré. Au reste, Quasimodo ne se faisait pas illusion à cet égard.

Elle ne le voyait plus, mais elle sentait la présence d’un bon génie autour d’elle. Ses provisions étaient renouvelées par une main invisible pendant son sommeil. Un matin, elle trouva sur sa fenêtre une cage d’oiseaux. Il y avait au-dessus de sa cellule une sculpture qui lui faisait peur. Elle l’avait témoigné plus d’une fois devant Quasimodo. Un matin (car toutes ces choses-là se faisaient la nuit), elle ne la vit plus. On l’avait brisée, celui qui avait grimpé jusqu’à cette sculpture avait dû risquer sa vie.

Quelquefois, le soir, elle entendait une voix cachée sous les abat-vent du clocher chanter comme pour l’endormir une chanson triste et bizarre. C’étaient des vers sans rime, comme un sourd en peut faire.

Ne regarde pas la figure,
Jeune fille, regarde le cœur.
Le cœur d’un beau jeune homme est souvent difforme.
Il y a des cœurs où l’amour ne se conserve pas.
Jeune fille, le sapin n’est pas beau,
N’est pas beau comme le peuplier,
Mais il garde son feuillage l’hiver.
Hélas! à quoi bon dire cela?
Ce qui n’est pas beau a tort d’être;
La beauté n’aime que la beauté,
Avril tourne le dos à janvier.
La beauté est parfaite,
La beauté peut tout,
La beauté est la seule chose qui n’existe pas à demi.
Le corbeau ne vole que le jour,
Le hibou ne vole que la nuit,
Le cygne vole la nuit et le jour.

Un matin, elle vit, en s’éveillant, sur sa fenêtre, deux vases pleins de fleurs. L’un était un vase de cristal fort beau et fort brillant, mais fêlé. Il avait laissé fuir l’eau dont on l’avait rempli, et les fleurs qu’il contenait étaient fanées. L’autre était un pot de grès, grossier et commun, mais qui avait conservé toute son eau, et dont les fleurs étaient restées fraîches et vermeilles.

Je ne sais pas si ce fut avec intention, mais la Esmeralda prit le bouquet fané, et le porta tout le jour sur son sein.

Ce jour-là, elle n’entendit pas la voix de la tour chanter.

Elle s’en soucia médiocrement. Elle passait ses journées à caresser Djali, à épier la porte du logis Gondelaurier, à s’entretenir tout bas de Phoebus, et à émietter son pain aux hirondelles.

Elle avait du reste tout à fait cessé de voir, cessé d’entendre Quasimodo. Le pauvre sonneur semblait avoir disparu de l’église. Une nuit pourtant, comme elle ne dormait pas et songeait à son beau capitaine, elle entendit soupirer près de sa cellule. Effrayée, elle se leva, et vit à la lumière de la lune une masse informe couchée en travers devant sa porte. C’était Quasimodo qui dormait là sur une pierre.

V

LA CLEF DE LA PORTE-ROUGE

Cependant la voix publique avait fait connaître à l’archidiacre de quelle manière miraculeuse l’égyptienne avait été sauvée. Quand il apprit cela, il ne sut ce qu’il en éprouvait. Il s’était arrangé de la mort de la Esmeralda. De cette façon il était tranquille, il avait touché le fond de la douleur possible. Le cœur humain (dom Claude avait médité sur ces matières) ne peut contenir qu’une certaine quantité de désespoir. Quand l’éponge est imbibée, la mer peut passer dessus sans y faire entrer une larme de plus.

Or, la Esmeralda morte, l’éponge était imbibée, tout était dit pour dom Claude sur cette terre. Mais la sentir vivante, et Phoebus aussi, c’étaient les tortures qui recommençaient, les secousses, les alternatives, la vie. Et Claude était las de tout cela.

Quand il sut cette nouvelle, il s’enferma dans sa cellule du cloître. Il ne parut ni aux conférences capitulaires, ni aux offices. Il ferma sa porte à tous, même à l’évêque. Il resta muré de cette sorte plusieurs semaines. On le crut malade. Il l’était en effet.

Que faisait-il ainsi enfermé? Sous quelles pensées l’infortuné se débattait-il? Livrait-il une dernière lutte à sa redoutable passion? Combinait-il un dernier plan de mort pour elle et de perdition pour lui?

Son Jehan, son frère chéri, son enfant gâté, vint une fois à sa porte, frappa, jura, supplia, se nomma dix fois. Claude n’ouvrit pas.

Il passait des journées entières la face collée aux vitres de sa fenêtre. De cette fenêtre, située dans le cloître, il voyait la logette de la Esmeralda, il la voyait souvent elle-même avec sa chèvre, quelquefois avec Quasimodo. Il remarquait les petits soins du vilain sourd, ses obéissances, ses façons délicates et soumises avec l’égyptienne. Il se rappelait, car il avait bonne mémoire, lui, et la mémoire est la tourmenteuse des jaloux, il se rappelait le regard singulier du sonneur sur la danseuse un certain soir. Il se demandait quel motif avait pu pousser Quasimodo à la sauver. Il fut témoin de mille petites scènes entre la bohémienne et le sourd dont la pantomime, vue de loin et commentée par sa passion, lui parut fort tendre. Il se défiait de la singularité des femmes. Alors il sentit confusément s’éveiller en lui une jalousie à laquelle il ne se fût jamais attendu, une jalousie qui le faisait rougir de honte et d’indignation. «Passe encore pour le capitaine, mais celui-ci!» Cette pensée le bouleversait.

Ses nuits étaient affreuses. Depuis qu’il savait l’égyptienne vivante, les froides idées de spectre et de tombe qui l’avaient obsédé un jour entier s’étaient évanouies, et la chair revenait l’aiguillonner. Il se tordait sur son lit de sentir la brune jeune fille si près de lui.

Chaque nuit, son imagination délirante lui représentait la Esmeralda dans toutes les attitudes qui avaient le plus fait bouillir ses veines. Il la voyait étendue sur le capitaine poignardé, les yeux fermés, sa belle gorge nue couverte du sang de Phoebus, à ce moment de délice où l’archidiacre avait imprimé sur ses lèvres pâles ce baiser dont la malheureuse, quoique à demi morte, avait senti la brûlure. Il la revoyait déshabillée par les mains sauvages des tortionnaires, laissant mettre à nu et emboîter dans le brodequin aux vis de fer son petit pied, sa jambe fine et ronde, son genou souple et blanc. Il revoyait encore ce genou d’ivoire resté seul en dehors de l’horrible appareil de Torterue. Il se figurait enfin la jeune fille en chemise, la corde au cou, épaules nues, pieds nus, presque nue, comme il l’avait vue le dernier jour. Ces images de volupté faisaient crisper ses poings et courir un frisson le long de ses vertèbres.

Une nuit entre autres, elles échauffèrent si cruellement dans ses artères son sang de vierge et de prêtre qu’il mordit son oreiller, sauta hors de son lit, jeta un surplis sur sa chemise, et sortit de sa cellule, sa lampe à la main, à demi nu, effaré, l’œil en feu.

Il savait où trouver la clef de la Porte-Rouge qui communiquait du cloître à l’église, et il avait toujours sur lui, comme on sait, une clef de l’escalier des tours.

VI

SUITE DE LA CLEF DE LA PORTE-ROUGE

Cette nuit-là, la Esmeralda s’était endormie dans sa logette, pleine d’oubli, d’espérance et de douces pensées. Elle dormait depuis quelque temps, rêvant, comme toujours, de Phoebus, lorsqu’il lui sembla entendre du bruit autour d’elle. Elle avait un sommeil léger et inquiet, un sommeil d’oiseau. Un rien la réveillait. Elle ouvrit les yeux. La nuit était très noire. Cependant elle vit à sa lucarne une figure qui la regardait. Il y avait une lampe qui éclairait cette apparition. Au moment où elle se vit aperçue de la Esmeralda, cette figure souffla la lampe. Néanmoins la jeune fille avait eu le temps de l’entrevoir. Ses paupières se refermèrent de terreur.

«Oh! dit-elle d’une voix éteinte, le prêtre!»

Tout son malheur passé lui revint comme dans un éclair. Elle retomba sur son lit, glacée.

Un moment après, elle sentit le long de son corps un contact qui la fit tellement frémir qu’elle se dressa réveillée et furieuse sur son séant.

Le prêtre venait de se glisser près d’elle. Il l’entourait de ses deux bras.

Elle voulut crier, et ne put.

«Va-t’en, monstre! va-t’en, assassin! dit-elle d’une voix tremblante et basse à force de colère et d’épouvante.

— Grâce! grâce!» murmura le prêtre en lui imprimant ses lèvres sur les épaules.

Elle lui prit sa tête chauve à deux mains par son reste de cheveux, et s’efforça d’éloigner ses baisers comme si c’eût été des morsures.

«Grâce! répétait l’infortuné. Si tu savais ce que c’est que mon amour pour toi! c’est du feu, du plomb fondu, mille couteaux dans mon cœur!»

Et il arrêta ses deux bras avec une force surhumaine. Éperdue: «Lâche-moi, lui dit-elle, ou je te crache au visage!»

Il la lâcha. «Avilis-moi, frappe-moi, sois méchante! fais ce que tu voudras! Mais grâce! aime-moi!»

Alors elle le frappa avec une fureur d’enfant. Elle raidissait ses belles mains pour lui meurtrir la face. «Va-t’en, démon!

— Aime-moi! aime-moi! pitié!» criait le pauvre prêtre en se roulant sur elle et en répondant à ses coups par des caresses.

Tout à coup, elle le sentit plus fort qu’elle. «Il faut en finir!» dit-il en grinçant des dents.

Elle était subjuguée, palpitante, brisée, entre ses bras, à sa discrétion. Elle sentait une main lascive s’égarer sur elle. Elle fit un dernier effort, et se mit à crier: «Au secours! à moi! un vampire! un vampire!»

Rien ne venait. Djali seule était éveillée, et bêlait avec angoisse.

«Tais-toi!» disait le prêtre haletant.

Tout à coup, en se débattant, en rampant sur le sol, la main de l’égyptienne rencontra quelque chose de froid et de métallique. C’était le sifflet de Quasimodo. Elle le saisit avec une convulsion d’espérance, le porta à ses lèvres, et y siffla de tout ce qui lui restait de force. Le sifflet rendit un son clair, aigu, perçant.

«Qu’est-ce que cela?» dit le prêtre.

Presque au même instant il se sentit enlever par un bras vigoureux; la cellule était sombre, il ne put distinguer nettement qui le tenait ainsi; mais il entendit des dents claquer de rage, et il y avait juste assez de lumière éparse dans l’ombre pour qu’il vît briller au-dessus de sa tête une large lame de coutelas.

Le prêtre crut apercevoir la forme de Quasimodo. Il supposa que ce ne pouvait être que lui. Il se souvint d’avoir trébuché en entrant contre un paquet qui était étendu en travers de la porte en dehors. Cependant, comme le nouveau venu ne proférait pas une parole, il ne savait que croire. Il se jeta sur le bras qui tenait le coutelas en criant: «Quasimodo!» Il oubliait, en ce moment de détresse, que Quasimodo était sourd.

En un clin d’œil le prêtre fut terrassé, et sentit un genou de plomb s’appuyer sur sa poitrine. À l’empreinte anguleuse de ce genou, il reconnut Quasimodo. Mais que faire? comment de son côté être reconnu de lui? la nuit faisait le sourd aveugle.

Il était perdu. La jeune fille, sans pitié, comme une tigresse irritée, n’intervenait pas pour le sauver. Le coutelas se rapprochait de sa tête. Le moment était critique. Tout à coup son adversaire parut pris d’une hésitation. «Pas de sang sur elle!» dit-il d’une voix sourde.

C’était en effet la voix de Quasimodo.

Alors le prêtre sentit la grosse main qui le traînait par le pied hors de la cellule. C’est là qu’il devait mourir. Heureusement pour lui, la lune venait de se lever depuis quelques instants.

Quand ils eurent franchi la porte de la logette, son pâle rayon tomba sur la figure du prêtre. Quasimodo le regarda en face, un tremblement le prit, il lâcha le prêtre, et recula.

L'égyptienne, qui s'était avancée sur le seuil de la cellule, vit avec surprise les rôles changer brusquement. C'était maintenant le prêtre qui menaçait, Quasimodo qui suppliait.

Le prêtre, qui accablait le sourd de gestes de colère et de reproche, lui fit violemment signe de se retirer.

Le sourd baissa la tête, puis il vint se mettre à genoux devant la porte de l'égyptienne. «Monseigneur, dit-il d'une voix grave et résignée, vous ferez après ce qu'il vous plaira; mais tuez-moi d'abord.»

En parlant ainsi, il présentait au prêtre son coutelas. Le prêtre hors de lui se jeta dessus, mais la jeune fille fut plus prompte que lui. Elle arracha le couteau des mains de Quasimodo, et éclata de rire avec fureur. «Approche!» dit-elle au prêtre.

Elle tenait la lame haute. Le prêtre demeura indécis. Elle eût certainement frappé. «Tu n'oserais plus approcher, lâche!» lui cria-t-elle. Puis elle ajouta avec une expression impitoyable, et sachant bien qu'elle allait percer de mille fers rouges le cœur du prêtre: «Ah! je sais que Phoebus n'est pas mort!»

Le prêtre renversa Quasimodo à terre d'un coup de pied et se replongea en frémissant de rage sous la voûte de l'escalier.

Quand il fut parti, Quasimodo ramassa le sifflet qui venait de sauver l'égyptienne. «Il se rouillait», dit-il en le lui rendant. Puis il la laissa seule.

La jeune fille, bouleversée par cette scène violente, tomba épuisée sur son lit, et se mit à pleurer à sanglots. Son horizon redevenait sinistre.

De son côté, le prêtre était rentré à tâtons dans sa cellule.

C'en était fait. Dom Claude était jaloux de Quasimodo!

Il répéta d'un air pensif sa fatale parole: «Personne ne l'aura!»

LIVRE DIXIÈME

I

GRINGOIRE A PLUSIEURS BONNES IDÉES DE SUITE RUE DES BERNARDINS

Depuis que Pierre Gringoire avait vu comment toute cette affaire tournait, et que décidément il y aurait corde, pendaison et autres désagréments pour les personnages principaux de cette comédie, il ne s’était plus soucié de s’en mêler. Les truands, parmi lesquels il était resté considérant qu’en dernier résultat c’était la meilleure compagnie de Paris, les truands avaient continué de s’intéresser à l’égyptienne. Il avait trouvé cela fort simple de la part de gens qui n’avaient, comme elle, d’autre perspective que Charmolue et Torterue, et qui ne chevauchaient pas comme lui dans les régions imaginaires entre les deux ailes de Pegasus. Il avait appris par leurs propos que son épousée au pot cassé s’était réfugiée dans Notre-Dame, et il en était bien aise. Mais il n’avait pas même la tentation d’y aller voir. Il songeait quelquefois à la petite chèvre, et c’était tout. Du reste, le jour il faisait des tours de force pour vivre, et la nuit il élucubrait un mémoire contre l’évêque de Paris, car il se souvenait d’avoir été inondé par les roues de ses moulins, et il lui en gardait rancune. Il s’occupait aussi de commenter le bel ouvrage de Baudry le Rouge, évêque de Noyon et de Tournay, D*e* c*upa petrarum*, ce qui lui avait donné un goût violent pour l’architecture; penchant qui avait remplacé dans son cœur sa passion pour l’hermétisme, dont il n’était d’ailleurs qu’un corollaire naturel, puisqu’il y a un lien intime entre l’hermétique et la maçonnerie. Gringoire avait passé de l’amour d’une idée à l’amour de la forme de cette idée.

Un jour, il s’était arrêté près de Saint-Germain-l’Auxerrois à l’angle d’un logis qu’on appelait *Le For-l’Évêque*, lequel faisait face à un autre qu’on appelait *Le For-le-Roi*. Il y avait à ce For-l’Évêque une charmante chapelle du quatorzième siècle dont le chevet donnait sur la rue. Gringoire en examinait dévotement les sculptures extérieures. Il était dans un de ces moments de jouissance égoïste, exclusive, suprême, où l’artiste ne voit dans le monde que l’art et voit le monde dans l’art. Tout à coup, il sent une main se poser gravement sur son épaule. Il se retourne. C’était son ancien ami, son ancien maître, monsieur l’archidiacre.

Il resta stupéfait. Il y avait longtemps qu'il n'avait vu l'archidiacre, et dom Claude était un de ces hommes solennels et passionnés dont la rencontre dérange toujours l'équilibre d'un philosophe sceptique.

L'archidiacre garda quelques instants un silence pendant lequel Gringoire eut le loisir de l'observer. Il trouva dom Claude bien changé, pâle comme un matin d'hiver, les yeux caves, les cheveux presque blancs. Ce fut le prêtre qui rompit enfin le silence en disant d'un ton tranquille, mais glacial: «Comment vous portez-vous, maître Pierre?

— Ma santé? répondit Gringoire. Hé! hé! on en peut dire ceci et cela. Toutefois l'ensemble est bon. Je ne prends trop de rien. Vous savez, maître? le secret de se bien porter, selon Hippocrates, *id est cibi, potus, somni, Venus, omnia moderata sint.*

— Vous n'avez donc aucun souci, maître Pierre? reprit l'archidiacre en regardant fixement Gringoire.

— Ma foi, non.

— Et que faites-vous maintenant?

— Vous le voyez, mon maître. J'examine la coupe de ces pierres, et la façon dont est fouillé ce bas-relief.»

Le prêtre se mit à sourire, de ce sourire amer qui ne relève qu'une des extrémités de la bouche. «Et cela vous amuse?

— C'est le paradis!» s'écria Gringoire. Et se penchant sur les sculptures avec la mine éblouie d'un démonstrateur de phénomènes vivants: «Est-ce donc que vous ne trouvez pas, par exemple, cette métamorphose de basse-taille exécutée avec beaucoup d'adresse, de mignardise et de patience? Regardez cette colonnette. Autour de quel chapiteau avez-vous vu feuilles plus tendres et mieux caressées du ciseau? Voici trois rondes-bosses de Jean Maillevin. Ce ne sont pas les plus belles œuvres de ce grand génie. Néanmoins, la naïveté, la douceur des visages, la gaieté des attitudes et des draperies, et cet agrément inexplicable qui se mêle dans tous les défauts, rendent les figurines bien égayées et bien délicates, peut-être même trop. — Vous trouvez que ce n'est pas divertissant?

— Si fait! dit le prêtre.

— Et si vous voyiez l'intérieur de la chapelle! reprit le poète avec son enthousiasme bavard. Partout des sculptures. C'est touffu comme un cœur de chou! L'abside est d'une façon fort dévote et si particulière que je n'ai rien vu de même ailleurs!»

Dom Claude l'interrompit: «Vous êtes donc heureux?»

Gringoire répondit avec feu:

«En honneur, oui! J’ai d’abord aimé des femmes, puis des bêtes. Maintenant j’aime des pierres. C’est tout aussi amusant que les bêtes et les femmes, et c’est moins perfide.»

Le prêtre mit sa main sur son front. C’était son geste habituel.

«En vérité!

— Tenez! dit Gringoire, on a des jouissances!» Il prit le bras du prêtre qui se laissait aller, et le fit entrer sous la tourelle de l’escalier du For-l’Évêque. «Voilà un escalier! chaque fois que je le vois, je suis heureux. C’est le degré de la manière la plus simple et la plus rare de Paris. Toutes les marches sont par-dessous délardées. Sa beauté et sa simplicité consistent dans les girons de l’une et de l’autre, portant un pied ou environ, qui sont entrelacés, enclavés, emboîtés, enchaînés, enchâssés, entretaillés l’un dans l’autre et s’entre-mordent d’une façon vraiment ferme et gentille!

— Et vous ne désirez rien?

— Non.

— Et vous ne regrettez rien?

— Ni regret ni désir. J’ai arrangé ma vie.

— Ce qu’arrangent les hommes, dit Claude, les choses le dérangent.

— Je suis un philosophe pyrrhonien, répondit Gringoire, et je tiens tout en équilibre.

— Et comment la gagnez-vous, votre vie?

— Je fais encore çà et là des épopées et des tragédies; mais ce qui me rapporte le plus, c’est l’industrie que vous me connaissez, mon maître. Porter des pyramides de chaises sur mes dents.

— Le métier est grossier pour un philosophe.

— C’est encore de l’équilibre, dit Gringoire. Quand on a une pensée, on la retrouve en tout.

— Je le sais», répondit l’archidiacre.

Après un silence, le prêtre reprit: «Vous êtes néanmoins assez misérable?

— Misérable, oui; malheureux, non.»

En ce moment, un bruit de chevaux se fit entendre, et nos deux interlocuteurs virent défiler au bout de la rue une compagnie des archers de l’ordonnance du roi, les lances hautes, l’officier en tête. La cavalcade était brillante et résonnait sur le pavé.

«Comme vous regardez cet officier! dit Gringoire à l’archidiacre.

— C’est que je crois le reconnaître.

— Comment le nommez-vous?

— Je crois, dit Claude, qu'il s'appelle Phoebus de Châteaupers.

— Phoebus! un nom de curiosité! Il y a aussi Phoebus, comte de Foix. J'ai souvenir d'avoir connu une fille qui ne jurait que par Phoebus.

— Venez-vous-en, dit le prêtre. J'ai quelque chose à vous dire.»

Depuis le passage de cette troupe, quelque agitation perçait sous l'enveloppe glaciale de l'archidiacre. Il se mit à marcher. Gringoire le suivait, habitué à lui obéir, comme tout ce qui avait approché une fois cet homme plein d'ascendant. Ils arrivèrent en silence jusqu'à la rue des Bernardins qui était assez déserte. Dom Claude s'y arrêta.

«Qu'avez-vous à me dire, mon maître? lui demanda Gringoire.

— Est-ce que vous ne trouvez pas, répondit l'archidiacre d'un air de profonde réflexion, que l'habit de ces cavaliers que nous venons de voir est plus beau que le vôtre et que le mien?»

Gringoire hocha la tête.

«Ma foi! j'aime mieux ma gonelle jaune et rouge que ces écailles de fer et d'acier. Beau plaisir, de faire en marchant le même bruit que le quai de la Ferraille par un tremblement de terre!

— Donc, Gringoire, vous n'avez jamais porté envie à ces beaux fils en hoquetons de guerre?

— Envie de quoi, monsieur l'archidiacre? de leur force, de leur armure, de leur discipline? Mieux valent la philosophie et l'indépendance en guenilles. J'aime mieux être tête de mouche que queue de lion.

— Cela est singulier, dit le prêtre rêveur. Une belle livrée est pourtant belle.»

Gringoire, le voyant pensif, le quitta pour aller admirer le porche d'une maison voisine. Il revint en frappant des mains. «Si vous étiez moins occupé des beaux habits des gens de guerre, monsieur l'archidiacre, je vous prierais d'aller voir cette porte. Je l'ai toujours dit, la maison du sieur Aubry a une entrée la plus superbe du monde.

— Pierre Gringoire, dit l'archidiacre, qu'avez-vous fait de cette petite danseuse égyptienne?

— La Esmeralda? Vous changez bien brusquement de conversation.

— N'était-elle pas votre femme?

— Oui, au moyen d'une cruche cassée. Nous en avions pour quatre ans. — À propos, ajouta Gringoire en regardant l'archidiacre d'un air à demi goguenard, vous y pensez donc toujours?

— Et vous, vous n’y pensez plus?

— Peu. — J’ai tant de choses!... Mon Dieu, que la petite chèvre était jolie!

— Cette bohémienne ne vous avait-elle pas sauvé la vie?

— C’est pardieu vrai.

— Eh bien! qu’est-elle devenue? qu’en avez-vous fait?

— Je ne vous dirai pas. Je crois qu’ils l’ont pendue.

— Vous croyez?

— Je ne suis pas sûr. Quand j’ai vu qu’ils voulaient pendre les gens, je me suis retiré du jeu.

— C’est là tout ce que vous en savez?

— Attendez donc. On m’a dit qu’elle s’était réfugiée dans Notre-Dame, et qu’elle y était en sûreté, et j’en suis ravi, et je n’ai pu découvrir si la chèvre s’était sauvée avec elle, et c’est tout ce que j’en sais.

— Je vais vous en apprendre davantage, cria dom Claude, et sa voix, jusqu’alors basse, lente et presque sourde, était devenue tonnante. Elle est en effet réfugiée dans Notre-Dame. Mais dans trois jours la justice l’y reprendra, et elle sera pendue en Grève. Il y a arrêt du parlement.

— Voilà qui est fâcheux», dit Gringoire.

Le prêtre, en un clin d’œil, était redevenu froid et calme.

«Et qui diable, reprit le poète, s’est donc amusé à solliciter un arrêt de réintégration? Est-ce qu’on ne pouvait pas laisser le parlement tranquille? Qu’est-ce que cela fait qu’une pauvre fille s’abrite sous les arcs-boutants de Notre-Dame à côté des nids d’hirondelle?

— Il y a des satans dans le monde, répondit l’archidiacre.

— Cela est diablement mal emmanché», observa Gringoire.

L’archidiacre reprit après un silence:

«Donc, elle vous a sauvé la vie?

— Chez mes bons amis les truandiers. Un peu plus, un peu moins, j’étais pendu. Ils en seraient fâchés aujourd’hui.

— Est-ce que vous ne voulez rien faire pour elle?

— Je ne demande pas mieux, dom Claude. Mais si je vais m’entortiller une vilaine affaire autour du corps?

— Qu’importe!

— Bah! qu’importe! Vous êtes bon, vous, mon maître! j’ai deux grands ouvrages commencés.»

Le prêtre se frappa le front. Malgré le calme qu'il affectait, de temps en temps un geste violent révélait ses convulsions intérieures.

«Comment la sauver?»

Gringoire lui dit: «Mon maître, je vous répondrai: *Il padelt,* ce qui veut dire en turc: *Dieu est notre espérance*.

— Comment la sauver?» répéta Claude rêveur.

Gringoire à son tour se frappa le front.

«Écoutez, mon maître. J'ai de l'imagination. Je vais vous trouver des expédients. — Si on demandait la grâce au roi?

— À Louis XI? une grâce?

— Pourquoi pas?

— Va prendre son os au tigre!»

Gringoire se mit à chercher de nouvelles solutions.

«Eh bien! tenez! — Voulez-vous que j'adresse aux matrones une requête avec déclaration que la fille est enceinte?»

Cela fit étinceler la creuse prunelle du prêtre.

«Enceinte! drôle! est-ce que tu en sais quelque chose?»

Gringoire fut effrayé de son air. Il se hâta de dire: «Oh! non pas moi! Notre mariage était un vrai *forismaritagium*. Je suis resté dehors. Mais enfin on obtiendrait un sursis.

— Folie! infamie! tais-toi!

— Vous avez tort de vous fâcher, grommela Gringoire. On obtient un sursis, cela ne fait de mal à personne, et cela fait gagner quarante deniers parisis aux matrones, qui sont de pauvres femmes.»

Le prêtre ne l'écoutait pas.

«Il faut pourtant qu'elle sorte de là! murmura-t-il. L'arrêt est exécutoire sous trois jours! D'ailleurs, il n'y aurait pas d'arrêt, ce Quasimodo! Les femmes ont des goûts bien dépravés!» Il haussa la voix: «Maître Pierre, j'y ai bien réfléchi, il n'y a qu'un moyen de salut pour elle.

— Lequel? moi, je n'en vois plus.

— Écoutez, maître Pierre, souvenez-vous que vous lui devez la vie. Je vais vous dire franchement mon idée. L'église est guettée jour et nuit. On n'en laisse sortir que ceux qu'on y a vus entrer. Vous pourrez donc entrer. Vous viendrez. Je vous introduirai près d'elle. Vous changerez d'habits avec elle. Elle prendra votre pourpoint, vous prendrez sa jupe.

— Cela va bien jusqu'à présent, observa le philosophe. Et puis?

— Et puis? Elle sortira avec vos habits; vous resterez avec les siens. On vous pendra peut-être, mais elle sera sauvée.»

Gringoire se gratta l’oreille avec un air très sérieux.

«Tiens! dit-il, voilà une idée qui ne me serait jamais venue toute seule.»

À la proposition inattendue de dom Claude, la figure ouverte et bénigne du poète s’était brusquement rembrunie, comme un riant paysage d’Italie quand il survient un coup de vent malencontreux qui écrase un nuage sur le soleil.

«Hé bien, Gringoire! que dites-vous du moyen?

— Je dis, mon maître, qu’on ne me pendra pas peut-être, mais qu’on me pendra indubitablement.

— Cela ne nous regarde pas.

— La peste! dit Gringoire.

— Elle vous a sauvé la vie. C’est une dette que vous payez.

— Il y en a bien d’autres que je ne paie pas!

— Maître Pierre, il le faut absolument.»

L’archidiacre parlait avec empire.

«Écoutez, dom Claude, répondit le poète tout consterné. Vous tenez à cette idée et vous avez tort. Je ne vois pas pourquoi je me ferais pendre à la place d’un autre.

— Qu’avez-vous donc tant qui vous attache à la vie?

— Ah! mille raisons!

— Lesquelles, s’il vous plaît?

— Lesquelles? L’air, le ciel, le matin, le soir, le clair de lune, mes bons amis les truands, nos gorges chaudes avec les vilotières, les belles architectures de Paris à étudier, trois gros livres à faire, dont un contre l’évêque et ses moulins, que sais-je, moi? Anaxagoras disait qu’il était au monde pour admirer le soleil. Et puis, j’ai le bonheur de passer toutes mes journées du matin au soir avec un homme de génie qui est moi, et c’est fort agréable.

— Tête à faire un grelot! grommela l’archidiacre. Eh! parle, cette vie que tu te fais si charmante, qui te l’a conservée? À qui dois-tu de respirer cet air, de voir ce ciel, et de pouvoir encore amuser ton esprit d’alouette de billevesées et de folies? Sans elle, où serais-tu? Tu veux donc qu’elle meure, elle par qui tu es vivant? qu’elle meure, cette créature, belle, douce, adorable, nécessaire à la lumière du monde, plus divine que Dieu! tandis que toi, demi-sage et demi-fou, vaine ébauche de quelque chose, espèce de végétal qui crois marcher et qui crois penser, tu continueras à vivre avec la vie que tu lui as volée, aussi inutile qu'une chandelle en plein midi? Allons, un peu de pitié, Gringoire! sois généreux à ton tour. C'est elle qui a commencé.»

Le prêtre était véhément. Gringoire l'écouta d'abord avec un air indéterminé, puis il s'attendrit, et finit par faire une grimace tragique qui fit ressembler sa blême figure à celle d'un nouveau-né qui a la colique.

«Vous êtes pathétique, dit-il en essuyant une larme. — Eh bien! j'y réfléchirai. — C'est une drôle d'idée que vous avez eue là. — Après tout, poursuivit-il après un silence, qui sait? peut-être ne me pendront-ils pas. N'épouse pas toujours qui fiance. Quand ils me trouveront dans cette logette, si grotesquement affublé, en jupe et en coiffe, peut-être éclateront-ils de rire. — Et puis, s'ils me pendent, eh bien! la corde, c'est une mort comme une autre, ou, pour mieux dire, ce n'est pas une mort comme une autre. C'est une mort digne du sage qui a oscillé toute sa vie, une mort qui n'est ni chair ni poisson, comme l'esprit du véritable sceptique, une mort tout empreinte de pyrrhonisme et d'hésitation, qui tient le milieu entre le ciel et la terre, qui vous laisse en suspens. C'est une mort de philosophe, et j'y étais prédestiné peut-être. Il est magnifique de mourir comme on a vécu.»

Le prêtre l'interrompit: «Est-ce convenu?

— Qu'est-ce que la mort, à tout prendre? poursuivit Gringoire avec exaltation. Un mauvais moment, un péage, le passage de peu de chose à rien. Quelqu'un ayant demandé à Cercidas, mégalopolitain, s'il mourrait volontiers: «Pourquoi non? répondit-il; car après ma mort je verrai ces grands hommes, Pythagoras entre les philosophes, Hecatæus entre les historiens, Homère entre les poètes, Olympe entre les musiciens.»»

L'archidiacre lui présenta la main. «Donc c'est dit? vous viendrez demain.»

Ce geste ramena Gringoire au positif.

«Ah! ma foi non! dit-il du ton d'un homme qui se réveille. Être pendu! c'est trop absurde. Je ne veux pas.

— Adieu alors!» Et l'archidiacre ajouta entre ses dents: «Je te retrouverai!»

«Je ne veux pas que ce diable d'homme me retrouve», pensa Gringoire; et il courut après dom Claude. «Tenez, monsieur l'archidiacre, pas d'humeur entre vieux amis! Vous vous intéressez à cette fille, à ma femme, veux-je dire, c’est bien. Vous avez imaginé un stratagème pour la faire sortir sauve de Notre-Dame, mais votre moyen est extrêmement désagréable pour moi, Gringoire. — Si j’en avais un autre, moi! — Je vous préviens qu’il vient de me survenir à l’instant une inspiration très lumineuse. — Si j’avais une idée expédiente pour la tirer du mauvais pas sans compromettre mon cou avec le moindre nœud coulant? qu’est-ce que vous diriez? cela ne vous suffirait-il point? Est-il absolument nécessaire que je sois pendu pour que vous soyez content?»

Le prêtre arrachait d’impatience les boutons de sa soutane. «Ruisseau de paroles! — Quel est ton moyen?

— Oui, reprit Gringoire se parlant à lui-même et touchant son nez avec son index en signe de méditation, c’est cela! — Les truands sont de braves fils. — La tribu d’Égypte l’aime. — Ils se lèveront au premier mot. — Rien de plus facile. — Un coup de main. — À la faveur du désordre, on l’enlèvera aisément. — Dès demain soir... ils ne demanderont pas mieux.

— Le moyen! parle», dit le prêtre en le secouant.

Gringoire se tourna majestueusement vers lui: «Laissez-moi donc! vous voyez bien que je compose.» Il réfléchit encore quelques instants. Puis il se mit à battre des mains à sa pensée en criant: «Admirable! réussite sûre!

— Le moyen!» reprit Claude en colère.

Gringoire était radieux.

«Venez, que je vous dise cela tout bas. C’est une contre-mine vraiment gaillarde et qui nous tire tous d’affaire. Pardieu! il faut convenir que je ne suis pas un imbécile.»

Il s’interrompit: «Ah çà! la petite chèvre est-elle avec la fille?

— Oui. Que le diable t’emporte!

— C’est qu’ils l’auraient pendue aussi, n’est-ce pas?

— Qu’est-ce que cela me fait?

— Oui, ils l’auraient pendue. Ils ont bien pendu une truie le mois passé. Le bourrel aime cela. Il mange la bête après. Pendre ma jolie Djali! Pauvre petit agneau!

— Malédiction! s’écria dom Claude. Le bourreau, c’est toi. Quel moyen de salut as-tu donc trouvé, drôle? faudra-t-il t’accoucher ton idée avec le forceps?

— Tout beau, maître! voici.»

Gringoire se pencha à l’oreille de l’archidiacre et lui parla très bas, en jetant un regard inquiet d’un bout à l’autre de la rue où il ne passait pourtant personne. Quand il eut fini, dom Claude lui prit la main et lui dit froidement: «C’est bon. À demain.

— À demain», répéta Gringoire. Et tandis que l’archidiacre s’éloignait d’un côté, il s’en alla de l’autre en se disant à demi-voix: «Voilà une fière affaire, monsieur Pierre Gringoire. N’importe. Il n’est pas dit, parce qu’on est petit, qu’on s’effraiera d’une grande entreprise. Biton porta un grand taureau sur ses épaules; les hochequeues, les fauvettes et les traquets traversent l’océan.»

II

FAITES-VOUS TRUAND

L’archidiacre, en rentrant au cloître, trouva à la porte de sa cellule son frère Jehan du Moulin qui l’attendait et qui avait charmé les ennuis de l’attente en dessinant avec un charbon sur le mur un profil de son frère aîné enrichi d’un nez démesuré.

Dom Claude regarda à peine son frère. Il avait d’autres songes. Ce joyeux visage de vaurien dont le rayonnement avait tant de fois rasséréné la sombre physionomie du prêtre était maintenant impuissant à fondre la brume qui s’épaississait chaque jour davantage sur cette âme corrompue, méphitique et stagnante.

«Mon frère, dit timidement Jehan, je viens vous voir.»

L’archidiacre ne leva seulement pas les yeux sur lui.

«Après?

— Mon frère, reprit l’hypocrite, vous êtes si bon pour moi, et vous me donnez de si bons conseils que je reviens toujours à vous.

— Ensuite?

— Hélas! mon frère, c’est que vous aviez bien raison quand vous me disiez: «Jehan! Jehan! *cessat doctorum doctrina, discipulorum disciplina*. Jehan, soyez sage, Jehan, docte, Jehan, ne pernoctez pas hors le collège sans légitime et congé du maître. Ne battez pas les Picards, *noli, Joannes, verberare picardos*. Ne pourrissez pas comme un âne illettré, *quasi asinus illitteratus*, sur le feurre de l’école. Jehan, laissez-vous punir à la discrétion du maître. Jehan, allez tous les soirs à la chapelle et chantez-y une antienne avec verset et oraison à madame la glorieuse Vierge Marie.» Hélas! que c’étaient là de très excellents avis!

— Et puis?

— Mon frère, vous voyez un coupable, un criminel, un misérable, un libertin, un homme énorme! Mon cher frère, Jehan a fait de vos gracieux conseils paille et fumier à fouler aux pieds. J’en suis bien châtié, et le bon Dieu est extraordinairement juste. Tant que j’ai eu de l’argent, j’ai fait ripaille, folie et vie joyeuse. Oh! que la débauche, si charmante de face, est laide et rechignée par derrière! Maintenant je n’ai plus un blanc, j’ai vendu ma nappe, ma chemise et ma touaille, plus de joyeuse vie! la belle chandelle est éteinte, et je n’ai plus que la vilaine mèche de suif qui me fume dans le nez. Les filles se moquent de moi. Je bois de l’eau. Je suis bourrelé de remords et de créanciers.

— Le reste? dit l’archidiacre.

— Hélas! très cher frère, je voudrais bien me ranger à une meilleure vie. Je viens à vous, plein de contrition. Je suis pénitent. Je me confesse. Je me frappe la poitrine à grands coups de poing. Vous avez bien raison de vouloir que je devienne un jour licencié et sous-moniteur du collège de Torchi. Voici que je me sens à présent une vocation magnifique pour cet état. Mais je n’ai plus d’encre, il faut que j’en rachète; je n’ai plus de plumes, il faut que j’en rachète; je n’ai plus de papier, je n’ai plus de livres, il faut que j’en rachète. J’ai grand besoin pour cela d’un peu de finance. Et je viens à vous, mon frère, le cœur plein de contrition.

— Est-ce tout?

— Oui, dit l’écolier. Un peu d’argent.

— Je n’en ai pas.»

L’écolier dit alors d’un air grave et résolu en même temps: «Eh bien, mon frère, je suis fâché d’avoir à vous dire qu’on me fait d’autre part de très belles offres et propositions. Vous ne voulez pas me donner d’argent? Non? — En ce cas, je vais me faire truand.»

En prononçant ce mot monstrueux, il prit une mine d’Ajax, s’attendant à voir tomber la foudre sur sa tête.

L’archidiacre lui dit froidement:

«Faites-vous truand.»

Jehan le salua profondément et redescendit l’escalier du cloître en sifflant.

Au moment où il passait dans la cour du cloître sous la fenêtre de la cellule de son frère, il entendit cette fenêtre s’ouvrir, leva le nez et vit passer par l’ouverture la tête sévère de l’archidiacre. «Va-t’en au diable! disait dom Claude; voici le dernier argent que tu auras de moi.»

En même temps, le prêtre jeta à Jehan une bourse qui fit à l’écolier une grosse bosse au front, et dont Jehan s’en alla à la fois fâché et content, comme un chien qu’on lapiderait avec des os à moelle.

III

VIVE LA JOIE!

Le lecteur n’a peut-être pas oublié qu’une partie de la Cour des Miracles était enclose par l’ancien mur d’enceinte de la ville, dont bon nombre de tours commençaient dès cette époque à tomber en ruine. L’une de ces tours avait été convertie en lieu de plaisir par les truands. Il y avait cabaret dans la salle basse, et le reste dans les étages supérieurs. Cette tour était le point le plus vivant et par conséquent le plus hideux de la truanderie. C’était une sorte de ruche monstrueuse qui y bourdonnait nuit et jour. La nuit, quand tout le surplus de la gueuserie dormait, quand il n’y avait plus une fenêtre allumée sur les façades terreuses de la place, quand on n’entendait plus sortir un cri de ces innombrables maisonnées, de ces fourmilières de voleurs, de filles et d’enfants volés ou bâtards, on reconnaissait toujours la joyeuse tour au bruit qu’elle faisait, à la lumière écarlate qui, rayonnant à la fois aux soupiraux, aux fenêtres, aux fissures des murs lézardés, s’échappait pour ainsi dire de tous ses pores.

La cave était donc le cabaret. On y descendait par une porte basse et par un escalier aussi roide qu’un alexandrin classique. Sur la porte il y avait en guise d’enseigne un merveilleux barbouillage représentant des sols neufs et des poulets tués, avec ce calembour au-dessous: *Aux sonneurs pour les trépassés*.

Un soir, au moment où le couvre-feu sonnait à tous les beffrois de Paris, les sergents du guet, s’il leur eût été donné d’entrer dans la redoutable Cour des Miracles, auraient pu remarquer qu’il se faisait dans la taverne des truands plus de tumulte encore qu’à l’ordinaire, qu’on y buvait plus et qu’on y jurait mieux. Au dehors, il y avait dans la place force groupes qui s’entretenaient à voix basse, comme lorsqu’il se trame un grand dessein, et çà et là un drôle accroupi qui aiguisait une méchante lame de fer sur un pavé.

Cependant dans la taverne même, le vin et le jeu étaient une si puissante diversion aux idées qui occupaient ce soir-là la truanderie, qu’il eût été difficile de deviner aux propos des buveurs de quoi il s’agissait. Seulement ils avaient l’air plus gai que de coutume, et on leur voyait à tous reluire quelque arme entre les jambes, une serpe, une cognée, un gros estramaçon, ou le croc d’une vieille hacquebute.

La salle, de forme ronde, était très vaste, mais les tables étaient si pressées et les buveurs si nombreux, que tout ce que contenait la taverne, hommes, femmes, bancs, cruches à bière, ce qui buvait, ce qui dormait, ce qui jouait, les bien portants, les éclopés, semblaient entassés pêle-mêle avec autant d’ordre et d’harmonie qu’un tas d’écailles d’huîtres. Il y avait quelques suifs allumés sur les tables; mais le véritable luminaire de la taverne, ce qui remplissait dans le cabaret le rôle du lustre dans une salle d’opéra, c’était le feu. Cette cave était si humide qu’on n’y laissait jamais éteindre la cheminée, même en plein été; une cheminée immense à manteau sculpté, toute hérissée de lourds chenets de fer et d’appareils de cuisine, avec un de ces gros feux mêlés de bois et de tourbe qui, la nuit, dans les rues de village, font saillir si rouge sur les murs d’en face le spectre des fenêtres de forge. Un grand chien, gravement assis dans la cendre, tournait devant la braise une broche chargée de viandes.

Quelle que fût la confusion, après le premier coup d’œil, on pouvait distinguer dans cette multitude trois groupes principaux, qui se pressaient autour de trois personnages que le lecteur connaît déjà. L’un de ces personnages, bizarrement accoutré de maint oripeau oriental, était Mathias Hungadi Spicali, duc d’Égypte et de Bohême. Le maraud était assis sur une table, les jambes croisées, le doigt en l’air et faisait d’une voix haute distribution de sa science en magie blanche et noire à mainte face béante qui l’entourait.

Une autre cohue s’épaississait autour de notre ancien ami, le vaillant roi de Thunes, armé jusqu’aux dents. Clopin Trouillefou, d’un air très sérieux et à voix basse, réglait le pillage d’une énorme futaille pleine d’armes, largement défoncée devant lui, d’où se dégorgeaient en foule haches, épées, bassinets, cottes de mailles, platers, fers de lance et d’archegayes, sagettes et viretons, comme pommes et raisins d’une corne d’abondance. Chacun prenait au tas, qui le morion, qui l’estoc, qui la miséricorde à poignée en croix. Les enfants eux-mêmes s’armaient, et il y avait jusqu’à des culs-de-jatte qui, bardés et cuirassés, passaient entre les jambes des buveurs comme de gros scarabées.

Enfin un troisième auditoire, le plus bruyant, le plus jovial et le plus nombreux, encombrait les bancs et les tables au milieu desquels pérorait et jurait une voix en flûte qui s’échappait de dessous une pesante armure complète du casque aux éperons. L'individu qui s'était ainsi vissé une panoplie sur le corps disparaissait tellement sous l'habit de guerre qu'on ne voyait plus de sa personne qu'un nez effronté, rouge, retroussé, une boucle de cheveux blonds, une bouche rose et des yeux hardis. Il avait la ceinture pleine de dagues et de poignards, une grande épée au flanc, une arbalète rouillée à sa gauche, et un vaste broc de vin devant lui, sans compter à sa droite une épaisse fille débraillée. Toutes les bouches à l'entour de lui riaient, sacraient et buvaient.

Qu'on ajoute vingt groupes secondaires, les filles et les garçons de service courant avec des brocs en tête, les joueurs accroupis sur les billes, sur les merelles, sur les dés, sur les vachettes, sur le jeu passionné du tringlet, les querelles dans un coin, les baisers dans l'autre, et l'on aura quelque idée de cet ensemble, sur lequel vacillait la clarté d'un grand feu flambant qui faisait danser sur les murs du cabaret mille ombres démesurées et grotesques.

Quant au bruit, c'était l'intérieur d'une cloche en grande volée.

La lèchefrite, où pétillait une pluie de graisse, emplissait de son glapissement continu les intervalles de ces mille dialogues qui se croisaient d'un bout à l'autre de la salle.

Il y avait parmi ce vacarme, au fond de la taverne, sur le banc intérieur de la cheminée, un philosophe qui méditait, les pieds dans la cendre et l'œil sur les tisons. C'était Pierre Gringoire.

«Allons, vite! dépêchons, armez-vous! on se met en marche dans une heure!» disait Clopin Trouillefou à ses argotiers.

Une fille fredonnait:

Bonsoir, mon père et ma mère!
Les derniers couvrent le feu.

Deux joueurs de cartes se disputaient. «Valet! criait le plus empourpré des deux, en montrant le poing à l'autre, je vais te marquer au trèfle. Tu pourras remplacer Mistigri dans le jeu de cartes de monseigneur le roi.»

«Ouf! hurlait un normand, reconnaissable à son accent nasillard, on est ici tassé comme les saints de Caillouville!»

«Fils, disait à son auditoire le duc d'Égypte parlant en fausset, les sorcières de France vont au sabbat sans balai, ni graisse, ni monture, seulement avec quelques paroles magiques. Les sorcières d'Italie ont toujours un bouc qui les attend à leur porte. Toutes sont tenues de sortir par la cheminée.»

La voix du jeune drôle armé de pied en cap dominait le brouhaha.

«Noël! Noël! criait-il. Mes première armes aujourd’hui! Truand! je suis truand, ventre de Christ! versez-moi à boire! — Mes amis, je m’appelle Jehan Frollo du Moulin, et je suis gentilhomme. Je suis d’avis que, si Dieu était gendarme, il se ferait pillard. Frères, nous allons faire une belle expédition. Nous sommes des vaillants. Assiéger l’église, enfoncer les portes, en tirer la belle fille, la sauver des juges, la sauver des prêtres, démanteler le cloître, brûler l’évêque dans l’évêché, nous ferons cela en moins de temps qu’il n’en faut à un bourgmestre pour manger une cuillerée de soupe. Notre cause est juste, nous pillerons Notre-Dame, et tout sera dit. Nous pendrons Quasimodo. Connaissez-vous Quasimodo, mesdamoiselles? L’avez-vous vu s’essouffler sur le bourdon un jour de grande Pentecôte? Corne du Père! c’est très beau! on dirait un diable à cheval sur une gueule. — Mes amis, écoutez-moi, je suis truand au fond du cœur, je suis argotier dans l’âme, je suis né cagou. J’ai été très riche, et j’ai mangé mon bien. Ma mère voulait me faire officier, mon père sous-diacre, ma tante conseiller aux enquêtes, ma grand-mère protonotaire du roi, ma grand-tante trésorier de robe courte. Moi, je me suis fait truand. J’ai dit cela à mon père qui m’a craché sa malédiction au visage, à ma mère qui s’est mise, la vieille dame, à pleurer et à baver comme cette bûche sur ce chenet. Vive la joie! je suis un vrai Bicêtre! Tavernière ma mie, d’autre vin! j’ai encore de quoi payer. Je ne veux plus de vin de Suresnes. Il me chagrine le gosier. J’aimerais autant, corbœuf! me gargariser d’un panier!»

Cependant la cohue applaudissait avec des éclats de rire et, voyant que le tumulte redoublait autour de lui, l’écolier s’écria: «Oh! le beau bruit! *Populi debacchantis populosa debacchatio*!» Alors il se mit à chanter, l’œil comme noyé dans l’extase, du ton d’un chanoine qui entonne vêpres: « — *Quæ cantica! quæ organa! quæ cantilenæ! quæ melodiæ hic sine fine decantantur! sonant melliflua hymnorum organa, suavissima angelorum melodia, cantica canticorum mira*!» Il s’interrompit: «Buvetière du diable, donne-moi à souper.»

Il y eut un moment de quasi-silence pendant lequel s’éleva à son tour la voix aigre du duc d’Égypte, enseignant ses bohémiens... «La belette s’appelle Aduine, le renard Pied-Bleu ou le Coureur-des-Bois, le loup Pied-Gris ou Pied-Doré, l’ours le Vieux ou le Grand-Père. — Le bonnet d’un gnome rend invisible, et fait voir les choses invisibles. — Tout crapaud qu’on baptise doit être vêtu de velours rouge ou noir, une sonnette au cou, une sonnette aux pieds. Le parrain tient la tête, la marraine le derrière. — C’est le démon Sidragasum qui a le pouvoir de faire danser les filles toutes nues.

— Par la messe! interrompit Jehan, je voudrais être le démon Sidragasum.»

Cependant les truands continuaient de s’armer en chuchotant à l’autre bout du cabaret.

«Cette pauvre Esmeralda! disait un bohémien. C’est notre sœur. — Il faut la tirer de là.

— Est-elle donc toujours à Notre-Dame? reprenait un marcandier à mine de juif.

— Oui, pardieu!

— Eh bien! camarades, s’écria le marcandier, à Notre-Dame! D’autant mieux qu’il y a à la chapelle des saints Féréol et Ferrution deux statues, l’une de saint Jean-Baptiste, l’autre de saint Antoine, toutes d’or, pesant ensemble dix-sept marcs d’or et quinze estellins, et les sous-pieds d’argent doré dix-sept marcs cinq onces. Je sais cela. Je suis orfèvre.»

Ici on servit à Jehan son souper. Il s’écria, en s’étalant sur la gorge de la fille sa voisine:

«Par saint Voult-de-Lucques, que le peuple appelle saint Goguelu, je suis parfaitement heureux. J’ai là devant moi un imbécile qui me regarde avec la mine glabre d’un archiduc. En voici un à ma gauche qui a les dents si longues qu’elles lui cachent le menton. Et puis je suis comme le maréchal de Gié au siège de Pontoise, j’ai ma droite appuyée à un mamelon. — Ventre-Mahom! camarade! tu as l’air d’un marchand d’esteufs, et tu viens t’asseoir auprès de moi! Je suis noble, l’ami. La marchandise est incompatible avec la noblesse! Va-t’en de là. — Holàhée! vous autres! ne vous battez pas! Comment, Baptiste Croque-Oison, toi qui as un si beau nez, tu vas le risquer contre les gros poings de ce butor! Imbécile! *Non cuiquam datum est habere nasum.* — Tu es vraiment divine, Jacqueline Ronge-Oreille! c’est dommage que tu n’aies pas de cheveux. — Holà! je m’appelle Jehan Frollo, et mon frère est archidiacre. Que le diable l’emporte! Tout ce que je vous dis est la vérité. En me faisant truand, j’ai renoncé de gaieté de cœur à la moitié d’une maison située dans le paradis que mon frère m’avait promise. *Dimidiam domum in paradiso.* Je cite le texte. J’ai un fief rue Tirechappe, et toutes les femmes sont amoureuses de moi, aussi vrai qu’il est vrai que saint Éloy était un excellent orfèvre, et que les cinq métiers de la bonne ville de Paris sont les tanneurs, les mégissiers, les baudroyeurs, les boursiers et les sueurs, et que saint Laurent a été brûlé avec des coquilles d'œufs. Je vous jure, camarades,

Que je ne beuvrai de piment
Devant un an, si je cy ment!

Ma charmante, il fait clair de lune, regarde donc là-bas par le soupirail comme le vent chiffonne les nuages! Ainsi je fais ta gorgerette. — Les filles! mouchez les enfants et les chandelles. — Christ et Mahom! qu'est-ce que je mange là, Jupiter! Ohé! la matrulle! les cheveux qu'on ne trouve pas sur la tête de tes ribaudes, on les retrouve dans tes omelettes. La vieille! j'aime les omelettes chauves. Que le diable te fasse camuse! — Belle hôtellerie de Belzébuth où les ribaudes se peignent avec les fourchettes!»

Cela dit, il brisa son assiette sur le pavé et se mit à chanter à tue-tête:

Et je n'ai, moi,
Par la sang-Dieu!
Ni foi, ni loi,
Ni feu, ni lieu,
Ni roi,
Ni Dieu!

Cependant, Clopin Trouillefou avait fini sa distribution d'armes. Il s'approcha de Gringoire qui paraissait plongé dans une profonde rêverie, les pieds sur un chenet.

«L'ami Pierre, dit le roi de Thunes, à quoi diable penses-tu?»

Gringoire se retourna vers lui avec un sourire mélancolique:

«J'aime le feu, mon cher seigneur. Non par la raison triviale que le feu réchauffe nos pieds ou cuit notre soupe, mais parce qu'il a des étincelles. Quelquefois je passe des heures à regarder les étincelles. Je découvre mille choses dans ces étoiles qui saupoudrent le fond noir de l'âtre. Ces étoiles-là aussi sont des mondes.

— Tonnerre si je te comprends! dit le truand. Sais-tu quelle heure il est?

— Je ne sais pas», répondit Gringoire.

Clopin s'approcha alors du duc d'Égypte.

«Camarade Mathias, le quart d'heure n'est pas bon. On dit le roi Louis onzième à Paris.

— Raison de plus pour lui tirer notre sœur des griffes, répondit le vieux bohémien.

— Tu parles en homme, Mathias, dit le roi de Thunes. D’ailleurs nous ferons lestement. Pas de résistance à craindre dans l’église. Les chanoines sont des lièvres, et nous sommes en force. Les gens du parlement seront bien attrapés demain quand ils viendront la chercher! Boyaux du pape! je ne veux pas qu’on pende la jolie fille!»

Clopin sortit du cabaret.

Pendant ce temps-là, Jehan s’écriait d’une voix enrouée: «Je bois, je mange, je suis ivre, je suis Jupiter! — Eh! Pierre l’Assommeur, si tu me regardes encore comme cela, je vais t’épousseter le nez avec des chiquenaudes.»

De son côté Gringoire, arraché de ses méditations, s’était mis à considérer la scène fougueuse et criarde qui l’environnait en murmurant entre ses dents: «*Luxuriosa res vinum et tumultuosa ebrietas*. Hélas! que j’ai bien raison de ne pas boire, et que saint Benoît dit excellemment: *Vinum apostatare facit etiam sapientes*.»

En ce moment Clopin rentra et cria d’une voix de tonnerre: «Minuit!»

À ce mot, qui fit l’effet du boute-selle sur un régiment en halte, tous les truands, hommes, femmes, enfants, se précipitèrent en foule hors de la taverne avec un grand bruit d’armes et de ferrailles.

La lune s’était voilée. La Cour des Miracles était tout à fait obscure. Il n’y avait pas une lumière. Elle était pourtant loin d’être déserte. On y distinguait une foule d’hommes et de femmes qui se parlaient bas. On les entendait bourdonner, et l’on voyait reluire toutes sortes d’armes dans les ténèbres. Clopin monta sur une grosse pierre.

«À vos rangs, l’Argot! cria-t-il. À vos rangs, l’Égypte! À vos rangs, Galilée!»

Un mouvement se fit dans l’ombre. L’immense multitude parut se former en colonne. Après quelques minutes, le roi de Thunes éleva encore la voix: «Maintenant, silence pour traverser Paris! Le mot de passe est: *Petite flambe en baguenaud!* On n’allumera les torches qu’à Notre-Dame! En marche!»

Dix minutes après, les cavaliers du guet s’enfuyaient épouvantés devant une longue procession d’hommes noirs et silencieux qui descendait vers le Pont-au-Change, à travers les rues tortueuses qui percent en tous sens le massif quartier des Halles.

IV

UN MALADROIT AMI

Cette même nuit, Quasimodo ne dormait pas. Il venait de faire sa dernière ronde dans l’église. Il n’avait pas remarqué, au moment où il en fermait les portes, que l’archidiacre était passé près de lui et avait témoigné quelque humeur en le voyant verrouiller et cadenasser avec soin l’énorme armature de fer qui donnait à leurs larges battants la solidité d’une muraille. Dom Claude avait l’air encore plus préoccupé qu’à l’ordinaire. Du reste, depuis l’aventure nocturne de la cellule, il maltraitait constamment Quasimodo; mais il avait beau le rudoyer, le frapper même quelquefois, rien n’ébranlait la soumission, la patience, la résignation dévouée du fidèle sonneur. De la part de l’archidiacre il souffrait tout, injures, menaces, coups, sans murmurer un reproche, sans pousser une plainte. Tout au plus le suivait-il des yeux avec inquiétude quand dom Claude montait l’escalier de la tour, mais l’archidiacre s’était de lui-même abstenu de reparaître aux yeux de l’égyptienne.

Cette nuit-là donc, Quasimodo, après avoir donné un coup d’œil à ses pauvres cloches si délaissées, à Jacqueline, à Marie, à Thibauld, était monté jusque sur le sommet de la tour septentrionale, et là, posant sur les plombs sa lanterne sourde bien fermée, il s’était mis à regarder Paris. La nuit, nous l’avons déjà dit, était fort obscure. Paris, qui n’était, pour ainsi dire, pas éclairé à cette époque, présentait à l’œil un amas confus de masses noires, coupé çà et là par la courbe blanchâtre de la Seine. Quasimodo n’y voyait plus de lumière qu’à une fenêtre d’un édifice éloigné dont le vague et sombre profil se dessinait bien au-dessus des toits, du côté de la porte Saint-Antoine. Là aussi il y avait quelqu’un qui veillait.

Tout en laissant flotter dans cet horizon de brume et de nuit son unique regard, le sonneur sentait au dedans de lui-même une inexprimable inquiétude. Depuis plusieurs jours il était sur ses gardes. Il voyait sans cesse rôder autour de l’église des hommes à mine sinistre qui ne quittaient pas des yeux l’asile de la jeune fille. Il songeait qu’il se tramait peut-être quelque complot contre la malheureuse réfugiée. Il se figurait qu’il y avait une haine populaire sur elle comme il y en avait une sur lui, et qu’il se pourrait bien qu’il arrivât bientôt quelque chose. Aussi se tenait-il sur son clocher, aux aguets, *rêvant dans son rêvoir*, comme dit Rabelais, l'œil tour à tour sur la cellule et sur Paris, faisant sûre garde, comme un bon chien, avec mille défiances dans l'esprit.

Tout à coup, tandis qu'il scrutait la grande ville de cet œil que la nature, par une sorte de compensation, avait fait si perçant qu'il pouvait presque suppléer aux autres organes qui manquaient à Quasimodo, il lui parut que la silhouette du quai de la Vieille-Pelleterie avait quelque chose de singulier, qu'il y avait un mouvement sur ce point, que la ligne du parapet détachée en noir sur la blancheur de l'eau n'était pas droite et tranquille semblablement à celle des autres quais, mais qu'elle ondulait au regard comme les vagues d'un fleuve ou comme les têtes d'une foule en marche.

Cela lui parut étrange. Il redoubla d'attention. Le mouvement semblait venir vers la Cité. Aucune lumière d'ailleurs. Il dura quelque temps sur le quai, puis il s'écoula peu à peu, comme si ce qui passait entrait dans l'intérieur de l'île, puis il cessa tout à fait, et la ligne du quai redevint droite et immobile.

Au moment où Quasimodo s'épuisait en conjectures, il lui sembla que le mouvement reparaissait dans la rue du Parvis qui se prolonge dans la Cité perpendiculairement à la façade de Notre-Dame. Enfin, si épaisse que fût l'obscurité, il vit une tête de colonne déboucher par cette rue et en un instant se répandre dans la place une foule dont on ne pouvait rien distinguer dans les ténèbres sinon que c'était une foule.

Ce spectacle avait sa terreur. Il est probable que cette procession singulière, qui semblait si intéressée à se dérober sous une profonde obscurité, ne gardait pas un silence moins profond. Cependant un bruit quelconque devait s'en échapper, ne fût-ce qu'un piétinement. Mais ce bruit n'arrivait même pas à notre sourd, et cette grande multitude, dont il voyait à peine quelque chose et dont il n'entendait rien, s'agitant et marchant néanmoins si près de lui, lui faisait l'effet d'une cohue de morts, muette, impalpable, perdue dans une fumée. Il lui semblait voir s'avancer vers lui un brouillard plein d'hommes, voir remuer des ombres dans l'ombre.

Alors ses craintes lui revinrent, l'idée d'une tentative contre l'égyptienne se représenta à son esprit. Il sentit confusément qu'il approchait d'une situation violente. En ce moment critique, il tint conseil en lui-même avec un raisonnement meilleur et plus prompt qu'on ne l'eût attendu d'un cerveau si mal organisé. Devait-il éveiller l'égyptienne? la faire évader? Par où? les rues étaient investies, l'église était acculée à la rivière. Pas de bateau! pas d’issue! — Il n’y avait qu’un parti, se faire tuer au seuil de Notre-Dame, résister du moins jusqu’à ce qu’il vînt un secours, s’il en devait venir, et ne pas troubler le sommeil de la Esmeralda. La malheureuse serait toujours éveillée assez tôt pour mourir. Cette résolution une fois arrêtée, il se mit à examiner *l’ennemi* avec plus de tranquillité.

La foule semblait grossir à chaque instant dans le Parvis. Seulement il présuma qu’elle ne devait faire que fort peu de bruit, puisque les fenêtres des rues et de la place restaient fermées. Tout à coup une lumière brilla, et en un instant sept ou huit torches allumées se promenèrent sur les têtes, en secouant dans l’ombre leurs touffes de flammes. Quasimodo vit alors distinctement moutonner dans le Parvis un effrayant troupeau d’hommes et de femmes en haillons, armés de faulx, de piques, de serpes, de pertuisanes dont les mille pointes étincelaient. Çà et là, des fourches noires faisaient des cornes à ces faces hideuses. Il se ressouvint vaguement de cette populace, et crut reconnaître toutes les têtes qui l’avaient, quelques mois auparavant, salué pape des fous. Un homme qui tenait une torche d’une main et une boullaye de l’autre monta sur une borne et parut haranguer. En même temps l’étrange armée fit quelques évolutions comme si elle prenait poste autour de l’église. Quasimodo ramassa sa lanterne et descendit sur la plate-forme d’entre les tours pour voir de plus près et aviser aux moyens de défense.

Clopin Trouillefou, arrivé devant le haut portail de Notre-Dame, avait en effet rangé sa troupe en bataille. Quoiqu’il ne s’attendît à aucune résistance, il voulait, en général prudent, conserver un ordre qui lui permît de faire front au besoin contre une attaque subite du guet ou des onze-vingts. Il avait donc échelonné sa brigade de telle façon que, vue de haut et de loin, vous eussiez dit le triangle romain de la bataille d’Ecnome, la tête-de-porc d’Alexandre, ou le fameux coin de Gustave-Adolphe. La base de ce triangle s’appuyait au fond de la place, de manière à barrer la rue du Parvis; un des côtés regardait l’Hôtel-Dieu, l’autre la rue Saint-Pierre-aux-Bœufs. Clopin Trouillefou s’était placé au sommet, avec le duc d’Égypte, notre ami Jehan, et les sabouleux les plus hardis.

Ce n’était point chose très rare dans les villes du moyen âge qu’une entreprise comme celle que les truands tentaient en ce moment sur Notre-Dame. Ce que nous nommons aujourd’hui *police* n’existait pas alors. Dans les cités populeuses, dans les capitales surtout, pas de pouvoir central, un, régulateur. La féodalité avait construit ces grandes communes d’une façon bizarre. Une cité était un assemblage de mille seigneuries qui la divisaient en compartiments de toutes formes et de toutes grandeurs. De là mille polices contradictoires, c'est-à-dire pas de police. À Paris, par exemple, indépendamment des cent quarante et un seigneurs prétendant censive, il y en avait vingt-cinq prétendant justice et censive, depuis l'évêque de Paris, qui avait cent cinq rues, jusqu'au prieur de Notre-Dame-des-Champs, qui en avait quatre. Tous ces justiciers féodaux ne reconnaissaient que nominalement l'autorité suzeraine du roi. Tous avaient droit de voirie. Tous étaient chez eux. Louis XI, cet infatigable ouvrier qui a si largement commencé la démolition de l'édifice féodal, continuée par Richelieu et Louis XIV au profit de la royauté, et achevée par Mirabeau au profit du peuple, Louis XI avait bien essayé de crever ce réseau de seigneuries qui recouvrait Paris, en jetant violemment tout au travers deux ou trois ordonnances de police générale. Ainsi, en 1465, ordre aux habitants, la nuit venue, d'illuminer de chandelles leurs croisées, et d'enfermer leurs chiens, sous peine de la hart; même année, ordre de fermer le soir les rues avec des chaînes de fer, et défense de porter dagues ou armes offensives la nuit dans les rues. Mais, en peu de temps, tous ces essais de législation communale tombèrent en désuétude. Les bourgeois laissèrent le vent éteindre leurs chandelles à leurs fenêtres, et leurs chiens errer; les chaînes de fer ne se tendirent qu'en état de siège; la défense de porter dagues n'amena d'autres changements que le nom de la rue *Coupe-Gueule* au nom de rue *Coupe-Gorge*, ce qui est un progrès évident. Le vieil échafaudage des juridictions féodales resta debout; immense entassement de bailliages et de seigneuries se croisant sur la ville, se gênant, s'enchevêtrant, s'emmaillant de travers, s'échancrant les uns les autres; inutile taillis de guets, de sous-guets et de contre-guets, à travers lequel passaient à main armée le brigandage, la rapine et la sédition. Ce n'était donc pas, dans ce désordre, un événement inouï que ces coups de main d'une partie de la populace sur un palais, sur un hôtel, sur une maison, dans les quartiers les plus peuplés. Dans la plupart des cas, les voisins ne se mêlaient de l'affaire que si le pillage arrivait jusque chez eux. Ils se bouchaient les oreilles à la mousquetade, fermaient leurs volets, barricadaient leurs portes, laissaient le débat se vider avec ou sans le guet, et le lendemain on se disait dans Paris: «Cette nuit, Étienne Barbette a été forcé.» «Le maréchal de Clermont a été pris au corps», etc. — Aussi, non seulement les habitations royales, le Louvre, le Palais, la Bastille, les Tournelles, mais les résidences simplement seigneuriales, le Petit-Bourbon, l'Hôtel de Sens, l'Hôtel d'Angoulême, etc., avaient leurs créneaux aux murs et leurs mâchicoulis au-dessus des portes. Les églises se gardaient par leur sainteté. Quelques-unes pourtant, du nombre desquelles n’était pas Notre-Dame, étaient fortifiées. L’abbé de Saint-Germain-des-Prés était crénelé comme un baron, et il y avait chez lui encore plus de cuivre dépensé en bombardes qu’en cloches. On voyait encore sa forteresse en 1610. Aujourd’hui il reste à peine son église.

Revenons à Notre-Dame.

Quand les premières dispositions furent terminées, et nous devons dire à l’honneur de la discipline truande que les ordres de Clopin furent exécutés en silence et avec une admirable précision, le digne chef de la bande monta sur le parapet du Parvis et éleva sa voix rauque et bourrue, se tenant tourné vers Notre-Dame et agitant sa torche dont la lumière, tourmentée par le vent et voilée à tout moment de sa propre fumée, faisait paraître et disparaître aux yeux la rougeâtre façade de l’église.

«À toi, Louis de Beaumont, évêque de Paris, conseiller en la cour de parlement, moi Clopin Trouillefou, roi de Thunes, grand coësre, prince de l’argot, évêque des fous, je dis: «Notre sœur, faussement condamnée pour magie, s’est réfugiée dans ton église; tu lui dois asile et sauvegarde; or la cour de parlement l’y veut reprendre, et tu y consens; si bien qu’on la pendrait demain en Grève si Dieu et les truands n’étaient pas là. Donc nous venons à toi, évêque. Si ton église est sacrée, notre sœur l’est aussi; si notre sœur n’est pas sacrée, ton église ne l’est pas non plus. C’est pourquoi nous te sommons de nous rendre la fille si tu veux sauver ton église, ou que nous reprendrons la fille et que nous pillerons l’église. Ce qui sera bien. En foi de quoi, je plante cy ma bannière, et Dieu te soit en garde, évêque de Paris!»

Quasimodo malheureusement ne put entendre ces paroles prononcées avec une sorte de majesté sombre et sauvage. Un truand présenta sa bannière à Clopin, qui la planta solennellement entre deux pavés. C’était une fourche aux dents de laquelle pendait, saignant, un quartier de charogne.

Cela fait, le roi de Thunes se retourna et promena ses yeux sur son armée, farouche multitude où les regards brillaient presque autant que les piques. Après une pause d’un instant: «En avant, fils! cria-t-il. À la besogne, les hutins!»

Trente hommes robustes, à membres carrés, à face de serruriers, sortirent des rangs, avec des marteaux, des pinces et des barres de fer sur leurs épaules. Ils se dirigèrent vers la principale porte de l’église, montèrent le degré, et bientôt on les vit tous accroupis sous l'ogive, travaillant la porte de pinces et de leviers. Une foule de truands les suivit pour les aider ou les regarder. Les onze marches du portail en étaient encombrées.

Cependant la porte tenait bon. «Diable! elle est dure et têtue! disait l'un. — Elle est vieille, et elle a les cartilages racornis, disait l'autre. — Courage, camarades! reprenait Clopin. Je gage ma tête contre une pantoufle que vous aurez ouvert la porte, pris la fille et déshabillé le maître-autel avant qu'il y ait un bedeau de réveillé. Tenez! je crois que la serrure se détraque.»

Clopin fut interrompu par un fracas effroyable qui retentit en ce moment derrière lui. Il se retourna. Une énorme poutre venait de tomber du ciel, elle avait écrasé une douzaine de truands sur le degré de l'église, et rebondissait sur le pavé avec le bruit d'une pièce de canon, en cassant encore çà et là des jambes dans la foule des gueux qui s'écartaient avec des cris d'épouvante. En un clin d'œil l'enceinte réservée du Parvis fut vide. Les hutins, quoique protégés par les profondes voussures du portail, abandonnèrent la porte, et Clopin lui-même se replia à distance respectueuse de l'église.

«Je l'ai échappé belle! criait Jehan. J'en ai senti le vent, tête-bœuf! Mais Pierre l'Assommeur est assommé!»

Il est impossible de dire quel étonnement mêlé d'effroi tomba avec cette poutre sur les bandits. Ils restèrent quelques minutes les yeux fixés en l'air, plus consternés de ce morceau de bois que de vingt mille archers du roi.

«Satan! grommela le duc d'Égypte, voilà qui flaire la magie

— C'est la lune qui nous jette cette bûche, dit Andry le Rouge.

— Avec cela, reprit François Chanteprune, qu'on dit la lune amie de la Vierge!

— Mille papes! s'écria Clopin, vous êtes tous des imbéciles!» Mais il ne savait comment expliquer la chute du madrier.

Cependant on ne distinguait rien sur la façade, au sommet de laquelle la clarté des torches n'arrivait pas. Le pesant madrier gisait au milieu du Parvis, et l'on entendait les gémissements des misérables qui avaient reçu son premier choc et qui avaient eu le ventre coupé en deux sur l'angle des marches de pierre.

Le roi de Thunes, le premier étonnement passé, trouva enfin une explication qui sembla plausible à ses compagnons.

«Gueule-Dieu! est-ce que les chanoines se défendent? Alors à sac! à sac!

— À sac!» répéta la cohue avec un hourra furieux. Et il se fit une décharge d'arbalètes et de hacquebutes sur la façade de l'église.

À cette détonation, les paisibles habitants des maisons circonvoisines se réveillèrent, on vit plusieurs fenêtres s’ouvrir, et des bonnets de nuit et des mains tenant des chandelles apparurent aux croisées. «Tirez aux fenêtres!» cria Clopin. Les fenêtres se refermèrent sur-le-champ, et les pauvres bourgeois, qui avaient à peine eu le temps de jeter un regard effaré sur cette scène de lueurs et de tumultes, s’en revinrent suer de peur près de leurs femmes, se demandant si le sabbat se tenait maintenant dans le Parvis Notre-Dame, ou s’il y avait assaut de Bourguignons comme en 64. Alors les maris songeaient au vol, les femmes au viol, et tous tremblaient.

«À sac!» répétaient les argotiers. Mais ils n’osaient approcher. Ils regardaient l’église, ils regardaient le madrier. Le madrier ne bougeait pas. L’édifice conservait son air calme et désert, mais quelque chose glaçait les truands.

«À l’œuvre donc, les hutins! cria Trouillefou. Qu’on force la porte.»

Personne ne fit un pas.

«Barbe et ventre! dit Clopin, voilà des hommes qui ont peur d’une solive.»

Un vieux hutin lui adressa la parole.

«Capitaine, ce n’est pas la solive qui nous ennuie, c’est la porte qui est toute cousue de barres de fer. Les pinces n’y peuvent rien.

— Que vous faudrait-il donc pour l’enfoncer? demanda Clopin.

— Ah! il nous faudrait un bélier.»

Le roi de Thunes courut bravement au formidable madrier et mit le pied dessus. «En voilà un, cria-t-il; ce sont les chanoines qui vous l’envoient.» Et faisant un salut dérisoire du côté de l’église: «Merci, chanoines!»

Cette bravade fit bon effet, le charme du madrier était rompu. Les truands reprirent courage; bientôt la lourde poutre, enlevée comme une plume par deux cents bras vigoureux, vint se jeter avec furie sur la grande porte qu’on avait déjà essayé d’ébranler. À voir ainsi, dans le demi-jour que les rares torches des truands répandaient sur la place, ce long madrier porté par cette foule d’hommes qui le précipitaient en courant sur l’église, on eût cru voir une monstrueuse bête à mille pieds attaquant tête baissée la géante de pierre.

Au choc de la poutre, la porte à demi métallique résonna comme un immense tambour; elle ne se creva point, mais la cathédrale tout entière tressaillit, et l’on entendit gronder les profondes cavités de l’édifice.

Au même instant, une pluie de grosses pierres commença à tomber du haut de la façade sur les assaillants.

«Diable! cria Jehan, est-ce que les tours nous secouent leurs balustrades sur la tête?»

Mais l’élan était donné, le roi de Thunes payait d’exemple, c’était décidément l’évêque qui se défendait, et l’on n’en battit la porte qu’avec plus de rage, malgré les pierres qui faisaient éclater les crânes à droite et à gauche.

Il est remarquable que ces pierres tombaient toutes une à une; mais elles se suivaient de près. Les argotiers en sentaient toujours deux à la fois, une dans leurs jambes, une sur leurs têtes. Il y en avait peu qui ne portassent coup, et déjà une large couche de morts et de blessés saignait et palpitait sous les pieds des assaillants qui, maintenant furieux, se renouvelaient sans cesse. La longue poutre continuait de battre la porte à temps réguliers comme le mouton d’une cloche, les pierres de pleuvoir, la porte de mugir.

Le lecteur n’en est sans doute point à deviner que cette résistance inattendue qui avait exaspéré les truands venait de Quasimodo.

Le hasard avait par malheur servi le brave sourd.

Quand il était descendu sur la plate-forme d’entre les tours, ses idées étaient en confusion dans sa tête. Il avait couru quelques minutes le long de la galerie, allant et venant, comme fou, voyant d’en haut la masse compacte des truands prête à se ruer sur l’église, demandant au diable ou à Dieu de sauver l’égyptienne. La pensée lui était venue de monter au beffroi méridional et de sonner le tocsin; mais avant qu’il eût pu mettre la cloche en branle, avant que la grosse voix de Marie eût pu jeter une seule clameur, la porte de l’église n’avait-elle pas dix fois le temps d’être enfoncée? C’était précisément l’instant où les hutins s’avançaient vers elle avec leur serrurerie. Que faire?

Tout d’un coup, il se souvint que des maçons avaient travaillé tout le jour à réparer le mur, la charpente et la toiture de la tour méridionale. Ce fut un trait de lumière. Le mur était en pierre, la toiture en plomb, la charpente en bois. Cette charpente prodigieuse, si touffue qu’on appelait *la forêt*.

Quasimodo courut à cette tour. Les chambres inférieures étaient en effet pleines de matériaux. Il y avait des piles de moellons, des feuilles de plomb en rouleaux, des faisceaux de lattes, de fortes solives déjà entaillées par la scie, des tas de gravats. Un arsenal complet.

L’instant pressait. Les pinces et les marteaux travaillaient en bas. Avec une force que décuplait le sentiment du danger, il souleva une des poutres, la plus lourde, la plus longue, il la fit sortir par une lucarne, puis, la ressaisissant du dehors de la tour, il la fit glisser sur l’angle de la balustrade qui entoure la plate-forme, et la lâcha sur l’abîme. L’énorme charpente, dans cette chute de cent soixante pieds, raclant la muraille, cassant les sculptures, tourna plusieurs fois sur elle-même comme une aile de moulin qui s’en irait toute seule à travers l’espace. Enfin elle toucha le sol, l’horrible cri s’éleva, et la noire poutre, en rebondissant sur le pavé, ressemblait à un serpent qui saute.

Quasimodo vit les truands s’éparpiller à la chute du madrier, comme la cendre au souffle d’un enfant. Il profita de leur épouvante, et tandis qu’ils fixaient un regard superstitieux sur la massue tombée du ciel, et qu’ils éborgnaient les saints de pierre du portail avec une décharge de sagettes et de chevrotines, Quasimodo entassait silencieusement des gravats, des pierres, des moellons, jusqu’aux sacs d’outils des maçons, sur le rebord de cette balustrade d’où la poutre s’était déjà élancée.

Aussi, dès qu’ils se mirent à battre la grande porte, la grêle de moellons commença à tomber, et il leur sembla que l’église se démolissait d’elle-même sur leur tête.

Qui eût pu voir Quasimodo en ce moment eût été effrayé. Indépendamment de ce qu’il avait empilé de projectiles sur la balustrade, il avait amoncelé un tas de pierres sur la plate-forme même. Dès que les moellons amassés sur le rebord extérieur furent épuisés, il prit au tas. Alors il se baissait, se relevait, se baissait et se relevait encore, avec une activité incroyable. Sa grosse tête de gnome se penchait par-dessus la balustrade, puis une pierre énorme tombait, puis une autre, puis une autre. De temps en temps il suivait une belle pierre de l’œil, et, quand elle tuait bien, il disait: «Hun!»

Cependant les gueux ne se décourageaient pas. Déjà plus de vingt fois l’épaisse porte sur laquelle ils s’acharnaient avait tremblé sous la pesanteur de leur bélier de chêne multipliée par la force de cent hommes. Les panneaux craquaient, les ciselures volaient en éclats, les gonds à chaque secousse sautaient en sursaut sur leurs pitons, les ais se détraquaient, le bois tombait en poudre broyé entre les nervures de fer. Heureusement pour Quasimodo, il y avait plus de fer que de bois.

Il sentait pourtant que la grande porte chancelait. Quoiqu'il n'entendît pas, chaque coup de bélier se répercutait à la fois dans les cavernes de l'église et dans ses entrailles. Il voyait d'en haut les truands, pleins de triomphe et de rage, montrer le poing à la ténébreuse façade, et il enviait, pour l'égyptienne et pour lui, les ailes des hiboux qui s'enfuyaient au-dessus de sa tête par volées.

Sa pluie de moellons ne suffisait pas à repousser les assaillants.

En ce moment d'angoisse, il remarqua, un peu plus bas que la balustrade d'où il écrasait les argotiers, deux longues gouttières de pierre qui se dégorgeaient immédiatement au-dessus de la grande porte. L'orifice interne de ces gouttières aboutissait au pavé de la plate-forme. Une idée lui vint. Il courut chercher un fagot dans son bouge de sonneur, posa sur ce fagot force bottes de lattes et force rouleaux de plomb, munitions dont il n'avait pas encore usé, et, ayant bien disposé ce bûcher devant le trou des deux gouttières, il y mit le feu avec sa lanterne.

Pendant ce temps-là, les pierres ne tombant plus, les truands avaient cessé de regarder en l'air. Les bandits, haletant comme une meute qui force le sanglier dans sa bauge, se pressaient en tumulte autour de la grande porte, toute déformée par le bélier, mais debout encore. Ils attendaient avec un frémissement le grand coup, le coup qui allait l'éventrer. C'était à qui se tiendrait le plus près pour pouvoir s'élancer des premiers, quand elle s'ouvrirait, dans cette opulente cathédrale, vaste réservoir où étaient venues s'amonceler les richesses de trois siècles. Ils se rappelaient les uns aux autres, avec des rugissements de joie et d'appétit, les belles croix d'argent, les belles chapes de brocart, les belles tombes de vermeil, les grandes magnificences du chœur, les fêtes éblouissantes, les Noëls étincelantes de flambeaux, les Pâques éclatantes de soleil, toutes ces solennités splendides où châsses, chandeliers, ciboires, tabernacles, reliquaires, bosselaient les autels d'une croûte d'or et de diamants. Certes, en ce beau moment, cagoux et malingreux, archisuppôts et rifodés, songeaient beaucoup moins à la délivrance de l'égyptienne qu'au pillage de Notre-Dame. Nous croirions même volontiers que pour bon nombre d'entre eux la Esmeralda n'était qu'un prétexte, si des voleurs avaient besoin de prétextes.

Tout à coup, au moment où ils se groupaient pour un dernier effort autour du bélier, chacun retenant son haleine et roidissant ses muscles afin de donner toute sa force au coup décisif, un hurlement, plus épouvantable encore que celui qui avait éclaté et expiré sous le madrier, s'éleva au milieu d’eux. Ceux qui ne criaient pas, ceux qui vivaient encore, regardèrent. — Deux jets de plomb fondu tombaient du haut de l’édifice au plus épais de la cohue. Cette mer d’hommes venait de s’affaisser sous le métal bouillant qui avait fait, aux deux points où il tombait, deux trous noirs et fumants dans la foule, comme ferait de l’eau chaude dans la neige. On y voyait remuer des mourants à demi calcinés et mugissant de douleur. Autour de ces deux jets principaux, il y avait des gouttes de cette pluie horrible qui s’éparpillaient sur les assaillants et entraient dans les crânes comme des vrilles de flamme. C’était un feu pesant qui criblait ces misérables de mille grêlons.

La clameur fut déchirante. Ils s’enfuirent pêle-mêle, jetant le madrier sur les cadavres, les plus hardis comme les plus timides, et le Parvis fut vide une seconde fois.

Tous les yeux s’étaient levés vers le haut de l’église. Ce qu’ils voyaient était extraordinaire. Sur le sommet de la galerie la plus élevée, plus haut que la rosace centrale, il y avait une grande flamme qui montait entre les deux clochers avec des tourbillons d’étincelles, une grande flamme désordonnée et furieuse dont le vent emportait par moments un lambeau dans la fumée. Au-dessous de cette flamme, au-dessous de la sombre balustrade à trèfles de braise, deux gouttières en gueules de monstres vomissaient sans relâche cette pluie ardente qui détachait son ruissellement argenté sur les ténèbres de la façade inférieure. À mesure qu’ils approchaient du sol, les deux jets de plomb liquide s’élargissaient en gerbes, comme l’eau qui jaillit des mille trous de l’arrosoir. Au-dessus de la flamme, les énormes tours, de chacune desquelles on voyait deux faces crues et tranchées, l’une toute noire, l’autre toute rouge, semblaient plus grandes encore de toute l’immensité de l’ombre qu’elles projetaient jusque dans le ciel. Leurs innombrables sculptures de diables et de dragons prenaient un aspect lugubre. La clarté inquiète de la flamme les faisait remuer à l’œil. Il y avait des guivres qui avaient l’air de rire, des gargouilles qu’on croyait entendre japper, des salamandres qui soufflaient dans le feu, des tarasques qui éternuaient dans la fumée. Et parmi ces monstres ainsi réveillés de leur sommeil de pierre par cette flamme, par ce bruit, il y en avait un qui marchait et qu’on voyait de temps en temps passer sur le front ardent du bûcher comme une chauve-souris devant une chandelle.

Sans doute ce phare étrange allait éveiller au loin le bûcheron des collines de Bicêtre, épouvanté de voir chanceler sur ses bruyères l’ombre gigantesque des tours de Notre-Dame.

Il se fit un silence de terreur parmi les truands, pendant lequel on n’entendit que les cris d’alarme des chanoines enfermés dans leur cloître et plus inquiets que des chevaux dans une écurie qui brûle, le bruit furtif des fenêtres vite ouvertes et plus vite fermées, le remue-ménage intérieur des maisons et de l’Hôtel-Dieu, le vent dans la flamme, le dernier râle des mourants, et le pétillement continu de la pluie de plomb sur le pavé.

Cependant les principaux truands s’étaient retirés sous le porche du logis Gondelaurier, et tenaient conseil. Le duc d’Égypte, assis sur une borne, contemplait avec une crainte religieuse le bûcher fantasmagorique resplendissant à deux cents pieds en l’air. Clopin Trouillefou se mordait ses gros poings avec rage.

«Impossible d’entrer! murmurait-il dans ses dents.

— Une vieille église fée! grommelait le vieux bohémien Mathias Hungadi Spicali.

— Par les moustaches du pape! reprenait un narquois grisonnant qui avait servi, voilà des gouttières d’églises qui vous crachent du plomb fondu mieux que les mâchicoulis de Lectoure.

— Voyez-vous ce démon qui passe et repasse devant le feu? s’écriait le duc d’Égypte.

— Pardieu, dit Clopin, c’est le damné sonneur, c’est Quasimodo.»

Le bohémien hochait la tête. «Je vous dis, moi, que c’est l’esprit Sabnac, le grand marquis, le démon des fortifications. Il a forme d’un soldat armé, une tête de lion. Quelquefois il monte un cheval hideux. Il change les hommes en pierres dont il bâtit des tours. Il commande à cinquante légions. C’est bien lui. Je le reconnais. Quelquefois il est habillé d’une belle robe d’or figurée à la façon des Turcs.

— Où est Bellevigne de l’Étoile? demanda Clopin.

— Il est mort», répondit une truande.

Andry le Rouge riait d’un rire idiot: «Notre-Dame donne de la besogne à l’Hôtel-Dieu, disait-il.

— Il n’y a donc pas moyen de forcer cette porte?» s’écria le roi de Thunes en frappant du pied.

Le duc d’Égypte lui montra tristement les deux ruisseaux de plomb bouillant qui ne cessaient de rayer la noire façade, comme deux longues quenouilles de phosphore. «On a vu des églises qui se défendaient ainsi d’elles-mêmes, observa-t-il en soupirant. Sainte-Sophie, de Constantinople, il y a quarante ans de cela, a trois fois de suite jeté à terre le croissant de

Mahom en secouant ses dômes, qui sont ses têtes. Guillaume de Paris, qui a bâti celle-ci, était un magicien.

— Faut-il donc s’en aller piteusement comme des laquais de grand-route? dit Clopin. Laisser là notre sœur que ces loups chaperonnés pendront demain!

— Et la sacristie, où il y a des charretées d’or! ajouta un truand dont nous regrettons de ne pas savoir le nom.

— Barbe-Mahom! cria Trouillefou.

— Essayons encore une fois», reprit le truand.

Mathias Hungadi hocha la tête.

«Nous n’entrerons pas par la porte. Il faut trouver le défaut de l’armure de la vieille fée. Un trou, une fausse poterne, une jointure quelconque.

— Qui en est? dit Clopin. J’y retourne. — À propos, où est donc le petit écolier Jehan qui était si enferraillé?

— Il est sans doute mort, répondit quelqu’un. On ne l’entend plus rire.»

Le roi de Thunes fronça le sourcil.

«Tant pis. Il y avait un brave cœur sous cette ferraille. — Et maître Pierre Gringoire?

— Capitaine Clopin, dit Andry le Rouge, il s’est esquivé que nous n’étions encore qu’au Pont-aux-Changeurs.»

Clopin frappa du pied. «Gueule-Dieu! c’est lui qui nous pousse céans, et il nous plante là au beau milieu de la besogne! — Lâche bavard, casqué d’une pantoufle!

— Capitaine Clopin, cria Andry le Rouge, qui regardait dans la rue du Parvis, voilà le petit écolier.

— Loué soit Pluto! dit Clopin. Mais que diable tire-t-il après lui?»

C’était Jehan, en effet, qui accourait aussi vite que le lui permettaient ses lourds habits de paladin et une longue échelle qu’il traînait bravement sur le pavé, plus essoufflé qu’une fourmi attelée à un brin d’herbe vingt fois plus long qu’elle.

«Victoire! *Te Deum*! criait l’écolier. Voilà l’échelle des déchargeurs du port Saint-Landry.»

Clopin s’approcha de lui.

«Enfant! que veux-tu faire, corne-Dieu! de cette échelle?

— Je l’ai, répondit Jehan haletant. Je savais où elle était. — Sous le hangar de la maison du lieutenant. — Il y a là une fille que je connais, qui me trouve beau comme un Cupido. — Je m’en suis servi pour avoir l’échelle, et j’ai l’échelle, Pasque-Mahom! — La pauvre fille est venue m’ouvrir toute en chemise.

— Oui, dit Clopin, mais que veux-tu faire de cette échelle?»

Jehan le regarda d’un air malin et capable, et fit claquer ses doigts comme des castagnettes. Il était sublime en ce moment. Il avait sur la tête un de ces casques surchargés du quinzième siècle, qui épouvantaient l’ennemi de leurs cimiers chimériques. Le sien était hérissé de dix becs de fer, de sorte que Jehan eût pu disputer la redoutable épithète de au navire homérique de Nestor.

«Ce que j’en veux faire, auguste roi de Thunes? Voyez-vous cette rangée de statues qui ont des mines d’imbéciles là-bas au-dessus des trois portails?

— Oui. Eh bien?

— C’est la galerie des rois de France!

— Qu’est-ce que cela me fait? dit Clopin.

— Attendez donc! Il y a au bout de cette galerie une porte qui n’est jamais fermée qu’au loquet, avec cette échelle j’y monte, et je suis dans l’église.

— Enfant, laisse-moi monter le premier.

— Non pas, camarade, c’est à moi l’échelle. Venez, vous serez le second.

— Que Belzébuth t’étrangle! dit le bourru Clopin. Je ne veux être après personne.

— Alors, Clopin, cherche une échelle!»

Jehan se mit à courir par la place, tirant son échelle et criant: «À moi les fils!»

En un instant l’échelle fut dressée et appuyée à la balustrade de la galerie inférieure, au-dessus d’un des portails latéraux. La foule des truands poussant de grandes acclamations se pressa au bas pour y monter. Mais Jehan maintint son droit et posa le premier le pied sur les échelons. Le trajet était assez long. La galerie des rois de France est élevée aujourd’hui d’environ soixante pieds au-dessus du pavé. Les onze marches du perron l’exhaussaient encore. Jehan montait lentement, assez empêché de sa lourde armure, d’une main tenant l’échelon, de l’autre son arbalète. Quand il fut au milieu de l’échelle il jeta un coup d’œil mélancolique sur les pauvres argotiers morts, dont le degré était jonché. «Hélas! dit-il, voilà un monceau de cadavres digne du cinquième chant de *l’Iliade*!» Puis il continua de monter. Les truands le suivaient. Il y en avait un sur chaque échelon. À voir s’élever en ondulant dans l’ombre cette ligne de dos cuirassés, on eût dit un serpent à écailles d’acier qui se dressait contre l’église. Jehan qui faisait la tête et qui sifflait complétait l’illusion.

L’écolier toucha enfin au balcon de la galerie, et l’enjamba assez lestement aux applaudissements de toute la truanderie. Ainsi maître de la citadelle, il poussa un cri de joie, et tout à coup s’arrêta pétrifié. Il venait d’apercevoir, derrière une statue de roi, Quasimodo caché dans les ténèbres, l’œil étincelant.

Avant qu’un second assiégeant eût pu prendre pied sur la galerie, le formidable bossu sauta à la tête de l’échelle, saisit sans dire une parole le bout des deux montants de ses mains puissantes, les souleva, les éloigna du mur, balança un moment, au milieu des clameurs d’angoisse, la longue et pliante échelle encombrée de truands du haut en bas, et subitement, avec une force surhumaine, rejeta cette grappe d’hommes dans la place. Il y eut un instant où les plus déterminés palpitèrent. L’échelle, lancée en arrière, resta un moment droite et debout et parut hésiter, puis oscilla, puis tout à coup, décrivant un effrayant arc de cercle de quatre-vingts pieds de rayon, s’abattit sur le pavé avec sa charge de bandits plus rapidement qu’un pont-levis dont les chaînes se cassent. Il y eut une immense imprécation, puis tout s’éteignit, et quelques malheureux mutilés se retirèrent en rampant de dessous le monceau de morts.

Une rumeur de douleur et de colère succéda parmi les assiégeants aux premiers cris de triomphe. Quasimodo impassible, les deux coudes appuyés sur la balustrade, regardait. Il avait l’air d’un vieux roi chevelu à sa fenêtre.

Jehan Frollo était, lui, dans une situation critique. Il se trouvait dans la galerie avec le redoutable sonneur, seul, séparé de ses compagnons par un mur vertical de quatre-vingts pieds. Pendant que Quasimodo jouait avec l’échelle, l’écolier avait couru à la poterne qu’il croyait ouverte. Point. Le sourd en entrant dans la galerie l’avait fermée derrière lui, Jehan alors s’était caché derrière un roi de pierre, n’osant souffler, et fixant sur le monstrueux bossu une mine effarée, comme cet homme qui, faisant la cour à la femme du gardien d’une ménagerie, alla un soir à un rendez-vous d’amour, se trompa de mur dans son escalade, et se trouva brusquement tête à tête avec un ours blanc.

Dans les premiers moments le sourd ne prit pas garde à lui; mais enfin il tourna la tête et se redressa tout d’un coup. Il venait d’apercevoir l’écolier.

Jehan se prépara à un rude choc, mais le sourd resta immobile; seulement il était tourné vers l’écolier qu’il regardait.

«Ho! ho! dit Jehan, qu’as-tu à me regarder de cet œil borgne et mélancolique?»

Et en parlant ainsi, le jeune drôle apprêtait sournoisement son arbalète.

«Quasimodo! cria-t-il, je vais changer ton surnom. On t’appellera l’aveugle.»

Le coup partit. Le vireton empenné siffla et vint se ficher dans le bras gauche du bossu, Quasimodo ne s’en émut pas plus que d’une égratignure au roi Pharamond. Il porta la main à la sagette, l’arracha de son bras et la brisa tranquillement sur son gros genou. Puis il laissa tomber, plutôt qu’il ne jeta à terre les deux morceaux. Mais Jehan n’eut pas le temps de tirer une seconde fois. La flèche brisée, Quasimodo souffla bruyamment, bondit comme une sauterelle et retomba sur l’écolier, dont l’armure s’aplatit du coup contre la muraille.

Alors dans cette pénombre où flottait la lumière des torches, on entrevit une chose terrible.

Quasimodo avait pris de la main gauche les deux bras de Jehan qui ne se débattait pas, tant il se sentait perdu. De la droite le sourd lui détachait l’une après l’autre, en silence, avec une lenteur sinistre, toutes les pièces de son armure, l’épée, les poignards, le casque, la cuirasse, les brassards. On eût dit un singe qui épluche une noix. Quasimodo jetait à ses pieds, morceau à morceau, la coquille de fer de l’écolier.

Quand l’écolier se vit désarmé, déshabillé, faible et nu dans ces redoutables mains, il n’essaya pas de parler à ce sourd, mais il se mit à lui rire effrontément au visage, et à chanter, avec son intrépide insouciance d’enfant de seize ans, la chanson alors populaire:

Elle est bien habillée,
La ville de Cambrai.
Marafin l’a pillée...

Il n’acheva pas. On vit Quasimodo debout sur le parapet de la galerie, qui d’une seule main tenait l’écolier par les pieds, en le faisant tourner sur l’abîme comme une fronde. Puis on entendit un bruit comme celui d’une boîte osseuse qui éclate contre un mur, et l’on vit tomber quelque chose qui s’arrêta au tiers de la chute à une saillie de l’architecture. C’était un corps mort qui resta accroché là, plié en deux, les reins brisés, le crâne vide.

Un cri d’horreur s’éleva parmi les truands. «Vengeance! cria Clopin. — À sac! répondit la multitude. — Assaut! assaut!»

Alors ce fut un hurlement prodigieux où se mêlaient toutes les langues, tous les patois, tous les accents. La mort du pauvre écolier jeta une ardeur furieuse dans cette foule. La honte la prit, et la colère d’avoir été si longtemps tenue en échec devant une église par un bossu. La rage trouva des échelles, multiplia les torches, et au bout de quelques minutes Quasimodo éperdu vit cette épouvantable fourmilière monter de toutes parts à l’assaut de Notre-Dame. Ceux qui n’avaient pas d’échelles avaient des cordes à nœuds, ceux qui n’avaient pas de cordes grimpaient aux reliefs des sculptures. Ils se pendaient aux guenilles les uns des autres. Aucun moyen de résister à cette marée ascendante de faces épouvantables. La fureur faisait rutiler ces figures farouches; leurs fronts terreux ruisselaient de sueur; leurs yeux éclairaient. Toutes ces grimaces, toutes ces laideurs investissaient Quasimodo. On eût dit que quelque autre église avait envoyé à l’assaut de Notre-Dame ses gorgones, ses dogues, ses drées, ses démons, ses sculptures les plus fantastiques. C’était comme une couche de monstres vivants sur les monstres de pierre de la façade.

Cependant, la place s’était étoilée de mille torches. Cette scène désordonnée, jusqu’alors enfouie dans l’obscurité, s’était subitement embrasée de lumière. Le Parvis resplendissait et jetait un rayonnement dans le ciel. Le bûcher allumé sur la haute plate-forme brûlait toujours, et illuminait au loin la ville. L’énorme silhouette des deux tours, développée au loin sur les toits de Paris, faisait dans cette clarté une large échancrure d’ombre. La ville semblait s’être émue. Des tocsins éloignés se plaignaient. Les truands hurlaient, haletaient, juraient, montaient, et Quasimodo, impuissant contre tant d’ennemis, frissonnant pour l’égyptienne, voyant les faces furieuses se rapprocher de plus en plus de sa galerie, demandait un miracle au ciel, et se tordait les bras de désespoir.

V

LE RETRAIT OÙ DIT SES HEURES MONSIEUR LOUIS DE FRANCE

Le lecteur n’a peut-être pas oublié qu’un moment avant d’apercevoir la bande nocturne des truands, Quasimodo, inspectant Paris du haut de son clocher, n’y voyait plus briller qu’une lumière, laquelle étoilait une vitre à l’étage le plus élevé d’un haut et sombre édifice, à côté de la porte Saint-Antoine. Cet édifice, c’était la Bastille. Cette étoile, c’était la chandelle de Louis XI.

Le roi Louis XI était en effet à Paris depuis deux jours. Il devait repartir le surlendemain pour sa citadelle de Montilz-lès-Tours. Il ne faisait jamais que de rares et courtes apparitions dans sa bonne ville de Paris, n’y sentant pas autour de lui assez de trappes, de gibets et d’archers écossais.

Il était venu ce jour-là coucher à la Bastille. La grande chambre de cinq toises carrées qu’il avait au Louvre, avec cheminée chargée de douze grosses bêtes et des treize grands prophètes, et son grand lit de onze pieds sur douze lui agréaient peu. Il se perdait dans toutes ces grandeurs. Ce roi bon bourgeois aimait mieux la Bastille avec une chambrette et une couchette. Et puis la Bastille était plus forte que le Louvre.

Cette *chambrette* que le roi s’était réservée dans la fameuse prison d’état était encore assez vaste et occupait l’étage le plus élevé d’une tourelle engagée dans le donjon. C’était un réduit de forme ronde, tapissé de nattes en paille luisante, plafonné à poutres rehaussées de fleurs de lys d’étain doré avec les entrevous de couleur, lambrissé à riches boiseries semées de rosettes d’étain blanc et peintes de beau vert-gai, fait d’orpin et de florée fine.

Il n’y avait qu’une fenêtre, une longue ogive treillissée de fil d’archal et de barreaux de fer, d’ailleurs obscurcie de belles vitres coloriées aux armes du roi et de la reine, dont le panneau revenait à vingt-deux sols.

Il n’y avait qu’une entrée, une porte moderne, à cintre surbaissé, garnie d’une tapisserie en dedans, et, au dehors, d’un de ces porches de bois d’Irlande, frêles édifices de menuiserie curieusement ouvrée, qu’on voyait encore en quantité de vieux logis il y a cent cinquante ans. «Quoiqu’ils défigurent et embarrassent les lieux, dit Sauval avec désespoir, nos vieillards pourtant ne s’en veulent point défaire et les conservent en dépit d’un chacun.»

On ne trouvait dans cette chambre rien de ce qui meublait les appartements ordinaires, ni bancs, ni tréteaux, ni formes, ni escabelles communes en forme de caisse, ni belles escabelles soutenues de piliers et de contre-piliers à quatre sols la pièce. On n’y voyait qu’une chaise pliante à bras, fort magnifique: le bois en était peint de roses sur fond rouge, le siège de cordouan vermeil, garni de longues franges de soie et piqué de mille clous d’or. La solitude de cette chaise faisait voir qu’une seule personne avait droit de s’asseoir dans la chambre. À côté de la chaise et tout près de la fenêtre, il y avait une table recouverte d’un tapis à figures d’oiseaux. Sur cette table un gallemard taché d’encre, quelques parchemins, quelques plumes, et un hanap d’argent ciselé. Un peu plus loin, un chauffe-doux, un prie-Dieu de velours cramoisi, relevé de bossettes d’or. Enfin au fond un simple lit de damas jaune et incarnat, sans clinquant ni passement; les franges sans façon. C’est ce lit, fameux pour avoir porté le sommeil ou l’insomnie de Louis XI, qu’on pouvait encore contempler, il y a deux cents ans, chez un conseiller d’état, où il a été vu par la vieille Madame Pilou, célèbre dans le *Cyrus* sous le nom *d’Arricidie* et de *La Morale vivante*.

Telle était la chambre qu’on appelait «le retrait où dit ses heures monsieur Louis de France».

Au moment où nous y avons introduit le lecteur, ce retrait était fort obscur. Le couvre-feu était sonné depuis une heure, il faisait nuit, et il n’y avait qu’une vacillante chandelle de cire posée sur la table pour éclairer cinq personnages diversement groupés dans la chambre.

Le premier sur lequel tombait la lumière était un seigneur superbement vêtu d’un haut-de-chausses et d’un justaucorps écarlate rayé d’argent, et d’une casaque à mahoîtres de drap d’or à dessins noirs. Ce splendide costume, où se jouait la lumière, semblait glacé de flamme à tous ses plis. L’homme qui le portait avait sur la poitrine ses armoiries brodées de vives couleurs: un chevron accompagné en pointe d’un daim passant. L’écusson était accosté à droite d’un rameau d’olivier, à gauche d’une corne de daim. Cet homme portait à sa ceinture une riche dague dont la poignée de vermeil était ciselée en forme de cimier et surmontée d’une couronne comtale. Il avait l’air mauvais, la mine fière et la tête haute. Au premier coup d’œil on voyait sur son visage l’arrogance, au second la ruse.

Il se tenait tête nue, une longue pancarte à la main, derrière la chaise à bras sur laquelle était assis, le corps disgracieusement plié en deux, les genoux chevauchant l’un sur l’autre, le coude sur la table, un personnage fort mal accoutré. Qu’on se figure en effet, sur l’opulent cuir de Cordoue, deux rotules cagneuses, deux cuisses maigres pauvrement habillées d’un tricot de laine noire, un torse enveloppé d’un surtout de futaine avec une fourrure dont on voyait moins de poil que de cuir; enfin, pour couronner un vieux chapeau gras du plus méchant drap noir bordé d’un cordon circulaire de figurines de plomb. Voilà, avec une sale calotte qui laissait à peine passer un cheveu, tout ce qu’on distinguait du personnage assis. Il tenait sa tête tellement courbée sur sa poitrine qu’on n’apercevait rien de son visage recouvert d’ombre, si ce n’est le bout de son nez sur lequel tombait un rayon de lumière, et qui devait être long. À la maigreur de sa main ridée on devinait un vieillard. C’était Louis XI.

À quelque distance derrière eux causaient à voix basse deux hommes vêtus à la coupe flamande, qui n’étaient pas assez perdus dans l’ombre pour que quelqu’un de ceux qui avaient assisté à la représentation du mystère de Gringoire n’eût pu reconnaître en eux deux des principaux envoyés flamands, Guillaume Rym, le sagace pensionnaire de Gand, et Jacques Coppenole, le populaire chaussetier. On se souvient que ces deux hommes étaient mêlés à la politique secrète de Louis XI.

Enfin, tout au fond, près de la porte, se tenait debout dans l’obscurité, immobile comme une statue, un vigoureux homme à membres trapus, à harnois militaire, à casaque armoriée, dont la face carrée, percée d’yeux à fleur de tête, fendue d’une immense bouche, dérobant ses oreilles sous deux larges abat-vent de cheveux plats, sans front, tenait à la fois du chien et du tigre.

Tous étaient découverts, excepté le roi.

Le seigneur qui était auprès du roi lui faisait lecture d’une espèce de long mémoire que Sa Majesté semblait écouter avec attention. Les deux flamands chuchotaient.

«Croix-Dieu! grommelait Coppenole, je suis las d’être debout. Est-ce qu’il n’y a pas de chaise ici?»

Rym répondait par un geste négatif, accompagné d’un sourire discret.

«Croix-Dieu! reprenait Coppenole tout malheureux d’être obligé de baisser ainsi la voix, l’envie me démange de m’asseoir à terre, jambes croisées, en chaussetier, comme je fais dans ma boutique.

— Gardez-vous-en bien, maître Jacques!

— Ouais! maître Guillaume! ici l’on ne peut donc être que sur les pieds?

— Ou sur les genoux», dit Rym.

En ce moment la voix du roi s’éleva. Ils se turent.

«Cinquante sols les robes de nos valets, et douze livres les manteaux des clercs de notre couronne! C’est cela! versez l’or à tonnes! Êtes-vous fou, Olivier?»

En parlant ainsi, le vieillard avait levé la tête. On voyait reluire à son cou les coquilles d’or du collier de Saint-Michel. La chandelle éclairait en plein son profil décharné et morose. Il arracha le papier des mains de l’autre.

«Vous nous ruinez! cria-t-il en promenant ses yeux creux sur le cahier. Qu’est-ce que tout cela? qu’avons-nous besoin d’une si prodigieuse maison? Deux chapelains à raison de dix livres par mois chacun, et un clerc de chapelle à cent sols! Un valet de chambre à quatre-vingt-dix livres par an! Quatre écuyers de cuisine à six vingts livres par an chacun! Un hasteur, un potager, un saussier, un queux, un sommelier d’armures, deux valets de sommiers à raison de dix livres par mois chaque! Deux galopins de cuisine à huit livres! Un palefrenier et ses deux aides à vingt-quatre livres par mois! Un porteur, un pâtissier, un boulanger, deux charretiers, chacun soixante livres par an! Et le maréchal des forges, six vingts livres! Et le maître de la chambre de nos deniers, douze cents livres, et le contrôleur, cinq cents! — Que sais-je, moi? C’est une furie! Les gages de nos domestiques mettent la France au pillage! Tous les mugots du Louvre fondront à un tel feu de dépense! Nous y vendrons nos vaisselles! Et l’an prochain, si Dieu et Notre-Dame (ici il souleva son chapeau) nous prêtent vie, nous boirons nos tisanes dans un pot d’étain!»

En disant cela, il jetait un coup d’œil sur le hanap d’argent qui étincelait sur la table. Il toussa, et poursuivit:

«Maître Olivier, les princes qui règnent aux grandes seigneuries, comme rois et empereurs, ne doivent pas laisser engendrer la somptuosité en leurs maisons; car de là ce feu court par la province. — Donc, maître Olivier, tiens-toi ceci pour dit. Notre dépense augmente tous les ans. La chose nous déplaît. Comment, pasque-Dieu! jusqu’en 79 elle n’a point passé trente-six mille livres. En 80, elle a atteint quarante-trois mille six cent dix-neuf livres, — j’ai le chiffre en tête, — en 81, soixante-six mille six cent quatre-vingts livres; et cette année, par la foi de mon corps! elle atteindra quatre-vingt mille livres! Doublée en quatre ans! Monstrueux!»

Il s’arrêta essoufflé, puis il reprit avec emportement: «Je ne vois autour de moi que gens qui s’engraissent de ma maigreur! Vous me sucez des écus par tous les pores!»

Tous gardaient le silence. C’était une de ces colères qu’on laisse aller. Il continua:

«C’est comme cette requête en latin de la seigneurie de France, pour que nous ayons à rétablir ce qu’ils appellent les grandes charges de la couronne! Charges en effet! charges qui écrasent! Ah! messieurs! vous dites que nous ne sommes pas un roi, pour régner *dapifero nullo, buticulario nullo*! Nous vous le ferons voir, pasque-Dieu! si nous ne sommes pas un roi!»

Ici il sourit dans le sentiment de sa puissance, sa mauvaise humeur s’en adoucit, et il se tourna vers les flamands:

«Voyez-vous, compère Guillaume? le grand panetier, le grand bouteillier, le grand chambellan, le grand sénéchal ne valent pas le moindre valet. — Retenez ceci, compère Coppenole; — ils ne servent à rien. À se tenir ainsi inutiles autour du roi, ils me font l’effet des quatre évangélistes qui environnent le cadran de la grande horloge du Palais, et que Philippe Brille vient de remettre à neuf. Ils sont dorés, mais ils ne marquent pas l’heure; et l’aiguille peut se passer d’eux.»

Il demeura un moment pensif, et ajouta en hochant sa vieille tête:

«Ho! Ho! par Notre-Dame, je ne suis pas Philippe Brille, et je ne redorerai pas les grands vassaux. Je suis de l’avis du roi Édouard: sauvez le peuple et tuez les seigneurs. — Continue, Olivier.»

Le personnage qu’il désignait par ce nom reprit le cahier de ses mains, et se remit à lire à haute voix:

«... À Adam Tenon, commis à la garde des sceaux de la prévôté de Paris, pour l’argent, façon et gravure desdits sceaux qui ont été faits neufs pour ce que les autres précédents, pour leur antiquité et caduqueté, ne pouvaient plus bonnement servir. — Douze livres parisis.

«À Guillaume Frère, la somme de quatre livres quatre sols parisis, pour ses peines et salaires d’avoir nourri et alimenté les colombes des deux colombiers de l’Hôtel des Tournelles, durant les mois de janvier, février et mars de cette année; et pour ce a donné sept sextiers d’orge.

«À un cordelier, pour confession d’un criminel, quatre sols parisis.»

Le roi écoutait en silence. De temps en temps il toussait. Alors il portait le hanap à ses lèvres et buvait une gorgée en faisant une grimace.

«En cette année ont été faits par ordonnance de justice à son de trompe par les carrefours de Paris cinquante-six cris. — Compte à régler.

«Pour avoir fouillé et cherché en certains endroits, tant dans Paris qu'ailleurs, de la finance qu'on disait y avoir été cachée, mais rien n'y a été trouvé; — quarante-cinq livres parisis.»

— Enterrer un écu pour déterrer un sou! dit le roi.

— ... Pour avoir mis à point, à l'Hôtel des Tournelles, six panneaux de verre blanc à l'endroit où est la cage de fer, treize sols. — Pour avoir fait et livré, par le commandement du roi, le jour des monstres, quatre écussons aux armes dudit seigneur, enchapessés de chapeaux de roses tout à l'entour, six livres. — Pour deux manches neuves au vieil pourpoint du roi, vingt sols. — Pour une boîte de graisse à graisser les bottes du roi, quinze deniers. — Une étable faite de neuf pour loger les pourceaux noirs du roi, trente livres parisis. — Plusieurs cloisons, planches et trappes faites pour enfermer les lions d'emprès Saint-Paul, vingt-deux livres.

— Voilà des bêtes qui sont chères, dit Louis XI. N'importe! c'est une belle magnificence de roi. Il y a un grand lion roux que j'aime pour ses gentillesses. — L'avez-vous vu, maître Guillaume? — Il faut que les princes aient de ces animaux mirifiques. À nous autres rois, nos chiens doivent être des lions, et nos chats des tigres. Le grand va aux couronnes. Du temps des païens de Jupiter, quand le peuple offrait aux églises cent bœufs et cent brebis, les empereurs donnaient cent lions et cent aigles. Cela était farouche et fort beau. Les rois de France ont toujours eu de ces rugissements autour de leur trône. Néanmoins on me rendra cette justice que j'y dépense encore moins d'argent qu'eux, et que j'ai une plus grande modestie de lions, d'ours, d'éléphants et de léopards. — Allez, maître Olivier. Nous voulions dire cela à nos amis les Flamands.»

Guillaume Rym s'inclina profondément, tandis que Coppenole, avec sa mine bourrue, avait l'air d'un de ces ours dont parlait Sa Majesté. Le roi n'y prit pas garde. Il venait de tremper ses lèvres dans le hanap, et recrachait le breuvage en disant: «Pouah! la fâcheuse tisane!» Celui qui lisait continua:

«Pour nourriture d'un maraud piéton enverrouillé depuis six mois dans la logette de l'écorcherie, en attendant qu'on sache qu'en faire. — Six livres quatre sols.

— Qu'est cela? interrompit le roi. Nourrir ce qu'il faut pendre! Pasque-Dieu! je ne donnerai plus un sol pour cette nourriture. — Olivier, entendez-vous de la chose avec monsieur d’Estouteville, et dès ce soir faites-moi le préparatif des noces du galant avec une potence. — Reprenez.»

Olivier fit une marque avec le pouce à l’article du *maraud piéton* et passa outre.

«À Henriet Cousin, maître exécuteur des hautes œuvres de la justice de Paris, la somme de soixante sols parisis, à lui taxée et ordonnée par monseigneur le prévôt de Paris, pour avoir acheté, de l’ordonnance de mondit sieur le prévôt, une grande épée à feuille servant à exécuter et décapiter les personnes qui par justice sont condamnées pour leurs démérites, et icelle fait garnir de fourreau et de tout ce qui y appartient; et pareillement a fait remettre à point et rhabiller la vieille épée, qui s’était éclatée et ébréchée en faisant la justice de messire Louis de Luxembourg, comme plus à plein peut apparoir...»

Le roi interrompit: «Il suffit. J’ordonnance la somme de grand cœur. Voilà des dépenses où je ne regarde pas. Je n’ai jamais regretté cet argent-là. — Suivez.

— Pour avoir fait de neuf une grande cage...

— Ah! dit le roi en prenant de ses deux mains les bras de sa chaise, je savais bien que j’étais venu en cette Bastille pour quelque chose. — Attendez, maître Olivier. Je veux voir moi-même la cage. Vous m’en lirez le coût pendant que je l’examinerai. — Messieurs les Flamands, venez voir cela. C’est curieux.»

Alors il se leva, s’appuya sur le bras de son interlocuteur, fit signe à l’espèce de muet qui se tenait debout devant la porte de le précéder, aux deux Flamands de le suivre, et sortit de la chambre.

La royale compagnie se recruta, à la porte du retrait, d’hommes d’armes tout alourdis de fer, et de minces pages qui portaient des flambeaux. Elle chemina quelque temps dans l’intérieur du sombre donjon, percé d’escaliers et de corridors jusque dans l’épaisseur des murailles. Le capitaine de la Bastille marchait en tête, et faisait ouvrir les guichets devant le vieux roi malade et voûté, qui toussait en marchant.

À chaque guichet, toutes les têtes étaient obligées de se baisser excepté celle du vieillard plié par l’âge. «Hum! disait-il entre ses gencives, car il n’avait plus de dents, nous sommes déjà tout prêt pour la porte du sépulcre. À porte basse, passant courbé.»

Enfin, après avoir franchi un dernier guichet si embarrassé de serrures qu’on mit un quart d’heure à l’ouvrir, ils entrèrent dans une haute et vaste salle en ogive, au centre de laquelle on distinguait, à la lueur des torches, un gros cube massif de maçonnerie, de fer et de bois. L’intérieur était creux. C’était une des ces fameuses cages à prisonniers d’État qu’on appelait *les fillettes du roi*. Il y avait aux parois deux ou trois petites fenêtres, si drument treillissées d’épais barreaux de fer qu’on n’en voyait pas la vitre. La porte était une grande dalle de pierre plate, comme aux tombeaux. De ces portes qui ne servent jamais que pour entrer. Seulement, ici, le mort était un vivant.

Le roi se mit à marcher lentement autour du petit édifice en l’examinant avec soin, tandis que maître Olivier qui le suivait lisait tout haut le mémoire:

«Pour avoir fait de neuf une grande cage de bois de grosses solives, membrures et sablières, contenant neuf pieds de long sur huit de lé, et de hauteur sept pieds entre deux planchers, lissée et boujonnée à gros boujons de fer, laquelle a été assise en une chambre étant à l’une des tours de la bastide Saint-Antoine, en laquelle cage est mis et détenu, par commandement du roi notre seigneur, un prisonnier qui habitait précédemment une vieille cage caduque et décrépite. — Ont été employées à cette dite cage neuve quatre-vingt-seize solives de couche et cinquante-deux solives debout, dix sablières de trois toises de long; et ont été occupés dix-neuf charpentiers pour équarrir, ouvrer et tailler tout ledit bois en la cour de la Bastille pendant vingt jours...

— D’assez beaux cœurs de chêne, dit le roi en cognant du poing la charpente.

— ... Il est entré dans cette cage, poursuivit l’autre, deux cent vingt gros boujons de fer, de neuf pieds et de huit, le surplus de moyenne longueur, avec les rouelles, pommelles et contre-bandes servant auxdits boujons, pesant tout ledit fer trois mille sept cent trente-cinq livres; outre huit grosses équières de fer servant à attacher ladite cage, avec les crampons et clous pesant ensemble deux cent dix-huit livres de fer, sans compter le fer des treillis des fenêtres de la chambre où la cage a été posée, les barres de fer de la porte de la chambre, et autres choses...

— Voilà bien du fer, dit le roi, pour contenir la légèreté d’un esprit!

— ... Le tout revient à trois cent dix-sept livres cinq sols sept deniers.

— Pasque-Dieu!» s’écria le roi.

À ce juron, qui était le favori de Louis XI, il parut que quelqu’un se réveillait dans l’intérieur de la cage, on entendit des chaînes qui en écorchaient le plancher avec bruit, et il s’éleva une voix faible qui semblait sortir de la tombe: «Sire! Sire! grâce!» On ne pouvait voir celui qui parlait ainsi.

«Trois cent dix-sept livres cinq sols sept deniers!» reprit Louis XI.

La voix lamentable qui était sortie de la cage avait glacé tous les assistants, maître Olivier lui-même. Le roi seul avait l’air de ne pas l’avoir entendue. Sur son ordre, maître Olivier reprit sa lecture, et Sa Majesté continua froidement l’inspection de la cage.

«...Outre cela, il a été payé à un maçon qui a fait les trous pour poser les grilles des fenêtres, et le plancher de la chambre où est la cage, parce que le plancher n’eût pu porter cette cage à cause de sa pesanteur, vingt-sept livres quatorze sols parisis...»

La voix recommença à gémir:

«Grâce! Sire! Je vous jure que c’est monsieur le cardinal d’Angers qui a fait la trahison, et non pas moi.

— Le maçon est rude! dit le roi. Continue, Olivier.»

Olivier continua:

«... À un menuisier, pour fenêtres, couches, selle percée et autres choses, vingt livres deux sols parisis...»

La voix continuait aussi:

«Hélas! Sire! ne m’écouterez-vous pas? Je vous proteste que ce n’est pas moi qui ai écrit la chose à monseigneur de Guyenne, mais monsieur le cardinal La Balue!

— Le menuisier est cher, observa le roi. — Est-ce tout?

— Non, Sire. — ... À un vitrier, pour les vitres de ladite chambre, quarante-six sols huit deniers parisis.

— Faites grâce, Sire! N’est-ce donc pas assez qu’on ait donné tous mes biens à mes juges, ma vaisselle à monsieur de Torcy, ma librairie à maître Pierre Doriolle, ma tapisserie au gouverneur du Roussillon? Je suis innocent. Voilà quatorze ans que je grelotte dans une cage de fer. Faites grâce, Sire! vous retrouverez cela dans le ciel.

— Maître Olivier, dit le roi, le total?

— Trois cent soixante-sept livres huit sols trois deniers parisis.

— Notre-Dame! cria le roi. Voilà une cage outrageuse!»

Il arracha le cahier des mains de maître Olivier, et se mit à compter lui-même sur ses doigts, en examinant tour à tour le papier et la cage.

Cependant on entendait sangloter le prisonnier. Cela était lugubre dans l’ombre, et les visages se regardaient en pâlissant.

«Quatorze ans, Sire! voilà quatorze ans! depuis le mois d’avril 1469. Au nom de la sainte mère de Dieu, Sire, écoutez-moi! Vous avez joui tout ce temps de la chaleur du soleil. Moi, chétif, ne verrai-je plus jamais le jour? Grâce, Sire! Soyez miséricordieux. La clémence est une belle vertu royale qui rompt les courantes de la colère. Croit-elle, Votre Majesté, que ce soit à l’heure de la mort un grand contentement pour un roi, de n’avoir laissé aucune offense impunie? D’ailleurs, Sire, je n’ai point trahi Votre Majesté; c’est monsieur d’Angers. Et j’ai au pied une bien lourde chaîne, et une grosse boule de fer au bout, beaucoup plus pesante qu’il n’est de raison. Hé! Sire! ayez pitié de moi!

— Olivier, dit le roi en hochant la tête, je remarque qu’on me compte le muid de plâtre à vingt sols, qui n’en vaut que douze. Vous referez ce mémoire.»

Il tourna le dos à la cage, et se mit en devoir de sortir de la chambre. Le misérable prisonnier, à l’éloignement des flambeaux et du bruit, jugea que le roi s’en allait.

«Sire! Sire!» cria-t-il avec désespoir.

La porte se referma. Il ne vit plus rien, et n’entendit plus que la voix rauque du guichetier, qui lui chantait aux oreilles la chanson:

Maître Jean Balue
A perdu la vue
De ses évêchés;
Monsieur de Verdun
N’en a plus pas un,
Tous sont dépêchés.

Le roi remontait en silence à son retrait, et son cortège le suivait, terrifié des derniers gémissements du condamné. Tout à coup, Sa Majesté se tourna vers le gouverneur de la Bastille.

«À propos, dit-elle, n’y avait-il pas quelqu’un dans cette cage?

«Pardieu, Sire! répondit le gouverneur stupéfait de la question.

— Et qui donc?

— Monsieur l’évêque de Verdun.»

Le roi savait cela mieux que personne. Mais c’était une manie.

«Ah! dit-il avec l’air naïf d’y songer pour la première fois, Guillaume de Harancourt, l’ami de monsieur le cardinal La Balue. Un bon diable d’évêque!»

Au bout de quelques instants, la porte du retrait s’était rouverte, puis reclose sur les cinq personnages que le lecteur y a vus au commencement de ce chapitre, et qui y avaient repris leurs places, leurs causeries à demi-voix, et leurs attitudes.

Pendant l’absence du roi, on avait déposé sur sa table quelques dépêches, dont il rompit lui-même le cachet. Puis il se mit à les lire promptement l’une après l’autre, fit signe à *maître Olivier*, qui paraissait avoir près de lui office de ministre, de prendre une plume, et, sans lui faire part au contenu des dépêches, commença à lui en dicter à voix basse les réponses, que celui-ci écrivait, assez incommodément agenouillé devant la table.

Guillaume Rym observait.

Le roi parlait si bas, que les Flamands n’entendaient rien de sa dictée, si ce n’est çà et là quelques lambeaux isolés et peu intelligibles comme: «...Maintenir les lieux fertiles par le commerce, les stériles par les manufactures... — Faire voir aux seigneurs anglais nos quatre bombardes, la Londres, la Brabant, la Bourg-en-Bresse, la Saint-Omer... — L’artillerie est cause que la guerre se fait maintenant plus judicieusement... — À M. de Bressuire, notre ami... — Les armées ne s’entretiennent sans les tributs...» — Etc.

Une fois il haussa la voix: «Pasque-Dieu! monsieur le roi de Sicile scelle ses lettres sur cire jaune, comme un roi de France. Nous avons peut-être tort de le lui permettre. Mon beau cousin de Bourgogne ne donnait pas d’armoiries à champ de gueules. La grandeur des maisons s’assure en l’intégrité des prérogatives. Note ceci, compère Olivier.»

Une autre fois: «Oh! oh! dit-il, le gros message! Que nous réclame notre frère l’empereur?» Et parcourant des yeux la missive en coupant sa lecture d’interjections: «Certes! les Allemagnes sont si grandes et puissantes qu’il est à peine croyable. — Mais nous n’oublions pas le vieux proverbe: La plus belle comté est Flandre; la plus belle duché, Milan; le plus beau royaume, France. — N’est-ce pas, messieurs les Flamands?»

Cette fois, Coppenole s’inclina avec Guillaume Rym. Le patriotisme du chaussetier était chatouillé.

Une dernière dépêche fit froncer le sourcil à Louis XI. «Qu’est cela? s’écria-t-il. Des plaintes et quérimonies contre nos garnisons de Picardie! Olivier, écrivez en diligence à monsieur le maréchal de Rouault. — Que les disciplines se relâchent. — Que les gendarmes des ordonnances, les nobles de ban, les francs-archers, les suisses, font des maux infinis aux manants. — Que l'homme de guerre, ne se contentant pas des biens qu'il trouve en la maison des laboureurs, les contraint, à grands coups de bâton ou de voulge, à aller quérir du vin à la ville, du poisson, des épiceries, et autres choses excessives. — Que monsieur le roi sait cela. — Que nous entendons garder notre peuple des inconvénients, larcins et pilleries. — Que c'est notre volonté, par Notre-Dame! — Qu'en outre, il ne nous agrée pas qu'aucun ménétrier, barbier, ou valet de guerre, soit vêtu comme prince, de velours, de drap de soie et d'anneaux d'or. — Que ces vanités sont haineuses à Dieu. — Que nous nous contentons, nous qui sommes gentilhomme, d'un pourpoint de drap à seize sols l'aune de Paris. — Que messieurs les goujats peuvent bien se rabaisser jusque-là, eux aussi. — Mandez et ordonnez. — À monsieur de Rouault, notre ami. — Bien.»

Il dicta cette lettre à haute voix, d'un ton ferme et par saccades. Au moment où il achevait, la porte s'ouvrit et donna passage à un nouveau personnage, qui se précipita tout effaré dans la chambre en criant: «Sire! Sire! il y a une sédition de populaire dans Paris!»

La grave figure de Louis XI se contracta; mais ce qu'il y eut de visible dans son émotion passa comme un éclair. Il se contint, et dit avec une sévérité tranquille:

«Compère Jacques, vous entrez bien brusquement!

— Sire! Sire! il y a une révolte!» reprit le compère Jacques essoufflé.

Le roi, qui s'était levé, lui prit rudement le bras et lui dit à l'oreille, de façon à être entendu de lui seul, avec une colère concentrée et un regard oblique sur les flamands:

«Tais-toi, ou parle bas!»

Le nouveau venu comprit, et se mit à lui faire tout bas une narration très effarouchée que le roi écoutait avec calme, tandis que Guillaume Rym faisait remarquer à Coppenole le visage et l'habit du nouveau venu, sa capuce fourrée, *caputia fourrata,* son épitoge courte, *epitogia curta,* sa robe de velours noir, qui annonçait un président de la Cour des comptes.

À peine ce personnage eut-il donné au roi quelques explications, que Louis XI s'écria en éclatant de rire:

«En vérité! parlez tout haut, compère Coictier! Qu'avez-vous à parler bas ainsi? Notre-Dame sait que nous n'avons rien de caché pour nos bons amis flamands.

— Mais, Sire...

— Parlez tout haut!»

Le «compère Coictier» demeurait muet de surprise.

«Donc, reprit le roi, — parlez, monsieur, — il y a une émotion de manants dans notre bonne ville de Paris?

— Oui, Sire.

— Et qui se dirige, dites-vous, contre monsieur le bailli du Palais de Justice?

— Il y a apparence», répondit *le compère*, qui balbutiait, encore tout étourdi du brusque et inexplicable changement qui venait de s’opérer dans les pensées du roi.

Louis XI reprit: «Où le guet a-t-il rencontré la cohue?

— Cheminant de la Grande-Truanderie vers le Pont-aux-Changeurs. Je l’ai rencontrée moi-même comme je venais ici pour obéir aux ordres de Votre Majesté. J’en ai entendu quelques-uns qui criaient: À bas le bailli du Palais!

— Et quels griefs ont-ils contre le bailli?

— Ah! dit le compère Jacques, qu’il est leur seigneur.

— Vraiment!

— Oui, Sire. Ce sont des marauds de la Cour des Miracles. Voilà longtemps déjà qu’ils se plaignent du bailli, dont ils sont vassaux. Ils ne veulent le reconnaître ni comme justicier ni comme voyer.

— Oui-da! repartit le roi avec un sourire de satisfaction qu’il s’efforçait en vain de déguiser.

— Dans toutes leurs requêtes au parlement, reprit le compère Jacques, ils prétendent n’avoir que deux maîtres, Votre Majesté et leur Dieu, qui est, je crois, le diable.

— Hé! hé!» dit le roi.

Il se frottait les mains, il riait de ce rire intérieur qui fait rayonner le visage. Il ne pouvait dissimuler sa joie, quoiqu’il essayât par instants de se composer. Personne n’y comprenait rien, pas même «maître Olivier». Il resta un moment silencieux, avec un air pensif, mais content.

«Sont-ils en force? demanda-t-il tout à coup.

— Oui certes, Sire, répondit le compère Jacques.

— Combien?

— Au moins six mille.»

Le roi ne put s’empêcher de dire: «Bon!» Il reprit:

«Sont-ils armés?

— Des faulx, des piques, des hacquebutes, des pioches. Toutes sortes d’armes fort violentes.»

Le roi ne parut nullement inquiet de cet étalage. Le compère Jacques crut devoir ajouter:

«Si Votre Majesté n’envoie pas promptement au secours du bailli, il est perdu.

— Nous enverrons, dit le roi avec un faux air sérieux. C’est bon. Certainement nous enverrons. Monsieur le bailli est notre ami. Six mille! Ce sont de déterminés drôles. La hardiesse est merveilleuse, et nous en sommes fort courroucé. Mais nous avons peu de monde cette nuit autour de nous. — Il sera temps demain matin.»

Le compère Jacques se récria. «Tout de suite, Sire! Le bailliage aura vingt fois le temps d’être saccagé, la seigneurie violée et le bailli pendu. Pour Dieu, Sire! envoyez avant demain matin.»

Le roi le regarda en face. «Je vous ai dit demain matin.»

C’était un de ces regards auxquels on ne réplique pas.

Après un silence, Louis XI éleva de nouveau la voix. «Mon compère Jacques, vous devez savoir cela? Quelle était...» Il se reprit: «Quelle est la juridiction féodale du bailli?

— Sire, le bailli du Palais a la rue de la Calandre jusqu’à la rue de l’Herberie, la place Saint-Michel et les lieux vulgairement nommés les Mureaux assis près de l’église Notre-Dame-des-Champs (ici Louis XI souleva le bord de son chapeau), lesquels hôtels sont au nombre de treize, plus la Cour des Miracles, plus la Maladerie appelée la Banlieue, plus toute la chaussée qui commence à cette Maladerie et finit à la porte Saint-Jacques. De ces divers endroits il est voyer, haut, moyen et bas justicier, plein seigneur.

— Ouais! dit le roi en se grattant l’oreille gauche avec la main droite, cela fait un bon bout de ma ville! Ah! monsieur le bailli *était* roi de tout cela!»

Cette fois il ne se reprit point. Il continua, rêveur et comme se parlant à lui-même:

«Tout beau, monsieur le bailli! vous aviez là entre les dents un gentil morceau de notre Paris.»

Tout à coup il fit explosion: «Pasque-Dieu! qu’est-ce que c’est que ces gens qui se prétendent voyers, justiciers, seigneurs et maîtres chez nous? qui ont leur péage à tout bout de champ, leur justice et leur bourreau à tout carrefour parmi notre peuple? de façon que, comme le Grec se croyait autant de dieux qu'il avait de fontaines, et le Persan autant qu'il voyait d'étoiles, le Français se compte autant de rois qu'il voit de gibets! Pardieu! cette chose est mauvaise, et la confusion m'en déplaît. Je voudrais bien savoir si c'est la grâce de Dieu qu'il y ait à Paris un autre voyer que le roi, une autre justice que notre parlement, un autre empereur que nous dans cet empire! Par la foi de mon âme! il faudra bien que le jour vienne où il n'y aura en France qu'un roi, qu'un seigneur, qu'un juge, qu'un coupe-tête, comme il n'y a au paradis qu'un Dieu!»

Il souleva encore son bonnet, et continua, rêvant toujours, avec l'air et l'accent d'un chasseur qui agace et lance sa meute: «Bon! mon peuple! bravement! brise ces faux seigneurs! fais ta besogne. Sus! sus! pille-les, pends-les, saccage-les!... Ah! vous voulez être rois, messeigneurs? Va! peuple! va!»

Ici il s'interrompit brusquement, se mordit la lèvre, comme pour rattraper sa pensée à demi échappée, appuya tour à tour son œil perçant sur chacun des cinq personnages qui l'entouraient, et tout à coup saisissant son chapeau à deux mains et le regardant en face, il lui dit: «Oh! je te brûlerais si tu savais ce qu'il y a dans ma tête!»

Puis, promenant de nouveau autour de lui le regard attentif et inquiet du renard qui rentre sournoisement à son terrier:

«Il n'importe! nous secourrons monsieur le bailli. Par malheur nous n'avons que peu de troupe ici en ce moment contre tant de populaire. Il faut attendre jusqu'à demain. On remettra l'ordre en la Cité, et l'on pendra vertement tout ce qui sera pris.

— À propos, Sire! dit le compère Coictier, j'ai oublié cela dans le premier trouble, le guet a saisi deux traînards de la bande. Si Votre Majesté veut voir ces hommes, ils sont là.

— Si je veux les voir! cria le roi. Comment! Pasque-Dieu! tu oublies chose pareille! — Cours vite, toi, Olivier! va les chercher.»

Maître Olivier sortit et rentra un moment après avec les deux prisonniers, environnés d'archers de l'ordonnance. Le premier avait une grosse face idiote, ivre et étonnée. Il était vêtu de guenilles et marchait en pliant le genou et en traînant le pied. Le second était une figure blême et souriante que le lecteur connaît déjà.

Le roi les examina un instant sans mot dire, puis s'adressant brusquement au premier:

«Comment t'appelles-tu?

— Gieffroy Pincebourde.

— Ton métier?

— Truand.

— Qu'allais-tu faire dans cette damnable sédition?»

Le truand regarda le roi, en balançant ses bras d'un air hébété. C'était une de ces têtes mal conformées où l'intelligence est à peu près aussi à l'aise que la lumière sous l'éteignoir.

«Je ne sais pas, dit-il. On allait, j'allais.

— N'alliez-vous pas attaquer outrageusement et piller votre seigneur le bailli du Palais?

— Je sais qu'on allait prendre quelque chose chez quelqu'un. Voilà tout.»

Un soldat montra au roi une serpe qu'on avait saisie sur le truand.

«Reconnais-tu cette arme? demanda le roi.

— Oui, c'est ma serpe. Je suis vigneron.

— Et reconnais-tu cet homme pour ton compagnon? ajouta Louis XI, en désignant l'autre prisonnier.

— Non. Je ne le connais point.

— Il suffit», dit le roi. Et faisant un signe du doigt au personnage silencieux, immobile près de la porte, que nous avons déjà fait remarquer au lecteur:

«Compère Tristan, voilà un homme pour vous.»

Tristan l'Hermite s'inclina. Il donna un ordre à voix basse à deux archers qui emmenèrent le pauvre truand.

Cependant le roi s'était approché du second prisonnier, qui suait à grosses gouttes. «Ton nom?

— Sire, Pierre Gringoire.

— Ton métier?

— Philosophe, Sire.

— Comment te permets-tu, drôle, d'aller investir notre ami monsieur le bailli du Palais, et qu'as-tu à dire de cette émotion populaire?

— Sire, je n'en étais pas.

— Or çà! paillard, n'as-tu pas été appréhendé par le guet dans cette mauvaise compagnie?

— Non, Sire, il y a méprise. C'est une fatalité. Je fais des tragédies. Sire, je supplie Votre Majesté de m'entendre. Je suis poète. C'est la mélancolie des gens de ma profession d'aller la nuit par les rues. Je passais par là ce soir. C'est grand hasard. On m'a arrêté à tort. Je suis innocent de cette tempête civile. Votre Majesté voit que le truand ne m'a pas reconnu. Je conjure Votre Majesté...

— Tais-toi! dit le roi entre deux gorgées de tisane. Tu nous romps la tête.»

Tristan l'Hermite s'avança et désignant Gringoire du doigt:

«Sire, peut-on pendre aussi celui-là?»

C'était la première parole qu'il proférait.

«Peuh! répondit négligemment le roi. Je n'y vois pas d'inconvénients.

— J'en vois beaucoup, moi!» dit Gringoire.

Notre philosophe était en ce moment plus vert qu'une olive. Il vit à la mine froide et indifférente du roi qu'il n'y avait plus de ressource que dans quelque chose de très pathétique, et se précipita aux pieds de Louis XI en s'écriant avec une gesticulation désespérée:

«Sire! Votre Majesté daignera m'entendre! Sire! n'éclatez pas en tonnerre sur si peu de chose que moi. La grande foudre de Dieu ne bombarde pas une laitue. Sire, vous êtes un auguste monarque très puissant, ayez pitié d'un pauvre homme honnête, et qui serait plus empêché d'attiser une révolte qu'un glaçon de donner une étincelle! Très gracieux Sire, la débonnaireté est vertu de lion et de roi. Hélas! la rigueur ne fait qu'effaroucher les esprits, les bouffées impétueuses de la bise ne sauraient faire quitter le manteau au passant, le soleil donnant de ses rayons peu à peu l'échauffe de telle sorte qu'il le fera mettre en chemise. Sire, vous êtes le soleil. Je vous le proteste, mon souverain maître et seigneur, je ne suis pas un compagnon truand, voleur et désordonné. La révolte et les briganderies ne sont pas de l'équipage d'Apollo. Ce n'est pas moi qui m'irai précipiter dans ces nuées qui éclatent en des bruits de séditions. Je suis un fidèle vassal de Votre Majesté. La même jalousie qu'a le mari pour l'honneur de sa femme, le ressentiment qu'a le fils pour l'amour de son père, un bon vassal les doit avoir pour la gloire de son roi, il doit sécher pour le zèle de sa maison, pour l'accroissement de son service. Toute autre passion qui le transporterait ne serait que fureur. Voilà, Sire, mes maximes d'état. Donc, ne me jugez pas séditieux et pillard à mon habit usé aux coudes. Si vous me faites grâce, Sire, je l'userai aux genoux à prier Dieu soir et matin pour vous! Hélas! je ne suis pas extrêmement riche, c'est vrai. Je suis même un peu pauvre. Mais non vicieux pour cela. Ce n'est pas ma faute. Chacun sait que les grandes richesses ne se tirent pas des belles-lettres, et que les plus consommés aux bons livres n'ont pas toujours gros feu l'hiver. La seule avocasserie prend tout le grain et ne laisse que la paille aux autres professions scientifiques. Il y a quarante très excellents proverbes sur le manteau troué des philosophes. Oh! Sire! la clémence est la seule lumière qui puisse éclairer l'intérieur d'une grande âme. La clémence porte le flambeau devant toutes les autres vertus. Sans elle, ce sont des aveugles qui cherchent Dieu à tâtons. La miséricorde, qui est la même chose que la clémence, fait l'amour des sujets qui est le plus puissant corps de garde à la personne du prince. Qu'est-ce que cela vous fait, à vous Majesté dont les faces sont éblouies, qu'il y ait un pauvre homme de plus sur la terre? un pauvre innocent philosophe, barbotant dans les ténèbres de la calamité, avec son gousset vide qui résonne sur son ventre creux? D'ailleurs, Sire, je suis un lettré. Les grands rois se font une perle à leur couronne de protéger les lettres. Hercules ne dédaignait pas le titre de Musagetes. Mathias Corvin favorisait Jean de Monroyal, l'ornement des mathématiques. Or, c'est une mauvaise manière de protéger les lettres que de pendre les lettrés. Quelle tache à Alexandre s'il avait fait pendre Aristoteles! Ce trait ne serait pas un petit moucheron sur le visage de sa réputation pour l'embellir, mais bien un malin ulcère pour le défigurer. Sire! j'ai fait un très expédient épithalame pour madamoiselle de Flandre et monseigneur le très auguste dauphin. Cela n'est pas d'un boute-feu de rébellion. Votre Majesté voit que je ne suis pas un grimaud, que j'ai étudié excellemment, et que j'ai beaucoup d'éloquence naturelle. Faites-moi grâce, Sire. Cela faisant, vous ferez une action galante à Notre-Dame, et je vous jure que je suis très effrayé de l'idée d'être pendu!»

En parlant ainsi, le désolé Gringoire baisait les pantoufles du roi, et Guillaume Rym disait tout bas à Coppenole: «Il fait bien de se traîner à terre. Les rois sont comme le Jupiter de Crète, ils n'ont des oreilles qu'aux pieds.» Et, sans s'occuper du Jupiter de Crète, le chaussetier répondait avec un lourd sourire, l'œil fixé sur Gringoire: «Oh! que c'est bien cela! je crois entendre le chancelier Hugonet me demander grâce.»

Quand Gringoire s'arrêta enfin tout essoufflé, il leva la tête en tremblant vers le roi qui grattait avec son ongle une tache que ses chausses avaient au genou. Puis Sa Majesté se mit à boire au hanap de tisane. Du reste, elle ne soufflait mot, et ce silence torturait Gringoire. Le roi le regarda enfin.

«Voilà un terrible braillard!» dit-il. Puis se tournant vers Tristan l’Hermite: «Bah! lâchez-le!»

Gringoire tomba sur le derrière, tout épouvanté de joie.

«En liberté! grogna Tristan. Votre Majesté ne veut-elle pas qu’on le retienne un peu en cage?

— Compère, repartit Louis XI, crois-tu que ce soit pour de pareils oiseaux que nous faisons faire des cages de trois cent soixante-sept livres huit sols trois deniers? — Lâchez-moi incontinent le paillard (Louis XI affectionnait ce mot, qui faisait avec Pasque-Dieu le fond de sa jovialité), et mettez-le hors avec une bourrade!

— Ouf! s’écria Gringoire, que voilà un grand roi!»

Et de peur d’un contre-ordre, il se précipita vers la porte que Tristan lui rouvrit d’assez mauvaise grâce. Les soldats sortirent avec lui en le poussant devant eux à grands coups de poing, ce que Gringoire supporta en vrai philosophe stoïcien.

La bonne humeur du roi, depuis que la révolte contre le bailli lui avait été annoncée, perçait dans tout. Cette clémence inusitée n’en était pas un médiocre signe. Tristan l’Hermite dans son coin avait la mine renfrognée d’un dogue qui a vu et qui n’a pas eu.

Le roi cependant battait gaiement avec les doigts sur le bras de sa chaise la marche de Pont-Audemer. C’était un prince dissimulé, mais qui savait beaucoup mieux cacher ses peines que ses joies. Ces manifestations extérieures de joie à toute bonne nouvelle allaient quelquefois très loin; ainsi, à la mort de Charles le Téméraire, jusqu’à vouer des balustrades d’argent à Saint-Martin de Tours; à son avènement au trône jusqu’à oublier d’ordonner les obsèques de son père.

«Hé! Sire! s’écria tout à coup Jacques Coictier, qu’est devenue la pointe aiguë de maladie pour laquelle Votre Majesté m’avait fait mander?

— Oh! dit le roi, vraiment je souffre beaucoup, mon compère. J’ai l’oreille sibilante, et des râteaux de feu qui me raclent la poitrine.»

Coictier prit la main du roi, et se mit à lui tâter le pouls avec une mine capable.

«Regardez, Coppenole, disait Rym à voix basse. Le voilà entre Coictier et Tristan. C’est là toute sa cour. Un médecin pour lui, un bourreau pour les autres.»

En tâtant le pouls du roi, Coictier prenait un air de plus en plus alarmé. Louis XI le regardait avec quelque anxiété. Coictier se rembrunissait à vue d’œil. Le brave homme n’avait d’autre métairie que la mauvaise santé du roi. Il l’exploitait de son mieux.

«Oh! oh! murmura-t-il enfin, ceci est grave, en effet.

— N’est-ce pas? dit le roi inquiet.

— *Pulsus creber, anhelans, crepitans, irregularis,* continua le médecin.

— Pasque-Dieu!

— Avant trois jours, ceci peut emporter son homme.

— Notre-Dame! s’écria le roi. Et le remède, compère?

— J’y songe, Sire.»

Il fit tirer la langue à Louis XI, hocha la tête, fit la grimace, et tout au milieu de ces simagrées:

«Pardieu, dit-il tout à coup, il faut que je vous conte qu’il y a une recette des régales vacante, et que j’ai un neveu.

— Je donne ma recette à ton neveu, compère Jacques, répondit le roi; mais tire-moi ce feu de la poitrine.

— Puisque Votre Majesté est si clémente, reprit le médecin, elle ne refusera pas de m’aider un peu en la bâtisse de ma maison rue Saint-André-des-Arcs.

— Heuh! dit le roi.

— Je suis au bout de ma finance, poursuivit le docteur, et il serait vraiment dommage que la maison n’eût pas de toit. Non pour la maison, qui est simple et toute bourgeoise, mais pour les peintures de Jehan Fourbault, qui en égaient le lambris. Il y a une Diane en l’air qui vole, mais si excellente, si tendre, si délicate, d’une action si ingénue, la tête si bien coiffée et couronnée d’un croissant, la chair si blanche qu’elle donne de la tentation à ceux qui la regardent trop curieusement. Il y a aussi une Cérès. C’est encore une très belle divinité. Elle est assise sur des gerbes de blé, et coiffée d’une guirlande galante d’épis entrelacés de salsifis et autres fleurs. Il ne se peut rien voir de plus amoureux que ses yeux, de plus rond que ses jambes, de plus noble que son air, de mieux drapé que sa jupe. C’est une des beautés les plus innocentes et les plus parfaites qu’ait produites le pinceau.

— Bourreau! grommela Louis XI, où en veux-tu venir?

— Il me faut un toit sur ces peintures, Sire, et, quoique ce soit peu de chose, je n’ai plus d’argent.

— Combien est-ce, ton toit?

— Mais... un toit de cuivre historié et doré, deux mille livres au plus.

— Ah! l’assassin! cria le roi. Il ne m’arrache pas une dent qui ne soit un diamant.

— Ai-je mon toit? dit Coictier.

— Oui! et va au diable, mais guéris-moi.»

Jacques Coictier s’inclina profondément et dit:

«Sire, c’est un répercussif qui vous sauvera. Nous vous appliquerons sur les reins le grand défensif, composé avec le cérat, le bol d’Arménie, le blanc d’œuf, l’huile et le vinaigre. Vous continuerez votre tisane, et nous répondons de Votre Majesté.»

Une chandelle qui brille n’attire pas qu’un moucheron. Maître Olivier, voyant le roi en libéralité et croyant le moment bon, s’approcha à son tour: «Sire...

— Qu’est-ce encore? dit Louis XI.

— Sire, Votre Majesté sait que maître Simon Radin est mort?

— Eh bien?

— C’est qu’il était conseiller du roi sur le fait de la justice du trésor.

— Eh bien?

— Sire, sa place est vacante.»

En parlant ainsi, la figure hautaine de maître Olivier avait quitté l’expression arrogante pour l’expression basse. C’est le seul rechange qu’ait une figure de courtisan. Le roi le regarda très en face, et dit d’un ton sec: «Je comprends.»

Il reprit:

«Maître Olivier, le maréchal de Boucicaut disait: «Il n’est don que de roi, il n’est peschier que en la mer.» Je vois que vous êtes de l’avis de monsieur de Boucicaut. Maintenant oyez ceci. Nous avons bonne mémoire. En 68, nous vous avons fait varlet de notre chambre; en 69, garde du châtel du pont de Saint-Cloud à cent livres tournois de gages (vous les vouliez parisis). En novembre 73, par lettres données à Gergeole, nous vous avons institué concierge du bois de Vincennes, au lieu de Gilbert Acle, écuyer; en 75, gruyer de la forêt de Rouvray-lez-Saint-Cloud, en place de Jacques Le Maire; en 78, nous vous avons gracieusement assis, par lettres patentes scellées sur double queue de cire verte, une rente de dix livres parisis, pour vous et votre femme, sur la place aux marchands, sise à l’école Saint-Germain; en 79, nous vous avons fait gruyer de la forêt de Senart, au lieu de ce pauvre Jehan Daiz; puis capitaine du château de Loches; puis gouverneur de Saint-Quentin; puis capitaine du pont de Meulan, dont vous vous faites appeler comte. Sur les cinq sols d'amende que paie tout barbier qui rase un jour de fête, il y a trois sols pour vous, et nous avons votre reste. Nous avons bien voulu changer votre nom de *Le Mauvais*, qui ressemblait trop à votre mine. En 74, nous vous avons octroyé, au grand déplaisir de notre noblesse, des armoiries de mille couleurs qui vous font une poitrine de paon. Pasque-Dieu! n'êtes-vous pas saoul? La pescherie n'est-elle point assez belle et miraculeuse? Et ne craignez-vous pas qu'un saumon de plus ne fasse chavirer votre bateau? L'orgueil vous perdra, mon compère. L'orgueil est toujours talonné de la ruine et de la honte. Considérez ceci, et taisez-vous.»

Ces paroles, prononcées avec sévérité, firent revenir à l'insolence la physionomie dépitée de maître Olivier.

«Bon, murmura-t-il presque tout haut, on voit bien que le roi est malade aujourd'hui. Il donne tout au médecin.»

Louis XI, loin de s'irriter de cette incartade, reprit avec quelque douceur: «Tenez, j'oubliais encore que je vous ai fait mon ambassadeur à Gand près de madame Marie. Oui, messieurs, ajouta le roi en se tournant vers les Flamands, celui-ci a été ambassadeur. — Là, mon compère, poursuivit-il en s'adressant à maître Olivier, ne nous fâchons pas, nous sommes vieux amis. Voilà qu'il est très tard. Nous avons terminé notre travail. Rasez-moi.»

Nos lecteurs n'ont sans doute pas attendu jusqu'à présent pour reconnaître dans *maître Olivier* ce Figaro terrible que la providence, cette grande faiseuse de drames, a mêlé si artistement à la longue et sanglante comédie de Louis XI. Ce n'est pas ici que nous entreprendrons de développer cette figure singulière. Ce barbier du roi avait trois noms. À la cour, on l'appelait poliment Olivier le Daim; parmi le peuple, Olivier le Diable. Il s'appelait de son vrai nom Olivier le Mauvais.

Olivier le Mauvais donc resta immobile, boudant le roi, en regardant Jacques Coictier de travers.

«Oui, oui! le médecin! disait-il entre ses dents.

— Eh! oui, le médecin, reprit Louis XI avec une bonhomie singulière, le médecin a plus de crédit encore que toi. C'est tout simple. Il a prise sur nous par tout le corps, et tu ne nous tiens que par le menton. Va, mon pauvre barbier, cela se retrouvera. Que dirais-tu donc, et que deviendrait ta charge si j'étais un roi comme le roi Chilpéric qui avait pour geste de tenir sa barbe d'une main? — Allons, mon compère, vaque à ton office, rase-moi. Va chercher ce qu'il te faut.»

Olivier, voyant que le roi avait pris le parti de rire et qu'il n'y avait pas même moyen de le fâcher, sortit en grondant pour exécuter ses ordres.

Le roi se leva, s'approcha de la fenêtre, et tout à coup l'ouvrant avec une agitation extraordinaire: «Oh! oui! s'écria-t-il en battant des mains, voilà une rougeur dans le ciel sur la Cité. C'est le bailli qui brûle. Ce ne peut être que cela. Ah! mon bon peuple! voilà donc que tu m'aides enfin à l'écroulement des seigneuries!»

Alors, se tournant vers les Flamands: «Messieurs, venez voir ceci. N'est-ce pas un feu qui rougeoie?»

Les deux Gantois s'approchèrent.

«Un grand feu, dit Guillaume Rym.

— Oh! ajouta Coppenole, dont les yeux étincelèrent tout à coup, cela me rappelle le brûlement de la maison du seigneur d'Hymbercourt. Il doit y avoir une grosse révolte là-bas.

— Vous croyez, maître Coppenole?» Et le regard de Louis XI était presque aussi joyeux que celui du chaussetier. «N'est-ce pas qu'il sera difficile d'y résister?

— Croix-Dieu! Sire! Votre Majesté ébréchera là-dessus bien des compagnies de gens de guerre!

— Ah! moi! c'est différent, repartit le roi. Si je voulais!...»

Le chaussetier répondit hardiment:

«Si cette révolte est ce que je suppose, vous auriez beau vouloir, Sire!

— Compère, dit Louis XI, avec deux compagnies de mon ordonnance et une volée de serpentine, on a bon marché d'une populace de manants.»

Le chaussetier, malgré les signes que lui faisait Guillaume Rym, paraissait déterminé à tenir tête au roi.

«Sire, les suisses aussi étaient des manants. Monsieur le duc de Bourgogne était un grand gentilhomme, et il faisait fi de cette canaille. À la bataille de Grandson, Sire, il criait: Gens de canons! feu sur ces vilains! et il jurait par Saint-Georges. Mais l'avoyer Scharnachtal se rua sur le beau duc avec sa massue et son peuple, et de la rencontre des paysans à peaux de buffle la luisante armée bourguignonne s'éclata comme une vitre au choc d'un caillou. Il y eut là bien des chevaliers de tués par des marauds; et l'on trouva monsieur de Château-Guyon, le plus grand seigneur de la Bourgogne, mort avec son grand cheval grison dans un petit pré de marais.

— L'ami, repartit le roi, vous parlez d'une bataille. Il s'agit d'une mutinerie. Et j'en viendrai à bout quand il me plaira de froncer le sourcil.»

L’autre répliqua avec indifférence:

«Cela se peut, Sire. En ce cas, c’est que l’heure du peuple n’est pas venue.»

Guillaume Rym crut devoir intervenir.

«Maître Coppenole, vous parlez à un puissant roi.

— Je le sais, répondit gravement le chaussetier.

— Laissez-le dire, monsieur Rym mon ami, dit le roi, j’aime ce franc-parler. Mon père Charles septième disait que la vérité était malade. Je croyais, moi, qu’elle était morte, et qu’elle n’avait point trouvé de confesseur. Maître Coppenole me détrompe.»

Alors, posant familièrement sa main sur l’épaule de Coppenole:

«Vous disiez donc, maître Jacques?...

— Je dis, Sire, que vous avez peut-être raison, que l’heure du peuple n’est pas venue chez vous.»

Louis XI le regarda avec son œil pénétrant.

«Et quand viendra cette heure, maître?

— Vous l’entendrez sonner.

— À quelle horloge, s’il vous plaît?»

Coppenole avec sa contenance tranquille et rustique fit approcher le roi de la fenêtre.

«Écoutez, Sire! Il y a ici un donjon, un beffroi, des canons, des bourgeois, des soldats. Quand le beffroi bourdonnera, quand les canons gronderont, quand le donjon croulera à grand bruit, quand bourgeois et soldats hurleront et s’entre-tueront, c’est l’heure qui sonnera.»

Le visage de Louis devint sombre et rêveur. Il resta un moment silencieux, puis il frappa doucement de la main, comme on flatte une croupe de destrier, l’épaisse muraille du donjon. «Oh! que non! dit-il. N’est-ce pas que tu ne crouleras pas si aisément, ma bonne Bastille?»

Et se tournant d’un geste brusque vers le hardi flamand:

«Avez-vous jamais vu une révolte, maître Jacques?

— J’en ai fait, dit le chaussetier.

— Comment faites-vous, dit le roi, pour faire une révolte?

— Ah! répondit Coppenole, ce n’est pas bien difficile. Il y a cent façons. D’abord il faut qu’on soit mécontent dans la ville. La chose n’est pas rare. Et puis le caractère des habitants. Ceux de Gand sont commodes à la révolte. Ils aiment toujours le fils du prince, le prince jamais. Eh bien! un matin, je suppose, on entre dans ma boutique, on me dit: Père Coppenole, il y a ceci, il y a cela, la demoiselle de Flandre veut sauver ses ministres, le grand bailli double le tru de l’esgrin, ou autre chose. Ce qu’on veut. Moi, je laisse là l’ouvrage, je sors de ma chausseterie, et je vais dans la rue, et je crie: À sac! Il y a bien toujours là quelque futaille défoncée. Je monte dessus, et je dis tout haut les premières paroles venues, ce que j’ai sur le cœur; et quand on est du peuple, Sire, on a toujours quelque chose sur le cœur. Alors on s’attroupe, on crie, on sonne le tocsin, on arme les manants du désarmement des soldats, les gens du marché s’y joignent, et l’on va! Et ce sera toujours ainsi, tant qu’il y aura des seigneurs dans les seigneuries, des bourgeois dans les bourgs, et des paysans dans les pays.

— Et contre qui vous rebellez-vous ainsi? demanda le roi. Contre vos baillis? contre vos seigneurs?

— Quelquefois. C’est selon. Contre le duc aussi, quelquefois.»

Louis XI alla se rasseoir, et dit avec un sourire:

«Ah! ici, ils n’en sont encore qu’aux baillis!»

En cet instant Olivier le Daim rentra. Il était suivi de deux pages qui portaient les toilettes du roi; mais ce qui frappa Louis XI, c’est qu’il était en outre accompagné du prévôt de Paris et du chevalier du guet, lesquels paraissaient consternés. Le rancuneux barbier avait aussi l’air consterné, mais content en dessous. C’est lui qui prit la parole:

«Sire, je demande pardon à Votre Majesté de la calamiteuse nouvelle que je lui apporte.»

Le roi en se tournant vivement écorcha la natte du plancher avec les pieds de sa chaise:

«Qu’est-ce à dire?

— Sire, reprit Olivier le Daim avec la mine méchante d’un homme qui se réjouit d’avoir à porter un coup violent, ce n’est pas sur le bailli du palais que se rue cette sédition populaire.

— Et sur qui donc?

— Sur vous, Sire.»

Le vieux roi se dressa debout et droit comme un jeune homme: «Explique-toi, Olivier! explique-toi! Et tiens bien ta tête, mon compère, car je te jure par la croix de Saint-Lô que si tu nous mens à cette heure, l’épée qui a coupé le cou de monsieur de Luxembourg n’est pas si ébréchée qu’elle ne scie encore le tien!»

Le serment était formidable. Louis XI n’avait juré que deux fois dans sa vie par la croix de Saint-Lô.

Olivier ouvrit la bouche pour répondre: «Sire...

— Mets-toi à genoux! interrompit violemment le toi. Tristan, veillez sur cet homme!»

Olivier se mit à genoux, et dit froidement: «Sire, une sorcière a été condamnée à mort par votre cour de parlement. Elle s'est réfugiée dans Notre-Dame. Le peuple l'y veut reprendre de vive force. Monsieur le prévôt et monsieur le chevalier du guet, qui viennent de l'émeute, sont là pour me démentir si ce n'est pas la vérité. C'est Notre-Dame que le peuple assiège.

— Oui-da! dit le roi à voix basse, tout pâle et tout tremblant de colère. Notre-Dame! ils assiègent dans sa cathédrale Notre-Dame, ma bonne maîtresse! — Relève-toi, Olivier. Tu as raison. Je te donne la charge de Simon Radin. Tu as raison. — C'est à moi qu'on s'attaque. La sorcière est sous la sauvegarde de l'église, l'église est sous ma sauvegarde. Et moi qui croyais qu'il s'agissait du bailli! C'est contre moi!»

Alors, rajeuni par la fureur, il se mit à marcher à grands pas. Il ne riait plus, il était terrible, il allait et venait, le renard s'était changé en hyène, il semblait suffoqué à ne pouvoir parler, ses lèvres remuaient, et ses poings décharnés se crispaient. Tout à coup il releva la tête, son œil cave parut plein de lumière, et sa voix éclata comme un clairon. «Main basse, Tristan! main basse sur ces coquins! Va! Tristan mon ami! tue! tue!»

Cette éruption passée, il vint se rasseoir, et dit avec une rage froide et concentrée:

«Ici, Tristan! — Il y a près de nous dans cette Bastille les cinquante lances du vicomte de Gif, ce qui fait trois cents chevaux, vous les prendrez. Il y a aussi la compagnie des archers de notre ordonnance de monsieur de Châteaupers, vous la prendrez. Vous êtes prévôt des maréchaux, vous avez les gens de votre prévôté, vous les prendrez. À l'Hôtel Saint-Pol, vous trouverez quarante archers de la nouvelle garde de monsieur le Dauphin, vous les prendrez; et avec tout cela, vous allez courir à Notre-Dame. — Ah! messieurs les manants de Paris, vous vous jetez ainsi tout au travers de la couronne de France, de la sainteté de Notre-Dame et de la paix de cette république! — Extermine, Tristan! extermine! et que pas un n'en réchappe que pour Montfaucon.»

Tristan s'inclina. «C'est bon, Sire!»

Il ajouta après un silence: «Et que ferai-je de la sorcière?»

Cette question fit songer le roi.

«Ah! dit-il, la sorcière! — Monsieur d'Estouteville, qu'est-ce que le peuple en voulait faire?

— Sire, répondit le prévôt de Paris, j'imagine que, puisque le peuple la vient arracher de son asile de Notre-Dame, c'est que cette impunité le blesse et qu'il la veut pendre.»

Le roi parut réfléchir profondément, puis s'adressant à Tristan l'Hermite: «Eh bien! mon compère, extermine le peuple et pends la sorcière.

— C'est cela, dit tout bas Rym à Coppenole, punir le peuple de vouloir, et faire ce qu'il veut.

— Il suffit, Sire, répondit Tristan. Si la sorcière est encore dans Notre-Dame, faudra-t-il l'y prendre malgré l'asile?

— Pasque-Dieu, l'asile! dit le roi en se grattant l'oreille. Il faut pourtant que cette femme soit pendue.»

Ici, comme pris d'une idée subite, il se rua à genoux devant sa chaise, ôta son chapeau, le posa sur le siège, et regardant dévotement l'une des amulettes de plomb qui le chargeaient: «Oh! dit-il les mains jointes, Notre-Dame de Paris, ma gracieuse patronne, pardonnez-moi. Je ne le ferai que cette fois. Il faut punir cette criminelle. Je vous assure, madame la Vierge, ma bonne maîtresse, que c'est une sorcière qui n'est pas digne de votre aimable protection. Vous savez, madame, que bien des princes très pieux ont outrepassé le privilège des églises pour la gloire de Dieu et la nécessité de l'État. Saint Hugues, évêque d'Angleterre, a permis au roi Édouard de prendre un magicien dans son église. Saint Louis de France, mon maître, a transgressé pour le même objet l'église de monsieur saint Paul; et monsieur Alphonse, fils du roi de Jérusalem, l'église même du Saint-Sépulcre. Pardonnez-moi donc pour cette fois, Notre-Dame de Paris. Je ne le ferai plus, et je vous donnerai une belle statue d'argent, pareille à celle que j'ai donnée l'an passé à Notre-Dame d'Écouys. Ainsi soit-il.»

Il fit un signe de croix, se releva, se recoiffa, et dit à Tristan: «Faites diligence, mon compère. Prenez monsieur de Châteaupers avec vous. Vous ferez sonner le tocsin. Vous écraserez le populaire. Vous pendrez la sorcière. C'est dit. Et j'entends que le pourchas de l'exécution soit fait par vous. Vous m'en rendrez compte. — Allons, Olivier, je ne me coucherai pas cette nuit. Rase-moi.»

Tristan l'Hermite s'inclina et sortit. Alors le roi, congédiant du geste Rym et Coppenole: «Dieu vous garde, messieurs mes bons amis les

Flamands. Allez prendre un peu de repos. La nuit s’avance, et nous sommes plus près du matin que du soir.»

Tous deux se retirèrent, et en gagnant leurs appartements sous la conduite du capitaine de la Bastille, Coppenole disait à Guillaume Rym: «Hum! j’en ai assez de ce roi qui tousse! J’ai vu Charles de Bourgogne ivre, il était moins méchant que Louis XI malade.

— Maître Jacques, répondit Rym, c’est que les rois ont le vin moins cruel que la tisane.»

VI

PETITE FLAMBE EN BAGUENAUD

En sortant de la Bastille, Gringoire descendit la rue Saint-Antoine de la vitesse d'un cheval échappé. Arrivé à la porte Baudoyer, il marcha droit à la croix de pierre qui se dressait au milieu de cette place, comme s'il eût pu distinguer dans l'obscurité la figure d'un homme vêtu et encapuchonné de noir qui était assis sur les marches de la croix.

«Est-ce vous, maître?» dit Gringoire.

Le personnage noir se leva.

«Mort et passion! vous me faites bouillir, Gringoire. L'homme qui est sur la tour de Saint-Gervais vient de crier une heure et demie du matin.

— Oh! repartit Gringoire, ce n'est pas ma faute, mais celle du guet et du roi. Je viens de l'échapper belle! Je manque toujours d'être pendu. C'est ma prédestination.

— Tu manques tout, dit l'autre. Mais allons vite. As-tu le mot de passe?

— Figurez-vous, maître, que j'ai vu le roi. J'en viens. Il a une culotte de futaine. C'est une aventure.

— Oh! quenouille de paroles! que me fait ton aventure? As-tu le mot de passe des truands?

— Je l'ai. Soyez tranquille. *Petite flambe en baguenaud*.

— Bien. Autrement nous ne pourrions pénétrer jusqu'à l'église. Les truands barrent les rues. Heureusement il paraît qu'ils ont trouvé de la résistance. Nous arriverons peut-être encore à temps.

— Oui, maître. Mais comment entrerons-nous dans Notre-Dame?

— J'ai la clef des tours.

— Et comment en sortirons-nous?

— Il y a derrière le cloître une petite porte qui donne sur le Terrain, et de là sur l'eau. J'en ai pris la clef, et j'y ai amarré un bateau ce matin.

— J'ai joliment manqué d'être pendu! reprit Gringoire.

— Eh vite! allons!» dit l'autre.

Tous deux descendirent à grands pas vers la Cité.

VII

CHATEAUPERS À LA RESCOUSSE!

Le lecteur se souvient peut-être de la situation critique où nous avons laissé Quasimodo. Le brave sourd, assailli de toutes parts, avait perdu, sinon tout courage, du moins tout espoir de sauver, non pas lui, il ne songeait pas à lui, mais l'égyptienne. Il courait éperdu sur la galerie. Notre-Dame allait être enlevée par les truands. Tout à coup un grand galop de chevaux emplit les rues voisines, et avec une longue file de torches et une épaisse colonne de cavaliers abattant lances et brides, ces bruits furieux débouchèrent sur la place comme un ouragan: France! France! Taillez les manants! Châteaupers à la rescousse! Prévôté! prévôté!

Les truands effarés firent volte-face.

Quasimodo, qui n'entendait pas, vit les épées nues, les flambeaux, les fers de piques, toute cette cavalerie, en tête de laquelle il reconnut le capitaine Phoebus, il vit la confusion des truands, l'épouvante chez les uns, le trouble chez les meilleurs, et il reprit de ce secours inespéré tant de force qu'il rejeta hors de l'église les premiers assaillants qui enjambaient déjà la galerie.

C'étaient en effet les troupes du roi qui survenaient.

Les truands firent bravement. Ils se défendirent en désespérés. Pris en flanc par la rue Saint-Pierre-aux-Bœufs et en queue par la rue du Parvis, acculés à Notre-Dame qu'ils assaillaient encore et que défendait Quasimodo, tout à la fois assiégeants et assiégés, ils étaient dans la situation singulière où se retrouva depuis, au fameux siège de Turin, en 1640, entre le prince Thomas de Savoie qu'il assiégeait et le marquis de Leganez qui le bloquait, le comte Henri d'Harcourt, *Taurinum obsessor idem et obsessus*, comme dit son épitaphe.

La mêlée fut affreuse. À chair de loup dent de chien, comme dit P. Mathieu. Les cavaliers du roi, au milieu desquels Phoebus de Châteaupers se comportait vaillamment, ne faisaient aucun quartier, et la taille reprenait ce qui échappait à l'estoc. Les truands, mal armés, écumaient et mordaient. Hommes, femmes, enfants se jetaient aux croupes et aux poitrails des chevaux, et s'y accrochaient comme des chats avec les dents et les ongles des quatre membres. D'autres tamponnaient à coups de torches le visage des archers. D’autres piquaient des crocs de fer au cou des cavaliers et tiraient à eux. Ils déchiquetaient ceux qui tombaient.

On en remarqua un qui avait une large faulx luisante, et qui faucha longtemps les jambes des chevaux. Il était effrayant. Il chantait une chanson nasillarde, il lançait sans relâche et ramenait sa faulx. À chaque coup, il traçait autour de lui un grand cercle de membres coupés. Il avançait ainsi au plus fourré de la cavalerie, avec la lenteur tranquille, le balancement de tête et l’essoufflement régulier d’un moissonneur qui entame un champ de blé. C’était Clopin Trouillefou. Une arquebusade l’abattit.

Cependant les croisées s’étaient rouvertes. Les voisins, entendant les cris de guerre des gens du roi, s’étaient mêlés à l’affaire, et de tous les étages les balles pleuvaient sur les truands. Le Parvis était plein d’une fumée épaisse que la mousqueterie rayait de feu. On y distinguait confusément la façade de Notre-Dame, et l’Hôtel-Dieu décrépit, avec quelques hâves malades qui regardaient du haut de son toit écaillé de lucarnes.

Enfin les truands cédèrent. La lassitude, le défaut de bonnes armes, l’effroi de cette surprise, la mousqueterie des fenêtres, le brave choc des gens du roi, tout les abattit. Ils forcèrent la ligne des assaillants, et se mirent à fuir dans toutes les directions, laissant dans le Parvis un encombrement de morts.

Quand Quasimodo, qui n’avait pas cessé un moment de combattre, vit cette déroute, il tomba à deux genoux, et leva les mains au ciel; puis, ivre de joie, il courut, il monta avec la vitesse d’un oiseau à cette cellule dont il avait si intrépidement défendu les approches. Il n’avait plus qu’une pensée maintenant, c’était de s’agenouiller devant celle qu’il venait de sauver une seconde fois.

Lorsqu’il entra dans la cellule, il la trouva vide.

LIVRE ONZIÈME

I

LE PETIT SOULIER

Au moment où les truands avaient assailli l'église, la Esmeralda dormait. Bientôt la rumeur toujours croissante autour de l'édifice et le bêlement inquiet de sa chèvre éveillée avant elle l'avaient tirée de ce sommeil. Elle s'était levée sur son séant, elle avait écouté, elle avait regardé, puis, effrayée de la lueur et du bruit, elle s'était jetée hors de la cellule et avait été voir. L'aspect de la place, la vision qui s'y agitait, le désordre de cet assaut nocturne, cette foule hideuse, sautelante comme une nuée de grenouilles, à demi entrevue dans les ténèbres, le coassement de cette rauque multitude, ces quelques torches rouges courant et se croisant sur cette ombre comme les feux de nuit qui rayent la surface brumeuse des marais, toute cette scène lui fit l'effet d'une mystérieuse bataille engagée entre les fantômes du sabbat et les monstres de pierre de l'église. Imbue dès l'enfance des superstitions de la tribu bohémienne, sa première pensée fut qu'elle avait surpris en maléfice les étranges êtres propres à la nuit. Alors elle courut épouvantée se tapir dans sa cellule, demandant à son grabat un moins horrible cauchemar.

Peu à peu les premières fumées de la peur s'étaient pourtant dissipées; au bruit sans cesse grandissant, et à plusieurs autres signes de réalité, elle s'était sentie investie, non de spectres, mais d'êtres humains. Alors sa frayeur, sans s'accroître, s'était transformée. Elle avait songé à la possibilité d'une mutinerie populaire pour l'arracher de son asile. L'idée de reperdre encore une fois la vie, Phoebus, qu'elle entrevoyait toujours dans son avenir, le profond néant de sa faiblesse, toute fuite fermée, aucun appui, son abandon, son isolement, ces pensées et mille autres l'avaient accablée. Elle était tombée à genoux, la tête sur son lit, les mains jointes sur sa tête, pleine d'anxiété et de frémissement, et quoique égyptienne, idolâtre et païenne, elle s'était mise à demander avec sanglots grâce au bon Dieu chrétien et à prier Notre-Dame son hôtesse. Car, ne crût-on à rien, il y a des moments dans la vie où l'on est toujours de la religion du temple qu'on a sous la main.

Elle resta ainsi prosternée fort longtemps, tremblant, à la vérité, plus qu'elle ne priait, glacée au souffle de plus en plus rapproché de cette multitude furieuse, ne comprenant rien à ce déchaînement, ignorant ce qui se tramait, ce qu’on faisait, ce qu’on voulait, mais pressentant une issue terrible.

Voilà qu’au milieu de cette angoisse elle entend marcher près d’elle. Elle se détourne. Deux hommes, dont l’un portait, une lanterne, venaient d’entrer dans sa cellule. Elle poussa un faible cri.

«Ne craignez rien, dit une voix qui ne lui était pas inconnue, c’est moi.

— Qui? vous? demanda-t-elle.

— Pierre Gringoire.»

Ce nom la rassura. Elle releva les yeux, et reconnut en effet le poète. Mais il y avait auprès de lui une figure noire et voilée de la tête aux pieds qui la frappa de silence.

«Ah! reprit Gringoire d’un ton de reproche, Djali m’avait reconnu avant vous!»

La petite chèvre en effet n’avait pas attendu que Gringoire se nommât. À peine était-il entré qu’elle s’était tendrement frottée à ses genoux, couvrant le poète de caresses et de poils blancs, car elle était en mue. Gringoire lui rendait les caresses.

«Qui est là avec vous? dit l’égyptienne à voix basse.

— Soyez tranquille, répondit Gringoire. C’est un de mes amis.»

Alors le philosophe, posant sa lanterne à terre, s’accroupit sur la dalle et s’écria avec enthousiasme en serrant Djali dans ses bras: «Oh! c’est une gracieuse bête, sans doute plus considérable pour sa propreté que pour sa grandeur, mais ingénieuse, subtile et lettrée comme un grammairien! Voyons, ma Djali, n’as-tu rien oublié de tes jolis tours? Comment fait maître Jacques Charmolue?...»

L’homme noir ne le laissa pas achever. Il s’approcha de Gringoire et le poussa rudement par l’épaule. Gringoire se leva.

«C’est vrai, dit-il, j’oubliais que nous sommes pressés. — Ce n’est pourtant point une raison, mon maître, pour forcener les gens de la sorte. — Ma chère belle enfant, votre vie est en danger, et celle de Djali. On veut vous reprendre. Nous sommes vos amis, et nous venons vous sauver. Suivez-nous.

— Est-il vrai? s’écria-t-elle bouleversée.

— Oui, très vrai. Venez vite!

— Je le veux bien, balbutia-t-elle. Mais pourquoi votre ami ne parle-t-il pas?

— Ah! dit Gringoire, c’est que son père et sa mère étaient des gens fantasques qui l’ont fait de tempérament taciturne.»

Il fallut qu’elle se contentât de cette explication. Gringoire la prit par la main, son compagnon ramassa la lanterne et marcha devant. La peur étourdissait la jeune fille. Elle se laissa emmener. La chèvre les suivait en sautant, si joyeuse de revoir Gringoire qu’elle le faisait trébucher à tout moment pour lui fourrer ses cornes dans les jambes.

«Voilà la vie, disait le philosophe chaque fois qu’il manquait de tomber, ce sont souvent nos meilleurs amis qui nous font choir!»

Ils descendirent rapidement l’escalier des tours, traversèrent l’église, pleine de ténèbres et de solitude et toute résonnante de vacarme, ce qui faisait un affreux contraste, et sortirent dans la cour du cloître par la Porte-Rouge. Le cloître était abandonné, les chanoines s’étaient enfuis dans l’évêché pour y prier en commun; la cour était vide, quelques laquais effarouchés s’y blottissaient dans les coins obscurs. Ils se dirigèrent vers la petite porte qui donnait de cette cour sur le Terrain. L’homme noir l’ouvrit avec une clef qu’il avait. Nos lecteurs savent que le Terrain était une langue de terre enclose de murs du côté de la Cité, et appartenant au chapitre de Notre-Dame, qui terminait l’île à l’orient derrière l’église. Ils trouvèrent cet enclos parfaitement désert. Là, il y avait déjà moins de tumulte dans l’air. La rumeur de l’assaut des truands leur arrivait plus brouillée et moins criarde. Le vent frais qui suit le fil de l’eau remuait les feuilles de l’arbre unique planté à la pointe du Terrain avec un bruit déjà appréciable. Cependant ils étaient encore fort près du péril. Les édifices les plus rapprochés d’eux étaient l’évêché et l’église. Il y avait visiblement un grand désordre intérieur dans l’évêché. Sa masse ténébreuse était toute sillonnée de lumières qui y couraient d’une fenêtre à l’autre; comme, lorsqu’on vient de brûler du papier, il reste un sombre édifice de cendre où de vives étincelles font mille courses bizarres. À côté, les énormes tours de Notre-Dame, ainsi vues de derrière avec la longue nef sur laquelle elles se dressent, découpées en noir sur la rouge et vaste lueur qui emplissait le Parvis, ressemblaient aux deux chenets gigantesques d’un feu de cyclopes.

Ce qu’on voyait de Paris de tous côtés oscillait à l’œil dans une ombre mêlée de lumière. Rembrandt a de ces fonds de tableau.

L’homme à la lanterne marcha droit à la pointe du Terrain. Il y avait là, au bord extrême de l’eau, le débris vermoulu d’une haie de pieux maillée de lattes où une basse vigne accrochait quelques maigres branches étendues comme les doigts d’une main ouverte. Derrière, dans l’ombre que faisait ce treillis, une petite barque était cachée. L’homme fit signe à Gringoire et à sa compagne d’y entrer. La chèvre les y suivit. L’homme y descendit le dernier. Puis il coupa l’amarre du bateau, l’éloigna de terre avec un long croc, et, saisissant deux rames, s’assit à l’avant, en ramant de toutes ses forces vers le large. La Seine est fort rapide en cet endroit, et il eut assez de peine à quitter la pointe de l’île.

Le premier soin de Gringoire en entrant dans le bateau fut de mettre la chèvre sur ses genoux. Il prit place à l’arrière, et la jeune fille, à qui l’inconnu inspirait une inquiétude indéfinissable, vint s’asseoir et se serrer contre le poète.

Quand notre philosophe sentit le bateau s’ébranler, il battit des mains, et baisa Djali entre les cornes. «Oh! dit-il, nous voilà sauvés tous quatre.»

Il ajouta, avec une mine de profond penseur: «On est obligé, quelquefois à la fortune, quelquefois à la ruse, de l’heureuse issue des grandes entreprises.»

Le bateau voguait lentement vers la rive droite. La jeune fille observait avec une terreur secrète l’inconnu. Il avait rebouché soigneusement la lumière de sa lanterne sourde. On l’entrevoyait dans l’obscurité, à l’avant du bateau, comme un spectre. Sa carapoue, toujours baissée, lui faisait une sorte de masque, et à chaque fois qu’il entrouvrait en ramant ses bras où pendaient de larges manches noires, on eût dit deux grandes ailes de chauve-souris. Du reste, il n’avait pas encore dit une parole, jeté un souffle. Il ne se faisait dans le bateau d’autre bruit que le va-et-vient de la rame, mêlé au froissement des mille plis de l’eau le long de la barque.

«Sur mon âme! s’écria tout à coup Gringoire, nous sommes allègres et joyeux comme des ascalaphes! Nous observons un silence de pythagoriciens ou de poissons! Pasque-Dieu! mes amis, je voudrais bien que quelqu’un me parlât. — La voix humaine est une musique à l’oreille humaine. Ce n’est pas moi qui dis cela, mais Didyme d’Alexandrie, et ce sont d’illustres paroles. — Certes, Didyme d’Alexandrie n’est pas un médiocre philosophe. Une parole, ma belle enfant! dites-moi, je vous supplie, une parole. — À propos, vous aviez une drôle de petite singulière moue; la faites-vous toujours? Savez-vous, ma mie, que le parlement a toute juridiction sur les lieux d’asile, et que vous couriez grand péril dans votre logette de Notre-Dame? Hélas! le petit oiseau trochilus fait son nid dans la gueule du crocodile. — Maître, voici la lune qui reparaît. — Pourvu qu’on ne nous aperçoive pas! — Nous faisons une chose louable en sauvant madamoiselle, et cependant on nous pendrait de par le roi si l'on nous attrapait. Hélas! les actions humaines se prennent par deux anses. On flétrit en moi ce qu'on couronne en toi. Tel admire César qui blâme Catilina. N'est-ce pas, mon maître? Que dites-vous de cette philosophie? Moi, je possède la philosophie d'instinct, de nature, *ut apes geometriam*. — Allons! personne ne me répond. Les fâcheuses humeurs que vous avez là tous deux! Il faut que je parle tout seul. C'est ce que nous appelons en tragédie un monologue. — Pasque-Dieu! — Je vous préviens que je viens de voir le roi Louis onzième et que j'en ai retenu ce jurement. — Pasque-Dieu donc! ils font toujours un fier hurlement dans la Cité. — C'est un vilain méchant vieux roi. Il est tout embrunché dans les fourrures. Il me doit toujours l'argent de mon épithalame, et c'est tout au plus s'il ne m'a pas fait pendre ce soir, ce qui m'aurait fort empêché. — Il est avaricieux pour les hommes de mérite. Il devrait bien lire les quatre livres de Salvien de Cologne *Adversus avaritiam*. En vérité! c'est un roi étroit dans ses façons avec les gens de lettres, et qui fait des cruautés fort barbares. C'est une éponge à prendre l'argent posée sur le peuple. Son épargne est la ratelle qui s'enfle de la maigreur de tous les autres membres. Aussi les plaintes contre la rigueur du temps deviennent murmures contre le prince. Sous ce doux sire dévot, les fourches craquent de pendus, les billots pourrissent de sang, les prisons crèvent comme des ventres trop pleins. Ce roi a une main qui prend et une main qui pend. C'est le procureur de dame Gabelle et de monseigneur Gibet. Les grands sont dépouillés de leurs dignités et les petits sans cesse accablés de nouvelles foules. C'est un prince exorbitant. Je n'aime pas ce monarque. Et vous, mon maître?»

L'homme noir laissait gloser le bavard poète. Il continuait de lutter contre le courant violent et serré qui sépare la poupe de la Cité de la proue de l'île Notre-Dame, que nous nommons aujourd'hui l'île Saint-Louis.

«À propos, maître! reprit Gringoire subitement. Au moment où nous arrivions sur le Parvis à travers ces enragés truands, votre révérence a-t-elle remarqué ce pauvre petit diable auquel votre sourd était en train d'écraser la cervelle sur la rampe de la galerie des rois? J'ai la vue basse et ne l'ai pu reconnaître. Savez-vous qui ce peut être?»

L'inconnu ne répondit pas une parole. Mais il cessa brusquement de ramer, ses bras défaillirent comme brisés, sa tête tomba sur sa poitrine, et la

Esmeralda l’entendit soupirer convulsivement. Elle tressaillit de son côté. Elle avait déjà entendu de ces soupirs-là.

La barque abandonnée à elle-même dériva quelques instants au gré de l’eau. Mais l’homme noir se redressa enfin, ressaisit les rames, et se remit à remonter le courant. Il doubla la pointe de l’île Notre-Dame, et se dirigea vers le débarcadère du Port-au-Foin.

«Ah! dit Gringoire, voici là-bas le logis Barbeau. Tenez, maître, regardez, ce groupe de toits noirs qui font des angles singuliers, là, au-dessous de ce tas de nuages bas, filandreux, barbouillés et sales, où la lune est tout écrasée et répandue comme un jaune d’œuf dont la coquille est cassée. — C’est un beau logis. Il y a une chapelle couronnée d’une petite voûte pleine d’enrichissements bien coupés. Au-dessus vous pouvez voir le clocher très délicatement percé. Il y a aussi un jardin plaisant, qui consiste en un étang, une volière, un écho, un mail, un labyrinthe, une maison pour les bêtes farouches, et quantité d’allées touffues fort agréables à Vénus. Il y a encore un coquin d’arbre qu’on appelle *le luxurieux*, pour avoir servi aux plaisirs d’une princesse fameuse et d’un connétable de France galant et bel esprit. — Hélas! nous autres pauvres philosophes nous sommes à un connétable ce qu’un carré de choux et de radis est au jardin du Louvre. Qu’importe après tout? La vie humaine pour les grands comme pour nous est mêlée de bien et de mal. La douleur est toujours à côté de la joie, le spondée auprès du dactyle. — Mon maître, il faut que je vous conte cette histoire du logis Barbeau. Cela finit d’une façon tragique. C’était en 1319, sous le règne de Philippe V, le plus long des rois de France. La moralité de l’histoire est que les tentations de la chair sont pernicieuses et malignes. N’appuyons pas trop le regard sur la femme du voisin, si chatouilleux que nos sens soient à sa beauté. La fornication est une pensée fort libertine. L’adultère est une curiosité de la volupté d’autrui... — Ohé! voilà que le bruit redouble là-bas!»

Le tumulte en effet croissait autour de Notre-Dame. Ils écoutèrent. On entendait assez clairement des cris de victoire. Tout à coup, cent flambeaux qui faisaient étinceler des casques d’hommes d’armes se répandirent sur l’église à toutes les hauteurs, sur les tours, sur les galeries, sous les arcs-boutants. Ces flambeaux semblaient chercher quelque chose; et bientôt ces clameurs éloignées arrivèrent distinctement jusqu’aux fugitifs: «L’égyptienne! la sorcière! à mort l’égyptienne!»

La malheureuse laissa tomber sa tête sur ses mains, et l’inconnu se mit à ramer avec furie vers le bord. Cependant notre philosophe réfléchissait. Il pressait la chèvre dans ses bras, et s’éloignait tout doucement de la bohémienne, qui se serrait de plus en plus contre lui, comme au seul asile qui lui restât.

Il est certain que Gringoire était dans une cruelle perplexité. Il songeait que la chèvre aussi, *d’après la législation existante*, serait pendue si elle était reprise, que ce serait grand dommage, la pauvre Djali! qu’il avait trop de deux condamnées ainsi accrochées après lui, qu’enfin son compagnon ne demandait pas mieux que de se charger de l’égyptienne. Il se livrait entre ses pensées un violent combat, dans lequel, comme le Jupiter de L’Iliade, il pesait tour à tour l’égyptienne et la chèvre; et il les regardait l’une après l’autre, avec des yeux humides de larmes, en disant entre ses dents: «Je ne puis pas pourtant vous sauver toutes deux.»

Une secousse les avertit enfin que le bateau abordait. Le brouhaha sinistre remplissait toujours la Cité. L’inconnu se leva, vint à l’égyptienne, et voulut lui prendre le bras pour l’aider à descendre. Elle le repoussa, et se pendit à la manche de Gringoire, qui, de son côté, occupé de la chèvre, la repoussa presque. Alors elle sauta seule à bas du bateau. Elle était si troublée qu’elle ne savait ce qu’elle faisait, où elle allait. Elle demeura ainsi un moment stupéfaite, regardant couler l’eau. Quand elle revint un peu à elle, elle était seule sur le port avec l’inconnu. Il paraît que Gringoire avait profité de l’instant du débarquement pour s’esquiver avec la chèvre dans le pâté de maisons de la rue Grenier-sur-l’eau.

La pauvre égyptienne frissonna de se voir seule avec cet homme. Elle voulut parler, crier, appeler Gringoire, sa langue était inerte dans sa bouche, et aucun son ne sortit de ses lèvres. Tout à coup elle sentit la main de l’inconnu sur la sienne. C’était une main froide et forte. Ses dents claquèrent, elle devint plus pâle que le rayon de lune qui l’éclairait. L’homme ne dit pas une parole. Il se mit à remonter à grands pas vers la place de Grève, en la tenant par la main. En cet instant, elle sentit vaguement que la destinée est une force irrésistible. Elle n’avait plus de ressort, elle se laissa entraîner, courant tandis qu’il marchait. Le quai en cet endroit allait en montant. Il lui semblait cependant qu’elle descendait une pente.

Elle regarda de tous côtés. Pas un passant. Le quai était absolument désert. Elle n’entendait de bruit, elle ne sentait remuer des hommes que dans la Cité tumultueuse et rougeoyante, dont elle n'était séparée que par un bras de Seine, et d'où son nom lui arrivait mêlé à des cris de mort. Le reste de Paris était répandu autour d'elle par grands blocs d'ombre.

Cependant l'inconnu l'entraînait toujours avec le même silence et la même rapidité. Elle ne retrouvait dans sa mémoire aucun des lieux où elle marchait. En passant devant une fenêtre éclairée, elle fit un effort, se raidit brusquement, et cria: «Au secours!»

Le bourgeois à qui était la fenêtre l'ouvrit, y parut en chemise avec sa lampe, regarda sur le quai avec un air hébété, prononça quelques paroles qu'elle n'entendit pas, et referma son volet. C'était la dernière lueur d'espoir qui s'éteignait.

L'homme noir ne proféra pas une syllabe, il la tenait bien, et se remit à marcher plus vite. Elle ne résista plus, et le suivit, brisée.

De temps en temps elle recueillait un peu de force, et disait d'une voix entrecoupée par les cahots du pavé et l'essoufflement de la course: «Qui êtes-vous? qui êtes-vous?» Il ne répondait point.

Ils arrivèrent ainsi, toujours le long du quai, à une place assez grande. Il y avait un peu de lune. C'était la Grève. On distinguait au milieu une espèce de croix noire debout. C'était le gibet. Elle reconnut tout cela, et vit où elle était.

L'homme s'arrêta, se tourna vers elle, et leva sa carapoue.

«Oh! bégaya-t-elle pétrifiée, je savais bien que c'était encore lui!»

C'était le prêtre. Il avait l'air de son fantôme. C'est un effet du clair de lune. Il semble qu'à cette lumière on ne voie que les spectres des choses.

«Écoute», lui dit-il, et elle frémit au son de cette voix funeste qu'elle n'avait pas entendue depuis longtemps. Il continua. Il articulait avec ces saccades brèves et haletantes qui révèlent par leurs secousses de profonds tremblements intérieurs. «Écoute. Nous sommes ici. Je vais te parler. Ceci est la Grève. C'est ici un point extrême. La destinée nous livre l'un à l'autre. Je vais décider de ta vie; toi, de mon âme. Voici une place et une nuit au delà desquelles on ne voit rien. Écoute-moi donc. Je vais te dire... D'abord ne me parle pas de ton Phoebus. (En disant cela, il allait et venait, comme un homme qui ne peut rester en place, et la tirait après lui.) Ne m'en parle pas. Vois-tu? si tu prononces ce nom, je ne sais pas ce que je ferai, mais ce sera terrible.»

Cela dit, comme un corps qui retrouve son centre de gravité, il redevint immobile. Mais ses paroles ne décelaient pas moins d'agitation. Sa voix était de plus en plus basse.

«Ne détourne point la tête ainsi. Écoute-moi. C’est une affaire sérieuse. D’abord, voici ce qui s’est passé. — On ne rira pas de tout ceci, je te jure. — Qu’est-ce donc que je disais? rappelle-le-moi! ah! — Il y a un arrêt du parlement qui te rend à l’échafaud. Je viens de te tirer de leurs mains. Mais les voilà qui te poursuivent. Regarde.»

Il étendit le bras vers la Cité. Les perquisitions en effet paraissaient y continuer. Les rumeurs se rapprochaient. La tour de la maison du Lieutenant, située vis-à-vis la Grève, était pleine de bruit et de clartés, et l’on voyait des soldats courir sur le quai opposé, avec des torches et ces cris: «L’égyptienne! où est l’égyptienne? Mort! mort!»

«Tu vois bien qu’ils te poursuivent, et que je ne te mens pas. Moi, je t’aime. — N’ouvre pas la bouche, ne me parle plutôt pas, si c’est pour me dire que tu me hais. Je suis décidé à ne plus entendre cela. — Je viens de te sauver. Laisse-moi d’abord achever. — Je puis te sauver tout à fait. J’ai tout préparé. C’est à toi de vouloir. Comme tu voudras, je pourrai.»

Il s’interrompit violemment. «Non, ce n’est pas cela qu’il faut dire.»

Et courant, et la faisant courir, car il ne la lâchait pas, il marcha droit au gibet, et le lui montrant du doigt:

«Choisis entre nous deux», dit-il froidement.

Elle s’arracha de ses mains et tomba au pied du gibet en embrassant cet appui funèbre. Puis elle tourna sa belle tête à demi, et regarda le prêtre par-dessus son épaule. On eût dit une sainte Vierge au pied de la croix. Le prêtre était demeuré sans mouvement, le doigt toujours levé vers le gibet, conservant son geste, comme une statue.

Enfin l’égyptienne lui dit: «Il me fait encore moins horreur que vous.»

Alors il laissa retomber lentement son bras, et regarda le pavé avec un profond accablement. «Si ces pierres pouvaient parler, murmura-t-il, oui, elles diraient que voilà un homme bien malheureux.»

Il reprit. La jeune fille agenouillée devant le gibet et noyée dans sa longue chevelure le laissait parler sans l’interrompre. Il avait maintenant un accent plaintif et doux qui contrastait douloureusement avec l’âpreté hautaine de ses traits.

«Moi, je vous aime. Oh! cela est pourtant bien vrai. Il ne sort donc rien au dehors de ce feu qui me brûle le cœur! Hélas! jeune fille, nuit et jour, oui, nuit et jour, cela ne mérite-t-il aucune pitié? C’est un amour de la nuit et du jour, vous dis-je, c’est une torture. — Oh! je souffre trop, ma pauvre enfant! — C’est une chose digne de compassion, je vous assure. Vous voyez que je vous parle doucement. Je voudrais bien que vous n’eussiez plus cette horreur de moi. — Enfin, un homme qui aime une femme, ce n’est pas sa faute! — Oh! mon Dieu! — Comment! vous ne me pardonnerez donc jamais? Vous me haïrez toujours! C’est donc fini! C’est là ce qui me rend mauvais, voyez-vous, et horrible à moi-même! — Vous ne me regardez seulement pas! Vous pensez à autre chose peut-être tandis que je vous parle debout et frémissant sur la limite de notre éternité à tous deux! — Surtout ne me parlez pas de l’officier! Quoi! je me jetterais à vos genoux, quoi! je baiserais, non vos pieds, vous ne voudriez pas, mais la terre qui est sous vos pieds, quoi! je sangloterais comme un enfant, j’arracherais de ma poitrine, non des paroles, mais mon cœur et mes entrailles, pour vous dire que je vous aime, tout serait inutile, tout! — Et cependant vous n’avez rien dans l’âme que de tendre et de clément, vous êtes rayonnante de la plus belle douceur, vous êtes tout entière suave, bonne, miséricordieuse et charmante. Hélas! vous n’avez de méchanceté que pour moi seul! Oh! quelle fatalité!»

Il cacha son visage dans ses mains. La jeune fille l’entendit pleurer. C’était la première fois. Ainsi debout et secoué par les sanglots, il était plus misérable et plus suppliant qu’à genoux. Il pleura ainsi un certain temps.

«Allons! poursuivit-il ces premières larmes passées, je ne trouve pas de paroles. J’avais pourtant bien songé à ce que je vous dirais. Maintenant je tremble et je frissonne, je défaille à l’instant décisif, je sens quelque chose de suprême qui nous enveloppe, et je balbutie. Oh! je vais tomber sur le pavé si vous ne prenez pas pitié de moi, pitié de vous. Ne nous condamnez pas tous deux. Si vous saviez combien je vous aime! quel cœur c’est que mon cœur! Oh! quelle désertion de toute vertu! quel abandon désespéré de moi-même! Docteur, je bafoue la science; gentilhomme, je déchire mon nom; prêtre, je fais du missel un oreiller de luxure, je crache au visage de mon Dieu! tout cela pour toi, enchanteresse! pour être plus digne de ton enfer! et tu ne veux pas du damné! Oh! que je te dise tout! plus encore, quelque chose de plus horrible, oh! plus horrible!...»

En prononçant ces dernières paroles, son air devint tout à fait égaré. Il se tut un instant, et reprit comme se parlant à lui-même, et d’une voix forte:

«Caïn, qu’as-tu fait de ton frère?»

Il y eut encore un silence, et il poursuivit:

«Ce que j’en ai fait, Seigneur? Je l’ai recueilli, je l’ai élevé, je l’ai nourri, je l’ai aimé, je l’ai idolâtré, et je l’ai tué! Oui, Seigneur, voici qu’on vient de lui écraser la tête devant moi sur la pierre de votre maison, et c'est à cause de moi, à cause de cette femme, à cause d'elle...»

Son œil était hagard. Sa voix allait s'éteignant, il répéta encore plusieurs fois, machinalement, avec d'assez longs intervalles, comme une cloche qui prolonge sa dernière vibration: «À cause d'elle... — À cause d'elle...»

Puis sa langue n'articula plus aucun son perceptible, ses lèvres remuaient toujours cependant. Tout à coup il s'affaissa sur lui-même comme quelque chose qui s'écroule, et demeura à terre sans mouvement, la tête dans les genoux.

Un frôlement de la jeune fille qui retirait son pied de dessous lui le fit revenir. Il passa lentement sa main sur ses joues creuses, et regarda quelques instants avec stupeur ses doigts qui étaient mouillés. «Quoi! murmura-t-il, j'ai pleuré!»

Et se tournant subitement vers l'égyptienne avec une angoisse inexprimable:

«Hélas! vous m'avez regardé froidement pleurer! Enfant! sais-tu que ces larmes sont des laves? Est-il donc bien vrai? de l'homme qu'on hait rien ne touche. Tu me verrais mourir, tu rirais. Oh! moi je ne veux pas te voir mourir! Un mot! un seul mot de pardon! Ne me dis pas que tu m'aimes, dis-moi seulement que tu veux bien, cela suffira, je te sauverai. Sinon... Oh! l'heure passe, je t'en supplie par tout ce qui est sacré, n'attends pas que je sois redevenu de pierre comme ce gibet qui te réclame aussi! Songe que je tiens nos deux destinées dans ma main, que je suis insensé, cela est terrible, que je puis laisser tout choir, et qu'il y a au-dessous de nous un abîme sans fond, malheureuse, où ma chute poursuivra la tienne durant l'éternité! Un mot de bonté! dis un mot! rien qu'un mot!»

Elle ouvrit la bouche pour lui répondre. Il se précipita à genoux devant elle pour recueillir avec adoration la parole, peut-être attendrie, qui allait sortir de ses lèvres. Elle lui dit: «Vous êtes un assassin!»

Le prêtre la prit dans ses bras avec fureur et se mit à rire d'un rire abominable.

«Eh bien, oui! assassin! dit-il, et je t'aurai. Tu ne veux pas de moi pour esclave, tu m'auras pour maître. Je t'aurai. J'ai un repaire où je te traînerai. Tu me suivras, il faudra bien que tu me suives, ou je te livre! Il faut mourir, la belle, ou être à moi! être au prêtre! être à l'apostat! être à l'assassin! dès cette nuit, entends-tu cela? Allons! de la joie! allons! baise-moi, folle! La tombe ou mon lit!»

Son œil pétillait d'impureté et de rage. Sa bouche lascive rougissait le cou de la jeune fille. Elle se débattait dans ses bras. Il la couvrait de baisers écumants.

«Ne me mords pas, monstre! cria-t-elle. Oh! l'odieux infect! laisse-moi! Je vais t'arracher tes vilains cheveux gris et te les jeter à poignées par la face!»

Il rougit, il pâlit, puis il la lâcha et la regarda d'un air sombre. Elle se crut victorieuse, et poursuivit: «Je te dis que je suis à mon Phoebus, que c'est Phoebus que j'aime, que c'est Phoebus qui est beau! Toi, prêtre, tu es vieux! tu es laid! Va-t'en!»

Il poussa un cri violent, comme le misérable auquel on applique un fer rouge. «Meurs donc!» dit-il à travers un grincement de dents. Elle vit son affreux regard, et voulut fuir. Il la reprit, il la secoua, il la jeta à terre, et marcha à pas rapides vers l'angle de la Tour-Roland en la traînant après lui sur le pavé par ses belles mains.

Arrivé là, il se tourna vers elle:

«Une dernière fois, veux-tu être à moi?»

Elle répondit avec force:

«Non.»

Alors il s'écria d'une voix haute:

«Gudule! Gudule! voici l'égyptienne! venge-toi!»

La jeune fille se sentit saisir brusquement au coude. Elle regarda. C'était un bras décharné qui sortait d'une lucarne dans le mur et qui la tenait comme une main de fer.

«Tiens bien! dit le prêtre. C'est l'égyptienne échappée. Ne la lâche pas. Je vais chercher les sergents. Tu la verras pendre.»

Un rire guttural répondit de l'intérieur du mur à ces sanglantes paroles. «Hah! hah! hah!» L'égyptienne vit le prêtre s'éloigner en courant dans la direction du pont Notre-Dame. On entendait une cavalcade de ce côté.

La jeune fille avait reconnu la méchante recluse. Haletante de terreur, elle essaya de se dégager. Elle se tordit, elle fit plusieurs soubresauts d'agonie et de désespoir, mais l'autre la tenait avec une force inouïe. Les doigts osseux et maigres qui la meurtrissaient se crispaient sur sa chair et se rejoignaient à l'entour. On eût dit que cette main était rivée à son bras. C'était plus qu'une chaîne, plus qu'un carcan, plus qu'un anneau de fer, c'était une tenaille intelligente et vivante qui sortait d'un mur.

Épuisée, elle retomba contre la muraille, et alors la crainte de la mort s’empara d’elle. Elle songea à la beauté de la vie, à la jeunesse, à la vue du ciel, aux aspects de la nature, à l’amour, à Phoebus, à tout ce qui s’enfuyait et à tout ce qui s’approchait, au prêtre qui la dénonçait, au bourreau qui allait venir, au gibet qui était là. Alors elle sentit l’épouvante lui monter jusque dans les racines des cheveux, et elle entendit le rire lugubre de la recluse qui lui disait tout bas: «Hah! hah! hah! tu vas être pendue!»

Elle se tourna mourante vers la lucarne, et elle vit la figure fauve de la sachette à travers les barreaux.

«Que vous ai-je fait?» dit-elle presque inanimée.

La recluse ne répondit pas, elle se mit à marmotter avec une intonation chantante, irritée et railleuse: «Fille d’Égypte! fille d’Égypte! fille d’Égypte!»

La malheureuse Esmeralda laissa retomber sa tête sous ses cheveux, comprenant qu’elle n’avait pas affaire à un être humain.

Tout à coup la recluse s’écria, comme si la question de l’égyptienne avait mis tout ce temps pour arriver jusqu’à sa pensée: «Ce que tu m’as fait? dis-tu! — Ah! ce que tu m’as fait, égyptienne! Eh bien! écoute. — J’avais un enfant, moi! vois-tu? j’avais un enfant! un enfant, te dis-je! — Une jolie petite fille! — Mon Agnès, reprit-elle égarée et baisant quelque chose dans les ténèbres. — Eh bien! vois-tu, fille d’Égypte? on m’a pris mon enfant, on m’a volé mon enfant, on m’a mangé mon enfant. Voilà ce que tu m’as fait.»

La jeune fille répondit comme l’agneau:

«Hélas! je n’étais peut-être pas née alors!

— Oh! si! repartit la recluse, tu devais être née. Tu en étais. Elle serait de ton âge! Ainsi! — Voilà quinze ans que je suis ici, quinze ans que je souffre, quinze ans que je prie, quinze ans que je me cogne la tête aux quatre murs. — Je te dis que ce sont des égyptiennes qui me l’ont volée, entends-tu cela? et qui l’ont mangée avec leurs dents. As-tu un cœur? figure-toi ce que c’est qu’un enfant qui joue, un enfant qui tette, un enfant qui dort. C’est si innocent! — Eh bien! cela, c’est cela qu’on m’a pris, qu’on m’a tué! Le bon Dieu le sait bien! — Aujourd’hui, c’est mon tour, je vais manger de l’égyptienne. — Oh! que je te mordrais bien si les barreaux ne m’empêchaient. J’ai la tête trop grosse! — La pauvre petite! pendant qu’elle dormait! Et si elles l’ont réveillée en la prenant, elle aura eu beau crier, je n’étais pas là! — Ah! les mères égyptiennes, vous avez mangé mon enfant! Venez voir la vôtre.»

Alors elle se mit à rire ou à grincer des dents, les deux choses se ressemblaient sur cette figure furieuse. Le jour commençait à poindre. Un reflet de cendre éclairait vaguement cette scène, et le gibet devenait de plus en plus distinct dans la place. De l'autre côté, vers le pont Notre-Dame, la pauvre condamnée croyait entendre se rapprocher le bruit de cavalerie.

«Madame! cria-t-elle joignant les mains et tombée sur ses deux genoux, échevelée, éperdue, folle d'effroi, madame! ayez pitié. Ils viennent. Je ne vous ai rien fait. Voulez-vous me voir mourir de cette horrible façon sous vos yeux? Vous avez de la pitié, j'en suis sûre. C'est trop affreux. Laissez-moi me sauver. Lâchez-moi! Grâce! Je ne veux pas mourir comme cela!

— Rends-moi mon enfant! dit la recluse.

— Grâce! grâce!

— Rends-moi mon enfant!

— Lâchez-moi, au nom du ciel!

— Rends-moi mon enfant!»

Cette fois encore, la jeune fille retomba, épuisée, rompue, ayant déjà le regard vitré de quelqu'un qui est dans la fosse.

«Hélas! bégaya-t-elle, vous cherchez votre enfant. Moi, je cherche mes parents.

— Rends-moi ma petite Agnès! poursuivit Gudule. Tu ne sais pas où elle est? Alors, meurs! — Je vais te dire. J'étais une fille de joie, j'avais un enfant, on m'a pris mon enfant. — Ce sont les égyptiennes. Tu vois bien qu'il faut que tu meures. Quand ta mère l'égyptienne viendra te réclamer, je lui dirai: La mère, regarde à ce gibet! — Ou bien rends-moi mon enfant. — Sais-tu où elle est, ma petite fille? Tiens, que je te montre. Voilà son soulier, tout ce qui m'en reste. Sais-tu où est le pareil? Si tu le sais, dis-le-moi, et si ce n'est qu'à l'autre bout de la terre, je l'irai chercher en marchant sur les genoux.»

En parlant ainsi, de son autre bras tendu hors de la lucarne elle montrait à l'égyptienne le petit soulier brodé. Il faisait déjà assez jour pour en distinguer la forme et les couleurs.

«Montrez-moi ce soulier, dit l'égyptienne en tressaillant. Dieu! Dieu!» Et en même temps, de la main qu'elle avait libre, elle ouvrait vivement le petit sachet orné de verroterie verte qu'elle portait au cou.

— Va! va! grommelait Gudule, fouille ton amulette du démon!» Tout à coup elle s'interrompit, trembla de tout son corps, et cria avec une voix qui venait du plus profond des entrailles: «Ma fille!»

L’égyptienne venait de tirer du sachet un petit soulier absolument pareil à l’autre. À ce petit soulier était attaché un parchemin sur lequel ce *carme* était écrit:

Quand le pareil retrouveras,
Ta mère te tendra les bras.

En moins de temps qu’il n’en faut à l’éclair, la recluse avait confronté les deux souliers, lu l’inscription du parchemin, et collé aux barreaux de la lucarne son visage rayonnant d’une joie céleste en criant:

«Ma fille! ma fille!

— Ma mère!» répondit l’égyptienne.

Ici nous renonçons à peindre.

Le mur et les barreaux de fer étaient entre elles deux. «Oh! le mur! cria la recluse! Oh! la voir et ne pas l’embrasser! Ta main! ta main!»

La jeune fille lui passa son bras à travers la lucarne, la recluse se jeta sur cette main, y attacha ses lèvres, et y demeura, abîmée dans ce baiser, ne donnant plus d’autre signe de vie qu’un sanglot qui soulevait ses hanches de temps en temps. Cependant elle pleurait à torrents, en silence, dans l’ombre, comme une pluie de nuit. La pauvre mère vidait par flots sur cette main adorée le noir et profond puits de larmes qui était au dedans d’elle, et où toute sa douleur avait filtré goutté à goutte depuis quinze années.

Tout à coup, elle se releva, écarta ses longs cheveux gris de dessus son front, et, sans dire une parole, se mit à ébranler de ses deux mains les barreaux de sa loge plus furieusement qu’une lionne. Les barreaux tinrent bon. Alors elle alla chercher dans un coin de sa cellule un gros pavé qui lui servait d’oreiller, et le lança contre eux avec tant de violence qu’un des barreaux se brisa en jetant mille étincelles. Un second coup effondra tout à fait la vieille croix de fer qui barricadait la lucarne. Alors avec ses deux mains elle acheva de rompre et d’écarter les tronçons rouillés des barreaux. Il y a des moments où les mains d’une femme ont une force surhumaine.

Le passage frayé, et il fallut moins d’une minute pour cela, elle saisit sa fille par le milieu du corps et la tira dans sa cellule. «Viens! que je te repêche de l’abîme!» murmurait-elle.

Quand sa fille fut dans la cellule, elle la posa doucement à terre, puis la reprit, et la portant dans ses bras comme si ce n’était toujours que sa petite Agnès, elle allait et venait dans l’étroite loge, ivre, forcenée, joyeuse, criant, chantant, baisant sa fille, lui parlant, éclatant de rire, fondant en larmes, le tout à la fois et avec emportement.

«Ma fille! ma fille! disait-elle. J’ai ma fille! la voilà. Le bon Dieu me l’a rendue. Eh vous! venez tous! Y a-t-il quelqu’un là pour voir que j’ai ma fille? Seigneur Jésus, qu’elle est belle! Vous me l’avez fait attendre quinze ans, mon bon Dieu, mais c’était pour me la rendre belle. — Les égyptiennes ne l’avaient donc pas mangée! Qui avait dit cela? Ma petite fille! ma petite fille! baise-moi. Ces bonnes égyptiennes! J’aime les égyptiennes. — C’est bien toi. C’est donc cela que le cœur me sautait chaque fois que tu passais. Moi qui prenais cela pour de la haine! Pardonne-moi, mon Agnès, pardonne-moi. Tu m’as trouvée bien méchante, n’est-ce pas? Je t’aime. — Ton petit signe au cou, l’as-tu toujours? voyons. Elle l’a toujours. Oh! tu es belle! C’est moi qui vous ai fait ces grands yeux-là, mademoiselle. Baise-moi. Je t’aime. Cela m’est bien égal que les autres mères aient des enfants, je me moque bien d’elles à présent. Elles n’ont qu’à venir. Voici la mienne. Voilà son cou, ses yeux, ses cheveux, sa main. Trouvez-moi quelque chose de beau comme cela! Oh! je vous en réponds qu’elle aura des amoureux, celle-là! J’ai pleuré quinze ans. Toute ma beauté s’en est allée, et lui est venue. Baise-moi!»

Elle lui tenait mille autres discours extravagants dont l’accent faisait toute la beauté, dérangeait les vêtements de la pauvre fille jusqu’à la faire rougir, lui lissait sa chevelure de soie avec la main, lui baisait le pied, le genou, le front, les yeux, s’extasiait de tout. La jeune fille se laissait faire, en répétant par intervalles très bas et avec une douceur infinie: «Ma mère!

— Vois-tu, ma petite fille, reprenait la recluse en entrecoupant tous ses mots de baisers, vois-tu, je t’aimerai bien. Nous nous en irons d’ici. Nous allons être bien heureuses. J’ai hérité quelque chose à Reims, dans notre pays. Tu sais, Reims? Ah! non, tu ne sais pas cela, toi, tu étais trop petite! Si tu savais comme tu étais jolie, à quatre mois! Des petits pieds qu’on venait voir par curiosité d’Épernay qui est à sept lieues! Nous aurons un champ, une maison. Je te coucherai dans mon lit. Mon Dieu! mon Dieu! qui est-ce qui croirait cela? j’ai ma fille!

— Ô ma mère! dit la jeune fille trouvant enfin la force de parler dans son émotion, l’égyptienne me l’avait bien dit. Il y a une bonne égyptienne des nôtres qui est morte l’an passé, et qui avait toujours eu soin de moi comme une nourrice. C’est elle qui m’avait mis ce sachet au cou. Elle me disait toujours: «Petite, garde bien ce bijou. C’est un trésor. Il te fera retrouver ta mère. Tu portes ta mère à ton cou.» Elle l’avait prédit, l’égyptienne!»

La sachette serra de nouveau sa fille dans ses bras.

«Viens, que je te baise! tu dis cela gentiment. Quand nous serons au pays, nous chausserons un Enfant-Jésus d'église avec les petits souliers. Nous devons bien cela à la bonne sainte Vierge. Mon Dieu! que tu as une jolie voix! Quand tu me parlais tout à l'heure, c'était une musique! Ah! mon Dieu Seigneur! J'ai retrouvé mon enfant! Mais est-ce croyable, cette histoire-là? On ne meurt de rien, car je ne suis pas morte de joie.»

Et puis, elle se remit à battre des mains et à rire et à crier: «Nous allons être heureuses!»

En ce moment la logette retentit d'un cliquetis d'armes et d'un galop de chevaux qui semblait déboucher du pont Notre-Dame et s'avancer de plus en plus sur le quai. L'égyptienne se jeta avec angoisse dans les bras de la sachette.

«Sauvez-moi! sauvez-moi! ma mère! les voilà qui viennent!» La recluse devint pâle.

— Ô ciel! que dis-tu là? J'avais oublié! on te poursuit! Qu'as-tu donc fait?

— Je ne sais pas, répondit la malheureuse enfant, mais je suis condamnée à mourir.

— Mourir! dit Gudule chancelant comme sous un coup de foudre. Mourir! reprit-elle lentement et regardant sa fille avec son œil fixe.

— Oui, ma mère, reprit la jeune fille éperdue, ils veulent me tuer. Voilà qu'on vient me prendre. Cette potence est pour moi! Sauvez-moi! sauvez-moi! Ils arrivent! sauvez-moi!»

La recluse resta quelques instants immobile comme une pétrification, puis elle remua la tête en signe de doute, et tout à coup partant d'un éclat de rire, mais de son rire effrayant qui lui était revenu:

«Ho! ho! non! c'est un rêve que tu me dis là. Ah! oui! je l'aurais perdue, cela aurait duré quinze ans, et puis je la retrouverais, et cela durerait une minute! Et on me la reprendrait! et c'est maintenant qu'elle est belle, qu'elle est grande, qu'elle me parle, qu'elle m'aime, c'est maintenant qu'ils viendraient me la manger, sous mes yeux à moi qui suis la mère! Oh non! ces choses-là ne sont pas possibles. Le bon Dieu n'en permet pas comme cela.»

Ici la cavalcade parut s'arrêter, et l'on entendit une voix éloignée qui disait: «Par ici, messire Tristan! Le prêtre dit que nous la trouverons au Trou aux rats.» Le bruit de chevaux recommença.

La recluse se dressa debout avec un cri désespéré. «Sauve-toi! sauve-toi! mon enfant! Tout me revient. Tu as raison. C'est ta mort! Horreur! malédiction! Sauve-toi!»

Elle mit la tête à la lucarne, et la retira vite.

«Reste, dit-elle d'une voix basse, brève et lugubre, en serrant convulsivement la main de l'égyptienne plus morte que vive. Reste! ne souffle pas! il y a des soldats partout. Tu ne peux sortir. Il fait trop de jour.»

Ses yeux étaient secs et brûlants. Elle resta un moment sans parler. Seulement elle marchait à grands pas dans la cellule, et s'arrêtait par intervalles pour s'arracher des poignées de cheveux gris qu'elle déchirait ensuite avec ses dents.

Tout à coup elle dit: «Ils approchent. Je vais leur parler. Cache-toi dans ce coin. Ils ne te verront pas. Je leur dirai que tu t'es échappée, que je t'ai lâchée, ma foi!»

Elle posa sa fille, car elle la portait toujours, dans un angle de la cellule qu'on ne voyait pas du dehors. Elle l'accroupit, l'arrangea soigneusement de manière que ni son pied ni sa main ne dépassassent l'ombre, lui dénoua ses cheveux noirs qu'elle répandit sur sa robe blanche pour la masquer, mit devant elle sa cruche et son pavé, les seuls meubles qu'elle eût, s'imaginant que cette cruche et ce pavé la cacheraient. Et quand ce fut fini, plus tranquille, elle se mit à genoux, et pria. Le jour, qui ne faisait que de poindre, laissait encore beaucoup de ténèbres dans le Trou aux Rats.

En cet instant, la voix du prêtre, cette voix infernale, passa très près de la cellule en criant: «Par ici, capitaine Phoebus de Châteaupers!»

À ce nom, à cette voix, la Esmeralda, tapie dans son coin, fit un mouvement.

«Ne bouge pas!» dit Gudule.

Elle achevait à peine qu'un tumulte d'hommes, d'épées et de chevaux s'arrêta autour de la cellule. La mère se leva bien vite et s'alla poster devant sa lucarne pour la boucher. Elle vit une grande troupe d'hommes armés, de pied et de cheval, rangée sur la Grève. Celui qui les commandait mit pied à terre et vint vers elle. «La vieille, dit cet homme, qui avait une figure atroce, nous cherchons une sorcière pour la pendre: on nous a dit que tu l'avais.»

La pauvre mère prit l'air le plus indifférent qu'elle put, et répondit:

«Je ne sais pas trop ce que vous voulez dire.»

L'autre reprit: «Tête-Dieu! que chantait donc cet effaré d'archidiacre? Où est-il?»

«Monseigneur, dit un soldat, il a disparu.

— Or çà, la vieille folle, repartit le commandant, ne me mens pas. On t'a donné une sorcière à garder. Qu'en as-tu fait?»

La recluse ne voulut pas tout nier, de peur d'éveiller des soupçons, et répondit d'un accent sincère et bourru:

«Si vous parlez d'une grande jeune fille qu'on m'a accrochée aux mains tout à l'heure, je vous dirai qu'elle m'a mordue et que je l'ai lâchée. Voilà. Laissez-moi en repos.»

Le commandant fit une grimace désappointée.

«Ne va pas me mentir, vieux spectre, reprit-il. Je m'appelle Tristan l'Hermite, et je suis le compère du roi. Tristan l'Hermite, entends-tu?» Il ajouta, en regardant la place de Grève autour de lui: «C'est un nom qui a de l'écho ici.

— Vous seriez Satan l'Hermite, répliqua Gudule qui reprenait espoir, que je n'aurais pas autre chose à vous dire et que je n'aurais pas peur de vous.

— Tête-Dieu! dit Tristan, voilà une commère! Ah! la fille sorcière s'est sauvée! et par où a-t-elle pris?»

Gudule répondit d'un ton insouciant:

«Par la rue du Mouton, je crois.»

Tristan tourna la tête, et fit signe à sa troupe de se préparer à se remettre en marche. La recluse respira.

«Monseigneur, dit tout à coup un archer, demandez donc à la vieille fée pourquoi les barreaux de sa lucarne sont défaits de la sorte.»

Cette question fit rentrer l'angoisse au cœur de la misérable mère. Elle ne perdit pourtant pas toute présence d'esprit. «Ils ont toujours été ainsi, bégaya-t-elle.

— Bah! repartir l'archer, hier encore ils faisaient une belle croix noire qui donnait de la dévotion.»

Tristan jeta un regard oblique à la recluse.

«Je crois que la commère se trouble!»

L'infortunée sentit que tout dépendait de sa bonne contenance, et la mort dans l'âme elle se mit à ricaner. Les mères ont de ces forces-là.

«Bah! dit-elle, cet homme est ivre. Il y a plus d'un an que le cul d'une charrette de pierres a donné dans ma lucarne et en a défoncé la grille. Que même j'ai injurié le charretier!

— C'est vrai, dit un autre archer, j'y étais.»

Il se trouve toujours partout des gens qui ont tout vu. Ce témoignage inespéré de l'archer ranima la recluse, à qui cet interrogatoire faisait traverser un abîme sur le tranchant d'un couteau.

Mais elle était condamnée à une alternative continuelle d'espérance et d'alarme.

«Si c'est une charrette qui a fait cela, repartit le premier soldat, les tronçons des barres devraient être repoussés en dedans, tandis qu'ils sont ramenés en dehors.

— Hé! hé! dit Tristan au soldat, tu as un nez d'enquêteur au Châtelet. Répondez à ce qu'il dit, la vieille!

— Mon Dieu! s'écria-t-elle aux abois et d'une voix malgré elle pleine de larmes, je vous jure, monseigneur, que c'est une charrette qui a brisé ces barreaux. Vous entendez que cet homme l'a vu. Et puis, qu'est-ce que cela fait pour votre égyptienne?

— Hum! grommela Tristan.

— Diable! reprit le soldat flatté de l'éloge du prévôt, les cassures du fer sont toutes fraîches!»

Tristan hocha la tête. Elle pâlit. «Combien y a-t-il de temps, dites-vous, de cette charrette?

— Un mois, quinze jours peut-être, monseigneur. Je ne sais plus, moi.

— Elle a d'abord dit plus d'un an, observa le soldat.

— Voilà qui est louche! dit le prévôt.

— Monseigneur, cria-t-elle toujours collée devant la lucarne, et tremblant que le soupçon ne les poussât à y passer la tête et à regarder dans la cellule, monseigneur, je vous jure que c'est une charrette qui a brisé cette grille. Je vous le jure par les saints anges du paradis. Si ce n'est pas une charrette, je veux être éternellement damnée et je renie Dieu!

— Tu mets bien de la chaleur à ce jurement!» dit Tristan avec son coup d'œil d'inquisiteur.

La pauvre femme sentait s'évanouir de plus en plus son assurance. Elle en était à faire des maladresses, et elle comprenait avec terreur qu'elle ne disait pas ce qu'il aurait fallu dire.

Ici, un autre soldat arriva en criant: «Monseigneur, la vieille fée ment. La sorcière ne s'est pas sauvée par la rue Mouton. La chaîne de la rue est restée tendue toute la nuit, et le garde-chaîne n'a vu passer personne.»

Tristan, dont la physionomie devenait à chaque instant plus sinistre, interpella la recluse: «Qu'as-tu à dire à cela?»

Elle essaya encore de faire tête à ce nouvel incident: «Que je ne sais, monseigneur, que j'ai pu me tromper. Je crois qu'elle a passé l'eau en effet.

— C'est le côté opposé, dit le prévôt. Il n'y a pourtant pas grande apparence qu'elle ait voulu rentrer dans la Cité où on la poursuivait. Tu mens, la vieille!

— Et puis, ajouta le premier soldat, il n'y a de bateau ni de ce côté de l'eau ni de l'autre.

— Elle aura passé à la nage, répliqua la recluse défendant le terrain pied à pied.

— Est-ce que les femmes nagent? dit le soldat.

— Tête-Dieu! la vieille! tu mens! tu mens! reprit Tristan avec colère. J'ai bonne envie de laisser là cette sorcière, et de te pendre, toi. Un quart d'heure de question te tirera peut-être la vérité du gosier. Allons! tu vas nous suivre.»

Elle saisit ces paroles avec avidité.

«Comme vous voudrez, monseigneur. Faites. Faites. La question, je veux bien. Emmenez-moi. Vite, vite! partons tout de suite.» Pendant ce temps-là, pensait-elle, ma fille se sauvera.

«Mort-Dieu! dit le prévôt, quel appétit du chevalet! Je ne comprends rien à cette folle.»

Un vieux sergent du guet à tête grise sortit des rangs, et s'adressant au prévôt:

«Folle en effet, monseigneur! Si elle a lâché l'égyptienne, ce n'est pas sa faute, car elle n'aime pas les égyptiennes. Voilà quinze ans que je fais le guet, et que je l'entends tous les soirs maugréer les femmes bohèmes avec des exécrations sans fin. Si celle que nous poursuivons est, comme je le crois, la petite danseuse à la chèvre, elle déteste celle-là surtout.»

Gudule fit un effort et dit: «Celle-là surtout.»

Le témoignage unanime des hommes du guet confirma au prévôt les paroles du vieux sergent. Tristan l'Hermite, désespérant de rien tirer de la recluse, lui tourna le dos, et elle le vit avec une anxiété inexprimable se diriger lentement vers son cheval.

«Allons, disait-il entre ses dents, en route! remettons-nous à l'enquête. Je ne dormirai pas que l'égyptienne ne soit pendue.»

Cependant il hésita encore quelque temps avant de monter à cheval. Gudule palpitait entre la vie et la mort en le voyant promener autour de la place cette mine inquiète d'un chien de chasse qui sent près de lui le gîte de la bête et résiste à s'éloigner. Enfin il secoua la tête et sauta en selle. Le cœur si horriblement comprimé de Gudule se dilata, et elle dit à voix basse en jetant un coup d'œil sur sa fille, qu'elle n'avait pas encore osé regarder depuis qu'ils étaient là: «Sauvée!»

La pauvre enfant était restée tout ce temps dans son coin, sans souffler, sans remuer, avec l'idée de la mort debout devant elle. Elle n'avait rien perdu de la scène entre Gudule et Tristan, et chacune des angoisses de sa mère avait retenti en elle. Elle avait entendu tous les craquements successifs du fil qui la tenait suspendue sur le gouffre, elle avait cru vingt fois le voir se briser, et commençait enfin à respirer et à se sentir le pied en terre ferme. En ce moment, elle entendit une voix qui disait au prévôt:

«Corbœuf! monsieur le prévôt, ce n'est pas mon affaire, à moi homme d'armes, de pendre les sorcières. La quenaille de peuple est à bas. Je vous laisse besogner tout seul. Vous trouverez bon que j'aille rejoindre ma compagnie, pour ce qu'elle est sans capitaine.» Cette voix, c'était celle de Phoebus de Châteaupers. Ce qui se passa en elle est ineffable. Il était donc là, son ami, son protecteur, son appui, son asile, son Phoebus! Elle se leva, et avant que sa mère eût pu l'en empêcher, elle s'était jetée à la lucarne en criant:

«Phoebus! à moi, mon Phoebus!»

Phoebus n'y était plus. Il venait de tourner au galop l'angle de la rue de la Coutellerie. Mais Tristan n'était pas encore parti.

La recluse se précipita sur sa fille avec un rugissement. Elle la retira violemment en arrière en lui enfonçant ses ongles dans le cou. Une mère tigresse n'y regarde pas de si près. Mais il était trop tard, Tristan avait vu.

«Hé! hé! s'écria-t-il avec un rire qui déchaussait toutes ses dents et faisait ressembler sa figure au museau d'un loup, deux souris dans la souricière!

— Je m'en doutais», dit le soldat.

Tristan lui frappa sur l'épaule: «Tu es un bon chat! — Allons, ajouta-t-il, où est Henriet Cousin?»

Un homme qui n'avait ni le vêtement ni la mine des soldats sortit de leurs rangs. Il portait un costume mi-parti gris et brun, les cheveux plats, des manches de cuir, et un paquet de cordes à sa grosse main. Cet homme accompagnait toujours Tristan, qui accompagnait toujours Louis XI.

«L'ami, dit Tristan l'Hermite, je présume que voilà la sorcière que nous cherchions. Tu vas me pendre cela. As-tu ton échelle?

— Il y en a une là sous le hangar de la Maison-aux-Piliers, répondit l’homme. Est-ce à cette justice-là que nous ferons la chose? poursuivit-il en montrant le gibet de pierre.

— Oui.

— Ho hé! reprit l’homme avec un gros rire plus bestial encore que celui du prévôt, nous n’aurons pas beaucoup de chemin à faire.

— Dépêche! dit Tristan. Tu riras après.»

Cependant, depuis que Tristan avait vu sa fille et que tout espoir était perdu, la recluse n’avait pas encore dit une parole. Elle avait jeté la pauvre égyptienne à demi morte dans le coin du caveau, et s’était replacée à la lucarne, ses deux mains appuyées à l’angle de l’entablement comme deux griffes. Dans cette attitude, on la voyait promener intrépidement sur tous ces soldats son regard, qui était redevenu fauve et insensé. Au moment où Henriet Cousin s’approcha de la loge, elle lui fit une figure tellement sauvage qu’il recula.

«Monseigneur, dit-il en revenant au prévôt, laquelle faut-il prendre?

— La jeune.

— Tant mieux. Car la vieille paraît malaisée.

— Pauvre petite danseuse à la chèvre!» dit le vieux sergent du guet.

Henriet Cousin se rapprocha de la lucarne. L’œil de la mère fit baisser le sien. Il dit assez timidement:

«Madame...»

Elle l’interrompit d’une voix très basse et furieuse: «Que demandes-tu?

— Ce n’est pas vous, dit-il, c’est l’autre.

— Quelle autre?

— La jeune.»

Elle se mit à secouer la tête en criant: «Il n’y a personne! Il n’y a personne! Il n’y a personne!

— Si! reprit le bourreau, vous le savez bien. Laissez-moi prendre la jeune. Je ne veux pas vous faire de mal, à vous.»

Elle dit avec un ricanement étrange:

«Ah! tu ne veux pas me faire de mal, à moi!

— Laissez-moi l’autre, madame; c’est monsieur le prévôt qui le veut.»

Elle répéta d’un air de folie: «Il n’y a personne.

— Je vous dis que si! répliqua le bourreau. Nous avons tous vu que vous étiez deux.

— Regarde plutôt! dit la recluse en ricanant. Fourre ta tête par la lucarne.»

Le bourreau examina les ongles de la mère, et n’osa pas.

«Dépêche!» cria Tristan qui venait de ranger sa troupe en cercle autour du Trou aux Rats et qui se tenait à cheval près du gibet.

Henriet revint au prévôt encore une fois, tout embarrassé. Il avait posé sa corde à terre, et roulait d’un air gauche son chapeau dans ses mains.

«Monseigneur, demanda-t-il, par où entrer?

«Par la porte.

— Il n’y en a pas.

— Par la fenêtre.

— Elle est trop étroite.

— Élargis-la, dit Tristan avec colère. N’as-tu pas des pioches?»

Du fond de son antre, la mère, toujours en arrêt, regardait. Elle n’espérait plus rien, elle ne savait plus ce qu’elle voulait, mais elle ne voulait pas qu’on lui prît sa fille.

Henriet Cousin alla chercher la caisse d’outils des basses œuvres sous le hangar de la Maison-aux-Piliers. Il en retira aussi la double échelle qu’il appliqua sur-le-champ au gibet. Cinq ou six hommes de la prévôté s’armèrent de pics et de leviers, et Tristan se dirigea avec eux vers la lucarne.

«La vieille, dit le prévôt d’un ton sévère, livre-nous cette fille de bonne grâce.»

Elle le regarda comme quand on ne comprend pas.

«Tête-Dieu! reprit Tristan, qu’as-tu donc à empêcher cette sorcière d’être pendue comme il plaît au roi?»

La misérable se mit à rire de son rire farouche.

«Ce que j’y ai? C’est ma fille.»

L’accent dont elle prononça ce mot fit frissonner jusqu’à Henriet Cousin lui-même.

«J’en suis fâché, repartit le prévôt. Mais c’est le bon plaisir du roi.»

Elle cria en redoublant son rire terrible: «Qu’est-ce que cela me fait, ton roi? Je te dis que c’est ma fille!

— Percez le mur», dit Tristan.

Il suffisait, pour pratiquer une ouverture assez large, de desceller une assise de pierre au-dessous de la lucarne. Quand la mère entendit les pics et les leviers saper sa forteresse, elle poussa un cri épouvantable, puis elle se mit à tourner avec une vitesse effrayante autour de sa loge, habitude de bête fauve que la cage lui avait donnée. Elle ne disait plus rien, mais ses yeux flamboyaient. Les soldats étaient glacés au fond du cœur.

Tout à coup elle prit son pavé, rit, et le jeta à deux poings sur les travailleurs. Le pavé, mal lancé, car ses mains tremblaient, ne toucha personne, et vint s'arrêter sous les pieds du cheval de Tristan. Elle grinça des dents.

Cependant, quoique le soleil ne fût pas encore levé, il faisait grand jour, une belle teinte rose égayait les vieilles cheminées vermoulues de la Maison-aux-Piliers. C'était l'heure où les fenêtres les plus matinales de la grande ville s'ouvrent joyeusement sur les toits. Quelques manants, quelques fruitiers allant aux halles sur leur âne, commençaient à traverser la Grève, ils s'arrêtaient un moment devant ce groupe de soldats amoncelés autour du Trou aux Rats, le considéraient d'un air étonné, et passaient outre.

La recluse était allée s'asseoir près de sa fille, la couvrant de son corps, devant elle, l'œil fixe, écoutant la pauvre enfant qui ne bougeait pas, et qui murmurait à voix basse pour toute parole: «Phoebus! Phoebus!» À mesure que le travail des démolisseurs semblait s'avancer, la mère se reculait machinalement, et serrait de plus en plus la jeune fille contre le mur. Tout à coup la recluse vit la pierre (car elle faisait sentinelle et ne la quittait pas du regard) s'ébranler, et elle entendit la voix de Tristan qui encourageait les travailleurs. Alors elle sortit de l'affaissement où elle était tombée depuis quelques instants, et s'écria, et tandis qu'elle parlait sa voix tantôt déchirait l'oreille comme une scie, tantôt balbutiait comme si toutes les malédictions se fussent pressées sur ses lèvres pour éclater à la fois.

«Ho! ho! ho! Mais c'est horrible! Vous êtes des brigands! Est-ce que vous allez vraiment me prendre ma fille? je vous dis que c'est ma fille! Oh! les lâches! Oh! les laquais bourreaux! les misérables goujats assassins! Au secours! au secours! au feu! Mais est-ce qu'ils me prendront mon enfant comme cela? Qui est-ce donc qu'on appelle le bon Dieu?»

Alors s'adressant à Tristan, écumante, l'œil hagard, à quatre pattes comme une panthère, et toute hérissée:

«Approche un peu me prendre ma fille! Est-ce que tu ne comprends pas que cette femme te dit que c'est sa fille? Sais-tu ce que c'est qu'un enfant qu'on a? Hé! loup-cervier, n'as-tu jamais gîté avec ta louve? n'en as-tu jamais eu un louveteau? et si tu as des petits, quand ils hurlent, est-ce que tu n'as rien dans le ventre que cela remue?

— Mettez bas la pierre, dit Tristan, elle ne tient plus.»

Les leviers soulevèrent la lourde assise. C'était, nous l'avons dit, le dernier rempart de la mère. Elle se jeta dessus, elle voulut la retenir, elle égratigna la pierre avec ses ongles, mais le bloc massif, mis en mouvement par six hommes, lui échappa et glissa doucement jusqu'à terre le long des leviers de fer.

La mère, voyant l'entrée faite, tomba devant l'ouverture en travers, barricadant la brèche avec son corps, tordant ses bras, heurtant la dalle de sa tête, et criant d'une voix enrouée de fatigue qu'on entendait à peine: «Au secours! au feu! au feu!

— Maintenant, prenez la fille», dit Tristan toujours impassible.

La mère regarda les soldats d'une manière si formidable qu'ils avaient plus envie de reculer que d'avancer.

«Allons donc, reprit le prévôt. Henriet Cousin, toi!»

Personne ne fit un pas.

Le prévôt jura: «Tête-Christ! mes gens de guerre! peur d'une femme!

— Monseigneur, dit Henriet, vous appelez cela une femme?

— Elle a une crinière de lion! dit un autre.

— Allons! repartit le prévôt, la baie est assez large. Entrez-y trois de front, comme à la brèche de Pontoise. Finissons, mort-Mahom! Le premier qui recule, j'en fais deux morceaux!»

Placés entre le prévôt et la mère, tous deux menaçants, les soldats hésitèrent un moment, puis, prenant leur parti, s'avancèrent vers le Trou aux Rats.

Quand la recluse vit cela, elle se dressa brusquement sur les genoux, écarta ses cheveux de son visage, puis laissa retomber ses mains maigres et écorchées sur ses cuisses. Alors de grosses larmes sortirent une à une de ses yeux, elles descendaient par une ride le long de ses joues comme un torrent par le lit qu'il s'est creusé. En même temps elle se mit à parler, mais d'une voix si suppliante, si douce, si soumise et si poignante, qu'à l'entour de Tristan plus d'un vieil argousin qui aurait mangé de la chair humaine s'essuyait les yeux.

«Messeigneurs! messieurs les sergents, un mot! C'est une chose qu'il faut que je vous dise. C'est ma fille, voyez-vous? ma chère petite fille que j'avais perdue! Écoutez. C'est une histoire. Figurez-vous que je connais très bien messieurs les sergents. Ils ont toujours été bons pour moi dans le temps que les petits garçons me jetaient des pierres parce que je faisais la vie d’amour. Voyez-vous? vous me laisserez mon enfant, quand vous saurez! je suis une pauvre fille de joie. Ce sont les bohémiennes qui me l’ont volée. Même que j’ai gardé son soulier quinze ans. Tenez, le voilà. Elle avait ce pied-là. À Reims! La Chantefleurie! rue Folle-Peine! Vous avez connu cela peut-être. C’était moi. Dans votre jeunesse, alors, c’était un beau temps. On passait de bons quarts d’heure. Vous aurez pitié de moi, n’est-ce pas, messeigneurs? Les égyptiennes me l’ont volée, elles me l’ont cachée quinze ans. Je la croyais morte. Figurez-vous, mes bons amis, que je la croyais morte, j’ai passé quinze ans ici, dans cette cave, sans feu l’hiver. C’est dur, cela. Le pauvre cher petit soulier! j’ai tant crié que le bon Dieu m’a entendue. Cette nuit, il m’a rendu ma fille. C’est un miracle du bon Dieu. Elle n’était pas morte. Vous ne me la prendrez pas, j’en suis sûre. Encore si c’était moi, je ne dirais pas, mais elle, une enfant de seize ans! laissez-lui le temps de voir le soleil! — Qu’est-ce qu’elle vous a fait? rien du tout. Moi non plus. Si vous saviez que je n’ai qu’elle, que je suis vieille, que c’est une bénédiction que la sainte Vierge m’envoie. Et puis, vous êtes si bons tous! Vous ne saviez pas que c’était ma fille, à présent vous le savez. Oh! je l’aime! Monsieur le grand prévôt, j’aimerais mieux un trou à mes entrailles qu’une égratignure à son doigt! C’est vous qui avez l’air d’un bon seigneur! Ce que je vous dis là vous explique la chose, n’est-il pas vrai? Oh! si vous avez eu une mère, monseigneur! vous êtes le capitaine, laissez-moi mon enfant! Considérez que je vous prie à genoux, comme on prie un Jésus-Christ! Je ne demande rien à personne, je suis de Reims, messeigneurs, j’ai un petit champ de mon oncle Mahiet Pradon. Je ne suis pas une mendiante. Je ne veux rien, mais je veux mon enfant! Oh! je veux garder mon enfant! Le bon Dieu, qui est le maître, ne me l’a pas rendue pour rien! Le roi! vous dites le roi! Cela ne lui fera déjà pas beaucoup de plaisir qu’on tue ma petite fille! Et puis le roi est bon! C’est ma fille! c’est ma fille, à moi! elle n’est pas au roi! elle n’est pas à vous! je veux m’en aller! nous voulons nous en aller! Enfin, deux femmes qui passent, dont l’une est la mère et l’autre la fille, on les laisse passer! Laissez-nous passer! nous sommes de Reims. Oh! vous êtes bien bons, messieurs les sergents, je vous aime tous. Vous ne me prendrez pas ma chère petite, c’est impossible! N’est-ce pas que c’est tout à fait impossible? Mon enfant! mon enfant!»

Nous n’essaierons pas de donner une idée de son geste, de son accent, des larmes qu’elle buvait en parlant, des mains qu’elle joignait et puis tordait, des sourires navrants, des regards noyés, des gémissements, des soupirs, des cris misérables et saisissants qu'elle mêlait à ses paroles désordonnées, folles et décousues. Quand elle se tut, Tristan l'Hermite fronça le sourcil, mais c'était pour cacher une larme qui roulait dans son œil de tigre. Il surmonta pourtant cette faiblesse, et dit d'un ton bref: «Le roi le veut.»

Puis, il se pencha à l'oreille d'Henriet Cousin, et lui dit tout bas: «Finis vite!» Le redoutable prévôt sentait peut-être le cœur lui manquer, à lui aussi.

Le bourreau et les sergents entrèrent dans la logette. La mère ne fit aucune résistance, seulement elle se traîna vers sa fille et se jeta à corps perdu sur elle.

L'égyptienne vit les soldats s'approcher. L'horreur de la mort la ranima.

«Ma mère! cria-t-elle avec un inexprimable accent de détresse, ma mère! ils viennent! défendez-moi!

— Oui, mon amour, je te défends!» répondit la mère d'une voix éteinte, et, la serrant étroitement dans ses bras, elle la couvrit de baisers. Toutes deux ainsi à terre, la mère sur la fille, faisaient un spectacle digne de pitié.

Henriet Cousin prit la jeune fille par le milieu du corps sous ses belles épaules. Quand elle sentit cette main, elle fit: «Heuh!» et s'évanouit. Le bourreau, qui laissait tomber goutte à goutte de grosses larmes sur elle, voulut l'enlever dans ses bras. Il essaya de détacher la mère, qui avait pour ainsi dire noué ses deux mains autour de la ceinture de sa fille, mais elle était si puissamment cramponnée à son enfant qu'il fut impossible de l'en séparer. Henriet Cousin alors traîna la jeune fille hors de la loge, et la mère après elle. La mère aussi tenait ses yeux fermés.

Le soleil se levait en ce moment, et il y avait déjà sur la place un assez bon amas de peuple qui regardait à distance ce qu'on traînait ainsi sur le pavé vers le gibet. Car c'était la mode du prévôt Tristan aux exécutions. Il avait la manie d'empêcher les curieux d'approcher.

Il n'y avait personne aux fenêtres. On voyait seulement de loin, au sommet de celle des tours de Notre-Dame qui domine la Grève, deux hommes détachés en noir sur le ciel clair du matin, qui semblaient regarder.

Henriet Cousin s'arrêta avec ce qu'il traînait au pied de la fatale échelle, et, respirant à peine, tant la chose l'apitoyait, il passa la corde autour du cou adorable de la jeune fille. La malheureuse enfant sentit l'horrible attouchement du chanvre. Elle souleva ses paupières, et vit le bras décharné du gibet de pierre, étendu au-dessus de sa tête. Alors elle se secoua, et cria d’une voix haute et déchirante: «Non! non! je ne veux pas!» La mère, dont la tête était enfouie et perdue sous les vêtements de sa fille, ne dit pas une parole; seulement on vit frémir tout son corps et on l’entendit redoubler ses baisers sur son enfant. Le bourreau profita de ce moment pour dénouer vivement les bras dont elle étreignait la condamnée. Soit épuisement, soit désespoir, elle le laissa faire. Alors il prit la jeune fille sur son épaule, d’où la charmante créature retombait gracieusement pliée en deux sur sa large tête. Puis il mit le pied sur l’échelle pour monter.

En ce moment la mère, accroupie sur le pavé, ouvrit tout à fait les yeux. Sans jeter un cri, elle se redressa avec une expression terrible, puis, comme une bête sur sa proie, elle se jeta sur la main du bourreau et le mordit. Ce fut un éclair. Le bourreau hurla de douleur. On accourut. On retira avec peine sa main sanglante d’entre les dents de la mère. Elle gardait un profond silence. On la repoussa assez brutalement, et l’on remarqua que sa tête retombait lourdement sur le pavé. On la releva. Elle se laissa de nouveau retomber. C’est qu’elle était morte.

Le bourreau, qui n’avait pas lâché la jeune fille, se remit à monter l’échelle.

II

«LA CREATURA BELLA BIANCO VESTITA» (DANTE)

Quand Quasimodo vit que la cellule était vide, que l'égyptienne n'y était plus, que pendant qu'il la défendait on l'avait enlevée, il prit ses cheveux à deux mains et trépigna de surprise et de douleur. Puis il se mit à courir par toute l'église, cherchant sa bohémienne, hurlant des cris étranges à tous les coins de mur, semant ses cheveux rouges sur le pavé. C'était précisément le moment où les archers du roi entraient victorieux dans Notre-Dame, cherchant aussi l'égyptienne. Quasimodo les y aida, sans se douter, le pauvre sourd, de leurs fatales intentions; il croyait que les ennemis de l'égyptienne, c'étaient les truands. Il mena lui-même Tristan l'Hermite à toutes les cachettes possibles, lui ouvrit les portes secrètes, les doubles fonds d'autel, les arrière-sacristies. Si la malheureuse y eût été encore, c'est lui qui l'eût livrée.

Quand la lassitude de ne rien trouver eut rebuté Tristan qui ne se rebutait pas aisément, Quasimodo continua de chercher tout seul. Il fit vingt fois, cent fois le tour de l'église, de long en large, du haut en bas, montant, descendant, courant, appelant, criant, flairant, furetant, fouillant, fourrant sa tête dans tous les trous, poussant une torche sous toutes les voûtes, désespéré, fou. Un mâle qui a perdu sa femelle n'est pas plus rugissant ni plus hagard. Enfin quand il fut sûr, bien sûr qu'elle n'y était plus, que c'en était fait, qu'on la lui avait dérobée, il remonta lentement l'escalier des tours, cet escalier qu'il avait escaladé avec tant d'emportement et de triomphe le jour où il l'avait sauvée. Il repassa par les mêmes lieux, la tête basse, sans voix, sans larmes, presque sans souffle. L'église était déserte de nouveau et retombée dans son silence. Les archers l'avaient quittée pour traquer la sorcière dans la Cité. Quasimodo, resté seul dans cette vaste Notre-Dame, si assiégée et si tumultueuse le moment d'auparavant, reprit le chemin de la cellule où l'égyptienne avait dormi tant de semaines sous sa garde.

En s'en approchant, il se figurait qu'il allait peut-être l'y retrouver. Quand, au détour de la galerie qui donne sur le toit des bas côtés, il aperçut l'étroite logette avec sa petite fenêtre et sa petite porte, tapie sous un grand arc-boutant comme un nid d'oiseau sous une branche, le cœur lui manqua, au pauvre homme, et il s’appuya contre un pilier pour ne pas tomber. Il s’imagina qu’elle y était peut-être rentrée, qu’un bon génie l’y avait sans doute ramenée, que cette logette était trop tranquille, trop sûre et trop charmante pour qu’elle n’y fût point, et il n’osait faire un pas de plus, de peur de briser son illusion. «Oui, se disait-il en lui-même, elle dort peut-être, ou elle prie. Ne la troublons pas.»

Enfin il rassembla son courage, il avança sur la pointe des pieds, il regarda, il entra. Vide! la cellule était toujours vide. Le malheureux sourd en fit le tour à pas lents, souleva le lit et regarda dessous, comme si elle pouvait être cachée entre la dalle et le matelas, puis il secoua la tête et demeura stupide. Tout à coup il écrasa furieusement sa torche du pied, et, sans dire une parole, sans pousser un soupir, il se précipita de toute sa course la tête contre le mur et tomba évanoui sur le pavé.

Quand il revint à lui, il se jeta sur le lit, il s’y roula, il baisa avec frénésie la place tiède encore où la jeune fille avait dormi, il y resta quelques minutes immobile comme s’il allait y expirer, puis il se releva, ruisselant de sueur, haletant, insensé, et se mit à cogner les murailles de sa tête avec l’effrayante régularité du battant de ses cloches, et la résolution d’un homme qui veut l’y briser. Enfin il tomba une seconde fois, épuisé; il se traîna sur les genoux hors de la cellule et s’accroupit en face de la porte, dans une attitude d’étonnement.

Il resta ainsi plus d’une heure sans faire un mouvement, l’œil fixé sur la cellule déserte, plus sombre et plus pensif qu’une mère assise entre un berceau vide et un cercueil plein. Il ne prononçait pas un mot; seulement, à de longs intervalles, un sanglot remuait violemment tout son corps, mais un sanglot sans larmes, comme ces éclairs d’été qui ne font pas de bruit.

Il paraît que ce fut alors que, cherchant au fond de sa rêverie désolée quel pouvait être le ravisseur inattendu de l’égyptienne, il songea à l’archidiacre. Il se souvint que dom Claude avait seul une clef de l’escalier qui menait à la cellule, il se rappela ses tentatives nocturnes sur la jeune fille, la première à laquelle lui Quasimodo avait aidé, la seconde qu’il avait empêchée. Il se rappela mille détails, et ne douta bientôt plus que l’archidiacre ne lui eût pris l’égyptienne. Cependant tel était son respect du prêtre, la reconnaissance, le dévouement, l’amour pour cet homme avaient de si profondes racines dans son cœur qu’elles résistaient, même en ce moment, aux ongles de la jalousie et du désespoir.

Il songeait que l’archidiacre avait fait cela, et la colère de sang et de mort qu’il en eût ressentie contre tout autre, du moment où il s’agissait de Claude Frollo, se tournait chez le pauvre sourd en accroissement de douleur.

Au moment où sa pensée se fixait ainsi sur le prêtre, comme l’aube blanchissait les arcs-boutants, il vit à l’étage supérieur de Notre-Dame, au coude que fait la balustrade extérieure qui tourne autour de l’abside, une figure qui marchait. Cette figure venait de son côté. Il la reconnut. C’était l’archidiacre.

Claude allait d’un pas grave et lent. Il ne regardait pas devant lui en marchant, il se dirigeait vers la tour septentrionale, mais son visage était tourné de côté, vers la rive droite de la Seine, et il tenait la tête haute, comme s’il eût tâché de voir quelque chose par-dessus les toits. Le hibou a souvent cette attitude oblique. Il vole vers un point et en regarde un autre. — Le prêtre passa ainsi au-dessus de Quasimodo sans le voir.

Le sourd, que cette brusque apparition avait pétrifié, le vit s’enfoncer sous la porte de l’escalier de la tour septentrionale. Le lecteur sait que cette tour est celle d’où l’on voit l’Hôtel de Ville. Quasimodo se leva et suivit l’archidiacre.

Quasimodo monta l’escalier de la tour pour le monter, pour savoir pourquoi le prêtre le montait. Du reste, le pauvre sonneur ne savait ce qu’il ferait, lui Quasimodo, ce qu’il dirait, ce qu’il voulait. Il était plein de fureur et plein de crainte. L’archidiacre et l’égyptienne se heurtaient dans son cœur.

Quand il fut parvenu au sommet de la tour, avant de sortir de l’ombre de l’escalier et d’entrer sur la plate-forme, il examina avec précaution où était le prêtre. Le prêtre lui tournait le dos. Il y a une balustrade percée à jour qui entoure la plate-forme du clocher. Le prêtre, dont les yeux plongeaient sur la ville, avait la poitrine appuyée à celui des quatre côtés de la balustrade qui regarde le pont Notre-Dame.

Quasimodo, s’avançant à pas de loup derrière lui, alla voir ce qu’il regardait ainsi.

L’attention du prêtre était tellement absorbée ailleurs qu’il n’entendit point le sourd marcher près de lui.

C’est un magnifique et charmant spectacle que Paris, et le Paris d’alors surtout, vu du haut des tours Notre-Dame aux fraîches lueurs d’une aube d’été. On pouvait être, ce jour-là, en juillet. Le ciel était parfaitement serein. Quelques étoiles attardées s’y éteignaient sur divers points, et il y en avait une très brillante au levant dans le plus clair du ciel. Le soleil était au moment de paraître. Paris commençait à remuer. Une lumière très blanche et très pure faisait saillir vivement à l'œil tous les plans que ses mille maisons présentent à l'orient. L'ombre géante des clochers allait de toit en toit d'un bout de la grande ville à l'autre. Il y avait déjà des quartiers qui parlaient et qui faisaient du bruit. Ici un coup de cloche, là un coup de marteau, là-bas le cliquetis compliqué d'une charrette en marche. Déjà quelques fumées se dégorgeaient çà et là sur toute cette surface de toits comme par les fissures d'une immense solfatare. La rivière, qui fronce son eau aux arches de tant de ponts, à la pointe de tant d'îles, était toute moirée de plis d'argent. Autour de la ville, au dehors des remparts, la vue se perdait dans un grand cercle de vapeurs floconneuses à travers lesquelles on distinguait confusément la ligne indéfinie des plaines et le gracieux renflement des coteaux. Toutes sortes de rumeurs flottantes se dispersaient sur cette cité à demi réveillée. Vers l'orient le vent du matin chassait à travers le ciel quelques blanches ouates arrachées à la toison de brume des collines.

Dans le Parvis, quelques bonnes femmes qui avaient en main leur pot au lait se montraient avec étonnement le délabrement singulier de la grande porte de Notre-Dame et deux ruisseaux de plomb figés entre les fentes des grès. C'était tout ce qui restait du tumulte de la nuit. Le bûcher allumé par Quasimodo entre les tours s'était éteint. Tristan avait déjà déblayé la place et fait jeter les morts à la Seine. Les rois comme Louis XI ont soin de laver vite le pavé après un massacre.

En dehors de la balustrade de la tour, précisément au-dessous du point où s'était arrêté le prêtre, il y avait une de ces gouttières de pierre fantastiquement taillées qui hérissent les édifices gothiques, et dans une crevasse de cette gouttière deux jolies giroflées en fleur, secouées et rendues comme vivantes par le souffle de l'air, se faisaient des salutations folâtres. Au-dessus des tours, en haut, bien loin au fond du ciel, on entendait de petits cris d'oiseaux.

Mais le prêtre n'écoutait, ne regardait rien de tout cela. Il était de ces hommes pour lesquels il n'y a pas de matins, pas d'oiseaux, pas de fleurs. Dans cet immense horizon qui prenait tant d'aspects autour de lui, sa contemplation était concentrée sur un point unique.

Quasimodo brûlait de lui demander ce qu'il avait fait de l'égyptienne. Mais l'archidiacre semblait en ce moment être hors du monde. Il était visiblement dans une de ces minutes violentes de la vie où l’on ne sentirait pas la terre crouler. Les yeux invariablement fixés sur un certain lieu, il demeurait immobile et silencieux; et ce silence et cette immobilité avaient quelque chose de si redoutable que le sauvage sonneur frémissait devant et n’osait s’y heurter. Seulement, et c’était encore une manière d’interroger l’archidiacre, il suivit la direction de son rayon visuel, et de cette façon le regard du malheureux sourd tomba sur la place de Grève.

Il vit ainsi ce que le prêtre regardait. L’échelle était dressée près du gibet permanent. Il y avait quelque peuple dans la place et beaucoup de soldats. Un homme traînait sur le pavé une chose blanche à laquelle une chose noire était accrochée. Cet homme s’arrêta au pied du gibet.

Ici il se passa quelque chose que Quasimodo ne vit pas bien. Ce n’est pas que son œil unique n’eût conservé sa longue portée, mais il y avait un gros de soldats qui empêchait de distinguer tout. D’ailleurs en cet instant le soleil parut, et un tel flot de lumière déborda par-dessus l’horizon qu’on eût dit que toutes les pointes de Paris, flèches, cheminées, pignons, prenaient feu à la fois.

Cependant l’homme se mit à monter l’échelle. Alors Quasimodo le revit distinctement. Il portait une femme sur son épaule, une jeune fille vêtue de blanc, cette jeune fille avait un nœud au cou. Quasimodo la reconnut.

C’était elle.

L’homme parvint ainsi au haut de l’échelle. Là il arrangea le nœud. Ici le prêtre, pour mieux voir, se mit à genoux sur la balustrade.

Tout à coup l’homme repoussa brusquement l’échelle du talon, et Quasimodo qui ne respirait plus depuis quelques instants vit se balancer au bout de la corde, à deux toises au-dessus du pavé, la malheureuse enfant avec l’homme accroupi les pieds sur ses épaules. La corde fit plusieurs tours sur elle-même, et Quasimodo vit courir d’horribles convulsions le long du corps de l’égyptienne. Le prêtre de son côté, le cou tendu, l’œil hors de la tête, contemplait ce groupe épouvantable de l’homme et de la jeune fille, de l’araignée et de la mouche.

Au moment où c’était le plus effroyable, un rire de démon, un rire qu’on ne peut avoir que lorsqu’on n’est plus homme, éclata sur le visage livide du prêtre. Quasimodo n’entendit pas ce rire, mais il le vit. Le sonneur recula de quelques pas derrière l’archidiacre, et tout à coup, se ruant sur lui avec fureur, de ses deux grosses mains il le poussa par le dos dans l’abîme sur lequel dom Claude était penché.

Le prêtre cria: «Damnation!» et tomba.

La gouttière au-dessus de laquelle il se trouvait l’arrêta dans sa chute. Il s’y accrocha avec des mains désespérées, et, au moment où il ouvrit la bouche pour jeter un second cri, il vit passer au rebord de la balustrade, au-dessus de sa tête, la figure formidable et vengeresse de Quasimodo.

Alors il se tut.

L’abîme était au-dessous de lui. Une chute de plus de deux cents pieds, et le pavé.

Dans cette situation terrible, l’archidiacre ne dit pas une parole, ne poussa pas un gémissement. Seulement il se tordit sur la gouttière avec des efforts inouïs pour remonter. Mais ses mains n’avaient pas de prise sur le granit, ses pieds rayaient la muraille noircie, sans y mordre. Les personnes qui ont monté sur les tours de Notre-Dame savent qu’il y a un renflement de la pierre immédiatement au-dessous de la balustrade. C’est sur cet angle rentrant que s’épuisait le misérable archidiacre. Il n’avait pas affaire à un mur à pic, mais à un mur qui fuyait sous lui.

Quasimodo n’eût eu pour le tirer du gouffre qu’à lui tendre la main, mais il ne le regardait seulement pas. Il regardait la Grève. Il regardait le gibet. Il regardait l’égyptienne.

Le sourd s’était accoudé sur la balustrade à la place où était l’archidiacre le moment d’auparavant, et là, ne détachant pas son regard du seul objet qu’il y eût pour lui au monde en ce moment, il était immobile et muet comme un homme foudroyé, et un long ruisseau de pleurs coulait en silence de cet œil qui jusqu’alors n’avait encore versé qu’une seule larme.

Cependant l’archidiacre haletait. Son front chauve ruisselait de sueur, ses ongles saignaient sur la pierre, ses genoux s’écorchaient au mur.

Il entendait sa soutane accrochée à la gouttière craquer et se découdre à chaque secousse qu’il lui donnait. Pour comble de malheur, cette gouttière était terminée par un tuyau de plomb qui fléchissait sous le poids de son corps. L’archidiacre sentait ce tuyau ployer lentement. Il se disait, le misérable, que quand ses mains seraient brisées de fatigue, quand sa soutane serait déchirée, quand ce plomb serait ployé, il faudrait tomber, et l’épouvante le prenait aux entrailles. Quelquefois, il regardait avec égarement une espèce d’étroit plateau formé à quelque dix pieds plus bas par des accidents de sculpture, et il demandait au ciel dans le fond de son âme en détresse de pouvoir finir sa vie sur cet espace de deux pieds carrés, dût-elle durer cent années. Une fois, il regarda au-dessous de lui dans la place, dans l’abîme; la tête qu’il releva fermait les yeux et avait les cheveux tout droits.

C’était quelque chose d’effrayant que le silence de ces deux hommes. Tandis que l’archidiacre à quelques pieds de lui agonisait de cette horrible façon, Quasimodo pleurait et regardait la Grève.

L’archidiacre, voyant que tous ses soubresauts ne servaient qu’à ébranler le fragile point d’appui qui lui restait, avait pris le parti de ne plus remuer. Il était là, embrassant la gouttière, respirant à peine, ne bougeant plus, n’ayant plus d’autres mouvements que cette convulsion machinale du ventre qu’on éprouve dans les rêves quand on croit se sentir tomber. Ses yeux fixes étaient ouverts d’une manière maladive et étonnée. Peu à peu cependant, il perdait du terrain, ses doigts glissaient sur la gouttière, il sentait de plus en plus la faiblesse de ses bras et la pesanteur de son corps, la courbure du plomb qui le soutenait s’inclinait à tout moment d’un cran vers l’abîme.

Il voyait au-dessous de lui, chose affreuse, le toit de Saint-Jean-le-Rond petit comme une carte ployée en deux. Il regardait l’une après l’autre les impassibles sculptures de la tour, comme lui suspendues sur le précipice, mais sans terreur pour elles ni pitié pour lui. Tout était de pierre autour de lui, devant ses yeux, les monstres béants, au-dessous, tout au fond, dans la place, le pavé, au-dessus de sa tête, Quasimodo qui pleurait.

Il y avait dans le Parvis quelques groupes de braves curieux qui cherchaient tranquillement à deviner quel pouvait être le fou qui s’amusait d’une si étrange manière. Le prêtre leur entendait dire, car leur voix arrivait jusqu’à lui, claire et grêle: «Mais il va se rompre le cou!»

Quasimodo pleurait.

Enfin l’archidiacre, écumant de rage et d’épouvante, comprit que tout était inutile. Il rassembla pourtant tout ce qui lui restait de force pour un dernier effort. Il se roidit sur la gouttière, repoussa le mur de ses deux genoux, s’accrocha des mains à une fente des pierres, et parvint à regrimper d’un pied peut-être; mais cette commotion fit ployer brusquement le bec de plomb sur lequel il s’appuyait. Du même coup la soutane s’éventra. Alors sentant tout manquer sous lui, n’ayant plus que ses mains roidies et défaillantes qui tinssent à quelque chose, l’infortuné ferma les yeux et lâcha la gouttière. Il tomba.

Quasimodo le regarda tomber.

Une chute de si haut est rarement perpendiculaire. L’archidiacre lancé dans l’espace tomba d’abord la tête en bas et les deux mains étendues, puis il fit plusieurs tours sur lui-même. Le vent le poussa sur le toit d'une maison où le malheureux commença à se briser. Cependant il n'était pas mort quand il y arriva. Le sonneur le vit essayer encore de se retenir au pignon avec les ongles. Mais le plan était trop incliné, et il n'avait plus de force. Il glissa rapidement sur le toit comme une tuile qui se détache, et alla rebondir sur le pavé. Là, il ne remua plus.

Quasimodo alors releva son œil sur l'égyptienne dont il voyait le corps, suspendu au gibet, frémir au loin sous sa robe blanche des derniers tressaillements de l'agonie, puis il le rabaissa sur l'archidiacre étendu au bas de la tour et n'ayant plus forme humaine, et il dit avec un sanglot qui souleva sa profonde poitrine: «Oh! tout ce que j'ai aimé!»

III

MARIAGE DE PHŒBUS

Vers le soir de cette Journée, quand les officiers judiciaires de l’évêque vinrent relever sur le pavé du Parvis le cadavre disloqué de l’archidiacre, Quasimodo avait disparu de Notre-Dame.

Il courut beaucoup de bruits sur cette aventure. On ne douta pas que le jour ne fût venu où, d’après leur pacte, Quasimodo, c’est-à-dire le diable, devait emporter Claude Frollo, c’est-à-dire le sorcier. On présuma qu’il avait brisé le corps en prenant l’âme, comme les singes qui cassent la coquille pour manger la noix.

C’est pourquoi l’archidiacre ne fut pas inhumé en terre sainte.

Louis XI mourut l’année d’après, au mois d’août 1483.

Quant à Pierre Gringoire, il parvint à sauver la chèvre, et il obtint des succès en tragédie. Il paraît qu’après avoir goûté de l’astrologie, de la philosophie, de l’architecture, de l’hermétique, de toutes les folies, il revint à la tragédie, qui est la plus folle de toutes. C’est ce qu’il appelait *avoir fait une fin tragique*. Voici, au sujet de ses triomphes dramatiques, ce qu’on lit dès 1483 dans les comptes de l’ordinaire: «À Jehan Marchand et Pierre Gringoire, charpentier et compositeur, qui ont fait et composé le mystère fait au Châtelet de Paris à l’entrée de monsieur le légat, ordonné des personnages, iceux revêtus et habillés ainsi que audit mystère était requis, et pareillement, d’avoir fait les échafauds qui étaient à ce nécessaires; et pour ce faire, cent livres.»

Phoebus de Châteaupers aussi fit une fin tragique, il se maria.

IV

MARIAGE DE QUASIMODO

Nous venons de dire que Quasimodo avait disparu de Notre-Dame le jour de la mort de l’égyptienne et de l’archidiacre. On ne le revit plus en effet, on ne sut ce qu’il était devenu.

Dans la nuit qui suivit le supplice de la Esmeralda, les gens des basses œuvres avaient détaché son corps du gibet et l’avaient porté, selon l’usage, dans la cave de Montfaucon.

Montfaucon était, comme dit Sauval, «le plus ancien et le plus superbe gibet du royaume». Entre les faubourgs du Temple et de Saint-Martin, à environ cent soixante toises des murailles de Paris, à quelques portées d’arbalète de la Courtille, on voyait au sommet d’une éminence douce, insensible, assez élevée pour être aperçue de quelques lieues à la ronde, un édifice de forme étrange, qui ressemblait assez à un cromlech celtique, et où il se faisait aussi des sacrifices humains.

Qu’on se figure, au couronnement d’une butte de plâtre, un gros parallélépipède de maçonnerie, haut de quinze pieds, large de trente, long de quarante, avec une porte, une rampe extérieure et une plate-forme; sur cette plate-forme seize énormes piliers de pierre brute, debout, hauts de trente pieds, disposés en colonnade autour de trois des quatre côtés du massif qui les supporte, liés entre eux à leur sommet par de fortes poutres où pendent des chaînes d’intervalle en intervalle; à toutes ces chaînes, des squelettes; aux alentours dans la plaine, une croix de pierre et deux gibets de second ordre qui semblent pousser de bouture autour de la fourche centrale; au-dessus de tout cela, dans le ciel, un vol perpétuel de corbeaux. Voilà Montfaucon.

À la fin du quinzième siècle, le formidable gibet, qui datait de 1328, était déjà fort décrépit. Les poutres étaient vermoulues, les chaînes rouillées, les piliers verts de moisissure. Les assises de pierre de taille étaient toutes refendues à leur jointure, et l’herbe poussait sur cette plate-forme où les pieds ne touchaient pas. C’était un horrible profil sur le ciel que celui de ce monument; la nuit surtout, quand il y avait un peu de lune sur ces crânes blancs, ou quand la bise du soir froissait chaînes et squelettes et remuait tout cela dans l’ombre. Il suffisait de ce gibet présent là pour faire de tous les environs des lieux sinistres.

Le massif de pierre qui servait de base à l’odieux édifice était creux. On y avait pratiqué une vaste cave, fermée d’une vieille grille de fer détraquée, où l’on jetait non seulement les débris humains qui se détachaient des chaînes de Montfaucon, mais les corps de tous les malheureux exécutés aux autres gibets permanents de Paris. Dans ce profond charnier où tant de poussières humaines et tant de crimes ont pourri ensemble, bien des grands du monde, bien des innocents sont venus successivement apporter leurs os, depuis Enguerrand de Marigni, qui étrenna Montfaucon et qui était un juste, jusqu’à l’amiral de Coligni, qui en fit la clôture et qui était un juste.

Quant à la mystérieuse disparition de Quasimodo, voici tout ce que nous avons pu découvrir.

Deux ans environ ou dix-huit mois après les événements qui terminent cette histoire, quand on vint rechercher dans la cave de Montfaucon le cadavre d’Olivier le Daim, qui avait été pendu deux jours auparavant, et à qui Charles VIII accordait la grâce d’être enterré à Saint-Laurent en meilleure compagnie, on trouva parmi toutes ces carcasses hideuses deux squelettes dont l’un tenait l’autre singulièrement embrassé. L’un de ces deux squelettes, qui était celui d’une femme, avait encore quelques lambeaux de robe d’une étoffe qui avait été blanche, et on voyait autour de son cou un collier de grains d’adrézarach avec un petit sachet de soie, orné de verroterie verte, qui était ouvert et vide. Ces objets avaient si peu de valeur que le bourreau sans doute n’en avait pas voulu. L’autre, qui tenait celui-ci étroitement embrassé, était un squelette d’homme. On remarqua qu’il avait la colonne vertébrale déviée, la tête dans les omoplates, et une jambe plus courte que l’autre. Il n’avait d’ailleurs aucune rupture de vertèbre à la nuque, et il était évident qu’il n’avait pas été pendu. L’homme auquel il avait appartenu était donc venu là, et il y était mort. Quand on voulut le détacher du squelette qu’il embrassait, il tomba en poussière.

FIN

CLAUDE GUEUX

Translated by Eugenia De B

This short novella was written in 1834 and is considered to be an early example of crime fiction, containing Hugo's thoughts on injustice in society. The narrative concerns Claude Gueux, a poor, hungry inhabitant of Troyes, who has received neither education nor help from society. One day, in the midst of a great famine, he steals a loaf of bread to feed his wife and child; but he is caught and sent to the Clairvaux Prison, an old abbey turned into a high-security detention centre.

Though this is a lesser known work, its content would later inspire Hugo in the writing of *Les Misérables*.

A scene from a French 2009 TV adaptation of the novella

CLAUDE GUEUX

The original French text of this novel can be accessed via this link.

Claude Gueux was a poor workman, living in Paris about eight years ago, with his mistress and child. Although his education had been neglected, and he could not even read, the man was naturally clever and intelligent, and thought deeply over matters. Winter came with its attendant miseries, — want of work, want of food, want of fuel. The man, the woman, and the child were frozen and famished. The man turned thief. I know not what he stole. What signifies, as the result was the same: to the woman and child it gave three days' bread and warmth; to the man, five years' imprisonment. He was taken to Clairvaux, — the abbey now converted into a prison, its cells into dungeons, and the altar itself into a pillory. This is called progress.

Claude Gueux the honest workman, who turned thief from force of circumstances, had a countenance which impressed you, — a high forehead somewhat lined with care, dark hair already streaked with gray, deep-set eyes beaming with kindness, while the lower part clearly indicated firmness mingled with self-respect. He rarely spoke, yet there was a certain dignity in the man which commanded respect and obedience. A fine character, and we shall see what society made of it.

Over the prison workshop was an inspector, who rarely forgot that he was a jailer also to his subordinates, handing them the tools with one hand, and casting chains upon them with the other. A tyrant, never using even self-reasoning; with ideas against which there was no appeal; hard rather than firm, at times he could even be jocular, — doubtless a good father, a good husband, really not vicious, but , *bad*.

He was one of those men who never can grasp a fresh idea, who apparently fail to be moved by an emotion; yet with hatred and rage in their hearts they look like blocks of wood, heated on the one side but frozen on the other. This man's chief characteristic was obstinacy; and so proud was he of this very stubbornness that he compared himself with Napoleon, — an optical delusion, like taking the mere flicker of a candle for a star. When he had made up his mind to a thing, however absurd, he would carry out that absurd idea. How often it happens, that, when a catastrophe occurs, if we inquire into the cause we find it originated through the obstinacy of one with little ability, but having full faith in his own powers.

Such was the inspector of the prison workshop at Clairvaux, — a man of flint placed by society over others, who hoped to strike sparks out of such material; but a spark from a like source is apt to end in a conflagration.

The inspector soon singled out Claude Gueux, who had been numbered and placed in the workshop, and finding him clever, treated him well. Seeing Claude looking sad (for he was ever thinking of her he termed his wife), and being in a good humour, by way of pastime to console the prisoner he told him the woman had become one of the unfortunate sisterhood, and had been reduced to infamy; of the child nothing was known.

After a time Claude had accustomed himself to prison rule, and by his calmness of manner and a certain amount of resolution clearly marked in his face, he had acquired a great ascendancy over his companions, who so much admired him that they asked his advice, and tried in all ways to imitate him. The very expression in his eyes clearly indicated the man’s character; besides, is not the eye the window to the soul, and what other result could be anticipated than that the intelligent spirit should lead men with few ideas, who yielded to the attraction as the metal does to the loadstone? In less than three months Claude was the virtual head of the workshop, and at times he almost doubted whether he was king or prisoner, being treated something like a captive pope, surrounded by his cardinals.

Such popularity ever has as its attendant hatred; and though beloved by the prisoners, Claude was detested by the jailers. To him two men’s rations would have been scarcely sufficient. The inspector laughed at this, as his own appetite was large; but what would be mirth to a duke, to a prisoner would be a great misfortune. When a free man, Claude Gueux could earn his daily four-pound loaf and enjoy it; but as a prisoner he daily worked, and for his labour received one pound and a half of bread and four ounces of meat; it naturally followed that he was always hungry.

He had just finished his meagre fare, and was about to resume his labours, hoping in work to forget famine, when a weakly-looking young man came towards him, holding a knife and his untasted rations in his hand, but seemingly afraid to address him.

“What do you want?” said Claude, roughly.

“A favour at your hands,” timidly replied the young man.

“What is it?” said Claude.

“Help me with my rations; I have more than I can eat.”

For a moment Claude was taken aback, but without further ceremony he divided the food in two and at once partook of one half.

“Thank you,” said the young man; “allow me to share my rations with you every day.”

“What is your name?” said Claude.

“Albin.”

“Why are you here? “added Claude.

“I robbed.”

“So did I,” said Claude.

The same scene took place daily between this man old before his time (he was only thirty-six) and the boy of twenty, who looked at the most seventeen. The feeling was more like that of father and son than one brother to another; everything created a bond of union between them, — the very toil they endured together, the fact of sleeping in the same quarters and taking exercise in the same courtyard. They were happy, for were they not all the world to each other?

The inspector of the workshop was so hated by the prisoners that he often had recourse to Claude Gueux to enforce his authority; and when a tumult was on the point of breaking out, a few words from Claude had more effect than the authority of the warders. Although the inspector was glad to avail himself of this influence, he was jealous all the same, and hated the superior prisoner with an envious and implacable feeling, — an example of might over right, all the more fearful as it was secretly nourished. But Claude cared so much for Albin that he thought little about the inspector.

One morning as th warders were going their rounds one of them summoned Albin, who was working with Claude, to go before the inspector.

“What are you wanted for?” said Claude.

“I do not know”, replied Albin, following the warder.

All day Claude looked in vain for his companion, and at night, finding him still absent, he broke though his ordinary reserve and addressed the turnkey. “Is Albin ill?” said he.

“No,” replied the man.

“How is it that he has never put in an appearance today?”

“His quarters have been changed,” was the reply.

For a moment Claude trembled, then calmly continued, “Who gave the order?”

“Monsieur D.” This was the inspector’s name.

On the following night the inspector, Monsieur D, went his rounds as usual. Claude, who had perceived him from the distance, rose, and hastened to rasie his woollen cap and button his gray woolelen vest to the throat, — considered a mark of respect to superiors in prison discipline.

“Sir,” said Claude, as the inspector was about to pass him, “has Albin really been quartered elsewhere?”

“Yes,” replied the inspector.

“Sir, I cannot live without him. You know the rations are insufficient for me, and Albin divided his portion with me. Could you not manage to let him resume his old place near me?”

“Impossible; the order cannot be revoked.”

“By whom was it given?”

“By me.”

“Monsieur D,” replied Claude, “on you my life depends.”

“I never cancel an order once given.”

“Sir, what have I done to you?”

“Nothing.”

“Why, then,” cried Claude, “separate me from Albin?”

“Because I do,” replied the inspector, and with that he passed on.

Claude’s head sank down, like the poor caged lion deprived of his dog; but the grief, though so deeply felt, in no way changed his appetite, — he was famished. Many offered to share their rations with him, but he steadily refused, and continued his usual routine in silence, — breaking it only to ask the inspector daily, in tones of anguish mingled with rage, something between a prayer and a threat, these two words: “And Albin?”

The inspector simply passed on, shrugging his shoulders; but had he only observed Claude he would have seen the evident change, noticable to all present, and he would have heard these words, spoken respectfully but firmly: —

“Sir, listen to me; send my companion to me. It would be wise to do so, I can assure you. Remember my words!”

On Sunday he had sat for hours in the courtyard, with his head bowed in his hands, and when a prisoner called Faillette came up laughing, Claude said, “I am judging some one.”

On the 25th of October, 1831, as the inspector went his rounds, Claude, to draw his attention, smashed a watch-glass he had found in the passage. This had the desired effect.

“It was I,” said Claude. “Sir, resore my comrade to me.”

“Impossible,” was the answer.

Looking the inspector full in the face, Claude firmly added: “Now, reflect! Today is the 25th of October; I give you till the 4th of November.”

A warder remarked that Claude was threatening Monsieur D, and ought at once to be locked up.

“No, it is not a case of blackhole,” replied the inspector, smiling disdainfully; “we must be considerate with people of this stamp.”

The following day Claude was again accosted by one of the prisoners named Pernot, as he was brooding in the courtyard.

“Well, Claude, you are sad indeed; what are you pondering over?”

“I fear some evil threatens that good Monsieur D,” answered Claude.

Claude daily impressed the fact on the inspector how much Albin’s absence affected him, but with no result save four-and-twenty hours’ solitary confinement. On the 4th of November he looked round his cell for the little that remained to remind him of his former life. A pair of scissors, and an old volume of the “Emile,” belonging to the woman he had loved so well, the mother of his child, — how useless to a man who could neither work nor read!

As Claude walked down the old cloisters, so dishonoured by its new inmates and its fresh whitewashed walls, he noticed how earnestly the convict Ferrari was looking at the heavy iron bars that crossed the window, and he said to him: “Tonight I will cut through those bars with these scissors, pointing to the pair he still held in his hand.”

Ferrari laughed incredulously, and Claude joined in the mirth. During the day he worked with more than ordinary ardour, wishing to finish a straw hat, which he had been paid for in advance by a tradesman at Troyes, — M. Bressier.

Shortly before noon he made some excuse to go down into the carpenter’s quarters, a story below his own, at the time the warders were absent. Claude received a hearty welcome, as he was equally popular here as elsewhere.

“Can any one lend me an axe?” he said.

“What for?”

Without exacting any promises of secrecy he at once replied: “To kill the inspector with tonight.”

Claude was at once offered several; choosing the smallest, he hid it beneath his waistcoat and left. Now, there were twenty-seven prisoners present, and not one of those men betrayed him; they even refrained from talking upon the subject among themselves, waiting for the terrible event which must follow.

As Claude passed on he saw a young convict of sixteen yawning idly there, and he strongly advised him to learn how to read. Just then Faillette asked what he was hiding.

Claude answered unhestitatingly: “An axe to kill Monseiur D tonight; but can you see it?”

“A little,” said Faillette.

At seven o’clock the prisoners were locked in their several workshops. It was then the custom for the warders to leave them, until the inspector has been his rounds.

In Claude’s workshop a most extraordinary scene took place, the only one of its kind on record. Claude rose and addressed his companions, eighty-four in number, in the following words: —

“You all know Albin and I were like brothers. I liked him at first for sharing his rations with me, afterwards because he cared for me. Now I never have sufficient, though I spend the pittance I earn in bread. It could make no possible difference to the inspector, Monsieur D, that we should be together; but he chose to separate us simply from a love of tormenting, for he is a bad man. I asked again and again for Albin to be sent back, without success; and when I gave him a stated time, the 4th of November, I was thrust into a dungeon. During that time I became his judge, and sentenced him to death on November the 4th. In two hours he will be here, and I warn you I intend to kill him. But have you anything to say?”

There was dead silence. Claude then continued telling his comrades, the eighty-one thieves, his ideas on the subject, — that he was reduced to a fearful extremity, and compelled by that very necessity to take the law into his own hands; that he knew full well he could not take the inspector’s life without sacrificing his own, but that as the cause was a just one he would bear the consequences, having come to the conclusion after two months’ calm reflection; that if they considered resentment alone hurried him on to such a step they were at once to say so, and to state their objections to the sentence being carried out.

One voice alone broke the silence which followed, saying, “Before killing the inspector, Claude ought to give him a chance of relenting.”

“That is but just,” said Claude, “and he shall have the benefit of the doubt.”

Claude then sorted the few things a poor prisoner is allowed, and gave them to the comrades he mostly cared for after Albin, keeping only the pair of scissors. He then embraced them all, — some not being able to withold their tears at such a moment. Claude continued calmly to converse during this last hour, and even gave way to a trick he had as a boy, of extinguishing the candle with a breath from his nose. Seeing him thus, his companions afterwards owned that they hoped he had abandoned his sinister idea. One young convict looked at him fixedly, trembling for the coming event.

“Take courage, young fellow,” said Claude, gently; “it will be but the work of a minute.”

The workshop was a long room with a door at both ends, and with windows each side overlooking the benches, thus leaving a pathway up the centre for the inspector to review the work on both sides of him. Claude had now resumed his work, — something like Jacques Clement, who did not fail to repeat his prayers.

As the clock sounded the last quarter to nine, Claude rose and placed himself near the entrance, apparently calm. Amidst the most profound silence the clock struck nine; the door was thrown open, and the inspector came in as usual alone, looking quite jovial and self-satisfied, passing rapidly along, tossing his head at one, grinding words out to another, little heeding the eyes fixed so fiercely upon him. Just then he heard Claude’s step, and turning quickly round said, —

“What are you doing here? Why are you not in your place?” just as he would have spoken to a dog.

Claude answered respectfully, “I wish to speak to you, sir.”

“On what subject?”

“Albin.”

“Again!”

“Always the same,” said Claude.

“So then,” replied the inspector, walking along, “you have not had enough with twenty-four hours in the blackhole.”

Claude, following him closely, replied: “Sir, return my companion to me!”

“Impossible!”

“Sir,” continued Claude, in a voice which would have moved Satan, I” implore you to send Albin back to me; you will then see how I will work. You are free, and it would matter but little to you; you do not know the feeling of having only one friend. To me it is everything, encircled by the prison walls. You can come and go at your pleasure; I have but Albin. Pray let him come back to me! You know well he shared his food with me. What can it matter to you that a man named Claude Gueux should be in this hall, having another by his side called Albin? You have but to say ‘Yes,’ nothing more. Sir, my good sir, I implore you, in the name of Heaven, to grant my prayer!”

Claude, overcome with emotion, waited for an answer.

“Impossible!” replied the inspector impatiently; “I will not recall my words. Now go, you annoyance!” And with that he hurried on towards the outer door, amidst the breathless silence maintained by eighty-one thieves.

Claude, following and touching the inspector, gently asked:” Let me at least know why I am condemned to death. Why did you separate us?”

“I have already answered you: because I chose,” replied the inspector.

With that he was about to lift the latch, when Claude raised the axe, and without one cry the inspector fell to the ground, with his skull completely cloven from three heavy blows dealt with the rapidity of lightning. A fourth completely disfigured his face, and Claude, in his mad fury, gave another and a useless blow; for the inspector was dead.

Claude, throwing the axe aside, cried out, “Now for the other!”

The other was himself; and taking the scissors, his *wife’s*, he plunged them into his breast. But the blade was short, and the chest was deep, and vainly he strove to give the fatal blow. At last, covered with blood he fell fainting across the dead. Which of the two would be considered the victim?

When Claude regained consciousness he was in bed, surrounded by every care and covered with bandages. Near him were Sisters of Charity, and a recorder ready to take down his deposition, who with much interest inquired how he was. Claude had lost a great deal of blood; but the scissors had done him a bad turn, inflicting wounds not one of which was dangerous: the only mortal blows he had struck were on the body of Monsieur D. Then the interrogatory commenced.

“Did you kill the inspector of the prison workshops at Clairvaux?”

“Yes,” was the reply.

“Why did you do so?”

“Because I did.”

Claude’s wounds now assumed a more serious aspect, and he was prostrated with a fever which threatened his life. November, December, January, February passed, in nursing and preparations, and Claude in turn was visited by doctor and judge, — the one to restore him to health, the other to glean the evidence needful to send him to the scaffold.

On the 16th of March, 1832, perfectly cured, Claude appeared in court at Troyes, to answer the charge brought against him. His appearance impressed the court favorably; he had been shaved and stood bareheaded, but still clad in prison garb. The court was well guarded by a strong military guard, to keep the witnesses within bounds, as they were all convicts. But an unexpected dificulty occurred; not one of these men would give evidence; neither questions nor threats availed to make them break their silence, until Claude requested them to do so. Then they in turn gave a faithful account of the terrible event; and if one, from forgetfullness or affection for the accused, failed to relate the whole facts, Claude supplied the deficiency. At one time the women’s tears fell fast.

The usher now called the convict Albin. He came in trembling with emotion and sobbing painfully, and threw himself into Claude’s arms. Turning to the Public Prosecutor, Claude said, —

“Here is a convict who gives his food to the hungry,” and stooping, he kissed Albin’s hand.

All the witnesses having been examined, the counsel for the prosecution then rose to address the court. “Gentlemen of the jury, society would be utterly put to confusion if a public prosecution did not condemn great culprits like him, who, etc.”

After the long address by the prosecution, Claude’s counsel rose. Then followed the usual pleading for and against, which ever takes place at the criminal court.

Claude in his turn gave evidence, and every one was astonished at his intelligence; there appeared far more of the orator about this poor workman than the assassin. In a clear and straightforward way he detailed the facts as they were, — standing proudly there, resolved to tell the whole truth. At times the crowd was carried away by his eloquence. This man, who could not read, would grasp the most difficult points of argument, yet treat the judges with all due deference. Once Claude lost his temper, when the counsel for the prosecution stated that he had assassinated the inspector without provocation.

“What!” said Claude, “I had no provocation? Indeed! A drunkard strikes me, — I kill him; then you would allow there was provocation, and the penalty of death would be changed for that of the galleys. But a man who wounds me in every way during four years, humiliates me for four years, taunts me daily, hourly, for four years, and heaps every insult on my head, — what follows? You consider I have had no provocation! I had a wife for whom I robbed, — he tortured me about her. I had a child for whom I robbed, — he taunted me about this child. I was hungry, a friend shared his bread with me, — he took away my friend. I begged him to return my friend to me, — he cast me into a dungeon. I told him how much I suffered, — he said it wearied him to listen. What then would you have me do? I took his life; and you look upon me as a monster for killing this man, and you decapitate me: then do so.”

Provocation such as this the law fails to acknowledge, because the blows have no marks to show.

The judge then summed up the case in a clear and impartial manner, — dwelling on the life Claude had led, living openly with an improper character; then he had robbed, and ended by being a murderer. All this was true. Before the jury retired, the judge asked Claude if he had any questions to ask, or anything to say.

“Very little,” said Claude. “ I am a murderer, I am a thief; but I ask you gentlemen of the jury, why did I kill? Why did I steal?”

The jury retired for a quarter of an hour, and according to the judgment of these twelve countrymen — gentlemen of the jury, as they are styled — Claude Gueux was condemned to death. At the very outset several of them were much impressed with the name of Gueux (vagabond), and that influenced their decision.

When the verdit was pronounced, Claude simply said: “Very well; but there are two questions these gentlemen have not answered. Why did this man steal? What made him a murderer?”

He made a good supper that night, exclaiming, “Thirty-six years have now passed me.” He refused to make any appeal until the last minute, but at the instance of one of the sisters who had nursed him he consented to do so. She in her fulness of heart gave him a five-franc piece.

His fellow prisoners, as we have already noticed, were devoted to him, and placed all the means at their disposal to help him to escape. They threw into his dungeon, through the air-hole, a nail, some wire, the handle of a pail: any one of these would have been enough for a man like Claude to free himself from his chains. He gave them all up to the warder.

On the 8th of June, 1832, seven months and four days after the murder, the recorder of the court came, and Claude was told that he had but one hour more to live, for his appeal had been rejected.

“Indeed,” said Claude coldly; “I slept well last night, and doubtless I shall pass my next even better.”

First came the priest, then the executioner. he was humble to the priest, and listened to him with great attention, regretting much that he had not had the benefit of religious training, at the same time blaming himself for much in the past.

He was courteous in his manner to the executioner; in fact he gave up all, — his soul to the priest, his body to the executioner.

While his hair was being cut, someone mentioned how the cholera was spreading, and Troyes at any moment might become prey to this fearful scourge. Claude joined in the conversation, saying, with a smile, “There is one thing to be said, — I have no fear of the cholera!” He had broken half of the scissors, — what remained he asked the jailer to give to Albin; the other half lay buried in his chest. He also wished the day’s rations to be taken to his friend. The only trifle he retained was the five franc piece that the sister had given him, which he kept in his right hand after he was bound.

At a quarter to eight, the dismal procession usual in such cases left the prison. Pale, but with a firm tread, Claude Gueux slowly mounted the scaffold, keeping his eyes fixed on the crucifix the priest carried, — an emblem of the Savior’s suffering. He wished to embrace the priest and the executioner, thanking the one and pardoning the other; the executioner simply repulsed him. Just before he was bound to the infernal machine, he gave the five franc piece to the priest, saying, “For the poor.”

The hour had scarcely struck its eight chimes, when this man, so noble, so intelligent, received the fatal blow which severed his head from his body.

A market-day had been chosen for the time of execution, as there would be more people about, for there are still in France small towns that glory in having an execution. The guillotine that day remained, inflaming the imagination of the mob to such an extent that one of the tax-gatherers was nearly murdered. Such is the admirable effect of public executions!

We have given the history of Claude Gueux's life, more to solve a difficult problem than for aught else. In his life there are two questions to be considered, — before his fall, and after his fall. What was his training, and what was the penalty? This must interest society generally; for this man was well gifted, his instincts were good. Then what was wanting? On this revolves the grand problem which would place society on a firm basis.

What nature has begun in the individual, let society carry out. Look at Claude Gueux. An intelligent and most noble-hearted man, placed in the midst of evil surroundings, he turned thief. Society placed him in a prison where the evil was yet greater, and he ended up becoming a murderer. Can we really blame him, or ourselves? — questions which require deep thought, or the result will be that we shall be compelled to shirk this most important subject. The facts are now before us, and if the government gives no thought to the matter, what are the rulers about?

The Deputies are yearly much occupied. It is important to shift sinecures and to unravel the budget; to pass an Act which compels me, disguised as a soldier, to mount guard at the Count de Lobau's whom I do not know, and to whom I wish to remain a stranger, or to go on a parade under the command of my grocer, who has been made an officer. I wish to cast no reflections on the patrol, who keep order and protect our homes, but on the absurdity of making such parade and military hubub about turning citizens into parodies of soldiers.

Deputies or ministers! it is important that we should sound every subject, even though it end in nothing; that we should question and cross-question what we know but little about. Rulers and legislators! you pass your time in classical comparisons that would make a village schoolmaster smile. You assert that it is the habits of modern civilization that have engendered adultery, incest, parricide, infanticide, and poisoning, — proving that you know little of Jocasta, Phedra, Oedipus, Medea, or Rodoguna. The great orators occupy themselves in lengthy discussions on Corneille and Racine, and get so heated in literary argument as to make the grossest mistakes in the French language. Very important indeed all this is, but we consider there are subjects of far greater consequence. In the midst of such useless arguments, what answer would the Deputies give if one rose and gravely addressed them in the following words: —

“Silence, all those who have been speaking! silence, I say! You consider yourself acquainted with the question? You know nothing about it. The question is this: In the name of justice, scarcely a year ago, a man at Panners was cut to pieces; at Dijon a woman’s head was taken off; in Paris, at St. Jacques, executions take place without number. This is the question! Now take your time to consider it, you who argue over the buttons of the National Guards, whether they should be white or yellow, and if *security* is preferable to *certainty*!

“Gentlemen of the Right, gentlemen of the Left, the great mass of the people suffer! Whether a republic or a monarchy, the fact remains the same, — the people suffer! The people are famished, the people are frozen. Such misery leads them to crime: the galleys take the sons, houses of ill-fame the daughters. You have too many convicts, too many unfortunates.

“What is the meaning of this social gangrene? You are near the patient: treat the malady. You are at fault; now study the matter more deeply.

“When you pass laws, what are they but expedients and palliatives? Half your codes result from routine.

“Branding but cauterizes the wound, and it mortifies, and what is the end? You stamp the crime for life on the criminal; you make two friends of them, two companions — inseparables. The convict prison is a blister which spreads far worse matter than ever it extracts; and as for the sentence of death, when carried out it is a barbarous amputation. Therefore, branding, penal servitude, and sentence of death are all of one class; you have done away with the branding, banish the rest. Why keep the chain and the chopper now you have put aside the hot iron? Farinace was atrocious, but he was not ridiculous.

“Take down that worn ladder that leads to crime and to suffering. Revise your laws; revise your codes; rebuild your prisons; replace your judges. Make laws suited to the present time.

“You are bent on economy; do not be so lavish in taking off the heads of so many during the year. Suppress the executioner; you could defray the expenses of six hundred schoolmasters with the wages you give your eighty executioners. Think of the multitude; then there would be schools for the children, workshops for the men.

"Do you know that in France there are fewer people who know how to read than in any other country in Europe? Fancy, Switzerland can read, Belgium can read, Denmark can read, Greece can read, Ireland can read — and France cannot read! It is a crying evil.

"Go into our convict prisons, examine each one of these condemned men, and you will observe by the profile, the shape of the head, how many could find their type in the lower animals. Here are the lynx, the cat, the monkey, the vulture, the hyena. Nature was first to blame, no doubt; but the want of training fostered the evil. Then give the people a fair education, and what there is of good in these ill-conditioned minds, let that be developed. people must be judged by their opportunities. Rome and Greece were educated; then brighten the people's intellect.

"When France can read, then give the people encouragement for higher things. Ignorance is preferable to a little ill-directed knowledge; and remember, there is a book of far greater importance than the 'Compere Mathieu,' more popular than the 'Constitutionnel,' and more worthy of perusal than the charter of 1830, — that is the Bible.

"Whatever you may do for the people, the majority will always remain poor and unhappy. Theirs the work, the heavy burden to carry, to endure: all the miseries for the poor, all the pleasures for the rich.

"As such is life, ought not the State to lean to the weaker and helpless side?

"In the midst of all this wretchedness, if you but throw hope in the balance, let the poor man learn there is a heaven where joy reigns, a paradise that he can share, and you raise him; he feels that he has a part in the rich man's joys. And this was the teaching Jesus gave, and He knew more about it than Voltaire.

"Then give to those people who work, and who suffer here, the hope of a different world to come, and they will go on patiently; for patience but follows in the footsteps of hope.

"Then spread the Gospel in all our villages, let every cottage have its Bible; the seed thus sown will soon circulate. Encourage virtue, and from that will spring so much that now lies fallow.

“The man turned assassin under certain circumstances, if differently influenced would have served his country well.

“Then give the people all encouragement; improve the masses, enlighten them, guard their morals, make them useful, and to such heads as those you will not require to use cold steel.”

CLAUDE GUEUX

Il y a sept ou huit ans, un homme nommé Claude Gueux, pauvre ouvrier, vivait à Paris. Il avait avec lui une fille qui était sa maîtresse, et un enfant de cette fille. Je dis les choses comme elles sont, laissant le lecteur ramasser les moralités à mesure que les faits les sèment sur leur chemin. L'ouvrier était capable, habile, intelligent, fort maltraité par l'éducation, fort bien traité par la nature, ne sachant pas lire et sachant penser. Un hiver, l'ouvrage manqua. Pas de feu ni de pain dans le galetas. L'homme, la fille et l'enfant eurent froid et faim. L'homme vola. Je ne sais ce qu'il vola, je ne sais où il vola. Ce que je sais, c'est que de ce vol il résulta trois jours de pain et de feu pour la femme et pour l'enfant, et cinq ans de prison pour l'homme.

L'homme fut envoyé faire son temps à la maison centrale de Clairvaux. Clairvaux, abbaye dont on a fait une bastille, cellule dont on a fait un cabanon, autel dont on a fait un pilori. Quand nous parlons de progrès, c'est ainsi que certaines gens le comprennent et l'exécutent. Voilà la chose qu'ils mettent sous notre mot.

Poursuivons.

Arrivé là, on le mit dans un cachot pour la nuit, et dans un atelier pour le jour. Ce n'est pas l'atelier que je blâme.

Claude Gueux, honnête ouvrier naguère, voleur désormais, était une figure digne et grave. Il avait le front haut, déjà ridé quoique jeune encore, quelques cheveux gris perdus dans les touffes noires, l'œil doux et fort puissamment enfoncé sous une arcade sourcilière bien modelée, les narines ouvertes, le menton avancé, la lèvre dédaigneuse. C'était une belle tête. On va voir ce que la société en a fait.

Il avait la parole rare, le geste peu fréquent, quelque chose d'impérieux dans toute sa personne et qui se faisait obéir, l'air pensif, sérieux plutôt que souffrant. Il avait pourtant bien souffert.

Dans le dépôt où Claude Gueux était enfermé, il y avait un directeur des ateliers, espèce de fonctionnaire propre aux prisons, qui tient tout ensemble du guichetier et du marchand, qui fait en même temps une commande à l'ouvrier et une menace au prisonnier, qui vous met l'outil aux mains et les fers aux pieds. Celui-là était lui-même une variété de l'espèce, un homme bref, tyrannique, obéissant à ses idées, toujours à courte bride sur son autorité; d'ailleurs, dans l'occasion, bon compagnon, bon prince, jovial même et raillant avec grâce; dur plutôt que ferme; ne raisonnant avec personne, pas même avec lui; bon père, bon mari sans doute, ce qui est devoir et non vertu; en un mot, pas méchant, mauvais. C’était un de ces hommes qui n’ont rien de vibrant ni d’élastique, qui sont composés de molécules inertes, qui ne résonnent au choc d’aucune idée, au contact d’aucun sentiment, qui ont des colères glacées, des haines mornes, des emportements sans émotion, qui prennent feu sans s’échauffer, dont la capacité de calorique est nulle, et qu’on dirait souvent faits de bois; ils flambent par un bout et sont froids par l’autre. La ligne principale, la ligne diagonale du caractère de cet homme, c’était la ténacité. Il était fier d’être tenace, et se comparait à Napoléon. Ceci n’est qu’une illusion d’optique. Il y a nombre de gens qui en sont dupes et qui, à certaine distance, prennent la ténacité pour de la volonté, et une chandelle pour une étoile. Quand cet homme donc avait une fois ajusté ce qu’il appelait sa volonté à une chose absurde, il allait tête haute et à travers toute broussaille jusqu’au bout de la chose absurde. L’entêtement sans l’intelligence, c’est la sottise soudée au bout de la bêtise et lui servant de rallonge. Cela va loin. En général, quand une catastrophe privée ou publique s’est écroulée sur nous, si nous examinons, d’après les décombres qui en gisent à terre, de quelle façon elle s’est échafaudée, nous trouvons presque toujours qu’elle a été aveuglément construite par un homme médiocre et obstiné qui avait foi en lui et qui s’admirait. Il y a par le monde beaucoup de ces petites fatalités têtues qui se croient des providences.

Voilà donc ce que c’était que le directeur des ateliers de la prison centrale de Clairvaux. Voilà de quoi était fait le briquet avec lequel la société frappait chaque jour sur les prisonniers pour en tirer des étincelles.

L’étincelle que de pareils briquets arrachent à de pareils cailloux allume souvent des incendies.

Nous avons dit qu’une fois arrivé à Clairvaux, Claude Gueux fut numéroté dans un atelier et rivé à une besogne. Le directeur de l’atelier fit connaissance avec lui, le reconnut bon ouvrier, et le traita bien. Il paraît même qu’un jour, étant de bonne. humeur, et voyant Claude Gueux fort triste, car cet homme pensait toujours à celle qu’il appelait sa femme, il lui conta, par manière de jovialité et de passe-temps, et aussi pour le consoler, que cette malheureuse s’était faite fille publique. Claude demanda froidement ce qu’était devenu l’enfant. On ne savait.

Au bout de quelques mois, Claude s'acclimata à l'air de la prison et parut ne plus songer à rien. Une certaine sérénité sévère, propre à son caractère, avait repris le dessus.

Au bout du même espace de temps à peu près, Claude avait acquis un ascendant singulier sur tous ses compagnons. Comme par une sorte de convention tacite, et sans que personne sût pourquoi, pas même lui, tous ces hommes le consultaient, l'écoutaient, l'admiraient et l'imitaient, ce qui est le dernier degré ascendant de l'admiration. Ce n'était pas une médiocre gloire d'être obéi par toutes ces natures désobéissantes. Cet empire lui était venu sans qu'il y songeât. Cela tenait au regard qu'il avait dans les yeux. L'œil de l'homme est une fenêtre par laquelle on voit les pensées qui vont et viennent dans sa tête.

Mettez un homme qui contient des idées parmi des hommes qui n'en contiennent pas, au bout d'un temps donné, et par une loi d'attraction irrésistible, tous les cerveaux ténébreux graviteront humblement et avec adoration autour du cerveau rayonnant. Il y a des hommes qui sont fer et des hommes qui sont aimant. Claude était aimant.

En moins de trois mois donc, Claude était devenu l'âme, la loi et l'ordre de l'atelier. Toutes ces aiguilles tournaient sur son cadran. Il devait douter lui-même par moments s'il était roi ou prisonnier. C'était une sorte de pape captif avec ses cardinaux.

Et, par une réaction toute naturelle, dont l'effet s'accomplit sur toutes les échelles, aimé des prisonniers, il était détesté des geôliers. Cela est toujours ainsi. La popularité ne va jamais sans la défaveur. L'amour des esclaves est toujours doublé de la haine des maîtres.

Claude Gueux était grand mangeur. C'était une particularité de son organisation. Il avait l'estomac fait de telle sorte que la nourriture de deux hommes ordinaires suffisait à peine à sa journée. M. de Cotadilla avait un de ces appétits-là, et en riait; mais ce qui est une occasion de gaieté pour un duc, grand d'Espagne, qui a cinq cent mille moutons, est une charge pour un ouvrier et un malheur pour un prisonnier.

Claude Gueux, libre dans son grenier, travaillait tout le jour, gagnait son pain de quatre livres et le mangeait. Claude Gueux, en prison, travaillait tout le jour et recevait invariablement pour sa peine une livre et demie de pain et quatre onces de viande. La ration est inexorable. Claude avait donc habituellement faim dans la prison de Clairvaux.

Il avait faim, et c'était tout. Il n'en parlait pas. C'était sa nature ainsi.

Un jour, Claude venait de dévorer sa maigre pitance, et s'était remis à son métier, croyant tromper la faim par le travail. Les autres prisonniers mangeaient joyeusement. Un jeune homme, pâle, blanc, faible, vint se placer près de lui. Il tenait à la main sa ration, à laquelle il n'avait pas encore touché, et un couteau. Il restait là debout, près de Claude, ayant l'air de vouloir parler et de ne pas oser. Cet homme, et son pain, et sa viande, importunaient Claude.

— Que veux-tu? dit-il enfin brusquement.

— Que tu me rendes un service, dit timidement le jeune homme.

— Quoi? reprit Claude.

— Que tu m'aides à manger cela. J'en ai trop.

Une larme roula dans l'œil hautain de Claude. Il prit le couteau, partagea la ration du jeune homme en deux parts égales, en prit une, et se mit à manger.

— Merci, dit le jeune homme. Si tu veux, nous partagerons comme cela tous les jours.

— Comment t'appelles-tu? dit Claude Gueux.

— Albin.

— Pourquoi es-tu ici? reprit Claude.

— J'ai volé.

— Et moi aussi, dit Claude.

Ils partagèrent en effet de la sorte tous les jours. Claude Gueux avait trente-six ans, et par moments il en paraissait cinquante, tant sa pensée habituelle était sévère. Albin avait vingt ans, on lui en eût donné dix-sept, tant il y avait encore d'innocence dans le regard de ce voleur. Une étroite amitié se noua entre ces deux hommes, amitié de père à fils plutôt que de frère à frère. Albin était encore presque un enfant; Claude était déjà presque un vieillard.

Ils travaillaient dans le même atelier, ils couchaient sous la même clef de voûte, ils se promenaient dans le même préau, ils mordaient au même pain. Chacun des deux amis était l'univers pour l'autre. Il paraît qu'ils étaient heureux.

Nous avons déjà parlé du directeur des ateliers. Cet homme, haï des prisonniers, était souvent obligé, pour se faire obéir d'eux, d'avoir recours à Claude Gueux, qui en était aimé. Dans plus d'une occasion, lorsqu'il s'était agi d'empêcher une rébellion ou un tumulte, l'autorité sans titre de Claude Gueux avait prêté main-forte à l'autorité officielle du directeur. En effet, pour contenir les prisonniers, dix paroles de Claude valaient dix gendarmes. Claude avait maintes fois rendu ce service au directeur. Aussi le directeur le détestait-il cordialement. Il était jaloux de ce voleur. Il avait au fond du cœur une haine secrète, envieuse, implacable, contre Claude, une haine de souverain de droit à souverain de fait, de pouvoir temporel à pouvoir spirituel.

Ces haines-là sont les pires.

Claude aimait beaucoup Albin, et ne songeait pas au directeur.

Un jour, un matin, au moment où les porte-clefs transvasaient les prisonniers deux à deux du dortoir dans l'atelier, un guichetier appela Albin, qui était à côté de Claude et le prévint que le directeur le demandait.

— Que te veut-on? dit Claude.

— Je ne sais pas, dit Albin.

Le guichetier emmena Albin.

La matinée se passa, Albin ne revint pas à l'atelier. Quand arriva l'heure du repas, Claude pensa qu'il retrouverait Albin au préau. Albin n'était pas au préau. On rentra dans l'atelier, Albin ne reparut pas dans l'atelier. La journée s'écoula ainsi. Le soir, quand on ramena les prisonniers dans leur dortoir, Claude y chercha des yeux Albin, et ne le vit pas. Il paraît qu'il souffrait beaucoup dans ce moment-là, car il adressa la parole à un guichetier, ce qu'il ne faisait jamais.

— Est-ce qu'Albin est malade? dit-il.

— Non, répondit le guichetier.

— D'où vient donc, reprit Claude, qu'il n'a pas reparu aujourd'hui?

— Ah! dit négligemment le porte-clefs, c'est qu'on l'a changé de quartier.

Les témoins qui ont déposé de ces faits plus tard remarquèrent qu'à cette réponse du guichetier la main de Claude, qui portait une chandelle allumée, trembla légèrement. Il reprit avec calme:

— Qui a donné cet ordre-là?

Le guichetier répondit:

— M. D.

Le directeur des ateliers s'appelait M. D.

La journée du lendemain se passa comme la journée précédente, sans Albin.

Le soir, à l'heure de la clôture des travaux, le directeur, M. D. , vint faire sa ronde habituelle dans l'atelier. Du plus loin que Claude le vit, il ôta son bonnet de grosse laine, il boutonna sa veste grise, triste livrée de Clairvaux, car il est de principe dans les prisons qu'une veste respectueusement boutonnée prévient favorablement les supérieurs, et il se tint debout et son bonnet à la main à l'entrée de son banc, attendant le passage du directeur. Le directeur passa.

— Monsieur! dit Claude.

Le directeur s'arrêta et se détourna à demi.

— Monsieur, reprit Claude, est-ce que c'est vrai qu'on a changé Albin de quartier?

— Oui, répondit le directeur.

— Monsieur, poursuivit Claude, j'ai besoin d'Albin pour vivre.

Il ajouta:

— Vous savez que je n'ai pas assez de quoi manger avec la ration de la maison, et qu'Albin partageait son pain avec moi.

— C'était son affaire, dit le directeur.

— Monsieur, est-ce qu'il n'y aurait pas moyen de faire remettre Albin dans le même quartier que moi?

— Impossible. Il y a décision prise.

— Par qui?

— Par moi.

— Monsieur D. , reprit Claude, c'est la vie ou la mort pour moi, et cela dépend de vous.

— Je ne reviens jamais sur mes décisions.

— Monsieur, est-ce que je vous ai fait quelque chose?

— Rien.

— En ce cas, dit Claude, pourquoi me séparez-vous d'Albin?

— Parce que, dit le directeur.

Cette explication donnée, le directeur passa outre.

Claude baissa la tête et ne répliqua pas. Pauvre lion en cage à qui l'on ôtait son chien!

Nous sommes forcé de dire que le chagrin de cette séparation n'altéra en rien la voracité en quelque sorte maladive du prisonnier. Rien d'ailleurs ne parut sensiblement changé en lui. Il ne parlait d'Albin à aucun de ses camarades. Il se promenait seul dans le préau aux heures de récréation, et il avait faim. Rien de plus.

Cependant ceux qui le connaissaient bien remarquaient quelque chose de sinistre et de sombre qui s'épaississait chaque jour de plus en plus sur son visage. Du reste, il était plus doux que jamais.

Plusieurs voulurent partager leur ration avec lui, il refusa en souriant.

Tous les soirs, depuis l'explication que lui avait donnée le directeur, il faisait une espèce de chose folle qui étonnait de la part d'un homme aussi sérieux. Au moment où le directeur, ramené à heure fixe par sa tournée habituelle, passait devant le métier de Claude, Claude levait les yeux et le regardait fixement, puis il lui adressait d'un ton plein d'angoisse et de colère, qui tenait à la fois de la prière et de la menace, ces deux mots seulement: *Et Albin?* Le directeur faisait semblant de ne pas entendre ou s'éloignait en haussant les épaules.

Cet homme avait tort de hausser les épaules, car il était évident pour tous les spectateurs de ces scènes étranges que Claude Gueux était intérieurement déterminé à quelque chose. Toute la prison attendait avec anxiété quel serait le résultat de cette lutte entre une ténacité et une résolution.

Il a été constaté qu'une fois entre autres Claude dit au directeur:

— Écoutez, monsieur, rendez-moi mon camarade. Vous ferez bien, je vous assure. Remarquez que je vous dis cela.

Une autre fois, un dimanche, comme il se tenait dans le préau, assis sur une pierre, les coudes sur les genoux et son front dans ses mains, immobile depuis plusieurs heures dans la même attitude, le condamné Faillette s'approcha de lui, et lui cria en riant:

— Que diable fais-tu donc là, Claude?

Claude leva lentement sa tête sévère, et dit

— *Je juge quelqu'un.*

Un soir enfin, le 25 octobre 1831, au moment où le directeur faisait sa ronde, Claude brisa sous son pied avec bruit un verre de montre qu'il avait trouvé le matin dans un corridor. Le directeur demanda d'où venait ce bruit.

— Ce n'est rien, dit Claude, c'est moi. Monsieur le directeur, rendez-moi mon camarade.

— Impossible, dit le maître.

— Il le faut pourtant, dit Claude d'une voix basse et ferme; et, regardant le directeur en face, il ajouta:

— Réfléchissez. Nous sommes aujourd'hui le 25 octobre. Je vous donne jusqu'au 4 novembre.

Un guichetier fit remarquer à M. D. que Claude le menaçait, et que c'était un cas de cachot.

— Non, point de cachot, dit le directeur avec un sourire dédaigneux; il faut être bon avec ces gens-là!

Le lendemain, le condamné Pernot aborda Claude, qui se promenait seul et pensif, laissant les autres prisonniers s’ébattre dans un petit carré de soleil à l’autre bout de la cour.

— Eh bien! Claude, à quoi songes-tu? tu parais triste.

— *Je crains,* dit Claude, *qu’il n’arrive bientôt quelque malheur à ce bon M. D.*

Il y a neuf jours pleins du 25 octobre au 4 novembre. Claude n’en laissa pas passer un sans avertir gravement le directeur de l’état de plus en plus douloureux où le mettait la disparition d’Albin. Le directeur, fatigué, lui infligea une fois vingt-quatre heures de cachot, parce que la prière ressemblait trop à une sommation. Voilà tout ce que Claude obtint.

Le 4 novembre arriva. Ce jour-là, Claude s’éveilla avec un visage serein qu’on ne lui avait pas encore vu depuis le jour où la *décision* de M. D. l’avait séparé de son ami. En se levant, il fouilla dans une espèce de caisse de bois blanc qui était au pied de son lit, et qui contenait ses quelques guenilles. Il en tira une paire de ciseaux de couturière. C’était, avec un volume dépareillé de l’*Émile*, la seule chose qui lui restât de la femme qu’il avait aimée, de la mère de son enfant, de son heureux petit ménage d’autrefois. Deux meubles bien inutiles pour Claude; les ciseaux ne pouvaient servir qu’à une femme, le livre qu’à un lettré. Claude ne savait ni coudre ni lire.

Au moment où il traversait le vieux cloître déshonoré et blanchi à la chaux qui sert de promenoir l’hiver, il s’approcha du condamné Ferrari, qui regardait avec attention les énormes barreaux d’une croisée. Claude tenait à la main la petite paire de ciseaux; il la montra à Ferrari en disant:

— Ce soir je couperai ces barreaux-ci avec ces ciseaux-là.

Ferrari, incrédule, se mit à rire, et Claude aussi.

Ce matin-là, il travailla avec plus d’ardeur qu’à l’ordinaire; jamais il n’avait fait si vite et si bien. Il parut attacher un certain prix à terminer dans la matinée un chapeau de paille que lui avait payé d’avance un honnête bourgeois de Troyes, M. Bressier.

Un peu avant midi, il descendit sous un prétexte à l’atelier des menuisiers, situé au rez-de-chaussée, au-dessous de l’étage où il travaillait. Claude était aimé là comme ailleurs, mais il y entrait rarement. Aussi:

— Tiens! voilà Claude!

On l’entoura. Ce fut une fête. Claude jeta un coup d’œil rapide dans là salle. Pas un des surveillants n’y était.

— Qui est-ce qui a une hache à me prêter? dit-il.

— Pourquoi faire? lui demanda-t-on.

Il répondit:

— C’est pour tuer ce soir le directeur des ateliers.

On lui présenta plusieurs haches à choisir. Il prit la plus petite, qui était fort tranchante, la cacha dans son pantalon, et sortit. Il y avait là vingt-sept prisonniers. Il ne leur avait pas recommandé le secret. Tous le gardèrent.

Ils ne causèrent même pas de la chose entre eux.

Chacun attendit de son côté ce qui arriverait. L’affaire était terrible, droite et simple. Pas de complication possible. Claude ne pouvait être ni conseillé ni dénoncé.

Une heure après, il aborda un jeune condamné de seize ans qui bâillait dans le promenoir, et lui conseilla d’apprendre à lire. En ce moment, le détenu Faillette accosta Claude, et lui demanda ce que diable il cachait là dans son pantalon. Claude dit:

— C’est une hache pour tuer M. D. ce soir.

Il ajouta:

— Est-ce que cela se voit?

— Un peu, dit Faillette.

Le reste de la journée fut à l’ordinaire. À sept heures du soir, on renferma les prisonniers, chaque section dans l’atelier qui lui était assigné; et les surveillants sortirent des salles de travail, comme il paraît que c’est l’habitude, pour ne rentrer qu’après la ronde du directeur.

Claude Gueux fut donc verrouillé comme les autres dans son atelier avec ses compagnons de métier.

Alors il se passa dans cet atelier une scène extraordinaire, une scène qui n’est ni sans majesté ni sans terreur, la seule de ce genre qu’aucune histoire puisse raconter.

Il y avait là, ainsi que l’a constaté l’instruction judiciaire qui a eu lieu depuis, quatrevingt-deux voleurs, y compris Claude.

Une fois que les surveillants les eurent laissés seuls, Claude se leva debout sur son banc, et annonça à toute la chambrée qu’il avait quelque chose à dire. On fit silence.

Alors Claude haussa la voix et dit:

— Vous savez tous qu’Albin était mon frère. Je n’ai pas assez de ce qu’on me donne ici pour manger. Même en n’achetant que du pain avec le peu que je gagne, cela ne suffirait pas. Albin partageait sa ration avec moi; je l’ai aimé d’abord parce qu’il m’a nourri, ensuite parce qu’il m’a aimé. Le directeur, M. D., nous a séparés. Cela ne lui faisait rien que nous fussions ensemble; mais c’est un méchant homme, qui jouit de tourmenter. Je lui ai redemandé Albin. Vous avez vu, il n’a pas voulu. Je lui ai donné jusqu’au 4 novembre pour me rendre Albin. Il m’a fait mettre au cachot pour avoir dit cela. Moi, pendant ce temps-là, je l’ai jugé et je l’ai condamné à mort. Nous sommes au 4 novembre. Il viendra dans deux heures faire sa tournée. Je vous préviens que je vais le tuer. Avez-vous quelque chose à dire à cela?

Tous gardèrent le silence.

Claude reprit. Il parla, à ce qu’il paraît, avec une éloquence singulière, qui d’ailleurs lui était naturelle. Il déclara qu’il savait bien qu’il allait faire une action violente, mais qu’il ne croyait pas avoir tort. Il attesta la conscience des quatrevingt-un voleurs qui l’écoutaient:

Qu’il était dans une rude extrémité;

Que la nécessité de se faire justice soi-même était un cul-de-sac où l’on se trouvait engagé quelquefois;

Qu’à la vérité il ne pouvait prendre la vie du directeur sans donner la sienne propre, mais qu’il trouvait bon de donner sa vie pour une chose juste;

Qu’il avait mûrement réfléchi, et à cela seulement, depuis deux mois;

Qu’il croyait bien ne pas se laisser entraîner par le ressentiment, mais que, dans le cas où cela serait, il suppliait qu’on l’en avertît;

Qu’il soumettait honnêtement ses raisons aux hommes justes qui l’écoutaient;

Qu’il allait donc tuer M. D., mais que, si quelqu’un avait une objection à lui faire, il était prêt à l’écouter.

Une voix seulement s’éleva, et dit qu’avant de tuer le directeur, Claude devait essayer une dernière fois de lui parler et de le fléchir.

— C’est juste, dit Claude, et je le ferai.

Huit heures sonnèrent à la grande horloge. Le directeur devait venir à neuf heures.

Une fois que cette étrange cour de cassation eut en quelque sorte ratifié la sentence qu’il avait portée, Claude reprit toute sa sérénité. Il mit sur une table tout ce qu’il possédait en linge et en vêtements, la pauvre dépouille du prisonnier, et, appelant l’un après l’autre ceux de ses compagnons qu’il aimait le plus après Albin, il leur distribua tout. Il ne garda que la petite paire de ciseaux.

Puis il les embrassa tous. Quelques-uns pleuraient, il souriait à ceux-là.

Il y eut, dans cette heure dernière, des instants où il causa avec tant de tranquillité et même de gaieté, que plusieurs de ses camarades espéraient intérieurement, comme ils l'ont déclaré depuis, qu'il abandonnerait peut-être sa résolution. Il s'amusa même une fois à éteindre une des rares chandelles qui éclairaient l'atelier avec le souffle de sa narine, car il avait de mauvaises habitudes d'éducation qui dérangeaient sa dignité naturelle plus souvent qu'il n'aurait fallu. Rien ne pouvait faire que cet ancien gamin des rues n'eût point par moments l'odeur du ruisseau de Paris.

Il aperçut un jeune condamné qui était pâle, qui le regardait avec des yeux fixes, et qui tremblait, sans doute dans l'attente de ce qu'il allait voir.

— Allons, du courage, jeune homme! lui dit Claude doucement, ce ne sera que l'affaire d'un instant.

Quand il eut distribué toutes ses hardes, fait tous ses adieux, serré toutes les mains, il interrompit quelques causeries inquiètes qui se faisaient çà et là dans les coins obscurs de l'atelier, et il commanda qu'on se remît au travail. Tous obéirent en silence.

L'atelier où ceci se passait était une salle oblongue, un long parallélogramme percé de fenêtres sur ses deux grands côtés, et de deux portes qui se regardaient à ses deux extrémités. Les métiers étaient rangés de chaque côté près des fenêtres, les bancs touchant le mur à angle droit, et l'espace resté libre entre les deux rangées de métiers formait une sorte de longue voie qui allait en ligne droite de l'une des portes à l'autre et traversait ainsi toute la salle. C'était cette longue voie, assez étroite, que le directeur avait à parcourir en faisant son inspection; il devait entrer par la porte sud et ressortir par la porte nord, après avoir regardé les travailleurs à droite et à gauche. D'ordinaire il faisait ce trajet assez rapidement et sans s'arrêter.

Claude s'était replacé lui-même à son banc, et il s'était remis au travail, comme Jacques Clément se fût remis, à la prière.

Tous attendaient. Le moment approchait. Tout à coup on entendit un coup de cloche. Claude dit:

— C'est l'avant-quart.

Alors il se leva, traversa gravement une partie de la salle, et alla s'accouder sur l'angle du premier métier à gauche, tout à côté de la porte d’entrée. Son visage était parfaitement calme et bienveillant.

Neuf heures sonnèrent. La porte s’ouvrit. Le directeur entra.

En ce moment-là, il se fit dans l’atelier un silence de statues.

Le directeur était seul comme d’habitude.

Il entra avec sa figure joviale, satisfaite et inexorable, ne vit pas Claude qui était debout à gauche de la porte, la main droite cachée dans son pantalon, et passa rapidement devant les premiers métiers, hochant la tête, mâchant ses paroles, et jetant çà et là son regard banal, sans s’apercevoir que tous les yeux qui l’entouraient étaient fixés sur une idée terrible.

Tout à coup il se détourna brusquement, surpris d’entendre un pas derrière lui.

C’était Claude, qui le suivait en silence depuis quelques instants.

— Que fais-tu là, toi? dit le directeur; pourquoi n’es-tu pas à ta place?

Car un homme n’est plus un homme là, c’est un chien, on le tutoie.

Claude Gueux répondit respectueusement:

— C’est que j’ai à vous parler, monsieur le directeur.

— De quoi?

— D’Albin.

— Encore! dit le directeur.

— Toujours! dit Claude.

— Ah çà! reprit le directeur continuant de marcher, tu n’as donc pas eu assez de vingt-quatre heures de cachot?

Claude répondit en continuant de le suivre:

— Monsieur le directeur, rendez-moi mon camarade.

— Impossible!

— Monsieur le directeur, dit Claude avec une voix qui eût attendri le démon, je vous en supplie, remettez Albin avec moi, vous verrez comme je travaillerai bien. Vous qui êtes libre, cela vous est égal, vous ne savez pas ce que c’est qu’un ami; mais, moi, je n’ai que les quatre murs de ma prison. Vous pouvez aller et venir, vous; moi je n’ai qu’Albin. Rendez-le-moi. Albin me nourrissait, vous le savez bien. Cela ne vous coûterait que la peine de dire oui. Qu’est-ce que cela vous fait qu’il y ait dans la même salle un homme qui s’appelle Claude Gueux et un autre qui s’appelle Albin? Car ce n’est pas plus compliqué que cela. Monsieur le directeur, mon bon monsieur D. , je vous supplie vraiment, au nom du ciel!

Claude n’en avait peut-être jamais tant dit à la fois à un geôlier. Après cet effort, épuisé, il attendit. Le directeur répliqua avec un geste d’impatience:

— Impossible. C’est dit. Voyons, ne m’en reparle plus. Tu m’ennuies.

Et, comme il était pressé, il doubla le pas. Claude aussi. En parlant ainsi, ils étaient arrivés tous deux près de la porte de sortie; les quatrevingts voleurs regardaient et écoutaient, haletants.

Claude toucha doucement le bras du directeur.

— Mais au moins que je sache pourquoi je suis condamné à mort. Dites-moi pourquoi vous l’avez séparé de moi.

— Je te l’ai déjà dit, répondit le directeur, parce que.

Et, tournant le dos à Claude, il avança la main vers le loquet de la porte de sortie.

À la réponse du directeur, Claude avait reculé d’un pas. Les quatrevingts statues qui étaient là virent sortir de son pantalon sa main droite avec la hache. Cette main se leva, et, avant que le directeur eût pu pousser un cri, trois coups de hache, chose affreuse à dire, assénés tous les trois dans la même entaille, lui avaient ouvert le crâne. Au moment où il tombait à la renverse, un quatrième coup lui balafra le visage; puis, comme une fureur lancée ne s’arrête pas court, Claude Gueux lui fendit la cuisse droite d’un cinquième coup inutile. Le directeur était mort.

Alors Claude jeta la hache et cria: *À l’autre maintenant!* L’autre, c’était lui. On le vit tirer de sa veste les petits ciseaux de « sa femme”, et, sans que personne songeât à l’en empêcher, il se les enfonça dans la poitrine. La laine était courte, la poitrine était profonde. Il y fouilla longtemps et à plus de vingt reprises en criant — Cœur de damné, je ne te trouverai donc pas! — Et enfin il tomba baigné dans son sang, évanoui sur le mort.

Lequel des deux était la victime de l’autre?

Quand Claude reprit connaissance, il était dans un lit, couvert de linges et de bandages, entouré de soins. Il avait auprès de son chevet de bonnes sœurs de charité, et de plus un juge d’instruction qui instrumentait et qui lui demanda avec beaucoup d’intérêt:

— *Comment vous trouvez-vous?*

Il avait perdu une grande quantité de sang, mais les ciseaux avec lesquels il avait eu la superstition touchante de se frapper avaient mal fait leur devoir; aucun des coups qu’il s’était portés n’était dangereux. Il n’y avait de mortelles pour lui que les blessures qu’il avait faites à M. D.

Les interrogatoires commencèrent. On lui demanda si c’était lui qui avait tué le directeur des ateliers de la prison de Clairvaux. Il répondit: *Oui.* On lui demanda pourquoi. Il répondit: *Parce que.*

Cependant, à un certain moment, ses plaies s'envenimèrent; il fut pris d'une fièvre mauvaise dont il faillit mourir.

Novembre, décembre, janvier et février se passèrent en soins et en préparatifs; médecins et juges s'empressaient autour de Claude; les uns guérissaient ses blessures, les autres dressaient son échafaud.

Abrégeons. Le 16 mars 1832, il parut, étant parfaitement guéri, devant la cour d'assises de Troyes. Tout ce que la ville peut donner de foule était là.

Claude eut une bonne attitude devant la cour. Il s'était fait raser avec soin, il avait la tête nue, il portait ce morne habit des prisonniers de Clairvaux, mi-parti de deux espèces de gris.

Le procureur du roi avait encombré la salle de toutes les bayonnettes de l'arrondissement, « afin, dit-il à l'audience, de contenir tous les scélérats qui devaient figurer comme témoins dans cette affaire".

Lorsqu'il fallut entamer les débats, il se présenta une difficulté singulière. Aucun des témoins des événements du 4 novembre ne voulait déposer contre Claude. Le président les menaça de son pouvoir discrétionnaire. Ce fut en vain. Claude alors leur commanda de déposer. Toutes les langues se délièrent. Ils dirent ce qu'ils avaient vu.

Claude les écoutait tous avec une profonde attention. Quand l'un d'eux, par oubli, ou par affection pour Claude, omettait des faits à la charge de l'accusé, Claude les rétablissait.

De témoignage en témoignage, la série des faits que nous venons de développer se déroula devant la cour.

Il y eut un moment où les femmes qui étaient là pleurèrent. L'huissier appela le condamné Albin. C'était son tour de déposer. Il entra en chancelant; il sanglotait. Les gendarmes ne purent empêcher qu'il n'allât tomber dans les bras de Claude. Claude le soutint et dit en souriant au procureur du roi — Voilà un scélérat qui partage son pain avec ceux qui ont faim.

— Puis il baisa la main d'Albin.

La liste des témoins épuisée, monsieur le procureur du roi se leva et prit la parole en ces termes — Messieurs les jurés, la société serait ébranlée jusque dans ses fondements, si la vindicte publique n'atteignait pas les grands coupables comme celui qui, etc.

Après ce discours mémorable, l'avocat de Claude parla. La plaidoirie contre et la plaidoirie pour firent, chacune à leur tour, les évolutions qu’elles ont coutume de faire dans cette espèce d’hippodrome qu’on appelle un procès criminel.

Claude jugea que tout n’était pas dit. Il se leva à son tour. Il parla de telle sorte qu’une personne intelligente qui assistait à cette audience s’en revint frappée d’étonnement.

Il paraît que ce pauvre ouvrier contenait bien plutôt un orateur qu’un assassin. Il parla debout, avec une voix pénétrante et bien ménagée, avec un œil clair, honnête et résolu, avec un geste presque toujours le même, mais plein d’empire. Il dit les choses comme elles étaient, simplement, sérieusement, sans charger ni amoindrir, convint de tout, regarda l’article 296 en face, et posa sa tête dessous. Il eut des moments de véritable haute éloquence qui faisaient remuer la foule, et où l’on se répétait à l’oreille dans l’auditoire ce qu’il venait de dire.

Cela faisait un murmure pendant lequel Claude reprenait haleine en jetant un regard fier sur les assistants.

Dans d’autres instants, cet homme qui ne savait pas lire était doux, poli, choisi, comme un lettré; puis, par moments encore, modeste, mesuré, attentif, marchant pas à pas dans la partie irritante de la discussion, bienveillant pour les juges.

Une fois seulement, il se laissa aller à une secousse de colère. Le procureur du roi avait établi dans le discours que nous avons cité en entier que Claude Gueux avait assassiné le directeur des ateliers sans voie de fait ni violence de la part du directeur, par conséquent *sans provocation.*

— Quoi! s’écria Claude, je n’ai pas été provoqué! Ah! oui, vraiment, c’est juste, je vous comprends. Un homme ivre me donne un coup de poing, je le tue, j’ai été provoqué, vous me faites grâce, vous m’envoyez aux galères. Mais un homme qui n’est pas ivre et qui a toute sa raison me comprime le cœur pendant quatre ans, m’humilie pendant quatre ans, me pique tous les jours, toutes les heures, toutes les minutes, d’un coup d’épingle à quelque place inattendue pendant quatre ans! J’avais une femme pour qui j’ai volé, il me torture avec cette femme; j’avais un enfant pour qui j’ai volé, il me torture avec cet enfant; je n’ai pas assez de pain, un ami m’en donne, il m’ôte mon ami et mon pain. Je redemande mon ami, il me met au cachot. Je lui dis *vous*, à lui mouchard, il me dit *tu*. Je lui dis que je souffre, il me dit que je l’ennuie. Alors que voulez-vous que je fasse? Je le tue. C’est bien, je suis un monstre, j’ai tué cet homme, je n’ai pas été provoqué, vous me coupez la tête. Faites.

Mouvement sublime, selon nous, qui faisait tout à coup surgir, au-dessus du système de la provocation matérielle, sur lequel s'appuie l'échelle mal proportionnée des circonstances atténuantes, toute une théorie de la provocation morale oubliée par la loi.

Les débats fermés, le président fit son résumé impartial et lumineux. Il en résulta ceci. Une vilaine vie. Un monstre en effet. Claude Gueux avait commencé par vivre en concubinage avec une fille publique, puis il avait volé, puis il avait tué. Tout cela était vrai.

Au moment d'envoyer les jurés dans leur chambre, le président demanda à l'accusé s'il avait quelque chose à dire sur la position des questions.

— Peu de chose, dit Claude. Voici, pourtant. Je suis un voleur et un assassin; j'ai volé et tué. Mais pourquoi ai-je volé? pourquoi ai-je tué? Posez ces deux questions à côté des autres, messieurs les jurés.

Après un quart d'heure de délibération, sur la déclaration des douze champenois qu'on appelait *messieurs les jurés*, Claude Gueux fut condamné à mort.

Il est certain que, dès l'ouverture des débats, plusieurs d'entre eux avaient remarqué que l'accusé s'appelait *Gueux*, ce qui leur avait fait une impression profonde.

On lut son arrêt à Claude, qui se contenta de dire:

— *C'est bien. Mais pourquoi cet homme a-t-il volé? Pourquoi cet homme a-t-il tué? Voilà deux questions auxquelles ils ne répondent pas.*

Rentré dans la prison, il soupa gaiement et dit:

— Trente-six ans de faits!

Il ne voulut pas se pourvoir en cassation. Une des sœurs qui l'avaient soigné vint l'en prier avec larmes. Il se pourvut par complaisance pour elle. Il paraît qu'il résista jusqu'au dernier instant, car, au moment où il signa son pourvoi sur le registre du greffé; le délai légal des trois jours était expiré depuis quelques minutes.

La pauvre fille reconnaissante lui donna cinq francs. Il prit l'argent et la remercia.

Pendant que son pourvoi pendait, des offres d'évasion lui furent faites par les prisonniers de Troyes, qui s'y dévouaient tous. Il refusa.

Les détenus jetèrent successivement dans son cachot, par le soupirail, un clou, un morceau de fil de fer et une anse de seau. Chacun de ces trois outils eût suffi, à un homme aussi intelligent que l'était Claude, pour limer ses fers. Il remit l'anse, le fil de fer et le clou au guichetier.

Le 8 juin 1832, sept mois et quatre jours après le fait, l’expiation arriva, *pede claudo*, comme on voit. Ce jour-là, à sept heures du matin, le greffier du tribunal entra dans le cachot de Claude, et lui annonça qu’il n’avait plus qu’une heure à vivre.

Son pourvoi était rejeté.

— Allons, dit Claude froidement, j’ai bien dormi cette nuit, sans me douter que je dormirais encore mieux la prochaine.

Il paraît que les paroles des hommes forts doivent toujours recevoir de l’approche de la mort une certaine grandeur.

Le prêtre arriva, puis le bourreau. Il fut humble avec le prêtre, doux avec l’autre. Il ne refusa ni son âme, ni son corps.

Il conserva une liberté d’esprit parfaite. Pendant qu’on lui coupait les cheveux, quelqu’un parla, dans un coin du cachot, du choléra qui menaçait Troyes en ce moment.

— Quant à moi, dit Claude avec un sourire, je n’ai pas peur du choléra.

Il écoutait d’ailleurs le prêtre avec une attention extrême, en s’accusant beaucoup et en regrettant de n’avoir pas été instruit dans la religion.

Sur sa demande, on lui avait rendu les ciseaux avec lesquels il s’était frappé. Il y manquait une lame, qui s’était brisée dans sa poitrine. Il pria le geôlier de faire porter de sa part ces ciseaux à Albin. Il dit aussi qu’il désirait qu’on ajoutât à ce legs la ration de pain qu’il aurait dû manger ce jour-là.

Il pria ceux qui lui lièrent les mains de mettre dans sa main droite la pièce de cinq francs que lui avait donnée la sœur, la seule chose qui lui restât désormais.

À huit heures moins un quart, il sortit de la prison, avec tout le lugubre cortège ordinaire des condamnés. Il était à pied, pâle, l’oeil fixé sur le crucifix du prêtre, mais marchant d’un pas ferme.

On avait choisi ce jour-là pour l’exécution, parce que c’était jour de marché, afin qu’il y eût le plus de regards possible sur son passage; car il paraît qu’il y a encore en France des bourgades à demi sauvages où, quand la société tue un homme, elle s’en vante.

Il monta sur l’échafaud gravement, l’œil toujours fixé sur le gibet du Christ. Il voulut embrasser le prêtre, puis le bourreau, remerciant l’un, pardonnant à l’autre. Le bourreau *le repoussa doucement*, dit une relation. Au moment où l’aide le liait sur la hideuse mécanique, il fit signe au prêtre de prendre la pièce de cinq francs qu’il avait dans sa main droite, et lui dit:

— *Pour les pauvres.*

Comme huit heures sonnaient en ce moment, le bruit du beffroi de l’horloge couvrit sa voix, et le confesseur lui répondit qu’il n’entendait pas. Claude attendit l’intervalle de deux coups et répéta avec douceur:

— *Pour les pauvres.*

Le huitième coup n’était pas encore sonné que cette noble et intelligente tête était tombée.

Admirable effet des exécutions publiques! ce jour-là même, la machine étant encore debout au milieu d’eux et pas lavée, les gens du marché s’ameutèrent pour une question de tarif et faillirent massacrer un employé de l’octroi. Le doux peuple que vous font ces lois-là!

Nous avons cru devoir raconter en détail l’histoire de Claude Gueux, parce que, selon nous, tous les paragraphes de cette histoire pourraient servir de têtes de chapitre au livre où serait résolu le grand problème du peuple au dix-neuvième siècle.

Dans cette vie importante il y a deux phases principales: avant la chute, après la chute; et, sous ces deux phases, deux questions: question de l’éducation, question de la pénalité; et, entre ces deux questions, la société tout entière.

Cet homme, certes, était bien né, bien organisé, bien doué. Que lui a-t-il donc manqué? Réfléchissez.

C’est là le grand problème de proportion dont la solution, encore à trouver, donnera l’équilibre universel: *Que la société fasse toujours pour l’individu autant que la nature.*

Voyez Claude Gueux. Cerveau bien fait, cœur bien fait, sans nul doute. Mais le sort le met dans une société si mal faite, qu’il finit, par voler; la société le met dans une prison si mal faite, qu’il finit par tuer.

Qui est réellement coupable?

Est-ce lui?

Est-ce nous?

Questions sévères, questions poignantes, qui sollicitent à cette heure toutes les intelligences, qui nous tirent tous tant que nous sommes par le pan de notre habit, et qui nous barreront un jour si complètement le chemin, qu’il faudra bien les regarder en face et savoir ce qu’elles nous veulent.

Celui qui écrit ces lignes essaiera de dire bientôt peut-être de quelle façon il les comprend.

Quand on est en présence de pareils faits, quand on songe à la manière dont ces questions nous pressent, on se demande à quoi pensent ceux qui gouvernent, s’ils ne pensent pas à cela.

Les Chambres, tous les ans, sont gravement occupées.

Il est sans doute très important de désenfler les sinécures et d’écheniller le budget; il est très important de faire des lois pour que j’aille, déguisé en soldat, monter patriotiquement la garde à la porte de M. le comte de Lobau, que je ne connais pas et que je ne veux pas connaître, ou pour me contraindre à parader au carré Marigny, sous le bon plaisir de mon épicier, dont on a fait mon officier.

Il est important, députés ou ministres, de fatiguer et de tirailler toutes les choses et toutes les idées de ce pays dans des discussions pleines d’avortements; il est essentiel, par exemple, de mettre sur la sellette et d’interroger et de questionner à grands cris, et sans savoir ce qu’on dit, l’art du dix-neuvième siècle, ce grand et sévère accusé qui ne daigne pas répondre et qui fait bien; il est expédient de passer son temps, gouvernants et législateurs, en conférences classiques qui font hausser les épaules aux maîtres d’école de la banlieue; il est utile de déclarer que c’est le drame moderne qui a inventé l’inceste, l’adultère, le parricide, l’infanticide et l’empoisonnement, et de prouver par là qu’on ne connaît ni Phèdre, ni Jocaste, ni Œdipe, ni Médée, ni Rodogune; il est indispensable que les orateurs politiques de ce pays ferraillent, trois grands jours durant, à propos du budget, pour Corneille et Racine, contre on ne sait qui, et profitent de cette occasion littéraire pour s’enfoncer les uns les autres à qui mieux mieux dans la gorge de grandes fautes de français jusqu’à la garde.

Tout cela est important; nous croyons cependant qu’il pourrait y avoir des choses plus importantes encore.

Que dirait la Chambre, au milieu des futiles démêlés qui font si souvent colleter le ministère par l’opposition et l’opposition par le ministère, si, tout à coup, des bancs de la Chambre ou de la tribune publique, qu’importe? quelqu’un se levait et disait ces sérieuses paroles:

— Taisez-vous, qui que vous soyez, vous qui parlez ici, taisez-vous! vous croyez être dans la question, vous n’y êtes pas.

La question, la voici. La justice vient, il y a un an à peine, de déchiqueter un homme à Pamiers avec un eustache; à Dijon, elle vient d’arracher la tête à une femme; à Paris, elle fait, barrière Saint-Jacques, des exécutions inédites.

Ceci est la question. Occupez-vous de ceci.

Vous vous querellerez après pour savoir si les boutons de la garde nationale doivent être blancs ou jaunes, et si l'*assurance* est une plus belle chose que la *certitude*.

Messieurs des centres, messieurs des extrémités, le gros du peuple souffre!

Que vous l'appeliez république ou que vous l'appeliez monarchie, le peuple souffre, ceci est un fait.

Le peuple a faim, le peuple a froid. La misère le pousse au crime ou au vice, selon le sexe. Ayez pitié du peuple, à qui le bagne prend ses fils, et le lupanar ses filles. Vous avez trop de forçats, vous avez trop de prostituées.

Que prouvent ces deux ulcères?

Que le corps social a un vice dans le sang.

Vous voilà réunis en consultation au chevet du malade; occupez-vous de la maladie.

Cette maladie, vous la traitez mal. Étudiez-là mieux. Les lois que vous faites, quand vous en faites, ne sont que des palliatifs et des expédients. Une moitié de vos codes est routine, l'autre moitié empirisme.

La flétrissure était une cautérisation qui gangrenait la plaie; peine insensée que celle qui pour la vie scellait et rivait le crime sur le criminel! qui en faisait deux amis, deux compagnons, deux inséparables!

Le bagne est un vésicatoire absurde qui laisse résorber, non sans l'avoir rendu pire encore, presque tout le mauvais sang qu'il extrait. La peine de mort est une amputation barbare.

Or, flétrissure, bagne, peine de mort, trois choses qui se tiennent. Vous avez supprimé la flétrissure; si vous êtes logiques, supprimez le reste.

Le fer rouge, le boulet et le couperet, c'étaient les trois parties d'un syllogisme.

Vous avez ôté le fer rouge; le boulet et le couperet n'ont plus de sens. Farinace était atroce; mais il n'était pas absurde.

Démontez-moi cette vieille échelle boiteuse des crimes et des peines, et refaites-la. Refaites votre pénalité, refaites vos codes, refaites vos prisons, refaites vos juges. Remettez les lois au pas des mœurs.

Messieurs, il se coupe trop de têtes par an en France. Puisque vous êtes en train de faire des économies, faites-en là-dessus.

Puisque vous êtes en verve de suppressions, supprimez le bourreau. Avec la solde de vos quatrevingts bourreaux, vous payerez six cents maîtres d'école.

Songez au gros du peuple. Des écoles pour les enfants, des ateliers pour les hommes.

Savez-vous que la France est un des pays de l'Europe où il y a le moins de natifs qui sachent lire! Quoi! là Suisse sait lire, la Belgique. sait lire, le Danemark sait lire, la Grèce sait lire, l'Irlande sait lire, et la France ne sait pas lire? c'est une honte.

Allez dans les bagnes. Appelez autour de vous toute la chiourme. Examinez un à un tous ces damnés de la loi humaine. Calculez l'inclinaison de tous ces profils, tâtez tous ces crânes. Chacun de ces hommes tombés a au-dessous de lui son type bestial; il semble que chacun d'eux soit le point d'intersection de telle ou telle espèce animale avec l'humanité. Voici le loup-cervier, voici le chat, voici le singe, voici le vautour, voici la hyène. Or, de ces pauvres têtes mal conformées, le premier tort est à la nature sans doute, le second à l'éducation.

La nature a mal ébauché, l'éducation a mal retouché l'ébauche. Tournez vos soins de ce côté. Une bonne éducation au peuple. Développez de votre mieux ces malheureuses têtes, afin que l'intelligence qui est dedans puisse grandir.

Les nations ont le crâne bien ou mal fait selon leurs institutions.

Rome et la Grèce avaient le front haut. Ouvrez le plus que vous pourrez l'angle facial du peuple.

Quand la France saura lire, ne laissez pas sans direction cette intelligence que vous aurez développée. Ce serait un autre désordre. L'ignorance vaut encore mieux que la mauvaise science. Non. Souvenez-vous qu'il y a un livre plus philosophique que *Le Compère Mathieu*, plus populaire que le *Constitutionnel*, plus éternel que la charte de 1830; c'est l'Écriture sainte. Et ici un mot d'explication.

Quoi que vous fassiez, le sort de la grande foule, de la multitude, de la *majorité*, sera toujours relativement pauvre, et malheureux, et triste. À elle le dur travail, les fardeaux à pousser, les fardeaux à traîner, les fardeaux à porter.

Examinez cette balance: toutes les jouissances dans le plateau du riche, toutes les misères dans le plateau du pauvre. Les deux parts ne sont-elles pas inégales? La balance ne doit-elle pas nécessairement pencher, et l'état avec elle?

Et maintenant dans le lot du pauvre, dans le plateau des misères, jetez la certitude d’un avenir céleste, jetez l’aspiration au bonheur éternel, jetez le paradis, contre-poids magnifique! Vous rétablissez l’équilibre. La part du pauvre est aussi riche que la part du riche.

C’est ce que savait Jésus, qui en savait plus long que Voltaire.

Donnez au peuple qui travaille et qui souffre, donnez au peuple, pour qui ce monde-ci est mauvais, la croyance à un meilleur monde fait pour lui.

Il sera tranquille, il sera patient. La patience est faite d’espérance.

Donc ensemencez les villages d’évangiles. Une bible par cabane. Que chaque livre et chaque champ produisent à eux deux un travailleur moral.

La tête de l’homme du peuple, voilà la question. Cette tête est pleine de germes utiles. Employez pour la faire mûrir et venir à bien ce qu’il y a de plus lumineux et de mieux tempéré dans la vertu.

Tel a assassiné sur les grandes routes qui, mieux dirigé, eût été le plus excellent serviteur de la cité.

Cette tête de l’homme du peuple, cultivez-la, défrichez-la, arrosez-la, fécondez-la, éclairez-la, moralisez-la, utilisez-la; vous n’aurez pas besoin de la couper.

LES MISÉRABLES

Translated by Isabel F. Hapgood

This famous 1862 novel is widely considered to be one of the greatest works of the nineteenth century. The narrative follows the lives and interactions of many French characters over a seventeen-year period in the early nineteenth century, starting in 1815 and culminating with the 1832 June Rebellion.

The novel focuses on the struggles of ex-convict Jean Valjean and his journey to redemption. While examining the nature of law and grace, *Les Misérables* also concerns the history of France, architecture of Paris, politics, moral philosophy, antimonarchism, justice, religion and many more themes.

Woven between various sub-plots, the main thread of *Les Misérables* is the story of Jean Valjean, known by his prison number 24601, who becomes a force for good in the world, but cannot escape his dark past. The novel is divided into five volumes, each volume divided into books, and subdivided into chapters (for a total of three hundred sixty-five chapters). Each chapter is relatively short, usually no longer than a few pages, though the novel is very large, numbering approximately 1,500 pages in most printed editions. As well as the main plots in the novel, Hugo fills many pages with his thoughts on religion, politics, and society, as well as including several lengthy digressions, one being a discussion on a famous convent, one on the construction of the Paris sewers, another being on argot and, most famously, his retelling of the Battle of Waterloo.

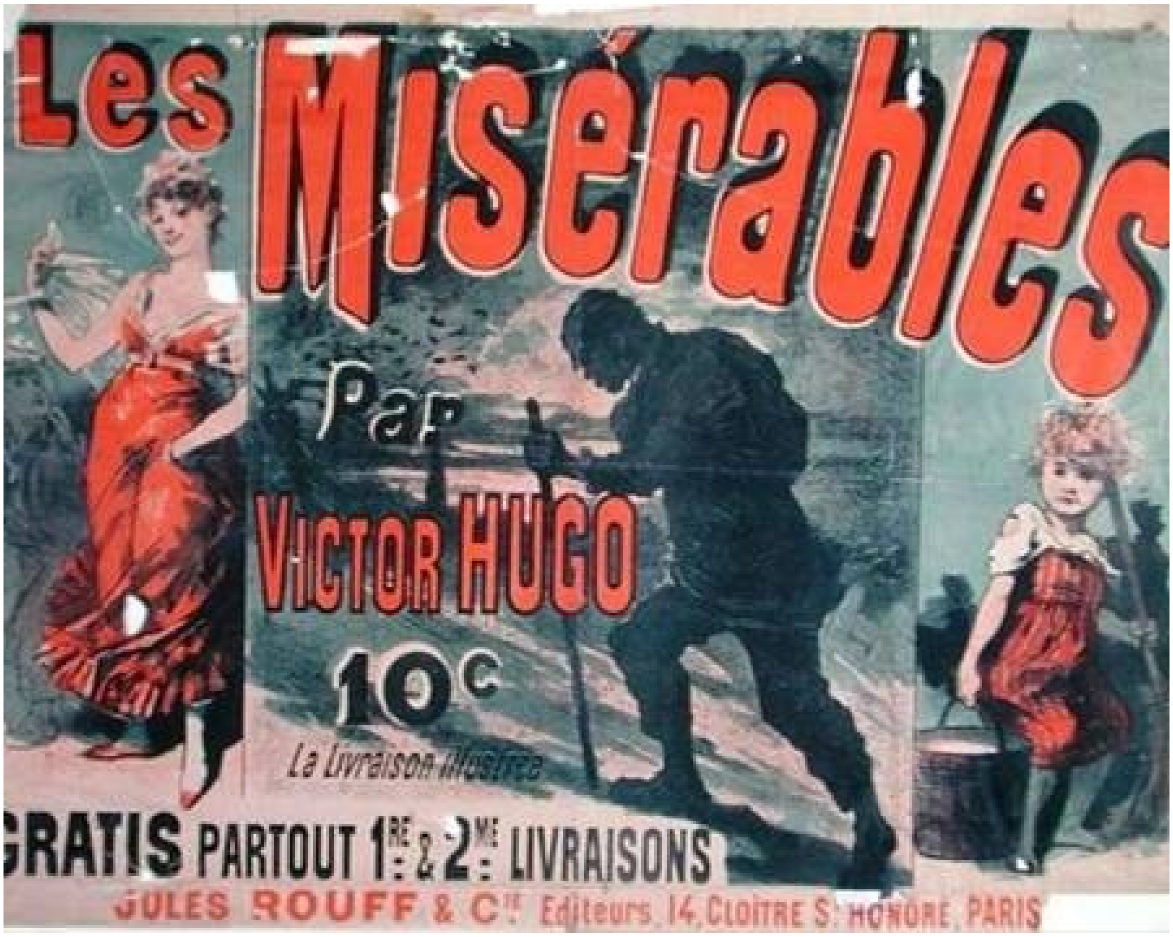
Les Misérables
Par
Victor Hugo
10c
La Livraison illustrée
GRATIS PARTOUT 1re & 2me LIVRAISONS
JULES ROUFF & Cie Editeurs, 14, Cloitre St Honoré, PARIS

One of Jules Cheret's popular illustrations, 1890

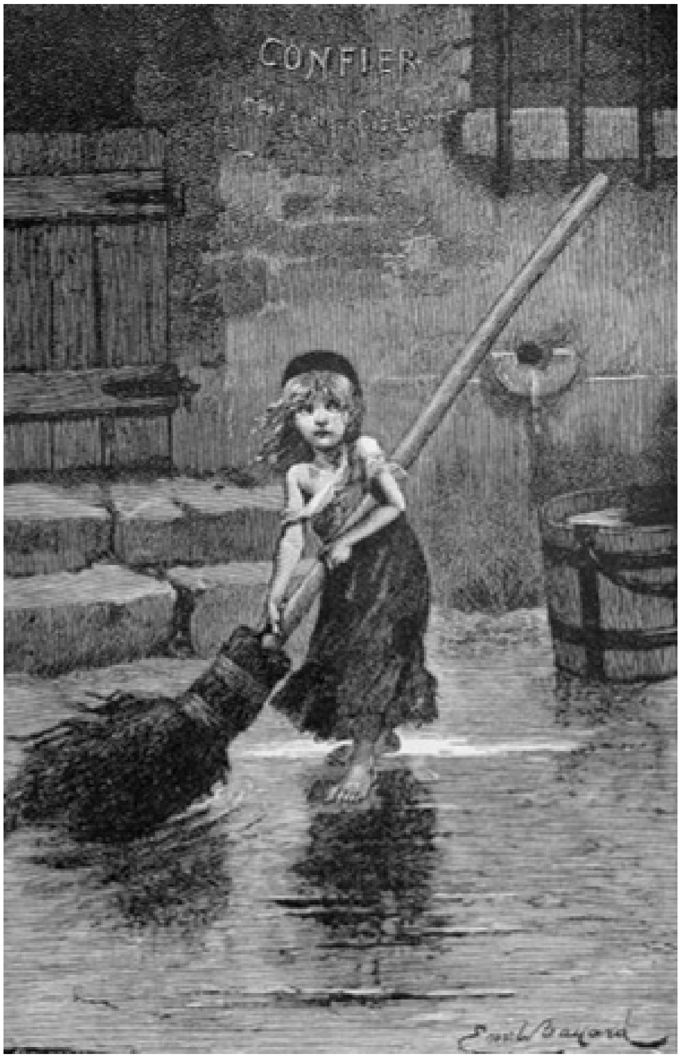

One of the original illustrations in the 1862 first edition

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The Paris of 1830, the setting of Les Misérables

GÉRARD DEPARDIEU, CHRISTIAN CLAVIER & JOHN MALKOVITCH
dans
Les Misérables
Un film réalisé par JOSÉE DAYAN
Musique composée et dirigée par JEAN-CLAUDE PETIT

The 2000 TV series of four episodes

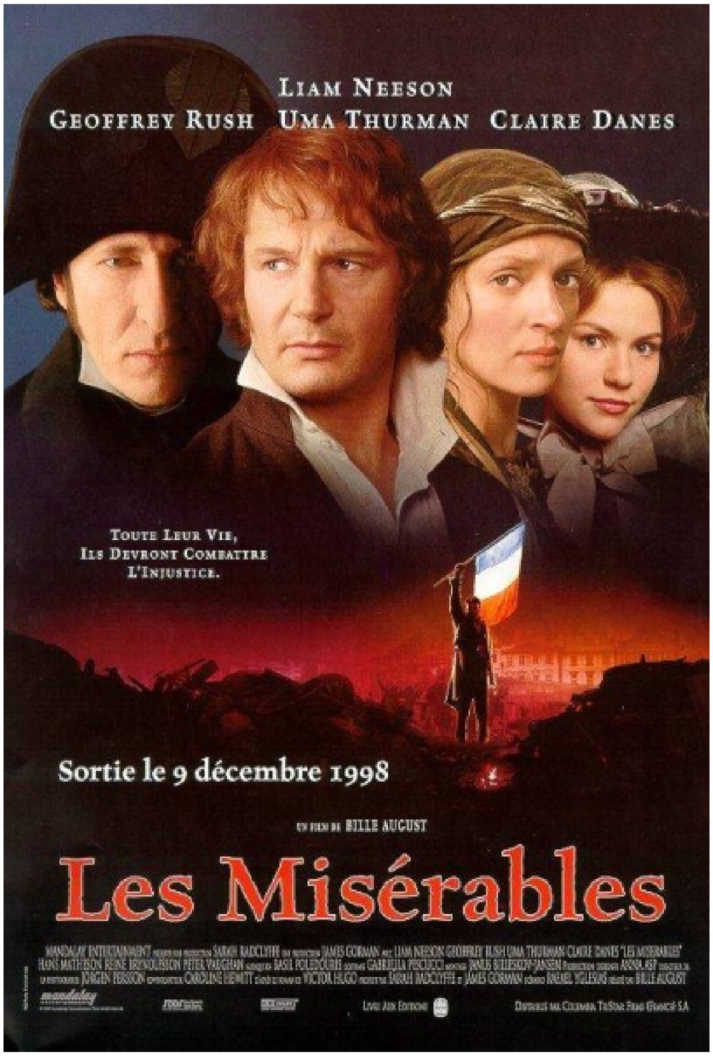
LIAM NEESON
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UMA THURMAN
CLAIRE DANES
TOUTE LEUR VIE,
ILS DEVRONT COMBATTRE
L'INJUSTICE.
Sortie le 9 décembre 1998
UN FILM DE BILLE AUGUST
Les Misérables

The 1998 Hollywood adaptation

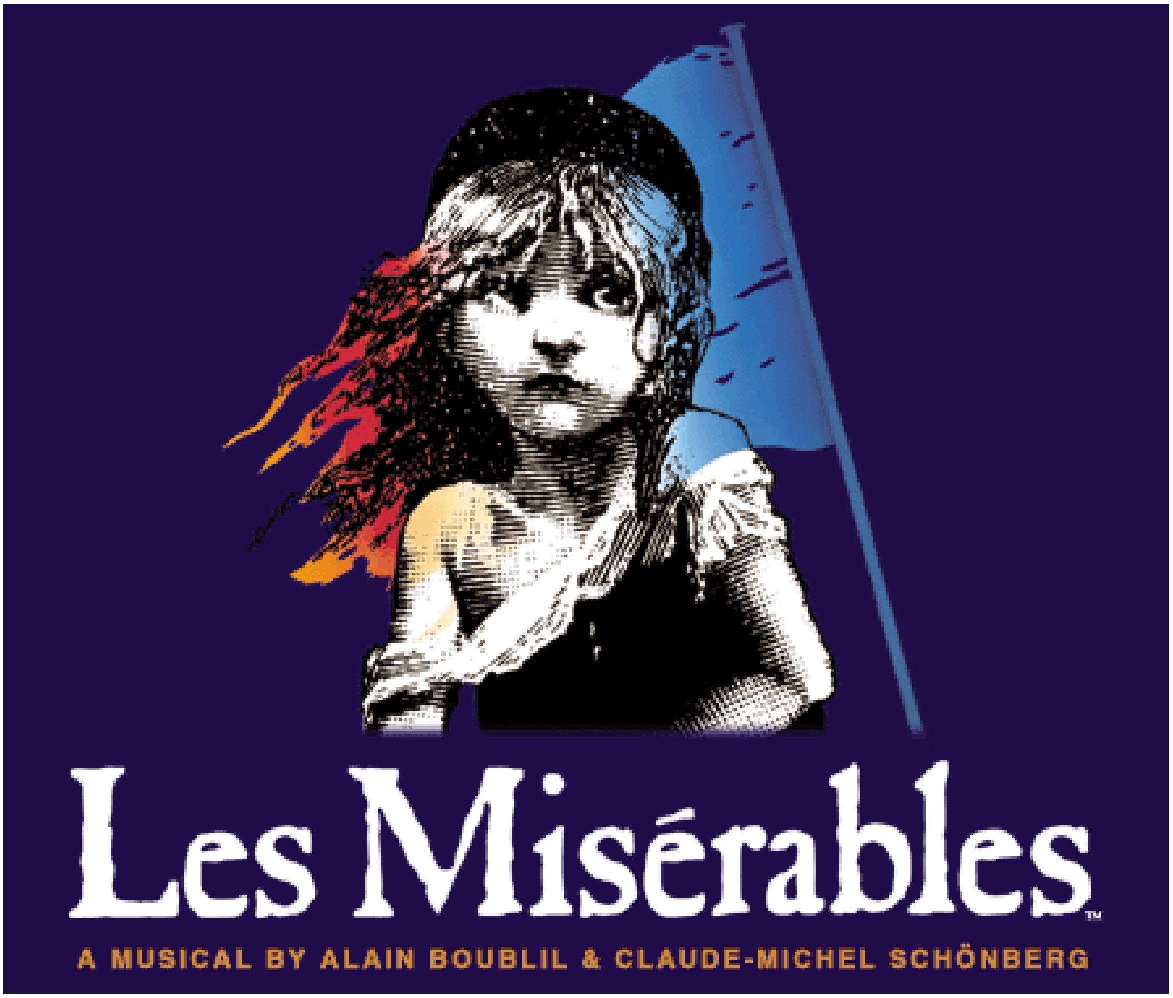
Les Misérables™
A MUSICAL BY ALAIN BOUBLIL & CLAUDE-MICHEL SCHÖNBERG

The poster for the 1985 stage musical, which has since sparked great interest in Hugo's works in English-speaking countries

MORE POWERFUL THAN EVER!
Les Misérables
LES MISÉRABLES
Les Misérables
GIELGUD
China to Argentina
'STILL LIKE A FIRST NIGHT'
QUEEN'S THEATRE
P436 RYM

The Queen's Theatre in London, where the award winning musical adaptation is still performed today

VOLUME I. — FANTINE.

PREFACE

So long as there shall exist, by virtue of law and custom, decrees of damnation pronounced by society, artificially creating hells amid the civilization of earth, and adding the element of human fate to divine destiny; so long as the three great problems of the century — the degradation of man through pauperism, the corruption of woman through hunger, the crippling of children through lack of light — are unsolved; so long as social asphyxia is possible in any part of the world; — in other words, and with a still wider significance, so long as ignorance and poverty exist on earth, books of the nature of Les Misérables cannot fail to be of use.

HAUTEVILLE HOUSE, 1862.

BOOK FIRST — A JUST MAN

CHAPTER I — M. MYRIEL

In 1815, M. Charles-Francois-Bienvenu Myriel was Bishop of D —— He was an old man of about seventy-five years of age; he had occupied the see of D —— since 1806.

Although this detail has no connection whatever with the real substance of what we are about to relate, it will not be superfluous, if merely for the sake of exactness in all points, to mention here the various rumors and remarks which had been in circulation about him from the very moment when he arrived in the diocese. True or false, that which is said of men often occupies as important a place in their lives, and above all in their destinies, as that which they do. M. Myriel was the son of a councillor of the Parliament of Aix; hence he belonged to the nobility of the bar. It was said that his father, destining him to be the heir of his own post, had married him at a very early age, eighteen or twenty, in accordance with a custom which is rather widely prevalent in parliamentary families. In spite of this marriage, however, it was said that Charles Myriel created a great deal of talk. He was well formed, though rather short in stature, elegant, graceful, intelligent; the whole of the first portion of his life had been devoted to the world and to gallantry.

The Revolution came; events succeeded each other with precipitation; the parliamentary families, decimated, pursued, hunted down, were dispersed. M. Charles Myriel emigrated to Italy at the very beginning of the Revolution. There his wife died of a malady of the chest, from which she had long suffered. He had no children. What took place next in the fate of M. Myriel? The ruin of the French society of the olden days, the fall of his own family, the tragic spectacles of ‘93, which were, perhaps, even more alarming to the emigrants who viewed them from a distance, with the magnifying powers of terror, — did these cause the ideas of renunciation and solitude to germinate in him? Was he, in the midst of these distractions, these affections which absorbed his life, suddenly smitten with one of those mysterious and terrible blows which sometimes overwhelm, by striking to his heart, a man whom public catastrophes would not shake, by striking at his existence and his fortune? No one could have told: all that was known was, that when he returned from Italy he was a priest.

In 1804, M. Myriel was the Curé of B —— [Brignolles]. He was already advanced in years, and lived in a very retired manner.

About the epoch of the coronation, some petty affair connected with his curacy — just what, is not precisely known — took him to Paris. Among other powerful persons to whom he went to solicit aid for his parishioners was M. le Cardinal Fesch. One day, when the Emperor had come to visit his uncle, the worthy Curé, who was waiting in the anteroom, found himself present when His Majesty passed. Napoleon, on finding himself observed with a certain curiosity by this old man, turned round and said abruptly: —

“Who is this good man who is staring at me?”

“Sire,” said M. Myriel, “you are looking at a good man, and I at a great man. Each of us can profit by it.”

That very evening, the Emperor asked the Cardinal the name of the Curé, and some time afterwards M. Myriel was utterly astonished to learn that he had been appointed Bishop of D ——

What truth was there, after all, in the stories which were invented as to the early portion of M. Myriel’s life? No one knew. Very few families had been acquainted with the Myriel family before the Revolution.

M. Myriel had to undergo the fate of every newcomer in a little town, where there are many mouths which talk, and very few heads which think. He was obliged to undergo it although he was a bishop, and because he was a bishop. But after all, the rumors with which his name was connected were rumors only, — noise, sayings, words; less than words — palabres, as the energetic language of the South expresses it.

However that may be, after nine years of episcopal power and of residence in D —— , all the stories and subjects of conversation which engross petty towns and petty people at the outset had fallen into profound oblivion. No one would have dared to mention them; no one would have dared to recall them.

M. Myriel had arrived at D —— accompanied by an elderly spinster, Mademoiselle Baptistine, who was his sister, and ten years his junior.

Their only domestic was a female servant of the same age as Mademoiselle Baptistine, and named Madame Magloire, who, after having been the servant of M. le Curé, now assumed the double title of maid to Mademoiselle and housekeeper to Monseigneur.

Mademoiselle Baptistine was a long, pale, thin, gentle creature; she realized the ideal expressed by the word “respectable”; for it seems that a woman must needs be a mother in order to be venerable. She had never been pretty; her whole life, which had been nothing but a succession of holy deeds, had finally conferred upon her a sort of pallor and transparency; and as she advanced in years she had acquired what may be called the beauty of goodness. What had been leanness in her youth had become transparency in her maturity; and this diaphaneity allowed the angel to be seen. She was a soul rather than a virgin. Her person seemed made of a shadow; there was hardly sufficient body to provide for sex; a little matter enclosing a light; large eyes forever drooping; — a mere pretext for a soul's remaining on the earth.

Madame Magloire was a little, fat, white old woman, corpulent and bustling; always out of breath, — in the first place, because of her activity, and in the next, because of her asthma.

On his arrival, M. Myriel was installed in the episcopal palace with the honors required by the Imperial decrees, which class a bishop immediately after a major-general. The mayor and the president paid the first call on him, and he, in turn, paid the first call on the general and the prefect.

The installation over, the town waited to see its bishop at work.

CHAPTER II — M. MYRIEL BECOMES M. WELCOME

The episcopal palace of D —— adjoins the hospital.

The episcopal palace was a huge and beautiful house, built of stone at the beginning of the last century by M. Henri Puget, Doctor of Theology of the Faculty of Paris, Abbé of Simore, who had been Bishop of D —— in 1712. This palace was a genuine seignorial residence. Everything about it had a grand air, — the apartments of the Bishop, the drawing-rooms, the chambers, the principal courtyard, which was very large, with walks encircling it under arcades in the old Florentine fashion, and gardens planted with magnificent trees. In the dining-room, a long and superb gallery which was situated on the ground-floor and opened on the gardens, M. Henri Puget had entertained in state, on July 29, 1714, My Lords Charles Brulart de Genlis, archbishop; Prince d'Embrun; Antoine de Mesgrigny, the capuchin, Bishop of Grasse; Philippe de Vendome, Grand Prior of France, Abbé of Saint Honore de Lerins; Francois de Berton de Crillon, bishop, Baron de Vence; Cesar de Sabran de Forcalquier, bishop, Seignor of Glandeve; and Jean Soanen, Priest of the Oratory, preacher in ordinary to the king, bishop, Seignor of Senez. The portraits of these seven reverend personages decorated this apartment; and this memorable date, the 29th of July, 1714, was there engraved in letters of gold on a table of white marble.

The hospital was a low and narrow building of a single story, with a small garden.

Three days after his arrival, the Bishop visited the hospital. The visit ended, he had the director requested to be so good as to come to his house.

“Monsieur the director of the hospital,” said he to him, “how many sick people have you at the present moment?”

“Twenty-six, Monseigneur.”

“That was the number which I counted,” said the Bishop.

“The beds,” pursued the director, “are very much crowded against each other.”

“That is what I observed.”

“The halls are nothing but rooms, and it is with difficulty that the air can be changed in them.”

“So it seems to me.”

“And then, when there is a ray of sun, the garden is very small for the convalescents.”

“That was what I said to myself.”

“In case of epidemics, — we have had the typhus fever this year; we had the sweating sickness two years ago, and a hundred patients at times, — we know not what to do.”

“That is the thought which occurred to me.”

“What would you have, Monseigneur?” said the director. “One must resign one’s self.”

This conversation took place in the gallery dining-room on the ground-floor.

The Bishop remained silent for a moment; then he turned abruptly to the director of the hospital.

“Monsieur,” said he, “how many beds do you think this hall alone would hold?”

“Monseigneur’s dining-room?” exclaimed the stupefied director.

The Bishop cast a glance round the apartment, and seemed to be taking measures and calculations with his eyes.

“It would hold full twenty beds,” said he, as though speaking to himself. Then, raising his voice: —

“Hold, Monsieur the director of the hospital, I will tell you something. There is evidently a mistake here. There are thirty-six of you, in five or six small rooms. There are three of us here, and we have room for sixty. There is some mistake, I tell you; you have my house, and I have yours. Give me back my house; you are at home here.”

On the following day the thirty-six patients were installed in the Bishop’s palace, and the Bishop was settled in the hospital.

M. Myriel had no property, his family having been ruined by the Revolution. His sister was in receipt of a yearly income of five hundred francs, which sufficed for her personal wants at the vicarage. M. Myriel received from the State, in his quality of bishop, a salary of fifteen thousand francs. On the very day when he took up his abode in the hospital, M. Myriel settled on the disposition of this sum once for all, in the following manner. We transcribe here a note made by his own hand: —

NOTE ON THE REGULATION OF MY HOUSEHOLD EXPENSES.

For the little seminary	1,500 livres
Society of the mission	100 “
For the Lazarists of Montdidier	100 “
Seminary for foreign missions in Paris	200 “
Congregation of the Holy Spirit	150 “
Religious establishments of the Holy Land	100 “
Charitable maternity societies	300 “
Extra, for that of Arles	50 “
Work for the amelioration of prisons	400 “
Work for the relief and delivery of prisoners	500 “
To liberate fathers of families incarcerated for debt	1,000 “
Addition to the salary of the poor teachers of the diocese	2,000 “
Public granary of the Hautes-Alpes	100 “
Congregation of the ladies of D —— , of Manosque, and of Sisteron, for the gratuitous instruction of poor girls	1,500 “
For the poor	6,000 “
My personal expenses	1,000 “
Total	15,000 “

M. Myriel made no change in this arrangement during the entire period that he occupied the see of D —— As has been seen, he called it regulating his household expenses.

This arrangement was accepted with absolute submission by Mademoiselle Baptistine. This holy woman regarded Monseigneur of D —— as at one and the same time her brother and her bishop, her friend according to the flesh and her superior according to the Church. She simply loved and venerated him. When he spoke, she bowed; when he acted, she yielded her adherence. Their only servant, Madame Magloire, grumbled a little. It will be observed that Monsieur the Bishop had reserved for himself only one thousand livres, which, added to the pension of Mademoiselle Baptistine, made fifteen hundred francs a year. On these fifteen hundred francs these two old women and the old man subsisted.

And when a village curate came to D —— , the Bishop still found means to entertain him, thanks to the severe economy of Madame Magloire, and to the intelligent administration of Mademoiselle Baptistine.

One day, after he had been in D —— about three months, the Bishop said: —

“And still I am quite cramped with it all!”

“I should think so!” exclaimed Madame Magloire. “Monseigneur has not even claimed the allowance which the department owes him for the expense of his carriage in town, and for his journeys about the diocese. It was customary for bishops in former days.”

“Hold!” cried the Bishop, “you are quite right, Madame Magloire.”

And he made his demand.

Some time afterwards the General Council took this demand under consideration, and voted him an annual sum of three thousand francs, under this heading: Allowance to M. the Bishop for expenses of carriage, expenses of posting, and expenses of pastoral visits.

This provoked a great outcry among the local burgesses; and a senator of the Empire, a former member of the Council of the Five Hundred which favored the 18 Brumaire, and who was provided with a magnificent senatorial office in the vicinity of the town of D —— , wrote to M. Bigot de Preameneu, the minister of public worship, a very angry and confidential note on the subject, from which we extract these authentic lines: —

“Expenses of carriage? What can be done with it in a town of less than four thousand inhabitants? Expenses of journeys? What is the use of these trips, in the first place? Next, how can the posting be accomplished in these mountainous parts? There are no roads. No one travels otherwise than on horseback. Even the bridge between Durance and Chateau-Arnoux can barely support ox-teams. These priests are all thus, greedy and avaricious. This man played the good priest when he first came. Now he does like the rest; he must have a carriage and a posting-chaise, he must have luxuries, like the bishops of the olden days. Oh, all this priesthood! Things will not go well, M. le Comte, until the Emperor has freed us from these black-capped rascals. Down with the Pope! [Matters were getting embroiled with Rome.] For my part, I am for Caesar alone.” Etc., etc.

On the other hand, this affair afforded great delight to Madame Magloire. “Good,” said she to Mademoiselle Baptistine; “Monseigneur began with other people, but he has had to wind up with himself, after all. He has regulated all his charities. Now here are three thousand francs for us! At last!”

That same evening the Bishop wrote out and handed to his sister a memorandum conceived in the following terms: —

EXPENSES OF CARRIAGE AND CIRCUIT.

For furnishing meat soup to the patients in the hospital.	1,500 livres
For the maternity charitable society of Aix	250 “
For the maternity charitable society of Draguignan	250 “
For foundlings	500 “
For orphans	500 “
Total	3,000 “

Such was M. Myriel’s budget.

As for the chance episcopal perquisites, the fees for marriage bans, dispensations, private baptisms, sermons, benedictions, of churches or chapels, marriages, etc., the Bishop levied them on the wealthy with all the more asperity, since he bestowed them on the needy.

After a time, offerings of money flowed in. Those who had and those who lacked knocked at M. Myriel’s door, — the latter in search of the alms which the former came to deposit. In less than a year the Bishop had become the treasurer of all benevolence and the cashier of all those in distress. Considerable sums of money passed through his hands, but nothing could induce him to make any change whatever in his mode of life, or add anything superfluous to his bare necessities.

Far from it. As there is always more wretchedness below than there is brotherhood above, all was given away, so to speak, before it was received. It was like water on dry soil; no matter how much money he received, he never had any. Then he stripped himself.

The usage being that bishops shall announce their baptismal names at the head of their charges and their pastoral letters, the poor people of the country-side had selected, with a sort of affectionate instinct, among the names and prenomens of their bishop, that which had a meaning for them; and they never called him anything except Monseigneur Bienvenu [Welcome]. We will follow their example, and will also call him thus when we have occasion to name him. Moreover, this appellation pleased him.

“I like that name,” said he. “Bienvenu makes up for the Monseigneur.”

We do not claim that the portrait herewith presented is probable; we confine ourselves to stating that it resembles the original.

CHAPTER III — A HARD BISHOPRIC FOR A GOOD BISHOP

The Bishop did not omit his pastoral visits because he had converted his carriage into alms. The diocese of D —— is a fatiguing one. There are very few plains and a great many mountains; hardly any roads, as we have just seen; thirty-two curacies, forty-one vicarships, and two hundred and eighty-five auxiliary chapels. To visit all these is quite a task.

The Bishop managed to do it. He went on foot when it was in the neighborhood, in a tilted spring-cart when it was on the plain, and on a donkey in the mountains. The two old women accompanied him. When the trip was too hard for them, he went alone.

One day he arrived at Senez, which is an ancient episcopal city. He was mounted on an ass. His purse, which was very dry at that moment, did not permit him any other equipage. The mayor of the town came to receive him at the gate of the town, and watched him dismount from his ass, with scandalized eyes. Some of the citizens were laughing around him. “Monsieur the Mayor,” said the Bishop, “and Messieurs Citizens, I perceive that I shock you. You think it very arrogant in a poor priest to ride an animal which was used by Jesus Christ. I have done so from necessity, I assure you, and not from vanity.”

In the course of these trips he was kind and indulgent, and talked rather than preached. He never went far in search of his arguments and his examples. He quoted to the inhabitants of one district the example of a neighboring district. In the cantons where they were harsh to the poor, he said: “Look at the people of Briancon! They have conferred on the poor, on widows and orphans, the right to have their meadows mown three days in advance of every one else. They rebuild their houses for them gratuitously when they are ruined. Therefore it is a country which is blessed by God. For a whole century, there has not been a single murderer among them.”

In villages which were greedy for profit and harvest, he said: “Look at the people of Embrun! If, at the harvest season, the father of a family has his son away on service in the army, and his daughters at service in the town, and if he is ill and incapacitated, the cure recommends him to the prayers of the congregation; and on Sunday, after the mass, all the inhabitants of the village — men, women, and children — go to the poor man’s field and do his harvesting for him, and carry his straw and his grain to his granary.” To families divided by questions of money and inheritance he said: “Look at the mountaineers of Devolny, a country so wild that the nightingale is not heard there once in fifty years. Well, when the father of a family dies, the boys go off to seek their fortunes, leaving the property to the girls, so that they may find husbands.” To the cantons which had a taste for lawsuits, and where the farmers ruined themselves in stamped paper, he said: “Look at those good peasants in the valley of Queyras! There are three thousand souls of them. Mon Dieu! it is like a little republic. Neither judge nor bailiff is known there. The mayor does everything. He allots the imposts, taxes each person conscientiously, judges quarrels for nothing, divides inheritances without charge, pronounces sentences gratuitously; and he is obeyed, because he is a just man among simple men.” To villages where he found no schoolmaster, he quoted once more the people of Queyras: “Do you know how they manage?” he said. “Since a little country of a dozen or fifteen hearths cannot always support a teacher, they have school-masters who are paid by the whole valley, who make the round of the villages, spending a week in this one, ten days in that, and instruct them. These teachers go to the fairs. I have seen them there. They are to be recognized by the quill pens which they wear in the cord of their hat. Those who teach reading only have one pen; those who teach reading and reckoning have two pens; those who teach reading, reckoning, and Latin have three pens. But what a disgrace to be ignorant! Do like the people of Queyras!”

Thus he discoursed gravely and paternally; in default of examples, he invented parables, going directly to the point, with few phrases and many images, which characteristic formed the real eloquence of Jesus Christ. And being convinced himself, he was persuasive.

CHAPTER IV — WORKS CORRESPONDING TO WORDS

His conversation was gay and affable. He put himself on a level with the two old women who had passed their lives beside him. When he laughed, it was the laugh of a schoolboy. Madame Magloire liked to call him Your Grace [Votre Grandeur]. One day he rose from his arm-chair, and went to his library in search of a book. This book was on one of the upper shelves. As the bishop was rather short of stature, he could not reach it. “Madame Magloire,” said he, “fetch me a chair. My greatness [grandeur] does not reach as far as that shelf.”

One of his distant relatives, Madame la Comtesse de Lo, rarely allowed an opportunity to escape of enumerating, in his presence, what she designated as “the expectations” of her three sons. She had numerous relatives, who were very old and near to death, and of whom her sons were the natural heirs. The youngest of the three was to receive from a grand-aunt a good hundred thousand livres of income; the second was the heir by entail to the title of the Duke, his uncle; the eldest was to succeed to the peerage of his grandfather. The Bishop was accustomed to listen in silence to these innocent and pardonable maternal boasts. On one occasion, however, he appeared to be more thoughtful than usual, while Madame de Lo was relating once again the details of all these inheritances and all these “expectations.” She interrupted herself impatiently: “Mon Dieu, cousin! What are you thinking about?” “I am thinking,” replied the Bishop, “of a singular remark, which is to be found, I believe, in St. Augustine,— ‘Place your hopes in the man from whom you do not inherit.’”

At another time, on receiving a notification of the decease of a gentleman of the country-side, wherein not only the dignities of the dead man, but also the feudal and noble qualifications of all his relatives, spread over an entire page: “What a stout back Death has!” he exclaimed. “What a strange burden of titles is cheerfully imposed on him, and how much wit must men have, in order thus to press the tomb into the service of vanity!”

He was gifted, on occasion, with a gentle raillery, which almost always concealed a serious meaning. In the course of one Lent, a youthful vicar came to D —— , and preached in the cathedral. He was tolerably eloquent.

The subject of his sermon was charity. He urged the rich to give to the poor, in order to avoid hell, which he depicted in the most frightful manner of which he was capable, and to win paradise, which he represented as charming and desirable. Among the audience there was a wealthy retired merchant, who was somewhat of a usurer, named M. Geborand, who had amassed two millions in the manufacture of coarse cloth, serges, and woollen galloons. Never in his whole life had M. Geborand bestowed alms on any poor wretch. After the delivery of that sermon, it was observed that he gave a sou every Sunday to the poor old beggar-women at the door of the cathedral. There were six of them to share it. One day the Bishop caught sight of him in the act of bestowing this charity, and said to his sister, with a smile, “There is M. Geborand purchasing paradise for a sou.”

When it was a question of charity, he was not to be rebuffed even by a refusal, and on such occasions he gave utterance to remarks which induced reflection. Once he was begging for the poor in a drawing-room of the town; there was present the Marquis de Champtercier, a wealthy and avaricious old man, who contrived to be, at one and the same time, an ultra-royalist and an ultra-Voltairian. This variety of man has actually existed. When the Bishop came to him, he touched his arm, “You must give me something, M. le Marquis.” The Marquis turned round and answered dryly, “I have poor people of my own, Monseigneur.” “Give them to me,” replied the Bishop.

One day he preached the following sermon in the cathedral: —

“My very dear brethren, my good friends, there are thirteen hundred and twenty thousand peasants’ dwellings in France which have but three openings; eighteen hundred and seventeen thousand hovels which have but two openings, the door and one window; and three hundred and forty-six thousand cabins besides which have but one opening, the door. And this arises from a thing which is called the tax on doors and windows. Just put poor families, old women and little children, in those buildings, and behold the fevers and maladies which result! Alas! God gives air to men; the law sells it to them. I do not blame the law, but I bless God. In the department of the Isere, in the Var, in the two departments of the Alpes, the Hautes, and the Basses, the peasants have not even wheelbarrows; they transport their manure on the backs of men; they have no candles, and they burn resinous sticks, and bits of rope dipped in pitch. That is the state of affairs throughout the whole of the hilly country of Dauphine. They make bread for six months at one time; they bake it with dried cow-dung. In the winter they break this bread up with an axe, and they soak it for twenty-four hours, in order to render it eatable. My brethren, have pity! behold the suffering on all sides of you!"

Born a Provencal, he easily familiarized himself with the dialect of the south. He said, "En be! moussu, ses sage?" as in lower Languedoc; "Onte anaras passa?" as in the Basses-Alpes; "Puerte un bouen moutu embe un bouen fromage grase," as in upper Dauphine. This pleased the people extremely, and contributed not a little to win him access to all spirits. He was perfectly at home in the thatched cottage and in the mountains. He understood how to say the grandest things in the most vulgar of idioms. As he spoke all tongues, he entered into all hearts.

Moreover, he was the same towards people of the world and towards the lower classes. He condemned nothing in haste and without taking circumstances into account. He said, "Examine the road over which the fault has passed."

Being, as he described himself with a smile, an ex-sinner, he had none of the asperities of austerity, and he professed, with a good deal of distinctness, and without the frown of the ferociously virtuous, a doctrine which may be summed up as follows: —

"Man has upon him his flesh, which is at once his burden and his temptation. He drags it with him and yields to it. He must watch it, cheek it, repress it, and obey it only at the last extremity. There may be some fault even in this obedience; but the fault thus committed is venial; it is a fall, but a fall on the knees which may terminate in prayer.

"To be a saint is the exception; to be an upright man is the rule. Err, fall, sin if you will, but be upright.

"The least possible sin is the law of man. No sin at all is the dream of the angel. All which is terrestrial is subject to sin. Sin is a gravitation."

When he saw everyone exclaiming very loudly, and growing angry very quickly, "Oh! oh!" he said, with a smile; "to all appearance, this is a great crime which all the world commits. These are hypocrisies which have taken fright, and are in haste to make protest and to put themselves under shelter."

He was indulgent towards women and poor people, on whom the burden of human society rest. He said, "The faults of women, of children, of the feeble, the indigent, and the ignorant, are the fault of the husbands, the fathers, the masters, the strong, the rich, and the wise."

He said, moreover, “Teach those who are ignorant as many things as possible; society is culpable, in that it does not afford instruction gratis; it is responsible for the night which it produces. This soul is full of shadow; sin is therein committed. The guilty one is not the person who has committed the sin, but the person who has created the shadow.”

It will be perceived that he had a peculiar manner of his own of judging things: I suspect that he obtained it from the Gospel.

One day he heard a criminal case, which was in preparation and on the point of trial, discussed in a drawing-room. A wretched man, being at the end of his resources, had coined counterfeit money, out of love for a woman, and for the child which he had had by her. Counterfeiting was still punishable with death at that epoch. The woman had been arrested in the act of passing the first false piece made by the man. She was held, but there were no proofs except against her. She alone could accuse her lover, and destroy him by her confession. She denied; they insisted. She persisted in her denial. Thereupon an idea occurred to the attorney for the crown. He invented an infidelity on the part of the lover, and succeeded, by means of fragments of letters cunningly presented, in persuading the unfortunate woman that she had a rival, and that the man was deceiving her. Thereupon, exasperated by jealousy, she denounced her lover, confessed all, proved all.

The man was ruined. He was shortly to be tried at Aix with his accomplice. They were relating the matter, and each one was expressing enthusiasm over the cleverness of the magistrate. By bringing jealousy into play, he had caused the truth to burst forth in wrath, he had educed the justice of revenge. The Bishop listened to all this in silence. When they had finished, he inquired, —

“Where are this man and woman to be tried?”

“At the Court of Assizes.”

He went on, “And where will the advocate of the crown be tried?”

A tragic event occurred at D —— A man was condemned to death for murder. He was a wretched fellow, not exactly educated, not exactly ignorant, who had been a mountebank at fairs, and a writer for the public. The town took a great interest in the trial. On the eve of the day fixed for the execution of the condemned man, the chaplain of the prison fell ill. A priest was needed to attend the criminal in his last moments. They sent for the cure. It seems that he refused to come, saying, “That is no affair of mine. I have nothing to do with that unpleasant task, and with that mountebank: I, too, am ill; and besides, it is not my place.” This reply was reported to the Bishop, who said, “Monsieur le Curé is right: it is not his place; it is mine.”

He went instantly to the prison, descended to the cell of the “mountebank,” called him by name, took him by the hand, and spoke to him. He passed the entire day with him, forgetful of food and sleep, praying to God for the soul of the condemned man, and praying the condemned man for his own. He told him the best truths, which are also the most simple. He was father, brother, friend; he was bishop only to bless. He taught him everything, encouraged and consoled him. The man was on the point of dying in despair. Death was an abyss to him. As he stood trembling on its mournful brink, he recoiled with horror. He was not sufficiently ignorant to be absolutely indifferent. His condemnation, which had been a profound shock, had, in a manner, broken through, here and there, that wall which separates us from the mystery of things, and which we call life. He gazed incessantly beyond this world through these fatal breaches, and beheld only darkness. The Bishop made him see light.

On the following day, when they came to fetch the unhappy wretch, the Bishop was still there. He followed him, and exhibited himself to the eyes of the crowd in his purple camail and with his episcopal cross upon his neck, side by side with the criminal bound with cords.

He mounted the tumbril with him, he mounted the scaffold with him. The sufferer, who had been so gloomy and cast down on the preceding day, was radiant. He felt that his soul was reconciled, and he hoped in God. The Bishop embraced him, and at the moment when the knife was about to fall, he said to him: “God raises from the dead him whom man slays; he whom his brothers have rejected finds his Father once more. Pray, believe, enter into life: the Father is there.” When he descended from the scaffold, there was something in his look which made the people draw aside to let him pass. They did not know which was most worthy of admiration, his pallor or his serenity. On his return to the humble dwelling, which he designated, with a smile, as his palace, he said to his sister, “I have just officiated pontifically.”

Since the most sublime things are often those which are the least understood, there were people in the town who said, when commenting on this conduct of the Bishop, “It is affectation.”

This, however, was a remark which was confined to the drawing-rooms. The populace, which perceives no jest in holy deeds, was touched, and admired him.

As for the Bishop, it was a shock to him to have beheld the guillotine, and it was a long time before he recovered from it.

In fact, when the scaffold is there, all erected and prepared, it has something about it which produces hallucination. One may feel a certain indifference to the death penalty, one may refrain from pronouncing upon it, from saying yes or no, so long as one has not seen a guillotine with one's own eyes: but if one encounters one of them, the shock is violent; one is forced to decide, and to take part for or against. Some admire it, like de Maistre; others execrate it, like Beccaria. The guillotine is the concretion of the law; it is called vindicte; it is not neutral, and it does not permit you to remain neutral. He who sees it shivers with the most mysterious of shivers. All social problems erect their interrogation point around this chopping-knife. The scaffold is a vision. The scaffold is not a piece of carpentry; the scaffold is not a machine; the scaffold is not an inert bit of mechanism constructed of wood, iron and cords.

It seems as though it were a being, possessed of I know not what sombre initiative; one would say that this piece of carpenter's work saw, that this machine heard, that this mechanism understood, that this wood, this iron, and these cords were possessed of will. In the frightful meditation into which its presence casts the soul the scaffold appears in terrible guise, and as though taking part in what is going on. The scaffold is the accomplice of the executioner; it devours, it eats flesh, it drinks blood; the scaffold is a sort of monster fabricated by the judge and the carpenter, a spectre which seems to live with a horrible vitality composed of all the death which it has inflicted.

Therefore, the impression was terrible and profound; on the day following the execution, and on many succeeding days, the Bishop appeared to be crushed. The almost violent serenity of the funereal moment had disappeared; the phantom of social justice tormented him. He, who generally returned from all his deeds with a radiant satisfaction, seemed to be reproaching himself. At times he talked to himself, and stammered lugubrious monologues in a low voice. This is one which his sister overheard one evening and preserved: “I did not think that it was so monstrous. It is wrong to become absorbed in the divine law to such a degree as not to perceive human law. Death belongs to God alone. By what right do men touch that unknown thing?”

In course of time these impressions weakened and probably vanished. Nevertheless, it was observed that the Bishop thenceforth avoided passing the place of execution.

M. Myriel could be summoned at any hour to the bedside of the sick and dying. He did not ignore the fact that therein lay his greatest duty and his greatest labor. Widowed and orphaned families had no need to summon him; he came of his own accord. He understood how to sit down and hold his peace for long hours beside the man who had lost the wife of his love, of the mother who had lost her child. As he knew the moment for silence he knew also the moment for speech. Oh, admirable consoler! He sought not to efface sorrow by forgetfulness, but to magnify and dignify it by hope. He said: —

“Have a care of the manner in which you turn towards the dead. Think not of that which perishes. Gaze steadily. You will perceive the living light of your well-beloved dead in the depths of heaven.” He knew that faith is wholesome. He sought to counsel and calm the despairing man, by pointing out to him the resigned man, and to transform the grief which gazes upon a grave by showing him the grief which fixes its gaze upon a star.

CHAPTER V — MONSEIGNEUR BIENVENU MADE HIS CASSOCKS LAST TOO LONG

The private life of M. Myriel was filled with the same thoughts as his public life. The voluntary poverty in which the Bishop of D —— lived, would have been a solemn and charming sight for any one who could have viewed it close at hand.

Like all old men, and like the majority of thinkers, he slept little. This brief slumber was profound. In the morning he meditated for an hour, then he said his mass, either at the cathedral or in his own house. His mass said, he broke his fast on rye bread dipped in the milk of his own cows. Then he set to work.

A Bishop is a very busy man: he must every day receive the secretary of the bishopric, who is generally a canon, and nearly every day his vicars-general. He has congregations to reprove, privileges to grant, a whole ecclesiastical library to examine, — prayer-books, diocesan catechisms, books of hours, etc., — charges to write, sermons to authorize, cures and mayors to reconcile, a clerical correspondence, an administrative correspondence; on one side the State, on the other the Holy See; and a thousand matters of business.

What time was left to him, after these thousand details of business, and his offices and his breviary, he bestowed first on the necessitous, the sick, and the afflicted; the time which was left to him from the afflicted, the sick, and the necessitous, he devoted to work. Sometimes he dug in his garden; again, he read or wrote. He had but one word for both these kinds of toil; he called them gardening. “The mind is a garden,” said he.

Towards mid-day, when the weather was fine, he went forth and took a stroll in the country or in town, often entering lowly dwellings. He was seen walking alone, buried in his own thoughts, his eyes cast down, supporting himself on his long cane, clad in his wadded purple garment of silk, which was very warm, wearing purple stockings inside his coarse shoes, and surmounted by a flat hat which allowed three golden tassels of large bullion to droop from its three points.

It was a perfect festival wherever he appeared. One would have said that his presence had something warming and luminous about it. The children and the old people came out to the doorsteps for the Bishop as for the sun. He bestowed his blessing, and they blessed him. They pointed out his house to any one who was in need of anything.

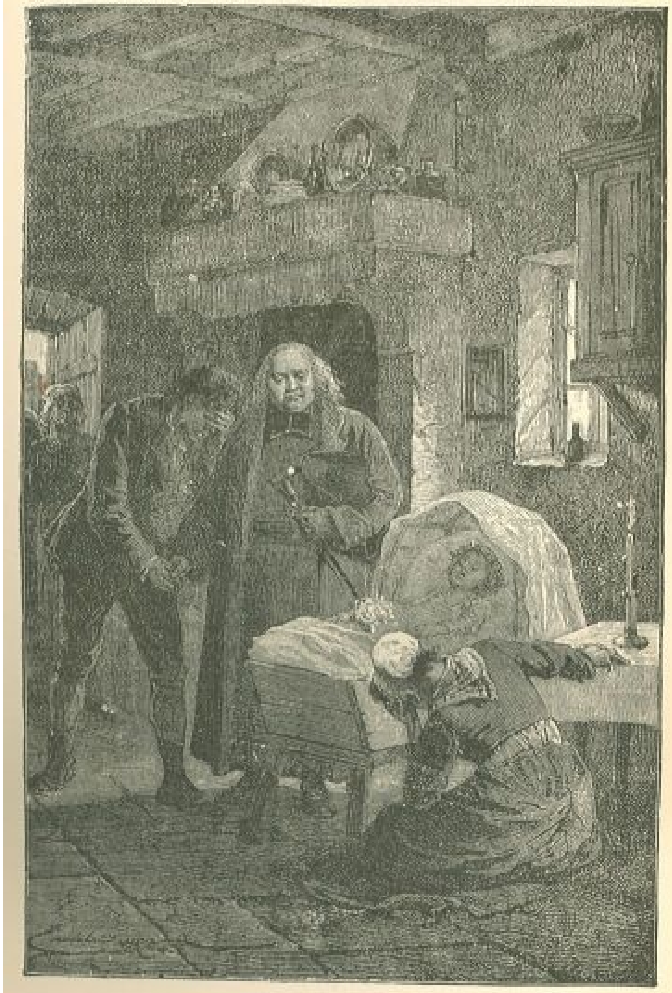

THE COMFORTER.

Here and there he halted, accosted the little boys and girls, and smiled upon the mothers. He visited the poor so long as he had any money; when he no longer had any, he visited the rich.

As he made his cassocks last a long while, and did not wish to have it noticed, he never went out in the town without his wadded purple cloak. This inconvenienced him somewhat in summer.

On his return, he dined. The dinner resembled his breakfast.

At half-past eight in the evening he supped with his sister, Madame Magloire standing behind them and serving them at table. Nothing could be more frugal than this repast. If, however, the Bishop had one of his cures to supper, Madame Magloire took advantage of the opportunity to serve Monseigneur with some excellent fish from the lake, or with some fine game from the mountains. Every cure furnished the pretext for a good meal: the Bishop did not interfere. With that exception, his ordinary diet consisted only of vegetables boiled in water, and oil soup. Thus it was said in the town, when the Bishop does not indulge in the cheer of a cure, he indulges in the cheer of a trappist.

After supper he conversed for half an hour with Mademoiselle Baptistine and Madame Magloire; then he retired to his own room and set to writing, sometimes on loose sheets, and again on the margin of some folio. He was a man of letters and rather learned. He left behind him five or six very curious manuscripts; among others, a dissertation on this verse in Genesis, In the beginning, the spirit of God floated upon the waters. With this verse he compares three texts: the Arabic verse which says, The winds of God blew; Flavius Josephus who says, A wind from above was precipitated upon the earth; and finally, the Chaldaic paraphrase of Onkelos, which renders it, A wind coming from God blew upon the face of the waters. In another dissertation, he examines the theological works of Hugo, Bishop of Ptolemais, great-grand-uncle to the writer of this book, and establishes the fact, that to this bishop must be attributed the divers little works published during the last century, under the pseudonym of Barleycourt.

Sometimes, in the midst of his reading, no matter what the book might be which he had in his hand, he would suddenly fall into a profound meditation, whence he only emerged to write a few lines on the pages of the volume itself. These lines have often no connection whatever with the book which contains them. We now have under our eyes a note written by him on the margin of a quarto entitled Correspondence of Lord Germain with Generals Clinton, Cornwallis, and the Admirals on the American station. Versailles, Poincot, book-seller; and Paris, Pissot, bookseller, Quai des Augustins.

Here is the note: —

“Oh, you who are!

“Ecclesiastes calls you the All-powerful; the Maccabees call you the Creator; the Epistle to the Ephesians calls you liberty; Baruch calls you Immensity; the Psalms call you Wisdom and Truth; John calls you Light; the Books of Kings call you Lord; Exodus calls you Providence; Leviticus, Sanctity; Esdras, Justice; the creation calls you God; man calls you Father; but Solomon calls you Compassion, and that is the most beautiful of all your names.”

Toward nine o’clock in the evening the two women retired and betook themselves to their chambers on the first floor, leaving him alone until morning on the ground floor.

It is necessary that we should, in this place, give an exact idea of the dwelling of the Bishop of D ——

CHAPTER VI — WHO GUARDED HIS HOUSE FOR HIM

The house in which he lived consisted, as we have said, of a ground floor, and one story above; three rooms on the ground floor, three chambers on the first, and an attic above. Behind the house was a garden, a quarter of an acre in extent. The two women occupied the first floor; the Bishop was lodged below. The first room, opening on the street, served him as dining-room, the second was his bedroom, and the third his oratory. There was no exit possible from this oratory, except by passing through the bedroom, nor from the bedroom, without passing through the dining-room. At the end of the suite, in the oratory, there was a detached alcove with a bed, for use in cases of hospitality. The Bishop offered this bed to country curates whom business or the requirements of their parishes brought to D ——

The pharmacy of the hospital, a small building which had been added to the house, and abutted on the garden, had been transformed into a kitchen and cellar. In addition to this, there was in the garden a stable, which had formerly been the kitchen of the hospital, and in which the Bishop kept two cows. No matter what the quantity of milk they gave, he invariably sent half of it every morning to the sick people in the hospital. “I am paying my tithes,” he said.

His bedroom was tolerably large, and rather difficult to warm in bad weather. As wood is extremely dear at D —— , he hit upon the idea of having a compartment of boards constructed in the cow-shed. Here he passed his evenings during seasons of severe cold: he called it his winter salon.

In this winter salon, as in the dining-room, there was no other furniture than a square table in white wood, and four straw-seated chairs. In addition to this the dining-room was ornamented with an antique sideboard, painted pink, in water colors. Out of a similar sideboard, properly draped with white napery and imitation lace, the Bishop had constructed the altar which decorated his oratory.

His wealthy penitents and the sainted women of D —— had more than once assessed themselves to raise the money for a new altar for Monseigneur’s oratory; on each occasion he had taken the money and had given it to the poor. “The most beautiful of altars,” he said, “is the soul of an unhappy creature consoled and thanking God.”

In his oratory there were two straw prie-Dieu, and there was an arm-chair, also in straw, in his bedroom. When, by chance, he received seven or eight persons at one time, the prefect, or the general, or the staff of the regiment in garrison, or several pupils from the little seminary, the chairs had to be fetched from the winter salon in the stable, the prie-Dieu from the oratory, and the arm-chair from the bedroom: in this way as many as eleven chairs could be collected for the visitors. A room was dismantled for each new guest.

It sometimes happened that there were twelve in the party; the Bishop then relieved the embarrassment of the situation by standing in front of the chimney if it was winter, or by strolling in the garden if it was summer.

There was still another chair in the detached alcove, but the straw was half gone from it, and it had but three legs, so that it was of service only when propped against the wall. Mademoiselle Baptistine had also in her own room a very large easy-chair of wood, which had formerly been gilded, and which was covered with flowered pekin; but they had been obliged to hoist this bergere up to the first story through the window, as the staircase was too narrow; it could not, therefore, be reckoned among the possibilities in the way of furniture.

Mademoiselle Baptistine’s ambition had been to be able to purchase a set of drawing-room furniture in yellow Utrecht velvet, stamped with a rose pattern, and with mahogany in swan’s neck style, with a sofa. But this would have cost five hundred francs at least, and in view of the fact that she had only been able to lay by forty-two francs and ten sous for this purpose in the course of five years, she had ended by renouncing the idea. However, who is there who has attained his ideal?

Nothing is more easy to present to the imagination than the Bishop’s bedchamber. A glazed door opened on the garden; opposite this was the bed, — a hospital bed of iron, with a canopy of green serge; in the shadow of the bed, behind a curtain, were the utensils of the toilet, which still betrayed the elegant habits of the man of the world: there were two doors, one near the chimney, opening into the oratory; the other near the bookcase, opening into the dining-room. The bookcase was a large cupboard with glass doors filled with books; the chimney was of wood painted to represent marble, and habitually without fire. In the chimney stood a pair of firedogs of iron, ornamented above with two garlanded vases, and flutings which had formerly been silvered with silver leaf, which was a sort of episcopal luxury; above the chimney-piece hung a crucifix of copper, with the silver worn off, fixed on a background of threadbare velvet in a wooden frame from which the gilding had fallen; near the glass door a large table with an inkstand, loaded with a confusion of papers and with huge volumes; before the table an arm-chair of straw; in front of the bed a prie-Dieu, borrowed from the oratory.

Two portraits in oval frames were fastened to the wall on each side of the bed. Small gilt inscriptions on the plain surface of the cloth at the side of these figures indicated that the portraits represented, one the Abbé of Chaliot, bishop of Saint Claude; the other, the Abbé Tourteau, vicar-general of Agde, abbe of Grand-Champ, order of Citeaux, diocese of Chartres. When the Bishop succeeded to this apartment, after the hospital patients, he had found these portraits there, and had left them. They were priests, and probably donors — two reasons for respecting them. All that he knew about these two persons was, that they had been appointed by the king, the one to his bishopric, the other to his benefice, on the same day, the 27th of April, 1785. Madame Magloire having taken the pictures down to dust, the Bishop had discovered these particulars written in whitish ink on a little square of paper, yellowed by time, and attached to the back of the portrait of the Abbé of Grand-Champ with four wafers.

At his window he had an antique curtain of a coarse woollen stuff, which finally became so old, that, in order to avoid the expense of a new one, Madame Magloire was forced to take a large seam in the very middle of it. This seam took the form of a cross. The Bishop often called attention to it: “How delightful that is!” he said.

All the rooms in the house, without exception, those on the ground floor as well as those on the first floor, were white-washed, which is a fashion in barracks and hospitals.

However, in their latter years, Madame Magloire discovered beneath the paper which had been washed over, paintings, ornamenting the apartment of Mademoiselle Baptistine, as we shall see further on. Before becoming a hospital, this house had been the ancient parliament house of the Bourgeois. Hence this decoration. The chambers were paved in red bricks, which were washed every week, with straw mats in front of all the beds. Altogether, this dwelling, which was attended to by the two women, was exquisitely clean from top to bottom. This was the sole luxury which the Bishop permitted. He said, “That takes nothing from the poor.”

It must be confessed, however, that he still retained from his former possessions six silver knives and forks and a soup-ladle, which Madame Magloire contemplated every day with delight, as they glistened splendidly upon the coarse linen cloth. And since we are now painting the Bishop of D—— as he was in reality, we must add that he had said more than once, “I find it difficult to renounce eating from silver dishes.”

To this silverware must be added two large candlesticks of massive silver, which he had inherited from a great-aunt. These candlesticks held two wax candles, and usually figured on the Bishop’s chimney-piece. When he had any one to dinner, Madame Magloire lighted the two candles and set the candlesticks on the table.

In the Bishop’s own chamber, at the head of his bed, there was a small cupboard, in which Madame Magloire locked up the six silver knives and forks and the big spoon every night. But it is necessary to add, that the key was never removed.

The garden, which had been rather spoiled by the ugly buildings which we have mentioned, was composed of four alleys in cross-form, radiating from a tank. Another walk made the circuit of the garden, and skirted the white wall which enclosed it. These alleys left behind them four square plots rimmed with box. In three of these, Madame Magloire cultivated vegetables; in the fourth, the Bishop had planted some flowers; here and there stood a few fruit-trees. Madame Magloire had once remarked, with a sort of gentle malice: “Monseigneur, you who turn everything to account, have, nevertheless, one useless plot. It would be better to grow salads there than bouquets.” “Madame Magloire,” retorted the Bishop, “you are mistaken. The beautiful is as useful as the useful.” He added after a pause, “More so, perhaps.”

This plot, consisting of three or four beds, occupied the Bishop almost as much as did his books. He liked to pass an hour or two there, trimming, hoeing, and making holes here and there in the earth, into which he dropped seeds. He was not as hostile to insects as a gardener could have wished to see him. Moreover, he made no pretensions to botany; he ignored groups and consistency; he made not the slightest effort to decide between Tournefort and the natural method; he took part neither with the buds against the cotyledons, nor with Jussieu against Linnaeus. He did not study plants; he loved flowers. He respected learned men greatly; he respected the ignorant still more; and, without ever failing in these two respects, he watered his flower-beds every summer evening with a tin watering-pot painted green.

The house had not a single door which could be locked. The door of the dining-room, which, as we have said, opened directly on the cathedral square, had formerly been ornamented with locks and bolts like the door of a prison. The Bishop had had all this ironwork removed, and this door was never fastened, either by night or by day, with anything except the latch. All that the first passerby had to do at any hour, was to give it a push. At first, the two women had been very much tried by this door, which was never fastened, but Monsieur de D —— had said to them, “Have bolts put on your rooms, if that will please you.” They had ended by sharing his confidence, or by at least acting as though they shared it. Madame Magloire alone had frights from time to time. As for the Bishop, his thought can be found explained, or at least indicated, in the three lines which he wrote on the margin of a Bible, “This is the shade of difference: the door of the physician should never be shut, the door of the priest should always be open.”

On another book, entitled Philosophy of the Medical Science, he had written this other note: “Am not I a physician like them? I also have my patients, and then, too, I have some whom I call my unfortunates.”

Again he wrote: “Do not inquire the name of him who asks a shelter of you. The very man who is embarrassed by his name is the one who needs shelter.”

It chanced that a worthy cure, I know not whether it was the cure of Couloubroux or the cure of Pompierry, took it into his head to ask him one day, probably at the instigation of Madame Magloire, whether Monsieur was sure that he was not committing an indiscretion, to a certain extent, in leaving his door unfastened day and night, at the mercy of any one who should choose to enter, and whether, in short, he did not fear lest some misfortune might occur in a house so little guarded. The Bishop touched his shoulder, with gentle gravity, and said to him, “Nisi Dominus custodierit domum, in vanum vigilant qui custodiunt eam,” Unless the Lord guard the house, in vain do they watch who guard it.

Then he spoke of something else.

He was fond of saying, “There is a bravery of the priest as well as the bravery of a colonel of dragoons, — only,” he added, “ours must be tranquil.”

CHAPTER VII — CRAVATTE

It is here that a fact falls naturally into place, which we must not omit, because it is one of the sort which show us best what sort of a man the Bishop of D —— was.

After the destruction of the band of Gaspard Bes, who had infested the gorges of Ollioules, one of his lieutenants, Cravatte, took refuge in the mountains. He concealed himself for some time with his bandits, the remnant of Gaspard Bes’s troop, in the county of Nice; then he made his way to Piedmont, and suddenly reappeared in France, in the vicinity of Barcelonette. He was first seen at Jauziers, then at Tuiles. He hid himself in the caverns of the Joug-de-l’Aigle, and thence he descended towards the hamlets and villages through the ravines of Ubaye and Ubayette.

He even pushed as far as Embrun, entered the cathedral one night, and despoiled the sacristy. His highway robberies laid waste the country-side. The gendarmes were set on his track, but in vain. He always escaped; sometimes he resisted by main force. He was a bold wretch. In the midst of all this terror the Bishop arrived. He was making his circuit to Chastelar. The mayor came to meet him, and urged him to retrace his steps. Cravatte was in possession of the mountains as far as Arche, and beyond; there was danger even with an escort; it merely exposed three or four unfortunate gendarmes to no purpose.

“Therefore,” said the Bishop, “I intend to go without escort.”

“You do not really mean that, Monseigneur!” exclaimed the mayor.

“I do mean it so thoroughly that I absolutely refuse any gendarmes, and shall set out in an hour.”

“Set out?”

“Set out.”

“Alone?”

“Alone.”

“Monseigneur, you will not do that!”

“There exists yonder in the mountains,” said the Bishop, “a tiny community no bigger than that, which I have not seen for three years. They are my good friends, those gentle and honest shepherds. They own one goat out of every thirty that they tend. They make very pretty woollen cords of various colors, and they play the mountain airs on little flutes with six holes. They need to be told of the good God now and then. What would they say to a bishop who was afraid? What would they say if I did not go?”

“But the brigands, Monseigneur?”

“Hold,” said the Bishop, “I must think of that. You are right. I may meet them. They, too, need to be told of the good God.”

“But, Monseigneur, there is a band of them! A flock of wolves!”

“Monsieur le maire, it may be that it is of this very flock of wolves that Jesus has constituted me the shepherd. Who knows the ways of Providence?”

“They will rob you, Monseigneur.”

“I have nothing.”

“They will kill you.”

“An old goodman of a priest, who passes along mumbling his prayers? Bah! To what purpose?”

“Oh, mon Dieu! what if you should meet them!”

“I should beg alms of them for my poor.”

“Do not go, Monseigneur. In the name of Heaven! You are risking your life!”

“Monsieur le maire,” said the Bishop, “is that really all? I am not in the world to guard my own life, but to guard souls.”

They had to allow him to do as he pleased. He set out, accompanied only by a child who offered to serve as a guide. His obstinacy was bruited about the country-side, and caused great consternation.

He would take neither his sister nor Madame Magloire. He traversed the mountain on mule-back, encountered no one, and arrived safe and sound at the residence of his “good friends,” the shepherds. He remained there for a fortnight, preaching, administering the sacrament, teaching, exhorting. When the time of his departure approached, he resolved to chant a Te Deum pontifically. He mentioned it to the cure. But what was to be done? There were no episcopal ornaments. They could only place at his disposal a wretched village sacristy, with a few ancient chasubles of threadbare damask adorned with imitation lace.

“Bah!” said the Bishop. “Let us announce our Te Deum from the pulpit, nevertheless, Monsieur le Curé. Things will arrange themselves.”

They instituted a search in the churches of the neighborhood. All the magnificence of these humble parishes combined would not have sufficed to clothe the chorister of a cathedral properly.

While they were thus embarrassed, a large chest was brought and deposited in the presbytery for the Bishop, by two unknown horsemen, who departed on the instant. The chest was opened; it contained a cope of cloth of gold, a mitre ornamented with diamonds, an archbishop's cross, a magnificent crosier, — all the pontifical vestments which had been stolen a month previously from the treasury of Notre Dame d'Embrun. In the chest was a paper, on which these words were written, "From Cravatte to Monseigneur Bienvenu."

"Did not I say that things would come right of themselves?" said the Bishop. Then he added, with a smile, "To him who contents himself with the surplice of a curate, God sends the cope of an archbishop."

"Monseigneur," murmured the cure, throwing back his head with a smile. "God — or the Devil."

The Bishop looked steadily at the cure, and repeated with authority, "God!"

When he returned to Chastelar, the people came out to stare at him as at a curiosity, all along the road. At the priest's house in Chastelar he rejoined Mademoiselle Baptistine and Madame Magloire, who were waiting for him, and he said to his sister: "Well! was I in the right? The poor priest went to his poor mountaineers with empty hands, and he returns from them with his hands full. I set out bearing only my faith in God; I have brought back the treasure of a cathedral."

That evening, before he went to bed, he said again: "Let us never fear robbers nor murderers. Those are dangers from without, petty dangers. Let us fear ourselves. Prejudices are the real robbers; vices are the real murderers. The great dangers lie within ourselves. What matters it what threatens our head or our purse! Let us think only of that which threatens our soul."

Then, turning to his sister: "Sister, never a precaution on the part of the priest, against his fellow-man. That which his fellow does, God permits. Let us confine ourselves to prayer, when we think that a danger is approaching us. Let us pray, not for ourselves, but that our brother may not fall into sin on our account."

However, such incidents were rare in his life. We relate those of which we know; but generally he passed his life in doing the same things at the same moment. One month of his year resembled one hour of his day.

As to what became of “the treasure” of the cathedral of Embrun, we should be embarrassed by any inquiry in that direction. It consisted of very handsome things, very tempting things, and things which were very well adapted to be stolen for the benefit of the unfortunate. Stolen they had already been elsewhere. Half of the adventure was completed; it only remained to impart a new direction to the theft, and to cause it to take a short trip in the direction of the poor. However, we make no assertions on this point. Only, a rather obscure note was found among the Bishop’s papers, which may bear some relation to this matter, and which is couched in these terms, “The question is, to decide whether this should be turned over to the cathedral or to the hospital.”

CHAPTER VIII — PHILOSOPHY AFTER DRINKING

The senator above mentioned was a clever man, who had made his own way, heedless of those things which present obstacles, and which are called conscience, sworn faith, justice, duty: he had marched straight to his goal, without once flinching in the line of his advancement and his interest. He was an old attorney, softened by success; not a bad man by any means, who rendered all the small services in his power to his sons, his sons-in-law, his relations, and even to his friends, having wisely seized upon, in life, good sides, good opportunities, good windfalls. Everything else seemed to him very stupid. He was intelligent, and just sufficiently educated to think himself a disciple of Epicurus; while he was, in reality, only a product of Pigault-Lebrun. He laughed willingly and pleasantly over infinite and eternal things, and at the “Crotchets of that good old fellow the Bishop.” He even sometimes laughed at him with an amiable authority in the presence of M. Myriel himself, who listened to him.

On some semi-official occasion or other, I do not recollect what, Count*** [this senator] and M. Myriel were to dine with the prefect. At dessert, the senator, who was slightly exhilarated, though still perfectly dignified, exclaimed: —

“Egad, Bishop, let’s have a discussion. It is hard for a senator and a bishop to look at each other without winking. We are two augurs. I am going to make a confession to you. I have a philosophy of my own.”

“And you are right,” replied the Bishop. “As one makes one’s philosophy, so one lies on it. You are on the bed of purple, senator.”

The senator was encouraged, and went on: —

“Let us be good fellows.”

“Good devils even,” said the Bishop.

“I declare to you,” continued the senator, “that the Marquis d’Argens, Pyrrhon, Hobbes, and M. Naigeon are no rascals. I have all the philosophers in my library gilded on the edges.”

“Like yourself, Count,” interposed the Bishop.

The senator resumed: —

“I hate Diderot; he is an ideologist, a declaimer, and a revolutionist, a believer in God at bottom, and more bigoted than Voltaire. Voltaire made sport of Needham, and he was wrong, for Needham’s eels prove that God is useless. A drop of vinegar in a spoonful of flour paste supplies the fiat lux. Suppose the drop to be larger and the spoonful bigger; you have the world. Man is the eel. Then what is the good of the Eternal Father? The Jehovah hypothesis tires me, Bishop. It is good for nothing but to produce shallow people, whose reasoning is hollow. Down with that great All, which torments me! Hurrah for Zero which leaves me in peace! Between you and me, and in order to empty my sack, and make confession to my pastor, as it behooves me to do, I will admit to you that I have good sense. I am not enthusiastic over your Jesus, who preaches renunciation and sacrifice to the last extremity. ’Tis the counsel of an avaricious man to beggars. Renunciation; why? Sacrifice; to what end? I do not see one wolf immolating himself for the happiness of another wolf. Let us stick to nature, then. We are at the top; let us have a superior philosophy. What is the advantage of being at the top, if one sees no further than the end of other people’s noses? Let us live merrily. Life is all. That man has another future elsewhere, on high, below, anywhere, I don’t believe; not one single word of it. Ah! sacrifice and renunciation are recommended to me; I must take heed to everything I do; I must cudgel my brains over good and evil, over the just and the unjust, over the fas and the nefas. Why? Because I shall have to render an account of my actions. When? After death. What a fine dream! After my death it will be a very clever person who can catch me. Have a handful of dust seized by a shadow-hand, if you can. Let us tell the truth, we who are initiated, and who have raised the veil of Isis: there is no such thing as either good or evil; there is vegetation. Let us seek the real. Let us get to the bottom of it. Let us go into it thoroughly. What the deuce! let us go to the bottom of it! We must scent out the truth; dig in the earth for it, and seize it. Then it gives you exquisite joys. Then you grow strong, and you laugh. I am square on the bottom, I am. Immortality, Bishop, is a chance, a waiting for dead men’s shoes. Ah! what a charming promise! trust to it, if you like! What a fine lot Adam has! We are souls, and we shall be angels, with blue wings on our shoulder-blades. Do come to my assistance: is it not Tertullian who says that the blessed shall travel from star to star? Very well. We shall be the grasshoppers of the stars. And then, besides, we shall see God. Ta, ta, ta! What twaddle all these paradises are! God is a nonsensical monster. I would not say that in the Moniteur, egad! but I may whisper it among friends. Inter pocula. To sacrifice the world to paradise is to let slip the prey for the shadow. Be the dupe of the infinite! I'm not such a fool. I am a nought. I call myself Monsieur le Comte Nought, senator. Did I exist before my birth? No. Shall I exist after death? No. What am I? A little dust collected in an organism. What am I to do on this earth? The choice rests with me: suffer or enjoy. Whither will suffering lead me? To nothingness; but I shall have suffered. Whither will enjoyment lead me? To nothingness; but I shall have enjoyed myself. My choice is made. One must eat or be eaten. I shall eat. It is better to be the tooth than the grass. Such is my wisdom. After which, go whither I push thee, the grave-digger is there; the Pantheon for some of us: all falls into the great hole. End. Finis. Total liquidation. This is the vanishing-point. Death is death, believe me. I laugh at the idea of there being any one who has anything to tell me on that subject. Fables of nurses; bugaboo for children; Jehovah for men. No; our to-morrow is the night. Beyond the tomb there is nothing but equal nothingness. You have been Sardanapalus, you have been Vincent de Paul — it makes no difference. That is the truth. Then live your life, above all things. Make use of your *I* while you have it. In truth, Bishop, I tell you that I have a philosophy of my own, and I have my philosophers. I don't let myself be taken in with that nonsense. Of course, there must be something for those who are down, — for the barefooted beggars, knife-grinders, and miserable wretches. Legends, chimeras, the soul, immortality, paradise, the stars, are provided for them to swallow. They gobble it down. They spread it on their dry bread. He who has nothing else has the good. God. That is the least he can have. I oppose no objection to that; but I reserve Monsieur Naigeon for myself. The good God is good for the populace."

The Bishop clapped his hands.

"That's talking!" he exclaimed. "What an excellent and really marvellous thing is this materialism! Not every one who wants it can have it. Ah! when one does have it, one is no longer a dupe, one does not stupidly allow one's self to be exiled like Cato, nor stoned like Stephen, nor burned alive like Jeanne d'Arc. Those who have succeeded in procuring this admirable materialism have the joy of feeling themselves irresponsible, and of thinking that they can devour everything without uneasiness, — places, sinecures, dignities, power, whether well or ill acquired, lucrative recantations, useful treacheries, savory capitulations of conscience, — and that they shall enter the tomb with their digestion accomplished. How agreeable that is! I do not say that with reference to you, senator. Nevertheless, it is impossible for me to refrain from congratulating you. You great lords have, so you say, a philosophy of your own, and for yourselves, which is exquisite, refined, accessible to the rich alone, good for all sauces, and which seasons the voluptuousness of life admirably. This philosophy has been extracted from the depths, and unearthed by special seekers. But you are good-natured princes, and you do not think it a bad thing that belief in the good God should constitute the philosophy of the people, very much as the goose stuffed with chestnuts is the truffled turkey of the poor."

CHAPTER IX — THE BROTHER AS DEPICTED BY THE SISTER

In order to furnish an idea of the private establishment of the Bishop of D —— , and of the manner in which those two sainted women subordinated their actions, their thoughts, their feminine instincts even, which are easily alarmed, to the habits and purposes of the Bishop, without his even taking the trouble of speaking in order to explain them, we cannot do better than transcribe in this place a letter from Mademoiselle Baptistine to Madame the Vicomtess de Boischevron, the friend of her childhood. This letter is in our possession.

D —— , Dec. 16, 18 — .

MY GOOD MADAM: Not a day passes without our speaking of you. It is our established custom; but there is another reason besides. Just imagine, while washing and dusting the ceilings and walls, Madam Magloire has made some discoveries; now our two chambers hung with antique paper whitewashed over, would not discredit a chateau in the style of yours. Madam Magloire has pulled off all the paper. There were things beneath. My drawing-room, which contains no furniture, and which we use for spreading out the linen after washing, is fifteen feet in height, eighteen square, with a ceiling which was formerly painted and gilded, and with beams, as in yours. This was covered with a cloth while this was the hospital. And the woodwork was of the era of our grandmothers.

But my room is the one you ought to see. Madam Magloire has discovered, under at least ten thicknesses of paper pasted on top, some paintings, which without being good are very tolerable. The subject is Telemachus being knighted by Minerva in some gardens, the name of which escapes me. In short, where the Roman ladies repaired on one single night. What shall I say to you? I have Romans, and Roman ladies [here occurs an illegible word], and the whole train. Madam Magloire has cleaned it all off; this summer she is going to have some small injuries repaired, and the whole revarnished, and my chamber will be a regular museum. She has also found in a corner of the attic two wooden pier-tables of ancient fashion. They asked us two crowns of six francs each to regild them, but it is much better to give the money to the poor; and they are very ugly besides, and I should much prefer a round table of mahogany.

I am always very happy. My brother is so good. He gives all he has to the poor and sick. We are very much cramped. The country is trying in the winter, and we really must do something for those who are in need. We are almost comfortably lighted and warmed. You see that these are great treats.

My brother has ways of his own. When he talks, he says that a bishop ought to be so. Just imagine! the door of our house is never fastened. Whoever chooses to enter finds himself at once in my brother's room. He fears nothing, even at night. That is his sort of bravery, he says.

He does not wish me or Madame Magloire feel any fear for him. He exposes himself to all sorts of dangers, and he does not like to have us even seem to notice it. One must know how to understand him.

He goes out in the rain, he walks in the water, he travels in winter. He fears neither suspicious roads nor dangerous encounters, nor night.

Last year he went quite alone into a country of robbers. He would not take us. He was absent for a fortnight. On his return nothing had happened to him; he was thought to be dead, but was perfectly well, and said, “This is the way I have been robbed!” And then he opened a trunk full of jewels, all the jewels of the cathedral of Embrun, which the thieves had given him.

When he returned on that occasion, I could not refrain from scolding him a little, taking care, however, not to speak except when the carriage was making a noise, so that no one might hear me.

At first I used to say to myself, “There are no dangers which will stop him; he is terrible.” Now I have ended by getting used to it. I make a sign to Madam Magloire that she is not to oppose him. He risks himself as he sees fit. I carry off Madam Magloire, I enter my chamber, I pray for him and fall asleep. I am at ease, because I know that if anything were to happen to him, it would be the end of me. I should go to the good God with my brother and my bishop. It has cost Madam Magloire more trouble than it did me to accustom herself to what she terms his imprudences. But now the habit has been acquired. We pray together, we tremble together, and we fall asleep. If the devil were to enter this house, he would be allowed to do so. After all, what is there for us to fear in this house? There is always some one with us who is stronger than we. The devil may pass through it, but the good God dwells here.

This suffices me. My brother has no longer any need of saying a word to me. I understand him without his speaking, and we abandon ourselves to the care of Providence. That is the way one has to do with a man who possesses grandeur of soul.

I have interrogated my brother with regard to the information which you desire on the subject of the Faux family. You are aware that he knows everything, and that he has memories, because he is still a very good royalist. They really are a very ancient Norman family of the generalship of Caen. Five hundred years ago there was a Raoul de Faux, a Jean de Faux, and a Thomas de Faux, who were gentlemen, and one of whom was a seigneur de Rochefort. The last was Guy-Etienne-Alexandre, and was commander of a regiment, and something in the light horse of Bretagne. His daughter, Marie-Louise, married Adrien-Charles de Gramont, son of the Duke Louis de Gramont, peer of France, colonel of the French guards, and lieutenant-general of the army. It is written Faux, Fauq, and Faoucq.

Good Madame, recommend us to the prayers of your sainted relative, Monsieur the Cardinal. As for your dear Sylvanie, she has done well in not wasting the few moments which she passes with you in writing to me.

She is well, works as you would wish, and loves me.

> That is all that I desire. The souvenir which she sent through you reached me safely, and it makes me very happy. My health is not so very bad, and yet I grow thinner every day. Farewell; my paper is at an end, and this forces me to leave you. A thousand good wishes.
>
> BAPTISTINE.
>
> P.S. Your grand nephew is charming. Do you know that he will soon be five years old? Yesterday he saw some one riding by on horseback who had on knee-caps, and he said, “What has he got on his knees?” He is a charming child! His little brother is dragging an old broom about the room, like a carriage, and saying, “Hu!”

As will be perceived from this letter, these two women understood how to mould themselves to the Bishop’s ways with that special feminine genius which comprehends the man better than he comprehends himself. The Bishop of D —— , in spite of the gentle and candid air which never deserted him, sometimes did things that were grand, bold, and magnificent, without seeming to have even a suspicion of the fact. They trembled, but they let him alone. Sometimes Madame Magloire essayed a remonstrance in advance, but never at the time, nor afterwards. They never interfered with him by so much as a word or sign, in any action once entered upon. At certain moments, without his having occasion to mention it, when he was not even conscious of it himself in all probability, so perfect was his simplicity, they vaguely felt that he was acting as a bishop; then they were nothing more than two shadows in the house. They served him passively; and if obedience consisted in disappearing, they disappeared. They understood, with an admirable delicacy of instinct, that certain cares may be put under constraint. Thus, even when believing him to be in peril, they understood, I will not say his thought, but his nature, to such a degree that they no longer watched over him. They confided him to God.

Moreover, Baptistine said, as we have just read, that her brother’s end would prove her own. Madame Magloire did not say this, but she knew it.

CHAPTER X — THE BISHOP IN THE PRESENCE OF AN UNKNOWN LIGHT

At an epoch a little later than the date of the letter cited in the preceding pages, he did a thing which, if the whole town was to be believed, was even more hazardous than his trip across the mountains infested with bandits.

In the country near D —— a man lived quite alone. This man, we will state at once, was a former member of the Convention. His name was G ——

Member of the Convention, G —— was mentioned with a sort of horror in the little world of D —— A member of the Convention — can you imagine such a thing? That existed from the time when people called each other thou, and when they said "citizen." This man was almost a monster. He had not voted for the death of the king, but almost. He was a quasi-regicide. He had been a terrible man. How did it happen that such a man had not been brought before a provost's court, on the return of the legitimate princes? They need not have cut off his head, if you please; clemency must be exercised, agreed; but a good banishment for life. An example, in short, etc. Besides, he was an atheist, like all the rest of those people. Gossip of the geese about the vulture.

Was G —— a vulture after all? Yes; if he were to be judged by the element of ferocity in this solitude of his. As he had not voted for the death of the king, he had not been included in the decrees of exile, and had been able to remain in France.

He dwelt at a distance of three-quarters of an hour from the city, far from any hamlet, far from any road, in some hidden turn of a very wild valley, no one knew exactly where. He had there, it was said, a sort of field, a hole, a lair. There were no neighbors, not even passers-by. Since he had dwelt in that valley, the path which led thither had disappeared under a growth of grass. The locality was spoken of as though it had been the dwelling of a hangman.

Nevertheless, the Bishop meditated on the subject, and from time to time he gazed at the horizon at a point where a clump of trees marked the valley of the former member of the Convention, and he said, "There is a soul yonder which is lonely."

And he added, deep in his own mind, “I owe him a visit.”

But, let us avow it, this idea, which seemed natural at the first blush, appeared to him after a moment’s reflection, as strange, impossible, and almost repulsive. For, at bottom, he shared the general impression, and the old member of the Convention inspired him, without his being clearly conscious of the fact himself, with that sentiment which borders on hate, and which is so well expressed by the word estrangement.

Still, should the scab of the sheep cause the shepherd to recoil? No. But what a sheep!

The good Bishop was perplexed. Sometimes he set out in that direction; then he returned.

Finally, the rumor one day spread through the town that a sort of young shepherd, who served the member of the Convention in his hovel, had come in quest of a doctor; that the old wretch was dying, that paralysis was gaining on him, and that he would not live over night.— “Thank God!” some added.

The Bishop took his staff, put on his cloak, on account of his too threadbare cassock, as we have mentioned, and because of the evening breeze which was sure to rise soon, and set out.

The sun was setting, and had almost touched the horizon when the Bishop arrived at the excommunicated spot. With a certain beating of the heart, he recognized the fact that he was near the lair. He strode over a ditch, leaped a hedge, made his way through a fence of dead boughs, entered a neglected paddock, took a few steps with a good deal of boldness, and suddenly, at the extremity of the waste land, and behind lofty brambles, he caught sight of the cavern.

It was a very low hut, poor, small, and clean, with a vine nailed against the outside.

Near the door, in an old wheel-chair, the arm-chair of the peasants, there was a white-haired man, smiling at the sun.

Near the seated man stood a young boy, the shepherd lad. He was offering the old man a jar of milk.

While the Bishop was watching him, the old man spoke: “Thank you,” he said, “I need nothing.” And his smile quitted the sun to rest upon the child.

The Bishop stepped forward. At the sound which he made in walking, the old man turned his head, and his face expressed the sum total of the surprise which a man can still feel after a long life.

"This is the first time since I have been here," said he, "that any one has entered here. Who are you, sir?"

The Bishop answered: —

"My name is Bienvenu Myriel."

"Bienvenu Myriel? I have heard that name. Are you the man whom the people call Monseigneur Welcome?"

"I am."

The old man resumed with a half-smile

"In that case, you are my bishop?"

"Something of that sort."

"Enter, sir."

The member of the Convention extended his hand to the Bishop, but the Bishop did not take it. The Bishop confined himself to the remark: —

"I am pleased to see that I have been misinformed. You certainly do not seem to me to be ill."

"Monsieur," replied the old man, "I am going to recover."

He paused, and then said: —

"I shall die three hours hence."

Then he continued: —

"I am something of a doctor; I know in what fashion the last hour draws on. Yesterday, only my feet were cold; to-day, the chill has ascended to my knees; now I feel it mounting to my waist; when it reaches the heart, I shall stop. The sun is beautiful, is it not? I had myself wheeled out here to take a last look at things. You can talk to me; it does not fatigue me. You have done well to come and look at a man who is on the point of death. It is well that there should be witnesses at that moment. One has one's caprices; I should have liked to last until the dawn, but I know that I shall hardly live three hours. It will be night then. What does it matter, after all? Dying is a simple affair. One has no need of the light for that. So be it. I shall die by starlight."

The old man turned to the shepherd lad: —

"Go to thy bed; thou wert awake all last night; thou art tired."

The child entered the hut.

The old man followed him with his eyes, and added, as though speaking to himself: —

"I shall die while he sleeps. The two slumbers may be good neighbors."

The Bishop was not touched as it seems that he should have been. He did not think he discerned God in this manner of dying; let us say the whole, for these petty contradictions of great hearts must be indicated like the rest: he, who on occasion, was so fond of laughing at “His Grace,” was rather shocked at not being addressed as Monseigneur, and he was almost tempted to retort “citizen.” He was assailed by a fancy for peevish familiarity, common enough to doctors and priests, but which was not habitual with him. This man, after all, this member of the Convention, this representative of the people, had been one of the powerful ones of the earth; for the first time in his life, probably, the Bishop felt in a mood to be severe.

Meanwhile, the member of the Convention had been surveying him with a modest cordiality, in which one could have distinguished, possibly, that humility which is so fitting when one is on the verge of returning to dust.

The Bishop, on his side, although he generally restrained his curiosity, which, in his opinion, bordered on a fault, could not refrain from examining the member of the Convention with an attention which, as it did not have its course in sympathy, would have served his conscience as a matter of reproach, in connection with any other man. A member of the Convention produced on him somewhat the effect of being outside the pale of the law, even of the law of charity. G —— , calm, his body almost upright, his voice vibrating, was one of those octogenarians who form the subject of astonishment to the physiologist. The Revolution had many of these men, proportioned to the epoch. In this old man one was conscious of a man put to the proof. Though so near to his end, he preserved all the gestures of health. In his clear glance, in his firm tone, in the robust movement of his shoulders, there was something calculated to disconcert death. Azrael, the Mohammedan angel of the sepulchre, would have turned back, and thought that he had mistaken the door. G —— seemed to be dying because he willed it so. There was freedom in his agony. His legs alone were motionless. It was there that the shadows held him fast. His feet were cold and dead, but his head survived with all the power of life, and seemed full of light. G —— , at this solemn moment, resembled the king in that tale of the Orient who was flesh above and marble below.

There was a stone there. The Bishop sat down. The exordium was abrupt.

“I congratulate you,” said he, in the tone which one uses for a reprimand. “You did not vote for the death of the king, after all.”

The old member of the Convention did not appear to notice the bitter meaning underlying the words “after all.” He replied. The smile had quite disappeared from his face.

“Do not congratulate me too much, sir. I did vote for the death of the tyrant.”

It was the tone of austerity answering the tone of severity.

“What do you mean to say?” resumed the Bishop.

“I mean to say that man has a tyrant, — ignorance. I voted for the death of that tyrant. That tyrant engendered royalty, which is authority falsely understood, while science is authority rightly understood. Man should be governed only by science.”

“And conscience,” added the Bishop.

“It is the same thing. Conscience is the quantity of innate science which we have within us.”

Monseigneur Bienvenu listened in some astonishment to this language, which was very new to him.

The member of the Convention resumed: —

“So far as Louis XVI. was concerned, I said ‘no.’ I did not think that I had the right to kill a man; but I felt it my duty to exterminate evil. I voted the end of the tyrant, that is to say, the end of prostitution for woman, the end of slavery for man, the end of night for the child. In voting for the Republic, I voted for that. I voted for fraternity, concord, the dawn. I have aided in the overthrow of prejudices and errors. The crumbling away of prejudices and errors causes light. We have caused the fall of the old world, and the old world, that vase of miseries, has become, through its upsetting upon the human race, an urn of joy.”

“Mixed joy,” said the Bishop.

“You may say troubled joy, and to-day, after that fatal return of the past, which is called 1814, joy which has disappeared! Alas! The work was incomplete, I admit: we demolished the ancient regime in deeds; we were not able to suppress it entirely in ideas. To destroy abuses is not sufficient; customs must be modified. The mill is there no longer; the wind is still there.”

“You have demolished. It may be of use to demolish, but I distrust a demolition complicated with wrath.”

“Right has its wrath, Bishop; and the wrath of right is an element of progress. In any case, and in spite of whatever may be said, the French

Revolution is the most important step of the human race since the advent of Christ. Incomplete, it may be, but sublime. It set free all the unknown social quantities; it softened spirits, it calmed, appeased, enlightened; it caused the waves of civilization to flow over the earth. It was a good thing. The French Revolution is the consecration of humanity."

The Bishop could not refrain from murmuring: —

"Yes? '93!"

The member of the Convention straightened himself up in his chair with an almost lugubrious solemnity, and exclaimed, so far as a dying man is capable of exclamation: —

"Ah, there you go; '93! I was expecting that word. A cloud had been forming for the space of fifteen hundred years; at the end of fifteen hundred years it burst. You are putting the thunderbolt on its trial."

The Bishop felt, without, perhaps, confessing it, that something within him had suffered extinction. Nevertheless, he put a good face on the matter. He replied: —

"The judge speaks in the name of justice; the priest speaks in the name of pity, which is nothing but a more lofty justice. A thunderbolt should commit no error." And he added, regarding the member of the Convention steadily the while, "Louis XVII.?"

The conventionary stretched forth his hand and grasped the Bishop's arm.

"Louis XVII.! let us see. For whom do you mourn? is it for the innocent child? very good; in that case I mourn with you. Is it for the royal child? I demand time for reflection. To me, the brother of Cartouche, an innocent child who was hung up by the armpits in the Place de Greve, until death ensued, for the sole crime of having been the brother of Cartouche, is no less painful than the grandson of Louis XV., an innocent child, martyred in the tower of the Temple, for the sole crime of having been grandson of Louis XV."

"Monsieur," said the Bishop, "I like not this conjunction of names."

"Cartouche? Louis XV.? To which of the two do you object?"

A momentary silence ensued. The Bishop almost regretted having come, and yet he felt vaguely and strangely shaken.

The conventionary resumed: —

"Ah, Monsieur Priest, you love not the crudities of the true. Christ loved them. He seized a rod and cleared out the Temple. His scourge, full of lightnings, was a harsh speaker of truths. When he cried, ‘Sinite parvulos,’ he made no distinction between the little children. It would not have embarrassed him to bring together the Dauphin of Barabbas and the Dauphin of Herod. Innocence, Monsieur, is its own crown. Innocence has no need to be a highness. It is as august in rags as in fleurs de lys.”

“That is true,” said the Bishop in a low voice.

“I persist,” continued the conventionary G — — “You have mentioned Louis XVII. to me. Let us come to an understanding. Shall we weep for all the innocent, all martyrs, all children, the lowly as well as the exalted? I agree to that. But in that case, as I have told you, we must go back further than ‘93, and our tears must begin before Louis XVII. I will weep with you over the children of kings, provided that you will weep with me over the children of the people.”

“I weep for all,” said the Bishop.

“Equally!” exclaimed conventionary G —— ; “and if the balance must incline, let it be on the side of the people. They have been suffering longer.”

Another silence ensued. The conventionary was the first to break it. He raised himself on one elbow, took a bit of his cheek between his thumb and his forefinger, as one does mechanically when one interrogates and judges, and appealed to the Bishop with a gaze full of all the forces of the death agony. It was almost an explosion.

“Yes, sir, the people have been suffering a long while. And hold! that is not all, either; why have you just questioned me and talked to me about Louis XVII.? I know you not. Ever since I have been in these parts I have dwelt in this enclosure alone, never setting foot outside, and seeing no one but that child who helps me. Your name has reached me in a confused manner, it is true, and very badly pronounced, I must admit; but that signifies nothing: clever men have so many ways of imposing on that honest goodman, the people. By the way, I did not hear the sound of your carriage; you have left it yonder, behind the coppice at the fork of the roads, no doubt. I do not know you, I tell you. You have told me that you are the Bishop; but that affords me no information as to your moral personality. In short, I repeat my question. Who are you? You are a bishop; that is to say, a prince of the church, one of those gilded men with heraldic bearings and revenues, who have vast prebends, — the bishopric of D —— fifteen thousand francs settled income, ten thousand in perquisites; total, twenty-five thousand francs, — who have kitchens, who have liveries, who make good cheer, who eat moor-hens on Friday, who strut about, a lackey before, a lackey behind, in a gala coach, and who have palaces, and who roll in their carriages in the name of Jesus Christ who went barefoot! You are a prelate, — revenues, palace, horses, servants, good table, all the sensualities of life; you have this like the rest, and like the rest, you enjoy it; it is well; but this says either too much or too little; this does not enlighten me upon the intrinsic and essential value of the man who comes with the probable intention of bringing wisdom to me. To whom do I speak? Who are you?"

The Bishop hung his head and replied, "Vermis sum — I am a worm."

"A worm of the earth in a carriage?" growled the conventionary.

It was the conventionary's turn to be arrogant, and the Bishop's to be humble.

The Bishop resumed mildly: —

"So be it, sir. But explain to me how my carriage, which is a few paces off behind the trees yonder, how my good table and the moor-hens which I eat on Friday, how my twenty-five thousand francs income, how my palace and my lackeys prove that clemency is not a duty, and that '93 was not inexorable."

The conventionary passed his hand across his brow, as though to sweep away a cloud.

"Before replying to you," he said, "I beseech you to pardon me. I have just committed a wrong, sir. You are at my house, you are my guest, I owe you courtesy. You discuss my ideas, and it becomes me to confine myself to combating your arguments. Your riches and your pleasures are advantages which I hold over you in the debate; but good taste dictates that I shall not make use of them. I promise you to make no use of them in the future."

"I thank you," said the Bishop.

G —— resumed.

"Let us return to the explanation which you have asked of me. Where were we? What were you saying to me? That '93 was inexorable?"

"Inexorable; yes," said the Bishop. "What think you of Marat clapping his hands at the guillotine?"

"What think you of Bossuet chanting the Te Deum over the dragonnades?"

The retort was a harsh one, but it attained its mark with the directness of a point of steel. The Bishop quivered under it; no reply occurred to him; but he was offended by this mode of alluding to Bossuet. The best of minds will have their fetiches, and they sometimes feel vaguely wounded by the want of respect of logic.

The conventionary began to pant; the asthma of the agony which is mingled with the last breaths interrupted his voice; still, there was a perfect lucidity of soul in his eyes. He went on: —

“Let me say a few words more in this and that direction; I am willing. Apart from the Revolution, which, taken as a whole, is an immense human affirmation, ‘93 is, alas! a rejoinder. You think it inexorable, sir; but what of the whole monarchy, sir? Carrier is a bandit; but what name do you give to Montrevel? Fouquier-Tainville is a rascal; but what is your opinion as to Lamoignon-Baville? Maillard is terrible; but Saulx-Tavannes, if you please? Duchene senior is ferocious; but what epithet will you allow me for the elder Letellier? Jourdan-Coupe-Tete is a monster; but not so great a one as M. the Marquis de Louvois. Sir, sir, I am sorry for Marie Antoinette, archduchess and queen; but I am also sorry for that poor Huguenot woman, who, in 1685, under Louis the Great, sir, while with a nursing infant, was bound, naked to the waist, to a stake, and the child kept at a distance; her breast swelled with milk and her heart with anguish; the little one, hungry and pale, beheld that breast and cried and agonized; the executioner said to the woman, a mother and a nurse, ‘Abjure!’ giving her her choice between the death of her infant and the death of her conscience. What say you to that torture of Tantalus as applied to a mother? Bear this well in mind sir: the French Revolution had its reasons for existence; its wrath will be absolved by the future; its result is the world made better. From its most terrible blows there comes forth a caress for the human race. I abridge, I stop, I have too much the advantage; moreover, I am dying.”

And ceasing to gaze at the Bishop, the conventionary concluded his thoughts in these tranquil words: —

“Yes, the brutalities of progress are called revolutions. When they are over, this fact is recognized, — that the human race has been treated harshly, but that it has progressed.”

The conventionary doubted not that he had successively conquered all the inmost intrenchments of the Bishop. One remained, however, and from this intrenchment, the last resource of Monseigneur Bienvenu’s resistance, came forth this reply, wherein appeared nearly all the harshness of the beginning: —

“Progress should believe in God. Good cannot have an impious servitor. He who is an atheist is but a bad leader for the human race.”

The former representative of the people made no reply. He was seized with a fit of trembling. He looked towards heaven, and in his glance a tear gathered slowly. When the eyelid was full, the tear trickled down his livid cheek, and he said, almost in a stammer, quite low, and to himself, while his eyes were plunged in the depths: —

“O thou! O ideal! Thou alone existest!”

The Bishop experienced an indescribable shock.

After a pause, the old man raised a finger heavenward and said: —

“The infinite is. He is there. If the infinite had no person, person would be without limit; it would not be infinite; in other words, it would not exist. There is, then, an *I*. That *I* of the infinite is God.”

The dying man had pronounced these last words in a loud voice, and with the shiver of ecstasy, as though he beheld some one. When he had spoken, his eyes closed. The effort had exhausted him. It was evident that he had just lived through in a moment the few hours which had been left to him. That which he had said brought him nearer to him who is in death. The supreme moment was approaching.

The Bishop understood this; time pressed; it was as a priest that he had come: from extreme coldness he had passed by degrees to extreme emotion; he gazed at those closed eyes, he took that wrinkled, aged and ice-cold hand in his, and bent over the dying man.

“This hour is the hour of God. Do you not think that it would be regrettable if we had met in vain?”

The conventionary opened his eyes again. A gravity mingled with gloom was imprinted on his countenance.

“Bishop,” said he, with a slowness which probably arose more from his dignity of soul than from the failing of his strength, “I have passed my life in meditation, study, and contemplation. I was sixty years of age when my country called me and commanded me to concern myself with its affairs. I obeyed. Abuses existed, I combated them; tyrannies existed, I destroyed them; rights and principles existed, I proclaimed and confessed them. Our territory was invaded, I defended it; France was menaced, I offered my breast. I was not rich; I am poor. I have been one of the masters of the state; the vaults of the treasury were encumbered with specie to such a degree that we were forced to shore up the walls, which were on the point of bursting beneath the weight of gold and silver; I dined in Dead Tree Street, at twenty-two sous. I have succored the oppressed, I have comforted the suffering. I tore the cloth from the altar, it is true; but it was to bind up the wounds of my country. I have always upheld the march forward of the human race, forward towards the light, and I have sometimes resisted progress without pity. I have, when the occasion offered, protected my own adversaries, men of your profession. And there is at Peteghem, in Flanders, at the very spot where the Merovingian kings had their summer palace, a convent of Urbanists, the Abbéy of Sainte Claire en Beaulieu, which I saved in 1793. I have done my duty according to my powers, and all the good that I was able. After which, I was hunted down, pursued, persecuted, blackened, jeered at, scorned, cursed, proscribed. For many years past, I with my white hair have been conscious that many people think they have the right to despise me; to the poor ignorant masses I present the visage of one damned. And I accept this isolation of hatred, without hating any one myself. Now I am eighty-six years old; I am on the point of death. What is it that you have come to ask of me?”

“Your blessing,” said the Bishop.

And he knelt down.

When the Bishop raised his head again, the face of the conventionary had become august. He had just expired.

The Bishop returned home, deeply absorbed in thoughts which cannot be known to us. He passed the whole night in prayer. On the following morning some bold and curious persons attempted to speak to him about member of the Convention G —— ; he contented himself with pointing heavenward.

From that moment he redoubled his tenderness and brotherly feeling towards all children and sufferers.

Any allusion to “that old wretch of a G — —” caused him to fall into a singular preoccupation. No one could say that the passage of that soul before his, and the reflection of that grand conscience upon his, did not count for something in his approach to perfection.

This “pastoral visit” naturally furnished an occasion for a murmur of comment in all the little local coteries.

“Was the bedside of such a dying man as that the proper place for a bishop? There was evidently no conversion to be expected. All those revolutionists are backsliders. Then why go there? What was there to be seen there? He must have been very curious indeed to see a soul carried off by the devil."

One day a dowager of the impertinent variety who thinks herself spiritual, addressed this sally to him, "Monseigneur, people are inquiring when Your Greatness will receive the red cap!"— "Oh! oh! that's a coarse color," replied the Bishop. "It is lucky that those who despise it in a cap revere it in a hat."

CHAPTER XI — A RESTRICTION

We should incur a great risk of deceiving ourselves, were we to conclude from this that Monseigneur Welcome was “a philosophical bishop,” or a “patriotic cure.” His meeting, which may almost be designated as his union, with conventionary G —— , left behind it in his mind a sort of astonishment, which rendered him still more gentle. That is all.

Although Monseigneur Bienvenu was far from being a politician, this is, perhaps, the place to indicate very briefly what his attitude was in the events of that epoch, supposing that Monseigneur Bienvenu ever dreamed of having an attitude.

Let us, then, go back a few years.

Some time after the elevation of M. Myriel to the episcopate, the Emperor had made him a baron of the Empire, in company with many other bishops. The arrest of the Pope took place, as every one knows, on the night of the 5th to the 6th of July, 1809; on this occasion, M. Myriel was summoned by Napoleon to the synod of the bishops of France and Italy convened at Paris. This synod was held at Notre-Dame, and assembled for the first time on the 15th of June, 1811, under the presidency of Cardinal Fesch. M. Myriel was one of the ninety-five bishops who attended it. But he was present only at one sitting and at three or four private conferences. Bishop of a mountain diocese, living so very close to nature, in rusticity and deprivation, it appeared that he imported among these eminent personages, ideas which altered the temperature of the assembly. He very soon returned to D —— He was interrogated as to this speedy return, and he replied: “I embarrassed them. The outside air penetrated to them through me. I produced on them the effect of an open door.”

On another occasion he said, “What would you have? Those gentlemen are princes. I am only a poor peasant bishop.”

The fact is that he displeased them. Among other strange things, it is said that he chanced to remark one evening, when he found himself at the house of one of his most notable colleagues: “What beautiful clocks! What beautiful carpets! What beautiful liveries! They must be a great trouble. I would not have all those superfluities, crying incessantly in my ears: ‘There are people who are hungry! There are people who are cold! There are poor people! There are poor people!’”

Let us remark, by the way, that the hatred of luxury is not an intelligent hatred. This hatred would involve the hatred of the arts. Nevertheless, in churchmen, luxury is wrong, except in connection with representations and ceremonies. It seems to reveal habits which have very little that is charitable about them. An opulent priest is a contradiction. The priest must keep close to the poor. Now, can one come in contact incessantly night and day with all this distress, all these misfortunes, and this poverty, without having about one's own person a little of that misery, like the dust of labor? Is it possible to imagine a man near a brazier who is not warm? Can one imagine a workman who is working near a furnace, and who has neither a singed hair, nor blackened nails, nor a drop of sweat, nor a speck of ashes on his face? The first proof of charity in the priest, in the bishop especially, is poverty.

This is, no doubt, what the Bishop of D —— thought.

It must not be supposed, however, that he shared what we call the "ideas of the century" on certain delicate points. He took very little part in the theological quarrels of the moment, and maintained silence on questions in which Church and State were implicated; but if he had been strongly pressed, it seems that he would have been found to be an ultramontane rather than a gallican. Since we are making a portrait, and since we do not wish to conceal anything, we are forced to add that he was glacial towards Napoleon in his decline. Beginning with 1813, he gave in his adherence to or applauded all hostile manifestations. He refused to see him, as he passed through on his return from the island of Elba, and he abstained from ordering public prayers for the Emperor in his diocese during the Hundred Days.

Besides his sister, Mademoiselle Baptistine, he had two brothers, one a general, the other a prefect. He wrote to both with tolerable frequency. He was harsh for a time towards the former, because, holding a command in Provence at the epoch of the disembarkation at Cannes, the general had put himself at the head of twelve hundred men and had pursued the Emperor as though the latter had been a person whom one is desirous of allowing to escape. His correspondence with the other brother, the ex-prefect, a fine, worthy man who lived in retirement at Paris, Rue Cassette, remained more affectionate.

Thus Monseigneur Bienvenu also had his hour of party spirit, his hour of bitterness, his cloud. The shadow of the passions of the moment traversed this grand and gentle spirit occupied with eternal things. Certainly, such a man would have done well not to entertain any political opinions. Let there be no mistake as to our meaning: we are not confounding what is called “political opinions” with the grand aspiration for progress, with the sublime faith, patriotic, democratic, humane, which in our day should be the very foundation of every generous intellect. Without going deeply into questions which are only indirectly connected with the subject of this book, we will simply say this: It would have been well if Monseigneur Bienvenu had not been a Royalist, and if his glance had never been, for a single instant, turned away from that serene contemplation in which is distinctly discernible, above the fictions and the hatreds of this world, above the stormy vicissitudes of human things, the beaming of those three pure radiances, truth, justice, and charity.

While admitting that it was not for a political office that God created Monseigneur Welcome, we should have understood and admired his protest in the name of right and liberty, his proud opposition, his just but perilous resistance to the all-powerful Napoleon. But that which pleases us in people who are rising pleases us less in the case of people who are falling. We only love the fray so long as there is danger, and in any case, the combatants of the first hour have alone the right to be the exterminators of the last. He who has not been a stubborn accuser in prosperity should hold his peace in the face of ruin. The denunciator of success is the only legitimate executioner of the fall. As for us, when Providence intervenes and strikes, we let it work. 1812 commenced to disarm us. In 1813 the cowardly breach of silence of that taciturn legislative body, emboldened by catastrophe, possessed only traits which aroused indignation. And it was a crime to applaud, in 1814, in the presence of those marshals who betrayed; in the presence of that senate which passed from one dunghill to another, insulting after having deified; in the presence of that idolatry which was loosing its footing and spitting on its idol, — it was a duty to turn aside the head. In 1815, when the supreme disasters filled the air, when France was seized with a shiver at their sinister approach, when Waterloo could be dimly discerned opening before Napoleon, the mournful acclamation of the army and the people to the condemned of destiny had nothing laughable in it, and, after making all allowance for the despot, a heart like that of the Bishop of D —— , ought not perhaps to have failed to recognize the august and touching features presented by the embrace of a great nation and a great man on the brink of the abyss.

With this exception, he was in all things just, true, equitable, intelligent, humble and dignified, beneficent and kindly, which is only another sort of benevolence. He was a priest, a sage, and a man. It must be admitted, that even in the political views with which we have just reproached him, and which we are disposed to judge almost with severity, he was tolerant and easy, more so, perhaps, than we who are speaking here. The porter of the town-hall had been placed there by the Emperor. He was an old non-commissioned officer of the old guard, a member of the Legion of Honor at Austerlitz, as much of a Bonapartist as the eagle. This poor fellow occasionally let slip inconsiderate remarks, which the law then stigmatized as seditious speeches. After the imperial profile disappeared from the Legion of Honor, he never dressed himself in his regimentals, as he said, so that he should not be obliged to wear his cross. He had himself devoutly removed the imperial effigy from the cross which Napoleon had given him; this made a hole, and he would not put anything in its place. “I will die,” he said, “rather than wear the three frogs upon my heart!” He liked to scoff aloud at Louis XVIII. “The gouty old creature in English gaiters!” he said; “let him take himself off to Prussia with that queue of his.” He was happy to combine in the same imprecation the two things which he most detested, Prussia and England. He did it so often that he lost his place. There he was, turned out of the house, with his wife and children, and without bread. The Bishop sent for him, reproved him gently, and appointed him beadle in the cathedral.

In the course of nine years Monseigneur Bienvenu had, by dint of holy deeds and gentle manners, filled the town of D —— with a sort of tender and filial reverence. Even his conduct towards Napoleon had been accepted and tacitly pardoned, as it were, by the people, the good and weakly flock who adored their emperor, but loved their bishop.

CHAPTER XII — THE SOLITUDE OF MONSEIGNEUR WELCOME

A bishop is almost always surrounded by a full squadron of little abbes, just as a general is by a covey of young officers. This is what that charming Saint Francois de Sales calls somewhere “les pretres blancs-becs,” callow priests. Every career has its aspirants, who form a train for those who have attained eminence in it. There is no power which has not its dependents. There is no fortune which has not its court. The seekers of the future eddy around the splendid present. Every metropolis has its staff of officials. Every bishop who possesses the least influence has about him his patrol of cherubim from the seminary, which goes the round, and maintains good order in the episcopal palace, and mounts guard over monseigneur’s smile. To please a bishop is equivalent to getting one’s foot in the stirrup for a sub-diaconate. It is necessary to walk one’s path discreetly; the apostleship does not disdain the canonship.

Just as there are bigwigs elsewhere, there are big mitres in the Church. These are the bishops who stand well at Court, who are rich, well endowed, skilful, accepted by the world, who know how to pray, no doubt, but who know also how to beg, who feel little scruple at making a whole diocese dance attendance in their person, who are connecting links between the sacristy and diplomacy, who are abbes rather than priests, prelates rather than bishops. Happy those who approach them! Being persons of influence, they create a shower about them, upon the assiduous and the favored, and upon all the young men who understand the art of pleasing, of large parishes, prebends, archidiaconates, chaplaincies, and cathedral posts, while awaiting episcopal honors. As they advance themselves, they cause their satellites to progress also; it is a whole solar system on the march. Their radiance casts a gleam of purple over their suite. Their prosperity is crumbled up behind the scenes, into nice little promotions. The larger the diocese of the patron, the fatter the curacy for the favorite. And then, there is Rome. A bishop who understands how to become an archbishop, an archbishop who knows how to become a cardinal, carries you with him as conclavist; you enter a court of papal jurisdiction, you receive the pallium, and behold! you are an auditor, then a papal chamberlain, then monsignor, and from a Grace to an Eminence is only a step, and between the Eminence and the Holiness there is but the smoke of a ballot. Every skull-cap may dream of the tiara. The priest is nowadays the only man who can become a king in a regular manner; and what a king! the supreme king. Then what a nursery of aspirations is a seminary! How many blushing choristers, how many youthful abbes bear on their heads Perrette's pot of milk! Who knows how easy it is for ambition to call itself vocation? in good faith, perchance, and deceiving itself, devotee that it is.

Monseigneur Bienvenu, poor, humble, retiring, was not accounted among the big mitres. This was plain from the complete absence of young priests about him. We have seen that he "did not take" in Paris. Not a single future dreamed of engrafting itself on this solitary old man. Not a single sprouting ambition committed the folly of putting forth its foliage in his shadow. His canons and grand-vicars were good old men, rather vulgar like himself, walled up like him in this diocese, without exit to a cardinalship, and who resembled their bishop, with this difference, that they were finished and he was completed. The impossibility of growing great under Monseigneur Bienvenu was so well understood, that no sooner had the young men whom he ordained left the seminary than they got themselves recommended to the archbishops of Aix or of Auch, and went off in a great hurry. For, in short, we repeat it, men wish to be pushed. A saint who dwells in a paroxysm of abnegation is a dangerous neighbor; he might communicate to you, by contagion, an incurable poverty, an anchylosis of the joints, which are useful in advancement, and in short, more renunciation than you desire; and this infectious virtue is avoided. Hence the isolation of Monseigneur Bienvenu. We live in the midst of a gloomy society. Success; that is the lesson which falls drop by drop from the slope of corruption.

Be it said in passing, that success is a very hideous thing. Its false resemblance to merit deceives men. For the masses, success has almost the same profile as supremacy. Success, that Menaechmus of talent, has one dupe, — history. Juvenal and Tacitus alone grumble at it. In our day, a philosophy which is almost official has entered into its service, wears the livery of success, and performs the service of its antechamber. Succeed: theory. Prosperity argues capacity. Win in the lottery, and behold! you are a clever man. He who triumphs is venerated. Be born with a silver spoon in your mouth! everything lies in that. Be lucky, and you will have all the rest; be happy, and people will think you great. Outside of five or six immense exceptions, which compose the splendor of a century, contemporary admiration is nothing but short-sightedness. Gilding is gold. It does no harm to be the first arrival by pure chance, so long as you do arrive. The common herd is an old Narcissus who adores himself, and who applauds the vulgar herd. That enormous ability by virtue of which one is Moses, Aeschylus, Dante, Michael Angelo, or Napoleon, the multitude awards on the spot, and by acclamation, to whomsoever attains his object, in whatsoever it may consist. Let a notary transfigure himself into a deputy: let a false Corneille compose Tiridate; let a eunuch come to possess a harem; let a military Prudhomme accidentally win the decisive battle of an epoch; let an apothecary invent cardboard shoe-soles for the army of the Sambre-and-Meuse, and construct for himself, out of this cardboard, sold as leather, four hundred thousand francs of income; let a pork-packer espouse usury, and cause it to bring forth seven or eight millions, of which he is the father and of which it is the mother; let a preacher become a bishop by force of his nasal drawl; let the steward of a fine family be so rich on retiring from service that he is made minister of finances, — and men call that Genius, just as they call the face of Mousqueton Beauty, and the mien of Claude Majesty. With the constellations of space they confound the stars of the abyss which are made in the soft mire of the puddle by the feet of ducks.

CHAPTER XIII — WHAT HE BELIEVED

We are not obliged to sound the Bishop of D —— on the score of orthodoxy. In the presence of such a soul we feel ourselves in no mood but respect. The conscience of the just man should be accepted on his word. Moreover, certain natures being given, we admit the possible development of all beauties of human virtue in a belief that differs from our own.

What did he think of this dogma, or of that mystery? These secrets of the inner tribunal of the conscience are known only to the tomb, where souls enter naked. The point on which we are certain is, that the difficulties of faith never resolved themselves into hypocrisy in his case. No decay is possible to the diamond. He believed to the extent of his powers. “Credo in Patrem,” he often exclaimed. Moreover, he drew from good works that amount of satisfaction which suffices to the conscience, and which whispers to a man, “Thou art with God!”

The point which we consider it our duty to note is, that outside of and beyond his faith, as it were, the Bishop possessed an excess of love. In was in that quarter, quia multum amavit, — because he loved much — that he was regarded as vulnerable by “serious men,” “grave persons” and “reasonable people”; favorite locutions of our sad world where egotism takes its word of command from pedantry. What was this excess of love? It was a serene benevolence which overflowed men, as we have already pointed out, and which, on occasion, extended even to things. He lived without disdain. He was indulgent towards God’s creation. Every man, even the best, has within him a thoughtless harshness which he reserves for animals. The Bishop of D —— had none of that harshness, which is peculiar to many priests, nevertheless. He did not go as far as the Brahmin, but he seemed to have weighed this saying of Ecclesiastes: “Who knoweth whither the soul of the animal goeth?” Hideousness of aspect, deformity of instinct, troubled him not, and did not arouse his indignation. He was touched, almost softened by them. It seemed as though he went thoughtfully away to seek beyond the bounds of life which is apparent, the cause, the explanation, or the excuse for them. He seemed at times to be asking God to commute these penalties. He examined without wrath, and with the eye of a linguist who is deciphering a palimpsest, that portion of chaos which still exists in nature. This revery sometimes caused him to utter odd sayings.

One morning he was in his garden, and thought himself alone, but his sister was walking behind him, unseen by him: suddenly he paused and gazed at something on the ground; it was a large, black, hairy, frightful spider. His sister heard him say: —

“Poor beast! It is not its fault!”

Why not mention these almost divinely childish sayings of kindness? Puerile they may be; but these sublime puerilities were peculiar to Saint Francis d’Assisi and of Marcus Aurelius. One day he sprained his ankle in his effort to avoid stepping on an ant. Thus lived this just man. Sometimes he fell asleep in his garden, and then there was nothing more venerable possible.

Monseigneur Bienvenu had formerly been, if the stories anent his youth, and even in regard to his manhood, were to be believed, a passionate, and, possibly, a violent man. His universal suavity was less an instinct of nature than the result of a grand conviction which had filtered into his heart through the medium of life, and had trickled there slowly, thought by thought; for, in a character, as in a rock, there may exist apertures made by drops of water. These hollows are uneffaceable; these formations are indestructible.

In 1815, as we think we have already said, he reached his seventy-fifth birthday, but he did not appear to be more than sixty. He was not tall; he was rather plump; and, in order to combat this tendency, he was fond of taking long strolls on foot; his step was firm, and his form was but slightly bent, a detail from which we do not pretend to draw any conclusion. Gregory XVI., at the age of eighty, held himself erect and smiling, which did not prevent him from being a bad bishop. Monseigneur Welcome had what the people term a “fine head,” but so amiable was he that they forgot that it was fine.

When he conversed with that infantile gayety which was one of his charms, and of which we have already spoken, people felt at their ease with him, and joy seemed to radiate from his whole person. His fresh and ruddy complexion, his very white teeth, all of which he had preserved, and which were displayed by his smile, gave him that open and easy air which cause the remark to be made of a man, “He’s a good fellow”; and of an old man, “He is a fine man.” That, it will be recalled, was the effect which he produced upon Napoleon. On the first encounter, and to one who saw him for the first time, he was nothing, in fact, but a fine man. But if one remained near him for a few hours, and beheld him in the least degree pensive, the fine man became gradually transfigured, and took on some imposing quality, I know not what; his broad and serious brow, rendered august by his white locks, became august also by virtue of meditation; majesty radiated from his goodness, though his goodness ceased not to be radiant; one experienced something of the emotion which one would feel on beholding a smiling angel slowly unfold his wings, without ceasing to smile. Respect, an unutterable respect, penetrated you by degrees and mounted to your heart, and one felt that one had before him one of those strong, thoroughly tried, and indulgent souls where thought is so grand that it can no longer be anything but gentle.

As we have seen, prayer, the celebration of the offices of religion, alms-giving, the consolation of the afflicted, the cultivation of a bit of land, fraternity, frugality, hospitality, renunciation, confidence, study, work, filled every day of his life. Filled is exactly the word; certainly the Bishop's day was quite full to the brim, of good words and good deeds. Nevertheless, it was not complete if cold or rainy weather prevented his passing an hour or two in his garden before going to bed, and after the two women had retired. It seemed to be a sort of rite with him, to prepare himself for slumber by meditation in the presence of the grand spectacles of the nocturnal heavens. Sometimes, if the two old women were not asleep, they heard him pacing slowly along the walks at a very advanced hour of the night. He was there alone, communing with himself, peaceful, adoring, comparing the serenity of his heart with the serenity of the ether, moved amid the darkness by the visible splendor of the constellations and the invisible splendor of God, opening his heart to the thoughts which fall from the Unknown. At such moments, while he offered his heart at the hour when nocturnal flowers offer their perfume, illuminated like a lamp amid the starry night, as he poured himself out in ecstasy in the midst of the universal radiance of creation, he could not have told himself, probably, what was passing in his spirit; he felt something take its flight from him, and something descend into him. Mysterious exchange of the abysses of the soul with the abysses of the universe!

He thought of the grandeur and presence of God; of the future eternity, that strange mystery; of the eternity past, a mystery still more strange; of all the infinities, which pierced their way into all his senses, beneath his eyes; and, without seeking to comprehend the incomprehensible, he gazed upon it. He did not study God; he was dazzled by him. He considered those magnificent conjunctions of atoms, which communicate aspects to matter, reveal forces by verifying them, create individualities in unity, proportions in extent, the innumerable in the infinite, and, through light, produce beauty. These conjunctions are formed and dissolved incessantly; hence life and death.

He seated himself on a wooden bench, with his back against a decrepit vine; he gazed at the stars, past the puny and stunted silhouettes of his fruit-trees. This quarter of an acre, so poorly planted, so encumbered with mean buildings and sheds, was dear to him, and satisfied his wants.

What more was needed by this old man, who divided the leisure of his life, where there was so little leisure, between gardening in the daytime and contemplation at night? Was not this narrow enclosure, with the heavens for a ceiling, sufficient to enable him to adore God in his most divine works, in turn? Does not this comprehend all, in fact? and what is there left to desire beyond it? A little garden in which to walk, and immensity in which to dream. At one’s feet that which can be cultivated and plucked; over head that which one can study and meditate upon: some flowers on earth, and all the stars in the sky.

CHAPTER XIV — WHAT HE THOUGHT

One last word.

Since this sort of details might, particularly at the present moment, and to use an expression now in fashion, give to the Bishop of D —— a certain “pantheistical” physiognomy, and induce the belief, either to his credit or discredit, that he entertained one of those personal philosophies which are peculiar to our century, which sometimes spring up in solitary spirits, and there take on a form and grow until they usurp the place of religion, we insist upon it, that not one of those persons who knew Monseigneur Welcome would have thought himself authorized to think anything of the sort. That which enlightened this man was his heart. His wisdom was made of the light which comes from there.

No systems; many works. Abstruse speculations contain vertigo; no, there is nothing to indicate that he risked his mind in apocalypses. The apostle may be daring, but the bishop must be timid. He would probably have felt a scruple at sounding too far in advance certain problems which are, in a manner, reserved for terrible great minds. There is a sacred horror beneath the porches of the enigma; those gloomy openings stand yawning there, but something tells you, you, a passer-by in life, that you must not enter. Woe to him who penetrates thither!

Geniuses in the impenetrable depths of abstraction and pure speculation, situated, so to speak, above all dogmas, propose their ideas to God. Their prayer audaciously offers discussion. Their adoration interrogates. This is direct religion, which is full of anxiety and responsibility for him who attempts its steep cliffs.

Human meditation has no limits. At his own risk and peril, it analyzes and digs deep into its own bedazzlement. One might almost say, that by a sort of splendid reaction, it with it dazzles nature; the mysterious world which surrounds us renders back what it has received; it is probable that the contemplators are contemplated. However that may be, there are on earth men who — are they men? — perceive distinctly at the verge of the horizons of revery the heights of the absolute, and who have the terrible vision of the infinite mountain. Monseigneur Welcome was one of these men; Monseigneur Welcome was not a genius. He would have feared those sublimities whence some very great men even, like Swedenborg and Pascal, have slipped into insanity. Certainly, these powerful reveries have their moral utility, and by these arduous paths one approaches to ideal perfection. As for him, he took the path which shortens, — the Gospel's.

He did not attempt to impart to his chasuble the folds of Elijah's mantle; he projected no ray of future upon the dark groundswell of events; he did not see to condense in flame the light of things; he had nothing of the prophet and nothing of the magician about him. This humble soul loved, and that was all.

That he carried prayer to the pitch of a superhuman aspiration is probable: but one can no more pray too much than one can love too much; and if it is a heresy to pray beyond the texts, Saint Theresa and Saint Jerome would be heretics.

He inclined towards all that groans and all that expiates. The universe appeared to him like an immense malady; everywhere he felt fever, everywhere he heard the sound of suffering, and, without seeking to solve the enigma, he strove to dress the wound. The terrible spectacle of created things developed tenderness in him; he was occupied only in finding for himself, and in inspiring others with the best way to compassionate and relieve. That which exists was for this good and rare priest a permanent subject of sadness which sought consolation.

There are men who toil at extracting gold; he toiled at the extraction of pity. Universal misery was his mine. The sadness which reigned everywhere was but an excuse for unfailing kindness. Love each other; he declared this to be complete, desired nothing further, and that was the whole of his doctrine. One day, that man who believed himself to be a "philosopher," the senator who has already been alluded to, said to the Bishop: "Just survey the spectacle of the world: all war against all; the strongest has the most wit. Your love each other is nonsense."— "Well," replied Monseigneur Welcome, without contesting the point, "if it is nonsense, the soul should shut itself up in it, as the pearl in the oyster." Thus he shut himself up, he lived there, he was absolutely satisfied with it, leaving on one side the prodigious questions which attract and terrify, the fathomless perspectives of abstraction, the precipices of metaphysics — all those profundities which converge, for the apostle in God, for the atheist in nothingness; destiny, good and evil, the way of being against being, the conscience of man, the thoughtful somnambulism of the animal, the transformation in death, the recapitulation of existences which the tomb contains, the incomprehensible grafting of successive loves on the persistent *I*, the essence, the substance, the Nile, and the Ens, the soul, nature, liberty, necessity; perpendicular problems, sinister obscurities, where lean the gigantic archangels of the human mind; formidable abysses, which Lucretius, Manou, Saint Paul, Dante, contemplate with eyes flashing lightning, which seems by its steady gaze on the infinite to cause stars to blaze forth there.

Monseigneur Bienvenu was simply a man who took note of the exterior of mysterious questions without scrutinizing them, and without troubling his own mind with them, and who cherished in his own soul a grave respect for darkness.

BOOK SECOND — THE FALL

CHAPTER I — THE EVENING OF A DAY OF WALKING

Early in the month of October, 1815, about an hour before sunset, a man who was travelling on foot entered the little town of D —— The few inhabitants who were at their windows or on their thresholds at the moment stared at this traveller with a sort of uneasiness. It was difficult to encounter a wayfarer of more wretched appearance. He was a man of medium stature, thickset and robust, in the prime of life. He might have been forty-six or forty-eight years old. A cap with a drooping leather visor partly concealed his face, burned and tanned by sun and wind, and dripping with perspiration. His shirt of coarse yellow linen, fastened at the neck by a small silver anchor, permitted a view of his hairy breast: he had a cravat twisted into a string; trousers of blue drilling, worn and threadbare, white on one knee and torn on the other; an old gray, tattered blouse, patched on one of the elbows with a bit of green cloth sewed on with twine; a tightly packed soldier knapsack, well buckled and perfectly new, on his back; an enormous, knotty stick in his hand; iron-shod shoes on his stockingless feet; a shaved head and a long beard.

The sweat, the heat, the journey on foot, the dust, added I know not what sordid quality to this dilapidated whole. His hair was closely cut, yet bristling, for it had begun to grow a little, and did not seem to have been cut for some time.

No one knew him. He was evidently only a chance passer-by. Whence came he? From the south; from the seashore, perhaps, for he made his entrance into D —— by the same street which, seven months previously, had witnessed the passage of the Emperor Napoleon on his way from Cannes to Paris. This man must have been walking all day. He seemed very much fatigued. Some women of the ancient market town which is situated below the city had seen him pause beneath the trees of the boulevard Gassendi, and drink at the fountain which stands at the end of the promenade. He must have been very thirsty: for the children who followed him saw him stop again for a drink, two hundred paces further on, at the fountain in the market-place.

On arriving at the corner of the Rue Poichevert, he turned to the left, and directed his steps toward the town-hall. He entered, then came out a quarter of an hour later. A gendarme was seated near the door, on the stone bench which General Drouot had mounted on the 4th of March to read to the frightened throng of the inhabitants of D —— the proclamation of the Gulf Juan. The man pulled off his cap and humbly saluted the gendarme.

The gendarme, without replying to his salute, stared attentively at him, followed him for a while with his eyes, and then entered the town-hall.

There then existed at D —— a fine inn at the sign of the Cross of Colbas. This inn had for a landlord a certain Jacquin Labarre, a man of consideration in the town on account of his relationship to another Labarre, who kept the inn of the Three Dauphins in Grenoble, and had served in the Guides. At the time of the Emperor's landing, many rumors had circulated throughout the country with regard to this inn of the Three Dauphins. It was said that General Bertrand, disguised as a carter, had made frequent trips thither in the month of January, and that he had distributed crosses of honor to the soldiers and handfuls of gold to the citizens. The truth is, that when the Emperor entered Grenoble he had refused to install himself at the hotel of the prefecture; he had thanked the mayor, saying, "I am going to the house of a brave man of my acquaintance"; and he had betaken himself to the Three Dauphins. This glory of the Labarre of the Three Dauphins was reflected upon the Labarre of the Cross of Colbas, at a distance of five and twenty leagues. It was said of him in the town, "That is the cousin of the man of Grenoble."

The man bent his steps towards this inn, which was the best in the country-side. He entered the kitchen, which opened on a level with the street. All the stoves were lighted; a huge fire blazed gayly in the fireplace. The host, who was also the chief cook, was going from one stew-pan to another, very busily superintending an excellent dinner designed for the wagoners, whose loud talking, conversation, and laughter were audible from an adjoining apartment. Any one who has travelled knows that there is no one who indulges in better cheer than wagoners. A fat marmot, flanked by white partridges and heather-cocks, was turning on a long spit before the fire; on the stove, two huge carps from Lake Lauzet and a trout from Lake Alloz were cooking.

The host, hearing the door open and seeing a newcomer enter, said, without raising his eyes from his stoves: —

“What do you wish, sir?”

“Food and lodging,” said the man.

“Nothing easier,” replied the host. At that moment he turned his head, took in the traveller’s appearance with a single glance, and added, “By paying for it.”

The man drew a large leather purse from the pocket of his blouse, and answered, “I have money.”

“In that case, we are at your service,” said the host.

The man put his purse back in his pocket, removed his knapsack from his back, put it on the ground near the door, retained his stick in his hand, and seated himself on a low stool close to the fire. D —— is in the mountains. The evenings are cold there in October.

But as the host went back and forth, he scrutinized the traveller.

“Will dinner be ready soon?” said the man.

“Immediately,” replied the landlord.

While the newcomer was warming himself before the fire, with his back turned, the worthy host, Jacquin Labarre, drew a pencil from his pocket, then tore off the corner of an old newspaper which was lying on a small table near the window. On the white margin he wrote a line or two, folded it without sealing, and then intrusted this scrap of paper to a child who seemed to serve him in the capacity both of scullion and lackey. The landlord whispèred a word in the scullion’s ear, and the child set off on a run in the direction of the town-hall.

The traveller saw nothing of all this.

Once more he inquired, “Will dinner be ready soon?”

“Immediately,” responded the host.

The child returned. He brought back the paper. The host unfolded it eagerly, like a person who is expecting a reply. He seemed to read it attentively, then tossed his head, and remained thoughtful for a moment. Then he took a step in the direction of the traveller, who appeared to be immersed in reflections which were not very serene.

“I cannot receive you, sir,” said he.

The man half rose.

“What! Are you afraid that I will not pay you? Do you want me to pay you in advance? I have money, I tell you.”

“It is not that.”

“What then?”

“You have money—”

“Yes,” said the man.

“And I,” said the host, “have no room.”

The man resumed tranquilly, “Put me in the stable.”

“I cannot.”

“Why?”

“The horses take up all the space.”

“Very well!” retorted the man; “a corner of the loft then, a truss of straw. We will see about that after dinner.”

“I cannot give you any dinner.”

This declaration, made in a measured but firm tone, struck the stranger as grave. He rose.

“Ah! bah! But I am dying of hunger. I have been walking since sunrise. I have travelled twelve leagues. I pay. I wish to eat.”

“I have nothing,” said the landlord.

The man burst out laughing, and turned towards the fireplace and the stoves: “Nothing! and all that?”

“All that is engaged.”

“By whom?”

“By messieurs the wagoners.”

“How many are there of them?”

“Twelve.”

“There is enough food there for twenty.”

“They have engaged the whole of it and paid for it in advance.”

The man seated himself again, and said, without raising his voice, “I am at an inn; I am hungry, and I shall remain.”

Then the host bent down to his ear, and said in a tone which made him start, “Go away!”

At that moment the traveller was bending forward and thrusting some brands into the fire with the iron-shod tip of his staff; he turned quickly round, and as he opened his mouth to reply, the host gazed steadily at him and added, still in a low voice: “Stop! there’s enough of that sort of talk. Do you want me to tell you your name? Your name is Jean Valjean. Now do you want me to tell you who you are? When I saw you come in I suspected something; I sent to the town-hall, and this was the reply that was sent to me. Can you read?”

So saying, he held out to the stranger, fully unfolded, the paper which had just travelled from the inn to the town-hall, and from the town-hall to the inn. The man cast a glance upon it. The landlord resumed after a pause.

“I am in the habit of being polite to every one. Go away!”

The man dropped his head, picked up the knapsack which he had deposited on the ground, and took his departure.

He chose the principal street. He walked straight on at a venture, keeping close to the houses like a sad and humiliated man. He did not turn round a single time. Had he done so, he would have seen the host of the Cross of Colbas standing on his threshold, surrounded by all the guests of his inn, and all the passers-by in the street, talking vivaciously, and pointing him out with his finger; and, from the glances of terror and distrust cast by the group, he might have divined that his arrival would speedily become an event for the whole town.

He saw nothing of all this. People who are crushed do not look behind them. They know but too well the evil fate which follows them.

Thus he proceeded for some time, walking on without ceasing, traversing at random streets of which he knew nothing, forgetful of his fatigue, as is often the case when a man is sad. All at once he felt the pangs of hunger sharply. Night was drawing near. He glanced about him, to see whether he could not discover some shelter.

The fine hostelry was closed to him; he was seeking some very humble public house, some hovel, however lowly.

Just then a light flashed up at the end of the streets; a pine branch suspended from a cross-beam of iron was outlined against the white sky of the twilight. He proceeded thither.

It proved to be, in fact, a public house. The public house which is in the Rue de Chaffaut.

The wayfarer halted for a moment, and peeped through the window into the interior of the low-studded room of the public house, illuminated by a small lamp on a table and by a large fire on the hearth. Some men were engaged in drinking there. The landlord was warming himself. An iron pot, suspended from a crane, bubbled over the flame.

The entrance to this public house, which is also a sort of an inn, is by two doors. One opens on the street, the other upon a small yard filled with manure. The traveller dare not enter by the street door. He slipped into the yard, halted again, then raised the latch timidly and opened the door.

“Who goes there?” said the master.

“Some one who wants supper and bed.”

“Good. We furnish supper and bed here.”

He entered. All the men who were drinking turned round. The lamp illuminated him on one side, the firelight on the other. They examined him for some time while he was taking off his knapsack.

The host said to him, “There is the fire. The supper is cooking in the pot. Come and warm yourself, comrade.”

He approached and seated himself near the hearth. He stretched out his feet, which were exhausted with fatigue, to the fire; a fine odor was emitted by the pot. All that could be distinguished of his face, beneath his cap, which was well pulled down, assumed a vague appearance of comfort, mingled with that other poignant aspect which habitual suffering bestows.

It was, moreover, a firm, energetic, and melancholy profile. This physiognomy was strangely composed; it began by seeming humble, and ended by seeming severe. The eye shone beneath its lashes like a fire beneath brushwood.

One of the men seated at the table, however, was a fishmonger who, before entering the public house of the Rue de Chaffaut, had been to stable his horse at Labarre’s. It chanced that he had that very morning encountered this unprepossessing stranger on the road between Bras d’Asse and — I have forgotten the name. I think it was Escoublon. Now, when he met him, the man, who then seemed already extremely weary, had requested him to take him on his crupper; to which the fishmonger had made no reply except by redoubling his gait. This fishmonger had been a member half an hour previously of the group which surrounded Jacquin Labarre, and had himself related his disagreeable encounter of the morning to the people at the Cross of Colbas. From where he sat he made an imperceptible sign to the tavern-keeper. The tavern-keeper went to him. They exchanged a few words in a low tone. The man had again become absorbed in his reflections.

The tavern-keeper returned to the fireplace, laid his hand abruptly on the shoulder of the man, and said to him: —

“You are going to get out of here.”

The stranger turned round and replied gently, “Ah! You know?—”

“Yes.”

“I was sent away from the other inn.”

“And you are to be turned out of this one.”

“Where would you have me go?”

“Elsewhere.”

The man took his stick and his knapsack and departed.

As he went out, some children who had followed him from the Cross of Colbas, and who seemed to be lying in wait for him, threw stones at him. He retraced his steps in anger, and threatened them with his stick: the children dispersed like a flock of birds.

He passed before the prison. At the door hung an iron chain attached to a bell. He rang.

The wicket opened.

“Turnkey,” said he, removing his cap politely, “will you have the kindness to admit me, and give me a lodging for the night?”

A voice replied: —

“The prison is not an inn. Get yourself arrested, and you will be admitted.”

The wicket closed again.

He entered a little street in which there were many gardens. Some of them are enclosed only by hedges, which lends a cheerful aspect to the street. In the midst of these gardens and hedges he caught sight of a small house of a single story, the window of which was lighted up. He peered through the pane as he had done at the public house. Within was a large whitewashed room, with a bed draped in printed cotton stuff, and a cradle in one corner, a few wooden chairs, and a double-barrelled gun hanging on the wall. A table was spread in the centre of the room. A copper lamp illuminated the tablecloth of coarse white linen, the pewter jug shining like silver, and filled with wine, and the brown, smoking soup-tureen. At this table sat a man of about forty, with a merry and open countenance, who was dandling a little child on his knees. Close by a very young woman was nursing another child. The father was laughing, the child was laughing, the mother was smiling.

The stranger paused a moment in revery before this tender and calming spectacle. What was taking place within him? He alone could have told. It is probable that he thought that this joyous house would be hospitable, and that, in a place where he beheld so much happiness, he would find perhaps a little pity.

He tapped on the pane with a very small and feeble knock.

They did not hear him.

He tapped again.

He heard the woman say, “It seems to me, husband, that some one is knocking.”

“No,” replied the husband.

He tapped a third time.

The husband rose, took the lamp, and went to the door, which he opened.

He was a man of lofty stature, half peasant, half artisan. He wore a huge leather apron, which reached to his left shoulder, and which a hammer, a red handkerchief, a powder-horn, and all sorts of objects which were upheld by the girdle, as in a pocket, caused to bulge out. He carried his head thrown backwards; his shirt, widely opened and turned back, displayed his bull neck, white and bare. He had thick eyelashes, enormous black whiskers, prominent eyes, the lower part of his face like a snout; and besides all this, that air of being on his own ground, which is indescribable.

“Pardon me, sir,” said the wayfarer, “Could you, in consideration of payment, give me a plate of soup and a corner of that shed yonder in the garden, in which to sleep? Tell me; can you? For money?”

“Who are you?” demanded the master of the house.

The man replied: “I have just come from Puy-Moisson. I have walked all day long. I have travelled twelve leagues. Can you? — if I pay?”

“I would not refuse,” said the peasant, “to lodge any respectable man who would pay me. But why do you not go to the inn?”

“There is no room.”

“Bah! Impossible. This is neither a fair nor a market day. Have you been to Labarre?”

“Yes.”

“Well?”

The traveller replied with embarrassment: “I do not know. He did not receive me.”

“Have you been to What’s-his-name’s, in the Rue Chaffaut?”

The stranger’s embarrassment increased; he stammered, “He did not receive me either.”

The peasant’s countenance assumed an expression of distrust; he surveyed the newcomer from head to feet, and suddenly exclaimed, with a sort of shudder: —

“Are you the man?—”

He cast a fresh glance upon the stranger, took three steps backwards, placed the lamp on the table, and took his gun down from the wall.

Meanwhile, at the words, Are you the man? the woman had risen, had clasped her two children in her arms, and had taken refuge precipitately behind her husband, staring in terror at the stranger, with her bosom uncovered, and with frightened eyes, as she murmured in a low tone, “Tso-maraude.”

All this took place in less time than it requires to picture it to one’s self. After having scrutinized the man for several moments, as one scrutinizes a viper, the master of the house returned to the door and said: —

“Clear out!”

“For pity’s sake, a glass of water,” said the man.

“A shot from my gun!” said the peasant.

Then he closed the door violently, and the man heard him shoot two large bolts. A moment later, the window-shutter was closed, and the sound of a bar of iron which was placed against it was audible outside.

Night continued to fall. A cold wind from the Alps was blowing. By the light of the expiring day the stranger perceived, in one of the gardens which bordered the street, a sort of hut, which seemed to him to be built of sods. He climbed over the wooden fence resolutely, and found himself in the garden. He approached the hut; its door consisted of a very low and narrow aperture, and it resembled those buildings which road-laborers construct for themselves along the roads. He thought without doubt, that it was, in fact, the dwelling of a road-laborer; he was suffering from cold and hunger, but this was, at least, a shelter from the cold. This sort of dwelling is not usually occupied at night. He threw himself flat on his face, and crawled into the hut. It was warm there, and he found a tolerably good bed of straw. He lay, for a moment, stretched out on this bed, without the power to make a movement, so fatigued was he. Then, as the knapsack on his back was in his way, and as it furnished, moreover, a pillow ready to his hand, he set about unbuckling one of the straps. At that moment, a ferocious growl became audible. He raised his eyes. The head of an enormous dog was outlined in the darkness at the entrance of the hut.

It was a dog’s kennel.

He was himself vigorous and formidable; he armed himself with his staff, made a shield of his knapsack, and made his way out of the kennel in the best way he could, not without enlarging the rents in his rags.

He left the garden in the same manner, but backwards, being obliged, in order to keep the dog respectful, to have recourse to that manoeuvre with his stick which masters in that sort of fencing designate as la rose couverte.

When he had, not without difficulty, repassed the fence, and found himself once more in the street, alone, without refuge, without shelter, without a roof over his head, chased even from that bed of straw and from that miserable kennel, he dropped rather than seated himself on a stone, and it appears that a passer-by heard him exclaim, “I am not even a dog!”

He soon rose again and resumed his march. He went out of the town, hoping to find some tree or haystack in the fields which would afford him shelter.

He walked thus for some time, with his head still drooping. When he felt himself far from every human habitation, he raised his eyes and gazed searchingly about him. He was in a field. Before him was one of those low hills covered with close-cut stubble, which, after the harvest, resemble shaved heads.

The horizon was perfectly black. This was not alone the obscurity of night; it was caused by very low-hanging clouds which seemed to rest upon the hill itself, and which were mounting and filling the whole sky. Meanwhile, as the moon was about to rise, and as there was still floating in the zenith a remnant of the brightness of twilight, these clouds formed at the summit of the sky a sort of whitish arch, whence a gleam of light fell upon the earth.

The earth was thus better lighted than the sky, which produces a particularly sinister effect, and the hill, whose contour was poor and mean, was outlined vague and wan against the gloomy horizon. The whole effect was hideous, petty, lugubrious, and narrow.

There was nothing in the field or on the hill except a deformed tree, which writhed and shivered a few paces distant from the wayfarer.

This man was evidently very far from having those delicate habits of intelligence and spirit which render one sensible to the mysterious aspects of things; nevertheless, there was something in that sky, in that hill, in that plain, in that tree, which was so profoundly desolate, that after a moment of immobility and revery he turned back abruptly. There are instants when nature seems hostile.

He retraced his steps; the gates of D —— were closed. D —— , which had sustained sieges during the wars of religion, was still surrounded in

1815 by ancient walls flanked by square towers which have been demolished since. He passed through a breach and entered the town again.

It might have been eight o'clock in the evening. As he was not acquainted with the streets, he recommenced his walk at random.

In this way he came to the prefecture, then to the seminary. As he passed through the Cathedral Square, he shook his fist at the church.

At the corner of this square there is a printing establishment. It is there that the proclamations of the Emperor and of the Imperial Guard to the army, brought from the Island of Elba and dictated by Napoleon himself, were printed for the first time.

Worn out with fatigue, and no longer entertaining any hope, he lay down on a stone bench which stands at the doorway of this printing office.

At that moment an old woman came out of the church. She saw the man stretched out in the shadow. "What are you doing there, my friend?" said she.

He answered harshly and angrily: "As you see, my good woman, I am sleeping." The good woman, who was well worthy the name, in fact, was the Marquise de R ——

"On this bench?" she went on.

"I have had a mattress of wood for nineteen years," said the man; "to-day I have a mattress of stone."

"You have been a soldier?"

"Yes, my good woman, a soldier."

"Why do you not go to the inn?"

"Because I have no money."

"Alas!" said Madame de R —— , "I have only four sous in my purse."

"Give it to me all the same."

The man took the four sous. Madame de R —— continued: "You cannot obtain lodgings in an inn for so small a sum. But have you tried? It is impossible for you to pass the night thus. You are cold and hungry, no doubt. Some one might have given you a lodging out of charity."

"I have knocked at all doors."

"Well?"

"I have been driven away everywhere."

The "good woman" touched the man's arm, and pointed out to him on the other side of the street a small, low house, which stood beside the Bishop's palace.

“You have knocked at all doors?”
“Yes.”
“Have you knocked at that one?”
“No.”
“Knock there.”

CHAPTER II — PRUDENCE COUNSELLED TO WISDOM.

That evening, the Bishop of D —— , after his promenade through the town, remained shut up rather late in his room. He was busy over a great work on Duties, which was never completed, unfortunately. He was carefully compiling everything that the Fathers and the doctors have said on this important subject. His book was divided into two parts: firstly, the duties of all; secondly, the duties of each individual, according to the class to which he belongs. The duties of all are the great duties. There are four of these. Saint Matthew points them out: duties towards God (Matt. vi.); duties towards one’s self (Matt. v. 29, 30); duties towards one’s neighbor (Matt. vii. 12); duties towards animals (Matt. vi. 20, 25). As for the other duties the Bishop found them pointed out and prescribed elsewhere: to sovereigns and subjects, in the Epistle to the Romans; to magistrates, to wives, to mothers, to young men, by Saint Peter; to husbands, fathers, children and servants, in the Epistle to the Ephesians; to the faithful, in the Epistle to the Hebrews; to virgins, in the Epistle to the Corinthians. Out of these precepts he was laboriously constructing a harmonious whole, which he desired to present to souls.

At eight o’clock he was still at work, writing with a good deal of inconvenience upon little squares of paper, with a big book open on his knees, when Madame Magloire entered, according to her wont, to get the silver-ware from the cupboard near his bed. A moment later, the Bishop, knowing that the table was set, and that his sister was probably waiting for him, shut his book, rose from his table, and entered the dining-room.

The dining-room was an oblong apartment, with a fireplace, which had a door opening on the street (as we have said), and a window opening on the garden.

Madame Magloire was, in fact, just putting the last touches to the table.

As she performed this service, she was conversing with Mademoiselle Baptistine.

A lamp stood on the table; the table was near the fireplace. A wood fire was burning there.

One can easily picture to one’s self these two women, both of whom were over sixty years of age. Madame Magloire small, plump, vivacious; Mademoiselle Baptistine gentle, slender, frail, somewhat taller than her brother, dressed in a gown of puce-colored silk, of the fashion of 1806, which she had purchased at that date in Paris, and which had lasted ever since. To borrow vulgar phrases, which possess the merit of giving utterance in a single word to an idea which a whole page would hardly suffice to express, Madame Magloire had the air of a peasant, and Mademoiselle Baptistine that of a lady. Madame Magloire wore a white quilted cap, a gold Jeannette cross on a velvet ribbon upon her neck, the only bit of feminine jewelry that there was in the house, a very white fichu puffing out from a gown of coarse black woollen stuff, with large, short sleeves, an apron of cotton cloth in red and green checks, knotted round the waist with a green ribbon, with a stomacher of the same attached by two pins at the upper corners, coarse shoes on her feet, and yellow stockings, like the women of Marseilles. Mademoiselle Baptistine’s gown was cut on the patterns of 1806, with a short waist, a narrow, sheath-like skirt, puffed sleeves, with flaps and buttons. She concealed her gray hair under a frizzed wig known as the baby wig. Madame Magloire had an intelligent, vivacious, and kindly air; the two corners of her mouth unequally raised, and her upper lip, which was larger than the lower, imparted to her a rather crabbed and imperious look. So long as Monseigneur held his peace, she talked to him resolutely with a mixture of respect and freedom; but as soon as Monseigneur began to speak, as we have seen, she obeyed passively like her mistress. Mademoiselle Baptistine did not even speak. She confined herself to obeying and pleasing him. She had never been pretty, even when she was young; she had large, blue, prominent eyes, and a long arched nose; but her whole visage, her whole person, breathed forth an ineffable goodness, as we stated in the beginning. She had always been predestined to gentleness; but faith, charity, hope, those three virtues which mildly warm the soul, had gradually elevated that gentleness to sanctity. Nature had made her a lamb, religion had made her an angel. Poor sainted virgin! Sweet memory which has vanished!

Mademoiselle Baptistine has so often narrated what passed at the episcopal residence that evening, that there are many people now living who still recall the most minute details.

At the moment when the Bishop entered, Madame Magloire was talking with considerable vivacity. She was haranguing Mademoiselle Baptistine on a subject which was familiar to her and to which the Bishop was also accustomed. The question concerned the lock upon the entrance door.

It appears that while procuring some provisions for supper, Madame Magloire had heard things in divers places. People had spoken of a prowler of evil appearance; a suspicious vagabond had arrived who must be somewhere about the town, and those who should take it into their heads to return home late that night might be subjected to unpleasant encounters. The police was very badly organized, moreover, because there was no love lost between the Prefect and the Mayor, who sought to injure each other by making things happen. It behooved wise people to play the part of their own police, and to guard themselves well, and care must be taken to duly close, bar and barricade their houses, and to fasten the doors well.

Madame Magloire emphasized these last words; but the Bishop had just come from his room, where it was rather cold. He seated himself in front of the fire, and warmed himself, and then fell to thinking of other things. He did not take up the remark dropped with design by Madame Magloire. She repeated it. Then Mademoiselle Baptistine, desirous of satisfying Madame Magloire without displeasing her brother, ventured to say timidly: —

“Did you hear what Madame Magloire is saying, brother?”

“I have heard something of it in a vague way,” replied the Bishop. Then half-turning in his chair, placing his hands on his knees, and raising towards the old servant woman his cordial face, which so easily grew joyous, and which was illuminated from below by the firelight,— “Come, what is the matter? What is the matter? Are we in any great danger?”

Then Madame Magloire began the whole story afresh, exaggerating it a little without being aware of the fact. It appeared that a Bohemian, a bare-footed vagabond, a sort of dangerous mendicant, was at that moment in the town. He had presented himself at Jacquin Labarre’s to obtain lodgings, but the latter had not been willing to take him in. He had been seen to arrive by the way of the boulevard Gassendi and roam about the streets in the gloaming. A gallows-bird with a terrible face.

“Really!” said the Bishop.

This willingness to interrogate encouraged Madame Magloire; it seemed to her to indicate that the Bishop was on the point of becoming alarmed; she pursued triumphantly: —

“Yes, Monseigneur. That is how it is. There will be some sort of catastrophe in this town to-night. Every one says so. And withal, the police is so badly regulated” (a useful repetition). “The idea of living in a mountainous country, and not even having lights in the streets at night! One goes out. Black as ovens, indeed! And I say, Monseigneur, and Mademoiselle there says with me—”

“I,” interrupted his sister, “say nothing. What my brother does is well done.”

Madame Magloire continued as though there had been no protest: —

“We say that this house is not safe at all; that if Monseigneur will permit, I will go and tell Paulin Musebois, the locksmith, to come and replace the ancient locks on the doors; we have them, and it is only the work of a moment; for I say that nothing is more terrible than a door which can be opened from the outside with a latch by the first passer-by; and I say that we need bolts, Monseigneur, if only for this night; moreover, Monseigneur has the habit of always saying ‘come in’; and besides, even in the middle of the night, O mon Dieu! there is no need to ask permission.”

At that moment there came a tolerably violent knock on the door.

“Come in,” said the Bishop.

CHAPTER III — THE HEROISM OF PASSIVE OBEDIENCE.

The door opened.

It opened wide with a rapid movement, as though some one had given it an energetic and resolute push.

A man entered.

We already know the man. It was the wayfarer whom we have seen wandering about in search of shelter.

He entered, advanced a step, and halted, leaving the door open behind him. He had his knapsack on his shoulders, his cudgel in his hand, a rough, audacious, weary, and violent expression in his eyes. The fire on the hearth lighted him up. He was hideous. It was a sinister apparition.

Madame Magloire had not even the strength to utter a cry. She trembled, and stood with her mouth wide open.

Mademoiselle Baptistine turned round, beheld the man entering, and half started up in terror; then, turning her head by degrees towards the fireplace again, she began to observe her brother, and her face became once more profoundly calm and serene.

The Bishop fixed a tranquil eye on the man.

As he opened his mouth, doubtless to ask the new-comer what he desired, the man rested both hands on his staff, directed his gaze at the old man and the two women, and without waiting for the Bishop to speak, he said, in a loud voice: —

“See here. My name is Jean Valjean. I am a convict from the galleys. I have passed nineteen years in the galleys. I was liberated four days ago, and am on my way to Pontarlier, which is my destination. I have been walking for four days since I left Toulon. I have travelled a dozen leagues to-day on foot. This evening, when I arrived in these parts, I went to an inn, and they turned me out, because of my yellow passport, which I had shown at the town-hall. I had to do it. I went to an inn. They said to me, ‘Be off,’ at both places. No one would take me. I went to the prison; the jailer would not admit me. I went into a dog’s kennel; the dog bit me and chased me off, as though he had been a man. One would have said that he knew who I was. I went into the fields, intending to sleep in the open air, beneath the stars.

There were no stars. I thought it was going to rain, and I re-entered the town, to seek the recess of a doorway. Yonder, in the square, I meant to sleep on a stone bench. A good woman pointed out your house to me, and said to me, ‘Knock there!’ I have knocked. What is this place? Do you keep an inn? I have money — savings. One hundred and nine francs fifteen sous, which I earned in the galleys by my labor, in the course of nineteen years. I will pay. What is that to me? I have money. I am very weary; twelve leagues on foot; I am very hungry. Are you willing that I should remain?”

“Madame Magloire,” said the Bishop, “you will set another place.”

The man advanced three paces, and approached the lamp which was on the table. “Stop,” he resumed, as though he had not quite understood; “that’s not it. Did you hear? I am a galley-slave; a convict. I come from the galleys.” He drew from his pocket a large sheet of yellow paper, which he unfolded. “Here’s my passport. Yellow, as you see. This serves to expel me from every place where I go. Will you read it? I know how to read. I learned in the galleys. There is a school there for those who choose to learn. Hold, this is what they put on this passport: ‘Jean Valjean, discharged convict, native of’ — that is nothing to you— ‘has been nineteen years in the galleys: five years for house-breaking and burglary; fourteen years for having attempted to escape on four occasions. He is a very dangerous man.’ There! Every one has cast me out. Are you willing to receive me? Is this an inn? Will you give me something to eat and a bed? Have you a stable?”

“Madame Magloire,” said the Bishop, “you will put white sheets on the bed in the alcove.” We have already explained the character of the two women’s obedience.

Madame Magloire retired to execute these orders.

The Bishop turned to the man.

“Sit down, sir, and warm yourself. We are going to sup in a few moments, and your bed will be prepared while you are supping.”

At this point the man suddenly comprehended. The expression of his face, up to that time sombre and harsh, bore the imprint of stupefaction, of doubt, of joy, and became extraordinary. He began stammering like a crazy man: —

“Really? What! You will keep me? You do not drive me forth? A convict! You call me sir! You do not address me as thou? ‘Get out of here, you dog!’ is what people always say to me. I felt sure that you would expel me, so I told you at once who I am. Oh, what a good woman that was who directed me hither! I am going to sup! A bed with a mattress and sheets, like the rest of the world! a bed! It is nineteen years since I have slept in a bed! You actually do not want me to go! You are good people. Besides, I have money. I will pay well. Pardon me, monsieur the inn-keeper, but what is your name? I will pay anything you ask. You are a fine man. You are an inn-keeper, are you not?"

"I am," replied the Bishop, "a priest who lives here."

"A priest!" said the man. "Oh, what a fine priest! Then you are not going to demand any money of me? You are the cure, are you not? the cure of this big church? Well! I am a fool, truly! I had not perceived your skull-cap."

As he spoke, he deposited his knapsack and his cudgel in a corner, replaced his passport in his pocket, and seated himself. Mademoiselle Baptistine gazed mildly at him. He continued:

"You are humane, Monsieur le Curé; you have not scorned me. A good priest is a very good thing. Then you do not require me to pay?"

"No," said the Bishop; "keep your money. How much have you? Did you not tell me one hundred and nine francs?"

"And fifteen sous," added the man.

"One hundred and nine francs fifteen sous. And how long did it take you to earn that?"

"Nineteen years."

"Nineteen years!"

The Bishop sighed deeply.

The man continued: "I have still the whole of my money. In four days I have spent only twenty-five sous, which I earned by helping unload some wagons at Grasse. Since you are an abbe, I will tell you that we had a chaplain in the galleys. And one day I saw a bishop there. Monseigneur is what they call him. He was the Bishop of Majore at Marseilles. He is the cure who rules over the other cures, you understand. Pardon me, I say that very badly; but it is such a far-off thing to me! You understand what we are! He said mass in the middle of the galleys, on an altar. He had a pointed thing, made of gold, on his head; it glittered in the bright light of midday. We were all ranged in lines on the three sides, with cannons with lighted matches facing us. We could not see very well. He spoke; but he was too far off, and we did not hear. That is what a bishop is like."

While he was speaking, the Bishop had gone and shut the door, which had remained wide open.

Madame Magloire returned. She brought a silver fork and spoon, which she placed on the table.

“Madame Magloire,” said the Bishop, “place those things as near the fire as possible.” And turning to his guest: “The night wind is harsh on the Alps. You must be cold, sir.”

Each time that he uttered the word sir, in his voice which was so gently grave and polished, the man’s face lighted up. Monsieur to a convict is like a glass of water to one of the shipwrecked of the Medusa. Ignominy thirsts for consideration.

“This lamp gives a very bad light,” said the Bishop.

Madame Magloire understood him, and went to get the two silver candlesticks from the chimney-piece in Monseigneur’s bed-chamber, and placed them, lighted, on the table.

“Monsieur le Curé,” said the man, “you are good; you do not despise me. You receive me into your house. You light your candles for me. Yet I have not concealed from you whence I come and that I am an unfortunate man.”

The Bishop, who was sitting close to him, gently touched his hand. “You could not help telling me who you were. This is not my house; it is the house of Jesus Christ. This door does not demand of him who enters whether he has a name, but whether he has a grief. You suffer, you are hungry and thirsty; you are welcome. And do not thank me; do not say that I receive you in my house. No one is at home here, except the man who needs a refuge. I say to you, who are passing by, that you are much more at home here than I am myself. Everything here is yours. What need have I to know your name? Besides, before you told me you had one which I knew.”

The man opened his eyes in astonishment.

“Really? You knew what I was called?”

“Yes,” replied the Bishop, “you are called my brother.”

“Stop, Monsieur le Curé,” exclaimed the man. “I was very hungry when I entered here; but you are so good, that I no longer know what has happened to me.”

The Bishop looked at him, and said, —

“You have suffered much?”

“Oh, the red coat, the ball on the ankle, a plank to sleep on, heat, cold, toil, the convicts, the thrashings, the double chain for nothing, the cell for one word; even sick and in bed, still the chain! Dogs, dogs are happier!

Nineteen years! I am forty-six. Now there is the yellow passport. That is what it is like."

"Yes," resumed the Bishop, "you have come from a very sad place. Listen. There will be more joy in heaven over the tear-bathed face of a repentant sinner than over the white robes of a hundred just men. If you emerge from that sad place with thoughts of hatred and of wrath against mankind, you are deserving of pity; if you emerge with thoughts of good-will and of peace, you are more worthy than any one of us."

In the meantime, Madame Magloire had served supper: soup, made with water, oil, bread, and salt; a little bacon, a bit of mutton, figs, a fresh cheese, and a large loaf of rye bread. She had, of her own accord, added to the Bishop's ordinary fare a bottle of his old Mauves wine.

The Bishop's face at once assumed that expression of gayety which is peculiar to hospitable natures. "To table!" he cried vivaciously. As was his custom when a stranger supped with him, he made the man sit on his right. Mademoiselle Baptistine, perfectly peaceable and natural, took her seat at his left.

The Bishop asked a blessing; then helped the soup himself, according to his custom. The man began to eat with avidity.

All at once the Bishop said: "It strikes me there is something missing on this table."

Madame Magloire had, in fact, only placed the three sets of forks and spoons which were absolutely necessary. Now, it was the usage of the house, when the Bishop had any one to supper, to lay out the whole six sets of silver on the table-cloth — an innocent ostentation. This graceful semblance of luxury was a kind of child's play, which was full of charm in that gentle and severe household, which raised poverty into dignity.

Madame Magloire understood the remark, went out without saying a word, and a moment later the three sets of silver forks and spoons demanded by the Bishop were glittering upon the cloth, symmetrically arranged before the three persons seated at the table.

CHAPTER IV — DETAILS CONCERNING THE CHEESE-DAIRIES OF PONTARLIER.

Now, in order to convey an idea of what passed at that table, we cannot do better than to transcribe here a passage from one of Mademoiselle Baptistine's letters to Madame Boischevron, wherein the conversation between the convict and the Bishop is described with ingenious minuteness.

“. . . This man paid no attention to any one. He ate with the voracity of a starving man. However, after supper he said:

“‘Monsieur le Curé of the good God, all this is far too good for me; but I must say that the carters who would not allow me to eat with them keep a better table than you do.’

“Between ourselves, the remark rather shocked me. My brother replied: —

“‘They are more fatigued than I.’

“‘No,’ returned the man, ‘they have more money. You are poor; I see that plainly. You cannot be even a curate. Are you really a cure? Ah, if the good God were but just, you certainly ought to be a cure!’

“‘The good God is more than just,’ said my brother.

“A moment later he added: —

“‘Monsieur Jean Valjean, is it to Pontarlier that you are going?’

“‘With my road marked out for me.’

“I think that is what the man said. Then he went on: —

“‘I must be on my way by daybreak to-morrow. Travelling is hard. If the nights are cold, the days are hot.’

“‘You are going to a good country,’ said my brother. ‘During the Revolution my family was ruined. I took refuge in Franche-Comte at first, and there I lived for some time by the toil of my hands. My will was good. I found plenty to occupy me. One has only to choose. There are paper mills, tanneries, distilleries, oil factories, watch factories on a large scale, steel mills, copper works, twenty iron foundries at least, four of which, situated at Lods, at Chatillon, at Audincourt, and at Beure, are tolerably large.’

“I think I am not mistaken in saying that those are the names which my brother mentioned. Then he interrupted himself and addressed me: —

“‘Have we not some relatives in those parts, my dear sister?’

"I replied, —

"'We did have some; among others, M. de Lucenet, who was captain of the gates at Pontarlier under the old regime.'

"'Yes,' resumed my brother; 'but in '93, one had no longer any relatives, one had only one's arms. I worked. They have, in the country of Pontarlier, whither you are going, Monsieur Valjean, a truly patriarchal and truly charming industry, my sister. It is their cheese-dairies, which they call fruitieres.'

"Then my brother, while urging the man to eat, explained to him, with great minuteness, what these fruitieres of Pontarlier were; that they were divided into two classes: the big barns which belong to the rich, and where there are forty or fifty cows which produce from seven to eight thousand cheeses each summer, and the associated fruitieres, which belong to the poor; these are the peasants of mid-mountain, who hold their cows in common, and share the proceeds. 'They engage the services of a cheese-maker, whom they call the grurin; the grurin receives the milk of the associates three times a day, and marks the quantity on a double tally. It is towards the end of April that the work of the cheese-dairies begins; it is towards the middle of June that the cheese-makers drive their cows to the mountains.'

"The man recovered his animation as he ate. My brother made him drink that good Mauves wine, which he does not drink himself, because he says that wine is expensive. My brother imparted all these details with that easy gayety of his with which you are acquainted, interspersing his words with graceful attentions to me. He recurred frequently to that comfortable trade of grurin, as though he wished the man to understand, without advising him directly and harshly, that this would afford him a refuge. One thing struck me. This man was what I have told you. Well, neither during supper, nor during the entire evening, did my brother utter a single word, with the exception of a few words about Jesus when he entered, which could remind the man of what he was, nor of what my brother was. To all appearances, it was an occasion for preaching him a little sermon, and of impressing the Bishop on the convict, so that a mark of the passage might remain behind. This might have appeared to any one else who had this, unfortunate man in his hands to afford a chance to nourish his soul as well as his body, and to bestow upon him some reproach, seasoned with moralizing and advice, or a little commiseration, with an exhortation to conduct himself better in the future. My brother did not even ask him from what country he came, nor what was his history. For in his history there is a fault, and my brother seemed to avoid everything which could remind him of it. To such a point did he carry it, that at one time, when my brother was speaking of the mountaineers of Pontarlier, who exercise a gentle labor near heaven, and who, he added, are happy because they are innocent, he stopped short, fearing lest in this remark there might have escaped him something which might wound the man. By dint of reflection, I think I have comprehended what was passing in my brother's heart. He was thinking, no doubt, that this man, whose name is Jean Valjean, had his misfortune only too vividly present in his mind; that the best thing was to divert him from it, and to make him believe, if only momentarily, that he was a person like any other, by treating him just in his ordinary way. Is not this indeed, to understand charity well? Is there not, dear Madame, something truly evangelical in this delicacy which abstains from sermon, from moralizing, from allusions? and is not the truest pity, when a man has a sore point, not to touch it at all? It has seemed to me that this might have been my brother's private thought. In any case, what I can say is that, if he entertained all these ideas, he gave no sign of them; from beginning to end, even to me he was the same as he is every evening, and he supped with this Jean Valjean with the same air and in the same manner in which he would have supped with M. Gedeon le Provost, or with the curate of the parish.

"Towards the end, when he had reached the figs, there came a knock at the door. It was Mother Gerbaud, with her little one in her arms. My brother kissed the child on the brow, and borrowed fifteen sous which I had about me to give to Mother Gerbaud. The man was not paying much heed to anything then. He was no longer talking, and he seemed very much fatigued. After poor old Gerbaud had taken her departure, my brother said grace; then he turned to the man and said to him, 'You must be in great need of your bed.' Madame Magloire cleared the table very promptly. I understood that we must retire, in order to allow this traveller to go to sleep, and we both went up stairs. Nevertheless, I sent Madame Magloire down a moment later, to carry to the man's bed a goat skin from the Black Forest, which was in my room. The nights are frigid, and that keeps one warm. It is a pity that this skin is old; all the hair is falling out. My brother bought it while he was in Germany, at Tottlingen, near the sources of the Danube, as well as the little ivory-handled knife which I use at table.

“Madame Magloire returned immediately. We said our prayers in the drawing-room, where we hang up the linen, and then we each retired to our own chambers, without saying a word to each other.”

CHAPTER V — TRANQUILLITY

After bidding his sister good night, Monseigneur Bienvenu took one of the two silver candlesticks from the table, handed the other to his guest, and said to him, —

“Monsieur, I will conduct you to your room.”

The man followed him.

As might have been observed from what has been said above, the house was so arranged that in order to pass into the oratory where the alcove was situated, or to get out of it, it was necessary to traverse the Bishop’s bedroom.

At the moment when he was crossing this apartment, Madame Magloire was putting away the silverware in the cupboard near the head of the bed. This was her last care every evening before she went to bed.

The Bishop installed his guest in the alcove. A fresh white bed had been prepared there. The man set the candle down on a small table.

“Well,” said the Bishop, “may you pass a good night. To-morrow morning, before you set out, you shall drink a cup of warm milk from our cows.”

“Thanks, Monsieur l’ Abbé,” said the man.

Hardly had he pronounced these words full of peace, when all of a sudden, and without transition, he made a strange movement, which would have frozen the two sainted women with horror, had they witnessed it. Even at this day it is difficult for us to explain what inspired him at that moment. Did he intend to convey a warning or to throw out a menace? Was he simply obeying a sort of instinctive impulse which was obscure even to himself? He turned abruptly to the old man, folded his arms, and bending upon his host a savage gaze, he exclaimed in a hoarse voice: —

“Ah! really! You lodge me in your house, close to yourself like this?”

He broke off, and added with a laugh in which there lurked something monstrous: —

“Have you really reflected well? How do you know that I have not been an assassin?”

The Bishop replied: —

“That is the concern of the good God.”

Then gravely, and moving his lips like one who is praying or talking to himself, he raised two fingers of his right hand and bestowed his benediction on the man, who did not bow, and without turning his head or looking behind him, he returned to his bedroom.

When the alcove was in use, a large serge curtain drawn from wall to wall concealed the altar. The Bishop knelt before this curtain as he passed and said a brief prayer. A moment later he was in his garden, walking, meditating, contemplating, his heart and soul wholly absorbed in those grand and mysterious things which God shows at night to the eyes which remain open.

As for the man, he was actually so fatigued that he did not even profit by the nice white sheets. Snuffing out his candle with his nostrils after the manner of convicts, he dropped, all dressed as he was, upon the bed, where he immediately fell into a profound sleep.

Midnight struck as the Bishop returned from his garden to his apartment.

A few minutes later all were asleep in the little house.

CHAPTER VI — JEAN VALJEAN

Towards the middle of the night Jean Valjean woke.

Jean Valjean came from a poor peasant family of Brie. He had not learned to read in his childhood. When he reached man's estate, he became a tree-pruner at Faverolles. His mother was named Jeanne Mathieu; his father was called Jean Valjean or Vlajean, probably a sobriquet, and a contraction of viola Jean, "here's Jean."

Jean Valjean was of that thoughtful but not gloomy disposition which constitutes the peculiarity of affectionate natures. On the whole, however, there was something decidedly sluggish and insignificant about Jean Valjean in appearance, at least. He had lost his father and mother at a very early age. His mother had died of a milk fever, which had not been properly attended to. His father, a tree-pruner, like himself, had been killed by a fall from a tree. All that remained to Jean Valjean was a sister older than himself, — a widow with seven children, boys and girls. This sister had brought up Jean Valjean, and so long as she had a husband she lodged and fed her young brother.

The husband died. The eldest of the seven children was eight years old. The youngest, one.

Jean Valjean had just attained his twenty-fifth year. He took the father's place, and, in his turn, supported the sister who had brought him up. This was done simply as a duty and even a little churlishly on the part of Jean Valjean. Thus his youth had been spent in rude and ill-paid toil. He had never known a "kind woman friend" in his native parts. He had not had the time to fall in love.

He returned at night weary, and ate his broth without uttering a word. His sister, mother Jeanne, often took the best part of his repast from his bowl while he was eating, — a bit of meat, a slice of bacon, the heart of the cabbage, — to give to one of her children. As he went on eating, with his head bent over the table and almost into his soup, his long hair falling about his bowl and concealing his eyes, he had the air of perceiving nothing and allowing it. There was at Faverolles, not far from the Valjean thatched cottage, on the other side of the lane, a farmer's wife named Marie-Claude; the Valjean children, habitually famished, sometimes went to borrow from

Marie-Claude a pint of milk, in their mother's name, which they drank behind a hedge or in some alley corner, snatching the jug from each other so hastily that the little girls spilled it on their aprons and down their necks. If their mother had known of this marauding, she would have punished the delinquents severely. Jean Valjean gruffly and grumblingly paid Marie-Claude for the pint of milk behind their mother's back, and the children were not punished.

In pruning season he earned eighteen sous a day; then he hired out as a hay-maker, as laborer, as neat-herd on a farm, as a drudge. He did whatever he could. His sister worked also but what could she do with seven little children? It was a sad group enveloped in misery, which was being gradually annihilated. A very hard winter came. Jean had no work. The family had no bread. No bread literally. Seven children!

One Sunday evening, Maubert Isabeau, the baker on the Church Square at Faverolles, was preparing to go to bed, when he heard a violent blow on the grated front of his shop. He arrived in time to see an arm passed through a hole made by a blow from a fist, through the grating and the glass. The arm seized a loaf of bread and carried it off. Isabeau ran out in haste; the robber fled at the full speed of his legs. Isabeau ran after him and stopped him. The thief had flung away the loaf, but his arm was still bleeding. It was Jean Valjean.

This took place in 1795. Jean Valjean was taken before the tribunals of the time for theft and breaking and entering an inhabited house at night. He had a gun which he used better than any one else in the world, he was a bit of a poacher, and this injured his case. There exists a legitimate prejudice against poachers. The poacher, like the smuggler, smacks too strongly of the brigand. Nevertheless, we will remark cursorily, there is still an abyss between these races of men and the hideous assassin of the towns. The poacher lives in the forest, the smuggler lives in the mountains or on the sea. The cities make ferocious men because they make corrupt men. The mountain, the sea, the forest, make savage men; they develop the fierce side, but often without destroying the humane side.

Jean Valjean was pronounced guilty. The terms of the Code were explicit. There occur formidable hours in our civilization; there are moments when the penal laws decree a shipwreck. What an ominous minute is that in which society draws back and consummates the irreparable abandonment of a sentient being! Jean Valjean was condemned to five years in the galleys.

On the 22d of April, 1796, the victory of Montenotte, won by the general-in-chief of the army of Italy, whom the message of the Directory to the Five Hundred, of the 2d of Floreal, year IV., calls Buona-Parte, was announced in Paris; on that same day a great gang of galley-slaves was put in chains at Bicêtre. Jean Valjean formed a part of that gang. An old turnkey of the prison, who is now nearly eighty years old, still recalls perfectly that unfortunate wretch who was chained to the end of the fourth line, in the north angle of the courtyard. He was seated on the ground like the others. He did not seem to comprehend his position, except that it was horrible. It is probable that he, also, was disentangling from amid the vague ideas of a poor man, ignorant of everything, something excessive. While the bolt of his iron collar was being riveted behind his head with heavy blows from the hammer, he wept, his tears stifled him, they impeded his speech; he only managed to say from time to time, “I was a tree-pruner at Faverolles.” Then still sobbing, he raised his right hand and lowered it gradually seven times, as though he were touching in succession seven heads of unequal heights, and from this gesture it was divined that the thing which he had done, whatever it was, he had done for the sake of clothing and nourishing seven little children.

He set out for Toulon. He arrived there, after a journey of twenty-seven days, on a cart, with a chain on his neck. At Toulon he was clothed in the red cassock. All that had constituted his life, even to his name, was effaced; he was no longer even Jean Valjean; he was number 24,601. What became of his sister? What became of the seven children? Who troubled himself about that? What becomes of the handful of leaves from the young tree which is sawed off at the root?

It is always the same story. These poor living beings, these creatures of God, henceforth without support, without guide, without refuge, wandered away at random, — who even knows? — each in his own direction perhaps, and little by little buried themselves in that cold mist which engulfs solitary destinies; gloomy shades, into which disappear in succession so many unlucky heads, in the sombre march of the human race. They quitted the country. The clock-tower of what had been their village forgot them; the boundary line of what had been their field forgot them; after a few years’ residence in the galleys, Jean Valjean himself forgot them. In that heart, where there had been a wound, there was a scar. That is all. Only once, during all the time which he spent at Toulon, did he hear his sister mentioned. This happened, I think, towards the end of the fourth year of his captivity. I know not through what channels the news reached him. Some one who had known them in their own country had seen his sister. She was in Paris. She lived in a poor street Rear Saint-Sulpice, in the Rue du Gindre. She had with her only one child, a little boy, the youngest. Where were the other six? Perhaps she did not know herself. Every morning she went to a printing office, No. 3 Rue du Sabot, where she was a folder and stitcher. She was obliged to be there at six o'clock in the morning — long before daylight in winter. In the same building with the printing office there was a school, and to this school she took her little boy, who was seven years old. But as she entered the printing office at six, and the school only opened at seven, the child had to wait in the courtyard, for the school to open, for an hour — one hour of a winter night in the open air! They would not allow the child to come into the printing office, because he was in the way, they said. When the workmen passed in the morning, they beheld this poor little being seated on the pavement, overcome with drowsiness, and often fast asleep in the shadow, crouched down and doubled up over his basket. When it rained, an old woman, the portress, took pity on him; she took him into her den, where there was a pallet, a spinning-wheel, and two wooden chairs, and the little one slumbered in a corner, pressing himself close to the cat that he might suffer less from cold. At seven o'clock the school opened, and he entered. That is what was told to Jean Valjean.

They talked to him about it for one day; it was a moment, a flash, as though a window had suddenly been opened upon the destiny of those things whom he had loved; then all closed again. He heard nothing more forever. Nothing from them ever reached him again; he never beheld them; he never met them again; and in the continuation of this mournful history they will not be met with any more.

Towards the end of this fourth year Jean Valjean's turn to escape arrived. His comrades assisted him, as is the custom in that sad place. He escaped. He wandered for two days in the fields at liberty, if being at liberty is to be hunted, to turn the head every instant, to quake at the slightest noise, to be afraid of everything, — of a smoking roof, of a passing man, of a barking dog, of a galloping horse, of a striking clock, of the day because one can see, of the night because one cannot see, of the highway, of the path, of a bush, of sleep. On the evening of the second day he was captured. He had neither eaten nor slept for thirty-six hours. The maritime tribunal condemned him, for this crime, to a prolongation of his term for three years, which made eight years. In the sixth year his turn to escape occurred again; he availed himself of it, but could not accomplish his flight fully. He was missing at roll-call. The cannon were fired, and at night the patrol found him hidden under the keel of a vessel in process of construction; he resisted the galley guards who seized him. Escape and rebellion. This case, provided for by a special code, was punished by an addition of five years, two of them in the double chain. Thirteen years. In the tenth year his turn came round again; he again profited by it; he succeeded no better. Three years for this fresh attempt. Sixteen years. Finally, I think it was during his thirteenth year, he made a last attempt, and only succeeded in getting retaken at the end of four hours of absence. Three years for those four hours. Nineteen years. In October, 1815, he was released; he had entered there in 1796, for having broken a pane of glass and taken a loaf of bread.

Room for a brief parenthesis. This is the second time, during his studies on the penal question and damnation by law, that the author of this book has come across the theft of a loaf of bread as the point of departure for the disaster of a destiny. Claude Gaux had stolen a loaf; Jean Valjean had stolen a loaf. English statistics prove the fact that four thefts out of five in London have hunger for their immediate cause.

Jean Valjean had entered the galleys sobbing and shuddering; he emerged impassive. He had entered in despair; he emerged gloomy.

What had taken place in that soul?

CHAPTER VII — THE INTERIOR OF DESPAIR

Let us try to say it.

It is necessary that society should look at these things, because it is itself which creates them.

He was, as we have said, an ignorant man, but he was not a fool. The light of nature was ignited in him. Unhappiness, which also possesses a clearness of vision of its own, augmented the small amount of daylight which existed in this mind. Beneath the cudgel, beneath the chain, in the cell, in hardship, beneath the burning sun of the galleys, upon the plank bed of the convict, he withdrew into his own consciousness and meditated.

He constituted himself the tribunal.

He began by putting himself on trial.

He recognized the fact that he was not an innocent man unjustly punished. He admitted that he had committed an extreme and blameworthy act; that that loaf of bread would probably not have been refused to him had he asked for it; that, in any case, it would have been better to wait until he could get it through compassion or through work; that it is not an unanswerable argument to say, “Can one wait when one is hungry?” That, in the first place, it is very rare for any one to die of hunger, literally; and next, that, fortunately or unfortunately, man is so constituted that he can suffer long and much, both morally and physically, without dying; that it is therefore necessary to have patience; that that would even have been better for those poor little children; that it had been an act of madness for him, a miserable, unfortunate wretch, to take society at large violently by the collar, and to imagine that one can escape from misery through theft; that that is in any case a poor door through which to escape from misery through which infamy enters; in short, that he was in the wrong.

Then he asked himself —

Whether he had been the only one in fault in his fatal history. Whether it was not a serious thing, that he, a laborer, out of work, that he, an industrious man, should have lacked bread. And whether, the fault once committed and confessed, the chastisement had not been ferocious and disproportioned. Whether there had not been more abuse on the part of the law, in respect to the penalty, than there had been on the part of the culprit in respect to his fault. Whether there had not been an excess of weights in one balance of the scale, in the one which contains expiation. Whether the over-weight of the penalty was not equivalent to the annihilation of the crime, and did not result in reversing the situation, of replacing the fault of the delinquent by the fault of the repression, of converting the guilty man into the victim, and the debtor into the creditor, and of ranging the law definitely on the side of the man who had violated it.

Whether this penalty, complicated by successive aggravations for attempts at escape, had not ended in becoming a sort of outrage perpetrated by the stronger upon the feebler, a crime of society against the individual, a crime which was being committed afresh every day, a crime which had lasted nineteen years.

He asked himself whether human society could have the right to force its members to suffer equally in one case for its own unreasonable lack of foresight, and in the other case for its pitiless foresight; and to seize a poor man forever between a defect and an excess, a default of work and an excess of punishment.

Whether it was not outrageous for society to treat thus precisely those of its members who were the least well endowed in the division of goods made by chance, and consequently the most deserving of consideration.

These questions put and answered, he judged society and condemned it.

He condemned it to his hatred.

He made it responsible for the fate which he was suffering, and he said to himself that it might be that one day he should not hesitate to call it to account. He declared to himself that there was no equilibrium between the harm which he had caused and the harm which was being done to him; he finally arrived at the conclusion that his punishment was not, in truth, unjust, but that it most assuredly was iniquitous.

Anger may be both foolish and absurd; one can be irritated wrongfully; one is exasperated only when there is some show of right on one’s side at bottom. Jean Valjean felt himself exasperated.

And besides, human society had done him nothing but harm; he had never seen anything of it save that angry face which it calls Justice, and which it shows to those whom it strikes. Men had only touched him to bruise him. Every contact with them had been a blow. Never, since his infancy, since the days of his mother, of his sister, had he ever encountered a friendly word and a kindly glance. From suffering to suffering, he had gradually arrived at the conviction that life is a war; and that in this war he was the conquered. He had no other weapon than his hate. He resolved to whet it in the galleys and to bear it away with him when he departed.

There was at Toulon a school for the convicts, kept by the Ignorantin friars, where the most necessary branches were taught to those of the unfortunate men who had a mind for them. He was of the number who had a mind. He went to school at the age of forty, and learned to read, to write, to cipher. He felt that to fortify his intelligence was to fortify his hate. In certain cases, education and enlightenment can serve to eke out evil.

This is a sad thing to say; after having judged society, which had caused his unhappiness, he judged Providence, which had made society, and he condemned it also.

Thus during nineteen years of torture and slavery, this soul mounted and at the same time fell. Light entered it on one side, and darkness on the other.

Jean Valjean had not, as we have seen, an evil nature. He was still good when he arrived at the galleys. He there condemned society, and felt that he was becoming wicked; he there condemned Providence, and was conscious that he was becoming impious.

It is difficult not to indulge in meditation at this point.

Does human nature thus change utterly and from top to bottom? Can the man created good by God be rendered wicked by man? Can the soul be completely made over by fate, and become evil, fate being evil? Can the heart become misshapen and contract incurable deformities and infirmities under the oppression of a disproportionate unhappiness, as the vertebral column beneath too low a vault? Is there not in every human soul, was there not in the soul of Jean Valjean in particular, a first spark, a divine element, incorruptible in this world, immortal in the other, which good can develop, fan, ignite, and make to glow with splendor, and which evil can never wholly extinguish?

Grave and obscure questions, to the last of which every physiologist would probably have responded no, and that without hesitation, had he beheld at Toulon, during the hours of repose, which were for Jean Valjean hours of revery, this gloomy galley-slave, seated with folded arms upon the bar of some capstan, with the end of his chain thrust into his pocket to prevent its dragging, serious, silent, and thoughtful, a pariah of the laws which regarded the man with wrath, condemned by civilization, and regarding heaven with severity.

Certainly, — and we make no attempt to dissimulate the fact, — the observing physiologist would have beheld an irremediable misery; he would, perchance, have pitied this sick man, of the law's making; but he would not have even essayed any treatment; he would have turned aside his gaze from the caverns of which he would have caught a glimpse within this soul, and, like Dante at the portals of hell, he would have effaced from this existence the word which the finger of God has, nevertheless, inscribed upon the brow of every man, — hope.

Was this state of his soul, which we have attempted to analyze, as perfectly clear to Jean Valjean as we have tried to render it for those who read us? Did Jean Valjean distinctly perceive, after their formation, and had he seen distinctly during the process of their formation, all the elements of which his moral misery was composed? Had this rough and unlettered man gathered a perfectly clear perception of the succession of ideas through which he had, by degrees, mounted and descended to the lugubrious aspects which had, for so many years, formed the inner horizon of his spirit? Was he conscious of all that passed within him, and of all that was working there? That is something which we do not presume to state; it is something which we do not even believe. There was too much ignorance in Jean Valjean, even after his misfortune, to prevent much vagueness from still lingering there. At times he did not rightly know himself what he felt. Jean Valjean was in the shadows; he suffered in the shadows; he hated in the shadows; one might have said that he hated in advance of himself. He dwelt habitually in this shadow, feeling his way like a blind man and a dreamer. Only, at intervals, there suddenly came to him, from without and from within, an access of wrath, a surcharge of suffering, a livid and rapid flash which illuminated his whole soul, and caused to appear abruptly all around him, in front, behind, amid the gleams of a frightful light, the hideous precipices and the sombre perspective of his destiny.

The flash passed, the night closed in again; and where was he? He no longer knew. The peculiarity of pains of this nature, in which that which is pitiless — that is to say, that which is brutalizing — predominates, is to transform a man, little by little, by a sort of stupid transfiguration, into a wild beast; sometimes into a ferocious beast.

Jean Valjean's successive and obstinate attempts at escape would alone suffice to prove this strange working of the law upon the human soul. Jean Valjean would have renewed these attempts, utterly useless and foolish as they were, as often as the opportunity had presented itself, without reflecting for an instant on the result, nor on the experiences which he had already gone through. He escaped impetuously, like the wolf who finds his cage open. Instinct said to him, "Flee!" Reason would have said, "Remain!" But in the presence of so violent a temptation, reason vanished; nothing remained but instinct. The beast alone acted. When he was recaptured, the fresh severities inflicted on him only served to render him still more wild.

One detail, which we must not omit, is that he possessed a physical strength which was not approached by a single one of the denizens of the galleys. At work, at paying out a cable or winding up a capstan, Jean Valjean was worth four men. He sometimes lifted and sustained enormous weights on his back; and when the occasion demanded it, he replaced that implement which is called a jack-screw, and was formerly called orgueil [pride], whence, we may remark in passing, is derived the name of the Rue Montorgueil, near the Halles [Fishmarket] in Paris. His comrades had nicknamed him Jean the Jack-screw. Once, when they were repairing the balcony of the town-hall at Toulon, one of those admirable caryatids of Puget, which support the balcony, became loosened, and was on the point of falling. Jean Valjean, who was present, supported the caryatid with his shoulder, and gave the workmen time to arrive.

His suppleness even exceeded his strength. Certain convicts who were forever dreaming of escape, ended by making a veritable science of force and skill combined. It is the science of muscles. An entire system of mysterious statics is daily practised by prisoners, men who are forever envious of the flies and birds. To climb a vertical surface, and to find points of support where hardly a projection was visible, was play to Jean Valjean. An angle of the wall being given, with the tension of his back and legs, with his elbows and his heels fitted into the unevenness of the stone, he raised himself as if by magic to the third story. He sometimes mounted thus even to the roof of the galley prison.

He spoke but little. He laughed not at all. An excessive emotion was required to wring from him, once or twice a year, that lugubrious laugh of the convict, which is like the echo of the laugh of a demon. To all appearance, he seemed to be occupied in the constant contemplation of something terrible.

He was absorbed, in fact.

Athwart the unhealthy perceptions of an incomplete nature and a crushed intelligence, he was confusedly conscious that some monstrous thing was resting on him. In that obscure and wan shadow within which he crawled, each time that he turned his neck and essayed to raise his glance, he perceived with terror, mingled with rage, a sort of frightful accumulation of things, collecting and mounting above him, beyond the range of his vision, — laws, prejudices, men, and deeds, — whose outlines escaped him, whose mass terrified him, and which was nothing else than that prodigious pyramid which we call civilization. He distinguished, here and there in that swarming and formless mass, now near him, now afar off and on inaccessible table-lands, some group, some detail, vividly illuminated; here the galley-sergeant and his cudgel; there the gendarme and his sword; yonder the mitred archbishop; away at the top, like a sort of sun, the Emperor, crowned and dazzling. It seemed to him that these distant splendors, far from dissipating his night, rendered it more funereal and more black. All this — laws, prejudices, deeds, men, things — went and came above him, over his head, in accordance with the complicated and mysterious movement which God imparts to civilization, walking over him and crushing him with I know not what peacefulness in its cruelty and inexorability in its indifference. Souls which have fallen to the bottom of all possible misfortune, unhappy men lost in the lowest of those limbos at which no one any longer looks, the reproved of the law, feel the whole weight of this human society, so formidable for him who is without, so frightful for him who is beneath, resting upon their heads.

In this situation Jean Valjean meditated; and what could be the nature of his meditation?

If the grain of millet beneath the millstone had thoughts, it would, doubtless, think that same thing which Jean Valjean thought.

All these things, realities full of spectres, phantasmagories full of realities, had eventually created for him a sort of interior state which is almost indescribable.

At times, amid his convict toil, he paused. He fell to thinking. His reason, at one and the same time riper and more troubled than of yore, rose in revolt. Everything which had happened to him seemed to him absurd;

everything that surrounded him seemed to him impossible. He said to himself, “It is a dream.” He gazed at the galley-sergeant standing a few paces from him; the galley-sergeant seemed a phantom to him. All of a sudden the phantom dealt him a blow with his cudgel.

Visible nature hardly existed for him. It would almost be true to say that there existed for Jean Valjean neither sun, nor fine summer days, nor radiant sky, nor fresh April dawns. I know not what vent-hole daylight habitually illumined his soul.

To sum up, in conclusion, that which can be summed up and translated into positive results in all that we have just pointed out, we will confine ourselves to the statement that, in the course of nineteen years, Jean Valjean, the inoffensive tree-pruner of Faverolles, the formidable convict of Toulon, had become capable, thanks to the manner in which the galleys had moulded him, of two sorts of evil action: firstly, of evil action which was rapid, unpremeditated, dashing, entirely instinctive, in the nature of reprisals for the evil which he had undergone; secondly, of evil action which was serious, grave, consciously argued out and premeditated, with the false ideas which such a misfortune can furnish. His deliberate deeds passed through three successive phases, which natures of a certain stamp can alone traverse, — reasoning, will, perseverance. He had for moving causes his habitual wrath, bitterness of soul, a profound sense of indignities suffered, the reaction even against the good, the innocent, and the just, if there are any such. The point of departure, like the point of arrival, for all his thoughts, was hatred of human law; that hatred which, if it be not arrested in its development by some providential incident, becomes, within a given time, the hatred of society, then the hatred of the human race, then the hatred of creation, and which manifests itself by a vague, incessant, and brutal desire to do harm to some living being, no matter whom. It will be perceived that it was not without reason that Jean Valjean’s passport described him as a very dangerous man.

From year to year this soul had dried away slowly, but with fatal sureness. When the heart is dry, the eye is dry. On his departure from the galleys it had been nineteen years since he had shed a tear.

CHAPTER VIII — BILLOWS AND SHADOWS

A man overboard!

What matters it? The vessel does not halt. The wind blows. That sombre ship has a path which it is forced to pursue. It passes on.

The man disappears, then reappears; he plunges, he rises again to the surface; he calls, he stretches out his arms; he is not heard. The vessel, trembling under the hurricane, is wholly absorbed in its own workings; the passengers and sailors do not even see the drowning man; his miserable head is but a speck amid the immensity of the waves. He gives vent to desperate cries from out of the depths. What a spectre is that retreating sail! He gazes and gazes at it frantically. It retreats, it grows dim, it diminishes in size. He was there but just now, he was one of the crew, he went and came along the deck with the rest, he had his part of breath and of sunlight, he was a living man. Now, what has taken place? He has slipped, he has fallen; all is at an end.

He is in the tremendous sea. Under foot he has nothing but what flees and crumbles. The billows, torn and lashed by the wind, encompass him hideously; the tossings of the abyss bear him away; all the tongues of water dash over his head; a populace of waves spits upon him; confused openings half devour him; every time that he sinks, he catches glimpses of precipices filled with night; frightful and unknown vegetations seize him, knot about his feet, draw him to them; he is conscious that he is becoming an abyss, that he forms part of the foam; the waves toss him from one to another; he drinks in the bitterness; the cowardly ocean attacks him furiously, to drown him; the enormity plays with his agony. It seems as though all that water were hate.

Nevertheless, he struggles.

He tries to defend himself; he tries to sustain himself; he makes an effort; he swims. He, his petty strength all exhausted instantly, combats the inexhaustible.

Where, then, is the ship? Yonder. Barely visible in the pale shadows of the horizon.

The wind blows in gusts; all the foam overwhelms him. He raises his eyes and beholds only the lividness of the clouds. He witnesses, amid his death-pangs, the immense madness of the sea. He is tortured by this madness; he hears noises strange to man, which seem to come from beyond the limits of the earth, and from one knows not what frightful region beyond.

There are birds in the clouds, just as there are angels above human distresses; but what can they do for him? They sing and fly and float, and he, he rattles in the death agony.

He feels himself buried in those two infinities, the ocean and the sky, at one and the same time: the one is a tomb; the other is a shroud.

Night descends; he has been swimming for hours; his strength is exhausted; that ship, that distant thing in which there were men, has vanished; he is alone in the formidable twilight gulf; he sinks, he stiffens himself, he twists himself; he feels under him the monstrous billows of the invisible; he shouts.

There are no more men. Where is God?

He shouts. Help! Help! He still shouts on.

Nothing on the horizon; nothing in heaven.

He implores the expanse, the waves, the seaweed, the reef; they are deaf. He beseeches the tempest; the imperturbable tempest obeys only the infinite.

Around him darkness, fog, solitude, the stormy and nonsentient tumult, the undefined curling of those wild waters. In him horror and fatigue. Beneath him the depths. Not a point of support. He thinks of the gloomy adventures of the corpse in the limitless shadow. The bottomless cold paralyzes him. His hands contract convulsively; they close, and grasp nothingness. Winds, clouds, whirlwinds, gusts, useless stars! What is to be done? The desperate man gives up; he is weary, he chooses the alternative of death; he resists not; he lets himself go; he abandons his grip; and then he tosses forevermore in the lugubrious dreary depths of engulfment.

Oh, implacable march of human societies! Oh, losses of men and of souls on the way! Ocean into which falls all that the law lets slip! Disastrous absence of help! Oh, moral death!

The sea is the inexorable social night into which the penal laws fling their condemned. The sea is the immensity of wretchedness.

The soul, going down stream in this gulf, may become a corpse. Who shall resuscitate it?

CHAPTER IX — NEW TROUBLES

When the hour came for him to take his departure from the galleys, when Jean Valjean heard in his ear the strange words, Thou art free! the moment seemed improbable and unprecedented; a ray of vivid light, a ray of the true light of the living, suddenly penetrated within him. But it was not long before this ray paled. Jean Valjean had been dazzled by the idea of liberty. He had believed in a new life. He very speedily perceived what sort of liberty it is to which a yellow passport is provided.

And this was encompassed with much bitterness. He had calculated that his earnings, during his sojourn in the galleys, ought to amount to a hundred and seventy-one francs. It is but just to add that he had forgotten to include in his calculations the forced repose of Sundays and festival days during nineteen years, which entailed a diminution of about eighty francs. At all events, his hoard had been reduced by various local levies to the sum of one hundred and nine francs fifteen sous, which had been counted out to him on his departure. He had understood nothing of this, and had thought himself wronged. Let us say the word — robbed.

On the day following his liberation, he saw, at Grasse, in front of an orange-flower distillery, some men engaged in unloading bales. He offered his services. Business was pressing; they were accepted. He set to work. He was intelligent, robust, adroit; he did his best; the master seemed pleased. While he was at work, a gendarme passed, observed him, and demanded his papers. It was necessary to show him the yellow passport. That done, Jean Valjean resumed his labor. A little while before he had questioned one of the workmen as to the amount which they earned each day at this occupation; he had been told thirty sous. When evening arrived, as he was forced to set out again on the following day, he presented himself to the owner of the distillery and requested to be paid. The owner did not utter a word, but handed him fifteen sous. He objected. He was told, “That is enough for thee.” He persisted. The master looked him straight between the eyes, and said to him “Beware of the prison.”

There, again, he considered that he had been robbed.

Society, the State, by diminishing his hoard, had robbed him wholesale. Now it was the individual who was robbing him at retail.

Liberation is not deliverance. One gets free from the galleys, but not from the sentence.

That is what happened to him at Grasse. We have seen in what manner he was received at D ——

CHAPTER X — THE MAN AROUSED

As the Cathedral clock struck two in the morning, Jean Valjean awoke.

What woke him was that his bed was too good. It was nearly twenty years since he had slept in a bed, and, although he had not undressed, the sensation was too novel not to disturb his slumbers.

He had slept more than four hours. His fatigue had passed away. He was accustomed not to devote many hours to repose.

He opened his eyes and stared into the gloom which surrounded him; then he closed them again, with the intention of going to sleep once more.

When many varied sensations have agitated the day, when various matters preoccupy the mind, one falls asleep once, but not a second time. Sleep comes more easily than it returns. This is what happened to Jean Valjean. He could not get to sleep again, and he fell to thinking.

He was at one of those moments when the thoughts which one has in one’s mind are troubled. There was a sort of dark confusion in his brain. His memories of the olden time and of the immediate present floated there pell-mell and mingled confusedly, losing their proper forms, becoming disproportionately large, then suddenly disappearing, as in a muddy and perturbed pool. Many thoughts occurred to him; but there was one which kept constantly presenting itself afresh, and which drove away all others. We will mention this thought at once: he had observed the six sets of silver forks and spoons and the ladle which Madame Magloire had placed on the table.

Those six sets of silver haunted him. — They were there. — A few paces distant. — Just as he was traversing the adjoining room to reach the one in which he then was, the old servant-woman had been in the act of placing them in a little cupboard near the head of the bed. — He had taken careful note of this cupboard. — On the right, as you entered from the dining-room. — They were solid. — And old silver. — From the ladle one could get at least two hundred francs. — Double what he had earned in nineteen years. — It is true that he would have earned more if “the administration had not robbed him.”

His mind wavered for a whole hour in fluctuations with which there was certainly mingled some struggle. Three o’clock struck. He opened his eyes again, drew himself up abruptly into a sitting posture, stretched out his arm and felt of his knapsack, which he had thrown down on a corner of the alcove; then he hung his legs over the edge of the bed, and placed his feet on the floor, and thus found himself, almost without knowing it, seated on his bed.

He remained for a time thoughtfully in this attitude, which would have been suggestive of something sinister for any one who had seen him thus in the dark, the only person awake in that house where all were sleeping. All of a sudden he stooped down, removed his shoes and placed them softly on the mat beside the bed; then he resumed his thoughtful attitude, and became motionless once more.

Throughout this hideous meditation, the thoughts which we have above indicated moved incessantly through his brain; entered, withdrew, re-entered, and in a manner oppressed him; and then he thought, also, without knowing why, and with the mechanical persistence of revery, of a convict named Brevet, whom he had known in the galleys, and whose trousers had been upheld by a single suspender of knitted cotton. The checkered pattern of that suspender recurred incessantly to his mind.

He remained in this situation, and would have so remained indefinitely, even until daybreak, had not the clock struck one — the half or quarter hour. It seemed to him that that stroke said to him, “Come on!”

He rose to his feet, hesitated still another moment, and listened; all was quiet in the house; then he walked straight ahead, with short steps, to the window, of which he caught a glimpse. The night was not very dark; there was a full moon, across which coursed large clouds driven by the wind. This created, outdoors, alternate shadow and gleams of light, eclipses, then bright openings of the clouds; and indoors a sort of twilight. This twilight, sufficient to enable a person to see his way, intermittent on account of the clouds, resembled the sort of livid light which falls through an air-hole in a cellar, before which the passersby come and go. On arriving at the window, Jean Valjean examined it. It had no grating; it opened in the garden and was fastened, according to the fashion of the country, only by a small pin. He opened it; but as a rush of cold and piercing air penetrated the room abruptly, he closed it again immediately. He scrutinized the garden with that attentive gaze which studies rather than looks. The garden was enclosed by a tolerably low white wall, easy to climb. Far away, at the extremity, he perceived tops of trees, spaced at regular intervals, which indicated that the wall separated the garden from an avenue or lane planted with trees.

Having taken this survey, he executed a movement like that of a man who has made up his mind, strode to his alcove, grasped his knapsack, opened it, fumbled in it, pulled out of it something which he placed on the bed, put his shoes into one of his pockets, shut the whole thing up again, threw the knapsack on his shoulders, put on his cap, drew the visor down over his eyes, felt for his cudgel, went and placed it in the angle of the window; then returned to the bed, and resolutely seized the object which he had deposited there. It resembled a short bar of iron, pointed like a pike at one end. It would have been difficult to distinguish in that darkness for what employment that bit of iron could have been designed. Perhaps it was a lever; possibly it was a club.

In the daytime it would have been possible to recognize it as nothing more than a miner’s candlestick. Convicts were, at that period, sometimes employed in quarrying stone from the lofty hills which environ Toulon, and it was not rare for them to have miners’ tools at their command. These miners’ candlesticks are of massive iron, terminated at the lower extremity by a point, by means of which they are stuck into the rock.

He took the candlestick in his right hand; holding his breath and trying to deaden the sound of his tread, he directed his steps to the door of the adjoining room, occupied by the Bishop, as we already know.

On arriving at this door, he found it ajar. The Bishop had not closed it.

CHAPTER XI — WHAT HE DOES

Jean Valjean listened. Not a sound.

He gave the door a push.

He pushed it gently with the tip of his finger, lightly, with the furtive and uneasy gentleness of a cat which is desirous of entering.

The door yielded to this pressure, and made an imperceptible and silent movement, which enlarged the opening a little.

He waited a moment; then gave the door a second and a bolder push.

It continued to yield in silence. The opening was now large enough to allow him to pass. But near the door there stood a little table, which formed an embarrassing angle with it, and barred the entrance.

Jean Valjean recognized the difficulty. It was necessary, at any cost, to enlarge the aperture still further.

He decided on his course of action, and gave the door a third push, more energetic than the two preceding. This time a badly oiled hinge suddenly emitted amid the silence a hoarse and prolonged cry.

Jean Valjean shuddered. The noise of the hinge rang in his ears with something of the piercing and formidable sound of the trump of the Day of Judgment.

In the fantastic exaggerations of the first moment he almost imagined that that hinge had just become animated, and had suddenly assumed a terrible life, and that it was barking like a dog to arouse every one, and warn and to wake those who were asleep. He halted, shuddering, bewildered, and fell back from the tips of his toes upon his heels. He heard the arteries in his temples beating like two forge hammers, and it seemed to him that his breath issued from his breast with the roar of the wind issuing from a cavern. It seemed impossible to him that the horrible clamor of that irritated hinge should not have disturbed the entire household, like the shock of an earthquake; the door, pushed by him, had taken the alarm, and had shouted; the old man would rise at once; the two old women would shriek out; people would come to their assistance; in less than a quarter of an hour the town would be in an uproar, and the gendarmerie on hand. For a moment he thought himself lost.

He remained where he was, petrified like the statue of salt, not daring to make a movement. Several minutes elapsed. The door had fallen wide open. He ventured to peep into the next room. Nothing had stirred there. He lent an ear. Nothing was moving in the house. The noise made by the rusty hinge had not awakened any one.

This first danger was past; but there still reigned a frightful tumult within him. Nevertheless, he did not retreat. Even when he had thought himself lost, he had not drawn back. His only thought now was to finish as soon as possible. He took a step and entered the room.

This room was in a state of perfect calm. Here and there vague and confused forms were distinguishable, which in the daylight were papers scattered on a table, open folios, volumes piled upon a stool, an arm-chair heaped with clothing, a prie-Dieu, and which at that hour were only shadowy corners and whitish spots. Jean Valjean advanced with precaution, taking care not to knock against the furniture. He could hear, at the extremity of the room, the even and tranquil breathing of the sleeping Bishop.

He suddenly came to a halt. He was near the bed. He had arrived there sooner than he had thought for.

Nature sometimes mingles her effects and her spectacles with our actions with sombre and intelligent appropriateness, as though she desired to make us reflect. For the last half-hour a large cloud had covered the heavens. At the moment when Jean Valjean paused in front of the bed, this cloud parted, as though on purpose, and a ray of light, traversing the long window, suddenly illuminated the Bishop’s pale face. He was sleeping peacefully. He lay in his bed almost completely dressed, on account of the cold of the Basses-Alps, in a garment of brown wool, which covered his arms to the wrists. His head was thrown back on the pillow, in the careless attitude of repose; his hand, adorned with the pastoral ring, and whence had fallen so many good deeds and so many holy actions, was hanging over the edge of the bed. His whole face was illumined with a vague expression of satisfaction, of hope, and of felicity. It was more than a smile, and almost a radiance. He bore upon his brow the indescribable reflection of a light which was invisible. The soul of the just contemplates in sleep a mysterious heaven.

A reflection of that heaven rested on the Bishop.

It was, at the same time, a luminous transparency, for that heaven was within him. That heaven was his conscience.

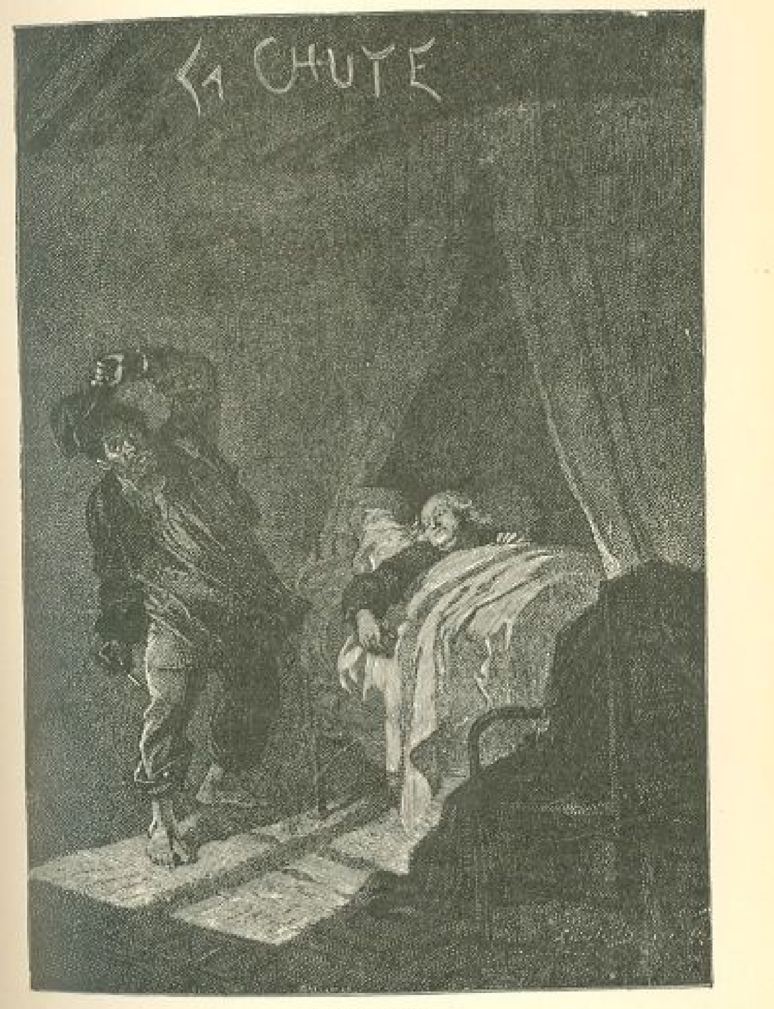

THE FALL.

At the moment when the ray of moonlight superposed itself, so to speak, upon that inward radiance, the sleeping Bishop seemed as in a glory. It remained, however, gentle and veiled in an ineffable half-light. That moon in the sky, that slumbering nature, that garden without a quiver, that house which was so calm, the hour, the moment, the silence, added some solemn and unspeakable quality to the venerable repose of this man, and enveloped in a sort of serene and majestic aureole that white hair, those closed eyes, that face in which all was hope and all was confidence, that head of an old man, and that slumber of an infant.

There was something almost divine in this man, who was thus august, without being himself aware of it.

Jean Valjean was in the shadow, and stood motionless, with his iron candlestick in his hand, frightened by this luminous old man. Never had he beheld anything like this. This confidence terrified him. The moral world has no grander spectacle than this: a troubled and uneasy conscience, which has arrived on the brink of an evil action, contemplating the slumber of the just.

That slumber in that isolation, and with a neighbor like himself, had about it something sublime, of which he was vaguely but imperiously conscious.

No one could have told what was passing within him, not even himself. In order to attempt to form an idea of it, it is necessary to think of the most violent of things in the presence of the most gentle. Even on his visage it would have been impossible to distinguish anything with certainty. It was a sort of haggard astonishment. He gazed at it, and that was all. But what was his thought? It would have been impossible to divine it. What was evident was, that he was touched and astounded. But what was the nature of this emotion?

His eye never quitted the old man. The only thing which was clearly to be inferred from his attitude and his physiognomy was a strange indecision. One would have said that he was hesitating between the two abysses, — the one in which one loses one's self and that in which one saves one's self. He seemed prepared to crush that skull or to kiss that hand.

At the expiration of a few minutes his left arm rose slowly towards his brow, and he took off his cap; then his arm fell back with the same deliberation, and Jean Valjean fell to meditating once more, his cap in his left hand, his club in his right hand, his hair bristling all over his savage head.

The Bishop continued to sleep in profound peace beneath that terrifying gaze.

The gleam of the moon rendered confusedly visible the crucifix over the chimney-piece, which seemed to be extending its arms to both of them, with a benediction for one and pardon for the other.

Suddenly Jean Valjean replaced his cap on his brow; then stepped rapidly past the bed, without glancing at the Bishop, straight to the cupboard, which he saw near the head; he raised his iron candlestick as though to force the lock; the key was there; he opened it; the first thing which presented itself to him was the basket of silverware; he seized it, traversed the chamber with long strides, without taking any precautions and without troubling himself about the noise, gained the door, re-entered the oratory, opened the window, seized his cudgel, bestrode the window-sill of the ground-floor, put the silver into his knapsack, threw away the basket, crossed the garden, leaped over the wall like a tiger, and fled.

CHAPTER XII — THE BISHOP WORKS

The next morning at sunrise Monseigneur Bienvenu was strolling in his garden. Madame Magloire ran up to him in utter consternation.

“Monseigneur, Monseigneur!” she exclaimed, “does your Grace know where the basket of silver is?”

“Yes,” replied the Bishop.

“Jesus the Lord be blessed!” she resumed; “I did not know what had become of it.”

The Bishop had just picked up the basket in a flower-bed. He presented it to Madame Magloire.

“Here it is.”

“Well!” said she. “Nothing in it! And the silver?”

“Ah,” returned the Bishop, “so it is the silver which troubles you? I don’t know where it is.”

“Great, good God! It is stolen! That man who was here last night has stolen it.”

In a twinkling, with all the vivacity of an alert old woman, Madame Magloire had rushed to the oratory, entered the alcove, and returned to the Bishop. The Bishop had just bent down, and was sighing as he examined a plant of cochlearia des Guillons, which the basket had broken as it fell across the bed. He rose up at Madame Magloire’s cry.

“Monseigneur, the man is gone! The silver has been stolen!”

As she uttered this exclamation, her eyes fell upon a corner of the garden, where traces of the wall having been scaled were visible. The coping of the wall had been torn away.

“Stay! yonder is the way he went. He jumped over into Cochefilet Lane. Ah, the abomination! He has stolen our silver!”

The Bishop remained silent for a moment; then he raised his grave eyes, and said gently to Madame Magloire: —

“And, in the first place, was that silver ours?”

Madame Magloire was speechless. Another silence ensued; then the Bishop went on: —

“Madame Magloire, I have for a long time detained that silver wrongfully. It belonged to the poor. Who was that man? A poor man, evidently.”

“Alas! Jesus!” returned Madame Magloire. “It is not for my sake, nor for Mademoiselle’s. It makes no difference to us. But it is for the sake of Monseigneur. What is Monseigneur to eat with now?”

The Bishop gazed at her with an air of amazement.

“Ah, come! Are there no such things as pewter forks and spoons?”

Madame Magloire shrugged her shoulders.

“Pewter has an odor.”

“Iron forks and spoons, then.”

Madame Magloire made an expressive grimace.

“Iron has a taste.”

“Very well,” said the Bishop; “wooden ones then.”

A few moments later he was breakfasting at the very table at which Jean Valjean had sat on the previous evening. As he ate his breakfast, Monseigneur Welcome remarked gayly to his sister, who said nothing, and to Madame Magloire, who was grumbling under her breath, that one really does not need either fork or spoon, even of wood, in order to dip a bit of bread in a cup of milk.

“A pretty idea, truly,” said Madame Magloire to herself, as she went and came, “to take in a man like that! and to lodge him close to one’s self! And how fortunate that he did nothing but steal! Ah, mon Dieu! it makes one shudder to think of it!”

As the brother and sister were about to rise from the table, there came a knock at the door.

“Come in,” said the Bishop.

The door opened. A singular and violent group made its appearance on the threshold. Three men were holding a fourth man by the collar. The three men were gendarmes; the other was Jean Valjean.

A brigadier of gendarmes, who seemed to be in command of the group, was standing near the door. He entered and advanced to the Bishop, making a military salute.

“Monseigneur—” said he.

At this word, Jean Valjean, who was dejected and seemed overwhelmed, raised his head with an air of stupefaction.

“Monseigneur!” he murmured. “So he is not the cure?”

“Silence!” said the gendarme. “He is Monseigneur the Bishop.”

In the meantime, Monseigneur Bienvenu had advanced as quickly as his great age permitted.

“Ah! here you are!” he exclaimed, looking at Jean Valjean. “I am glad to see you. Well, but how is this? I gave you the candlesticks too, which are of silver like the rest, and for which you can certainly get two hundred francs. Why did you not carry them away with your forks and spoons?”

Jean Valjean opened his eyes wide, and stared at the venerable Bishop with an expression which no human tongue can render any account of.

“Monseigneur,” said the brigadier of gendarmes, “so what this man said is true, then? We came across him. He was walking like a man who is running away. We stopped him to look into the matter. He had this silver—”

“And he told you,” interposed the Bishop with a smile, “that it had been given to him by a kind old fellow of a priest with whom he had passed the night? I see how the matter stands. And you have brought him back here? It is a mistake.”

“In that case,” replied the brigadier, “we can let him go?”

“Certainly,” replied the Bishop.

The gendarmes released Jean Valjean, who recoiled.

“Is it true that I am to be released?” he said, in an almost inarticulate voice, and as though he were talking in his sleep.

“Yes, thou art released; dost thou not understand?” said one of the gendarmes.

“My friend,” resumed the Bishop, “before you go, here are your candlesticks. Take them.”

He stepped to the chimney-piece, took the two silver candlesticks, and brought them to Jean Valjean. The two women looked on without uttering a word, without a gesture, without a look which could disconcert the Bishop.

Jean Valjean was trembling in every limb. He took the two candlesticks mechanically, and with a bewildered air.

“Now,” said the Bishop, “go in peace. By the way, when you return, my friend, it is not necessary to pass through the garden. You can always enter and depart through the street door. It is never fastened with anything but a latch, either by day or by night.”

Then, turning to the gendarmes: —

“You may retire, gentlemen.”

The gendarmes retired.

Jean Valjean was like a man on the point of fainting.

The Bishop drew near to him, and said in a low voice: —

“Do not forget, never forget, that you have promised to use this money in becoming an honest man.”

Jean Valjean, who had no recollection of ever having promised anything, remained speechless. The Bishop had emphasized the words when he uttered them. He resumed with solemnity: —

“Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to good. It is your soul that I buy from you; I withdraw it from black thoughts and the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God.”

CHAPTER XIII — LITTLE GERVAIS

Jean Valjean left the town as though he were fleeing from it. He set out at a very hasty pace through the fields, taking whatever roads and paths presented themselves to him, without perceiving that he was incessantly retracing his steps. He wandered thus the whole morning, without having eaten anything and without feeling hungry. He was the prey of a throng of novel sensations. He was conscious of a sort of rage; he did not know against whom it was directed. He could not have told whether he was touched or humiliated. There came over him at moments a strange emotion which he resisted and to which he opposed the hardness acquired during the last twenty years of his life. This state of mind fatigued him. He perceived with dismay that the sort of frightful calm which the injustice of his misfortune had conferred upon him was giving way within him. He asked himself what would replace this. At times he would have actually preferred to be in prison with the gendarmes, and that things should not have happened in this way; it would have agitated him less. Although the season was tolerably far advanced, there were still a few late flowers in the hedgerows here and there, whose odor as he passed through them in his march recalled to him memories of his childhood. These memories were almost intolerable to him, it was so long since they had recurred to him.

Unutterable thoughts assembled within him in this manner all day long.

As the sun declined to its setting, casting long shadows athwart the soil from every pebble, Jean Valjean sat down behind a bush upon a large ruddy plain, which was absolutely deserted. There was nothing on the horizon except the Alps. Not even the spire of a distant village. Jean Valjean might have been three leagues distant from D —— A path which intersected the plain passed a few paces from the bush.

In the middle of this meditation, which would have contributed not a little to render his rags terrifying to any one who might have encountered him, a joyous sound became audible.

He turned his head and saw a little Savoyard, about ten years of age, coming up the path and singing, his hurdy-gurdy on his hip, and his marmot-box on his back.

One of those gay and gentle children, who go from land to land affording a view of their knees through the holes in their trousers.

Without stopping his song, the lad halted in his march from time to time, and played at knuckle-bones with some coins which he had in his hand — his whole fortune, probably.

Among this money there was one forty-sou piece.

The child halted beside the bush, without perceiving Jean Valjean, and tossed up his handful of sous, which, up to that time, he had caught with a good deal of adroitness on the back of his hand.

This time the forty-sou piece escaped him, and went rolling towards the brushwood until it reached Jean Valjean.

Jean Valjean set his foot upon it.

In the meantime, the child had looked after his coin and had caught sight of him.

He showed no astonishment, but walked straight up to the man.

The spot was absolutely solitary. As far as the eye could see there was not a person on the plain or on the path. The only sound was the tiny, feeble cries of a flock of birds of passage, which was traversing the heavens at an immense height. The child was standing with his back to the sun, which cast threads of gold in his hair and empurpled with its blood-red gleam the savage face of Jean Valjean.

“Sir,” said the little Savoyard, with that childish confidence which is composed of ignorance and innocence, “my money.”

“What is your name?” said Jean Valjean.

“Little Gervais, sir.”

“Go away,” said Jean Valjean.

“Sir,” resumed the child, “give me back my money.”

Jean Valjean dropped his head, and made no reply.

The child began again, “My money, sir.”

Jean Valjean’s eyes remained fixed on the earth.

“My piece of money!” cried the child, “my white piece! my silver!”

It seemed as though Jean Valjean did not hear him. The child grasped him by the collar of his blouse and shook him. At the same time he made an effort to displace the big iron-shod shoe which rested on his treasure.

“I want my piece of money! my piece of forty sous!”

The child wept. Jean Valjean raised his head. He still remained seated. His eyes were troubled. He gazed at the child, in a sort of amazement, then he stretched out his hand towards his cudgel and cried in a terrible voice, “Who’s there?”

"I, sir," replied the child. "Little Gervais! I! Give me back my forty sous, if you please! Take your foot away, sir, if you please!"

Then irritated, though he was so small, and becoming almost menacing: —

"Come now, will you take your foot away? Take your foot away, or we'll see!"

"Ah! It's still you!" said Jean Valjean, and rising abruptly to his feet, his foot still resting on the silver piece, he added: —

"Will you take yourself off!"

The frightened child looked at him, then began to tremble from head to foot, and after a few moments of stupor he set out, running at the top of his speed, without daring to turn his neck or to utter a cry.

Nevertheless, lack of breath forced him to halt after a certain distance, and Jean Valjean heard him sobbing, in the midst of his own revery.

At the end of a few moments the child had disappeared.

The sun had set.

The shadows were descending around Jean Valjean. He had eaten nothing all day; it is probable that he was feverish.

He had remained standing and had not changed his attitude after the child's flight. The breath heaved his chest at long and irregular intervals. His gaze, fixed ten or twelve paces in front of him, seemed to be scrutinizing with profound attention the shape of an ancient fragment of blue earthenware which had fallen in the grass. All at once he shivered; he had just begun to feel the chill of evening.

He settled his cap more firmly on his brow, sought mechanically to cross and button his blouse, advanced a step and stopped to pick up his cudgel.

At that moment he caught sight of the forty-sou piece, which his foot had half ground into the earth, and which was shining among the pebbles. It was as though he had received a galvanic shock. "What is this?" he muttered between his teeth. He recoiled three paces, then halted, without being able to detach his gaze from the spot which his foot had trodden but an instant before, as though the thing which lay glittering there in the gloom had been an open eye riveted upon him.

At the expiration of a few moments he darted convulsively towards the silver coin, seized it, and straightened himself up again and began to gaze afar off over the plain, at the same time casting his eyes towards all points of the horizon, as he stood there erect and shivering, like a terrified wild animal which is seeking refuge.

He saw nothing. Night was falling, the plain was cold and vague, great banks of violet haze were rising in the gleam of the twilight.

He said, “Ah!” and set out rapidly in the direction in which the child had disappeared. After about thirty paces he paused, looked about him and saw nothing.

Then he shouted with all his might: —

“Little Gervais! Little Gervais!”

He paused and waited.

There was no reply.

The landscape was gloomy and deserted. He was encompassed by space. There was nothing around him but an obscurity in which his gaze was lost, and a silence which engulfed his voice.

An icy north wind was blowing, and imparted to things around him a sort of lugubrious life. The bushes shook their thin little arms with incredible fury. One would have said that they were threatening and pursuing some one.

He set out on his march again, then he began to run; and from time to time he halted and shouted into that solitude, with a voice which was the most formidable and the most disconsolate that it was possible to hear, “Little Gervais! Little Gervais!”

Assuredly, if the child had heard him, he would have been alarmed and would have taken good care not to show himself. But the child was no doubt already far away.

He encountered a priest on horseback. He stepped up to him and said: —

“Monsieur le Curé, have you seen a child pass?”

“No,” said the priest.

“One named Little Gervais?”

“I have seen no one.”

He drew two five-franc pieces from his money-bag and handed them to the priest.

“Monsieur le Curé, this is for your poor people. Monsieur le Curé, he was a little lad, about ten years old, with a marmot, I think, and a hurdy-gurdy. One of those Savoyards, you know?”

“I have not seen him.”

“Little Gervais? There are no villages here? Can you tell me?”

“If he is like what you say, my friend, he is a little stranger. Such persons pass through these parts. We know nothing of them.”

Jean Valjean seized two more coins of five francs each with violence, and gave them to the priest.

“For your poor,” he said.

Then he added, wildly: —

“Monsieur l’ Abbé, have me arrested. I am a thief.”

The priest put spurs to his horse and fled in haste, much alarmed.

Jean Valjean set out on a run, in the direction which he had first taken.

In this way he traversed a tolerably long distance, gazing, calling, shouting, but he met no one. Two or three times he ran across the plain towards something which conveyed to him the effect of a human being reclining or crouching down; it turned out to be nothing but brushwood or rocks nearly on a level with the earth. At length, at a spot where three paths intersected each other, he stopped. The moon had risen. He sent his gaze into the distance and shouted for the last time, “Little Gervais! Little Gervais! Little Gervais!” His shout died away in the mist, without even awakening an echo. He murmured yet once more, “Little Gervais!” but in a feeble and almost inarticulate voice. It was his last effort; his legs gave way abruptly under him, as though an invisible power had suddenly overwhelmed him with the weight of his evil conscience; he fell exhausted, on a large stone, his fists clenched in his hair and his face on his knees, and he cried, “I am a wretch!”

Then his heart burst, and he began to cry. It was the first time that he had wept in nineteen years.

When Jean Valjean left the Bishop’s house, he was, as we have seen, quite thrown out of everything that had been his thought hitherto. He could not yield to the evidence of what was going on within him. He hardened himself against the angelic action and the gentle words of the old man. “You have promised me to become an honest man. I buy your soul. I take it away from the spirit of perversity; I give it to the good God.”

This recurred to his mind unceasingly. To this celestial kindness he opposed pride, which is the fortress of evil within us. He was indistinctly conscious that the pardon of this priest was the greatest assault and the most formidable attack which had moved him yet; that his obduracy was finally settled if he resisted this clemency; that if he yielded, he should be obliged to renounce that hatred with which the actions of other men had filled his soul through so many years, and which pleased him; that this time it was necessary to conquer or to be conquered; and that a struggle, a colossal and final struggle, had been begun between his viciousness and the goodness of that man.

In the presence of these lights, he proceeded like a man who is intoxicated. As he walked thus with haggard eyes, did he have a distinct perception of what might result to him from his adventure at D —— ? Did he understand all those mysterious murmurs which warn or importune the spirit at certain moments of life? Did a voice whisper in his ear that he had just passed the solemn hour of his destiny; that there no longer remained a middle course for him; that if he were not henceforth the best of men, he would be the worst; that it behooved him now, so to speak, to mount higher than the Bishop, or fall lower than the convict; that if he wished to become good be must become an angel; that if he wished to remain evil, he must become a monster?

Here, again, some questions must be put, which we have already put to ourselves elsewhere: did he catch some shadow of all this in his thought, in a confused way? Misfortune certainly, as we have said, does form the education of the intelligence; nevertheless, it is doubtful whether Jean Valjean was in a condition to disentangle all that we have here indicated. If these ideas occurred to him, he but caught glimpses of, rather than saw them, and they only succeeded in throwing him into an unutterable and almost painful state of emotion. On emerging from that black and deformed thing which is called the galleys, the Bishop had hurt his soul, as too vivid a light would have hurt his eyes on emerging from the dark. The future life, the possible life which offered itself to him henceforth, all pure and radiant, filled him with tremors and anxiety. He no longer knew where he really was. Like an owl, who should suddenly see the sun rise, the convict had been dazzled and blinded, as it were, by virtue.

That which was certain, that which he did not doubt, was that he was no longer the same man, that everything about him was changed, that it was no longer in his power to make it as though the Bishop had not spoken to him and had not touched him.

In this state of mind he had encountered little Gervais, and had robbed him of his forty sous. Why? He certainly could not have explained it; was this the last effect and the supreme effort, as it were, of the evil thoughts which he had brought away from the galleys, — a remnant of impulse, a result of what is called in statics, acquired force? It was that, and it was also, perhaps, even less than that. Let us say it simply, it was not he who stole; it was not the man; it was the beast, who, by habit and instinct, had simply placed his foot upon that money, while the intelligence was struggling amid so many novel and hitherto unheard-of thoughts besetting it.

When intelligence re-awakened and beheld that action of the brute, Jean Valjean recoiled with anguish and uttered a cry of terror.

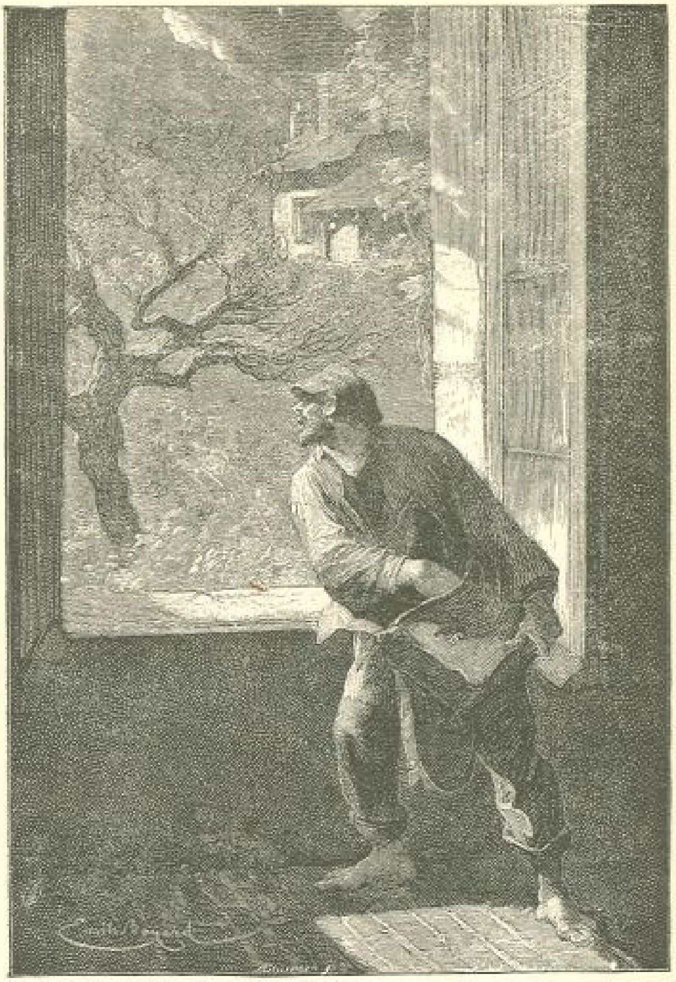

THE MAN AWAKENED.

It was because, — strange phenomenon, and one which was possible only in the situation in which he found himself, — in stealing the money from that child, he had done a thing of which he was no longer capable.

However that may be, this last evil action had a decisive effect on him; it abruptly traversed that chaos which he bore in his mind, and dispersed it, placed on one side the thick obscurity, and on the other the light, and acted on his soul, in the state in which it then was, as certain chemical reagents act upon a troubled mixture by precipitating one element and clarifying the other.

First of all, even before examining himself and reflecting, all bewildered, like one who seeks to save himself, he tried to find the child in order to return his money to him; then, when he recognized the fact that this was impossible, he halted in despair. At the moment when he exclaimed "I am a wretch!" he had just perceived what he was, and he was already separated from himself to such a degree, that he seemed to himself to be no longer anything more than a phantom, and as if he had, there before him, in flesh and blood, the hideous galley-convict, Jean Valjean, cudgel in hand, his blouse on his hips, his knapsack filled with stolen objects on his back, with his resolute and gloomy visage, with his thoughts filled with abominable projects.

Excess of unhappiness had, as we have remarked, made him in some sort a visionary. This, then, was in the nature of a vision. He actually saw that Jean Valjean, that sinister face, before him. He had almost reached the point of asking himself who that man was, and he was horrified by him.

His brain was going through one of those violent and yet perfectly calm moments in which revery is so profound that it absorbs reality. One no longer beholds the object which one has before one, and one sees, as though apart from one's self, the figures which one has in one's own mind.

Thus he contemplated himself, so to speak, face to face, and at the same time, athwart this hallucination, he perceived in a mysterious depth a sort of light which he at first took for a torch. On scrutinizing this light which appeared to his conscience with more attention, he recognized the fact that it possessed a human form and that this torch was the Bishop.

His conscience weighed in turn these two men thus placed before it, — the Bishop and Jean Valjean. Nothing less than the first was required to soften the second. By one of those singular effects, which are peculiar to this sort of ecstasies, in proportion as his revery continued, as the Bishop grew great and resplendent in his eyes, so did Jean Valjean grow less and vanish. After a certain time he was no longer anything more than a shade.

All at once he disappeared. The Bishop alone remained; he filled the whole soul of this wretched man with a magnificent radiance.

Jean Valjean wept for a long time. He wept burning tears, he sobbed with more weakness than a woman, with more fright than a child.

As he wept, daylight penetrated more and more clearly into his soul; an extraordinary light; a light at once ravishing and terrible. His past life, his first fault, his long expiation, his external brutishness, his internal hardness, his dismissal to liberty, rejoicing in manifold plans of vengeance, what had happened to him at the Bishop's, the last thing that he had done, that theft of forty sous from a child, a crime all the more cowardly, and all the more monstrous since it had come after the Bishop's pardon, — all this recurred to his mind and appeared clearly to him, but with a clearness which he had never hitherto witnessed. He examined his life, and it seemed horrible to him; his soul, and it seemed frightful to him. In the meantime a gentle light rested over this life and this soul. It seemed to him that he beheld Satan by the light of Paradise.

How many hours did he weep thus? What did he do after he had wept? Whither did he go! No one ever knew. The only thing which seems to be authenticated is that that same night the carrier who served Grenoble at that epoch, and who arrived at D —— about three o'clock in the morning, saw, as he traversed the street in which the Bishop's residence was situated, a man in the attitude of prayer, kneeling on the pavement in the shadow, in front of the door of Monseigneur Welcome.

BOOK THIRD. — IN THE YEAR 1817

CHAPTER I — THE YEAR 1817

1817 is the year which Louis XVIII., with a certain royal assurance which was not wanting in pride, entitled the twenty-second of his reign. It is the year in which M. Bruguiere de Sorsum was celebrated. All the hairdressers' shops, hoping for powder and the return of the royal bird, were besmeared with azure and decked with fleurs-de-lys. It was the candid time at which Count Lynch sat every Sunday as church-warden in the church-warden's pew of Saint-Germain-des-Pres, in his costume of a peer of France, with his red ribbon and his long nose and the majesty of profile peculiar to a man who has performed a brilliant action. The brilliant action performed by M. Lynch was this: being mayor of Bordeaux, on the 12th of March, 1814, he had surrendered the city a little too promptly to M. the Duke d'Angoulême. Hence his peerage. In 1817 fashion swallowed up little boys of from four to six years of age in vast caps of morocco leather with ear-tabs resembling Esquimaux mitres. The French army was dressed in white, after the mode of the Austrian; the regiments were called legions; instead of numbers they bore the names of departments; Napoleon was at St. Helena; and since England refused him green cloth, he was having his old coats turned. In 1817 Pelligrini sang; Mademoiselle Bigottini danced; Potier reigned; Odry did not yet exist. Madame Saqui had succeeded to Forioso. There were still Prussians in France. M. Delalot was a personage. Legitimacy had just asserted itself by cutting off the hand, then the head, of Pleignier, of Carbonneau, and of Tolleron. The Prince de Talleyrand, grand chamberlain, and the Abbé Louis, appointed minister of finance, laughed as they looked at each other, with the laugh of the two augurs; both of them had celebrated, on the 14th of July, 1790, the mass of federation in the Champ de Mars; Talleyrand had said it as bishop, Louis had served it in the capacity of deacon. In 1817, in the side-alleys of this same Champ de Mars, two great cylinders of wood might have been seen lying in the rain, rotting amid the grass, painted blue, with traces of eagles and bees, from which the gilding was falling. These were the columns which two years before had upheld the Emperor's platform in the Champ de Mai. They were blackened here and there with the scorches of the bivouac of Austrians encamped near Gros-Caillou. Two or three of these columns had disappeared in these bivouac fires, and had warmed the large hands of the Imperial troops. The Field of

May had this remarkable point: that it had been held in the month of June and in the Field of March (Mars). In this year, 1817, two things were popular: the Voltaire-Touquet and the snuff-box a la Charter. The most recent Parisian sensation was the crime of Dautun, who had thrown his brother's head into the fountain of the Flower-Market.

They had begun to feel anxious at the Naval Department, on account of the lack of news from that fatal frigate, The Medusa, which was destined to cover Chaumareix with infamy and Gericault with glory. Colonel Selves was going to Egypt to become Soliman-Pasha. The palace of Thermes, in the Rue de La Harpe, served as a shop for a cooper. On the platform of the octagonal tower of the Hotel de Cluny, the little shed of boards, which had served as an observatory to Messier, the naval astronomer under Louis XVI., was still to be seen. The Duchesse de Duras read to three or four friends her unpublished Ourika, in her boudoir furnished by X. in sky-blue satin. The N's were scratched off the Louvre. The bridge of Austerlitz had abdicated, and was entitled the bridge of the King's Garden [du Jardin du Roi], a double enigma, which disguised the bridge of Austerlitz and the Jardin des Plantes at one stroke. Louis XVIII., much preoccupied while annotating Horace with the corner of his finger-nail, heroes who have become emperors, and makers of wooden shoes who have become dauphins, had two anxieties, — Napoleon and Mathurin Bruneau. The French Academy had given for its prize subject, The Happiness procured through Study. M. Bellart was officially eloquent. In his shadow could be seen germinating that future advocate-general of Broe, dedicated to the sarcasms of Paul-Louis Courier. There was a false Chateaubriand, named Marchangy, in the interim, until there should be a false Marchangy, named d'Arlincourt. Claire d'Albe and Malek-Adel were masterpieces; Madame Cottin was proclaimed the chief writer of the epoch. The Institute had the academician, Napoleon Bonaparte, stricken from its list of members. A royal ordinance erected Angoulême into a naval school; for the Duc d'Angoulême, being lord high admiral, it was evident that the city of Angoulême had all the qualities of a seaport; otherwise the monarchical principle would have received a wound. In the Council of Ministers the question was agitated whether vignettes representing slack-rope performances, which adorned Franconi's advertising posters, and which attracted throngs of street urchins, should be tolerated. M. Paer, the author of Agnese, a good sort of fellow, with a square face and a wart on his cheek, directed the little private concerts of the Marquise de Sasenaye in the Rue Ville l'Eveque. All the young girls were singing the Hermit of Saint-Avelle, with words by Edmond Geraud. The Yellow Dwarf was transferred into Mirror. The Cafe Lemblin stood up for the Emperor, against the Cafe Valois, which upheld the Bourbons. The Duc de Berri, already surveyed from the shadow by Louvel, had just been married to a princess of Sicily. Madame de Stael had died a year previously. The body-guard hissed Mademoiselle Mars. The grand newspapers were all very small. Their form was restricted, but their liberty was great. The Constitutionnel was constitutional. La Minerve called Chateaubriand Chateaubriant. That t made the good middle-class people laugh heartily at the expense of the great writer. In journals which sold themselves, prostituted journalists, insulted the exiles of 1815. David had no longer any talent, Arnault had no longer any wit, Carnot was no longer honest, Soult had won no battles; it is true that Napoleon had no longer any genius. No one is ignorant of the fact that letters sent to an exile by post very rarely reached him, as the police made it their religious duty to intercept them. This is no new fact; Descartes complained of it in his exile. Now David, having, in a Belgian publication, shown some displeasure at not receiving letters which had been written to him, it struck the royalist journals as amusing; and they derided the prescribed man well on this occasion. What separated two men more than an abyss was to say, the regicides, or to say the voters; to say the enemies, or to say the allies; to say Napoleon, or to say Buonaparte. All sensible people were agreed that the era of revolution had been closed forever by King Louis XVIII., surnamed "The Immortal Author of the Charter." On the platform of the Pont-Neuf, the word Redivivus was carved on the pedestal that awaited the statue of Henry IV. M. Piet, in the Rue Therese, No. 4, was making the rough draft of his privy assembly to consolidate the monarchy. The leaders of the Right said at grave conjunctures, "We must write to Bacot." MM. Canuel, O'Mahoney, and De Chappedelaine were preparing the sketch, to some extent with Monsieur's approval, of what was to become later on "The Conspiracy of the Bord de l'Eau" — of the waterside. L'Epingle Noire was already plotting in his own quarter. Delaverderie was conferring with Trogoff. M. Decazes, who was liberal to a degree, reigned. Chateaubriand stood every morning at his window at No. 27 Rue Saint-Dominique, clad in footed trousers, and slippers, with a madras kerchief knotted over his gray hair, with his eyes fixed on a mirror, a complete set of dentist's instruments spread out before him, cleaning his teeth, which were charming, while he dictated The Monarchy according to the Charter to M. Pilorge, his secretary. Criticism, assuming an authoritative tone, preferred Lafon to Talma. M. de Feletez signed himself A.; M. Hoffmann signed himself Z. Charles Nodier wrote Therese Aubert. Divorce was abolished. Lyceums called themselves colleges. The collegians, decorated on the collar with a golden fleur-de-lys, fought each other apropos of the King of Rome. The counter-police of the chateau had denounced to her Royal Highness Madame, the portrait, everywhere exhibited, of M. the Duc d'Orleans, who made a better appearance in his uniform of a colonel-general of hussars than M. the Duc de Berri, in his uniform of colonel-general of dragoons — a serious inconvenience. The city of Paris was having the dome of the Invalides regilded at its own expense. Serious men asked themselves what M. de Trinquelague would do on such or such an occasion; M. Clausel de Montals differed on divers points from M. Clausel de Coussergues; M. de Salaberry was not satisfied. The comedian Picard, who belonged to the Academy, which the comedian Moliere had not been able to do, had The Two Philiberts played at the Odeon, upon whose pediment the removal of the letters still allowed THEATRE OF THE EMPRESS to be plainly read. People took part for or against Cugnet de Montarlot. Fabvier was factious; Bavoux was revolutionary. The Liberal, Pelicier, published an edition of Voltaire, with the following title: Works of Voltaire, of the French Academy. "That will attract purchasers," said the ingenious editor. The general opinion was that M. Charles Loyson would be the genius of the century; envy was beginning to gnaw at him — a sign of glory; and this verse was composed on him: —

"Even when Loyson steals, one feels that he has paws."

As Cardinal Fesch refused to resign, M. de Pins, Archbishop of Amasie, administered the diocese of Lyons. The quarrel over the valley of Dappes was begun between Switzerland and France by a memoir from Captain, afterwards General Dufour. Saint-Simon, ignored, was erecting his sublime dream. There was a celebrated Fourier at the Academy of Science, whom posterity has forgotten; and in some garret an obscure Fourier, whom the future will recall. Lord Byron was beginning to make his mark; a note to a poem by Millevoye introduced him to France in these terms: a certain Lord Baron. David d'Angers was trying to work in marble. The Abbé Caron was speaking, in terms of praise, to a private gathering of seminarists in the blind alley of Feuillantines, of an unknown priest, named Felicite-Robert, who, at a latter date, became Lamennais. A thing which smoked and clattered on the Seine with the noise of a swimming dog went and came beneath the windows of the Tuileries, from the Pont Royal to the Pont Louis XV.; it was a piece of mechanism which was not good for much; a sort of plaything, the idle dream of a dream-ridden inventor; an utopia — a steamboat. The Parisians stared indifferently at this useless thing. M. de Vaublanc, the reformer of the Institute by a coup d'etat, the distinguished author of numerous academicians, ordinances, and batches of members, after having created them, could not succeed in becoming one himself. The Faubourg Saint-Germain and the pavilion de Marsan wished to have M. Delaveau for prefect of police, on account of his piety. Dupuytren and Recamier entered into a quarrel in the amphitheatre of the School of Medicine, and threatened each other with their fists on the subject of the divinity of Jesus Christ. Cuvier, with one eye on Genesis and the other on nature, tried to please bigoted reaction by reconciling fossils with texts and by making mastodons flatter Moses.

M. Francois de Neufchateau, the praiseworthy cultivator of the memory of Parmentier, made a thousand efforts to have pomme de terre [potato] pronounced parmentiere, and succeeded therein not at all. The Abbé Gregoire, ex-bishop, ex-conventionary, ex-senator, had passed, in the royalist polemics, to the state of "Infamous Gregoire." The locution of which we have made use — passed to the state of — has been condemned as a neologism by M. Royer Collard. Under the third arch of the Pont de Jena, the new stone with which, the two years previously, the mining aperture made by Blucher to blow up the bridge had been stopped up, was still recognizable on account of its whiteness. Justice summoned to its bar a man who, on seeing the Comte d'Artois enter Notre Dame, had said aloud: "Sapristi! I regret the time when I saw Bonaparte and Talma enter the Bel Sauvage, arm in arm." A seditious utterance. Six months in prison. Traitors showed themselves unbuttoned; men who had gone over to the enemy on the eve of battle made no secret of their recompense, and strutted immodestly in the light of day, in the cynicism of riches and dignities; deserters from Ligny and Quatre-Bras, in the brazenness of their well-paid turpitude, exhibited their devotion to the monarchy in the most barefaced manner.

This is what floats up confusedly, pell-mell, for the year 1817, and is now forgotten. History neglects nearly all these particulars, and cannot do otherwise; the infinity would overwhelm it. Nevertheless, these details, which are wrongly called trivial, — there are no trivial facts in humanity, nor little leaves in vegetation, — are useful. It is of the physiognomy of the years that the physiognomy of the centuries is composed. In this year of 1817 four young Parisians arranged “a fine farce.”

CHAPTER II — A DOUBLE QUARTETTE

These Parisians came, one from Toulouse, another from Limoges, the third from Cahors, and the fourth from Montauban; but they were students; and when one says student, one says Parisian: to study in Paris is to be born in Paris.

These young men were insignificant; every one has seen such faces; four specimens of humanity taken at random; neither good nor bad, neither wise nor ignorant, neither geniuses nor fools; handsome, with that charming April which is called twenty years. They were four Oscars; for, at that epoch, Arthurs did not yet exist. Burn for him the perfumes of Araby! exclaimed romance. Oscar advances. Oscar, I shall behold him! People had just emerged from Ossian; elegance was Scandinavian and Caledonian; the pure English style was only to prevail later, and the first of the Arthurs, Wellington, had but just won the battle of Waterloo.

These Oscars bore the names, one of Felix Tholomyes, of Toulouse; the second, Listolier, of Cahors; the next, Fameuil, of Limoges; the last, Blachevelle, of Montauban. Naturally, each of them had his mistress. Blachevelle loved Favourite, so named because she had been in England; Listolier adored Dahlia, who had taken for her nickname the name of a flower; Fameuil idolized Zephine, an abridgment of Josephine; Tholomyes had Fantine, called the Blonde, because of her beautiful, sunny hair.

Favourite, Dahlia, Zephine, and Fantine were four ravishing young women, perfumed and radiant, still a little like working-women, and not yet entirely divorced from their needles; somewhat disturbed by intrigues, but still retaining on their faces something of the serenity of toil, and in their souls that flower of honesty which survives the first fall in woman. One of the four was called the young, because she was the youngest of them, and one was called the old; the old one was twenty-three. Not to conceal anything, the three first were more experienced, more heedless, and more emancipated into the tumult of life than Fantine the Blonde, who was still in her first illusions.

Dahlia, Zephine, and especially Favourite, could not have said as much. There had already been more than one episode in their romance, though hardly begun; and the lover who had borne the name of Adolph in the first chapter had turned out to be Alphonse in the second, and Gustave in the third. Poverty and coquetry are two fatal counsellors; one scolds and the other flatters, and the beautiful daughters of the people have both of them whispering in their ear, each on its own side. These badly guarded souls listen. Hence the falls which they accomplish, and the stones which are thrown at them. They are overwhelmed with splendor of all that is immaculate and inaccessible. Alas! what if the Jungfrau were hungry?

Favourite having been in England, was admired by Dahlia and Zephine. She had had an establishment of her own very early in life. Her father was an old unmarried professor of mathematics, a brutal man and a braggart, who went out to give lessons in spite of his age. This professor, when he was a young man, had one day seen a chambermaid's gown catch on a fender; he had fallen in love in consequence of this accident. The result had been Favourite. She met her father from time to time, and he bowed to her. One morning an old woman with the air of a devotee, had entered her apartments, and had said to her, "You do not know me, Mamemoiselle?" "No." "I am your mother." Then the old woman opened the sideboard, and ate and drank, had a mattress which she owned brought in, and installed herself. This cross and pious old mother never spoke to Favourite, remained hours without uttering a word, breakfasted, dined, and supped for four, and went down to the porter's quarters for company, where she spoke ill of her daughter.

It was having rosy nails that were too pretty which had drawn Dahlia to Listolier, to others perhaps, to idleness. How could she make such nails work? She who wishes to remain virtuous must not have pity on her hands. As for Zephine, she had conquered Fameuil by her roguish and caressing little way of saying "Yes, sir."

The young men were comrades; the young girls were friends. Such loves are always accompanied by such friendships.

Goodness and philosophy are two distinct things; the proof of this is that, after making all due allowances for these little irregular households, Favourite, Zephine, and Dahlia were philosophical young women, while Fantine was a good girl.

Good! some one will exclaim; and Tholomyes? Solomon would reply that love forms a part of wisdom. We will confine ourselves to saying that the love of Fantine was a first love, a sole love, a faithful love.

She alone, of all the four, was not called "thou" by a single one of them.

Fantine was one of those beings who blossom, so to speak, from the dregs of the people. Though she had emerged from the most unfathomable depths of social shadow, she bore on her brow the sign of the anonymous and the unknown. She was born at M. sur M. Of what parents? Who can say? She had never known father or mother. She was called Fantine. Why Fantine? She had never borne any other name. At the epoch of her birth the Directory still existed. She had no family name; she had no family; no baptismal name; the Church no longer existed. She bore the name which pleased the first random passer-by, who had encountered her, when a very small child, running bare-legged in the street. She received the name as she received the water from the clouds upon her brow when it rained. She was called little Fantine. No one knew more than that. This human creature had entered life in just this way. At the age of ten, Fantine quitted the town and went to service with some farmers in the neighborhood. At fifteen she came to Paris “to seek her fortune.” Fantine was beautiful, and remained pure as long as she could. She was a lovely blonde, with fine teeth. She had gold and pearls for her dowry; but her gold was on her head, and her pearls were in her mouth.

She worked for her living; then, still for the sake of her living, — for the heart, also, has its hunger, — she loved.

She loved Tholomyes.

An amour for him; passion for her. The streets of the Latin quarter, filled with throngs of students and grisettes, saw the beginning of their dream. Fantine had long evaded Tholomyes in the mazes of the hill of the Pantheon, where so many adventurers twine and untwine, but in such a way as constantly to encounter him again. There is a way of avoiding which resembles seeking. In short, the eclogue took place.

Blachevelle, Listolier, and Fameuil formed a sort of group of which Tholomyes was the head. It was he who possessed the wit.

Tholomyes was the antique old student; he was rich; he had an income of four thousand francs; four thousand francs! a splendid scandal on Mount Sainte-Genevieve. Tholomyes was a fast man of thirty, and badly preserved. He was wrinkled and toothless, and he had the beginning of a bald spot, of which he himself said with sadness, the skull at thirty, the knee at forty. His digestion was mediocre, and he had been attacked by a watering in one eye. But in proportion as his youth disappeared, gayety was kindled; he replaced his teeth with buffooneries, his hair with mirth, his health with irony, his weeping eye laughed incessantly. He was dilapidated but still in flower. His youth, which was packing up for departure long before its time, beat a retreat in good order, bursting with laughter, and no one saw anything but fire. He had had a piece rejected at the Vaudeville. He made a few verses now and then. In addition to this he doubted everything to the last degree, which is a vast force in the eyes of the weak. Being thus ironical and bald, he was the leader. Iron is an English word. Is it possible that irony is derived from it?

One day Tholomyes took the three others aside, with the gesture of an oracle, and said to them: —

“Fantine, Dahlia, Zephine, and Favourite have been teasing us for nearly a year to give them a surprise. We have promised them solemnly that we would. They are forever talking about it to us, to me in particular, just as the old women in Naples cry to Saint Januarius, ‘Faccia gialluta, fa o miracolo, Yellow face, perform thy miracle,’ so our beauties say to me incessantly, ‘Tholomyes, when will you bring forth your surprise?’ At the same time our parents keep writing to us. Pressure on both sides. The moment has arrived, it seems to me; let us discuss the question.”

Thereupon, Tholomyes lowered his voice and articulated something so mirthful, that a vast and enthusiastic grin broke out upon the four mouths simultaneously, and Blachevelle exclaimed, “That is an idea.”

A smoky tap-room presented itself; they entered, and the remainder of their confidential colloquy was lost in shadow.

The result of these shades was a dazzling pleasure party which took place on the following Sunday, the four young men inviting the four young girls.

CHAPTER III — FOUR AND FOUR

It is hard nowadays to picture to one’s self what a pleasure-trip of students and grisettes to the country was like, forty-five years ago. The suburbs of Paris are no longer the same; the physiognomy of what may be called circumparisian life has changed completely in the last half-century; where there was the cuckoo, there is the railway car; where there was a tender-boat, there is now the steamboat; people speak of Fecamp nowadays as they spoke of Saint-Cloud in those days. The Paris of 1862 is a city which has France for its outskirts.

The four couples conscientiously went through with all the country follies possible at that time. The vacation was beginning, and it was a warm, bright, summer day. On the preceding day, Favourite, the only one who knew how to write, had written the following to Tholomyes in the name of the four: “It is a good hour to emerge from happiness.” That is why they rose at five o’clock in the morning. Then they went to Saint-Cloud by the coach, looked at the dry cascade and exclaimed, “This must be very beautiful when there is water!” They breakfasted at the Tete-Noir, where Castaing had not yet been; they treated themselves to a game of ring-throwing under the quincunx of trees of the grand fountain; they ascended Diogenes’ lantern, they gambled for macaroons at the roulette establishment of the Pont de Sevres, picked bouquets at Pateaux, bought reed-pipes at Neuilly, ate apple tarts everywhere, and were perfectly happy.

The young girls rustled and chatted like warblers escaped from their cage. It was a perfect delirium. From time to time they bestowed little taps on the young men. Matutinal intoxication of life! adorable years! the wings of the dragonfly quiver. Oh, whoever you may be, do you not remember? Have you rambled through the brushwood, holding aside the branches, on account of the charming head which is coming on behind you? Have you slid, laughing, down a slope all wet with rain, with a beloved woman holding your hand, and crying, “Ah, my new boots! what a state they are in!”

Let us say at once that that merry obstacle, a shower, was lacking in the case of this good-humored party, although Favourite had said as they set out, with a magisterial and maternal tone, “The slugs are crawling in the paths, — a sign of rain, children.”

All four were madly pretty. A good old classic poet, then famous, a good fellow who had an Eleonore, M. le Chevalier de Labouisse, as he strolled that day beneath the chestnut-trees of Saint-Cloud, saw them pass about ten o'clock in the morning, and exclaimed, "There is one too many of them," as he thought of the Graces. Favourite, Blachevelle's friend, the one aged three and twenty, the old one, ran on in front under the great green boughs, jumped the ditches, stalked distractedly over bushes, and presided over this merry-making with the spirit of a young female faun. Zephine and Dahlia, whom chance had made beautiful in such a way that they set each off when they were together, and completed each other, never left each other, more from an instinct of coquetry than from friendship, and clinging to each other, they assumed English poses; the first keepsakes had just made their appearance, melancholy was dawning for women, as later on, Byronism dawned for men; and the hair of the tender sex began to droop dolefully. Zephine and Dahlia had their hair dressed in rolls. Listolier and Fameuil, who were engaged in discussing their professors, explained to Fantine the difference that existed between M. Delvincourt and M. Blondeau.

Blachevelle seemed to have been created expressly to carry Favourite's single-bordered, imitation India shawl of Ternaux's manufacture, on his arm on Sundays.

Tholomyes followed, dominating the group. He was very gay, but one felt the force of government in him; there was dictation in his joviality; his principal ornament was a pair of trousers of elephant-leg pattern of nankeen, with straps of braided copper wire; he carried a stout rattan worth two hundred francs in his hand, and, as he treated himself to everything, a strange thing called a cigar in his mouth. Nothing was sacred to him; he smoked.

"That Tholomyes is astounding!" said the others, with veneration. "What trousers! What energy!"

As for Fantine, she was a joy to behold. Her splendid teeth had evidently received an office from God, — laughter. She preferred to carry her little hat of sewed straw, with its long white strings, in her hand rather than on her head. Her thick blond hair, which was inclined to wave, and which easily uncoiled, and which it was necessary to fasten up incessantly, seemed made for the flight of Galatea under the willows. Her rosy lips babbled enchantingly. The corners of her mouth voluptuously turned up, as in the antique masks of Erigone, had an air of encouraging the audacious; but her long, shadowy lashes drooped discreetly over the jollity of the lower part of the face as though to call a halt. There was something indescribably harmonious and striking about her entire dress. She wore a gown of mauve barege, little reddish brown buskins, whose ribbons traced an X on her fine, white, open-worked stockings, and that sort of muslin spencer, a Marseilles invention, whose name, canezou, a corruption of the words quinze aout, pronounced after the fashion of the Canebiere, signifies fine weather, heat, and midday. The three others, less timid, as we have already said, wore low-necked dresses without disguise, which in summer, beneath flower-adorned hats, are very graceful and enticing; but by the side of these audacious outfits, blond Fantine's canezou, with its transparencies, its indiscretion, and its reticence, concealing and displaying at one and the same time, seemed an alluring godsend of decency, and the famous Court of Love, presided over by the Vicomtesse de Cette, with the sea-green eyes, would, perhaps, have awarded the prize for coquetry to this canezou, in the contest for the prize of modesty. The most ingenious is, at times, the wisest. This does happen.

Brilliant of face, delicate of profile, with eyes of a deep blue, heavy lids, feet arched and small, wrists and ankles admirably formed, a white skin which, here and there allowed the azure branching of the veins to be seen, joy, a cheek that was young and fresh, the robust throat of the Juno of AEgina, a strong and supple nape of the neck, shoulders modelled as though by Coustou, with a voluptuous dimple in the middle, visible through the muslin; a gayety cooled by dreaminess; sculptural and exquisite — such was Fantine; and beneath these feminine adornments and these ribbons one could divine a statue, and in that statue a soul.

Fantine was beautiful, without being too conscious of it. Those rare dreamers, mysterious priests of the beautiful who silently confront everything with perfection, would have caught a glimpse in this little working-woman, through the transparency of her Parisian grace, of the ancient sacred euphony. This daughter of the shadows was thoroughbred. She was beautiful in the two ways — style and rhythm. Style is the form of the ideal; rhythm is its movement.

We have said that Fantine was joy; she was also modesty.

To an observer who studied her attentively, that which breathed from her athwart all the intoxication of her age, the season, and her love affair, was an invincible expression of reserve and modesty. She remained a little astonished. This chaste astonishment is the shade of difference which separates Psyche from Venus. Fantine had the long, white, fine fingers of the vestal virgin who stirs the ashes of the sacred fire with a golden pin. Although she would have refused nothing to Tholomyes, as we shall have more than ample opportunity to see, her face in repose was supremely virginal; a sort of serious and almost austere dignity suddenly overwhelmed her at certain times, and there was nothing more singular and disturbing than to see gayety become so suddenly extinct there, and meditation succeed to cheerfulness without any transition state. This sudden and sometimes severely accentuated gravity resembled the disdain of a goddess. Her brow, her nose, her chin, presented that equilibrium of outline which is quite distinct from equilibrium of proportion, and from which harmony of countenance results; in the very characteristic interval which separates the base of the nose from the upper lip, she had that imperceptible and charming fold, a mysterious sign of chastity, which makes Barberousse fall in love with a Diana found in the treasures of Iconia.

Love is a fault; so be it. Fantine was innocence floating high over fault.

CHAPTER IV — THOLOMYES IS SO MERRY THAT HE SINGS A SPANISH DITTY

That day was composed of dawn, from one end to the other. All nature seemed to be having a holiday, and to be laughing. The flower-beds of Saint-Cloud perfumed the air; the breath of the Seine rustled the leaves vaguely; the branches gesticulated in the wind, bees pillaged the jasmines; a whole bohemia of butterflies swooped down upon the yarrow, the clover, and the sterile oats; in the august park of the King of France there was a pack of vagabonds, the birds.

The four merry couples, mingled with the sun, the fields, the flowers, the trees, were resplendent.

And in this community of Paradise, talking, singing, running, dancing, chasing butterflies, plucking convolvulus, wetting their pink, open-work stockings in the tall grass, fresh, wild, without malice, all received, to some extent, the kisses of all, with the exception of Fantine, who was hedged about with that vague resistance of hers composed of dreaminess and wildness, and who was in love. “You always have a queer look about you,” said Favourite to her.

Such things are joys. These passages of happy couples are a profound appeal to life and nature, and make a caress and light spring forth from everything. There was once a fairy who created the fields and forests expressly for those in love, — in that eternal hedge-school of lovers, which is forever beginning anew, and which will last as long as there are hedges and scholars. Hence the popularity of spring among thinkers. The patrician and the knife-grinder, the duke and the peer, the limb of the law, the courtiers and townspeople, as they used to say in olden times, all are subjects of this fairy. They laugh and hunt, and there is in the air the brilliance of an apotheosis — what a transfiguration effected by love! Notaries’ clerks are gods. And the little cries, the pursuits through the grass, the waists embraced on the fly, those jargons which are melodies, those adorations which burst forth in the manner of pronouncing a syllable, those cherries torn from one mouth by another, — all this blazes forth and takes its place among the celestial glories. Beautiful women waste themselves sweetly. They think that this will never come to an end. Philosophers, poets, painters, observe these ecstasies and know not what to make of it, so greatly are they dazzled by it. The departure for Cythera! exclaims Watteau; Lancret, the painter of plebeians, contemplates his bourgeois, who have flitted away into the azure sky; Diderot stretches out his arms to all these love idyls, and d'Urfe mingles druids with them.

After breakfast the four couples went to what was then called the King's Square to see a newly arrived plant from India, whose name escapes our memory at this moment, and which, at that epoch, was attracting all Paris to Saint-Cloud. It was an odd and charming shrub with a long stem, whose numerous branches, bristling and leafless and as fine as threads, were covered with a million tiny white rosettes; this gave the shrub the air of a head of hair studded with flowers. There was always an admiring crowd about it.

After viewing the shrub, Tholomyes exclaimed, "I offer you asses!" and having agreed upon a price with the owner of the asses, they returned by way of Vanvres and Issy. At Issy an incident occurred. The truly national park, at that time owned by Bourguin the contractor, happened to be wide open. They passed the gates, visited the manikin anchorite in his grotto, tried the mysterious little effects of the famous cabinet of mirrors, the wanton trap worthy of a satyr become a millionaire or of Turcaret metamorphosed into a Priapus. They had stoutly shaken the swing attached to the two chestnut-trees celebrated by the Abbé de Bernis. As he swung these beauties, one after the other, producing folds in the fluttering skirts which Greuze would have found to his taste, amid peals of laughter, the Toulousan Tholomyes, who was somewhat of a Spaniard, Toulouse being the cousin of Tolosa, sang, to a melancholy chant, the old ballad gallega, probably inspired by some lovely maid dashing in full flight upon a rope between two trees: —

"Soy de Badajoz,	"Badajoz is my home,
Amor me llama,	And Love is my name;
Toda mi alma,	To my eyes in flame,
Es en mi ojos,	All my soul doth come;
Porque ensenas,	For instruction meet
A tuas piernas.	I receive at thy feet"

Fantine alone refused to swing.

"I don't like to have people put on airs like that," muttered Favourite, with a good deal of acrimony.

After leaving the asses there was a fresh delight; they crossed the Seine in a boat, and proceeding from Passy on foot they reached the barrier of l’Etoile. They had been up since five o’clock that morning, as the reader will remember; but bah! there is no such thing as fatigue on Sunday, said Favourite; on Sunday fatigue does not work.

About three o’clock the four couples, frightened at their happiness, were sliding down the Russian mountains, a singular edifice which then occupied the heights of Beaujon, and whose undulating line was visible above the trees of the Champs Elysees.

From time to time Favourite exclaimed: —

“And the surprise? I claim the surprise.”

“Patience,” replied Tholomyes.

CHAPTER V — AT BOMBARDA'S

The Russian mountains having been exhausted, they began to think about dinner; and the radiant party of eight, somewhat weary at last, became stranded in Bombarda's public house, a branch establishment which had been set up in the Champs-Elysees by that famous restaurant-keeper, Bombarda, whose sign could then be seen in the Rue de Rivoli, near Delorme Alley.

A large but ugly room, with an alcove and a bed at the end (they had been obliged to put up with this accommodation in view of the Sunday crowd); two windows whence they could survey beyond the elms, the quay and the river; a magnificent August sunlight lightly touching the panes; two tables; upon one of them a triumphant mountain of bouquets, mingled with the hats of men and women; at the other the four couples seated round a merry confusion of platters, dishes, glasses, and bottles; jugs of beer mingled with flasks of wine; very little order on the table, some disorder beneath it;

"They made beneath the table
A noise, a clatter of the feet that was abominable,"

says Moliere.

This was the state which the shepherd idyl, begun at five o'clock in the morning, had reached at half-past four in the afternoon. The sun was setting; their appetites were satisfied.

The Champs-Elysees, filled with sunshine and with people, were nothing but light and dust, the two things of which glory is composed. The horses of Marly, those neighing marbles, were prancing in a cloud of gold. Carriages were going and coming. A squadron of magnificent body-guards, with their clarions at their head, were descending the Avenue de Neuilly; the white flag, showing faintly rosy in the setting sun, floated over the dome of the Tuileries. The Place de la Concorde, which had become the Place Louis XV. once more, was choked with happy promenaders. Many wore the silver fleur-de-lys suspended from the white-watered ribbon, which had not yet wholly disappeared from button-holes in the year 1817. Here and there choruses of little girls threw to the winds, amid the passersby, who formed into circles and applauded, the then celebrated Bourbon air, which was destined to strike the Hundred Days with lightning, and which had for its refrain: —

“Rendez-nous notre père de Gand,
Rendez-nous notre père.”

“Give us back our father from Ghent,
Give us back our father.”

Groups of dwellers in the suburbs, in Sunday array, sometimes even decorated with the fleur-de-lys, like the bourgeois, scattered over the large square and the Marigny square, were playing at rings and revolving on the wooden horses; others were engaged in drinking; some journeyman printers had on paper caps; their laughter was audible. Every thing was radiant. It was a time of undisputed peace and profound royalist security; it was the epoch when a special and private report of Chief of Police Angeles to the King, on the subject of the suburbs of Paris, terminated with these lines: —

“Taking all things into consideration, Sire, there is nothing to be feared from these people. They are as heedless and as indolent as cats. The populace is restless in the provinces; it is not in Paris. These are very pretty men, Sire. It would take all of two of them to make one of your grenadiers. There is nothing to be feared on the part of the populace of Paris the capital. It is remarkable that the stature of this population should have diminished in the last fifty years; and the populace of the suburbs is still more puny than at the time of the Revolution. It is not dangerous. In short, it is an amiable rabble.”

Prefects of the police do not deem it possible that a cat can transform itself into a lion; that does happen, however, and in that lies the miracle wrought by the populace of Paris. Moreover, the cat so despised by Count Angles possessed the esteem of the republics of old. In their eyes it was liberty incarnate; and as though to serve as pendant to the Minerva Aptera of the Piraeus, there stood on the public square in Corinth the colossal bronze figure of a cat. The ingenuous police of the Restoration beheld the populace of Paris in too “rose-colored” a light; it is not so much of “an amiable rabble” as it is thought. The Parisian is to the Frenchman what the Athenian was to the Greek: no one sleeps more soundly than he, no one is more frankly frivolous and lazy than he, no one can better assume the air of forgetfulness; let him not be trusted nevertheless; he is ready for any sort of cool deed; but when there is glory at the end of it, he is worthy of admiration in every sort of fury. Give him a pike, he will produce the 10th of August; give him a gun, you will have Austerlitz. He is Napoleon's stay and Danton's resource. Is it a question of country, he enlists; is it a question of liberty, he tears up the pavements. Beware! his hair filled with wrath, is epic; his blouse drapes itself like the folds of a chlamys. Take care! he will make of the first Rue Grenetat which comes to hand Caudine Forks. When the hour strikes, this man of the faubourgs will grow in stature; this little man will arise, and his gaze will be terrible, and his breath will become a tempest, and there will issue forth from that slender chest enough wind to disarrange the folds of the Alps. It is, thanks to the suburban man of Paris, that the Revolution, mixed with arms, conquers Europe. He sings; it is his delight. Proportion his song to his nature, and you will see! As long as he has for refrain nothing but la Carmagnole, he only overthrows Louis XVI.; make him sing the Marseillaise, and he will free the world.

This note jotted down on the margin of Angles' report, we will return to our four couples. The dinner, as we have said, was drawing to its close.

CHAPTER VI — A CHAPTER IN WHICH THEY ADORE EACH OTHER

Chat at table, the chat of love; it is as impossible to reproduce one as the other; the chat of love is a cloud; the chat at table is smoke.

Fameuil and Dahlia were humming. Tholomyes was drinking. Zephine was laughing, Fantine smiling, Listolier blowing a wooden trumpet which he had purchased at Saint-Cloud.

Favourite gazed tenderly at Blachevelle and said: —

“Blachevelle, I adore you.”

This called forth a question from Blachevelle: —

“What would you do, Favourite, if I were to cease to love you?”

“I!” cried Favourite. “Ah! Do not say that even in jest! If you were to cease to love me, I would spring after you, I would scratch you, I should rend you, I would throw you into the water, I would have you arrested.”

Blachevelle smiled with the voluptuous self-conceit of a man who is tickled in his self-love. Favourite resumed: —

“Yes, I would scream to the police! Ah! I should not restrain myself, not at all! Rabble!”

Blachevelle threw himself back in his chair, in an ecstasy, and closed both eyes proudly.

Dahlia, as she ate, said in a low voice to Favourite, amid the uproar: —

“So you really idolize him deeply, that Blachevelle of yours?”

“I? I detest him,” replied Favourite in the same tone, seizing her fork again. “He is avaricious. I love the little fellow opposite me in my house. He is very nice, that young man; do you know him? One can see that he is an actor by profession. I love actors. As soon as he comes in, his mother says to him: ‘Ah! mon Dieu! my peace of mind is gone. There he goes with his shouting. But, my dear, you are splitting my head!’ So he goes up to rat-ridden garrets, to black holes, as high as he can mount, and there he sets to singing, declaiming, how do I know what? so that he can be heard down stairs! He earns twenty sous a day at an attorney’s by penning quibbles. He is the son of a former precentor of Saint-Jacques-du-Haut-Pas. Ah! he is very nice. He idolizes me so, that one day when he saw me making batter for some pancakes, he said to me: ‘Mamselle, make your gloves into fritters, and I will eat them.’ It is only artists who can say such things as that. Ah! he is very nice. I am in a fair way to go out of my head over that little fellow. Never mind; I tell Blachevelle that I adore him — how I lie! Hey! How I do lie!”

Favourite paused, and then went on: —

“I am sad, you see, Dahlia. It has done nothing but rain all summer; the wind irritates me; the wind does not abate. Blachevelle is very stingy; there are hardly any green peas in the market; one does not know what to eat. I have the spleen, as the English say, butter is so dear! and then you see it is horrible, here we are dining in a room with a bed in it, and that disgusts me with life.”

CHAPTER VII — THE WISDOM OF THOLOMYES

In the meantime, while some sang, the rest talked together tumultuously all at once; it was no longer anything but noise. Tholomyes intervened.

“Let us not talk at random nor too fast,” he exclaimed. “Let us reflect, if we wish to be brilliant. Too much improvisation empties the mind in a stupid way. Running beer gathers no froth. No haste, gentlemen. Let us mingle majesty with the feast. Let us eat with meditation; let us make haste slowly. Let us not hurry. Consider the springtime; if it makes haste, it is done for; that is to say, it gets frozen. Excess of zeal ruins peach-trees and apricot-trees. Excess of zeal kills the grace and the mirth of good dinners. No zeal, gentlemen! Grimod de la Reynière agrees with Talleyrand.”

A hollow sound of rebellion rumbled through the group.

“Leave us in peace, Tholomyes,” said Blachevelle.

“Down with the tyrant!” said Fameuil.

“Bombarda, Bombance, and Bambochel!” cried Listolier.

“Sunday exists,” resumed Fameuil.

“We are sober,” added Listolier.

“Tholomyes,” remarked Blachevelle, “contemplate my calmness [mon calme].”

“You are the Marquis of that,” retorted Tholomyes.

This mediocre play upon words produced the effect of a stone in a pool. The Marquis de Montcalm was at that time a celebrated royalist. All the frogs held their peace.

“Friends,” cried Tholomyes, with the accent of a man who had recovered his empire, “Come to yourselves. This pun which has fallen from the skies must not be received with too much stupor. Everything which falls in that way is not necessarily worthy of enthusiasm and respect. The pun is the dung of the mind which soars. The jest falls, no matter where; and the mind after producing a piece of stupidity plunges into the azure depths. A whitish speck flattened against the rock does not prevent the condor from soaring aloft. Far be it from me to insult the pun! I honor it in proportion to its merits; nothing more. All the most august, the most sublime, the most charming of humanity, and perhaps outside of humanity, have made puns.

Jesus Christ made a pun on St. Peter, Moses on Isaac, AEschylus on Polynices, Cleopatra on Octavius. And observe that Cleopatra's pun preceded the battle of Actium, and that had it not been for it, no one would have remembered the city of Toryne, a Greek name which signifies a ladle. That once conceded, I return to my exhortation. I repeat, brothers, I repeat, no zeal, no hubbub, no excess; even in witticisms, gayety, jollities, or plays on words. Listen to me. I have the prudence of Amphiaraus and the baldness of Caesar. There must be a limit, even to rebuses. Est modus in rebus.

"There must be a limit, even to dinners. You are fond of apple turnovers, ladies; do not indulge in them to excess. Even in the matter of turnovers, good sense and art are requisite. Gluttony chastises the glutton, Gula punit Gulax. Indigestion is charged by the good God with preaching morality to stomachs. And remember this: each one of our passions, even love, has a stomach which must not be filled too full. In all things the word finis must be written in good season; self-control must be exercised when the matter becomes urgent; the bolt must be drawn on appetite; one must set one's own fantasy to the violin, and carry one's self to the post. The sage is the man who knows how, at a given moment, to effect his own arrest. Have some confidence in me, for I have succeeded to some extent in my study of the law, according to the verdict of my examinations, for I know the difference between the question put and the question pending, for I have sustained a thesis in Latin upon the manner in which torture was administered at Rome at the epoch when Munatius Demens was quaestor of the Parricide; because I am going to be a doctor, apparently it does not follow that it is absolutely necessary that I should be an imbecile. I recommend you to moderation in your desires. It is true that my name is Felix Tholomyes; I speak well. Happy is he who, when the hour strikes, takes a heroic resolve, and abdicates like Sylla or Origenes."

Favourite listened with profound attention.

"Felix," said she, "what a pretty word! I love that name. It is Latin; it means prosper."

Tholomyes went on: —

"Quirites, gentlemen, caballeros, my friends. Do you wish never to feel the prick, to do without the nuptial bed, and to brave love? Nothing more simple. Here is the receipt: lemonade, excessive exercise, hard labor; work yourself to death, drag blocks, sleep not, hold vigil, gorge yourself with nitrous beverages, and potions of nymphaeas; drink emulsions of poppies and agnus castus; season this with a strict diet, starve yourself, and add thereto cold baths, girdles of herbs, the application of a plate of lead, lotions made with the subacetate of lead, and fomentations of oxycrat."

"I prefer a woman," said Listolier.

"Woman," resumed Tholomyes; "distrust her. Woe to him who yields himself to the unstable heart of woman! Woman is perfidious and disingenuous. She detests the serpent from professional jealousy. The serpent is the shop over the way."

"Tholomyes!" cried Blachevelle, "you are drunk!"

"Pardieu," said Tholomyes.

"Then be gay," resumed Blachevelle.

"I agree to that," responded Tholomyes.

And, refilling his glass, he rose.

"Glory to wine! Nunc te, Bacche, canam! Pardon me ladies; that is Spanish. And the proof of it, senoras, is this: like people, like cask. The arrobe of Castile contains sixteen litres; the cantaro of Alicante, twelve; the almude of the Canaries, twenty-five; the cuartin of the Balearic Isles, twenty-six; the boot of Tzar Peter, thirty. Long live that Tzar who was great, and long live his boot, which was still greater! Ladies, take the advice of a friend; make a mistake in your neighbor if you see fit. The property of love is to err. A love affair is not made to crouch down and brutalize itself like an English serving-maid who has callouses on her knees from scrubbing. It is not made for that; it errs gayly, our gentle love. It has been said, error is human; I say, error is love. Ladies, I idolize you all. O Zephine, O Josephine, face more than irregular, you would be charming were you not all askew. You have the air of a pretty face upon which some one has sat down by mistake. As for Favourite, O nymphs and muses! one day when Blachevelle was crossing the gutter in the Rue Guerin-Boisseau, he espied a beautiful girl with white stockings well drawn up, which displayed her legs. This prologue pleased him, and Blachevelle fell in love. The one he loved was Favourite. O Favourite, thou hast Ionian lips. There was a Greek painter named Euphorion, who was surnamed the painter of the lips. That Greek alone would have been worthy to paint thy mouth. Listen! before thee, there was never a creature worthy of the name. Thou wert made to receive the apple like Venus, or to eat it like Eve; beauty begins with thee. I have just referred to Eve; it is thou who hast created her. Thou deservest the letters-patent of the beautiful woman. O Favourite, I cease to address you as ‘thou,’ because I pass from poetry to prose. You were speaking of my name a little while ago. That touched me; but let us, whoever we may be, distrust names. They may delude us. I am called Felix, and I am not happy. Words are liars. Let us not blindly accept the indications which they afford us. It would be a mistake to write to Liege for corks, and to Pau for gloves. Miss Dahlia, were I in your place, I would call myself Rosa. A flower should smell sweet, and woman should have wit. I say nothing of Fantine; she is a dreamer, a musing, thoughtful, pensive person; she is a phantom possessed of the form of a nymph and the modesty of a nun, who has strayed into the life of a grisette, but who takes refuge in illusions, and who sings and prays and gazes into the azure without very well knowing what she sees or what she is doing, and who, with her eyes fixed on heaven, wanders in a garden where there are more birds than are in existence. O Fantine, know this: I, Tholomyes, I am all illusion; but she does not even hear me, that blond maid of Chimeras! as for the rest, everything about her is freshness, suavity, youth, sweet morning light. O Fantine, maid worthy of being called Marguerite or Pearl, you are a woman from the beauteous Orient. Ladies, a second piece of advice: do not marry; marriage is a graft; it takes well or ill; avoid that risk. But bah! what am I saying? I am wasting my words. Girls are incurable on the subject of marriage, and all that we wise men can say will not prevent the waistcoat-makers and the shoe-stitchers from dreaming of husbands studded with diamonds. Well, so be it; but, my beauties, remember this, you eat too much sugar. You have but one fault, O woman, and that is nibbling sugar. O nibbling sex, your pretty little white teeth adore sugar. Now, heed me well, sugar is a salt. All salts are withering. Sugar is the most desiccating of all salts; it sucks the liquids of the blood through the veins; hence the coagulation, and then the solidification of the blood; hence tubercles in the lungs, hence death. That is why diabetes borders on consumption. Then, do not crunch sugar, and you will live. I turn to the men: gentlemen, make conquest, rob each other of your well-beloved without remorse. Chassez across. In love there are no friends. Everywhere where there is a pretty woman hostility is open. No quarter, war to the death! a pretty woman is a casus belli; a pretty woman is flagrant misdemeanor. All the invasions of history have been determined by petticoats. Woman is man’s right. Romulus carried off the Sabines; William carried off the Saxon women; Caesar carried off the Roman women. The man who is not loved soars like a vulture over the mistresses of other men; and for my own part, to all those unfortunate men who are widowers, I throw the sublime proclamation of Bonaparte to the army of Italy: “Soldiers, you are in need of everything; the enemy has it.”

Tholomyes paused.

“Take breath, Tholomyes,” said Blachevelle.

At the same moment Blachevelle, supported by Listolier and Fameuil, struck up to a plaintive air, one of those studio songs composed of the first words which come to hand, rhymed richly and not at all, as destitute of sense as the gesture of the tree and the sound of the wind, which have their birth in the vapor of pipes, and are dissipated and take their flight with them. This is the couplet by which the group replied to Tholomyes’ harangue: —

“The father turkey-cocks so grave
Some money to an agent gave,
That master good Clermont-Tonnerre
Might be made pope on Saint Johns’ day fair.
But this good Clermont could not be
Made pope, because no priest was he;
And then their agent, whose wrath burned,
With all their money back returned.”

This was not calculated to calm Tholomyes’ improvisation; he emptied his glass, filled, refilled it, and began again: —

“Down with wisdom! Forget all that I have said. Let us be neither prudes nor prudent men nor prudhommes. I propose a toast to mirth; be merry. Let us complete our course of law by folly and eating! Indigestion and the digest. Let Justinian be the male, and Feasting, the female! Joy in the depths! Live, O creation! The world is a great diamond. I am happy. The birds are astonishing. What a festival everywhere! The nightingale is a gratuitous Elleviou. Summer, I salute thee! O Luxembourg! O Georgics of the Rue Madame, and of the Allee de l’Observatoire! O pensive infantry soldiers! O all those charming nurses who, while they guard the children, amuse themselves! The pampas of America would please me if I had not the arcades of the Odeon. My soul flits away into the virgin forests and to the savannas. All is beautiful. The flies buzz in the sun. The sun has sneezed out the humming bird. Embrace me, Fantine!”

He made a mistake and embraced Favourite.

CHAPTER VIII — THE DEATH OF A HORSE

“The dinners are better at Edon’s than at Bombarda’s,” exclaimed Zephine.

“I prefer Bombarda to Edon,” declared Blachevelle. “There is more luxury. It is more Asiatic. Look at the room downstairs; there are mirrors [glaces] on the walls.”

“I prefer them [glaces, ices] on my plate,” said Favourite.

Blachevelle persisted: —

“Look at the knives. The handles are of silver at Bombarda’s and of bone at Edon’s. Now, silver is more valuable than bone.”

“Except for those who have a silver chin,” observed Tholomyes.

He was looking at the dome of the Invalides, which was visible from Bombarda’s windows.

A pause ensued.

“Tholomyes,” exclaimed Fameuil, “Listolier and I were having a discussion just now.”

“A discussion is a good thing,” replied Tholomyes; “a quarrel is better.”

“We were disputing about philosophy.”

“Well?”

“Which do you prefer, Descartes or Spinoza?”

“Desaugiers,” said Tholomyes.

This decree pronounced, he took a drink, and went on: —

“I consent to live. All is not at an end on earth since we can still talk nonsense. For that I return thanks to the immortal gods. We lie. One lies, but one laughs. One affirms, but one doubts. The unexpected bursts forth from the syllogism. That is fine. There are still human beings here below who know how to open and close the surprise box of the paradox merrily. This, ladies, which you are drinking with so tranquil an air is Madeira wine, you must know, from the vineyard of Coural das Freiras, which is three hundred and seventeen fathoms above the level of the sea. Attention while you drink! three hundred and seventeen fathoms! and Monsieur Bombarda, the magnificent eating-house keeper, gives you those three hundred and seventeen fathoms for four francs and fifty centimes.”

Again Fameuil interrupted him: —

“Tholomyes, your opinions fix the law. Who is your favorite author?”

“Ber—”

“Quin?”

“No; Choux.”

And Tholomyes continued: —

“Honor to Bombarda! He would equal Munophis of Elephanta if he could but get me an Indian dancing-girl, and Thygelion of Chaeronea if he could bring me a Greek courtesan; for, oh, ladies! there were Bombardas in Greece and in Egypt. Apuleius tells us of them. Alas! always the same, and nothing new; nothing more unpublished by the creator in creation! Nil sub sole novum, says Solomon; amor omnibus idem, says Virgil; and Carabine mounts with Carabin into the bark at Saint-Cloud, as Aspasia embarked with Pericles upon the fleet at Samos. One last word. Do you know what Aspasia was, ladies? Although she lived at an epoch when women had, as yet, no soul, she was a soul; a soul of a rosy and purple hue, more ardent hued than fire, fresher than the dawn. Aspasia was a creature in whom two extremes of womanhood met; she was the goddess prostitute; Socrates plus Manon Lescaut. Aspasia was created in case a mistress should be needed for Prometheus.”

Tholomyes, once started, would have found some difficulty in stopping, had not a horse fallen down upon the quay just at that moment. The shock caused the cart and the orator to come to a dead halt. It was a Beauceron mare, old and thin, and one fit for the knacker, which was dragging a very heavy cart. On arriving in front of Bombarda’s, the worn-out, exhausted beast had refused to proceed any further. This incident attracted a crowd. Hardly had the cursing and indignant carter had time to utter with proper energy the sacramental word, Matin (the jade), backed up with a pitiless cut of the whip, when the jade fell, never to rise again. On hearing the hubbub made by the passersby, Tholomyes’ merry auditors turned their heads, and Tholomyes took advantage of the opportunity to bring his allocution to a close with this melancholy strophe: —

“Elle etait de ce monde ou coucous et carrosses
 Ont le même destin;
Et, rosse, elle a vécu ce que vivant les rosses,
 L’espace d’un matin!”

“Poor horse!” sighed Fantine.

And Dahlia exclaimed: —

“There is Fantine on the point of crying over horses. How can one be such a pitiful fool as that!”

At that moment Favourite, folding her arms and throwing her head back, looked resolutely at Tholomyes and said: —

“Come, now! the surprise?”

“Exactly. The moment has arrived,” replied Tholomyes. “Gentlemen, the hour for giving these ladies a surprise has struck. Wait for us a moment, ladies.”

“It begins with a kiss,” said Blachevelle.

“On the brow,” added Tholomyes.

Each gravely bestowed a kiss on his mistress’s brow; then all four filed out through the door, with their fingers on their lips.

Favourite clapped her hands on their departure.

“It is beginning to be amusing already,” said she.

“Don’t be too long,” murmured Fantine; “we are waiting for you.”

CHAPTER IX — A MERRY END TO MIRTH

When the young girls were left alone, they leaned two by two on the window-sills, chatting, craning out their heads, and talking from one window to the other.

They saw the young men emerge from the Cafe Bombarda arm in arm. The latter turned round, made signs to them, smiled, and disappeared in that dusty Sunday throng which makes a weekly invasion into the Champs-Elysees.

“Don’t be long!” cried Fantine.

“What are they going to bring us?” said Zephine.

“It will certainly be something pretty,” said Dahlia.

“For my part,” said Favourite, “I want it to be of gold.”

Their attention was soon distracted by the movements on the shore of the lake, which they could see through the branches of the large trees, and which diverted them greatly.

It was the hour for the departure of the mail-coaches and diligences. Nearly all the stage-coaches for the south and west passed through the Champs-Elysees. The majority followed the quay and went through the Passy Barrier. From moment to moment, some huge vehicle, painted yellow and black, heavily loaded, noisily harnessed, rendered shapeless by trunks, tarpaulins, and valises, full of heads which immediately disappeared, rushed through the crowd with all the sparks of a forge, with dust for smoke, and an air of fury, grinding the pavements, changing all the paving-stones into steels. This uproar delighted the young girls. Favourite exclaimed: —

“What a row! One would say that it was a pile of chains flying away.”

It chanced that one of these vehicles, which they could only see with difficulty through the thick elms, halted for a moment, then set out again at a gallop. This surprised Fantine.

“That’s odd!” said she. “I thought the diligence never stopped.”

Favourite shrugged her shoulders.

“This Fantine is surprising. I am coming to take a look at her out of curiosity. She is dazzled by the simplest things. Suppose a case: I am a traveller; I say to the diligence, ‘I will go on in advance; you shall pick me up on the quay as you pass.’ The diligence passes, sees me, halts, and takes me. That is done every day. You do not know life, my dear.”

In this manner a certain time elapsed. All at once Favourite made a movement, like a person who is just waking up.

"Well," said she, "and the surprise?"

"Yes, by the way," joined in Dahlia, "the famous surprise?"

"They are a very long time about it!" said Fantine.

As Fantine concluded this sigh, the waiter who had served them at dinner entered. He held in his hand something which resembled a letter.

"What is that?" demanded Favourite.

The waiter replied: —

"It is a paper that those gentlemen left for these ladies."

"Why did you not bring it at once?"

"Because," said the waiter, "the gentlemen ordered me not to deliver it to the ladies for an hour."

Favourite snatched the paper from the waiter's hand. It was, in fact, a letter.

"Stop!" said she; "there is no address; but this is what is written on it—"

"THIS IS THE SURPRISE."

She tore the letter open hastily, opened it, and read [she knew how to read]: —

"OUR BELOVED: —

"You must know that we have parents. Parents — you do not know much about such things. They are called fathers and mothers by the civil code, which is puerile and honest. Now, these parents groan, these old folks implore us, these good men and these good women call us prodigal sons; they desire our return, and offer to kill calves for us. Being virtuous, we obey them. At the hour when you read this, five fiery horses will be bearing us to our papas and mammas. We are pulling up our stakes, as Bossuet says. We are going; we are gone. We flee in the arms of Lafitte and on the wings of Caillard. The Toulouse diligence tears us from the abyss, and the abyss is you, O our little beauties! We return to society, to duty, to respectability, at full trot, at the rate of three leagues an hour. It is necessary for the good of the country that we should be, like the rest of the world, prefects, fathers of families, rural police, and councillors of state. Venerate us. We are sacrificing ourselves. Mourn for us in haste, and replace us with speed. If this letter lacerates you, do the same by it. Adieu.

"For the space of nearly two years we have made you happy. We bear you no grudge for that. “Signed:

BLACHEVELLE.
FAMUEIL.
LISTOLIER.
FELIX THOLOMYES.

“Postscriptum. The dinner is paid for.”

The four young women looked at each other.

Favourite was the first to break the silence.

“Well!” she exclaimed, “it’s a very pretty farce, all the same.”

“It is very droll,” said Zephine.

“That must have been Blachevelle’s idea,” resumed Favourite. “It makes me in love with him. No sooner is he gone than he is loved. This is an adventure, indeed.”

“No,” said Dahlia; “it was one of Tholomyes’ ideas. That is evident.

“In that case,” retorted Favourite, “death to Blachevelle, and long live Tholomyes!”

“Long live Tholomyes!” exclaimed Dahlia and Zephine.

And they burst out laughing.

Fantine laughed with the rest.

An hour later, when she had returned to her room, she wept. It was her first love affair, as we have said; she had given herself to this Tholomyes as to a husband, and the poor girl had a child.

BOOK FOURTH. — TO CONFIDE IS SOMETIMES TO DELIVER INTO A PERSON’S POWER

CHAPTER I — ONE MOTHER MEETS ANOTHER MOTHER

There was, at Montfermeil, near Paris, during the first quarter of this century, a sort of cook-shop which no longer exists. This cook-shop was kept by some people named Thenardier, husband and wife. It was situated in Boulanger Lane. Over the door there was a board nailed flat against the wall. Upon this board was painted something which resembled a man carrying another man on his back, the latter wearing the big gilt epaulettes of a general, with large silver stars; red spots represented blood; the rest of the picture consisted of smoke, and probably represented a battle. Below ran this inscription: AT THE SIGN OF SERGEANT OF WATERLOO (Au Sargent de Waterloo).

Nothing is more common than a cart or a truck at the door of a hostelry. Nevertheless, the vehicle, or, to speak more accurately, the fragment of a vehicle, which encumbered the street in front of the cook-shop of the Sergeant of Waterloo, one evening in the spring of 1818, would certainly have attracted, by its mass, the attention of any painter who had passed that way.

It was the fore-carriage of one of those trucks which are used in wooded tracts of country, and which serve to transport thick planks and the trunks of trees. This fore-carriage was composed of a massive iron axle-tree with a pivot, into which was fitted a heavy shaft, and which was supported by two huge wheels. The whole thing was compact, overwhelming, and misshapen. It seemed like the gun-carriage of an enormous cannon. The ruts of the road had bestowed on the wheels, the fellies, the hub, the axle, and the shaft, a layer of mud, a hideous yellowish daubing hue, tolerably like that with which people are fond of ornamenting cathedrals. The wood was disappearing under mud, and the iron beneath rust. Under the axle-tree hung, like drapery, a huge chain, worthy of some Goliath of a convict. This chain suggested, not the beams, which it was its office to transport, but the mastodons and mammoths which it might have served to harness; it had the air of the galleys, but of cyclopean and superhuman galleys, and it seemed to have been detached from some monster. Homer would have bound Polyphemus with it, and Shakespeare, Caliban.

Why was that fore-carriage of a truck in that place in the street? In the first place, to encumber the street; next, in order that it might finish the process of rusting. There is a throng of institutions in the old social order, which one comes across in this fashion as one walks about outdoors, and which have no other reasons for existence than the above.

The centre of the chain swung very near the ground in the middle, and in the loop, as in the rope of a swing, there were seated and grouped, on that particular evening, in exquisite interlacement, two little girls; one about two years and a half old, the other, eighteen months; the younger in the arms of the other. A handkerchief, cleverly knotted about them, prevented their falling out. A mother had caught sight of that frightful chain, and had said, “Come! there’s a plaything for my children.”

The two children, who were dressed prettily and with some elegance, were radiant with pleasure; one would have said that they were two roses amid old iron; their eyes were a triumph; their fresh cheeks were full of laughter. One had chestnut hair; the other, brown. Their innocent faces were two delighted surprises; a blossoming shrub which grew near wafted to the passers-by perfumes which seemed to emanate from them; the child of eighteen months displayed her pretty little bare stomach with the chaste indecency of childhood. Above and around these two delicate heads, all made of happiness and steeped in light, the gigantic fore-carriage, black with rust, almost terrible, all entangled in curves and wild angles, rose in a vault, like the entrance of a cavern. A few paces apart, crouching down upon the threshold of the hostelry, the mother, not a very prepossessing woman, by the way, though touching at that moment, was swinging the two children by means of a long cord, watching them carefully, for fear of accidents, with that animal and celestial expression which is peculiar to maternity. At every backward and forward swing the hideous links emitted a strident sound, which resembled a cry of rage; the little girls were in ecstasies; the setting sun mingled in this joy, and nothing could be more charming than this caprice of chance which had made of a chain of Titans the swing of cherubim.

As she rocked her little ones, the mother hummed in a discordant voice a romance then celebrated: —

“It must be, said a warrior.”

Her song, and the contemplation of her daughters, prevented her hearing and seeing what was going on in the street.

In the meantime, some one had approached her, as she was beginning the first couplet of the romance, and suddenly she heard a voice saying very near her ear: —

“You have two beautiful children there, Madame.”

“To the fair and tender Imogene—”

replied the mother, continuing her romance; then she turned her head.

A woman stood before her, a few paces distant. This woman also had a child, which she carried in her arms.

She was carrying, in addition, a large carpet-bag, which seemed very heavy.

This woman’s child was one of the most divine creatures that it is possible to behold. It was a girl, two or three years of age. She could have entered into competition with the two other little ones, so far as the coquetry of her dress was concerned; she wore a cap of fine linen, ribbons on her bodice, and Valenciennes lace on her cap. The folds of her skirt were raised so as to permit a view of her white, firm, and dimpled leg. She was admirably rosy and healthy. The little beauty inspired a desire to take a bite from the apples of her cheeks. Of her eyes nothing could be known, except that they must be very large, and that they had magnificent lashes. She was asleep.

She slept with that slumber of absolute confidence peculiar to her age. The arms of mothers are made of tenderness; in them children sleep profoundly.

As for the mother, her appearance was sad and poverty-stricken. She was dressed like a working-woman who is inclined to turn into a peasant again. She was young. Was she handsome? Perhaps; but in that attire it was not apparent. Her hair, a golden lock of which had escaped, seemed very thick, but was severely concealed beneath an ugly, tight, close, nun-like cap, tied under the chin. A smile displays beautiful teeth when one has them; but she did not smile. Her eyes did not seem to have been dry for a very long time. She was pale; she had a very weary and rather sickly appearance. She gazed upon her daughter asleep in her arms with the air peculiar to a mother who has nursed her own child. A large blue handkerchief, such as the Invalides use, was folded into a fichu, and concealed her figure clumsily. Her hands were sunburnt and all dotted with freckles, her forefinger was hardened and lacerated with the needle; she wore a cloak of coarse brown woollen stuff, a linen gown, and coarse shoes. It was Fantine.

It was Fantine, but difficult to recognize. Nevertheless, on scrutinizing her attentively, it was evident that she still retained her beauty. A melancholy fold, which resembled the beginning of irony, wrinkled her right cheek. As for her toilette, that aerial toilette of muslin and ribbons, which seemed made of mirth, of folly, and of music, full of bells, and perfumed with lilacs had vanished like that beautiful and dazzling hoar-frost which is mistaken for diamonds in the sunlight; it melts and leaves the branch quite black.

Ten months had elapsed since the “pretty farce.”

What had taken place during those ten months? It can be divined.

After abandonment, straightened circumstances. Fantine had immediately lost sight of Favourite, Zephine and Dahlia; the bond once broken on the side of the men, it was loosed between the women; they would have been greatly astonished had any one told them a fortnight later, that they had been friends; there no longer existed any reason for such a thing. Fantine had remained alone. The father of her child gone, — alas! such ruptures are irrevocable, — she found herself absolutely isolated, minus the habit of work and plus the taste for pleasure. Drawn away by her liaison with Tholomyes to disdain the pretty trade which she knew, she had neglected to keep her market open; it was now closed to her. She had no resource. Fantine barely knew how to read, and did not know how to write; in her childhood she had only been taught to sign her name; she had a public letter-writer indite an epistle to Tholomyes, then a second, then a third. Tholomyes replied to none of them. Fantine heard the gossips say, as they looked at her child: “Who takes those children seriously! One only shrugs one’s shoulders over such children!” Then she thought of Tholomyes, who had shrugged his shoulders over his child, and who did not take that innocent being seriously; and her heart grew gloomy toward that man. But what was she to do? She no longer knew to whom to apply. She had committed a fault, but the foundation of her nature, as will be remembered, was modesty and virtue. She was vaguely conscious that she was on the verge of falling into distress, and of gliding into a worse state. Courage was necessary; she possessed it, and held herself firm. The idea of returning to her native town of M. sur M. occurred to her. There, some one might possibly know her and give her work; yes, but it would be necessary to conceal her fault. In a confused way she perceived the necessity of a separation which would be more painful than the first one. Her heart contracted, but she took her resolution. Fantine, as we shall see, had the fierce bravery of life. She had already valiantly renounced finery, had dressed herself in linen, and had put all her silks, all her ornaments, all her ribbons, and all her laces on her daughter, the only vanity which was left to her, and a holy one it was. She sold all that she had, which produced for her two hundred francs; her little debts paid, she had only about eighty francs left. At the age of twenty-two, on a beautiful spring morning, she quitted Paris, bearing her child on her back. Any one who had seen these two pass would have had pity on them. This woman had, in all the world, nothing but her child, and the child had, in all the world, no one but this woman. Fantine had nursed her child, and this had tired her chest, and she coughed a little.

We shall have no further occasion to speak of M. Felix Tholomyes. Let us confine ourselves to saying, that, twenty years later, under King Louis Philippe, he was a great provincial lawyer, wealthy and influential, a wise elector, and a very severe juryman; he was still a man of pleasure.

Towards the middle of the day, after having, from time to time, for the sake of resting herself, travelled, for three or four sous a league, in what was then known as the Petites Voitures des Environs de Paris, the “little suburban coach service,” Fantine found herself at Montfermeil, in the alley Boulanger.

As she passed the Thenardier hostelry, the two little girls, blissful in the monster swing, had dazzled her in a manner, and she had halted in front of that vision of joy.

Charms exist. These two little girls were a charm to this mother.

She gazed at them in much emotion. The presence of angels is an announcement of Paradise. She thought that, above this inn, she beheld the mysterious HERE of Providence. These two little creatures were evidently happy. She gazed at them, she admired them, in such emotion that at the moment when their mother was recovering her breath between two couplets of her song, she could not refrain from addressing to her the remark which we have just read: —

“You have two pretty children, Madame.”

The most ferocious creatures are disarmed by caresses bestowed on their young.

The mother raised her head and thanked her, and bade the wayfarer sit down on the bench at the door, she herself being seated on the threshold.

The two women began to chat.

"My name is Madame Thenardier," said the mother of the two little girls. "We keep this inn."

Then, her mind still running on her romance, she resumed humming between her teeth: —

"It must be so; I am a knight,
And I am off to Palestine."

This Madame Thenardier was a sandy-complexioned woman, thin and angular — the type of the soldier's wife in all its unpleasantness; and what was odd, with a languishing air, which she owed to her perusal of romances. She was a simpering, but masculine creature. Old romances produce that effect when rubbed against the imagination of cook-shop woman. She was still young; she was barely thirty. If this crouching woman had stood upright, her lofty stature and her frame of a perambulating colossus suitable for fairs, might have frightened the traveller at the outset, troubled her confidence, and disturbed what caused what we have to relate to vanish. A person who is seated instead of standing erect — destinies hang upon such a thing as that.

The traveller told her story, with slight modifications.

That she was a working-woman; that her husband was dead; that her work in Paris had failed her, and that she was on her way to seek it elsewhere, in her own native parts; that she had left Paris that morning on foot; that, as she was carrying her child, and felt fatigued, she had got into the Villemomble coach when she met it; that from Villemomble she had come to Montfermeil on foot; that the little one had walked a little, but not much, because she was so young, and that she had been obliged to take her up, and the jewel had fallen asleep.

At this word she bestowed on her daughter a passionate kiss, which woke her. The child opened her eyes, great blue eyes like her mother's, and looked at — what? Nothing; with that serious and sometimes severe air of little children, which is a mystery of their luminous innocence in the presence of our twilight of virtue. One would say that they feel themselves to be angels, and that they know us to be men. Then the child began to laugh; and although the mother held fast to her, she slipped to the ground with the unconquerable energy of a little being which wished to run. All at once she caught sight of the two others in the swing, stopped short, and put out her tongue, in sign of admiration.

Mother Thenardier released her daughters, made them descend from the swing, and said: —

“Now amuse yourselves, all three of you.”

Children become acquainted quickly at that age, and at the expiration of a minute the little Thenardiers were playing with the new-comer at making holes in the ground, which was an immense pleasure.

The new-comer was very gay; the goodness of the mother is written in the gayety of the child; she had seized a scrap of wood which served her for a shovel, and energetically dug a cavity big enough for a fly. The grave-digger’s business becomes a subject for laughter when performed by a child.

The two women pursued their chat.

“What is your little one’s name?”

“Cosette.”

For Cosette, read Euphrasie. The child’s name was Euphrasie. But out of Euphrasie the mother had made Cosette by that sweet and graceful instinct of mothers and of the populace which changes Josepha into Pepita, and Francoise into Sillette. It is a sort of derivative which disarranges and disconcerts the whole science of etymologists. We have known a grandmother who succeeded in turning Theodore into Gnon.

“How old is she?”

“She is going on three.”

“That is the age of my eldest.”

In the meantime, the three little girls were grouped in an attitude of profound anxiety and blissfulness; an event had happened; a big worm had emerged from the ground, and they were afraid; and they were in ecstasies over it.

Their radiant brows touched each other; one would have said that there were three heads in one aureole.

“How easily children get acquainted at once!” exclaimed Mother Thenardier; “one would swear that they were three sisters!”

This remark was probably the spark which the other mother had been waiting for. She seized the Thenardier’s hand, looked at her fixedly, and said: —

“Will you keep my child for me?”

The Thenardier made one of those movements of surprise which signify neither assent nor refusal.

Cosette's mother continued: —

"You see, I cannot take my daughter to the country. My work will not permit it. With a child one can find no situation. People are ridiculous in the country. It was the good God who caused me to pass your inn. When I caught sight of your little ones, so pretty, so clean, and so happy, it overwhelmed me. I said: 'Here is a good mother. That is just the thing; that will make three sisters.' And then, it will not be long before I return. Will you keep my child for me?"

"I must see about it," replied the Thenardier.

"I will give you six francs a month."

Here a man's voice called from the depths of the cook-shop: —

"Not for less than seven francs. And six months paid in advance."

"Six times seven makes forty-two," said the Thenardier.

"I will give it," said the mother.

"And fifteen francs in addition for preliminary expenses," added the man's voice.

"Total, fifty-seven francs," said Madame Thenardier. And she hummed vaguely, with these figures: —

"It must be, said a warrior."

"I will pay it," said the mother. "I have eighty francs. I shall have enough left to reach the country, by travelling on foot. I shall earn money there, and as soon as I have a little I will return for my darling."

The man's voice resumed: —

"The little one has an outfit?"

"That is my husband," said the Thenardier.

"Of course she has an outfit, the poor treasure. — I understood perfectly that it was your husband. — And a beautiful outfit, too! a senseless outfit, everything by the dozen, and silk gowns like a lady. It is here, in my carpet-bag."

"You must hand it over," struck in the man's voice again.

"Of course I shall give it to you," said the mother. "It would be very queer if I were to leave my daughter quite naked!"

The master's face appeared.

"That's good," said he.

The bargain was concluded. The mother passed the night at the inn, gave up her money and left her child, fastened her carpet-bag once more, now reduced in volume by the removal of the outfit, and light henceforth and set out on the following morning, intending to return soon. People arrange such departures tranquilly; but they are despairs!

A neighbor of the Thenardiers met this mother as she was setting out, and came back with the remark: —

“I have just seen a woman crying in the street so that it was enough to rend your heart.”

When Cosette’s mother had taken her departure, the man said to the woman: —

“That will serve to pay my note for one hundred and ten francs which falls due to-morrow; I lacked fifty francs. Do you know that I should have had a bailiff and a protest after me? You played the mouse-trap nicely with your young ones.”

“Without suspecting it,” said the woman.

CHAPTER II — FIRST SKETCH OF TWO UNPREPOSSESSING FIGURES

The mouse which had been caught was a pitiful specimen; but the cat rejoices even over a lean mouse.

Who were these Thenardiers?

Let us say a word or two of them now. We will complete the sketch later on.

These beings belonged to that bastard class composed of coarse people who have been successful, and of intelligent people who have descended in the scale, which is between the class called “middle” and the class denominated as “inferior,” and which combines some of the defects of the second with nearly all the vices of the first, without possessing the generous impulse of the workingman nor the honest order of the bourgeois.

They were of those dwarfed natures which, if a dull fire chances to warm them up, easily become monstrous. There was in the woman a substratum of the brute, and in the man the material for a blackguard. Both were susceptible, in the highest degree, of the sort of hideous progress which is accomplished in the direction of evil. There exist crab-like souls which are continually retreating towards the darkness, retrograding in life rather than advancing, employing experience to augment their deformity, growing incessantly worse, and becoming more and more impregnated with an ever-augmenting blackness. This man and woman possessed such souls.

Thenardier, in particular, was troublesome for a physiognomist. One can only look at some men to distrust them; for one feels that they are dark in both directions. They are uneasy in the rear and threatening in front. There is something of the unknown about them. One can no more answer for what they have done than for what they will do. The shadow which they bear in their glance denounces them. From merely hearing them utter a word or seeing them make a gesture, one obtains a glimpse of sombre secrets in their past and of sombre mysteries in their future.

This Thenardier, if he himself was to be believed, had been a soldier — a sergeant, he said. He had probably been through the campaign of 1815, and had even conducted himself with tolerable valor, it would seem. We shall see later on how much truth there was in this. The sign of his hostelry was in allusion to one of his feats of arms. He had painted it himself; for he knew how to do a little of everything, and badly.

It was at the epoch when the ancient classical romance which, after having been Clelie, was no longer anything but Lodoiska, still noble, but ever more and more vulgar, having fallen from Mademoiselle de Scuderi to Madame Bournon-Malarme, and from Madame de Lafayette to Madame Barthelemy-Hadot, was setting the loving hearts of the portresses of Paris aflame, and even ravaging the suburbs to some extent. Madame Thenardier was just intelligent enough to read this sort of books. She lived on them. In them she drowned what brains she possessed. This had given her, when very young, and even a little later, a sort of pensive attitude towards her husband, a scamp of a certain depth, a ruffian lettered to the extent of the grammar, coarse and fine at one and the same time, but, so far as sentimentalism was concerned, given to the perusal of Pigault-Lebrun, and "in what concerns the sex," as he said in his jargon — a downright, unmitigated lout. His wife was twelve or fifteen years younger than he was. Later on, when her hair, arranged in a romantically drooping fashion, began to grow gray, when the Magaera began to be developed from the Pamela, the female Thenardier was nothing but a coarse, vicious woman, who had dabbled in stupid romances. Now, one cannot read nonsense with impunity. The result was that her eldest daughter was named Eponine; as for the younger, the poor little thing came near being called Gulnare; I know not to what diversion, effected by a romance of Ducray-Dumenil, she owed the fact that she merely bore the name of Azelma.

However, we will remark by the way, everything was not ridiculous and superficial in that curious epoch to which we are alluding, and which may be designated as the anarchy of baptismal names. By the side of this romantic element which we have just indicated there is the social symptom. It is not rare for the neatherd's boy nowadays to bear the name of Arthur, Alfred, or Alphonse, and for the vicomte — if there are still any vicomtes — to be called Thomas, Pierre, or Jacques. This displacement, which places the "elegant" name on the plebeian and the rustic name on the aristocrat, is nothing else than an eddy of equality. The irresistible penetration of the new inspiration is there as everywhere else. Beneath this apparent discord there is a great and a profound thing, — the French Revolution.

CHAPTER III — THE LARK

It is not all in all sufficient to be wicked in order to prosper. The cook-shop was in a bad way.

Thanks to the traveller’s fifty-seven francs, Thenardier had been able to avoid a protest and to honor his signature. On the following month they were again in need of money. The woman took Cosette’s outfit to Paris, and pawned it at the pawnbroker’s for sixty francs. As soon as that sum was spent, the Thenardiers grew accustomed to look on the little girl merely as a child whom they were caring for out of charity; and they treated her accordingly. As she had no longer any clothes, they dressed her in the cast-off petticoats and chemises of the Thenardier brats; that is to say, in rags. They fed her on what all the rest had left — a little better than the dog, a little worse than the cat. Moreover, the cat and the dog were her habitual table-companions; Cosette ate with them under the table, from a wooden bowl similar to theirs.

The mother, who had established herself, as we shall see later on, at M. sur M., wrote, or, more correctly, caused to be written, a letter every month, that she might have news of her child. The Thenardiers replied invariably, “Cosette is doing wonderfully well.”

At the expiration of the first six months the mother sent seven francs for the seventh month, and continued her remittances with tolerable regularity from month to month. The year was not completed when Thenardier said: “A fine favor she is doing us, in sooth! What does she expect us to do with her seven francs?” and he wrote to demand twelve francs. The mother, whom they had persuaded into the belief that her child was happy, “and was coming on well,” submitted, and forwarded the twelve francs.

Certain natures cannot love on the one hand without hating on the other. Mother Thenardier loved her two daughters passionately, which caused her to hate the stranger.

It is sad to think that the love of a mother can possess villainous aspects. Little as was the space occupied by Cosette, it seemed to her as though it were taken from her own, and that that little child diminished the air which her daughters breathed. This woman, like many women of her sort, had a load of caresses and a burden of blows and injuries to dispense each day. If she had not had Cosette, it is certain that her daughters, idolized as they were, would have received the whole of it; but the stranger did them the service to divert the blows to herself. Her daughters received nothing but caresses. Cosette could not make a motion which did not draw down upon her head a heavy shower of violent blows and unmerited chastisement. The sweet, feeble being, who should not have understood anything of this world or of God, incessantly punished, scolded, ill-used, beaten, and seeing beside her two little creatures like herself, who lived in a ray of dawn!

Madame Thenardier was vicious with Cosette. Eponine and Azelma were vicious. Children at that age are only copies of their mother. The size is smaller; that is all.

A year passed; then another.

People in the village said: —

“Those Thenardiers are good people. They are not rich, and yet they are bringing up a poor child who was abandoned on their hands!”

They thought that Cosette’s mother had forgotten her.

In the meanwhile, Thenardier, having learned, it is impossible to say by what obscure means, that the child was probably a bastard, and that the mother could not acknowledge it, exacted fifteen francs a month, saying that “the creature” was growing and “eating,” and threatening to send her away. “Let her not bother me,” he exclaimed, “or I’ll fire her brat right into the middle of her secrets. I must have an increase.” The mother paid the fifteen francs.

From year to year the child grew, and so did her wretchedness.

As long as Cosette was little, she was the scape-goat of the two other children; as soon as she began to develop a little, that is to say, before she was even five years old, she became the servant of the household.

Five years old! the reader will say; that is not probable. Alas! it is true. Social suffering begins at all ages. Have we not recently seen the trial of a man named Dumollard, an orphan turned bandit, who, from the age of five, as the official documents state, being alone in the world, “worked for his living and stole”?

Cosette was made to run on errands, to sweep the rooms, the courtyard, the street, to wash the dishes, to even carry burdens. The Thenardiers considered themselves all the more authorized to behave in this manner, since the mother, who was still at M. sur M., had become irregular in her payments. Some months she was in arrears.

If this mother had returned to Montfermeil at the end of these three years, she would not have recognized her child. Cosette, so pretty and rosy on her arrival in that house, was now thin and pale. She had an indescribably uneasy look. “The sly creature,” said the Thenardiers.

Injustice had made her peevish, and misery had made her ugly. Nothing remained to her except her beautiful eyes, which inspired pain, because, large as they were, it seemed as though one beheld in them a still larger amount of sadness.

It was a heart-breaking thing to see this poor child, not yet six years old, shivering in the winter in her old rags of linen, full of holes, sweeping the street before daylight, with an enormous broom in her tiny red hands, and a tear in her great eyes.

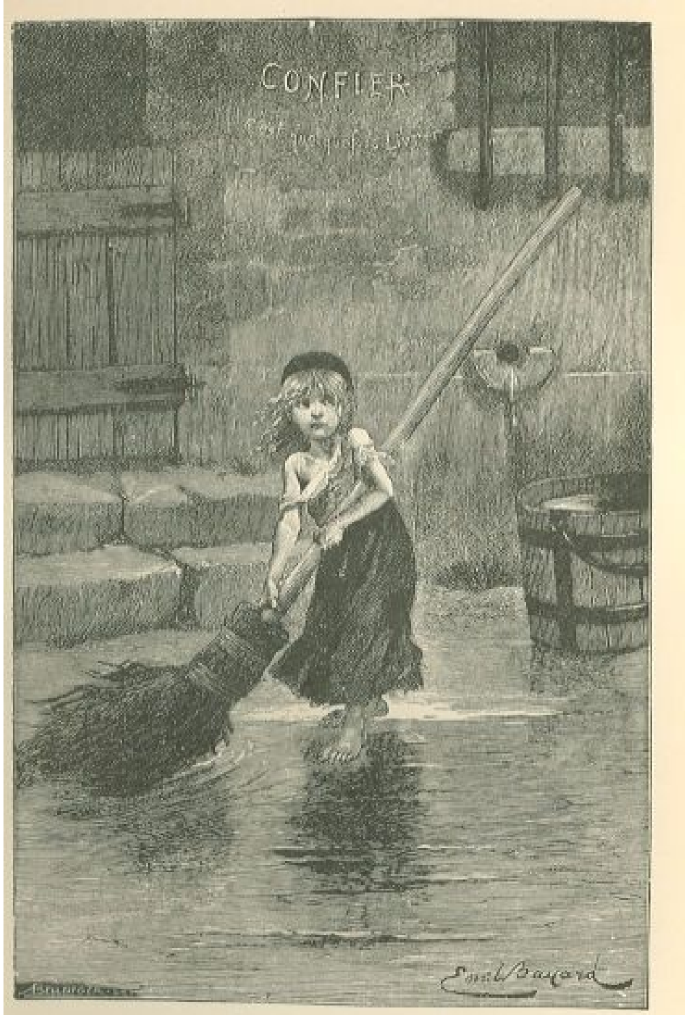

COSETTE SWEEPING.

She was called the Lark in the neighborhood. The populace, who are fond of these figures of speech, had taken a fancy to bestow this name on this trembling, frightened, and shivering little creature, no bigger than a bird, who was awake every morning before any one else in the house or the village, and was always in the street or the fields before daybreak.

Only the little lark never sang.

BOOK FIFTH. — THE DESCENT.

CHAPTER I — THE HISTORY OF A PROGRESS IN BLACK GLASS TRINKETS

And in the meantime, what had become of that mother who according to the people at Montfermeil, seemed to have abandoned her child? Where was she? What was she doing?

After leaving her little Cosette with the Thenardiers, she had continued her journey, and had reached M. sur M.

This, it will be remembered, was in 1818.

Fantine had quitted her province ten years before. M. sur M. had changed its aspect. While Fantine had been slowly descending from wretchedness to wretchedness, her native town had prospèred.

About two years previously one of those industrial facts which are the grand events of small districts had taken place.

This detail is important, and we regard it as useful to develop it at length; we should almost say, to underline it.

From time immemorial, M. sur M. had had for its special industry the imitation of English jet and the black glass trinkets of Germany. This industry had always vegetated, on account of the high price of the raw material, which reacted on the manufacture. At the moment when Fantine returned to M. sur M., an unheard-of transformation had taken place in the production of “black goods.” Towards the close of 1815 a man, a stranger, had established himself in the town, and had been inspired with the idea of substituting, in this manufacture, gum-lac for resin, and, for bracelets in particular, slides of sheet-iron simply laid together, for slides of soldered sheet-iron.

This very small change had effected a revolution.

This very small change had, in fact, prodigiously reduced the cost of the raw material, which had rendered it possible in the first place, to raise the price of manufacture, a benefit to the country; in the second place, to improve the workmanship, an advantage to the consumer; in the third place, to sell at a lower price, while trebling the profit, which was a benefit to the manufacturer.

Thus three results ensued from one idea.

In less than three years the inventor of this process had become rich, which is good, and had made every one about him rich, which is better. He was a stranger in the Department. Of his origin, nothing was known; of the beginning of his career, very little. It was rumored that he had come to town with very little money, a few hundred francs at the most.

It was from this slender capital, enlisted in the service of an ingenious idea, developed by method and thought, that he had drawn his own fortune, and the fortune of the whole countryside.

On his arrival at M. sur M. he had only the garments, the appearance, and the language of a workingman.

It appears that on the very day when he made his obscure entry into the little town of M. sur M., just at nightfall, on a December evening, knapsack on back and thorn club in hand, a large fire had broken out in the town-hall. This man had rushed into the flames and saved, at the risk of his own life, two children who belonged to the captain of the gendarmerie; this is why they had forgotten to ask him for his passport. Afterwards they had learned his name. He was called Father Madeleine.

CHAPTER II — MADELEINE

He was a man about fifty years of age, who had a preoccupied air, and who was good. That was all that could be said about him.

Thanks to the rapid progress of the industry which he had so admirably reconstructed, M. sur M. had become a rather important centre of trade. Spain, which consumes a good deal of black jet, made enormous purchases there each year. M. sur M. almost rivalled London and Berlin in this branch of commerce. Father Madeleine's profits were such, that at the end of the second year he was able to erect a large factory, in which there were two vast workrooms, one for the men, and the other for women. Any one who was hungry could present himself there, and was sure of finding employment and bread. Father Madeleine required of the men good will, of the women pure morals, and of all, probity. He had separated the workrooms in order to separate the sexes, and so that the women and girls might remain discreet. On this point he was inflexible. It was the only thing in which he was in a manner intolerant. He was all the more firmly set on this severity, since M. sur M., being a garrison town, opportunities for corruption abounded. However, his coming had been a boon, and his presence was a godsend. Before Father Madeleine's arrival, everything had languished in the country; now everything lived with a healthy life of toil. A strong circulation warmed everything and penetrated everywhere. Slack seasons and wretchedness were unknown. There was no pocket so obscure that it had not a little money in it; no dwelling so lowly that there was not some little joy within it.

Father Madeleine gave employment to every one. He exacted but one thing: Be an honest man. Be an honest woman.

As we have said, in the midst of this activity of which he was the cause and the pivot, Father Madeleine made his fortune; but a singular thing in a simple man of business, it did not seem as though that were his chief care. He appeared to be thinking much of others, and little of himself. In 1820 he was known to have a sum of six hundred and thirty thousand francs lodged in his name with Laffitte; but before reserving these six hundred and thirty thousand francs, he had spent more than a million for the town and its poor.

The hospital was badly endowed; he founded six beds there. M. sur M. is divided into the upper and the lower town. The lower town, in which he lived, had but one school, a miserable hovel, which was falling to ruin: he constructed two, one for girls, the other for boys. He allotted a salary from his own funds to the two instructors, a salary twice as large as their meagre official salary, and one day he said to some one who expressed surprise, “The two prime functionaries of the state are the nurse and the schoolmaster.” He created at his own expense an infant school, a thing then almost unknown in France, and a fund for aiding old and infirm workmen. As his factory was a centre, a new quarter, in which there were a good many indigent families, rose rapidly around him; he established there a free dispensary.

At first, when they watched his beginnings, the good souls said, “He’s a jolly fellow who means to get rich.” When they saw him enriching the country before he enriched himself, the good souls said, “He is an ambitious man.” This seemed all the more probable since the man was religious, and even practised his religion to a certain degree, a thing which was very favorably viewed at that epoch. He went regularly to low mass every Sunday. The local deputy, who nosed out all rivalry everywhere, soon began to grow uneasy over this religion. This deputy had been a member of the legislative body of the Empire, and shared the religious ideas of a father of the Oratoire, known under the name of Fouche, Duc d’Otrante, whose creature and friend he had been. He indulged in gentle raillery at God with closed doors. But when he beheld the wealthy manufacturer Madeleine going to low mass at seven o’clock, he perceived in him a possible candidate, and resolved to outdo him; he took a Jesuit confessor, and went to high mass and to vespers. Ambition was at that time, in the direct acceptation of the word, a race to the steeple. The poor profited by this terror as well as the good God, for the honorable deputy also founded two beds in the hospital, which made twelve.

Nevertheless, in 1819 a rumor one morning circulated through the town to the effect that, on the representations of the prefect and in consideration of the services rendered by him to the country, Father Madeleine was to be appointed by the King, mayor of M. sur M. Those who had pronounced this new-comer to be “an ambitious fellow,” seized with delight on this opportunity which all men desire, to exclaim, “There! what did we say!” All M. sur M. was in an uproar. The rumor was well founded. Several days later the appointment appeared in the Moniteur. On the following day Father Madeleine refused.

In this same year of 1819 the products of the new process invented by Madeleine figured in the industrial exhibition; when the jury made their report, the King appointed the inventor a chevalier of the Legion of Honor. A fresh excitement in the little town. Well, so it was the cross that he wanted! Father Madeleine refused the cross.

Decidedly this man was an enigma. The good souls got out of their predicament by saying, “After all, he is some sort of an adventurer.”

We have seen that the country owed much to him; the poor owed him everything; he was so useful and he was so gentle that people had been obliged to honor and respect him. His workmen, in particular, adored him, and he endured this adoration with a sort of melancholy gravity. When he was known to be rich, “people in society” bowed to him, and he received invitations in the town; he was called, in town, Monsieur Madeleine; his workmen and the children continued to call him Father Madeleine, and that was what was most adapted to make him smile. In proportion as he mounted, throve, invitations rained down upon him. “Society” claimed him for its own. The prim little drawing-rooms on M. sur M., which, of course, had at first been closed to the artisan, opened both leaves of their folding-doors to the millionnaire. They made a thousand advances to him. He refused.

This time the good gossips had no trouble. “He is an ignorant man, of no education. No one knows where he came from. He would not know how to behave in society. It has not been absolutely proved that he knows how to read.”

When they saw him making money, they said, “He is a man of business.” When they saw him scattering his money about, they said, “He is an ambitious man.” When he was seen to decline honors, they said, “He is an adventurer.” When they saw him repulse society, they said, “He is a brute.”

In 1820, five years after his arrival in M. sur M., the services which he had rendered to the district were so dazzling, the opinion of the whole country round about was so unanimous, that the King again appointed him mayor of the town. He again declined; but the prefect resisted his refusal, all the notabilities of the place came to implore him, the people in the street besought him; the urging was so vigorous that he ended by accepting. It was noticed that the thing which seemed chiefly to bring him to a decision was the almost irritated apostrophe addressed to him by an old woman of the people, who called to him from her threshold, in an angry way: “A good mayor is a useful thing. Is he drawing back before the good which he can do?”

This was the third phase of his ascent. Father Madeleine had become Monsieur Madeleine. Monsieur Madeleine became Monsieur le Maire.

CHAPTER III — SUMS DEPOSITED WITH LAFFITTE

On the other hand, he remained as simple as on the first day. He had gray hair, a serious eye, the sunburned complexion of a laborer, the thoughtful visage of a philosopher. He habitually wore a hat with a wide brim, and a long coat of coarse cloth, buttoned to the chin. He fulfilled his duties as mayor; but, with that exception, he lived in solitude. He spoke to but few people. He avoided polite attentions; he escaped quickly; he smiled to relieve himself of the necessity of talking; he gave, in order to get rid of the necessity for smiling, The women said of him, “What a good-natured bear!” His pleasure consisted in strolling in the fields.

He always took his meals alone, with an open book before him, which he read. He had a well-selected little library. He loved books; books are cold but safe friends. In proportion as leisure came to him with fortune, he seemed to take advantage of it to cultivate his mind. It had been observed that, ever since his arrival at M. sur M.. his language had grown more polished, more choice, and more gentle with every passing year. He liked to carry a gun with him on his strolls, but he rarely made use of it. When he did happen to do so, his shooting was something so infallible as to inspire terror. He never killed an inoffensive animal. He never shot at a little bird.

Although he was no longer young, it was thought that he was still prodigiously strong. He offered his assistance to any one who was in need of it, lifted a horse, released a wheel clogged in the mud, or stopped a runaway bull by the horns. He always had his pockets full of money when he went out; but they were empty on his return. When he passed through a village, the ragged brats ran joyously after him, and surrounded him like a swarm of gnats.

It was thought that he must, in the past, have lived a country life, since he knew all sorts of useful secrets, which he taught to the peasants. He taught them how to destroy scurf on wheat, by sprinkling it and the granary and inundating the cracks in the floor with a solution of common salt; and how to chase away weevils by hanging up orviot in bloom everywhere, on the walls and the ceilings, among the grass and in the houses.

He had “recipes” for exterminating from a field, blight, tares, foxtail, and all parasitic growths which destroy the wheat. He defended a rabbit warren against rats, simply by the odor of a guinea-pig which he placed in it.

One day he saw some country people busily engaged in pulling up nettles; he examined the plants, which were uprooted and already dried, and said: “They are dead. Nevertheless, it would be a good thing to know how to make use of them. When the nettle is young, the leaf makes an excellent vegetable; when it is older, it has filaments and fibres like hemp and flax. Nettle cloth is as good as linen cloth. Chopped up, nettles are good for poultry; pounded, they are good for horned cattle. The seed of the nettle, mixed with fodder, gives gloss to the hair of animals; the root, mixed with salt, produces a beautiful yellow coloring-matter. Moreover, it is an excellent hay, which can be cut twice. And what is required for the nettle? A little soil, no care, no culture. Only the seed falls as it is ripe, and it is difficult to collect it. That is all. With the exercise of a little care, the nettle could be made useful; it is neglected and it becomes hurtful. It is exterminated. How many men resemble the nettle!” He added, after a pause: “Remember this, my friends: there are no such things as bad plants or bad men. There are only bad cultivators.”

The children loved him because he knew how to make charming little trifles of straw and cocoanuts.

When he saw the door of a church hung in black, he entered: he sought out funerals as other men seek christenings. Widowhood and the grief of others attracted him, because of his great gentleness; he mingled with the friends clad in mourning, with families dressed in black, with the priests groaning around a coffin. He seemed to like to give to his thoughts for text these funereal psalmodies filled with the vision of the other world. With his eyes fixed on heaven, he listened with a sort of aspiration towards all the mysteries of the infinite, those sad voices which sing on the verge of the obscure abyss of death.

He performed a multitude of good actions, concealing his agency in them as a man conceals himself because of evil actions. He penetrated houses privately, at night; he ascended staircases furtively. A poor wretch on returning to his attic would find that his door had been opened, sometimes even forced, during his absence. The poor man made a clamor over it: some malefactor had been there! He entered, and the first thing he beheld was a piece of gold lying forgotten on some piece of furniture. The "malefactor" who had been there was Father Madeleine.

He was affable and sad. The people said: "There is a rich man who has not a haughty air. There is a happy man who has not a contented air."

Some people maintained that he was a mysterious person, and that no one ever entered his chamber, which was a regular anchorite's cell, furnished with winged hour-glasses and enlivened by cross-bones and skulls of dead men! This was much talked of, so that one of the elegant and malicious young women of M. sur M. came to him one day, and asked: "Monsieur le Maire, pray show us your chamber. It is said to be a grotto." He smiled, and introduced them instantly into this "grotto." They were well punished for their curiosity. The room was very simply furnished in mahogany, which was rather ugly, like all furniture of that sort, and hung with paper worth twelve sous. They could see nothing remarkable about it, except two candlesticks of antique pattern which stood on the chimney-piece and appeared to be silver, "for they were hall-marked," an observation full of the type of wit of petty towns.

Nevertheless, people continued to say that no one ever got into the room, and that it was a hermit's cave, a mysterious retreat, a hole, a tomb.

It was also whispèred about that he had "immense" sums deposited with Laffitte, with this peculiar feature, that they were always at his immediate disposal, so that, it was added, M. Madeleine could make his appearance at Laffitte's any morning, sign a receipt, and carry off his two or three millions in ten minutes. In reality, "these two or three millions" were reducible, as we have said, to six hundred and thirty or forty thousand francs.

CHAPTER IV — M. MADELEINE IN MOURNING

At the beginning of 1820 the newspapers announced the death of M. Myriel, Bishop of D —— , surnamed “Monseigneur Bienvenu,” who had died in the odor of sanctity at the age of eighty-two.

The Bishop of D —— to supply here a detail which the papers omitted — had been blind for many years before his death, and content to be blind, as his sister was beside him.

Let us remark by the way, that to be blind and to be loved, is, in fact, one of the most strangely exquisite forms of happiness upon this earth, where nothing is complete. To have continually at one’s side a woman, a daughter, a sister, a charming being, who is there because you need her and because she cannot do without you; to know that we are indispensable to a person who is necessary to us; to be able to incessantly measure one’s affection by the amount of her presence which she bestows on us, and to say to ourselves, “Since she consecrates the whole of her time to me, it is because I possess the whole of her heart”; to behold her thought in lieu of her face; to be able to verify the fidelity of one being amid the eclipse of the world; to regard the rustle of a gown as the sound of wings; to hear her come and go, retire, speak, return, sing, and to think that one is the centre of these steps, of this speech; to manifest at each instant one’s personal attraction; to feel one’s self all the more powerful because of one’s infirmity; to become in one’s obscurity, and through one’s obscurity, the star around which this angel gravitates, — few felicities equal this. The supreme happiness of life consists in the conviction that one is loved; loved for one’s own sake — let us say rather, loved in spite of one’s self; this conviction the blind man possesses. To be served in distress is to be caressed. Does he lack anything? No. One does not lose the sight when one has love. And what love! A love wholly constituted of virtue! There is no blindness where there is certainty. Soul seeks soul, gropingly, and finds it. And this soul, found and tested, is a woman. A hand sustains you; it is hers: a mouth lightly touches your brow; it is her mouth: you hear a breath very near you; it is hers. To have everything of her, from her worship to her pity, never to be left, to have that sweet weakness aiding you, to lean upon that immovable reed, to touch

Providence with one’s hands, and to be able to take it in one’s arms, — God made tangible, — what bliss! The heart, that obscure, celestial flower, undergoes a mysterious blossoming. One would not exchange that shadow for all brightness! The angel soul is there, uninterruptedly there; if she departs, it is but to return again; she vanishes like a dream, and reappears like reality. One feels warmth approaching, and behold! she is there. One overflows with serenity, with gayety, with ecstasy; one is a radiance amid the night. And there are a thousand little cares. Nothings, which are enormous in that void. The most ineffable accents of the feminine voice employed to lull you, and supplying the vanished universe to you. One is caressed with the soul. One sees nothing, but one feels that one is adored. It is a paradise of shadows.

It was from this paradise that Monseigneur Welcome had passed to the other.

The announcement of his death was reprinted by the local journal of M. sur M. On the following day, M. Madeleine appeared clad wholly in black, and with crape on his hat.

This mourning was noticed in the town, and commented on. It seemed to throw a light on M. Madeleine’s origin. It was concluded that some relationship existed between him and the venerable Bishop. “He has gone into mourning for the Bishop of D — —” said the drawing-rooms; this raised M. Madeleine’s credit greatly, and procured for him, instantly and at one blow, a certain consideration in the noble world of M. sur M. The microscopic Faubourg Saint-Germain of the place meditated raising the quarantine against M. Madeleine, the probable relative of a bishop. M. Madeleine perceived the advancement which he had obtained, by the more numerous courtesies of the old women and the more plentiful smiles of the young ones. One evening, a ruler in that petty great world, who was curious by right of seniority, ventured to ask him, “M. le Maire is doubtless a cousin of the late Bishop of D —— ?”

He said, “No, Madame.”

“But,” resumed the dowager, “you are wearing mourning for him.”

He replied, “It is because I was a servant in his family in my youth.”

Another thing which was remarked, was, that every time that he encountered in the town a young Savoyard who was roaming about the country and seeking chimneys to sweep, the mayor had him summoned, inquired his name, and gave him money. The little Savoyards told each other about it: a great many of them passed that way.

CHAPTER V — VAGUE FLASHES ON THE HORIZON

Little by little, and in the course of time, all this opposition subsided. There had at first been exercised against M. Madeleine, in virtue of a sort of law which all those who rise must submit to, blackening and calumnies; then they grew to be nothing more than ill-nature, then merely malicious remarks, then even this entirely disappeared; respect became complete, unanimous, cordial, and towards 1821 the moment arrived when the word "Monsieur le Maire" was pronounced at M. sur M. with almost the same accent as "Monseigneur the Bishop" had been pronounced in D —— in 1815. People came from a distance of ten leagues around to consult M. Madeleine. He put an end to differences, he prevented lawsuits, he reconciled enemies. Every one took him for the judge, and with good reason. It seemed as though he had for a soul the book of the natural law. It was like an epidemic of veneration, which in the course of six or seven years gradually took possession of the whole district.

One single man in the town, in the arrondissement, absolutely escaped this contagion, and, whatever Father Madeleine did, remained his opponent as though a sort of incorruptible and imperturbable instinct kept him on the alert and uneasy. It seems, in fact, as though there existed in certain men a veritable bestial instinct, though pure and upright, like all instincts, which creates antipathies and sympathies, which fatally separates one nature from another nature, which does not hesitate, which feels no disquiet, which does not hold its peace, and which never belies itself, clear in its obscurity, infallible, imperious, intractable, stubborn to all counsels of the intelligence and to all the dissolvents of reason, and which, in whatever manner destinies are arranged, secretly warns the man-dog of the presence of the man-cat, and the man-fox of the presence of the man-lion.

It frequently happened that when M. Madeleine was passing along a street, calm, affectionate, surrounded by the blessings of all, a man of lofty stature, clad in an iron-gray frock-coat, armed with a heavy cane, and wearing a battered hat, turned round abruptly behind him, and followed him with his eyes until he disappeared, with folded arms and a slow shake of the head, and his upper lip raised in company with his lower to his nose, a sort of significant grimace which might be translated by: “What is that man, after all? I certainly have seen him somewhere. In any case, I am not his dupe.”

This person, grave with a gravity which was almost menacing, was one of those men who, even when only seen by a rapid glimpse, arrest the spectator’s attention.

His name was Javert, and he belonged to the police.

At M. sur M. he exercised the unpleasant but useful functions of an inspector. He had not seen Madeleine’s beginnings. Javert owed the post which he occupied to the protection of M. Chabouillet, the secretary of the Minister of State, Comte Angeles, then prefect of police at Paris. When Javert arrived at M. sur M. the fortune of the great manufacturer was already made, and Father Madeleine had become Monsieur Madeleine.

Certain police officers have a peculiar physiognomy, which is complicated with an air of baseness mingled with an air of authority. Javert possessed this physiognomy minus the baseness.

It is our conviction that if souls were visible to the eyes, we should be able to see distinctly that strange thing that each one individual of the human race corresponds to some one of the species of the animal creation; and we could easily recognize this truth, hardly perceived by the thinker, that from the oyster to the eagle, from the pig to the tiger, all animals exist in man, and that each one of them is in a man. Sometimes even several of them at a time.

Animals are nothing else than the figures of our virtues and our vices, straying before our eyes, the visible phantoms of our souls. God shows them to us in order to induce us to reflect. Only since animals are mere shadows, God has not made them capable of education in the full sense of the word; what is the use? On the contrary, our souls being realities and having a goal which is appropriate to them, God has bestowed on them intelligence; that is to say, the possibility of education. Social education, when well done, can always draw from a soul, of whatever sort it may be, the utility which it contains.

This, be it said, is of course from the restricted point of view of the terrestrial life which is apparent, and without prejudging the profound question of the anterior or ulterior personality of the beings which are not man. The visible *I* in nowise authorizes the thinker to deny the latent *I*. Having made this reservation, let us pass on.

Now, if the reader will admit, for a moment, with us, that in every man there is one of the animal species of creation, it will be easy for us to say what there was in Police Officer Javert.

The peasants of Asturias are convinced that in every litter of wolves there is one dog, which is killed by the mother because, otherwise, as he grew up, he would devour the other little ones.

Give to this dog-son of a wolf a human face, and the result will be Javert.

Javert had been born in prison, of a fortune-teller, whose husband was in the galleys. As he grew up, he thought that he was outside the pale of society, and he despaired of ever re-entering it. He observed that society unpardoningly excludes two classes of men, — those who attack it and those who guard it; he had no choice except between these two classes; at the same time, he was conscious of an indescribable foundation of rigidity, regularity, and probity, complicated with an inexpressible hatred for the race of bohemians whence he was sprung. He entered the police; he succeeded there. At forty years of age he was an inspector.

During his youth he had been employed in the convict establishments of the South.

Before proceeding further, let us come to an understanding as to the words, “human face,” which we have just applied to Javert.

The human face of Javert consisted of a flat nose, with two deep nostrils, towards which enormous whiskers ascended on his cheeks. One felt ill at ease when he saw these two forests and these two caverns for the first time. When Javert laughed, — and his laugh was rare and terrible, — his thin lips parted and revealed to view not only his teeth, but his gums, and around his nose there formed a flattened and savage fold, as on the muzzle of a wild beast. Javert, serious, was a watchdog; when he laughed, he was a tiger. As for the rest, he had very little skull and a great deal of jaw; his hair concealed his forehead and fell over his eyebrows; between his eyes there was a permanent, central frown, like an imprint of wrath; his gaze was obscure; his mouth pursed up and terrible; his air that of ferocious command.

This man was composed of two very simple and two very good sentiments, comparatively; but he rendered them almost bad, by dint of exaggerating them, — respect for authority, hatred of rebellion; and in his eyes, murder, robbery, all crimes, are only forms of rebellion. He enveloped in a blind and profound faith every one who had a function in the state, from the prime minister to the rural policeman. He covered with scorn, aversion, and disgust every one who had once crossed the legal threshold of evil. He was absolute, and admitted no exceptions. On the one hand, he said, “The functionary can make no mistake; the magistrate is never the wrong.” On the other hand, he said, “These men are irremediably lost. Nothing good can come from them.” He fully shared the opinion of those extreme minds which attribute to human law I know not what power of making, or, if the reader will have it so, of authenticating, demons, and who place a Styx at the base of society. He was stoical, serious, austere; a melancholy dreamer, humble and haughty, like fanatics. His glance was like a gimlet, cold and piercing. His whole life hung on these two words: watchfulness and supervision. He had introduced a straight line into what is the most crooked thing in the world; he possessed the conscience of his usefulness, the religion of his functions, and he was a spy as other men are priests. Woe to the man who fell into his hands! He would have arrested his own father, if the latter had escaped from the galleys, and would have denounced his mother, if she had broken her ban. And he would have done it with that sort of inward satisfaction which is conferred by virtue. And, withal, a life of privation, isolation, abnegation, chastity, with never a diversion. It was implacable duty; the police understood, as the Spartans understood Sparta, a pitiless lying in wait, a ferocious honesty, a marble informer, Brutus in Vidocq.

Javert’s whole person was expressive of the man who spies and who withdraws himself from observation. The mystical school of Joseph de Maistre, which at that epoch seasoned with lofty cosmogony those things which were called the ultra newspapers, would not have failed to declare that Javert was a symbol. His brow was not visible; it disappeared beneath his hat: his eyes were not visible, since they were lost under his eyebrows: his chin was not visible, for it was plunged in his cravat: his hands were not visible; they were drawn up in his sleeves: and his cane was not visible; he carried it under his coat. But when the occasion presented itself, there was suddenly seen to emerge from all this shadow, as from an ambuscade, a narrow and angular forehead, a baleful glance, a threatening chin, enormous hands, and a monstrous cudgel.

In his leisure moments, which were far from frequent, he read, although he hated books; this caused him to be not wholly illiterate. This could be recognized by some emphasis in his speech.

As we have said, he had no vices. When he was pleased with himself, he permitted himself a pinch of snuff. Therein lay his connection with humanity.

The reader will have no difficulty in understanding that Javert was the terror of that whole class which the annual statistics of the Ministry of Justice designates under the rubric, Vagrants. The name of Javert routed them by its mere utterance; the face of Javert petrified them at sight.

Such was this formidable man.

Javert was like an eye constantly fixed on M. Madeleine. An eye full of suspicion and conjecture. M. Madeleine had finally perceived the fact; but it seemed to be of no importance to him. He did not even put a question to Javert; he neither sought nor avoided him; he bore that embarrassing and almost oppressive gaze without appearing to notice it. He treated Javert with ease and courtesy, as he did all the rest of the world.

It was divined, from some words which escaped Javert, that he had secretly investigated, with that curiosity which belongs to the race, and into which there enters as much instinct as will, all the anterior traces which Father Madeleine might have left elsewhere. He seemed to know, and he sometimes said in covert words, that some one had gleaned certain information in a certain district about a family which had disappeared. Once he chanced to say, as he was talking to himself, “I think I have him!” Then he remained pensive for three days, and uttered not a word. It seemed that the thread which he thought he held had broken.

Moreover, and this furnishes the necessary corrective for the too absolute sense which certain words might present, there can be nothing really infallible in a human creature, and the peculiarity of instinct is that it can become confused, thrown off the track, and defeated. Otherwise, it would be superior to intelligence, and the beast would be found to be provided with a better light than man.

Javert was evidently somewhat disconcerted by the perfect naturalness and tranquillity of M. Madeleine.

One day, nevertheless, his strange manner appeared to produce an impression on M. Madeleine. It was on the following occasion.

CHAPTER VI — FATHER FAUCHELEVENT

One morning M. Madeleine was passing through an unpaved alley of M. sur M.; he heard a noise, and saw a group some distance away. He approached. An old man named Father Fauchelevent had just fallen beneath his cart, his horse having tumbled down.

This Fauchelevent was one of the few enemies whom M. Madeleine had at that time. When Madeleine arrived in the neighborhood, Fauchelevent, an ex-notary and a peasant who was almost educated, had a business which was beginning to be in a bad way. Fauchelevent had seen this simple workman grow rich, while he, a lawyer, was being ruined. This had filled him with jealousy, and he had done all he could, on every occasion, to injure Madeleine. Then bankruptcy had come; and as the old man had nothing left but a cart and a horse, and neither family nor children, he had turned carter.

The horse had two broken legs and could not rise. The old man was caught in the wheels. The fall had been so unlucky that the whole weight of the vehicle rested on his breast. The cart was quite heavily laden. Father Fauchelevent was rattling in the throat in the most lamentable manner. They had tried, but in vain, to drag him out. An unmethodical effort, aid awkwardly given, a wrong shake, might kill him. It was impossible to disengage him otherwise than by lifting the vehicle off of him. Javert, who had come up at the moment of the accident, had sent for a jack-screw.

M. Madeleine arrived. People stood aside respectfully.

“Help!” cried old Fauchelevent. “Who will be good and save the old man?”

M. Madeleine turned towards those present: —

“Is there a jack-screw to be had?”

“One has been sent for,” answered the peasant.

“How long will it take to get it?”

“They have gone for the nearest, to Flachot’s place, where there is a farrier; but it makes no difference; it will take a good quarter of an hour.”

“A quarter of an hour!” exclaimed Madeleine.

It had rained on the preceding night; the soil was soaked.

The cart was sinking deeper into the earth every moment, and crushing the old carter’s breast more and more. It was evident that his ribs would be broken in five minutes more.

“It is impossible to wait another quarter of an hour,” said Madeleine to the peasants, who were staring at him.

“We must!”

“But it will be too late then! Don’t you see that the cart is sinking?”

“Well!”

“Listen,” resumed Madeleine; “there is still room enough under the cart to allow a man to crawl beneath it and raise it with his back. Only half a minute, and the poor man can be taken out. Is there any one here who has stout loins and heart? There are five louis d’or to be earned!”

Not a man in the group stirred.

“Ten louis,” said Madeleine.

The persons present dropped their eyes. One of them muttered: “A man would need to be devilish strong. And then he runs the risk of getting crushed!”

“Come,” began Madeleine again, “twenty louis.”

The same silence.

“It is not the will which is lacking,” said a voice.

M. Madeleine turned round, and recognized Javert. He had not noticed him on his arrival.

Javert went on: —

“It is strength. One would have to be a terrible man to do such a thing as lift a cart like that on his back.”

Then, gazing fixedly at M. Madeleine, he went on, emphasizing every word that he uttered: —

“Monsieur Madeleine, I have never known but one man capable of doing what you ask.”

Madeleine shuddered.

Javert added, with an air of indifference, but without removing his eyes from Madeleine: —

“He was a convict.”

“Ah!” said Madeleine.

“In the galleys at Toulon.”

Madeleine turned pale.

Meanwhile, the cart continued to sink slowly. Father Fauchelevent rattled in the throat, and shrieked: —

“I am strangling! My ribs are breaking! a screw! something! Ah!”

Madeleine glanced about him.

“Is there, then, no one who wishes to earn twenty louis and save the life of this poor old man?”

No one stirred. Javert resumed: —

“I have never known but one man who could take the place of a screw, and he was that convict.”

“Ah! It is crushing me!” cried the old man.

Madeleine raised his head, met Javert’s falcon eye still fixed upon him, looked at the motionless peasants, and smiled sadly. Then, without saying a word, he fell on his knees, and before the crowd had even had time to utter a cry, he was underneath the vehicle.

A terrible moment of expectation and silence ensued.

They beheld Madeleine, almost flat on his stomach beneath that terrible weight, make two vain efforts to bring his knees and his elbows together. They shouted to him, “Father Madeleine, come out!” Old Fauchelevent himself said to him, “Monsieur Madeleine, go away! You see that I am fated to die! Leave me! You will get yourself crushed also!” Madeleine made no reply.

All the spectators were panting. The wheels had continued to sink, and it had become almost impossible for Madeleine to make his way from under the vehicle.

Suddenly the enormous mass was seen to quiver, the cart rose slowly, the wheels half emerged from the ruts. They heard a stifled voice crying, “Make haste! Help!” It was Madeleine, who had just made a final effort.

They rushed forwards. The devotion of a single man had given force and courage to all. The cart was raised by twenty arms. Old Fauchelevent was saved.

Madeleine rose. He was pale, though dripping with perspiration. His clothes were torn and covered with mud. All wept. The old man kissed his knees and called him the good God. As for him, he bore upon his countenance an indescribable expression of happy and celestial suffering, and he fixed his tranquil eye on Javert, who was still staring at him.

CHAPTER VII — FAUCHELEVENT BECOMES A GARDENER IN PARIS

Fauchelevent had dislocated his kneepan in his fall. Father Madeleine had him conveyed to an infirmary which he had established for his workmen in the factory building itself, and which was served by two sisters of charity. On the following morning the old man found a thousand-franc bank-note on his night-stand, with these words in Father Madeleine’s writing: “I purchase your horse and cart.” The cart was broken, and the horse was dead. Fauchelevent recovered, but his knee remained stiff. M. Madeleine, on the recommendation of the sisters of charity and of his priest, got the good man a place as gardener in a female convent in the Rue Saint-Antoine in Paris.

Some time afterwards, M. Madeleine was appointed mayor. The first time that Javert beheld M. Madeleine clothed in the scarf which gave him authority over the town, he felt the sort of shudder which a watch-dog might experience on smelling a wolf in his master’s clothes. From that time forth he avoided him as much as he possibly could. When the requirements of the service imperatively demanded it, and he could not do otherwise than meet the mayor, he addressed him with profound respect.

This prosperity created at M. sur M. by Father Madeleine had, besides the visible signs which we have mentioned, another symptom which was none the less significant for not being visible. This never deceives. When the population suffers, when work is lacking, when there is no commerce, the tax-payer resists imposts through penury, he exhausts and oversteps his respite, and the state expends a great deal of money in the charges for compelling and collection. When work is abundant, when the country is rich and happy, the taxes are paid easily and cost the state nothing. It may be said, that there is one infallible thermometer of the public misery and riches, — the cost of collecting the taxes. In the course of seven years the expense of collecting the taxes had diminished three-fourths in the arrondissement of M. sur M., and this led to this arrondissement being frequently cited from all the rest by M. de Villele, then Minister of Finance.

Such was the condition of the country when Fantine returned thither. No one remembered her. Fortunately, the door of M. Madeleine’s factory was like the face of a friend. She presented herself there, and was admitted to the women’s workroom. The trade was entirely new to Fantine; she could not be very skilful at it, and she therefore earned but little by her day’s work; but it was sufficient; the problem was solved; she was earning her living.

CHAPTER VIII — MADAME VICTURNIEN EXPENDS THIRTY FRANCS ON MORALITY

When Fantine saw that she was making her living, she felt joyful for a moment. To live honestly by her own labor, what mercy from heaven! The taste for work had really returned to her. She bought a looking-glass, took pleasure in surveying in it her youth, her beautiful hair, her fine teeth; she forgot many things; she thought only of Cosette and of the possible future, and was almost happy. She hired a little room and furnished on credit on the strength of her future work — a lingering trace of her improvident ways. As she was not able to say that she was married she took good care, as we have seen, not to mention her little girl.

At first, as the reader has seen, she paid the Thenardiers promptly. As she only knew how to sign her name, she was obliged to write through a public letter-writer.

She wrote often, and this was noticed. It began to be said in an undertone, in the women's workroom, that Fantine "wrote letters" and that "she had ways about her."

There is no one for spying on people's actions like those who are not concerned in them. Why does that gentleman never come except at nightfall? Why does Mr. So-and-So never hang his key on its nail on Tuesday? Why does he always take the narrow streets? Why does Madame always descend from her hackney-coach before reaching her house? Why does she send out to purchase six sheets of note paper, when she has a "whole stationer's shop full of it?" etc. There exist beings who, for the sake of obtaining the key to these enigmas, which are, moreover, of no consequence whatever to them, spend more money, waste more time, take more trouble, than would be required for ten good actions, and that gratuitously, for their own pleasure, without receiving any other payment for their curiosity than curiosity. They will follow up such and such a man or woman for whole days; they will do sentry duty for hours at a time on the corners of the streets, under alley-way doors at night, in cold and rain; they will bribe errand-porters, they will make the drivers of hackney-coaches and lackeys tipsy, buy a waiting-maid, suborn a porter. Why? For no reason. A pure passion for seeing, knowing, and penetrating into things. A pure itch for talking. And often these secrets once known, these mysteries made public, these enigmas illuminated by the light of day, bring on catastrophies, duels, failures, the ruin of families, and broken lives, to the great joy of those who have "found out everything," without any interest in the matter, and by pure instinct. A sad thing.

Certain persons are malicious solely through a necessity for talking. Their conversation, the chat of the drawing-room, gossip of the anteroom, is like those chimneys which consume wood rapidly; they need a great amount of combustibles; and their combustibles are furnished by their neighbors.

So Fantine was watched.

In addition, many a one was jealous of her golden hair and of her white teeth.

It was remarked that in the workroom she often turned aside, in the midst of the rest, to wipe away a tear. These were the moments when she was thinking of her child; perhaps, also, of the man whom she had loved.

Breaking the gloomy bonds of the past is a mournful task.

It was observed that she wrote twice a month at least, and that she paid the carriage on the letter. They managed to obtain the address: Monsieur, Monsieur Thenardier, inn-keeper at Montfermeil. The public writer, a good old man who could not fill his stomach with red wine without emptying his pocket of secrets, was made to talk in the wine-shop. In short, it was discovered that Fantine had a child. "She must be a pretty sort of a woman." An old gossip was found, who made the trip to Montfermeil, talked to the Thenardiers, and said on her return: "For my five and thirty francs I have freed my mind. I have seen the child."

The gossip who did this thing was a gorgon named Madame Victurnien, the guardian and door-keeper of every one's virtue. Madame Victurnien was fifty-six, and re-enforced the mask of ugliness with the mask of age. A quavering voice, a whimsical mind. This old dame had once been young — astonishing fact! In her youth, in '93, she had married a monk who had fled from his cloister in a red cap, and passed from the Bernardines to the Jacobins. She was dry, rough, peevish, sharp, captious, almost venomous; all this in memory of her monk, whose widow she was, and who had ruled over her masterfully and bent her to his will. She was a nettle in which the rustle of the cassock was visible. At the Restoration she had turned bigot, and that with so much energy that the priests had forgiven her her monk.

She had a small property, which she bequeathed with much ostentation to a religious community. She was in high favor at the episcopal palace of Arras. So this Madame Victurnien went to Montfermeil, and returned with the remark, “I have seen the child.”

All this took time. Fantine had been at the factory for more than a year, when, one morning, the superintendent of the workroom handed her fifty francs from the mayor, told her that she was no longer employed in the shop, and requested her, in the mayor’s name, to leave the neighborhood.

This was the very month when the Thenardiers, after having demanded twelve francs instead of six, had just exacted fifteen francs instead of twelve.

Fantine was overwhelmed. She could not leave the neighborhood; she was in debt for her rent and furniture. Fifty francs was not sufficient to cancel this debt. She stammered a few supplicating words. The superintendent ordered her to leave the shop on the instant. Besides, Fantine was only a moderately good workwoman. Overcome with shame, even more than with despair, she quitted the shop, and returned to her room. So her fault was now known to every one.

She no longer felt strong enough to say a word. She was advised to see the mayor; she did not dare. The mayor had given her fifty francs because he was good, and had dismissed her because he was just. She bowed before the decision.

CHAPTER IX — MADAME VICTURNIEN'S SUCCESS

So the monk's widow was good for something.

But M. Madeleine had heard nothing of all this. Life is full of just such combinations of events. M. Madeleine was in the habit of almost never entering the women's workroom.

At the head of this room he had placed an elderly spinster, whom the priest had provided for him, and he had full confidence in this superintendent, — a truly respectable person, firm, equitable, upright, full of the charity which consists in giving, but not having in the same degree that charity which consists in understanding and in forgiving. M. Madeleine relied wholly on her. The best men are often obliged to delegate their authority. It was with this full power, and the conviction that she was doing right, that the superintendent had instituted the suit, judged, condemned, and executed Fantine.

As regards the fifty francs, she had given them from a fund which M. Madeleine had intrusted to her for charitable purposes, and for giving assistance to the workwomen, and of which she rendered no account.

Fantine tried to obtain a situation as a servant in the neighborhood; she went from house to house. No one would have her. She could not leave town. The second-hand dealer, to whom she was in debt for her furniture — and what furniture! — said to her, "If you leave, I will have you arrested as a thief." The householder, whom she owed for her rent, said to her, "You are young and pretty; you can pay." She divided the fifty francs between the landlord and the furniture-dealer, returned to the latter three-quarters of his goods, kept only necessaries, and found herself without work, without a trade, with nothing but her bed, and still about fifty francs in debt.

She began to make coarse shirts for soldiers of the garrison, and earned twelve sous a day. Her daughter cost her ten. It was at this point that she began to pay the Thenardiers irregularly.

However, the old woman who lighted her candle for her when she returned at night, taught her the art of living in misery. Back of living on little, there is the living on nothing. These are the two chambers; the first is dark, the second is black.

Fantine learned how to live without fire entirely in the winter; how to give up a bird which eats a half a farthing's worth of millet every two days; how to make a coverlet of one's petticoat, and a petticoat of one's coverlet; how to save one's candle, by taking one's meals by the light of the opposite window. No one knows all that certain feeble creatures, who have grown old in privation and honesty, can get out of a sou. It ends by being a talent. Fantine acquired this sublime talent, and regained a little courage.

At this epoch she said to a neighbor, "Bah! I say to myself, by only sleeping five hours, and working all the rest of the time at my sewing, I shall always manage to nearly earn my bread. And, then, when one is sad, one eats less. Well, sufferings, uneasiness, a little bread on one hand, trouble on the other, — all this will support me."

It would have been a great happiness to have her little girl with her in this distress. She thought of having her come. But what then! Make her share her own destitution! And then, she was in debt to the Thenardiers! How could she pay them? And the journey! How pay for that?

The old woman who had given her lessons in what may be called the life of indigence, was a sainted spinster named Marguerite, who was pious with a true piety, poor and charitable towards the poor, and even towards the rich, knowing how to write just sufficiently to sign herself Marguerite, and believing in God, which is science.

There are many such virtuous people in this lower world; some day they will be in the world above. This life has a morrow.

At first, Fantine had been so ashamed that she had not dared to go out.

When she was in the street, she divined that people turned round behind her, and pointed at her; every one stared at her and no one greeted her; the cold and bitter scorn of the passers-by penetrated her very flesh and soul like a north wind.

It seems as though an unfortunate woman were utterly bare beneath the sarcasm and the curiosity of all in small towns. In Paris, at least, no one knows you, and this obscurity is a garment. Oh! how she would have liked to betake herself to Paris! Impossible!

She was obliged to accustom herself to disrepute, as she had accustomed herself to indigence. Gradually she decided on her course. At the expiration of two or three months she shook off her shame, and began to go about as though there were nothing the matter. "It is all the same to me," she said.

She went and came, bearing her head well up, with a bitter smile, and was conscious that she was becoming brazen-faced.

Madame Victurnien sometimes saw her passing, from her window, noticed the distress of “that creature” who, “thanks to her,” had been “put back in her proper place,” and congratulated herself. The happiness of the evil-minded is black.

Excess of toil wore out Fantine, and the little dry cough which troubled her increased. She sometimes said to her neighbor, Marguerite, “Just feel how hot my hands are!”

Nevertheless, when she combed her beautiful hair in the morning with an old broken comb, and it flowed about her like floss silk, she experienced a moment of happy coquetry.

CHAPTER X — RESULT OF THE SUCCESS

She had been dismissed towards the end of the winter; the summer passed, but winter came again. Short days, less work. Winter: no warmth, no light, no noonday, the evening joining on to the morning, fogs, twilight; the window is gray; it is impossible to see clearly at it. The sky is but a vent-hole. The whole day is a cavern. The sun has the air of a beggar. A frightful season! Winter changes the water of heaven and the heart of man into a stone. Her creditors harrassed her.

Fantine earned too little. Her debts had increased. The Thenardiers, who were not promptly paid, wrote to her constantly letters whose contents drove her to despair, and whose carriage ruined her. One day they wrote to her that her little Cosette was entirely naked in that cold weather, that she needed a woollen skirt, and that her mother must send at least ten francs for this. She received the letter, and crushed it in her hands all day long. That evening she went into a barber’s shop at the corner of the street, and pulled out her comb. Her admirable golden hair fell to her knees.

“What splendid hair!” exclaimed the barber.

“How much will you give me for it?” said she.

“Ten francs.”

“Cut it off.”

She purchased a knitted petticoat and sent it to the Thenardiers. This petticoat made the Thenardiers furious. It was the money that they wanted. They gave the petticoat to Eponine. The poor Lark continued to shiver.

Fantine thought: “My child is no longer cold. I have clothed her with my hair.” She put on little round caps which concealed her shorn head, and in which she was still pretty.

Dark thoughts held possession of Fantine’s heart.

When she saw that she could no longer dress her hair, she began to hate every one about her. She had long shared the universal veneration for Father Madeleine; yet, by dint of repeating to herself that it was he who had discharged her, that he was the cause of her unhappiness, she came to hate him also, and most of all. When she passed the factory in working hours, when the workpeople were at the door, she affected to laugh and sing.

An old workwoman who once saw her laughing and singing in this fashion said, “There’s a girl who will come to a bad end.”

She took a lover, the first who offered, a man whom she did not love, out of bravado and with rage in her heart. He was a miserable scamp, a sort of mendicant musician, a lazy beggar, who beat her, and who abandoned her as she had taken him, in disgust.

She adored her child.

The lower she descended, the darker everything grew about her, the more radiant shone that little angel at the bottom of her heart. She said, “When I get rich, I will have my Cosette with me;” and she laughed. Her cough did not leave her, and she had sweats on her back.

One day she received from the Thenardiers a letter couched in the following terms: “Cosette is ill with a malady which is going the rounds of the neighborhood. A miliary fever, they call it. Expensive drugs are required. This is ruining us, and we can no longer pay for them. If you do not send us forty francs before the week is out, the little one will be dead.”

She burst out laughing, and said to her old neighbor: “Ah! they are good! Forty francs! the idea! That makes two napoleons! Where do they think I am to get them? These peasants are stupid, truly.”

Nevertheless she went to a dormer window in the staircase and read the letter once more. Then she descended the stairs and emerged, running and leaping and still laughing.

Some one met her and said to her, “What makes you so gay?”

She replied: “A fine piece of stupidity that some country people have written to me. They demand forty francs of me. So much for you, you peasants!”

As she crossed the square, she saw a great many people collected around a carriage of eccentric shape, upon the top of which stood a man dressed in red, who was holding forth. He was a quack dentist on his rounds, who was offering to the public full sets of teeth, opiates, powders and elixirs.

Fantine mingled in the group, and began to laugh with the rest at the harangue, which contained slang for the populace and jargon for respectable people. The tooth-puller espied the lovely, laughing girl, and suddenly exclaimed: “You have beautiful teeth, you girl there, who are laughing; if you want to sell me your palettes, I will give you a gold napoleon apiece for them.”

“What are my palettes?” asked Fantine.

“The palettes,” replied the dental professor, “are the front teeth, the two upper ones.”

“How horrible!” exclaimed Fantine.

“Two napoleons!” grumbled a toothless old woman who was present. “Here’s a lucky girl!”

Fantine fled and stopped her ears that she might not hear the hoarse voice of the man shouting to her: “Reflect, my beauty! two napoleons; they may prove of service. If your heart bids you, come this evening to the inn of the Tillac d’Argent; you will find me there.”

Fantine returned home. She was furious, and related the occurrence to her good neighbor Marguerite: “Can you understand such a thing? Is he not an abominable man? How can they allow such people to go about the country! Pull out my two front teeth! Why, I should be horrible! My hair will grow again, but my teeth! Ah! what a monster of a man! I should prefer to throw myself head first on the pavement from the fifth story! He told me that he should be at the Tillac d’Argent this evening.”

“And what did he offer?” asked Marguerite.

“Two napoleons.”

“That makes forty francs.”

“Yes,” said Fantine; “that makes forty francs.”

She remained thoughtful, and began her work. At the expiration of a quarter of an hour she left her sewing and went to read the Thenardiers’ letter once more on the staircase.

On her return, she said to Marguerite, who was at work beside her: —

“What is a miliary fever? Do you know?”

“Yes,” answered the old spinster; “it is a disease.”

“Does it require many drugs?”

“Oh! terrible drugs.”

“How does one get it?”

“It is a malady that one gets without knowing how.”

“Then it attacks children?”

“Children in particular.”

“Do people die of it?”

“They may,” said Marguerite.

Fantine left the room and went to read her letter once more on the staircase.

That evening she went out, and was seen to turn her steps in the direction of the Rue de Paris, where the inns are situated.

The next morning, when Marguerite entered Fantine's room before daylight, — for they always worked together, and in this manner used only one candle for the two, — she found Fantine seated on her bed, pale and frozen. She had not lain down. Her cap had fallen on her knees. Her candle had burned all night, and was almost entirely consumed. Marguerite halted on the threshold, petrified at this tremendous wastefulness, and exclaimed: —

"Lord! the candle is all burned out! Something has happened."

Then she looked at Fantine, who turned toward her her head bereft of its hair.

Fantine had grown ten years older since the preceding night.

"Jesus!" said Marguerite, "what is the matter with you, Fantine?"

"Nothing," replied Fantine. "Quite the contrary. My child will not die of that frightful malady, for lack of succor. I am content."

So saying, she pointed out to the spinster two napoleons which were glittering on the table.

"Ah! Jesus God!" cried Marguerite. "Why, it is a fortune! Where did you get those louis d'or?"

"I got them," replied Fantine.

At the same time she smiled. The candle illuminated her countenance. It was a bloody smile. A reddish saliva soiled the corners of her lips, and she had a black hole in her mouth.

The two teeth had been extracted.

She sent the forty francs to Montfermeil.

After all it was a ruse of the Thenardiers to obtain money. Cosette was not ill.

Fantine threw her mirror out of the window. She had long since quitted her cell on the second floor for an attic with only a latch to fasten it, next the roof; one of those attics whose extremity forms an angle with the floor, and knocks you on the head every instant. The poor occupant can reach the end of his chamber as he can the end of his destiny, only by bending over more and more.

She had no longer a bed; a rag which she called her coverlet, a mattress on the floor, and a seatless chair still remained. A little rosebush which she had, had dried up, forgotten, in one corner. In the other corner was a butter-pot to hold water, which froze in winter, and in which the various levels of the water remained long marked by these circles of ice. She had lost her shame; she lost her coquetry. A final sign. She went out, with dirty caps. Whether from lack of time or from indifference, she no longer mended her linen. As the heels wore out, she dragged her stockings down into her shoes. This was evident from the perpendicular wrinkles. She patched her bodice, which was old and worn out, with scraps of calico which tore at the slightest movement. The people to whom she was indebted made “scenes” and gave her no peace. She found them in the street, she found them again on her staircase. She passed many a night weeping and thinking. Her eyes were very bright, and she felt a steady pain in her shoulder towards the top of the left shoulder-blade. She coughed a great deal. She deeply hated Father Madeleine, but made no complaint. She sewed seventeen hours a day; but a contractor for the work of prisons, who made the prisoners work at a discount, suddenly made prices fall, which reduced the daily earnings of working-women to nine sous. Seventeen hours of toil, and nine sous a day! Her creditors were more pitiless than ever. The second-hand dealer, who had taken back nearly all his furniture, said to her incessantly, “When will you pay me, you hussy?” What did they want of her, good God! She felt that she was being hunted, and something of the wild beast developed in her. About the same time, Thenardier wrote to her that he had waited with decidedly too much amiability and that he must have a hundred francs at once; otherwise he would turn little Cosette out of doors, convalescent as she was from her heavy illness, into the cold and the streets, and that she might do what she liked with herself, and die if she chose. “A hundred francs,” thought Fantine. “But in what trade can one earn a hundred sous a day?”

“Come!” said she, “let us sell what is left.”

The unfortunate girl became a woman of the town.

CHAPTER XI — CHRISTUS NOS LIBERAVIT

What is this history of Fantine? It is society purchasing a slave.

From whom? From misery.

From hunger, cold, isolation, destitution. A dolorous bargain. A soul for a morsel of bread. Misery offers; society accepts.

The sacred law of Jesus Christ governs our civilization, but it does not, as yet, permeate it; it is said that slavery has disappeared from European civilization. This is a mistake. It still exists; but it weighs only upon the woman, and it is called prostitution.

It weighs upon the woman, that is to say, upon grace, weakness, beauty, maternity. This is not one of the least of man's disgraces.

At the point in this melancholy drama which we have now reached, nothing is left to Fantine of that which she had formerly been.

She has become marble in becoming mire. Whoever touches her feels cold. She passes; she endures you; she ignores you; she is the severe and dishonored figure. Life and the social order have said their last word for her. All has happened to her that will happen to her. She has felt everything, borne everything, experienced everything, suffered everything, lost everything, mourned everything. She is resigned, with that resignation which resembles indifference, as death resembles sleep. She no longer avoids anything. Let all the clouds fall upon her, and all the ocean sweep over her! What matters it to her? She is a sponge that is soaked.

At least, she believes it to be so; but it is an error to imagine that fate can be exhausted, and that one has reached the bottom of anything whatever.

Alas! What are all these fates, driven on pell-mell? Whither are they going? Why are they thus?

He who knows that sees the whole of the shadow.

He is alone. His name is God.

CHAPTER XII — M. BAMATABOIS'S INACTIVITY

There is in all small towns, and there was at M. sur M. in particular, a class of young men who nibble away an income of fifteen hundred francs with the same air with which their prototypes devour two hundred thousand francs a year in Paris. These are beings of the great neuter species: impotent men, parasites, cyphers, who have a little land, a little folly, a little wit; who would be rustics in a drawing-room, and who think themselves gentlemen in the dram-shop; who say, "My fields, my peasants, my woods"; who hiss actresses at the theatre to prove that they are persons of taste; quarrel with the officers of the garrison to prove that they are men of war; hunt, smoke, yawn, drink, smell of tobacco, play billiards, stare at travellers as they descend from the diligence, live at the cafe, dine at the inn, have a dog which eats the bones under the table, and a mistress who eats the dishes on the table; who stick at a sou, exaggerate the fashions, admire tragedy, despise women, wear out their old boots, copy London through Paris, and Paris through the medium of Pont-A-Mousson, grow old as dullards, never work, serve no use, and do no great harm.

M. Felix Tholomyes, had he remained in his own province and never beheld Paris, would have been one of these men.

If they were richer, one would say, "They are dandies;" if they were poorer, one would say, "They are idlers." They are simply men without employment. Among these unemployed there are bores, the bored, dreamers, and some knaves.

At that period a dandy was composed of a tall collar, a big cravat, a watch with trinkets, three vests of different colors, worn one on top of the other — the red and blue inside; of a short-waisted olive coat, with a codfish tail, a double row of silver buttons set close to each other and running up to the shoulder; and a pair of trousers of a lighter shade of olive, ornamented on the two seams with an indefinite, but always uneven, number of lines, varying from one to eleven — a limit which was never exceeded. Add to this, high shoes with little irons on the heels, a tall hat with a narrow brim, hair worn in a tuft, an enormous cane, and conversation set off by puns of Potier. Over all, spurs and a mustache. At that epoch mustaches indicated the bourgeois, and spurs the pedestrian.

The provincial dandy wore the longest of spurs and the fiercest of mustaches.

It was the period of the conflict of the republics of South America with the King of Spain, of Bolivar against Morillo. Narrow-brimmed hats were royalist, and were called morillos; liberals wore hats with wide brims, which were called bolivars.

Eight or ten months, then, after that which is related in the preceding pages, towards the first of January, 1823, on a snowy evening, one of these dandies, one of these unemployed, a “right thinker,” for he wore a morillo, and was, moreover, warmly enveloped in one of those large cloaks which completed the fashionable costume in cold weather, was amusing himself by tormenting a creature who was prowling about in a ball-dress, with neck uncovered and flowers in her hair, in front of the officers’ cafe. This dandy was smoking, for he was decidedly fashionable.

Each time that the woman passed in front of him, he bestowed on her, together with a puff from his cigar, some apostrophe which he considered witty and mirthful, such as, “How ugly you are! — Will you get out of my sight? — You have no teeth!” etc., etc. This gentleman was known as M. Bamatabois. The woman, a melancholy, decorated spectre which went and came through the snow, made him no reply, did not even glance at him, and nevertheless continued her promenade in silence, and with a sombre regularity, which brought her every five minutes within reach of this sarcasm, like the condemned soldier who returns under the rods. The small effect which he produced no doubt piqued the lounger; and taking advantage of a moment when her back was turned, he crept up behind her with the gait of a wolf, and stifling his laugh, bent down, picked up a handful of snow from the pavement, and thrust it abruptly into her back, between her bare shoulders. The woman uttered a roar, whirled round, gave a leap like a panther, and hurled herself upon the man, burying her nails in his face, with the most frightful words which could fall from the guard-room into the gutter. These insults, poured forth in a voice roughened by brandy, did, indeed, proceed in hideous wise from a mouth which lacked its two front teeth. It was Fantine.

At the noise thus produced, the officers ran out in throngs from the cafe, passers-by collected, and a large and merry circle, hooting and applauding, was formed around this whirlwind composed of two beings, whom there was some difficulty in recognizing as a man and a woman: the man struggling, his hat on the ground; the woman striking out with feet and fists, bareheaded, howling, minus hair and teeth, livid with wrath, horrible.

Suddenly a man of lofty stature emerged vivaciously from the crowd, seized the woman by her satin bodice, which was covered with mud, and said to her, “Follow me!”

The woman raised her head; her furious voice suddenly died away. Her eyes were glassy; she turned pale instead of livid, and she trembled with a quiver of terror. She had recognized Javert.

The dandy took advantage of the incident to make his escape.

CHAPTER XIII — THE SOLUTION OF SOME QUESTIONS CONNECTED WITH THE

MUNICIPAL POLICE

Javert thrust aside the spectators, broke the circle, and set out with long strides towards the police station, which is situated at the extremity of the square, dragging the wretched woman after him. She yielded mechanically. Neither he nor she uttered a word. The cloud of spectators followed, jesting, in a paroxysm of delight. Supreme misery an occasion for obscenity.

On arriving at the police station, which was a low room, warmed by a stove, with a glazed and grated door opening on the street, and guarded by a detachment, Javert opened the door, entered with Fantine, and shut the door behind him, to the great disappointment of the curious, who raised themselves on tiptoe, and craned their necks in front of the thick glass of the station-house, in their effort to see. Curiosity is a sort of gluttony. To see is to devour.

On entering, Fantine fell down in a corner, motionless and mute, crouching down like a terrified dog.

The sergeant of the guard brought a lighted candle to the table. Javert seated himself, drew a sheet of stamped paper from his pocket, and began to write.

This class of women is consigned by our laws entirely to the discretion of the police. The latter do what they please, punish them, as seems good to them, and confiscate at their will those two sorry things which they entitle their industry and their liberty. Javert was impassive; his grave face betrayed no emotion whatever. Nevertheless, he was seriously and deeply preoccupied. It was one of those moments when he was exercising without control, but subject to all the scruples of a severe conscience, his redoubtable discretionary power. At that moment he was conscious that his police agent’s stool was a tribunal. He was entering judgment. He judged and condemned. He summoned all the ideas which could possibly exist in his mind, around the great thing which he was doing. The more he examined the deed of this woman, the more shocked he felt. It was evident that he had just witnessed the commission of a crime. He had just beheld, yonder, in the street, society, in the person of a freeholder and an elector, insulted and attacked by a creature who was outside all pales. A prostitute had made an attempt on the life of a citizen. He had seen that, he, Javert. He wrote in silence.

When he had finished he signed the paper, folded it, and said to the sergeant of the guard, as he handed it to him, “Take three men and conduct this creature to jail.”

Then, turning to Fantine, “You are to have six months of it.” The unhappy woman shuddered.

“Six months! six months of prison!” she exclaimed. “Six months in which to earn seven sous a day! But what will become of Cosette? My daughter! my daughter! But I still owe the Thenardiers over a hundred francs; do you know that, Monsieur Inspector?”

She dragged herself across the damp floor, among the muddy boots of all those men, without rising, with clasped hands, and taking great strides on her knees.

“Monsieur Javert,” said she, “I beseech your mercy. I assure you that I was not in the wrong. If you had seen the beginning, you would have seen. I swear to you by the good God that I was not to blame! That gentleman, the bourgeois, whom I do not know, put snow in my back. Has any one the right to put snow down our backs when we are walking along peaceably, and doing no harm to any one? I am rather ill, as you see. And then, he had been saying impertinent things to me for a long time: ‘You are ugly! you have no teeth!’ I know well that I have no longer those teeth. I did nothing; I said to myself, ‘The gentleman is amusing himself.’ I was honest with him; I did not speak to him. It was at that moment that he put the snow down my back. Monsieur Javert, good Monsieur Inspector! is there not some person here who saw it and can tell you that this is quite true? Perhaps I did wrong to get angry. You know that one is not master of one’s self at the first moment. One gives way to vivacity; and then, when some one puts something cold down your back just when you are not expecting it! I did wrong to spoil that gentleman’s hat. Why did he go away? I would ask his pardon. Oh, my God! It makes no difference to me whether I ask his pardon. Do me the favor to-day, for this once, Monsieur Javert. Hold! you do not know that in prison one can earn only seven sous a day; it is not the government’s fault, but seven sous is one’s earnings; and just fancy, I must pay one hundred francs, or my little girl will be sent to me. Oh, my God! I cannot have her with me. What I do is so vile! Oh, my Cosette! Oh, my little angel of the Holy Virgin! what will become of her, poor creature? I will tell you: it is the Thenardiers, inn-keepers, peasants; and such people are unreasonable. They want money. Don't put me in prison! You see, there is a little girl who will be turned out into the street to get along as best she may, in the very heart of the winter; and you must have pity on such a being, my good Monsieur Javert. If she were older, she might earn her living; but it cannot be done at that age. I am not a bad woman at bottom. It is not cowardliness and gluttony that have made me what I am. If I have drunk brandy, it was out of misery. I do not love it; but it benumbs the senses. When I was happy, it was only necessary to glance into my closets, and it would have been evident that I was not a coquettish and untidy woman. I had linen, a great deal of linen. Have pity on me, Monsieur Javert!"

She spoke thus, rent in twain, shaken with sobs, blinded with tears, her neck bare, wringing her hands, and coughing with a dry, short cough, stammering softly with a voice of agony. Great sorrow is a divine and terrible ray, which transfigures the unhappy. At that moment Fantine had become beautiful once more. From time to time she paused, and tenderly kissed the police agent's coat. She would have softened a heart of granite; but a heart of wood cannot be softened.

"Come!" said Javert, "I have heard you out. Have you entirely finished? You will get six months. Now march! The Eternal Father in person could do nothing more."

At these solemn words, "the Eternal Father in person could do nothing more," she understood that her fate was sealed. She sank down, murmuring, "Mercy!"

Javert turned his back.

The soldiers seized her by the arms.

A few moments earlier a man had entered, but no one had paid any heed to him. He shut the door, leaned his back against it, and listened to Fantine's despairing supplications.

At the instant when the soldiers laid their hands upon the unfortunate woman, who would not rise, he emerged from the shadow, and said: —

"One moment, if you please."

Javert raised his eyes and recognized M. Madeleine. He removed his hat, and, saluting him with a sort of aggrieved awkwardness: —

"Excuse me, Mr. Mayor—"

The words “Mr. Mayor” produced a curious effect upon Fantine. She rose to her feet with one bound, like a spectre springing from the earth, thrust aside the soldiers with both arms, walked straight up to M. Madeleine before any one could prevent her, and gazing intently at him, with a bewildered air, she cried: —

“Ah! so it is you who are M. le Maire!”

Then she burst into a laugh, and spit in his face.

M. Madeleine wiped his face, and said: —

“Inspector Javert, set this woman at liberty.”

Javert felt that he was on the verge of going mad. He experienced at that moment, blow upon blow and almost simultaneously, the most violent emotions which he had ever undergone in all his life. To see a woman of the town spit in the mayor’s face was a thing so monstrous that, in his most daring flights of fancy, he would have regarded it as a sacrilege to believe it possible. On the other hand, at the very bottom of his thought, he made a hideous comparison as to what this woman was, and as to what this mayor might be; and then he, with horror, caught a glimpse of I know not what simple explanation of this prodigious attack. But when he beheld that mayor, that magistrate, calmly wipe his face and say, “Set this woman at liberty,” he underwent a sort of intoxication of amazement; thought and word failed him equally; the sum total of possible astonishment had been exceeded in his case. He remained mute.

The words had produced no less strange an effect on Fantine. She raised her bare arm, and clung to the damper of the stove, like a person who is reeling. Nevertheless, she glanced about her, and began to speak in a low voice, as though talking to herself: —

“At liberty! I am to be allowed to go! I am not to go to prison for six months! Who said that? It is not possible that any one could have said that. I did not hear aright. It cannot have been that monster of a mayor! Was it you, my good Monsieur Javert, who said that I was to be set free? Oh, see here! I will tell you about it, and you will let me go. That monster of a mayor, that old blackguard of a mayor, is the cause of all. Just imagine, Monsieur Javert, he turned me out! all because of a pack of rascally women, who gossip in the workroom. If that is not a horror, what is? To dismiss a poor girl who is doing her work honestly! Then I could no longer earn enough, and all this misery followed. In the first place, there is one improvement which these gentlemen of the police ought to make, and that is, to prevent prison contractors from wronging poor people. I will explain it to you, you see: you are earning twelve sous at shirt-making, the price falls to nine sous; and it is not enough to live on. Then one has to become whatever one can. As for me, I had my little Cosette, and I was actually forced to become a bad woman. Now you understand how it is that that blackguard of a mayor caused all the mischief. After that I stamped on that gentleman's hat in front of the officers' cafe; but he had spoiled my whole dress with snow. We women have but one silk dress for evening wear. You see that I did not do wrong deliberately — truly, Monsieur Javert; and everywhere I behold women who are far more wicked than I, and who are much happier. O Monsieur Javert! it was you who gave orders that I am to be set free, was it not? Make inquiries, speak to my landlord; I am paying my rent now; they will tell you that I am perfectly honest. Ah! my God! I beg your pardon; I have unintentionally touched the damper of the stove, and it has made it smoke."

M. Madeleine listened to her with profound attention. While she was speaking, he fumbled in his waistcoat, drew out his purse and opened it. It was empty. He put it back in his pocket. He said to Fantine, "How much did you say that you owed?"

Fantine, who was looking at Javert only, turned towards him: —

"Was I speaking to you?"

Then, addressing the soldiers: —

"Say, you fellows, did you see how I spit in his face? Ah! you old wretch of a mayor, you came here to frighten me, but I'm not afraid of you. I am afraid of Monsieur Javert. I am afraid of my good Monsieur Javert!"

So saying, she turned to the inspector again: —

"And yet, you see, Mr. Inspector, it is necessary to be just. I understand that you are just, Mr. Inspector; in fact, it is perfectly simple: a man amuses himself by putting snow down a woman's back, and that makes the officers laugh; one must divert themselves in some way; and we — well, we are here for them to amuse themselves with, of course! And then, you, you come; you are certainly obliged to preserve order, you lead off the woman who is in the wrong; but on reflection, since you are a good man, you say that I am to be set at liberty; it is for the sake of the little one, for six months in prison would prevent my supporting my child. 'Only, don't do it again, you hussy!' Oh! I won't do it again, Monsieur Javert! They may do whatever they please to me now; I will not stir. But to-day, you see, I cried because it hurt me. I was not expecting that snow from the gentleman at all; and then as I told you, I am not well; I have a cough; I seem to have a burning ball in my stomach, and the doctor tells me, ‘Take care of yourself.’ Here, feel, give me your hand; don’t be afraid — it is here.”

She no longer wept, her voice was caressing; she placed Javert’s coarse hand on her delicate, white throat and looked smilingly at him.

All at once she rapidly adjusted her disordered garments, dropped the folds of her skirt, which had been pushed up as she dragged herself along, almost to the height of her knee, and stepped towards the door, saying to the soldiers in a low voice, and with a friendly nod: —

“Children, Monsieur l’Inspecteur has said that I am to be released, and I am going.”

She laid her hand on the latch of the door. One step more and she would be in the street.

Javert up to that moment had remained erect, motionless, with his eyes fixed on the ground, cast athwart this scene like some displaced statue, which is waiting to be put away somewhere.

The sound of the latch roused him. He raised his head with an expression of sovereign authority, an expression all the more alarming in proportion as the authority rests on a low level, ferocious in the wild beast, atrocious in the man of no estate.

“Sergeant!” he cried, “don’t you see that that jade is walking off! Who bade you let her go?”

“I,” said Madeleine.

Fantine trembled at the sound of Javert’s voice, and let go of the latch as a thief relinquishes the article which he has stolen. At the sound of Madeleine’s voice she turned around, and from that moment forth she uttered no word, nor dared so much as to breathe freely, but her glance strayed from Madeleine to Javert, and from Javert to Madeleine in turn, according to which was speaking.

It was evident that Javert must have been exasperated beyond measure before he would permit himself to apostrophize the sergeant as he had done, after the mayor’s suggestion that Fantine should be set at liberty. Had he reached the point of forgetting the mayor’s presence? Had he finally declared to himself that it was impossible that any “authority” should have given such an order, and that the mayor must certainly have said one thing by mistake for another, without intending it? Or, in view of the enormities of which he had been a witness for the past two hours, did he say to himself, that it was necessary to recur to supreme resolutions, that it was indispensable that the small should be made great, that the police spy should transform himself into a magistrate, that the policeman should become a dispenser of justice, and that, in this prodigious extremity, order, law, morality, government, society in its entirety, was personified in him, Javert?

However that may be, when M. Madeleine uttered that word, *I,* as we have just heard, Police Inspector Javert was seen to turn toward the mayor, pale, cold, with blue lips, and a look of despair, his whole body agitated by an imperceptible quiver and an unprecedented occurrence, and say to him, with downcast eyes but a firm voice: —

“Mr. Mayor, that cannot be.”

“Why not?” said M. Madeleine.

“This miserable woman has insulted a citizen.”

“Inspector Javert,” replied the mayor, in a calm and conciliating tone, “listen. You are an honest man, and I feel no hesitation in explaining matters to you. Here is the true state of the case: I was passing through the square just as you were leading this woman away; there were still groups of people standing about, and I made inquiries and learned everything; it was the townsman who was in the wrong and who should have been arrested by properly conducted police.”

Javert retorted: —

“This wretch has just insulted Monsieur le Maire.”

“That concerns me,” said M. Madeleine. “My own insult belongs to me, I think. I can do what I please about it.”

“I beg Monsieur le Maire’s pardon. The insult is not to him but to the law.”

“Inspector Javert,” replied M. Madeleine, “the highest law is conscience. I have heard this woman; I know what I am doing.”

“And I, Mr. Mayor, do not know what I see.”

“Then content yourself with obeying.”

“I am obeying my duty. My duty demands that this woman shall serve six months in prison.”

M. Madeleine replied gently: —

“Heed this well; she will not serve a single day.”

At this decisive word, Javert ventured to fix a searching look on the mayor and to say, but in a tone of voice that was still profoundly respectful: —

“I am sorry to oppose Monsieur le Maire; it is for the first time in my life, but he will permit me to remark that I am within the bounds of my authority. I confine myself, since Monsieur le Maire desires it, to the question of the gentleman. I was present. This woman flung herself on Monsieur Bamatabnois, who is an elector and the proprietor of that handsome house with a balcony, which forms the corner of the esplanade, three stories high and entirely of cut stone. Such things as there are in the world! In any case, Monsieur le Maire, this is a question of police regulations in the streets, and concerns me, and I shall detain this woman Fantine.”

Then M. Madeleine folded his arms, and said in a severe voice which no one in the town had heard hitherto: —

“The matter to which you refer is one connected with the municipal police. According to the terms of articles nine, eleven, fifteen, and sixty-six of the code of criminal examination, I am the judge. I order that this woman shall be set at liberty.”

Javert ventured to make a final effort.

“But, Mr. Mayor—”

“I refer you to article eighty-one of the law of the 13th of December, 1799, in regard to arbitrary detention.”

“Monsieur le Maire, permit me—”

“Not another word.”

“But—”

“Leave the room,” said M. Madeleine.

Javert received the blow erect, full in the face, in his breast, like a Russian soldier. He bowed to the very earth before the mayor and left the room.

Fantine stood aside from the door and stared at him in amazement as he passed.

Nevertheless, she also was the prey to a strange confusion. She had just seen herself a subject of dispute between two opposing powers. She had seen two men who held in their hands her liberty, her life, her soul, her child, in combat before her very eyes; one of these men was drawing her towards darkness, the other was leading her back towards the light. In this conflict, viewed through the exaggerations of terror, these two men had appeared to her like two giants; the one spoke like her demon, the other like her good angel. The angel had conquered the demon, and, strange to say, that which made her shudder from head to foot was the fact that this angel, this liberator, was the very man whom she abhorred, that mayor whom she had so long regarded as the author of all her woes, that Madeleine! And at the very moment when she had insulted him in so hideous a fashion, he had saved her! Had she, then, been mistaken? Must she change her whole soul? She did not know; she trembled. She listened in bewilderment, she looked on in affright, and at every word uttered by M. Madeleine she felt the frightful shades of hatred crumble and melt within her, and something warm and ineffable, indescribable, which was both joy, confidence and love, dawn in her heart.

When Javert had taken his departure, M. Madeleine turned to her and said to her in a deliberate voice, like a serious man who does not wish to weep and who finds some difficulty in speaking: —

“I have heard you. I knew nothing about what you have mentioned. I believe that it is true, and I feel that it is true. I was even ignorant of the fact that you had left my shop. Why did you not apply to me? But here; I will pay your debts, I will send for your child, or you shall go to her. You shall live here, in Paris, or where you please. I undertake the care of your child and yourself. You shall not work any longer if you do not like. I will give all the money you require. You shall be honest and happy once more. And listen! I declare to you that if all is as you say, — and I do not doubt it, — you have never ceased to be virtuous and holy in the sight of God. Oh! poor woman.”

This was more than Fantine could bear. To have Cosette! To leave this life of infamy. To live free, rich, happy, respectable with Cosette; to see all these realities of paradise blossom of a sudden in the midst of her misery. She stared stupidly at this man who was talking to her, and could only give vent to two or three sobs, “Oh! Oh! Oh!”

Her limbs gave way beneath her, she knelt in front of M. Madeleine, and before he could prevent her he felt her grasp his hand and press her lips to it.

Then she fainted.

BOOK SIXTH. — JAVERT

CHAPTER I — THE BEGINNING OF REPOSE

M. Madeleine had Fantine removed to that infirmary which he had established in his own house. He confided her to the sisters, who put her to bed. A burning fever had come on. She passed a part of the night in delirium and raving. At length, however, she fell asleep.

On the morrow, towards midday, Fantine awoke. She heard some one breathing close to her bed; she drew aside the curtain and saw M. Madeleine standing there and looking at something over her head. His gaze was full of pity, anguish, and supplication. She followed its direction, and saw that it was fixed on a crucifix which was nailed to the wall.

Thenceforth, M. Madeleine was transfigured in Fantine's eyes. He seemed to her to be clothed in light. He was absorbed in a sort of prayer. She gazed at him for a long time without daring to interrupt him. At last she said timidly: —

"What are you doing?"

M. Madeleine had been there for an hour. He had been waiting for Fantine to awake. He took her hand, felt of her pulse, and replied: —

"How do you feel?"

"Well, I have slept," she replied; "I think that I am better, It is nothing."

He answered, responding to the first question which she had put to him as though he had just heard it: —

"I was praying to the martyr there on high."

And he added in his own mind, "For the martyr here below."

M. Madeleine had passed the night and the morning in making inquiries. He knew all now. He knew Fantine's history in all its heart-rending details. He went on: —

"You have suffered much, poor mother. Oh! do not complain; you now have the dowry of the elect. It is thus that men are transformed into angels. It is not their fault they do not know how to go to work otherwise. You see this hell from which you have just emerged is the first form of heaven. It was necessary to begin there."

He sighed deeply. But she smiled on him with that sublime smile in which two teeth were lacking.

That same night, Javert wrote a letter. The next morning be posted it himself at the office of M. sur M. It was addressed to Paris, and the superscription ran: To Monsieur Chabouillet, Secretary of Monsieur le Prefet of Police. As the affair in the station-house had been bruited about, the post-mistress and some other persons who saw the letter before it was sent off, and who recognized Javert's handwriting on the cover, thought that he was sending in his resignation.

M. Madeleine made haste to write to the Thenardiers. Fantine owed them one hundred and twenty francs. He sent them three hundred francs, telling them to pay themselves from that sum, and to fetch the child instantly to M. sur M., where her sick mother required her presence.

This dazzled Thenardier. "The devil!" said the man to his wife; "don't let's allow the child to go. This lark is going to turn into a milch cow. I see through it. Some ninny has taken a fancy to the mother."

He replied with a very well drawn-up bill for five hundred and some odd francs. In this memorandum two indisputable items figured up over three hundred francs, — one for the doctor, the other for the apothecary who had attended and physicked Eponine and Azelma through two long illnesses. Cosette, as we have already said, had not been ill. It was only a question of a trifling substitution of names. At the foot of the memorandum Thenardier wrote, Received on account, three hundred francs.

M. Madeleine immediately sent three hundred francs more, and wrote, "Make haste to bring Cosette."

"Christi!" said Thenardier, "let's not give up the child."

In the meantime, Fantine did not recover. She still remained in the infirmary.

The sisters had at first only received and nursed "that woman" with repugnance. Those who have seen the bas-reliefs of Rheims will recall the inflation of the lower lip of the wise virgins as they survey the foolish virgins. The ancient scorn of the vestals for the ambubajae is one of the most profound instincts of feminine dignity; the sisters felt it with the double force contributed by religion. But in a few days Fantine disarmed them. She said all kinds of humble and gentle things, and the mother in her provoked tenderness. One day the sisters heard her say amid her fever: "I have been a sinner; but when I have my child beside me, it will be a sign that God has pardoned me. While I was leading a bad life, I should not have liked to have my Cosette with me; I could not have borne her sad, astonished eyes. It was for her sake that I did evil, and that is why God pardons me. I shall feel the benediction of the good God when Cosette is here. I shall gaze at her; it will do me good to see that innocent creature. She knows nothing at all. She is an angel, you see, my sisters. At that age the wings have not fallen off.”

M. Madeleine went to see her twice a day, and each time she asked him: —

“Shall I see my Cosette soon?”

He answered: —

“To-morrow, perhaps. She may arrive at any moment. I am expecting her.”

And the mother’s pale face grew radiant.

“Oh!” she said, “how happy I am going to be!”

We have just said that she did not recover her health. On the contrary, her condition seemed to become more grave from week to week. That handful of snow applied to her bare skin between her shoulder-blades had brought about a sudden suppression of perspiration, as a consequence of which the malady which had been smouldering within her for many years was violently developed at last. At that time people were beginning to follow the fine Laennec’s fine suggestions in the study and treatment of chest maladies. The doctor sounded Fantine’s chest and shook his head.

M. Madeleine said to the doctor: —

“Well?”

“Has she not a child which she desires to see?” said the doctor.

“Yes.”

“Well! Make haste and get it here!”

M. Madeleine shuddered.

Fantine inquired: —

“What did the doctor say?”

M. Madeleine forced himself to smile.

“He said that your child was to be brought speedily. That that would restore your health.”

“Oh!” she rejoined, “he is right! But what do those Thenardiers mean by keeping my Cosette from me! Oh! she is coming. At last I behold happiness close beside me!”

In the meantime Thenardier did not “let go of the child,” and gave a hundred insufficient reasons for it. Cosette was not quite well enough to take a journey in the winter. And then, there still remained some petty but pressing debts in the neighborhood, and they were collecting the bills for them, etc., etc.

“I shall send some one to fetch Cosette!” said Father Madeleine. “If necessary, I will go myself.”

He wrote the following letter to Fantine’s dictation, and made her sign it: —

“MONSIEUR THENARDIER: —

You will deliver Cosette to this person.

You will be paid for all the little things.

I have the honor to salute you with respect.

“FANTINE.”

In the meantime a serious incident occurred. Carve as we will the mysterious block of which our life is made, the black vein of destiny constantly reappears in it.

CHAPTER II — HOW JEAN MAY BECOME CHAMP

One morning M. Madeleine was in his study, occupied in arranging in advance some pressing matters connected with the mayor’s office, in case he should decide to take the trip to Montfermeil, when he was informed that Police Inspector Javert was desirous of speaking with him. Madeleine could not refrain from a disagreeable impression on hearing this name. Javert had avoided him more than ever since the affair of the police-station, and M. Madeleine had not seen him.

“Admit him,” he said.

Javert entered.

M. Madeleine had retained his seat near the fire, pen in hand, his eyes fixed on the docket which he was turning over and annotating, and which contained the trials of the commission on highways for the infraction of police regulations. He did not disturb himself on Javert’s account. He could not help thinking of poor Fantine, and it suited him to be glacial in his manner.

Javert bestowed a respectful salute on the mayor, whose back was turned to him. The mayor did not look at him, but went on annotating this docket.

Javert advanced two or three paces into the study, and halted, without breaking the silence.

If any physiognomist who had been familiar with Javert, and who had made a lengthy study of this savage in the service of civilization, this singular composite of the Roman, the Spartan, the monk, and the corporal, this spy who was incapable of a lie, this unspotted police agent — if any physiognomist had known his secret and long-cherished aversion for M. Madeleine, his conflict with the mayor on the subject of Fantine, and had examined Javert at that moment, he would have said to himself, “What has taken place?” It was evident to any one acquainted with that clear, upright, sincere, honest, austere, and ferocious conscience, that Javert had but just gone through some great interior struggle. Javert had nothing in his soul which he had not also in his countenance. Like violent people in general, he was subject to abrupt changes of opinion. His physiognomy had never been more peculiar and startling. On entering he bowed to M. Madeleine with a look in which there was neither rancor, anger, nor distrust; he halted a few paces in the rear of the mayor’s arm-chair, and there he stood, perfectly erect, in an attitude almost of discipline, with the cold, ingenuous roughness of a man who has never been gentle and who has always been patient; he waited without uttering a word, without making a movement, in genuine humility and tranquil resignation, calm, serious, hat in hand, with eyes cast down, and an expression which was half-way between that of a soldier in the presence of his officer and a criminal in the presence of his judge, until it should please the mayor to turn round. All the sentiments as well as all the memories which one might have attributed to him had disappeared. That face, as impenetrable and simple as granite, no longer bore any trace of anything but a melancholy depression. His whole person breathed lowliness and firmness and an indescribable courageous despondency.

At last the mayor laid down his pen and turned half round.

“Well! What is it? What is the matter, Javert?”

Javert remained silent for an instant as though collecting his ideas, then raised his voice with a sort of sad solemnity, which did not, however, preclude simplicity.

“This is the matter, Mr. Mayor; a culpable act has been committed.”

“What act?”

“An inferior agent of the authorities has failed in respect, and in the gravest manner, towards a magistrate. I have come to bring the fact to your knowledge, as it is my duty to do.”

“Who is the agent?” asked M. Madeleine.

“I,” said Javert.

“You?”

“I.”

“And who is the magistrate who has reason to complain of the agent?”

“You, Mr. Mayor.”

M. Madeleine sat erect in his arm-chair. Javert went on, with a severe air and his eyes still cast down.

“Mr. Mayor, I have come to request you to instigate the authorities to dismiss me.”

M. Madeleine opened his mouth in amazement. Javert interrupted him:—

“You will say that I might have handed in my resignation, but that does not suffice. Handing in one’s resignation is honorable. I have failed in my duty; I ought to be punished; I must be turned out.”

And after a pause he added: —

“Mr. Mayor, you were severe with me the other day, and unjustly. Be so to-day, with justice.”

“Come, now! Why?” exclaimed M. Madeleine. “What nonsense is this? What is the meaning of this? What culpable act have you been guilty of towards me? What have you done to me? What are your wrongs with regard to me? You accuse yourself; you wish to be superseded—”

“Turned out,” said Javert.

“Turned out; so it be, then. That is well. I do not understand.”

“You shall understand, Mr. Mayor.”

Javert sighed from the very bottom of his chest, and resumed, still coldly and sadly: —

“Mr. Mayor, six weeks ago, in consequence of the scene over that woman, I was furious, and I informed against you.”

“Informed against me!”

“At the Prefecture of Police in Paris.”

M. Madeleine, who was not in the habit of laughing much oftener than Javert himself, burst out laughing now: —

“As a mayor who had encroached on the province of the police?”

“As an ex-convict.”

The mayor turned livid.

Javert, who had not raised his eyes, went on: —

“I thought it was so. I had had an idea for a long time; a resemblance; inquiries which you had caused to be made at Faverolles; the strength of your loins; the adventure with old Fauchelevant; your skill in marksmanship; your leg, which you drag a little; — I hardly know what all, — absurdities! But, at all events, I took you for a certain Jean Valjean.”

“A certain — What did you say the name was?”

“Jean Valjean. He was a convict whom I was in the habit of seeing twenty years ago, when I was adjutant-guard of convicts at Toulon. On leaving the galleys, this Jean Valjean, as it appears, robbed a bishop; then he committed another theft, accompanied with violence, on a public highway on the person of a little Savoyard. He disappeared eight years ago, no one knows how, and he has been sought, I fancied. In short, I did this thing! Wrath impelled me; I denounced you at the Prefecture!”

M. Madeleine, who had taken up the docket again several moments before this, resumed with an air of perfect indifference: —

“And what reply did you receive?”

“That I was mad.”

“Well?”

“Well, they were right.”

“It is lucky that you recognize the fact.”

“I am forced to do so, since the real Jean Valjean has been found.”

The sheet of paper which M. Madeleine was holding dropped from his hand; he raised his head, gazed fixedly at Javert, and said with his indescribable accent: —

“Ah!”

Javert continued: —

“This is the way it is, Mr. Mayor. It seems that there was in the neighborhood near Ailly-le-Haut-Clocher an old fellow who was called Father Champmathieu. He was a very wretched creature. No one paid any attention to him. No one knows what such people subsist on. Lately, last autumn, Father Champmathieu was arrested for the theft of some cider apples from — Well, no matter, a theft had been committed, a wall scaled, branches of trees broken. My Champmathieu was arrested. He still had the branch of apple-tree in his hand. The scamp is locked up. Up to this point it was merely an affair of a misdemeanor. But here is where Providence intervened.

“The jail being in a bad condition, the examining magistrate finds it convenient to transfer Champmathieu to Arras, where the departmental prison is situated. In this prison at Arras there is an ex-convict named Brevet, who is detained for I know not what, and who has been appointed turnkey of the house, because of good behavior. Mr. Mayor, no sooner had Champmathieu arrived than Brevet exclaims: ‘Eh! Why, I know that man! He is a fagot! Take a good look at me, my good man! You are Jean Valjean!’ ‘Jean Valjean! who’s Jean Valjean?’ Champmathieu feigns astonishment. ‘Don’t play the innocent dodge,’ says Brevet. ‘You are Jean Valjean! You have been in the galleys of Toulon; it was twenty years ago; we were there together.’ Champmathieu denies it. Parbleu! You understand. The case is investigated. The thing was well ventilated for me. This is what they discovered: This Champmathieu had been, thirty years ago, a pruner of trees in various localities, notably at Faverolles. There all trace of him was lost. A long time afterwards he was seen again in Auvergne; then in Paris, where he is said to have been a wheelwright, and to have had a daughter, who was a laundress; but that has not been proved. Now, before going to the galleys for theft, what was Jean Valjean? A pruner of trees. Where? At Faverolles. Another fact. This Valjean's Christian name was Jean, and his mother's surname was Mathieu. What more natural to suppose than that, on emerging from the galleys, he should have taken his mother's name for the purpose of concealing himself, and have called himself Jean Mathieu? He goes to Auvergne. The local pronunciation turns Jean into Chan — he is called Chan Mathieu. Our man offers no opposition, and behold him transformed into Champmathieu. You follow me, do you not? Inquiries were made at Faverolles. The family of Jean Valjean is no longer there. It is not known where they have gone. You know that among those classes a family often disappears. Search was made, and nothing was found. When such people are not mud, they are dust. And then, as the beginning of the story dates thirty years back, there is no longer any one at Faverolles who knew Jean Valjean. Inquiries were made at Toulon. Besides Brevet, there are only two convicts in existence who have seen Jean Valjean; they are Cochepaille and Chenildieu, and are sentenced for life. They are taken from the galleys and confronted with the pretended Champmathieu. They do not hesitate; he is Jean Valjean for them as well as for Brevet. The same age, — he is fifty-four, — the same height, the same air, the same man; in short, it is he. It was precisely at this moment that I forwarded my denunciation to the Prefecture in Paris. I was told that I had lost my reason, and that Jean Valjean is at Arras, in the power of the authorities. You can imagine whether this surprised me, when I thought that I had that same Jean Valjean here. I write to the examining judge; he sends for me; Champmathieu is conducted to me—"

"Well?" interposed M. Madeleine.

Javert replied, his face incorruptible, and as melancholy as ever: —

"Mr. Mayor, the truth is the truth. I am sorry; but that man is Jean Valjean. I recognized him also."

M. Madeleine resumed in, a very low voice: —

"You are sure?"

Javert began to laugh, with that mournful laugh which comes from profound conviction.

"O! Sure!"

He stood there thoughtfully for a moment, mechanically taking pinches of powdered wood for blotting ink from the wooden bowl which stood on the table, and he added: —

“And even now that I have seen the real Jean Valjean, I do not see how I could have thought otherwise. I beg your pardon, Mr. Mayor.”

Javert, as he addressed these grave and supplicating words to the man, who six weeks before had humiliated him in the presence of the whole station-house, and bade him “leave the room,” — Javert, that haughty man, was unconsciously full of simplicity and dignity, — M. Madeleine made no other reply to his prayer than the abrupt question: —

“And what does this man say?”

“Ah! Indeed, Mr. Mayor, it’s a bad business. If he is Jean Valjean, he has his previous conviction against him. To climb a wall, to break a branch, to purloin apples, is a mischievous trick in a child; for a man it is a misdemeanor; for a convict it is a crime. Robbing and housebreaking — it is all there. It is no longer a question of correctional police; it is a matter for the Court of Assizes. It is no longer a matter of a few days in prison; it is the galleys for life. And then, there is the affair with the little Savoyard, who will return, I hope. The deuce! there is plenty to dispute in the matter, is there not? Yes, for any one but Jean Valjean. But Jean Valjean is a sly dog. That is the way I recognized him. Any other man would have felt that things were getting hot for him; he would struggle, he would cry out — the kettle sings before the fire; he would not be Jean Valjean, et cetera. But he has not the appearance of understanding; he says, ‘I am Champmathieu, and I won’t depart from that!’ He has an astonished air, he pretends to be stupid; it is far better. Oh! the rogue is clever! But it makes no difference. The proofs are there. He has been recognized by four persons; the old scamp will be condemned. The case has been taken to the Assizes at Arras. I shall go there to give my testimony. I have been summoned.”

M. Madeleine had turned to his desk again, and taken up his docket, and was turning over the leaves tranquilly, reading and writing by turns, like a busy man. He turned to Javert: —

“That will do, Javert. In truth, all these details interest me but little. We are wasting our time, and we have pressing business on hand. Javert, you will betake yourself at once to the house of the woman Buseaupied, who sells herbs at the corner of the Rue Saint-Saulve. You will tell her that she must enter her complaint against carter Pierre Chesnelong. The man is a brute, who came near crushing this woman and her child. He must be punished. You will then go to M. Charcellay, Rue Montre-de-Champigny. He complained that there is a gutter on the adjoining house which discharges rain-water on his premises, and is undermining the foundations of his house. After that, you will verify the infractions of police regulations which have been reported to me in the Rue Guibourg, at Widow Doris's, and Rue du Garraud-Blanc, at Madame Renee le Bosse's, and you will prepare documents. But I am giving you a great deal of work. Are you not to be absent? Did you not tell me that you were going to Arras on that matter in a week or ten days?"

"Sooner than that, Mr. Mayor."

"On what day, then?"

"Why, I thought that I had said to Monsieur le Maire that the case was to be tried to-morrow, and that I am to set out by diligence to-night."

M. Madeleine made an imperceptible movement.

"And how long will the case last?"

"One day, at the most. The judgment will be pronounced to-morrow evening at latest. But I shall not wait for the sentence, which is certain; I shall return here as soon as my deposition has been taken."

"That is well," said M. Madeleine.

And he dismissed Javert with a wave of the hand.

Javert did not withdraw.

"Excuse me, Mr. Mayor," said he.

"What is it now?" demanded M. Madeleine.

"Mr. Mayor, there is still something of which I must remind you."

"What is it?"

"That I must be dismissed."

M. Madeleine rose.

"Javert, you are a man of honor, and I esteem you. You exaggerate your fault. Moreover, this is an offence which concerns me. Javert, you deserve promotion instead of degradation. I wish you to retain your post."

Javert gazed at M. Madeleine with his candid eyes, in whose depths his not very enlightened but pure and rigid conscience seemed visible, and said in a tranquil voice: —

"Mr. Mayor, I cannot grant you that."

"I repeat," replied M. Madeleine, "that the matter concerns me."

But Javert, heeding his own thought only, continued: —

“So far as exaggeration is concerned, I am not exaggerating. This is the way I reason: I have suspected you unjustly. That is nothing. It is our right to cherish suspicion, although suspicion directed above ourselves is an abuse. But without proofs, in a fit of rage, with the object of wreaking my vengeance, I have denounced you as a convict, you, a respectable man, a mayor, a magistrate! That is serious, very serious. I have insulted authority in your person, I, an agent of the authorities! If one of my subordinates had done what I have done, I should have declared him unworthy of the service, and have expelled him. Well? Stop, Mr. Mayor; one word more. I have often been severe in the course of my life towards others. That is just. I have done well. Now, if I were not severe towards myself, all the justice that I have done would become injustice. Ought I to spare myself more than others? No! What! I should be good for nothing but to chastise others, and not myself! Why, I should be a blackguard! Those who say, ‘That blackguard of a Javert!’ would be in the right. Mr. Mayor, I do not desire that you should treat me kindly; your kindness roused sufficient bad blood in me when it was directed to others. I want none of it for myself. The kindness which consists in upholding a woman of the town against a citizen, the police agent against the mayor, the man who is down against the man who is up in the world, is what I call false kindness. That is the sort of kindness which disorganizes society. Good God! it is very easy to be kind; the difficulty lies in being just. Come! if you had been what I thought you, I should not have been kind to you, not I! You would have seen! Mr. Mayor, I must treat myself as I would treat any other man. When I have subdued malefactors, when I have proceeded with vigor against rascals, I have often said to myself, ‘If you flinch, if I ever catch you in fault, you may rest at your ease!’ I have flinched, I have caught myself in a fault. So much the worse! Come, discharged, cashiered, expelled! That is well. I have arms. I will till the soil; it makes no difference to me. Mr. Mayor, the good of the service demands an example. I simply require the discharge of Inspector Javert.”

All this was uttered in a proud, humble, despairing, yet convinced tone, which lent indescribable grandeur to this singular, honest man.

“We shall see,” said M. Madeleine.

And he offered him his hand.

Javert recoiled, and said in a wild voice: —

“Excuse me, Mr. Mayor, but this must not be. A mayor does not offer his hand to a police spy.”

He added between his teeth: —

“A police spy, yes; from the moment when I have misused the police. I am no more than a police spy.”

Then he bowed profoundly, and directed his steps towards the door.

There he wheeled round, and with eyes still downcast: —

“Mr. Mayor,” he said, “I shall continue to serve until I am superseded.”

He withdrew. M. Madeleine remained thoughtfully listening to the firm, sure step, which died away on the pavement of the corridor.

BOOK SEVENTH. — THE CHAMPMATHIEU AFFAIR

CHAPTER I — SISTER SIMPLICE

The incidents the reader is about to peruse were not all known at M. sur M. But the small portion of them which became known left such a memory in that town that a serious gap would exist in this book if we did not narrate them in their most minute details. Among these details the reader will encounter two or three improbable circumstances, which we preserve out of respect for the truth.

On the afternoon following the visit of Javert, M. Madeleine went to see Fantine according to his wont.

Before entering Fantine's room, he had Sister Simplice summoned.

The two nuns who performed the services of nurse in the infirmary, Lazariste ladies, like all sisters of charity, bore the names of Sister Perpetue and Sister Simplice.

Sister Perpetue was an ordinary villager, a sister of charity in a coarse style, who had entered the service of God as one enters any other service. She was a nun as other women are cooks. This type is not so very rare. The monastic orders gladly accept this heavy peasant earthenware, which is easily fashioned into a Capuchin or an Ursuline. These rustics are utilized for the rough work of devotion. The transition from a drover to a Carmelite is not in the least violent; the one turns into the other without much effort; the fund of ignorance common to the village and the cloister is a preparation ready at hand, and places the boor at once on the same footing as the monk: a little more amplitude in the smock, and it becomes a frock. Sister Perpetue was a robust nun from Marines near Pontoise, who chattered her patois, droned, grumbled, sugared the potion according to the bigotry or the hypocrisy of the invalid, treated her patients abruptly, roughly, was crabbed with the dying, almost flung God in their faces, stoned their death agony with prayers mumbled in a rage; was bold, honest, and ruddy.

Sister Simplice was white, with a waxen pallor. Beside Sister Perpetue, she was the taper beside the candle. Vincent de Paul has divinely traced the features of the Sister of Charity in these admirable words, in which he mingles as much freedom as servitude: “They shall have for their convent only the house of the sick; for cell only a hired room; for chapel only their parish church; for cloister only the streets of the town and the wards of the hospitals; for enclosure only obedience; for gratings only the fear of God;

for veil only modesty.” This ideal was realized in the living person of Sister Simplice: she had never been young, and it seemed as though she would never grow old. No one could have told Sister Simplice’s age. She was a person — we dare not say a woman — who was gentle, austere, well-bred, cold, and who had never lied. She was so gentle that she appeared fragile; but she was more solid than granite. She touched the unhappy with fingers that were charmingly pure and fine. There was, so to speak, silence in her speech; she said just what was necessary, and she possessed a tone of voice which would have equally edified a confessional or enchanted a drawing-room. This delicacy accommodated itself to the serge gown, finding in this harsh contact a continual reminder of heaven and of God. Let us emphasize one detail. Never to have lied, never to have said, for any interest whatever, even in indifference, any single thing which was not the truth, the sacred truth, was Sister Simplice’s distinctive trait; it was the accent of her virtue. She was almost renowned in the congregation for this imperturbable veracity. The Abbé Sicard speaks of Sister Simplice in a letter to the deaf-mute Massieu. However pure and sincere we may be, we all bear upon our candor the crack of the little, innocent lie. She did not. Little lie, innocent lie — does such a thing exist? To lie is the absolute form of evil. To lie a little is not possible: he who lies, lies the whole lie. To lie is the very face of the demon. Satan has two names; he is called Satan and Lying. That is what she thought; and as she thought, so she did. The result was the whiteness which we have mentioned — a whiteness which covered even her lips and her eyes with radiance. Her smile was white, her glance was white. There was not a single spider’s web, not a grain of dust, on the glass window of that conscience. On entering the order of Saint Vincent de Paul, she had taken the name of Simplice by special choice. Simplice of Sicily, as we know, is the saint who preferred to allow both her breasts to be torn off rather than to say that she had been born at Segesta when she had been born at Syracuse — a lie which would have saved her. This patron saint suited this soul.

Sister Simplice, on her entrance into the order, had had two faults which she had gradually corrected: she had a taste for dainties, and she liked to receive letters. She never read anything but a book of prayers printed in Latin, in coarse type. She did not understand Latin, but she understood the book.

This pious woman had conceived an affection for Fantine, probably feeling a latent virtue there, and she had devoted herself almost exclusively to her care.

M. Madeleine took Sister Simplice apart and recommended Fantine to her in a singular tone, which the sister recalled later on.

On leaving the sister, he approached Fantine.

Fantine awaited M. Madeleine’s appearance every day as one awaits a ray of warmth and joy. She said to the sisters, “I only live when Monsieur le Maire is here.”

She had a great deal of fever that day. As soon as she saw M. Madeleine she asked him: —

“And Cosette?”

He replied with a smile: —

“Soon.”

M. Madeleine was the same as usual with Fantine. Only he remained an hour instead of half an hour, to Fantine’s great delight. He urged every one repeatedly not to allow the invalid to want for anything. It was noticed that there was a moment when his countenance became very sombre. But this was explained when it became known that the doctor had bent down to his ear and said to him, “She is losing ground fast.”

Then he returned to the town-hall, and the clerk observed him attentively examining a road map of France which hung in his study. He wrote a few figures on a bit of paper with a pencil.

CHAPTER II — THE PERSPICACITY OF MASTER SCAUFFLAIRE

From the town-hall he betook himself to the extremity of the town, to a Fleming named Master Scaufflaer, French Scaufflaire, who let out “horses and cabriolets as desired.”

In order to reach this Scaufflaire, the shortest way was to take the little-frequented street in which was situated the parsonage of the parish in which M. Madeleine resided. The cure was, it was said, a worthy, respectable, and sensible man. At the moment when M. Madeleine arrived in front of the parsonage there was but one passer-by in the street, and this person noticed this: After the mayor had passed the priest’s house he halted, stood motionless, then turned about, and retraced his steps to the door of the parsonage, which had an iron knocker. He laid his hand quickly on the knocker and lifted it; then he paused again and stopped short, as though in thought, and after the lapse of a few seconds, instead of allowing the knocker to fall abruptly, he placed it gently, and resumed his way with a sort of haste which had not been apparent previously.

M. Madeleine found Master Scaufflaire at home, engaged in stitching a harness over.

“Master Scaufflaire,” he inquired, “have you a good horse?”

“Mr. Mayor,” said the Fleming, “all my horses are good. What do you mean by a good horse?”

“I mean a horse which can travel twenty leagues in a day.”

“The deuce!” said the Fleming. “Twenty leagues!”

“Yes.”

“Hitched to a cabriolet?”

“Yes.”

“And how long can he rest at the end of his journey?”

“He must be able to set out again on the next day if necessary.”

“To traverse the same road?”

“Yes.”

“The deuce! the deuce! And it is twenty leagues?”

M. Madeleine drew from his pocket the paper on which he had pencilled some figures. He showed it to the Fleming. The figures were 5, 6, 8 1/2.

“You see,” he said, “total, nineteen and a half; as well say twenty leagues.”

“Mr. Mayor,” returned the Fleming, “I have just what you want. My little white horse — you may have seen him pass occasionally; he is a small beast from Lower Boulonnais. He is full of fire. They wanted to make a saddle-horse of him at first. Bah! He reared, he kicked, he laid everybody flat on the ground. He was thought to be vicious, and no one knew what to do with him. I bought him. I harnessed him to a carriage. That is what he wanted, sir; he is as gentle as a girl; he goes like the wind. Ah! indeed he must not be mounted. It does not suit his ideas to be a saddle-horse. Every one has his ambition. ‘Draw? Yes. Carry? No.’ We must suppose that is what he said to himself.”

“And he will accomplish the trip?”

“Your twenty leagues all at a full trot, and in less than eight hours. But here are the conditions.”

“State them.”

“In the first place, you will give him half an hour’s breathing spell midway of the road; he will eat; and some one must be by while he is eating to prevent the stable boy of the inn from stealing his oats; for I have noticed that in inns the oats are more often drunk by the stable men than eaten by the horses.”

“Some one will be by.”

“In the second place — is the cabriolet for Monsieur le Maire?”

“Yes.”

“Does Monsieur le Maire know how to drive?”

“Yes.”

“Well, Monsieur le Maire will travel alone and without baggage, in order not to overload the horse?”

“Agreed.”

“But as Monsieur le Maire will have no one with him, he will be obliged to take the trouble himself of seeing that the oats are not stolen.”

“That is understood.”

“I am to have thirty francs a day. The days of rest to be paid for also — not a farthing less; and the beast’s food to be at Monsieur le Maire’s expense.”

M. Madeleine drew three napoleons from his purse and laid them on the table.

“Here is the pay for two days in advance.”

“Fourthly, for such a journey a cabriolet would be too heavy, and would fatigue the horse. Monsieur le Maire must consent to travel in a little tilbury that I own.”

“I consent to that.”

“It is light, but it has no cover.”

“That makes no difference to me.”

“Has Monsieur le Maire reflected that we are in the middle of winter?”

M. Madeleine did not reply. The Fleming resumed: —

“That it is very cold?”

M. Madeleine preserved silence.

Master Scaufflaire continued: —

“That it may rain?”

M. Madeleine raised his head and said: —

“The tilbury and the horse will be in front of my door to-morrow morning at half-past four o’clock.”

“Of course, Monsieur le Maire,” replied Scaufflaire; then, scratching a speck in the wood of the table with his thumb-nail, he resumed with that careless air which the Flemings understand so well how to mingle with their shrewdness: —

“But this is what I am thinking of now: Monsieur le Maire has not told me where he is going. Where is Monsieur le Maire going?”

He had been thinking of nothing else since the beginning of the conversation, but he did not know why he had not dared to put the question.

“Are your horse’s forelegs good?” said M. Madeleine.

“Yes, Monsieur le Maire. You must hold him in a little when going down hill. Are there many descends between here and the place whither you are going?”

“Do not forget to be at my door at precisely half-past four o’clock to-morrow morning,” replied M. Madeleine; and he took his departure.

The Fleming remained “utterly stupid,” as he himself said some time afterwards.

The mayor had been gone two or three minutes when the door opened again; it was the mayor once more.

He still wore the same impassive and preoccupied air.

“Monsieur Scaufflaire,” said he, “at what sum do you estimate the value of the horse and tilbury which you are to let to me, — the one bearing the other?”

“The one dragging the other, Monsieur le Maire,” said the Fleming, with a broad smile.

“So be it. Well?”

“Does Monsieur le Maire wish to purchase them or me?”

“No; but I wish to guarantee you in any case. You shall give me back the sum at my return. At what value do you estimate your horse and cabriolet?”

“Five hundred francs, Monsieur le Maire.”

“Here it is.”

M. Madeleine laid a bank-bill on the table, then left the room; and this time he did not return.

Master Scaufflaire experienced a frightful regret that he had not said a thousand francs. Besides the horse and tilbury together were worth but a hundred crowns.

The Fleming called his wife, and related the affair to her. “Where the devil could Monsieur le Maire be going?” They held counsel together. “He is going to Paris,” said the wife. “I don’t believe it,” said the husband.

M. Madeleine had forgotten the paper with the figures on it, and it lay on the chimney-piece. The Fleming picked it up and studied it. “Five, six, eight and a half? That must designate the posting relays.” He turned to his wife: —

“I have found out.”

“What?”

“It is five leagues from here to Hesdin, six from Hesdin to Saint-Pol, eight and a half from Saint-Pol to Arras. He is going to Arras.”

Meanwhile, M. Madeleine had returned home. He had taken the longest way to return from Master Scaufflaire’s, as though the parsonage door had been a temptation for him, and he had wished to avoid it. He ascended to his room, and there he shut himself up, which was a very simple act, since he liked to go to bed early. Nevertheless, the portress of the factory, who was, at the same time, M. Madeleine’s only servant, noticed that the latter’s light was extinguished at half-past eight, and she mentioned it to the cashier when he came home, adding: —

“Is Monsieur le Maire ill? I thought he had a rather singular air.”

This cashier occupied a room situated directly under M. Madeleine’s chamber. He paid no heed to the portress’s words, but went to bed and to sleep. Towards midnight he woke up with a start; in his sleep he had heard a noise above his head. He listened; it was a footstep pacing back and forth, as though some one were walking in the room above him. He listened more attentively, and recognized M. Madeleine's step. This struck him as strange; usually, there was no noise in M. Madeleine's chamber until he rose in the morning. A moment later the cashier heard a noise which resembled that of a cupboard being opened, and then shut again; then a piece of furniture was disarranged; then a pause ensued; then the step began again. The cashier sat up in bed, quite awake now, and staring; and through his window-panes he saw the reddish gleam of a lighted window reflected on the opposite wall; from the direction of the rays, it could only come from the window of M. Madeleine's chamber. The reflection wavered, as though it came rather from a fire which had been lighted than from a candle. The shadow of the window-frame was not shown, which indicated that the window was wide open. The fact that this window was open in such cold weather was surprising. The cashier fell asleep again. An hour or two later he waked again. The same step was still passing slowly and regularly back and forth overhead.

The reflection was still visible on the wall, but now it was pale and peaceful, like the reflection of a lamp or of a candle. The window was still open.

This is what had taken place in M. Madeleine's room.

CHAPTER III — A TEMPEST IN A SKULL

The reader has, no doubt, already divined that M. Madeleine is no other than Jean Valjean.

We have already gazed into the depths of this conscience; the moment has now come when we must take another look into it. We do so not without emotion and trepidation. There is nothing more terrible in existence than this sort of contemplation. The eye of the spirit can nowhere find more dazzling brilliance and more shadow than in man; it can fix itself on no other thing which is more formidable, more complicated, more mysterious, and more infinite. There is a spectacle more grand than the sea; it is heaven: there is a spectacle more grand than heaven; it is the inmost recesses of the soul.

To make the poem of the human conscience, were it only with reference to a single man, were it only in connection with the basest of men, would be to blend all epics into one superior and definitive epic. Conscience is the chaos of chimeras, of lusts, and of temptations; the furnace of dreams; the lair of ideas of which we are ashamed; it is the pandemonium of sophisms; it is the battlefield of the passions. Penetrate, at certain hours, past the livid face of a human being who is engaged in reflection, and look behind, gaze into that soul, gaze into that obscurity. There, beneath that external silence, battles of giants, like those recorded in Homer, are in progress; skirmishes of dragons and hydras and swarms of phantoms, as in Milton; visionary circles, as in Dante. What a solemn thing is this infinity which every man bears within him, and which he measures with despair against the caprices of his brain and the actions of his life!

Alighieri one day met with a sinister-looking door, before which he hesitated. Here is one before us, upon whose threshold we hesitate. Let us enter, nevertheless.

We have but little to add to what the reader already knows of what had happened to Jean Valjean after the adventure with Little Gervais. From that moment forth he was, as we have seen, a totally different man. What the Bishop had wished to make of him, that he carried out. It was more than a transformation; it was a transfiguration.

He succeeded in disappearing, sold the Bishop’s silver, reserving only the candlesticks as a souvenir, crept from town to town, traversed France, came to M. sur M., conceived the idea which we have mentioned, accomplished what we have related, succeeded in rendering himself safe from seizure and inaccessible, and, thenceforth, established at M. sur M., happy in feeling his conscience saddened by the past and the first half of his existence belied by the last, he lived in peace, reassured and hopeful, having henceforth only two thoughts, — to conceal his name and to sanctify his life; to escape men and to return to God.

These two thoughts were so closely intertwined in his mind that they formed but a single one there; both were equally absorbing and imperative and ruled his slightest actions. In general, they conspired to regulate the conduct of his life; they turned him towards the gloom; they rendered him kindly and simple; they counselled him to the same things. Sometimes, however, they conflicted. In that case, as the reader will remember, the man whom all the country of M. sur M. called M. Madeleine did not hesitate to sacrifice the first to the second — his security to his virtue. Thus, in spite of all his reserve and all his prudence, he had preserved the Bishop’s candlesticks, worn mourning for him, summoned and interrogated all the little Savoyards who passed that way, collected information regarding the families at Faverolles, and saved old Fauchelevent’s life, despite the disquieting insinuations of Javert. It seemed, as we have already remarked, as though he thought, following the example of all those who have been wise, holy, and just, that his first duty was not towards himself.

At the same time, it must be confessed, nothing just like this had yet presented itself.

Never had the two ideas which governed the unhappy man whose sufferings we are narrating, engaged in so serious a struggle. He understood this confusedly but profoundly at the very first words pronounced by Javert, when the latter entered his study. At the moment when that name, which he had buried beneath so many layers, was so strangely articulated, he was struck with stupor, and as though intoxicated with the sinister eccentricity of his destiny; and through this stupor he felt that shudder which precedes great shocks. He bent like an oak at the approach of a storm, like a soldier at the approach of an assault. He felt shadows filled with thunders and lightnings descending upon his head. As he listened to Javert, the first thought which occurred to him was to go, to run and denounce himself, to take that Champmathieu out of prison and place himself there; this was as painful and as poignant as an incision in the living flesh. Then it passed away, and he said to himself, “We will see! We will see!” He repressed this first, generous instinct, and recoiled before heroism.

It would be beautiful, no doubt, after the Bishop’s holy words, after so many years of repentance and abnegation, in the midst of a penitence admirably begun, if this man had not flinched for an instant, even in the presence of so terrible a conjecture, but had continued to walk with the same step towards this yawning precipice, at the bottom of which lay heaven; that would have been beautiful; but it was not thus. We must render an account of the things which went on in this soul, and we can only tell what there was there. He was carried away, at first, by the instinct of self-preservation; he rallied all his ideas in haste, stifled his emotions, took into consideration Javert’s presence, that great danger, postponed all decision with the firmness of terror, shook off thought as to what he had to do, and resumed his calmness as a warrior picks up his buckler.

He remained in this state during the rest of the day, a whirlwind within, a profound tranquillity without. He took no “preservative measures,” as they may be called. Everything was still confused, and jostling together in his brain. His trouble was so great that he could not perceive the form of a single idea distinctly, and he could have told nothing about himself, except that he had received a great blow.

He repaired to Fantine’s bed of suffering, as usual, and prolonged his visit, through a kindly instinct, telling himself that he must behave thus, and recommend her well to the sisters, in case he should be obliged to be absent himself. He had a vague feeling that he might be obliged to go to Arras; and without having the least in the world made up his mind to this trip, he said to himself that being, as he was, beyond the shadow of any suspicion, there could be nothing out of the way in being a witness to what was to take place, and he engaged the tilbury from Scaufflaire in order to be prepared in any event.

He dined with a good deal of appetite.

On returning to his room, he communed with himself.

He examined the situation, and found it unprecedented; so unprecedented that in the midst of his revery he rose from his chair, moved by some inexplicable impulse of anxiety, and bolted his door. He feared lest something more should enter. He was barricading himself against possibilities.

A moment later he extinguished his light; it embarrassed him.

It seemed to him as though he might be seen.

By whom?

Alas! That on which he desired to close the door had already entered; that which he desired to blind was staring him in the face, — his conscience.

His conscience; that is to say, God.

Nevertheless, he deluded himself at first; he had a feeling of security and of solitude; the bolt once drawn, he thought himself impregnable; the candle extinguished, he felt himself invisible. Then he took possession of himself: he set his elbows on the table, leaned his head on his hand, and began to meditate in the dark.

“Where do I stand? Am not I dreaming? What have I heard? Is it really true that I have seen that Javert, and that he spoke to me in that manner? Who can that Champmathieu be? So he resembles me! Is it possible? When I reflect that yesterday I was so tranquil, and so far from suspecting anything! What was I doing yesterday at this hour? What is there in this incident? What will the end be? What is to be done?”

This was the torment in which he found himself. His brain had lost its power of retaining ideas; they passed like waves, and he clutched his brow in both hands to arrest them.

Nothing but anguish extricated itself from this tumult which overwhelmed his will and his reason, and from which he sought to draw proof and resolution.

His head was burning. He went to the window and threw it wide open. There were no stars in the sky. He returned and seated himself at the table.

The first hour passed in this manner.

Gradually, however, vague outlines began to take form and to fix themselves in his meditation, and he was able to catch a glimpse with precision of the reality, — not the whole situation, but some of the details. He began by recognizing the fact that, critical and extraordinary as was this situation, he was completely master of it.

This only caused an increase of his stupor.

Independently of the severe and religious aim which he had assigned to his actions, all that he had made up to that day had been nothing but a hole in which to bury his name. That which he had always feared most of all in his hours of self-communion, during his sleepless nights, was to ever hear that name pronounced; he had said to himself, that that would be the end of all things for him; that on the day when that name made its reappearance it would cause his new life to vanish from about him, and — who knows? — perhaps even his new soul within him, also. He shuddered at the very thought that this was possible. Assuredly, if any one had said to him at such moments that the hour would come when that name would ring in his ears, when the hideous words, Jean Valjean, would suddenly emerge from the darkness and rise in front of him, when that formidable light, capable of dissipating the mystery in which he had enveloped himself, would suddenly blaze forth above his head, and that that name would not menace him, that that light would but produce an obscurity more dense, that this rent veil would but increase the mystery, that this earthquake would solidify his edifice, that this prodigious incident would have no other result, so far as he was concerned, if so it seemed good to him, than that of rendering his existence at once clearer and more impenetrable, and that, out of his confrontation with the phantom of Jean Valjean, the good and worthy citizen Monsieur Madeleine would emerge more honored, more peaceful, and more respected than ever — if any one had told him that, he would have tossed his head and regarded the words as those of a madman. Well, all this was precisely what had just come to pass; all that accumulation of impossibilities was a fact, and God had permitted these wild fancies to become real things!

His revery continued to grow clearer. He came more and more to an understanding of his position.

It seemed to him that he had but just waked up from some inexplicable dream, and that he found himself slipping down a declivity in the middle of the night, erect, shivering, holding back all in vain, on the very brink of the abyss. He distinctly perceived in the darkness a stranger, a man unknown to him, whom destiny had mistaken for him, and whom she was thrusting into the gulf in his stead; in order that the gulf might close once more, it was necessary that some one, himself or that other man, should fall into it: he had only let things take their course.

The light became complete, and he acknowledged this to himself: That his place was empty in the galleys; that do what he would, it was still awaiting him; that the theft from little Gervais had led him back to it; that this vacant place would await him, and draw him on until he filled it; that this was inevitable and fatal; and then he said to himself, “that, at this moment, he had a substitute; that it appeared that a certain Champmathieu had that ill luck, and that, as regards himself, being present in the galleys in the person of that Champmathieu, present in society under the name of M. Madeleine, he had nothing more to fear, provided that he did not prevent men from sealing over the head of that Champmathieu this stone of infamy which, like the stone of the sepulchre, falls once, never to rise again."

All this was so strange and so violent, that there suddenly took place in him that indescribable movement, which no man feels more than two or three times in the course of his life, a sort of convulsion of the conscience which stirs up all that there is doubtful in the heart, which is composed of irony, of joy, and of despair, and which may be called an outburst of inward laughter.

He hastily relighted his candle.

"Well, what then?" he said to himself; "what am I afraid of? What is there in all that for me to think about? I am safe; all is over. I had but one partly open door through which my past might invade my life, and behold that door is walled up forever! That Javert, who has been annoying me so long; that terrible instinct which seemed to have divined me, which had divined me — good God! and which followed me everywhere; that frightful hunting-dog, always making a point at me, is thrown off the scent, engaged elsewhere, absolutely turned from the trail: henceforth he is satisfied; he will leave me in peace; he has his Jean Valjean. Who knows? it is even probable that he will wish to leave town! And all this has been brought about without any aid from me, and I count for nothing in it! Ah! but where is the misfortune in this? Upon my honor, people would think, to see me, that some catastrophe had happened to me! After all, if it does bring harm to some one, that is not my fault in the least: it is Providence which has done it all; it is because it wishes it so to be, evidently. Have I the right to disarrange what it has arranged? What do I ask now? Why should I meddle? It does not concern me; what! I am not satisfied: but what more do I want? The goal to which I have aspired for so many years, the dream of my nights, the object of my prayers to Heaven, — security, — I have now attained; it is God who wills it; I can do nothing against the will of God, and why does God will it? In order that I may continue what I have begun, that I may do good, that I may one day be a grand and encouraging example, that it may be said at last, that a little happiness has been attached to the penance which I have undergone, and to that virtue to which I have returned. Really, I do not understand why I was afraid, a little while ago, to enter the house of that good cure, and to ask his advice; this is evidently what he would have said to me: It is settled; let things take their course; let the good God do as he likes!”

Thus did he address himself in the depths of his own conscience, bending over what may be called his own abyss; he rose from his chair, and began to pace the room: “Come,” said he, “let us think no more about it; my resolve is taken!” but he felt no joy.

Quite the reverse.

One can no more prevent thought from recurring to an idea than one can the sea from returning to the shore: the sailor calls it the tide; the guilty man calls it remorse; God upheaves the soul as he does the ocean.

After the expiration of a few moments, do what he would, he resumed the gloomy dialogue in which it was he who spoke and he who listened, saying that which he would have preferred to ignore, and listened to that which he would have preferred not to hear, yielding to that mysterious power which said to him: “Think!” as it said to another condemned man, two thousand years ago, “March on!”

Before proceeding further, and in order to make ourselves fully understood, let us insist upon one necessary observation.

It is certain that people do talk to themselves; there is no living being who has not done it. It may even be said that the word is never a more magnificent mystery than when it goes from thought to conscience within a man, and when it returns from conscience to thought; it is in this sense only that the words so often employed in this chapter, he said, he exclaimed, must be understood; one speaks to one’s self, talks to one’s self, exclaims to one’s self without breaking the external silence; there is a great tumult; everything about us talks except the mouth. The realities of the soul are none the less realities because they are not visible and palpable.

So he asked himself where he stood. He interrogated himself upon that “settled resolve.” He confessed to himself that all that he had just arranged in his mind was monstrous, that “to let things take their course, to let the good God do as he liked,” was simply horrible; to allow this error of fate and of men to be carried out, not to hinder it, to lend himself to it through his silence, to do nothing, in short, was to do everything! that this was hypocritical baseness in the last degree! that it was a base, cowardly, sneaking, abject, hideous crime!

For the first time in eight years, the wretched man had just tasted the bitter savor of an evil thought and of an evil action.

He spit it out with disgust.

He continued to question himself. He asked himself severely what he had meant by this, “My object is attained!” He declared to himself that his life really had an object; but what object? To conceal his name? To deceive the police? Was it for so petty a thing that he had done all that he had done? Had he not another and a grand object, which was the true one — to save, not his person, but his soul; to become honest and good once more; to be a just man? Was it not that above all, that alone, which he had always desired, which the Bishop had enjoined upon him — to shut the door on his past? But he was not shutting it! great God! he was re-opening it by committing an infamous action! He was becoming a thief once more, and the most odious of thieves! He was robbing another of his existence, his life, his peace, his place in the sunshine. He was becoming an assassin. He was murdering, morally murdering, a wretched man. He was inflicting on him that frightful living death, that death beneath the open sky, which is called the galleys. On the other hand, to surrender himself to save that man, struck down with so melancholy an error, to resume his own name, to become once more, out of duty, the convict Jean Valjean, that was, in truth, to achieve his resurrection, and to close forever that hell whence he had just emerged; to fall back there in appearance was to escape from it in reality. This must be done! He had done nothing if he did not do all this; his whole life was useless; all his penitence was wasted. There was no longer any need of saying, “What is the use?” He felt that the Bishop was there, that the Bishop was present all the more because he was dead, that the Bishop was gazing fixedly at him, that henceforth Mayor Madeleine, with all his virtues, would be abominable to him, and that the convict Jean Valjean would be pure and admirable in his sight; that men beheld his mask, but that the Bishop saw his face; that men saw his life, but that the Bishop beheld his conscience. So he must go to Arras, deliver the false Jean Valjean, and denounce the real one. Alas! that was the greatest of sacrifices, the most poignant of victories, the last step to take; but it must be done. Sad fate! he would enter into sanctity only in the eyes of God when he returned to infamy in the eyes of men.

“Well,” said he, “let us decide upon this; let us do our duty; let us save this man.” He uttered these words aloud, without perceiving that he was speaking aloud.

He took his books, verified them, and put them in order. He flung in the fire a bundle of bills which he had against petty and embarrassed tradesmen. He wrote and sealed a letter, and on the envelope it might have been read, had there been any one in his chamber at the moment, To Monsieur Laffitte, Banker, Rue d’Artois, Paris. He drew from his secretary a pocket-book which contained several bank-notes and the passport of which he had made use that same year when he went to the elections.

Any one who had seen him during the execution of these various acts, into which there entered such grave thought, would have had no suspicion of what was going on within him. Only occasionally did his lips move; at other times he raised his head and fixed his gaze upon some point of the wall, as though there existed at that point something which he wished to elucidate or interrogate.

When he had finished the letter to M. Laffitte, he put it into his pocket, together with the pocket-book, and began his walk once more.

His revery had not swerved from its course. He continued to see his duty clearly, written in luminous letters, which flamed before his eyes and changed its place as he altered the direction of his glance: —

“Go! Tell your name! Denounce yourself!”

In the same way he beheld, as though they had passed before him in visible forms, the two ideas which had, up to that time, formed the double rule of his soul, — the concealment of his name, the sanctification of his life. For the first time they appeared to him as absolutely distinct, and he perceived the distance which separated them. He recognized the fact that one of these ideas was, necessarily, good, while the other might become bad; that the first was self-devotion, and that the other was personality; that the one said, my neighbor, and that the other said, myself; that one emanated from the light, and the other from darkness.

They were antagonistic. He saw them in conflict. In proportion as he meditated, they grew before the eyes of his spirit. They had now attained colossal statures, and it seemed to him that he beheld within himself, in that infinity of which we were recently speaking, in the midst of the darkness and the lights, a goddess and a giant contending.

He was filled with terror; but it seemed to him that the good thought was getting the upper hand.

He felt that he was on the brink of the second decisive crisis of his conscience and of his destiny; that the Bishop had marked the first phase of his new life, and that Champmathieu marked the second. After the grand crisis, the grand test.

But the fever, allayed for an instant, gradually resumed possession of him. A thousand thoughts traversed his mind, but they continued to fortify him in his resolution.

One moment he said to himself that he was, perhaps, taking the matter too keenly; that, after all, this Champmathieu was not interesting, and that he had actually been guilty of theft.

He answered himself: “If this man has, indeed, stolen a few apples, that means a month in prison. It is a long way from that to the galleys. And who knows? Did he steal? Has it been proved? The name of Jean Valjean overwhelms him, and seems to dispense with proofs. Do not the attorneys for the Crown always proceed in this manner? He is supposed to be a thief because he is known to be a convict.”

In another instant the thought had occurred to him that, when he denounced himself, the heroism of his deed might, perhaps, be taken into consideration, and his honest life for the last seven years, and what he had done for the district, and that they would have mercy on him.

But this supposition vanished very quickly, and he smiled bitterly as he remembered that the theft of the forty sous from little Gervais put him in the position of a man guilty of a second offence after conviction, that this affair would certainly come up, and, according to the precise terms of the law, would render him liable to penal servitude for life.

He turned aside from all illusions, detached himself more and more from earth, and sought strength and consolation elsewhere. He told himself that he must do his duty; that perhaps he should not be more unhappy after doing his duty than after having avoided it; that if he allowed things to take their own course, if he remained at M. sur M., his consideration, his good name, his good works, the deference and veneration paid to him, his charity, his wealth, his popularity, his virtue, would be seasoned with a crime. And what would be the taste of all these holy things when bound up with this hideous thing? while, if he accomplished his sacrifice, a celestial idea would be mingled with the galleys, the post, the iron necklet, the green cap, unceasing toil, and pitiless shame.

At length he told himself that it must be so, that his destiny was thus allotted, that he had not authority to alter the arrangements made on high, that, in any case, he must make his choice: virtue without and abomination within, or holiness within and infamy without.

The stirring up of these lugubrious ideas did not cause his courage to fail, but his brain grow weary. He began to think of other things, of indifferent matters, in spite of himself.

The veins in his temples throbbed violently; he still paced to and fro; midnight sounded first from the parish church, then from the town-hall; he counted the twelve strokes of the two clocks, and compared the sounds of the two bells; he recalled in this connection the fact that, a few days previously, he had seen in an ironmonger's shop an ancient clock for sale, upon which was written the name, Antoine-Albin de Romainville.

He was cold; he lighted a small fire; it did not occur to him to close the window.

In the meantime he had relapsed into his stupor; he was obliged to make a tolerably vigorous effort to recall what had been the subject of his thoughts before midnight had struck; he finally succeeded in doing this.

"Ah! yes," he said to himself, "I had resolved to inform against myself."

And then, all of a sudden, he thought of Fantine.

"Hold!" said he, "and what about that poor woman?"

Here a fresh crisis declared itself.

Fantine, by appearing thus abruptly in his revery, produced the effect of an unexpected ray of light; it seemed to him as though everything about him were undergoing a change of aspect: he exclaimed: —

"Ah! but I have hitherto considered no one but myself; it is proper for me to hold my tongue or to denounce myself, to conceal my person or to save my soul, to be a despicable and respected magistrate, or an infamous and venerable convict; it is I, it is always I and nothing but I: but, good God! all this is egotism; these are diverse forms of egotism, but it is egotism all the same. What if I were to think a little about others? The highest holiness is to think of others; come, let us examine the matter. The *I* excepted, the *I* effaced, the *I* forgotten, what would be the result of all this? What if I denounce myself? I am arrested; this Champmathieu is released; I am put back in the galleys; that is well — and what then? What is going on here? Ah! here is a country, a town, here are factories, an industry, workers, both men and women, aged grandsires, children, poor people! All this I have created; all these I provide with their living; everywhere where there is a smoking chimney, it is I who have placed the brand on the hearth and meat in the pot; I have created ease, circulation, credit; before me there was nothing; I have elevated, vivified, informed with life, fecundated, stimulated, enriched the whole country-side; lacking me, the soul is lacking; I take myself off, everything dies: and this woman, who has suffered so much, who possesses so many merits in spite of her fall; the cause of all whose misery I have unwittingly been! And that child whom I meant to go in search of, whom I have promised to her mother; do I not also owe something to this woman, in reparation for the evil which I have done her? If I disappear, what happens? The mother dies; the child becomes what it can; that is what will take place, if I denounce myself. If I do not denounce myself? come, let us see how it will be if I do not denounce myself."

After putting this question to himself, he paused; he seemed to undergo a momentary hesitation and trepidation; but it did not last long, and he answered himself calmly: —

"Well, this man is going to the galleys; it is true, but what the deuce! he has stolen! There is no use in my saying that he has not been guilty of theft, for he has! I remain here; I go on: in ten years I shall have made ten millions; I scatter them over the country; I have nothing of my own; what is that to me? It is not for myself that I am doing it; the prosperity of all goes on augmenting; industries are aroused and animated; factories and shops are multiplied; families, a hundred families, a thousand families, are happy; the district becomes populated; villages spring up where there were only farms before; farms rise where there was nothing; wretchedness disappears, and with wretchedness debauchery, prostitution, theft, murder; all vices disappear, all crimes: and this poor mother rears her child; and behold a whole country rich and honest! Ah! I was a fool! I was absurd! what was that I was saying about denouncing myself? I really must pay attention and not be precipitate about anything. What! because it would have pleased me to play the grand and generous; this is melodrama, after all; because I should have thought of no one but myself, the idea! for the sake of saving from a punishment, a trifle exaggerated, perhaps, but just at bottom, no one knows whom, a thief, a good-for-nothing, evidently, a whole country-side must perish! a poor woman must die in the hospital! a poor little girl must die in the street! like dogs; ah, this is abominable! And without the mother even having seen her child once more, almost without the child's having known her mother; and all that for the sake of an old wretch of an apple-thief who, most assuredly, has deserved the galleys for something else, if not for that; fine scruples, indeed, which save a guilty man and sacrifice the innocent, which save an old vagabond who has only a few years to live at most, and who will not be more unhappy in the galleys than in his hovel, and which sacrifice a whole population, mothers, wives, children. This poor little Cosette who has no one in the world but me, and who is, no doubt, blue with cold at this moment in the den of those Thenardiers; those peoples are rascals; and I was going to neglect my duty towards all these poor creatures; and I was going off to denounce myself; and I was about to commit that unspeakable folly! Let us put it at the worst: suppose that there is a wrong action on my part in this, and that my conscience will reproach me for it some day, to accept, for the good of others, these reproaches which weigh only on myself; this evil action which compromises my soul alone; in that lies self-sacrifice; in that alone there is virtue."

He rose and resumed his march; this time, he seemed to be content.

Diamonds are found only in the dark places of the earth; truths are found only in the depths of thought. It seemed to him, that, after having descended into these depths, after having long groped among the darkest of these shadows, he had at last found one of these diamonds, one of these truths, and that he now held it in his hand, and he was dazzled as he gazed upon it.

"Yes," he thought, "this is right; I am on the right road; I have the solution; I must end by holding fast to something; my resolve is taken; let things take their course; let us no longer vacillate; let us no longer hang back; this is for the interest of all, not for my own; I am Madeleine, and Madeleine I remain. Woe to the man who is Jean Valjean! I am no longer he; I do not know that man; I no longer know anything; it turns out that some one is Jean Valjean at the present moment; let him look out for himself; that does not concern me; it is a fatal name which was floating abroad in the night; if it halts and descends on a head, so much the worse for that head."

He looked into the little mirror which hung above his chimney-piece, and said: —

"Hold! it has relieved me to come to a decision; I am quite another man now."

He proceeded a few paces further, then he stopped short.

“Come!” he said, “I must not flinch before any of the consequences of the resolution which I have once adopted; there are still threads which attach me to that Jean Valjean; they must be broken; in this very room there are objects which would betray me, dumb things which would bear witness against me; it is settled; all these things must disappear.”

He fumbled in his pocket, drew out his purse, opened it, and took out a small key; he inserted the key in a lock whose aperture could hardly be seen, so hidden was it in the most sombre tones of the design which covered the wall-paper; a secret receptacle opened, a sort of false cupboard constructed in the angle between the wall and the chimney-piece; in this hiding-place there were some rags — a blue linen blouse, an old pair of trousers, an old knapsack, and a huge thorn cudgel shod with iron at both ends. Those who had seen Jean Valjean at the epoch when he passed through D —— in October, 1815, could easily have recognized all the pieces of this miserable outfit.

He had preserved them as he had preserved the silver candlesticks, in order to remind himself continually of his starting-point, but he had concealed all that came from the galleys, and he had allowed the candlesticks which came from the Bishop to be seen.

He cast a furtive glance towards the door, as though he feared that it would open in spite of the bolt which fastened it; then, with a quick and abrupt movement, he took the whole in his arms at once, without bestowing so much as a glance on the things which he had so religiously and so perilously preserved for so many years, and flung them all, rags, cudgel, knapsack, into the fire.

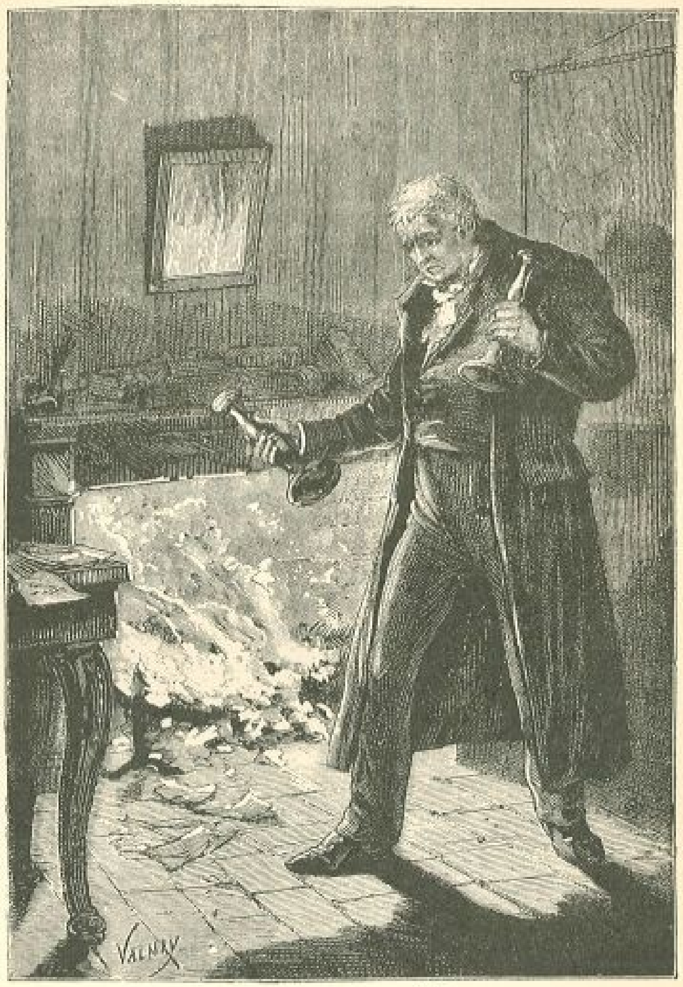

"INTO THE FIRE!"

He closed the false cupboard again, and with redoubled precautions, henceforth unnecessary, since it was now empty, he concealed the door behind a heavy piece of furniture, which he pushed in front of it.

After the lapse of a few seconds, the room and the opposite wall were lighted up with a fierce, red, tremulous glow. Everything was on fire; the thorn cudgel snapped and threw out sparks to the middle of the chamber.

As the knapsack was consumed, together with the hideous rags which it contained, it revealed something which sparkled in the ashes. By bending over, one could have readily recognized a coin, — no doubt the forty-sou piece stolen from the little Savoyard.

He did not look at the fire, but paced back and forth with the same step.

All at once his eye fell on the two silver candlesticks, which shone vaguely on the chimney-piece, through the glow.

"Hold!" he thought; "the whole of Jean Valjean is still in them. They must be destroyed also."

He seized the two candlesticks.

There was still fire enough to allow of their being put out of shape, and converted into a sort of unrecognizable bar of metal.

He bent over the hearth and warmed himself for a moment. He felt a sense of real comfort. "How good warmth is!" said he.

He stirred the live coals with one of the candlesticks.

A minute more, and they were both in the fire.

At that moment it seemed to him that he heard a voice within him shouting: "Jean Valjean! Jean Valjean!"

His hair rose upright: he became like a man who is listening to some terrible thing.

"Yes, that's it! finish!" said the voice. "Complete what you are about! Destroy these candlesticks! Annihilate this souvenir! Forget the Bishop! Forget everything! Destroy this Champmathieu, do! That is right! Applaud yourself! So it is settled, resolved, fixed, agreed: here is an old man who does not know what is wanted of him, who has, perhaps, done nothing, an innocent man, whose whole misfortune lies in your name, upon whom your name weighs like a crime, who is about to be taken for you, who will be condemned, who will finish his days in abjectness and horror. That is good! Be an honest man yourself; remain Monsieur le Maire; remain honorable and honored; enrich the town; nourish the indigent; rear the orphan; live happy, virtuous, and admired; and, during this time, while you are here in the midst of joy and light, there will be a man who will wear your red blouse, who will bear your name in ignominy, and who will drag your chain in the galleys. Yes, it is well arranged thus. Ah, wretch!"

The perspiration streamed from his brow. He fixed a haggard eye on the candlesticks. But that within him which had spoken had not finished. The voice continued: —

"Jean Valjean, there will be around you many voices, which will make a great noise, which will talk very loud, and which will bless you, and only one which no one will hear, and which will curse you in the dark. Well! listen, infamous man! All those benedictions will fall back before they reach heaven, and only the malediction will ascend to God."

This voice, feeble at first, and which had proceeded from the most obscure depths of his conscience, had gradually become startling and formidable, and he now heard it in his very ear. It seemed to him that it had detached itself from him, and that it was now speaking outside of him. He thought that he heard the last words so distinctly, that he glanced around the room in a sort of terror.

“Is there any one here?” he demanded aloud, in utter bewilderment.

Then he resumed, with a laugh which resembled that of an idiot: —

“How stupid I am! There can be no one!”

There was some one; but the person who was there was of those whom the human eye cannot see.

He placed the candlesticks on the chimney-piece.

Then he resumed his monotonous and lugubrious tramp, which troubled the dreams of the sleeping man beneath him, and awoke him with a start.

This tramping to and fro soothed and at the same time intoxicated him. It sometimes seems, on supreme occasions, as though people moved about for the purpose of asking advice of everything that they may encounter by change of place. After the lapse of a few minutes he no longer knew his position.

He now recoiled in equal terror before both the resolutions at which he had arrived in turn. The two ideas which counselled him appeared to him equally fatal. What a fatality! What conjunction that that Champmathieu should have been taken for him; to be overwhelmed by precisely the means which Providence seemed to have employed, at first, to strengthen his position!

There was a moment when he reflected on the future. Denounce himself, great God! Deliver himself up! With immense despair he faced all that he should be obliged to leave, all that he should be obliged to take up once more. He should have to bid farewell to that existence which was so good, so pure, so radiant, to the respect of all, to honor, to liberty. He should never more stroll in the fields; he should never more hear the birds sing in the month of May; he should never more bestow alms on the little children; he should never more experience the sweetness of having glances of gratitude and love fixed upon him; he should quit that house which he had built, that little chamber! Everything seemed charming to him at that moment. Never again should he read those books; never more should he write on that little table of white wood; his old portress, the only servant whom he kept, would never more bring him his coffee in the morning. Great God! instead of that, the convict gang, the iron necklet, the red waistcoat, the chain on his ankle, fatigue, the cell, the camp bed all those horrors which he knew so well! At his age, after having been what he was! If he were only young again! but to be addressed in his old age as “thou” by any one who pleased; to be searched by the convict-guard; to receive the galley-sergeant’s cudgellings; to wear iron-bound shoes on his bare feet; to have to stretch out his leg night and morning to the hammer of the roundsman who visits the gang; to submit to the curiosity of strangers, who would be told: “That man yonder is the famous Jean Valjean, who was mayor of M. sur M.”; and at night, dripping with perspiration, overwhelmed with lassitude, their green caps drawn over their eyes, to remount, two by two, the ladder staircase of the galleys beneath the sergeant’s whip. Oh, what misery! Can destiny, then, be as malicious as an intelligent being, and become as monstrous as the human heart?

And do what he would, he always fell back upon the heartrending dilemma which lay at the foundation of his revery: “Should he remain in paradise and become a demon? Should he return to hell and become an angel?”

What was to be done? Great God! what was to be done?

The torment from which he had escaped with so much difficulty was unchained afresh within him. His ideas began to grow confused once more; they assumed a kind of stupefied and mechanical quality which is peculiar to despair. The name of Romainville recurred incessantly to his mind, with the two verses of a song which he had heard in the past. He thought that Romainville was a little grove near Paris, where young lovers go to pluck lilacs in the month of April.

He wavered outwardly as well as inwardly. He walked like a little child who is permitted to toddle alone.

At intervals, as he combated his lassitude, he made an effort to recover the mastery of his mind. He tried to put to himself, for the last time, and definitely, the problem over which he had, in a manner, fallen prostrate with fatigue: Ought he to denounce himself? Ought he to hold his peace? He could not manage to see anything distinctly. The vague aspects of all the courses of reasoning which had been sketched out by his meditations quivered and vanished, one after the other, into smoke. He only felt that, to whatever course of action he made up his mind, something in him must die, and that of necessity, and without his being able to escape the fact; that he was entering a sepulchre on the right hand as much as on the left; that he was passing through a death agony, — the agony of his happiness, or the agony of his virtue.

Alas! all his resolution had again taken possession of him. He was no further advanced than at the beginning.

Thus did this unhappy soul struggle in its anguish. Eighteen hundred years before this unfortunate man, the mysterious Being in whom are summed up all the sanctities and all the sufferings of humanity had also long thrust aside with his hand, while the olive-trees quivered in the wild wind of the infinite, the terrible cup which appeared to Him dripping with darkness and overflowing with shadows in the depths all studded with stars.

CHAPTER IV — FORMS ASSUMED BY SUFFERING DURING SLEEP

Three o’clock in the morning had just struck, and he had been walking thus for five hours, almost uninterruptedly, when he at length allowed himself to drop into his chair.

There he fell asleep and had a dream.

This dream, like the majority of dreams, bore no relation to the situation, except by its painful and heart-rending character, but it made an impression on him. This nightmare struck him so forcibly that he wrote it down later on. It is one of the papers in his own handwriting which he has bequeathed to us. We think that we have here reproduced the thing in strict accordance with the text.

Of whatever nature this dream may be, the history of this night would be incomplete if we were to omit it: it is the gloomy adventure of an ailing soul.

Here it is. On the envelope we find this line inscribed, “The Dream I had that Night.”

“I was in a plain; a vast, gloomy plain, where there was no grass. It did not seem to me to be daylight nor yet night.

“I was walking with my brother, the brother of my childish years, the brother of whom, I must say, I never think, and whom I now hardly remember.

“We were conversing and we met some passers-by. We were talking of a neighbor of ours in former days, who had always worked with her window open from the time when she came to live on the street. As we talked we felt cold because of that open window.

“There were no trees in the plain. We saw a man passing close to us. He was entirely nude, of the hue of ashes, and mounted on a horse which was earth color. The man had no hair; we could see his skull and the veins on it. In his hand he held a switch which was as supple as a vine-shoot and as heavy as iron. This horseman passed and said nothing to us.

“My brother said to me, ‘Let us take to the hollow road.’

“There existed a hollow way wherein one saw neither a single shrub nor a spear of moss. Everything was dirt-colored, even the sky. After proceeding a few paces, I received no reply when I spoke: I perceived that my brother was no longer with me.

"I entered a village which I espied. I reflected that it must be Romainville. (Why Romainville?)

"The first street that I entered was deserted. I entered a second street. Behind the angle formed by the two streets, a man was standing erect against the wall. I said to this Man: —

"'What country is this? Where am I?' The man made no reply. I saw the door of a house open, and I entered.

"The first chamber was deserted. I entered the second. Behind the door of this chamber a man was standing erect against the wall. I inquired of this man, 'Whose house is this? Where am I?' The man replied not.

"The house had a garden. I quitted the house and entered the garden. The garden was deserted. Behind the first tree I found a man standing upright. I said to this man, 'What garden is this? Where am I?' The man did not answer.

"I strolled into the village, and perceived that it was a town. All the streets were deserted, all the doors were open. Not a single living being was passing in the streets, walking through the chambers or strolling in the gardens. But behind each angle of the walls, behind each door, behind each tree, stood a silent man. Only one was to be seen at a time. These men watched me pass.

"I left the town and began to ramble about the fields.

"After the lapse of some time I turned back and saw a great crowd coming up behind me. I recognized all the men whom I had seen in that town. They had strange heads. They did not seem to be in a hurry, yet they walked faster than I did. They made no noise as they walked. In an instant this crowd had overtaken and surrounded me. The faces of these men were earthen in hue.

"Then the first one whom I had seen and questioned on entering the town said to me: —

"'Whither are you going! Do you not know that you have been dead this long time?'

"I opened my mouth to reply, and I perceived that there was no one near me."

He woke. He was icy cold. A wind which was chill like the breeze of dawn was rattling the leaves of the window, which had been left open on their hinges. The fire was out. The candle was nearing its end. It was still black night.

He rose, he went to the window. There were no stars in the sky even yet.

From his window the yard of the house and the street were visible. A sharp, harsh noise, which made him drop his eyes, resounded from the earth.

Below him he perceived two red stars, whose rays lengthened and shortened in a singular manner through the darkness.

As his thoughts were still half immersed in the mists of sleep, “Hold!” said he, “there are no stars in the sky. They are on earth now.”

But this confusion vanished; a second sound similar to the first roused him thoroughly; he looked and recognized the fact that these two stars were the lanterns of a carriage. By the light which they cast he was able to distinguish the form of this vehicle. It was a tilbury harnessed to a small white horse. The noise which he had heard was the trampling of the horse’s hoofs on the pavement.

“What vehicle is this?” he said to himself. “Who is coming here so early in the morning?”

At that moment there came a light tap on the door of his chamber.

He shuddered from head to foot, and cried in a terrible voice: —

“Who is there?”

Some one said: —

“I, Monsieur le Maire.”

He recognized the voice of the old woman who was his portress.

“Well!” he replied, “what is it?”

“Monsieur le Maire, it is just five o’clock in the morning.”

“What is that to me?”

“The cabriolet is here, Monsieur le Maire.”

“What cabriolet?”

“The tilbury.”

“What tilbury?”

“Did not Monsieur le Maire order a tilbury?”

“No,” said he.

“The coachman says that he has come for Monsieur le Maire.”

“What coachman?”

“M. Scaufflaire’s coachman.”

“M. Scaufflaire?”

That name sent a shudder over him, as though a flash of lightning had passed in front of his face.

“Ah! yes,” he resumed; “M. Scaufflaire!”

If the old woman could have seen him at that moment, she would have been frightened.

A tolerably long silence ensued. He examined the flame of the candle with a stupid air, and from around the wick he took some of the burning wax, which he rolled between his fingers. The old woman waited for him. She even ventured to uplift her voice once more: —

“What am I to say, Monsieur le Maire?”

“Say that it is well, and that I am coming down.”

CHAPTER V — HINDRANCES

The posting service from Arras to M. sur M. was still operated at this period by small mail-wagons of the time of the Empire. These mail-wagons were two-wheeled cabriolets, upholstered inside with fawn-colored leather, hung on springs, and having but two seats, one for the postboy, the other for the traveller. The wheels were armed with those long, offensive axles which keep other vehicles at a distance, and which may still be seen on the road in Germany. The despatch box, an immense oblong coffer, was placed behind the vehicle and formed a part of it. This coffer was painted black, and the cabriolet yellow.

These vehicles, which have no counterparts nowadays, had something distorted and hunchbacked about them; and when one saw them passing in the distance, and climbing up some road to the horizon, they resembled the insects which are called, I think, termites, and which, though with but little corselet, drag a great train behind them. But they travelled at a very rapid rate. The post-wagon which set out from Arras at one o'clock every night, after the mail from Paris had passed, arrived at M. sur M. a little before five o'clock in the morning.

That night the wagon which was descending to M. sur M. by the Hesdin road, collided at the corner of a street, just as it was entering the town, with a little tilbury harnessed to a white horse, which was going in the opposite direction, and in which there was but one person, a man enveloped in a mantle. The wheel of the tilbury received quite a violent shock. The postman shouted to the man to stop, but the traveller paid no heed and pursued his road at full gallop.

"That man is in a devilish hurry!" said the postman.

The man thus hastening on was the one whom we have just seen struggling in convulsions which are certainly deserving of pity.

Whither was he going? He could not have told. Why was he hastening? He did not know. He was driving at random, straight ahead. Whither? To Arras, no doubt; but he might have been going elsewhere as well. At times he was conscious of it, and he shuddered. He plunged into the night as into a gulf. Something urged him forward; something drew him on. No one could have told what was taking place within him; every one will understand it. What man is there who has not entered, at least once in his life, into that obscure cavern of the unknown?

However, he had resolved on nothing, decided nothing, formed no plan, done nothing. None of the actions of his conscience had been decisive. He was, more than ever, as he had been at the first moment.

Why was he going to Arras?

He repeated what he had already said to himself when he had hired Scaufflaire's cabriolet: that, whatever the result was to be, there was no reason why he should not see with his own eyes, and judge of matters for himself; that this was even prudent; that he must know what took place; that no decision could be arrived at without having observed and scrutinized; that one made mountains out of everything from a distance; that, at any rate, when he should have seen that Champmathieu, some wretch, his conscience would probably be greatly relieved to allow him to go to the galleys in his stead; that Javert would indeed be there; and that Brevet, that Chenildieu, that Cochepaille, old convicts who had known him; but they certainly would not recognize him; — bah! what an idea! that Javert was a hundred leagues from suspecting the truth; that all conjectures and all suppositions were fixed on Champmathieu, and that there is nothing so headstrong as suppositions and conjectures; that accordingly there was no danger.

That it was, no doubt, a dark moment, but that he should emerge from it; that, after all, he held his destiny, however bad it might be, in his own hand; that he was master of it. He clung to this thought.

At bottom, to tell the whole truth, he would have preferred not to go to Arras.

Nevertheless, he was going thither.

As he meditated, he whipped up his horse, which was proceeding at that fine, regular, and even trot which accomplishes two leagues and a half an hour.

In proportion as the cabriolet advanced, he felt something within him draw back.

At daybreak he was in the open country; the town of M. sur M. lay far behind him. He watched the horizon grow white; he stared at all the chilly figures of a winter's dawn as they passed before his eyes, but without seeing them. The morning has its spectres as well as the evening. He did not see them; but without his being aware of it, and by means of a sort of penetration which was almost physical, these black silhouettes of trees and of hills added some gloomy and sinister quality to the violent state of his soul.

Each time that he passed one of those isolated dwellings which sometimes border on the highway, he said to himself, “And yet there are people there within who are sleeping!”

The trot of the horse, the bells on the harness, the wheels on the road, produced a gentle, monotonous noise. These things are charming when one is joyous, and lugubrious when one is sad.

It was broad daylight when he arrived at Hesdin. He halted in front of the inn, to allow the horse a breathing spell, and to have him given some oats.

The horse belonged, as Scaufflaire had said, to that small race of the Boulonnais, which has too much head, too much belly, and not enough neck and shoulders, but which has a broad chest, a large crupper, thin, fine legs, and solid hoofs — a homely, but a robust and healthy race. The excellent beast had travelled five leagues in two hours, and had not a drop of sweat on his loins.

He did not get out of the tilbury. The stableman who brought the oats suddenly bent down and examined the left wheel.

“Are you going far in this condition?” said the man.

He replied, with an air of not having roused himself from his revery: —

“Why?”

“Have you come from a great distance?” went on the man.

“Five leagues.”

“Ah!”

“Why do you say, ‘Ah?’”

The man bent down once more, was silent for a moment, with his eyes fixed on the wheel; then he rose erect and said: —

“Because, though this wheel has travelled five leagues, it certainly will not travel another quarter of a league.”

He sprang out of the tilbury.

“What is that you say, my friend?”

“I say that it is a miracle that you should have travelled five leagues without you and your horse rolling into some ditch on the highway. Just see here!”

The wheel really had suffered serious damage. The shock administered by the mail-wagon had split two spokes and strained the hub, so that the nut no longer held firm.

“My friend,” he said to the stableman, “is there a wheelwright here?”

“Certainly, sir.”

“Do me the service to go and fetch him.”

“He is only a step from here. Hey! Master Bourgaillard!”

Master Bourgaillard, the wheelwright, was standing on his own threshold. He came, examined the wheel and made a grimace like a surgeon when the latter thinks a limb is broken.

“Can you repair this wheel immediately?”

“Yes, sir.”

“When can I set out again?”

“To-morrow.”

“To-morrow!”

“There is a long day’s work on it. Are you in a hurry, sir?”

“In a very great hurry. I must set out again in an hour at the latest.”

“Impossible, sir.”

“I will pay whatever you ask.”

“Impossible.”

“Well, in two hours, then.”

“Impossible to-day. Two new spokes and a hub must be made. Monsieur will not be able to start before to-morrow morning.”

“The matter cannot wait until to-morrow. What if you were to replace this wheel instead of repairing it?”

“How so?”

“You are a wheelwright?”

“Certainly, sir.”

“Have you not a wheel that you can sell me? Then I could start again at once.”

“A spare wheel?”

“Yes.”

“I have no wheel on hand that would fit your cabriolet. Two wheels make a pair. Two wheels cannot be put together hap-hazard.”

“In that case, sell me a pair of wheels.”

“Not all wheels fit all axles, sir.”

“Try, nevertheless.”

“It is useless, sir. I have nothing to sell but cart-wheels. We are but a poor country here.”

“Have you a cabriolet that you can let me have?”

The wheelwright had seen at the first glance that the tilbury was a hired vehicle. He shrugged his shoulders.

"You treat the cabriolets that people let you so well! If I had one, I would not let it to you!"

"Well, sell it to me, then."

"I have none."

"What! not even a spring-cart? I am not hard to please, as you see."

"We live in a poor country. There is, in truth," added the wheelwright, "an old calash under the shed yonder, which belongs to a bourgeois of the town, who gave it to me to take care of, and who only uses it on the thirty-sixth of the month — never, that is to say. I might let that to you, for what matters it to me? But the bourgeois must not see it pass — and then, it is a calash; it would require two horses."

"I will take two post-horses."

"Where is Monsieur going?"

"To Arras."

"And Monsieur wishes to reach there to-day?"

"Yes, of course."

"By taking two post-horses?"

"Why not?"

"Does it make any difference whether Monsieur arrives at four o'clock to-morrow morning?"

"Certainly not."

"There is one thing to be said about that, you see, by taking post-horses — Monsieur has his passport?"

"Yes."

"Well, by taking post-horses, Monsieur cannot reach Arras before to-morrow. We are on a cross-road. The relays are badly served, the horses are in the fields. The season for ploughing is just beginning; heavy teams are required, and horses are seized upon everywhere, from the post as well as elsewhere. Monsieur will have to wait three or four hours at the least at every relay. And, then, they drive at a walk. There are many hills to ascend."

"Come then, I will go on horseback. Unharness the cabriolet. Some one can surely sell me a saddle in the neighborhood."

"Without doubt. But will this horse bear the saddle?"

"That is true; you remind me of that; he will not bear it."

“Then—”

“But I can surely hire a horse in the village?”

“A horse to travel to Arras at one stretch?”

“Yes.”

“That would require such a horse as does not exist in these parts. You would have to buy it to begin with, because no one knows you. But you will not find one for sale nor to let, for five hundred francs, or for a thousand.”

“What am I to do?”

“The best thing is to let me repair the wheel like an honest man, and set out on your journey to-morrow.”

“To-morrow will be too late.”

“The deuce!”

“Is there not a mail-wagon which runs to Arras? When will it pass?”

“To-night. Both the posts pass at night; the one going as well as the one coming.”

“What! It will take you a day to mend this wheel?”

“A day, and a good long one.”

“If you set two men to work?”

“If I set ten men to work.”

“What if the spokes were to be tied together with ropes?”

“That could be done with the spokes, not with the hub; and the felly is in a bad state, too.”

“Is there any one in this village who lets out teams?”

“No.”

“Is there another wheelwright?”

The stableman and the wheelwright replied in concert, with a toss of the head.

“No.”

He felt an immense joy.

It was evident that Providence was intervening. That it was it who had broken the wheel of the tilbury and who was stopping him on the road. He had not yielded to this sort of first summons; he had just made every possible effort to continue the journey; he had loyally and scrupulously exhausted all means; he had been deterred neither by the season, nor fatigue, nor by the expense; he had nothing with which to reproach himself. If he went no further, that was no fault of his. It did not concern him further.

It was no longer his fault. It was not the act of his own conscience, but the act of Providence.

He breathed again. He breathed freely and to the full extent of his lungs for the first time since Javert's visit. It seemed to him that the hand of iron which had held his heart in its grasp for the last twenty hours had just released him.

It seemed to him that God was for him now, and was manifesting Himself.

He said himself that he had done all he could, and that now he had nothing to do but retrace his steps quietly.

If his conversation with the wheelwright had taken place in a chamber of the inn, it would have had no witnesses, no one would have heard him, things would have rested there, and it is probable that we should not have had to relate any of the occurrences which the reader is about to peruse; but this conversation had taken place in the street. Any colloquy in the street inevitably attracts a crowd. There are always people who ask nothing better than to become spectators. While he was questioning the wheelwright, some people who were passing back and forth halted around them. After listening for a few minutes, a young lad, to whom no one had paid any heed, detached himself from the group and ran off.

At the moment when the traveller, after the inward deliberation which we have just described, resolved to retrace his steps, this child returned. He was accompanied by an old woman.

"Monsieur," said the woman, "my boy tells me that you wish to hire a cabriolet."

These simple words uttered by an old woman led by a child made the perspiration trickle down his limbs. He thought that he beheld the hand which had relaxed its grasp reappear in the darkness behind him, ready to seize him once more.

He answered: —

"Yes, my good woman; I am in search of a cabriolet which I can hire."

And he hastened to add: —

"But there is none in the place."

"Certainly there is," said the old woman.

"Where?" interpolated the wheelwright.

"At my house," replied the old woman.

He shuddered. The fatal hand had grasped him again.

The old woman really had in her shed a sort of basket spring-cart. The wheelwright and the stable-man, in despair at the prospect of the traveller escaping their clutches, interfered.

"It was a frightful old trap; it rests flat on the axle; it is an actual fact that the seats were suspended inside it by leather thongs; the rain came into it; the wheels were rusted and eaten with moisture; it would not go much further than the tilbury; a regular ramshackle old stage-wagon; the gentleman would make a great mistake if he trusted himself to it," etc., etc.

All this was true; but this trap, this ramshackle old vehicle, this thing, whatever it was, ran on its two wheels and could go to Arras.

He paid what was asked, left the tilbury with the wheelwright to be repaired, intending to reclaim it on his return, had the white horse put to the cart, climbed into it, and resumed the road which he had been travelling since morning.

At the moment when the cart moved off, he admitted that he had felt, a moment previously, a certain joy in the thought that he should not go whither he was now proceeding. He examined this joy with a sort of wrath, and found it absurd. Why should he feel joy at turning back? After all, he was taking this trip of his own free will. No one was forcing him to it.

And assuredly nothing would happen except what he should choose.

As he left Hesdin, he heard a voice shouting to him: "Stop! Stop!" He halted the cart with a vigorous movement which contained a feverish and convulsive element resembling hope.

It was the old woman's little boy.

"Monsieur," said the latter, "it was I who got the cart for you."

"Well?"

"You have not given me anything."

He who gave to all so readily thought this demand exorbitant and almost odious.

"Ah! it's you, you scamp?" said he; "you shall have nothing."

He whipped up his horse and set off at full speed.

He had lost a great deal of time at Hesdin. He wanted to make it good. The little horse was courageous, and pulled for two; but it was the month of February, there had been rain; the roads were bad. And then, it was no longer the tilbury. The cart was very heavy, and in addition, there were many ascents.

He took nearly four hours to go from Hesdin to Saint-Pol; four hours for five leagues.

At Saint-Pol he had the horse unharnessed at the first inn he came to and led to the stable; as he had promised Scaufflaire, he stood beside the manger while the horse was eating; he thought of sad and confusing things.

The inn-keeper’s wife came to the stable.

“Does not Monsieur wish to breakfast?”

“Come, that is true; I even have a good appetite.”

He followed the woman, who had a rosy, cheerful face; she led him to the public room where there were tables covered with waxed cloth.

“Make haste!” said he; “I must start again; I am in a hurry.”

A big Flemish servant-maid placed his knife and fork in all haste; he looked at the girl with a sensation of comfort.

“That is what ailed me,” he thought; “I had not breakfasted.”

His breakfast was served; he seized the bread, took a mouthful, and then slowly replaced it on the table, and did not touch it again.

A carter was eating at another table; he said to this man: —

“Why is their bread so bitter here?”

The carter was a German and did not understand him.

He returned to the stable and remained near the horse.

An hour later he had quitted Saint-Pol and was directing his course towards Tinques, which is only five leagues from Arras.

What did he do during this journey? Of what was he thinking? As in the morning, he watched the trees, the thatched roofs, the tilled fields pass by, and the way in which the landscape, broken at every turn of the road, vanished; this is a sort of contemplation which sometimes suffices to the soul, and almost relieves it from thought. What is more melancholy and more profound than to see a thousand objects for the first and the last time? To travel is to be born and to die at every instant; perhaps, in the vaguest region of his mind, he did make comparisons between the shifting horizon and our human existence: all the things of life are perpetually fleeing before us; the dark and bright intervals are intermingled; after a dazzling moment, an eclipse; we look, we hasten, we stretch out our hands to grasp what is passing; each event is a turn in the road, and, all at once, we are old; we feel a shock; all is black; we distinguish an obscure door; the gloomy horse of life, which has been drawing us halts, and we see a veiled and unknown person unharnessing amid the shadows.

Twilight was falling when the children who were coming out of school beheld this traveller enter Tinques; it is true that the days were still short; he did not halt at Tinques; as he emerged from the village, a laborer, who was mending the road with stones, raised his head and said to him: —

“That horse is very much fatigued.”

The poor beast was, in fact, going at a walk.

“Are you going to Arras?” added the road-mender.

“Yes.”

“If you go on at that rate you will not arrive very early.”

He stopped his horse, and asked the laborer: —

“How far is it from here to Arras?”

“Nearly seven good leagues.”

“How is that? the posting guide only says five leagues and a quarter.”

“Ah!” returned the road-mender, “so you don’t know that the road is under repair? You will find it barred a quarter of an hour further on; there is no way to proceed further.”

“Really?”

“You will take the road on the left, leading to Carency; you will cross the river; when you reach Camblin, you will turn to the right; that is the road to Mont-Saint-Eloy which leads to Arras.”

“But it is night, and I shall lose my way.”

“You do not belong in these parts?”

“No.”

“And, besides, it is all cross-roads; stop! sir,” resumed the road-mender; “shall I give you a piece of advice? your horse is tired; return to Tinques; there is a good inn there; sleep there; you can reach Arras to-morrow.”

“I must be there this evening.”

“That is different; but go to the inn all the same, and get an extra horse; the stable-boy will guide you through the cross-roads.”

He followed the road-mender’s advice, retraced his steps, and, half an hour later, he passed the same spot again, but this time at full speed, with a good horse to aid; a stable-boy, who called himself a postilion, was seated on the shaft of the cariole.

Still, he felt that he had lost time.

Night had fully come.

They turned into the cross-road; the way became frightfully bad; the cart lurched from one rut to the other; he said to the postilion: —

"Keep at a trot, and you shall have a double fee."

In one of the jolts, the whiffle-tree broke.

"There's the whiffle-tree broken, sir," said the postilion; "I don't know how to harness my horse now; this road is very bad at night; if you wish to return and sleep at Tinques, we could be in Arras early to-morrow morning."

He replied, "Have you a bit of rope and a knife?"

"Yes, sir."

He cut a branch from a tree and made a whiffle-tree of it.

This caused another loss of twenty minutes; but they set out again at a gallop.

The plain was gloomy; low-hanging, black, crisp fogs crept over the hills and wrenched themselves away like smoke: there were whitish gleams in the clouds; a strong breeze which blew in from the sea produced a sound in all quarters of the horizon, as of some one moving furniture; everything that could be seen assumed attitudes of terror. How many things shiver beneath these vast breaths of the night!

He was stiff with cold; he had eaten nothing since the night before; he vaguely recalled his other nocturnal trip in the vast plain in the neighborhood of D —— , eight years previously, and it seemed but yesterday.

The hour struck from a distant tower; he asked the boy: —

"What time is it?"

"Seven o'clock, sir; we shall reach Arras at eight; we have but three leagues still to go."

At that moment, he for the first time indulged in this reflection, thinking it odd the while that it had not occurred to him sooner: that all this trouble which he was taking was, perhaps, useless; that he did not know so much as the hour of the trial; that he should, at least, have informed himself of that; that he was foolish to go thus straight ahead without knowing whether he would be of any service or not; then he sketched out some calculations in his mind: that, ordinarily, the sittings of the Court of Assizes began at nine o'clock in the morning; that it could not be a long affair; that the theft of the apples would be very brief; that there would then remain only a question of identity, four or five depositions, and very little for the lawyers to say; that he should arrive after all was over.

The postilion whipped up the horses; they had crossed the river and left Mont-Saint-Eloy behind them.

The night grew more profound.

CHAPTER VI — SISTER SIMPLICE PUT TO THE PROOF

But at that moment Fantine was joyous.

She had passed a very bad night; her cough was frightful; her fever had doubled in intensity; she had had dreams: in the morning, when the doctor paid his visit, she was delirious; he assumed an alarmed look, and ordered that he should be informed as soon as M. Madeleine arrived.

All the morning she was melancholy, said but little, and laid plaits in her sheets, murmuring the while, in a low voice, calculations which seemed to be calculations of distances. Her eyes were hollow and staring. They seemed almost extinguished at intervals, then lighted up again and shone like stars. It seems as though, at the approach of a certain dark hour, the light of heaven fills those who are quitting the light of earth.

Each time that Sister Simplice asked her how she felt, she replied invariably, “Well. I should like to see M. Madeleine.”

Some months before this, at the moment when Fantine had just lost her last modesty, her last shame, and her last joy, she was the shadow of herself; now she was the spectre of herself. Physical suffering had completed the work of moral suffering. This creature of five and twenty had a wrinkled brow, flabby cheeks, pinched nostrils, teeth from which the gums had receded, a leaden complexion, a bony neck, prominent shoulder-blades, frail limbs, a clayey skin, and her golden hair was growing out sprinkled with gray. Alas! how illness improvises old-age!

At mid-day the physician returned, gave some directions, inquired whether the mayor had made his appearance at the infirmary, and shook his head.

M. Madeleine usually came to see the invalid at three o’clock. As exactness is kindness, he was exact.

About half-past two, Fantine began to be restless. In the course of twenty minutes, she asked the nun more than ten times, “What time is it, sister?”

Three o’clock struck. At the third stroke, Fantine sat up in bed; she who could, in general, hardly turn over, joined her yellow, fleshless hands in a sort of convulsive clasp, and the nun heard her utter one of those profound sighs which seem to throw off dejection. Then Fantine turned and looked at the door.

No one entered; the door did not open.

She remained thus for a quarter of an hour, her eyes riveted on the door, motionless and apparently holding her breath. The sister dared not speak to her. The clock struck a quarter past three. Fantine fell back on her pillow.

She said nothing, but began to plait the sheets once more.

Half an hour passed, then an hour, no one came; every time the clock struck, Fantine started up and looked towards the door, then fell back again.

Her thought was clearly perceptible, but she uttered no name, she made no complaint, she blamed no one. But she coughed in a melancholy way. One would have said that something dark was descending upon her. She was livid and her lips were blue. She smiled now and then.

Five o'clock struck. Then the sister heard her say, very low and gently, "He is wrong not to come to-day, since I am going away to-morrow."

Sister Simplice herself was surprised at M. Madeleine's delay.

In the meantime, Fantine was staring at the tester of her bed. She seemed to be endeavoring to recall something. All at once she began to sing in a voice as feeble as a breath. The nun listened. This is what Fantine was singing: —

"Lovely things we will buy
As we stroll the faubourgs through.
Roses are pink, corn-flowers are blue,
I love my love, corn-flowers are blue.

"Yestere'en the Virgin Mary came near my stove, in a broidered mantle clad, and said to me, 'Here, hide 'neath my veil the child whom you one day begged from me. Haste to the city, buy linen, buy a needle, buy thread.'

"Lovely things we will buy
As we stroll the faubourgs through.

"Dear Holy Virgin, beside my stove I have set a cradle with ribbons decked. God may give me his loveliest star; I prefer the child thou hast granted me. 'Madame, what shall I do with this linen fine?'— 'Make of it clothes for thy new-born babe.'

"Roses are pink and corn-flowers are blue,
I love my love, and corn-flowers are blue.

"'Wash this linen.'— 'Where?'— 'In the stream. Make of it, soiling not, spoiling not, a petticoat fair with its bodice fine, which I will embroider and fill with flowers.'— 'Madame, the child is no longer here; what is to be done?'— 'Then make of it a winding-sheet in which to bury me.'

"Lovely things we will buy
As we stroll the faubourgs through,
Roses are pink, corn-flowers are blue,
I love my love, corn-flowers are blue."

This song was an old cradle romance with which she had, in former days, lulled her little Cosette to sleep, and which had never recurred to her mind in all the five years during which she had been parted from her child. She sang it in so sad a voice, and to so sweet an air, that it was enough to make any one, even a nun, weep. The sister, accustomed as she was to austerities, felt a tear spring to her eyes.

The clock struck six. Fantine did not seem to hear it. She no longer seemed to pay attention to anything about her.

Sister Simplice sent a serving-maid to inquire of the portress of the factory, whether the mayor had returned, and if he would not come to the infirmary soon. The girl returned in a few minutes.

Fantine was still motionless and seemed absorbed in her own thoughts.

The servant informed Sister Simplice in a very low tone, that the mayor had set out that morning before six o'clock, in a little tilbury harnessed to a white horse, cold as the weather was; that he had gone alone, without even a driver; that no one knew what road he had taken; that people said he had been seen to turn into the road to Arras; that others asserted that they had met him on the road to Paris. That when he went away he had been very gentle, as usual, and that he had merely told the portress not to expect him that night.

While the two women were whispering together, with their backs turned to Fantine's bed, the sister interrogating, the servant conjecturing, Fantine, with the feverish vivacity of certain organic maladies, which unite the free movements of health with the frightful emaciation of death, had raised herself to her knees in bed, with her shrivelled hands resting on the bolster, and her head thrust through the opening of the curtains, and was listening. All at once she cried: —

"You are speaking of M. Madeleine! Why are you talking so low? What is he doing? Why does he not come?"

Her voice was so abrupt and hoarse that the two women thought they heard the voice of a man; they wheeled round in affright.

"Answer me!" cried Fantine.

The servant stammered: —

"The portress told me that he could not come to-day."

"Be calm, my child," said the sister; "lie down again."

Fantine, without changing her attitude, continued in a loud voice, and with an accent that was both imperious and heart-rending: —

"He cannot come? Why not? You know the reason. You are whispering it to each other there. I want to know it."

The servant-maid hastened to say in the nun's ear, "Say that he is busy with the city council."

Sister Simplice blushed faintly, for it was a lie that the maid had proposed to her.

On the other hand, it seemed to her that the mere communication of the truth to the invalid would, without doubt, deal her a terrible blow, and that this was a serious matter in Fantine's present state. Her flush did not last long; the sister raised her calm, sad eyes to Fantine, and said, "Monsieur le Maire has gone away."

Fantine raised herself and crouched on her heels in the bed: her eyes sparkled; indescribable joy beamed from that melancholy face.

"Gone!" she cried; "he has gone to get Cosette."

Then she raised her arms to heaven, and her white face became ineffable; her lips moved; she was praying in a low voice.

When her prayer was finished, "Sister," she said, "I am willing to lie down again; I will do anything you wish; I was naughty just now; I beg your pardon for having spoken so loud; it is very wrong to talk loudly; I know that well, my good sister, but, you see, I am very happy: the good God is good; M. Madeleine is good; just think! he has gone to Montfermeil to get my little Cosette."

She lay down again, with the nun's assistance, helped the nun to arrange her pillow, and kissed the little silver cross which she wore on her neck, and which Sister Simplice had given her.

"My child," said the sister, "try to rest now, and do not talk any more."

Fantine took the sister's hand in her moist hands, and the latter was pained to feel that perspiration.

"He set out this morning for Paris; in fact, he need not even go through Paris; Montfermeil is a little to the left as you come thence. Do you remember how he said to me yesterday, when I spoke to him of Cosette, Soon, soon? He wants to give me a surprise, you know! he made me sign a letter so that she could be taken from the Thenardiers; they cannot say anything, can they? they will give back Cosette, for they have been paid; the authorities will not allow them to keep the child since they have received their pay. Do not make signs to me that I must not talk, sister! I am extremely happy; I am doing well; I am not ill at all any more; I am going to see Cosette again; I am even quite hungry; it is nearly five years since I saw her last; you cannot imagine how much attached one gets to children, and then, she will be so pretty; you will see! If you only knew what pretty little rosy fingers she had! In the first place, she will have very beautiful hands; she had ridiculous hands when she was only a year old; like this! she must be a big girl now; she is seven years old; she is quite a young lady; I call her Cosette, but her name is really Euphrasie. Stop! this morning I was looking at the dust on the chimney-piece, and I had a sort of idea come across me, like that, that I should see Cosette again soon. Mon Dieu! how wrong it is not to see one's children for years! One ought to reflect that life is not eternal. Oh, how good M. le Maire is to go! it is very cold! it is true; he had on his cloak, at least? he will be here to-morrow, will he not? to-morrow will be a festival day; to-morrow morning, sister, you must remind me to put on my little cap that has lace on it. What a place that Montfermeil is! I took that journey on foot once; it was very long for me, but the diligences go very quickly! he will be here to-morrow with Cosette: how far is it from here to Montfermeil?"

The sister, who had no idea of distances, replied, "Oh, I think that he will be here to-morrow."

"To-morrow! to-morrow!" said Fantine, "I shall see Cosette to-morrow! you see, good sister of the good God, that I am no longer ill; I am mad; I could dance if any one wished it."

A person who had seen her a quarter of an hour previously would not have understood the change; she was all rosy now; she spoke in a lively and natural voice; her whole face was one smile; now and then she talked, she laughed softly; the joy of a mother is almost infantile.

"Well," resumed the nun, "now that you are happy, mind me, and do not talk any more."

Fantine laid her head on her pillow and said in a low voice: "Yes, lie down again; be good, for you are going to have your child; Sister Simplice is right; every one here is right."

And then, without stirring, without even moving her head, she began to stare all about her with wide-open eyes and a joyous air, and she said nothing more.

The sister drew the curtains together again, hoping that she would fall into a doze. Between seven and eight o’clock the doctor came; not hearing any sound, he thought Fantine was asleep, entered softly, and approached the bed on tiptoe; he opened the curtains a little, and, by the light of the taper, he saw Fantine’s big eyes gazing at him.

She said to him, “She will be allowed to sleep beside me in a little bed, will she not, sir?”

The doctor thought that she was delirious. She added: —

“See! there is just room.”

The doctor took Sister Simplice aside, and she explained matters to him; that M. Madeleine was absent for a day or two, and that in their doubt they had not thought it well to undeceive the invalid, who believed that the mayor had gone to Montfermeil; that it was possible, after all, that her guess was correct: the doctor approved.

He returned to Fantine’s bed, and she went on: —

“You see, when she wakes up in the morning, I shall be able to say good morning to her, poor kitten, and when I cannot sleep at night, I can hear her asleep; her little gentle breathing will do me good.”

“Give me your hand,” said the doctor.

She stretched out her arm, and exclaimed with a laugh: —

“Ah, hold! in truth, you did not know it; I am cured; Cosette will arrive to-morrow.”

The doctor was surprised; she was better; the pressure on her chest had decreased; her pulse had regained its strength; a sort of life had suddenly supervened and reanimated this poor, worn-out creature.

“Doctor,” she went on, “did the sister tell you that M. le Maire has gone to get that mite of a child?”

The doctor recommended silence, and that all painful emotions should be avoided; he prescribed an infusion of pure chinchona, and, in case the fever should increase again during the night, a calming potion. As he took his departure, he said to the sister: —

“She is doing better; if good luck willed that the mayor should actually arrive to-morrow with the child, who knows? there are crises so astounding; great joy has been known to arrest maladies; I know well that this is an organic disease, and in an advanced state, but all those things are such mysteries: we may be able to save her.”

CHAPTER VII — THE TRAVELLER ON HIS ARRIVAL TAKES PRECAUTIONS FOR

DEPARTURE

It was nearly eight o’clock in the evening when the cart, which we left on the road, entered the porte-cochère of the Hotel de la Poste in Arras; the man whom we have been following up to this moment alighted from it, responded with an abstracted air to the attentions of the people of the inn, sent back the extra horse, and with his own hands led the little white horse to the stable; then he opened the door of a billiard-room which was situated on the ground floor, sat down there, and leaned his elbows on a table; he had taken fourteen hours for the journey which he had counted on making in six; he did himself the justice to acknowledge that it was not his fault, but at bottom, he was not sorry.

The landlady of the hotel entered.

“Does Monsieur wish a bed? Does Monsieur require supper?”

He made a sign of the head in the negative.

“The stableman says that Monsieur’s horse is extremely fatigued.”

Here he broke his silence.

“Will not the horse be in a condition to set out again to-morrow morning?”

“Oh, Monsieur! he must rest for two days at least.”

He inquired: —

“Is not the posting-station located here?”

“Yes, sir.”

The hostess conducted him to the office; he showed his passport, and inquired whether there was any way of returning that same night to M. sur M. by the mail-wagon; the seat beside the post-boy chanced to be vacant; he engaged it and paid for it. “Monsieur,” said the clerk, “do not fail to be here ready to start at precisely one o’clock in the morning.”

This done, he left the hotel and began to wander about the town.

He was not acquainted with Arras; the streets were dark, and he walked on at random; but he seemed bent upon not asking the way of the passers-by. He crossed the little river Crinchon, and found himself in a labyrinth of narrow alleys where he lost his way. A citizen was passing along with a lantern. After some hesitation, he decided to apply to this man, not without having first glanced behind and in front of him, as though he feared lest some one should hear the question which he was about to put.

“Monsieur,” said he, “where is the court-house, if you please.”

“You do not belong in town, sir?” replied the bourgeois, who was an oldish man; “well, follow me. I happen to be going in the direction of the court-house, that is to say, in the direction of the hotel of the prefecture; for the court-house is undergoing repairs just at this moment, and the courts are holding their sittings provisionally in the prefecture.”

“Is it there that the Assizes are held?” he asked.

“Certainly, sir; you see, the prefecture of to-day was the bishop’s palace before the Revolution. M. de Conzie, who was bishop in ‘82, built a grand hall there. It is in this grand hall that the court is held.”

On the way, the bourgeois said to him: —

“If Monsieur desires to witness a case, it is rather late. The sittings generally close at six o’clock.”

When they arrived on the grand square, however, the man pointed out to him four long windows all lighted up, in the front of a vast and gloomy building.

“Upon my word, sir, you are in luck; you have arrived in season. Do you see those four windows? That is the Court of Assizes. There is light there, so they are not through. The matter must have been greatly protracted, and they are holding an evening session. Do you take an interest in this affair? Is it a criminal case? Are you a witness?”

He replied: —

“I have not come on any business; I only wish to speak to one of the lawyers.”

“That is different,” said the bourgeois. “Stop, sir; here is the door where the sentry stands. You have only to ascend the grand staircase.”

He conformed to the bourgeois’s directions, and a few minutes later he was in a hall containing many people, and where groups, intermingled with lawyers in their gowns, were whispering together here and there.

It is always a heart-breaking thing to see these congregations of men robed in black, murmuring together in low voices, on the threshold of the halls of justice. It is rare that charity and pity are the outcome of these words. Condemnations pronounced in advance are more likely to be the result. All these groups seem to the passing and thoughtful observer so many sombre hives where buzzing spirits construct in concert all sorts of dark edifices.

This spacious hall, illuminated by a single lamp, was the old hall of the episcopal palace, and served as the large hall of the palace of justice. A double-leaved door, which was closed at that moment, separated it from the large apartment where the court was sitting.

The obscurity was such that he did not fear to accost the first lawyer whom he met.

“What stage have they reached, sir?” he asked.

“It is finished,” said the lawyer.

“Finished!”

This word was repeated in such accents that the lawyer turned round.

“Excuse me sir; perhaps you are a relative?”

“No; I know no one here. Has judgment been pronounced?”

“Of course. Nothing else was possible.”

“To penal servitude?”

“For life.”

He continued, in a voice so weak that it was barely audible: —

“Then his identity was established?”

“What identity?” replied the lawyer. “There was no identity to be established. The matter was very simple. The woman had murdered her child; the infanticide was proved; the jury threw out the question of premeditation, and she was condemned for life.”

“So it was a woman?” said he.

“Why, certainly. The Limosin woman. Of what are you speaking?”

“Nothing. But since it is all over, how comes it that the hall is still lighted?”

“For another case, which was begun about two hours ago.”

“What other case?”

“Oh! this one is a clear case also. It is about a sort of blackguard; a man arrested for a second offence; a convict who has been guilty of theft. I don’t know his name exactly. There’s a bandit’s phiz for you! I’d send him to the galleys on the strength of his face alone.”

“Is there any way of getting into the court-room, sir?” said he.

“I really think that there is not. There is a great crowd. However, the hearing has been suspended. Some people have gone out, and when the hearing is resumed, you might make an effort.”

“Where is the entrance?”

“Through yonder large door.”

The lawyer left him. In the course of a few moments he had experienced, almost simultaneously, almost intermingled with each other, all possible emotions. The words of this indifferent spectator had, in turn, pierced his heart like needles of ice and like blades of fire. When he saw that nothing was settled, he breathed freely once more; but he could not have told whether what he felt was pain or pleasure.

He drew near to many groups and listened to what they were saying. The docket of the session was very heavy; the president had appointed for the same day two short and simple cases. They had begun with the infanticide, and now they had reached the convict, the old offender, the “return horse.” This man had stolen apples, but that did not appear to be entirely proved; what had been proved was, that he had already been in the galleys at Toulon. It was that which lent a bad aspect to his case. However, the man’s examination and the depositions of the witnesses had been completed, but the lawyer’s plea, and the speech of the public prosecutor were still to come; it could not be finished before midnight. The man would probably be condemned; the attorney-general was very clever, and never missed his culprits; he was a brilliant fellow who wrote verses.

An usher stood at the door communicating with the hall of the Assizes. He inquired of this usher: —

“Will the door be opened soon, sir?”

“It will not be opened at all,” replied the usher.

“What! It will not be opened when the hearing is resumed? Is not the hearing suspended?”

“The hearing has just been begun again,” replied the usher, “but the door will not be opened again.”

“Why?”

“Because the hall is full.”

“What! There is not room for one more?”

“Not another one. The door is closed. No one can enter now.”

The usher added after a pause: “There are, to tell the truth, two or three extra places behind Monsieur le Président, but Monsieur le Président only admits public functionaries to them.”

So saying, the usher turned his back.

He retired with bowed head, traversed the antechamber, and slowly descended the stairs, as though hesitating at every step. It is probable that he was holding counsel with himself. The violent conflict which had been going on within him since the preceding evening was not yet ended; and every moment he encountered some new phase of it. On reaching the landing-place, he leaned his back against the balusters and folded his arms. All at once he opened his coat, drew out his pocket-book, took from it a pencil, tore out a leaf, and upon that leaf he wrote rapidly, by the light of the street lantern, this line: M. Madeleine, Mayor of M. sur M.; then he ascended the stairs once more with great strides, made his way through the crowd, walked straight up to the usher, handed him the paper, and said in an authoritative manner: —

“Take this to Monsieur le Président.”

The usher took the paper, cast a glance upon it, and obeyed.

CHAPTER VIII — AN ENTRANCE BY FAVOR

Although he did not suspect the fact, the mayor of M. sur M. enjoyed a sort of celebrity. For the space of seven years his reputation for virtue had filled the whole of Bas Boulonnais; it had eventually passed the confines of a small district and had been spread abroad through two or three neighboring departments. Besides the service which he had rendered to the chief town by resuscitating the black jet industry, there was not one out of the hundred and forty communes of the arrondissement of M. sur M. which was not indebted to him for some benefit. He had even at need contrived to aid and multiply the industries of other arrondissements. It was thus that he had, when occasion offered, supported with his credit and his funds the linen factory at Boulogne, the flax-spinning industry at Frevent, and the hydraulic manufacture of cloth at Boubers-sur-Canche. Everywhere the name of M. Madeleine was pronounced with veneration. Arras and Douai envied the happy little town of M. sur M. its mayor.

The Councillor of the Royal Court of Douai, who was presiding over this session of the Assizes at Arras, was acquainted, in common with the rest of the world, with this name which was so profoundly and universally honored. When the usher, discreetly opening the door which connected the council-chamber with the court-room, bent over the back of the Président’s arm-chair and handed him the paper on which was inscribed the line which we have just perused, adding: “The gentleman desires to be present at the trial,” the Président, with a quick and deferential movement, seized a pen and wrote a few words at the bottom of the paper and returned it to the usher, saying, “Admit him.”

The unhappy man whose history we are relating had remained near the door of the hall, in the same place and the same attitude in which the usher had left him. In the midst of his revery he heard some one saying to him, “Will Monsieur do me the honor to follow me?” It was the same usher who had turned his back upon him but a moment previously, and who was now bowing to the earth before him. At the same time, the usher handed him the paper. He unfolded it, and as he chanced to be near the light, he could read it.

“The Président of the Court of Assizes presents his respects to M. Madeleine.”

He crushed the paper in his hand as though those words contained for him a strange and bitter aftertaste.

He followed the usher.

A few minutes later he found himself alone in a sort of wainscoted cabinet of severe aspect, lighted by two wax candles, placed upon a table with a green cloth. The last words of the usher who had just quitted him still rang in his ears: “Monsieur, you are now in the council-chamber; you have only to turn the copper handle of yonder door, and you will find yourself in the court-room, behind the Président’s chair.” These words were mingled in his thoughts with a vague memory of narrow corridors and dark staircases which he had recently traversed.

The usher had left him alone. The supreme moment had arrived. He sought to collect his faculties, but could not. It is chiefly at the moment when there is the greatest need for attaching them to the painful realities of life, that the threads of thought snap within the brain. He was in the very place where the judges deliberated and condemned. With stupid tranquillity he surveyed this peaceful and terrible apartment, where so many lives had been broken, which was soon to ring with his name, and which his fate was at that moment traversing. He stared at the wall, then he looked at himself, wondering that it should be that chamber and that it should be he.

He had eaten nothing for four and twenty hours; he was worn out by the jolts of the cart, but he was not conscious of it. It seemed to him that he felt nothing.

He approached a black frame which was suspended on the wall, and which contained, under glass, an ancient autograph letter of Jean Nicolas Pache, mayor of Paris and minister, and dated, through an error, no doubt, the 9th of June, of the year II., and in which Pache forwarded to the commune the list of ministers and deputies held in arrest by them. Any spectator who had chanced to see him at that moment, and who had watched him, would have imagined, doubtless, that this letter struck him as very curious, for he did not take his eyes from it, and he read it two or three times. He read it without paying any attention to it, and unconsciously. He was thinking of Fantine and Cosette.

As he dreamed, he turned round, and his eyes fell upon the brass knob of the door which separated him from the Court of Assizes. He had almost forgotten that door. His glance, calm at first, paused there, remained fixed on that brass handle, then grew terrified, and little by little became impregnated with fear. Beads of perspiration burst forth among his hair and trickled down upon his temples.

At a certain moment he made that indescribable gesture of a sort of authority mingled with rebellion, which is intended to convey, and which does so well convey, “Pardieu! who compels me to this?” Then he wheeled briskly round, caught sight of the door through which he had entered in front of him, went to it, opened it, and passed out. He was no longer in that chamber; he was outside in a corridor, a long, narrow corridor, broken by steps and gratings, making all sorts of angles, lighted here and there by lanterns similar to the night taper of invalids, the corridor through which he had approached. He breathed, he listened; not a sound in front, not a sound behind him, and he fled as though pursued.

When he had turned many angles in this corridor, he still listened. The same silence reigned, and there was the same darkness around him. He was out of breath; he staggered; he leaned against the wall. The stone was cold; the perspiration lay ice-cold on his brow; he straightened himself up with a shiver.

Then, there alone in the darkness, trembling with cold and with something else, too, perchance, he meditated.

He had meditated all night long; he had meditated all the day: he heard within him but one voice, which said, “Alas!”

A quarter of an hour passed thus. At length he bowed his head, sighed with agony, dropped his arms, and retraced his steps. He walked slowly, and as though crushed. It seemed as though some one had overtaken him in his flight and was leading him back.

He re-entered the council-chamber. The first thing he caught sight of was the knob of the door. This knob, which was round and of polished brass, shone like a terrible star for him. He gazed at it as a lamb might gaze into the eye of a tiger.

He could not take his eyes from it. From time to time he advanced a step and approached the door.

Had he listened, he would have heard the sound of the adjoining hall like a sort of confused murmur; but he did not listen, and he did not hear.

Suddenly, without himself knowing how it happened, he found himself near the door; he grasped the knob convulsively; the door opened.

He was in the court-room.

CHAPTER IX — A PLACE WHERE CONVICTIONS ARE IN PROCESS OF FORMATION

He advanced a pace, closed the door mechanically behind him, and remained standing, contemplating what he saw.

It was a vast and badly lighted apartment, now full of uproar, now full of silence, where all the apparatus of a criminal case, with its petty and mournful gravity in the midst of the throng, was in process of development.

At the one end of the hall, the one where he was, were judges, with abstracted air, in threadbare robes, who were gnawing their nails or closing their eyelids; at the other end, a ragged crowd; lawyers in all sorts of attitudes; soldiers with hard but honest faces; ancient, spotted woodwork, a dirty ceiling, tables covered with serge that was yellow rather than green; doors blackened by handmarks; tap-room lamps which emitted more smoke than light, suspended from nails in the wainscot; on the tables candles in brass candlesticks; darkness, ugliness, sadness; and from all this there was disengaged an austere and august impression, for one there felt that grand human thing which is called the law, and that grand divine thing which is called justice.

No one in all that throng paid any attention to him; all glances were directed towards a single point, a wooden bench placed against a small door, in the stretch of wall on the Président’s left; on this bench, illuminated by several candles, sat a man between two gendarmes.

This man was the man.

He did not seek him; he saw him; his eyes went thither naturally, as though they had known beforehand where that figure was.

He thought he was looking at himself, grown old; not absolutely the same in face, of course, but exactly similar in attitude and aspect, with his bristling hair, with that wild and uneasy eye, with that blouse, just as it was on the day when he entered D —— , full of hatred, concealing his soul in that hideous mass of frightful thoughts which he had spent nineteen years in collecting on the floor of the prison.

He said to himself with a shudder, “Good God! shall I become like that again?”

This creature seemed to be at least sixty; there was something indescribably coarse, stupid, and frightened about him.

At the sound made by the opening door, people had drawn aside to make way for him; the Président had turned his head, and, understanding that the personage who had just entered was the mayor of M. sur M., he had bowed to him; the attorney-general, who had seen M. Madeleine at M. sur M., whither the duties of his office had called him more than once, recognized him and saluted him also: he had hardly perceived it; he was the victim of a sort of hallucination; he was watching.

Judges, clerks, gendarmes, a throng of cruelly curious heads, all these he had already beheld once, in days gone by, twenty-seven years before; he had encountered those fatal things once more; there they were; they moved; they existed; it was no longer an effort of his memory, a mirage of his thought; they were real gendarmes and real judges, a real crowd, and real men of flesh and blood: it was all over; he beheld the monstrous aspects of his past reappear and live once more around him, with all that there is formidable in reality.

All this was yawning before him.

He was horrified by it; he shut his eyes, and exclaimed in the deepest recesses of his soul, "Never!"

And by a tragic play of destiny which made all his ideas tremble, and rendered him nearly mad, it was another self of his that was there! all called that man who was being tried Jean Valjean.

Under his very eyes, unheard-of vision, he had a sort of representation of the most horrible moment of his life, enacted by his spectre.

Everything was there; the apparatus was the same, the hour of the night, the faces of the judges, of soldiers, and of spectators; all were the same, only above the Président's head there hung a crucifix, something which the courts had lacked at the time of his condemnation: God had been absent when he had been judged.

There was a chair behind him; he dropped into it, terrified at the thought that he might be seen; when he was seated, he took advantage of a pile of cardboard boxes, which stood on the judge's desk, to conceal his face from the whole room; he could now see without being seen; he had fully regained consciousness of the reality of things; gradually he recovered; he attained that phase of composure where it is possible to listen.

M. Bamatabois was one of the jurors.

He looked for Javert, but did not see him; the seat of the witnesses was hidden from him by the clerk’s table, and then, as we have just said, the hall was sparely lighted.

At the moment of this entrance, the defendant’s lawyer had just finished his plea.

The attention of all was excited to the highest pitch; the affair had lasted for three hours: for three hours that crowd had been watching a strange man, a miserable specimen of humanity, either profoundly stupid or profoundly subtle, gradually bending beneath the weight of a terrible likeness. This man, as the reader already knows, was a vagabond who had been found in a field carrying a branch laden with ripe apples, broken in the orchard of a neighbor, called the Pierron orchard. Who was this man? an examination had been made; witnesses had been heard, and they were unanimous; light had abounded throughout the entire debate; the accusation said: “We have in our grasp not only a marauder, a stealer of fruit; we have here, in our hands, a bandit, an old offender who has broken his ban, an ex-convict, a miscreant of the most dangerous description, a malefactor named Jean Valjean, whom justice has long been in search of, and who, eight years ago, on emerging from the galleys at Toulon, committed a highway robbery, accompanied by violence, on the person of a child, a Savoyard named Little Gervais; a crime provided for by article 383 of the Penal Code, the right to try him for which we reserve hereafter, when his identity shall have been judicially established. He has just committed a fresh theft; it is a case of a second offence; condemn him for the fresh deed; later on he will be judged for the old crime.” In the face of this accusation, in the face of the unanimity of the witnesses, the accused appeared to be astonished more than anything else; he made signs and gestures which were meant to convey No, or else he stared at the ceiling: he spoke with difficulty, replied with embarrassment, but his whole person, from head to foot, was a denial; he was an idiot in the presence of all these minds ranged in order of battle around him, and like a stranger in the midst of this society which was seizing fast upon him; nevertheless, it was a question of the most menacing future for him; the likeness increased every moment, and the entire crowd surveyed, with more anxiety than he did himself, that sentence freighted with calamity, which descended ever closer over his head; there was even a glimpse of a possibility afforded; besides the galleys, a possible death penalty, in case his identity were established, and the affair of Little Gervais were to end thereafter in condemnation. Who was this man? what was the nature of his apathy? was it imbecility or craft? Did he understand too well, or did he not understand at all? these were questions which divided the crowd, and seemed to divide the jury; there was something both terrible and puzzling in this case: the drama was not only melancholy; it was also obscure.

The counsel for the defence had spoken tolerably well, in that provincial tongue which has long constituted the eloquence of the bar, and which was formerly employed by all advocates, at Paris as well as at Romorantin or at Montbrison, and which to-day, having become classic, is no longer spoken except by the official orators of magistracy, to whom it is suited on account of its grave sonorousness and its majestic stride; a tongue in which a husband is called a consort, and a woman a spouse; Paris, the centre of art and civilization; the king, the monarch; Monseigneur the Bishop, a sainted pontiff; the district-attorney, the eloquent interpreter of public prosecution; the arguments, the accents which we have just listened to; the age of Louis XIV., the grand age; a theatre, the temple of Melpomene; the reigning family, the august blood of our kings; a concert, a musical solemnity; the General Commandant of the province, the illustrious warrior, who, etc.; the pupils in the seminary, these tender levities; errors imputed to newspapers, the imposture which distills its venom through the columns of those organs; etc. The lawyer had, accordingly, begun with an explanation as to the theft of the apples, — an awkward matter couched in fine style; but Benigne Bossuet himself was obliged to allude to a chicken in the midst of a funeral oration, and he extricated himself from the situation in stately fashion. The lawyer established the fact that the theft of the apples had not been circumstantially proved. His client, whom he, in his character of counsel, persisted in calling Champmathieu, had not been seen scaling that wall nor breaking that branch by any one. He had been taken with that branch (which the lawyer preferred to call a bough) in his possession; but he said that he had found it broken off and lying on the ground, and had picked it up. Where was there any proof to the contrary? No doubt that branch had been broken off and concealed after the scaling of the wall, then thrown away by the alarmed marauder; there was no doubt that there had been a thief in the case. But what proof was there that that thief had been Champmathieu? One thing only. His character as an ex-convict. The lawyer did not deny that that character appeared to be, unhappily, well attested; the accused had resided at Faverolles; the accused had exercised the calling of a tree-pruner there; the name of Champmathieu might well have had its origin in Jean Mathieu; all that was true, — in short, four witnesses recognize Champmathieu, positively and without hesitation, as that convict, Jean Valjean; to these signs, to this testimony, the counsel could oppose nothing but the denial of his client, the denial of an interested party; but supposing that he was the convict Jean Valjean, did that prove that he was the thief of the apples? that was a presumption at the most, not a proof. The prisoner, it was true, and his counsel, "in good faith," was obliged to admit it, had adopted "a bad system of defence." He obstinately denied everything, the theft and his character of convict. An admission upon this last point would certainly have been better, and would have won for him the indulgence of his judges; the counsel had advised him to do this; but the accused had obstinately refused, thinking, no doubt, that he would save everything by admitting nothing. It was an error; but ought not the paucity of this intelligence to be taken into consideration? This man was visibly stupid. Long-continued wretchedness in the galleys, long misery outside the galleys, had brutalized him, etc. He defended himself badly; was that a reason for condemning him? As for the affair with Little Gervais, the counsel need not discuss it; it did not enter into the case. The lawyer wound up by beseeching the jury and the court, if the identity of Jean Valjean appeared to them to be evident, to apply to him the police penalties which are provided for a criminal who has broken his ban, and not the frightful chastisement which descends upon the convict guilty of a second offence.

The district-attorney answered the counsel for the defence. He was violent and florid, as district-attorneys usually are.

He congratulated the counsel for the defence on his "loyalty," and skilfully took advantage of this loyalty. He reached the accused through all the concessions made by his lawyer. The advocate had seemed to admit that the prisoner was Jean Valjean. He took note of this. So this man was Jean Valjean. This point had been conceded to the accusation and could no longer be disputed. Here, by means of a clever autonomasia which went back to the sources and causes of crime, the district-attorney thundered against the immorality of the romantic school, then dawning under the name of the Satanic school, which had been bestowed upon it by the critics of the Quotidienne and the Oriflamme; he attributed, not without some probability, to the influence of this perverse literature the crime of

Champmathieu, or rather, to speak more correctly, of Jean Valjean. Having exhausted these considerations, he passed on to Jean Valjean himself. Who was this Jean Valjean? Description of Jean Valjean: a monster spewed forth, etc. The model for this sort of description is contained in the tale of Theramene, which is not useful to tragedy, but which every day renders great services to judicial eloquence. The audience and the jury "shuddered." The description finished, the district-attorney resumed with an oratorical turn calculated to raise the enthusiasm of the journal of the prefecture to the highest pitch on the following day: And it is such a man, etc., etc., etc., vagabond, beggar, without means of existence, etc., etc., inured by his past life to culpable deeds, and but little reformed by his sojourn in the galleys, as was proved by the crime committed against Little Gervais, etc., etc.; it is such a man, caught upon the highway in the very act of theft, a few paces from a wall that had been scaled, still holding in his hand the object stolen, who denies the crime, the theft, the climbing the wall; denies everything; denies even his own identity! In addition to a hundred other proofs, to which we will not recur, four witnesses recognize him — Javert, the upright inspector of police; Javert, and three of his former companions in infamy, the convicts Brevet, Chenildieu, and Cochepaille. What does he offer in opposition to this overwhelming unanimity? His denial. What obduracy! You will do justice, gentlemen of the jury, etc., etc. While the district-attorney was speaking, the accused listened to him open-mouthed, with a sort of amazement in which some admiration was assuredly blended. He was evidently surprised that a man could talk like that. From time to time, at those "energetic" moments of the prosecutor's speech, when eloquence which cannot contain itself overflows in a flood of withering epithets and envelops the accused like a storm, he moved his head slowly from right to left and from left to right in the sort of mute and melancholy protest with which he had contented himself since the beginning of the argument. Two or three times the spectators who were nearest to him heard him say in a low voice, "That is what comes of not having asked M. Baloup." The district-attorney directed the attention of the jury to this stupid attitude, evidently deliberate, which denoted not imbecility, but craft, skill, a habit of deceiving justice, and which set forth in all its nakedness the "profound perversity" of this man. He ended by making his reserves on the affair of Little Gervais and demanding a severe sentence.

At that time, as the reader will remember, it was penal servitude for life.

The counsel for the defence rose, began by complimenting Monsieur l’Avocat-General on his “admirable speech,” then replied as best he could; but he weakened; the ground was evidently slipping away from under his feet.

CHAPTER X — THE SYSTEM OF DENIALS

The moment for closing the debate had arrived. The Président had the accused stand up, and addressed to him the customary question, “Have you anything to add to your defence?”

The man did not appear to understand, as he stood there, twisting in his hands a terrible cap which he had.

The Président repeated the question.

This time the man heard it. He seemed to understand. He made a motion like a man who is just waking up, cast his eyes about him, stared at the audience, the gendarmes, his counsel, the jury, the court, laid his monstrous fist on the rim of woodwork in front of his bench, took another look, and all at once, fixing his glance upon the district-attorney, he began to speak. It was like an eruption. It seemed, from the manner in which the words escaped from his mouth, — incoherent, impetuous, pell-mell, tumbling over each other, — as though they were all pressing forward to issue forth at once. He said: —

“This is what I have to say. That I have been a wheelwright in Paris, and that it was with Monsieur Baloup. It is a hard trade. In the wheelwright’s trade one works always in the open air, in courtyards, under sheds when the masters are good, never in closed workshops, because space is required, you see. In winter one gets so cold that one beats one’s arms together to warm one’s self; but the masters don’t like it; they say it wastes time. Handling iron when there is ice between the paving-stones is hard work. That wears a man out quickly One is old while he is still quite young in that trade. At forty a man is done for. I was fifty-three. I was in a bad state. And then, workmen are so mean! When a man is no longer young, they call him nothing but an old bird, old beast! I was not earning more than thirty sous a day. They paid me as little as possible. The masters took advantage of my age — and then I had my daughter, who was a laundress at the river. She earned a little also. It sufficed for us two. She had trouble, also; all day long up to her waist in a tub, in rain, in snow. When the wind cuts your face, when it freezes, it is all the same; you must still wash. There are people who have not much linen, and wait until late; if you do not wash, you lose your custom. The planks are badly joined, and water drops on you from everywhere; you have your petticoats all damp above and below. That penetrates. She has also worked at the laundry of the Enfants-Rouges, where the water comes through faucets. You are not in the tub there; you wash at the faucet in front of you, and rinse in a basin behind you. As it is enclosed, you are not so cold; but there is that hot steam, which is terrible, and which ruins your eyes. She came home at seven o'clock in the evening, and went to bed at once, she was so tired. Her husband beat her. She is dead. We have not been very happy. She was a good girl, who did not go to the ball, and who was very peaceable. I remember one Shrove-Tuesday when she went to bed at eight o'clock. There, I am telling the truth; you have only to ask. Ah, yes! how stupid I am! Paris is a gulf. Who knows Father Champmathieu there? But M. Baloup does, I tell you. Go see at M. Baloup's; and after all, I don't know what is wanted of me."

The man ceased speaking, and remained standing. He had said these things in a loud, rapid, hoarse voice, with a sort of irritated and savage ingenuousness. Once he paused to salute some one in the crowd. The sort of affirmations which he seemed to fling out before him at random came like hiccoughs, and to each he added the gesture of a wood-cutter who is splitting wood. When he had finished, the audience burst into a laugh. He stared at the public, and, perceiving that they were laughing, and not understanding why, he began to laugh himself.

It was inauspicious.

The Président, an attentive and benevolent man, raised his voice.

He reminded "the gentlemen of the jury" that "the sieur Baloup, formerly a master-wheelwright, with whom the accused stated that he had served, had been summoned in vain. He had become bankrupt, and was not to be found." Then turning to the accused, he enjoined him to listen to what he was about to say, and added: "You are in a position where reflection is necessary. The gravest presumptions rest upon you, and may induce vital results. Prisoner, in your own interests, I summon you for the last time to explain yourself clearly on two points. In the first place, did you or did you not climb the wall of the Pierron orchard, break the branch, and steal the apples; that is to say, commit the crime of breaking in and theft? In the second place, are you the discharged convict, Jean Valjean — yes or no?"

The prisoner shook his head with a capable air, like a man who has thoroughly understood, and who knows what answer he is going to make. He opened his mouth, turned towards the Président, and said: —

"In the first place—"

Then he stared at his cap, stared at the ceiling, and held his peace.

"Prisoner," said the district-attorney, in a severe voice; "pay attention. You are not answering anything that has been asked of you. Your embarrassment condemns you. It is evident that your name is not Champmathieu; that you are the convict, Jean Valjean, concealed first under the name of Jean Mathieu, which was the name of his mother; that you went to Auvergne; that you were born at Faverolles, where you were a pruner of trees. It is evident that you have been guilty of entering, and of the theft of ripe apples from the Pierron orchard. The gentlemen of the jury will form their own opinion."

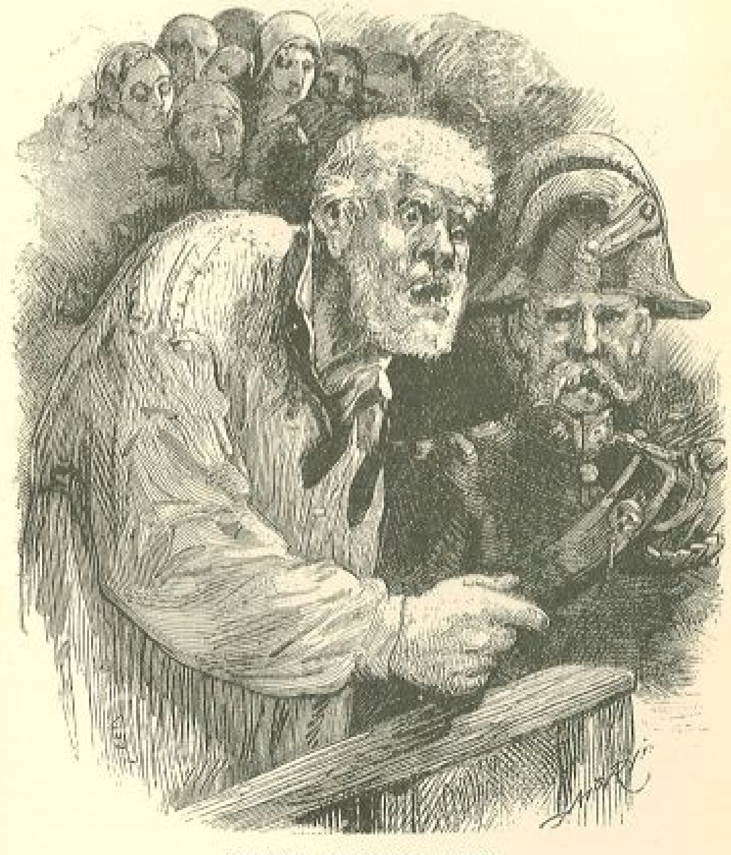

FATHER CHAMPMATHIEU.

The prisoner had finally resumed his seat; he arose abruptly when the district-attorney had finished, and exclaimed: —

“You are very wicked; that you are! This what I wanted to say; I could not find words for it at first. I have stolen nothing. I am a man who does not have something to eat every day. I was coming from Ailly; I was walking through the country after a shower, which had made the whole country yellow: even the ponds were overflowed, and nothing sprang from the sand any more but the little blades of grass at the wayside. I found a broken branch with apples on the ground; I picked up the branch without knowing that it would get me into trouble. I have been in prison, and they have been dragging me about for the last three months; more than that I cannot say; people talk against me, they tell me, ‘Answer!’ The gendarme, who is a good fellow, nudges my elbow, and says to me in a low voice, ‘Come, answer!’ I don’t know how to explain; I have no education; I am a poor man; that is where they wrong me, because they do not see this. I have not stolen; I picked up from the ground things that were lying there. You say, Jean Valjean, Jean Mathieu! I don’t know those persons; they are villagers. I worked for M. Baloup, Boulevard de l’Hopital; my name is Champmathieu. You are very clever to tell me where I was born; I don’t know myself: it’s not everybody who has a house in which to come into the world; that would be too convenient. I think that my father and mother were people who strolled along the highways; I know nothing different. When I was a child, they called me young fellow; now they call me old fellow; those are my baptismal names; take that as you like. I have been in Auvergne; I have been at Faverolles. Pardi. Well! can’t a man have been in Auvergne, or at Faverolles, without having been in the galleys? I tell you that I have not stolen, and that I am Father Champmathieu; I have been with M. Baloup; I have had a settled residence. You worry me with your nonsense, there! Why is everybody pursuing me so furiously?”

The district-attorney had remained standing; he addressed the Président: —

“Monsieur le Président, in view of the confused but exceedingly clever denials of the prisoner, who would like to pass himself off as an idiot, but who will not succeed in so doing, — we shall attend to that, — we demand that it shall please you and that it shall please the court to summon once more into this place the convicts Brevet, Cochepaille, and Chenildieu, and Police-Inspector Javert, and question them for the last time as to the identity of the prisoner with the convict Jean Valjean.”

“I would remind the district-attorney,” said the Président, “that Police-Inspector Javert, recalled by his duties to the capital of a neighboring arrondissement, left the court-room and the town as soon as he had made his deposition; we have accorded him permission, with the consent of the district-attorney and of the counsel for the prisoner.”

“That is true, Mr. Président,” responded the district-attorney. “In the absence of sieur Javert, I think it my duty to remind the gentlemen of the jury of what he said here a few hours ago. Javert is an estimable man, who does honor by his rigorous and strict probity to inferior but important functions. These are the terms of his deposition: ‘I do not even stand in need of circumstantial proofs and moral presumptions to give the lie to the prisoner’s denial. I recognize him perfectly. The name of this man is not Champmathieu; he is an ex-convict named Jean Valjean, and is very vicious and much to be feared. It is only with extreme regret that he was released at the expiration of his term. He underwent nineteen years of penal servitude for theft. He made five or six attempts to escape. Besides the theft from Little Gervais, and from the Pierron orchard, I suspect him of a theft committed in the house of His Grace the late Bishop of D —— I often saw him at the time when I was adjutant of the galley-guard at the prison in Toulon. I repeat that I recognize him perfectly.’”

This extremely precise statement appeared to produce a vivid impression on the public and on the jury. The district-attorney concluded by insisting, that in default of Javert, the three witnesses Brevet, Chenildieu, and Cochepaille should be heard once more and solemnly interrogated.

The Président transmitted the order to an usher, and, a moment later, the door of the witnesses’ room opened. The usher, accompanied by a gendarme ready to lend him armed assistance, introduced the convict Brevet. The audience was in suspense; and all breasts heaved as though they had contained but one soul.

The ex-convict Brevet wore the black and gray waistcoat of the central prisons. Brevet was a person sixty years of age, who had a sort of business man’s face, and the air of a rascal. The two sometimes go together. In prison, whither fresh misdeeds had led him, he had become something in the nature of a turnkey. He was a man of whom his superiors said, “He tries to make himself of use.” The chaplains bore good testimony as to his religious habits. It must not be forgotten that this passed under the Restoration.

“Brevet,” said the Président, “you have undergone an ignominious sentence, and you cannot take an oath.”

Brevet dropped his eyes.

“Nevertheless,” continued the Président, “even in the man whom the law has degraded, there may remain, when the divine mercy permits it, a sentiment of honor and of equity. It is to this sentiment that I appeal at this decisive hour. If it still exists in you, — and I hope it does, — reflect before replying to me: consider on the one hand, this man, whom a word from you may ruin; on the other hand, justice, which a word from you may enlighten. The instant is solemn; there is still time to retract if you think you have been mistaken. Rise, prisoner. Brevet, take a good look at the accused, recall your souvenirs, and tell us on your soul and conscience, if you persist in recognizing this man as your former companion in the galleys, Jean Valjean?”

Brevet looked at the prisoner, then turned towards the court.

“Yes, Mr. Président, I was the first to recognize him, and I stick to it; that man is Jean Valjean, who entered at Toulon in 1796, and left in 1815. I left a year later. He has the air of a brute now; but it must be because age has brutalized him; he was sly at the galleys: I recognize him positively.”

“Take your seat,” said the Président. “Prisoner, remain standing.”

Chenildieu was brought in, a prisoner for life, as was indicated by his red cassock and his green cap. He was serving out his sentence at the galleys of Toulon, whence he had been brought for this case. He was a small man of about fifty, brisk, wrinkled, frail, yellow, brazen-faced, feverish, who had a sort of sickly feebleness about all his limbs and his whole person, and an immense force in his glance. His companions in the galleys had nicknamed him I-deny-God (Je-nie Dieu, Chenildieu).

The Président addressed him in nearly the same words which he had used to Brevet. At the moment when he reminded him of his infamy which deprived him of the right to take an oath, Chenildieu raised his head and looked the crowd in the face. The Président invited him to reflection, and asked him as he had asked Brevet, if he persisted in recognition of the prisoner.

Chenildieu burst out laughing.

“Pardieu, as if I didn’t recognize him! We were attached to the same chain for five years. So you are sulking, old fellow?”

“Go take your seat,” said the Président.

The usher brought in Cochepaille. He was another convict for life, who had come from the galleys, and was dressed in red, like Chenildieu, was a peasant from Lourdes, and a half-bear of the Pyrenees. He had guarded the flocks among the mountains, and from a shepherd he had slipped into a brigand. Cochepaille was no less savage and seemed even more stupid than the prisoner. He was one of those wretched men whom nature has sketched out for wild beasts, and on whom society puts the finishing touches as convicts in the galleys.

The Président tried to touch him with some grave and pathetic words, and asked him, as he had asked the other two, if he persisted, without hesitation or trouble, in recognizing the man who was standing before him.

“He is Jean Valjean,” said Cochepaille. “He was even called Jean-the-Screw, because he was so strong.”

Each of these affirmations from these three men, evidently sincere and in good faith, had raised in the audience a murmur of bad augury for the prisoner, — a murmur which increased and lasted longer each time that a fresh declaration was added to the proceeding.

The prisoner had listened to them, with that astounded face which was, according to the accusation, his principal means of defence; at the first, the gendarmes, his neighbors, had heard him mutter between his teeth: “Ah, well, he’s a nice one!” after the second, he said, a little louder, with an air that was almost that of satisfaction, “Good!” at the third, he cried, “Famous!”

The Président addressed him: —

“Have you heard, prisoner? What have you to say?”

He replied: —

“I say, ‘Famous!’”

An uproar broke out among the audience, and was communicated to the jury; it was evident that the man was lost.

“Ushers,” said the Président, “enforce silence! I am going to sum up the arguments.”

At that moment there was a movement just beside the Président; a voice was heard crying: —

“Brevet! Chenildieu! Cochepaille! look here!”

All who heard that voice were chilled, so lamentable and terrible was it; all eyes were turned to the point whence it had proceeded. A man, placed among the privileged spectators who were seated behind the court, had just risen, had pushed open the half-door which separated the tribunal from the audience, and was standing in the middle of the hall; the Président, the district-attorney, M. Bamatabois, twenty persons, recognized him, and exclaimed in concert: —

“M. Madeleine!”

CHAPTER XI — CHAMPMATHIEU MORE AND MORE ASTONISHED

It was he, in fact. The clerk's lamp illumined his countenance. He held his hat in his hand; there was no disorder in his clothing; his coat was carefully buttoned; he was very pale, and he trembled slightly; his hair, which had still been gray on his arrival in Arras, was now entirely white: it had turned white during the hour he had sat there.

All heads were raised: the sensation was indescribable; there was a momentary hesitation in the audience, the voice had been so heart-rending; the man who stood there appeared so calm that they did not understand at first. They asked themselves whether he had indeed uttered that cry; they could not believe that that tranquil man had been the one to give that terrible outcry.

This indecision only lasted a few seconds. Even before the Président and the district-attorney could utter a word, before the ushers and the gendarmes could make a gesture, the man whom all still called, at that moment, M. Madeleine, had advanced towards the witnesses Cochepaille, Brevet, and Chenildieu.

"Do you not recognize me?" said he.

All three remained speechless, and indicated by a sign of the head that they did not know him. Cochepaille, who was intimidated, made a military salute. M. Madeleine turned towards the jury and the court, and said in a gentle voice: —

"Gentlemen of the jury, order the prisoner to be released! Mr. Président, have me arrested. He is not the man whom you are in search of; it is I: I am Jean Valjean."

Not a mouth breathed; the first commotion of astonishment had been followed by a silence like that of the grave; those within the hall experienced that sort of religious terror which seizes the masses when something grand has been done.

In the meantime, the face of the Président was stamped with sympathy and sadness; he had exchanged a rapid sign with the district-attorney and a few low-toned words with the assistant judges; he addressed the public, and asked in accents which all understood: —

“Is there a physician present?”

The district-attorney took the word: —

“Gentlemen of the jury, the very strange and unexpected incident which disturbs the audience inspires us, like yourselves, only with a sentiment which it is unnecessary for us to express. You all know, by reputation at least, the honorable M. Madeleine, mayor of M. sur M.; if there is a physician in the audience, we join the Président in requesting him to attend to M. Madeleine, and to conduct him to his home.”

M. Madeleine did not allow the district-attorney to finish; he interrupted him in accents full of suavity and authority. These are the words which he uttered; here they are literally, as they were written down, immediately after the trial by one of the witnesses to this scene, and as they now ring in the ears of those who heard them nearly forty years ago: —

“I thank you, Mr. District-Attorney, but I am not mad; you shall see; you were on the point of committing a great error; release this man! I am fulfilling a duty; I am that miserable criminal. I am the only one here who sees the matter clearly, and I am telling you the truth. God, who is on high, looks down on what I am doing at this moment, and that suffices. You can take me, for here I am: but I have done my best; I concealed myself under another name; I have become rich; I have become a mayor; I have tried to re-enter the ranks of the honest. It seems that that is not to be done. In short, there are many things which I cannot tell. I will not narrate the story of my life to you; you will hear it one of these days. I robbed Monseigneur the Bishop, it is true; it is true that I robbed Little Gervais; they were right in telling you that Jean Valjean was a very vicious wretch. Perhaps it was not altogether his fault. Listen, honorable judges! a man who has been so greatly humbled as I have has neither any remonstrances to make to Providence, nor any advice to give to society; but, you see, the infamy from which I have tried to escape is an injurious thing; the galleys make the convict what he is; reflect upon that, if you please. Before going to the galleys, I was a poor peasant, with very little intelligence, a sort of idiot; the galleys wrought a change in me. I was stupid; I became vicious: I was a block of wood; I became a firebrand. Later on, indulgence and kindness saved me, as severity had ruined me. But, pardon me, you cannot understand what I am saying. You will find at my house, among the ashes in the fireplace, the forty-sou piece which I stole, seven years ago, from little Gervais. I have nothing farther to add; take me. Good God! the district-attorney shakes his head; you say, ‘M. Madeleine has gone mad!’ you do not believe me! that is distressing. Do not, at least, condemn this man! What! these men do not recognize me! I wish Javert were here; he would recognize me.”

Nothing can reproduce the sombre and kindly melancholy of tone which accompanied these words.

He turned to the three convicts, and said: —

“Well, I recognize you; do you remember, Brevet?”

He paused, hesitated for an instant, and said: —

“Do you remember the knitted suspenders with a checked pattern which you wore in the galleys?”

Brevet gave a start of surprise, and surveyed him from head to foot with a frightened air. He continued: —

“Chenildieu, you who conferred on yourself the name of ‘Jenie-Dieu,’ your whole right shoulder bears a deep burn, because you one day laid your shoulder against the chafing-dish full of coals, in order to efface the three letters T. F. P., which are still visible, nevertheless; answer, is this true?”

“It is true,” said Chenildieu.

He addressed himself to Cochepaille: —

“Cochepaille, you have, near the bend in your left arm, a date stamped in blue letters with burnt powder; the date is that of the landing of the Emperor at Cannes, March 1, 1815; pull up your sleeve!”

Cochepaille pushed up his sleeve; all eyes were focused on him and on his bare arm.

A gendarme held a light close to it; there was the date.

The unhappy man turned to the spectators and the judges with a smile which still rends the hearts of all who saw it whenever they think of it. It was a smile of triumph; it was also a smile of despair.

“You see plainly,” he said, “that I am Jean Valjean.”

In that chamber there were no longer either judges, accusers, nor gendarmes; there was nothing but staring eyes and sympathizing hearts. No one recalled any longer the part that each might be called upon to play; the district-attorney forgot he was there for the purpose of prosecuting, the Président that he was there to preside, the counsel for the defence that he was there to defend. It was a striking circumstance that no question was put, that no authority intervened. The peculiarity of sublime spectacles is, that they capture all souls and turn witnesses into spectators. No one, probably, could have explained what he felt; no one, probably, said to himself that he was witnessing the splendid outburst of a grand light: all felt themselves inwardly dazzled.

It was evident that they had Jean Valjean before their eyes. That was clear. The appearance of this man had sufficed to suffuse with light that matter which had been so obscure but a moment previously, without any further explanation: the whole crowd, as by a sort of electric revelation, understood instantly and at a single glance the simple and magnificent history of a man who was delivering himself up so that another man might not be condemned in his stead. The details, the hesitations, little possible oppositions, were swallowed up in that vast and luminous fact.

It was an impression which vanished speedily, but which was irresistible at the moment.

“I do not wish to disturb the court further,” resumed Jean Valjean. “I shall withdraw, since you do not arrest me. I have many things to do. The district-attorney knows who I am; he knows whither I am going; he can have me arrested when he likes.”

He directed his steps towards the door. Not a voice was raised, not an arm extended to hinder him. All stood aside. At that moment there was about him that divine something which causes multitudes to stand aside and make way for a man. He traversed the crowd slowly. It was never known who opened the door, but it is certain that he found the door open when he reached it. On arriving there he turned round and said: —

“I am at your command, Mr. District-Attorney.”

Then he addressed the audience: —

“All of you, all who are present — consider me worthy of pity, do you not? Good God! When I think of what I was on the point of doing, I consider that I am to be envied. Nevertheless, I should have preferred not to have had this occur.”

He withdrew, and the door closed behind him as it had opened, for those who do certain sovereign things are always sure of being served by some one in the crowd.

Less than an hour after this, the verdict of the jury freed the said Champmathieu from all accusations; and Champmathieu, being at once released, went off in a state of stupefaction, thinking that all men were fools, and comprehending nothing of this vision.

BOOK EIGHTH. — A COUNTER-BLOW

CHAPTER I — IN WHAT MIRROR M. MADELEINE CONTEMPLATES HIS HAIR

The day had begun to dawn. Fantine had passed a sleepless and feverish night, filled with happy visions; at daybreak she fell asleep. Sister Simplice, who had been watching with her, availed herself of this slumber to go and prepare a new potion of chinchona. The worthy sister had been in the laboratory of the infirmary but a few moments, bending over her drugs and phials, and scrutinizing things very closely, on account of the dimness which the half-light of dawn spreads over all objects. Suddenly she raised her head and uttered a faint shriek. M. Madeleine stood before her; he had just entered silently.

“Is it you, Mr. Mayor?” she exclaimed.

He replied in a low voice: —

“How is that poor woman?”

“Not so bad just now; but we have been very uneasy.”

She explained to him what had passed: that Fantine had been very ill the day before, and that she was better now, because she thought that the mayor had gone to Montfermeil to get her child. The sister dared not question the mayor; but she perceived plainly from his air that he had not come from there.

“All that is good,” said he; “you were right not to undeceive her.”

“Yes,” responded the sister; “but now, Mr. Mayor, she will see you and will not see her child. What shall we say to her?”

He reflected for a moment.

“God will inspire us,” said he.

“But we cannot tell a lie,” murmured the sister, half aloud.

It was broad daylight in the room. The light fell full on M. Madeleine’s face. The sister chanced to raise her eyes to it.

“Good God, sir!” she exclaimed; “what has happened to you? Your hair is perfectly white!”

“White!” said he.

Sister Simplice had no mirror. She rummaged in a drawer, and pulled out the little glass which the doctor of the infirmary used to see whether a patient was dead and whether he no longer breathed. M. Madeleine took the mirror, looked at his hair, and said: —

"Well!"

He uttered the word indifferently, and as though his mind were on something else.

The sister felt chilled by something strange of which she caught a glimpse in all this.

He inquired: —

"Can I see her?"

"Is not Monsieur le Maire going to have her child brought back to her?" said the sister, hardly venturing to put the question.

"Of course; but it will take two or three days at least."

"If she were not to see Monsieur le Maire until that time," went on the sister, timidly, "she would not know that Monsieur le Maire had returned, and it would be easy to inspire her with patience; and when the child arrived, she would naturally think Monsieur le Maire had just come with the child. We should not have to enact a lie."

M. Madeleine seemed to reflect for a few moments; then he said with his calm gravity: —

"No, sister, I must see her. I may, perhaps, be in haste."

The nun did not appear to notice this word "perhaps," which communicated an obscure and singular sense to the words of the mayor's speech. She replied, lowering her eyes and her voice respectfully: —

"In that case, she is asleep; but Monsieur le Maire may enter."

He made some remarks about a door which shut badly, and the noise of which might awaken the sick woman; then he entered Fantine's chamber, approached the bed and drew aside the curtains. She was asleep. Her breath issued from her breast with that tragic sound which is peculiar to those maladies, and which breaks the hearts of mothers when they are watching through the night beside their sleeping child who is condemned to death. But this painful respiration hardly troubled a sort of ineffable serenity which overspread her countenance, and which transfigured her in her sleep. Her pallor had become whiteness; her cheeks were crimson; her long golden lashes, the only beauty of her youth and her virginity which remained to her, palpitated, though they remained closed and drooping. Her whole person was trembling with an indescribable unfolding of wings, all ready to open wide and bear her away, which could be felt as they rustled, though they could not be seen. To see her thus, one would never have dreamed that she was an invalid whose life was almost despaired of. She resembled rather something on the point of soaring away than something on the point of dying.

The branch trembles when a hand approaches it to pluck a flower, and seems to both withdraw and to offer itself at one and the same time. The human body has something of this tremor when the instant arrives in which the mysterious fingers of Death are about to pluck the soul.

M. Madeleine remained for some time motionless beside that bed, gazing in turn upon the sick woman and the crucifix, as he had done two months before, on the day when he had come for the first time to see her in that asylum. They were both still there in the same attitude — she sleeping, he praying; only now, after the lapse of two months, her hair was gray and his was white.

The sister had not entered with him. He stood beside the bed, with his finger on his lips, as though there were some one in the chamber whom he must enjoin to silence.

She opened her eyes, saw him, and said quietly, with a smile: —

“And Cosette?”

CHAPTER II — FANTINE HAPPY

She made no movement of either surprise or of joy; she was joy itself. That simple question, “And Cosette?” was put with so profound a faith, with so much certainty, with such a complete absence of disquiet and of doubt, that he found not a word of reply. She continued: —

“I knew that you were there. I was asleep, but I saw you. I have seen you for a long, long time. I have been following you with my eyes all night long. You were in a glory, and you had around you all sorts of celestial forms.”

He raised his glance to the crucifix.

“But,” she resumed, “tell me where Cosette is. Why did not you place her on my bed against the moment of my waking?”

He made some mechanical reply which he was never afterwards able to recall.

Fortunately, the doctor had been warned, and he now made his appearance. He came to the aid of M. Madeleine.

“Calm yourself, my child,” said the doctor; “your child is here.”

Fantine’s eyes beamed and filled her whole face with light. She clasped her hands with an expression which contained all that is possible to prayer in the way of violence and tenderness.

“Oh!” she exclaimed, “bring her to me!”

Touching illusion of a mother! Cosette was, for her, still the little child who is carried.

“Not yet,” said the doctor, “not just now. You still have some fever. The sight of your child would agitate you and do you harm. You must be cured first.”

She interrupted him impetuously: —

“But I am cured! Oh, I tell you that I am cured! What an ass that doctor is! The idea! I want to see my child!”

“You see,” said the doctor, “how excited you become. So long as you are in this state I shall oppose your having your child. It is not enough to see her; it is necessary that you should live for her. When you are reasonable, I will bring her to you myself.”

The poor mother bowed her head.

“I beg your pardon, doctor, I really beg your pardon. Formerly I should never have spoken as I have just done; so many misfortunes have happened to me, that I sometimes do not know what I am saying. I understand you; you fear the emotion. I will wait as long as you like, but I swear to you that it would not have harmed me to see my daughter. I have been seeing her; I have not taken my eyes from her since yesterday evening. Do you know? If she were brought to me now, I should talk to her very gently. That is all. Is it not quite natural that I should desire to see my daughter, who has been brought to me expressly from Montfermeil? I am not angry. I know well that I am about to be happy. All night long I have seen white things, and persons who smiled at me. When Monsieur le Docteur pleases, he shall bring me Cosette. I have no longer any fever; I am well. I am perfectly conscious that there is nothing the matter with me any more; but I am going to behave as though I were ill, and not stir, to please these ladies here. When it is seen that I am very calm, they will say, ‘She must have her child.’”

M. Madeleine was sitting on a chair beside the bed. She turned towards him; she was making a visible effort to be calm and “very good,” as she expressed it in the feebleness of illness which resembles infancy, in order that, seeing her so peaceable, they might make no difficulty about bringing Cosette to her. But while she controlled herself she could not refrain from questioning M. Madeleine.

“Did you have a pleasant trip, Monsieur le Maire? Oh! how good you were to go and get her for me! Only tell me how she is. Did she stand the journey well? Alas! she will not recognize me. She must have forgotten me by this time, poor darling! Children have no memories. They are like birds. A child sees one thing to-day and another thing to-morrow, and thinks of nothing any longer. And did she have white linen? Did those Thenardiers keep her clean? How have they fed her? Oh! if you only knew how I have suffered, putting such questions as that to myself during all the time of my wretchedness. Now, it is all past. I am happy. Oh, how I should like to see her! Do you think her pretty, Monsieur le Maire? Is not my daughter beautiful? You must have been very cold in that diligence! Could she not be brought for just one little instant? She might be taken away directly afterwards. Tell me; you are the master; it could be so if you chose!”

He took her hand. “Cosette is beautiful,” he said, “Cosette is well. You shall see her soon; but calm yourself; you are talking with too much vivacity, and you are throwing your arms out from under the clothes, and that makes you cough."

In fact, fits of coughing interrupted Fantine at nearly every word.

Fantine did not murmur; she feared that she had injured by her too passionate lamentations the confidence which she was desirous of inspiring, and she began to talk of indifferent things.

"Montfermeil is quite pretty, is it not? People go there on pleasure parties in summer. Are the Thenardiers prosperous? There are not many travellers in their parts. That inn of theirs is a sort of a cook-shop."

M. Madeleine was still holding her hand, and gazing at her with anxiety; it was evident that he had come to tell her things before which his mind now hesitated. The doctor, having finished his visit, retired. Sister Simplice remained alone with them.

But in the midst of this pause Fantine exclaimed: —

"I hear her! mon Dieu, I hear her!"

She stretched out her arm to enjoin silence about her, held her breath, and began to listen with rapture.

There was a child playing in the yard — the child of the portress or of some work-woman. It was one of those accidents which are always occurring, and which seem to form a part of the mysterious stage-setting of mournful scenes. The child — a little girl — was going and coming, running to warm herself, laughing, singing at the top of her voice. Alas! in what are the plays of children not intermingled. It was this little girl whom Fantine heard singing.

"Oh!" she resumed, "it is my Cosette! I recognize her voice."

The child retreated as it had come; the voice died away. Fantine listened for a while longer, then her face clouded over, and M. Madeleine heard her say, in a low voice: "How wicked that doctor is not to allow me to see my daughter! That man has an evil countenance, that he has."

But the smiling background of her thoughts came to the front again. She continued to talk to herself, with her head resting on the pillow: "How happy we are going to be! We shall have a little garden the very first thing; M. Madeleine has promised it to me. My daughter will play in the garden. She must know her letters by this time. I will make her spell. She will run over the grass after butterflies. I will watch her. Then she will take her first communion. Ah! when will she take her first communion?"

She began to reckon on her fingers.

“One, two, three, four — she is seven years old. In five years she will have a white veil, and openwork stockings; she will look like a little woman. O my good sister, you do not know how foolish I become when I think of my daughter’s first communion!”

She began to laugh.

He had released Fantine’s hand. He listened to her words as one listens to the sighing of the breeze, with his eyes on the ground, his mind absorbed in reflection which had no bottom. All at once she ceased speaking, and this caused him to raise his head mechanically. Fantine had become terrible.

She no longer spoke, she no longer breathed; she had raised herself to a sitting posture, her thin shoulder emerged from her chemise; her face, which had been radiant but a moment before, was ghastly, and she seemed to have fixed her eyes, rendered large with terror, on something alarming at the other extremity of the room.

“Good God!” he exclaimed; “what ails you, Fantine?”

She made no reply; she did not remove her eyes from the object which she seemed to see. She removed one hand from his arm, and with the other made him a sign to look behind him.

He turned, and beheld Javert.

CHAPTER III — JAVERT SATISFIED

This is what had taken place.

The half-hour after midnight had just struck when M. Madeleine quitted the Hall of Assizes in Arras. He regained his inn just in time to set out again by the mail-wagon, in which he had engaged his place. A little before six o'clock in the morning he had arrived at M. sur M., and his first care had been to post a letter to M. Laffitte, then to enter the infirmary and see Fantine.

However, he had hardly quitted the audience hall of the Court of Assizes, when the district-attorney, recovering from his first shock, had taken the word to deplore the mad deed of the honorable mayor of M. sur M., to declare that his convictions had not been in the least modified by that curious incident, which would be explained thereafter, and to demand, in the meantime, the condemnation of that Champmathieu, who was evidently the real Jean Valjean. The district-attorney's persistence was visibly at variance with the sentiments of every one, of the public, of the court, and of the jury. The counsel for the defence had some difficulty in refuting this harangue and in establishing that, in consequence of the revelations of M. Madeleine, that is to say, of the real Jean Valjean, the aspect of the matter had been thoroughly altered, and that the jury had before their eyes now only an innocent man. Thence the lawyer had drawn some epiphonemas, not very fresh, unfortunately, upon judicial errors, etc., etc.; the Président, in his summing up, had joined the counsel for the defence, and in a few minutes the jury had thrown Champmathieu out of the case.

Nevertheless, the district-attorney was bent on having a Jean Valjean; and as he had no longer Champmathieu, he took Madeleine.

Immediately after Champmathieu had been set at liberty, the district-attorney shut himself up with the Président. They conferred "as to the necessity of seizing the person of M. le Maire of M. sur M." This phrase, in which there was a great deal of of, is the district-attorney's, written with his own hand, on the minutes of his report to the attorney-general. His first emotion having passed off, the Président did not offer many objections. Justice must, after all, take its course. And then, when all was said, although the Président was a kindly and a tolerably intelligent man, he was, at the same time, a devoted and almost an ardent royalist, and he had been shocked to hear the Mayor of M. sur M. say the Emperor, and not Bonaparte, when alluding to the landing at Cannes.

The order for his arrest was accordingly despatched. The district-attorney forwarded it to M. sur M. by a special messenger, at full speed, and entrusted its execution to Police Inspector Javert.

The reader knows that Javert had returned to M. sur M. immediately after having given his deposition.

Javert was just getting out of bed when the messenger handed him the order of arrest and the command to produce the prisoner.

The messenger himself was a very clever member of the police, who, in two words, informed Javert of what had taken place at Arras. The order of arrest, signed by the district-attorney, was couched in these words: “Inspector Javert will apprehend the body of the Sieur Madeleine, mayor of M. sur M., who, in this day’s session of the court, was recognized as the liberated convict, Jean Valjean.”

Any one who did not know Javert, and who had chanced to see him at the moment when he penetrated the antechamber of the infirmary, could have divined nothing of what had taken place, and would have thought his air the most ordinary in the world. He was cool, calm, grave, his gray hair was perfectly smooth upon his temples, and he had just mounted the stairs with his habitual deliberation. Any one who was thoroughly acquainted with him, and who had examined him attentively at the moment, would have shuddered. The buckle of his leather stock was under his left ear instead of at the nape of his neck. This betrayed unwonted agitation.

Javert was a complete character, who never had a wrinkle in his duty or in his uniform; methodical with malefactors, rigid with the buttons of his coat.

That he should have set the buckle of his stock awry, it was indispensable that there should have taken place in him one of those emotions which may be designated as internal earthquakes.

He had come in a simple way, had made a requisition on the neighboring post for a corporal and four soldiers, had left the soldiers in the courtyard, had had Fantine’s room pointed out to him by the portress, who was utterly unsuspicious, accustomed as she was to seeing armed men inquiring for the mayor.

On arriving at Fantine’s chamber, Javert turned the handle, pushed the door open with the gentleness of a sick-nurse or a police spy, and entered.

Properly speaking, he did not enter. He stood erect in the half-open door, his hat on his head and his left hand thrust into his coat, which was buttoned up to the chin. In the bend of his elbow the leaden head of his enormous cane, which was hidden behind him, could be seen.

Thus he remained for nearly a minute, without his presence being perceived. All at once Fantine raised her eyes, saw him, and made M. Madeleine turn round.

The instant that Madeleine’s glance encountered Javert’s glance, Javert, without stirring, without moving from his post, without approaching him, became terrible. No human sentiment can be as terrible as joy.

It was the visage of a demon who has just found his damned soul.

The satisfaction of at last getting hold of Jean Valjean caused all that was in his soul to appear in his countenance. The depths having been stirred up, mounted to the surface. The humiliation of having, in some slight degree, lost the scent, and of having indulged, for a few moments, in an error with regard to Champmathieu, was effaced by pride at having so well and accurately divined in the first place, and of having for so long cherished a just instinct. Javert’s content shone forth in his sovereign attitude. The deformity of triumph overspread that narrow brow. All the demonstrations of horror which a satisfied face can afford were there.

Javert was in heaven at that moment. Without putting the thing clearly to himself, but with a confused intuition of the necessity of his presence and of his success, he, Javert, personified justice, light, and truth in their celestial function of crushing out evil. Behind him and around him, at an infinite distance, he had authority, reason, the case judged, the legal conscience, the public prosecution, all the stars; he was protecting order, he was causing the law to yield up its thunders, he was avenging society, he was lending a helping hand to the absolute, he was standing erect in the midst of a glory. There existed in his victory a remnant of defiance and of combat. Erect, haughty, brilliant, he flaunted abroad in open day the superhuman bestiality of a ferocious archangel. The terrible shadow of the action which he was accomplishing caused the vague flash of the social sword to be visible in his clenched fist; happy and indignant, he held his heel upon crime, vice, rebellion, perdition, hell; he was radiant, he exterminated, he smiled, and there was an incontestable grandeur in this monstrous Saint Michael.

Javert, though frightful, had nothing ignoble about him.

Probity, sincerity, candor, conviction, the sense of duty, are things which may become hideous when wrongly directed; but which, even when hideous, remain grand: their majesty, the majesty peculiar to the human conscience, clings to them in the midst of horror; they are virtues which have one vice, — error. The honest, pitiless joy of a fanatic in the full flood of his atrocity preserves a certain lugubriously venerable radiance. Without himself suspecting the fact, Javert in his formidable happiness was to be pitied, as is every ignorant man who triumphs. Nothing could be so poignant and so terrible as this face, wherein was displayed all that may be designated as the evil of the good.

CHAPTER IV — AUTHORITY REASSERTS ITS RIGHTS

Fantine had not seen Javert since the day on which the mayor had torn her from the man. Her ailing brain comprehended nothing, but the only thing which she did not doubt was that he had come to get her. She could not endure that terrible face; she felt her life quitting her; she hid her face in both hands, and shrieked in her anguish: —

“Monsieur Madeleine, save me!”

Jean Valjean — we shall henceforth not speak of him otherwise — had risen. He said to Fantine in the gentlest and calmest of voices: —

“Be at ease; it is not for you that he is come.”

Then he addressed Javert, and said: —

“I know what you want.”

Javert replied: —

“Be quick about it!”

There lay in the inflection of voice which accompanied these words something indescribably fierce and frenzied. Javert did not say, “Be quick about it!” he said “Bequiabouit.”

No orthography can do justice to the accent with which it was uttered: it was no longer a human word: it was a roar.

He did not proceed according to his custom, he did not enter into the matter, he exhibited no warrant of arrest. In his eyes, Jean Valjean was a sort of mysterious combatant, who was not to be laid hands upon, a wrestler in the dark whom he had had in his grasp for the last five years, without being able to throw him. This arrest was not a beginning, but an end. He confined himself to saying, “Be quick about it!”

As he spoke thus, he did not advance a single step; he hurled at Jean Valjean a glance which he threw out like a grappling-hook, and with which he was accustomed to draw wretches violently to him.

It was this glance which Fantine had felt penetrating to the very marrow of her bones two months previously.

At Javert’s exclamation, Fantine opened her eyes once more. But the mayor was there; what had she to fear?

Javert advanced to the middle of the room, and cried: —

“See here now! Art thou coming?”

The unhappy woman glanced about her. No one was present excepting the nun and the mayor. To whom could that abject use of “thou” be addressed? To her only. She shuddered.

Then she beheld a most unprecedented thing, a thing so unprecedented that nothing equal to it had appeared to her even in the blackest deliriums of fever.

She beheld Javert, the police spy, seize the mayor by the collar; she saw the mayor bow his head. It seemed to her that the world was coming to an end.

Javert had, in fact, grasped Jean Valjean by the collar.

“Monsieur le Maire!” shrieked Fantine.

Javert burst out laughing with that frightful laugh which displayed all his gums.

“There is no longer any Monsieur le Maire here!”

Jean Valjean made no attempt to disengage the hand which grasped the collar of his coat. He said: —

“Javert—”

Javert interrupted him: “Call me Mr. Inspector.”

“Monsieur,” said Jean Valjean, “I should like to say a word to you in private.”

“Aloud! Say it aloud!” replied Javert; “people are in the habit of talking aloud to me.”

Jean Valjean went on in a lower tone: —

“I have a request to make of you—”

“I tell you to speak loud.”

“But you alone should hear it—”

“What difference does that make to me? I shall not listen.”

Jean Valjean turned towards him and said very rapidly and in a very low voice: —

“Grant me three days’ grace! three days in which to go and fetch the child of this unhappy woman. I will pay whatever is necessary. You shall accompany me if you choose.”

“You are making sport of me!” cried Javert. “Come now, I did not think you such a fool! You ask me to give you three days in which to run away! You say that it is for the purpose of fetching that creature’s child! Ah! Ah! That’s good! That’s really capital!”

Fantine was seized with a fit of trembling.

“My child!” she cried, “to go and fetch my child! She is not here, then! Answer me, sister; where is Cosette? I want my child! Monsieur Madeleine! Monsieur le Maire!”

Javert stamped his foot.

“And now there’s the other one! Will you hold your tongue, you hussy? It’s a pretty sort of a place where convicts are magistrates, and where women of the town are cared for like countesses! Ah! But we are going to change all that; it is high time!”

He stared intently at Fantine, and added, once more taking into his grasp Jean Valjean’s cravat, shirt and collar: —

“I tell you that there is no Monsieur Madeleine and that there is no Monsieur le Maire. There is a thief, a brigand, a convict named Jean Valjean! And I have him in my grasp! That’s what there is!”

Fantine raised herself in bed with a bound, supporting herself on her stiffened arms and on both hands: she gazed at Jean Valjean, she gazed at Javert, she gazed at the nun, she opened her mouth as though to speak; a rattle proceeded from the depths of her throat, her teeth chattered; she stretched out her arms in her agony, opening her hands convulsively, and fumbling about her like a drowning person; then suddenly fell back on her pillow.

Her head struck the head-board of the bed and fell forwards on her breast, with gaping mouth and staring, sightless eyes.

She was dead.

Jean Valjean laid his hand upon the detaining hand of Javert, and opened it as he would have opened the hand of a baby; then he said to Javert: —

“You have murdered that woman.”

“Let’s have an end of this!” shouted Javert, in a fury; “I am not here to listen to argument. Let us economize all that; the guard is below; march on instantly, or you’ll get the thumb-screws!”

In the corner of the room stood an old iron bedstead, which was in a decidedly decrepit state, and which served the sisters as a camp-bed when they were watching with the sick. Jean Valjean stepped up to this bed, in a twinkling wrenched off the head-piece, which was already in a dilapidated condition, an easy matter to muscles like his, grasped the principal rod like a bludgeon, and glanced at Javert. Javert retreated towards the door. Jean Valjean, armed with his bar of iron, walked slowly up to Fantine’s couch.

When he arrived there he turned and said to Javert, in a voice that was barely audible: —

“I advise you not to disturb me at this moment.”

One thing is certain, and that is, that Javert trembled.

It did occur to him to summon the guard, but Jean Valjean might avail himself of that moment to effect his escape; so he remained, grasped his cane by the small end, and leaned against the door-post, without removing his eyes from Jean Valjean.

Jean Valjean rested his elbow on the knob at the head of the bed, and his brow on his hand, and began to contemplate the motionless body of Fantine, which lay extended there. He remained thus, mute, absorbed, evidently with no further thought of anything connected with this life. Upon his face and in his attitude there was nothing but inexpressible pity. After a few moments of this meditation he bent towards Fantine, and spoke to her in a low voice.

What did he say to her? What could this man, who was reproved, say to that woman, who was dead? What words were those? No one on earth heard them. Did the dead woman hear them? There are some touching illusions which are, perhaps, sublime realities. The point as to which there exists no doubt is, that Sister Simplice, the sole witness of the incident, often said that at the moment that Jean Valjean whispèred in Fantine’s ear, she distinctly beheld an ineffable smile dawn on those pale lips, and in those dim eyes, filled with the amazement of the tomb.

Jean Valjean took Fantine’s head in both his hands, and arranged it on the pillow as a mother might have done for her child; then he tied the string of her chemise, and smoothed her hair back under her cap. That done, he closed her eyes.

Fantine’s face seemed strangely illuminated at that moment.

Death, that signifies entrance into the great light.

Fantine’s hand was hanging over the side of the bed. Jean Valjean knelt down before that hand, lifted it gently, and kissed it.

Then he rose, and turned to Javert.

“Now,” said he, “I am at your disposal.”

CHAPTER V — A SUITABLE TOMB

Javert deposited Jean Valjean in the city prison.

The arrest of M. Madeleine occasioned a sensation, or rather, an extraordinary commotion in M. sur M. We are sorry that we cannot conceal the fact, that at the single word, “He was a convict,” nearly every one deserted him. In less than two hours all the good that he had done had been forgotten, and he was nothing but a “convict from the galleys.” It is just to add that the details of what had taken place at Arras were not yet known. All day long conversations like the following were to be heard in all quarters of the town: —

“You don’t know? He was a liberated convict!” “Who?” “The mayor.” “Bah! M. Madeleine?” “Yes.” “Really?” “His name was not Madeleine at all; he had a frightful name, Bejean, Bojean, Boujean.” “Ah! Good God!” “He has been arrested.” “Arrested!” “In prison, in the city prison, while waiting to be transferred.” “Until he is transferred!” “He is to be transferred!” “Where is he to be taken?” “He will be tried at the Assizes for a highway robbery which he committed long ago.” “Well! I suspected as much. That man was too good, too perfect, too affected. He refused the cross; he bestowed sous on all the little scamps he came across. I always thought there was some evil history back of all that.”

The “drawing-rooms” particularly abounded in remarks of this nature.

One old lady, a subscriber to the Drapeau Blanc, made the following remark, the depth of which it is impossible to fathom: —

“I am not sorry. It will be a lesson to the Bonapartists!”

It was thus that the phantom which had been called M. Madeleine vanished from M. sur M. Only three or four persons in all the town remained faithful to his memory. The old portress who had served him was among the number.

On the evening of that day the worthy old woman was sitting in her lodge, still in a thorough fright, and absorbed in sad reflections. The factory had been closed all day, the carriage gate was bolted, the street was deserted. There was no one in the house but the two nuns, Sister Perpetue and Sister Simplice, who were watching beside the body of Fantine.

Towards the hour when M. Madeleine was accustomed to return home, the good portress rose mechanically, took from a drawer the key of M. Madeleine's chamber, and the flat candlestick which he used every evening to go up to his quarters; then she hung the key on the nail whence he was accustomed to take it, and set the candlestick on one side, as though she was expecting him. Then she sat down again on her chair, and became absorbed in thought once more. The poor, good old woman bad done all this without being conscious of it.

It was only at the expiration of two hours that she roused herself from her revery, and exclaimed, "Hold! My good God Jesus! And I hung his key on the nail!"

At that moment the small window in the lodge opened, a hand passed through, seized the key and the candlestick, and lighted the taper at the candle which was burning there.

The portress raised her eyes, and stood there with gaping mouth, and a shriek which she confined to her throat.

She knew that hand, that arm, the sleeve of that coat.

It was M. Madeleine.

It was several seconds before she could speak; she had a seizure, as she said herself, when she related the adventure afterwards.

"Good God, Monsieur le Maire," she cried at last, "I thought you were —"

She stopped; the conclusion of her sentence would have been lacking in respect towards the beginning. Jean Valjean was still Monsieur le Maire to her.

He finished her thought.

"In prison," said he. "I was there; I broke a bar of one of the windows; I let myself drop from the top of a roof, and here I am. I am going up to my room; go and find Sister Simplice for me. She is with that poor woman, no doubt."

The old woman obeyed in all haste.

He gave her no orders; he was quite sure that she would guard him better than he should guard himself.

No one ever found out how he had managed to get into the courtyard without opening the big gates. He had, and always carried about him, a pass-key which opened a little side-door; but he must have been searched, and his latch-key must have been taken from him. This point was never explained.

He ascended the staircase leading to his chamber. On arriving at the top, he left his candle on the top step of his stairs, opened his door with very little noise, went and closed his window and his shutters by feeling, then returned for his candle and re-entered his room.

It was a useful precaution; it will be recollected that his window could be seen from the street.

He cast a glance about him, at his table, at his chair, at his bed which had not been disturbed for three days. No trace of the disorder of the night before last remained. The portress had "done up" his room; only she had picked out of the ashes and placed neatly on the table the two iron ends of the cudgel and the forty-sou piece which had been blackened by the fire.

He took a sheet of paper, on which he wrote: "These are the two tips of my iron-shod cudgel and the forty-sou piece stolen from Little Gervais, which I mentioned at the Court of Assizes," and he arranged this piece of paper, the bits of iron, and the coin in such a way that they were the first things to be seen on entering the room. From a cupboard he pulled out one of his old shirts, which he tore in pieces. In the strips of linen thus prepared he wrapped the two silver candlesticks. He betrayed neither haste nor agitation; and while he was wrapping up the Bishop's candlesticks, he nibbled at a piece of black bread. It was probably the prison-bread which he had carried with him in his flight.

This was proved by the crumbs which were found on the floor of the room when the authorities made an examination later on.

There came two taps at the door.

"Come in," said he.

It was Sister Simplice.

She was pale; her eyes were red; the candle which she carried trembled in her hand. The peculiar feature of the violences of destiny is, that however polished or cool we may be, they wring human nature from our very bowels, and force it to reappear on the surface. The emotions of that day had turned the nun into a woman once more. She had wept, and she was trembling.

Jean Valjean had just finished writing a few lines on a paper, which he handed to the nun, saying, "Sister, you will give this to Monsieur le Curé."

The paper was not folded. She cast a glance upon it.

“You can read it,” said he.

She read: —

“I beg Monsieur le Curé to keep an eye on all that I leave behind me. He will be so good as to pay out of it the expenses of my trial, and of the funeral of the woman who died yesterday. The rest is for the poor.”

The sister tried to speak, but she only managed to stammer a few inarticulate sounds. She succeeded in saying, however: —

“Does not Monsieur le Maire desire to take a last look at that poor, unhappy woman?”

“No,” said he; “I am pursued; it would only end in their arresting me in that room, and that would disturb her.”

He had hardly finished when a loud noise became audible on the staircase. They heard a tumult of ascending footsteps, and the old portress saying in her loudest and most piercing tones: —

“My good sir, I swear to you by the good God, that not a soul has entered this house all day, nor all the evening, and that I have not even left the door.”

A man responded: —

“But there is a light in that room, nevertheless.”

They recognized Javert’s voice.

The chamber was so arranged that the door in opening masked the corner of the wall on the right. Jean Valjean blew out the light and placed himself in this angle. Sister Simplice fell on her knees near the table.

The door opened.

Javert entered.

The whispers of many men and the protestations of the portress were audible in the corridor.

The nun did not raise her eyes. She was praying.

The candle was on the chimney-piece, and gave but very little light.

Javert caught sight of the nun and halted in amazement.

It will be remembered that the fundamental point in Javert, his element, the very air he breathed, was veneration for all authority. This was impregnable, and admitted of neither objection nor restriction. In his eyes, of course, the ecclesiastical authority was the chief of all; he was religious, superficial and correct on this point as on all others. In his eyes, a priest was a mind, who never makes a mistake; a nun was a creature who never sins;

they were souls walled in from this world, with a single door which never opened except to allow the truth to pass through.

On perceiving the sister, his first movement was to retire.

But there was also another duty which bound him and impelled him imperiously in the opposite direction. His second movement was to remain and to venture on at least one question.

This was Sister Simplice, who had never told a lie in her life. Javert knew it, and held her in special veneration in consequence.

“Sister,” said he, “are you alone in this room?”

A terrible moment ensued, during which the poor portress felt as though she should faint.

The sister raised her eyes and answered: —

“Yes.”

“Then,” resumed Javert, “you will excuse me if I persist; it is my duty; you have not seen a certain person — a man — this evening? He has escaped; we are in search of him — that Jean Valjean; you have not seen him?”

The sister replied: —

“No.”

She lied. She had lied twice in succession, one after the other, without hesitation, promptly, as a person does when sacrificing herself.

“Pardon me,” said Javert, and he retired with a deep bow.

O sainted maid! you left this world many years ago; you have rejoined your sisters, the virgins, and your brothers, the angels, in the light; may this lie be counted to your credit in paradise!

The sister’s affirmation was for Javert so decisive a thing that he did not even observe the singularity of that candle which had but just been extinguished, and which was still smoking on the table.

An hour later, a man, marching amid trees and mists, was rapidly departing from M. sur M. in the direction of Paris. That man was Jean Valjean. It has been established by the testimony of two or three carters who met him, that he was carrying a bundle; that he was dressed in a blouse. Where had he obtained that blouse? No one ever found out. But an aged workman had died in the infirmary of the factory a few days before, leaving behind him nothing but his blouse. Perhaps that was the one.

One last word about Fantine.

We all have a mother, — the earth. Fantine was given back to that mother.

The cure thought that he was doing right, and perhaps he really was, in reserving as much money as possible from what Jean Valjean had left for the poor. Who was concerned, after all? A convict and a woman of the town. That is why he had a very simple funeral for Fantine, and reduced it to that strictly necessary form known as the pauper’s grave.

So Fantine was buried in the free corner of the cemetery which belongs to anybody and everybody, and where the poor are lost. Fortunately, God knows where to find the soul again. Fantine was laid in the shade, among the first bones that came to hand; she was subjected to the promiscuousness of ashes. She was thrown into the public grave. Her grave resembled her bed.

[THE END OF VOLUME I. “FANTINE”]

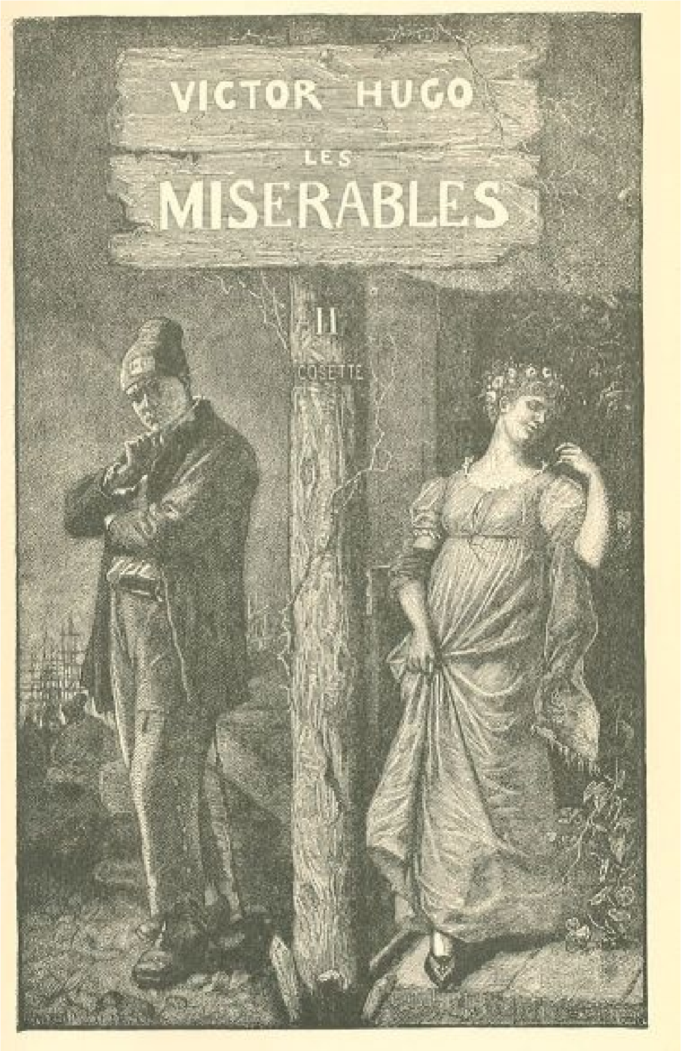
VICTOR HUGO
LES
MISERABLES
II
COSETTE

LES MISÉRABLES

BY

VICTOR HUGO

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH

BY

ISABEL F. HAPGOOD

IN FIVE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

COSETTE

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VOLUME II. — COSETTE

BOOK FIRST. — WATERLOO

CHAPTER I — WHAT IS MET WITH ON THE WAY FROM NIVELLES

Last year (1861), on a beautiful May morning, a traveller, the person who is telling this story, was coming from Nivelles, and directing his course towards La Hulpe. He was on foot. He was pursuing a broad paved road, which undulated between two rows of trees, over the hills which succeed each other, raise the road and let it fall again, and produce something in the nature of enormous waves.

He had passed Lillois and Bois-Seigneur-Isaac. In the west he perceived the slate-roofed tower of Braine-l'Alleud, which has the form of a reversed vase. He had just left behind a wood upon an eminence; and at the angle of the cross-road, by the side of a sort of mouldy gibbet bearing the inscription Ancient Barrier No. 4, a public house, bearing on its front this sign: At the Four Winds (Aux Quatre Vents). Echabeau, Private Cafe.

A quarter of a league further on, he arrived at the bottom of a little valley, where there is water which passes beneath an arch made through the embankment of the road. The clump of sparsely planted but very green trees, which fills the valley on one side of the road, is dispersed over the meadows on the other, and disappears gracefully and as in order in the direction of Braine-l'Alleud.

On the right, close to the road, was an inn, with a four-wheeled cart at the door, a large bundle of hop-poles, a plough, a heap of dried brushwood near a flourishing hedge, lime smoking in a square hole, and a ladder suspended along an old penthouse with straw partitions. A young girl was weeding in a field, where a huge yellow poster, probably of some outside spectacle, such as a parish festival, was fluttering in the wind. At one corner of the inn, beside a pool in which a flotilla of ducks was navigating, a badly paved path plunged into the bushes. The wayfarer struck into this.

After traversing a hundred paces, skirting a wall of the fifteenth century, surmounted by a pointed gable, with bricks set in contrast, he found himself before a large door of arched stone, with a rectilinear impost, in the sombre style of Louis XIV., flanked by two flat medallions. A severe facade rose above this door; a wall, perpendicular to the facade, almost touched the door, and flanked it with an abrupt right angle. In the meadow before the door lay three harrows, through which, in disorder, grew all the flowers of May. The door was closed. The two decrepit leaves which barred it were ornamented with an old rusty knocker.

The sun was charming; the branches had that soft shivering of May, which seems to proceed rather from the nests than from the wind. A brave little bird, probably a lover, was carolling in a distracted manner in a large tree.

The wayfarer bent over and examined a rather large circular excavation, resembling the hollow of a sphere, in the stone on the left, at the foot of the pier of the door.

At this moment the leaves of the door parted, and a peasant woman emerged.

She saw the wayfarer, and perceived what he was looking at.

"It was a French cannon-ball which made that," she said to him. And she added: —

"That which you see there, higher up in the door, near a nail, is the hole of a big iron bullet as large as an egg. The bullet did not pierce the wood."

"What is the name of this place?" inquired the wayfarer.

"Hougomont," said the peasant woman.

The traveller straightened himself up. He walked on a few paces, and went off to look over the tops of the hedges. On the horizon through the trees, he perceived a sort of little elevation, and on this elevation something which at that distance resembled a lion.

He was on the battle-field of Waterloo.

CHAPTER II — HOUGOMONT

Hougomont, — this was a funereal spot, the beginning of the obstacle, the first resistance, which that great wood-cutter of Europe, called Napoleon, encountered at Waterloo, the first knot under the blows of his axe.

It was a chateau; it is no longer anything but a farm. For the antiquary, Hougomont is Hugomons. This manor was built by Hugo, Sire of Somerel, the same who endowed the sixth chaplaincy of the Abbéy of Villiers.

The traveller pushed open the door, elbowed an ancient calash under the porch, and entered the courtyard.

The first thing which struck him in this paddock was a door of the sixteenth century, which here simulates an arcade, everything else having fallen prostrate around it. A monumental aspect often has its birth in ruin. In a wall near the arcade opens another arched door, of the time of Henry IV., permitting a glimpse of the trees of an orchard; beside this door, a manure-hole, some pickaxes, some shovels, some carts, an old well, with its flagstone and its iron reel, a chicken jumping, and a turkey spreading its tail, a chapel surmounted by a small bell-tower, a blossoming pear-tree trained in espalier against the wall of the chapel — behold the court, the conquest of which was one of Napoleon's dreams. This corner of earth, could he but have seized it, would, perhaps, have given him the world likewise. Chickens are scattering its dust abroad with their beaks. A growl is audible; it is a huge dog, who shows his teeth and replaces the English.

The English behaved admirably there. Cooke's four companies of guards there held out for seven hours against the fury of an army.

Hougomont viewed on the map, as a geometrical plan, comprising buildings and enclosures, presents a sort of irregular rectangle, one angle of which is nicked out. It is this angle which contains the southern door, guarded by this wall, which commands it only a gun's length away. Hougomont has two doors, — the southern door, that of the chateau; and the northern door, belonging to the farm. Napoleon sent his brother Jerome against Hougomont; the divisions of Foy, Guilleminot, and Bachelu hurled themselves against it; nearly the entire corps of Reille was employed against it, and miscarried; Kellermann's balls were exhausted on this heroic section of wall. Bauduin's brigade was not strong enough to force

Hougomont on the north, and the brigade of Soye could not do more than effect the beginning of a breach on the south, but without taking it.

The farm buildings border the courtyard on the south. A bit of the north door, broken by the French, hangs suspended to the wall. It consists of four planks nailed to two cross-beams, on which the scars of the attack are visible.

The northern door, which was beaten in by the French, and which has had a piece applied to it to replace the panel suspended on the wall, stands half-open at the bottom of the paddock; it is cut squarely in the wall, built of stone below, of brick above which closes in the courtyard on the north. It is a simple door for carts, such as exist in all farms, with the two large leaves made of rustic planks: beyond lie the meadows. The dispute over this entrance was furious. For a long time, all sorts of imprints of bloody hands were visible on the door-posts. It was there that Bauduin was killed.

The storm of the combat still lingers in this courtyard; its horror is visible there; the confusion of the fray was petrified there; it lives and it dies there; it was only yesterday. The walls are in the death agony, the stones fall; the breaches cry aloud; the holes are wounds; the drooping, quivering trees seem to be making an effort to flee.

This courtyard was more built up in 1815 than it is to-day. Buildings which have since been pulled down then formed redans and angles.

The English barricaded themselves there; the French made their way in, but could not stand their ground. Beside the chapel, one wing of the chateau, the only ruin now remaining of the manor of Hougomont, rises in a crumbling state, — disembowelled, one might say. The chateau served for a dungeon, the chapel for a block-house. There men exterminated each other. The French, fired on from every point, — from behind the walls, from the summits of the garrets, from the depths of the cellars, through all the casements, through all the air-holes, through every crack in the stones, — fetched fagots and set fire to walls and men; the reply to the grape-shot was a conflagration.

In the ruined wing, through windows garnished with bars of iron, the dismantled chambers of the main building of brick are visible; the English guards were in ambush in these rooms; the spiral of the staircase, cracked from the ground floor to the very roof, appears like the inside of a broken shell. The staircase has two stories; the English, besieged on the staircase, and massed on its upper steps, had cut off the lower steps. These consisted of large slabs of blue stone, which form a heap among the nettles. Half a score of steps still cling to the wall; on the first is cut the figure of a trident. These inaccessible steps are solid in their niches. All the rest resembles a jaw which has been denuded of its teeth. There are two old trees there: one is dead; the other is wounded at its base, and is clothed with verdure in April. Since 1815 it has taken to growing through the staircase.

A massacre took place in the chapel. The interior, which has recovered its calm, is singular. The mass has not been said there since the carnage. Nevertheless, the altar has been left there — an altar of unpolished wood, placed against a background of roughhewn stone. Four whitewashed walls, a door opposite the altar, two small arched windows; over the door a large wooden crucifix, below the crucifix a square air-hole stopped up with a bundle of hay; on the ground, in one corner, an old window-frame with the glass all broken to pieces — such is the chapel. Near the altar there is nailed up a wooden statue of Saint Anne, of the fifteenth century; the head of the infant Jesus has been carried off by a large ball. The French, who were masters of the chapel for a moment, and were then dislodged, set fire to it. The flames filled this building; it was a perfect furnace; the door was burned, the floor was burned, the wooden Christ was not burned. The fire preyed upon his feet, of which only the blackened stumps are now to be seen; then it stopped, — a miracle, according to the assertion of the people of the neighborhood. The infant Jesus, decapitated, was less fortunate than the Christ.

The walls are covered with inscriptions. Near the feet of Christ this name is to be read: Henquinez. Then these others: Conde de Rio Maior Marques y Marquesa de Almagro (Habana). There are French names with exclamation points, — a sign of wrath. The wall was freshly whitewashed in 1849. The nations insulted each other there.

It was at the door of this chapel that the corpse was picked up which held an axe in its hand; this corpse was Sub-Lieutenant Legros.

On emerging from the chapel, a well is visible on the left. There are two in this courtyard. One inquires, Why is there no bucket and pulley to this? It is because water is no longer drawn there. Why is water not drawn there? Because it is full of skeletons.

The last person who drew water from the well was named Guillaume van Kylsom. He was a peasant who lived at Hougomont, and was gardener there. On the 18th of June, 1815, his family fled and concealed themselves in the woods.

The forest surrounding the Abbéy of Villiers sheltered these unfortunate people who had been scattered abroad, for many days and nights. There are at this day certain traces recognizable, such as old boles of burned trees, which mark the site of these poor bivouacs trembling in the depths of the thickets.

Guillaume van Kylsom remained at Hougomont, “to guard the chateau,” and concealed himself in the cellar. The English discovered him there. They tore him from his hiding-place, and the combatants forced this frightened man to serve them, by administering blows with the flats of their swords. They were thirsty; this Guillaume brought them water. It was from this well that he drew it. Many drank there their last draught. This well where drank so many of the dead was destined to die itself.

After the engagement, they were in haste to bury the dead bodies. Death has a fashion of harassing victory, and she causes the pest to follow glory. The typhus is a concomitant of triumph. This well was deep, and it was turned into a sepulchre. Three hundred dead bodies were cast into it. With too much haste perhaps. Were they all dead? Legend says they were not. It seems that on the night succeeding the interment, feeble voices were heard calling from the well.

This well is isolated in the middle of the courtyard. Three walls, part stone, part brick, and simulating a small, square tower, and folded like the leaves of a screen, surround it on all sides. The fourth side is open. It is there that the water was drawn. The wall at the bottom has a sort of shapeless loophole, possibly the hole made by a shell. This little tower had a platform, of which only the beams remain. The iron supports of the well on the right form a cross. On leaning over, the eye is lost in a deep cylinder of brick which is filled with a heaped-up mass of shadows. The base of the walls all about the well is concealed in a growth of nettles.

This well has not in front of it that large blue slab which forms the table for all wells in Belgium. The slab has here been replaced by a cross-beam, against which lean five or six shapeless fragments of knotty and petrified wood which resemble huge bones. There is no longer either pail, chain, or pulley; but there is still the stone basin which served the overflow. The rain-water collects there, and from time to time a bird of the neighboring forests comes thither to drink, and then flies away. One house in this ruin, the farmhouse, is still inhabited. The door of this house opens on the courtyard. Upon this door, beside a pretty Gothic lock-plate, there is an iron handle with trefoils placed slanting. At the moment when the Hanoverian lieutenant, Wilda, grasped this handle in order to take refuge in the farm, a French sapper hewed off his hand with an axe.

The family who occupy the house had for their grandfather Guillaume van Kylsom, the old gardener, dead long since. A woman with gray hair said to us: “I was there. I was three years old. My sister, who was older, was terrified and wept. They carried us off to the woods. I went there in my mother’s arms. We glued our ears to the earth to hear. I imitated the cannon, and went boum! boum!”

A door opening from the courtyard on the left led into the orchard, so we were told. The orchard is terrible.

It is in three parts; one might almost say, in three acts. The first part is a garden, the second is an orchard, the third is a wood. These three parts have a common enclosure: on the side of the entrance, the buildings of the chateau and the farm; on the left, a hedge; on the right, a wall; and at the end, a wall. The wall on the right is of brick, the wall at the bottom is of stone. One enters the garden first. It slopes downwards, is planted with gooseberry bushes, choked with a wild growth of vegetation, and terminated by a monumental terrace of cut stone, with balustrade with a double curve.

It was a seignorial garden in the first French style which preceded Le Notre; to-day it is ruins and briars. The pilasters are surmounted by globes which resemble cannon-balls of stone. Forty-three balusters can still be counted on their sockets; the rest lie prostrate in the grass. Almost all bear scratches of bullets. One broken baluster is placed on the pediment like a fractured leg.

It was in this garden, further down than the orchard, that six light-infantry men of the 1st, having made their way thither, and being unable to escape, hunted down and caught like bears in their dens, accepted the combat with two Hanoverian companies, one of which was armed with carbines. The Hanoverians lined this balustrade and fired from above. The infantry men, replying from below, six against two hundred, intrepid and with no shelter save the currant-bushes, took a quarter of an hour to die.

One mounts a few steps and passes from the garden into the orchard, properly speaking. There, within the limits of those few square fathoms, fifteen hundred men fell in less than an hour. The wall seems ready to renew the combat. Thirty-eight loopholes, pierced by the English at irregular heights, are there still. In front of the sixth are placed two English tombs of granite. There are loopholes only in the south wall, as the principal attack came from that quarter. The wall is hidden on the outside by a tall hedge; the French came up, thinking that they had to deal only with a hedge, crossed it, and found the wall both an obstacle and an ambuscade, with the English guards behind it, the thirty-eight loopholes firing at once a shower of grape-shot and balls, and Soye's brigade was broken against it. Thus Waterloo began.

Nevertheless, the orchard was taken. As they had no ladders, the French scaled it with their nails. They fought hand to hand amid the trees. All this grass has been soaked in blood. A battalion of Nassau, seven hundred strong, was overwhelmed there. The outside of the wall, against which Kellermann's two batteries were trained, is gnawed by grape-shot.

This orchard is sentient, like others, in the month of May. It has its buttercups and its daisies; the grass is tall there; the cart-horses browse there; cords of hair, on which linen is drying, traverse the spaces between the trees and force the passer-by to bend his head; one walks over this uncultivated land, and one's foot dives into mole-holes. In the middle of the grass one observes an uprooted tree-bole which lies there all verdant. Major Blackmann leaned against it to die. Beneath a great tree in the neighborhood fell the German general, Duplat, descended from a French family which fled on the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. An aged and falling apple-tree leans far over to one side, its wound dressed with a bandage of straw and of clayey loam. Nearly all the apple-trees are falling with age. There is not one which has not had its bullet or its biscayan. The skeletons of dead trees abound in this orchard. Crows fly through their branches, and at the end of it is a wood full of violets.

Bauduin, killed, Foy wounded, conflagration, massacre, carnage, a rivulet formed of English blood, French blood, German blood mingled in fury, a well crammed with corpses, the regiment of Nassau and the regiment of Brunswick destroyed, Duplat killed, Blackmann killed, the English Guards mutilated, twenty French battalions, besides the forty from Reille's corps, decimated, three thousand men in that hovel of Hougomont alone cut down, slashed to pieces, shot, burned, with their throats cut, — and all this so that a peasant can say to-day to the traveller: Monsieur, give me three francs, and if you like, I will explain to you the affair of Waterloo!

CHAPTER III — THE EIGHTEENTH OF JUNE, 1815

Let us turn back, — that is one of the story-teller’s rights, — and put ourselves once more in the year 1815, and even a little earlier than the epoch when the action narrated in the first part of this book took place.

If it had not rained in the night between the 17th and the 18th of June, 1815, the fate of Europe would have been different. A few drops of water, more or less, decided the downfall of Napoleon. All that Providence required in order to make Waterloo the end of Austerlitz was a little more rain, and a cloud traversing the sky out of season sufficed to make a world crumble.

The battle of Waterloo could not be begun until half-past eleven o’clock, and that gave Blucher time to come up. Why? Because the ground was wet. The artillery had to wait until it became a little firmer before they could manoeuvre.

Napoleon was an artillery officer, and felt the effects of this. The foundation of this wonderful captain was the man who, in the report to the Directory on Aboukir, said: Such a one of our balls killed six men. All his plans of battle were arranged for projectiles. The key to his victory was to make the artillery converge on one point. He treated the strategy of the hostile general like a citadel, and made a breach in it. He overwhelmed the weak point with grape-shot; he joined and dissolved battles with cannon. There was something of the sharpshooter in his genius. To beat in squares, to pulverize regiments, to break lines, to crush and disperse masses, — for him everything lay in this, to strike, strike, strike incessantly, — and he intrusted this task to the cannon-ball. A redoubtable method, and one which, united with genius, rendered this gloomy athlete of the pugilism of war invincible for the space of fifteen years.

On the 18th of June, 1815, he relied all the more on his artillery, because he had numbers on his side. Wellington had only one hundred and fifty-nine mouths of fire; Napoleon had two hundred and forty.

Suppose the soil dry, and the artillery capable of moving, the action would have begun at six o’clock in the morning. The battle would have been won and ended at two o’clock, three hours before the change of fortune in favor of the Prussians. What amount of blame attaches to Napoleon for the loss of this battle? Is the shipwreck due to the pilot?

Was it the evident physical decline of Napoleon that complicated this epoch by an inward diminution of force? Had the twenty years of war worn out the blade as it had worn the scabbard, the soul as well as the body? Did the veteran make himself disastrously felt in the leader? In a word, was this genius, as many historians of note have thought, suffering from an eclipse? Did he go into a frenzy in order to disguise his weakened powers from himself? Did he begin to waver under the delusion of a breath of adventure? Had he become — a grave matter in a general — unconscious of peril? Is there an age, in this class of material great men, who may be called the giants of action, when genius grows short-sighted? Old age has no hold on the geniuses of the ideal; for the Dantes and Michael Angelos to grow old is to grow in greatness; is it to grow less for the Hannibals and the Bonapartes? Had Napoleon lost the direct sense of victory? Had he reached the point where he could no longer recognize the reef, could no longer divine the snare, no longer discern the crumbling brink of abysses? Had he lost his power of scenting out catastrophes? He who had in former days known all the roads to triumph, and who, from the summit of his chariot of lightning, pointed them out with a sovereign finger, had he now reached that state of sinister amazement when he could lead his tumultuous legions harnessed to it, to the precipice? Was he seized at the age of forty-six with a supreme madness? Was that titanic charioteer of destiny no longer anything more than an immense dare-devil?

We do not think so.

His plan of battle was, by the confession of all, a masterpiece. To go straight to the centre of the Allies’ line, to make a breach in the enemy, to cut them in two, to drive the British half back on Hal, and the Prussian half on Tongres, to make two shattered fragments of Wellington and Blucher, to carry Mont-Saint-Jean, to seize Brussels, to hurl the German into the Rhine, and the Englishman into the sea. All this was contained in that battle, according to Napoleon. Afterwards people would see.

Of course, we do not here pretend to furnish a history of the battle of Waterloo; one of the scenes of the foundation of the story which we are relating is connected with this battle, but this history is not our subject; this history, moreover, has been finished, and finished in a masterly manner, from one point of view by Napoleon, and from another point of view by a whole pleiad of historians.

As for us, we leave the historians at loggerheads; we are but a distant witness, a passer-by on the plain, a seeker bending over that soil all made of human flesh, taking appearances for realities, perchance; we have no right to oppose, in the name of science, a collection of facts which contain illusions, no doubt; we possess neither military practice nor strategic ability which authorize a system; in our opinion, a chain of accidents dominated the two leaders at Waterloo; and when it becomes a question of destiny, that mysterious culprit, we judge like that ingenious judge, the populace.

CHAPTER IV — A

Those persons who wish to gain a clear idea of the battle of Waterloo have only to place, mentally, on the ground, a capital A. The left limb of the A is the road to Nivelles, the right limb is the road to Genappe, the tie of the A is the hollow road to Ohain from Braine-l'Alleud. The top of the A is Mont-Saint-Jean, where Wellington is; the lower left tip is Hougomont, where Reille is stationed with Jerome Bonaparte; the right tip is the Belle-Alliance, where Napoleon was. At the centre of this chord is the precise point where the final word of the battle was pronounced. It was there that the lion has been placed, the involuntary symbol of the supreme heroism of the Imperial Guard.

The triangle included in the top of the A, between the two limbs and the tie, is the plateau of Mont-Saint-Jean. The dispute over this plateau constituted the whole battle. The wings of the two armies extended to the right and left of the two roads to Genappe and Nivelles; d'Erlon facing Picton, Reille facing Hill.

Behind the tip of the A, behind the plateau of Mont-Saint-Jean, is the forest of Soignes.

As for the plain itself, let the reader picture to himself a vast undulating sweep of ground; each rise commands the next rise, and all the undulations mount towards Mont-Saint-Jean, and there end in the forest.

Two hostile troops on a field of battle are two wrestlers. It is a question of seizing the opponent round the waist. The one seeks to trip up the other. They clutch at everything: a bush is a point of support; an angle of the wall offers them a rest to the shoulder; for the lack of a hovel under whose cover they can draw up, a regiment yields its ground; an unevenness in the ground, a chance turn in the landscape, a cross-path encountered at the right moment, a grove, a ravine, can stay the heel of that colossus which is called an army, and prevent its retreat. He who quits the field is beaten; hence the necessity devolving on the responsible leader, of examining the most insignificant clump of trees, and of studying deeply the slightest relief in the ground.

The two generals had attentively studied the plain of Mont-Saint-Jean, now called the plain of Waterloo. In the preceding year, Wellington, with the sagacity of foresight, had examined it as the possible seat of a great battle. Upon this spot, and for this duel, on the 18th of June, Wellington had the good post, Napoleon the bad post. The English army was stationed above, the French army below.

It is almost superfluous here to sketch the appearance of Napoleon on horseback, glass in hand, upon the heights of Rossomme, at daybreak, on June 18, 1815. All the world has seen him before we can show him. That calm profile under the little three-cornered hat of the school of Brienne, that green uniform, the white revers concealing the star of the Legion of Honor, his great coat hiding his epaulets, the corner of red ribbon peeping from beneath his vest, his leather trousers, the white horse with the saddle-cloth of purple velvet bearing on the corners crowned N's and eagles, Hessian boots over silk stockings, silver spurs, the sword of Marengo, — that whole figure of the last of the Caesars is present to all imaginations, saluted with acclamations by some, severely regarded by others.

That figure stood for a long time wholly in the light; this arose from a certain legendary dimness evolved by the majority of heroes, and which always veils the truth for a longer or shorter time; but to-day history and daylight have arrived.

That light called history is pitiless; it possesses this peculiar and divine quality, that, pure light as it is, and precisely because it is wholly light, it often casts a shadow in places where people had hitherto beheld rays; from the same man it constructs two different phantoms, and the one attacks the other and executes justice on it, and the shadows of the despot contend with the brilliancy of the leader. Hence arises a truer measure in the definitive judgments of nations. Babylon violated lessens Alexander, Rome enchained lessens Caesar, Jerusalem murdered lessens Titus, tyranny follows the tyrant. It is a misfortune for a man to leave behind him the night which bears his form.

CHAPTER V — THE QUID OBSCURUM OF BATTLES

Every one is acquainted with the first phase of this battle; a beginning which was troubled, uncertain, hesitating, menacing to both armies, but still more so for the English than for the French.

It had rained all night, the earth had been cut up by the downpour, the water had accumulated here and there in the hollows of the plain as if in casks; at some points the gear of the artillery carriages was buried up to the axles, the circingles of the horses were dripping with liquid mud. If the wheat and rye trampled down by this cohort of transports on the march had not filled in the ruts and strewn a litter beneath the wheels, all movement, particularly in the valleys, in the direction of Papelotte would have been impossible.

The affair began late. Napoleon, as we have already explained, was in the habit of keeping all his artillery well in hand, like a pistol, aiming it now at one point, now at another, of the battle; and it had been his wish to wait until the horse batteries could move and gallop freely. In order to do that it was necessary that the sun should come out and dry the soil. But the sun did not make its appearance. It was no longer the rendezvous of Austerlitz. When the first cannon was fired, the English general, Colville, looked at his watch, and noted that it was thirty-five minutes past eleven.

The action was begun furiously, with more fury, perhaps, than the Emperor would have wished, by the left wing of the French resting on Hougomont. At the same time Napoleon attacked the centre by hurling Quiot's brigade on La Haie-Sainte, and Ney pushed forward the right wing of the French against the left wing of the English, which rested on Papelotte.

The attack on Hougomont was something of a feint; the plan was to draw Wellington thither, and to make him swerve to the left. This plan would have succeeded if the four companies of the English guards and the brave Belgians of Perponcher's division had not held the position solidly, and Wellington, instead of massing his troops there, could confine himself to despatching thither, as reinforcements, only four more companies of guards and one battalion from Brunswick.

The attack of the right wing of the French on Papelotte was calculated, in fact, to overthrow the English left, to cut off the road to Brussels, to bar the passage against possible Prussians, to force Mont-Saint-Jean, to turn Wellington back on Hougomont, thence on Braine-l'Alleud, thence on Hal; nothing easier. With the exception of a few incidents this attack succeeded Papelotte was taken; La Haie-Sainte was carried.

A detail to be noted. There was in the English infantry, particularly in Kempt's brigade, a great many raw recruits. These young soldiers were valiant in the presence of our redoubtable infantry; their inexperience extricated them intrepidly from the dilemma; they performed particularly excellent service as skirmishers: the soldier skirmisher, left somewhat to himself, becomes, so to speak, his own general. These recruits displayed some of the French ingenuity and fury. This novice of an infantry had dash. This displeased Wellington.

After the taking of La Haie-Sainte the battle wavered.

There is in this day an obscure interval, from mid-day to four o'clock; the middle portion of this battle is almost indistinct, and participates in the sombreness of the hand-to-hand conflict. Twilight reigns over it. We perceive vast fluctuations in that fog, a dizzy mirage, paraphernalia of war almost unknown to-day, pendant colbacks, floating sabre-taches, cross-belts, cartridge-boxes for grenades, hussar dolmans, red boots with a thousand wrinkles, heavy shakos garlanded with torsades, the almost black infantry of Brunswick mingled with the scarlet infantry of England, the English soldiers with great, white circular pads on the slopes of their shoulders for epaulets, the Hanoverian light-horse with their oblong casques of leather, with brass hands and red horse-tails, the Scotch with their bare knees and plaids, the great white gaiters of our grenadiers; pictures, not strategic lines — what Salvator Rosa requires, not what is suited to the needs of Gribeauval.

A certain amount of tempest is always mingled with a battle. Quid obscurum, quid divinum. Each historian traces, to some extent, the particular feature which pleases him amid this pell-mell. Whatever may be the combinations of the generals, the shock of armed masses has an incalculable ebb. During the action the plans of the two leaders enter into each other and become mutually thrown out of shape. Such a point of the field of battle devours more combatants than such another, just as more or less spongy soils soak up more or less quickly the water which is poured on them. It becomes necessary to pour out more soldiers than one would like; a series of expenditures which are the unforeseen. The line of battle waves and undulates like a thread, the trails of blood gush illogically, the fronts of the armies waver, the regiments form capes and gulfs as they enter and withdraw; all these reefs are continually moving in front of each other. Where the infantry stood the artillery arrives, the cavalry rushes in where the artillery was, the battalions are like smoke. There was something there; seek it. It has disappeared; the open spots change place, the sombre folds advance and retreat, a sort of wind from the sepulchre pushes forward, hurls back, distends, and disperses these tragic multitudes. What is a fray? an oscillation? The immobility of a mathematical plan expresses a minute, not a day. In order to depict a battle, there is required one of those powerful painters who have chaos in their brushes. Rembrandt is better than Vandermeulen; Vandermeulen, exact at noon, lies at three o’clock. Geometry is deceptive; the hurricane alone is trustworthy. That is what confers on Folard the right to contradict Polybius. Let us add, that there is a certain instant when the battle degenerates into a combat, becomes specialized, and disperses into innumerable detailed feats, which, to borrow the expression of Napoleon himself, “belong rather to the biography of the regiments than to the history of the army.” The historian has, in this case, the evident right to sum up the whole. He cannot do more than seize the principal outlines of the struggle, and it is not given to any one narrator, however conscientious he may be, to fix, absolutely, the form of that horrible cloud which is called a battle.

This, which is true of all great armed encounters, is particularly applicable to Waterloo.

Nevertheless, at a certain moment in the afternoon the battle came to a point.

CHAPTER VI — FOUR O’CLOCK IN THE AFTERNOON

Towards four o’clock the condition of the English army was serious. The Prince of Orange was in command of the centre, Hill of the right wing, Picton of the left wing. The Prince of Orange, desperate and intrepid, shouted to the Hollando-Belgians: “Nassau! Brunswick! Never retreat!” Hill, having been weakened, had come up to the support of Wellington; Picton was dead. At the very moment when the English had captured from the French the flag of the 105th of the line, the French had killed the English general, Picton, with a bullet through the head. The battle had, for Wellington, two bases of action, Hougomont and La Haie-Sainte; Hougomont still held out, but was on fire; La Haie-Sainte was taken. Of the German battalion which defended it, only forty-two men survived; all the officers, except five, were either dead or captured. Three thousand combatants had been massacred in that barn. A sergeant of the English Guards, the foremost boxer in England, reputed invulnerable by his companions, had been killed there by a little French drummer-boy. Baring had been dislodged, Alten put to the sword. Many flags had been lost, one from Alten’s division, and one from the battalion of Lunenburg, carried by a prince of the house of Deux-Ponts. The Scotch Grays no longer existed; Ponsonby’s great dragoons had been hacked to pieces. That valiant cavalry had bent beneath the lancers of Bro and beneath the cuirassiers of Travers; out of twelve hundred horses, six hundred remained; out of three lieutenant-colonels, two lay on the earth, — Hamilton wounded, Mater slain. Ponsonby had fallen, riddled by seven lance-thrusts. Gordon was dead. Marsh was dead. Two divisions, the fifth and the sixth, had been annihilated.

Hougomont injured, La Haie-Sainte taken, there now existed but one rallying-point, the centre. That point still held firm. Wellington reinforced it. He summoned thither Hill, who was at Merle-Braine; he summoned Chasse, who was at Braine-l’Alleud.

The centre of the English army, rather concave, very dense, and very compact, was strongly posted. It occupied the plateau of Mont-Saint-Jean, having behind it the village, and in front of it the slope, which was tolerably steep then. It rested on that stout stone dwelling which at that time belonged to the domain of Nivelles, and which marks the intersection of the roads — a pile of the sixteenth century, and so robust that the cannon-balls rebounded from it without injuring it. All about the plateau the English had cut the hedges here and there, made embrasures in the hawthorn-trees, thrust the throat of a cannon between two branches, embattled the shrubs. There artillery was ambushed in the brushwood. This punic labor, incontestably authorized by war, which permits traps, was so well done, that Haxo, who had been despatched by the Emperor at nine o'clock in the morning to reconnoitre the enemy's batteries, had discovered nothing of it, and had returned and reported to Napoleon that there were no obstacles except the two barricades which barred the road to Nivelles and to Genappe. It was at the season when the grain is tall; on the edge of the plateau a battalion of Kempt's brigade, the 95th, armed with carabines, was concealed in the tall wheat.

Thus assured and buttressed, the centre of the Anglo-Dutch army was well posted. The peril of this position lay in the forest of Soignes, then adjoining the field of battle, and intersected by the ponds of Groenendael and Boitsfort. An army could not retreat thither without dissolving; the regiments would have broken up immediately there. The artillery would have been lost among the morasses. The retreat, according to many a man versed in the art, — though it is disputed by others, — would have been a disorganized flight.

To this centre, Wellington added one of Chasse's brigades taken from the right wing, and one of Wincke's brigades taken from the left wing, plus Clinton's division. To his English, to the regiments of Halkett, to the brigades of Mitchell, to the guards of Maitland, he gave as reinforcements and aids, the infantry of Brunswick, Nassau's contingent, Kielmansegg's Hanoverians, and Ompteda's Germans. This placed twenty-six battalions under his hand. The right wing, as Charras says, was thrown back on the centre. An enormous battery was masked by sacks of earth at the spot where there now stands what is called the "Museum of Waterloo." Besides this, Wellington had, behind a rise in the ground, Somerset's Dragoon Guards, fourteen hundred horse strong. It was the remaining half of the justly celebrated English cavalry. Ponsonby destroyed, Somerset remained.

The battery, which, if completed, would have been almost a redoubt, was ranged behind a very low garden wall, backed up with a coating of bags of sand and a large slope of earth. This work was not finished; there had been no time to make a palisade for it.

Wellington, uneasy but impassive, was on horseback, and there remained the whole day in the same attitude, a little in advance of the old mill of Mont-Saint-Jean, which is still in existence, beneath an elm, which an Englishman, an enthusiastic vandal, purchased later on for two hundred francs, cut down, and carried off. Wellington was coldly heroic. The bullets rained about him. His aide-de-camp, Gordon, fell at his side. Lord Hill, pointing to a shell which had burst, said to him: “My lord, what are your orders in case you are killed?” “To do like me,” replied Wellington. To Clinton he said laconically, “To hold this spot to the last man.” The day was evidently turning out ill. Wellington shouted to his old companions of Talavera, of Vittoria, of Salamanca: “Boys, can retreat be thought of? Think of old England!”

Towards four o’clock, the English line drew back. Suddenly nothing was visible on the crest of the plateau except the artillery and the sharpshooters; the rest had disappeared: the regiments, dislodged by the shells and the French bullets, retreated into the bottom, now intersected by the back road of the farm of Mont-Saint-Jean; a retrograde movement took place, the English front hid itself, Wellington drew back. “The beginning of retreat!” cried Napoleon.

CHAPTER VII — NAPOLEON IN A GOOD HUMOR

The Emperor, though ill and discommoded on horseback by a local trouble, had never been in a better humor than on that day. His impenetrability had been smiling ever since the morning. On the 18th of June, that profound soul masked by marble beamed blindly. The man who had been gloomy at Austerlitz was gay at Waterloo. The greatest favorites of destiny make mistakes. Our joys are composed of shadow. The supreme smile is God's alone.

Ridet Caesar, Pompeius flebit, said the legionaries of the Fulminatrix Legion. Pompey was not destined to weep on that occasion, but it is certain that Caesar laughed. While exploring on horseback at one o'clock on the preceding night, in storm and rain, in company with Bertrand, the communes in the neighborhood of Rossomme, satisfied at the sight of the long line of the English camp-fires illuminating the whole horizon from Frischemont to Braine-l'Alleud, it had seemed to him that fate, to whom he had assigned a day on the field of Waterloo, was exact to the appointment; he stopped his horse, and remained for some time motionless, gazing at the lightning and listening to the thunder; and this fatalist was heard to cast into the darkness this mysterious saying, "We are in accord." Napoleon was mistaken. They were no longer in accord.

He took not a moment for sleep; every instant of that night was marked by a joy for him. He traversed the line of the principal outposts, halting here and there to talk to the sentinels. At half-past two, near the wood of Hougomont, he heard the tread of a column on the march; he thought at the moment that it was a retreat on the part of Wellington. He said: "It is the rear-guard of the English getting under way for the purpose of decamping. I will take prisoners the six thousand English who have just arrived at Ostend." He conversed expansively; he regained the animation which he had shown at his landing on the first of March, when he pointed out to the Grand-Marshal the enthusiastic peasant of the Gulf Juan, and cried, "Well, Bertrand, here is a reinforcement already!" On the night of the 17th to the 18th of June he rallied Wellington. "That little Englishman needs a lesson," said Napoleon. The rain redoubled in violence; the thunder rolled while the Emperor was speaking.

At half-past three o'clock in the morning, he lost one illusion; officers who had been despatched to reconnoitre announced to him that the enemy was not making any movement. Nothing was stirring; not a bivouac-fire had been extinguished; the English army was asleep. The silence on earth was profound; the only noise was in the heavens. At four o'clock, a peasant was brought in to him by the scouts; this peasant had served as guide to a brigade of English cavalry, probably Vivian's brigade, which was on its way to take up a position in the village of Ohain, at the extreme left. At five o'clock, two Belgian deserters reported to him that they had just quitted their regiment, and that the English army was ready for battle. "So much the better!" exclaimed Napoleon. "I prefer to overthrow them rather than to drive them back."

In the morning he dismounted in the mud on the slope which forms an angle with the Plancenoit road, had a kitchen table and a peasant's chair brought to him from the farm of Rossomme, seated himself, with a truss of straw for a carpet, and spread out on the table the chart of the battle-field, saying to Soult as he did so, "A pretty checker-board."

In consequence of the rains during the night, the transports of provisions, embedded in the soft roads, had not been able to arrive by morning; the soldiers had had no sleep; they were wet and fasting. This did not prevent Napoleon from exclaiming cheerfully to Ney, "We have ninety chances out of a hundred." At eight o'clock the Emperor's breakfast was brought to him. He invited many generals to it. During breakfast, it was said that Wellington had been to a ball two nights before, in Brussels, at the Duchess of Richmond's; and Soult, a rough man of war, with a face of an archbishop, said, "The ball takes place to-day." The Emperor jested with Ney, who said, "Wellington will not be so simple as to wait for Your Majesty." That was his way, however. "He was fond of jesting," says Fleury de Chaboulon. "A merry humor was at the foundation of his character," says Gourgaud. "He abounded in pleasantries, which were more peculiar than witty," says Benjamin Constant. These gayeties of a giant are worthy of insistence. It was he who called his grenadiers "his grumblers"; he pinched their ears; he pulled their mustaches. "The Emperor did nothing but play pranks on us," is the remark of one of them. During the mysterious trip from the island of Elba to France, on the 27th of February, on the open sea, the French brig of war, Le Zephyr, having encountered the brig L'Inconstant, on which Napoleon was concealed, and having asked the news of Napoleon from L'Inconstant, the Emperor, who still wore in his hat the white and amaranthine cockade sown with bees, which he had adopted at the isle of Elba, laughingly seized the speaking-trumpet, and answered for himself, "The Emperor is well." A man who laughs like that is on familiar terms with events. Napoleon indulged in many fits of this laughter during the breakfast at Waterloo. After breakfast he meditated for a quarter of an hour; then two generals seated themselves on the truss of straw, pen in hand and their paper on their knees, and the Emperor dictated to them the order of battle.

At nine o'clock, at the instant when the French army, ranged in echelons and set in motion in five columns, had deployed — the divisions in two lines, the artillery between the brigades, the music at their head; as they beat the march, with rolls on the drums and the blasts of trumpets, mighty, vast, joyous, a sea of casques, of sabres, and of bayonets on the horizon, the Emperor was touched, and twice exclaimed, "Magnificent! Magnificent!"

Between nine o'clock and half-past ten the whole army, incredible as it may appear, had taken up its position and ranged itself in six lines, forming, to repeat the Emperor's expression, "the figure of six V's." A few moments after the formation of the battle-array, in the midst of that profound silence, like that which heralds the beginning of a storm, which precedes engagements, the Emperor tapped Haxo on the shoulder, as he beheld the three batteries of twelve-pounders, detached by his orders from the corps of Erlon, Reille, and Lobau, and destined to begin the action by taking Mont-Saint-Jean, which was situated at the intersection of the Nivelles and the Genappe roads, and said to him, "There are four and twenty handsome maids, General."

Sure of the issue, he encouraged with a smile, as they passed before him, the company of sappers of the first corps, which he had appointed to barricade Mont-Saint-Jean as soon as the village should be carried. All this serenity had been traversed by but a single word of haughty pity; perceiving on his left, at a spot where there now stands a large tomb, those admirable Scotch Grays, with their superb horses, massing themselves, he said, "It is a pity."

Then he mounted his horse, advanced beyond Rossomme, and selected for his post of observation a contracted elevation of turf to the right of the road from Genappe to Brussels, which was his second station during the battle. The third station, the one adopted at seven o'clock in the evening, between La Belle-Alliance and La Haie-Sainte, is formidable; it is a rather elevated knoll, which still exists, and behind which the guard was massed on a slope of the plain. Around this knoll the balls rebounded from the pavements of the road, up to Napoleon himself. As at Brienne, he had over his head the shriek of the bullets and of the heavy artillery. Mouldy cannon-balls, old sword-blades, and shapeless projectiles, eaten up with rust, were picked up at the spot where his horse' feet stood. Scabra rubigine. A few years ago, a shell of sixty pounds, still charged, and with its fuse broken off level with the bomb, was unearthed. It was at this last post that the Emperor said to his guide, Lacoste, a hostile and terrified peasant, who was attached to the saddle of a hussar, and who turned round at every discharge of canister and tried to hide behind Napoleon: "Fool, it is shameful! You'll get yourself killed with a ball in the back." He who writes these lines has himself found, in the friable soil of this knoll, on turning over the sand, the remains of the neck of a bomb, disintegrated, by the oxidization of six and forty years, and old fragments of iron which parted like elder-twigs between the fingers.

Every one is aware that the variously inclined undulations of the plains, where the engagement between Napoleon and Wellington took place, are no longer what they were on June 18, 1815. By taking from this mournful field the wherewithal to make a monument to it, its real relief has been taken away, and history, disconcerted, no longer finds her bearings there. It has been disfigured for the sake of glorifying it. Wellington, when he beheld Waterloo once more, two years later, exclaimed, "They have altered my field of battle!" Where the great pyramid of earth, surmounted by the lion, rises to-day, there was a hillock which descended in an easy slope towards the Nivelles road, but which was almost an escarpment on the side of the highway to Genappe. The elevation of this escarpment can still be measured by the height of the two knolls of the two great sepulchres which enclose the road from Genappe to Brussels: one, the English tomb, is on the left; the other, the German tomb, is on the right. There is no French tomb. The whole of that plain is a sepulchre for France. Thanks to the thousands upon thousands of cartloads of earth employed in the hillock one hundred and fifty feet in height and half a mile in circumference, the plateau of Mont-Saint-Jean is now accessible by an easy slope. On the day of battle, particularly on the side of La Haie-Sainte, it was abrupt and difficult of approach. The slope there is so steep that the English cannon could not see the farm, situated in the bottom of the valley, which was the centre of the combat. On the 18th of June, 1815, the rains had still farther increased this acclivity, the mud complicated the problem of the ascent, and the men not only slipped back, but stuck fast in the mire. Along the crest of the plateau ran a sort of trench whose presence it was impossible for the distant observer to divine.

What was this trench? Let us explain. Braine-l’Alleud is a Belgian village; Ohain is another. These villages, both of them concealed in curves of the landscape, are connected by a road about a league and a half in length, which traverses the plain along its undulating level, and often enters and buries itself in the hills like a furrow, which makes a ravine of this road in some places. In 1815, as at the present day, this road cut the crest of the plateau of Mont-Saint-Jean between the two highways from Genappe and Nivelles; only, it is now on a level with the plain; it was then a hollow way. Its two slopes have been appropriated for the monumental hillock. This road was, and still is, a trench throughout the greater portion of its course; a hollow trench, sometimes a dozen feet in depth, and whose banks, being too steep, crumbled away here and there, particularly in winter, under driving rains. Accidents happened here. The road was so narrow at the Braine-l’Alleud entrance that a passer-by was crushed by a cart, as is proved by a stone cross which stands near the cemetery, and which gives the name of the dead, Monsieur Bernard Debrye, Merchant of Brussels, and the date of the accident, February, 1637. It was so deep on the table-land of Mont-Saint-Jean that a peasant, Mathieu Nicaise, was crushed there, in 1783, by a slide from the slope, as is stated on another stone cross, the top of which has disappeared in the process of clearing the ground, but whose overturned pedestal is still visible on the grassy slope to the left of the highway between La Haie-Sainte and the farm of Mont-Saint-Jean.

On the day of battle, this hollow road whose existence was in no way indicated, bordering the crest of Mont-Saint-Jean, a trench at the summit of the escarpment, a rut concealed in the soil, was invisible; that is to say, terrible.

CHAPTER VIII — THE EMPEROR PUTS A QUESTION TO THE GUIDE LACOSTE

So, on the morning of Waterloo, Napoleon was content.

He was right; the plan of battle conceived by him was, as we have seen, really admirable.

The battle once begun, its very various changes, — the resistance of Hougomont; the tenacity of La Haie-Sainte; the killing of Bauduin; the disabling of Foy; the unexpected wall against which Soye’s brigade was shattered; Guilleminot’s fatal heedlessness when he had neither petard nor powder sacks; the miring of the batteries; the fifteen unescorted pieces overwhelmed in a hollow way by Uxbridge; the small effect of the bombs falling in the English lines, and there embedding themselves in the rain-soaked soil, and only succeeding in producing volcanoes of mud, so that the canister was turned into a splash; the uselessness of Pire’s demonstration on Braine-l’Alleud; all that cavalry, fifteen squadrons, almost exterminated; the right wing of the English badly alarmed, the left wing badly cut into; Ney’s strange mistake in massing, instead of echelonning the four divisions of the first corps; men delivered over to grape-shot, arranged in ranks twenty-seven deep and with a frontage of two hundred; the frightful holes made in these masses by the cannon-balls; attacking columns disorganized; the side-battery suddenly unmasked on their flank; Bourgeois, Donzelot, and Durutte compromised; Quiot repulsed; Lieutenant Vieux, that Hercules graduated at the Polytechnic School, wounded at the moment when he was beating in with an axe the door of La Haie-Sainte under the downright fire of the English barricade which barred the angle of the road from Genappe to Brussels; Marcognet’s division caught between the infantry and the cavalry, shot down at the very muzzle of the guns amid the grain by Best and Pack, put to the sword by Ponsonby; his battery of seven pieces spiked; the Prince of Saxe-Weimar holding and guarding, in spite of the Comte d’Erlon, both Frischemont and Smohain; the flag of the 105th taken, the flag of the 45th captured; that black Prussian hussar stopped by runners of the flying column of three hundred light cavalry on the scout between Wavre and Plancenoit; the alarming things that had been said by prisoners; Grouchy’s delay; fifteen hundred men killed in the orchard of Hougomont in less than an hour; eighteen hundred men overthrown in a still shorter time about La Haie-Sainte, — all these stormy incidents passing like the clouds of battle before Napoleon, had hardly troubled his gaze and had not overshadowed that face of imperial certainty. Napoleon was accustomed to gaze steadily at war; he never added up the heart-rending details, cipher by cipher; ciphers mattered little to him, provided that they furnished the total, victory; he was not alarmed if the beginnings did go astray, since he thought himself the master and the possessor at the end; he knew how to wait, supposing himself to be out of the question, and he treated destiny as his equal: he seemed to say to fate, Thou wilt not dare.

Composed half of light and half of shadow, Napoleon thought himself protected in good and tolerated in evil. He had, or thought that he had, a connivance, one might almost say a complicity, of events in his favor, which was equivalent to the invulnerability of antiquity.

Nevertheless, when one has Beresina, Leipzig, and Fontainebleau behind one, it seems as though one might distrust Waterloo. A mysterious frown becomes perceptible in the depths of the heavens.

At the moment when Wellington retreated, Napoleon shuddered. He suddenly beheld the table-land of Mont-Saint-Jean cleared, and the van of the English army disappear. It was rallying, but hiding itself. The Emperor half rose in his stirrups. The lightning of victory flashed from his eyes.

Wellington, driven into a corner at the forest of Soignes and destroyed — that was the definitive conquest of England by France; it was Crecy, Poitiers, Malplaquet, and Ramillies avenged. The man of Marengo was wiping out Agincourt.

So the Emperor, meditating on this terrible turn of fortune, swept his glass for the last time over all the points of the field of battle. His guard, standing behind him with grounded arms, watched him from below with a sort of religion. He pondered; he examined the slopes, noted the declivities, scrutinized the clumps of trees, the square of rye, the path; he seemed to be counting each bush. He gazed with some intentness at the English barricades of the two highways, — two large abatis of trees, that on the road to Genappe above La Haie-Sainte, armed with two cannon, the only ones out of all the English artillery which commanded the extremity of the field of battle, and that on the road to Nivelles where gleamed the Dutch bayonets of Chasse’s brigade. Near this barricade he observed the old chapel of Saint Nicholas, painted white, which stands at the angle of the cross-road near Braine-l’Alleud; he bent down and spoke in a low voice to the guide Lacoste. The guide made a negative sign with his head, which was probably perfidious.

The Emperor straightened himself up and fell to thinking.

Wellington had drawn back.

All that remained to do was to complete this retreat by crushing him.

Napoleon turning round abruptly, despatched an express at full speed to Paris to announce that the battle was won.

Napoleon was one of those geniuses from whom thunder darts.

He had just found his clap of thunder.

He gave orders to Milhaud’s cuirassiers to carry the table-land of Mont-Saint-Jean.

CHAPTER IX — THE UNEXPECTED

There were three thousand five hundred of them. They formed a front a quarter of a league in extent. They were giant men, on colossal horses. There were six and twenty squadrons of them; and they had behind them to support them Lefebvre-Desnouettes's division, — the one hundred and six picked gendarmes, the light cavalry of the Guard, eleven hundred and ninety-seven men, and the lancers of the guard of eight hundred and eighty lances. They wore casques without horse-tails, and cuirasses of beaten iron, with horse-pistols in their holsters, and long sabre-swords. That morning the whole army had admired them, when, at nine o'clock, with braying of trumpets and all the music playing "Let us watch o'er the Safety of the Empire," they had come in a solid column, with one of their batteries on their flank, another in their centre, and deployed in two ranks between the roads to Genappe and Frischemont, and taken up their position for battle in that powerful second line, so cleverly arranged by Napoleon, which, having on its extreme left Kellermann's cuirassiers and on its extreme right Milhaud's cuirassiers, had, so to speak, two wings of iron.

Aide-de-camp Bernard carried them the Emperor's orders. Ney drew his sword and placed himself at their head. The enormous squadrons were set in motion.

Then a formidable spectacle was seen.

All their cavalry, with upraised swords, standards and trumpets flung to the breeze, formed in columns by divisions, descended, by a simultaneous movement and like one man, with the precision of a brazen battering-ram which is effecting a breach, the hill of La Belle Alliance, plunged into the terrible depths in which so many men had already fallen, disappeared there in the smoke, then emerging from that shadow, reappeared on the other side of the valley, still compact and in close ranks, mounting at a full trot, through a storm of grape-shot which burst upon them, the terrible muddy slope of the table-land of Mont-Saint-Jean. They ascended, grave, threatening, imperturbable; in the intervals between the musketry and the artillery, their colossal trampling was audible. Being two divisions, there were two columns of them; Wathier's division held the right, Delort's division was on the left. It seemed as though two immense adders of steel were to be seen crawling towards the crest of the table-land. It traversed the battle like a prodigy.

Nothing like it had been seen since the taking of the great redoubt of the Muskowa by the heavy cavalry; Murat was lacking here, but Ney was again present. It seemed as though that mass had become a monster and had but one soul. Each column undulated and swelled like the ring of a polyp. They could be seen through a vast cloud of smoke which was rent here and there. A confusion of helmets, of cries, of sabres, a stormy heaving of the cruppers of horses amid the cannons and the flourish of trumpets, a terrible and disciplined tumult; over all, the cuirasses like the scales on the hydra.

These narrations seemed to belong to another age. Something parallel to this vision appeared, no doubt, in the ancient Orphic epics, which told of the centaurs, the old hippanthropes, those Titans with human heads and equestrian chests who scaled Olympus at a gallop, horrible, invulnerable, sublime — gods and beasts.

Odd numerical coincidence, — twenty-six battalions rode to meet twenty-six battalions. Behind the crest of the plateau, in the shadow of the masked battery, the English infantry, formed into thirteen squares, two battalions to the square, in two lines, with seven in the first line, six in the second, the stocks of their guns to their shoulders, taking aim at that which was on the point of appearing, waited, calm, mute, motionless. They did not see the cuirassiers, and the cuirassiers did not see them. They listened to the rise of this flood of men. They heard the swelling noise of three thousand horse, the alternate and symmetrical tramp of their hoofs at full trot, the jingling of the cuirasses, the clang of the sabres and a sort of grand and savage breathing. There ensued a most terrible silence; then, all at once, a long file of uplifted arms, brandishing sabres, appeared above the crest, and casques, trumpets, and standards, and three thousand heads with gray mustaches, shouting, “Vive l’Empèreur!” All this cavalry debouched on the plateau, and it was like the appearance of an earthquake.

All at once, a tragic incident; on the English left, on our right, the head of the column of cuirassiers reared up with a frightful clamor. On arriving at the culminating point of the crest, ungovernable, utterly given over to fury and their course of extermination of the squares and cannon, the cuirassiers had just caught sight of a trench, — a trench between them and the English. It was the hollow road of Ohain.

It was a terrible moment. The ravine was there, unexpected, yawning, directly under the horses' feet, two fathoms deep between its double slopes; the second file pushed the first into it, and the third pushed on the second; the horses reared and fell backward, landed on their haunches, slid down, all four feet in the air, crushing and overwhelming the riders; and there being no means of retreat, — the whole column being no longer anything more than a projectile, — the force which had been acquired to crush the English crushed the French; the inexorable ravine could only yield when filled; horses and riders rolled there pell-mell, grinding each other, forming but one mass of flesh in this gulf: when this trench was full of living men, the rest marched over them and passed on. Almost a third of Dubois's brigade fell into that abyss.

This began the loss of the battle.

A local tradition, which evidently exaggerates matters, says that two thousand horses and fifteen hundred men were buried in the hollow road of Ohain. This figure probably comprises all the other corpses which were flung into this ravine the day after the combat.

Let us note in passing that it was Dubois's sorely tried brigade which, an hour previously, making a charge to one side, had captured the flag of the Lunenburg battalion.

Napoleon, before giving the order for this charge of Milhaud's cuirassiers, had scrutinized the ground, but had not been able to see that hollow road, which did not even form a wrinkle on the surface of the plateau. Warned, nevertheless, and put on the alert by the little white chapel which marks its angle of junction with the Nivelles highway, he had probably put a question as to the possibility of an obstacle, to the guide Lacoste. The guide had answered No. We might almost affirm that Napoleon's catastrophe originated in that sign of a peasant's head.

Other fatalities were destined to arise.

Was it possible that Napoleon should have won that battle? We answer No. Why? Because of Wellington? Because of Blucher? No. Because of God.

Bonaparte victor at Waterloo; that does not come within the law of the nineteenth century. Another series of facts was in preparation, in which there was no longer any room for Napoleon. The ill will of events had declared itself long before.

It was time that this vast man should fall.

The excessive weight of this man in human destiny disturbed the balance. This individual alone counted for more than a universal group. These plethoras of all human vitality concentrated in a single head; the world mounting to the brain of one man, — this would be mortal to civilization were it to last. The moment had arrived for the incorruptible and supreme equity to alter its plan. Probably the principles and the elements, on which the regular gravitations of the moral, as of the material, world depend, had complained. Smoking blood, over-filled cemeteries, mothers in tears, — these are formidable pleaders. When the earth is suffering from too heavy a burden, there are mysterious groanings of the shades, to which the abyss lends an ear.

Napoleon had been denounced in the infinite and his fall had been decided on.

He embarrassed God.

Waterloo is not a battle; it is a change of front on the part of the Universe.

CHAPTER X — THE PLATEAU OF MONT-SAINT-JEAN

The battery was unmasked at the same moment with the ravine.

Sixty cannons and the thirteen squares darted lightning point-blank on the cuirassiers. The intrepid General Delort made the military salute to the English battery.

The whole of the flying artillery of the English had re-entered the squares at a gallop. The cuirassiers had not had even the time for a halt. The disaster of the hollow road had decimated, but not discouraged them. They belonged to that class of men who, when diminished in number, increase in courage.

Wathier's column alone had suffered in the disaster; Delort's column, which Ney had deflected to the left, as though he had a presentiment of an ambush, had arrived whole.

The cuirassiers hurled themselves on the English squares.

At full speed, with bridles loose, swords in their teeth pistols in fist, — such was the attack.

There are moments in battles in which the soul hardens the man until the soldier is changed into a statue, and when all this flesh turns into granite. The English battalions, desperately assaulted, did not stir.

Then it was terrible.

All the faces of the English squares were attacked at once. A frenzied whirl enveloped them. That cold infantry remained impassive. The first rank knelt and received the cuirassiers on their bayonets, the second ranks shot them down; behind the second rank the cannoneers charged their guns, the front of the square parted, permitted the passage of an eruption of grape-shot, and closed again. The cuirassiers replied by crushing them. Their great horses reared, strode across the ranks, leaped over the bayonets and fell, gigantic, in the midst of these four living wells. The cannon-balls ploughed furrows in these cuirassiers; the cuirassiers made breaches in the squares. Files of men disappeared, ground to dust under the horses. The bayonets plunged into the bellies of these centaurs; hence a hideousness of wounds which has probably never been seen anywhere else. The squares, wasted by this mad cavalry, closed up their ranks without flinching. Inexhaustible in the matter of grape-shot, they created explosions in their assailants’ midst. The form of this combat was monstrous. These squares were no longer battalions, they were craters; those cuirassiers were no longer cavalry, they were a tempest. Each square was a volcano attacked by a cloud; lava contended with lightning.

The square on the extreme right, the most exposed of all, being in the air, was almost annihilated at the very first shock. lt was formed of the 75th regiment of Highlanders. The bagpipe-player in the centre dropped his melancholy eyes, filled with the reflections of the forests and the lakes, in profound inattention, while men were being exterminated around him, and seated on a drum, with his pibroch under his arm, played the Highland airs. These Scotchmen died thinking of Ben Lothian, as did the Greeks recalling Argos. The sword of a cuirassier, which hewed down the bagpipes and the arm which bore it, put an end to the song by killing the singer.

The cuirassiers, relatively few in number, and still further diminished by the catastrophe of the ravine, had almost the whole English army against them, but they multiplied themselves so that each man of them was equal to ten. Nevertheless, some Hanoverian battalions yielded. Wellington perceived it, and thought of his cavalry. Had Napoleon at that same moment thought of his infantry, he would have won the battle. This forgetfulness was his great and fatal mistake.

All at once, the cuirassiers, who had been the assailants, found themselves assailed. The English cavalry was at their back. Before them two squares, behind them Somerset; Somerset meant fourteen hundred dragoons of the guard. On the right, Somerset had Dornberg with the German light-horse, and on his left, Trip with the Belgian carabineers; the cuirassiers attacked on the flank and in front, before and in the rear, by infantry and cavalry, had to face all sides. What mattered it to them? They were a whirlwind. Their valor was something indescribable.

In addition to this, they had behind them the battery, which was still thundering. It was necessary that it should be so, or they could never have been wounded in the back. One of their cuirasses, pierced on the shoulder by a ball from a biscayan, is in the collection of the Waterloo Museum.

For such Frenchmen nothing less than such Englishmen was needed. It was no longer a hand-to-hand conflict; it was a shadow, a fury, a dizzy transport of souls and courage, a hurricane of lightning swords. In an instant the fourteen hundred dragoon guards numbered only eight hundred. Fuller, their lieutenant-colonel, fell dead. Ney rushed up with the lancers and Lefebvre-Desnouettes's light-horse. The plateau of Mont-Saint-Jean was captured, recaptured, captured again. The cuirassiers quitted the cavalry to return to the infantry; or, to put it more exactly, the whole of that formidable rout collared each other without releasing the other. The squares still held firm.

There were a dozen assaults. Ney had four horses killed under him. Half the cuirassiers remained on the plateau. This conflict lasted two hours.

The English army was profoundly shaken. There is no doubt that, had they not been enfeebled in their first shock by the disaster of the hollow road the cuirassiers would have overwhelmed the centre and decided the victory. This extraordinary cavalry petrified Clinton, who had seen Talavera and Badajoz. Wellington, three-quarters vanquished, admired heroically. He said in an undertone, “Sublime!”

The cuirassiers annihilated seven squares out of thirteen, took or spiked sixty pieces of ordnance, and captured from the English regiments six flags, which three cuirassiers and three chasseurs of the Guard bore to the Emperor, in front of the farm of La Belle Alliance.

Wellington's situation had grown worse. This strange battle was like a duel between two raging, wounded men, each of whom, still fighting and still resisting, is expending all his blood.

Which of the two will be the first to fall?

The conflict on the plateau continued.

What had become of the cuirassiers? No one could have told. One thing is certain, that on the day after the battle, a cuirassier and his horse were found dead among the woodwork of the scales for vehicles at Mont-Saint-Jean, at the very point where the four roads from Nivelles, Genappe, La Hulpe, and Brussels meet and intersect each other. This horseman had pierced the English lines. One of the men who picked up the body still lives at Mont-Saint-Jean. His name is Dehaze. He was eighteen years old at that time.

Wellington felt that he was yielding. The crisis was at hand.

The cuirassiers had not succeeded, since the centre was not broken through. As every one was in possession of the plateau, no one held it, and in fact it remained, to a great extent, with the English. Wellington held the village and the culminating plain; Ney had only the crest and the slope. They seemed rooted in that fatal soil on both sides.

But the weakening of the English seemed irremediable. The bleeding of that army was horrible. Kempt, on the left wing, demanded reinforcements. “There are none,” replied Wellington; “he must let himself be killed!” Almost at that same moment, a singular coincidence which paints the exhaustion of the two armies, Ney demanded infantry from Napoleon, and Napoleon exclaimed, “Infantry! Where does he expect me to get it? Does he think I can make it?”

Nevertheless, the English army was in the worse case of the two. The furious onsets of those great squadrons with cuirasses of iron and breasts of steel had ground the infantry to nothing. A few men clustered round a flag marked the post of a regiment; such and such a battalion was commanded only by a captain or a lieutenant; Alten’s division, already so roughly handled at La Haie-Sainte, was almost destroyed; the intrepid Belgians of Van Kluze’s brigade strewed the rye-fields all along the Nivelles road; hardly anything was left of those Dutch grenadiers, who, intermingled with Spaniards in our ranks in 1811, fought against Wellington; and who, in 1815, rallied to the English standard, fought against Napoleon. The loss in officers was considerable. Lord Uxbridge, who had his leg buried on the following day, had his knee shattered. If, on the French side, in that tussle of the cuirassiers, Delort, l’Heritier, Colbert, Dnop, Travers, and Blancard were disabled, on the side of the English there was Alten wounded, Barne wounded, Delancey killed, Van Meeren killed, Ompteda killed, the whole of Wellington’s staff decimated, and England had the worse of it in that bloody scale. The second regiment of foot-guards had lost five lieutenant-colonels, four captains, and three ensigns; the first battalion of the 30th infantry had lost 24 officers and 1,200 soldiers; the 79th Highlanders had lost 24 officers wounded, 18 officers killed, 450 soldiers killed. The Hanoverian hussars of Cumberland, a whole regiment, with Colonel Hacke at its head, who was destined to be tried later on and cashiered, had turned bridle in the presence of the fray, and had fled to the forest of Soignes, sowing defeat all the way to Brussels. The transports, ammunition-wagons, the baggage-wagons, the wagons filled with wounded, on perceiving that the French were gaining ground and approaching the forest, rushed headlong thither. The Dutch, mowed down by the French cavalry, cried, “Alarm!” From Vert-Coucou to Groentendael, for a distance of nearly two leagues in the direction of Brussels, according to the testimony of eye-witnesses who are still alive, the roads were encumbered with fugitives. This panic was such that it attacked the Prince de Conde at Mechlin, and Louis XVIII. at Ghent. With the exception of the feeble reserve echelonned behind the ambulance established at the farm of Mont-Saint-Jean, and of Vivian's and Vandeleur's brigades, which flanked the left wing, Wellington had no cavalry left. A number of batteries lay unhorsed. These facts are attested by Siborne; and Pringle, exaggerating the disaster, goes so far as to say that the Anglo-Dutch army was reduced to thirty-four thousand men. The Iron Duke remained calm, but his lips blanched. Vincent, the Austrian commissioner, Alava, the Spanish commissioner, who were present at the battle in the English staff, thought the Duke lost. At five o'clock Wellington drew out his watch, and he was heard to murmur these sinister words, "Blucher, or night!"

It was at about that moment that a distant line of bayonets gleamed on the heights in the direction of Frischemont.

Here comes the change of face in this giant drama.

CHAPTER XI — A BAD GUIDE TO NAPOLEON; A GOOD GUIDE TO BULOW

The painful surprise of Napoleon is well known. Grouchy hoped for, Blucher arriving. Death instead of life.

Fate has these turns; the throne of the world was expected; it was Saint Helena that was seen.

If the little shepherd who served as guide to Bulow, Blucher's lieutenant, had advised him to debouch from the forest above Frischemont, instead of below Plancenoit, the form of the nineteenth century might, perhaps, have been different. Napoleon would have won the battle of Waterloo. By any other route than that below Plancenoit, the Prussian army would have come out upon a ravine impassable for artillery, and Bulow would not have arrived.

Now the Prussian general, Muffling, declares that one hour's delay, and Blucher would not have found Wellington on his feet. "The battle was lost."

It was time that Bulow should arrive, as will be seen. He had, moreover, been very much delayed. He had bivouacked at Dion-le-Mont, and had set out at daybreak; but the roads were impassable, and his divisions stuck fast in the mire. The ruts were up to the hubs of the cannons. Moreover, he had been obliged to pass the Dyle on the narrow bridge of Wavre; the street leading to the bridge had been fired by the French, so the caissons and ammunition-wagons could not pass between two rows of burning houses, and had been obliged to wait until the conflagration was extinguished. It was mid-day before Bulow's vanguard had been able to reach Chapelle-Saint-Lambert.

Had the action been begun two hours earlier, it would have been over at four o'clock, and Blucher would have fallen on the battle won by Napoleon. Such are these immense risks proportioned to an infinite which we cannot comprehend.

The Emperor had been the first, as early as mid-day, to descry with his field-glass, on the extreme horizon, something which had attracted his attention. He had said, "I see yonder a cloud, which seems to me to be troops." Then he asked the Duc de Dalmatie, "Soult, what do you see in the direction of Chapelle-Saint-Lambert?" The marshal, levelling his glass, answered, “Four or five thousand men, Sire; evidently Grouchy.” But it remained motionless in the mist. All the glasses of the staff had studied “the cloud” pointed out by the Emperor. Some said: “It is trees.” The truth is, that the cloud did not move. The Emperor detached Domon’s division of light cavalry to reconnoitre in that quarter.

Bulow had not moved, in fact. His vanguard was very feeble, and could accomplish nothing. He was obliged to wait for the body of the army corps, and he had received orders to concentrate his forces before entering into line; but at five o’clock, perceiving Wellington’s peril, Blucher ordered Bulow to attack, and uttered these remarkable words: “We must give air to the English army.”

A little later, the divisions of Losthin, Hiller, Hacke, and Ryssel deployed before Lobau’s corps, the cavalry of Prince William of Prussia debouched from the forest of Paris, Plancenoit was in flames, and the Prussian cannon-balls began to rain even upon the ranks of the guard in reserve behind Napoleon.

CHAPTER XII — THE GUARD

Every one knows the rest, — the irruption of a third army; the battle broken to pieces; eighty-six mouths of fire thundering simultaneously; Pirch the first coming up with Bulow; Zieten's cavalry led by Blucher in person, the French driven back; Marcognet swept from the plateau of Ohain; Durutte dislodged from Papelotte; Donzelot and Quiot retreating; Lobau caught on the flank; a fresh battle precipitating itself on our dismantled regiments at nightfall; the whole English line resuming the offensive and thrust forward; the gigantic breach made in the French army; the English grape-shot and the Prussian grape-shot aiding each other; the extermination; disaster in front; disaster on the flank; the Guard entering the line in the midst of this terrible crumbling of all things.

Conscious that they were about to die, they shouted, "Vive l'Empèreur!" History records nothing more touching than that agony bursting forth in acclamations.

The sky had been overcast all day long. All of a sudden, at that very moment, — it was eight o'clock in the evening — the clouds on the horizon parted, and allowed the grand and sinister glow of the setting sun to pass through, athwart the elms on the Nivelles road. They had seen it rise at Austerlitz.

Each battalion of the Guard was commanded by a general for this final catastrophe. Friant, Michel, Roguet, Harlet, Mallet, Poret de Morvan, were there. When the tall caps of the grenadiers of the Guard, with their large plaques bearing the eagle appeared, symmetrical, in line, tranquil, in the midst of that combat, the enemy felt a respect for France; they thought they beheld twenty victories entering the field of battle, with wings outspread, and those who were the conquerors, believing themselves to be vanquished, retreated; but Wellington shouted, "Up, Guards, and aim straight!" The red regiment of English guards, lying flat behind the hedges, sprang up, a cloud of grape-shot riddled the tricolored flag and whistled round our eagles; all hurled themselves forwards, and the final carnage began. In the darkness, the Imperial Guard felt the army losing ground around it, and in the vast shock of the rout it heard the desperate flight which had taken the place of the "Vive l'Empèreur!" and, with flight behind it, it continued to advance, more crushed, losing more men at every step that it took. There were none who hesitated, no timid men in its ranks. The soldier in that troop was as much of a hero as the general. Not a man was missing in that suicide.

Ney, bewildered, great with all the grandeur of accepted death, offered himself to all blows in that tempest. He had his fifth horse killed under him there. Perspiring, his eyes aflame, foaming at the mouth, with uniform unbuttoned, one of his epaulets half cut off by a sword-stroke from a horseguard, his plaque with the great eagle dented by a bullet; bleeding, bemired, magnificent, a broken sword in his hand, he said, “Come and see how a Marshal of France dies on the field of battle!” But in vain; he did not die. He was haggard and angry. At Drouet d’Erlon he hurled this question, “Are you not going to get yourself killed?” In the midst of all that artillery engaged in crushing a handful of men, he shouted: “So there is nothing for me! Oh! I should like to have all these English bullets enter my bowels!” Unhappy man, thou wert reserved for French bullets!

CHAPTER XIII — THE CATASTROPHE

The rout behind the Guard was melancholy.

The army yielded suddenly on all sides at once, — Hougomont, La Haie-Sainte, Papelotte, Plancenoit. The cry “Treachery!” was followed by a cry of “Save yourselves who can!” An army which is disbanding is like a thaw. All yields, splits, cracks, floats, rolls, falls, jostles, hastens, is precipitated. The disintegration is unprecedented. Ney borrows a horse, leaps upon it, and without hat, cravat, or sword, places himself across the Brussels road, stopping both English and French. He strives to detain the army, he recalls it to its duty, he insults it, he clings to the rout. He is overwhelmed. The soldiers fly from him, shouting, “Long live Marshal Ney!” Two of Durutte’s regiments go and come in affright as though tossed back and forth between the swords of the Uhlans and the fusillade of the brigades of Kempt, Best, Pack, and Rylandt; the worst of hand-to-hand conflicts is the defeat; friends kill each other in order to escape; squadrons and battalions break and disperse against each other, like the tremendous foam of battle. Lobau at one extremity, and Reille at the other, are drawn into the tide. In vain does Napoleon erect walls from what is left to him of his Guard; in vain does he expend in a last effort his last serviceable squadrons. Quiot retreats before Vivian, Kellermann before Vandeleur, Lobau before Bulow, Morand before Pirch, Domon and Subervic before Prince William of Prussia; Guyot, who led the Emperor’s squadrons to the charge, falls beneath the feet of the English dragoons. Napoleon gallops past the line of fugitives, harangues, urges, threatens, entreats them. All the mouths which in the morning had shouted, “Long live the Emperor!” remain gaping; they hardly recognize him. The Prussian cavalry, newly arrived, dashes forwards, flies, hews, slashes, kills, exterminates. Horses lash out, the cannons flee; the soldiers of the artillery-train unharness the caissons and use the horses to make their escape; transports overturned, with all four wheels in the air, clog the road and occasion massacres. Men are crushed, trampled down, others walk over the dead and the living. Arms are lost. A dizzy multitude fills the roads, the paths, the bridges, the plains, the hills, the valleys, the woods, encumbered by this invasion of forty thousand men. Shouts despair, knapsacks and guns flung among the rye, passages forced at the point of the sword, no more comrades, no more officers, no more generals, an inexpressible terror. Zieten putting France to the sword at its leisure. Lions converted into goats. Such was the flight.

At Genappe, an effort was made to wheel about, to present a battle front, to draw up in line. Lobau rallied three hundred men. The entrance to the village was barricaded, but at the first volley of Prussian canister, all took to flight again, and Lobau was taken. That volley of grape-shot can be seen to-day imprinted on the ancient gable of a brick building on the right of the road at a few minutes' distance before you enter Genappe. The Prussians threw themselves into Genappe, furious, no doubt, that they were not more entirely the conquerors. The pursuit was stupendous. Blucher ordered extermination. Roguet had set the lugubrious example of threatening with death any French grenadier who should bring him a Prussian prisoner. Blucher outdid Roguet. Duhesme, the general of the Young Guard, hemmed in at the doorway of an inn at Genappe, surrendered his sword to a huzzar of death, who took the sword and slew the prisoner. The victory was completed by the assassination of the vanquished. Let us inflict punishment, since we are history: old Blucher disgraced himself. This ferocity put the finishing touch to the disaster. The desperate route traversed Genappe, traversed Quatre-Bras, traversed Gosselies, traversed Frasnes, traversed Charleroi, traversed Thuin, and only halted at the frontier. Alas! and who, then, was fleeing in that manner? The Grand Army.

This vertigo, this terror, this downfall into ruin of the loftiest bravery which ever astounded history, — is that causeless? No. The shadow of an enormous right is projected athwart Waterloo. It is the day of destiny. The force which is mightier than man produced that day. Hence the terrified wrinkle of those brows; hence all those great souls surrendering their swords. Those who had conquered Europe have fallen prone on the earth, with nothing left to say nor to do, feeling the present shadow of a terrible presence. Hoc erat in fatis. That day the perspective of the human race underwent a change. Waterloo is the hinge of the nineteenth century. The disappearance of the great man was necessary to the advent of the great century. Some one, a person to whom one replies not, took the responsibility on himself. The panic of heroes can be explained. In the battle of Waterloo there is something more than a cloud, there is something of the meteor. God has passed by.

At nightfall, in a meadow near Genappe, Bernard and Bertrand seized by the skirt of his coat and detained a man, haggard, pensive, sinister, gloomy, who, dragged to that point by the current of the rout, had just dismounted, had passed the bridle of his horse over his arm, and with wild eye was returning alone to Waterloo. It was Napoleon, the immense somnambulist of this dream which had crumbled, essaying once more to advance.

CHAPTER XIV — THE LAST SQUARE

Several squares of the Guard, motionless amid this stream of the defeat, as rocks in running water, held their own until night. Night came, death also; they awaited that double shadow, and, invincible, allowed themselves to be enveloped therein. Each regiment, isolated from the rest, and having no bond with the army, now shattered in every part, died alone. They had taken up position for this final action, some on the heights of Rossomme, others on the plain of Mont-Saint-Jean. There, abandoned, vanquished, terrible, those gloomy squares endured their death-throes in formidable fashion. Ulm, Wagram, Jena, Friedland, died with them.

At twilight, towards nine o'clock in the evening, one of them was left at the foot of the plateau of Mont-Saint-Jean. In that fatal valley, at the foot of that declivity which the cuirassiers had ascended, now inundated by the masses of the English, under the converging fires of the victorious hostile cavalry, under a frightful density of projectiles, this square fought on. It was commanded by an obscure officer named Cambronne. At each discharge, the square diminished and replied. It replied to the grape-shot with a fusillade, continually contracting its four walls. The fugitives pausing breathless for a moment in the distance, listened in the darkness to that gloomy and ever-decreasing thunder.

When this legion had been reduced to a handful, when nothing was left of their flag but a rag, when their guns, the bullets all gone, were no longer anything but clubs, when the heap of corpses was larger than the group of survivors, there reigned among the conquerors, around those men dying so sublimely, a sort of sacred terror, and the English artillery, taking breath, became silent. This furnished a sort of respite. These combatants had around them something in the nature of a swarm of spectres, silhouettes of men on horseback, the black profiles of cannon, the white sky viewed through wheels and gun-carriages, the colossal death's-head, which the heroes saw constantly through the smoke, in the depths of the battle, advanced upon them and gazed at them. Through the shades of twilight they could hear the pieces being loaded; the matches all lighted, like the eyes of tigers at night, formed a circle round their heads; all the lintstocks of the English batteries approached the cannons, and then, with emotion, holding the supreme moment suspended above these men, an English general, Colville according to some, Maitland according to others, shouted to them, “Surrender, brave Frenchmen!” Cambronne replied, “ —— .”

{EDITOR’S COMMENTARY: Another edition of this book has the word “Merde!” in lieu of the —— above.}

CHAPTER XV — CAMBRONNE

If any French reader object to having his susceptibilities offended, one would have to refrain from repeating in his presence what is perhaps the finest reply that a Frenchman ever made. This would enjoin us from consigning something sublime to History.

At our own risk and peril, let us violate this injunction.

Now, then, among those giants there was one Titan, — Cambronne.

To make that reply and then perish, what could be grander? For being willing to die is the same as to die; and it was not this man’s fault if he survived after he was shot.

The winner of the battle of Waterloo was not Napoleon, who was put to flight; nor Wellington, giving way at four o’clock, in despair at five; nor Blucher, who took no part in the engagement. The winner of Waterloo was Cambronne.

To thunder forth such a reply at the lightning-flash that kills you is to conquer!

Thus to answer the Catastrophe, thus to speak to Fate, to give this pedestal to the future lion, to hurl such a challenge to the midnight rainstorm, to the treacherous wall of Hougomont, to the sunken road of Ohain, to Grouchy’s delay, to Blucher’s arrival, to be Irony itself in the tomb, to act so as to stand upright though fallen, to drown in two syllables the European coalition, to offer kings privies which the Caesars once knew, to make the lowest of words the most lofty by entwining with it the glory of France, insolently to end Waterloo with Mardigras, to finish Leonidas with Rabellais, to set the crown on this victory by a word impossible to speak, to lose the field and preserve history, to have the laugh on your side after such a carnage, — this is immense!

It was an insult such as a thunder-cloud might hurl! It reaches the grandeur of AEschylus!

Cambronne’s reply produces the effect of a violent break. ’Tis like the breaking of a heart under a weight of scorn. ’Tis the overflow of agony bursting forth. Who conquered? Wellington? No! Had it not been for Blucher, he was lost. Was it Blucher? No! If Wellington had not begun, Blucher could not have finished. This Cambronne, this man spending his last hour, this unknown soldier, this infinitesimal of war, realizes that here is a falsehood, a falsehood in a catastrophe, and so doubly agonizing; and at the moment when his rage is bursting forth because of it, he is offered this mockery, — life! How could he restrain himself? Yonder are all the kings of Europe, the general's flushed with victory, the Jupiter's darting thunderbolts; they have a hundred thousand victorious soldiers, and back of the hundred thousand a million; their cannon stand with yawning mouths, the match is lighted; they grind down under their heels the Imperial guards, and the grand army; they have just crushed Napoleon, and only Cambronne remains, — only this earthworm is left to protest. He will protest. Then he seeks for the appropriate word as one seeks for a sword. His mouth froths, and the froth is the word. In face of this mean and mighty victory, in face of this victory which counts none victorious, this desperate soldier stands erect. He grants its overwhelming immensity, but he establishes its triviality; and he does more than spit upon it. Borne down by numbers, by superior force, by brute matter, he finds in his soul an expression: "Excrement!" We repeat it, — to use that word, to do thus, to invent such an expression, is to be the conqueror!

The spirit of mighty days at that portentous moment made its descent on that unknown man. Cambronne invents the word for Waterloo as Rouget invents the "Marseillaise," under the visitation of a breath from on high. An emanation from the divine whirlwind leaps forth and comes sweeping over these men, and they shake, and one of them sings the song supreme, and the other utters the frightful cry.

This challenge of titanic scorn Cambronne hurls not only at Europe in the name of the Empire, — that would be a trifle: he hurls it at the past in the name of the Revolution. It is heard, and Cambronne is recognized as possessed by the ancient spirit of the Titans. Danton seems to be speaking! Kleber seems to be bellowing!

At that word from Cambronne, the English voice responded, "Fire!" The batteries flamed, the hill trembled, from all those brazen mouths belched a last terrible gush of grape-shot; a vast volume of smoke, vaguely white in the light of the rising moon, rolled out, and when the smoke dispersed, there was no longer anything there. That formidable remnant had been annihilated; the Guard was dead. The four walls of the living redoubt lay prone, and hardly was there discernible, here and there, even a quiver in the bodies; it was thus that the French legions, greater than the Roman legions, expired on Mont-Saint-Jean, on the soil watered with rain and blood, amid the gloomy grain, on the spot where nowadays Joseph, who drives the post-wagon from Nivelles, passes whistling, and cheerfully whipping up his horse at four o’clock in the morning.

CHAPTER XVI — QUOT LIBRAS IN DUCE?

The battle of Waterloo is an enigma. It is as obscure to those who won it as to those who lost it. For Napoleon it was a panic; Blucher sees nothing in it but fire; Wellington understands nothing in regard to it. Look at the reports. The bulletins are confused, the commentaries involved. Some stammer, others lisp. Jomini divides the battle of Waterloo into four moments; Muffling cuts it up into three changes; Charras alone, though we hold another judgment than his on some points, seized with his haughty glance the characteristic outlines of that catastrophe of human genius in conflict with divine chance. All the other historians suffer from being somewhat dazzled, and in this dazzled state they fumble about. It was a day of lightning brilliancy; in fact, a crumbling of the military monarchy which, to the vast stupefaction of kings, drew all the kingdoms after it — the fall of force, the defeat of war.

In this event, stamped with superhuman necessity, the part played by men amounts to nothing.

If we take Waterloo from Wellington and Blucher, do we thereby deprive England and Germany of anything? No. Neither that illustrious England nor that august Germany enter into the problem of Waterloo. Thank Heaven, nations are great, independently of the lugubrious feats of the sword. Neither England, nor Germany, nor France is contained in a scabbard. At this epoch when Waterloo is only a clashing of swords, above Blucher, Germany has Schiller; above Wellington, England has Byron. A vast dawn of ideas is the peculiarity of our century, and in that aurora England and Germany have a magnificent radiance. They are majestic because they think. The elevation of level which they contribute to civilization is intrinsic with them; it proceeds from themselves and not from an accident. The aggrandizement which they have brought to the nineteenth century has not Waterloo as its source. It is only barbarous peoples who undergo rapid growth after a victory. That is the temporary vanity of torrents swelled by a storm. Civilized people, especially in our day, are neither elevated nor abased by the good or bad fortune of a captain. Their specific gravity in the human species results from something more than a combat. Their honor, thank God! their dignity, their intelligence, their genius, are not numbers which those gamblers, heroes and conquerors, can put in the lottery of battles. Often a battle is lost and progress is conquered. There is less glory and more liberty. The drum holds its peace; reason takes the word. It is a game in which he who loses wins. Let us, therefore, speak of Waterloo coldly from both sides. Let us render to chance that which is due to chance, and to God that which is due to God. What is Waterloo? A victory? No. The winning number in the lottery.

The quine won by Europe, paid by France.

It was not worth while to place a lion there.

Waterloo, moreover, is the strangest encounter in history. Napoleon and Wellington. They are not enemies; they are opposites. Never did God, who is fond of antitheses, make a more striking contrast, a more extraordinary comparison. On one side, precision, foresight, geometry, prudence, an assured retreat, reserves spared, with an obstinate coolness, an imperturbable method, strategy, which takes advantage of the ground, tactics, which preserve the equilibrium of battalions, carnage, executed according to rule, war regulated, watch in hand, nothing voluntarily left to chance, the ancient classic courage, absolute regularity; on the other, intuition, divination, military oddity, superhuman instinct, a flaming glance, an indescribable something which gazes like an eagle, and which strikes like the lightning, a prodigious art in disdainful impetuosity, all the mysteries of a profound soul, associated with destiny; the stream, the plain, the forest, the hill, summoned, and in a manner, forced to obey, the despot going even so far as to tyrannize over the field of battle; faith in a star mingled with strategic science, elevating but perturbing it. Wellington was the Bareme of war; Napoleon was its Michael Angelo; and on this occasion, genius was vanquished by calculation. On both sides some one was awaited. It was the exact calculator who succeeded. Napoleon was waiting for Grouchy; he did not come. Wellington expected Blucher; he came.

Wellington is classic war taking its revenge. Bonaparte, at his dawning, had encountered him in Italy, and beaten him superbly. The old owl had fled before the young vulture. The old tactics had been not only struck as by lightning, but disgraced. Who was that Corsican of six and twenty? What signified that splendid ignoramus, who, with everything against him, nothing in his favor, without provisions, without ammunition, without cannon, without shoes, almost without an army, with a mere handful of men against masses, hurled himself on Europe combined, and absurdly won victories in the impossible? Whence had issued that fulminating convict, who almost without taking breath, and with the same set of combatants in hand, pulverized, one after the other, the five armies of the emperor of Germany, upsetting Beaulieu on Alvinzi, Wurmser on Beaulieu, Melas on Wurmser, Mack on Melas? Who was this novice in war with the effrontery of a luminary? The academical military school excommunicated him, and as it lost its footing; hence, the implacable rancor of the old Caesarism against the new; of the regular sword against the flaming sword; and of the exchequer against genius. On the 18th of June, 1815, that rancor had the last word. and beneath Lodi, Montebello, Montenotte, Mantua, Arcola, it wrote: Waterloo. A triumph of the mediocres which is sweet to the majority. Destiny consented to this irony. In his decline, Napoleon found Wurmser, the younger, again in front of him.

In fact, to get Wurmser, it sufficed to blanch the hair of Wellington.

Waterloo is a battle of the first order, won by a captain of the second.

That which must be admired in the battle of Waterloo, is England; the English firmness, the English resolution, the English blood; the superb thing about England there, no offence to her, was herself. It was not her captain; it was her army.

Wellington, oddly ungrateful, declares in a letter to Lord Bathurst, that his army, the army which fought on the 18th of June, 1815, was a “detestable army.” What does that sombre intermingling of bones buried beneath the furrows of Waterloo think of that?

England has been too modest in the matter of Wellington. To make Wellington so great is to belittle England. Wellington is nothing but a hero like many another. Those Scotch Grays, those Horse Guards, those regiments of Maitland and of Mitchell, that infantry of Pack and Kempt, that cavalry of Ponsonby and Somerset, those Highlanders playing the pibroch under the shower of grape-shot, those battalions of Rylandt, those utterly raw recruits, who hardly knew how to handle a musket holding their own against Essling’s and Rivoli’s old troops, — that is what was grand. Wellington was tenacious; in that lay his merit, and we are not seeking to lessen it: but the least of his foot-soldiers and of his cavalry would have been as solid as he. The iron soldier is worth as much as the Iron Duke. As for us, all our glorification goes to the English soldier, to the English army, to the English people. If trophy there be, it is to England that the trophy is due. The column of Waterloo would be more just, if, instead of the figure of a man, it bore on high the statue of a people.

But this great England will be angry at what we are saying here. She still cherishes, after her own 1688 and our 1789, the feudal illusion. She believes in heredity and hierarchy. This people, surpassed by none in power and glory, regards itself as a nation, and not as a people. And as a people, it willingly subordinates itself and takes a lord for its head. As a workman, it allows itself to be disdained; as a soldier, it allows itself to be flogged.

It will be remembered, that at the battle of Inkermann a sergeant who had, it appears, saved the army, could not be mentioned by Lord Paglan, as the English military hierarchy does not permit any hero below the grade of an officer to be mentioned in the reports.

That which we admire above all, in an encounter of the nature of Waterloo, is the marvellous cleverness of chance. A nocturnal rain, the wall of Hougomont, the hollow road of Ohain, Grouchy deaf to the cannon, Napoleon’s guide deceiving him, Bulow’s guide enlightening him, — the whole of this cataclysm is wonderfully conducted.

On the whole, let us say it plainly, it was more of a massacre than of a battle at Waterloo.

Of all pitched battles, Waterloo is the one which has the smallest front for such a number of combatants. Napoleon three-quarters of a league; Wellington, half a league; seventy-two thousand combatants on each side. From this denseness the carnage arose.

The following calculation has been made, and the following proportion established: Loss of men: at Austerlitz, French, fourteen per cent; Russians, thirty per cent; Austrians, forty-four per cent. At Wagram, French, thirteen per cent; Austrians, fourteen. At the Moskowa, French, thirty-seven per cent; Russians, forty-four. At Bautzen, French, thirteen per cent; Russians and Prussians, fourteen. At Waterloo, French, fifty-six per cent; the Allies, thirty-one. Total for Waterloo, forty-one per cent; one hundred and forty-four thousand combatants; sixty thousand dead.

To-day the field of Waterloo has the calm which belongs to the earth, the impassive support of man, and it resembles all plains.

At night, moreover, a sort of visionary mist arises from it; and if a traveller strolls there, if he listens, if he watches, if he dreams like Virgil in the fatal plains of Philippi, the hallucination of the catastrophe takes possession of him. The frightful 18th of June lives again; the false monumental hillock disappears, the lion vanishes in air, the battle-field resumes its reality, lines of infantry undulate over the plain, furious gallops traverse the horizon; the frightened dreamer beholds the flash of sabres, the gleam of bayonets, the flare of bombs, the tremendous interchange of thunders; he hears, as it were, the death rattle in the depths of a tomb, the vague clamor of the battle phantom; those shadows are grenadiers, those lights are cuirassiers; that skeleton Napoleon, that other skeleton is Wellington; all this no longer exists, and yet it clashes together and combats still; and the ravines are empurpled, and the trees quiver, and there is fury even in the clouds and in the shadows; all those terrible heights, Hougomont, Mont-Saint-Jean, Frischemont, Papelotte, Plancenoit, appear confusedly crowned with whirlwinds of spectres engaged in exterminating each other.

CHAPTER XVII — IS WATERLOO TO BE CONSIDERED GOOD?

There exists a very respectable liberal school which does not hate Waterloo. We do not belong to it. To us, Waterloo is but the stupefied date of liberty. That such an eagle should emerge from such an egg is certainly unexpected.

If one places one's self at the culminating point of view of the question, Waterloo is intentionally a counter-revolutionary victory. It is Europe against France; it is Petersburg, Berlin, and Vienna against Paris; it is the statu quo against the initiative; it is the 14th of July, 1789, attacked through the 20th of March, 1815; it is the monarchies clearing the decks in opposition to the indomitable French rioting. The final extinction of that vast people which had been in eruption for twenty-six years — such was the dream. The solidarity of the Brunswicks, the Nassaus, the Romanoffs, the Hohenzollerns, the Hapsburgs with the Bourbons. Waterloo bears divine right on its crupper. It is true, that the Empire having been despotic, the kingdom by the natural reaction of things, was forced to be liberal, and that a constitutional order was the unwilling result of Waterloo, to the great regret of the conquerors. It is because revolution cannot be really conquered, and that being providential and absolutely fatal, it is always cropping up afresh: before Waterloo, in Bonaparte overthrowing the old thrones; after Waterloo, in Louis XVIII. granting and conforming to the charter. Bonaparte places a postilion on the throne of Naples, and a sergeant on the throne of Sweden, employing inequality to demonstrate equality; Louis XVIII. at Saint-Ouen countersigns the declaration of the rights of man. If you wish to gain an idea of what revolution is, call it Progress; and if you wish to acquire an idea of the nature of progress, call it To-morrow. To-morrow fulfils its work irresistibly, and it is already fulfilling it to-day. It always reaches its goal strangely. It employs Wellington to make of Foy, who was only a soldier, an orator. Foy falls at Hougomont and rises again in the tribune. Thus does progress proceed. There is no such thing as a bad tool for that workman. It does not become disconcerted, but adjusts to its divine work the man who has bestridden the Alps, and the good old tottering invalid of Father Elysee. It makes use of the gouty man as well as of the conqueror; of the conqueror without, of the gouty man within.

Waterloo, by cutting short the demolition of European thrones by the sword, had no other effect than to cause the revolutionary work to be continued in another direction. The slashers have finished; it was the turn of the thinkers. The century that Waterloo was intended to arrest has pursued its march. That sinister victory was vanquished by liberty.

In short, and incontestably, that which triumphed at Waterloo; that which smiled in Wellington's rear; that which brought him all the marshals' staffs of Europe, including, it is said, the staff of a marshal of France; that which joyously trundled the barrows full of bones to erect the knoll of the lion; that which triumphantly inscribed on that pedestal the date "June 18, 1815"; that which encouraged Blucher, as he put the flying army to the sword; that which, from the heights of the plateau of Mont-Saint-Jean, hovered over France as over its prey, was the counter-revolution. It was the counter-revolution which murmured that infamous word "dismemberment." On arriving in Paris, it beheld the crater close at hand; it felt those ashes which scorched its feet, and it changed its mind; it returned to the stammer of a charter.

Let us behold in Waterloo only that which is in Waterloo. Of intentional liberty there is none. The counter-revolution was involuntarily liberal, in the same manner as, by a corresponding phenomenon, Napoleon was involuntarily revolutionary. On the 18th of June, 1815, the mounted Robespierre was hurled from his saddle.

CHAPTER XVIII — A RECRUDESCENCE OF DIVINE RIGHT

End of the dictatorship. A whole European system crumbled away.

The Empire sank into a gloom which resembled that of the Roman world as it expired. Again we behold the abyss, as in the days of the barbarians; only the barbarism of 1815, which must be called by its pet name of the counter-revolution, was not long breathed, soon fell to panting, and halted short. The Empire was bewept, — let us acknowledge the fact, — and bewept by heroic eyes. If glory lies in the sword converted into a sceptre, the Empire had been glory in person. It had diffused over the earth all the light which tyranny can give a sombre light. We will say more; an obscure light. Compared to the true daylight, it is night. This disappearance of night produces the effect of an eclipse.

Louis XVIII. re-entered Paris. The circling dances of the 8th of July effaced the enthusiasms of the 20th of March. The Corsican became the antithesis of the Bearnese. The flag on the dome of the Tuileries was white. The exile reigned. Hartwell’s pine table took its place in front of the fleur-de-lys-strewn throne of Louis XIV. Bouvines and Fontenoy were mentioned as though they had taken place on the preceding day, Austerlitz having become antiquated. The altar and the throne fraternized majestically. One of the most undisputed forms of the health of society in the nineteenth century was established over France, and over the continent. Europe adopted the white cockade. Trestaillon was celebrated. The device non pluribus impar re-appeared on the stone rays representing a sun upon the front of the barracks on the Quai d’Orsay. Where there had been an Imperial Guard, there was now a red house. The Arc du Carrousel, all laden with badly borne victories, thrown out of its element among these novelties, a little ashamed, it may be, of Marengo and Arcola, extricated itself from its predicament with the statue of the Duc d’Angoulême. The cemetery of the Madeleine, a terrible pauper’s grave in 1793, was covered with jasper and marble, since the bones of Louis XVI. and Marie Antoinette lay in that dust.

In the moat of Vincennes a sepulchral shaft sprang from the earth, recalling the fact that the Duc d’Enghien had perished in the very month when Napoleon was crowned. Pope Pius VII., who had performed the coronation very near this death, tranquilly bestowed his blessing on the fall as he had bestowed it on the elevation. At Schoenbrunn there was a little shadow, aged four, whom it was seditious to call the King of Rome. And these things took place, and the kings resumed their thrones, and the master of Europe was put in a cage, and the old regime became the new regime, and all the shadows and all the light of the earth changed place, because, on the afternoon of a certain summer's day, a shepherd said to a Prussian in the forest, "Go this way, and not that!"

This 1815 was a sort of lugubrious April. Ancient unhealthy and poisonous realities were covered with new appearances. A lie wedded 1789; the right divine was masked under a charter; fictions became constitutional; prejudices, superstitions and mental reservations, with Article 14 in the heart, were varnished over with liberalism. It was the serpent's change of skin.

Man had been rendered both greater and smaller by Napoleon. Under this reign of splendid matter, the ideal had received the strange name of ideology! It is a grave imprudence in a great man to turn the future into derision. The populace, however, that food for cannon which is so fond of the cannoneer, sought him with its glance. Where is he? What is he doing? "Napoleon is dead," said a passer-by to a veteran of Marengo and Waterloo. "He dead!" cried the soldier; "you don't know him." Imagination distrusted this man, even when overthrown. The depths of Europe were full of darkness after Waterloo. Something enormous remained long empty through Napoleon's disappearance.

The kings placed themselves in this void. Ancient Europe profited by it to undertake reforms. There was a Holy Alliance; Belle-Alliance, Beautiful Alliance, the fatal field of Waterloo had said in advance.

In presence and in face of that antique Europe reconstructed, the features of a new France were sketched out. The future, which the Emperor had rallied, made its entry. On its brow it bore the star, Liberty. The glowing eyes of all young generations were turned on it. Singular fact! people were, at one and the same time, in love with the future, Liberty, and the past, Napoleon. Defeat had rendered the vanquished greater. Bonaparte fallen seemed more lofty than Napoleon erect. Those who had triumphed were alarmed. England had him guarded by Hudson Lowe, and France had him watched by Montchenu. His folded arms became a source of uneasiness to thrones. Alexander called him "my sleeplessness." This terror was the result of the quantity of revolution which was contained in him. That is what explains and excuses Bonapartist liberalism. This phantom caused the old world to tremble. The kings reigned, but ill at their ease, with the rock of Saint Helena on the horizon.

While Napoleon was passing through the death struggle at Longwood, the sixty thousand men who had fallen on the field of Waterloo were quietly rotting, and something of their peace was shed abroad over the world. The Congress of Vienna made the treaties in 1815, and Europe called this the Restoration.

This is what Waterloo was.

But what matters it to the Infinite? all that tempest, all that cloud, that war, then that peace? All that darkness did not trouble for a moment the light of that immense Eye before which a grub skipping from one blade of grass to another equals the eagle soaring from belfry to belfry on the towers of Notre Dame.

CHAPTER XIX — THE BATTLE-FIELD AT NIGHT

Let us return — it is a necessity in this book — to that fatal battle-field.

On the 18th of June the moon was full. Its light favored Blucher's ferocious pursuit, betrayed the traces of the fugitives, delivered up that disastrous mass to the eager Prussian cavalry, and aided the massacre. Such tragic favors of the night do occur sometimes during catastrophes.

After the last cannon-shot had been fired, the plain of Mont-Saint-Jean remained deserted.

The English occupied the encampment of the French; it is the usual sign of victory to sleep in the bed of the vanquished. They established their bivouac beyond Rossomme. The Prussians, let loose on the retreating rout, pushed forward. Wellington went to the village of Waterloo to draw up his report to Lord Bathurst.

If ever the sic vos non vobis was applicable, it certainly is to that village of Waterloo. Waterloo took no part, and lay half a league from the scene of action. Mont-Saint-Jean was cannonaded, Hougomont was burned, La Haie-Sainte was taken by assault, Papelotte was burned, Plancenoit was burned, La Belle-Alliance beheld the embrace of the two conquerors; these names are hardly known, and Waterloo, which worked not in the battle, bears off all the honor.

We are not of the number of those who flatter war; when the occasion presents itself, we tell the truth about it. War has frightful beauties which we have not concealed; it has also, we acknowledge, some hideous features. One of the most surprising is the prompt stripping of the bodies of the dead after the victory. The dawn which follows a battle always rises on naked corpses.

Who does this? Who thus soils the triumph? What hideous, furtive hand is that which is slipped into the pocket of victory? What pickpockets are they who ply their trade in the rear of glory? Some philosophers — Voltaire among the number — affirm that it is precisely those persons have made the glory. It is the same men, they say; there is no relief corps; those who are erect pillage those who are prone on the earth. The hero of the day is the vampire of the night. One has assuredly the right, after all, to strip a corpse a bit when one is the author of that corpse. For our own part, we do not think so; it seems to us impossible that the same hand should pluck laurels and purloin the shoes from a dead man.

One thing is certain, which is, that generally after conquerors follow thieves. But let us leave the soldier, especially the contemporary soldier, out of the question.

Every army has a rear-guard, and it is that which must be blamed. Bat-like creatures, half brigands and lackeys; all the sorts of vespertillos that that twilight called war engenders; wearers of uniforms, who take no part in the fighting; pretended invalids; formidable limpers; interloping sutlers, trotting along in little carts, sometimes accompanied by their wives, and stealing things which they sell again; beggars offering themselves as guides to officers; soldiers' servants; marauders; armies on the march in days gone by, — we are not speaking of the present, — dragged all this behind them, so that in the special language they are called "stragglers." No army, no nation, was responsible for those beings; they spoke Italian and followed the Germans, then spoke French and followed the English. It was by one of these wretches, a Spanish straggler who spoke French, that the Marquis of Fervacques, deceived by his Picard jargon, and taking him for one of our own men, was traitorously slain and robbed on the battle-field itself, in the course of the night which followed the victory of Cerisoles. The rascal sprang from this marauding. The detestable maxim, Live on the enemy! produced this leprosy, which a strict discipline alone could heal. There are reputations which are deceptive; one does not always know why certain generals, great in other directions, have been so popular. Turenne was adored by his soldiers because he tolerated pillage; evil permitted constitutes part of goodness. Turenne was so good that he allowed the Palatinate to be delivered over to fire and blood. The marauders in the train of an army were more or less in number, according as the chief was more or less severe. Hoche and Marceau had no stragglers; Wellington had few, and we do him the justice to mention it.

Nevertheless, on the night from the 18th to the 19th of June, the dead were robbed. Wellington was rigid; he gave orders that any one caught in the act should be shot; but rapine is tenacious. The marauders stole in one corner of the battlefield while others were being shot in another.

The moon was sinister over this plain.

Towards midnight, a man was prowling about, or rather, climbing in the direction of the hollow road of Ohain. To all appearance he was one of those whom we have just described, — neither English nor French, neither peasant nor soldier, less a man than a ghoul attracted by the scent of the dead bodies having theft for his victory, and come to rifle Waterloo. He was clad in a blouse that was something like a great coat; he was uneasy and audacious; he walked forwards and gazed behind him. Who was this man? The night probably knew more of him than the day. He had no sack, but evidently he had large pockets under his coat. From time to time he halted, scrutinized the plain around him as though to see whether he were observed, bent over abruptly, disturbed something silent and motionless on the ground, then rose and fled. His sliding motion, his attitudes, his mysterious and rapid gestures, caused him to resemble those twilight larvae which haunt ruins, and which ancient Norman legends call the Alleurs.

Certain nocturnal wading birds produce these silhouettes among the marshes.

A glance capable of piercing all that mist deeply would have perceived at some distance a sort of little sutler’s wagon with a fluted wicker hood, harnessed to a famished nag which was cropping the grass across its bit as it halted, hidden, as it were, behind the hovel which adjoins the highway to Nivelles, at the angle of the road from Mont-Saint-Jean to Braine l’Alleud; and in the wagon, a sort of woman seated on coffers and packages. Perhaps there was some connection between that wagon and that prowler.

The darkness was serene. Not a cloud in the zenith. What matters it if the earth be red! the moon remains white; these are the indifferences of the sky. In the fields, branches of trees broken by grape-shot, but not fallen, upheld by their bark, swayed gently in the breeze of night. A breath, almost a respiration, moved the shrubbery. Quivers which resembled the departure of souls ran through the grass.

In the distance the coming and going of patrols and the general rounds of the English camp were audible.

Hougomont and La Haie-Sainte continued to burn, forming, one in the west, the other in the east, two great flames which were joined by the cordon of bivouac fires of the English, like a necklace of rubies with two carbuncles at the extremities, as they extended in an immense semicircle over the hills along the horizon.

We have described the catastrophe of the road of Ohain. The heart is terrified at the thought of what that death must have been to so many brave men.

If there is anything terrible, if there exists a reality which surpasses dreams, it is this: to live, to see the sun; to be in full possession of virile force; to possess health and joy; to laugh valiantly; to rush towards a glory which one sees dazzling in front of one; to feel in one’s breast lungs which breathe, a heart which beats, a will which reasons; to speak, think, hope, love; to have a mother, to have a wife, to have children; to have the light — and all at once, in the space of a shout, in less than a minute, to sink into an abyss; to fall, to roll, to crush, to be crushed; to see ears of wheat, flowers, leaves, branches; not to be able to catch hold of anything; to feel one’s sword useless, men beneath one, horses on top of one; to struggle in vain, since one’s bones have been broken by some kick in the darkness; to feel a heel which makes one’s eyes start from their sockets; to bite horses’ shoes in one’s rage; to stifle, to yell, to writhe; to be beneath, and to say to one’s self, “But just a little while ago I was a living man!”

There, where that lamentable disaster had uttered its death-rattle, all was silence now. The edges of the hollow road were encumbered with horses and riders, inextricably heaped up. Terrible entanglement! There was no longer any slope, for the corpses had levelled the road with the plain, and reached the brim like a well-filled bushel of barley. A heap of dead bodies in the upper part, a river of blood in the lower part — such was that road on the evening of the 18th of June, 1815. The blood ran even to the Nivelles highway, and there overflowed in a large pool in front of the abatis of trees which barred the way, at a spot which is still pointed out.

It will be remembered that it was at the opposite point, in the direction of the Genappe road, that the destruction of the cuirassiers had taken place. The thickness of the layer of bodies was proportioned to the depth of the hollow road. Towards the middle, at the point where it became level, where Delort’s division had passed, the layer of corpses was thinner.

The nocturnal prowler whom we have just shown to the reader was going in that direction. He was searching that vast tomb. He gazed about. He passed the dead in some sort of hideous review. He walked with his feet in the blood.

All at once he paused.

A few paces in front of him, in the hollow road, at the point where the pile of dead came to an end, an open hand, illumined by the moon, projected from beneath that heap of men. That hand had on its finger something sparkling, which was a ring of gold.

The man bent over, remained in a crouching attitude for a moment, and when he rose there was no longer a ring on the hand.

He did not precisely rise; he remained in a stooping and frightened attitude, with his back turned to the heap of dead, scanning the horizon on his knees, with the whole upper portion of his body supported on his two forefingers, which rested on the earth, and his head peering above the edge of the hollow road. The jackal's four paws suit some actions.

Then coming to a decision, he rose to his feet.

At that moment, he gave a terrible start. He felt some one clutch him from behind.

He wheeled round; it was the open hand, which had closed, and had seized the skirt of his coat.

An honest man would have been terrified; this man burst into a laugh.

"Come," said he, "it's only a dead body. I prefer a spook to a gendarme."

But the hand weakened and released him. Effort is quickly exhausted in the grave.

"Well now," said the prowler, "is that dead fellow alive? Let's see."

He bent down again, fumbled among the heap, pushed aside everything that was in his way, seized the hand, grasped the arm, freed the head, pulled out the body, and a few moments later he was dragging the lifeless, or at least the unconscious, man, through the shadows of hollow road. He was a cuirassier, an officer, and even an officer of considerable rank; a large gold epaulette peeped from beneath the cuirass; this officer no longer possessed a helmet. A furious sword-cut had scarred his face, where nothing was discernible but blood.

However, he did not appear to have any broken limbs, and, by some happy chance, if that word is permissible here, the dead had been vaulted above him in such a manner as to preserve him from being crushed. His eyes were still closed.

On his cuirass he wore the silver cross of the Legion of Honor.

The prowler tore off this cross, which disappeared into one of the gulfs which he had beneath his great coat.

Then he felt of the officer’s fob, discovered a watch there, and took possession of it. Next he searched his waistcoat, found a purse and pocketed it.

When he had arrived at this stage of succor which he was administering to this dying man, the officer opened his eyes.

“Thanks,” he said feebly.

The abruptness of the movements of the man who was manipulating him, the freshness of the night, the air which he could inhale freely, had roused him from his lethargy.

The prowler made no reply. He raised his head. A sound of footsteps was audible in the plain; some patrol was probably approaching.

The officer murmured, for the death agony was still in his voice: —

“Who won the battle?”

“The English,” answered the prowler.

The officer went on: —

“Look in my pockets; you will find a watch and a purse. Take them.”

It was already done.

The prowler executed the required feint, and said: —

“There is nothing there.”

“I have been robbed,” said the officer; “I am sorry for that. You should have had them.”

The steps of the patrol became more and more distinct.

“Some one is coming,” said the prowler, with the movement of a man who is taking his departure.

The officer raised his arm feebly, and detained him.

“You have saved my life. Who are you?”

The prowler answered rapidly, and in a low voice: —

“Like yourself, I belonged to the French army. I must leave you. If they were to catch me, they would shoot me. I have saved your life. Now get out of the scrape yourself.”

“What is your rank?”

“Sergeant.”

“What is your name?”

“Thenardier.”

“I shall not forget that name,” said the officer; “and do you remember mine. My name is Pontmercy.”

BOOK SECOND. — THE SHIP ORION

CHAPTER I — NUMBER 24,601 BECOMES NUMBER 9,430

Jean Valjean had been recaptured.

The reader will be grateful to us if we pass rapidly over the sad details. We will confine ourselves to transcribing two paragraphs published by the journals of that day, a few months after the surprising events which had taken place at M. sur M.

These articles are rather summary. It must be remembered, that at that epoch the Gazette des Tribunaux was not yet in existence.

We borrow the first from the Drapeau Blanc. It bears the date of July 25, 1823.

An arrondissement of the Pas de Calais has just been the theatre of an event quite out of the ordinary course. A man, who was a stranger in the Department, and who bore the name of M. Madeleine, had, thanks to the new methods, resuscitated some years ago an ancient local industry, the manufacture of jet and of black glass trinkets. He had made his fortune in the business, and that of the arrondissement as well, we will admit. He had been appointed mayor, in recognition of his services. The police discovered that M. Madeleine was no other than an ex-convict who had broken his ban, condemned in 1796 for theft, and named Jean Valjean. Jean Valjean has been recommitted to prison. It appears that previous to his arrest he had succeeded in withdrawing from the hands of M. Laffitte, a sum of over half a million which he had lodged there, and which he had, moreover, and by perfectly legitimate means, acquired in his business. No one has been able to discover where Jean Valjean has concealed this money since his return to prison at Toulon.

The second article, which enters a little more into detail, is an extract from the Journal de Paris, of the same date. A former convict, who had been liberated, named Jean Valjean, has just appeared before the Court of Assizes of the Var, under circumstances calculated to attract attention. This wretch had succeeded in escaping the vigilance of the police, he had changed his name, and had succeeded in getting himself appointed mayor of one of our small northern towns; in this town he had established a considerable commerce. He has at last been unmasked and arrested, thanks to the indefatigable zeal of the public prosecutor. He had for his concubine a woman of the town, who died of a shock at the moment of his arrest. This scoundrel, who is endowed with Herculean strength, found means to escape; but three or four days after his flight the police laid their hands on him once more, in Paris itself, at the very moment when he was entering one of those little vehicles which run between the capital and the village of Montfermeil (Seine-et-Oise). He is said to have profited by this interval of three or four days of liberty, to withdraw a considerable sum deposited by him with one of our leading bankers. This sum has been estimated at six or seven hundred thousand francs. If the indictment is to be trusted, he has hidden it in some place known to himself alone, and it has not been possible to lay hands on it. However that may be, the said Jean Valjean has just been brought before the Assizes of the Department of the Var as accused of highway robbery accompanied with violence, about eight years ago, on the person of one of those honest children who, as the patriarch of Ferney has said, in immortal verse,

“. . . Arrive from Savoy every year,
And who, with gentle hands, do clear
Those long canals choked up with soot.”

This bandit refused to defend himself. It was proved by the skilful and eloquent representative of the public prosecutor, that the theft was committed in complicity with others, and that Jean Valjean was a member of a band of robbers in the south. Jean Valjean was pronounced guilty and was condemned to the death penalty in consequence. This criminal refused to lodge an appeal. The king, in his inexhaustible clemency, has deigned to commute his penalty to that of penal servitude for life. Jean Valjean was immediately taken to the prison at Toulon.

The reader has not forgotten that Jean Valjean had religious habits at M. sur M. Some papers, among others the Constitutional, presented this commutation as a triumph of the priestly party.

Jean Valjean changed his number in the galleys. He was called 9,430.

However, and we will mention it at once in order that we may not be obliged to recur to the subject, the prosperity of M. sur M. vanished with M. Madeleine; all that he had foreseen during his night of fever and hesitation was realized; lacking him, there actually was a soul lacking. After this fall, there took place at M. sur M. that egotistical division of great existences which have fallen, that fatal dismemberment of flourishing things which is accomplished every day, obscurely, in the human community, and which history has noted only once, because it occurred after the death of Alexander. Lieutenants are crowned kings; superintendents improvise manufacturers out of themselves. Envious rivalries arose. M. Madeleine’s vast workshops were shut; his buildings fell to ruin, his workmen were scattered. Some of them quitted the country, others abandoned the trade. Thenceforth, everything was done on a small scale, instead of on a grand scale; for lucre instead of the general good. There was no longer a centre; everywhere there was competition and animosity. M. Madeleine had reigned over all and directed all. No sooner had he fallen, than each pulled things to himself; the spirit of combat succeeded to the spirit of organization, bitterness to cordiality, hatred of one another to the benevolence of the founder towards all; the threads which M. Madeleine had set were tangled and broken, the methods were adulterated, the products were debased, confidence was killed; the market diminished, for lack of orders; salaries were reduced, the workshops stood still, bankruptcy arrived. And then there was nothing more for the poor. All had vanished.

The state itself perceived that some one had been crushed somewhere. Less than four years after the judgment of the Court of Assizes establishing the identity of Jean Valjean and M. Madeleine, for the benefit of the galleys, the cost of collecting taxes had doubled in the arrondissement of M. sur M.; and M. de Villele called attention to the fact in the rostrum, in the month of February, 1827.

CHAPTER II — IN WHICH THE READER WILL PERUSE TWO VERSES, WHICH ARE OF THE DEVIL’S COMPOSITION, POSSIBLY

Before proceeding further, it will be to the purpose to narrate in some detail, a singular occurrence which took place at about the same epoch, in Montfermeil, and which is not lacking in coincidence with certain conjectures of the indictment.

There exists in the region of Montfermeil a very ancient superstition, which is all the more curious and all the more precious, because a popular superstition in the vicinity of Paris is like an aloe in Siberia. We are among those who respect everything which is in the nature of a rare plant. Here, then, is the superstition of Montfermeil: it is thought that the devil, from time immemorial, has selected the forest as a hiding-place for his treasures. Goodwives affirm that it is no rarity to encounter at nightfall, in secluded nooks of the forest, a black man with the air of a carter or a wood-chopper, wearing wooden shoes, clad in trousers and a blouse of linen, and recognizable by the fact, that, instead of a cap or hat, he has two immense horns on his head. This ought, in fact, to render him recognizable. This man is habitually engaged in digging a hole. There are three ways of profiting by such an encounter. The first is to approach the man and speak to him. Then it is seen that the man is simply a peasant, that he appears black because it is nightfall; that he is not digging any hole whatever, but is cutting grass for his cows, and that what had been taken for horns is nothing but a dung-fork which he is carrying on his back, and whose teeth, thanks to the perspective of evening, seemed to spring from his head. The man returns home and dies within the week. The second way is to watch him, to wait until he has dug his hole, until he has filled it and has gone away; then to run with great speed to the trench, to open it once more and to seize the “treasure” which the black man has necessarily placed there. In this case one dies within the month. Finally, the last method is not to speak to the black man, not to look at him, and to flee at the best speed of one’s legs. One then dies within the year.

As all three methods are attended with their special inconveniences, the second, which at all events, presents some advantages, among others that of possessing a treasure, if only for a month, is the one most generally adopted. So bold men, who are tempted by every chance, have quite frequently, as we are assured, opened the holes excavated by the black man, and tried to rob the devil. The success of the operation appears to be but moderate. At least, if the tradition is to be believed, and in particular the two enigmatical lines in barbarous Latin, which an evil Norman monk, a bit of a sorcerer, named Tryphon has left on this subject. This Tryphon is buried at the Abbéy of Saint-Georges de Bocherville, near Rouen, and toads spawn on his grave.

Accordingly, enormous efforts are made. Such trenches are ordinarily extremely deep; a man sweats, digs, toils all night — for it must be done at night; he wets his shirt, burns out his candle, breaks his mattock, and when he arrives at the bottom of the hole, when he lays his hand on the "treasure," what does he find? What is the devil's treasure? A sou, sometimes a crown-piece, a stone, a skeleton, a bleeding body, sometimes a spectre folded in four like a sheet of paper in a portfolio, sometimes nothing. This is what Tryphon's verses seem to announce to the indiscreet and curious: —

"Fodit, et in fossa thesauros condit opaca,
As, nummas, lapides, cadaver, simulacra, nihilque."

It seems that in our day there is sometimes found a powder-horn with bullets, sometimes an old pack of cards greasy and worn, which has evidently served the devil. Tryphon does not record these two finds, since Tryphon lived in the twelfth century, and since the devil does not appear to have had the wit to invent powder before Roger Bacon's time, and cards before the time of Charles VI.

Moreover, if one plays at cards, one is sure to lose all that one possesses! and as for the powder in the horn, it possesses the property of making your gun burst in your face.

Now, a very short time after the epoch when it seemed to the prosecuting attorney that the liberated convict Jean Valjean during his flight of several days had been prowling around Montfermeil, it was remarked in that village that a certain old road-laborer, named Boulatruelle, had "peculiar ways" in the forest. People thereabouts thought they knew that this Boulatruelle had been in the galleys. He was subjected to certain police supervision, and, as he could find work nowhere, the administration employed him at reduced rates as a road-mender on the cross-road from Gagny to Lagny.

This Boulatruelle was a man who was viewed with disfavor by the inhabitants of the district as too respectful, too humble, too prompt in removing his cap to every one, and trembling and smiling in the presence of the gendarmes, — probably affiliated to robber bands, they said; suspected of lying in ambush at verge of copses at nightfall. The only thing in his favor was that he was a drunkard.

This is what people thought they had noticed: —

Of late, Boulatruelle had taken to quitting his task of stone-breaking and care of the road at a very early hour, and to betaking himself to the forest with his pickaxe. He was encountered towards evening in the most deserted clearings, in the wildest thickets; and he had the appearance of being in search of something, and sometimes he was digging holes. The goodwives who passed took him at first for Beelzebub; then they recognized Boulatruelle, and were not in the least reassured thereby. These encounters seemed to cause Boulatruelle a lively displeasure. It was evident that he sought to hide, and that there was some mystery in what he was doing.

It was said in the village: “It is clear that the devil has appeared. Boulatruelle has seen him, and is on the search. In sooth, he is cunning enough to pocket Lucifer’s hoard.”

The Voltairians added, “Will Boulatruelle catch the devil, or will the devil catch Boulatruelle?” The old women made a great many signs of the cross.

In the meantime, Boulatruelle’s manoeuvres in the forest ceased; and he resumed his regular occupation of roadmending; and people gossiped of something else.

Some persons, however, were still curious, surmising that in all this there was probably no fabulous treasure of the legends, but some fine windfall of a more serious and palpable sort than the devil’s bank-bills, and that the road-mender had half discovered the secret. The most “puzzled” were the school-master and Thenardier, the proprietor of the tavern, who was everybody’s friend, and had not disdained to ally himself with Boulatruelle.

“He has been in the galleys,” said Thenardier. “Eh! Good God! no one knows who has been there or will be there.”

One evening the schoolmaster affirmed that in former times the law would have instituted an inquiry as to what Boulatruelle did in the forest, and that the latter would have been forced to speak, and that he would have been put to the torture in case of need, and that Boulatruelle would not have resisted the water test, for example. “Let us put him to the wine test,” said Thenardier.

They made an effort, and got the old road-mender to drinking. Boulatruelle drank an enormous amount, but said very little. He combined with admirable art, and in masterly proportions, the thirst of a gormandizer with the discretion of a judge. Nevertheless, by dint of returning to the charge and of comparing and putting together the few obscure words which he did allow to escape him, this is what Thenardier and the schoolmaster imagined that they had made out: —

One morning, when Boulatruelle was on his way to his work, at daybreak, he had been surprised to see, at a nook of the forest in the underbrush, a shovel and a pickaxe, concealed, as one might say.

However, he might have supposed that they were probably the shovel and pick of Father Six-Fours, the water-carrier, and would have thought no more about it. But, on the evening of that day, he saw, without being seen himself, as he was hidden by a large tree, “a person who did not belong in those parts, and whom he, Boulatruelle, knew well,” directing his steps towards the densest part of the wood. Translation by Thenardier: A comrade of the galleys. Boulatruelle obstinately refused to reveal his name. This person carried a package — something square, like a large box or a small trunk. Surprise on the part of Boulatruelle. However, it was only after the expiration of seven or eight minutes that the idea of following that “person” had occurred to him. But it was too late; the person was already in the thicket, night had descended, and Boulatruelle had not been able to catch up with him. Then he had adopted the course of watching for him at the edge of the woods. “It was moonlight.” Two or three hours later, Boulatruelle had seen this person emerge from the brushwood, carrying no longer the coffer, but a shovel and pick. Boulatruelle had allowed the person to pass, and had not dreamed of accosting him, because he said to himself that the other man was three times as strong as he was, and armed with a pickaxe, and that he would probably knock him over the head on recognizing him, and on perceiving that he was recognized. Touching effusion of two old comrades on meeting again. But the shovel and pick had served as a ray of light to Boulatruelle; he had hastened to the thicket in the morning, and had found neither shovel nor pick. From this he had drawn the inference that this person, once in the forest, had dug a hole with his pick, buried the coffer, and reclosed the hole with his shovel. Now, the coffer was too small to contain a body; therefore it contained money. Hence his researches. Boulatruelle had explored, sounded, searched the entire forest and the thicket, and had dug wherever the earth appeared to him to have been recently turned up. In vain.

He had “ferreted out” nothing. No one in Montfermeil thought any more about it. There were only a few brave gossips, who said, “You may be certain that the mender on the Gagny road did not take all that trouble for nothing; he was sure that the devil had come.”

CHAPTER III — THE ANKLE-CHAIN MUST HAVE UNDERGONE A CERTAIN PREPARATORY MANIPULATION TO BE THUS BROKEN WITH A BLOW FROM A HAMMER

Towards the end of October, in that same year, 1823, the inhabitants of Toulon beheld the entry into their port, after heavy weather, and for the purpose of repairing some damages, of the ship Orion, which was employed later at Brest as a school-ship, and which then formed a part of the Mediterranean squadron.

This vessel, battered as it was, — for the sea had handled it roughly, — produced a fine effect as it entered the roads. It flew some colors which procured for it the regulation salute of eleven guns, which it returned, shot for shot; total, twenty-two. It has been calculated that what with salvos, royal and military politenesses, courteous exchanges of uproar, signals of etiquette, formalities of roadsteads and citadels, sunrises and sunsets, saluted every day by all fortresses and all ships of war, openings and closings of ports, etc., the civilized world, discharged all over the earth, in the course of four and twenty hours, one hundred and fifty thousand useless shots. At six francs the shot, that comes to nine hundred thousand francs a day, three hundred millions a year, which vanish in smoke. This is a mere detail. All this time the poor were dying of hunger.

The year 1823 was what the Restoration called “the epoch of the Spanish war.”

This war contained many events in one, and a quantity of peculiarities. A grand family affair for the house of Bourbon; the branch of France succoring and protecting the branch of Madrid, that is to say, performing an act devolving on the elder; an apparent return to our national traditions, complicated by servitude and by subjection to the cabinets of the North; M. le Duc d’Angoulême, surnamed by the liberal sheets the hero of Andujar, compressing in a triumphal attitude that was somewhat contradicted by his peaceable air, the ancient and very powerful terrorism of the Holy Office at variance with the chimerical terrorism of the liberals; the sansculottes resuscitated, to the great terror of dowagers, under the name of descamisados; monarchy opposing an obstacle to progress described as anarchy; the theories of ‘89 roughly interrupted in the sap; a European halt, called to the French idea, which was making the tour of the world; beside the son of France as generalissimo, the Prince de Carignan, afterwards Charles Albert, enrolling himself in that crusade of kings against people as a volunteer, with grenadier epaulets of red worsted; the soldiers of the Empire setting out on a fresh campaign, but aged, saddened, after eight years of repose, and under the white cockade; the tricolored standard waved abroad by a heroic handful of Frenchmen, as the white standard had been thirty years earlier at Coblentz; monks mingled with our troops; the spirit of liberty and of novelty brought to its senses by bayonets; principles slaughtered by cannonades; France undoing by her arms that which she had done by her mind; in addition to this, hostile leaders sold, soldiers hesitating, cities besieged by millions; no military perils, and yet possible explosions, as in every mine which is surprised and invaded; but little bloodshed, little honor won, shame for some, glory for no one. Such was this war, made by the princes descended from Louis XIV., and conducted by generals who had been under Napoleon. Its sad fate was to recall neither the grand war nor grand politics.

Some feats of arms were serious; the taking of the Trocadero, among others, was a fine military action; but after all, we repeat, the trumpets of this war give back a cracked sound, the whole effect was suspicious; history approves of France for making a difficulty about accepting this false triumph. It seemed evident that certain Spanish officers charged with resistance yielded too easily; the idea of corruption was connected with the victory; it appears as though generals and not battles had been won, and the conquering soldier returned humiliated. A debasing war, in short, in which the Bank of France could be read in the folds of the flag.

Soldiers of the war of 1808, on whom Saragossa had fallen in formidable ruin, frowned in 1823 at the easy surrender of citadels, and began to regret Palafox. It is the nature of France to prefer to have Rostopchine rather than Ballesteros in front of her.

From a still more serious point of view, and one which it is also proper to insist upon here, this war, which wounded the military spirit of France, enraged the democratic spirit. It was an enterprise of inthralment. In that campaign, the object of the French soldier, the son of democracy, was the conquest of a yoke for others. A hideous contradiction. France is made to arouse the soul of nations, not to stifle it. All the revolutions of Europe since 1792 are the French Revolution: liberty darts rays from France. That is a solar fact. Blind is he who will not see! It was Bonaparte who said it.

The war of 1823, an outrage on the generous Spanish nation, was then, at the same time, an outrage on the French Revolution. It was France who committed this monstrous violence; by foul means, for, with the exception of wars of liberation, everything that armies do is by foul means. The words passive obedience indicate this. An army is a strange masterpiece of combination where force results from an enormous sum of impotence. Thus is war, made by humanity against humanity, despite humanity, explained.

As for the Bourbons, the war of 1823 was fatal to them. They took it for a success. They did not perceive the danger that lies in having an idea slain to order. They went astray, in their innocence, to such a degree that they introduced the immense enfeeblement of a crime into their establishment as an element of strength. The spirit of the ambush entered into their politics. 1830 had its germ in 1823. The Spanish campaign became in their counsels an argument for force and for adventures by right Divine. France, having re-established elrey netto in Spain, might well have re-established the absolute king at home. They fell into the alarming error of taking the obedience of the soldier for the consent of the nation. Such confidence is the ruin of thrones. It is not permitted to fall asleep, either in the shadow of a machineel tree, nor in the shadow of an army.

Let us return to the ship Orion.

During the operations of the army commanded by the prince generalissimo, a squadron had been cruising in the Mediterranean. We have just stated that the Orion belonged to this fleet, and that accidents of the sea had brought it into port at Toulon.

The presence of a vessel of war in a port has something about it which attracts and engages a crowd. It is because it is great, and the crowd loves what is great.

A ship of the line is one of the most magnificent combinations of the genius of man with the powers of nature.

A ship of the line is composed, at the same time, of the heaviest and the lightest of possible matter, for it deals at one and the same time with three forms of substance, — solid, liquid, and fluid, — and it must do battle with all three. It has eleven claws of iron with which to seize the granite on the bottom of the sea, and more wings and more antennae than winged insects, to catch the wind in the clouds. Its breath pours out through its hundred and twenty cannons as through enormous trumpets, and replies proudly to the thunder. The ocean seeks to lead it astray in the alarming sameness of its billows, but the vessel has its soul, its compass, which counsels it and always shows it the north. In the blackest nights, its lanterns supply the place of the stars. Thus, against the wind, it has its cordage and its canvas; against the water, wood; against the rocks, its iron, brass, and lead; against the shadows, its light; against immensity, a needle.

If one wishes to form an idea of all those gigantic proportions which, taken as a whole, constitute the ship of the line, one has only to enter one of the six-story covered construction stocks, in the ports of Brest or Toulon. The vessels in process of construction are under a bell-glass there, as it were. This colossal beam is a yard; that great column of wood which stretches out on the earth as far as the eye can reach is the main-mast. Taking it from its root in the stocks to its tip in the clouds, it is sixty fathoms long, and its diameter at its base is three feet. The English main-mast rises to a height of two hundred and seventeen feet above the water-line. The navy of our fathers employed cables, ours employs chains. The simple pile of chains on a ship of a hundred guns is four feet high, twenty feet in breadth, and eight feet in depth. And how much wood is required to make this ship? Three thousand cubic metres. It is a floating forest.

And moreover, let this be borne in mind, it is only a question here of the military vessel of forty years ago, of the simple sailing-vessel; steam, then in its infancy, has since added new miracles to that prodigy which is called a war vessel. At the present time, for example, the mixed vessel with a screw is a surprising machine, propelled by three thousand square metres of canvas and by an engine of two thousand five hundred horse-power.

Not to mention these new marvels, the ancient vessel of Christopher Columbus and of De Ruyter is one of the masterpieces of man. It is as inexhaustible in force as is the Infinite in gales; it stores up the wind in its sails, it is precise in the immense vagueness of the billows, it floats, and it reigns.

There comes an hour, nevertheless, when the gale breaks that sixty-foot yard like a straw, when the wind bends that mast four hundred feet tall, when that anchor, which weighs tens of thousands, is twisted in the jaws of the waves like a fisherman’s hook in the jaws of a pike, when those monstrous cannons utter plaintive and futile roars, which the hurricane bears forth into the void and into night, when all that power and all that majesty are engulfed in a power and majesty which are superior.

Every time that immense force is displayed to culminate in an immense feebleness it affords men food for thought, Hence in the ports curious people abound around these marvellous machines of war and of navigation, without being able to explain perfectly to themselves why. Every day, accordingly, from morning until night, the quays, sluices, and the jetties of the port of Toulon were covered with a multitude of idlers and loungers, as they say in Paris, whose business consisted in staring at the Orion.

The Orion was a ship that had been ailing for a long time; in the course of its previous cruises thick layers of barnacles had collected on its keel to such a degree as to deprive it of half its speed; it had gone into the dry dock the year before this, in order to have the barnacles scraped off, then it had put to sea again; but this cleaning had affected the bolts of the keel: in the neighborhood of the Balearic Isles the sides had been strained and had opened; and, as the plating in those days was not of sheet iron, the vessel had sprung a leak. A violent equinoctial gale had come up, which had first staved in a grating and a porthole on the larboard side, and damaged the foretop-gallant-shrouds; in consequence of these injuries, the Orion had run back to Toulon.

It anchored near the Arsenal; it was fully equipped, and repairs were begun. The hull had received no damage on the starboard, but some of the planks had been unnailed here and there, according to custom, to permit of air entering the hold.

One morning the crowd which was gazing at it witnessed an accident.

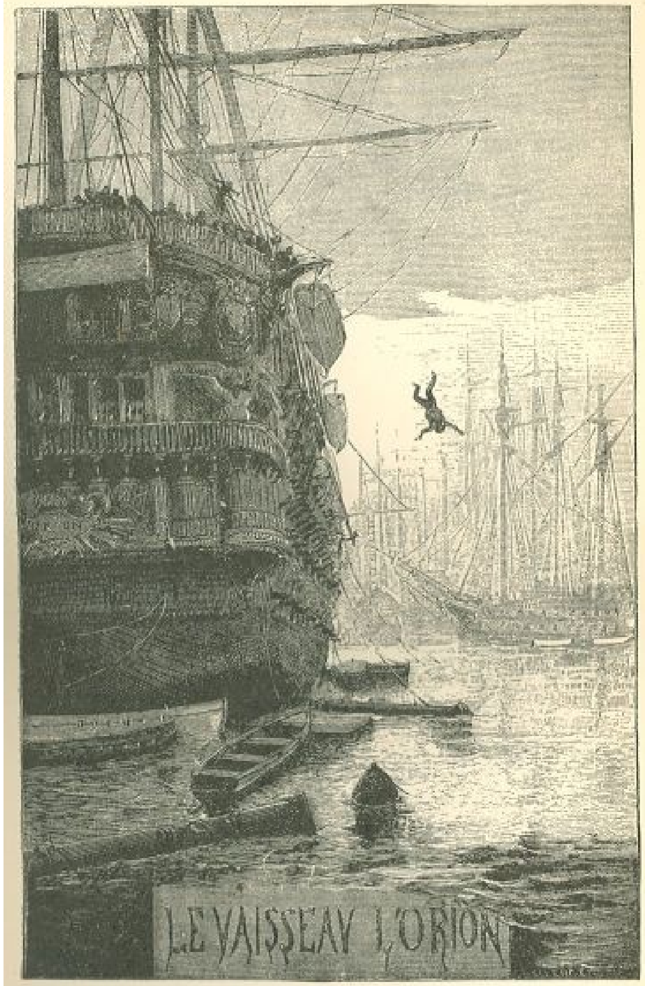

THE SHIP ORION.

The crew was busy bending the sails; the topman, who had to take the upper corner of the main-top-sail on the starboard, lost his balance; he was seen to waver; the multitude thronging the Arsenal quay uttered a cry; the man's head overbalanced his body; the man fell around the yard, with his hands outstretched towards the abyss; on his way he seized the footrope, first with one hand, then with the other, and remained hanging from it: the sea lay below him at a dizzy depth; the shock of his fall had imparted to the footrope a violent swinging motion; the man swayed back and forth at the end of that rope, like a stone in a sling.

It was incurring a frightful risk to go to his assistance; not one of the sailors, all fishermen of the coast, recently levied for the service, dared to attempt it. In the meantime, the unfortunate topman was losing his strength; his anguish could not be discerned on his face, but his exhaustion was visible in every limb; his arms were contracted in horrible twitchings; every effort which he made to re-ascend served but to augment the oscillations of the foot-rope; he did not shout, for fear of exhausting his strength. All were awaiting the minute when he should release his hold on the rope, and, from instant to instant, heads were turned aside that his fall might not be seen. There are moments when a bit of rope, a pole, the branch of a tree, is life itself, and it is a terrible thing to see a living being detach himself from it and fall like a ripe fruit.

All at once a man was seen climbing into the rigging with the agility of a tiger-cat; this man was dressed in red; he was a convict; he wore a green cap; he was a life convict. On arriving on a level with the top, a gust of wind carried away his cap, and allowed a perfectly white head to be seen: he was not a young man.

A convict employed on board with a detachment from the galleys had, in fact, at the very first instant, hastened to the officer of the watch, and, in the midst of the consternation and the hesitation of the crew, while all the sailors were trembling and drawing back, he had asked the officer's permission to risk his life to save the topman; at an affirmative sign from the officer he had broken the chain riveted to his ankle with one blow of a hammer, then he had caught up a rope, and had dashed into the rigging: no one noticed, at the instant, with what ease that chain had been broken; it was only later on that the incident was recalled.

In a twinkling he was on the yard; he paused for a few seconds and appeared to be measuring it with his eye; these seconds, during which the breeze swayed the topman at the extremity of a thread, seemed centuries to those who were looking on. At last, the convict raised his eyes to heaven and advanced a step: the crowd drew a long breath. He was seen to run out along the yard: on arriving at the point, he fastened the rope which he had brought to it, and allowed the other end to hang down, then he began to descend the rope, hand over hand, and then, — and the anguish was indescribable, — instead of one man suspended over the gulf, there were two.

One would have said it was a spider coming to seize a fly, only here the spider brought life, not death. Ten thousand glances were fastened on this group; not a cry, not a word; the same tremor contracted every brow; all mouths held their breath as though they feared to add the slightest puff to the wind which was swaying the two unfortunate men.

In the meantime, the convict had succeeded in lowering himself to a position near the sailor. It was high time; one minute more, and the exhausted and despairing man would have allowed himself to fall into the abyss. The convict had moored him securely with the cord to which he clung with one hand, while he was working with the other. At last, he was seen to climb back on the yard, and to drag the sailor up after him; he held him there a moment to allow him to recover his strength, then he grasped him in his arms and carried him, walking on the yard himself to the cap, and from there to the main-top, where he left him in the hands of his comrades.

At that moment the crowd broke into applause: old convict-sergeants among them wept, and women embraced each other on the quay, and all voices were heard to cry with a sort of tender rage, “Pardon for that man!”

He, in the meantime, had immediately begun to make his descent to rejoin his detachment. In order to reach them the more speedily, he dropped into the rigging, and ran along one of the lower yards; all eyes were following him. At a certain moment fear assailed them; whether it was that he was fatigued, or that his head turned, they thought they saw him hesitate and stagger. All at once the crowd uttered a loud shout: the convict had fallen into the sea.

The fall was perilous. The frigate Algesiras was anchored alongside the Orion, and the poor convict had fallen between the two vessels: it was to be feared that he would slip under one or the other of them. Four men flung themselves hastily into a boat; the crowd cheered them on; anxiety again took possession of all souls; the man had not risen to the surface; he had disappeared in the sea without leaving a ripple, as though he had fallen into a cask of oil: they sounded, they dived. In vain. The search was continued until the evening: they did not even find the body.

On the following day the Toulon newspaper printed these lines: —

“Nov. 17, 1823. Yesterday, a convict belonging to the detachment on board of the Orion, on his return from rendering assistance to a sailor, fell into the sea and was drowned. The body has not yet been found; it is supposed that it is entangled among the piles of the Arsenal point: this man was committed under the number 9,430, and his name was Jean Valjean.”

BOOK THIRD. — ACCOMPLISHMENT OF THE PROMISE MADE TO THE DEAD WOMAN

CHAPTER I — THE WATER QUESTION AT MONTFERMEIL

Montfermeil is situated between Livry and Chelles, on the southern edge of that lofty table-land which separates the Ourcq from the Marne. At the present day it is a tolerably large town, ornamented all the year through with plaster villas, and on Sundays with beaming bourgeois. In 1823 there were at Montfermeil neither so many white houses nor so many well-satisfied citizens: it was only a village in the forest. Some pleasure-houses of the last century were to be met with there, to be sure, which were recognizable by their grand air, their balconies in twisted iron, and their long windows, whose tiny panes cast all sorts of varying shades of green on the white of the closed shutters; but Montfermeil was none the less a village. Retired cloth-merchants and rusticating attorneys had not discovered it as yet; it was a peaceful and charming place, which was not on the road to anywhere: there people lived, and cheaply, that peasant rustic life which is so bounteous and so easy; only, water was rare there, on account of the elevation of the plateau.

It was necessary to fetch it from a considerable distance; the end of the village towards Gagny drew its water from the magnificent ponds which exist in the woods there. The other end, which surrounds the church and which lies in the direction of Chelles, found drinking-water only at a little spring half-way down the slope, near the road to Chelles, about a quarter of an hour from Montfermeil.

Thus each household found it hard work to keep supplied with water. The large houses, the aristocracy, of which the Thenardier tavern formed a part, paid half a farthing a bucketful to a man who made a business of it, and who earned about eight sous a day in his enterprise of supplying Montfermeil with water; but this good man only worked until seven o’clock in the evening in summer, and five in winter; and night once come and the shutters on the ground floor once closed, he who had no water to drink went to fetch it for himself or did without it.

This constituted the terror of the poor creature whom the reader has probably not forgotten, — little Cosette. It will be remembered that Cosette was useful to the Thenardiers in two ways: they made the mother pay them, and they made the child serve them. So when the mother ceased to pay altogether, the reason for which we have read in preceding chapters, the Thenardiers kept Cosette. She took the place of a servant in their house. In this capacity she it was who ran to fetch water when it was required. So the child, who was greatly terrified at the idea of going to the spring at night, took great care that water should never be lacking in the house.

Christmas of the year 1823 was particularly brilliant at Montfermeil. The beginning of the winter had been mild; there had been neither snow nor frost up to that time. Some mountebanks from Paris had obtained permission of the mayor to erect their booths in the principal street of the village, and a band of itinerant merchants, under protection of the same tolerance, had constructed their stalls on the Church Square, and even extended them into Boulanger Alley, where, as the reader will perhaps remember, the Thenardiers' hostelry was situated. These people filled the inns and drinking-shops, and communicated to that tranquil little district a noisy and joyous life. In order to play the part of a faithful historian, we ought even to add that, among the curiosities displayed in the square, there was a menagerie, in which frightful clowns, clad in rags and coming no one knew whence, exhibited to the peasants of Montfermeil in 1823 one of those horrible Brazilian vultures, such as our Royal Museum did not possess until 1845, and which have a tricolored cockade for an eye. I believe that naturalists call this bird Caracara Polyborus; it belongs to the order of the Apicides, and to the family of the vultures. Some good old Bonapartist soldiers, who had retired to the village, went to see this creature with great devotion. The mountebanks gave out that the tricolored cockade was a unique phenomenon made by God expressly for their menagerie.

On Christmas eve itself, a number of men, carters, and peddlers, were seated at table, drinking and smoking around four or five candles in the public room of Thenardier's hostelry. This room resembled all drinking-shop rooms, — tables, pewter jugs, bottles, drinkers, smokers; but little light and a great deal of noise. The date of the year 1823 was indicated, nevertheless, by two objects which were then fashionable in the bourgeois class: to wit, a kaleidoscope and a lamp of ribbed tin. The female Thenardier was attending to the supper, which was roasting in front of a clear fire; her husband was drinking with his customers and talking politics.

Besides political conversations which had for their principal subjects the Spanish war and M. le Duc d'Angoulême, strictly local parentheses, like the following, were audible amid the uproar: —

“About Nanterre and Suresnes the vines have flourished greatly. When ten pieces were reckoned on there have been twelve. They have yielded a great deal of juice under the press.” “But the grapes cannot be ripe?” “In those parts the grapes should not be ripe; the wine turns oily as soon as spring comes.” “Then it is very thin wine?” “There are wines poorer even than these. The grapes must be gathered while green.” Etc.

Or a miller would call out: —

“Are we responsible for what is in the sacks? We find in them a quantity of small seed which we cannot sift out, and which we are obliged to send through the mill-stones; there are tares, fennel, vetches, hempseed, fox-tail, and a host of other weeds, not to mention pebbles, which abound in certain wheat, especially in Breton wheat. I am not fond of grinding Breton wheat, any more than long-sawyers like to saw beams with nails in them. You can judge of the bad dust that makes in grinding. And then people complain of the flour. They are in the wrong. The flour is no fault of ours.”

In a space between two windows a mower, who was seated at table with a landed proprietor who was fixing on a price for some meadow work to be performed in the spring, was saying: —

“It does no harm to have the grass wet. It cuts better. Dew is a good thing, sir. It makes no difference with that grass. Your grass is young and very hard to cut still. It’s terribly tender. It yields before the iron.” Etc.

Cosette was in her usual place, seated on the cross-bar of the kitchen table near the chimney. She was in rags; her bare feet were thrust into wooden shoes, and by the firelight she was engaged in knitting woollen stockings destined for the young Thenardiers. A very young kitten was playing about among the chairs. Laughter and chatter were audible in the adjoining room, from two fresh children’s voices: it was Eponine and Azelma.

In the chimney-corner a cat-o’-nine-tails was hanging on a nail.

At intervals the cry of a very young child, which was somewhere in the house, rang through the noise of the dram-shop. It was a little boy who had been born to the Thenardiers during one of the preceding winters,— “she did not know why,” she said, “the result of the cold,” — and who was a little more than three years old. The mother had nursed him, but she did not love him. When the persistent clamor of the brat became too annoying, “Your son is squalling,” Thenardier would say; “do go and see what he wants.” “Bah!” the mother would reply, “he bothers me.” And the neglected child continued to shriek in the dark.

CHAPTER II — TWO COMPLETE PORTRAITS

So far in this book the Thenardiers have been viewed only in profile; the moment has arrived for making the circuit of this couple, and considering it under all its aspects.

Thenardier had just passed his fiftieth birthday; Madame Thenardier was approaching her forties, which is equivalent to fifty in a woman; so that there existed a balance of age between husband and wife.

Our readers have possibly preserved some recollection of this Thenardier woman, ever since her first appearance, — tall, blond, red, fat, angular, square, enormous, and agile; she belonged, as we have said, to the race of those colossal wild women, who contort themselves at fairs with paving-stones hanging from their hair. She did everything about the house, — made the beds, did the washing, the cooking, and everything else. Cosette was her only servant; a mouse in the service of an elephant. Everything trembled at the sound of her voice, — window panes, furniture, and people. Her big face, dotted with red blotches, presented the appearance of a skimmer. She had a beard. She was an ideal market-porter dressed in woman's clothes. She swore splendidly; she boasted of being able to crack a nut with one blow of her fist. Except for the romances which she had read, and which made the affected lady peep through the ogress at times, in a very queer way, the idea would never have occurred to any one to say of her, "That is a woman." This Thenardier female was like the product of a wench engrafted on a fishwife. When one heard her speak, one said, "That is a gendarme"; when one saw her drink, one said, "That is a carter"; when one saw her handle Cosette, one said, "That is the hangman." One of her teeth projected when her face was in repose.

Thenardier was a small, thin, pale, angular, bony, feeble man, who had a sickly air and who was wonderfully healthy. His cunning began here; he smiled habitually, by way of precaution, and was almost polite to everybody, even to the beggar to whom he refused half a farthing. He had the glance of a pole-cat and the bearing of a man of letters. He greatly resembled the portraits of the Abbé Delille. His coquetry consisted in drinking with the carters. No one had ever succeeded in rendering him drunk. He smoked a big pipe. He wore a blouse, and under his blouse an old black coat. He made pretensions to literature and to materialism. There were certain names which he often pronounced to support whatever things he might be saying, — Voltaire, Raynal, Parny, and, singularly enough, Saint Augustine. He declared that he had “a system.” In addition, he was a great swindler. A filousophe [philosophe], a scientific thief. The species does exist. It will be remembered that he pretended to have served in the army; he was in the habit of relating with exuberance, how, being a sergeant in the 6th or the 9th light something or other, at Waterloo, he had alone, and in the presence of a squadron of death-dealing hussars, covered with his body and saved from death, in the midst of the grape-shot, “a general, who had been dangerously wounded.” Thence arose for his wall the flaring sign, and for his inn the name which it bore in the neighborhood, of “the cabaret of the Sergeant of Waterloo.” He was a liberal, a classic, and a Bonapartist. He had subscribed for the Champ d’Asile. It was said in the village that he had studied for the priesthood.

We believe that he had simply studied in Holland for an inn-keeper. This rascal of composite order was, in all probability, some Fleming from Lille, in Flanders, a Frenchman in Paris, a Belgian at Brussels, being comfortably astride of both frontiers. As for his prowess at Waterloo, the reader is already acquainted with that. It will be perceived that he exaggerated it a trifle. Ebb and flow, wandering, adventure, was the leven of his existence; a tattered conscience entails a fragmentary life, and, apparently at the stormy epoch of June 18, 1815, Thenardier belonged to that variety of marauding sutlers of which we have spoken, beating about the country, selling to some, stealing from others, and travelling like a family man, with wife and children, in a rickety cart, in the rear of troops on the march, with an instinct for always attaching himself to the victorious army. This campaign ended, and having, as he said, “some quibus,” he had come to Montfermeil and set up an inn there.

This quibus, composed of purses and watches, of gold rings and silver crosses, gathered in harvest-time in furrows sown with corpses, did not amount to a large total, and did not carry this sutler turned eating-house-keeper very far.

Thenardier had that peculiar rectilinear something about his gestures which, accompanied by an oath, recalls the barracks, and by a sign of the cross, the seminary. He was a fine talker. He allowed it to be thought that he was an educated man. Nevertheless, the schoolmaster had noticed that he pronounced improperly.

He composed the travellers' tariff card in a superior manner, but practised eyes sometimes spied out orthographical errors in it. Thenardier was cunning, greedy, slothful, and clever. He did not disdain his servants, which caused his wife to dispense with them. This giantess was jealous. It seemed to her that that thin and yellow little man must be an object coveted by all.

Thenardier, who was, above all, an astute and well-balanced man, was a scamp of a temperate sort. This is the worst species; hypocrisy enters into it.

It is not that Thenardier was not, on occasion, capable of wrath to quite the same degree as his wife; but this was very rare, and at such times, since he was enraged with the human race in general, as he bore within him a deep furnace of hatred. And since he was one of those people who are continually avenging their wrongs, who accuse everything that passes before them of everything which has befallen them, and who are always ready to cast upon the first person who comes to hand, as a legitimate grievance, the sum total of the deceptions, the bankruptcies, and the calamities of their lives, — when all this leaven was stirred up in him and boiled forth from his mouth and eyes, he was terrible. Woe to the person who came under his wrath at such a time!

In addition to his other qualities, Thenardier was attentive and penetrating, silent or talkative, according to circumstances, and always highly intelligent. He had something of the look of sailors, who are accustomed to screw up their eyes to gaze through marine glasses. Thenardier was a statesman.

Every new-comer who entered the tavern said, on catching sight of Madame Thenardier, "There is the master of the house." A mistake. She was not even the mistress. The husband was both master and mistress. She worked; he created. He directed everything by a sort of invisible and constant magnetic action. A word was sufficient for him, sometimes a sign; the mastodon obeyed. Thenardier was a sort of special and sovereign being in Madame Thenardier's eyes, though she did not thoroughly realize it. She was possessed of virtues after her own kind; if she had ever had a disagreement as to any detail with "Monsieur Thenardier," — which was an inadmissible hypothesis, by the way, — she would not have blamed her husband in public on any subject whatever. She would never have committed “before strangers” that mistake so often committed by women, and which is called in parliamentary language, “exposing the crown.” Although their concord had only evil as its result, there was contemplation in Madame Thenardier’s submission to her husband. That mountain of noise and of flesh moved under the little finger of that frail despot. Viewed on its dwarfed and grotesque side, this was that grand and universal thing, the adoration of mind by matter; for certain ugly features have a cause in the very depths of eternal beauty. There was an unknown quantity about Thenardier; hence the absolute empire of the man over that woman. At certain moments she beheld him like a lighted candle; at others she felt him like a claw.

This woman was a formidable creature who loved no one except her children, and who did not fear any one except her husband. She was a mother because she was mammiferous. But her maternity stopped short with her daughters, and, as we shall see, did not extend to boys. The man had but one thought, — how to enrich himself.

He did not succeed in this. A theatre worthy of this great talent was lacking. Thenardier was ruining himself at Montfermeil, if ruin is possible to zero; in Switzerland or in the Pyrenees this penniless scamp would have become a millionaire; but an inn-keeper must browse where fate has hitched him.

It will be understood that the word inn-keeper is here employed in a restricted sense, and does not extend to an entire class.

In this same year, 1823, Thenardier was burdened with about fifteen hundred francs’ worth of petty debts, and this rendered him anxious.

Whatever may have been the obstinate injustice of destiny in this case, Thenardier was one of those men who understand best, with the most profundity and in the most modern fashion, that thing which is a virtue among barbarous peoples and an object of merchandise among civilized peoples, — hospitality. Besides, he was an admirable poacher, and quoted for his skill in shooting. He had a certain cold and tranquil laugh, which was particularly dangerous.

His theories as a landlord sometimes burst forth in lightning flashes. He had professional aphorisms, which he inserted into his wife’s mind. “The duty of the inn-keeper,” he said to her one day, violently, and in a low voice, “is to sell to the first comer, stews, repose, light, fire, dirty sheets, a servant, lice, and a smile; to stop passers-by, to empty small purses, and to honestly lighten heavy ones; to shelter travelling families respectfully: to shave the man, to pluck the woman, to pick the child clean; to quote the window open, the window shut, the chimney-corner, the arm-chair, the chair, the ottoman, the stool, the feather-bed, the mattress and the truss of straw; to know how much the shadow uses up the mirror, and to put a price on it; and, by five hundred thousand devils, to make the traveller pay for everything, even for the flies which his dog eats!”

This man and this woman were ruse and rage wedded — a hideous and terrible team.

While the husband pondered and combined, Madame Thenardier thought not of absent creditors, took no heed of yesterday nor of to-morrow, and lived in a fit of anger, all in a minute.

Such were these two beings. Cosette was between them, subjected to their double pressure, like a creature who is at the same time being ground up in a mill and pulled to pieces with pincers. The man and the woman each had a different method: Cosette was overwhelmed with blows — this was the woman’s; she went barefooted in winter — that was the man’s doing.

Cosette ran up stairs and down, washed, swept, rubbed, dusted, ran, fluttered about, panted, moved heavy articles, and weak as she was, did the coarse work. There was no mercy for her; a fierce mistress and venomous master. The Thenardier hostelry was like a spider’s web, in which Cosette had been caught, and where she lay trembling. The ideal of oppression was realized by this sinister household. It was something like the fly serving the spiders.

The poor child passively held her peace.

What takes place within these souls when they have but just quitted God, find themselves thus, at the very dawn of life, very small and in the midst of men all naked!

CHAPTER III — MEN MUST HAVE WINE, AND HORSES MUST HAVE WATER

Four new travellers had arrived.

Cosette was meditating sadly; for, although she was only eight years old, she had already suffered so much that she reflected with the lugubrious air of an old woman. Her eye was black in consequence of a blow from Madame Thenardier's fist, which caused the latter to remark from time to time, "How ugly she is with her fist-blow on her eye!"

Cosette was thinking that it was dark, very dark, that the pitchers and caraffes in the chambers of the travellers who had arrived must have been filled and that there was no more water in the cistern.

She was somewhat reassured because no one in the Thenardier establishment drank much water. Thirsty people were never lacking there; but their thirst was of the sort which applies to the jug rather than to the pitcher. Any one who had asked for a glass of water among all those glasses of wine would have appeared a savage to all these men. But there came a moment when the child trembled; Madame Thenardier raised the cover of a stew-pan which was boiling on the stove, then seized a glass and briskly approached the cistern. She turned the faucet; the child had raised her head and was following all the woman's movements. A thin stream of water trickled from the faucet, and half filled the glass. "Well," said she, "there is no more water!" A momentary silence ensued. The child did not breathe.

"Bah!" resumed Madame Thenardier, examining the half-filled glass, "this will be enough."

Cosette applied herself to her work once more, but for a quarter of an hour she felt her heart leaping in her bosom like a big snow-flake.

She counted the minutes that passed in this manner, and wished it were the next morning.

From time to time one of the drinkers looked into the street, and exclaimed, "It's as black as an oven!" or, "One must needs be a cat to go about the streets without a lantern at this hour!" And Cosette trembled.

All at once one of the pedlers who lodged in the hostelry entered, and said in a harsh voice: —

"My horse has not been watered."

"Yes, it has," said Madame Thenardier.

"I tell you that it has not," retorted the pedler.

Cosette had emerged from under the table.

"Oh, yes, sir!" said she, "the horse has had a drink; he drank out of a bucket, a whole bucketful, and it was I who took the water to him, and I spoke to him."

It was not true; Cosette lied.

"There's a brat as big as my fist who tells lies as big as the house," exclaimed the pedler. "I tell you that he has not been watered, you little jade! He has a way of blowing when he has had no water, which I know well."

Cosette persisted, and added in a voice rendered hoarse with anguish, and which was hardly audible: —

"And he drank heartily."

"Come," said the pedler, in a rage, "this won't do at all, let my horse be watered, and let that be the end of it!"

Cosette crept under the table again.

"In truth, that is fair!" said Madame Thenardier, "if the beast has not been watered, it must be."

Then glancing about her: —

"Well, now! Where's that other beast?"

She bent down and discovered Cosette cowering at the other end of the table, almost under the drinkers' feet.

"Are you coming?" shrieked Madame Thenardier.

Cosette crawled out of the sort of hole in which she had hidden herself. The Thenardier resumed: —

"Mademoiselle Dog-lack-name, go and water that horse."

"But, Madame," said Cosette, feebly, "there is no water."

The Thenardier threw the street door wide open: —

"Well, go and get some, then!"

Cosette dropped her head, and went for an empty bucket which stood near the chimney-corner.

This bucket was bigger than she was, and the child could have set down in it at her ease.

The Thenardier returned to her stove, and tasted what was in the stewpan, with a wooden spoon, grumbling the while: —

“There’s plenty in the spring. There never was such a malicious creature as that. I think I should have done better to strain my onions.”

Then she rummaged in a drawer which contained sous, pepper, and shallots.

“See here, Mam’selle Toad,” she added, “on your way back, you will get a big loaf from the baker. Here’s a fifteen-sou piece.”

Cosette had a little pocket on one side of her apron; she took the coin without saying a word, and put it in that pocket.

Then she stood motionless, bucket in hand, the open door before her. She seemed to be waiting for some one to come to her rescue.

“Get along with you!” screamed the Thenardier.

Cosette went out. The door closed behind her.

CHAPTER IV — ENTRANCE ON THE SCENE OF A DOLL

The line of open-air booths starting at the church, extended, as the reader will remember, as far as the hostelry of the Thenardiers. These booths were all illuminated, because the citizens would soon pass on their way to the midnight mass, with candles burning in paper funnels, which, as the schoolmaster, then seated at the table at the Thenardiers’ observed, produced “a magical effect.” In compensation, not a star was visible in the sky.

The last of these stalls, established precisely opposite the Thenardiers’ door, was a toy-shop all glittering with tinsel, glass, and magnificent objects of tin. In the first row, and far forwards, the merchant had placed on a background of white napkins, an immense doll, nearly two feet high, who was dressed in a robe of pink crepe, with gold wheat-ears on her head, which had real hair and enamel eyes. All that day, this marvel had been displayed to the wonderment of all passers-by under ten years of age, without a mother being found in Montfermeil sufficiently rich or sufficiently extravagant to give it to her child. Eponine and Azelma had passed hours in contemplating it, and Cosette herself had ventured to cast a glance at it, on the sly, it is true.

At the moment when Cosette emerged, bucket in hand, melancholy and overcome as she was, she could not refrain from lifting her eyes to that wonderful doll, towards the lady, as she called it. The poor child paused in amazement. She had not yet beheld that doll close to. The whole shop seemed a palace to her: the doll was not a doll; it was a vision. It was joy, splendor, riches, happiness, which appeared in a sort of chimerical halo to that unhappy little being so profoundly engulfed in gloomy and chilly misery. With the sad and innocent sagacity of childhood, Cosette measured the abyss which separated her from that doll. She said to herself that one must be a queen, or at least a princess, to have a “thing” like that. She gazed at that beautiful pink dress, that beautiful smooth hair, and she thought, “How happy that doll must be!” She could not take her eyes from that fantastic stall. The more she looked, the more dazzled she grew. She thought she was gazing at paradise. There were other dolls behind the large one, which seemed to her to be fairies and genii. The merchant, who was pacing back and forth in front of his shop, produced on her somewhat the effect of being the Eternal Father.

In this adoration she forgot everything, even the errand with which she was charged.

All at once the Thenardier's coarse voice recalled her to reality: "What, you silly jade! you have not gone? Wait! I'll give it to you! I want to know what you are doing there! Get along, you little monster!"

The Thenardier had cast a glance into the street, and had caught sight of Cosette in her ecstasy.

Cosette fled, dragging her pail, and taking the longest strides of which she was capable.

CHAPTER V — THE LITTLE ONE ALL ALONE

As the Thenardier hostelry was in that part of the village which is near the church, it was to the spring in the forest in the direction of Chelles that Cosette was obliged to go for her water.

She did not glance at the display of a single other merchant. So long as she was in Boulanger Lane and in the neighborhood of the church, the lighted stalls illuminated the road; but soon the last light from the last stall vanished. The poor child found herself in the dark. She plunged into it. Only, as a certain emotion overcame her, she made as much motion as possible with the handle of the bucket as she walked along. This made a noise which afforded her company.

The further she went, the denser the darkness became. There was no one in the streets. However, she did encounter a woman, who turned around on seeing her, and stood still, muttering between her teeth: “Where can that child be going? Is it a werewolf child?” Then the woman recognized Cosette. “Well,” said she, “it’s the Lark!”

In this manner Cosette traversed the labyrinth of tortuous and deserted streets which terminate in the village of Montfermeil on the side of Chelles. So long as she had the houses or even the walls only on both sides of her path, she proceeded with tolerable boldness. From time to time she caught the flicker of a candle through the crack of a shutter — this was light and life; there were people there, and it reassured her. But in proportion as she advanced, her pace slackened mechanically, as it were. When she had passed the corner of the last house, Cosette paused. It had been hard to advance further than the last stall; it became impossible to proceed further than the last house. She set her bucket on the ground, thrust her hand into her hair, and began slowly to scratch her head, — a gesture peculiar to children when terrified and undecided what to do. It was no longer Montfermeil; it was the open fields. Black and desert space was before her. She gazed in despair at that darkness, where there was no longer any one, where there were beasts, where there were spectres, possibly. She took a good look, and heard the beasts walking on the grass, and she distinctly saw spectres moving in the trees. Then she seized her bucket again; fear had lent her audacity. “Bah!” said she; “I will tell him that there was no more water!” And she resolutely re-entered Montfermeil.

Hardly had she gone a hundred paces when she paused and began to scratch her head again. Now it was the Thenardier who appeared to her, with her hideous, hyena mouth, and wrath flashing in her eyes. The child cast a melancholy glance before her and behind her. What was she to do? What was to become of her? Where was she to go? In front of her was the spectre of the Thenardier; behind her all the phantoms of the night and of the forest. It was before the Thenardier that she recoiled. She resumed her path to the spring, and began to run. She emerged from the village, she entered the forest at a run, no longer looking at or listening to anything. She only paused in her course when her breath failed her; but she did not halt in her advance. She went straight before her in desperation.

As she ran she felt like crying.

The nocturnal quivering of the forest surrounded her completely.

She no longer thought, she no longer saw. The immensity of night was facing this tiny creature. On the one hand, all shadow; on the other, an atom.

It was only seven or eight minutes’ walk from the edge of the woods to the spring. Cosette knew the way, through having gone over it many times in daylight. Strange to say, she did not get lost. A remnant of instinct guided her vaguely. But she did not turn her eyes either to right or to left, for fear of seeing things in the branches and in the brushwood. In this manner she reached the spring.

It was a narrow, natural basin, hollowed out by the water in a clayey soil, about two feet deep, surrounded with moss and with those tall, crimped grasses which are called Henry IV.’s frills, and paved with several large stones. A brook ran out of it, with a tranquil little noise.

Cosette did not take time to breathe. It was very dark, but she was in the habit of coming to this spring. She felt with her left hand in the dark for a young oak which leaned over the spring, and which usually served to support her, found one of its branches, clung to it, bent down, and plunged the bucket in the water. She was in a state of such violent excitement that her strength was trebled. While thus bent over, she did not notice that the pocket of her apron had emptied itself into the spring. The fifteen-sou piece fell into the water. Cosette neither saw nor heard it fall. She drew out the bucket nearly full, and set it on the grass.

That done, she perceived that she was worn out with fatigue. She would have liked to set out again at once, but the effort required to fill the bucket had been such that she found it impossible to take a step. She was forced to sit down. She dropped on the grass, and remained crouching there.

She shut her eyes; then she opened them again, without knowing why, but because she could not do otherwise. The agitated water in the bucket beside her was describing circles which resembled tin serpents.

Overhead the sky was covered with vast black clouds, which were like masses of smoke. The tragic mask of shadow seemed to bend vaguely over the child.

Jupiter was setting in the depths.

The child stared with bewildered eyes at this great star, with which she was unfamiliar, and which terrified her. The planet was, in fact, very near the horizon and was traversing a dense layer of mist which imparted to it a horrible ruddy hue. The mist, gloomily empurpled, magnified the star. One would have called it a luminous wound.

A cold wind was blowing from the plain. The forest was dark, not a leaf was moving; there were none of the vague, fresh gleams of summertide. Great boughs uplifted themselves in frightful wise. Slender and misshapen bushes whistled in the clearings. The tall grasses undulated like eels under the north wind. The nettles seemed to twist long arms furnished with claws in search of prey. Some bits of dry heather, tossed by the breeze, flew rapidly by, and had the air of fleeing in terror before something which was coming after. On all sides there were lugubrious stretches.

The darkness was bewildering. Man requires light. Whoever buries himself in the opposite of day feels his heart contract. When the eye sees black, the heart sees trouble. In an eclipse in the night, in the sooty opacity, there is anxiety even for the stoutest of hearts. No one walks alone in the forest at night without trembling. Shadows and trees — two formidable densities. A chimerical reality appears in the indistinct depths. The inconceivable is outlined a few paces distant from you with a spectral clearness. One beholds floating, either in space or in one’s own brain, one knows not what vague and intangible thing, like the dreams of sleeping flowers. There are fierce attitudes on the horizon. One inhales the effluvia of the great black void. One is afraid to glance behind him, yet desirous of doing so. The cavities of night, things grown haggard, taciturn profiles which vanish when one advances, obscure dishevelments, irritated tufts, livid pools, the lugubrious reflected in the funereal, the sepulchral immensity of silence, unknown but possible beings, bendings of mysterious branches, alarming torsos of trees, long handfuls of quivering plants, — against all this one has no protection. There is no hardihood which does not shudder and which does not feel the vicinity of anguish. One is conscious of something hideous, as though one's soul were becoming amalgamated with the darkness. This penetration of the shadows is indescribably sinister in the case of a child.

Forests are apocalypses, and the beating of the wings of a tiny soul produces a sound of agony beneath their monstrous vault.

Without understanding her sensations, Cosette was conscious that she was seized upon by that black enormity of nature; it was no longer terror alone which was gaining possession of her; it was something more terrible even than terror; she shivered. There are no words to express the strangeness of that shiver which chilled her to the very bottom of her heart; her eye grew wild; she thought she felt that she should not be able to refrain from returning there at the same hour on the morrow.

Then, by a sort of instinct, she began to count aloud, one, two, three, four, and so on up to ten, in order to escape from that singular state which she did not understand, but which terrified her, and, when she had finished, she began again; this restored her to a true perception of the things about her. Her hands, which she had wet in drawing the water, felt cold; she rose; her terror, a natural and unconquerable terror, had returned: she had but one thought now, — to flee at full speed through the forest, across the fields to the houses, to the windows, to the lighted candles. Her glance fell upon the water which stood before her; such was the fright which the Thenardier inspired in her, that she dared not flee without that bucket of water: she seized the handle with both hands; she could hardly lift the pail.

In this manner she advanced a dozen paces, but the bucket was full; it was heavy; she was forced to set it on the ground once more. She took breath for an instant, then lifted the handle of the bucket again, and resumed her march, proceeding a little further this time, but again she was obliged to pause. After some seconds of repose she set out again. She walked bent forward, with drooping head, like an old woman; the weight of the bucket strained and stiffened her thin arms. The iron handle completed the benumbing and freezing of her wet and tiny hands; she was forced to halt from time to time, and each time that she did so, the cold water which splashed from the pail fell on her bare legs. This took place in the depths of a forest, at night, in winter, far from all human sight; she was a child of eight: no one but God saw that sad thing at the moment.

And her mother, no doubt, alas!

For there are things that make the dead open their eyes in their graves.

She panted with a sort of painful rattle; sobs contracted her throat, but she dared not weep, so afraid was she of the Thenardier, even at a distance: it was her custom to imagine the Thenardier always present.

However, she could not make much headway in that manner, and she went on very slowly. In spite of diminishing the length of her stops, and of walking as long as possible between them, she reflected with anguish that it would take her more than an hour to return to Montfermeil in this manner, and that the Thenardier would beat her. This anguish was mingled with her terror at being alone in the woods at night; she was worn out with fatigue, and had not yet emerged from the forest. On arriving near an old chestnut-tree with which she was acquainted, made a last halt, longer than the rest, in order that she might get well rested; then she summoned up all her strength, picked up her bucket again, and courageously resumed her march, but the poor little desperate creature could not refrain from crying, “O my God! my God!”

At that moment she suddenly became conscious that her bucket no longer weighed anything at all: a hand, which seemed to her enormous, had just seized the handle, and lifted it vigorously. She raised her head. A large black form, straight and erect, was walking beside her through the darkness; it was a man who had come up behind her, and whose approach she had not heard. This man, without uttering a word, had seized the handle of the bucket which she was carrying.

There are instincts for all the encounters of life.

The child was not afraid.

CHAPTER VI — WHICH POSSIBLY PROVES BOULATRUELLE’S INTELLIGENCE

On the afternoon of that same Christmas Day, 1823, a man had walked for rather a long time in the most deserted part of the Boulevard de l’Hopital in Paris. This man had the air of a person who is seeking lodgings, and he seemed to halt, by preference, at the most modest houses on that dilapidated border of the faubourg Saint-Marceau.

We shall see further on that this man had, in fact, hired a chamber in that isolated quarter.

This man, in his attire, as in all his person, realized the type of what may be called the well-bred mendicant, — extreme wretchedness combined with extreme cleanliness. This is a very rare mixture which inspires intelligent hearts with that double respect which one feels for the man who is very poor, and for the man who is very worthy. He wore a very old and very well brushed round hat; a coarse coat, worn perfectly threadbare, of an ochre yellow, a color that was not in the least eccentric at that epoch; a large waistcoat with pockets of a venerable cut; black breeches, worn gray at the knee, stockings of black worsted; and thick shoes with copper buckles. He would have been pronounced a preceptor in some good family, returned from the emigration. He would have been taken for more than sixty years of age, from his perfectly white hair, his wrinkled brow, his livid lips, and his countenance, where everything breathed depression and weariness of life. Judging from his firm tread, from the singular vigor which stamped all his movements, he would have hardly been thought fifty. The wrinkles on his brow were well placed, and would have disposed in his favor any one who observed him attentively. His lip contracted with a strange fold which seemed severe, and which was humble. There was in the depth of his glance an indescribable melancholy serenity. In his left hand he carried a little bundle tied up in a handkerchief; in his right he leaned on a sort of a cudgel, cut from some hedge. This stick had been carefully trimmed, and had an air that was not too threatening; the most had been made of its knots, and it had received a coral-like head, made from red wax: it was a cudgel, and it seemed to be a cane.

There are but few passers-by on that boulevard, particularly in the winter. The man seemed to avoid them rather than to seek them, but this without any affectation.

At that epoch, King Louis XVIII. went nearly every day to Choisy-le-Roi: it was one of his favorite excursions. Towards two o'clock, almost invariably, the royal carriage and cavalcade was seen to pass at full speed along the Boulevard de l'Hopital.

This served in lieu of a watch or clock to the poor women of the quarter who said, "It is two o'clock; there he is returning to the Tuileries."

And some rushed forward, and others drew up in line, for a passing king always creates a tumult; besides, the appearance and disappearance of Louis XVIII. produced a certain effect in the streets of Paris. It was rapid but majestic. This impotent king had a taste for a fast gallop; as he was not able to walk, he wished to run: that cripple would gladly have had himself drawn by the lightning. He passed, pacific and severe, in the midst of naked swords. His massive couch, all covered with gilding, with great branches of lilies painted on the panels, thundered noisily along. There was hardly time to cast a glance upon it. In the rear angle on the right there was visible on tufted cushions of white satin a large, firm, and ruddy face, a brow freshly powdered a l'oiseau royal, a proud, hard, crafty eye, the smile of an educated man, two great epaulets with bullion fringe floating over a bourgeois coat, the Golden Fleece, the cross of Saint Louis, the cross of the Legion of Honor, the silver plaque of the Saint-Esprit, a huge belly, and a wide blue ribbon: it was the king. Outside of Paris, he held his hat decked with white ostrich plumes on his knees enwrapped in high English gaiters; when he re-entered the city, he put on his hat and saluted rarely; he stared coldly at the people, and they returned it in kind. When he appeared for the first time in the Saint-Marceau quarter, the whole success which he produced is contained in this remark of an inhabitant of the faubourg to his comrade, "That big fellow yonder is the government."

This infallible passage of the king at the same hour was, therefore, the daily event of the Boulevard de l'Hopital.

The promenader in the yellow coat evidently did not belong in the quarter, and probably did not belong in Paris, for he was ignorant as to this detail. When, at two o'clock, the royal carriage, surrounded by a squadron of the body-guard all covered with silver lace, debouched on the boulevard, after having made the turn of the Salpetriere, he appeared surprised and almost alarmed. There was no one but himself in this cross-lane. He drew up hastily behind the corner of the wall of an enclosure, though this did not prevent M. le Duc de Havre from spying him out.

M. le Duc de Havre, as captain of the guard on duty that day, was seated in the carriage, opposite the king. He said to his Majesty, “Yonder is an evil-looking man.” Members of the police, who were clearing the king’s route, took equal note of him: one of them received an order to follow him. But the man plunged into the deserted little streets of the faubourg, and as twilight was beginning to fall, the agent lost trace of him, as is stated in a report addressed that same evening to M. le Comte d’Angles, Minister of State, Prefect of Police.

When the man in the yellow coat had thrown the agent off his track, he redoubled his pace, not without turning round many a time to assure himself that he was not being followed. At a quarter-past four, that is to say, when night was fully come, he passed in front of the theatre of the Porte Saint-Martin, where The Two Convicts was being played that day. This poster, illuminated by the theatre lanterns, struck him; for, although he was walking rapidly, he halted to read it. An instant later he was in the blind alley of La Planchette, and he entered the Plat d’Etain [the Pewter Platter], where the office of the coach for Lagny was then situated. This coach set out at half-past four. The horses were harnessed, and the travellers, summoned by the coachman, were hastily climbing the lofty iron ladder of the vehicle.

The man inquired: —

“Have you a place?”

“Only one — beside me on the box,” said the coachman.

“I will take it.”

“Climb up.”

Nevertheless, before setting out, the coachman cast a glance at the traveller’s shabby dress, at the diminutive size of his bundle, and made him pay his fare.

“Are you going as far as Lagny?” demanded the coachman.

“Yes,” said the man.

The traveller paid to Lagny.

They started. When they had passed the barrier, the coachman tried to enter into conversation, but the traveller only replied in monosyllables. The coachman took to whistling and swearing at his horses.

The coachman wrapped himself up in his cloak. It was cold. The man did not appear to be thinking of that. Thus they passed Gournay and Neuilly-sur-Marne.

Towards six o’clock in the evening they reached Chelles. The coachman drew up in front of the carters’ inn installed in the ancient buildings of the Royal Abbéy, to give his horses a breathing spell.

“I get down here,” said the man.

He took his bundle and his cudgel and jumped down from the vehicle.

An instant later he had disappeared.

He did not enter the inn.

When the coach set out for Lagny a few minutes later, it did not encounter him in the principal street of Chelles.

The coachman turned to the inside travellers.

“There,” said he, “is a man who does not belong here, for I do not know him. He had not the air of owning a sou, but he does not consider money; he pays to Lagny, and he goes only as far as Chelles. It is night; all the houses are shut; he does not enter the inn, and he is not to be found. So he has dived through the earth.”

The man had not plunged into the earth, but he had gone with great strides through the dark, down the principal street of Chelles, then he had turned to the right before reaching the church, into the cross-road leading to Montfermeil, like a person who was acquainted with the country and had been there before.

He followed this road rapidly. At the spot where it is intersected by the ancient tree-bordered road which runs from Gagny to Lagny, he heard people coming. He concealed himself precipitately in a ditch, and there waited until the passers-by were at a distance. The precaution was nearly superfluous, however; for, as we have already said, it was a very dark December night. Not more than two or three stars were visible in the sky.

It is at this point that the ascent of the hill begins. The man did not return to the road to Montfermeil; he struck across the fields to the right, and entered the forest with long strides.

Once in the forest he slackened his pace, and began a careful examination of all the trees, advancing, step by step, as though seeking and following a mysterious road known to himself alone. There came a moment when he appeared to lose himself, and he paused in indecision. At last he arrived, by dint of feeling his way inch by inch, at a clearing where there was a great heap of whitish stones. He stepped up briskly to these stones, and examined them attentively through the mists of night, as though he were passing them in review. A large tree, covered with those excrescences which are the warts of vegetation, stood a few paces distant from the pile of stones. He went up to this tree and passed his hand over the bark of the trunk, as though seeking to recognize and count all the warts.

Opposite this tree, which was an ash, there was a chestnut-tree, suffering from a peeling of the bark, to which a band of zinc had been nailed by way of dressing. He raised himself on tiptoe and touched this band of zinc.

Then he trod about for awhile on the ground comprised in the space between the tree and the heap of stones, like a person who is trying to assure himself that the soil has not recently been disturbed.

That done, he took his bearings, and resumed his march through the forest.

It was the man who had just met Cosette.

As he walked through the thicket in the direction of Montfermeil, he had espied that tiny shadow moving with a groan, depositing a burden on the ground, then taking it up and setting out again. He drew near, and perceived that it was a very young child, laden with an enormous bucket of water. Then he approached the child, and silently grasped the handle of the bucket.

CHAPTER VII — COSETTE SIDE BY SIDE WITH THE STRANGER IN THE DARK

Cosette, as we have said, was not frightened.

The man accosted her. He spoke in a voice that was grave and almost bass.

“My child, what you are carrying is very heavy for you.”

Cosette raised her head and replied: —

“Yes, sir.”

“Give it to me,” said the man; “I will carry it for you.”

Cosette let go of the bucket-handle. The man walked along beside her.

“It really is very heavy,” he muttered between his teeth. Then he added: —

“How old are you, little one?”

“Eight, sir.”

“And have you come from far like this?”

“From the spring in the forest.”

“Are you going far?”

“A good quarter of an hour’s walk from here.”

The man said nothing for a moment; then he remarked abruptly: —

“So you have no mother.”

“I don’t know,” answered the child.

Before the man had time to speak again, she added: —

“I don’t think so. Other people have mothers. I have none.”

And after a silence she went on: —

“I think that I never had any.”

The man halted; he set the bucket on the ground, bent down and placed both hands on the child’s shoulders, making an effort to look at her and to see her face in the dark.

Cosette’s thin and sickly face was vaguely outlined by the livid light in the sky.

“What is your name?” said the man.

“Cosette.”

The man seemed to have received an electric shock. He looked at her once more; then he removed his hands from Cosette’s shoulders, seized the bucket, and set out again.

After a moment he inquired: —

“Where do you live, little one?”

“At Montfermeil, if you know where that is.”

“That is where we are going?”

“Yes, sir.”

He paused; then began again: —

“Who sent you at such an hour to get water in the forest?”

“It was Madame Thenardier.”

The man resumed, in a voice which he strove to render indifferent, but in which there was, nevertheless, a singular tremor: —

“What does your Madame Thenardier do?”

“She is my mistress,” said the child. “She keeps the inn.”

“The inn?” said the man. “Well, I am going to lodge there to-night. Show me the way.”

“We are on the way there,” said the child.

The man walked tolerably fast. Cosette followed him without difficulty. She no longer felt any fatigue. From time to time she raised her eyes towards the man, with a sort of tranquillity and an indescribable confidence. She had never been taught to turn to Providence and to pray; nevertheless, she felt within her something which resembled hope and joy, and which mounted towards heaven.

Several minutes elapsed. The man resumed: —

“Is there no servant in Madame Thenardier’s house?”

“No, sir.”

“Are you alone there?”

“Yes, sir.”

Another pause ensued. Cosette lifted up her voice: —

“That is to say, there are two little girls.”

“What little girls?”

“Ponine and Zelma.”

This was the way the child simplified the romantic names so dear to the female Thenardier.

“Who are Ponine and Zelma?”

“They are Madame Thenardier’s young ladies; her daughters, as you would say.”

“And what do those girls do?”

"Oh!" said the child, "they have beautiful dolls; things with gold in them, all full of affairs. They play; they amuse themselves."

"All day long?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you?"

"I? I work."

"All day long?"

The child raised her great eyes, in which hung a tear, which was not visible because of the darkness, and replied gently: —

"Yes, sir."

After an interval of silence she went on: —

"Sometimes, when I have finished my work and they let me, I amuse myself, too."

"How do you amuse yourself?"

"In the best way I can. They let me alone; but I have not many playthings. Ponine and Zelma will not let me play with their dolls. I have only a little lead sword, no longer than that."

The child held up her tiny finger.

"And it will not cut?"

"Yes, sir," said the child; "it cuts salad and the heads of flies."

They reached the village. Cosette guided the stranger through the streets. They passed the bakeshop, but Cosette did not think of the bread which she had been ordered to fetch. The man had ceased to ply her with questions, and now preserved a gloomy silence.

When they had left the church behind them, the man, on perceiving all the open-air booths, asked Cosette: —

"So there is a fair going on here?"

"No, sir; it is Christmas."

As they approached the tavern, Cosette timidly touched his arm: —

"Monsieur?"

"What, my child?"

"We are quite near the house."

"Well?"

"Will you let me take my bucket now?"

"Why?"

"If Madame sees that some one has carried it for me, she will beat me."

The man handed her the bucket. An instant later they were at the tavern door.

CHAPTER VIII — THE UNPLEASANTNESS OF RECEIVING INTO ONE'S HOUSE A POOR MAN WHO MAY BE A RICH MAN

Cosette could not refrain from casting a sidelong glance at the big doll, which was still displayed at the toy-merchant's; then she knocked. The door opened. The Thenardier appeared with a candle in her hand.

"Ah! so it's you, you little wretch! good mercy, but you've taken your time! The hussy has been amusing herself!"

"Madame," said Cosette, trembling all over, "here's a gentleman who wants a lodging."

The Thenardier speedily replaced her gruff air by her amiable grimace, a change of aspect common to tavern-keepers, and eagerly sought the new-comer with her eyes.

"This is the gentleman?" said she.

"Yes, Madame," replied the man, raising his hand to his hat.

Wealthy travellers are not so polite. This gesture, and an inspection of the stranger's costume and baggage, which the Thenardier passed in review with one glance, caused the amiable grimace to vanish, and the gruff mien to reappear. She resumed dryly: —

"Enter, my good man."

The "good man" entered. The Thenardier cast a second glance at him, paid particular attention to his frock-coat, which was absolutely threadbare, and to his hat, which was a little battered, and, tossing her head, wrinkling her nose, and screwing up her eyes, she consulted her husband, who was still drinking with the carters. The husband replied by that imperceptible movement of the forefinger, which, backed up by an inflation of the lips, signifies in such cases: A regular beggar. Thereupon, the Thenardier exclaimed: —

"Ah! see here, my good man; I am very sorry, but I have no room left."

"Put me where you like," said the man; "in the attic, in the stable. I will pay as though I occupied a room."

"Forty sous."

"Forty sous; agreed."

"Very well, then!"

"Forty sous!" said a carter, in a low tone, to the Thenardier woman; "why, the charge is only twenty sous!"

"It is forty in his case," retorted the Thenardier, in the same tone. "I don't lodge poor folks for less."

"That's true," added her husband, gently; "it ruins a house to have such people in it."

In the meantime, the man, laying his bundle and his cudgel on a bench, had seated himself at a table, on which Cosette made haste to place a bottle of wine and a glass. The merchant who had demanded the bucket of water took it to his horse himself. Cosette resumed her place under the kitchen table, and her knitting.

The man, who had barely moistened his lips in the wine which he had poured out for himself, observed the child with peculiar attention.

Cosette was ugly. If she had been happy, she might have been pretty. We have already given a sketch of that sombre little figure. Cosette was thin and pale; she was nearly eight years old, but she seemed to be hardly six. Her large eyes, sunken in a sort of shadow, were almost put out with weeping. The corners of her mouth had that curve of habitual anguish which is seen in condemned persons and desperately sick people. Her hands were, as her mother had divined, "ruined with chilblains." The fire which illuminated her at that moment brought into relief all the angles of her bones, and rendered her thinness frightfully apparent. As she was always shivering, she had acquired the habit of pressing her knees one against the other. Her entire clothing was but a rag which would have inspired pity in summer, and which inspired horror in winter. All she had on was hole-ridden linen, not a scrap of woollen. Her skin was visible here and there and everywhere black and blue spots could be descried, which marked the places where the Thenardier woman had touched her. Her naked legs were thin and red. The hollows in her neck were enough to make one weep. This child's whole person, her mien, her attitude, the sound of her voice, the intervals which she allowed to elapse between one word and the next, her glance, her silence, her slightest gesture, expressed and betrayed one sole idea, — fear.

Fear was diffused all over her; she was covered with it, so to speak; fear drew her elbows close to her hips, withdrew her heels under her petticoat, made her occupy as little space as possible, allowed her only the breath that was absolutely necessary, and had become what might be called the habit of her body, admitting of no possible variation except an increase. In the depths of her eyes there was an astonished nook where terror lurked.

Her fear was such, that on her arrival, wet as she was, Cosette did not dare to approach the fire and dry herself, but sat silently down to her work again.

The expression in the glance of that child of eight years was habitually so gloomy, and at times so tragic, that it seemed at certain moments as though she were on the verge of becoming an idiot or a demon.

As we have stated, she had never known what it is to pray; she had never set foot in a church. “Have I the time?” said the Thenardier.

The man in the yellow coat never took his eyes from Cosette.

All at once, the Thenardier exclaimed: —

“By the way, where’s that bread?”

Cosette, according to her custom whenever the Thenardier uplifted her voice, emerged with great haste from beneath the table.

She had completely forgotten the bread. She had recourse to the expedient of children who live in a constant state of fear. She lied.

“Madame, the baker’s shop was shut.”

“You should have knocked.”

“I did knock, Madame.”

“Well?”

“He did not open the door.”

“I’ll find out to-morrow whether that is true,” said the Thenardier; “and if you are telling me a lie, I’ll lead you a pretty dance. In the meantime, give me back my fifteen-sou piece.”

Cosette plunged her hand into the pocket of her apron, and turned green. The fifteen-sou piece was not there.

“Ah, come now,” said Madame Thenardier, “did you hear me?”

Cosette turned her pocket inside out; there was nothing in it. What could have become of that money? The unhappy little creature could not find a word to say. She was petrified.

“Have you lost that fifteen-sou piece?” screamed the Thenardier, hoarsely, “or do you want to rob me of it?”

At the same time, she stretched out her arm towards the cat-o’-nine-tails which hung on a nail in the chimney-corner.

This formidable gesture restored to Cosette sufficient strength to shriek: —

“Mercy, Madame, Madame! I will not do so any more!”

The Thenardier took down the whip.

In the meantime, the man in the yellow coat had been fumbling in the fob of his waistcoat, without any one having noticed his movements. Besides, the other travellers were drinking or playing cards, and were not paying attention to anything.

Cosette contracted herself into a ball, with anguish, within the angle of the chimney, endeavoring to gather up and conceal her poor half-nude limbs. The Thenardier raised her arm.

“Pardon me, Madame,” said the man, “but just now I caught sight of something which had fallen from this little one’s apron pocket, and rolled aside. Perhaps this is it.”

At the same time he bent down and seemed to be searching on the floor for a moment.

“Exactly; here it is,” he went on, straightening himself up.

And he held out a silver coin to the Thenardier.

“Yes, that’s it,” said she.

It was not it, for it was a twenty-sou piece; but the Thenardier found it to her advantage. She put the coin in her pocket, and confined herself to casting a fierce glance at the child, accompanied with the remark, “Don’t let this ever happen again!”

Cosette returned to what the Thenardier called “her kennel,” and her large eyes, which were riveted on the traveller, began to take on an expression such as they had never worn before. Thus far it was only an innocent amazement, but a sort of stupefied confidence was mingled with it.

“By the way, would you like some supper?” the Thenardier inquired of the traveller.

He made no reply. He appeared to be absorbed in thought.

“What sort of a man is that?” she muttered between her teeth. “He’s some frightfully poor wretch. He hasn’t a sou to pay for a supper. Will he even pay me for his lodging? It’s very lucky, all the same, that it did not occur to him to steal the money that was on the floor.”

In the meantime, a door had opened, and Eponine and Azelma entered.

They were two really pretty little girls, more bourgeois than peasant in looks, and very charming; the one with shining chestnut tresses, the other with long black braids hanging down her back, both vivacious, neat, plump, rosy, and healthy, and a delight to the eye. They were warmly clad, but with so much maternal art that the thickness of the stuffs did not detract from the coquetry of arrangement. There was a hint of winter, though the springtime was not wholly effaced. Light emanated from these two little beings. Besides this, they were on the throne. In their toilettes, in their gayety, in the noise which they made, there was sovereignty. When they entered, the Thenardier said to them in a grumbling tone which was full of adoration, “Ah! there you are, you children!”

Then drawing them, one after the other to her knees, smoothing their hair, tying their ribbons afresh, and then releasing them with that gentle manner of shaking off which is peculiar to mothers, she exclaimed, “What frights they are!”

They went and seated themselves in the chimney-corner. They had a doll, which they turned over and over on their knees with all sorts of joyous chatter. From time to time Cosette raised her eyes from her knitting, and watched their play with a melancholy air.

Eponine and Azelma did not look at Cosette. She was the same as a dog to them. These three little girls did not yet reckon up four and twenty years between them, but they already represented the whole society of man; envy on the one side, disdain on the other.

The doll of the Thenardier sisters was very much faded, very old, and much broken; but it seemed none the less admirable to Cosette, who had never had a doll in her life, a real doll, to make use of the expression which all children will understand.

All at once, the Thenardier, who had been going back and forth in the room, perceived that Cosette’s mind was distracted, and that, instead of working, she was paying attention to the little ones at their play.

“Ah! I’ve caught you at it!” she cried. “So that’s the way you work! I’ll make you work to the tune of the whip; that I will.”

The stranger turned to the Thenardier, without quitting his chair.

“Bah, Madame,” he said, with an almost timid air, “let her play!”

Such a wish expressed by a traveller who had eaten a slice of mutton and had drunk a couple of bottles of wine with his supper, and who had not the air of being frightfully poor, would have been equivalent to an order. But that a man with such a hat should permit himself such a desire, and that a man with such a coat should permit himself to have a will, was something which Madame Thenardier did not intend to tolerate. She retorted with acrimony: —

“She must work, since she eats. I don’t feed her to do nothing.”

“What is she making?” went on the stranger, in a gentle voice which contrasted strangely with his beggarly garments and his porter’s shoulders.

The Thenardier deigned to reply: —

“Stockings, if you please. Stockings for my little girls, who have none, so to speak, and who are absolutely barefoot just now.”

The man looked at Cosette’s poor little red feet, and continued: —

“When will she have finished this pair of stockings?”

“She has at least three or four good days’ work on them still, the lazy creature!”

“And how much will that pair of stockings be worth when she has finished them?”

The Thenardier cast a glance of disdain on him.

“Thirty sous at least.”

“Will you sell them for five francs?” went on the man.

“Good heavens!” exclaimed a carter who was listening, with a loud laugh; “five francs! the deuce, I should think so! five balls!”

Thenardier thought it time to strike in.

“Yes, sir; if such is your fancy, you will be allowed to have that pair of stockings for five francs. We can refuse nothing to travellers.”

“You must pay on the spot,” said the Thenardier, in her curt and pèremptory fashion.

“I will buy that pair of stockings,” replied the man, “and,” he added, drawing a five-franc piece from his pocket, and laying it on the table, “I will pay for them.”

Then he turned to Cosette.

“Now I own your work; play, my child.”

The carter was so much touched by the five-franc piece, that he abandoned his glass and hastened up.

“But it’s true!” he cried, examining it. “A real hind wheel! and not counterfeit!”

Thenardier approached and silently put the coin in his pocket.

The Thenardier had no reply to make. She bit her lips, and her face assumed an expression of hatred.

In the meantime, Cosette was trembling. She ventured to ask: —

“Is it true, Madame? May I play?”

“Play!” said the Thenardier, in a terrible voice.

“Thanks, Madame,” said Cosette.

And while her mouth thanked the Thenardier, her whole little soul thanked the traveller.

Thenardier had resumed his drinking; his wife whispèred in his ear: —

“Who can this yellow man be?”

“I have seen millionaires with coats like that,” replied Thenardier, in a sovereign manner.

Cosette had dropped her knitting, but had not left her seat. Cosette always moved as little as possible. She picked up some old rags and her little lead sword from a box behind her.

Eponine and Azelma paid no attention to what was going on. They had just executed a very important operation; they had just got hold of the cat. They had thrown their doll on the ground, and Eponine, who was the elder, was swathing the little cat, in spite of its mewing and its contortions, in a quantity of clothes and red and blue scraps. While performing this serious and difficult work she was saying to her sister in that sweet and adorable language of children, whose grace, like the splendor of the butterfly’s wing, vanishes when one essays to fix it fast.

“You see, sister, this doll is more amusing than the other. She twists, she cries, she is warm. See, sister, let us play with her. She shall be my little girl. I will be a lady. I will come to see you, and you shall look at her. Gradually, you will perceive her whiskers, and that will surprise you. And then you will see her ears, and then you will see her tail and it will amaze you. And you will say to me, ‘Ah! Mon Dieu!’ and I will say to you: ‘Yes, Madame, it is my little girl. Little girls are made like that just at present.’”

Azelma listened admiringly to Eponine.

In the meantime, the drinkers had begun to sing an obscene song, and to laugh at it until the ceiling shook. Thenardier accompanied and encouraged them.

As birds make nests out of everything, so children make a doll out of anything which comes to hand. While Eponine and Azelma were bundling up the cat, Cosette, on her side, had dressed up her sword. That done, she laid it in her arms, and sang to it softly, to lull it to sleep.

The doll is one of the most imperious needs and, at the same time, one of the most charming instincts of feminine childhood. To care for, to clothe, to deck, to dress, to undress, to redress, to teach, scold a little, to rock, to dandle, to lull to sleep, to imagine that something is some one, — therein lies the whole woman’s future. While dreaming and chattering, making tiny outfits, and baby clothes, while sewing little gowns, and corsages and bodices, the child grows into a young girl, the young girl into a big girl, the big girl into a woman. The first child is the continuation of the last doll.

A little girl without a doll is almost as unhappy, and quite as impossible, as a woman without children.

So Cosette had made herself a doll out of the sword.

Madame Thenardier approached the yellow man; “My husband is right,” she thought; “perhaps it is M. Laffitte; there are such queer rich men!”

She came and set her elbows on the table.

“Monsieur,” said she. At this word, Monsieur, the man turned; up to that time, the Thenardier had addressed him only as brave homme or bonhomme.

“You see, sir,” she pursued, assuming a sweetish air that was even more repulsive to behold than her fierce mien, “I am willing that the child should play; I do not oppose it, but it is good for once, because you are generous. You see, she has nothing; she must needs work.”

“Then this child is not yours?” demanded the man.

“Oh! mon Dieu! no, sir! she is a little beggar whom we have taken in through charity; a sort of imbecile child. She must have water on the brain; she has a large head, as you see. We do what we can for her, for we are not rich; we have written in vain to her native place, and have received no reply these six months. It must be that her mother is dead.”

“Ah!” said the man, and fell into his revery once more.

“Her mother didn’t amount to much,” added the Thenardier; “she abandoned her child.”

During the whole of this conversation Cosette, as though warned by some instinct that she was under discussion, had not taken her eyes from the Thenardier’s face; she listened vaguely; she caught a few words here and there.

Meanwhile, the drinkers, all three-quarters intoxicated, were repeating their unclean refrain with redoubled gayety; it was a highly spiced and wanton song, in which the Virgin and the infant Jesus were introduced. The Thenardier went off to take part in the shouts of laughter. Cosette, from her post under the table, gazed at the fire, which was reflected from her fixed eyes. She had begun to rock the sort of baby which she had made, and, as she rocked it, she sang in a low voice, “My mother is dead! my mother is dead! my mother is dead!”

On being urged afresh by the hostess, the yellow man, “the millionaire,” consented at last to take supper.

“What does Monsieur wish?”

“Bread and cheese,” said the man.

“Decidedly, he is a beggar” thought Madame Thenardier.

The drunken men were still singing their song, and the child under the table was singing hers.

All at once, Cosette paused; she had just turned round and caught sight of the little Thenardiers’ doll, which they had abandoned for the cat and had left on the floor a few paces from the kitchen table.

Then she dropped the swaddled sword, which only half met her needs, and cast her eyes slowly round the room. Madame Thenardier was whispering to her husband and counting over some money; Ponine and Zelma were playing with the cat; the travellers were eating or drinking or singing; not a glance was fixed on her. She had not a moment to lose; she crept out from under the table on her hands and knees, made sure once more that no one was watching her; then she slipped quickly up to the doll and seized it. An instant later she was in her place again, seated motionless, and only turned so as to cast a shadow on the doll which she held in her arms. The happiness of playing with a doll was so rare for her that it contained all the violence of voluptuousness.

No one had seen her, except the traveller, who was slowly devouring his meagre supper.

This joy lasted about a quarter of an hour.

But with all the precautions that Cosette had taken she did not perceive that one of the doll’s legs stuck out and that the fire on the hearth lighted it up very vividly. That pink and shining foot, projecting from the shadow, suddenly struck the eye of Azelma, who said to Eponine, “Look! sister.”

The two little girls paused in stupefaction; Cosette had dared to take their doll!

Eponine rose, and, without releasing the cat, she ran to her mother, and began to tug at her skirt.

“Let me alone!” said her mother; “what do you want?”

“Mother,” said the child, “look there!”

And she pointed to Cosette.

Cosette, absorbed in the ecstasies of possession, no longer saw or heard anything.

Madame Thenardier’s countenance assumed that peculiar expression which is composed of the terrible mingled with the trifles of life, and which has caused this style of woman to be named megaeras.

On this occasion, wounded pride exasperated her wrath still further. Cosette had overstepped all bounds; Cosette had laid violent hands on the doll belonging to “these young ladies.” A czarina who should see a muzhik trying on her imperial son’s blue ribbon would wear no other face.

She shrieked in a voice rendered hoarse with indignation: —

“Cosette!”

Cosette started as though the earth had trembled beneath her; she turned round.

“Cosette!” repeated the Thenardier.

Cosette took the doll and laid it gently on the floor with a sort of veneration, mingled with despair; then, without taking her eyes from it, she clasped her hands, and, what is terrible to relate of a child of that age, she wrung them; then — not one of the emotions of the day, neither the trip to the forest, nor the weight of the bucket of water, nor the loss of the money, nor the sight of the whip, nor even the sad words which she had heard Madame Thenardier utter had been able to wring this from her — she wept; she burst out sobbing.

Meanwhile, the traveller had risen to his feet.

“What is the matter?” he said to the Thenardier.

“Don’t you see?” said the Thenardier, pointing to the corpus delicti which lay at Cosette’s feet.

“Well, what of it?” resumed the man.

“That beggar,” replied the Thenardier, “has permitted herself to touch the children’s doll!”

“All this noise for that!” said the man; “well, what if she did play with that doll?”

“She touched it with her dirty hands!” pursued the Thenardier, “with her frightful hands!”

Here Cosette redoubled her sobs.

“Will you stop your noise?” screamed the Thenardier.

The man went straight to the street door, opened it, and stepped out.

As soon as he had gone, the Thenardier profited by his absence to give Cosette a hearty kick under the table, which made the child utter loud cries.

The door opened again, the man re-appeared; he carried in both hands the fabulous doll which we have mentioned, and which all the village brats had been staring at ever since the morning, and he set it upright in front of Cosette, saying: —

“Here; this is for you.”

It must be supposed that in the course of the hour and more which he had spent there he had taken confused notice through his revery of that toy shop, lighted up by fire-pots and candles so splendidly that it was visible like an illumination through the window of the drinking-shop.

Cosette raised her eyes; she gazed at the man approaching her with that doll as she might have gazed at the sun; she heard the unprecedented words, “It is for you”; she stared at him; she stared at the doll; then she slowly retreated, and hid herself at the extreme end, under the table in a corner of the wall.

She no longer cried; she no longer wept; she had the appearance of no longer daring to breathe.

The Thenardier, Eponine, and Azelma were like statues also; the very drinkers had paused; a solemn silence reigned through the whole room.

Madame Thenardier, petrified and mute, recommenced her conjectures: “Who is that old fellow? Is he a poor man? Is he a millionaire? Perhaps he is both; that is to say, a thief.”

The face of the male Thenardier presented that expressive fold which accentuates the human countenance whenever the dominant instinct appears there in all its bestial force. The tavern-keeper stared alternately at the doll and at the traveller; he seemed to be scenting out the man, as he would have scented out a bag of money. This did not last longer than the space of a flash of lightning. He stepped up to his wife and said to her in a low voice: —

“That machine costs at least thirty francs. No nonsense. Down on your belly before that man!”

Gross natures have this in common with naive natures, that they possess no transition state.

“Well, Cosette,” said the Thenardier, in a voice that strove to be sweet, and which was composed of the bitter honey of malicious women, “aren’t you going to take your doll?”

Cosette ventured to emerge from her hole.

“The gentleman has given you a doll, my little Cosette,” said Thenardier, with a caressing air. “Take it; it is yours.”

Cosette gazed at the marvellous doll in a sort of terror. Her face was still flooded with tears, but her eyes began to fill, like the sky at daybreak, with strange beams of joy. What she felt at that moment was a little like what she would have felt if she had been abruptly told, “Little one, you are the Queen of France.”

It seemed to her that if she touched that doll, lightning would dart from it.

This was true, up to a certain point, for she said to herself that the Thenardier would scold and beat her.

Nevertheless, the attraction carried the day. She ended by drawing near and murmuring timidly as she turned towards Madame Thenardier: —

“May I, Madame?”

No words can render that air, at once despairing, terrified, and ecstatic.

“Pardi!” cried the Thenardier, “it is yours. The gentleman has given it to you.”

“Truly, sir?” said Cosette. “Is it true? Is the ‘lady’ mine?”

The stranger’s eyes seemed to be full of tears. He appeared to have reached that point of emotion where a man does not speak for fear lest he should weep. He nodded to Cosette, and placed the “lady’s” hand in her tiny hand.

Cosette hastily withdrew her hand, as though that of the “lady” scorched her, and began to stare at the floor. We are forced to add that at that moment she stuck out her tongue immoderately. All at once she wheeled round and seized the doll in a transport.

“I shall call her Catherine,” she said.

It was an odd moment when Cosette’s rags met and clasped the ribbons and fresh pink muslins of the doll.

“Madame,” she resumed, “may I put her on a chair?”

“Yes, my child,” replied the Thenardier.

It was now the turn of Eponine and Azelma to gaze at Cosette with envy.

Cosette placed Catherine on a chair, then seated herself on the floor in front of her, and remained motionless, without uttering a word, in an attitude of contemplation.

“Play, Cosette,” said the stranger.

“Oh! I am playing,” returned the child.

This stranger, this unknown individual, who had the air of a visit which Providence was making on Cosette, was the person whom the Thenardier hated worse than any one in the world at that moment. However, it was necessary to control herself. Habituated as she was to dissimulation through endeavoring to copy her husband in all his actions, these emotions were more than she could endure. She made haste to send her daughters to bed, then she asked the man’s permission to send Cosette off also; “for she has worked hard all day,” she added with a maternal air. Cosette went off to bed, carrying Catherine in her arms.

From time to time the Thenardier went to the other end of the room where her husband was, to relieve her soul, as she said. She exchanged with her husband words which were all the more furious because she dared not utter them aloud.

“Old beast! What has he got in his belly, to come and upset us in this manner! To want that little monster to play! to give away forty-franc dolls to a jade that I would sell for forty sous, so I would! A little more and he will be saying Your Majesty to her, as though to the Duchess de Berry! Is there any sense in it? Is he mad, then, that mysterious old fellow?”

“Why! it is perfectly simple,” replied Thenardier, “if that amuses him! It amuses you to have the little one work; it amuses him to have her play. He’s all right. A traveller can do what he pleases when he pays for it. If the old fellow is a philanthropist, what is that to you? If he is an imbecile, it does not concern you. What are you worrying for, so long as he has money?”

The language of a master, and the reasoning of an innkeeper, neither of which admitted of any reply.

The man had placed his elbows on the table, and resumed his thoughtful attitude. All the other travellers, both pedlers and carters, had withdrawn a little, and had ceased singing. They were staring at him from a distance, with a sort of respectful awe. This poorly dressed man, who drew “hind-wheels” from his pocket with so much ease, and who lavished gigantic dolls on dirty little brats in wooden shoes, was certainly a magnificent fellow, and one to be feared.

Many hours passed. The midnight mass was over, the chimes had ceased, the drinkers had taken their departure, the drinking-shop was closed, the public room was deserted, the fire extinct, the stranger still remained in the same place and the same attitude. From time to time he changed the elbow on which he leaned. That was all; but he had not said a word since Cosette had left the room.

The Thenardiers alone, out of politeness and curiosity, had remained in the room.

"Is he going to pass the night in that fashion?" grumbled the Thenardier. When two o'clock in the morning struck, she declared herself vanquished, and said to her husband, "I'm going to bed. Do as you like." Her husband seated himself at a table in the corner, lighted a candle, and began to read the Courrier Francais.

A good hour passed thus. The worthy inn-keeper had perused the Courrier Francais at least three times, from the date of the number to the printer's name. The stranger did not stir.

Thenardier fidgeted, coughed, spit, blew his nose, and creaked his chair. Not a movement on the man's part. "Is he asleep?" thought Thenardier. The man was not asleep, but nothing could arouse him.

At last Thenardier took off his cap, stepped gently up to him, and ventured to say: —

"Is not Monsieur going to his repose?"

Not going to bed would have seemed to him excessive and familiar. To repose smacked of luxury and respect. These words possess the mysterious and admirable property of swelling the bill on the following day. A chamber where one sleeps costs twenty sous; a chamber in which one reposes costs twenty francs.

"Well!" said the stranger, "you are right. Where is your stable?"

"Sir!" exclaimed Thenardier, with a smile, "I will conduct you, sir."

He took the candle; the man picked up his bundle and cudgel, and Thenardier conducted him to a chamber on the first floor, which was of rare splendor, all furnished in mahogany, with a low bedstead, curtained with red calico.

"What is this?" said the traveller.

"It is really our bridal chamber," said the tavern-keeper. "My wife and I occupy another. This is only entered three or four times a year."

"I should have liked the stable quite as well," said the man, abruptly.

Thenardier pretended not to hear this unamiable remark.

He lighted two perfectly fresh wax candles which figured on the chimney-piece. A very good fire was flickering on the hearth.

On the chimney-piece, under a glass globe, stood a woman's head-dress in silver wire and orange flowers.

"And what is this?" resumed the stranger.

"That, sir," said Thenardier, "is my wife's wedding bonnet."

The traveller surveyed the object with a glance which seemed to say, "There really was a time, then, when that monster was a maiden?"

Thenardier lied, however. When he had leased this paltry building for the purpose of converting it into a tavern, he had found this chamber decorated in just this manner, and had purchased the furniture and obtained the orange flowers at second hand, with the idea that this would cast a graceful shadow on "his spouse," and would result in what the English call respectability for his house.

When the traveller turned round, the host had disappeared. Thenardier had withdrawn discreetly, without venturing to wish him a good night, as he did not wish to treat with disrespectful cordiality a man whom he proposed to fleece royally the following morning.

The inn-keeper retired to his room. His wife was in bed, but she was not asleep. When she heard her husband's step she turned over and said to him: —

"Do you know, I'm going to turn Cosette out of doors to-morrow."

Thenardier replied coldly: —

"How you do go on!"

They exchanged no further words, and a few moments later their candle was extinguished.

As for the traveller, he had deposited his cudgel and his bundle in a corner. The landlord once gone, he threw himself into an arm-chair and remained for some time buried in thought. Then he removed his shoes, took one of the two candles, blew out the other, opened the door, and quitted the room, gazing about him like a person who is in search of something. He traversed a corridor and came upon a staircase. There he heard a very faint and gentle sound like the breathing of a child. He followed this sound, and came to a sort of triangular recess built under the staircase, or rather formed by the staircase itself. This recess was nothing else than the space under the steps. There, in the midst of all sorts of old papers and potsherds, among dust and spiders' webs, was a bed — if one can call by the name of bed a straw pallet so full of holes as to display the straw, and a coverlet so tattered as to show the pallet. No sheets. This was placed on the floor.

In this bed Cosette was sleeping.

The man approached and gazed down upon her.

Cosette was in a profound sleep; she was fully dressed. In the winter she did not undress, in order that she might not be so cold.

Against her breast was pressed the doll, whose large eyes, wide open, glittered in the dark. From time to time she gave vent to a deep sigh as though she were on the point of waking, and she strained the doll almost convulsively in her arms. Beside her bed there was only one of her wooden shoes.

A door which stood open near Cosette's pallet permitted a view of a rather large, dark room. The stranger stepped into it. At the further extremity, through a glass door, he saw two small, very white beds. They belonged to Eponine and Azelma. Behind these beds, and half hidden, stood an uncurtained wicker cradle, in which the little boy who had cried all the evening lay asleep.

The stranger conjectured that this chamber connected with that of the Thenardier pair. He was on the point of retreating when his eye fell upon the fireplace — one of those vast tavern chimneys where there is always so little fire when there is any fire at all, and which are so cold to look at. There was no fire in this one, there was not even ashes; but there was something which attracted the stranger's gaze, nevertheless. It was two tiny children's shoes, coquettish in shape and unequal in size. The traveller recalled the graceful and immemorial custom in accordance with which children place their shoes in the chimney on Christmas eve, there to await in the darkness some sparkling gift from their good fairy. Eponine and Azelma had taken care not to omit this, and each of them had set one of her shoes on the hearth.

The traveller bent over them.

The fairy, that is to say, their mother, had already paid her visit, and in each he saw a brand-new and shining ten-sou piece.

The man straightened himself up, and was on the point of withdrawing, when far in, in the darkest corner of the hearth, he caught sight of another object. He looked at it, and recognized a wooden shoe, a frightful shoe of the coarsest description, half dilapidated and all covered with ashes and dried mud. It was Cosette's sabot. Cosette, with that touching trust of childhood, which can always be deceived yet never discouraged, had placed her shoe on the hearth-stone also.

Hope in a child who has never known anything but despair is a sweet and touching thing.

There was nothing in this wooden shoe.

The stranger fumbled in his waistcoat, bent over and placed a louis d’or in Cosette’s shoe.

Then he regained his own chamber with the stealthy tread of a wolf.

CHAPTER IX — THENARDIER AND HIS MANOEUVRES

On the following morning, two hours at least before day-break, Thenardier, seated beside a candle in the public room of the tavern, pen in hand, was making out the bill for the traveller with the yellow coat.

His wife, standing beside him, and half bent over him, was following him with her eyes. They exchanged not a word. On the one hand, there was profound meditation, on the other, the religious admiration with which one watches the birth and development of a marvel of the human mind. A noise was audible in the house; it was the Lark sweeping the stairs.

After the lapse of a good quarter of an hour, and some erasures, Thenardier produced the following masterpiece: —

BILL OF THE GENTLEMAN IN No. 1.

Supper	3 francs.
Chamber	10 “
Candle	5 “
Fire	4 “
Service	1 “
	—— —— —
Total	23 francs.

Service was written servisse.

“Twenty-three francs!” cried the woman, with an enthusiasm which was mingled with some hesitation.

Like all great artists, Thenardier was dissatisfied.

“Peuh!” he exclaimed.

It was the accent of Castlereagh auditing France’s bill at the Congress of Vienna.

“Monsieur Thenardier, you are right; he certainly owes that,” murmured the wife, who was thinking of the doll bestowed on Cosette in the presence of her daughters. “It is just, but it is too much. He will not pay it.”

Thenardier laughed coldly, as usual, and said: —

“He will pay.”

This laugh was the supreme assertion of certainty and authority. That which was asserted in this manner must needs be so. His wife did not insist.

She set about arranging the table; her husband paced the room. A moment later he added: —

“I owe full fifteen hundred francs!”

He went and seated himself in the chimney-corner, meditating, with his feet among the warm ashes.

“Ah! by the way,” resumed his wife, “you don’t forget that I’m going to turn Cosette out of doors to-day? The monster! She breaks my heart with that doll of hers! I’d rather marry Louis XVIII. than keep her another day in the house!”

Thenardier lighted his pipe, and replied between two puffs: —

“You will hand that bill to the man.”

Then he went out.

Hardly had he left the room when the traveller entered.

Thenardier instantly reappeared behind him and remained motionless in the half-open door, visible only to his wife.

The yellow man carried his bundle and his cudgel in his hand.

“Up so early?” said Madame Thenardier; “is Monsieur leaving us already?”

As she spoke thus, she was twisting the bill about in her hands with an embarrassed air, and making creases in it with her nails. Her hard face presented a shade which was not habitual with it, — timidity and scruples.

To present such a bill to a man who had so completely the air “of a poor wretch” seemed difficult to her.

The traveller appeared to be preoccupied and absent-minded. He replied: —

“Yes, Madame, I am going.”

“So Monsieur has no business in Montfermeil?”

“No, I was passing through. That is all. What do I owe you, Madame,” he added.

The Thenardier silently handed him the folded bill.

The man unfolded the paper and glanced at it; but his thoughts were evidently elsewhere.

“Madame,” he resumed, “is business good here in Montfermeil?”

“So so, Monsieur,” replied the Thenardier, stupefied at not witnessing another sort of explosion.

She continued, in a dreary and lamentable tone: —

“Oh! Monsieur, times are so hard! and then, we have so few bourgeois in the neighborhood! All the people are poor, you see. If we had not, now and then, some rich and generous travellers like Monsieur, we should not get along at all. We have so many expenses. Just see, that child is costing us our very eyes.”

“What child?”

“Why, the little one, you know! Cosette — the Lark, as she is called hereabouts!”

“Ah!” said the man.

She went on: —

“How stupid these peasants are with their nicknames! She has more the air of a bat than of a lark. You see, sir, we do not ask charity, and we cannot bestow it. We earn nothing and we have to pay out a great deal. The license, the imposts, the door and window tax, the hundredths! Monsieur is aware that the government demands a terrible deal of money. And then, I have my daughters. I have no need to bring up other people’s children.”

The man resumed, in that voice which he strove to render indifferent, and in which there lingered a tremor: —

“What if one were to rid you of her?”

“Who? Cosette?”

“Yes.”

The landlady’s red and violent face brightened up hideously.

“Ah! sir, my dear sir, take her, keep her, lead her off, carry her away, sugar her, stuff her with truffles, drink her, eat her, and the blessings of the good holy Virgin and of all the saints of paradise be upon you!”

“Agreed.”

“Really! You will take her away?”

“I will take her away.”

“Immediately?”

“Immediately. Call the child.”

“Cosette!” screamed the Thenardier.

“In the meantime,” pursued the man, “I will pay you what I owe you. How much is it?”

He cast a glance on the bill, and could not restrain a start of surprise: —

“Twenty-three francs!”

He looked at the landlady, and repeated: —

“Twenty-three francs?”

There was in the enunciation of these words, thus repeated, an accent between an exclamation and an interrogation point.

The Thenardier had had time to prepare herself for the shock. She replied, with assurance: —

“Good gracious, yes, sir, it is twenty-three francs.”

The stranger laid five five-franc pieces on the table.

“Go and get the child,” said he.

At that moment Thenardier advanced to the middle of the room, and said: —

“Monsieur owes twenty-six sous.”

“Twenty-six sous!” exclaimed his wife.

“Twenty sous for the chamber,” resumed Thenardier, coldly, “and six sous for his supper. As for the child, I must discuss that matter a little with the gentleman. Leave us, wife.”

Madame Thenardier was dazzled as with the shock caused by unexpected lightning flashes of talent. She was conscious that a great actor was making his entrance on the stage, uttered not a word in reply, and left the room.

As soon as they were alone, Thenardier offered the traveller a chair. The traveller seated himself; Thenardier remained standing, and his face assumed a singular expression of good-fellowship and simplicity.

“Sir,” said he, “what I have to say to you is this, that I adore that child.”

The stranger gazed intently at him.

“What child?”

Thenardier continued: —

“How strange it is, one grows attached. What money is that? Take back your hundred-sou piece. I adore the child.”

“Whom do you mean?” demanded the stranger.

“Eh! our little Cosette! Are you not intending to take her away from us? Well, I speak frankly; as true as you are an honest man, I will not consent to it. I shall miss that child. I saw her first when she was a tiny thing. It is true that she costs us money; it is true that she has her faults; it is true that we are not rich; it is true that I have paid out over four hundred francs for drugs for just one of her illnesses! But one must do something for the good God’s sake. She has neither father nor mother. I have brought her up. I have bread enough for her and for myself. In truth, I think a great deal of that child.

You understand, one conceives an affection for a person; I am a good sort of a beast, I am; I do not reason; I love that little girl; my wife is quick-tempèred, but she loves her also. You see, she is just the same as our own child. I want to keep her to babble about the house."

The stranger kept his eye intently fixed on Thenardier. The latter continued: —

"Excuse me, sir, but one does not give away one's child to a passer-by, like that. I am right, am I not? Still, I don't say — you are rich; you have the air of a very good man, — if it were for her happiness. But one must find out that. You understand: suppose that I were to let her go and to sacrifice myself, I should like to know what becomes of her; I should not wish to lose sight of her; I should like to know with whom she is living, so that I could go to see her from time to time; so that she may know that her good foster-father is alive, that he is watching over her. In short, there are things which are not possible. I do not even know your name. If you were to take her away, I should say: 'Well, and the Lark, what has become of her?' One must, at least, see some petty scrap of paper, some trifle in the way of a passport, you know!"

The stranger, still surveying him with that gaze which penetrates, as the saying goes, to the very depths of the conscience, replied in a grave, firm voice: —

"Monsieur Thenardier, one does not require a passport to travel five leagues from Paris. If I take Cosette away, I shall take her away, and that is the end of the matter. You will not know my name, you will not know my residence, you will not know where she is; and my intention is that she shall never set eyes on you again so long as she lives. I break the thread which binds her foot, and she departs. Does that suit you? Yes or no?"

Since geniuses, like demons, recognize the presence of a superior God by certain signs, Thenardier comprehended that he had to deal with a very strong person. It was like an intuition; he comprehended it with his clear and sagacious promptitude. While drinking with the carters, smoking, and singing coarse songs on the preceding evening, he had devoted the whole of the time to observing the stranger, watching him like a cat, and studying him like a mathematician. He had watched him, both on his own account, for the pleasure of the thing, and through instinct, and had spied upon him as though he had been paid for so doing. Not a movement, not a gesture, on the part of the man in the yellow great-coat had escaped him. Even before the stranger had so clearly manifested his interest in Cosette, Thenardier had divined his purpose. He had caught the old man's deep glances returning constantly to the child. Who was this man? Why this interest? Why this hideous costume, when he had so much money in his purse? Questions which he put to himself without being able to solve them, and which irritated him. He had pondered it all night long. He could not be Cosette's father. Was he her grandfather? Then why not make himself known at once? When one has a right, one asserts it. This man evidently had no right over Cosette. What was it, then? Thenardier lost himself in conjectures. He caught glimpses of everything, but he saw nothing. Be that as it may, on entering into conversation with the man, sure that there was some secret in the case, that the latter had some interest in remaining in the shadow, he felt himself strong; when he perceived from the stranger's clear and firm retort, that this mysterious personage was mysterious in so simple a way, he became conscious that he was weak. He had expected nothing of the sort. His conjectures were put to the rout. He rallied his ideas. He weighed everything in the space of a second. Thenardier was one of those men who take in a situation at a glance. He decided that the moment had arrived for proceeding straightforward, and quickly at that. He did as great leaders do at the decisive moment, which they know that they alone recognize; he abruptly unmasked his batteries.

"Sir," said he, "I am in need of fifteen hundred francs."

The stranger took from his side pocket an old pocketbook of black leather, opened it, drew out three bank-bills, which he laid on the table. Then he placed his large thumb on the notes and said to the inn-keeper: —

"Go and fetch Cosette."

While this was taking place, what had Cosette been doing?

On waking up, Cosette had run to get her shoe. In it she had found the gold piece. It was not a Napoleon; it was one of those perfectly new twenty-franc pieces of the Restoration, on whose effigy the little Prussian queue had replaced the laurel wreath. Cosette was dazzled. Her destiny began to intoxicate her. She did not know what a gold piece was; she had never seen one; she hid it quickly in her pocket, as though she had stolen it. Still, she felt that it really was hers; she guessed whence her gift had come, but the joy which she experienced was full of fear. She was happy; above all she was stupefied. Such magnificent and beautiful things did not appear real. The doll frightened her, the gold piece frightened her. She trembled vaguely in the presence of this magnificence. The stranger alone did not frighten her. On the contrary, he reassured her. Ever since the preceding evening, amid all her amazement, even in her sleep, she had been thinking in her little childish mind of that man who seemed to be so poor and so sad, and who was so rich and so kind. Everything had changed for her since she had met that good man in the forest. Cosette, less happy than the most insignificant swallow of heaven, had never known what it was to take refuge under a mother's shadow and under a wing. For the last five years, that is to say, as far back as her memory ran, the poor child had shivered and trembled. She had always been exposed completely naked to the sharp wind of adversity; now it seemed to her she was clothed. Formerly her soul had seemed cold, now it was warm. Cosette was no longer afraid of the Thenardier. She was no longer alone; there was some one there.

She hastily set about her regular morning duties. That louis, which she had about her, in the very apron pocket whence the fifteen-sou piece had fallen on the night before, distracted her thoughts. She dared not touch it, but she spent five minutes in gazing at it, with her tongue hanging out, if the truth must be told. As she swept the staircase, she paused, remained standing there motionless, forgetful of her broom and of the entire universe, occupied in gazing at that star which was blazing at the bottom of her pocket.

It was during one of these periods of contemplation that the Thenardier joined her. She had gone in search of Cosette at her husband's orders. What was quite unprecedented, she neither struck her nor said an insulting word to her.

"Cosette," she said, almost gently, "come immediately."

An instant later Cosette entered the public room.

The stranger took up the bundle which he had brought and untied it. This bundle contained a little woollen gown, an apron, a fustian bodice, a kerchief, a petticoat, woollen stockings, shoes — a complete outfit for a girl of seven years. All was black.

"My child," said the man, "take these, and go and dress yourself quickly."

Daylight was appearing when those of the inhabitants of Montfermeil who had begun to open their doors beheld a poorly clad old man leading a little girl dressed in mourning, and carrying a pink doll in her arms, pass along the road to Paris. They were going in the direction of Livry.

It was our man and Cosette.

No one knew the man; as Cosette was no longer in rags, many did not recognize her. Cosette was going away. With whom? She did not know. Whither? She knew not. All that she understood was that she was leaving the Thenardier tavern behind her. No one had thought of bidding her farewell, nor had she thought of taking leave of any one. She was leaving that hated and hating house.

Poor, gentle creature, whose heart had been repressed up to that hour!

Cosette walked along gravely, with her large eyes wide open, and gazing at the sky. She had put her louis in the pocket of her new apron. From time to time, she bent down and glanced at it; then she looked at the good man. She felt something as though she were beside the good God.

CHAPTER X — HE WHO SEEKS TO BETTER HIMSELF MAY RENDER HIS SITUATION WORSE

Madame Thenardier had allowed her husband to have his own way, as was her wont. She had expected great results. When the man and Cosette had taken their departure, Thenardier allowed a full quarter of an hour to elapse; then he took her aside and showed her the fifteen hundred francs.

“Is that all?” said she.

It was the first time since they had set up housekeeping that she had dared to criticise one of the master’s acts.

The blow told.

“You are right, in sooth,” said he; “I am a fool. Give me my hat.”

He folded up the three bank-bills, thrust them into his pocket, and ran out in all haste; but he made a mistake and turned to the right first. Some neighbors, of whom he made inquiries, put him on the track again; the Lark and the man had been seen going in the direction of Livry. He followed these hints, walking with great strides, and talking to himself the while: —

“That man is evidently a million dressed in yellow, and I am an animal. First he gave twenty sous, then five francs, then fifty francs, then fifteen hundred francs, all with equal readiness. He would have given fifteen thousand francs. But I shall overtake him.”

And then, that bundle of clothes prepared beforehand for the child; all that was singular; many mysteries lay concealed under it. One does not let mysteries out of one’s hand when one has once grasped them. The secrets of the wealthy are sponges of gold; one must know how to subject them to pressure. All these thoughts whirled through his brain. “I am an animal,” said he.

When one leaves Montfermeil and reaches the turn which the road takes that runs to Livry, it can be seen stretching out before one to a great distance across the plateau. On arriving there, he calculated that he ought to be able to see the old man and the child. He looked as far as his vision reached, and saw nothing. He made fresh inquiries, but he had wasted time. Some passers-by informed him that the man and child of whom he was in search had gone towards the forest in the direction of Gagny. He hastened in that direction.

They were far in advance of him; but a child walks slowly, and he walked fast; and then, he was well acquainted with the country.

All at once he paused and dealt himself a blow on his forehead like a man who has forgotten some essential point and who is ready to retrace his steps.

“I ought to have taken my gun,” said he to himself.

Thenardier was one of those double natures which sometimes pass through our midst without our being aware of the fact, and who disappear without our finding them out, because destiny has only exhibited one side of them. It is the fate of many men to live thus half submerged. In a calm and even situation, Thenardier possessed all that is required to make — we will not say to be — what people have agreed to call an honest trader, a good bourgeois. At the same time certain circumstances being given, certain shocks arriving to bring his under-nature to the surface, he had all the requisites for a blackguard. He was a shopkeeper in whom there was some taint of the monster. Satan must have occasionally crouched down in some corner of the hovel in which Thenardier dwelt, and have fallen a-dreaming in the presence of this hideous masterpiece.

After a momentary hesitation: —

“Bah!” he thought; “they will have time to make their escape.”

And he pursued his road, walking rapidly straight ahead, and with almost an air of certainty, with the sagacity of a fox scenting a covey of partridges.

In truth, when he had passed the ponds and had traversed in an oblique direction the large clearing which lies on the right of the Avenue de Bellevue, and reached that turf alley which nearly makes the circuit of the hill, and covers the arch of the ancient aqueduct of the Abbéy of Chelles, he caught sight, over the top of the brushwood, of the hat on which he had already erected so many conjectures; it was that man’s hat. The brushwood was not high. Thenardier recognized the fact that the man and Cosette were sitting there. The child could not be seen on account of her small size, but the head of her doll was visible.

Thenardier was not mistaken. The man was sitting there, and letting Cosette get somewhat rested. The inn-keeper walked round the brushwood and presented himself abruptly to the eyes of those whom he was in search of.

“Pardon, excuse me, sir,” he said, quite breathless, “but here are your fifteen hundred francs.”

So saying, he handed the stranger the three bank-bills.

The man raised his eyes.

“What is the meaning of this?”

Thenardier replied respectfully: —

“It means, sir, that I shall take back Cosette.”

Cosette shuddered, and pressed close to the old man.

He replied, gazing to the very bottom of Thenardier’s eyes the while, and enunciating every syllable distinctly: —

“You are go-ing to take back Co-sette?”

“Yes, sir, I am. I will tell you; I have considered the matter. In fact, I have not the right to give her to you. I am an honest man, you see; this child does not belong to me; she belongs to her mother. It was her mother who confided her to me; I can only resign her to her mother. You will say to me, ‘But her mother is dead.’ Good; in that case I can only give the child up to the person who shall bring me a writing, signed by her mother, to the effect that I am to hand the child over to the person therein mentioned; that is clear.”

The man, without making any reply, fumbled in his pocket, and Thenardier beheld the pocket-book of bank-bills make its appearance once more.

The tavern-keeper shivered with joy.

“Good!” thought he; “let us hold firm; he is going to bribe me!”

Before opening the pocket-book, the traveller cast a glance about him: the spot was absolutely deserted; there was not a soul either in the woods or in the valley. The man opened his pocket-book once more and drew from it, not the handful of bills which Thenardier expected, but a simple little paper, which he unfolded and presented fully open to the inn-keeper, saying: —

“You are right; read!”

Thenardier took the paper and read: —

“M. SUR M., March 25, 1823.

“MONSIEUR THENARDIER: —

You will deliver Cosette to this person.
You will be paid for all the little things.

I have the honor to salute you with respect,
FANTINE.”

“You know that signature?” resumed the man.

It certainly was Fantine’s signature; Thenardier recognized it.

There was no reply to make; he experienced two violent vexations, the vexation of renouncing the bribery which he had hoped for, and the vexation of being beaten; the man added: —

“You may keep this paper as your receipt.”

Thenardier retreated in tolerably good order.

“This signature is fairly well imitated,” he growled between his teeth; “however, let it go!”

Then he essayed a desperate effort.

“It is well, sir,” he said, “since you are the person, but I must be paid for all those little things. A great deal is owing to me.”

The man rose to his feet, filliping the dust from his thread-bare sleeve: —

“Monsieur Thenardier, in January last, the mother reckoned that she owed you one hundred and twenty francs. In February, you sent her a bill of five hundred francs; you received three hundred francs at the end of February, and three hundred francs at the beginning of March. Since then nine months have elapsed, at fifteen francs a month, the price agreed upon, which makes one hundred and thirty-five francs. You had received one hundred francs too much; that makes thirty-five still owing you. I have just given you fifteen hundred francs.”

Thenardier’s sensations were those of the wolf at the moment when he feels himself nipped and seized by the steel jaw of the trap.

“Who is this devil of a man?” he thought.

He did what the wolf does: he shook himself. Audacity had succeeded with him once.

“Monsieur-I-don’t-know-your-name,” he said resolutely, and this time casting aside all respectful ceremony, “I shall take back Cosette if you do not give me a thousand crowns.”

The stranger said tranquilly: —

“Come, Cosette.”

He took Cosette by his left hand, and with his right he picked up his cudgel, which was lying on the ground.

Thenardier noted the enormous size of the cudgel and the solitude of the spot.

The man plunged into the forest with the child, leaving the inn-keeper motionless and speechless.

While they were walking away, Thenardier scrutinized his huge shoulders, which were a little rounded, and his great fists.

Then, bringing his eyes back to his own person, they fell upon his feeble arms and his thin hands. “I really must have been exceedingly stupid not to have thought to bring my gun,” he said to himself, “since I was going hunting!”

However, the inn-keeper did not give up.

“I want to know where he is going,” said he, and he set out to follow them at a distance. Two things were left on his hands, an irony in the shape of the paper signed Fantine, and a consolation, the fifteen hundred francs.

The man led Cosette off in the direction of Livry and Bondy. He walked slowly, with drooping head, in an attitude of reflection and sadness. The winter had thinned out the forest, so that Thenardier did not lose them from sight, although he kept at a good distance. The man turned round from time to time, and looked to see if he was being followed. All at once he caught sight of Thenardier. He plunged suddenly into the brushwood with Cosette, where they could both hide themselves. “The deuce!” said Thenardier, and he redoubled his pace.

The thickness of the undergrowth forced him to draw nearer to them. When the man had reached the densest part of the thicket, he wheeled round. It was in vain that Thenardier sought to conceal himself in the branches; he could not prevent the man seeing him. The man cast upon him an uneasy glance, then elevated his head and continued his course. The inn-keeper set out again in pursuit. Thus they continued for two or three hundred paces. All at once the man turned round once more; he saw the inn-keeper. This time he gazed at him with so sombre an air that Thenardier decided that it was “useless” to proceed further. Thenardier retraced his steps.

CHAPTER XI — NUMBER 9,430 REAPPEARS, AND COSETTE WINS IT IN THE LOTTERY

Jean Valjean was not dead.

When he fell into the sea, or rather, when he threw himself into it, he was not ironed, as we have seen. He swam under water until he reached a vessel at anchor, to which a boat was moored. He found means of hiding himself in this boat until night. At night he swam off again, and reached the shore a little way from Cape Brun. There, as he did not lack money, he procured clothing. A small country-house in the neighborhood of Balaguier was at that time the dressing-room of escaped convicts, — a lucrative specialty. Then Jean Valjean, like all the sorry fugitives who are seeking to evade the vigilance of the law and social fatality, pursued an obscure and undulating itinerary. He found his first refuge at Pradeaux, near Beausset. Then he directed his course towards Grand-Villard, near Briancon, in the Hautes-Alpes. It was a fumbling and uneasy flight, — a mole's track, whose branchings are untraceable. Later on, some trace of his passage into Ain, in the territory of Civrieux, was discovered; in the Pyrenees, at Accons; at the spot called Grange-de-Doumec, near the market of Chavailles, and in the environs of Perigueux at Brunies, canton of La Chapelle-Gonaguet. He reached Paris. We have just seen him at Montfermeil.

His first care on arriving in Paris had been to buy mourning clothes for a little girl of from seven to eight years of age; then to procure a lodging. That done, he had betaken himself to Montfermeil. It will be remembered that already, during his preceding escape, he had made a mysterious trip thither, or somewhere in that neighborhood, of which the law had gathered an inkling.

However, he was thought to be dead, and this still further increased the obscurity which had gathered about him. At Paris, one of the journals which chronicled the fact fell into his hands. He felt reassured and almost at peace, as though he had really been dead.

On the evening of the day when Jean Valjean rescued Cosette from the claws of the Thenardiers, he returned to Paris. He re-entered it at nightfall, with the child, by way of the Barrier Monceaux. There he entered a cabriolet, which took him to the esplanade of the Observatoire. There he got out, paid the coachman, took Cosette by the hand, and together they directed their steps through the darkness, — through the deserted streets which adjoin the Ourcine and the Glaciere, towards the Boulevard de l’Hopital.

The day had been strange and filled with emotions for Cosette. They had eaten some bread and cheese purchased in isolated taverns, behind hedges; they had changed carriages frequently; they had travelled short distances on foot. She made no complaint, but she was weary, and Jean Valjean perceived it by the way she dragged more and more on his hand as she walked. He took her on his back. Cosette, without letting go of Catherine, laid her head on Jean Valjean’s shoulder, and there fell asleep.

BOOK FOURTH. — THE GORBEAU HOVEL

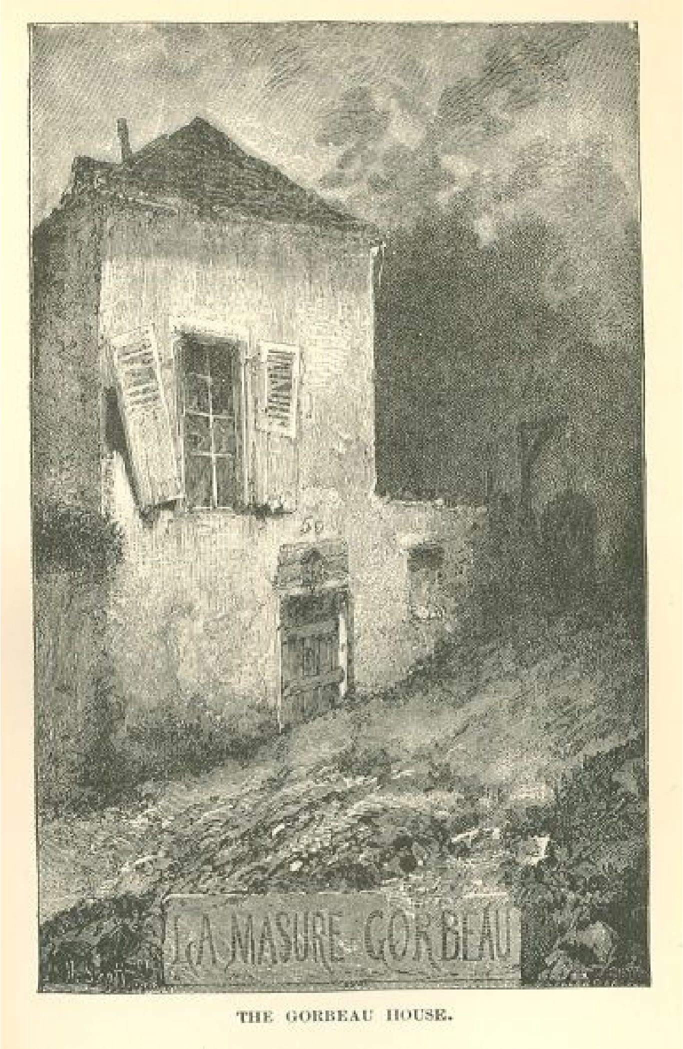
LA MASURE GORBEAU
50

THE GORBEAU HOUSE.

CHAPTER I — MASTER GORBEAU

Forty years ago, a rambler who had ventured into that unknown country of the Salpetriere, and who had mounted to the Barriere d'Italie by way of the boulevard, reached a point where it might be said that Paris disappeared. It was no longer solitude, for there were passers-by; it was not the country, for there were houses and streets; it was not the city, for the streets had ruts like highways, and the grass grew in them; it was not a village, the houses were too lofty. What was it, then? It was an inhabited spot where there was no one; it was a desert place where there was some one; it was a boulevard of the great city, a street of Paris; more wild at night than the forest, more gloomy by day than a cemetery.

It was the old quarter of the Marche-aux-Chevaux.

The rambler, if he risked himself outside the four decrepit walls of this Marche-aux-Chevaux; if he consented even to pass beyond the Rue du Petit-Banquier, after leaving on his right a garden protected by high walls; then a field in which tan-bark mills rose like gigantic beaver huts; then an enclosure encumbered with timber, with a heap of stumps, sawdust, and shavings, on which stood a large dog, barking; then a long, low, utterly dilapidated wall, with a little black door in mourning, laden with mosses, which were covered with flowers in the spring; then, in the most deserted spot, a frightful and decrepit building, on which ran the inscription in large letters: POST NO BILLS, — this daring rambler would have reached little known latitudes at the corner of the Rue des Vignes-Saint-Marcel. There, near a factory, and between two garden walls, there could be seen, at that epoch, a mean building, which, at the first glance, seemed as small as a thatched hovel, and which was, in reality, as large as a cathedral. It presented its side and gable to the public road; hence its apparent diminutiveness. Nearly the whole of the house was hidden. Only the door and one window could be seen.

This hovel was only one story high.

The first detail that struck the observer was, that the door could never have been anything but the door of a hovel, while the window, if it had been carved out of dressed stone instead of being in rough masonry, might have been the lattice of a lordly mansion.

The door was nothing but a collection of worm-eaten planks roughly bound together by cross-beams which resembled roughly hewn logs. It opened directly on a steep staircase of lofty steps, muddy, chalky, plaster-stained, dusty steps, of the same width as itself, which could be seen from the street, running straight up like a ladder and disappearing in the darkness between two walls. The top of the shapeless bay into which this door shut was masked by a narrow scantling in the centre of which a triangular hole had been sawed, which served both as wicket and air-hole when the door was closed. On the inside of the door the figures 52 had been traced with a couple of strokes of a brush dipped in ink, and above the scantling the same hand had daubed the number 50, so that one hesitated. Where was one? Above the door it said, “Number 50”; the inside replied, “no, Number 52.” No one knows what dust-colored figures were suspended like draperies from the triangular opening.

The window was large, sufficiently elevated, garnished with Venetian blinds, and with a frame in large square panes; only these large panes were suffering from various wounds, which were both concealed and betrayed by an ingenious paper bandage. And the blinds, dislocated and unpasted, threatened passers-by rather than screened the occupants. The horizontal slats were missing here and there and had been naively replaced with boards nailed on perpendicularly; so that what began as a blind ended as a shutter. This door with an unclean, and this window with an honest though dilapidated air, thus beheld on the same house, produced the effect of two incomplete beggars walking side by side, with different miens beneath the same rags, the one having always been a mendicant, and the other having once been a gentleman.

The staircase led to a very vast edifice which resembled a shed which had been converted into a house. This edifice had, for its intestinal tube, a long corridor, on which opened to right and left sorts of compartments of varied dimensions which were inhabitable under stress of circumstances, and rather more like stalls than cells. These chambers received their light from the vague waste grounds in the neighborhood.

All this was dark, disagreeable, wan, melancholy, sepulchral; traversed according as the crevices lay in the roof or in the door, by cold rays or by icy winds. An interesting and picturesque peculiarity of this sort of dwelling is the enormous size of the spiders.

To the left of the entrance door, on the boulevard side, at about the height of a man from the ground, a small window which had been walled up formed a square niche full of stones which the children had thrown there as they passed by.

A portion of this building has recently been demolished. From what still remains of it one can form a judgment as to what it was in former days. As a whole, it was not over a hundred years old. A hundred years is youth in a church and age in a house. It seems as though man's lodging partook of his ephemeral character, and God's house of his eternity.

The postmen called the house Number 50-52; but it was known in the neighborhood as the Gorbeau house.

Let us explain whence this appellation was derived.

Collectors of petty details, who become herbalists of anecdotes, and prick slippery dates into their memories with a pin, know that there was in Paris, during the last century, about 1770, two attorneys at the Chatelet named, one Corbeau (Raven), the other Renard (Fox). The two names had been forestalled by La Fontaine. The opportunity was too fine for the lawyers; they made the most of it. A parody was immediately put in circulation in the galleries of the court-house, in verses that limped a little:—

Maître Corbeau, sur un dossier perché,
  Tenait dans son bec une saisie exécutoire;
Maître Renard, par l'odeur alléché,
  Lui fit à peu près cette histoire:
    Hé! bonjour. Etc.

The two honest practitioners, embarrassed by the jests, and finding the bearing of their heads interfered with by the shouts of laughter which followed them, resolved to get rid of their names, and hit upon the expedient of applying to the king.

Their petition was presented to Louis XV. on the same day when the Papal Nuncio, on the one hand, and the Cardinal de la Roche-Aymon on the other, both devoutly kneeling, were each engaged in putting on, in his Majesty's presence, a slipper on the bare feet of Madame du Barry, who had just got out of bed. The king, who was laughing, continued to laugh, passed gayly from the two bishops to the two lawyers, and bestowed on these limbs of the law their former names, or nearly so. By the kings command, Maitre Corbeau was permitted to add a tail to his initial letter and to call himself Gorbeau. Maitre Renard was less lucky; all he obtained was leave to place a P in front of his R, and to call himself Prenard; so that the second name bore almost as much resemblance as the first.

Now, according to local tradition, this Maitre Gorbeau had been the proprietor of the building numbered 50-52 on the Boulevard de l'Hopital. He was even the author of the monumental window.

Hence the edifice bore the name of the Gorbeau house.

Opposite this house, among the trees of the boulevard, rose a great elm which was three-quarters dead; almost directly facing it opens the Rue de la Barrière des Gobelins, a street then without houses, unpaved, planted with unhealthy trees, which was green or muddy according to the season, and which ended squarely in the exterior wall of Paris. An odor of copperas issued in puffs from the roofs of the neighboring factory.

The barrier was close at hand. In 1823 the city wall was still in existence.

This barrier itself evoked gloomy fancies in the mind. It was the road to Bicêtre. It was through it that, under the Empire and the Restoration, prisoners condemned to death re-entered Paris on the day of their execution. It was there, that, about 1829, was committed that mysterious assassination, called "The assassination of the Fontainebleau barrier," whose authors justice was never able to discover; a melancholy problem which has never been elucidated, a frightful enigma which has never been unriddled. Take a few steps, and you come upon that fatal Rue Croulebarbe, where Ulbach stabbed the goat-girl of Ivry to the sound of thunder, as in the melodramas. A few paces more, and you arrive at the abominable pollarded elms of the Barriere Saint-Jacques, that expedient of the philanthropist to conceal the scaffold, that miserable and shameful Place de Grove of a shop-keeping and bourgeois society, which recoiled before the death penalty, neither daring to abolish it with grandeur, nor to uphold it with authority.

Leaving aside this Place Saint-Jacques, which was, as it were, predestined, and which has always been horrible, probably the most mournful spot on that mournful boulevard, seven and thirty years ago, was the spot which even to-day is so unattractive, where stood the building Number 50-52.

Bourgeois houses only began to spring up there twenty-five years later. The place was unpleasant. In addition to the gloomy thoughts which assailed one there, one was conscious of being between the Salpetriere, a glimpse of whose dome could be seen, and Bicêtre, whose outskirts one was fairly touching; that is to say, between the madness of women and the madness of men. As far as the eye could see, one could perceive nothing but the abattoirs, the city wall, and the fronts of a few factories, resembling barracks or monasteries; everywhere about stood hovels, rubbish, ancient walls blackened like cerecloths, new white walls like winding-sheets; everywhere parallel rows of trees, buildings erected on a line, flat constructions, long, cold rows, and the melancholy sadness of right angles. Not an unevenness of the ground, not a caprice in the architecture, not a fold. The ensemble was glacial, regular, hideous. Nothing oppresses the heart like symmetry. It is because symmetry is ennui, and ennui is at the very foundation of grief. Despair yawns. Something more terrible than a hell where one suffers may be imagined, and that is a hell where one is bored. If such a hell existed, that bit of the Boulevard de l’Hopital might have formed the entrance to it.

Nevertheless, at nightfall, at the moment when the daylight is vanishing, especially in winter, at the hour when the twilight breeze tears from the elms their last russet leaves, when the darkness is deep and starless, or when the moon and the wind are making openings in the clouds and losing themselves in the shadows, this boulevard suddenly becomes frightful. The black lines sink inwards and are lost in the shades, like morsels of the infinite. The passer-by cannot refrain from recalling the innumerable traditions of the place which are connected with the gibbet. The solitude of this spot, where so many crimes have been committed, had something terrible about it. One almost had a presentiment of meeting with traps in that darkness; all the confused forms of the darkness seemed suspicious, and the long, hollow square, of which one caught a glimpse between each tree, seemed graves: by day it was ugly; in the evening melancholy; by night it was sinister.

In summer, at twilight, one saw, here and there, a few old women seated at the foot of the elm, on benches mouldy with rain. These good old women were fond of begging.

However, this quarter, which had a superannuated rather than an antique air, was tending even then to transformation. Even at that time any one who was desirous of seeing it had to make haste. Each day some detail of the whole effect was disappearing. For the last twenty years the station of the

Orleans railway has stood beside the old faubourg and distracted it, as it does to-day. Wherever it is placed on the borders of a capital, a railway station is the death of a suburb and the birth of a city. It seems as though, around these great centres of the movements of a people, the earth, full of germs, trembled and yawned, to engulf the ancient dwellings of men and to allow new ones to spring forth, at the rattle of these powerful machines, at the breath of these monstrous horses of civilization which devour coal and vomit fire. The old houses crumble and new ones rise.

Since the Orleans railway has invaded the region of the Salpetriere, the ancient, narrow streets which adjoin the moats Saint-Victor and the Jardin des Plantes tremble, as they are violently traversed three or four times each day by those currents of coach fiacres and omnibuses which, in a given time, crowd back the houses to the right and the left; for there are things which are odd when said that are rigorously exact; and just as it is true to say that in large cities the sun makes the southern fronts of houses to vegetate and grow, it is certain that the frequent passage of vehicles enlarges streets. The symptoms of a new life are evident. In this old provincial quarter, in the wildest nooks, the pavement shows itself, the sidewalks begin to crawl and to grow longer, even where there are as yet no pedestrians. One morning, — a memorable morning in July, 1845, — black pots of bitumen were seen smoking there; on that day it might be said that civilization had arrived in the Rue de l’Ourcine, and that Paris had entered the suburb of Saint-Marceau.

CHAPTER II — A NEST FOR OWL AND A WARBLER

It was in front of this Gorbeau house that Jean Valjean halted. Like wild birds, he had chosen this desert place to construct his nest.

He fumbled in his waistcoat pocket, drew out a sort of a pass-key, opened the door, entered, closed it again carefully, and ascended the staircase, still carrying Cosette.

At the top of the stairs he drew from his pocket another key, with which he opened another door. The chamber which he entered, and which he closed again instantly, was a kind of moderately spacious attic, furnished with a mattress laid on the floor, a table, and several chairs; a stove in which a fire was burning, and whose embers were visible, stood in one corner. A lantern on the boulevard cast a vague light into this poor room. At the extreme end there was a dressing-room with a folding bed; Jean Valjean carried the child to this bed and laid her down there without waking her.

He struck a match and lighted a candle. All this was prepared beforehand on the table, and, as he had done on the previous evening, he began to scrutinize Cosette's face with a gaze full of ecstasy, in which the expression of kindness and tenderness almost amounted to aberration. The little girl, with that tranquil confidence which belongs only to extreme strength and extreme weakness, had fallen asleep without knowing with whom she was, and continued to sleep without knowing where she was.

Jean Valjean bent down and kissed that child's hand.

Nine months before he had kissed the hand of the mother, who had also just fallen asleep.

The same sad, piercing, religious sentiment filled his heart.

He knelt beside Cosette's bed.

lt was broad daylight, and the child still slept. A wan ray of the December sun penetrated the window of the attic and lay upon the ceiling in long threads of light and shade. All at once a heavily laden carrier's cart, which was passing along the boulevard, shook the frail bed, like a clap of thunder, and made it quiver from top to bottom.

"Yes, madame!" cried Cosette, waking with a start, "here I am! here I am!"

And she sprang out of bed, her eyes still half shut with the heaviness of sleep, extending her arms towards the corner of the wall.

“Ah! mon Dieu, my broom!” said she.

She opened her eyes wide now, and beheld the smiling countenance of Jean Valjean.

“Ah! so it is true!” said the child. “Good morning, Monsieur.”

Children accept joy and happiness instantly and familiarly, being themselves by nature joy and happiness.

Cosette caught sight of Catherine at the foot of her bed, and took possession of her, and, as she played, she put a hundred questions to Jean Valjean. Where was she? Was Paris very large? Was Madame Thenardier very far away? Was she to go back? etc., etc. All at once she exclaimed, “How pretty it is here!”

It was a frightful hole, but she felt free.

“Must I sweep?” she resumed at last.

“Play!” said Jean Valjean.

The day passed thus. Cosette, without troubling herself to understand anything, was inexpressibly happy with that doll and that kind man.

CHAPTER III — TWO MISFORTUNES MAKE ONE PIECE OF GOOD FORTUNE

On the following morning, at daybreak, Jean Valjean was still by Cosette’s bedside; he watched there motionless, waiting for her to wake.

Some new thing had come into his soul.

Jean Valjean had never loved anything; for twenty-five years he had been alone in the world. He had never been father, lover, husband, friend. In the prison he had been vicious, gloomy, chaste, ignorant, and shy. The heart of that ex-convict was full of virginity. His sister and his sister’s children had left him only a vague and far-off memory which had finally almost completely vanished; he had made every effort to find them, and not having been able to find them, he had forgotten them. Human nature is made thus; the other tender emotions of his youth, if he had ever had any, had fallen into an abyss.

When he saw Cosette, when he had taken possession of her, carried her off, and delivered her, he felt his heart moved within him.

All the passion and affection within him awoke, and rushed towards that child. He approached the bed, where she lay sleeping, and trembled with joy. He suffered all the pangs of a mother, and he knew not what it meant; for that great and singular movement of a heart which begins to love is a very obscure and a very sweet thing.

Poor old man, with a perfectly new heart!

Only, as he was five and fifty, and Cosette eight years of age, all that might have been love in the whole course of his life flowed together into a sort of ineffable light.

It was the second white apparition which he had encountered. The Bishop had caused the dawn of virtue to rise on his horizon; Cosette caused the dawn of love to rise.

The early days passed in this dazzled state.

Cosette, on her side, had also, unknown to herself, become another being, poor little thing! She was so little when her mother left her, that she no longer remembered her. Like all children, who resemble young shoots of the vine, which cling to everything, she had tried to love; she had not succeeded. All had repulsed her, — the Thenardiers, their children, other children. She had loved the dog, and he had died, after which nothing and nobody would have anything to do with her. It is a sad thing to say, and we have already intimated it, that, at eight years of age, her heart was cold. It was not her fault; it was not the faculty of loving that she lacked; alas! it was the possibility. Thus, from the very first day, all her sentient and thinking powers loved this kind man. She felt that which she had never felt before — a sensation of expansion.

The man no longer produced on her the effect of being old or poor; she thought Jean Valjean handsome, just as she thought the hovel pretty.

These are the effects of the dawn, of childhood, of joy. The novelty of the earth and of life counts for something here. Nothing is so charming as the coloring reflection of happiness on a garret. We all have in our past a delightful garret.

Nature, a difference of fifty years, had set a profound gulf between Jean Valjean and Cosette; destiny filled in this gulf. Destiny suddenly united and wedded with its irresistible power these two uprooted existences, differing in age, alike in sorrow. One, in fact, completed the other. Cosette's instinct sought a father, as Jean Valjean's instinct sought a child. To meet was to find each other. At the mysterious moment when their hands touched, they were welded together. When these two souls perceived each other, they recognized each other as necessary to each other, and embraced each other closely.

Taking the words in their most comprehensive and absolute sense, we may say that, separated from every one by the walls of the tomb, Jean Valjean was the widower, and Cosette was the orphan: this situation caused Jean Valjean to become Cosette's father after a celestial fashion.

And in truth, the mysterious impression produced on Cosette in the depths of the forest of Chelles by the hand of Jean Valjean grasping hers in the dark was not an illusion, but a reality. The entrance of that man into the destiny of that child had been the advent of God.

Moreover, Jean Valjean had chosen his refuge well. There he seemed perfectly secure.

The chamber with a dressing-room, which he occupied with Cosette, was the one whose window opened on the boulevard. This being the only window in the house, no neighbors' glances were to be feared from across the way or at the side.

The ground-floor of Number 50-52, a sort of dilapidated penthouse, served as a wagon-house for market-gardeners, and no communication existed between it and the first story. It was separated by the flooring, which had neither traps nor stairs, and which formed the diaphragm of the building, as it were. The first story contained, as we have said, numerous chambers and several attics, only one of which was occupied by the old woman who took charge of Jean Valjean's housekeeping; all the rest was uninhabited.

It was this old woman, ornamented with the name of the principal lodger, and in reality intrusted with the functions of portress, who had let him the lodging on Christmas eve. He had represented himself to her as a gentleman of means who had been ruined by Spanish bonds, who was coming there to live with his little daughter. He had paid her six months in advance, and had commissioned the old woman to furnish the chamber and dressing-room, as we have seen. It was this good woman who had lighted the fire in the stove, and prepared everything on the evening of their arrival.

Week followed week; these two beings led a happy life in that hovel.

Cosette laughed, chattered, and sang from daybreak. Children have their morning song as well as birds.

It sometimes happened that Jean Valjean clasped her tiny red hand, all cracked with chilblains, and kissed it. The poor child, who was used to being beaten, did not know the meaning of this, and ran away in confusion.

At times she became serious and stared at her little black gown. Cosette was no longer in rags; she was in mourning. She had emerged from misery, and she was entering into life.

Jean Valjean had undertaken to teach her to read. Sometimes, as he made the child spell, he remembered that it was with the idea of doing evil that he had learned to read in prison. This idea had ended in teaching a child to read. Then the ex-convict smiled with the pensive smile of the angels.

He felt in it a premeditation from on high, the will of some one who was not man, and he became absorbed in revery. Good thoughts have their abysses as well as evil ones.

To teach Cosette to read, and to let her play, this constituted nearly the whole of Jean Valjean's existence. And then he talked of her mother, and he made her pray.

She called him father, and knew no other name for him.

He passed hours in watching her dressing and undressing her doll, and in listening to her prattle. Life, henceforth, appeared to him to be full of interest; men seemed to him good and just; he no longer reproached any one in thought; he saw no reason why he should not live to be a very old man, now that this child loved him. He saw a whole future stretching out before him, illuminated by Cosette as by a charming light. The best of us are not exempt from egotistical thoughts. At times, he reflected with a sort of joy that she would be ugly.

This is only a personal opinion; but, to utter our whole thought, at the point where Jean Valjean had arrived when he began to love Cosette, it is by no means clear to us that he did not need this encouragement in order that he might persevere in well-doing. He had just viewed the malice of men and the misery of society under a new aspect — incomplete aspects, which unfortunately only exhibited one side of the truth, the fate of woman as summed up in Fantine, and public authority as personified in Javert. He had returned to prison, this time for having done right; he had quaffed fresh bitterness; disgust and lassitude were overpowering him; even the memory of the Bishop probably suffered a temporary eclipse, though sure to reappear later on luminous and triumphant; but, after all, that sacred memory was growing dim. Who knows whether Jean Valjean had not been on the eve of growing discouraged and of falling once more? He loved and grew strong again. Alas! he walked with no less indecision than Cosette. He protected her, and she strengthened him. Thanks to him, she could walk through life; thanks to her, he could continue in virtue. He was that child’s stay, and she was his prop. Oh, unfathomable and divine mystery of the balances of destiny!

CHAPTER IV — THE REMARKS OF THE PRINCIPAL TENANT

Jean Valjean was prudent enough never to go out by day. Every evening, at twilight, he walked for an hour or two, sometimes alone, often with Cosette, seeking the most deserted side alleys of the boulevard, and entering churches at nightfall. He liked to go to Saint-Medard, which is the nearest church. When he did not take Cosette with him, she remained with the old woman; but the child's delight was to go out with the good man. She preferred an hour with him to all her rapturous tete-a-tetes with Catherine. He held her hand as they walked, and said sweet things to her.

It turned out that Cosette was a very gay little person.

The old woman attended to the housekeeping and cooking and went to market.

They lived soberly, always having a little fire, but like people in very moderate circumstances. Jean Valjean had made no alterations in the furniture as it was the first day; he had merely had the glass door leading to Cosette's dressing-room replaced by a solid door.

He still wore his yellow coat, his black breeches, and his old hat. In the street, he was taken for a poor man. It sometimes happened that kind-hearted women turned back to bestow a sou on him. Jean Valjean accepted the sou with a deep bow. It also happened occasionally that he encountered some poor wretch asking alms; then he looked behind him to make sure that no one was observing him, stealthily approached the unfortunate man, put a piece of money into his hand, often a silver coin, and walked rapidly away. This had its disadvantages. He began to be known in the neighborhood under the name of the beggar who gives alms.

The old principal lodger, a cross-looking creature, who was thoroughly permeated, so far as her neighbors were concerned, with the inquisitiveness peculiar to envious persons, scrutinized Jean Valjean a great deal, without his suspecting the fact. She was a little deaf, which rendered her talkative. There remained to her from her past, two teeth, — one above, the other below, — which she was continually knocking against each other. She had questioned Cosette, who had not been able to tell her anything, since she knew nothing herself except that she had come from Montfermeil. One morning, this spy saw Jean Valjean, with an air which struck the old gossip as peculiar, entering one of the uninhabited compartments of the hovel. She followed him with the step of an old cat, and was able to observe him without being seen, through a crack in the door, which was directly opposite him. Jean Valjean had his back turned towards this door, by way of greater security, no doubt. The old woman saw him fumble in his pocket and draw thence a case, scissors, and thread; then he began to rip the lining of one of the skirts of his coat, and from the opening he took a bit of yellowish paper, which he unfolded. The old woman recognized, with terror, the fact that it was a bank-bill for a thousand francs. It was the second or third only that she had seen in the course of her existence. She fled in alarm.

A moment later, Jean Valjean accosted her, and asked her to go and get this thousand-franc bill changed for him, adding that it was his quarterly income, which he had received the day before. “Where?” thought the old woman. “He did not go out until six o’clock in the evening, and the government bank certainly is not open at that hour.” The old woman went to get the bill changed, and mentioned her surmises. That thousand-franc note, commented on and multiplied, produced a vast amount of terrified discussion among the gossips of the Rue des Vignes Saint-Marcel.

A few days later, it chanced that Jean Valjean was sawing some wood, in his shirt-sleeves, in the corridor. The old woman was in the chamber, putting things in order. She was alone. Cosette was occupied in admiring the wood as it was sawed. The old woman caught sight of the coat hanging on a nail, and examined it. The lining had been sewed up again. The good woman felt of it carefully, and thought she observed in the skirts and revers thicknesses of paper. More thousand-franc bank-bills, no doubt!

She also noticed that there were all sorts of things in the pockets. Not only the needles, thread, and scissors which she had seen, but a big pocket-book, a very large knife, and — a suspicious circumstance — several wigs of various colors. Each pocket of this coat had the air of being in a manner provided against unexpected accidents.

Thus the inhabitants of the house reached the last days of winter.

CHAPTER V — A FIVE-FRANC PIECE FALLS ON THE GROUND AND PRODUCES A TUMULT

Near Saint-Medard’s church there was a poor man who was in the habit of crouching on the brink of a public well which had been condemned, and on whom Jean Valjean was fond of bestowing charity. He never passed this man without giving him a few sous. Sometimes he spoke to him. Those who envied this mendicant said that he belonged to the police. He was an ex-beadle of seventy-five, who was constantly mumbling his prayers.

One evening, as Jean Valjean was passing by, when he had not Cosette with him, he saw the beggar in his usual place, beneath the lantern which had just been lighted. The man seemed engaged in prayer, according to his custom, and was much bent over. Jean Valjean stepped up to him and placed his customary alms in his hand. The mendicant raised his eyes suddenly, stared intently at Jean Valjean, then dropped his head quickly. This movement was like a flash of lightning. Jean Valjean was seized with a shudder. It seemed to him that he had just caught sight, by the light of the street lantern, not of the placid and beaming visage of the old beadle, but of a well-known and startling face. He experienced the same impression that one would have on finding one’s self, all of a sudden, face to face, in the dark, with a tiger. He recoiled, terrified, petrified, daring neither to breathe, to speak, to remain, nor to flee, staring at the beggar who had dropped his head, which was enveloped in a rag, and no longer appeared to know that he was there. At this strange moment, an instinct — possibly the mysterious instinct of self-preservation, — restrained Jean Valjean from uttering a word. The beggar had the same figure, the same rags, the same appearance as he had every day. “Bah!” said Jean Valjean, “I am mad! I am dreaming! Impossible!” And he returned profoundly troubled.

He hardly dared to confess, even to himself, that the face which he thought he had seen was the face of Javert.

That night, on thinking the matter over, he regretted not having questioned the man, in order to force him to raise his head a second time.

On the following day, at nightfall, he went back. The beggar was at his post. “Good day, my good man,” said Jean Valjean, resolutely, handing him a sou. The beggar raised his head, and replied in a whining voice, “Thanks, my good sir.” It was unmistakably the ex-beadle.

Jean Valjean felt completely reassured. He began to laugh. “How the deuce could I have thought that I saw Javert there?” he thought. “Am I going to lose my eyesight now?” And he thought no more about it.

A few days afterwards, — it might have been at eight o’clock in the evening, — he was in his room, and engaged in making Cosette spell aloud, when he heard the house door open and then shut again. This struck him as singular. The old woman, who was the only inhabitant of the house except himself, always went to bed at nightfall, so that she might not burn out her candles. Jean Valjean made a sign to Cosette to be quiet. He heard some one ascending the stairs. It might possibly be the old woman, who might have fallen ill and have been out to the apothecary’s. Jean Valjean listened.

The step was heavy, and sounded like that of a man; but the old woman wore stout shoes, and there is nothing which so strongly resembles the step of a man as that of an old woman. Nevertheless, Jean Valjean blew out his candle.

He had sent Cosette to bed, saying to her in a low voice, “Get into bed very softly”; and as he kissed her brow, the steps paused.

Jean Valjean remained silent, motionless, with his back towards the door, seated on the chair from which he had not stirred, and holding his breath in the dark.

After the expiration of a rather long interval, he turned round, as he heard nothing more, and, as he raised his eyes towards the door of his chamber, he saw a light through the keyhole. This light formed a sort of sinister star in the blackness of the door and the wall. There was evidently some one there, who was holding a candle in his hand and listening.

Several minutes elapsed thus, and the light retreated. But he heard no sound of footsteps, which seemed to indicate that the person who had been listening at the door had removed his shoes.

Jean Valjean threw himself, all dressed as he was, on his bed, and could not close his eyes all night.

At daybreak, just as he was falling into a doze through fatigue, he was awakened by the creaking of a door which opened on some attic at the end of the corridor, then he heard the same masculine footstep which had ascended the stairs on the preceding evening. The step was approaching. He sprang off the bed and applied his eye to the keyhole, which was tolerably large, hoping to see the person who had made his way by night into the house and had listened at his door, as he passed. It was a man, in fact, who passed, this time without pausing, in front of Jean Valjean's chamber. The corridor was too dark to allow of the person's face being distinguished; but when the man reached the staircase, a ray of light from without made it stand out like a silhouette, and Jean Valjean had a complete view of his back. The man was of lofty stature, clad in a long frock-coat, with a cudgel under his arm. The formidable neck and shoulders belonged to Javert.

Jean Valjean might have attempted to catch another glimpse of him through his window opening on the boulevard, but he would have been obliged to open the window: he dared not.

It was evident that this man had entered with a key, and like himself. Who had given him that key? What was the meaning of this?

When the old woman came to do the work, at seven o'clock in the morning, Jean Valjean cast a penetrating glance on her, but he did not question her. The good woman appeared as usual.

As she swept up she remarked to him: —

"Possibly Monsieur may have heard some one come in last night?"

At that age, and on that boulevard, eight o'clock in the evening was the dead of the night.

"That is true, by the way," he replied, in the most natural tone possible. "Who was it?"

"It was a new lodger who has come into the house," said the old woman.

"And what is his name?"

"I don't know exactly; Dumont, or Daumont, or some name of that sort."

"And who is this Monsieur Dumont?"

The old woman gazed at him with her little polecat eyes, and answered: —

"A gentleman of property, like yourself."

Perhaps she had no ulterior meaning. Jean Valjean thought he perceived one.

When the old woman had taken her departure, he did up a hundred francs which he had in a cupboard, into a roll, and put it in his pocket. In spite of all the precautions which he took in this operation so that he might not be heard rattling silver, a hundred-sou piece escaped from his hands and rolled noisily on the floor.

When darkness came on, he descended and carefully scrutinized both sides of the boulevard. He saw no one. The boulevard appeared to be absolutely deserted. It is true that a person can conceal himself behind trees.

He went up stairs again.

“Come.” he said to Cosette.

He took her by the hand, and they both went out.

BOOK FIFTH. — FOR A BLACK HUNT, A MUTE PACK

CHAPTER I — THE ZIGZAGS OF STRATEGY

An observation here becomes necessary, in view of the pages which the reader is about to peruse, and of others which will be met with further on.

The author of this book, who regrets the necessity of mentioning himself, has been absent from Paris for many years. Paris has been transformed since he quitted it. A new city has arisen, which is, after a fashion, unknown to him. There is no need for him to say that he loves Paris: Paris is his mind's natal city. In consequence of demolitions and reconstructions, the Paris of his youth, that Paris which he bore away religiously in his memory, is now a Paris of days gone by. He must be permitted to speak of that Paris as though it still existed. It is possible that when the author conducts his readers to a spot and says, "In such a street there stands such and such a house," neither street nor house will any longer exist in that locality. Readers may verify the facts if they care to take the trouble. For his own part, he is unacquainted with the new Paris, and he writes with the old Paris before his eyes in an illusion which is precious to him. It is a delight to him to dream that there still lingers behind him something of that which he beheld when he was in his own country, and that all has not vanished. So long as you go and come in your native land, you imagine that those streets are a matter of indifference to you; that those windows, those roofs, and those doors are nothing to you; that those walls are strangers to you; that those trees are merely the first encountered haphazard; that those houses, which you do not enter, are useless to you; that the pavements which you tread are merely stones. Later on, when you are no longer there, you perceive that the streets are dear to you; that you miss those roofs, those doors; and that those walls are necessary to you, those trees are well beloved by you; that you entered those houses which you never entered, every day, and that you have left a part of your heart, of your blood, of your soul, in those pavements. All those places which you no longer behold, which you may never behold again, perchance, and whose memory you have cherished, take on a melancholy charm, recur to your mind with the melancholy of an apparition, make the holy land visible to you, and are, so to speak, the very form of France, and you love them; and you call them up as they are, as they were, and you persist in this, and you will submit to no change: for you are attached to the figure of your fatherland as to the face of your mother.

May we, then, be permitted to speak of the past in the present? That said, we beg the reader to take note of it, and we continue.

Jean Valjean instantly quitted the boulevard and plunged into the streets, taking the most intricate lines which he could devise, returning on his track at times, to make sure that he was not being followed.

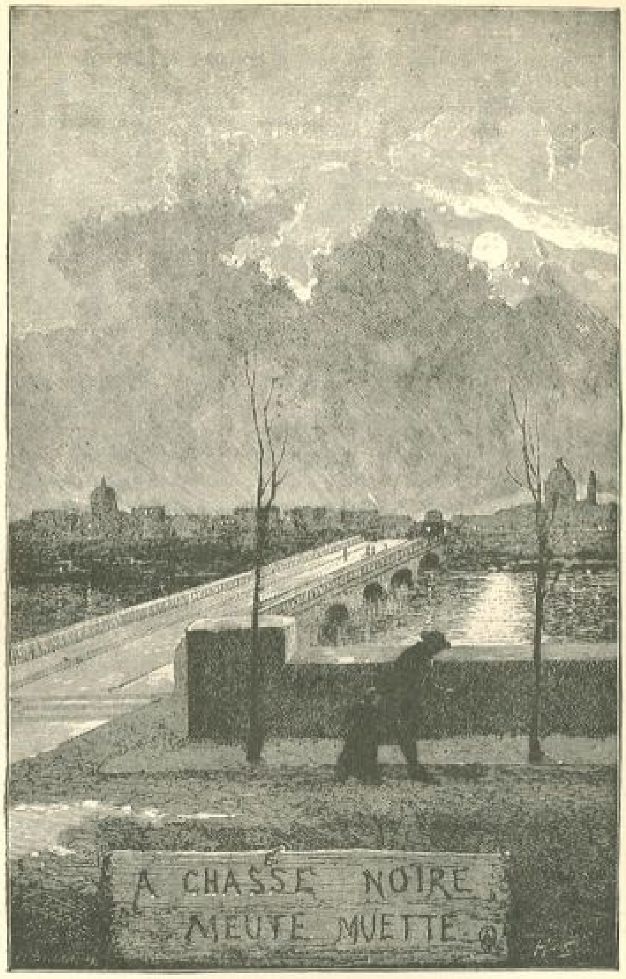

FOR A BLACK HUNT, A MUTE PACK.

This manoeuvre is peculiar to the hunted stag. On soil where an imprint of the track may be left, this manoeuvre possesses, among other advantages, that of deceiving the huntsmen and the dogs, by throwing them on the wrong scent. In venery this is called false re-imbushment.

The moon was full that night. Jean Valjean was not sorry for this. The moon, still very close to the horizon, cast great masses of light and shadow in the streets. Jean Valjean could glide along close to the houses on the dark side, and yet keep watch on the light side. He did not, perhaps, take sufficiently into consideration the fact that the dark side escaped him. Still, in the deserted lanes which lie near the Rue Poliveau, he thought he felt certain that no one was following him.

Cosette walked on without asking any questions. The sufferings of the first six years of her life had instilled something passive into her nature. Moreover, — and this is a remark to which we shall frequently have occasion to recur, — she had grown used, without being herself aware of it, to the peculiarities of this good man and to the freaks of destiny. And then she was with him, and she felt safe.

Jean Valjean knew no more where he was going than did Cosette. He trusted in God, as she trusted in him. It seemed as though he also were clinging to the hand of some one greater than himself; he thought he felt a being leading him, though invisible. However, he had no settled idea, no plan, no project. He was not even absolutely sure that it was Javert, and then it might have been Javert, without Javert knowing that he was Jean Valjean. Was not he disguised? Was not he believed to be dead? Still, queer things had been going on for several days. He wanted no more of them. He was determined not to return to the Gorbeau house. Like the wild animal chased from its lair, he was seeking a hole in which he might hide until he could find one where he might dwell.

Jean Valjean described many and varied labyrinths in the Mouffetard quarter, which was already asleep, as though the discipline of the Middle Ages and the yoke of the curfew still existed; he combined in various manners, with cunning strategy, the Rue Censier and the Rue Copeau, the Rue du Battoir-Saint-Victor and the Rue du Puits l'Ermite. There are lodging houses in this locality, but he did not even enter one, finding nothing which suited him. He had no doubt that if any one had chanced to be upon his track, they would have lost it.

As eleven o'clock struck from Saint-Etienne-du-Mont, he was traversing the Rue de Pontoise, in front of the office of the commissary of police, situated at No. 14. A few moments later, the instinct of which we have spoken above made him turn round. At that moment he saw distinctly, thanks to the commissary's lantern, which betrayed them, three men who were following him closely, pass, one after the other, under that lantern, on the dark side of the street. One of the three entered the alley leading to the commissary's house. The one who marched at their head struck him as decidedly suspicious.

"Come, child," he said to Cosette; and he made haste to quit the Rue Pontoise.

He took a circuit, turned into the Passage des Patriarches, which was closed on account of the hour, strode along the Rue de l'Epee-de-Bois and the Rue de l'Arbalete, and plunged into the Rue des Postes.

At that time there was a square formed by the intersection of streets, where the College Rollin stands to-day, and where the Rue Neuve-Sainte-Genevieve turns off.

It is understood, of course, that the Rue Neuve-Sainte-Genevieve is an old street, and that a posting-chaise does not pass through the Rue des Postes once in ten years. In the thirteenth century this Rue des Postes was inhabited by potters, and its real name is Rue des Pots.

The moon cast a livid light into this open space. Jean Valjean went into ambush in a doorway, calculating that if the men were still following him, he could not fail to get a good look at them, as they traversed this illuminated space.

In point of fact, three minutes had not elapsed when the men made their appearance. There were four of them now. All were tall, dressed in long, brown coats, with round hats, and huge cudgels in their hands. Their great stature and their vast fists rendered them no less alarming than did their sinister stride through the darkness. One would have pronounced them four spectres disguised as bourgeois.

They halted in the middle of the space and formed a group, like men in consultation. They had an air of indecision. The one who appeared to be their leader turned round and pointed hastily with his right hand in the direction which Jean Valjean had taken; another seemed to indicate the contrary direction with considerable obstinacy. At the moment when the first man wheeled round, the moon fell full in his face. Jean Valjean recognized Javert perfectly.

CHAPTER II — IT IS LUCKY THAT THE PONT D'AUSTERLITZ BEARS CARRIAGES

Uncertainty was at an end for Jean Valjean: fortunately it still lasted for the men. He took advantage of their hesitation. It was time lost for them, but gained for him. He slipped from under the gate where he had concealed himself, and went down the Rue des Postes, towards the region of the Jardin des Plantes. Cosette was beginning to be tired. He took her in his arms and carried her. There were no passers-by, and the street lanterns had not been lighted on account of there being a moon.

He redoubled his pace.

In a few strides he had reached the Goblet potteries, on the front of which the moonlight rendered distinctly legible the ancient inscription: —

De Goblet fils c'est ici la fabrique;
Venez choisir des cruches et des brocs,
Des pots à fleurs, des tuyaux, de la brique.
A tout venant le Coeur vend des Carreaux.

He left behind him the Rue de la Clef, then the Fountain Saint-Victor, skirted the Jardin des Plantes by the lower streets, and reached the quay. There he turned round. The quay was deserted. The streets were deserted. There was no one behind him. He drew a long breath.

He gained the Pont d'Austerlitz.

Tolls were still collected there at that epoch.

He presented himself at the toll office and handed over a sou.

"It is two sous," said the old soldier in charge of the bridge. "You are carrying a child who can walk. Pay for two."

He paid, vexed that his passage should have aroused remark. Every flight should be an imperceptible slipping away.

A heavy cart was crossing the Seine at the same time as himself, and on its way, like him, to the right bank. This was of use to him. He could traverse the bridge in the shadow of the cart.

Towards the middle of the Bridge, Cosette, whose feet were benumbed, wanted to walk. He set her on the ground and took her hand again.

The bridge once crossed, he perceived some timber-yards on his right. He directed his course thither. In order to reach them, it was necessary to risk himself in a tolerably large unsheltered and illuminated space. He did not hesitate. Those who were on his track had evidently lost the scent, and Jean Valjean believed himself to be out of danger. Hunted, yes; followed, no.

A little street, the Rue du Chemin-Vert-Saint-Antoine, opened out between two timber-yards enclosed in walls. This street was dark and narrow and seemed made expressly for him. Before entering it he cast a glance behind him.

From the point where he stood he could see the whole extent of the Pont d’Austerlitz.

Four shadows were just entering on the bridge.

These shadows had their backs turned to the Jardin des Plantes and were on their way to the right bank.

These four shadows were the four men.

Jean Valjean shuddered like the wild beast which is recaptured.

One hope remained to him; it was, that the men had not, perhaps, stepped on the bridge, and had not caught sight of him while he was crossing the large illuminated space, holding Cosette by the hand.

In that case, by plunging into the little street before him, he might escape, if he could reach the timber-yards, the marshes, the market-gardens, the uninhabited ground which was not built upon.

It seemed to him that he might commit himself to that silent little street. He entered it.

CHAPTER III — TO WIT, THE PLAN OF PARIS IN 1727

Three hundred paces further on, he arrived at a point where the street forked. It separated into two streets, which ran in a slanting line, one to the right, and the other to the left.

Jean Valjean had before him what resembled the two branches of a Y. Which should he choose? He did not hesitate, but took the one on the right.

Why?

Because that to the left ran towards a suburb, that is to say, towards inhabited regions, and the right branch towards the open country, that is to say, towards deserted regions.

However, they no longer walked very fast. Cosette's pace retarded Jean Valjean's.

He took her up and carried her again. Cosette laid her head on the shoulder of the good man and said not a word.

He turned round from time to time and looked behind him. He took care to keep always on the dark side of the street. The street was straight in his rear. The first two or three times that he turned round he saw nothing; the silence was profound, and he continued his march somewhat reassured. All at once, on turning round, he thought he perceived in the portion of the street which he had just passed through, far off in the obscurity, something which was moving.

He rushed forward precipitately rather than walked, hoping to find some side-street, to make his escape through it, and thus to break his scent once more.

He arrived at a wall.

This wall, however, did not absolutely prevent further progress; it was a wall which bordered a transverse street, in which the one he had taken ended.

Here again, he was obliged to come to a decision; should he go to the right or to the left.

He glanced to the right. The fragmentary lane was prolonged between buildings which were either sheds or barns, then ended at a blind alley. The extremity of the cul-de-sac was distinctly visible, — a lofty white wall.

He glanced to the left. On that side the lane was open, and about two hundred paces further on, ran into a street of which it was the affluent. On that side lay safety.

At the moment when Jean Valjean was meditating a turn to the left, in an effort to reach the street which he saw at the end of the lane, he perceived a sort of motionless, black statue at the corner of the lane and the street towards which he was on the point of directing his steps.

It was some one, a man, who had evidently just been posted there, and who was barring the passage and waiting.

Jean Valjean recoiled.

The point of Paris where Jean Valjean found himself, situated between the Faubourg Saint-Antoine and la Rapée, is one of those which recent improvements have transformed from top to bottom, — resulting in disfigurement according to some, and in a transfiguration according to others. The market-gardens, the timber-yards, and the old buildings have been effaced. To-day, there are brand-new, wide streets, arenas, circuses, hippodromes, railway stations, and a prison, Mazas, there; progress, as the reader sees, with its antidote.

Half a century ago, in that ordinary, popular tongue, which is all compounded of traditions, which persists in calling the Institut les Quatre-Nations, and the Opera-Comique Feydeau, the precise spot whither Jean Valjean had arrived was called le Petit Picpus. The Porte Saint-Jacques, the Porte Paris, the Barriere des Sergents, the Porcherons, la Galiote, les Celestins, les Capucins, le Mail, la Bourbe, l’Arbre de Cracovie, la Petite-Pologne — these are the names of old Paris which survive amid the new. The memory of the populace hovers over these relics of the past.

Le Petit-Picpus, which, moreover, hardly ever had any existence, and never was more than the outline of a quarter, had nearly the monkish aspect of a Spanish town. The roads were not much paved; the streets were not much built up. With the exception of the two or three streets, of which we shall presently speak, all was wall and solitude there. Not a shop, not a vehicle, hardly a candle lighted here and there in the windows; all lights extinguished after ten o’clock. Gardens, convents, timber-yards, marshes; occasional lowly dwellings and great walls as high as the houses.

Such was this quarter in the last century. The Revolution snubbed it soundly. The republican government demolished and cut through it. Rubbish shoots were established there. Thirty years ago, this quarter was disappearing under the erasing process of new buildings. To-day, it has been utterly blotted out. The Petit-Picpus, of which no existing plan has preserved a trace, is indicated with sufficient clearness in the plan of 1727, published at Paris by Denis Thierry, Rue Saint-Jacques, opposite the Rue du Platre; and at Lyons, by Jean Girin, Rue Merciere, at the sign of Prudence. Petit-Picpus had, as we have just mentioned, a Y of streets, formed by the Rue du Chemin-Vert-Saint-Antoine, which spread out in two branches, taking on the left the name of Little Picpus Street, and on the right the name of the Rue Polonceau. The two limbs of the Y were connected at the apex as by a bar; this bar was called Rue Droit-Mur. The Rue Polonceau ended there; Rue Petit-Picpus passed on, and ascended towards the Lenoir market. A person coming from the Seine reached the extremity of the Rue Polonceau, and had on his right the Rue Droit-Mur, turning abruptly at a right angle, in front of him the wall of that street, and on his right a truncated prolongation of the Rue Droit-Mur, which had no issue and was called the Cul-de-Sac Genrot.

It was here that Jean Valjean stood.

As we have just said, on catching sight of that black silhouette standing on guard at the angle of the Rue Droit-Mur and the Rue Petit-Picpus, he recoiled. There could be no doubt of it. That phantom was lying in wait for him.

What was he to do?

The time for retreating was passed. That which he had perceived in movement an instant before, in the distant darkness, was Javert and his squad without a doubt. Javert was probably already at the commencement of the street at whose end Jean Valjean stood. Javert, to all appearances, was acquainted with this little labyrinth, and had taken his precautions by sending one of his men to guard the exit. These surmises, which so closely resembled proofs, whirled suddenly, like a handful of dust caught up by an unexpected gust of wind, through Jean Valjean’s mournful brain. He examined the Cul-de-Sac Genrot; there he was cut off. He examined the Rue Petit-Picpus; there stood a sentinel. He saw that black form standing out in relief against the white pavement, illuminated by the moon; to advance was to fall into this man’s hands; to retreat was to fling himself into Javert’s arms. Jean Valjean felt himself caught, as in a net, which was slowly contracting; he gazed heavenward in despair.

CHAPTER IV — THE GROPINGS OF FLIGHT

In order to understand what follows, it is requisite to form an exact idea of the Droit-Mur lane, and, in particular, of the angle which one leaves on the left when one emerges from the Rue Polonceau into this lane. Droit-Mur lane was almost entirely bordered on the right, as far as the Rue Petit-Picpus, by houses of mean aspect; on the left by a solitary building of severe outlines, composed of numerous parts which grew gradually higher by a story or two as they approached the Rue Petit-Picpus side; so that this building, which was very lofty on the Rue Petit-Picpus side, was tolerably low on the side adjoining the Rue Polonceau. There, at the angle of which we have spoken, it descended to such a degree that it consisted of merely a wall. This wall did not abut directly on the Street; it formed a deeply retreating niche, concealed by its two corners from two observers who might have been, one in the Rue Polonceau, the other in the Rue Droit-Mur.

Beginning with these angles of the niche, the wall extended along the Rue Polonceau as far as a house which bore the number 49, and along the Rue Droit-Mur, where the fragment was much shorter, as far as the gloomy building which we have mentioned and whose gable it intersected, thus forming another retreating angle in the street. This gable was sombre of aspect; only one window was visible, or, to speak more correctly, two shutters covered with a sheet of zinc and kept constantly closed.

The state of the places of which we are here giving a description is rigorously exact, and will certainly awaken a very precise memory in the mind of old inhabitants of the quarter.

The niche was entirely filled by a thing which resembled a colossal and wretched door; it was a vast, formless assemblage of perpendicular planks, the upper ones being broader than the lower, bound together by long transverse strips of iron. At one side there was a carriage gate of the ordinary dimensions, and which had evidently not been cut more than fifty years previously.

A linden-tree showed its crest above the niche, and the wall was covered with ivy on the side of the Rue Polonceau.

In the imminent peril in which Jean Valjean found himself, this sombre building had about it a solitary and uninhabited look which tempted him. He ran his eyes rapidly over it; he said to himself, that if he could contrive to get inside it, he might save himself. First he conceived an idea, then a hope.

In the central portion of the front of this building, on the Rue Droit-Mur side, there were at all the windows of the different stories ancient cistern pipes of lead. The various branches of the pipes which led from one central pipe to all these little basins sketched out a sort of tree on the front. These ramifications of pipes with their hundred elbows imitated those old leafless vine-stocks which writhe over the fronts of old farm-houses.

This odd espalier, with its branches of lead and iron, was the first thing that struck Jean Valjean. He seated Cosette with her back against a stone post, with an injunction to be silent, and ran to the spot where the conduit touched the pavement. Perhaps there was some way of climbing up by it and entering the house. But the pipe was dilapidated and past service, and hardly hung to its fastenings. Moreover, all the windows of this silent dwelling were grated with heavy iron bars, even the attic windows in the roof. And then, the moon fell full upon that facade, and the man who was watching at the corner of the street would have seen Jean Valjean in the act of climbing. And finally, what was to be done with Cosette? How was she to be drawn up to the top of a three-story house?

He gave up all idea of climbing by means of the drain-pipe, and crawled along the wall to get back into the Rue Polonceau.

When he reached the slant of the wall where he had left Cosette, he noticed that no one could see him there. As we have just explained, he was concealed from all eyes, no matter from which direction they were approaching; besides this, he was in the shadow. Finally, there were two doors; perhaps they might be forced. The wall above which he saw the linden-tree and the ivy evidently abutted on a garden where he could, at least, hide himself, although there were as yet no leaves on the trees, and spend the remainder of the night.

Time was passing; he must act quickly.

He felt over the carriage door, and immediately recognized the fact that it was impracticable outside and in.

He approached the other door with more hope; it was frightfully decrepit; its very immensity rendered it less solid; the planks were rotten; the iron bands — there were only three of them — were rusted. It seemed as though it might be possible to pierce this worm-eaten barrier.

On examining it he found that the door was not a door; it had neither hinges, cross-bars, lock, nor fissure in the middle; the iron bands traversed it from side to side without any break. Through the crevices in the planks he caught a view of unhewn slabs and blocks of stone roughly cemented together, which passers-by might still have seen there ten years ago. He was forced to acknowledge with consternation that this apparent door was simply the wooden decoration of a building against which it was placed. It was easy to tear off a plank; but then, one found one's self face to face with a wall.

CHAPTER V — WHICH WOULD BE IMPOSSIBLE WITH GAS LANTERNS

At that moment a heavy and measured sound began to be audible at some distance. Jean Valjean risked a glance round the corner of the street. Seven or eight soldiers, drawn up in a platoon, had just debouched into the Rue Polonceau. He saw the gleam of their bayonets. They were advancing towards him; these soldiers, at whose head he distinguished Javert’s tall figure, advanced slowly and cautiously. They halted frequently; it was plain that they were searching all the nooks of the walls and all the embrasures of the doors and alleys.

This was some patrol that Javert had encountered — there could be no mistake as to this surmise — and whose aid he had demanded.

Javert’s two acolytes were marching in their ranks.

At the rate at which they were marching, and in consideration of the halts which they were making, it would take them about a quarter of an hour to reach the spot where Jean Valjean stood. It was a frightful moment. A few minutes only separated Jean Valjean from that terrible precipice which yawned before him for the third time. And the galleys now meant not only the galleys, but Cosette lost to him forever; that is to say, a life resembling the interior of a tomb.

There was but one thing which was possible.

Jean Valjean had this peculiarity, that he carried, as one might say, two beggar’s pouches: in one he kept his saintly thoughts; in the other the redoubtable talents of a convict. He rummaged in the one or the other, according to circumstances.

Among his other resources, thanks to his numerous escapes from the prison at Toulon, he was, as it will be remembered, a past master in the incredible art of crawling up without ladder or climbing-irons, by sheer muscular force, by leaning on the nape of his neck, his shoulders, his hips, and his knees, by helping himself on the rare projections of the stone, in the right angle of a wall, as high as the sixth story, if need be; an art which has rendered so celebrated and so alarming that corner of the wall of the Conciergerie of Paris by which Battemolle, condemned to death, made his escape twenty years ago.

Jean Valjean measured with his eyes the wall above which he espied the linden; it was about eighteen feet in height. The angle which it formed with the gable of the large building was filled, at its lower extremity, by a mass of masonry of a triangular shape, probably intended to preserve that too convenient corner from the rubbish of those dirty creatures called the passers-by. This practice of filling up corners of the wall is much in use in Paris.

This mass was about five feet in height; the space above the summit of this mass which it was necessary to climb was not more than fourteen feet.

The wall was surmounted by a flat stone without a coping.

Cosette was the difficulty, for she did not know how to climb a wall. Should he abandon her? Jean Valjean did not once think of that. It was impossible to carry her. A man's whole strength is required to successfully carry out these singular ascents. The least burden would disturb his centre of gravity and pull him downwards.

A rope would have been required; Jean Valjean had none. Where was he to get a rope at midnight, in the Rue Polonceau? Certainly, if Jean Valjean had had a kingdom, he would have given it for a rope at that moment.

All extreme situations have their lightning flashes which sometimes dazzle, sometimes illuminate us.

Jean Valjean's despairing glance fell on the street lantern-post of the blind alley Genrot.

At that epoch there were no gas-jets in the streets of Paris. At nightfall lanterns placed at regular distances were lighted; they were ascended and descended by means of a rope, which traversed the street from side to side, and was adjusted in a groove of the post. The pulley over which this rope ran was fastened underneath the lantern in a little iron box, the key to which was kept by the lamp-lighter, and the rope itself was protected by a metal case.

Jean Valjean, with the energy of a supreme struggle, crossed the street at one bound, entered the blind alley, broke the latch of the little box with the point of his knife, and an instant later he was beside Cosette once more. He had a rope. These gloomy inventors of expedients work rapidly when they are fighting against fatality.

We have already explained that the lanterns had not been lighted that night. The lantern in the Cul-de-Sac Genrot was thus naturally extinct, like the rest; and one could pass directly under it without even noticing that it was no longer in its place.

Nevertheless, the hour, the place, the darkness, Jean Valjean's absorption, his singular gestures, his goings and comings, all had begun to render Cosette uneasy. Any other child than she would have given vent to loud shrieks long before. She contented herself with plucking Jean Valjean by the skirt of his coat. They could hear the sound of the patrol's approach ever more and more distinctly.

"Father," said she, in a very low voice, "I am afraid. Who is coming yonder?"

"Hush!" replied the unhappy man; "it is Madame Thenardier."

Cosette shuddered. He added: —

"Say nothing. Don't interfere with me. If you cry out, if you weep, the Thenardier is lying in wait for you. She is coming to take you back."

Then, without haste, but without making a useless movement, with firm and curt precision, the more remarkable at a moment when the patrol and Javert might come upon him at any moment, he undid his cravat, passed it round Cosette's body under the armpits, taking care that it should not hurt the child, fastened this cravat to one end of the rope, by means of that knot which seafaring men call a "swallow knot," took the other end of the rope in his teeth, pulled off his shoes and stockings, which he threw over the wall, stepped upon the mass of masonry, and began to raise himself in the angle of the wall and the gable with as much solidity and certainty as though he had the rounds of a ladder under his feet and elbows. Half a minute had not elapsed when he was resting on his knees on the wall.

Cosette gazed at him in stupid amazement, without uttering a word. Jean Valjean's injunction, and the name of Madame Thenardier, had chilled her blood.

All at once she heard Jean Valjean's voice crying to her, though in a very low tone: —

"Put your back against the wall."

She obeyed.

"Don't say a word, and don't be alarmed," went on Jean Valjean.

And she felt herself lifted from the ground.

Before she had time to recover herself, she was on the top of the wall.

Jean Valjean grasped her, put her on his back, took her two tiny hands in his large left hand, lay down flat on his stomach and crawled along on top of the wall as far as the cant. As he had guessed, there stood a building whose roof started from the top of the wooden barricade and descended to within a very short distance of the ground, with a gentle slope which grazed the linden-tree. A lucky circumstance, for the wall was much higher on this side than on the street side. Jean Valjean could only see the ground at a great depth below him.

He had just reached the slope of the roof, and had not yet left the crest of the wall, when a violent uproar announced the arrival of the patrol. The thundering voice of Javert was audible: —

“Search the blind alley! The Rue Droit-Mur is guarded! so is the Rue Petit-Picpus. I’ll answer for it that he is in the blind alley.”

The soldiers rushed into the Genrot alley.

Jean Valjean allowed himself to slide down the roof, still holding fast to Cosette, reached the linden-tree, and leaped to the ground. Whether from terror or courage, Cosette had not breathed a sound, though her hands were a little abraded.

CHAPTER VI — THE BEGINNING OF AN ENIGMA

Jean Valjean found himself in a sort of garden which was very vast and of singular aspect; one of those melancholy gardens which seem made to be looked at in winter and at night. This garden was oblong in shape, with an alley of large poplars at the further end, tolerably tall forest trees in the corners, and an unshaded space in the centre, where could be seen a very large, solitary tree, then several fruit-trees, gnarled and bristling like bushes, beds of vegetables, a melon patch, whose glass frames sparkled in the moonlight, and an old well. Here and there stood stone benches which seemed black with moss. The alleys were bordered with gloomy and very erect little shrubs. The grass had half taken possession of them, and a green mould covered the rest.

Jean Valjean had beside him the building whose roof had served him as a means of descent, a pile of fagots, and, behind the fagots, directly against the wall, a stone statue, whose mutilated face was no longer anything more than a shapeless mask which loomed vaguely through the gloom.

The building was a sort of ruin, where dismantled chambers were distinguishable, one of which, much encumbered, seemed to serve as a shed.

The large building of the Rue Droit-Mur, which had a wing on the Rue Petit-Picpus, turned two facades, at right angles, towards this garden. These interior facades were even more tragic than the exterior. All the windows were grated. Not a gleam of light was visible at any one of them. The upper story had scuttles like prisons. One of those facades cast its shadow on the other, which fell over the garden like an immense black pall.

No other house was visible. The bottom of the garden was lost in mist and darkness. Nevertheless, walls could be confusedly made out, which intersected as though there were more cultivated land beyond, and the low roofs of the Rue Polonceau.

Nothing more wild and solitary than this garden could be imagined. There was no one in it, which was quite natural in view of the hour; but it did not seem as though this spot were made for any one to walk in, even in broad daylight.

Jean Valjean's first care had been to get hold of his shoes and put them on again, then to step under the shed with Cosette. A man who is fleeing never thinks himself sufficiently hidden. The child, whose thoughts were still on the Thenardier, shared his instinct for withdrawing from sight as much as possible.

Cosette trembled and pressed close to him. They heard the tumultuous noise of the patrol searching the blind alley and the streets; the blows of their gun-stocks against the stones; Javert's appeals to the police spies whom he had posted, and his imprecations mingled with words which could not be distinguished.

At the expiration of a quarter of an hour it seemed as though that species of stormy roar were becoming more distant. Jean Valjean held his breath.

He had laid his hand lightly on Cosette's mouth.

However, the solitude in which he stood was so strangely calm, that this frightful uproar, close and furious as it was, did not disturb him by so much as the shadow of a misgiving. It seemed as though those walls had been built of the deaf stones of which the Scriptures speak.

All at once, in the midst of this profound calm, a fresh sound arose; a sound as celestial, divine, ineffable, ravishing, as the other had been horrible. It was a hymn which issued from the gloom, a dazzling burst of prayer and harmony in the obscure and alarming silence of the night; women's voices, but voices composed at one and the same time of the pure accents of virgins and the innocent accents of children, — voices which are not of the earth, and which resemble those that the newborn infant still hears, and which the dying man hears already. This song proceeded from the gloomy edifice which towered above the garden. At the moment when the hubbub of demons retreated, one would have said that a choir of angels was approaching through the gloom.

Cosette and Jean Valjean fell on their knees.

They knew not what it was, they knew not where they were; but both of them, the man and the child, the penitent and the innocent, felt that they must kneel.

These voices had this strange characteristic, that they did not prevent the building from seeming to be deserted. It was a supernatural chant in an uninhabited house.

While these voices were singing, Jean Valjean thought of nothing. He no longer beheld the night; he beheld a blue sky. It seemed to him that he felt those wings which we all have within us, unfolding.

The song died away. It may have lasted a long time. Jean Valjean could not have told. Hours of ecstasy are never more than a moment.

All fell silent again. There was no longer anything in the street; there was nothing in the garden. That which had menaced, that which had reassured him, — all had vanished. The breeze swayed a few dry weeds on the crest of the wall, and they gave out a faint, sweet, melancholy sound.

CHAPTER VII — CONTINUATION OF THE ENIGMA

The night wind had risen, which indicated that it must be between one and two o'clock in the morning. Poor Cosette said nothing. As she had seated herself beside him and leaned her head against him, Jean Valjean had fancied that she was asleep. He bent down and looked at her. Cosette's eyes were wide open, and her thoughtful air pained Jean Valjean.

She was still trembling.

"Are you sleepy?" said Jean Valjean.

"I am very cold," she replied.

A moment later she resumed: —

"Is she still there?"

"Who?" said Jean Valjean.

"Madame Thenardier."

Jean Valjean had already forgotten the means which he had employed to make Cosette keep silent.

"Ah!" said he, "she is gone. You need fear nothing further."

The child sighed as though a load had been lifted from her breast.

The ground was damp, the shed open on all sides, the breeze grew more keen every instant. The goodman took off his coat and wrapped it round Cosette.

"Are you less cold now?" said he.

"Oh, yes, father."

"Well, wait for me a moment. I will soon be back."

He quitted the ruin and crept along the large building, seeking a better shelter. He came across doors, but they were closed. There were bars at all the windows of the ground floor.

Just after he had turned the inner angle of the edifice, he observed that he was coming to some arched windows, where he perceived a light. He stood on tiptoe and peeped through one of these windows. They all opened on a tolerably vast hall, paved with large flagstones, cut up by arcades and pillars, where only a tiny light and great shadows were visible. The light came from a taper which was burning in one corner. The apartment was deserted, and nothing was stirring in it. Nevertheless, by dint of gazing intently he thought he perceived on the ground something which appeared to be covered with a winding-sheet, and which resembled a human form. This form was lying face downward, flat on the pavement, with the arms extended in the form of a cross, in the immobility of death. One would have said, judging from a sort of serpent which undulated over the floor, that this sinister form had a rope round its neck.

The whole chamber was bathed in that mist of places which are sparely illuminated, which adds to horror.

Jean Valjean often said afterwards, that, although many funereal spectres had crossed his path in life, he had never beheld anything more bloodcurdling and terrible than that enigmatical form accomplishing some inexplicable mystery in that gloomy place, and beheld thus at night. It was alarming to suppose that that thing was perhaps dead; and still more alarming to think that it was perhaps alive.

He had the courage to plaster his face to the glass, and to watch whether the thing would move. In spite of his remaining thus what seemed to him a very long time, the outstretched form made no movement. All at once he felt himself overpowered by an inexpressible terror, and he fled. He began to run towards the shed, not daring to look behind him. It seemed to him, that if he turned his head, he should see that form following him with great strides and waving its arms.

He reached the ruin all out of breath. His knees were giving way beneath him; the perspiration was pouring from him.

Where was he? Who could ever have imagined anything like that sort of sepulchre in the midst of Paris! What was this strange house? An edifice full of nocturnal mystery, calling to souls through the darkness with the voice of angels, and when they came, offering them abruptly that terrible vision; promising to open the radiant portals of heaven, and then opening the horrible gates of the tomb! And it actually was an edifice, a house, which bore a number on the street! It was not a dream! He had to touch the stones to convince himself that such was the fact.

Cold, anxiety, uneasiness, the emotions of the night, had given him a genuine fever, and all these ideas were clashing together in his brain.

He stepped up to Cosette. She was asleep.

CHAPTER VIII — THE ENIGMA BECOMES DOUBLY MYSTERIOUS

The child had laid her head on a stone and fallen asleep.

He sat down beside her and began to think. Little by little, as he gazed at her, he grew calm and regained possession of his freedom of mind.

He clearly perceived this truth, the foundation of his life henceforth, that so long as she was there, so long as he had her near him, he should need nothing except for her, he should fear nothing except for her. He was not even conscious that he was very cold, since he had taken off his coat to cover her.

Nevertheless, athwart this revery into which he had fallen he had heard for some time a peculiar noise. It was like the tinkling of a bell. This sound proceeded from the garden. It could be heard distinctly though faintly. It resembled the faint, vague music produced by the bells of cattle at night in the pastures.

This noise made Valjean turn round.

He looked and saw that there was some one in the garden.

A being resembling a man was walking amid the bell-glasses of the melon beds, rising, stooping, halting, with regular movements, as though he were dragging or spreading out something on the ground. This person appeared to limp.

Jean Valjean shuddered with the continual tremor of the unhappy. For them everything is hostile and suspicious. They distrust the day because it enables people to see them, and the night because it aids in surprising them. A little while before he had shivered because the garden was deserted, and now he shivered because there was some one there.

He fell back from chimerical terrors to real terrors. He said to himself that Javert and the spies had, perhaps, not taken their departure; that they had, no doubt, left people on the watch in the street; that if this man should discover him in the garden, he would cry out for help against thieves and deliver him up. He took the sleeping Cosette gently in his arms and carried her behind a heap of old furniture, which was out of use, in the most remote corner of the shed. Cosette did not stir.

From that point he scrutinized the appearance of the being in the melon patch. The strange thing about it was, that the sound of the bell followed each of this man’s movements. When the man approached, the sound approached; when the man retreated, the sound retreated; if he made any hasty gesture, a tremolo accompanied the gesture; when he halted, the sound ceased. It appeared evident that the bell was attached to that man; but what could that signify? Who was this man who had a bell suspended about him like a ram or an ox?

As he put these questions to himself, he touched Cosette’s hands. They were icy cold.

“Ah! good God!” he cried.

He spoke to her in a low voice: —

“Cosette!”

She did not open her eyes.

He shook her vigorously.

She did not wake.

“Is she dead?” he said to himself, and sprang to his feet, quivering from head to foot.

The most frightful thoughts rushed pell-mell through his mind. There are moments when hideous surmises assail us like a cohort of furies, and violently force the partitions of our brains. When those we love are in question, our prudence invents every sort of madness. He remembered that sleep in the open air on a cold night may be fatal.

Cosette was pale, and had fallen at full length on the ground at his feet, without a movement.

He listened to her breathing: she still breathed, but with a respiration which seemed to him weak and on the point of extinction.

How was he to warm her back to life? How was he to rouse her? All that was not connected with this vanished from his thoughts. He rushed wildly from the ruin.

It was absolutely necessary that Cosette should be in bed and beside a fire in less than a quarter of an hour.

CHAPTER IX — THE MAN WITH THE BELL

He walked straight up to the man whom he saw in the garden. He had taken in his hand the roll of silver which was in the pocket of his waistcoat.

The man's head was bent down, and he did not see him approaching. In a few strides Jean Valjean stood beside him.

Jean Valjean accosted him with the cry: —

"One hundred francs!"

The man gave a start and raised his eyes.

"You can earn a hundred francs," went on Jean Valjean, "if you will grant me shelter for this night."

The moon shone full upon Jean Valjean's terrified countenance.

"What! so it is you, Father Madeleine!" said the man.

That name, thus pronounced, at that obscure hour, in that unknown spot, by that strange man, made Jean Valjean start back.

He had expected anything but that. The person who thus addressed him was a bent and lame old man, dressed almost like a peasant, who wore on his left knee a leather knee-cap, whence hung a moderately large bell. His face, which was in the shadow, was not distinguishable.

However, the goodman had removed his cap, and exclaimed, trembling all over: —

"Ah, good God! How come you here, Father Madeleine? Where did you enter? Dieu-Jesus! Did you fall from heaven? There is no trouble about that: if ever you do fall, it will be from there. And what a state you are in! You have no cravat; you have no hat; you have no coat! Do you know, you would have frightened any one who did not know you? No coat! Lord God! Are the saints going mad nowadays? But how did you get in here?"

His words tumbled over each other. The goodman talked with a rustic volubility, in which there was nothing alarming. All this was uttered with a mixture of stupefaction and naive kindliness.

"Who are you? and what house is this?" demanded Jean Valjean.

"Ah! pardieu, this is too much!" exclaimed the old man. "I am the person for whom you got the place here, and this house is the one where you had me placed. What! You don't recognize me?"

"No," said Jean Valjean; "and how happens it that you know me?"

"You saved my life," said the man.

He turned. A ray of moonlight outlined his profile, and Jean Valjean recognized old Fauchelevent.

“Ah!” said Jean Valjean, “so it is you? Yes, I recollect you.”

“That is very lucky,” said the old man, in a reproachful tone.

“And what are you doing here?” resumed Jean Valjean.

“Why, I am covering my melons, of course!”

In fact, at the moment when Jean Valjean accosted him, old Fauchelevent held in his hand the end of a straw mat which he was occupied in spreading over the melon bed. During the hour or thereabouts that he had been in the garden he had already spread out a number of them. It was this operation which had caused him to execute the peculiar movements observed from the shed by Jean Valjean.

He continued: —

“I said to myself, ‘The moon is bright: it is going to freeze. What if I were to put my melons into their greatcoats?’ And,” he added, looking at Jean Valjean with a broad smile,— “pardieu! you ought to have done the same! But how do you come here?”

Jean Valjean, finding himself known to this man, at least only under the name of Madeleine, thenceforth advanced only with caution. He multiplied his questions. Strange to say, their roles seemed to be reversed. It was he, the intruder, who interrogated.

“And what is this bell which you wear on your knee?”

“This,” replied Fauchelevent, “is so that I may be avoided.”

“What! so that you may be avoided?”

Old Fauchelevent winked with an indescribable air.

“Ah, goodness! there are only women in this house — many young girls. It appears that I should be a dangerous person to meet. The bell gives them warning. When I come, they go.”

“What house is this?”

“Come, you know well enough.”

“But I do not.”

“Not when you got me the place here as gardener?”

“Answer me as though I knew nothing.”

“Well, then, this is the Petit-Picpus convent.”

Memories recurred to Jean Valjean. Chance, that is to say, Providence, had cast him into precisely that convent in the Quartier Saint-Antoine where old Fauchelevent, crippled by the fall from his cart, had been admitted on his recommendation two years previously. He repeated, as though talking to himself: —

“The Petit-Picpus convent.”

“Exactly,” returned old Fauchelevent. “But to come to the point, how the deuce did you manage to get in here, you, Father Madeleine? No matter if you are a saint; you are a man as well, and no man enters here.”

“You certainly are here.”

“There is no one but me.”

“Still,” said Jean Valjean, “I must stay here.”

“Ah, good God!” cried Fauchelevent.

Jean Valjean drew near to the old man, and said to him in a grave voice: —

“Father Fauchelevent, I saved your life.”

“I was the first to recall it,” returned Fauchelevent.

“Well, you can do to-day for me that which I did for you in the olden days.”

Fauchelevent took in his aged, trembling, and wrinkled hands Jean Valjean’s two robust hands, and stood for several minutes as though incapable of speaking. At length he exclaimed: —

“Oh! that would be a blessing from the good God, if I could make you some little return for that! Save your life! Monsieur le Maire, dispose of the old man!”

A wonderful joy had transfigured this old man. His countenance seemed to emit a ray of light.

“What do you wish me to do?” he resumed.

“That I will explain to you. You have a chamber?”

“I have an isolated hovel yonder, behind the ruins of the old convent, in a corner which no one ever looks into. There are three rooms in it.”

The hut was, in fact, so well hidden behind the ruins, and so cleverly arranged to prevent it being seen, that Jean Valjean had not perceived it.

“Good,” said Jean Valjean. “Now I am going to ask two things of you.”

“What are they, Mr. Mayor?”

“In the first place, you are not to tell any one what you know about me. In the second, you are not to try to find out anything more.”

“As you please. I know that you can do nothing that is not honest, that you have always been a man after the good God’s heart. And then, moreover, you it was who placed me here. That concerns you. I am at your service."

"That is settled then. Now, come with me. We will go and get the child."

"Ah!" said Fauchelevent, "so there is a child?"

He added not a word further, and followed Jean Valjean as a dog follows his master.

Less than half an hour afterwards Cosette, who had grown rosy again before the flame of a good fire, was lying asleep in the old gardener's bed. Jean Valjean had put on his cravat and coat once more; his hat, which he had flung over the wall, had been found and picked up. While Jean Valjean was putting on his coat, Fauchelevent had removed the bell and kneecap, which now hung on a nail beside a vintage basket that adorned the wall. The two men were warming themselves with their elbows resting on a table upon which Fauchelevent had placed a bit of cheese, black bread, a bottle of wine, and two glasses, and the old man was saying to Jean Valjean, as he laid his hand on the latter's knee: "Ah! Father Madeleine! You did not recognize me immediately; you save people's lives, and then you forget them! That is bad! But they remember you! You are an ingrate!"

CHAPTER X — WHICH EXPLAINS HOW JAVERT GOT ON THE SCENT

The events of which we have just beheld the reverse side, so to speak, had come about in the simplest possible manner.

When Jean Valjean, on the evening of the very day when Javert had arrested him beside Fantine’s death-bed, had escaped from the town jail of M. sur M., the police had supposed that he had betaken himself to Paris. Paris is a maelstrom where everything is lost, and everything disappears in this belly of the world, as in the belly of the sea. No forest hides a man as does that crowd. Fugitives of every sort know this. They go to Paris as to an abyss; there are gulfs which save. The police know it also, and it is in Paris that they seek what they have lost elsewhere. They sought the ex-mayor of M. sur M. Javert was summoned to Paris to throw light on their researches. Javert had, in fact, rendered powerful assistance in the recapture of Jean Valjean. Javert’s zeal and intelligence on that occasion had been remarked by M. Chabouillet, secretary of the Prefecture under Comte Angles. M. Chabouillet, who had, moreover, already been Javert’s patron, had the inspector of M. sur M. attached to the police force of Paris. There Javert rendered himself useful in divers and, though the word may seem strange for such services, honorable manners.

He no longer thought of Jean Valjean, — the wolf of to-day causes these dogs who are always on the chase to forget the wolf of yesterday, — when, in December, 1823, he read a newspaper, he who never read newspapers; but Javert, a monarchical man, had a desire to know the particulars of the triumphal entry of the “Prince Generalissimo” into Bayonne. Just as he was finishing the article, which interested him; a name, the name of Jean Valjean, attracted his attention at the bottom of a page. The paper announced that the convict Jean Valjean was dead, and published the fact in such formal terms that Javert did not doubt it. He confined himself to the remark, “That’s a good entry.” Then he threw aside the paper, and thought no more about it.

Some time afterwards, it chanced that a police report was transmitted from the prefecture of the Seine-et-Oise to the prefecture of police in Paris, concerning the abduction of a child, which had taken place, under peculiar circumstances, as it was said, in the commune of Montfermeil. A little girl of seven or eight years of age, the report said, who had been intrusted by her mother to an inn-keeper of that neighborhood, had been stolen by a stranger; this child answered to the name of Cosette, and was the daughter of a girl named Fantine, who had died in the hospital, it was not known where or when.

This report came under Javert's eye and set him to thinking.

The name of Fantine was well known to him. He remembered that Jean Valjean had made him, Javert, burst into laughter, by asking him for a respite of three days, for the purpose of going to fetch that creature's child. He recalled the fact that Jean Valjean had been arrested in Paris at the very moment when he was stepping into the coach for Montfermeil. Some signs had made him suspect at the time that this was the second occasion of his entering that coach, and that he had already, on the previous day, made an excursion to the neighborhood of that village, for he had not been seen in the village itself. What had he been intending to do in that region of Montfermeil? It could not even be surmised. Javert understood it now. Fantine's daughter was there. Jean Valjean was going there in search of her. And now this child had been stolen by a stranger! Who could that stranger be? Could it be Jean Valjean? But Jean Valjean was dead. Javert, without saying anything to anybody, took the coach from the Pewter Platter, Cul-de-Sac de la Planchette, and made a trip to Montfermeil.

He expected to find a great deal of light on the subject there; he found a great deal of obscurity.

For the first few days the Thenardiers had chattered in their rage. The disappearance of the Lark had created a sensation in the village. He immediately obtained numerous versions of the story, which ended in the abduction of a child. Hence the police report. But their first vexation having passed off, Thenardier, with his wonderful instinct, had very quickly comprehended that it is never advisable to stir up the prosecutor of the Crown, and that his complaints with regard to the abduction of Cosette would have as their first result to fix upon himself, and upon many dark affairs which he had on hand, the glittering eye of justice. The last thing that owls desire is to have a candle brought to them. And in the first place, how explain the fifteen hundred francs which he had received? He turned squarely round, put a gag on his wife's mouth, and feigned astonishment when the stolen child was mentioned to him. He understood nothing about it; no doubt he had grumbled for awhile at having that dear little creature "taken from him" so hastily; he should have liked to keep her two or three days longer, out of tenderness; but her "grandfather" had come for her in the most natural way in the world. He added the "grandfather," which produced a good effect. This was the story that Javert hit upon when he arrived at Montfermeil. The grandfather caused Jean Valjean to vanish.

Nevertheless, Javert dropped a few questions, like plummets, into Thenardier's history. "Who was that grandfather? and what was his name?" Thenardier replied with simplicity: "He is a wealthy farmer. I saw his passport. I think his name was M. Guillaume Lambert."

Lambert is a respectable and extremely reassuring name. Thereupon Javert returned to Paris.

"Jean Valjean is certainly dead," said he, "and I am a ninny."

He had again begun to forget this history, when, in the course of March, 1824, he heard of a singular personage who dwelt in the parish of Saint-Medard and who had been surnamed "the mendicant who gives alms." This person, the story ran, was a man of means, whose name no one knew exactly, and who lived alone with a little girl of eight years, who knew nothing about herself, save that she had come from Montfermeil. Montfermeil! that name was always coming up, and it made Javert prick up his ears. An old beggar police spy, an ex-beadle, to whom this person had given alms, added a few more details. This gentleman of property was very shy, — never coming out except in the evening, speaking to no one, except, occasionally to the poor, and never allowing any one to approach him. He wore a horrible old yellow frock-coat, which was worth many millions, being all wadded with bank-bills. This piqued Javert's curiosity in a decided manner. In order to get a close look at this fantastic gentleman without alarming him, he borrowed the beadle's outfit for a day, and the place where the old spy was in the habit of crouching every evening, whining orisons through his nose, and playing the spy under cover of prayer.

"The suspected individual" did indeed approach Javert thus disguised, and bestow alms on him. At that moment Javert raised his head, and the shock which Jean Valjean received on recognizing Javert was equal to the one received by Javert when he thought he recognized Jean Valjean.

However, the darkness might have misled him; Jean Valjean's death was official; Javert cherished very grave doubts; and when in doubt, Javert, the man of scruples, never laid a finger on any one's collar.

He followed his man to the Gorbeau house, and got “the old woman” to talking, which was no difficult matter. The old woman confirmed the fact regarding the coat lined with millions, and narrated to him the episode of the thousand-franc bill. She had seen it! She had handled it! Javert hired a room; that evening he installed himself in it. He came and listened at the mysterious lodger’s door, hoping to catch the sound of his voice, but Jean Valjean saw his candle through the key-hole, and foiled the spy by keeping silent.

On the following day Jean Valjean decamped; but the noise made by the fall of the five-franc piece was noticed by the old woman, who, hearing the rattling of coin, suspected that he might be intending to leave, and made haste to warn Javert. At night, when Jean Valjean came out, Javert was waiting for him behind the trees of the boulevard with two men.

Javert had demanded assistance at the Prefecture, but he had not mentioned the name of the individual whom he hoped to seize; that was his secret, and he had kept it for three reasons: in the first place, because the slightest indiscretion might put Jean Valjean on the alert; next, because, to lay hands on an ex-convict who had made his escape and was reputed dead, on a criminal whom justice had formerly classed forever as among malefactors of the most dangerous sort, was a magnificent success which the old members of the Parisian police would assuredly not leave to a new-comer like Javert, and he was afraid of being deprived of his convict; and lastly, because Javert, being an artist, had a taste for the unforeseen. He hated those well-heralded successes which are talked of long in advance and have had the bloom brushed off. He preferred to elaborate his masterpieces in the dark and to unveil them suddenly at the last.

Javert had followed Jean Valjean from tree to tree, then from corner to corner of the street, and had not lost sight of him for a single instant; even at the moments when Jean Valjean believed himself to be the most secure Javert’s eye had been on him. Why had not Javert arrested Jean Valjean? Because he was still in doubt.

It must be remembered that at that epoch the police was not precisely at its ease; the free press embarrassed it; several arbitrary arrests denounced by the newspapers, had echoed even as far as the Chambers, and had rendered the Prefecture timid. Interference with individual liberty was a grave matter. The police agents were afraid of making a mistake; the prefect laid the blame on them; a mistake meant dismissal. The reader can imagine the effect which this brief paragraph, reproduced by twenty newspapers, would have caused in Paris: “Yesterday, an aged grandfather, with white hair, a respectable and well-to-do gentleman, who was walking with his grandchild, aged eight, was arrested and conducted to the agency of the Prefecture as an escaped convict!”

Let us repeat in addition that Javert had scruples of his own; injunctions of his conscience were added to the injunctions of the prefect. He was really in doubt.

Jean Valjean turned his back on him and walked in the dark.

Sadness, uneasiness, anxiety, depression, this fresh misfortune of being forced to flee by night, to seek a chance refuge in Paris for Cosette and himself, the necessity of regulating his pace to the pace of the child — all this, without his being aware of it, had altered Jean Valjean’s walk, and impressed on his bearing such senility, that the police themselves, incarnate in the person of Javert, might, and did in fact, make a mistake. The impossibility of approaching too close, his costume of an emigre preceptor, the declaration of Thenardier which made a grandfather of him, and, finally, the belief in his death in prison, added still further to the uncertainty which gathered thick in Javert’s mind.

For an instant it occurred to him to make an abrupt demand for his papers; but if the man was not Jean Valjean, and if this man was not a good, honest old fellow living on his income, he was probably some merry blade deeply and cunningly implicated in the obscure web of Parisian misdeeds, some chief of a dangerous band, who gave alms to conceal his other talents, which was an old dodge. He had trusty fellows, accomplices’ retreats in case of emergencies, in which he would, no doubt, take refuge. All these turns which he was making through the streets seemed to indicate that he was not a simple and honest man. To arrest him too hastily would be “to kill the hen that laid the golden eggs.” Where was the inconvenience in waiting? Javert was very sure that he would not escape.

Thus he proceeded in a tolerably perplexed state of mind, putting to himself a hundred questions about this enigmatical personage.

It was only quite late in the Rue de Pontoise, that, thanks to the brilliant light thrown from a dram-shop, he decidedly recognized Jean Valjean.

There are in this world two beings who give a profound start, — the mother who recovers her child and the tiger who recovers his prey. Javert gave that profound start.

As soon as he had positively recognized Jean Valjean, the formidable convict, he perceived that there were only three of them, and he asked for reinforcements at the police station of the Rue de Pontoise. One puts on gloves before grasping a thorn cudgel.

This delay and the halt at the Carrefour Rollin to consult with his agents came near causing him to lose the trail. He speedily divined, however, that Jean Valjean would want to put the river between his pursuers and himself. He bent his head and reflected like a blood-hound who puts his nose to the ground to make sure that he is on the right scent. Javert, with his powerful rectitude of instinct, went straight to the bridge of Austerlitz. A word with the toll-keeper furnished him with the information which he required: “Have you seen a man with a little girl?” “I made him pay two sous,” replied the toll-keeper. Javert reached the bridge in season to see Jean Valjean traverse the small illuminated spot on the other side of the water, leading Cosette by the hand. He saw him enter the Rue du Chemin-Vert-Saint-Antoine; he remembered the Cul-de-Sac Genrot arranged there like a trap, and of the sole exit of the Rue Droit-Mur into the Rue Petit-Picpus. He made sure of his back burrows, as huntsmen say; he hastily despatched one of his agents, by a roundabout way, to guard that issue. A patrol which was returning to the Arsenal post having passed him, he made a requisition on it, and caused it to accompany him. In such games soldiers are aces. Moreover, the principle is, that in order to get the best of a wild boar, one must employ the science of venery and plenty of dogs. These combinations having been effected, feeling that Jean Valjean was caught between the blind alley Genrot on the right, his agent on the left, and himself, Javert, in the rear, he took a pinch of snuff.

Then he began the game. He experienced one ecstatic and infernal moment; he allowed his man to go on ahead, knowing that he had him safe, but desirous of postponing the moment of arrest as long as possible, happy at the thought that he was taken and yet at seeing him free, gloating over him with his gaze, with that voluptuousness of the spider which allows the fly to flutter, and of the cat which lets the mouse run. Claws and talons possess a monstrous sensuality, — the obscure movements of the creature imprisoned in their pincers. What a delight this strangling is!

Javert was enjoying himself. The meshes of his net were stoutly knotted. He was sure of success; all he had to do now was to close his hand.

Accompanied as he was, the very idea of resistance was impossible, however vigorous, energetic, and desperate Jean Valjean might be.

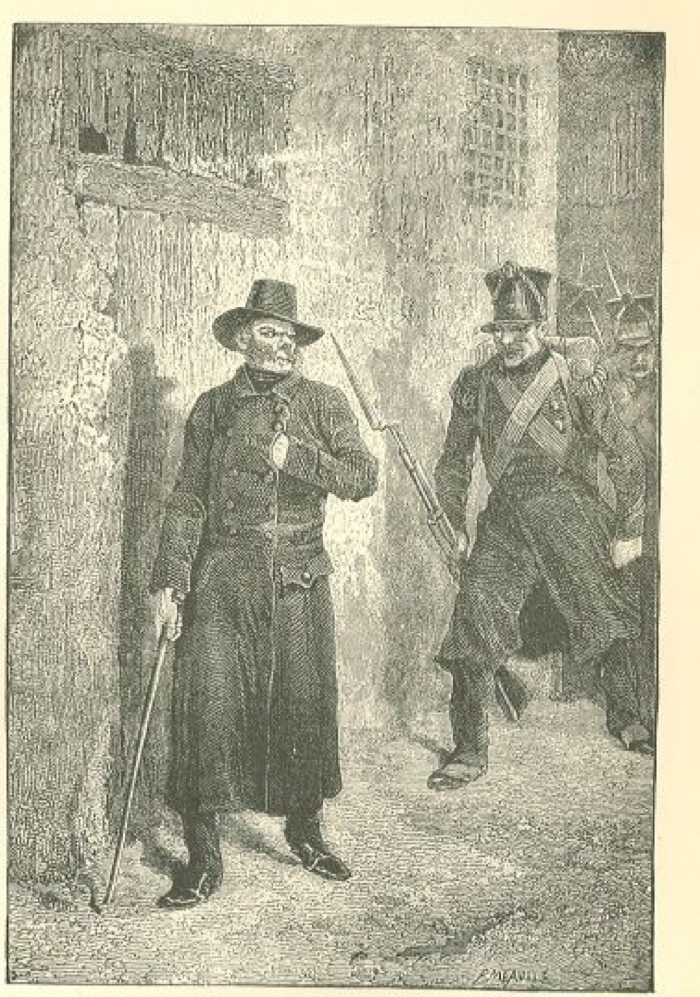

JAVERT ON THE HUNT.

Javert advanced slowly, sounding, searching on his way all the nooks of the street like so many pockets of thieves.

When he reached the centre of the web he found the fly no longer there.

His exasperation can be imagined.

He interrogated his sentinel of the Rues Droit-Mur and Petit-Picpus; that agent, who had remained imperturbably at his post, had not seen the man pass.

It sometimes happens that a stag is lost head and horns; that is to say, he escapes although he has the pack on his very heels, and then the oldest huntsmen know not what to say. Duvivier, Ligniville, and Desprez halt short. In a discomfiture of this sort, Artonge exclaims, “It was not a stag, but a sorcerer.” Javert would have liked to utter the same cry.

His disappointment bordered for a moment on despair and rage.

It is certain that Napoleon made mistakes during the war with Russia, that Alexander committed blunders in the war in India, that Caesar made mistakes in the war in Africa, that Cyrus was at fault in the war in Scythia, and that Javert blundered in this campaign against Jean Valjean. He was wrong, perhaps, in hesitating in his recognition of the exconvict. The first glance should have sufficed him. He was wrong in not arresting him purely and simply in the old building; he was wrong in not arresting him when he positively recognized him in the Rue de Pontoise. He was wrong in taking counsel with his auxiliaries in the full light of the moon in the Carrefour Rollin. Advice is certainly useful; it is a good thing to know and to interrogate those of the dogs who deserve confidence; but the hunter cannot be too cautious when he is chasing uneasy animals like the wolf and the convict. Javert, by taking too much thought as to how he should set the bloodhounds of the pack on the trail, alarmed the beast by giving him wind of the dart, and so made him run. Above all, he was wrong in that after he had picked up the scent again on the bridge of Austerlitz, he played that formidable and puerile game of keeping such a man at the end of a thread. He thought himself stronger than he was, and believed that he could play at the game of the mouse and the lion. At the same time, he reckoned himself as too weak, when he judged it necessary to obtain reinforcement. Fatal precaution, waste of precious time! Javert committed all these blunders, and none the less was one of the cleverest and most correct spies that ever existed. He was, in the full force of the term, what is called in venery a knowing dog. But what is there that is perfect?

Great strategists have their eclipses.

The greatest follies are often composed, like the largest ropes, of a multitude of strands. Take the cable thread by thread, take all the petty determining motives separately, and you can break them one after the other, and you say, “That is all there is of it!” Braid them, twist them together; the result is enormous: it is Attila hesitating between Marcian on the east and Valentinian on the west; it is Hannibal tarrying at Capua; it is Danton falling asleep at Arcis-sur-Aube.

However that may be, even at the moment when he saw that Jean Valjean had escaped him, Javert did not lose his head. Sure that the convict who had broken his ban could not be far off, he established sentinels, he organized traps and ambuscades, and beat the quarter all that night. The first thing he saw was the disorder in the street lantern whose rope had been cut. A precious sign which, however, led him astray, since it caused him to turn all his researches in the direction of the Cul-de-Sac Genrot. In this blind alley there were tolerably low walls which abutted on gardens whose bounds adjoined the immense stretches of waste land. Jean Valjean evidently must have fled in that direction. The fact is, that had he penetrated a little further in the Cul-de-Sac Genrot, he would probably have done so and have been lost. Javert explored these gardens and these waste stretches as though he had been hunting for a needle.

At daybreak he left two intelligent men on the outlook, and returned to the Prefecture of Police, as much ashamed as a police spy who had been captured by a robber might have been.

BOOK SIXTH. — LE PETIT-PICPUS

CHAPTER I — NUMBER 62 RUE PETIT-PICPUS

Nothing, half a century ago, more resembled every other carriage gate than the carriage gate of Number 62 Rue Petit-Picpus. This entrance, which usually stood ajar in the most inviting fashion, permitted a view of two things, neither of which have anything very funereal about them, — a courtyard surrounded by walls hung with vines, and the face of a lounging porter. Above the wall, at the bottom of the court, tall trees were visible. When a ray of sunlight enlivened the courtyard, when a glass of wine cheered up the porter, it was difficult to pass Number 62 Little Picpus Street without carrying away a smiling impression of it. Nevertheless, it was a sombre place of which one had had a glimpse.

The threshold smiled; the house prayed and wept.

If one succeeded in passing the porter, which was not easy, — which was even nearly impossible for every one, for there was an open sesame! which it was necessary to know, — if, the porter once passed, one entered a little vestibule on the right, on which opened a staircase shut in between two walls and so narrow that only one person could ascend it at a time, if one did not allow one's self to be alarmed by a daubing of canary yellow, with a dado of chocolate which clothed this staircase, if one ventured to ascend it, one crossed a first landing, then a second, and arrived on the first story at a corridor where the yellow wash and the chocolate-hued plinth pursued one with a peaceable persistency. Staircase and corridor were lighted by two beautiful windows. The corridor took a turn and became dark. If one doubled this cape, one arrived a few paces further on, in front of a door which was all the more mysterious because it was not fastened. If one opened it, one found one's self in a little chamber about six feet square, tiled, well-scrubbed, clean, cold, and hung with nankin paper with green flowers, at fifteen sous the roll. A white, dull light fell from a large window, with tiny panes, on the left, which usurped the whole width of the room. One gazed about, but saw no one; one listened, one heard neither a footstep nor a human murmur. The walls were bare, the chamber was not furnished; there was not even a chair.

One looked again, and beheld on the wall facing the door a quadrangular hole, about a foot square, with a grating of interlacing iron bars, black, knotted, solid, which formed squares — I had almost said meshes — of less than an inch and a half in diagonal length. The little green flowers of the nankin paper ran in a calm and orderly manner to those iron bars, without being startled or thrown into confusion by their funereal contact. Supposing that a living being had been so wonderfully thin as to essay an entrance or an exit through the square hole, this grating would have prevented it. It did not allow the passage of the body, but it did allow the passage of the eyes; that is to say, of the mind. This seems to have occurred to them, for it had been re-enforced by a sheet of tin inserted in the wall a little in the rear, and pierced with a thousand holes more microscopic than the holes of a strainer. At the bottom of this plate, an aperture had been pierced exactly similar to the orifice of a letter box. A bit of tape attached to a bell-wire hung at the right of the grated opening.

If the tape was pulled, a bell rang, and one heard a voice very near at hand, which made one start.

“Who is there?” the voice demanded.

It was a woman’s voice, a gentle voice, so gentle that it was mournful.

Here, again, there was a magical word which it was necessary to know. If one did not know it, the voice ceased, the wall became silent once more, as though the terrified obscurity of the sepulchre had been on the other side of it.

If one knew the password, the voice resumed, “Enter on the right.”

One then perceived on the right, facing the window, a glass door surmounted by a frame glazed and painted gray. On raising the latch and crossing the threshold, one experienced precisely the same impression as when one enters at the theatre into a grated baignoire, before the grating is lowered and the chandelier is lighted. One was, in fact, in a sort of theatre-box, narrow, furnished with two old chairs, and a much-frayed straw matting, sparely illuminated by the vague light from the glass door; a regular box, with its front just of a height to lean upon, bearing a tablet of black wood. This box was grated, only the grating of it was not of gilded wood, as at the opera; it was a monstrous lattice of iron bars, hideously interlaced and riveted to the wall by enormous fastenings which resembled clenched fists.

The first minutes passed; when one's eyes began to grow used to this cellar-like half-twilight, one tried to pass the grating, but got no further than six inches beyond it. There he encountered a barrier of black shutters, re-enforced and fortified with transverse beams of wood painted a gingerbread yellow. These shutters were divided into long, narrow slats, and they masked the entire length of the grating. They were always closed. At the expiration of a few moments one heard a voice proceeding from behind these shutters, and saying: —

"I am here. What do you wish with me?"

It was a beloved, sometimes an adored, voice. No one was visible. Hardly the sound of a breath was audible. It seemed as though it were a spirit which had been evoked, that was speaking to you across the walls of the tomb.

If one chanced to be within certain prescribed and very rare conditions, the slat of one of the shutters opened opposite you; the evoked spirit became an apparition. Behind the grating, behind the shutter, one perceived so far as the grating permitted sight, a head, of which only the mouth and the chin were visible; the rest was covered with a black veil. One caught a glimpse of a black guimpe, and a form that was barely defined, covered with a black shroud. That head spoke with you, but did not look at you and never smiled at you.

The light which came from behind you was adjusted in such a manner that you saw her in the white, and she saw you in the black. This light was symbolical.

Nevertheless, your eyes plunged eagerly through that opening which was made in that place shut off from all glances. A profound vagueness enveloped that form clad in mourning. Your eyes searched that vagueness, and sought to make out the surroundings of the apparition. At the expiration of a very short time you discovered that you could see nothing. What you beheld was night, emptiness, shadows, a wintry mist mingled with a vapor from the tomb, a sort of terrible peace, a silence from which you could gather nothing, not even sighs, a gloom in which you could distinguish nothing, not even phantoms.

What you beheld was the interior of a cloister.

It was the interior of that severe and gloomy edifice which was called the Convent of the Bernardines of the Perpetual Adoration. The box in which you stood was the parlor. The first voice which had addressed you was that of the portress who always sat motionless and silent, on the other side of the wall, near the square opening, screened by the iron grating and the plate with its thousand holes, as by a double visor. The obscurity which bathed the grated box arose from the fact that the parlor, which had a window on the side of the world, had none on the side of the convent. Profane eyes must see nothing of that sacred place.

Nevertheless, there was something beyond that shadow; there was a light; there was life in the midst of that death. Although this was the most strictly walled of all convents, we shall endeavor to make our way into it, and to take the reader in, and to say, without transgressing the proper bounds, things which story-tellers have never seen, and have, therefore, never described.

CHAPTER II — THE OBEDIENCE OF MARTIN VERGA

This convent, which in 1824 had already existed for many a long year in the Rue Petit-Picpus, was a community of Bernardines of the obedience of Martin Verga.

These Bernardines were attached, in consequence, not to Clairvaux, like the Bernardine monks, but to Citeaux, like the Benedictine monks. In other words, they were the subjects, not of Saint Bernard, but of Saint Benoit.

Any one who has turned over old folios to any extent knows that Martin Verga founded in 1425 a congregation of Bernardines-Benedictines, with Salamanca for the head of the order, and Alcala as the branch establishment.

This congregation had sent out branches throughout all the Catholic countries of Europe.

There is nothing unusual in the Latin Church in these grafts of one order on another. To mention only a single order of Saint-Benoit, which is here in question: there are attached to this order, without counting the obedience of Martin Verga, four congregations, — two in Italy, Mont-Cassin and Sainte-Justine of Padua; two in France, Cluny and Saint-Maur; and nine orders, — Vallombrosa, Granmont, the Celestins, the Camaldules, the Carthusians, the Humilies, the Olivateurs, the Silvestrins, and lastly, Citeaux; for Citeaux itself, a trunk for other orders, is only an offshoot of Saint-Benoit. Citeaux dates from Saint Robert, Abbé de Molesme, in the diocese of Langres, in 1098. Now it was in 529 that the devil, having retired to the desert of Subiaco — he was old — had he turned hermit? — was chased from the ancient temple of Apollo, where he dwelt, by Saint-Benoit, then aged seventeen.

After the rule of the Carmelites, who go barefoot, wear a bit of willow on their throats, and never sit down, the harshest rule is that of the Bernardines-Benedictines of Martin Verga. They are clothed in black, with a guimpe, which, in accordance with the express command of Saint-Benoit, mounts to the chin. A robe of serge with large sleeves, a large woollen veil, the guimpe which mounts to the chin cut square on the breast, the band which descends over their brow to their eyes, — this is their dress. All is black except the band, which is white. The novices wear the same habit, but all in white. The professed nuns also wear a rosary at their side.

The Bernardines-Benedictines of Martin Verga practise the Perpetual Adoration, like the Benedictines called Ladies of the Holy Sacrament, who, at the beginning of this century, had two houses in Paris, — one at the Temple, the other in the Rue Neuve-Sainte-Genevieve. However, the Bernardines-Benedictines of the Petit-Picpus, of whom we are speaking, were a totally different order from the Ladies of the Holy Sacrament, cloistered in the Rue Neuve-Sainte-Genevieve and at the Temple. There were numerous differences in their rule; there were some in their costume. The Bernardines-Benedictines of the Petit-Picpus wore the black guimpe, and the Benedictines of the Holy Sacrament and of the Rue Neuve-Sainte-Genevieve wore a white one, and had, besides, on their breasts, a Holy Sacrament about three inches long, in silver gilt or gilded copper. The nuns of the Petit-Picpus did not wear this Holy Sacrament. The Perpetual Adoration, which was common to the house of the Petit-Picpus and to the house of the Temple, leaves those two orders perfectly distinct. Their only resemblance lies in this practice of the Ladies of the Holy Sacrament and the Bernardines of Martin Verga, just as there existed a similarity in the study and the glorification of all the mysteries relating to the infancy, the life, and death of Jesus Christ and the Virgin, between the two orders, which were, nevertheless, widely separated, and on occasion even hostile. The Oratory of Italy, established at Florence by Philip de Neri, and the Oratory of France, established by Pierre de Berulle. The Oratory of France claimed the precedence, since Philip de Neri was only a saint, while Berulle was a cardinal.

Let us return to the harsh Spanish rule of Martin Verga.

The Bernardines-Benedictines of this obedience fast all the year round, abstain from meat, fast in Lent and on many other days which are peculiar to them, rise from their first sleep, from one to three o’clock in the morning, to read their breviary and chant matins, sleep in all seasons between serge sheets and on straw, make no use of the bath, never light a fire, scourge themselves every Friday, observe the rule of silence, speak to each other only during the recreation hours, which are very brief, and wear drugget chemises for six months in the year, from September 14th, which is the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, until Easter. These six months are a modification: the rule says all the year, but this drugget chemise, intolerable in the heat of summer, produced fevers and nervous spasms. The use of it had to be restricted. Even with this palliation, when the nuns put on this chemise on the 14th of September, they suffer from fever for three or four days. Obedience, poverty, chastity, perseverance in their seclusion, — these are their vows, which the rule greatly aggravates.

The prioress is elected for three years by the mothers, who are called meres vocales because they have a voice in the chapter. A prioress can only be re-elected twice, which fixes the longest possible reign of a prioress at nine years.

They never see the officiating priest, who is always hidden from them by a serge curtain nine feet in height. During the sermon, when the preacher is in the chapel, they drop their veils over their faces. They must always speak low, walk with their eyes on the ground and their heads bowed. One man only is allowed to enter the convent, — the archbishop of the diocese.

There is really one other, — the gardener. But he is always an old man, and, in order that he may always be alone in the garden, and that the nuns may be warned to avoid him, a bell is attached to his knee.

Their submission to the prioress is absolute and passive. It is the canonical subjection in the full force of its abnegation. As at the voice of Christ, ut voci Christi, at a gesture, at the first sign, ad nutum, ad primum signum, immediately, with cheerfulness, with perseverance, with a certain blind obedience, prompte, hilariter, perseveranter et caeca quadam obedientia, as the file in the hand of the workman, quasi limam in manibus fabri, without power to read or to write without express permission, legere vel scribere non addiscerit sine expressa superioris licentia.

Each one of them in turn makes what they call reparation. The reparation is the prayer for all the sins, for all the faults, for all the dissensions, for all the violations, for all the iniquities, for all the crimes committed on earth. For the space of twelve consecutive hours, from four o’clock in the afternoon till four o’clock in the morning, or from four o’clock in the morning until four o’clock in the afternoon, the sister who is making reparation remains on her knees on the stone before the Holy Sacrament, with hands clasped, a rope around her neck. When her fatigue becomes unendurable, she prostrates herself flat on her face against the earth, with her arms outstretched in the form of a cross; this is her only relief. In this attitude she prays for all the guilty in the universe. This is great to sublimity.

As this act is performed in front of a post on which burns a candle, it is called without distinction, to make reparation or to be at the post. The nuns even prefer, out of humility, this last expression, which contains an idea of torture and abasement.

To make reparation is a function in which the whole soul is absorbed. The sister at the post would not turn round were a thunderbolt to fall directly behind her.

Besides this, there is always a sister kneeling before the Holy Sacrament. This station lasts an hour. They relieve each other like soldiers on guard. This is the Perpetual Adoration.

The prioresses and the mothers almost always bear names stamped with peculiar solemnity, recalling, not the saints and martyrs, but moments in the life of Jesus Christ: as Mother Nativity, Mother Conception, Mother Presentation, Mother Passion. But the names of saints are not interdicted.

When one sees them, one never sees anything but their mouths.

All their teeth are yellow. No tooth-brush ever entered that convent. Brushing one's teeth is at the top of a ladder at whose bottom is the loss of one's soul.

They never say my. They possess nothing of their own, and they must not attach themselves to anything. They call everything our; thus: our veil, our chaplet; if they were speaking of their chemise, they would say our chemise. Sometimes they grow attached to some petty object, — to a book of hours, a relic, a medal that has been blessed. As soon as they become aware that they are growing attached to this object, they must give it up. They recall the words of Saint Therese, to whom a great lady said, as she was on the point of entering her order, "Permit me, mother, to send for a Bible to which I am greatly attached." "Ah, you are attached to something! In that case, do not enter our order!"

Every person whatever is forbidden to shut herself up, to have a place of her own, a chamber. They live with their cells open. When they meet, one says, "Blessed and adored be the most Holy Sacrament of the altar!" The other responds, "Forever." The same ceremony when one taps at the other's door. Hardly has she touched the door when a soft voice on the other side is heard to say hastily, "Forever!" Like all practices, this becomes mechanical by force of habit; and one sometimes says forever before the other has had time to say the rather long sentence, "Praised and adored be the most Holy Sacrament of the altar."

Among the Visitandines the one who enters says: “Ave Maria,” and the one whose cell is entered says, “Gratia plena.” It is their way of saying good day, which is in fact full of grace.

At each hour of the day three supplementary strokes sound from the church bell of the convent. At this signal prioress, vocal mothers, professed nuns, lay-sisters, novices, postulants, interrupt what they are saying, what they are doing, or what they are thinking, and all say in unison if it is five o’clock, for instance, “At five o’clock and at all hours praised and adored be the most Holy Sacrament of the altar!” If it is eight o’clock, “At eight o’clock and at all hours!” and so on, according to the hour.

This custom, the object of which is to break the thread of thought and to lead it back constantly to God, exists in many communities; the formula alone varies. Thus at The Infant Jesus they say, “At this hour and at every hour may the love of Jesus kindle my heart!” The Bernardines-Benedictines of Martin Verga, cloistered fifty years ago at Petit-Picpus, chant the offices to a solemn psalmody, a pure Gregorian chant, and always with full voice during the whole course of the office. Everywhere in the missal where an asterisk occurs they pause, and say in a low voice, “Jesus-Marie-Joseph.” For the office of the dead they adopt a tone so low that the voices of women can hardly descend to such a depth. The effect produced is striking and tragic.

The nuns of the Petit-Picpus had made a vault under their grand altar for the burial of their community. The Government, as they say, does not permit this vault to receive coffins so they leave the convent when they die. This is an affliction to them, and causes them consternation as an infraction of the rules.

They had obtained a mediocre consolation at best, — permission to be interred at a special hour and in a special corner in the ancient Vaugirard cemetery, which was made of land which had formerly belonged to their community.

On Fridays the nuns hear high mass, vespers, and all the offices, as on Sunday. They scrupulously observe in addition all the little festivals unknown to people of the world, of which the Church of France was so prodigal in the olden days, and of which it is still prodigal in Spain and Italy. Their stations in the chapel are interminable. As for the number and duration of their prayers we can convey no better idea of them than by quoting the ingenuous remark of one of them: “The prayers of the postulants are frightful, the prayers of the novices are still worse, and the prayers of the professed nuns are still worse.”

Once a week the chapter assembles: the prioress presides; the vocal mothers assist. Each sister kneels in turn on the stones, and confesses aloud, in the presence of all, the faults and sins which she has committed during the week. The vocal mothers consult after each confession and inflict the penance aloud.

Besides this confession in a loud tone, for which all faults in the least serious are reserved, they have for their venial offences what they call the coulpe. To make one’s coulpe means to prostrate one’s self flat on one’s face during the office in front of the prioress until the latter, who is never called anything but our mother, notifies the culprit by a slight tap of her foot against the wood of her stall that she can rise. The coulpe or peccavi, is made for a very small matter — a broken glass, a torn veil, an involuntary delay of a few seconds at an office, a false note in church, etc.; this suffices, and the coulpe is made. The coulpe is entirely spontaneous; it is the culpable person herself (the word is etymologically in its place here) who judges herself and inflicts it on herself. On festival days and Sundays four mother precentors intone the offices before a large reading-desk with four places. One day one of the mother precentors intoned a psalm beginning with Ecce, and instead of Ecce she uttered aloud the three notes do si sol; for this piece of absent-mindedness she underwent a coulpe which lasted during the whole service: what rendered the fault enormous was the fact that the chapter had laughed.

When a nun is summoned to the parlor, even were it the prioress herself, she drops her veil, as will be remembered, so that only her mouth is visible.

The prioress alone can hold communication with strangers. The others can see only their immediate family, and that very rarely. If, by chance, an outsider presents herself to see a nun, or one whom she has known and loved in the outer world, a regular series of negotiations is required. If it is a woman, the authorization may sometimes be granted; the nun comes, and they talk to her through the shutters, which are opened only for a mother or sister. It is unnecessary to say that permission is always refused to men.

Such is the rule of Saint-Benoit, aggravated by Martin Verga.

These nuns are not gay, rosy, and fresh, as the daughters of other orders often are. They are pale and grave. Between 1825 and 1830 three of them went mad.

CHAPTER III — AUSTERITIES

One is a postulant for two years at least, often for four; a novice for four. It is rare that the definitive vows can be pronounced earlier than the age of twenty-three or twenty-four years. The Bernardines-Benedictines of Martin Verga do not admit widows to their order.

In their cells, they deliver themselves up to many unknown macerations, of which they must never speak.

On the day when a novice makes her profession, she is dressed in her handsomest attire, she is crowned with white roses, her hair is brushed until it shines, and curled. Then she prostrates herself; a great black veil is thrown over her, and the office for the dead is sung. Then the nuns separate into two files; one file passes close to her, saying in plaintive accents, “Our sister is dead”; and the other file responds in a voice of ecstasy, “Our sister is alive in Jesus Christ!”

At the epoch when this story takes place, a boarding-school was attached to the convent — a boarding-school for young girls of noble and mostly wealthy families, among whom could be remarked Mademoiselle de Saint-Aulaire and de Belissen, and an English girl bearing the illustrious Catholic name of Talbot. These young girls, reared by these nuns between four walls, grew up with a horror of the world and of the age. One of them said to us one day, “The sight of the street pavement made me shudder from head to foot.” They were dressed in blue, with a white cap and a Holy Spirit of silver gilt or of copper on their breast. On certain grand festival days, particularly Saint Martha’s day, they were permitted, as a high favor and a supreme happiness, to dress themselves as nuns and to carry out the offices and practice of Saint-Benoit for a whole day. In the early days the nuns were in the habit of lending them their black garments. This seemed profane, and the prioress forbade it. Only the novices were permitted to lend. It is remarkable that these performances, tolerated and encouraged, no doubt, in the convent out of a secret spirit of proselytism and in order to give these children a foretaste of the holy habit, were a genuine happiness and a real recreation for the scholars. They simply amused themselves with it. It was new; it gave them a change. Candid reasons of childhood, which do not, however, succeed in making us worldlings comprehend the felicity of holding a holy water sprinkler in one’s hand and standing for hours together singing hard enough for four in front of a reading-desk.

The pupils conformed, with the exception of the austerities, to all the practices of the convent. There was a certain young woman who entered the world, and who after many years of married life had not succeeded in breaking herself of the habit of saying in great haste whenever any one knocked at her door, “forever!” Like the nuns, the pupils saw their relatives only in the parlor. Their very mothers did not obtain permission to embrace them. The following illustrates to what a degree severity on that point was carried. One day a young girl received a visit from her mother, who was accompanied by a little sister three years of age. The young girl wept, for she wished greatly to embrace her sister. Impossible. She begged that, at least, the child might be permitted to pass her little hand through the bars so that she could kiss it. This was almost indignantly refused.

CHAPTER IV — GAYETIES

None the less, these young girls filled this grave house with charming souvenirs.

At certain hours childhood sparkled in that cloister. The recreation hour struck. A door swung on its hinges. The birds said, “Good; here come the children!” An irruption of youth inundated that garden intersected with a cross like a shroud. Radiant faces, white foreheads, innocent eyes, full of merry light, all sorts of auroras, were scattered about amid these shadows. After the psalmodies, the bells, the peals, and knells and offices, the sound of these little girls burst forth on a sudden more sweetly than the noise of bees. The hive of joy was opened, and each one brought her honey. They played, they called to each other, they formed into groups, they ran about; pretty little white teeth chattered in the corners; the veils superintended the laughs from a distance, shades kept watch of the sunbeams, but what mattered it? Still they beamed and laughed. Those four lugubrious walls had their moment of dazzling brilliancy. They looked on, vaguely blanched with the reflection of so much joy at this sweet swarming of the hives. It was like a shower of roses falling athwart this house of mourning. The young girls frolicked beneath the eyes of the nuns; the gaze of impeccability does not embarrass innocence. Thanks to these children, there was, among so many austere hours, one hour of ingenuousness. The little ones skipped about; the elder ones danced. In this cloister play was mingled with heaven. Nothing is so delightful and so august as all these fresh, expanding young souls. Homer would have come thither to laugh with Perrault; and there was in that black garden, youth, health, noise, cries, giddiness, pleasure, happiness enough to smooth out the wrinkles of all their ancestresses, those of the epic as well as those of the fairy-tale, those of the throne as well as those of the thatched cottage from Hecuba to la Mère-Grand.

In that house more than anywhere else, perhaps, arise those children’s sayings which are so graceful and which evoke a smile that is full of thoughtfulness. It was between those four gloomy walls that a child of five years exclaimed one day: “Mother! one of the big girls has just told me that I have only nine years and ten months longer to remain here. What happiness!”

It was here, too, that this memorable dialogue took place: —

A Vocal Mother. Why are you weeping, my child?

The child (aged six). I told Alix that I knew my French history. She says that I do not know it, but I do.

Alix, the big girl (aged nine). No; she does not know it.

The Mother. How is that, my child?

Alix. She told me to open the book at random and to ask her any question in the book, and she would answer it.

"Well?"

"She did not answer it."

"Let us see about it. What did you ask her?"

"I opened the book at random, as she proposed, and I put the first question that I came across."

"And what was the question?"

"It was, 'What happened after that?'"

It was there that that profound remark was made anent a rather greedy paroquet which belonged to a lady boarder: —

"How well bred! it eats the top of the slice of bread and butter just like a person!"

It was on one of the flagstones of this cloister that there was once picked up a confession which had been written out in advance, in order that she might not forget it, by a sinner of seven years: —

"Father, I accuse myself of having been avaricious.

"Father, I accuse myself of having been an adulteress.

"Father, I accuse myself of having raised my eyes to the gentlemen."

It was on one of the turf benches of this garden that a rosy mouth six years of age improvised the following tale, which was listened to by blue eyes aged four and five years: —

"There were three little cocks who owned a country where there were a great many flowers. They plucked the flowers and put them in their pockets. After that they plucked the leaves and put them in their playthings. There was a wolf in that country; there was a great deal of forest; and the wolf was in the forest; and he ate the little cocks."

And this other poem: —

"There came a blow with a stick.

"It was Punchinello who bestowed it on the cat.

"It was not good for her; it hurt her.

"Then a lady put Punchinello in prison."

It was there that a little abandoned child, a foundling whom the convent was bringing up out of charity, uttered this sweet and heart-breaking saying. She heard the others talking of their mothers, and she murmured in her corner: —

“As for me, my mother was not there when I was born!”

There was a stout portress who could always be seen hurrying through the corridors with her bunch of keys, and whose name was Sister Agatha. The big big girls — those over ten years of age — called her Agathocles.

The refectory, a large apartment of an oblong square form, which received no light except through a vaulted cloister on a level with the garden, was dark and damp, and, as the children say, full of beasts. All the places round about furnished their contingent of insects.

Each of its four corners had received, in the language of the pupils, a special and expressive name. There was Spider corner, Caterpillar corner, Wood-louse corner, and Cricket corner.

Cricket corner was near the kitchen and was highly esteemed. It was not so cold there as elsewhere. From the refectory the names had passed to the boarding-school, and there served as in the old College Mazarin to distinguish four nations. Every pupil belonged to one of these four nations according to the corner of the refectory in which she sat at meals. One day Monseigneur the Archbishop while making his pastoral visit saw a pretty little rosy girl with beautiful golden hair enter the class-room through which he was passing.

He inquired of another pupil, a charming brunette with rosy cheeks, who stood near him: —

“Who is that?”

“She is a spider, Monseigneur.”

“Bah! And that one yonder?”

“She is a cricket.”

“And that one?”

“She is a caterpillar.”

“Really! and yourself?”

“I am a wood-louse, Monseigneur.”

Every house of this sort has its own peculiarities. At the beginning of this century Ecouen was one of those strict and graceful places where young girls pass their childhood in a shadow that is almost august. At Ecouen, in order to take rank in the procession of the Holy Sacrament, a distinction was made between virgins and florists. There were also the “dais” and the “censors,” — the first who held the cords of the dais, and the others who carried incense before the Holy Sacrament. The flowers belonged by right to the florists. Four “virgins” walked in advance. On the morning of that great day it was no rare thing to hear the question put in the dormitory, “Who is a virgin?”

Madame Campan used to quote this saying of a “little one” of seven years, to a “big girl” of sixteen, who took the head of the procession, while she, the little one, remained at the rear, “You are a virgin, but I am not.”

CHAPTER V — DISTRACTIONS

Above the door of the refectory this prayer, which was called the white Paternoster, and which possessed the property of bearing people straight to paradise, was inscribed in large black letters: —

“Little white Paternoster, which God made, which God said, which God placed in paradise. In the evening, when I went to bed, I found three angels sitting on my bed, one at the foot, two at the head, the good Virgin Mary in the middle, who told me to lie down without hesitation. The good God is my father, the good Virgin is my mother, the three apostles are my brothers, the three virgins are my sisters. The shirt in which God was born envelopes my body; Saint Margaret’s cross is written on my breast. Madame the Virgin was walking through the meadows, weeping for God, when she met M. Saint John. ‘Monsieur Saint John, whence come you?’ ‘I come from Ave Salus.’ ‘You have not seen the good God; where is he?’ ‘He is on the tree of the Cross, his feet hanging, his hands nailed, a little cap of white thorns on his head.’ Whoever shall say this thrice at eventide, thrice in the morning, shall win paradise at the last.”

In 1827 this characteristic orison had disappeared from the wall under a triple coating of daubing paint. At the present time it is finally disappearing from the memories of several who were young girls then, and who are old women now.

A large crucifix fastened to the wall completed the decoration of this refectory, whose only door, as we think we have mentioned, opened on the garden. Two narrow tables, each flanked by two wooden benches, formed two long parallel lines from one end to the other of the refectory. The walls were white, the tables were black; these two mourning colors constitute the only variety in convents. The meals were plain, and the food of the children themselves severe. A single dish of meat and vegetables combined, or salt fish — such was their luxury. This meagre fare, which was reserved for the pupils alone, was, nevertheless, an exception. The children ate in silence, under the eye of the mother whose turn it was, who, if a fly took a notion to fly or to hum against the rule, opened and shut a wooden book from time to time. This silence was seasoned with the lives of the saints, read aloud from a little pulpit with a desk, which was situated at the foot of the crucifix. The reader was one of the big girls, in weekly turn. At regular distances, on the bare tables, there were large, varnished bowls in which the pupils washed their own silver cups and knives and forks, and into which they sometimes threw some scrap of tough meat or spoiled fish; this was punished. These bowls were called ronds d'eau. The child who broke the silence "made a cross with her tongue." Where? On the ground. She licked the pavement. The dust, that end of all joys, was charged with the chastisement of those poor little rose-leaves which had been guilty of chirping.

There was in the convent a book which has never been printed except as a unique copy, and which it is forbidden to read. It is the rule of Saint-Benoit. An arcanum which no profane eye must penetrate. Nemo regulas, seu constitutiones nostras, externis communicabit.

The pupils one day succeeded in getting possession of this book, and set to reading it with avidity, a reading which was often interrupted by the fear of being caught, which caused them to close the volume precipitately.

From the great danger thus incurred they derived but a very moderate amount of pleasure. The most "interesting thing" they found were some unintelligible pages about the sins of young boys.

They played in an alley of the garden bordered with a few shabby fruit-trees. In spite of the extreme surveillance and the severity of the punishments administered, when the wind had shaken the trees, they sometimes succeeded in picking up a green apple or a spoiled apricot or an inhabited pear on the sly. I will now cede the privilege of speech to a letter which lies before me, a letter written five and twenty years ago by an old pupil, now Madame la Duchesse de —— one of the most elegant women in Paris. I quote literally: "One hides one's pear or one's apple as best one may. When one goes up stairs to put the veil on the bed before supper, one stuffs them under one's pillow and at night one eats them in bed, and when one cannot do that, one eats them in the closet." That was one of their greatest luxuries.

Once — it was at the epoch of the visit from the archbishop to the convent — one of the young girls, Mademoiselle Bouchard, who was connected with the Montmorency family, laid a wager that she would ask for a day's leave of absence — an enormity in so austere a community. The wager was accepted, but not one of those who bet believed that she would do it. When the moment came, as the archbishop was passing in front of the pupils, Mademoiselle Bouchard, to the indescribable terror of her companions, stepped out of the ranks, and said, "Monseigneur, a day's leave of absence.” Mademoiselle Bouchard was tall, blooming, with the prettiest little rosy face in the world. M. de Quelen smiled and said, “What, my dear child, a day’s leave of absence! Three days if you like. I grant you three days.” The prioress could do nothing; the archbishop had spoken. Horror of the convent, but joy of the pupil. The effect may be imagined.

This stern cloister was not so well walled off, however, but that the life of the passions of the outside world, drama, and even romance, did not make their way in. To prove this, we will confine ourselves to recording here and to briefly mentioning a real and incontestable fact, which, however, bears no reference in itself to, and is not connected by any thread whatever with the story which we are relating. We mention the fact for the sake of completing the physiognomy of the convent in the reader’s mind.

About this time there was in the convent a mysterious person who was not a nun, who was treated with great respect, and who was addressed as Madame Albertine. Nothing was known about her, save that she was mad, and that in the world she passed for dead. Beneath this history it was said there lay the arrangements of fortune necessary for a great marriage.

This woman, hardly thirty years of age, of dark complexion and tolerably pretty, had a vague look in her large black eyes. Could she see? There was some doubt about this. She glided rather than walked, she never spoke; it was not quite known whether she breathed. Her nostrils were livid and pinched as after yielding up their last sigh. To touch her hand was like touching snow. She possessed a strange spectral grace. Wherever she entered, people felt cold. One day a sister, on seeing her pass, said to another sister, “She passes for a dead woman.” “Perhaps she is one,” replied the other.

A hundred tales were told of Madame Albertine. This arose from the eternal curiosity of the pupils. In the chapel there was a gallery called L’Œil de Bœuf. It was in this gallery, which had only a circular bay, an œil de bœuf, that Madame Albertine listened to the offices. She always occupied it alone because this gallery, being on the level of the first story, the preacher or the officiating priest could be seen, which was interdicted to the nuns. One day the pulpit was occupied by a young priest of high rank, M. Le Duc de Rohan, peer of France, officer of the Red Musketeers in 1815 when he was Prince de Leon, and who died afterward, in 1830, as cardinal and Archbishop of Besancon. It was the first time that M. de Rohan had preached at the Petit-Picpus convent. Madame Albertine usually preserved perfect calmness and complete immobility during the sermons and services. That day, as soon as she caught sight of M. de Rohan, she half rose, and said, in a loud voice, amid the silence of the chapel, “Ah! Auguste!” The whole community turned their heads in amazement, the preacher raised his eyes, but Madame Albertine had relapsed into her immobility. A breath from the outer world, a flash of life, had passed for an instant across that cold and lifeless face and had then vanished, and the mad woman had become a corpse again.

Those two words, however, had set every one in the convent who had the privilege of speech to chattering. How many things were contained in that “Ah! Auguste!” what revelations! M. de Rohan’s name really was Auguste. It was evident that Madame Albertine belonged to the very highest society, since she knew M. de Rohan, and that her own rank there was of the highest, since she spoke thus familiarly of so great a lord, and that there existed between them some connection, of relationship, perhaps, but a very close one in any case, since she knew his “pet name.”

Two very severe duchesses, Mesdames de Choiseul and de Serent, often visited the community, whither they penetrated, no doubt, in virtue of the privilege Magnates mulieres, and caused great consternation in the boarding-school. When these two old ladies passed by, all the poor young girls trembled and dropped their eyes.

Moreover, M. de Rohan, quite unknown to himself, was an object of attention to the school-girls. At that epoch he had just been made, while waiting for the episcopate, vicar-general of the Archbishop of Paris. It was one of his habits to come tolerably often to celebrate the offices in the chapel of the nuns of the Petit-Picpus. Not one of the young recluses could see him, because of the serge curtain, but he had a sweet and rather shrill voice, which they had come to know and to distinguish. He had been a mousquetaire, and then, he was said to be very coquettish, that his handsome brown hair was very well dressed in a roll around his head, and that he had a broad girdle of magnificent moire, and that his black cassock was of the most elegant cut in the world. He held a great place in all these imaginations of sixteen years.

Not a sound from without made its way into the convent. But there was one year when the sound of a flute penetrated thither. This was an event, and the girls who were at school there at the time still recall it.

It was a flute which was played in the neighborhood. This flute always played the same air, an air which is very far away nowadays,— “My Zetulbe, come reign o’er my soul,” — and it was heard two or three times a day. The young girls passed hours in listening to it, the vocal mothers were upset by it, brains were busy, punishments descended in showers. This lasted for several months. The girls were all more or less in love with the unknown musician. Each one dreamed that she was Zetulbe. The sound of the flute proceeded from the direction of the Rue Droit-Mur; and they would have given anything, compromised everything, attempted anything for the sake of seeing, of catching a glance, if only for a second, of the “young man” who played that flute so deliciously, and who, no doubt, played on all these souls at the same time. There were some who made their escape by a back door, and ascended to the third story on the Rue Droit-Mur side, in order to attempt to catch a glimpse through the gaps. Impossible! One even went so far as to thrust her arm through the grating, and to wave her white handkerchief. Two were still bolder. They found means to climb on a roof, and risked their lives there, and succeeded at last in seeing “the young man.” He was an old emigre gentleman, blind and penniless, who was playing his flute in his attic, in order to pass the time.

CHAPTER VI — THE LITTLE CONVENT

In this enclosure of the Petit-Picpus there were three perfectly distinct buildings, — the Great Convent, inhabited by the nuns, the Boarding-school, where the scholars were lodged; and lastly, what was called the Little Convent. It was a building with a garden, in which lived all sorts of aged nuns of various orders, the relics of cloisters destroyed in the Revolution; a reunion of all the black, gray, and white medleys of all communities and all possible varieties; what might be called, if such a coupling of words is permissible, a sort of harlequin convent.

When the Empire was established, all these poor old dispersed and exiled women had been accorded permission to come and take shelter under the wings of the Bernardines-Benedictines. The government paid them a small pension, the ladies of the Petit-Picpus received them cordially. It was a singular pell-mell. Each followed her own rule, Sometimes the pupils of the boarding-school were allowed, as a great recreation, to pay them a visit; the result is, that all those young memories have retained among other souvenirs that of Mother Sainte-Bazile, Mother Sainte-Scolastique, and Mother Jacob.

One of these refugees found herself almost at home. She was a nun of Sainte-Aure, the only one of her order who had survived. The ancient convent of the ladies of Sainte-Aure occupied, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, this very house of the Petit-Picpus, which belonged later to the Benedictines of Martin Verga. This holy woman, too poor to wear the magnificent habit of her order, which was a white robe with a scarlet scapulary, had piously put it on a little manikin, which she exhibited with complacency and which she bequeathed to the house at her death. In 1824, only one nun of this order remained; to-day, there remains only a doll.

In addition to these worthy mothers, some old society women had obtained permission of the prioress, like Madame Albertine, to retire into the Little Convent. Among the number were Madame Beaufort d’Hautpoul and Marquise Dufresne. Another was never known in the convent except by the formidable noise which she made when she blew her nose. The pupils called her Madame Vacarmini (hubbub).

About 1820 or 1821, Madame de Genlis, who was at that time editing a little periodical publication called l’Intrepide, asked to be allowed to enter the convent of the Petit-Picpus as lady resident. The Duc d’Orleans recommended her. Uproar in the hive; the vocal-mothers were all in a flutter; Madame de Genlis had made romances. But she declared that she was the first to detest them, and then, she had reached her fierce stage of devotion. With the aid of God, and of the Prince, she entered. She departed at the end of six or eight months, alleging as a reason, that there was no shade in the garden. The nuns were delighted. Although very old, she still played the harp, and did it very well.

When she went away she left her mark in her cell. Madame de Genlis was superstitious and a Latinist. These two words furnish a tolerably good profile of her. A few years ago, there were still to be seen, pasted in the inside of a little cupboard in her cell in which she locked up her silverware and her jewels, these five lines in Latin, written with her own hand in red ink on yellow paper, and which, in her opinion, possessed the property of frightening away robbers: —

Imparibus meritis pendent tria corpora ramis:
Dismas et Gesmas, media est divina potestas;
Alta petit Dismas, infelix, infima, Gesmas;
Nos et res nostras conservet summa potestas.
Hos versus dicas, ne tu furto tua perdas.

These verses in sixth century Latin raise the question whether the two thieves of Calvary were named, as is commonly believed, Dismas and Gestas, or Dismas and Gesmas. This orthography might have confounded the pretensions put forward in the last century by the Vicomte de Gestas, of a descent from the wicked thief. However, the useful virtue attached to these verses forms an article of faith in the order of the Hospitallers.

The church of the house, constructed in such a manner as to separate the Great Convent from the Boarding-school like a veritable intrenchment, was, of course, common to the Boarding-school, the Great Convent, and the Little Convent. The public was even admitted by a sort of lazaretto entrance on the street. But all was so arranged, that none of the inhabitants of the cloister could see a face from the outside world. Suppose a church whose choir is grasped in a gigantic hand, and folded in such a manner as to form, not, as in ordinary churches, a prolongation behind the altar, but a sort of hall, or obscure cellar, to the right of the officiating priest; suppose this hall to be shut off by a curtain seven feet in height, of which we have already spoken; in the shadow of that curtain, pile up on wooden stalls the nuns in the choir on the left, the school-girls on the right, the lay-sisters and the novices at the bottom, and you will have some idea of the nuns of the Petit-Picpus assisting at divine service. That cavern, which was called the choir, communicated with the cloister by a lobby. The church was lighted from the garden. When the nuns were present at services where their rule enjoined silence, the public was warned of their presence only by the folding seats of the stalls noisily rising and falling.

CHAPTER VII — SOME SILHOUETTES OF THIS DARKNESS

During the six years which separate 1819 from 1825, the prioress of the Petit-Picpus was Mademoiselle de Blemeur, whose name, in religion, was Mother Innocente. She came of the family of Marguerite de Blemeur, author of Lives of the Saints of the Order of Saint-Benoit. She had been re-elected. She was a woman about sixty years of age, short, thick, "singing like a cracked pot," says the letter which we have already quoted; an excellent woman, moreover, and the only merry one in the whole convent, and for that reason adored. She was learned, erudite, wise, competent, curiously proficient in history, crammed with Latin, stuffed with Greek, full of Hebrew, and more of a Benedictine monk than a Benedictine nun.

The sub-prioress was an old Spanish nun, Mother Cineres, who was almost blind.

The most esteemed among the vocal mothers were Mother Sainte-Honorine; the treasurer, Mother Sainte-Gertrude, the chief mistress of the novices; Mother-Saint-Ange, the assistant mistress; Mother Annonciation, the sacristan; Mother Saint-Augustin, the nurse, the only one in the convent who was malicious; then Mother Sainte-Mechtilde (Mademoiselle Gauvain), very young and with a beautiful voice; Mother des Anges (Mademoiselle Drouet), who had been in the convent of the Filles-Dieu, and in the convent du Tresor, between Gisors and Magny; Mother Saint-Joseph (Mademoiselle de Cogolludo), Mother Sainte-Adelaide (Mademoiselle d'Auverney), Mother Misericorde (Mademoiselle de Cifuentes, who could not resist austerities), Mother Compassion (Mademoiselle de la Miltière, received at the age of sixty in defiance of the rule, and very wealthy); Mother Providence (Mademoiselle de Laudiniere), Mother Presentation (Mademoiselle de Siguenza), who was prioress in 1847; and finally, Mother Sainte-Celigne (sister of the sculptor Ceracchi), who went mad; Mother Sainte-Chantal (Mademoiselle de Suzon), who went mad.

There was also, among the prettiest of them, a charming girl of three and twenty, who was from the Isle de Bourbon, a descendant of the Chevalier

Roze, whose name had been Mademoiselle Roze, and who was called Mother Assumption.

Mother Sainte-Mechtilde, intrusted with the singing and the choir, was fond of making use of the pupils in this quarter. She usually took a complete scale of them, that is to say, seven, from ten to sixteen years of age, inclusive, of assorted voices and sizes, whom she made sing standing, drawn up in a line, side by side, according to age, from the smallest to the largest. This presented to the eye, something in the nature of a reed-pipe of young girls, a sort of living Pan-pipe made of angels.

Those of the lay-sisters whom the scholars loved most were Sister Euphrasie, Sister Sainte-Marguerite, Sister Sainte-Marthe, who was in her dotage, and Sister Sainte-Michel, whose long nose made them laugh.

All these women were gentle with the children. The nuns were severe only towards themselves. No fire was lighted except in the school, and the food was choice compared to that in the convent. Moreover, they lavished a thousand cares on their scholars. Only, when a child passed near a nun and addressed her, the nun never replied.

This rule of silence had had this effect, that throughout the whole convent, speech had been withdrawn from human creatures, and bestowed on inanimate objects. Now it was the church-bell which spoke, now it was the gardener's bell. A very sonorous bell, placed beside the portress, and which was audible throughout the house, indicated by its varied peals, which formed a sort of acoustic telegraph, all the actions of material life which were to be performed, and summoned to the parlor, in case of need, such or such an inhabitant of the house. Each person and each thing had its own peal. The prioress had one and one, the sub-prioress one and two. Six-five announced lessons, so that the pupils never said "to go to lessons," but "to go to six-five." Four-four was Madame de Genlis's signal. It was very often heard. "C'est le diable a quatre," — it's the very deuce — said the uncharitable. Tennine strokes announced a great event. It was the opening of the door of seclusion, a frightful sheet of iron bristling with bolts which only turned on its hinges in the presence of the archbishop.

With the exception of the archbishop and the gardener, no man entered the convent, as we have already said. The schoolgirls saw two others: one, the chaplain, the Abbé Banes, old and ugly, whom they were permitted to contemplate in the choir, through a grating; the other the drawing-master,

M. Ansiaux, whom the letter, of which we have perused a few lines, calls M. Anciot, and describes as a frightful old hunchback.

It will be seen that all these men were carefully chosen.

Such was this curious house.

CHAPTER VIII — POST CORDA LAPIDES

After having sketched its moral face, it will not prove unprofitable to point out, in a few words, its material configuration. The reader already has some idea of it.

The convent of the Petit-Picpus-Sainte-Antoine filled almost the whole of the vast trapezium which resulted from the intersection of the Rue Polonceau, the Rue Droit-Mur, the Rue Petit-Picpus, and the unused lane, called Rue Aumarais on old plans. These four streets surrounded this trapezium like a moat. The convent was composed of several buildings and a garden. The principal building, taken in its entirety, was a juxtaposition of hybrid constructions which, viewed from a bird's-eye view, outlined, with considerable exactness, a gibbet laid flat on the ground. The main arm of the gibbet occupied the whole of the fragment of the Rue Droit-Mur comprised between the Rue Petit-Picpus and the Rue Polonceau; the lesser arm was a lofty, gray, severe grated facade which faced the Rue Petit-Picpus; the carriage entrance No. 62 marked its extremity. Towards the centre of this facade was a low, arched door, whitened with dust and ashes, where the spiders wove their webs, and which was open only for an hour or two on Sundays, and on rare occasions, when the coffin of a nun left the convent. This was the public entrance of the church. The elbow of the gibbet was a square hall which was used as the servants' hall, and which the nuns called the buttery. In the main arm were the cells of the mothers, the sisters, and the novices. In the lesser arm lay the kitchens, the refectory, backed up by the cloisters and the church. Between the door No. 62 and the corner of the closed lane Aumarais, was the school, which was not visible from without. The remainder of the trapezium formed the garden, which was much lower than the level of the Rue Polonceau, which caused the walls to be very much higher on the inside than on the outside. The garden, which was slightly arched, had in its centre, on the summit of a hillock, a fine pointed and conical fir-tree, whence ran, as from the peaked boss of a shield, four grand alleys, and, ranged by twos in between the branchings of these, eight small ones, so that, if the enclosure had been circular, the geometrical plan of the alleys would have resembled a cross superposed on a wheel. As the alleys all ended in the very irregular walls of the garden, they were of unequal length. They were bordered with currant bushes. At the bottom, an alley of tall poplars ran from the ruins of the old convent, which was at the angle of the Rue Droit-Mur to the house of the Little Convent, which was at the angle of the Aumarais lane. In front of the Little Convent was what was called the little garden. To this whole, let the reader add a courtyard, all sorts of varied angles formed by the interior buildings, prison walls, the long black line of roofs which bordered the other side of the Rue Polonceau for its sole perspective and neighborhood, and he will be able to form for himself a complete image of what the house of the Bernardines of the Petit-Picpus was forty years ago. This holy house had been built on the precise site of a famous tennis-ground of the fourteenth to the sixteenth century, which was called the “tennis-ground of the eleven thousand devils.”

All these streets, moreover, were more ancient than Paris. These names, Droit-Mur and Aumarais, are very ancient; the streets which bear them are very much more ancient still. Aumarais Lane was called Maugout Lane; the Rue Droit-Mur was called the Rue des Eglantiers, for God opened flowers before man cut stones.

CHAPTER IX — A CENTURY UNDER A GUIMPE

Since we are engaged in giving details as to what the convent of the Petit-Picpus was in former times, and since we have ventured to open a window on that discreet retreat, the reader will permit us one other little digression, utterly foreign to this book, but characteristic and useful, since it shows that the cloister even has its original figures.

In the Little Convent there was a centenarian who came from the Abbéy of Fontevrault. She had even been in society before the Revolution. She talked a great deal of M. de Miromesnil, Keeper of the Seals under Louis XVI. and of a Présidentess Duplat, with whom she had been very intimate. It was her pleasure and her vanity to drag in these names on every pretext. She told wonders of the Abbéy of Fontevrault, — that it was like a city, and that there were streets in the monastery.

She talked with a Picard accent which amused the pupils. Every year, she solemnly renewed her vows, and at the moment of taking the oath, she said to the priest, “Monseigneur Saint-Francois gave it to Monseigneur Saint-Julien, Monseigneur Saint-Julien gave it to Monseigneur Saint-Eusebius, Monseigneur Saint-Eusebius gave it to Monseigneur Saint-Procopius, etc., etc.; and thus I give it to you, father.” And the school-girls would begin to laugh, not in their sleeves, but under their veils; charming little stifled laughs which made the vocal mothers frown.

On another occasion, the centenarian was telling stories. She said that in her youth the Bernardine monks were every whit as good as the mousquetaires. It was a century which spoke through her, but it was the eighteenth century. She told about the custom of the four wines, which existed before the Revolution in Champagne and Bourgogne. When a great personage, a marshal of France, a prince, a duke, and a peer, traversed a town in Burgundy or Champagne, the city fathers came out to harangue him and presented him with four silver gondolas into which they had poured four different sorts of wine. On the first goblet this inscription could be read, monkey wine; on the second, lion wine; on the third, sheep wine; on the fourth, hog wine. These four legends express the four stages descended by the drunkard; the first, intoxication, which enlivens; the second, that which irritates; the third, that which dulls; and the fourth, that which brutalizes.

In a cupboard, under lock and key, she kept a mysterious object of which she thought a great deal. The rule of Fontevrault did not forbid this. She would not show this object to anyone. She shut herself up, which her rule allowed her to do, and hid herself, every time that she desired to contemplate it. If she heard a footstep in the corridor, she closed the cupboard again as hastily as it was possible with her aged hands. As soon as it was mentioned to her, she became silent, she who was so fond of talking. The most curious were baffled by her silence and the most tenacious by her obstinacy. Thus it furnished a subject of comment for all those who were unoccupied or bored in the convent. What could that treasure of the centenarian be, which was so precious and so secret? Some holy book, no doubt? Some unique chaplet? Some authentic relic? They lost themselves in conjectures. When the poor old woman died, they rushed to her cupboard more hastily than was fitting, perhaps, and opened it. They found the object beneath a triple linen cloth, like some consecrated paten. It was a Faenza platter representing little Loves flitting away pursued by apothecary lads armed with enormous syringes. The chase abounds in grimaces and in comical postures. One of the charming little Loves is already fairly spitted. He is resisting, fluttering his tiny wings, and still making an effort to fly, but the dancer is laughing with a satanical air. Moral: Love conquered by the colic. This platter, which is very curious, and which had, possibly, the honor of furnishing Moliere with an idea, was still in existence in September, 1845; it was for sale by a bric-a-brac merchant in the Boulevard Beaumarchais.

This good old woman would not receive any visits from outside because, said she, the parlor is too gloomy.

CHAPTER X — ORIGIN OF THE PERPETUAL ADORATION

However, this almost sepulchral parlor, of which we have sought to convey an idea, is a purely local trait which is not reproduced with the same severity in other convents. At the convent of the Rue du Temple, in particular, which belonged, in truth, to another order, the black shutters were replaced by brown curtains, and the parlor itself was a salon with a polished wood floor, whose windows were draped in white muslin curtains and whose walls admitted all sorts of frames, a portrait of a Benedictine nun with unveiled face, painted bouquets, and even the head of a Turk.

It is in that garden of the Temple convent, that stood that famous chestnut-tree which was renowned as the finest and the largest in France, and which bore the reputation among the good people of the eighteenth century of being the father of all the chestnut trees of the realm.

As we have said, this convent of the Temple was occupied by Benedictines of the Perpetual Adoration, Benedictines quite different from those who depended on Citeaux. This order of the Perpetual Adoration is not very ancient and does not go back more than two hundred years. In 1649 the holy sacrament was profaned on two occasions a few days apart, in two churches in Paris, at Saint-Sulpice and at Saint-Jean en Greve, a rare and frightful sacrilege which set the whole town in an uproar. M. the Prior and Vicar-General of Saint-Germain des Pres ordered a solemn procession of all his clergy, in which the Pope’s Nuncio officiated. But this expiation did not satisfy two sainted women, Madame Courtin, Marquise de Boucs, and the Comtesse de Chateauvieux. This outrage committed on “the most holy sacrament of the altar,” though but temporary, would not depart from these holy souls, and it seemed to them that it could only be extenuated by a “Perpetual Adoration” in some female monastery. Both of them, one in 1652, the other in 1653, made donations of notable sums to Mother Catherine de Bar, called of the Holy Sacrament, a Benedictine nun, for the purpose of founding, to this pious end, a monastery of the order of Saint-Benoit; the first permission for this foundation was given to Mother Catherine de Bar by M. de Metz, Abbé of Saint-Germain, “on condition that no woman could be received unless she contributed three hundred livres income, which amounts to six thousand livres, to the principal.” After the Abbé of Saint-Germain, the king accorded letters-patent; and all the rest, abbatial charter, and royal letters, was confirmed in 1654 by the Chamber of Accounts and the Parliament.

Such is the origin of the legal consecration of the establishment of the Benedictines of the Perpetual Adoration of the Holy Sacrament at Paris. Their first convent was “a new building” in the Rue Cassette, out of the contributions of Mesdames de Boucs and de Chateauvieux.

This order, as it will be seen, was not to be confounded with the Benedictine nuns of Citeaux. It mounted back to the Abbé of Saint-Germain des Pres, in the same manner that the ladies of the Sacred Heart go back to the general of the Jesuits, and the sisters of charity to the general of the Lazarists.

It was also totally different from the Bernardines of the Petit-Picpus, whose interior we have just shown. In 1657, Pope Alexander VII. had authorized, by a special brief, the Bernardines of the Rue Petit-Picpus, to practise the Perpetual Adoration like the Benedictine nuns of the Holy Sacrament. But the two orders remained distinct none the less.

CHAPTER XI — END OF THE PETIT-PICPUS

At the beginning of the Restoration, the convent of the Petit-Picpus was in its decay; this forms a part of the general death of the order, which, after the eighteenth century, has been disappearing like all the religious orders. Contemplation is, like prayer, one of humanity's needs; but, like everything which the Revolution touched, it will be transformed, and from being hostile to social progress, it will become favorable to it.

The house of the Petit-Picpus was becoming rapidly depopulated. In 1840, the Little Convent had disappeared, the school had disappeared. There were no longer any old women, nor young girls; the first were dead, the latter had taken their departure. Volaverunt.

The rule of the Perpetual Adoration is so rigid in its nature that it alarms, vocations recoil before it, the order receives no recruits. In 1845, it still obtained lay-sisters here and there. But of professed nuns, none at all. Forty years ago, the nuns numbered nearly a hundred; fifteen years ago there were not more than twenty-eight of them. How many are there to-day? In 1847, the prioress was young, a sign that the circle of choice was restricted. She was not forty years old. In proportion as the number diminishes, the fatigue increases, the service of each becomes more painful; the moment could then be seen drawing near when there would be but a dozen bent and aching shoulders to bear the heavy rule of Saint-Benoit. The burden is implacable, and remains the same for the few as for the many. It weighs down, it crushes. Thus they die. At the period when the author of this book still lived in Paris, two died. One was twenty-five years old, the other twenty-three. This latter can say, like Julia Alpinula: "Hic jaceo. Vixi annos viginti et tres." It is in consequence of this decay that the convent gave up the education of girls.

We have not felt able to pass before this extraordinary house without entering it, and without introducing the minds which accompany us, and which are listening to our tale, to the profit of some, perchance, of the melancholy history of Jean Valjean. We have penetrated into this community, full of those old practices which seem so novel to-day. It is the closed garden, hortus conclusus. We have spoken of this singular place in detail, but with respect, in so far, at least, as detail and respect are compatible. We do not understand all, but we insult nothing. We are equally far removed from the hosanna of Joseph de Maistre, who wound up by anointing the executioner, and from the sneer of Voltaire, who even goes so far as to ridicule the cross.

An illogical act on Voltaire’s part, we may remark, by the way; for Voltaire would have defended Jesus as he defended Calas; and even for those who deny superhuman incarnations, what does the crucifix represent? The assassinated sage.

In this nineteenth century, the religious idea is undergoing a crisis. People are unlearning certain things, and they do well, provided that, while unlearning them they learn this: There is no vacuum in the human heart. Certain demolitions take place, and it is well that they do, but on condition that they are followed by reconstructions.

In the meantime, let us study things which are no more. It is necessary to know them, if only for the purpose of avoiding them. The counterfeits of the past assume false names, and gladly call themselves the future. This spectre, this past, is given to falsifying its own passport. Let us inform ourselves of the trap. Let us be on our guard. The past has a visage, superstition, and a mask, hypocrisy. Let us denounce the visage and let us tear off the mask.

As for convents, they present a complex problem, — a question of civilization, which condemns them; a question of liberty, which protects them.

BOOK SEVENTH. — PARENTHESIS

CHAPTER I — THE CONVENT AS AN ABSTRACT IDEA

This book is a drama, whose leading personage is the Infinite.

Man is the second.

Such being the case, and a convent having happened to be on our road, it has been our duty to enter it. Why? Because the convent, which is common to the Orient as well as to the Occident, to antiquity as well as to modern times, to paganism, to Buddhism, to Mahometanism, as well as to Christianity, is one of the optical apparatuses applied by man to the Infinite.

This is not the place for enlarging disproportionately on certain ideas; nevertheless, while absolutely maintaining our reserves, our restrictions, and even our indignations, we must say that every time we encounter man in the Infinite, either well or ill understood, we feel ourselves overpowered with respect. There is, in the synagogue, in the mosque, in the pagoda, in the wigwam, a hideous side which we execrate, and a sublime side, which we adore. What a contemplation for the mind, and what endless food for thought, is the reverberation of God upon the human wall!

CHAPTER II — THE CONVENT AS AN HISTORICAL FACT

From the point of view of history, of reason, and of truth, monasticism is condemned. Monasteries, when they abound in a nation, are clogs in its circulation, cumbrous establishments, centres of idleness where centres of labor should exist. Monastic communities are to the great social community what the mistletoe is to the oak, what the wart is to the human body. Their prosperity and their fatness mean the impoverishment of the country. The monastic regime, good at the beginning of civilization, useful in the reduction of the brutal by the spiritual, is bad when peoples have reached their manhood. Moreover, when it becomes relaxed, and when it enters into its period of disorder, it becomes bad for the very reasons which rendered it salutary in its period of purity, because it still continues to set the example.

Claustration has had its day. Cloisters, useful in the early education of modern civilization, have embarrassed its growth, and are injurious to its development. So far as institution and formation with relation to man are concerned, monasteries, which were good in the tenth century, questionable in the fifteenth, are detestable in the nineteenth. The leprosy of monasticism has gnawed nearly to a skeleton two wonderful nations, Italy and Spain; the one the light, the other the splendor of Europe for centuries; and, at the present day, these two illustrious peoples are but just beginning to convalesce, thanks to the healthy and vigorous hygiene of 1789 alone.

The convent — the ancient female convent in particular, such as it still presents itself on the threshold of this century, in Italy, in Austria, in Spain — is one of the most sombre concretions of the Middle Ages. The cloister, that cloister, is the point of intersection of horrors. The Catholic cloister, properly speaking, is wholly filled with the black radiance of death.

The Spanish convent is the most funereal of all. There rise, in obscurity, beneath vaults filled with gloom, beneath domes vague with shadow, massive altars of Babel, as high as cathedrals; there immense white crucifixes hang from chains in the dark; there are extended, all nude on the ebony, great Christs of ivory; more than bleeding, — bloody; hideous and magnificent, with their elbows displaying the bones, their knee-pans showing their integuments, their wounds showing their flesh, crowned with silver thorns, nailed with nails of gold, with blood drops of rubies on their brows, and diamond tears in their eyes. The diamonds and rubies seem wet, and make veiled beings in the shadow below weep, their sides bruised with the hair shirt and their iron-tipped scourges, their breasts crushed with wicker hurdles, their knees excoriated with prayer; women who think themselves wives, spectres who think themselves seraphim. Do these women think? No. Have they any will? No. Do they love? No. Do they live? No. Their nerves have turned to bone; their bones have turned to stone. Their veil is of woven night. Their breath under their veil resembles the indescribably tragic respiration of death. The abbess, a spectre, sanctifies them and terrifies them. The immaculate one is there, and very fierce. Such are the ancient monasteries of Spain. Liars of terrible devotion, caverns of virgins, ferocious places.

Catholic Spain is more Roman than Rome herself. The Spanish convent was, above all others, the Catholic convent. There was a flavor of the Orient about it. The archbishop, the kislar-aga of heaven, locked up and kept watch over this seraglio of souls reserved for God. The nun was the odalisque, the priest was the eunuch. The fervent were chosen in dreams and possessed Christ. At night, the beautiful, nude young man descended from the cross and became the ecstasy of the cloistered one. Lofty walls guarded the mystic sultana, who had the crucified for her sultan, from all living distraction. A glance on the outer world was infidelity. The in pace replaced the leather sack. That which was cast into the sea in the East was thrown into the ground in the West. In both quarters, women wrung their hands; the waves for the first, the grave for the last; here the drowned, there the buried. Monstrous parallel.

To-day the upholders of the past, unable to deny these things, have adopted the expedient of smiling at them. There has come into fashion a strange and easy manner of suppressing the revelations of history, of invalidating the commentaries of philosophy, of eliding all embarrassing facts and all gloomy questions. A matter for declamations, say the clever. Declamations, repeat the foolish. Jean-Jacques a declaimer; Diderot a declaimer; Voltaire on Calas, Labarre, and Sirven, declaimers. I know not who has recently discovered that Tacitus was a declaimer, that Nero was a victim, and that pity is decidedly due to “that poor Holofernes.”

Facts, however, are awkward things to disconcert, and they are obstinate. The author of this book has seen, with his own eyes, eight leagues distant from Brussels, — there are relics of the Middle Ages there which are attainable for everybody, — at the Abbéy of Villers, the hole of the oubliettes, in the middle of the field which was formerly the courtyard of the cloister, and on the banks of the Thil, four stone dungeons, half under ground, half under the water. They were in pace. Each of these dungeons has the remains of an iron door, a vault, and a grated opening which, on the outside, is two feet above the level of the river, and on the inside, six feet above the level of the ground. Four feet of river flow past along the outside wall. The ground is always soaked. The occupant of the in pace had this wet soil for his bed. In one of these dungeons, there is a fragment of an iron necklet riveted to the wall; in another, there can be seen a square box made of four slabs of granite, too short for a person to lie down in, too low for him to stand upright in. A human being was put inside, with a coverlid of stone on top. This exists. It can be seen. It can be touched. These in pace, these dungeons, these iron hinges, these necklets, that lofty peep-hole on a level with the river's current, that box of stone closed with a lid of granite like a tomb, with this difference, that the dead man here was a living being, that soil which is but mud, that vault hole, those oozing walls, — what declaimers!

CHAPTER III — ON WHAT CONDITIONS ONE CAN RESPECT THE PAST

Monasticism, such as it existed in Spain, and such as it still exists in Thibet, is a sort of phthisis for civilization. It stops life short. It simply depopulates. Claustration, castration. It has been the scourge of Europe. Add to this the violence so often done to the conscience, the forced vocations, feudalism bolstered up by the cloister, the right of the first-born pouring the excess of the family into monasticism, the ferocities of which we have just spoken, the in pace, the closed mouths, the walled-up brains, so many unfortunate minds placed in the dungeon of eternal vows, the taking of the habit, the interment of living souls. Add individual tortures to national degradations, and, whoever you may be, you will shudder before the frock and the veil, — those two winding-sheets of human devising. Nevertheless, at certain points and in certain places, in spite of philosophy, in spite of progress, the spirit of the cloister persists in the midst of the nineteenth century, and a singular ascetic recrudescence is, at this moment, astonishing the civilized world. The obstinacy of antiquated institutions in perpetuating themselves resembles the stubbornness of the rancid perfume which should claim our hair, the pretensions of the spoiled fish which should persist in being eaten, the persecution of the child's garment which should insist on clothing the man, the tenderness of corpses which should return to embrace the living.

"Ingrates!" says the garment, "I protected you in inclement weather. Why will you have nothing to do with me?" "I have just come from the deep sea," says the fish. "I have been a rose," says the perfume. "I have loved you," says the corpse. "I have civilized you," says the convent.

To this there is but one reply: "In former days."

To dream of the indefinite prolongation of defunct things, and of the government of men by embalming, to restore dogmas in a bad condition, to regild shrines, to patch up cloisters, to rebless reliquaries, to refurnish superstitions, to revictual fanaticisms, to put new handles on holy water brushes and militarism, to reconstitute monasticism and militarism, to believe in the salvation of society by the multiplication of parasites, to force the past on the present, — this seems strange. Still, there are theorists who hold such theories. These theorists, who are in other respects people of intelligence, have a very simple process; they apply to the past a glazing which they call social order, divine right, morality, family, the respect of elders, antique authority, sacred tradition, legitimacy, religion; and they go about shouting, “Look! take this, honest people.” This logic was known to the ancients. The soothsayers practise it. They rubbed a black heifer over with chalk, and said, “She is white, Bos cretatus.”

As for us, we respect the past here and there, and we spare it, above all, provided that it consents to be dead. If it insists on being alive, we attack it, and we try to kill it.

Superstitions, bigotries, affected devotion, prejudices, those forms all forms as they are, are tenacious of life; they have teeth and nails in their smoke, and they must be clasped close, body to body, and war must be made on them, and that without truce; for it is one of the fatalities of humanity to be condemned to eternal combat with phantoms. It is difficult to seize darkness by the throat, and to hurl it to the earth.

A convent in France, in the broad daylight of the nineteenth century, is a college of owls facing the light. A cloister, caught in the very act of asceticism, in the very heart of the city of ‘89 and of 1830 and of 1848, Rome blossoming out in Paris, is an anachronism. In ordinary times, in order to dissolve an anachronism and to cause it to vanish, one has only to make it spell out the date. But we are not in ordinary times.

Let us fight.

Let us fight, but let us make a distinction. The peculiar property of truth is never to commit excesses. What need has it of exaggeration? There is that which it is necessary to destroy, and there is that which it is simply necessary to elucidate and examine. What a force is kindly and serious examination! Let us not apply a flame where only a light is required.

So, given the nineteenth century, we are opposed, as a general proposition, and among all peoples, in Asia as well as in Europe, in India as well as in Turkey, to ascetic claustration. Whoever says cloister, says marsh. Their putrescence is evident, their stagnation is unhealthy, their fermentation infects people with fever, and etiolates them; their multiplication becomes a plague of Egypt. We cannot think without affright of those lands where fakirs, bonzes, santons, Greek monks, marabouts, talapoins, and dervishes multiply even like swarms of vermin.

This said, the religious question remains. This question has certain mysterious, almost formidable sides; may we be permitted to look at it fixedly.

CHAPTER IV — THE CONVENT FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF PRINCIPLES

Men unite themselves and dwell in communities. By virtue of what right? By virtue of the right of association.

They shut themselves up at home. By virtue of what right? By virtue of the right which every man has to open or shut his door.

They do not come forth. By virtue of what right? By virtue of the right to go and come, which implies the right to remain at home.

There, at home, what do they do?

They speak in low tones; they drop their eyes; they toil. They renounce the world, towns, sensualities, pleasures, vanities, pride, interests. They are clothed in coarse woollen or coarse linen. Not one of them possesses in his own right anything whatever. On entering there, each one who was rich makes himself poor. What he has, he gives to all. He who was what is called noble, a gentleman and a lord, is the equal of him who was a peasant. The cell is identical for all. All undergo the same tonsure, wear the same frock, eat the same black bread, sleep on the same straw, die on the same ashes. The same sack on their backs, the same rope around their loins. If the decision has been to go barefoot, all go barefoot. There may be a prince among them; that prince is the same shadow as the rest. No titles. Even family names have disappeared. They bear only first names. All are bowed beneath the equality of baptismal names. They have dissolved the carnal family, and constituted in their community a spiritual family. They have no other relatives than all men. They succor the poor, they care for the sick. They elect those whom they obey. They call each other “my brother.”

You stop me and exclaim, “But that is the ideal convent!”

It is sufficient that it may be the possible convent, that I should take notice of it.

Thence it results that, in the preceding book, I have spoken of a convent with respectful accents. The Middle Ages cast aside, Asia cast aside, the historical and political question held in reserve, from the purely philosophical point of view, outside the requirements of militant policy, on condition that the monastery shall be absolutely a voluntary matter and shall contain only consenting parties, I shall always consider a cloistered community with a certain attentive, and, in some respects, a deferential gravity.

Wherever there is a community, there is a commune; where there is a commune, there is right. The monastery is the product of the formula: Equality, Fraternity. Oh! how grand is liberty! And what a splendid transfiguration! Liberty suffices to transform the monastery into a republic.

Let us continue.

But these men, or these women who are behind these four walls. They dress themselves in coarse woollen, they are equals, they call each other brothers, that is well; but they do something else?

Yes.

What?

They gaze on the darkness, they kneel, and they clasp their hands.

What does this signify?

CHAPTER V — PRAYER

They pray.

To whom?

To God.

To pray to God, — what is the meaning of these words?

Is there an infinite beyond us? Is that infinite there, inherent, permanent; necessarily substantial, since it is infinite; and because, if it lacked matter it would be bounded; necessarily intelligent, since it is infinite, and because, if it lacked intelligence, it would end there? Does this infinite awaken in us the idea of essence, while we can attribute to ourselves only the idea of existence? In other terms, is it not the absolute, of which we are only the relative?

At the same time that there is an infinite without us, is there not an infinite within us? Are not these two infinites (what an alarming plural!) superposed, the one upon the other? Is not this second infinite, so to speak, subjacent to the first? Is it not the latter's mirror, reflection, echo, an abyss which is concentric with another abyss? Is this second infinity intelligent also? Does it think? Does it love? Does it will? If these two infinities are intelligent, each of them has a will principle, and there is an *I* in the upper infinity as there is an *I* in the lower infinity. The *I* below is the soul; the *I* on high is God.

To place the infinity here below in contact, by the medium of thought, with the infinity on high, is called praying.

Let us take nothing from the human mind; to suppress is bad. We must reform and transform. Certain faculties in man are directed towards the Unknown; thought, revery, prayer. The Unknown is an ocean. What is conscience? It is the compass of the Unknown. Thought, revery, prayer, — these are great and mysterious radiations. Let us respect them. Whither go these majestic irradiations of the soul? Into the shadow; that is to say, to the light.

The grandeur of democracy is to disown nothing and to deny nothing of humanity. Close to the right of the man, beside it, at the least, there exists the right of the soul.

To crush fanaticism and to venerate the infinite, such is the law. Let us not confine ourselves to prostrating ourselves before the tree of creation, and to the contemplation of its branches full of stars. We have a duty to labor over the human soul, to defend the mystery against the miracle, to adore the incomprehensible and reject the absurd, to admit, as an inexplicable fact, only what is necessary, to purify belief, to remove superstitions from above religion; to clear God of caterpillars.

CHAPTER VI — THE ABSOLUTE GOODNESS OF PRAYER

With regard to the modes of prayer, all are good, provided that they are sincere. Turn your book upside down and be in the infinite.

There is, as we know, a philosophy which denies the infinite. There is also a philosophy, pathologically classified, which denies the sun; this philosophy is called blindness.

To erect a sense which we lack into a source of truth, is a fine blind man’s self-sufficiency.

The curious thing is the haughty, superior, and compassionate airs which this groping philosophy assumes towards the philosophy which beholds God. One fancies he hears a mole crying, “I pity them with their sun!”

There are, as we know, powerful and illustrious atheists. At bottom, led back to the truth by their very force, they are not absolutely sure that they are atheists; it is with them only a question of definition, and in any case, if they do not believe in God, being great minds, they prove God.

We salute them as philosophers, while inexorably denouncing their philosophy.

Let us go on.

The remarkable thing about it is, also, their facility in paying themselves off with words. A metaphysical school of the North, impregnated to some extent with fog, has fancied that it has worked a revolution in human understanding by replacing the word Force with the word Will.

To say: “the plant wills,” instead of: “the plant grows”: this would be fecund in results, indeed, if we were to add: “the universe wills.” Why? Because it would come to this: the plant wills, therefore it has an *I*; the universe wills, therefore it has a God.

As for us, who, however, in contradistinction to this school, reject nothing a priori, a will in the plant, accepted by this school, appears to us more difficult to admit than a will in the universe denied by it.

To deny the will of the infinite, that is to say, God, is impossible on any other conditions than a denial of the infinite. We have demonstrated this.

The negation of the infinite leads straight to nihilism. Everything becomes “a mental conception.”

With nihilism, no discussion is possible; for the nihilist logic doubts the existence of its interlocutor, and is not quite sure that it exists itself.

From its point of view, it is possible that it may be for itself, only “a mental conception.”

Only, it does not perceive that all which it has denied it admits in the lump, simply by the utterance of the word, mind.

In short, no way is open to the thought by a philosophy which makes all end in the monosyllable, No.

To No there is only one reply, Yes.

Nihilism has no point.

There is no such thing as nothingness. Zero does not exist. Everything is something. Nothing is nothing.

Man lives by affirmation even more than by bread.

Even to see and to show does not suffice. Philosophy should be an energy; it should have for effort and effect to ameliorate the condition of man. Socrates should enter into Adam and produce Marcus Aurelius; in other words, the man of wisdom should be made to emerge from the man of felicity. Eden should be changed into a Lyceum. Science should be a cordial. To enjoy, — what a sad aim, and what a paltry ambition! The brute enjoys. To offer thought to the thirst of men, to give them all as an elixir the notion of God, to make conscience and science fraternize in them, to render them just by this mysterious confrontation; such is the function of real philosophy. Morality is a blossoming out of truths. Contemplation leads to action. The absolute should be practicable. It is necessary that the ideal should be breathable, drinkable, and eatable to the human mind. It is the ideal which has the right to say: Take, this It is on this condition that it ceases to be a sterile love of science and becomes the one and sovereign mode of human rallying, and that philosophy herself is promoted to religion.

Philosophy should not be a corbel erected on mystery to gaze upon it at its ease, without any other result than that of being convenient to curiosity.

For our part, adjourning the development of our thought to another occasion, we will confine ourselves to saying that we neither understand man as a point of departure nor progress as an end, without those two forces which are their two motors: faith and love.

Progress is the goal, the ideal is the type.

What is this ideal? It is God.
Ideal, absolute, perfection, infinity: identical words.

CHAPTER VII — PRECAUTIONS TO BE OBSERVED IN BLAME

History and philosophy have eternal duties, which are, at the same time, simple duties; to combat Caiphas the High-priest, Draco the Lawgiver, Trimalcion the Legislator, Tiberius the Emperor; this is clear, direct, and limpid, and offers no obscurity.

But the right to live apart, even with its inconveniences and its abuses, insists on being stated and taken into account. Cenobitism is a human problem.

When one speaks of convents, those abodes of error, but of innocence, of aberration but of good-will, of ignorance but of devotion, of torture but of martyrdom, it always becomes necessary to say either yes or no.

A convent is a contradiction. Its object, salvation; its means thereto, sacrifice. The convent is supreme egoism having for its result supreme abnegation.

To abdicate with the object of reigning seems to be the device of monasticism.

In the cloister, one suffers in order to enjoy. One draws a bill of exchange on death. One discounts in terrestrial gloom celestial light. In the cloister, hell is accepted in advance as a post obit on paradise.

The taking of the veil or the frock is a suicide paid for with eternity.

It does not seem to us, that on such a subject mockery is permissible. All about it is serious, the good as well as the bad.

The just man frowns, but never smiles with a malicious sneer. We understand wrath, but not malice.

CHAPTER VIII — FAITH, LAW

A few words more.

We blame the church when she is saturated with intrigues, we despise the spiritual which is harsh toward the temporal; but we everywhere honor the thoughtful man.

We salute the man who kneels.

A faith; this is a necessity for man. Woe to him who believes nothing.

One is not unoccupied because one is absorbed. There is visible labor and invisible labor.

To contemplate is to labor, to think is to act.

Folded arms toil, clasped hands work. A gaze fixed on heaven is a work.

Thales remained motionless for four years. He founded philosophy.

In our opinion, cenobites are not lazy men, and recluses are not idlers.

To meditate on the Shadow is a serious thing.

Without invalidating anything that we have just said, we believe that a perpetual memory of the tomb is proper for the living. On this point, the priest and the philosopher agree. We must die. The Abbé de la Trappe replies to Horace.

To mingle with one's life a certain presence of the sepulchre, — this is the law of the sage; and it is the law of the ascetic. In this respect, the ascetic and the sage converge. There is a material growth; we admit it. There is a moral grandeur; we hold to that. Thoughtless and vivacious spirits say: —

"What is the good of those motionless figures on the side of mystery? What purpose do they serve? What do they do?"

Alas! In the presence of the darkness which environs us, and which awaits us, in our ignorance of what the immense dispersion will make of us, we reply: "There is probably no work more divine than that performed by these souls." And we add: "There is probably no work which is more useful."

There certainly must be some who pray constantly for those who never pray at all.

In our opinion the whole question lies in the amount of thought that is mingled with prayer.

Leibnitz praying is grand, Voltaire adoring is fine. Deo erexit Voltaire.

We are for religion as against religions.

We are of the number who believe in the wretchedness of orisons, and the sublimity of prayer.

Moreover, at this minute which we are now traversing, — a minute which will not, fortunately, leave its impress on the nineteenth century, — at this hour, when so many men have low brows and souls but little elevated, among so many mortals whose morality consists in enjoyment, and who are busied with the brief and misshapen things of matter, whoever exiles himself seems worthy of veneration to us.

The monastery is a renunciation. Sacrifice wrongly directed is still sacrifice. To mistake a grave error for a duty has a grandeur of its own.

Taken by itself, and ideally, and in order to examine the truth on all sides until all aspects have been impartially exhausted, the monastery, the female convent in particular, — for in our century it is woman who suffers the most, and in this exile of the cloister there is something of protestation, — the female convent has incontestably a certain majesty.

This cloistered existence which is so austere, so depressing, a few of whose features we have just traced, is not life, for it is not liberty; it is not the tomb, for it is not plenitude; it is the strange place whence one beholds, as from the crest of a lofty mountain, on one side the abyss where we are, on the other, the abyss whither we shall go; it is the narrow and misty frontier separating two worlds, illuminated and obscured by both at the same time, where the ray of life which has become enfeebled is mingled with the vague ray of death; it is the half obscurity of the tomb.

We, who do not believe what these women believe, but who, like them, live by faith, — we have never been able to think without a sort of tender and religious terror, without a sort of pity, that is full of envy, of those devoted, trembling and trusting creatures, of these humble and august souls, who dare to dwell on the very brink of the mystery, waiting between the world which is closed and heaven which is not yet open, turned towards the light which one cannot see, possessing the sole happiness of thinking that they know where it is, aspiring towards the gulf, and the unknown, their eyes fixed motionless on the darkness, kneeling, bewildered, stupefied, shuddering, half lifted, at times, by the deep breaths of eternity.

BOOK EIGHTH. — CEMETERIES TAKE THAT WHICH IS COMMITTED THEM

CHAPTER I — WHICH TREATS OF THE MANNER OF ENTERING A CONVENT

It was into this house that Jean Valjean had, as Fauchelevent expressed it, “fallen from the sky.”

He had scaled the wall of the garden which formed the angle of the Rue Polonceau. That hymn of the angels which he had heard in the middle of the night, was the nuns chanting matins; that hall, of which he had caught a glimpse in the gloom, was the chapel. That phantom which he had seen stretched on the ground was the sister who was making reparation; that bell, the sound of which had so strangely surprised him, was the gardener’s bell attached to the knee of Father Fauchelevent.

Cosette once put to bed, Jean Valjean and Fauchelevent had, as we have already seen, supped on a glass of wine and a bit of cheese before a good, crackling fire; then, the only bed in the hut being occupied by Cosette, each threw himself on a truss of straw.

Before he shut his eyes, Jean Valjean said: “I must remain here henceforth.” This remark trotted through Fauchelevent’s head all night long.

To tell the truth, neither of them slept.

Jean Valjean, feeling that he was discovered and that Javert was on his scent, understood that he and Cosette were lost if they returned to Paris. Then the new storm which had just burst upon him had stranded him in this cloister. Jean Valjean had, henceforth, but one thought, — to remain there. Now, for an unfortunate man in his position, this convent was both the safest and the most dangerous of places; the most dangerous, because, as no men might enter there, if he were discovered, it was a flagrant offence, and Jean Valjean would find but one step intervening between the convent and prison; the safest, because, if he could manage to get himself accepted there and remain there, who would ever seek him in such a place? To dwell in an impossible place was safety.

On his side, Fauchelevent was cudgelling his brains. He began by declaring to himself that he understood nothing of the matter. How had M. Madeleine got there, when the walls were what they were? Cloister walls are not to be stepped over. How did he get there with a child? One cannot scale a perpendicular wall with a child in one’s arms. Who was that child?

Where did they both come from? Since Fauchelevent had lived in the convent, he had heard nothing of M. sur M., and he knew nothing of what had taken place there. Father Madeleine had an air which discouraged questions; and besides, Fauchelevent said to himself: “One does not question a saint.” M. Madeleine had preserved all his prestige in Fauchelevent’s eyes. Only, from some words which Jean Valjean had let fall, the gardener thought he could draw the inference that M. Madeleine had probably become bankrupt through the hard times, and that he was pursued by his creditors; or that he had compromised himself in some political affair, and was in hiding; which last did not displease Fauchelevent, who, like many of our peasants of the North, had an old fund of Bonapartism about him. While in hiding, M. Madeleine had selected the convent as a refuge, and it was quite simple that he should wish to remain there. But the inexplicable point, to which Fauchelevent returned constantly and over which he wearied his brain, was that M. Madeleine should be there, and that he should have that little girl with him. Fauchelevent saw them, touched them, spoke to them, and still did not believe it possible. The incomprehensible had just made its entrance into Fauchelevent’s hut. Fauchelevent groped about amid conjectures, and could see nothing clearly but this: “M. Madeleine saved my life.” This certainty alone was sufficient and decided his course. He said to himself: “It is my turn now.” He added in his conscience: “M. Madeleine did not stop to deliberate when it was a question of thrusting himself under the cart for the purpose of dragging me out.” He made up his mind to save M. Madeleine.

Nevertheless, he put many questions to himself and made himself divers replies: “After what he did for me, would I save him if he were a thief? Just the same. If he were an assassin, would I save him? Just the same. Since he is a saint, shall I save him? Just the same.”

But what a problem it was to manage to have him remain in the convent! Fauchelevent did not recoil in the face of this almost chimerical undertaking; this poor peasant of Picardy without any other ladder than his self-devotion, his good will, and a little of that old rustic cunning, on this occasion enlisted in the service of a generous enterprise, undertook to scale the difficulties of the cloister, and the steep escarpments of the rule of Saint-Benoit. Father Fauchelevent was an old man who had been an egoist all his life, and who, towards the end of his days, halt, infirm, with no interest left to him in the world, found it sweet to be grateful, and perceiving a generous action to be performed, flung himself upon it like a man, who at the moment when he is dying, should find close to his hand a glass of good wine which he had never tasted, and should swallow it with avidity. We may add, that the air which he had breathed for many years in this convent had destroyed all personality in him, and had ended by rendering a good action of some kind absolutely necessary to him.

So he took his resolve: to devote himself to M. Madeleine.

We have just called him a poor peasant of Picardy. That description is just, but incomplete. At the point of this story which we have now reached, a little of Father Fauchelevent's physiology becomes useful. He was a peasant, but he had been a notary, which added trickery to his cunning, and penetration to his ingenuousness. Having, through various causes, failed in his business, he had descended to the calling of a carter and a laborer. But, in spite of oaths and lashings, which horses seem to require, something of the notary had lingered in him. He had some natural wit; he talked good grammar; he conversed, which is a rare thing in a village; and the other peasants said of him: "He talks almost like a gentleman with a hat." Fauchelevent belonged, in fact, to that species, which the impertinent and flippant vocabulary of the last century qualified as demi-bourgeois, demi-lout, and which the metaphors showered by the chateau upon the thatched cottage ticketed in the pigeon-hole of the plebeian: rather rustic, rather citified; pepper and salt. Fauchelevent, though sorely tried and harshly used by fate, worn out, a sort of poor, threadbare old soul, was, nevertheless, an impulsive man, and extremely spontaneous in his actions; a precious quality which prevents one from ever being wicked. His defects and his vices, for he had some, were all superficial; in short, his physiognomy was of the kind which succeeds with an observer. His aged face had none of those disagreeable wrinkles at the top of the forehead, which signify malice or stupidity.

At daybreak, Father Fauchelevent opened his eyes, after having done an enormous deal of thinking, and beheld M. Madeleine seated on his truss of straw, and watching Cosette's slumbers. Fauchelevent sat up and said: —

"Now that you are here, how are you going to contrive to enter?"

This remark summed up the situation and aroused Jean Valjean from his revery.

The two men took counsel together.

“In the first place,” said Fauchelevent, “you will begin by not setting foot outside of this chamber, either you or the child. One step in the garden and we are done for.”

“That is true.”

“Monsieur Madeleine,” resumed Fauchelevent, “you have arrived at a very auspicious moment, I mean to say a very inauspicious moment; one of the ladies is very ill. This will prevent them from looking much in our direction. It seems that she is dying. The prayers of the forty hours are being said. The whole community is in confusion. That occupies them. The one who is on the point of departure is a saint. In fact, we are all saints here; all the difference between them and me is that they say ‘our cell,’ and that I say ‘my cabin.’ The prayers for the dying are to be said, and then the prayers for the dead. We shall be at peace here for to-day; but I will not answer for to-morrow.”

“Still,” observed Jean Valjean, “this cottage is in the niche of the wall, it is hidden by a sort of ruin, there are trees, it is not visible from the convent.”

“And I add that the nuns never come near it.”

“Well?” said Jean Valjean.

The interrogation mark which accentuated this “well” signified: “it seems to me that one may remain concealed here?” It was to this interrogation point that Fauchelevent responded: —

“There are the little girls.”

“What little girls?” asked Jean Valjean.

Just as Fauchelevent opened his mouth to explain the words which he had uttered, a bell emitted one stroke.

“The nun is dead,” said he. “There is the knell.”

And he made a sign to Jean Valjean to listen.

The bell struck a second time.

“It is the knell, Monsieur Madeleine. The bell will continue to strike once a minute for twenty-four hours, until the body is taken from the church. — You see, they play. At recreation hours it suffices to have a ball roll aside, to send them all hither, in spite of prohibitions, to hunt and rummage for it all about here. Those cherubs are devils.”

“Who?” asked Jean Valjean.

“The little girls. You would be very quickly discovered. They would shriek: ‘Oh! a man!’ There is no danger to-day. There will be no recreation hour. The day will be entirely devoted to prayers. You hear the bell. As I told you, a stroke each minute. It is the death knell."

"I understand, Father Fauchelevent. There are pupils."

And Jean Valjean thought to himself: —

"Here is Cosette's education already provided."

Fauchelevent exclaimed: —

"Pardine! There are little girls indeed! And they would bawl around you! And they would rush off! To be a man here is to have the plague. You see how they fasten a bell to my paw as though I were a wild beast."

Jean Valjean fell into more and more profound thought.— "This convent would be our salvation," he murmured.

Then he raised his voice: —

"Yes, the difficulty is to remain here."

"No," said Fauchelevent, "the difficulty is to get out."

Jean Valjean felt the blood rush back to his heart.

"To get out!"

"Yes, Monsieur Madeleine. In order to return here it is first necessary to get out."

And after waiting until another stroke of the knell had sounded, Fauchelevent went on: —

"You must not be found here in this fashion. Whence come you? For me, you fall from heaven, because I know you; but the nuns require one to enter by the door."

All at once they heard a rather complicated pealing from another bell.

"Ah!" said Fauchelevent, "they are ringing up the vocal mothers. They are going to the chapter. They always hold a chapter when any one dies. She died at daybreak. People generally do die at daybreak. But cannot you get out by the way in which you entered? Come, I do not ask for the sake of questioning you, but how did you get in?"

Jean Valjean turned pale; the very thought of descending again into that terrible street made him shudder. You make your way out of a forest filled with tigers, and once out of it, imagine a friendly counsel that shall advise you to return thither! Jean Valjean pictured to himself the whole police force still engaged in swarming in that quarter, agents on the watch, sentinels everywhere, frightful fists extended towards his collar, Javert at the corner of the intersection of the streets perhaps.

“Impossible!” said he. “Father Fauchelevent, say that I fell from the sky.”

“But I believe it, I believe it,” retorted Fauchelevent. “You have no need to tell me that. The good God must have taken you in his hand for the purpose of getting a good look at you close to, and then dropped you. Only, he meant to place you in a man’s convent; he made a mistake. Come, there goes another peal, that is to order the porter to go and inform the municipality that the dead-doctor is to come here and view a corpse. All that is the ceremony of dying. These good ladies are not at all fond of that visit. A doctor is a man who does not believe in anything. He lifts the veil. Sometimes he lifts something else too. How quickly they have had the doctor summoned this time! What is the matter? Your little one is still asleep. What is her name?”

“Cosette.”

“She is your daughter? You are her grandfather, that is?”

“Yes.”

“It will be easy enough for her to get out of here. I have my service door which opens on the courtyard. I knock. The porter opens; I have my vintage basket on my back, the child is in it, I go out. Father Fauchelevent goes out with his basket — that is perfectly natural. You will tell the child to keep very quiet. She will be under the cover. I will leave her for whatever time is required with a good old friend, a fruit-seller whom I know in the Rue Chemin-Vert, who is deaf, and who has a little bed. I will shout in the fruit-seller’s ear, that she is a niece of mine, and that she is to keep her for me until to-morrow. Then the little one will re-enter with you; for I will contrive to have you re-enter. It must be done. But how will you manage to get out?”

Jean Valjean shook his head.

“No one must see me, the whole point lies there, Father Fauchelevent. Find some means of getting me out in a basket, under cover, like Cosette.”

Fauchelevent scratched the lobe of his ear with the middle finger of his left hand, a sign of serious embarrassment.

A third peal created a diversion.

“That is the dead-doctor taking his departure,” said Fauchelevent. “He has taken a look and said: ‘She is dead, that is well.’ When the doctor has signed the passport for paradise, the undertaker’s company sends a coffin. If it is a mother, the mothers lay her out; if she is a sister, the sisters lay her out. After which, I nail her up. That forms a part of my gardener's duty. A gardener is a bit of a grave-digger. She is placed in a lower hall of the church which communicates with the street, and into which no man may enter save the doctor of the dead. I don't count the undertaker's men and myself as men. It is in that hall that I nail up the coffin. The undertaker's men come and get it, and whip up, coachman! that's the way one goes to heaven. They fetch a box with nothing in it, they take it away again with something in it. That's what a burial is like. De profundis."

A horizontal ray of sunshine lightly touched the face of the sleeping Cosette, who lay with her mouth vaguely open, and had the air of an angel drinking in the light. Jean Valjean had fallen to gazing at her. He was no longer listening to Fauchelevent.

That one is not listened to is no reason for preserving silence. The good old gardener went on tranquilly with his babble: —

"The grave is dug in the Vaugirard cemetery. They declare that they are going to suppress that Vaugirard cemetery. It is an ancient cemetery which is outside the regulations, which has no uniform, and which is going to retire. It is a shame, for it is convenient. I have a friend there, Father Mestienne, the grave-digger. The nuns here possess one privilege, it is to be taken to that cemetery at nightfall. There is a special permission from the Prefecture on their behalf. But how many events have happened since yesterday! Mother Crucifixion is dead, and Father Madeleine—"

"Is buried," said Jean Valjean, smiling sadly.

Fauchelevent caught the word.

"Goodness! if you were here for good, it would be a real burial."

A fourth peal burst out. Fauchelevent hastily detached the belled knee-cap from its nail and buckled it on his knee again.

"This time it is for me. The Mother Prioress wants me. Good, now I am pricking myself on the tongue of my buckle. Monsieur Madeleine, don't stir from here, and wait for me. Something new has come up. If you are hungry, there is wine, bread and cheese."

And he hastened out of the hut, crying: "Coming! coming!"

Jean Valjean watched him hurrying across the garden as fast as his crooked leg would permit, casting a sidelong glance by the way on his melon patch.

Less than ten minutes later, Father Fauchelevent, whose bell put the nuns in his road to flight, tapped gently at a door, and a gentle voice replied:

“Forever! Forever!” that is to say: “Enter.”

The door was the one leading to the parlor reserved for seeing the gardener on business. This parlor adjoined the chapter hall. The prioress, seated on the only chair in the parlor, was waiting for Fauchelevent.

CHAPTER II — FAUCHELEVENT IN THE PRESENCE OF A DIFFICULTY

It is the peculiarity of certain persons and certain professions, notably priests and nuns, to wear a grave and agitated air on critical occasions. At the moment when Fauchelevent entered, this double form of preoccupation was imprinted on the countenance of the prioress, who was that wise and charming Mademoiselle de Blemeur, Mother Innocente, who was ordinarily cheerful.

The gardener made a timid bow, and remained at the door of the cell. The prioress, who was telling her beads, raised her eyes and said: —

“Ah! it is you, Father Fauvent.”

This abbreviation had been adopted in the convent.

Fauchelevent bowed again.

“Father Fauvent, I have sent for you.”

“Here I am, reverend Mother.”

“I have something to say to you.”

“And so have I,” said Fauchelevent with a boldness which caused him inward terror, “I have something to say to the very reverend Mother.”

The prioress stared at him.

“Ah! you have a communication to make to me.”

“A request.”

“Very well, speak.”

Goodman Fauchelevent, the ex-notary, belonged to the category of peasants who have assurance. A certain clever ignorance constitutes a force; you do not distrust it, and you are caught by it. Fauchelevent had been a success during the something more than two years which he had passed in the convent. Always solitary and busied about his gardening, he had nothing else to do than to indulge his curiosity. As he was at a distance from all those veiled women passing to and fro, he saw before him only an agitation of shadows. By dint of attention and sharpness he had succeeded in clothing all those phantoms with flesh, and those corpses were alive for him. He was like a deaf man whose sight grows keener, and like a blind man whose hearing becomes more acute. He had applied himself to riddling out the significance of the different peals, and he had succeeded, so that this taciturn and enigmatical cloister possessed no secrets for him; the sphinx babbled all her secrets in his ear. Fauchelevent knew all and concealed all; that constituted his art. The whole convent thought him stupid. A great merit in religion. The vocal mothers made much of Fauchelevent. He was a curious mute. He inspired confidence. Moreover, he was regular, and never went out except for well-demonstrated requirements of the orchard and vegetable garden. This discretion of conduct had inured to his credit. None the less, he had set two men to chattering: the porter, in the convent, and he knew the singularities of their parlor, and the grave-digger, at the cemetery, and he was acquainted with the peculiarities of their sepulture; in this way, he possessed a double light on the subject of these nuns, one as to their life, the other as to their death. But he did not abuse his knowledge. The congregation thought a great deal of him. Old, lame, blind to everything, probably a little deaf into the bargain, — what qualities! They would have found it difficult to replace him.

The goodman, with the assurance of a person who feels that he is appreciated, entered into a rather diffuse and very deep rustic harangue to the reverend prioress. He talked a long time about his age, his infirmities, the surcharge of years counting double for him henceforth, of the increasing demands of his work, of the great size of the garden, of nights which must be passed, like the last, for instance, when he had been obliged to put straw mats over the melon beds, because of the moon, and he wound up as follows: “That he had a brother” — (the prioress made a movement),— “a brother no longer young” — (a second movement on the part of the prioress, but one expressive of reassurance),— “that, if he might be permitted, this brother would come and live with him and help him, that he was an excellent gardener, that the community would receive from him good service, better than his own; that, otherwise, if his brother were not admitted, as he, the elder, felt that his health was broken and that he was insufficient for the work, he should be obliged, greatly to his regret, to go away; and that his brother had a little daughter whom he would bring with him, who might be reared for God in the house, and who might, who knows, become a nun some day.”

When he had finished speaking, the prioress stayed the slipping of her rosary between her fingers, and said to him: —

“Could you procure a stout iron bar between now and this evening?”

“For what purpose?”

“To serve as a lever.”

“Yes, reverend Mother,” replied Fauchelevent.

The prioress, without adding a word, rose and entered the adjoining room, which was the hall of the chapter, and where the vocal mothers were probably assembled. Fauchelevent was left alone.

CHAPTER III — MOTHER INNOCENTE

About a quarter of an hour elapsed. The prioress returned and seated herself once more on her chair.

The two interlocutors seemed preoccupied. We will present a stenographic report of the dialogue which then ensued, to the best of our ability.

“Father Fauvent!”

“Reverend Mother!”

“Do you know the chapel?”

“I have a little cage there, where I hear the mass and the offices.”

“And you have been in the choir in pursuance of your duties?”

“Two or three times.”

“There is a stone to be raised.”

“Heavy?”

“The slab of the pavement which is at the side of the altar.”

“The slab which closes the vault?”

“Yes.”

“It would be a good thing to have two men for it.”

“Mother Ascension, who is as strong as a man, will help you.”

“A woman is never a man.”

“We have only a woman here to help you. Each one does what he can. Because Dom Mabillon gives four hundred and seventeen epistles of Saint Bernard, while Merlonus Horstius only gives three hundred and sixty-seven, I do not despise Merlonus Horstius.”

“Neither do I.”

“Merit consists in working according to one’s strength. A cloister is not a dock-yard.”

“And a woman is not a man. But my brother is the strong one, though!”

“And can you get a lever?”

“That is the only sort of key that fits that sort of door.”

“There is a ring in the stone.”

“I will put the lever through it.”

“And the stone is so arranged that it swings on a pivot.”

“That is good, reverend Mother. I will open the vault.”

“And the four Mother Precentors will help you.”

“And when the vault is open?”

"It must be closed again."

"Will that be all?"

"No."

"Give me your orders, very reverend Mother."

"Fauvent, we have confidence in you."

"I am here to do anything you wish."

"And to hold your peace about everything!"

"Yes, reverend Mother."

"When the vault is open—"

"I will close it again."

"But before that—"

"What, reverend Mother?"

"Something must be lowered into it."

A silence ensued. The prioress, after a pout of the under lip which resembled hesitation, broke it.

"Father Fauvent!"

"Reverend Mother!"

"You know that a mother died this morning?"

"No."

"Did you not hear the bell?"

"Nothing can be heard at the bottom of the garden."

"Really?"

"I can hardly distinguish my own signal."

"She died at daybreak."

"And then, the wind is not blowing in my direction this morning."

"It was Mother Crucifixion. A blessed woman."

The prioress paused, moved her lips, as though in mental prayer, and resumed: —

"Three years ago, Madame de Bethune, a Jansenist, turned orthodox, merely from having seen Mother Crucifixion at prayer."

"Ah! yes, now I hear the knell, reverend Mother."

"The mothers have taken her to the dead-room, which opens on the church."

"I know."

"No other man than you can or must enter that chamber. See to that. A fine sight it would be, to see a man enter the dead-room!"

"More often!"

“Hey?”

“More often!”

“What do you say?”

“I say more often.”

“More often than what?”

“Reverend Mother, I did not say more often than what, I said more often.”

“I don’t understand you. Why do you say more often?”

“In order to speak like you, reverend Mother.”

“But I did not say ‘more often.’”

At that moment, nine o’clock struck.

“At nine o’clock in the morning and at all hours, praised and adored be the most Holy Sacrament of the altar,” said the prioress.

“Amen,” said Fauchelevent.

The clock struck opportunely. It cut “more often” short. It is probable, that had it not been for this, the prioress and Fauchelevent would never have unravelled that skein.

Fauchelevent mopped his forehead.

The prioress indulged in another little inward murmur, probably sacred, then raised her voice: —

“In her lifetime, Mother Crucifixion made converts; after her death, she will perform miracles.”

“She will!” replied Father Fauchelevent, falling into step, and striving not to flinch again.

“Father Fauvent, the community has been blessed in Mother Crucifixion. No doubt, it is not granted to every one to die, like Cardinal de Berulle, while saying the holy mass, and to breathe forth their souls to God, while pronouncing these words: Hanc igitur oblationem. But without attaining to such happiness, Mother Crucifixion’s death was very precious. She retained her consciousness to the very last moment. She spoke to us, then she spoke to the angels. She gave us her last commands. If you had a little more faith, and if you could have been in her cell, she would have cured your leg merely by touching it. She smiled. We felt that she was regaining her life in God. There was something of paradise in that death.”

Fauchelevent thought that it was an orison which she was finishing.

“Amen,” said he.

“Father Fauvent, what the dead wish must be done.”

The prioress took off several beads of her chaplet. Fauchelevent held his peace.

She went on: —

“I have consulted upon this point many ecclesiastics laboring in Our Lord, who occupy themselves in the exercises of the clerical life, and who bear wonderful fruit.”

“Reverend Mother, you can hear the knell much better here than in the garden.”

“Besides, she is more than a dead woman, she is a saint.”

“Like yourself, reverend Mother.”

“She slept in her coffin for twenty years, by express permission of our Holy Father, Pius VII.—”

“The one who crowned the Emp — Buonaparte.”

For a clever man like Fauchelevent, this allusion was an awkward one. Fortunately, the prioress, completely absorbed in her own thoughts, did not hear it. She continued: —

“Father Fauvent?”

“Reverend Mother?”

“Saint Didorus, Archbishop of Cappadocia, desired that this single word might be inscribed on his tomb: Acarus, which signifies, a worm of the earth; this was done. Is this true?”

“Yes, reverend Mother.”

“The blessed Mezzocane, Abbot of Aquila, wished to be buried beneath the gallows; this was done.”

“That is true.”

“Saint Terentius, Bishop of Port, where the mouth of the Tiber empties into the sea, requested that on his tomb might be engraved the sign which was placed on the graves of parricides, in the hope that passers-by would spit on his tomb. This was done. The dead must be obeyed.”

“So be it.”

“The body of Bernard Guidonis, born in France near Roche-Abeille, was, as he had ordered, and in spite of the king of Castile, borne to the church of the Dominicans in Limoges, although Bernard Guidonis was Bishop of Tuy in Spain. Can the contrary be affirmed?”

“For that matter, no, reverend Mother.”

“The fact is attested by Plantavit de la Fosse.”

Several beads of the chaplet were told off, still in silence. The prioress resumed: —

“Father Fauvent, Mother Crucifixion will be interred in the coffin in which she has slept for the last twenty years.”

“That is just.”

“It is a continuation of her slumber.”

“So I shall have to nail up that coffin?”

“Yes.”

“And we are to reject the undertaker’s coffin?”

“Precisely.”

“I am at the orders of the very reverend community.”

“The four Mother Precentors will assist you.”

“In nailing up the coffin? I do not need them.”

“No. In lowering the coffin.”

“Where?”

“Into the vault.”

“What vault?”

“Under the altar.”

Fauchelevent started.

“The vault under the altar?”

“Under the altar.”

“But—”

“You will have an iron bar.”

“Yes, but—”

“You will raise the stone with the bar by means of the ring.”

“But—”

“The dead must be obeyed. To be buried in the vault under the altar of the chapel, not to go to profane earth; to remain there in death where she prayed while living; such was the last wish of Mother Crucifixion. She asked it of us; that is to say, commanded us.”

“But it is forbidden.”

“Forbidden by men, enjoined by God.”

“What if it became known?”

“We have confidence in you.”

“Oh! I am a stone in your walls.”

“The chapter assembled. The vocal mothers, whom I have just consulted again, and who are now deliberating, have decided that Mother Crucifixion shall be buried, according to her wish, in her own coffin, under our altar. Think, Father Fauvent, if she were to work miracles here! What a glory of God for the community! And miracles issue from tombs.”

“But, reverend Mother, if the agent of the sanitary commission—”

“Saint Benoit II., in the matter of sepulture, resisted Constantine Pogonatus.”

“But the commissary of police—”

“Chonodemaire, one of the seven German kings who entered among the Gauls under the Empire of Constantius, expressly recognized the right of nuns to be buried in religion, that is to say, beneath the altar.”

“But the inspector from the Prefecture—”

“The world is nothing in the presence of the cross. Martin, the eleventh general of the Carthusians, gave to his order this device: Stat crux dum volvitur orbis.”

“Amen,” said Fauchelevent, who imperturbably extricated himself in this manner from the dilemma, whenever he heard Latin.

Any audience suffices for a person who has held his peace too long. On the day when the rhetorician Gymnastoras left his prison, bearing in his body many dilemmas and numerous syllogisms which had struck in, he halted in front of the first tree which he came to, harangued it and made very great efforts to convince it. The prioress, who was usually subjected to the barrier of silence, and whose reservoir was overfull, rose and exclaimed with the loquacity of a dam which has broken away: —

“I have on my right Benoit and on my left Bernard. Who was Bernard? The first abbot of Clairvaux. Fontaines in Burgundy is a country that is blest because it gave him birth. His father was named Tecelin, and his mother Alethe. He began at Citeaux, to end in Clairvaux; he was ordained abbot by the bishop of Chalon-sur-Saone, Guillaume de Champeaux; he had seven hundred novices, and founded a hundred and sixty monasteries; he overthrew Abeilard at the council of Sens in 1140, and Pierre de Bruys and Henry his disciple, and another sort of erring spirits who were called the Apostolics; he confounded Arnauld de Brescia, darted lightning at the monk Raoul, the murderer of the Jews, dominated the council of Reims in 1148, caused the condemnation of Gilbert de Porea, Bishop of Poitiers, caused the condemnation of Eon de l’Etoile, arranged the disputes of princes, enlightened King Louis the Young, advised Pope Eugene III., regulated the Temple, preached the crusade, performed two hundred and fifty miracles during his lifetime, and as many as thirty-nine in one day. Who was Benoit? He was the patriarch of Mont-Cassin; he was the second founder of the Saintete Claustrale, he was the Basil of the West. His order has produced forty popes, two hundred cardinals, fifty patriarchs, sixteen hundred archbishops, four thousand six hundred bishops, four emperors, twelve empresses, forty-six kings, forty-one queens, three thousand six hundred canonized saints, and has been in existence for fourteen hundred years. On one side Saint Bernard, on the other the agent of the sanitary department! On one side Saint Benoit, on the other the inspector of public ways! The state, the road commissioners, the public undertaker, regulations, the administration, what do we know of all that? There is not a chance passer-by who would not be indignant to see how we are treated. We have not even the right to give our dust to Jesus Christ! Your sanitary department is a revolutionary invention. God subordinated to the commissary of police; such is the age. Silence, Fauvent!"

Fauchelevent was but ill at ease under this shower bath. The prioress continued: —

"No one doubts the right of the monastery to sepulture. Only fanatics and those in error deny it. We live in times of terrible confusion. We do not know that which it is necessary to know, and we know that which we should ignore. We are ignorant and impious. In this age there exist people who do not distinguish between the very great Saint Bernard and the Saint Bernard denominated of the poor Catholics, a certain good ecclesiastic who lived in the thirteenth century. Others are so blasphemous as to compare the scaffold of Louis XVI. to the cross of Jesus Christ. Louis XVI. was merely a king. Let us beware of God! There is no longer just nor unjust. The name of Voltaire is known, but not the name of Cesar de Bus. Nevertheless, Cesar de Bus is a man of blessed memory, and Voltaire one of unblessed memory. The last arch-bishop, the Cardinal de Perigord, did not even know that Charles de Gondren succeeded to Berulle, and Francois Bourgoin to Gondren, and Jean-Francois Senault to Bourgoin, and Father Sainte-Marthe to Jean-Francois Senault. The name of Father Coton is known, not because he was one of the three who urged the foundation of the Oratorie, but because he furnished Henri IV., the Huguenot king, with the material for an oath. That which pleases people of the world in Saint Francois de Sales, is that he cheated at play. And then, religion is attacked. Why? Because there have been bad priests, because Sagittaire, Bishop of Gap, was the brother of

Salone, Bishop of Embrun, and because both of them followed Mommol. What has that to do with the question? Does that prevent Martin de Tours from being a saint, and giving half of his cloak to a beggar? They persecute the saints. They shut their eyes to the truth. Darkness is the rule. The most ferocious beasts are beasts which are blind. No one thinks of hell as a reality. Oh! how wicked people are! By order of the king signifies to-day, by order of the revolution. One no longer knows what is due to the living or to the dead. A holy death is prohibited. Burial is a civil matter. This is horrible. Saint Leo II. wrote two special letters, one to Pierre Notaire, the other to the king of the Visigoths, for the purpose of combating and rejecting, in questions touching the dead, the authority of the exarch and the supremacy of the Emperor. Gauthier, Bishop of Chalons, held his own in this matter against Otho, Duke of Burgundy. The ancient magistracy agreed with him. In former times we had voices in the chapter, even on matters of the day. The Abbot of Citeaux, the general of the order, was councillor by right of birth to the parliament of Burgundy. We do what we please with our dead. Is not the body of Saint Benoit himself in France, in the abbey of Fleury, called Saint Benoit-sur-Loire, although he died in Italy at Mont-Cassin, on Saturday, the 21st of the month of March, of the year 543? All this is incontestable. I abhor psalm-singers, I hate priors, I execrate heretics, but I should detest yet more any one who should maintain the contrary. One has only to read Arnoul Wion, Gabriel Bucelin, Trithemus, Maurolics, and Dom Luc d’Achery.”

The prioress took breath, then turned to Fauchelevent.

“Is it settled, Father Fauvent?”

“It is settled, reverend Mother.”

“We may depend on you?”

“I will obey.”

“That is well.”

“I am entirely devoted to the convent.”

“That is understood. You will close the coffin. The sisters will carry it to the chapel. The office for the dead will then be said. Then we shall return to the cloister. Between eleven o’clock and midnight, you will come with your iron bar. All will be done in the most profound secrecy. There will be in the chapel only the four Mother Precentors, Mother Ascension and yourself.”

“And the sister at the post?”

“She will not turn round.”

“But she will hear.”

“She will not listen. Besides, what the cloister knows the world learns not.”

A pause ensued. The prioress went on: —

“You will remove your bell. It is not necessary that the sister at the post should perceive your presence.”

“Reverend Mother?”

“What, Father Fauvent?”

“Has the doctor for the dead paid his visit?”

“He will pay it at four o’clock to-day. The peal which orders the doctor for the dead to be summoned has already been rung. But you do not understand any of the peals?”

“I pay no attention to any but my own.”

“That is well, Father Fauvent.”

“Reverend Mother, a lever at least six feet long will be required.”

“Where will you obtain it?”

“Where gratings are not lacking, iron bars are not lacking. I have my heap of old iron at the bottom of the garden.”

“About three-quarters of an hour before midnight; do not forget.”

“Reverend Mother?”

“What?”

“If you were ever to have any other jobs of this sort, my brother is the strong man for you. A perfect Turk!”

“You will do it as speedily as possible.”

“I cannot work very fast. I am infirm; that is why I require an assistant. I limp.”

“To limp is no sin, and perhaps it is a blessing. The Emperor Henry II., who combated Antipope Gregory and re-established Benoit VIII., has two surnames, the Saint and the Lame.”

“Two surtouts are a good thing,” murmured Fauchelevent, who really was a little hard of hearing.

“Now that I think of it, Father Fauvent, let us give a whole hour to it. That is not too much. Be near the principal altar, with your iron bar, at eleven o’clock. The office begins at midnight. Everything must have been completed a good quarter of an hour before that.”

“I will do anything to prove my zeal towards the community. These are my orders. I am to nail up the coffin. At eleven o’clock exactly, I am to be in the chapel. The Mother Precentors will be there. Mother Ascension will be there. Two men would be better. However, never mind! I shall have my lever. We will open the vault, we will lower the coffin, and we will close the vault again. After which, there will be no trace of anything. The government will have no suspicion. Thus all has been arranged, reverend Mother?"

"No!"

"What else remains?"

"The empty coffin remains."

This produced a pause. Fauchelevent meditated. The prioress meditated.

"What is to be done with that coffin, Father Fauvent?"

"It will be given to the earth."

"Empty?"

Another silence. Fauchelevent made, with his left hand, that sort of a gesture which dismisses a troublesome subject.

"Reverend Mother, I am the one who is to nail up the coffin in the basement of the church, and no one can enter there but myself, and I will cover the coffin with the pall."

"Yes, but the bearers, when they place it in the hearse and lower it into the grave, will be sure to feel that there is nothing in it."

"Ah! the de — !" exclaimed Fauchelevent.

The prioress began to make the sign of the cross, and looked fixedly at the gardener. The vil stuck fast in his throat.

He made haste to improvise an expedient to make her forget the oath.

"I will put earth in the coffin, reverend Mother. That will produce the effect of a corpse."

"You are right. Earth, that is the same thing as man. So you will manage the empty coffin?"

"I will make that my special business."

The prioress's face, up to that moment troubled and clouded, grew serene once more. She made the sign of a superior dismissing an inferior to him. Fauchelevent went towards the door. As he was on the point of passing out, the prioress raised her voice gently: —

"I am pleased with you, Father Fauvent; bring your brother to me to-morrow, after the burial, and tell him to fetch his daughter."

CHAPTER IV — IN WHICH JEAN VALJEAN HAS QUITE THE AIR OF HAVING READ

AUSTIN CASTILLEJO

The strides of a lame man are like the ogling glances of a one-eyed man; they do not reach their goal very promptly. Moreover, Fauchelevent was in a dilemma. He took nearly a quarter of an hour to return to his cottage in the garden. Cosette had waked up. Jean Valjean had placed her near the fire. At the moment when Fauchelevent entered, Jean Valjean was pointing out to her the vintner's basket on the wall, and saying to her, "Listen attentively to me, my little Cosette. We must go away from this house, but we shall return to it, and we shall be very happy here. The good man who lives here is going to carry you off on his back in that. You will wait for me at a lady's house. I shall come to fetch you. Obey, and say nothing, above all things, unless you want Madame Thenardier to get you again!"

Cosette nodded gravely.

Jean Valjean turned round at the noise made by Fauchelevent opening the door.

"Well?"

"Everything is arranged, and nothing is," said Fauchelevent. "I have permission to bring you in; but before bringing you in you must be got out. That's where the difficulty lies. It is easy enough with the child."

"You will carry her out?"

"And she will hold her tongue?"

"I answer for that."

"But you, Father Madeleine?"

And, after a silence, fraught with anxiety, Fauchelevent exclaimed: —

"Why, get out as you came in!"

Jean Valjean, as in the first instance, contented himself with saying, "Impossible."

Fauchelevent grumbled, more to himself than to Jean Valjean: —

"There is another thing which bothers me. I have said that I would put earth in it. When I come to think it over, the earth instead of the corpse will not seem like the real thing, it won't do, it will get displaced, it will move about. The men will bear it. You understand, Father Madeleine, the government will notice it.”

Jean Valjean stared him straight in the eye and thought that he was raving.

Fauchelevent went on: —

“How the de — uce are you going to get out? It must all be done by to-morrow morning. It is to-morrow that I am to bring you in. The prioress expects you.”

Then he explained to Jean Valjean that this was his recompense for a service which he, Fauchelevent, was to render to the community. That it fell among his duties to take part in their burials, that he nailed up the coffins and helped the grave-digger at the cemetery. That the nun who had died that morning had requested to be buried in the coffin which had served her for a bed, and interred in the vault under the altar of the chapel. That the police regulations forbade this, but that she was one of those dead to whom nothing is refused. That the prioress and the vocal mothers intended to fulfil the wish of the deceased. That it was so much the worse for the government. That he, Fauchelevent, was to nail up the coffin in the cell, raise the stone in the chapel, and lower the corpse into the vault. And that, by way of thanks, the prioress was to admit his brother to the house as a gardener, and his niece as a pupil. That his brother was M. Madeleine, and that his niece was Cosette. That the prioress had told him to bring his brother on the following evening, after the counterfeit interment in the cemetery. But that he could not bring M. Madeleine in from the outside if M. Madeleine was not outside. That that was the first problem. And then, that there was another: the empty coffin.

“What is that empty coffin?” asked Jean Valjean.

Fauchelevent replied: —

“The coffin of the administration.”

“What coffin? What administration?”

“A nun dies. The municipal doctor comes and says, ‘A nun has died.’ The government sends a coffin. The next day it sends a hearse and undertaker’s men to get the coffin and carry it to the cemetery. The undertaker’s men will come and lift the coffin; there will be nothing in it.”

“Put something in it.”

“A corpse? I have none.”

“No.”

“What then?”

“A living person.”

“What person?”

“Me!” said Jean Valjean.

Fauchelevent, who was seated, sprang up as though a bomb had burst under his chair.

“You!”

“Why not?”

Jean Valjean gave way to one of those rare smiles which lighted up his face like a flash from heaven in the winter.

“You know, Fauchelevent, what you have said: ‘Mother Crucifixion is dead.’ and I add: ‘and Father Madeleine is buried.’”

“Ah! good, you can laugh, you are not speaking seriously.”

“Very seriously, I must get out of this place.”

“Certainly.”

“l have told you to find a basket, and a cover for me also.”

“Well?”

“The basket will be of pine, and the cover a black cloth.”

“In the first place, it will be a white cloth. Nuns are buried in white.”

“Let it be a white cloth, then.”

“You are not like other men, Father Madeleine.”

To behold such devices, which are nothing else than the savage and daring inventions of the galleys, spring forth from the peaceable things which surrounded him, and mingle with what he called the “petty course of life in the convent,” caused Fauchelevent as much amazement as a gull fishing in the gutter of the Rue Saint-Denis would inspire in a passer-by.

Jean Valjean went on: —

“The problem is to get out of here without being seen. This offers the means. But give me some information, in the first place. How is it managed? Where is this coffin?”

“The empty one?”

“Yes.”

“Down stairs, in what is called the dead-room. It stands on two trestles, under the pall.”

“How long is the coffin?”

“Six feet.”

“What is this dead-room?”

“It is a chamber on the ground floor which has a grated window opening on the garden, which is closed on the outside by a shutter, and two doors; one leads into the convent, the other into the church.”

“What church?”

“The church in the street, the church which any one can enter.”

“Have you the keys to those two doors?”

“No; I have the key to the door which communicates with the convent; the porter has the key to the door which communicates with the church.”

“When does the porter open that door?”

“Only to allow the undertaker’s men to enter, when they come to get the coffin. When the coffin has been taken out, the door is closed again.”

“Who nails up the coffin?”

“I do.”

“Who spreads the pall over it?”

“I do.”

“Are you alone?”

“Not another man, except the police doctor, can enter the dead-room. That is even written on the wall.”

“Could you hide me in that room to-night when every one is asleep?”

“No. But I could hide you in a small, dark nook which opens on the dead-room, where I keep my tools to use for burials, and of which I have the key.”

“At what time will the hearse come for the coffin to-morrow?”

“About three o’clock in the afternoon. The burial will take place at the Vaugirard cemetery a little before nightfall. It is not very near.”

“I will remain concealed in your tool-closet all night and all the morning. And how about food? I shall be hungry.”

“I will bring you something.”

“You can come and nail me up in the coffin at two o’clock.”

Fauchelevent recoiled and cracked his finger-joints.

“But that is impossible!”

“Bah! Impossible to take a hammer and drive some nails in a plank?”

What seemed unprecedented to Fauchelevent was, we repeat, a simple matter to Jean Valjean. Jean Valjean had been in worse straits than this. Any man who has been a prisoner understands how to contract himself to fit the diameter of the escape. The prisoner is subject to flight as the sick man is subject to a crisis which saves or kills him. An escape is a cure. What does not a man undergo for the sake of a cure? To have himself nailed up in a case and carried off like a bale of goods, to live for a long time in a box, to find air where there is none, to economize his breath for hours, to know how to stifle without dying — this was one of Jean Valjean's gloomy talents.

Moreover, a coffin containing a living being, — that convict's expedient, — is also an imperial expedient. If we are to credit the monk Austin Castillejo, this was the means employed by Charles the Fifth, desirous of seeing the Plombes for the last time after his abdication.

He had her brought into and carried out of the monastery of Saint-Yuste in this manner.

Fauchelevent, who had recovered himself a little, exclaimed: —

"But how will you manage to breathe?"

"I will breathe."

"In that box! The mere thought of it suffocates me."

"You surely must have a gimlet, you will make a few holes here and there, around my mouth, and you will nail the top plank on loosely."

"Good! And what if you should happen to cough or to sneeze?"

"A man who is making his escape does not cough or sneeze."

And Jean Valjean added: —

"Father Fauchelevent, we must come to a decision: I must either be caught here, or accept this escape through the hearse."

Every one has noticed the taste which cats have for pausing and lounging between the two leaves of a half-shut door. Who is there who has not said to a cat, "Do come in!" There are men who, when an incident stands half-open before them, have the same tendency to halt in indecision between two resolutions, at the risk of getting crushed through the abrupt closing of the adventure by fate. The over-prudent, cats as they are, and because they are cats, sometimes incur more danger than the audacious. Fauchelevent was of this hesitating nature. But Jean Valjean's coolness prevailed over him in spite of himself. He grumbled: —

"Well, since there is no other means."

Jean Valjean resumed: —

"The only thing which troubles me is what will take place at the cemetery."

"That is the very point that is not troublesome," exclaimed Fauchelevent. "If you are sure of coming out of the coffin all right, I am sure of getting you out of the grave. The grave-digger is a drunkard, and a friend of mine. He is Father Mestienne. An old fellow of the old school. The grave-digger puts the corpses in the grave, and I put the grave-digger in my pocket. I will tell you what will take place. They will arrive a little before dusk, three-quarters of an hour before the gates of the cemetery are closed. The hearse will drive directly up to the grave. I shall follow; that is my business. I shall have a hammer, a chisel, and some pincers in my pocket. The hearse halts, the undertaker's men knot a rope around your coffin and lower you down. The priest says the prayers, makes the sign of the cross, sprinkles the holy water, and takes his departure. I am left alone with Father Mestienne. He is my friend, I tell you. One of two things will happen, he will either be sober, or he will not be sober. If he is not drunk, I shall say to him: 'Come and drink a bout while the Bon Coing [the Good Quince] is open.' I carry him off, I get him drunk, — it does not take long to make Father Mestienne drunk, he always has the beginning of it about him, — I lay him under the table, I take his card, so that I can get into the cemetery again, and I return without him. Then you have no longer any one but me to deal with. If he is drunk, I shall say to him: 'Be off; I will do your work for you.' Off he goes, and I drag you out of the hole."

Jean Valjean held out his hand, and Fauchelevent precipitated himself upon it with the touching effusion of a peasant.

"That is settled, Father Fauchelevent. All will go well."

"Provided nothing goes wrong," thought Fauchelevent. "In that case, it would be terrible."

CHAPTER V — IT IS NOT NECESSARY TO BE DRUNK IN ORDER TO BE IMMORTAL

On the following day, as the sun was declining, the very rare passers-by on the Boulevard du Maine pulled off their hats to an old-fashioned hearse, ornamented with skulls, cross-bones, and tears. This hearse contained a coffin covered with a white cloth over which spread a large black cross, like a huge corpse with drooping arms. A mourning-coach, in which could be seen a priest in his surplice, and a choir boy in his red cap, followed. Two undertaker’s men in gray uniforms trimmed with black walked on the right and the left of the hearse. Behind it came an old man in the garments of a laborer, who limped along. The procession was going in the direction of the Vaugirard cemetery.

The handle of a hammer, the blade of a cold chisel, and the antennae of a pair of pincers were visible, protruding from the man’s pocket.

The Vaugirard cemetery formed an exception among the cemeteries of Paris. It had its peculiar usages, just as it had its carriage entrance and its house door, which old people in the quarter, who clung tenaciously to ancient words, still called the porte cavaliere and the porte pietonne. The Bernardines-Benedictines of the Rue Petit-Picpus had obtained permission, as we have already stated, to be buried there in a corner apart, and at night, the plot of land having formerly belonged to their community. The grave-diggers being thus bound to service in the evening in summer and at night in winter, in this cemetery, they were subjected to a special discipline. The gates of the Paris cemeteries closed, at that epoch, at sundown, and this being a municipal regulation, the Vaugirard cemetery was bound by it like the rest. The carriage gate and the house door were two contiguous grated gates, adjoining a pavilion built by the architect Perronet, and inhabited by the door-keeper of the cemetery. These gates, therefore, swung inexorably on their hinges at the instant when the sun disappeared behind the dome of the Invalides. If any grave-digger were delayed after that moment in the cemetery, there was but one way for him to get out — his grave-digger’s card furnished by the department of public funerals. A sort of letter-box was constructed in the porter’s window. The grave-digger dropped his card into this box, the porter heard it fall, pulled the rope, and the small door opened.

If the man had not his card, he mentioned his name, the porter, who was sometimes in bed and asleep, rose, came out and identified the man, and opened the gate with his key; the grave-digger stepped out, but had to pay a fine of fifteen francs.

This cemetery, with its peculiarities outside the regulations, embarrassed the symmetry of the administration. It was suppressed a little later than 1830. The cemetery of Mont-Parnasse, called the Eastern cemetery, succeeded to it, and inherited that famous dram-shop next to the Vaugirard cemetery, which was surmounted by a quince painted on a board, and which formed an angle, one side on the drinkers' tables, and the other on the tombs, with this sign: Au Bon Coing.

The Vaugirard cemetery was what may be called a faded cemetery. It was falling into disuse. Dampness was invading it, the flowers were deserting it. The bourgeois did not care much about being buried in the Vaugirard; it hinted at poverty. Pere-Lachaise if you please! to be buried in Pere-Lachaise is equivalent to having furniture of mahogany. It is recognized as elegant. The Vaugirard cemetery was a venerable enclosure, planted like an old-fashioned French garden. Straight alleys, box, thuya-trees, holly, ancient tombs beneath aged cypress-trees, and very tall grass. In the evening it was tragic there. There were very lugubrious lines about it.

The sun had not yet set when the hearse with the white pall and the black cross entered the avenue of the Vaugirard cemetery. The lame man who followed it was no other than Fauchelevent.

The interment of Mother Crucifixion in the vault under the altar, the exit of Cosette, the introduction of Jean Valjean to the dead-room, — all had been executed without difficulty, and there had been no hitch.

Let us remark in passing, that the burial of Mother Crucifixion under the altar of the convent is a perfectly venial offence in our sight. It is one of the faults which resemble a duty. The nuns had committed it, not only without difficulty, but even with the applause of their own consciences. In the cloister, what is called the "government" is only an intermeddling with authority, an interference which is always questionable. In the first place, the rule; as for the code, we shall see. Make as many laws as you please, men; but keep them for yourselves. The tribute to Caesar is never anything but the remnants of the tribute to God. A prince is nothing in the presence of a principle.

Fauchelevent limped along behind the hearse in a very contented frame of mind. His twin plots, the one with the nuns, the one for the convent, the other against it, the other with M. Madeleine, had succeeded, to all appearance. Jean Valjean's composure was one of those powerful tranquillities which are contagious. Fauchelevent no longer felt doubtful as to his success.

What remained to be done was a mere nothing. Within the last two years, he had made good Father Mestienne, a chubby-cheeked person, drunk at least ten times. He played with Father Mestienne. He did what he liked with him. He made him dance according to his whim. Mestienne's head adjusted itself to the cap of Fauchelevent's will. Fauchelevent's confidence was perfect.

At the moment when the convoy entered the avenue leading to the cemetery, Fauchelevent glanced cheerfully at the hearse, and said half aloud, as he rubbed his big hands: —

"Here's a fine farce!"

All at once the hearse halted; it had reached the gate. The permission for interment must be exhibited. The undertaker's man addressed himself to the porter of the cemetery. During this colloquy, which always is productive of a delay of from one to two minutes, some one, a stranger, came and placed himself behind the hearse, beside Fauchelevent. He was a sort of laboring man, who wore a waistcoat with large pockets and carried a mattock under his arm.

Fauchelevent surveyed this stranger.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"The man replied: —

"The grave-digger."

If a man could survive the blow of a cannon-ball full in the breast, he would make the same face that Fauchelevent made.

"The grave-digger?"

"Yes."

"You?"

"I."

"Father Mestienne is the grave-digger."

"He was."

"What! He was?"

"He is dead."

Fauchelevent had expected anything but this, that a grave-digger could die. It is true, nevertheless, that grave-diggers do die themselves. By dint of excavating graves for other people, one hollows out one's own.

Fauchelevent stood there with his mouth wide open. He had hardly the strength to stammer: —

"But it is not possible!"

"It is so."

"But," he persisted feebly, "Father Mestienne is the grave-digger."

"After Napoleon, Louis XVIII. After Mestienne, Gribier. Peasant, my name is Gribier."

Fauchelevent, who was deadly pale, stared at this Gribier.

He was a tall, thin, livid, utterly funereal man. He had the air of an unsuccessful doctor who had turned grave-digger.

Fauchelevent burst out laughing.

"Ah!" said he, "what queer things do happen! Father Mestienne is dead, but long live little Father Lenoir! Do you know who little Father Lenoir is? He is a jug of red wine. It is a jug of Surene, morbigou! of real Paris Surene? Ah! So old Mestienne is dead! I am sorry for it; he was a jolly fellow. But you are a jolly fellow, too. Are you not, comrade? We'll go and have a drink together presently."

The man replied: —

"I have been a student. I passed my fourth examination. I never drink."

The hearse had set out again, and was rolling up the grand alley of the cemetery.

Fauchelevent had slackened his pace. He limped more out of anxiety than from infirmity.

The grave-digger walked on in front of him.

Fauchelevent passed the unexpected Gribier once more in review.

He was one of those men who, though very young, have the air of age, and who, though slender, are extremely strong.

"Comrade!" cried Fauchelevent.

The man turned round.

"I am the convent grave-digger."

"My colleague," said the man.

Fauchelevent, who was illiterate but very sharp, understood that he had to deal with a formidable species of man, with a fine talker. He muttered:

"So Father Mestienne is dead."

The man replied: —

“Completely. The good God consulted his note-book which shows when the time is up. It was Father Mestienne’s turn. Father Mestienne died.”

Fauchelevent repeated mechanically: “The good God—”

“The good God,” said the man authoritatively. “According to the philosophers, the Eternal Father; according to the Jacobins, the Supreme Being.”

“Shall we not make each other’s acquaintance?” stammered Fauchelevent.

“It is made. You are a peasant, I am a Parisian.”

“People do not know each other until they have drunk together. He who empties his glass empties his heart. You must come and have a drink with me. Such a thing cannot be refused.”

“Business first.”

Fauchelevent thought: “I am lost.”

They were only a few turns of the wheel distant from the small alley leading to the nuns’ corner.

The grave-digger resumed: —

“Peasant, I have seven small children who must be fed. As they must eat, I cannot drink.”

And he added, with the satisfaction of a serious man who is turning a phrase well: —

“Their hunger is the enemy of my thirst.”

The hearse skirted a clump of cypress-trees, quitted the grand alley, turned into a narrow one, entered the waste land, and plunged into a thicket. This indicated the immediate proximity of the place of sepulture. Fauchelevent slackened his pace, but he could not detain the hearse. Fortunately, the soil, which was light and wet with the winter rains, clogged the wheels and retarded its speed.

He approached the grave-digger.

“They have such a nice little Argenteuil wine,” murmured Fauchelevent.

“Villager,” retorted the man, “I ought not be a grave-digger. My father was a porter at the Prytaneum [Town-Hall]. He destined me for literature. But he had reverses. He had losses on ‘change. I was obliged to renounce the profession of author. But I am still a public writer.”

“So you are not a grave-digger, then?” returned Fauchelevent, clutching at this branch, feeble as it was.

“The one does not hinder the other. I cumulate.”

Fauchelevent did not understand this last word.

“Come have a drink,” said he.

Here a remark becomes necessary. Fauchelevent, whatever his anguish, offered a drink, but he did not explain himself on one point; who was to pay? Generally, Fauchelevent offered and Father Mestienne paid. An offer of a drink was the evident result of the novel situation created by the new grave-digger, and it was necessary to make this offer, but the old gardener left the proverbial quarter of an hour named after Rabelais in the dark, and that not unintentionally. As for himself, Fauchelevent did not wish to pay, troubled as he was.

The grave-digger went on with a superior smile: —

“One must eat. I have accepted Father Mestienne’s reversion. One gets to be a philosopher when one has nearly completed his classes. To the labor of the hand I join the labor of the arm. I have my scrivener’s stall in the market of the Rue de Sevres. You know? the Umbrella Market. All the cooks of the Red Cross apply to me. I scribble their declarations of love to the raw soldiers. In the morning I write love letters; in the evening I dig graves. Such is life, rustic.”

The hearse was still advancing. Fauchelevent, uneasy to the last degree, was gazing about him on all sides. Great drops of perspiration trickled down from his brow.

“But,” continued the grave-digger, “a man cannot serve two mistresses. I must choose between the pen and the mattock. The mattock is ruining my hand.”

The hearse halted.

The choir boy alighted from the mourning-coach, then the priest.

One of the small front wheels of the hearse had run up a little on a pile of earth, beyond which an open grave was visible.

“What a farce this is!” repeated Fauchelevent in consternation.

CHAPTER VI — BETWEEN FOUR PLANKS

Who was in the coffin? The reader knows. Jean Valjean.

Jean Valjean had arranged things so that he could exist there, and he could almost breathe.

It is a strange thing to what a degree security of conscience confers security of the rest. Every combination thought out by Jean Valjean had been progressing, and progressing favorably, since the preceding day. He, like Fauchelevent, counted on Father Mestienne. He had no doubt as to the end. Never was there a more critical situation, never more complete composure.

The four planks of the coffin breathe out a kind of terrible peace. It seemed as though something of the repose of the dead entered into Jean Valjean's tranquillity.

From the depths of that coffin he had been able to follow, and he had followed, all the phases of the terrible drama which he was playing with death.

Shortly after Fauchelevent had finished nailing on the upper plank, Jean Valjean had felt himself carried out, then driven off. He knew, from the diminution in the jolting, when they left the pavements and reached the earth road. He had divined, from a dull noise, that they were crossing the bridge of Austerlitz. At the first halt, he had understood that they were entering the cemetery; at the second halt, he said to himself: —

"Here is the grave."

Suddenly, he felt hands seize the coffin, then a harsh grating against the planks; he explained it to himself as the rope which was being fastened round the casket in order to lower it into the cavity.

Then he experienced a giddiness.

The undertaker's man and the grave-digger had probably allowed the coffin to lose its balance, and had lowered the head before the foot. He recovered himself fully when he felt himself horizontal and motionless. He had just touched the bottom.

He had a certain sensation of cold.

A voice rose above him, glacial and solemn. He heard Latin words, which he did not understand, pass over him, so slowly that he was able to catch them one by one: —

“Qui dormiunt in terrae pulvere, evigilabunt; alii in vitam aeternam, et alii in approbrium, ut videant semper.”

A child’s voice said: —

“De profundis.”

The grave voice began again: —

“Requiem aeternam dona ei, Domine.”

The child’s voice responded: —

“Et lux perpetua luceat ei.”

He heard something like the gentle patter of several drops of rain on the plank which covered him. It was probably the holy water.

He thought: “This will be over soon now. Patience for a little while longer. The priest will take his departure. Fauchelevent will take Mestienne off to drink. I shall be left. Then Fauchelevent will return alone, and I shall get out. That will be the work of a good hour.”

The grave voice resumed

“Requiescat in pace.”

And the child’s voice said: —

“Amen.”

Jean Valjean strained his ears, and heard something like retreating footsteps.

“There, they are going now,” thought he. “I am alone.”

All at once, he heard over his head a sound which seemed to him to be a clap of thunder.

It was a shovelful of earth falling on the coffin.

A second shovelful fell.

One of the holes through which he breathed had just been stopped up.

A third shovelful of earth fell.

Then a fourth.

There are things which are too strong for the strongest man. Jean Valjean lost consciousness.

CHAPTER VII — IN WHICH WILL BE FOUND THE ORIGIN OF THE SAYING: DON’T LOSE THE CARD

This is what had taken place above the coffin in which lay Jean Valjean.

When the hearse had driven off, when the priest and the choir boy had entered the carriage again and taken their departure, Fauchelevent, who had not taken his eyes from the grave-digger, saw the latter bend over and grasp his shovel, which was sticking upright in the heap of dirt.

Then Fauchelevent took a supreme resolve.

He placed himself between the grave and the grave-digger, crossed his arms and said: —

“I am the one to pay!”

The grave-digger stared at him in amazement, and replied: —

“What’s that, peasant?”

Fauchelevent repeated: —

“I am the one who pays!”

“What?”

“For the wine.”

“What wine?”

“That Argenteuil wine.”

“Where is the Argenteuil?”

“At the Bon Coing.”

“Go to the devil!” said the grave-digger.

And he flung a shovelful of earth on the coffin.

The coffin gave back a hollow sound. Fauchelevent felt himself stagger and on the point of falling headlong into the grave himself. He shouted in a voice in which the strangling sound of the death rattle began to mingle: —

“Comrade! Before the Bon Coing is shut!”

The grave-digger took some more earth on his shovel. Fauchelevent continued.

“I will pay.”

And he seized the man’s arm.

“Listen to me, comrade. I am the convent grave-digger, I have come to help you. It is a business which can be performed at night. Let us begin, then, by going for a drink."

And as he spoke, and clung to this desperate insistence, this melancholy reflection occurred to him: "And if he drinks, will he get drunk?"

"Provincial," said the man, "if you positively insist upon it, I consent. We will drink. After work, never before."

And he flourished his shovel briskly. Fauchelevent held him back.

"It is Argenteuil wine, at six."

"Oh, come," said the grave-digger, "you are a bell-ringer. Ding dong, ding dong, that's all you know how to say. Go hang yourself."

And he threw in a second shovelful.

Fauchelevent had reached a point where he no longer knew what he was saying.

"Come along and drink," he cried, "since it is I who pays the bill."

"When we have put the child to bed," said the grave-digger.

He flung in a third shovelful.

Then he thrust his shovel into the earth and added: —

"It's cold to-night, you see, and the corpse would shriek out after us if we were to plant her there without a coverlet."

At that moment, as he loaded his shovel, the grave-digger bent over, and the pocket of his waistcoat gaped. Fauchelevent's wild gaze fell mechanically into that pocket, and there it stopped.

The sun was not yet hidden behind the horizon; there was still light enough to enable him to distinguish something white at the bottom of that yawning pocket.

The sum total of lightning that the eye of a Picard peasant can contain, traversed Fauchelevent's pupils. An idea had just occurred to him.

He thrust his hand into the pocket from behind, without the grave-digger, who was wholly absorbed in his shovelful of earth, observing it, and pulled out the white object which lay at the bottom of it.

The man sent a fourth shovelful tumbling into the grave.

Just as he turned round to get the fifth, Fauchelevent looked calmly at him and said: —

"By the way, you new man, have you your card?"

The grave-digger paused.

"What card?"

"The sun is on the point of setting."

"That's good, it is going to put on its nightcap."

“The gate of the cemetery will close immediately.”

“Well, what then?”

“Have you your card?”

“Ah! my card?” said the grave-digger.

And he fumbled in his pocket.

Having searched one pocket, he proceeded to search the other. He passed on to his fobs, explored the first, returned to the second.

“Why, no,” said he, “I have not my card. I must have forgotten it.”

“Fifteen francs fine,” said Fauchelevent.

The grave-digger turned green. Green is the pallor of livid people.

“Ah! Jesus-mon-Dieu-bancroche-a-bas-la-lune!” he exclaimed. “Fifteen francs fine!”

“Three pieces of a hundred sous,” said Fauchelevent.

The grave-digger dropped his shovel.

Fauchelevent’s turn had come.

“Ah, come now, conscript,” said Fauchelevent, “none of this despair. There is no question of committing suicide and benefiting the grave. Fifteen francs is fifteen francs, and besides, you may not be able to pay it. I am an old hand, you are a new one. I know all the ropes and the devices. I will give you some friendly advice. One thing is clear, the sun is on the point of setting, it is touching the dome now, the cemetery will be closed in five minutes more.”

“That is true,” replied the man.

“Five minutes more and you will not have time to fill the grave, it is as hollow as the devil, this grave, and to reach the gate in season to pass it before it is shut.”

“That is true.”

“In that case, a fine of fifteen francs.”

“Fifteen francs.”

“But you have time. Where do you live?”

“A couple of steps from the barrier, a quarter of an hour from here. No. 87 Rue de Vaugirard.”

“You have just time to get out by taking to your heels at your best speed.”

“That is exactly so.”

“Once outside the gate, you gallop home, you get your card, you return, the cemetery porter admits you. As you have your card, there will be nothing to pay. And you will bury your corpse. I'll watch it for you in the meantime, so that it shall not run away."

"I am indebted to you for my life, peasant."

"Decamp!" said Fauchelevent.

The grave-digger, overwhelmed with gratitude, shook his hand and set off on a run.

When the man had disappeared in the thicket, Fauchelevent listened until he heard his footsteps die away in the distance, then he leaned over the grave, and said in a low tone: —

"Father Madeleine!"

There was no reply.

Fauchelevent was seized with a shudder. He tumbled rather than climbed into the grave, flung himself on the head of the coffin and cried: —

"Are you there?"

Silence in the coffin.

Fauchelevent, hardly able to draw his breath for trembling, seized his cold chisel and his hammer, and pried up the coffin lid.

Jean Valjean's face appeared in the twilight; it was pale and his eyes were closed.

Fauchelevent's hair rose upright on his head, he sprang to his feet, then fell back against the side of the grave, ready to swoon on the coffin. He stared at Jean Valjean.

Jean Valjean lay there pallid and motionless.

Fauchelevent murmured in a voice as faint as a sigh: —

"He is dead!"

And, drawing himself up, and folding his arms with such violence that his clenched fists came in contact with his shoulders, he cried: —

"And this is the way I save his life!"

Then the poor man fell to sobbing. He soliloquized the while, for it is an error to suppose that the soliloquy is unnatural. Powerful emotion often talks aloud.

"It is Father Mestienne's fault. Why did that fool die? What need was there for him to give up the ghost at the very moment when no one was expecting it? It is he who has killed M. Madeleine. Father Madeleine! He is in the coffin. It is quite handy. All is over. Now, is there any sense in these things? Ah! my God! he is dead! Well! and his little girl, what am I to do with her? What will the fruit-seller say? The idea of its being possible for a man like that to die like this! When I think how he put himself under that cart! Father Madeleine! Father Madeleine! Pardine! He was suffocated, I said so. He wouldn't believe me. Well! Here's a pretty trick to play! He is dead, that good man, the very best man out of all the good God's good folks! And his little girl! Ah! In the first place, I won't go back there myself. I shall stay here. After having done such a thing as that! What's the use of being two old men, if we are two old fools! But, in the first place, how did he manage to enter the convent? That was the beginning of it all. One should not do such things. Father Madeleine! Father Madeleine! Father Madeleine! Madeleine! Monsieur Madeleine! Monsieur le Maire! He does not hear me. Now get out of this scrape if you can!"

And he tore his hair.

A grating sound became audible through the trees in the distance. It was the cemetery gate closing.

Fauchelevent bent over Jean Valjean, and all at once he bounded back and recoiled so far as the limits of a grave permit.

Jean Valjean's eyes were open and gazing at him.

To see a corpse is alarming, to behold a resurrection is almost as much so. Fauchelevent became like stone, pale, haggard, overwhelmed by all these excesses of emotion, not knowing whether he had to do with a living man or a dead one, and staring at Jean Valjean, who was gazing at him.

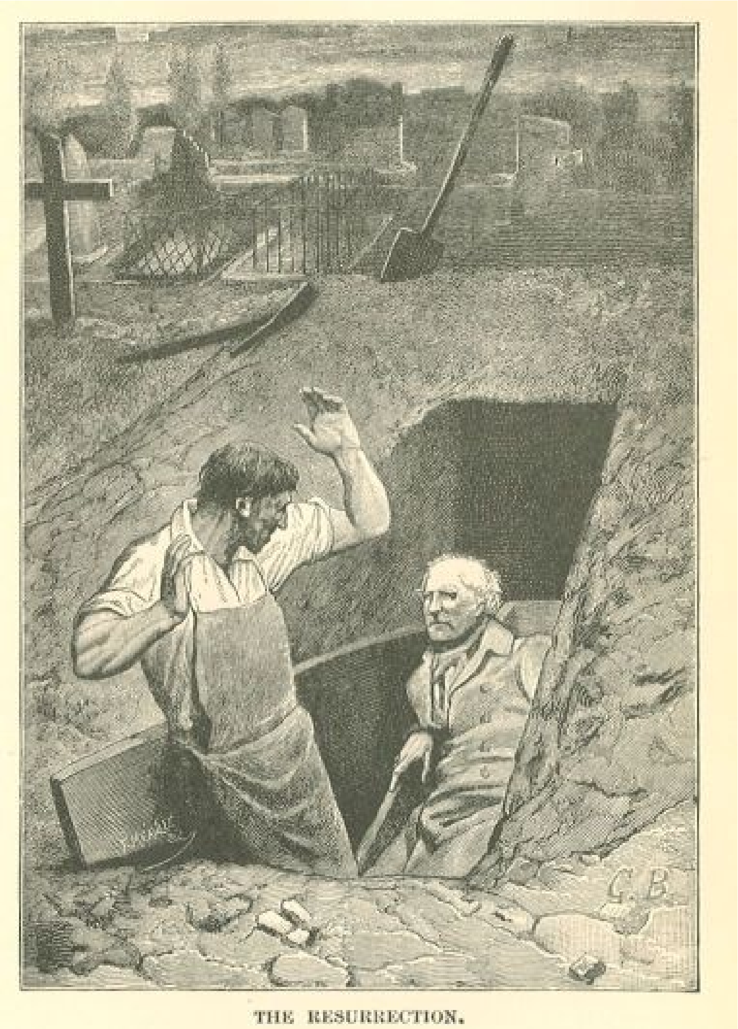

THE RESURRECTION.

“I fell asleep,” said Jean Valjean.

And he raised himself to a sitting posture.

Fauchelevent fell on his knees.

“Just, good Virgin! How you frightened me!”

Then he sprang to his feet and cried: —

“Thanks, Father Madeleine!”

Jean Valjean had merely fainted. The fresh air had revived him.

Joy is the ebb of terror. Fauchelevent found almost as much difficulty in recovering himself as Jean Valjean had.

“So you are not dead! Oh! How wise you are! I called you so much that you came back. When I saw your eyes shut, I said: ‘Good! there he is, stifled,’ I should have gone raving mad, mad enough for a strait jacket. They would have put me in Bicêtre. What do you suppose I should have done if you had been dead? And your little girl? There’s that fruit-seller, —

she would never have understood it! The child is thrust into your arms, and then — the grandfather is dead! What a story! good saints of paradise, what a tale! Ah! you are alive, that's the best of it!"

"I am cold," said Jean Valjean.

This remark recalled Fauchelevent thoroughly to reality, and there was pressing need of it. The souls of these two men were troubled even when they had recovered themselves, although they did not realize it, and there was about them something uncanny, which was the sinister bewilderment inspired by the place.

"Let us get out of here quickly," exclaimed Fauchelevent.

He fumbled in his pocket, and pulled out a gourd with which he had provided himself.

"But first, take a drop," said he.

The flask finished what the fresh air had begun, Jean Valjean swallowed a mouthful of brandy, and regained full possession of his faculties.

He got out of the coffin, and helped Fauchelevent to nail on the lid again.

Three minutes later they were out of the grave.

Moreover, Fauchelevent was perfectly composed. He took his time. The cemetery was closed. The arrival of the grave-digger Gribier was not to be apprehended. That "conscript" was at home busily engaged in looking for his card, and at some difficulty in finding it in his lodgings, since it was in Fauchelevent's pocket. Without a card, he could not get back into the cemetery.

Fauchelevent took the shovel, and Jean Valjean the pick-axe, and together they buried the empty coffin.

When the grave was full, Fauchelevent said to Jean Valjean: —

"Let us go. I will keep the shovel; do you carry off the mattock."

Night was falling.

Jean Valjean experienced rome difficulty in moving and in walking. He had stiffened himself in that coffin, and had become a little like a corpse. The rigidity of death had seized upon him between those four planks. He had, in a manner, to thaw out, from the tomb.

"You are benumbed," said Fauchelevent. "It is a pity that I have a game leg, for otherwise we might step out briskly."

"Bah!" replied Jean Valjean, "four paces will put life into my legs once more."

They set off by the alleys through which the hearse had passed. On arriving before the closed gate and the porter's pavilion Fauchelevent, who held the grave-digger's card in his hand, dropped it into the box, the porter pulled the rope, the gate opened, and they went out.

"How well everything is going!" said Fauchelevent; "what a capital idea that was of yours, Father Madeleine!"

They passed the Vaugirard barrier in the simplest manner in the world. In the neighborhood of the cemetery, a shovel and pick are equal to two passports.

The Rue Vaugirard was deserted.

"Father Madeleine," said Fauchelevent as they went along, and raising his eyes to the houses, "Your eyes are better than mine. Show me No. 87."

"Here it is," said Jean Valjean.

"There is no one in the street," said Fauchelevent. "Give me your mattock and wait a couple of minutes for me."

Fauchelevent entered No. 87, ascended to the very top, guided by the instinct which always leads the poor man to the garret, and knocked in the dark, at the door of an attic.

A voice replied: "Come in."

It was Gribier's voice.

Fauchelevent opened the door. The grave-digger's dwelling was, like all such wretched habitations, an unfurnished and encumbered garret. A packing-case — a coffin, perhaps — took the place of a commode, a butter-pot served for a drinking-fountain, a straw mattress served for a bed, the floor served instead of tables and chairs. In a corner, on a tattered fragment which had been a piece of an old carpet, a thin woman and a number of children were piled in a heap. The whole of this poverty-stricken interior bore traces of having been overturned. One would have said that there had been an earthquake "for one." The covers were displaced, the rags scattered about, the jug broken, the mother had been crying, the children had probably been beaten; traces of a vigorous and ill-tempèred search. It was plain that the grave-digger had made a desperate search for his card, and had made everybody in the garret, from the jug to his wife, responsible for its loss. He wore an air of desperation.

But Fauchelevent was in too great a hurry to terminate this adventure to take any notice of this sad side of his success.

He entered and said: —

“I have brought you back your shovel and pick.”

Gribier gazed at him in stupefaction.

“Is it you, peasant?”

“And to-morrow morning you will find your card with the porter of the cemetery.”

And he laid the shovel and mattock on the floor.

“What is the meaning of this?” demanded Gribier.

“The meaning of it is, that you dropped your card out of your pocket, that I found it on the ground after you were gone, that I have buried the corpse, that I have filled the grave, that I have done your work, that the porter will return your card to you, and that you will not have to pay fifteen francs. There you have it, conscript.”

“Thanks, villager!” exclaimed Gribier, radiant. “The next time I will pay for the drinks.”

CHAPTER VIII — A SUCCESSFUL INTERROGATORY

An hour later, in the darkness of night, two men and a child presented themselves at No. 62 Rue Petit-Picpus. The elder of the men lifted the knocker and rapped.

They were Fauchelevent, Jean Valjean, and Cosette.

The two old men had gone to fetch Cosette from the fruiterer’s in the Rue du Chemin-Vert, where Fauchelevent had deposited her on the preceding day. Cosette had passed these twenty-four hours trembling silently and understanding nothing. She trembled to such a degree that she wept. She had neither eaten nor slept. The worthy fruit-seller had plied her with a hundred questions, without obtaining any other reply than a melancholy and unvarying gaze. Cosette had betrayed nothing of what she had seen and heard during the last two days. She divined that they were passing through a crisis. She was deeply conscious that it was necessary to “be good.” Who has not experienced the sovereign power of those two words, pronounced with a certain accent in the ear of a terrified little being: Say nothing! Fear is mute. Moreover, no one guards a secret like a child.

But when, at the expiration of these lugubrious twenty-four hours, she beheld Jean Valjean again, she gave vent to such a cry of joy, that any thoughtful person who had chanced to hear that cry, would have guessed that it issued from an abyss.

Fauchelevent belonged to the convent and knew the pass-words. All the doors opened.

Thus was solved the double and alarming problem of how to get out and how to get in.

The porter, who had received his instructions, opened the little servant’s door which connected the courtyard with the garden, and which could still be seen from the street twenty years ago, in the wall at the bottom of the court, which faced the carriage entrance.

The porter admitted all three of them through this door, and from that point they reached the inner, reserved parlor where Fauchelevent, on the preceding day, had received his orders from the prioress.

The prioress, rosary in hand, was waiting for them. A vocal mother, with her veil lowered, stood beside her.

A discreet candle lighted, one might almost say, made a show of lighting the parlor.

The prioress passed Jean Valjean in review. There is nothing which examines like a downcast eye.

Then she questioned him: —

“You are the brother?”

“Yes, reverend Mother,” replied Fauchelevent.

“What is your name?”

Fauchelevent replied: —

“Ultime Fauchelevent.”

He really had had a brother named Ultime, who was dead.

“Where do you come from?”

Fauchelevent replied: —

“From Picquigny, near Amiens.”

“What is your age?”

Fauchelevent replied: —

“Fifty.”

“What is your profession?”

Fauchelevent replied: —

“Gardener.”

“Are you a good Christian?”

Fauchelevent replied: —

“Every one is in the family.”

“Is this your little girl?”

Fauchelevent replied: —

“Yes, reverend Mother.”

“You are her father?”

Fauchelevent replied: —

“Her grandfather.”

The vocal mother said to the prioress in a low voice

“He answers well.”

Jean Valjean had not uttered a single word.

The prioress looked attentively at Cosette, and said half aloud to the vocal mother: —

“She will grow up ugly.”

The two mothers consulted for a few moments in very low tones in the corner of the parlor, then the prioress turned round and said: —

“Father Fauvent, you will get another knee-cap with a bell. Two will be required now.”

On the following day, therefore, two bells were audible in the garden, and the nuns could not resist the temptation to raise the corner of their veils. At the extreme end of the garden, under the trees, two men, Fauvent and another man, were visible as they dug side by side. An enormous event. Their silence was broken to the extent of saying to each other: “He is an assistant gardener.”

The vocal mothers added: “He is a brother of Father Fauvent.”

Jean Valjean was, in fact, regularly installed; he had his belled knee-cap; henceforth he was official. His name was Ultime Fauchelevent.

The most powerful determining cause of his admission had been the prioress’s observation upon Cosette: “She will grow up ugly.”

The prioress, that pronounced prognosticator, immediately took a fancy to Cosette and gave her a place in the school as a charity pupil.

There is nothing that is not strictly logical about this.

It is in vain that mirrors are banished from the convent, women are conscious of their faces; now, girls who are conscious of their beauty do not easily become nuns; the vocation being voluntary in inverse proportion to their good looks, more is to be hoped from the ugly than from the pretty. Hence a lively taste for plain girls.

The whole of this adventure increased the importance of good, old Fauchelevent; he won a triple success; in the eyes of Jean Valjean, whom he had saved and sheltered; in those of grave-digger Gribier, who said to himself: “He spared me that fine”; with the convent, which, being enabled, thanks to him, to retain the coffin of Mother Crucifixion under the altar, eluded Caesar and satisfied God. There was a coffin containing a body in the Petit-Picpus, and a coffin without a body in the Vaugirard cemetery, public order had no doubt been deeply disturbed thereby, but no one was aware of it.

As for the convent, its gratitude to Fauchelevent was very great. Fauchelevent became the best of servitors and the most precious of gardeners. Upon the occasion of the archbishop’s next visit, the prioress recounted the affair to his Grace, making something of a confession at the same time, and yet boasting of her deed. On leaving the convent, the archbishop mentioned it with approval, and in a whisper to M. de Latil, Monsieur’s confessor, afterwards Archbishop of Reims and Cardinal. This admiration for Fauchelevent became widespread, for it made its way to Rome. We have seen a note addressed by the then reigning Pope, Leo XII., to one of his relatives, a Monsignor in the Nuncio’s establishment in Paris, and bearing, like himself, the name of Della Genga; it contained these lines: “It appears that there is in a convent in Paris an excellent gardener, who is also a holy man, named Fauvent.” Nothing of this triumph reached Fauchelevent in his hut; he went on grafting, weeding, and covering up his melon beds, without in the least suspecting his excellences and his sanctity. Neither did he suspect his glory, any more than a Durham or Surrey bull whose portrait is published in the London Illustrated News, with this inscription: “Bull which carried off the prize at the Cattle Show.”

CHAPTER IX — CLOISTERED

Cosette continued to hold her tongue in the convent.

It was quite natural that Cosette should think herself Jean Valjean’s daughter. Moreover, as she knew nothing, she could say nothing, and then, she would not have said anything in any case. As we have just observed, nothing trains children to silence like unhappiness. Cosette had suffered so much, that she feared everything, even to speak or to breathe. A single word had so often brought down an avalanche upon her. She had hardly begun to regain her confidence since she had been with Jean Valjean. She speedily became accustomed to the convent. Only she regretted Catherine, but she dared not say so. Once, however, she did say to Jean Valjean: “Father, if I had known, I would have brought her away with me.”

Cosette had been obliged, on becoming a scholar in the convent, to don the garb of the pupils of the house. Jean Valjean succeeded in getting them to restore to him the garments which she laid aside. This was the same mourning suit which he had made her put on when she had quitted the Thenardiers’ inn. It was not very threadbare even now. Jean Valjean locked up these garments, plus the stockings and the shoes, with a quantity of camphor and all the aromatics in which convents abound, in a little valise which he found means of procuring. He set this valise on a chair near his bed, and he always carried the key about his person. “Father,” Cosette asked him one day, “what is there in that box which smells so good?”

Father Fauchelevent received other recompense for his good action, in addition to the glory which we just mentioned, and of which he knew nothing; in the first place it made him happy; next, he had much less work, since it was shared. Lastly, as he was very fond of snuff, he found the presence of M. Madeleine an advantage, in that he used three times as much as he had done previously, and that in an infinitely more luxurious manner, seeing that M. Madeleine paid for it.

The nuns did not adopt the name of Ultime; they called Jean Valjean the other Fauvent.

If these holy women had possessed anything of Javert’s glance, they would eventually have noticed that when there was any errand to be done outside in the behalf of the garden, it was always the elder Fauchelevent, the old, the infirm, the lame man, who went, and never the other; but whether it is that eyes constantly fixed on God know not how to spy, or whether they were, by preference, occupied in keeping watch on each other, they paid no heed to this.

Moreover, it was well for Jean Valjean that he kept close and did not stir out. Javert watched the quarter for more than a month.

This convent was for Jean Valjean like an island surrounded by gulfs. Henceforth, those four walls constituted his world. He saw enough of the sky there to enable him to preserve his serenity, and Cosette enough to remain happy.

A very sweet life began for him.

He inhabited the old hut at the end of the garden, in company with Fauchelevent. This hovel, built of old rubbish, which was still in existence in 1845, was composed, as the reader already knows, of three chambers, all of which were utterly bare and had nothing beyond the walls. The principal one had been given up, by force, for Jean Valjean had opposed it in vain, to M. Madeleine, by Father Fauchelevent. The walls of this chamber had for ornament, in addition to the two nails whereon to hang the knee-cap and the basket, a Royalist bank-note of ‘93, applied to the wall over the chimney-piece, and of which the following is an exact facsimile: —

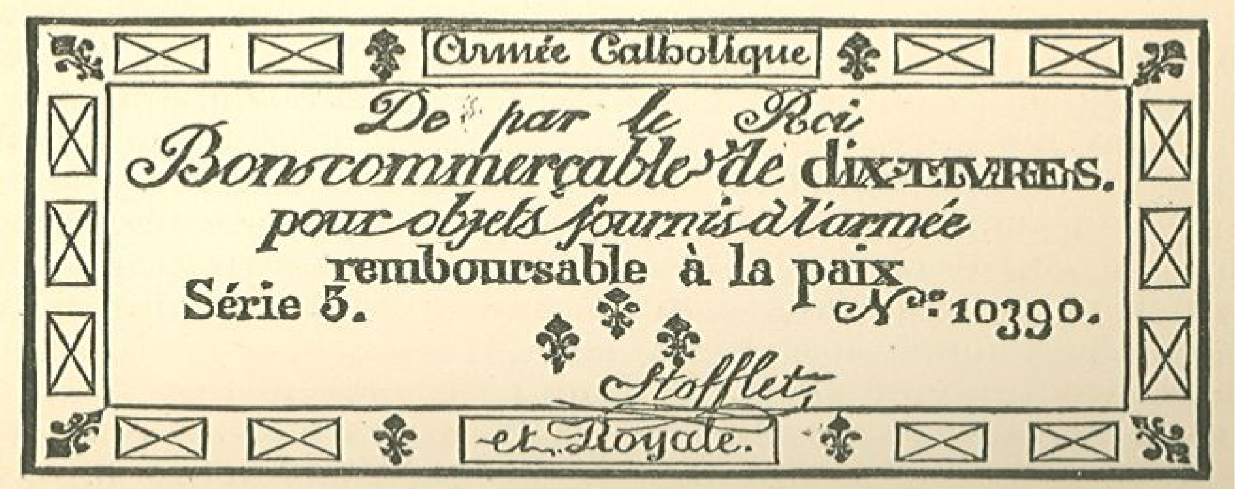

Armée Catholique

De par le Roi

Bon commerçable de dix livres.

pour objets fournis à l'armée

remboursable à la paix

Série 5.

Nº. 10390.

Stofflet

et Royale.

This specimen of Vendean paper money had been nailed to the wall by the preceding gardener, an old Chouan, who had died in the convent, and whose place Fauchelevent had taken.

Jean Valjean worked in the garden every day and made himself very useful. He had formerly been a pruner of trees, and he gladly found himself a gardener once more. It will be remembered that he knew all sorts of secrets and receipts for agriculture. He turned these to advantage. Almost all the trees in the orchard were ungrafted, and wild. He budded them and made them produce excellent fruit.

Cosette had permission to pass an hour with him every day. As the sisters were melancholy and he was kind, the child made comparisons and adored him. At the appointed hour she flew to the hut. When she entered the lowly cabin, she filled it with paradise. Jean Valjean blossomed out and felt his happiness increase with the happiness which he afforded Cosette. The joy which we inspire has this charming property, that, far from growing meagre, like all reflections, it returns to us more radiant than ever. At recreation hours, Jean Valjean watched her running and playing in the distance, and he distinguished her laugh from that of the rest.

For Cosette laughed now.

Cosette's face had even undergone a change, to a certain extent. The gloom had disappeared from it. A smile is the same as sunshine; it banishes winter from the human countenance.

Recreation over, when Cosette went into the house again, Jean Valjean gazed at the windows of her class-room, and at night he rose to look at the windows of her dormitory.

God has his own ways, moreover; the convent contributed, like Cosette, to uphold and complete the Bishop's work in Jean Valjean. It is certain that virtue adjoins pride on one side. A bridge built by the devil exists there. Jean Valjean had been, unconsciously, perhaps, tolerably near that side and that bridge, when Providence cast his lot in the convent of the Petit-Picpus; so long as he had compared himself only to the Bishop, he had regarded himself as unworthy and had remained humble; but for some time past he had been comparing himself to men in general, and pride was beginning to spring up. Who knows? He might have ended by returning very gradually to hatred.

The convent stopped him on that downward path.

This was the second place of captivity which he had seen. In his youth, in what had been for him the beginning of his life, and later on, quite recently again, he had beheld another, — a frightful place, a terrible place, whose severities had always appeared to him the iniquity of justice, and the crime of the law. Now, after the galleys, he saw the cloister; and when he meditated how he had formed a part of the galleys, and that he now, so to speak, was a spectator of the cloister, he confronted the two in his own mind with anxiety.

Sometimes he crossed his arms and leaned on his hoe, and slowly descended the endless spirals of revery.

He recalled his former companions: how wretched they were; they rose at dawn, and toiled until night; hardly were they permitted to sleep; they lay on camp beds, where nothing was tolerated but mattresses two inches thick, in rooms which were heated only in the very harshest months of the year; they were clothed in frightful red blouses; they were allowed, as a great favor, linen trousers in the hottest weather, and a woollen carter’s blouse on their backs when it was very cold; they drank no wine, and ate no meat, except when they went on “fatigue duty.” They lived nameless, designated only by numbers, and converted, after a manner, into ciphers themselves, with downcast eyes, with lowered voices, with shorn heads, beneath the cudgel and in disgrace.

Then his mind reverted to the beings whom he had under his eyes.

These beings also lived with shorn heads, with downcast eyes, with lowered voices, not in disgrace, but amid the scoffs of the world, not with their backs bruised with the cudgel, but with their shoulders lacerated with their discipline. Their names, also, had vanished from among men; they no longer existed except under austere appellations. They never ate meat and they never drank wine; they often remained until evening without food; they were attired, not in a red blouse, but in a black shroud, of woollen, which was heavy in summer and thin in winter, without the power to add or subtract anything from it; without having even, according to the season, the resource of the linen garment or the woollen cloak; and for six months in the year they wore serge chemises which gave them fever. They dwelt, not in rooms warmed only during rigorous cold, but in cells where no fire was ever lighted; they slept, not on mattresses two inches thick, but on straw. And finally, they were not even allowed their sleep; every night, after a day of toil, they were obliged, in the weariness of their first slumber, at the moment when they were falling sound asleep and beginning to get warm, to rouse themselves, to rise and to go and pray in an ice-cold and gloomy chapel, with their knees on the stones.

On certain days each of these beings in turn had to remain for twelve successive hours in a kneeling posture, or prostrate, with face upon the pavement, and arms outstretched in the form of a cross.

The others were men; these were women.

What had those men done? They had stolen, violated, pillaged, murdered, assassinated. They were bandits, counterfeiters, poisoners, incendiaries, murderers, parricides. What had these women done? They had done nothing whatever.

On the one hand, highway robbery, fraud, deceit, violence, sensuality, homicide, all sorts of sacrilege, every variety of crime; on the other, one thing only, innocence.

Perfect innocence, almost caught up into heaven in a mysterious assumption, attached to the earth by virtue, already possessing something of heaven through holiness.

On the one hand, confidences over crimes, which are exchanged in whispers; on the other, the confession of faults made aloud. And what crimes! And what faults!

On the one hand, miasms; on the other, an ineffable perfume. On the one hand, a moral pest, guarded from sight, penned up under the range of cannon, and literally devouring its plague-stricken victims; on the other, the chaste flame of all souls on the same hearth. There, darkness; here, the shadow; but a shadow filled with gleams of light, and of gleams full of radiance.

Two strongholds of slavery; but in the first, deliverance possible, a legal limit always in sight, and then, escape. In the second, perpetuity; the sole hope, at the distant extremity of the future, that faint light of liberty which men call death.

In the first, men are bound only with chains; in the other, chained by faith.

What flowed from the first? An immense curse, the gnashing of teeth, hatred, desperate viciousness, a cry of rage against human society, a sarcasm against heaven.

What results flowed from the second? Blessings and love.

And in these two places, so similar yet so unlike, these two species of beings who were so very unlike, were undergoing the same work, expiation.

Jean Valjean understood thoroughly the expiation of the former; that personal expiation, the expiation for one’s self. But he did not understand that of these last, that of creatures without reproach and without stain, and he trembled as he asked himself: The expiation of what? What expiation?

A voice within his conscience replied: “The most divine of human generosities, the expiation for others.”

Here all personal theory is withheld; we are only the narrator; we place ourselves at Jean Valjean’s point of view, and we translate his impressions.

Before his eyes he had the sublime summit of abnegation, the highest possible pitch of virtue; the innocence which pardons men their faults, and which expiates in their stead; servitude submitted to, torture accepted, punishment claimed by souls which have not sinned, for the sake of sparing it to souls which have fallen; the love of humanity swallowed up in the love of God, but even there preserving its distinct and mediatorial character; sweet and feeble beings possessing the misery of those who are punished and the smile of those who are recompensed.

And he remembered that he had dared to murmur!

Often, in the middle of the night, he rose to listen to the grateful song of those innocent creatures weighed down with severities, and the blood ran cold in his veins at the thought that those who were justly chastised raised their voices heavenward only in blasphemy, and that he, wretch that he was, had shaken his fist at God.

There was one striking thing which caused him to meditate deeply, like a warning whisper from Providence itself: the scaling of that wall, the passing of those barriers, the adventure accepted even at the risk of death, the painful and difficult ascent, all those efforts even, which he had made to escape from that other place of expiation, he had made in order to gain entrance into this one. Was this a symbol of his destiny? This house was a prison likewise and bore a melancholy resemblance to that other one whence he had fled, and yet he had never conceived an idea of anything similar.

Again he beheld gratings, bolts, iron bars — to guard whom? Angels.

These lofty walls which he had seen around tigers, he now beheld once more around lambs.

This was a place of expiation, and not of punishment; and yet, it was still more austere, more gloomy, and more pitiless than the other.

These virgins were even more heavily burdened than the convicts. A cold, harsh wind, that wind which had chilled his youth, traversed the barred and padlocked grating of the vultures; a still harsher and more biting breeze blew in the cage of these doves.

Why?

When he thought on these things, all that was within him was lost in amazement before this mystery of sublimity.

In these meditations, his pride vanished. He scrutinized his own heart in all manner of ways; he felt his pettiness, and many a time he wept. All that had entered into his life for the last six months had led him back towards the Bishop's holy injunctions; Cosette through love, the convent through humility.

Sometimes at eventide, in the twilight, at an hour when the garden was deserted, he could be seen on his knees in the middle of the walk which skirted the chapel, in front of the window through which he had gazed on the night of his arrival, and turned towards the spot where, as he knew, the sister was making reparation, prostrated in prayer. Thus he prayed as he knelt before the sister.

It seemed as though he dared not kneel directly before God.

Everything that surrounded him, that peaceful garden, those fragrant flowers, those children who uttered joyous cries, those grave and simple women, that silent cloister, slowly permeated him, and little by little, his soul became compounded of silence like the cloister, of perfume like the flowers, of simplicity like the women, of joy like the children. And then he reflected that these had been two houses of God which had received him in succession at two critical moments in his life: the first, when all doors were closed and when human society rejected him; the second, at a moment when human society had again set out in pursuit of him, and when the galleys were again yawning; and that, had it not been for the first, he should have relapsed into crime, and had it not been for the second, into torment.

His whole heart melted in gratitude, and he loved more and more.

Many years passed in this manner; Cosette was growing up.

[THE END OF VOLUME II. “COSETTE”]

VOLUME III — MARIUS.

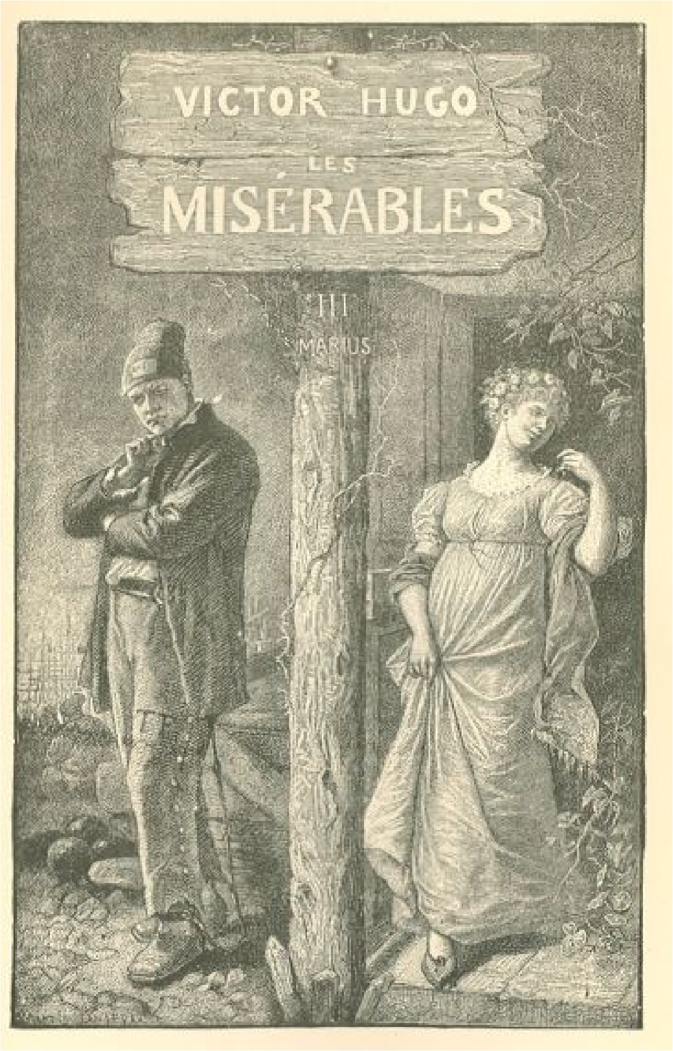
VICTOR HUGO
LES
MISÉRABLES
III
MARIUS

LES MISÉRABLES

BY

VICTOR HUGO

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH

BY

ISABEL F. HAPGOOD

IN FIVE VOLUMES

VOL. III.

MARIUS

NEW YORK
THOMAS Y. CROWELL & CO.
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BOOK FIRST. — PARIS STUDIED IN ITS ATOM

CHAPTER I — PARVULUS

Paris has a child, and the forest has a bird; the bird is called the sparrow; the child is called the gamin.

Couple these two ideas which contain, the one all the furnace, the other all the dawn; strike these two sparks together, Paris, childhood; there leaps out from them a little being. Homuncio, Plautus would say.

This little being is joyous. He has not food every day, and he goes to the play every evening, if he sees good. He has no shirt on his body, no shoes on his feet, no roof over his head; he is like the flies of heaven, who have none of these things. He is from seven to thirteen years of age, he lives in bands, roams the streets, lodges in the open air, wears an old pair of trousers of his father's, which descend below his heels, an old hat of some other father, which descends below his ears, a single suspender of yellow listing; he runs, lies in wait, rummages about, wastes time, blackens pipes, swears like a convict, haunts the wine-shop, knows thieves, calls gay women thou, talks slang, sings obscene songs, and has no evil in his heart. This is because he has in his heart a pearl, innocence; and pearls are not to be dissolved in mud. So long as man is in his childhood, God wills that he shall be innocent.

If one were to ask that enormous city: “What is this?” she would reply: “It is my little one.”

CHAPTER II — SOME OF HIS PARTICULAR CHARACTERISTICS

The gamin — the street Arab — of Paris is the dwarf of the giant.

Let us not exaggerate, this cherub of the gutter sometimes has a shirt, but, in that case, he owns but one; he sometimes has shoes, but then they have no soles; he sometimes has a lodging, and he loves it, for he finds his mother there; but he prefers the street, because there he finds liberty. He has his own games, his own bits of mischief, whose foundation consists of hatred for the bourgeois; his peculiar metaphors: to be dead is to eat dandelions by the root; his own occupations, calling hackney-coaches, letting down carriage-steps, establishing means of transit between the two sides of a street in heavy rains, which he calls making the bridge of arts, crying discourses pronounced by the authorities in favor of the French people, cleaning out the cracks in the pavement; he has his own coinage, which is composed of all the little morsels of worked copper which are found on the public streets. This curious money, which receives the name of loques — rags — has an invariable and well-regulated currency in this little Bohemia of children.

Lastly, he has his own fauna, which he observes attentively in the corners; the lady-bird, the death’s-head plant-louse, the daddy-long-legs, “the devil,” a black insect, which menaces by twisting about its tail armed with two horns. He has his fabulous monster, which has scales under its belly, but is not a lizard, which has pustules on its back, but is not a toad, which inhabits the nooks of old lime-kilns and wells that have run dry, which is black, hairy, sticky, which crawls sometimes slowly, sometimes rapidly, which has no cry, but which has a look, and is so terrible that no one has ever beheld it; he calls this monster “the deaf thing.” The search for these “deaf things” among the stones is a joy of formidable nature. Another pleasure consists in suddenly prying up a paving-stone, and taking a look at the wood-lice. Each region of Paris is celebrated for the interesting treasures which are to be found there. There are ear-wigs in the timber-yards of the Ursulines, there are millepeds in the Pantheon, there are tadpoles in the ditches of the Champs-de-Mars.

As far as sayings are concerned, this child has as many of them as Talleyrand. He is no less cynical, but he is more honest. He is endowed with a certain indescribable, unexpected joviality; he upsets the composure of the shopkeeper with his wild laughter. He ranges boldly from high comedy to farce.

A funeral passes by. Among those who accompany the dead there is a doctor. “Hey there!” shouts some street Arab, “how long has it been customary for doctors to carry home their own work?”

Another is in a crowd. A grave man, adorned with spectacles and trinkets, turns round indignantly: “You good-for-nothing, you have seized my wife’s waist!”— “I, sir? Search me!”

CHAPTER III — HE IS AGREEABLE

In the evening, thanks to a few sous, which he always finds means to procure, the homuncio enters a theatre. On crossing that magic threshold, he becomes transfigured; he was the street Arab, he becomes the titi. Theatres are a sort of ship turned upside down with the keel in the air. It is in that keel that the titi huddle together. The titi is to the gamin what the moth is to the larva; the same being endowed with wings and soaring. It suffices for him to be there, with his radiance of happiness, with his power of enthusiasm and joy, with his hand-clapping, which resembles a clapping of wings, to confer on that narrow, dark, fetid, sordid, unhealthy, hideous, abominable keel, the name of Paradise.

Bestow on an individual the useless and deprive him of the necessary, and you have the gamin.

The gamin is not devoid of literary intuition. His tendency, and we say it with the proper amount of regret, would not constitute classic taste. He is not very academic by nature. Thus, to give an example, the popularity of Mademoiselle Mars among that little audience of stormy children was seasoned with a touch of irony. The gamin called her Mademoiselle Muche — “hide yourself.”

This being bawls and scoffs and ridicules and fights, has rags like a baby and tatters like a philosopher, fishes in the sewer, hunts in the cesspool, extracts mirth from foulness, whips up the squares with his wit, grins and bites, whistles and sings, shouts, and shrieks, tempers Alleluia with Matantur-lurette, chants every rhythm from the De Profundis to the Jack-pudding, finds without seeking, knows what he is ignorant of, is a Spartan to the point of thieving, is mad to wisdom, is lyrical to filth, would crouch down on Olympus, wallows in the dunghill and emerges from it covered with stars. The gamin of Paris is Rabelais in this youth.

He is not content with his trousers unless they have a watch-pocket.

He is not easily astonished, he is still less easily terrified, he makes songs on superstitions, he takes the wind out of exaggerations, he twits mysteries, he thrusts out his tongue at ghosts, he takes the poetry out of stilted things, he introduces caricature into epic extravaganzas. It is not that he is prosaic; far from that; but he replaces the solemn vision by the farcical phantasmagoria. If Adamastor were to appear to him, the street Arab would say: “Hi there! The bugaboo!”

CHAPTER IV — HE MAY BE OF USE

Paris begins with the lounger and ends with the street Arab, two beings of which no other city is capable; the passive acceptance, which contents itself with gazing, and the inexhaustible initiative; Prudhomme and Fouillou. Paris alone has this in its natural history. The whole of the monarchy is contained in the lounger; the whole of anarchy in the gamin.

This pale child of the Parisian faubourgs lives and develops, makes connections, "grows supple" in suffering, in the presence of social realities and of human things, a thoughtful witness. He thinks himself heedless; and he is not. He looks and is on the verge of laughter; he is on the verge of something else also. Whoever you may be, if your name is Prejudice, Abuse, Ignorance, Oppression, Iniquity, Despotism, Injustice, Fanaticism, Tyranny, beware of the gaping gamin.

The little fellow will grow up.

Of what clay is he made? Of the first mud that comes to hand. A handful of dirt, a breath, and behold Adam. It suffices for a God to pass by. A God has always passed over the street Arab. Fortune labors at this tiny being. By the word "fortune" we mean chance, to some extent. That pigmy kneaded out of common earth, ignorant, unlettered, giddy, vulgar, low. Will that become an Ionian or a Boeotian? Wait, currit rota, the Spirit of Paris, that demon which creates the children of chance and the men of destiny, reversing the process of the Latin potter, makes of a jug an amphora.

CHAPTER V — HIS FRONTIERS

The gamin loves the city, he also loves solitude, since he has something of the sage in him. Urbis amator, like Fuscus; ruris amator, like Flaccus.

To roam thoughtfully about, that is to say, to lounge, is a fine employment of time in the eyes of the philosopher; particularly in that rather illegitimate species of campaign, which is tolerably ugly but odd and composed of two natures, which surrounds certain great cities, notably Paris. To study the suburbs is to study the amphibious animal. End of the trees, beginning of the roofs; end of the grass, beginning of the pavements; end of the furrows, beginning of the shops, end of the wheel-ruts, beginning of the passions; end of the divine murmur, beginning of the human uproar; hence an extraordinary interest.

Hence, in these not very attractive places, indelibly stamped by the passing stroller with the epithet: melancholy, the apparently objectless promenades of the dreamer.

He who writes these lines has long been a prowler about the barriers of Paris, and it is for him a source of profound souvenirs. That close-shaven turf, those pebbly paths, that chalk, those pools, those harsh monotonies of waste and fallow lands, the plants of early market-garden suddenly springing into sight in a bottom, that mixture of the savage and the citizen, those vast desert nooks where the garrison drums practise noisily, and produce a sort of lisping of battle, those hermits by day and cut-throats by night, that clumsy mill which turns in the wind, the hoisting-wheels of the quarries, the tea-gardens at the corners of the cemeteries; the mysterious charm of great, sombre walls squarely intersecting immense, vague stretches of land inundated with sunshine and full of butterflies, — all this attracted him.

There is hardly any one on earth who is not acquainted with those singular spots, the Glaciere, the Cunette, the hideous wall of Grenelle all speckled with balls, Mont-Parnasse, the Fosse-aux-Loups, Aubiers on the bank of the Marne, Mont-Souris, the Tombe-Issoire, the Pierre-Plate de Chatillon, where there is an old, exhausted quarry which no longer serves any purpose except to raise mushrooms, and which is closed, on a level with the ground, by a trap-door of rotten planks. The campagna of Rome is one idea, the banlieue of Paris is another; to behold nothing but fields, houses, or trees in what a stretch of country offers us, is to remain on the surface; all aspects of things are thoughts of God. The spot where a plain effects its junction with a city is always stamped with a certain piercing melancholy. Nature and humanity both appeal to you at the same time there. Local originalities there make their appearance.

Any one who, like ourselves, has wandered about in these solitudes contiguous to our faubourgs, which may be designated as the limbos of Paris, has seen here and there, in the most desert spot, at the most unexpected moment, behind a meagre hedge, or in the corner of a lugubrious wall, children grouped tumultuously, fetid, muddy, dusty, ragged, dishevelled, playing hide-and-seek, and crowned with corn-flowers. All of them are little ones who have made their escape from poor families. The outer boulevard is their breathing space; the suburbs belong to them. There they are eternally playing truant. There they innocently sing their repertory of dirty songs. There they are, or rather, there they exist, far from every eye, in the sweet light of May or June, kneeling round a hole in the ground, snapping marbles with their thumbs, quarrelling over half-farthings, irresponsible, volatile, free and happy; and, no sooner do they catch sight of you than they recollect that they have an industry, and that they must earn their living, and they offer to sell you an old woollen stocking filled with cockchafers, or a bunch of lilacs. These encounters with strange children are one of the charming and at the same time poignant graces of the environs of Paris.

Sometimes there are little girls among the throng of boys, — are they their sisters? — who are almost young maidens, thin, feverish, with sunburnt hands, covered with freckles, crowned with poppies and ears of rye, gay, haggard, barefooted. They can be seen devouring cherries among the wheat. In the evening they can be heard laughing. These groups, warmly illuminated by the full glow of midday, or indistinctly seen in the twilight, occupy the thoughtful man for a very long time, and these visions mingle with his dreams.

Paris, centre, banlieue, circumference; this constitutes all the earth to those children. They never venture beyond this. They can no more escape from the Parisian atmosphere than fish can escape from the water. For them, nothing exists two leagues beyond the barriers: Ivry, Gentilly, Arcueil, Belleville, Aubervilliers, Menilmontant, Choisy-le-Roi, Billancourt, Mendon, Issy, Vanvre, Sevres, Puteaux, Neuilly, Gennevilliers, Colombes, Romainville, Chatou, Asnieres, Bougival, Nanterre, Enghien, Noisy-le-Sec, Nogent, Gournay, Drancy, Gonesse; the universe ends there.

CHAPTER VI — A BIT OF HISTORY

At the epoch, nearly contemporary by the way, when the action of this book takes place, there was not, as there is to-day, a policeman at the corner of every street (a benefit which there is no time to discuss here); stray children abounded in Paris. The statistics give an average of two hundred and sixty homeless children picked up annually at that period, by the police patrols, in unenclosed lands, in houses in process of construction, and under the arches of the bridges. One of these nests, which has become famous, produced “the swallows of the bridge of Arcola.” This is, moreover, the most disastrous of social symptoms. All crimes of the man begin in the vagabondage of the child.

Let us make an exception in favor of Paris, nevertheless. In a relative measure, and in spite of the souvenir which we have just recalled, the exception is just. While in any other great city the vagabond child is a lost man, while nearly everywhere the child left to itself is, in some sort, sacrificed and abandoned to a kind of fatal immersion in the public vices which devour in him honesty and conscience, the street boy of Paris, we insist on this point, however defaced and injured on the surface, is almost intact on the interior. It is a magnificent thing to put on record, and one which shines forth in the splendid probity of our popular revolutions, that a certain incorruptibility results from the idea which exists in the air of Paris, as salt exists in the water of the ocean. To breathe Paris preserves the soul.

What we have just said takes away nothing of the anguish of heart which one experiences every time that one meets one of these children around whom one fancies that he beholds floating the threads of a broken family. In the civilization of the present day, incomplete as it still is, it is not a very abnormal thing to behold these fractured families pouring themselves out into the darkness, not knowing clearly what has become of their children, and allowing their own entrails to fall on the public highway. Hence these obscure destinies. This is called, for this sad thing has given rise to an expression, “to be cast on the pavements of Paris.”

Let it be said by the way, that this abandonment of children was not discouraged by the ancient monarchy. A little of Egypt and Bohemia in the lower regions suited the upper spheres, and compassed the aims of the powerful. The hatred of instruction for the children of the people was a dogma. What is the use of “half-lights”? Such was the countersign. Now, the erring child is the corollary of the ignorant child.

Besides this, the monarchy sometimes was in need of children, and in that case it skimmed the streets.

Under Louis XIV., not to go any further back, the king rightly desired to create a fleet. The idea was a good one. But let us consider the means. There can be no fleet, if, beside the sailing ship, that plaything of the winds, and for the purpose of towing it, in case of necessity, there is not the vessel which goes where it pleases, either by means of oars or of steam; the galleys were then to the marine what steamers are to-day. Therefore, galleys were necessary; but the galley is moved only by the galley-slave; hence, galley-slaves were required. Colbert had the commissioners of provinces and the parliaments make as many convicts as possible. The magistracy showed a great deal of complaisance in the matter. A man kept his hat on in the presence of a procession — it was a Huguenot attitude; he was sent to the galleys. A child was encountered in the streets; provided that he was fifteen years of age and did not know where he was to sleep, he was sent to the galleys. Grand reign; grand century.

Under Louis XV. children disappeared in Paris; the police carried them off, for what mysterious purpose no one knew. People whispèred with terror monstrous conjectures as to the king’s baths of purple. Barbier speaks ingenuously of these things. It sometimes happened that the exempts of the guard, when they ran short of children, took those who had fathers. The fathers, in despair, attacked the exempts. In that case, the parliament intervened and had some one hung. Who? The exempts? No, the fathers.

CHAPTER VII — THE GAMIN SHOULD HAVE HIS PLACE IN THE CLASSIFICATIONS OF INDIA

The body of street Arabs in Paris almost constitutes a caste. One might almost say: Not every one who wishes to belong to it can do so.

This word gamin was printed for the first time, and reached popular speech through the literary tongue, in 1834. It is in a little work entitled Claude Gueux that this word made its appearance. The horror was lively. The word passed into circulation.

The elements which constitute the consideration of the gamins for each other are very various. We have known and associated with one who was greatly respected and vastly admired because he had seen a man fall from the top of the tower of Notre-Dame; another, because he had succeeded in making his way into the rear courtyard where the statues of the dome of the Invalides had been temporarily deposited, and had “prigged” some lead from them; a third, because he had seen a diligence tip over; still another, because he “knew” a soldier who came near putting out the eye of a citizen.

This explains that famous exclamation of a Parisian gamin, a profound epiphonema, which the vulgar herd laughs at without comprehending, — Dieu de Dieu! What ill-luck I do have! to think that I have never yet seen anybody tumble from a fifth-story window! (I have pronounced I’ave and fifth pronounced fift’.)

Surely, this saying of a peasant is a fine one: “Father So-and-So, your wife has died of her malady; why did you not send for the doctor?” “What would you have, sir, we poor folks die of ourselves.” But if the peasant’s whole passivity lies in this saying, the whole of the free-thinking anarchy of the brat of the faubourgs is, assuredly, contained in this other saying. A man condemned to death is listening to his confessor in the tumbrel. The child of Paris exclaims: “He is talking to his black cap! Oh, the sneak!”

A certain audacity on matters of religion sets off the gamin. To be strong-minded is an important item.

To be present at executions constitutes a duty. He shows himself at the guillotine, and he laughs. He calls it by all sorts of pet names: The End of the Soup, The Growler, The Mother in the Blue (the sky), The Last

Mouthful, etc., etc. In order not to lose anything of the affair, he scales the walls, he hoists himself to balconies, he ascends trees, he suspends himself to gratings, he clings fast to chimneys. The gamin is born a tiler as he is born a mariner. A roof inspires him with no more fear than a mast. There is no festival which comes up to an execution on the Place de Greve. Samson and the Abbé Montes are the truly popular names. They hoot at the victim in order to encourage him. They sometimes admire him. Lacenaire, when a gamin, on seeing the hideous Dautin die bravely, uttered these words which contain a future: “I was jealous of him.” In the brotherhood of gamins Voltaire is not known, but Papavoine is. “Politicians” are confused with assassins in the same legend. They have a tradition as to everybody’s last garment. It is known that Tolleron had a fireman’s cap, Avril an otter cap, Losvel a round hat, that old Delaporte was bald and bare-headed, that Castaing was all ruddy and very handsome, that Bories had a romantic small beard, that Jean Martin kept on his suspenders, that Lecouffe and his mother quarrelled. “Don’t reproach each other for your basket,” shouted a gamin to them. Another, in order to get a look at Debacker as he passed, and being too small in the crowd, caught sight of the lantern on the quay and climbed it. A gendarme stationed opposite frowned. “Let me climb up, m’sieu le gendarme,” said the gamin. And, to soften the heart of the authorities he added: “I will not fall.” “I don’t care if you do,” retorted the gendarme.

In the brotherhood of gamins, a memorable accident counts for a great deal. One reaches the height of consideration if one chances to cut one’s self very deeply, “to the very bone.”

The fist is no mediocre element of respect. One of the things that the gamin is fondest of saying is: “I am fine and strong, come now!” To be left-handed renders you very enviable. A squint is highly esteemed.

CHAPTER VIII — IN WHICH THE READER WILL FIND A CHARMING SAYING OF THE LAST KING

In summer, he metamorphoses himself into a frog; and in the evening, when night is falling, in front of the bridges of Austerlitz and Jena, from the tops of coal wagons, and the washerwomen's boats, he hurls himself headlong into the Seine, and into all possible infractions of the laws of modesty and of the police. Nevertheless the police keep an eye on him, and the result is a highly dramatic situation which once gave rise to a fraternal and memorable cry; that cry which was celebrated about 1830, is a strategic warning from gamin to gamin; it scans like a verse from Homer, with a notation as inexpressible as the eleusiac chant of the Panathenaea, and in it one encounters again the ancient Evohe. Here it is: "Ohe, Titi, oheee! Here comes the bobby, here comes the p'lice, pick up your duds and be off, through the sewer with you!"

Sometimes this gnat — that is what he calls himself — knows how to read; sometimes he knows how to write; he always knows how to daub. He does not hesitate to acquire, by no one knows what mysterious mutual instruction, all the talents which can be of use to the public; from 1815 to 1830, he imitated the cry of the turkey; from 1830 to 1848, he scrawled pears on the walls. One summer evening, when Louis Philippe was returning home on foot, he saw a little fellow, no higher than his knee, perspiring and climbing up to draw a gigantic pear in charcoal on one of the pillars of the gate of Neuilly; the King, with that good-nature which came to him from Henry IV., helped the gamin, finished the pear, and gave the child a louis, saying: "The pear is on that also." The gamin loves uproar. A certain state of violence pleases him. He execrates "the cures." One day, in the Rue de l'Universite, one of these scamps was putting his thumb to his nose at the carriage gate of No. 69. "Why are you doing that at the gate?" a passer-by asked. The boy replied: "There is a cure there." It was there, in fact, that the Papal Nuncio lived.

Nevertheless, whatever may be the Voltairianism of the small gamin, if the occasion to become a chorister presents itself, it is quite possible that he will accept, and in that case he serves the mass civilly. There are two things to which he plays Tantalus, and which he always desires without ever attaining them: to overthrow the government, and to get his trousers sewed up again.

The gamin in his perfect state possesses all the policemen of Paris, and can always put the name to the face of any one which he chances to meet. He can tell them off on the tips of his fingers. He studies their habits, and he has special notes on each one of them. He reads the souls of the police like an open book. He will tell you fluently and without flinching: “Such an one is a traitor; such another is very malicious; such another is great; such another is ridiculous.” (All these words: traitor, malicious, great, ridiculous, have a particular meaning in his mouth.) That one imagines that he owns the Pont-Neuf, and he prevents people from walking on the cornice outside the parapet; that other has a mania for pulling person’s ears; etc., etc.

CHAPTER IX — THE OLD SOUL OF GAUL

There was something of that boy in Poquelin, the son of the fish-market; Beaumarchais had something of it. Gaminerie is a shade of the Gallic spirit. Mingled with good sense, it sometimes adds force to the latter, as alcohol does to wine. Sometimes it is a defect. Homer repeats himself eternally, granted; one may say that Voltaire plays the gamin. Camille Desmoulins was a native of the faubourgs. Championnet, who treated miracles brutally, rose from the pavements of Paris; he had, when a small lad, inundated the porticos of Saint-Jean de Beauvais, and of Saint-Etienne du Mont; he had addressed the shrine of Sainte-Genevieve familiarly to give orders to the phial of Saint Januarius.

The gamin of Paris is respectful, ironical, and insolent. He has villainous teeth, because he is badly fed and his stomach suffers, and handsome eyes because he has wit. If Jehovah himself were present, he would go hopping up the steps of paradise on one foot. He is strong on boxing. All beliefs are possible to him. He plays in the gutter, and straightens himself up with a revolt; his effrontery persists even in the presence of grape-shot; he was a scapegrace, he is a hero; like the little Theban, he shakes the skin from the lion; Barra the drummer-boy was a gamin of Paris; he Shouts: “Forward!” as the horse of Scripture says “Vah!” and in a moment he has passed from the small brat to the giant.

This child of the puddle is also the child of the ideal. Measure that spread of wings which reaches from Moliere to Barra.

To sum up the whole, and in one word, the gamin is a being who amuses himself, because he is unhappy.

CHAPTER X — ECCE PARIS, ECCE HOMO

To sum it all up once more, the Paris gamin of to-day, like the graeculus of Rome in days gone by, is the infant populace with the wrinkle of the old world on his brow.

The gamin is a grace to the nation, and at the same time a disease; a disease which must be cured, how? By light.

Light renders healthy.

Light kindles.

All generous social irradiations spring from science, letters, arts, education. Make men, make men. Give them light that they may warm you. Sooner or later the splendid question of universal education will present itself with the irresistible authority of the absolute truth; and then, those who govern under the superintendence of the French idea will have to make this choice; the children of France or the gamins of Paris; flames in the light or will-o'-the-wisps in the gloom.

The gamin expresses Paris, and Paris expresses the world.

For Paris is a total. Paris is the ceiling of the human race. The whole of this prodigious city is a foreshortening of dead manners and living manners. He who sees Paris thinks he sees the bottom of all history with heaven and constellations in the intervals. Paris has a capital, the Town-Hall, a Parthenon, Notre-Dame, a Mount Aventine, the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, an Asinarium, the Sorbonne, a Pantheon, the Pantheon, a Via Sacra, the Boulevard des Italiens, a temple of the winds, opinion; and it replaces the Gemoniae by ridicule. Its majo is called "faraud," its Transteverin is the man of the faubourgs, its hammal is the market-porter, its lazzarone is the pegre, its cockney is the native of Ghent. Everything that exists elsewhere exists at Paris. The fishwoman of Dumarsais can retort on the herb-seller of Euripides, the discobols Vejanus lives again in the Forioso, the tight-rope dancer. Therapontigonus Miles could walk arm in arm with Vadeboncœur the grenadier, Damasippus the second-hand dealer would be happy among bric-a-brac merchants, Vincennes could grasp Socrates in its fist as just as Agora could imprison Diderot, Grimod de la Reynière discovered larded roast beef, as Curtillus invented roast hedgehog, we see the trapeze which figures in Plautus reappear under the vault of the Arc of l'Etoile, the sword-eater of Poecilus encountered by Apuleius is a sword-swallower on the Pont

Neuf, the nephew of Rameau and Curculio the parasite make a pair, Ergasilus could get himself presented to Cambaceres by d’Aigrefeuille; the four dandies of Rome: Alcesimarchus, Phoedromus, Diabolus, and Argyrippus, descend from Courtille in Labatut’s posting-chaise; Aulus Gellius would halt no longer in front of Congrio than would Charles Nodier in front of Punchinello; Marto is not a tigress, but Pardalisca was not a dragon; Pantolabus the wag jeers in the Cafe Anglais at Nomentanus the fast liver, Hermogenus is a tenor in the Champs-Elysees, and round him, Thracius the beggar, clad like Bobeche, takes up a collection; the bore who stops you by the button of your coat in the Tuileries makes you repeat after a lapse of two thousand years Thesprion’s apostrophe: Quis properantem me prehendit pallio? The wine on Surene is a parody of the wine of Alba, the red border of Desaugiers forms a balance to the great cutting of Balatro, Pere Lachaise exhales beneath nocturnal rains same gleams as the Esquiliae, and the grave of the poor bought for five years, is certainly the equivalent of the slave’s hived coffin.

Seek something that Paris has not. The vat of Trophonius contains nothing that is not in Mesmer’s tub; Ergaphilas lives again in Cagliostro; the Brahmin Vasaphanta become incarnate in the Comte de Saint-Germain; the cemetery of Saint-Medard works quite as good miracles as the Mosque of Oumoumie at Damascus.

Paris has an AEsop-Mayeux, and a Canidia, Mademoiselle Lenormand. It is terrified, like Delphos at the fulgurating realities of the vision; it makes tables turn as Dodona did tripods. It places the grisette on the throne, as Rome placed the courtesan there; and, taking it altogether, if Louis XV. is worse than Claudian, Madame Dubarry is better than Messalina. Paris combines in an unprecedented type, which has existed and which we have elbowed, Grecian nudity, the Hebraic ulcer, and the Gascon pun. It mingles Diogenes, Job, and Jack-pudding, dresses up a spectre in old numbers of the Constitutional, and makes Chodruc Duclos.

Although Plutarch says: the tyrant never grows old, Rome, under Sylla as under Domitian, resigned itself and willingly put water in its wine. The Tiber was a Lethe, if the rather doctrinary eulogium made of it by Varus Vibiscus is to be credited: Contra Gracchos Tiberim habemus, Bibere Tiberim, id est seditionem oblivisci. Paris drinks a million litres of water a day, but that does not prevent it from occasionally beating the general alarm and ringing the tocsin.

With that exception, Paris is amiable. It accepts everything royally; it is not too particular about its Venus; its Callipyge is Hottentot; provided that it is made to laugh, it condones; ugliness cheers it, deformity provokes it to laughter, vice diverts it; be eccentric and you may be an eccentric; even hypocrisy, that supreme cynicism, does not disgust it; it is so literary that it does not hold its nose before Basile, and is no more scandalized by the prayer of Tartuffe than Horace was repelled by the “hiccup” of Priapus. No trait of the universal face is lacking in the profile of Paris. The bal Mabile is not the polymnia dance of the Janiculum, but the dealer in ladies’ wearing apparel there devours the lorette with her eyes, exactly as the procuress Staphyla lay in wait for the virgin Planesium. The Barriere du Combat is not the Coliseum, but people are as ferocious there as though Caesar were looking on. The Syrian hostess has more grace than Mother Saguet, but, if Virgil haunted the Roman wine-shop, David d’Angers, Balzac and Charlet have sat at the tables of Parisian taverns. Paris reigns. Geniuses flash forth there, the red tails prosper there. Adonai passes on his chariot with its twelve wheels of thunder and lightning; Silenus makes his entry there on his ass. For Silenus read Ramponneau.

Paris is the synonym of Cosmos, Paris is Athens, Sybaris, Jerusalem, Pantin. All civilizations are there in an abridged form, all barbarisms also. Paris would greatly regret it if it had not a guillotine.

A little of the Place de Greve is a good thing. What would all that eternal festival be without this seasoning? Our laws are wisely provided, and thanks to them, this blade drips on this Shrove Tuesday.

CHAPTER XI — TO SCOFF, TO REIGN

There is no limit to Paris. No city has had that domination which sometimes derides those whom it subjugates. To please you, O Athenians! exclaimed Alexander. Paris makes more than the law, it makes the fashion; Paris sets more than the fashion, it sets the routine. Paris may be stupid, if it sees fit; it sometimes allows itself this luxury; then the universe is stupid in company with it; then Paris awakes, rubs its eyes, says: “How stupid I am!” and bursts out laughing in the face of the human race. What a marvel is such a city! it is a strange thing that this grandioseness and this burlesque should be amicable neighbors, that all this majesty should not be thrown into disorder by all this parody, and that the same mouth can to-day blow into the trump of the Judgment Day, and to-morrow into the reed-flute! Paris has a sovereign joviality. Its gayety is of the thunder and its farce holds a sceptre.

Its tempest sometimes proceeds from a grimace. Its explosions, its days, its masterpieces, its prodigies, its epics, go forth to the bounds of the universe, and so also do its cock-and-bull stories. Its laugh is the mouth of a volcano which spatters the whole earth. Its jests are sparks. It imposes its caricatures as well as its ideal on people; the highest monuments of human civilization accept its ironies and lend their eternity to its mischievous pranks. It is superb; it has a prodigious 14th of July, which delivers the globe; it forces all nations to take the oath of tennis; its night of the 4th of August dissolves in three hours a thousand years of feudalism; it makes of its logic the muscle of unanimous will; it multiplies itself under all sorts of forms of the sublime; it fills with its light Washington, Kosciusko, Bolivar, Bozzaris, Riego, Bem, Manin, Lopez, John Brown, Garibaldi; it is everywhere where the future is being lighted up, at Boston in 1779, at the Isle de Leon in 1820, at Pesth in 1848, at Palermo in 1860, it whispers the mighty countersign: Liberty, in the ear of the American abolitionists grouped about the boat at Harper’s Ferry, and in the ear of the patriots of Ancona assembled in the shadow, to the Archi before the Gozzi inn on the seashore; it creates Canaris; it creates Quiroga; it creates Pisacane; it irradiates the great on earth; it was while proceeding whither its breath urge them, that Byron perished at Missolonghi, and that Mazet died at Barcelona; it is the tribune under the feet of Mirabeau, and a crater under the feet of Robespierre; its books, its theatre, its art, its science, its literature, its philosophy, are the manuals of the human race; it has Pascal, Regnier, Corneille, Descartes, Jean-Jacques: Voltaire for all moments, Moliere for all centuries; it makes its language to be talked by the universal mouth, and that language becomes the word; it constructs in all minds the idea of progress, the liberating dogmas which it forges are for the generations trusty friends, and it is with the soul of its thinkers and its poets that all heroes of all nations have been made since 1789; this does not prevent vagabondism, and that enormous genius which is called Paris, while transfiguring the world by its light, sketches in charcoal Bouginier's nose on the wall of the temple of Theseus and writes Credeville the thief on the Pyramids.

Paris is always showing its teeth; when it is not scolding it is laughing.

Such is Paris. The smoke of its roofs forms the ideas of the universe. A heap of mud and stone, if you will, but, above all, a moral being. It is more than great, it is immense. Why? Because it is daring.

To dare; that is the price of progress.

All sublime conquests are, more or less, the prizes of daring. In order that the Revolution should take place, it does not suffice that Montesquieu should foresee it, that Diderot should preach it, that Beaumarchais should announce it, that Condorcet should calculate it, that Arouet should prepare it, that Rousseau should premeditate it; it is necessary that Danton should dare it.

The cry: Audacity! is a Fiat lux. It is necessary, for the sake of the forward march of the human race, that there should be proud lessons of courage permanently on the heights. Daring deeds dazzle history and are one of man's great sources of light. The dawn dares when it rises. To attempt, to brave, to persist, to persevere, to be faithful to one's self, to grasp fate bodily, to astound catastrophe by the small amount of fear that it occasions us, now to affront unjust power, again to insult drunken victory, to hold one's position, to stand one's ground; that is the example which nations need, that is the light which electrifies them. The same formidable lightning proceeds from the torch of Prometheus to Cambronne's short pipe.

CHAPTER XII — THE FUTURE LATENT IN THE PEOPLE

As for the Parisian populace, even when a man grown, it is always the street Arab; to paint the child is to paint the city; and it is for that reason that we have studied this eagle in this arrant sparrow. It is in the faubourgs, above all, we maintain, that the Parisian race appears; there is the pure blood; there is the true physiognomy; there this people toils and suffers, and suffering and toil are the two faces of man. There exist there immense numbers of unknown beings, among whom swarm types of the strangest, from the porter of la Rapée to the knacker of Montfaucon. Fex urbis, exclaims Cicero; mob, adds Burke, indignantly; rabble, multitude, populace. These are words and quickly uttered. But so be it. What does it matter? What is it to me if they do go barefoot! They do not know how to read; so much the worse. Would you abandon them for that? Would you turn their distress into a malediction? Cannot the light penetrate these masses? Let us return to that cry: Light! and let us obstinately persist therein! Light! Light! Who knows whether these opacities will not become transparent? Are not revolutions transfigurations? Come, philosophers, teach, enlighten, light up, think aloud, speak aloud, hasten joyously to the great sun, fraternize with the public place, announce the good news, spend your alphabets lavishly, proclaim rights, sing the Marseillaises, sow enthusiasms, tear green boughs from the oaks. Make a whirlwind of the idea. This crowd may be rendered sublime. Let us learn how to make use of that vast conflagration of principles and virtues, which sparkles, bursts forth and quivers at certain hours. These bare feet, these bare arms, these rags, these ignorances, these abjectnesses, these darknesses, may be employed in the conquest of the ideal. Gaze past the people, and you will perceive truth. Let that vile sand which you trample under foot be cast into the furnace, let it melt and seethe there, it will become a splendid crystal, and it is thanks to it that Galileo and Newton will discover stars.

CHAPTER XIII — LITTLE GAVROCHE

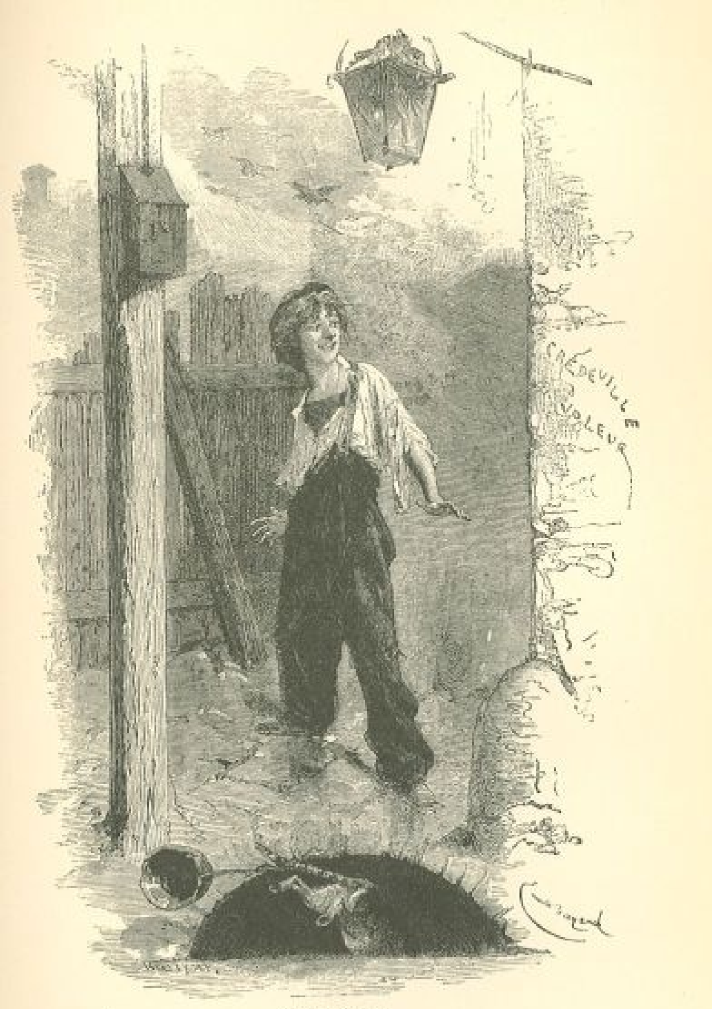

GAVROCHE.

Eight or nine years after the events narrated in the second part of this story, people noticed on the Boulevard du Temple, and in the regions of the Chateau-d’Eau, a little boy eleven or twelve years of age, who would have realized with tolerable accuracy that ideal of the gamin sketched out above, if, with the laugh of his age on his lips, he had not had a heart absolutely sombre and empty. This child was well muffled up in a pair of man’s trousers, but he did not get them from his father, and a woman’s chemise, but he did not get it from his mother. Some people or other had clothed him in rags out of charity. Still, he had a father and a mother. But his father did not think of him, and his mother did not love him.

He was one of those children most deserving of pity, among all, one of those who have father and mother, and who are orphans nevertheless.

This child never felt so well as when he was in the street. The pavements were less hard to him than his mother's heart.

His parents had despatched him into life with a kick.

He simply took flight.

He was a boisterous, pallid, nimble, wide-awake, jeering, lad, with a vivacious but sickly air. He went and came, sang, played at hopscotch, scraped the gutters, stole a little, but, like cats and sparrows, gayly laughed when he was called a rogue, and got angry when called a thief. He had no shelter, no bread, no fire, no love; but he was merry because he was free.

When these poor creatures grow to be men, the millstones of the social order meet them and crush them, but so long as they are children, they escape because of their smallness. The tiniest hole saves them.

Nevertheless, abandoned as this child was, it sometimes happened, every two or three months, that he said, "Come, I'll go and see mamma!" Then he quitted the boulevard, the Cirque, the Porte Saint-Martin, descended to the quays, crossed the bridges, reached the suburbs, arrived at the Salpetriere, and came to a halt, where? Precisely at that double number 50-52 with which the reader is acquainted — at the Gorbeau hovel.

At that epoch, the hovel 50-52 generally deserted and eternally decorated with the placard: "Chambers to let," chanced to be, a rare thing, inhabited by numerous individuals who, however, as is always the case in Paris, had no connection with each other. All belonged to that indigent class which begins to separate from the lowest of petty bourgeoisie in straitened circumstances, and which extends from misery to misery into the lowest depths of society down to those two beings in whom all the material things of civilization end, the sewer-man who sweeps up the mud, and the ragpicker who collects scraps.

The "principal lodger" of Jean Valjean's day was dead and had been replaced by another exactly like her. I know not what philosopher has said: "Old women are never lacking."

This new old woman was named Madame Bourgon, and had nothing remarkable about her life except a dynasty of three paroquets, who had reigned in succession over her soul.

The most miserable of those who inhabited the hovel were a family of four persons, consisting of father, mother, and two daughters, already well grown, all four of whom were lodged in the same attic, one of the cells which we have already mentioned.

At first sight, this family presented no very special feature except its extreme destitution; the father, when he hired the chamber, had stated that his name was Jondrette. Some time after his moving in, which had borne a singular resemblance to the entrance of nothing at all, to borrow the memorable expression of the principal tenant, this Jondrette had said to the woman, who, like her predecessor, was at the same time portress and stair-sweeper: “Mother So-and-So, if any one should chance to come and inquire for a Pole or an Italian, or even a Spaniard, perchance, it is I.”

This family was that of the merry barefoot boy. He arrived there and found distress, and, what is still sadder, no smile; a cold hearth and cold hearts. When he entered, he was asked: “Whence come you?” He replied: “From the street.” When he went away, they asked him: “Whither are you going?” He replied: “Into the streets.” His mother said to him: “What did you come here for?”

This child lived, in this absence of affection, like the pale plants which spring up in cellars. It did not cause him suffering, and he blamed no one. He did not know exactly how a father and mother should be.

Nevertheless, his mother loved his sisters.

We have forgotten to mention, that on the Boulevard du Temple this child was called Little Gavroche. Why was he called Little Gavroche?

Probably because his father’s name was Jondrette.

It seems to be the instinct of certain wretched families to break the thread.

The chamber which the Jondrettes inhabited in the Gorbeau hovel was the last at the end of the corridor. The cell next to it was occupied by a very poor young man who was called M. Marius.

Let us explain who this M. Marius was.

BOOK SECOND. — THE GREAT BOURGEOIS

CHAPTER I — NINETY YEARS AND THIRTY-TWO TEETH

In the Rue Boucherat, Rue de Normandie and the Rue de Saintonge there still exist a few ancient inhabitants who have preserved the memory of a worthy man named M. Gillenormand, and who mention him with complaisance. This good man was old when they were young. This silhouette has not yet entirely disappeared — for those who regard with melancholy that vague swarm of shadows which is called the past — from the labyrinth of streets in the vicinity of the Temple to which, under Louis XIV., the names of all the provinces of France were appended exactly as in our day, the streets of the new Tivoli quarter have received the names of all the capitals of Europe; a progression, by the way, in which progress is visible.

M.Gillenormand, who was as much alive as possible in 1831, was one of those men who had become curiosities to be viewed, simply because they have lived a long time, and who are strange because they formerly resembled everybody, and now resemble nobody. He was a peculiar old man, and in very truth, a man of another age, the real, complete and rather haughty bourgeois of the eighteenth century, who wore his good, old bourgeoisie with the air with which marquises wear their marquisates. He was over ninety years of age, his walk was erect, he talked loudly, saw clearly, drank neat, ate, slept, and snored. He had all thirty-two of his teeth. He only wore spectacles when he read. He was of an amorous disposition, but declared that, for the last ten years, he had wholly and decidedly renounced women. He could no longer please, he said; he did not add: “I am too old,” but: “I am too poor.” He said: “If I were not ruined — Heee!” All he had left, in fact, was an income of about fifteen thousand francs. His dream was to come into an inheritance and to have a hundred thousand livres income for mistresses. He did not belong, as the reader will perceive, to that puny variety of octogenaries who, like M. de Voltaire, have been dying all their life; his was no longevity of a cracked pot; this jovial old man had always had good health. He was superficial, rapid, easily angered. He flew into a passion at everything, generally quite contrary to all reason. When contradicted, he raised his cane; he beat people as he had done in the great century. He had a daughter over fifty years of age, and unmarried, whom he chastised severely with his tongue, when in a rage, and whom he would have liked to whip. She seemed to him to be eight years old. He boxed his servants’ ears soundly, and said: “Ah! carogne!” One of his oaths was: “By the pantoufloche of the pantouflochade!” He had singular freaks of tranquillity; he had himself shaved every day by a barber who had been mad and who detested him, being jealous of M. Gillenormand on account of his wife, a pretty and coquettish barberess. M. Gillenormand admired his own discernment in all things, and declared that he was extremely sagacious; here is one of his sayings: “I have, in truth, some penetration; I am able to say when a flea bites me, from what woman it came.”

The words which he uttered the most frequently were: the sensible man, and nature. He did not give to this last word the grand acceptation which our epoch has accorded to it, but he made it enter, after his own fashion, into his little chimney-corner satires: “Nature,” he said, “in order that civilization may have a little of everything, gives it even specimens of its amusing barbarism. Europe possesses specimens of Asia and Africa on a small scale. The cat is a drawing-room tiger, the lizard is a pocket crocodile. The dancers at the opera are pink female savages. They do not eat men, they crunch them; or, magicians that they are, they transform them into oysters and swallow them. The Caribbeans leave only the bones, they leave only the shell. Such are our morals. We do not devour, we gnaw; we do not exterminate, we claw.”

CHAPTER II — LIKE MASTER, LIKE HOUSE

He lived in the Marais, Rue des Filles-du-Calvaire, No. 6. He owned the house. This house has since been demolished and rebuilt, and the number has probably been changed in those revolutions of numeration which the streets of Paris undergo. He occupied an ancient and vast apartment on the first floor, between street and gardens, furnished to the very ceilings with great Gobelins and Beauvais tapestries representing pastoral scenes; the subjects of the ceilings and the panels were repeated in miniature on the arm-chairs. He enveloped his bed in a vast, nine-leaved screen of Coromandel lacquer. Long, full curtains hung from the windows, and formed great, broken folds that were very magnificent. The garden situated immediately under his windows was attached to that one of them which formed the angle, by means of a staircase twelve or fifteen steps long, which the old gentleman ascended and descended with great agility. In addition to a library adjoining his chamber, he had a boudoir of which he thought a great deal, a gallant and elegant retreat, with magnificent hangings of straw, with a pattern of flowers and fleurs-de-lys made on the galleys of Louis XIV. and ordered of his convicts by M. de Vivonne for his mistress. M. Gillenormand had inherited it from a grim maternal great-aunt, who had died a centenarian. He had had two wives. His manners were something between those of the courtier, which he had never been, and the lawyer, which he might have been. He was gay, and caressing when he had a mind. In his youth he had been one of those men who are always deceived by their wives and never by their mistresses, because they are, at the same time, the most sullen of husbands and the most charming of lovers in existence. He was a connoisseur of painting. He had in his chamber a marvellous portrait of no one knows whom, painted by Jordaens, executed with great dashes of the brush, with millions of details, in a confused and hap-hazard manner. M. Gillenormand's attire was not the habit of Louis XIV. nor yet that of Louis XVI.; it was that of the Incroyables of the Directory. He had thought himself young up to that period and had followed the fashions. His coat was of light-weight cloth with voluminous revers, a long swallow-tail and large steel buttons. With this he wore knee-breeches and buckle shoes. He always thrust his hands into his fobs. He said authoritatively: “The French Revolution is a heap of blackguards.”

CHAPTER III — LUC-ESPRIT

At the age of sixteen, one evening at the opera, he had had the honor to be stared at through opera-glasses by two beauties at the same time — ripe and celebrated beauties then, and sung by Voltaire, the Camargo and the Salle. Caught between two fires, he had beaten a heroic retreat towards a little dancer, a young girl named Nahenry, who was sixteen like himself, obscure as a cat, and with whom he was in love. He abounded in memories. He was accustomed to exclaim: “How pretty she was — that Guimard-Guimardini-Guimardinette, the last time I saw her at Longchamps, her hair curled in sustained sentiments, with her come-and-see of turquoises, her gown of the color of persons newly arrived, and her little agitation muff!” He had worn in his young manhood a waistcoat of Nain-Londrin, which he was fond of talking about effusively. “I was dressed like a Turk of the Levant Levantin,” said he. Madame de Boufflers, having seen him by chance when he was twenty, had described him as “a charming fool.” He was horrified by all the names which he saw in politics and in power, regarding them as vulgar and bourgeois. He read the journals, the newspapers, the gazettes as he said, stifling outbursts of laughter the while. “Oh!” he said, “what people these are! Corbiere! Humann! Casimir Perier! There’s a minister for you! I can imagine this in a journal: ‘M. Gillenorman, minister!’ that would be a farce. Well! They are so stupid that it would pass”; he merrily called everything by its name, whether decent or indecent, and did not restrain himself in the least before ladies. He uttered coarse speeches, obscenities, and filth with a certain tranquillity and lack of astonishment which was elegant. It was in keeping with the unceremoniousness of his century. It is to be noted that the age of periphrase in verse was the age of crudities in prose. His god-father had predicted that he would turn out a man of genius, and had bestowed on him these two significant names: Luc-Esprit.

CHAPTER IV — A CENTENARIAN ASPIRANT

He had taken prizes in his boyhood at the College of Moulins, where he was born, and he had been crowned by the hand of the Duc de Nivernais, whom he called the Duc de Nevers. Neither the Convention, nor the death of Louis XVI., nor the Napoleon, nor the return of the Bourbons, nor anything else had been able to efface the memory of this crowning. The Duc de Nevers was, in his eyes, the great figure of the century. “What a charming grand seigneur,” he said, “and what a fine air he had with his blue ribbon!”

In the eyes of M. Gillenormand, Catherine the Second had made reparation for the crime of the partition of Poland by purchasing, for three thousand roubles, the secret of the elixir of gold, from Bestucheff. He grew animated on this subject: “The elixir of gold,” he exclaimed, “the yellow dye of Bestucheff, General Lamotte’s drops, in the eighteenth century, — this was the great remedy for the catastrophes of love, the panacea against Venus, at one louis the half-ounce phial. Louis XV. sent two hundred phials of it to the Pope.” He would have been greatly irritated and thrown off his balance, had any one told him that the elixir of gold is nothing but the perchloride of iron. M. Gillenormand adored the Bourbons, and had a horror of 1789; he was forever narrating in what manner he had saved himself during the Terror, and how he had been obliged to display a vast deal of gayety and cleverness in order to escape having his head cut off. If any young man ventured to pronounce an eulogium on the Republic in his presence, he turned purple and grew so angry that he was on the point of swooning. He sometimes alluded to his ninety years, and said, “I hope that I shall not see ninety-three twice.” On these occasions, he hinted to people that he meant to live to be a hundred.

CHAPTER V — BASQUE AND NICOLETTE

He had theories. Here is one of them: “When a man is passionately fond of women, and when he has himself a wife for whom he cares but little, who is homely, cross, legitimate, with plenty of rights, perched on the code, and jealous at need, there is but one way of extricating himself from the quandry and of procuring peace, and that is to let his wife control the purse-strings. This abdication sets him free. Then his wife busies herself, grows passionately fond of handling coin, gets her fingers covered with verdigris in the process, undertakes the education of half-share tenants and the training of farmers, convokes lawyers, presides over notaries, harangues scriveners, visits limbs of the law, follows lawsuits, draws up leases, dictates contracts, feels herself the sovereign, sells, buys, regulates, promises and compromises, binds fast and annuls, yields, concedes and retrocedes, arranges, disarranges, hoards, lavishes; she commits follies, a supreme and personal delight, and that consoles her. While her husband disdains her, she has the satisfaction of ruining her husband.” This theory M. Gillenormand had himself applied, and it had become his history. His wife — the second one — had administered his fortune in such a manner that, one fine day, when M. Gillenormand found himself a widower, there remained to him just sufficient to live on, by sinking nearly the whole of it in an annuity of fifteen thousand francs, three-quarters of which would expire with him. He had not hesitated on this point, not being anxious to leave a property behind him. Besides, he had noticed that patrimonies are subject to adventures, and, for instance, become national property; he had been present at the avatars of consolidated three per cents, and he had no great faith in the Great Book of the Public Debt. “All that’s the Rue Quincampois!” he said. His house in the Rue Filles-du-Clavaire belonged to him, as we have already stated. He had two servants, “a male and a female.” When a servant entered his establishment, M. Gillenormand re-baptized him. He bestowed on the men the name of their province: Nimois, Comtois, Poitevin, Picard. His last valet was a big, foundered, short-winded fellow of fifty-five, who was incapable of running twenty paces; but, as he had been born at Bayonne, M. Gillenormand called him Basque. All the female servants in his house were called Nicolette (even the Magnon, of whom we shall hear more farther on). One day, a haughty cook, a cordon bleu, of the lofty race of porters, presented herself. “How much wages do you want a month?” asked M. Gillenormand. “Thirty francs.” “What is your name?” “Olympie.” “You shall have fifty francs, and you shall be called Nicolette.”

CHAPTER VI — IN WHICH MAGNON AND HER TWO CHILDREN ARE SEEN

With M. Gillenormand, sorrow was converted into wrath; he was furious at being in despair. He had all sorts of prejudices and took all sorts of liberties. One of the facts of which his exterior relief and his internal satisfaction was composed, was, as we have just hinted, that he had remained a brisk spark, and that he passed energetically for such. This he called having "royal renown." This royal renown sometimes drew down upon him singular windfalls. One day, there was brought to him in a basket, as though it had been a basket of oysters, a stout, newly born boy, who was yelling like the deuce, and duly wrapped in swaddling-clothes, which a servant-maid, dismissed six months previously, attributed to him. M. Gillenormand had, at that time, fully completed his eighty-fourth year. Indignation and uproar in the establishment. And whom did that bold hussy think she could persuade to believe that? What audacity! What an abominable calumny! M. Gillenormand himself was not at all enraged. He gazed at the brat with the amiable smile of a good man who is flattered by the calumny, and said in an aside: "Well, what now? What's the matter? You are finely taken aback, and really, you are excessively ignorant. M. le Duc d'Angoulême, the bastard of his Majesty Charles IX., married a silly jade of fifteen when he was eighty-five; M. Virginal, Marquis d'Alluye, brother to the Cardinal de Sourdis, Archbishop of Bordeaux, had, at the age of eighty-three, by the maid of Madame la Présidente Jacquin, a son, a real child of love, who became a Chevalier of Malta and a counsellor of state; one of the great men of this century, the Abbé Tabaraud, is the son of a man of eighty-seven. There is nothing out of the ordinary in these things. And then, the Bible! Upon that I declare that this little gentleman is none of mine. Let him be taken care of. It is not his fault." This manner of procedure was good-tempèred. The woman, whose name was Magnon, sent him another parcel in the following year. It was a boy again. Thereupon, M. Gillenormand capitulated. He sent the two brats back to their mother, promising to pay eighty francs a month for their maintenance, on the condition that the said mother would not do so any more. He added: "I insist upon it that the mother shall treat them well. I shall go to see them from time to time." And this he did. He had had a brother who was a priest, and who had been rector of the Academy of Poitiers for three and thirty years, and had died at seventy-nine. “I lost him young,” said he. This brother, of whom but little memory remains, was a peaceable miser, who, being a priest, thought himself bound to bestow alms on the poor whom he met, but he never gave them anything except bad or demonetized sous, thereby discovering a means of going to hell by way of paradise. As for M. Gillenormand the elder, he never haggled over his almsgiving, but gave gladly and nobly. He was kindly, abrupt, charitable, and if he had been rich, his turn of mind would have been magnificent. He desired that all which concerned him should be done in a grand manner, even his rogueries. One day, having been cheated by a business man in a matter of inheritance, in a gross and apparent manner, he uttered this solemn exclamation: “That was indecently done! I am really ashamed of this pilfering. Everything has degenerated in this century, even the rascals. Morbleu! this is not the way to rob a man of my standing. I am robbed as though in a forest, but badly robbed. Silva, sint consule dignae!” He had had two wives, as we have already mentioned; by the first he had had a daughter, who had remained unmarried, and by the second another daughter, who had died at about the age of thirty, who had wedded, through love, or chance, or otherwise, a soldier of fortune who had served in the armies of the Republic and of the Empire, who had won the cross at Austerlitz and had been made colonel at Waterloo. “He is the disgrace of my family,” said the old bourgeois. He took an immense amount of snuff, and had a particularly graceful manner of plucking at his lace ruffle with the back of one hand. He believed very little in God.

CHAPTER VII — RULE: RECEIVE NO ONE EXCEPT IN THE EVENING

Such was M. Luc-Esprit Gillenormand, who had not lost his hair, — which was gray rather than white, — and which was always dressed in “dog’s ears.” To sum up, he was venerable in spite of all this.

He had something of the eighteenth century about him; frivolous and great.

In 1814 and during the early years of the Restoration, M. Gillenormand, who was still young, — he was only seventy-four, — lived in the Faubourg Saint Germain, Rue Servandoni, near Saint-Sulpice. He had only retired to the Marais when he quitted society, long after attaining the age of eighty.

And, on abandoning society, he had immured himself in his habits. The principal one, and that which was invariable, was to keep his door absolutely closed during the day, and never to receive any one whatever except in the evening. He dined at five o’clock, and after that his door was open. That had been the fashion of his century, and he would not swerve from it. “The day is vulgar,” said he, “and deserves only a closed shutter. Fashionable people only light up their minds when the zenith lights up its stars.” And he barricaded himself against every one, even had it been the king himself. This was the antiquated elegance of his day.

CHAPTER VIII — TWO DO NOT MAKE A PAIR

We have just spoken of M. Gillenormand’s two daughters. They had come into the world ten years apart. In their youth they had borne very little resemblance to each other, either in character or countenance, and had also been as little like sisters to each other as possible. The youngest had a charming soul, which turned towards all that belongs to the light, was occupied with flowers, with verses, with music, which fluttered away into glorious space, enthusiastic, ethereal, and was wedded from her very youth, in ideal, to a vague and heroic figure. The elder had also her chimera; she espied in the azure some very wealthy purveyor, a contractor, a splendidly stupid husband, a million made man, or even a prefect; the receptions of the Prefecture, an usher in the antechamber with a chain on his neck, official balls, the harangues of the town-hall, to be “Madame la Préfète,” — all this had created a whirlwind in her imagination. Thus the two sisters strayed, each in her own dream, at the epoch when they were young girls. Both had wings, the one like an angel, the other like a goose.

No ambition is ever fully realized, here below at least. No paradise becomes terrestrial in our day. The younger wedded the man of her dreams, but she died. The elder did not marry at all.

At the moment when she makes her entrance into this history which we are relating, she was an antique virtue, an incombustible prude, with one of the sharpest noses, and one of the most obtuse minds that it is possible to see. A characteristic detail; outside of her immediate family, no one had ever known her first name. She was called Mademoiselle Gillenormand, the elder.

In the matter of cant, Mademoiselle Gillenormand could have given points to a miss. Her modesty was carried to the other extreme of blackness. She cherished a frightful memory of her life; one day, a man had beheld her garter.

Age had only served to accentuate this pitiless modesty. Her guimpe was never sufficiently opaque, and never ascended sufficiently high. She multiplied clasps and pins where no one would have dreamed of looking.

The peculiarity of prudery is to place all the more sentinels in proportion as the fortress is the less menaced.

Nevertheless, let him who can explain these antique mysteries of innocence, she allowed an officer of the Lancers, her grand nephew, named Theodule, to embrace her without displeasure.

In spite of this favored Lancer, the label: Prude, under which we have classed her, suited her to absolute perfection. Mademoiselle Gillenormand was a sort of twilight soul. Prudery is a demi-virtue and a demi-vice.

To prudery she added bigotry, a well-assorted lining. She belonged to the society of the Virgin, wore a white veil on certain festivals, mumbled special orisons, revered "the holy blood," venerated "the sacred heart," remained for hours in contemplation before a rococo-jesuit altar in a chapel which was inaccessible to the rank and file of the faithful, and there allowed her soul to soar among little clouds of marble, and through great rays of gilded wood.

She had a chapel friend, an ancient virgin like herself, named Mademoiselle Vaubois, who was a positive blockhead, and beside whom Mademoiselle Gillenormand had the pleasure of being an eagle. Beyond the Agnus Dei and Ave Maria, Mademoiselle Vaubois had no knowledge of anything except of the different ways of making preserves. Mademoiselle Vaubois, perfect in her style, was the ermine of stupidity without a single spot of intelligence.

Let us say it plainly, Mademoiselle Gillenormand had gained rather than lost as she grew older. This is the case with passive natures. She had never been malicious, which is relative kindness; and then, years wear away the angles, and the softening which comes with time had come to her. She was melancholy with an obscure sadness of which she did not herself know the secret. There breathed from her whole person the stupor of a life that was finished, and which had never had a beginning.

She kept house for her father. M. Gillenormand had his daughter near him, as we have seen that Monseigneur Bienvenu had his sister with him. These households comprised of an old man and an old spinster are not rare, and always have the touching aspect of two weaknesses leaning on each other for support.

There was also in this house, between this elderly spinster and this old man, a child, a little boy, who was always trembling and mute in the presence of M. Gillenormand. M. Gillenormand never addressed this child except in a severe voice, and sometimes, with uplifted cane: “Here, sir! rascal, scoundrel, come here! — Answer me, you scamp! Just let me see you, you good-for-nothing!” etc., etc. He idolized him.

This was his grandson. We shall meet with this child again later on.

BOOK THIRD. — THE GRANDFATHER AND THE GRANDSON

CHAPTER I — AN ANCIENT SALON

When M. Gillenormand lived in the Rue Servandoni, he had frequented many very good and very aristocratic salons. Although a bourgeois, M. Gillenormand was received in society. As he had a double measure of wit, in the first place, that which was born with him, and secondly, that which was attributed to him, he was even sought out and made much of. He never went anywhere except on condition of being the chief person there. There are people who will have influence at any price, and who will have other people busy themselves over them; when they cannot be oracles, they turn wags. M. Gillenormand was not of this nature; his domination in the Royalist salons which he frequented cost his self-respect nothing. He was an oracle everywhere. It had happened to him to hold his own against M. de Bonald, and even against M. Bengy-Puy-Vallee.

About 1817, he invariably passed two afternoons a week in a house in his own neighborhood, in the Rue Ferou, with Madame la Baronne de T., a worthy and respectable person, whose husband had been Ambassador of France to Berlin under Louis XVI. Baron de T., who, during his lifetime, had gone very passionately into ecstasies and magnetic visions, had died bankrupt, during the emigration, leaving, as his entire fortune, some very curious Memoirs about Mesmer and his tub, in ten manuscript volumes, bound in red morocco and gilded on the edges. Madame de T. had not published the memoirs, out of pride, and maintained herself on a meagre income which had survived no one knew how.

Madame de T. lived far from the Court; “a very mixed society,” as she said, in a noble isolation, proud and poor. A few friends assembled twice a week about her widowed hearth, and these constituted a purely Royalist salon. They sipped tea there, and uttered groans or cries of horror at the century, the charter, the Bonapartists, the prostitution of the blue ribbon, or the Jacobinism of Louis XVIII., according as the wind veered towards elegy or dithyrambs; and they spoke in low tones of the hopes which were presented by Monsieur, afterwards Charles X.

The songs of the fishwomen, in which Napoleon was called Nicolas, were received there with transports of joy. Duchesses, the most delicate and charming women in the world, went into ecstasies over couplets like the following, addressed to “the federates”: —

Refoncez dans vos culottes
Le bout d’ chemis’ qui vous pend.
Qu’on n’ dis’ pas qu’ les patriotes
Ont arboré l’ drapeau blanc?

There they amused themselves with puns which were considered terrible, with innocent plays upon words which they supposed to be venomous, with quatrains, with disticHes even; thus, upon the Dessolles ministry, a moderate cabinet, of which MM. Decazes and Deserre were members: —

Pour raffermir le trône ébranlé sur sa base,
Il faut changer de sol, et de serre et de case.

Or they drew up a list of the chamber of peers, “an abominably Jacobin chamber,” and from this list they combined alliances of names, in such a manner as to form, for example, phrases like the following: Damas. Sabran. Gouvion-Saint-Cyr. — All this was done merrily. In that society, they parodied the Revolution. They used I know not what desires to give point to the same wrath in inverse sense. They sang their little Ca ira: —

Ah! ça ira ça ira ça ira!
Les Bonapartistes à la lanterne!

Songs are like the guillotine; they chop away indifferently, to-day this head, to-morrow that. It is only a variation.

In the Fualdes affair, which belongs to this epoch, 1816, they took part for Bastide and Jausion, because Fualdes was “a Buonapartist.” They designated the liberals as friends and brothers; this constituted the most deadly insult.

Like certain church towers, Madame de T.’s salon had two cocks. One of them was M. Gillenormand, the other was Comte de Lamothe-Valois, of whom it was whispèred about, with a sort of respect: “Do you know? That is the Lamothe of the affair of the necklace.” These singular amnesties do occur in parties.

Let us add the following: in the bourgeoisie, honored situations decay through too easy relations; one must beware whom one admits; in the same way that there is a loss of caloric in the vicinity of those who are cold, there is a diminution of consideration in the approach of despised persons. The ancient society of the upper classes held themselves above this law, as above every other. Marigny, the brother of the Pompadour, had his entry with M. le Prince de Soubise. In spite of? No, because. Du Barry, the godfather of the Vaubernier, was very welcome at the house of M. le Marechal de Richelieu. This society is Olympus. Mercury and the Prince de Guemenee are at home there. A thief is admitted there, provided he be a god.

The Comte de Lamothe, who, in 1815, was an old man seventy-five years of age, had nothing remarkable about him except his silent and sententious air, his cold and angular face, his perfectly polished manners, his coat buttoned up to his cravat, and his long legs always crossed in long, flabby trousers of the hue of burnt sienna. His face was the same color as his trousers.

This M. de Lamothe was “held in consideration” in this salon on account of his “celebrity” and, strange to say, though true, because of his name of Valois.

As for M. Gillenormand, his consideration was of absolutely first-rate quality. He had, in spite of his levity, and without its interfering in any way with his dignity, a certain manner about him which was imposing, dignified, honest, and lofty, in a bourgeois fashion; and his great age added to it. One is not a century with impunity. The years finally produce around a head a venerable dishevelment.

In addition to this, he said things which had the genuine sparkle of the old rock. Thus, when the King of Prussia, after having restored Louis XVIII., came to pay the latter a visit under the name of the Count de Ruppin, he was received by the descendant of Louis XIV. somewhat as though he had been the Marquis de Brandebourg, and with the most delicate impertinence. M. Gillenormand approved: “All kings who are not the King of France,” said he, “are provincial kings.” One day, the following question was put and the following answer returned in his presence: “To what was the editor of the Courrier Francais condemned?” “To be suspended.” “Sus is superfluous,” observed M. Gillenormand. Remarks of this nature found a situation.

At the Te Deum on the anniversary of the return of the Bourbons, he said, on seeing M. de Talleyrand pass by: “There goes his Excellency the Evil One.”

M. Gillenormand was always accompanied by his daughter, that tall mademoiselle, who was over forty and looked fifty, and by a handsome little boy of seven years, white, rosy, fresh, with happy and trusting eyes, who never appeared in that salon without hearing voices murmur around him: “How handsome he is! What a pity! Poor child!” This child was the one of whom we dropped a word a while ago. He was called “poor child,” because he had for a father “a brigand of the Loire.”

This brigand of the Loire was M. Gillenormand’s son-in-law, who has already been mentioned, and whom M. Gillenormand called “the disgrace of his family.”

CHAPTER II — ONE OF THE RED SPECTRES OF THAT EPOCH

Any one who had chanced to pass through the little town of Vernon at this epoch, and who had happened to walk across that fine monumental bridge, which will soon be succeeded, let us hope, by some hideous iron cable bridge, might have observed, had he dropped his eyes over the parapet, a man about fifty years of age wearing a leather cap, and trousers and a waistcoat of coarse gray cloth, to which something yellow which had been a red ribbon, was sewn, shod with wooden sabots, tanned by the sun, his face nearly black and his hair nearly white, a large scar on his forehead which ran down upon his cheek, bowed, bent, prematurely aged, who walked nearly every day, hoe and sickle in hand, in one of those compartments surrounded by walls which abut on the bridge, and border the left bank of the Seine like a chain of terraces, charming enclosures full of flowers of which one could say, were they much larger: “these are gardens,” and were they a little smaller: “these are bouquets.” All these enclosures abut upon the river at one end, and on a house at the other. The man in the waistcoat and the wooden shoes of whom we have just spoken, inhabited the smallest of these enclosures and the most humble of these houses about 1817. He lived there alone and solitary, silently and poorly, with a woman who was neither young nor old, neither homely nor pretty, neither a peasant nor a bourgeoise, who served him. The plot of earth which he called his garden was celebrated in the town for the beauty of the flowers which he cultivated there. These flowers were his occupation.

By dint of labor, of perseverance, of attention, and of buckets of water, he had succeeded in creating after the Creator, and he had invented certain tulips and certain dahlias which seemed to have been forgotten by nature. He was ingenious; he had forestalled Soulange Bodin in the formation of little clumps of earth of heath mould, for the cultivation of rare and precious shrubs from America and China. He was in his alleys from the break of day, in summer, planting, cutting, hoeing, watering, walking amid his flowers with an air of kindness, sadness, and sweetness, sometimes standing motionless and thoughtful for hours, listening to the song of a bird in the trees, the babble of a child in a house, or with his eyes fixed on a drop of dew at the tip of a spear of grass, of which the sun made a carbuncle. His table was very plain, and he drank more milk than wine. A child could make him give way, and his servant scolded him. He was so timid that he seemed shy, he rarely went out, and he saw no one but the poor people who tapped at his pane and his cure, the Abbé Mabeuf, a good old man. Nevertheless, if the inhabitants of the town, or strangers, or any chance comers, curious to see his tulips, rang at his little cottage, he opened his door with a smile. He was the “brigand of the Loire.”

Any one who had, at the same time, read military memoirs, biographies, the Moniteur, and the bulletins of the grand army, would have been struck by a name which occurs there with tolerable frequency, the name of Georges Pontmercy. When very young, this Georges Pontmercy had been a soldier in Saintonge’s regiment. The revolution broke out. Saintonge’s regiment formed a part of the army of the Rhine; for the old regiments of the monarchy preserved their names of provinces even after the fall of the monarchy, and were only divided into brigades in 1794. Pontmercy fought at Spire, at Worms, at Neustadt, at Turkheim, at Alzey, at Mayence, where he was one of the two hundred who formed Houchard’s rearguard. It was the twelfth to hold its ground against the corps of the Prince of Hesse, behind the old rampart of Andernach, and only rejoined the main body of the army when the enemy’s cannon had opened a breach from the cord of the parapet to the foot of the glacis. He was under Kleber at Marchiennes and at the battle of Mont-Palissel, where a ball from a biscaien broke his arm. Then he passed to the frontier of Italy, and was one of the thirty grenadiers who defended the Col de Tende with Joubert. Joubert was appointed its adjutant-general, and Pontmercy sub-lieutenant. Pontmercy was by Berthier’s side in the midst of the grape-shot of that day at Lodi which caused Bonaparte to say: “Berthier has been cannoneer, cavalier, and grenadier.” He beheld his old general, Joubert, fall at Novi, at the moment when, with uplifted sabre, he was shouting: “Forward!” Having been embarked with his company in the exigencies of the campaign, on board a pinnace which was proceeding from Genoa to some obscure port on the coast, he fell into a wasps’-nest of seven or eight English vessels. The Genoese commander wanted to throw his cannon into the sea, to hide the soldiers between decks, and to slip along in the dark as a merchant vessel. Pontmercy had the colors hoisted to the peak, and sailed proudly past under the guns of the British frigates. Twenty leagues further on, his audacity having increased, he attacked with his pinnace, and captured a large English transport which was carrying troops to Sicily, and which was so loaded down with men and horses that the vessel was sunk to the level of the sea. In 1805 he was in that Malher division which took Gunzberg from the Archduke Ferdinand. At Weltingen he received into his arms, beneath a storm of bullets, Colonel Maupetit, mortally wounded at the head of the 9th Dragoons. He distinguished himself at Austerlitz in that admirable march in echelons effected under the enemy's fire. When the cavalry of the Imperial Russian Guard crushed a battalion of the 4th of the line, Pontmercy was one of those who took their revenge and overthrew the Guard. The Emperor gave him the cross. Pontmercy saw Wurmser at Mantua, Melas, and Alexandria, Mack at Ulm, made prisoners in succession. He formed a part of the eighth corps of the grand army which Mortier commanded, and which captured Hamburg. Then he was transferred to the 55th of the line, which was the old regiment of Flanders. At Eylau he was in the cemetery where, for the space of two hours, the heroic Captain Louis Hugo, the uncle of the author of this book, sustained alone with his company of eighty-three men every effort of the hostile army. Pontmercy was one of the three who emerged alive from that cemetery. He was at Friedland. Then he saw Moscow. Then La Beresina, then Lutzen, Bautzen, Dresden, Wachau, Leipzig, and the defiles of Gelenhausen; then Montmirail, Chateau-Thierry, Craon, the banks of the Marne, the banks of the Aisne, and the redoubtable position of Laon. At Arnay-Le-Duc, being then a captain, he put ten Cossacks to the sword, and saved, not his general, but his corporal. He was well slashed up on this occasion, and twenty-seven splinters were extracted from his left arm alone. Eight days before the capitulation of Paris he had just exchanged with a comrade and entered the cavalry. He had what was called under the old regime, the double hand, that is to say, an equal aptitude for handling the sabre or the musket as a soldier, or a squadron or a battalion as an officer. It is from this aptitude, perfected by a military education, which certain special branches of the service arise, the dragoons, for example, who are both cavalry-men and infantry at one and the same time. He accompanied Napoleon to the Island of Elba. At Waterloo, he was chief of a squadron of cuirassiers, in Dubois' brigade. It was he who captured the standard of the Lunenburg battalion. He came and cast the flag at the Emperor's feet. He was covered with blood. While tearing down the banner he had received a sword-cut across his face. The Emperor, greatly pleased, shouted to him: “You are a colonel, you are a baron, you are an officer of the Legion of Honor!” Pontmercy replied: “Sire, I thank you for my widow.” An hour later, he fell in the ravine of Ohain. Now, who was this Georges Pontmercy? He was this same “brigand of the Loire.”

We have already seen something of his history. After Waterloo, Pontmercy, who had been pulled out of the hollow road of Ohain, as it will be remembered, had succeeded in joining the army, and had dragged himself from ambulance to ambulance as far as the cantonments of the Loire.

The Restoration had placed him on half-pay, then had sent him into residence, that is to say, under surveillance, at Vernon. King Louis XVIII., regarding all that which had taken place during the Hundred Days as not having occurred at all, did not recognize his quality as an officer of the Legion of Honor, nor his grade of colonel, nor his title of baron. He, on his side, neglected no occasion of signing himself “Colonel Baron Pontmercy.” He had only an old blue coat, and he never went out without fastening to it his rosette as an officer of the Legion of Honor. The Attorney for the Crown had him warned that the authorities would prosecute him for “illegal” wearing of this decoration. When this notice was conveyed to him through an officious intermediary, Pontmercy retorted with a bitter smile: “I do not know whether I no longer understand French, or whether you no longer speak it; but the fact is that I do not understand.” Then he went out for eight successive days with his rosette. They dared not interfere with him. Two or three times the Minister of War and the general in command of the department wrote to him with the following address: “A Monsieur le Commandant Pontmercy.” He sent back the letters with the seals unbroken. At the same moment, Napoleon at Saint Helena was treating in the same fashion the missives of Sir Hudson Lowe addressed to General Bonaparte. Pontmercy had ended, may we be pardoned the expression, by having in his mouth the same saliva as his Emperor.

In the same way, there were at Rome Carthaginian prisoners who refused to salute Flaminius, and who had a little of Hannibal’s spirit.

One day he encountered the district-attorney in one of the streets of Vernon, stepped up to him, and said: “Mr. Crown Attorney, am I permitted to wear my scar?”

He had nothing save his meagre half-pay as chief of squadron. He had hired the smallest house which he could find at Vernon. He lived there alone, we have just seen how. Under the Empire, between two wars, he had found time to marry Mademoiselle Gillenormand. The old bourgeois, thoroughly indignant at bottom, had given his consent with a sigh, saying: “The greatest families are forced into it.” In 1815, Madame Pontmercy, an admirable woman in every sense, by the way, lofty in sentiment and rare, and worthy of her husband, died, leaving a child. This child had been the colonel’s joy in his solitude; but the grandfather had imperatively claimed his grandson, declaring that if the child were not given to him he would disinherit him. The father had yielded in the little one’s interest, and had transferred his love to flowers.

Moreover, he had renounced everything, and neither stirred up mischief nor conspired. He shared his thoughts between the innocent things which he was then doing and the great things which he had done. He passed his time in expecting a pink or in recalling Austerlitz.

M. Gillenormand kept up no relations with his son-in-law. The colonel was “a bandit” to him. M. Gillenormand never mentioned the colonel, except when he occasionally made mocking allusions to “his Baronship.” It had been expressly agreed that Pontmercy should never attempt to see his son nor to speak to him, under penalty of having the latter handed over to him disowned and disinherited. For the Gillenormands, Pontmercy was a man afflicted with the plague. They intended to bring up the child in their own way. Perhaps the colonel was wrong to accept these conditions, but he submitted to them, thinking that he was doing right and sacrificing no one but himself.

The inheritance of Father Gillenormand did not amount to much; but the inheritance of Mademoiselle Gillenormand the elder was considerable. This aunt, who had remained unmarried, was very rich on the maternal side, and her sister’s son was her natural heir. The boy, whose name was Marius, knew that he had a father, but nothing more. No one opened his mouth to him about it. Nevertheless, in the society into which his grandfather took him, whispers, innuendoes, and winks, had eventually enlightened the little boy’s mind; he had finally understood something of the case, and as he naturally took in the ideas and opinions which were, so to speak, the air he breathed, by a sort of infiltration and slow penetration, he gradually came to think of his father only with shame and with a pain at his heart.

While he was growing up in this fashion, the colonel slipped away every two or three months, came to Paris on the sly, like a criminal breaking his ban, and went and posted himself at Saint-Sulpice, at the hour when Aunt Gillenormand led Marius to the mass. There, trembling lest the aunt should turn round, concealed behind a pillar, motionless, not daring to breathe, he gazed at his child. The scarred veteran was afraid of that old spinster.

From this had arisen his connection with the cure of Vernon, M. l’ Abbé Mabeuf.

That worthy priest was the brother of a warden of Saint-Sulpice, who had often observed this man gazing at his child, and the scar on his cheek, and the large tears in his eyes. That man, who had so manly an air, yet who was weeping like a woman, had struck the warden. That face had clung to his mind. One day, having gone to Vernon to see his brother, he had encountered Colonel Pontmercy on the bridge, and had recognized the man of Saint-Sulpice. The warden had mentioned the circumstance to the cure, and both had paid the colonel a visit, on some pretext or other. This visit led to others. The colonel, who had been extremely reserved at first, ended by opening his heart, and the cure and the warden finally came to know the whole history, and how Pontmercy was sacrificing his happiness to his child’s future. This caused the cure to regard him with veneration and tenderness, and the colonel, on his side, became fond of the cure. And moreover, when both are sincere and good, no men so penetrate each other, and so amalgamate with each other, as an old priest and an old soldier. At bottom, the man is the same. The one has devoted his life to his country here below, the other to his country on high; that is the only difference.

Twice a year, on the first of January and on St. George’s day, Marius wrote duty letters to his father, which were dictated by his aunt, and which one would have pronounced to be copied from some formula; this was all that M. Gillenormand tolerated; and the father answered them with very tender letters which the grandfather thrust into his pocket unread.

CHAPTER III — REQUIESCANT

Madame de T.'s salon was all that Marius Pontmercy knew of the world. It was the only opening through which he could get a glimpse of life. This opening was sombre, and more cold than warmth, more night than day, came to him through this skylight. This child, who had been all joy and light on entering this strange world, soon became melancholy, and, what is still more contrary to his age, grave. Surrounded by all those singular and imposing personages, he gazed about him with serious amazement. Everything conspired to increase this astonishment in him. There were in Madame de T.'s salon some very noble ladies named Mathan, Noe, Levis, — which was pronounced Levi, — Cambis, pronounced Cambyse. These antique visages and these Biblical names mingled in the child's mind with the Old Testament which he was learning by heart, and when they were all there, seated in a circle around a dying fire, sparely lighted by a lamp shaded with green, with their severe profiles, their gray or white hair, their long gowns of another age, whose lugubrious colors could not be distinguished, dropping, at rare intervals, words which were both majestic and severe, little Marius stared at them with frightened eyes, in the conviction that he beheld not women, but patriarchs and magi, not real beings, but phantoms.

With these phantoms, priests were sometimes mingled, frequenters of this ancient salon, and some gentlemen; the Marquis de Sass****, private secretary to Madame de Berry, the Vicomte de Val***, who published, under the pseudonyme of Charles-Antoine, monorhymed odes, the Prince de Beauff*******, who, though very young, had a gray head and a pretty and witty wife, whose very low-necked toilettes of scarlet velvet with gold torsades alarmed these shadows, the Marquis de C*****d'E******, the man in all France who best understood "proportioned politeness," the Comte d'Am*****, the kindly man with the amiable chin, and the Chevalier de Port-de-Guy, a pillar of the library of the Louvre, called the King's cabinet, M. de Port-de-Guy, bald, and rather aged than old, was wont to relate that in 1793, at the age of sixteen, he had been put in the galleys as refractory and chained with an octogenarian, the Bishop of Mirepoix, also refractory, but as a priest, while he was so in the capacity of a soldier. This was at Toulon. Their business was to go at night and gather up on the scaffold the heads and bodies of the persons who had been guillotined during the day; they bore away on their backs these dripping corpses, and their red galley-slave blouses had a clot of blood at the back of the neck, which was dry in the morning and wet at night. These tragic tales abounded in Madame de T.’s salon, and by dint of cursing Marat, they applauded Trestaillon. Some deputies of the undiscoverable variety played their whist there; M. Thibord du Chalard, M. Lemarchant de Gomicourt, and the celebrated scoffer of the right, M. Cornet-Dincourt. The bailiff de Ferrette, with his short breeches and his thin legs, sometimes traversed this salon on his way to M. de Talleyrand. He had been M. le Comte d’Artois’ companion in pleasures and unlike Aristotle crouching under Campaspe, he had made the Guimard crawl on all fours, and in that way he had exhibited to the ages a philosopher avenged by a bailiff. As for the priests, there was the Abbé Halma, the same to whom M. Larose, his collaborator on la Foudre, said: “Bah! Who is there who is not fifty years old? a few greenhorns perhaps?” The Abbé Letourneur, preacher to the King, the Abbé Frayssinous, who was not, as yet, either count, or bishop, or minister, or peer, and who wore an old cassock whose buttons were missing, and the Abbé Keravenant, Curé of Saint-Germain-des-Pres; also the Pope’s Nuncio, then Monsignor Macchi, Archbishop of Nisibi, later on Cardinal, remarkable for his long, pensive nose, and another Monsignor, entitled thus: Abbate Palmieri, domestic prelate, one of the seven participant prothonotaries of the Holy See, Canon of the illustrious Liberian basilica, Advocate of the saints, Postulatore dei Santi, which refers to matters of canonization, and signifies very nearly: Master of Requests of the section of Paradise. Lastly, two cardinals, M. de la Luzerne, and M. de Cl****** T*******. The Cardinal of Luzerne was a writer and was destined to have, a few years later, the honor of signing in the Conservateur articles side by side with Chateaubriand; M. de Cl****** T******* was Archbishop of Toul****, and often made trips to Paris, to his nephew, the Marquis de T*******, who was Minister of Marine and War. The Cardinal of Cl****** T******* was a merry little man, who displayed his red stockings beneath his tucked-up cassock; his specialty was a hatred of the Encyclopaedia, and his desperate play at billiards, and persons who, at that epoch, passed through the Rue M***** on summer evenings, where the hotel de Cl****** T******* then stood, halted to listen to the shock of the balls and the piercing voice of the Cardinal shouting to his conclavist, Monseigneur

Cotiret, Bishop in partibus of Caryste: “Mark, Abbé, I make a cannon.” The Cardinal de Cl****** T******* had been brought to Madame de T.’s by his most intimate friend, M. de Roquelaure, former Bishop of Senlis, and one of the Forty. M. de Roquelaure was notable for his lofty figure and his assiduity at the Academy; through the glass door of the neighboring hall of the library where the French Academy then held its meetings, the curious could, on every Tuesday, contemplate the Ex-Bishop of Senlis, usually standing erect, freshly powdered, in violet hose, with his back turned to the door, apparently for the purpose of allowing a better view of his little collar. All these ecclesiastics, though for the most part as much courtiers as churchmen, added to the gravity of the T. salon, whose seigniorial aspect was accentuated by five peers of France, the Marquis de Vib****, the Marquis de Tal***, the Marquis de Herb*******, the Vicomte Damb***, and the Duc de Val********. This Duc de Val********, although Prince de Mon***, that is to say a reigning prince abroad, had so high an idea of France and its peerage, that he viewed everything through their medium. It was he who said: “The Cardinals are the peers of France of Rome; the lords are the peers of France of England.” Moreover, as it is indispensable that the Revolution should be everywhere in this century, this feudal salon was, as we have said, dominated by a bourgeois. M. Gillenormand reigned there.

There lay the essence and quintessence of the Parisian white society. There reputations, even Royalist reputations, were held in quarantine. There is always a trace of anarchy in renown. Chateaubriand, had he entered there, would have produced the effect of Pere Duchene. Some of the scoffed-at did, nevertheless, penetrate thither on sufferance. Comte Beug*** was received there, subject to correction.

The “noble” salons of the present day no longer resemble those salons. The Faubourg Saint-Germain reeks of the fagot even now. The Royalists of to-day are demagogues, let us record it to their credit.

At Madame de T.’s the society was superior, taste was exquisite and haughty, under the cover of a great show of politeness. Manners there admitted of all sorts of involuntary refinements which were the old regime itself, buried but still alive. Some of these habits, especially in the matter of language, seem eccentric. Persons but superficially acquainted with them would have taken for provincial that which was only antique. A woman was called Madame la Générale. Madame la Colonelle was not entirely disused. The charming Madame de Leon, in memory, no doubt, of the Duchesses de

Longueville and de Chevreuse, preferred this appellation to her title of Princesse. The Marquise de Crequy was also called Madame la Colonelle.

It was this little high society which invented at the Tuileries the refinement of speaking to the King in private as the King, in the third person, and never as Your Majesty, the designation of Your Majesty having been “soiled by the usurper.”

Men and deeds were brought to judgment there. They jeered at the age, which released them from the necessity of understanding it. They abetted each other in amazement. They communicated to each other that modicum of light which they possessed. Methuselah bestowed information on Epimenides. The deaf man made the blind man acquainted with the course of things. They declared that the time which had elasped since Coblentz had not existed. In the same manner that Louis XVIII. was by the grace of God, in the five and twentieth year of his reign, the emigrants were, by rights, in the five and twentieth year of their adolescence.

All was harmonious; nothing was too much alive; speech hardly amounted to a breath; the newspapers, agreeing with the salons, seemed a papyrus. There were some young people, but they were rather dead. The liveries in the antechamber were antiquated. These utterly obsolete personages were served by domestics of the same stamp.

They all had the air of having lived a long time ago, and of obstinately resisting the sepulchre. Nearly the whole dictionary consisted of Conserver, Conservation, Conservateur; to be in good odor, — that was the point. There are, in fact, aromatics in the opinions of these venerable groups, and their ideas smelled of it. It was a mummified society. The masters were embalmed, the servants were stuffed with straw.

A worthy old marquise, an emigree and ruined, who had but a solitary maid, continued to say: “My people.”

What did they do in Madame de T.’s salon? They were ultra.

To be ultra; this word, although what it represents may not have disappeared, has no longer any meaning at the present day. Let us explain it.

To be ultra is to go beyond. It is to attack the sceptre in the name of the throne, and the mitre in the name of the attar; it is to ill-treat the thing which one is dragging, it is to kick over the traces; it is to cavil at the fagot on the score of the amount of cooking received by heretics; it is to reproach the idol with its small amount of idolatry; it is to insult through excess of respect; it is to discover that the Pope is not sufficiently papish, that the

King is not sufficiently royal, and that the night has too much light; it is to be discontented with alabaster, with snow, with the swan and the lily in the name of whiteness; it is to be a partisan of things to the point of becoming their enemy; it is to be so strongly for, as to be against.

The ultra spirit especially characterizes the first phase of the Restoration.

Nothing in history resembles that quarter of an hour which begins in 1814 and terminates about 1820, with the advent of M. de Villele, the practical man of the Right. These six years were an extraordinary moment; at one and the same time brilliant and gloomy, smiling and sombre, illuminated as by the radiance of dawn and entirely covered, at the same time, with the shadows of the great catastrophes which still filled the horizon and were slowly sinking into the past. There existed in that light and that shadow, a complete little new and old world, comic and sad, juvenile and senile, which was rubbing its eyes; nothing resembles an awakening like a return; a group which regarded France with ill-temper, and which France regarded with irony; good old owls of marquises by the streetful, who had returned, and of ghosts, the “former” subjects of amazement at everything, brave and noble gentlemen who smiled at being in France but wept also, delighted to behold their country once more, in despair at not finding their monarchy; the nobility of the Crusades treating the nobility of the Empire, that is to say, the nobility of the sword, with scorn; historic races who had lost the sense of history; the sons of the companions of Charlemagne disdaining the companions of Napoleon. The swords, as we have just remarked, returned the insult; the sword of Fontenoy was laughable and nothing but a scrap of rusty iron; the sword of Marengo was odious and was only a sabre. Former days did not recognize Yesterday. People no longer had the feeling for what was grand. There was some one who called Bonaparte Scapin. This Society no longer exists. Nothing of it, we repeat, exists to-day. When we select from it some one figure at random, and attempt to make it live again in thought, it seems as strange to us as the world before the Deluge. It is because it, too, as a matter of fact, has been engulfed in a deluge. It has disappeared beneath two Revolutions. What billows are ideas! How quickly they cover all that it is their mission to destroy and to bury, and how promptly they create frightful gulfs!

Such was the physiognomy of the salons of those distant and candid times when M. Martainville had more wit than Voltaire.

These salons had a literature and politics of their own. They believed in Fievee. M. Agier laid down the law in them. They commentated M. Colnet, the old bookseller and publicist of the Quay Malaquais. Napoleon was to them thoroughly the Corsican Ogre. Later on the introduction into history of M. le Marquis de Bonaparte, Lieutenant-General of the King's armies, was a concession to the spirit of the age.

These salons did not long preserve their purity. Beginning with 1818, doctrinarians began to spring up in them, a disturbing shade. Their way was to be Royalists and to excuse themselves for being so. Where the ultras were very proud, the doctrinarians were rather ashamed. They had wit; they had silence; their political dogma was suitably impregnated with arrogance; they should have succeeded. They indulged, and usefully too, in excesses in the matter of white neckties and tightly buttoned coats. The mistake or the misfortune of the doctrinarian party was to create aged youth. They assumed the poses of wise men. They dreamed of engrafting a temperate power on the absolute and excessive principle. They opposed, and sometimes with rare intelligence, conservative liberalism to the liberalism which demolishes. They were heard to say: "Thanks for Royalism! It has rendered more than one service. It has brought back tradition, worship, religion, respect. It is faithful, brave, chivalric, loving, devoted. It has mingled, though with regret, the secular grandeurs of the monarchy with the new grandeurs of the nation. Its mistake is not to understand the Revolution, the Empire, glory, liberty, young ideas, young generations, the age. But this mistake which it makes with regard to us, — have we not sometimes been guilty of it towards them? The Revolution, whose heirs we are, ought to be intelligent on all points. To attack Royalism is a misconstruction of liberalism. What an error! And what blindness! Revolutionary France is wanting in respect towards historic France, that is to say, towards its mother, that is to say, towards itself. After the 5th of September, the nobility of the monarchy is treated as the nobility of the Empire was treated after the 5th of July. They were unjust to the eagle, we are unjust to the fleur-de-lys. It seems that we must always have something to proscribe! Does it serve any purpose to ungild the crown of Louis XIV., to scrape the coat of arms of Henry IV.? We scoff at M. de Vaublanc for erasing the N's from the bridge of Jena! What was it that he did? What are we doing? Bouvines belongs to us as well as Marengo. The fleurs-de-lys are ours as well as the N's. That is our patrimony. To what purpose shall we diminish it? We must not deny our country in the past any more than in the present. Why not accept the whole of history? Why not love the whole of France?”

It is thus that doctrinarians criticised and protected Royalism, which was displeased at criticism and furious at protection.

The ultras marked the first epoch of Royalism, congregation characterized the second. Skill follows ardor. Let us confine ourselves here to this sketch.

In the course of this narrative, the author of this book has encountered in his path this curious moment of contemporary history; he has been forced to cast a passing glance upon it, and to trace once more some of the singular features of this society which is unknown to-day. But he does it rapidly and without any bitter or derisive idea. Souvenirs both respectful and affectionate, for they touch his mother, attach him to this past. Moreover, let us remark, this same petty world had a grandeur of its own. One may smile at it, but one can neither despise nor hate it. It was the France of former days.

Marius Pontmercy pursued some studies, as all children do. When he emerged from the hands of Aunt Gillenormand, his grandfather confided him to a worthy professor of the most purely classic innocence. This young soul which was expanding passed from a prude to a vulgar pedant.

Marius went through his years of college, then he entered the law school. He was a Royalist, fanatical and severe. He did not love his grandfather much, as the latter’s gayety and cynicism repelled him, and his feelings towards his father were gloomy.

He was, on the whole, a cold and ardent, noble, generous, proud, religious, enthusiastic lad; dignified to harshness, pure to shyness.

CHAPTER IV — END OF THE BRIGAND

The conclusion of Marius' classical studies coincided with M. Gillenormand's departure from society. The old man bade farewell to the Faubourg Saint-Germain and to Madame de T.'s salon, and established himself in the Mardis, in his house of the Rue des Filles-du-Calvaire. There he had for servants, in addition to the porter, that chambermaid, Nicolette, who had succeeded to Magnon, and that short-breathed and pursy Basque, who have been mentioned above.

In 1827, Marius had just attained his seventeenth year. One evening, on his return home, he saw his grandfather holding a letter in his hand.

"Marius," said M. Gillenormand, "you will set out for Vernon to-morrow."

"Why?" said Marius.

"To see your father."

Marius was seized with a trembling fit. He had thought of everything except this — that he should one day be called upon to see his father. Nothing could be more unexpected, more surprising, and, let us admit it, more disagreeable to him. It was forcing estrangement into reconciliation. It was not an affliction, but it was an unpleasant duty.

Marius, in addition to his motives of political antipathy, was convinced that his father, the slasher, as M. Gillenormand called him on his amiable days, did not love him; this was evident, since he had abandoned him to others. Feeling that he was not beloved, he did not love. "Nothing is more simple," he said to himself.

He was so astounded that he did not question M. Gillenormand. The grandfather resumed: —

"It appears that he is ill. He demands your presence."

And after a pause, he added: —

"Set out to-morrow morning. I think there is a coach which leaves the Cour des Fontaines at six o'clock, and which arrives in the evening. Take it. He says that here is haste."

Then he crushed the letter in his hand and thrust it into his pocket. Marius might have set out that very evening and have been with his father on the following morning. A diligence from the Rue du Bouloi took the trip to Rouen by night at that date, and passed through Vernon. Neither Marius nor M. Gillenormand thought of making inquiries about it.

The next day, at twilight, Marius reached Vernon. People were just beginning to light their candles. He asked the first person whom he met for "M. Pontmercy's house." For in his own mind, he agreed with the Restoration, and like it, did not recognize his father's claim to the title of either colonel or baron.

The house was pointed out to him. He rang; a woman with a little lamp in her hand opened the door.

"M. Pontmercy?" said Marius.

The woman remained motionless.

"Is this his house?" demanded Marius.

The woman nodded affirmatively.

"Can I speak with him?"

The woman shook her head.

"But I am his son!" persisted Marius. "He is expecting me."

"He no longer expects you," said the woman.

Then he perceived that she was weeping.

She pointed to the door of a room on the ground-floor; he entered.

In that room, which was lighted by a tallow candle standing on the chimney-piece, there were three men, one standing erect, another kneeling, and one lying at full length, on the floor in his shirt. The one on the floor was the colonel.

The other two were the doctor, and the priest, who was engaged in prayer.

The colonel had been attacked by brain fever three days previously. As he had a foreboding of evil at the very beginning of his illness, he had written to M. Gillenormand to demand his son. The malady had grown worse. On the very evening of Marius' arrival at Vernon, the colonel had had an attack of delirium; he had risen from his bed, in spite of the servant's efforts to prevent him, crying: "My son is not coming! I shall go to meet him!" Then he ran out of his room and fell prostrate on the floor of the antechamber. He had just expired.

The doctor had been summoned, and the cure. The doctor had arrived too late. The son had also arrived too late.

By the dim light of the candle, a large tear could be distinguished on the pale and prostrate colonel's cheek, where it had trickled from his dead eye.

The eye was extinguished, but the tear was not yet dry. That tear was his son's delay.

Marius gazed upon that man whom he beheld for the first time, on that venerable and manly face, on those open eyes which saw not, on those white locks, those robust limbs, on which, here and there, brown lines, marking sword-thrusts, and a sort of red stars, which indicated bullet-holes, were visible. He contemplated that gigantic sear which stamped heroism on that countenance upon which God had imprinted goodness. He reflected that this man was his father, and that this man was dead, and a chill ran over him.

The sorrow which he felt was the sorrow which he would have felt in the presence of any other man whom he had chanced to behold stretched out in death.

Anguish, poignant anguish, was in that chamber. The servant-woman was lamenting in a corner, the cure was praying, and his sobs were audible, the doctor was wiping his eyes; the corpse itself was weeping.

The doctor, the priest, and the woman gazed at Marius in the midst of their affliction without uttering a word; he was the stranger there. Marius, who was far too little affected, felt ashamed and embarrassed at his own attitude; he held his hat in his hand; and he dropped it on the floor, in order to produce the impression that grief had deprived him of the strength to hold it.

At the same time, he experienced remorse, and he despised himself for behaving in this manner. But was it his fault? He did not love his father? Why should he!

The colonel had left nothing. The sale of big furniture barely paid the expenses of his burial.

The servant found a scrap of paper, which she handed to Marius. It contained the following, in the colonel's handwriting: —

"For my son. — The Emperor made me a Baron on the battle-field of Waterloo. Since the Restoration disputes my right to this title which I purchased with my blood, my son shall take it and bear it. That he will be worthy of it is a matter of course." Below, the colonel had added: "At that same battle of Waterloo, a sergeant saved my life. The man's name was Thenardier. I think that he has recently been keeping a little inn, in a village in the neighborhood of Paris, at Chelles or Montfermeil. If my son meets him, he will do all the good he can to Thenardier."

Marius took this paper and preserved it, not out of duty to his father, but because of that vague respect for death which is always imperious in the heart of man.

Nothing remained of the colonel. M. Gillenormand had his sword and uniform sold to an old-clothes dealer. The neighbors devastated the garden and pillaged the rare flowers. The other plants turned to nettles and weeds, and died.

Marius remained only forty-eight hours at Vernon. After the interment he returned to Paris, and applied himself again to his law studies, with no more thought of his father than if the latter had never lived. In two days the colonel was buried, and in three forgotten.

Marius wore crape on his hat. That was all.

CHAPTER V — THE UTILITY OF GOING TO MASS, IN ORDER TO BECOME A REVOLUTIONIST

Marius had preserved the religious habits of his childhood. One Sunday, when he went to hear mass at Saint-Sulpice, at that same chapel of the Virgin whither his aunt had led him when a small lad, he placed himself behind a pillar, being more absent-minded and thoughtful than usual on that occasion, and knelt down, without paying any special heed, upon a chair of Utrecht velvet, on the back of which was inscribed this name: Monsieur Mabeuf, warden. Mass had hardly begun when an old man presented himself and said to Marius: —

“This is my place, sir.”

Marius stepped aside promptly, and the old man took possession of his chair.

The mass concluded, Marius still stood thoughtfully a few paces distant; the old man approached him again and said: —

“I beg your pardon, sir, for having disturbed you a while ago, and for again disturbing you at this moment; you must have thought me intrusive, and I will explain myself.”

“There is no need of that, Sir,” said Marius.

“Yes!” went on the old man, “I do not wish you to have a bad opinion of me. You see, I am attached to this place. It seems to me that the mass is better from here. Why? I will tell you. It is from this place, that I have watched a poor, brave father come regularly, every two or three months, for the last ten years, since he had no other opportunity and no other way of seeing his child, because he was prevented by family arrangements. He came at the hour when he knew that his son would be brought to mass. The little one never suspected that his father was there. Perhaps he did not even know that he had a father, poor innocent! The father kept behind a pillar, so that he might not be seen. He gazed at his child and he wept. He adored that little fellow, poor man! I could see that. This spot has become sanctified in my sight, and I have contracted a habit of coming hither to listen to the mass. I prefer it to the stall to which I have a right, in my capacity of warden. I knew that unhappy gentleman a little, too. He had a father-in-law, a wealthy aunt, relatives, I don’t know exactly what all, who threatened to disinherit the child if he, the father, saw him. He sacrificed himself in order that his son might be rich and happy some day. He was separated from him because of political opinions. Certainly, I approve of political opinions, but there are people who do not know where to stop. Mon Dieu! a man is not a monster because he was at Waterloo; a father is not separated from his child for such a reason as that. He was one of Bonaparte’s colonels. He is dead, I believe. He lived at Vernon, where I have a brother who is a cure, and his name was something like Pontmarie or Montpercy. He had a fine sword-cut, on my honor.”

“Pontmercy,” suggested Marius, turning pale.

“Precisely, Pontmercy. Did you know him?”

“Sir,” said Marius, “he was my father.”

The old warden clasped his hands and exclaimed: —

“Ah! you are the child! Yes, that’s true, he must be a man by this time. Well! poor child, you may say that you had a father who loved you dearly!”

Marius offered his arm to the old man and conducted him to his lodgings.

On the following day, he said to M. Gillenormand: —

“I have arranged a hunting-party with some friends. Will you permit me to be absent for three days?”

“Four!” replied his grandfather. “Go and amuse yourself.”

And he said to his daughter in a low tone, and with a wink, “Some love affair!”

CHAPTER VI — THE CONSEQUENCES OF HAVING MET A WARDEN

Where it was that Marius went will be disclosed a little further on.

Marius was absent for three days, then he returned to Paris, went straight to the library of the law-school and asked for the files of the Moniteur.

He read the Moniteur, he read all the histories of the Republic and the Empire, the Memorial de Sainte-Helene, all the memoirs, all the newspapers, the bulletins, the proclamations; he devoured everything. The first time that he came across his father's name in the bulletins of the grand army, he had a fever for a week. He went to see the generals under whom Georges Pontmercy had served, among others, Comte H. Church-warden Mabeuf, whom he went to see again, told him about the life at Vernon, the colonel's retreat, his flowers, his solitude. Marius came to a full knowledge of that rare, sweet, and sublime man, that species of lion-lamb who had been his father.

In the meanwhile, occupied as he was with this study which absorbed all his moments as well as his thoughts, he hardly saw the Gillenormands at all. He made his appearance at meals; then they searched for him, and he was not to be found. Father Gillenormand smiled. “Bah! bah! He is just of the age for the girls!” Sometimes the old man added: “The deuce! I thought it was only an affair of gallantry, It seems that it is an affair of passion!”

It was a passion, in fact. Marius was on the high road to adoring his father.

At the same time, his ideas underwent an extraordinary change. The phases of this change were numerous and successive. As this is the history of many minds of our day, we think it will prove useful to follow these phases step by step and to indicate them all.

That history upon which he had just cast his eyes appalled him.

The first effect was to dazzle him.

Up to that time, the Republic, the Empire, had been to him only monstrous words. The Republic, a guillotine in the twilight; the Empire, a sword in the night. He had just taken a look at it, and where he had expected to find only a chaos of shadows, he had beheld, with a sort of unprecedented surprise, mingled with fear and joy, stars sparkling, Mirabeau, Vergniaud, Saint-Just, Robespierre, Camille, Desmoulins, Danton, and a sun arise, Napoleon. He did not know where he stood. He recoiled, blinded by the brilliant lights. Little by little, when his astonishment had passed off, he grew accustomed to this radiance, he contemplated these deeds without dizziness, he examined these personages without terror; the Revolution and the Empire presented themselves luminously, in perspective, before his mind's eye; he beheld each of these groups of events and of men summed up in two tremendous facts: the Republic in the sovereignty of civil right restored to the masses, the Empire in the sovereignty of the French idea imposed on Europe; he beheld the grand figure of the people emerge from the Revolution, and the grand figure of France spring forth from the Empire. He asserted in his conscience, that all this had been good. What his dazzled state neglected in this, his first far too synthetic estimation, we do not think it necessary to point out here. It is the state of a mind on the march that we are recording. Progress is not accomplished in one stage. That stated, once for all, in connection with what precedes as well as with what is to follow, we continue.

He then perceived that, up to that moment, he had comprehended his country no more than he had comprehended his father. He had not known either the one or the other, and a sort of voluntary night had obscured his eyes. Now he saw, and on the one hand he admired, while on the other he adored.

He was filled with regret and remorse, and he reflected in despair that all he had in his soul could now be said only to the tomb. Oh! if his father had still been in existence, if he had still had him, if God, in his compassion and his goodness, had permitted his father to be still among the living, how he would have run, how he would have precipitated himself, how he would have cried to his father: “Father! Here I am! It is I! I have the same heart as thou! I am thy son!” How he would have embraced that white head, bathed his hair in tears, gazed upon his scar, pressed his hands, adored his garment, kissed his feet! Oh! Why had his father died so early, before his time, before the justice, the love of his son had come to him? Marius had a continual sob in his heart, which said to him every moment: “Alas!” At the same time, he became more truly serious, more truly grave, more sure of his thought and his faith. At each instant, gleams of the true came to complete his reason. An inward growth seemed to be in progress within him. He was conscious of a sort of natural enlargement, which gave him two things that were new to him — his father and his country.

As everything opens when one has a key, so he explained to himself that which he had hated, he penetrated that which he had abhorred; henceforth he plainly perceived the providential, divine and human sense of the great things which he had been taught to detest, and of the great men whom he had been instructed to curse. When he reflected on his former opinions, which were but those of yesterday, and which, nevertheless, seemed to him already so very ancient, he grew indignant, yet he smiled.

From the rehabilitation of his father, he naturally passed to the rehabilitation of Napoleon.

But the latter, we will confess, was not effected without labor.

From his infancy, he had been imbued with the judgments of the party of 1814, on Bonaparte. Now, all the prejudices of the Restoration, all its interests, all its instincts tended to disfigure Napoleon. It execrated him even more than it did Robespierre. It had very cleverly turned to sufficiently good account the fatigue of the nation, and the hatred of mothers. Bonaparte had become an almost fabulous monster, and in order to paint him to the imagination of the people, which, as we lately pointed out, resembles the imagination of children, the party of 1814 made him appear under all sorts of terrifying masks in succession, from that which is terrible though it remains grandiose to that which is terrible and becomes grotesque, from Tiberius to the bugaboo. Thus, in speaking of Bonaparte, one was free to sob or to puff up with laughter, provided that hatred lay at the bottom. Marius had never entertained — about that man, as he was called — any other ideas in his mind. They had combined with the tenacity which existed in his nature. There was in him a headstrong little man who hated Napoleon.

On reading history, on studying him, especially in the documents and materials for history, the veil which concealed Napoleon from the eyes of Marius was gradually rent. He caught a glimpse of something immense, and he suspected that he had been deceived up to that moment, on the score of Bonaparte as about all the rest; each day he saw more distinctly; and he set about mounting, slowly, step by step, almost regretfully in the beginning, then with intoxication and as though attracted by an irresistible fascination, first the sombre steps, then the vaguely illuminated steps, at last the luminous and splendid steps of enthusiasm.

One night, he was alone in his little chamber near the roof. His candle was burning; he was reading, with his elbows resting on his table close to the open window. All sorts of reveries reached him from space, and mingled with his thoughts. What a spectacle is the night! One hears dull sounds, without knowing whence they proceed; one beholds Jupiter, which is twelve hundred times larger than the earth, glowing like a firebrand, the azure is black, the stars shine; it is formidable.

He was perusing the bulletins of the grand army, those heroic strophes penned on the field of battle; there, at intervals, he beheld his father's name, always the name of the Emperor; the whole of that great Empire presented itself to him; he felt a flood swelling and rising within him; it seemed to him at moments that his father passed close to him like a breath, and whispèred in his ear; he gradually got into a singular state; he thought that he heard drums, cannon, trumpets, the measured tread of battalions, the dull and distant gallop of the cavalry; from time to time, his eyes were raised heavenward, and gazed upon the colossal constellations as they gleamed in the measureless depths of space, then they fell upon his book once more, and there they beheld other colossal things moving confusedly. His heart contracted within him. He was in a transport, trembling, panting. All at once, without himself knowing what was in him, and what impulse he was obeying, he sprang to his feet, stretched both arms out of the window, gazed intently into the gloom, the silence, the infinite darkness, the eternal immensity, and exclaimed: "Long live the Emperor!"

From that moment forth, all was over; the Ogre of Corsica, — the usurper, — the tyrant, — the monster who was the lover of his own sisters, — the actor who took lessons of Talma, — the poisoner of Jaffa, — the tiger, — Buonaparte, — all this vanished, and gave place in his mind to a vague and brilliant radiance in which shone, at an inaccessible height, the pale marble phantom of Caesar. The Emperor had been for his father only the well-beloved captain whom one admires, for whom one sacrifices one's self; he was something more to Marius. He was the predestined constructor of the French group, succeeding the Roman group in the domination of the universe. He was a prodigious architect, of a destruction, the continuer of Charlemagne, of Louis XI., of Henry IV., of Richelieu, of Louis XIV., and of the Committee of Public Safety, having his spots, no doubt, his faults, his crimes even, being a man, that is to say; but august in his faults, brilliant in his spots, powerful in his crime.

He was the predestined man, who had forced all nations to say: “The great nation!” He was better than that, he was the very incarnation of France, conquering Europe by the sword which he grasped, and the world by the light which he shed. Marius saw in Bonaparte the dazzling spectre which will always rise upon the frontier, and which will guard the future. Despot but dictator; a despot resulting from a republic and summing up a revolution. Napoleon became for him the man-people as Jesus Christ is the man-God.

It will be perceived, that like all new converts to a religion, his conversion intoxicated him, he hurled himself headlong into adhesion and he went too far. His nature was so constructed; once on the downward slope, it was almost impossible for him to put on the drag. Fanaticism for the sword took possession of him, and complicated in his mind his enthusiasm for the idea. He did not perceive that, along with genius, and pell-mell, he was admitting force, that is to say, that he was installing in two compartments of his idolatry, on the one hand that which is divine, on the other that which is brutal. In many respects, he had set about deceiving himself otherwise. He admitted everything. There is a way of encountering error while on one’s way to the truth. He had a violent sort of good faith which took everything in the lump. In the new path which he had entered on, in judging the mistakes of the old regime, as in measuring the glory of Napoleon, he neglected the attenuating circumstances.

At all events, a tremendous step had been taken. Where he had formerly beheld the fall of the monarchy, he now saw the advent of France. His orientation had changed. What had been his East became the West. He had turned squarely round.

All these revolutions were accomplished within him, without his family obtaining an inkling of the case.

When, during this mysterious labor, he had entirely shed his old Bourbon and ultra skin, when he had cast off the aristocrat, the Jacobite and the Royalist, when he had become thoroughly a revolutionist, profoundly democratic and republican, he went to an engraver on the Quai des Orfevres and ordered a hundred cards bearing this name: Le Baron Marius Pontmercy.

This was only the strictly logical consequence of the change which had taken place in him, a change in which everything gravitated round his father.

Only, as he did not know any one and could not sow his cards with any porter, he put them in his pocket.

By another natural consequence, in proportion as he drew nearer to his father, to the latter’s memory, and to the things for which the colonel had fought five and twenty years before, he receded from his grandfather. We have long ago said, that M. Gillenormand’s temper did not please him. There already existed between them all the dissonances of the grave young man and the frivolous old man. The gayety of Geronte shocks and exasperates the melancholy of Werther. So long as the same political opinions and the same ideas had been common to them both, Marius had met M. Gillenormand there as on a bridge. When the bridge fell, an abyss was formed. And then, over and above all, Marius experienced unutterable impulses to revolt, when he reflected that it was M. Gillenormand who had, from stupid motives, torn him ruthlessly from the colonel, thus depriving the father of the child, and the child of the father.

By dint of pity for his father, Marius had nearly arrived at aversion for his grandfather.

Nothing of this sort, however, was betrayed on the exterior, as we have already said. Only he grew colder and colder; laconic at meals, and rare in the house. When his aunt scolded him for it, he was very gentle and alleged his studies, his lectures, the examinations, etc., as a pretext. His grandfather never departed from his infallible diagnosis: “In love! I know all about it.”

From time to time Marius absented himself.

“Where is it that he goes off like this?” said his aunt.

On one of these trips, which were always very brief, he went to Montfermeil, in order to obey the injunction which his father had left him, and he sought the old sergeant to Waterloo, the inn-keeper Thenardier. Thenardier had failed, the inn was closed, and no one knew what had become of him. Marius was away from the house for four days on this quest.

“He is getting decidedly wild,” said his grandfather.

They thought they had noticed that he wore something on his breast, under his shirt, which was attached to his neck by a black ribbon.

CHAPTER VII — SOME PETTICOAT

We have mentioned a lancer.

He was a great-grand-nephew of M. Gillenormand, on the paternal side, who led a garrison life, outside the family and far from the domestic hearth. Lieutenant Theodule Gillenormand fulfilled all the conditions required to make what is called a fine officer. He had “a lady’s waist,” a victorious manner of trailing his sword and of twirling his mustache in a hook. He visited Paris very rarely, and so rarely that Marius had never seen him. The cousins knew each other only by name. We think we have said that Theodule was the favorite of Aunt Gillenormand, who preferred him because she did not see him. Not seeing people permits one to attribute to them all possible perfections.

One morning, Mademoiselle Gillenormand the elder returned to her apartment as much disturbed as her placidity was capable of allowing. Marius had just asked his grandfather’s permission to take a little trip, adding that he meant to set out that very evening. “Go!” had been his grandfather’s reply, and M. Gillenormand had added in an aside, as he raised his eyebrows to the top of his forehead: “Here he is passing the night out again.” Mademoiselle Gillenormand had ascended to her chamber greatly puzzled, and on the staircase had dropped this exclamation: “This is too much!” — and this interrogation: “But where is it that he goes?” She espied some adventure of the heart, more or less illicit, a woman in the shadow, a rendezvous, a mystery, and she would not have been sorry to thrust her spectacles into the affair. Tasting a mystery resembles getting the first flavor of a scandal; sainted souls do not detest this. There is some curiosity about scandal in the secret compartments of bigotry.

So she was the prey of a vague appetite for learning a history.

In order to get rid of this curiosity which agitated her a little beyond her wont, she took refuge in her talents, and set about scalloping, with one layer of cotton after another, one of those embroideries of the Empire and the Restoration, in which there are numerous cart-wheels. The work was clumsy, the worker cross. She had been seated at this for several hours when the door opened. Mademoiselle Gillenormand raised her nose. Lieutenant Theodule stood before her, making the regulation salute. She uttered a cry of delight. One may be old, one may be a prude, one may be pious, one may be an aunt, but it is always agreeable to see a lancer enter one's chamber.

"You here, Theodule!" she exclaimed.

"On my way through town, aunt."

"Embrace me."

"Here goes!" said Theodule.

And he kissed her. Aunt Gillenormand went to her writing-desk and opened it.

"You will remain with us a week at least?"

"I leave this very evening, aunt."

"It is not possible!"

"Mathematically!"

"Remain, my little Theodule, I beseech you."

"My heart says 'yes,' but my orders say 'no.' The matter is simple. They are changing our garrison; we have been at Melun, we are being transferred to Gaillon. It is necessary to pass through Paris in order to get from the old post to the new one. I said: 'I am going to see my aunt.'"

"Here is something for your trouble."

And she put ten louis into his hand.

"For my pleasure, you mean to say, my dear aunt."

Theodule kissed her again, and she experienced the joy of having some of the skin scratched from her neck by the braidings on his uniform.

"Are you making the journey on horseback, with your regiment?" she asked him.

"No, aunt. I wanted to see you. I have special permission. My servant is taking my horse; I am travelling by diligence. And, by the way, I want to ask you something."

"What is it?"

"Is my cousin Marius Pontmercy travelling so, too?"

"How do you know that?" said his aunt, suddenly pricked to the quick with a lively curiosity.

"On my arrival, I went to the diligence to engage my seat in the coupe."

"Well?"

"A traveller had already come to engage a seat in the imperial. I saw his name on the card."

"What name?"

"Marius Pontmercy."

"The wicked fellow!" exclaimed his aunt. "Ah! your cousin is not a steady lad like yourself. To think that he is to pass the night in a diligence!"

"Just as I am going to do."

"But you — it is your duty; in his case, it is wildness."

"Bosh!" said Theodule.

Here an event occurred to Mademoiselle Gillenormand the elder, — an idea struck her. If she had been a man, she would have slapped her brow. She apostrophized Theodule: —

"Are you aware whether your cousin knows you?"

"No. I have seen him; but he has never deigned to notice me."

"So you are going to travel together?"

"He in the imperial, I in the coupe."

"Where does this diligence run?"

"To Andelys."

"Then that is where Marius is going?"

"Unless, like myself, he should stop on the way. I get down at Vernon, in order to take the branch coach for Gaillon. I know nothing of Marius' plan of travel."

"Marius! what an ugly name! what possessed them to name him Marius? While you, at least, are called Theodule."

"I would rather be called Alfred," said the officer.

"Listen, Theodule."

"I am listening, aunt."

"Pay attention."

"I am paying attention."

"You understand?"

"Yes."

"Well, Marius absents himself!"

"Eh! eh!"

"He travels."

"Ah! ah!"

"He spends the night out."

"Oh! oh!"

"We should like to know what there is behind all this."

Theodule replied with the composure of a man of bronze: —

"Some petticoat or other."

And with that inward laugh which denotes certainty, he added: —

“A lass.”

“That is evident,” exclaimed his aunt, who thought she heard M. Gillenormand speaking, and who felt her conviction become irresistible at that word fillette, accentuated in almost the very same fashion by the granduncle and the grandnephew. She resumed: —

“Do us a favor. Follow Marius a little. He does not know you, it will be easy. Since a lass there is, try to get a sight of her. You must write us the tale. It will amuse his grandfather.”

Theodule had no excessive taste for this sort of spying; but he was much touched by the ten louis, and he thought he saw a chance for a possible sequel. He accepted the commission and said: “As you please, aunt.”

And he added in an aside, to himself: “Here I am a duenna.”

Mademoiselle Gillenormand embraced him.

“You are not the man to play such pranks, Theodule. You obey discipline, you are the slave of orders, you are a man of scruples and duty, and you would not quit your family to go and see a creature.”

The lancer made the pleased grimace of Cartouche when praised for his probity.

Marius, on the evening following this dialogue, mounted the diligence without suspecting that he was watched. As for the watcher, the first thing he did was to fall asleep. His slumber was complete and conscientious. Argus snored all night long.

At daybreak, the conductor of the diligence shouted: “Vernon! relay of Vernon! Travellers for Vernon!” And Lieutenant Theodule woke.

“Good,” he growled, still half asleep, “this is where I get out.”

Then, as his memory cleared by degrees, the effect of waking, he recalled his aunt, the ten louis, and the account which he had undertaken to render of the deeds and proceedings of Marius. This set him to laughing.

“Perhaps he is no longer in the coach,” he thought, as he rebuttoned the waistcoat of his undress uniform. “He may have stopped at Poissy; he may have stopped at Triel; if he did not get out at Meulan, he may have got out at Mantes, unless he got out at Rolleboise, or if he did not go on as far as Pacy, with the choice of turning to the left at Evreus, or to the right at Laroche-Guyon. Run after him, aunty. What the devil am I to write to that good old soul?”

At that moment a pair of black trousers descending from the imperial, made its appearance at the window of the coupe.

“Can that be Marius?” said the lieutenant.

It was Marius.

A little peasant girl, all entangled with the horses and the postilions at the end of the vehicle, was offering flowers to the travellers. “Give your ladies flowers!” she cried.

Marius approached her and purchased the finest flowers in her flat basket.

“Come now,” said Theodule, leaping down from the coupe, “this piques my curiosity. Who the deuce is he going to carry those flowers to? She must be a splendidly handsome woman for so fine a bouquet. I want to see her.”

And no longer in pursuance of orders, but from personal curiosity, like dogs who hunt on their own account, he set out to follow Marius.

Marius paid no attention to Theodule. Elegant women descended from the diligence; he did not glance at them. He seemed to see nothing around him.

“He is pretty deeply in love!” thought Theodule.

Marius directed his steps towards the church.

“Capital,” said Theodule to himself. “Rendezvous seasoned with a bit of mass are the best sort. Nothing is so exquisite as an ogle which passes over the good God’s head.”

On arriving at the church, Marius did not enter it, but skirted the apse. He disappeared behind one of the angles of the apse.

“The rendezvous is appointed outside,” said Theodule. “Let’s have a look at the lass.”

And he advanced on the tips of his boots towards the corner which Marius had turned.

On arriving there, he halted in amazement.

Marius, with his forehead clasped in his hands, was kneeling upon the grass on a grave. He had strewn his bouquet there. At the extremity of the grave, on a little swelling which marked the head, there stood a cross of black wood with this name in white letters: COLONEL BARON PONTMERCY. Marius’ sobs were audible.

The “lass” was a grave.

CHAPTER VIII — MARBLE AGAINST GRANITE

It was hither that Marius had come on the first occasion of his absenting himself from Paris. It was hither that he had come every time that M. Gillenormand had said: “He is sleeping out.”

Lieutenant Theodule was absolutely put out of countenance by this unexpected encounter with a sepulchre; he experienced a singular and disagreeable sensation which he was incapable of analyzing, and which was composed of respect for the tomb, mingled with respect for the colonel. He retreated, leaving Marius alone in the cemetery, and there was discipline in this retreat. Death appeared to him with large epaulets, and he almost made the military salute to him. Not knowing what to write to his aunt, he decided not to write at all; and it is probable that nothing would have resulted from the discovery made by Theodule as to the love affairs of Marius, if, by one of those mysterious arrangements which are so frequent in chance, the scene at Vernon had not had an almost immediate counter-shock at Paris.

Marius returned from Vernon on the third day, in the middle of the morning, descended at his grandfather’s door, and, wearied by the two nights spent in the diligence, and feeling the need of repairing his loss of sleep by an hour at the swimming-school, he mounted rapidly to his chamber, took merely time enough to throw off his travelling-coat, and the black ribbon which he wore round his neck, and went off to the bath.

M. Gillenormand, who had risen betimes like all old men in good health, had heard his entrance, and had made haste to climb, as quickly as his old legs permitted, the stairs to the upper story where Marius lived, in order to embrace him, and to question him while so doing, and to find out where he had been.

But the youth had taken less time to descend than the old man had to ascend, and when Father Gillenormand entered the attic, Marius was no longer there.

The bed had not been disturbed, and on the bed lay, outspread, but not defiantly the great-coat and the black ribbon.

“I like this better,” said M. Gillenormand.

And a moment later, he made his entrance into the salon, where Mademoiselle Gillenormand was already seated, busily embroidering her cart-wheels.

The entrance was a triumphant one.

M. Gillenormand held in one hand the great-coat, and in the other the neck-ribbon, and exclaimed: —

“Victory! We are about to penetrate the mystery! We are going to learn the most minute details; we are going to lay our finger on the debaucheries of our sly friend! Here we have the romance itself. I have the portrait!”

In fact, a case of black shagreen, resembling a medallion portrait, was suspended from the ribbon.

The old man took this case and gazed at it for some time without opening it, with that air of enjoyment, rapture, and wrath, with which a poor hungry fellow beholds an admirable dinner which is not for him, pass under his very nose.

“For this evidently is a portrait. I know all about such things. That is worn tenderly on the heart. How stupid they are! Some abominable fright that will make us shudder, probably! Young men have such bad taste nowadays!”

“Let us see, father,” said the old spinster.

The case opened by the pressure of a spring. They found in it nothing but a carefully folded paper.

“From the same to the same,” said M. Gillenormand, bursting with laughter. “I know what it is. A billet-doux.”

“Ah! let us read it!” said the aunt.

And she put on her spectacles. They unfolded the paper and read as follows: —

“For my son. — The Emperor made me a Baron on the battlefield of Waterloo. Since the Restoration disputes my right to this title which I purchased with my blood, my son shall take it and bear it. That he will be worthy of it is a matter of course.”

The feelings of father and daughter cannot be described. They felt chilled as by the breath of a death’s-head. They did not exchange a word.

Only, M. Gillenormand said in a low voice and as though speaking to himself: —

“It is the slasher’s handwriting.”

The aunt examined the paper, turned it about in all directions, then put it back in its case.

At the same moment a little oblong packet, enveloped in blue paper, fell from one of the pockets of the great-coat. Mademoiselle Gillenormand picked it up and unfolded the blue paper.

It contained Marius' hundred cards. She handed one of them to M. Gillenormand, who read: Le Baron Marius Pontmercy.

The old man rang the bell. Nicolette came. M. Gillenormand took the ribbon, the case, and the coat, flung them all on the floor in the middle of the room, and said: —

"Carry those duds away."

A full hour passed in the most profound silence. The old man and the old spinster had seated themselves with their backs to each other, and were thinking, each on his own account, the same things, in all probability.

At the expiration of this hour, Aunt Gillenormand said:— "A pretty state of things!"

A few moments later, Marius made his appearance. He entered. Even before he had crossed the threshold, he saw his grandfather holding one of his own cards in his hand, and on catching sight of him, the latter exclaimed with his air of bourgeois and grinning superiority which was something crushing: —

"Well! well! well! well! well! so you are a baron now. I present you my compliments. What is the meaning of this?"

Marius reddened slightly and replied: —

"It means that I am the son of my father."

M. Gillenormand ceased to laugh, and said harshly: —

"I am your father."

"My father," retorted Marius, with downcast eyes and a severe air, "was a humble and heroic man, who served the Republic and France gloriously, who was great in the greatest history that men have ever made, who lived in the bivouac for a quarter of a century, beneath grape-shot and bullets, in snow and mud by day, beneath rain at night, who captured two flags, who received twenty wounds, who died forgotten and abandoned, and who never committed but one mistake, which was to love too fondly two ingrates, his country and myself."

This was more than M. Gillenormand could bear to hear. At the word republic, he rose, or, to speak more correctly, he sprang to his feet. Every word that Marius had just uttered produced on the visage of the old Royalist the effect of the puffs of air from a forge upon a blazing brand. From a dull hue he had turned red, from red, purple, and from purple, flame-colored.

"Marius!" he cried. "Abominable child! I do not know what your father was! I do not wish to know! I know nothing about that, and I do not know him! But what I do know is, that there never was anything but scoundrels among those men! They were all rascals, assassins, red-caps, thieves! I say all! I say all! I know not one! I say all! Do you hear me, Marius! See here, you are no more a baron than my slipper is! They were all bandits in the service of Robespierre! All who served B-u-o-naparte were brigands! They were all traitors who betrayed, betrayed, betrayed their legitimate king! All cowards who fled before the Prussians and the English at Waterloo! That is what I do know! Whether Monsieur your father comes in that category, I do not know! I am sorry for it, so much the worse, your humble servant!"

In his turn, it was Marius who was the firebrand and M. Gillenormand who was the bellows. Marius quivered in every limb, he did not know what would happen next, his brain was on fire. He was the priest who beholds all his sacred wafers cast to the winds, the fakir who beholds a passer-by spit upon his idol. It could not be that such things had been uttered in his presence. What was he to do? His father had just been trampled under foot and stamped upon in his presence, but by whom? By his grandfather. How was he to avenge the one without outraging the other? It was impossible for him to insult his grandfather and it was equally impossible for him to leave his father unavenged. On the one hand was a sacred grave, on the other hoary locks.

He stood there for several moments, staggering as though intoxicated, with all this whirlwind dashing through his head; then he raised his eyes, gazed fixedly at his grandfather, and cried in a voice of thunder: —

"Down with the Bourbons, and that great hog of a Louis XVIII.!"

Louis XVIII. had been dead for four years; but it was all the same to him.

The old man, who had been crimson, turned whiter than his hair. He wheeled round towards a bust of M. le Duc de Berry, which stood on the chimney-piece, and made a profound bow, with a sort of peculiar majesty. Then he paced twice, slowly and in silence, from the fireplace to the window and from the window to the fireplace, traversing the whole length of the room, and making the polished floor creak as though he had been a stone statue walking.

On his second turn, he bent over his daughter, who was watching this encounter with the stupefied air of an antiquated lamb, and said to her with a smile that was almost calm: “A baron like this gentleman, and a bourgeois like myself cannot remain under the same roof.”

And drawing himself up, all at once, pallid, trembling, terrible, with his brow rendered more lofty by the terrible radiance of wrath, he extended his arm towards Marius and shouted to him: —

“Be off!”

Marius left the house.

On the following day, M. Gillenormand said to his daughter:

“You will send sixty pistoles every six months to that blood-drinker, and you will never mention his name to me.”

Having an immense reserve fund of wrath to get rid of, and not knowing what to do with it, he continued to address his daughter as you instead of thou for the next three months.

Marius, on his side, had gone forth in indignation. There was one circumstance which, it must be admitted, aggravated his exasperation. There are always petty fatalities of the sort which complicate domestic dramas. They augment the grievances in such cases, although, in reality, the wrongs are not increased by them. While carrying Marius’ “duds” precipitately to his chamber, at his grandfather’s command, Nicolette had, inadvertently, let fall, probably, on the attic staircase, which was dark, that medallion of black shagreen which contained the paper penned by the colonel. Neither paper nor case could afterwards be found. Marius was convinced that “Monsieur Gillenormand” — from that day forth he never alluded to him otherwise — had flung “his father’s testament” in the fire. He knew by heart the few lines which the colonel had written, and, consequently, nothing was lost. But the paper, the writing, that sacred relic, — all that was his very heart. What had been done with it?

Marius had taken his departure without saying whither he was going, and without knowing where, with thirty francs, his watch, and a few clothes in a hand-bag. He had entered a hackney-coach, had engaged it by the hour, and had directed his course at hap-hazard towards the Latin quarter.

What was to become of Marius?

BOOK FOURTH. — THE FRIENDS OF THE A B C

CHAPTER I — A GROUP WHICH BARELY MISSED BECOMING HISTORIC

At that epoch, which was, to all appearances indifferent, a certain revolutionary quiver was vaguely current. Breaths which had started forth from the depths of ‘89 and ‘93 were in the air. Youth was on the point, may the reader pardon us the word, of moulting. People were undergoing a transformation, almost without being conscious of it, through the movement of the age. The needle which moves round the compass also moves in souls. Each person was taking that step in advance which he was bound to take. The Royalists were becoming liberals, liberals were turning democrats. It was a flood tide complicated with a thousand ebb movements; the peculiarity of ebbs is to create intermixtures; hence the combination of very singular ideas; people adored both Napoleon and liberty. We are making history here. These were the mirages of that period. Opinions traverse phases. Voltairian royalism, a quaint variety, had a no less singular sequel, Bonapartist liberalism.

Other groups of minds were more serious. In that direction, they sounded principles, they attached themselves to the right. They grew enthusiastic for the absolute, they caught glimpses of infinite realizations; the absolute, by its very rigidity, urges spirits towards the sky and causes them to float in illimitable space. There is nothing like dogma for bringing forth dreams. And there is nothing like dreams for engendering the future. Utopia to-day, flesh and blood to-morrow.

These advanced opinions had a double foundation. A beginning of mystery menaced “the established order of things,” which was suspicious and underhand. A sign which was revolutionary to the highest degree. The second thoughts of power meet the second thoughts of the populace in the mine. The incubation of insurrections gives the retort to the premeditation of coups d’etat.

There did not, as yet, exist in France any of those vast underlying organizations, like the German tugendbund and Italian Carbonarism; but here and there there were dark underminings, which were in process of throwing off shoots. The Cougourde was being outlined at Aix; there existed at Paris, among other affiliations of that nature, the society of the Friends of the A B C.

What were these Friends of the A B C? A society which had for its object apparently the education of children, in reality the elevation of man.

They declared themselves the Friends of the A B C, — the Abaisse, — the debased, — that is to say, the people. They wished to elevate the people. It was a pun which we should do wrong to smile at. Puns are sometimes serious factors in politics; witness the Castratus ad castra, which made a general of the army of Narses; witness: Barbari et Barberini; witness: Tu es Petrus et super hanc petram, etc., etc.

The Friends of the A B C were not numerous, it was a secret society in the state of embryo, we might almost say a coterie, if coteries ended in heroes. They assembled in Paris in two localities, near the fish-market, in a wine-shop called Corinthe, of which more will be heard later on, and near the Pantheon in a little cafe in the Rue Saint-Michel called the Cafe Musain, now torn down; the first of these meeting-places was close to the workingman, the second to the students.

The assemblies of the Friends of the A B C were usually held in a back room of the Cafe Musain.

This hall, which was tolerably remote from the cafe, with which it was connected by an extremely long corridor, had two windows and an exit with a private stairway on the little Rue des Gres. There they smoked and drank, and gambled and laughed. There they conversed in very loud tones about everything, and in whispers of other things. An old map of France under the Republic was nailed to the wall, — a sign quite sufficient to excite the suspicion of a police agent.

The greater part of the Friends of the A B C were students, who were on cordial terms with the working classes. Here are the names of the principal ones. They belong, in a certain measure, to history: Enjolras, Combeferre, Jean Prouvaire, Feuilly, Courfeyrac, Bahorel, Lesgle or Laigle, Joly, Grantaire.

These young men formed a sort of family, through the bond of friendship. All, with the exception of Laigle, were from the South.

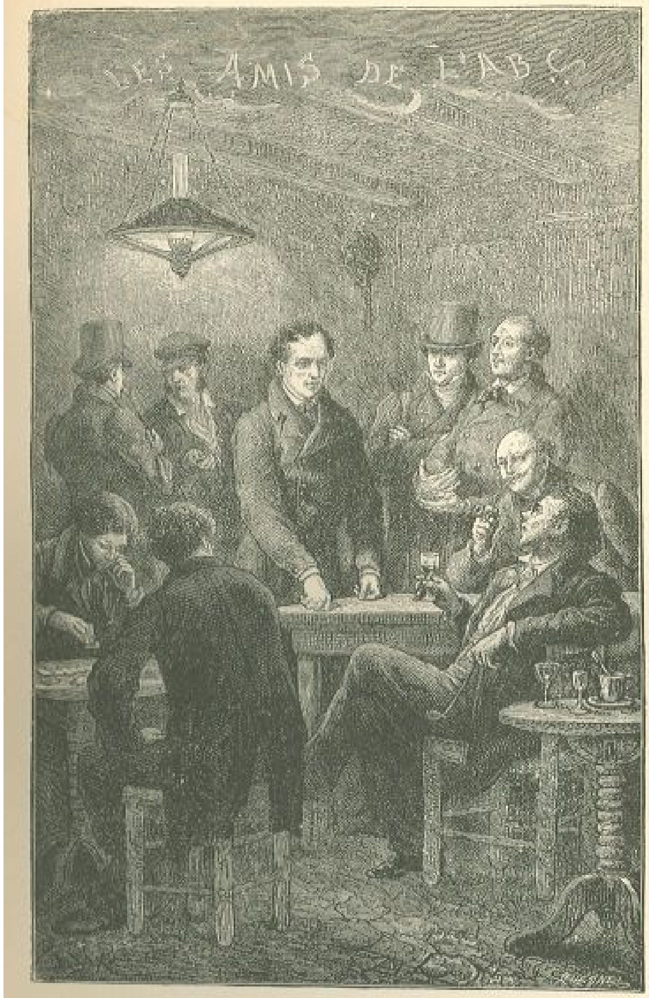

THE FRIENDS OF THE A B C

This was a remarkable group. It vanished in the invisible depths which lie behind us. At the point of this drama which we have now reached, it will not perhaps be superfluous to throw a ray of light upon these youthful heads, before the reader beholds them plunging into the shadow of a tragic adventure.

Enjolras, whose name we have mentioned first of all, — the reader shall see why later on, — was an only son and wealthy.

Enjolras was a charming young man, who was capable of being terrible. He was angelically handsome. He was a savage Antinous. One would have said, to see the pensive thoughtfulness of his glance, that he had already, in some previous state of existence, traversed the revolutionary apocalypse. He possessed the tradition of it as though he had been a witness. He was acquainted with all the minute details of the great affair. A pontifical and warlike nature, a singular thing in a youth. He was an officiating priest and a man of war; from the immediate point of view, a soldier of the democracy; above the contemporary movement, the priest of the ideal. His eyes were deep, his lids a little red, his lower lip was thick and easily became disdainful, his brow was lofty. A great deal of brow in a face is like a great deal of horizon in a view. Like certain young men at the beginning of this century and the end of the last, who became illustrious at an early age, he was endowed with excessive youth, and was as rosy as a young girl, although subject to hours of pallor. Already a man, he still seemed a child. His two and twenty years appeared to be but seventeen; he was serious, it did not seem as though he were aware there was on earth a thing called woman. He had but one passion — the right; but one thought — to overthrow the obstacle. On Mount Aventine, he would have been Gracchus; in the Convention, he would have been Saint-Just. He hardly saw the roses, he ignored spring, he did not hear the carolling of the birds; the bare throat of Evadne would have moved him no more than it would have moved Aristogeiton; he, like Harmodius, thought flowers good for nothing except to conceal the sword. He was severe in his enjoyments. He chastely dropped his eyes before everything which was not the Republic. He was the marble lover of liberty. His speech was harshly inspired, and had the thrill of a hymn. He was subject to unexpected outbursts of soul. Woe to the love-affair which should have risked itself beside him! If any grisette of the Place Cambrai or the Rue Saint-Jean-de-Beauvais, seeing that face of a youth escaped from college, that page's mien, those long, golden lashes, those blue eyes, that hair billowing in the wind, those rosy cheeks, those fresh lips, those exquisite teeth, had conceived an appetite for that complete aurora, and had tried her beauty on Enjolras, an astounding and terrible glance would have promptly shown her the abyss, and would have taught her not to confound the mighty cherub of Ezekiel with the gallant Cherubino of Beaumarchais.

By the side of Enjolras, who represented the logic of the Revolution, Combeferre represented its philosophy. Between the logic of the Revolution and its philosophy there exists this difference — that its logic may end in war, whereas its philosophy can end only in peace. Combeferre complemented and rectified Enjolras. He was less lofty, but broader. He desired to pour into all minds the extensive principles of general ideas: he said: “Revolution, but civilization”; and around the mountain peak he opened out a vast view of the blue sky. The Revolution was more adapted for breathing with Combeferre than with Enjolras. Enjolras expressed its divine right, and Combeferre its natural right. The first attached himself to Robespierre; the second confined himself to Condorcet. Combeferre lived the life of all the rest of the world more than did Enjolras. If it had been granted to these two young men to attain to history, the one would have been the just, the other the wise man. Enjolras was the more virile, Combeferre the more humane. Homo and vir, that was the exact effect of their different shades. Combeferre was as gentle as Enjolras was severe, through natural whiteness. He loved the word citizen, but he preferred the word man. He would gladly have said: Hombre, like the Spanish. He read everything, went to the theatres, attended the courses of public lecturers, learned the polarization of light from Arago, grew enthusiastic over a lesson in which Geoffrey Sainte-Hilaire explained the double function of the external carotid artery, and the internal, the one which makes the face, and the one which makes the brain; he kept up with what was going on, followed science step by step, compared Saint-Simon with Fourier, deciphered hieroglyphics, broke the pebble which he found and reasoned on geology, drew from memory a silkworm moth, pointed out the faulty French in the Dictionary of the Academy, studied Puysegur and Deleuze, affirmed nothing, not even miracles; denied nothing, not even ghosts; turned over the files of the Moniteur, reflected. He declared that the future lies in the hand of the schoolmaster, and busied himself with educational questions. He desired that society should labor without relaxation at the elevation of the moral and intellectual level, at coining science, at putting ideas into circulation, at increasing the mind in youthful persons, and he feared lest the present poverty of method, the paltriness from a literary point of view confined to two or three centuries called classic, the tyrannical dogmatism of official pedants, scholastic prejudices and routines should end by converting our colleges into artificial oyster beds. He was learned, a purist, exact, a graduate of the Polytechnic, a close student, and at the same time, thoughtful “even to chimaeras,” so his friends said. He believed in all dreams, railroads, the suppression of suffering in chirurgical operations, the fixing of images in the dark chamber, the electric telegraph, the steering of balloons. Moreover, he was not much alarmed by the citadels erected against the human mind in every direction, by superstition, despotism, and prejudice. He was one of those who think that science will eventually turn the position. Enjolras was a chief, Combeferre was a guide. One would have liked to fight under the one and to march behind the other. It is not that Combeferre was not capable of fighting, he did not refuse a hand-to-hand combat with the obstacle, and to attack it by main force and explosively; but it suited him better to bring the human race into accord with its destiny gradually, by means of education, the inculcation of axioms, the promulgation of positive laws; and, between two lights, his preference was rather for illumination than for conflagration. A conflagration can create an aurora, no doubt, but why not await the dawn? A volcano illuminates, but daybreak furnishes a still better illumination. Possibly, Combeferre preferred the whiteness of the beautiful to the blaze of the sublime. A light troubled by smoke, progress purchased at the expense of violence, only half satisfied this tender and serious spirit. The headlong precipitation of a people into the truth, a '93, terrified him; nevertheless, stagnation was still more repulsive to him, in it he detected putrefaction and death; on the whole, he preferred scum to miasma, and he preferred the torrent to the cesspool, and the falls of Niagara to the lake of Montfaucon. In short, he desired neither halt nor haste. While his tumultuous friends, captivated by the absolute, adored and invoked splendid revolutionary adventures, Combeferre was inclined to let progress, good progress, take its own course; he may have been cold, but he was pure; methodical, but irreproachable; phlegmatic, but imperturbable. Combeferre would have knelt and clasped his hands to enable the future to arrive in all its candor, and that nothing might disturb the immense and virtuous evolution of the races. The good must be innocent, he repeated incessantly. And in fact, if the grandeur of the Revolution consists in keeping the dazzling ideal fixedly in view, and of soaring thither athwart the lightnings, with fire and blood in its talons, the beauty of progress lies in being spotless; and there exists between Washington, who represents the one, and Danton, who incarnates the other, that difference which separates the swan from the angel with the wings of an eagle.

Jean Prouvaire was a still softer shade than Combeferre. His name was Jehan, owing to that petty momentary freak which mingled with the powerful and profound movement whence sprang the very essential study of the Middle Ages. Jean Prouvaire was in love; he cultivated a pot of flowers, played on the flute, made verses, loved the people, pitied woman, wept over the child, confounded God and the future in the same confidence, and blamed the Revolution for having caused the fall of a royal head, that of

Andre Chenier. His voice was ordinarily delicate, but suddenly grew manly. He was learned even to erudition, and almost an Orientalist. Above all, he was good; and, a very simple thing to those who know how nearly goodness borders on grandeur, in the matter of poetry, he preferred the immense. He knew Italian, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew; and these served him only for the perusal of four poets: Dante, Juvenal, AEschylus, and Isaiah. In French, he preferred Corneille to Racine, and Agrippa d'Aubigne to Corneille. He loved to saunter through fields of wild oats and corn-flowers, and busied himself with clouds nearly as much as with events. His mind had two attitudes, one on the side towards man, the other on that towards God; he studied or he contemplated. All day long, he buried himself in social questions, salary, capital, credit, marriage, religion, liberty of thought, education, penal servitude, poverty, association, property, production and sharing, the enigma of this lower world which covers the human ant-hill with darkness; and at night, he gazed upon the planets, those enormous beings. Like Enjolras, he was wealthy and an only son. He spoke softly, bowed his head, lowered his eyes, smiled with embarrassment, dressed badly, had an awkward air, blushed at a mere nothing, and was very timid. Yet he was intrepid.

Feuilly was a workingman, a fan-maker, orphaned both of father and mother, who earned with difficulty three francs a day, and had but one thought, to deliver the world. He had one other preoccupation, to educate himself; he called this also, delivering himself. He had taught himself to read and write; everything that he knew, he had learned by himself. Feuilly had a generous heart. The range of his embrace was immense. This orphan had adopted the peoples. As his mother had failed him, he meditated on his country. He brooded with the profound divination of the man of the people, over what we now call the idea of the nationality, had learned history with the express object of raging with full knowledge of the case. In this club of young Utopians, occupied chiefly with France, he represented the outside world. He had for his specialty Greece, Poland, Hungary, Roumania, Italy. He uttered these names incessantly, appropriately and inappropriately, with the tenacity of right. The violations of Turkey on Greece and Thessaly, of Russia on Warsaw, of Austria on Venice, enraged him. Above all things, the great violence of 1772 aroused him. There is no more sovereign eloquence than the true in indignation; he was eloquent with that eloquence. He was inexhaustible on that infamous date of 1772, on the subject of that noble and valiant race suppressed by treason, and that three-sided crime, on that monstrous ambush, the prototype and pattern of all those horrible suppressions of states, which, since that time, have struck many a noble nation, and have annulled their certificate of birth, so to speak. All contemporary social crimes have their origin in the partition of Poland. The partition of Poland is a theorem of which all present political outrages are the corollaries. There has not been a despot, nor a traitor for nearly a century back, who has not signed, approved, counter-signed, and copied, ne variatur, the partition of Poland. When the record of modern treasons was examined, that was the first thing which made its appearance. The congress of Vienna consulted that crime before consummating its own. 1772 sounded the onset; 1815 was the death of the game. Such was Feuilly's habitual text. This poor workingman had constituted himself the tutor of Justice, and she recompensed him by rendering him great. The fact is, that there is eternity in right. Warsaw can no more be Tartar than Venice can be Teuton. Kings lose their pains and their honor in the attempt to make them so. Sooner or later, the submerged part floats to the surface and reappears. Greece becomes Greece again, Italy is once more Italy. The protest of right against the deed persists forever. The theft of a nation cannot be allowed by prescription. These lofty deeds of rascality have no future. A nation cannot have its mark extracted like a pocket handkerchief.

Courfeyrac had a father who was called M. de Courfeyrac. One of the false ideas of the bourgeoisie under the Restoration as regards aristocracy and the nobility was to believe in the particle. The particle, as every one knows, possesses no significance. But the bourgeois of the epoch of la Minerve estimated so highly that poor de, that they thought themselves bound to abdicate it. M. de Chauvelin had himself called M. Chauvelin; M. de Caumartin, M. Caumartin; M. de Constant de Robecque, Benjamin Constant; M. de Lafayette, M. Lafayette. Courfeyrac had not wished to remain behind the rest, and called himself plain Courfeyrac.

We might almost, so far as Courfeyrac is concerned, stop here, and confine ourselves to saying with regard to what remains: “For Courfeyrac, see Tholomyes.”

Courfeyrac had, in fact, that animation of youth which may be called the beaute du diable of the mind. Later on, this disappears like the playfulness of the kitten, and all this grace ends, with the bourgeois, on two legs, and with the tomcat, on four paws.

This sort of wit is transmitted from generation to generation of the successive levies of youth who traverse the schools, who pass it from hand to hand, quasi cursores, and is almost always exactly the same; so that, as we have just pointed out, any one who had listened to Courfeyrac in 1828 would have thought he heard Tholomyes in 1817. Only, Courfeyrac was an honorable fellow. Beneath the apparent similarities of the exterior mind, the difference between him and Tholomyes was very great. The latent man which existed in the two was totally different in the first from what it was in the second. There was in Tholomyes a district attorney, and in Courfeyrac a paladin.

Enjolras was the chief, Combeferre was the guide, Courfeyrac was the centre. The others gave more light, he shed more warmth; the truth is, that he possessed all the qualities of a centre, roundness and radiance.

Bahorel had figured in the bloody tumult of June, 1822, on the occasion of the burial of young Lallemand.

Bahorel was a good-natured mortal, who kept bad company, brave, a spendthrift, prodigal, and to the verge of generosity, talkative, and at times eloquent, bold to the verge of effrontery; the best fellow possible; he had daring waistcoats, and scarlet opinions; a wholesale blusterer, that is to say, loving nothing so much as a quarrel, unless it were an uprising; and nothing so much as an uprising, unless it were a revolution; always ready to smash a window-pane, then to tear up the pavement, then to demolish a government, just to see the effect of it; a student in his eleventh year. He had nosed about the law, but did not practise it. He had taken for his device: “Never a lawyer,” and for his armorial bearings a nightstand in which was visible a square cap. Every time that he passed the law-school, which rarely happened, he buttoned up his frock-coat, — the paletot had not yet been invented, — and took hygienic precautions. Of the school porter he said: “What a fine old man!” and of the dean, M. Delvincourt: “What a monument!” In his lectures he espied subjects for ballads, and in his professors occasions for caricature. He wasted a tolerably large allowance, something like three thousand francs a year, in doing nothing.

He had peasant parents whom he had contrived to imbue with respect for their son.

He said of them: “They are peasants and not bourgeois; that is the reason they are intelligent.”

Bahorel, a man of caprice, was scattered over numerous cafes; the others had habits, he had none. He sauntered. To stray is human. To saunter is Parisian. In reality, he had a penetrating mind and was more of a thinker than appeared to view.

He served as a connecting link between the Friends of the A B C and other still unorganized groups, which were destined to take form later on.

In this conclave of young heads, there was one bald member.

The Marquis d'Avaray, whom Louis XVIII. made a duke for having assisted him to enter a hackney-coach on the day when he emigrated, was wont to relate, that in 1814, on his return to France, as the King was disembarking at Calais, a man handed him a petition.

"What is your request?" said the King.

"Sire, a post-office."

"What is your name?"

"L'Aigle."

The King frowned, glanced at the signature of the petition and beheld the name written thus: LESGLE. This non-Bonoparte orthography touched the King and he began to smile. "Sire," resumed the man with the petition, "I had for ancestor a keeper of the hounds surnamed Lesgueules. This surname furnished my name. I am called Lesgueules, by contraction Lesgle, and by corruption l'Aigle." This caused the King to smile broadly. Later on he gave the man the posting office of Meaux, either intentionally or accidentally.

The bald member of the group was the son of this Lesgle, or Legle, and he signed himself, Legle [de Meaux]. As an abbreviation, his companions called him Bossuet.

Bossuet was a gay but unlucky fellow. His specialty was not to succeed in anything. As an offset, he laughed at everything. At five and twenty he was bald. His father had ended by owning a house and a field; but he, the son, had made haste to lose that house and field in a bad speculation. He had nothing left. He possessed knowledge and wit, but all he did miscarried. Everything failed him and everybody deceived him; what he was building tumbled down on top of him. If he were splitting wood, he cut off a finger. If he had a mistress, he speedily discovered that he had a friend also. Some misfortune happened to him every moment, hence his joviality. He said: "I live under falling tiles." He was not easily astonished, because, for him, an accident was what he had foreseen, he took his bad luck serenely, and smiled at the teasing of fate, like a person who is listening to pleasantries.

He was poor, but his fund of good humor was inexhaustible. He soon reached his last sou, never his last burst of laughter. When adversity entered his doors, he saluted this old acquaintance cordially, he tapped all catastrophes on the stomach; he was familiar with fatality to the point of calling it by its nickname: “Good day, Guignon,” he said to it.

These persecutions of fate had rendered him inventive. He was full of resources. He had no money, but he found means, when it seemed good to him, to indulge in “unbridled extravagance.” One night, he went so far as to eat a “hundred francs” in a supper with a wench, which inspired him to make this memorable remark in the midst of the orgy: “Pull off my boots, you five-louis jade.”

Bossuet was slowly directing his steps towards the profession of a lawyer; he was pursuing his law studies after the manner of Bahorel. Bossuet had not much domicile, sometimes none at all. He lodged now with one, now with another, most often with Joly. Joly was studying medicine. He was two years younger than Bossuet.

Joly was the “malade imaginaire” junior. What he had won in medicine was to be more of an invalid than a doctor. At three and twenty he thought himself a valetudinarian, and passed his life in inspecting his tongue in the mirror. He affirmed that man becomes magnetic like a needle, and in his chamber he placed his bed with its head to the south, and the foot to the north, so that, at night, the circulation of his blood might not be interfered with by the great electric current of the globe. During thunder storms, he felt his pulse. Otherwise, he was the gayest of them all. All these young, maniacal, puny, merry incoherences lived in harmony together, and the result was an eccentric and agreeable being whom his comrades, who were prodigal of winged consonants, called Jolllly. “You may fly away on the four L’s,” Jean Prouvaire said to him.

Joly had a trick of touching his nose with the tip of his cane, which is an indication of a sagacious mind.

All these young men who differed so greatly, and who, on the whole, can only be discussed seriously, held the same religion: Progress.

All were the direct sons of the French Revolution. The most giddy of them became solemn when they pronounced that date: ‘89. Their fathers in the flesh had been, either royalists, doctrinaires, it matters not what; this confusion anterior to themselves, who were young, did not concern them at all; the pure blood of principle ran in their veins. They attached themselves, without intermediate shades, to incorruptible right and absolute duty.

Affiliated and initiated, they sketched out the ideal underground.

Among all these glowing hearts and thoroughly convinced minds, there was one sceptic. How came he there? By juxtaposition. This sceptic's name was Grantaire, and he was in the habit of signing himself with this rebus: R. Grantaire was a man who took good care not to believe in anything. Moreover, he was one of the students who had learned the most during their course at Paris; he knew that the best coffee was to be had at the Cafe Lemblin, and the best billiards at the Cafe Voltaire, that good cakes and lasses were to be found at the Ermitage, on the Boulevard du Maine, spatchcocked chickens at Mother Sauget's, excellent matelotes at the Barriere de la Cunette, and a certain thin white wine at the Barriere du Com pat. He knew the best place for everything; in addition, boxing and foot-fencing and some dances; and he was a thorough single-stick player. He was a tremendous drinker to boot. He was inordinately homely: the prettiest boot-stitcher of that day, Irma Boissy, enraged with his homeliness, pronounced sentence on him as follows: "Grantaire is impossible"; but Grantaire's fatuity was not to be disconcerted. He stared tenderly and fixedly at all women, with the air of saying to them all: "If I only chose!" and of trying to make his comrades believe that he was in general demand.

All those words: rights of the people, rights of man, the social contract, the French Revolution, the Republic, democracy, humanity, civilization, religion, progress, came very near to signifying nothing whatever to Grantaire. He smiled at them. Scepticism, that caries of the intelligence, had not left him a single whole idea. He lived with irony. This was his axiom: "There is but one certainty, my full glass." He sneered at all devotion in all parties, the father as well as the brother, Robespierre junior as well as Loizerolles. "They are greatly in advance to be dead," he exclaimed. He said of the crucifix: "There is a gibbet which has been a success." A rover, a gambler, a libertine, often drunk, he displeased these young dreamers by humming incessantly: "J'aimons les filles, et j'aimons le bon vin." Air: Vive Henri IV.

However, this sceptic had one fanaticism. This fanaticism was neither a dogma, nor an idea, nor an art, nor a science; it was a man: Enjolras. Grantaire admired, loved, and venerated Enjolras. To whom did this anarchical scoffer unite himself in this phalanx of absolute minds? To the most absolute. In what manner had Enjolras subjugated him? By his ideas? No. By his character. A phenomenon which is often observable. A sceptic who adheres to a believer is as simple as the law of complementary colors. That which we lack attracts us. No one loves the light like the blind man. The dwarf adores the drum-major. The toad always has his eyes fixed on heaven. Why? In order to watch the bird in its flight. Grantaire, in whom writhed doubt, loved to watch faith soar in Enjolras. He had need of Enjolras. That chaste, healthy, firm, upright, hard, candid nature charmed him, without his being clearly aware of it, and without the idea of explaining it to himself having occurred to him. He admired his opposite by instinct. His soft, yielding, dislocated, sickly, shapeless ideas attached themselves to Enjolras as to a spinal column. His moral backbone leaned on that firmness. Grantaire in the presence of Enjolras became some one once more. He was, himself, moreover, composed of two elements, which were, to all appearance, incompatible. He was ironical and cordial. His indifference loved. His mind could get along without belief, but his heart could not get along without friendship. A profound contradiction; for an affection is a conviction. His nature was thus constituted. There are men who seem to be born to be the reverse, the obverse, the wrong side. They are Pollux, Patrocles, Nisus, Eudamidas, Ephestion, Pechmeja. They only exist on condition that they are backed up with another man; their name is a sequel, and is only written preceded by the conjunction and; and their existence is not their own; it is the other side of an existence which is not theirs. Grantaire was one of these men. He was the obverse of Enjolras.

One might almost say that affinities begin with the letters of the alphabet. In the series O and P are inseparable. You can, at will, pronounce O and P or Orestes and Pylades.

Grantaire, Enjolras’ true satellite, inhabited this circle of young men; he lived there, he took no pleasure anywhere but there; he followed them everywhere. His joy was to see these forms go and come through the fumes of wine. They tolerated him on account of his good humor.

Enjolras, the believer, disdained this sceptic; and, a sober man himself, scorned this drunkard. He accorded him a little lofty pity. Grantaire was an unaccepted Pylades. Always harshly treated by Enjolras, roughly repulsed, rejected yet ever returning to the charge, he said of Enjolras: “What fine marble!”

CHAPTER II — BLONDEAU’S FUNERAL ORATION BY BOSSUET

On a certain afternoon, which had, as will be seen hereafter, some coincidence with the events heretofore related, Laigle de Meaux was to be seen leaning in a sensual manner against the doorpost of the Cafe Musain. He had the air of a caryatid on a vacation; he carried nothing but his revery, however. He was staring at the Place Saint-Michel. To lean one’s back against a thing is equivalent to lying down while standing erect, which attitude is not hated by thinkers. Laigle de Meaux was pondering without melancholy, over a little misadventure which had befallen him two days previously at the law-school, and which had modified his personal plans for the future, plans which were rather indistinct in any case.

Revery does not prevent a cab from passing by, nor the dreamer from taking note of that cab. Laigle de Meaux, whose eyes were straying about in a sort of diffuse lounging, perceived, athwart his somnambulism, a two-wheeled vehicle proceeding through the place, at a foot pace and apparently in indecision. For whom was this cabriolet? Why was it driving at a walk? Laigle took a survey. In it, beside the coachman, sat a young man, and in front of the young man lay a rather bulky hand-bag. The bag displayed to passers-by the following name inscribed in large black letters on a card which was sewn to the stuff: MARIUS PONTMERCY.

This name caused Laigle to change his attitude. He drew himself up and hurled this apostrophe at the young man in the cabriolet: —

“Monsieur Marius Pontmercy!”

The cabriolet thus addressed came to a halt.

The young man, who also seemed deeply buried in thought, raised his eyes: —

“Hey?” said he.

“You are M. Marius Pontmercy?”

“Certainly.”

“I was looking for you,” resumed Laigle de Meaux.

“How so?” demanded Marius; for it was he: in fact, he had just quitted his grandfather’s, and had before him a face which he now beheld for the first time. “I do not know you.”

“Neither do I know you,” responded Laigle.

Marius thought he had encountered a wag, the beginning of a mystification in the open street. He was not in a very good humor at the moment. He frowned. Laigle de Meaux went on imperturbably: —

“You were not at the school day before yesterday.”

“That is possible.”

“That is certain.”

“You are a student?” demanded Marius.

“Yes, sir. Like yourself. Day before yesterday, I entered the school, by chance. You know, one does have such freaks sometimes. The professor was just calling the roll. You are not unaware that they are very ridiculous on such occasions. At the third call, unanswered, your name is erased from the list. Sixty francs in the gulf.”

Marius began to listen.

“It was Blondeau who was making the call. You know Blondeau, he has a very pointed and very malicious nose, and he delights to scent out the absent. He slyly began with the letter P. I was not listening, not being compromised by that letter. The call was not going badly. No erasures; the universe was present. Blondeau was grieved. I said to myself: ‘Blondeau, my love, you will not get the very smallest sort of an execution to-day.’ All at once Blondeau calls, ‘Marius Pontmercy!’ No one answers. Blondeau, filled with hope, repeats more loudly: ‘Marius Pontmercy!’ And he takes his pen. Monsieur, I have bowels of compassion. I said to myself hastily: ‘Here’s a brave fellow who is going to get scratched out. Attention. Here is a veritable mortal who is not exact. He’s not a good student. Here is none of your heavy-sides, a student who studies, a greenhorn pedant, strong on letters, theology, science, and sapience, one of those dull wits cut by the square; a pin by profession. He is an honorable idler who lounges, who practises country jaunts, who cultivates the grisette, who pays court to the fair sex, who is at this very moment, perhaps, with my mistress. Let us save him. Death to Blondeau!’ At that moment, Blondeau dipped his pen in, all black with erasures in the ink, cast his yellow eyes round the audience room, and repeated for the third time: ‘Marius Pontmercy!’ I replied: ‘Present!’ This is why you were not crossed off.”

“Monsieur!—” said Marius.

“And why I was,” added Laigle de Meaux.

“I do not understand you,” said Marius.

Laigle resumed: —

“Nothing is more simple. I was close to the desk to reply, and close to the door for the purpose of flight. The professor gazed at me with a certain intensity. All of a sudden, Blondeau, who must be the malicious nose alluded to by Boileau, skipped to the letter L. L is my letter. I am from Meaux, and my name is Lesgle.”

“L’Aigle!” interrupted Marius, “what fine name!”

“Monsieur, Blondeau came to this fine name, and called: ‘Laigle!’ I reply: ‘Present!’ Then Blondeau gazes at me, with the gentleness of a tiger, and says to me: ‘If you are Pontmercy, you are not Laigle.’ A phrase which has a disobliging air for you, but which was lugubrious only for me. That said, he crossed me off.”

Marius exclaimed: —

“I am mortified, sir—”

“First of all,” interposed Laigle, “I demand permission to embalm Blondeau in a few phrases of deeply felt eulogium. I will assume that he is dead. There will be no great change required in his gauntness, in his pallor, in his coldness, and in his smell. And I say: ‘Erudimini qui judicatis terram. Here lies Blondeau, Blondeau the Nose, Blondeau Nasica, the ox of discipline, bos disciplinae, the bloodhound of the password, the angel of the roll-call, who was upright, square exact, rigid, honest, and hideous. God crossed him off as he crossed me off.’”

Marius resumed: —

“I am very sorry—”

“Young man,” said Laigle de Meaux, “let this serve you as a lesson. In future, be exact.”

“I really beg you a thousand pardons.”

“Do not expose your neighbor to the danger of having his name erased again.”

“I am extremely sorry—”

Laigle burst out laughing.

“And I am delighted. I was on the brink of becoming a lawyer. This erasure saves me. I renounce the triumphs of the bar. I shall not defend the widow, and I shall not attack the orphan. No more toga, no more stage. Here is my erasure all ready for me. It is to you that I am indebted for it, Monsieur Pontmercy. I intend to pay a solemn call of thanks upon you. Where do you live?”

“In this cab,” said Marius.

“A sign of opulence,” retorted Laigle calmly. “I congratulate you. You have there a rent of nine thousand francs per annum.”

At that moment, Courfeyrac emerged from the cafe.

Marius smiled sadly.

“I have paid this rent for the last two hours, and I aspire to get rid of it; but there is a sort of history attached to it, and I don’t know where to go.”

“Come to my place, sir,” said Courfeyrac.

“I have the priority,” observed Laigle, “but I have no home.”

“Hold your tongue, Bossuet,” said Courfeyrac.

“Bossuet,” said Marius, “but I thought that your name was Laigle.”

“De Meaux,” replied Laigle; “by metaphor, Bossuet.”

Courfeyrac entered the cab.

“Coachman,” said he, “hotel de la Porte-Saint-Jacques.”

And that very evening, Marius found himself installed in a chamber of the hotel de la Porte-Saint-Jacques side by side with Courfeyrac.

CHAPTER III — MARIUS' ASTONISHMENTS

In a few days, Marius had become Courfeyrac's friend. Youth is the season for prompt welding and the rapid healing of scars. Marius breathed freely in Courfeyrac's society, a decidedly new thing for him. Courfeyrac put no questions to him. He did not even think of such a thing. At that age, faces disclose everything on the spot. Words are superfluous. There are young men of whom it can be said that their countenances chatter. One looks at them and one knows them.

One morning, however, Courfeyrac abruptly addressed this interrogation to him: —

"By the way, have you any political opinions?"

"The idea!" said Marius, almost affronted by the question.

"What are you?"

"A democrat-Bonapartist."

"The gray hue of a reassured rat," said Courfeyrac.

On the following day, Courfeyrac introduced Marius at the Cafe Musain. Then he whispèred in his ear, with a smile: "I must give you your entry to the revolution." And he led him to the hall of the Friends of the A B C. He presented him to the other comrades, saying this simple word which Marius did not understand: "A pupil."

Marius had fallen into a wasps'-nest of wits. However, although he was silent and grave, he was, none the less, both winged and armed.

Marius, up to that time solitary and inclined to soliloquy, and to asides, both by habit and by taste, was a little fluttered by this covey of young men around him. All these various initiatives solicited his attention at once, and pulled him about. The tumultuous movements of these minds at liberty and at work set his ideas in a whirl. Sometimes, in his trouble, they fled so far from him, that he had difficulty in recovering them. He heard them talk of philosophy, of literature, of art, of history, of religion, in unexpected fashion. He caught glimpses of strange aspects; and, as he did not place them in proper perspective, he was not altogether sure that it was not chaos that he grasped. On abandoning his grandfather's opinions for the opinions of his father, he had supposed himself fixed; he now suspected, with uneasiness, and without daring to avow it to himself, that he was not. The angle at which he saw everything began to be displaced anew. A certain oscillation set all the horizons of his brains in motion. An odd internal upsetting. He almost suffered from it.

It seemed as though there were no “consecrated things” for those young men. Marius heard singular propositions on every sort of subject, which embarrassed his still timid mind.

A theatre poster presented itself, adorned with the title of a tragedy from the ancient repertory called classic: “Down with tragedy dear to the bourgeois!” cried Bahorel. And Marius heard Combeferre reply: —

“You are wrong, Bahorel. The bourgeoisie loves tragedy, and the bourgeoisie must be left at peace on that score. Bewigged tragedy has a reason for its existence, and I am not one of those who, by order of AEschylus, contest its right to existence. There are rough outlines in nature; there are, in creation, ready-made parodies; a beak which is not a beak, wings which are not wings, gills which are not gills, paws which are not paws, a cry of pain which arouses a desire to laugh, there is the duck. Now, since poultry exists by the side of the bird, I do not see why classic tragedy should not exist in the face of antique tragedy.”

Or chance decreed that Marius should traverse Rue Jean-Jacques Rousseau between Enjolras and Courfeyrac.

Courfeyrac took his arm: —

“Pay attention. This is the Rue Platriere, now called Rue Jean-Jacques Rousseau, on account of a singular household which lived in it sixty years ago. This consisted of Jean-Jacques and Therese. From time to time, little beings were born there. Therese gave birth to them, Jean-Jacques represented them as foundlings.”

And Enjolras addressed Courfeyrac roughly: —

“Silence in the presence of Jean-Jacques! I admire that man. He denied his own children, that may be; but he adopted the people.”

Not one of these young men articulated the word: The Emperor. Jean Prouvaire alone sometimes said Napoleon; all the others said “Bonaparte.” Enjolras pronounced it “Buonaparte.”

Marius was vaguely surprised. Initium sapientiae.

CHAPTER IV — THE BACK ROOM OF THE CAFE MUSAIN

One of the conversations among the young men, at which Marius was present and in which he sometimes joined, was a veritable shock to his mind.

This took place in the back room of the Cafe Musain. Nearly all the Friends of the A B C had convened that evening. The argand lamp was solemnly lighted. They talked of one thing and another, without passion and with noise. With the exception of Enjolras and Marius, who held their peace, all were haranguing rather at hap-hazard. Conversations between comrades sometimes are subject to these peaceable tumults. It was a game and an uproar as much as a conversation. They tossed words to each other and caught them up in turn. They were chattering in all quarters.

No woman was admitted to this back room, except Louison, the dish-washer of the cafe, who passed through it from time to time, to go to her washing in the "lavatory."

Grantaire, thoroughly drunk, was deafening the corner of which he had taken possession, reasoning and contradicting at the top of his lungs, and shouting: —

"I am thirsty. Mortals, I am dreaming: that the tun of Heidelberg has an attack of apoplexy, and that I am one of the dozen leeches which will be applied to it. I want a drink. I desire to forget life. Life is a hideous invention of I know not whom. It lasts no time at all, and is worth nothing. One breaks one's neck in living. Life is a theatre set in which there are but few practicable entrances. Happiness is an antique reliquary painted on one side only. Ecclesiastes says: 'All is vanity.' I agree with that good man, who never existed, perhaps. Zero not wishing to go stark naked, clothed himself in vanity. O vanity! The patching up of everything with big words! a kitchen is a laboratory, a dancer is a professor, an acrobat is a gymnast, a boxer is a pugilist, an apothecary is a chemist, a wigmaker is an artist, a hodman is an architect, a jockey is a sportsman, a wood-louse is a pterigybranche. Vanity has a right and a wrong side; the right side is stupid, it is the negro with his glass beads; the wrong side is foolish, it is the philosopher with his rags. I weep over the one and I laugh over the other.

What are called honors and dignities, and even dignity and honor, are generally of pinchbeck. Kings make playthings of human pride. Caligula made a horse a consul; Charles II. made a knight of a sirloin. Wrap yourself up now, then, between Consul Incitatus and Baronet Roastbeef. As for the intrinsic value of people, it is no longer respectable in the least. Listen to the panegyric which neighbor makes of neighbor. White on white is ferocious; if the lily could speak, what a setting down it would give the dove! A bigoted woman prating of a devout woman is more venomous than the asp and the cobra. It is a shame that I am ignorant, otherwise I would quote to you a mass of things; but I know nothing. For instance, I have always been witty; when I was a pupil of Gros, instead of daubing wretched little pictures, I passed my time in pilfering apples; rapin is the masculine of rapine. So much for myself; as for the rest of you, you are worth no more than I am. I scoff at your perfections, excellencies, and qualities. Every good quality tends towards a defect; economy borders on avarice, the generous man is next door to the prodigal, the brave man rubs elbows with the braggart; he who says very pious says a trifle bigoted; there are just as many vices in virtue as there are holes in Diogenes' cloak. Whom do you admire, the slain or the slayer, Caesar or Brutus? Generally men are in favor of the slayer. Long live Brutus, he has slain! There lies the virtue. Virtue, granted, but madness also. There are queer spots on those great men. The Brutus who killed Caesar was in love with the statue of a little boy. This statue was from the hand of the Greek sculptor Strongylion, who also carved that figure of an Amazon known as the Beautiful Leg, Eucnemos, which Nero carried with him in his travels. This Strongylion left but two statues which placed Nero and Brutus in accord. Brutus was in love with the one, Nero with the other. All history is nothing but wearisome repetition. One century is the plagiarist of the other. The battle of Marengo copies the battle of Pydna; the Tolbiac of Clovis and the Austerlitz of Napoleon are as like each other as two drops of water. I don't attach much importance to victory. Nothing is so stupid as to conquer; true glory lies in convincing. But try to prove something! If you are content with success, what mediocrity, and with conquering, what wretchedness! Alas, vanity and cowardice everywhere. Everything obeys success, even grammar. Si volet usus, says Horace. Therefore I disdain the human race. Shall we descend to the party at all? Do you wish me to begin admiring the peoples? What people, if you please? Shall it be Greece? The Athenians, those Parisians of days gone by, slew Phocion, as we might say Coligny, and fawned upon tyrants to such an extent that Anacephorus said of Pisistratus: “His urine attracts the bees.” The most prominent man in Greece for fifty years was that grammarian Philetas, who was so small and so thin that he was obliged to load his shoes with lead in order not to be blown away by the wind. There stood on the great square in Corinth a statue carved by Silanion and catalogued by Pliny; this statue represented Episthates. What did Episthates do? He invented a trip. That sums up Greece and glory. Let us pass on to others. Shall I admire England? Shall I admire France? France? Why? Because of Paris? I have just told you my opinion of Athens. England? Why? Because of London? I hate Carthage. And then, London, the metropolis of luxury, is the headquarters of wretchedness. There are a hundred deaths a year of hunger in the parish of Charing-Cross alone. Such is Albion. I add, as the climax, that I have seen an Englishwoman dancing in a wreath of roses and blue spectacles. A fig then for England! If I do not admire John Bull, shall I admire Brother Jonathan? I have but little taste for that slave-holding brother. Take away Time is money, what remains of England? Take away Cotton is king, what remains of America? Germany is the lymph, Italy is the bile. Shall we go into ecstasies over Russia? Voltaire admired it. He also admired China. I admit that Russia has its beauties, among others, a stout despotism; but I pity the despots. Their health is delicate. A decapitated Alexis, a poignarded Peter, a strangled Paul, another Paul crushed flat with kicks, divers Ivans strangled, with their throats cut, numerous Nicholases and Basils poisoned, all this indicates that the palace of the Emperors of Russia is in a condition of flagrant insalubrity. All civilized peoples offer this detail to the admiration of the thinker; war; now, war, civilized war, exhausts and sums up all the forms of ruffianism, from the brigandage of the Trabuceros in the gorges of Mont Jaxa to the marauding of the Comanche Indians in the Doubtful Pass. ‘Bah!’ you will say to me, ‘but Europe is certainly better than Asia?’ I admit that Asia is a farce; but I do not precisely see what you find to laugh at in the Grand Lama, you peoples of the west, who have mingled with your fashions and your elegances all the complicated filth of majesty, from the dirty chemise of Queen Isabella to the chamber-chair of the Dauphin. Gentlemen of the human race, I tell you, not a bit of it! It is at Brussels that the most beer is consumed, at Stockholm the most brandy, at Madrid the most chocolate, at Amsterdam the most gin, at London the most wine, at Constantinople the most coffee, at Paris the most absinthe; there are all the useful notions. Paris carries the day, in short. In Paris, even the rag-pickers are sybarites; Diogenes would have loved to be a rag-picker of the Place Maubert better than to be a philosopher at the Piraeus. Learn this in addition; the wineshops of the ragpickers are called bibines; the most celebrated are the Saucepan and The Slaughter-House. Hence, tea-gardens, goguettes, caboulots, bouibuis, mastroquets, bastringues, manezingues, bibines of the rag-pickers, caravanseries of the caliphs, I certify to you, I am a voluptuary, I eat at Richard's at forty sous a head, I must have Persian carpets to roll naked Cleopatra in! Where is Cleopatra? Ah! So it is you, Louison. Good day."

Thus did Grantaire, more than intoxicated, launch into speech, catching at the dish-washer in her passage, from his corner in the back room of the Cafe Musain.

Bossuet, extending his hand towards him, tried to impose silence on him, and Grantaire began again worse than ever: —

"Aigle de Meaux, down with your paws. You produce on me no effect with your gesture of Hippocrates refusing Artaxerxes' bric-a-brac. I excuse you from the task of soothing me. Moreover, I am sad. What do you wish me to say to you? Man is evil, man is deformed; the butterfly is a success, man is a failure. God made a mistake with that animal. A crowd offers a choice of ugliness. The first comer is a wretch, Femme — woman — rhymes with infame, — infamous. Yes, I have the spleen, complicated with melancholy, with homesickness, plus hypochondria, and I am vexed and I rage, and I yawn, and I am bored, and I am tired to death, and I am stupid! Let God go to the devil!"

"Silence then, capital R!" resumed Bossuet, who was discussing a point of law behind the scenes, and who was plunged more than waist high in a phrase of judicial slang, of which this is the conclusion: —

" — And as for me, although I am hardly a legist, and at the most, an amateur attorney, I maintain this: that, in accordance with the terms of the customs of Normandy, at Saint-Michel, and for each year, an equivalent must be paid to the profit of the lord of the manor, saving the rights of others, and by all and several, the proprietors as well as those seized with inheritance, and that, for all emphyteuses, leases, freeholds, contracts of domain, mortgages—"

"Echo, plaintive nymph," hummed Grantaire.

Near Grantaire, an almost silent table, a sheet of paper, an inkstand and a pen between two glasses of brandy, announced that a vaudeville was being sketched out.

This great affair was being discussed in a low voice, and the two heads at work touched each other: “Let us begin by finding names. When one has the names, one finds the subject.”

“That is true. Dictate. I will write.”

“Monsieur Dorimon.”

“An independent gentleman?”

“Of course.”

“His daughter, Celestine.”

“ — tine. What next?”

“Colonel Sainval.”

“Sainval is stale. I should say Valsin.”

Beside the vaudeville aspirants, another group, which was also taking advantage of the uproar to talk low, was discussing a duel. An old fellow of thirty was counselling a young one of eighteen, and explaining to him what sort of an adversary he had to deal with.

“The deuce! Look out for yourself. He is a fine swordsman. His play is neat. He has the attack, no wasted feints, wrist, dash, lightning, a just parade, mathematical parries, bigre! and he is left-handed.”

In the angle opposite Grantaire, Joly and Bahorel were playing dominoes, and talking of love.

“You are in luck, that you are,” Joly was saying. “You have a mistress who is always laughing.”

“That is a fault of hers,” returned Bahorel. “One’s mistress does wrong to laugh. That encourages one to deceive her. To see her gay removes your remorse; if you see her sad, your conscience pricks you.”

“Ingrate! a woman who laughs is such a good thing! And you never quarrel!”

“That is because of the treaty which we have made. On forming our little Holy Alliance we assigned ourselves each our frontier, which we never cross. What is situated on the side of winter belongs to Vaud, on the side of the wind to Gex. Hence the peace.”

“Peace is happiness digesting.”

“And you, Jolllly, where do you stand in your entanglement with Mamselle — you know whom I mean?”

"She sulks at me with cruel patience."

"Yet you are a lover to soften the heart with gauntness."

"Alas!"

"In your place, I would let her alone."

"That is easy enough to say."

"And to do. Is not her name Musichetta?"

"Yes. Ah! my poor Bahorel, she is a superb girl, very literary, with tiny feet, little hands, she dresses well, and is white and dimpled, with the eyes of a fortune-teller. I am wild over her."

"My dear fellow, then in order to please her, you must be elegant, and produce effects with your knees. Buy a good pair of trousers of double-milled cloth at Staub's. That will assist."

"At what price?" shouted Grantaire.

The third corner was delivered up to a poetical discussion. Pagan mythology was giving battle to Christian mythology. The question was about Olympus, whose part was taken by Jean Prouvaire, out of pure romanticism.

Jean Prouvaire was timid only in repose. Once excited, he burst forth, a sort of mirth accentuated his enthusiasm, and he was at once both laughing and lyric.

"Let us not insult the gods," said he. "The gods may not have taken their departure. Jupiter does not impress me as dead. The gods are dreams, you say. Well, even in nature, such as it is to-day, after the flight of these dreams, we still find all the grand old pagan myths. Such and such a mountain with the profile of a citadel, like the Vignemale, for example, is still to me the headdress of Cybele; it has not been proved to me that Pan does not come at night to breathe into the hollow trunks of the willows, stopping up the holes in turn with his fingers, and I have always believed that Io had something to do with the cascade of Pissevache."

In the last corner, they were talking politics. The Charter which had been granted was getting roughly handled. Combeferre was upholding it weakly. Courfeyrac was energetically making a breach in it. On the table lay an unfortunate copy of the famous Touquet Charter. Courfeyrac had seized it, and was brandishing it, mingling with his arguments the rattling of this sheet of paper.

"In the first place, I won't have any kings; if it were only from an economical point of view, I don't want any; a king is a parasite. One does not have kings gratis. Listen to this: the dearness of kings. At the death of Francois I., the national debt of France amounted to an income of thirty thousand livres; at the death of Louis XIV. it was two milliards, six hundred millions, at twenty-eight livres the mark, which was equivalent in 1760, according to Desmarets, to four milliards, five hundred millions, which would to-day be equivalent to twelve milliards. In the second place, and no offence to Combeferre, a charter granted is but a poor expedient of civilization. To save the transition, to soften the passage, to deaden the shock, to cause the nation to pass insensibly from the monarchy to democracy by the practice of constitutional fictions, — what detestable reasons all those are! No! no! let us never enlighten the people with false daylight. Principles dwindle and pale in your constitutional cellar. No illegitimacy, no compromise, no grant from the king to the people. In all such grants there is an Article 14. By the side of the hand which gives there is the claw which snatches back. I refuse your charter point-blank. A charter is a mask; the lie lurks beneath it. A people which accepts a charter abdicates. The law is only the law when entire. No! no charter!"

It was winter; a couple of fagots were crackling in the fireplace. This was tempting, and Courfeyrac could not resist. He crumpled the poor Touquet Charter in his fist, and flung it in the fire. The paper flashed up. Combeferre watched the masterpiece of Louis XVIII. burn philosophically, and contented himself with saying: —

"The charter metamorphosed into flame."

And sarcasms, sallies, jests, that French thing which is called entrain, and that English thing which is called humor, good and bad taste, good and bad reasons, all the wild pyrotechnics of dialogue, mounting together and crossing from all points of the room, produced a sort of merry bombardment over their heads.

CHAPTER V — ENLARGEMENT OF HORIZON

The shocks of youthful minds among themselves have this admirable property, that one can never foresee the spark, nor divine the lightning flash. What will dart out presently? No one knows. The burst of laughter starts from a tender feeling.

At the moment of jest, the serious makes its entry. Impulses depend on the first chance word. The spirit of each is sovereign, jest suffices to open the field to the unexpected. These are conversations with abrupt turns, in which the perspective changes suddenly. Chance is the stage-manager of such conversations.

A severe thought, starting oddly from a clash of words, suddenly traversed the conflict of quips in which Grantaire, Bahorel, Prouvaire, Bossuet, Combeferre, and Courfeyrac were confusedly fencing.

How does a phrase crop up in a dialogue? Whence comes it that it suddenly impresses itself on the attention of those who hear it? We have just said, that no one knows anything about it. In the midst of the uproar, Bossuet all at once terminated some apostrophe to Combeferre, with this date: —

“June 18th, 1815, Waterloo.”

At this name of Waterloo, Marius, who was leaning his elbows on a table, beside a glass of water, removed his wrist from beneath his chin, and began to gaze fixedly at the audience.

“Pardieu!” exclaimed Courfeyrac (“Parbleu” was falling into disuse at this period), “that number 18 is strange and strikes me. It is Bonaparte’s fatal number. Place Louis in front and Brumaire behind, you have the whole destiny of the man, with this significant peculiarity, that the end treads close on the heels of the commencement.”

Enjolras, who had remained mute up to that point, broke the silence and addressed this remark to Combeferre: —

“You mean to say, the crime and the expiation.”

This word crime overpassed the measure of what Marius, who was already greatly agitated by the abrupt evocation of Waterloo, could accept.

He rose, walked slowly to the map of France spread out on the wall, and at whose base an island was visible in a separate compartment, laid his finger on this compartment and said: —

“Corsica, a little island which has rendered France very great.”

This was like a breath of icy air. All ceased talking. They felt that something was on the point of occurring.

Bahorel, replying to Bossuet, was just assuming an attitude of the torso to which he was addicted. He gave it up to listen.

Enjolras, whose blue eye was not fixed on any one, and who seemed to be gazing at space, replied, without glancing at Marius: —

“France needs no Corsica to be great. France is great because she is France. Quia nomina leo.”

Marius felt no desire to retreat; he turned towards Enjolras, and his voice burst forth with a vibration which came from a quiver of his very being: —

“God forbid that I should diminish France! But amalgamating Napoleon with her is not diminishing her. Come! let us argue the question. I am a new comer among you, but I will confess that you amaze me. Where do we stand? Who are we? Who are you? Who am I? Let us come to an explanation about the Emperor. I hear you say Buonaparte, accenting the u like the Royalists. I warn you that my grandfather does better still; he says Buonaparte’. I thought you were young men. Where, then, is your enthusiasm? And what are you doing with it? Whom do you admire, if you do not admire the Emperor? And what more do you want? If you will have none of that great man, what great men would you like? He had everything. He was complete. He had in his brain the sum of human faculties. He made codes like Justinian, he dictated like Caesar, his conversation was mingled with the lightning-flash of Pascal, with the thunderclap of Tacitus, he made history and he wrote it, his bulletins are Iliads, he combined the cipher of Newton with the metaphor of Mahomet, he left behind him in the East words as great as the pyramids, at Tilsit he taught Emperors majesty, at the Academy of Sciences he replied to Laplace, in the Council of State be held his own against Merlin, he gave a soul to the geometry of the first, and to the chicanery of the last, he was a legist with the attorneys and sidereal with the astronomers; like Cromwell blowing out one of two candles, he went to the Temple to bargain for a curtain tassel; he saw everything; he knew everything; which did not prevent him from laughing good-naturedly beside the cradle of his little child; and all at once, frightened Europe lent an ear, armies put themselves in motion, parks of artillery rumbled, pontoons stretched over the rivers, clouds of cavalry galloped in the storm, cries, trumpets, a trembling of thrones in every direction, the frontiers of kingdoms oscillated on the map, the sound of a superhuman sword was heard, as it was drawn from its sheath; they beheld him, him, rise erect on the horizon with a blazing brand in his hand, and a glow in his eyes, unfolding amid the thunder, his two wings, the grand army and the old guard, and he was the archangel of war!"

All held their peace, and Enjolras bowed his head. Silence always produces somewhat the effect of acquiescence, of the enemy being driven to the wall. Marius continued with increased enthusiasm, and almost without pausing for breath: —

"Let us be just, my friends! What a splendid destiny for a nation to be the Empire of such an Emperor, when that nation is France and when it adds its own genius to the genius of that man! To appear and to reign, to march and to triumph, to have for halting-places all capitals, to take his grenadiers and to make kings of them, to decree the falls of dynasties, and to transfigure Europe at the pace of a charge; to make you feel that when you threaten you lay your hand on the hilt of the sword of God; to follow in a single man, Hannibal, Caesar, Charlemagne; to be the people of some one who mingles with your dawns the startling announcement of a battle won, to have the cannon of the Invalides to rouse you in the morning, to hurl into abysses of light prodigious words which flame forever, Marengo, Arcola, Austerlitz, Jena, Wagram! To cause constellations of victories to flash forth at each instant from the zenith of the centuries, to make the French Empire a pendant to the Roman Empire, to be the great nation and to give birth to the grand army, to make its legions fly forth over all the earth, as a mountain sends out its eagles on all sides to conquer, to dominate, to strike with lightning, to be in Europe a sort of nation gilded through glory, to sound athwart the centuries a trumpet-blast of Titans, to conquer the world twice, by conquest and by dazzling, that is sublime; and what greater thing is there?"

"To be free," said Combeferre.

Marius lowered his head in his turn; that cold and simple word had traversed his epic effusion like a blade of steel, and he felt it vanishing within him. When he raised his eyes, Combeferre was no longer there. Probably satisfied with his reply to the apotheosis, he had just taken his departure, and all, with the exception of Enjolras, had followed him. The room had been emptied. Enjolras, left alone with Marius, was gazing gravely at him. Marius, however, having rallied his ideas to some extent, did not consider himself beaten; there lingered in him a trace of inward fermentation which was on the point, no doubt, of translating itself into syllogisms arrayed against Enjolras, when all of a sudden, they heard some one singing on the stairs as he went. It was Combeferre, and this is what he was singing: —

“Si César m’avait donné
  La gloire et la guerre,
Et qu’il me fallait quitter
  L’amour de ma mère,
Je dirais au grand César:
  Reprends ton sceptre et ton char,
J’aime mieux ma mère, o gué!
  J’aime mieux ma mère!”

The wild and tender accents with which Combeferre sang communicated to this couplet a sort of strange grandeur. Marius, thoughtfully, and with his eyes diked on the ceiling, repeated almost mechanically: “My mother?—”

At that moment, he felt Enjolras’ hand on his shoulder.

“Citizen,” said Enjolras to him, “my mother is the Republic.”

CHAPTER VI — RES ANGUSTA

That evening left Marius profoundly shaken, and with a melancholy shadow in his soul. He felt what the earth may possibly feel, at the moment when it is torn open with the iron, in order that grain may be deposited within it; it feels only the wound; the quiver of the germ and the joy of the fruit only arrive later.

Marius was gloomy. He had but just acquired a faith; must he then reject it already? He affirmed to himself that he would not. He declared to himself that he would not doubt, and he began to doubt in spite of himself. To stand between two religions, from one of which you have not as yet emerged, and another into which you have not yet entered, is intolerable; and twilight is pleasing only to bat-like souls. Marius was clear-eyed, and he required the true light. The half-lights of doubt pained him. Whatever may have been his desire to remain where he was, he could not halt there, he was irresistibly constrained to continue, to advance, to examine, to think, to march further. Whither would this lead him? He feared, after having taken so many steps which had brought him nearer to his father, to now take a step which should estrange him from that father. His discomfort was augmented by all the reflections which occurred to him. An escarpment rose around him. He was in accord neither with his grandfather nor with his friends; daring in the eyes of the one, he was behind the times in the eyes of the others, and he recognized the fact that he was doubly isolated, on the side of age and on the side of youth. He ceased to go to the Cafe Musain.

In the troubled state of his conscience, he no longer thought of certain serious sides of existence. The realities of life do not allow themselves to be forgotten. They soon elbowed him abruptly.

One morning, the proprietor of the hotel entered Marius' room and said to him: —

"Monsieur Courfeyrac answered for you."

"Yes."

"But I must have my money."

"Request Courfeyrac to come and talk with me," said Marius.

Courfeyrac having made his appearance, the host left them. Marius then told him what it had not before occurred to him to relate, that he was the same as alone in the world, and had no relatives.

“What is to become of you?” said Courfeyrac.

“I do not know in the least,” replied Marius.

“What are you going to do?”

“I do not know.”

“Have you any money?”

“Fifteen francs.”

“Do you want me to lend you some?”

“Never.”

“Have you clothes?”

“Here is what I have.”

“Have you trinkets?”

“A watch.”

“Silver?”

“Gold; here it is.”

“I know a clothes-dealer who will take your frock-coat and a pair of trousers.”

“That is good.”

“You will then have only a pair of trousers, a waistcoat, a hat and a coat.”

“And my boots.”

“What! you will not go barefoot? What opulence!”

“That will be enough.”

“I know a watchmaker who will buy your watch.”

“That is good.”

“No; it is not good. What will you do after that?”

“Whatever is necessary. Anything honest, that is to say.”

“Do you know English?”

“No.”

“Do you know German?”

“No.”

“So much the worse.”

“Why?”

“Because one of my friends, a publisher, is getting up a sort of an encyclopaedia, for which you might have translated English or German articles. It is badly paid work, but one can live by it.”

“I will learn English and German.”

“And in the meanwhile?”

“In the meanwhile I will live on my clothes and my watch.”

The clothes-dealer was sent for. He paid twenty francs for the cast-off garments. They went to the watchmaker’s. He bought the watch for forty-five francs.

“That is not bad,” said Marius to Courfeyrac, on their return to the hotel, “with my fifteen francs, that makes eighty.”

“And the hotel bill?” observed Courfeyrac.

“Hello, I had forgotten that,” said Marius.

The landlord presented his bill, which had to be paid on the spot. It amounted to seventy francs.

“I have ten francs left,” said Marius.

“The deuce,” exclaimed Courfeyrac, “you will eat up five francs while you are learning English, and five while learning German. That will be swallowing a tongue very fast, or a hundred sous very slowly.”

In the meantime Aunt Gillenormand, a rather good-hearted person at bottom in difficulties, had finally hunted up Marius’ abode.

One morning, on his return from the law-school, Marius found a letter from his aunt, and the sixty pistoles, that is to say, six hundred francs in gold, in a sealed box.

Marius sent back the thirty louis to his aunt, with a respectful letter, in which he stated that he had sufficient means of subsistence and that he should be able thenceforth to supply all his needs. At that moment, he had three francs left.

His aunt did not inform his grandfather of this refusal for fear of exasperating him. Besides, had he not said: “Let me never hear the name of that blood-drinker again!”

Marius left the hotel de la Porte Saint-Jacques, as he did not wish to run in debt there.

BOOK FIFTH. — THE EXCELLENCE OF MISFORTUNE

CHAPTER I — MARIUS INDIGENT

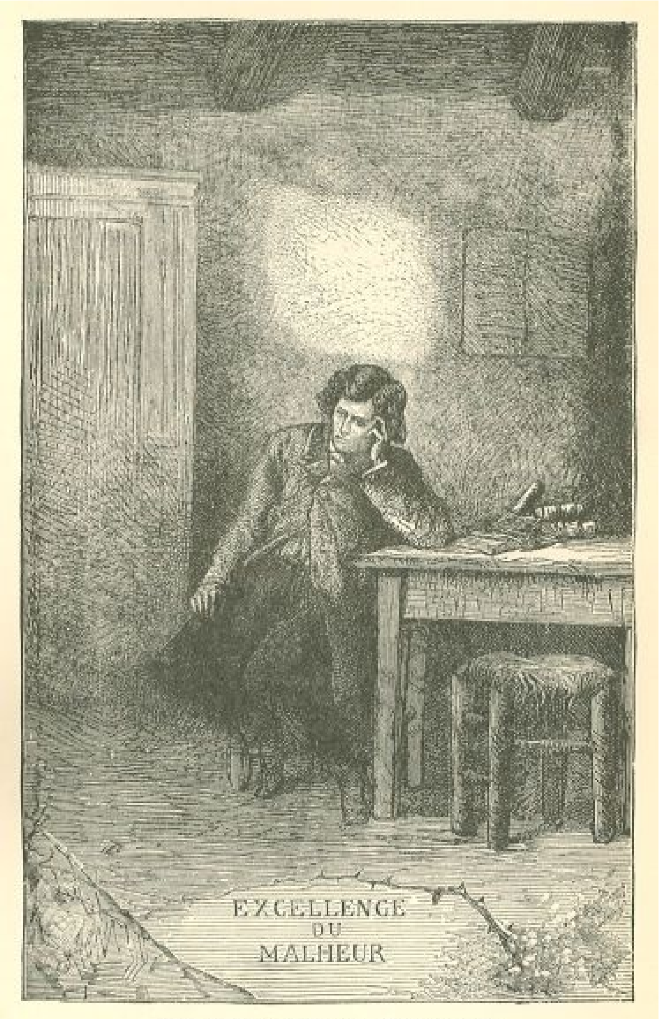

THE EXCELLENCE OF MISFORTUNE.

Life became hard for Marius. It was nothing to eat his clothes and his watch. He ate of that terrible, inexpressible thing that is called de la vache enrage; that is to say, he endured great hardships and privations. A terrible thing it is, containing days without bread, nights without sleep, evenings without a candle, a hearth without a fire, weeks without work, a future without hope, a coat out at the elbows, an old hat which evokes the laughter of young girls, a door which one finds locked on one at night because one’s rent is not paid, the insolence of the porter and the cook-shop man, the sneers of neighbors, humiliations, dignity trampled on, work of whatever nature accepted, disgusts, bitterness, despondency. Marius learned how all this is eaten, and how such are often the only things which one has to devour. At that moment of his existence when a man needs his pride, because he needs love, he felt that he was jeered at because he was badly dressed, and ridiculous because he was poor. At the age when youth swells the heart with imperial pride, he dropped his eyes more than once on his dilapidated boots, and he knew the unjust shame and the poignant blushes of wretchedness. Admirable and terrible trial from which the feeble emerge base, from which the strong emerge sublime. A crucible into which destiny casts a man, whenever it desires a scoundrel or a demi-god.

For many great deeds are performed in petty combats. There are instances of bravery ignored and obstinate, which defend themselves step by step in that fatal onslaught of necessities and turpitudes. Noble and mysterious triumphs which no eye beholds, which are requited with no renown, which are saluted with no trumpet blast. Life, misfortune, isolation, abandonment, poverty, are the fields of battle which have their heroes; obscure heroes, who are, sometimes, grander than the heroes who win renown.

Firm and rare natures are thus created; misery, almost always a step-mother, is sometimes a mother; destitution gives birth to might of soul and spirit; distress is the nurse of pride; unhappiness is a good milk for the magnanimous.

There came a moment in Marius' life, when he swept his own landing, when he bought his sou's worth of Brie cheese at the fruiterer's, when he waited until twilight had fallen to slip into the baker's and purchase a loaf, which he carried off furtively to his attic as though he had stolen it. Sometimes there could be seen gliding into the butcher's shop on the corner, in the midst of the bantering cooks who elbowed him, an awkward young man, carrying big books under his arm, who had a timid yet angry air, who, on entering, removed his hat from a brow whereon stood drops of perspiration, made a profound bow to the butcher's astonished wife, asked for a mutton cutlet, paid six or seven sous for it, wrapped it up in a paper, put it under his arm, between two books, and went away. It was Marius. On this cutlet, which he cooked for himself, he lived for three days.

On the first day he ate the meat, on the second he ate the fat, on the third he gnawed the bone. Aunt Gillenormand made repeated attempts, and sent him the sixty pistoles several times. Marius returned them on every occasion, saying that he needed nothing.

He was still in mourning for his father when the revolution which we have just described was effected within him. From that time forth, he had not put off his black garments. But his garments were quitting him. The day came when he had no longer a coat. The trousers would go next. What was to be done? Courfeyrac, to whom he had, on his side, done some good turns, gave him an old coat. For thirty sous, Marius got it turned by some porter or other, and it was a new coat. But this coat was green. Then Marius ceased to go out until after nightfall. This made his coat black. As he wished always to appear in mourning, he clothed himself with the night.

In spite of all this, he got admitted to practice as a lawyer. He was supposed to live in Courfeyrac's room, which was decent, and where a certain number of law-books backed up and completed by several dilapidated volumes of romance, passed as the library required by the regulations. He had his letters addressed to Courfeyrac's quarters.

When Marius became a lawyer, he informed his grandfather of the fact in a letter which was cold but full of submission and respect. M. Gillenormand trembled as he took the letter, read it, tore it in four pieces, and threw it into the waste-basket. Two or three days later, Mademoiselle Gillenormand heard her father, who was alone in his room, talking aloud to himself. He always did this whenever he was greatly agitated. She listened, and the old man was saying: "If you were not a fool, you would know that one cannot be a baron and a lawyer at the same time."

CHAPTER II — MARIUS POOR

It is the same with wretchedness as with everything else. It ends by becoming bearable. It finally assumes a form, and adjusts itself. One vegetates, that is to say, one develops in a certain meagre fashion, which is, however, sufficient for life. This is the mode in which the existence of Marius Pontmercy was arranged:

He had passed the worst straits; the narrow pass was opening out a little in front of him. By dint of toil, perseverance, courage, and will, he had managed to draw from his work about seven hundred francs a year. He had learned German and English; thanks to Courfeyrac, who had put him in communication with his friend the publisher, Marius filled the modest post of utility man in the literature of the publishing house. He drew up prospectuses, translated newspapers, annotated editions, compiled biographies, etc.; net product, year in and year out, seven hundred francs. He lived on it. How? Not so badly. We will explain.

Marius occupied in the Gorbeau house, for an annual sum of thirty francs, a den minus a fireplace, called a cabinet, which contained only the most indispensable articles of furniture. This furniture belonged to him. He gave three francs a month to the old principal tenant to come and sweep his hole, and to bring him a little hot water every morning, a fresh egg, and a penny roll. He breakfasted on this egg and roll. His breakfast varied in cost from two to four sous, according as eggs were dear or cheap. At six o'clock in the evening he descended the Rue Saint-Jacques to dine at Rousseau's, opposite Basset's, the stamp-dealer's, on the corner of the Rue des Mathurins. He ate no soup. He took a six-sou plate of meat, a half-portion of vegetables for three sous, and a three-sou dessert. For three sous he got as much bread as he wished. As for wine, he drank water. When he paid at the desk where Madam Rousseau, at that period still plump and rosy majestically presided, he gave a sou to the waiter, and Madam Rousseau gave him a smile. Then he went away. For sixteen sous he had a smile and a dinner.

This Restaurant Rousseau, where so few bottles and so many water carafes were emptied, was a calming potion rather than a restaurant. It no longer exists. The proprietor had a fine nickname: he was called Rousseau the Aquatic.

Thus, breakfast four sous, dinner sixteen sous; his food cost him twenty sous a day; which made three hundred and sixty-five francs a year. Add the thirty francs for rent, and the thirty-six francs to the old woman, plus a few trifling expenses; for four hundred and fifty francs, Marius was fed, lodged, and waited on. His clothing cost him a hundred francs, his linen fifty francs, his washing fifty francs; the whole did not exceed six hundred and fifty francs. He was rich. He sometimes lent ten francs to a friend. Courfeyrac had once been able to borrow sixty francs of him. As far as fire was concerned, as Marius had no fireplace, he had "simplified matters."

Marius always had two complete suits of clothes, the one old, "for every day"; the other, brand new for special occasions. Both were black. He had but three shirts, one on his person, the second in the commode, and the third in the washerwoman's hands. He renewed them as they wore out. They were always ragged, which caused him to button his coat to the chin.

It had required years for Marius to attain to this flourishing condition. Hard years; difficult, some of them, to traverse, others to climb. Marius had not failed for a single day. He had endured everything in the way of destitution; he had done everything except contract debts. He did himself the justice to say that he had never owed any one a sou. A debt was, to him, the beginning of slavery. He even said to himself, that a creditor is worse than a master; for the master possesses only your person, a creditor possesses your dignity and can administer to it a box on the ear. Rather than borrow, he went without food. He had passed many a day fasting. Feeling that all extremes meet, and that, if one is not on one's guard, lowered fortunes may lead to baseness of soul, he kept a jealous watch on his pride. Such and such a formality or action, which, in any other situation would have appeared merely a deference to him, now seemed insipidity, and he nerved himself against it. His face wore a sort of severe flush. He was timid even to rudeness.

During all these trials he had felt himself encouraged and even uplifted, at times, by a secret force that he possessed within himself. The soul aids the body, and at certain moments, raises it. It is the only bird which bears up its own cage.

Besides his father's name, another name was graven in Marius' heart, the name of Thenardier. Marius, with his grave and enthusiastic nature, surrounded with a sort of aureole the man to whom, in his thoughts, he owed his father's life, — that intrepid sergeant who had saved the colonel amid the bullets and the cannon-balls of Waterloo. He never separated the memory of this man from the memory of his father, and he associated them in his veneration. It was a sort of worship in two steps, with the grand altar for the colonel and the lesser one for Thenardier. What redoubled the tenderness of his gratitude towards Thenardier, was the idea of the distress into which he knew that Thenardier had fallen, and which had engulfed the latter. Marius had learned at Montfermeil of the ruin and bankruptcy of the unfortunate inn-keeper. Since that time, he had made unheard-of efforts to find traces of him and to reach him in that dark abyss of misery in which Thenardier had disappeared. Marius had beaten the whole country; he had gone to Chelles, to Bondy, to Gourney, to Nogent, to Lagny. He had persisted for three years, expending in these explorations the little money which he had laid by. No one had been able to give him any news of Thenardier: he was supposed to have gone abroad. His creditors had also sought him, with less love than Marius, but with as much assiduity, and had not been able to lay their hands on him. Marius blamed himself, and was almost angry with himself for his lack of success in his researches. It was the only debt left him by the colonel, and Marius made it a matter of honor to pay it. “What,” he thought, “when my father lay dying on the field of battle, did Thenardier contrive to find him amid the smoke and the grape-shot, and bear him off on his shoulders, and yet he owed him nothing, and I, who owe so much to Thenardier, cannot join him in this shadow where he is lying in the pangs of death, and in my turn bring him back from death to life! Oh! I will find him!” To find Thenardier, in fact, Marius would have given one of his arms, to rescue him from his misery, he would have sacrificed all his blood. To see Thenardier, to render Thenardier some service, to say to him: “You do not know me; well, I do know you! Here I am. Dispose of me!” This was Marius’ sweetest and most magnificent dream.

CHAPTER III — MARIUS GROWN UP

At this epoch, Marius was twenty years of age. It was three years since he had left his grandfather. Both parties had remained on the same terms, without attempting to approach each other, and without seeking to see each other. Besides, what was the use of seeing each other? Marius was the brass vase, while Father Gillenormand was the iron pot.

We admit that Marius was mistaken as to his grandfather’s heart. He had imagined that M. Gillenormand had never loved him, and that that crusty, harsh, and smiling old fellow who cursed, shouted, and stormed and brandished his cane, cherished for him, at the most, only that affection, which is at once slight and severe, of the dotards of comedy. Marius was in error. There are fathers who do not love their children; there exists no grandfather who does not adore his grandson. At bottom, as we have said, M. Gillenormand idolized Marius. He idolized him after his own fashion, with an accompaniment of snappishness and boxes on the ear; but, this child once gone, he felt a black void in his heart; he would allow no one to mention the child to him, and all the while secretly regretted that he was so well obeyed. At first, he hoped that this Buonapartist, this Jacobin, this terrorist, this Septembrist, would return. But the weeks passed by, years passed; to M. Gillenormand’s great despair, the “blood-drinker” did not make his appearance. “I could not do otherwise than turn him out,” said the grandfather to himself, and he asked himself: “If the thing were to do over again, would I do it?” His pride instantly answered “yes,” but his aged head, which he shook in silence, replied sadly “no.” He had his hours of depression. He missed Marius. Old men need affection as they need the sun. It is warmth. Strong as his nature was, the absence of Marius had wrought some change in him. Nothing in the world could have induced him to take a step towards “that rogue”; but he suffered. He never inquired about him, but he thought of him incessantly. He lived in the Marais in a more and more retired manner; he was still merry and violent as of old, but his merriment had a convulsive harshness, and his violences always terminated in a sort of gentle and gloomy dejection. He sometimes said: “Oh! if he only would return, what a good box on the ear I would give him!”

As for his aunt, she thought too little to love much; Marius was no longer for her much more than a vague black form; and she eventually came to occupy herself with him much less than with the cat or the paroquet which she probably had. What augmented Father Gillenormand's secret suffering was, that he locked it all up within his breast, and did not allow its existence to be divined. His sorrow was like those recently invented furnaces which consume their own smoke. It sometimes happened that officious busybodies spoke to him of Marius, and asked him: "What is your grandson doing?" "What has become of him?" The old bourgeois replied with a sigh, that he was a sad case, and giving a fillip to his cuff, if he wished to appear gay: "Monsieur le Baron de Pontmercy is practising pettifogging in some corner or other."

While the old man regretted, Marius applauded himself. As is the case with all good-hearted people, misfortune had eradicated his bitterness. He only thought of M. Gillenormand in an amiable light, but he had set his mind on not receiving anything more from the man who had been unkind to his father. This was the mitigated translation of his first indignation. Moreover, he was happy at having suffered, and at suffering still. It was for his father's sake. The hardness of his life satisfied and pleased him. He said to himself with a sort of joy that — it was certainly the least he could do; that it was an expiation; — that, had it not been for that, he would have been punished in some other way and later on for his impious indifference towards his father, and such a father! that it would not have been just that his father should have all the suffering, and he none of it; and that, in any case, what were his toils and his destitution compared with the colonel's heroic life? that, in short, the only way for him to approach his father and resemble him, was to be brave in the face of indigence, as the other had been valiant before the enemy; and that that was, no doubt, what the colonel had meant to imply by the words: "He will be worthy of it." Words which Marius continued to wear, not on his breast, since the colonel's writing had disappeared, but in his heart.

And then, on the day when his grandfather had turned him out of doors, he had been only a child, now he was a man. He felt it. Misery, we repeat, had been good for him. Poverty in youth, when it succeeds, has this magnificent property about it, that it turns the whole will towards effort, and the whole soul towards aspiration. Poverty instantly lays material life bare and renders it hideous; hence inexpressible bounds towards the ideal life. The wealthy young man has a hundred coarse and brilliant distractions, horse races, hunting, dogs, tobacco, gaming, good repasts, and all the rest of it; occupations for the baser side of the soul, at the expense of the loftier and more delicate sides. The poor young man wins his bread with difficulty; he eats; when he has eaten, he has nothing more but meditation. He goes to the spectacles which God furnishes gratis; he gazes at the sky, space, the stars, flowers, children, the humanity among which he is suffering, the creation amid which he beams. He gazes so much on humanity that he perceives its soul, he gazes upon creation to such an extent that he beholds God. He dreams, he feels himself great; he dreams on, and feels himself tender. From the egotism of the man who suffers he passes to the compassion of the man who meditates. An admirable sentiment breaks forth in him, forgetfulness of self and pity for all. As he thinks of the innumerable enjoyments which nature offers, gives, and lavishes to souls which stand open, and refuses to souls that are closed, he comes to pity, he the millionnaire of the mind, the millionnaire of money. All hatred departs from his heart, in proportion as light penetrates his spirit. And is he unhappy? No. The misery of a young man is never miserable. The first young lad who comes to hand, however poor he may be, with his strength, his health, his rapid walk, his brilliant eyes, his warmly circulating blood, his black hair, his red lips, his white teeth, his pure breath, will always arouse the envy of an aged emperor. And then, every morning, he sets himself afresh to the task of earning his bread; and while his hands earn his bread, his dorsal column gains pride, his brain gathers ideas. His task finished, he returns to ineffable ecstasies, to contemplation, to joys; he beholds his feet set in afflictions, in obstacles, on the pavement, in the nettles, sometimes in the mire; his head in the light. He is firm serene, gentle, peaceful, attentive, serious, content with little, kindly; and he thanks God for having bestowed on him those two forms of riches which many a rich man lacks: work, which makes him free; and thought, which makes him dignified.

This is what had happened with Marius. To tell the truth, he inclined a little too much to the side of contemplation. From the day when he had succeeded in earning his living with some approach to certainty, he had stopped, thinking it good to be poor, and retrenching time from his work to give to thought; that is to say, he sometimes passed entire days in meditation, absorbed, engulfed, like a visionary, in the mute voluptuousness of ecstasy and inward radiance. He had thus propounded the problem of his life: to toil as little as possible at material labor, in order to toil as much as possible at the labor which is impalpable; in other words, to bestow a few hours on real life, and to cast the rest to the infinite. As he believed that he lacked nothing, he did not perceive that contemplation, thus understood, ends by becoming one of the forms of idleness; that he was contenting himself with conquering the first necessities of life, and that he was resting from his labors too soon.

It was evident that, for this energetic and enthusiastic nature, this could only be a transitory state, and that, at the first shock against the inevitable complications of destiny, Marius would awaken.

In the meantime, although he was a lawyer, and whatever Father Gillenormand thought about the matter, he was not practising, he was not even pettifogging. Meditation had turned him aside from pleading. To haunt attorneys, to follow the court, to hunt up cases — what a bore! Why should he do it? He saw no reason for changing the manner of gaining his livelihood! The obscure and ill-paid publishing establishment had come to mean for him a sure source of work which did not involve too much labor, as we have explained, and which sufficed for his wants.

One of the publishers for whom he worked, M. Magimel, I think, offered to take him into his own house, to lodge him well, to furnish him with regular occupation, and to give him fifteen hundred francs a year. To be well lodged! Fifteen hundred francs! No doubt. But renounce his liberty! Be on fixed wages! A sort of hired man of letters! According to Marius' opinion, if he accepted, his position would become both better and worse at the same time, he acquired comfort, and lost his dignity; it was a fine and complete unhappiness converted into a repulsive and ridiculous state of torture: something like the case of a blind man who should recover the sight of one eye. He refused.

Marius dwelt in solitude. Owing to his taste for remaining outside of everything, and through having been too much alarmed, he had not entered decidedly into the group presided over by Enjolras. They had remained good friends; they were ready to assist each other on occasion in every possible way; but nothing more. Marius had two friends: one young, Courfeyrac; and one old, M. Mabeuf. He inclined more to the old man. In the first place, he owed to him the revolution which had taken place within him; to him he was indebted for having known and loved his father. "He operated on me for a cataract," he said.

The churchwarden had certainly played a decisive part.

It was not, however, that M. Mabeuf had been anything but the calm and impassive agent of Providence in this connection. He had enlightened Marius by chance and without being aware of the fact, as does a candle which some one brings; he had been the candle and not the some one.

As for Marius’ inward political revolution, M. Mabeuf was totally incapable of comprehending it, of willing or of directing it.

As we shall see M. Mabeuf again, later on, a few words will not be superfluous.

CHAPTER IV — M. MABEUF

On the day when M. Mabeuf said to Marius: “Certainly I approve of political opinions,” he expressed the real state of his mind. All political opinions were matters of indifference to him, and he approved them all, without distinction, provided they left him in peace, as the Greeks called the Furies “the beautiful, the good, the charming,” the Eumenides. M. Mabeuf’s political opinion consisted in a passionate love for plants, and, above all, for books. Like all the rest of the world, he possessed the termination in ist, without which no one could exist at that time, but he was neither a Royalist, a Bonapartist, a Chartist, an Orleanist, nor an Anarchist; he was a bouquinist, a collector of old books. He did not understand how men could busy themselves with hating each other because of silly stuff like the charter, democracy, legitimacy, monarchy, the republic, etc., when there were in the world all sorts of mosses, grasses, and shrubs which they might be looking at, and heaps of folios, and even of 32mos, which they might turn over. He took good care not to become useless; having books did not prevent his reading, being a botanist did not prevent his being a gardener. When he made Pontmercy’s acquaintance, this sympathy had existed between the colonel and himself — that what the colonel did for flowers, he did for fruits. M. Mabeuf had succeeded in producing seedling pears as savory as the pears of St. Germain; it is from one of his combinations, apparently, that the October Mirabelle, now celebrated and no less perfumed than the summer Mirabelle, owes its origin. He went to mass rather from gentleness than from piety, and because, as he loved the faces of men, but hated their noise, he found them assembled and silent only in church. Feeling that he must be something in the State, he had chosen the career of warden. However, he had never succeeded in loving any woman as much as a tulip bulb, nor any man as much as an Elzevir. He had long passed sixty, when, one day, some one asked him: “Have you never been married?” “I have forgotten,” said he. When it sometimes happened to him — and to whom does it not happen? — to say: “Oh! if I were only rich!” it was not when ogling a pretty girl, as was the case with Father Gillenormand, but when contemplating an old book. He lived alone with an old housekeeper. He was somewhat gouty, and when he was asleep, his aged fingers, stiffened with rheumatism, lay crooked up in the folds of his sheets. He had composed and published a Flora of the Environs of Cauteretz, with colored plates, a work which enjoyed a tolerable measure of esteem and which sold well. People rang his bell, in the Rue Mesieres, two or three times a day, to ask for it. He drew as much as two thousand francs a year from it; this constituted nearly the whole of his fortune. Although poor, he had had the talent to form for himself, by dint of patience, privations, and time, a precious collection of rare copies of every sort. He never went out without a book under his arm, and he often returned with two. The sole decoration of the four rooms on the ground floor, which composed his lodgings, consisted of framed herbariums, and engravings of the old masters. The sight of a sword or a gun chilled his blood. He had never approached a cannon in his life, even at the Invalides. He had a passable stomach, a brother who was a cure, perfectly white hair, no teeth, either in his mouth or his mind, a trembling in every limb, a Picard accent, an infantile laugh, the air of an old sheep, and he was easily frightened. Add to this, that he had no other friendship, no other acquaintance among the living, than an old bookseller of the Porte-Saint-Jacques, named Royal. His dream was to naturalize indigo in France.

His servant was also a sort of innocent. The poor good old woman was a spinster. Sultan, her cat, which might have mewed Allegri's miserere in the Sixtine Chapel, had filled her heart and sufficed for the quantity of passion which existed in her. None of her dreams had ever proceeded as far as man. She had never been able to get further than her cat. Like him, she had a mustache. Her glory consisted in her caps, which were always white. She passed her time, on Sundays, after mass, in counting over the linen in her chest, and in spreading out on her bed the dresses in the piece which she bought and never had made up. She knew how to read. M. Mabeuf had nicknamed her Mother Plutarque.

M. Mabeuf had taken a fancy to Marius, because Marius, being young and gentle, warmed his age without startling his timidity. Youth combined with gentleness produces on old people the effect of the sun without wind. When Marius was saturated with military glory, with gunpowder, with marches and countermarches, and with all those prodigious battles in which his father had given and received such tremendous blows of the sword, he went to see M. Mabeuf, and M. Mabeuf talked to him of his hero from the point of view of flowers.

His brother the cure died about 1830, and almost immediately, as when the night is drawing on, the whole horizon grew dark for M. Mabeuf. A notary's failure deprived him of the sum of ten thousand francs, which was all that he possessed in his brother's right and his own. The Revolution of July brought a crisis to publishing. In a period of embarrassment, the first thing which does not sell is a Flora. The Flora of the Environs of Cauteretz stopped short. Weeks passed by without a single purchaser. Sometimes M. Mabeuf started at the sound of the bell. "Monsieur," said Mother Plutarque sadly, "it is the water-carrier." In short, one day, M. Mabeuf quitted the Rue Mesieres, abdicated the functions of warden, gave up Saint-Sulpice, sold not a part of his books, but of his prints, — that to which he was the least attached, — and installed himself in a little house on the Rue Montparnasse, where, however, he remained but one quarter for two reasons: in the first place, the ground floor and the garden cost three hundred francs, and he dared not spend more than two hundred francs on his rent; in the second, being near Faton's shooting-gallery, he could hear the pistol-shots; which was intolerable to him.

He carried off his Flora, his copper-plates, his herbariums, his portfolios, and his books, and established himself near the Salpetriere, in a sort of thatched cottage of the village of Austerlitz, where, for fifty crowns a year, he got three rooms and a garden enclosed by a hedge, and containing a well. He took advantage of this removal to sell off nearly all his furniture. On the day of his entrance into his new quarters, he was very gay, and drove the nails on which his engravings and herbariums were to hang, with his own hands, dug in his garden the rest of the day, and at night, perceiving that Mother Plutarque had a melancholy air, and was very thoughtful, he tapped her on the shoulder and said to her with a smile: "We have the indigo!"

Only two visitors, the bookseller of the Porte-Saint-Jacques and Marius, were admitted to view the thatched cottage at Austerlitz, a brawling name which was, to tell the truth, extremely disagreeable to him.

However, as we have just pointed out, brains which are absorbed in some bit of wisdom, or folly, or, as it often happens, in both at once, are but slowly accessible to the things of actual life. Their own destiny is a far-off thing to them. There results from such concentration a passivity, which, if it were the outcome of reasoning, would resemble philosophy. One declines, descends, trickles away, even crumbles away, and yet is hardly conscious of it one's self. It always ends, it is true, in an awakening, but the awakening is tardy. In the meantime, it seems as though we held ourselves neutral in the game which is going on between our happiness and our unhappiness. We are the stake, and we look on at the game with indifference.

It is thus that, athwart the cloud which formed about him, when all his hopes were extinguished one after the other, M. Mabeuf remained rather puerilely, but profoundly serene. His habits of mind had the regular swing of a pendulum. Once mounted on an illusion, he went for a very long time, even after the illusion had disappeared. A clock does not stop short at the precise moment when the key is lost.

M. Mabeuf had his innocent pleasures. These pleasures were inexpensive and unexpected; the merest chance furnished them. One day, Mother Plutarque was reading a romance in one corner of the room. She was reading aloud, finding that she understood better thus. To read aloud is to assure one's self of what one is reading. There are people who read very loud, and who have the appearance of giving themselves their word of honor as to what they are perusing.

It was with this sort of energy that Mother Plutarque was reading the romance which she had in hand. M. Mabeuf heard her without listening to her.

In the course of her reading, Mother Plutarque came to this phrase. It was a question of an officer of dragoons and a beauty: —

" — The beauty pouted, and the dragoon—"

Here she interrupted herself to wipe her glasses.

"Bouddha and the Dragon," struck in M. Mabeuf in a low voice. "Yes, it is true that there was a dragon, which, from the depths of its cave, spouted flame through his maw and set the heavens on fire. Many stars had already been consumed by this monster, which, besides, had the claws of a tiger. Bouddha went into its den and succeeded in converting the dragon. That is a good book that you are reading, Mother Plutarque. There is no more beautiful legend in existence."

And M. Mabeuf fell into a delicious revery.

CHAPTER V — POVERTY A GOOD NEIGHBOR FOR MISERY

Marius liked this candid old man who saw himself gradually falling into the clutches of indigence, and who came to feel astonishment, little by little, without, however, being made melancholy by it. Marius met Courfeyrac and sought out M. Mabeuf. Very rarely, however; twice a month at most.

Marius' pleasure consisted in taking long walks alone on the outer boulevards, or in the Champs-de-Mars, or in the least frequented alleys of the Luxembourg. He often spent half a day in gazing at a market garden, the beds of lettuce, the chickens on the dung-heap, the horse turning the water-wheel. The passers-by stared at him in surprise, and some of them thought his attire suspicious and his mien sinister. He was only a poor young man dreaming in an objectless way.

It was during one of his strolls that he had hit upon the Gorbeau house, and, tempted by its isolation and its cheapness, had taken up his abode there. He was known there only under the name of M. Marius.

Some of his father's old generals or old comrades had invited him to go and see them, when they learned about him. Marius had not refused their invitations. They afforded opportunities of talking about his father. Thus he went from time to time, to Comte Pajol, to General Bellavesne, to General Fririon, to the Invalides. There was music and dancing there. On such evenings, Marius put on his new coat. But he never went to these evening parties or balls except on days when it was freezing cold, because he could not afford a carriage, and he did not wish to arrive with boots otherwise than like mirrors.

He said sometimes, but without bitterness: "Men are so made that in a drawing-room you may be soiled everywhere except on your shoes. In order to insure a good reception there, only one irreproachable thing is asked of you; your conscience? No, your boots."

All passions except those of the heart are dissipated by revery. Marius' political fevers vanished thus. The Revolution of 1830 assisted in the process, by satisfying and calming him. He remained the same, setting aside his fits of wrath. He still held the same opinions. Only, they had been tempèred. To speak accurately, he had no longer any opinions, he had sympathies. To what party did he belong? To the party of humanity. Out of humanity he chose France; out of the Nation he chose the people; out of the people he chose the woman. It was to that point above all, that his pity was directed. Now he preferred an idea to a deed, a poet to a hero, and he admired a book like Job more than an event like Marengo. And then, when, after a day spent in meditation, he returned in the evening through the boulevards, and caught a glimpse through the branches of the trees of the fathomless space beyond, the nameless gleams, the abyss, the shadow, the mystery, all that which is only human seemed very pretty indeed to him.

He thought that he had, and he really had, in fact, arrived at the truth of life and of human philosophy, and he had ended by gazing at nothing but heaven, the only thing which Truth can perceive from the bottom of her well.

This did not prevent him from multiplying his plans, his combinations, his scaffoldings, his projects for the future. In this state of revery, an eye which could have cast a glance into Marius' interior would have been dazzled with the purity of that soul. In fact, had it been given to our eyes of the flesh to gaze into the consciences of others, we should be able to judge a man much more surely according to what he dreams, than according to what he thinks. There is will in thought, there is none in dreams. Revery, which is utterly spontaneous, takes and keeps, even in the gigantic and the ideal, the form of our spirit. Nothing proceeds more directly and more sincerely from the very depth of our soul, than our unpremeditated and boundless aspirations towards the splendors of destiny. In these aspirations, much more than in deliberate, rational coordinated ideas, is the real character of a man to be found. Our chimeras are the things which the most resemble us. Each one of us dreams of the unknown and the impossible in accordance with his nature.

Towards the middle of this year 1831, the old woman who waited on Marius told him that his neighbors, the wretched Jondrette family, had been turned out of doors. Marius, who passed nearly the whole of his days out of the house, hardly knew that he had any neighbors.

"Why are they turned out?" he asked.

"Because they do not pay their rent; they owe for two quarters."

"How much is it?"

"Twenty francs," said the old woman.

Marius had thirty francs saved up in a drawer.

“Here,” he said to the old woman, “take these twenty-five francs. Pay for the poor people and give them five francs, and do not tell them that it was I.”

CHAPTER VI — THE SUBSTITUTE

It chanced that the regiment to which Lieutenant Theodule belonged came to perform garrison duty in Paris. This inspired Aunt Gillenormand with a second idea. She had, on the first occasion, hit upon the plan of having Marius spied upon by Theodule; now she plotted to have Theodule take Marius' place.

At all events and in case the grandfather should feel the vague need of a young face in the house, — these rays of dawn are sometimes sweet to ruin, — it was expedient to find another Marius. "Take it as a simple erratum," she thought, "such as one sees in books. For Marius, read Theodule."

A grandnephew is almost the same as a grandson; in default of a lawyer one takes a lancer.

One morning, when M. Gillenormand was about to read something in the Quotidienne, his daughter entered and said to him in her sweetest voice; for the question concerned her favorite: —

"Father, Theodule is coming to present his respects to you this morning."

"Who's Theodule?"

"Your grandnephew."

"Ah!" said the grandfather.

Then he went back to his reading, thought no more of his grandnephew, who was merely some Theodule or other, and soon flew into a rage, which almost always happened when he read. The "sheet" which he held, although Royalist, of course, announced for the following day, without any softening phrases, one of these little events which were of daily occurrence at that date in Paris: "That the students of the schools of law and medicine were to assemble on the Place du Pantheon, at midday, — to deliberate." The discussion concerned one of the questions of the moment, the artillery of the National Guard, and a conflict between the Minister of War and "the citizen's militia," on the subject of the cannon parked in the courtyard of the Louvre. The students were to "deliberate" over this. It did not take much more than this to swell M. Gillenormand's rage.

He thought of Marius, who was a student, and who would probably go with the rest, to "deliberate, at midday, on the Place du Pantheon."

As he was indulging in this painful dream, Lieutenant Theodule entered clad in plain clothes as a bourgeois, which was clever of him, and was discreetly introduced by Mademoiselle Gillenormand. The lancer had reasoned as follows: “The old druid has not sunk all his money in a life pension. It is well to disguise one’s self as a civilian from time to time.”

Mademoiselle Gillenormand said aloud to her father: —

“Theodule, your grandnephew.”

And in a low voice to the lieutenant: —

“Approve of everything.”

And she withdrew.

The lieutenant, who was but little accustomed to such venerable encounters, stammered with some timidity: “Good day, uncle,” — and made a salute composed of the involuntary and mechanical outline of the military salute finished off as a bourgeois salute.

“Ah! so it’s you; that is well, sit down,” said the old gentleman.

That said, he totally forgot the lancer.

Theodule seated himself, and M. Gillenormand rose.

M. Gillenormand began to pace back and forth, his hands in his pockets, talking aloud, and twitching, with his irritated old fingers, at the two watches which he wore in his two fobs.

“That pack of brats! they convene on the Place du Pantheon! by my life! urchins who were with their nurses but yesterday! If one were to squeeze their noses, milk would burst out. And they deliberate to-morrow, at midday. What are we coming to? What are we coming to? It is clear that we are making for the abyss. That is what the descamisados have brought us to! To deliberate on the citizen artillery! To go and jabber in the open air over the jibes of the National Guard! And with whom are they to meet there? Just see whither Jacobinism leads. I will bet anything you like, a million against a counter, that there will be no one there but returned convicts and released galley-slaves. The Republicans and the galley-slaves, — they form but one nose and one handkerchief. Carnot used to say: ‘Where would you have me go, traitor?’ Fouche replied: ‘Wherever you please, imbecile!’ That’s what the Republicans are like.”

“That is true,” said Theodule.

M. Gillenormand half turned his head, saw Theodule, and went on: —

“When one reflects that that scoundrel was so vile as to turn carbonaro! Why did you leave my house? To go and become a Republican! Pssst! In the first place, the people want none of your republic, they have common sense, they know well that there always have been kings, and that there always will be; they know well that the people are only the people, after all, they make sport of it, of your republic — do you understand, idiot? Is it not a horrible caprice? To fall in love with Pere Duchesne, to make sheep's-eyes at the guillotine, to sing romances, and play on the guitar under the balcony of '93 — it's enough to make one spit on all these young fellows, such fools are they! They are all alike. Not one escapes. It suffices for them to breathe the air which blows through the street to lose their senses. The nineteenth century is poison. The first scamp that happens along lets his beard grow like a goat's, thinks himself a real scoundrel, and abandons his old relatives. He's a Republican, he's a romantic. What does that mean, romantic? Do me the favor to tell me what it is. All possible follies. A year ago, they ran to Hernani. Now, I just ask you, Hernani! antitheses! abominations which are not even written in French! And then, they have cannons in the courtyard of the Louvre. Such are the rascalities of this age!"

"You are right, uncle," said Theodule.

M. Gillenormand resumed: —

"Cannons in the courtyard of the Museum! For what purpose? Do you want to fire grape-shot at the Apollo Belvedere? What have those cartridges to do with the Venus de Medici? Oh! the young men of the present day are all blackguards! What a pretty creature is their Benjamin Constant! And those who are not rascals are simpletons! They do all they can to make themselves ugly, they are badly dressed, they are afraid of women, in the presence of petticoats they have a mendicant air which sets the girls into fits of laughter; on my word of honor, one would say the poor creatures were ashamed of love. They are deformed, and they complete themselves by being stupid; they repeat the puns of Tiercelin and Potier, they have sack coats, stablemen's waistcoats, shirts of coarse linen, trousers of coarse cloth, boots of coarse leather, and their rigmarole resembles their plumage. One might make use of their jargon to put new soles on their old shoes. And all this awkward batch of brats has political opinions, if you please. Political opinions should be strictly forbidden. They fabricate systems, they recast society, they demolish the monarchy, they fling all laws to the earth, they put the attic in the cellar's place and my porter in the place of the King, they turn Europe topsy-turvy, they reconstruct the world, and all their love affairs consist in staring slily at the ankles of the laundresses as these women climb into their carts. Ah! Marius! Ah! you blackguard! to go and vociferate on the public place! to discuss, to debate, to take measures! They call that measures, just God! Disorder humbles itself and becomes silly. I have seen chaos, I now see a mess. Students deliberating on the National Guard, — such a thing could not be seen among the Ogibewas nor the Cadodaches! Savages who go naked, with their noddles dressed like a shuttlecock, with a club in their paws, are less of brutes than those bachelors of arts! The four-penny monkeys! And they set up for judges! Those creatures deliberate and ratiocinate! The end of the world is come! This is plainly the end of this miserable terraqueous globe! A final hiccough was required, and France has emitted it. Deliberate, my rascals! Such things will happen so long as they go and read the newspapers under the arcades of the Odeon. That costs them a sou, and their good sense, and their intelligence, and their heart and their soul, and their wits. They emerge thence, and decamp from their families. All newspapers are pests; all, even the Drapeau Blanc! At bottom, Martainville was a Jacobin. Ah! just Heaven! you may boast of having driven your grandfather to despair, that you may!”

“That is evident,” said Theodule.

And profiting by the fact that M. Gillenormand was taking breath, the lancer added in a magisterial manner: —

“There should be no other newspaper than the Moniteur, and no other book than the Annuaire Militaire.”

M. Gillenormand continued: —

“It is like their Sieyes! A regicide ending in a senator; for that is the way they always end. They give themselves a scar with the address of thou as citizens, in order to get themselves called, eventually, Monsieur le Comte. Monsieur le Comte as big as my arm, assassins of September. The philosopher Sieyes! I will do myself the justice to say, that I have never had any better opinion of the philosophies of all those philosophers, than of the spectacles of the grimacer of Tivoli! One day I saw the Senators cross the Quai Malplaquet in mantles of violet velvet sown with bees, with hats a la Henri IV. They were hideous. One would have pronounced them monkeys from the tiger’s court. Citizens, I declare to you, that your progress is madness, that your humanity is a dream, that your revolution is a crime, that your republic is a monster, that your young and virgin France comes from the brothel, and I maintain it against all, whoever you may be, whether journalists, economists, legists, or even were you better judges of liberty, of equality, and fraternity than the knife of the guillotine! And that I announce to you, my fine fellows!”

“Parbleu!” cried the lieutenant, “that is wonderfully true.”

M. Gillenormand paused in a gesture which he had begun, wheeled round, stared Lancer Theodule intently in the eyes, and said to him: —

“You are a fool.”

BOOK SIXTH. — THE CONJUNCTION OF TWO STARS

CHAPTER I — THE SOBRIQUET: MODE OF FORMATION OF FAMILY NAMES

Marius was, at this epoch, a handsome young man, of medium stature, with thick and intensely black hair, a lofty and intelligent brow, well-opened and passionate nostrils, an air of calmness and sincerity, and with something indescribably proud, thoughtful, and innocent over his whole countenance. His profile, all of whose lines were rounded, without thereby losing their firmness, had a certain Germanic sweetness, which has made its way into the French physiognomy by way of Alsace and Lorraine, and that complete absence of angles which rendered the Sicambres so easily recognizable among the Romans, and which distinguishes the leonine from the aquiline race. He was at that period of life when the mind of men who think is composed, in nearly equal parts, of depth and ingenuousness. A grave situation being given, he had all that is required to be stupid: one more turn of the key, and he might be sublime. His manners were reserved, cold, polished, not very genial. As his mouth was charming, his lips the reddest, and his teeth the whitest in the world, his smile corrected the severity of his face, as a whole. At certain moments, that pure brow and that voluptuous smile presented a singular contrast. His eyes were small, but his glance was large.

At the period of his most abject misery, he had observed that young girls turned round when he passed by, and he fled or hid, with death in his soul. He thought that they were staring at him because of his old clothes, and that they were laughing at them; the fact is, that they stared at him because of his grace, and that they dreamed of him.

This mute misunderstanding between him and the pretty passers-by had made him shy. He chose none of them for the excellent reason that he fled from all of them. He lived thus indefinitely, — stupidly, as Courfeyrac said.

Courfeyrac also said to him: “Do not aspire to be venerable” [they called each other thou; it is the tendency of youthful friendships to slip into this mode of address]. “Let me give you a piece of advice, my dear fellow. Don’t read so many books, and look a little more at the lasses. The jades have some good points about them, O Marius! By dint of fleeing and blushing, you will become brutalized.”

On other occasions, Courfeyrac encountered him and said:— “Good morning, Monsieur l’ Abbé!”

When Courfeyrac had addressed to him some remark of this nature, Marius avoided women, both young and old, more than ever for a week to come, and he avoided Courfeyrac to boot.

Nevertheless, there existed in all the immensity of creation, two women whom Marius did not flee, and to whom he paid no attention whatever. In truth, he would have been very much amazed if he had been informed that they were women. One was the bearded old woman who swept out his chamber, and caused Courfeyrac to say: “Seeing that his servant woman wears his beard, Marius does not wear his own beard.” The other was a sort of little girl whom he saw very often, and whom he never looked at.

For more than a year, Marius had noticed in one of the walks of the Luxembourg, the one which skirts the parapet of the Pepiniere, a man and a very young girl, who were almost always seated side by side on the same bench, at the most solitary end of the alley, on the Rue de l’Ouest side. Every time that that chance which meddles with the strolls of persons whose gaze is turned inwards, led Marius to that walk, — and it was nearly every day, — he found this couple there. The man appeared to be about sixty years of age; he seemed sad and serious; his whole person presented the robust and weary aspect peculiar to military men who have retired from the service. If he had worn a decoration, Marius would have said: “He is an ex-officer.” He had a kindly but unapproachable air, and he never let his glance linger on the eyes of any one. He wore blue trousers, a blue frock coat and a broad-brimmed hat, which always appeared to be new, a black cravat, a quaker shirt, that is to say, it was dazzlingly white, but of coarse linen. A grisette who passed near him one day, said: “Here’s a very tidy widower.” His hair was very white.

The first time that the young girl who accompanied him came and seated herself on the bench which they seemed to have adopted, she was a sort of child thirteen or fourteen years of age, so thin as to be almost homely, awkward, insignificant, and with a possible promise of handsome eyes. Only, they were always raised with a sort of displeasing assurance. Her dress was both aged and childish, like the dress of the scholars in a convent; it consisted of a badly cut gown of black merino. They had the air of being father and daughter.

Marius scanned this old man, who was not yet aged, and this little girl, who was not yet a person, for a few days, and thereafter paid no attention to them. They, on their side, did not appear even to see him. They conversed together with a peaceful and indifferent air. The girl chattered incessantly and merrily. The old man talked but little, and, at times, he fixed on her eyes overflowing with an ineffable paternity.

Marius had acquired the mechanical habit of strolling in that walk. He invariably found them there.

This is the way things went: —

Marius liked to arrive by the end of the alley which was furthest from their bench; he walked the whole length of the alley, passed in front of them, then returned to the extremity whence he had come, and began again. This he did five or six times in the course of his promenade, and the promenade was taken five or six times a week, without its having occurred to him or to these people to exchange a greeting. That personage, and that young girl, although they appeared, — and perhaps because they appeared, — to shun all glances, had, naturally, caused some attention on the part of the five or six students who strolled along the Pepiniere from time to time; the studious after their lectures, the others after their game of billiards. Courfeyrac, who was among the last, had observed them several times, but, finding the girl homely, he had speedily and carefully kept out of the way. He had fled, discharging at them a sobriquet, like a Parthian dart. Impressed solely with the child’s gown and the old man’s hair, he had dubbed the daughter Mademoiselle Lanoire, and the father, Monsieur Leblanc, so that as no one knew them under any other title, this nickname became a law in the default of any other name. The students said: “Ah! Monsieur Leblanc is on his bench.” And Marius, like the rest, had found it convenient to call this unknown gentleman Monsieur Leblanc.

We shall follow their example, and we shall say M. Leblanc, in order to facilitate this tale.

So Marius saw them nearly every day, at the same hour, during the first year. He found the man to his taste, but the girl insipid.

CHAPTER II — LUX FACTA EST

During the second year, precisely at the point in this history which the reader has now reached, it chanced that this habit of the Luxembourg was interrupted, without Marius himself being quite aware why, and nearly six months elapsed, during which he did not set foot in the alley. One day, at last, he returned thither once more; it was a serene summer morning, and Marius was in joyous mood, as one is when the weather is fine. It seemed to him that he had in his heart all the songs of the birds that he was listening to, and all the bits of blue sky of which he caught glimpses through the leaves of the trees.

He went straight to “his alley,” and when he reached the end of it he perceived, still on the same bench, that well-known couple. Only, when he approached, it certainly was the same man; but it seemed to him that it was no longer the same girl. The person whom he now beheld was a tall and beautiful creature, possessed of all the most charming lines of a woman at the precise moment when they are still combined with all the most ingenuous graces of the child; a pure and fugitive moment, which can be expressed only by these two words,— “fifteen years.” She had wonderful brown hair, shaded with threads of gold, a brow that seemed made of marble, cheeks that seemed made of rose-leaf, a pale flush, an agitated whiteness, an exquisite mouth, whence smiles darted like sunbeams, and words like music, a head such as Raphael would have given to Mary, set upon a neck that Jean Goujon would have attributed to a Venus. And, in order that nothing might be lacking to this bewitching face, her nose was not handsome — it was pretty; neither straight nor curved, neither Italian nor Greek; it was the Parisian nose, that is to say, spiritual, delicate, irregular, pure, — which drives painters to despair, and charms poets.

When Marius passed near her, he could not see her eyes, which were constantly lowered. He saw only her long chestnut lashes, permeated with shadow and modesty.

This did not prevent the beautiful child from smiling as she listened to what the white-haired old man was saying to her, and nothing could be more fascinating than that fresh smile, combined with those drooping eyes.

For a moment, Marius thought that she was another daughter of the same man, a sister of the former, no doubt. But when the invariable habit of his stroll brought him, for the second time, near the bench, and he had examined her attentively, he recognized her as the same. In six months the little girl had become a young maiden; that was all. Nothing is more frequent than this phenomenon. There is a moment when girls blossom out in the twinkling of an eye, and become roses all at once. One left them children but yesterday; today, one finds them disquieting to the feelings.

This child had not only grown, she had become idealized. As three days in April suffice to cover certain trees with flowers, six months had sufficed to clothe her with beauty. Her April had arrived.

One sometimes sees people, who, poor and mean, seem to wake up, pass suddenly from indigence to luxury, indulge in expenditures of all sorts, and become dazzling, prodigal, magnificent, all of a sudden. That is the result of having pocketed an income; a note fell due yesterday. The young girl had received her quarterly income.

And then, she was no longer the school-girl with her felt hat, her merino gown, her scholar's shoes, and red hands; taste had come to her with beauty; she was a well-dressed person, clad with a sort of rich and simple elegance, and without affectation. She wore a dress of black damask, a cape of the same material, and a bonnet of white crape. Her white gloves displayed the delicacy of the hand which toyed with the carved, Chinese ivory handle of a parasol, and her silken shoe outlined the smallness of her foot. When one passed near her, her whole toilette exhaled a youthful and penetrating perfume.

As for the man, he was the same as usual.

The second time that Marius approached her, the young girl raised her eyelids; her eyes were of a deep, celestial blue, but in that veiled azure, there was, as yet, nothing but the glance of a child. She looked at Marius indifferently, as she would have stared at the brat running beneath the sycamores, or the marble vase which cast a shadow on the bench, and Marius, on his side, continued his promenade, and thought about something else.

He passed near the bench where the young girl sat, five or six times, but without even turning his eyes in her direction.

On the following days, he returned, as was his wont, to the Luxembourg; as usual, he found there "the father and daughter;" but he paid no further attention to them. He thought no more about the girl now that she was beautiful than he had when she was homely. He passed very near the bench where she sat, because such was his habit.

CHAPTER III — EFFECT OF THE SPRING

One day, the air was warm, the Luxembourg was inundated with light and shade, the sky was as pure as though the angels had washed it that morning, the sparrows were giving vent to little twitters in the depths of the chestnut-trees. Marius had thrown open his whole soul to nature, he was not thinking of anything, he simply lived and breathed, he passed near the bench, the young girl raised her eyes to him, the two glances met.

What was there in the young girl's glance on this occasion? Marius could not have told. There was nothing and there was everything. It was a strange flash.

She dropped her eyes, and he pursued his way.

What he had just seen was no longer the ingenuous and simple eye of a child; it was a mysterious gulf which had half opened, then abruptly closed again.

There comes a day when the young girl glances in this manner. Woe to him who chances to be there!

That first gaze of a soul which does not, as yet, know itself, is like the dawn in the sky. It is the awakening of something radiant and strange. Nothing can give any idea of the dangerous charm of that unexpected gleam, which flashes suddenly and vaguely forth from adorable shadows, and which is composed of all the innocence of the present, and of all the passion of the future. It is a sort of undecided tenderness which reveals itself by chance, and which waits. It is a snare which the innocent maiden sets unknown to herself, and in which she captures hearts without either wishing or knowing it. It is a virgin looking like a woman.

It is rare that a profound revery does not spring from that glance, where it falls. All purities and all candors meet in that celestial and fatal gleam which, more than all the best-planned tender glances of coquettes, possesses the magic power of causing the sudden blossoming, in the depths of the soul, of that sombre flower, impregnated with perfume and with poison, which is called love.

That evening, on his return to his garret, Marius cast his eyes over his garments, and perceived, for the first time, that he had been so slovenly, indecorous, and inconceivably stupid as to go for his walk in the Luxembourg with his "every-day clothes," that is to say, with a hat battered near the band, coarse carter’s boots, black trousers which showed white at the knees, and a black coat which was pale at the elbows.

CHAPTER IV — BEGINNING OF A GREAT MALADY

On the following day, at the accustomed hour, Marius drew from his wardrobe his new coat, his new trousers, his new hat, and his new boots; he clothed himself in this complete panoply, put on his gloves, a tremendous luxury, and set off for the Luxembourg.

On the way thither, he encountered Courfeyrac, and pretended not to see him. Courfeyrac, on his return home, said to his friends: —

“I have just met Marius’ new hat and new coat, with Marius inside them. He was going to pass an examination, no doubt. He looked utterly stupid.”

On arriving at the Luxembourg, Marius made the tour of the fountain basin, and stared at the swans; then he remained for a long time in contemplation before a statue whose head was perfectly black with mould, and one of whose hips was missing. Near the basin there was a bourgeois forty years of age, with a prominent stomach, who was holding by the hand a little urchin of five, and saying to him: “Shun excess, my son, keep at an equal distance from despotism and from anarchy.” Marius listened to this bourgeois. Then he made the circuit of the basin once more. At last he directed his course towards “his alley,” slowly, and as if with regret. One would have said that he was both forced to go there and withheld from doing so. He did not perceive it himself, and thought that he was doing as he always did.

On turning into the walk, he saw M. Leblanc and the young girl at the other end, “on their bench.” He buttoned his coat up to the very top, pulled it down on his body so that there might be no wrinkles, examined, with a certain complaisance, the lustrous gleams of his trousers, and marched on the bench. This march savored of an attack, and certainly of a desire for conquest. So I say that he marched on the bench, as I should say: “Hannibal marched on Rome.”

However, all his movements were purely mechanical, and he had interrupted none of the habitual preoccupations of his mind and labors. At that moment, he was thinking that the Manuel du Baccalaureat was a stupid book, and that it must have been drawn up by rare idiots, to allow of three tragedies of Racine and only one comedy of Moliere being analyzed therein as masterpieces of the human mind. There was a piercing whistling going on in his ears. As he approached the bench, he held fast to the folds in his coat, and fixed his eyes on the young girl. It seemed to him that she filled the entire extremity of the alley with a vague blue light.

In proportion as he drew near, his pace slackened more and more. On arriving at some little distance from the bench, and long before he had reached the end of the walk, he halted, and could not explain to himself why he retraced his steps. He did not even say to himself that he would not go as far as the end. It was only with difficulty that the young girl could have perceived him in the distance and noted his fine appearance in his new clothes. Nevertheless, he held himself very erect, in case any one should be looking at him from behind.

He attained the opposite end, then came back, and this time he approached a little nearer to the bench. He even got to within three intervals of trees, but there he felt an indescribable impossibility of proceeding further, and he hesitated. He thought he saw the young girl's face bending towards him. But he exerted a manly and violent effort, subdued his hesitation, and walked straight ahead. A few seconds later, he rushed in front of the bench, erect and firm, reddening to the very ears, without daring to cast a glance either to the right or to the left, with his hand thrust into his coat like a statesman. At the moment when he passed, — under the cannon of the place, — he felt his heart beat wildly. As on the preceding day, she wore her damask gown and her crape bonnet. He heard an ineffable voice, which must have been "her voice." She was talking tranquilly. She was very pretty. He felt it, although he made no attempt to see her. "She could not, however," he thought, "help feeling esteem and consideration for me, if she only knew that I am the veritable author of the dissertation on Marcos Obregon de la Ronde, which M. Francois de Neufchateau put, as though it were his own, at the head of his edition of Gil Blas." He went beyond the bench as far as the extremity of the walk, which was very near, then turned on his heel and passed once more in front of the lovely girl. This time, he was very pale. Moreover, all his emotions were disagreeable. As he went further from the bench and the young girl, and while his back was turned to her, he fancied that she was gazing after him, and that made him stumble.

He did not attempt to approach the bench again; he halted near the middle of the walk, and there, a thing which he never did, he sat down, and reflecting in the most profoundly indistinct depths of his spirit, that after all, it was hard that persons whose white bonnet and black gown he admired should be absolutely insensible to his splendid trousers and his new coat.

At the expiration of a quarter of an hour, he rose, as though he were on the point of again beginning his march towards that bench which was surrounded by an aureole. But he remained standing there, motionless. For the first time in fifteen months, he said to himself that that gentleman who sat there every day with his daughter, had, on his side, noticed him, and probably considered his assiduity singular.

For the first time, also, he was conscious of some irreverence in designating that stranger, even in his secret thoughts, by the sobriquet of M. le Blanc.

He stood thus for several minutes, with drooping head, tracing figures in the sand, with the cane which he held in his hand.

Then he turned abruptly in the direction opposite to the bench, to M. Leblanc and his daughter, and went home.

That day he forgot to dine. At eight o’clock in the evening he perceived this fact, and as it was too late to go down to the Rue Saint-Jacques, he said: “Never mind!” and ate a bit of bread.

He did not go to bed until he had brushed his coat and folded it up with great care.

CHAPTER V — DIVRS CLAPS OF THUNDER FALL ON MA’AM BOUGON

On the following day, Ma’am Bougon, as Courfeyrac styled the old portress-principal-tenant, housekeeper of the Gorbeau hovel, Ma’am Bougon, whose name was, in reality, Madame Burgon, as we have found out, but this iconoclast, Courfeyrac, respected nothing, — Ma’am Bougon observed, with stupefaction, that M. Marius was going out again in his new coat.

He went to the Luxembourg again, but he did not proceed further than his bench midway of the alley. He seated himself there, as on the preceding day, surveying from a distance, and clearly making out, the white bonnet, the black dress, and above all, that blue light. He did not stir from it, and only went home when the gates of the Luxembourg closed. He did not see M. Leblanc and his daughter retire. He concluded that they had quitted the garden by the gate on the Rue de l’Ouest. Later on, several weeks afterwards, when he came to think it over, he could never recall where he had dined that evening.

On the following day, which was the third, Ma’am Bougon was thunderstruck. Marius went out in his new coat. “Three days in succession!” she exclaimed.

She tried to follow him, but Marius walked briskly, and with immense strides; it was a hippopotamus undertaking the pursuit of a chamois. She lost sight of him in two minutes, and returned breathless, three-quarters choked with asthma, and furious. “If there is any sense,” she growled, “in putting on one’s best clothes every day, and making people run like this!”

Marius betook himself to the Luxembourg.

The young girl was there with M. Leblanc. Marius approached as near as he could, pretending to be busy reading a book, but he halted afar off, then returned and seated himself on his bench, where he spent four hours in watching the house-sparrows who were skipping about the walk, and who produced on him the impression that they were making sport of him.

A fortnight passed thus. Marius went to the Luxembourg no longer for the sake of strolling there, but to seat himself always in the same spot, and that without knowing why. Once arrived there, he did not stir. He put on his new coat every morning, for the purpose of not showing himself, and he began all over again on the morrow.

She was decidedly a marvellous beauty. The only remark approaching a criticism, that could be made, was, that the contradiction between her gaze, which was melancholy, and her smile, which was merry, gave a rather wild effect to her face, which sometimes caused this sweet countenance to become strange without ceasing to be charming.

CHAPTER VI — TAKEN PRISONER

On one of the last days of the second week, Marius was seated on his bench, as usual, holding in his hand an open book, of which he had not turned a page for the last two hours. All at once he started. An event was taking place at the other extremity of the walk. Leblanc and his daughter had just left their seat, and the daughter had taken her father’s arm, and both were advancing slowly, towards the middle of the alley where Marius was. Marius closed his book, then opened it again, then forced himself to read; he trembled; the aureole was coming straight towards him. “Ah! good Heavens!” thought he, “I shall not have time to strike an attitude.” Still the white-haired man and the girl advanced. It seemed to him that this lasted for a century, and that it was but a second. “What are they coming in this direction for?” he asked himself. “What! She will pass here? Her feet will tread this sand, this walk, two paces from me?” He was utterly upset, he would have liked to be very handsome, he would have liked to own the cross. He heard the soft and measured sound of their approaching footsteps. He imagined that M. Leblanc was darting angry glances at him. “Is that gentleman going to address me?” he thought to himself. He dropped his head; when he raised it again, they were very near him. The young girl passed, and as she passed, she glanced at him. She gazed steadily at him, with a pensive sweetness which thrilled Marius from head to foot. It seemed to him that she was reproaching him for having allowed so long a time to elapse without coming as far as her, and that she was saying to him: “I am coming myself.” Marius was dazzled by those eyes fraught with rays and abysses.

He felt his brain on fire. She had come to him, what joy! And then, how she had looked at him! She appeared to him more beautiful than he had ever seen her yet. Beautiful with a beauty which was wholly feminine and angelic, with a complete beauty which would have made Petrarch sing and Dante kneel. It seemed to him that he was floating free in the azure heavens. At the same time, he was horribly vexed because there was dust on his boots.

He thought he felt sure that she had looked at his boots too.

He followed her with his eyes until she disappeared. Then he started up and walked about the Luxembourg garden like a madman. It is possible that, at times, he laughed to himself and talked aloud. He was so dreamy when he came near the children’s nurses, that each one of them thought him in love with her.

He quitted the Luxembourg, hoping to find her again in the street.

He encountered Courfeyrac under the arcades of the Odeon, and said to him: “Come and dine with me.” They went off to Rousseau’s and spent six francs. Marius ate like an ogre. He gave the waiter six sous. At dessert, he said to Courfeyrac. “Have you read the paper? What a fine discourse Audry de Puyraveau delivered!”

He was desperately in love.

After dinner, he said to Courfeyrac: “I will treat you to the play.” They went to the Porte-Sainte-Martin to see Frederick in l’Auberge des Adrets. Marius was enormously amused.

At the same time, he had a redoubled attack of shyness. On emerging from the theatre, he refused to look at the garter of a modiste who was stepping across a gutter, and Courfeyrac, who said: “I should like to put that woman in my collection,” almost horrified him.

Courfeyrac invited him to breakfast at the Cafe Voltaire on the following morning. Marius went thither, and ate even more than on the preceding evening. He was very thoughtful and very merry. One would have said that he was taking advantage of every occasion to laugh uproariously. He tenderly embraced some man or other from the provinces, who was presented to him. A circle of students formed round the table, and they spoke of the nonsense paid for by the State which was uttered from the rostrum in the Sorbonne, then the conversation fell upon the faults and omissions in Guicherat’s dictionaries and grammars. Marius interrupted the discussion to exclaim: “But it is very agreeable, all the same to have the cross!”

“That’s queer!” whispèred Courfeyrac to Jean Prouvaire.

“No,” responded Prouvaire, “that’s serious.”

It was serious; in fact, Marius had reached that first violent and charming hour with which grand passions begin.

A glance had wrought all this.

When the mine is charged, when the conflagration is ready, nothing is more simple. A glance is a spark.

It was all over with him. Marius loved a woman. His fate was entering the unknown.

The glance of women resembles certain combinations of wheels, which are tranquil in appearance yet formidable. You pass close to them every day, peaceably and with impunity, and without a suspicion of anything. A moment arrives when you forget that the thing is there. You go and come, dream, speak, laugh. All at once you feel yourself clutched; all is over. The wheels hold you fast, the glance has ensnared you. It has caught you, no matter where or how, by some portion of your thought which was fluttering loose, by some distraction which had attacked you. You are lost. The whole of you passes into it. A chain of mysterious forces takes possession of you. You struggle in vain; no more human succor is possible. You go on falling from gearing to gearing, from agony to agony, from torture to torture, you, your mind, your fortune, your future, your soul; and, according to whether you are in the power of a wicked creature, or of a noble heart, you will not escape from this terrifying machine otherwise than disfigured with shame, or transfigured by passion.

CHAPTER VII — ADVENTURES OF THE LETTER U DELIVERED OVER TO CONJECTURES

Isolation, detachment, from everything, pride, independence, the taste of nature, the absence of daily and material activity, the life within himself, the secret conflicts of chastity, a benevolent ecstasy towards all creation, had prepared Marius for this possession which is called passion. His worship of his father had gradually become a religion, and, like all religions, it had retreated to the depths of his soul. Something was required in the foreground. Love came.

A full month elapsed, during which Marius went every day to the Luxembourg. When the hour arrived, nothing could hold him back.— “He is on duty,” said Courfeyrac. Marius lived in a state of delight. It is certain that the young girl did look at him.

He had finally grown bold, and approached the bench. Still, he did not pass in front of it any more, in obedience to the instinct of timidity and to the instinct of prudence common to lovers. He considered it better not to attract “the attention of the father.” He combined his stations behind the trees and the pedestals of the statues with a profound diplomacy, so that he might be seen as much as possible by the young girl and as little as possible by the old gentleman. Sometimes, he remained motionless by the half-hour together in the shade of a Leonidas or a Spartacus, holding in his hand a book, above which his eyes, gently raised, sought the beautiful girl, and she, on her side, turned her charming profile towards him with a vague smile. While conversing in the most natural and tranquil manner in the world with the white-haired man, she bent upon Marius all the reveries of a virginal and passionate eye. Ancient and time-honored manoeuvre which Eve understood from the very first day of the world, and which every woman understands from the very first day of her life! her mouth replied to one, and her glance replied to another.

It must be supposed, that M. Leblanc finally noticed something, for often, when Marius arrived, he rose and began to walk about. He had abandoned their accustomed place and had adopted the bench by the Gladiator, near the other end of the walk, as though with the object of seeing whether Marius would pursue them thither. Marius did not understand, and committed this error. “The father” began to grow inexact, and no longer brought “his daughter” every day. Sometimes, he came alone. Then Marius did not stay. Another blunder.

Marius paid no heed to these symptoms. From the phase of timidity, he had passed, by a natural and fatal progress, to the phase of blindness. His love increased. He dreamed of it every night. And then, an unexpected bliss had happened to him, oil on the fire, a redoubling of the shadows over his eyes. One evening, at dusk, he had found, on the bench which “M. Leblanc and his daughter” had just quitted, a handkerchief, a very simple handkerchief, without embroidery, but white, and fine, and which seemed to him to exhale ineffable perfume. He seized it with rapture. This handkerchief was marked with the letters U. F. Marius knew nothing about this beautiful child, — neither her family name, her Christian name nor her abode; these two letters were the first thing of her that he had gained possession of, adorable initials, upon which he immediately began to construct his scaffolding. U was evidently the Christian name. “Ursule!” he thought, “what a delicious name!” He kissed the handkerchief, drank it in, placed it on his heart, on his flesh, during the day, and at night, laid it beneath his lips that he might fall asleep on it.

“I feel that her whole soul lies within it!” he exclaimed.

This handkerchief belonged to the old gentleman, who had simply let it fall from his pocket.

In the days which followed the finding of this treasure, he only displayed himself at the Luxembourg in the act of kissing the handkerchief and laying it on his heart. The beautiful child understood nothing of all this, and signified it to him by imperceptible signs.

“O modesty!” said Marius.

CHAPTER VIII — THE VETERANS THEMSELVES CAN BE HAPPY

Since we have pronounced the word modesty, and since we conceal nothing, we ought to say that once, nevertheless, in spite of his ecstasies, “his Ursule” caused him very serious grief. It was on one of the days when she persuaded M. Leblanc to leave the bench and stroll along the walk. A brisk May breeze was blowing, which swayed the crests of the plaintain-trees. The father and daughter, arm in arm, had just passed Marius’ bench. Marius had risen to his feet behind them, and was following them with his eyes, as was fitting in the desperate situation of his soul.

All at once, a gust of wind, more merry than the rest, and probably charged with performing the affairs of Springtime, swept down from the nursery, flung itself on the alley, enveloped the young girl in a delicious shiver, worthy of Virgil’s nymphs, and the fawns of Theocritus, and lifted her dress, the robe more sacred than that of Isis, almost to the height of her garter. A leg of exquisite shape appeared. Marius saw it. He was exasperated and furious.

The young girl had hastily thrust down her dress, with a divinely troubled motion, but he was none the less angry for all that. He was alone in the alley, it is true. But there might have been some one there. And what if there had been some one there! Can any one comprehend such a thing? What she had just done is horrible! — Alas, the poor child had done nothing; there had been but one culprit, the wind; but Marius, in whom quivered the Bartholo who exists in Cherubin, was determined to be vexed, and was jealous of his own shadow. It is thus, in fact, that the harsh and capricious jealousy of the flesh awakens in the human heart, and takes possession of it, even without any right. Moreover, setting aside even that jealousy, the sight of that charming leg had contained nothing agreeable for him; the white stocking of the first woman he chanced to meet would have afforded him more pleasure.

When “his Ursule,” after having reached the end of the walk, retraced her steps with M. Leblanc, and passed in front of the bench on which Marius had seated himself once more, Marius darted a sullen and ferocious glance at her. The young girl gave way to that slight straightening up with a backward movement, accompanied by a raising of the eyelids, which signifies: “Well, what is the matter?”

This was “their first quarrel.”

Marius had hardly made this scene at her with his eyes, when some one crossed the walk. It was a veteran, very much bent, extremely wrinkled, and pale, in a uniform of the Louis XV. pattern, bearing on his breast the little oval plaque of red cloth, with the crossed swords, the soldier’s cross of Saint-Louis, and adorned, in addition, with a coat-sleeve, which had no arm within it, with a silver chin and a wooden leg. Marius thought he perceived that this man had an extremely well satisfied air. It even struck him that the aged cynic, as he hobbled along past him, addressed to him a very fraternal and very merry wink, as though some chance had created an understanding between them, and as though they had shared some piece of good luck together. What did that relic of Mars mean by being so contented? What had passed between that wooden leg and the other? Marius reached a paroxysm of jealousy.— “Perhaps he was there!” he said to himself; “perhaps he saw!” — And he felt a desire to exterminate the veteran.

With the aid of time, all points grow dull. Marius’ wrath against “Ursule,” just and legitimate as it was, passed off. He finally pardoned her; but this cost him a great effort; he sulked for three days.

Nevertheless, in spite of all this, and because of all this, his passion augmented and grew to madness.

CHAPTER IX — ECLIPSE

The reader has just seen how Marius discovered, or thought that he discovered, that She was named Ursule.

Appetite grows with loving. To know that her name was Ursule was a great deal; it was very little. In three or four weeks, Marius had devoured this bliss. He wanted another. He wanted to know where she lived.

He had committed his first blunder, by falling into the ambush of the bench by the Gladiator. He had committed a second, by not remaining at the Luxembourg when M. Leblanc came thither alone. He now committed a third, and an immense one. He followed “Ursule.”

She lived in the Rue de l’Ouest, in the most unfrequented spot, in a new, three-story house, of modest appearance.

From that moment forth, Marius added to his happiness of seeing her at the Luxembourg the happiness of following her home.

His hunger was increasing. He knew her first name, at least, a charming name, a genuine woman’s name; he knew where she lived; he wanted to know who she was.

One evening, after he had followed them to their dwelling, and had seen them disappear through the carriage gate, he entered in their train and said boldly to the porter: —

“Is that the gentleman who lives on the first floor, who has just come in?”

“No,” replied the porter. “He is the gentleman on the third floor.”

Another step gained. This success emboldened Marius.

“On the front?” he asked.

“Parbleu!” said the porter, “the house is only built on the street.”

“And what is that gentleman’s business?” began Marius again.

“He is a gentleman of property, sir. A very kind man who does good to the unfortunate, though not rich himself.”

“What is his name?” resumed Marius.

The porter raised his head and said: —

“Are you a police spy, sir?”

Marius went off quite abashed, but delighted. He was getting on.

“Good,” thought he, “I know that her name is Ursule, that she is the daughter of a gentleman who lives on his income, and that she lives there, on the third floor, in the Rue de l’Ouest.”

On the following day, M. Leblanc and his daughter made only a very brief stay in the Luxembourg; they went away while it was still broad daylight. Marius followed them to the Rue de l’Ouest, as he had taken up the habit of doing. On arriving at the carriage entrance M. Leblanc made his daughter pass in first, then paused, before crossing the threshold, and stared intently at Marius.

On the next day they did not come to the Luxembourg. Marius waited for them all day in vain.

At nightfall, he went to the Rue de l’Ouest, and saw a light in the windows of the third story.

He walked about beneath the windows until the light was extinguished.

The next day, no one at the Luxembourg. Marius waited all day, then went and did sentinel duty under their windows. This carried him on to ten o’clock in the evening.

His dinner took care of itself. Fever nourishes the sick man, and love the lover.

He spent a week in this manner. M. Leblanc no longer appeared at the Luxembourg.

Marius indulged in melancholy conjectures; he dared not watch the porte cochere during the day; he contented himself with going at night to gaze upon the red light of the windows. At times he saw shadows flit across them, and his heart began to beat.

On the eighth day, when he arrived under the windows, there was no light in them.

“Hello!” he said, “the lamp is not lighted yet. But it is dark. Can they have gone out?” He waited until ten o’clock. Until midnight. Until one in the morning. Not a light appeared in the windows of the third story, and no one entered the house.

He went away in a very gloomy frame of mind.

On the morrow, — for he only existed from morrow to morrow, there was, so to speak, no to-day for him, — on the morrow, he found no one at the Luxembourg; he had expected this. At dusk, he went to the house.

No light in the windows; the shades were drawn; the third floor was totally dark.

Marius rapped at the porte cochere, entered, and said to the porter: —

“The gentleman on the third floor?”

“Has moved away,” replied the porter.

Marius reeled and said feebly: —

“How long ago?”

“Yesterday.”

“Where is he living now?”

“I don’t know anything about it.”

“So he has not left his new address?”

“No.”

And the porter, raising his eyes, recognized Marius.

“Come! So it’s you!” said he; “but you are decidedly a spy then?”

BOOK SEVENTH. — PATRON MINETTE

CHAPTER I — MINES AND MINERS

Human societies all have what is called in theatrical parlance, a third lower floor. The social soil is everywhere undermined, sometimes for good, sometimes for evil. These works are superposed one upon the other. There are superior mines and inferior mines. There is a top and a bottom in this obscure sub-soil, which sometimes gives way beneath civilization, and which our indifference and heedlessness trample under foot. The Encyclopedia, in the last century, was a mine that was almost open to the sky. The shades, those sombre hatchers of primitive Christianity, only awaited an opportunity to bring about an explosion under the Caesars and to inundate the human race with light. For in the sacred shadows there lies latent light. Volcanoes are full of a shadow that is capable of flashing forth. Every form begins by being night. The catacombs, in which the first mass was said, were not alone the cellar of Rome, they were the vaults of the world.

Beneath the social construction, that complicated marvel of a structure, there are excavations of all sorts. There is the religious mine, the philosophical mine, the economic mine, the revolutionary mine. Such and such a pick-axe with the idea, such a pick with ciphers. Such another with wrath. People hail and answer each other from one catacomb to another. Utopias travel about underground, in the pipes. There they branch out in every direction. They sometimes meet, and fraternize there. Jean-Jacques lends his pick to Diogenes, who lends him his lantern. Sometimes they enter into combat there. Calvin seizes Socinius by the hair. But nothing arrests nor interrupts the tension of all these energies toward the goal, and the vast, simultaneous activity, which goes and comes, mounts, descends, and mounts again in these obscurities, and which immense unknown swarming slowly transforms the top and the bottom and the inside and the outside. Society hardly even suspects this digging which leaves its surface intact and changes its bowels. There are as many different subterranean stages as there are varying works, as there are extractions. What emerges from these deep excavations? The future.

The deeper one goes, the more mysterious are the toilers. The work is good, up to a degree which the social philosophies are able to recognize; beyond that degree it is doubtful and mixed; lower down, it becomes terrible. At a certain depth, the excavations are no longer penetrable by the spirit of civilization, the limit breathable by man has been passed; a beginning of monsters is possible.

The descending scale is a strange one; and each one of the rungs of this ladder corresponds to a stage where philosophy can find foothold, and where one encounters one of these workmen, sometimes divine, sometimes misshapen. Below John Huss, there is Luther; below Luther, there is Descartes; below Descartes, there is Voltaire; below Voltaire, there is Condorcet; below Condorcet, there is Robespierre; below Robespierre, there is Marat; below Marat there is Babeuf. And so it goes on. Lower down, confusedly, at the limit which separates the indistinct from the invisible, one perceives other gloomy men, who perhaps do not exist as yet. The men of yesterday are spectres; those of to-morrow are forms. The eye of the spirit distinguishes them but obscurely. The embryonic work of the future is one of the visions of philosophy.

A world in limbo, in the state of foetus, what an unheard-of spectre!

Saint-Simon, Owen, Fourier, are there also, in lateral galleries.

Surely, although a divine and invisible chain unknown to themselves, binds together all these subterranean pioneers who, almost always, think themselves isolated, and who are not so, their works vary greatly, and the light of some contrasts with the blaze of others. The first are paradisiacal, the last are tragic. Nevertheless, whatever may be the contrast, all these toilers, from the highest to the most nocturnal, from the wisest to the most foolish, possess one likeness, and this is it: disinterestedness. Marat forgets himself like Jesus. They throw themselves on one side, they omit themselves, they think not of themselves. They have a glance, and that glance seeks the absolute. The first has the whole heavens in his eyes; the last, enigmatical though he may be, has still, beneath his eyelids, the pale beam of the infinite. Venerate the man, whoever he may be, who has this sign — the starry eye.

The shadowy eye is the other sign.

With it, evil commences. Reflect and tremble in the presence of any one who has no glance at all. The social order has its black miners.

There is a point where depth is tantamount to burial, and where light becomes extinct.

Below all these mines which we have just mentioned, below all these galleries, below this whole immense, subterranean, venous system of progress and utopia, much further on in the earth, much lower than Marat, lower than Babeuf, lower, much lower, and without any connection with the upper levels, there lies the last mine. A formidable spot. This is what we have designated as the le troisième dessous. It is the grave of shadows. It is the cellar of the blind. Inferi.

This communicates with the abyss.

CHAPTER II — THE LOWEST DEPTHS

There disinterestedness vanishes. The demon is vaguely outlined; each one is for himself. The *I* in the eyes howls, seeks, fumbles, and gnaws. The social Ugolino is in this gulf.

The wild spectres who roam in this grave, almost beasts, almost phantoms, are not occupied with universal progress; they are ignorant both of the idea and of the word; they take no thought for anything but the satisfaction of their individual desires. They are almost unconscious, and there exists within them a sort of terrible obliteration. They have two mothers, both step-mothers, ignorance and misery. They have a guide, necessity; and for all forms of satisfaction, appetite. They are brutally voracious, that is to say, ferocious, not after the fashion of the tyrant, but after the fashion of the tiger. From suffering these spectres pass to crime; fatal affiliation, dizzy creation, logic of darkness. That which crawls in the social third lower level is no longer complaint stifled by the absolute; it is the protest of matter. Man there becomes a dragon. To be hungry, to be thirsty — that is the point of departure; to be Satan — that is the point reached. From that vault Lacenaire emerges.

We have just seen, in Book Fourth, one of the compartments of the upper mine, of the great political, revolutionary, and philosophical excavation. There, as we have just said, all is pure, noble, dignified, honest. There, assuredly, one might be misled; but error is worthy of veneration there, so thoroughly does it imply heroism. The work there effected, taken as a whole has a name: Progress.

The moment has now come when we must take a look at other depths, hideous depths. There exists beneath society, we insist upon this point, and there will exist, until that day when ignorance shall be dissipated, the great cavern of evil.

This cavern is below all, and is the foe of all. It is hatred, without exception. This cavern knows no philosophers; its dagger has never cut a pen. Its blackness has no connection with the sublime blackness of the inkstand. Never have the fingers of night which contract beneath this stifling ceiling, turned the leaves of a book nor unfolded a newspaper. Babeuf is a speculator to Cartouche; Marat is an aristocrat to Schinderhannes. This cavern has for its object the destruction of everything.

Of everything. Including the upper superior mines, which it execrates. It not only undermines, in its hideous swarming, the actual social order; it undermines philosophy, it undermines human thought, it undermines civilization, it undermines revolution, it undermines progress. Its name is simply theft, prostitution, murder, assassination. It is darkness, and it desires chaos. Its vault is formed of ignorance.

All the others, those above it, have but one object — to suppress it. It is to this point that philosophy and progress tend, with all their organs simultaneously, by their amelioration of the real, as well as by their contemplation of the absolute. Destroy the cavern Ignorance and you destroy the lair Crime.

Let us condense, in a few words, a part of what we have just written. The only social peril is darkness.

Humanity is identity. All men are made of the same clay. There is no difference, here below, at least, in predestination. The same shadow in front, the same flesh in the present, the same ashes afterwards. But ignorance, mingled with the human paste, blackens it. This incurable blackness takes possession of the interior of a man and is there converted into evil.

CHAPTER III — BABET, GUEULEMER, CLAQUESOUS, AND MONTPARNASSE

A quartette of ruffians, Claquesous, Gueulemer, Babet, and Montparnasse governed the third lower floor of Paris, from 1830 to 1835.

Gueulemer was a Hercules of no defined position. For his lair he had the sewer of the Arche-Marion. He was six feet high, his pectoral muscles were of marble, his biceps of brass, his breath was that of a cavern, his torso that of a colossus, his head that of a bird. One thought one beheld the Farnese Hercules clad in duck trousers and a cotton velvet waistcoat. Gueulemer, built after this sculptural fashion, might have subdued monsters; he had found it more expeditious to be one. A low brow, large temples, less than forty years of age, but with crow's-feet, harsh, short hair, cheeks like a brush, a beard like that of a wild boar; the reader can see the man before him. His muscles called for work, his stupidity would have none of it. He was a great, idle force. He was an assassin through coolness. He was thought to be a creole. He had, probably, somewhat to do with Marshal Brune, having been a porter at Avignon in 1815. After this stage, he had turned ruffian.

The diaphaneity of Babet contrasted with the grossness of Gueulemer. Babet was thin and learned. He was transparent but impenetrable. Daylight was visible through his bones, but nothing through his eyes. He declared that he was a chemist. He had been a jack of all trades. He had played in vaudeville at Saint-Mihiel. He was a man of purpose, a fine talker, who underlined his smiles and accentuated his gestures. His occupation consisted in selling, in the open air, plaster busts and portraits of "the head of the State." In addition to this, he extracted teeth. He had exhibited phenomena at fairs, and he had owned a booth with a trumpet and this poster: "Babet, Dental Artist, Member of the Academies, makes physical experiments on metals and metalloids, extracts teeth, undertakes stumps abandoned by his brother practitioners. Price: one tooth, one franc, fifty centimes; two teeth, two francs; three teeth, two francs, fifty. Take advantage of this opportunity." This Take advantage of this opportunity meant: Have as many teeth extracted as possible. He had been married and had had children. He did not know what had become of his wife and children. He had lost them as one loses his handkerchief. Babet read the papers, a striking exception in the world to which he belonged. One day, at the period when he had his family with him in his booth on wheels, he had read in the Messager, that a woman had just given birth to a child, who was doing well, and had a calf's muzzle, and he exclaimed: “There's a fortune! my wife has not the wit to present me with a child like that!”

Later on he had abandoned everything, in order to “undertake Paris.” This was his expression.

Who was Claquesous? He was night. He waited until the sky was daubed with black, before he showed himself. At nightfall he emerged from the hole whither he returned before daylight. Where was this hole? No one knew. He only addressed his accomplices in the most absolute darkness, and with his back turned to them. Was his name Claquesous? Certainly not. If a candle was brought, he put on a mask. He was a ventriloquist. Babet said: “Claquesous is a nocturne for two voices.” Claquesous was vague, terrible, and a roamer. No one was sure whether he had a name, Claquesous being a sobriquet; none was sure that he had a voice, as his stomach spoke more frequently than his voice; no one was sure that he had a face, as he was never seen without his mask. He disappeared as though he had vanished into thin air; when he appeared, it was as though he sprang from the earth.

A lugubrious being was Montparnasse. Montparnasse was a child; less than twenty years of age, with a handsome face, lips like cherries, charming black hair, the brilliant light of springtime in his eyes; he had all vices and aspired to all crimes.

The digestion of evil aroused in him an appetite for worse. It was the street boy turned pickpocket, and a pickpocket turned garroter. He was genteel, effeminate, graceful, robust, sluggish, ferocious. The rim of his hat was curled up on the left side, in order to make room for a tuft of hair, after the style of 1829. He lived by robbery with violence. His coat was of the best cut, but threadbare. Montparnasse was a fashion-plate in misery and given to the commission of murders. The cause of all this youth's crimes was the desire to be well-dressed. The first grisette who had said to him: “You are handsome!” had cast the stain of darkness into his heart, and had made a Cain of this Abel. Finding that he was handsome, he desired to be elegant: now, the height of elegance is idleness; idleness in a poor man means crime. Few prowlers were so dreaded as Montparnasse. At eighteen, he had already numerous corpses in his past. More than one passer-by lay with outstretched arms in the presence of this wretch, with his face in a pool of blood. Curled, pomaded, with laced waist, the hips of a woman, the bust of a Prussian officer, the murmur of admiration from the boulevard wenches surrounding him, his cravat knowingly tied, a bludgeon in his pocket, a flower in his buttonhole; such was this dandy of the sepulchre.

CHAPTER IV — COMPOSITION OF THE TROUPE

These four ruffians formed a sort of Proteus, winding like a serpent among the police, and striving to escape Vidocq's indiscreet glances "under divers forms, tree, flame, fountain," lending each other their names and their traps, hiding in their own shadows, boxes with secret compartments and refuges for each other, stripping off their personalities, as one removes his false nose at a masked ball, sometimes simplifying matters to the point of consisting of but one individual, sometimes multiplying themselves to such a point that Coco-Latour himself took them for a whole throng.

These four men were not four men; they were a sort of mysterious robber with four heads, operating on a grand scale on Paris; they were that monstrous polyp of evil, which inhabits the crypt of society.

Thanks to their ramifications, and to the network underlying their relations, Babet, Gueulemer, Claquesous, and Montparnasse were charged with the general enterprise of the ambushes of the department of the Seine. The inventors of ideas of that nature, men with nocturnal imaginations, applied to them to have their ideas executed. They furnished the canvas to the four rascals, and the latter undertook the preparation of the scenery. They labored at the stage setting. They were always in a condition to lend a force proportioned and suitable to all crimes which demanded a lift of the shoulder, and which were sufficiently lucrative. When a crime was in quest of arms, they under-let their accomplices. They kept a troupe of actors of the shadows at the disposition of all underground tragedies.

They were in the habit of assembling at nightfall, the hour when they woke up, on the plains which adjoin the Salpetriere. There they held their conferences. They had twelve black hours before them; they regulated their employment accordingly.

Patron-Minette, — such was the name which was bestowed in the subterranean circulation on the association of these four men. In the fantastic, ancient, popular parlance, which is vanishing day by day, Patron-Minette signifies the morning, the same as entre chien et loup — between dog and wolf — signifies the evening. This appellation, Patron-Minette, was probably derived from the hour at which their work ended, the dawn being the vanishing moment for phantoms and for the separation of ruffians. These four men were known under this title. When the Président of the Assizes visited Lacenaire in his prison, and questioned him concerning a misdeed which Lacenaire denied, “Who did it?” demanded the Président. Lacenaire made this response, enigmatical so far as the magistrate was concerned, but clear to the police: “Perhaps it was Patron-Minette.”

A piece can sometimes be divined on the enunciation of the personages; in the same manner a band can almost be judged from the list of ruffians composing it. Here are the appellations to which the principal members of Patron-Minette answered, — for the names have survived in special memoirs.

Panchaud, alias Printanier, alias Bigrenaille.

Brujon. [There was a Brujon dynasty; we cannot refrain from interpolating this word.]

Boulatruelle, the road-mender already introduced.

Laveuve.

Finistere.

Homere-Hogu, a negro.

Mardisoir. (Tuesday evening.)

Depeche. (Make haste.)

Fauntleroy, alias Bouquetiere (the Flower Girl).

Glorieux, a discharged convict.

Barrecarrosse (Stop-carriage), called Monsieur Dupont.

L’Esplanade-du-Sud.

Poussagrive.

Carmagnolet.

Kruideniers, called Bizarro.

Mangedentelle. (Lace-eater.)

Les-pieds-en-l’Air. (Feet in the air.)

Demi-Liard, called Deux-Milliards.

Etc., etc.

We pass over some, and not the worst of them. These names have faces attached. They do not express merely beings, but species. Each one of these names corresponds to a variety of those misshapen fungi from the under side of civilization.

Those beings, who were not very lavish with their countenances, were not among the men whom one sees passing along the streets. Fatigued by the wild nights which they passed, they went off by day to sleep, sometimes in the lime-kilns, sometimes in the abandoned quarries of Montmatre or Montrouge, sometimes in the sewers. They ran to earth.

What became of these men? They still exist. They have always existed. Horace speaks of them: Ambubaiarum collegia, pharmacopolae, mendici, mimae; and so long as society remains what it is, they will remain what they are. Beneath the obscure roof of their cavern, they are continually born again from the social ooze. They return, spectres, but always identical; only, they no longer bear the same names and they are no longer in the same skins. The individuals extirpated, the tribe subsists.

They always have the same faculties. From the vagrant to the tramp, the race is maintained in its purity. They divine purses in pockets, they scent out watches in fobs. Gold and silver possess an odor for them. There exist ingenuous bourgeois, of whom it might be said, that they have a “stealable” air. These men patiently pursue these bourgeois. They experience the quivers of a spider at the passage of a stranger or of a man from the country.

These men are terrible, when one encounters them, or catches a glimpse of them, towards midnight, on a deserted boulevard. They do not seem to be men but forms composed of living mists; one would say that they habitually constitute one mass with the shadows, that they are in no wise distinct from them, that they possess no other soul than the darkness, and that it is only momentarily and for the purpose of living for a few minutes a monstrous life, that they have separated from the night.

What is necessary to cause these spectres to vanish? Light. Light in floods. Not a single bat can resist the dawn. Light up society from below.

BOOK EIGHTH. — THE WICKED POOR MAN

CHAPTER I — MARIUS, WHILE SEEKING A GIRL IN A BONNET, ENCOUNTERS A MAN IN A CAP

Summer passed, then the autumn; winter came. Neither M. Leblanc nor the young girl had again set foot in the Luxembourg garden. Thenceforth, Marius had but one thought, — to gaze once more on that sweet and adorable face. He sought constantly, he sought everywhere; he found nothing. He was no longer Marius, the enthusiastic dreamer, the firm, resolute, ardent man, the bold defier of fate, the brain which erected future on future, the young spirit encumbered with plans, with projects, with pride, with ideas and wishes; he was a lost dog. He fell into a black melancholy. All was over. Work disgusted him, walking tired him. Vast nature, formerly so filled with forms, lights, voices, counsels, perspectives, horizons, teachings, now lay empty before him. It seemed to him that everything had disappeared.

He thought incessantly, for he could not do otherwise; but he no longer took pleasure in his thoughts. To everything that they proposed to him in a whisper, he replied in his darkness: “What is the use?”

He heaped a hundred reproaches on himself. “Why did I follow her? I was so happy at the mere sight of her! She looked at me; was not that immense? She had the air of loving me. Was not that everything? I wished to have, what? There was nothing after that. I have been absurd. It is my own fault,” etc., etc. Courfeyrac, to whom he confided nothing, — it was his nature, — but who made some little guess at everything, — that was his nature, — had begun by congratulating him on being in love, though he was amazed at it; then, seeing Marius fall into this melancholy state, he ended by saying to him: “I see that you have been simply an animal. Here, come to the Chaumiere.”

Once, having confidence in a fine September sun, Marius had allowed himself to be taken to the ball at Sceaux by Courfeyrac, Bossuet, and Grantaire, hoping, what a dream! that he might, perhaps, find her there. Of course he did not see the one he sought.— “But this is the place, all the same, where all lost women are found,” grumbled Grantaire in an aside. Marius left his friends at the ball and returned home on foot, alone, through the night, weary, feverish, with sad and troubled eyes, stunned by the noise and dust of the merry wagons filled with singing creatures on their way home from the feast, which passed close to him, as he, in his discouragement, breathed in the acrid scent of the walnut-trees, along the road, in order to refresh his head.

He took to living more and more alone, utterly overwhelmed, wholly given up to his inward anguish, going and coming in his pain like the wolf in the trap, seeking the absent one everywhere, stupefied by love.

On another occasion, he had an encounter which produced on him a singular effect. He met, in the narrow streets in the vicinity of the Boulevard des Invalides, a man dressed like a workingman and wearing a cap with a long visor, which allowed a glimpse of locks of very white hair. Marius was struck with the beauty of this white hair, and scrutinized the man, who was walking slowly and as though absorbed in painful meditation. Strange to say, he thought that he recognized M. Leblanc. The hair was the same, also the profile, so far as the cap permitted a view of it, the mien identical, only more depressed. But why these workingman’s clothes? What was the meaning of this? What signified that disguise? Marius was greatly astonished. When he recovered himself, his first impulse was to follow the man; who knows whether he did not hold at last the clue which he was seeking? In any case, he must see the man near at hand, and clear up the mystery. But the idea occurred to him too late, the man was no longer there. He had turned into some little side street, and Marius could not find him. This encounter occupied his mind for three days and then was effaced. “After all,” he said to himself, “it was probably only a resemblance.”

CHAPTER II — TREASURE TROVE

Marius had not left the Gorbeau house. He paid no attention to any one there.

At that epoch, to tell the truth, there were no other inhabitants in the house, except himself and those Jondrettes whose rent he had once paid, without, moreover, ever having spoken to either father, mother, or daughters. The other lodgers had moved away or had died, or had been turned out in default of payment.

One day during that winter, the sun had shown itself a little in the afternoon, but it was the 2d of February, that ancient Candlemas day whose treacherous sun, the precursor of a six weeks' cold spell, inspired Mathieu Laensberg with these two lines, which have with justice remained classic: —

Qu'il luise ou qu'il luiserne,
L'ours rentre dans en sa caverne.

Marius had just emerged from his: night was falling. It was the hour for his dinner; for he had been obliged to take to dining again, alas! oh, infirmities of ideal passions!

He had just crossed his threshold, where Ma'am Bougon was sweeping at the moment, as she uttered this memorable monologue: —

"What is there that is cheap now? Everything is dear. There is nothing in the world that is cheap except trouble; you can get that for nothing, the trouble of the world!"

Marius slowly ascended the boulevard towards the barrier, in order to reach the Rue Saint-Jacques. He was walking along with drooping head.

All at once, he felt some one elbow him in the dusk; he wheeled round, and saw two young girls clad in rags, the one tall and slim, the other a little shorter, who were passing rapidly, all out of breath, in terror, and with the appearance of fleeing; they had been coming to meet him, had not seen him, and had jostled him as they passed. Through the twilight, Marius could distinguish their livid faces, their wild heads, their dishevelled hair, their hideous bonnets, their ragged petticoats, and their bare feet. They were talking as they ran. The taller said in a very low voice: —

"The bobbies have come. They came near nabbing me at the half-circle."

The other answered: "I saw them. I bolted, bolted, bolted!"

Through this repulsive slang, Marius understood that gendarmes or the police had come near apprehending these two children, and that the latter had escaped.

They plunged among the trees of the boulevard behind him, and there created, for a few minutes, in the gloom, a sort of vague white spot, then disappeared.

Marius had halted for a moment.

He was about to pursue his way, when his eye lighted on a little grayish package lying on the ground at his feet. He stooped and picked it up. It was a sort of envelope which appeared to contain papers.

“Good,” he said to himself, “those unhappy girls dropped it.”

He retraced his steps, he called, he did not find them; he reflected that they must already be far away, put the package in his pocket, and went off to dine.

On the way, he saw in an alley of the Rue Mouffetard, a child’s coffin, covered with a black cloth resting on three chairs, and illuminated by a candle. The two girls of the twilight recurred to his mind.

“Poor mothers!” he thought. “There is one thing sadder than to see one’s children die; it is to see them leading an evil life.”

Then those shadows which had varied his melancholy vanished from his thoughts, and he fell back once more into his habitual preoccupations. He fell to thinking once more of his six months of love and happiness in the open air and the broad daylight, beneath the beautiful trees of Luxembourg.

“How gloomy my life has become!” he said to himself. “Young girls are always appearing to me, only formerly they were angels and now they are ghouls.”

CHAPTER III — QUADRIFRONS

That evening, as he was undressing preparatory to going to bed, his hand came in contact, in the pocket of his coat, with the packet which he had picked up on the boulevard. He had forgotten it. He thought that it would be well to open it, and that this package might possibly contain the address of the young girls, if it really belonged to them, and, in any case, the information necessary to a restitution to the person who had lost it.

He opened the envelope.

It was not sealed and contained four letters, also unsealed.

They bore addresses.

All four exhaled a horrible odor of tobacco.

The first was addressed: “To Madame, Madame la Marquise de Grucheray, the place opposite the Chamber of Deputies, No.—”

Marius said to himself, that he should probably find in it the information which he sought, and that, moreover, the letter being open, it was probable that it could be read without impropriety.

It was conceived as follows: —

Madame la Marquise: The virtue of clemency and piety is that which most closely unites sosiety. Turn your Christian spirit and cast a look of compassion on this unfortunate Spanish victim of loyalty and attachment to the sacred cause of legitimacy, who has given with his blood, consecrated his fortune, evverything, to defend that cause, and to-day finds himself in the greatest missery. He doubts not that your honorable person will grant succor to preserve an existence exteremely painful for a military man of education and honor full of wounds, counts in advance on the humanity which animates you and on the interest which Madame la Marquise bears to a nation so unfortunate. Their prayer will not be in vain, and their gratitude will preserve theirs charming souvenir.

My respectful sentiments, with which I have the honor to be

Madame,

Don Alvares, Spanish Captain
of Cavalry, a royalist who
has take refuge in France,
who finds himself on travells
for his country, and the

resources are lacking him to
continue his travells.

No address was joined to the signature. Marius hoped to find the address in the second letter, whose superscription read: A Madame, Madame la Comtesse de Montvernet, Rue Cassette, No. 9. This is what Marius read in it: —

Madame la Comtesse: It is an unhappy mother of a family of six
children the last of which is only eight months old. I sick
since my last confinement, abandoned by my husband five months ago,
haveing no resources in the world the most frightful indigance.

In the hope of Madame la Comtesse, she has the honor to be,
Madame, with profound respect,

Mistress Balizard.

Marius turned to the third letter, which was a petition like the preceding; he read: —

Monsieur Pabourgeot, Elector, wholesale stocking merchant,
Rue Saint-Denis on the corner of the Rue aux Fers.

I permit myself to address you this letter to beg you to grant me the pretious favor of your simpaties and to interest yourself in a man of letters who has just sent a drama to the Theatre-Francais. The subject is historical, and the action takes place in Auvergne in the time of the Empire; the style, I think, is natural, laconic, and may have some merit. There are couplets to be sung in four places. The comic, the serious, the unexpected, are mingled in a variety of characters, and a tinge of romanticism lightly spread through all the intrigue which proceeds misteriously, and ends, after striking altarations, in the midst of many beautiful strokes of brilliant scenes.

My principal object is to satisfi the desire which progressively animates the man of our century, that is to say, the fashion, that capritious and bizarre weathervane which changes at almost every new wind.

In spite of these qualities I have reason to fear that jealousy, the egotism of priviliged authors, may obtaine my exclusion from the theatre, for I am not ignorant of the mortifications with which new-comers are treated.

Monsiuer Pabourgeot, your just reputation as an enlightened protector of men of litters emboldens me to send you my daughter who will explain our indigant situation to you, lacking bread and fire in this wynter season. When I say to you that I beg you to accept the dedication of my drama which I desire to make to you and of all those that I shall make, is to prove to you how great is my ambition to have the honor of sheltering myself under your protection, and of adorning my writings with your name. If you deign to honor me with the most modest offering, I shall immediately occupy myself in making a piesse of verse to pay you my tribute of gratitude. Which I shall endeavor to render this piesse as perfect as possible, will be sent to you before it is inserted at the beginning of the drama and delivered on the stage.

To Monsieur
and Madame Pabourgeot,
My most respectful complements,
Genflot, man of letters.

P. S. Even if it is only forty sous.

Excuse me for sending my daughter and not presenting myself, but sad motives connected with the toilet do not permit me, alas! to go out.

Finally, Marius opened the fourth letter. The address ran: To the benevolent Gentleman of the church of Saint-Jacquesdu-haut-Pas. It contained the following lines: —

Benevolent Man: If you deign to accompany my daughter, you will behold a misserable calamity, and I will show you my certificates.

At the aspect of these writings your generous soul will be moved with a sentiment of obvious benevolence, for true philosophers always feel lively emotions.

Admit, compassionate man, that it is necessary to suffer the most cruel need, and that it is very painful, for the sake of obtaining

> a little relief, to get oneself attested by the authorities as though one were not free to suffer and to die of inanition while waiting to have our misery relieved. Destinies are very fatal for several and too prodigal or too protecting for others.
>
> I await your presence or your offering, if you deign to make one, and I beseech you to accept the respectful sentiments with which I have the honor to be,
>
> truly magnanimous man,
> your very humble
> and very obedient servant,
> P. Fabantou, dramatic artist.

After perusing these four letters, Marius did not find himself much further advanced than before.

In the first place, not one of the signers gave his address.

Then, they seemed to come from four different individuals, Don Alveras, Mistress Balizard, the poet Genflot, and dramatic artist Fabantou; but the singular thing about these letters was, that all four were written by the same hand.

What conclusion was to be drawn from this, except that they all come from the same person?

Moreover, and this rendered the conjecture all the more probable, the coarse and yellow paper was the same in all four, the odor of tobacco was the same, and, although an attempt had been made to vary the style, the same orthographical faults were reproduced with the greatest tranquillity, and the man of letters Genflot was no more exempt from them than the Spanish captain.

It was waste of trouble to try to solve this petty mystery. Had it not been a chance find, it would have borne the air of a mystification. Marius was too melancholy to take even a chance pleasantry well, and to lend himself to a game which the pavement of the street seemed desirous of playing with him. It seemed to him that he was playing the part of the blind man in blind man’s buff between the four letters, and that they were making sport of him.

Nothing, however, indicated that these letters belonged to the two young girls whom Marius had met on the boulevard. After all, they were evidently papers of no value. Marius replaced them in their envelope, flung the whole into a corner and went to bed. About seven o’clock in the morning, he had just risen and breakfasted, and was trying to settle down to work, when there came a soft knock at his door.

As he owned nothing, he never locked his door, unless occasionally, though very rarely, when he was engaged in some pressing work. Even when absent he left his key in the lock. “You will be robbed,” said Ma’am Bougon. “Of what?” said Marius. The truth is, however, that he had, one day, been robbed of an old pair of boots, to the great triumph of Ma’am Bougon.

There came a second knock, as gentle as the first.

“Come in,” said Marius.

The door opened.

“What do you want, Ma’am Bougon?” asked Marius, without raising his eyes from the books and manuscripts on his table.

A voice which did not belong to Ma’am Bougon replied: —

“Excuse me, sir—”

It was a dull, broken, hoarse, strangled voice, the voice of an old man, roughened with brandy and liquor.

Marius turned round hastily, and beheld a young girl.

CHAPTER IV — A ROSE IN MISERY

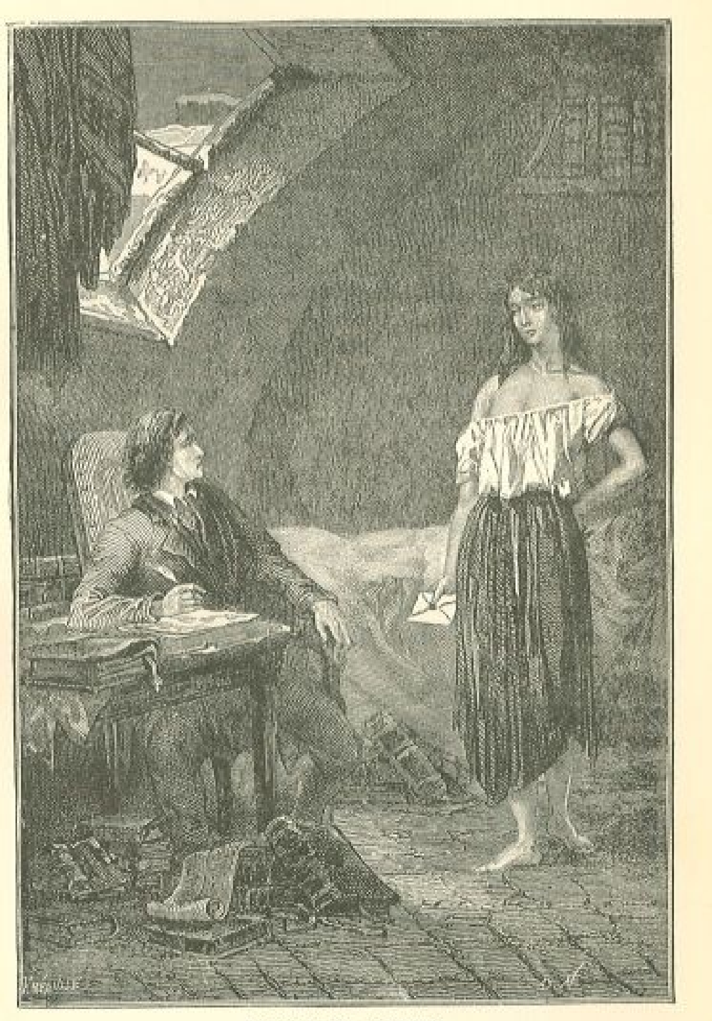

A ROSE IN MISERY.

A very young girl was standing in the half-open door. The dormer window of the garret, through which the light fell, was precisely opposite the door, and illuminated the figure with a wan light. She was a frail, emaciated, slender creature; there was nothing but a chemise and a petticoat upon that chilled and shivering nakedness. Her girdle was a string, her head ribbon a string, her pointed shoulders emerged from her chemise, a blond and lymphatic pallor, earth-colored collar-bones, red hands, a half-open and degraded mouth, missing teeth, dull, bold, base eyes; she had the form of a young girl who has missed her youth, and the look of a corrupt old woman; fifty years mingled with fifteen; one of those beings which are both feeble and horrible, and which cause those to shudder whom they do not cause to weep.

Marius had risen, and was staring in a sort of stupor at this being, who was almost like the forms of the shadows which traverse dreams.

The most heart-breaking thing of all was, that this young girl had not come into the world to be homely. In her early childhood she must even have been pretty. The grace of her age was still struggling against the hideous, premature decrepitude of debauchery and poverty. The remains of beauty were dying away in that face of sixteen, like the pale sunlight which is extinguished under hideous clouds at dawn on a winter’s day.

That face was not wholly unknown to Marius. He thought he remembered having seen it somewhere.

“What do you wish, Mademoiselle?” he asked.

The young girl replied in her voice of a drunken convict: —

“Here is a letter for you, Monsieur Marius.”

She called Marius by his name; he could not doubt that he was the person whom she wanted; but who was this girl? How did she know his name?

Without waiting for him to tell her to advance, she entered. She entered resolutely, staring, with a sort of assurance that made the heart bleed, at the whole room and the unmade bed. Her feet were bare. Large holes in her petticoat permitted glimpses of her long legs and her thin knees. She was shivering.

She held a letter in her hand, which she presented to Marius.

Marius, as he opened the letter, noticed that the enormous wafer which sealed it was still moist. The message could not have come from a distance. He read: —

My amiable neighbor, young man: I have learned of your goodness to me,
that you paid my rent six months ago. I bless you, young man.
My eldest daughter will tell you that we have been without a morsel
of bread for two days, four persons and my spouse ill. If I am
not deseaved in my opinion, I think I may hope that your generous
heart will melt at this statement and the desire will subjugate you
to be propitious to me by daigning to lavish on me a slight favor.

I am with the distinguished consideration which is due to the benefactors of humanity, —

Jondrette.

P.S. My eldest daughter will await your orders, dear Monsieur Marius.

This letter, coming in the very midst of the mysterious adventure which had occupied Marius' thoughts ever since the preceding evening, was like a candle in a cellar. All was suddenly illuminated.

This letter came from the same place as the other four. There was the same writing, the same style, the same orthography, the same paper, the same odor of tobacco.

There were five missives, five histories, five signatures, and a single signer. The Spanish Captain Don Alvares, the unhappy Mistress Balizard, the dramatic poet Genflot, the old comedian Fabantou, were all four named Jondrette, if, indeed, Jondrette himself were named Jondrette.

Marius had lived in the house for a tolerably long time, and he had had, as we have said, but very rare occasion to see, to even catch a glimpse of, his extremely mean neighbors. His mind was elsewhere, and where the mind is, there the eyes are also. He had been obliged more than once to pass the Jondrettes in the corridor or on the stairs; but they were mere forms to him; he had paid so little heed to them, that, on the preceding evening, he had jostled the Jondrette girls on the boulevard, without recognizing them, for it had evidently been they, and it was with great difficulty that the one who had just entered his room had awakened in him, in spite of disgust and pity, a vague recollection of having met her elsewhere.

Now he saw everything clearly. He understood that his neighbor Jondrette, in his distress, exercised the industry of speculating on the charity of benevolent persons, that he procured addresses, and that he wrote under feigned names to people whom he judged to be wealthy and compassionate, letters which his daughters delivered at their risk and peril, for this father had come to such a pass, that he risked his daughters; he was playing a game with fate, and he used them as the stake. Marius understood that probably, judging from their flight on the evening before, from their breathless condition, from their terror and from the words of slang which he had overheard, these unfortunate creatures were plying some inexplicably sad profession, and that the result of the whole was, in the midst of human society, as it is now constituted, two miserable beings who were neither girls nor women, a species of impure and innocent monsters produced by misery.

Sad creatures, without name, or sex, or age, to whom neither good nor evil were any longer possible, and who, on emerging from childhood, have already nothing in this world, neither liberty, nor virtue, nor responsibility. Souls which blossomed out yesterday, and are faded to-day, like those flowers let fall in the streets, which are soiled with every sort of mire, while waiting for some wheel to crush them. Nevertheless, while Marius bent a pained and astonished gaze on her, the young girl was wandering back and forth in the garret with the audacity of a spectre. She kicked about, without troubling herself as to her nakedness. Occasionally her chemise, which was untied and torn, fell almost to her waist. She moved the chairs about, she disarranged the toilet articles which stood on the commode, she handled Marius' clothes, she rummaged about to see what there was in the corners.

"Hullo!" said she, "you have a mirror!"

And she hummed scraps of vaudevilles, as though she had been alone, frolicsome refrains which her hoarse and guttural voice rendered lugubrious.

An indescribable constraint, weariness, and humiliation were perceptible beneath this hardihood. Effrontery is a disgrace.

Nothing could be more melancholy than to see her sport about the room, and, so to speak, flit with the movements of a bird which is frightened by the daylight, or which has broken its wing. One felt that under other conditions of education and destiny, the gay and over-free mien of this young girl might have turned out sweet and charming. Never, even among animals, does the creature born to be a dove change into an osprey. That is only to be seen among men.

Marius reflected, and allowed her to have her way.

She approached the table.

"Ah!" said she, "books!"

A flash pierced her glassy eye. She resumed, and her accent expressed the happiness which she felt in boasting of something, to which no human creature is insensible: —

"I know how to read, I do!"

She eagerly seized a book which lay open on the table, and read with tolerable fluency: —

“ — General Bauduin received orders to take the chateau of Hougomont which stands in the middle of the plain of Waterloo, with five battalions of his brigade.”

She paused.

“Ah! Waterloo! I know about that. It was a battle long ago. My father was there. My father has served in the armies. We are fine Bonapartists in our house, that we are! Waterloo was against the English.”

She laid down the book, caught up a pen, and exclaimed: —

“And I know how to write, too!”

She dipped her pen in the ink, and turning to Marius: —

“Do you want to see? Look here, I’m going to write a word to show you.”

And before he had time to answer, she wrote on a sheet of white paper, which lay in the middle of the table: “The bobbies are here.”

Then throwing down the pen: —

“There are no faults of orthography. You can look. We have received an education, my sister and I. We have not always been as we are now. We were not made—”

Here she paused, fixed her dull eyes on Marius, and burst out laughing, saying, with an intonation which contained every form of anguish, stifled by every form of cynicism: —

“Bah!”

And she began to hum these words to a gay air: —

“J’ai faim, mon père.” I am hungry, father.
Pas de fricot. I have no food.
J’ai froid, ma mère. I am cold, mother.
Pas de tricot. I have no clothes.
Grelotte, Lolotte!
Lolotte! Shiver,
Sanglote, Sob,
Jacquot!” Jacquot!”

She had hardly finished this couplet, when she exclaimed: —

“Do you ever go to the play, Monsieur Marius? I do. I have a little brother who is a friend of the artists, and who gives me tickets sometimes. But I don’t like the benches in the galleries. One is cramped and uncomfortable there. There are rough people there sometimes; and people who smell bad.”

Then she scrutinized Marius, assumed a singular air and said: —

“Do you know, Mr. Marius, that you are a very handsome fellow?”

And at the same moment the same idea occurred to them both, and made her smile and him blush. She stepped up to him, and laid her hand on his shoulder: “You pay no heed to me, but I know you, Mr. Marius. I meet you here on the staircase, and then I often see you going to a person named Father Mabeuf who lives in the direction of Austerlitz, sometimes when I have been strolling in that quarter. It is very becoming to you to have your hair tumbled thus.”

She tried to render her voice soft, but only succeeded in making it very deep. A portion of her words was lost in the transit from her larynx to her lips, as though on a piano where some notes are missing.

Marius had retreated gently.

“Mademoiselle,” said he, with his cool gravity, “I have here a package which belongs to you, I think. Permit me to return it to you.”

And he held out the envelope containing the four letters.

She clapped her hands and exclaimed: —

“We have been looking everywhere for that!”

Then she eagerly seized the package and opened the envelope, saying as she did so: —

“Dieu de Dieu! how my sister and I have hunted! And it was you who found it! On the boulevard, was it not? It must have been on the boulevard? You see, we let it fall when we were running. It was that brat of a sister of mine who was so stupid. When we got home, we could not find it anywhere. As we did not wish to be beaten, as that is useless, as that is entirely useless, as that is absolutely useless, we said that we had carried the letters to the proper persons, and that they had said to us: ‘Nix.’ So here they are, those poor letters! And how did you find out that they belonged to me? Ah! yes, the writing. So it was you that we jostled as we passed last night. We couldn’t see. I said to my sister: ‘Is it a gentleman?’ My sister said to me: ‘I think it is a gentleman.’”

In the meanwhile she had unfolded the petition addressed to “the benevolent gentleman of the church of Saint-Jacquesdu-Haut-Pas.”

“Here!” said she, “this is for that old fellow who goes to mass. By the way, this is his hour. I’ll go and carry it to him. Perhaps he will give us something to breakfast on.”

Then she began to laugh again, and added: —

“Do you know what it will mean if we get a breakfast today? It will mean that we shall have had our breakfast of the day before yesterday, our breakfast of yesterday, our dinner of to-day, and all that at once, and this morning. Come! Parbleu! if you are not satisfied, dogs, burst!”

This reminded Marius of the wretched girl’s errand to himself. He fumbled in his waistcoat pocket, and found nothing there.

The young girl went on, and seemed to have no consciousness of Marius’ presence.

“I often go off in the evening. Sometimes I don’t come home again. Last winter, before we came here, we lived under the arches of the bridges. We huddled together to keep from freezing. My little sister cried. How melancholy the water is! When I thought of drowning myself, I said to myself: ‘No, it’s too cold.’ I go out alone, whenever I choose, I sometimes sleep in the ditches. Do you know, at night, when I walk along the boulevard, I see the trees like forks, I see houses, all black and as big as Notre Dame, I fancy that the white walls are the river, I say to myself: ‘Why, there’s water there!’ The stars are like the lamps in illuminations, one would say that they smoked and that the wind blew them out, I am bewildered, as though horses were breathing in my ears; although it is night, I hear hand-organs and spinning-machines, and I don’t know what all. I think people are flinging stones at me, I flee without knowing whither, everything whirls and whirls. You feel very queer when you have had no food.”

And then she stared at him with a bewildered air.

By dint of searching and ransacking his pockets, Marius had finally collected five francs sixteen sous. This was all he owned in the world for the moment. “At all events,” he thought, “there is my dinner for to-day, and to-morrow we will see.” He kept the sixteen sous, and handed the five francs to the young girl.

She seized the coin.

“Good!” said she, “the sun is shining!”

And, as though the sun had possessed the property of melting the avalanches of slang in her brain, she went on: —

“Five francs! the shiner! a monarch! in this hole! Ain’t this fine! You’re a jolly thief! I’m your humble servant! Bravo for the good fellows! Two days’ wine! and meat! and stew! we’ll have a royal feast! and a good fill!”

She pulled her chemise up on her shoulders, made a low bow to Marius, then a familiar sign with her hand, and went towards the door, saying: —

“Good morning, sir. It’s all right. I’ll go and find my old man.”

As she passed, she caught sight of a dry crust of bread on the commode, which was moulding there amid the dust; she flung herself upon it and bit into it, muttering: —

“That’s good! it’s hard! it breaks my teeth!”

Then she departed.

CHAPTER V — A PROVIDENTIAL PEEP-HOLE

Marius had lived for five years in poverty, in destitution, even in distress, but he now perceived that he had not known real misery. True misery he had but just had a view of. It was its spectre which had just passed before his eyes. In fact, he who has only beheld the misery of man has seen nothing; the misery of woman is what he must see; he who has seen only the misery of woman has seen nothing; he must see the misery of the child.

When a man has reached his last extremity, he has reached his last resources at the same time. Woe to the defenceless beings who surround him! Work, wages, bread, fire, courage, good will, all fail him simultaneously. The light of day seems extinguished without, the moral light within; in these shadows man encounters the feebleness of the woman and the child, and bends them violently to ignominy.

Then all horrors become possible. Despair is surrounded with fragile partitions which all open on either vice or crime.

Health, youth, honor, all the shy delicacies of the young body, the heart, virginity, modesty, that epidermis of the soul, are manipulated in sinister wise by that fumbling which seeks resources, which encounters opprobrium, and which accommodates itself to it. Fathers, mothers, children, brothers, sisters, men, women, daughters, adhere and become incorporated, almost like a mineral formation, in that dusky promiscuousness of sexes, relationships, ages, infamies, and innocences. They crouch, back to back, in a sort of hut of fate. They exchange woe-begone glances. Oh, the unfortunate wretches! How pale they are! How cold they are! It seems as though they dwelt in a planet much further from the sun than ours.

This young girl was to Marius a sort of messenger from the realm of sad shadows. She revealed to him a hideous side of the night.

Marius almost reproached himself for the preoccupations of revery and passion which had prevented his bestowing a glance on his neighbors up to that day. The payment of their rent had been a mechanical movement, which any one would have yielded to; but he, Marius, should have done better than that. What! only a wall separated him from those abandoned beings who lived gropingly in the dark outside the pale of the rest of the world, he was elbow to elbow with them, he was, in some sort, the last link of the human race which they touched, he heard them live, or rather, rattle in the death agony beside him, and he paid no heed to them! Every day, every instant, he heard them walking on the other side of the wall, he heard them go, and come, and speak, and he did not even lend an ear! And groans lay in those words, and he did not even listen to them, his thoughts were elsewhere, given up to dreams, to impossible radiances, to loves in the air, to follies; and all the while, human creatures, his brothers in Jesus Christ, his brothers in the people, were agonizing in vain beside him! He even formed a part of their misfortune, and he aggravated it. For if they had had another neighbor who was less chimerical and more attentive, any ordinary and charitable man, evidently their indigence would have been noticed, their signals of distress would have been perceived, and they would have been taken hold of and rescued! They appeared very corrupt and very depraved, no doubt, very vile, very odious even; but those who fall without becoming degraded are rare; besides, there is a point where the unfortunate and the infamous unite and are confounded in a single word, a fatal word, the miserable; whose fault is this? And then should not the charity be all the more profound, in proportion as the fall is great?

While reading himself this moral lesson, for there were occasions on which Marius, like all truly honest hearts, was his own pedagogue and scolded himself more than he deserved, he stared at the wall which separated him from the Jondrettes, as though he were able to make his gaze, full of pity, penetrate that partition and warm these wretched people. The wall was a thin layer of plaster upheld by lathes and beams, and, as the reader had just learned, it allowed the sound of voices and words to be clearly distinguished. Only a man as dreamy as Marius could have failed to perceive this long before. There was no paper pasted on the wall, either on the side of the Jondrettes or on that of Marius; the coarse construction was visible in its nakedness. Marius examined the partition, almost unconsciously; sometimes revery examines, observes, and scrutinizes as thought would. All at once he sprang up; he had just perceived, near the top, close to the ceiling, a triangular hole, which resulted from the space between three lathes. The plaster which should have filled this cavity was missing, and by mounting on the commode, a view could be had through this aperture into the Jondrettes' attic. Commiseration has, and should have, its curiosity. This aperture formed a sort of peep-hole. It is permissible to gaze at misfortune like a traitor in order to succor it.

“Let us get some little idea of what these people are like,” thought Marius, “and in what condition they are.”

He climbed upon the commode, put his eye to the crevice, and looked.

CHAPTER VI — THE WILD MAN IN HIS LAIR

Cities, like forests, have their caverns in which all the most wicked and formidable creatures which they contain conceal themselves. Only, in cities, that which thus conceals itself is ferocious, unclean, and petty, that is to say, ugly; in forests, that which conceals itself is ferocious, savage, and grand, that is to say, beautiful. Taking one lair with another, the beast's is preferable to the man's. Caverns are better than hovels.

What Marius now beheld was a hovel.

Marius was poor, and his chamber was poverty-stricken, but as his poverty was noble, his garret was neat. The den upon which his eye now rested was abject, dirty, fetid, pestiferous, mean, sordid. The only furniture consisted of a straw chair, an infirm table, some old bits of crockery, and in two of the corners, two indescribable pallets; all the light was furnished by a dormer window of four panes, draped with spiders' webs. Through this aperture there penetrated just enough light to make the face of a man appear like the face of a phantom. The walls had a leprous aspect, and were covered with seams and scars, like a visage disfigured by some horrible malady; a repulsive moisture exuded from them. Obscene sketches roughly sketched with charcoal could be distinguished upon them.

The chamber which Marius occupied had a dilapidated brick pavement; this one was neither tiled nor planked; its inhabitants stepped directly on the antique plaster of the hovel, which had grown black under the long-continued pressure of feet. Upon this uneven floor, where the dirt seemed to be fairly incrusted, and which possessed but one virginity, that of the broom, were capriciously grouped constellations of old shoes, socks, and repulsive rags; however, this room had a fireplace, so it was let for forty francs a year. There was every sort of thing in that fireplace, a brazier, a pot, broken boards, rags suspended from nails, a bird-cage, ashes, and even a little fire. Two brands were smouldering there in a melancholy way.

One thing which added still more to the horrors of this garret was, that it was large. It had projections and angles and black holes, the lower sides of roofs, bays, and promontories. Hence horrible, unfathomable nooks where it seemed as though spiders as big as one's fist, wood-lice as large as one's foot, and perhaps even — who knows? — some monstrous human beings, must be hiding.

One of the pallets was near the door, the other near the window. One end of each touched the fireplace and faced Marius. In a corner near the aperture through which Marius was gazing, a colored engraving in a black frame was suspended to a nail on the wall, and at its bottom, in large letters, was the inscription: THE DREAM. This represented a sleeping woman, and a child, also asleep, the child on the woman's lap, an eagle in a cloud, with a crown in his beak, and the woman thrusting the crown away from the child's head, without awaking the latter; in the background, Napoleon in a glory, leaning on a very blue column with a yellow capital ornamented with this inscription:

MARINGO
AUSTERLITS
IENA
WAGRAMME
ELOT

Beneath this frame, a sort of wooden panel, which was no longer than it was broad, stood on the ground and rested in a sloping attitude against the wall. It had the appearance of a picture with its face turned to the wall, of a frame probably showing a daub on the other side, of some pier-glass detached from a wall and lying forgotten there while waiting to be rehung.

Near the table, upon which Marius descried a pen, ink, and paper, sat a man about sixty years of age, small, thin, livid, haggard, with a cunning, cruel, and uneasy air; a hideous scoundrel.

If Lavater had studied this visage, he would have found the vulture mingled with the attorney there, the bird of prey and the pettifogger rendering each other mutually hideous and complementing each other; the pettifogger making the bird of prey ignoble, the bird of prey making the pettifogger horrible.

This man had a long gray beard. He was clad in a woman's chemise, which allowed his hairy breast and his bare arms, bristling with gray hair, to be seen. Beneath this chemise, muddy trousers and boots through which his toes projected were visible.

He had a pipe in his mouth and was smoking. There was no bread in the hovel, but there was still tobacco.

He was writing probably some more letters like those which Marius had read.

On the corner of the table lay an ancient, dilapidated, reddish volume, and the size, which was the antique 12mo of reading-rooms, betrayed a romance. On the cover sprawled the following title, printed in large capitals: GOD; THE KING; HONOR AND THE LADIES; BY DUCRAY DUMINIL, 1814.

As the man wrote, he talked aloud, and Marius heard his words: —

“The idea that there is no equality, even when you are dead! Just look at Pere Lachaise! The great, those who are rich, are up above, in the acacia alley, which is paved. They can reach it in a carriage. The little people, the poor, the unhappy, well, what of them? they are put down below, where the mud is up to your knees, in the damp places. They are put there so that they will decay the sooner! You cannot go to see them without sinking into the earth.”

He paused, smote the table with his fist, and added, as he ground his teeth: —

“Oh! I could eat the whole world!”

A big woman, who might be forty years of age, or a hundred, was crouching near the fireplace on her bare heels.

She, too, was clad only in a chemise and a knitted petticoat patched with bits of old cloth. A coarse linen apron concealed the half of her petticoat. Although this woman was doubled up and bent together, it could be seen that she was of very lofty stature. She was a sort of giant, beside her husband. She had hideous hair, of a reddish blond which was turning gray, and which she thrust back from time to time, with her enormous shining hands, with their flat nails.

Beside her, on the floor, wide open, lay a book of the same form as the other, and probably a volume of the same romance.

On one of the pallets, Marius caught a glimpse of a sort of tall pale young girl, who sat there half naked and with pendant feet, and who did not seem to be listening or seeing or living.

No doubt the younger sister of the one who had come to his room.

She seemed to be eleven or twelve years of age. On closer scrutiny it was evident that she really was fourteen. She was the child who had said, on the boulevard the evening before: “I bolted, bolted, bolted!”

She was of that puny sort which remains backward for a long time, then suddenly starts up rapidly. It is indigence which produces these melancholy human plants. These creatures have neither childhood nor youth. At fifteen years of age they appear to be twelve, at sixteen they seem twenty. To-day a little girl, to-morrow a woman. One might say that they stride through life, in order to get through with it the more speedily.

At this moment, this being had the air of a child.

Moreover, no trace of work was revealed in that dwelling; no handicraft, no spinning-wheel, not a tool. In one corner lay some ironmongery of dubious aspect. It was the dull listlessness which follows despair and precedes the death agony.

Marius gazed for a while at this gloomy interior, more terrifying than the interior of a tomb, for the human soul could be felt fluttering there, and life was palpitating there. The garret, the cellar, the lowly ditch where certain indigent wretches crawl at the very bottom of the social edifice, is not exactly the sepulchre, but only its antechamber; but, as the wealthy display their greatest magnificence at the entrance of their palaces, it seems that death, which stands directly side by side with them, places its greatest miseries in that vestibule.

The man held his peace, the woman spoke no word, the young girl did not even seem to breathe. The scratching of the pen on the paper was audible.

The man grumbled, without pausing in his writing. “Canaille! canaille! everybody is canaille!”

This variation to Solomon’s exclamation elicited a sigh from the woman.

“Calm yourself, my little friend,” she said. “Don’t hurt yourself, my dear. You are too good to write to all those people, husband.”

Bodies press close to each other in misery, as in cold, but hearts draw apart. This woman must have loved this man, to all appearance, judging from the amount of love within her; but probably, in the daily and reciprocal reproaches of the horrible distress which weighed on the whole group, this had become extinct. There no longer existed in her anything more than the ashes of affection for her husband. Nevertheless, caressing appellations had survived, as is often the case. She called him: My dear, my little friend, my good man, etc., with her mouth while her heart was silent.

The man resumed his writing.

CHAPTER VII — STRATEGY AND TACTICS

Marius, with a load upon his breast, was on the point of descending from the species of observatory which he had improvised, when a sound attracted his attention and caused him to remain at his post.

The door of the attic had just burst open abruptly. The eldest girl made her appearance on the threshold. On her feet, she had large, coarse, men's shoes, bespattered with mud, which had splashed even to her red ankles, and she was wrapped in an old mantle which hung in tatters. Marius had not seen it on her an hour previously, but she had probably deposited it at his door, in order that she might inspire the more pity, and had picked it up again on emerging. She entered, pushed the door to behind her, paused to take breath, for she was completely breathless, then exclaimed with an expression of triumph and joy: —

"He is coming!"

The father turned his eyes towards her, the woman turned her head, the little sister did not stir.

"Who?" demanded her father.

"The gentleman!"

"The philanthropist?"

"Yes."

"From the church of Saint-Jacques?"

"Yes."

"That old fellow?"

"Yes."

"And he is coming?"

"He is following me."

"You are sure?"

"I am sure."

"There, truly, he is coming?"

"He is coming in a fiacre."

"In a fiacre. He is Rothschild."

The father rose.

"How are you sure? If he is coming in a fiacre, how is it that you arrive before him? You gave him our address at least? Did you tell him that it was the last door at the end of the corridor, on the right? If he only does not make a mistake! So you found him at the church? Did he read my letter? What did he say to you?”

“Ta, ta, ta,” said the girl, “how you do gallop on, my good man! See here: I entered the church, he was in his usual place, I made him a reverence, and I handed him the letter; he read it and said to me: ‘Where do you live, my child?’ I said: ‘Monsieur, I will show you.’ He said to me: ‘No, give me your address, my daughter has some purchases to make, I will take a carriage and reach your house at the same time that you do.’ I gave him the address. When I mentioned the house, he seemed surprised and hesitated for an instant, then he said: ‘Never mind, I will come.’ When the mass was finished, I watched him leave the church with his daughter, and I saw them enter a carriage. I certainly did tell him the last door in the corridor, on the right.”

“And what makes you think that he will come?”

“I have just seen the fiacre turn into the Rue Petit-Banquier. That is what made me run so.”

“How do you know that it was the same fiacre?”

“Because I took notice of the number, so there!”

“What was the number?”

“440.”

“Good, you are a clever girl.”

The girl stared boldly at her father, and showing the shoes which she had on her feet: —

“A clever girl, possibly; but I tell you I won’t put these shoes on again, and that I won’t, for the sake of my health, in the first place, and for the sake of cleanliness, in the next. I don’t know anything more irritating than shoes that squelch, and go ghi, ghi, ghi, the whole time. I prefer to go barefoot.”

“You are right,” said her father, in a sweet tone which contrasted with the young girl’s rudeness, “but then, you will not be allowed to enter churches, for poor people must have shoes to do that. One cannot go barefoot to the good God,” he added bitterly.

Then, returning to the subject which absorbed him: —

“So you are sure that he will come?”

“He is following on my heels,” said she.

The man started up. A sort of illumination appeared on his countenance.

"Wife!" he exclaimed, "you hear. Here is the philanthropist. Extinguish the fire."

The stupefied mother did not stir.

The father, with the agility of an acrobat, seized a broken-nosed jug which stood on the chimney, and flung the water on the brands.

Then, addressing his eldest daughter: —

"Here you! Pull the straw off that chair!"

His daughter did not understand.

He seized the chair, and with one kick he rendered it seatless. His leg passed through it.

As he withdrew his leg, he asked his daughter: —

"Is it cold?"

"Very cold. It is snowing."

The father turned towards the younger girl who sat on the bed near the window, and shouted to her in a thundering voice: —

"Quick! get off that bed, you lazy thing! will you never do anything? Break a pane of glass!"

The little girl jumped off the bed with a shiver.

"Break a pane!" he repeated.

The child stood still in bewilderment.

"Do you hear me?" repeated her father, "I tell you to break a pane!"

The child, with a sort of terrified obedience, rose on tiptoe, and struck a pane with her fist. The glass broke and fell with a loud clatter.

"Good," said the father.

He was grave and abrupt. His glance swept rapidly over all the crannies of the garret. One would have said that he was a general making the final preparation at the moment when the battle is on the point of beginning.

The mother, who had not said a word so far, now rose and demanded in a dull, slow, languid voice, whence her words seemed to emerge in a congealed state: —

"What do you mean to do, my dear?"

"Get into bed," replied the man.

His intonation admitted of no deliberation. The mother obeyed, and threw herself heavily on one of the pallets.

In the meantime, a sob became audible in one corner.

"What's that?" cried the father.

The younger daughter exhibited her bleeding fist, without quitting the corner in which she was cowering. She had wounded herself while breaking the window; she went off, near her mother's pallet and wept silently.

It was now the mother's turn to start up and exclaim: —

"Just see there! What follies you commit! She has cut herself breaking that pane for you!"

"So much the better!" said the man. "I foresaw that."

"What? So much the better?" retorted his wife.

"Peace!" replied the father, "I suppress the liberty of the press."

Then tearing the woman's chemise which he was wearing, he made a strip of cloth with which he hastily swathed the little girl's bleeding wrist.

That done, his eye fell with a satisfied expression on his torn chemise.

"And the chemise too," said he, "this has a good appearance."

An icy breeze whistled through the window and entered the room. The outer mist penetrated thither and diffused itself like a whitish sheet of wadding vaguely spread by invisible fingers. Through the broken pane the snow could be seen falling. The snow promised by the Candlemas sun of the preceding day had actually come.

The father cast a glance about him as though to make sure that he had forgotten nothing. He seized an old shovel and spread ashes over the wet brands in such a manner as to entirely conceal them.

Then drawing himself up and leaning against the chimney-piece: —

"Now," said he, "we can receive the philanthropist."

CHAPTER VIII — THE RAY OF LIGHT IN THE HOVEL

The big girl approached and laid her hand in her father’s.

“Feel how cold I am,” said she.

“Bah!” replied the father, “I am much colder than that.”

The mother exclaimed impetuously: —

“You always have something better than any one else, so you do! even bad things.”

“Down with you!” said the man.

The mother, being eyed after a certain fashion, held her tongue.

Silence reigned for a moment in the hovel. The elder girl was removing the mud from the bottom of her mantle, with a careless air; her younger sister continued to sob; the mother had taken the latter’s head between her hands, and was covering it with kisses, whispering to her the while: —

“My treasure, I entreat you, it is nothing of consequence, don’t cry, you will anger your father.”

“No!” exclaimed the father, “quite the contrary! sob! sob! that’s right.”

Then turning to the elder: —

“There now! He is not coming! What if he were not to come! I shall have extinguished my fire, wrecked my chair, torn my shirt, and broken my pane all for nothing.”

“And wounded the child!” murmured the mother.

“Do you know,” went on the father, “that it’s beastly cold in this devil’s garret! What if that man should not come! Oh! See there, you! He makes us wait! He says to himself: ‘Well! they will wait for me! That’s what they’re there for.’ Oh! how I hate them, and with what joy, jubilation, enthusiasm, and satisfaction I could strangle all those rich folks! all those rich folks! These men who pretend to be charitable, who put on airs, who go to mass, who make presents to the priesthood, preachy, preachy, in their skullcaps, and who think themselves above us, and who come for the purpose of humiliating us, and to bring us ‘clothes,’ as they say! old duds that are not worth four sous! And bread! That’s not what I want, pack of rascals that they are, it’s money! Ah! money! Never! Because they say that we would go off and drink it up, and that we are drunkards and idlers! And they! What are they, then, and what have they been in their time! Thieves! They never could have become rich otherwise! Oh! Society ought to be grasped by the four corners of the cloth and tossed into the air, all of it! It would all be smashed, very likely, but at least, no one would have anything, and there would be that much gained! But what is that blockhead of a benevolent gentleman doing? Will he come? Perhaps the animal has forgotten the address! I'll bet that that old beast—"

At that moment there came a light tap at the door, the man rushed to it and opened it, exclaiming, amid profound bows and smiles of adoration: —

"Enter, sir! Deign to enter, most respected benefactor, and your charming young lady, also."

A man of ripe age and a young girl made their appearance on the threshold of the attic.

Marius had not quitted his post. His feelings for the moment surpassed the powers of the human tongue.

It was She!

Whoever has loved knows all the radiant meanings contained in those three letters of that word: She.

It was certainly she. Marius could hardly distinguish her through the luminous vapor which had suddenly spread before his eyes. It was that sweet, absent being, that star which had beamed upon him for six months; it was those eyes, that brow, that mouth, that lovely vanished face which had created night by its departure. The vision had been eclipsed, now it reappeared.

It reappeared in that gloom, in that garret, in that misshapen attic, in all that horror.

Marius shuddered in dismay. What! It was she! The palpitations of his heart troubled his sight. He felt that he was on the brink of bursting into tears! What! He beheld her again at last, after having sought her so long! It seemed to him that he had lost his soul, and that he had just found it again.

She was the same as ever, only a little pale; her delicate face was framed in a bonnet of violet velvet, her figure was concealed beneath a pelisse of black satin. Beneath her long dress, a glimpse could be caught of her tiny foot shod in a silken boot.

She was still accompanied by M. Leblanc.

She had taken a few steps into the room, and had deposited a tolerably bulky parcel on the table.

The eldest Jondrette girl had retired behind the door, and was staring with sombre eyes at that velvet bonnet, that silk mantle, and that charming, happy face.

CHAPTER IX — JONDRETTE COMES NEAR WEEPING

The hovel was so dark, that people coming from without felt on entering it the effect produced on entering a cellar. The two new-comers advanced, therefore, with a certain hesitation, being hardly able to distinguish the vague forms surrounding them, while they could be clearly seen and scrutinized by the eyes of the inhabitants of the garret, who were accustomed to this twilight.

M. Leblanc approached, with his sad but kindly look, and said to Jondrette the father: —

“Monsieur, in this package you will find some new clothes and some woollen stockings and blankets.”

“Our angelic benefactor overwhelms us,” said Jondrette, bowing to the very earth.

Then, bending down to the ear of his eldest daughter, while the two visitors were engaged in examining this lamentable interior, he added in a low and rapid voice: —

“Hey? What did I say? Duds! No money! They are all alike! By the way, how was the letter to that old blockhead signed?”

“Fabantou,” replied the girl.

“The dramatic artist, good!”

It was lucky for Jondrette, that this had occurred to him, for at the very moment, M. Leblanc turned to him, and said to him with the air of a person who is seeking to recall a name: —

“I see that you are greatly to be pitied, Monsieur—”

“Fabantou,” replied Jondrette quickly.

“Monsieur Fabantou, yes, that is it. I remember.”

“Dramatic artist, sir, and one who has had some success.”

Here Jondrette evidently judged the moment propitious for capturing the “philanthropist.” He exclaimed with an accent which smacked at the same time of the vainglory of the mountebank at fairs, and the humility of the mendicant on the highway: —

“A pupil of Talma! Sir! I am a pupil of Talma! Fortune formerly smiled on me — Alas! Now it is misfortune’s turn. You see, my benefactor, no bread, no fire. My poor babes have no fire! My only chair has no seat! A broken pane! And in such weather! My spouse in bed! Ill!”

“Poor woman!” said M. Leblanc.

“My child wounded!” added Jondrette.

The child, diverted by the arrival of the strangers, had fallen to contemplating “the young lady,” and had ceased to sob.

“Cry! bawl!” said Jondrette to her in a low voice.

At the same time he pinched her sore hand. All this was done with the talent of a juggler.

The little girl gave vent to loud shrieks.

The adorable young girl, whom Marius, in his heart, called “his Ursule,” approached her hastily.

“Poor, dear child!” said she.

“You see, my beautiful young lady,” pursued Jondrette “her bleeding wrist! It came through an accident while working at a machine to earn six sous a day. It may be necessary to cut off her arm.”

“Really?” said the old gentleman, in alarm.

The little girl, taking this seriously, fell to sobbing more violently than ever.

“Alas! yes, my benefactor!” replied the father.

For several minutes, Jondrette had been scrutinizing “the benefactor” in a singular fashion. As he spoke, he seemed to be examining the other attentively, as though seeking to summon up his recollections. All at once, profiting by a moment when the new-comers were questioning the child with interest as to her injured hand, he passed near his wife, who lay in her bed with a stupid and dejected air, and said to her in a rapid but very low tone: —

“Take a look at that man!”

Then, turning to M. Leblanc, and continuing his lamentations: —

“You see, sir! All the clothing that I have is my wife’s chemise! And all torn at that! In the depths of winter! I can’t go out for lack of a coat. If I had a coat of any sort, I would go and see Mademoiselle Mars, who knows me and is very fond of me. Does she not still reside in the Rue de la Tour-des-Dames? Do you know, sir? We played together in the provinces. I shared her laurels. Celimene would come to my succor, sir! Elmire would bestow alms on Belisaire! But no, nothing! And not a sou in the house! My wife ill, and not a sou! My daughter dangerously injured, not a sou! My wife suffers from fits of suffocation. It comes from her age, and besides, her nervous system is affected. She ought to have assistance, and my daughter also! But the doctor! But the apothecary! How am I to pay them? I would kneel to a penny, sir! Such is the condition to which the arts are reduced. And do you know, my charming young lady, and you, my generous protector, do you know, you who breathe forth virtue and goodness, and who perfume that church where my daughter sees you every day when she says her prayers? — For I have brought up my children religiously, sir. I did not want them to take to the theatre. Ah! the hussies! If I catch them tripping! I do not jest, that I don't! I read them lessons on honor, on morality, on virtue! Ask them! They have got to walk straight. They are none of your unhappy wretches who begin by having no family, and end by espousing the public. One is Mamselle Nobody, and one becomes Madame Everybody. Deuce take it! None of that in the Fabantou family! I mean to bring them up virtuously, and they shall be honest, and nice, and believe in God, by the sacred name! Well, sir, my worthy sir, do you know what is going to happen to-morrow? To-morrow is the fourth day of February, the fatal day, the last day of grace allowed me by my landlord; if by this evening I have not paid my rent, to-morrow my oldest daughter, my spouse with her fever, my child with her wound, — we shall all four be turned out of here and thrown into the street, on the boulevard, without shelter, in the rain, in the snow. There, sir. I owe for four quarters — a whole year! that is to say, sixty francs."

Jondrette lied. Four quarters would have amounted to only forty francs, and he could not owe four, because six months had not elapsed since Marius had paid for two.

M. Leblanc drew five francs from his pocket and threw them on the table.

Jondrette found time to mutter in the ear of his eldest daughter: —

"The scoundrel! What does he think I can do with his five francs? That won't pay me for my chair and pane of glass! That's what comes of incurring expenses!"

In the meanwhile, M. Leblanc had removed the large brown great-coat which he wore over his blue coat, and had thrown it over the back of the chair.

"Monsieur Fabantou," he said, "these five francs are all that I have about me, but I shall now take my daughter home, and I will return this evening, — it is this evening that you must pay, is it not?"

Jondrette's face lighted up with a strange expression. He replied vivaciously: —

"Yes, respected sir. At eight o'clock, I must be at my landlord's."

"I will be here at six, and I will fetch you the sixty francs."

"My benefactor!" exclaimed Jondrette, overwhelmed. And he added, in a low tone: "Take a good look at him, wife!"

M. Leblanc had taken the arm of the young girl, once more, and had turned towards the door.

"Farewell until this evening, my friends!" said he.

"Six o'clock?" said Jondrette.

"Six o'clock precisely."

At that moment, the overcoat lying on the chair caught the eye of the elder Jondrette girl.

"You are forgetting your coat, sir," said she.

Jondrette darted an annihilating look at his daughter, accompanied by a formidable shrug of the shoulders.

M. Leblanc turned back and said, with a smile: —

"I have not forgotten it, I am leaving it."

"O my protector!" said Jondrette, "my august benefactor, I melt into tears! Permit me to accompany you to your carriage."

"If you come out," answered M. Leblanc, "put on this coat. It really is very cold."

Jondrette did not need to be told twice. He hastily donned the brown great-coat. And all three went out, Jondrette preceding the two strangers.

CHAPTER X — TARIFF OF LICENSED CABS: TWO FRANCS AN HOUR

Marius had lost nothing of this entire scene, and yet, in reality, had seen nothing. His eyes had remained fixed on the young girl, his heart had, so to speak, seized her and wholly enveloped her from the moment of her very first step in that garret. During her entire stay there, he had lived that life of ecstasy which suspends material perceptions and precipitates the whole soul on a single point. He contemplated, not that girl, but that light which wore a satin pelisse and a velvet bonnet. The star Sirius might have entered the room, and he would not have been any more dazzled.

While the young girl was engaged in opening the package, unfolding the clothing and the blankets, questioning the sick mother kindly, and the little injured girl tenderly, he watched her every movement, he sought to catch her words. He knew her eyes, her brow, her beauty, her form, her walk, he did not know the sound of her voice. He had once fancied that he had caught a few words at the Luxembourg, but he was not absolutely sure of the fact. He would have given ten years of his life to hear it, in order that he might bear away in his soul a little of that music. But everything was drowned in the lamentable exclamations and trumpet bursts of Jondrette. This added a touch of genuine wrath to Marius' ecstasy. He devoured her with his eyes. He could not believe that it really was that divine creature whom he saw in the midst of those vile creatures in that monstrous lair. It seemed to him that he beheld a humming-bird in the midst of toads.

When she took her departure, he had but one thought, to follow her, to cling to her trace, not to quit her until he learned where she lived, not to lose her again, at least, after having so miraculously re-discovered her. He leaped down from the commode and seized his hat. As he laid his hand on the lock of the door, and was on the point of opening it, a sudden reflection caused him to pause. The corridor was long, the staircase steep, Jondrette was talkative, M. Leblanc had, no doubt, not yet regained his carriage; if, on turning round in the corridor, or on the staircase, he were to catch sight of him, Marius, in that house, he would, evidently, take the alarm, and find means to escape from him again, and this time it would be final. What was he to do? Should he wait a little? But while he was waiting, the carriage might drive off. Marius was perplexed. At last he accepted the risk and quitted his room.

There was no one in the corridor. He hastened to the stairs. There was no one on the staircase. He descended in all haste, and reached the boulevard in time to see a fiacre turning the corner of the Rue du Petit-Banquier, on its way back to Paris.

Marius rushed headlong in that direction. On arriving at the angle of the boulevard, he caught sight of the fiacre again, rapidly descending the Rue Mouffetard; the carriage was already a long way off, and there was no means of overtaking it; what! run after it? Impossible; and besides, the people in the carriage would assuredly notice an individual running at full speed in pursuit of a fiacre, and the father would recognize him. At that moment, wonderful and unprecedented good luck, Marius perceived an empty cab passing along the boulevard. There was but one thing to be done, to jump into this cab and follow the fiacre. That was sure, efficacious, and free from danger.

Marius made the driver a sign to halt, and called to him: —

“By the hour?”

Marius wore no cravat, he had on his working-coat, which was destitute of buttons, his shirt was torn along one of the plaits on the bosom.

The driver halted, winked, and held out his left hand to Marius, rubbing his forefinger gently with his thumb.

“What is it?” said Marius.

“Pay in advance,” said the coachman.

Marius recollected that he had but sixteen sous about him.

“How much?” he demanded.

“Forty sous.”

“I will pay on my return.”

The driver’s only reply was to whistle the air of La Palisse and to whip up his horse.

Marius stared at the retreating cabriolet with a bewildered air. For the lack of four and twenty sous, he was losing his joy, his happiness, his love! He had seen, and he was becoming blind again. He reflected bitterly, and it must be confessed, with profound regret, on the five francs which he had bestowed, that very morning, on that miserable girl. If he had had those five francs, he would have been saved, he would have been born again, he would have emerged from the limbo and darkness, he would have made his escape from isolation and spleen, from his widowed state; he might have re-knotted the black thread of his destiny to that beautiful golden thread, which had just floated before his eyes and had broken at the same instant, once more! He returned to his hovel in despair.

He might have told himself that M. Leblanc had promised to return in the evening, and that all he had to do was to set about the matter more skilfully, so that he might follow him on that occasion; but, in his contemplation, it is doubtful whether he had heard this.

As he was on the point of mounting the staircase, he perceived, on the other side of the boulevard, near the deserted wall skirting the Rue De la Barriere-des-Gobelins, Jondrette, wrapped in the “philanthropist’s” great-coat, engaged in conversation with one of those men of disquieting aspect who have been dubbed by common consent, prowlers of the barriers; people of equivocal face, of suspicious monologues, who present the air of having evil minds, and who generally sleep in the daytime, which suggests the supposition that they work by night.

These two men, standing there motionless and in conversation, in the snow which was falling in whirlwinds, formed a group that a policeman would surely have observed, but which Marius hardly noticed.

Still, in spite of his mournful preoccupation, he could not refrain from saying to himself that this prowler of the barriers with whom Jondrette was talking resembled a certain Panchaud, alias Printanier, alias Bigrenaille, whom Courfeyrac had once pointed out to him as a very dangerous nocturnal roamer. This man’s name the reader has learned in the preceding book. This Panchaud, alias Printanier, alias Bigrenaille, figured later on in many criminal trials, and became a notorious rascal. He was at that time only a famous rascal. To-day he exists in the state of tradition among ruffians and assassins. He was at the head of a school towards the end of the last reign. And in the evening, at nightfall, at the hour when groups form and talk in whispers, he was discussed at La Force in the Fosse-aux-Lions. One might even, in that prison, precisely at the spot where the sewer which served the unprecedented escape, in broad daylight, of thirty prisoners, in 1843, passes under the culvert, read his name, PANCHAUD, audaciously carved by his own hand on the wall of the sewer, during one of his attempts at flight. In 1832, the police already had their eye on him, but he had not as yet made a serious beginning.

CHAPTER XI — OFFERS OF SERVICE FROM MISERY TO WRETCHEDNESS

Marius ascended the stairs of the hovel with slow steps; at the moment when he was about to re-enter his cell, he caught sight of the elder Jondrette girl following him through the corridor. The very sight of this girl was odious to him; it was she who had his five francs, it was too late to demand them back, the cab was no longer there, the fiacre was far away. Moreover, she would not have given them back. As for questioning her about the residence of the persons who had just been there, that was useless; it was evident that she did not know, since the letter signed Fabantou had been addressed "to the benevolent gentleman of the church of Saint-Jacquesdu-Haut-Pas."

Marius entered his room and pushed the door to after him.

It did not close; he turned round and beheld a hand which held the door half open.

"What is it?" he asked, "who is there?"

It was the Jondrette girl.

"Is it you?" resumed Marius almost harshly, "still you! What do you want with me?"

She appeared to be thoughtful and did not look at him. She no longer had the air of assurance which had characterized her that morning. She did not enter, but held back in the darkness of the corridor, where Marius could see her through the half-open door.

"Come now, will you answer?" cried Marius. "What do you want with me?"

She raised her dull eyes, in which a sort of gleam seemed to flicker vaguely, and said: —

"Monsieur Marius, you look sad. What is the matter with you?"

"With me!" said Marius.

"Yes, you."

"There is nothing the matter with me."

"Yes, there is!"

"No."

"I tell you there is!"

“Let me alone!”

Marius gave the door another push, but she retained her hold on it.

“Stop,” said she, “you are in the wrong. Although you are not rich, you were kind this morning. Be so again now. You gave me something to eat, now tell me what ails you. You are grieved, that is plain. I do not want you to be grieved. What can be done for it? Can I be of any service? Employ me. I do not ask for your secrets, you need not tell them to me, but I may be of use, nevertheless. I may be able to help you, since I help my father. When it is necessary to carry letters, to go to houses, to inquire from door to door, to find out an address, to follow any one, I am of service. Well, you may assuredly tell me what is the matter with you, and I will go and speak to the persons; sometimes it is enough if some one speaks to the persons, that suffices to let them understand matters, and everything comes right. Make use of me.”

An idea flashed across Marius’ mind. What branch does one disdain when one feels that one is falling?

He drew near to the Jondrette girl.

“Listen—” he said to her.

She interrupted him with a gleam of joy in her eyes.

“Oh yes, do call me thou! I like that better.”

“Well,” he resumed, “thou hast brought hither that old gentleman and his daughter!”

“Yes.”

“Dost thou know their address?”

“No.”

“Find it for me.”

The Jondrette’s dull eyes had grown joyous, and they now became gloomy.

“Is that what you want?” she demanded.

“Yes.”

“Do you know them?”

“No.”

“That is to say,” she resumed quickly, “you do not know her, but you wish to know her.”

This them which had turned into her had something indescribably significant and bitter about it.

“Well, can you do it?” said Marius.

“You shall have the beautiful lady’s address.”

There was still a shade in the words “the beautiful lady” which troubled Marius. He resumed: —

“Never mind, after all, the address of the father and daughter. Their address, indeed!”

She gazed fixedly at him.

“What will you give me?”

“Anything you like.”

“Anything I like?”

“Yes.”

“You shall have the address.”

She dropped her head; then, with a brusque movement, she pulled to the door, which closed behind her.

Marius found himself alone.

He dropped into a chair, with his head and both elbows on his bed, absorbed in thoughts which he could not grasp, and as though a prey to vertigo. All that had taken place since the morning, the appearance of the angel, her disappearance, what that creature had just said to him, a gleam of hope floating in an immense despair, — this was what filled his brain confusedly.

All at once he was violently aroused from his revery.

He heard the shrill, hard voice of Jondrette utter these words, which were fraught with a strange interest for him: —

“I tell you that I am sure of it, and that I recognized him.”

Of whom was Jondrette speaking? Whom had he recognized? M. Leblanc? The father of “his Ursule”? What! Did Jondrette know him? Was Marius about to obtain in this abrupt and unexpected fashion all the information without which his life was so dark to him? Was he about to learn at last who it was that he loved, who that young girl was? Who her father was? Was the dense shadow which enwrapped them on the point of being dispelled? Was the veil about to be rent? Ah! Heavens!

He bounded rather than climbed upon his commode, and resumed his post near the little peep-hole in the partition wall.

Again he beheld the interior of Jondrette’s hovel.

CHAPTER XII — THE USE MADE OF M. LEBLANC’S FIVE-FRANC PIECE

Nothing in the aspect of the family was altered, except that the wife and daughters had levied on the package and put on woollen stockings and jackets. Two new blankets were thrown across the two beds.

Jondrette had evidently just returned. He still had the breathlessness of out of doors. His daughters were seated on the floor near the fireplace, the elder engaged in dressing the younger’s wounded hand. His wife had sunk back on the bed near the fireplace, with a face indicative of astonishment. Jondrette was pacing up and down the garret with long strides. His eyes were extraordinary.

The woman, who seemed timid and overwhelmed with stupor in the presence of her husband, turned to say: —

“What, really? You are sure?”

“Sure! Eight years have passed! But I recognize him! Ah! I recognize him. I knew him at once! What! Didn’t it force itself on you?”

“No.”

“But I told you: ‘Pay attention!’ Why, it is his figure, it is his face, only older, — there are people who do not grow old, I don’t know how they manage it, — it is the very sound of his voice. He is better dressed, that is all! Ah! you mysterious old devil, I’ve got you, that I have!”

He paused, and said to his daughters: —

“Get out of here, you! — It’s queer that it didn’t strike you!”

They arose to obey.

The mother stammered: —

“With her injured hand.”

“The air will do it good,” said Jondrette. “Be off.”

It was plain that this man was of the sort to whom no one offers to reply. The two girls departed.

At the moment when they were about to pass through the door, the father detained the elder by the arm, and said to her with a peculiar accent: —

“You will be here at five o’clock precisely. Both of you. I shall need you.”

Marius redoubled his attention.

On being left alone with his wife, Jondrette began to pace the room again, and made the tour of it two or three times in silence. Then he spent several minutes in tucking the lower part of the woman's chemise which he wore into his trousers.

All at once, he turned to the female Jondrette, folded his arms and exclaimed: —

"And would you like to have me tell you something? The young lady—"

"Well, what?" retorted his wife, "the young lady?"

Marius could not doubt that it was really she of whom they were speaking. He listened with ardent anxiety. His whole life was in his ears.

But Jondrette had bent over and spoke to his wife in a whisper. Then he straightened himself up and concluded aloud: —

"It is she!"

"That one?" said his wife.

"That very one," said the husband.

No expression can reproduce the significance of the mother's words. Surprise, rage, hate, wrath, were mingled and combined in one monstrous intonation. The pronunciation of a few words, the name, no doubt, which her husband had whispèred in her ear, had sufficed to rouse this huge, somnolent woman, and from being repulsive she became terrible.

"It is not possible!" she cried. "When I think that my daughters are going barefoot, and have not a gown to their backs! What! A satin pelisse, a velvet bonnet, boots, and everything; more than two hundred francs' worth of clothes! so that one would think she was a lady! No, you are mistaken! Why, in the first place, the other was hideous, and this one is not so bad-looking! She really is not bad-looking! It can't be she!"

"I tell you that it is she. You will see."

At this absolute assertion, the Jondrette woman raised her large, red, blonde face and stared at the ceiling with a horrible expression. At that moment, she seemed to Marius even more to be feared than her husband. She was a sow with the look of a tigress.

"What!" she resumed, "that horrible, beautiful young lady, who gazed at my daughters with an air of pity, — she is that beggar brat! Oh! I should like to kick her stomach in for her!"

She sprang off of the bed, and remained standing for a moment, her hair in disorder, her nostrils dilating, her mouth half open, her fists clenched and drawn back. Then she fell back on the bed once more. The man paced to and fro and paid no attention to his female.

After a silence lasting several minutes, he approached the female Jondrette, and halted in front of her, with folded arms, as he had done a moment before: —

“And shall I tell you another thing?”

“What is it?” she asked.

He answered in a low, curt voice: —

“My fortune is made.”

The woman stared at him with the look that signifies: “Is the person who is addressing me on the point of going mad?”

He went on: —

“Thunder! It was not so very long ago that I was a parishioner of the parish of die-of-hunger-if-you-have-a-fire,-die-of-cold-if-you-have-bread! I have had enough of misery! my share and other people’s share! I am not joking any longer, I don’t find it comic any more, I’ve had enough of puns, good God! no more farces, Eternal Father! I want to eat till I am full, I want to drink my fill! to gormandize! to sleep! to do nothing! I want to have my turn, so I do, come now! before I die! I want to be a bit of a millionnaire!”

He took a turn round the hovel, and added: —

“Like other people.”

“What do you mean by that?” asked the woman.

He shook his head, winked, screwed up one eye, and raised his voice like a medical professor who is about to make a demonstration: —

“What do I mean by that? Listen!”

“Hush!” muttered the woman, “not so loud! These are matters which must not be overheard.”

“Bah! Who’s here? Our neighbor? I saw him go out a little while ago. Besides, he doesn’t listen, the big booby. And I tell you that I saw him go out.”

Nevertheless, by a sort of instinct, Jondrette lowered his voice, although not sufficiently to prevent Marius hearing his words. One favorable circumstance, which enabled Marius not to lose a word of this conversation was the falling snow which deadened the sound of vehicles on the boulevard.

This is what Marius heard: —

“Listen carefully. The Croesus is caught, or as good as caught! That’s all settled already. Everything is arranged. I have seen some people. He will come here this evening at six o’clock. To bring sixty francs, the rascal! Did you notice how I played that game on him, my sixty francs, my landlord, my fourth of February? I don’t even owe for one quarter! Isn’t he a fool! So he will come at six o’clock! That’s the hour when our neighbor goes to his dinner. Mother Bougon is off washing dishes in the city. There’s not a soul in the house. The neighbor never comes home until eleven o’clock. The children shall stand on watch. You shall help us. He will give in.”

“And what if he does not give in?” demanded his wife.

Jondrette made a sinister gesture, and said: —

“We’ll fix him.”

And he burst out laughing.

This was the first time Marius had seen him laugh. The laugh was cold and sweet, and provoked a shudder.

Jondrette opened a cupboard near the fireplace, and drew from it an old cap, which he placed on his head, after brushing it with his sleeve.

“Now,” said he, “I’m going out. I have some more people that I must see. Good ones. You’ll see how well the whole thing will work. I shall be away as short a time as possible, it’s a fine stroke of business, do you look after the house.”

And with both fists thrust into the pockets of his trousers, he stood for a moment in thought, then exclaimed: —

“Do you know, it’s mighty lucky, by the way, that he didn’t recognize me! If he had recognized me on his side, he would not have come back again. He would have slipped through our fingers! It was my beard that saved us! my romantic beard! my pretty little romantic beard!”

And again he broke into a laugh.

He stepped to the window. The snow was still falling, and streaking the gray of the sky.

“What beastly weather!” said he.

Then lapping his overcoat across his breast: —

“This rind is too large for me. Never mind,” he added, “he did a devilish good thing in leaving it for me, the old scoundrel! If it hadn’t been for that, I couldn’t have gone out, and everything would have gone wrong! What small points things hang on, anyway!”

And pulling his cap down over his eyes, he quitted the room.

He had barely had time to take half a dozen steps from the door, when the door opened again, and his savage but intelligent face made its appearance once more in the opening.

“I came near forgetting,” said he. “You are to have a brazier of charcoal ready.”

And he flung into his wife’s apron the five-franc piece which the “philanthropist” had left with him.

“A brazier of charcoal?” asked his wife.

“Yes.”

“How many bushels?”

“Two good ones.”

“That will come to thirty sous. With the rest I will buy something for dinner.”

“The devil, no.”

“Why?”

“Don’t go and spend the hundred-sou piece.”

“Why?”

“Because I shall have to buy something, too.”

“What?”

“Something.”

“How much shall you need?”

“Whereabouts in the neighborhood is there an ironmonger’s shop?”

“Rue Mouffetard.”

“Ah! yes, at the corner of a street; I can see the shop.”

“But tell me how much you will need for what you have to purchase?”

“Fifty sous — three francs.”

“There won’t be much left for dinner.”

“Eating is not the point to-day. There’s something better to be done.”

“That’s enough, my jewel.”

At this word from his wife, Jondrette closed the door again, and this time, Marius heard his step die away in the corridor of the hovel, and descend the staircase rapidly.

At that moment, one o’clock struck from the church of Saint-Medard.

CHAPTER XIII — SOLUS CUM SOLO, IN LOCO REMOTO, NON COGITABUNTUR ORARE

PATER NOSTER

Marius, dreamer as he was, was, as we have said, firm and energetic by nature. His habits of solitary meditation, while they had developed in him sympathy and compassion, had, perhaps, diminished the faculty for irritation, but had left intact the power of waxing indignant; he had the kindliness of a brahmin, and the severity of a judge; he took pity upon a toad, but he crushed a viper. Now, it was into a hole of vipers that his glance had just been directed, it was a nest of monsters that he had beneath his eyes.

“These wretches must be stamped upon,” said he.

Not one of the enigmas which he had hoped to see solved had been elucidated; on the contrary, all of them had been rendered more dense, if anything; he knew nothing more about the beautiful maiden of the Luxembourg and the man whom he called M. Leblanc, except that Jondrette was acquainted with them. Athwart the mysterious words which had been uttered, the only thing of which he caught a distinct glimpse was the fact that an ambush was in course of preparation, a dark but terrible trap; that both of them were incurring great danger, she probably, her father certainly; that they must be saved; that the hideous plots of the Jondrettes must be thwarted, and the web of these spiders broken.

He scanned the female Jondrette for a moment. She had pulled an old sheet-iron stove from a corner, and she was rummaging among the old heap of iron.

He descended from the commode as softly as possible, taking care not to make the least noise. Amid his terror as to what was in preparation, and in the horror with which the Jondrettes had inspired him, he experienced a sort of joy at the idea that it might be granted to him perhaps to render a service to the one whom he loved.

But how was it to be done? How warn the persons threatened? He did not know their address. They had reappeared for an instant before his eyes, and had then plunged back again into the immense depths of Paris. Should he wait for M. Leblanc at the door that evening at six o’clock, at the moment of his arrival, and warn him of the trap? But Jondrette and his men would see him on the watch, the spot was lonely, they were stronger than he, they would devise means to seize him or to get him away, and the man whom Marius was anxious to save would be lost. One o’clock had just struck, the trap was to be sprung at six. Marius had five hours before him.

There was but one thing to be done.

He put on his decent coat, knotted a silk handkerchief round his neck, took his hat, and went out, without making any more noise than if he had been treading on moss with bare feet.

Moreover, the Jondrette woman continued to rummage among her old iron.

Once outside of the house, he made for the Rue du Petit-Banquier.

He had almost reached the middle of this street, near a very low wall which a man can easily step over at certain points, and which abuts on a waste space, and was walking slowly, in consequence of his preoccupied condition, and the snow deadened the sound of his steps; all at once he heard voices talking very close by. He turned his head, the street was deserted, there was not a soul in it, it was broad daylight, and yet he distinctly heard voices.

It occurred to him to glance over the wall which he was skirting.

There, in fact, sat two men, flat on the snow, with their backs against the wall, talking together in subdued tones.

These two persons were strangers to him; one was a bearded man in a blouse, and the other a long-haired individual in rags. The bearded man had on a fez, the other’s head was bare, and the snow had lodged in his hair.

By thrusting his head over the wall, Marius could hear their remarks.

The hairy one jogged the other man’s elbow and said: —

“ — With the assistance of Patron-Minette, it can’t fail.”

“Do you think so?” said the bearded man.

And the long-haired one began again: —

“It’s as good as a warrant for each one, of five hundred balls, and the worst that can happen is five years, six years, ten years at the most!”

The other replied with some hesitation, and shivering beneath his fez: —

“That’s a real thing. You can’t go against such things.”

“I tell you that the affair can’t go wrong,” resumed the long-haired man. “Father What’s-his-name’s team will be already harnessed.”

Then they began to discuss a melodrama that they had seen on the preceding evening at the Gaite Theatre.

Marius went his way.

It seemed to him that the mysterious words of these men, so strangely hidden behind that wall, and crouching in the snow, could not but bear some relation to Jondrette’s abominable projects. That must be the affair.

He directed his course towards the faubourg Saint-Marceau and asked at the first shop he came to where he could find a commissary of police.

He was directed to Rue de Pontoise, No. 14.

Thither Marius betook himself.

As he passed a baker’s shop, he bought a two-penny roll, and ate it, foreseeing that he should not dine.

On the way, he rendered justice to Providence. He reflected that had he not given his five francs to the Jondrette girl in the morning, he would have followed M. Leblanc’s fiacre, and consequently have remained ignorant of everything, and that there would have been no obstacle to the trap of the Jondrettes and that M. Leblanc would have been lost, and his daughter with him, no doubt.

CHAPTER XIV — IN WHICH A POLICE AGENT BESTOWS TWO FISTFULS ON A LAWYER

On arriving at No. 14, Rue de Pontoise, he ascended to the first floor and inquired for the commissary of police.

“The commissary of police is not here,” said a clerk; “but there is an inspector who takes his place. Would you like to speak to him? Are you in haste?”

“Yes,” said Marius.

The clerk introduced him into the commissary’s office. There stood a tall man behind a grating, leaning against a stove, and holding up with both hands the tails of a vast topcoat, with three collars. His face was square, with a thin, firm mouth, thick, gray, and very ferocious whiskers, and a look that was enough to turn your pockets inside out. Of that glance it might have been well said, not that it penetrated, but that it searched.

This man’s air was not much less ferocious nor less terrible than Jondrette’s; the dog is, at times, no less terrible to meet than the wolf.

“What do you want?” he said to Marius, without adding “monsieur.”

“Is this Monsieur le Commissaire de Police?”

“He is absent. I am here in his stead.”

“The matter is very private.”

“Then speak.”

“And great haste is required.”

“Then speak quick.”

This calm, abrupt man was both terrifying and reassuring at one and the same time. He inspired fear and confidence. Marius related the adventure to him: That a person with whom he was not acquainted otherwise than by sight, was to be inveigled into a trap that very evening; that, as he occupied the room adjoining the den, he, Marius Pontmercy, a lawyer, had heard the whole plot through the partition; that the wretch who had planned the trap was a certain Jondrette; that there would be accomplices, probably some prowlers of the barriers, among others a certain Panchaud, alias Printanier, alias Bigrenaille; that Jondrette’s daughters were to lie in wait; that there was no way of warning the threatened man, since he did not even know his name; and that, finally, all this was to be carried out at six o'clock that evening, at the most deserted point of the Boulevard de l'Hopital, in house No. 50-52.

At the sound of this number, the inspector raised his head, and said coldly: —

"So it is in the room at the end of the corridor?"

"Precisely," answered Marius, and he added: "Are you acquainted with that house?"

The inspector remained silent for a moment, then replied, as he warmed the heel of his boot at the door of the stove: —

"Apparently."

He went on, muttering between his teeth, and not addressing Marius so much as his cravat: —

"Patron-Minette must have had a hand in this."

This word struck Marius.

"Patron-Minette," said he, "I did hear that word pronounced, in fact."

And he repeated to the inspector the dialogue between the long-haired man and the bearded man in the snow behind the wall of the Rue du Petit-Banquier.

The inspector muttered: —

"The long-haired man must be Brujon, and the bearded one Demi-Liard, alias Deux-Milliards."

He had dropped his eyelids again, and became absorbed in thought.

"As for Father What's-his-name, I think I recognize him. Here, I've burned my coat. They always have too much fire in these cursed stoves. Number 50-52. Former property of Gorbeau."

Then he glanced at Marius.

"You saw only that bearded and that long-haired man?"

"And Panchaud."

"You didn't see a little imp of a dandy prowling about the premises?"

"No."

"Nor a big lump of matter, resembling an elephant in the Jardin des Plantes?"

"No."

"Nor a scamp with the air of an old red tail?"

"No."

“As for the fourth, no one sees him, not even his adjutants, clerks, and employees. It is not surprising that you did not see him.”

“No. Who are all those persons?” asked Marius.

The inspector answered: —

“Besides, this is not the time for them.”

He relapsed into silence, then resumed: —

“50-52. I know that barrack. Impossible to conceal ourselves inside it without the artists seeing us, and then they will get off simply by countermanding the vaudeville. They are so modest! An audience embarrasses them. None of that, none of that. I want to hear them sing and make them dance.”

This monologue concluded, he turned to Marius, and demanded, gazing at him intently the while: —

“Are you afraid?”

“Of what?” said Marius.

“Of these men?”

“No more than yourself!” retorted Marius rudely, who had begun to notice that this police agent had not yet said “monsieur” to him.

The inspector stared still more intently at Marius, and continued with sententious solemnity: —

“There, you speak like a brave man, and like an honest man. Courage does not fear crime, and honesty does not fear authority.”

Marius interrupted him: —

“That is well, but what do you intend to do?”

The inspector contented himself with the remark: —

“The lodgers have pass-keys with which to get in at night. You must have one.”

“Yes,” said Marius.

“Have you it about you?”

“Yes.”

“Give it to me,” said the inspector.

Marius took his key from his waistcoat pocket, handed it to the inspector and added: —

“If you will take my advice, you will come in force.”

The inspector cast on Marius such a glance as Voltaire might have bestowed on a provincial academician who had suggested a rhyme to him; with one movement he plunged his hands, which were enormous, into the two immense pockets of his top-coat, and pulled out two small steel pistols, of the sort called “knock-me-downs.” Then he presented them to Marius, saying rapidly, in a curt tone: —

“Take these. Go home. Hide in your chamber, so that you may be supposed to have gone out. They are loaded. Each one carries two balls. You will keep watch; there is a hole in the wall, as you have informed me. These men will come. Leave them to their own devices for a time. When you think matters have reached a crisis, and that it is time to put a stop to them, fire a shot. Not too soon. The rest concerns me. A shot into the ceiling, the air, no matter where. Above all things, not too soon. Wait until they begin to put their project into execution; you are a lawyer; you know the proper point.” Marius took the pistols and put them in the side pocket of his coat.

“That makes a lump that can be seen,” said the inspector. “Put them in your trousers pocket.”

Marius hid the pistols in his trousers pockets.

“Now,” pursued the inspector, “there is not a minute more to be lost by any one. What time is it? Half-past two. Seven o’clock is the hour?”

“Six o’clock,” answered Marius.

“I have plenty of time,” said the inspector, “but no more than enough. Don’t forget anything that I have said to you. Bang. A pistol shot.”

“Rest easy,” said Marius.

And as Marius laid his hand on the handle of the door on his way out, the inspector called to him: —

“By the way, if you have occasion for my services between now and then, come or send here. You will ask for Inspector Javert.”

CHAPTER XV — JONDRETTE MAKES HIS PURCHASES

A few moments later, about three o’clock, Courfeyrac chanced to be passing along the Rue Mouffetard in company with Bossuet. The snow had redoubled in violence, and filled the air. Bossuet was just saying to Courfeyrac: —

“One would say, to see all these snow-flakes fall, that there was a plague of white butterflies in heaven.” All at once, Bossuet caught sight of Marius coming up the street towards the barrier with a peculiar air.

“Hold!” said Bossuet. “There’s Marius.”

“I saw him,” said Courfeyrac. “Don’t let’s speak to him.”

“Why?”

“He is busy.”

“With what?”

“Don’t you see his air?”

“What air?”

“He has the air of a man who is following some one.”

“That’s true,” said Bossuet.

“Just see the eyes he is making!” said Courfeyrac.

“But who the deuce is he following?”

“Some fine, flowery bonneted wench! He’s in love.”

“But,” observed Bossuet, “I don’t see any wench nor any flowery bonnet in the street. There’s not a woman round.”

Courfeyrac took a survey, and exclaimed: —

“He’s following a man!”

A man, in fact, wearing a gray cap, and whose gray beard could be distinguished, although they only saw his back, was walking along about twenty paces in advance of Marius.

This man was dressed in a great-coat which was perfectly new and too large for him, and in a frightful pair of trousers all hanging in rags and black with mud.

Bossuet burst out laughing.

“Who is that man?”

“He?” retorted Courfeyrac, “he’s a poet. Poets are very fond of wearing the trousers of dealers in rabbit skins and the overcoats of peers of France.”

“Let’s see where Marius will go,” said Bossuet; “let’s see where the man is going, let’s follow them, hey?”

“Bossuet!” exclaimed Courfeyrac, “eagle of Meaux! You are a prodigious brute. Follow a man who is following another man, indeed!”

They retraced their steps.

Marius had, in fact, seen Jondrette passing along the Rue Mouffetard, and was spying on his proceedings.

Jondrette walked straight ahead, without a suspicion that he was already held by a glance.

He quitted the Rue Mouffetard, and Marius saw him enter one of the most terrible hovels in the Rue Gracieuse; he remained there about a quarter of an hour, then returned to the Rue Mouffetard. He halted at an ironmonger’s shop, which then stood at the corner of the Rue Pierre-Lombard, and a few minutes later Marius saw him emerge from the shop, holding in his hand a huge cold chisel with a white wood handle, which he concealed beneath his great-coat. At the top of the Rue Petit-Gentilly he turned to the left and proceeded rapidly to the Rue du Petit-Banquier. The day was declining; the snow, which had ceased for a moment, had just begun again. Marius posted himself on the watch at the very corner of the Rue du Petit-Banquier, which was deserted, as usual, and did not follow Jondrette into it. It was lucky that he did so, for, on arriving in the vicinity of the wall where Marius had heard the long-haired man and the bearded man conversing, Jondrette turned round, made sure that no one was following him, did not see him, then sprang across the wall and disappeared.

The waste land bordered by this wall communicated with the back yard of an ex-livery stable-keeper of bad repute, who had failed and who still kept a few old single-seated berlins under his sheds.

Marius thought that it would be wise to profit by Jondrette’s absence to return home; moreover, it was growing late; every evening, Ma’am Bougon when she set out for her dish-washing in town, had a habit of locking the door, which was always closed at dusk. Marius had given his key to the inspector of police; it was important, therefore, that he should make haste.

Evening had arrived, night had almost closed in; on the horizon and in the immensity of space, there remained but one spot illuminated by the sun, and that was the moon.

It was rising in a ruddy glow behind the low dome of Salpetriere.

Marius returned to No. 50-52 with great strides. The door was still open when he arrived. He mounted the stairs on tip-toe and glided along the wall of the corridor to his chamber. This corridor, as the reader will remember, was bordered on both sides by attics, all of which were, for the moment, empty and to let. Ma’am Bougon was in the habit of leaving all the doors open. As he passed one of these attics, Marius thought he perceived in the uninhabited cell the motionless heads of four men, vaguely lighted up by a remnant of daylight, falling through a dormer window.

Marius made no attempt to see, not wishing to be seen himself. He succeeded in reaching his chamber without being seen and without making any noise. It was high time. A moment later he heard Ma’am Bougon take her departure, locking the door of the house behind her.

CHAPTER XVI — IN WHICH WILL BE FOUND THE WORDS TO AN ENGLISH AIR WHICH WAS IN FASHION IN 1832

Marius seated himself on his bed. It might have been half-past five o’clock. Only half an hour separated him from what was about to happen. He heard the beating of his arteries as one hears the ticking of a watch in the dark. He thought of the double march which was going on at that moment in the dark, — crime advancing on one side, justice coming up on the other. He was not afraid, but he could not think without a shudder of what was about to take place. As is the case with all those who are suddenly assailed by an unforeseen adventure, the entire day produced upon him the effect of a dream, and in order to persuade himself that he was not the prey of a nightmare, he had to feel the cold barrels of the steel pistols in his trousers pockets.

It was no longer snowing; the moon disengaged itself more and more clearly from the mist, and its light, mingled with the white reflection of the snow which had fallen, communicated to the chamber a sort of twilight aspect.

There was a light in the Jondrette den. Marius saw the hole in the wall shining with a reddish glow which seemed bloody to him.

It was true that the light could not be produced by a candle. However, there was not a sound in the Jondrette quarters, not a soul was moving there, not a soul speaking, not a breath; the silence was glacial and profound, and had it not been for that light, he might have thought himself next door to a sepulchre.

Marius softly removed his boots and pushed them under his bed.

Several minutes elapsed. Marius heard the lower door turn on its hinges; a heavy step mounted the staircase, and hastened along the corridor; the latch of the hovel was noisily lifted; it was Jondrette returning.

Instantly, several voices arose. The whole family was in the garret. Only, it had been silent in the master’s absence, like wolf whelps in the absence of the wolf.

“It’s I,” said he.

“Good evening, daddy,” yelped the girls.

“Well?” said the mother.

“All’s going first-rate,” responded Jondrette, “but my feet are beastly cold. Good! You have dressed up. You have done well! You must inspire confidence.”

“All ready to go out.”

“Don’t forget what I told you. You will do everything sure?”

“Rest easy.”

“Because—” said Jondrette. And he left the phrase unfinished.

Marius heard him lay something heavy on the table, probably the chisel which he had purchased.

“By the way,” said Jondrette, “have you been eating here?”

“Yes,” said the mother. “I got three large potatoes and some salt. I took advantage of the fire to cook them.”

“Good,” returned Jondrette. “To-morrow I will take you out to dine with me. We will have a duck and fixings. You shall dine like Charles the Tenth; all is going well!”

Then he added: —

“The mouse-trap is open. The cats are there.”

He lowered his voice still further, and said: —

“Put this in the fire.”

Marius heard a sound of charcoal being knocked with the tongs or some iron utensil, and Jondrette continued: —

“Have you greased the hinges of the door so that they will not squeak?”

“Yes,” replied the mother.

“What time is it?”

“Nearly six. The half-hour struck from Saint-Medard a while ago.”

“The devil!” ejaculated Jondrette; “the children must go and watch. Come you, do you listen here.”

A whispering ensued.

Jondrette’s voice became audible again: —

“Has old Bougon left?”

“Yes,” said the mother.

“Are you sure that there is no one in our neighbor’s room?”

“He has not been in all day, and you know very well that this is his dinner hour.”

“You are sure?”

“Sure.”

“All the same,” said Jondrette, “there’s no harm in going to see whether he is there. Here, my girl, take the candle and go there.”

Marius fell on his hands and knees and crawled silently under his bed.

Hardly had he concealed himself, when he perceived a light through the crack of his door.

“P’pa,” cried a voice, “he is not in here.”

He recognized the voice of the eldest daughter.

“Did you go in?” demanded her father.

“No,” replied the girl, “but as his key is in the door, he must be out.”

The father exclaimed: —

“Go in, nevertheless.”

The door opened, and Marius saw the tall Jondrette come in with a candle in her hand. She was as she had been in the morning, only still more repulsive in this light.

She walked straight up to the bed. Marius endured an indescribable moment of anxiety; but near the bed there was a mirror nailed to the wall, and it was thither that she was directing her steps. She raised herself on tiptoe and looked at herself in it. In the neighboring room, the sound of iron articles being moved was audible.

She smoothed her hair with the palm of her hand, and smiled into the mirror, humming with her cracked and sepulchral voice: —

Nos amours ont duré toute une semaine,
Mais que du bonheur les instants sont courts!
S’adorer huit jours, c’était bien la peine!
Le temps des amours devrait durer toujours!
Devrait durer toujours! devrait durer toujours!

In the meantime, Marius trembled. It seemed impossible to him that she should not hear his breathing.

She stepped to the window and looked out with the half-foolish way she had.

“How ugly Paris is when it has put on a white chemise!” said she.

She returned to the mirror and began again to put on airs before it, scrutinizing herself full-face and three-quarters face in turn.

“Well!” cried her father, “what are you about there?”

“I am looking under the bed and the furniture,” she replied, continuing to arrange her hair; “there’s no one here.”

“Booby!” yelled her father. “Come here this minute! And don’t waste any time about it!”

“Coming! Coming!” said she. “One has no time for anything in this hovel!”

She hummed: —

Vous me quittez pour aller à la gloire;
Mon triste cœur suivra partout.

She cast a parting glance in the mirror and went out, shutting the door behind her.

A moment more, and Marius heard the sound of the two young girls’ bare feet in the corridor, and Jondrette’s voice shouting to them: —

“Pay strict heed! One on the side of the barrier, the other at the corner of the Rue du Petit-Banquier. Don’t lose sight for a moment of the door of this house, and the moment you see anything, rush here on the instant! as hard as you can go! You have a key to get in.”

The eldest girl grumbled: —

“The idea of standing watch in the snow barefoot!”

“To-morrow you shall have some dainty little green silk boots!” said the father.

They ran down stairs, and a few seconds later the shock of the outer door as it banged to announced that they were outside.

There now remained in the house only Marius, the Jondrettes and probably, also, the mysterious persons of whom Marius had caught a glimpse in the twilight, behind the door of the unused attic.

CHAPTER XVII — THE USE MADE OF MARIUS’ FIVE-FRANC PIECE

Marius decided that the moment had now arrived when he must resume his post at his observatory. In a twinkling, and with the agility of his age, he had reached the hole in the partition.

He looked.

The interior of the Jondrette apartment presented a curious aspect, and Marius found an explanation of the singular light which he had noticed. A candle was burning in a candlestick covered with verdigris, but that was not what really lighted the chamber. The hovel was completely illuminated, as it were, by the reflection from a rather large sheet-iron brazier standing in the fireplace, and filled with burning charcoal, the brazier prepared by the Jondrette woman that morning. The charcoal was glowing hot and the brazier was red; a blue flame flickered over it, and helped him to make out the form of the chisel purchased by Jondrette in the Rue Pierre-Lombard, where it had been thrust into the brazier to heat. In one corner, near the door, and as though prepared for some definite use, two heaps were visible, which appeared to be, the one a heap of old iron, the other a heap of ropes. All this would have caused the mind of a person who knew nothing of what was in preparation, to waver between a very sinister and a very simple idea. The lair thus lighted up more resembled a forge than a mouth of hell, but Jondrette, in this light, had rather the air of a demon than of a smith.

The heat of the brazier was so great, that the candle on the table was melting on the side next the chafing-dish, and was drooping over. An old dark-lantern of copper, worthy of Diogenes turned Cartouche, stood on the chimney-piece.

The brazier, placed in the fireplace itself, beside the nearly extinct brands, sent its vapors up the chimney, and gave out no odor.

The moon, entering through the four panes of the window, cast its whiteness into the crimson and flaming garret; and to the poetic spirit of Marius, who was dreamy even in the moment of action, it was like a thought of heaven mingled with the misshapen reveries of earth.

A breath of air which made its way in through the open pane, helped to dissipate the smell of the charcoal and to conceal the presence of the brazier.

The Jondrette lair was, if the reader recalls what we have said of the Gorbeau building, admirably chosen to serve as the theatre of a violent and sombre deed, and as the envelope for a crime. It was the most retired chamber in the most isolated house on the most deserted boulevard in Paris. If the system of ambush and traps had not already existed, they would have been invented there.

The whole thickness of a house and a multitude of uninhabited rooms separated this den from the boulevard, and the only window that existed opened on waste lands enclosed with walls and palisades.

Jondrette had lighted his pipe, seated himself on the seatless chair, and was engaged in smoking. His wife was talking to him in a low tone.

If Marius had been Courfeyrac, that is to say, one of those men who laugh on every occasion in life, he would have burst with laughter when his gaze fell on the Jondrette woman. She had on a black bonnet with plumes not unlike the hats of the heralds-at-arms at the coronation of Charles X., an immense tartan shawl over her knitted petticoat, and the man's shoes which her daughter had scorned in the morning. It was this toilette which had extracted from Jondrette the exclamation: "Good! You have dressed up. You have done well. You must inspire confidence!"

As for Jondrette, he had not taken off the new surtout, which was too large for him, and which M. Leblanc had given him, and his costume continued to present that contrast of coat and trousers which constituted the ideal of a poet in Courfeyrac's eyes.

All at once, Jondrette lifted up his voice: —

"By the way! Now that I think of it. In this weather, he will come in a carriage. Light the lantern, take it and go down stairs. You will stand behind the lower door. The very moment that you hear the carriage stop, you will open the door, instantly, he will come up, you will light the staircase and the corridor, and when he enters here, you will go down stairs again as speedily as possible, you will pay the coachman, and dismiss the fiacre."

"And the money?" inquired the woman.

Jondrette fumbled in his trousers pocket and handed her five francs.

"What's this?" she exclaimed.

Jondrette replied with dignity: —

"That is the monarch which our neighbor gave us this morning."

And he added: —

"Do you know what? Two chairs will be needed here."

"What for?"

"To sit on."

Marius felt a cold chill pass through his limbs at hearing this mild answer from Jondrette.

"Pardieu! I'll go and get one of our neighbor's."

And with a rapid movement, she opened the door of the den, and went out into the corridor.

Marius absolutely had not the time to descend from the commode, reach his bed, and conceal himself beneath it.

"Take the candle," cried Jondrette.

"No," said she, "it would embarrass me, I have the two chairs to carry. There is moonlight."

Marius heard Mother Jondrette's heavy hand fumbling at his lock in the dark. The door opened. He remained nailed to the spot with the shock and with horror.

The Jondrette entered.

The dormer window permitted the entrance of a ray of moonlight between two blocks of shadow. One of these blocks of shadow entirely covered the wall against which Marius was leaning, so that he disappeared within it.

Mother Jondrette raised her eyes, did not see Marius, took the two chairs, the only ones which Marius possessed, and went away, letting the door fall heavily to behind her.

She re-entered the lair.

"Here are the two chairs."

"And here is the lantern. Go down as quick as you can."

She hastily obeyed, and Jondrette was left alone.

He placed the two chairs on opposite sides of the table, turned the chisel in the brazier, set in front of the fireplace an old screen which masked the chafing-dish, then went to the corner where lay the pile of rope, and bent down as though to examine something. Marius then recognized the fact, that what he had taken for a shapeless mass was a very well-made rope-ladder, with wooden rungs and two hooks with which to attach it.

This ladder, and some large tools, veritable masses of iron, which were mingled with the old iron piled up behind the door, had not been in the

Jondrette hovel in the morning, and had evidently been brought thither in the afternoon, during Marius' absence.

"Those are the utensils of an edge-tool maker," thought Marius.

Had Marius been a little more learned in this line, he would have recognized in what he took for the engines of an edge-tool maker, certain instruments which will force a lock or pick a lock, and others which will cut or slice, the two families of tools which burglars call cadets and fauchants.

The fireplace and the two chairs were exactly opposite Marius. The brazier being concealed, the only light in the room was now furnished by the candle; the smallest bit of crockery on the table or on the chimney-piece cast a large shadow. There was something indescribably calm, threatening, and hideous about this chamber. One felt that there existed in it the anticipation of something terrible.

Jondrette had allowed his pipe to go out, a serious sign of preoccupation, and had again seated himself. The candle brought out the fierce and the fine angles of his countenance. He indulged in scowls and in abrupt unfoldings of the right hand, as though he were responding to the last counsels of a sombre inward monologue. In the course of one of these dark replies which he was making to himself, he pulled the table drawer rapidly towards him, took out a long kitchen knife which was concealed there, and tried the edge of its blade on his nail. That done, he put the knife back in the drawer and shut it.

Marius, on his side, grasped the pistol in his right pocket, drew it out and cocked it.

The pistol emitted a sharp, clear click, as he cocked it.

Jondrette started, half rose, listened a moment, then began to laugh and said: —

"What a fool I am! It's the partition cracking!"

Marius kept the pistol in his hand.

CHAPTER XVIII — MARIUS’ TWO CHAIRS FORM A VIS-A-VIS

Suddenly, the distant and melancholy vibration of a clock shook the panes. Six o’clock was striking from Saint-Medard.

Jondrette marked off each stroke with a toss of his head. When the sixth had struck, he snuffed the candle with his fingers.

Then he began to pace up and down the room, listened at the corridor, walked on again, then listened once more.

“Provided only that he comes!” he muttered, then he returned to his chair.

He had hardly reseated himself when the door opened.

Mother Jondrette had opened it, and now remained in the corridor making a horrible, amiable grimace, which one of the holes of the dark-lantern illuminated from below.

“Enter, sir,” she said.

“Enter, my benefactor,” repeated Jondrette, rising hastily.

M. Leblanc made his appearance.

He wore an air of serenity which rendered him singularly venerable.

He laid four louis on the table.

“Monsieur Fabantou,” said he, “this is for your rent and your most pressing necessities. We will attend to the rest hereafter.”

“May God requite it to you, my generous benefactor!” said Jondrette.

And rapidly approaching his wife: —

“Dismiss the carriage!”

She slipped out while her husband was lavishing salutes and offering M. Leblanc a chair. An instant later she returned and whispèred in his ear: —

“’Tis done.”

The snow, which had not ceased falling since the morning, was so deep that the arrival of the fiacre had not been audible, and they did not now hear its departure.

Meanwhile, M. Leblanc had seated himself.

Jondrette had taken possession of the other chair, facing M. Leblanc.

Now, in order to form an idea of the scene which is to follow, let the reader picture to himself in his own mind, a cold night, the solitudes of the

Salpetriere covered with snow and white as winding-sheets in the moonlight, the taper-like lights of the street lanterns which shone redly here and there along those tragic boulevards, and the long rows of black elms, not a passer-by for perhaps a quarter of a league around, the Gorbeau hovel, at its highest pitch of silence, of horror, and of darkness; in that building, in the midst of those solitudes, in the midst of that darkness, the vast Jondrette garret lighted by a single candle, and in that den two men seated at a table, M. Leblanc tranquil, Jondrette smiling and alarming, the Jondrette woman, the female wolf, in one corner, and, behind the partition, Marius, invisible, erect, not losing a word, not missing a single movement, his eye on the watch, and pistol in hand.

However, Marius experienced only an emotion of horror, but no fear. He clasped the stock of the pistol firmly and felt reassured. “I shall be able to stop that wretch whenever I please,” he thought.

He felt that the police were there somewhere in ambuscade, waiting for the signal agreed upon and ready to stretch out their arm.

Moreover, he was in hopes, that this violent encounter between Jondrette and M. Leblanc would cast some light on all the things which he was interested in learning.

CHAPTER XIX — OCCUPYING ONE'S SELF WITH OBSCURE DEPTHS

Hardly was M. Leblanc seated, when he turned his eyes towards the pallets, which were empty.

"How is the poor little wounded girl?" he inquired.

"Bad," replied Jondrette with a heart-broken and grateful smile, "very bad, my worthy sir. Her elder sister has taken her to the Bourbe to have her hurt dressed. You will see them presently; they will be back immediately."

"Madame Fabantou seems to me to be better," went on M. Leblanc, casting his eyes on the eccentric costume of the Jondrette woman, as she stood between him and the door, as though already guarding the exit, and gazed at him in an attitude of menace and almost of combat.

"She is dying," said Jondrette. "But what do you expect, sir! She has so much courage, that woman has! She's not a woman, she's an ox."

The Jondrette, touched by his compliment, deprecated it with the affected airs of a flattered monster.

"You are always too good to me, Monsieur Jondrette!"

"Jondrette!" said M. Leblanc, "I thought your name was Fabantou?"

"Fabantou, alias Jondrette!" replied the husband hurriedly. "An artistic sobriquet!"

And launching at his wife a shrug of the shoulders which M. Leblanc did not catch, he continued with an emphatic and caressing inflection of voice: —

"Ah! we have had a happy life together, this poor darling and I! What would there be left for us if we had not that? We are so wretched, my respectable sir! We have arms, but there is no work! We have the will, no work! I don't know how the government arranges that, but, on my word of honor, sir, I am not Jacobin, sir, I am not a bousingot. I don't wish them any evil, but if I were the ministers, on my most sacred word, things would be different. Here, for instance, I wanted to have my girls taught the trade of paper-box makers. You will say to me: 'What! a trade?' Yes! A trade! A simple trade! A bread-winner! What a fall, my benefactor! What a degradation, when one has been what we have been! Alas! There is nothing left to us of our days of prosperity! One thing only, a picture, of which I think a great deal, but which I am willing to part with, for I must live! Item, one must live!”

While Jondrette thus talked, with an apparent incoherence which detracted nothing from the thoughtful and sagacious expression of his physiognomy, Marius raised his eyes, and perceived at the other end of the room a person whom he had not seen before. A man had just entered, so softly that the door had not been heard to turn on its hinges. This man wore a violet knitted vest, which was old, worn, spotted, cut and gaping at every fold, wide trousers of cotton velvet, wooden shoes on his feet, no shirt, had his neck bare, his bare arms tattooed, and his face smeared with black. He had seated himself in silence on the nearest bed, and, as he was behind Jondrette, he could only be indistinctly seen.

That sort of magnetic instinct which turns aside the gaze, caused M. Leblanc to turn round almost at the same moment as Marius. He could not refrain from a gesture of surprise which did not escape Jondrette.

“Ah! I see!” exclaimed Jondrette, buttoning up his coat with an air of complaisance, “you are looking at your overcoat? It fits me! My faith, but it fits me!”

“Who is that man?” said M. Leblanc.

“Him?” ejaculated Jondrette, “he’s a neighbor of mine. Don’t pay any attention to him.”

The neighbor was a singular-looking individual. However, manufactories of chemical products abound in the Faubourg Saint-Marceau. Many of the workmen might have black faces. Besides this, M. Leblanc’s whole person was expressive of candid and intrepid confidence.

He went on: —

“Excuse me; what were you saying, M. Fabantou?”

“I was telling you, sir, and dear protector,” replied Jondrette placing his elbows on the table and contemplating M. Leblanc with steady and tender eyes, not unlike the eyes of the boa-constrictor, “I was telling you, that I have a picture to sell.”

A slight sound came from the door. A second man had just entered and seated himself on the bed, behind Jondrette.

Like the first, his arms were bare, and he had a mask of ink or lampblack.

Although this man had, literally, glided into the room, he had not been able to prevent M. Leblanc catching sight of him.

“Don’t mind them,” said Jondrette, “they are people who belong in the house. So I was saying, that there remains in my possession a valuable picture. But stop, sir, take a look at it.”

He rose, went to the wall at the foot of which stood the panel which we have already mentioned, and turned it round, still leaving it supported against the wall. It really was something which resembled a picture, and which the candle illuminated, somewhat. Marius could make nothing out of it, as Jondrette stood between the picture and him; he only saw a coarse daub, and a sort of principal personage colored with the harsh crudity of foreign canvasses and screen paintings.

“What is that?” asked M. Leblanc.

Jondrette exclaimed: —

“A painting by a master, a picture of great value, my benefactor! I am as much attached to it as I am to my two daughters; it recalls souvenirs to me! But I have told you, and I will not take it back, that I am so wretched that I will part with it.”

Either by chance, or because he had begun to feel a dawning uneasiness, M. Leblanc’s glance returned to the bottom of the room as he examined the picture.

There were now four men, three seated on the bed, one standing near the door-post, all four with bare arms and motionless, with faces smeared with black. One of those on the bed was leaning against the wall, with closed eyes, and it might have been supposed that he was asleep. He was old; his white hair contrasting with his blackened face produced a horrible effect. The other two seemed to be young; one wore a beard, the other wore his hair long. None of them had on shoes; those who did not wear socks were barefooted.

Jondrette noticed that M. Leblanc’s eye was fixed on these men.

“They are friends. They are neighbors,” said he. “Their faces are black because they work in charcoal. They are chimney-builders. Don’t trouble yourself about them, my benefactor, but buy my picture. Have pity on my misery. I will not ask you much for it. How much do you think it is worth?”

“Well,” said M. Leblanc, looking Jondrette full in the eye, and with the manner of a man who is on his guard, “it is some signboard for a tavern, and is worth about three francs.”

Jondrette replied sweetly: —

"Have you your pocket-book with you? I should be satisfied with a thousand crowns."

M. Leblanc sprang up, placed his back against the wall, and cast a rapid glance around the room. He had Jondrette on his left, on the side next the window, and the Jondrette woman and the four men on his right, on the side next the door. The four men did not stir, and did not even seem to be looking on.

Jondrette had again begun to speak in a plaintive tone, with so vague an eye, and so lamentable an intonation, that M. Leblanc might have supposed that what he had before him was a man who had simply gone mad with misery.

"If you do not buy my picture, my dear benefactor," said Jondrette, "I shall be left without resources; there will be nothing left for me but to throw myself into the river. When I think that I wanted to have my two girls taught the middle-class paper-box trade, the making of boxes for New Year's gifts! Well! A table with a board at the end to keep the glasses from falling off is required, then a special stove is needed, a pot with three compartments for the different degrees of strength of the paste, according as it is to be used for wood, paper, or stuff, a paring-knife to cut the cardboard, a mould to adjust it, a hammer to nail the steels, pincers, how the devil do I know what all? And all that in order to earn four sous a day! And you have to work fourteen hours a day! And each box passes through the workwoman's hands thirteen times! And you can't wet the paper! And you mustn't spot anything! And you must keep the paste hot. The devil, I tell you! Four sous a day! How do you suppose a man is to live?"

As he spoke, Jondrette did not look at M. Leblanc, who was observing him. M. Leblanc's eye was fixed on Jondrette, and Jondrette's eye was fixed on the door. Marius' eager attention was transferred from one to the other. M. Leblanc seemed to be asking himself: "Is this man an idiot?" Jondrette repeated two or three distinct times, with all manner of varying inflections of the whining and supplicating order: "There is nothing left for me but to throw myself into the river! I went down three steps at the side of the bridge of Austerlitz the other day for that purpose."

All at once his dull eyes lighted up with a hideous flash; the little man drew himself up and became terrible, took a step toward M. Leblanc and cried in a voice of thunder: "That has nothing to do with the question! Do you know me?"

CHAPTER XX — THE TRAP

The door of the garret had just opened abruptly, and allowed a view of three men clad in blue linen blouses, and masked with masks of black paper. The first was thin, and had a long, iron-tipped cudgel; the second, who was a sort of colossus, carried, by the middle of the handle, with the blade downward, a butcher’s pole-axe for slaughtering cattle. The third, a man with thick-set shoulders, not so slender as the first, held in his hand an enormous key stolen from the door of some prison.

It appeared that the arrival of these men was what Jondrette had been waiting for. A rapid dialogue ensued between him and the man with the cudgel, the thin one.

“Is everything ready?” said Jondrette.

“Yes,” replied the thin man.

“Where is Montparnasse?”

“The young principal actor stopped to chat with your girl.”

“Which?”

“The eldest.”

“Is there a carriage at the door?”

“Yes.”

“Is the team harnessed?”

“Yes.”

“With two good horses?”

“Excellent.”

“Is it waiting where I ordered?”

“Yes.”

“Good,” said Jondrette.

M. Leblanc was very pale. He was scrutinizing everything around him in the den, like a man who understands what he has fallen into, and his head, directed in turn toward all the heads which surrounded him, moved on his neck with an astonished and attentive slowness, but there was nothing in his air which resembled fear. He had improvised an intrenchment out of the table; and the man, who but an instant previously, had borne merely the appearance of a kindly old man, had suddenly become a sort of athlete, and placed his robust fist on the back of his chair, with a formidable and surprising gesture.

This old man, who was so firm and so brave in the presence of such a danger, seemed to possess one of those natures which are as courageous as they are kind, both easily and simply. The father of a woman whom we love is never a stranger to us. Marius felt proud of that unknown man.

Three of the men, of whom Jondrette had said: “They are chimney-builders,” had armed themselves from the pile of old iron, one with a heavy pair of shears, the second with weighing-tongs, the third with a hammer, and had placed themselves across the entrance without uttering a syllable. The old man had remained on the bed, and had merely opened his eyes. The Jondrette woman had seated herself beside him.

Marius decided that in a few seconds more the moment for intervention would arrive, and he raised his right hand towards the ceiling, in the direction of the corridor, in readiness to discharge his pistol.

Jondrette having terminated his colloquy with the man with the cudgel, turned once more to M. Leblanc, and repeated his question, accompanying it with that low, repressed, and terrible laugh which was peculiar to him: —

“So you do not recognize me?”

M. Leblanc looked him full in the face, and replied: —

“No.”

Then Jondrette advanced to the table. He leaned across the candle, crossing his arms, putting his angular and ferocious jaw close to M. Leblanc’s calm face, and advancing as far as possible without forcing M. Leblanc to retreat, and, in this posture of a wild beast who is about to bite, he exclaimed: —

“My name is not Fabantou, my name is not Jondrette, my name is Thenardier. I am the inn-keeper of Montfermeil! Do you understand? Thenardier! Now do you know me?”

An almost imperceptible flush crossed M. Leblanc’s brow, and he replied with a voice which neither trembled nor rose above its ordinary level, with his accustomed placidity: —

“No more than before.”

Marius did not hear this reply. Any one who had seen him at that moment through the darkness would have perceived that he was haggard, stupid, thunder-struck. At the moment when Jondrette said: “My name is Thenardier,” Marius had trembled in every limb, and had leaned against the wall, as though he felt the cold of a steel blade through his heart. Then his right arm, all ready to discharge the signal shot, dropped slowly, and at the moment when Jondrette repeated, “Thenardier, do you understand?” Marius’s faltering fingers had come near letting the pistol fall. Jondrette, by revealing his identity, had not moved M. Leblanc, but he had quite upset Marius. That name of Thenardier, with which M. Leblanc did not seem to be acquainted, Marius knew well. Let the reader recall what that name meant to him! That name he had worn on his heart, inscribed in his father’s testament! He bore it at the bottom of his mind, in the depths of his memory, in that sacred injunction: “A certain Thenardier saved my life. If my son encounters him, he will do him all the good that lies in his power.” That name, it will be remembered, was one of the pieties of his soul; he mingled it with the name of his father in his worship. What! This man was that Thenardier, that inn-keeper of Montfermeil whom he had so long and so vainly sought! He had found him at last, and how? His father’s saviour was a ruffian! That man, to whose service Marius was burning to devote himself, was a monster! That liberator of Colonel Pontmercy was on the point of committing a crime whose scope Marius did not, as yet, clearly comprehend, but which resembled an assassination! And against whom, great God! what a fatality! What a bitter mockery of fate! His father had commanded him from the depths of his coffin to do all the good in his power to this Thenardier, and for four years Marius had cherished no other thought than to acquit this debt of his father’s, and at the moment when he was on the eve of having a brigand seized in the very act of crime by justice, destiny cried to him: “This is Thenardier!” He could at last repay this man for his father’s life, saved amid a hail-storm of grape-shot on the heroic field of Waterloo, and repay it with the scaffold! He had sworn to himself that if ever he found that Thenardier, he would address him only by throwing himself at his feet; and now he actually had found him, but it was only to deliver him over to the executioner! His father said to him: “Succor Thenardier!” And he replied to that adored and sainted voice by crushing Thenardier! He was about to offer to his father in his grave the spectacle of that man who had torn him from death at the peril of his own life, executed on the Place Saint-Jacques through the means of his son, of that Marius to whom he had entrusted that man by his will! And what a mockery to have so long worn on his breast his father’s last commands, written in his own hand, only to act in so horribly contrary a sense! But, on the other hand, now look on that trap and not prevent it! Condemn the victim and to spare the assassin! Could one be held to any gratitude towards so miserable a wretch? All the ideas which Marius had cherished for the last four years were pierced through and through, as it were, by this unforeseen blow.

He shuddered. Everything depended on him. Unknown to themselves, he held in his hand all those beings who were moving about there before his eyes. If he fired his pistol, M. Leblanc was saved, and Thenardier lost; if he did not fire, M. Leblanc would be sacrificed, and, who knows? Thenardier would escape. Should he dash down the one or allow the other to fall? Remorse awaited him in either case.

What was he to do? What should he choose? Be false to the most imperious souvenirs, to all those solemn vows to himself, to the most sacred duty, to the most venerated text! Should he ignore his father's testament, or allow the perpetration of a crime! On the one hand, it seemed to him that he heard "his Ursule" supplicating for her father and on the other, the colonel commending Thenardier to his care. He felt that he was going mad. His knees gave way beneath him. And he had not even the time for deliberation, so great was the fury with which the scene before his eyes was hastening to its catastrophe. It was like a whirlwind of which he had thought himself the master, and which was now sweeping him away. He was on the verge of swooning.

In the meantime, Thenardier, whom we shall henceforth call by no other name, was pacing up and down in front of the table in a sort of frenzy and wild triumph.

He seized the candle in his fist, and set it on the chimney-piece with so violent a bang that the wick came near being extinguished, and the tallow bespattered the wall.

Then he turned to M. Leblanc with a horrible look, and spit out these words: —

"Done for! Smoked brown! Cooked! Spitchcocked!"

And again he began to march back and forth, in full eruption.

"Ah!" he cried, "so I've found you again at last, Mister philanthropist! Mister threadbare millionnaire! Mister giver of dolls! you old ninny! Ah! so you don't recognize me! No, it wasn't you who came to Montfermeil, to my inn, eight years ago, on Christmas eve, 1823! It wasn't you who carried off that Fantine's child from me! The Lark! It wasn't you who had a yellow great-coat! No! Nor a package of duds in your hand, as you had this morning here! Say, wife, it seems to be his mania to carry packets of woollen stockings into houses! Old charity monger, get out with you! Are you a hosier, Mister millionnaire? You give away your stock in trade to the poor, holy man! What bosh! merry Andrew! Ah! and you don't recognize me? Well, I recognize you, that I do! I recognized you the very moment you poked your snout in here. Ah! you'll find out presently, that it isn't all roses to thrust yourself in that fashion into people's houses, under the pretext that they are taverns, in wretched clothes, with the air of a poor man, to whom one would give a sou, to deceive persons, to play the generous, to take away their means of livelihood, and to make threats in the woods, and you can't call things quits because afterwards, when people are ruined, you bring a coat that is too large, and two miserable hospital blankets, you old blackguard, you child-stealer!"

He paused, and seemed to be talking to himself for a moment. One would have said that his wrath had fallen into some hole, like the Rhone; then, as though he were concluding aloud the things which he had been saying to himself in a whisper, he smote the table with his fist, and shouted: —

"And with his goody-goody air!"

And, apostrophizing M. Leblanc: —

"Parbleu! You made game of me in the past! You are the cause of all my misfortunes! For fifteen hundred francs you got a girl whom I had, and who certainly belonged to rich people, and who had already brought in a great deal of money, and from whom I might have extracted enough to live on all my life! A girl who would have made up to me for everything that I lost in that vile cook-shop, where there was nothing but one continual row, and where, like a fool, I ate up my last farthing! Oh! I wish all the wine folks drank in my house had been poison to those who drank it! Well, never mind! Say, now! You must have thought me ridiculous when you went off with the Lark! You had your cudgel in the forest. You were the stronger. Revenge. I'm the one to hold the trumps to-day! You're in a sorry case, my good fellow! Oh, but I can laugh! Really, I laugh! Didn't he fall into the trap! I told him that I was an actor, that my name was Fabantou, that I had played comedy with Mamselle Mars, with Mamselle Muche, that my landlord insisted on being paid tomorrow, the 4th of February, and he didn't even notice that the 8th of January, and not the 4th of February is the time when the quarter runs out! Absurd idiot! And the four miserable Philippes which he has brought me! Scoundrel! He hadn't the heart even to go as high as a hundred francs! And how he swallowed my platitudes! That did amuse me. I said to myself: ‘Blockhead! Come, I’ve got you! I lick your paws this morning, but I’ll gnaw your heart this evening!’”

Thenardier paused. He was out of breath. His little, narrow chest panted like a forge bellows. His eyes were full of the ignoble happiness of a feeble, cruel, and cowardly creature, which finds that it can, at last, harass what it has feared, and insult what it has flattered, the joy of a dwarf who should be able to set his heel on the head of Goliath, the joy of a jackal which is beginning to rend a sick bull, so nearly dead that he can no longer defend himself, but sufficiently alive to suffer still.

M. Leblanc did not interrupt him, but said to him when he paused: —

“I do not know what you mean to say. You are mistaken in me. I am a very poor man, and anything but a millionnaire. I do not know you. You are mistaking me for some other person.”

“Ah!” roared Thenardier hoarsely, “a pretty lie! You stick to that pleasantry, do you! You’re floundering, my old buck! Ah! You don’t remember! You don’t see who I am?”

“Excuse me, sir,” said M. Leblanc with a politeness of accent, which at that moment seemed peculiarly strange and powerful, “I see that you are a villain!”

Who has not remarked the fact that odious creatures possess a susceptibility of their own, that monsters are ticklish! At this word “villain,” the female Thenardier sprang from the bed, Thenardier grasped his chair as though he were about to crush it in his hands. “Don’t you stir!” he shouted to his wife; and, turning to M. Leblanc: —

“Villain! Yes, I know that you call us that, you rich gentlemen! Stop! it’s true that I became bankrupt, that I am in hiding, that I have no bread, that I have not a single sou, that I am a villain! It’s three days since I have had anything to eat, so I’m a villain! Ah! you folks warm your feet, you have Sakoski boots, you have wadded great-coats, like archbishops, you lodge on the first floor in houses that have porters, you eat truffles, you eat asparagus at forty francs the bunch in the month of January, and green peas, you gorge yourselves, and when you want to know whether it is cold, you look in the papers to see what the engineer Chevalier’s thermometer says about it. We, it is we who are thermometers. We don’t need to go out and look on the quay at the corner of the Tour de l’Horologe, to find out the number of degrees of cold; we feel our blood congealing in our veins, and the ice forming round our hearts, and we say: ‘There is no God!’ And you come to our caverns, yes our caverns, for the purpose of calling us villains! But we'll devour you! But we'll devour you, poor little things! Just see here, Mister millionnaire: I have been a solid man, I have held a license, I have been an elector, I am a bourgeois, that I am! And it's quite possible that you are not!"

Here Thenardier took a step towards the men who stood near the door, and added with a shudder: —

"When I think that he has dared to come here and talk to me like a cobbler!"

Then addressing M. Leblanc with a fresh outburst of frenzy: —

"And listen to this also, Mister philanthropist! I'm not a suspicious character, not a bit of it! I'm not a man whose name nobody knows, and who comes and abducts children from houses! I'm an old French soldier, I ought to have been decorated! I was at Waterloo, so I was! And in the battle I saved a general called the Comte of I don't know what. He told me his name, but his beastly voice was so weak that I didn't hear. All I caught was Merci [thanks]. I'd rather have had his name than his thanks. That would have helped me to find him again. The picture that you see here, and which was painted by David at Bruqueselles, — do you know what it represents? It represents me. David wished to immortalize that feat of prowess. I have that general on my back, and I am carrying him through the grape-shot. There's the history of it! That general never did a single thing for me; he was no better than the rest! But none the less, I saved his life at the risk of my own, and I have the certificate of the fact in my pocket! I am a soldier of Waterloo, by all the furies! And now that I have had the goodness to tell you all this, let's have an end of it. I want money, I want a deal of money, I must have an enormous lot of money, or I'll exterminate you, by the thunder of the good God!"

Marius had regained some measure of control over his anguish, and was listening. The last possibility of doubt had just vanished. It certainly was the Thenardier of the will. Marius shuddered at that reproach of ingratitude directed against his father, and which he was on the point of so fatally justifying. His perplexity was redoubled.

Moreover, there was in all these words of Thenardier, in his accent, in his gesture, in his glance which darted flames at every word, there was, in this explosion of an evil nature disclosing everything, in that mixture of braggadocio and abjectness, of pride and pettiness, of rage and folly, in that chaos of real griefs and false sentiments, in that immodesty of a malicious man tasting the voluptuous delights of violence, in that shameless nudity of a repulsive soul, in that conflagration of all sufferings combined with all hatreds, something which was as hideous as evil, and as heart-rending as the truth.

The picture of the master, the painting by David which he had proposed that M. Leblanc should purchase, was nothing else, as the reader has divined, than the sign of his tavern painted, as it will be remembered, by himself, the only relic which he had preserved from his shipwreck at Montfermeil.

As he had ceased to intercept Marius' visual ray, Marius could examine this thing, and in the daub, he actually did recognize a battle, a background of smoke, and a man carrying another man. It was the group composed of Pontmercy and Thenardier; the sergeant the rescuer, the colonel rescued. Marius was like a drunken man; this picture restored his father to life in some sort; it was no longer the signboard of the wine-shop at Montfermeil, it was a resurrection; a tomb had yawned, a phantom had risen there. Marius heard his heart beating in his temples, he had the cannon of Waterloo in his ears, his bleeding father, vaguely depicted on that sinister panel terrified him, and it seemed to him that the misshapen spectre was gazing intently at him.

When Thenardier had recovered his breath, he turned his bloodshot eyes on M. Leblanc, and said to him in a low, curt voice: —

"What have you to say before we put the handcuffs on you?"

M. Leblanc held his peace.

In the midst of this silence, a cracked voice launched this lugubrious sarcasm from the corridor: —

"If there's any wood to be split, I'm there!"

It was the man with the axe, who was growing merry.

At the same moment, an enormous, bristling, and clayey face made its appearance at the door, with a hideous laugh which exhibited not teeth, but fangs.

It was the face of the man with the butcher's axe.

"Why have you taken off your mask?" cried Thenardier in a rage.

"For fun," retorted the man.

For the last few minutes M. Leblanc had appeared to be watching and following all the movements of Thenardier, who, blinded and dazzled by his own rage, was stalking to and fro in the den with full confidence that the door was guarded, and of holding an unarmed man fast, he being armed himself, of being nine against one, supposing that the female Thenardier counted for but one man.

During his address to the man with the pole-axe, he had turned his back to M. Leblanc.

M. Leblanc seized this moment, overturned the chair with his foot and the table with his fist, and with one bound, with prodigious agility, before Thenardier had time to turn round, he had reached the window. To open it, to scale the frame, to bestride it, was the work of a second only. He was half out when six robust fists seized him and dragged him back energetically into the hovel. These were the three "chimney-builders," who had flung themselves upon him. At the same time the Thenardier woman had wound her hands in his hair.

At the trampling which ensued, the other ruffians rushed up from the corridor. The old man on the bed, who seemed under the influence of wine, descended from the pallet and came reeling up, with a stone-breaker's hammer in his hand.

One of the "chimney-builders," whose smirched face was lighted up by the candle, and in whom Marius recognized, in spite of his daubing, Panchaud, alias Printanier, alias Bigrenaille, lifted above M. Leblanc's head a sort of bludgeon made of two balls of lead, at the two ends of a bar of iron.

Marius could not resist this sight. "My father," he thought, "forgive me!"

And his finger sought the trigger of his pistol.

The shot was on the point of being discharged when Thenardier's voice shouted: —

"Don't harm him!"

This desperate attempt of the victim, far from exasperating Thenardier, had calmed him. There existed in him two men, the ferocious man and the adroit man. Up to that moment, in the excess of his triumph in the presence of the prey which had been brought down, and which did not stir, the ferocious man had prevailed; when the victim struggled and tried to resist, the adroit man reappeared and took the upper hand.

"Don't hurt him!" he repeated, and without suspecting it, his first success was to arrest the pistol in the act of being discharged, and to paralyze

Marius, in whose opinion the urgency of the case disappeared, and who, in the face of this new phase, saw no inconvenience in waiting a while longer.

Who knows whether some chance would not arise which would deliver him from the horrible alternative of allowing Ursule's father to perish, or of destroying the colonel's saviour?

A herculean struggle had begun. With one blow full in the chest, M. Leblanc had sent the old man tumbling, rolling in the middle of the room, then with two backward sweeps of his hand he had overthrown two more assailants, and he held one under each of his knees; the wretches were rattling in the throat beneath this pressure as under a granite millstone; but the other four had seized the formidable old man by both arms and the back of his neck, and were holding him doubled up over the two "chimney-builders" on the floor.

Thus, the master of some and mastered by the rest, crushing those beneath him and stifling under those on top of him, endeavoring in vain to shake off all the efforts which were heaped upon him, M. Leblanc disappeared under the horrible group of ruffians like the wild boar beneath a howling pile of dogs and hounds.

They succeeded in overthrowing him upon the bed nearest the window, and there they held him in awe. The Thenardier woman had not released her clutch on his hair.

"Don't you mix yourself up in this affair," said Thenardier. "You'll tear your shawl."

The Thenardier obeyed, as the female wolf obeys the male wolf, with a growl.

"Now," said Thenardier, "search him, you other fellows!"

M. Leblanc seemed to have renounced the idea of resistance.

They searched him.

He had nothing on his person except a leather purse containing six francs, and his handkerchief.

Thenardier put the handkerchief into his own pocket.

"What! No pocket-book?" he demanded.

"No, nor watch," replied one of the "chimney-builders."

"Never mind," murmured the masked man who carried the big key, in the voice of a ventriloquist, "he's a tough old fellow."

Thenardier went to the corner near the door, picked up a bundle of ropes and threw them at the men.

“Tie him to the leg of the bed,” said he.

And, catching sight of the old man who had been stretched across the room by the blow from M. Leblanc’s fist, and who made no movement, he added: —

“Is Boulatruelle dead?”

“No,” replied Bigrenaille, “he’s drunk.”

“Sweep him into a corner,” said Thenardier.

Two of the “chimney-builders” pushed the drunken man into the corner near the heap of old iron with their feet.

“Babet,” said Thenardier in a low tone to the man with the cudgel, “why did you bring so many; they were not needed.”

“What can you do?” replied the man with the cudgel, “they all wanted to be in it. This is a bad season. There’s no business going on.”

The pallet on which M. Leblanc had been thrown was a sort of hospital bed, elevated on four coarse wooden legs, roughly hewn.

M. Leblanc let them take their own course.

The ruffians bound him securely, in an upright attitude, with his feet on the ground at the head of the bed, the end which was most remote from the window, and nearest to the fireplace.

When the last knot had been tied, Thenardier took a chair and seated himself almost facing M. Leblanc.

Thenardier no longer looked like himself; in the course of a few moments his face had passed from unbridled violence to tranquil and cunning sweetness.

Marius found it difficult to recognize in that polished smile of a man in official life the almost bestial mouth which had been foaming but a moment before; he gazed with amazement on that fantastic and alarming metamorphosis, and he felt as a man might feel who should behold a tiger converted into a lawyer.

“Monsieur—” said Thenardier.

And dismissing with a gesture the ruffians who still kept their hands on M. Leblanc: —

“Stand off a little, and let me have a talk with the gentleman.”

All retired towards the door.

He went on: —

“Monsieur, you did wrong to try to jump out of the window. You might have broken your leg. Now, if you will permit me, we will converse quietly.

In the first place, I must communicate to you an observation which I have made which is, that you have not uttered the faintest cry.”

Thenardier was right, this detail was correct, although it had escaped Marius in his agitation. M. Leblanc had barely pronounced a few words, without raising his voice, and even during his struggle with the six ruffians near the window he had preserved the most profound and singular silence.

Thenardier continued: —

“Mon Dieu! You might have shouted ‘stop thief’ a bit, and I should not have thought it improper. ‘Murder!’ That, too, is said occasionally, and, so far as I am concerned, I should not have taken it in bad part. It is very natural that you should make a little row when you find yourself with persons who don’t inspire you with sufficient confidence. You might have done that, and no one would have troubled you on that account. You would not even have been gagged. And I will tell you why. This room is very private. That’s its only recommendation, but it has that in its favor. You might fire off a mortar and it would produce about as much noise at the nearest police station as the snores of a drunken man. Here a cannon would make a boum, and the thunder would make a pouf. It’s a handy lodging. But, in short, you did not shout, and it is better so. I present you my compliments, and I will tell you the conclusion that I draw from that fact: My dear sir, when a man shouts, who comes? The police. And after the police? Justice. Well! You have not made an outcry; that is because you don’t care to have the police and the courts come in any more than we do. It is because, — I have long suspected it, — you have some interest in hiding something. On our side we have the same interest. So we can come to an understanding.”

As he spoke thus, it seemed as though Thenardier, who kept his eyes fixed on M. Leblanc, were trying to plunge the sharp points which darted from the pupils into the very conscience of his prisoner. Moreover, his language, which was stamped with a sort of moderated, subdued insolence and crafty insolence, was reserved and almost choice, and in that rascal, who had been nothing but a robber a short time previously, one now felt “the man who had studied for the priesthood.”

The silence preserved by the prisoner, that precaution which had been carried to the point of forgetting all anxiety for his own life, that resistance opposed to the first impulse of nature, which is to utter a cry, all this, it must be confessed, now that his attention had been called to it, troubled Marius, and affected him with painful astonishment.

Thenardier's well-grounded observation still further obscured for Marius the dense mystery which enveloped that grave and singular person on whom Courfeyrac had bestowed the sobriquet of Monsieur Leblanc.

But whoever he was, bound with ropes, surrounded with executioners, half plunged, so to speak, in a grave which was closing in upon him to the extent of a degree with every moment that passed, in the presence of Thenardier's wrath, as in the presence of his sweetness, this man remained impassive; and Marius could not refrain from admiring at such a moment the superbly melancholy visage.

Here, evidently, was a soul which was inaccessible to terror, and which did not know the meaning of despair. Here was one of those men who command amazement in desperate circumstances. Extreme as was the crisis, inevitable as was the catastrophe, there was nothing here of the agony of the drowning man, who opens his horror-filled eyes under the water.

Thenardier rose in an unpretending manner, went to the fireplace, shoved aside the screen, which he leaned against the neighboring pallet, and thus unmasked the brazier full of glowing coals, in which the prisoner could plainly see the chisel white-hot and spotted here and there with tiny scarlet stars.

Then Thenardier returned to his seat beside M. Leblanc.

"I continue," said he. "We can come to an understanding. Let us arrange this matter in an amicable way. I was wrong to lose my temper just now, I don't know what I was thinking of, I went a great deal too far, I said extravagant things. For example, because you are a millionnaire, I told you that I exacted money, a lot of money, a deal of money. That would not be reasonable. Mon Dieu, in spite of your riches, you have expenses of your own — who has not? I don't want to ruin you, I am not a greedy fellow, after all. I am not one of those people who, because they have the advantage of the position, profit by the fact to make themselves ridiculous. Why, I'm taking things into consideration and making a sacrifice on my side. I only want two hundred thousand francs."

M. Leblanc uttered not a word.

Thenardier went on: —

"You see that I put not a little water in my wine; I'm very moderate. I don't know the state of your fortune, but I do know that you don't stick at money, and a benevolent man like yourself can certainly give two hundred thousand francs to the father of a family who is out of luck. Certainly, you are reasonable, too; you haven't imagined that I should take all the trouble I have to-day and organized this affair this evening, which has been labor well bestowed, in the opinion of these gentlemen, merely to wind up by asking you for enough to go and drink red wine at fifteen sous and eat veal at Desnoyer's. Two hundred thousand francs — it's surely worth all that. This trifle once out of your pocket, I guarantee you that that's the end of the matter, and that you have no further demands to fear. You will say to me: 'But I haven't two hundred thousand francs about me.' Oh! I'm not extortionate. I don't demand that. I only ask one thing of you. Have the goodness to write what I am about to dictate to you."

Here Thenardier paused; then he added, emphasizing his words, and casting a smile in the direction of the brazier: —

"I warn you that I shall not admit that you don't know how to write."

A grand inquisitor might have envied that smile.

Thenardier pushed the table close to M. Leblanc, and took an inkstand, a pen, and a sheet of paper from the drawer which he left half open, and in which gleamed the long blade of the knife.

He placed the sheet of paper before M. Leblanc.

"Write," said he.

The prisoner spoke at last.

"How do you expect me to write? I am bound."

"That's true, excuse me!" ejaculated Thenardier, "you are quite right."

And turning to Bigrenaille: —

"Untie the gentleman's right arm."

Panchaud, alias Printanier, alias Bigrenaille, executed Thenardier's order.

When the prisoner's right arm was free, Thenardier dipped the pen in the ink and presented it to him.

"Understand thoroughly, sir, that you are in our power, at our discretion, that no human power can get you out of this, and that we shall be really grieved if we are forced to proceed to disagreeable extremities. I know neither your name, nor your address, but I warn you, that you will remain bound until the person charged with carrying the letter which you are about to write shall have returned. Now, be so good as to write."

"What?" demanded the prisoner.

"I will dictate."

M. Leblanc took the pen.

Thenardier began to dictate: —

“My daughter—”

The prisoner shuddered, and raised his eyes to Thenardier.

“Put down ‘My dear daughter’—” said Thenardier.

M. Leblanc obeyed.

Thenardier continued: —

“Come instantly—”

He paused: —

“You address her as thou, do you not?”

“Who?” asked M. Leblanc.

“Parbleu!” cried Thenardier, “the little one, the Lark.”

M. Leblanc replied without the slightest apparent emotion: —

“I do not know what you mean.”

“Go on, nevertheless,” ejaculated Thenardier, and he continued to dictate: —

“Come immediately, I am in absolute need of thee. The person who will deliver this note to thee is instructed to conduct thee to me. I am waiting for thee. Come with confidence.”

M. Leblanc had written the whole of this.

Thenardier resumed: —

“Ah! erase ‘come with confidence’; that might lead her to suppose that everything was not as it should be, and that distrust is possible.”

M. Leblanc erased the three words.

“Now,” pursued Thenardier, “sign it. What’s your name?”

The prisoner laid down the pen and demanded: —

“For whom is this letter?”

“You know well,” retorted Thenardier, “for the little one I just told you so.”

It was evident that Thenardier avoided naming the young girl in question. He said “the Lark,” he said “the little one,” but he did not pronounce her name — the precaution of a clever man guarding his secret from his accomplices. To mention the name was to deliver the whole “affair” into their hands, and to tell them more about it than there was any need of their knowing.

He went on: —

“Sign. What is your name?”

“Urbain Fabre,” said the prisoner.

Thenardier, with the movement of a cat, dashed his hand into his pocket and drew out the handkerchief which had been seized on M. Leblanc. He looked for the mark on it, and held it close to the candle.

“U. F. That’s it. Urbain Fabre. Well, sign it U. F.”

The prisoner signed.

“As two hands are required to fold the letter, give it to me, I will fold it.”

That done, Thenardier resumed: —

“Address it, ‘Mademoiselle Fabre,’ at your house. I know that you live a long distance from here, near Saint-Jacquesdu-Haut-Pas, because you go to mass there every day, but I don’t know in what street. I see that you understand your situation. As you have not lied about your name, you will not lie about your address. Write it yourself.”

The prisoner paused thoughtfully for a moment, then he took the pen and wrote: —

“Mademoiselle Fabre, at M. Urbain Fabre’s, Rue Saint-Dominique-D’Enfer, No. 17.”

Thenardier seized the letter with a sort of feverish convulsion.

“Wife!” he cried.

The Thenardier woman hastened to him.

“Here’s the letter. You know what you have to do. There is a carriage at the door. Set out at once, and return ditto.”

And addressing the man with the meat-axe: —

“Since you have taken off your nose-screen, accompany the mistress. You will get up behind the fiacre. You know where you left the team?”

“Yes,” said the man.

And depositing his axe in a corner, he followed Madame Thenardier.

As they set off, Thenardier thrust his head through the half-open door, and shouted into the corridor: —

“Above all things, don’t lose the letter! remember that you carry two hundred thousand francs with you!”

The Thenardier’s hoarse voice replied: —

“Be easy. I have it in my bosom.”

A minute had not elapsed, when the sound of the cracking of a whip was heard, which rapidly retreated and died away.

“Good!” growled Thenardier. “They’re going at a fine pace. At such a gallop, the bourgeoise will be back inside three-quarters of an hour.”

He drew a chair close to the fireplace, folding his arms, and presenting his muddy boots to the brazier.

“My feet are cold!” said he.

Only five ruffians now remained in the den with Thenardier and the prisoner.

These men, through the black masks or paste which covered their faces, and made of them, at fear’s pleasure, charcoal-burners, negroes, or demons, had a stupid and gloomy air, and it could be felt that they perpetrated a crime like a bit of work, tranquilly, without either wrath or mercy, with a sort of ennui. They were crowded together in one corner like brutes, and remained silent.

Thenardier warmed his feet.

The prisoner had relapsed into his taciturnity. A sombre calm had succeeded to the wild uproar which had filled the garret but a few moments before.

The candle, on which a large “stranger” had formed, cast but a dim light in the immense hovel, the brazier had grown dull, and all those monstrous heads cast misshapen shadows on the walls and ceiling.

No sound was audible except the quiet breathing of the old drunken man, who was fast asleep.

Marius waited in a state of anxiety that was augmented by every trifle. The enigma was more impenetrable than ever.

Who was this “little one” whom Thenardier had called the Lark? Was she his “Ursule”? The prisoner had not seemed to be affected by that word, “the Lark,” and had replied in the most natural manner in the world: “I do not know what you mean.” On the other hand, the two letters U. F. were explained; they meant Urbain Fabre; and Ursule was no longer named Ursule. This was what Marius perceived most clearly of all.

A sort of horrible fascination held him nailed to his post, from which he was observing and commanding this whole scene. There he stood, almost incapable of movement or reflection, as though annihilated by the abominable things viewed at such close quarters. He waited, in the hope of some incident, no matter of what nature, since he could not collect his thoughts and did not know upon what course to decide.

“In any case,” he said, “if she is the Lark, I shall see her, for the Thenardier woman is to bring her hither. That will be the end, and then I will give my life and my blood if necessary, but I will deliver her! Nothing shall stop me."

Nearly half an hour passed in this manner. Thenardier seemed to be absorbed in gloomy reflections, the prisoner did not stir. Still, Marius fancied that at intervals, and for the last few moments, he had heard a faint, dull noise in the direction of the prisoner.

All at once, Thenardier addressed the prisoner:

"By the way, Monsieur Fabre, I might as well say it to you at once."

These few words appeared to be the beginning of an explanation. Marius strained his ears.

"My wife will be back shortly, don't get impatient. I think that the Lark really is your daughter, and it seems to me quite natural that you should keep her. Only, listen to me a bit. My wife will go and hunt her up with your letter. I told my wife to dress herself in the way she did, so that your young lady might make no difficulty about following her. They will both enter the carriage with my comrade behind. Somewhere, outside the barrier, there is a trap harnessed to two very good horses. Your young lady will be taken to it. She will alight from the fiacre. My comrade will enter the other vehicle with her, and my wife will come back here to tell us: 'It's done.' As for the young lady, no harm will be done to her; the trap will conduct her to a place where she will be quiet, and just as soon as you have handed over to me those little two hundred thousand francs, she will be returned to you. If you have me arrested, my comrade will give a turn of his thumb to the Lark, that's all."

The prisoner uttered not a syllable. After a pause, Thenardier continued: —

"It's very simple, as you see. There'll be no harm done unless you wish that there should be harm done. I'm telling you how things stand. I warn you so that you may be prepared."

He paused: the prisoner did not break the silence, and Thenardier resumed: —

"As soon as my wife returns and says to me: 'The Lark is on the way,' we will release you, and you will be free to go and sleep at home. You see that our intentions are not evil."

Terrible images passed through Marius' mind. What! That young girl whom they were abducting was not to be brought back? One of those monsters was to bear her off into the darkness? Whither? And what if it were she!

It was clear that it was she. Marius felt his heart stop beating.

What was he to do? Discharge the pistol? Place all those scoundrels in the hands of justice? But the horrible man with the meat-axe would, none the less, be out of reach with the young girl, and Marius reflected on Thenardier's words, of which he perceived the bloody significance: "If you have me arrested, my comrade will give a turn of his thumb to the Lark."

Now, it was not alone by the colonel's testament, it was by his own love, it was by the peril of the one he loved, that he felt himself restrained.

This frightful situation, which had already lasted above half an hour, was changing its aspect every moment.

Marius had sufficient strength of mind to review in succession all the most heart-breaking conjectures, seeking hope and finding none.

The tumult of his thoughts contrasted with the funereal silence of the den.

In the midst of this silence, the door at the bottom of the staircase was heard to open and shut again.

The prisoner made a movement in his bonds.

"Here's the bourgeoise," said Thenardier.

He had hardly uttered the words, when the Thenardier woman did in fact rush hastily into the room, red, panting, breathless, with flaming eyes, and cried, as she smote her huge hands on her thighs simultaneously: —

"False address!"

The ruffian who had gone with her made his appearance behind her and picked up his axe again.

She resumed: —

"Nobody there! Rue Saint-Dominique, No. 17, no Monsieur Urbain Fabre! They know not what it means!"

She paused, choking, then went on: —

"Monsieur Thenardier! That old fellow has duped you! You are too good, you see! If it had been me, I'd have chopped the beast in four quarters to begin with! And if he had acted ugly, I'd have boiled him alive! He would have been obliged to speak, and say where the girl is, and where he keeps his shiners! That's the way I should have managed matters! People are perfectly right when they say that men are a deal stupider than women! Nobody at No. 17. It's nothing but a big carriage gate! No Monsieur Fabre in the Rue Saint-Dominique! And after all that racing and fee to the coachman and all! I spoke to both the porter and the portress, a fine, stout woman, and they know nothing about him!”

Marius breathed freely once more.

She, Ursule or the Lark, he no longer knew what to call her, was safe.

While his exasperated wife vociferated, Thenardier had seated himself on the table.

For several minutes he uttered not a word, but swung his right foot, which hung down, and stared at the brazier with an air of savage revery.

Finally, he said to the prisoner, with a slow and singularly ferocious tone:

“A false address? What did you expect to gain by that?”

“To gain time!” cried the prisoner in a thundering voice, and at the same instant he shook off his bonds; they were cut. The prisoner was only attached to the bed now by one leg.

Before the seven men had time to collect their senses and dash forward, he had bent down into the fireplace, had stretched out his hand to the brazier, and had then straightened himself up again, and now Thenardier, the female Thenardier, and the ruffians, huddled in amazement at the extremity of the hovel, stared at him in stupefaction, as almost free and in a formidable attitude, he brandished above his head the red-hot chisel, which emitted a threatening glow.

The judicial examination to which the ambush in the Gorbeau house eventually gave rise, established the fact that a large sou piece, cut and worked in a peculiar fashion, was found in the garret, when the police made their descent on it. This sou piece was one of those marvels of industry, which are engendered by the patience of the galleys in the shadows and for the shadows, marvels which are nothing else than instruments of escape. These hideous and delicate products of wonderful art are to jewellers’ work what the metaphors of slang are to poetry. There are Benvenuto Cellinis in the galleys, just as there are Villons in language. The unhappy wretch who aspires to deliverance finds means sometimes without tools, sometimes with a common wooden-handled knife, to saw a sou into two thin plates, to hollow out these plates without affecting the coinage stamp, and to make a furrow on the edge of the sou in such a manner that the plates will adhere again. This can be screwed together and unscrewed at will; it is a box. In this box he hides a watch-spring, and this watch-spring, properly handled, cuts good-sized chains and bars of iron. The unfortunate convict is supposed to possess merely a sou; not at all, he possesses liberty. It was a large sou of this sort which, during the subsequent search of the police, was found under the bed near the window. They also found a tiny saw of blue steel which would fit the sou.

It is probable that the prisoner had this sou piece on his person at the moment when the ruffians searched him, that he contrived to conceal it in his hand, and that afterward, having his right hand free, he unscrewed it, and used it as a saw to cut the cords which fastened him, which would explain the faint noise and almost imperceptible movements which Marius had observed.

As he had not been able to bend down, for fear of betraying himself, he had not cut the bonds of his left leg.

The ruffians had recovered from their first surprise.

“Be easy,” said Bigrenaille to Thenardier. “He still holds by one leg, and he can’t get away. I’ll answer for that. I tied that paw for him.”

In the meanwhile, the prisoner had begun to speak: —

“You are wretches, but my life is not worth the trouble of defending it. When you think that you can make me speak, that you can make me write what I do not choose to write, that you can make me say what I do not choose to say—”

He stripped up his left sleeve, and added: —

“See here.”

At the same moment he extended his arm, and laid the glowing chisel which he held in his left hand by its wooden handle on his bare flesh.

The crackling of the burning flesh became audible, and the odor peculiar to chambers of torture filled the hovel.

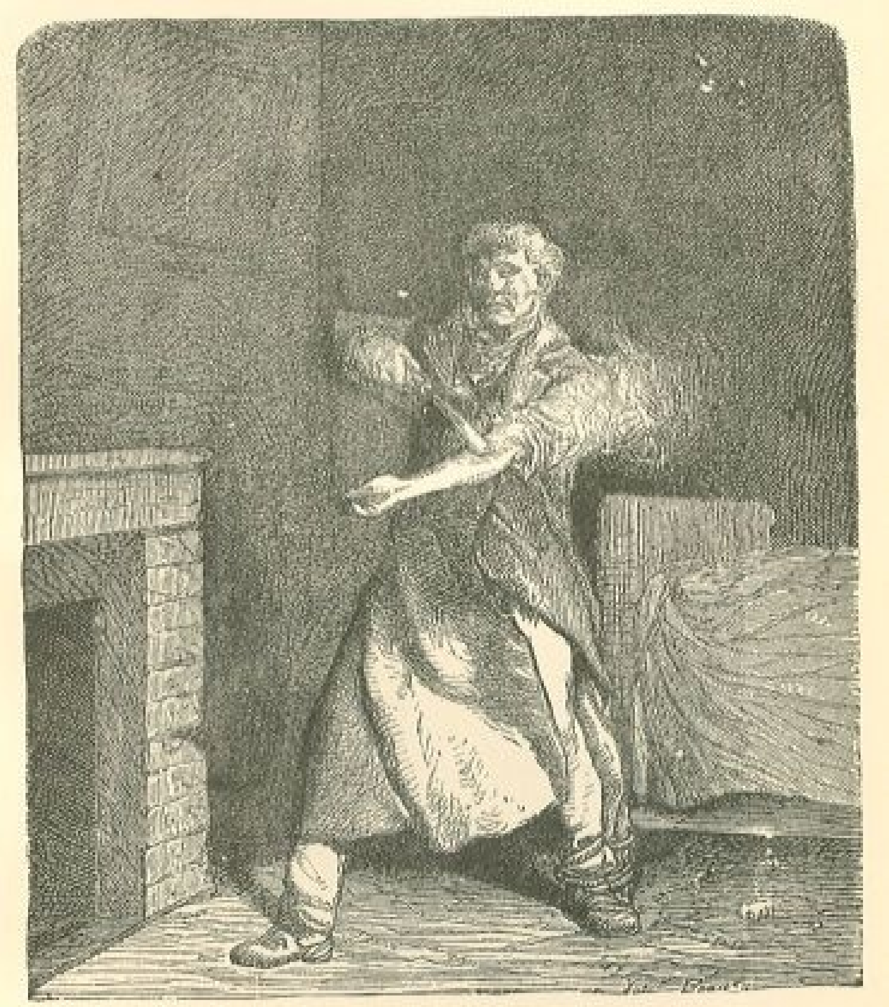

THE RED-HOT CHISEL.

Marius reeled in utter horror, the very ruffians shuddered, hardly a muscle of the old man’s face contracted, and while the red-hot iron sank into the smoking wound, impassive and almost august, he fixed on Thenardier his beautiful glance, in which there was no hatred, and where suffering vanished in serene majesty.

With grand and lofty natures, the revolts of the flesh and the senses when subjected to physical suffering cause the soul to spring forth, and make it appear on the brow, just as rebellions among the soldiery force the captain to show himself.

“Wretches!” said he, “have no more fear of me than I have for you!”

And, tearing the chisel from the wound, he hurled it through the window, which had been left open; the horrible, glowing tool disappeared into the night, whirling as it flew, and fell far away on the snow.

The prisoner resumed: —

“Do what you please with me.” He was disarmed.

“Seize him!” said Thenardier.

Two of the ruffians laid their hands on his shoulder, and the masked man with the ventriloquist’s voice took up his station in front of him, ready to smash his skull at the slightest movement.

At the same time, Marius heard below him, at the base of the partition, but so near that he could not see who was speaking, this colloquy conducted in a low tone: —

“There is only one thing left to do.”

“Cut his throat.”

“That’s it.”

It was the husband and wife taking counsel together.

Thenardier walked slowly towards the table, opened the drawer, and took out the knife. Marius fretted with the handle of his pistol. Unprecedented perplexity! For the last hour he had had two voices in his conscience, the one enjoining him to respect his father’s testament, the other crying to him to rescue the prisoner. These two voices continued uninterruptedly that struggle which tormented him to agony. Up to that moment he had cherished a vague hope that he should find some means of reconciling these two duties, but nothing within the limits of possibility had presented itself.

However, the peril was urgent, the last bounds of delay had been reached; Thenardier was standing thoughtfully a few paces distant from the prisoner.

Marius cast a wild glance about him, the last mechanical resource of despair. All at once a shudder ran through him.

At his feet, on the table, a bright ray of light from the full moon illuminated and seemed to point out to him a sheet of paper. On this paper he read the following line written that very morning, in large letters, by the eldest of the Thenardier girls: —

“THE BOBBIES ARE HERE.”

An idea, a flash, crossed Marius’ mind; this was the expedient of which he was in search, the solution of that frightful problem which was torturing him, of sparing the assassin and saving the victim.

He knelt down on his commode, stretched out his arm, seized the sheet of paper, softly detached a bit of plaster from the wall, wrapped the paper round it, and tossed the whole through the crevice into the middle of the den.

It was high time. Thenardier had conquered his last fears or his last scruples, and was advancing on the prisoner.

“Something is falling!” cried the Thenardier woman.

“What is it?” asked her husband.

The woman darted forward and picked up the bit of plaster. She handed it to her husband.

“Where did this come from?” demanded Thenardier.

“Pardie!” ejaculated his wife, “where do you suppose it came from? Through the window, of course.”

“I saw it pass,” said Bigrenaille.

Thenardier rapidly unfolded the paper and held it close to the candle.

“It’s in Eponine’s handwriting. The devil!”

He made a sign to his wife, who hastily drew near, and showed her the line written on the sheet of paper, then he added in a subdued voice: —

“Quick! The ladder! Let’s leave the bacon in the mousetrap and decamp!”

“Without cutting that man’s throat?” asked, the Thenardier woman.

“We haven’t the time.”

“Through what?” resumed Bigrenaille.

“Through the window,” replied Thenardier. “Since Ponine has thrown the stone through the window, it indicates that the house is not watched on that side.”

The mask with the ventriloquist’s voice deposited his huge key on the floor, raised both arms in the air, and opened and clenched his fists, three times rapidly without uttering a word.

This was the signal like the signal for clearing the decks for action on board ship.

The ruffians who were holding the prisoner released him; in the twinkling of an eye the rope ladder was unrolled outside the window, and solidly fastened to the sill by the two iron hooks.

The prisoner paid no attention to what was going on around him. He seemed to be dreaming or praying.

As soon as the ladder was arranged, Thenardier cried:

“Come! the bourgeoise first!”

And he rushed headlong to the window.

But just as he was about to throw his leg over, Bigrenaille seized him roughly by the collar.

“Not much, come now, you old dog, after us!”

“After us!” yelled the ruffians.

“You are children,” said Thenardier, “we are losing time. The police are on our heels.”

“Well,” said the ruffians, “let’s draw lots to see who shall go down first.”

Thenardier exclaimed: —

“Are you mad! Are you crazy! What a pack of boobies! You want to waste time, do you? Draw lots, do you? By a wet finger, by a short straw! With written names! Thrown into a hat!—”

“Would you like my hat?” cried a voice on the threshold.

All wheeled round. It was Javert.

He had his hat in his hand, and was holding it out to them with a smile.

CHAPTER XXI — ONE SHOULD ALWAYS BEGIN BY ARRESTING THE VICTIMS

At nightfall, Javert had posted his men and had gone into ambush himself between the trees of the Rue de la Barrière-des-Gobelins which faced the Gorbeau house, on the other side of the boulevard. He had begun operations by opening "his pockets," and dropping into it the two young girls who were charged with keeping a watch on the approaches to the den. But he had only "caged" Azelma. As for Eponine, she was not at her post, she had disappeared, and he had not been able to seize her. Then Javert had made a point and had bent his ear to waiting for the signal agreed upon. The comings and goings of the fiacres had greatly agitated him. At last, he had grown impatient, and, sure that there was a nest there, sure of being in "luck," having recognized many of the ruffians who had entered, he had finally decided to go upstairs without waiting for the pistol-shot.

It will be remembered that he had Marius' pass-key.

He had arrived just in the nick of time.

The terrified ruffians flung themselves on the arms which they had abandoned in all the corners at the moment of flight. In less than a second, these seven men, horrible to behold, had grouped themselves in an attitude of defence, one with his meat-axe, another with his key, another with his bludgeon, the rest with shears, pincers, and hammers. Thenardier had his knife in his fist. The Thenardier woman snatched up an enormous paving-stone which lay in the angle of the window and served her daughters as an ottoman.

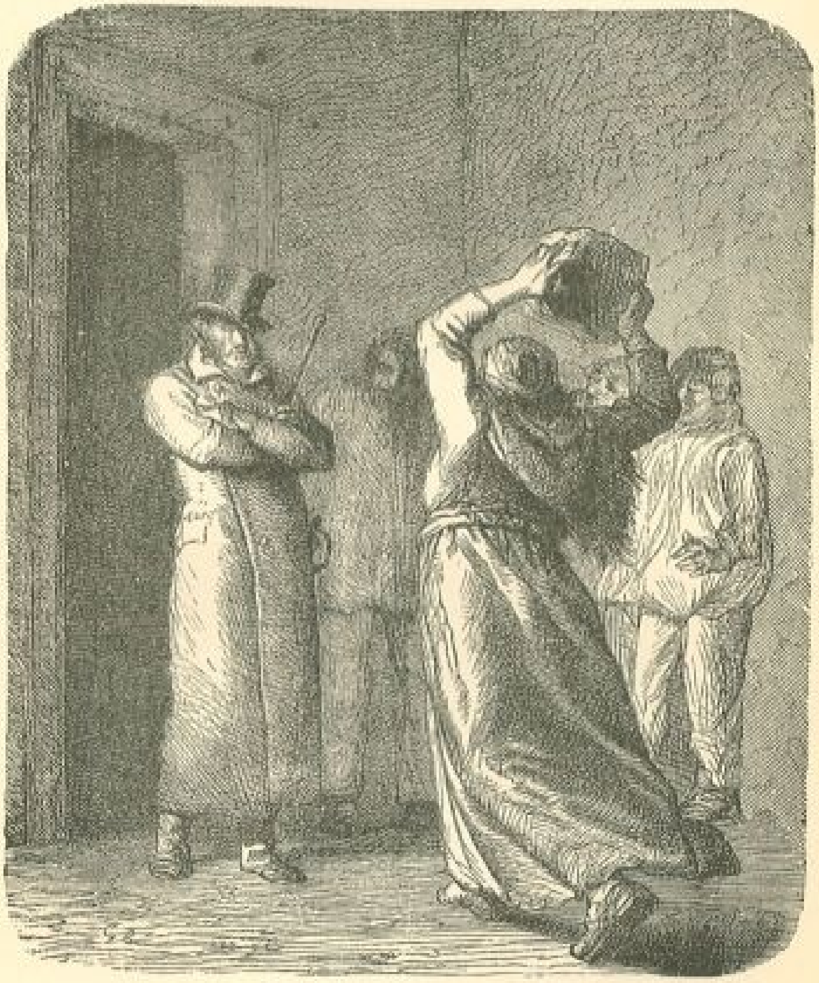

THE PAVING-STONE.

Javert put on his hat again, and advanced a couple of paces into the room, with arms folded, his cane under one arm, his sword in its sheath.

“Halt there,” said he. “You shall not go out by the window, you shall go through the door. It’s less unhealthy. There are seven of you, there are fifteen of us. Don’t let’s fall to collaring each other like men of Auvergne.”

Bigrenaille drew out a pistol which he had kept concealed under his blouse, and put it in Thenardier’s hand, whispering in the latter’s ear: —

“It’s Javert. I don’t dare fire at that man. Do you dare?”

“Parbleu!” replied Thenardier.

“Well, then, fire.”

Thenardier took the pistol and aimed at Javert.

Javert, who was only three paces from him, stared intently at him and contented himself with saying: —

“Come now, don’t fire. You’ll miss fire.”

Thenardier pulled the trigger. The pistol missed fire.

“Didn’t I tell you so!” ejaculated Javert.

Bigrenaille flung his bludgeon at Javert’s feet.

“You’re the emperor of the fiends! I surrender.”

“And you?” Javert asked the rest of the ruffians.

They replied: —

“So do we.”

Javert began again calmly: —

“That’s right, that’s good, I said so, you are nice fellows.”

“I only ask one thing,” said Bigrenaille, “and that is, that I may not be denied tobacco while I am in confinement.”

“Granted,” said Javert.

And turning round and calling behind him: —

“Come in now!”

A squad of policemen, sword in hand, and agents armed with bludgeons and cudgels, rushed in at Javert’s summons. They pinioned the ruffians.

This throng of men, sparely lighted by the single candle, filled the den with shadows.

“Handcuff them all!” shouted Javert.

“Come on!” cried a voice which was not the voice of a man, but of which no one would ever have said: “It is a woman’s voice.”

The Thenardier woman had entrenched herself in one of the angles of the window, and it was she who had just given vent to this roar.

The policemen and agents recoiled.

She had thrown off her shawl, but retained her bonnet; her husband, who was crouching behind her, was almost hidden under the discarded shawl, and she was shielding him with her body, as she elevated the paving-stone above her head with the gesture of a giantess on the point of hurling a rock.

“Beware!” she shouted.

All crowded back towards the corridor. A broad open space was cleared in the middle of the garret.

The Thenardier woman cast a glance at the ruffians who had allowed themselves to be pinioned, and muttered in hoarse and guttural accents: —

“The cowards!”

Javert smiled, and advanced across the open space which the Thenardier was devouring with her eyes.

“Don’t come near me,” she cried, “or I’ll crush you.”

“What a grenadier!” ejaculated Javert; “you’ve got a beard like a man, mother, but I have claws like a woman.”

And he continued to advance.

The Thenardier, dishevelled and terrible, set her feet far apart, threw herself backwards, and hurled the paving-stone at Javert’s head. Javert ducked, the stone passed over him, struck the wall behind, knocked off a huge piece of plastering, and, rebounding from angle to angle across the hovel, now luckily almost empty, rested at Javert’s feet.

At the same moment, Javert reached the Thenardier couple. One of his big hands descended on the woman’s shoulder; the other on the husband’s head.

“The handcuffs!” he shouted.

The policemen trooped in in force, and in a few seconds Javert’s order had been executed.

The Thenardier female, overwhelmed, stared at her pinioned hands, and at those of her husband, who had dropped to the floor, and exclaimed, weeping: —

“My daughters!”

“They are in the jug,” said Javert.

In the meanwhile, the agents had caught sight of the drunken man asleep behind the door, and were shaking him: —

He awoke, stammering: —

“Is it all over, Jondrette?”

“Yes,” replied Javert.

The six pinioned ruffians were standing, and still preserved their spectral mien; all three besmeared with black, all three masked.

“Keep on your masks,” said Javert.

And passing them in review with a glance of a Frederick II. at a Potsdam parade, he said to the three “chimney-builders”: —

“Good day, Bigrenaille! good day, Brujon! good day, Deuxmilliards!”

Then turning to the three masked men, he said to the man with the meat-axe: —

“Good day, Gueulemer!”

And to the man with the cudgel: —

“Good day, Babet!”

And to the ventriloquist: —

“Your health, Claquesous.”

At that moment, he caught sight of the ruffians' prisoner, who, ever since the entrance of the police, had not uttered a word, and had held his head down.

"Untie the gentleman!" said Javert, "and let no one go out!"

That said, he seated himself with sovereign dignity before the table, where the candle and the writing-materials still remained, drew a stamped paper from his pocket, and began to prepare his report.

When he had written the first lines, which are formulas that never vary, he raised his eyes: —

"Let the gentleman whom these gentlemen bound step forward."

The policemen glanced round them.

"Well," said Javert, "where is he?"

The prisoner of the ruffians, M. Leblanc, M. Urbain Fabre, the father of Ursule or the Lark, had disappeared.

The door was guarded, but the window was not. As soon as he had found himself released from his bonds, and while Javert was drawing up his report, he had taken advantage of confusion, the crowd, the darkness, and of a moment when the general attention was diverted from him, to dash out of the window.

An agent sprang to the opening and looked out. He saw no one outside.

The rope ladder was still shaking.

"The devil!" ejaculated Javert between his teeth, "he must have been the most valuable of the lot."

CHAPTER XXII — THE LITTLE ONE WHO WAS CRYING IN VOLUME TWO

On the day following that on which these events took place in the house on the Boulevard de l'Hopital, a child, who seemed to be coming from the direction of the bridge of Austerlitz, was ascending the side-alley on the right in the direction of the Barriere de Fontainebleau.

Night had fully come.

This lad was pale, thin, clad in rags, with linen trousers in the month of February, and was singing at the top of his voice.

At the corner of the Rue du Petit-Banquier, a bent old woman was rummaging in a heap of refuse by the light of a street lantern; the child jostled her as he passed, then recoiled, exclaiming: —

"Hello! And I took it for an enormous, enormous dog!"

He pronounced the word enormous the second time with a jeering swell of the voice which might be tolerably well represented by capitals: "an enormous, ENORMOUS dog."

The old woman straightened herself up in a fury.

"Nasty brat!" she grumbled. "If I hadn't been bending over, I know well where I would have planted my foot on you."

The boy was already far away.

"Kisss! kisss!" he cried. "After that, I don't think I was mistaken!"

The old woman, choking with indignation, now rose completely upright, and the red gleam of the lantern fully lighted up her livid face, all hollowed into angles and wrinkles, with crow's-feet meeting the corners of her mouth.

Her body was lost in the darkness, and only her head was visible. One would have pronounced her a mask of Decrepitude carved out by a light from the night.

The boy surveyed her.

"Madame," said he, "does not possess that style of beauty which pleases me."

He then pursued his road, and resumed his song: —

"Le roi Coupdesabot
S'en allait à la chasse,

A la chasse aux corbeaux—”

At the end of these three lines he paused. He had arrived in front of No. 50-52, and finding the door fastened, he began to assault it with resounding and heroic kicks, which betrayed rather the man’s shoes that he was wearing than the child’s feet which he owned.

In the meanwhile, the very old woman whom he had encountered at the corner of the Rue du Petit-Banquier hastened up behind him, uttering clamorous cries and indulging in lavish and exaggerated gestures.

“What’s this? What’s this? Lord God! He’s battering the door down! He’s knocking the house down.”

The kicks continued.

The old woman strained her lungs.

“Is that the way buildings are treated nowadays?”

All at once she paused.

She had recognized the gamin.

“What! so it’s that imp!”

“Why, it’s the old lady,” said the lad. “Good day, Bougonmuche. I have come to see my ancestors.”

The old woman retorted with a composite grimace, and a wonderful improvisation of hatred taking advantage of feebleness and ugliness, which was, unfortunately, wasted in the dark: —

“There’s no one here.”

“Bah!” retorted the boy, “where’s my father?”

“At La Force.”

“Come, now! And my mother?”

“At Saint-Lazare.”

“Well! And my sisters?”

“At the Madelonettes.”

The lad scratched his head behind his ear, stared at Ma’am Bougon, and said: —

“Ah!”

Then he executed a pirouette on his heel; a moment later, the old woman, who had remained on the door-step, heard him singing in his clear, young voice, as he plunged under the black elm-trees, in the wintry wind: —

“Le roi Coupdesabot
S’en allait à la chasse,
A la chasse aux corbeaux,

Monté sur deux échasses.
Quand on passait dessous,
On lui payait deux sous.”

[THE END OF VOLUME III. “MARIUS”]

VOLUME IV. — SAINT-DENIS.

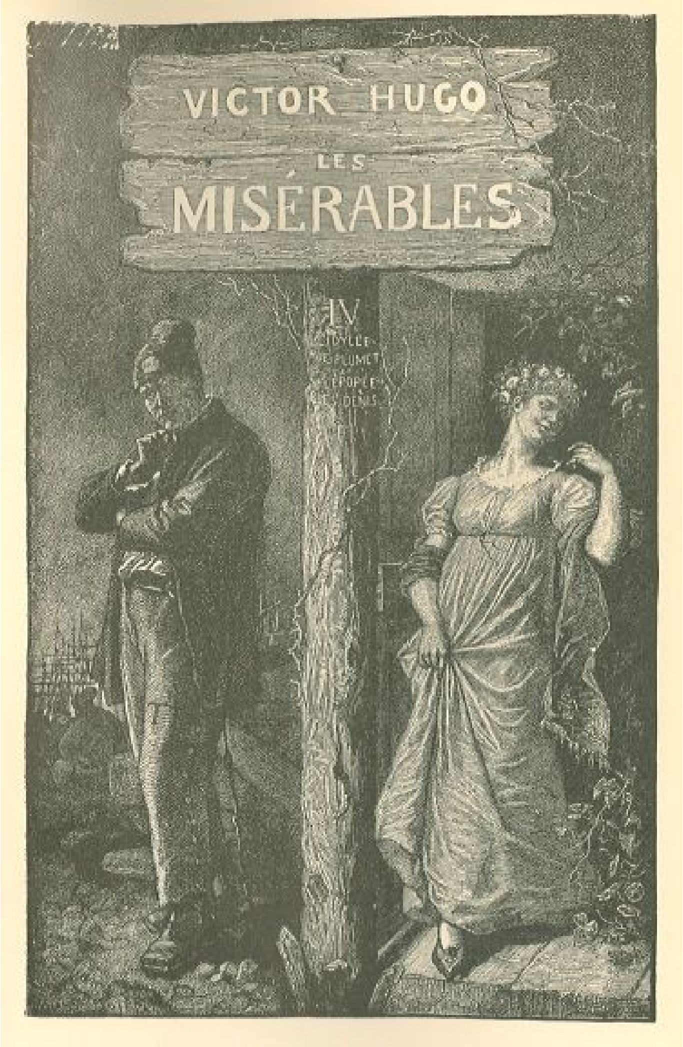
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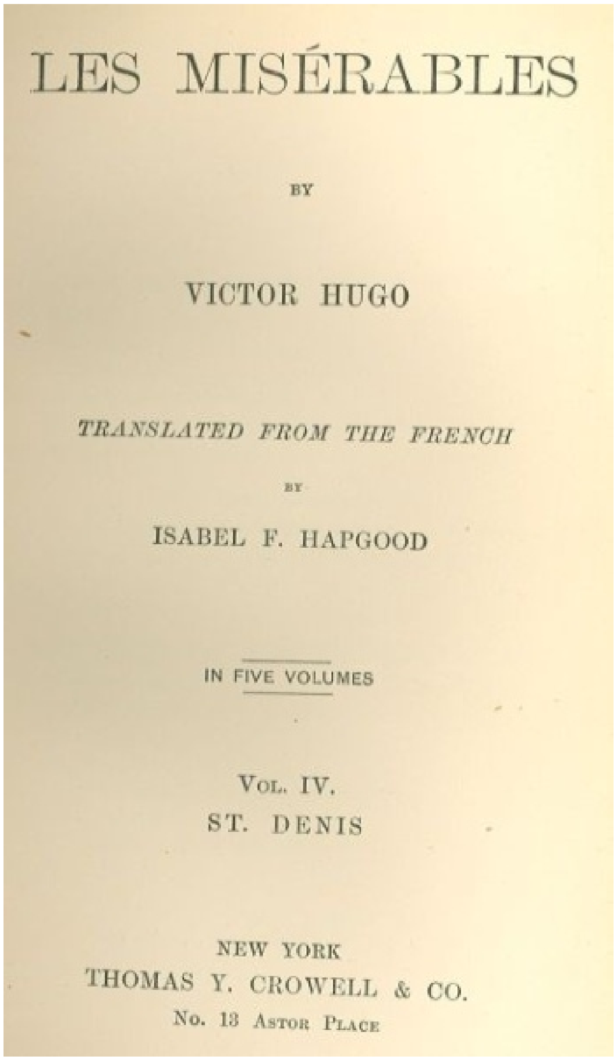

LES MISÉRABLES

BY

VICTOR HUGO

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH

BY

ISABEL F. HAPGOOD

IN FIVE VOLUMES

VOL. IV.
ST. DENIS

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THE IDYL IN THE RUE PLUMET AND THE EPIC IN THE RUE SAINT-DENIS

BOOK FIRST. — A FEW PAGES OF HISTORY

CHAPTER I — WELL CUT

1831 and 1832, the two years which are immediately connected with the Revolution of July, form one of the most peculiar and striking moments of history. These two years rise like two mountains midway between those which precede and those which follow them. They have a revolutionary grandeur. Precipices are to be distinguished there. The social masses, the very assizes of civilization, the solid group of superposed and adhering interests, the century-old profiles of the ancient French formation, appear and disappear in them every instant, athwart the storm clouds of systems, of passions, and of theories. These appearances and disappearances have been designated as movement and resistance. At intervals, truth, that daylight of the human soul, can be descried shining there.

This remarkable epoch is decidedly circumscribed and is beginning to be sufficiently distant from us to allow of our grasping the principal lines even at the present day.

We shall make the attempt.

The Restoration had been one of those intermediate phases, hard to define, in which there is fatigue, buzzing, murmurs, sleep, tumult, and which are nothing else than the arrival of a great nation at a halting-place.

These epochs are peculiar and mislead the politicians who desire to convert them to profit. In the beginning, the nation asks nothing but repose; it thirsts for but one thing, peace; it has but one ambition, to be small. Which is the translation of remaining tranquil. Of great events, great hazards, great adventures, great men, thank God, we have seen enough, we have them heaped higher than our heads. We would exchange Caesar for Prusias, and Napoleon for the King of Yvetot. “What a good little king was he!” We have marched since daybreak, we have reached the evening of a long and toilsome day; we have made our first change with Mirabeau, the second with Robespierre, the third with Bonaparte; we are worn out. Each one demands a bed.

Devotion which is weary, heroism which has grown old, ambitions which are sated, fortunes which are made, seek, demand, implore, solicit, what? A shelter. They have it. They take possession of peace, of tranquillity, of leisure; behold, they are content. But, at the same time certain facts arise, compel recognition, and knock at the door in their turn. These facts are the products of revolutions and wars, they are, they exist, they have the right to install themselves in society, and they do install themselves therein; and most of the time, facts are the stewards of the household and fouriers who do nothing but prepare lodgings for principles.

This, then, is what appears to philosophical politicians: —

At the same time that weary men demand repose, accomplished facts demand guarantees. Guarantees are the same to facts that repose is to men.

This is what England demanded of the Stuarts after the Protector; this is what France demanded of the Bourbons after the Empire.

These guarantees are a necessity of the times. They must be accorded. Princes “grant” them, but in reality, it is the force of things which gives them. A profound truth, and one useful to know, which the Stuarts did not suspect in 1662 and which the Bourbons did not even obtain a glimpse of in 1814.

The predestined family, which returned to France when Napoleon fell, had the fatal simplicity to believe that it was itself which bestowed, and that what it had bestowed it could take back again; that the House of Bourbon possessed the right divine, that France possessed nothing, and that the political right conceded in the charter of Louis XVIII. was merely a branch of the right divine, was detached by the House of Bourbon and graciously given to the people until such day as it should please the King to reassume it. Still, the House of Bourbon should have felt, from the displeasure created by the gift, that it did not come from it.

This house was churlish to the nineteenth century. It put on an ill-tempèred look at every development of the nation. To make use of a trivial word, that is to say, of a popular and a true word, it looked glum. The people saw this.

It thought it possessed strength because the Empire had been carried away before it like a theatrical stage-setting. It did not perceive that it had, itself, been brought in in the same fashion. It did not perceive that it also lay in that hand which had removed Napoleon.

It thought that it had roots, because it was the past. It was mistaken; it formed a part of the past, but the whole past was France. The roots of French society were not fixed in the Bourbons, but in the nations. These obscure and lively roots constituted, not the right of a family, but the history of a people. They were everywhere, except under the throne.

The House of Bourbon was to France the illustrious and bleeding knot in her history, but was no longer the principal element of her destiny, and the necessary base of her politics. She could get along without the Bourbons; she had done without them for two and twenty years; there had been a break of continuity; they did not suspect the fact. And how should they have suspected it, they who fancied that Louis XVII. reigned on the 9th of Thermidor, and that Louis XVIII. was reigning at the battle of Marengo? Never, since the origin of history, had princes been so blind in the presence of facts and the portion of divine authority which facts contain and promulgate. Never had that pretension here below which is called the right of kings denied to such a point the right from on high.

A capital error which led this family to lay its hand once more on the guarantees "granted" in 1814, on the concessions, as it termed them. Sad. A sad thing! What it termed its concessions were our conquests; what it termed our encroachments were our rights.

When the hour seemed to it to have come, the Restoration, supposing itself victorious over Bonaparte and well-rooted in the country, that is to say, believing itself to be strong and deep, abruptly decided on its plan of action, and risked its stroke. One morning it drew itself up before the face of France, and, elevating its voice, it contested the collective title and the individual right of the nation to sovereignty, of the citizen to liberty. In other words, it denied to the nation that which made it a nation, and to the citizen that which made him a citizen.

This is the foundation of those famous acts which are called the ordinances of July. The Restoration fell.

It fell justly. But, we admit, it had not been absolutely hostile to all forms of progress. Great things had been accomplished, with it alongside.

Under the Restoration, the nation had grown accustomed to calm discussion, which had been lacking under the Republic, and to grandeur in peace, which had been wanting under the Empire. France free and strong had offered an encouraging spectacle to the other peoples of Europe. The Revolution had had the word under Robespierre; the cannon had had the word under Bonaparte; it was under Louis XVIII. and Charles X. that it was the turn of intelligence to have the word. The wind ceased, the torch was lighted once more. On the lofty heights, the pure light of mind could be seen flickering. A magnificent, useful, and charming spectacle. For a space of fifteen years, those great principles which are so old for the thinker, so new for the statesman, could be seen at work in perfect peace, on the public square; equality before the law, liberty of conscience, liberty of speech, liberty of the press, the accessibility of all aptitudes to all functions. Thus it proceeded until 1830. The Bourbons were an instrument of civilization which broke in the hands of Providence.

The fall of the Bourbons was full of grandeur, not on their side, but on the side of the nation. They quitted the throne with gravity, but without authority; their descent into the night was not one of those solemn disappearances which leave a sombre emotion in history; it was neither the spectral calm of Charles I., nor the eagle scream of Napoleon. They departed, that is all. They laid down the crown, and retained no aureole. They were worthy, but they were not august. They lacked, in a certain measure, the majesty of their misfortune. Charles X. during the voyage from Cherbourg, causing a round table to be cut over into a square table, appeared to be more anxious about imperilled etiquette than about the crumbling monarchy. This diminution saddened devoted men who loved their persons, and serious men who honored their race. The populace was admirable. The nation, attacked one morning with weapons, by a sort of royal insurrection, felt itself in the possession of so much force that it did not go into a rage. It defended itself, restrained itself, restored things to their places, the government to law, the Bourbons to exile, alas! and then halted! It took the old king Charles X. from beneath that dais which had sheltered Louis XIV. and set him gently on the ground. It touched the royal personages only with sadness and precaution. It was not one man, it was not a few men, it was France, France entire, France victorious and intoxicated with her victory, who seemed to be coming to herself, and who put into practice, before the eyes of the whole world, these grave words of Guillaume du Vair after the day of the Barricades: —

“It is easy for those who are accustomed to skim the favors of the great, and to spring, like a bird from bough to bough, from an afflicted fortune to a flourishing one, to show themselves harsh towards their Prince in his adversity; but as for me, the fortune of my Kings and especially of my afflicted Kings, will always be venerable to me.”

The Bourbons carried away with them respect, but not regret. As we have just stated, their misfortune was greater than they were. They faded out in the horizon.

The Revolution of July instantly had friends and enemies throughout the entire world. The first rushed toward her with joy and enthusiasm, the others turned away, each according to his nature. At the first blush, the princes of Europe, the owls of this dawn, shut their eyes, wounded and stupefied, and only opened them to threaten. A fright which can be comprehended, a wrath which can be pardoned. This strange revolution had hardly produced a shock; it had not even paid to vanquished royalty the honor of treating it as an enemy, and of shedding its blood. In the eyes of despotic governments, who are always interested in having liberty calumniate itself, the Revolution of July committed the fault of being formidable and of remaining gentle. Nothing, however, was attempted or plotted against it. The most discontented, the most irritated, the most trembling, saluted it; whatever our egotism and our rancor may be, a mysterious respect springs from events in which we are sensible of the collaboration of some one who is working above man.

The Revolution of July is the triumph of right overthrowing the fact. A thing which is full of splendor.

Right overthrowing the fact. Hence the brilliancy of the Revolution of 1830, hence, also, its mildness. Right triumphant has no need of being violent.

Right is the just and the true.

The property of right is to remain eternally beautiful and pure. The fact, even when most necessary to all appearances, even when most thoroughly accepted by contemporaries, if it exist only as a fact, and if it contain only too little of right, or none at all, is infallibly destined to become, in the course of time, deformed, impure, perhaps, even monstrous. If one desires to learn at one blow, to what degree of hideousness the fact can attain, viewed at the distance of centuries, let him look at Machiavelli. Machiavelli is not an evil genius, nor a demon, nor a miserable and cowardly writer; he is nothing but the fact. And he is not only the Italian fact; he is the European fact, the fact of the sixteenth century. He seems hideous, and so he is, in the presence of the moral idea of the nineteenth.

This conflict of right and fact has been going on ever since the origin of society. To terminate this duel, to amalgamate the pure idea with the humane reality, to cause right to penetrate pacifically into the fact and the fact into right, that is the task of sages.

CHAPTER II — BADLY SEWED

But the task of sages is one thing, the task of clever men is another. The Revolution of 1830 came to a sudden halt.

As soon as a revolution has made the coast, the skilful make haste to prepare the shipwreck.

The skilful in our century have conferred on themselves the title of Statesmen; so that this word, statesmen, has ended by becoming somewhat of a slang word. It must be borne in mind, in fact, that wherever there is nothing but skill, there is necessarily pettiness. To say “the skilful” amounts to saying “the mediocre.”

In the same way, to say “statesmen” is sometimes equivalent to saying “traitors.” If, then, we are to believe the skilful, revolutions like the Revolution of July are severed arteries; a prompt ligature is indispensable. The right, too grandly proclaimed, is shaken. Also, right once firmly fixed, the state must be strengthened. Liberty once assured, attention must be directed to power.

Here the sages are not, as yet, separated from the skilful, but they begin to be distrustful. Power, very good. But, in the first place, what is power? In the second, whence comes it? The skilful do not seem to hear the murmured objection, and they continue their manoeuvres.

According to the politicians, who are ingenious in putting the mask of necessity on profitable fictions, the first requirement of a people after a revolution, when this people forms part of a monarchical continent, is to procure for itself a dynasty. In this way, say they, peace, that is to say, time to dress our wounds, and to repair the house, can be had after a revolution. The dynasty conceals the scaffolding and covers the ambulance. Now, it is not always easy to procure a dynasty.

If it is absolutely necessary, the first man of genius or even the first man of fortune who comes to hand suffices for the manufacturing of a king. You have, in the first case, Napoleon; in the second, Iturbide.

But the first family that comes to hand does not suffice to make a dynasty. There is necessarily required a certain modicum of antiquity in a race, and the wrinkle of the centuries cannot be improvised.

If we place ourselves at the point of view of the “statesmen,” after making all allowances, of course, after a revolution, what are the qualities of the king which result from it? He may be and it is useful for him to be a revolutionary; that is to say, a participant in his own person in that revolution, that he should have lent a hand to it, that he should have either compromised or distinguished himself therein, that he should have touched the axe or wielded the sword in it.

What are the qualities of a dynasty? It should be national; that is to say, revolutionary at a distance, not through acts committed, but by reason of ideas accepted. It should be composed of past and be historic; be composed of future and be sympathetic.

All this explains why the early revolutions contented themselves with finding a man, Cromwell or Napoleon; and why the second absolutely insisted on finding a family, the House of Brunswick or the House of Orleans.

Royal houses resemble those Indian fig-trees, each branch of which, bending over to the earth, takes root and becomes a fig-tree itself. Each branch may become a dynasty. On the sole condition that it shall bend down to the people.

Such is the theory of the skilful.

Here, then, lies the great art: to make a little render to success the sound of a catastrophe in order that those who profit by it may tremble from it also, to season with fear every step that is taken, to augment the curve of the transition to the point of retarding progress, to dull that aurora, to denounce and retrench the harshness of enthusiasm, to cut all angles and nails, to wad triumph, to muffle up right, to envelop the giant-people in flannel, and to put it to bed very speedily, to impose a diet on that excess of health, to put Hercules on the treatment of a convalescent, to dilute the event with the expedient, to offer to spirits thirsting for the ideal that nectar thinned out with a potion, to take one's precautions against too much success, to garnish the revolution with a shade.

1830 practised this theory, already applied to England by 1688.

1830 is a revolution arrested midway. Half of progress, quasi-right. Now, logic knows not the "almost," absolutely as the sun knows not the candle.

Who arrests revolutions half-way? The bourgeoisie?

Why?

Because the bourgeoisie is interest which has reached satisfaction. Yesterday it was appetite, to-day it is plenitude, to-morrow it will be satiety.

The phenomenon of 1814 after Napoleon was reproduced in 1830 after Charles X.

The attempt has been made, and wrongly, to make a class of the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie is simply the contented portion of the people. The bourgeois is the man who now has time to sit down. A chair is not a caste.

But through a desire to sit down too soon, one may arrest the very march of the human race. This has often been the fault of the bourgeoisie.

One is not a class because one has committed a fault. Selfishness is not one of the divisions of the social order.

Moreover, we must be just to selfishness. The state to which that part of the nation which is called the bourgeoisie aspired after the shock of 1830 was not the inertia which is complicated with indifference and laziness, and which contains a little shame; it was not the slumber which presupposes a momentary forgetfulness accessible to dreams; it was the halt.

The halt is a word formed of a singular double and almost contradictory sense: a troop on the march, that is to say, movement; a stand, that is to say, repose.

The halt is the restoration of forces; it is repose armed and on the alert; it is the accomplished fact which posts sentinels and holds itself on its guard.

The halt presupposes the combat of yesterday and the combat of to-morrow.

It is the partition between 1830 and 1848.

What we here call combat may also be designated as progress.

The bourgeoisie then, as well as the statesmen, required a man who should express this word Halt. An Although-Because. A composite individuality, signifying revolution and signifying stability, in other terms, strengthening the present by the evident compatibility of the past with the future.

This man was “already found.” His name was Louis Philippe d’Orleans.

The 221 made Louis Philippe King. Lafayette undertook the coronation.

He called it the best of republics. The town-hall of Paris took the place of the Cathedral of Rheims.

This substitution of a half-throne for a whole throne was “the work of 1830.”

When the skilful had finished, the immense vice of their solution became apparent. All this had been accomplished outside the bounds of absolute right. Absolute right cried: “I protest!” then, terrible to say, it retired into the darkness.

CHAPTER III — LOUIS PHILIPPE

Revolutions have a terrible arm and a happy hand, they strike firmly and choose well. Even incomplete, even debased and abused and reduced to the state of a junior revolution like the Revolution of 1830, they nearly always retain sufficient providential lucidity to prevent them from falling amiss. Their eclipse is never an abdication.

Nevertheless, let us not boast too loudly; revolutions also may be deceived, and grave errors have been seen.

Let us return to 1830. 1830, in its deviation, had good luck. In the establishment which entitled itself order after the revolution had been cut short, the King amounted to more than royalty. Louis Philippe was a rare man.

The son of a father to whom history will accord certain attenuating circumstances, but also as worthy of esteem as that father had been of blame; possessing all private virtues and many public virtues; careful of his health, of his fortune, of his person, of his affairs, knowing the value of a minute and not always the value of a year; sober, serene, peaceable, patient; a good man and a good prince; sleeping with his wife, and having in his palace lackeys charged with the duty of showing the conjugal bed to the bourgeois, an ostentation of the regular sleeping-apartment which had become useful after the former illegitimate displays of the elder branch; knowing all the languages of Europe, and, what is more rare, all the languages of all interests, and speaking them; an admirable representative of the “middle class,” but outstripping it, and in every way greater than it; possessing excellent sense, while appreciating the blood from which he had sprung, counting most of all on his intrinsic worth, and, on the question of his race, very particular, declaring himself Orleans and not Bourbon; thoroughly the first Prince of the Blood Royal while he was still only a Serene Highness, but a frank bourgeois from the day he became king; diffuse in public, concise in private; reputed, but not proved to be a miser; at bottom, one of those economists who are readily prodigal at their own fancy or duty; lettered, but not very sensitive to letters; a gentleman, but not a chevalier; simple, calm, and strong; adored by his family and his household; a fascinating talker, an undeceived statesman, inwardly cold, dominated by immediate interest, always governing at the shortest range, incapable of rancor and of gratitude, making use without mercy of superiority on mediocrity, clever in getting parliamentary majorities to put in the wrong those mysterious unanimities which mutter dully under thrones; unreserved, sometimes imprudent in his lack of reserve, but with marvellous address in that imprudence; fertile in expedients, in countenances, in masks; making France fear Europe and Europe France! Incontestably fond of his country, but preferring his family; assuming more domination than authority and more authority than dignity, a disposition which has this unfortunate property, that as it turns everything to success, it admits of ruse and does not absolutely repudiate baseness, but which has this valuable side, that it preserves politics from violent shocks, the state from fractures, and society from catastrophes; minute, correct, vigilant, attentive, sagacious, indefatigable; contradicting himself at times and giving himself the lie; bold against Austria at Ancona, obstinate against England in Spain, bombarding Antwerp, and paying off Pritchard; singing the Marseillaise with conviction, inaccessible to despondency, to lassitude, to the taste for the beautiful and the ideal, to daring generosity, to Utopia, to chimeras, to wrath, to vanity, to fear; possessing all the forms of personal intrepidity; a general at Valmy; a soldier at Jemappes; attacked eight times by regicides and always smiling. Brave as a grenadier, courageous as a thinker; uneasy only in the face of the chances of a European shaking up, and unfitted for great political adventures; always ready to risk his life, never his work; disguising his will in influence, in order that he might be obeyed as an intelligence rather than as a king; endowed with observation and not with divination; not very attentive to minds, but knowing men, that is to say requiring to see in order to judge; prompt and penetrating good sense, practical wisdom, easy speech, prodigious memory; drawing incessantly on this memory, his only point of resemblance with Caesar, Alexander, and Napoleon; knowing deeds, facts, details, dates, proper names, ignorant of tendencies, passions, the diverse geniuses of the crowd, the interior aspirations, the hidden and obscure uprisings of souls, in a word, all that can be designated as the invisible currents of consciences; accepted by the surface, but little in accord with France lower down; extricating himself by dint of tact; governing too much and not enough; his own first minister; excellent at creating out of the pettiness of realities an obstacle to the immensity of ideas; mingling a genuine creative faculty of civilization, of order and organization, an indescribable spirit of proceedings and chicanery, the founder and lawyer of a dynasty; having something of Charlemagne and something of an attorney; in short, a lofty and original figure, a prince who understood how to create authority in spite of the uneasiness of France, and power in spite of the jealousy of Europe. Louis Philippe will be classed among the eminent men of his century, and would be ranked among the most illustrious governors of history had he loved glory but a little, and if he had had the sentiment of what is great to the same degree as the feeling for what is useful.

Louis Philippe had been handsome, and in his old age he remained graceful; not always approved by the nation, he always was so by the masses; he pleased. He had that gift of charming. He lacked majesty; he wore no crown, although a king, and no white hair, although an old man; his manners belonged to the old regime and his habits to the new; a mixture of the noble and the bourgeois which suited 1830; Louis Philippe was transition reigning; he had preserved the ancient pronunciation and the ancient orthography which he placed at the service of opinions modern; he loved Poland and Hungary, but he wrote les Polonois, and he pronounced les Hongrais. He wore the uniform of the national guard, like Charles X., and the ribbon of the Legion of Honor, like Napoleon.

He went a little to chapel, not at all to the chase, never to the opera. Incorruptible by sacristans, by whippers-in, by ballet-dancers; this made a part of his bourgeois popularity. He had no heart. He went out with his umbrella under his arm, and this umbrella long formed a part of his aureole. He was a bit of a mason, a bit of a gardener, something of a doctor; he bled a postilion who had tumbled from his horse; Louis Philippe no more went about without his lancet, than did Henri IV. without his poniard. The Royalists jeered at this ridiculous king, the first who had ever shed blood with the object of healing.

For the grievances against Louis Philippe, there is one deduction to be made; there is that which accuses royalty, that which accuses the reign, that which accuses the King; three columns which all give different totals. Democratic right confiscated, progress becomes a matter of secondary interest, the protests of the street violently repressed, military execution of insurrections, the rising passed over by arms, the Rue Transnonain, the counsels of war, the absorption of the real country by the legal country, on half shares with three hundred thousand privileged persons, — these are the deeds of royalty; Belgium refused, Algeria too harshly conquered, and, as in the case of India by the English, with more barbarism than civilization, the breach of faith, to Abd-el-Kader, Blaye, Deutz bought, Pritchard paid, — these are the doings of the reign; the policy which was more domestic than national was the doing of the King.

As will be seen, the proper deduction having been made, the King's charge is decreased.

This is his great fault; he was modest in the name of France.

Whence arises this fault?

We will state it.

Louis Philippe was rather too much of a paternal king; that incubation of a family with the object of founding a dynasty is afraid of everything and does not like to be disturbed; hence excessive timidity, which is displeasing to the people, who have the 14th of July in their civil and Austerlitz in their military tradition.

Moreover, if we deduct the public duties which require to be fulfilled first of all, that deep tenderness of Louis Philippe towards his family was deserved by the family. That domestic group was worthy of admiration. Virtues there dwelt side by side with talents. One of Louis Philippe's daughters, Marie d'Orleans, placed the name of her race among artists, as Charles d'Orleans had placed it among poets. She made of her soul a marble which she named Jeanne d'Arc. Two of Louis Philippe's daughters elicited from Metternich this eulogium: "They are young people such as are rarely seen, and princes such as are never seen."

This, without any dissimulation, and also without any exaggeration, is the truth about Louis Philippe.

To be Prince Equality, to bear in his own person the contradiction of the Restoration and the Revolution, to have that disquieting side of the revolutionary which becomes reassuring in governing power, therein lay the fortune of Louis Philippe in 1830; never was there a more complete adaptation of a man to an event; the one entered into the other, and the incarnation took place. Louis Philippe is 1830 made man. Moreover, he had in his favor that great recommendation to the throne, exile. He had been proscribed, a wanderer, poor. He had lived by his own labor. In Switzerland, this heir to the richest princely domains in France had sold an old horse in order to obtain bread. At Reichenau, he gave lessons in mathematics, while his sister Adelaide did wool work and sewed. These souvenirs connected with a king rendered the bourgeoisie enthusiastic. He had, with his own hands, demolished the iron cage of Mont-Saint-Michel, built by Louis XI, and used by Louis XV. He was the companion of Dumouriez, he was the friend of Lafayette; he had belonged to the Jacobins' club; Mirabeau had slapped him on the shoulder; Danton had said to him: "Young man!" At the age of four and twenty, in '93, being then M. de Chartres, he had witnessed, from the depth of a box, the trial of Louis XVI., so well named that poor tyrant. The blind clairvoyance of the Revolution, breaking royalty in the King and the King with royalty, did so almost without noticing the man in the fierce crushing of the idea, the vast storm of the Assembly-Tribunal, the public wrath interrogating, Capet not knowing what to reply, the alarming, stupefied vacillation by that royal head beneath that sombre breath, the relative innocence of all in that catastrophe, of those who condemned as well as of the man condemned, — he had looked on those things, he had contemplated that giddiness; he had seen the centuries appear before the bar of the Assembly-Convention; he had beheld, behind Louis XVI., that unfortunate passer-by who was made responsible, the terrible culprit, the monarchy, rise through the shadows; and there had lingered in his soul the respectful fear of these immense justices of the populace, which are almost as impersonal as the justice of God.

The trace left in him by the Revolution was prodigious. Its memory was like a living imprint of those great years, minute by minute. One day, in the presence of a witness whom we are not permitted to doubt, he rectified from memory the whole of the letter A in the alphabetical list of the Constituent Assembly.

Louis Philippe was a king of the broad daylight. While he reigned the press was free, the tribune was free, conscience and speech were free. The laws of September are open to sight. Although fully aware of the gnawing power of light on privileges, he left his throne exposed to the light. History will do justice to him for this loyalty.

Louis Philippe, like all historical men who have passed from the scene, is to-day put on his trial by the human conscience. His case is, as yet, only in the lower court.

The hour when history speaks with its free and venerable accent, has not yet sounded for him; the moment has not come to pronounce a definite judgment on this king; the austere and illustrious historian Louis Blanc has himself recently softened his first verdict; Louis Philippe was elected by those two almosts which are called the 221 and 1830, that is to say, by a half-Parliament, and a half-revolution; and in any case, from the superior point of view where philosophy must place itself, we cannot judge him here, as the reader has seen above, except with certain reservations in the name of the absolute democratic principle; in the eyes of the absolute, outside these two rights, the right of man in the first place, the right of the people in the second, all is usurpation; but what we can say, even at the present day, that after making these reserves is, that to sum up the whole, and in whatever manner he is considered, Louis Philippe, taken in himself, and from the point of view of human goodness, will remain, to use the antique language of ancient history, one of the best princes who ever sat on a throne.

What is there against him? That throne. Take away Louis Philippe the king, there remains the man. And the man is good. He is good at times even to the point of being admirable. Often, in the midst of his gravest souvenirs, after a day of conflict with the whole diplomacy of the continent, he returned at night to his apartments, and there, exhausted with fatigue, overwhelmed with sleep, what did he do? He took a death sentence and passed the night in revising a criminal suit, considering it something to hold his own against Europe, but that it was a still greater matter to rescue a man from the executioner. He obstinately maintained his opinion against his keeper of the seals; he disputed the ground with the guillotine foot by foot against the crown attorneys, those chatterers of the law, as he called them. Sometimes the pile of sentences covered his table; he examined them all; it was anguish to him to abandon these miserable, condemned heads. One day, he said to the same witness to whom we have recently referred: “I won seven last night.” During the early years of his reign, the death penalty was as good as abolished, and the erection of a scaffold was a violence committed against the King. The Greve having disappeared with the elder branch, a bourgeois place of execution was instituted under the name of the Barriere-Saint-Jacques; “practical men” felt the necessity of a quasi-legitimate guillotine; and this was one of the victories of Casimir Perier, who represented the narrow sides of the bourgeoisie, over Louis Philippe, who represented its liberal sides. Louis Philippe annotated Beccaria with his own hand. After the Fieschi machine, he exclaimed: “What a pity that I was not wounded! Then I might have pardoned!” On another occasion, alluding to the resistance offered by his ministry, he wrote in connection with a political criminal, who is one of the most generous figures of our day: “His pardon is granted; it only remains for me to obtain it.” Louis Philippe was as gentle as Louis IX. and as kindly as Henri IV.

Now, to our mind, in history, where kindness is the rarest of pearls, the man who is kindly almost takes precedence of the man who is great.

Louis Philippe having been severely judged by some, harshly, perhaps, by others, it is quite natural that a man, himself a phantom at the present day, who knew that king, should come and testify in his favor before history; this deposition, whatever else it may be, is evidently and above all things, entirely disinterested; an epitaph penned by a dead man is sincere; one shade may console another shade; the sharing of the same shadows confers the right to praise it; it is not greatly to be feared that it will ever be said of two tombs in exile: “This one flattered the other.”

CHAPTER IV — CRACKS BENEATH THE FOUNDATION

At the moment when the drama which we are narrating is on the point of penetrating into the depths of one of the tragic clouds which envelop the beginning of Louis Philippe's reign, it was necessary that there should be no equivoque, and it became requisite that this book should offer some explanation with regard to this king.

Louis Philippe had entered into possession of his royal authority without violence, without any direct action on his part, by virtue of a revolutionary change, evidently quite distinct from the real aim of the Revolution, but in which he, the Duc d'Orleans, exercised no personal initiative. He had been born a Prince, and he believed himself to have been elected King. He had not served this mandate on himself; he had not taken it; it had been offered to him, and he had accepted it; convinced, wrongly, to be sure, but convinced nevertheless, that the offer was in accordance with right and that the acceptance of it was in accordance with duty. Hence his possession was in good faith. Now, we say it in good conscience, Louis Philippe being in possession in perfect good faith, and the democracy being in good faith in its attack, the amount of terror discharged by the social conflicts weighs neither on the King nor on the democracy. A clash of principles resembles a clash of elements. The ocean defends the water, the hurricane defends the air, the King defends Royalty, the democracy defends the people; the relative, which is the monarchy, resists the absolute, which is the republic; society bleeds in this conflict, but that which constitutes its suffering to-day will constitute its safety later on; and, in any case, those who combat are not to be blamed; one of the two parties is evidently mistaken; the right is not, like the Colossus of Rhodes, on two shores at once, with one foot on the republic, and one in Royalty; it is indivisible, and all on one side; but those who are in error are so sincerely; a blind man is no more a criminal than a Vendean is a ruffian. Let us, then, impute to the fatality of things alone these formidable collisions. Whatever the nature of these tempests may be, human irresponsibility is mingled with them.

Let us complete this exposition.

The government of 1840 led a hard life immediately. Born yesterday, it was obliged to fight to-day.

Hardly installed, it was already everywhere conscious of vague movements of traction on the apparatus of July so recently laid, and so lacking in solidity.

Resistance was born on the morrow; perhaps even, it was born on the preceding evening. From month to month the hostility increased, and from being concealed it became patent.

The Revolution of July, which gained but little acceptance outside of France by kings, had been diversely interpreted in France, as we have said.

God delivers over to men his visible will in events, an obscure text written in a mysterious tongue. Men immediately make translations of it; translations hasty, incorrect, full of errors, of gaps, and of nonsense. Very few minds comprehend the divine language. The most sagacious, the calmest, the most profound, decipher slowly, and when they arrive with their text, the task has long been completed; there are already twenty translations on the public place. From each remaining springs a party, and from each misinterpretation a faction; and each party thinks that it alone has the true text, and each faction thinks that it possesses the light.

Power itself is often a faction.

There are, in revolutions, swimmers who go against the current; they are the old parties.

For the old parties who clung to heredity by the grace of God, think that revolutions, having sprung from the right to revolt, one has the right to revolt against them. Error. For in these revolutions, the one who revolts is not the people; it is the king. Revolution is precisely the contrary of revolt. Every revolution, being a normal outcome, contains within itself its legitimacy, which false revolutionists sometimes dishonor, but which remains even when soiled, which survives even when stained with blood.

Revolutions spring not from an accident, but from necessity. A revolution is a return from the fictitious to the real. It is because it must be that it is.

None the less did the old legitimist parties assail the Revolution of 1830 with all the vehemence which arises from false reasoning. Errors make excellent projectiles. They strike it cleverly in its vulnerable spot, in default of a cuirass, in its lack of logic; they attacked this revolution in its royalty.

They shouted to it: “Revolution, why this king?” Factions are blind men who aim correctly.

This cry was uttered equally by the republicans. But coming from them, this cry was logical. What was blindness in the legitimists was clearness of vision in the democrats. 1830 had bankrupted the people. The enraged democracy reproached it with this.

Between the attack of the past and the attack of the future, the establishment of July struggled. It represented the minute at loggerheads on the one hand with the monarchical centuries, on the other hand with eternal right.

In addition, and beside all this, as it was no longer revolution and had become a monarchy, 1830 was obliged to take precedence of all Europe. To keep the peace, was an increase of complication. A harmony established contrary to sense is often more onerous than a war. From this secret conflict, always muzzled, but always growling, was born armed peace, that ruinous expedient of civilization which in the harness of the European cabinets is suspicious in itself. The Royalty of July reared up, in spite of the fact that it caught it in the harness of European cabinets. Metternich would gladly have put it in kicking-straps. Pushed on in France by progress, it pushed on the monarchies, those loiterers in Europe. After having been towed, it undertook to tow.

Meanwhile, within her, pauperism, the proletariat, salary, education, penal servitude, prostitution, the fate of the woman, wealth, misery, production, consumption, division, exchange, coin, credit, the rights of capital, the rights of labor, — all these questions were multiplied above society, a terrible slope.

Outside of political parties properly so called, another movement became manifest. Philosophical fermentation replied to democratic fermentation. The elect felt troubled as well as the masses; in another manner, but quite as much.

Thinkers meditated, while the soil, that is to say, the people, traversed by revolutionary currents, trembled under them with indescribably vague epileptic shocks. These dreamers, some isolated, others united in families and almost in communion, turned over social questions in a pacific but profound manner; impassive miners, who tranquilly pushed their galleries into the depths of a volcano, hardly disturbed by the dull commotion and the furnaces of which they caught glimpses.

This tranquillity was not the least beautiful spectacle of this agitated epoch.

These men left to political parties the question of rights, they occupied themselves with the question of happiness.

The well-being of man, that was what they wanted to extract from society.

They raised material questions, questions of agriculture, of industry, of commerce, almost to the dignity of a religion. In civilization, such as it has formed itself, a little by the command of God, a great deal by the agency of man, interests combine, unite, and amalgamate in a manner to form a veritable hard rock, in accordance with a dynamic law, patiently studied by economists, those geologists of politics. These men who grouped themselves under different appellations, but who may all be designated by the generic title of socialists, endeavored to pierce that rock and to cause it to spout forth the living waters of human felicity.

From the question of the scaffold to the question of war, their works embraced everything. To the rights of man, as proclaimed by the French Revolution, they added the rights of woman and the rights of the child.

The reader will not be surprised if, for various reasons, we do not here treat in a thorough manner, from the theoretical point of view, the questions raised by socialism. We confine ourselves to indicating them.

All the problems that the socialists proposed to themselves, cosmogonic visions, revery and mysticism being cast aside, can be reduced to two principal problems.

First problem: To produce wealth.

Second problem: To share it.

The first problem contains the question of work.

The second contains the question of salary.

In the first problem the employment of forces is in question.

In the second, the distribution of enjoyment.

From the proper employment of forces results public power.

From a good distribution of enjoyments results individual happiness.

By a good distribution, not an equal but an equitable distribution must be understood.

From these two things combined, the public power without, individual happiness within, results social prosperity.

Social prosperity means the man happy, the citizen free, the nation great.

England solves the first of these two problems. She creates wealth admirably, she divides it badly. This solution which is complete on one side only leads her fatally to two extremes: monstrous opulence, monstrous wretchedness. All enjoyments for some, all privations for the rest, that is to say, for the people; privilege, exception, monopoly, feudalism, born from toil itself. A false and dangerous situation, which sates public power or private misery, which sets the roots of the State in the sufferings of the individual. A badly constituted grandeur in which are combined all the material elements and into which no moral element enters.

Communism and agrarian law think that they solve the second problem. They are mistaken. Their division kills production. Equal partition abolishes emulation; and consequently labor. It is a partition made by the butcher, which kills that which it divides. It is therefore impossible to pause over these pretended solutions. Slaying wealth is not the same thing as dividing it.

The two problems require to be solved together, to be well solved. The two problems must be combined and made but one.

Solve only the first of the two problems; you will be Venice, you will be England. You will have, like Venice, an artificial power, or, like England, a material power; you will be the wicked rich man. You will die by an act of violence, as Venice died, or by bankruptcy, as England will fall. And the world will allow to die and fall all that is merely selfishness, all that does not represent for the human race either a virtue or an idea.

It is well understood here, that by the words Venice, England, we designate not the peoples, but social structures; the oligarchies superposed on nations, and not the nations themselves. The nations always have our respect and our sympathy. Venice, as a people, will live again; England, the aristocracy, will fall, but England, the nation, is immortal. That said, we continue.

Solve the two problems, encourage the wealthy, and protect the poor, suppress misery, put an end to the unjust farming out of the feeble by the strong, put a bridle on the iniquitous jealousy of the man who is making his way against the man who has reached the goal, adjust, mathematically and fraternally, salary to labor, mingle gratuitous and compulsory education with the growth of childhood, and make of science the base of manliness, develop minds while keeping arms busy, be at one and the same time a powerful people and a family of happy men, render property democratic, not by abolishing it, but by making it universal, so that every citizen, without exception, may be a proprietor, an easier matter than is generally supposed; in two words, learn how to produce wealth and how to distribute it, and you will have at once moral and material greatness; and you will be worthy to call yourself France.

This is what socialism said outside and above a few sects which have gone astray; that is what it sought in facts, that is what it sketched out in minds.

Efforts worthy of admiration! Sacred attempts!

These doctrines, these theories, these resistances, the unforeseen necessity for the statesman to take philosophers into account, confused evidences of which we catch a glimpse, a new system of politics to be created, which shall be in accord with the old world without too much disaccord with the new revolutionary ideal, a situation in which it became necessary to use Lafayette to defend Polignac, the intuition of progress transparent beneath the revolt, the chambers and streets, the competitions to be brought into equilibrium around him, his faith in the Revolution, perhaps an eventual indefinable resignation born of the vague acceptance of a superior definitive right, his desire to remain of his race, his domestic spirit, his sincere respect for the people, his own honesty, preoccupied Louis Philippe almost painfully, and there were moments when strong and courageous as he was, he was overwhelmed by the difficulties of being a king.

He felt under his feet a formidable disaggregation, which was not, nevertheless, a reduction to dust, France being more France than ever.

Piles of shadows covered the horizon. A strange shade, gradually drawing nearer, extended little by little over men, over things, over ideas; a shade which came from wraths and systems. Everything which had been hastily stifled was moving and fermenting. At times the conscience of the honest man resumed its breathing, so great was the discomfort of that air in which sophisms were intermingled with truths. Spirits trembled in the social anxiety like leaves at the approach of a storm. The electric tension was such that at certain instants, the first comer, a stranger, brought light. Then the twilight obscurity closed in again. At intervals, deep and dull mutterings allowed a judgment to be formed as to the quantity of thunder contained by the cloud.

Twenty months had barely elapsed since the Revolution of July, the year 1832 had opened with an aspect of something impending and threatening.

The distress of the people, the laborers without bread, the last Prince de Conde engulfed in the shadows, Brussels expelling the Nassaus as Paris did the Bourbons, Belgium offering herself to a French Prince and giving herself to an English Prince, the Russian hatred of Nicolas, behind us the demons of the South, Ferdinand in Spain, Miguel in Portugal, the earth quaking in Italy, Metternich extending his hand over Bologna, France treating Austria sharply at Ancona, at the North no one knew what sinister sound of the hammer nailing up Poland in her coffin, irritated glances watching France narrowly all over Europe, England, a suspected ally, ready to give a push to that which was tottering and to hurl herself on that which should fall, the peerage sheltering itself behind Beccaria to refuse four heads to the law, the fleurs-de-lys erased from the King’s carriage, the cross torn from Notre Dame, Lafayette lessened, Laffitte ruined, Benjamin Constant dead in indigence, Casimir Perier dead in the exhaustion of his power; political and social malady breaking out simultaneously in the two capitals of the kingdom, the one in the city of thought, the other in the city of toil; at Paris civil war, at Lyons servile war; in the two cities, the same glare of the furnace; a crater-like crimson on the brow of the people; the South rendered fanatic, the West troubled, the Duchesse de Berry in la Vendee, plots, conspiracies, risings, cholera, added the sombre roar of tumult of events to the sombre roar of ideas.

CHAPTER V — FACTS WHENCE HISTORY SPRINGS AND WHICH HISTORY IGNORES

Towards the end of April, everything had become aggravated. The fermentation entered the boiling state. Ever since 1830, petty partial revolts had been going on here and there, which were quickly suppressed, but ever bursting forth afresh, the sign of a vast underlying conflagration. Something terrible was in preparation. Glimpses could be caught of the features still indistinct and imperfectly lighted, of a possible revolution. France kept an eye on Paris; Paris kept an eye on the Faubourg Saint-Antoine.

The Faubourg Saint-Antoine, which was in a dull glow, was beginning its ebullition.

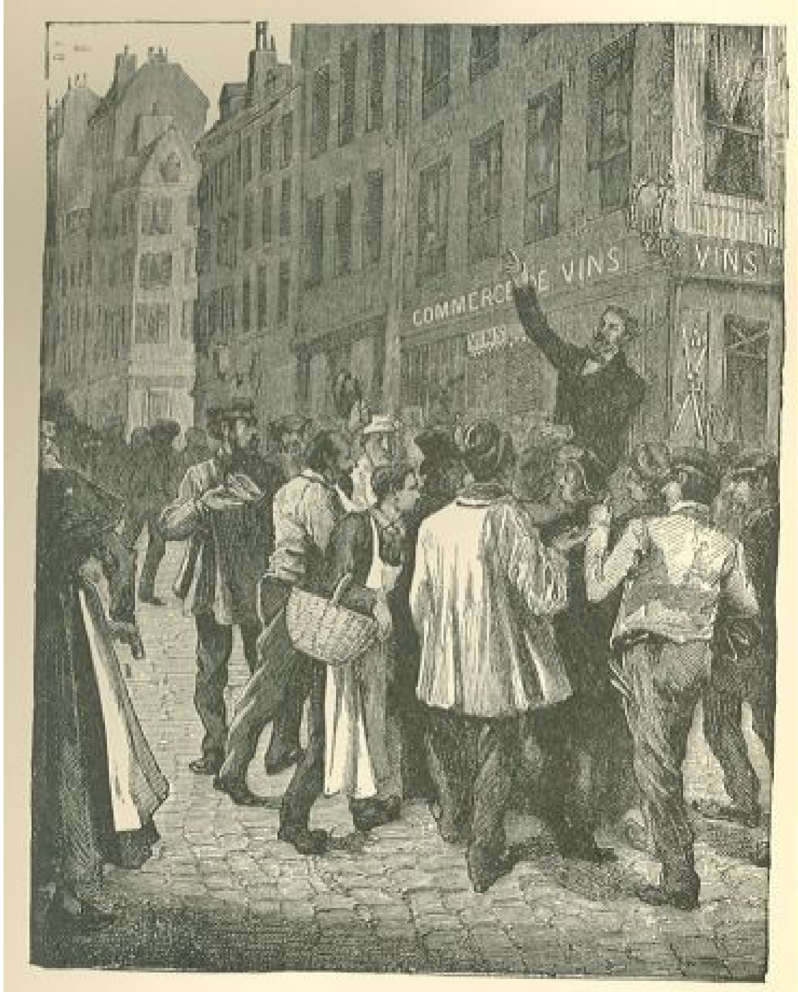

A STREET ORATOR.

The wine-shops of the Rue de Charonne were, although the union of the two epithets seems singular when applied to wine-shops, grave and stormy.

The government was there purely and simply called in question. There people publicly discussed the question of fighting or of keeping quiet. There were back shops where workingmen were made to swear that they would hasten into the street at the first cry of alarm, and “that they would fight without counting the number of the enemy.” This engagement once entered into, a man seated in the corner of the wine-shop “assumed a sonorous tone,” and said, “You understand! You have sworn!”

Sometimes they went up stairs, to a private room on the first floor, and there scenes that were almost masonic were enacted. They made the initiated take oaths to render service to himself as well as to the fathers of families. That was the formula.

In the tap-rooms, “subversive” pamphlets were read. They treated the government with contempt, says a secret report of that time.

Words like the following could be heard there: —

“I don’t know the names of the leaders. We folks shall not know the day until two hours beforehand.” One workman said: “There are three hundred of us, let each contribute ten sous, that will make one hundred and fifty francs with which to procure powder and shot.”

Another said: “I don’t ask for six months, I don’t ask for even two. In less than a fortnight we shall be parallel with the government. With twenty-five thousand men we can face them.” Another said: “I don’t sleep at night, because I make cartridges all night.” From time to time, men “of bourgeois appearance, and in good coats” came and “caused embarrassment,” and with the air of “command,” shook hands with the most important, and then went away. They never stayed more than ten minutes. Significant remarks were exchanged in a low tone: “The plot is ripe, the matter is arranged.” “It was murmured by all who were there,” to borrow the very expression of one of those who were present. The exaltation was such that one day, a workingman exclaimed, before the whole wine-shop: “We have no arms!” One of his comrades replied: “The soldiers have!” thus parodying without being aware of the fact, Bonaparte’s proclamation to the army in Italy: “When they had anything of a more secret nature on hand,” adds one report, “they did not communicate it to each other.” It is not easy to understand what they could conceal after what they said.

These reunions were sometimes periodical. At certain ones of them, there were never more than eight or ten persons present, and they were always the same. In others, any one entered who wished, and the room was so full that they were forced to stand. Some went thither through enthusiasm and passion; others because it was on their way to their work. As during the Revolution, there were patriotic women in some of these wine-shops who embraced new-comers.

Other expressive facts came to light.

A man would enter a shop, drink, and go his way with the remark: “Wine-merchant, the revolution will pay what is due to you.”

Revolutionary agents were appointed in a wine-shop facing the Rue de Charonne. The balloting was carried on in their caps.

Workingmen met at the house of a fencing-master who gave lessons in the Rue de Cotte. There there was a trophy of arms formed of wooden broadswords, canes, clubs, and foils. One day, the buttons were removed from the foils.

A workman said: “There are twenty-five of us, but they don’t count on me, because I am looked upon as a machine.” Later on, that machine became Quenisset.

The indefinite things which were brewing gradually acquired a strange and indescribable notoriety. A woman sweeping off her doorsteps said to another woman: “For a long time, there has been a strong force busy making cartridges.” In the open street, proclamation could be seen addressed to the National Guard in the departments. One of these proclamations was signed: Burtot, wine-merchant.

One day a man with his beard worn like a collar and with an Italian accent mounted a stone post at the door of a liquor-seller in the Marche Lenoir, and read aloud a singular document, which seemed to emanate from an occult power. Groups formed around him, and applauded.

The passages which touched the crowd most deeply were collected and noted down. “ — Our doctrines are trammelled, our proclamations torn, our bill-stickers are spied upon and thrown into prison.”— “The breakdown which has recently taken place in cottons has converted to us many mediums.”— “The future of nations is being worked out in our obscure ranks.”— “Here are the fixed terms: action or reaction, revolution or counter-revolution. For, at our epoch, we no longer believe either in inertia or in immobility. For the people against the people, that is the question. There is no other.”— “On the day when we cease to suit you, break us, but up to that day, help us to march on.” All this in broad daylight.

Other deeds, more audacious still, were suspicious in the eyes of the people by reason of their very audacity. On the 4th of April, 1832, a passer-by mounted the post on the corner which forms the angle of the Rue Sainte-Marguerite and shouted: “I am a Babouvist!” But beneath Babeuf, the people scented Gisquet.

Among other things, this man said: —

“Down with property! The opposition of the left is cowardly and treacherous. When it wants to be on the right side, it preaches revolution, it is democratic in order to escape being beaten, and royalist so that it may not have to fight. The republicans are beasts with feathers. Distrust the republicans, citizens of the laboring classes.”

“Silence, citizen spy!” cried an artisan.

This shout put an end to the discourse.

Mysterious incidents occurred.

At nightfall, a workingman encountered near the canal a “very well dressed man,” who said to him: “Whither are you bound, citizen?” “Sir,” replied the workingman, “I have not the honor of your acquaintance.” “I know you very well, however.” And the man added: “Don’t be alarmed, I am an agent of the committee. You are suspected of not being quite faithful. You know that if you reveal anything, there is an eye fixed on you.” Then he shook hands with the workingman and went away, saying: “We shall meet again soon.”

The police, who were on the alert, collected singular dialogues, not only in the wine-shops, but in the street.

“Get yourself received very soon,” said a weaver to a cabinet-maker.

“Why?”

“There is going to be a shot to fire.”

Two ragged pedestrians exchanged these remarkable replies, fraught with evident Jacquerie: —

“Who governs us?”

“M. Philippe.”

“No, it is the bourgeoisie.”

The reader is mistaken if he thinks that we take the word Jacquerie in a bad sense. The Jacques were the poor.

On another occasion two men were heard to say to each other as they passed by: “We have a good plan of attack.”

Only the following was caught of a private conversation between four men who were crouching in a ditch of the circle of the Barriere du Trone: —

“Everything possible will be done to prevent his walking about Paris any more.”

Who was the he? Menacing obscurity.

“The principal leaders,” as they said in the faubourg, held themselves apart. It was supposed that they met for consultation in a wine-shop near the point Saint-Eustache. A certain Aug — , chief of the Society aid for tailors, Rue Mondetour, had the reputation of serving as intermediary central between the leaders and the Faubourg Saint-Antoine.

Nevertheless, there was always a great deal of mystery about these leaders, and no certain fact can invalidate the singular arrogance of this reply made later on by a man accused before the Court of Peers: —

“Who was your leader?”

“I knew of none and I recognized none.”

There was nothing but words, transparent but vague; sometimes idle reports, rumors, hearsay. Other indications cropped up.

A carpenter, occupied in nailing boards to a fence around the ground on which a house was in process of construction, in the Rue de Reuilly found on that plot the torn fragment of a letter on which were still legible the following lines: —

The committee must take measures to prevent recruiting in the sections for the different societies.

And, as a postscript: —

We have learned that there are guns in the Rue du Faubourg-Poissonniere, No. 5 [bis], to the number of five or six thousand, in the house of a gunsmith in that court. The section owns no arms.

What excited the carpenter and caused him to show this thing to his neighbors was the fact, that a few paces further on he picked up another paper, torn like the first, and still more significant, of which we reproduce a facsimile, because of the historical interest attaching to these strange documents: —

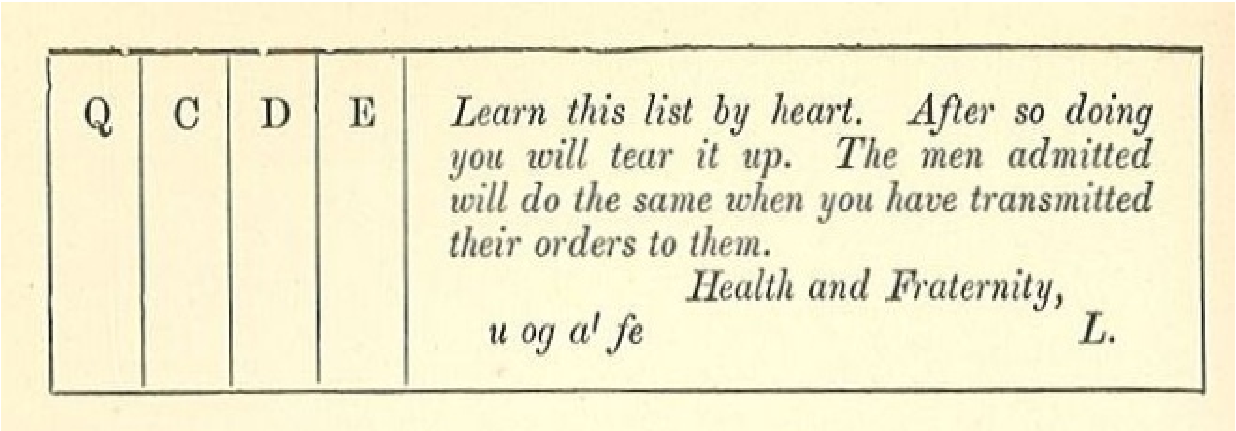

Q	C	D	E	*Learn this list by heart. After so doing you will tear it up. The men admitted will do the same when you have transmitted their orders to them.* *Health and Fraternity,* *u og a' fe L.*

+ ——— ——— ——— ——— ——— ——— ——— ——— ——— ——— ——— ——— ——— ——— ——— +

| Q | C | D | E | Learn this list by heart. After so doing

| | | | | | you will tear it up. The men admitted

| | | | | | will do the same when you have transmitted

| | | | | | their orders to them.

| | | | | | Health and Fraternity,

| | | | | | u og a fe L. |
+ —— —— —— —— —— —— —— —— —— —— —— —— —— —— —— +

It was only later on that the persons who were in the secret of this find at the time, learned the significance of those four capital letters: quinturions, centurions, decurions, eclaireurs [scouts], and the sense of the letters: u og a fe, which was a date, and meant April 15th, 1832. Under each capital letter were inscribed names followed by very characteristic notes. Thus: Q. Bannerel. 8 guns, 83 cartridges. A safe man. — C. Boubiere. 1 pistol, 40 cartridges. — D. Rollet. 1 foil, 1 pistol, 1 pound of powder. — E. Tessier. 1 sword, 1 cartridge-box. Exact. — Terreur. 8 guns. Brave, etc.

Finally, this carpenter found, still in the same enclosure, a third paper on which was written in pencil, but very legibly, this sort of enigmatical list: —

Unite: Blanchard: Arbre-Sec. 6.
Barra. Soize. Salle-au-Comte.
Kosciusko. Aubry the Butcher?
J. J. R.
Caius Gracchus.
Right of revision. Dufond. Four.
Fall of the Girondists. Derbac. Maubuee.
Washington. Pinson. 1 pistol, 86 cartridges.
Marseillaise.
Sovereignty of the people. Michel. Quincampoix. Sword.
Hoche.
Marceau. Plato. Arbre-Sec.
Warsaw. Tilly, crier of the Populaire.

The honest bourgeois into whose hands this list fell knew its significance. It appears that this list was the complete nomenclature of the sections of the fourth arondissement of the Society of the Rights of Man, with the names and dwellings of the chiefs of sections. To-day, when all these facts which were obscure are nothing more than history, we may publish them. It should be added, that the foundation of the Society of the Rights of Man seems to have been posterior to the date when this paper was found. Perhaps this was only a rough draft.

Still, according to all the remarks and the words, according to written notes, material facts begin to make their appearance.

In the Rue Popincourt, in the house of a dealer in bric-abrac, there were seized seven sheets of gray paper, all folded alike lengthwise and in four; these sheets enclosed twenty-six squares of this same gray paper folded in the form of a cartridge, and a card, on which was written the following: —

Saltpetre	12 ounces.
Sulphur	2 ounces.
Charcoal	2 ounces and a half.
Water	2 ounces.

The report of the seizure stated that the drawer exhaled a strong smell of powder.

A mason returning from his day’s work, left behind him a little package on a bench near the bridge of Austerlitz. This package was taken to the police station. It was opened, and in it were found two printed dialogues, signed Lahautiere, a song entitled: “Workmen, band together,” and a tin box full of cartridges.

One artisan drinking with a comrade made the latter feel him to see how warm he was; the other man felt a pistol under his waistcoat.

In a ditch on the boulevard, between Pere-Lachaise and the Barriere du Trone, at the most deserted spot, some children, while playing, discovered beneath a mass of shavings and refuse bits of wood, a bag containing a bullet-mould, a wooden punch for the preparation of cartridges, a wooden bowl, in which there were grains of hunting-powder, and a little cast-iron pot whose interior presented evident traces of melted lead.

Police agents, making their way suddenly and unexpectedly at five o’clock in the morning, into the dwelling of a certain Pardon, who was afterwards a member of the Barricade-Merry section and got himself killed in the insurrection of April, 1834, found him standing near his bed, and holding in his hand some cartridges which he was in the act of preparing.

Towards the hour when workingmen repose, two men were seen to meet between the Barriere Picpus and the Barriere Charenton in a little lane between two walls, near a wine-shop, in front of which there was a “Jeu de Siam.” One drew a pistol from beneath his blouse and handed it to the other. As he was handing it to him, he noticed that the perspiration of his chest had made the powder damp. He primed the pistol and added more powder to what was already in the pan. Then the two men parted.

A certain Gallais, afterwards killed in the Rue Beaubourg in the affair of April, boasted of having in his house seven hundred cartridges and twenty-four flints.

The government one day received a warning that arms and two hundred thousand cartridges had just been distributed in the faubourg. On the following week thirty thousand cartridges were distributed. The remarkable point about it was, that the police were not able to seize a single one.

An intercepted letter read: “The day is not far distant when, within four hours by the clock, eighty thousand patriots will be under arms.”

All this fermentation was public, one might almost say tranquil. The approaching insurrection was preparing its storm calmly in the face of the government. No singularity was lacking to this still subterranean crisis, which was already perceptible. The bourgeois talked peaceably to the working-classes of what was in preparation. They said: “How is the rising coming along?” in the same tone in which they would have said: “How is your wife?”

A furniture-dealer, of the Rue Moreau, inquired: “Well, when are you going to make the attack?”

Another shop-keeper said: —

“The attack will be made soon.”

“I know it. A month ago, there were fifteen thousand of you, now there are twenty-five thousand.” He offered his gun, and a neighbor offered a small pistol which he was willing to sell for seven francs.

Moreover, the revolutionary fever was growing. Not a point in Paris nor in France was exempt from it. The artery was beating everywhere. Like those membranes which arise from certain inflammations and form in the human body, the network of secret societies began to spread all over the country. From the associations of the Friends of the People, which was at the same time public and secret, sprang the Society of the Rights of Man, which also dated from one of the orders of the day: Pluviose, Year 40 of the republican era, which was destined to survive even the mandate of the Court of Assizes which pronounced its dissolution, and which did not hesitate to bestow on its sections significant names like the following: —

Pikes.
Tocsin.
Signal cannon.
Phrygian cap.
January 21.
The beggars.

The vagabonds.
Forward march.
Robespierre.
Level.
Ca Ira.

The Society of the Rights of Man engendered the Society of Action. These were impatient individuals who broke away and hastened ahead. Other associations sought to recruit themselves from the great mother societies. The members of sections complained that they were torn asunder. Thus, the Gallic Society, and the committee of organization of the Municipalities. Thus the associations for the liberty of the press, for individual liberty, for the instruction of the people against indirect taxes. Then the Society of Equal Workingmen which was divided into three fractions, the levellers, the communists, the reformers. Then the Army of the Bastilles, a sort of cohort organized on a military footing, four men commanded by a corporal, ten by a sergeant, twenty by a sub-lieutenant, forty by a lieutenant; there were never more than five men who knew each other. Creation where precaution is combined with audacity and which seemed stamped with the genius of Venice.

The central committee, which was at the head, had two arms, the Society of Action, and the Army of the Bastilles.

A legitimist association, the Chevaliers of Fidelity, stirred about among these the republican affiliations. It was denounced and repudiated there.

The Parisian societies had ramifications in the principal cities, Lyons, Nantes, Lille, Marseilles, and each had its Society of the Rights of Man, the Charbonniere, and The Free Men. All had a revolutionary society which was called the Cougourde. We have already mentioned this word.

In Paris, the Faubourg Saint-Marceau kept up an equal buzzing with the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, and the schools were no less moved than the faubourgs. A cafe in the Rue Saint-Hyacinthe and the wine-shop of the Seven Billiards, Rue des Mathurins-Saint-Jacques, served as rallying points for the students. The Society of the Friends of the A B C affiliated to the Mutualists of Angers, and to the Cougourde of Aix, met, as we have seen, in the Cafe Musain. These same young men assembled also, as we have stated already, in a restaurant wine-shop of the Rue Mondetour which was called Corinthe. These meetings were secret. Others were as public as possible, and the reader can judge of their boldness from these fragments of an interrogatory undergone in one of the ulterior prosecutions: “Where was this meeting held?” “In the Rue de la Paix.” “At whose house?” “In the street.” “What sections were there?” “Only one.” “Which?” “The Manuel section.” “Who was its leader?” “I.” “You are too young to have decided alone upon the bold course of attacking the government. Where did your instructions come from?” “From the central committee.”

The army was mined at the same time as the population, as was proved subsequently by the operations of Beford, Luneville, and Epinard. They counted on the fifty-second regiment, on the fifth, on the eighth, on the thirty-seventh, and on the twentieth light cavalry. In Burgundy and in the southern towns they planted the liberty tree; that is to say, a pole surmounted by a red cap.

Such was the situation.

The Faubourg Saint-Antoine, more than any other group of the population, as we stated in the beginning, accentuated this situation and made it felt. That was the sore point. This old faubourg, peopled like an ant-hill, laborious, courageous, and angry as a hive of bees, was quivering with expectation and with the desire for a tumult. Everything was in a state of agitation there, without any interruption, however, of the regular work. It is impossible to convey an idea of this lively yet sombre physiognomy. In this faubourg exists poignant distress hidden under attic roofs; there also exist rare and ardent minds. It is particularly in the matter of distress and intelligence that it is dangerous to have extremes meet.

The Faubourg Saint-Antoine had also other causes to tremble; for it received the counter-shock of commercial crises, of failures, strikes, slack seasons, all inherent to great political disturbances. In times of revolution misery is both cause and effect. The blow which it deals rebounds upon it. This population full of proud virtue, capable to the highest degree of latent heat, always ready to fly to arms, prompt to explode, irritated, deep, undermined, seemed to be only awaiting the fall of a spark. Whenever certain sparks float on the horizon chased by the wind of events, it is impossible not to think of the Faubourg Saint-Antoine and of the formidable chance which has placed at the very gates of Paris that powder-house of suffering and ideas.

The wine-shops of the Faubourg Antoine, which have been more than once drawn in the sketches which the reader has just perused, possess historical notoriety. In troublous times people grow intoxicated there more on words than on wine. A sort of prophetic spirit and an afflatus of the future circulates there, swelling hearts and enlarging souls. The cabarets of the Faubourg Saint-Antoine resemble those taverns of Mont Aventine erected on the cave of the Sibyl and communicating with the profound and sacred breath; taverns where the tables were almost tripods, and where was drunk what Ennius calls the sibylline wine.

The Faubourg Saint-Antoine is a reservoir of people. Revolutionary agitations create fissures there, through which trickles the popular sovereignty. This sovereignty may do evil; it can be mistaken like any other; but, even when led astray, it remains great. We may say of it as of the blind cyclops, Ingens.

In ‘93, according as the idea which was floating about was good or evil, according as it was the day of fanaticism or of enthusiasm, there leaped forth from the Faubourg Saint-Antoine now savage legions, now heroic bands.

Savage. Let us explain this word. When these bristling men, who in the early days of the revolutionary chaos, tattered, howling, wild, with uplifted bludgeon, pike on high, hurled themselves upon ancient Paris in an uproar, what did they want? They wanted an end to oppression, an end to tyranny, an end to the sword, work for men, instruction for the child, social sweetness for the woman, liberty, equality, fraternity, bread for all, the idea for all, the Edenizing of the world. Progress; and that holy, sweet, and good thing, progress, they claimed in terrible wise, driven to extremities as they were, half naked, club in fist, a roar in their mouths. They were savages, yes; but the savages of civilization.

They proclaimed right furiously; they were desirous, if only with fear and trembling, to force the human race to paradise. They seemed barbarians, and they were saviours. They demanded light with the mask of night.

Facing these men, who were ferocious, we admit, and terrifying, but ferocious and terrifying for good ends, there are other men, smiling, embroidered, gilded, beribboned, starred, in silk stockings, in white plumes, in yellow gloves, in varnished shoes, who, with their elbows on a velvet table, beside a marble chimney-piece, insist gently on demeanor and the preservation of the past, of the Middle Ages, of divine right, of fanaticism, of innocence, of slavery, of the death penalty, of war, glorifying in low tones and with politeness, the sword, the stake, and the scaffold. For our part, if we were forced to make a choice between the barbarians of civilization and the civilized men of barbarism, we should choose the barbarians.

But, thank Heaven, still another choice is possible. No perpendicular fall is necessary, in front any more than in the rear.

Neither despotism nor terrorism. We desire progress with a gentle slope.

God takes care of that. God’s whole policy consists in rendering slopes less steep.

CHAPTER VI — ENJOLRAS AND HIS LIEUTENANTS

It was about this epoch that Enjolras, in view of a possible catastrophe, instituted a kind of mysterious census.

All were present at a secret meeting at the Cafe Musain.

Enjolras said, mixing his words with a few half-enigmatical but significant metaphors: —

“It is proper that we should know where we stand and on whom we may count. If combatants are required, they must be provided. It can do no harm to have something with which to strike. Passers-by always have more chance of being gored when there are bulls on the road than when there are none. Let us, therefore, reckon a little on the herd. How many of us are there? There is no question of postponing this task until to-morrow. Revolutionists should always be hurried; progress has no time to lose. Let us mistrust the unexpected. Let us not be caught unprepared. We must go over all the seams that we have made and see whether they hold fast. This business ought to be concluded to-day. Courfeyrac, you will see the polytechnic students. It is their day to go out. To-day is Wednesday. Feuilly, you will see those of the Glaciere, will you not? Combeferre has promised me to go to Picpus. There is a perfect swarm and an excellent one there. Bahorel will visit the Estrapade. Prouvaire, the masons are growing lukewarm; you will bring us news from the lodge of the Rue de Grenelle-Saint-Honore. Joly will go to Dupuytren’s clinical lecture, and feel the pulse of the medical school. Bossuet will take a little turn in the court and talk with the young law licentiates. I will take charge of the Cougourde myself.”

“That arranges everything,” said Courfeyrac.

“No.”

“What else is there?”

“A very important thing.”

“What is that?” asked Courfeyrac.

“The Barriere du Maine,” replied Enjolras.

Enjolras remained for a moment as though absorbed in reflection, then he resumed: —

"At the Barriere du Maine there are marble-workers, painters, and journeymen in the studios of sculptors. They are an enthusiastic family, but liable to cool off. I don't know what has been the matter with them for some time past. They are thinking of something else. They are becoming extinguished. They pass their time playing dominoes. There is urgent need that some one should go and talk with them a little, but with firmness. They meet at Richefeu's. They are to be found there between twelve and one o'clock. Those ashes must be fanned into a glow. For that errand I had counted on that abstracted Marius, who is a good fellow on the whole, but he no longer comes to us. I need some one for the Barriere du Maine. I have no one."

"What about me?" said Grantaire. "Here am I."

"You?"

"I."

"You indoctrinate republicans! you warm up hearts that have grown cold in the name of principle!"

"Why not?"

"Are you good for anything?"

"I have a vague ambition in that direction," said Grantaire.

"You do not believe in everything."

"I believe in you."

"Grantaire will you do me a service?"

"Anything. I'll black your boots."

"Well, don't meddle with our affairs. Sleep yourself sober from your absinthe."

"You are an ingrate, Enjolras."

"You the man to go to the Barriere du Maine! You capable of it!"

"I am capable of descending the Rue de Gres, of crossing the Place Saint-Michel, of sloping through the Rue Monsieur-le-Prince, of taking the Rue de Vaugirard, of passing the Carmelites, of turning into the Rue d'Assas, of reaching the Rue du Cherche-Midi, of leaving behind me the Conseil de Guerre, of pacing the Rue des Vielles Tuileries, of striding across the boulevard, of following the Chaussée du Maine, of passing the barrier, and entering Richefeu's. I am capable of that. My shoes are capable of that."

"Do you know anything of those comrades who meet at Richefeu's?"

"Not much. We only address each other as thou."

“What will you say to them?”

“I will speak to them of Robespierre, pardi! Of Danton. Of principles.”

“You?”

“I. But I don’t receive justice. When I set about it, I am terrible. I have read Prudhomme, I know the Social Contract, I know my constitution of the year Two by heart. ‘The liberty of one citizen ends where the liberty of another citizen begins.’ Do you take me for a brute? I have an old bank-bill of the Republic in my drawer. The Rights of Man, the sovereignty of the people, sapristi! I am even a bit of a Hebertist. I can talk the most superb twaddle for six hours by the clock, watch in hand.”

“Be serious,” said Enjolras.

“I am wild,” replied Grantaire.

Enjolras meditated for a few moments, and made the gesture of a man who has taken a resolution.

“Grantaire,” he said gravely, “I consent to try you. You shall go to the Barriere du Maine.”

Grantaire lived in furnished lodgings very near the Cafe Musain. He went out, and five minutes later he returned. He had gone home to put on a Robespierre waistcoat.

“Red,” said he as he entered, and he looked intently at Enjolras. Then, with the palm of his energetic hand, he laid the two scarlet points of the waistcoat across his breast.

And stepping up to Enjolras, he whispèred in his ear: —

“Be easy.”

He jammed his hat on resolutely and departed.

A quarter of an hour later, the back room of the Cafe Musain was deserted. All the friends of the A B C were gone, each in his own direction, each to his own task. Enjolras, who had reserved the Cougourde of Aix for himself, was the last to leave.

Those members of the Cougourde of Aix who were in Paris then met on the plain of Issy, in one of the abandoned quarries which are so numerous in that side of Paris.

As Enjolras walked towards this place, he passed the whole situation in review in his own mind. The gravity of events was self-evident. When facts, the premonitory symptoms of latent social malady, move heavily, the slightest complication stops and entangles them. A phenomenon whence arises ruin and new births. Enjolras descried a luminous uplifting beneath the gloomy skirts of the future. Who knows? Perhaps the moment was at hand. The people were again taking possession of right, and what a fine spectacle! The revolution was again majestically taking possession of France and saying to the world: “The sequel to-morrow!” Enjolras was content. The furnace was being heated. He had at that moment a powder train of friends scattered all over Paris. He composed, in his own mind, with Combeferre’s philosophical and penetrating eloquence, Feuilly’s cosmopolitan enthusiasm, Courfeyrac’s dash, Bahorel’s smile, Jean Prouvaire’s melancholy, Joly’s science, Bossuet’s sarcasms, a sort of electric spark which took fire nearly everywhere at once. All hands to work. Surely, the result would answer to the effort. This was well. This made him think of Grantaire.

“Hold,” said he to himself, “the Barriere du Maine will not take me far out of my way. What if I were to go on as far as Richefeu’s? Let us have a look at what Grantaire is about, and see how he is getting on.”

One o’clock was striking from the Vaugirard steeple when Enjolras reached the Richefeu smoking-room.

He pushed open the door, entered, folded his arms, letting the door fall to and strike his shoulders, and gazed at that room filled with tables, men, and smoke.

A voice broke forth from the mist of smoke, interrupted by another voice. It was Grantaire holding a dialogue with an adversary.

Grantaire was sitting opposite another figure, at a marble Saint-Anne table, strewn with grains of bran and dotted with dominos. He was hammering the table with his fist, and this is what Enjolras heard: —

“Double-six.”

“Fours.”

“The pig! I have no more.”

“You are dead. A two.”

“Six.”

“Three.”

“One.”

“It’s my move.”

“Four points.”

“Not much.”

“It’s your turn.”

“I have made an enormous mistake.”

“You are doing well.”

“Fifteen.”

“Seven more.”

“That makes me twenty-two.” [Thoughtfully, “Twenty-two!”]

“You weren’t expecting that double-six. If I had placed it at the beginning, the whole play would have been changed.”

“A two again.”

“One.”

“One! Well, five.”

“I haven’t any.”

“It was your play, I believe?”

“Yes.”

“Blank.”

“What luck he has! Ah! You are lucky! [Long revery.] Two.”

“One.”

“Neither five nor one. That’s bad for you.”

“Domino.”

“Plague take it!”

BOOK SECOND. — EPONINE

CHAPTER I — THE LARK'S MEADOW

Marius had witnessed the unexpected termination of the ambush upon whose track he had set Javert; but Javert had no sooner quitted the building, bearing off his prisoners in three hackney-coaches, than Marius also glided out of the house. It was only nine o'clock in the evening. Marius betook himself to Courfeyrac. Courfeyrac was no longer the imperturbable inhabitant of the Latin Quarter, he had gone to live in the Rue de la Verrerie "for political reasons"; this quarter was one where, at that epoch, insurrection liked to install itself. Marius said to Courfeyrac: "I have come to sleep with you." Courfeyrac dragged a mattress off his bed, which was furnished with two, spread it out on the floor, and said: "There."

At seven o'clock on the following morning, Marius returned to the hovel, paid the quarter's rent which he owed to Ma'am Bougon, had his books, his bed, his table, his commode, and his two chairs loaded on a hand-cart and went off without leaving his address, so that when Javert returned in the course of the morning, for the purpose of questioning Marius as to the events of the preceding evening, he found only Ma'am Bougon, who answered: "Moved away!"

Ma'am Bougon was convinced that Marius was to some extent an accomplice of the robbers who had been seized the night before. "Who would ever have said it?" she exclaimed to the portresses of the quarter, "a young man like that, who had the air of a girl!"

Marius had two reasons for this prompt change of residence. The first was, that he now had a horror of that house, where he had beheld, so close at hand, and in its most repulsive and most ferocious development, a social deformity which is, perhaps, even more terrible than the wicked rich man, the wicked poor man. The second was, that he did not wish to figure in the lawsuit which would insue in all probability, and be brought in to testify against Thenardier.

Javert thought that the young man, whose name he had forgotten, was afraid, and had fled, or perhaps, had not even returned home at the time of the ambush; he made some efforts to find him, however, but without success.

A month passed, then another. Marius was still with Courfeyrac. He had learned from a young licentiate in law, an habitual frequenter of the courts, that Thenardier was in close confinement. Every Monday, Marius had five francs handed in to the clerk's office of La Force for Thenardier.

As Marius had no longer any money, he borrowed the five francs from Courfeyrac. It was the first time in his life that he had ever borrowed money. These periodical five francs were a double riddle to Courfeyrac who lent and to Thenardier who received them. "To whom can they go?" thought Courfeyrac. "Whence can this come to me?" Thenardier asked himself.

Moreover, Marius was heart-broken. Everything had plunged through a trap-door once more. He no longer saw anything before him; his life was again buried in mystery where he wandered fumblingly. He had for a moment beheld very close at hand, in that obscurity, the young girl whom he loved, the old man who seemed to be her father, those unknown beings, who were his only interest and his only hope in this world; and, at the very moment when he thought himself on the point of grasping them, a gust had swept all these shadows away. Not a spark of certainty and truth had been emitted even in the most terrible of collisions. No conjecture was possible. He no longer knew even the name that he thought he knew. It certainly was not Ursule. And the Lark was a nickname. And what was he to think of the old man? Was he actually in hiding from the police? The white-haired workman whom Marius had encountered in the vicinity of the Invalides recurred to his mind. It now seemed probable that that workingman and M. Leblanc were one and the same person. So he disguised himself? That man had his heroic and his equivocal sides. Why had he not called for help? Why had he fled? Was he, or was he not, the father of the young girl? Was he, in short, the man whom Thenardier thought that he recognized? Thenardier might have been mistaken. These formed so many insoluble problems. All this, it is true, detracted nothing from the angelic charms of the young girl of the Luxembourg. Heart-rending distress; Marius bore a passion in his heart, and night over his eyes. He was thrust onward, he was drawn, and he could not stir. All had vanished, save love. Of love itself he had lost the instincts and the sudden illuminations. Ordinarily, this flame which burns us lights us also a little, and casts some useful gleams without. But Marius no longer even heard these mute counsels of passion. He never said to himself: "What if I were to go to such a place? What if I were to try such and such a thing?" The girl whom he could no longer call Ursule was evidently somewhere; nothing warned Marius in what direction he should seek her. His whole life was now summed up in two words; absolute uncertainty within an impenetrable fog. To see her once again; he still aspired to this, but he no longer expected it.

To crown all, his poverty had returned. He felt that icy breath close to him, on his heels. In the midst of his torments, and long before this, he had discontinued his work, and nothing is more dangerous than discontinued work; it is a habit which vanishes. A habit which is easy to get rid of, and difficult to take up again.

A certain amount of dreaming is good, like a narcotic in discreet doses. It lulls to sleep the fevers of the mind at labor, which are sometimes severe, and produces in the spirit a soft and fresh vapor which corrects the over-harsh contours of pure thought, fills in gaps here and there, binds together and rounds off the angles of the ideas. But too much dreaming sinks and drowns. Woe to the brain-worker who allows himself to fall entirely from thought into revery! He thinks that he can re-ascend with equal ease, and he tells himself that, after all, it is the same thing. Error!

Thought is the toil of the intelligence, revery its voluptuousness. To replace thought with revery is to confound a poison with a food.

Marius had begun in that way, as the reader will remember. Passion had supervened and had finished the work of precipitating him into chimaeras without object or bottom. One no longer emerges from one’s self except for the purpose of going off to dream. Idle production. Tumultuous and stagnant gulf. And, in proportion as labor diminishes, needs increase. This is a law. Man, in a state of revery, is generally prodigal and slack; the unstrung mind cannot hold life within close bounds.

There is, in that mode of life, good mingled with evil, for if enervation is baleful, generosity is good and healthful. But the poor man who is generous and noble, and who does not work, is lost. Resources are exhausted, needs crop up.

Fatal declivity down which the most honest and the firmest as well as the most feeble and most vicious are drawn, and which ends in one of two holds, suicide or crime.

By dint of going outdoors to think, the day comes when one goes out to throw one’s self in the water.

Excess of revery breeds men like Escousse and Lebras.

Marius was descending this declivity at a slow pace, with his eyes fixed on the girl whom he no longer saw. What we have just written seems strange, and yet it is true. The memory of an absent being kindles in the darkness of the heart; the more it has disappeared, the more it beams; the gloomy and despairing soul sees this light on its horizon; the star of the inner night. She — that was Marius' whole thought. He meditated of nothing else; he was confusedly conscious that his old coat was becoming an impossible coat, and that his new coat was growing old, that his shirts were wearing out, that his hat was wearing out, that his boots were giving out, and he said to himself: "If I could but see her once again before I die!"

One sweet idea alone was left to him, that she had loved him, that her glance had told him so, that she did not know his name, but that she did know his soul, and that, wherever she was, however mysterious the place, she still loved him perhaps. Who knows whether she were not thinking of him as he was thinking of her? Sometimes, in those inexplicable hours such as are experienced by every heart that loves, though he had no reasons for anything but sadness and yet felt an obscure quiver of joy, he said to himself: "It is her thoughts that are coming to me!" Then he added: "Perhaps my thoughts reach her also."

This illusion, at which he shook his head a moment later, was sufficient, nevertheless, to throw beams, which at times resembled hope, into his soul. From time to time, especially at that evening hour which is the most depressing to even the dreamy, he allowed the purest, the most impersonal, the most ideal of the reveries which filled his brain, to fall upon a notebook which contained nothing else. He called this "writing to her."

It must not be supposed that his reason was deranged. Quite the contrary. He had lost the faculty of working and of moving firmly towards any fixed goal, but he was endowed with more clear-sightedness and rectitude than ever. Marius surveyed by a calm and real, although peculiar light, what passed before his eyes, even the most indifferent deeds and men; he pronounced a just criticism on everything with a sort of honest dejection and candid disinterestedness. His judgment, which was almost wholly disassociated from hope, held itself aloof and soared on high.

In this state of mind nothing escaped him, nothing deceived him, and every moment he was discovering the foundation of life, of humanity, and of destiny. Happy, even in the midst of anguish, is he to whom God has given a soul worthy of love and of unhappiness! He who has not viewed the things of this world and the heart of man under this double light has seen nothing and knows nothing of the true.

The soul which loves and suffers is in a state of sublimity.

However, day followed day, and nothing new presented itself. It merely seemed to him, that the sombre space which still remained to be traversed by him was growing shorter with every instant. He thought that he already distinctly perceived the brink of the bottomless abyss.

“What!” he repeated to himself, “shall I not see her again before then!”

When you have ascended the Rue Saint-Jacques, left the barrier on one side and followed the old inner boulevard for some distance, you reach the Rue de la Santé, then the Glaciere, and, a little while before arriving at the little river of the Gobelins, you come to a sort of field which is the only spot in the long and monotonous chain of the boulevards of Paris, where Ruysdeel would be tempted to sit down.

There is something indescribable there which exhales grace, a green meadow traversed by tightly stretched lines, from which flutter rags drying in the wind, and an old market-gardener’s house, built in the time of Louis XIII., with its great roof oddly pierced with dormer windows, dilapidated palisades, a little water amid poplar-trees, women, voices, laughter; on the horizon the Pantheon, the pole of the Deaf-Mutes, the Val-de-Grace, black, squat, fantastic, amusing, magnificent, and in the background, the severe square crests of the towers of Notre Dame.

As the place is worth looking at, no one goes thither. Hardly one cart or wagoner passes in a quarter of an hour.

It chanced that Marius’ solitary strolls led him to this plot of ground, near the water. That day, there was a rarity on the boulevard, a passer-by. Marius, vaguely impressed with the almost savage beauty of the place, asked this passer-by:— “What is the name of this spot?”

The person replied: “It is the Lark’s meadow.”

And he added: “It was here that Ulbach killed the shepherdess of Ivry.”

But after the word “Lark” Marius heard nothing more. These sudden congealments in the state of revery, which a single word suffices to evoke, do occur. The entire thought is abruptly condensed around an idea, and it is no longer capable of perceiving anything else.

The Lark was the appellation which had replaced Ursule in the depths of Marius’ melancholy.— “Stop,” said he with a sort of unreasoning stupor peculiar to these mysterious asides, “this is her meadow. I shall know where she lives now.”

It was absurd, but irresistible.

And every day he returned to that meadow of the Lark.

CHAPTER II — EMBRYONIC FORMATION OF CRIMES IN THE INCUBATION OF PRISONS

Javert's triumph in the Gorbeau hovel seemed complete, but had not been so.

In the first place, and this constituted the principal anxiety, Javert had not taken the prisoner prisoner. The assassinated man who flees is more suspicious than the assassin, and it is probable that this personage, who had been so precious a capture for the ruffians, would be no less fine a prize for the authorities.

And then, Montparnasse had escaped Javert.

Another opportunity of laying hands on that "devil's dandy" must be waited for. Montparnasse had, in fact, encountered Eponine as she stood on the watch under the trees of the boulevard, and had led her off, preferring to play Nemorin with the daughter rather than Schinderhannes with the father. It was well that he did so. He was free. As for Eponine, Javert had caused her to be seized; a mediocre consolation. Eponine had joined Azelma at Les Madelonettes.

And finally, on the way from the Gorbeau house to La Force, one of the principal prisoners, Claquesous, had been lost. It was not known how this had been effected, the police agents and the sergeants "could not understand it at all." He had converted himself into vapor, he had slipped through the handcuffs, he had trickled through the crevices of the carriage, the fiacre was cracked, and he had fled; all that they were able to say was, that on arriving at the prison, there was no Claquesous. Either the fairies or the police had had a hand in it. Had Claquesous melted into the shadows like a snow-flake in water? Had there been unavowed connivance of the police agents? Did this man belong to the double enigma of order and disorder? Was he concentric with infraction and repression? Had this sphinx his fore paws in crime and his hind paws in authority? Javert did not accept such comminations, and would have bristled up against such compromises; but his squad included other inspectors besides himself, who were more initiated than he, perhaps, although they were his subordinates in the secrets of the Prefecture, and Claquesous had been such a villain that he might make a very good agent. It is an excellent thing for ruffianism and an admirable thing for the police to be on such intimate juggling terms with the night. These double-edged rascals do exist. However that may be, Claquesous had gone astray and was not found again. Javert appeared to be more irritated than amazed at this.

As for Marius, “that booby of a lawyer,” who had probably become frightened, and whose name Javert had forgotten, Javert attached very little importance to him. Moreover, a lawyer can be hunted up at any time. But was he a lawyer after all?

The investigation had begun.

The magistrate had thought it advisable not to put one of these men of the band of Patron Minette in close confinement, in the hope that he would chatter. This man was Brujon, the long-haired man of the Rue du Petit-Banquier. He had been let loose in the Charlemagne courtyard, and the eyes of the watchers were fixed on him.

This name of Brujon is one of the souvenirs of La Force. In that hideous courtyard, called the court of the Batiment-Neuf (New Building), which the administration called the court Saint-Bernard, and which the robbers called the Fosseaux-Lions (The Lion’s Ditch), on that wall covered with scales and leprosy, which rose on the left to a level with the roofs, near an old door of rusty iron which led to the ancient chapel of the ducal residence of La Force, then turned in a dormitory for ruffians, there could still be seen, twelve years ago, a sort of fortress roughly carved in the stone with a nail, and beneath it this signature: —

BRUJON, 1811.

The Brujon of 1811 was the father of the Brujon of 1832.

The latter, of whom the reader caught but a glimpse at the Gorbeau house, was a very cunning and very adroit young spark, with a bewildered and plaintive air. It was in consequence of this plaintive air that the magistrate had released him, thinking him more useful in the Charlemagne yard than in close confinement.

Robbers do not interrupt their profession because they are in the hands of justice. They do not let themselves be put out by such a trifle as that. To be in prison for one crime is no reason for not beginning on another crime. They are artists, who have one picture in the salon, and who toil, none the less, on a new work in their studios.

Brujon seemed to be stupefied by prison. He could sometimes be seen standing by the hour together in front of the sutler’s window in the Charlemagne yard, staring like an idiot at the sordid list of prices which began with: garlic, 62 centimes, and ended with: cigar, 5 centimes. Or he passed his time in trembling, chattering his teeth, saying that he had a fever, and inquiring whether one of the eight and twenty beds in the fever ward was vacant.

All at once, towards the end of February, 1832, it was discovered that Brujon, that somnolent fellow, had had three different commissions executed by the errand-men of the establishment, not under his own name, but in the name of three of his comrades; and they had cost him in all fifty sous, an exorbitant outlay which attracted the attention of the prison corporal.

Inquiries were instituted, and on consulting the tariff of commissions posted in the convict’s parlor, it was learned that the fifty sous could be analyzed as follows: three commissions; one to the Pantheon, ten sous; one to Val-de-Grace, fifteen sous; and one to the Barriere de Grenelle, twenty-five sous. This last was the dearest of the whole tariff. Now, at the Pantheon, at the Val-de-Grace, and at the Barriere de Grenelle were situated the domiciles of the three very redoubtable prowlers of the barriers, Kruideniers, alias Bizarre, Glorieux, an ex-convict, and Barre-Carosse, upon whom the attention of the police was directed by this incident. It was thought that these men were members of Patron Minette; two of those leaders, Babet and Gueulemer, had been captured. It was supposed that the messages, which had been addressed, not to houses, but to people who were waiting for them in the street, must have contained information with regard to some crime that had been plotted. They were in possession of other indications; they laid hand on the three prowlers, and supposed that they had circumvented some one or other of Brujon’s machinations.

About a week after these measures had been taken, one night, as the superintendent of the watch, who had been inspecting the lower dormitory in the Batiment-Neuf, was about to drop his chestnut in the box — this was the means adopted to make sure that the watchmen performed their duties punctually; every hour a chestnut must be dropped into all the boxes nailed to the doors of the dormitories — a watchman looked through the peep-hole of the dormitory and beheld Brujon sitting on his bed and writing something by the light of the hall-lamp. The guardian entered, Brujon was put in a solitary cell for a month, but they were not able to seize what he had written. The police learned nothing further about it.

What is certain is, that on the following morning, a “postilion” was flung from the Charlemagne yard into the Lions’ Ditch, over the five-story building which separated the two court-yards.

What prisoners call a “postilion” is a pallet of bread artistically moulded, which is sent into Ireland, that is to say, over the roofs of a prison, from one courtyard to another. Etymology: over England; from one land to another; into Ireland. This little pellet falls in the yard. The man who picks it up opens it and finds in it a note addressed to some prisoner in that yard. If it is a prisoner who finds the treasure, he forwards the note to its destination; if it is a keeper, or one of the prisoners secretly sold who are called sheep in prisons and foxes in the galleys, the note is taken to the office and handed over to the police.

On this occasion, the postilion reached its address, although the person to whom it was addressed was, at that moment, in solitary confinement. This person was no other than Babet, one of the four heads of Patron Minette.

The postilion contained a roll of paper on which only these two lines were written: —

“Babet. There is an affair in the Rue Plumet. A gate on a garden.”

This is what Brujon had written the night before.

In spite of male and female searchers, Babet managed to pass the note on from La Force to the Salpetriere, to a “good friend” whom he had and who was shut up there. This woman in turn transmitted the note to another woman of her acquaintance, a certain Magnon, who was strongly suspected by the police, though not yet arrested. This Magnon, whose name the reader has already seen, had relations with the Thenardier, which will be described in detail later on, and she could, by going to see Eponine, serve as a bridge between the Salpetriere and Les Madelonettes.

It happened, that at precisely that moment, as proofs were wanting in the investigation directed against Thenardier in the matter of his daughters, Eponine and Azelma were released. When Eponine came out, Magnon, who was watching the gate of the Madelonettes, handed her Brujon’s note to Babet, charging her to look into the matter.

Eponine went to the Rue Plumet, recognized the gate and the garden, observed the house, spied, lurked, and, a few days later, brought to Magnon, who delivers in the Rue Clocheperce, a biscuit, which Magnon transmitted to Babet’s mistress in the Salpetriere. A biscuit, in the shady symbolism of prisons, signifies: Nothing to be done.

So that in less than a week from that time, as Brujon and Babet met in the circle of La Force, the one on his way to the examination, the other on his way from it: —

“Well?” asked Brujon, “the Rue P.?”

“Biscuit,” replied Babet. Thus did the foetus of crime engendered by Brujon in La Force miscarry.

This miscarriage had its consequences, however, which were perfectly distinct from Brujon’s programme. The reader will see what they were.

Often when we think we are knotting one thread, we are tying quite another.

CHAPTER III — APPARITION TO FATHER MABEUF

Marius no longer went to see any one, but he sometimes encountered Father Mabeuf by chance.

While Marius was slowly descending those melancholy steps which may be called the cellar stairs, and which lead to places without light, where the happy can be heard walking overhead, M. Mabeuf was descending on his side.

The Flora of Cauteretz no longer sold at all. The experiments on indigo had not been successful in the little garden of Austerlitz, which had a bad exposure. M. Mabeuf could cultivate there only a few plants which love shade and dampness. Nevertheless, he did not become discouraged. He had obtained a corner in the Jardin des Plantes, with a good exposure, to make his trials with indigo "at his own expense." For this purpose he had pawned his copperplates of the Flora. He had reduced his breakfast to two eggs, and he left one of these for his old servant, to whom he had paid no wages for the last fifteen months. And often his breakfast was his only meal. He no longer smiled with his infantile smile, he had grown morose and no longer received visitors. Marius did well not to dream of going thither. Sometimes, at the hour when M. Mabeuf was on his way to the Jardin des Plantes, the old man and the young man passed each other on the Boulevard de l'Hopital. They did not speak, and only exchanged a melancholy sign of the head. A heart-breaking thing it is that there comes a moment when misery looses bonds! Two men who have been friends become two chance passers-by.

Royal the bookseller was dead. M. Mabeuf no longer knew his books, his garden, or his indigo: these were the three forms which happiness, pleasure, and hope had assumed for him. This sufficed him for his living. He said to himself: "When I shall have made my balls of blueing, I shall be rich, I will withdraw my copperplates from the pawn-shop, I will put my Flora in vogue again with trickery, plenty of money and advertisements in the newspapers and I will buy, I know well where, a copy of Pierre de Medine's Art de Naviguer, with wood-cuts, edition of 1655." In the meantime, he toiled all day over his plot of indigo, and at night he returned home to water his garden, and to read his books. At that epoch, M. Mabeuf was nearly eighty years of age.

One evening he had a singular apparition.

He had returned home while it was still broad daylight. Mother Plutarque, whose health was declining, was ill and in bed. He had dined on a bone, on which a little meat lingered, and a bit of bread that he had found on the kitchen table, and had seated himself on an overturned stone post, which took the place of a bench in his garden.

Near this bench there rose, after the fashion in orchard-gardens, a sort of large chest, of beams and planks, much dilapidated, a rabbit-hutch on the ground floor, a fruit-closet on the first. There was nothing in the hutch, but there were a few apples in the fruit-closet, — the remains of the winter's provision.

M. Mabeuf had set himself to turning over and reading, with the aid of his glasses, two books of which he was passionately fond and in which, a serious thing at his age, he was interested. His natural timidity rendered him accessible to the acceptance of superstitions in a certain degree. The first of these books was the famous treatise of Président Delancre, De l'inconstance des Demons; the other was a quarto by Mutor de la Rubaudière, Sur les Diables de Vauvert et les Gobelins de la Bievre. This last-mentioned old volume interested him all the more, because his garden had been one of the spots haunted by goblins in former times. The twilight had begun to whiten what was on high and to blacken all below. As he read, over the top of the book which he held in his hand, Father Mabeuf was surveying his plants, and among others a magnificent rhododendron which was one of his consolations; four days of heat, wind, and sun without a drop of rain, had passed; the stalks were bending, the buds drooping, the leaves falling; all this needed water, the rhododendron was particularly sad. Father Mabeuf was one of those persons for whom plants have souls. The old man had toiled all day over his indigo plot, he was worn out with fatigue, but he rose, laid his books on the bench, and walked, all bent over and with tottering footsteps, to the well, but when he had grasped the chain, he could not even draw it sufficiently to unhook it. Then he turned round and cast a glance of anguish toward heaven which was becoming studded with stars.

The evening had that serenity which overwhelms the troubles of man beneath an indescribably mournful and eternal joy. The night promised to be as arid as the day had been.

"Stars everywhere!" thought the old man; "not the tiniest cloud! Not a drop of water!"

And his head, which had been upraised for a moment, fell back upon his breast.

He raised it again, and once more looked at the sky, murmuring: —

"A tear of dew! A little pity!"

He tried again to unhook the chain of the well, and could not.

At that moment, he heard a voice saying: —

"Father Mabeuf, would you like to have me water your garden for you?"

At the same time, a noise as of a wild animal passing became audible in the hedge, and he beheld emerging from the shrubbery a sort of tall, slender girl, who drew herself up in front of him and stared boldly at him. She had less the air of a human being than of a form which had just blossomed forth from the twilight.

Before Father Mabeuf, who was easily terrified, and who was, as we have said, quick to take alarm, was able to reply by a single syllable, this being, whose movements had a sort of odd abruptness in the darkness, had unhooked the chain, plunged in and withdrawn the bucket, and filled the watering-pot, and the goodman beheld this apparition, which had bare feet and a tattered petticoat, running about among the flower-beds distributing life around her. The sound of the watering-pot on the leaves filled Father Mabeuf's soul with ecstasy. It seemed to him that the rhododendron was happy now.

The first bucketful emptied, the girl drew a second, then a third. She watered the whole garden.

There was something about her, as she thus ran about among paths, where her outline appeared perfectly black, waving her angular arms, and with her fichu all in rags, that resembled a bat.

When she had finished, Father Mabeuf approached her with tears in his eyes, and laid his hand on her brow.

"God will bless you," said he, "you are an angel since you take care of the flowers."

"No," she replied. "I am the devil, but that's all the same to me."

The old man exclaimed, without either waiting for or hearing her response: —

"What a pity that I am so unhappy and so poor, and that I can do nothing for you!"

“You can do something,” said she.

“What?”

“Tell me where M. Marius lives.”

The old man did not understand. “What Monsieur Marius?”

He raised his glassy eyes and seemed to be seeking something that had vanished.

“A young man who used to come here.”

In the meantime, M. Mabeuf had searched his memory.

“Ah! yes—” he exclaimed. “I know what you mean. Wait! Monsieur Marius — the Baron Marius Pontmercy, parbleu! He lives, — or rather, he no longer lives, — ah well, I don’t know.”

As he spoke, he had bent over to train a branch of rhododendron, and he continued: —

“Hold, I know now. He very often passes along the boulevard, and goes in the direction of the Glaciere, Rue Croulebarbe. The meadow of the Lark. Go there. It is not hard to meet him.”

When M. Mabeuf straightened himself up, there was no longer any one there; the girl had disappeared.

He was decidedly terrified.

“Really,” he thought, “if my garden had not been watered, I should think that she was a spirit.”

An hour later, when he was in bed, it came back to him, and as he fell asleep, at that confused moment when thought, like that fabulous bird which changes itself into a fish in order to cross the sea, little by little assumes the form of a dream in order to traverse slumber, he said to himself in a bewildered way: —

“In sooth, that greatly resembles what Rubaudière narrates of the goblins. Could it have been a goblin?”

CHAPTER IV — AN APPARITION TO MARIUS

Some days after this visit of a “spirit” to Farmer Mabeuf, one morning, — it was on a Monday, the day when Marius borrowed the hundred-sou piece from Courfeyrac for Thenardier — Marius had put this coin in his pocket, and before carrying it to the clerk’s office, he had gone “to take a little stroll,” in the hope that this would make him work on his return. It was always thus, however. As soon as he rose, he seated himself before a book and a sheet of paper in order to scribble some translation; his task at that epoch consisted in turning into French a celebrated quarrel between Germans, the Gans and Savigny controversy; he took Savigny, he took Gans, read four lines, tried to write one, could not, saw a star between him and his paper, and rose from his chair, saying: “I shall go out. That will put me in spirits.”

And off he went to the Lark’s meadow.

There he beheld more than ever the star, and less than ever Savigny and Gans.

He returned home, tried to take up his work again, and did not succeed; there was no means of re-knotting a single one of the threads which were broken in his brain; then he said to himself: “I will not go out to-morrow. It prevents my working.” And he went out every day.

He lived in the Lark’s meadow more than in Courfeyrac’s lodgings. That was his real address: Boulevard de la Santé, at the seventh tree from the Rue Croulebarbe.

That morning he had quitted the seventh tree and had seated himself on the parapet of the River des Gobelins. A cheerful sunlight penetrated the freshly unfolded and luminous leaves.

He was dreaming of “Her.” And his meditation turning to a reproach, fell back upon himself; he reflected dolefully on his idleness, his paralysis of soul, which was gaining on him, and of that night which was growing more dense every moment before him, to such a point that he no longer even saw the sun.

Nevertheless, athwart this painful extrication of indistinct ideas which was not even a monologue, so feeble had action become in him, and he had no longer the force to care to despair, athwart this melancholy absorption, sensations from without did reach him. He heard behind him, beneath him, on both banks of the river, the laundresses of the Gobelins beating their linen, and above his head, the birds chattering and singing in the elm-trees. On the one hand, the sound of liberty, the careless happiness of the leisure which has wings; on the other, the sound of toil. What caused him to meditate deeply, and almost reflect, were two cheerful sounds.

All at once, in the midst of his dejected ecstasy, he heard a familiar voice saying: —

“Come! Here he is!”

He raised his eyes, and recognized that wretched child who had come to him one morning, the elder of the Thenardier daughters, Eponine; he knew her name now. Strange to say, she had grown poorer and prettier, two steps which it had not seemed within her power to take. She had accomplished a double progress, towards the light and towards distress. She was barefooted and in rags, as on the day when she had so resolutely entered his chamber, only her rags were two months older now, the holes were larger, the tatters more sordid. It was the same harsh voice, the same brow dimmed and wrinkled with tan, the same free, wild, and vacillating glance. She had besides, more than formerly, in her face that indescribably terrified and lamentable something which sojourn in a prison adds to wretchedness.

She had bits of straw and hay in her hair, not like Ophelia through having gone mad from the contagion of Hamlet’s madness, but because she had slept in the loft of some stable.

And in spite of it all, she was beautiful. What a star art thou, O youth!

In the meantime, she had halted in front of Marius with a trace of joy in her livid countenance, and something which resembled a smile.

She stood for several moments as though incapable of speech.

“So I have met you at last!” she said at length. “Father Mabeuf was right, it was on this boulevard! How I have hunted for you! If you only knew! Do you know? I have been in the jug. A fortnight! They let me out! seeing that there was nothing against me, and that, moreover, I had not reached years of discretion. I lack two months of it. Oh! how I have hunted for you! These six weeks! So you don’t live down there any more?”

“No,” said Marius.

“Ah! I understand. Because of that affair. Those take-downs are disagreeable. You cleared out. Come now! Why do you wear old hats like this! A young man like you ought to have fine clothes. Do you know, Monsieur Marius, Father Mabeuf calls you Baron Marius, I don’t know what. It isn’t true that you are a baron? Barons are old fellows, they go to the Luxembourg, in front of the chateau, where there is the most sun, and they read the Quotidienne for a sou. I once carried a letter to a baron of that sort. He was over a hundred years old. Say, where do you live now?”

Marius made no reply.

“Ah!” she went on, “you have a hole in your shirt. I must sew it up for you.”

She resumed with an expression which gradually clouded over: —

“You don’t seem glad to see me.”

Marius held his peace; she remained silent for a moment, then exclaimed: —

“But if I choose, nevertheless, I could force you to look glad!”

“What?” demanded Marius. “What do you mean?”

“Ah! you used to call me thou,” she retorted.

“Well, then, what dost thou mean?”

She bit her lips; she seemed to hesitate, as though a prey to some sort of inward conflict. At last she appeared to come to a decision.

“So much the worse, I don’t care. You have a melancholy air, I want you to be pleased. Only promise me that you will smile. I want to see you smile and hear you say: ‘Ah, well, that’s good.’ Poor Mr. Marius! you know? You promised me that you would give me anything I like—”

“Yes! Only speak!”

She looked Marius full in the eye, and said: —

“I have the address.”

Marius turned pale. All the blood flowed back to his heart.

“What address?”

“The address that you asked me to get!”

She added, as though with an effort: —

“The address — you know very well!”

“Yes!” stammered Marius.

“Of that young lady.”

This word uttered, she sighed deeply.

Marius sprang from the parapet on which he had been sitting and seized her hand distractedly.

“Oh! Well! lead me thither! Tell me! Ask of me anything you wish! Where is it?”

“Come with me,” she responded. “I don’t know the street or number very well; it is in quite the other direction from here, but I know the house well, I will take you to it.”

She withdrew her hand and went on, in a tone which could have rent the heart of an observer, but which did not even graze Marius in his intoxicated and ecstatic state: —

“Oh! how glad you are!”

A cloud swept across Marius’ brow. He seized Eponine by the arm: —

“Swear one thing to me!”

“Swear!” said she, “what does that mean? Come! You want me to swear?”

And she laughed.

“Your father! promise me, Eponine! Swear to me that you will not give this address to your father!”

She turned to him with a stupefied air.

“Eponine! How do you know that my name is Eponine?”

“Promise what I tell you!”

But she did not seem to hear him.

“That’s nice! You have called me Eponine!”

Marius grasped both her arms at once.

“But answer me, in the name of Heaven! pay attention to what I am saying to you, swear to me that you will not tell your father this address that you know!”

“My father!” said she. “Ah yes, my father! Be at ease. He’s in close confinement. Besides, what do I care for my father!”

“But you do not promise me!” exclaimed Marius.

“Let go of me!” she said, bursting into a laugh, “how you do shake me! Yes! Yes! I promise that! I swear that to you! What is that to me? I will not tell my father the address. There! Is that right? Is that it?”

“Nor to any one?” said Marius.

“Nor to any one.”

“Now,” resumed Marius, “take me there.”

“Immediately?”

“Immediately.”

“Come along. Ah! how pleased he is!” said she.

After a few steps she halted.

“You are following me too closely, Monsieur Marius. Let me go on ahead, and follow me so, without seeming to do it. A nice young man like you must not be seen with a woman like me.”

No tongue can express all that lay in that word, woman, thus pronounced by that child.

She proceeded a dozen paces and then halted once more; Marius joined her. She addressed him sideways, and without turning towards him: —

“By the way, you know that you promised me something?”

Marius fumbled in his pocket. All that he owned in the world was the five francs intended for Thenardier the father. He took them and laid them in Eponine’s hand.

She opened her fingers and let the coin fall to the ground, and gazed at him with a gloomy air.

“I don’t want your money,” said she.

BOOK THIRD. — THE HOUSE IN THE RUE PLUMET

CHAPTER I — THE HOUSE WITH A SECRET

About the middle of the last century, a chief justice in the Parliament of Paris having a mistress and concealing the fact, for at that period the grand seignors displayed their mistresses, and the bourgeois concealed them, had “a little house” built in the Faubourg Saint-Germain, in the deserted Rue Blomet, which is now called Rue Plumet, not far from the spot which was then designated as Combat des Animaux.

This house was composed of a single-storied pavilion; two rooms on the ground floor, two chambers on the first floor, a kitchen down stairs, a boudoir up stairs, an attic under the roof, the whole preceded by a garden with a large gate opening on the street. This garden was about an acre and a half in extent. This was all that could be seen by passers-by; but behind the pavilion there was a narrow courtyard, and at the end of the courtyard a low building consisting of two rooms and a cellar, a sort of preparation destined to conceal a child and nurse in case of need. This building communicated in the rear by a masked door which opened by a secret spring, with a long, narrow, paved winding corridor, open to the sky, hemmed in with two lofty walls, which, hidden with wonderful art, and lost as it were between garden enclosures and cultivated land, all of whose angles and detours it followed, ended in another door, also with a secret lock which opened a quarter of a league away, almost in another quarter, at the solitary extremity of the Rue du Babylone.

Through this the chief justice entered, so that even those who were spying on him and following him would merely have observed that the justice betook himself every day in a mysterious way somewhere, and would never have suspected that to go to the Rue de Babylone was to go to the Rue Blomet. Thanks to clever purchasers of land, the magistrate had been able to make a secret, sewer-like passage on his own property, and consequently, without interference. Later on, he had sold in little parcels, for gardens and market gardens, the lots of ground adjoining the corridor, and the proprietors of these lots on both sides thought they had a party wall before their eyes, and did not even suspect the long, paved ribbon winding between two walls amid their flower-beds and their orchards. Only the birds beheld this curiosity. It is probable that the linnets and tomtits of the last century gossiped a great deal about the chief justice.

The pavilion, built of stone in the taste of Mansard, wainscoted and furnished in the Watteau style, rocaille on the inside, old-fashioned on the outside, walled in with a triple hedge of flowers, had something discreet, coquettish, and solemn about it, as befits a caprice of love and magistracy.

This house and corridor, which have now disappeared, were in existence fifteen years ago. In ‘93 a coppersmith had purchased the house with the idea of demolishing it, but had not been able to pay the price; the nation made him bankrupt. So that it was the house which demolished the coppersmith. After that, the house remained uninhabited, and fell slowly to ruin, as does every dwelling to which the presence of man does not communicate life. It had remained fitted with its old furniture, was always for sale or to let, and the ten or a dozen people who passed through the Rue Plumet were warned of the fact by a yellow and illegible bit of writing which had hung on the garden wall since 1819.

Towards the end of the Restoration, these same passers-by might have noticed that the bill had disappeared, and even that the shutters on the first floor were open. The house was occupied, in fact. The windows had short curtains, a sign that there was a woman about.

In the month of October, 1829, a man of a certain age had presented himself and had hired the house just as it stood, including, of course, the back building and the lane which ended in the Rue de Babylone. He had had the secret openings of the two doors to this passage repaired. The house, as we have just mentioned, was still very nearly furnished with the justice’s old fitting; the new tenant had ordered some repairs, had added what was lacking here and there, had replaced the paving-stones in the yard, bricks in the floors, steps in the stairs, missing bits in the inlaid floors and the glass in the lattice windows, and had finally installed himself there with a young girl and an elderly maid-servant, without commotion, rather like a person who is slipping in than like a man who is entering his own house. The neighbors did not gossip about him, for the reason that there were no neighbors.

This unobtrusive tenant was Jean Valjean, the young girl was Cosette. The servant was a woman named Toussaint, whom Jean Valjean had saved from the hospital and from wretchedness, and who was elderly, a stammerer, and from the provinces, three qualities which had decided Jean Valjean to take her with him. He had hired the house under the name of M. Fauchelevent, independent gentleman. In all that has been related heretofore, the reader has, doubtless, been no less prompt than Thenardier to recognize Jean Valjean.

Why had Jean Valjean quitted the convent of the Petit-Picpus? What had happened?

Nothing had happened.

It will be remembered that Jean Valjean was happy in the convent, so happy that his conscience finally took the alarm. He saw Cosette every day, he felt paternity spring up and develop within him more and more, he brooded over the soul of that child, he said to himself that she was his, that nothing could take her from him, that this would last indefinitely, that she would certainly become a nun, being thereto gently incited every day, that thus the convent was henceforth the universe for her as it was for him, that he should grow old there, and that she would grow up there, that she would grow old there, and that he should die there; that, in short, delightful hope, no separation was possible. On reflecting upon this, he fell into perplexity. He interrogated himself. He asked himself if all that happiness were really his, if it were not composed of the happiness of another, of the happiness of that child which he, an old man, was confiscating and stealing; if that were not theft? He said to himself, that this child had a right to know life before renouncing it, that to deprive her in advance, and in some sort without consulting her, of all joys, under the pretext of saving her from all trials, to take advantage of her ignorance of her isolation, in order to make an artificial vocation germinate in her, was to rob a human creature of its nature and to lie to God. And who knows if, when she came to be aware of all this some day, and found herself a nun to her sorrow, Cosette would not come to hate him? A last, almost selfish thought, and less heroic than the rest, but which was intolerable to him. He resolved to quit the convent.

He resolved on this; he recognized with anguish, the fact that it was necessary. As for objections, there were none. Five years' sojourn between these four walls and of disappearance had necessarily destroyed or dispersed the elements of fear. He could return tranquilly among men. He had grown old, and all had undergone a change. Who would recognize him now? And then, to face the worst, there was danger only for himself, and he had no right to condemn Cosette to the cloister for the reason that he had been condemned to the galleys. Besides, what is danger in comparison with the right? Finally, nothing prevented his being prudent and taking his precautions.

As for Cosette's education, it was almost finished and complete.

His determination once taken, he awaited an opportunity. It was not long in presenting itself. Old Fauchelevent died.

Jean Valjean demanded an audience with the revered prioress and told her that, having come into a little inheritance at the death of his brother, which permitted him henceforth to live without working, he should leave the service of the convent and take his daughter with him; but that, as it was not just that Cosette, since she had not taken the vows, should have received her education gratuitously, he humbly begged the Reverend Prioress to see fit that he should offer to the community, as indemnity, for the five years which Cosette had spent there, the sum of five thousand francs.

It was thus that Jean Valjean quitted the convent of the Perpetual Adoration.

On leaving the convent, he took in his own arms the little valise the key to which he still wore on his person, and would permit no porter to touch it. This puzzled Cosette, because of the odor of embalming which proceeded from it.

Let us state at once, that this trunk never quitted him more. He always had it in his chamber. It was the first and only thing sometimes, that he carried off in his moving when he moved about. Cosette laughed at it, and called this valise his inseparable, saying: "I am jealous of it."

Nevertheless, Jean Valjean did not reappear in the open air without profound anxiety.

He discovered the house in the Rue Plumet, and hid himself from sight there. Henceforth he was in the possession of the name: — Ultime Fauchelevent.

At the same time he hired two other apartments in Paris, in order that he might attract less attention than if he were to remain always in the same quarter, and so that he could, at need, take himself off at the slightest disquietude which should assail him, and in short, so that he might not again be caught unprovided as on the night when he had so miraculously escaped from Javert. These two apartments were very pitiable, poor in appearance, and in two quarters which were far remote from each other, the one in the Rue de l'Ouest, the other in the Rue de l'Homme Arme.

He went from time to time, now to the Rue de l'Homme Arme, now to the Rue de l'Ouest, to pass a month or six weeks, without taking Toussaint. He had himself served by the porters, and gave himself out as a gentleman from the suburbs, living on his funds, and having a little temporary resting-place in town. This lofty virtue had three domiciles in Paris for the sake of escaping from the police.

CHAPTER II — JEAN VALJEAN AS A NATIONAL GUARD

However, properly speaking, he lived in the Rue Plumet, and he had arranged his existence there in the following fashion: —

Cosette and the servant occupied the pavilion; she had the big sleeping-room with the painted pier-glasses, the boudoir with the gilded fillets, the justice's drawing-room furnished with tapestries and vast arm-chairs; she had the garden. Jean Valjean had a canopied bed of antique damask in three colors and a beautiful Persian rug purchased in the Rue du Figuier-Saint-Paul at Mother Gaucher's, put into Cosette's chamber, and, in order to redeem the severity of these magnificent old things, he had amalgamated with this bric-a-brac all the gay and graceful little pieces of furniture suitable to young girls, an etagere, a bookcase filled with gilt-edged books, an inkstand, a blotting-book, paper, a work-table incrusted with mother of pearl, a silver-gilt dressing-case, a toilet service in Japanese porcelain. Long damask curtains with a red foundation and three colors, like those on the bed, hung at the windows of the first floor. On the ground floor, the curtains were of tapestry. All winter long, Cosette's little house was heated from top to bottom. Jean Valjean inhabited the sort of porter's lodge which was situated at the end of the back courtyard, with a mattress on a folding-bed, a white wood table, two straw chairs, an earthenware water-jug, a few old volumes on a shelf, his beloved valise in one corner, and never any fire. He dined with Cosette, and he had a loaf of black bread on the table for his own use.

When Toussaint came, he had said to her: "It is the young lady who is the mistress of this house."— "And you, monsieur?" Toussaint replied in amazement.— "I am a much better thing than the master, I am the father."

Cosette had been taught housekeeping in the convent, and she regulated their expenditure, which was very modest. Every day, Jean Valjean put his arm through Cosette's and took her for a walk. He led her to the Luxembourg, to the least frequented walk, and every Sunday he took her to mass at Saint-Jacques-du-Haut-Pas, because that was a long way off. As it was a very poor quarter, he bestowed alms largely there, and the poor people surrounded him in church, which had drawn down upon him

Thenardier's epistle: "To the benevolent gentleman of the church of Saint-Jacques-du-Haut-Pas." He was fond of taking Cosette to visit the poor and the sick. No stranger ever entered the house in the Rue Plumet. Toussaint brought their provisions, and Jean Valjean went himself for water to a fountain near by on the boulevard. Their wood and wine were put into a half-subterranean hollow lined with rock-work which lay near the Rue de Babylone and which had formerly served the chief-justice as a grotto; for at the epoch of follies and "Little Houses" no love was without a grotto.

In the door opening on the Rue de Babylone, there was a box destined for the reception of letters and papers; only, as the three inhabitants of the pavilion in the Rue Plumet received neither papers nor letters, the entire usefulness of that box, formerly the go-between of a love affair, and the confidant of a love-lorn lawyer, was now limited to the tax-collector's notices, and the summons of the guard. For M. Fauchelevent, independent gentleman, belonged to the national guard; he had not been able to escape through the fine meshes of the census of 1831. The municipal information collected at that time had even reached the convent of the Petit-Picpus, a sort of impenetrable and holy cloud, whence Jean Valjean had emerged in venerable guise, and, consequently, worthy of mounting guard in the eyes of the townhall.

Three or four times a year, Jean Valjean donned his uniform and mounted guard; he did this willingly, however; it was a correct disguise which mixed him with every one, and yet left him solitary. Jean Valjean had just attained his sixtieth birthday, the age of legal exemption; but he did not appear to be over fifty; moreover, he had no desire to escape his sergeant-major nor to quibble with Comte de Lobau; he possessed no civil status, he was concealing his name, he was concealing his identity, so he concealed his age, he concealed everything; and, as we have just said, he willingly did his duty as a national guard; the sum of his ambition lay in resembling any other man who paid his taxes. This man had for his ideal, within, the angel, without, the bourgeois.

Let us note one detail, however; when Jean Valjean went out with Cosette, he dressed as the reader has already seen, and had the air of a retired officer. When he went out alone, which was generally at night, he was always dressed in a workingman's trousers and blouse, and wore a cap which concealed his face. Was this precaution or humility? Both. Cosette was accustomed to the enigmatical side of her destiny, and hardly noticed her father’s peculiarities. As for Toussaint, she venerated Jean Valjean, and thought everything he did right.

One day, her butcher, who had caught a glimpse of Jean Valjean, said to her: “That’s a queer fish.” She replied: “He’s a saint.”

Neither Jean Valjean nor Cosette nor Toussaint ever entered or emerged except by the door on the Rue de Babylone. Unless seen through the garden gate it would have been difficult to guess that they lived in the Rue Plumet. That gate was always closed. Jean Valjean had left the garden uncultivated, in order not to attract attention.

In this, possibly, he made a mistake.

CHAPTER III — FOLIIS AC FRONDIBUS

The garden thus left to itself for more than half a century had become extraordinary and charming. The passers-by of forty years ago halted to gaze at it, without a suspicion of the secrets which it hid in its fresh and verdant depths. More than one dreamer of that epoch often allowed his thoughts and his eyes to penetrate indiscreetly between the bars of that ancient, padlocked gate, twisted, tottering, fastened to two green and moss-covered pillars, and oddly crowned with a pediment of undecipherable arabesque.

There was a stone bench in one corner, one or two mouldy statues, several lattices which had lost their nails with time, were rotting on the wall, and there were no walks nor turf; but there was enough grass everywhere. Gardening had taken its departure, and nature had returned. Weeds abounded, which was a great piece of luck for a poor corner of land. The festival of gilliflowers was something splendid. Nothing in this garden obstructed the sacred effort of things towards life; venerable growth reigned there among them. The trees had bent over towards the nettles, the plant had sprung upward, the branch had inclined, that which crawls on the earth had gone in search of that which expands in the air, that which floats on the wind had bent over towards that which trails in the moss; trunks, boughs, leaves, fibres, clusters, tendrils, shoots, spines, thorns, had mingled, crossed, married, confounded themselves in each other; vegetation in a deep and close embrace, had celebrated and accomplished there, under the well-pleased eye of the Creator, in that enclosure three hundred feet square, the holy mystery of fraternity, symbol of the human fraternity. This garden was no longer a garden, it was a colossal thicket, that is to say, something as impenetrable as a forest, as peopled as a city, quivering like a nest, sombre like a cathedral, fragrant like a bouquet, solitary as a tomb, living as a throng.

In Floreal this enormous thicket, free behind its gate and within its four walls, entered upon the secret labor of germination, quivered in the rising sun, almost like an animal which drinks in the breaths of cosmic love, and which feels the sap of April rising and boiling in its veins, and shakes to the wind its enormous wonderful green locks, sprinkled on the damp earth, on the defaced statues, on the crumbling steps of the pavilion, and even on the pavement of the deserted street, flowers like stars, dew like pearls, fecundity, beauty, life, joy, perfumes. At midday, a thousand white butterflies took refuge there, and it was a divine spectacle to see that living summer snow whirling about there in flakes amid the shade. There, in those gay shadows of verdure, a throng of innocent voices spoke sweetly to the soul, and what the twittering forgot to say the humming completed. In the evening, a dreamy vapor exhaled from the garden and enveloped it; a shroud of mist, a calm and celestial sadness covered it; the intoxicating perfume of the honeysuckles and convolvulus poured out from every part of it, like an exquisite and subtle poison; the last appeals of the woodpeckers and the wagtails were audible as they dozed among the branches; one felt the sacred intimacy of the birds and the trees; by day the wings rejoice the leaves, by night the leaves protect the wings.

In winter the thicket was black, dripping, bristling, shivering, and allowed some glimpse of the house. Instead of flowers on the branches and dew in the flowers, the long silvery tracks of the snails were visible on the cold, thick carpet of yellow leaves; but in any fashion, under any aspect, at all seasons, spring, winter, summer, autumn, this tiny enclosure breathed forth melancholy, contemplation, solitude, liberty, the absence of man, the presence of God; and the rusty old gate had the air of saying: “This garden belongs to me.”

It was of no avail that the pavements of Paris were there on every side, the classic and splendid hotels of the Rue de Varennes a couple of paces away, the dome of the Invalides close at hand, the Chamber of Deputies not far off; the carriages of the Rue de Bourgogne and of the Rue Saint-Dominique rumbled luxuriously, in vain, in the vicinity, in vain did the yellow, brown, white, and red omnibuses cross each other’s course at the neighboring cross-roads; the Rue Plumet was the desert; and the death of the former proprietors, the revolution which had passed over it, the crumbling away of ancient fortunes, absence, forgetfulness, forty years of abandonment and widowhood, had sufficed to restore to this privileged spot ferns, mulleins, hemlock, yarrow, tall weeds, great crimped plants, with large leaves of pale green cloth, lizards, beetles, uneasy and rapid insects; to cause to spring forth from the depths of the earth and to reappear between those four walls a certain indescribable and savage grandeur; and for nature, which disconcerts the petty arrangements of man, and which sheds herself always thoroughly where she diffuses herself at all, in the ant as well as in the eagle, to blossom out in a petty little Parisian garden with as much rude force and majesty as in a virgin forest of the New World.

Nothing is small, in fact; any one who is subject to the profound and penetrating influence of nature knows this. Although no absolute satisfaction is given to philosophy, either to circumscribe the cause or to limit the effect, the contemplator falls into those unfathomable ecstasies caused by these decompositions of force terminating in unity. Everything toils at everything.

Algebra is applied to the clouds; the radiation of the star profits the rose; no thinker would venture to affirm that the perfume of the hawthorn is useless to the constellations. Who, then, can calculate the course of a molecule? How do we know that the creation of worlds is not determined by the fall of grains of sand? Who knows the reciprocal ebb and flow of the infinitely great and the infinitely little, the reverberations of causes in the precipices of being, and the avalanches of creation? The tiniest worm is of importance; the great is little, the little is great; everything is balanced in necessity; alarming vision for the mind. There are marvellous relations between beings and things; in that inexhaustible whole, from the sun to the grub, nothing despises the other; all have need of each other. The light does not bear away terrestrial perfumes into the azure depths, without knowing what it is doing; the night distributes stellar essences to the sleeping flowers. All birds that fly have round their leg the thread of the infinite. Germination is complicated with the bursting forth of a meteor and with the peck of a swallow cracking its egg, and it places on one level the birth of an earthworm and the advent of Socrates. Where the telescope ends, the microscope begins. Which of the two possesses the larger field of vision? Choose. A bit of mould is a pleiad of flowers; a nebula is an ant-hill of stars. The same promiscuousness, and yet more unprecedented, exists between the things of the intelligence and the facts of substance. Elements and principles mingle, combine, wed, multiply with each other, to such a point that the material and the moral world are brought eventually to the same clearness. The phenomenon is perpetually returning upon itself. In the vast cosmic exchanges the universal life goes and comes in unknown quantities, rolling entirely in the invisible mystery of effluvia, employing everything, not losing a single dream, not a single slumber, sowing an animalcule here, crumbling to bits a planet there, oscillating and winding, making of light a force and of thought an element, disseminated and invisible, dissolving all, except that geometrical point, the I; bringing everything back to the soul-atom; expanding everything in God, entangling all activity, from summit to base, in the obscurity of a dizzy mechanism, attaching the flight of an insect to the movement of the earth, subordinating, who knows? Were it only by the identity of the law, the evolution of the comet in the firmament to the whirling of the infusoria in the drop of water. A machine made of mind. Enormous gearing, the prime motor of which is the gnat, and whose final wheel is the zodiac.

CHAPTER IV — CHANGE OF GATE

It seemed that this garden, created in olden days to conceal wanton mysteries, had been transformed and become fitted to shelter chaste mysteries. There were no longer either arbors, or bowling greens, or tunnels, or grottos; there was a magnificent, dishevelled obscurity falling like a veil over all. Paphos had been made over into Eden. It is impossible to say what element of repentance had rendered this retreat wholesome. This flower-girl now offered her blossom to the soul. This coquettish garden, formerly decidedly compromised, had returned to virginity and modesty. A justice assisted by a gardener, a goodman who thought that he was a continuation of Lamoignon, and another goodman who thought that he was a continuation of Lenotre, had turned it about, cut, ruffled, decked, moulded it to gallantry; nature had taken possession of it once more, had filled it with shade, and had arranged it for love.

There was, also, in this solitude, a heart which was quite ready. Love had only to show himself; he had here a temple composed of verdure, grass, moss, the sight of birds, tender shadows, agitated branches, and a soul made of sweetness, of faith, of candor, of hope, of aspiration, and of illusion.

Cosette had left the convent when she was still almost a child; she was a little more than fourteen, and she was at the “ungrateful age”; we have already said, that with the exception of her eyes, she was homely rather than pretty; she had no ungraceful feature, but she was awkward, thin, timid and bold at once, a grown-up little girl, in short.

Her education was finished, that is to say, she has been taught religion, and even and above all, devotion; then “history,” that is to say the thing that bears that name in convents, geography, grammar, the participles, the kings of France, a little music, a little drawing, etc.; but in all other respects she was utterly ignorant, which is a great charm and a great peril. The soul of a young girl should not be left in the dark; later on, mirages that are too abrupt and too lively are formed there, as in a dark chamber. She should be gently and discreetly enlightened, rather with the reflection of realities than with their harsh and direct light. A useful and graciously austere half-light which dissipates puerile fears and obviates falls. There is nothing but the maternal instinct, that admirable intuition composed of the memories of the virgin and the experience of the woman, which knows how this half-light is to be created and of what it should consist.

Nothing supplies the place of this instinct. All the nuns in the world are not worth as much as one mother in the formation of a young girl's soul.

Cosette had had no mother. She had only had many mothers, in the plural.

As for Jean Valjean, he was, indeed, all tenderness, all solicitude; but he was only an old man and he knew nothing at all.

Now, in this work of education, in this grave matter of preparing a woman for life, what science is required to combat that vast ignorance which is called innocence!

Nothing prepares a young girl for passions like the convent. The convent turns the thoughts in the direction of the unknown. The heart, thus thrown back upon itself, works downward within itself, since it cannot overflow, and grows deep, since it cannot expand. Hence visions, suppositions, conjectures, outlines of romances, a desire for adventures, fantastic constructions, edifices built wholly in the inner obscurity of the mind, sombre and secret abodes where the passions immediately find a lodgement as soon as the open gate permits them to enter. The convent is a compression which, in order to triumph over the human heart, should last during the whole life.

On quitting the convent, Cosette could have found nothing more sweet and more dangerous than the house in the Rue Plumet. It was the continuation of solitude with the beginning of liberty; a garden that was closed, but a nature that was acrid, rich, voluptuous, and fragrant; the same dreams as in the convent, but with glimpses of young men; a grating, but one that opened on the street.

Still, when she arrived there, we repeat, she was only a child. Jean Valjean gave this neglected garden over to her. "Do what you like with it," he said to her. This amused Cosette; she turned over all the clumps and all the stones, she hunted for "beasts"; she played in it, while awaiting the time when she would dream in it; she loved this garden for the insects that she found beneath her feet amid the grass, while awaiting the day when she would love it for the stars that she would see through the boughs above her head.

And then, she loved her father, that is to say, Jean Valjean, with all her soul, with an innocent filial passion which made the goodman a beloved and charming companion to her. It will be remembered that M. Madeleine had been in the habit of reading a great deal. Jean Valjean had continued this practice; he had come to converse well; he possessed the secret riches and the eloquence of a true and humble mind which has spontaneously cultivated itself. He retained just enough sharpness to season his kindness; his mind was rough and his heart was soft. During their conversations in the Luxembourg, he gave her explanations of everything, drawing on what he had read, and also on what he had suffered. As she listened to him, Cosette's eyes wandered vaguely about.

This simple man sufficed for Cosette's thought, the same as the wild garden sufficed for her eyes. When she had had a good chase after the butterflies, she came panting up to him and said: "Ah! How I have run!" He kissed her brow.

Cosette adored the goodman. She was always at his heels. Where Jean Valjean was, there happiness was. Jean Valjean lived neither in the pavilion nor the garden; she took greater pleasure in the paved back courtyard, than in the enclosure filled with flowers, and in his little lodge furnished with straw-seated chairs than in the great drawing-room hung with tapestry, against which stood tufted easy-chairs. Jean Valjean sometimes said to her, smiling at his happiness in being importuned: "Do go to your own quarters! Leave me alone a little!"

She gave him those charming and tender scoldings which are so graceful when they come from a daughter to her father.

"Father, I am very cold in your rooms; why don't you have a carpet here and a stove?"

"Dear child, there are so many people who are better than I and who have not even a roof over their heads."

"Then why is there a fire in my rooms, and everything that is needed?"

"Because you are a woman and a child."

"Bah! must men be cold and feel uncomfortable?"

"Certain men."

"That is good, I shall come here so often that you will be obliged to have a fire."

And again she said to him: —

"Father, why do you eat horrible bread like that?"

"Because, my daughter."

"Well, if you eat it, I will eat it too."

Then, in order to prevent Cosette eating black bread, Jean Valjean ate white bread.

Cosette had but a confused recollection of her childhood. She prayed morning and evening for her mother whom she had never known. The Thenardiers had remained with her as two hideous figures in a dream. She remembered that she had gone “one day, at night,” to fetch water in a forest. She thought that it had been very far from Paris. It seemed to her that she had begun to live in an abyss, and that it was Jean Valjean who had rescued her from it. Her childhood produced upon her the effect of a time when there had been nothing around her but millepeds, spiders, and serpents. When she meditated in the evening, before falling asleep, as she had not a very clear idea that she was Jean Valjean’s daughter, and that he was her father, she fancied that the soul of her mother had passed into that good man and had come to dwell near her.

When he was seated, she leaned her cheek against his white hair, and dropped a silent tear, saying to herself: “Perhaps this man is my mother.”

Cosette, although this is a strange statement to make, in the profound ignorance of a girl brought up in a convent, — maternity being also absolutely unintelligible to virginity, — had ended by fancying that she had had as little mother as possible. She did not even know her mother’s name. Whenever she asked Jean Valjean, Jean Valjean remained silent. If she repeated her question, he responded with a smile. Once she insisted; the smile ended in a tear.

This silence on the part of Jean Valjean covered Fantine with darkness.

Was it prudence? Was it respect? Was it a fear that he should deliver this name to the hazards of another memory than his own?

So long as Cosette had been small, Jean Valjean had been willing to talk to her of her mother; when she became a young girl, it was impossible for him to do so. It seemed to him that he no longer dared. Was it because of Cosette? Was it because of Fantine? He felt a certain religious horror at letting that shadow enter Cosette’s thought; and of placing a third in their destiny. The more sacred this shade was to him, the more did it seem that it was to be feared. He thought of Fantine, and felt himself overwhelmed with silence.

Through the darkness, he vaguely perceived something which appeared to have its finger on its lips. Had all the modesty which had been in Fantine, and which had violently quitted her during her lifetime, returned to rest upon her after her death, to watch in indignation over the peace of that dead woman, and in its shyness, to keep her in her grave? Was Jean Valjean unconsciously submitting to the pressure? We who believe in death, are not among the number who will reject this mysterious explanation.

Hence the impossibility of uttering, even for Cosette, that name of Fantine.

One day Cosette said to him: —

“Father, I saw my mother in a dream last night. She had two big wings. My mother must have been almost a saint during her life.”

“Through martyrdom,” replied Jean Valjean.

However, Jean Valjean was happy.

When Cosette went out with him, she leaned on his arm, proud and happy, in the plenitude of her heart. Jean Valjean felt his heart melt within him with delight, at all these sparks of a tenderness so exclusive, so wholly satisfied with himself alone. The poor man trembled, inundated with angelic joy; he declared to himself ecstatically that this would last all their lives; he told himself that he really had not suffered sufficiently to merit so radiant a bliss, and he thanked God, in the depths of his soul, for having permitted him to be loved thus, he, a wretch, by that innocent being.

CHAPTER V — THE ROSE PERCEIVES THAT IT IS AN ENGINE OF WAR

One day, Cosette chanced to look at herself in her mirror, and she said to herself: “Really!” It seemed to her almost that she was pretty. This threw her in a singularly troubled state of mind. Up to that moment she had never thought of her face. She saw herself in her mirror, but she did not look at herself. And then, she had so often been told that she was homely; Jean Valjean alone said gently: “No indeed! no indeed!” At all events, Cosette had always thought herself homely, and had grown up in that belief with the easy resignation of childhood. And here, all at once, was her mirror saying to her, as Jean Valjean had said: “No indeed!” That night, she did not sleep. “What if I were pretty!” she thought. “How odd it would be if I were pretty!” And she recalled those of her companions whose beauty had produced a sensation in the convent, and she said to herself: “What! Am I to be like Mademoiselle So-and-So?”

The next morning she looked at herself again, not by accident this time, and she was assailed with doubts: “Where did I get such an idea?” said she; “no, I am ugly.” She had not slept well, that was all, her eyes were sunken and she was pale. She had not felt very joyous on the preceding evening in the belief that she was beautiful, but it made her very sad not to be able to believe in it any longer. She did not look at herself again, and for more than a fortnight she tried to dress her hair with her back turned to the mirror.

In the evening, after dinner, she generally embroidered in wool or did some convent needlework in the drawing-room, and Jean Valjean read beside her. Once she raised her eyes from her work, and was rendered quite uneasy by the manner in which her father was gazing at her.

On another occasion, she was passing along the street, and it seemed to her that some one behind her, whom she did not see, said: “A pretty woman! but badly dressed.” “Bah!” she thought, “he does not mean me. I am well dressed and ugly.” She was then wearing a plush hat and her merino gown.

At last, one day when she was in the garden, she heard poor old Toussaint saying: “Do you notice how pretty Cosette is growing, sir?” Cosette did not hear her father’s reply, but Toussaint’s words caused a sort of commotion within her. She fled from the garden, ran up to her room, flew to the looking-glass, — it was three months since she had looked at herself, — and gave vent to a cry. She had just dazzled herself.

She was beautiful and lovely; she could not help agreeing with Toussaint and her mirror. Her figure was formed, her skin had grown white, her hair was lustrous, an unaccustomed splendor had been lighted in her blue eyes. The consciousness of her beauty burst upon her in an instant, like the sudden advent of daylight; other people noticed it also, Toussaint had said so, it was evidently she of whom the passer-by had spoken, there could no longer be any doubt of that; she descended to the garden again, thinking herself a queen, imagining that she heard the birds singing, though it was winter, seeing the sky gilded, the sun among the trees, flowers in the thickets, distracted, wild, in inexpressible delight.

Jean Valjean, on his side, experienced a deep and undefinable oppression at heart.

In fact, he had, for some time past, been contemplating with terror that beauty which seemed to grow more radiant every day on Cosette's sweet face. The dawn that was smiling for all was gloomy for him.

Cosette had been beautiful for a tolerably long time before she became aware of it herself. But, from the very first day, that unexpected light which was rising slowly and enveloping the whole of the young girl's person, wounded Jean Valjean's sombre eye. He felt that it was a change in a happy life, a life so happy that he did not dare to move for fear of disarranging something. This man, who had passed through all manner of distresses, who was still all bleeding from the bruises of fate, who had been almost wicked and who had become almost a saint, who, after having dragged the chain of the galleys, was now dragging the invisible but heavy chain of indefinite misery, this man whom the law had not released from its grasp and who could be seized at any moment and brought back from the obscurity of his virtue to the broad daylight of public opprobrium, this man accepted all, excused all, pardoned all, and merely asked of Providence, of man, of the law, of society, of nature, of the world, one thing, that Cosette might love him!

That Cosette might continue to love him! That God would not prevent the heart of the child from coming to him, and from remaining with him! Beloved by Cosette, he felt that he was healed, rested, appeased, loaded with benefits, recompensed, crowned. Beloved by Cosette, it was well with him! He asked nothing more! Had any one said to him: “Do you want anything better?” he would have answered: “No.” God might have said to him: “Do you desire heaven?” and he would have replied: “I should lose by it.”

Everything which could affect this situation, if only on the surface, made him shudder like the beginning of something new. He had never known very distinctly himself what the beauty of a woman means; but he understood instinctively, that it was something terrible.

He gazed with terror on this beauty, which was blossoming out ever more triumphant and superb beside him, beneath his very eyes, on the innocent and formidable brow of that child, from the depths of her homeliness, of his old age, of his misery, of his reprobation.

He said to himself: “How beautiful she is! What is to become of me?”

There, moreover, lay the difference between his tenderness and the tenderness of a mother. What he beheld with anguish, a mother would have gazed upon with joy.

The first symptoms were not long in making their appearance.

On the very morrow of the day on which she had said to herself: “Decidedly I am beautiful!” Cosette began to pay attention to her toilet. She recalled the remark of that passer-by: “Pretty, but badly dressed,” the breath of an oracle which had passed beside her and had vanished, after depositing in her heart one of the two germs which are destined, later on, to fill the whole life of woman, coquetry. Love is the other.

With faith in her beauty, the whole feminine soul expanded within her. She conceived a horror for her merinos, and shame for her plush hat. Her father had never refused her anything. She at once acquired the whole science of the bonnet, the gown, the mantle, the boot, the cuff, the stuff which is in fashion, the color which is becoming, that science which makes of the Parisian woman something so charming, so deep, and so dangerous. The words heady woman were invented for the Parisienne.

In less than a month, little Cosette, in that Thebaid of the Rue de Babylone, was not only one of the prettiest, but one of the “best dressed” women in Paris, which means a great deal more.

She would have liked to encounter her “passer-by,” to see what he would say, and to “teach him a lesson!” The truth is, that she was ravishing in every respect, and that she distinguished the difference between a bonnet from Gerard and one from Herbaut in the most marvellous way.

Jean Valjean watched these ravages with anxiety. He who felt that he could never do anything but crawl, walk at the most, beheld wings sprouting on Cosette.

Moreover, from the mere inspection of Cosette's toilet, a woman would have recognized the fact that she had no mother. Certain little proprieties, certain special conventionalities, were not observed by Cosette. A mother, for instance, would have told her that a young girl does not dress in damask.

The first day that Cosette went out in her black damask gown and mantle, and her white crape bonnet, she took Jean Valjean's arm, gay, radiant, rosy, proud, dazzling. "Father," she said, "how do you like me in this guise?" Jean Valjean replied in a voice which resembled the bitter voice of an envious man: "Charming!" He was the same as usual during their walk. On their return home, he asked Cosette: —

"Won't you put on that other gown and bonnet again, — you know the ones I mean?"

This took place in Cosette's chamber. Cosette turned towards the wardrobe where her cast-off schoolgirl's clothes were hanging.

"That disguise!" said she. "Father, what do you want me to do with it? Oh no, the idea! I shall never put on those horrors again. With that machine on my head, I have the air of Madame Mad-dog."

Jean Valjean heaved a deep sigh.

From that moment forth, he noticed that Cosette, who had always heretofore asked to remain at home, saying: "Father, I enjoy myself more here with you," now was always asking to go out. In fact, what is the use of having a handsome face and a delicious costume if one does not display them?

He also noticed that Cosette had no longer the same taste for the back garden. Now she preferred the garden, and did not dislike to promenade back and forth in front of the railed fence. Jean Valjean, who was shy, never set foot in the garden. He kept to his back yard, like a dog.

Cosette, in gaining the knowledge that she was beautiful, lost the grace of ignoring it. An exquisite grace, for beauty enhanced by ingenuousness is ineffable, and nothing is so adorable as a dazzling and innocent creature who walks along, holding in her hand the key to paradise without being conscious of it. But what she had lost in ingenuous grace, she gained in pensive and serious charm. Her whole person, permeated with the joy of youth, of innocence, and of beauty, breathed forth a splendid melancholy.

It was at this epoch that Marius, after the lapse of six months, saw her once more at the Luxembourg.

CHAPTER VI — THE BATTLE BEGUN

Cosette in her shadow, like Marius in his, was all ready to take fire. Destiny, with its mysterious and fatal patience, slowly drew together these two beings, all charged and all languishing with the stormy electricity of passion, these two souls which were laden with love as two clouds are laden with lightning, and which were bound to overflow and mingle in a look like the clouds in a flash of fire.

The glance has been so much abused in love romances that it has finally fallen into disrepute. One hardly dares to say, nowadays, that two beings fell in love because they looked at each other. That is the way people do fall in love, nevertheless, and the only way. The rest is nothing, but the rest comes afterwards. Nothing is more real than these great shocks which two souls convey to each other by the exchange of that spark.

At that particular hour when Cosette unconsciously darted that glance which troubled Marius, Marius had no suspicion that he had also launched a look which disturbed Cosette.

He caused her the same good and the same evil.

She had been in the habit of seeing him for a long time, and she had scrutinized him as girls scrutinize and see, while looking elsewhere. Marius still considered Cosette ugly, when she had already begun to think Marius handsome. But as he paid no attention to her, the young man was nothing to her.

Still, she could not refrain from saying to herself that he had beautiful hair, beautiful eyes, handsome teeth, a charming tone of voice when she heard him conversing with his comrades, that he held himself badly when he walked, if you like, but with a grace that was all his own, that he did not appear to be at all stupid, that his whole person was noble, gentle, simple, proud, and that, in short, though he seemed to be poor, yet his air was fine.

On the day when their eyes met at last, and said to each other those first, obscure, and ineffable things which the glance lisps, Cosette did not immediately understand. She returned thoughtfully to the house in the Rue de l’Ouest, where Jean Valjean, according to his custom, had come to spend six weeks. The next morning, on waking, she thought of that strange young man, so long indifferent and icy, who now seemed to pay attention to her, and it did not appear to her that this attention was the least in the world agreeable to her. She was, on the contrary, somewhat incensed at this handsome and disdainful individual. A substratum of war stirred within her. It struck her, and the idea caused her a wholly childish joy, that she was going to take her revenge at last.

Knowing that she was beautiful, she was thoroughly conscious, though in an indistinct fashion, that she possessed a weapon. Women play with their beauty as children do with a knife. They wound themselves.

The reader will recall Marius' hesitations, his palpitations, his terrors. He remained on his bench and did not approach. This vexed Cosette. One day, she said to Jean Valjean: "Father, let us stroll about a little in that direction." Seeing that Marius did not come to her, she went to him. In such cases, all women resemble Mahomet. And then, strange to say, the first symptom of true love in a young man is timidity; in a young girl it is boldness. This is surprising, and yet nothing is more simple. It is the two sexes tending to approach each other and assuming, each the other's qualities.

That day, Cosette's glance drove Marius beside himself, and Marius' glance set Cosette to trembling. Marius went away confident, and Cosette uneasy. From that day forth, they adored each other.

The first thing that Cosette felt was a confused and profound melancholy. It seemed to her that her soul had become black since the day before. She no longer recognized it. The whiteness of soul in young girls, which is composed of coldness and gayety, resembles snow. It melts in love, which is its sun.

Cosette did not know what love was. She had never heard the word uttered in its terrestrial sense. On the books of profane music which entered the convent, amour (love) was replaced by tambour (drum) or pandour. This created enigmas which exercised the imaginations of the big girls, such as: Ah, how delightful is the drum! or, Pity is not a pandour. But Cosette had left the convent too early to have occupied herself much with the "drum." Therefore, she did not know what name to give to what she now felt. Is any one the less ill because one does not know the name of one's malady?

She loved with all the more passion because she loved ignorantly. She did not know whether it was a good thing or a bad thing, useful or dangerous, eternal or temporary, allowable or prohibited; she loved. She would have been greatly astonished, had any one said to her: "You do not sleep? But that is forbidden! You do not eat? Why, that is very bad! You have oppressions and palpitations of the heart? That must not be! You blush and turn pale, when a certain being clad in black appears at the end of a certain green walk? But that is abominable!” She would not have understood, and she would have replied: “What fault is there of mine in a matter in which I have no power and of which I know nothing?”

It turned out that the love which presented itself was exactly suited to the state of her soul. It was a sort of admiration at a distance, a mute contemplation, the deification of a stranger. It was the apparition of youth to youth, the dream of nights become a reality yet remaining a dream, the longed-for phantom realized and made flesh at last, but having as yet, neither name, nor fault, nor spot, nor exigence, nor defect; in a word, the distant lover who lingered in the ideal, a chimaera with a form. Any nearer and more palpable meeting would have alarmed Cosette at this first stage, when she was still half immersed in the exaggerated mists of the cloister. She had all the fears of children and all the fears of nuns combined. The spirit of the convent, with which she had been permeated for the space of five years, was still in the process of slow evaporation from her person, and made everything tremble around her. In this situation he was not a lover, he was not even an admirer, he was a vision. She set herself to adoring Marius as something charming, luminous, and impossible.

As extreme innocence borders on extreme coquetry, she smiled at him with all frankness.

Every day, she looked forward to the hour for their walk with impatience, she found Marius there, she felt herself unspeakably happy, and thought in all sincerity that she was expressing her whole thought when she said to Jean Valjean: —

“What a delicious garden that Luxembourg is!”

Marius and Cosette were in the dark as to one another. They did not address each other, they did not salute each other, they did not know each other; they saw each other; and like stars of heaven which are separated by millions of leagues, they lived by gazing at each other.

It was thus that Cosette gradually became a woman and developed, beautiful and loving, with a consciousness of her beauty, and in ignorance of her love. She was a coquette to boot through her ignorance.

CHAPTER VII — TO ONE SADNESS OPPOSE A SADNESS AND A HALF

All situations have their instincts. Old and eternal Mother Nature warned Jean Valjean in a dim way of the presence of Marius. Jean Valjean shuddered to the very bottom of his soul. Jean Valjean saw nothing, knew nothing, and yet he scanned with obstinate attention, the darkness in which he walked, as though he felt on one side of him something in process of construction, and on the other, something which was crumbling away. Marius, also warned, and, in accordance with the deep law of God, by that same Mother Nature, did all he could to keep out of sight of “the father.” Nevertheless, it came to pass that Jean Valjean sometimes espied him. Marius’ manners were no longer in the least natural. He exhibited ambiguous prudence and awkward daring. He no longer came quite close to them as formerly. He seated himself at a distance and pretended to be reading; why did he pretend that? Formerly he had come in his old coat, now he wore his new one every day; Jean Valjean was not sure that he did not have his hair curled, his eyes were very queer, he wore gloves; in short, Jean Valjean cordially detested this young man.

Cosette allowed nothing to be divined. Without knowing just what was the matter with her she was convinced that there was something in it, and that it must be concealed.

There was a coincidence between the taste for the toilet which had recently come to Cosette, and the habit of new clothes developed by that stranger which was very repugnant to Jean Valjean. It might be accidental, no doubt, certainly, but it was a menacing accident.

He never opened his mouth to Cosette about this stranger. One day, however, he could not refrain from so doing, and, with that vague despair which suddenly casts the lead into the depths of its despair, he said to her: “What a very pedantic air that young man has!”

Cosette, but a year before only an indifferent little girl, would have replied: “Why, no, he is charming.” Ten years later, with the love of Marius in her heart, she would have answered: “A pedant, and insufferable to the sight! You are right!” — At the moment in life and the heart which she had then attained, she contented herself with replying, with supreme calmness: “That young man!”

As though she now beheld him for the first time in her life.

“How stupid I am!” thought Jean Valjean. “She had not noticed him. It is I who have pointed him out to her.”

Oh, simplicity of the old! oh, the depth of children!

It is one of the laws of those fresh years of suffering and trouble, of those vivacious conflicts between a first love and the first obstacles, that the young girl does not allow herself to be caught in any trap whatever, and that the young man falls into every one. Jean Valjean had instituted an undeclared war against Marius, which Marius, with the sublime stupidity of his passion and his age, did not divine. Jean Valjean laid a host of ambushes for him; he changed his hour, he changed his bench, he forgot his handkerchief, he came alone to the Luxembourg; Marius dashed headlong into all these snares; and to all the interrogation marks planted by Jean Valjean in his pathway, he ingenuously answered “yes.” But Cosette remained immured in her apparent unconcern and in her imperturbable tranquillity, so that Jean Valjean arrived at the following conclusion: “That ninny is madly in love with Cosette, but Cosette does not even know that he exists.”

None the less did he bear in his heart a mournful tremor. The minute when Cosette would love might strike at any moment. Does not everything begin with indifference?

Only once did Cosette make a mistake and alarm him. He rose from his seat to depart, after a stay of three hours, and she said: “What, already?”

Jean Valjean had not discontinued his trips to the Luxembourg, as he did not wish to do anything out of the way, and as, above all things, he feared to arouse Cosette; but during the hours which were so sweet to the lovers, while Cosette was sending her smile to the intoxicated Marius, who perceived nothing else now, and who now saw nothing in all the world but an adored and radiant face, Jean Valjean was fixing on Marius flashing and terrible eyes. He, who had finally come to believe himself incapable of a malevolent feeling, experienced moments when Marius was present, in which he thought he was becoming savage and ferocious once more, and he felt the old depths of his soul, which had formerly contained so much wrath, opening once more and rising up against that young man. It almost seemed to him that unknown craters were forming in his bosom.

What! he was there, that creature! What was he there for? He came creeping about, smelling out, examining, trying! He came, saying: “Hey! Why not?” He came to prowl about his, Jean Valjean’s, life! to prowl about his happiness, with the purpose of seizing it and bearing it away!

Jean Valjean added: “Yes, that’s it! What is he in search of? An adventure! What does he want? A love affair! A love affair! And I? What! I have been first, the most wretched of men, and then the most unhappy, and I have traversed sixty years of life on my knees, I have suffered everything that man can suffer, I have grown old without having been young, I have lived without a family, without relatives, without friends, without life, without children, I have left my blood on every stone, on every bramble, on every mile-post, along every wall, I have been gentle, though others have been hard to me, and kind, although others have been malicious, I have become an honest man once more, in spite of everything, I have repented of the evil that I have done and have forgiven the evil that has been done to me, and at the moment when I receive my recompense, at the moment when it is all over, at the moment when I am just touching the goal, at the moment when I have what I desire, it is well, it is good, I have paid, I have earned it, all this is to take flight, all this will vanish, and I shall lose Cosette, and I shall lose my life, my joy, my soul, because it has pleased a great booby to come and lounge at the Luxembourg.”

Then his eyes were filled with a sad and extraordinary gleam.

It was no longer a man gazing at a man; it was no longer an enemy surveying an enemy. It was a dog scanning a thief.

The reader knows the rest. Marius pursued his senseless course. One day he followed Cosette to the Rue de l’Ouest. Another day he spoke to the porter. The porter, on his side, spoke, and said to Jean Valjean: “Monsieur, who is that curious young man who is asking for you?” On the morrow Jean Valjean bestowed on Marius that glance which Marius at last perceived. A week later, Jean Valjean had taken his departure. He swore to himself that he would never again set foot either in the Luxembourg or in the Rue de l’Ouest. He returned to the Rue Plumet.

Cosette did not complain, she said nothing, she asked no questions, she did not seek to learn his reasons; she had already reached the point where she was afraid of being divined, and of betraying herself. Jean Valjean had no experience of these miseries, the only miseries which are charming and the only ones with which he was not acquainted; the consequence was that he did not understand the grave significance of Cosette's silence.

He merely noticed that she had grown sad, and he grew gloomy. On his side and on hers, inexperience had joined issue.

Once he made a trial. He asked Cosette: —

"Would you like to come to the Luxembourg?"

A ray illuminated Cosette's pale face.

"Yes," said she.

They went thither. Three months had elapsed. Marius no longer went there. Marius was not there.

On the following day, Jean Valjean asked Cosette again: —

"Would you like to come to the Luxembourg?"

She replied, sadly and gently: —

"No."

Jean Valjean was hurt by this sadness, and heart-broken at this gentleness.

What was going on in that mind which was so young and yet already so impenetrable? What was on its way there within? What was taking place in Cosette's soul? Sometimes, instead of going to bed, Jean Valjean remained seated on his pallet, with his head in his hands, and he passed whole nights asking himself: "What has Cosette in her mind?" and in thinking of the things that she might be thinking about.

Oh! at such moments, what mournful glances did he cast towards that cloister, that chaste peak, that abode of angels, that inaccessible glacier of virtue! How he contemplated, with despairing ecstasy, that convent garden, full of ignored flowers and cloistered virgins, where all perfumes and all souls mount straight to heaven! How he adored that Eden forever closed against him, whence he had voluntarily and madly emerged! How he regretted his abnegation and his folly in having brought Cosette back into the world, poor hero of sacrifice, seized and hurled to the earth by his very self-devotion! How he said to himself, "What have I done?"

However, nothing of all this was perceptible to Cosette. No ill-temper, no harshness. His face was always serene and kind. Jean Valjean's manners were more tender and more paternal than ever. If anything could have betrayed his lack of joy, it was his increased suavity.

On her side, Cosette languished. She suffered from the absence of Marius as she had rejoiced in his presence, peculiarly, without exactly being conscious of it. When Jean Valjean ceased to take her on their customary strolls, a feminine instinct murmured confusedly, at the bottom of her heart, that she must not seem to set store on the Luxembourg garden, and that if this proved to be a matter of indifference to her, her father would take her thither once more. But days, weeks, months, elapsed. Jean Valjean had tacitly accepted Cosette's tacit consent. She regretted it. It was too late. So Marius had disappeared; all was over. The day on which she returned to the Luxembourg, Marius was no longer there. What was to be done? Should she ever find him again? She felt an anguish at her heart, which nothing relieved, and which augmented every day; she no longer knew whether it was winter or summer, whether it was raining or shining, whether the birds were singing, whether it was the season for dahlias or daisies, whether the Luxembourg was more charming than the Tuileries, whether the linen which the laundress brought home was starched too much or not enough, whether Toussaint had done "her marketing" well or ill; and she remained dejected, absorbed, attentive to but a single thought, her eyes vague and staring as when one gazes by night at a black and fathomless spot where an apparition has vanished.

However, she did not allow Jean Valjean to perceive anything of this, except her pallor.

She still wore her sweet face for him.

This pallor sufficed but too thoroughly to trouble Jean Valjean. Sometimes he asked her: —

"What is the matter with you?"

She replied: "There is nothing the matter with me."

And after a silence, when she divined that he was sad also, she would add: —

"And you, father — is there anything wrong with you?"

"With me? Nothing," said he.

These two beings who had loved each other so exclusively, and with so touching an affection, and who had lived so long for each other now suffered side by side, each on the other's account; without acknowledging it to each other, without anger towards each other, and with a smile.

CHAPTER VIII — THE CHAIN-GANG

Jean Valjean was the more unhappy of the two. Youth, even in its sorrows, always possesses its own peculiar radiance.

At times, Jean Valjean suffered so greatly that he became puerile. It is the property of grief to cause the childish side of man to reappear. He had an unconquerable conviction that Cosette was escaping from him. He would have liked to resist, to retain her, to arouse her enthusiasm by some external and brilliant matter. These ideas, puerile, as we have just said, and at the same time senile, conveyed to him, by their very childishness, a tolerably just notion of the influence of gold lace on the imaginations of young girls. He once chanced to see a general on horseback, in full uniform, pass along the street, Comte Coutard, the commandant of Paris. He envied that gilded man; what happiness it would be, he said to himself, if he could put on that suit which was an incontestable thing; and if Cosette could behold him thus, she would be dazzled, and when he had Cosette on his arm and passed the gates of the Tuileries, the guard would present arms to him, and that would suffice for Cosette, and would dispel her idea of looking at young men.

An unforeseen shock was added to these sad reflections.

In the isolated life which they led, and since they had come to dwell in the Rue Plumet, they had contracted one habit. They sometimes took a pleasure trip to see the sun rise, a mild species of enjoyment which befits those who are entering life and those who are quitting it.

For those who love solitude, a walk in the early morning is equivalent to a stroll by night, with the cheerfulness of nature added. The streets are deserted and the birds are singing. Cosette, a bird herself, liked to rise early. These matutinal excursions were planned on the preceding evening. He proposed, and she agreed. It was arranged like a plot, they set out before daybreak, and these trips were so many small delights for Cosette. These innocent eccentricities please young people.

Jean Valjean's inclination led him, as we have seen, to the least frequented spots, to solitary nooks, to forgotten places. There then existed, in the vicinity of the barriers of Paris, a sort of poor meadows, which were almost confounded with the city, where grew in summer sickly grain, and which, in autumn, after the harvest had been gathered, presented the appearance, not of having been reaped, but peeled. Jean Valjean loved to haunt these fields. Cosette was not bored there. It meant solitude to him and liberty to her. There, she became a little girl once more, she could run and almost play; she took off her hat, laid it on Jean Valjean's knees, and gathered bunches of flowers. She gazed at the butterflies on the flowers, but did not catch them; gentleness and tenderness are born with love, and the young girl who cherishes within her breast a trembling and fragile ideal has mercy on the wing of a butterfly. She wove garlands of poppies, which she placed on her head, and which, crossed and penetrated with sunlight, glowing until they flamed, formed for her rosy face a crown of burning embers.

Even after their life had grown sad, they kept up their custom of early strolls.

One morning in October, therefore, tempted by the serene perfection of the autumn of 1831, they set out, and found themselves at break of day near the Barriere du Maine. It was not dawn, it was daybreak; a delightful and stern moment. A few constellations here and there in the deep, pale azure, the earth all black, the heavens all white, a quiver amid the blades of grass, everywhere the mysterious chill of twilight. A lark, which seemed mingled with the stars, was carolling at a prodigious height, and one would have declared that that hymn of pettiness calmed immensity. In the East, the Valde-Grace projected its dark mass on the clear horizon with the sharpness of steel; Venus dazzlingly brilliant was rising behind that dome and had the air of a soul making its escape from a gloomy edifice.

All was peace and silence; there was no one on the road; a few stray laborers, of whom they caught barely a glimpse, were on their way to their work along the side-paths.

Jean Valjean was sitting in a cross-walk on some planks deposited at the gate of a timber-yard. His face was turned towards the highway, his back towards the light; he had forgotten the sun which was on the point of rising; he had sunk into one of those profound absorptions in which the mind becomes concentrated, which imprison even the eye, and which are equivalent to four walls. There are meditations which may be called vertical; when one is at the bottom of them, time is required to return to earth. Jean Valjean had plunged into one of these reveries. He was thinking of Cosette, of the happiness that was possible if nothing came between him and her, of the light with which she filled his life, a light which was but the emanation of her soul. He was almost happy in his revery. Cosette, who was standing beside him, was gazing at the clouds as they turned rosy.

All at once Cosette exclaimed: “Father, I should think some one was coming yonder.” Jean Valjean raised his eyes.

Cosette was right. The causeway which leads to the ancient Barriere du Maine is a prolongation, as the reader knows, of the Rue de Sevres, and is cut at right angles by the inner boulevard. At the elbow of the causeway and the boulevard, at the spot where it branches, they heard a noise which it was difficult to account for at that hour, and a sort of confused pile made its appearance. Some shapeless thing which was coming from the boulevard was turning into the road.

It grew larger, it seemed to move in an orderly manner, though it was bristling and quivering; it seemed to be a vehicle, but its load could not be distinctly made out. There were horses, wheels, shouts; whips were cracking. By degrees the outlines became fixed, although bathed in shadows. It was a vehicle, in fact, which had just turned from the boulevard into the highway, and which was directing its course towards the barrier near which sat Jean Valjean; a second, of the same aspect, followed, then a third, then a fourth; seven chariots made their appearance in succession, the heads of the horses touching the rear of the wagon in front. Figures were moving on these vehicles, flashes were visible through the dusk as though there were naked swords there, a clanking became audible which resembled the rattling of chains, and as this something advanced, the sound of voices waxed louder, and it turned into a terrible thing such as emerges from the cave of dreams.

As it drew nearer, it assumed a form, and was outlined behind the trees with the pallid hue of an apparition; the mass grew white; the day, which was slowly dawning, cast a wan light on this swarming heap which was at once both sepulchral and living, the heads of the figures turned into the faces of corpses, and this is what it proved to be: —

Seven wagons were driving in a file along the road. The first six were singularly constructed. They resembled coopers’ drays; they consisted of long ladders placed on two wheels and forming barrows at their rear extremities. Each dray, or rather let us say, each ladder, was attached to four horses harnessed tandem. On these ladders strange clusters of men were being drawn. In the faint light, these men were to be divined rather than seen. Twenty-four on each vehicle, twelve on a side, back to back, facing the passers-by, their legs dangling in the air, — this was the manner in which these men were travelling, and behind their backs they had something which clanked, and which was a chain, and on their necks something which shone, and which was an iron collar. Each man had his collar, but the chain was for all; so that if these four and twenty men had occasion to alight from the dray and walk, they were seized with a sort of inexorable unity, and were obliged to wind over the ground with the chain for a backbone, somewhat after the fashion of millepeds. In the back and front of each vehicle, two men armed with muskets stood erect, each holding one end of the chain under his foot. The iron necklets were square. The seventh vehicle, a huge rack-sided baggage wagon, without a hood, had four wheels and six horses, and carried a sonorous pile of iron boilers, cast-iron pots, braziers, and chains, among which were mingled several men who were pinioned and stretched at full length, and who seemed to be ill. This wagon, all lattice-work, was garnished with dilapidated hurdles which appeared to have served for former punishments. These vehicles kept to the middle of the road. On each side marched a double hedge of guards of infamous aspect, wearing three-cornered hats, like the soldiers under the Directory, shabby, covered with spots and holes, muffled in uniforms of veterans and the trousers of undertakers’ men, half gray, half blue, which were almost hanging in rags, with red epaulets, yellow shoulder belts, short sabres, muskets, and cudgels; they were a species of soldier-blackguards. These myrmidons seemed composed of the abjectness of the beggar and the authority of the executioner. The one who appeared to be their chief held a postilion’s whip in his hand. All these details, blurred by the dimness of dawn, became more and more clearly outlined as the light increased. At the head and in the rear of the convoy rode mounted gendarmes, serious and with sword in fist.

This procession was so long that when the first vehicle reached the barrier, the last was barely debauching from the boulevard. A throng, sprung, it is impossible to say whence, and formed in a twinkling, as is frequently the case in Paris, pressed forward from both sides of the road and looked on. In the neighboring lanes the shouts of people calling to each other and the wooden shoes of market-gardeners hastening up to gaze were audible.

The men massed upon the drays allowed themselves to be jolted along in silence. They were livid with the chill of morning. They all wore linen trousers, and their bare feet were thrust into wooden shoes. The rest of their costume was a fantasy of wretchedness. Their accoutrements were horribly incongruous; nothing is more funereal than the harlequin in rags. Battered felt hats, tarpaulin caps, hideous woollen nightcaps, and, side by side with a short blouse, a black coat broken at the elbow; many wore women's headgear, others had baskets on their heads; hairy breasts were visible, and through the rent in their garments tattooed designs could be descried; temples of Love, flaming hearts, Cupids; eruptions and unhealthy red blotches could also be seen. Two or three had a straw rope attached to the cross-bar of the dray, and suspended under them like a stirrup, which supported their feet. One of them held in his hand and raised to his mouth something which had the appearance of a black stone and which he seemed to be gnawing; it was bread which he was eating. There were no eyes there which were not either dry, dulled, or flaming with an evil light. The escort troop cursed, the men in chains did not utter a syllable; from time to time the sound of a blow became audible as the cudgels descended on shoulder-blades or skulls; some of these men were yawning; their rags were terrible; their feet hung down, their shoulders oscillated, their heads clashed together, their fetters clanked, their eyes glared ferociously, their fists clenched or fell open inertly like the hands of corpses; in the rear of the convoy ran a band of children screaming with laughter.

This file of vehicles, whatever its nature was, was mournful. It was evident that to-morrow, that an hour hence, a pouring rain might descend, that it might be followed by another and another, and that their dilapidated garments would be drenched, that once soaked, these men would not get dry again, that once chilled, they would not again get warm, that their linen trousers would be glued to their bones by the downpour, that the water would fill their shoes, that no lashes from the whips would be able to prevent their jaws from chattering, that the chain would continue to bind them by the neck, that their legs would continue to dangle, and it was impossible not to shudder at the sight of these human beings thus bound and passive beneath the cold clouds of autumn, and delivered over to the rain, to the blast, to all the furies of the air, like trees and stones.

Blows from the cudgel were not omitted even in the case of the sick men, who lay there knotted with ropes and motionless on the seventh wagon, and who appeared to have been tossed there like sacks filled with misery.

Suddenly, the sun made its appearance; the immense light of the Orient burst forth, and one would have said that it had set fire to all those ferocious heads. Their tongues were unloosed; a conflagration of grins, oaths, and songs exploded. The broad horizontal sheet of light severed the file in two parts, illuminating heads and bodies, leaving feet and wheels in the obscurity. Thoughts made their appearance on these faces; it was a terrible moment; visible demons with their masks removed, fierce souls laid bare. Though lighted up, this wild throng remained in gloom. Some, who were gay, had in their mouths quills through which they blew vermin over the crowd, picking out the women; the dawn accentuated these lamentable profiles with the blackness of its shadows; there was not one of these creatures who was not deformed by reason of wretchedness; and the whole was so monstrous that one would have said that the sun's brilliancy had been changed into the glare of the lightning. The wagon-load which headed the line had struck up a song, and were shouting at the top of their voices with a haggard joviality, a potpourri by Desaugiers, then famous, called The Vestal; the trees shivered mournfully; in the cross-lanes, countenances of bourgeois listened in an idiotic delight to these coarse strains droned by spectres.

All sorts of distress met in this procession as in chaos; here were to be found the facial angles of every sort of beast, old men, youths, bald heads, gray beards, cynical monstrosities, sour resignation, savage grins, senseless attitudes, snouts surmounted by caps, heads like those of young girls with corkscrew curls on the temples, infantile visages, and by reason of that, horrible thin skeleton faces, to which death alone was lacking. On the first cart was a negro, who had been a slave, in all probability, and who could make a comparison of his chains. The frightful leveller from below, shame, had passed over these brows; at that degree of abasement, the last transformations were suffered by all in their extremest depths, and ignorance, converted into dulness, was the equal of intelligence converted into despair. There was no choice possible between these men who appeared to the eye as the flower of the mud. It was evident that the person who had had the ordering of that unclean procession had not classified them. These beings had been fettered and coupled pell-mell, in alphabetical disorder, probably, and loaded hap-hazard on those carts. Nevertheless, horrors, when grouped together, always end by evolving a result; all additions of wretched men give a sum total, each chain exhaled a common soul, and each dray-load had its own physiognomy. By the side of the one where they were singing, there was one where they were howling; a third where they were begging; one could be seen in which they were gnashing their teeth; another load menaced the spectators, another blasphemed God; the last was as silent as the tomb. Dante would have thought that he beheld his seven circles of hell on the march. The march of the damned to their tortures, performed in sinister wise, not on the formidable and flaming chariot of the Apocalypse, but, what was more mournful than that, on the gibbet cart.

One of the guards, who had a hook on the end of his cudgel, made a pretence from time to time, of stirring up this mass of human filth. An old woman in the crowd pointed them out to her little boy five years old, and said to him: “Rascal, let that be a warning to you!”

As the songs and blasphemies increased, the man who appeared to be the captain of the escort cracked his whip, and at that signal a fearful dull and blind flogging, which produced the sound of hail, fell upon the seven dray-loads; many roared and foamed at the mouth; which redoubled the delight of the street urchins who had hastened up, a swarm of flies on these wounds.

Jean Valjean’s eyes had assumed a frightful expression. They were no longer eyes; they were those deep and glassy objects which replace the glance in the case of certain wretched men, which seem unconscious of reality, and in which flames the reflection of terrors and of catastrophes. He was not looking at a spectacle, he was seeing a vision. He tried to rise, to flee, to make his escape; he could not move his feet. Sometimes, the things that you see seize upon you and hold you fast. He remained nailed to the spot, petrified, stupid, asking himself, athwart confused and inexpressible anguish, what this sepulchral persecution signified, and whence had come that pandemonium which was pursuing him. All at once, he raised his hand to his brow, a gesture habitual to those whose memory suddenly returns; he remembered that this was, in fact, the usual itinerary, that it was customary to make this detour in order to avoid all possibility of encountering royalty on the road to Fontainebleau, and that, five and thirty years before, he had himself passed through that barrier.

Cosette was no less terrified, but in a different way. She did not understand; what she beheld did not seem to her to be possible; at length she cried: —

“Father! What are those men in those carts?”

Jean Valjean replied: “Convicts.”

“Whither are they going?”

“To the galleys.”

At that moment, the cudgelling, multiplied by a hundred hands, became zealous, blows with the flat of the sword were mingled with it, it was a perfect storm of whips and clubs; the convicts bent before it, a hideous obedience was evoked by the torture, and all held their peace, darting glances like chained wolves.

Cosette trembled in every limb; she resumed: —

“Father, are they still men?”

“Sometimes,” answered the unhappy man.

It was the chain-gang, in fact, which had set out before daybreak from Bicêtre, and had taken the road to Mans in order to avoid Fontainebleau, where the King then was. This caused the horrible journey to last three or four days longer; but torture may surely be prolonged with the object of sparing the royal personage a sight of it.

Jean Valjean returned home utterly overwhelmed. Such encounters are shocks, and the memory that they leave behind them resembles a thorough shaking up.

Nevertheless, Jean Valjean did not observe that, on his way back to the Rue de Babylone with Cosette, the latter was plying him with other questions on the subject of what they had just seen; perhaps he was too much absorbed in his own dejection to notice her words and reply to them. But when Cosette was leaving him in the evening, to betake herself to bed, he heard her say in a low voice, and as though talking to herself: “It seems to me, that if I were to find one of those men in my pathway, oh, my God, I should die merely from the sight of him close at hand.”

Fortunately, chance ordained that on the morrow of that tragic day, there was some official solemnity apropos of I know not what, — fetes in Paris, a review in the Champ de Mars, jousts on the Seine, theatrical performances in the Champs-Elysees, fireworks at the Arc de l’Etoile, illuminations everywhere. Jean Valjean did violence to his habits, and took Cosette to see these rejoicings, for the purpose of diverting her from the memory of the day before, and of effacing, beneath the smiling tumult of all Paris, the abominable thing which had passed before her. The review with which the festival was spiced made the presence of uniforms perfectly natural; Jean

Valjean donned his uniform of a national guard with the vague inward feeling of a man who is betaking himself to shelter. However, this trip seemed to attain its object. Cosette, who made it her law to please her father, and to whom, moreover, all spectacles were a novelty, accepted this diversion with the light and easy good grace of youth, and did not pout too disdainfully at that flutter of enjoyment called a public fete; so that Jean Valjean was able to believe that he had succeeded, and that no trace of that hideous vision remained.

Some days later, one morning, when the sun was shining brightly, and they were both on the steps leading to the garden, another infraction of the rules which Jean Valjean seemed to have imposed upon himself, and to the custom of remaining in her chamber which melancholy had caused Cosette to adopt, Cosette, in a wrapper, was standing erect in that negligent attire of early morning which envelops young girls in an adorable way and which produces the effect of a cloud drawn over a star; and, with her head bathed in light, rosy after a good sleep, submitting to the gentle glances of the tender old man, she was picking a daisy to pieces. Cosette did not know the delightful legend, I love a little, passionately, etc. — who was there who could have taught her? She was handling the flower instinctively, innocently, without a suspicion that to pluck a daisy apart is to do the same by a heart. If there were a fourth, and smiling Grace called Melancholy, she would have worn the air of that Grace. Jean Valjean was fascinated by the contemplation of those tiny fingers on that flower, and forgetful of everything in the radiance emitted by that child. A red-breast was warbling in the thicket, on one side. White cloudlets floated across the sky, so gayly, that one would have said that they had just been set at liberty. Cosette went on attentively tearing the leaves from her flower; she seemed to be thinking about something; but whatever it was, it must be something charming; all at once she turned her head over her shoulder with the delicate languor of a swan, and said to Jean Valjean: “Father, what are the galleys like?”

BOOK FOURTH. — SUCCOR FROM BELOW MAY TURN OUT TO BE SUCCOR FROM ON HIGH

CHAPTER I — A WOUND WITHOUT, HEALING WITHIN

Thus their life clouded over by degrees.

But one diversion, which had formerly been a happiness, remained to them, which was to carry bread to those who were hungry, and clothing to those who were cold. Cosette often accompanied Jean Valjean on these visits to the poor, on which they recovered some remnants of their former free intercourse; and sometimes, when the day had been a good one, and they had assisted many in distress, and cheered and warmed many little children, Cosette was rather merry in the evening. It was at this epoch that they paid their visit to the Jondrette den.

On the day following that visit, Jean Valjean made his appearance in the pavilion in the morning, calm as was his wont, but with a large wound on his left arm which was much inflamed, and very angry, which resembled a burn, and which he explained in some way or other. This wound resulted in his being detained in the house for a month with fever. He would not call in a doctor. When Cosette urged him, “Call the dog-doctor,” said he.

Cosette dressed the wound morning and evening with so divine an air and such angelic happiness at being of use to him, that Jean Valjean felt all his former joy returning, his fears and anxieties dissipating, and he gazed at Cosette, saying: “Oh! what a kindly wound! Oh! what a good misfortune!”

Cosette on perceiving that her father was ill, had deserted the pavilion and again taken a fancy to the little lodging and the back courtyard. She passed nearly all her days beside Jean Valjean and read to him the books which he desired. Generally they were books of travel. Jean Valjean was undergoing a new birth; his happiness was reviving in these ineffable rays; the Luxembourg, the prowling young stranger, Cosette’s coldness, — all these clouds upon his soul were growing dim. He had reached the point where he said to himself: “I imagined all that. I am an old fool.”

His happiness was so great that the horrible discovery of the Thenardiers made in the Jondrette hovel, unexpected as it was, had, after a fashion, glided over him unnoticed. He had succeeded in making his escape; all trace of him was lost — what more did he care for! he only thought of those wretched beings to pity them. “Here they are in prison, and henceforth they will be incapacitated for doing any harm,” he thought, “but what a lamentable family in distress!”

As for the hideous vision of the Barriere du Maine, Cosette had not referred to it again.

Sister Sainte-Mechtilde had taught Cosette music in the convent; Cosette had the voice of a linnet with a soul, and sometimes, in the evening, in the wounded man’s humble abode, she warbled melancholy songs which delighted Jean Valjean.

Spring came; the garden was so delightful at that season of the year, that Jean Valjean said to Cosette: —

“You never go there; I want you to stroll in it.”

“As you like, father,” said Cosette.

And for the sake of obeying her father, she resumed her walks in the garden, generally alone, for, as we have mentioned, Jean Valjean, who was probably afraid of being seen through the fence, hardly ever went there.

Jean Valjean’s wound had created a diversion.

When Cosette saw that her father was suffering less, that he was convalescing, and that he appeared to be happy, she experienced a contentment which she did not even perceive, so gently and naturally had it come. Then, it was in the month of March, the days were growing longer, the winter was departing, the winter always bears away with it a portion of our sadness; then came April, that daybreak of summer, fresh as dawn always is, gay like every childhood; a little inclined to weep at times like the new-born being that it is. In that month, nature has charming gleams which pass from the sky, from the trees, from the meadows and the flowers into the heart of man.

Cosette was still too young to escape the penetrating influence of that April joy which bore so strong a resemblance to herself. Insensibly, and without her suspecting the fact, the blackness departed from her spirit. In spring, sad souls grow light, as light falls into cellars at midday. Cosette was no longer sad. However, though this was so, she did not account for it to herself. In the morning, about ten o’clock, after breakfast, when she had succeeded in enticing her father into the garden for a quarter of an hour, and when she was pacing up and down in the sunlight in front of the steps, supporting his left arm for him, she did not perceive that she laughed every moment and that she was happy.

Jean Valjean, intoxicated, beheld her growing fresh and rosy once more.

“Oh! What a good wound!” he repeated in a whisper.

And he felt grateful to the Thenardiers.

His wound once healed, he resumed his solitary twilight strolls.

It is a mistake to suppose that a person can stroll alone in that fashion in the uninhabited regions of Paris without meeting with some adventure.

CHAPTER II — MOTHER PLUTARQUE FINDS NO DIFFICULTY IN EXPLAINING A PHENOMENON

One evening, little Gavroche had had nothing to eat; he remembered that he had not dined on the preceding day either; this was becoming tiresome. He resolved to make an effort to secure some supper. He strolled out beyond the Salpetriere into deserted regions; that is where windfalls are to be found; where there is no one, one always finds something. He reached a settlement which appeared to him to be the village of Austerlitz.

In one of his preceding lounges he had noticed there an old garden haunted by an old man and an old woman, and in that garden, a passable apple-tree. Beside the apple-tree stood a sort of fruit-house, which was not securely fastened, and where one might contrive to get an apple. One apple is a supper; one apple is life. That which was Adam’s ruin might prove Gavroche’s salvation. The garden abutted on a solitary, unpaved lane, bordered with brushwood while awaiting the arrival of houses; the garden was separated from it by a hedge.

Gavroche directed his steps towards this garden; he found the lane, he recognized the apple-tree, he verified the fruit-house, he examined the hedge; a hedge means merely one stride. The day was declining, there was not even a cat in the lane, the hour was propitious. Gavroche began the operation of scaling the hedge, then suddenly paused. Some one was talking in the garden. Gavroche peeped through one of the breaks in the hedge.

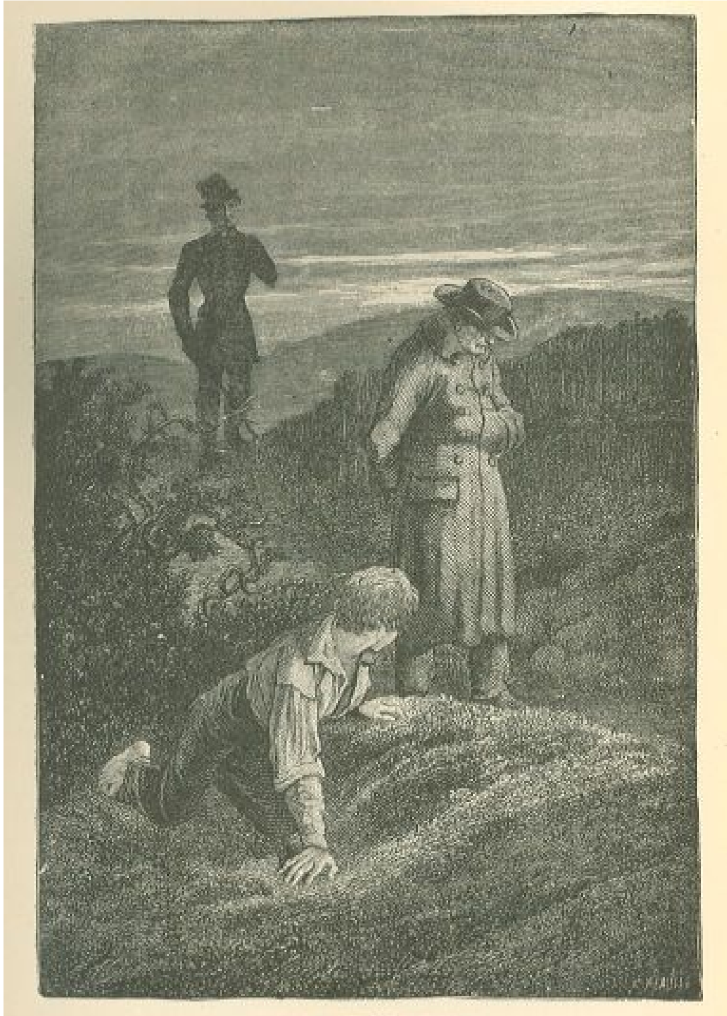

SUCCOR FROM BELOW.

A couple of paces distant, at the foot of the hedge on the other side, exactly at the point where the gap which he was meditating would have been made, there was a sort of recumbent stone which formed a bench, and on this bench was seated the old man of the garden, while the old woman was standing in front of him. The old woman was grumbling. Gavroche, who was not very discreet, listened.

“Monsieur Mabeuf!” said the old woman.

“Mabeuf!” thought Gavroche, “that name is a perfect farce.”

The old man who was thus addressed, did not stir. The old woman repeated: —

“Monsieur Mabeuf!”

The old man, without raising his eyes from the ground, made up his mind to answer: —

“What is it, Mother Plutarque?”

“Mother Plutarque!” thought Gavroche, “another farcical name.”

Mother Plutarque began again, and the old man was forced to accept the conversation: —

“The landlord is not pleased.”

“Why?”

“We owe three quarters rent.”

“In three months, we shall owe him for four quarters.”

“He says that he will turn you out to sleep.”

“I will go.”

“The green-grocer insists on being paid. She will no longer leave her fagots. What will you warm yourself with this winter? We shall have no wood.”

“There is the sun.”

“The butcher refuses to give credit; he will not let us have any more meat.”

“That is quite right. I do not digest meat well. It is too heavy.”

“What shall we have for dinner?”

“Bread.”

“The baker demands a settlement, and says, ‘no money, no bread.’”

“That is well.”

“What will you eat?”

“We have apples in the apple-room.”

“But, Monsieur, we can’t live like that without money.”

“I have none.”

The old woman went away, the old man remained alone. He fell into thought. Gavroche became thoughtful also. It was almost dark.

The first result of Gavroche’s meditation was, that instead of scaling the hedge, he crouched down under it. The branches stood apart a little at the foot of the thicket.

“Come,” exclaimed Gavroche mentally, “here’s a nook!” and he curled up in it. His back was almost in contact with Father Mabeuf’s bench. He could hear the octogenarian breathe.

Then, by way of dinner, he tried to sleep.

It was a cat-nap, with one eye open. While he dozed, Gavroche kept on the watch.

The twilight pallor of the sky blanched the earth, and the lane formed a livid line between two rows of dark bushes.

All at once, in this whitish band, two figures made their appearance. One was in front, the other some distance in the rear.

"There come two creatures," muttered Gavroche.

The first form seemed to be some elderly bourgeois, who was bent and thoughtful, dressed more than plainly, and who was walking slowly because of his age, and strolling about in the open evening air.

The second was straight, firm, slender. It regulated its pace by that of the first; but in the voluntary slowness of its gait, suppleness and agility were discernible. This figure had also something fierce and disquieting about it, the whole shape was that of what was then called an elegant; the hat was of good shape, the coat black, well cut, probably of fine cloth, and well fitted in at the waist. The head was held erect with a sort of robust grace, and beneath the hat the pale profile of a young man could be made out in the dim light. The profile had a rose in its mouth. This second form was well known to Gavroche; it was Montparnasse.

He could have told nothing about the other, except that he was a respectable old man.

Gavroche immediately began to take observations.

One of these two pedestrians evidently had a project connected with the other. Gavroche was well placed to watch the course of events. The bedroom had turned into a hiding-place at a very opportune moment.

Montparnasse on the hunt at such an hour, in such a place, betokened something threatening. Gavroche felt his gamin's heart moved with compassion for the old man.

What was he to do? Interfere? One weakness coming to the aid of another! It would be merely a laughing matter for Montparnasse. Gavroche did not shut his eyes to the fact that the old man, in the first place, and the child in the second, would make but two mouthfuls for that redoubtable ruffian eighteen years of age.

While Gavroche was deliberating, the attack took place, abruptly and hideously. The attack of the tiger on the wild ass, the attack of the spider on the fly. Montparnasse suddenly tossed away his rose, bounded upon the old man, seized him by the collar, grasped and clung to him, and Gavroche with difficulty restrained a scream. A moment later one of these men was underneath the other, groaning, struggling, with a knee of marble upon his breast. Only, it was not just what Gavroche had expected. The one who lay on the earth was Montparnasse; the one who was on top was the old man. All this took place a few paces distant from Gavroche.

The old man had received the shock, had returned it, and that in such a terrible fashion, that in a twinkling, the assailant and the assailed had exchanged roles.

“Here’s a hearty veteran!” thought Gavroche.

He could not refrain from clapping his hands. But it was applause wasted. It did not reach the combatants, absorbed and deafened as they were, each by the other, as their breath mingled in the struggle.

Silence ensued. Montparnasse ceased his struggles. Gavroche indulged in this aside: “Can he be dead!”

The goodman had not uttered a word, nor given vent to a cry. He rose to his feet, and Gavroche heard him say to Montparnasse: —

“Get up.”

Montparnasse rose, but the goodman held him fast. Montparnasse’s attitude was the humiliated and furious attitude of the wolf who has been caught by a sheep.

Gavroche looked on and listened, making an effort to reinforce his eyes with his ears. He was enjoying himself immensely.

He was repaid for his conscientious anxiety in the character of a spectator. He was able to catch on the wing a dialogue which borrowed from the darkness an indescribably tragic accent. The goodman questioned, Montparnasse replied.

“How old are you?”

“Nineteen.”

“You are strong and healthy. Why do you not work?”

“It bores me.”

“What is your trade?”

“An idler.”

“Speak seriously. Can anything be done for you? What would you like to be?”

“A thief.”

A pause ensued. The old man seemed absorbed in profound thought. He stood motionless, and did not relax his hold on Montparnasse.

Every moment the vigorous and agile young ruffian indulged in the twitchings of a wild beast caught in a snare. He gave a jerk, tried a crook of the knee, twisted his limbs desperately, and made efforts to escape.

The old man did not appear to notice it, and held both his arms with one hand, with the sovereign indifference of absolute force.

The old man's revery lasted for some time, then, looking steadily at Montparnasse, he addressed to him in a gentle voice, in the midst of the darkness where they stood, a solemn harangue, of which Gavroche did not lose a single syllable: —

“My child, you are entering, through indolence, on one of the most laborious of lives. Ah! You declare yourself to be an idler! prepare to toil. There is a certain formidable machine, have you seen it? It is the rolling-mill. You must be on your guard against it, it is crafty and ferocious; if it catches hold of the skirt of your coat, you will be drawn in bodily. That machine is laziness. Stop while there is yet time, and save yourself! Otherwise, it is all over with you; in a short time you will be among the gearing. Once entangled, hope for nothing more. Toil, lazybones! there is no more repose for you! The iron hand of implacable toil has seized you. You do not wish to earn your living, to have a task, to fulfil a duty! It bores you to be like other men? Well! You will be different. Labor is the law; he who rejects it will find ennui his torment. You do not wish to be a workingman, you will be a slave. Toil lets go of you on one side only to grasp you again on the other. You do not desire to be its friend, you shall be its negro slave. Ah! You would have none of the honest weariness of men, you shall have the sweat of the damned. Where others sing, you will rattle in your throat. You will see afar off, from below, other men at work; it will seem to you that they are resting. The laborer, the harvester, the sailor, the blacksmith, will appear to you in glory like the blessed spirits in paradise. What radiance surrounds the forge! To guide the plough, to bind the sheaves, is joy. The bark at liberty in the wind, what delight! Do you, lazy idler, delve, drag on, roll, march! Drag your halter. You are a beast of burden in the team of hell! Ah! To do nothing is your object. Well, not a week, not a day, not an hour shall you have free from oppression. You will be able to lift nothing without anguish. Every minute that passes will make your muscles crack. What is a feather to others will be a rock to you. The simplest things will become steep acclivities. Life will become monstrous all about you. To go, to come, to breathe, will be just so many terrible labors. Your lungs will produce on you the effect of weighing a hundred pounds. Whether you shall walk here rather than there, will become a problem that must be solved. Any one who wants to go out simply gives his door a push, and there he is in the open air. If you wish to go out, you will be obliged to pierce your wall. What does every one who wants to step into the street do? He goes down stairs; you will tear up your sheets, little by little you will make of them a rope, then you will climb out of your window, and you will suspend yourself by that thread over an abyss, and it will be night, amid storm, rain, and the hurricane, and if the rope is too short, but one way of descending will remain to you, to fall. To drop hap-hazard into the gulf, from an unknown height, on what? On what is beneath, on the unknown. Or you will crawl up a chimney-flue, at the risk of burning; or you will creep through a sewer-pipe, at the risk of drowning; I do not speak of the holes that you will be obliged to mask, of the stones which you will have to take up and replace twenty times a day, of the plaster that you will have to hide in your straw pallet. A lock presents itself; the bourgeois has in his pocket a key made by a locksmith. If you wish to pass out, you will be condemned to execute a terrible work of art; you will take a large sou, you will cut it in two plates; with what tools? You will have to invent them. That is your business. Then you will hollow out the interior of these plates, taking great care of the outside, and you will make on the edges a thread, so that they can be adjusted one upon the other like a box and its cover. The top and bottom thus screwed together, nothing will be suspected. To the overseers it will be only a sou; to you it will be a box. What will you put in this box? A small bit of steel. A watch-spring, in which you will have cut teeth, and which will form a saw. With this saw, as long as a pin, and concealed in a sou, you will cut the bolt of the lock, you will sever bolts, the padlock of your chain, and the bar at your window, and the fetter on your leg. This masterpiece finished, this prodigy accomplished, all these miracles of art, address, skill, and patience executed, what will be your recompense if it becomes known that you are the author? The dungeon. There is your future. What precipices are idleness and pleasure! Do you know that to do nothing is a melancholy resolution? To live in idleness on the property of society! to be useless, that is to say, pernicious! This leads straight to the depth of wretchedness. Woe to the man who desires to be a parasite! He will become vermin! Ah! So it does not please you to work? Ah! You have but one thought, to drink well, to eat well, to sleep well. You will drink water, you will eat black bread, you will sleep on a plank with a fetter whose cold touch you will feel on your flesh all night long, riveted to your limbs. You will break those fetters, you will flee. That is well. You will crawl on your belly through the brushwood, and you will eat grass like the beasts of the forest. And you will be recaptured. And then you will pass years in a dungeon, riveted to a wall, groping for your jug that you may drink, gnawing at a horrible loaf of darkness which dogs would not touch, eating beans that the worms have eaten before you. You will be a wood-louse in a cellar. Ah! Have pity on yourself, you miserable young child, who were sucking at nurse less than twenty years ago, and who have, no doubt, a mother still alive! I conjure you, listen to me, I entreat you. You desire fine black cloth, varnished shoes, to have your hair curled and sweet-smelling oils on your locks, to please low women, to be handsome. You will be shaven clean, and you will wear a red blouse and wooden shoes. You want rings on your fingers, you will have an iron necklet on your neck. If you glance at a woman, you will receive a blow. And you will enter there at the age of twenty. And you will come out at fifty! You will enter young, rosy, fresh, with brilliant eyes, and all your white teeth, and your handsome, youthful hair; you will come out broken, bent, wrinkled, toothless, horrible, with white locks! Ah! my poor child, you are on the wrong road; idleness is counselling you badly; the hardest of all work is thieving. Believe me, do not undertake that painful profession of an idle man. It is not comfortable to become a rascal. It is less disagreeable to be an honest man. Now go, and ponder on what I have said to you. By the way, what did you want of me? My purse? Here it is."

And the old man, releasing Montparnasse, put his purse in the latter's hand; Montparnasse weighed it for a moment, after which he allowed it to slide gently into the back pocket of his coat, with the same mechanical precaution as though he had stolen it.

All this having been said and done, the goodman turned his back and tranquilly resumed his stroll.

"The blockhead!" muttered Montparnasse.

Who was this goodman? The reader has, no doubt, already divined.

Montparnasse watched him with amazement, as he disappeared in the dusk. This contemplation was fatal to him.

While the old man was walking away, Gavroche drew near.

Gavroche had assured himself, with a sidelong glance, that Father Mabeuf was still sitting on his bench, probably sound asleep. Then the gamin emerged from his thicket, and began to crawl after Montparnasse in the dark, as the latter stood there motionless. In this manner he came up to

Montparnasse without being seen or heard, gently insinuated his hand into the back pocket of that frock-coat of fine black cloth, seized the purse, withdrew his hand, and having recourse once more to his crawling, he slipped away like an adder through the shadows. Montparnasse, who had no reason to be on his guard, and who was engaged in thought for the first time in his life, perceived nothing. When Gavroche had once more attained the point where Father Mabeuf was, he flung the purse over the hedge, and fled as fast as his legs would carry him.

The purse fell on Father Mabeuf's foot. This commotion roused him.

He bent over and picked up the purse.

He did not understand in the least, and opened it.

The purse had two compartments; in one of them there was some small change; in the other lay six napoleons.

M. Mabeuf, in great alarm, referred the matter to his housekeeper.

"That has fallen from heaven," said Mother Plutarque.

BOOK FIFTH. — THE END OF WHICH DOES NOT RESEMBLE THE BEGINNING

CHAPTER I — SOLITUDE AND THE BARRACKS COMBINED

Cosette's grief, which had been so poignant and lively four or five months previously, had, without her being conscious of the fact, entered upon its convalescence. Nature, spring, youth, love for her father, the gayety of the birds and flowers, caused something almost resembling forgetfulness to filter gradually, drop by drop, into that soul, which was so virgin and so young. Was the fire wholly extinct there? Or was it merely that layers of ashes had formed? The truth is, that she hardly felt the painful and burning spot any longer.

One day she suddenly thought of Marius: "Why!" said she, "I no longer think of him."

That same week, she noticed a very handsome officer of lancers, with a wasp-like waist, a delicious uniform, the cheeks of a young girl, a sword under his arm, waxed mustaches, and a glazed schapka, passing the gate. Moreover, he had light hair, prominent blue eyes, a round face, was vain, insolent and good-looking; quite the reverse of Marius. He had a cigar in his mouth. Cosette thought that this officer doubtless belonged to the regiment in barracks in the Rue de Babylone.

On the following day, she saw him pass again. She took note of the hour.

From that time forth, was it chance? she saw him pass nearly every day.

The officer's comrades perceived that there was, in that "badly kept" garden, behind that malicious rococo fence, a very pretty creature, who was almost always there when the handsome lieutenant, — who is not unknown to the reader, and whose name was Theodule Gillenormand, — passed by.

"See here!" they said to him, "there's a little creature there who is making eyes at you, look."

"Have I the time," replied the lancer, "to look at all the girls who look at me?"

This was at the precise moment when Marius was descending heavily towards agony, and was saying: "If I could but see her before I die!" — Had his wish been realized, had he beheld Cosette at that moment gazing at the lancer, he would not have been able to utter a word, and he would have expired with grief.

Whose fault was it? No one’s.

Marius possessed one of those temperaments which bury themselves in sorrow and there abide; Cosette was one of those persons who plunge into sorrow and emerge from it again.

Cosette was, moreover, passing through that dangerous period, the fatal phase of feminine revery abandoned to itself, in which the isolated heart of a young girl resembles the tendrils of the vine which cling, as chance directs, to the capital of a marble column or to the post of a wine-shop: A rapid and decisive moment, critical for every orphan, be she rich or poor, for wealth does not prevent a bad choice; misalliances are made in very high circles, real misalliance is that of souls; and as many an unknown young man, without name, without birth, without fortune, is a marble column which bears up a temple of grand sentiments and grand ideas, so such and such a man of the world satisfied and opulent, who has polished boots and varnished words, if looked at not outside, but inside, a thing which is reserved for his wife, is nothing more than a block obscurely haunted by violent, unclean, and vinous passions; the post of a drinking-shop.

What did Cosette’s soul contain? Passion calmed or lulled to sleep; something limpid, brilliant, troubled to a certain depth, and gloomy lower down. The image of the handsome officer was reflected in the surface. Did a souvenir linger in the depths? — Quite at the bottom? — Possibly. Cosette did not know.

A singular incident supervened.

CHAPTER II — COSETTE'S APPREHENSIONS

During the first fortnight in April, Jean Valjean took a journey. This, as the reader knows, happened from time to time, at very long intervals. He remained absent a day or two days at the utmost. Where did he go? No one knew, not even Cosette. Once only, on the occasion of one of these departures, she had accompanied him in a hackney-coach as far as a little blind-alley at the corner of which she read: Impasse de la Planchette. There he alighted, and the coach took Cosette back to the Rue de Babylone. It was usually when money was lacking in the house that Jean Valjean took these little trips.

So Jean Valjean was absent. He had said: "I shall return in three days."

That evening, Cosette was alone in the drawing-room. In order to get rid of her ennui, she had opened her piano-organ, and had begun to sing, accompanying herself the while, the chorus from Euryanthe: "Hunters astray in the wood!" which is probably the most beautiful thing in all the sphere of music. When she had finished, she remained wrapped in thought.

All at once, it seemed to her that she heard the sound of footsteps in the garden.

It could not be her father, he was absent; it could not be Toussaint, she was in bed, and it was ten o'clock at night.

She stepped to the shutter of the drawing-room, which was closed, and laid her ear against it.

It seemed to her that it was the tread of a man, and that he was walking very softly.

She mounted rapidly to the first floor, to her own chamber, opened a small wicket in her shutter, and peeped into the garden. The moon was at the full. Everything could be seen as plainly as by day.

There was no one there.

She opened the window. The garden was absolutely calm, and all that was visible was that the street was deserted as usual.

Cosette thought that she had been mistaken. She thought that she had heard a noise. It was a hallucination produced by the melancholy and magnificent chorus of Weber, which lays open before the mind terrified depths, which trembles before the gaze like a dizzy forest, and in which one hears the crackling of dead branches beneath the uneasy tread of the huntsmen of whom one catches a glimpse through the twilight.

She thought no more about it.

Moreover, Cosette was not very timid by nature. There flowed in her veins some of the blood of the bohemian and the adventuress who runs barefoot. It will be remembered that she was more of a lark than a dove. There was a foundation of wildness and bravery in her.

On the following day, at an earlier hour, towards nightfall, she was strolling in the garden. In the midst of the confused thoughts which occupied her, she fancied that she caught for an instant a sound similar to that of the preceding evening, as though some one were walking beneath the trees in the dusk, and not very far from her; but she told herself that nothing so closely resembles a step on the grass as the friction of two branches which have moved from side to side, and she paid no heed to it. Besides, she could see nothing.

She emerged from “the thicket”; she had still to cross a small lawn to regain the steps.

The moon, which had just risen behind her, cast Cosette’s shadow in front of her upon this lawn, as she came out from the shrubbery.

Cosette halted in alarm.

Beside her shadow, the moon outlined distinctly upon the turf another shadow, which was particularly startling and terrible, a shadow which had a round hat.

It was the shadow of a man, who must have been standing on the border of the clump of shrubbery, a few paces in the rear of Cosette.

She stood for a moment without the power to speak, or cry, or call, or stir, or turn her head.

Then she summoned up all her courage, and turned round resolutely.

There was no one there.

She glanced on the ground. The figure had disappeared.

She re-entered the thicket, searched the corners boldly, went as far as the gate, and found nothing.

She felt herself absolutely chilled with terror. Was this another hallucination? What! Two days in succession! One hallucination might pass, but two hallucinations? The disquieting point about it was, that the shadow had assuredly not been a phantom. Phantoms do not wear round hats.

On the following day Jean Valjean returned. Cosette told him what she thought she had heard and seen. She wanted to be reassured and to see her father shrug his shoulders and say to her: “You are a little goose.”

Jean Valjean grew anxious.

“It cannot be anything,” said he.

He left her under some pretext, and went into the garden, and she saw him examining the gate with great attention.

During the night she woke up; this time she was sure, and she distinctly heard some one walking close to the flight of steps beneath her window. She ran to her little wicket and opened it. In point of fact, there was a man in the garden, with a large club in his hand. Just as she was about to scream, the moon lighted up the man’s profile. It was her father. She returned to her bed, saying to herself: “He is very uneasy!”

Jean Valjean passed that night and the two succeeding nights in the garden. Cosette saw him through the hole in her shutter.

On the third night, the moon was on the wane, and had begun to rise later; at one o’clock in the morning, possibly, she heard a loud burst of laughter and her father’s voice calling her: —

“Cosette!”

She jumped out of bed, threw on her dressing-gown, and opened her window.

Her father was standing on the grass-plot below.

“I have waked you for the purpose of reassuring you,” said he; “look, there is your shadow with the round hat.”

And he pointed out to her on the turf a shadow cast by the moon, and which did indeed, bear considerable resemblance to the spectre of a man wearing a round hat. It was the shadow produced by a chimney-pipe of sheet iron, with a hood, which rose above a neighboring roof.

Cosette joined in his laughter, all her lugubrious suppositions were allayed, and the next morning, as she was at breakfast with her father, she made merry over the sinister garden haunted by the shadows of iron chimney-pots.

Jean Valjean became quite tranquil once more; as for Cosette, she did not pay much attention to the question whether the chimney-pot was really in the direction of the shadow which she had seen, or thought she had seen, and whether the moon had been in the same spot in the sky.

She did not question herself as to the peculiarity of a chimney-pot which is afraid of being caught in the act, and which retires when some one looks at its shadow, for the shadow had taken the alarm when Cosette had turned round, and Cosette had thought herself very sure of this. Cosette’s serenity was fully restored. The proof appeared to her to be complete, and it quite vanished from her mind, whether there could possibly be any one walking in the garden during the evening or at night.

A few days later, however, a fresh incident occurred.

CHAPTER III — ENRICHED WITH COMMENTARIES BY TOUSSAINT

In the garden, near the railing on the street, there was a stone bench, screened from the eyes of the curious by a plantation of yoke-elms, but which could, in case of necessity, be reached by an arm from the outside, past the trees and the gate.

One evening during that same month of April, Jean Valjean had gone out; Cosette had seated herself on this bench after sundown. The breeze was blowing briskly in the trees, Cosette was meditating; an objectless sadness was taking possession of her little by little, that invincible sadness evoked by the evening, and which arises, perhaps, who knows, from the mystery of the tomb which is ajar at that hour.

Perhaps Fantine was within that shadow.

Cosette rose, slowly made the tour of the garden, walking on the grass drenched in dew, and saying to herself, through the species of melancholy somnambulism in which she was plunged: “Really, one needs wooden shoes for the garden at this hour. One takes cold.”

She returned to the bench.

As she was about to resume her seat there, she observed on the spot which she had quitted, a tolerably large stone which had, evidently, not been there a moment before.

Cosette gazed at the stone, asking herself what it meant. All at once the idea occurred to her that the stone had not reached the bench all by itself, that some one had placed it there, that an arm had been thrust through the railing, and this idea appeared to alarm her. This time, the fear was genuine; the stone was there. No doubt was possible; she did not touch it, fled without glancing behind her, took refuge in the house, and immediately closed with shutter, bolt, and bar the door-like window opening on the flight of steps. She inquired of Toussaint: —

“Has my father returned yet?”

“Not yet, Mademoiselle.”

[We have already noted once for all the fact that Toussaint stuttered. May we be permitted to dispense with it for the future. The musical notation of an infirmity is repugnant to us.]

Jean Valjean, a thoughtful man, and given to nocturnal strolls, often returned quite late at night.

"Toussaint," went on Cosette, "are you careful to thoroughly barricade the shutters opening on the garden, at least with bars, in the evening, and to put the little iron things in the little rings that close them?"

"Oh! be easy on that score, Miss."

Toussaint did not fail in her duty, and Cosette was well aware of the fact, but she could not refrain from adding: —

"It is so solitary here."

"So far as that is concerned," said Toussaint, "it is true. We might be assassinated before we had time to say ouf! And Monsieur does not sleep in the house, to boot. But fear nothing, Miss, I fasten the shutters up like prisons. Lone women! That is enough to make one shudder, I believe you! Just imagine, what if you were to see men enter your chamber at night and say: 'Hold your tongue!' and begin to cut your throat. It's not the dying so much; you die, for one must die, and that's all right; it's the abomination of feeling those people touch you. And then, their knives; they can't be able to cut well with them! Ah, good gracious!"

"Be quiet," said Cosette. "Fasten everything thoroughly."

Cosette, terrified by the melodrama improvised by Toussaint, and possibly, also, by the recollection of the apparitions of the past week, which recurred to her memory, dared not even say to her: "Go and look at the stone which has been placed on the bench!" for fear of opening the garden gate and allowing "the men" to enter. She saw that all the doors and windows were carefully fastened, made Toussaint go all over the house from garret to cellar, locked herself up in her own chamber, bolted her door, looked under her couch, went to bed and slept badly. All night long she saw that big stone, as large as a mountain and full of caverns.

At sunrise, — the property of the rising sun is to make us laugh at all our terrors of the past night, and our laughter is in direct proportion to our terror which they have caused, — at sunrise Cosette, when she woke, viewed her fright as a nightmare, and said to herself: "What have I been thinking of? It is like the footsteps that I thought I heard a week or two ago in the garden at night! It is like the shadow of the chimney-pot! Am I becoming a coward?" The sun, which was glowing through the crevices in her shutters, and turning the damask curtains crimson, reassured her to such an extent that everything vanished from her thoughts, even the stone.

“There was no more a stone on the bench than there was a man in a round hat in the garden; I dreamed about the stone, as I did all the rest.”

She dressed herself, descended to the garden, ran to the bench, and broke out in a cold perspiration. The stone was there.

But this lasted only for a moment. That which is terror by night is curiosity by day.

“Bah!” said she, “come, let us see what it is.”

She lifted the stone, which was tolerably large. Beneath it was something which resembled a letter. It was a white envelope. Cosette seized it. There was no address on one side, no seal on the other. Yet the envelope, though unsealed, was not empty. Papers could be seen inside.

Cosette examined it. It was no longer alarm, it was no longer curiosity; it was a beginning of anxiety.

Cosette drew from the envelope its contents, a little notebook of paper, each page of which was numbered and bore a few lines in a very fine and rather pretty handwriting, as Cosette thought.

Cosette looked for a name; there was none. To whom was this addressed? To her, probably, since a hand had deposited the packet on her bench. From whom did it come? An irresistible fascination took possession of her; she tried to turn away her eyes from the leaflets which were trembling in her hand, she gazed at the sky, the street, the acacias all bathed in light, the pigeons fluttering over a neighboring roof, and then her glance suddenly fell upon the manuscript, and she said to herself that she must know what it contained.

This is what she read.

CHAPTER IV — A HEART BENEATH A STONE

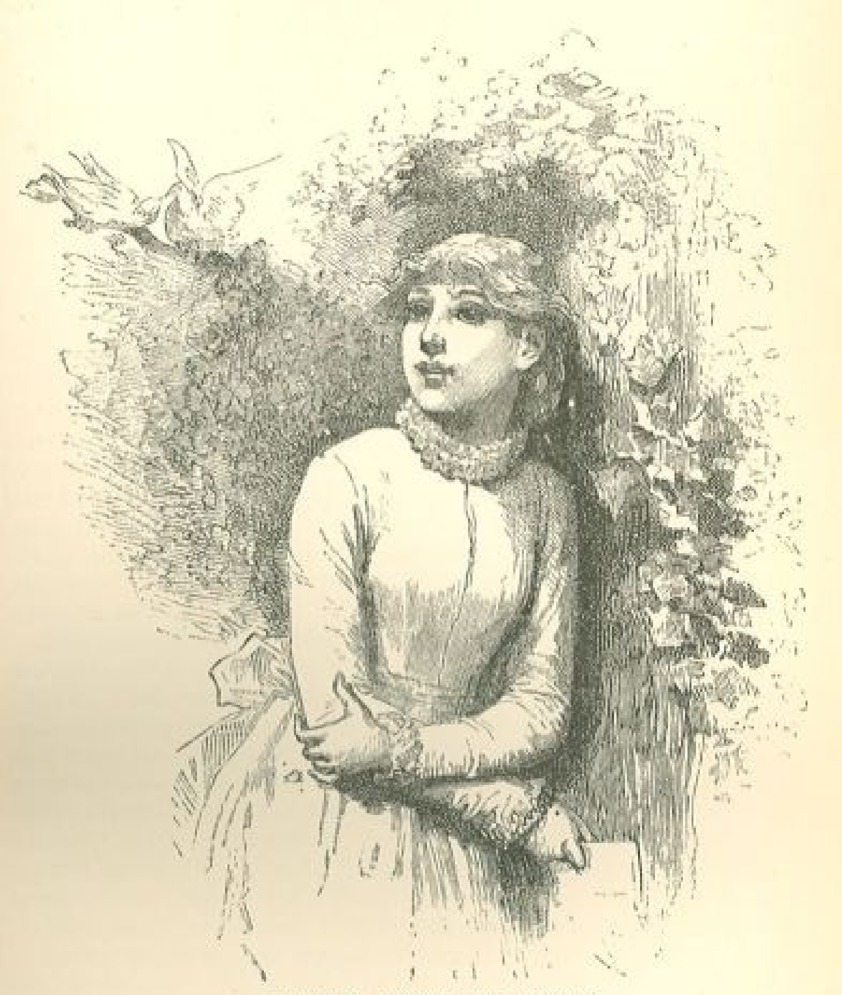

COSETTE AFTER THE LETTER.

The reduction of the universe to a single being, the expansion of a single being even to God, that is love.

Love is the salutation of the angels to the stars.

How sad is the soul, when it is sad through love!

What a void in the absence of the being who, by herself alone fills the world! Oh! how true it is that the beloved being becomes God. One could comprehend that God might be jealous of this had not God the Father of all evidently made creation for the soul, and the soul for love.

The glimpse of a smile beneath a white crape bonnet with a lilac curtain is sufficient to cause the soul to enter into the palace of dreams.

God is behind everything, but everything hides God. Things are black, creatures are opaque. To love a being is to render that being transparent.

Certain thoughts are prayers. There are moments when, whatever the attitude of the body may be, the soul is on its knees.

Parted lovers beguile absence by a thousand chimerical devices, which possess, however, a reality of their own. They are prevented from seeing each other, they cannot write to each other; they discover a multitude of mysterious means to correspond. They send each other the song of the birds, the perfume of the flowers, the smiles of children, the light of the sun, the sighings of the breeze, the rays of stars, all creation. And why not? All the works of God are made to serve love. Love is sufficiently potent to charge all nature with its messages.

Oh Spring! Thou art a letter that I write to her.

The future belongs to hearts even more than it does to minds. Love, that is the only thing that can occupy and fill eternity. In the infinite, the inexhaustible is requisite.

Love participates of the soul itself. It is of the same nature. Like it, it is the divine spark; like it, it is incorruptible, indivisible, imperishable. It is a point of fire that exists within us, which is immortal and infinite, which nothing can confine, and which nothing can extinguish. We feel it burning even to the very marrow of our bones, and we see it beaming in the very depths of heaven.

Oh Love! Adorations! voluptuousness of two minds which understand each other, of two hearts which exchange with each other, of two glances which penetrate each other! You will come to me, will you not, bliss! strolls by twos in the solitudes! Blessed and radiant days! I have sometimes dreamed that from time to time hours detached themselves from the lives of the angels and came here below to traverse the destinies of men.

God can add nothing to the happiness of those who love, except to give them endless duration. After a life of love, an eternity of love is, in fact, an augmentation; but to increase in intensity even the ineffable felicity which love bestows on the soul even in this world, is impossible, even to God. God is the plenitude of heaven; love is the plenitude of man.

You look at a star for two reasons, because it is luminous, and because it is impenetrable. You have beside you a sweeter radiance and a greater mystery, woman.

All of us, whoever we may be, have our respirable beings. We lack air and we stifle. Then we die. To die for lack of love is horrible. Suffocation of the soul.

When love has fused and mingled two beings in a sacred and angelic unity, the secret of life has been discovered so far as they are concerned; they are no longer anything more than the two boundaries of the same destiny; they are no longer anything but the two wings of the same spirit. Love, soar.

On the day when a woman as she passes before you emits light as she walks, you are lost, you love. But one thing remains for you to do: to think of her so intently that she is constrained to think of you.

What love commences can be finished by God alone.

True love is in despair and is enchanted over a glove lost or a handkerchief found, and eternity is required for its devotion and its hopes. It is composed both of the infinitely great and the infinitely little.

If you are a stone, be adamant; if you are a plant, be the sensitive plant; if you are a man, be love.

Nothing suffices for love. We have happiness, we desire paradise; we possess paradise, we desire heaven.

Oh ye who love each other, all this is contained in love. Understand how to find it there. Love has contemplation as well as heaven, and more than heaven, it has voluptuousness.

“Does she still come to the Luxembourg?” “No, sir.” “This is the church where she attends mass, is it not?” “She no longer comes here.” “Does she still live in this house?” “She has moved away.” “Where has she gone to dwell?”

“She did not say.”

What a melancholy thing not to know the address of one’s soul!

Love has its childishness, other passions have their pettinesses. Shame on the passions which belittle man! Honor to the one which makes a child of him!

There is one strange thing, do you know it? I dwell in the night. There is a being who carried off my sky when she went away.

Oh! would that we were lying side by side in the same grave, hand in hand, and from time to time, in the darkness, gently caressing a finger, — that would suffice for my eternity!

Ye who suffer because ye love, love yet more. To die of love, is to live in it.

Love. A sombre and starry transfiguration is mingled with this torture. There is ecstasy in agony.

Oh joy of the birds! It is because they have nests that they sing.

Love is a celestial respiration of the air of paradise.

Deep hearts, sage minds, take life as God has made it; it is a long trial, an incomprehensible preparation for an unknown destiny. This destiny, the true one, begins for a man with the first step inside the tomb. Then something appears to him, and he begins to distinguish the definitive. The definitive, meditate upon that word. The living perceive the infinite; the definitive permits itself to be seen only by the dead. In the meanwhile, love and suffer, hope and contemplate. Woe, alas! to him who shall have loved only bodies, forms, appearances! Death will deprive him of all. Try to love souls, you will find them again.

I encountered in the street, a very poor young man who was in love. His hat was old, his coat was worn, his elbows were in holes; water trickled through his shoes, and the stars through his soul.

What a grand thing it is to be loved! What a far grander thing it is to love! The heart becomes heroic, by dint of passion. It is no longer composed of anything but what is pure; it no longer rests on anything that is not elevated and great. An unworthy thought can no more germinate in it, than a nettle on a glacier. The serene and lofty soul, inaccessible to vulgar passions and emotions, dominating the clouds and the shades of this world, its follies, its lies, its hatreds, its vanities, its miseries, inhabits the blue of heaven, and no longer feels anything but profound and subterranean shocks of destiny, as the crests of mountains feel the shocks of earthquake.

If there did not exist some one who loved, the sun would become extinct.

CHAPTER V — COSETTE AFTER THE LETTER

As Cosette read, she gradually fell into thought. At the very moment when she raised her eyes from the last line of the note-book, the handsome officer passed triumphantly in front of the gate, — it was his hour; Cosette thought him hideous.

She resumed her contemplation of the book. It was written in the most charming of chirography, thought Cosette; in the same hand, but with divers inks, sometimes very black, again whitish, as when ink has been added to the inkstand, and consequently on different days. It was, then, a mind which had unfolded itself there, sigh by sigh, irregularly, without order, without choice, without object, hap-hazard. Cosette had never read anything like it. This manuscript, in which she already perceived more light than obscurity, produced upon her the effect of a half-open sanctuary. Each one of these mysterious lines shone before her eyes and inundated her heart with a strange radiance. The education which she had received had always talked to her of the soul, and never of love, very much as one might talk of the firebrand and not of the flame. This manuscript of fifteen pages suddenly and sweetly revealed to her all of love, sorrow, destiny, life, eternity, the beginning, the end. It was as if a hand had opened and suddenly flung upon her a handful of rays of light. In these few lines she felt a passionate, ardent, generous, honest nature, a sacred will, an immense sorrow, and an immense despair, a suffering heart, an ecstasy fully expanded. What was this manuscript? A letter. A letter without name, without address, without date, without signature, pressing and disinterested, an enigma composed of truths, a message of love made to be brought by an angel and read by a virgin, an appointment made beyond the bounds of earth, the love-letter of a phantom to a shade. It was an absent one, tranquil and dejected, who seemed ready to take refuge in death and who sent to the absent love, his lady, the secret of fate, the key of life, love. This had been written with one foot in the grave and one finger in heaven. These lines, which had fallen one by one on the paper, were what might be called drops of soul.

Now, from whom could these pages come? Who could have penned them?

Cosette did not hesitate a moment. One man only.

He!

Day had dawned once more in her spirit; all had reappeared. She felt an unheard-of joy, and a profound anguish. It was he! he who had written! he was there! it was he whose arm had been thrust through that railing! While she was forgetful of him, he had found her again! But had she forgotten him? No, never! She was foolish to have thought so for a single moment. She had always loved him, always adored him. The fire had been smothered, and had smouldered for a time, but she saw all plainly now; it had but made headway, and now it had burst forth afresh, and had inflamed her whole being. This note-book was like a spark which had fallen from that other soul into hers. She felt the conflagration starting up once more.

She imbued herself thoroughly with every word of the manuscript: “Oh yes!” said she, “how perfectly I recognize all that! That is what I had already read in his eyes.” As she was finishing it for the third time, Lieutenant Theodule passed the gate once more, and rattled his spurs upon the pavement. Cosette was forced to raise her eyes. She thought him insipid, silly, stupid, useless, foppish, displeasing, impertinent, and extremely ugly. The officer thought it his duty to smile at her.

She turned away as in shame and indignation. She would gladly have thrown something at his head.

She fled, re-entered the house, and shut herself up in her chamber to peruse the manuscript once more, to learn it by heart, and to dream. When she had thoroughly mastered it she kissed it and put it in her bosom.

All was over, Cosette had fallen back into deep, seraphic love. The abyss of Eden had yawned once more.

All day long, Cosette remained in a sort of bewilderment. She scarcely thought, her ideas were in the state of a tangled skein in her brain, she could not manage to conjecture anything, she hoped through a tremor, what? vague things. She dared make herself no promises, and she did not wish to refuse herself anything. Flashes of pallor passed over her countenance, and shivers ran through her frame. It seemed to her, at intervals, that she was entering the land of chimaeras; she said to herself: “Is this reality?” Then she felt of the dear paper within her bosom under her gown, she pressed it to her heart, she felt its angles against her flesh; and if Jean Valjean had seen her at the moment, he would have shuddered in the presence of that luminous and unknown joy, which overflowed from beneath her eyelids.—

“Oh yes!” she thought, “it is certainly he! This comes from him, and is for me!”

And she told herself that an intervention of the angels, a celestial chance, had given him back to her.

Oh transfiguration of love! Oh dreams! That celestial chance, that intervention of the angels, was a pellet of bread tossed by one thief to another thief, from the Charlemagne Courtyard to the Lion’s Ditch, over the roofs of La Force.

CHAPTER VI — OLD PEOPLE ARE MADE TO GO OUT OPPORTUNELY

When evening came, Jean Valjean went out; Cosette dressed herself. She arranged her hair in the most becoming manner, and she put on a dress whose bodice had received one snip of the scissors too much, and which, through this slope, permitted a view of the beginning of her throat, and was, as young girls say, “a trifle indecent.” It was not in the least indecent, but it was prettier than usual. She made her toilet thus without knowing why she did so.

Did she mean to go out? No.

Was she expecting a visitor? No.

At dusk, she went down to the garden. Toussaint was busy in her kitchen, which opened on the back yard.

She began to stroll about under the trees, thrusting aside the branches from time to time with her hand, because there were some which hung very low.

In this manner she reached the bench.

The stone was still there.

She sat down, and gently laid her white hand on this stone as though she wished to caress and thank it.

All at once, she experienced that indefinable impression which one undergoes when there is some one standing behind one, even when she does not see the person.

She turned her head and rose to her feet.

It was he.

His head was bare. He appeared to have grown thin and pale. His black clothes were hardly discernible. The twilight threw a wan light on his fine brow, and covered his eyes in shadows. Beneath a veil of incomparable sweetness, he had something about him that suggested death and night. His face was illuminated by the light of the dying day, and by the thought of a soul that is taking flight.

He seemed to be not yet a ghost, and he was no longer a man.

He had flung away his hat in the thicket, a few paces distant.

Cosette, though ready to swoon, uttered no cry. She retreated slowly, for she felt herself attracted. He did not stir. By virtue of something ineffable and melancholy which enveloped him, she felt the look in his eyes which she could not see.

Cosette, in her retreat, encountered a tree and leaned against it. Had it not been for this tree, she would have fallen.

Then she heard his voice, that voice which she had really never heard, barely rising above the rustle of the leaves, and murmuring: —

“Pardon me, here I am. My heart is full. I could not live on as I was living, and I have come. Have you read what I placed there on the bench? Do you recognize me at all? Have no fear of me. It is a long time, you remember the day, since you looked at me at the Luxembourg, near the Gladiator. And the day when you passed before me? It was on the 16th of June and the 2d of July. It is nearly a year ago. I have not seen you for a long time. I inquired of the woman who let the chairs, and she told me that she no longer saw you. You lived in the Rue de l’Ouest, on the third floor, in the front apartments of a new house, — you see that I know! I followed you. What else was there for me to do? And then you disappeared. I thought I saw you pass once, while I was reading the newspapers under the arcade of the Odeon. I ran after you. But no. It was a person who had a bonnet like yours. At night I came hither. Do not be afraid, no one sees me. I come to gaze upon your windows near at hand. I walk very softly, so that you may not hear, for you might be alarmed. The other evening I was behind you, you turned round, I fled. Once, I heard you singing. I was happy. Did it affect you because I heard you singing through the shutters? That could not hurt you. No, it is not so? You see, you are my angel! Let me come sometimes; I think that I am going to die. If you only knew! I adore you. Forgive me, I speak to you, but I do not know what I am saying; I may have displeased you; have I displeased you?”

“Oh! my mother!” said she.

And she sank down as though on the point of death.

He grasped her, she fell, he took her in his arms, he pressed her close, without knowing what he was doing. He supported her, though he was tottering himself. It was as though his brain were full of smoke; lightnings darted between his lips; his ideas vanished; it seemed to him that he was accomplishing some religious act, and that he was committing a profanation. Moreover, he had not the least passion for this lovely woman whose force he felt against his breast. He was beside himself with love.

She took his hand and laid it on her heart. He felt the paper there, he stammered: —

“You love me, then?”

She replied in a voice so low that it was no longer anything more than a barely audible breath: —

“Hush! Thou knowest it!”

And she hid her blushing face on the breast of the superb and intoxicated young man.

He fell upon the bench, and she beside him. They had no words more. The stars were beginning to gleam. How did it come to pass that their lips met? How comes it to pass that the birds sing, that snow melts, that the rose unfolds, that May expands, that the dawn grows white behind the black trees on the shivering crest of the hills?

A kiss, and that was all.

Both started, and gazed into the darkness with sparkling eyes.

They felt neither the cool night, nor the cold stone, nor the damp earth, nor the wet grass; they looked at each other, and their hearts were full of thoughts. They had clasped hands unconsciously.

She did not ask him, she did not even wonder, how he had entered there, and how he had made his way into the garden. It seemed so simple to her that he should be there!

From time to time, Marius’ knee touched Cosette’s knee, and both shivered.

At intervals, Cosette stammered a word. Her soul fluttered on her lips like a drop of dew on a flower.

Little by little they began to talk to each other. Effusion followed silence, which is fulness. The night was serene and splendid overhead. These two beings, pure as spirits, told each other everything, their dreams, their intoxications, their ecstasies, their chimaeras, their weaknesses, how they had adored each other from afar, how they had longed for each other, their despair when they had ceased to see each other. They confided to each other in an ideal intimacy, which nothing could augment, their most secret and most mysterious thoughts. They related to each other, with candid faith in their illusions, all that love, youth, and the remains of childhood which still lingered about them, suggested to their minds. Their two hearts poured themselves out into each other in such wise, that at the expiration of a quarter of an hour, it was the young man who had the young girl’s soul, and the young girl who had the young man’s soul. Each became permeated with the other, they were enchanted with each other, they dazzled each other.

When they had finished, when they had told each other everything, she laid her head on his shoulder and asked him: —

“What is your name?”

“My name is Marius,” said he. “And yours?”

“My name is Cosette.”

BOOK SIXTH. — LITTLE GAVROCHE

CHAPTER I — THE MALICIOUS PLAYFULNESS OF THE WIND

Since 1823, when the tavern of Montfermeil was on the way to shipwreck and was being gradually engulfed, not in the abyss of a bankruptcy, but in the cesspool of petty debts, the Thenardier pair had had two other children; both males. That made five; two girls and three boys.

Madame Thenardier had got rid of the last two, while they were still young and very small, with remarkable luck.

Got rid of is the word. There was but a mere fragment of nature in that woman. A phenomenon, by the way, of which there is more than one example extant. Like the Marechale de La Mothe-Houdancourt, the Thenardier was a mother to her daughters only. There her maternity ended. Her hatred of the human race began with her own sons. In the direction of her sons her evil disposition was uncompromising, and her heart had a lugubrious wall in that quarter. As the reader has seen, she detested the eldest; she cursed the other two. Why? Because. The most terrible of motives, the most unanswerable of retorts — Because. “I have no need of a litter of squalling brats,” said this mother.

Let us explain how the Thenardiers had succeeded in getting rid of their last two children; and even in drawing profit from the operation.

The woman Magnon, who was mentioned a few pages further back, was the same one who had succeeded in making old Gillenormand support the two children which she had had. She lived on the Quai des Celestins, at the corner of this ancient street of the Petit-Musc which afforded her the opportunity of changing her evil repute into good odor. The reader will remember the great epidemic of croup which ravaged the river districts of the Seine in Paris thirty-five years ago, and of which science took advantage to make experiments on a grand scale as to the efficacy of inhalations of alum, so beneficially replaced at the present day by the external tincture of iodine. During this epidemic, the Magnon lost both her boys, who were still very young, one in the morning, the other in the evening of the same day. This was a blow. These children were precious to their mother; they represented eighty francs a month. These eighty francs were punctually paid in the name of M. Gillenormand, by collector of his rents, M. Barge, a retired tip-staff, in the Rue du Roi-de-Sicile. The children dead, the income was at an end. The Magnon sought an expedient. In that dark free-masonry of evil of which she formed a part, everything is known, all secrets are kept, and all lend mutual aid. Magnon needed two children; the Thenardiers had two. The same sex, the same age. A good arrangement for the one, a good investment for the other. The little Thenardiers became little Magnons. Magnon quitted the Quai des Celestins and went to live in the Rue Clocheperce. In Paris, the identity which binds an individual to himself is broken between one street and another.

The registry office being in no way warned, raised no objections, and the substitution was effected in the most simple manner in the world. Only, the Thenardier exacted for this loan of her children, ten francs a month, which Magnon promised to pay, and which she actually did pay. It is unnecessary to add that M. Gillenormand continued to perform his compact. He came to see the children every six months. He did not perceive the change. “Monsieur,” Magnon said to him, “how much they resemble you!”

Thenardier, to whom avatars were easy, seized this occasion to become Jondrette. His two daughters and Gavroche had hardly had time to discover that they had two little brothers. When a certain degree of misery is reached, one is overpowered with a sort of spectral indifference, and one regards human beings as though they were spectres. Your nearest relations are often no more for you than vague shadowy forms, barely outlined against a nebulous background of life and easily confounded again with the invisible.

On the evening of the day when she had handed over her two little ones to Magnon, with express intention of renouncing them forever, the Thenardier had felt, or had appeared to feel, a scruple. She said to her husband: “But this is abandoning our children!” Thenardier, masterful and phlegmatic, cauterized the scruple with this saying: “Jean Jacques Rousseau did even better!” From scruples, the mother proceeded to uneasiness: “But what if the police were to annoy us? Tell me, Monsieur Thenardier, is what we have done permissible?” Thenardier replied: “Everything is permissible. No one will see anything but true blue in it. Besides, no one has any interest in looking closely after children who have not a sou.”

Magnon was a sort of fashionable woman in the sphere of crime. She was careful about her toilet. She shared her lodgings, which were furnished in an affected and wretched style, with a clever gallicized English thief.

This English woman, who had become a naturalized Parisienne, recommended by very wealthy relations, intimately connected with the medals in the Library and Mademoiselle Mar’s diamonds, became celebrated later on in judicial accounts. She was called Mamselle Miss.

The two little creatures who had fallen to Magnon had no reason to complain of their lot. Recommended by the eighty francs, they were well cared for, as is everything from which profit is derived; they were neither badly clothed, nor badly fed; they were treated almost like “little gentlemen,” — better by their false mother than by their real one. Magnon played the lady, and talked no thieves’ slang in their presence.

Thus passed several years. Thenardier augured well from the fact. One day, he chanced to say to Magnon as she handed him his monthly stipend of ten francs: “The father must give them some education.”

All at once, these two poor children, who had up to that time been protected tolerably well, even by their evil fate, were abruptly hurled into life and forced to begin it for themselves.

A wholesale arrest of malefactors, like that in the Jondrette garret, necessarily complicated by investigations and subsequent incarcerations, is a veritable disaster for that hideous and occult counter-society which pursues its existence beneath public society; an adventure of this description entails all sorts of catastrophes in that sombre world. The Thenardier catastrophe involved the catastrophe of Magnon.

One day, a short time after Magnon had handed to Eponine the note relating to the Rue Plumet, a sudden raid was made by the police in the Rue Clocheperce; Magnon was seized, as was also Mamselle Miss; and all the inhabitants of the house, which was of a suspicious character, were gathered into the net. While this was going on, the two little boys were playing in the back yard, and saw nothing of the raid. When they tried to enter the house again, they found the door fastened and the house empty. A cobbler opposite called them to him, and delivered to them a paper which “their mother” had left for them. On this paper there was an address: M. Barge, collector of rents, Rue du Roi-de-Sicile, No. 8. The proprietor of the stall said to them: “You cannot live here any longer. Go there. It is near by. The first street on the left. Ask your way from this paper.”

The children set out, the elder leading the younger, and holding in his hand the paper which was to guide them. It was cold, and his benumbed little fingers could not close very firmly, and they did not keep a very good hold on the paper. At the corner of the Rue Clocheperce, a gust of wind tore it from him, and as night was falling, the child was not able to find it again.

They began to wander aimlessly through the streets.

CHAPTER II — IN WHICH LITTLE GAVROCHE EXTRACTS PROFIT FROM NAPOLEON THE GREAT

Spring in Paris is often traversed by harsh and piercing breezes which do not precisely chill but freeze one; these north winds which sadden the most beautiful days produce exactly the effect of those puffs of cold air which enter a warm room through the cracks of a badly fitting door or window. It seems as though the gloomy door of winter had remained ajar, and as though the wind were pouring through it. In the spring of 1832, the epoch when the first great epidemic of this century broke out in Europe, these north gales were more harsh and piercing than ever. It was a door even more glacial than that of winter which was ajar. It was the door of the sepulchre. In these winds one felt the breath of the cholera.

From a meteorological point of view, these cold winds possessed this peculiarity, that they did not preclude a strong electric tension. Frequent storms, accompanied by thunder and lightning, burst forth at this epoch.

One evening, when these gales were blowing rudely, to such a degree that January seemed to have returned and that the bourgeois had resumed their cloaks, Little Gavroche, who was always shivering gayly under his rags, was standing as though in ecstasy before a wig-maker's shop in the vicinity of the Orme-Saint-Gervais. He was adorned with a woman's woollen shawl, picked up no one knows where, and which he had converted into a neck comforter. Little Gavroche appeared to be engaged in intent admiration of a wax bride, in a low-necked dress, and crowned with orange-flowers, who was revolving in the window, and displaying her smile to passers-by, between two argand lamps; but in reality, he was taking an observation of the shop, in order to discover whether he could not "prig" from the shop-front a cake of soap, which he would then proceed to sell for a sou to a "hair-dresser" in the suburbs. He had often managed to breakfast off of such a roll. He called his species of work, for which he possessed special aptitude, "shaving barbers."

While contemplating the bride, and eyeing the cake of soap, he muttered between his teeth: "Tuesday. It was not Tuesday. Was it Tuesday? Perhaps it was Tuesday. Yes, it was Tuesday."

No one has ever discovered to what this monologue referred.

Yes, perchance, this monologue had some connection with the last occasion on which he had dined, three days before, for it was now Friday.

The barber in his shop, which was warmed by a good stove, was shaving a customer and casting a glance from time to time at the enemy, that freezing and impudent street urchin both of whose hands were in his pockets, but whose mind was evidently unsheathed.

While Gavroche was scrutinizing the shop-window and the cakes of windsor soap, two children of unequal stature, very neatly dressed, and still smaller than himself, one apparently about seven years of age, the other five, timidly turned the handle and entered the shop, with a request for something or other, alms possibly, in a plaintive murmur which resembled a groan rather than a prayer. They both spoke at once, and their words were unintelligible because sobs broke the voice of the younger, and the teeth of the elder were chattering with cold. The barber wheeled round with a furious look, and without abandoning his razor, thrust back the elder with his left hand and the younger with his knee, and slammed his door, saying: "The idea of coming in and freezing everybody for nothing!"

The two children resumed their march in tears. In the meantime, a cloud had risen; it had begun to rain.

Little Gavroche ran after them and accosted them: —

"What's the matter with you, brats?"

"We don't know where we are to sleep," replied the elder.

"Is that all?" said Gavroche. "A great matter, truly. The idea of bawling about that. They must be greenies!"

And adopting, in addition to his superiority, which was rather bantering, an accent of tender authority and gentle patronage: —

"Come along with me, young 'uns!"

"Yes, sir," said the elder.

And the two children followed him as they would have followed an archbishop. They had stopped crying.

Gavroche led them up the Rue Saint-Antoine in the direction of the Bastille.

As Gavroche walked along, he cast an indignant backward glance at the barber's shop.

"That fellow has no heart, the whiting," he muttered. "He's an Englishman."

A woman who caught sight of these three marching in a file, with Gavroche at their head, burst into noisy laughter. This laugh was wanting in respect towards the group.

“Good day, Mamselle Omnibus,” said Gavroche to her.

An instant later, the wig-maker occurred to his mind once more, and he added: —

“I am making a mistake in the beast; he’s not a whiting, he’s a serpent. Barber, I’ll go and fetch a locksmith, and I’ll have a bell hung to your tail.”

This wig-maker had rendered him aggressive. As he strode over a gutter, he apostrophized a bearded portress who was worthy to meet Faust on the Brocken, and who had a broom in her hand.

“Madam,” said he, “so you are going out with your horse?”

And thereupon, he spattered the polished boots of a pedestrian.

“You scamp!” shouted the furious pedestrian.

Gavroche elevated his nose above his shawl.

“Is Monsieur complaining?”

“Of you!” ejaculated the man.

“The office is closed,” said Gavroche, “I do not receive any more complaints.”

In the meanwhile, as he went on up the street, he perceived a beggar-girl, thirteen or fourteen years old, and clad in so short a gown that her knees were visible, lying thoroughly chilled under a porte-cochère. The little girl was getting to be too old for such a thing. Growth does play these tricks. The petticoat becomes short at the moment when nudity becomes indecent.

“Poor girl!” said Gavroche. “She hasn’t even trousers. Hold on, take this.”

And unwinding all the comfortable woollen which he had around his neck, he flung it on the thin and purple shoulders of the beggar-girl, where the scarf became a shawl once more.

The child stared at him in astonishment, and received the shawl in silence. When a certain stage of distress has been reached in his misery, the poor man no longer groans over evil, no longer returns thanks for good.

That done: “Brrr!” said Gavroche, who was shivering more than Saint Martin, for the latter retained one-half of his cloak.

At this brrr! the downpour of rain, redoubled in its spite, became furious. The wicked skies punish good deeds.

“Ah, come now!” exclaimed Gavroche, “what’s the meaning of this? It’s re-raining! Good Heavens, if it goes on like this, I shall stop my subscription.”

And he set out on the march once more.

“It’s all right,” he resumed, casting a glance at the beggar-girl, as she coiled up under the shawl, “she’s got a famous peel.”

And looking up at the clouds he exclaimed: —

“Caught!”

The two children followed close on his heels.

As they were passing one of these heavy grated lattices, which indicate a baker’s shop, for bread is put behind bars like gold, Gavroche turned round: —

“Ah, by the way, brats, have we dined?”

“Monsieur,” replied the elder, “we have had nothing to eat since this morning.”

“So you have neither father nor mother?” resumed Gavroche majestically.

“Excuse us, sir, we have a papa and a mamma, but we don’t know where they are.”

“Sometimes that’s better than knowing where they are,” said Gavroche, who was a thinker.

“We have been wandering about these two hours,” continued the elder, “we have hunted for things at the corners of the streets, but we have found nothing.”

“I know,” ejaculated Gavroche, “it’s the dogs who eat everything.”

He went on, after a pause: —

“Ah! we have lost our authors. We don’t know what we have done with them. This should not be, gamins. It’s stupid to let old people stray off like that. Come now! we must have a snooze all the same.”

However, he asked them no questions. What was more simple than that they should have no dwelling place!

The elder of the two children, who had almost entirely recovered the prompt heedlessness of childhood, uttered this exclamation: —

“It’s queer, all the same. Mamma told us that she would take us to get a blessed spray on Palm Sunday.”

“Bosh,” said Gavroche.

“Mamma,” resumed the elder, “is a lady who lives with Mamselle Miss.”

“Tanflute!” retorted Gavroche.

Meanwhile he had halted, and for the last two minutes he had been feeling and fumbling in all sorts of nooks which his rags contained.

At last he tossed his head with an air intended to be merely satisfied, but which was triumphant, in reality.

“Let us be calm, young ‘uns. Here’s supper for three.”

And from one of his pockets he drew forth a sou.

Without allowing the two urchins time for amazement, he pushed both of them before him into the baker’s shop, and flung his sou on the counter, crying: —

“Boy! five centimes’ worth of bread.”

The baker, who was the proprietor in person, took up a loaf and a knife.

“In three pieces, my boy!” went on Gavroche.

And he added with dignity: —

“There are three of us.”

And seeing that the baker, after scrutinizing the three customers, had taken down a black loaf, he thrust his finger far up his nose with an inhalation as imperious as though he had had a pinch of the great Frederick’s snuff on the tip of his thumb, and hurled this indignant apostrophe full in the baker’s face: —

“Keksekca?”

Those of our readers who might be tempted to espy in this interpellation of Gavroche’s to the baker a Russian or a Polish word, or one of those savage cries which the Yoways and the Botocudos hurl at each other from bank to bank of a river, athwart the solitudes, are warned that it is a word which they [our readers] utter every day, and which takes the place of the phrase: “Qu’est-ce que c’est que cela?” The baker understood perfectly, and replied: —

“Well! It’s bread, and very good bread of the second quality.”

“You mean larton brutal [black bread]!” retorted Gavroche, calmly and coldly disdainful. “White bread, boy! white bread [larton savonne]! I’m standing treat.”

The baker could not repress a smile, and as he cut the white bread he surveyed them in a compassionate way which shocked Gavroche.

“Come, now, baker’s boy!” said he, “what are you taking our measure like that for?”

All three of them placed end to end would have hardly made a measure.

When the bread was cut, the baker threw the sou into his drawer, and Gavroche said to the two children: —

“Grub away.”

The little boys stared at him in surprise.

Gavroche began to laugh.

“Ah! hullo, that’s so! they don’t understand yet, they’re too small.”

And he repeated: —

“Eat away.”

At the same time, he held out a piece of bread to each of them.

And thinking that the elder, who seemed to him the more worthy of his conversation, deserved some special encouragement and ought to be relieved from all hesitation to satisfy his appetite, he added, as be handed him the largest share: —

“Ram that into your muzzle.”

One piece was smaller than the others; he kept this for himself.

The poor children, including Gavroche, were famished. As they tore their bread apart in big mouthfuls, they blocked up the shop of the baker, who, now that they had paid their money, looked angrily at them.

“Let’s go into the street again,” said Gavroche.

They set off once more in the direction of the Bastille.

From time to time, as they passed the lighted shop-windows, the smallest halted to look at the time on a leaden watch which was suspended from his neck by a cord.

“Well, he is a very green ‘un,” said Gavroche.

Then, becoming thoughtful, he muttered between his teeth: —

“All the same, if I had charge of the babes I’d lock ’em up better than that.”

Just as they were finishing their morsel of bread, and had reached the angle of that gloomy Rue des Ballets, at the other end of which the low and threatening wicket of La Force was visible: —

“Hullo, is that you, Gavroche?” said some one.

“Hullo, is that you, Montparnasse?” said Gavroche.

A man had just accosted the street urchin, and the man was no other than Montparnasse in disguise, with blue spectacles, but recognizable to Gavroche.

“The bow-wows!” went on Gavroche, “you’ve got a hide the color of a linseed plaster, and blue specs like a doctor. You’re putting on style, ‘pon my word!”

“Hush!” ejaculated Montparnasse, “not so loud.”

And he drew Gavroche hastily out of range of the lighted shops.

The two little ones followed mechanically, holding each other by the hand.

When they were ensconced under the arch of a portecochere, sheltered from the rain and from all eyes: —

“Do you know where I’m going?” demanded Montparnasse.

“To the Abbéy of Ascend-with-Regret,” replied Gavroche.

“Joker!”

And Montparnasse went on: —

“I’m going to find Babet.”

“Ah!” exclaimed Gavroche, “so her name is Babet.”

Montparnasse lowered his voice: —

“Not she, he.”

“Ah! Babet.”

“Yes, Babet.”

“I thought he was buckled.”

“He has undone the buckle,” replied Montparnasse.

And he rapidly related to the gamin how, on the morning of that very day, Babet, having been transferred to La Conciergerie, had made his escape, by turning to the left instead of to the right in “the police office.”

Gavroche expressed his admiration for this skill.

“What a dentist!” he cried.

Montparnasse added a few details as to Babet’s flight, and ended with: —

“Oh! That’s not all.”

Gavroche, as he listened, had seized a cane that Montparnasse held in his hand, and mechanically pulled at the upper part, and the blade of a dagger made its appearance.

“Ah!” he exclaimed, pushing the dagger back in haste, “you have brought along your gendarme disguised as a bourgeois.”

Montparnasse winked.

“The deuce!” resumed Gavroche, “so you’re going to have a bout with the bobbies?”

“You can’t tell,” replied Montparnasse with an indifferent air. “It’s always a good thing to have a pin about one.”

Gavroche persisted: —

“What are you up to to-night?”

Again Montparnasse took a grave tone, and said, mouthing every syllable: “Things.”

And abruptly changing the conversation: —

“By the way!”

“What?”

“Something happened t’other day. Fancy. I meet a bourgeois. He makes me a present of a sermon and his purse. I put it in my pocket. A minute later, I feel in my pocket. There’s nothing there.”

“Except the sermon,” said Gavroche.

“But you,” went on Montparnasse, “where are you bound for now?”

Gavroche pointed to his two proteges, and said: —

“I’m going to put these infants to bed.”

“Whereabouts is the bed?”

“At my house.”

“Where’s your house?”

“At my house.”

“So you have a lodging?”

“Yes, I have.”

“And where is your lodging?”

“In the elephant,” said Gavroche.

Montparnasse, though not naturally inclined to astonishment, could not restrain an exclamation.

“In the elephant!”

“Well, yes, in the elephant!” retorted Gavroche. “Kekcaa?”

This is another word of the language which no one writes, and which every one speaks.

Kekcaa signifies: Quest que c’est que cela a? [What’s the matter with that?]

The urchin’s profound remark recalled Montparnasse to calmness and good sense. He appeared to return to better sentiments with regard to Gavroche’s lodging.

“Of course,” said he, “yes, the elephant. Is it comfortable there?”

“Very,” said Gavroche. “It’s really bully there. There ain’t any draughts, as there are under the bridges.”

“How do you get in?”

“Oh, I get in.”

“So there is a hole?” demanded Montparnasse.

“Parbleu! I should say so. But you mustn’t tell. It’s between the fore legs. The bobbies haven’t seen it.”

“And you climb up? Yes, I understand.”

“A turn of the hand, cric, crac, and it’s all over, no one there.”

After a pause, Gavroche added: —

“I shall have a ladder for these children.”

Montparnasse burst out laughing: —

“Where the devil did you pick up those young ‘uns?”

Gavroche replied with great simplicity: —

“They are some brats that a wig-maker made me a present of.”

Meanwhile, Montparnasse had fallen to thinking: —

“You recognized me very readily,” he muttered.

He took from his pocket two small objects which were nothing more than two quills wrapped in cotton, and thrust one up each of his nostrils. This gave him a different nose.

“That changes you,” remarked Gavroche, “you are less homely so, you ought to keep them on all the time.”

Montparnasse was a handsome fellow, but Gavroche was a tease.

“Seriously,” demanded Montparnasse, “how do you like me so?”

The sound of his voice was different also. In a twinkling, Montparnasse had become unrecognizable.

“Oh! Do play Porrichinelle for us!” exclaimed Gavroche.

The two children, who had not been listening up to this point, being occupied themselves in thrusting their fingers up their noses, drew near at this name, and stared at Montparnasse with dawning joy and admiration.

Unfortunately, Montparnasse was troubled.

He laid his hand on Gavroche’s shoulder, and said to him, emphasizing his words: “Listen to what I tell you, boy! if I were on the square with my dog, my knife, and my wife, and if you were to squander ten sous on me, I wouldn’t refuse to work, but this isn’t Shrove Tuesday.”

This odd phrase produced a singular effect on the gamin. He wheeled round hastily, darted his little sparkling eyes about him with profound attention, and perceived a police sergeant standing with his back to them a few paces off. Gavroche allowed an: “Ah! good!” to escape him, but immediately suppressed it, and shaking Montparnasse’s hand: —

“Well, good evening,” said he, “I’m going off to my elephant with my brats. Supposing that you should need me some night, you can come and hunt me up there. I lodge on the entresol. There is no porter. You will inquire for Monsieur Gavroche.”

“Very good,” said Montparnasse.

And they parted, Montparnasse betaking himself in the direction of the Greve, and Gavroche towards the Bastille. The little one of five, dragged along by his brother who was dragged by Gavroche, turned his head back several times to watch “Porrichinelle” as he went.

The ambiguous phrase by means of which Montparnasse had warned Gavroche of the presence of the policeman, contained no other talisman than the assonance dig repeated five or six times in different forms. This syllable, dig, uttered alone or artistically mingled with the words of a phrase, means: “Take care, we can no longer talk freely.” There was besides, in Montparnasse’s sentence, a literary beauty which was lost upon Gavroche, that is mon dogue, ma dague et ma digue, a slang expression of the Temple, which signifies my dog, my knife, and my wife, greatly in vogue among clowns and the red-tails in the great century when Moliere wrote and Callot drew.

Twenty years ago, there was still to be seen in the southwest corner of the Place de la Bastille, near the basin of the canal, excavated in the ancient ditch of the fortress-prison, a singular monument, which has already been effaced from the memories of Parisians, and which deserved to leave some trace, for it was the idea of a “member of the Institute, the General-in-chief of the army of Egypt.”

We say monument, although it was only a rough model. But this model itself, a marvellous sketch, the grandiose skeleton of an idea of Napoleon’s, which successive gusts of wind have carried away and thrown, on each occasion, still further from us, had become historical and had acquired a certain definiteness which contrasted with its provisional aspect. It was an elephant forty feet high, constructed of timber and masonry, bearing on its back a tower which resembled a house, formerly painted green by some dauber, and now painted black by heaven, the wind, and time. In this deserted and unprotected corner of the place, the broad brow of the colossus, his trunk, his tusks, his tower, his enormous crupper, his four feet, like columns produced, at night, under the starry heavens, a surprising and terrible form. It was a sort of symbol of popular force. It was sombre, mysterious, and immense. It was some mighty, visible phantom, one knew not what, standing erect beside the invisible spectre of the Bastille.

Few strangers visited this edifice, no passer-by looked at it. It was falling into ruins; every season the plaster which detached itself from its sides formed hideous wounds upon it. “The aediles,” as the expression ran in elegant dialect, had forgotten it ever since 1814. There it stood in its corner, melancholy, sick, crumbling, surrounded by a rotten palisade, soiled continually by drunken coachmen; cracks meandered athwart its belly, a lath projected from its tail, tall grass flourished between its legs; and, as the level of the place had been rising all around it for a space of thirty years, by that slow and continuous movement which insensibly elevates the soil of large towns, it stood in a hollow, and it looked as though the ground were giving way beneath it. It was unclean, despised, repulsive, and superb, ugly in the eyes of the bourgeois, melancholy in the eyes of the thinker. There was something about it of the dirt which is on the point of being swept out, and something of the majesty which is on the point of being decapitated. As we have said, at night, its aspect changed. Night is the real element of everything that is dark. As soon as twilight descended, the old elephant became transfigured; he assumed a tranquil and redoubtable appearance in the formidable serenity of the shadows. Being of the past, he belonged to night; and obscurity was in keeping with his grandeur.

This rough, squat, heavy, hard, austere, almost misshapen, but assuredly majestic monument, stamped with a sort of magnificent and savage gravity, has disappeared, and left to reign in peace, a sort of gigantic stove, ornamented with its pipe, which has replaced the sombre fortress with its nine towers, very much as the bourgeoisie replaces the feudal classes. It is quite natural that a stove should be the symbol of an epoch in which a pot contains power. This epoch will pass away, people have already begun to understand that, if there can be force in a boiler, there can be no force except in the brain; in other words, that which leads and drags on the world, is not locomotives, but ideas. Harness locomotives to ideas, — that is well done; but do not mistake the horse for the rider.

At all events, to return to the Place de la Bastille, the architect of this elephant succeeded in making a grand thing out of plaster; the architect of the stove has succeeded in making a pretty thing out of bronze.

This stove-pipe, which has been baptized by a sonorous name, and called the column of July, this monument of a revolution that miscarried, was still enveloped in 1832, in an immense shirt of woodwork, which we regret, for our part, and by a vast plank enclosure, which completed the task of isolating the elephant.

It was towards this corner of the place, dimly lighted by the reflection of a distant street lamp, that the gamin guided his two “brats.”

The reader must permit us to interrupt ourselves here and to remind him that we are dealing with simple reality, and that twenty years ago, the tribunals were called upon to judge, under the charge of vagabondage, and mutilation of a public monument, a child who had been caught asleep in this very elephant of the Bastille. This fact noted, we proceed.

On arriving in the vicinity of the colossus, Gavroche comprehended the effect which the infinitely great might produce on the infinitely small, and said: —

“Don’t be scared, infants.”

Then he entered through a gap in the fence into the elephant’s enclosure and helped the young ones to clamber through the breach. The two children, somewhat frightened, followed Gavroche without uttering a word, and confided themselves to this little Providence in rags which had given them bread and had promised them a shelter.

There, extended along the fence, lay a ladder which by day served the laborers in the neighboring timber-yard. Gavroche raised it with remarkable vigor, and placed it against one of the elephant’s forelegs. Near the point where the ladder ended, a sort of black hole in the belly of the colossus could be distinguished.

Gavroche pointed out the ladder and the hole to his guests, and said to them: —

“Climb up and go in.”

The two little boys exchanged terrified glances.

“You’re afraid, brats!” exclaimed Gavroche.

And he added: —

“You shall see!”

He clasped the rough leg of the elephant, and in a twinkling, without deigning to make use of the ladder, he had reached the aperture. He entered it as an adder slips through a crevice, and disappeared within, and an instant later, the two children saw his head, which looked pale, appear vaguely, on the edge of the shadowy hole, like a wan and whitish spectre.

“Well!” he exclaimed, “climb up, young ‘uns! You’ll see how snug it is here! Come up, you!” he said to the elder, “I’ll lend you a hand.”

The little fellows nudged each other, the gamin frightened and inspired them with confidence at one and the same time, and then, it was raining very hard. The elder one undertook the risk. The younger, on seeing his brother climbing up, and himself left alone between the paws of this huge beast, felt greatly inclined to cry, but he did not dare.

The elder lad climbed, with uncertain steps, up the rungs of the ladder; Gavroche, in the meanwhile, encouraging him with exclamations like a fencing-master to his pupils, or a muleteer to his mules.

“Don’t be afraid! — That’s it! — Come on! — Put your feet there! — Give us your hand here! — Boldly!”

And when the child was within reach, he seized him suddenly and vigorously by the arm, and pulled him towards him.

“Nabbed!” said he.

The brat had passed through the crack.

“Now,” said Gavroche, “wait for me. Be so good as to take a seat, Monsieur.”

And making his way out of the hole as he had entered it, he slipped down the elephant’s leg with the agility of a monkey, landed on his feet in the grass, grasped the child of five round the body, and planted him fairly in the middle of the ladder, then he began to climb up behind him, shouting to the elder: —

“I’m going to boost him, do you tug.”

And in another instant, the small lad was pushed, dragged, pulled, thrust, stuffed into the hole, before he had time to recover himself, and Gavroche, entering behind him, and repulsing the ladder with a kick which sent it flat on the grass, began to clap his hands and to cry: —

“Here we are! Long live General Lafayette!”

This explosion over, he added: —

“Now, young ‘uns, you are in my house.”

Gavroche was at home, in fact.

Oh, unforeseen utility of the useless! Charity of great things! Goodness of giants! This huge monument, which had embodied an idea of the Emperor’s, had become the box of a street urchin. The brat had been accepted and sheltered by the colossus. The bourgeois decked out in their Sunday finery who passed the elephant of the Bastille, were fond of saying as they scanned it disdainfully with their prominent eyes: “What’s the good of that?” It served to save from the cold, the frost, the hail, and rain, to shelter from the winds of winter, to preserve from slumber in the mud which produces fever, and from slumber in the snow which produces death, a little being who had no father, no mother, no bread, no clothes, no refuge. It served to receive the innocent whom society repulsed. It served to diminish public crime. It was a lair open to one against whom all doors were shut. It seemed as though the miserable old mastodon, invaded by vermin and oblivion, covered with warts, with mould, and ulcers, tottering, worm-eaten, abandoned, condemned, a sort of mendicant colossus, asking alms in vain with a benevolent look in the midst of the cross-roads, had taken pity on that other mendicant, the poor pygmy, who roamed without shoes to his feet, without a roof over his head, blowing on his fingers, clad in rags, fed on rejected scraps. That was what the elephant of the Bastille was good for. This idea of Napoleon, disdained by men, had been taken back by God. That which had been merely illustrious, had become august. In order to realize his thought, the Emperor should have had porphyry, brass, iron, gold, marble; the old collection of planks, beams and plaster sufficed for God. The Emperor had had the dream of a genius; in that Titanic elephant, armed, prodigious, with trunk uplifted, bearing its tower and scattering on all sides its merry and vivifying waters, he wished to incarnate the people. God had done a grander thing with it, he had lodged a child there.

The hole through which Gavroche had entered was a breach which was hardly visible from the outside, being concealed, as we have stated, beneath the elephant’s belly, and so narrow that it was only cats and homeless children who could pass through it.

“Let’s begin,” said Gavroche, “by telling the porter that we are not at home.”

And plunging into the darkness with the assurance of a person who is well acquainted with his apartments, he took a plank and stopped up the aperture.

Again Gavroche plunged into the obscurity. The children heard the crackling of the match thrust into the phosphoric bottle. The chemical match was not yet in existence; at that epoch the Fumade steel represented progress.

A sudden light made them blink; Gavroche had just managed to ignite one of those bits of cord dipped in resin which are called cellar rats. The cellar rat, which emitted more smoke than light, rendered the interior of the elephant confusedly visible.

Gavroche’s two guests glanced about them, and the sensation which they experienced was something like that which one would feel if shut up in the great tun of Heidelberg, or, better still, like what Jonah must have felt in the biblical belly of the whale. An entire and gigantic skeleton appeared enveloping them. Above, a long brown beam, whence started at regular distances, massive, arching ribs, represented the vertebral column with its sides, stalactites of plaster depended from them like entrails, and vast spiders’ webs stretching from side to side, formed dirty diaphragms. Here and there, in the corners, were visible large blackish spots which had the appearance of being alive, and which changed places rapidly with an abrupt and frightened movement.

Fragments which had fallen from the elephant’s back into his belly had filled up the cavity, so that it was possible to walk upon it as on a floor.

The smaller child nestled up against his brother, and whispèred to him: —

“It’s black.”

This remark drew an exclamation from Gavroche. The petrified air of the two brats rendered some shock necessary.

“What’s that you are gabbling about there?” he exclaimed. “Are you scoffing at me? Are you turning up your noses? Do you want the tuileries? Are you brutes? Come, say! I warn you that I don’t belong to the regiment of simpletons. Ah, come now, are you brats from the Pope’s establishment?”

A little roughness is good in cases of fear. It is reassuring. The two children drew close to Gavroche.

Gavroche, paternally touched by this confidence, passed from grave to gentle, and addressing the smaller: —

“Stupid,” said he, accenting the insulting word, with a caressing intonation, “it’s outside that it is black. Outside it’s raining, here it does not rain; outside it’s cold, here there’s not an atom of wind; outside there are heaps of people, here there’s no one; outside there ain’t even the moon, here there’s my candle, confound it!”

The two children began to look upon the apartment with less terror; but Gavroche allowed them no more time for contemplation.

“Quick,” said he.

And he pushed them towards what we are very glad to be able to call the end of the room.

There stood his bed.

Gavroche’s bed was complete; that is to say, it had a mattress, a blanket, and an alcove with curtains.

The mattress was a straw mat, the blanket a rather large strip of gray woollen stuff, very warm and almost new. This is what the alcove consisted of: —

Three rather long poles, thrust into and consolidated, with the rubbish which formed the floor, that is to say, the belly of the elephant, two in front and one behind, and united by a rope at their summits, so as to form a pyramidal bundle. This cluster supported a trellis-work of brass wire which was simply placed upon it, but artistically applied, and held by fastenings of iron wire, so that it enveloped all three holes. A row of very heavy stones kept this network down to the floor so that nothing could pass under it. This grating was nothing else than a piece of the brass screens with which aviaries are covered in menageries. Gavroche’s bed stood as in a cage, behind this net. The whole resembled an Esquimaux tent.

This trellis-work took the place of curtains.

Gavroche moved aside the stones which fastened the net down in front, and the two folds of the net which lapped over each other fell apart.

“Down on all fours, brats!” said Gavroche.

He made his guests enter the cage with great precaution, then he crawled in after them, pulled the stones together, and closed the opening hermetically again.

All three had stretched out on the mat. Gavroche still had the cellar rat in his hand.

“Now,” said he, “go to sleep! I’m going to suppress the candelabra.”

“Monsieur,” the elder of the brothers asked Gavroche, pointing to the netting, “what’s that for?”

“That,” answered Gavroche gravely, “is for the rats. Go to sleep!”

Nevertheless, he felt obliged to add a few words of instruction for the benefit of these young creatures, and he continued: —

“It’s a thing from the Jardin des Plantes. It’s used for fierce animals. There’s a whole shopful of them there. All you’ve got to do is to climb over a wall, crawl through a window, and pass through a door. You can get as much as you want.”

As he spoke, he wrapped the younger one up bodily in a fold of the blanket, and the little one murmured: —

“Oh! how good that is! It’s warm!”

Gavroche cast a pleased eye on the blanket.

“That’s from the Jardin des Plantes, too,” said he. “I took that from the monkeys.”

And, pointing out to the eldest the mat on which he was lying, a very thick and admirably made mat, he added: —

“That belonged to the giraffe.”

After a pause he went on: —

“The beasts had all these things. I took them away from them. It didn’t trouble them. I told them: ‘It’s for the elephant.’”

He paused, and then resumed: —

“You crawl over the walls and you don’t care a straw for the government. So there now!”

The two children gazed with timid and stupefied respect on this intrepid and ingenious being, a vagabond like themselves, isolated like themselves, frail like themselves, who had something admirable and all-powerful about him, who seemed supernatural to them, and whose physiognomy was composed of all the grimaces of an old mountebank, mingled with the most ingenuous and charming smiles.

“Monsieur,” ventured the elder timidly, “you are not afraid of the police, then?”

Gavroche contented himself with replying: —

“Brat! Nobody says ‘police,’ they say ‘bobbies.’”

The smaller had his eyes wide open, but he said nothing. As he was on the edge of the mat, the elder being in the middle, Gavroche tucked the blanket round him as a mother might have done, and heightened the mat under his head with old rags, in such a way as to form a pillow for the child. Then he turned to the elder: —

“Hey! We’re jolly comfortable here, ain’t we?”

“Ah, yes!” replied the elder, gazing at Gavroche with the expression of a saved angel.

The two poor little children who had been soaked through, began to grow warm once more.

“Ah, by the way,” continued Gavroche, “what were you bawling about?”

And pointing out the little one to his brother: —

“A mite like that, I’ve nothing to say about, but the idea of a big fellow like you crying! It’s idiotic; you looked like a calf.”

“Gracious,” replied the child, “we have no lodging.”

“Bother!” retorted Gavroche, “you don’t say ‘lodgings,’ you say ‘crib.’”

“And then, we were afraid of being alone like that at night.”

“You don’t say ‘night,’ you say ‘darkmans.’”

“Thank you, sir,” said the child.

“Listen,” went on Gavroche, “you must never bawl again over anything. I’ll take care of you. You shall see what fun we’ll have. In summer, we’ll go to the Glaciere with Navet, one of my pals, we’ll bathe in the Gare, we’ll run stark naked in front of the rafts on the bridge at Austerlitz, — that makes the laundresses raging. They scream, they get mad, and if you only knew how ridiculous they are! We’ll go and see the man-skeleton. And then I’ll take you to the play. I’ll take you to see Frederick Lemaitre. I have tickets, I know some of the actors, I even played in a piece once. There were a lot of us fellers, and we ran under a cloth, and that made the sea. I’ll get you an engagement at my theatre. We’ll go to see the savages. They ain’t real, those savages ain’t. They wear pink tights that go all in wrinkles, and you can see where their elbows have been darned with white. Then, we’ll go to the Opera. We’ll get in with the hired applauders. The Opera claque is well managed. I wouldn’t associate with the claque on the boulevard. At the Opera, just fancy! some of them pay twenty sous, but they’re ninnies. They’re called dishclouts. And then we’ll go to see the guillotine work. I’ll show you the executioner. He lives in the Rue des Marais. Monsieur Sanson. He has a letter-box at his door. Ah! we’ll have famous fun!”

At that moment a drop of wax fell on Gavroche’s finger, and recalled him to the realities of life.

“The deuce!” said he, “there’s the wick giving out. Attention! I can’t spend more than a sou a month on my lighting. When a body goes to bed, he must sleep. We haven’t the time to read M. Paul de Kock’s romances. And besides, the light might pass through the cracks of the porte-cochère, and all the bobbies need to do is to see it.”

“And then,” remarked the elder timidly, — he alone dared talk to Gavroche, and reply to him, “a spark might fall in the straw, and we must look out and not burn the house down.”

“People don’t say ‘burn the house down,’” remarked Gavroche, “they say ‘blaze the crib.’”

The storm increased in violence, and the heavy downpour beat upon the back of the colossus amid claps of thunder. “You’re taken in, rain!” said Gavroche. “It amuses me to hear the decanter run down the legs of the house. Winter is a stupid; it wastes its merchandise, it loses its labor, it can’t wet us, and that makes it kick up a row, old water-carrier that it is.”

This allusion to the thunder, all the consequences of which Gavroche, in his character of a philosopher of the nineteenth century, accepted, was followed by a broad flash of lightning, so dazzling that a hint of it entered the belly of the elephant through the crack. Almost at the same instant, the thunder rumbled with great fury. The two little creatures uttered a shriek, and started up so eagerly that the network came near being displaced, but Gavroche turned his bold face to them, and took advantage of the clap of thunder to burst into a laugh.

“Calm down, children. Don’t topple over the edifice. That’s fine, first-class thunder; all right. That’s no slouch of a streak of lightning. Bravo for the good God! Deuce take it! It’s almost as good as it is at the Ambigu.”

That said, he restored order in the netting, pushed the two children gently down on the bed, pressed their knees, in order to stretch them out at full length, and exclaimed: —

“Since the good God is lighting his candle, I can blow out mine. Now, babes, now, my young humans, you must shut your peepers. It’s very bad not to sleep. It’ll make you swallow the strainer, or, as they say, in fashionable society, stink in the gullet. Wrap yourself up well in the hide! I’m going to put out the light. Are you ready?”

“Yes,” murmured the elder, “I’m all right. I seem to have feathers under my head.”

“People don’t say ‘head,’” cried Gavroche, “they say ‘nut’.”

The two children nestled close to each other, Gavroche finished arranging them on the mat, drew the blanket up to their very ears, then repeated, for the third time, his injunction in the hieratical tongue: —

“Shut your peepers!”

And he snuffed out his tiny light.

Hardly had the light been extinguished, when a peculiar trembling began to affect the netting under which the three children lay.

It consisted of a multitude of dull scratches which produced a metallic sound, as if claws and teeth were gnawing at the copper wire. This was accompanied by all sorts of little piercing cries.

The little five-year-old boy, on hearing this hubbub overhead, and chilled with terror, jogged his brother's elbow; but the elder brother had already shut his peepers, as Gavroche had ordered. Then the little one, who could no longer control his terror, questioned Gavroche, but in a very low tone, and with bated breath: —

"Sir?"

"Hey?" said Gavroche, who had just closed his eyes.

"What is that?"

"It's the rats," replied Gavroche.

And he laid his head down on the mat again.

The rats, in fact, who swarmed by thousands in the carcass of the elephant, and who were the living black spots which we have already mentioned, had been held in awe by the flame of the candle, so long as it had been lighted; but as soon as the cavern, which was the same as their city, had returned to darkness, scenting what the good story-teller Perrault calls "fresh meat," they had hurled themselves in throngs on Gavroche's tent, had climbed to the top of it, and had begun to bite the meshes as though seeking to pierce this new-fangled trap.

Still the little one could not sleep.

"Sir?" he began again.

"Hey?" said Gavroche.

"What are rats?"

"They are mice."

This explanation reassured the child a little. He had seen white mice in the course of his life, and he was not afraid of them. Nevertheless, he lifted up his voice once more.

"Sir?"

"Hey?" said Gavroche again.

"Why don't you have a cat?"

"I did have one," replied Gavroche, "I brought one here, but they ate her."

This second explanation undid the work of the first, and the little fellow began to tremble again.

The dialogue between him and Gavroche began again for the fourth time: —

“Monsieur?”

“Hey?”

“Who was it that was eaten?”

“The cat.”

“And who ate the cat?”

“The rats.”

“The mice?”

“Yes, the rats.”

The child, in consternation, dismayed at the thought of mice which ate cats, pursued: —

“Sir, would those mice eat us?”

“Wouldn’t they just!” ejaculated Gavroche.

The child’s terror had reached its climax. But Gavroche added: —

“Don’t be afraid. They can’t get in. And besides, I’m here! Here, catch hold of my hand. Hold your tongue and shut your peepers!”

At the same time Gavroche grasped the little fellow’s hand across his brother. The child pressed the hand close to him, and felt reassured. Courage and strength have these mysterious ways of communicating themselves. Silence reigned round them once more, the sound of their voices had frightened off the rats; at the expiration of a few minutes, they came raging back, but in vain, the three little fellows were fast asleep and heard nothing more.

The hours of the night fled away. Darkness covered the vast Place de la Bastille. A wintry gale, which mingled with the rain, blew in gusts, the patrol searched all the doorways, alleys, enclosures, and obscure nooks, and in their search for nocturnal vagabonds they passed in silence before the elephant; the monster, erect, motionless, staring open-eyed into the shadows, had the appearance of dreaming happily over his good deed; and sheltered from heaven and from men the three poor sleeping children.

In order to understand what is about to follow, the reader must remember, that, at that epoch, the Bastille guard-house was situated at the other end of the square, and that what took place in the vicinity of the elephant could neither be seen nor heard by the sentinel.

Towards the end of that hour which immediately precedes the dawn, a man turned from the Rue Saint-Antoine at a run, made the circuit of the enclosure of the column of July, and glided between the palings until he was underneath the belly of the elephant. If any light had illuminated that man, it might have been divined from the thorough manner in which he was soaked that he had passed the night in the rain. Arrived beneath the elephant, he uttered a peculiar cry, which did not belong to any human tongue, and which a paroquet alone could have imitated. Twice he repeated this cry, of whose orthography the following barely conveys an idea: —

“Kirikikiou!”

At the second cry, a clear, young, merry voice responded from the belly of the elephant: —

“Yes!”

Almost immediately, the plank which closed the hole was drawn aside, and gave passage to a child who descended the elephant’s leg, and fell briskly near the man. It was Gavroche. The man was Montparnasse.

As for his cry of Kirikikiou, — that was, doubtless, what the child had meant, when he said: —

“You will ask for Monsieur Gavroche.”

On hearing it, he had waked with a start, had crawled out of his “alcove,” pushing apart the netting a little, and carefully drawing it together again, then he had opened the trap, and descended.

The man and the child recognized each other silently amid the gloom: Montparnasse confined himself to the remark: —

“We need you. Come, lend us a hand.”

The lad asked for no further enlightenment.

“I’m with you,” said he.

And both took their way towards the Rue Saint-Antoine, whence Montparnasse had emerged, winding rapidly through the long file of market-gardeners’ carts which descend towards the markets at that hour.

The market-gardeners, crouching, half-asleep, in their wagons, amid the salads and vegetables, enveloped to their very eyes in their mufflers on account of the beating rain, did not even glance at these strange pedestrians.

CHAPTER III — THE VICISSITUDES OF FLIGHT

This is what had taken place that same night at the La Force: —

An escape had been planned between Babet, Brujon, Guelemer, and Thenardier, although Thenardier was in close confinement. Babet had arranged the matter for his own benefit, on the same day, as the reader has seen from Montparnasse’s account to Gavroche. Montparnasse was to help them from outside.

Brujon, after having passed a month in the punishment cell, had had time, in the first place, to weave a rope, in the second, to mature a plan. In former times, those severe places where the discipline of the prison delivers the convict into his own hands, were composed of four stone walls, a stone ceiling, a flagged pavement, a camp bed, a grated window, and a door lined with iron, and were called dungeons; but the dungeon was judged to be too terrible; nowadays they are composed of an iron door, a grated window, a camp bed, a flagged pavement, four stone walls, and a stone ceiling, and are called chambers of punishment. A little light penetrates towards mid-day. The inconvenient point about these chambers which, as the reader sees, are not dungeons, is that they allow the persons who should be at work to think.

So Brujon meditated, and he emerged from the chamber of punishment with a rope. As he had the name of being very dangerous in the Charlemagne courtyard, he was placed in the New Building. The first thing he found in the New Building was Guelemer, the second was a nail; Guelemer, that is to say, crime; a nail, that is to say, liberty. Brujon, of whom it is high time that the reader should have a complete idea, was, with an appearance of delicate health and a profoundly premeditated languor, a polished, intelligent sprig, and a thief, who had a caressing glance, and an atrocious smile. His glance resulted from his will, and his smile from his nature. His first studies in his art had been directed to roofs. He had made great progress in the industry of the men who tear off lead, who plunder the roofs and despoil the gutters by the process called double pickings.

The circumstance which put the finishing touch on the moment peculiarly favorable for an attempt at escape, was that the roofers were re-laying and re-jointing, at that very moment, a portion of the slates on the prison. The Saint-Bernard courtyard was no longer absolutely isolated from the Charlemagne and the Saint-Louis courts. Up above there were scaffoldings and ladders; in other words, bridges and stairs in the direction of liberty.

The New Building, which was the most cracked and decrepit thing to be seen anywhere in the world, was the weak point in the prison. The walls were eaten by saltpetre to such an extent that the authorities had been obliged to line the vaults of the dormitories with a sheathing of wood, because stones were in the habit of becoming detached and falling on the prisoners in their beds. In spite of this antiquity, the authorities committed the error of confining in the New Building the most troublesome prisoners, of placing there "the hard cases," as they say in prison parlance.

The New Building contained four dormitories, one above the other, and a top story which was called the Bel-Air (Fine Air). A large chimney-flue, probably from some ancient kitchen of the Dukes de la Force, started from the groundfloor, traversed all four stories, cut the dormitories, where it figured as a flattened pillar, into two portions, and finally pierced the roof.

Guelemer and Brujon were in the same dormitory. They had been placed, by way of precaution, on the lower story. Chance ordained that the heads of their beds should rest against the chimney.

Thenardier was directly over their heads in the top story known as Fine-Air. The pedestrian who halts on the Rue Culture-Sainte-Catherine, after passing the barracks of the firemen, in front of the porte-cochère of the bathing establishment, beholds a yard full of flowers and shrubs in wooden boxes, at the extremity of which spreads out a little white rotunda with two wings, brightened up with green shutters, the bucolic dream of Jean Jacques.

Not more than ten years ago, there rose above that rotunda an enormous black, hideous, bare wall by which it was backed up.

This was the outer wall of La Force.

This wall, beside that rotunda, was Milton viewed through Berquin.

Lofty as it was, this wall was overtopped by a still blacker roof, which could be seen beyond. This was the roof of the New Building. There one could descry four dormer-windows, guarded with bars; they were the windows of the Fine-Air.

A chimney pierced the roof; this was the chimney which traversed the dormitories.

The Bel-Air, that top story of the New Building, was a sort of large hall, with a Mansard roof, guarded with triple gratings and double doors of sheet iron, which were studded with enormous bolts. When one entered from the north end, one had on one's left the four dormer-windows, on one's right, facing the windows, at regular intervals, four square, tolerably vast cages, separated by narrow passages, built of masonry to about the height of the elbow, and the rest, up to the roof, of iron bars.

Thenardier had been in solitary confinement in one of these cages since the night of the 3d of February. No one was ever able to discover how, and by what connivance, he succeeded in procuring, and secreting a bottle of wine, invented, so it is said, by Desrues, with which a narcotic is mixed, and which the band of the Endormeurs, or Sleep-compellers, rendered famous.

There are, in many prisons, treacherous employees, half-jailers, half-thieves, who assist in escapes, who sell to the police an unfaithful service, and who turn a penny whenever they can.

On that same night, then, when Little Gavroche picked up the two lost children, Brujon and Guelemer, who knew that Babet, who had escaped that morning, was waiting for them in the street as well as Montparnasse, rose softly, and with the nail which Brujon had found, began to pierce the chimney against which their beds stood. The rubbish fell on Brujon's bed, so that they were not heard. Showers mingled with thunder shook the doors on their hinges, and created in the prison a terrible and opportune uproar. Those of the prisoners who woke, pretended to fall asleep again, and left Guelemer and Brujon to their own devices. Brujon was adroit; Guelemer was vigorous. Before any sound had reached the watcher, who was sleeping in the grated cell which opened into the dormitory, the wall had, been pierced, the chimney scaled, the iron grating which barred the upper orifice of the flue forced, and the two redoubtable ruffians were on the roof. The wind and rain redoubled, the roof was slippery.

"What a good night to leg it!" said Brujon.

An abyss six feet broad and eighty feet deep separated them from the surrounding wall. At the bottom of this abyss, they could see the musket of a sentinel gleaming through the gloom. They fastened one end of the rope which Brujon had spun in his dungeon to the stumps of the iron bars which they had just wrenched off, flung the other over the outer wall, crossed the abyss at one bound, clung to the coping of the wall, got astride of it, let themselves slip, one after the other, along the rope, upon a little roof which touches the bath-house, pulled their rope after them, jumped down into the courtyard of the bath-house, traversed it, pushed open the porter's wicket, beside which hung his rope, pulled this, opened the porte-cochère, and found themselves in the street.

Three-quarters of an hour had not elapsed since they had risen in bed in the dark, nail in hand, and their project in their heads.

A few moments later they had joined Babet and Montparnasse, who were prowling about the neighborhood.

They had broken their rope in pulling it after them, and a bit of it remained attached to the chimney on the roof. They had sustained no other damage, however, than that of scratching nearly all the skin off their hands.

That night, Thenardier was warned, without any one being able to explain how, and was not asleep.

Towards one o'clock in the morning, the night being very dark, he saw two shadows pass along the roof, in the rain and squalls, in front of the dormer-window which was opposite his cage. One halted at the window, long enough to dart in a glance. This was Brujon.

Thenardier recognized him, and understood. This was enough.

Thenardier, rated as a burglar, and detained as a measure of precaution under the charge of organizing a nocturnal ambush, with armed force, was kept in sight. The sentry, who was relieved every two hours, marched up and down in front of his cage with loaded musket. The Fine-Air was lighted by a skylight. The prisoner had on his feet fetters weighing fifty pounds. Every day, at four o'clock in the afternoon, a jailer, escorted by two dogs, — this was still in vogue at that time, — entered his cage, deposited beside his bed a loaf of black bread weighing two pounds, a jug of water, a bowl filled with rather thin bouillon, in which swam a few Mayagan beans, inspected his irons and tapped the bars. This man and his dogs made two visits during the night.

Thenardier had obtained permission to keep a sort of iron bolt which he used to spike his bread into a crack in the wall, "in order to preserve it from the rats," as he said. As Thenardier was kept in sight, no objection had been made to this spike. Still, it was remembered afterwards, that one of the jailers had said: "It would be better to let him have only a wooden spike."

At two o'clock in the morning, the sentinel, who was an old soldier, was relieved, and replaced by a conscript. A few moments later, the man with the dogs paid his visit, and went off without noticing anything, except, possibly, the excessive youth and “the rustic air” of the “raw recruit.” Two hours afterwards, at four o’clock, when they came to relieve the conscript, he was found asleep on the floor, lying like a log near Thenardier’s cage. As for Thenardier, he was no longer there. There was a hole in the ceiling of his cage, and, above it, another hole in the roof. One of the planks of his bed had been wrenched off, and probably carried away with him, as it was not found. They also seized in his cell a half-empty bottle which contained the remains of the stupefying wine with which the soldier had been drugged. The soldier’s bayonet had disappeared.

At the moment when this discovery was made, it was assumed that Thenardier was out of reach. The truth is, that he was no longer in the New Building, but that he was still in great danger.

Thenardier, on reaching the roof of the New Building, had found the remains of Brujon’s rope hanging to the bars of the upper trap of the chimney, but, as this broken fragment was much too short, he had not been able to escape by the outer wall, as Brujon and Guelemer had done.

When one turns from the Rue des Ballets into the Rue du Roi-de-Sicile, one almost immediately encounters a repulsive ruin. There stood on that spot, in the last century, a house of which only the back wall now remains, a regular wall of masonry, which rises to the height of the third story between the adjoining buildings. This ruin can be recognized by two large square windows which are still to be seen there; the middle one, that nearest the right gable, is barred with a worm-eaten beam adjusted like a prop. Through these windows there was formerly visible a lofty and lugubrious wall, which was a fragment of the outer wall of La Force.

The empty space on the street left by the demolished house is half-filled by a fence of rotten boards, shored up by five stone posts. In this recess lies concealed a little shanty which leans against the portion of the ruin which has remained standing. The fence has a gate, which, a few years ago, was fastened only by a latch.

It was the crest of this ruin that Thenardier had succeeded in reaching, a little after one o’clock in the morning.

How had he got there? That is what no one has ever been able to explain or understand. The lightning must, at the same time, have hindered and helped him. Had he made use of the ladders and scaffoldings of the slaters to get from roof to roof, from enclosure to enclosure, from compartment to compartment, to the buildings of the Charlemagne court, then to the buildings of the Saint-Louis court, to the outer wall, and thence to the hut on the Rue du Roi-de-Sicile? But in that itinerary there existed breaks which seemed to render it an impossibility. Had he placed the plank from his bed like a bridge from the roof of the Fine-Air to the outer wall, and crawled flat, on his belly on the coping of the outer wall the whole distance round the prison as far as the hut? But the outer wall of La Force formed a crenellated and unequal line; it mounted and descended, it dropped at the firemen's barracks, it rose towards the bath-house, it was cut in twain by buildings, it was not even of the same height on the Hotel Lamoignon as on the Rue Pavee; everywhere occurred falls and right angles; and then, the sentinels must have espied the dark form of the fugitive; hence, the route taken by Thenardier still remains rather inexplicable. In two manners, flight was impossible. Had Thenardier, spurred on by that thirst for liberty which changes precipices into ditches, iron bars into wattles of osier, a legless man into an athlete, a gouty man into a bird, stupidity into instinct, instinct into intelligence, and intelligence into genius, had Thenardier invented a third mode? No one has ever found out.

The marvels of escape cannot always be accounted for. The man who makes his escape, we repeat, is inspired; there is something of the star and of the lightning in the mysterious gleam of flight; the effort towards deliverance is no less surprising than the flight towards the sublime, and one says of the escaped thief: “How did he contrive to scale that wall?” in the same way that one says of Corneille: “Where did he find the means of dying?”

At all events, dripping with perspiration, drenched with rain, with his clothes hanging in ribbons, his hands flayed, his elbows bleeding, his knees torn, Thenardier had reached what children, in their figurative language, call the edge of the wall of the ruin, there he had stretched himself out at full length, and there his strength had failed him. A steep escarpment three stories high separated him from the pavement of the street.

The rope which he had was too short.

There he waited, pale, exhausted, desperate with all the despair which he had undergone, still hidden by the night, but telling himself that the day was on the point of dawning, alarmed at the idea of hearing the neighboring clock of Saint-Paul strike four within a few minutes, an hour when the sentinel was relieved and when the latter would be found asleep under the pierced roof, staring in horror at a terrible depth, at the light of the street lanterns, the wet, black pavement, that pavement longed for yet frightful, which meant death, and which meant liberty.

He asked himself whether his three accomplices in flight had succeeded, if they had heard him, and if they would come to his assistance. He listened. With the exception of the patrol, no one had passed through the street since he had been there. Nearly the whole of the descent of the market-gardeners from Montreuil, from Charonne, from Vincennes, and from Bercy to the markets was accomplished through the Rue Saint-Antoine.

Four o'clock struck. Thenardier shuddered. A few moments later, that terrified and confused uproar which follows the discovery of an escape broke forth in the prison. The sound of doors opening and shutting, the creaking of gratings on their hinges, a tumult in the guard-house, the hoarse shouts of the turnkeys, the shock of musket-butts on the pavement of the courts, reached his ears. Lights ascended and descended past the grated windows of the dormitories, a torch ran along the ridge-pole of the top story of the New Building, the firemen belonging in the barracks on the right had been summoned. Their helmets, which the torch lighted up in the rain, went and came along the roofs. At the same time, Thenardier perceived in the direction of the Bastille a wan whiteness lighting up the edge of the sky in doleful wise.

He was on top of a wall ten inches wide, stretched out under the heavy rains, with two gulfs to right and left, unable to stir, subject to the giddiness of a possible fall, and to the horror of a certain arrest, and his thoughts, like the pendulum of a clock, swung from one of these ideas to the other: “Dead if I fall, caught if I stay.” In the midst of this anguish, he suddenly saw, the street being still dark, a man who was gliding along the walls and coming from the Rue Pavee, halt in the recess above which Thenardier was, as it were, suspended. Here this man was joined by a second, who walked with the same caution, then by a third, then by a fourth. When these men were re-united, one of them lifted the latch of the gate in the fence, and all four entered the enclosure in which the shanty stood. They halted directly under Thenardier. These men had evidently chosen this vacant space in order that they might consult without being seen by the passers-by or by the sentinel who guards the wicket of La Force a few paces distant. It must be added, that the rain kept this sentinel blocked in his box. Thenardier, not being able to distinguish their visages, lent an ear to their words with the desperate attention of a wretch who feels himself lost.

Thenardier saw something resembling a gleam of hope flash before his eyes, — these men conversed in slang.

The first said in a low but distinct voice: —

“Let’s cut. What are we up to here?”

The second replied: “It’s raining hard enough to put out the very devil’s fire. And the bobbies will be along instanter. There’s a soldier on guard yonder. We shall get nabbed here.”

These two words, icigo and icicaille, both of which mean ici, and which belong, the first to the slang of the barriers, the second to the slang of the Temple, were flashes of light for Thenardier. By the icigo he recognized Brujon, who was a prowler of the barriers, by the icicaille he knew Babet, who, among his other trades, had been an old-clothes broker at the Temple.

The antique slang of the great century is no longer spoken except in the Temple, and Babet was really the only person who spoke it in all its purity. Had it not been for the icicaille, Thenardier would not have recognized him, for he had entirely changed his voice.

In the meanwhile, the third man had intervened.

“There’s no hurry yet, let’s wait a bit. How do we know that he doesn’t stand in need of us?”

By this, which was nothing but French, Thenardier recognized Montparnasse, who made it a point in his elegance to understand all slangs and to speak none of them.

As for the fourth, he held his peace, but his huge shoulders betrayed him. Thenardier did not hesitate. It was Guelemer.

Brujon replied almost impetuously but still in a low tone: —

“What are you jabbering about? The tavern-keeper hasn’t managed to cut his stick. He don’t tumble to the racket, that he don’t! You have to be a pretty knowing cove to tear up your shirt, cut up your sheet to make a rope, punch holes in doors, get up false papers, make false keys, file your irons, hang out your cord, hide yourself, and disguise yourself! The old fellow hasn’t managed to play it, he doesn’t understand how to work the business.”

Babet added, still in that classical slang which was spoken by Poulailler and Cartouche, and which is to the bold, new, highly colored and risky argot used by Brujon what the language of Racine is to the language of Andre Chenier: —

"Your tavern-keeper must have been nabbed in the act. You have to be knowing. He's only a greenhorn. He must have let himself be taken in by a bobby, perhaps even by a sheep who played it on him as his pal. Listen, Montparnasse, do you hear those shouts in the prison? You have seen all those lights. He's recaptured, there! He'll get off with twenty years. I ain't afraid, I ain't a coward, but there ain't anything more to do, or otherwise they'd lead us a dance. Don't get mad, come with us, let's go drink a bottle of old wine together."

"One doesn't desert one's friends in a scrape," grumbled Montparnasse.

"I tell you he's nabbed!" retorted Brujon. "At the present moment, the inn-keeper ain't worth a ha'penny. We can't do nothing for him. Let's be off. Every minute I think a bobby has got me in his fist."

Montparnasse no longer offered more than a feeble resistance; the fact is, that these four men, with the fidelity of ruffians who never abandon each other, had prowled all night long about La Force, great as was their peril, in the hope of seeing Thenardier make his appearance on the top of some wall. But the night, which was really growing too fine, — for the downpour was such as to render all the streets deserted, — the cold which was overpowering them, their soaked garments, their hole-ridden shoes, the alarming noise which had just burst forth in the prison, the hours which had elapsed, the patrol which they had encountered, the hope which was vanishing, all urged them to beat a retreat. Montparnasse himself, who was, perhaps, almost Thenardier's son-in-law, yielded. A moment more, and they would be gone. Thenardier was panting on his wall like the shipwrecked sufferers of the Meduse on their raft when they beheld the vessel which had appeared in sight vanish on the horizon.

He dared not call to them; a cry might be heard and ruin everything. An idea occurred to him, a last idea, a flash of inspiration; he drew from his pocket the end of Brujon's rope, which he had detached from the chimney of the New Building, and flung it into the space enclosed by the fence.

This rope fell at their feet.

"A widow," said Babet.

"My tortouse!" said Brujon.

"The tavern-keeper is there," said Montparnasse.

They raised their eyes. Thenardier thrust out his head a very little.

"Quick!" said Montparnasse, "have you the other end of the rope, Brujon?"

“Yes.”

“Knot the two pieces together, we’ll fling him the rope, he can fasten it to the wall, and he’ll have enough of it to get down with.”

Thenardier ran the risk, and spoke: —

“I am paralyzed with cold.”

“We’ll warm you up.”

“I can’t budge.”

“Let yourself slide, we’ll catch you.”

“My hands are benumbed.”

“Only fasten the rope to the wall.”

“I can’t.”

“Then one of us must climb up,” said Montparnasse.

“Three stories!” ejaculated Brujon.

An ancient plaster flue, which had served for a stove that had been used in the shanty in former times, ran along the wall and mounted almost to the very spot where they could see Thenardier. This flue, then much damaged and full of cracks, has since fallen, but the marks of it are still visible.

It was very narrow.

“One might get up by the help of that,” said Montparnasse.

“By that flue?” exclaimed Babet, “a grown-up cove, never! it would take a brat.”

“A brat must be got,” resumed Brujon.

“Where are we to find a young ‘un?” said Guelemer.

“Wait,” said Montparnasse. “I’ve got the very article.”

He opened the gate of the fence very softly, made sure that no one was passing along the street, stepped out cautiously, shut the gate behind him, and set off at a run in the direction of the Bastille.

Seven or eight minutes elapsed, eight thousand centuries to Thenardier; Babet, Brujon, and Guelemer did not open their lips; at last the gate opened once more, and Montparnasse appeared, breathless, and followed by Gavroche. The rain still rendered the street completely deserted.

Little Gavroche entered the enclosure and gazed at the forms of these ruffians with a tranquil air. The water was dripping from his hair. Guelemer addressed him: —

“Are you a man, young ‘un?”

Gavroche shrugged his shoulders, and replied: —

“A young ‘un like me’s a man, and men like you are babes.”

“The brat’s tongue’s well hung!” exclaimed Babet.

“The Paris brat ain’t made of straw,” added Brujon.

“What do you want?” asked Gavroche.

Montparnasse answered: —

“Climb up that flue.”

“With this rope,” said Babet.

“And fasten it,” continued Brujon.

“To the top of the wall,” went on Babet.

“To the cross-bar of the window,” added Brujon.

“And then?” said Gavroche.

“There!” said Guelemer.

The gamin examined the rope, the flue, the wall, the windows, and made that indescribable and disdainful noise with his lips which signifies: —

“Is that all!”

“There’s a man up there whom you are to save,” resumed Montparnasse.

“Will you?” began Brujon again.

“Greenhorn!” replied the lad, as though the question appeared a most unprecedented one to him.

And he took off his shoes.

Guelemer seized Gavroche by one arm, set him on the roof of the shanty, whose worm-eaten planks bent beneath the urchin’s weight, and handed him the rope which Brujon had knotted together during Montparnasse’s absence. The gamin directed his steps towards the flue, which it was easy to enter, thanks to a large crack which touched the roof. At the moment when he was on the point of ascending, Thenardier, who saw life and safety approaching, bent over the edge of the wall; the first light of dawn struck white upon his brow dripping with sweat, upon his livid cheek-bones, his sharp and savage nose, his bristling gray beard, and Gavroche recognized him.

“Hullo! it’s my father! Oh, that won’t hinder.”

And taking the rope in his teeth, he resolutely began the ascent.

He reached the summit of the hut, bestrode the old wall as though it had been a horse, and knotted the rope firmly to the upper cross-bar of the window.

A moment later, Thenardier was in the street.

As soon as he touched the pavement, as soon as he found himself out of danger, he was no longer either weary, or chilled or trembling; the terrible things from which he had escaped vanished like smoke, all that strange and ferocious mind awoke once more, and stood erect and free, ready to march onward.

These were this man's first words: —

"Now, whom are we to eat?"

It is useless to explain the sense of this frightfully transparent remark, which signifies both to kill, to assassinate, and to plunder. To eat, true sense: to devour.

"Let's get well into a corner," said Brujon. "Let's settle it in three words, and part at once. There was an affair that promised well in the Rue Plumet, a deserted street, an isolated house, an old rotten gate on a garden, and lone women."

"Well! why not?" demanded Thenardier.

"Your girl, Eponine, went to see about the matter," replied Babet.

"And she brought a biscuit to Magnon," added Guelemer. "Nothing to be made there."

"The girl's no fool," said Thenardier. "Still, it must be seen to."

"Yes, yes," said Brujon, "it must be looked up."

In the meanwhile, none of the men seemed to see Gavroche, who, during this colloquy, had seated himself on one of the fence-posts; he waited a few moments, thinking that perhaps his father would turn towards him, then he put on his shoes again, and said: —

"Is that all? You don't want any more, my men? Now you're out of your scrape. I'm off. I must go and get my brats out of bed."

And off he went.

The five men emerged, one after another, from the enclosure.

When Gavroche had disappeared at the corner of the Rue des Ballets, Babet took Thenardier aside.

"Did you take a good look at that young 'un?" he asked.

"What young 'un?"

"The one who climbed the wall and carried you the rope."

"Not particularly."

"Well, I don't know, but it strikes me that it was your son."

"Bah!" said Thenardier, "do you think so?"

BOOK SEVENTH. — SLANG

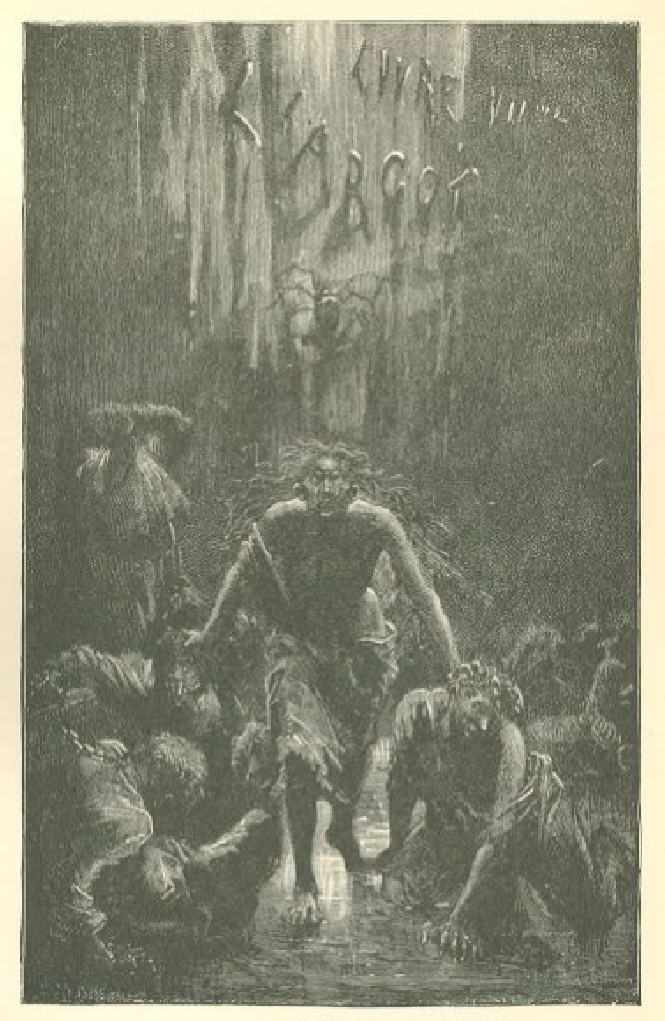
LIVRE VII
L'ARGOT

SLANG.

CHAPTER I — ORIGIN

Pigritia is a terrible word.

It engenders a whole world, la pègre, for which read theft, and a hell, la pègrenne, for which read hunger.

Thus, idleness is the mother.

She has a son, theft, and a daughter, hunger.

Where are we at this moment? In the land of slang.

What is slang? It is at one and the same time, a nation and a dialect; it is theft in its two kinds; people and language.

When, four and thirty years ago, the narrator of this grave and sombre history introduced into a work written with the same aim as this a thief who talked argot, there arose amazement and clamor.— “What! How! Argot! Why, argot is horrible! It is the language of prisons, galleys, convicts, of everything that is most abominable in society!” etc., etc.

We have never understood this sort of objections.

Since that time, two powerful romancers, one of whom is a profound observer of the human heart, the other an intrepid friend of the people, Balzac and Eugene Sue, having represented their ruffians as talking their natural language, as the author of The Last Day of a Condemned Man did in 1828, the same objections have been raised. People repeated: “What do authors mean by that revolting dialect? Slang is odious! Slang makes one shudder!”

Who denies that? Of course it does.

When it is a question of probing a wound, a gulf, a society, since when has it been considered wrong to go too far? to go to the bottom? We have always thought that it was sometimes a courageous act, and, at least, a simple and useful deed, worthy of the sympathetic attention which duty accepted and fulfilled merits. Why should one not explore everything, and study everything? Why should one halt on the way? The halt is a matter depending on the sounding-line, and not on the leadsman.

Certainly, too, it is neither an attractive nor an easy task to undertake an investigation into the lowest depths of the social order, where terra firma comes to an end and where mud begins, to rummage in those vague, murky waves, to follow up, to seize and to fling, still quivering, upon the pavement that abject dialect which is dripping with filth when thus brought to the light, that pustulous vocabulary each word of which seems an unclean ring from a monster of the mire and the shadows. Nothing is more lugubrious than the contemplation thus in its nudity, in the broad light of thought, of the horrible swarming of slang. It seems, in fact, to be a sort of horrible beast made for the night which has just been torn from its cesspool. One thinks one beholds a frightful, living, and bristling thicket which quivers, rustles, wavers, returns to shadow, threatens and glares. One word resembles a claw, another an extinguished and bleeding eye, such and such a phrase seems to move like the claw of a crab. All this is alive with the hideous vitality of things which have been organized out of disorganization.

Now, when has horror ever excluded study? Since when has malady banished medicine? Can one imagine a naturalist refusing to study the viper, the bat, the scorpion, the centipede, the tarantula, and one who would cast them back into their darkness, saying: "Oh! how ugly that is!" The thinker who should turn aside from slang would resemble a surgeon who should avert his face from an ulcer or a wart. He would be like a philologist refusing to examine a fact in language, a philosopher hesitating to scrutinize a fact in humanity. For, it must be stated to those who are ignorant of the case, that argot is both a literary phenomenon and a social result. What is slang, properly speaking? It is the language of wretchedness.

We may be stopped; the fact may be put to us in general terms, which is one way of attenuating it; we may be told, that all trades, professions, it may be added, all the accidents of the social hierarchy and all forms of intelligence, have their own slang. The merchant who says: "Montpellier not active, Marseilles fine quality," the broker on 'change who says: "Assets at end of current month," the gambler who says: "Tiers et tout, refait de pique," the sheriff of the Norman Isles who says: "The holder in fee reverting to his landed estate cannot claim the fruits of that estate during the hereditary seizure of the real estate by the mortgagor," the playwright who says: "The piece was hissed," the comedian who says: "I've made a hit," the philosopher who says: "Phenomenal triplicity," the huntsman who says: "Voileci allais, Voileci fuyant," the phrenologist who says: "Amativeness, combativeness, secretiveness," the infantry soldier who says: "My shooting-iron," the cavalry-man who says: "My turkey-cock," the fencing-master who says: "Tierce, quarte, break," the printer who says: "My shooting-stick and galley," — all, printer, fencing-master, cavalry dragoon, infantry-man, phrenologist, huntsman, philosopher, comedian, playwright, sheriff, gambler, stock-broker, and merchant, speak slang. The painter who says: “My grinder,” the notary who says: “My Skip-the-Gutter,” the hairdresser who says: “My mealyback,” the cobbler who says: “My cub,” talks slang. Strictly speaking, if one absolutely insists on the point, all the different fashions of saying the right and the left, the sailor’s port and starboard, the scene-shifter’s court-side, and garden-side, the beadle’s Gospel-side and Epistle-side, are slang. There is the slang of the affected lady as well as of the precieuses. The Hotel Rambouillet nearly adjoins the Cour des Miracles. There is a slang of duchesses, witness this phrase contained in a love-letter from a very great lady and a very pretty woman of the Restoration: “You will find in this gossip a fultitude of reasons why I should libertize.” Diplomatic ciphers are slang; the pontifical chancellery by using 26 for Rome, grkztntgzyal for despatch, and abfxustgrnogrkzu tu XI. for the Due de Modena, speaks slang. The physicians of the Middle Ages who, for carrot, radish, and turnip, said Opoponach, perfroschinum, reptitalmus, dracatholicum, angelorum, postmegorum, talked slang. The sugar-manufacturer who says: “Loaf, clarified, lumps, bastard, common, burnt,” — this honest manufacturer talks slang. A certain school of criticism twenty years ago, which used to say: “Half of the works of Shakespeare consists of plays upon words and puns,” — talked slang. The poet, and the artist who, with profound understanding, would designate M. de Montmorency as “a bourgeois,” if he were not a judge of verses and statues, speak slang. The classic Academician who calls flowers “Flora,” fruits, “Pomona,” the sea, “Neptune,” love, “fires,” beauty, “charms,” a horse, “a courser,” the white or tricolored cockade, “the rose of Bellona,” the three-cornered hat, “Mars’ triangle,” — that classical Academician talks slang. Algebra, medicine, botany, have each their slang. The tongue which is employed on board ship, that wonderful language of the sea, which is so complete and so picturesque, which was spoken by Jean Bart, Duquesne, Suffren, and Duperre, which mingles with the whistling of the rigging, the sound of the speaking-trumpets, the shock of the boarding-irons, the roll of the sea, the wind, the gale, the cannon, is wholly a heroic and dazzling slang, which is to the fierce slang of the thieves what the lion is to the jackal.

No doubt. But say what we will, this manner of understanding the word slang is an extension which every one will not admit. For our part, we reserve to the word its ancient and precise, circumscribed and determined significance, and we restrict slang to slang. The veritable slang and the slang that is pre-eminently slang, if the two words can be coupled thus, the slang immemorial which was a kingdom, is nothing else, we repeat, than the homely, uneasy, crafty, treacherous, venomous, cruel, equivocal, vile, profound, fatal tongue of wretchedness. There exists, at the extremity of all abasement and all misfortunes, a last misery which revolts and makes up its mind to enter into conflict with the whole mass of fortunate facts and reigning rights; a fearful conflict, where, now cunning, now violent, unhealthy and ferocious at one and the same time, it attacks the social order with pin-pricks through vice, and with club-blows through crime. To meet the needs of this conflict, wretchedness has invented a language of combat, which is slang.

To keep afloat and to rescue from oblivion, to hold above the gulf, were it but a fragment of some language which man has spoken and which would, otherwise, be lost, that is to say, one of the elements, good or bad, of which civilization is composed, or by which it is complicated, to extend the records of social observation; is to serve civilization itself. This service Plautus rendered, consciously or unconsciously, by making two Carthaginian soldiers talk Phoenician; that service Moliere rendered, by making so many of his characters talk Levantine and all sorts of dialects. Here objections spring up afresh. Phoenician, very good! Levantine, quite right! Even dialect, let that pass! They are tongues which have belonged to nations or provinces; but slang! What is the use of preserving slang? What is the good of assisting slang “to survive”?

To this we reply in one word, only. Assuredly, if the tongue which a nation or a province has spoken is worthy of interest, the language which has been spoken by a misery is still more worthy of attention and study.

It is the language which has been spoken, in France, for example, for more than four centuries, not only by a misery, but by every possible human misery.

And then, we insist upon it, the study of social deformities and infirmities, and the task of pointing them out with a view to remedy, is not a business in which choice is permitted. The historian of manners and ideas has no less austere a mission than the historian of events. The latter has the surface of civilization, the conflicts of crowns, the births of princes, the marriages of kings, battles, assemblages, great public men, revolutions in the daylight, everything on the exterior; the other historian has the interior, the depths, the people who toil, suffer, wait, the oppressed woman, the agonizing child, the secret war between man and man, obscure ferocities, prejudices, plotted iniquities, the subterranean, the indistinct tremors of multitudes, the die-of-hunger, the counter-blows of the law, the secret evolution of souls, the go-bare-foot, the bare-armed, the disinherited, the orphans, the unhappy, and the infamous, all the forms which roam through the darkness. He must descend with his heart full of charity, and severity at the same time, as a brother and as a judge, to those impenetrable casemates where crawl, pell-mell, those who bleed and those who deal the blow, those who weep and those who curse, those who fast and those who devour, those who endure evil and those who inflict it. Have these historians of hearts and souls duties at all inferior to the historians of external facts? Does any one think that Alighieri has any fewer things to say than Machiavelli? Is the under side of civilization any less important than the upper side merely because it is deeper and more sombre? Do we really know the mountain well when we are not acquainted with the cavern?

Let us say, moreover, parenthetically, that from a few words of what precedes a marked separation might be inferred between the two classes of historians which does not exist in our mind. No one is a good historian of the patent, visible, striking, and public life of peoples, if he is not, at the same time, in a certain measure, the historian of their deep and hidden life; and no one is a good historian of the interior unless he understands how, at need, to be the historian of the exterior also. The history of manners and ideas permeates the history of events, and this is true reciprocally. They constitute two different orders of facts which correspond to each other, which are always interlaced, and which often bring forth results. All the lineaments which providence traces on the surface of a nation have their parallels, sombre but distinct, in their depths, and all convulsions of the depths produce ebullitions on the surface. True history being a mixture of all things, the true historian mingles in everything.

Man is not a circle with a single centre; he is an ellipse with a double focus. Facts form one of these, and ideas the other.

Slang is nothing but a dressing-room where the tongue having some bad action to perform, disguises itself. There it clothes itself in word-masks, in metaphor-rags. In this guise it becomes horrible.

One finds it difficult to recognize. Is it really the French tongue, the great human tongue? Behold it ready to step upon the stage and to retort upon crime, and prepared for all the employments of the repertory of evil. It no longer walks, it hobbles; it limps on the crutch of the Court of Miracles, a crutch metamorphosable into a club; it is called vagrancy; every sort of spectre, its dressers, have painted its face, it crawls and rears, the double gait of the reptile. Henceforth, it is apt at all roles, it is made suspicious by the counterfeiter, covered with verdigris by the forger, blacked by the soot of the incendiary; and the murderer applies its rouge.

When one listens, by the side of honest men, at the portals of society, one overhears the dialogues of those who are on the outside. One distinguishes questions and replies. One perceives, without understanding it, a hideous murmur, sounding almost like human accents, but more nearly resembling a howl than an articulate word. It is slang. The words are misshapen and stamped with an indescribable and fantastic bestiality. One thinks one hears hydras talking.

It is unintelligible in the dark. It gnashes and whispers, completing the gloom with mystery. It is black in misfortune, it is blacker still in crime; these two blacknesses amalgamated, compose slang. Obscurity in the atmosphere, obscurity in acts, obscurity in voices. Terrible, toad-like tongue which goes and comes, leaps, crawls, slobbers, and stirs about in monstrous wise in that immense gray fog composed of rain and night, of hunger, of vice, of falsehood, of injustice, of nudity, of suffocation, and of winter, the high noonday of the miserable.

Let us have compassion on the chastised. Alas! Who are we ourselves? Who am I who now address you? Who are you who are listening to me? And are you very sure that we have done nothing before we were born? The earth is not devoid of resemblance to a jail. Who knows whether man is not a recaptured offender against divine justice? Look closely at life. It is so made, that everywhere we feel the sense of punishment.

Are you what is called a happy man? Well! you are sad every day. Each day has its own great grief or its little care. Yesterday you were trembling for a health that is dear to you, to-day you fear for your own; to-morrow it will be anxiety about money, the day after to-morrow the diatribe of a slanderer, the day after that, the misfortune of some friend; then the prevailing weather, then something that has been broken or lost, then a pleasure with which your conscience and your vertebral column reproach you; again, the course of public affairs. This without reckoning in the pains of the heart. And so it goes on. One cloud is dispelled, another forms. There is hardly one day out of a hundred which is wholly joyous and sunny. And you belong to that small class who are happy! As for the rest of mankind, stagnating night rests upon them.

Thoughtful minds make but little use of the phrase: the fortunate and the unfortunate. In this world, evidently the vestibule of another, there are no fortunate.

The real human division is this: the luminous and the shady. To diminish the number of the shady, to augment the number of the luminous, — that is the object. That is why we cry: Education! science! To teach reading, means to light the fire; every syllable spelled out sparkles.

However, he who says light does not, necessarily, say joy. People suffer in the light; excess burns. The flame is the enemy of the wing. To burn without ceasing to fly, — therein lies the marvel of genius.

When you shall have learned to know, and to love, you will still suffer. The day is born in tears. The luminous weep, if only over those in darkness.

CHAPTER II — ROOTS

Slang is the tongue of those who sit in darkness.

Thought is moved in its most sombre depths, social philosophy is bidden to its most poignant meditations, in the presence of that enigmatic dialect at once so blighted and rebellious. Therein lies chastisement made visible. Every syllable has an air of being marked. The words of the vulgar tongue appear therein wrinkled and shrivelled, as it were, beneath the hot iron of the executioner. Some seem to be still smoking. Such and such a phrase produces upon you the effect of the shoulder of a thief branded with the fleur-de-lys, which has suddenly been laid bare. Ideas almost refuse to be expressed in these substantives which are fugitives from justice. Metaphor is sometimes so shameless, that one feels that it has worn the iron neck-fetter.

Moreover, in spite of all this, and because of all this, this strange dialect has by rights, its own compartment in that great impartial case of pigeon-holes where there is room for the rusty farthing as well as for the gold medal, and which is called literature. Slang, whether the public admit the fact or not has its syntax and its poetry. It is a language. Yes, by the deformity of certain terms, we recognize the fact that it was chewed by Mandrin, and by the splendor of certain metonymies, we feel that Villon spoke it.

That exquisite and celebrated verse —

Mais où sont les neiges d’antan?
But where are the snows of years gone by?

is a verse of slang. Antam — ante annum — is a word of Thunes slang, which signified the past year, and by extension, formerly. Thirty-five years ago, at the epoch of the departure of the great chain-gang, there could be read in one of the cells at Bicêtre, this maxim engraved with a nail on the wall by a king of Thunes condemned to the galleys: Les dabs d’antan trimaient siempre pour la pierre du Coesre. This means Kings in days gone by always went and had themselves anointed. In the opinion of that king, anointment meant the galleys.

The word decarade, which expresses the departure of heavy vehicles at a gallop, is attributed to Villon, and it is worthy of him. This word, which strikes fire with all four of its feet, sums up in a masterly onomatopoeia the whole of La Fontaine's admirable verse: —

Six forts chevaux tiraient un coche.
Six stout horses drew a coach.

From a purely literary point of view, few studies would prove more curious and fruitful than the study of slang. It is a whole language within a language, a sort of sickly excrescence, an unhealthy graft which has produced a vegetation, a parasite which has its roots in the old Gallic trunk, and whose sinister foliage crawls all over one side of the language. This is what may be called the first, the vulgar aspect of slang. But, for those who study the tongue as it should be studied, that is to say, as geologists study the earth, slang appears like a veritable alluvial deposit. According as one digs a longer or shorter distance into it, one finds in slang, below the old popular French, Provencal, Spanish, Italian, Levantine, that language of the Mediterranean ports, English and German, the Romance language in its three varieties, French, Italian, and Romance Romance, Latin, and finally Basque and Celtic. A profound and unique formation. A subterranean edifice erected in common by all the miserable. Each accursed race has deposited its layer, each suffering has dropped its stone there, each heart has contributed its pebble. A throng of evil, base, or irritated souls, who have traversed life and have vanished into eternity, linger there almost entirely visible still beneath the form of some monstrous word.

Do you want Spanish? The old Gothic slang abounded in it. Here is boffete, a box on the ear, which is derived from bofeton; vantane, window (later on vanterne), which comes from vantana; gat, cat, which comes from gato; acite, oil, which comes from aceyte. Do you want Italian? Here is spade, sword, which comes from spada; carvel, boat, which comes from caravella. Do you want English? Here is bichot, which comes from bishop; raille, spy, which comes from rascal, rascalion; pilche, a case, which comes from pilcher, a sheath. Do you want German? Here is the caleur, the waiter, kellner; the hers, the master, herzog (duke). Do you want Latin? Here is frangir, to break, frangere; affurer, to steal, fur; cadene, chain, catena. There is one word which crops up in every language of the continent, with a sort of mysterious power and authority. It is the word magnus; the Scotchman makes of it his mac, which designates the chief of the clan; Mac-Farlane, Mac-Callumore, the great Farlane, the great Callumore; slang turns it into meck and later le meg, that is to say, God. Would you like Basque? Here is gahisto, the devil, which comes from gaiztoa, evil; sorgabon, good night, which comes from gabon, good evening. Do you want Celtic? Here is blavin, a handkerchief, which comes from blavet, gushing water; menesse, a woman (in a bad sense), which comes from meinec, full of stones; barant, brook, from baranton, fountain; goffeur, locksmith, from goff, blacksmith; guedouze, death, which comes from guenn-du, black-white. Finally, would you like history? Slang calls crowns les malteses, a souvenir of the coin in circulation on the galleys of Malta.

In addition to the philological origins just indicated, slang possesses other and still more natural roots, which spring, so to speak, from the mind of man itself.

In the first place, the direct creation of words. Therein lies the mystery of tongues. To paint with words, which contains figures one knows not how or why, is the primitive foundation of all human languages, what may be called their granite.

Slang abounds in words of this description, immediate words, words created instantaneously no one knows either where or by whom, without etymology, without analogies, without derivatives, solitary, barbarous, sometimes hideous words, which at times possess a singular power of expression and which live. The executioner, le taule; the forest, le sabri; fear, flight, taf; the lackey, le larbin; the mineral, the prefect, the minister, pharos; the devil, le rabouin. Nothing is stranger than these words which both mask and reveal. Some, le rabouin, for example, are at the same time grotesque and terrible, and produce on you the effect of a cyclopean grimace.

In the second place, metaphor. The peculiarity of a language which is desirous of saying all yet concealing all is that it is rich in figures. Metaphor is an enigma, wherein the thief who is plotting a stroke, the prisoner who is arranging an escape, take refuge. No idiom is more metaphorical than slang: devisser le coco (to unscrew the nut), to twist the neck; tortiller (to wriggle), to eat; etre gerbe, to be tried; a rat, a bread thief; il lansquine, it rains, a striking, ancient figure which partly bears its date about it, which assimilates long oblique lines of rain, with the dense and slanting pikes of the lancers, and which compresses into a single word the popular expression: it rains halberds. Sometimes, in proportion as slang progresses from the first epoch to the second, words pass from the primitive and savage sense to the metaphorical sense. The devil ceases to be le rabouin, and becomes le boulanger (the baker), who puts the bread into the oven. This is more witty, but less grand, something like Racine after Corneille, like Euripides after AEschylus. Certain slang phrases which participate in the two epochs and have at once the barbaric character and the metaphorical character resemble phantasmagories. Les sorgueuers vont solliciter des gails à la lune — the prowlers are going to steal horses by night, — this passes before the mind like a group of spectres. One knows not what one sees.

In the third place, the expedient. Slang lives on the language. It uses it in accordance with its fancy, it dips into it hap-hazard, and it often confines itself, when occasion arises, to alter it in a gross and summary fashion. Occasionally, with the ordinary words thus deformed and complicated with words of pure slang, picturesque phrases are formed, in which there can be felt the mixture of the two preceding elements, the direct creation and the metaphor: le cab jaspine, je marronne que la roulotte de Pantin trime dans le sabri, the dog is barking, I suspect that the diligence for Paris is passing through the woods. Le dab est sinve, la dabuge est merloussiere, la fée est bative, the bourgeois is stupid, the bourgeoise is cunning, the daughter is pretty. Generally, to throw listeners off the track, slang confines itself to adding to all the words of the language without distinction, an ignoble tail, a termination in aille, in orgue, in iergue, or in uche. Thus: Vousiergue trouvaille bonorgue ce gigotmuche? Do you think that leg of mutton good? A phrase addressed by Cartouche to a turnkey in order to find out whether the sum offered for his escape suited him.

The termination in mar has been added recently.

Slang, being the dialect of corruption, quickly becomes corrupted itself. Besides this, as it is always seeking concealment, as soon as it feels that it is understood, it changes its form. Contrary to what happens with every other vegetation, every ray of light which falls upon it kills whatever it touches. Thus slang is in constant process of decomposition and recomposition; an obscure and rapid work which never pauses. It passes over more ground in ten years than a language in ten centuries. Thus le larton (bread) becomes le lartif; le gail (horse) becomes le gaye; la fertanche (straw) becomes la fertille; le momignard (brat), le momacque; les fiques (duds), frusques; la chique (the church), l’egrugeoir; le colabre (neck), le colas. The devil is at first, gahisto, then le rabouin, then the baker; the priest is a ratichon, then the boar (le sanglier); the dagger is le vingt-deux (twenty-two), then le surin, then le lingre; the police are railles, then roussins, then rousses, then marchands de lacets (dealers in stay-laces), then coquers, then cognes; the executioner is le taule, then Charlot, l’atigeur, then le becquillard. In the seventeenth century, to fight was “to give each other snuff”; in the nineteenth it is “to chew each other’s throats.” There have been twenty different phrases between these two extremes. Cartouche’s talk would have been Hebrew to Lacenaire. All the words of this language are perpetually engaged in flight like the men who utter them.

Still, from time to time, and in consequence of this very movement, the ancient slang crops up again and becomes new once more. It has its headquarters where it maintains its sway. The Temple preserved the slang of the seventeenth century; Bicêtre, when it was a prison, preserved the slang of Thunes. There one could hear the termination in anche of the old Thuneurs. Boyanches-tu (bois-tu), do you drink? But perpetual movement remains its law, nevertheless.

If the philosopher succeeds in fixing, for a moment, for purposes of observation, this language which is incessantly evaporating, he falls into doleful and useful meditation. No study is more efficacious and more fecund in instruction. There is not a metaphor, not an analogy, in slang, which does not contain a lesson. Among these men, to beat means to feign; one beats a malady; ruse is their strength.

For them, the idea of the man is not separated from the idea of darkness. The night is called la sorgue; man, l’orgue. Man is a derivative of the night.

They have taken up the practice of considering society in the light of an atmosphere which kills them, of a fatal force, and they speak of their liberty as one would speak of his health. A man under arrest is a sick man; one who is condemned is a dead man.

The most terrible thing for the prisoner within the four walls in which he is buried, is a sort of glacial chastity, and he calls the dungeon the castus. In that funereal place, life outside always presents itself under its most smiling aspect. The prisoner has irons on his feet; you think, perhaps, that his thought is that it is with the feet that one walks? No; he is thinking that it is with the feet that one dances; so, when he has succeeded in severing his fetters, his first idea is that now he can dance, and he calls the saw the bastringue (public-house ball). — A name is a centre; profound assimilation. — The ruffian has two heads, one of which reasons out his actions and leads him all his life long, and the other which he has upon his shoulders on the day of his death; he calls the head which counsels him in crime la sorbonne, and the head which expiates it la tronche. — When a man has no longer anything but rags upon his body and vices in his heart, when he has arrived at that double moral and material degradation which the word blackguard characterizes in its two acceptations, he is ripe for crime; he is like a well-whetted knife; he has two cutting edges, his distress and his malice; so slang does not say a blackguard, it says un reguise. — What are the galleys? A brazier of damnation, a hell. The convict calls himself a fagot. — And finally, what name do malefactors give to their prison? The college. A whole penitentiary system can be evolved from that word.

Does the reader wish to know where the majority of the songs of the galleys, those refrains called in the special vocabulary lirlonfa, have had their birth?

Let him listen to what follows: —

There existed at the Chatelet in Paris a large and long cellar. This cellar was eight feet below the level of the Seine. It had neither windows nor air-holes, its only aperture was the door; men could enter there, air could not. This vault had for ceiling a vault of stone, and for floor ten inches of mud. It was flagged; but the pavement had rotted and cracked under the oozing of the water. Eight feet above the floor, a long and massive beam traversed this subterranean excavation from side to side; from this beam hung, at short distances apart, chains three feet long, and at the end of these chains there were rings for the neck. In this vault, men who had been condemned to the galleys were incarcerated until the day of their departure for Toulon. They were thrust under this beam, where each one found his fetters swinging in the darkness and waiting for him.

The chains, those pendant arms, and the necklets, those open hands, caught the unhappy wretches by the throat. They were rivetted and left there. As the chain was too short, they could not lie down. They remained motionless in that cavern, in that night, beneath that beam, almost hanging, forced to unheard-of efforts to reach their bread, jug, or their vault overhead, mud even to mid-leg, filth flowing to their very calves, broken asunder with fatigue, with thighs and knees giving way, clinging fast to the chain with their hands in order to obtain some rest, unable to sleep except when standing erect, and awakened every moment by the strangling of the collar; some woke no more. In order to eat, they pushed the bread, which was flung to them in the mud, along their leg with their heel until it reached their hand.

How long did they remain thus? One month, two months, six months sometimes; one stayed a year. It was the antechamber of the galleys. Men were put there for stealing a hare from the king. In this sepulchre-hell, what did they do? What man can do in a sepulchre, they went through the agonies of death, and what can man do in hell, they sang; for song lingers where there is no longer any hope. In the waters of Malta, when a galley was approaching, the song could be heard before the sound of the oars. Poor Survincent, the poacher, who had gone through the prison-cellar of the Chatelet, said: “It was the rhymes that kept me up.” Uselessness of poetry. What is the good of rhyme?

It is in this cellar that nearly all the slang songs had their birth. It is from the dungeon of the Grand-Chatelet of Paris that comes the melancholy refrain of the Montgomery galley: “Timaloumisaine, timaloumison.” The majority of these

Icicaille est la theatre	Here is the theatre
Du petit dardant.	Of the little archer (Cupid).

Do what you will, you cannot annihilate that eternal relic in the heart of man, love.

In this world of dismal deeds, people keep their secrets. The secret is the thing above all others. The secret, in the eyes of these wretches, is unity which serves as a base of union. To betray a secret is to tear from each member of this fierce community something of his own personality. To inform against, in the energetic slang dialect, is called: “to eat the bit.” As though the informer drew to himself a little of the substance of all and nourished himself on a bit of each one’s flesh.

What does it signify to receive a box on the ear? Commonplace metaphor replies: “It is to see thirty-six candles.”

Here slang intervenes and takes it up: Candle, camoufle. Thereupon, the ordinary tongue gives camouflet as the synonym for soufflet. Thus, by a sort of infiltration from below upwards, with the aid of metaphor, that incalculable, trajectory slang mounts from the cavern to the Academy; and Poulailler saying: “I light my camoufle,” causes Voltaire to write: “Langleviel La Beaumelle deserves a hundred camouflets.”

Researches in slang mean discoveries at every step. Study and investigation of this strange idiom lead to the mysterious point of intersection of regular society with society which is accursed.

The thief also has his food for cannon, stealable matter, you, I, whoever passes by; le pantre. (Pan, everybody.)

Slang is language turned convict.

That the thinking principle of man be thrust down ever so low, that it can be dragged and pinioned there by obscure tyrannies of fatality, that it can be bound by no one knows what fetters in that abyss, is sufficient to create consternation.

Oh, poor thought of miserable wretches!

Alas! will no one come to the succor of the human soul in that darkness? Is it her destiny there to await forever the mind, the liberator, the immense rider of Pegasi and hippo-griffs, the combatant of heroes of the dawn who shall descend from the azure between two wings, the radiant knight of the future? Will she forever summon in vain to her assistance the lance of light of the ideal? Is she condemned to hear the fearful approach of Evil through the density of the gulf, and to catch glimpses, nearer and nearer at hand, beneath the hideous water of that dragon’s head, that maw streaked with foam, and that writhing undulation of claws, swellings, and rings? Must it remain there, without a gleam of light, without hope, given over to that terrible approach, vaguely scented out by the monster, shuddering, dishevelled, wringing its arms, forever chained to the rock of night, a sombre Andromeda white and naked amid the shadows!

CHAPTER III — SLANG WHICH WEEPS AND SLANG WHICH LAUGHS

As the reader perceives, slang in its entirety, slang of four hundred years ago, like the slang of to-day, is permeated with that sombre, symbolical spirit which gives to all words a mien which is now mournful, now menacing. One feels in it the wild and ancient sadness of those vagrants of the Court of Miracles who played at cards with packs of their own, some of which have come down to us. The eight of clubs, for instance, represented a huge tree bearing eight enormous trefoil leaves, a sort of fantastic personification of the forest. At the foot of this tree a fire was burning, over which three hares were roasting a huntsman on a spit, and behind him, on another fire, hung a steaming pot, whence emerged the head of a dog. Nothing can be more melancholy than these reprisals in painting, by a pack of cards, in the presence of stakes for the roasting of smugglers and of the cauldron for the boiling of counterfeiters. The diverse forms assumed by thought in the realm of slang, even song, even raillery, even menace, all partook of this powerless and dejected character. All the songs, the melodies of some of which have been collected, were humble and lamentable to the point of evoking tears. The pegre is always the poor pegre, and he is always the hare in hiding, the fugitive mouse, the flying bird. He hardly complains, he contents himself with sighing; one of his moans has come down to us: “I do not understand how God, the father of men, can torture his children and his grandchildren and hear them cry, without himself suffering torture.” The wretch, whenever he has time to think, makes himself small before the low, and frail in the presence of society; he lies down flat on his face, he entreats, he appeals to the side of compassion; we feel that he is conscious of his guilt.

Towards the middle of the last century a change took place, prison songs and thieves’ ritournelles assumed, so to speak, an insolent and jovial mien. The plaintive malure was replaced by the larifla. We find in the eighteenth century, in nearly all the songs of the galleys and prisons, a diabolical and enigmatical gayety. We hear this strident and lilting refrain which we should say had been lighted up by a phosphorescent gleam, and which seems to have been flung into the forest by a will-o’-the-wisp playing the fife: —

Miralabi suslababo
Mirliton ribonribette
Surlababi mirlababo
Mirliton ribonribo.

This was sung in a cellar or in a nook of the forest while cutting a man's throat.

A serious symptom. In the eighteenth century, the ancient melancholy of the dejected classes vanishes. They began to laugh. They rally the grand meg and the grand dab. Given Louis XV. they call the King of France "le Marquis de Pantin." And behold, they are almost gay. A sort of gleam proceeds from these miserable wretches, as though their consciences were not heavy within them any more. These lamentable tribes of darkness have no longer merely the desperate audacity of actions, they possess the heedless audacity of mind. A sign that they are losing the sense of their criminality, and that they feel, even among thinkers and dreamers, some indefinable support which the latter themselves know not of. A sign that theft and pillage are beginning to filter into doctrines and sophisms, in such a way as to lose somewhat of their ugliness, while communicating much of it to sophisms and doctrines. A sign, in short, of some outbreak which is prodigious and near unless some diversion shall arise.

Let us pause a moment. Whom are we accusing here? Is it the eighteenth century? Is it philosophy? Certainly not. The work of the eighteenth century is healthy and good and wholesome. The encyclopedists, Diderot at their head; the physiocrates, Turgot at their head; the philosophers, Voltaire at their head; the Utopians, Rousseau at their head, — these are four sacred legions. Humanity's immense advance towards the light is due to them. They are the four vanguards of the human race, marching towards the four cardinal points of progress. Diderot towards the beautiful, Turgot towards the useful, Voltaire towards the true, Rousseau towards the just. But by the side of and above the philosophers, there were the sophists, a venomous vegetation mingled with a healthy growth, hemlock in the virgin forest. While the executioner was burning the great books of the liberators of the century on the grand staircase of the court-house, writers now forgotten were publishing, with the King's sanction, no one knows what strangely disorganizing writings, which were eagerly read by the unfortunate. Some of these publications, odd to say, which were patronized by a prince, are to be found in the Secret Library. These facts, significant but unknown, were imperceptible on the surface. Sometimes, in the very obscurity of a fact lurks its danger. It is obscure because it is underhand. Of all these writers, the one who probably then excavated in the masses the most unhealthy gallery was Restif de La Bretonne.

This work, peculiar to the whole of Europe, effected more ravages in Germany than anywhere else. In Germany, during a given period, summed up by Schiller in his famous drama The Robbers, theft and pillage rose up in protest against property and labor, assimilated certain specious and false elementary ideas, which, though just in appearance, were absurd in reality, enveloped themselves in these ideas, disappeared within them, after a fashion, assumed an abstract name, passed into the state of theory, and in that shape circulated among the laborious, suffering, and honest masses, unknown even to the imprudent chemists who had prepared the mixture, unknown even to the masses who accepted it. Whenever a fact of this sort presents itself, the case is grave. Suffering engenders wrath; and while the prosperous classes blind themselves or fall asleep, which is the same thing as shutting one's eyes, the hatred of the unfortunate classes lights its torch at some aggrieved or ill-made spirit which dreams in a corner, and sets itself to the scrutiny of society. The scrutiny of hatred is a terrible thing.

Hence, if the ill-fortune of the times so wills it, those fearful commotions which were formerly called jacqueries, beside which purely political agitations are the merest child's play, which are no longer the conflict of the oppressed and the oppressor, but the revolt of discomfort against comfort. Then everything crumbles.

Jacqueries are earthquakes of the people.

It is this peril, possibly imminent towards the close of the eighteenth century, which the French Revolution, that immense act of probity, cut short.

The French Revolution, which is nothing else than the idea armed with the sword, rose erect, and, with the same abrupt movement, closed the door of ill and opened the door of good.

It put a stop to torture, promulgated the truth, expelled miasma, rendered the century healthy, crowned the populace.

It may be said of it that it created man a second time, by giving him a second soul, the right.

The nineteenth century has inherited and profited by its work, and to-day, the social catastrophe to which we lately alluded is simply impossible.

Blind is he who announces it! Foolish is he who fears it! Revolution is the vaccine of Jacquerie.

Thanks to the Revolution, social conditions have changed. Feudal and monarchical maladies no longer run in our blood. There is no more of the Middle Ages in our constitution. We no longer live in the days when terrible swarms within made irruptions, when one heard beneath his feet the obscure course of a dull rumble, when indescribable elevations from mole-like tunnels appeared on the surface of civilization, where the soil cracked open, where the roofs of caverns yawned, and where one suddenly beheld monstrous heads emerging from the earth.

The revolutionary sense is a moral sense. The sentiment of right, once developed, develops the sentiment of duty. The law of all is liberty, which ends where the liberty of others begins, according to Robespierre's admirable definition. Since '89, the whole people has been dilating into a sublime individual; there is not a poor man, who, possessing his right, has not his ray of sun; the die-of-hunger feels within him the honesty of France; the dignity of the citizen is an internal armor; he who is free is scrupulous; he who votes reigns. Hence incorruptibility; hence the miscarriage of unhealthy lusts; hence eyes heroically lowered before temptations. The revolutionary wholesomeness is such, that on a day of deliverance, a 14th of July, a 10th of August, there is no longer any populace. The first cry of the enlightened and increasing throngs is: death to thieves! Progress is an honest man; the ideal and the absolute do not filch pocket-handkerchiefs. By whom were the wagons containing the wealth of the Tuileries escorted in 1848? By the rag-pickers of the Faubourg Saint-Antoine. Rags mounted guard over the treasure. Virtue rendered these tatterdemalions resplendent. In those wagons in chests, hardly closed, and some, even, half-open, amid a hundred dazzling caskets, was that ancient crown of France, studded with diamonds, surmounted by the carbuncle of royalty, by the Regent diamond, which was worth thirty millions. Barefooted, they guarded that crown.

Hence, no more Jacquerie. I regret it for the sake of the skilful. The old fear has produced its last effects in that quarter; and henceforth it can no longer be employed in politics. The principal spring of the red spectre is broken. Every one knows it now. The scare-crow scares no longer. The birds take liberties with the mannikin, foul creatures alight upon it, the bourgeois laugh at it.

CHAPTER IV — THE TWO DUTIES: TO WATCH AND TO HOPE

This being the case, is all social danger dispelled? Certainly not. There is no Jacquerie; society may rest assured on that point; blood will no longer rush to its head. But let society take heed to the manner in which it breathes. Apoplexy is no longer to be feared, but phthisis is there. Social phthisis is called misery.

One can perish from being undermined as well as from being struck by lightning.

Let us not weary of repeating, and sympathetic souls must not forget that this is the first of fraternal obligations, and selfish hearts must understand that the first of political necessities consists in thinking first of all of the disinherited and sorrowing throngs, in solacing, airing, enlightening, loving them, in enlarging their horizon to a magnificent extent, in lavishing upon them education in every form, in offering them the example of labor, never the example of idleness, in diminishing the individual burden by enlarging the notion of the universal aim, in setting a limit to poverty without setting a limit to wealth, in creating vast fields of public and popular activity, in having, like Briareus, a hundred hands to extend in all directions to the oppressed and the feeble, in employing the collective power for that grand duty of opening workshops for all arms, schools for all aptitudes, and laboratories for all degrees of intelligence, in augmenting salaries, diminishing trouble, balancing what should be and what is, that is to say, in proportioning enjoyment to effort and a glut to need; in a word, in evolving from the social apparatus more light and more comfort for the benefit of those who suffer and those who are ignorant.

And, let us say it, all this is but the beginning. The true question is this: labor cannot be a law without being a right.

We will not insist upon this point; this is not the proper place for that.

If nature calls itself Providence, society should call itself foresight.

Intellectual and moral growth is no less indispensable than material improvement. To know is a sacrament, to think is the prime necessity, truth is nourishment as well as grain. A reason which fasts from science and wisdom grows thin. Let us enter equal complaint against stomachs and minds which do not eat. If there is anything more heart-breaking than a body perishing for lack of bread, it is a soul which is dying from hunger for the light.

The whole of progress tends in the direction of solution. Some day we shall be amazed. As the human race mounts upward, the deep layers emerge naturally from the zone of distress. The obliteration of misery will be accomplished by a simple elevation of level.

We should do wrong were we to doubt this blessed consummation.

The past is very strong, it is true, at the present moment. It censures. This rejuvenation of a corpse is surprising. Behold, it is walking and advancing. It seems a victor; this dead body is a conqueror. He arrives with his legions, superstitions, with his sword, despotism, with his banner, ignorance; a while ago, he won ten battles. He advances, he threatens, he laughs, he is at our doors. Let us not despair, on our side. Let us sell the field on which Hannibal is encamped.

What have we to fear, we who believe?

No such thing as a back-flow of ideas exists any more than there exists a return of a river on its course.

But let those who do not desire a future reflect on this matter. When they say “no” to progress, it is not the future but themselves that they are condemning. They are giving themselves a sad malady; they are inoculating themselves with the past. There is but one way of rejecting To-morrow, and that is to die.

Now, no death, that of the body as late as possible, that of the soul never, — this is what we desire.

Yes, the enigma will utter its word, the sphinx will speak, the problem will be solved.

Yes, the people, sketched out by the eighteenth century, will be finished by the nineteenth. He who doubts this is an idiot! The future blossoming, the near blossoming forth of universal well-being, is a divinely fatal phenomenon.

Immense combined propulsions direct human affairs and conduct them within a given time to a logical state, that is to say, to a state of equilibrium; that is to say, to equity. A force composed of earth and heaven results from humanity and governs it; this force is a worker of miracles; marvellous issues are no more difficult to it than extraordinary vicissitudes. Aided by science, which comes from one man, and by the event, which comes from another, it is not greatly alarmed by these contradictions in the attitude of problems, which seem impossibilities to the vulgar herd. It is no less skilful at causing a solution to spring forth from the reconciliation of ideas, than a lesson from the reconciliation of facts, and we may expect anything from that mysterious power of progress, which brought the Orient and the Occident face to face one fine day, in the depths of a sepulchre, and made the imaums converse with Bonaparte in the interior of the Great Pyramid.

In the meantime, let there be no halt, no hesitation, no pause in the grandiose onward march of minds. Social philosophy consists essentially in science and peace. Its object is, and its result must be, to dissolve wrath by the study of antagonisms. It examines, it scrutinizes, it analyzes; then it puts together once more, it proceeds by means of reduction, discarding all hatred.

More than once, a society has been seen to give way before the wind which is let loose upon mankind; history is full of the shipwrecks of nations and empires; manners, customs, laws, religions, — and some fine day that unknown force, the hurricane, passes by and bears them all away. The civilizations of India, of Chaldea, of Persia, of Syria, of Egypt, have disappeared one after the other. Why? We know not. What are the causes of these disasters? We do not know. Could these societies have been saved? Was it their fault? Did they persist in the fatal vice which destroyed them? What is the amount of suicide in these terrible deaths of a nation and a race? Questions to which there exists no reply. Darkness enwraps condemned civilizations. They sprung a leak, then they sank. We have nothing more to say; and it is with a sort of terror that we look on, at the bottom of that sea which is called the past, behind those colossal waves, at the shipwreck of those immense vessels, Babylon, Nineveh, Tarsus, Thebes, Rome, beneath the fearful gusts which emerge from all the mouths of the shadows. But shadows are there, and light is here. We are not acquainted with the maladies of these ancient civilizations, we do not know the infirmities of our own. Everywhere upon it we have the right of light, we contemplate its beauties, we lay bare its defects. Where it is ill, we probe; and the sickness once diagnosed, the study of the cause leads to the discovery of the remedy. Our civilization, the work of twenty centuries, is its law and its prodigy; it is worth the trouble of saving. It will be saved. It is already much to have solaced it; its enlightenment is yet another point. All the labors of modern social philosophies must converge towards this point. The thinker of to-day has a great duty — to auscultate civilization.

We repeat, that this auscultation brings encouragement; it is by this persistence in encouragement that we wish to conclude these pages, an austere interlude in a mournful drama. Beneath the social mortality, we feel human imperishableness. The globe does not perish, because it has these wounds, craters, eruptions, sulphur pits, here and there, nor because of a volcano which ejects its pus. The maladies of the people do not kill man.

And yet, any one who follows the course of social clinics shakes his head at times. The strongest, the tenderest, the most logical have their hours of weakness.

Will the future arrive? It seems as though we might almost put this question, when we behold so much terrible darkness. Melancholy face-to-face encounter of selfish and wretched. On the part of the selfish, the prejudices, shadows of costly education, appetite increasing through intoxication, a giddiness of prosperity which dulls, a fear of suffering which, in some, goes as far as an aversion for the suffering, an implacable satisfaction, the I so swollen that it bars the soul; on the side of the wretched covetousness, envy, hatred of seeing others enjoy, the profound impulses of the human beast towards assuaging its desires, hearts full of mist, sadness, need, fatality, impure and simple ignorance.

Shall we continue to raise our eyes to heaven? is the luminous point which we distinguish there one of those which vanish? The ideal is frightful to behold, thus lost in the depths, small, isolated, imperceptible, brilliant, but surrounded by those great, black menaces, monstrously heaped around it; yet no more in danger than a star in the maw of the clouds.

BOOK EIGHTH. — ENCHANTMENTS AND DESOLATIONS

CHAPTER I — FULL LIGHT

The reader has probably understood that Eponine, having recognized through the gate, the inhabitant of that Rue Plumet whither Magnon had sent her, had begun by keeping the ruffians away from the Rue Plumet, and had then conducted Marius thither, and that, after many days spent in ecstasy before that gate, Marius, drawn on by that force which draws the iron to the magnet and a lover towards the stones of which is built the house of her whom he loves, had finally entered Cosette's garden as Romeo entered the garden of Juliet. This had even proved easier for him than for Romeo; Romeo was obliged to scale a wall, Marius had only to use a little force on one of the bars of the decrepit gate which vacillated in its rusty recess, after the fashion of old people's teeth. Marius was slender and readily passed through.

As there was never any one in the street, and as Marius never entered the garden except at night, he ran no risk of being seen.

Beginning with that blessed and holy hour when a kiss betrothed these two souls, Marius was there every evening. If, at that period of her existence, Cosette had fallen in love with a man in the least unscrupulous or debauched, she would have been lost; for there are generous natures which yield themselves, and Cosette was one of them. One of woman's magnanimities is to yield. Love, at the height where it is absolute, is complicated with some indescribably celestial blindness of modesty. But what dangers you run, O noble souls! Often you give the heart, and we take the body. Your heart remains with you, you gaze upon it in the gloom with a shudder. Love has no middle course; it either ruins or it saves. All human destiny lies in this dilemma. This dilemma, ruin, or safety, is set forth no more inexorably by any fatality than by love. Love is life, if it is not death. Cradle; also coffin. The same sentiment says "yes" and "no" in the human heart. Of all the things that God has made, the human heart is the one which sheds the most light, alas! and the most darkness.

God willed that Cosette's love should encounter one of the loves which save.

Throughout the whole of the month of May of that year 1832, there were there, in every night, in that poor, neglected garden, beneath that thicket which grew thicker and more fragrant day by day, two beings composed of all chastity, all innocence, overflowing with all the felicity of heaven, nearer to the archangels than to mankind, pure, honest, intoxicated, radiant, who shone for each other amid the shadows. It seemed to Cosette that Marius had a crown, and to Marius that Cosette had a nimbus. They touched each other, they gazed at each other, they clasped each other's hands, they pressed close to each other; but there was a distance which they did not pass. Not that they respected it; they did not know of its existence. Marius was conscious of a barrier, Cosette's innocence; and Cosette of a support, Marius' loyalty. The first kiss had also been the last. Marius, since that time, had not gone further than to touch Cosette's hand, or her kerchief, or a lock of her hair, with his lips. For him, Cosette was a perfume and not a woman. He inhaled her. She refused nothing, and he asked nothing. Cosette was happy, and Marius was satisfied. They lived in this ecstatic state which can be described as the dazzling of one soul by another soul. It was the ineffable first embrace of two maiden souls in the ideal. Two swans meeting on the Jungfrau.

At that hour of love, an hour when voluptuousness is absolutely mute, beneath the omnipotence of ecstasy, Marius, the pure and seraphic Marius, would rather have gone to a woman of the town than have raised Cosette's robe to the height of her ankle. Once, in the moonlight, Cosette stooped to pick up something on the ground, her bodice fell apart and permitted a glimpse of the beginning of her throat. Marius turned away his eyes.

What took place between these two beings? Nothing. They adored each other.

At night, when they were there, that garden seemed a living and a sacred spot. All flowers unfolded around them and sent them incense; and they opened their souls and scattered them over the flowers. The wanton and vigorous vegetation quivered, full of strength and intoxication, around these two innocents, and they uttered words of love which set the trees to trembling.

What words were these? Breaths. Nothing more. These breaths sufficed to trouble and to touch all nature round about. Magic power which we should find it difficult to understand were we to read in a book these conversations which are made to be borne away and dispersed like smoke wreaths by the breeze beneath the leaves. Take from those murmurs of two lovers that melody which proceeds from the soul and which accompanies them like a lyre, and what remains is nothing more than a shade; you say:

“What! is that all!” eh! yes, childish prattle, repetitions, laughter at nothing, nonsense, everything that is deepest and most sublime in the world! The only things which are worth the trouble of saying and hearing!

The man who has never heard, the man who has never uttered these absurdities, these paltry remarks, is an imbecile and a malicious fellow. Cosette said to Marius: —

“Dost thou know?—”

[In all this and athwart this celestial maidenliness, and without either of them being able to say how it had come about, they had begun to call each other thou.]

“Dost thou know? My name is Euphrasie.”

“Euphrasie? Why, no, thy name is Cosette.”

“Oh! Cosette is a very ugly name that was given to me when I was a little thing. But my real name is Euphrasie. Dost thou like that name — Euphrasie?”

“Yes. But Cosette is not ugly.”

“Do you like it better than Euphrasie?”

“Why, yes.”

“Then I like it better too. Truly, it is pretty, Cosette. Call me Cosette.”

And the smile that she added made of this dialogue an idyl worthy of a grove situated in heaven. On another occasion she gazed intently at him and exclaimed: —

“Monsieur, you are handsome, you are good-looking, you are witty, you are not at all stupid, you are much more learned than I am, but I bid you defiance with this word: I love you!”

And Marius, in the very heavens, thought he heard a strain sung by a star.

Or she bestowed on him a gentle tap because he coughed, and she said to him: —

“Don’t cough, sir; I will not have people cough on my domain without my permission. It’s very naughty to cough and to disturb me. I want you to be well, because, in the first place, if you were not well, I should be very unhappy. What should I do then?”

And this was simply divine.

Once Marius said to Cosette: —

“Just imagine, I thought at one time that your name was Ursule.”

This made both of them laugh the whole evening.

In the middle of another conversation, he chanced to exclaim: —

“Oh! One day, at the Luxembourg, I had a good mind to finish breaking up a veteran!” But he stopped short, and went no further. He would have been obliged to speak to Cosette of her garter, and that was impossible. This bordered on a strange theme, the flesh, before which that immense and innocent love recoiled with a sort of sacred fright.

Marius pictured life with Cosette to himself like this, without anything else; to come every evening to the Rue Plumet, to displace the old and accommodating bar of the chief-justice’s gate, to sit elbow to elbow on that bench, to gaze through the trees at the scintillation of the on-coming night, to fit a fold of the knee of his trousers into the ample fall of Cosette’s gown, to caress her thumb-nail, to call her thou, to smell of the same flower, one after the other, forever, indefinitely. During this time, clouds passed above their heads. Every time that the wind blows it bears with it more of the dreams of men than of the clouds of heaven.

This chaste, almost shy love was not devoid of gallantry, by any means. To pay compliments to the woman whom a man loves is the first method of bestowing caresses, and he is half audacious who tries it. A compliment is something like a kiss through a veil. Voluptuousness mingles there with its sweet tiny point, while it hides itself. The heart draws back before voluptuousness only to love the more. Marius’ blandishments, all saturated with fancy, were, so to speak, of azure hue. The birds when they fly up yonder, in the direction of the angels, must hear such words. There were mingled with them, nevertheless, life, humanity, all the positiveness of which Marius was capable. It was what is said in the bower, a prelude to what will be said in the chamber; a lyrical effusion, strophe and sonnet intermingled, pleasing hyperboles of cooing, all the refinements of adoration arranged in a bouquet and exhaling a celestial perfume, an ineffable twitter of heart to heart.

“Oh!” murmured Marius, “how beautiful you are! I dare not look at you. It is all over with me when I contemplate you. You are a grace. I know not what is the matter with me. The hem of your gown, when the tip of your shoe peeps from beneath, upsets me. And then, what an enchanted gleam when you open your thought even but a little! You talk astonishingly good sense. It seems to me at times that you are a dream. Speak, I listen, I admire. Oh Cosette! how strange it is and how charming! I am really beside myself. You are adorable, Mademoiselle. I study your feet with the microscope and your soul with the telescope."

And Cosette answered: —

"I have been loving a little more all the time that has passed since this morning."

Questions and replies took care of themselves in this dialogue, which always turned with mutual consent upon love, as the little pith figures always turn on their peg.

Cosette's whole person was ingenuousness, ingenuity, transparency, whiteness, candor, radiance. It might have been said of Cosette that she was clear. She produced on those who saw her the sensation of April and dawn. There was dew in her eyes. Cosette was a condensation of the auroral light in the form of a woman.

It was quite simple that Marius should admire her, since he adored her. But the truth is, that this little school-girl, fresh from the convent, talked with exquisite penetration and uttered, at times, all sorts of true and delicate sayings. Her prattle was conversation. She never made a mistake about anything, and she saw things justly. The woman feels and speaks with the tender instinct of the heart, which is infallible.

No one understands so well as a woman, how to say things that are, at once, both sweet and deep. Sweetness and depth, they are the whole of woman; in them lies the whole of heaven.

In this full felicity, tears welled up to their eyes every instant. A crushed lady-bug, a feather fallen from a nest, a branch of hawthorn broken, aroused their pity, and their ecstasy, sweetly mingled with melancholy, seemed to ask nothing better than to weep. The most sovereign symptom of love is a tenderness that is, at times, almost unbearable.

And, in addition to this, — all these contradictions are the lightning play of love, — they were fond of laughing, they laughed readily and with a delicious freedom, and so familiarly that they sometimes presented the air of two boys.

Still, though unknown to hearts intoxicated with purity, nature is always present and will not be forgotten. She is there with her brutal and sublime object; and however great may be the innocence of souls, one feels in the most modest private interview, the adorable and mysterious shade which separates a couple of lovers from a pair of friends.

They idolized each other.

The permanent and the immutable are persistent. People live, they smile, they laugh, they make little grimaces with the tips of their lips, they interlace their fingers, they call each other thou, and that does not prevent eternity.

Two lovers hide themselves in the evening, in the twilight, in the invisible, with the birds, with the roses; they fascinate each other in the darkness with their hearts which they throw into their eyes, they murmur, they whisper, and in the meantime, immense librations of the planets fill the infinite universe.

CHAPTER II — THE BEWILDERMENT OF PERFECT HAPPINESS

They existed vaguely, frightened at their happiness. They did not notice the cholera which decimated Paris precisely during that very month. They had confided in each other as far as possible, but this had not extended much further than their names. Marius had told Cosette that he was an orphan, that his name was Marius Pontmercy, that he was a lawyer, that he lived by writing things for publishers, that his father had been a colonel, that the latter had been a hero, and that he, Marius, was on bad terms with his grandfather who was rich. He had also hinted at being a baron, but this had produced no effect on Cosette. She did not know the meaning of the word. Marius was Marius. On her side, she had confided to him that she had been brought up at the Petit-Picpus convent, that her mother, like his own, was dead, that her father's name was M. Fauchelevent, that he was very good, that he gave a great deal to the poor, but that he was poor himself, and that he denied himself everything though he denied her nothing.

Strange to say, in the sort of symphony which Marius had lived since he had been in the habit of seeing Cosette, the past, even the most recent past, had become so confused and distant to him, that what Cosette told him satisfied him completely. It did not even occur to him to tell her about the nocturnal adventure in the hovel, about Thenardier, about the burn, and about the strange attitude and singular flight of her father. Marius had momentarily forgotten all this; in the evening he did not even know that there had been a morning, what he had done, where he had breakfasted, nor who had spoken to him; he had songs in his ears which rendered him deaf to every other thought; he only existed at the hours when he saw Cosette. Then, as he was in heaven, it was quite natural that he should forget earth. Both bore languidly the indefinable burden of immaterial pleasures. Thus lived these somnambulists who are called lovers.

Alas! Who is there who has not felt all these things? Why does there come an hour when one emerges from this azure, and why does life go on afterwards?

Loving almost takes the place of thinking. Love is an ardent forgetfulness of all the rest. Then ask logic of passion if you will. There is no more absolute logical sequence in the human heart than there is a perfect geometrical figure in the celestial mechanism. For Cosette and Marius nothing existed except Marius and Cosette. The universe around them had fallen into a hole. They lived in a golden minute. There was nothing before them, nothing behind. It hardly occurred to Marius that Cosette had a father. His brain was dazzled and obliterated. Of what did these lovers talk then? We have seen, of the flowers, and the swallows, the setting sun and the rising moon, and all sorts of important things. They had told each other everything except everything. The everything of lovers is nothing. But the father, the realities, that lair, the ruffians, that adventure, to what purpose? And was he very sure that this nightmare had actually existed? They were two, and they adored each other, and beyond that there was nothing. Nothing else existed. It is probable that this vanishing of hell in our rear is inherent to the arrival of paradise. Have we beheld demons? Are there any? Have we trembled? Have we suffered? We no longer know. A rosy cloud hangs over it.

So these two beings lived in this manner, high aloft, with all that improbability which is in nature; neither at the nadir nor at the zenith, between man and seraphim, above the mire, below the ether, in the clouds; hardly flesh and blood, soul and ecstasy from head to foot; already too sublime to walk the earth, still too heavily charged with humanity to disappear in the blue, suspended like atoms which are waiting to be precipitated; apparently beyond the bounds of destiny; ignorant of that rut; yesterday, to-day, to-morrow; amazed, rapturous, floating, soaring; at times so light that they could take their flight out into the infinite; almost prepared to soar away to all eternity. They slept wide-awake, thus sweetly lulled. Oh! splendid lethargy of the real overwhelmed by the ideal.

Sometimes, beautiful as Cosette was, Marius shut his eyes in her presence. The best way to look at the soul is through closed eyes.

Marius and Cosette never asked themselves whither this was to lead them. They considered that they had already arrived. It is a strange claim on man’s part to wish that love should lead to something.

CHAPTER III — THE BEGINNING OF SHADOW

Jean Valjean suspected nothing.

Cosette, who was rather less dreamy than Marius, was gay, and that sufficed for Jean Valjean's happiness. The thoughts which Cosette cherished, her tender preoccupations, Marius' image which filled her heart, took away nothing from the incomparable purity of her beautiful, chaste, and smiling brow. She was at the age when the virgin bears her love as the angel his lily. So Jean Valjean was at ease. And then, when two lovers have come to an understanding, things always go well; the third party who might disturb their love is kept in a state of perfect blindness by a restricted number of precautions which are always the same in the case of all lovers. Thus, Cosette never objected to any of Jean Valjean's proposals. Did she want to take a walk? "Yes, dear little father." Did she want to stay at home? Very good. Did he wish to pass the evening with Cosette? She was delighted. As he always went to bed at ten o'clock, Marius did not come to the garden on such occasions until after that hour, when, from the street, he heard Cosette open the long glass door on the veranda. Of course, no one ever met Marius in the daytime. Jean Valjean never even dreamed any longer that Marius was in existence. Only once, one morning, he chanced to say to Cosette: "Why, you have whitewash on your back!" On the previous evening, Marius, in a transport, had pushed Cosette against the wall.

Old Toussaint, who retired early, thought of nothing but her sleep, and was as ignorant of the whole matter as Jean Valjean.

Marius never set foot in the house. When he was with Cosette, they hid themselves in a recess near the steps, in order that they might neither be seen nor heard from the street, and there they sat, frequently contenting themselves, by way of conversation, with pressing each other's hands twenty times a minute as they gazed at the branches of the trees. At such times, a thunderbolt might have fallen thirty paces from them, and they would not have noticed it, so deeply was the revery of the one absorbed and sunk in the revery of the other.

Limpid purity. Hours wholly white; almost all alike. This sort of love is a recollection of lily petals and the plumage of the dove.

The whole extent of the garden lay between them and the street. Every time that Marius entered and left, he carefully adjusted the bar of the gate in such a manner that no displacement was visible.

He usually went away about midnight, and returned to Courfeyrac's lodgings. Courfeyrac said to Bahorel: —

"Would you believe it? Marius comes home nowadays at one o'clock in the morning."

Bahorel replied: —

"What do you expect? There's always a petard in a seminary fellow."

At times, Courfeyrac folded his arms, assumed a serious air, and said to Marius: —

"You are getting irregular in your habits, young man."

Courfeyrac, being a practical man, did not take in good part this reflection of an invisible paradise upon Marius; he was not much in the habit of concealed passions; it made him impatient, and now and then he called upon Marius to come back to reality.

One morning, he threw him this admonition: —

"My dear fellow, you produce upon me the effect of being located in the moon, the realm of dreams, the province of illusions, capital, soap-bubble. Come, be a good boy, what's her name?"

But nothing could induce Marius "to talk." They might have torn out his nails before one of the two sacred syllables of which that ineffable name, Cosette, was composed. True love is as luminous as the dawn and as silent as the tomb. Only, Courfeyrac saw this change in Marius, that his taciturnity was of the beaming order.

During this sweet month of May, Marius and Cosette learned to know these immense delights. To dispute and to say you for thou, simply that they might say thou the better afterwards. To talk at great length with very minute details, of persons in whom they took not the slightest interest in the world; another proof that in that ravishing opera called love, the libretto counts for almost nothing.

For Marius, to listen to Cosette discussing finery.

For Cosette, to listen to Marius talk in politics;

To listen, knee pressed to knee, to the carriages rolling along the Rue de Babylone;

To gaze upon the same planet in space, or at the same glowworm gleaming in the grass;

To hold their peace together; a still greater delight than conversation;

Etc., etc.

In the meantime, divers complications were approaching.

One evening, Marius was on his way to the rendezvous, by way of the Boulevard des Invalides. He habitually walked with drooping head. As he was on the point of turning the corner of the Rue Plumet, he heard some one quite close to him say: —

“Good evening, Monsieur Marius.”

He raised his head and recognized Eponine.

This produced a singular effect upon him. He had not thought of that girl a single time since the day when she had conducted him to the Rue Plumet, he had not seen her again, and she had gone completely out of his mind. He had no reasons for anything but gratitude towards her, he owed her his happiness, and yet, it was embarrassing to him to meet her.

It is an error to think that passion, when it is pure and happy, leads man to a state of perfection; it simply leads him, as we have noted, to a state of oblivion. In this situation, man forgets to be bad, but he also forgets to be good. Gratitude, duty, matters essential and important to be remembered, vanish. At any other time, Marius would have behaved quite differently to Eponine. Absorbed in Cosette, he had not even clearly put it to himself that this Eponine was named Eponine Thenardier, and that she bore the name inscribed in his father’s will, that name, for which, but a few months before, he would have so ardently sacrificed himself. We show Marius as he was. His father himself was fading out of his soul to some extent, under the splendor of his love.

He replied with some embarrassment: —

“Ah! so it’s you, Eponine?”

“Why do you call me you? Have I done anything to you?”

“No,” he answered.

Certainly, he had nothing against her. Far from it. Only, he felt that he could not do otherwise, now that he used thou to Cosette, than say you to Eponine.

As he remained silent, she exclaimed: —

“Say—”

Then she paused. It seemed as though words failed that creature formerly so heedless and so bold. She tried to smile and could not. Then she resumed: —

“Well?”

Then she paused again, and remained with downcast eyes.

“Good evening, Mr. Marius,” said she suddenly and abruptly; and away she went.

CHAPTER IV — A CAB RUNS IN ENGLISH AND BARKS IN SLANG

The following day was the 3d of June, 1832, a date which it is necessary to indicate on account of the grave events which at that epoch hung on the horizon of Paris in the state of lightning-charged clouds. Marius, at nightfall, was pursuing the same road as on the preceding evening, with the same thoughts of delight in his heart, when he caught sight of Eponine approaching, through the trees of the boulevard. Two days in succession — this was too much. He turned hastily aside, quitted the boulevard, changed his course and went to the Rue Plumet through the Rue Monsieur.

This caused Eponine to follow him to the Rue Plumet, a thing which she had not yet done. Up to that time, she had contented herself with watching him on his passage along the boulevard without ever seeking to encounter him. It was only on the evening before that she had attempted to address him.

So Eponine followed him, without his suspecting the fact. She saw him displace the bar and slip into the garden.

She approached the railing, felt of the bars one after the other, and readily recognized the one which Marius had moved.

She murmured in a low voice and in gloomy accents: —

“None of that, Lisette!”

She seated herself on the underpinning of the railing, close beside the bar, as though she were guarding it. It was precisely at the point where the railing touched the neighboring wall. There was a dim nook there, in which Eponine was entirely concealed.

She remained thus for more than an hour, without stirring and without breathing, a prey to her thoughts.

Towards ten o’clock in the evening, one of the two or three persons who passed through the Rue Plumet, an old, belated bourgeois who was making haste to escape from this deserted spot of evil repute, as he skirted the garden railings and reached the angle which it made with the wall, heard a dull and threatening voice saying: —

“I’m no longer surprised that he comes here every evening.”

The passer-by cast a glance around him, saw no one, dared not peer into the black niche, and was greatly alarmed. He redoubled his pace.

This passer-by had reason to make haste, for a very few instants later, six men, who were marching separately and at some distance from each other, along the wall, and who might have been taken for a gray patrol, entered the Rue Plumet.

The first to arrive at the garden railing halted, and waited for the others; a second later, all six were reunited.

These men began to talk in a low voice.

“This is the place,” said one of them.

“Is there a cab [dog] in the garden?” asked another.

“I don’t know. In any case, I have fetched a ball that we’ll make him eat.”

“Have you some putty to break the pane with?”

“Yes.”

“The railing is old,” interpolated a fifth, who had the voice of a ventriloquist.

“So much the better,” said the second who had spoken. “It won’t screech under the saw, and it won’t be hard to cut.”

The sixth, who had not yet opened his lips, now began to inspect the gate, as Eponine had done an hour earlier, grasping each bar in succession, and shaking them cautiously.

Thus he came to the bar which Marius had loosened. As he was on the point of grasping this bar, a hand emerged abruptly from the darkness, fell upon his arm; he felt himself vigorously thrust aside by a push in the middle of his breast, and a hoarse voice said to him, but not loudly: —

“There’s a dog.”

At the same moment, he perceived a pale girl standing before him.

The man underwent that shock which the unexpected always brings. He bristled up in hideous wise; nothing is so formidable to behold as ferocious beasts who are uneasy; their terrified air evokes terror.

He recoiled and stammered: —

“What jade is this?”

“Your daughter.”

It was, in fact, Eponine, who had addressed Thenardier.

At the apparition of Eponine, the other five, that is to say, Claquesous, Guelemer, Babet, Brujon, and Montparnasse had noiselessly drawn near, without precipitation, without uttering a word, with the sinister slowness peculiar to these men of the night.

Some indescribable but hideous tools were visible in their hands. Guelemer held one of those pairs of curved pincers which prowlers call fanchons.

“Ah, see here, what are you about there? What do you want with us? Are you crazy?” exclaimed Thenardier, as loudly as one can exclaim and still speak low; “what have you come here to hinder our work for?”

Eponine burst out laughing, and threw herself on his neck.

“I am here, little father, because I am here. Isn’t a person allowed to sit on the stones nowadays? It’s you who ought not to be here. What have you come here for, since it’s a biscuit? I told Magnon so. There’s nothing to be done here. But embrace me, my good little father! It’s a long time since I’ve seen you! So you’re out?”

Thenardier tried to disentangle himself from Eponine’s arms, and grumbled: —

“That’s good. You’ve embraced me. Yes, I’m out. I’m not in. Now, get away with you.”

But Eponine did not release her hold, and redoubled her caresses.

“But how did you manage it, little pa? You must have been very clever to get out of that. Tell me about it! And my mother? Where is mother? Tell me about mamma.”

Thenardier replied: —

“She’s well. I don’t know, let me alone, and be off, I tell you.”

“I won’t go, so there now,” pouted Eponine like a spoiled child; “you send me off, and it’s four months since I saw you, and I’ve hardly had time to kiss you.”

And she caught her father round the neck again.

“Come, now, this is stupid!” said Babet.

“Make haste!” said Guelemer, “the cops may pass.”

The ventriloquist’s voice repeated his distich: —

“Nous n’ sommes pas le jour de l’an,
“This isn’t New Year’s day
A bécoter papa, maman.”
To peck at pa and ma.”

Eponine turned to the five ruffians.

“Why, it’s Monsieur Brujon. Good day, Monsieur Babet. Good day, Monsieur Claquesous. Don’t you know me, Monsieur Guelemer? How goes it, Montparnasse?”

“Yes, they know you!” ejaculated Thenardier. “But good day, good evening, sheer off! leave us alone!”

“It’s the hour for foxes, not for chickens,” said Montparnasse.

“You see the job we have on hand here,” added Babet.

Eponine caught Montparnasse’s hand.

“Take care,” said he, “you’ll cut yourself, I’ve a knife open.”

“My little Montparnasse,” responded Eponine very gently, “you must have confidence in people. I am the daughter of my father, perhaps. Monsieur Babet, Monsieur Guelemer, I’m the person who was charged to investigate this matter.”

It is remarkable that Eponine did not talk slang. That frightful tongue had become impossible to her since she had known Marius.

She pressed in her hand, small, bony, and feeble as that of a skeleton, Guelemer’s huge, coarse fingers, and continued: —

“You know well that I’m no fool. Ordinarily, I am believed. I have rendered you service on various occasions. Well, I have made inquiries; you will expose yourselves to no purpose, you see. I swear to you that there is nothing in this house.”

“There are lone women,” said Guelemer.

“No, the persons have moved away.”

“The candles haven’t, anyway!” ejaculated Babet.

And he pointed out to Eponine, across the tops of the trees, a light which was wandering about in the mansard roof of the pavilion. It was Toussaint, who had stayed up to spread out some linen to dry.

Eponine made a final effort.

“Well,” said she, “they’re very poor folks, and it’s a hovel where there isn’t a sou.”

“Go to the devil!” cried Thenardier. “When we’ve turned the house upside down and put the cellar at the top and the attic below, we’ll tell you what there is inside, and whether it’s francs or sous or half-farthings.”

And he pushed her aside with the intention of entering.

“My good friend, Mr. Montparnasse,” said Eponine, “I entreat you, you are a good fellow, don’t enter.”

“Take care, you’ll cut yourself,” replied Montparnasse.

Thenardier resumed in his decided tone: —

“Decamp, my girl, and leave men to their own affairs!”

Eponine released Montparnasse’s hand, which she had grasped again, and said: —

“So you mean to enter this house?”

“Rather!” grinned the ventriloquist.

Then she set her back against the gate, faced the six ruffians who were armed to the teeth, and to whom the night lent the visages of demons, and said in a firm, low voice: —

“Well, I don’t mean that you shall.”

They halted in amazement. The ventriloquist, however, finished his grin. She went on: —

“Friends! Listen well. This is not what you want. Now I’m talking. In the first place, if you enter this garden, if you lay a hand on this gate, I’ll scream, I’ll beat on the door, I’ll rouse everybody, I’ll have the whole six of you seized, I’ll call the police.”

“She’d do it, too,” said Thenardier in a low tone to Brujon and the ventriloquist.

She shook her head and added: —

“Beginning with my father!”

Thenardier stepped nearer.

“Not so close, my good man!” said she.

He retreated, growling between his teeth: —

“Why, what’s the matter with her?”

And he added: —

“Bitch!”

She began to laugh in a terrible way: —

“As you like, but you shall not enter here. I’m not the daughter of a dog, since I’m the daughter of a wolf. There are six of you, what matters that to me? You are men. Well, I’m a woman. You don’t frighten me. I tell you that you shan’t enter this house, because it doesn’t suit me. If you approach, I’ll bark. I told you, I’m the dog, and I don’t care a straw for you. Go your way, you bore me! Go where you please, but don’t come here, I forbid it! You can use your knives. I’ll use kicks; it’s all the same to me, come on!”

She advanced a pace nearer the ruffians, she was terrible, she burst out laughing: —

"Pardine! I'm not afraid. I shall be hungry this summer, and I shall be cold this winter. Aren't they ridiculous, these ninnies of men, to think they can scare a girl! What! Scare? Oh, yes, much! Because you have finical poppets of mistresses who hide under the bed when you put on a big voice, forsooth! I ain't afraid of anything, that I ain't!"

She fastened her intent gaze upon Thenardier and said: —

"Not even of you, father!"

Then she continued, as she cast her blood-shot, spectre-like eyes upon the ruffians in turn: —

"What do I care if I'm picked up to-morrow morning on the pavement of the Rue Plumet, killed by the blows of my father's club, or whether I'm found a year from now in the nets at Saint-Cloud or the Isle of Swans in the midst of rotten old corks and drowned dogs?"

She was forced to pause; she was seized by a dry cough, her breath came from her weak and narrow chest like the death-rattle.

She resumed: —

"I have only to cry out, and people will come, and then slap, bang! There are six of you; I represent the whole world."

Thenardier made a movement towards her.

"Don't approach!" she cried.

He halted, and said gently: —

"Well, no; I won't approach, but don't speak so loud. So you intend to hinder us in our work, my daughter? But we must earn our living all the same. Have you no longer any kind feeling for your father?"

"You bother me," said Eponine.

"But we must live, we must eat—"

"Burst!"

So saying, she seated herself on the underpinning of the fence and hummed: —

"Mon bras si dodu,	"My arm so plump,
Ma jambe bien faite	My leg well formed,
Et le temps perdu."	And time wasted."

She had set her elbow on her knee and her chin in her hand, and she swung her foot with an air of indifference. Her tattered gown permitted a view of her thin shoulder-blades. The neighboring street lantern illuminated her profile and her attitude. Nothing more resolute and more surprising could be seen.

The six rascals, speechless and gloomy at being held in check by a girl, retreated beneath the shadow cast by the lantern, and held counsel with furious and humiliated shrugs.

In the meantime she stared at them with a stern but peaceful air.

“There’s something the matter with her,” said Babet. “A reason. Is she in love with the dog? It’s a shame to miss this, anyway. Two women, an old fellow who lodges in the back-yard, and curtains that ain’t so bad at the windows. The old cove must be a Jew. I think the job’s a good one.”

“Well, go in, then, the rest of you,” exclaimed Montparnasse. “Do the job. I’ll stay here with the girl, and if she fails us—”

He flashed the knife, which he held open in his hand, in the light of the lantern.

Thenardier said not a word, and seemed ready for whatever the rest pleased.

Brujon, who was somewhat of an oracle, and who had, as the reader knows, “put up the job,” had not as yet spoken. He seemed thoughtful. He had the reputation of not sticking at anything, and it was known that he had plundered a police post simply out of bravado. Besides this he made verses and songs, which gave him great authority.

Babet interrogated him: —

“You say nothing, Brujon?”

Brujon remained silent an instant longer, then he shook his head in various ways, and finally concluded to speak: —

“See here; this morning I came across two sparrows fighting, this evening I jostled a woman who was quarrelling. All that’s bad. Let’s quit.”

They went away.

As they went, Montparnasse muttered: —

“Never mind! if they had wanted, I’d have cut her throat.”

Babet responded

“I wouldn’t. I don’t hit a lady.”

At the corner of the street they halted and exchanged the following enigmatical dialogue in a low tone: —

“Where shall we go to sleep to-night?”

“Under Pantin [Paris].”

“Have you the key to the gate, Thenardier?”

“Pardi.”

Eponine, who never took her eyes off of them, saw them retreat by the road by which they had come. She rose and began to creep after them along the walls and the houses. She followed them thus as far as the boulevard.

There they parted, and she saw these six men plunge into the gloom, where they appeared to melt away.

CHAPTER V — THINGS OF THE NIGHT

After the departure of the ruffians, the Rue Plumet resumed its tranquil, nocturnal aspect. That which had just taken place in this street would not have astonished a forest. The lofty trees, the copses, the heaths, the branches rudely interlaced, the tall grass, exist in a sombre manner; the savage swarming there catches glimpses of sudden apparitions of the invisible; that which is below man distinguishes, through the mists, that which is beyond man; and the things of which we living beings are ignorant there meet face to face in the night. Nature, bristling and wild, takes alarm at certain approaches in which she fancies that she feels the supernatural. The forces of the gloom know each other, and are strangely balanced by each other. Teeth and claws fear what they cannot grasp. Blood-drinking bestiality, voracious appetites, hunger in search of prey, the armed instincts of nails and jaws which have for source and aim the belly, glare and smell out uneasily the impassive spectral forms straying beneath a shroud, erect in its vague and shuddering robe, and which seem to them to live with a dead and terrible life. These brutalities, which are only matter, entertain a confused fear of having to deal with the immense obscurity condensed into an unknown being. A black figure barring the way stops the wild beast short. That which emerges from the cemetery intimidates and disconcerts that which emerges from the cave; the ferocious fear the sinister; wolves recoil when they encounter a ghoul.

CHAPTER VI — MARIUS BECOMES PRACTICAL ONCE MORE TO THE EXTENT OF GIVING COSETTE HIS ADDRESS

While this sort of a dog with a human face was mounting guard over the gate, and while the six ruffians were yielding to a girl, Marius was by Cosette’s side.

Never had the sky been more studded with stars and more charming, the trees more trembling, the odor of the grass more penetrating; never had the birds fallen asleep among the leaves with a sweeter noise; never had all the harmonies of universal serenity responded more thoroughly to the inward music of love; never had Marius been more captivated, more happy, more ecstatic.

But he had found Cosette sad; Cosette had been weeping. Her eyes were red.

This was the first cloud in that wonderful dream.

Marius’ first word had been: “What is the matter?”

And she had replied: “This.”

Then she had seated herself on the bench near the steps, and while he tremblingly took his place beside her, she had continued: —

“My father told me this morning to hold myself in readiness, because he has business, and we may go away from here.”

Marius shivered from head to foot.

When one is at the end of one’s life, to die means to go away; when one is at the beginning of it, to go away means to die.

For the last six weeks, Marius had little by little, slowly, by degrees, taken possession of Cosette each day. As we have already explained, in the case of first love, the soul is taken long before the body; later on, one takes the body long before the soul; sometimes one does not take the soul at all; the Faublas and the Prudhommes add: “Because there is none”; but the sarcasm is, fortunately, a blasphemy. So Marius possessed Cosette, as spirits possess, but he enveloped her with all his soul, and seized her jealously with incredible conviction. He possessed her smile, her breath, her perfume, the profound radiance of her blue eyes, the sweetness of her skin when he touched her hand, the charming mark which she had on her neck, all her thoughts. Therefore, he possessed all Cosette's dreams.

He incessantly gazed at, and he sometimes touched lightly with his breath, the short locks on the nape of her neck, and he declared to himself that there was not one of those short hairs which did not belong to him, Marius. He gazed upon and adored the things that she wore, her knot of ribbon, her gloves, her sleeves, her shoes, her cuffs, as sacred objects of which he was the master. He dreamed that he was the lord of those pretty shell combs which she wore in her hair, and he even said to himself, in confused and suppressed stammerings of voluptuousness which did not make their way to the light, that there was not a ribbon of her gown, not a mesh in her stockings, not a fold in her bodice, which was not his. Beside Cosette he felt himself beside his own property, his own thing, his own despot and his slave. It seemed as though they had so intermingled their souls, that it would have been impossible to tell them apart had they wished to take them back again.— "This is mine." "No, it is mine." "I assure you that you are mistaken. This is my property." "What you are taking as your own is myself." — Marius was something that made a part of Cosette, and Cosette was something which made a part of Marius. Marius felt Cosette within him. To have Cosette, to possess Cosette, this, to him, was not to be distinguished from breathing. It was in the midst of this faith, of this intoxication, of this virgin possession, unprecedented and absolute, of this sovereignty, that these words: "We are going away," fell suddenly, at a blow, and that the harsh voice of reality cried to him: "Cosette is not yours!"

Marius awoke. For six weeks Marius had been living, as we have said, outside of life; those words, going away! caused him to re-enter it harshly.

He found not a word to say. Cosette merely felt that his hand was very cold. She said to him in her turn: "What is the matter?"

He replied in so low a tone that Cosette hardly heard him: —

"I did not understand what you said."

She began again: —

"This morning my father told me to settle all my little affairs and to hold myself in readiness, that he would give me his linen to put in a trunk, that he was obliged to go on a journey, that we were to go away, that it is necessary to have a large trunk for me and a small one for him, and that all is to be ready in a week from now, and that we might go to England."

"But this is outrageous!" exclaimed Marius.

It is certain, that, at that moment, no abuse of power, no violence, not one of the abominations of the worst tyrants, no action of Busiris, of Tiberius, or of Henry VIII., could have equalled this in atrocity, in the opinion of Marius; M. Fauchelevent taking his daughter off to England because he had business there.

He demanded in a weak voice: —

"And when do you start?"

"He did not say when."

"And when shall you return?"

"He did not say when."

Marius rose and said coldly: —

"Cosette, shall you go?"

Cosette turned toward him her beautiful eyes, all filled with anguish, and replied in a sort of bewilderment: —

"Where?"

"To England. Shall you go?"

"Why do you say you to me?"

"I ask you whether you will go?"

"What do you expect me to do?" she said, clasping her hands.

"So, you will go?"

"If my father goes."

"So, you will go?"

Cosette took Marius' hand, and pressed it without replying.

"Very well," said Marius, "then I will go elsewhere."

Cosette felt rather than understood the meaning of these words. She turned so pale that her face shone white through the gloom. She stammered: —

"What do you mean?"

Marius looked at her, then raised his eyes to heaven, and answered: "Nothing."

When his eyes fell again, he saw Cosette smiling at him. The smile of a woman whom one loves possesses a visible radiance, even at night.

"How silly we are! Marius, I have an idea."

"What is it?"

"If we go away, do you go too! I will tell you where! Come and join me wherever I am."

Marius was now a thoroughly roused man. He had fallen back into reality. He cried to Cosette: —

"Go away with you! Are you mad? Why, I should have to have money, and I have none! Go to England? But I am in debt now, I owe, I don't know how much, more than ten louis to Courfeyrac, one of my friends with whom you are not acquainted! I have an old hat which is not worth three francs, I have a coat which lacks buttons in front, my shirt is all ragged, my elbows are torn, my boots let in the water; for the last six weeks I have not thought about it, and I have not told you about it. You only see me at night, and you give me your love; if you were to see me in the daytime, you would give me a sou! Go to England! Eh! I haven't enough to pay for a passport!"

He threw himself against a tree which was close at hand, erect, his brow pressed close to the bark, feeling neither the wood which flayed his skin, nor the fever which was throbbing in his temples, and there he stood motionless, on the point of falling, like the statue of despair.

He remained a long time thus. One could remain for eternity in such abysses. At last he turned round. He heard behind him a faint stifled noise, which was sweet yet sad.

It was Cosette sobbing.

She had been weeping for more than two hours beside Marius as he meditated.

He came to her, fell at her knees, and slowly prostrating himself, he took the tip of her foot which peeped out from beneath her robe, and kissed it.

She let him have his way in silence. There are moments when a woman accepts, like a sombre and resigned goddess, the religion of love.

"Do not weep," he said.

She murmured: —

"Not when I may be going away, and you cannot come!"

He went on: —

"Do you love me?"

She replied, sobbing, by that word from paradise which is never more charming than amid tears: —

"I adore you!"

He continued in a tone which was an indescribable caress: —

"Do not weep. Tell me, will you do this for me, and cease to weep?"

"Do you love me?" said she.

He took her hand.

“Cosette, I have never given my word of honor to any one, because my word of honor terrifies me. I feel that my father is by my side. Well, I give you my most sacred word of honor, that if you go away I shall die.”

In the tone with which he uttered these words there lay a melancholy so solemn and so tranquil, that Cosette trembled. She felt that chill which is produced by a true and gloomy thing as it passes by. The shock made her cease weeping.

“Now, listen,” said he, “do not expect me to-morrow.”

“Why?”

“Do not expect me until the day after to-morrow.”

“Oh! Why?”

“You will see.”

“A day without seeing you! But that is impossible!”

“Let us sacrifice one day in order to gain our whole lives, perhaps.”

And Marius added in a low tone and in an aside: —

“He is a man who never changes his habits, and he has never received any one except in the evening.”

“Of what man are you speaking?” asked Cosette.

“I? I said nothing.”

“What do you hope, then?”

“Wait until the day after to-morrow.”

“You wish it?”

“Yes, Cosette.”

She took his head in both her hands, raising herself on tiptoe in order to be on a level with him, and tried to read his hope in his eyes.

Marius resumed: —

“Now that I think of it, you ought to know my address: something might happen, one never knows; I live with that friend named Courfeyrac, Rue de la Verrerie, No. 16.”

He searched in his pocket, pulled out his penknife, and with the blade he wrote on the plaster of the wall: —

“16 Rue de la Verrerie.”

In the meantime, Cosette had begun to gaze into his eyes once more.

“Tell me your thought, Marius; you have some idea. Tell it to me. Oh! tell me, so that I may pass a pleasant night.”

“This is my idea: that it is impossible that God should mean to part us. Wait; expect me the day after to-morrow.”

“What shall I do until then?” said Cosette. “You are outside, you go, and come! How happy men are! I shall remain entirely alone! Oh! How sad I shall be! What is it that you are going to do to-morrow evening? tell me.”

“I am going to try something.”

“Then I will pray to God and I will think of you here, so that you may be successful. I will question you no further, since you do not wish it. You are my master. I shall pass the evening to-morrow in singing that music from Euryanthe that you love, and that you came one evening to listen to, outside my shutters. But day after to-morrow you will come early. I shall expect you at dusk, at nine o’clock precisely, I warn you. Mon Dieu! how sad it is that the days are so long! On the stroke of nine, do you understand, I shall be in the garden.”

“And I also.”

And without having uttered it, moved by the same thought, impelled by those electric currents which place lovers in continual communication, both being intoxicated with delight even in their sorrow, they fell into each other’s arms, without perceiving that their lips met while their uplifted eyes, overflowing with rapture and full of tears, gazed upon the stars.

When Marius went forth, the street was deserted. This was the moment when Eponine was following the ruffians to the boulevard.

While Marius had been dreaming with his head pressed to the tree, an idea had crossed his mind; an idea, alas! that he himself judged to be senseless and impossible. He had come to a desperate decision.

CHAPTER VII — THE OLD HEART AND THE YOUNG HEART IN THE PRESENCE OF EACH OTHER

At that epoch, Father Gillenormand was well past his ninety-first birthday. He still lived with Mademoiselle Gillenormand in the Rue des Filles-du-Calvaire, No. 6, in the old house which he owned. He was, as the reader will remember, one of those antique old men who await death perfectly erect, whom age bears down without bending, and whom even sorrow cannot curve.

Still, his daughter had been saying for some time: “My father is sinking.” He no longer boxed the maids’ ears; he no longer thumped the landing-place so vigorously with his cane when Basque was slow in opening the door. The Revolution of July had exasperated him for the space of barely six months. He had viewed, almost tranquilly, that coupling of words, in the Moniteur: M. Humblot-Conte, peer of France. The fact is, that the old man was deeply dejected. He did not bend, he did not yield; this was no more a characteristic of his physical than of his moral nature, but he felt himself giving way internally. For four years he had been waiting for Marius, with his foot firmly planted, that is the exact word, in the conviction that that good-for-nothing young scamp would ring at his door some day or other; now he had reached the point, where, at certain gloomy hours, he said to himself, that if Marius made him wait much longer — It was not death that was insupportable to him; it was the idea that perhaps he should never see Marius again. The idea of never seeing Marius again had never entered his brain until that day; now the thought began to recur to him, and it chilled him. Absence, as is always the case in genuine and natural sentiments, had only served to augment the grandfather’s love for the ungrateful child, who had gone off like a flash. It is during December nights, when the cold stands at ten degrees, that one thinks oftenest of the son.

M. Gillenormand was, or thought himself, above all things, incapable of taking a single step, he — the grandfather, towards his grandson; “I would die rather,” he said to himself. He did not consider himself as the least to blame; but he thought of Marius only with profound tenderness, and the mute despair of an elderly, kindly old man who is about to vanish in the dark.

He began to lose his teeth, which added to his sadness.

M. Gillenormand, without however acknowledging it to himself, for it would have rendered him furious and ashamed, had never loved a mistress as he loved Marius.

He had had placed in his chamber, opposite the head of his bed, so that it should be the first thing on which his eyes fell on waking, an old portrait of his other daughter, who was dead, Madame Pontmercy, a portrait which had been taken when she was eighteen. He gazed incessantly at that portrait. One day, he happened to say, as he gazed upon it: —

“I think the likeness is strong.”

“To my sister?” inquired Mademoiselle Gillenormand. “Yes, certainly.”

“The old man added: —

“And to him also.”

Once as he sat with his knees pressed together, and his eyes almost closed, in a despondent attitude, his daughter ventured to say to him: —

“Father, are you as angry with him as ever?”

She paused, not daring to proceed further.

“With whom?” he demanded.

“With that poor Marius.”

He raised his aged head, laid his withered and emaciated fist on the table, and exclaimed in his most irritated and vibrating tone: —

“Poor Marius, do you say! That gentleman is a knave, a wretched scoundrel, a vain little ingrate, a heartless, soulless, haughty, and wicked man!”

And he turned away so that his daughter might not see the tear that stood in his eye.

Three days later he broke a silence which had lasted four hours, to say to his daughter point-blank: —

“I had the honor to ask Mademoiselle Gillenormand never to mention him to me.”

Aunt Gillenormand renounced every effort, and pronounced this acute diagnosis: “My father never cared very much for my sister after her folly. It is clear that he detests Marius.”

“After her folly” meant: “after she had married the colonel.”

However, as the reader has been able to conjecture, Mademoiselle Gillenormand had failed in her attempt to substitute her favorite, the officer of lancers, for Marius. The substitute, Theodule, had not been a success. M. Gillenormand had not accepted the quid pro quo. A vacancy in the heart does not accommodate itself to a stop-gap. Theodule, on his side, though he scented the inheritance, was disgusted at the task of pleasing. The goodman bored the lancer; and the lancer shocked the goodman. Lieutenant Theodule was gay, no doubt, but a chatter-box, frivolous, but vulgar; a high liver, but a frequenter of bad company; he had mistresses, it is true, and he had a great deal to say about them, it is true also; but he talked badly. All his good qualities had a defect. M. Gillenormand was worn out with hearing him tell about the love affairs that he had in the vicinity of the barracks in the Rue de Babylone. And then, Lieutenant Gillenormand sometimes came in his uniform, with the tricolored cockade. This rendered him downright intolerable. Finally, Father Gillenormand had said to his daughter: “I’ve had enough of that Theodule. I haven’t much taste for warriors in time of peace. Receive him if you choose. I don’t know but I prefer slashers to fellows that drag their swords. The clash of blades in battle is less dismal, after all, than the clank of the scabbard on the pavement. And then, throwing out your chest like a bully and lacing yourself like a girl, with stays under your cuirass, is doubly ridiculous. When one is a veritable man, one holds equally aloof from swagger and from affected airs. He is neither a blusterer nor a finnicky-hearted man. Keep your Theodule for yourself.”

It was in vain that his daughter said to him: “But he is your grandnephew, nevertheless,” — it turned out that M. Gillenormand, who was a grandfather to the very finger-tips, was not in the least a grand-uncle.

In fact, as he had good sense, and as he had compared the two, Theodule had only served to make him regret Marius all the more.

One evening, — it was the 24th of June, which did not prevent Father Gillenormand having a rousing fire on the hearth, — he had dismissed his daughter, who was sewing in a neighboring apartment. He was alone in his chamber, amid its pastoral scenes, with his feet propped on the andirons, half enveloped in his huge screen of coromandel lacquer, with its nine leaves, with his elbow resting on a table where burned two candles under a green shade, engulfed in his tapestry armchair, and in his hand a book which he was not reading. He was dressed, according to his wont, like an incroyable, and resembled an antique portrait by Garat. This would have made people run after him in the street, had not his daughter covered him up, whenever he went out, in a vast bishop’s wadded cloak, which concealed his attire. At home, he never wore a dressing gown, except when he rose and retired. “It gives one a look of age,” said he.

Father Gillenormand was thinking of Marius lovingly and bitterly; and, as usual, bitterness predominated. His tenderness once soured always ended by boiling and turning to indignation. He had reached the point where a man tries to make up his mind and to accept that which rends his heart. He was explaining to himself that there was no longer any reason why Marius should return, that if he intended to return, he should have done it long ago, that he must renounce the idea. He was trying to accustom himself to the thought that all was over, and that he should die without having beheld “that gentleman” again. But his whole nature revolted; his aged paternity would not consent to this. “Well!” said he, — this was his doleful refrain,— “he will not return!” His bald head had fallen upon his breast, and he fixed a melancholy and irritated gaze upon the ashes on his hearth.

In the very midst of his revery, his old servant Basque entered, and inquired: —

“Can Monsieur receive M. Marius?”

The old man sat up erect, pallid, and like a corpse which rises under the influence of a galvanic shock. All his blood had retreated to his heart. He stammered: —

“M. Marius what?”

“I don’t know,” replied Basque, intimidated and put out of countenance by his master’s air; “I have not seen him. Nicolette came in and said to me: ‘There’s a young man here; say that it is M. Marius.’”

Father Gillenormand stammered in a low voice: —

“Show him in.”

And he remained in the same attitude, with shaking head, and his eyes fixed on the door. It opened once more. A young man entered. It was Marius.

Marius halted at the door, as though waiting to be bidden to enter.

His almost squalid attire was not perceptible in the obscurity caused by the shade. Nothing could be seen but his calm, grave, but strangely sad face.

It was several minutes before Father Gillenormand, dulled with amazement and joy, could see anything except a brightness as when one is in the presence of an apparition. He was on the point of swooning; he saw Marius through a dazzling light. It certainly was he, it certainly was Marius.

At last! After the lapse of four years! He grasped him entire, so to speak, in a single glance. He found him noble, handsome, distinguished, well-grown, a complete man, with a suitable mien and a charming air. He felt a desire to open his arms, to call him, to fling himself forward; his heart melted with rapture, affectionate words swelled and overflowed his breast; at length all his tenderness came to the light and reached his lips, and, by a contrast which constituted the very foundation of his nature, what came forth was harshness. He said abruptly: —

“What have you come here for?”

Marius replied with embarrassment: —

“Monsieur—”

M. Gillenormand would have liked to have Marius throw himself into his arms. He was displeased with Marius and with himself. He was conscious that he was brusque, and that Marius was cold. It caused the goodman unendurable and irritating anxiety to feel so tender and forlorn within, and only to be able to be hard outside. Bitterness returned. He interrupted Marius in a peevish tone: —

“Then why did you come?”

That “then” signified: If you do not come to embrace me. Marius looked at his grandfather, whose pallor gave him a face of marble.

“Monsieur—”

“Have you come to beg my pardon? Do you acknowledge your faults?”

He thought he was putting Marius on the right road, and that “the child” would yield. Marius shivered; it was the denial of his father that was required of him; he dropped his eyes and replied: —

“No, sir.”

“Then,” exclaimed the old man impetuously, with a grief that was poignant and full of wrath, “what do you want of me?”

Marius clasped his hands, advanced a step, and said in a feeble and trembling voice: —

“Sir, have pity on me.”

These words touched M. Gillenormand; uttered a little sooner, they would have rendered him tender, but they came too late. The grandfather rose; he supported himself with both hands on his cane; his lips were white, his brow wavered, but his lofty form towered above Marius as he bowed.

“Pity on you, sir! It is youth demanding pity of the old man of ninety-one! You are entering into life, I am leaving it; you go to the play, to balls, to the cafe, to the billiard-hall; you have wit, you please the women, you are a handsome fellow; as for me, I spit on my brands in the heart of summer; you are rich with the only riches that are really such, I possess all the poverty of age; infirmity, isolation! You have your thirty-two teeth, a good digestion, bright eyes, strength, appetite, health, gayety, a forest of black hair; I have no longer even white hair, I have lost my teeth, I am losing my legs, I am losing my memory; there are three names of streets that I confound incessantly, the Rue Charlot, the Rue du Chaume, and the Rue Saint-Claude, that is what I have come to; you have before you the whole future, full of sunshine, and I am beginning to lose my sight, so far am I advancing into the night; you are in love, that is a matter of course, I am beloved by no one in all the world; and you ask pity of me! Parbleu! Moliere forgot that. If that is the way you jest at the courthouse, Messieurs the lawyers, I sincerely compliment you. You are droll.”

And the octogenarian went on in a grave and angry voice: —

“Come, now, what do you want of me?”

“Sir,” said Marius, “I know that my presence is displeasing to you, but I have come merely to ask one thing of you, and then I shall go away immediately.”

“You are a fool!” said the old man. “Who said that you were to go away?”

This was the translation of the tender words which lay at the bottom of his heart: —

“Ask my pardon! Throw yourself on my neck!”

M. Gillenormand felt that Marius would leave him in a few moments, that his harsh reception had repelled the lad, that his hardness was driving him away; he said all this to himself, and it augmented his grief; and as his grief was straightway converted into wrath, it increased his harshness. He would have liked to have Marius understand, and Marius did not understand, which made the goodman furious.

He began again: —

“What! you deserted me, your grandfather, you left my house to go no one knows whither, you drove your aunt to despair, you went off, it is easily guessed, to lead a bachelor life; it’s more convenient, to play the dandy, to come in at all hours, to amuse yourself; you have given me no signs of life, you have contracted debts without even telling me to pay them, you have become a smasher of windows and a blusterer, and, at the end of four years, you come to me, and that is all you have to say to me!"

This violent fashion of driving a grandson to tenderness was productive only of silence on the part of Marius. M. Gillenormand folded his arms; a gesture which with him was peculiarly imperious, and apostrophized Marius bitterly: —

"Let us make an end of this. You have come to ask something of me, you say? Well, what? What is it? Speak!"

"Sir," said Marius, with the look of a man who feels that he is falling over a precipice, "I have come to ask your permission to marry."

M. Gillenormand rang the bell. Basque opened the door half-way.

"Call my daughter."

A second later, the door was opened once more, Mademoiselle Gillenormand did not enter, but showed herself; Marius was standing, mute, with pendant arms and the face of a criminal; M. Gillenormand was pacing back and forth in the room. He turned to his daughter and said to her: —

"Nothing. It is Monsieur Marius. Say good day to him. Monsieur wishes to marry. That's all. Go away."

The curt, hoarse sound of the old man's voice announced a strange degree of excitement. The aunt gazed at Marius with a frightened air, hardly appeared to recognize him, did not allow a gesture or a syllable to escape her, and disappeared at her father's breath more swiftly than a straw before the hurricane.

In the meantime, Father Gillenormand had returned and placed his back against the chimney-piece once more.

"You marry! At one and twenty! You have arranged that! You have only a permission to ask! a formality. Sit down, sir. Well, you have had a revolution since I had the honor to see you last. The Jacobins got the upper hand. You must have been delighted. Are you not a Republican since you are a Baron? You can make that agree. The Republic makes a good sauce for the barony. Are you one of those decorated by July? Have you taken the Louvre at all, sir? Quite near here, in the Rue Saint-Antoine, opposite the Rue des Nonamdieres, there is a cannon-ball incrusted in the wall of the third story of a house with this inscription: 'July 28th, 1830.' Go take a look at that. It produces a good effect. Ah! those friends of yours do pretty things. By the way, aren't they erecting a fountain in the place of the monument of M. le Duc de Berry? So you want to marry? Whom? Can one inquire without indiscretion?”

He paused, and, before Marius had time to answer, he added violently: —

“Come now, you have a profession? A fortune made? How much do you earn at your trade of lawyer?”

“Nothing,” said Marius, with a sort of firmness and resolution that was almost fierce.

“Nothing? Then all that you have to live upon is the twelve hundred livres that I allow you?”

Marius did not reply. M. Gillenormand continued: —

“Then I understand the girl is rich?”

“As rich as I am.”

“What! No dowry?”

“No.”

“Expectations?”

“I think not.”

“Utterly naked! What’s the father?”

“I don’t know.”

“And what’s her name?”

“Mademoiselle Fauchelevent.”

“Fauchewhat?”

“Fauchelevent.”

“Pttt!” ejaculated the old gentleman.

“Sir!” exclaimed Marius.

M. Gillenormand interrupted him with the tone of a man who is speaking to himself: —

“That’s right, one and twenty years of age, no profession, twelve hundred livres a year, Madame la Baronne de Pontmercy will go and purchase a couple of sous’ worth of parsley from the fruiterer.”

“Sir,” repeated Marius, in the despair at the last hope, which was vanishing, “I entreat you! I conjure you in the name of Heaven, with clasped hands, sir, I throw myself at your feet, permit me to marry her!”

The old man burst into a shout of strident and mournful laughter, coughing and laughing at the same time.

“Ah! ah! ah! You said to yourself: ‘Pardine! I’ll go hunt up that old blockhead, that absurd numskull! What a shame that I’m not twenty-five!

How I'd treat him to a nice respectful summons! How nicely I'd get along without him! It's nothing to me, I'd say to him: "You're only too happy to see me, you old idiot, I want to marry, I desire to wed Mamselle No-matter-whom, daughter of Monsieur No-matter-what, I have no shoes, she has no chemise, that just suits; I want to throw my career, my future, my youth, my life to the dogs; I wish to take a plunge into wretchedness with a woman around my neck, that's an idea, and you must consent to it!" and the old fossil will consent.' Go, my lad, do as you like, attach your paving-stone, marry your Pousselevent, your Coupelevent — Never, sir, never!"

"Father—"

"Never!"

At the tone in which that "never" was uttered, Marius lost all hope. He traversed the chamber with slow steps, with bowed head, tottering and more like a dying man than like one merely taking his departure. M. Gillenormand followed him with his eyes, and at the moment when the door opened, and Marius was on the point of going out, he advanced four paces, with the senile vivacity of impetuous and spoiled old gentlemen, seized Marius by the collar, brought him back energetically into the room, flung him into an armchair and said to him: —

"Tell me all about it!"

"It was that single word "father" which had effected this revolution.

Marius stared at him in bewilderment. M. Gillenormand's mobile face was no longer expressive of anything but rough and ineffable good-nature. The grandsire had given way before the grandfather.

"Come, see here, speak, tell me about your love affairs, jabber, tell me everything! Sapristi! how stupid young folks are!"

"Father—" repeated Marius.

The old man's entire countenance lighted up with indescribable radiance.

"Yes, that's right, call me father, and you'll see!"

There was now something so kind, so gentle, so openhearted, and so paternal in this brusqueness, that Marius, in the sudden transition from discouragement to hope, was stunned and intoxicated by it, as it were. He was seated near the table, the light from the candles brought out the dilapidation of his costume, which Father Gillenormand regarded with amazement.

"Well, father—" said Marius.

“Ah, by the way,” interrupted M. Gillenormand, “you really have not a penny then? You are dressed like a pickpocket.”

He rummaged in a drawer, drew forth a purse, which he laid on the table: “Here are a hundred louis, buy yourself a hat.”

“Father,” pursued Marius, “my good father, if you only knew! I love her. You cannot imagine it; the first time I saw her was at the Luxembourg, she came there; in the beginning, I did not pay much heed to her, and then, I don’t know how it came about, I fell in love with her. Oh! how unhappy that made me! Now, at last, I see her every day, at her own home, her father does not know it, just fancy, they are going away, it is in the garden that we meet, in the evening, her father means to take her to England, then I said to myself: ‘I’ll go and see my grandfather and tell him all about the affair. I should go mad first, I should die, I should fall ill, I should throw myself into the water. I absolutely must marry her, since I should go mad otherwise.’ This is the whole truth, and I do not think that I have omitted anything. She lives in a garden with an iron fence, in the Rue Plumet. It is in the neighborhood of the Invalides.”

Father Gillenormand had seated himself, with a beaming countenance, beside Marius. As he listened to him and drank in the sound of his voice, he enjoyed at the same time a protracted pinch of snuff. At the words “Rue Plumet” he interrupted his inhalation and allowed the remainder of his snuff to fall upon his knees.

“The Rue Plumet, the Rue Plumet, did you say? — Let us see! — Are there not barracks in that vicinity? — Why, yes, that’s it. Your cousin Theodule has spoken to me about it. The lancer, the officer. A gay girl, my good friend, a gay girl! — Pardieu, yes, the Rue Plumet. It is what used to be called the Rue Blomet. — It all comes back to me now. I have heard of that little girl of the iron railing in the Rue Plumet. In a garden, a Pamela. Your taste is not bad. She is said to be a very tidy creature. Between ourselves, I think that simpleton of a lancer has been courting her a bit. I don’t know where he did it. However, that’s not to the purpose. Besides, he is not to be believed. He brags, Marius! I think it quite proper that a young man like you should be in love. It’s the right thing at your age. I like you better as a lover than as a Jacobin. I like you better in love with a petticoat, sapristi! with twenty petticoats, than with M. de Robespierre. For my part, I will do myself the justice to say, that in the line of sans-culottes, I have never loved any one but women. Pretty girls are pretty girls, the deuce!

There's no objection to that. As for the little one, she receives you without her father's knowledge. That's in the established order of things. I have had adventures of that same sort myself. More than one. Do you know what is done then? One does not take the matter ferociously; one does not precipitate himself into the tragic; one does not make one's mind to marriage and M. le Maire with his scarf. One simply behaves like a fellow of spirit. One shows good sense. Slip along, mortals; don't marry. You come and look up your grandfather, who is a good-natured fellow at bottom, and who always has a few rolls of louis in an old drawer; you say to him: 'See here, grandfather.' And the grandfather says: 'That's a simple matter. Youth must amuse itself, and old age must wear out. I have been young, you will be old. Come, my boy, you shall pass it on to your grandson. Here are two hundred pistoles. Amuse yourself, deuce take it!' Nothing better! That's the way the affair should be treated. You don't marry, but that does no harm. You understand me?"

Marius, petrified and incapable of uttering a syllable, made a sign with his head that he did not.

The old man burst out laughing, winked his aged eye, gave him a slap on the knee, stared him full in the face with a mysterious and beaming air, and said to him, with the tenderest of shrugs of the shoulder: —

"Booby! make her your mistress."

Marius turned pale. He had understood nothing of what his grandfather had just said. This twaddle about the Rue Blomet, Pamela, the barracks, the lancer, had passed before Marius like a dissolving view. Nothing of all that could bear any reference to Cosette, who was a lily. The good man was wandering in his mind. But this wandering terminated in words which Marius did understand, and which were a mortal insult to Cosette. Those words, "make her your mistress," entered the heart of the strict young man like a sword.

He rose, picked up his hat which lay on the floor, and walked to the door with a firm, assured step. There he turned round, bowed deeply to his grandfather, raised his head erect again, and said: —

"Five years ago you insulted my father; to-day you have insulted my wife. I ask nothing more of you, sir. Farewell."

Father Gillenormand, utterly confounded, opened his mouth, extended his arms, tried to rise, and before he could utter a word, the door closed once more, and Marius had disappeared.

The old man remained for several minutes motionless and as though struck by lightning, without the power to speak or breathe, as though a clenched fist grasped his throat. At last he tore himself from his arm-chair, ran, so far as a man can run at ninety-one, to the door, opened it, and cried: —

“Help! Help!”

His daughter made her appearance, then the domestics. He began again, with a pitiful rattle: “Run after him! Bring him back! What have I done to him? He is mad! He is going away! Ah! my God! Ah! my God! This time he will not come back!”

He went to the window which looked out on the street, threw it open with his aged and palsied hands, leaned out more than half-way, while Basque and Nicolette held him behind, and shouted: —

“Marius! Marius! Marius! Marius!”

But Marius could no longer hear him, for at that moment he was turning the corner of the Rue Saint-Louis.

The octogenarian raised his hands to his temples two or three times with an expression of anguish, recoiled tottering, and fell back into an arm-chair, pulseless, voiceless, tearless, with quivering head and lips which moved with a stupid air, with nothing in his eyes and nothing any longer in his heart except a gloomy and profound something which resembled night.

BOOK NINTH. — WHITHER ARE THEY GOING?

CHAPTER I — JEAN VALJEAN

That same day, towards four o’clock in the afternoon, Jean Valjean was sitting alone on the back side of one of the most solitary slopes in the Champ-de-Mars. Either from prudence, or from a desire to meditate, or simply in consequence of one of those insensible changes of habit which gradually introduce themselves into the existence of every one, he now rarely went out with Cosette. He had on his workman’s waistcoat, and trousers of gray linen; and his long-visored cap concealed his countenance.

He was calm and happy now beside Cosette; that which had, for a time, alarmed and troubled him had been dissipated; but for the last week or two, anxieties of another nature had come up. One day, while walking on the boulevard, he had caught sight of Thenardier; thanks to his disguise, Thenardier had not recognized him; but since that day, Jean Valjean had seen him repeatedly, and he was now certain that Thenardier was prowling about in their neighborhood.

This had been sufficient to make him come to a decision.

Moreover, Paris was not tranquil: political troubles presented this inconvenient feature, for any one who had anything to conceal in his life, that the police had grown very uneasy and very suspicious, and that while seeking to ferret out a man like Pepin or Morey, they might very readily discover a man like Jean Valjean.

Jean Valjean had made up his mind to quit Paris, and even France, and go over to England.

He had warned Cosette. He wished to set out before the end of the week.

He had seated himself on the slope in the Champ-de-Mars, turning over all sorts of thoughts in his mind, — Thenardier, the police, the journey, and the difficulty of procuring a passport.

He was troubled from all these points of view.

Last of all, an inexplicable circumstance which had just attracted his attention, and from which he had not yet recovered, had added to his state of alarm.

On the morning of that very day, when he alone of the household was stirring, while strolling in the garden before Cosette’s shutters were open, he had suddenly perceived on the wall, the following line, engraved, probably with a nail: —

16 Rue de la Verrerie.

This was perfectly fresh, the grooves in the ancient black mortar were white, a tuft of nettles at the foot of the wall was powdered with the fine, fresh plaster.

This had probably been written on the preceding night.

What was this? A signal for others? A warning for himself?

In any case, it was evident that the garden had been violated, and that strangers had made their way into it.

He recalled the odd incidents which had already alarmed the household.

His mind was now filling in this canvas.

He took good care not to speak to Cosette of the line written on the wall, for fear of alarming her.

In the midst of his preoccupations, he perceived, from a shadow cast by the sun, that some one had halted on the crest of the slope immediately behind him.

He was on the point of turning round, when a paper folded in four fell upon his knees as though a hand had dropped it over his head.

He took the paper, unfolded it, and read these words written in large characters, with a pencil: —

“MOVE AWAY FROM YOUR HOUSE.”

Jean Valjean sprang hastily to his feet; there was no one on the slope; he gazed all around him and perceived a creature larger than a child, not so large as a man, clad in a gray blouse and trousers of dust-colored cotton velvet, who was jumping over the parapet and who slipped into the moat of the Champde-Mars.

Jean Valjean returned home at once, in a very thoughtful mood.

CHAPTER II — MARIUS

Marius had left M. Gillenormand in despair. He had entered the house with very little hope, and quitted it with immense despair.

However, and those who have observed the depths of the human heart will understand this, the officer, the lancer, the ninny, Cousin Theodule, had left no trace in his mind. Not the slightest. The dramatic poet might, apparently, expect some complications from this revelation made point-blank by the grandfather to the grandson. But what the drama would gain thereby, truth would lose. Marius was at an age when one believes nothing in the line of evil; later on comes the age when one believes everything. Suspicions are nothing else than wrinkles. Early youth has none of them. That which overwhelmed Othello glides innocuous over Candide. Suspect Cosette! There are hosts of crimes which Marius could sooner have committed.

He began to wander about the streets, the resource of those who suffer. He thought of nothing, so far as he could afterwards remember. At two o'clock in the morning he returned to Courfeyrac's quarters and flung himself, without undressing, on his mattress. The sun was shining brightly when he sank into that frightful leaden slumber which permits ideas to go and come in the brain. When he awoke, he saw Courfeyrac, Enjolras, Feuilly, and Combeferre standing in the room with their hats on and all ready to go out.

Courfeyrac said to him: —

"Are you coming to General Lamarque's funeral?"

It seemed to him that Courfeyrac was speaking Chinese.

He went out some time after them. He put in his pocket the pistols which Javert had given him at the time of the adventure on the 3d of February, and which had remained in his hands. These pistols were still loaded. It would be difficult to say what vague thought he had in his mind when he took them with him.

All day long he prowled about, without knowing where he was going; it rained at times, he did not perceive it; for his dinner, he purchased a penny roll at a baker's, put it in his pocket and forgot it. It appears that he took a bath in the Seine without being aware of it. There are moments when a man has a furnace within his skull. Marius was passing through one of those moments. He no longer hoped for anything; this step he had taken since the preceding evening. He waited for night with feverish impatience, he had but one idea clearly before his mind; — this was, that at nine o'clock he should see Cosette. This last happiness now constituted his whole future; after that, gloom. At intervals, as he roamed through the most deserted boulevards, it seemed to him that he heard strange noises in Paris. He thrust his head out of his revery and said: "Is there fighting on hand?"

At nightfall, at nine o'clock precisely, as he had promised Cosette, he was in the Rue Plumet. When he approached the grating he forgot everything. It was forty-eight hours since he had seen Cosette; he was about to behold her once more; every other thought was effaced, and he felt only a profound and unheard-of joy. Those minutes in which one lives centuries always have this sovereign and wonderful property, that at the moment when they are passing they fill the heart completely.

Marius displaced the bar, and rushed headlong into the garden. Cosette was not at the spot where she ordinarily waited for him. He traversed the thicket, and approached the recess near the flight of steps: "She is waiting for me there," said he. Cosette was not there. He raised his eyes, and saw that the shutters of the house were closed. He made the tour of the garden, the garden was deserted. Then he returned to the house, and, rendered senseless by love, intoxicated, terrified, exasperated with grief and uneasiness, like a master who returns home at an evil hour, he tapped on the shutters. He knocked and knocked again, at the risk of seeing the window open, and her father's gloomy face make its appearance, and demand: "What do you want?" This was nothing in comparison with what he dimly caught a glimpse of. When he had rapped, he lifted up his voice and called Cosette.— "Cosette!" he cried; "Cosette!" he repeated imperiously. There was no reply. All was over. No one in the garden; no one in the house.

Marius fixed his despairing eyes on that dismal house, which was as black and as silent as a tomb and far more empty. He gazed at the stone seat on which he had passed so many adorable hours with Cosette. Then he seated himself on the flight of steps, his heart filled with sweetness and resolution, he blessed his love in the depths of his thought, and he said to himself that, since Cosette was gone, all that there was left for him was to die.

All at once he heard a voice which seemed to proceed from the street, and which was calling to him through the trees: —

"Mr. Marius!"

He started to his feet.

“Hey?” said he.

“Mr. Marius, are you there?”

“Yes.”

“Mr. Marius,” went on the voice, “your friends are waiting for you at the barricade of the Rue de la Chanvrerie.”

This voice was not wholly unfamiliar to him. It resembled the hoarse, rough voice of Eponine. Marius hastened to the gate, thrust aside the movable bar, passed his head through the aperture, and saw some one who appeared to him to be a young man, disappearing at a run into the gloom.

CHAPTER III — M. MABEUF

Jean Valjean’s purse was of no use to M. Mabeuf. M. Mabeuf, in his venerable, infantile austerity, had not accepted the gift of the stars; he had not admitted that a star could coin itself into louis d’or. He had not divined that what had fallen from heaven had come from Gavroche. He had taken the purse to the police commissioner of the quarter, as a lost article placed by the finder at the disposal of claimants. The purse was actually lost. It is unnecessary to say that no one claimed it, and that it did not succor M. Mabeuf.

Moreover, M. Mabeuf had continued his downward course.

His experiments on indigo had been no more successful in the Jardin des Plantes than in his garden at Austerlitz. The year before he had owed his housekeeper’s wages; now, as we have seen, he owed three quarters of his rent. The pawnshop had sold the plates of his Flora after the expiration of thirteen months. Some coppersmith had made stewpans of them. His copper plates gone, and being unable to complete even the incomplete copies of his Flora which were in his possession, he had disposed of the text, at a miserable price, as waste paper, to a second-hand bookseller. Nothing now remained to him of his life’s work. He set to work to eat up the money for these copies. When he saw that this wretched resource was becoming exhausted, he gave up his garden and allowed it to run to waste. Before this, a long time before, he had given up his two eggs and the morsel of beef which he ate from time to time. He dined on bread and potatoes. He had sold the last of his furniture, then all duplicates of his bedding, his clothing and his blankets, then his herbariums and prints; but he still retained his most precious books, many of which were of the greatest rarity, among others, Les Quadrins Historiques de la Bible, edition of 1560; La Concordance des Bibles, by Pierre de Besse; Les Marguerites de la Marguerite, of Jean de La Haye, with a dedication to the Queen of Navarre; the book de la Charge et Dignite de l’Ambassadeur, by the Sieur de Villiers Hotman; a Florilegium Rabbinicum of 1644; a Tibullus of 1567, with this magnificent inscription: Venetiis, in aedibus Manutianis; and lastly, a Diogenes Laertius, printed at Lyons in 1644, which contained the famous variant of the manuscript 411, thirteenth century, of the Vatican, and those of the two manuscripts of Venice, 393 and 394, consulted with such fruitful results by Henri Estienne, and all the passages in Doric dialect which are only found in the celebrated manuscript of the twelfth century belonging to the Naples Library. M. Mabeuf never had any fire in his chamber, and went to bed at sundown, in order not to consume any candles. It seemed as though he had no longer any neighbors: people avoided him when he went out; he perceived the fact. The wretchedness of a child interests a mother, the wretchedness of a young man interests a young girl, the wretchedness of an old man interests no one. It is, of all distresses, the coldest. Still, Father Mabeuf had not entirely lost his childlike serenity. His eyes acquired some vivacity when they rested on his books, and he smiled when he gazed at the Diogenes Laertius, which was a unique copy. His bookcase with glass doors was the only piece of furniture which he had kept beyond what was strictly indispensable.

One day, Mother Plutarque said to him: —

“I have no money to buy any dinner.”

What she called dinner was a loaf of bread and four or five potatoes.

“On credit?” suggested M. Mabeuf.

“You know well that people refuse me.”

M. Mabeuf opened his bookcase, took a long look at all his books, one after another, as a father obliged to decimate his children would gaze upon them before making a choice, then seized one hastily, put it in under his arm and went out. He returned two hours later, without anything under his arm, laid thirty sous on the table, and said: —

“You will get something for dinner.”

From that moment forth, Mother Plutarque saw a sombre veil, which was never more lifted, descend over the old man’s candid face.

On the following day, on the day after, and on the day after that, it had to be done again.

M. Mabeuf went out with a book and returned with a coin. As the second-hand dealers perceived that he was forced to sell, they purchased of him for twenty sous that for which he had paid twenty francs, sometimes at those very shops. Volume by volume, the whole library went the same road. He said at times: “But I am eighty;” as though he cherished some secret hope that he should arrive at the end of his days before reaching the end of his books. His melancholy increased. Once, however, he had a pleasure. He had gone out with a Robert Estienne, which he had sold for thirty-five sous under the Quai Malaquais, and he returned with an Aldus which he had bought for forty sous in the Rue des Gres.— “I owe five sous,” he said, beaming on Mother Plutarque. That day he had no dinner.

He belonged to the Horticultural Society. His destitution became known there. The president of the society came to see him, promised to speak to the Minister of Agriculture and Commerce about him, and did so.— “Why, what!” exclaimed the Minister, “I should think so! An old savant! a botanist! an inoffensive man! Something must be done for him!” On the following day, M. Mabeuf received an invitation to dine with the Minister. Trembling with joy, he showed the letter to Mother Plutarque. “We are saved!” said he. On the day appointed, he went to the Minister’s house. He perceived that his ragged cravat, his long, square coat, and his waxed shoes astonished the ushers. No one spoke to him, not even the Minister. About ten o’clock in the evening, while he was still waiting for a word, he heard the Minister’s wife, a beautiful woman in a low-necked gown whom he had not ventured to approach, inquire: “Who is that old gentleman?” He returned home on foot at midnight, in a driving rain-storm. He had sold an Elzevir to pay for a carriage in which to go thither.

He had acquired the habit of reading a few pages in his Diogenes Laertius every night, before he went to bed. He knew enough Greek to enjoy the peculiarities of the text which he owned. He had now no other enjoyment. Several weeks passed. All at once, Mother Plutarque fell ill. There is one thing sadder than having no money with which to buy bread at the baker’s and that is having no money to purchase drugs at the apothecary’s. One evening, the doctor had ordered a very expensive potion. And the malady was growing worse; a nurse was required. M. Mabeuf opened his bookcase; there was nothing there. The last volume had taken its departure. All that was left to him was Diogenes Laertius. He put this unique copy under his arm, and went out. It was the 4th of June, 1832; he went to the Porte Saint-Jacques, to Royal’s successor, and returned with one hundred francs. He laid the pile of five-franc pieces on the old serving-woman’s nightstand, and returned to his chamber without saying a word.

On the following morning, at dawn, he seated himself on the overturned post in his garden, and he could be seen over the top of the hedge, sitting the whole morning motionless, with drooping head, his eyes vaguely fixed on the withered flower-beds. It rained at intervals; the old man did not seem to perceive the fact.

In the afternoon, extraordinary noises broke out in Paris. They resembled shots and the clamors of a multitude.

Father Mabeuf raised his head. He saw a gardener passing, and inquired: —

“What is it?”

The gardener, spade on back, replied in the most unconcerned tone: —

“It is the riots.”

“What riots?”

“Yes, they are fighting.”

“Why are they fighting?”

“Ah, good Heavens!” ejaculated the gardener.

“In what direction?” went on M. Mabeuf.

“In the neighborhood of the Arsenal.”

Father Mabeuf went to his room, took his hat, mechanically sought for a book to place under his arm, found none, said: “Ah! truly!” and went off with a bewildered air.

BOOK TENTH. — THE 5TH OF JUNE, 1832

CHAPTER I — THE SURFACE OF THE QUESTION

Of what is revolt composed? Of nothing and of everything. Of an electricity disengaged, little by little, of a flame suddenly darting forth, of a wandering force, of a passing breath. This breath encounters heads which speak, brains which dream, souls which suffer, passions which burn, wretchedness which howls, and bears them away.

Whither?

At random. Athwart the state, the laws, athwart prosperity and the insolence of others.

Irritated convictions, embittered enthusiasms, agitated indignations, instincts of war which have been repressed, youthful courage which has been exalted, generous blindness; curiosity, the taste for change, the thirst for the unexpected, the sentiment which causes one to take pleasure in reading the posters for the new play, and love, the prompter's whistle, at the theatre; the vague hatreds, rancors, disappointments, every vanity which thinks that destiny has bankrupted it; discomfort, empty dreams, ambitious that are hedged about, whoever hopes for a downfall, some outcome, in short, at the very bottom, the rabble, that mud which catches fire, — such are the elements of revolt. That which is grandest and that which is basest; the beings who prowl outside of all bounds, awaiting an occasion, bohemians, vagrants, vagabonds of the cross-roads, those who sleep at night in a desert of houses with no other roof than the cold clouds of heaven, those who, each day, demand their bread from chance and not from toil, the unknown of poverty and nothingness, the bare-armed, the bare-footed, belong to revolt. Whoever cherishes in his soul a secret revolt against any deed whatever on the part of the state, of life or of fate, is ripe for riot, and, as soon as it makes its appearance, he begins to quiver, and to feel himself borne away with the whirlwind.

Revolt is a sort of waterspout in the social atmosphere which forms suddenly in certain conditions of temperature, and which, as it eddies about, mounts, descends, thunders, tears, razes, crushes, demolishes, uproots, bearing with it great natures and small, the strong man and the feeble mind, the tree trunk and the stalk of straw. Woe to him whom it bears away as well as to him whom it strikes! It breaks the one against the other.

It communicates to those whom it seizes an indescribable and extraordinary power. It fills the first-comer with the force of events; it converts everything into projectiles. It makes a cannon-ball of a rough stone, and a general of a porter.

If we are to believe certain oracles of crafty political views, a little revolt is desirable from the point of view of power. System: revolt strengthens those governments which it does not overthrow. It puts the army to the test; it consecrates the bourgeoisie, it draws out the muscles of the police; it demonstrates the force of the social framework. It is an exercise in gymnastics; it is almost hygiene. Power is in better health after a revolt, as a man is after a good rubbing down.

Revolt, thirty years ago, was regarded from still other points of view.

There is for everything a theory, which proclaims itself “good sense”; Philintus against Alcestis; mediation offered between the false and the true; explanation, admonition, rather haughty extenuation which, because it is mingled with blame and excuse, thinks itself wisdom, and is often only pedantry. A whole political school called “the golden mean” has been the outcome of this. As between cold water and hot water, it is the lukewarm water party. This school with its false depth, all on the surface, which dissects effects without going back to first causes, chides from its height of a demi-science, the agitation of the public square.

If we listen to this school, “The riots which complicated the affair of 1830 deprived that great event of a portion of its purity. The Revolution of July had been a fine popular gale, abruptly followed by blue sky. They made the cloudy sky reappear. They caused that revolution, at first so remarkable for its unanimity, to degenerate into a quarrel. In the Revolution of July, as in all progress accomplished by fits and starts, there had been secret fractures; these riots rendered them perceptible. It might have been said: ‘Ah! this is broken.’ After the Revolution of July, one was sensible only of deliverance; after the riots, one was conscious of a catastrophe.

“All revolt closes the shops, depresses the funds, throws the Exchange into consternation, suspends commerce, clogs business, precipitates failures; no more money, private fortunes rendered uneasy, public credit shaken, industry disconcerted, capital withdrawing, work at a discount, fear everywhere; counter-shocks in every town. Hence gulfs. It has been calculated that the first day of a riot costs France twenty millions, the second day forty, the third sixty, a three days' uprising costs one hundred and twenty millions, that is to say, if only the financial result be taken into consideration, it is equivalent to a disaster, a shipwreck or a lost battle, which should annihilate a fleet of sixty ships of the line.

"No doubt, historically, uprisings have their beauty; the war of the pavements is no less grandiose, and no less pathetic, than the war of thickets: in the one there is the soul of forests, in the other the heart of cities; the one has Jean Chouan, the other has a Jeanne. Revolts have illuminated with a red glare all the most original points of the Parisian character, generosity, devotion, stormy gayety, students proving that bravery forms part of intelligence, the National Guard invincible, bivouacs of shopkeepers, fortresses of street urchins, contempt of death on the part of passers-by. Schools and legions clashed together. After all, between the combatants, there was only a difference of age; the race is the same; it is the same stoical men who died at the age of twenty for their ideas, at forty for their families. The army, always a sad thing in civil wars, opposed prudence to audacity. Uprisings, while proving popular intrepidity, also educated the courage of the bourgeois.

"This is well. But is all this worth the bloodshed? And to the bloodshed add the future darkness, progress compromised, uneasiness among the best men, honest liberals in despair, foreign absolutism happy in these wounds dealt to revolution by its own hand, the vanquished of 1830 triumphing and saying: 'We told you so!' Add Paris enlarged, possibly, but France most assuredly diminished. Add, for all must needs be told, the massacres which have too often dishonored the victory of order grown ferocious over liberty gone mad. To sum up all, uprisings have been disastrous."

Thus speaks that approximation to wisdom with which the bourgeoisie, that approximation to the people, so willingly contents itself.

For our parts, we reject this word uprisings as too large, and consequently as too convenient. We make a distinction between one popular movement and another popular movement. We do not inquire whether an uprising costs as much as a battle. Why a battle, in the first place? Here the question of war comes up. Is war less of a scourge than an uprising is of a calamity? And then, are all uprisings calamities? And what if the revolt of July did cost a hundred and twenty millions? The establishment of Philip V. in Spain cost France two milliards. Even at the same price, we should prefer the 14th of July. However, we reject these figures, which appear to be reasons and which are only words. An uprising being given, we examine it by itself. In all that is said by the doctrinarian objection above presented, there is no question of anything but effect, we seek the cause.

We will be explicit.

CHAPTER II — THE ROOT OF THE MATTER

There is such a thing as an uprising, and there is such a thing as insurrection; these are two separate phases of wrath; one is in the wrong, the other is in the right. In democratic states, the only ones which are founded on justice, it sometimes happens that the fraction usurps; then the whole rises and the necessary claim of its rights may proceed as far as resort to arms. In all questions which result from collective sovereignty, the war of the whole against the fraction is insurrection; the attack of the fraction against the whole is revolt; according as the Tuileries contain a king or the Convention, they are justly or unjustly attacked. The same cannon, pointed against the populace, is wrong on the 10th of August, and right on the 14th of Vendemiaire. Alike in appearance, fundamentally different in reality; the Swiss defend the false, Bonaparte defends the true. That which universal suffrage has effected in its liberty and in its sovereignty cannot be undone by the street. It is the same in things pertaining purely to civilization; the instinct of the masses, clear-sighted to-day, may be troubled to-morrow. The same fury legitimate when directed against Terray and absurd when directed against Turgot. The destruction of machines, the pillage of warehouses, the breaking of rails, the demolition of docks, the false routes of multitudes, the refusal by the people of justice to progress, Ramus assassinated by students, Rousseau driven out of Switzerland and stoned, — that is revolt. Israel against Moses, Athens against Phocian, Rome against Cicero, — that is an uprising; Paris against the Bastille, — that is insurrection. The soldiers against Alexander, the sailors against Christopher Columbus, — this is the same revolt; impious revolt; why? Because Alexander is doing for Asia with the sword that which Christopher Columbus is doing for America with the compass; Alexander like Columbus, is finding a world. These gifts of a world to civilization are such augmentations of light, that all resistance in that case is culpable. Sometimes the populace counterfeits fidelity to itself. The masses are traitors to the people. Is there, for example, anything stranger than that long and bloody protest of dealers in contraband salt, a legitimate chronic revolt, which, at the decisive moment, on the day of salvation, at the very hour of popular victory, espouses the throne, turns into chouannerie, and, from having been an insurrection against, becomes an uprising for, sombre masterpieces of ignorance! The contraband salt dealer escapes the royal gibbets, and with a rope's end round his neck, mounts the white cockade. "Death to the salt duties," brings forth, "Long live the King!" The assassins of Saint-Barthelemy, the cut-throats of September, the manslaughterers of Avignon, the assassins of Coligny, the assassins of Madam Lamballe, the assassins of Brune, Miquelets, Verdets, Cadenettes, the companions of Jehu, the chevaliers of Brassard, — behold an uprising. La Vendee is a grand, catholic uprising. The sound of right in movement is recognizable, it does not always proceed from the trembling of excited masses; there are mad rages, there are cracked bells, all tocsins do not give out the sound of bronze. The brawl of passions and ignorances is quite another thing from the shock of progress. Show me in what direction you are going. Rise, if you will, but let it be that you may grow great. There is no insurrection except in a forward direction. Any other sort of rising is bad; every violent step towards the rear is a revolt; to retreat is to commit a deed of violence against the human race. Insurrection is a fit of rage on the part of truth; the pavements which the uprising disturbs give forth the spark of right. These pavements bequeath to the uprising only their mud. Danton against Louis XIV. is insurrection; Hebert against Danton is revolt.

Hence it results that if insurrection in given cases may be, as Lafayette says, the most holy of duties, an uprising may be the most fatal of crimes.

There is also a difference in the intensity of heat; insurrection is often a volcano, revolt is often only a fire of straw.

Revolt, as we have said, is sometimes found among those in power. Polignac is a rioter; Camille Desmoulins is one of the governing powers.

Insurrection is sometimes resurrection.

The solution of everything by universal suffrage being an absolutely modern fact, and all history anterior to this fact being, for the space of four thousand years, filled with violated right, and the suffering of peoples, each epoch of history brings with it that protest of which it is capable. Under the Caesars, there was no insurrection, but there was Juvenal.

The facit indignatio replaces the Gracchi.

Under the Caesars, there is the exile to Syene; there is also the man of the Annales. We do not speak of the immense exile of Patmos who, on his part also, overwhelms the real world with a protest in the name of the ideal world, who makes of his vision an enormous satire and casts on Rome-Nineveh, on Rome-Babylon, on Rome-Sodom, the flaming reflection of the Apocalypse. John on his rock is the sphinx on its pedestal; we may understand him, he is a Jew, and it is Hebrew; but the man who writes the Annales is of the Latin race, let us rather say he is a Roman.

As the Neros reign in a black way, they should be painted to match. The work of the graving-tool alone would be too pale; there must be poured into the channel a concentrated prose which bites.

Despots count for something in the question of philosophers. A word that is chained is a terrible word. The writer doubles and trebles his style when silence is imposed on a nation by its master. From this silence there arises a certain mysterious plenitude which filters into thought and there congeals into bronze. The compression of history produces conciseness in the historian. The granite solidity of such and such a celebrated prose is nothing but the accumulation effected by the tyrant.

Tyranny constrains the writer to conditions of diameter which are augmentations of force. The Ciceronian period, which hardly sufficed for Verres, would be blunted on Caligula. The less spread of sail in the phrase, the more intensity in the blow. Tacitus thinks with all his might.

The honesty of a great heart, condensed in justice and truth, overwhelms as with lightning.

Be it remarked, in passing, that Tacitus is not historically superposed upon Caesar. The Tiberii were reserved for him. Caesar and Tacitus are two successive phenomena, a meeting between whom seems to be mysteriously avoided, by the One who, when He sets the centuries on the stage, regulates the entrances and the exits. Caesar is great, Tacitus is great; God spares these two greatnesses by not allowing them to clash with one another. The guardian of justice, in striking Caesar, might strike too hard and be unjust. God does not will it. The great wars of Africa and Spain, the pirates of Sicily destroyed, civilization introduced into Gaul, into Britanny, into Germany, — all this glory covers the Rubicon. There is here a sort of delicacy of the divine justice, hesitating to let loose upon the illustrious usurper the formidable historian, sparing Caesar Tacitus, and according extenuating circumstances to genius.

Certainly, despotism remains despotism, even under the despot of genius. There is corruption under all illustrious tyrants, but the moral pest is still more hideous under infamous tyrants. In such reigns, nothing veils the shame; and those who make examples, Tacitus as well as Juvenal, slap this ignominy which cannot reply, in the face, more usefully in the presence of all humanity.

Rome smells worse under Vitellius than under Sylla. Under Claudius and under Domitian, there is a deformity of baseness corresponding to the repulsiveness of the tyrant. The villainy of slaves is a direct product of the despot; a miasma exhales from these cowering consciences wherein the master is reflected; public powers are unclean; hearts are small; consciences are dull, souls are like vermin; thus it is under Caracalla, thus it is under Commodus, thus it is under Heliogabalus, while, from the Roman Senate, under Caesar, there comes nothing but the odor of the dung which is peculiar to the eyries of the eagles.

Hence the advent, apparently tardy, of the Tacituses and the Juvenals; it is in the hour for evidence, that the demonstrator makes his appearance.

But Juvenal and Tacitus, like Isaiah in Biblical times, like Dante in the Middle Ages, is man; riot and insurrection are the multitude, which is sometimes right and sometimes wrong.

In the majority of cases, riot proceeds from a material fact; insurrection is always a moral phenomenon. Riot is Masaniello; insurrection, Spartacus. Insurrection borders on mind, riot on the stomach; Gaster grows irritated; but Gaster, assuredly, is not always in the wrong. In questions of famine, riot, Buzancais, for example, holds a true, pathetic, and just point of departure. Nevertheless, it remains a riot. Why? It is because, right at bottom, it was wrong in form. Shy although in the right, violent although strong, it struck at random; it walked like a blind elephant; it left behind it the corpses of old men, of women, and of children; it wished the blood of inoffensive and innocent persons without knowing why. The nourishment of the people is a good object; to massacre them is a bad means.

All armed protests, even the most legitimate, even that of the 10th of August, even that of July 14th, begin with the same troubles. Before the right gets set free, there is foam and tumult. In the beginning, the insurrection is a riot, just as a river is a torrent. Ordinarily it ends in that ocean: revolution. Sometimes, however, coming from those lofty mountains which dominate the moral horizon, justice, wisdom, reason, right, formed of the pure snow of the ideal, after a long fall from rock to rock, after having reflected the sky in its transparency and increased by a hundred affluents in the majestic mien of triumph, insurrection is suddenly lost in some quagmire, as the Rhine is in a swamp.

All this is of the past, the future is another thing. Universal suffrage has this admirable property, that it dissolves riot in its inception, and, by giving the vote to insurrection, it deprives it of its arms. The disappearance of wars, of street wars as well as of wars on the frontiers, such is the inevitable progression. Whatever To-day may be, To-morrow will be peace.

However, insurrection, riot, and points of difference between the former and the latter, — the bourgeois, properly speaking, knows nothing of such shades. In his mind, all is sedition, rebellion pure and simple, the revolt of the dog against his master, an attempt to bite whom must be punished by the chain and the kennel, barking, snapping, until such day as the head of the dog, suddenly enlarged, is outlined vaguely in the gloom face to face with the lion.

Then the bourgeois shouts: “Long live the people!”

This explanation given, what does the movement of June, 1832, signify, so far as history is concerned? Is it a revolt? Is it an insurrection?

It may happen to us, in placing this formidable event on the stage, to say revolt now and then, but merely to distinguish superficial facts, and always preserving the distinction between revolt, the form, and insurrection, the foundation.

This movement of 1832 had, in its rapid outbreak and in its melancholy extinction, so much grandeur, that even those who see in it only an uprising, never refer to it otherwise than with respect. For them, it is like a relic of 1830. Excited imaginations, say they, are not to be calmed in a day. A revolution cannot be cut off short. It must needs undergo some undulations before it returns to a state of rest, like a mountain sinking into the plain. There are no Alps without their Jura, nor Pyrenees without the Asturias.

This pathetic crisis of contemporary history which the memory of Parisians calls “the epoch of the riots,” is certainly a characteristic hour amid the stormy hours of this century. A last word, before we enter on the recital.

The facts which we are about to relate belong to that dramatic and living reality, which the historian sometimes neglects for lack of time and space. There, nevertheless, we insist upon it, is life, palpitation, human tremor. Petty details, as we think we have already said, are, so to speak, the foliage of great events, and are lost in the distance of history. The epoch, surnamed “of the riots,” abounds in details of this nature. Judicial inquiries have not revealed, and perhaps have not sounded the depths, for another reason than history. We shall therefore bring to light, among the known and published peculiarities, things which have not heretofore been known, about facts over which have passed the forgetfulness of some, and the death of others. The majority of the actors in these gigantic scenes have disappeared; beginning with the very next day they held their peace; but of what we shall relate, we shall be able to say: “We have seen this.” We alter a few names, for history relates and does not inform against, but the deed which we shall paint will be genuine. In accordance with the conditions of the book which we are now writing, we shall show only one side and one episode, and certainly, the least known at that, of the two days, the 5th and the 6th of June, 1832, but we shall do it in such wise that the reader may catch a glimpse, beneath the gloomy veil which we are about to lift, of the real form of this frightful public adventure.

CHAPTER III — A BURIAL; AN OCCASION TO BE BORN AGAIN

In the spring of 1832, although the cholera had been chilling all minds for the last three months and had cast over their agitation an indescribable and gloomy pacification, Paris had already long been ripe for commotion. As we have said, the great city resembles a piece of artillery; when it is loaded, it suffices for a spark to fall, and the shot is discharged. In June, 1832, the spark was the death of General Lamarque.

Lamarque was a man of renown and of action. He had had in succession, under the Empire and under the Restoration, the sorts of bravery requisite for the two epochs, the bravery of the battle-field and the bravery of the tribune. He was as eloquent as he had been valiant; a sword was discernible in his speech. Like Foy, his predecessor, after upholding the command, he upheld liberty; he sat between the left and the extreme left, beloved of the people because he accepted the chances of the future, beloved of the populace because he had served the Emperor well; he was, in company with Comtes Gerard and Drouet, one of Napoleon’s marshals in petto. The treaties of 1815 removed him as a personal offence. He hated Wellington with a downright hatred which pleased the multitude; and, for seventeen years, he majestically preserved the sadness of Waterloo, paying hardly any attention to intervening events. In his death agony, at his last hour, he clasped to his breast a sword which had been presented to him by the officers of the Hundred Days. Napoleon had died uttering the word army, Lamarque uttering the word country.

His death, which was expected, was dreaded by the people as a loss, and by the government as an occasion. This death was an affliction. Like everything that is bitter, affliction may turn to revolt. This is what took place.

On the preceding evening, and on the morning of the 5th of June, the day appointed for Lamarque’s burial, the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, which the procession was to touch at, assumed a formidable aspect. This tumultuous network of streets was filled with rumors. They armed themselves as best they might. Joiners carried off door-weights of their establishment “to break down doors.” One of them had made himself a dagger of a stocking-weaver’s hook by breaking off the hook and sharpening the stump. Another, who was in a fever “to attack,” slept wholly dressed for three days. A carpenter named Lombier met a comrade, who asked him: “Whither are you going?” “Eh! well, I have no weapons.” “What then?” “I’m going to my timber-yard to get my compasses.” “What for?” “I don’t know,” said Lombier. A certain Jacqueline, an expeditious man, accosted some passing artisans: “Come here, you!” He treated them to ten sous’ worth of wine and said: “Have you work?” “No.” “Go to Filspierre, between the Barriere Charonne and the Barriere Montreuil, and you will find work.” At Filspierre’s they found cartridges and arms. Certain well-known leaders were going the rounds, that is to say, running from one house to another, to collect their men. At Barthelemy’s, near the Barriere du Trone, at Capel’s, near the Petit-Chapeau, the drinkers accosted each other with a grave air. They were heard to say: “Have you your pistol?” “Under my blouse.” “And you?” “Under my shirt.” In the Rue Traversiere, in front of the Bland workshop, and in the yard of the Maison-Brulee, in front of tool-maker Bernier’s, groups whispèred together. Among them was observed a certain Mavot, who never remained more than a week in one shop, as the masters always discharged him “because they were obliged to dispute with him every day.” Mavot was killed on the following day at the barricade of the Rue Menilmontant. Pretot, who was destined to perish also in the struggle, seconded Mavot, and to the question: “What is your object?” he replied: “Insurrection.” Workmen assembled at the corner of the Rue de Bercy, waited for a certain Lemarin, the revolutionary agent for the Faubourg Saint-Marceau. Watchwords were exchanged almost publicly.

On the 5th of June, accordingly, a day of mingled rain and sun, General Lamarque’s funeral procession traversed Paris with official military pomp, somewhat augmented through precaution. Two battalions, with draped drums and reversed arms, ten thousand National Guards, with their swords at their sides, escorted the coffin. The hearse was drawn by young men. The officers of the Invalides came immediately behind it, bearing laurel branches. Then came an innumerable, strange, agitated multitude, the sectionaries of the Friends of the People, the Law School, the Medical School, refugees of all nationalities, and Spanish, Italian, German, and Polish flags, tricolored horizontal banners, every possible sort of banner, children waving green boughs, stone-cutters and carpenters who were on strike at the moment, printers who were recognizable by their paper caps, marching two by two, three by three, uttering cries, nearly all of them brandishing sticks, some brandishing sabres, without order and yet with a single soul, now a tumultuous rout, again a column. Squads chose themselves leaders; a man armed with a pair of pistols in full view, seemed to pass the host in review, and the files separated before him. On the side alleys of the boulevards, in the branches of the trees, on balconies, in windows, on the roofs, swarmed the heads of men, women, and children; all eyes were filled with anxiety. An armed throng was passing, and a terrified throng looked on.

The Government, on its side, was taking observations. It observed with its hand on its sword. Four squadrons of carabineers could be seen in the Place Louis XV. in their saddles, with their trumpets at their head, cartridge-boxes filled and muskets loaded, all in readiness to march; in the Latin country and at the Jardin des Plantes, the Municipal Guard echelonned from street to street; at the Halle-aux-Vins, a squadron of dragoons; at the Greve half of the 12th Light Infantry, the other half being at the Bastille; the 6th Dragoons at the Celestins; and the courtyard of the Louvre full of artillery. The remainder of the troops were confined to their barracks, without reckoning the regiments of the environs of Paris. Power being uneasy, held suspended over the menacing multitude twenty-four thousand soldiers in the city and thirty thousand in the banlieue.

Divers reports were in circulation in the cortege. Legitimist tricks were hinted at; they spoke of the Duc de Reichstadt, whom God had marked out for death at that very moment when the populace were designating him for the Empire. One personage, whose name has remained unknown, announced that at a given hour two overseers who had been won over, would throw open the doors of a factory of arms to the people. That which predominated on the uncovered brows of the majority of those present was enthusiasm mingled with dejection. Here and there, also, in that multitude given over to such violent but noble emotions, there were visible genuine visages of criminals and ignoble mouths which said: “Let us plunder!” There are certain agitations which stir up the bottoms of marshes and make clouds of mud rise through the water. A phenomenon to which “well drilled” policemen are no strangers.

The procession proceeded, with feverish slowness, from the house of the deceased, by way of the boulevards as far as the Bastille. It rained from time to time; the rain mattered nothing to that throng. Many incidents, the coffin borne round the Vendome column, stones thrown at the Duc de Fitz-James, who was seen on a balcony with his hat on his head, the Gallic cock torn from a popular flag and dragged in the mire, a policeman wounded with a blow from a sword at the Porte Saint-Martin, an officer of the 12th Light Infantry saying aloud: “I am a Republican,” the Polytechnic School coming up unexpectedly against orders to remain at home, the shouts of: “Long live the Polytechnique! Long live the Republic!” marked the passage of the funeral train. At the Bastille, long files of curious and formidable people who descended from the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, effected a junction with the procession, and a certain terrible seething began to agitate the throng.

One man was heard to say to another: “Do you see that fellow with a red beard, he’s the one who will give the word when we are to fire.” It appears that this red beard was present, at another riot, the Quenisset affair, entrusted with this same function.

The hearse passed the Bastille, traversed the small bridge, and reached the esplanade of the bridge of Austerlitz. There it halted. The crowd, surveyed at that moment with a bird’seye view, would have presented the aspect of a comet whose head was on the esplanade and whose tail spread out over the Quai Bourdon, covered the Bastille, and was prolonged on the boulevard as far as the Porte Saint-Martin. A circle was traced around the hearse. The vast rout held their peace. Lafayette spoke and bade Lamarque farewell. This was a touching and august instant, all heads uncovered, all hearts beat high.

All at once, a man on horseback, clad in black, made his appearance in the middle of the group with a red flag, others say, with a pike surmounted with a red liberty-cap. Lafayette turned aside his head. Exelmans quitted the procession.

This red flag raised a storm, and disappeared in the midst of it. From the Boulevard Bourdon to the bridge of Austerlitz one of those clamors which resemble billows stirred the multitude. Two prodigious shouts went up: “Lamarque to the Pantheon! — Lafayette to the Town-hall!” Some young men, amid the declamations of the throng, harnessed themselves and began to drag Lamarque in the hearse across the bridge of Austerlitz and Lafayette in a hackney-coach along the Quai Morland.

In the crowd which surrounded and cheered Lafayette, it was noticed that a German showed himself named Ludwig Snyder, who died a centenarian afterwards, who had also been in the war of 1776, and who had fought at Trenton under Washington, and at Brandywine under Lafayette.

In the meantime, the municipal cavalry on the left bank had been set in motion, and came to bar the bridge, on the right bank the dragoons emerged from the Celestins and deployed along the Quai Morland. The men who were dragging Lafayette suddenly caught sight of them at the corner of the quay and shouted: “The dragoons!” The dragoons advanced at a walk, in silence, with their pistols in their holsters, their swords in their scabbards, their guns slung in their leather sockets, with an air of gloomy expectation.

They halted two hundred paces from the little bridge. The carriage in which sat Lafayette advanced to them, their ranks opened and allowed it to pass, and then closed behind it. At that moment the dragoons and the crowd touched. The women fled in terror. What took place during that fatal minute? No one can say. It is the dark moment when two clouds come together. Some declare that a blast of trumpets sounding the charge was heard in the direction of the Arsenal others that a blow from a dagger was given by a child to a dragoon. The fact is, that three shots were suddenly discharged: the first killed Cholet, chief of the squadron, the second killed an old deaf woman who was in the act of closing her window, the third singed the shoulder of an officer; a woman screamed: “They are beginning too soon!” and all at once, a squadron of dragoons which had remained in the barracks up to this time, was seen to debouch at a gallop with bared swords, through the Rue Bassompierre and the Boulevard Bourdon, sweeping all before them.

Then all is said, the tempest is loosed, stones rain down, a fusillade breaks forth, many precipitate themselves to the bottom of the bank, and pass the small arm of the Seine, now filled in, the timber-yards of the Isle Louviers, that vast citadel ready to hand, bristle with combatants, stakes are torn up, pistol-shots fired, a barricade begun, the young men who are thrust back pass the Austerlitz bridge with the hearse at a run, and the municipal guard, the carabineers rush up, the dragoons ply their swords, the crowd disperses in all directions, a rumor of war flies to all four quarters of Paris, men shout: “To arms!” they run, tumble down, flee, resist. Wrath spreads abroad the riot as wind spreads a fire.

CHAPTER IV — THE EBULLITIONS OF FORMER DAYS

Nothing is more extraordinary than the first breaking out of a riot. Everything bursts forth everywhere at once. Was it foreseen? Yes. Was it prepared? No. Whence comes it? From the pavements. Whence falls it? From the clouds. Here insurrection assumes the character of a plot; there of an improvisation. The first comer seizes a current of the throng and leads it whither he wills. A beginning full of terror, in which is mingled a sort of formidable gayety. First come clamors, the shops are closed, the displays of the merchants disappear; then come isolated shots; people flee; blows from gun-stocks beat against portes cocheres, servants can be heard laughing in the courtyards of houses and saying: “There’s going to be a row!”

A quarter of an hour had not elapsed when this is what was taking place at twenty different spots in Paris at once.

In the Rue Sainte-Croix-de-la-Bretonnerie, twenty young men, bearded and with long hair, entered a dram-shop and emerged a moment later, carrying a horizontal tricolored flag covered with crape, and having at their head three men armed, one with a sword, one with a gun, and the third with a pike.

In the Rue des Nonaindieres, a very well-dressed bourgeois, who had a prominent belly, a sonorous voice, a bald head, a lofty brow, a black beard, and one of these stiff mustaches which will not lie flat, offered cartridges publicly to passers-by.

In the Rue Saint-Pierre-Montmartre, men with bare arms carried about a black flag, on which could be read in white letters this inscription: “Republic or Death!” In the Rue des Jeuneurs, Rue du Cadran, Rue Montorgueil, Rue Mandar, groups appeared waving flags on which could be distinguished in gold letters, the word section with a number. One of these flags was red and blue with an almost imperceptible stripe of white between.

They pillaged a factory of small-arms on the Boulevard Saint-Martin, and three armorers’ shops, the first in the Rue Beaubourg, the second in the Rue Michel-le-Comte, the other in the Rue du Temple. In a few minutes, the thousand hands of the crowd had seized and carried off two hundred and thirty guns, nearly all double-barrelled, sixty-four swords, and eighty-three pistols. In order to provide more arms, one man took the gun, the other the bayonet.

Opposite the Quai de la Grève, young men armed with muskets installed themselves in the houses of some women for the purpose of firing. One of them had a flint-lock. They rang, entered, and set about making cartridges. One of these women relates: "I did not know what cartridges were; it was my husband who told me."

One cluster broke into a curiosity shop in the Rue des Vielles Haudriettes, and seized yataghans and Turkish arms.

The body of a mason who had been killed by a gun-shot lay in the Rue de la Perle.

And then on the right bank, the left bank, on the quays, on the boulevards, in the Latin country, in the quarter of the Halles, panting men, artisans, students, members of sections read proclamations and shouted: "To arms!" broke street lanterns, unharnessed carriages, unpaved the streets, broke in the doors of houses, uprooted trees, rummaged cellars, rolled out hogsheads, heaped up paving-stones, rough slabs, furniture and planks, and made barricades.

They forced the bourgeois to assist them in this. They entered the dwellings of women, they forced them to hand over the swords and guns of their absent husbands, and they wrote on the door, with whiting: "The arms have been delivered"; some signed "their names" to receipts for the guns and swords and said: "Send for them to-morrow at the Mayor's office." They disarmed isolated sentinels and National Guardsmen in the streets on their way to the Townhall. They tore the epaulets from officers. In the Rue du Cimitiere-Saint-Nicholas, an officer of the National Guard, on being pursued by a crowd armed with clubs and foils, took refuge with difficulty in a house, whence he was only able to emerge at nightfall and in disguise.

In the Quartier Saint-Jacques, the students swarmed out of their hotels and ascended the Rue Saint-Hyacinthe to the Cafe du Progress, or descended to the Cafe des Sept-Billards, in the Rue des Mathurins. There, in front of the door, young men mounted on the stone corner-posts, distributed arms. They plundered the timber-yard in the Rue Transnonain in order to obtain material for barricades. On a single point the inhabitants resisted, at the corner of the Rue Sainte-Avoye and the Rue Simon-Le-Franc, where they destroyed the barricade with their own hands. At a single point the insurgents yielded; they abandoned a barricade begun in the Rue de Temple after having fired on a detachment of the National Guard, and fled through the Rue de la Corderie. The detachment picked up in the barricade a red flag, a package of cartridges, and three hundred pistol-balls. The National Guardsmen tore up the flag, and carried off its tattered remains on the points of their bayonets.

All that we are here relating slowly and successively took place simultaneously at all points of the city in the midst of a vast tumult, like a mass of tongues of lightning in one clap of thunder. In less than an hour, twenty-seven barricades sprang out of the earth in the quarter of the Halles alone. In the centre was that famous house No. 50, which was the fortress of Jeanne and her six hundred companions, and which, flanked on the one hand by a barricade at Saint-Merry, and on the other by a barricade of the Rue Maubuee, commanded three streets, the Rue des Arcis, the Rue Saint-Martin, and the Rue Aubry-le-Boucher, which it faced. The barricades at right angles fell back, the one of the Rue Montorgueil on the Grande-Truanderie, the other of the Rue Geoffroy-Langevin on the Rue Sainte-Avoye. Without reckoning innumerable barricades in twenty other quarters of Paris, in the Marais, at Mont-Sainte-Genevieve; one in the Rue Menilmontant, where was visible a porte cochere torn from its hinges; another near the little bridge of the Hotel-Dieu made with an “ecossais,” which had been unharnessed and overthrown, three hundred paces from the Prefecture of Police.

At the barricade of the Rue des Menetriers, a well-dressed man distributed money to the workmen. At the barricade of the Rue Grenetat, a horseman made his appearance and handed to the one who seemed to be the commander of the barricade what had the appearance of a roll of silver. “Here,” said he, “this is to pay expenses, wine, et caetera.” A light-haired young man, without a cravat, went from barricade to barricade, carrying pass-words. Another, with a naked sword, a blue police cap on his head, placed sentinels. In the interior, beyond the barricades, the wine-shops and porters’ lodges were converted into guard-houses. Otherwise the riot was conducted after the most scientific military tactics. The narrow, uneven, sinuous streets, full of angles and turns, were admirably chosen; the neighborhood of the Halles, in particular, a network of streets more intricate than a forest. The Society of the Friends of the People had, it was said, undertaken to direct the insurrection in the Quartier Sainte-Avoye. A man killed in the Rue du Ponceau who was searched had on his person a plan of Paris.

That which had really undertaken the direction of the uprising was a sort of strange impetuosity which was in the air. The insurrection had abruptly built barricades with one hand, and with the other seized nearly all the posts of the garrison. In less than three hours, like a train of powder catching fire, the insurgents had invaded and occupied, on the right bank, the Arsenal, the Mayoralty of the Place Royale, the whole of the Marais, the Popincourt arms manufactory, la Galiote, the Chateau-d'Eau, and all the streets near the Halles; on the left bank, the barracks of the Veterans, Sainte-Pelagie, the Place Maubert, the powder magazine of the Deux-Moulins, and all the barriers. At five o'clock in the evening, they were masters of the Bastille, of the Lingerie, of the Blancs-Manteaux; their scouts had reached the Place des Victoires, and menaced the Bank, the Petits-Peres barracks, and the Post-Office. A third of Paris was in the hands of the rioters.

The conflict had been begun on a gigantic scale at all points; and, as a result of the disarming domiciliary visits, and armorers' shops hastily invaded, was, that the combat which had begun with the throwing of stones was continued with gun-shots.

About six o'clock in the evening, the Passage du Saumon became the field of battle. The uprising was at one end, the troops were at the other. They fired from one gate to the other. An observer, a dreamer, the author of this book, who had gone to get a near view of this volcano, found himself in the passage between the two fires. All that he had to protect him from the bullets was the swell of the two half-columns which separate the shops; he remained in this delicate situation for nearly half an hour.

Meanwhile the call to arms was beaten, the National Guard armed in haste, the legions emerged from the Mayoralities, the regiments from their barracks. Opposite the passage de l'Ancre a drummer received a blow from a dagger. Another, in the Rue du Cygne, was assailed by thirty young men who broke his instrument, and took away his sword. Another was killed in the Rue Grenier-Saint-Lazare. In the Rue-Michelle-Comte, three officers fell dead one after the other. Many of the Municipal Guards, on being wounded, in the Rue des Lombards, retreated.

In front of the Cour-Batave, a detachment of National Guards found a red flag bearing the following inscription: Republican revolution, No. 127. Was this a revolution, in fact?

The insurrection had made of the centre of Paris a sort of inextricable, tortuous, colossal citadel.

There was the hearth; there, evidently, was the question. All the rest was nothing but skirmishes. The proof that all would be decided there lay in the fact that there was no fighting going on there as yet.

In some regiments, the soldiers were uncertain, which added to the fearful uncertainty of the crisis. They recalled the popular ovation which had greeted the neutrality of the 53d of the Line in July, 1830. Two intrepid men, tried in great wars, the Marshal Lobau and General Bugeaud, were in command, Bugeaud under Lobau. Enormous patrols, composed of battalions of the Line, enclosed in entire companies of the National Guard, and preceded by a commissary of police wearing his scarf of office, went to reconnoitre the streets in rebellion. The insurgents, on their side, placed videttes at the corners of all open spaces, and audaciously sent their patrols outside the barricades. Each side was watching the other. The Government, with an army in its hand, hesitated; the night was almost upon them, and the Saint-Merry tocsin began to make itself heard. The Minister of War at that time, Marshal Soult, who had seen Austerlitz, regarded this with a gloomy air.

These old sailors, accustomed to correct manoeuvres and having as resource and guide only tactics, that compass of battles, are utterly disconcerted in the presence of that immense foam which is called public wrath.

The National Guards of the suburbs rushed up in haste and disorder. A battalion of the 12th Light came at a run from Saint-Denis, the 14th of the Line arrived from Courbevoie, the batteries of the Military School had taken up their position on the Carrousel; cannons were descending from Vincennes.

Solitude was formed around the Tuileries. Louis Philippe was perfectly serene.

CHAPTER V — ORIGINALITY OF PARIS

During the last two years, as we have said, Paris had witnessed more than one insurrection. Nothing is, generally, more singularly calm than the physiognomy of Paris during an uprising beyond the bounds of the rebellious quarters. Paris very speedily accustoms herself to anything, — it is only a riot, — and Paris has so many affairs on hand, that she does not put herself out for so small a matter. These colossal cities alone can offer such spectacles. These immense enclosures alone can contain at the same time civil war and an odd and indescribable tranquillity. Ordinarily, when an insurrection commences, when the shop-keeper hears the drum, the call to arms, the general alarm, he contents himself with the remark: —

“There appears to be a squabble in the Rue Saint-Martin.”

Or: —

“In the Faubourg Saint-Antoine.”

Often he adds carelessly: —

“Or somewhere in that direction.”

Later on, when the heart-rending and mournful hubbub of musketry and firing by platoons becomes audible, the shopkeeper says: —

“It’s getting hot! Hullo, it’s getting hot!”

A moment later, the riot approaches and gains in force, he shuts up his shop precipitately, hastily dons his uniform, that is to say, he places his merchandise in safety and risks his own person.

Men fire in a square, in a passage, in a blind alley; they take and re-take the barricade; blood flows, the grape-shot riddles the fronts of the houses, the balls kill people in their beds, corpses encumber the streets. A few streets away, the shock of billiard-balls can be heard in the cafes.

The theatres open their doors and present vaudevilles; the curious laugh and chat a couple of paces distant from these streets filled with war. Hackney-carriages go their way; passers-by are going to a dinner somewhere in town. Sometimes in the very quarter where the fighting is going on.

In 1831, a fusillade was stopped to allow a wedding party to pass.

At the time of the insurrection of 1839, in the Rue Saint-Martin a little, infirm old man, pushing a hand-cart surmounted by a tricolored rag, in which he had carafes filled with some sort of liquid, went and came from barricade to troops and from troops to the barricade, offering his glasses of cocoa impartially, — now to the Government, now to anarchy.

Nothing can be stranger; and this is the peculiar character of uprisings in Paris, which cannot be found in any other capital. To this end, two things are requisite, the size of Paris and its gayety. The city of Voltaire and Napoleon is necessary.

On this occasion, however, in the resort to arms of June 25th, 1832, the great city felt something which was, perhaps, stronger than itself. It was afraid.

Closed doors, windows, and shutters were to be seen everywhere, in the most distant and most “disinterested” quarters. The courageous took to arms, the poltroons hid. The busy and heedless passer-by disappeared. Many streets were empty at four o’clock in the morning.

Alarming details were hawked about, fatal news was disseminated, — that they were masters of the Bank; — that there were six hundred of them in the Cloister of Saint-Merry alone, entrenched and embattled in the church; that the line was not to be depended on; that Armand Carrel had been to see Marshal Clausel and that the Marshal had said: “Get a regiment first”; that Lafayette was ill, but that he had said to them, nevertheless: “I am with you. I will follow you wherever there is room for a chair”; that one must be on one’s guard; that at night there would be people pillaging isolated dwellings in the deserted corners of Paris (there the imagination of the police, that Anne Radcliffe mixed up with the Government was recognizable); that a battery had been established in the Rue Aubry le Boucher; that Lobau and Bugeaud were putting their heads together, and that, at midnight, or at daybreak at latest, four columns would march simultaneously on the centre of the uprising, the first coming from the Bastille, the second from the Porte Saint-Martin, the third from the Greve, the fourth from the Halles; that perhaps, also, the troops would evacuate Paris and withdraw to the Champ-de-Mars; that no one knew what would happen, but that this time, it certainly was serious.

People busied themselves over Marshal Soult’s hesitations. Why did not he attack at once? It is certain that he was profoundly absorbed. The old lion seemed to scent an unknown monster in that gloom.

Evening came, the theatres did not open; the patrols circulated with an air of irritation; passers-by were searched; suspicious persons were arrested. By nine o’clock, more than eight hundred persons had been arrested, the

Prefecture of Police was encumbered with them, so was the Conciergerie, so was La Force.

At the Conciergerie in particular, the long vault which is called the Rue de Paris was littered with trusses of straw upon which lay a heap of prisoners, whom the man of Lyons, Lagrange, harangued valiantly. All that straw rustled by all these men, produced the sound of a heavy shower. Elsewhere prisoners slept in the open air in the meadows, piled on top of each other.

Anxiety reigned everywhere, and a certain tremor which was not habitual with Paris.

People barricaded themselves in their houses; wives and mothers were uneasy; nothing was to be heard but this: “Ah! my God! He has not come home!” There was hardly even the distant rumble of a vehicle to be heard.

People listened on their thresholds, to the rumors, the shouts, the tumult, the dull and indistinct sounds, to the things that were said: “It is cavalry,” or: “Those are the caissons galloping,” to the trumpets, the drums, the firing, and, above all, to that lamentable alarm peal from Saint-Merry.

They waited for the first cannon-shot. Men sprang up at the corners of the streets and disappeared, shouting: “Go home!” And people made haste to bolt their doors. They said: “How will all this end?” From moment to moment, in proportion as the darkness descended, Paris seemed to take on a more mournful hue from the formidable flaming of the revolt.

BOOK ELEVENTH. — THE ATOM FRATERNIZES WITH THE HURRICANE

CHAPTER I — SOME EXPLANATIONS WITH REGARD TO THE ORIGIN OF GAVROCHE'S POETRY. THE INFLUENCE OF AN ACADEMICIAN ON THIS POETRY

At the instant when the insurrection, arising from the shock of the populace and the military in front of the Arsenal, started a movement in advance and towards the rear in the multitude which was following the hearse and which, through the whole length of the boulevards, weighed, so to speak, on the head of the procession, there arose a frightful ebb. The rout was shaken, their ranks were broken, all ran, fled, made their escape, some with shouts of attack, others with the pallor of flight. The great river which covered the boulevards divided in a twinkling, overflowed to right and left, and spread in torrents over two hundred streets at once with the roar of a sewer that has broken loose.

At that moment, a ragged child who was coming down through the Rue Menilmontant, holding in his hand a branch of blossoming laburnum which he had just plucked on the heights of Belleville, caught sight of an old holster-pistol in the show-window of a bric-a-brac merchant's shop.

"Mother What's-your-name, I'm going to borrow your machine."

And off he ran with the pistol.

Two minutes later, a flood of frightened bourgeois who were fleeing through the Rue Amelot and the Rue Basse, encountered the lad brandishing his pistol and singing: —

La nuit on ne voit rien,
Le jour on voit très bien,
D'un écrit apocryphe
Le bourgeois s'ébouriffe,
Pratiquez la vertu,
Tutu, chapeau pointu!

It was little Gavroche on his way to the wars.

On the boulevard he noticed that the pistol had no trigger.

Who was the author of that couplet which served to punctuate his march, and of all the other songs which he was fond of singing on occasion? We know not. Who does know? Himself, perhaps. However, Gavroche was well up in all the popular tunes in circulation, and he mingled with them his own chirpings. An observing urchin and a rogue, he made a potpourri of the voices of nature and the voices of Paris. He combined the repertory of the birds with the repertory of the workshops. He was acquainted with thieves, a tribe contiguous to his own. He had, it appears, been for three months apprenticed to a printer. He had one day executed a commission for M. Baour-Lormian, one of the Forty. Gavroche was a gamin of letters.

Moreover, Gavroche had no suspicion of the fact that when he had offered the hospitality of his elephant to two brats on that villainously rainy night, it was to his own brothers that he had played the part of Providence. His brothers in the evening, his father in the morning; that is what his night had been like. On quitting the Rue des Ballets at daybreak, he had returned in haste to the elephant, had artistically extracted from it the two brats, had shared with them some sort of breakfast which he had invented, and had then gone away, confiding them to that good mother, the street, who had brought him up, almost entirely. On leaving them, he had appointed to meet them at the same spot in the evening, and had left them this discourse by way of a farewell: “I break a cane, otherwise expressed, I cut my stick, or, as they say at the court, I file off. If you don’t find papa and mamma, young ‘uns, come back here this evening. I’ll scramble you up some supper, and I’ll give you a shakedown.” The two children, picked up by some policeman and placed in the refuge, or stolen by some mountebank, or having simply strayed off in that immense Chinese puzzle of a Paris, did not return. The lowest depths of the actual social world are full of these lost traces. Gavroche did not see them again. Ten or twelve weeks had elapsed since that night. More than once he had scratched the back of his head and said: “Where the devil are my two children?”

In the meantime, he had arrived, pistol in hand, in the Rue du Pont-aux-Choux. He noticed that there was but one shop open in that street, and, a matter worthy of reflection, that was a pastry-cook’s shop. This presented a providential occasion to eat another apple-turnover before entering the unknown. Gavroche halted, fumbled in his fob, turned his pocket inside out, found nothing, not even a sou, and began to shout: “Help!”

It is hard to miss the last cake.

Nevertheless, Gavroche pursued his way.

Two minutes later he was in the Rue Saint-Louis. While traversing the Rue du Parc-Royal, he felt called upon to make good the loss of the apple-turnover which had been impossible, and he indulged himself in the immense delight of tearing down the theatre posters in broad daylight.

A little further on, on catching sight of a group of comfortable-looking persons, who seemed to be landed proprietors, he shrugged his shoulders and spit out at random before him this mouthful of philosophical bile as they passed:

“How fat those moneyed men are! They’re drunk! They just wallow in good dinners. Ask ’em what they do with their money. They don’t know. They eat it, that’s what they do! As much as their bellies will hold.”

CHAPTER II — GAVROCHE ON THE MARCH

The brandishing of a triggerless pistol, grasped in one’s hand in the open street, is so much of a public function that Gavroche felt his fervor increasing with every moment. Amid the scraps of the Marseillaise which he was singing, he shouted: —

“All goes well. I suffer a great deal in my left paw, I’m all broken up with rheumatism, but I’m satisfied, citizens. All that the bourgeois have to do is to bear themselves well, I’ll sneeze them out subversive couplets. What are the police spies? Dogs. And I’d just like to have one of them at the end of my pistol. I’m just from the boulevard, my friends. It’s getting hot there, it’s getting into a little boil, it’s simmering. It’s time to skim the pot. Forward march, men! Let an impure blood inundate the furrows! I give my days to my country, I shall never see my concubine more, Nini, finished, yes, Nini? But never mind! Long live joy! Let’s fight, crebleu! I’ve had enough of despotism.”

At that moment, the horse of a lancer of the National Guard having fallen, Gavroche laid his pistol on the pavement, and picked up the man, then he assisted in raising the horse. After which he picked up his pistol and resumed his way. In the Rue de Thorigny, all was peace and silence. This apathy, peculiar to the Marais, presented a contrast with the vast surrounding uproar. Four gossips were chatting in a doorway.

Scotland has trios of witches, Paris has quartettes of old gossiping hags; and the “Thou shalt be King” could be quite as mournfully hurled at Bonaparte in the Carrefour Baudoyer as at Macbeth on the heath of Armuyr. The croak would be almost identical.

The gossips of the Rue de Thorigny busied themselves only with their own concerns. Three of them were portresses, and the fourth was a rag-picker with her basket on her back.

All four of them seemed to be standing at the four corners of old age, which are decrepitude, decay, ruin, and sadness.

The rag-picker was humble. In this open-air society, it is the rag-picker who salutes and the portress who patronizes. This is caused by the corner for refuse, which is fat or lean, according to the will of the portresses, and after the fancy of the one who makes the heap. There may be kindness in the broom.

This rag-picker was a grateful creature, and she smiled, with what a smile! on the three portresses. Things of this nature were said: —

“Ah, by the way, is your cat still cross?”

“Good gracious, cats are naturally the enemies of dogs, you know. It’s the dogs who complain.”

“And people also.”

“But the fleas from a cat don’t go after people.”

“That’s not the trouble, dogs are dangerous. I remember one year when there were so many dogs that it was necessary to put it in the newspapers. That was at the time when there were at the Tuileries great sheep that drew the little carriage of the King of Rome. Do you remember the King of Rome?”

“I liked the Duc de Bordeau better.”

“I knew Louis XVIII. I prefer Louis XVIII.”

“Meat is awfully dear, isn’t it, Mother Patagon?”

“Ah! don’t mention it, the butcher’s shop is a horror. A horrible horror — one can’t afford anything but the poor cuts nowadays.”

Here the rag-picker interposed: —

“Ladies, business is dull. The refuse heaps are miserable. No one throws anything away any more. They eat everything.”

“There are poorer people than you, la Vargouleme.”

“Ah, that’s true,” replied the rag-picker, with deference, “I have a profession.”

A pause succeeded, and the rag-picker, yielding to that necessity for boasting which lies at the bottom of man, added: —

“In the morning, on my return home, I pick over my basket, I sort my things. This makes heaps in my room. I put the rags in a basket, the cores and stalks in a bucket, the linen in my cupboard, the woollen stuff in my commode, the old papers in the corner of the window, the things that are good to eat in my bowl, the bits of glass in my fireplace, the old shoes behind my door, and the bones under my bed.”

Gavroche had stopped behind her and was listening.

“Old ladies,” said he, “what do you mean by talking politics?”

He was assailed by a broadside, composed of a quadruple howl.

“Here’s another rascal.”

“What’s that he’s got in his paddle? A pistol?”

“Well, I’d like to know what sort of a beggar’s brat this is?”

“That sort of animal is never easy unless he’s overturning the authorities.”

Gavroche disdainfully contented himself, by way of reprisal, with elevating the tip of his nose with his thumb and opening his hand wide.

The rag-picker cried: —

“You malicious, bare-pawed little wretch!”

The one who answered to the name of Patagon clapped her hands together in horror.

“There’s going to be evil doings, that’s certain. The errand-boy next door has a little pointed beard, I have seen him pass every day with a young person in a pink bonnet on his arm; to-day I saw him pass, and he had a gun on his arm. Mame Bacheux says, that last week there was a revolution at — at — at — where’s the calf! — at Pontoise. And then, there you see him, that horrid scamp, with his pistol! It seems that the Celestins are full of pistols. What do you suppose the Government can do with good-for-nothings who don’t know how to do anything but contrive ways of upsetting the world, when we had just begun to get a little quiet after all the misfortunes that have happened, good Lord! to that poor queen whom I saw pass in the tumbril! And all this is going to make tobacco dearer. It’s infamous! And I shall certainly go to see him beheaded on the guillotine, the wretch!”

“You’ve got the sniffles, old lady,” said Gavroche. “Blow your promontory.”

And he passed on. When he was in the Rue Pavee, the rag-picker occurred to his mind, and he indulged in this soliloquy: —

“You’re in the wrong to insult the revolutionists, Mother Dust-Heap-Corner. This pistol is in your interests. It’s so that you may have more good things to eat in your basket.”

All at once, he heard a shout behind him; it was the portress Patagon who had followed him, and who was shaking her fist at him in the distance and crying: —

“You’re nothing but a bastard.”

“Oh! Come now,” said Gavroche, “I don’t care a brass farthing for that!”

Shortly afterwards, he passed the Hotel Lamoignon. There he uttered this appeal: —

“Forward march to the battle!”

And he was seized with a fit of melancholy. He gazed at his pistol with an air of reproach which seemed an attempt to appease it: —

“I’m going off,” said he, “but you won’t go off!”

One dog may distract the attention from another dog. A very gaunt poodle came along at the moment. Gavroche felt compassion for him.

“My poor doggy,” said he, “you must have gone and swallowed a cask, for all the hoops are visible.”

Then he directed his course towards l’Orme-Saint-Gervais.

CHAPTER III — JUST INDIGNATION OF A HAIR-DRESSER

The worthy hair-dresser who had chased from his shop the two little fellows to whom Gavroche had opened the paternal interior of the elephant was at that moment in his shop engaged in shaving an old soldier of the legion who had served under the Empire. They were talking. The hair-dresser had, naturally, spoken to the veteran of the riot, then of General Lamarque, and from Lamarque they had passed to the Emperor. Thence sprang up a conversation between barber and soldier which Prudhomme, had he been present, would have enriched with arabesques, and which he would have entitled: “Dialogue between the razor and the sword.”

“How did the Emperor ride, sir?” said the barber.

“Badly. He did not know how to fall — so he never fell.”

“Did he have fine horses? He must have had fine horses!”

“On the day when he gave me my cross, I noticed his beast. It was a racing mare, perfectly white. Her ears were very wide apart, her saddle deep, a fine head marked with a black star, a very long neck, strongly articulated knees, prominent ribs, oblique shoulders and a powerful crupper. A little more than fifteen hands in height.”

“A pretty horse,” remarked the hair-dresser.

“It was His Majesty’s beast.”

The hair-dresser felt, that after this observation, a short silence would be fitting, so he conformed himself to it, and then went on: —

“The Emperor was never wounded but once, was he, sir?”

The old soldier replied with the calm and sovereign tone of a man who had been there: —

“In the heel. At Ratisbon. I never saw him so well dressed as on that day. He was as neat as a new sou.”

“And you, Mr. Veteran, you must have been often wounded?”

“I?” said the soldier, “ah! not to amount to anything. At Marengo, I received two sabre-blows on the back of my neck, a bullet in the right arm at Austerlitz, another in the left hip at Jena. At Friedland, a thrust from a bayonet, there, — at the Moskowa seven or eight lance-thrusts, no matter where, at Lutzen a splinter of a shell crushed one of my fingers. Ah! and then at Waterloo, a ball from a biscaien in the thigh, that’s all.”

“How fine that is!” exclaimed the hair-dresser, in Pindaric accents, “to die on the field of battle! On my word of honor, rather than die in bed, of an illness, slowly, a bit by bit each day, with drugs, cataplasms, syringes, medicines, I should prefer to receive a cannon-ball in my belly!”

“You’re not over fastidious,” said the soldier.

He had hardly spoken when a fearful crash shook the shop. The show-window had suddenly been fractured.

The wig-maker turned pale.

“Ah, good God!” he exclaimed, “it’s one of them!”

“What?”

“A cannon-ball.”

“Here it is,” said the soldier.

And he picked up something that was rolling about the floor. It was a pebble.

The hair-dresser ran to the broken window and beheld Gavroche fleeing at the full speed, towards the Marche Saint-Jean. As he passed the hair-dresser’s shop Gavroche, who had the two brats still in his mind, had not been able to resist the impulse to say good day to him, and had flung a stone through his panes.

“You see!” shrieked the hair-dresser, who from white had turned blue, “that fellow returns and does mischief for the pure pleasure of it. What has any one done to that gamin?”

CHAPTER IV — THE CHILD IS AMAZED AT THE OLD MAN

In the meantime, in the Marche Saint-Jean, where the post had already been disarmed, Gavroche had just “effected a junction” with a band led by Enjolras, Courfeyrac, Combeferre, and Feuilly. They were armed after a fashion. Bahorel and Jean Prouvaire had found them and swelled the group. Enjolras had a double-barrelled hunting-gun, Combeferre the gun of a National Guard bearing the number of his legion, and in his belt, two pistols which his unbuttoned coat allowed to be seen, Jean Prouvaire an old cavalry musket, Bahorel a rifle; Courfeyrac was brandishing an unsheathed sword-cane. Feuilly, with a naked sword in his hand, marched at their head shouting: “Long live Poland!”

They reached the Quai Morland. Cravatless, hatless, breathless, soaked by the rain, with lightning in their eyes. Gavroche accosted them calmly: —

“Where are we going?”

“Come along,” said Courfeyrac.

Behind Feuilly marched, or rather bounded, Bahorel, who was like a fish in water in a riot. He wore a scarlet waistcoat, and indulged in the sort of words which break everything. His waistcoat astounded a passer-by, who cried in bewilderment: —

“Here are the reds!”

“The reds, the reds!” retorted Bahorel. “A queer kind of fear, bourgeois. For my part I don’t tremble before a poppy, the little red hat inspires me with no alarm. Take my advice, bourgeois, let’s leave fear of the red to horned cattle.”

He caught sight of a corner of the wall on which was placarded the most peaceable sheet of paper in the world, a permission to eat eggs, a Lenten admonition addressed by the Archbishop of Paris to his “flock.”

Bahorel exclaimed: —

“‘Flock’; a polite way of saying geese.”

And he tore the charge from the nail. This conquered Gavroche. From that instant Gavroche set himself to study Bahorel.

“Bahorel,” observed Enjolras, “you are wrong. You should have let that charge alone, he is not the person with whom we have to deal, you are wasting your wrath to no purpose. Take care of your supply. One does not fire out of the ranks with the soul any more than with a gun.”

“Each one in his own fashion, Enjolras,” retorted Bahorel. “This bishop’s prose shocks me; I want to eat eggs without being permitted. Your style is the hot and cold; I am amusing myself. Besides, I’m not wasting myself, I’m getting a start; and if I tore down that charge, Hercle! ’twas only to whet my appetite.”

This word, Hercle, struck Gavroche. He sought all occasions for learning, and that tearer-down of posters possessed his esteem. He inquired of him: —

“What does Hercle mean?”

Bahorel answered: —

“It means cursed name of a dog, in Latin.”

Here Bahorel recognized at a window a pale young man with a black beard who was watching them as they passed, probably a Friend of the A B C. He shouted to him: —

“Quick, cartridges, para bellum.”

“A fine man! that’s true,” said Gavroche, who now understood Latin.

A tumultuous retinue accompanied them, — students, artists, young men affiliated to the Cougourde of Aix, artisans, longshoremen, armed with clubs and bayonets; some, like Combeferre, with pistols thrust into their trousers.

An old man, who appeared to be extremely aged, was walking in the band.

He had no arms, and he made great haste, so that he might not be left behind, although he had a thoughtful air.

Gavroche caught sight of him: —

“Keksekca?” said he to Courfeyrac.

“He’s an old duffer.”

It was M. Mabeuf.

CHAPTER V — THE OLD MAN

Let us recount what had taken place.

Enjolras and his friends had been on the Boulevard Bourdon, near the public storehouses, at the moment when the dragoons had made their charge. Enjolras, Courfeyrac, and Combeferre were among those who had taken to the Rue Bassompierre, shouting: “To the barricades!” In the Rue Lesdiguieres they had met an old man walking along. What had attracted their attention was that the goodman was walking in a zig-zag, as though he were intoxicated. Moreover, he had his hat in his hand, although it had been raining all the morning, and was raining pretty briskly at the very time. Courfeyrac had recognized Father Mabeuf. He knew him through having many times accompanied Marius as far as his door. As he was acquainted with the peaceful and more than timid habits of the old beadle-book-collector, and was amazed at the sight of him in the midst of that uproar, a couple of paces from the cavalry charges, almost in the midst of a fusillade, hatless in the rain, and strolling about among the bullets, he had accosted him, and the following dialogue had been exchanged between the rioter of fire and the octogenarian: —

“M. Mabeuf, go to your home.”

“Why?”

“There’s going to be a row.”

“That’s well.”

“Thrusts with the sword and firing, M. Mabeuf.”

“That is well.”

“Firing from cannon.”

“That is good. Where are the rest of you going?”

“We are going to fling the government to the earth.”

“That is good.”

And he had set out to follow them. From that moment forth he had not uttered a word. His step had suddenly become firm; artisans had offered him their arms; he had refused with a sign of the head. He advanced nearly to the front rank of the column, with the movement of a man who is marching and the countenance of a man who is sleeping.

"What a fierce old fellow!" muttered the students. The rumor spread through the troop that he was a former member of the Convention, — an old regicide. The mob had turned in through the Rue de la Verrerie.

Little Gavroche marched in front with that deafening song which made of him a sort of trumpet.

He sang:

"Voici la lune qui paraît,
Quand irons-nous dans la forêt?
Demandait Charlot à Charlotte.

Tou tou tou
Pour Chatou.
Je n'ai qu'un Dieu, qu'un roi, qu'un liard, et qu'une botte.

"Pour avoir bu de grand matin
La rosee à même le thym,
Deux moineaux étaient en ribotte.

Zi zi zi
Pour Passy.
Je n'ai qu'un Dieu, qu'un roi, qu'un liard, et qu'une botte.

"Et ces deux pauvres petits loups,
Comme deux grives étaient souls;
Un tigre en riait dans sa grotte.

Don don don
Pour Meudon.
Je n'ai qu'un Dieu, qu'un roi, qu'un liard, et qu'une botte.

"L'un jurait et l'autre sacrait.
Quand irons nous dans la forêt?
Demandait Charlot à Charlotte.

Tin tin tin
Pour Pantin.
Je n'ai qu'un Dieu, qu'un roi, qu'un liard, et qu'une botte."

They directed their course towards Saint-Merry.

CHAPTER VI — RECRUITS

The band augmented every moment. Near the Rue des Billettes, a man of lofty stature, whose hair was turning gray, and whose bold and daring mien was remarked by Courfeyrac, Enjolras, and Combeferre, but whom none of them knew, joined them. Gavroche, who was occupied in singing, whistling, humming, running on ahead and pounding on the shutters of the shops with the butt of his triggerless pistol; paid no attention to this man.

It chanced that in the Rue de la Verrerie, they passed in front of Courfeyrac's door.

"This happens just right," said Courfeyrac, "I have forgotten my purse, and I have lost my hat."

He quitted the mob and ran up to his quarters at full speed. He seized an old hat and his purse.

He also seized a large square coffer, of the dimensions of a large valise, which was concealed under his soiled linen.

As he descended again at a run, the portress hailed him: —

"Monsieur de Courfeyrac!"

"What's your name, portress?"

The portress stood bewildered.

"Why, you know perfectly well, I'm the concierge; my name is Mother Veuvain."

"Well, if you call me Monsieur de Courfeyrac again, I shall call you Mother de Veuvain. Now speak, what's the matter? What do you want?"

"There is some one who wants to speak with you."

"Who is it?"

"I don't know."

"Where is he?"

"In my lodge."

"The devil!" ejaculated Courfeyrac.

"But the person has been waiting your return for over an hour," said the portress.

At the same time, a sort of pale, thin, small, freckled, and youthful artisan, clad in a tattered blouse and patched trousers of ribbed velvet, and who had rather the air of a girl accoutred as a man than of a man, emerged from the lodge and said to Courfeyrac in a voice which was not the least in the world like a woman’s voice: —

“Monsieur Marius, if you please.”

“He is not here.”

“Will he return this evening?”

“I know nothing about it.”

And Courfeyrac added: —

“For my part, I shall not return.”

The young man gazed steadily at him and said: —

“Why not?”

“Because.”

“Where are you going, then?”

“What business is that of yours?”

“Would you like to have me carry your coffer for you?”

“I am going to the barricades.”

“Would you like to have me go with you?”

“If you like!” replied Courfeyrac. “The street is free, the pavements belong to every one.”

And he made his escape at a run to join his friends. When he had rejoined them, he gave the coffer to one of them to carry. It was only a quarter of an hour after this that he saw the young man, who had actually followed them.

A mob does not go precisely where it intends. We have explained that a gust of wind carries it away. They overshot Saint-Merry and found themselves, without precisely knowing how, in the Rue Saint-Denis.

BOOK TWELFTH. — CORINTHE

CHAPTER I — HISTORY OF CORINTHE FROM ITS FOUNDATION

The Parisians who nowadays on entering on the Rue Rambuteau at the end near the Halles, notice on their right, opposite the Rue Mondetour, a basket-maker's shop having for its sign a basket in the form of Napoleon the Great with this inscription: —

NAPOLEON IS MADE
WHOLLY OF WILLOW,

have no suspicion of the terrible scenes which this very spot witnessed hardly thirty years ago.

It was there that lay the Rue de la Chanvrerie, which ancient deeds spell Chanverrerie, and the celebrated public-house called Corinthe.

The reader will remember all that has been said about the barricade effected at this point, and eclipsed, by the way, by the barricade Saint-Merry. It was on this famous barricade of the Rue de la Chanvrerie, now fallen into profound obscurity, that we are about to shed a little light.

May we be permitted to recur, for the sake of clearness in the recital, to the simple means which we have already employed in the case of Waterloo. Persons who wish to picture to themselves in a tolerably exact manner the constitution of the houses which stood at that epoch near the Pointe Saint-Eustache, at the northeast angle of the Halles of Paris, where to-day lies the embouchure of the Rue Rambuteau, have only to imagine an N touching the Rue Saint-Denis with its summit and the Halles with its base, and whose two vertical bars should form the Rue de la Grande-Truanderie, and the Rue de la Chanvrerie, and whose transverse bar should be formed by the Rue de la Petite-Truanderie. The old Rue Mondetour cut the three strokes of the N at the most crooked angles. So that the labyrinthine confusion of these four streets sufficed to form, on a space three fathoms square, between the Halles and the Rue Saint-Denis on the one hand, and between the Rue du Cygne and the Rue des Prêcheurs on the other, seven islands of houses, oddly cut up, of varying sizes, placed crosswise and hap-hazard, and barely separated, like the blocks of stone in a dock, by narrow crannies.

We say narrow crannies, and we can give no more just idea of those dark, contracted, many-angled alleys, lined with eight-story buildings.

These buildings were so decrepit that, in the Rue de la Chanvrerie and the Rue de la Petite-Truanderie, the fronts were shored up with beams running from one house to another. The street was narrow and the gutter broad, the pedestrian there walked on a pavement that was always wet, skirting little stalls resembling cellars, big posts encircled with iron hoops, excessive heaps of refuse, and gates armed with enormous, century-old gratings. The Rue Rambuteau has devastated all that.

The name of Mondetour paints marvellously well the sinuosities of that whole set of streets. A little further on, they are found still better expressed by the Rue Pirouette, which ran into the Rue Mondetour.

The passer-by who got entangled from the Rue Saint-Denis in the Rue de la Chanvrerie beheld it gradually close in before him as though he had entered an elongated funnel. At the end of this street, which was very short, he found further passage barred in the direction of the Halles by a tall row of houses, and he would have thought himself in a blind alley, had he not perceived on the right and left two dark cuts through which he could make his escape. This was the Rue Mondetour, which on one side ran into the Rue de Prêcheurs, and on the other into the Rue du Cygne and the Petite-Truanderie. At the bottom of this sort of cul-de-sac, at the angle of the cutting on the right, there was to be seen a house which was not so tall as the rest, and which formed a sort of cape in the street. It is in this house, of two stories only, that an illustrious wine-shop had been merrily installed three hundred years before. This tavern created a joyous noise in the very spot which old Theophilus described in the following couplet: —

Là branle le squelette horrible
D’un pauvre amant qui se pendit.

The situation was good, and tavern-keepers succeeded each other there, from father to son.

In the time of Mathurin Regnier, this cabaret was called the Pot-aux-Roses, and as the rebus was then in fashion, it had for its sign-board, a post (poteau) painted rose-color. In the last century, the worthy Natoire, one of the fantastic masters nowadays despised by the stiff school, having got drunk many times in this wine-shop at the very table where Regnier had drunk his fill, had painted, by way of gratitude, a bunch of Corinth grapes on the pink post. The keeper of the cabaret, in his joy, had changed his device and had caused to be placed in gilt letters beneath the bunch these words: “At the Bunch of Corinth Grapes” (“Au Raisin de Corinthe”). Hence the name of Corinthe. Nothing is more natural to drunken men than ellipses. The ellipsis is the zig-zag of the phrase. Corinthe gradually dethroned the Pot-aux-Roses. The last proprietor of the dynasty, Father Hucheloup, no longer acquainted even with the tradition, had the post painted blue.

A room on the ground floor, where the bar was situated, one on the first floor containing a billiard-table, a wooden spiral staircase piercing the ceiling, wine on the tables, smoke on the walls, candles in broad daylight, — this was the style of this cabaret. A staircase with a trap-door in the lower room led to the cellar. On the second floor were the lodgings of the Hucheloup family. They were reached by a staircase which was a ladder rather than a staircase, and had for their entrance only a private door in the large room on the first floor. Under the roof, in two mansard attics, were the nests for the servants. The kitchen shared the ground-floor with the tap-room.

Father Hucheloup had, possibly, been born a chemist, but the fact is that he was a cook; people did not confine themselves to drinking alone in his wine-shop, they also ate there. Hucheloup had invented a capital thing which could be eaten nowhere but in his house, stuffed carps, which he called carpes au gras. These were eaten by the light of a tallow candle or of a lamp of the time of Louis XVI., on tables to which were nailed waxed cloths in lieu of table-cloths. People came thither from a distance. Hucheloup, one fine morning, had seen fit to notify passers-by of this “specialty”; he had dipped a brush in a pot of black paint, and as he was an orthographer on his own account, as well as a cook after his own fashion, he had improvised on his wall this remarkable inscription: —

CARPES HO GRAS.

One winter, the rain-storms and the showers had taken a fancy to obliterate the S which terminated the first word, and the G which began the third; this is what remained: —

CARPE HO RAS.

Time and rain assisting, a humble gastronomical announcement had become a profound piece of advice.

In this way it came about, that though he knew no French, Father Hucheloup understood Latin, that he had evoked philosophy from his kitchen, and that, desirous simply of effacing Lent, he had equalled Horace. And the striking thing about it was, that that also meant: “Enter my wine-shop.”

Nothing of all this is in existence now. The Mondetour labyrinth was disembowelled and widely opened in 1847, and probably no longer exists at the present moment. The Rue de la Chanvrerie and Corinthe have disappeared beneath the pavement of the Rue Rambuteau.

As we have already said, Corinthe was the meeting-place if not the rallying-point, of Courfeyrac and his friends. It was Grantaire who had discovered Corinthe. He had entered it on account of the Carpe horas, and had returned thither on account of the Carpes au gras. There they drank, there they ate, there they shouted; they did not pay much, they paid badly, they did not pay at all, but they were always welcome. Father Hucheloup was a jovial host.

Hucheloup, that amiable man, as was just said, was a wine-shop-keeper with a mustache; an amusing variety. He always had an ill-tempèred air, seemed to wish to intimidate his customers, grumbled at the people who entered his establishment, and had rather the mien of seeking a quarrel with them than of serving them with soup. And yet, we insist upon the word, people were always welcome there. This oddity had attracted customers to his shop, and brought him young men, who said to each other: “Come hear Father Hucheloup growl.” He had been a fencing-master. All of a sudden, he would burst out laughing. A big voice, a good fellow. He had a comic foundation under a tragic exterior, he asked nothing better than to frighten you, very much like those snuff-boxes which are in the shape of a pistol. The detonation makes one sneeze.

Mother Hucheloup, his wife, was a bearded and a very homely creature.

About 1830, Father Hucheloup died. With him disappeared the secret of stuffed carps. His inconsolable widow continued to keep the wine-shop. But the cooking deteriorated, and became execrable; the wine, which had always been bad, became fearfully bad. Nevertheless, Courfeyrac and his friends continued to go to Corinthe, — out of pity, as Bossuet said.

The Widow Hucheloup was breathless and misshapen and given to rustic recollections. She deprived them of their flatness by her pronunciation. She had a way of her own of saying things, which spiced her reminiscences of the village and of her springtime. It had formerly been her delight, so she affirmed, to hear the loups-de-gorge (rouges-gorges) chanter dans les ogrepines (aubepines) — to hear the redbreasts sing in the hawthorn-trees.

The hall on the first floor, where “the restaurant” was situated, was a large and long apartment encumbered with stools, chairs, benches, and tables, and with a crippled, lame, old billiard-table. It was reached by a spiral staircase which terminated in the corner of the room at a square hole like the hatchway of a ship.

This room, lighted by a single narrow window, and by a lamp that was always burning, had the air of a garret. All the four-footed furniture comported itself as though it had but three legs — the whitewashed walls had for their only ornament the following quatrain in honor of Mame Hucheloup: —

Elle étonne à dix pas, elle épouvente à deux,
Une verrue habite en son nez hasardeux;
On tremble à chaque instant qu’elle ne vous la mouche
Et qu’un beau jour son nez ne tombe dans sa bouche.

This was scrawled in charcoal on the wall.

Mame Hucheloup, a good likeness, went and came from morning till night before this quatrain with the most perfect tranquillity. Two serving-maids, named Matelote and Gibelotte, and who had never been known by any other names, helped Mame Hucheloup to set on the tables the jugs of poor wine, and the various broths which were served to the hungry patrons in earthenware bowls. Matelote, large, plump, redhaired, and noisy, the favorite ex-sultana of the defunct Hucheloup, was homelier than any mythological monster, be it what it may; still, as it becomes the servant to always keep in the rear of the mistress, she was less homely than Mame Hucheloup. Gibelotte, tall, delicate, white with a lymphatic pallor, with circles round her eyes, and drooping lids, always languid and weary, afflicted with what may be called chronic lassitude, the first up in the house and the last in bed, waited on every one, even the other maid, silently and gently, smiling through her fatigue with a vague and sleepy smile.

Before entering the restaurant room, the visitor read on the door the following line written there in chalk by Courfeyrac: —

Régale si tu peux et mange si tu l’oses.

CHAPTER II — PRELIMINARY GAYETIES

Laigle de Meaux, as the reader knows, lived more with Joly than elsewhere. He had a lodging, as a bird has one on a branch. The two friends lived together, ate together, slept together. They had everything in common, even Musichetta, to some extent. They were, what the subordinate monks who accompany monks are called, bini. On the morning of the 5th of June, they went to Corinthe to breakfast. Joly, who was all stuffed up, had a catarrh which Laigle was beginning to share. Laigle's coat was threadbare, but Joly was well dressed.

It was about nine o'clock in the morning, when they opened the door of Corinthe.

They ascended to the first floor.

Matelote and Gibelotte received them.

"Oysters, cheese, and ham," said Laigle.

And they seated themselves at a table.

The wine-shop was empty; there was no one there but themselves.

Gibelotte, knowing Joly and Laigle, set a bottle of wine on the table.

While they were busy with their first oysters, a head appeared at the hatchway of the staircase, and a voice said: —

"I am passing by. I smell from the street a delicious odor of Brie cheese. I enter." It was Grantaire.

Grantaire took a stool and drew up to the table.

At the sight of Grantaire, Gibelotte placed two bottles of wine on the table.

That made three.

"Are you going to drink those two bottles?" Laigle inquired of Grantaire.

Grantaire replied: —

"All are ingenious, thou alone art ingenuous. Two bottles never yet astonished a man."

The others had begun by eating, Grantaire began by drinking. Half a bottle was rapidly gulped down.

"So you have a hole in your stomach?" began Laigle again.

"You have one in your elbow," said Grantaire.

And after having emptied his glass, he added: —

"Ah, by the way, Laigle of the funeral oration, your coat is old."

"I should hope so," retorted Laigle. "That's why we get on well together, my coat and I. It has acquired all my folds, it does not bind me anywhere, it is moulded on my deformities, it falls in with all my movements, I am only conscious of it because it keeps me warm. Old coats are just like old friends."

"That's true," ejaculated Joly, striking into the dialogue, "an old goat is an old abi" (ami, friend).

"Especially in the mouth of a man whose head is stuffed up," said Grantaire.

"Grantaire," demanded Laigle, "have you just come from the boulevard?"

"No."

"We have just seen the head of the procession pass, Joly and I."

"It's a marvellous sight," said Joly.

"How quiet this street is!" exclaimed Laigle. "Who would suspect that Paris was turned upside down? How plainly it is to be seen that in former days there were nothing but convents here! In this neighborhood! Du Breul and Sauval give a list of them, and so does the Abbé Lebeuf. They were all round here, they fairly swarmed, booted and barefooted, shaven, bearded, gray, black, white, Franciscans, Minims, Capuchins, Carmelites, Little Augustines, Great Augustines, old Augustines — there was no end of them."

"Don't let's talk of monks," interrupted Grantaire, "it makes one want to scratch one's self."

Then he exclaimed: —

"Bouh! I've just swallowed a bad oyster. Now hypochondria is taking possession of me again. The oysters are spoiled, the servants are ugly. I hate the human race. I just passed through the Rue Richelieu, in front of the big public library. That pile of oyster-shells which is called a library is disgusting even to think of. What paper! What ink! What scrawling! And all that has been written! What rascal was it who said that man was a featherless biped? And then, I met a pretty girl of my acquaintance, who is as beautiful as the spring, worthy to be called Floreal, and who is delighted, enraptured, as happy as the angels, because a wretch yesterday, a frightful banker all spotted with small-pox, deigned to take a fancy to her! Alas! woman keeps on the watch for a protector as much as for a lover; cats chase mice as well as birds. Two months ago that young woman was virtuous in an attic, she adjusted little brass rings in the eyelet-holes of corsets, what do you call it? She sewed, she had a camp bed, she dwelt beside a pot of flowers, she was contented. Now here she is a bankeress. This transformation took place last night. I met the victim this morning in high spirits. The hideous point about it is, that the jade is as pretty to-day as she was yesterday. Her financier did not show in her face. Roses have this advantage or disadvantage over women, that the traces left upon them by caterpillars are visible. Ah! there is no morality on earth. I call to witness the myrtle, the symbol of love, the laurel, the symbol of air, the olive, that ninny, the symbol of peace, the apple-tree which came nearest rangling Adam with its pips, and the fig-tree, the grandfather of petticoats. As for right, do you know what right is? The Gauls covet Clusium, Rome protects Clusium, and demands what wrong Clusium has done to them. Brennus answers: ‘The wrong that Alba did to you, the wrong that Fidenae did to you, the wrong that the Eques, the Volsci, and the Sabines have done to you. They were your neighbors. The Clusians are ours. We understand neighborliness just as you do. You have stolen Alba, we shall take Clusium.’ Rome said: ‘You shall not take Clusium.’ Brennus took Rome. Then he cried: ‘Vae victis!’ That is what right is. Ah! what beasts of prey there are in this world! What eagles! It makes my flesh creep.”

He held out his glass to Joly, who filled it, then he drank and went on, having hardly been interrupted by this glass of wine, of which no one, not even himself, had taken any notice: —

“Brennus, who takes Rome, is an eagle; the banker who takes the grisette is an eagle. There is no more modesty in the one case than in the other. So we believe in nothing. There is but one reality: drink. Whatever your opinion may be in favor of the lean cock, like the Canton of Uri, or in favor of the fat cock, like the Canton of Glaris, it matters little, drink. You talk to me of the boulevard, of that procession, et caetera, et caetera. Come now, is there going to be another revolution? This poverty of means on the part of the good God astounds me. He has to keep greasing the groove of events every moment. There is a hitch, it won’t work. Quick, a revolution! The good God has his hands perpetually black with that cart-grease. If I were in his place, I’d be perfectly simple about it, I would not wind up my mechanism every minute, I’d lead the human race in a straightforward way, I’d weave matters mesh by mesh, without breaking the thread, I would have no provisional arrangements, I would have no extraordinary repertory. What the rest of you call progress advances by means of two motors, men and events. But, sad to say, from time to time, the exceptional becomes necessary. The ordinary troupe suffices neither for event nor for men: among men geniuses are required, among events revolutions. Great accidents are the law; the order of things cannot do without them; and, judging from the apparition of comets, one would be tempted to think that Heaven itself finds actors needed for its performance. At the moment when one expects it the least, God placards a meteor on the wall of the firmament. Some queer star turns up, underlined by an enormous tail. And that causes the death of Caesar. Brutus deals him a blow with a knife, and God a blow with a comet. Crac, and behold an aurora borealis, behold a revolution, behold a great man; '93 in big letters, Napoleon on guard, the comet of 1811 at the head of the poster. Ah! what a beautiful blue theatre all studded with unexpected flashes! Boum! Boum! extraordinary show! Raise your eyes, boobies. Everything is in disorder, the star as well as the drama. Good God, it is too much and not enough. These resources, gathered from exception, seem magnificence and poverty. My friends, Providence has come down to expedients. What does a revolution prove? That God is in a quandry. He effects a coup d'etat because he, God, has not been able to make both ends meet. In fact, this confirms me in my conjectures as to Jehovah's fortune; and when I see so much distress in heaven and on earth, from the bird who has not a grain of millet to myself without a hundred thousand livres of income, when I see human destiny, which is very badly worn, and even royal destiny, which is threadbare, witness the Prince de Conde hung, when I see winter, which is nothing but a rent in the zenith through which the wind blows, when I see so many rags even in the perfectly new purple of the morning on the crests of hills, when I see the drops of dew, those mock pearls, when I see the frost, that paste, when I see humanity ripped apart and events patched up, and so many spots on the sun and so many holes in the moon, when I see so much misery everywhere, I suspect that God is not rich. The appearance exists, it is true, but I feel that he is hard up. He gives a revolution as a tradesman whose money-box is empty gives a ball. God must not be judged from appearances. Beneath the gilding of heaven I perceive a poverty-stricken universe. Creation is bankrupt. That is why I am discontented. Here it is the 4th of June, it is almost night; ever since this morning I have been waiting for daylight to come; it has not come, and I bet that it won't come all day. This is the inexactness of an ill-paid clerk. Yes, everything is badly arranged, nothing fits anything else, this old world is all warped, I take my stand on the opposition, everything goes awry; the universe is a tease. It's like children, those who want them have none, and those who don't want them have them. Total: I'm vexed. Besides, Laigle de Meaux, that bald-head, offends my sight. It humiliates me to think that I am of the same age as that baldy. However, I criticise, but I do not insult. The universe is what it is. I speak here without evil intent and to ease my conscience. Receive, Eternal Father, the assurance of my distinguished consideration. Ah! by all the saints of Olympus and by all the gods of paradise, I was not intended to be a Parisian, that is to say, to rebound forever, like a shuttlecock between two battledores, from the group of the loungers to the group of the roysterers. I was made to be a Turk, watching oriental houris all day long, executing those exquisite Egyptian dances, as sensuous as the dream of a chaste man, or a Beauceron peasant, or a Venetian gentleman surrounded by gentlewoman, or a petty German prince, furnishing the half of a foot-soldier to the Germanic confederation, and occupying his leisure with drying his breeches on his hedge, that is to say, his frontier. Those are the positions for which I was born! Yes, I have said a Turk, and I will not retract. I do not understand how people can habitually take Turks in bad part; Mohammed had his good points; respect for the inventor of seraglios with houris and paradises with odalisques! Let us not insult Mohammedanism, the only religion which is ornamented with a hen-roost! Now, I insist on a drink. The earth is a great piece of stupidity. And it appears that they are going to fight, all those imbeciles, and to break each other's profiles and to massacre each other in the heart of summer, in the month of June, when they might go off with a creature on their arm, to breathe the immense heaps of new-mown hay in the meadows! Really, people do commit altogether too many follies. An old broken lantern which I have just seen at a bric-a-brac merchant's suggests a reflection to my mind; it is time to enlighten the human race. Yes, behold me sad again. That's what comes of swallowing an oyster and a revolution the wrong way! I am growing melancholy once more. Oh! frightful old world. People strive, turn each other out, prostitute themselves, kill each other, and get used to it!"

And Grantaire, after this fit of eloquence, had a fit of coughing, which was well earned.

“A propos of revolution,” said Joly, “it is decidedly abberent that Barius is in lub.”

“Does any one know with whom?” demanded Laigle.

“Do.”

“No?”

“Do! I tell you.”

“Marius’ love affairs!” exclaimed Grantaire. “I can imagine it. Marius is a fog, and he must have found a vapor. Marius is of the race of poets. He who says poet, says fool, madman, Tymbraeus Apollo. Marius and his Marie, or his Marion, or his Maria, or his Mariette. They must make a queer pair of lovers. I know just what it is like. Ecstasies in which they forget to kiss. Pure on earth, but joined in heaven. They are souls possessed of senses. They lie among the stars.”

Grantaire was attacking his second bottle and, possibly, his second harangue, when a new personage emerged from the square aperture of the stairs. It was a boy less than ten years of age, ragged, very small, yellow, with an odd phiz, a vivacious eye, an enormous amount of hair drenched with rain, and wearing a contented air.

The child unhesitatingly making his choice among the three, addressed himself to Laigle de Meaux.

“Are you Monsieur Bossuet?”

“That is my nickname,” replied Laigle. “What do you want with me?”

“This. A tall blonde fellow on the boulevard said to me: ‘Do you know Mother Hucheloup?’ I said: ‘Yes, Rue Chanvrerie, the old man’s widow;’ he said to me: ‘Go there. There you will find M. Bossuet. Tell him from me: “A B C”.’ It’s a joke that they’re playing on you, isn’t it. He gave me ten sous.”

“Joly, lend me ten sous,” said Laigle; and, turning to Grantaire: “Grantaire, lend me ten sous.”

This made twenty sous, which Laigle handed to the lad.

“Thank you, sir,” said the urchin.

“What is your name?” inquired Laigle.

“Navet, Gavroche’s friend.”

“Stay with us,” said Laigle.

“Breakfast with us,” said Grantaire.

The child replied: —

“I can’t, I belong in the procession, I’m the one to shout ‘Down with Polignac!’”

And executing a prolonged scrape of his foot behind him, which is the most respectful of all possible salutes, he took his departure.

The child gone, Grantaire took the word: —

“That is the pure-bred gamin. There are a great many varieties of the gamin species. The notary’s gamin is called Skip-the-Gutter, the cook’s gamin is called a scullion, the baker’s gamin is called a mitron, the lackey’s gamin is called a groom, the marine gamin is called the cabin-boy, the soldier’s gamin is called the drummer-boy, the painter’s gamin is called paint-grinder, the tradesman’s gamin is called an errand-boy, the courtesan gamin is called the minion, the kingly gamin is called the dauphin, the god gamin is called the bambino.”

In the meantime, Laigle was engaged in reflection; he said half aloud: —

“A B C, that is to say: the burial of Lamarque.”

“The tall blonde,” remarked Grantaire, “is Enjolras, who is sending you a warning.”

“Shall we go?” ejaculated Bossuet.

“It’s raiding,” said Joly. “I have sworn to go through fire, but not through water. I don’t wand to ged a gold.”

“I shall stay here,” said Grantaire. “I prefer a breakfast to a hearse.”

“Conclusion: we remain,” said Laigle. “Well, then, let us drink. Besides, we might miss the funeral without missing the riot.”

“Ah! the riot, I am with you!” cried Joly.

Laigle rubbed his hands.

“Now we’re going to touch up the revolution of 1830. As a matter of fact, it does hurt the people along the seams.”

“I don’t think much of your revolution,” said Grantaire. “I don’t execrate this Government. It is the crown tempèred by the cotton night-cap. It is a sceptre ending in an umbrella. In fact, I think that to-day, with the present weather, Louis Philippe might utilize his royalty in two directions, he might extend the tip of the sceptre end against the people, and open the umbrella end against heaven.”

The room was dark, large clouds had just finished the extinction of daylight. There was no one in the wine-shop, or in the street, every one having gone off “to watch events.”

“Is it mid-day or midnight?” cried Bossuet. “You can’t see your hand before your face. Gibelotte, fetch a light.”

Grantaire was drinking in a melancholy way.

“Enjolras disdains me,” he muttered. “Enjolras said: ‘Joly is ill, Grantaire is drunk.’ It was to Bossuet that he sent Navet. If he had come for me, I would have followed him. So much the worse for Enjolras! I won’t go to his funeral.”

This resolution once arrived at, Bossuet, Joly, and Grantaire did not stir from the wine-shop. By two o’clock in the afternoon, the table at which they sat was covered with empty bottles. Two candles were burning on it, one in a flat copper candlestick which was perfectly green, the other in the neck of a cracked carafe. Grantaire had seduced Joly and Bossuet to wine; Bossuet and Joly had conducted Grantaire back towards cheerfulness.

As for Grantaire, he had got beyond wine, that merely moderate inspirer of dreams, ever since mid-day. Wine enjoys only a conventional popularity with serious drinkers. There is, in fact, in the matter of inebriety, white magic and black magic; wine is only white magic. Grantaire was a daring drinker of dreams. The blackness of a terrible fit of drunkenness yawning before him, far from arresting him, attracted him. He had abandoned the bottle and taken to the beerglass. The beer-glass is the abyss. Having neither opium nor hashish on hand, and being desirous of filling his brain with twilight, he had had recourse to that fearful mixture of brandy, stout, absinthe, which produces the most terrible of lethargies. It is of these three vapors, beer, brandy, and absinthe, that the lead of the soul is composed. They are three grooms; the celestial butterfly is drowned in them; and there are formed there in a membranous smoke, vaguely condensed into the wing of the bat, three mute furies, Nightmare, Night, and Death, which hover about the slumbering Psyche.

Grantaire had not yet reached that lamentable phase; far from it. He was tremendously gay, and Bossuet and Joly retorted. They clinked glasses. Grantaire added to the eccentric accentuation of words and ideas, a peculiarity of gesture; he rested his left fist on his knee with dignity, his arm forming a right angle, and, with cravat untied, seated astride a stool, his full glass in his right hand, he hurled solemn words at the big maid-servant Matelote: —

“Let the doors of the palace be thrown open! Let every one be a member of the French Academy and have the right to embrace Madame Hucheloup.

Let us drink.”

And turning to Madame Hucheloup, he added: —

“Woman ancient and consecrated by use, draw near that I may contemplate thee!”

And Joly exclaimed: —

“Matelote and Gibelotte, dod’t gib Grantaire anything more to drink. He has already devoured, since this bording, in wild prodigality, two francs and ninety-five centibes.”

And Grantaire began again: —

“Who has been unhooking the stars without my permission, and putting them on the table in the guise of candles?”

Bossuet, though very drunk, preserved his equanimity.

He was seated on the sill of the open window, wetting his back in the falling rain, and gazing at his two friends.

All at once, he heard a tumult behind him, hurried footsteps, cries of “To arms!” He turned round and saw in the Rue Saint-Denis, at the end of the Rue de la Chanvrerie, Enjolras passing, gun in hand, and Gavroche with his pistol, Feuilly with his sword, Courfeyrac with his sword, and Jean Prouvaire with his blunderbuss, Combeferre with his gun, Bahorel with his gun, and the whole armed and stormy rabble which was following them.

The Rue de la Chanvrerie was not more than a gunshot long. Bossuet improvised a speaking-trumpet from his two hands placed around his mouth, and shouted: —

“Courfeyrac! Courfeyrac! Hohee!”

Courfeyrac heard the shout, caught sight of Bossuet, and advanced a few paces into the Rue de la Chanvrerie, shouting: “What do you want?” which crossed a “Where are you going?”

“To make a barricade,” replied Courfeyrac.

“Well, here! This is a good place! Make it here!”

“That’s true, Aigle,” said Courfeyrac.

And at a signal from Courfeyrac, the mob flung themselves into the Rue de la Chanvrerie.

CHAPTER III — NIGHT BEGINS TO DESCEND UPON GRANTAIRE

The spot was, in fact, admirably adapted, the entrance to the street widened out, the other extremity narrowed together into a pocket without exit. Corinthe created an obstacle, the Rue Mondetour was easily barricaded on the right and the left, no attack was possible except from the Rue Saint-Denis, that is to say, in front, and in full sight. Bossuet had the comprehensive glance of a fasting Hannibal.

Terror had seized on the whole street at the irruption of the mob. There was not a passer-by who did not get out of sight. In the space of a flash of lightning, in the rear, to right and left, shops, stables, area-doors, windows, blinds, attic skylights, shutters of every description were closed, from the ground floor to the roof. A terrified old woman fixed a mattress in front of her window on two clothes-poles for drying linen, in order to deaden the effect of musketry. The wine-shop alone remained open; and that for a very good reason, that the mob had rushed into it.— “Ah my God! Ah my God!” sighed Mame Hucheloup.

Bossuet had gone down to meet Courfeyrac.

Joly, who had placed himself at the window, exclaimed: —

“Courfeyrac, you ought to have brought an umbrella. You will gatch gold.”

In the meantime, in the space of a few minutes, twenty iron bars had been wrenched from the grated front of the wine-shop, ten fathoms of street had been unpaved; Gavroche and Bahorel had seized in its passage, and overturned, the dray of a lime-dealer named Anceau; this dray contained three barrels of lime, which they placed beneath the piles of paving-stones: Enjolras raised the cellar trap, and all the widow Hucheloup’s empty casks were used to flank the barrels of lime; Feuilly, with his fingers skilled in painting the delicate sticks of fans, had backed up the barrels and the dray with two massive heaps of blocks of rough stone. Blocks which were improvised like the rest and procured no one knows where. The beams which served as props were torn from the neighboring house-fronts and laid on the casks. When Bossuet and Courfeyrac turned round, half the street was already barred with a rampart higher than a man. There is nothing like the hand of the populace for building everything that is built by demolishing.

Matelote and Gibelotte had mingled with the workers. Gibelotte went and came loaded with rubbish. Her lassitude helped on the barricade. She served the barricade as she would have served wine, with a sleepy air.

An omnibus with two white horses passed the end of the street.

Bossuet strode over the paving-stones, ran to it, stopped the driver, made the passengers alight, offered his hand to “the ladies,” dismissed the conductor, and returned, leading the vehicle and the horses by the bridle.

“Omnibuses,” said he, “do not pass the Corinthe. Non licet omnibus adire Corinthum.”

An instant later, the horses were unharnessed and went off at their will, through the Rue Mondetour, and the omnibus lying on its side completed the bar across the street.

Mame Hucheloup, quite upset, had taken refuge in the first story.

Her eyes were vague, and stared without seeing anything, and she cried in a low tone. Her terrified shrieks did not dare to emerge from her throat.

“The end of the world has come,” she muttered.

Joly deposited a kiss on Mame Hucheloup’s fat, red, wrinkled neck, and said to Grantaire: “My dear fellow, I have always regarded a woman’s neck as an infinitely delicate thing.”

But Grantaire attained to the highest regions of dithryamb. Matelote had mounted to the first floor once more, Grantaire seized her round her waist, and gave vent to long bursts of laughter at the window.

“Matelote is homely!” he cried: “Matelote is of a dream of ugliness! Matelote is a chimaera. This is the secret of her birth: a Gothic Pygmalion, who was making gargoyles for cathedrals, fell in love with one of them, the most horrible, one fine morning. He besought Love to give it life, and this produced Matelote. Look at her, citizens! She has chromate-of-lead-colored hair, like Titian’s mistress, and she is a good girl. I guarantee that she will fight well. Every good girl contains a hero. As for Mother Hucheloup, she’s an old warrior. Look at her moustaches! She inherited them from her husband. A hussar indeed! She will fight too. These two alone will strike terror to the heart of the banlieue. Comrades, we shall overthrow the government as true as there are fifteen intermediary acids between margaric acid and formic acid; however, that is a matter of perfect indifference to me. Gentlemen, my father always detested me because I could not understand mathematics. I understand only love and liberty. I am Grantaire, the good fellow. Having never had any money, I never acquired the habit of it, and the result is that I have never lacked it; but, if I had been rich, there would have been no more poor people! You would have seen! Oh, if the kind hearts only had fat purses, how much better things would go! I picture myself Jesus Christ with Rothschild's fortune! How much good he would do! Matelote, embrace me! You are voluptuous and timid! You have cheeks which invite the kiss of a sister, and lips which claim the kiss of a lover."

"Hold your tongue, you cask!" said Courfeyrac.

Grantaire retorted: —

"I am the capitoul and the master of the floral games!"

Enjolras, who was standing on the crest of the barricade, gun in hand, raised his beautiful, austere face. Enjolras, as the reader knows, had something of the Spartan and of the Puritan in his composition. He would have perished at Thermopylae with Leonidas, and burned at Drogheda with Cromwell.

"Grantaire," he shouted, "go get rid of the fumes of your wine somewhere else than here. This is the place for enthusiasm, not for drunkenness. Don't disgrace the barricade!"

This angry speech produced a singular effect on Grantaire. One would have said that he had had a glass of cold water flung in his face. He seemed to be rendered suddenly sober.

He sat down, put his elbows on a table near the window, looked at Enjolras with indescribable gentleness, and said to him: —

"Let me sleep here."

"Go and sleep somewhere else," cried Enjolras.

But Grantaire, still keeping his tender and troubled eyes fixed on him, replied: —

"Let me sleep here, — until I die."

Enjolras regarded him with disdainful eyes: —

"Grantaire, you are incapable of believing, of thinking, of willing, of living, and of dying."

Grantaire replied in a grave tone: —

"You will see."

He stammered a few more unintelligible words, then his head fell heavily on the table, and, as is the usual effect of the second period of inebriety, into which Enjolras had roughly and abruptly thrust him, an instant later he had fallen asleep.

CHAPTER IV — AN ATTEMPT TO CONSOLE THE WIDOW HUCHELOUP

Bahorel, in ecstasies over the barricade, shouted: —

“Here’s the street in its low-necked dress! How well it looks!”

Courfeyrac, as he demolished the wine-shop to some extent, sought to console the widowed proprietress.

“Mother Hucheloup, weren’t you complaining the other day because you had had a notice served on you for infringing the law, because Gibelotte shook a counterpane out of your window?”

“Yes, my good Monsieur Courfeyrac. Ah! good Heavens, are you going to put that table of mine in your horror, too? And it was for the counterpane, and also for a pot of flowers which fell from the attic window into the street, that the government collected a fine of a hundred francs. If that isn’t an abomination, what is!”

“Well, Mother Hucheloup, we are avenging you.”

Mother Hucheloup did not appear to understand very clearly the benefit which she was to derive from these reprisals made on her account. She was satisfied after the manner of that Arab woman, who, having received a box on the ear from her husband, went to complain to her father, and cried for vengeance, saying: “Father, you owe my husband affront for affront.” The father asked: “On which cheek did you receive the blow?” “On the left cheek.” The father slapped her right cheek and said: “Now you are satisfied. Go tell your husband that he boxed my daughter’s ears, and that I have accordingly boxed his wife’s.”

The rain had ceased. Recruits had arrived. Workmen had brought under their blouses a barrel of powder, a basket containing bottles of vitriol, two or three carnival torches, and a basket filled with fire-pots, “left over from the King’s festival.” This festival was very recent, having taken place on the 1st of May. It was said that these munitions came from a grocer in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine named Pepin. They smashed the only street lantern in the Rue de la Chanvrerie, the lantern corresponding to one in the Rue Saint-Denis, and all the lanterns in the surrounding streets, de Mondetour, du Cygne, des Prêcheurs, and de la Grande and de la Petite-Truanderie.

Enjolras, Combeferre, and Courfeyrac directed everything. Two barricades were now in process of construction at once, both of them resting on the Corinthe house and forming a right angle; the larger shut off the Rue de la Chanvrerie, the other closed the Rue Mondetour, on the side of the Rue de Cygne. This last barricade, which was very narrow, was constructed only of casks and paving-stones. There were about fifty workers on it; thirty were armed with guns; for, on their way, they had effected a wholesale loan from an armorer's shop.

Nothing could be more bizarre and at the same time more motley than this troop. One had a round-jacket, a cavalry sabre, and two holster-pistols, another was in his shirt-sleeves, with a round hat, and a powder-horn slung at his side, a third wore a plastron of nine sheets of gray paper and was armed with a saddler's awl. There was one who was shouting: "Let us exterminate them to the last man and die at the point of our bayonet." This man had no bayonet. Another spread out over his coat the cross-belt and cartridge-box of a National Guardsman, the cover of the cartridge-box being ornamented with this inscription in red worsted: Public Order. There were a great many guns bearing the numbers of the legions, few hats, no cravats, many bare arms, some pikes. Add to this, all ages, all sorts of faces, small, pale young men, and bronzed longshoremen. All were in haste; and as they helped each other, they discussed the possible chances. That they would receive succor about three o'clock in the morning — that they were sure of one regiment, that Paris would rise. Terrible sayings with which was mingled a sort of cordial joviality. One would have pronounced them brothers, but they did not know each other's names. Great perils have this fine characteristic, that they bring to light the fraternity of strangers. A fire had been lighted in the kitchen, and there they were engaged in moulding into bullets, pewter mugs, spoons, forks, and all the brass table-ware of the establishment. In the midst of it all, they drank. Caps and buckshot were mixed pell-mell on the tables with glasses of wine. In the billiard-hall, Mame Hucheloup, Matelote, and Gibelotte, variously modified by terror, which had stupefied one, rendered another breathless, and roused the third, were tearing up old dish-cloths and making lint; three insurgents were assisting them, three bushy-haired, jolly blades with beards and moustaches, who plucked away at the linen with the fingers of seamstresses and who made them tremble.

The man of lofty stature whom Courfeyrac, Combeferre, and Enjolras had observed at the moment when he joined the mob at the corner of the Rue des Billettes, was at work on the smaller barricade and was making himself useful there. Gavroche was working on the larger one. As for the young man who had been waiting for Courfeyrac at his lodgings, and who had inquired for M. Marius, he had disappeared at about the time when the omnibus had been overturned.

Gavroche, completely carried away and radiant, had undertaken to get everything in readiness. He went, came, mounted, descended, re-mounted, whistled, and sparkled. He seemed to be there for the encouragement of all. Had he any incentive? Yes, certainly, his poverty; had he wings? yes, certainly, his joy. Gavroche was a whirlwind. He was constantly visible, he was incessantly audible. He filled the air, as he was everywhere at once. He was a sort of almost irritating ubiquity; no halt was possible with him. The enormous barricade felt him on its haunches. He troubled the loungers, he excited the idle, he reanimated the weary, he grew impatient over the thoughtful, he inspired gayety in some, and breath in others, wrath in others, movement in all, now pricking a student, now biting an artisan; he alighted, paused, flew off again, hovered over the tumult, and the effort, sprang from one party to another, murmuring and humming, and harassed the whole company; a fly on the immense revolutionary coach.

Perpetual motion was in his little arms and perpetual clamor in his little lungs.

“Courage! more paving-stones! more casks! more machines! Where are you now? A hod of plaster for me to stop this hole with! Your barricade is very small. It must be carried up. Put everything on it, fling everything there, stick it all in. Break down the house. A barricade is Mother Gibou’s tea. Hullo, here’s a glass door.”

This elicited an exclamation from the workers.

“A glass door? what do you expect us to do with a glass door, tubercle?”

“Hercules yourselves!” retorted Gavroche. “A glass door is an excellent thing in a barricade. It does not prevent an attack, but it prevents the enemy taking it. So you’ve never prigged apples over a wall where there were broken bottles? A glass door cuts the corns of the National Guard when they try to mount on the barricade. Pardi! glass is a treacherous thing. Well, you haven’t a very wildly lively imagination, comrades.”

However, he was furious over his triggerless pistol. He went from one to another, demanding: “A gun, I want a gun! Why don’t you give me a gun?”

“Give you a gun!” said Combeferre.

“Come now!” said Gavroche, “why not? I had one in 1830 when we had a dispute with Charles X.”

Enjolras shrugged his shoulders.

“When there are enough for the men, we will give some to the children.”

Gavroche wheeled round haughtily, and answered: —

“If you are killed before me, I shall take yours.”

“Gamin!” said Enjolras.

“Greenhorn!” said Gavroche.

A dandy who had lost his way and who lounged past the end of the street created a diversion! Gavroche shouted to him: —

“Come with us, young fellow! well now, don’t we do anything for this old country of ours?”

The dandy fled.

CHAPTER V — PREPARATIONS

The journals of the day which said that that nearly impregnable structure, of the barricade of the Rue de la Chanvrerie, as they call it, reached to the level of the first floor, were mistaken. The fact is, that it did not exceed an average height of six or seven feet. It was built in such a manner that the combatants could, at their will, either disappear behind it or dominate the barrier and even scale its crest by means of a quadruple row of paving-stones placed on top of each other and arranged as steps in the interior. On the outside, the front of the barricade, composed of piles of paving-stones and casks bound together by beams and planks, which were entangled in the wheels of Anceau's dray and of the overturned omnibus, had a bristling and inextricable aspect.

An aperture large enough to allow a man to pass through had been made between the wall of the houses and the extremity of the barricade which was furthest from the wine-shop, so that an exit was possible at this point. The pole of the omnibus was placed upright and held up with ropes, and a red flag, fastened to this pole, floated over the barricade.

The little Mondetour barricade, hidden behind the wine-shop building, was not visible. The two barricades united formed a veritable redoubt. Enjolras and Courfeyrac had not thought fit to barricade the other fragment of the Rue Mondetour which opens through the Rue des Prêcheurs an issue into the Halles, wishing, no doubt, to preserve a possible communication with the outside, and not entertaining much fear of an attack through the dangerous and difficult street of the Rue des Prêcheurs.

With the exception of this issue which was left free, and which constituted what Folard in his strategical style would have termed a branch and taking into account, also, the narrow cutting arranged on the Rue de la Chanvrerie, the interior of the barricade, where the wine-shop formed a salient angle, presented an irregular square, closed on all sides. There existed an interval of twenty paces between the grand barrier and the lofty houses which formed the background of the street, so that one might say that the barricade rested on these houses, all inhabited, but closed from top to bottom.

All this work was performed without any hindrance, in less than an hour, and without this handful of bold men seeing a single bear-skin cap or a single bayonet make their appearance. The very bourgeois who still ventured at this hour of riot to enter the Rue Saint-Denis cast a glance at the Rue de la Chanvrerie, caught sight of the barricade, and redoubled their pace.

The two barricades being finished, and the flag run up, a table was dragged out of the wine-shop; and Courfeyrac mounted on the table. Enjolras brought the square coffer, and Courfeyrac opened it. This coffer was filled with cartridges. When the mob saw the cartridges, a tremor ran through the bravest, and a momentary silence ensued.

Courfeyrac distributed them with a smile.

Each one received thirty cartridges. Many had powder, and set about making others with the bullets which they had run. As for the barrel of powder, it stood on a table on one side, near the door, and was held in reserve.

The alarm beat which ran through all Paris, did not cease, but it had finally come to be nothing more than a monotonous noise to which they no longer paid any attention. This noise retreated at times, and again drew near, with melancholy undulations.

They loaded the guns and carbines, all together, without haste, with solemn gravity. Enjolras went and stationed three sentinels outside the barricades, one in the Rue de la Chanvrerie, the second in the Rue des Prêcheurs, the third at the corner of the Rue de la Petite Truanderie.

Then, the barricades having been built, the posts assigned, the guns loaded, the sentinels stationed, they waited, alone in those redoubtable streets through which no one passed any longer, surrounded by those dumb houses which seemed dead and in which no human movement palpitated, enveloped in the deepening shades of twilight which was drawing on, in the midst of that silence through which something could be felt advancing, and which had about it something tragic and terrifying, isolated, armed, determined, and tranquil.

CHAPTER VI — WAITING

During those hours of waiting, what did they do?

We must needs tell, since this is a matter of history.

While the men made bullets and the women lint, while a large saucepan of melted brass and lead, destined to the bullet-mould smoked over a glowing brazier, while the sentinels watched, weapon in hand, on the barricade, while Enjolras, whom it was impossible to divert, kept an eye on the sentinels, Combeferre, Courfeyrac, Jean Prouvaire, Feuilly, Bossuet, Joly, Bahorel, and some others, sought each other out and united as in the most peaceful days of their conversations in their student life, and, in one corner of this wine-shop which had been converted into a casement, a couple of paces distant from the redoubt which they had built, with their carbines loaded and primed resting against the backs of their chairs, these fine young fellows, so close to a supreme hour, began to recite love verses.

What verses? These: —

Vous rappelez-vous notre douce vie,
  Lorsque nous étions si jeunes tous deux,
Et que nous n’avions au cœur d’autre envie
  Que d’être bien mis et d’être amoureux,

Lorsqu’en ajoutant votre âge à mon âge,
  Nous ne comptions pas à deux quarante ans,
Et que, dans notre humble et petit ménage,
  Tout, même l’hiver, nous était printemps?

Beaux jours! Manuel était fier et sage,
  Paris s’asseyait à de saints banquets,
Foy lancait la foudre, et votre corsage
  Avait une épingle où je me piquais.

Tout vous contemplait. Avocat sans causes,
  Quand je vous menais au Prado dîner,
Vous étiez jolie au point que les roses
  Me faisaient l’effet de se retourner.

Je les entendais dire: Est elle belle!
  Comme elle sent bon! Quels cheveux à flots!
Sous son mantelet elle cache une aile,
  Son bonnet charmant est à peine eclos.

J'errais avec toi, pressant ton bras souple.
  Les passants croyaient que l'amour charmé
Avait marié, dans notre heureux couple,
  Le doux mois d'avril au beau mois de mai.

Nous vivions cachés, contents, porte close,
  Devorant l'amour, bon fruit défendu,
Ma bouche n'avait pas dit une chose
  Que déjà ton cœur avait répondu.

La Sorbonne était l'endroit bucolique
  Où je t'adorais du soir au matin.
C'est ainsi qu'une âme amoureuse applique
  La carte du Tendre au pays Latin.

O place Maubert! ô place Dauphine!
  Quand, dans le taudis frais et printanier,
Tu tirais ton bas sur ta jambe fine,
  Je voyais un astre au fond du grenier.

J'ai fort lu Platon, mais rien ne m'en reste;
  Mieux que Malebranche et que Lamennais,
Tu me démontrais la bonté céleste
  Avec une fleur que tu me donnais.

Je t'obéissais, tu m'étais soumise;
  O grenier doré! te lacer! te voir
Aller et venir dès l'aube en chemise,
  Mirant ton jeune front à ton vieux miroir.

Et qui donc pourrait perdre la mémoire

De ces temps d’aurore et de firmament,
De rubans, de fleurs, de gaze et de moire,
Où l’amour bégaye un argot charmant?

Nos jardins étaient un pot de tulipe;
Tu masquais la vitre avec un jupon;
Je prenais le bol de terre de pipe,
Et je te donnais le tasse en japon.

Et ces grands malheurs qui nous faisaient rire!
Ton manchon brûlé, ton boa perdu!
Et ce cher portrait du divin Shakespeare
Qu’un soir pour souper nons avons vendu!

J’étais mendiant et toi charitable.
Je baisais au vol tes bras frais et ronds.
Dante in folio nous servait de table
Pour manger gaîment un cent de marrons.

La première fois qu’en mon joyeux bouge
Je pris un baiser à ta lèvre en feu,
Quand tu t’en allais décoiffée et rouge,
Je restai tout pâle et je crus en Dieu!

Te rappelles-tu nos bonheurs sans nombre,
Et tous ces fichus changés en chiffons?
Oh que de soupirs, de nos cœurs pleins d’ombre,
Se sont envolés dans les cieux profonds!

The hour, the spot, these souvenirs of youth recalled, a few stars which began to twinkle in the sky, the funeral repose of those deserted streets, the imminence of the inexorable adventure, which was in preparation, gave a pathetic charm to these verses murmured in a low tone in the dusk by Jean Prouvaire, who, as we have said, was a gentle poet.

In the meantime, a lamp had been lighted in the small barricade, and in the large one, one of those wax torches such as are to be met with on Shrove-Tuesday in front of vehicles loaded with masks, on their way to la

Courtille. These torches, as the reader has seen, came from the Faubourg Saint-Antoine.

The torch had been placed in a sort of cage of paving-stones closed on three sides to shelter it from the wind, and disposed in such a fashion that all the light fell on the flag. The street and the barricade remained sunk in gloom, and nothing was to be seen except the red flag formidably illuminated as by an enormous dark-lantern.

This light enhanced the scarlet of the flag, with an indescribable and terrible purple.

CHAPTER VII — THE MAN RECRUITED IN THE RUE DES BILLETTES

Night was fully come, nothing made its appearance. All that they heard was confused noises, and at intervals, fusillades; but these were rare, badly sustained and distant. This respite, which was thus prolonged, was a sign that the Government was taking its time, and collecting its forces. These fifty men were waiting for sixty thousand.

Enjolras felt attacked by that impatience which seizes on strong souls on the threshold of redoubtable events. He went in search of Gavroche, who had set to making cartridges in the tap-room, by the dubious light of two candles placed on the counter by way of precaution, on account of the powder which was scattered on the tables. These two candles cast no gleam outside. The insurgents had, moreover, taken pains not to have any light in the upper stories.

Gavroche was deeply preoccupied at that moment, but not precisely with his cartridges. The man of the Rue des Billettes had just entered the tap-room and had seated himself at the table which was the least lighted. A musket of large model had fallen to his share, and he held it between his legs. Gavroche, who had been, up to that moment, distracted by a hundred “amusing” things, had not even seen this man.

When he entered, Gavroche followed him mechanically with his eyes, admiring his gun; then, all at once, when the man was seated, the street urchin sprang to his feet. Any one who had spied upon that man up to that moment, would have seen that he was observing everything in the barricade and in the band of insurgents, with singular attention; but, from the moment when he had entered this room, he had fallen into a sort of brown study, and no longer seemed to see anything that was going on. The gamin approached this pensive personage, and began to step around him on tiptoe, as one walks in the vicinity of a person whom one is afraid of waking. At the same time, over his childish countenance which was, at once so impudent and so serious, so giddy and so profound, so gay and so heart-breaking, passed all those grimaces of an old man which signify: Ah bah! impossible! My sight is bad! I am dreaming! can this be? no, it is not! but yes! why, no! etc. Gavroche balanced on his heels, clenched both fists in his pockets, moved his neck around like a bird, expended in a gigantic pout all the sagacity of his lower lip. He was astounded, uncertain, incredulous, convinced, dazzled. He had the mien of the chief of the eunuchs in the slave mart, discovering a Venus among the blowsy females, and the air of an amateur recognizing a Raphael in a heap of daubs. His whole being was at work, the instinct which scents out, and the intelligence which combines. It was evident that a great event had happened in Gavroche's life.

It was at the most intense point of this preoccupation that Enjolras accosted him.

"You are small," said Enjolras, "you will not be seen. Go out of the barricade, slip along close to the houses, skirmish about a bit in the streets, and come back and tell me what is going on."

Gavroche raised himself on his haunches.

"So the little chaps are good for something! that's very lucky! I'll go! In the meanwhile, trust to the little fellows, and distrust the big ones." And Gavroche, raising his head and lowering his voice, added, as he indicated the man of the Rue des Billettes: "Do you see that big fellow there?"

"Well?"

"He's a police spy."

"Are you sure of it?"

"It isn't two weeks since he pulled me off the cornice of the Port Royal, where I was taking the air, by my ear."

Enjolras hastily quitted the urchin and murmured a few words in a very low tone to a longshoreman from the winedocks who chanced to be at hand. The man left the room, and returned almost immediately, accompanied by three others. The four men, four porters with broad shoulders, went and placed themselves without doing anything to attract his attention, behind the table on which the man of the Rue des Billettes was leaning with his elbows. They were evidently ready to hurl themselves upon him.

Then Enjolras approached the man and demanded of him: —

"Who are you?"

At this abrupt query, the man started. He plunged his gaze deep into Enjolras' clear eyes and appeared to grasp the latter's meaning. He smiled with a smile than which nothing more disdainful, more energetic, and more resolute could be seen in the world, and replied with haughty gravity: —

"I see what it is. Well, yes!"

"You are a police spy?"

“I am an agent of the authorities.”

“And your name?”

“Javert.”

Enjolras made a sign to the four men. In the twinkling of an eye, before Javert had time to turn round, he was collared, thrown down, pinioned and searched.

They found on him a little round card pasted between two pieces of glass, and bearing on one side the arms of France, engraved, and with this motto: Supervision and vigilance, and on the other this note: “JAVERT, inspector of police, aged fifty-two,” and the signature of the Prefect of Police of that day, M. Gisquet.

Besides this, he had his watch and his purse, which contained several gold pieces. They left him his purse and his watch. Under the watch, at the bottom of his fob, they felt and seized a paper in an envelope, which Enjolras unfolded, and on which he read these five lines, written in the very hand of the Prefect of Police: —

“As soon as his political mission is accomplished, Inspector Javert will make sure, by special supervision, whether it is true that the malefactors have instituted intrigues on the right bank of the Seine, near the Jena bridge.”

The search ended, they lifted Javert to his feet, bound his arms behind his back, and fastened him to that celebrated post in the middle of the room which had formerly given the wine-shop its name.

Gavroche, who had looked on at the whole of this scene and had approved of everything with a silent toss of his head, stepped up to Javert and said to him: —

“It’s the mouse who has caught the cat.”

All this was so rapidly executed, that it was all over when those about the wine-shop noticed it.

Javert had not uttered a single cry.

At the sight of Javert bound to the post, Courfeyrac, Bossuet, Joly, Combeferre, and the men scattered over the two barricades came running up.

Javert, with his back to the post, and so surrounded with ropes that he could not make a movement, raised his head with the intrepid serenity of the man who has never lied.

“He is a police spy,” said Enjolras.

And turning to Javert: “You will be shot ten minutes before the barricade is taken.”

Javert replied in his most imperious tone: —

“Why not at once?”

“We are saving our powder.”

“Then finish the business with a blow from a knife.”

“Spy,” said the handsome Enjolras, “we are judges and not assassins.”

Then he called Gavroche: —

“Here you! go about your business! Do what I told you!”

“I’m going!” cried Gavroche.

And halting as he was on the point of setting out: —

“By the way, you will give me his gun!” and he added: “I leave you the musician, but I want the clarionet.”

The gamin made the military salute and passed gayly through the opening in the large barricade.

CHAPTER VIII — MANY INTERROGATION POINTS WITH REGARD TO A CERTAIN LE CABUC WHOSE NAME MAY NOT HAVE BEEN LE CABUC

The tragic picture which we have undertaken would not be complete, the reader would not see those grand moments of social birth-pangs in a revolutionary birth, which contain convulsion mingled with effort, in their exact and real relief, were we to omit, in the sketch here outlined, an incident full of epic and savage horror which occurred almost immediately after Gavroche’s departure.

Mobs, as the reader knows, are like a snowball, and collect as they roll along, a throng of tumultuous men. These men do not ask each other whence they come. Among the passers-by who had joined the rabble led by Enjolras, Combeferre, and Courfeyrac, there had been a person wearing the jacket of a street porter, which was very threadbare on the shoulders, who gesticulated and vociferated, and who had the look of a drunken savage. This man, whose name or nickname was Le Cabuc, and who was, moreover, an utter stranger to those who pretended to know him, was very drunk, or assumed the appearance of being so, and had seated himself with several others at a table which they had dragged outside of the wine-shop. This Cabuc, while making those who vied with him drunk seemed to be examining with a thoughtful air the large house at the extremity of the barricade, whose five stories commanded the whole street and faced the Rue Saint-Denis. All at once he exclaimed: —

“Do you know, comrades, it is from that house yonder that we must fire. When we are at the windows, the deuce is in it if any one can advance into the street!”

“Yes, but the house is closed,” said one of the drinkers.

“Let us knock!”

“They will not open.”

“Let us break in the door!”

Le Cabuc runs to the door, which had a very massive knocker, and knocks. The door opens not. He strikes a second blow. No one answers. A third stroke. The same silence.

"Is there any one here?" shouts Cabuc.

Nothing stirs.

Then he seizes a gun and begins to batter the door with the butt end.

It was an ancient alley door, low, vaulted, narrow, solid, entirely of oak, lined on the inside with a sheet of iron and iron stays, a genuine prison postern. The blows from the butt end of the gun made the house tremble, but did not shake the door.

Nevertheless, it is probable that the inhabitants were disturbed, for a tiny, square window was finally seen to open on the third story, and at this aperture appeared the reverend and terrified face of a gray-haired old man, who was the porter, and who held a candle.

The man who was knocking paused.

"Gentlemen," said the porter, "what do you want?"

"Open!" said Cabuc.

"That cannot be, gentlemen."

"Open, nevertheless."

"Impossible, gentlemen."

Le Cabuc took his gun and aimed at the porter; but as he was below, and as it was very dark, the porter did not see him.

"Will you open, yes or no?"

"No, gentlemen."

"Do you say no?"

"I say no, my goo—"

The porter did not finish. The shot was fired; the ball entered under his chin and came out at the nape of his neck, after traversing the jugular vein.

The old man fell back without a sigh. The candle fell and was extinguished, and nothing more was to be seen except a motionless head lying on the sill of the small window, and a little whitish smoke which floated off towards the roof.

"There!" said Le Cabuc, dropping the butt end of his gun to the pavement.

He had hardly uttered this word, when he felt a hand laid on his shoulder with the weight of an eagle's talon, and he heard a voice saying to him: —

"On your knees."

The murderer turned round and saw before him Enjolras' cold, white face.

Enjolras held a pistol in his hand.

He had hastened up at the sound of the discharge.

He had seized Cabuc's collar, blouse, shirt, and suspender with his left hand.

"On your knees!" he repeated.

And, with an imperious motion, the frail young man of twenty years bent the thickset and sturdy porter like a reed, and brought him to his knees in the mire.

Le Cabuc attempted to resist, but he seemed to have been seized by a superhuman hand.

Enjolras, pale, with bare neck and dishevelled hair, and his woman's face, had about him at that moment something of the antique Themis. His dilated nostrils, his downcast eyes, gave to his implacable Greek profile that expression of wrath and that expression of Chastity which, as the ancient world viewed the matter, befit Justice.

The whole barricade hastened up, then all ranged themselves in a circle at a distance, feeling that it was impossible to utter a word in the presence of the thing which they were about to behold.

Le Cabuc, vanquished, no longer tried to struggle, and trembled in every limb.

Enjolras released him and drew out his watch.

"Collect yourself," said he. "Think or pray. You have one minute."

"Mercy!" murmured the murderer; then he dropped his head and stammered a few inarticulate oaths.

Enjolras never took his eyes off of him: he allowed a minute to pass, then he replaced his watch in his fob. That done, he grasped Le Cabuc by the hair, as the latter coiled himself into a ball at his knees and shrieked, and placed the muzzle of the pistol to his ear. Many of those intrepid men, who had so tranquilly entered upon the most terrible of adventures, turned aside their heads.

An explosion was heard, the assassin fell to the pavement face downwards.

Enjolras straightened himself up, and cast a convinced and severe glance around him. Then he spurned the corpse with his foot and said: —

"Throw that outside."

Three men raised the body of the unhappy wretch, which was still agitated by the last mechanical convulsions of the life that had fled, and flung it over the little barricade into the Rue Mondetour.

Enjolras was thoughtful. It is impossible to say what grandiose shadows slowly spread over his redoubtable serenity. All at once he raised his voice.

A silence fell upon them.

“Citizens,” said Enjolras, “what that man did is frightful, what I have done is horrible. He killed, therefore I killed him. I had to do it, because insurrection must have its discipline. Assassination is even more of a crime here than elsewhere; we are under the eyes of the Revolution, we are the priests of the Republic, we are the victims of duty, and must not be possible to slander our combat. I have, therefore, tried that man, and condemned him to death. As for myself, constrained as I am to do what I have done, and yet abhorring it, I have judged myself also, and you shall soon see to what I have condemned myself.”

Those who listened to him shuddered.

“We will share thy fate,” cried Combeferre.

“So be it,” replied Enjolras. “One word more. In executing this man, I have obeyed necessity; but necessity is a monster of the old world, necessity’s name is Fatality. Now, the law of progress is, that monsters shall disappear before the angels, and that Fatality shall vanish before Fraternity. It is a bad moment to pronounce the word love. No matter, I do pronounce it. And I glorify it. Love, the future is thine. Death, I make use of thee, but I hate thee. Citizens, in the future there will be neither darkness nor thunderbolts; neither ferocious ignorance, nor bloody retaliation. As there will be no more Satan, there will be no more Michael. In the future no one will kill any one else, the earth will beam with radiance, the human race will love. The day will come, citizens, when all will be concord, harmony, light, joy and life; it will come, and it is in order that it may come that we are about to die.”

Enjolras ceased. His virgin lips closed; and he remained for some time standing on the spot where he had shed blood, in marble immobility. His staring eye caused those about him to speak in low tones.

Jean Prouvaire and Combeferre pressed each other’s hands silently, and, leaning against each other in an angle of the barricade, they watched with an admiration in which there was some compassion, that grave young man, executioner and priest, composed of light, like crystal, and also of rock.

Let us say at once that later on, after the action, when the bodies were taken to the morgue and searched, a police agent’s card was found on Le

Cabuc. The author of this book had in his hands, in 1848, the special report on this subject made to the Prefect of Police in 1832.

We will add, that if we are to believe a tradition of the police, which is strange but probably well founded, Le Cabuc was Claquesous. The fact is, that dating from the death of Le Cabuc, there was no longer any question of Claquesous. Claquesous had nowhere left any trace of his disappearance; he would seem to have amalgamated himself with the invisible. His life had been all shadows, his end was night.

The whole insurgent group was still under the influence of the emotion of that tragic case which had been so quickly tried and so quickly terminated, when Courfeyrac again beheld on the barricade, the small young man who had inquired of him that morning for Marius.

This lad, who had a bold and reckless air, had come by night to join the insurgents.

BOOK THIRTEENTH. — MARIUS ENTERS THE SHADOW

CHAPTER I — FROM THE RUE PLUMET TO THE QUARTIER SAINT-DENIS

The voice which had summoned Marius through the twilight to the barricade of the Rue de la Chanvrerie, had produced on him the effect of the voice of destiny. He wished to die; the opportunity presented itself; he knocked at the door of the tomb, a hand in the darkness offered him the key. These melancholy openings which take place in the gloom before despair, are tempting. Marius thrust aside the bar which had so often allowed him to pass, emerged from the garden, and said: "I will go."

Mad with grief, no longer conscious of anything fixed or solid in his brain, incapable of accepting anything thenceforth of fate after those two months passed in the intoxication of youth and love, overwhelmed at once by all the reveries of despair, he had but one desire remaining, to make a speedy end of all.

He set out at rapid pace. He found himself most opportunely armed, as he had Javert's pistols with him.

The young man of whom he thought that he had caught a glimpse, had vanished from his sight in the street.

Marius, who had emerged from the Rue Plumet by the boulevard, traversed the Esplanade and the bridge of the Invalides, the Champs Elysees, the Place Louis XV., and reached the Rue de Rivoli. The shops were open there, the gas was burning under the arcades, women were making their purchases in the stalls, people were eating ices in the Cafe Laiter, and nibbling small cakes at the English pastry-cook's shop. Only a few posting-chaises were setting out at a gallop from the Hotel des Princes and the Hotel Meurice.

Marius entered the Rue Saint-Honore through the Passage Delorme. There the shops were closed, the merchants were chatting in front of their half-open doors, people were walking about, the street lanterns were lighted, beginning with the first floor, all the windows were lighted as usual. There was cavalry on the Place du Palais-Royal.

Marius followed the Rue Saint-Honore. In proportion as he left the Palais-Royal behind him, there were fewer lighted windows, the shops were fast shut, no one was chatting on the thresholds, the street grew sombre, and, at the same time, the crowd increased in density. For the passers-by now amounted to a crowd. No one could be seen to speak in this throng, and yet there arose from it a dull, deep murmur.

Near the fountain of the Arbre-Sec, there were “assemblages”, motionless and gloomy groups which were to those who went and came as stones in the midst of running water.

At the entrance to the Rue des Prouvaires, the crowd no longer walked. It formed a resisting, massive, solid, compact, almost impenetrable block of people who were huddled together, and conversing in low tones. There were hardly any black coats or round hats now, but smock frocks, blouses, caps, and bristling and cadaverous heads. This multitude undulated confusedly in the nocturnal gloom. Its whisperings had the hoarse accent of a vibration. Although not one of them was walking, a dull trampling was audible in the mire. Beyond this dense portion of the throng, in the Rue du Roule, in the Rue des Prouvaires, and in the extension of the Rue Saint-Honore, there was no longer a single window in which a candle was burning. Only the solitary and diminishing rows of lanterns could be seen vanishing into the street in the distance. The lanterns of that date resembled large red stars, hanging to ropes, and shed upon the pavement a shadow which had the form of a huge spider. These streets were not deserted. There could be descried piles of guns, moving bayonets, and troops bivouacking. No curious observer passed that limit. There circulation ceased. There the rabble ended and the army began.

Marius willed with the will of a man who hopes no more. He had been summoned, he must go. He found a means to traverse the throng and to pass the bivouac of the troops, he shunned the patrols, he avoided the sentinels. He made a circuit, reached the Rue de Bethisy, and directed his course towards the Halles. At the corner of the Rue des Bourdonnais, there were no longer any lanterns.

After having passed the zone of the crowd, he had passed the limits of the troops; he found himself in something startling. There was no longer a passer-by, no longer a soldier, no longer a light, there was no one; solitude, silence, night, I know not what chill which seized hold upon one. Entering a street was like entering a cellar.

He continued to advance.

He took a few steps. Some one passed close to him at a run. Was it a man? Or a woman? Were there many of them? he could not have told. It had passed and vanished.

Proceeding from circuit to circuit, he reached a lane which he judged to be the Rue de la Poterie; near the middle of this street, he came in contact with an obstacle. He extended his hands. It was an overturned wagon; his foot recognized pools of water, gullies, and paving-stones scattered and piled up. A barricade had been begun there and abandoned. He climbed over the stones and found himself on the other side of the barrier. He walked very near the street-posts, and guided himself along the walls of the houses. A little beyond the barricade, it seemed to him that he could make out something white in front of him. He approached, it took on a form. It was two white horses; the horses of the omnibus harnessed by Bossuet in the morning, who had been straying at random all day from street to street, and had finally halted there, with the weary patience of brutes who no more understand the actions of men, than man understands the actions of Providence.

Marius left the horses behind him. As he was approaching a street which seemed to him to be the Rue du Contrat-Social, a shot coming no one knows whence, and traversing the darkness at random, whistled close by him, and the bullet pierced a brass shaving-dish suspended above his head over a hairdresser’s shop. This pierced shaving-dish was still to be seen in 1848, in the Rue du Contrat-Social, at the corner of the pillars of the market.

This shot still betokened life. From that instant forth he encountered nothing more.

The whole of this itinerary resembled a descent of black steps.

Nevertheless, Marius pressed forward.

CHAPTER II — AN OWL’S VIEW OF PARIS

A being who could have hovered over Paris that night with the wing of the bat or the owl would have had beneath his eyes a gloomy spectacle.

All that old quarter of the Halles, which is like a city within a city, through which run the Rues Saint-Denis and Saint-Martin, where a thousand lanes cross, and of which the insurgents had made their redoubt and their stronghold, would have appeared to him like a dark and enormous cavity hollowed out in the centre of Paris. There the glance fell into an abyss. Thanks to the broken lanterns, thanks to the closed windows, there all radiance, all life, all sound, all movement ceased. The invisible police of the insurrection were on the watch everywhere, and maintained order, that is to say, night. The necessary tactics of insurrection are to drown small numbers in a vast obscurity, to multiply every combatant by the possibilities which that obscurity contains. At dusk, every window where a candle was burning received a shot. The light was extinguished, sometimes the inhabitant was killed. Hence nothing was stirring. There was nothing but fright, mourning, stupor in the houses; and in the streets, a sort of sacred horror. Not even the long rows of windows and stores, the indentations of the chimneys, and the roofs, and the vague reflections which are cast back by the wet and muddy pavements, were visible. An eye cast upward at that mass of shadows might, perhaps, have caught a glimpse here and there, at intervals, of indistinct gleams which brought out broken and eccentric lines, and profiles of singular buildings, something like the lights which go and come in ruins; it was at such points that the barricades were situated. The rest was a lake of obscurity, foggy, heavy, and funereal, above which, in motionless and melancholy outlines, rose the tower of Saint-Jacques, the church of Saint-Merry, and two or three more of those grand edifices of which man makes giants and the night makes phantoms.

All around this deserted and disquieting labyrinth, in the quarters where the Parisian circulation had not been annihilated, and where a few street lanterns still burned, the aerial observer might have distinguished the metallic gleam of swords and bayonets, the dull rumble of artillery, and the swarming of silent battalions whose ranks were swelling from minute to minute; a formidable girdle which was slowly drawing in and around the insurrection.

The invested quarter was no longer anything more than a monstrous cavern; everything there appeared to be asleep or motionless, and, as we have just seen, any street which one might come to offered nothing but darkness.

A wild darkness, full of traps, full of unseen and formidable shocks, into which it was alarming to penetrate, and in which it was terrible to remain, where those who entered shivered before those whom they awaited, where those who waited shuddered before those who were coming. Invisible combatants were entrenched at every corner of the street; snares of the sepulchre concealed in the density of night. All was over. No more light was to be hoped for, henceforth, except the lightning of guns, no further encounter except the abrupt and rapid apparition of death. Where? How? When? No one knew, but it was certain and inevitable. In this place which had been marked out for the struggle, the Government and the insurrection, the National Guard, and popular societies, the bourgeois and the uprising, groping their way, were about to come into contact. The necessity was the same for both. The only possible issue thenceforth was to emerge thence killed or conquerors. A situation so extreme, an obscurity so powerful, that the most timid felt themselves seized with resolution, and the most daring with terror.

Moreover, on both sides, the fury, the rage, and the determination were equal. For the one party, to advance meant death, and no one dreamed of retreating; for the other, to remain meant death, and no one dreamed of flight.

It was indispensable that all should be ended on the following day, that triumph should rest either here or there, that the insurrection should prove itself a revolution or a skirmish. The Government understood this as well as the parties; the most insignificant bourgeois felt it. Hence a thought of anguish which mingled with the impenetrable gloom of this quarter where all was at the point of being decided; hence a redoubled anxiety around that silence whence a catastrophe was on the point of emerging. Here only one sound was audible, a sound as heart-rending as the death rattle, as menacing as a malediction, the tocsin of Saint-Merry. Nothing could be more blood-curdling than the clamor of that wild and desperate bell, wailing amid the shadows.

As it often happens, nature seemed to have fallen into accord with what men were about to do. Nothing disturbed the harmony of the whole effect.

The stars had disappeared, heavy clouds filled the horizon with their melancholy folds. A black sky rested on these dead streets, as though an immense winding-sheet were being outspread over this immense tomb.

While a battle that was still wholly political was in preparation in the same locality which had already witnessed so many revolutionary events, while youth, the secret associations, the schools, in the name of principles, and the middle classes, in the name of interests, were approaching preparatory to dashing themselves together, clasping and throwing each other, while each one hastened and invited the last and decisive hour of the crisis, far away and quite outside of this fatal quarter, in the most profound depths of the unfathomable cavities of that wretched old Paris which disappears under the splendor of happy and opulent Paris, the sombre voice of the people could be heard giving utterance to a dull roar.

A fearful and sacred voice which is composed of the roar of the brute and of the word of God, which terrifies the weak and which warns the wise, which comes both from below like the voice of the lion, and from on high like the voice of the thunder.

CHAPTER III — THE EXTREME EDGE

Marius had reached the Halles.

There everything was still calmer, more obscure and more motionless than in the neighboring streets. One would have said that the glacial peace of the sepulchre had sprung forth from the earth and had spread over the heavens.

Nevertheless, a red glow brought out against this black background the lofty roofs of the houses which barred the Rue de la Chanvrerie on the Saint-Eustache side. It was the reflection of the torch which was burning in the Corinthe barricade. Marius directed his steps towards that red light. It had drawn him to the Marche-aux-Poirees, and he caught a glimpse of the dark mouth of the Rue des Prêcheurs. He entered it. The insurgents' sentinel, who was guarding the other end, did not see him. He felt that he was very close to that which he had come in search of, and he walked on tiptoe. In this manner he reached the elbow of that short section of the Rue Mondetour which was, as the reader will remember, the only communication which Enjolras had preserved with the outside world. At the corner of the last house, on his left, he thrust his head forward, and looked into the fragment of the Rue Mondetour.

A little beyond the angle of the lane and the Rue de la Chanvrerie which cast a broad curtain of shadow, in which he was himself engulfed, he perceived some light on the pavement, a bit of the wine-shop, and beyond, a flickering lamp within a sort of shapeless wall, and men crouching down with guns on their knees. All this was ten fathoms distant from him. It was the interior of the barricade.

The houses which bordered the lane on the right concealed the rest of the wine-shop, the large barricade, and the flag from him.

Marius had but a step more to take.

Then the unhappy young man seated himself on a post, folded his arms, and fell to thinking about his father.

He thought of that heroic Colonel Pontmercy, who had been so proud a soldier, who had guarded the frontier of France under the Republic, and had touched the frontier of Asia under Napoleon, who had beheld Genoa, Alexandria, Milan, Turin, Madrid, Vienna, Dresden, Berlin, Moscow, who had left on all the victorious battle-fields of Europe drops of that same blood, which he, Marius, had in his veins, who had grown gray before his time in discipline and command, who had lived with his sword-belt buckled, his epaulets falling on his breast, his cockade blackened with powder, his brow furrowed with his helmet, in barracks, in camp, in the bivouac, in ambulances, and who, at the expiration of twenty years, had returned from the great wars with a scarred cheek, a smiling countenance, tranquil, admirable, pure as a child, having done everything for France and nothing against her.

He said to himself that his day had also come now, that his hour had struck, that following his father, he too was about to show himself brave, intrepid, bold, to run to meet the bullets, to offer his breast to bayonets, to shed his blood, to seek the enemy, to seek death, that he was about to wage war in his turn and descend to the field of battle, and that the field of battle upon which he was to descend was the street, and that the war in which he was about to engage was civil war!

He beheld civil war laid open like a gulf before him, and into this he was about to fall. Then he shuddered.

He thought of his father's sword, which his grandfather had sold to a second-hand dealer, and which he had so mournfully regretted. He said to himself that that chaste and valiant sword had done well to escape from him, and to depart in wrath into the gloom; that if it had thus fled, it was because it was intelligent and because it had foreseen the future; that it had had a presentiment of this rebellion, the war of the gutters, the war of the pavements, fusillades through cellar-windows, blows given and received in the rear; it was because, coming from Marengo and Friedland, it did not wish to go to the Rue de la Chanvrerie; it was because, after what it had done with the father, it did not wish to do this for the son! He told himself that if that sword were there, if after taking possession of it at his father's pillow, he had dared to take it and carry it off for this combat of darkness between Frenchmen in the streets, it would assuredly have scorched his hands and burst out aflame before his eyes, like the sword of the angel! He told himself that it was fortunate that it was not there and that it had disappeared, that that was well, that that was just, that his grandfather had been the true guardian of his father's glory, and that it was far better that the colonel's sword should be sold at auction, sold to the old-clothes man, thrown among the old junk, than that it should, to-day, wound the side of his country.

And then he fell to weeping bitterly.

This was horrible. But what was he to do? Live without Cosette he could not. Since she was gone, he must needs die. Had he not given her his word of honor that he would die? She had gone knowing that; this meant that it pleased her that Marius should die. And then, it was clear that she no longer loved him, since she had departed thus without warning, without a word, without a letter, although she knew his address! What was the good of living, and why should he live now? And then, what! should he retreat after going so far? should he flee from danger after having approached it? should he slip away after having come and peeped into the barricade? slip away, all in a tremble, saying: “After all, I have had enough of it as it is. I have seen it, that suffices, this is civil war, and I shall take my leave!” Should he abandon his friends who were expecting him? Who were in need of him possibly! who were a mere handful against an army! Should he be untrue at once to his love, to country, to his word? Should he give to his cowardice the pretext of patriotism? But this was impossible, and if the phantom of his father was there in the gloom, and beheld him retreating, he would beat him on the loins with the flat of his sword, and shout to him: “March on, you poltroon!”

Thus a prey to the conflicting movements of his thoughts, he dropped his head.

All at once he raised it. A sort of splendid rectification had just been effected in his mind. There is a widening of the sphere of thought which is peculiar to the vicinity of the grave; it makes one see clearly to be near death. The vision of the action into which he felt that he was, perhaps, on the point of entering, appeared to him no more as lamentable, but as superb. The war of the street was suddenly transfigured by some unfathomable inward working of his soul, before the eye of his thought. All the tumultuous interrogation points of revery recurred to him in throngs, but without troubling him. He left none of them unanswered.

Let us see, why should his father be indignant? Are there not cases where insurrection rises to the dignity of duty? What was there that was degrading for the son of Colonel Pontmercy in the combat which was about to begin? It is no longer Montmirail nor Champaubert; it is something quite different. The question is no longer one of sacred territory, — but of a holy idea. The country wails, that may be, but humanity applauds. But is it true that the country does wail? France bleeds, but liberty smiles; and in the presence of liberty’s smile, France forgets her wound. And then if we look at things from a still more lofty point of view, why do we speak of civil war?

Civil war — what does that mean? Is there a foreign war? Is not all war between men, war between brothers? War is qualified only by its object. There is no such thing as foreign or civil war; there is only just and unjust war. Until that day when the grand human agreement is concluded, war, that at least which is the effort of the future, which is hastening on against the past, which is lagging in the rear, may be necessary. What have we to reproach that war with? War does not become a disgrace, the sword does not become a disgrace, except when it is used for assassinating the right, progress, reason, civilization, truth. Then war, whether foreign or civil, is iniquitous; it is called crime. Outside the pale of that holy thing, justice, by what right does one form of man despise another? By what right should the sword of Washington disown the pike of Camille Desmoulins? Leonidas against the stranger, Timoleon against the tyrant, which is the greater? the one is the defender, the other the liberator. Shall we brand every appeal to arms within a city’s limits without taking the object into a consideration? Then note the infamy of Brutus, Marcel, Arnould von Blankenheim, Coligny, Hedgerow war? War of the streets? Why not? That was the war of Ambiorix, of Artevelde, of Marnix, of Pelagius. But Ambiorix fought against Rome, Artevelde against France, Marnix against Spain, Pelagius against the Moors; all against the foreigner. Well, the monarchy is a foreigner; oppression is a stranger; the right divine is a stranger. Despotism violates the moral frontier, an invasion violates the geographical frontier. Driving out the tyrant or driving out the English, in both cases, regaining possession of one’s own territory. There comes an hour when protestation no longer suffices; after philosophy, action is required; live force finishes what the idea has sketched out; Prometheus chained begins, Arostogeiton ends; the encyclopedia enlightens souls, the 10th of August electrifies them. After AEschylus, Thrasybulus; after Diderot, Danton. Multitudes have a tendency to accept the master. Their mass bears witness to apathy. A crowd is easily led as a whole to obedience. Men must be stirred up, pushed on, treated roughly by the very benefit of their deliverance, their eyes must be wounded by the true, light must be hurled at them in terrible handfuls. They must be a little thunderstruck themselves at their own well-being; this dazzling awakens them. Hence the necessity of tocsins and wars. Great combatants must rise, must enlighten nations with audacity, and shake up that sad humanity which is covered with gloom by the right divine, Caesarian glory, force, fanaticism, irresponsible power, and absolute majesty; a rabble stupidly occupied in the contemplation, in their twilight splendor, of these sombre triumphs of the night. Down with the tyrant! Of whom are you speaking? Do you call Louis Philippe the tyrant? No; no more than Louis XVI. Both of them are what history is in the habit of calling good kings; but principles are not to be parcelled out, the logic of the true is rectilinear, the peculiarity of truth is that it lacks complaisance; no concessions, then; all encroachments on man should be repressed. There is a divine right in Louis XVI., there is because a Bourbon in Louis Philippe; both represent in a certain measure the confiscation of right, and, in order to clear away universal insurrection, they must be combated; it must be done, France being always the one to begin. When the master falls in France, he falls everywhere. In short, what cause is more just, and consequently, what war is greater, than that which re-establishes social truth, restores her throne to liberty, restores the people to the people, restores sovereignty to man, replaces the purple on the head of France, restores equity and reason in their plenitude, suppresses every germ of antagonism by restoring each one to himself, annihilates the obstacle which royalty presents to the whole immense universal concord, and places the human race once more on a level with the right? These wars build up peace. An enormous fortress of prejudices, privileges, superstitions, lies, exactions, abuses, violences, iniquities, and darkness still stands erect in this world, with its towers of hatred. It must be cast down. This monstrous mass must be made to crumble. To conquer at Austerlitz is grand; to take the Bastille is immense.

There is no one who has not noticed it in his own case — the soul, — and therein lies the marvel of its unity complicated with ubiquity, has a strange aptitude for reasoning almost coldly in the most violent extremities, and it often happens that heartbroken passion and profound despair in the very agony of their blackest monologues, treat subjects and discuss theses. Logic is mingled with convulsion, and the thread of the syllogism floats, without breaking, in the mournful storm of thought. This was the situation of Marius' mind.

As he meditated thus, dejected but resolute, hesitating in every direction, and, in short, shuddering at what he was about to do, his glance strayed to the interior of the barricade. The insurgents were here conversing in a low voice, without moving, and there was perceptible that quasi-silence which marks the last stage of expectation. Overhead, at the small window in the third story Marius descried a sort of spectator who appeared to him to be singularly attentive. This was the porter who had been killed by Le Cabuc. Below, by the lights of the torch, which was thrust between the paving-stones, this head could be vaguely distinguished. Nothing could be stranger, in that sombre and uncertain gleam, than that livid, motionless, astonished face, with its bristling hair, its eyes fixed and staring, and its yawning mouth, bent over the street in an attitude of curiosity. One would have said that the man who was dead was surveying those who were about to die. A long trail of blood which had flowed from that head, descended in reddish threads from the window to the height of the first floor, where it stopped.

BOOK FOURTEENTH. — THE GRANDEURS OF DESPAIR

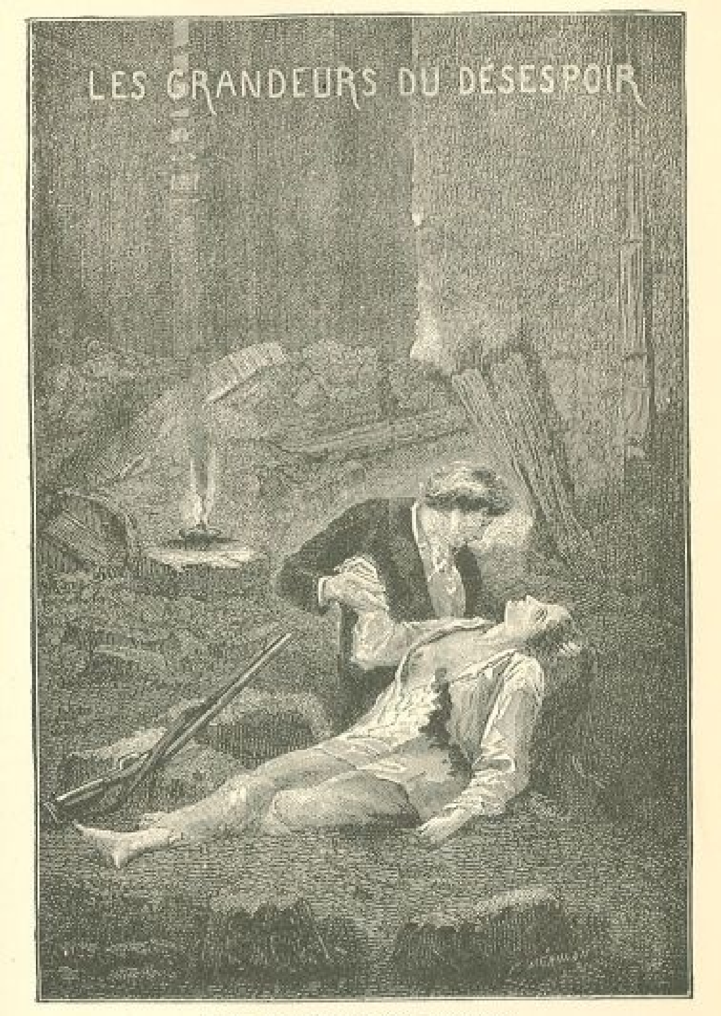
LES GRANDEURS DU DÉSESPOIR

THE GRANDEUR OF DESPAIR.

CHAPTER I — THE FLAG: ACT FIRST

As yet, nothing had come. Ten o'clock had sounded from Saint-Merry. Enjolras and Combeferre had gone and seated themselves, carbines in hand, near the outlet of the grand barricade. They no longer addressed each other, they listened, seeking to catch even the faintest and most distant sound of marching.

Suddenly, in the midst of the dismal calm, a clear, gay, young voice, which seemed to come from the Rue Saint-Denis, rose and began to sing distinctly, to the old popular air of "By the Light of the Moon," this bit of poetry, terminated by a cry like the crow of a cock: —

Mon nez est en larmes,
Mon ami Bugeaud,
Prête moi tes gendarmes
Pour leur dire un mot.

En capote bleue,
La poule au shako,
Voici la banlieue!
Co-cocorico!

They pressed each other's hands.

"That is Gavroche," said Enjolras.

"He is warning us," said Combeferre.

A hasty rush troubled the deserted street; they beheld a being more agile than a clown climb over the omnibus, and Gavroche bounded into the barricade, all breathless, saying: —

"My gun! Here they are!"

An electric quiver shot through the whole barricade, and the sound of hands seeking their guns became audible.

"Would you like my carbine?" said Enjolras to the lad.

"I want a big gun," replied Gavroche.

And he seized Javert's gun.

Two sentinels had fallen back, and had come in almost at the same moment as Gavroche. They were the sentinels from the end of the street, and the vidette of the Rue de la Petite-Truanderie. The vidette of the Lane des Prêcheurs had remained at his post, which indicated that nothing was approaching from the direction of the bridges and Halles.

The Rue de la Chanvrerie, of which a few paving-stones alone were dimly visible in the reflection of the light projected on the flag, offered to the insurgents the aspect of a vast black door vaguely opened into a smoke.

Each man had taken up his position for the conflict.

Forty-three insurgents, among whom were Enjolras, Combeferre, Courfeyrac, Bossuet, Joly, Bahorel, and Gavroche, were kneeling inside the large barricade, with their heads on a level with the crest of the barrier, the barrels of their guns and carbines aimed on the stones as though at loop-holes, attentive, mute, ready to fire. Six, commanded by Feuilly, had installed themselves, with their guns levelled at their shoulders, at the windows of the two stories of Corinthe.

Several minutes passed thus, then a sound of footsteps, measured, heavy, and numerous, became distinctly audible in the direction of Saint-Leu. This sound, faint at first, then precise, then heavy and sonorous, approached slowly, without halt, without intermission, with a tranquil and terrible continuity. Nothing was to be heard but this. It was that combined silence and sound, of the statue of the commander, but this stony step had something indescribably enormous and multiple about it which awakened the idea of a throng, and, at the same time, the idea of a spectre. One thought one heard the terrible statue Legion marching onward. This tread drew near; it drew still nearer, and stopped. It seemed as though the breathing of many men could be heard at the end of the street. Nothing was to be seen, however, but at the bottom of that dense obscurity there could be distinguished a multitude of metallic threads, as fine as needles and almost imperceptible, which moved about like those indescribable phosphoric networks which one sees beneath one’s closed eyelids, in the first mists of slumber at the moment when one is dropping off to sleep. These were bayonets and gun-barrels confusedly illuminated by the distant reflection of the torch.

A pause ensued, as though both sides were waiting. All at once, from the depths of this darkness, a voice, which was all the more sinister, since no one was visible, and which appeared to be the gloom itself speaking, shouted: —

“Who goes there?”

At the same time, the click of guns, as they were lowered into position, was heard.

Enjolras replied in a haughty and vibrating tone: —

“The French Revolution!”

“Fire!” shouted the voice.

A flash empurpled all the facades in the street as though the door of a furnace had been flung open, and hastily closed again.

A fearful detonation burst forth on the barricade. The red flag fell. The discharge had been so violent and so dense that it had cut the staff, that is to say, the very tip of the omnibus pole.

Bullets which had rebounded from the cornices of the houses penetrated the barricade and wounded several men.

The impression produced by this first discharge was freezing. The attack had been rough, and of a nature to inspire reflection in the boldest. It was evident that they had to deal with an entire regiment at the very least.

“Comrades!” shouted Courfeyrac, “let us not waste our powder. Let us wait until they are in the street before replying.”

“And, above all,” said Enjolras, “let us raise the flag again.”

He picked up the flag, which had fallen precisely at his feet.

Outside, the clatter of the ramrods in the guns could be heard; the troops were re-loading their arms.

Enjolras went on: —

“Who is there here with a bold heart? Who will plant the flag on the barricade again?”

Not a man responded. To mount on the barricade at the very moment when, without any doubt, it was again the object of their aim, was simply death. The bravest hesitated to pronounce his own condemnation. Enjolras himself felt a thrill. He repeated: —

“Does no one volunteer?”

CHAPTER II — THE FLAG: ACT SECOND

Since they had arrived at Corinthe, and had begun the construction of the barricade, no attention had been paid to Father Mabeuf. M. Mabeuf had not quitted the mob, however; he had entered the ground-floor of the wine-shop and had seated himself behind the counter. There he had, so to speak, retreated into himself. He no longer seemed to look or to think. Courfeyrac and others had accosted him two or three times, warning him of his peril, beseeching him to withdraw, but he did not hear them. When they were not speaking to him, his mouth moved as though he were replying to some one, and as soon as he was addressed, his lips became motionless and his eyes no longer had the appearance of being alive.

Several hours before the barricade was attacked, he had assumed an attitude which he did not afterwards abandon, with both fists planted on his knees and his head thrust forward as though he were gazing over a precipice. Nothing had been able to move him from this attitude; it did not seem as though his mind were in the barricade. When each had gone to take up his position for the combat, there remained in the tap-room where Javert was bound to the post, only a single insurgent with a naked sword, watching over Javert, and himself, Mabeuf. At the moment of the attack, at the detonation, the physical shock had reached him and had, as it were, awakened him; he started up abruptly, crossed the room, and at the instant when Enjolras repeated his appeal: “Does no one volunteer?” the old man was seen to make his appearance on the threshold of the wine-shop. His presence produced a sort of commotion in the different groups. A shout went up: —

“It is the voter! It is the member of the Convention! It is the representative of the people!”

It is probable that he did not hear them.

He strode straight up to Enjolras, the insurgents withdrawing before him with a religious fear; he tore the flag from Enjolras, who recoiled in amazement and then, since no one dared to stop or to assist him, this old man of eighty, with shaking head but firm foot, began slowly to ascend the staircase of paving-stones arranged in the barricade. This was so melancholy and so grand that all around him cried: “Off with your hats!” At every step that he mounted, it was a frightful spectacle; his white locks, his decrepit face, his lofty, bald, and wrinkled brow, his amazed and open mouth, his aged arm upholding the red banner, rose through the gloom and were enlarged in the bloody light of the torch, and the bystanders thought that they beheld the spectre of ‘93 emerging from the earth, with the flag of terror in his hand.

When he had reached the last step, when this trembling and terrible phantom, erect on that pile of rubbish in the presence of twelve hundred invisible guns, drew himself up in the face of death and as though he were more powerful than it, the whole barricade assumed amid the darkness, a supernatural and colossal form.

There ensued one of those silences which occur only in the presence of prodigies. In the midst of this silence, the old man waved the red flag and shouted: —

“Long live the Revolution! Long live the Republic! Fraternity! Equality! and Death!”

Those in the barricade heard a low and rapid whisper, like the murmur of a priest who is despatching a prayer in haste. It was probably the commissary of police who was making the legal summons at the other end of the street.

Then the same piercing voice which had shouted: “Who goes there?” shouted: —

“Retire!”

M. Mabeuf, pale, haggard, his eyes lighted up with the mournful flame of aberration, raised the flag above his head and repeated: —

“Long live the Republic!”

“Fire!” said the voice.

A second discharge, similar to the first, rained down upon the barricade.

The old man fell on his knees, then rose again, dropped the flag and fell backwards on the pavement, like a log, at full length, with outstretched arms.

Rivulets of blood flowed beneath him. His aged head, pale and sad, seemed to be gazing at the sky.

One of those emotions which are superior to man, which make him forget even to defend himself, seized upon the insurgents, and they approached the body with respectful awe.

“What men these regicides were!” said Enjolras.

Courfeyrac bent down to Enjolras’ ear: —

“This is for yourself alone, I do not wish to dampen the enthusiasm. But this man was anything rather than a regicide. I knew him. His name was Father Mabeuf. I do not know what was the matter with him to-day. But he was a brave blockhead. Just look at his head.”

“The head of a blockhead and the heart of a Brutus,” replied Enjolras.

Then he raised his voice: —

“Citizens! This is the example which the old give to the young. We hesitated, he came! We were drawing back, he advanced! This is what those who are trembling with age teach to those who tremble with fear! This aged man is august in the eyes of his country. He has had a long life and a magnificent death! Now, let us place the body under cover, that each one of us may defend this old man dead as he would his father living, and may his presence in our midst render the barricade impregnable!”

A murmur of gloomy and energetic assent followed these words.

Enjolras bent down, raised the old man’s head, and fierce as he was, he kissed him on the brow, then, throwing wide his arms, and handling this dead man with tender precaution, as though he feared to hurt it, he removed his coat, showed the bloody holes in it to all, and said: —

“This is our flag now.”

CHAPTER III — GAVROCHE WOULD HAVE DONE BETTER TO ACCEPT ENJOLRAS' CARBINE

They threw a long black shawl of Widow Hucheloup's over Father Mabeuf. Six men made a litter of their guns; on this they laid the body, and bore it, with bared heads, with solemn slowness, to the large table in the tap-room.

These men, wholly absorbed in the grave and sacred task in which they were engaged, thought no more of the perilous situation in which they stood.

When the corpse passed near Javert, who was still impassive, Enjolras said to the spy: —

"It will be your turn presently!"

During all this time, Little Gavroche, who alone had not quitted his post, but had remained on guard, thought he espied some men stealthily approaching the barricade. All at once he shouted: —

"Look out!"

Courfeyrac, Enjolras, Jean Prouvaire, Combeferre, Joly, Bahorel, Bossuet, and all the rest ran tumultuously from the wine-shop. It was almost too late. They saw a glistening density of bayonets undulating above the barricade. Municipal guards of lofty stature were making their way in, some striding over the omnibus, others through the cut, thrusting before them the urchin, who retreated, but did not flee.

The moment was critical. It was that first, redoubtable moment of inundation, when the stream rises to the level of the levee and when the water begins to filter through the fissures of dike. A second more and the barricade would have been taken.

Bahorel dashed upon the first municipal guard who was entering, and killed him on the spot with a blow from his gun; the second killed Bahorel with a blow from his bayonet. Another had already overthrown Courfeyrac, who was shouting: "Follow me!" The largest of all, a sort of colossus, marched on Gavroche with his bayonet fixed. The urchin took in his arms Javert's immense gun, levelled it resolutely at the giant, and fired. No discharge followed. Javert's gun was not loaded. The municipal guard burst into a laugh and raised his bayonet at the child.

Before the bayonet had touched Gavroche, the gun slipped from the soldier’s grasp, a bullet had struck the municipal guardsman in the centre of the forehead, and he fell over on his back. A second bullet struck the other guard, who had assaulted Courfeyrac in the breast, and laid him low on the pavement.

This was the work of Marius, who had just entered the barricade.

CHAPTER IV — THE BARREL OF POWDER

Marius, still concealed in the turn of the Rue Mondetour, had witnessed, shuddering and irresolute, the first phase of the combat. But he had not long been able to resist that mysterious and sovereign vertigo which may be designated as the call of the abyss. In the presence of the imminence of the peril, in the presence of the death of M. Mabeuf, that melancholy enigma, in the presence of Bahorel killed, and Courfeyrac shouting: “Follow me!” of that child threatened, of his friends to succor or to avenge, all hesitation had vanished, and he had flung himself into the conflict, his two pistols in hand. With his first shot he had saved Gavroche, and with the second delivered Courfeyrac.

Amid the sound of the shots, amid the cries of the assaulted guards, the assailants had climbed the entrenchment, on whose summit Municipal Guards, soldiers of the line and National Guards from the suburbs could now be seen, gun in hand, rearing themselves to more than half the height of their bodies.

They already covered more than two-thirds of the barrier, but they did not leap into the enclosure, as though wavering in the fear of some trap. They gazed into the dark barricade as one would gaze into a lion’s den. The light of the torch illuminated only their bayonets, their bear-skin caps, and the upper part of their uneasy and angry faces.

Marius had no longer any weapons; he had flung away his discharged pistols after firing them; but he had caught sight of the barrel of powder in the tap-room, near the door.

As he turned half round, gazing in that direction, a soldier took aim at him. At the moment when the soldier was sighting Marius, a hand was laid on the muzzle of the gun and obstructed it. This was done by some one who had darted forward, — the young workman in velvet trousers. The shot sped, traversed the hand and possibly, also, the workman, since he fell, but the ball did not strike Marius. All this, which was rather to be apprehended than seen through the smoke, Marius, who was entering the tap-room, hardly noticed. Still, he had, in a confused way, perceived that gun-barrel aimed at him, and the hand which had blocked it, and he had heard the discharge. But in moments like this, the things which one sees vacillate and are precipitated, and one pauses for nothing. One feels obscurely impelled towards more darkness still, and all is cloud.

The insurgents, surprised but not terrified, had rallied. Enjolras had shouted: “Wait! Don’t fire at random!” In the first confusion, they might, in fact, wound each other. The majority of them had ascended to the window on the first story and to the attic windows, whence they commanded the assailants.

The most determined, with Enjolras, Courfeyrac, Jean Prouvaire, and Combeferre, had proudly placed themselves with their backs against the houses at the rear, unsheltered and facing the ranks of soldiers and guards who crowned the barricade.

All this was accomplished without haste, with that strange and threatening gravity which precedes engagements. They took aim, point blank, on both sides: they were so close that they could talk together without raising their voices.

When they had reached this point where the spark is on the brink of darting forth, an officer in a gorget extended his sword and said: —

“Lay down your arms!”

“Fire!” replied Enjolras.

The two discharges took place at the same moment, and all disappeared in smoke.

An acrid and stifling smoke in which dying and wounded lay with weak, dull groans. When the smoke cleared away, the combatants on both sides could be seen to be thinned out, but still in the same positions, reloading in silence. All at once, a thundering voice was heard, shouting: —

“Be off with you, or I’ll blow up the barricade!”

All turned in the direction whence the voice proceeded.

Marius had entered the tap-room, and had seized the barrel of powder, then he had taken advantage of the smoke, and the sort of obscure mist which filled the entrenched enclosure, to glide along the barricade as far as that cage of paving-stones where the torch was fixed. To tear it from the torch, to replace it by the barrel of powder, to thrust the pile of stones under the barrel, which was instantly staved in, with a sort of horrible obedience, — all this had cost Marius but the time necessary to stoop and rise again; and now all, National Guards, Municipal Guards, officers, soldiers, huddled at the other extremity of the barricade, gazed stupidly at him, as he stood with his foot on the stones, his torch in his hand, his haughty face illuminated by a fatal resolution, drooping the flame of the torch towards that redoubtable pile where they could make out the broken barrel of powder, and giving vent to that startling cry: —

“Be off with you, or I’ll blow up the barricade!”

Marius on that barricade after the octogenarian was the vision of the young revolution after the apparition of the old.

“Blow up the barricade!” said a sergeant, “and yourself with it!”

Marius retorted: “And myself also.”

And he dropped the torch towards the barrel of powder.

But there was no longer any one on the barrier. The assailants, abandoning their dead and wounded, flowed back pell-mell and in disorder towards the extremity of the street, and there were again lost in the night. It was a headlong flight.

The barricade was free.

CHAPTER V — END OF THE VERSES OF JEAN PROUVAIRE

All flocked around Marius. Courfeyrac flung himself on his neck.

“Here you are!”

“What luck!” said Combeferre.

“You came in opportunely!” ejaculated Bossuet.

“If it had not been for you, I should have been dead!” began Courfeyrac again.

“If it had not been for you, I should have been gobbled up!” added Gavroche.

Marius asked: —

“Where is the chief?”

“You are he!” said Enjolras.

Marius had had a furnace in his brain all day long; now it was a whirlwind. This whirlwind which was within him, produced on him the effect of being outside of him and of bearing him away. It seemed to him that he was already at an immense distance from life. His two luminous months of joy and love, ending abruptly at that frightful precipice, Cosette lost to him, that barricade, M. Mabeuf getting himself killed for the Republic, himself the leader of the insurgents, — all these things appeared to him like a tremendous nightmare. He was obliged to make a mental effort to recall the fact that all that surrounded him was real. Marius had already seen too much of life not to know that nothing is more imminent than the impossible, and that what it is always necessary to foresee is the unforeseen. He had looked on at his own drama as a piece which one does not understand.

In the mists which enveloped his thoughts, he did not recognize Javert, who, bound to his post, had not so much as moved his head during the whole of the attack on the barricade, and who had gazed on the revolt seething around him with the resignation of a martyr and the majesty of a judge. Marius had not even seen him.

In the meanwhile, the assailants did not stir, they could be heard marching and swarming through at the end of the street but they did not venture into it, either because they were awaiting orders or because they were awaiting reinforcements before hurling themselves afresh on this impregnable redoubt. The insurgents had posted sentinels, and some of them, who were medical students, set about caring for the wounded.

They had thrown the tables out of the wine-shop, with the exception of the two tables reserved for lint and cartridges, and of the one on which lay Father Mabeuf; they had added them to the barricade, and had replaced them in the tap-room with mattresses from the bed of the widow Hucheloup and her servants. On these mattresses they had laid the wounded. As for the three poor creatures who inhabited Corinthe, no one knew what had become of them. They were finally found, however, hidden in the cellar.

A poignant emotion clouded the joy of the disencumbered barricade.

The roll was called. One of the insurgents was missing. And who was it? One of the dearest. One of the most valiant. Jean Prouvaire. He was sought among the wounded, he was not there. He was sought among the dead, he was not there. He was evidently a prisoner. Combeferre said to Enjolras: —

"They have our friend; we have their agent. Are you set on the death of that spy?"

"Yes," replied Enjolras; "but less so than on the life of Jean Prouvaire."

This took place in the tap-room near Javert's post.

"Well," resumed Combeferre, "I am going to fasten my handkerchief to my cane, and go as a flag of truce, to offer to exchange our man for theirs."

"Listen," said Enjolras, laying his hand on Combeferre's arm.

At the end of the street there was a significant clash of arms.

They heard a manly voice shout: —

"Vive la France! Long live France! Long live the future!"

They recognized the voice of Prouvaire.

A flash passed, a report rang out.

Silence fell again.

"They have killed him," exclaimed Combeferre.

Enjolras glanced at Javert, and said to him: —

"Your friends have just shot you."

CHAPTER VI — THE AGONY OF DEATH AFTER THE AGONY OF LIFE

A peculiarity of this species of war is, that the attack of the barricades is almost always made from the front, and that the assailants generally abstain from turning the position, either because they fear ambushes, or because they are afraid of getting entangled in the tortuous streets. The insurgents' whole attention had been directed, therefore, to the grand barricade, which was, evidently, the spot always menaced, and there the struggle would infallibly recommence. But Marius thought of the little barricade, and went thither. It was deserted and guarded only by the fire-pot which trembled between the paving-stones. Moreover, the Mondetour alley, and the branches of the Rue de la Petite Truanderie and the Rue du Cygne were profoundly calm.

As Marius was withdrawing, after concluding his inspection, he heard his name pronounced feebly in the darkness.

"Monsieur Marius!"

He started, for he recognized the voice which had called to him two hours before through the gate in the Rue Plumet.

Only, the voice now seemed to be nothing more than a breath.

He looked about him, but saw no one.

Marius thought he had been mistaken, that it was an illusion added by his mind to the extraordinary realities which were clashing around him. He advanced a step, in order to quit the distant recess where the barricade lay.

"Monsieur Marius!" repeated the voice.

This time he could not doubt that he had heard it distinctly; he looked and saw nothing.

"At your feet," said the voice.

He bent down, and saw in the darkness a form which was dragging itself towards him.

It was crawling along the pavement. It was this that had spoken to him.

The fire-pot allowed him to distinguish a blouse, torn trousers of coarse velvet, bare feet, and something which resembled a pool of blood. Marius indistinctly made out a pale head which was lifted towards him and which was saying to him: —

“You do not recognize me?”

“No.”

“Eponine.”

Marius bent hastily down. It was, in fact, that unhappy child. She was dressed in men’s clothes.

“How come you here? What are you doing here?”

“I am dying,” said she.

There are words and incidents which arouse dejected beings. Marius cried out with a start: —

“You are wounded! Wait, I will carry you into the room! They will attend to you there. Is it serious? How must I take hold of you in order not to hurt you? Where do you suffer? Help! My God! But why did you come hither?”

And he tried to pass his arm under her, in order to raise her.

She uttered a feeble cry.

“Have I hurt you?” asked Marius.

“A little.”

“But I only touched your hand.”

She raised her hand to Marius, and in the middle of that hand Marius saw a black hole.

“What is the matter with your hand?” said he.

“It is pierced.”

“Pierced?”

“Yes.”

“What with?”

“A bullet.”

“How?”

“Did you see a gun aimed at you?”

“Yes, and a hand stopping it.”

“It was mine.”

Marius was seized with a shudder.

“What madness! Poor child! But so much the better, if that is all, it is nothing, let me carry you to a bed. They will dress your wound; one does not die of a pierced hand.”

She murmured: —

“The bullet traversed my hand, but it came out through my back. It is useless to remove me from this spot. I will tell you how you can care for me better than any surgeon. Sit down near me on this stone.”

He obeyed; she laid her head on Marius’ knees, and, without looking at him, she said: —

“Oh! How good this is! How comfortable this is! There; I no longer suffer.”

She remained silent for a moment, then she turned her face with an effort, and looked at Marius.

“Do you know what, Monsieur Marius? It puzzled me because you entered that garden; it was stupid, because it was I who showed you that house; and then, I ought to have said to myself that a young man like you —”

She paused, and overstepping the sombre transitions that undoubtedly existed in her mind, she resumed with a heartrending smile: —

“You thought me ugly, didn’t you?”

She continued: —

“You see, you are lost! Now, no one can get out of the barricade. It was I who led you here, by the way! You are going to die, I count upon that. And yet, when I saw them taking aim at you, I put my hand on the muzzle of the gun. How queer it is! But it was because I wanted to die before you. When I received that bullet, I dragged myself here, no one saw me, no one picked me up, I was waiting for you, I said: ‘So he is not coming!’ Oh, if you only knew. I bit my blouse, I suffered so! Now I am well. Do you remember the day I entered your chamber and when I looked at myself in your mirror, and the day when I came to you on the boulevard near the washerwomen? How the birds sang! That was a long time ago. You gave me a hundred sous, and I said to you: ‘I don’t want your money.’ I hope you picked up your coin? You are not rich. I did not think to tell you to pick it up. The sun was shining bright, and it was not cold. Do you remember, Monsieur Marius? Oh! How happy I am! Every one is going to die.”

She had a mad, grave, and heart-breaking air. Her torn blouse disclosed her bare throat.

As she talked, she pressed her pierced hand to her breast, where there was another hole, and whence there spurted from moment to moment a stream of blood, like a jet of wine from an open bung-hole.

Marius gazed at this unfortunate creature with profound compassion.

“Oh!” she resumed, “it is coming again, I am stifling!”

She caught up her blouse and bit it, and her limbs stiffened on the pavement.

At that moment the young cock's crow executed by little Gavroche resounded through the barricade.

The child had mounted a table to load his gun, and was singing gayly the song then so popular: —

"En voyant Lafayette,	"On beholding Lafayette,
Le gendarme répète: —	The gendarme repeats: —
Sauvons nous! sauvons nous!	Let us flee! let us flee!
sauvons nous!"	let us flee!

Eponine raised herself and listened; then she murmured: —

"It is he."

And turning to Marius: —

"My brother is here. He must not see me. He would scold me."

"Your brother?" inquired Marius, who was meditating in the most bitter and sorrowful depths of his heart on the duties to the Thenardiers which his father had bequeathed to him; "who is your brother?"

"That little fellow."

"The one who is singing?"

"Yes."

Marius made a movement.

"Oh! don't go away," said she, "it will not be long now."

She was sitting almost upright, but her voice was very low and broken by hiccoughs.

At intervals, the death rattle interrupted her. She put her face as near that of Marius as possible. She added with a strange expression: —

"Listen, I do not wish to play you a trick. I have a letter in my pocket for you. I was told to put it in the post. I kept it. I did not want to have it reach you. But perhaps you will be angry with me for it when we meet again presently? Take your letter."

She grasped Marius' hand convulsively with her pierced hand, but she no longer seemed to feel her sufferings. She put Marius' hand in the pocket of her blouse. There, in fact, Marius felt a paper.

"Take it," said she.

Marius took the letter.

She made a sign of satisfaction and contentment.

"Now, for my trouble, promise me—"

And she stopped.

“What?” asked Marius.

“Promise me!”

“I promise.”

“Promise to give me a kiss on my brow when I am dead. — I shall feel it.”

She dropped her head again on Marius’ knees, and her eyelids closed. He thought the poor soul had departed. Eponine remained motionless. All at once, at the very moment when Marius fancied her asleep forever, she slowly opened her eyes in which appeared the sombre profundity of death, and said to him in a tone whose sweetness seemed already to proceed from another world: —

“And by the way, Monsieur Marius, I believe that I was a little bit in love with you.”

She tried to smile once more and expired.

CHAPTER VII — GAVROCHE AS A PROFOUND CALCULATOR OF DISTANCES

Marius kept his promise. He dropped a kiss on that livid brow, where the icy perspiration stood in beads.

This was no infidelity to Cosette; it was a gentle and pensive farewell to an unhappy soul.

It was not without a tremor that he had taken the letter which Eponine had given him. He had immediately felt that it was an event of weight. He was impatient to read it. The heart of man is so constituted that the unhappy child had hardly closed her eyes when Marius began to think of unfolding this paper.

He laid her gently on the ground, and went away. Something told him that he could not peruse that letter in the presence of that body.

He drew near to a candle in the tap-room. It was a small note, folded and sealed with a woman's elegant care. The address was in a woman's hand and ran: —

"To Monsieur, Monsieur Marius Pontmercy, at M. Courfeyrac's, Rue de la Verrerie, No. 16."

He broke the seal and read: —

"My dearest, alas! my father insists on our setting out immediately.

We shall be this evening in the Rue de l'Homme Arme, No. 7.

In a week we shall be in England. COSETTE. June 4th."

Such was the innocence of their love that Marius was not even acquainted with Cosette's handwriting.

What had taken place may be related in a few words. Eponine had been the cause of everything. After the evening of the 3d of June she had cherished a double idea, to defeat the projects of her father and the ruffians on the house of the Rue Plumet, and to separate Marius and Cosette. She had exchanged rags with the first young scamp she came across who had thought it amusing to dress like a woman, while Eponine disguised herself like a man. It was she who had conveyed to Jean Valjean in the Champ de Mars the expressive warning: "Leave your house." Jean Valjean had, in fact, returned home, and had said to Cosette: "We set out this evening and we go to the Rue de l'Homme Arme with Toussaint. Next week, we shall be in

London.” Cosette, utterly overwhelmed by this unexpected blow, had hastily penned a couple of lines to Marius. But how was she to get the letter to the post? She never went out alone, and Toussaint, surprised at such a commission, would certainly show the letter to M. Fauchelevent. In this dilemma, Cosette had caught sight through the fence of Eponine in man’s clothes, who now prowled incessantly around the garden. Cosette had called to “this young workman” and had handed him five francs and the letter, saying: “Carry this letter immediately to its address.” Eponine had put the letter in her pocket. The next day, on the 5th of June, she went to Courfeyrac’s quarters to inquire for Marius, not for the purpose of delivering the letter, but, — a thing which every jealous and loving soul will comprehend,— “to see.” There she had waited for Marius, or at least for Courfeyrac, still for the purpose of seeing. When Courfeyrac had told her: “We are going to the barricades,” an idea flashed through her mind, to fling herself into that death, as she would have done into any other, and to thrust Marius into it also. She had followed Courfeyrac, had made sure of the locality where the barricade was in process of construction; and, quite certain, since Marius had received no warning, and since she had intercepted the letter, that he would go at dusk to his trysting place for every evening, she had betaken herself to the Rue Plumet, had there awaited Marius, and had sent him, in the name of his friends, the appeal which would, she thought, lead him to the barricade. She reckoned on Marius’ despair when he should fail to find Cosette; she was not mistaken. She had returned to the Rue de la Chanvrerie herself. What she did there the reader has just seen. She died with the tragic joy of jealous hearts who drag the beloved being into their own death, and who say: “No one shall have him!”

Marius covered Cosette’s letter with kisses. So she loved him! For one moment the idea occurred to him that he ought not to die now. Then he said to himself: “She is going away. Her father is taking her to England, and my grandfather refuses his consent to the marriage. Nothing is changed in our fates.” Dreamers like Marius are subject to supreme attacks of dejection, and desperate resolves are the result. The fatigue of living is insupportable; death is sooner over with. Then he reflected that he had still two duties to fulfil: to inform Cosette of his death and send her a final farewell, and to save from the impending catastrophe which was in preparation, that poor child, Eponine’s brother and Thenardier’s son.

He had a pocket-book about him; the same one which had contained the note-book in which he had inscribed so many thoughts of love for Cosette. He tore out a leaf and wrote on it a few lines in pencil: —

“Our marriage was impossible. I asked my grandfather, he refused; I have no fortune, neither hast thou. I hastened to thee, thou wert no longer there. Thou knowest the promise that I gave thee, I shall keep it. I die. I love thee. When thou readest this, my soul will be near thee, and thou wilt smile.”

Having nothing wherewith to seal this letter, he contented himself with folding the paper in four, and added the address: —

“To Mademoiselle Cosette Fauchelevent, at M. Fauchelevent’s, Rue de l’Homme Arme, No. 7.”

Having folded the letter, he stood in thought for a moment, drew out his pocket-book again, opened it, and wrote, with the same pencil, these four lines on the first page: —

“My name is Marius Pontmercy. Carry my body to my grandfather, M. Gillenormand, Rue des Filles-du-Calvaire, No. 6, in the Marais.”

He put his pocketbook back in his pocket, then he called Gavroche.

The gamin, at the sound of Marius’ voice, ran up to him with his merry and devoted air.

“Will you do something for me?”

“Anything,” said Gavroche. “Good God! if it had not been for you, I should have been done for.”

“Do you see this letter?”

“Yes.”

“Take it. Leave the barricade instantly” (Gavroche began to scratch his ear uneasily) “and to-morrow morning, you will deliver it at its address to Mademoiselle Cosette, at M. Fauchelevent’s, Rue de l’Homme Arme, No. 7.”

The heroic child replied

“Well, but! in the meanwhile the barricade will be taken, and I shall not be there.”

“The barricade will not be attacked until daybreak, according to all appearances, and will not be taken before to-morrow noon.”

The fresh respite which the assailants were granting to the barricade had, in fact, been prolonged. It was one of those intermissions which frequently occur in nocturnal combats, which are always followed by an increase of rage.

“Well,” said Gavroche, “what if I were to go and carry your letter to-morrow?”

“It will be too late. The barricade will probably be blockaded, all the streets will be guarded, and you will not be able to get out. Go at once.”

Gavroche could think of no reply to this, and stood there in indecision, scratching his ear sadly.

All at once, he took the letter with one of those birdlike movements which were common with him.

“All right,” said he.

And he started off at a run through Mondetour lane.

An idea had occurred to Gavroche which had brought him to a decision, but he had not mentioned it for fear that Marius might offer some objection to it.

This was the idea: —

“It is barely midnight, the Rue de l’Homme Arme is not far off; I will go and deliver the letter at once, and I shall get back in time.”

BOOK FIFTEENTH. — THE RUE DE L’HOMME ARME

CHAPTER I — A DRINKER IS A BABBLER

What are the convulsions of a city in comparison with the insurrections of the soul? Man is a depth still greater than the people. Jean Valjean at that very moment was the prey of a terrible upheaval. Every sort of gulf had opened again within him. He also was trembling, like Paris, on the brink of an obscure and formidable revolution. A few hours had sufficed to bring this about. His destiny and his conscience had suddenly been covered with gloom. Of him also, as well as of Paris, it might have been said: “Two principles are face to face. The white angel and the black angel are about to seize each other on the bridge of the abyss. Which of the two will hurl the other over? Who will carry the day?”

On the evening preceding this same 5th of June, Jean Valjean, accompanied by Cosette and Toussaint had installed himself in the Rue de l’Homme Arme. A change awaited him there.

Cosette had not quitted the Rue Plumet without making an effort at resistance. For the first time since they had lived side by side, Cosette’s will and the will of Jean Valjean had proved to be distinct, and had been in opposition, at least, if they had not clashed. There had been objections on one side and inflexibility on the other. The abrupt advice: “Leave your house,” hurled at Jean Valjean by a stranger, had alarmed him to the extent of rendering him pèremptory. He thought that he had been traced and followed. Cosette had been obliged to give way.

Both had arrived in the Rue de l’Homme Arme without opening their lips, and without uttering a word, each being absorbed in his own personal preoccupation; Jean Valjean so uneasy that he did not notice Cosette’s sadness, Cosette so sad that she did not notice Jean Valjean’s uneasiness.

Jean Valjean had taken Toussaint with him, a thing which he had never done in his previous absences. He perceived the possibility of not returning to the Rue Plumet, and he could neither leave Toussaint behind nor confide his secret to her. Besides, he felt that she was devoted and trustworthy. Treachery between master and servant begins in curiosity. Now Toussaint, as though she had been destined to be Jean Valjean’s servant, was not curious. She stammered in her peasant dialect of Barneville: “I am made so; I do my work; the rest is no affair of mine.”

In this departure from the Rue Plumet, which had been almost a flight, Jean Valjean had carried away nothing but the little embalmed valise, baptized by Cosette “the inseparable.” Full trunks would have required porters, and porters are witnesses. A fiacre had been summoned to the door on the Rue de Babylone, and they had taken their departure.

It was with difficulty that Toussaint had obtained permission to pack up a little linen and clothes and a few toilet articles. Cosette had taken only her portfolio and her blotting-book.

Jean Valjean, with a view to augmenting the solitude and the mystery of this departure, had arranged to quit the pavilion of the Rue Plumet only at dusk, which had allowed Cosette time to write her note to Marius. They had arrived in the Rue de l’Homme Arme after night had fully fallen.

They had gone to bed in silence.

The lodgings in the Rue de l’Homme Arme were situated on a back court, on the second floor, and were composed of two sleeping-rooms, a dining-room and a kitchen adjoining the dining-room, with a garret where there was a folding-bed, and which fell to Toussaint’s share. The dining-room was an antechamber as well, and separated the two bedrooms. The apartment was provided with all necessary utensils.

People re-acquire confidence as foolishly as they lose it; human nature is so constituted. Hardly had Jean Valjean reached the Rue de l’Homme Arme when his anxiety was lightened and by degrees dissipated. There are soothing spots which act in some sort mechanically on the mind. An obscure street, peaceable inhabitants. Jean Valjean experienced an indescribable contagion of tranquillity in that alley of ancient Paris, which is so narrow that it is barred against carriages by a transverse beam placed on two posts, which is deaf and dumb in the midst of the clamorous city, dimly lighted at mid-day, and is, so to speak, incapable of emotions between two rows of lofty houses centuries old, which hold their peace like ancients as they are. There was a touch of stagnant oblivion in that street. Jean Valjean drew his breath once more there. How could he be found there?

His first care was to place the inseparable beside him.

He slept well. Night brings wisdom; we may add, night soothes. On the following morning he awoke in a mood that was almost gay. He thought the dining-room charming, though it was hideous, furnished with an old round table, a long sideboard surmounted by a slanting mirror, a dilapidated arm-chair, and several plain chairs which were encumbered with Toussaint’s packages. In one of these packages Jean Valjean’s uniform of a National Guard was visible through a rent.

As for Cosette, she had had Toussaint take some broth to her room, and did not make her appearance until evening.

About five o’clock, Toussaint, who was going and coming and busying herself with the tiny establishment, set on the table a cold chicken, which Cosette, out of deference to her father, consented to glance at.

That done, Cosette, under the pretext of an obstinate sick headache, had bade Jean Valjean good night and had shut herself up in her chamber. Jean Valjean had eaten a wing of the chicken with a good appetite, and with his elbows on the table, having gradually recovered his serenity, had regained possession of his sense of security.

While he was discussing this modest dinner, he had, twice or thrice, noticed in a confused way, Toussaint’s stammering words as she said to him: “Monsieur, there is something going on, they are fighting in Paris.” But absorbed in a throng of inward calculations, he had paid no heed to it. To tell the truth, he had not heard her. He rose and began to pace from the door to the window and from the window to the door, growing ever more serene.

With this calm, Cosette, his sole anxiety, recurred to his thoughts. Not that he was troubled by this headache, a little nervous crisis, a young girl’s fit of sulks, the cloud of a moment, there would be nothing left of it in a day or two; but he meditated on the future, and, as was his habit, he thought of it with pleasure. After all, he saw no obstacle to their happy life resuming its course. At certain hours, everything seems impossible, at others everything appears easy; Jean Valjean was in the midst of one of these good hours. They generally succeed the bad ones, as day follows night, by virtue of that law of succession and of contrast which lies at the very foundation of nature, and which superficial minds call antithesis. In this peaceful street where he had taken refuge, Jean Valjean got rid of all that had been troubling him for some time past. This very fact, that he had seen many shadows, made him begin to perceive a little azure. To have quitted the Rue Plumet without complications or incidents was one good step already accomplished. Perhaps it would be wise to go abroad, if only for a few months, and to set out for London. Well, they would go. What difference did it make to him whether he was in France or in England, provided he had

Cosette beside him? Cosette was his nation. Cosette sufficed for his happiness; the idea that he, perhaps, did not suffice for Cosette's happiness, that idea which had formerly been the cause of his fever and sleeplessness, did not even present itself to his mind. He was in a state of collapse from all his past sufferings, and he was fully entered on optimism. Cosette was by his side, she seemed to be his; an optical illusion which every one has experienced. He arranged in his own mind, with all sorts of felicitous devices, his departure for England with Cosette, and he beheld his felicity reconstituted wherever he pleased, in the perspective of his revery.

As he paced to and fro with long strides, his glance suddenly encountered something strange.

In the inclined mirror facing him which surmounted the sideboard, he saw the four lines which follow: —

"My dearest, alas! my father insists on our setting out immediately. We shall be this evening in the Rue de l'Homme Arme, No. 7. In a week we shall be in England. COSETTE. June 4th."

Jean Valjean halted, perfectly haggard.

Cosette on her arrival had placed her blotting-book on the sideboard in front of the mirror, and, utterly absorbed in her agony of grief, had forgotten it and left it there, without even observing that she had left it wide open, and open at precisely the page on which she had laid to dry the four lines which she had penned, and which she had given in charge of the young workman in the Rue Plumet. The writing had been printed off on the blotter.

The mirror reflected the writing.

The result was, what is called in geometry, the symmetrical image; so that the writing, reversed on the blotter, was righted in the mirror and presented its natural appearance; and Jean Valjean had beneath his eyes the letter written by Cosette to Marius on the preceding evening.

It was simple and withering.

Jean Valjean stepped up to the mirror. He read the four lines again, but he did not believe them. They produced on him the effect of appearing in a flash of lightning. It was a hallucination, it was impossible. It was not so.

Little by little, his perceptions became more precise; he looked at Cosette's blotting-book, and the consciousness of the reality returned to him. He caught up the blotter and said: "It comes from there." He feverishly examined the four lines imprinted on the blotter, the reversal of the letters converted into an odd scrawl, and he saw no sense in it. Then he said to himself: “But this signifies nothing; there is nothing written here.” And he drew a long breath with inexpressible relief. Who has not experienced those foolish joys in horrible instants? The soul does not surrender to despair until it has exhausted all illusions.

He held the blotter in his hand and contemplated it in stupid delight, almost ready to laugh at the hallucination of which he had been the dupe. All at once his eyes fell upon the mirror again, and again he beheld the vision. There were the four lines outlined with inexorable clearness. This time it was no mirage. The recurrence of a vision is a reality; it was palpable, it was the writing restored in the mirror. He understood.

Jean Valjean tottered, dropped the blotter, and fell into the old arm-chair beside the buffet, with drooping head, and glassy eyes, in utter bewilderment. He told himself that it was plain, that the light of the world had been eclipsed forever, and that Cosette had written that to some one. Then he heard his soul, which had become terrible once more, give vent to a dull roar in the gloom. Try then the effect of taking from the lion the dog which he has in his cage!

Strange and sad to say, at that very moment, Marius had not yet received Cosette’s letter; chance had treacherously carried it to Jean Valjean before delivering it to Marius. Up to that day, Jean Valjean had not been vanquished by trial. He had been subjected to fearful proofs; no violence of bad fortune had been spared him; the ferocity of fate, armed with all vindictiveness and all social scorn, had taken him for her prey and had raged against him. He had accepted every extremity when it had been necessary; he had sacrificed his inviolability as a reformed man, had yielded up his liberty, risked his head, lost everything, suffered everything, and he had remained disinterested and stoical to such a point that he might have been thought to be absent from himself like a martyr. His conscience inured to every assault of destiny, might have appeared to be forever impregnable. Well, any one who had beheld his spiritual self would have been obliged to concede that it weakened at that moment. It was because, of all the tortures which he had undergone in the course of this long inquisition to which destiny had doomed him, this was the most terrible. Never had such pincers seized him hitherto. He felt the mysterious stirring of all his latent sensibilities. He felt the plucking at the strange chord. Alas! the supreme trial, let us say rather, the only trial, is the loss of the beloved being.

Poor old Jean Valjean certainly did not love Cosette otherwise than as a father; but we have already remarked, above, that into this paternity the widowhood of his life had introduced all the shades of love; he loved Cosette as his daughter, and he loved her as his mother, and he loved her as his sister; and, as he had never had either a woman to love or a wife, as nature is a creditor who accepts no protest, that sentiment also, the most impossible to lose, was mingled with the rest, vague, ignorant, pure with the purity of blindness, unconscious, celestial, angelic, divine; less like a sentiment than like an instinct, less like an instinct than like an imperceptible and invisible but real attraction; and love, properly speaking, was, in his immense tenderness for Cosette, like the thread of gold in the mountain, concealed and virgin.

Let the reader recall the situation of heart which we have already indicated. No marriage was possible between them; not even that of souls; and yet, it is certain that their destinies were wedded. With the exception of Cosette, that is to say, with the exception of a childhood, Jean Valjean had never, in the whole of his long life, known anything of that which may be loved. The passions and loves which succeed each other had not produced in him those successive green growths, tender green or dark green, which can be seen in foliage which passes through the winter and in men who pass fifty. In short, and we have insisted on it more than once, all this interior fusion, all this whole, of which the sum total was a lofty virtue, ended in rendering Jean Valjean a father to Cosette. A strange father, forged from the grandfather, the son, the brother, and the husband, that existed in Jean Valjean; a father in whom there was included even a mother; a father who loved Cosette and adored her, and who held that child as his light, his home, his family, his country, his paradise.

Thus when he saw that the end had absolutely come, that she was escaping from him, that she was slipping from his hands, that she was gliding from him, like a cloud, like water, when he had before his eyes this crushing proof: “another is the goal of her heart, another is the wish of her life; there is a dearest one, I am no longer anything but her father, I no longer exist”; when he could no longer doubt, when he said to himself: “She is going away from me!” the grief which he felt surpassed the bounds of possibility. To have done all that he had done for the purpose of ending like this! And the very idea of being nothing! Then, as we have just said, a quiver of revolt ran through him from head to foot. He felt, even in the very roots of his hair, the immense reawakening of egotism, and the *I* in this man's abyss howled.

There is such a thing as the sudden giving way of the inward subsoil. A despairing certainty does not make its way into a man without thrusting aside and breaking certain profound elements which, in some cases, are the very man himself. Grief, when it attains this shape, is a headlong flight of all the forces of the conscience. These are fatal crises. Few among us emerge from them still like ourselves and firm in duty. When the limit of endurance is overstepped, the most imperturbable virtue is disconcerted. Jean Valjean took the blotter again, and convinced himself afresh; he remained bowed and as though petrified and with staring eyes, over those four unobjectionable lines; and there arose within him such a cloud that one might have thought that everything in this soul was crumbling away.

He examined this revelation, athwart the exaggerations of revery, with an apparent and terrifying calmness, for it is a fearful thing when a man's calmness reaches the coldness of the statue.

He measured the terrible step which his destiny had taken without his having a suspicion of the fact; he recalled his fears of the preceding summer, so foolishly dissipated; he recognized the precipice, it was still the same; only, Jean Valjean was no longer on the brink, he was at the bottom of it.

The unprecedented and heart-rending thing about it was that he had fallen without perceiving it. All the light of his life had departed, while he still fancied that he beheld the sun.

His instinct did not hesitate. He put together certain circumstances, certain dates, certain blushes and certain pallors on Cosette's part, and he said to himself: "It is he."

The divination of despair is a sort of mysterious bow which never misses its aim. He struck Marius with his first conjecture. He did not know the name, but he found the man instantly. He distinctly perceived, in the background of the implacable conjuration of his memories, the unknown prowler of the Luxembourg, that wretched seeker of love adventures, that idler of romance, that idiot, that coward, for it is cowardly to come and make eyes at young girls who have beside them a father who loves them.

After he had thoroughly verified the fact that this young man was at the bottom of this situation, and that everything proceeded from that quarter, he, Jean Valjean, the regenerated man, the man who had so labored over his soul, the man who had made so many efforts to resolve all life, all misery, and all unhappiness into love, looked into his own breast and there beheld a spectre, Hate.

Great griefs contain something of dejection. They discourage one with existence. The man into whom they enter feels something within him withdraw from him. In his youth, their visits are lugubrious; later on they are sinister. Alas, if despair is a fearful thing when the blood is hot, when the hair is black, when the head is erect on the body like the flame on the torch, when the roll of destiny still retains its full thickness, when the heart, full of desirable love, still possesses beats which can be returned to it, when one has time for redress, when all women and all smiles and all the future and all the horizon are before one, when the force of life is complete, what is it in old age, when the years hasten on, growing ever paler, to that twilight hour when one begins to behold the stars of the tomb?

While he was meditating, Toussaint entered. Jean Valjean rose and asked her: —

“In what quarter is it? Do you know?”

Toussaint was struck dumb, and could only answer him: —

“What is it, sir?”

Jean Valjean began again: “Did you not tell me that just now that there is fighting going on?”

“Ah! yes, sir,” replied Toussaint. “It is in the direction of Saint-Merry.”

There is a mechanical movement which comes to us, unconsciously, from the most profound depths of our thought. It was, no doubt, under the impulse of a movement of this sort, and of which he was hardly conscious, that Jean Valjean, five minutes later, found himself in the street.

Bareheaded, he sat upon the stone post at the door of his house. He seemed to be listening.

Night had come.

CHAPTER II — THE STREET URCHIN AN ENEMY OF LIGHT

How long did he remain thus? What was the ebb and flow of this tragic meditation? Did he straighten up? Did he remain bowed? Had he been bent to breaking? Could he still rise and regain his footing in his conscience upon something solid? He probably would not have been able to tell himself.

The street was deserted. A few uneasy bourgeois, who were rapidly returning home, hardly saw him. Each one for himself in times of peril. The lamp-lighter came as usual to light the lantern which was situated precisely opposite the door of No. 7, and then went away. Jean Valjean would not have appeared like a living man to any one who had examined him in that shadow. He sat there on the post of his door, motionless as a form of ice. There is congealment in despair. The alarm bells and a vague and stormy uproar were audible. In the midst of all these convulsions of the bell mingled with the revolt, the clock of Saint-Paul struck eleven, gravely and without haste; for the tocsin is man; the hour is God. The passage of the hour produced no effect on Jean Valjean; Jean Valjean did not stir. Still, at about that moment, a brusque report burst forth in the direction of the Halles, a second yet more violent followed; it was probably that attack on the barricade in the Rue de la Chanvrerie which we have just seen repulsed by Marius. At this double discharge, whose fury seemed augmented by the stupor of the night, Jean Valjean started; he rose, turning towards the quarter whence the noise proceeded; then he fell back upon the post again, folded his arms, and his head slowly sank on his bosom again.

He resumed his gloomy dialogue with himself.

All at once, he raised his eyes; some one was walking in the street, he heard steps near him. He looked, and by the light of the lanterns, in the direction of the street which ran into the Rue-aux-Archives, he perceived a young, livid, and beaming face.

Gavroche had just arrived in the Rue l’Homme Arme.

Gavroche was staring into the air, apparently in search of something. He saw Jean Valjean perfectly well but he took no notice of him.

Gavroche after staring into the air, stared below; he raised himself on tiptoe, and felt of the doors and windows of the ground floor; they were all shut, bolted, and padlocked. After having authenticated the fronts of five or six barricaded houses in this manner, the urchin shrugged his shoulders, and took himself to task in these terms: —

“Pardi!”

Then he began to stare into the air again.

Jean Valjean, who, an instant previously, in his then state of mind, would not have spoken to or even answered any one, felt irresistibly impelled to accost that child.

“What is the matter with you, my little fellow?” he said.

“The matter with me is that I am hungry,” replied Gavroche frankly. And he added: “Little fellow yourself.”

Jean Valjean fumbled in his fob and pulled out a five-franc piece.

But Gavroche, who was of the wagtail species, and who skipped vivaciously from one gesture to another, had just picked up a stone. He had caught sight of the lantern.

“See here,” said he, “you still have your lanterns here. You are disobeying the regulations, my friend. This is disorderly. Smash that for me.”

And he flung the stone at the lantern, whose broken glass fell with such a clatter that the bourgeois in hiding behind their curtains in the opposite house cried: “There is ‘Ninety-three’ come again.”

The lantern oscillated violently, and went out. The street had suddenly become black.

“That’s right, old street,” ejaculated Gavroche, “put on your night-cap.”

And turning to Jean Valjean: —

“What do you call that gigantic monument that you have there at the end of the street? It’s the Archives, isn’t it? I must crumble up those big stupids of pillars a bit and make a nice barricade out of them.”

Jean Valjean stepped up to Gavroche.

“Poor creature,” he said in a low tone, and speaking to himself, “he is hungry.”

And he laid the hundred-sou piece in his hand.

Gavroche raised his face, astonished at the size of this sou; he stared at it in the darkness, and the whiteness of the big sou dazzled him. He knew five-franc pieces by hearsay; their reputation was agreeable to him; he was delighted to see one close to. He said: —

"Let us contemplate the tiger."

He gazed at it for several minutes in ecstasy; then, turning to Jean Valjean, he held out the coin to him, and said majestically to him: —

"Bourgeois, I prefer to smash lanterns. Take back your ferocious beast. You can't bribe me. That has got five claws; but it doesn't scratch me."

"Have you a mother?" asked Jean Valjean.

Gavroche replied: —

"More than you have, perhaps."

"Well," returned Jean Valjean, "keep the money for your mother!"

Gavroche was touched. Moreover, he had just noticed that the man who was addressing him had no hat, and this inspired him with confidence.

"Truly," said he, "so it wasn't to keep me from breaking the lanterns?"

"Break whatever you please."

"You're a fine man," said Gavroche.

And he put the five-franc piece into one of his pockets.

His confidence having increased, he added: —

"Do you belong in this street?"

"Yes, why?"

"Can you tell me where No. 7 is?"

"What do you want with No. 7?"

Here the child paused, he feared that he had said too much; he thrust his nails energetically into his hair and contented himself with replying: —

"Ah! Here it is."

An idea flashed through Jean Valjean's mind. Anguish does have these gleams. He said to the lad: —

"Are you the person who is bringing a letter that I am expecting?"

"You?" said Gavroche. "You are not a woman."

"The letter is for Mademoiselle Cosette, is it not?"

"Cosette," muttered Gavroche. "Yes, I believe that is the queer name."

"Well," resumed Jean Valjean, "I am the person to whom you are to deliver the letter. Give it here."

"In that case, you must know that I was sent from the barricade."

"Of course," said Jean Valjean.

Gavroche engulfed his hand in another of his pockets and drew out a paper folded in four.

Then he made the military salute.

“Respect for despatches,” said he. “It comes from the Provisional Government.”

“Give it to me,” said Jean Valjean.

Gavroche held the paper elevated above his head.

“Don’t go and fancy it’s a love letter. It is for a woman, but it’s for the people. We men fight and we respect the fair sex. We are not as they are in fine society, where there are lions who send chickens to camels.”

“Give it to me.”

“After all,” continued Gavroche, “you have the air of an honest man.”

“Give it to me quick.”

“Catch hold of it.”

And he handed the paper to Jean Valjean.

“And make haste, Monsieur What’s-your-name, for Mamselle Cosette is waiting.”

Gavroche was satisfied with himself for having produced this remark.

Jean Valjean began again: —

“Is it to Saint-Merry that the answer is to be sent?”

“There you are making some of those bits of pastry vulgarly called brioches [blunders]. This letter comes from the barricade of the Rue de la Chanvrerie, and I’m going back there. Good evening, citizen.”

That said, Gavroche took himself off, or, to describe it more exactly, fluttered away in the direction whence he had come with a flight like that of an escaped bird. He plunged back into the gloom as though he made a hole in it, with the rigid rapidity of a projectile; the alley of l’Homme Arme became silent and solitary once more; in a twinkling, that strange child, who had about him something of the shadow and of the dream, had buried himself in the mists of the rows of black houses, and was lost there, like smoke in the dark; and one might have thought that he had dissipated and vanished, had there not taken place, a few minutes after his disappearance, a startling shiver of glass, and had not the magnificent crash of a lantern rattling down on the pavement once more abruptly awakened the indignant bourgeois. It was Gavroche upon his way through the Rue du Chaume.

CHAPTER III — WHILE COSETTE AND TOUSSAINT ARE ASLEEP

Jean Valjean went into the house with Marius' letter.

He groped his way up the stairs, as pleased with the darkness as an owl who grips his prey, opened and shut his door softly, listened to see whether he could hear any noise, — made sure that, to all appearances, Cosette and Toussaint were asleep, and plunged three or four matches into the bottle of the Fumade lighter before he could evoke a spark, so greatly did his hand tremble. What he had just done smacked of theft. At last the candle was lighted; he leaned his elbows on the table, unfolded the paper, and read.

In violent emotions, one does not read, one flings to the earth, so to speak, the paper which one holds, one clutches it like a victim, one crushes it, one digs into it the nails of one's wrath, or of one's joy; one hastens to the end, one leaps to the beginning; attention is at fever heat; it takes up in the gross, as it were, the essential points; it seizes on one point, and the rest disappears. In Marius' note to Cosette, Jean Valjean saw only these words: —

"I die. When thou readest this, my soul will be near thee."

In the presence of these two lines, he was horribly dazzled; he remained for a moment, crushed, as it were, by the change of emotion which was taking place within him, he stared at Marius' note with a sort of intoxicated amazement, he had before his eyes that splendor, the death of a hated individual.

He uttered a frightful cry of inward joy. So it was all over. The catastrophe had arrived sooner than he had dared to hope. The being who obstructed his destiny was disappearing. That man had taken himself off of his own accord, freely, willingly. This man was going to his death, and he, Jean Valjean, had had no hand in the matter, and it was through no fault of his. Perhaps, even, he is already dead. Here his fever entered into calculations. No, he is not dead yet. The letter had evidently been intended for Cosette to read on the following morning; after the two discharges that were heard between eleven o'clock and midnight, nothing more has taken place; the barricade will not be attacked seriously until daybreak; but that makes no difference, from the moment when "that man" is concerned in this war, he is lost; he is caught in the gearing. Jean Valjean felt himself delivered. So he was about to find himself alone with Cosette once more. The rivalry would cease; the future was beginning again. He had but to keep this note in his pocket. Cosette would never know what had become of that man. All that there requires to be done is to let things take their own course. This man cannot escape. If he is not already dead, it is certain that he is about to die. What good fortune!

Having said all this to himself, he became gloomy.

Then he went down stairs and woke up the porter.

About an hour later, Jean Valjean went out in the complete costume of a National Guard, and with his arms. The porter had easily found in the neighborhood the wherewithal to complete his equipment. He had a loaded gun and a cartridge-box filled with cartridges.

He strode off in the direction of the markets.

CHAPTER IV — GAVROCHE’S EXCESS OF ZEAL

In the meantime, Gavroche had had an adventure.

Gavroche, after having conscientiously stoned the lantern in the Rue du Chaume, entered the Rue des Vielles-Haudriettes, and not seeing “even a cat” there, he thought the opportunity a good one to strike up all the song of which he was capable. His march, far from being retarded by his singing, was accelerated by it. He began to sow along the sleeping or terrified houses these incendiary couplets: —

“L’oiseau médit dans les charmilles,
Et prétend qu’hier Atala
Avec un Russe s’en alla.
    Où vont les belles filles,
        Lon la.

“Mon ami Pierrot, tu babilles,
Parce que l’autre jour Mila
Cogna sa vitre et m’appela,
    Où vont les belles filles,
        Lon la.

“Les drôlesses sont fort gentilles,
Leur poison qui m’ensorcela
Griserait Monsieur Orfila.
    Où vont les belles filles,
        Lon la.

“J’aime l’amour et les bisbilles,
J’aime Agnès, j’aime Pamela,
Lise en m’allumant se brûla.
    Où vont les belles filles,
        Lon la.

“Jadis, quand je vis les mantilles

De Suzette et de Zeila,
Mon âme à leurs plis se mêla,
  Où vont les belles filles,
    Lon la.

“Amour, quand dans l’ombre où tu brilles,
Tu coiffes de roses Lola,
Je me damnerais pour cela.
  Où vont les belles filles,
    Lon la.

“Jeanne à ton miroir tu t’habilles!
Mon cœur un beau jour s’envola.
Je crois que c’est Jeanne qui l’a.
  Où vont les belles filles,
    Lon la.

“Le soir, en sortant des quadrilles,
Je montre aux étoiles Stella,
Et je leur dis: ‘Regardez-la.’
  Où vont les belles filles,
    Lon la.”

Gavroche, as he sang, was lavish of his pantomime. Gesture is the strong point of the refrain. His face, an inexhaustible repertory of masks, produced grimaces more convulsing and more fantastic than the rents of a cloth torn in a high gale. Unfortunately, as he was alone, and as it was night, this was neither seen nor even visible. Such wastes of riches do occur.

All at once, he stopped short.

“Let us interrupt the romance,” said he.

His feline eye had just descried, in the recess of a carriage door, what is called in painting, an ensemble, that is to say, a person and a thing; the thing was a hand-cart, the person was a man from Auvergene who was sleeping therein.

The shafts of the cart rested on the pavement, and the Auvergnat’s head was supported against the front of the cart. His body was coiled up on this inclined plane and his feet touched the ground.

Gavroche, with his experience of the things of this world, recognized a drunken man. He was some corner errand-man who had drunk too much and was sleeping too much.

"There now," thought Gavroche, "that's what the summer nights are good for. We'll take the cart for the Republic, and leave the Auvergnat for the Monarchy."

His mind had just been illuminated by this flash of light: —

"How bully that cart would look on our barricade!"

The Auvergnat was snoring.

Gavroche gently tugged at the cart from behind, and at the Auvergnat from the front, that is to say, by the feet, and at the expiration of another minute the imperturbable Auvergnat was reposing flat on the pavement.

The cart was free.

Gavroche, habituated to facing the unexpected in all quarters, had everything about him. He fumbled in one of his pockets, and pulled from it a scrap of paper and a bit of red pencil filched from some carpenter.

He wrote: —

"French Republic."

"Received thy cart."

And he signed it: "GAVROCHE."

That done, he put the paper in the pocket of the still snoring Auvergnat's velvet vest, seized the cart shafts in both hands, and set off in the direction of the Halles, pushing the cart before him at a hard gallop with a glorious and triumphant uproar.

This was perilous. There was a post at the Royal Printing Establishment. Gavroche did not think of this. This post was occupied by the National Guards of the suburbs. The squad began to wake up, and heads were raised from camp beds. Two street lanterns broken in succession, that ditty sung at the top of the lungs. This was a great deal for those cowardly streets, which desire to go to sleep at sunset, and which put the extinguisher on their candles at such an early hour. For the last hour, that boy had been creating an uproar in that peaceable arrondissement, the uproar of a fly in a bottle. The sergeant of the banlieue lent an ear. He waited. He was a prudent man.

The mad rattle of the cart, filled to overflowing the possible measure of waiting, and decided the sergeant to make a reconnaisance.

“There’s a whole band of them there!” said he, “let us proceed gently.”

It was clear that the hydra of anarchy had emerged from its box and that it was stalking abroad through the quarter.

And the sergeant ventured out of the post with cautious tread.

All at once, Gavroche, pushing his cart in front of him, and at the very moment when he was about to turn into the Rue des Vielles-Haudriettes, found himself face to face with a uniform, a shako, a plume, and a gun.

For the second time, he stopped short.

“Hullo,” said he, “it’s him. Good day, public order.”

Gavroche’s amazement was always brief and speedily thawed.

“Where are you going, you rascal?” shouted the sergeant.

“Citizen,” retorted Gavroche, “I haven’t called you ‘bourgeois’ yet. Why do you insult me?”

“Where are you going, you rogue?”

“Monsieur,” retorted Gavroche, “perhaps you were a man of wit yesterday, but you have degenerated this morning.”

“I ask you where are you going, you villain?”

Gavroche replied: —

“You speak prettily. Really, no one would suppose you as old as you are. You ought to sell all your hair at a hundred francs apiece. That would yield you five hundred francs.”

“Where are you going? Where are you going? Where are you going, bandit?”

Gavroche retorted again: —

“What villainous words! You must wipe your mouth better the first time that they give you suck.”

The sergeant lowered his bayonet.

“Will you tell me where you are going, you wretch?”

“General,” said Gavroche “I’m on my way to look for a doctor for my wife who is in labor.”

“To arms!” shouted the sergeant.

The master-stroke of strong men consists in saving themselves by the very means that have ruined them; Gavroche took in the whole situation at a glance. It was the cart which had told against him, it was the cart’s place to protect him.

At the moment when the sergeant was on the point of making his descent on Gavroche, the cart, converted into a projectile and launched with all the latter’s might, rolled down upon him furiously, and the sergeant, struck full in the stomach, tumbled over backwards into the gutter while his gun went off in the air.

The men of the post had rushed out pell-mell at the sergeant’s shout; the shot brought on a general random discharge, after which they reloaded their weapons and began again.

This blind-man’s-buff musketry lasted for a quarter of an hour and killed several panes of glass.

In the meanwhile, Gavroche, who had retraced his steps at full speed, halted five or six streets distant and seated himself, panting, on the stone post which forms the corner of the Enfants-Rouges.

He listened.

After panting for a few minutes, he turned in the direction where the fusillade was raging, lifted his left hand to a level with his nose and thrust it forward three times, as he slapped the back of his head with his right hand; an imperious gesture in which Parisian street-urchindom has condensed French irony, and which is evidently efficacious, since it has already lasted half a century.

This gayety was troubled by one bitter reflection.

“Yes,” said he, “I’m splitting with laughter, I’m twisting with delight, I abound in joy, but I’m losing my way, I shall have to take a roundabout way. If I only reach the barricade in season!”

Thereupon he set out again on a run.

And as he ran: —

“Ah, by the way, where was I?” said he.

And he resumed his ditty, as he plunged rapidly through the streets, and this is what died away in the gloom: —

“Mais il reste encore des bastilles,
Et je vais mettre le hola
Dans l’ordre public que voilà.
  Où vont les belles filles,
    Lon la.

“Quelqu’un veut-il jouer aux quilles?
Tout l’ancien monde s’écroula
Quand la grosse boule roula.
  Où vont les belles filles,

Lon la.

“Vieux bon peuple, à coups de béquilles,
Cassons ce Louvre où s’étala
La monarchie en falbala.
Où vont les belles filles,
Lon la.

“Nous en avons forcé les grilles,
Le roi Charles-Dix ce jour-là,
Tenait mal et se décolla.
Où vont les belles filles,
Lon la.”

The post’s recourse to arms was not without result. The cart was conquered, the drunken man was taken prisoner. The first was put in the pound, the second was later on somewhat harassed before the councils of war as an accomplice. The public ministry of the day proved its indefatigable zeal in the defence of society, in this instance.

Gavroche’s adventure, which has lingered as a tradition in the quarters of the Temple, is one of the most terrible souvenirs of the elderly bourgeois of the Marais, and is entitled in their memories: “The nocturnal attack by the post of the Royal Printing Establishment.”

[THE END OF VOLUME IV. “SAINT DENIS”]

VOLUME V — JEAN VALJEAN

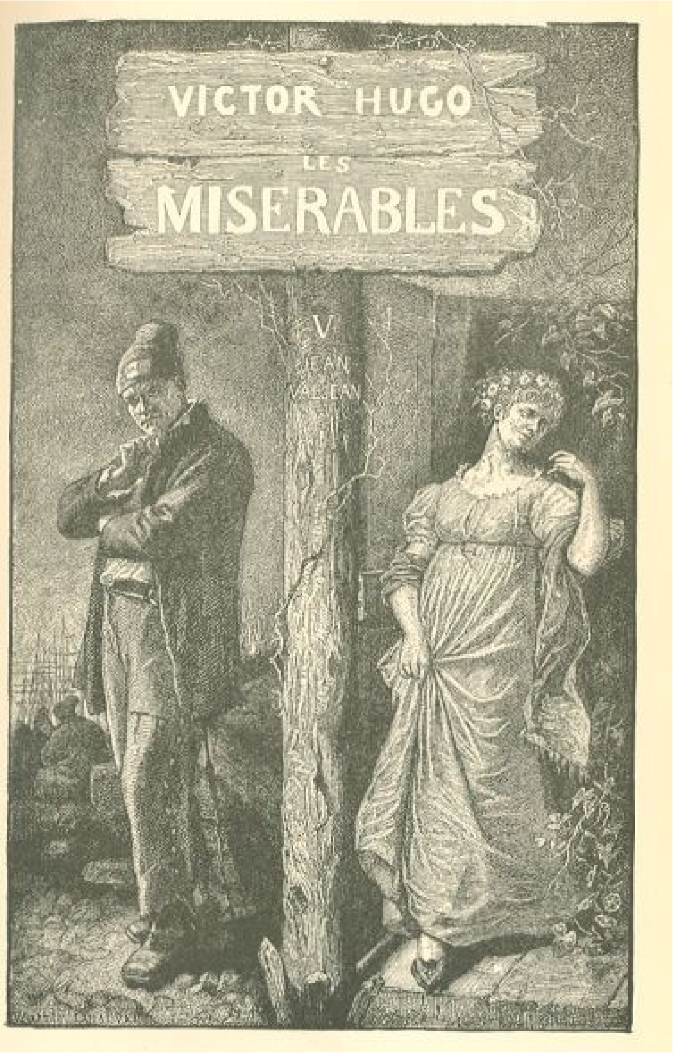
VICTOR HUGO
LES
MISERABLES
V
JEAN
VALJEAN

LES MISÉRABLES

BY

VICTOR HUGO

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH

BY

ISABEL F. HAPGOOD

IN FIVE VOLUMES

VOL. V.

JEAN VALJEAN

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BOOK FIRST. — THE WAR BETWEEN FOUR WALLS

CHAPTER I — THE CHARYBDIS OF THE FAUBOURG SAINT ANTOINE AND THE SCYLLA OF THE FAUBOURG DU TEMPLE

The two most memorable barricades which the observer of social maladies can name do not belong to the period in which the action of this work is laid. These two barricades, both of them symbols, under two different aspects, of a redoubtable situation, sprang from the earth at the time of the fatal insurrection of June, 1848, the greatest war of the streets that history has ever beheld.

It sometimes happens that, even contrary to principles, even contrary to liberty, equality, and fraternity, even contrary to the universal vote, even contrary to the government, by all for all, from the depths of its anguish, of its discouragements and its destitutions, of its fevers, of its distresses, of its miasmas, of its ignorances, of its darkness, that great and despairing body, the rabble, protests against, and that the populace wages battle against, the people.

Beggars attack the common right; the ochlocracy rises against demos.

These are melancholy days; for there is always a certain amount of night even in this madness, there is suicide in this duel, and those words which are intended to be insults — beggars, canaille, ochlocracy, populace — exhibit, alas! rather the fault of those who reign than the fault of those who suffer; rather the fault of the privileged than the fault of the disinherited.

For our own part, we never pronounce those words without pain and without respect, for when philosophy fathoms the facts to which they correspond, it often finds many a grandeur beside these miseries. Athens was an ochlocracy; the beggars were the making of Holland; the populace saved Rome more than once; and the rabble followed Jesus Christ.

There is no thinker who has not at times contemplated the magnificences of the lower classes.

It was of this rabble that Saint Jerome was thinking, no doubt, and of all these poor people and all these vagabonds and all these miserable people whence sprang the apostles and the martyrs, when he uttered this mysterious saying: “Fex urbis, lex orbis,” — the dregs of the city, the law of the earth.

The exasperations of this crowd which suffers and bleeds, its violences contrary to all sense, directed against the principles which are its life, its masterful deeds against the right, are its popular coups d'etat and should be repressed. The man of probity sacrifices himself, and out of his very love for this crowd, he combats it. But how excusable he feels it even while holding out against it! How he venerates it even while resisting it! This is one of those rare moments when, while doing that which it is one's duty to do, one feels something which disconcerts one, and which would dissuade one from proceeding further; one persists, it is necessary, but conscience, though satisfied, is sad, and the accomplishment of duty is complicated with a pain at the heart.

June, 1848, let us hasten to say, was an exceptional fact, and almost impossible of classification, in the philosophy of history. All the words which we have just uttered, must be discarded, when it becomes a question of this extraordinary revolt, in which one feels the holy anxiety of toil claiming its rights. It was necessary to combat it, and this was a duty, for it attacked the republic. But what was June, 1848, at bottom? A revolt of the people against itself.

Where the subject is not lost sight of, there is no digression; may we, then, be permitted to arrest the reader's attention for a moment on the two absolutely unique barricades of which we have just spoken and which characterized this insurrection.

One blocked the entrance to the Faubourg Saint Antoine; the other defended the approach to the Faubourg du Temple; those before whom these two fearful masterpieces of civil war reared themselves beneath the brilliant blue sky of June, will never forget them.

The Saint-Antoine barricade was tremendous; it was three stories high, and seven hundred feet wide. It barred the vast opening of the faubourg, that is to say, three streets, from angle to angle; ravined, jagged, cut up, divided, crenelated, with an immense rent, buttressed with piles that were bastions in themselves throwing out capes here and there, powerfully backed up by two great promontories of houses of the faubourg, it reared itself like a cyclopean dike at the end of the formidable place which had seen the 14th of July. Nineteen barricades were ranged, one behind the other, in the depths of the streets behind this principal barricade. At the very sight of it, one felt the agonizing suffering in the immense faubourg, which had reached that point of extremity when a distress may become a catastrophe.

Of what was that barricade made? Of the ruins of three six-story houses demolished expressly, said some. Of the prodigy of all wraths, said others. It wore the lamentable aspect of all constructions of hatred, ruin. It might be asked: Who built this? It might also be said: Who destroyed this? It was the improvisation of the ebullition. Hold! take this door! this grating! this penthouse! this chimney-piece! this broken brazier! this cracked pot! Give all! cast away all! Push this roll, dig, dismantle, overturn, ruin everything! It was the collaboration of the pavement, the block of stone, the beam, the bar of iron, the rag, the scrap, the broken pane, the unseated chair, the cabbage-stalk, the tatter, the rag, and the malediction. It was grand and it was petty. It was the abyss parodied on the public place by hubbub. The mass beside the atom; the strip of ruined wall and the broken bowl, — threatening fraternization of every sort of rubbish. Sisyphus had thrown his rock there and Job his potsherd. Terrible, in short. It was the acropolis of the barefooted. Overturned carts broke the uniformity of the slope; an immense dray was spread out there crossways, its axle pointing heavenward, and seemed a scar on that tumultuous facade; an omnibus hoisted gayly, by main force, to the very summit of the heap, as though the architects of this bit of savagery had wished to add a touch of the street urchin humor to their terror, presented its horseless, unharnessed pole to no one knows what horses of the air. This gigantic heap, the alluvium of the revolt, figured to the mind an Ossa on Pelion of all revolutions; ‘93 on ‘89, the 9th of Thermidor on the 10th of August, the 18th of Brumaire on the 11th of January, Vendemiaire on Prairial, 1848 on 1830. The situation deserved the trouble and this barricade was worthy to figure on the very spot whence the Bastille had disappeared. If the ocean made dikes, it is thus that it would build. The fury of the flood was stamped upon this shapeless mass. What flood? The crowd. One thought one beheld hubbub petrified. One thought one heard humming above this barricade as though there had been over their hive, enormous, dark bees of violent progress. Was it a thicket? Was it a bacchanalia? Was it a fortress? Vertigo seemed to have constructed it with blows of its wings. There was something of the cess-pool in that redoubt and something Olympian in that confusion. One there beheld in a pell-mell full of despair, the rafters of roofs, bits of garret windows with their figured paper, window sashes with their glass planted there in the ruins awaiting the cannon, wrecks of chimneys, cupboards, tables, benches, howling topsyturveydom, and those thousand poverty-stricken things, the very refuse of the mendicant, which contain at the same time fury and nothingness. One would have said that it was the tatters of a people, rags of wood, of iron, of bronze, of stone, and that the Faubourg Saint Antoine had thrust it there at its door, with a colossal flourish of the broom making of its misery its barricade. Blocks resembling headsman's blocks, dislocated chains, pieces of woodwork with brackets having the form of gibbets, horizontal wheels projecting from the rubbish, amalgamated with this edifice of anarchy the sombre figure of the old tortures endured by the people. The barricade Saint Antoine converted everything into a weapon; everything that civil war could throw at the head of society proceeded thence; it was not combat, it was a paroxysm; the carbines which defended this redoubt, among which there were some blunderbusses, sent bits of earthenware bones, coat-buttons, even the casters from night-stands, dangerous projectiles on account of the brass. This barricade was furious; it hurled to the clouds an inexpressible clamor; at certain moments, when provoking the army, it was covered with throngs and tempest; a tumultuous crowd of flaming heads crowned it; a swarm filled it; it had a thorny crest of guns, of sabres, of cudgels, of axes, of pikes and of bayonets; a vast red flag flapped in the wind; shouts of command, songs of attack, the roll of drums, the sobs of women and bursts of gloomy laughter from the starving were to be heard there. It was huge and living, and, like the back of an electric beast, there proceeded from it little flashes of lightning. The spirit of revolution covered with its cloud this summit where rumbled that voice of the people which resembles the voice of God; a strange majesty was emitted by this titanic basket of rubbish. It was a heap of filth and it was Sinai.

As we have said previously, it attacked in the name of the revolution — what? The revolution. It — that barricade, chance, hazard, disorder, terror, misunderstanding, the unknown — had facing it the Constituent Assembly, the sovereignty of the people, universal suffrage, the nation, the republic; and it was the Carmagnole bidding defiance to the Marseillaise.

Immense but heroic defiance, for the old faubourg is a hero.

The faubourg and its redoubt lent each other assistance. The faubourg shouldered the redoubt, the redoubt took its stand under cover of the faubourg. The vast barricade spread out like a cliff against which the strategy of the African generals dashed itself. Its caverns, its excrescences, its warts, its gibbosities, grimaced, so to speak, and grinned beneath the smoke. The mitraille vanished in shapelessness; the bombs plunged into it; bullets only succeeded in making holes in it; what was the use of cannonading chaos? and the regiments, accustomed to the fiercest visions of war, gazed with uneasy eyes on that species of redoubt, a wild beast in its boar-like bristling and a mountain by its enormous size.

A quarter of a league away, from the corner of the Rue du Temple which debouches on the boulevard near the Chateaud'Eau, if one thrust one's head bodily beyond the point formed by the front of the Dallemagne shop, one perceived in the distance, beyond the canal, in the street which mounts the slopes of Belleville at the culminating point of the rise, a strange wall reaching to the second story of the house fronts, a sort of hyphen between the houses on the right and the houses on the left, as though the street had folded back on itself its loftiest wall in order to close itself abruptly. This wall was built of paving-stones. It was straight, correct, cold, perpendicular, levelled with the square, laid out by rule and line. Cement was lacking, of course, but, as in the case of certain Roman walls, without interfering with its rigid architecture. The entablature was mathematically parallel with the base. From distance to distance, one could distinguish on the gray surface, almost invisible loopholes which resembled black threads. These loopholes were separated from each other by equal spaces. The street was deserted as far as the eye could reach. All windows and doors were closed. In the background rose this barrier, which made a blind thoroughfare of the street, a motionless and tranquil wall; no one was visible, nothing was audible; not a cry, not a sound, not a breath. A sepulchre.

The dazzling sun of June inundated this terrible thing with light.

It was the barricade of the Faubourg of the Temple.

As soon as one arrived on the spot, and caught sight of it, it was impossible, even for the boldest, not to become thoughtful before this mysterious apparition. It was adjusted, jointed, imbricated, rectilinear, symmetrical and funereal. Science and gloom met there. One felt that the chief of this barricade was a geometrician or a spectre. One looked at it and spoke low.

From time to time, if some soldier, an officer or representative of the people, chanced to traverse the deserted highway, a faint, sharp whistle was heard, and the passer-by fell dead or wounded, or, if he escaped the bullet, sometimes a biscaien was seen to ensconce itself in some closed shutter, in the interstice between two blocks of stone, or in the plaster of a wall. For the men in the barricade had made themselves two small cannons out of two cast-iron lengths of gas-pipe, plugged up at one end with tow and fire-clay. There was no waste of useless powder. Nearly every shot told. There were corpses here and there, and pools of blood on the pavement. I remember a white butterfly which went and came in the street. Summer does not abdicate.

In the neighborhood, the spaces beneath the portes cocheres were encumbered with wounded.

One felt oneself aimed at by some person whom one did not see, and one understood that guns were levelled at the whole length of the street.

Massed behind the sort of sloping ridge which the vaulted canal forms at the entrance to the Faubourg du Temple, the soldiers of the attacking column, gravely and thoughtfully, watched this dismal redoubt, this immobility, this passivity, whence sprang death. Some crawled flat on their faces as far as the crest of the curve of the bridge, taking care that their shakos did not project beyond it.

The valiant Colonel Monteynard admired this barricade with a shudder. — “How that is built!” he said to a Representative. “Not one paving-stone projects beyond its neighbor. It is made of porcelain.” — At that moment, a bullet broke the cross on his breast, and he fell.

“The cowards!” people said. “Let them show themselves. Let us see them! They dare not! They are hiding!”

The barricade of the Faubourg du Temple, defended by eighty men, attacked by ten thousand, held out for three days. On the fourth, they did as at Zaatcha, as at Constantine, they pierced the houses, they came over the roofs, the barricade was taken. Not one of the eighty cowards thought of flight, all were killed there with the exception of the leader, Barthelemy, of whom we shall speak presently.

The Saint-Antoine barricade was the tumult of thunders; the barricade of the Temple was silence. The difference between these two redoubts was the difference between the formidable and the sinister. One seemed a maw; the other a mask.

Admitting that the gigantic and gloomy insurrection of June was composed of a wrath and of an enigma, one divined in the first barricade the dragon, and behind the second the sphinx.

These two fortresses had been erected by two men named, the one, Cournet, the other, Barthelemy. Cournet made the Saint-Antoine barricade;

Barthelemy the barricade of the Temple. Each was the image of the man who had built it.

Cournet was a man of lofty stature; he had broad shoulders, a red face, a crushing fist, a bold heart, a loyal soul, a sincere and terrible eye. Intrepid, energetic, irascible, stormy; the most cordial of men, the most formidable of combatants. War, strife, conflict, were the very air he breathed and put him in a good humor. He had been an officer in the navy, and, from his gestures and his voice, one divined that he sprang from the ocean, and that he came from the tempest; he carried the hurricane on into battle. With the exception of the genius, there was in Cournet something of Danton, as, with the exception of the divinity, there was in Danton something of Hercules.

Barthelemy, thin, feeble, pale, taciturn, was a sort of tragic street urchin, who, having had his ears boxed by a policeman, lay in wait for him, and killed him, and at seventeen was sent to the galleys. He came out and made this barricade.

Later on, fatal circumstance, in London, proscribed by all, Barthelemy slew Cournet. It was a funereal duel. Some time afterwards, caught in the gearing of one of those mysterious adventures in which passion plays a part, a catastrophe in which French justice sees extenuating circumstances, and in which English justice sees only death, Barthelemy was hanged. The sombre social construction is so made that, thanks to material destitution, thanks to moral obscurity, that unhappy being who possessed an intelligence, certainly firm, possibly great, began in France with the galleys, and ended in England with the gallows. Barthelemy, on occasion, flew but one flag, the black flag.

CHAPTER II — WHAT IS TO BE DONE IN THE ABYSS IF ONE DOES NOT CONVERSE

Sixteen years count in the subterranean education of insurrection, and June, 1848, knew a great deal more about it than June, 1832. So the barricade of the Rue de la Chanvrerie was only an outline, and an embryo compared to the two colossal barricades which we have just sketched; but it was formidable for that epoch.

The insurgents under the eye of Enjolras, for Marius no longer looked after anything, had made good use of the night. The barricade had been not only repaired, but augmented. They had raised it two feet. Bars of iron planted in the pavement resembled lances in rest. All sorts of rubbish brought and added from all directions complicated the external confusion. The redoubt had been cleverly made over, into a wall on the inside and a thicket on the outside.

The staircase of paving-stones which permitted one to mount it like the wall of a citadel had been reconstructed.

The barricade had been put in order, the tap-room disencumbered, the kitchen appropriated for the ambulance, the dressing of the wounded completed, the powder scattered on the ground and on the tables had been gathered up, bullets run, cartridges manufactured, lint scraped, the fallen weapons re-distributed, the interior of the redoubt cleaned, the rubbish swept up, corpses removed.

They laid the dead in a heap in the Mondetour lane, of which they were still the masters. The pavement was red for a long time at that spot. Among the dead there were four National Guardsmen of the suburbs. Enjolras had their uniforms laid aside.

Enjolras had advised two hours of sleep. Advice from Enjolras was a command. Still, only three or four took advantage of it.

Feuilly employed these two hours in engraving this inscription on the wall which faced the tavern: —

LONG LIVE THE PEOPLES!

These four words, hollowed out in the rough stone with a nail, could be still read on the wall in 1848.

The three women had profited by the respite of the night to vanish definitely; which allowed the insurgents to breathe more freely.

They had found means of taking refuge in some neighboring house.

The greater part of the wounded were able, and wished, to fight still. On a litter of mattresses and trusses of straw in the kitchen, which had been converted into an ambulance, there were five men gravely wounded, two of whom were municipal guardsmen. The municipal guardsmen were attended to first.

In the tap-room there remained only Mabeuf under his black cloth and Javert bound to his post.

"This is the hall of the dead," said Enjolras.

In the interior of this hall, barely lighted by a candle at one end, the mortuary table being behind the post like a horizontal bar, a sort of vast, vague cross resulted from Javert erect and Mabeuf lying prone.

The pole of the omnibus, although snapped off by the fusillade, was still sufficiently upright to admit of their fastening the flag to it.

Enjolras, who possessed that quality of a leader, of always doing what he said, attached to this staff the bullet-ridden and bloody coat of the old man's.

No repast had been possible. There was neither bread nor meat. The fifty men in the barricade had speedily exhausted the scanty provisions of the wine-shop during the sixteen hours which they had passed there. At a given moment, every barricade inevitably becomes the raft of la Meduse. They were obliged to resign themselves to hunger. They had then reached the first hours of that Spartan day of the 6th of June when, in the barricade Saint-Merry, Jeanne, surrounded by the insurgents who demanded bread, replied to all combatants crying: "Something to eat!" with: "Why? It is three o'clock; at four we shall be dead."

As they could no longer eat, Enjolras forbade them to drink. He interdicted wine, and portioned out the brandy.

They had found in the cellar fifteen full bottles hermetically sealed. Enjolras and Combeferre examined them. Combeferre when he came up again said:— "It's the old stock of Father Hucheloup, who began business as a grocer."— "It must be real wine," observed Bossuet. "It's lucky that Grantaire is asleep. If he were on foot, there would be a good deal of difficulty in saving those bottles." — Enjolras, in spite of all murmurs, placed his veto on the fifteen bottles, and, in order that no one might touch them, he had them placed under the table on which Father Mabeuf was lying.

About two o'clock in the morning, they reckoned up their strength. There were still thirty-seven of them.

The day began to dawn. The torch, which had been replaced in its cavity in the pavement, had just been extinguished. The interior of the barricade, that species of tiny courtyard appropriated from the street, was bathed in shadows, and resembled, athwart the vague, twilight horror, the deck of a disabled ship. The combatants, as they went and came, moved about there like black forms. Above that terrible nesting-place of gloom the stories of the mute houses were lividly outlined; at the very top, the chimneys stood palely out. The sky was of that charming, undecided hue, which may be white and may be blue. Birds flew about in it with cries of joy. The lofty house which formed the back of the barricade, being turned to the East, had upon its roof a rosy reflection. The morning breeze ruffled the gray hair on the head of the dead man at the third-story window.

"I am delighted that the torch has been extinguished," said Courfeyrac to Feuilly. "That torch flickering in the wind annoyed me. It had the appearance of being afraid. The light of torches resembles the wisdom of cowards; it gives a bad light because it trembles."

Dawn awakens minds as it does the birds; all began to talk.

Joly, perceiving a cat prowling on a gutter, extracted philosophy from it.

"What is the cat?" he exclaimed. "It is a corrective. The good God, having made the mouse, said: 'Hullo! I have committed a blunder.' And so he made the cat. The cat is the erratum of the mouse. The mouse, plus the cat, is the proof of creation revised and corrected."

Combeferre, surrounded by students and artisans, was speaking of the dead, of Jean Prouvaire, of Bahorel, of Mabeuf, and even of Cabuc, and of Enjolras' sad severity. He said: —

"Harmodius and Aristogiton, Brutus, Chereas, Stephanus, Cromwell, Charlotte Corday, Sand, have all had their moment of agony when it was too late. Our hearts quiver so, and human life is such a mystery that, even in the case of a civic murder, even in a murder for liberation, if there be such a thing, the remorse for having struck a man surpasses the joy of having served the human race."

And, such are the windings of the exchange of speech, that, a moment later, by a transition brought about through Jean Prouvaire's verses, Combeferre was comparing the translators of the Georgics, Raux with Cournand, Cournand with Delille, pointing out the passages translated by Malfilatre, particularly the prodigies of Caesar's death; and at that word, Caesar, the conversation reverted to Brutus.

"Caesar," said Combeferre, "fell justly. Cicero was severe towards Caesar, and he was right. That severity is not diatribe. When Zoilus insults Homer, when Maevius insults Virgil, when Vise insults Moliere, when Pope insults Shakspeare, when Frederic insults Voltaire, it is an old law of envy and hatred which is being carried out; genius attracts insult, great men are always more or less barked at. But Zoilus and Cicero are two different persons. Cicero is an arbiter in thought, just as Brutus is an arbiter by the sword. For my own part, I blame that last justice, the blade; but, antiquity admitted it. Caesar, the violator of the Rubicon, conferring, as though they came from him, the dignities which emanated from the people, not rising at the entrance of the senate, committed the acts of a king and almost of a tyrant, regia ac pene tyrannica. He was a great man; so much the worse, or so much the better; the lesson is but the more exalted. His twenty-three wounds touch me less than the spitting in the face of Jesus Christ. Caesar is stabbed by the senators; Christ is cuffed by lackeys. One feels the God through the greater outrage."

Bossuet, who towered above the interlocutors from the summit of a heap of paving-stones, exclaimed, rifle in hand: —

"Oh Cydathenaeum, Oh Myrrhinus, Oh Probalinthus, Oh graces of the AEantides! Oh! Who will grant me to pronounce the verses of Homer like a Greek of Laurium or of Edapteon?"

CHAPTER III — LIGHT AND SHADOW

Enjolras had been to make a reconnaissance. He had made his way out through Mondetour lane, gliding along close to the houses.

The insurgents, we will remark, were full of hope. The manner in which they had repulsed the attack of the preceding night had caused them to almost disdain in advance the attack at dawn. They waited for it with a smile. They had no more doubt as to their success than as to their cause. Moreover, succor was, evidently, on the way to them. They reckoned on it. With that facility of triumphant prophecy which is one of the sources of strength in the French combatant, they divided the day which was at hand into three distinct phases. At six o’clock in the morning a regiment “which had been labored with,” would turn; at noon, the insurrection of all Paris; at sunset, revolution.

They heard the alarm bell of Saint-Merry, which had not been silent for an instant since the night before; a proof that the other barricade, the great one, Jeanne’s, still held out.

All these hopes were exchanged between the different groups in a sort of gay and formidable whisper which resembled the warlike hum of a hive of bees.

Enjolras reappeared. He returned from his sombre eagle flight into outer darkness. He listened for a moment to all this joy with folded arms, and one hand on his mouth. Then, fresh and rosy in the growing whiteness of the dawn, he said:

“The whole army of Paris is to strike. A third of the army is bearing down upon the barricades in which you now are. There is the National Guard in addition. I have picked out the shakos of the fifth of the line, and the standard-bearers of the sixth legion. In one hour you will be attacked. As for the populace, it was seething yesterday, to-day it is not stirring. There is nothing to expect; nothing to hope for. Neither from a faubourg nor from a regiment. You are abandoned.”

These words fell upon the buzzing of the groups, and produced on them the effect caused on a swarm of bees by the first drops of a storm. A moment of indescribable silence ensued, in which death might have been heard flitting by.

This moment was brief.

A voice from the obscurest depths of the groups shouted to Enjolras:

“So be it. Let us raise the barricade to a height of twenty feet, and let us all remain in it. Citizens, let us offer the protests of corpses. Let us show that, if the people abandon the republicans, the republicans do not abandon the people.”

These words freed the thought of all from the painful cloud of individual anxieties. It was hailed with an enthusiastic acclamation.

No one ever has known the name of the man who spoke thus; he was some unknown blouse-wearer, a stranger, a man forgotten, a passing hero, that great anonymous, always mingled in human crises and in social geneses who, at a given moment, utters in a supreme fashion the decisive word, and who vanishes into the shadows after having represented for a minute, in a lightning flash, the people and God.

This inexorable resolution so thoroughly impregnated the air of the 6th of June, 1832, that, almost at the very same hour, on the barricade Saint-Merry, the insurgents were raising that clamor which has become a matter of history and which has been consigned to the documents in the case:—“What matters it whether they come to our assistance or not? Let us get ourselves killed here, to the very last man.”

As the reader sees, the two barricades, though materially isolated, were in communication with each other.

CHAPTER IV — MINUS FIVE, PLUS ONE

After the man who decreed the “protest of corpses” had spoken, and had given this formula of their common soul, there issued from all mouths a strangely satisfied and terrible cry, funereal in sense and triumphant in tone:

“Long live death! Let us all remain here!”

“Why all?” said Enjolras.

“All! All!”

Enjolras resumed:

“The position is good; the barricade is fine. Thirty men are enough. Why sacrifice forty?”

They replied:

“Because not one will go away.”

“Citizens,” cried Enjolras, and there was an almost irritated vibration in his voice, “this republic is not rich enough in men to indulge in useless expenditure of them. Vain-glory is waste. If the duty of some is to depart, that duty should be fulfilled like any other.”

Enjolras, the man-principle, had over his co-religionists that sort of omnipotent power which emanates from the absolute. Still, great as was this omnipotence, a murmur arose. A leader to the very finger-tips, Enjolras, seeing that they murmured, insisted. He resumed haughtily:

“Let those who are afraid of not numbering more than thirty say so.”

The murmurs redoubled.

“Besides,” observed a voice in one group, “it is easy enough to talk about leaving. The barricade is hemmed in.”

“Not on the side of the Halles,” said Enjolras. “The Rue Mondetour is free, and through the Rue des Prêcheurs one can reach the Marche des Innocents.”

“And there,” went on another voice, “you would be captured. You would fall in with some grand guard of the line or the suburbs; they will spy a man passing in blouse and cap. ‘Whence come you?’ ‘Don’t you belong to the barricade?’ And they will look at your hands. You smell of powder. Shot.”

Enjolras, without making any reply, touched Combeferre’s shoulder, and the two entered the tap-room.

They emerged thence a moment later. Enjolras held in his outstretched hands the four uniforms which he had laid aside. Combeferre followed, carrying the shoulder-belts and the shakos.

“With this uniform,” said Enjolras, “you can mingle with the ranks and escape; here is enough for four.” And he flung on the ground, deprived of its pavement, the four uniforms.

No wavering took place in his stoical audience. Combeferre took the word.

“Come,” said he, “you must have a little pity. Do you know what the question is here? It is a question of women. See here. Are there women or are there not? Are there children or are there not? Are there mothers, yes or no, who rock cradles with their foot and who have a lot of little ones around them? Let that man of you who has never beheld a nurse’s breast raise his hand. Ah! you want to get yourselves killed, so do I — I, who am speaking to you; but I do not want to feel the phantoms of women wreathing their arms around me. Die, if you will, but don’t make others die. Suicides like that which is on the brink of accomplishment here are sublime; but suicide is narrow, and does not admit of extension; and as soon as it touches your neighbors, suicide is murder. Think of the little blond heads; think of the white locks. Listen, Enjolras has just told me that he saw at the corner of the Rue du Cygne a lighted casement, a candle in a poor window, on the fifth floor, and on the pane the quivering shadow of the head of an old woman, who had the air of having spent the night in watching. Perhaps she is the mother of some one of you. Well, let that man go, and make haste, to say to his mother: ‘Here I am, mother!’ Let him feel at ease, the task here will be performed all the same. When one supports one’s relatives by one’s toil, one has not the right to sacrifice one’s self. That is deserting one’s family. And those who have daughters! what are you thinking of? You get yourselves killed, you are dead, that is well. And tomorrow? Young girls without bread — that is a terrible thing. Man begs, woman sells. Ah! those charming and gracious beings, so gracious and so sweet, who have bonnets of flowers, who fill the house with purity, who sing and prattle, who are like a living perfume, who prove the existence of angels in heaven by the purity of virgins on earth, that Jeanne, that Lise, that Mimi, those adorable and honest creatures who are your blessings and your pride, ah! good God, they will suffer hunger! What do you want me to say to you? There is a market for human flesh; and it is not with your shadowy hands, shuddering around them, that you will prevent them from entering it! Think of the street, think of the pavement covered with passers-by, think of the shops past which women go and come with necks all bare, and through the mire. These women, too, were pure once. Think of your sisters, those of you who have them. Misery, prostitution, the police, Saint-Lazare — that is what those beautiful, delicate girls, those fragile marvels of modesty, gentleness and loveliness, fresher than lilacs in the month of May, will come to. Ah! you have got yourselves killed! You are no longer on hand! That is well; you have wished to release the people from Royalty, and you deliver over your daughters to the police. Friends, have a care, have mercy. Women, unhappy women, we are not in the habit of bestowing much thought on them. We trust to the women not having received a man's education, we prevent their reading, we prevent their thinking, we prevent their occupying themselves with politics; will you prevent them from going to the dead-house this evening, and recognizing your bodies? Let us see, those who have families must be tractable, and shake hands with us and take themselves off, and leave us here alone to attend to this affair. I know well that courage is required to leave, that it is hard; but the harder it is, the more meritorious. You say: 'I have a gun, I am at the barricade; so much the worse, I shall remain there.' So much the worse is easily said. My friends, there is a morrow; you will not be here to-morrow, but your families will; and what sufferings! See, here is a pretty, healthy child, with cheeks like an apple, who babbles, prattles, chatters, who laughs, who smells sweet beneath your kiss, — and do you know what becomes of him when he is abandoned? I have seen one, a very small creature, no taller than that. His father was dead. Poor people had taken him in out of charity, but they had bread only for themselves. The child was always hungry. It was winter. He did not cry. You could see him approach the stove, in which there was never any fire, and whose pipe, you know, was of mastic and yellow clay. His breathing was hoarse, his face livid, his limbs flaccid, his belly prominent. He said nothing. If you spoke to him, he did not answer. He is dead. He was taken to the Necker Hospital, where I saw him. I was house-surgeon in that hospital. Now, if there are any fathers among you, fathers whose happiness it is to stroll on Sundays holding their child's tiny hand in their robust hand, let each one of those fathers imagine that this child is his own. That poor brat, I remember, and I seem to see him now, when he lay nude on the dissecting table, how his ribs stood out on his skin like the graves beneath the grass in a cemetery. A sort of mud was found in his stomach. There were ashes in his teeth. Come, let us examine ourselves conscientiously and take counsel with our heart. Statistics show that the mortality among abandoned children is fifty-five per cent. I repeat, it is a question of women, it concerns mothers, it concerns young girls, it concerns little children. Who is talking to you of yourselves? We know well what you are; we know well that you are all brave, parbleu! we know well that you all have in your souls the joy and the glory of giving your life for the great cause; we know well that you feel yourselves elected to die usefully and magnificently, and that each one of you clings to his share in the triumph. Very well. But you are not alone in this world. There are other beings of whom you must think. You must not be egoists."

All dropped their heads with a gloomy air.

Strange contradictions of the human heart at its most sublime moments. Combeferre, who spoke thus, was not an orphan. He recalled the mothers of other men, and forgot his own. He was about to get himself killed. He was "an egoist."

Marius, fasting, fevered, having emerged in succession from all hope, and having been stranded in grief, the most sombre of shipwrecks, and saturated with violent emotions and conscious that the end was near, had plunged deeper and deeper into that visionary stupor which always precedes the fatal hour voluntarily accepted.

A physiologist might have studied in him the growing symptoms of that febrile absorption known to, and classified by, science, and which is to suffering what voluptuousness is to pleasure. Despair, also, has its ecstasy. Marius had reached this point. He looked on at everything as from without; as we have said, things which passed before him seemed far away; he made out the whole, but did not perceive the details. He beheld men going and coming as through a flame. He heard voices speaking as at the bottom of an abyss.

But this moved him. There was in this scene a point which pierced and roused even him. He had but one idea now, to die; and he did not wish to be turned aside from it, but he reflected, in his gloomy somnambulism, that while destroying himself, he was not prohibited from saving some one else.

He raised his voice.

"Enjolras and Combeferre are right," said he; "no unnecessary sacrifice. I join them, and you must make haste. Combeferre has said convincing things to you. There are some among you who have families, mothers, sisters, wives, children. Let such leave the ranks."

No one stirred.

“Married men and the supporters of families, step out of the ranks!” repeated Marius.

His authority was great. Enjolras was certainly the head of the barricade, but Marius was its savior.

“I order it,” cried Enjolras.

“I entreat you,” said Marius.

Then, touched by Combeferre’s words, shaken by Enjolras’ order, touched by Marius’ entreaty, these heroic men began to denounce each other.— “It is true,” said one young man to a full grown man, “you are the father of a family. Go.”— “It is your duty rather,” retorted the man, “you have two sisters whom you maintain.” — And an unprecedented controversy broke forth. Each struggled to determine which should not allow himself to be placed at the door of the tomb.

“Make haste,” said Courfeyrac, “in another quarter of an hour it will be too late.”

“Citizens,” pursued Enjolras, “this is the Republic, and universal suffrage reigns. Do you yourselves designate those who are to go.”

They obeyed. After the expiration of a few minutes, five were unanimously selected and stepped out of the ranks.

“There are five of them!” exclaimed Marius.

There were only four uniforms.

“Well,” began the five, “one must stay behind.”

And then a struggle arose as to who should remain, and who should find reasons for the others not remaining. The generous quarrel began afresh.

“You have a wife who loves you.”— “You have your aged mother.”—” You have neither father nor mother, and what is to become of your three little brothers?”— “You are the father of five children.”— “You have a right to live, you are only seventeen, it is too early for you to die.”

These great revolutionary barricades were assembling points for heroism. The improbable was simple there. These men did not astonish each other.

“Be quick,” repeated Courfeyrac.

Men shouted to Marius from the groups:

“Do you designate who is to remain.”

“Yes,” said the five, “choose. We will obey you.”

Marius did not believe that he was capable of another emotion. Still, at this idea, that of choosing a man for death, his blood rushed back to his heart. He would have turned pale, had it been possible for him to become any paler.

He advanced towards the five, who smiled upon him, and each, with his eyes full of that grand flame which one beholds in the depths of history hovering over Thermopylae, cried to him:

“Me! me! me!”

And Marius stupidly counted them; there were still five of them! Then his glance dropped to the four uniforms.

At that moment, a fifth uniform fell, as if from heaven, upon the other four.

The fifth man was saved.

Marius raised his eyes and recognized M. Fauchelevent.

Jean Valjean had just entered the barricade.

He had arrived by way of Mondetour lane, whither by dint of inquiries made, or by instinct, or chance. Thanks to his dress of a National Guardsman, he had made his way without difficulty.

The sentinel stationed by the insurgents in the Rue Mondetour had no occasion to give the alarm for a single National Guardsman, and he had allowed the latter to entangle himself in the street, saying to himself: “Probably it is a reinforcement, in any case it is a prisoner.” The moment was too grave to admit of the sentinel abandoning his duty and his post of observation.

At the moment when Jean Valjean entered the redoubt, no one had noticed him, all eyes being fixed on the five chosen men and the four uniforms. Jean Valjean also had seen and heard, and he had silently removed his coat and flung it on the pile with the rest.

The emotion aroused was indescribable.

“Who is this man?” demanded Bossuet.

“He is a man who saves others,” replied Combeferre.

Marius added in a grave voice:

“I know him.”

This guarantee satisfied every one.

Enjolras turned to Jean Valjean.

“Welcome, citizen.”

And he added:

“You know that we are about to die.”

Jean Valjean, without replying, helped the insurgent whom he was saving to don his uniform.

CHAPTER V — THE HORIZON WHICH ONE BEHOLDS FROM THE SUMMIT OF A BARRICADE

The situation of all in that fatal hour and that pitiless place, had as result and culminating point Enjolras' supreme melancholy.

Enjolras bore within him the plenitude of the revolution; he was incomplete, however, so far as the absolute can be so; he had too much of Saint-Just about him, and not enough of Anacharsis Cloots; still, his mind, in the society of the Friends of the A B C, had ended by undergoing a certain polarization from Combeferre's ideas; for some time past, he had been gradually emerging from the narrow form of dogma, and had allowed himself to incline to the broadening influence of progress, and he had come to accept, as a definitive and magnificent evolution, the transformation of the great French Republic, into the immense human republic. As far as the immediate means were concerned, a violent situation being given, he wished to be violent; on that point, he never varied; and he remained of that epic and redoubtable school which is summed up in the words: "Eighty-three." Enjolras was standing erect on the staircase of paving-stones, one elbow resting on the stock of his gun. He was engaged in thought; he quivered, as at the passage of prophetic breaths; places where death is have these effects of tripods. A sort of stifled fire darted from his eyes, which were filled with an inward look. All at once he threw back his head, his blond locks fell back like those of an angel on the sombre quadriga made of stars, they were like the mane of a startled lion in the flaming of an halo, and Enjolras cried:

"Citizens, do you picture the future to yourselves? The streets of cities inundated with light, green branches on the thresholds, nations sisters, men just, old men blessing children, the past loving the present, thinkers entirely at liberty, believers on terms of full equality, for religion heaven, God the direct priest, human conscience become an altar, no more hatreds, the fraternity of the workshop and the school, for sole penalty and recompense fame, work for all, right for all, peace over all, no more bloodshed, no more wars, happy mothers! To conquer matter is the first step; to realize the ideal is the second. Reflect on what progress has already accomplished.

Formerly, the first human races beheld with terror the hydra pass before their eyes, breathing on the waters, the dragon which vomited flame, the griffin who was the monster of the air, and who flew with the wings of an eagle and the talons of a tiger; fearful beasts which were above man. Man, nevertheless, spread his snares, consecrated by intelligence, and finally conquered these monsters. We have vanquished the hydra, and it is called the locomotive; we are on the point of vanquishing the griffin, we already grasp it, and it is called the balloon. On the day when this Promethean task shall be accomplished, and when man shall have definitely harnessed to his will the triple Chimaera of antiquity, the hydra, the dragon and the griffin, he will be the master of water, fire, and of air, and he will be for the rest of animated creation that which the ancient gods formerly were to him. Courage, and onward! Citizens, whither are we going? To science made government, to the force of things become the sole public force, to the natural law, having in itself its sanction and its penalty and promulgating itself by evidence, to a dawn of truth corresponding to a dawn of day. We are advancing to the union of peoples; we are advancing to the unity of man. No more fictions; no more parasites. The real governed by the true, that is the goal. Civilization will hold its assizes at the summit of Europe, and, later on, at the centre of continents, in a grand parliament of the intelligence. Something similar has already been seen. The amphictyons had two sittings a year, one at Delphos the seat of the gods, the other at Thermopylae, the place of heroes. Europe will have her amphictyons; the globe will have its amphictyons. France bears this sublime future in her breast. This is the gestation of the nineteenth century. That which Greece sketched out is worthy of being finished by France. Listen to me, you, Feuilly, valiant artisan, man of the people. I revere you. Yes, you clearly behold the future, yes, you are right. You had neither father nor mother, Feuilly; you adopted humanity for your mother and right for your father. You are about to die, that is to say to triumph, here. Citizens, whatever happens to-day, through our defeat as well as through our victory, it is a revolution that we are about to create. As conflagrations light up a whole city, so revolutions illuminate the whole human race. And what is the revolution that we shall cause? I have just told you, the Revolution of the True. From a political point of view, there is but a single principle; the sovereignty of man over himself. This sovereignty of myself over myself is called Liberty. Where two or three of these sovereignties are combined, the state begins. But in that association there is no abdication. Each sovereignty concedes a certain quantity of itself, for the purpose of forming the common right. This quantity is the same for all of us. This identity of concession which each makes to all, is called Equality. Common right is nothing else than the protection of all beaming on the right of each. This protection of all over each is called Fraternity. The point of intersection of all these assembled sovereignties is called society. This intersection being a junction, this point is a knot. Hence what is called the social bond. Some say social contract; which is the same thing, the word contract being etymologically formed with the idea of a bond. Let us come to an understanding about equality; for, if liberty is the summit, equality is the base. Equality, citizens, is not wholly a surface vegetation, a society of great blades of grass and tiny oaks; a proximity of jealousies which render each other null and void; legally speaking, it is all aptitudes possessed of the same opportunity; politically, it is all votes possessed of the same weight; religiously, it is all consciences possessed of the same right. Equality has an organ: gratuitous and obligatory instruction. The right to the alphabet, that is where the beginning must be made. The primary school imposed on all, the secondary school offered to all, that is the law. From an identical school, an identical society will spring. Yes, instruction! light! light! everything comes from light, and to it everything returns. Citizens, the nineteenth century is great, but the twentieth century will be happy. Then, there will be nothing more like the history of old, we shall no longer, as to-day, have to fear a conquest, an invasion, a usurpation, a rivalry of nations, arms in hand, an interruption of civilization depending on a marriage of kings, on a birth in hereditary tyrannies, a partition of peoples by a congress, a dismemberment because of the failure of a dynasty, a combat of two religions meeting face to face, like two bucks in the dark, on the bridge of the infinite; we shall no longer have to fear famine, farming out, prostitution arising from distress, misery from the failure of work and the scaffold and the sword, and battles and the ruffianism of chance in the forest of events. One might almost say: There will be no more events. We shall be happy. The human race will accomplish its law, as the terrestrial globe accomplishes its law; harmony will be re-established between the soul and the star; the soul will gravitate around the truth, as the planet around the light. Friends, the present hour in which I am addressing you, is a gloomy hour; but these are terrible purchases of the future. A revolution is a toll. Oh! the human race will be delivered, raised up, consoled! We affirm it on this barrier. Whence should proceed that cry of love, if not from the heights of sacrifice? Oh my brothers, this is the point of junction, of those who think and of those who suffer; this barricade is not made of paving-stones, nor of joists, nor of bits of iron; it is made of two heaps, a heap of ideas, and a heap of woes. Here misery meets the ideal. The day embraces the night, and says to it: ‘I am about to die, and thou shalt be born again with me.’ From the embrace of all desolations faith leaps forth. Sufferings bring hither their agony and ideas their immortality. This agony and this immortality are about to join and constitute our death. Brothers, he who dies here dies in the radiance of the future, and we are entering a tomb all flooded with the dawn.”

Enjolras paused rather than became silent; his lips continued to move silently, as though he were talking to himself, which caused them all to gaze attentively at him, in the endeavor to hear more. There was no applause; but they whispèred together for a long time. Speech being a breath, the rustling of intelligences resembles the rustling of leaves.

CHAPTER VI — MARIUS HAGGARD, JAVERT LACONIC

Let us narrate what was passing in Marius' thoughts.

Let the reader recall the state of his soul. We have just recalled it, everything was a vision to him now. His judgment was disturbed. Marius, let us insist on this point, was under the shadow of the great, dark wings which are spread over those in the death agony. He felt that he had entered the tomb, it seemed to him that he was already on the other side of the wall, and he no longer beheld the faces of the living except with the eyes of one dead.

How did M. Fauchelevent come there? Why was he there? What had he come there to do? Marius did not address all these questions to himself. Besides, since our despair has this peculiarity, that it envelops others as well as ourselves, it seemed logical to him that all the world should come thither to die.

Only, he thought of Cosette with a pang at his heart.

However, M. Fauchelevent did not speak to him, did not look at him, and had not even the air of hearing him, when Marius raised his voice to say: "I know him."

As far as Marius was concerned, this attitude of M. Fauchelevent was comforting, and, if such a word can be used for such impressions, we should say that it pleased him. He had always felt the absolute impossibility of addressing that enigmatical man, who was, in his eyes, both equivocal and imposing. Moreover, it had been a long time since he had seen him; and this still further augmented the impossibility for Marius' timid and reserved nature.

The five chosen men left the barricade by way of Mondetour lane; they bore a perfect resemblance to members of the National Guard. One of them wept as he took his leave. Before setting out, they embraced those who remained.

When the five men sent back to life had taken their departure, Enjolras thought of the man who had been condemned to death.

He entered the tap-room. Javert, still bound to the post, was engaged in meditation.

“Do you want anything?” Enjolras asked him.

Javert replied: “When are you going to kill me?”

“Wait. We need all our cartridges just at present.”

“Then give me a drink,” said Javert.

Enjolras himself offered him a glass of water, and, as Javert was pinioned, he helped him to drink.

“Is that all?” inquired Enjolras.

“I am uncomfortable against this post,” replied Javert. “You are not tender to have left me to pass the night here. Bind me as you please, but you surely might lay me out on a table like that other man.”

And with a motion of the head, he indicated the body of M. Mabeuf.

There was, as the reader will remember, a long, broad table at the end of the room, on which they had been running bullets and making cartridges. All the cartridges having been made, and all the powder used, this table was free.

At Enjolras’ command, four insurgents unbound Javert from the post. While they were loosing him, a fifth held a bayonet against his breast.

Leaving his arms tied behind his back, they placed about his feet a slender but stout whip-cord, as is done to men on the point of mounting the scaffold, which allowed him to take steps about fifteen inches in length, and made him walk to the table at the end of the room, where they laid him down, closely bound about the middle of the body.

By way of further security, and by means of a rope fastened to his neck, they added to the system of ligatures which rendered every attempt at escape impossible, that sort of bond which is called in prisons a martingale, which, starting at the neck, forks on the stomach, and meets the hands, after passing between the legs.

While they were binding Javert, a man standing on the threshold was surveying him with singular attention. The shadow cast by this man made Javert turn his head. He raised his eyes, and recognized Jean Valjean. He did not even start, but dropped his lids proudly and confined himself to the remark: “It is perfectly simple.”

CHAPTER VII — THE SITUATION BECOMES AGGRAVATED

The daylight was increasing rapidly. Not a window was opened, not a door stood ajar; it was the dawn but not the awaking. The end of the Rue de la Chanvrerie, opposite the barricade, had been evacuated by the troops, as we have stated it seemed to be free, and presented itself to passers-by with a sinister tranquillity. The Rue Saint-Denis was as dumb as the avenue of Sphinxes at Thebes. Not a living being in the cross-roads, which gleamed white in the light of the sun. Nothing is so mournful as this light in deserted streets. Nothing was to be seen, but there was something to be heard. A mysterious movement was going on at a certain distance. It was evident that the critical moment was approaching. As on the previous evening, the sentinels had come in; but this time all had come.

The barricade was stronger than on the occasion of the first attack. Since the departure of the five, they had increased its height still further.

On the advice of the sentinel who had examined the region of the Halles, Enjolras, for fear of a surprise in the rear, came to a serious decision. He had the small gut of the Mondetour lane, which had been left open up to that time, barricaded. For this purpose, they tore up the pavement for the length of several houses more. In this manner, the barricade, walled on three streets, in front on the Rue de la Chanvrerie, to the left on the Rues du Cygne and de la Petite Truanderie, to the right on the Rue Mondetour, was really almost impregnable; it is true that they were fatally hemmed in there. It had three fronts, but no exit.— “A fortress but a rat hole too,” said Courfeyrac with a laugh.

Enjolras had about thirty paving-stones “torn up in excess,” said Bossuet, piled up near the door of the wine-shop.

The silence was now so profound in the quarter whence the attack must needs come, that Enjolras had each man resume his post of battle.

An allowance of brandy was doled out to each.

Nothing is more curious than a barricade preparing for an assault. Each man selects his place as though at the theatre. They jostle, and elbow and crowd each other. There are some who make stalls of paving-stones. Here is a corner of the wall which is in the way, it is removed; here is a redan which may afford protection, they take shelter behind it. Left-handed men are precious; they take the places that are inconvenient to the rest. Many arrange to fight in a sitting posture. They wish to be at ease to kill, and to die comfortably. In the sad war of June, 1848, an insurgent who was a formidable marksman, and who was firing from the top of a terrace upon a roof, had a reclining-chair brought there for his use; a charge of grape-shot found him out there.

As soon as the leader has given the order to clear the decks for action, all disorderly movements cease; there is no more pulling from one another; there are no more coteries; no more asides, there is no more holding aloof; everything in their spirits converges in, and changes into, a waiting for the assailants. A barricade before the arrival of danger is chaos; in danger, it is discipline itself. Peril produces order.

As soon as Enjolras had seized his double-barrelled rifle, and had placed himself in a sort of embrasure which he had reserved for himself, all the rest held their peace. A series of faint, sharp noises resounded confusedly along the wall of paving-stones. It was the men cocking their guns.

Moreover, their attitudes were prouder, more confident than ever; the excess of sacrifice strengthens; they no longer cherished any hope, but they had despair, despair, — the last weapon, which sometimes gives victory; Virgil has said so. Supreme resources spring from extreme resolutions. To embark in death is sometimes the means of escaping a shipwreck; and the lid of the coffin becomes a plank of safety.

As on the preceding evening, the attention of all was directed, we might almost say leaned upon, the end of the street, now lighted up and visible.

They had not long to wait. A stir began distinctly in the Saint-Leu quarter, but it did not resemble the movement of the first attack. A clashing of chains, the uneasy jolting of a mass, the click of brass skipping along the pavement, a sort of solemn uproar, announced that some sinister construction of iron was approaching. There arose a tremor in the bosoms of these peaceful old streets, pierced and built for the fertile circulation of interests and ideas, and which are not made for the horrible rumble of the wheels of war.

The fixity of eye in all the combatants upon the extremity of the street became ferocious.

A cannon made its appearance.

Artillery-men were pushing the piece; it was in firing trim; the fore-carriage had been detached; two upheld the gun-carriage, four were at the wheels; others followed with the caisson. They could see the smoke of the burning lint-stock.

“Fire!” shouted Enjolras.

The whole barricade fired, the report was terrible; an avalanche of smoke covered and effaced both cannon and men; after a few seconds, the cloud dispersed, and the cannon and men re-appeared; the gun-crew had just finished rolling it slowly, correctly, without haste, into position facing the barricade. Not one of them had been struck. Then the captain of the piece, bearing down upon the breech in order to raise the muzzle, began to point the cannon with the gravity of an astronomer levelling a telescope.

“Bravo for the cannoneers!” cried Bossuet.

And the whole barricade clapped their hands.

A moment later, squarely planted in the very middle of the street, astride of the gutter, the piece was ready for action. A formidable pair of jaws yawned on the barricade.

“Come, merrily now!” ejaculated Courfeyrac. “That’s the brutal part of it. After the fillip on the nose, the blow from the fist. The army is reaching out its big paw to us. The barricade is going to be severely shaken up. The fusillade tries, the cannon takes.”

“It is a piece of eight, new model, brass,” added Combeferre. “Those pieces are liable to burst as soon as the proportion of ten parts of tin to one hundred of brass is exceeded. The excess of tin renders them too tender. Then it comes to pass that they have caves and chambers when looked at from the vent hole. In order to obviate this danger, and to render it possible to force the charge, it may become necessary to return to the process of the fourteenth century, hooping, and to encircle the piece on the outside with a series of unwelded steel bands, from the breech to the trunnions. In the meantime, they remedy this defect as best they may; they manage to discover where the holes are located in the vent of a cannon, by means of a searcher. But there is a better method, with Gribeauval’s movable star.”

“In the sixteenth century,” remarked Bossuet, “they used to rifle cannon.”

“Yes,” replied Combeferre, “that augments the projectile force, but diminishes the accuracy of the firing. In firing at short range, the trajectory is not as rigid as could be desired, the parabola is exaggerated, the line of the projectile is no longer sufficiently rectilinear to allow of its striking intervening objects, which is, nevertheless, a necessity of battle, the importance of which increases with the proximity of the enemy and the precipitation of the discharge. This defect of the tension of the curve of the projectile in the rifled cannon of the sixteenth century arose from the smallness of the charge; small charges for that sort of engine are imposed by the ballistic necessities, such, for instance, as the preservation of the gun-carriage. In short, that despot, the cannon, cannot do all that it desires; force is a great weakness. A cannon-ball only travels six hundred leagues an hour; light travels seventy thousand leagues a second. Such is the superiority of Jesus Christ over Napoleon."

"Reload your guns," said Enjolras.

How was the casing of the barricade going to behave under the cannon-balls? Would they effect a breach? That was the question. While the insurgents were reloading their guns, the artillery-men were loading the cannon.

The anxiety in the redoubt was profound.

The shot sped the report burst forth.

"Present!" shouted a joyous voice.

And Gavroche flung himself into the barricade just as the ball dashed against it.

He came from the direction of the Rue du Cygne, and he had nimbly climbed over the auxiliary barricade which fronted on the labyrinth of the Rue de la Petite Truanderie.

Gavroche produced a greater sensation in the barricade than the cannon-ball.

The ball buried itself in the mass of rubbish. At the most there was an omnibus wheel broken, and the old Anceau cart was demolished. On seeing this, the barricade burst into a laugh.

"Go on!" shouted Bossuet to the artillerists.

CHAPTER VIII — THE ARTILLERY-MEN COMPEL PEOPLE TO TAKE THEM SERIOUSLY

They flocked round Gavroche. But he had no time to tell anything. Marius drew him aside with a shudder.

“What are you doing here?”

“Hullo!” said the child, “what are you doing here yourself?”

And he stared at Marius intently with his epic effrontery. His eyes grew larger with the proud light within them.

It was with an accent of severity that Marius continued:

“Who told you to come back? Did you deliver my letter at the address?”

Gavroche was not without some compunctions in the matter of that letter. In his haste to return to the barricade, he had got rid of it rather than delivered it. He was forced to acknowledge to himself that he had confided it rather lightly to that stranger whose face he had not been able to make out. It is true that the man was bareheaded, but that was not sufficient. In short, he had been administering to himself little inward remonstrances and he feared Marius’ reproaches. In order to extricate himself from the predicament, he took the simplest course; he lied abominably.

“Citizen, I delivered the letter to the porter. The lady was asleep. She will have the letter when she wakes up.”

Marius had had two objects in sending that letter: to bid farewell to Cosette and to save Gavroche. He was obliged to content himself with the half of his desire.

The despatch of his letter and the presence of M. Fauchelevent in the barricade, was a coincidence which occurred to him. He pointed out M. Fauchelevent to Gavroche.

“Do you know that man?”

“No,” said Gavroche.

Gavroche had, in fact, as we have just mentioned, seen Jean Valjean only at night.

The troubled and unhealthy conjectures which had outlined themselves in Marius’ mind were dissipated. Did he know M. Fauchelevent’s opinions?

Perhaps M. Fauchelevent was a republican. Hence his very natural presence in this combat.

In the meanwhile, Gavroche was shouting, at the other end of the barricade: “My gun!”

Courfeyrac had it returned to him.

Gavroche warned “his comrades” as he called them, that the barricade was blocked. He had had great difficulty in reaching it. A battalion of the line whose arms were piled in the Rue de la Petite Truanderie was on the watch on the side of the Rue du Cygne; on the opposite side, the municipal guard occupied the Rue des Prêcheurs. The bulk of the army was facing them in front.

This information given, Gavroche added:

“I authorize you to hit ’em a tremendous whack.”

Meanwhile, Enjolras was straining his ears and watching at his embrasure.

The assailants, dissatisfied, no doubt, with their shot, had not repeated it.

A company of infantry of the line had come up and occupied the end of the street behind the piece of ordnance. The soldiers were tearing up the pavement and constructing with the stones a small, low wall, a sort of side-work not more than eighteen inches high, and facing the barricade. In the angle at the left of this epaulement, there was visible the head of the column of a battalion from the suburbs massed in the Rue Saint-Denis.

Enjolras, on the watch, thought he distinguished the peculiar sound which is produced when the shells of grape-shot are drawn from the caissons, and he saw the commander of the piece change the elevation and incline the mouth of the cannon slightly to the left. Then the cannoneers began to load the piece. The chief seized the lint-stock himself and lowered it to the vent.

“Down with your heads, hug the wall!” shouted Enjolras, “and all on your knees along the barricade!”

The insurgents who were straggling in front of the wine-shop, and who had quitted their posts of combat on Gavroche’s arrival, rushed pell-mell towards the barricade; but before Enjolras’ order could be executed, the discharge took place with the terrifying rattle of a round of grape-shot. This is what it was, in fact.

The charge had been aimed at the cut in the redoubt, and had there rebounded from the wall; and this terrible rebound had produced two dead and three wounded.

If this were continued, the barricade was no longer tenable. The grape-shot made its way in.

A murmur of consternation arose.

“Let us prevent the second discharge,” said Enjolras.

And, lowering his rifle, he took aim at the captain of the gun, who, at that moment, was bearing down on the breach of his gun and rectifying and definitely fixing its pointing.

The captain of the piece was a handsome sergeant of artillery, very young, blond, with a very gentle face, and the intelligent air peculiar to that predestined and redoubtable weapon which, by dint of perfecting itself in horror, must end in killing war.

Combeferre, who was standing beside Enjolras, scrutinized this young man.

“What a pity!” said Combeferre. “What hideous things these butcheries are! Come, when there are no more kings, there will be no more war. Enjolras, you are taking aim at that sergeant, you are not looking at him. Fancy, he is a charming young man; he is intrepid; it is evident that he is thoughtful; those young artillery-men are very well educated; he has a father, a mother, a family; he is probably in love; he is not more than five and twenty at the most; he might be your brother.”

“He is,” said Enjolras.

“Yes,” replied Combeferre, “he is mine too. Well, let us not kill him.”

“Let me alone. It must be done.”

And a tear trickled slowly down Enjolras’ marble cheek.

At the same moment, he pressed the trigger of his rifle. The flame leaped forth. The artillery-man turned round twice, his arms extended in front of him, his head uplifted, as though for breath, then he fell with his side on the gun, and lay there motionless. They could see his back, from the centre of which there flowed directly a stream of blood. The ball had traversed his breast from side to side. He was dead.

He had to be carried away and replaced by another. Several minutes were thus gained, in fact.

CHAPTER IX — EMPLOYMENT OF THE OLD TALENTS OF A POACHER AND THAT INFALLIBLE MARKSMANSHIP WHICH INFLUENCED THE CONDEMNATION OF 1796

Opinions were exchanged in the barricade. The firing from the gun was about to begin again. Against that grape-shot, they could not hold out a quarter of an hour longer. It was absolutely necessary to deaden the blows.

Enjolras issued this command:

“We must place a mattress there.”

“We have none,” said Combeferre, “the wounded are lying on them.”

Jean Valjean, who was seated apart on a stone post, at the corner of the tavern, with his gun between his knees, had, up to that moment, taken no part in anything that was going on. He did not appear to hear the combatants saying around him: “Here is a gun that is doing nothing.”

At the order issued by Enjolras, he rose.

It will be remembered that, on the arrival of the rabble in the Rue de la Chanvrerie, an old woman, foreseeing the bullets, had placed her mattress in front of her window. This window, an attic window, was on the roof of a six-story house situated a little beyond the barricade. The mattress, placed cross-wise, supported at the bottom on two poles for drying linen, was upheld at the top by two ropes, which, at that distance, looked like two threads, and which were attached to two nails planted in the window frames. These ropes were distinctly visible, like hairs, against the sky.

“Can some one lend me a double-barrelled rifle?” said Jean Valjean.

Enjolras, who had just re-loaded his, handed it to him.

Jean Valjean took aim at the attic window and fired.

One of the mattress ropes was cut.

The mattress now hung by one thread only.

Jean Valjean fired the second charge. The second rope lashed the panes of the attic window. The mattress slipped between the two poles and fell into the street.

The barricade applauded.

All voices cried:

“Here is a mattress!”

“Yes,” said Combeferre, “but who will go and fetch it?”

The mattress had, in fact, fallen outside the barricade, between besiegers and besieged. Now, the death of the sergeant of artillery having exasperated the troop, the soldiers had, for several minutes, been lying flat on their stomachs behind the line of paving-stones which they had erected, and, in order to supply the forced silence of the piece, which was quiet while its service was in course of reorganization, they had opened fire on the barricade. The insurgents did not reply to this musketry, in order to spare their ammunition The fusillade broke against the barricade; but the street, which it filled, was terrible.

Jean Valjean stepped out of the cut, entered the street, traversed the storm of bullets, walked up to the mattress, hoisted it upon his back, and returned to the barricade.

He placed the mattress in the cut with his own hands. He fixed it there against the wall in such a manner that the artillery-men should not see it.

That done, they awaited the next discharge of grape-shot.

It was not long in coming.

The cannon vomited forth its package of buck-shot with a roar. But there was no rebound. The effect which they had foreseen had been attained. The barricade was saved.

“Citizen,” said Enjolras to Jean Valjean, “the Republic thanks you.”

Bossuet admired and laughed. He exclaimed:

“It is immoral that a mattress should have so much power. Triumph of that which yields over that which strikes with lightning. But never mind, glory to the mattress which annuls a cannon!”

CHAPTER X — DAWN

At that moment, Cosette awoke.

Her chamber was narrow, neat, unobtrusive, with a long sash-window, facing the East on the back court-yard of the house.

Cosette knew nothing of what was going on in Paris. She had not been there on the preceding evening, and she had already retired to her chamber when Toussaint had said:

“It appears that there is a row.”

Cosette had slept only a few hours, but soundly. She had had sweet dreams, which possibly arose from the fact that her little bed was very white. Some one, who was Marius, had appeared to her in the light. She awoke with the sun in her eyes, which, at first, produced on her the effect of being a continuation of her dream. Her first thought on emerging from this dream was a smiling one. Cosette felt herself thoroughly reassured. Like Jean Valjean, she had, a few hours previously, passed through that reaction of the soul which absolutely will not hear of unhappiness. She began to cherish hope, with all her might, without knowing why. Then she felt a pang at her heart. It was three days since she had seen Marius. But she said to herself that he must have received her letter, that he knew where she was, and that he was so clever that he would find means of reaching her. — And that certainly to-day, and perhaps that very morning. — It was broad daylight, but the rays of light were very horizontal; she thought that it was very early, but that she must rise, nevertheless, in order to receive Marius.

She felt that she could not live without Marius, and that, consequently, that was sufficient and that Marius would come. No objection was valid. All this was certain. It was monstrous enough already to have suffered for three days. Marius absent three days, this was horrible on the part of the good God. Now, this cruel teasing from on high had been gone through with. Marius was about to arrive, and he would bring good news. Youth is made thus; it quickly dries its eyes; it finds sorrow useless and does not accept it. Youth is the smile of the future in the presence of an unknown quantity, which is itself. It is natural to it to be happy. It seems as though its respiration were made of hope.

Moreover, Cosette could not remember what Marius had said to her on the subject of this absence which was to last only one day, and what explanation of it he had given her. Every one has noticed with what nimbleness a coin which one has dropped on the ground rolls away and hides, and with what art it renders itself undiscoverable. There are thoughts which play us the same trick; they nestle away in a corner of our brain; that is the end of them; they are lost; it is impossible to lay the memory on them. Cosette was somewhat vexed at the useless little effort made by her memory. She told herself, that it was very naughty and very wicked of her, to have forgotten the words uttered by Marius.

She sprang out of bed and accomplished the two ablutions of soul and body, her prayers and her toilet.

One may, in a case of exigency, introduce the reader into a nuptial chamber, not into a virginal chamber. Verse would hardly venture it, prose must not.

It is the interior of a flower that is not yet unfolded, it is whiteness in the dark, it is the private cell of a closed lily, which must not be gazed upon by man so long as the sun has not gazed upon it. Woman in the bud is sacred. That innocent bud which opens, that adorable half-nudity which is afraid of itself, that white foot which takes refuge in a slipper, that throat which veils itself before a mirror as though a mirror were an eye, that chemise which makes haste to rise up and conceal the shoulder for a creaking bit of furniture or a passing vehicle, those cords tied, those clasps fastened, those laces drawn, those tremors, those shivers of cold and modesty, that exquisite affright in every movement, that almost winged uneasiness where there is no cause for alarm, the successive phases of dressing, as charming as the clouds of dawn, — it is not fitting that all this should be narrated, and it is too much to have even called attention to it.

The eye of man must be more religious in the presence of the rising of a young girl than in the presence of the rising of a star. The possibility of hurting should inspire an augmentation of respect. The down on the peach, the bloom on the plum, the radiated crystal of the snow, the wing of the butterfly powdered with feathers, are coarse compared to that chastity which does not even know that it is chaste. The young girl is only the flash of a dream, and is not yet a statue. Her bed-chamber is hidden in the sombre part of the ideal. The indiscreet touch of a glance brutalizes this vague penumbra. Here, contemplation is profanation.

We shall, therefore, show nothing of that sweet little flutter of Cosette's rising.

An oriental tale relates how the rose was made white by God, but that Adam looked upon her when she was unfolding, and she was ashamed and turned crimson. We are of the number who fall speechless in the presence of young girls and flowers, since we think them worthy of veneration.

Cosette dressed herself very hastily, combed and dressed her hair, which was a very simple matter in those days, when women did not swell out their curls and bands with cushions and puffs, and did not put crinoline in their locks. Then she opened the window and cast her eyes around her in every direction, hoping to descry some bit of the street, an angle of the house, an edge of pavement, so that she might be able to watch for Marius there. But no view of the outside was to be had. The back court was surrounded by tolerably high walls, and the outlook was only on several gardens. Cosette pronounced these gardens hideous: for the first time in her life, she found flowers ugly. The smallest scrap of the gutter of the street would have met her wishes better. She decided to gaze at the sky, as though she thought that Marius might come from that quarter.

All at once, she burst into tears. Not that this was fickleness of soul; but hopes cut in twain by dejection — that was her case. She had a confused consciousness of something horrible. Thoughts were rife in the air, in fact. She told herself that she was not sure of anything, that to withdraw herself from sight was to be lost; and the idea that Marius could return to her from heaven appeared to her no longer charming but mournful.

Then, as is the nature of these clouds, calm returned to her, and hope and a sort of unconscious smile, which yet indicated trust in God.

Every one in the house was still asleep. A country-like silence reigned. Not a shutter had been opened. The porter's lodge was closed. Toussaint had not risen, and Cosette, naturally, thought that her father was asleep. She must have suffered much, and she must have still been suffering greatly, for she said to herself, that her father had been unkind; but she counted on Marius. The eclipse of such a light was decidedly impossible. Now and then, she heard sharp shocks in the distance, and she said: "It is odd that people should be opening and shutting their carriage gates so early." They were the reports of the cannon battering the barricade.

A few feet below Cosette's window, in the ancient and perfectly black cornice of the wall, there was a martin's nest; the curve of this nest formed a little projection beyond the cornice, so that from above it was possible to look into this little paradise. The mother was there, spreading her wings like a fan over her brood; the father fluttered about, flew away, then came back, bearing in his beak food and kisses. The dawning day gilded this happy thing, the great law, “Multiply,” lay there smiling and august, and that sweet mystery unfolded in the glory of the morning. Cosette, with her hair in the sunlight, her soul absorbed in chimeras, illuminated by love within and by the dawn without, bent over mechanically, and almost without daring to avow to herself that she was thinking at the same time of Marius, began to gaze at these birds, at this family, at that male and female, that mother and her little ones, with the profound trouble which a nest produces on a virgin.

CHAPTER XI — THE SHOT WHICH MISSES NOTHING AND KILLS NO ONE

The assailants’ fire continued. Musketry and grape-shot alternated, but without committing great ravages, to tell the truth. The top alone of the Corinthe facade suffered; the window on the first floor, and the attic window in the roof, riddled with buck-shot and biscaiens, were slowly losing their shape. The combatants who had been posted there had been obliged to withdraw. However, this is according to the tactics of barricades; to fire for a long while, in order to exhaust the insurgents’ ammunition, if they commit the mistake of replying. When it is perceived, from the slackening of their fire, that they have no more powder and ball, the assault is made. Enjolras had not fallen into this trap; the barricade did not reply.

At every discharge by platoons, Gavroche puffed out his cheek with his tongue, a sign of supreme disdain.

“Good for you,” said he, “rip up the cloth. We want some lint.”

Courfeyrac called the grape-shot to order for the little effect which it produced, and said to the cannon:

“You are growing diffuse, my good fellow.”

One gets puzzled in battle, as at a ball. It is probable that this silence on the part of the redoubt began to render the besiegers uneasy, and to make them fear some unexpected incident, and that they felt the necessity of getting a clear view behind that heap of paving-stones, and of knowing what was going on behind that impassable wall which received blows without retorting. The insurgents suddenly perceived a helmet glittering in the sun on a neighboring roof. A fireman had placed his back against a tall chimney, and seemed to be acting as sentinel. His glance fell directly down into the barricade.

“There’s an embarrassing watcher,” said Enjolras.

Jean Valjean had returned Enjolras’ rifle, but he had his own gun.

Without saying a word, he took aim at the fireman, and, a second later, the helmet, smashed by a bullet, rattled noisily into the street. The terrified soldier made haste to disappear. A second observer took his place. This one was an officer. Jean Valjean, who had re-loaded his gun, took aim at the newcomer and sent the officer’s casque to join the soldier’s. The officer did not persist, and retired speedily. This time the warning was understood. No one made his appearance thereafter on that roof; and the idea of spying on the barricade was abandoned.

“Why did you not kill the man?” Bossuet asked Jean Valjean.

Jean Valjean made no reply.

CHAPTER XII — DISORDER A PARTISAN OF ORDER

Bossuet muttered in Combeferre’s ear:

“He did not answer my question.”

“He is a man who does good by gun-shots,” said Combeferre.

Those who have preserved some memory of this already distant epoch know that the National Guard from the suburbs was valiant against insurrections. It was particularly zealous and intrepid in the days of June, 1832. A certain good dram-shop keeper of Pantin des Vertus or la Cunette, whose “establishment” had been closed by the riots, became leonine at the sight of his deserted dance-hall, and got himself killed to preserve the order represented by a tea-garden. In that bourgeois and heroic time, in the presence of ideas which had their knights, interests had their paladins. The prosiness of the originators detracted nothing from the bravery of the movement. The diminution of a pile of crowns made bankers sing the Marseillaise. They shed their blood lyrically for the counting-house; and they defended the shop, that immense diminutive of the fatherland, with Lacedaemonian enthusiasm.

At bottom, we will observe, there was nothing in all this that was not extremely serious. It was social elements entering into strife, while awaiting the day when they should enter into equilibrium.

Another sign of the times was the anarchy mingled with governmentalism [the barbarous name of the correct party]. People were for order in combination with lack of discipline.

The drum suddenly beat capricious calls, at the command of such or such a Colonel of the National Guard; such and such a captain went into action through inspiration; such and such National Guardsmen fought, “for an idea,” and on their own account. At critical moments, on “days” they took counsel less of their leaders than of their instincts. There existed in the army of order, veritable guerilleros, some of the sword, like Fannicot, others of the pen, like Henri Fonfrede.

Civilization, unfortunately, represented at this epoch rather by an aggregation of interests than by a group of principles, was or thought itself, in peril; it set up the cry of alarm; each, constituting himself a centre, defended it, succored it, and protected it with his own head; and the first comer took it upon himself to save society.

Zeal sometimes proceeded to extermination. A platoon of the National Guard would constitute itself on its own authority a private council of war, and judge and execute a captured insurgent in five minutes. It was an improvisation of this sort that had slain Jean Prouvaire. Fierce Lynch law, with which no one party had any right to reproach the rest, for it has been applied by the Republic in America, as well as by the monarchy in Europe. This Lynch law was complicated with mistakes. On one day of rioting, a young poet, named Paul Aime Garnier, was pursued in the Place Royale, with a bayonet at his loins, and only escaped by taking refuge under the porte-cochère of No. 6. They shouted:— “There’s another of those Saint-Simonians!” and they wanted to kill him. Now, he had under his arm a volume of the memoirs of the Duc de Saint-Simon. A National Guard had read the words Saint-Simon on the book, and had shouted: “Death!”

On the 6th of June, 1832, a company of the National Guards from the suburbs, commanded by the Captain Fannicot, above mentioned, had itself decimated in the Rue de la Chanvrerie out of caprice and its own good pleasure. This fact, singular though it may seem, was proved at the judicial investigation opened in consequence of the insurrection of 1832. Captain Fannicot, a bold and impatient bourgeois, a sort of condottiere of the order of those whom we have just characterized, a fanatical and intractable governmentalist, could not resist the temptation to fire prematurely, and the ambition of capturing the barricade alone and unaided, that is to say, with his company. Exasperated by the successive apparition of the red flag and the old coat which he took for the black flag, he loudly blamed the generals and chiefs of the corps, who were holding council and did not think that the moment for the decisive assault had arrived, and who were allowing “the insurrection to fry in its own fat,” to use the celebrated expression of one of them. For his part, he thought the barricade ripe, and as that which is ripe ought to fall, he made the attempt.

He commanded men as resolute as himself, “raging fellows,” as a witness said. His company, the same which had shot Jean Prouvaire the poet, was the first of the battalion posted at the angle of the street. At the moment when they were least expecting it, the captain launched his men against the barricade. This movement, executed with more good will than strategy, cost the Fannicot company dear. Before it had traversed two thirds of the street it was received by a general discharge from the barricade. Four, the most audacious, who were running on in front, were mown down point-blank at the very foot of the redoubt, and this courageous throng of National Guards, very brave men but lacking in military tenacity, were forced to fall back, after some hesitation, leaving fifteen corpses on the pavement. This momentary hesitation gave the insurgents time to re-load their weapons, and a second and very destructive discharge struck the company before it could regain the corner of the street, its shelter. A moment more, and it was caught between two fires, and it received the volley from the battery piece which, not having received the order, had not discontinued its firing.

The intrepid and imprudent Fannicot was one of the dead from this grape-shot. He was killed by the cannon, that is to say, by order.

This attack, which was more furious than serious, irritated Enjolras.—"The fools!" said he. "They are getting their own men killed and they are using up our ammunition for nothing."

Enjolras spoke like the real general of insurrection which he was. Insurrection and repression do not fight with equal weapons. Insurrection, which is speedily exhausted, has only a certain number of shots to fire and a certain number of combatants to expend. An empty cartridge-box, a man killed, cannot be replaced. As repression has the army, it does not count its men, and, as it has Vincennes, it does not count its shots. Repression has as many regiments as the barricade has men, and as many arsenals as the barricade has cartridge-boxes. Thus they are struggles of one against a hundred, which always end in crushing the barricade; unless the revolution, uprising suddenly, flings into the balance its flaming archangel's sword. This does happen sometimes. Then everything rises, the pavements begin to seethe, popular redoubts abound. Paris quivers supremely, the quid divinum is given forth, a 10th of August is in the air, a 29th of July is in the air, a wonderful light appears, the yawning maw of force draws back, and the army, that lion, sees before it, erect and tranquil, that prophet, France.

CHAPTER XIII — PASSING GLEAMS

In the chaos of sentiments and passions which defend a barricade, there is a little of everything; there is bravery, there is youth, honor, enthusiasm, the ideal, conviction, the rage of the gambler, and, above all, intermittences of hope.

One of these intermittences, one of these vague quivers of hope suddenly traversed the barricade of the Rue de la Chanvrerie at the moment when it was least expected.

“Listen,” suddenly cried Enjolras, who was still on the watch, “it seems to me that Paris is waking up.”

It is certain that, on the morning of the 6th of June, the insurrection broke out afresh for an hour or two, to a certain extent. The obstinacy of the alarm peal of Saint-Merry reanimated some fancies. Barricades were begun in the Rue du Poirier and the Rue des Gravilliers. In front of the Porte Saint-Martin, a young man, armed with a rifle, attacked alone a squadron of cavalry. In plain sight, on the open boulevard, he placed one knee on the ground, shouldered his weapon, fired, killed the commander of the squadron, and turned away, saying: “There’s another who will do us no more harm.”

He was put to the sword. In the Rue Saint-Denis, a woman fired on the National Guard from behind a lowered blind. The slats of the blind could be seen to tremble at every shot. A child fourteen years of age was arrested in the Rue de la Cossonerie, with his pockets full of cartridges. Many posts were attacked. At the entrance to the Rue Bertin-Poiree, a very lively and utterly unexpected fusillade welcomed a regiment of cuirrassiers, at whose head marched Marshal General Cavaignac de Barague. In the Rue Planche-Mibray, they threw old pieces of pottery and household utensils down on the soldiers from the roofs; a bad sign; and when this matter was reported to Marshal Soult, Napoleon’s old lieutenant grew thoughtful, as he recalled Suchet’s saying at Saragossa: “We are lost when the old women empty their pots de chambre on our heads.”

These general symptoms which presented themselves at the moment when it was thought that the uprising had been rendered local, this fever of wrath, these sparks which flew hither and thither above those deep masses of combustibles which are called the faubourgs of Paris, — all this, taken together, disturbed the military chiefs. They made haste to stamp out these beginnings of conflagration.

They delayed the attack on the barricades Maubuee, de la Chanvrerie and Saint-Merry until these sparks had been extinguished, in order that they might have to deal with the barricades only and be able to finish them at one blow. Columns were thrown into the streets where there was fermentation, sweeping the large, sounding the small, right and left, now slowly and cautiously, now at full charge. The troops broke in the doors of houses whence shots had been fired; at the same time, manoeuvres by the cavalry dispersed the groups on the boulevards. This repression was not effected without some commotion, and without that tumultuous uproar peculiar to collisions between the army and the people. This was what Enjolras had caught in the intervals of the cannonade and the musketry. Moreover, he had seen wounded men passing the end of the street in litters, and he said to Courfeyrac:— “Those wounded do not come from us.”

Their hope did not last long; the gleam was quickly eclipsed. In less than half an hour, what was in the air vanished, it was a flash of lightning unaccompanied by thunder, and the insurgents felt that sort of leaden cope, which the indifference of the people casts over obstinate and deserted men, fall over them once more.

The general movement, which seemed to have assumed a vague outline, had miscarried; and the attention of the minister of war and the strategy of the generals could now be concentrated on the three or four barricades which still remained standing.

The sun was mounting above the horizon.

An insurgent hailed Enjolras.

“We are hungry here. Are we really going to die like this, without anything to eat?”

Enjolras, who was still leaning on his elbows at his embrasure, made an affirmative sign with his head, but without taking his eyes from the end of the street.

CHAPTER XIV — WHEREIN WILL APPEAR THE NAME OF ENJOLRAS' MISTRESS

Courfeyrac, seated on a paving-stone beside Enjolras, continued to insult the cannon, and each time that that gloomy cloud of projectiles which is called grape-shot passed overhead with its terrible sound he assailed it with a burst of irony.

"You are wearing out your lungs, poor, brutal, old fellow, you pain me, you are wasting your row. That's not thunder, it's a cough."

And the bystanders laughed.

Courfeyrac and Bossuet, whose brave good humor increased with the peril, like Madame Scarron, replaced nourishment with pleasantry, and, as wine was lacking, they poured out gayety to all.

"I admire Enjolras," said Bossuet. "His impassive temerity astounds me. He lives alone, which renders him a little sad, perhaps; Enjolras complains of his greatness, which binds him to widowhood. The rest of us have mistresses, more or less, who make us crazy, that is to say, brave. When a man is as much in love as a tiger, the least that he can do is to fight like a lion. That is one way of taking our revenge for the capers that mesdames our grisettes play on us. Roland gets himself killed for Angelique; all our heroism comes from our women. A man without a woman is a pistol without a trigger; it is the woman that sets the man off. Well, Enjolras has no woman. He is not in love, and yet he manages to be intrepid. It is a thing unheard of that a man should be as cold as ice and as bold as fire."

Enjolras did not appear to be listening, but had any one been near him, that person would have heard him mutter in a low voice: "Patria."

Bossuet was still laughing when Courfeyrac exclaimed:

"News!"

And assuming the tone of an usher making an announcement, he added:

"My name is Eight-Pounder."

In fact, a new personage had entered on the scene. This was a second piece of ordnance.

The artillery-men rapidly performed their manoeuvres in force and placed this second piece in line with the first.

This outlined the catastrophe.

A few minutes later, the two pieces, rapidly served, were firing point-blank at the redoubt; the platoon firing of the line and of the soldiers from the suburbs sustained the artillery.

Another cannonade was audible at some distance. At the same time that the two guns were furiously attacking the redoubt from the Rue de la Chanvrerie, two other cannons, trained one from the Rue Saint-Denis, the other from the Rue Aubry-le-Boucher, were riddling the Saint-Merry barricade. The four cannons echoed each other mournfully.

The barking of these sombre dogs of war replied to each other.

One of the two pieces which was now battering the barricade on the Rue de la Chanvrerie was firing grape-shot, the other balls.

The piece which was firing balls was pointed a little high, and the aim was calculated so that the ball struck the extreme edge of the upper crest of the barricade, and crumbled the stone down upon the insurgents, mingled with bursts of grape-shot.

The object of this mode of firing was to drive the insurgents from the summit of the redoubt, and to compel them to gather close in the interior, that is to say, this announced the assault.

The combatants once driven from the crest of the barricade by balls, and from the windows of the cabaret by grape-shot, the attacking columns could venture into the street without being picked off, perhaps, even, without being seen, could briskly and suddenly scale the redoubt, as on the preceding evening, and, who knows? take it by surprise.

“It is absolutely necessary that the inconvenience of those guns should be diminished,” said Enjolras, and he shouted: “Fire on the artillery-men!”

All were ready. The barricade, which had long been silent, poured forth a desperate fire; seven or eight discharges followed, with a sort of rage and joy; the street was filled with blinding smoke, and, at the end of a few minutes, athwart this mist all streaked with flame, two thirds of the gunners could be distinguished lying beneath the wheels of the cannons. Those who were left standing continued to serve the pieces with severe tranquillity, but the fire had slackened.

“Things are going well now,” said Bossuet to Enjolras. “Success.”

Enjolras shook his head and replied:

“Another quarter of an hour of this success, and there will not be any cartridges left in the barricade.”

It appears that Gavroche overheard this remark.

CHAPTER XV — GAVROCHE OUTSIDE

Courfeyrac suddenly caught sight of some one at the base of the barricade, outside in the street, amid the bullets.

Gavroche had taken a bottle basket from the wine-shop, had made his way out through the cut, and was quietly engaged in emptying the full cartridge-boxes of the National Guardsmen who had been killed on the slope of the redoubt, into his basket.

“What are you doing there?” asked Courfeyrac.

Gavroche raised his face: —

“I’m filling my basket, citizen.”

“Don’t you see the grape-shot?”

Gavroche replied:

“Well, it is raining. What then?”

Courfeyrac shouted:— “Come in!”

“Instanter,” said Gavroche.

And with a single bound he plunged into the street.

It will be remembered that Fannicot’s company had left behind it a trail of bodies. Twenty corpses lay scattered here and there on the pavement, through the whole length of the street. Twenty cartouches for Gavroche meant a provision of cartridges for the barricade.

The smoke in the street was like a fog. Whoever has beheld a cloud which has fallen into a mountain gorge between two peaked escarpments can imagine this smoke rendered denser and thicker by two gloomy rows of lofty houses. It rose gradually and was incessantly renewed; hence a twilight which made even the broad daylight turn pale. The combatants could hardly see each other from one end of the street to the other, short as it was.

This obscurity, which had probably been desired and calculated on by the commanders who were to direct the assault on the barricade, was useful to Gavroche.

Beneath the folds of this veil of smoke, and thanks to his small size, he could advance tolerably far into the street without being seen. He rifled the first seven or eight cartridge-boxes without much danger.

He crawled flat on his belly, galloped on all fours, took his basket in his teeth, twisted, glided, undulated, wound from one dead body to another, and emptied the cartridge-box or cartouche as a monkey opens a nut.

They did not dare to shout to him to return from the barricade, which was quite near, for fear of attracting attention to him.

On one body, that of a corporal, he found a powder-flask.

“For thirst,” said he, putting it in his pocket.

By dint of advancing, he reached a point where the fog of the fusillade became transparent. So that the sharpshooters of the line ranged on the outlook behind their paving-stone dike and the sharpshooters of the banlieue massed at the corner of the street suddenly pointed out to each other something moving through the smoke.

At the moment when Gavroche was relieving a sergeant, who was lying near a stone door-post, of his cartridges, a bullet struck the body.

“Fichtre!” ejaculated Gavroche. “They are killing my dead men for me.”

A second bullet struck a spark from the pavement beside him. — A third overturned his basket.

Gavroche looked and saw that this came from the men of the banlieue.

He sprang to his feet, stood erect, with his hair flying in the wind, his hands on his hips, his eyes fixed on the National Guardsmen who were firing, and sang:

“On est laid à Nanterre,   “Men are ugly at Nanterre,
C’est la faute à Voltaire;   ’Tis the fault of Voltaire;
Et bête à Palaiseau,   And dull at Palaiseau,
C’est la faute à Rousseau.”   ’Tis the fault of Rousseau.”

Then he picked up his basket, replaced the cartridges which had fallen from it, without missing a single one, and, advancing towards the fusillade, set about plundering another cartridge-box. There a fourth bullet missed him, again. Gavroche sang:

“Je ne suis pas notaire,   “I am not a notary,
C’est la faute à Voltaire;   ’Tis the fault of Voltaire;
Je suis un petit oiseau,   I’m a little bird,
C’est la faute à Rousseau.”   ’Tis the fault of Rousseau.”

A fifth bullet only succeeded in drawing from him a third couplet.

“Joie est mon caractère,   “Joy is my character,
C’est la faute à Voltaire;   ’Tis the fault of Voltaire;
Misère est mon trousseau,   Misery is my trousseau,
C’est la faute à Rousseau.”   ’Tis the fault of Rousseau.”

Thus it went on for some time.

It was a charming and terrible sight. Gavroche, though shot at, was teasing the fusillade. He had the air of being greatly diverted. It was the sparrow pecking at the sportsmen. To each discharge he retorted with a couplet. They aimed at him constantly, and always missed him. The National Guardsmen and the soldiers laughed as they took aim at him. He lay down, sprang to his feet, hid in the corner of a doorway, then made a bound, disappeared, re-appeared, scampèred away, returned, replied to the grape-shot with his thumb at his nose, and, all the while, went on pillaging the cartouches, emptying the cartridge-boxes, and filling his basket. The insurgents, panting with anxiety, followed him with their eyes. The barricade trembled; he sang. He was not a child, he was not a man; he was a strange gamin-fairy. He might have been called the invulnerable dwarf of the fray. The bullets flew after him, he was more nimble than they. He played a fearful game of hide and seek with death; every time that the flat-nosed face of the spectre approached, the urchin administered to it a fillip.

One bullet, however, better aimed or more treacherous than the rest, finally struck the will-o'-the-wisp of a child. Gavroche was seen to stagger, then he sank to the earth. The whole barricade gave vent to a cry; but there was something of Antaeus in that pygmy; for the gamin to touch the pavement is the same as for the giant to touch the earth; Gavroche had fallen only to rise again; he remained in a sitting posture, a long thread of blood streaked his face, he raised both arms in the air, glanced in the direction whence the shot had come, and began to sing:

“Je suis tombé par terre, “I have fallen to the earth,
C’est la faute à Voltaire; ’Tis the fault of Voltaire;
Le nez dans le ruisseau, With my nose in the gutter,
C’est la faute à . . . “ ’Tis the fault of . . .”

He did not finish. A second bullet from the same marksman stopped him short. This time he fell face downward on the pavement, and moved no more. This grand little soul had taken its flight.

CHAPTER XVI — HOW FROM A BROTHER ONE BECOMES A FATHER

At that same moment, in the garden of the Luxembourg, — for the gaze of the drama must be everywhere present, — two children were holding each other by the hand. One might have been seven years old, the other five. The rain having soaked them, they were walking along the paths on the sunny side; the elder was leading the younger; they were pale and ragged; they had the air of wild birds. The smaller of them said: “I am very hungry.”

The elder, who was already somewhat of a protector, was leading his brother with his left hand and in his right he carried a small stick.

They were alone in the garden. The garden was deserted, the gates had been closed by order of the police, on account of the insurrection. The troops who had been bivouacking there had departed for the exigencies of combat.

How did those children come there? Perhaps they had escaped from some guard-house which stood ajar; perhaps there was in the vicinity, at the Barriere d’Enfer; or on the Esplanade de l’Observatoire, or in the neighboring carrefour, dominated by the pediment on which could be read: Invenerunt parvulum pannis involutum, some mountebank’s booth from which they had fled; perhaps they had, on the preceding evening, escaped the eye of the inspectors of the garden at the hour of closing, and had passed the night in some one of those sentry-boxes where people read the papers? The fact is, they were stray lambs and they seemed free. To be astray and to seem free is to be lost. These poor little creatures were, in fact, lost.

These two children were the same over whom Gavroche had been put to some trouble, as the reader will recollect. Children of the Thenardiers, leased out to Magnon, attributed to M. Gillenormand, and now leaves fallen from all these rootless branches, and swept over the ground by the wind. Their clothing, which had been clean in Magnon’s day, and which had served her as a prospectus with M. Gillenormand, had been converted into rags.

Henceforth these beings belonged to the statistics as “Abandoned children,” whom the police take note of, collect, mislay and find again on the pavements of Paris.

It required the disturbance of a day like that to account for these miserable little creatures being in that garden. If the superintendents had caught sight of them, they would have driven such rags forth. Poor little things do not enter public gardens; still, people should reflect that, as children, they have a right to flowers.

These children were there, thanks to the locked gates. They were there contrary to the regulations. They had slipped into the garden and there they remained. Closed gates do not dismiss the inspectors, oversight is supposed to continue, but it grows slack and reposes; and the inspectors, moved by the public anxiety and more occupied with the outside than the inside, no longer glanced into the garden, and had not seen the two delinquents.

It had rained the night before, and even a little in the morning. But in June, showers do not count for much. An hour after a storm, it can hardly be seen that the beautiful blonde day has wept. The earth, in summer, is as quickly dried as the cheek of a child. At that period of the solstice, the light of full noonday is, so to speak, poignant. It takes everything. It applies itself to the earth, and superposes itself with a sort of suction. One would say that the sun was thirsty. A shower is but a glass of water; a rainstorm is instantly drunk up. In the morning everything was dripping, in the afternoon everything is powdered over.

Nothing is so worthy of admiration as foliage washed by the rain and wiped by the rays of sunlight; it is warm freshness. The gardens and meadows, having water at their roots, and sun in their flowers, become perfuming-pans of incense, and smoke with all their odors at once. Everything smiles, sings and offers itself. One feels gently intoxicated. The springtime is a provisional paradise, the sun helps man to have patience.

There are beings who demand nothing further; mortals, who, having the azure of heaven, say: “It is enough!” dreamers absorbed in the wonderful, dipping into the idolatry of nature, indifferent to good and evil, contemplators of cosmos and radiantly forgetful of man, who do not understand how people can occupy themselves with the hunger of these, and the thirst of those, with the nudity of the poor in winter, with the lymphatic curvature of the little spinal column, with the pallet, the attic, the dungeon, and the rags of shivering young girls, when they can dream beneath the trees; peaceful and terrible spirits they, and pitilessly satisfied. Strange to say, the infinite suffices them. That great need of man, the finite, which admits of embrace, they ignore. The finite which admits of progress and sublime toil, they do not think about. The indefinite, which is born from the human and divine combination of the infinite and the finite, escapes them. Provided that they are face to face with immensity, they smile. Joy never, ecstasy forever. Their life lies in surrendering their personality in contemplation. The history of humanity is for them only a detailed plan. All is not there; the true All remains without; what is the use of busying oneself over that detail, man? Man suffers, that is quite possible; but look at Aldebaran rising! The mother has no more milk, the new-born babe is dying. I know nothing about that, but just look at this wonderful rosette which a slice of wood-cells of the pine presents under the microscope! Compare the most beautiful Mechlin lace to that if you can! These thinkers forget to love. The zodiac thrives with them to such a point that it prevents their seeing the weeping child. God eclipses their souls. This is a family of minds which are, at once, great and petty. Horace was one of them; so was Goethe. La Fontaine perhaps; magnificent egoists of the infinite, tranquil spectators of sorrow, who do not behold Nero if the weather be fair, for whom the sun conceals the funeral pile, who would look on at an execution by the guillotine in the search for an effect of light, who hear neither the cry nor the sob, nor the death rattle, nor the alarm peal, for whom everything is well, since there is a month of May, who, so long as there are clouds of purple and gold above their heads, declare themselves content, and who are determined to be happy until the radiance of the stars and the songs of the birds are exhausted.

These are dark radiances. They have no suspicion that they are to be pitied. Certainly they are so. He who does not weep does not see. They are to be admired and pitied, as one would both pity and admire a being at once night and day, without eyes beneath his lashes but with a star on his brow.

The indifference of these thinkers, is, according to some, a superior philosophy. That may be; but in this superiority there is some infirmity. One may be immortal and yet limp: witness Vulcan. One may be more than man and less than man. There is incomplete immensity in nature. Who knows whether the sun is not a blind man?

But then, what? In whom can we trust? Solem quis dicere falsum audeat? Who shall dare to say that the sun is false? Thus certain geniuses, themselves, certain Very-Lofty mortals, man-stars, may be mistaken? That which is on high at the summit, at the crest, at the zenith, that which sends down so much light on the earth, sees but little, sees badly, sees not at all?

Is not this a desperate state of things? No. But what is there, then, above the sun? The god.

On the 6th of June, 1832, about eleven o'clock in the morning, the Luxembourg, solitary and depopulated, was charming. The quincunxes and flower-beds shed forth balm and dazzling beauty into the sunlight. The branches, wild with the brilliant glow of midday, seemed endeavoring to embrace. In the sycamores there was an uproar of linnets, sparrows triumphed, woodpeckers climbed along the chestnut trees, administering little pecks on the bark. The flower-beds accepted the legitimate royalty of the lilies; the most august of perfumes is that which emanates from whiteness. The peppery odor of the carnations was perceptible. The old crows of Marie de Medici were amorous in the tall trees. The sun gilded, empurpled, set fire to and lighted up the tulips, which are nothing but all the varieties of flame made into flowers. All around the banks of tulips the bees, the sparks of these flame-flowers, hummed. All was grace and gayety, even the impending rain; this relapse, by which the lilies of the valley and the honeysuckles were destined to profit, had nothing disturbing about it; the swallows indulged in the charming threat of flying low. He who was there aspired to happiness; life smelled good; all nature exhaled candor, help, assistance, paternity, caress, dawn. The thoughts which fell from heaven were as sweet as the tiny hand of a baby when one kisses it.

The statues under the trees, white and nude, had robes of shadow pierced with light; these goddesses were all tattered with sunlight; rays hung from them on all sides. Around the great fountain, the earth was already dried up to the point of being burnt. There was sufficient breeze to raise little insurrections of dust here and there. A few yellow leaves, left over from the autumn, chased each other merrily, and seemed to be playing tricks on each other.

This abundance of light had something indescribably reassuring about it. Life, sap, heat, odors overflowed; one was conscious, beneath creation, of the enormous size of the source; in all these breaths permeated with love, in this interchange of reverberations and reflections, in this marvellous expenditure of rays, in this infinite outpouring of liquid gold, one felt the prodigality of the inexhaustible; and, behind this splendor as behind a curtain of flame, one caught a glimpse of God, that millionaire of stars.

Thanks to the sand, there was not a speck of mud; thanks to the rain, there was not a grain of ashes. The clumps of blossoms had just been bathed; every sort of velvet, satin, gold and varnish, which springs from the earth in the form of flowers, was irreproachable. This magnificence was cleanly. The grand silence of happy nature filled the garden. A celestial silence that is compatible with a thousand sorts of music, the cooing of nests, the buzzing of swarms, the flutterings of the breeze. All the harmony of the season was complete in one gracious whole; the entrances and exits of spring took place in proper order; the lilacs ended; the jasmines began; some flowers were tardy, some insects in advance of their time; the van-guard of the red June butterflies fraternized with the rear-guard of the white butterflies of May. The plantain trees were getting their new skins. The breeze hollowed out undulations in the magnificent enormity of the chestnut-trees. It was splendid. A veteran from the neighboring barracks, who was gazing through the fence, said: “Here is the Spring presenting arms and in full uniform.”

All nature was breakfasting; creation was at table; this was its hour; the great blue cloth was spread in the sky, and the great green cloth on earth; the sun lighted it all up brilliantly. God was serving the universal repast. Each creature had his pasture or his mess. The ring-dove found his hemp-seed, the chaffinch found his millet, the goldfinch found chickweed, the red-breast found worms, the green finch found flies, the fly found infusoriae, the bee found flowers. They ate each other somewhat, it is true, which is the misery of evil mixed with good; but not a beast of them all had an empty stomach.

The two little abandoned creatures had arrived in the vicinity of the grand fountain, and, rather bewildered by all this light, they tried to hide themselves, the instinct of the poor and the weak in the presence of even impersonal magnificence; and they kept behind the swans’ hutch.

Here and there, at intervals, when the wind blew, shouts, clamor, a sort of tumultuous death rattle, which was the firing, and dull blows, which were discharges of cannon, struck the ear confusedly. Smoke hung over the roofs in the direction of the Halles. A bell, which had the air of an appeal, was ringing in the distance.

These children did not appear to notice these noises. The little one repeated from time to time: “I am hungry.”

Almost at the same instant with the children, another couple approached the great basin. They consisted of a goodman, about fifty years of age, who was leading by the hand a little fellow of six. No doubt, a father and his son. The little man of six had a big brioche.

At that epoch, certain houses abutting on the river, in the Rues Madame and d'Enfer, had keys to the Luxembourg garden, of which the lodgers enjoyed the use when the gates were shut, a privilege which was suppressed later on. This father and son came from one of these houses, no doubt.

The two poor little creatures watched "that gentleman" approaching, and hid themselves a little more thoroughly.

He was a bourgeois. The same person, perhaps, whom Marius had one day heard, through his love fever, near the same grand basin, counselling his son "to avoid excesses." He had an affable and haughty air, and a mouth which was always smiling, since it did not shut. This mechanical smile, produced by too much jaw and too little skin, shows the teeth rather than the soul. The child, with his brioche, which he had bitten into but had not finished eating, seemed satiated. The child was dressed as a National Guardsman, owing to the insurrection, and the father had remained clad as a bourgeois out of prudence.

Father and son halted near the fountain where two swans were sporting. This bourgeois appeared to cherish a special admiration for the swans. He resembled them in this sense, that he walked like them.

For the moment, the swans were swimming, which is their principal talent, and they were superb.

If the two poor little beings had listened and if they had been of an age to understand, they might have gathered the words of this grave man. The father was saying to his son:

"The sage lives content with little. Look at me, my son. I do not love pomp. I am never seen in clothes decked with gold lace and stones; I leave that false splendor to badly organized souls."

Here the deep shouts which proceeded from the direction of the Halles burst out with fresh force of bell and uproar.

"What is that?" inquired the child.

The father replied:

"It is the Saturnalia."

All at once, he caught sight of the two little ragged boys behind the green swan-hutch.

"There is the beginning," said he.

And, after a pause, he added:

"Anarchy is entering this garden."

In the meanwhile, his son took a bite of his brioche, spit it out, and, suddenly burst out crying.

"What are you crying about?" demanded his father.

"I am not hungry any more," said the child.

The father's smile became more accentuated.

"One does not need to be hungry in order to eat a cake."

"My cake tires me. It is stale."

"Don't you want any more of it?"

"No."

The father pointed to the swans.

"Throw it to those palmipeds."

The child hesitated. A person may not want any more of his cake; but that is no reason for giving it away.

The father went on:

"Be humane. You must have compassion on animals."

And, taking the cake from his son, he flung it into the basin.

The cake fell very near the edge.

The swans were far away, in the centre of the basin, and busy with some prey. They had seen neither the bourgeois nor the brioche.

The bourgeois, feeling that the cake was in danger of being wasted, and moved by this useless shipwreck, entered upon a telegraphic agitation, which finally attracted the attention of the swans.

They perceived something floating, steered for the edge like ships, as they are, and slowly directed their course toward the brioche, with the stupid majesty which befits white creatures.

"The swans [cygnes] understand signs [signes]," said the bourgeois, delighted to make a jest.

At that moment, the distant tumult of the city underwent another sudden increase. This time it was sinister. There are some gusts of wind which speak more distinctly than others. The one which was blowing at that moment brought clearly defined drum-beats, clamors, platoon firing, and the dismal replies of the tocsin and the cannon. This coincided with a black cloud which suddenly veiled the sun.

The swans had not yet reached the brioche.

"Let us return home," said the father, "they are attacking the Tuileries."

He grasped his son's hand again. Then he continued:

“From the Tuileries to the Luxembourg, there is but the distance which separates Royalty from the peerage; that is not far. Shots will soon rain down.”

He glanced at the cloud.

“Perhaps it is rain itself that is about to shower down; the sky is joining in; the younger branch is condemned. Let us return home quickly.”

“I should like to see the swans eat the brioche,” said the child.

The father replied:

“That would be imprudent.”

And he led his little bourgeois away.

The son, regretting the swans, turned his head back toward the basin until a corner of the quincunxes concealed it from him.

In the meanwhile, the two little waifs had approached the brioche at the same time as the swans. It was floating on the water. The smaller of them stared at the cake, the elder gazed after the retreating bourgeois.

Father and son entered the labyrinth of walks which leads to the grand flight of steps near the clump of trees on the side of the Rue Madame.

As soon as they had disappeared from view, the elder child hastily flung himself flat on his stomach on the rounding curb of the basin, and clinging to it with his left hand, and leaning over the water, on the verge of falling in, he stretched out his right hand with his stick towards the cake. The swans, perceiving the enemy, made haste, and in so doing, they produced an effect of their breasts which was of service to the little fisher; the water flowed back before the swans, and one of these gentle concentric undulations softly floated the brioche towards the child’s wand. Just as the swans came up, the stick touched the cake. The child gave it a brisk rap, drew in the brioche, frightened away the swans, seized the cake, and sprang to his feet. The cake was wet; but they were hungry and thirsty. The elder broke the cake into two portions, a large one and a small one, took the small one for himself, gave the large one to his brother, and said to him:

“Ram that into your muzzle.”

CHAPTER XVII — MORTUUS PATER FILIUM MORITURUM EXPECTAT

Marius dashed out of the barricade, Combeferre followed him. But he was too late. Gavroche was dead. Combeferre brought back the basket of cartridges; Marius bore the child.

“Alas!” he thought, “that which the father had done for his father, he was requiting to the son; only, Thenardier had brought back his father alive; he was bringing back the child dead.”

When Marius re-entered the redoubt with Gavroche in his arms, his face, like the child, was inundated with blood.

At the moment when he had stooped to lift Gavroche, a bullet had grazed his head; he had not noticed it.

Courfeyrac untied his cravat and with it bandaged Marius’ brow.

They laid Gavroche on the same table with Mabeuf, and spread over the two corpses the black shawl. There was enough of it for both the old man and the child.

Combeferre distributed the cartridges from the basket which he had brought in.

This gave each man fifteen rounds to fire.

Jean Valjean was still in the same place, motionless on his stone post. When Combeferre offered him his fifteen cartridges, he shook his head.

“Here’s a rare eccentric,” said Combeferre in a low voice to Enjolras. “He finds a way of not fighting in this barricade.”

“Which does not prevent him from defending it,” responded Enjolras.

“Heroism has its originals,” resumed Combeferre.

And Courfeyrac, who had overheard, added:

“He is another sort from Father Mabeuf.”

One thing which must be noted is, that the fire which was battering the barricade hardly disturbed the interior. Those who have never traversed the whirlwind of this sort of war can form no idea of the singular moments of tranquillity mingled with these convulsions. Men go and come, they talk, they jest, they lounge. Some one whom we know heard a combatant say to him in the midst of the grape-shot: “We are here as at a bachelor breakfast.” The redoubt of the Rue de la Chanvrerie, we repeat, seemed very calm within. All mutations and all phases had been, or were about to be, exhausted. The position, from critical, had become menacing, and, from menacing, was probably about to become desperate. In proportion as the situation grew gloomy, the glow of heroism empurpled the barricade more and more. Enjolras, who was grave, dominated it, in the attitude of a young Spartan sacrificing his naked sword to the sombre genius, Epidotas.

Combeferre, wearing an apron, was dressing the wounds: Bossuet and Feuilly were making cartridges with the powder-flask picked up by Gavroche on the dead corporal, and Bossuet said to Feuilly: “We are soon to take the diligence for another planet”; Courfeyrac was disposing and arranging on some paving-stones which he had reserved for himself near Enjolras, a complete arsenal, his sword-cane, his gun, two holster pistols, and a cudgel, with the care of a young girl setting a small dunkerque in order. Jean Valjean stared silently at the wall opposite him. An artisan was fastening Mother Hucheloup’s big straw hat on his head with a string, “for fear of sun-stroke,” as he said. The young men from the Cougourde d’Aix were chatting merrily among themselves, as though eager to speak patois for the last time. Joly, who had taken Widow Hucheloup’s mirror from the wall, was examining his tongue in it. Some combatants, having discovered a few crusts of rather mouldy bread, in a drawer, were eagerly devouring them. Marius was disturbed with regard to what his father was about to say to him.

CHAPTER XVIII — THE VULTURE BECOME PREY

We must insist upon one psychological fact peculiar to barricades. Nothing which is characteristic of that surprising war of the streets should be omitted.

Whatever may have been the singular inward tranquillity which we have just mentioned, the barricade, for those who are inside it, remains, none the less, a vision.

There is something of the apocalypse in civil war, all the mists of the unknown are commingled with fierce flashes, revolutions are sphinxes, and any one who has passed through a barricade thinks he has traversed a dream.

The feelings to which one is subject in these places we have pointed out in the case of Marius, and we shall see the consequences; they are both more and less than life. On emerging from a barricade, one no longer knows what one has seen there. One has been terrible, but one knows it not. One has been surrounded with conflicting ideas which had human faces; one’s head has been in the light of the future. There were corpses lying prone there, and phantoms standing erect. The hours were colossal and seemed hours of eternity. One has lived in death. Shadows have passed by. What were they?

One has beheld hands on which there was blood; there was a deafening horror; there was also a frightful silence; there were open mouths which shouted, and other open mouths which held their peace; one was in the midst of smoke, of night, perhaps. One fancied that one had touched the sinister ooze of unknown depths; one stares at something red on one’s finger nails. One no longer remembers anything.

Let us return to the Rue de la Chanvrerie.

All at once, between two discharges, the distant sound of a clock striking the hour became audible.

“It is midday,” said Combeferre.

The twelve strokes had not finished striking when Enjolras sprang to his feet, and from the summit of the barricade hurled this thundering shout:

“Carry stones up into the houses; line the windowsills and the roofs with them. Half the men to their guns, the other half to the paving-stones. There is not a minute to be lost.”

A squad of sappers and miners, axe on shoulder, had just made their appearance in battle array at the end of the street.

This could only be the head of a column; and of what column? The attacking column, evidently; the sappers charged with the demolition of the barricade must always precede the soldiers who are to scale it.

They were, evidently, on the brink of that moment which M. Clermont-Tonnerre, in 1822, called “the tug of war.”

Enjolras’ order was executed with the correct haste which is peculiar to ships and barricades, the only two scenes of combat where escape is impossible. In less than a minute, two thirds of the stones which Enjolras had had piled up at the door of Corinthe had been carried up to the first floor and the attic, and before a second minute had elapsed, these stones, artistically set one upon the other, walled up the sash-window on the first floor and the windows in the roof to half their height. A few loop-holes carefully planned by Feuilly, the principal architect, allowed of the passage of the gun-barrels. This armament of the windows could be effected all the more easily since the firing of grape-shot had ceased. The two cannons were now discharging ball against the centre of the barrier in order to make a hole there, and, if possible, a breach for the assault.

When the stones destined to the final defence were in place, Enjolras had the bottles which he had set under the table where Mabeuf lay, carried to the first floor.

“Who is to drink that?” Bossuet asked him.

“They,” replied Enjolras.

Then they barricaded the window below, and held in readiness the iron cross-bars which served to secure the door of the wine-shop at night.

The fortress was complete. The barricade was the rampart, the wine-shop was the dungeon. With the stones which remained they stopped up the outlet.

As the defenders of a barricade are always obliged to be sparing of their ammunition, and as the assailants know this, the assailants combine their arrangements with a sort of irritating leisure, expose themselves to fire prematurely, though in appearance more than in reality, and take their ease.

The preparations for attack are always made with a certain methodical deliberation; after which, the lightning strikes.

This deliberation permitted Enjolras to take a review of everything and to perfect everything. He felt that, since such men were to die, their death ought to be a masterpiece.

He said to Marius: “We are the two leaders. I will give the last orders inside. Do you remain outside and observe.”

Marius posted himself on the lookout upon the crest of the barricade.

Enjolras had the door of the kitchen, which was the ambulance, as the reader will remember, nailed up.

“No splashing of the wounded,” he said.

He issued his final orders in the tap-room in a curt, but profoundly tranquil tone; Feuilly listened and replied in the name of all.

“On the first floor, hold your axes in readiness to cut the staircase. Have you them?”

“Yes,” said Feuilly.

“How many?”

“Two axes and a pole-axe.”

“That is good. There are now twenty-six combatants of us on foot. How many guns are there?”

“Thirty-four.”

“Eight too many. Keep those eight guns loaded like the rest and at hand. Swords and pistols in your belts. Twenty men to the barricade. Six ambushed in the attic windows, and at the window on the first floor to fire on the assailants through the loop-holes in the stones. Let not a single worker remain inactive here. Presently, when the drum beats the assault, let the twenty below stairs rush to the barricade. The first to arrive will have the best places.”

These arrangements made, he turned to Javert and said:

“I am not forgetting you.”

And, laying a pistol on the table, he added:

“The last man to leave this room will smash the skull of this spy.”

“Here?” inquired a voice.

“No, let us not mix their corpses with our own. The little barricade of the Mondetour lane can be scaled. It is only four feet high. The man is well pinioned. He shall be taken thither and put to death.”

There was some one who was more impassive at that moment than Enjolras, it was Javert. Here Jean Valjean made his appearance.

He had been lost among the group of insurgents. He stepped forth and said to Enjolras:

“You are the commander?”

“Yes.”

“You thanked me a while ago.”

“In the name of the Republic. The barricade has two saviors, Marius Pontmercy and yourself.”

“Do you think that I deserve a recompense?”

“Certainly.”

“Well, I request one.”

“What is it?”

“That I may blow that man’s brains out.”

Javert raised his head, saw Jean Valjean, made an almost imperceptible movement, and said:

“That is just.”

As for Enjolras, he had begun to re-load his rifle; he cut his eyes about him:

“No objections.”

And he turned to Jean Valjean:

“Take the spy.”

Jean Valjean did, in fact, take possession of Javert, by seating himself on the end of the table. He seized the pistol, and a faint click announced that he had cocked it.

Almost at the same moment, a blast of trumpets became audible.

“Take care!” shouted Marius from the top of the barricade.

Javert began to laugh with that noiseless laugh which was peculiar to him, and gazing intently at the insurgents, he said to them:

“You are in no better case than I am.”

“All out!” shouted Enjolras.

The insurgents poured out tumultuously, and, as they went, received in the back, — may we be permitted the expression, — this sally of Javert’s:

“We shall meet again shortly!”

CHAPTER XIX — JEAN VALJEAN TAKES HIS REVENGE

When Jean Valjean was left alone with Javert, he untied the rope which fastened the prisoner across the middle of the body, and the knot of which was under the table. After this he made him a sign to rise.

Javert obeyed with that indefinable smile in which the supremacy of enchained authority is condensed.

Jean Valjean took Javert by the martingale, as one would take a beast of burden by the breast-band, and, dragging the latter after him, emerged from the wine-shop slowly, because Javert, with his impeded limbs, could take only very short steps.

Jean Valjean had the pistol in his hand.

In this manner they crossed the inner trapezium of the barricade. The insurgents, all intent on the attack, which was imminent, had their backs turned to these two.

Marius alone, stationed on one side, at the extreme left of the barricade, saw them pass. This group of victim and executioner was illuminated by the sepulchral light which he bore in his own soul.

Jean Valjean with some difficulty, but without relaxing his hold for a single instant, made Javert, pinioned as he was, scale the little entrenchment in the Mondetour lane.

When they had crossed this barrier, they found themselves alone in the lane. No one saw them. Among the heap they could distinguish a livid face, streaming hair, a pierced hand and the half nude breast of a woman. It was Eponine. The corner of the houses hid them from the insurgents. The corpses carried away from the barricade formed a terrible pile a few paces distant.

Javert gazed askance at this body, and, profoundly calm, said in a low tone:

“It strikes me that I know that girl.”

Then he turned to Jean Valjean.

Jean Valjean thrust the pistol under his arm and fixed on Javert a look which it required no words to interpret: “Javert, it is I.”

Javert replied:

“Take your revenge.”

Jean Valjean drew from his pocket a knife, and opened it.

“A clasp-knife!” exclaimed Javert, “you are right. That suits you better.”

Jean Valjean cut the martingale which Javert had about his neck, then he cut the cords on his wrists, then, stooping down, he cut the cord on his feet; and, straightening himself up, he said to him:

“You are free.”

Javert was not easily astonished. Still, master of himself though he was, he could not repress a start. He remained open-mouthed and motionless.

Jean Valjean continued:

“I do not think that I shall escape from this place. But if, by chance, I do, I live, under the name of Fauchelevent, in the Rue de l’Homme Arme, No. 7.”

Javert snarled like a tiger, which made him half open one corner of his mouth, and he muttered between his teeth:

“Have a care.”

“Go,” said Jean Valjean.

Javert began again:

“Thou saidst Fauchelevent, Rue de l’Homme Arme?”

“Number 7.”

Javert repeated in a low voice:— “Number 7.”

He buttoned up his coat once more, resumed the military stiffness between his shoulders, made a half turn, folded his arms and, supporting his chin on one of his hands, he set out in the direction of the Halles. Jean Valjean followed him with his eyes:

A few minutes later, Javert turned round and shouted to Jean Valjean:

“You annoy me. Kill me, rather.”

Javert himself did not notice that he no longer addressed Jean Valjean as “thou.”

“Be off with you,” said Jean Valjean.

Javert retreated slowly. A moment later he turned the corner of the Rue des Prêcheurs.

When Javert had disappeared, Jean Valjean fired his pistol in the air.

Then he returned to the barricade and said:

“It is done.”

In the meanwhile, this is what had taken place.

Marius, more intent on the outside than on the interior, had not, up to that time, taken a good look at the pinioned spy in the dark background of the tap-room.

When he beheld him in broad daylight, striding over the barricade in order to proceed to his death, he recognized him. Something suddenly recurred to his mind. He recalled the inspector of the Rue de Pontoise, and the two pistols which the latter had handed to him and which he, Marius, had used in this very barricade, and not only did he recall his face, but his name as well.

This recollection was misty and troubled, however, like all his ideas.

It was not an affirmation that he made, but a question which he put to himself:

“Is not that the inspector of police who told me that his name was Javert?”

Perhaps there was still time to intervene in behalf of that man. But, in the first place, he must know whether this was Javert.

Marius called to Enjolras, who had just stationed himself at the other extremity of the barricade:

“Enjolras!”

“What?”

“What is the name of yonder man?”

“What man?”

“The police agent. Do you know his name?”

“Of course. He told us.”

“What is it?”

“Javert.”

Marius sprang to his feet.

At that moment, they heard the report of the pistol.

Jean Valjean re-appeared and cried: “It is done.”

A gloomy chill traversed Marius’ heart.

CHAPTER XX — THE DEAD ARE IN THE RIGHT AND THE LIVING ARE NOT IN THE WRONG

The death agony of the barricade was about to begin.

Everything contributed to its tragic majesty at that supreme moment; a thousand mysterious crashes in the air, the breath of armed masses set in movement in the streets which were not visible, the intermittent gallop of cavalry, the heavy shock of artillery on the march, the firing by squads, and the cannonades crossing each other in the labyrinth of Paris, the smokes of battle mounting all gilded above the roofs, indescribable and vaguely terrible cries, lightnings of menace everywhere, the tocsin of Saint-Merry, which now had the accents of a sob, the mildness of the weather, the splendor of the sky filled with sun and clouds, the beauty of the day, and the alarming silence of the houses.

For, since the preceding evening, the two rows of houses in the Rue de la Chanvrerie had become two walls; ferocious walls, doors closed, windows closed, shutters closed.

In those days, so different from those in which we live, when the hour was come, when the people wished to put an end to a situation, which had lasted too long, with a charter granted or with a legal country, when universal wrath was diffused in the atmosphere, when the city consented to the tearing up of the pavements, when insurrection made the bourgeoisie smile by whispering its password in its ear, then the inhabitant, thoroughly penetrated with the revolt, so to speak, was the auxiliary of the combatant, and the house fraternized with the improvised fortress which rested on it. When the situation was not ripe, when the insurrection was not decidedly admitted, when the masses disowned the movement, all was over with the combatants, the city was changed into a desert around the revolt, souls grew chilled, refuges were nailed up, and the street turned into a defile to help the army to take the barricade.

A people cannot be forced, through surprise, to walk more quickly than it chooses. Woe to whomsoever tries to force its hand! A people does not let itself go at random. Then it abandons the insurrection to itself. The insurgents become noxious, infected with the plague. A house is an escarpment, a door is a refusal, a facade is a wall. This wall hears, sees and will not. It might open and save you. No. This wall is a judge. It gazes at you and condemns you. What dismal things are closed houses. They seem dead, they are living. Life which is, as it were, suspended there, persists there. No one has gone out of them for four and twenty hours, but no one is missing from them. In the interior of that rock, people go and come, go to bed and rise again; they are a family party there; there they eat and drink; they are afraid, a terrible thing! Fear excuses this fearful lack of hospitality; terror is mixed with it, an extenuating circumstance. Sometimes, even, and this has been actually seen, fear turns to passion; fright may change into fury, as prudence does into rage; hence this wise saying: "The enraged moderates." There are outbursts of supreme terror, whence springs wrath like a mournful smoke.— "What do these people want? What have they come there to do? Let them get out of the scrape. So much the worse for them. It is their fault. They are only getting what they deserve. It does not concern us. Here is our poor street all riddled with balls. They are a pack of rascals. Above all things, don't open the door." — And the house assumes the air of a tomb. The insurgent is in the death-throes in front of that house; he sees the grape-shot and naked swords drawing near; if he cries, he knows that they are listening to him, and that no one will come; there stand walls which might protect him, there are men who might save him; and these walls have ears of flesh, and these men have bowels of stone.

Whom shall he reproach?

No one and every one.

The incomplete times in which we live.

It is always at its own risk and peril that Utopia is converted into revolution, and from philosophical protest becomes an armed protest, and from Minerva turns to Pallas.

The Utopia which grows impatient and becomes revolt knows what awaits it; it almost always comes too soon. Then it becomes resigned, and stoically accepts catastrophe in lieu of triumph. It serves those who deny it without complaint, even excusing them, and even disculpates them, and its magnanimity consists in consenting to abandonment. It is indomitable in the face of obstacles and gentle towards ingratitude.

Is this ingratitude, however?

Yes, from the point of view of the human race.

No, from the point of view of the individual.

Progress is man’s mode of existence. The general life of the human race is called Progress, the collective stride of the human race is called Progress. Progress advances; it makes the great human and terrestrial journey towards the celestial and the divine; it has its halting places where it rallies the laggard troop, it has its stations where it meditates, in the presence of some splendid Canaan suddenly unveiled on its horizon, it has its nights when it sleeps; and it is one of the poignant anxieties of the thinker that he sees the shadow resting on the human soul, and that he gropes in darkness without being able to awaken that slumbering Progress.

“God is dead, perhaps,” said Gerard de Nerval one day to the writer of these lines, confounding progress with God, and taking the interruption of movement for the death of Being.

He who despairs is in the wrong. Progress infallibly awakes, and, in short, we may say that it marches on, even when it is asleep, for it has increased in size. When we behold it erect once more, we find it taller. To be always peaceful does not depend on progress any more than it does on the stream; erect no barriers, cast in no boulders; obstacles make water froth and humanity boil. Hence arise troubles; but after these troubles, we recognize the fact that ground has been gained. Until order, which is nothing else than universal peace, has been established, until harmony and unity reign, progress will have revolutions as its halting-places.

What, then, is progress? We have just enunciated it; the permanent life of the peoples.

Now, it sometimes happens, that the momentary life of individuals offers resistance to the eternal life of the human race.

Let us admit without bitterness, that the individual has his distinct interests, and can, without forfeiture, stipulate for his interest, and defend it; the present has its pardonable dose of egotism; momentary life has its rights, and is not bound to sacrifice itself constantly to the future. The generation which is passing in its turn over the earth, is not forced to abridge it for the sake of the generations, its equal, after all, who will have their turn later on.— “I exist,” murmurs that some one whose name is All. “I am young and in love, I am old and I wish to repose, I am the father of a family, I toil, I prosper, I am successful in business, I have houses to lease, I have money in the government funds, I am happy, I have a wife and children, I have all this, I desire to live, leave me in peace.” — Hence, at certain hours, a profound cold broods over the magnanimous vanguard of the human race.

Utopia, moreover, we must admit, quits its radiant sphere when it makes war. It, the truth of to-morrow, borrows its mode of procedure, battle, from the lie of yesterday. It, the future, behaves like the past. It, pure idea, becomes a deed of violence. It complicates its heroism with a violence for which it is just that it should be held to answer; a violence of occasion and expedient, contrary to principle, and for which it is fatally punished. The Utopia, insurrection, fights with the old military code in its fist; it shoots spies, it executes traitors; it suppresses living beings and flings them into unknown darkness. It makes use of death, a serious matter. It seems as though Utopia had no longer any faith in radiance, its irresistible and incorruptible force. It strikes with the sword. Now, no sword is simple. Every blade has two edges; he who wounds with the one is wounded with the other.

Having made this reservation, and made it with all severity, it is impossible for us not to admire, whether they succeed or not, those the glorious combatants of the future, the confessors of Utopia. Even when they miscarry, they are worthy of veneration; and it is, perhaps, in failure, that they possess the most majesty. Victory, when it is in accord with progress, merits the applause of the people; but a heroic defeat merits their tender compassion. The one is magnificent, the other sublime. For our own part, we prefer martyrdom to success. John Brown is greater than Washington, and Pisacane is greater than Garibaldi.

It certainly is necessary that some one should take the part of the vanquished.

We are unjust towards these great men who attempt the future, when they fail.

Revolutionists are accused of sowing fear abroad. Every barricade seems a crime. Their theories are incriminated, their aim suspected, their ulterior motive is feared, their conscience denounced. They are reproached with raising, erecting, and heaping up, against the reigning social state, a mass of miseries, of griefs, of iniquities, of wrongs, of despairs, and of tearing from the lowest depths blocks of shadow in order therein to embattle themselves and to combat. People shout to them: “You are tearing up the pavements of hell!” They might reply: “That is because our barricade is made of good intentions.”

The best thing, assuredly, is the pacific solution. In short, let us agree that when we behold the pavement, we think of the bear, and it is a good will which renders society uneasy. But it depends on society to save itself, it is to its own good will that we make our appeal. No violent remedy is necessary. To study evil amiably, to prove its existence, then to cure it. It is to this that we invite it.

However that may be, even when fallen, above all when fallen, these men, who at every point of the universe, with their eyes fixed on France, are striving for the grand work with the inflexible logic of the ideal, are august; they give their life a free offering to progress; they accomplish the will of providence; they perform a religious act. At the appointed hour, with as much disinterestedness as an actor who answers to his cue, in obedience to the divine stage-manager, they enter the tomb. And this hopeless combat, this stoical disappearance they accept in order to bring about the supreme and universal consequences, the magnificent and irresistibly human movement begun on the 14th of July, 1789; these soldiers are priests. The French revolution is an act of God.

Moreover, there are, and it is proper to add this distinction to the distinctions already pointed out in another chapter, — there are accepted revolutions, revolutions which are called revolutions; there are refused revolutions, which are called riots.

An insurrection which breaks out, is an idea which is passing its examination before the people. If the people lets fall a black ball, the idea is dried fruit; the insurrection is a mere skirmish.

Waging war at every summons and every time that Utopia desires it, is not the thing for the peoples. Nations have not always and at every hour the temperament of heroes and martyrs.

They are positive. A priori, insurrection is repugnant to them, in the first place, because it often results in a catastrophe, in the second place, because it always has an abstraction as its point of departure.

Because, and this is a noble thing, it is always for the ideal, and for the ideal alone, that those who sacrifice themselves do thus sacrifice themselves. An insurrection is an enthusiasm. Enthusiasm may wax wroth; hence the appeal to arms. But every insurrection, which aims at a government or a regime, aims higher. Thus, for instance, and we insist upon it, what the chiefs of the insurrection of 1832, and, in particular, the young enthusiasts of the Rue de la Chanvrerie were combating, was not precisely

Louis Philippe. The majority of them, when talking freely, did justice to this king who stood midway between monarchy and revolution; no one hated him. But they attacked the younger branch of the divine right in Louis Philippe as they had attacked its elder branch in Charles X.; and that which they wished to overturn in overturning royalty in France, was, as we have explained, the usurpation of man over man, and of privilege over right in the entire universe. Paris without a king has as result the world without despots. This is the manner in which they reasoned. Their aim was distant no doubt, vague perhaps, and it retreated in the face of their efforts; but it was great.

Thus it is. And we sacrifice ourselves for these visions, which are almost always illusions for the sacrificed, but illusions with which, after all, the whole of human certainty is mingled. We throw ourselves into these tragic affairs and become intoxicated with that which we are about to do. Who knows? We may succeed. We are few in number, we have a whole army arrayed against us; but we are defending right, the natural law, the sovereignty of each one over himself from which no abdication is possible, justice and truth, and in case of need, we die like the three hundred Spartans. We do not think of Don Quixote but of Leonidas. And we march straight before us, and once pledged, we do not draw back, and we rush onwards with head held low, cherishing as our hope an unprecedented victory, revolution completed, progress set free again, the aggrandizement of the human race, universal deliverance; and in the event of the worst, Thermopylae.

These passages of arms for the sake of progress often suffer shipwreck, and we have just explained why. The crowd is restive in the presence of the impulses of paladins. Heavy masses, the multitudes which are fragile because of their very weight, fear adventures; and there is a touch of adventure in the ideal.

Moreover, and we must not forget this, interests which are not very friendly to the ideal and the sentimental are in the way. Sometimes the stomach paralyzes the heart.

The grandeur and beauty of France lies in this, that she takes less from the stomach than other nations: she more easily knots the rope about her loins. She is the first awake, the last asleep. She marches forwards. She is a seeker.

This arises from the fact that she is an artist.

The ideal is nothing but the culminating point of logic, the same as the beautiful is nothing but the summit of the true. Artistic peoples are also consistent peoples. To love beauty is to see the light. That is why the torch of Europe, that is to say of civilization, was first borne by Greece, who passed it on to Italy, who handed it on to France. Divine, illuminating nations of scouts! Vitaelampada tradunt.

It is an admirable thing that the poetry of a people is the element of its progress. The amount of civilization is measured by the quantity of imagination. Only, a civilizing people should remain a manly people. Corinth, yes; Sybaris, no. Whoever becomes effeminate makes himself a bastard. He must be neither a dilettante nor a virtuoso: but he must be artistic. In the matter of civilization, he must not refine, but he must sublime. On this condition, one gives to the human race the pattern of the ideal.

The modern ideal has its type in art, and its means is science. It is through science that it will realize that august vision of the poets, the socially beautiful. Eden will be reconstructed by A+B. At the point which civilization has now reached, the exact is a necessary element of the splendid, and the artistic sentiment is not only served, but completed by the scientific organ; dreams must be calculated. Art, which is the conqueror, should have for support science, which is the walker; the solidity of the creature which is ridden is of importance. The modern spirit is the genius of Greece with the genius of India as its vehicle; Alexander on the elephant.

Races which are petrified in dogma or demoralized by lucre are unfit to guide civilization. Genuflection before the idol or before money wastes away the muscles which walk and the will which advances. Hieratic or mercantile absorption lessens a people’s power of radiance, lowers its horizon by lowering its level, and deprives it of that intelligence, at once both human and divine of the universal goal, which makes missionaries of nations. Babylon has no ideal; Carthage has no ideal. Athens and Rome have and keep, throughout all the nocturnal darkness of the centuries, halos of civilization.

France is in the same quality of race as Greece and Italy. She is Athenian in the matter of beauty, and Roman in her greatness. Moreover, she is good. She gives herself. Oftener than is the case with other races, is she in the humor for self-devotion and sacrifice. Only, this humor seizes upon her, and again abandons her. And therein lies the great peril for those who run when she desires only to walk, or who walk on when she desires to halt. France has her relapses into materialism, and, at certain instants, the ideas which obstruct that sublime brain have no longer anything which recalls French greatness and are of the dimensions of a Missouri or a South Carolina. What is to be done in such a case? The giantess plays at being a dwarf; immense France has her freaks of pettiness. That is all.

To this there is nothing to say. Peoples, like planets, possess the right to an eclipse. And all is well, provided that the light returns and that the eclipse does not degenerate into night. Dawn and resurrection are synonymous. The reappearance of the light is identical with the persistence of the *I*.

Let us state these facts calmly. Death on the barricade or the tomb in exile, is an acceptable occasion for devotion. The real name of devotion is disinterestedness. Let the abandoned allow themselves to be abandoned, let the exiled allow themselves to be exiled, and let us confine ourselves to entreating great nations not to retreat too far, when they do retreat. One must not push too far in descent under pretext of a return to reason.

Matter exists, the minute exists, interest exists, the stomach exists; but the stomach must not be the sole wisdom. The life of the moment has its rights, we admit, but permanent life has its rights also. Alas! the fact that one is mounted does not preclude a fall. This can be seen in history more frequently than is desirable: A nation is great, it tastes the ideal, then it bites the mire, and finds it good; and if it be asked how it happens that it has abandoned Socrates for Falstaff, it replies: “Because I love statesmen.”

One word more before returning to our subject, the conflict.

A battle like the one which we are engaged in describing is nothing else than a convulsion towards the ideal. Progress trammelled is sickly, and is subject to these tragic epilepsies. With that malady of progress, civil war, we have been obliged to come in contact in our passage. This is one of the fatal phases, at once act and entr’acte of that drama whose pivot is a social condemnation, and whose veritable title is Progress.

Progress!

The cry to which we frequently give utterance is our whole thought; and, at the point of this drama which we have now reached, the idea which it contains having still more than one trial to undergo, it is, perhaps, permitted to us, if not to lift the veil from it, to at least allow its light to shine through.

The book which the reader has under his eye at this moment is, from one end to the other, as a whole and in detail, whatever may be its intermittences, exceptions and faults, the march from evil to good, from the unjust to the just, from night to day, from appetite to conscience, from rottenness to life, from hell to heaven, from nothingness to God. Point of departure: matter; point of arrival: the soul. The hydra at the beginning, the angel at the end.

CHAPTER XXI — THE HEROES

All at once, the drum beat the charge.

The attack was a hurricane. On the evening before, in the darkness, the barricade had been approached silently, as by a boa. Now, in broad daylight, in that widening street, surprise was decidedly impossible, rude force had, moreover, been unmasked, the cannon had begun the roar, the army hurled itself on the barricade. Fury now became skill. A powerful detachment of infantry of the line, broken at regular intervals, by the National Guard and the Municipal Guard on foot, and supported by serried masses which could be heard though not seen, debauched into the street at a run, with drums beating, trumpets braying, bayonets levelled, the sappers at their head, and, imperturbable under the projectiles, charged straight for the barricade with the weight of a brazen beam against a wall.

The wall held firm.

The insurgents fired impetuously. The barricade once scaled had a mane of lightning flashes. The assault was so furious, that for one moment, it was inundated with assailants; but it shook off the soldiers as the lion shakes off the dogs, and it was only covered with besiegers as the cliff is covered with foam, to re-appear, a moment later, beetling, black and formidable.

The column, forced to retreat, remained massed in the street, unprotected but terrible, and replied to the redoubt with a terrible discharge of musketry. Any one who has seen fireworks will recall the sheaf formed of interlacing lightnings which is called a bouquet. Let the reader picture to himself this bouquet, no longer vertical but horizontal, bearing a bullet, buck-shot or a biscaien at the tip of each one of its jets of flame, and picking off dead men one after another from its clusters of lightning. The barricade was underneath it.

On both sides, the resolution was equal. The bravery exhibited there was almost barbarous and was complicated with a sort of heroic ferocity which began by the sacrifice of self.

This was the epoch when a National Guardsman fought like a Zouave. The troop wished to make an end of it, insurrection was desirous of fighting. The acceptance of the death agony in the flower of youth and in the flush of health turns intrepidity into frenzy. In this fray, each one underwent the broadening growth of the death hour. The street was strewn with corpses.

The barricade had Enjolras at one of its extremities and Marius at the other. Enjolras, who carried the whole barricade in his head, reserved and sheltered himself; three soldiers fell, one after the other, under his embrasure, without having even seen him; Marius fought unprotected. He made himself a target. He stood with more than half his body above the breastworks. There is no more violent prodigal than the avaricious man who takes the bit in his teeth; there is no man more terrible in action than a dreamer. Marius was formidable and pensive. In battle he was as in a dream. One would have pronounced him a phantom engaged in firing a gun.

The insurgents’ cartridges were giving out; but not their sarcasms. In this whirlwind of the sepulchre in which they stood, they laughed.

Courfeyrac was bare-headed.

“What have you done with your hat?” Bossuet asked him.

Courfeyrac replied:

“They have finally taken it away from me with cannon-balls.”

Or they uttered haughty comments.

“Can any one understand,” exclaimed Feuilly bitterly, “those men, — [and he cited names, well-known names, even celebrated names, some belonging to the old army] — who had promised to join us, and taken an oath to aid us, and who had pledged their honor to it, and who are our generals, and who abandon us!”

And Combeferre restricted himself to replying with a grave smile.

“There are people who observe the rules of honor as one observes the stars, from a great distance.”

The interior of the barricade was so strewn with torn cartridges that one would have said that there had been a snowstorm.

The assailants had numbers in their favor; the insurgents had position. They were at the top of a wall, and they thundered point-blank upon the soldiers tripping over the dead and wounded and entangled in the escarpment. This barricade, constructed as it was and admirably buttressed, was really one of those situations where a handful of men hold a legion in check. Nevertheless, the attacking column, constantly recruited and enlarged under the shower of bullets, drew inexorably nearer, and now, little by little, step by step, but surely, the army closed in around the barricade as the vice grasps the wine-press.

One assault followed another. The horror of the situation kept increasing.

Then there burst forth on that heap of paving-stones, in that Rue de la Chanvrerie, a battle worthy of a wall of Troy. These haggard, ragged, exhausted men, who had had nothing to eat for four and twenty hours, who had not slept, who had but a few more rounds to fire, who were fumbling in their pockets which had been emptied of cartridges, nearly all of whom were wounded, with head or arm bandaged with black and blood-stained linen, with holes in their clothes from which the blood trickled, and who were hardly armed with poor guns and notched swords, became Titans. The barricade was ten times attacked, approached, assailed, scaled, and never captured.

In order to form an idea of this struggle, it is necessary to imagine fire set to a throng of terrible courages, and then to gaze at the conflagration. It was not a combat, it was the interior of a furnace; there mouths breathed the flame; there countenances were extraordinary. The human form seemed impossible there, the combatants flamed forth there, and it was formidable to behold the going and coming in that red glow of those salamanders of the fray.

The successive and simultaneous scenes of this grand slaughter we renounce all attempts at depicting. The epic alone has the right to fill twelve thousand verses with a battle.

One would have pronounced this that hell of Brahmanism, the most redoubtable of the seventeen abysses, which the Veda calls the Forest of Swords.

They fought hand to hand, foot to foot, with pistol shots, with blows of the sword, with their fists, at a distance, close at hand, from above, from below, from everywhere, from the roofs of the houses, from the windows of the wine-shop, from the cellar windows, whither some had crawled. They were one against sixty.

The facade of Corinthe, half demolished, was hideous. The window, tattooed with grape-shot, had lost glass and frame and was nothing now but a shapeless hole, tumultuously blocked with paving-stones.

Bossuet was killed; Feuilly was killed; Courfeyrac was killed; Combeferre, transfixed by three blows from a bayonet in the breast at the moment when he was lifting up a wounded soldier, had only time to cast a glance to heaven when he expired.

Marius, still fighting, was so riddled with wounds, particularly in the head, that his countenance disappeared beneath the blood, and one would have said that his face was covered with a red kerchief.

Enjolras alone was not struck. When he had no longer any weapon, he reached out his hands to right and left and an insurgent thrust some arm or other into his fist. All he had left was the stumps of four swords; one more than Francois I. at Marignan. Homer says: “Diomedes cuts the throat of Axylus, son of Teuthranis, who dwelt in happy Arisba; Euryalus, son of Mecistaeus, exterminates Dresos and Opheltios, Esepius, and that Pedasus whom the naiad Abarbarea bore to the blameless Bucolion; Ulysses overthrows Pidytes of Percosius; Antilochus, Ablerus; Polypaetes, Astyalus; Polydamas, Otos, of Cyllene; and Teucer, Aretaon. Meganthios dies under the blows of Euripylus’ pike. Agamemnon, king of the heroes, flings to earth Elatos, born in the rocky city which is laved by the sounding river Satnois.” In our old poems of exploits, Esplandian attacks the giant marquis Swantibore with a cobbler’s shoulder-stick of fire, and the latter defends himself by stoning the hero with towers which he plucks up by the roots. Our ancient mural frescoes show us the two Dukes of Bretagne and Bourbon, armed, emblazoned and crested in war-like guise, on horseback and approaching each other, their battle-axes in hand, masked with iron, gloved with iron, booted with iron, the one caparisoned in ermine, the other draped in azure: Bretagne with his lion between the two horns of his crown, Bourbon helmeted with a monster fleur de lys on his visor. But, in order to be superb, it is not necessary to wear, like Yvon, the ducal morion, to have in the fist, like Esplandian, a living flame, or, like Phyles, father of Polydamas, to have brought back from Ephyra a good suit of mail, a present from the king of men, Euphetes; it suffices to give one’s life for a conviction or a loyalty. This ingenuous little soldier, yesterday a peasant of Bauce or Limousin, who prowls with his clasp-knife by his side, around the children’s nurses in the Luxembourg garden, this pale young student bent over a piece of anatomy or a book, a blond youth who shaves his beard with scissors, — take both of them, breathe upon them with a breath of duty, place them face to face in the Carrefour Boucherat or in the blind alley Planche-Mibray, and let the one fight for his flag, and the other for his ideal, and let both of them imagine that they are fighting for their country; the struggle will be colossal; and the shadow which this raw recruit and this sawbones in conflict will produce in that grand epic field where humanity is striving, will equal the shadow cast by Megaryon, King of Lycia, tiger-filled, crushing in his embrace the immense body of Ajax, equal to the gods.

CHAPTER XXII — FOOT TO FOOT

When there were no longer any of the leaders left alive, except Enjolras and Marius at the two extremities of the barricade, the centre, which had so long sustained Courfeyrac, Joly, Bossuet, Feuilly and Combeferre, gave way. The cannon, though it had not effected a practicable breach, had made a rather large hollow in the middle of the redoubt; there, the summit of the wall had disappeared before the balls, and had crumbled away; and the rubbish which had fallen, now inside, now outside, had, as it accumulated, formed two piles in the nature of slopes on the two sides of the barrier, one on the inside, the other on the outside. The exterior slope presented an inclined plane to the attack.

A final assault was there attempted, and this assault succeeded. The mass bristling with bayonets and hurled forward at a run, came up with irresistible force, and the serried front of battle of the attacking column made its appearance through the smoke on the crest of the battlements. This time, it was decisive. The group of insurgents who were defending the centre retreated in confusion.

Then the gloomy love of life awoke once more in some of them. Many, finding themselves under the muzzles of this forest of guns, did not wish to die. This is a moment when the instinct of self-preservation emits howls, when the beast re-appears in men. They were hemmed in by the lofty, six-story house which formed the background of their redoubt. This house might prove their salvation. The building was barricaded, and walled, as it were, from top to bottom. Before the troops of the line had reached the interior of the redoubt, there was time for a door to open and shut, the space of a flash of lightning was sufficient for that, and the door of that house, suddenly opened a crack and closed again instantly, was life for these despairing men. Behind this house, there were streets, possible flight, space. They set to knocking at that door with the butts of their guns, and with kicks, shouting, calling, entreating, wringing their hands. No one opened. From the little window on the third floor, the head of the dead man gazed down upon them.

But Enjolras and Marius, and the seven or eight rallied about them, sprang forward and protected them. Enjolras had shouted to the soldiers: “Don’t advance!” and as an officer had not obeyed, Enjolras had killed the officer. He was now in the little inner court of the redoubt, with his back planted against the Corinthe building, a sword in one hand, a rifle in the other, holding open the door of the wine-shop which he barred against assailants. He shouted to the desperate men:— “There is but one door open; this one.” — And shielding them with his body, and facing an entire battalion alone, he made them pass in behind him. All precipitated themselves thither. Enjolras, executing with his rifle, which he now used like a cane, what single-stick players call a “covered rose” round his head, levelled the bayonets around and in front of him, and was the last to enter; and then ensued a horrible moment, when the soldiers tried to make their way in, and the insurgents strove to bar them out. The door was slammed with such violence, that, as it fell back into its frame, it showed the five fingers of a soldier who had been clinging to it, cut off and glued to the post.

Marius remained outside. A shot had just broken his collar bone, he felt that he was fainting and falling. At that moment, with eyes already shut, he felt the shock of a vigorous hand seizing him, and the swoon in which his senses vanished, hardly allowed him time for the thought, mingled with a last memory of Cosette:— “I am taken prisoner. I shall be shot.”

Enjolras, not seeing Marius among those who had taken refuge in the wine-shop, had the same idea. But they had reached a moment when each man has not the time to meditate on his own death. Enjolras fixed the bar across the door, and bolted it, and double-locked it with key and chain, while those outside were battering furiously at it, the soldiers with the butts of their muskets, the sappers with their axes. The assailants were grouped about that door. The siege of the wine-shop was now beginning.

The soldiers, we will observe, were full of wrath.

The death of the artillery-sergeant had enraged them, and then, a still more melancholy circumstance. During the few hours which had preceded the attack, it had been reported among them that the insurgents were mutilating their prisoners, and that there was the headless body of a soldier in the wine-shop. This sort of fatal rumor is the usual accompaniment of civil wars, and it was a false report of this kind which, later on, produced the catastrophe of the Rue Transnonain.

When the door was barricaded, Enjolras said to the others:

“Let us sell our lives dearly.”

Then he approached the table on which lay Mabeuf and Gavroche. Beneath the black cloth two straight and rigid forms were visible, one large, the other small, and the two faces were vaguely outlined beneath the cold folds of the shroud. A hand projected from beneath the winding sheet and hung near the floor. It was that of the old man.

Enjolras bent down and kissed that venerable hand, just as he had kissed his brow on the preceding evening.

These were the only two kisses which he had bestowed in the course of his life.

Let us abridge the tale. The barricade had fought like a gate of Thebes; the wine-shop fought like a house of Saragossa. These resistances are dogged. No quarter. No flag of truce possible. Men are willing to die, provided their opponent will kill them.

When Suchet says:— "Capitulate," — Palafox replies: "After the war with cannon, the war with knives." Nothing was lacking in the capture by assault of the Hucheloup wine-shop; neither paving-stones raining from the windows and the roof on the besiegers and exasperating the soldiers by crushing them horribly, nor shots fired from the attic-windows and the cellar, nor the fury of attack, nor, finally, when the door yielded, the frenzied madness of extermination. The assailants, rushing into the wine-shop, their feet entangled in the panels of the door which had been beaten in and flung on the ground, found not a single combatant there. The spiral staircase, hewn asunder with the axe, lay in the middle of the tap-room, a few wounded men were just breathing their last, every one who was not killed was on the first floor, and from there, through the hole in the ceiling, which had formed the entrance of the stairs, a terrific fire burst forth. It was the last of their cartridges. When they were exhausted, when these formidable men on the point of death had no longer either powder or ball, each grasped in his hands two of the bottles which Enjolras had reserved, and of which we have spoken, and held the scaling party in check with these frightfully fragile clubs. They were bottles of aquafortis.

We relate these gloomy incidents of carnage as they occurred. The besieged man, alas! converts everything into a weapon. Greek fire did not disgrace Archimedes, boiling pitch did not disgrace Bayard. All war is a thing of terror, and there is no choice in it. The musketry of the besiegers, though confined and embarrassed by being directed from below upwards, was deadly. The rim of the hole in the ceiling was speedily surrounded by heads of the slain, whence dripped long, red and smoking streams, the uproar was indescribable; a close and burning smoke almost produced night over this combat. Words are lacking to express horror when it has reached this pitch. There were no longer men in this conflict, which was now infernal. They were no longer giants matched with colossi. It resembled Milton and Dante rather than Homer. Demons attacked, spectres resisted.

It was heroism become monstrous.

CHAPTER XXIII — ORESTES FASTING AND PYLADES DRUNK

At length, by dint of mounting on each other's backs, aiding themselves with the skeleton of the staircase, climbing up the walls, clinging to the ceiling, slashing away at the very brink of the trap-door, the last one who offered resistance, a score of assailants, soldiers, National Guardsmen, municipal guardsmen, in utter confusion, the majority disfigured by wounds in the face during that redoubtable ascent, blinded by blood, furious, rendered savage, made an irruption into the apartment on the first floor. There they found only one man still on his feet, Enjolras. Without cartridges, without sword, he had nothing in his hand now but the barrel of his gun whose stock he had broken over the head of those who were entering. He had placed the billiard table between his assailants and himself; he had retreated into the corner of the room, and there, with haughty eye, and head borne high, with this stump of a weapon in his hand, he was still so alarming as to speedily create an empty space around him. A cry arose:

"He is the leader! It was he who slew the artillery-man. It is well that he has placed himself there. Let him remain there. Let us shoot him down on the spot."

"Shoot me," said Enjolras.

And flinging away his bit of gun-barrel, and folding his arms, he offered his breast.

The audacity of a fine death always affects men. As soon as Enjolras folded his arms and accepted his end, the din of strife ceased in the room, and this chaos suddenly stilled into a sort of sepulchral solemnity. The menacing majesty of Enjolras disarmed and motionless, appeared to oppress this tumult, and this young man, haughty, bloody, and charming, who alone had not a wound, who was as indifferent as an invulnerable being, seemed, by the authority of his tranquil glance, to constrain this sinister rabble to kill him respectfully. His beauty, at that moment augmented by his pride, was resplendent, and he was fresh and rosy after the fearful four and twenty hours which had just elapsed, as though he could no more be fatigued than wounded. It was of him, possibly, that a witness spoke afterwards, before the council of war: “There was an insurgent whom I heard called Apollo.” A National Guardsman who had taken aim at Enjolras, lowered his gun, saying: “It seems to me that I am about to shoot a flower.”

Twelve men formed into a squad in the corner opposite Enjolras, and silently made ready their guns.

Then a sergeant shouted:

“Take aim!”

An officer intervened.

“Wait.”

And addressing Enjolras:

“Do you wish to have your eyes bandaged?”

“No.”

“Was it you who killed the artillery sergeant?”

“Yes.”

Grantaire had waked up a few moments before.

Grantaire, it will be remembered, had been asleep ever since the preceding evening in the upper room of the wine-shop, seated on a chair and leaning on the table.

He realized in its fullest sense the old metaphor of “dead drunk.” The hideous potion of absinthe-porter and alcohol had thrown him into a lethargy. His table being small, and not suitable for the barricade, he had been left in possession of it. He was still in the same posture, with his breast bent over the table, his head lying flat on his arms, surrounded by glasses, beer-jugs and bottles. His was the overwhelming slumber of the torpid bear and the satiated leech. Nothing had had any effect upon it, neither the fusillade, nor the cannon-balls, nor the grape-shot which had made its way through the window into the room where he was. Nor the tremendous uproar of the assault. He merely replied to the cannonade, now and then, by a snore. He seemed to be waiting there for a bullet which should spare him the trouble of waking. Many corpses were strewn around him; and, at the first glance, there was nothing to distinguish him from those profound sleepers of death.

Noise does not rouse a drunken man; silence awakens him. The fall of everything around him only augmented Grantaire’s prostration; the crumbling of all things was his lullaby. The sort of halt which the tumult underwent in the presence of Enjolras was a shock to this heavy slumber. It had the effect of a carriage going at full speed, which suddenly comes to a dead stop. The persons dozing within it wake up. Grantaire rose to his feet with a start, stretched out his arms, rubbed his eyes, stared, yawned, and understood.

A fit of drunkenness reaching its end resembles a curtain which is torn away. One beholds, at a single glance and as a whole, all that it has concealed. All suddenly presents itself to the memory; and the drunkard who has known nothing of what has been taking place during the last twenty-four hours, has no sooner opened his eyes than he is perfectly informed. Ideas recur to him with abrupt lucidity; the obliteration of intoxication, a sort of steam which has obscured the brain, is dissipated, and makes way for the clear and sharply outlined importunity of realities.

Relegated, as he was, to one corner, and sheltered behind the billiard-table, the soldiers whose eyes were fixed on Enjolras, had not even noticed Grantaire, and the sergeant was preparing to repeat his order: “Take aim!” when all at once, they heard a strong voice shout beside them:

“Long live the Republic! I’m one of them.”

Grantaire had risen. The immense gleam of the whole combat which he had missed, and in which he had had no part, appeared in the brilliant glance of the transfigured drunken man.

He repeated: “Long live the Republic!” crossed the room with a firm stride and placed himself in front of the guns beside Enjolras.

“Finish both of us at one blow,” said he.

And turning gently to Enjolras, he said to him:

“Do you permit it?”

Enjolras pressed his hand with a smile.

This smile was not ended when the report resounded.

Enjolras, pierced by eight bullets, remained leaning against the wall, as though the balls had nailed him there. Only, his head was bowed.

Grantaire fell at his feet, as though struck by a thunderbolt.

A few moments later, the soldiers dislodged the last remaining insurgents, who had taken refuge at the top of the house. They fired into the attic through a wooden lattice. They fought under the very roof. They flung bodies, some of them still alive, out through the windows. Two light-infantrymen, who tried to lift the shattered omnibus, were slain by two shots fired from the attic. A man in a blouse was flung down from it, with a bayonet wound in the abdomen, and breathed his last on the ground. A soldier and an insurgent slipped together on the sloping slates of the roof, and, as they would not release each other, they fell, clasped in a ferocious embrace. A similar conflict went on in the cellar. Shouts, shots, a fierce trampling. Then silence. The barricade was captured.

The soldiers began to search the houses round about, and to pursue the fugitives.

CHAPTER XXIV — PRISONER

Marius was, in fact, a prisoner.

The hand which had seized him from behind and whose grasp he had felt at the moment of his fall and his loss of consciousness was that of Jean Valjean.

Jean Valjean had taken no other part in the combat than to expose himself in it. Had it not been for him, no one, in that supreme phase of agony, would have thought of the wounded. Thanks to him, everywhere present in the carnage, like a providence, those who fell were picked up, transported to the tap-room, and cared for. In the intervals, he reappeared on the barricade. But nothing which could resemble a blow, an attack or even personal defence proceeded from his hands. He held his peace and lent succor. Moreover he had received only a few scratches. The bullets would have none of him. If suicide formed part of what he had meditated on coming to this sepulchre, to that spot, he had not succeeded. But we doubt whether he had thought of suicide, an irreligious act.

Jean Valjean, in the thick cloud of the combat, did not appear to see Marius; the truth is, that he never took his eyes from the latter. When a shot laid Marius low, Jean Valjean leaped forward with the agility of a tiger, fell upon him as on his prey, and bore him off.

The whirlwind of the attack was, at that moment, so violently concentrated upon Enjolras and upon the door of the wine-shop, that no one saw Jean Valjean sustaining the fainting Marius in his arms, traverse the unpaved field of the barricade and disappear behind the angle of the Corinthe building.

The reader will recall this angle which formed a sort of cape on the street; it afforded shelter from the bullets, the grape-shot, and all eyes, and a few square feet of space. There is sometimes a chamber which does not burn in the midst of a conflagration, and in the midst of raging seas, beyond a promontory or at the extremity of a blind alley of shoals, a tranquil nook. It was in this sort of fold in the interior trapezium of the barricade, that Eponine had breathed her last.

There Jean Valjean halted, let Marius slide to the ground, placed his back against the wall, and cast his eyes about him.

The situation was alarming.

For an instant, for two or three perhaps, this bit of wall was a shelter, but how was he to escape from this massacre? He recalled the anguish which he had suffered in the Rue Polonceau eight years before, and in what manner he had contrived to make his escape; it was difficult then, to-day it was impossible. He had before him that deaf and implacable house, six stories in height, which appeared to be inhabited only by a dead man leaning out of his window; he had on his right the rather low barricade, which shut off the Rue de la Petite Truanderie; to pass this obstacle seemed easy, but beyond the crest of the barrier a line of bayonets was visible. The troops of the line were posted on the watch behind that barricade. It was evident, that to pass the barricade was to go in quest of the fire of the platoon, and that any head which should run the risk of lifting itself above the top of that wall of stones would serve as a target for sixty shots. On his left he had the field of battle. Death lurked round the corner of that wall.

What was to be done?

Only a bird could have extricated itself from this predicament.

And it was necessary to decide on the instant, to devise some expedient, to come to some decision. Fighting was going on a few paces away; fortunately, all were raging around a single point, the door of the wine-shop; but if it should occur to one soldier, to one single soldier, to turn the corner of the house, or to attack him on the flank, all was over.

Jean Valjean gazed at the house facing him, he gazed at the barricade at one side of him, then he looked at the ground, with the violence of the last extremity, bewildered, and as though he would have liked to pierce a hole there with his eyes.

By dint of staring, something vaguely striking in such an agony began to assume form and outline at his feet, as though it had been a power of glance which made the thing desired unfold. A few paces distant he perceived, at the base of the small barrier so pitilessly guarded and watched on the exterior, beneath a disordered mass of paving-stones which partly concealed it, an iron grating, placed flat and on a level with the soil. This grating, made of stout, transverse bars, was about two feet square. The frame of paving-stones which supported it had been torn up, and it was, as it were, unfastened.

Through the bars a view could be had of a dark aperture, something like the flue of a chimney, or the pipe of a cistern. Jean Valjean darted forward.

His old art of escape rose to his brain like an illumination. To thrust aside the stones, to raise the grating, to lift Marius, who was as inert as a dead body, upon his shoulders, to descend, with this burden on his loins, and with the aid of his elbows and knees into that sort of well, fortunately not very deep, to let the heavy trap, upon which the loosened stones rolled down afresh, fall into its place behind him, to gain his footing on a flagged surface three metres below the surface, — all this was executed like that which one does in dreams, with the strength of a giant and the rapidity of an eagle; this took only a few minutes.

Jean Valjean found himself with Marius, who was still unconscious, in a sort of long, subterranean corridor.

There reigned profound peace, absolute silence, night.

The impression which he had formerly experienced when falling from the wall into the convent recurred to him. Only, what he was carrying to-day was not Cosette; it was Marius. He could barely hear the formidable tumult in the wine-shop, taken by assault, like a vague murmur overhead.

BOOK SECOND. — THE INTESTINE OF THE LEVIATHAN

CHAPTER I — THE LAND IMPOVERISHED BY THE SEA

Paris casts twenty-five millions yearly into the water. And this without metaphor. How, and in what manner? Day and night. With what object? With no object. With what intention? With no intention. Why? For no reason. By means of what organ? By means of its intestine. What is its intestine? The sewer.

Twenty-five millions is the most moderate approximative figure which the valuations of special science have set upon it.

Science, after having long groped about, now knows that the most fecundating and the most efficacious of fertilizers is human manure. The Chinese, let us confess it to our shame, knew it before us. Not a Chinese peasant — it is Eckberg who says this, — goes to town without bringing back with him, at the two extremities of his bamboo pole, two full buckets of what we designate as filth. Thanks to human dung, the earth in China is still as young as in the days of Abraham. Chinese wheat yields a hundred fold of the seed. There is no guano comparable in fertility with the detritus of a capital. A great city is the most mighty of dung-makers. Certain success would attend the experiment of employing the city to manure the plain. If our gold is manure, our manure, on the other hand, is gold.

What is done with this golden manure? It is swept into the abyss.

Fleets of vessels are despatched, at great expense, to collect the dung of petrels and penguins at the South Pole, and the incalculable element of opulence which we have on hand, we send to the sea. All the human and animal manure which the world wastes, restored to the land instead of being cast into the water, would suffice to nourish the world.

Those heaps of filth at the gate-posts, those tumbrils of mud which jolt through the street by night, those terrible casks of the street department, those fetid drippings of subterranean mire, which the pavements hide from you, — do you know what they are? They are the meadow in flower, the green grass, wild thyme, thyme and sage, they are game, they are cattle, they are the satisfied bellows of great oxen in the evening, they are perfumed hay, they are golden wheat, they are the bread on your table, they are the warm blood in your veins, they are health, they are joy, they are life.

This is the will of that mysterious creation which is transformation on earth and transfiguration in heaven.

Restore this to the great crucible; your abundance will flow forth from it. The nutrition of the plains furnishes the nourishment of men.

You have it in your power to lose this wealth, and to consider me ridiculous to boot. This will form the master-piece of your ignorance.

Statisticians have calculated that France alone makes a deposit of half a milliard every year, in the Atlantic, through the mouths of her rivers. Note this: with five hundred millions we could pay one quarter of the expenses of our budget. The cleverness of man is such that he prefers to get rid of these five hundred millions in the gutter. It is the very substance of the people that is carried off, here drop by drop, there wave after wave, the wretched outpour of our sewers into the rivers, and the gigantic collection of our rivers into the ocean. Every hiccough of our sewers costs us a thousand francs. From this spring two results, the land impoverished, and the water tainted. Hunger arising from the furrow, and disease from the stream.

It is notorious, for example, that at the present hour, the Thames is poisoning London.

So far as Paris is concerned, it has become indispensable of late, to transport the mouths of the sewers down stream, below the last bridge.

A double tubular apparatus, provided with valves and sluices, sucking up and driving back, a system of elementary drainage, simple as the lungs of a man, and which is already in full working order in many communities in England, would suffice to conduct the pure water of the fields into our cities, and to send back to the fields the rich water of the cities, and this easy exchange, the simplest in the world, would retain among us the five hundred millions now thrown away. People are thinking of other things.

The process actually in use does evil, with the intention of doing good. The intention is good, the result is melancholy. Thinking to purge the city, the population is blanched like plants raised in cellars. A sewer is a mistake. When drainage, everywhere, with its double function, restoring what it takes, shall have replaced the sewer, which is a simple impoverishing washing, then, this being combined with the data of a now social economy, the product of the earth will be increased tenfold, and the problem of misery will be singularly lightened. Add the suppression of parasitism, and it will be solved.

In the meanwhile, the public wealth flows away to the river, and leakage takes place. Leakage is the word. Europe is being ruined in this manner by exhaustion.

As for France, we have just cited its figures. Now, Paris contains one twenty-fifth of the total population of France, and Parisian guano being the richest of all, we understate the truth when we value the loss on the part of Paris at twenty-five millions in the half milliard which France annually rejects. These twenty-five millions, employed in assistance and enjoyment, would double the splendor of Paris. The city spends them in sewers. So that we may say that Paris's great prodigality, its wonderful festival, its Beaujon folly, its orgy, its stream of gold from full hands, its pomp, its luxury, its magnificence, is its sewer system.

It is in this manner that, in the blindness of a poor political economy, we drown and allow to float down stream and to be lost in the gulfs the well-being of all. There should be nets at Saint-Cloud for the public fortune.

Economically considered, the matter can be summed up thus: Paris is a spendthrift. Paris, that model city, that patron of well-arranged capitals, of which every nation strives to possess a copy, that metropolis of the ideal, that august country of the initiative, of impulse and of effort, that centre and that dwelling of minds, that nation-city, that hive of the future, that marvellous combination of Babylon and Corinth, would make a peasant of the Fo-Kian shrug his shoulders, from the point of view which we have just indicated.

Imitate Paris and you will ruin yourselves.

Moreover, and particularly in this immemorial and senseless waste, Paris is itself an imitator.

These surprising exhibitions of stupidity are not novel; this is no young folly. The ancients did like the moderns. “The sewers of Rome,” says Liebig, “have absorbed all the well-being of the Roman peasant.” When the Campagna of Rome was ruined by the Roman sewer, Rome exhausted Italy, and when she had put Italy in her sewer, she poured in Sicily, then Sardinia, then Africa. The sewer of Rome has engulfed the world. This cess-pool offered its engulfment to the city and the universe. Urbi et orbi. Eternal city, unfathomable sewer.

Rome sets the example for these things as well as for others.

Paris follows this example with all the stupidity peculiar to intelligent towns.

For the requirements of the operation upon the subject of which we have just explained our views, Paris has beneath it another Paris; a Paris of sewers; which has its streets, its cross-roads, its squares, its blind-alleys, its arteries, and its circulation, which is of mire and minus the human form.

For nothing must be flattered, not even a great people; where there is everything there is also ignominy by the side of sublimity; and, if Paris contains Athens, the city of light, Tyre, the city of might, Sparta, the city of virtue, Nineveh, the city of marvels, it also contains Lutetia, the city of mud.

However, the stamp of its power is there also, and the Titanic sink of Paris realizes, among monuments, that strange ideal realized in humanity by some men like Macchiavelli, Bacon and Mirabeau, grandiose vileness.

The sub-soil of Paris, if the eye could penetrate its surface, would present the aspect of a colossal madrepore. A sponge has no more partitions and ducts than the mound of earth for a circuit of six leagues round about, on which rests the great and ancient city. Not to mention its catacombs, which are a separate cellar, not to mention the inextricable trellis-work of gas pipes, without reckoning the vast tubular system for the distribution of fresh water which ends in the pillar fountains, the sewers alone form a tremendous, shadowy net-work under the two banks; a labyrinth which has its slope for its guiding thread.

There appears, in the humid mist, the rat which seems the product to which Paris has given birth.

CHAPTER II — ANCIENT HISTORY OF THE SEWER

Let the reader imagine Paris lifted off like a cover, the subterranean network of sewers, from a bird's eye view, will outline on the banks a species of large branch grafted on the river. On the right bank, the belt sewer will form the trunk of this branch, the secondary ducts will form the branches, and those without exit the twigs.

This figure is but a summary one and half exact, the right angle, which is the customary angle of this species of subterranean ramifications, being very rare in vegetation.

A more accurate image of this strange geometrical plan can be formed by supposing that one is viewing some eccentric oriental alphabet, as intricate as a thicket, against a background of shadows, and the misshapen letters should be welded one to another in apparent confusion, and as at haphazard, now by their angles, again by their extremities.

Sinks and sewers played a great part in the Middle Ages, in the Lower Empire and in the Orient of old. The masses regarded these beds of decomposition, these monstrous cradles of death, with a fear that was almost religious. The vermin ditch of Benares is no less conducive to giddiness than the lions' ditch of Babylon. Teglath-Phalasar, according to the rabbinical books, swore by the sink of Nineveh. It was from the sewer of Munster that John of Leyden produced his false moon, and it was from the cess-pool of Kekscheb that oriental menalchme, Mokanna, the veiled prophet of Khorassan, caused his false sun to emerge.

The history of men is reflected in the history of sewers. The Germoniae narrated Rome. The sewer of Paris has been an ancient and formidable thing. It has been a sepulchre, it has served as an asylum. Crime, intelligence, social protest, liberty of conscience, thought, theft, all that human laws persecute or have persecuted, is hidden in that hole; the maillotins in the fourteenth century, the tire-laine of the fifteenth, the Huguenots in the sixteenth, Morin's illuminated in the seventeenth, the chauffeurs [brigands] in the eighteenth. A hundred years ago, the nocturnal blow of the dagger emerged thence, the pickpocket in danger slipped thither; the forest had its cave, Paris had its sewer. Vagrancy, that Gallic picareria, accepted the sewer as the adjunct of the Cour des Miracles, and at evening, it returned thither, fierce and sly, through the Maubuee outlet, as into a bed-chamber.

It was quite natural, that those who had the blind-alley Vide-Gousset, [Empty-Pocket] or the Rue Coupe-Gorge [Cut-Throat], for the scene of their daily labor, should have for their domicile by night the culvert of the Chemin-Vert, or the catch basin of Hurepoix. Hence a throng of souvenirs. All sorts of phantoms haunt these long, solitary corridors; everywhere is putrescence and miasma; here and there are breathing-holes, where Villon within converses with Rabelais without.

The sewer in ancient Paris is the rendezvous of all exhaustions and of all attempts. Political economy therein spies a detritus, social philosophy there beholds a residuum.

The sewer is the conscience of the city. Everything there converges and confronts everything else. In that livid spot there are shades, but there are no longer any secrets. Each thing bears its true form, or at least, its definitive form. The mass of filth has this in its favor, that it is not a liar. Ingenuousness has taken refuge there. The mask of Basil is to be found there, but one beholds its cardboard and its strings and the inside as well as the outside, and it is accentuated by honest mud. Scapin’s false nose is its next-door neighbor. All the uncleannesses of civilization, once past their use, fall into this trench of truth, where the immense social sliding ends. They are there engulfed, but they display themselves there. This mixture is a confession. There, no more false appearances, no plastering over is possible, filth removes its shirt, absolute denudation puts to the rout all illusions and mirages, there is nothing more except what really exists, presenting the sinister form of that which is coming to an end. There, the bottom of a bottle indicates drunkenness, a basket-handle tells a tale of domesticity; there the core of an apple which has entertained literary opinions becomes an apple-core once more; the effigy on the big sou becomes frankly covered with verdigris, Caiphas’ spittle meets Falstaff’s puking, the louis-d’or which comes from the gaming-house jostles the nail whence hangs the rope’s end of the suicide. A livid foetus rolls along, enveloped in the spangles which danced at the Opera last Shrove-Tuesday, a cap which has pronounced judgment on men wallows beside a mass of rottenness which was formerly Margoton’s petticoat; it is more than fraternization, it is equivalent to addressing each other as thou. All which was formerly rouged, is washed free. The last veil is torn away. A sewer is a cynic. It tells everything.

The sincerity of foulness pleases us, and rests the soul. When one has passed one's time in enduring upon earth the spectacle of the great airs which reasons of state, the oath, political sagacity, human justice, professional probity, the austerities of situation, incorruptible robes all assume, it solaces one to enter a sewer and to behold the mire which befits it.

This is instructive at the same time. We have just said that history passes through the sewer. The Saint-Barthelemys filter through there, drop by drop, between the paving-stones. Great public assassinations, political and religious butcheries, traverse this underground passage of civilization, and thrust their corpses there. For the eye of the thinker, all historic murderers are to be found there, in that hideous penumbra, on their knees, with a scrap of their winding-sheet for an apron, dismally sponging out their work. Louis XI. is there with Tristan, Francois I. with Duprat, Charles IX. is there with his mother, Richelieu is there with Louis XIII., Louvois is there, Letellier is there, Hebert and Maillard are there, scratching the stones, and trying to make the traces of their actions disappear. Beneath these vaults one hears the brooms of spectres. One there breathes the enormous fetidness of social catastrophes. One beholds reddish reflections in the corners. There flows a terrible stream, in which bloody hands have been washed.

The social observer should enter these shadows. They form a part of his laboratory. Philosophy is the microscope of the thought. Everything desires to flee from it, but nothing escapes it. Tergiversation is useless. What side of oneself does one display in evasions? the shameful side. Philosophy pursues with its glance, probes the evil, and does not permit it to escape into nothingness. In the obliteration of things which disappear, in the watching of things which vanish, it recognizes all. It reconstructs the purple from the rag, and the woman from the scrap of her dress. From the cess-pool, it re-constitutes the city; from mud, it reconstructs manners; from the potsherd it infers the amphora or the jug. By the imprint of a finger-nail on a piece of parchment, it recognizes the difference which separates the Jewry of the Judengasse from the Jewry of the Ghetto. It re-discovers in what remains that which has been, good, evil, the true, the blood-stain of the palace, the ink-blot of the cavern, the drop of sweat from the brothel, trials undergone, temptations welcomed, orgies cast forth, the turn which characters have taken as they became abased, the trace of prostitution in souls of which their grossness rendered them capable, and on the vesture of the porters of Rome the mark of Messalina’s elbowing.

CHAPTER III — BRUNESEAU

The sewer of Paris in the Middle Ages was legendary. In the sixteenth century, Henri II. attempted a bore, which failed. Not a hundred years ago, the cess-pool, Mercier attests the fact, was abandoned to itself, and fared as best it might.

Such was this ancient Paris, delivered over to quarrels, to indecision, and to gropings. It was tolerably stupid for a long time. Later on, ‘89 showed how understanding comes to cities. But in the good, old times, the capital had not much head. It did not know how to manage its own affairs either morally or materially, and could not sweep out filth any better than it could abuses. Everything presented an obstacle, everything raised a question. The sewer, for example, was refractory to every itinerary. One could no more find one’s bearings in the sewer than one could understand one’s position in the city; above the unintelligible, below the inextricable; beneath the confusion of tongues there reigned the confusion of caverns; Daedalus backed up Babel.

Sometimes the Paris sewer took a notion to overflow, as though this misunderstood Nile were suddenly seized with a fit of rage. There occurred, infamous to relate, inundations of the sewer. At times, that stomach of civilization digested badly, the cess-pool flowed back into the throat of the city, and Paris got an after-taste of her own filth. These resemblances of the sewer to remorse had their good points; they were warnings; very badly accepted, however; the city waxed indignant at the audacity of its mire, and did not admit that the filth should return. Drive it out better.

The inundation of 1802 is one of the actual memories of Parisians of the age of eighty. The mud spread in cross-form over the Place des Victoires, where stands the statue of Louis XIV.; it entered the Rue Saint-Honore by the two mouths to the sewer in the Champs-Elysees, the Rue Saint-Florentin through the Saint-Florentin sewer, the Rue Pierre-a-Poisson through the sewer de la Sonnerie, the Rue Popincourt, through the sewer of the Chemin-Vert, the Rue de la Roquette, through the sewer of the Rue de Lappe; it covered the drain of the Rue des Champs-Elysees to the height of thirty-five centimetres; and, to the South, through the vent of the Seine, performing its functions in inverse sense, it penetrated the Rue Mazarine, the Rue de l’Echaude, and the Rue des Marais, where it stopped at a distance of one hundred and nine metres, a few paces distant from the house in which Racine had lived, respecting, in the seventeenth century, the poet more than the King. It attained its maximum depth in the Rue Saint-Pierre, where it rose to the height of three feet above the flag-stones of the water-spout, and its maximum length in the Rue Saint-Sabin, where it spread out over a stretch two hundred and thirty-eight metres in length.

At the beginning of this century, the sewer of Paris was still a mysterious place. Mud can never enjoy a good fame; but in this case its evil renown reached the verge of the terrible. Paris knew, in a confused way, that she had under her a terrible cavern. People talked of it as of that monstrous bed of Thebes in which swarmed centipedes fifteen long feet in length, and which might have served Behemoth for a bathtub. The great boots of the sewermen never ventured further than certain well-known points. We were then very near the epoch when the scavenger's carts, from the summit of which Sainte-Foix fraternized with the Marquis de Crequi, discharged their loads directly into the sewer. As for cleaning out, — that function was entrusted to the pouring rains which encumbered rather than swept away. Rome left some poetry to her sewer, and called it the Gemoniae; Paris insulted hers, and entitled it the Polypus-Hole. Science and superstition were in accord, in horror. The Polypus hole was no less repugnant to hygiene than to legend. The goblin was developed under the fetid covering of the Mouffetard sewer; the corpses of the Marmousets had been cast into the sewer de la Barillerie; Fagon attributed the redoubtable malignant fever of 1685 to the great hiatus of the sewer of the Marais, which remained yawning until 1833 in the Rue Saint-Louis, almost opposite the sign of the Gallant Messenger. The mouth of the sewer of the Rue de la Mortellerie was celebrated for the pestilences which had their source there; with its grating of iron, with points simulating a row of teeth, it was like a dragon's maw in that fatal street, breathing forth hell upon men. The popular imagination seasoned the sombre Parisian sink with some indescribably hideous intermixture of the infinite. The sewer had no bottom. The sewer was the lower world. The idea of exploring these leprous regions did not even occur to the police. To try that unknown thing, to cast the plummet into that shadow, to set out on a voyage of discovery in that abyss — who would have dared? It was alarming. Nevertheless, some one did present himself. The cess-pool had its Christopher Columbus.

One day, in 1805, during one of the rare apparitions which the Emperor made in Paris, the Minister of the Interior, some Decres or Cretet or other, came to the master's intimate levee. In the Carrousel there was audible the clanking of swords of all those extraordinary soldiers of the great Republic, and of the great Empire; then Napoleon's door was blocked with heroes; men from the Rhine, from the Escaut, from the Adige, and from the Nile; companions of Joubert, of Desaix, of Marceau, of Hoche, of Kleber; the aerostiers of Fleurus, the grenadiers of Mayence, the pontoon-builders of Genoa, hussars whom the Pyramids had looked down upon, artillerists whom Junot's cannon-ball had spattered with mud, cuirassiers who had taken by assault the fleet lying at anchor in the Zuyderzee; some had followed Bonaparte upon the bridge of Lodi, others had accompanied Murat in the trenches of Mantua, others had preceded Lannes in the hollow road of Montebello. The whole army of that day was present there, in the court-yard of the Tuileries, represented by a squadron or a platoon, and guarding Napoleon in repose; and that was the splendid epoch when the grand army had Marengo behind it and Austerlitz before it.— "Sire," said the Minister of the Interior to Napoleon, "yesterday I saw the most intrepid man in your Empire."— "What man is that?" said the Emperor brusquely, "and what has he done?"— "He wants to do something, Sire."— "What is it?"— "To visit the sewers of Paris."

This man existed and his name was Bruneseau.

CHAPTER IV — BRUNESEAU.

The visit took place. It was a formidable campaign; a nocturnal battle against pestilence and suffocation. It was, at the same time, a voyage of discovery. One of the survivors of this expedition, an intelligent workingman, who was very young at the time, related curious details with regard to it, several years ago, which Bruneseau thought himself obliged to omit in his report to the prefect of police, as unworthy of official style. The processes of disinfection were, at that epoch, extremely rudimentary. Hardly had Bruneseau crossed the first articulations of that subterranean network, when eight laborers out of the twenty refused to go any further. The operation was complicated; the visit entailed the necessity of cleaning; hence it was necessary to cleanse and at the same time, to proceed; to note the entrances of water, to count the gratings and the vents, to lay out in detail the branches, to indicate the currents at the point where they parted, to define the respective bounds of the divers basins, to sound the small sewers grafted on the principal sewer, to measure the height under the key-stone of each drain, and the width, at the spring of the vaults as well as at the bottom, in order to determine the arrangements with regard to the level of each water-entrance, either of the bottom of the arch, or on the soil of the street. They advanced with toil. The lanterns pined away in the foul atmosphere. From time to time, a fainting sewerman was carried out. At certain points, there were precipices. The soil had given away, the pavement had crumbled, the sewer had changed into a bottomless well; they found nothing solid; a man disappeared suddenly; they had great difficulty in getting him out again. On the advice of Fourcroy, they lighted large cages filled with tow steeped in resin, from time to time, in spots which had been sufficiently disinfected. In some places, the wall was covered with misshapen fungi, — one would have said tumors; the very stone seemed diseased within this unbreathable atmosphere.

Bruneseau, in his exploration, proceeded down hill. At the point of separation of the two water-conduits of the Grand-Hurleur, he deciphered upon a projecting stone the date of 1550; this stone indicated the limits where Philibert Delorme, charged by Henri II. with visiting the subterranean drains of Paris, had halted. This stone was the mark of the sixteenth century on the sewer; Bruneseau found the handiwork of the seventeenth century once more in the Ponceau drain of the old Rue Vielle-du-Temple, vaulted between 1600 and 1650; and the handiwork of the eighteenth in the western section of the collecting canal, walled and vaulted in 1740. These two vaults, especially the less ancient, that of 1740, were more cracked and decrepit than the masonry of the belt sewer, which dated from 1412, an epoch when the brook of fresh water of Menilmontant was elevated to the dignity of the Grand Sewer of Paris, an advancement analogous to that of a peasant who should become first valet de chambre to the King; something like Gros-Jean transformed into Lebel.

Here and there, particularly beneath the Court-House, they thought they recognized the hollows of ancient dungeons, excavated in the very sewer itself. Hideous in-pace. An iron neck-collar was hanging in one of these cells. They walled them all up. Some of their finds were singular; among others, the skeleton of an ourang-outan, who had disappeared from the Jardin des Plantes in 1800, a disappearance probably connected with the famous and indisputable apparition of the devil in the Rue des Bernardins, in the last year of the eighteenth century. The poor devil had ended by drowning himself in the sewer.

Beneath this long, arched drain which terminated at the Arche-Marion, a perfectly preserved rag-picker's basket excited the admiration of all connoisseurs. Everywhere, the mire, which the sewermen came to handle with intrepidity, abounded in precious objects, jewels of gold and silver, precious stones, coins. If a giant had filtered this cesspool, he would have had the riches of centuries in his lair. At the point where the two branches of the Rue du Temple and of the Rue Sainte-Avoye separate, they picked up a singular Huguenot medal in copper, bearing on one side the pig hooded with a cardinal's hat, and on the other, a wolf with a tiara on his head.

The most surprising rencounter was at the entrance to the Grand Sewer. This entrance had formerly been closed by a grating of which nothing but the hinges remained. From one of these hinges hung a dirty and shapeless rag which, arrested there in its passage, no doubt, had floated there in the darkness and finished its process of being torn apart. Bruneseau held his lantern close to this rag and examined it. It was of very fine batiste, and in one of the corners, less frayed than the rest, they made out a heraldic coronet and embroidered above these seven letters: LAVBESP. The crown was the coronet of a Marquis, and the seven letters signified Laubespine. They recognized the fact, that what they had before their eyes was a morsel of the shroud of Marat. Marat in his youth had had amorous intrigues. This was when he was a member of the household of the Comte d’Artois, in the capacity of physician to the Stables. From these love affairs, historically proved, with a great lady, he had retained this sheet. As a waif or a souvenir. At his death, as this was the only linen of any fineness which he had in his house, they buried him in it. Some old women had shrouded him for the tomb in that swaddling-band in which the tragic Friend of the people had enjoyed voluptuousness. Bruneseau passed on. They left that rag where it hung; they did not put the finishing touch to it. Did this arise from scorn or from respect? Marat deserved both. And then, destiny was there sufficiently stamped to make them hesitate to touch it. Besides, the things of the sepulchre must be left in the spot which they select. In short, the relic was a strange one. A Marquise had slept in it; Marat had rotted in it; it had traversed the Pantheon to end with the rats of the sewer. This chamber rag, of which Watteau would formerly have joyfully sketched every fold, had ended in becoming worthy of the fixed gaze of Dante.

The whole visit to the subterranean stream of filth of Paris lasted seven years, from 1805 to 1812. As he proceeded, Bruneseau drew, directed, and completed considerable works; in 1808 he lowered the arch of the Ponceau, and, everywhere creating new lines, he pushed the sewer, in 1809, under the Rue Saint-Denis as far as the fountain of the Innocents; in 1810, under the Rue Froidmanteau and under the Salpetriere; in 1811 under the Rue Neuve-des-Petits-Peres, under the Rue du Mail, under the Rue de l’Echarpe, under the Place Royale; in 1812, under the Rue de la Paix, and under the Chaussée d’Antin. At the same time, he had the whole net-work disinfected and rendered healthful. In the second year of his work, Bruneseau engaged the assistance of his son-in-law Nargaud.

It was thus that, at the beginning of the century, ancient society cleansed its double bottom, and performed the toilet of its sewer. There was that much clean, at all events.

Tortuous, cracked, unpaved, full of fissures, intersected by gullies, jolted by eccentric elbows, mounting and descending illogically, fetid, wild, fierce, submerged in obscurity, with cicatrices on its pavements and scars on its walls, terrible, — such was, retrospectively viewed, the antique sewer of Paris. Ramifications in every direction, crossings, of trenches, branches, goose-feet, stars, as in military mines, coecum, blind alleys, vaults lined with saltpetre, pestiferous pools, scabby sweats, on the walls, drops dripping from the ceilings, darkness; nothing could equal the horror of this old, waste crypt, the digestive apparatus of Babylon, a cavern, ditch, gulf pierced with streets, a titanic mole-burrow, where the mind seems to behold that enormous blind mole, the past, prowling through the shadows, in the filth which has been splendor.

This, we repeat, was the sewer of the past.

CHAPTER V — PRESENT PROGRESS

To-day the sewer is clean, cold, straight, correct. It almost realizes the ideal of what is understood in England by the word “respectable.” It is proper and grayish; laid out by rule and line; one might almost say as though it came out of a bandbox. It resembles a tradesman who has become a councillor of state. One can almost see distinctly there. The mire there comports itself with decency. At first, one might readily mistake it for one of those subterranean corridors, which were so common in former days, and so useful in flights of monarchs and princes, in those good old times, “when the people loved their kings.” The present sewer is a beautiful sewer; the pure style reigns there; the classical rectilinear alexandrine which, driven out of poetry, appears to have taken refuge in architecture, seems mingled with all the stones of that long, dark and whitish vault; each outlet is an arcade; the Rue de Rivoli serves as pattern even in the sewer. However, if the geometrical line is in place anywhere, it is certainly in the drainage trench of a great city. There, everything should be subordinated to the shortest road. The sewer has, nowadays, assumed a certain official aspect. The very police reports, of which it sometimes forms the subject, no longer are wanting in respect towards it. The words which characterize it in administrative language are sonorous and dignified. What used to be called a gut is now called a gallery; what used to be called a hole is now called a surveying orifice. Villon would no longer meet with his ancient temporary provisional lodging. This net-work of cellars has its immemorial population of prowlers, rodents, swarming in greater numbers than ever; from time to time, an aged and veteran rat risks his head at the window of the sewer and surveys the Parisians; but even these vermin grow tame, so satisfied are they with their subterranean palace. The cesspool no longer retains anything of its primitive ferocity. The rain, which in former days soiled the sewer, now washes it. Nevertheless, do not trust yourself too much to it. Miasmas still inhabit it. It is more hypocritical than irreproachable. The prefecture of police and the commission of health have done their best. But, in spite of all the processes of disinfection, it exhales, a vague, suspicious odor like Tartuffe after confession.

Let us confess, that, taking it all in all, this sweeping is a homage which the sewer pays to civilization, and as, from this point of view, Tartuffe’s conscience is a progress over the Augean stables, it is certain that the sewers of Paris have been improved.

It is more than progress; it is transmutation. Between the ancient and the present sewer there is a revolution. What has effected this revolution?

The man whom all the world forgets, and whom we have mentioned, Bruneseau.

CHAPTER VI — FUTURE PROGRESS

The excavation of the sewer of Paris has been no slight task. The last ten centuries have toiled at it without being able to bring it to a termination, any more than they have been able to finish Paris. The sewer, in fact, receives all the counter-shocks of the growth of Paris. Within the bosom of the earth, it is a sort of mysterious polyp with a thousand antennae, which expands below as the city expands above. Every time that the city cuts a street, the sewer stretches out an arm. The old monarchy had constructed only twenty-three thousand three hundred metres of sewers; that was where Paris stood in this respect on the first of January, 1806. Beginning with this epoch, of which we shall shortly speak, the work was usefully and energetically resumed and prosecuted; Napoleon built — the figures are curious — four thousand eight hundred and four metres; Louis XVIII., five thousand seven hundred and nine; Charles X., ten thousand eight hundred and thirty-six; Louis-Philippe, eighty-nine thousand and twenty; the Republic of 1848, twenty-three thousand three hundred and eighty-one; the present government, seventy thousand five hundred; in all, at the present time, two hundred and twenty-six thousand six hundred and ten metres; sixty leagues of sewers; the enormous entrails of Paris. An obscure ramification ever at work; a construction which is immense and ignored.

As the reader sees, the subterranean labyrinth of Paris is to-day more than ten times what it was at the beginning of the century. It is difficult to form any idea of all the perseverance and the efforts which have been required to bring this cess-pool to the point of relative perfection in which it now is. It was with great difficulty that the ancient monarchical provostship and, during the last ten years of the eighteenth century, the revolutionary mayoralty, had succeeded in perforating the five leagues of sewer which existed previous to 1806. All sorts of obstacles hindered this operation, some peculiar to the soil, others inherent in the very prejudices of the laborious population of Paris. Paris is built upon a soil which is singularly rebellious to the pick, the hoe, the bore, and to human manipulation. There is nothing more difficult to pierce and to penetrate than the geological formation upon which is superposed the marvellous historical formation called Paris; as soon as work in any form whatsoever is begun and adventures upon this stretch of alluvium, subterranean resistances abound.

There are liquid clays, springs, hard rocks, and those soft and deep quagmires which special science calls moutardes. The pick advances laboriously through the calcareous layers alternating with very slender threads of clay, and schistose beds in plates incrusted with oyster-shells, the contemporaries of the pre-Adamite oceans. Sometimes a rivulet suddenly bursts through a vault that has been begun, and inundates the laborers; or a layer of marl is laid bare, and rolls down with the fury of a cataract, breaking the stoutest supporting beams like glass. Quite recently, at Villette, when it became necessary to pass the collecting sewer under the Saint-Martin canal without interrupting navigation or emptying the canal, a fissure appeared in the basin of the canal, water suddenly became abundant in the subterranean tunnel, which was beyond the power of the pumping engines; it was necessary to send a diver to explore the fissure which had been made in the narrow entrance of the grand basin, and it was not without great difficulty that it was stopped up. Elsewhere near the Seine, and even at a considerable distance from the river, as for instance, at Belleville, Grand-Rue and Lumiere Passage, quicksands are encountered in which one sticks fast, and in which a man sinks visibly. Add suffocation by miasmas, burial by slides, and sudden crumbling of the earth. Add the typhus, with which the workmen become slowly impregnated. In our own day, after having excavated the gallery of Clichy, with a banquette to receive the principal water-conduit of Ourcq, a piece of work which was executed in a trench ten metres deep; after having, in the midst of land-slides, and with the aid of excavations often putrid, and of shoring up, vaulted the Bievre from the Boulevard de l’Hopital, as far as the Seine; after having, in order to deliver Paris from the floods of Montmartre and in order to provide an outlet for that river-like pool nine hectares in extent, which crouched near the Barriere des Martyrs, after having, let us state, constructed the line of sewers from the Barriere Blanche to the road of Aubervilliers, in four months, working day and night, at a depth of eleven metres; after having — a thing heretofore unseen — made a subterranean sewer in the Rue Barre-du-Bec, without a trench, six metres below the surface, the superintendent, Monnot, died. After having vaulted three thousand metres of sewer in all quarters of the city, from the Rue Traversiere-Saint-Antoine to the Rue de l’Ourcine, after having freed the Carrefour Censier-Mouffetard from inundations of rain by means of the branch of the Arbalete, after having built the Saint-Georges sewer, on rock and concrete in the fluid sands, after having directed the formidable lowering of the flooring of the vault timber in the Notre-Dame-de-Nazareth branch, Duleau the engineer died. There are no bulletins for such acts of bravery as these, which are more useful, nevertheless, than the brutal slaughter of the field of battle.

The sewers of Paris in 1832 were far from being what they are to-day. Bruneseau had given the impulse, but the cholera was required to bring about the vast reconstruction which took place later on. It is surprising to say, for example, that in 1821, a part of the belt sewer, called the Grand Canal, as in Venice, still stood stagnating uncovered to the sky, in the Rue des Gourdes. It was only in 1821 that the city of Paris found in its pocket the two hundred and sixty-thousand eighty francs and six centimes required for covering this mass of filth. The three absorbing wells, of the Combat, the Cunette, and Saint-Mande, with their discharging mouths, their apparatus, their cesspools, and their depuratory branches, only date from 1836. The intestinal sewer of Paris has been made over anew, and, as we have said, it has been extended more than tenfold within the last quarter of a century.

Thirty years ago, at the epoch of the insurrection of the 5th and 6th of June, it was still, in many localities, nearly the same ancient sewer. A very great number of streets which are now convex were then sunken causeways. At the end of a slope, where the tributaries of a street or cross-roads ended, there were often to be seen large, square gratings with heavy bars, whose iron, polished by the footsteps of the throng, gleamed dangerous and slippery for vehicles, and caused horses to fall. The official language of the Roads and Bridges gave to these gratings the expressive name of Cassis.

In 1832, in a number of streets, in the Rue de l’Etoile, the Rue Saint-Louis, the Rue du Temple, the Rue Vielle-duTemple, the Rue Notre-Dame de Nazareth, the Rue Folie-Mericourt, the Quai aux Fleurs, the Rue du Petit-Muse, the Rue du Normandie, the Rue Pont-Aux-Biches, the Rue des Marais, the Faubourg Saint-Martin, the Rue Notre Dame des-Victoires, the Faubourg Montmartre, the Rue Grange-Bateliere, in the Champs-Elysees, the Rue Jacob, the Rue de Tournon, the ancient gothic sewer still cynically displayed its maw. It consisted of enormous voids of stone catch-basins sometimes surrounded by stone posts, with monumental effrontery.

Paris in 1806 still had nearly the same sewers numerically as stated in 1663; five thousand three hundred fathoms. After Bruneseau, on the 1st of January, 1832, it had forty thousand three hundred metres. Between 1806 and 1831, there had been built, on an average, seven hundred and fifty metres annually, afterwards eight and even ten thousand metres of galleries were constructed every year, in masonry, of small stones, with hydraulic mortar which hardens under water, on a cement foundation. At two hundred francs the metre, the sixty leagues of Paris' sewers of the present day represent forty-eight millions.

In addition to the economic progress which we have indicated at the beginning, grave problems of public hygiene are connected with that immense question: the sewers of Paris.

Paris is the centre of two sheets, a sheet of water and a sheet of air. The sheet of water, lying at a tolerably great depth underground, but already sounded by two bores, is furnished by the layer of green clay situated between the chalk and the Jurassic lime-stone; this layer may be represented by a disk five and twenty leagues in circumference; a multitude of rivers and brooks ooze there; one drinks the Seine, the Marne, the Yonne, the Oise, the Aisne, the Cher, the Vienne and the Loire in a glass of water from the well of Grenelle. The sheet of water is healthy, it comes from heaven in the first place and next from the earth; the sheet of air is unhealthy, it comes from the sewer. All the miasms of the cess-pool are mingled with the breath of the city; hence this bad breath. The air taken from above a dung-heap, as has been scientifically proved, is purer than the air taken from above Paris. In a given time, with the aid of progress, mechanisms become perfected, and as light increases, the sheet of water will be employed to purify the sheet of air; that is to say, to wash the sewer. The reader knows, that by "washing the sewer" we mean: the restitution of the filth to the earth; the return to the soil of dung and of manure to the fields. Through this simple act, the entire social community will experience a diminution of misery and an augmentation of health. At the present hour, the radiation of diseases from Paris extends to fifty leagues around the Louvre, taken as the hub of this pestilential wheel.

We might say that, for ten centuries, the cess-pool has been the disease of Paris. The sewer is the blemish which Paris has in her blood. The popular instinct has never been deceived in it. The occupation of sewermen was formerly almost as perilous, and almost as repugnant to the people, as the occupation of knacker, which was so long held in horror and handed over to the executioner. High wages were necessary to induce a mason to disappear in that fetid mine; the ladder of the cess-pool cleaner hesitated to plunge into it; it was said, in proverbial form: “to descend into the sewer is to enter the grave;” and all sorts of hideous legends, as we have said, covered this colossal sink with terror; a dread sink-hole which bears the traces of the revolutions of the globe as of the revolutions of man, and where are to be found vestiges of all cataclysms from the shells of the Deluge to the rag of Marat.

BOOK THIRD. — MUD BUT THE SOUL

CHAPTER I — THE SEWER AND ITS SURPRISES

It was in the sewers of Paris that Jean Valjean found himself.

Still another resemblance between Paris and the sea. As in the ocean, the diver may disappear there.

The transition was an unheard-of one. In the very heart of the city, Jean Valjean had escaped from the city, and, in the twinkling of an eye, in the time required to lift the cover and to replace it, he had passed from broad daylight to complete obscurity, from midday to midnight, from tumult to silence, from the whirlwind of thunders to the stagnation of the tomb, and, by a vicissitude far more tremendous even than that of the Rue Polonceau, from the most extreme peril to the most absolute obscurity.

An abrupt fall into a cavern; a disappearance into the secret trap-door of Paris; to quit that street where death was on every side, for that sort of sepulchre where there was life, was a strange instant. He remained for several seconds as though bewildered; listening, stupefied. The waste-trap of safety had suddenly yawned beneath him. Celestial goodness had, in a manner, captured him by treachery. Adorable ambuscades of providence!

Only, the wounded man did not stir, and Jean Valjean did not know whether that which he was carrying in that grave was a living being or a dead corpse.

His first sensation was one of blindness. All of a sudden, he could see nothing. It seemed to him too, that, in one instant, he had become deaf. He no longer heard anything. The frantic storm of murder which had been let loose a few feet above his head did not reach him, thanks to the thickness of the earth which separated him from it, as we have said, otherwise than faintly and indistinctly, and like a rumbling, in the depths. He felt that the ground was solid under his feet; that was all; but that was enough. He extended one arm and then the other, touched the walls on both sides, and perceived that the passage was narrow; he slipped, and thus perceived that the pavement was wet. He cautiously put forward one foot, fearing a hole, a sink, some gulf; he discovered that the paving continued. A gust of fetidness informed him of the place in which he stood.

After the lapse of a few minutes, he was no longer blind. A little light fell through the man-hole through which he had descended, and his eyes became accustomed to this cavern. He began to distinguish something. The passage in which he had burrowed — no other word can better express the situation — was walled in behind him. It was one of those blind alleys, which the special jargon terms branches. In front of him there was another wall, a wall like night. The light of the air-hole died out ten or twelve paces from the point where Jean Valjean stood, and barely cast a wan pallor on a few metres of the damp walls of the sewer. Beyond, the opaqueness was massive; to penetrate thither seemed horrible, an entrance into it appeared like an engulfment. A man could, however, plunge into that wall of fog and it was necessary so to do. Haste was even requisite. It occurred to Jean Valjean that the grating which he had caught sight of under the flag-stones might also catch the eye of the soldiery, and that everything hung upon this chance. They also might descend into that well and search it. There was not a minute to be lost. He had deposited Marius on the ground, he picked him up again, — that is the real word for it, — placed him on his shoulders once more, and set out. He plunged resolutely into the gloom.

The truth is, that they were less safe than Jean Valjean fancied. Perils of another sort and no less serious were awaiting them, perchance. After the lightning-charged whirlwind of the combat, the cavern of miasmas and traps; after chaos, the sewer. Jean Valjean had fallen from one circle of hell into another.

When he had advanced fifty paces, he was obliged to halt. A problem presented itself. The passage terminated in another gut which he encountered across his path. There two ways presented themselves. Which should he take? Ought he to turn to the left or to the right? How was he to find his bearings in that black labyrinth? This labyrinth, to which we have already called the reader’s attention, has a clue, which is its slope. To follow to the slope is to arrive at the river.

This Jean Valjean instantly comprehended.

He said to himself that he was probably in the sewer des Halles; that if he were to choose the path to the left and follow the slope, he would arrive, in less than a quarter of an hour, at some mouth on the Seine between the Pont au Change and the Pont-Neuf, that is to say, he would make his appearance in broad daylight on the most densely peopled spot in Paris. Perhaps he would come out on some man-hole at the intersection of streets.

Amazement of the passers-by at beholding two bleeding men emerge from the earth at their feet. Arrival of the police, a call to arms of the neighboring post of guards. Thus they would be seized before they had even got out. It would be better to plunge into that labyrinth, to confide themselves to that black gloom, and to trust to Providence for the outcome.

He ascended the incline, and turned to the right.

When he had turned the angle of the gallery, the distant glimmer of an air-hole disappeared, the curtain of obscurity fell upon him once more, and he became blind again. Nevertheless, he advanced as rapidly as possible. Marius' two arms were passed round his neck, and the former's feet dragged behind him. He held both these arms with one hand, and groped along the wall with the other. Marius' cheek touched his, and clung there, bleeding. He felt a warm stream which came from Marius trickling down upon him and making its way under his clothes. But a humid warmth near his ear, which the mouth of the wounded man touched, indicated respiration, and consequently, life. The passage along which Jean Valjean was now proceeding was not so narrow as the first. Jean Valjean walked through it with considerable difficulty. The rain of the preceding day had not, as yet, entirely run off, and it created a little torrent in the centre of the bottom, and he was forced to hug the wall in order not to have his feet in the water.

Thus he proceeded in the gloom. He resembled the beings of the night groping in the invisible and lost beneath the earth in veins of shadow.

Still, little by little, whether it was that the distant air-holes emitted a little wavering light in this opaque gloom, or whether his eyes had become accustomed to the obscurity, some vague vision returned to him, and he began once more to gain a confused idea, now of the wall which he touched, now of the vault beneath which he was passing. The pupil dilates in the dark, and the soul dilates in misfortune and ends by finding God there.

It was not easy to direct his course.

The line of the sewer re-echoes, so to speak, the line of the streets which lie above it. There were then in Paris two thousand two hundred streets. Let the reader imagine himself beneath that forest of gloomy branches which is called the sewer. The system of sewers existing at that epoch, placed end to end, would have given a length of eleven leagues. We have said above, that the actual net-work, thanks to the special activity of the last thirty years, was no less than sixty leagues in extent.

Jean Valjean began by committing a blunder. He thought that he was beneath the Rue Saint-Denis, and it was a pity that it was not so. Under the Rue Saint-Denis there is an old stone sewer which dates from Louis XIII. and which runs straight to the collecting sewer, called the Grand Sewer, with but a single elbow, on the right, on the elevation of the ancient Cour des Miracles, and a single branch, the Saint-Martin sewer, whose four arms describe a cross. But the gut of the Petite-Truanderie the entrance to which was in the vicinity of the Corinthe wine-shop has never communicated with the sewer of the Rue Saint-Denis; it ended at the Montmartre sewer, and it was in this that Jean Valjean was entangled. There opportunities of losing oneself abound. The Montmartre sewer is one of the most labyrinthine of the ancient network. Fortunately, Jean Valjean had left behind him the sewer of the markets whose geometrical plan presents the appearance of a multitude of parrots’ roosts piled on top of each other; but he had before him more than one embarrassing encounter and more than one street corner — for they are streets — presenting itself in the gloom like an interrogation point; first, on his left, the vast sewer of the Platriere, a sort of Chinese puzzle, thrusting out and entangling its chaos of Ts and Zs under the Post-Office and under the rotunda of the Wheat Market, as far as the Seine, where it terminates in a Y; secondly, on his right, the curving corridor of the Rue du Cadran with its three teeth, which are also blind courts; thirdly, on his left, the branch of the Mail, complicated, almost at its inception, with a sort of fork, and proceeding from zig-zag to zig-zag until it ends in the grand crypt of the outlet of the Louvre, truncated and ramified in every direction; and lastly, the blind alley of a passage of the Rue des Jeuneurs, without counting little ducts here and there, before reaching the belt sewer, which alone could conduct him to some issue sufficiently distant to be safe.

Had Jean Valjean had any idea of all that we have here pointed out, he would speedily have perceived, merely by feeling the wall, that he was not in the subterranean gallery of the Rue Saint-Denis. Instead of the ancient stone, instead of the antique architecture, haughty and royal even in the sewer, with pavement and string courses of granite and mortar costing eight hundred livres the fathom, he would have felt under his hand contemporary cheapness, economical expedients, porous stone filled with mortar on a concrete foundation, which costs two hundred francs the metre, and the bourgeoise masonry known as a petits materiaux — small stuff; but of all this he knew nothing.

He advanced with anxiety, but with calmness, seeing nothing, knowing nothing, buried in chance, that is to say, engulfed in providence.

By degrees, we will admit, a certain horror seized upon him. The gloom which enveloped him penetrated his spirit. He walked in an enigma. This aqueduct of the sewer is formidable; it interlaces in a dizzy fashion. It is a melancholy thing to be caught in this Paris of shadows. Jean Valjean was obliged to find and even to invent his route without seeing it. In this unknown, every step that he risked might be his last. How was he to get out? should he find an issue? should he find it in time? would that colossal subterranean sponge with its stone cavities, allow itself to be penetrated and pierced? should he there encounter some unexpected knot in the darkness? should he arrive at the inextricable and the impassable? would Marius die there of hemorrhage and he of hunger? should they end by both getting lost, and by furnishing two skeletons in a nook of that night? He did not know. He put all these questions to himself without replying to them. The intestines of Paris form a precipice. Like the prophet, he was in the belly of the monster.

All at once, he had a surprise. At the most unforeseen moment, and without having ceased to walk in a straight line, he perceived that he was no longer ascending; the water of the rivulet was beating against his heels, instead of meeting him at his toes. The sewer was now descending. Why? Was he about to arrive suddenly at the Seine? This danger was a great one, but the peril of retreating was still greater. He continued to advance.

It was not towards the Seine that he was proceeding. The ridge which the soil of Paris forms on its right bank empties one of its water-sheds into the Seine and the other into the Grand Sewer. The crest of this ridge which determines the division of the waters describes a very capricious line. The culminating point, which is the point of separation of the currents, is in the Sainte-Avoye sewer, beyond the Rue Michelle-Comte, in the sewer of the Louvre, near the boulevards, and in the Montmartre sewer, near the Halles. It was this culminating point that Jean Valjean had reached. He was directing his course towards the belt sewer; he was on the right path. But he did not know it.

Every time that he encountered a branch, he felt of its angles, and if he found that the opening which presented itself was smaller than the passage in which he was, he did not enter but continued his route, rightly judging that every narrower way must needs terminate in a blind alley, and could only lead him further from his goal, that is to say, the outlet. Thus he avoided the quadruple trap which was set for him in the darkness by the four labyrinths which we have just enumerated.

At a certain moment, he perceived that he was emerging from beneath the Paris which was petrified by the uprising, where the barricades had suppressed circulation, and that he was entering beneath the living and normal Paris. Overhead he suddenly heard a noise as of thunder, distant but continuous. It was the rumbling of vehicles.

He had been walking for about half an hour, at least according to the calculation which he made in his own mind, and he had not yet thought of rest; he had merely changed the hand with which he was holding Marius. The darkness was more profound than ever, but its very depth reassured him.

All at once, he saw his shadow in front of him. It was outlined on a faint, almost indistinct reddish glow, which vaguely empurpled the flooring vault underfoot, and the vault overhead, and gilded to his right and to his left the two viscous walls of the passage. Stupefied, he turned round.

Behind him, in the portion of the passage which he had just passed through, at a distance which appeared to him immense, piercing the dense obscurity, flamed a sort of horrible star which had the air of surveying him.

It was the gloomy star of the police which was rising in the sewer.

In the rear of that star eight or ten forms were moving about in a confused way, black, upright, indistinct, horrible.

CHAPTER II — EXPLANATION

On the day of the sixth of June, a battue of the sewers had been ordered. It was feared that the vanquished might have taken to them for refuge, and Prefect Gisquet was to search occult Paris while General Bugeaud swept public Paris; a double and connected operation which exacted a double strategy on the part of the public force, represented above by the army and below by the police. Three squads of agents and sewermen explored the subterranean drain of Paris, the first on the right bank, the second on the left bank, the third in the city. The agents of police were armed with carabines, with bludgeons, swords and poignards.

That which was directed at Jean Valjean at that moment, was the lantern of the patrol of the right bank.

This patrol had just visited the curving gallery and the three blind alleys which lie beneath the Rue du Cadran. While they were passing their lantern through the depths of these blind alleys, Jean Valjean had encountered on his path the entrance to the gallery, had perceived that it was narrower than the principal passage and had not penetrated thither. He had passed on. The police, on emerging from the gallery du Cadran, had fancied that they heard the sound of footsteps in the direction of the belt sewer. They were, in fact, the steps of Jean Valjean. The sergeant in command of the patrol had raised his lantern, and the squad had begun to gaze into the mist in the direction whence the sound proceeded.

This was an indescribable moment for Jean Valjean.

Happily, if he saw the lantern well, the lantern saw him but ill. It was light and he was shadow. He was very far off, and mingled with the darkness of the place. He hugged the wall and halted. Moreover, he did not understand what it was that was moving behind him. The lack of sleep and food, and his emotions had caused him also to pass into the state of a visionary. He beheld a gleam, and around that gleam, forms. What was it? He did not comprehend.

Jean Valjean having paused, the sound ceased.

The men of the patrol listened, and heard nothing, they looked and saw nothing. They held a consultation.

There existed at that epoch at this point of the Montmartre sewer a sort of cross-roads called de service, which was afterwards suppressed, on account of the little interior lake which formed there, swallowing up the torrent of rain in heavy storms. The patrol could form a cluster in this open space. Jean Valjean saw these spectres form a sort of circle. These bull-dogs' heads approached each other closely and whispèred together.

The result of this council held by the watch dogs was, that they had been mistaken, that there had been no noise, that it was useless to get entangled in the belt sewer, that it would only be a waste of time, but that they ought to hasten towards Saint-Merry; that if there was anything to do, and any "bousingot" to track out, it was in that quarter.

From time to time, parties re-sole their old insults. In 1832, the word bousingot formed the interim between the word jacobin, which had become obsolete, and the word demagogue which has since rendered such excellent service.

The sergeant gave orders to turn to the left, towards the watershed of the Seine.

If it had occurred to them to separate into two squads, and to go in both directions, Jean Valjean would have been captured. All hung on that thread. It is probable that the instructions of the prefecture, foreseeing a possibility of combat and insurgents in force, had forbidden the patrol to part company. The patrol resumed its march, leaving Jean Valjean behind it. Of all this movement, Jean Valjean perceived nothing, except the eclipse of the lantern which suddenly wheeled round.

Before taking his departure, the Sergeant, in order to acquit his policeman's conscience, discharged his gun in the direction of Jean Valjean. The detonation rolled from echo to echo in the crypt, like the rumbling of that titanic entrail. A bit of plaster which fell into the stream and splashed up the water a few paces away from Jean Valjean, warned him that the ball had struck the arch over his head.

Slow and measured steps resounded for some time on the timber work, gradually dying away as they retreated to a greater distance; the group of black forms vanished, a glimmer of light oscillated and floated, communicating to the vault a reddish glow which grew fainter, then disappeared; the silence became profound once more, the obscurity became complete, blindness and deafness resumed possession of the shadows; and Jean Valjean, not daring to stir as yet, remained for a long time leaning with his back against the wall, with straining ears, and dilated pupils, watching the disappearance of that phantom patrol.

CHAPTER III — THE “SPUN” MAN

This justice must be rendered to the police of that period, that even in the most serious public junctures, it imperturbably fulfilled its duties connected with the sewers and surveillance. A revolt was, in its eyes, no pretext for allowing malefactors to take the bit in their own mouths, and for neglecting society for the reason that the government was in peril. The ordinary service was performed correctly in company with the extraordinary service, and was not troubled by the latter. In the midst of an incalculable political event already begun, under the pressure of a possible revolution, a police agent, “spun” a thief without allowing himself to be distracted by insurrection and barricades.

It was something precisely parallel which took place on the afternoon of the 6th of June on the banks of the Seine, on the slope of the right shore, a little beyond the Pont des Invalides.

There is no longer any bank there now. The aspect of the locality has changed.

On that bank, two men, separated by a certain distance, seemed to be watching each other while mutually avoiding each other. The one who was in advance was trying to get away, the one in the rear was trying to overtake the other.

It was like a game of checkers played at a distance and in silence. Neither seemed to be in any hurry, and both walked slowly, as though each of them feared by too much haste to make his partner redouble his pace.

One would have said that it was an appetite following its prey, and purposely without wearing the air of doing so. The prey was crafty and on its guard.

The proper relations between the hunted pole-cat and the hunting dog were observed. The one who was seeking to escape had an insignificant mien and not an impressive appearance; the one who was seeking to seize him was rude of aspect, and must have been rude to encounter.

The first, conscious that he was the more feeble, avoided the second; but he avoided him in a manner which was deeply furious; any one who could have observed him would have discerned in his eyes the sombre hostility of flight, and all the menace that fear contains.

The shore was deserted; there were no passers-by; not even a boatman nor a lighter-man was in the skiffs which were moored here and there.

It was not easy to see these two men, except from the quay opposite, and to any person who had scrutinized them at that distance, the man who was in advance would have appeared like a bristling, tattered, and equivocal being, who was uneasy and trembling beneath a ragged blouse, and the other like a classic and official personage, wearing the frock-coat of authority buttoned to the chin.

Perchance the reader might recognize these two men, if he were to see them closer at hand.

What was the object of the second man?

Probably to succeed in clothing the first more warmly.

When a man clothed by the state pursues a man in rags, it is in order to make of him a man who is also clothed by the state. Only, the whole question lies in the color. To be dressed in blue is glorious; to be dressed in red is disagreeable.

There is a purple from below.

It is probably some unpleasantness and some purple of this sort which the first man is desirous of shirking.

If the other allowed him to walk on, and had not seized him as yet, it was, judging from all appearances, in the hope of seeing him lead up to some significant meeting-place and to some group worth catching. This delicate operation is called “spinning.”

What renders this conjecture entirely probable is that the buttoned-up man, on catching sight from the shore of a hackney-coach on the quay as it was passing along empty, made a sign to the driver; the driver understood, evidently recognized the person with whom he had to deal, turned about and began to follow the two men at the top of the quay, at a foot-pace. This was not observed by the slouching and tattered personage who was in advance.

The hackney-coach rolled along the trees of the Champs-Elysees. The bust of the driver, whip in hand, could be seen moving along above the parapet.

One of the secret instructions of the police authorities to their agents contains this article: “Always have on hand a hackney-coach, in case of emergency.”

While these two men were manoeuvring, each on his own side, with irreproachable strategy, they approached an inclined plane on the quay which descended to the shore, and which permitted cab-drivers arriving from Passy to come to the river and water their horses. This inclined plane was suppressed later on, for the sake of symmetry; horses may die of thirst, but the eye is gratified.

It is probable that the man in the blouse had intended to ascend this inclined plane, with a view to making his escape into the Champs-Elysees, a place ornamented with trees, but, in return, much infested with policemen, and where the other could easily exercise violence.

This point on the quay is not very far distant from the house brought to Paris from Moret in 1824, by Colonel Brack, and designated as "the house of Francois I." A guard house is situated close at hand.

To the great surprise of his watcher, the man who was being tracked did not mount by the inclined plane for watering. He continued to advance along the quay on the shore.

His position was visibly becoming critical.

What was he intending to do, if not to throw himself into the Seine?

Henceforth, there existed no means of ascending to the quay; there was no other inclined plane, no staircase; and they were near the spot, marked by the bend in the Seine towards the Pont de Jena, where the bank, growing constantly narrower, ended in a slender tongue, and was lost in the water. There he would inevitably find himself blocked between the perpendicular wall on his right, the river on his left and in front of him, and the authorities on his heels.

It is true that this termination of the shore was hidden from sight by a heap of rubbish six or seven feet in height, produced by some demolition or other. But did this man hope to conceal himself effectually behind that heap of rubbish, which one need but skirt? The expedient would have been puerile. He certainly was not dreaming of such a thing. The innocence of thieves does not extend to that point.

The pile of rubbish formed a sort of projection at the water's edge, which was prolonged in a promontory as far as the wall of the quay.

The man who was being followed arrived at this little mound and went round it, so that he ceased to be seen by the other.

The latter, as he did not see, could not be seen; he took advantage of this fact to abandon all dissimulation and to walk very rapidly. In a few moments, he had reached the rubbish heap and passed round it. There he halted in sheer amazement. The man whom he had been pursuing was no longer there.

Total eclipse of the man in the blouse.

The shore, beginning with the rubbish heap, was only about thirty paces long, then it plunged into the water which beat against the wall of the quay. The fugitive could not have thrown himself into the Seine without being seen by the man who was following him. What had become of him?

The man in the buttoned-up coat walked to the extremity of the shore, and remained there in thought for a moment, his fists clenched, his eyes searching. All at once he smote his brow. He had just perceived, at the point where the land came to an end and the water began, a large iron grating, low, arched, garnished with a heavy lock and with three massive hinges. This grating, a sort of door pierced at the base of the quay, opened on the river as well as on the shore. A blackish stream passed under it. This stream discharged into the Seine.

Beyond the heavy, rusty iron bars, a sort of dark and vaulted corridor could be descried. The man folded his arms and stared at the grating with an air of reproach.

As this gaze did not suffice, he tried to thrust it aside; he shook it, it resisted solidly. It is probable that it had just been opened, although no sound had been heard, a singular circumstance in so rusty a grating; but it is certain that it had been closed again. This indicated that the man before whom that door had just opened had not a hook but a key.

This evidence suddenly burst upon the mind of the man who was trying to move the grating, and evoked from him this indignant ejaculation:

“That is too much! A government key!”

Then, immediately regaining his composure, he expressed a whole world of interior ideas by this outburst of monosyllables accented almost ironically: “Come! Come! Come! Come!”

That said, and in the hope of something or other, either that he should see the man emerge or other men enter, he posted himself on the watch behind a heap of rubbish, with the patient rage of a pointer.

The hackney-coach, which regulated all its movements on his, had, in its turn, halted on the quay above him, close to the parapet. The coachman, foreseeing a prolonged wait, encased his horses’ muzzles in the bag of oats which is damp at the bottom, and which is so familiar to Parisians, to whom, be it said in parenthesis, the Government sometimes applies it. The rare passers-by on the Pont de Jena turned their heads, before they pursued their way, to take a momentary glance at these two motionless items in the landscape, the man on the shore, the carriage on the quay.

CHAPTER IV — HE ALSO BEARS HIS CROSS

Jean Valjean had resumed his march and had not again paused.

This march became more and more laborious. The level of these vaults varies; the average height is about five feet, six inches, and has been calculated for the stature of a man; Jean Valjean was forced to bend over, in order not to strike Marius against the vault; at every step he had to bend, then to rise, and to feel incessantly of the wall. The moisture of the stones, and the viscous nature of the timber framework furnished but poor supports to which to cling, either for hand or foot. He stumbled along in the hideous dung-heap of the city. The intermittent gleams from the air-holes only appeared at very long intervals, and were so wan that the full sunlight seemed like the light of the moon; all the rest was mist, miasma, opaqueness, blackness. Jean Valjean was both hungry and thirsty; especially thirsty; and this, like the sea, was a place full of water where a man cannot drink. His strength, which was prodigious, as the reader knows, and which had been but little decreased by age, thanks to his chaste and sober life, began to give way, nevertheless. Fatigue began to gain on him; and as his strength decreased, it made the weight of his burden increase. Marius, who was, perhaps, dead, weighed him down as inert bodies weigh. Jean Valjean held him in such a manner that his chest was not oppressed, and so that respiration could proceed as well as possible. Between his legs he felt the rapid gliding of the rats. One of them was frightened to such a degree that he bit him. From time to time, a breath of fresh air reached him through the vent-holes of the mouths of the sewer, and re-animated him.

It might have been three hours past midday when he reached the belt-sewer.

He was, at first, astonished at this sudden widening. He found himself, all at once, in a gallery where his outstretched hands could not reach the two walls, and beneath a vault which his head did not touch. The Grand Sewer is, in fact, eight feet wide and seven feet high.

At the point where the Montmartre sewer joins the Grand Sewer, two other subterranean galleries, that of the Rue de Provence, and that of the Abattoir, form a square. Between these four ways, a less sagacious man would have remained undecided. Jean Valjean selected the broadest, that is to say, the belt-sewer. But here the question again came up — should he descend or ascend? He thought that the situation required haste, and that he must now gain the Seine at any risk. In other terms, he must descend. He turned to the left.

It was well that he did so, for it is an error to suppose that the belt-sewer has two outlets, the one in the direction of Bercy, the other towards Passy, and that it is, as its name indicates, the subterranean girdle of the Paris on the right bank. The Grand Sewer, which is, it must be remembered, nothing else than the old brook of Menilmontant, terminates, if one ascends it, in a blind sack, that is to say, at its ancient point of departure which was its source, at the foot of the knoll of Menilmontant. There is no direct communication with the branch which collects the waters of Paris beginning with the Quartier Popincourt, and which falls into the Seine through the Amelot sewer above the ancient Isle Louviers. This branch, which completes the collecting sewer, is separated from it, under the Rue Menilmontant itself, by a pile which marks the dividing point of the waters, between upstream and downstream. If Jean Valjean had ascended the gallery he would have arrived, after a thousand efforts, and broken down with fatigue, and in an expiring condition, in the gloom, at a wall. He would have been lost.

In case of necessity, by retracing his steps a little way, and entering the passage of the Filles-du-Calvaire, on condition that he did not hesitate at the subterranean crossing of the Carrefour Boucherat, and by taking the corridor Saint-Louis, then the Saint-Gilles gut on the left, then turning to the right and avoiding the Saint-Sebastian gallery, he might have reached the Amelot sewer, and thence, provided that he did not go astray in the sort of F which lies under the Bastille, he might have attained the outlet on the Seine near the Arsenal. But in order to do this, he must have been thoroughly familiar with the enormous madrepore of the sewer in all its ramifications and in all its openings. Now, we must again insist that he knew nothing of that frightful drain which he was traversing; and had any one asked him in what he was, he would have answered: “In the night.”

His instinct served him well. To descend was, in fact, possible safety.

He left on his right the two narrow passages which branch out in the form of a claw under the Rue Laffitte and the Rue Saint-Georges and the long, bifurcated corridor of the Chaussée d’Antin.

A little beyond an affluent, which was, probably, the Madeleine branch, he halted. He was extremely weary. A passably large air-hole, probably the man-hole in the Rue d'Anjou, furnished a light that was almost vivid. Jean Valjean, with the gentleness of movement which a brother would exercise towards his wounded brother, deposited Marius on the banquette of the sewer. Marius' blood-stained face appeared under the wan light of the air-hole like the ashes at the bottom of a tomb. His eyes were closed, his hair was plastered down on his temples like a painter's brushes dried in red wash; his hands hung limp and dead. A clot of blood had collected in the knot of his cravat; his limbs were cold, and blood was clotted at the corners of his mouth; his shirt had thrust itself into his wounds, the cloth of his coat was chafing the yawning gashes in the living flesh. Jean Valjean, pushing aside the garments with the tips of his fingers, laid his hand upon Marius' breast; his heart was still beating. Jean Valjean tore up his shirt, bandaged the young man's wounds as well as he was able and stopped the flowing blood; then bending over Marius, who still lay unconscious and almost without breathing, in that half light, he gazed at him with inexpressible hatred.

On disarranging Marius' garments, he had found two things in his pockets, the roll which had been forgotten there on the preceding evening, and Marius' pocketbook. He ate the roll and opened the pocketbook. On the first page he found the four lines written by Marius. The reader will recall them:

"My name is Marius Pontmercy. Carry my body to my grandfather, M. Gillenormand, Rue des Filles-du-Calvaire, No. 6, in the Marais."

Jean Valjean read these four lines by the light of the air-hole, and remained for a moment as though absorbed in thought, repeating in a low tone: "Rue des Filles-du-Calvaire, number 6, Monsieur Gillenormand." He replaced the pocketbook in Marius' pocket. He had eaten, his strength had returned to him; he took Marius up once more upon his back, placed the latter's head carefully on his right shoulder, and resumed his descent of the sewer.

The Grand Sewer, directed according to the course of the valley of Menilmontant, is about two leagues long. It is paved throughout a notable portion of its extent.

This torch of the names of the streets of Paris, with which we are illuminating for the reader Jean Valjean's subterranean march, Jean Valjean himself did not possess. Nothing told him what zone of the city he was traversing, nor what way he had made. Only the growing pallor of the pools of light which he encountered from time to time indicated to him that the sun was withdrawing from the pavement, and that the day would soon be over; and the rolling of vehicles overhead, having become intermittent instead of continuous, then having almost ceased, he concluded that he was no longer under central Paris, and that he was approaching some solitary region, in the vicinity of the outer boulevards, or the extreme outer quays. Where there are fewer houses and streets, the sewer has fewer air-holes. The gloom deepened around Jean Valjean. Nevertheless, he continued to advance, groping his way in the dark.

Suddenly this darkness became terrible.

CHAPTER V — IN THE CASE OF SAND AS IN THAT OF WOMAN, THERE IS A FINENESS WHICH IS TREACHEROUS

He felt that he was entering the water, and that he no longer had a pavement under his feet, but only mud.

It sometimes happens, that on certain shores of Bretagne or Scotland a man, either a traveller or a fisherman, while walking at low tide on the beach far from shore, suddenly notices that for several minutes past, he has been walking with some difficulty. The beach under foot is like pitch; his soles stick fast to it; it is no longer sand, it is bird-lime. The strand is perfectly dry, but at every step that he takes, as soon as the foot is raised, the print is filled with water. The eye, however, has perceived no change; the immense beach is smooth and tranquil, all the sand has the same aspect, nothing distinguishes the soil that is solid from that which is not solid; the joyous little cloud of sand-lice continues to leap tumultuously under the feet of the passer-by.

The man pursues his way, he walks on, turns towards the land, endeavors to approach the shore. He is not uneasy. Uneasy about what? Only he is conscious that the heaviness of his feet seems to be increasing at every step that he takes. All at once he sinks in. He sinks in two or three inches. Decidedly, he is not on the right road; he halts to get his bearings. Suddenly he glances at his feet; his feet have disappeared. The sand has covered them. He draws his feet out of the sand, he tries to retrace his steps, he turns back, he sinks in more deeply than before. The sand is up to his ankles, he tears himself free from it and flings himself to the left, the sand reaches to mid-leg, he flings himself to the right, the sand comes up to his knees. Then, with indescribable terror, he recognizes the fact that he is caught in a quicksand, and that he has beneath him that frightful medium in which neither man can walk nor fish can swim. He flings away his burden, if he have one, he lightens himself, like a ship in distress; it is too late, the sand is above his knees.

He shouts, he waves his hat, or his handkerchief, the sand continually gains on him; if the beach is deserted, if the land is too far away, if the bank of sand is too ill-famed, there is no hero in the neighborhood, all is over, he is condemned to be engulfed. He is condemned to that terrible interment, long, infallible, implacable, which it is impossible to either retard or hasten, which lasts for hours, which will not come to an end, which seizes you erect, free, in the flush of health, which drags you down by the feet, which, at every effort that you attempt, at every shout that you utter, draws you a little lower, which has the air of punishing you for your resistance by a redoubled grasp, which forces a man to return slowly to earth, while leaving him time to survey the horizon, the trees, the verdant country, the smoke of the villages on the plain, the sails of the ships on the sea, the birds which fly and sing, the sun and the sky. This engulfment is the sepulchre which assumes a tide, and which mounts from the depths of the earth towards a living man. Each minute is an inexorable layer-out of the dead. The wretched man tries to sit down, to lie down, to climb; every movement that he makes buries him deeper; he straightens himself up, he sinks; he feels that he is being swallowed up; he shrieks, implores, cries to the clouds, wrings his hands, grows desperate. Behold him in the sand up to his belly, the sand reaches to his breast, he is only a bust now. He uplifts his hands, utters furious groans, clenches his nails on the beach, tries to cling fast to that ashes, supports himself on his elbows in order to raise himself from that soft sheath, and sobs frantically; the sand mounts higher. The sand has reached his shoulders, the sand reaches to his throat; only his face is visible now. His mouth cries aloud, the sand fills it; silence. His eyes still gaze forth, the sand closes them, night. Then his brow decreases, a little hair quivers above the sand; a hand projects, pierces the surface of the beach, waves and disappears. Sinister obliteration of a man.

Sometimes a rider is engulfed with his horse; sometimes the carter is swallowed up with his cart; all founders in that strand. It is shipwreck elsewhere than in the water. It is the earth drowning a man. The earth, permeated with the ocean, becomes a pitfall. It presents itself in the guise of a plain, and it yawns like a wave. The abyss is subject to these treacheries.

This melancholy fate, always possible on certain sea beaches, was also possible, thirty years ago, in the sewers of Paris.

Before the important works, undertaken in 1833, the subterranean drain of Paris was subject to these sudden slides.

The water filtered into certain subjacent strata, which were particularly friable; the foot-way, which was of flag-stones, as in the ancient sewers, or of cement on concrete, as in the new galleries, having no longer an underpinning, gave way. A fold in a flooring of this sort means a crack, means crumbling. The framework crumbled away for a certain length. This crevice, the hiatus of a gulf of mire, was called a fontis, in the special tongue. What is a fontis? It is the quicksands of the seashore suddenly encountered under the surface of the earth; it is the beach of Mont Saint-Michel in a sewer. The soaked soil is in a state of fusion, as it were; all its molecules are in suspension in soft medium; it is not earth and it is not water. The depth is sometimes very great. Nothing can be more formidable than such an encounter. If the water predominates, death is prompt, the man is swallowed up; if earth predominates, death is slow.

Can any one picture to himself such a death? If being swallowed by the earth is terrible on the seashore, what is it in a cess-pool? Instead of the open air, the broad daylight, the clear horizon, those vast sounds, those free clouds whence rains life, instead of those barks descried in the distance, of that hope under all sorts of forms, of probable passers-by, of succor possible up to the very last moment, — instead of all this, deafness, blindness, a black vault, the inside of a tomb already prepared, death in the mire beneath a cover! slow suffocation by filth, a stone box where asphyxia opens its claw in the mire and clutches you by the throat; fetidness mingled with the death-rattle; slime instead of the strand, sulfuretted hydrogen in place of the hurricane, dung in place of the ocean! And to shout, to gnash one’s teeth, and to writhe, and to struggle, and to agonize, with that enormous city which knows nothing of it all, over one’s head!

Inexpressible is the horror of dying thus! Death sometimes redeems his atrocity by a certain terrible dignity. On the funeral pile, in shipwreck, one can be great; in the flames as in the foam, a superb attitude is possible; one there becomes transfigured as one perishes. But not here. Death is filthy. It is humiliating to expire. The supreme floating visions are abject. Mud is synonymous with shame. It is petty, ugly, infamous. To die in a butt of Malvoisie, like Clarence, is permissible; in the ditch of a scavenger, like Escoubleau, is horrible. To struggle therein is hideous; at the same time that one is going through the death agony, one is floundering about. There are shadows enough for hell, and mire enough to render it nothing but a slough, and the dying man knows not whether he is on the point of becoming a spectre or a frog.

Everywhere else the sepulchre is sinister; here it is deformed.

The depth of the fontis varied, as well as their length and their density, according to the more or less bad quality of the sub-soil. Sometimes a fontis was three or four feet deep, sometimes eight or ten; sometimes the bottom was unfathomable. Here the mire was almost solid, there almost liquid. In the Luniere fontis, it would have taken a man a day to disappear, while he would have been devoured in five minutes by the Philippeaux slough. The mire bears up more or less, according to its density. A child can escape where a man will perish. The first law of safety is to get rid of every sort of load. Every sewerman who felt the ground giving way beneath him began by flinging away his sack of tools, or his back-basket, or his hod.

The fontis were due to different causes: the friability of the soil; some landslip at a depth beyond the reach of man; the violent summer rains; the incessant flooding of winter; long, drizzling showers. Sometimes the weight of the surrounding houses on a marly or sandy soil forced out the vaults of the subterranean galleries and caused them to bend aside, or it chanced that a flooring vault burst and split under this crushing thrust. In this manner, the heaping up of the Parthenon, obliterated, a century ago, a portion of the vaults of Saint-Genevieve hill. When a sewer was broken in under the pressure of the houses, the mischief was sometimes betrayed in the street above by a sort of space, like the teeth of a saw, between the paving-stones; this crevice was developed in an undulating line throughout the entire length of the cracked vault, and then, the evil being visible, the remedy could be promptly applied. It also frequently happened, that the interior ravages were not revealed by any external scar, and in that case, woe to the sewermen. When they entered without precaution into the sewer, they were liable to be lost. Ancient registers make mention of several scavengers who were buried in fontis in this manner. They give many names; among others, that of the sewerman who was swallowed up in a quagmire under the man-hole of the Rue Careme-Prenant, a certain Blaise Poutrain; this Blaise Poutrain was the brother of Nicholas Poutrain, who was the last grave-digger of the cemetery called the Charnier des Innocents, in 1785, the epoch when that cemetery expired.

There was also that young and charming Vicomte d’Escoubleau, of whom we have just spoken, one of the heroes of the siege of Lerida, where they delivered the assault in silk stockings, with violins at their head. D’Escoubleau, surprised one night at his cousin’s, the Duchess de Sourdis’, was drowned in a quagmire of the Beautreillis sewer, in which he had taken refuge in order to escape from the Duke. Madame de Sourdis, when informed of his death, demanded her smelling-bottle, and forgot to weep, through sniffling at her salts. In such cases, there is no love which holds fast; the sewer extinguishes it. Hero refuses to wash the body of Leander. Thisbe stops her nose in the presence of Pyramus and says: “Phew!”

CHAPTER VI — THE FONTIS

Jean Valjean found himself in the presence of a fontis.

This sort of quagmire was common at that period in the subsoil of the Champs-Elysees, difficult to handle in the hydraulic works and a bad preservative of the subterranean constructions, on account of its excessive fluidity. This fluidity exceeds even the inconsistency of the sands of the Quartier Saint-Georges, which could only be conquered by a stone construction on a concrete foundation, and the clayey strata, infected with gas, of the Quartier des Martyrs, which are so liquid that the only way in which a passage was effected under the gallery des Martyrs was by means of a cast-iron pipe. When, in 1836, the old stone sewer beneath the Faubourg Saint-Honore, in which we now see Jean Valjean, was demolished for the purpose of reconstructing it, the quicksand, which forms the subsoil of the Champs-Elysees as far as the Seine, presented such an obstacle, that the operation lasted nearly six months, to the great clamor of the dwellers on the riverside, particularly those who had hotels and carriages. The work was more than unhealthy; it was dangerous. It is true that they had four months and a half of rain, and three floods of the Seine.

The fontis which Jean Valjean had encountered was caused by the downpour of the preceding day. The pavement, badly sustained by the subjacent sand, had given way and had produced a stoppage of the water. Infiltration had taken place, a slip had followed. The dislocated bottom had sunk into the ooze. To what extent? Impossible to say. The obscurity was more dense there than elsewhere. It was a pit of mire in a cavern of night.

Jean Valjean felt the pavement vanishing beneath his feet. He entered this slime. There was water on the surface, slime at the bottom. He must pass it. To retrace his steps was impossible. Marius was dying, and Jean Valjean exhausted. Besides, where was he to go? Jean Valjean advanced. Moreover, the pit seemed, for the first few steps, not to be very deep. But in proportion as he advanced, his feet plunged deeper. Soon he had the slime up to his calves and water above his knees. He walked on, raising Marius in his arms, as far above the water as he could. The mire now reached to his knees, and the water to his waist. He could no longer retreat. This mud, dense enough for one man, could not, obviously, uphold two. Marius and

Jean Valjean would have stood a chance of extricating themselves singly. Jean Valjean continued to advance, supporting the dying man, who was, perhaps, a corpse.

The water came up to his arm-pits; he felt that he was sinking; it was only with difficulty that he could move in the depth of ooze which he had now reached. The density, which was his support, was also an obstacle. He still held Marius on high, and with an unheard-of expenditure of force, he advanced still; but he was sinking. He had only his head above the water now and his two arms holding up Marius. In the old paintings of the deluge there is a mother holding her child thus.

He sank still deeper, he turned his face to the rear, to escape the water, and in order that he might be able to breathe; anyone who had seen him in that gloom would have thought that what he beheld was a mask floating on the shadows; he caught a faint glimpse above him of the drooping head and livid face of Marius; he made a desperate effort and launched his foot forward; his foot struck something solid; a point of support. It was high time.

He straightened himself up, and rooted himself upon that point of support with a sort of fury. This produced upon him the effect of the first step in a staircase leading back to life.

The point of support, thus encountered in the mire at the supreme moment, was the beginning of the other water-shed of the pavement, which had bent but had not given way, and which had curved under the water like a plank and in a single piece. Well built pavements form a vault and possess this sort of firmness. This fragment of the vaulting, partly submerged, but solid, was a veritable inclined plane, and, once on this plane, he was safe. Jean Valjean mounted this inclined plane and reached the other side of the quagmire.

As he emerged from the water, he came in contact with a stone and fell upon his knees. He reflected that this was but just, and he remained there for some time, with his soul absorbed in words addressed to God.

He rose to his feet, shivering, chilled, foul-smelling, bowed beneath the dying man whom he was dragging after him, all dripping with slime, and his soul filled with a strange light.

CHAPTER VII — ONE SOMETIMES RUNS AGROUND WHEN ONE FANCIES THAT ONE IS DISEMBARKING

He set out on his way once more.

However, although he had not left his life in the fontis, he seemed to have left his strength behind him there. That supreme effort had exhausted him. His lassitude was now such that he was obliged to pause for breath every three or four steps, and lean against the wall. Once he was forced to seat himself on the banquette in order to alter Marius' position, and he thought that he should have to remain there. But if his vigor was dead, his energy was not. He rose again.

He walked on desperately, almost fast, proceeded thus for a hundred paces, almost without drawing breath, and suddenly came in contact with the wall. He had reached an elbow of the sewer, and, arriving at the turn with head bent down, he had struck the wall. He raised his eyes, and at the extremity of the vault, far, very far away in front of him, he perceived a light. This time it was not that terrible light; it was good, white light. It was daylight. Jean Valjean saw the outlet.

A damned soul, who, in the midst of the furnace, should suddenly perceive the outlet of Gehenna, would experience what Jean Valjean felt. It would fly wildly with the stumps of its burned wings towards that radiant portal. Jean Valjean was no longer conscious of fatigue, he no longer felt Marius' weight, he found his legs once more of steel, he ran rather than walked. As he approached, the outlet became more and more distinctly defined. It was a pointed arch, lower than the vault, which gradually narrowed, and narrower than the gallery, which closed in as the vault grew lower. The tunnel ended like the interior of a funnel; a faulty construction, imitated from the wickets of penitentiaries, logical in a prison, illogical in a sewer, and which has since been corrected.

Jean Valjean reached the outlet.

There he halted.

It certainly was the outlet, but he could not get out.

The arch was closed by a heavy grating, and the grating, which, to all appearance, rarely swung on its rusty hinges, was clamped to its stone jamb by a thick lock, which, red with rust, seemed like an enormous brick. The keyhole could be seen, and the robust latch, deeply sunk in the iron staple. The door was plainly double-locked. It was one of those prison locks which old Paris was so fond of lavishing.

Beyond the grating was the open air, the river, the daylight, the shore, very narrow but sufficient for escape. The distant quays, Paris, that gulf in which one so easily hides oneself, the broad horizon, liberty. On the right, down stream, the bridge of Jena was discernible, on the left, upstream, the bridge of the Invalides; the place would have been a propitious one in which to await the night and to escape. It was one of the most solitary points in Paris; the shore which faces the Grand-Caillou. Flies were entering and emerging through the bars of the grating.

It might have been half-past eight o'clock in the evening. The day was declining.

Jean Valjean laid Marius down along the wall, on the dry portion of the vaulting, then he went to the grating and clenched both fists round the bars; the shock which he gave it was frenzied, but it did not move. The grating did not stir. Jean Valjean seized the bars one after the other, in the hope that he might be able to tear away the least solid, and to make of it a lever wherewith to raise the door or to break the lock. Not a bar stirred. The teeth of a tiger are not more firmly fixed in their sockets. No lever; no prying possible. The obstacle was invincible. There was no means of opening the gate.

Must he then stop there? What was he to do? What was to become of him? He had not the strength to retrace his steps, to recommence the journey which he had already taken. Besides, how was he to again traverse that quagmire whence he had only extricated himself as by a miracle? And after the quagmire, was there not the police patrol, which assuredly could not be twice avoided? And then, whither was he to go? What direction should he pursue? To follow the incline would not conduct him to his goal. If he were to reach another outlet, he would find it obstructed by a plug or a grating. Every outlet was, undoubtedly, closed in that manner. Chance had unsealed the grating through which he had entered, but it was evident that all the other sewer mouths were barred. He had only succeeded in escaping into a prison.

All was over. Everything that Jean Valjean had done was useless. Exhaustion had ended in failure.

They were both caught in the immense and gloomy web of death, and Jean Valjean felt the terrible spider running along those black strands and quivering in the shadows. He turned his back to the grating, and fell upon the pavement, hurled to earth rather than seated, close to Marius, who still made no movement, and with his head bent between his knees. This was the last drop of anguish.

Of what was he thinking during this profound depression? Neither of himself nor of Marius. He was thinking of Cosette.

CHAPTER VIII — THE TORN COAT-TAIL

In the midst of this prostration, a hand was laid on his shoulder, and a low voice said to him:

“Half shares.”

Some person in that gloom? Nothing so closely resembles a dream as despair. Jean Valjean thought that he was dreaming. He had heard no footsteps. Was it possible? He raised his eyes.

A man stood before him.

This man was clad in a blouse; his feet were bare; he held his shoes in his left hand; he had evidently removed them in order to reach Jean Valjean, without allowing his steps to be heard.

Jean Valjean did not hesitate for an instant. Unexpected as was this encounter, this man was known to him. The man was Thenardier.

Although awakened, so to speak, with a start, Jean Valjean, accustomed to alarms, and steeled to unforeseen shocks that must be promptly parried, instantly regained possession of his presence of mind. Moreover, the situation could not be made worse, a certain degree of distress is no longer capable of a crescendo, and Thenardier himself could add nothing to this blackness of this night.

A momentary pause ensued.

Thenardier, raising his right hand to a level with his forehead, formed with it a shade, then he brought his eyelashes together, by screwing up his eyes, a motion which, in connection with a slight contraction of the mouth, characterizes the sagacious attention of a man who is endeavoring to recognize another man. He did not succeed. Jean Valjean, as we have just stated, had his back turned to the light, and he was, moreover, so disfigured, so bemired, so bleeding that he would have been unrecognizable in full noonday. On the contrary, illuminated by the light from the grating, a cellar light, it is true, livid, yet precise in its lividness, Thenardier, as the energetic popular metaphor expresses it, immediately “leaped into” Jean Valjean’s eyes. This inequality of conditions sufficed to assure some advantage to Jean Valjean in that mysterious duel which was on the point of beginning between the two situations and the two men. The encounter took place between Jean Valjean veiled and Thenardier unmasked.

Jean Valjean immediately perceived that Thenardier did not recognize him.

They surveyed each other for a moment in that half-gloom, as though taking each other's measure. Thenardier was the first to break the silence.

"How are you going to manage to get out?"

Jean Valjean made no reply. Thenardier continued:

"It's impossible to pick the lock of that gate. But still you must get out of this."

"That is true," said Jean Valjean.

"Well, half shares then."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You have killed that man; that's all right. I have the key."

Thenardier pointed to Marius. He went on:

"I don't know you, but I want to help you. You must be a friend."

Jean Valjean began to comprehend. Thenardier took him for an assassin.

Thenardier resumed:

"Listen, comrade. You didn't kill that man without looking to see what he had in his pockets. Give me my half. I'll open the door for you."

And half drawing from beneath his tattered blouse a huge key, he added:

"Do you want to see how a key to liberty is made? Look here."

Jean Valjean "remained stupid" — the expression belongs to the elder Corneille — to such a degree that he doubted whether what he beheld was real. It was providence appearing in horrible guise, and his good angel springing from the earth in the form of Thenardier.

Thenardier thrust his fist into a large pocket concealed under his blouse, drew out a rope and offered it to Jean Valjean.

"Hold on," said he, "I'll give you the rope to boot."

"What is the rope for?"

"You will need a stone also, but you can find one outside. There's a heap of rubbish."

"What am I to do with a stone?"

"Idiot, you'll want to sling that stiff into the river, you'll need a stone and a rope, otherwise it would float on the water."

Jean Valjean took the rope. There is no one who does not occasionally accept in this mechanical way.

Thenardier snapped his fingers as though an idea had suddenly occurred to him.

"Ah, see here, comrade, how did you contrive to get out of that slough yonder? I haven't dared to risk myself in it. Phew! you don't smell good."

After a pause he added:

"I'm asking you questions, but you're perfectly right not to answer. It's an apprenticeship against that cursed quarter of an hour before the examining magistrate. And then, when you don't talk at all, you run no risk of talking too loud. That's no matter, as I can't see your face and as I don't know your name, you are wrong in supposing that I don't know who you are and what you want. I twig. You've broken up that gentleman a bit; now you want to tuck him away somewhere. The river, that great hider of folly, is what you want. I'll get you out of your scrape. Helping a good fellow in a pinch is what suits me to a hair."

While expressing his approval of Jean Valjean's silence, he endeavored to force him to talk. He jostled his shoulder in an attempt to catch a sight of his profile, and he exclaimed, without, however, raising his tone:

"Apropos of that quagmire, you're a hearty animal. Why didn't you toss the man in there?"

Jean Valjean preserved silence.

Thenardier resumed, pushing the rag which served him as a cravat to the level of his Adam's apple, a gesture which completes the capable air of a serious man:

"After all, you acted wisely. The workmen, when they come to-morrow to stop up that hole, would certainly have found the stiff abandoned there, and it might have been possible, thread by thread, straw by straw, to pick up the scent and reach you. Some one has passed through the sewer. Who? Where did he get out? Was he seen to come out? The police are full of cleverness. The sewer is treacherous and tells tales of you. Such a find is a rarity, it attracts attention, very few people make use of the sewers for their affairs, while the river belongs to everybody. The river is the true grave. At the end of a month they fish up your man in the nets at Saint-Cloud. Well, what does one care for that? It's carrion! Who killed that man? Paris. And justice makes no inquiries. You have done well."

The more loquacious Thenardier became, the more mute was Jean Valjean.

Again Thenardier shook him by the shoulder.

"Now let's settle this business. Let's go shares. You have seen my key, show me your money."

Thenardier was haggard, fierce, suspicious, rather menacing, yet amicable.

There was one singular circumstance; Thenardier's manners were not simple; he had not the air of being wholly at his ease; while affecting an air of mystery, he spoke low; from time to time he laid his finger on his mouth, and muttered, "hush!" It was difficult to divine why. There was no one there except themselves. Jean Valjean thought that other ruffians might possibly be concealed in some nook, not very far off, and that Thenardier did not care to share with them.

Thenardier resumed:

"Let's settle up. How much did the stiff have in his bags?"

Jean Valjean searched his pockets.

It was his habit, as the reader will remember, to always have some money about him. The mournful life of expedients to which he had been condemned imposed this as a law upon him. On this occasion, however, he had been caught unprepared. When donning his uniform of a National Guardsman on the preceding evening, he had forgotten, dolefully absorbed as he was, to take his pocket-book. He had only some small change in his fob. He turned out his pocket, all soaked with ooze, and spread out on the banquette of the vault one louis d'or, two five-franc pieces, and five or six large sous.

Thenardier thrust out his lower lip with a significant twist of the neck.

"You knocked him over cheap," said he.

He set to feeling the pockets of Jean Valjean and Marius, with the greatest familiarity. Jean Valjean, who was chiefly concerned in keeping his back to the light, let him have his way.

While handling Marius' coat, Thenardier, with the skill of a pickpocket, and without being noticed by Jean Valjean, tore off a strip which he concealed under his blouse, probably thinking that this morsel of stuff might serve, later on, to identify the assassinated man and the assassin. However, he found no more than the thirty francs.

"That's true," said he, "both of you together have no more than that."

And, forgetting his motto: "half shares," he took all.

He hesitated a little over the large sous. After due reflection, he took them also, muttering:

"Never mind! You cut folks' throats too cheap altogether."

That done, he once more drew the big key from under his blouse.

“Now, my friend, you must leave. It’s like the fair here, you pay when you go out. You have paid, now clear out.”

And he began to laugh.

Had he, in lending to this stranger the aid of his key, and in making some other man than himself emerge from that portal, the pure and disinterested intention of rescuing an assassin? We may be permitted to doubt this.

Thenardier helped Jean Valjean to replace Marius on his shoulders, then he betook himself to the grating on tiptoe, and barefooted, making Jean Valjean a sign to follow him, looked out, laid his finger on his mouth, and remained for several seconds, as though in suspense; his inspection finished, he placed the key in the lock. The bolt slipped back and the gate swung open. It neither grated nor squeaked. It moved very softly.

It was obvious that this gate and those hinges, carefully oiled, were in the habit of opening more frequently than was supposed. This softness was suspicious; it hinted at furtive goings and comings, silent entrances and exits of nocturnal men, and the wolf-like tread of crime.

The sewer was evidently an accomplice of some mysterious band. This taciturn grating was a receiver of stolen goods.

Thenardier opened the gate a little way, allowing just sufficient space for Jean Valjean to pass out, closed the grating again, gave the key a double turn in the lock and plunged back into the darkness, without making any more noise than a breath. He seemed to walk with the velvet paws of a tiger.

A moment later, that hideous providence had retreated into the invisibility.

Jean Valjean found himself in the open air.

CHAPTER IX — MARIUS PRODUCES ON SOME ONE WHO IS A JUDGE OF THE MATTER,

THE EFFECT OF BEING DEAD

He allowed Marius to slide down upon the shore.

They were in the open air!

The miasmas, darkness, horror lay behind him. The pure, healthful, living, joyous air that was easy to breathe inundated him. Everywhere around him reigned silence, but that charming silence when the sun has set in an unclouded azure sky. Twilight had descended; night was drawing on, the great deliverer, the friend of all those who need a mantle of darkness that they may escape from an anguish. The sky presented itself in all directions like an enormous calm. The river flowed to his feet with the sound of a kiss. The aerial dialogue of the nests bidding each other good night in the elms of the Champs-Elysees was audible. A few stars, daintily piercing the pale blue of the zenith, and visible to revery alone, formed imperceptible little splendors amid the immensity. Evening was unfolding over the head of Jean Valjean all the sweetness of the infinite.

It was that exquisite and undecided hour which says neither yes nor no. Night was already sufficiently advanced to render it possible to lose oneself at a little distance and yet there was sufficient daylight to permit of recognition at close quarters.

For several seconds, Jean Valjean was irresistibly overcome by that august and caressing serenity; such moments of oblivion do come to men; suffering refrains from harassing the unhappy wretch; everything is eclipsed in the thoughts; peace broods over the dreamer like night; and, beneath the twilight which beams and in imitation of the sky which is illuminated, the soul becomes studded with stars. Jean Valjean could not refrain from contemplating that vast, clear shadow which rested over him; thoughtfully he bathed in the sea of ecstasy and prayer in the majestic silence of the eternal heavens. Then he bent down swiftly to Marius, as though the sentiment of duty had returned to him, and, dipping up water in the hollow of his hand, he gently sprinkled a few drops on the latter’s face. Marius’ eyelids did not open; but his half-open mouth still breathed.

Jean Valjean was on the point of dipping his hand in the river once more, when, all at once, he experienced an indescribable embarrassment, such as a person feels when there is some one behind him whom he does not see.

We have already alluded to this impression, with which everyone is familiar.

He turned round.

Some one was, in fact, behind him, as there had been a short while before.

A man of lofty stature, enveloped in a long coat, with folded arms, and bearing in his right fist a bludgeon of which the leaden head was visible, stood a few paces in the rear of the spot where Jean Valjean was crouching over Marius.

With the aid of the darkness, it seemed a sort of apparition. An ordinary man would have been alarmed because of the twilight, a thoughtful man on account of the bludgeon. Jean Valjean recognized Javert.

The reader has divined, no doubt, that Thenardier's pursuer was no other than Javert. Javert, after his unlooked-for escape from the barricade, had betaken himself to the prefecture of police, had rendered a verbal account to the Prefect in person in a brief audience, had then immediately gone on duty again, which implied — the note, the reader will recollect, which had been captured on his person — a certain surveillance of the shore on the right bank of the Seine near the Champs-Elysees, which had, for some time past, aroused the attention of the police. There he had caught sight of Thenardier and had followed him. The reader knows the rest.

Thus it will be easily understood that that grating, so obligingly opened to Jean Valjean, was a bit of cleverness on Thenardier's part. Thenardier intuitively felt that Javert was still there; the man spied upon has a scent which never deceives him; it was necessary to fling a bone to that sleuth-hound. An assassin, what a godsend! Such an opportunity must never be allowed to slip. Thenardier, by putting Jean Valjean outside in his stead, provided a prey for the police, forced them to relinquish his scent, made them forget him in a bigger adventure, repaid Javert for his waiting, which always flatters a spy, earned thirty francs, and counted with certainty, so far as he himself was concerned, on escaping with the aid of this diversion.

Jean Valjean had fallen from one danger upon another.

These two encounters, this falling one after the other, from Thenardier upon Javert, was a rude shock.

Javert did not recognize Jean Valjean, who, as we have stated, no longer looked like himself. He did not unfold his arms, he made sure of his bludgeon in his fist, by an imperceptible movement, and said in a curt, calm voice:

“Who are you?”

“I.”

“Who is ‘I’?”

“Jean Valjean.”

Javert thrust his bludgeon between his teeth, bent his knees, inclined his body, laid his two powerful hands on the shoulders of Jean Valjean, which were clamped within them as in a couple of vices, scrutinized him, and recognized him. Their faces almost touched. Javert’s look was terrible.

Jean Valjean remained inert beneath Javert’s grasp, like a lion submitting to the claws of a lynx.

“Inspector Javert,” said he, “you have me in your power. Moreover, I have regarded myself as your prisoner ever since this morning. I did not give you my address with any intention of escaping from you. Take me. Only grant me one favor.”

Javert did not appear to hear him. He kept his eyes riveted on Jean Valjean. His chin being contracted, thrust his lips upwards towards his nose, a sign of savage revery. At length he released Jean Valjean, straightened himself stiffly up without bending, grasped his bludgeon again firmly, and, as though in a dream, he murmured rather than uttered this question:

“What are you doing here? And who is this man?”

He still abstained from addressing Jean Valjean as thou.

Jean Valjean replied, and the sound of his voice appeared to rouse Javert:

“It is with regard to him that I desire to speak to you. Dispose of me as you see fit; but first help me to carry him home. That is all that I ask of you.”

Javert’s face contracted as was always the case when any one seemed to think him capable of making a concession. Nevertheless, he did not say “no.”

Again he bent over, drew from his pocket a handkerchief which he moistened in the water and with which he then wiped Marius’ blood-stained brow.

“This man was at the barricade,” said he in a low voice and as though speaking to himself. “He is the one they called Marius.”

A spy of the first quality, who had observed everything, listened to everything, and taken in everything, even when he thought that he was to die; who had played the spy even in his agony, and who, with his elbows leaning on the first step of the sepulchre, had taken notes.

He seized Marius' hand and felt his pulse.

"He is wounded," said Jean Valjean.

"He is a dead man," said Javert.

Jean Valjean replied:

"No. Not yet."

"So you have brought him thither from the barricade?" remarked Javert.

His preoccupation must indeed have been very profound for him not to insist on this alarming rescue through the sewer, and for him not to even notice Jean Valjean's silence after his question.

Jean Valjean, on his side, seemed to have but one thought. He resumed:

"He lives in the Marais, Rue des Filles-du-Calvaire, with his grandfather. I do not recollect his name."

Jean Valjean fumbled in Marius' coat, pulled out his pocket-book, opened it at the page which Marius had pencilled, and held it out to Javert.

There was still sufficient light to admit of reading. Besides this, Javert possessed in his eye the feline phosphorescence of night birds. He deciphered the few lines written by Marius, and muttered: "Gillenormand, Rue des Filles-du Calvaire, No. 6."

Then he exclaimed: "Coachman!"

The reader will remember that the hackney-coach was waiting in case of need.

Javert kept Marius' pocket-book.

A moment later, the carriage, which had descended by the inclined plane of the watering-place, was on the shore. Marius was laid upon the back seat, and Javert seated himself on the front seat beside Jean Valjean.

The door slammed, and the carriage drove rapidly away, ascending the quays in the direction of the Bastille.

They quitted the quays and entered the streets. The coachman, a black form on his box, whipped up his thin horses. A glacial silence reigned in the carriage. Marius, motionless, with his body resting in the corner, and his head drooping on his breast, his arms hanging, his legs stiff, seemed to be awaiting only a coffin; Jean Valjean seemed made of shadow, and Javert of stone, and in that vehicle full of night, whose interior, every time that it passed in front of a street lantern, appeared to be turned lividly wan, as by an intermittent flash of lightning, chance had united and seemed to be bringing face to face the three forms of tragic immobility, the corpse, the spectre, and the statue.

CHAPTER X — RETURN OF THE SON WHO WAS PRODIGAL OF HIS LIFE

At every jolt over the pavement, a drop of blood trickled from Marius’ hair. Night had fully closed in when the carriage arrived at No. 6, Rue des Filles-du-Calvaire.

Javert was the first to alight; he made sure with one glance of the number on the carriage gate, and, raising the heavy knocker of beaten iron, embellished in the old style, with a male goat and a satyr confronting each other, he gave a violent peal. The gate opened a little way and Javert gave it a push. The porter half made his appearance yawning, vaguely awake, and with a candle in his hand.

Everyone in the house was asleep. People go to bed betimes in the Marais, especially on days when there is a revolt. This good, old quarter, terrified at the Revolution, takes refuge in slumber, as children, when they hear the Bugaboo coming, hide their heads hastily under their coverlet.

In the meantime Jean Valjean and the coachman had taken Marius out of the carriage, Jean Valjean supporting him under the armpits, and the coachman under the knees.

As they thus bore Marius, Jean Valjean slipped his hand under the latter’s clothes, which were broadly rent, felt his breast, and assured himself that his heart was still beating. It was even beating a little less feebly, as though the movement of the carriage had brought about a certain fresh access of life.

Javert addressed the porter in a tone befitting the government, and the presence of the porter of a factious person.

“Some person whose name is Gillenormand?”

“Here. What do you want with him?”

“His son is brought back.”

“His son?” said the porter stupidly.

“He is dead.”

Jean Valjean, who, soiled and tattered, stood behind Javert, and whom the porter was surveying with some horror, made a sign to him with his head that this was not so.

The porter did not appear to understand either Javert's words or Jean Valjean's sign.

Javert continued:

"He went to the barricade, and here he is."

"To the barricade?" ejaculated the porter.

"He has got himself killed. Go waken his father."

The porter did not stir.

"Go along with you!" repeated Javert.

And he added:

"There will be a funeral here to-morrow."

For Javert, the usual incidents of the public highway were categorically classed, which is the beginning of foresight and surveillance, and each contingency had its own compartment; all possible facts were arranged in drawers, as it were, whence they emerged on occasion, in variable quantities; in the street, uproar, revolt, carnival, and funeral.

The porter contented himself with waking Basque. Basque woke Nicolette; Nicolette roused great-aunt Gillenormand.

As for the grandfather, they let him sleep on, thinking that he would hear about the matter early enough in any case.

Marius was carried up to the first floor, without any one in the other parts of the house being aware of the fact, and deposited on an old sofa in M. Gillenormand's antechamber; and while Basque went in search of a physician, and while Nicolette opened the linen-presses, Jean Valjean felt Javert touch him on the shoulder. He understood and descended the stairs, having behind him the step of Javert who was following him.

The porter watched them take their departure as he had watched their arrival, in terrified somnolence.

They entered the carriage once more, and the coachman mounted his box.

"Inspector Javert," said Jean, "grant me yet another favor."

"What is it?" demanded Javert roughly.

"Let me go home for one instant. Then you shall do whatever you like with me."

Javert remained silent for a few moments, with his chin drawn back into the collar of his great-coat, then he lowered the glass and front:

"Driver," said he, "Rue de l'Homme Arme, No. 7."

CHAPTER XI — CONCUSSION IN THE ABSOLUTE

They did not open their lips again during the whole space of their ride.

What did Jean Valjean want? To finish what he had begun; to warn Cosette, to tell her where Marius was, to give her, possibly, some other useful information, to take, if he could, certain final measures. As for himself, so far as he was personally concerned, all was over; he had been seized by Javert and had not resisted; any other man than himself in like situation would, perhaps, have had some vague thoughts connected with the rope which Thenardier had given him, and of the bars of the first cell that he should enter; but, let us impress it upon the reader, after the Bishop, there had existed in Jean Valjean a profound hesitation in the presence of any violence, even when directed against himself.

Suicide, that mysterious act of violence against the unknown which may contain, in a measure, the death of the soul, was impossible to Jean Valjean.

At the entrance to the Rue de l’Homme Arme, the carriage halted, the way being too narrow to admit of the entrance of vehicles. Javert and Jean Valjean alighted.

The coachman humbly represented to “monsieur l’Inspecteur,” that the Utrecht velvet of his carriage was all spotted with the blood of the assassinated man, and with mire from the assassin. That is the way he understood it. He added that an indemnity was due him. At the same time, drawing his certificate book from his pocket, he begged the inspector to have the goodness to write him “a bit of an attestation.”

Javert thrust aside the book which the coachman held out to him, and said:

“How much do you want, including your time of waiting and the drive?”

“It comes to seven hours and a quarter,” replied the man, “and my velvet was perfectly new. Eighty francs, Mr. Inspector.”

Javert drew four napoleons from his pocket and dismissed the carriage.

Jean Valjean fancied that it was Javert’s intention to conduct him on foot to the post of the Blancs-Manteaux or to the post of the Archives, both of which are close at hand.

They entered the street. It was deserted as usual. Javert followed Jean Valjean. They reached No. 7. Jean Valjean knocked. The door opened.

“It is well,” said Javert. “Go up stairs.”

He added with a strange expression, and as though he were exerting an effort in speaking in this manner:

“I will wait for you here.”

Jean Valjean looked at Javert. This mode of procedure was but little in accord with Javert’s habits. However, he could not be greatly surprised that Javert should now have a sort of haughty confidence in him, the confidence of the cat which grants the mouse liberty to the length of its claws, seeing that Jean Valjean had made up his mind to surrender himself and to make an end of it. He pushed open the door, entered the house, called to the porter who was in bed and who had pulled the cord from his couch: “It is I!” and ascended the stairs.

On arriving at the first floor, he paused. All sorrowful roads have their stations. The window on the landing-place, which was a sash-window, was open. As in many ancient houses, the staircase got its light from without and had a view on the street. The street-lantern, situated directly opposite, cast some light on the stairs, and thus effected some economy in illumination.

Jean Valjean, either for the sake of getting the air, or mechanically, thrust his head out of this window. He leaned out over the street. It is short, and the lantern lighted it from end to end. Jean Valjean was overwhelmed with amazement; there was no longer any one there.

Javert had taken his departure.

CHAPTER XII — THE GRANDFATHER

Basque and the porter had carried Marius into the drawing-room, as he still lay stretched out, motionless, on the sofa upon which he had been placed on his arrival. The doctor who had been sent for had hastened thither. Aunt Gillenormand had risen.

Aunt Gillenormand went and came, in affright, wringing her hands and incapable of doing anything but saying: “Heavens! is it possible?” At times she added: “Everything will be covered with blood.” When her first horror had passed off, a certain philosophy of the situation penetrated her mind, and took form in the exclamation: “It was bound to end in this way!” She did not go so far as: “I told you so!” which is customary on this sort of occasion. At the physician’s orders, a camp bed had been prepared beside the sofa. The doctor examined Marius, and after having found that his pulse was still beating, that the wounded man had no very deep wound on his breast, and that the blood on the corners of his lips proceeded from his nostrils, he had him placed flat on the bed, without a pillow, with his head on the same level as his body, and even a trifle lower, and with his bust bare in order to facilitate respiration. Mademoiselle Gillenormand, on perceiving that they were undressing Marius, withdrew. She set herself to telling her beads in her own chamber.

The trunk had not suffered any internal injury; a bullet, deadened by the pocket-book, had turned aside and made the tour of his ribs with a hideous laceration, which was of no great depth, and consequently, not dangerous. The long, underground journey had completed the dislocation of the broken collar-bone, and the disorder there was serious. The arms had been slashed with sabre cuts. Not a single scar disfigured his face; but his head was fairly covered with cuts; what would be the result of these wounds on the head? Would they stop short at the hairy cuticle, or would they attack the brain? As yet, this could not be decided. A grave symptom was that they had caused a swoon, and that people do not always recover from such swoons. Moreover, the wounded man had been exhausted by hemorrhage. From the waist down, the barricade had protected the lower part of the body from injury.

Basque and Nicolette tore up linen and prepared bandages; Nicolette sewed them, Basque rolled them. As lint was lacking, the doctor, for the time being, arrested the bleeding with layers of wadding. Beside the bed, three candles burned on a table where the case of surgical instruments lay spread out. The doctor bathed Marius’ face and hair with cold water. A full pail was reddened in an instant. The porter, candle in hand, lighted them.

The doctor seemed to be pondering sadly. From time to time, he made a negative sign with his head, as though replying to some question which he had inwardly addressed to himself.

A bad sign for the sick man are these mysterious dialogues of the doctor with himself.

At the moment when the doctor was wiping Marius’ face, and lightly touching his still closed eyes with his finger, a door opened at the end of the drawing-room, and a long, pallid figure made its appearance.

This was the grandfather.

The revolt had, for the past two days, deeply agitated, enraged and engrossed the mind of M. Gillenormand. He had not been able to sleep on the previous night, and he had been in a fever all day long. In the evening, he had gone to bed very early, recommending that everything in the house should be well barred, and he had fallen into a doze through sheer fatigue.

Old men sleep lightly; M. Gillenormand’s chamber adjoined the drawing-room, and in spite of all the precautions that had been taken, the noise had awakened him. Surprised at the rift of light which he saw under his door, he had risen from his bed, and had groped his way thither.

He stood astonished on the threshold, one hand on the handle of the half-open door, with his head bent a little forward and quivering, his body wrapped in a white dressing-gown, which was straight and as destitute of folds as a winding-sheet; and he had the air of a phantom who is gazing into a tomb.

He saw the bed, and on the mattress that young man, bleeding, white with a waxen whiteness, with closed eyes and gaping mouth, and pallid lips, stripped to the waist, slashed all over with crimson wounds, motionless and brilliantly lighted up.

The grandfather trembled from head to foot as powerfully as ossified limbs can tremble, his eyes, whose corneae were yellow on account of his great age, were veiled in a sort of vitreous glitter, his whole face assumed in an instant the earthy angles of a skull, his arms fell pendent, as though a spring had broken, and his amazement was betrayed by the outspreading of the fingers of his two aged hands, which quivered all over, his knees formed an angle in front, allowing, through the opening in his dressing-gown, a view of his poor bare legs, all bristling with white hairs, and he murmured:

“Marius!”

“Sir,” said Basque, “Monsieur has just been brought back. He went to the barricade, and . . .”

“He is dead!” cried the old man in a terrible voice. “Ah! The rascal!”

Then a sort of sepulchral transformation straightened up this centenarian as erect as a young man.

“Sir,” said he, “you are the doctor. Begin by telling me one thing. He is dead, is he not?”

The doctor, who was at the highest pitch of anxiety, remained silent.

M. Gillenormand wrung his hands with an outburst of terrible laughter.

“He is dead! He is dead! He is dead! He has got himself killed on the barricades! Out of hatred to me! He did that to spite me! Ah! You blood-drinker! This is the way he returns to me! Misery of my life, he is dead!”

He went to the window, threw it wide open as though he were stifling, and, erect before the darkness, he began to talk into the street, to the night:

“Pierced, sabred, exterminated, slashed, hacked in pieces! Just look at that, the villain! He knew well that I was waiting for him, and that I had had his room arranged, and that I had placed at the head of my bed his portrait taken when he was a little child! He knew well that he had only to come back, and that I had been recalling him for years, and that I remained by my fireside, with my hands on my knees, not knowing what to do, and that I was mad over it! You knew well, that you had but to return and to say: ‘It is I,’ and you would have been the master of the house, and that I should have obeyed you, and that you could have done whatever you pleased with your old numskull of a grandfather! you knew that well, and you said:

“No, he is a Royalist, I will not go! And you went to the barricades, and you got yourself killed out of malice! To revenge yourself for what I said to you about Monsieur le Duc de Berry. It is infamous! Go to bed then and sleep tranquilly! he is dead, and this is my awakening.”

The doctor, who was beginning to be uneasy in both quarters, quitted Marius for a moment, went to M. Gillenormand, and took his arm. The grandfather turned round, gazed at him with eyes which seemed exaggerated in size and bloodshot, and said to him calmly:

“I thank you, sir. I am composed, I am a man, I witnessed the death of Louis XVI., I know how to bear events. One thing is terrible and that is to think that it is your newspapers which do all the mischief. You will have scribblers, chatterers, lawyers, orators, tribunes, discussions, progress, enlightenment, the rights of man, the liberty of the press, and this is the way that your children will be brought home to you. Ah! Marius! It is abominable! Killed! Dead before me! A barricade! Ah, the scamp! Doctor, you live in this quarter, I believe? Oh! I know you well. I see your cabriolet pass my window. I am going to tell you. You are wrong to think that I am angry. One does not fly into a rage against a dead man. That would be stupid. This is a child whom I have reared. I was already old while he was very young. He played in the Tuileries garden with his little shovel and his little chair, and in order that the inspectors might not grumble, I stopped up the holes that he made in the earth with his shovel, with my cane. One day he exclaimed: Down with Louis XVIII.! and off he went. It was no fault of mine. He was all rosy and blond. His mother is dead. Have you ever noticed that all little children are blond? Why is it so? He is the son of one of those brigands of the Loire, but children are innocent of their fathers' crimes. I remember when he was no higher than that. He could not manage to pronounce his Ds. He had a way of talking that was so sweet and indistinct that you would have thought it was a bird chirping. I remember that once, in front of the Hercules Farnese, people formed a circle to admire him and marvel at him, he was so handsome, was that child! He had a head such as you see in pictures. I talked in a deep voice, and I frightened him with my cane, but he knew very well that it was only to make him laugh. In the morning, when he entered my room, I grumbled, but he was like the sunlight to me, all the same. One cannot defend oneself against those brats. They take hold of you, they hold you fast, they never let you go again. The truth is, that there never was a cupid like that child. Now, what can you say for your Lafayettes, your Benjamin Constants, and your Tirecuir de Corcelles who have killed him? This cannot be allowed to pass in this fashion."

He approached Marius, who still lay livid and motionless, and to whom the physician had returned, and began once more to wring his hands. The old man's pallid lips moved as though mechanically, and permitted the passage of words that were barely audible, like breaths in the death agony:

"Ah! heartless lad! Ah! clubbist! Ah! wretch! Ah! Septembrist!"

Reproaches in the low voice of an agonizing man, addressed to a corpse.

Little by little, as it is always indispensable that internal eruptions should come to the light, the sequence of words returned, but the grandfather appeared no longer to have the strength to utter them, his voice was so weak, and extinct, that it seemed to come from the other side of an abyss:

“It is all the same to me, I am going to die too, that I am. And to think that there is not a hussy in Paris who would not have been delighted to make this wretch happy! A scamp who, instead of amusing himself and enjoying life, went off to fight and get himself shot down like a brute! And for whom? Why? For the Republic! Instead of going to dance at the Chaumiere, as it is the duty of young folks to do! What’s the use of being twenty years old? The Republic, a cursed pretty folly! Poor mothers, beget fine boys, do! Come, he is dead. That will make two funerals under the same carriage gate. So you have got yourself arranged like this for the sake of General Lamarque’s handsome eyes! What had that General Lamarque done to you? A slasher! A chatter-box! To get oneself killed for a dead man! If that isn’t enough to drive any one mad! Just think of it! At twenty! And without so much as turning his head to see whether he was not leaving something behind him! That’s the way poor, good old fellows are forced to die alone, now-adays. Perish in your corner, owl! Well, after all, so much the better, that is what I was hoping for, this will kill me on the spot. I am too old, I am a hundred years old, I am a hundred thousand years old, I ought, by rights, to have been dead long ago. This blow puts an end to it. So all is over, what happiness! What is the good of making him inhale ammonia and all that parcel of drugs? You are wasting your trouble, you fool of a doctor! Come, he’s dead, completely dead. I know all about it, I am dead myself too. He hasn’t done things by half. Yes, this age is infamous, infamous and that’s what I think of you, of your ideas, of your systems, of your masters, of your oracles, of your doctors, of your scapegraces of writers, of your rascally philosophers, and of all the revolutions which, for the last sixty years, have been frightening the flocks of crows in the Tuileries! But you were pitiless in getting yourself killed like this, I shall not even grieve over your death, do you understand, you assassin?”

At that moment, Marius slowly opened his eyes, and his glance, still dimmed by lethargic wonder, rested on M. Gillenormand.

“Marius!” cried the old man. “Marius! My little Marius! my child! my well-beloved son! You open your eyes, you gaze upon me, you are alive, thanks!”

And he fell fainting.

BOOK FOURTH. — JAVERT DERAILED

CHAPTER I — JAVERT

Javert passed slowly down the Rue de l’Homme Arme.

He walked with drooping head for the first time in his life, and likewise, for the first time in his life, with his hands behind his back.

Up to that day, Javert had borrowed from Napoleon’s attitudes, only that which is expressive of resolution, with arms folded across the chest; that which is expressive of uncertainty — with the hands behind the back — had been unknown to him. Now, a change had taken place; his whole person, slow and sombre, was stamped with anxiety.

He plunged into the silent streets.

Nevertheless, he followed one given direction.

He took the shortest cut to the Seine, reached the Quai des Ormes, skirted the quay, passed the Greve, and halted at some distance from the post of the Place du Chatelet, at the angle of the Pont Notre-Dame. There, between the Notre-Dame and the Pont au Change on the one hand, and the Quai de la Megisserie and the Quai aux Fleurs on the other, the Seine forms a sort of square lake, traversed by a rapid.

This point of the Seine is dreaded by mariners. Nothing is more dangerous than this rapid, hemmed in, at that epoch, and irritated by the piles of the mill on the bridge, now demolished. The two bridges, situated thus close together, augment the peril; the water hurries in formidable wise through the arches. It rolls in vast and terrible waves; it accumulates and piles up there; the flood attacks the piles of the bridges as though in an effort to pluck them up with great liquid ropes. Men who fall in there never re-appear; the best of swimmers are drowned there.

Javert leaned both elbows on the parapet, his chin resting in both hands, and, while his nails were mechanically twined in the abundance of his whiskers, he meditated.

A novelty, a revolution, a catastrophe had just taken place in the depths of his being; and he had something upon which to examine himself.

Javert was undergoing horrible suffering.

For several hours, Javert had ceased to be simple. He was troubled; that brain, so limpid in its blindness, had lost its transparency; that crystal was clouded. Javert felt duty divided within his conscience, and he could not conceal the fact from himself. When he had so unexpectedly encountered Jean Valjean on the banks of the Seine, there had been in him something of the wolf which regains his grip on his prey, and of the dog who finds his master again.

He beheld before him two paths, both equally straight, but he beheld two; and that terrified him; him, who had never in all his life known more than one straight line. And, the poignant anguish lay in this, that the two paths were contrary to each other. One of these straight lines excluded the other. Which of the two was the true one?

His situation was indescribable.

To owe his life to a malefactor, to accept that debt and to repay it; to be, in spite of himself, on a level with a fugitive from justice, and to repay his service with another service; to allow it to be said to him, "Go," and to say to the latter in his turn: "Be free"; to sacrifice to personal motives duty, that general obligation, and to be conscious, in those personal motives, of something that was also general, and, perchance, superior, to betray society in order to remain true to his conscience; that all these absurdities should be realized and should accumulate upon him, — this was what overwhelmed him.

One thing had amazed him, — this was that Jean Valjean should have done him a favor, and one thing petrified him, — that he, Javert, should have done Jean Valjean a favor.

Where did he stand? He sought to comprehend his position, and could no longer find his bearings.

What was he to do now? To deliver up Jean Valjean was bad; to leave Jean Valjean at liberty was bad. In the first case, the man of authority fell lower than the man of the galleys, in the second, a convict rose above the law, and set his foot upon it. In both cases, dishonor for him, Javert. There was disgrace in any resolution at which he might arrive. Destiny has some extremities which rise perpendicularly from the impossible, and beyond which life is no longer anything but a precipice. Javert had reached one of those extremities.

One of his anxieties consisted in being constrained to think. The very violence of all these conflicting emotions forced him to it. Thought was something to which he was unused, and which was peculiarly painful.

In thought there always exists a certain amount of internal rebellion; and it irritated him to have that within him.

Thought on any subject whatever, outside of the restricted circle of his functions, would have been for him in any case useless and a fatigue; thought on the day which had just passed was a torture. Nevertheless, it was indispensable that he should take a look into his conscience, after such shocks, and render to himself an account of himself.

What he had just done made him shudder. He, Javert, had seen fit to decide, contrary to all the regulations of the police, contrary to the whole social and judicial organization, contrary to the entire code, upon a release; this had suited him; he had substituted his own affairs for the affairs of the public; was not this unjustifiable? Every time that he brought himself face to face with this deed without a name which he had committed, he trembled from head to foot. Upon what should he decide? One sole resource remained to him; to return in all haste to the Rue de l’Homme Arme, and commit Jean Valjean to prison. It was clear that that was what he ought to do. He could not.

Something barred his way in that direction.

Something? What? Is there in the world, anything outside of the tribunals, executory sentences, the police and the authorities? Javert was overwhelmed.

A galley-slave sacred! A convict who could not be touched by the law! And that the deed of Javert!

Was it not a fearful thing that Javert and Jean Valjean, the man made to proceed with vigor, the man made to submit, — that these two men who were both the things of the law, should have come to such a pass, that both of them had set themselves above the law? What then! such enormities were to happen and no one was to be punished! Jean Valjean, stronger than the whole social order, was to remain at liberty, and he, Javert, was to go on eating the government’s bread!

His revery gradually became terrible.

He might, athwart this revery, have also reproached himself on the subject of that insurgent who had been taken to the Rue des Filles-du-Calvaire; but he never even thought of that. The lesser fault was lost in the greater. Besides, that insurgent was, obviously, a dead man, and, legally, death puts an end to pursuit.

Jean Valjean was the load which weighed upon his spirit.

Jean Valjean disconcerted him. All the axioms which had served him as points of support all his life long, had crumbled away in the presence of this man. Jean Valjean's generosity towards him, Javert, crushed him. Other facts which he now recalled, and which he had formerly treated as lies and folly, now recurred to him as realities. M. Madeleine re-appeared behind Jean Valjean, and the two figures were superposed in such fashion that they now formed but one, which was venerable. Javert felt that something terrible was penetrating his soul — admiration for a convict. Respect for a galley-slave — is that a possible thing? He shuddered at it, yet could not escape from it. In vain did he struggle, he was reduced to confess, in his inmost heart, the sublimity of that wretch. This was odious.

A benevolent malefactor, merciful, gentle, helpful, clement, a convict, returning good for evil, giving back pardon for hatred, preferring pity to vengeance, preferring to ruin himself rather than to ruin his enemy, saving him who had smitten him, kneeling on the heights of virtue, more nearly akin to an angel than to a man. Javert was constrained to admit to himself that this monster existed.

Things could not go on in this manner.

Certainly, and we insist upon this point, he had not yielded without resistance to that monster, to that infamous angel, to that hideous hero, who enraged almost as much as he amazed him. Twenty times, as he sat in that carriage face to face with Jean Valjean, the legal tiger had roared within him. A score of times he had been tempted to fling himself upon Jean Valjean, to seize him and devour him, that is to say, to arrest him. What more simple, in fact? To cry out at the first post that they passed:— "Here is a fugitive from justice, who has broken his ban!" to summon the gendarmes and say to them: "This man is yours!" then to go off, leaving that condemned man there, to ignore the rest and not to meddle further in the matter. This man is forever a prisoner of the law; the law may do with him what it will. What could be more just? Javert had said all this to himself; he had wished to pass beyond, to act, to apprehend the man, and then, as at present, he had not been able to do it; and every time that his arm had been raised convulsively towards Jean Valjean's collar, his hand had fallen back again, as beneath an enormous weight, and in the depths of his thought he had heard a voice, a strange voice crying to him:— "It is well. Deliver up your savior. Then have the basin of Pontius Pilate brought and wash your claws."

Then his reflections reverted to himself and beside Jean Valjean glorified he beheld himself, Javert, degraded.

A convict was his benefactor!

But then, why had he permitted that man to leave him alive? He had the right to be killed in that barricade. He should have asserted that right. It would have been better to summon the other insurgents to his succor against Jean Valjean, to get himself shot by force.

His supreme anguish was the loss of certainty. He felt that he had been uprooted. The code was no longer anything more than a stump in his hand. He had to deal with scruples of an unknown species. There had taken place within him a sentimental revelation entirely distinct from legal affirmation, his only standard of measurement hitherto. To remain in his former uprightness did not suffice. A whole order of unexpected facts had cropped up and subjugated him. A whole new world was dawning on his soul: kindness accepted and repaid, devotion, mercy, indulgence, violences committed by pity on austerity, respect for persons, no more definitive condemnation, no more conviction, the possibility of a tear in the eye of the law, no one knows what justice according to God, running in inverse sense to justice according to men. He perceived amid the shadows the terrible rising of an unknown moral sun; it horrified and dazzled him. An owl forced to the gaze of an eagle.

He said to himself that it was true that there were exceptional cases, that authority might be put out of countenance, that the rule might be inadequate in the presence of a fact, that everything could not be framed within the text of the code, that the unforeseen compelled obedience, that the virtue of a convict might set a snare for the virtue of the functionary, that destiny did indulge in such ambushes, and he reflected with despair that he himself had not even been fortified against a surprise.

He was forced to acknowledge that goodness did exist. This convict had been good. And he himself, unprecedented circumstance, had just been good also. So he was becoming depraved.

He found that he was a coward. He conceived a horror of himself.

Javert’s ideal, was not to be human, to be grand, to be sublime; it was to be irreproachable.

Now, he had just failed in this.

How had he come to such a pass? How had all this happened? He could not have told himself. He clasped his head in both hands, but in spite of all that he could do, he could not contrive to explain it to himself.

He had certainly always entertained the intention of restoring Jean Valjean to the law of which Jean Valjean was the captive, and of which he, Javert, was the slave. Not for a single instant while he held him in his grasp had he confessed to himself that he entertained the idea of releasing him. It was, in some sort, without his consciousness, that his hand had relaxed and had let him go free.

All sorts of interrogation points flashed before his eyes. He put questions to himself, and made replies to himself, and his replies frightened him. He asked himself: “What has that convict done, that desperate fellow, whom I have pursued even to persecution, and who has had me under his foot, and who could have avenged himself, and who owed it both to his rancor and to his safety, in leaving me my life, in showing mercy upon me? His duty? No. Something more. And I in showing mercy upon him in my turn — what have I done? My duty? No. Something more. So there is something beyond duty?” Here he took fright; his balance became disjointed; one of the scales fell into the abyss, the other rose heavenward, and Javert was no less terrified by the one which was on high than by the one which was below. Without being in the least in the world what is called Voltairian or a philosopher, or incredulous, being, on the contrary, respectful by instinct, towards the established church, he knew it only as an august fragment of the social whole; order was his dogma, and sufficed for him; ever since he had attained to man’s estate and the rank of a functionary, he had centred nearly all his religion in the police. Being, — and here we employ words without the least irony and in their most serious acceptation, being, as we have said, a spy as other men are priests. He had a superior, M. Gisquet; up to that day he had never dreamed of that other superior, God.

This new chief, God, he became unexpectedly conscious of, and he felt embarrassed by him. This unforeseen presence threw him off his bearings; he did not know what to do with this superior, he, who was not ignorant of the fact that the subordinate is bound always to bow, that he must not disobey, nor find fault, nor discuss, and that, in the presence of a superior who amazes him too greatly, the inferior has no other resource than that of handing in his resignation.

But how was he to set about handing in his resignation to God?

However things might stand, — and it was to this point that he reverted constantly, — one fact dominated everything else for him, and that was, that he had just committed a terrible infraction of the law. He had just shut his eyes on an escaped convict who had broken his ban. He had just set a galley-slave at large. He had just robbed the laws of a man who belonged to them. That was what he had done. He no longer understood himself. The very reasons for his action escaped him; only their vertigo was left with him. Up to that moment he had lived with that blind faith which gloomy probity engenders. This faith had quitted him, this probity had deserted him. All that he had believed in melted away. Truths which he did not wish to recognize were besieging him, inexorably. Henceforth, he must be a different man. He was suffering from the strange pains of a conscience abruptly operated on for the cataract. He saw that which it was repugnant to him to behold. He felt himself emptied, useless, put out of joint with his past life, turned out, dissolved. Authority was dead within him. He had no longer any reason for existing.

A terrible situation! to be touched.

To be granite and to doubt! to be the statue of Chastisement cast in one piece in the mould of the law, and suddenly to become aware of the fact that one cherishes beneath one’s breast of bronze something absurd and disobedient which almost resembles a heart! To come to the pass of returning good for good, although one has said to oneself up to that day that that good is evil! to be the watch-dog, and to lick the intruder’s hand! to be ice and melt! to be the pincers and to turn into a hand! to suddenly feel one’s fingers opening! to relax one’s grip, — what a terrible thing!

The man-projectile no longer acquainted with his route and retreating!

To be obliged to confess this to oneself: infallibility is not infallible, there may exist error in the dogma, all has not been said when a code speaks, society is not perfect, authority is complicated with vacillation, a crack is possible in the immutable, judges are but men, the law may err, tribunals may make a mistake! to behold a rift in the immense blue pane of the firmament!

That which was passing in Javert was the Fampoux of a rectilinear conscience, the derailment of a soul, the crushing of a probity which had been irresistibly launched in a straight line and was breaking against God. It certainly was singular that the stoker of order, that the engineer of authority, mounted on the blind iron horse with its rigid road, could be unseated by a flash of light! that the immovable, the direct, the correct, the geometrical, the passive, the perfect, could bend! that there should exist for the locomotive a road to Damascus!

God, always within man, and refractory, He, the true conscience, to the false; a prohibition to the spark to die out; an order to the ray to remember the sun; an injunction to the soul to recognize the veritable absolute when confronted with the fictitious absolute, humanity which cannot be lost; the human heart indestructible; that splendid phenomenon, the finest, perhaps, of all our interior marvels, did Javert understand this? Did Javert penetrate it? Did Javert account for it to himself? Evidently he did not. But beneath the pressure of that incontestable incomprehensibility he felt his brain bursting.

He was less the man transfigured than the victim of this prodigy. In all this he perceived only the tremendous difficulty of existence. It seemed to him that, henceforth, his respiration was repressed forever. He was not accustomed to having something unknown hanging over his head.

Up to this point, everything above him had been, to his gaze, merely a smooth, limpid and simple surface; there was nothing incomprehensible, nothing obscure; nothing that was not defined, regularly disposed, linked, precise, circumscribed, exact, limited, closed, fully provided for; authority was a plane surface; there was no fall in it, no dizziness in its presence. Javert had never beheld the unknown except from below. The irregular, the unforeseen, the disordered opening of chaos, the possible slip over a precipice — this was the work of the lower regions, of rebels, of the wicked, of wretches. Now Javert threw himself back, and he was suddenly terrified by this unprecedented apparition: a gulf on high.

What! one was dismantled from top to bottom! one was disconcerted, absolutely! In what could one trust! That which had been agreed upon was giving way! What! the defect in society’s armor could be discovered by a magnanimous wretch! What! an honest servitor of the law could suddenly find himself caught between two crimes — the crime of allowing a man to escape and the crime of arresting him! everything was not settled in the orders given by the State to the functionary! There might be blind alleys in duty! What, — all this was real! was it true that an ex-ruffian, weighed down with convictions, could rise erect and end by being in the right? Was this credible? were there cases in which the law should retire before transfigured crime, and stammer its excuses? — Yes, that was the state of the case! and Javert saw it! and Javert had touched it! and not only could he not deny it, but he had taken part in it. These were realities. It was abominable that actual facts could reach such deformity. If facts did their duty, they would confine themselves to being proofs of the law; facts — it is God who sends them. Was anarchy, then, on the point of now descending from on high?

Thus, — and in the exaggeration of anguish, and the optical illusion of consternation, all that might have corrected and restrained this impression was effaced, and society, and the human race, and the universe were, henceforth, summed up in his eyes, in one simple and terrible feature, — thus the penal laws, the thing judged, the force due to legislation, the decrees of the sovereign courts, the magistracy, the government, prevention, repression, official cruelty, wisdom, legal infallibility, the principle of authority, all the dogmas on which rest political and civil security, sovereignty, justice, public truth, all this was rubbish, a shapeless mass, chaos; he himself, Javert, the spy of order, incorruptibility in the service of the police, the bull-dog providence of society, vanquished and hurled to earth; and, erect, at the summit of all that ruin, a man with a green cap on his head and a halo round his brow; this was the astounding confusion to which he had come; this was the fearful vision which he bore within his soul.

Was this to be endured? No.

A violent state, if ever such existed. There were only two ways of escaping from it. One was to go resolutely to Jean Valjean, and restore to his cell the convict from the galleys. The other . . .

Javert quitted the parapet, and, with head erect this time, betook himself, with a firm tread, towards the station-house indicated by a lantern at one of the corners of the Place du Chatelet.

On arriving there, he saw through the window a sergeant of police, and he entered. Policemen recognize each other by the very way in which they open the door of a station-house. Javert mentioned his name, showed his card to the sergeant, and seated himself at the table of the post on which a candle was burning. On a table lay a pen, a leaden inkstand and paper, provided in the event of possible reports and the orders of the night patrols. This table, still completed by its straw-seated chair, is an institution; it exists in all police stations; it is invariably ornamented with a box-wood saucer filled with sawdust and a wafer box of cardboard filled with red wafers, and it forms the lowest stage of official style. It is there that the literature of the State has its beginning.

Javert took a pen and a sheet of paper, and began to write. This is what he wrote:

A FEW OBSERVATIONS FOR THE GOOD OF THE SERVICE.

“In the first place: I beg Monsieur le Prefet to cast his eyes on this.

“Secondly: prisoners, on arriving after examination, take off their shoes and stand barefoot on the flagstones while they are being searched. Many of them cough on their return to prison. This entails hospital expenses.

“Thirdly: the mode of keeping track of a man with relays of police agents from distance to distance, is good, but, on important occasions, it is requisite that at least two agents should never lose sight of each other, so that, in case one agent should, for any cause, grow weak in his service, the other may supervise him and take his place.

“Fourthly: it is inexplicable why the special regulation of the prison of the Madelonettes interdicts the prisoner from having a chair, even by paying for it.

“Fifthly: in the Madelonettes there are only two bars to the canteen, so that the canteen woman can touch the prisoners with her hand.

“Sixthly: the prisoners called barkers, who summon the other prisoners to the parlor, force the prisoner to pay them two sous to call his name distinctly. This is a theft.

“Seventhly: for a broken thread ten sous are withheld in the weaving shop; this is an abuse of the contractor, since the cloth is none the worse for it.

“Eighthly: it is annoying for visitors to La Force to be obliged to traverse the boys’ court in order to reach the parlor of Sainte-Marie-l’Egyptienne.

"Ninthly: it is a fact that any day gendarmes can be overheard relating in the court-yard of the prefecture the interrogations put by the magistrates to prisoners. For a gendarme, who should be sworn to secrecy, to repeat what he has heard in the examination room is a grave disorder.

"Tenthly: Mme. Henry is an honest woman; her canteen is very neat; but it is bad to have a woman keep the wicket to the mouse-trap of the secret cells. This is unworthy of the Conciergerie of a great civilization."

Javert wrote these lines in his calmest and most correct chirography, not omitting a single comma, and making the paper screech under his pen.

Below the last line he signed:

"JAVERT,
"Inspector of the 1st class.
"The Post of the Place du Chatelet.
"June 7th, 1832, about one o'clock in the morning."

Javert dried the fresh ink on the paper, folded it like a letter, sealed it, wrote on the back: Note for the administration, left it on the table, and quitted the post. The glazed and grated door fell to behind him.

Again he traversed the Place du Chatelet diagonally, regained the quay, and returned with automatic precision to the very point which he had abandoned a quarter of an hour previously, leaned on his elbows and found himself again in the same attitude on the same paving-stone of the parapet. He did not appear to have stirred.

The darkness was complete. It was the sepulchral moment which follows midnight. A ceiling of clouds concealed the stars. Not a single light burned in the houses of the city; no one was passing; all of the streets and quays which could be seen were deserted; Notre-Dame and the towers of the Court-House seemed features of the night. A street lantern reddened the margin of the quay. The outlines of the bridges lay shapeless in the mist one behind the other. Recent rains had swollen the river.

The spot where Javert was leaning was, it will be remembered, situated precisely over the rapids of the Seine, perpendicularly above that formidable spiral of whirlpools which loose and knot themselves again like an endless screw.

Javert bent his head and gazed. All was black. Nothing was to be distinguished. A sound of foam was audible; but the river could not be seen. At moments, in that dizzy depth, a gleam of light appeared, and undulated vaguely, water possessing the power of taking light, no one knows whence, and converting it into a snake. The light vanished, and all became indistinct once more. Immensity seemed thrown open there. What lay below was not water, it was a gulf. The wall of the quay, abrupt, confused, mingled with the vapors, instantly concealed from sight, produced the effect of an escarpment of the infinite. Nothing was to be seen, but the hostile chill of the water and the stale odor of the wet stones could be felt. A fierce breath rose from this abyss. The flood in the river, divined rather than perceived, the tragic whispering of the waves, the melancholy vastness of the arches of the bridge, the imaginable fall into that gloomy void, into all that shadow was full of horror.

Javert remained motionless for several minutes, gazing at this opening of shadow; he considered the invisible with a fixity that resembled attention. The water roared. All at once he took off his hat and placed it on the edge of the quay. A moment later, a tall black figure, which a belated passer-by in the distance might have taken for a phantom, appeared erect upon the parapet of the quay, bent over towards the Seine, then drew itself up again, and fell straight down into the shadows; a dull splash followed; and the shadow alone was in the secret of the convulsions of that obscure form which had disappeared beneath the water.

BOOK FIFTH. — GRANDSON AND GRANDFATHER

CHAPTER I — IN WHICH THE TREE WITH THE ZINC PLASTER APPEARS AGAIN

Some time after the events which we have just recorded, Sieur Boulatruelle experienced a lively emotion.

Sieur Boulatruelle was that road-mender of Montfermeil whom the reader has already seen in the gloomy parts of this book.

Boulatruelle, as the reader may, perchance, recall, was a man who was occupied with divers and troublesome matters. He broke stones and damaged travellers on the highway.

Road-mender and thief as he was, he cherished one dream; he believed in the treasures buried in the forest of Montfermeil. He hoped some day to find the money in the earth at the foot of a tree; in the meanwhile, he lived to search the pockets of passers-by.

Nevertheless, for an instant, he was prudent. He had just escaped neatly. He had been, as the reader is aware, picked up in Jondrette’s garret in company with the other ruffians. Utility of a vice: his drunkenness had been his salvation. The authorities had never been able to make out whether he had been there in the quality of a robber or a man who had been robbed. An order of nolle prosequi, founded on his well authenticated state of intoxication on the evening of the ambush, had set him at liberty. He had taken to his heels. He had returned to his road from Gagny to Lagny, to make, under administrative supervision, broken stone for the good of the state, with downcast mien, in a very pensive mood, his ardor for theft somewhat cooled; but he was addicted none the less tenderly to the wine which had recently saved him.

As for the lively emotion which he had experienced a short time after his return to his road-mender’s turf-thatched cot, here it is:

One morning, Boulatruelle, while on his way as was his wont, to his work, and possibly also to his ambush, a little before daybreak caught sight, through the branches of the trees, of a man, whose back alone he saw, but the shape of whose shoulders, as it seemed to him at that distance and in the early dusk, was not entirely unfamiliar to him. Boulatruelle, although intoxicated, had a correct and lucid memory, a defensive arm that is indispensable to any one who is at all in conflict with legal order.

“Where the deuce have I seen something like that man yonder?” he said to himself. But he could make himself no answer, except that the man resembled some one of whom his memory preserved a confused trace.

However, apart from the identity which he could not manage to catch, Boulatruelle put things together and made calculations. This man did not belong in the country-side. He had just arrived there. On foot, evidently. No public conveyance passes through Montfermeil at that hour. He had walked all night. Whence came he? Not from a very great distance; for he had neither haversack, nor bundle. From Paris, no doubt. Why was he in these woods? why was he there at such an hour? what had he come there for?

Boulatruelle thought of the treasure. By dint of ransacking his memory, he recalled in a vague way that he had already, many years before, had a similar alarm in connection with a man who produced on him the effect that he might well be this very individual.

“By the deuce,” said Boulatruelle, “I’ll find him again. I’ll discover the parish of that parishioner. This prowler of Patron-Minette has a reason, and I’ll know it. People can’t have secrets in my forest if I don’t have a finger in the pie.”

He took his pick-axe which was very sharply pointed.

“There now,” he grumbled, “is something that will search the earth and a man.”

And, as one knots one thread to another thread, he took up the line of march at his best pace in the direction which the man must follow, and set out across the thickets.

When he had compassed a hundred strides, the day, which was already beginning to break, came to his assistance. Footprints stamped in the sand, weeds trodden down here and there, heather crushed, young branches in the brushwood bent and in the act of straightening themselves up again with the graceful deliberation of the arms of a pretty woman who stretches herself when she wakes, pointed out to him a sort of track. He followed it, then lost it. Time was flying. He plunged deeper into the woods and came to a sort of eminence. An early huntsman who was passing in the distance along a path, whistling the air of Guillery, suggested to him the idea of climbing a tree. Old as he was, he was agile. There stood close at hand a beech-tree of great size, worthy of Tityrus and of Boulatruelle. Boulatruelle ascended the beech as high as he was able.

The idea was a good one. On scrutinizing the solitary waste on the side where the forest is thoroughly entangled and wild, Boulatruelle suddenly caught sight of his man.

Hardly had he got his eye upon him when he lost sight of him.

The man entered, or rather, glided into, an open glade, at a considerable distance, masked by large trees, but with which Boulatruelle was perfectly familiar, on account of having noticed, near a large pile of porous stones, an ailing chestnut-tree bandaged with a sheet of zinc nailed directly upon the bark. This glade was the one which was formerly called the Blaru-bottom. The heap of stones, destined for no one knows what employment, which was visible there thirty years ago, is doubtless still there. Nothing equals a heap of stones in longevity, unless it is a board fence. They are temporary expedients. What a reason for lasting!

Boulatruelle, with the rapidity of joy, dropped rather than descended from the tree. The lair was unearthed, the question now was to seize the beast. That famous treasure of his dreams was probably there.

It was no small matter to reach that glade. By the beaten paths, which indulge in a thousand teasing zigzags, it required a good quarter of an hour. In a bee-line, through the underbrush, which is peculiarly dense, very thorny, and very aggressive in that locality, a full half hour was necessary. Boulatruelle committed the error of not comprehending this. He believed in the straight line; a respectable optical illusion which ruins many a man. The thicket, bristling as it was, struck him as the best road.

“Let’s take to the wolves’ Rue de Rivoli,” said he.

Boulatruelle, accustomed to taking crooked courses, was on this occasion guilty of the fault of going straight.

He flung himself resolutely into the tangle of undergrowth.

He had to deal with holly bushes, nettles, hawthorns, eglantines, thistles, and very irascible brambles. He was much lacerated.

At the bottom of the ravine he found water which he was obliged to traverse.

At last he reached the Blaru-bottom, after the lapse of forty minutes, sweating, soaked, breathless, scratched, and ferocious.

There was no one in the glade. Boulatruelle rushed to the heap of stones. It was in its place. It had not been carried off.

As for the man, he had vanished in the forest. He had made his escape. Where? in what direction? into what thicket? Impossible to guess.

And, heartrending to say, there, behind the pile of stones, in front of the tree with the sheet of zinc, was freshly turned earth, a pick-axe, abandoned or forgotten, and a hole.

The hole was empty.

“Thief!” shrieked Boulatruelle, shaking his fist at the horizon.

CHAPTER II — MARIUS, EMERGING FROM CIVIL WAR, MAKES READY FOR DOMESTIC WAR

For a long time, Marius was neither dead nor alive. For many weeks he lay in a fever accompanied by delirium, and by tolerably grave cerebral symptoms, caused more by the shocks of the wounds on the head than by the wounds themselves.

He repeated Cosette’s name for whole nights in the melancholy loquacity of fever, and with the sombre obstinacy of agony. The extent of some of the lesions presented a serious danger, the suppuration of large wounds being always liable to become re-absorbed, and consequently, to kill the sick man, under certain atmospheric conditions; at every change of weather, at the slightest storm, the physician was uneasy.

“Above all things,” he repeated, “let the wounded man be subjected to no emotion.” The dressing of the wounds was complicated and difficult, the fixation of apparatus and bandages by cerecloths not having been invented as yet, at that epoch. Nicolette used up a sheet “as big as the ceiling,” as she put it, for lint. It was not without difficulty that the chloruretted lotions and the nitrate of silver overcame the gangrene. As long as there was any danger, M. Gillenormand, seated in despair at his grandson’s pillow, was, like Marius, neither alive nor dead.

Every day, sometimes twice a day, a very well dressed gentleman with white hair, — such was the description given by the porter, — came to inquire about the wounded man, and left a large package of lint for the dressings.

Finally, on the 7th of September, four months to a day, after the sorrowful night when he had been brought back to his grandfather in a dying condition, the doctor declared that he would answer for Marius. Convalescence began. But Marius was forced to remain for two months more stretched out on a long chair, on account of the results called up by the fracture of his collar-bone. There always is a last wound like that which will not close, and which prolongs the dressings indefinitely, to the great annoyance of the sick person.

However, this long illness and this long convalescence saved him from all pursuit. In France, there is no wrath, not even of a public character, which six months will not extinguish. Revolts, in the present state of society, are so much the fault of every one, that they are followed by a certain necessity of shutting the eyes.

Let us add, that the inexcusable Gisquet order, which enjoined doctors to lodge information against the wounded, having outraged public opinion, and not opinion alone, but the King first of all, the wounded were covered and protected by this indignation; and, with the exception of those who had been made prisoners in the very act of combat, the councils of war did not dare to trouble any one. So Marius was left in peace.

M. Gillenormand first passed through all manner of anguish, and then through every form of ecstasy. It was found difficult to prevent his passing every night beside the wounded man; he had his big arm-chair carried to Marius' bedside; he required his daughter to take the finest linen in the house for compresses and bandages. Mademoiselle Gillenormand, like a sage and elderly person, contrived to spare the fine linen, while allowing the grandfather to think that he was obeyed. M. Gillenormand would not permit any one to explain to him, that for the preparation of lint batiste is not nearly so good as coarse linen, nor new linen as old linen. He was present at all the dressings of the wounds from which Mademoiselle Gillenormand modestly absented herself. When the dead flesh was cut away with scissors, he said: "Aie! aie!" Nothing was more touching than to see him with his gentle, senile palsy, offer the wounded man a cup of his cooling-draught. He overwhelmed the doctor with questions. He did not observe that he asked the same ones over and over again.

On the day when the doctor announced to him that Marius was out of danger, the good man was in a delirium. He made his porter a present of three louis. That evening, on his return to his own chamber, he danced a gavotte, using his thumb and forefinger as castanets, and he sang the following song:

"Jeanne est née à Fougère
Vrai nid d'une bergère;
J'adore son jupon,
Fripon.

"Amour, tu vis en elle;
Car c'est dans sa prunelle
Que tu mets ton carquois.
Narquois!

"Moi, je la chante, et j'aime,

Plus que Diane même,
Jeanne et ses durs tétons
Bretons."

"Love, thou dwellest in her; For 'tis in her eyes that thou placest thy quiver, sly scamp!

"As for me, I sing her, and I love, more than Diana herself, Jeanne and her firm Breton breasts."

Then he knelt upon a chair, and Basque, who was watching him through the half-open door, made sure that he was praying.

Up to that time, he had not believed in God.

At each succeeding phase of improvement, which became more and more pronounced, the grandfather raved. He executed a multitude of mechanical actions full of joy; he ascended and descended the stairs, without knowing why. A pretty female neighbor was amazed one morning at receiving a big bouquet; it was M. Gillenormand who had sent it to her. The husband made a jealous scene. M. Gillenormand tried to draw Nicolette upon his knees. He called Marius, "M. le Baron." He shouted: "Long live the Republic!"

Every moment, he kept asking the doctor: "Is he no longer in danger?" He gazed upon Marius with the eyes of a grandmother. He brooded over him while he ate. He no longer knew himself, he no longer rendered himself an account of himself. Marius was the master of the house, there was abdication in his joy, he was the grandson of his grandson.

In the state of joy in which he then was, he was the most venerable of children. In his fear lest he might fatigue or annoy the convalescent, he stepped behind him to smile. He was content, joyous, delighted, charming, young. His white locks added a gentle majesty to the gay radiance of his visage. When grace is mingled with wrinkles, it is adorable. There is an indescribable aurora in beaming old age.

As for Marius, as he allowed them to dress his wounds and care for him, he had but one fixed idea: Cosette.

After the fever and delirium had left him, he did not again pronounce her name, and it might have been supposed that he no longer thought of her. He held his peace, precisely because his soul was there.

He did not know what had become of Cosette; the whole affair of the Rue de la Chanvrerie was like a cloud in his memory; shadows that were almost indistinct, floated through his mind, Eponine, Gavroche, Mabeuf, the

Thenardiers, all his friends gloomily intermingled with the smoke of the barricade; the strange passage of M. Fauchelevent through that adventure produced on him the effect of a puzzle in a tempest; he understood nothing connected with his own life, he did not know how nor by whom he had been saved, and no one of those around him knew this; all that they had been able to tell him was, that he had been brought home at night in a hackney-coach, to the Rue des Filles-du-Calvaire; past, present, future were nothing more to him than the mist of a vague idea; but in that fog there was one immovable point, one clear and precise outline, something made of granite, a resolution, a will; to find Cosette once more. For him, the idea of life was not distinct from the idea of Cosette. He had decreed in his heart that he would not accept the one without the other, and he was immovably resolved to exact of any person whatever, who should desire to force him to live, — from his grandfather, from fate, from hell, — the restitution of his vanished Eden.

He did not conceal from himself the fact that obstacles existed.

Let us here emphasize one detail, he was not won over and was but little softened by all the solicitude and tenderness of his grandfather. In the first place, he was not in the secret; then, in his reveries of an invalid, which were still feverish, possibly, he distrusted this tenderness as a strange and novel thing, which had for its object his conquest. He remained cold. The grandfather absolutely wasted his poor old smile. Marius said to himself that it was all right so long as he, Marius, did not speak, and let things take their course; but that when it became a question of Cosette, he would find another face, and that his grandfather’s true attitude would be unmasked. Then there would be an unpleasant scene; a recrudescence of family questions, a confrontation of positions, every sort of sarcasm and all manner of objections at one and the same time, Fauchelevent, Coupelevent, fortune, poverty, a stone about his neck, the future. Violent resistance; conclusion: a refusal. Marius stiffened himself in advance.

And then, in proportion as he regained life, the old ulcers of his memory opened once more, he reflected again on the past, Colonel Pontmercy placed himself once more between M. Gillenormand and him, Marius, he told himself that he had no true kindness to expect from a person who had been so unjust and so hard to his father. And with health, there returned to him a sort of harshness towards his grandfather. The old man was gently pained by this. M. Gillenormand, without however allowing it to appear, observed that Marius, ever since the latter had been brought back to him and had regained consciousness, had not once called him father. It is true that he did not say “monsieur” to him; but he contrived not to say either the one or the other, by means of a certain way of turning his phrases. Obviously, a crisis was approaching.

As almost always happens in such cases, Marius skirmished before giving battle, by way of proving himself. This is called “feeling the ground.” One morning it came to pass that M. Gillenormand spoke slightingly of the Convention, apropos of a newspaper which had fallen into his hands, and gave vent to a Royalist harangue on Danton, Saint-Juste and Robespierre.— “The men of ‘93 were giants,” said Marius with severity. The old man held his peace, and uttered not a sound during the remainder of that day.

Marius, who had always present to his mind the inflexible grandfather of his early years, interpreted this silence as a profound concentration of wrath, augured from it a hot conflict, and augmented his preparations for the fray in the inmost recesses of his mind.

He decided that, in case of a refusal, he would tear off his bandages, dislocate his collar-bone, that he would lay bare all the wounds which he had left, and would reject all food. His wounds were his munitions of war. He would have Cosette or die.

He awaited the propitious moment with the crafty patience of the sick.

That moment arrived.

CHAPTER III — MARIUS ATTACKED

One day, M. Gillenormand, while his daughter was putting in order the phials and cups on the marble of the commode, bent over Marius and said to him in his tenderest accents: “Look here, my little Marius, if I were in your place, I would eat meat now in preference to fish. A fried sole is excellent to begin a convalescence with, but a good cutlet is needed to put a sick man on his feet.”

Marius, who had almost entirely recovered his strength, collected the whole of it, drew himself up into a sitting posture, laid his two clenched fists on the sheets of his bed, looked his grandfather in the face, assumed a terrible air, and said:

“This leads me to say something to you.”

“What is it?”

“That I wish to marry.”

“Agreed,” said his grandfather. — And he burst out laughing.

“How agreed?”

“Yes, agreed. You shall have your little girl.”

Marius, stunned and overwhelmed with the dazzling shock, trembled in every limb.

M. Gillenormand went on:

“Yes, you shall have her, that pretty little girl of yours. She comes every day in the shape of an old gentleman to inquire after you. Ever since you were wounded, she has passed her time in weeping and making lint. I have made inquiries. She lives in the Rue de l’Homme Arme, No. 7. Ah! There we have it! Ah! so you want her! Well, you shall have her. You’re caught. You had arranged your little plot, you had said to yourself:— ‘I’m going to signify this squarely to my grandfather, to that mummy of the Regency and of the Directory, to that ancient beau, to that Dorante turned Geronte; he has indulged in his frivolities also, that he has, and he has had his love affairs, and his grisettes and his Cosettes; he has made his rustle, he has had his wings, he has eaten of the bread of spring; he certainly must remember it.’ Ah! you take the cockchafer by the horns. That’s good. I offer you a cutlet and you answer me: ‘By the way, I want to marry.’ There’s a transition for you! Ah! you reckoned on a bickering! You do not know that I am an old coward. What do you say to that? You are vexed? You did not expect to find your grandfather still more foolish than yourself, you are wasting the discourse which you meant to bestow upon me, Mr. Lawyer, and that's vexatious. Well, so much the worse, rage away. I'll do whatever you wish, and that cuts you short, imbecile! Listen. I have made my inquiries, I'm cunning too; she is charming, she is discreet, it is not true about the lancer, she has made heaps of lint, she's a jewel, she adores you, if you had died, there would have been three of us, her coffin would have accompanied mine. I have had an idea, ever since you have been better, of simply planting her at your bedside, but it is only in romances that young girls are brought to the bedsides of handsome young wounded men who interest them. It is not done. What would your aunt have said to it? You were nude three quarters of the time, my good fellow. Ask Nicolette, who has not left you for a moment, if there was any possibility of having a woman here. And then, what would the doctor have said? A pretty girl does not cure a man of fever. In short, it's all right, let us say no more about it, all's said, all's done, it's all settled, take her. Such is my ferocity. You see, I perceived that you did not love me. I said to myself: 'Here now, I have my little Cosette right under my hand, I'm going to give her to him, he will be obliged to love me a little then, or he must tell the reason why.' Ah! so you thought that the old man was going to storm, to put on a big voice, to shout no, and to lift his cane at all that aurora. Not a bit of it. Cosette, so be it; love, so be it; I ask nothing better. Pray take the trouble of getting married, sir. Be happy, my well-beloved child."

That said, the old man burst forth into sobs.

And he seized Marius' head, and pressed it with both arms against his breast, and both fell to weeping. This is one of the forms of supreme happiness.

"Father!" cried Marius.

"Ah, so you love me!" said the old man.

An ineffable moment ensued. They were choking and could not speak.

At length the old man stammered:

"Come! his mouth is unstopped at last. He has said: 'Father' to me."

Marius disengaged his head from his grandfather's arms, and said gently:

"But, father, now that I am quite well, it seems to me that I might see her."

"Agreed again, you shall see her to-morrow."

"Father!"

“What?”

“Why not to-day?”

“Well, to-day then. Let it be to-day. You have called me ‘father’ three times, and it is worth it. I will attend to it. She shall be brought hither. Agreed, I tell you. It has already been put into verse. This is the ending of the elegy of the ‘Jeune Malade’ by Andre Chenier, by Andre Chenier whose throat was cut by the ras . . . by the giants of ‘93.”

M. Gillenormand fancied that he detected a faint frown on the part of Marius, who, in truth, as we must admit, was no longer listening to him, and who was thinking far more of Cosette than of 1793.

The grandfather, trembling at having so inopportunely introduced Andre Chenier, resumed precipitately:

“Cut his throat is not the word. The fact is that the great revolutionary geniuses, who were not malicious, that is incontestable, who were heroes, pardi! found that Andre Chenier embarrassed them somewhat, and they had him guillot . . . that is to say, those great men on the 7th of Thermidor, besought Andre Chenier, in the interests of public safety, to be so good as to go . . .”

M. Gillenormand, clutched by the throat by his own phrase, could not proceed. Being able neither to finish it nor to retract it, while his daughter arranged the pillow behind Marius, who was overwhelmed with so many emotions, the old man rushed headlong, with as much rapidity as his age permitted, from the bed-chamber, shut the door behind him, and, purple, choking and foaming at the mouth, his eyes starting from his head, he found himself nose to nose with honest Basque, who was blacking boots in the anteroom. He seized Basque by the collar, and shouted full in his face in fury:— “By the hundred thousand Javottes of the devil, those ruffians did assassinate him!”

“Who, sir?”

“Andre Chenier!”

“Yes, sir,” said Basque in alarm.

CHAPTER IV — MADEMOISELLE GILLENORMAND ENDS BY NO LONGER THINKING IT A BAD THING THAT M. FAUCHELEVENT SHOULD HAVE ENTERED WITH SOMETHING UNDER HIS ARM

Cosette and Marius beheld each other once more.

What that interview was like we decline to say. There are things which one must not attempt to depict; the sun is one of them.

The entire family, including Basque and Nicolette, were assembled in Marius' chamber at the moment when Cosette entered it.

Precisely at that moment, the grandfather was on the point of blowing his nose; he stopped short, holding his nose in his handkerchief, and gazing over it at Cosette.

She appeared on the threshold; it seemed to him that she was surrounded by a glory.

"Adorable!" he exclaimed.

Then he blew his nose noisily.

Cosette was intoxicated, delighted, frightened, in heaven. She was as thoroughly alarmed as any one can be by happiness. She stammered all pale, yet flushed, she wanted to fling herself into Marius' arms, and dared not. Ashamed of loving in the presence of all these people. People are pitiless towards happy lovers; they remain when the latter most desire to be left alone. Lovers have no need of any people whatever.

With Cosette, and behind her, there had entered a man with white hair who was grave yet smiling, though with a vague and heartrending smile. It was "Monsieur Fauchelevent"; it was Jean Valjean.

He was very well dressed, as the porter had said, entirely in black, in perfectly new garments, and with a white cravat.

The porter was a thousand leagues from recognizing in this correct bourgeois, in this probable notary, the fear-inspiring bearer of the corpse, who had sprung up at his door on the night of the 7th of June, tattered, muddy, hideous, haggard, his face masked in blood and mire, supporting in his arms the fainting Marius; still, his porter's scent was aroused. When M. Fauchelevent arrived with Cosette, the porter had not been able to refrain from communicating to his wife this aside: "I don't know why it is, but I can't help fancying that I've seen that face before."

M. Fauchelevent in Marius' chamber, remained apart near the door. He had under his arm, a package which bore considerable resemblance to an octavo volume enveloped in paper. The enveloping paper was of a greenish hue, and appeared to be mouldy.

"Does the gentleman always have books like that under his arm?" Mademoiselle Gillenormand, who did not like books, demanded in a low tone of Nicolette.

"Well," retorted M. Gillenormand, who had overheard her, in the same tone, "he's a learned man. What then? Is that his fault? Monsieur Boulard, one of my acquaintances, never walked out without a book under his arm either, and he always had some old volume hugged to his heart like that."

And, with a bow, he said aloud:

"Monsieur Tranchelevent . . ."

Father Gillenormand did not do it intentionally, but inattention to proper names was an aristocratic habit of his.

"Monsieur Tranchelevent, I have the honor of asking you, on behalf of my grandson, Baron Marius Pontmercy, for the hand of Mademoiselle."

Monsieur Tranchelevent bowed.

"That's settled," said the grandfather.

And, turning to Marius and Cosette, with both arms extended in blessing, he cried:

"Permission to adore each other!"

They did not require him to repeat it twice. So much the worse! the chirping began. They talked low. Marius, resting on his elbow on his reclining chair, Cosette standing beside him. "Oh, heavens!" murmured Cosette, "I see you once again! it is thou! it is you! The idea of going and fighting like that! But why? It is horrible. I have been dead for four months. Oh! how wicked it was of you to go to that battle! What had I done to you? I pardon you, but you will never do it again. A little while ago, when they came to tell us to come to you, I still thought that I was about to die, but it was from joy. I was so sad! I have not taken the time to dress myself, I must frighten people with my looks! What will your relatives say to see me in a crumpled collar? Do speak! You let me do all the talking. We are still in the

Rue de l'Homme Arme. It seems that your shoulder was terrible. They told me that you could put your fist in it. And then, it seems that they cut your flesh with the scissors. That is frightful. I have cried till I have no eyes left. It is queer that a person can suffer like that. Your grandfather has a very kindly air. Don't disturb yourself, don't rise on your elbow, you will injure yourself. Oh! how happy I am! So our unhappiness is over! I am quite foolish. I had things to say to you, and I no longer know in the least what they were. Do you still love me? We live in the Rue de l'Homme Arme. There is no garden. I made lint all the time; stay, sir, look, it is your fault, I have a callous on my fingers."

"Angel!" said Marius.

Angel is the only word in the language which cannot be worn out. No other word could resist the merciless use which lovers make of it.

Then as there were spectators, they paused and said not a word more, contenting themselves with softly touching each other's hands.

M. Gillenormand turned towards those who were in the room and cried:

"Talk loud, the rest of you. Make a noise, you people behind the scenes. Come, a little uproar, the deuce! so that the children can chatter at their ease."

And, approaching Marius and Cosette, he said to them in a very low voice:

"Call each other thou. Don't stand on ceremony."

Aunt Gillenormand looked on in amazement at this irruption of light in her elderly household. There was nothing aggressive about this amazement; it was not the least in the world like the scandalized and envious glance of an owl at two turtle-doves, it was the stupid eye of a poor innocent seven and fifty years of age; it was a life which had been a failure gazing at that triumph, love.

"Mademoiselle Gillenormand senior," said her father to her, "I told you that this is what would happen to you."

He remained silent for a moment, and then added:

"Look at the happiness of others."

Then he turned to Cosette.

"How pretty she is! how pretty she is! She's a Greuze. So you are going to have that all to yourself, you scamp! Ah! my rogue, you are getting off nicely with me, you are happy; if I were not fifteen years too old, we would fight with swords to see which of us should have her. Come now! I am in love with you, mademoiselle. It's perfectly simple. It is your right. You are in the right. Ah! what a sweet, charming little wedding this will make! Our parish is Saint-Denis du Saint Sacrament, but I will get a dispensation so that you can be married at Saint-Paul. The church is better. It was built by the Jesuits. It is more coquettish. It is opposite the fountain of Cardinal de Birague. The masterpiece of Jesuit architecture is at Namur. It is called Saint-Loup. You must go there after you are married. It is worth the journey. Mademoiselle, I am quite of your mind, I think girls ought to marry; that is what they are made for. There is a certain Sainte-Catherine whom I should always like to see uncoiffed. It's a fine thing to remain a spinster, but it is chilly. The Bible says: Multiply. In order to save the people, Jeanne d'Arc is needed; but in order to make people, what is needed is Mother Goose. So, marry, my beauties. I really do not see the use in remaining a spinster! I know that they have their chapel apart in the church, and that they fall back on the Society of the Virgin; but, sapristi, a handsome husband, a fine fellow, and at the expiration of a year, a big, blond brat who nurses lustily, and who has fine rolls of fat on his thighs, and who musses up your breast in handfuls with his little rosy paws, laughing the while like the dawn, —that's better than holding a candle at vespers, and chanting Turris eburnea!"

The grandfather executed a pirouette on his eighty-year-old heels, and began to talk again like a spring that has broken loose once more:

"Ainsi, bornant les cours de tes rêvasseries,
Alcippe, il est donc vrai, dans peu tu te maries."

"By the way!"

"What is it, father?"

"Have not you an intimate friend?"

"Yes, Courfeyrac."

"What has become of him?"

"He is dead."

"That is good."

He seated himself near them, made Cosette sit down, and took their four hands in his aged and wrinkled hands:

"She is exquisite, this darling. She's a masterpiece, this Cosette! She is a very little girl and a very great lady. She will only be a Baroness, which is a come down for her; she was born a Marquise. What eyelashes she has! Get it well fixed in your noddles, my children, that you are in the true road. Love each other. Be foolish about it. Love is the folly of men and the wit of

God. Adore each other. Only,” he added, suddenly becoming gloomy, “what a misfortune! It has just occurred to me! More than half of what I possess is swallowed up in an annuity; so long as I live, it will not matter, but after my death, a score of years hence, ah! my poor children, you will not have a sou! Your beautiful white hands, Madame la Baronne, will do the devil the honor of pulling him by the tail.”

At this point they heard a grave and tranquil voice say:

“Mademoiselle Euphrasie Fauchelevent possesses six hundred thousand francs.”

It was the voice of Jean Valjean.

So far he had not uttered a single word, no one seemed to be aware that he was there, and he had remained standing erect and motionless, behind all these happy people.

“What has Mademoiselle Euphrasie to do with the question?” inquired the startled grandfather.

“I am she,” replied Cosette.

“Six hundred thousand francs?” resumed M. Gillenormand.

“Minus fourteen or fifteen thousand francs, possibly,” said Jean Valjean.

And he laid on the table the package which Mademoiselle Gillenormand had mistaken for a book.

Jean Valjean himself opened the package; it was a bundle of bank-notes. They were turned over and counted. There were five hundred notes for a thousand francs each, and one hundred and sixty-eight of five hundred. In all, five hundred and eighty-four thousand francs.

“This is a fine book,” said M. Gillenormand.

“Five hundred and eighty-four thousand francs!” murmured the aunt.

“This arranges things well, does it not, Mademoiselle Gillenormand senior?” said the grandfather. “That devil of a Marius has ferreted out the nest of a millionaire grisette in his tree of dreams! Just trust to the love affairs of young folks now, will you! Students find studentesses with six hundred thousand francs. Cherubino works better than Rothschild.”

“Five hundred and eighty-four thousand francs!” repeated Mademoiselle Gillenormand, in a low tone. “Five hundred and eighty-four! one might as well say six hundred thousand!”

As for Marius and Cosette, they were gazing at each other while this was going on; they hardly heeded this detail.

CHAPTER V — DEPOSIT YOUR MONEY IN A FOREST RATHER THAN WITH A NOTARY

The reader has, no doubt, understood, without necessitating a lengthy explanation, that Jean Valjean, after the Champmathieu affair, had been able, thanks to his first escape of a few days' duration, to come to Paris and to withdraw in season, from the hands of Laffitte, the sum earned by him, under the name of Monsieur Madeleine, at Montreuil-sur-Mer; and that fearing that he might be recaptured, — which eventually happened — he had buried and hidden that sum in the forest of Montfermeil, in the locality known as the Blaru-bottom. The sum, six hundred and thirty thousand francs, all in bank-bills, was not very bulky, and was contained in a box; only, in order to preserve the box from dampness, he had placed it in a coffer filled with chestnut shavings. In the same coffer he had placed his other treasures, the Bishop's candlesticks. It will be remembered that he had carried off the candlesticks when he made his escape from Montreuil-sur-Mer. The man seen one evening for the first time by Boulatruelle, was Jean Valjean. Later on, every time that Jean Valjean needed money, he went to get it in the Blaru-bottom. Hence the absences which we have mentioned. He had a pickaxe somewhere in the heather, in a hiding-place known to himself alone. When he beheld Marius convalescent, feeling that the hour was at hand, when that money might prove of service, he had gone to get it; it was he again, whom Boulatruelle had seen in the woods, but on this occasion, in the morning instead of in the evening. Boulatreulle inherited his pickaxe.

The actual sum was five hundred and eighty-four thousand, five hundred francs. Jean Valjean withdrew the five hundred francs for himself.— "We shall see hereafter," he thought.

The difference between that sum and the six hundred and thirty thousand francs withdrawn from Laffitte represented his expenditure in ten years, from 1823 to 1833. The five years of his stay in the convent had cost only five thousand francs.

Jean Valjean set the two candlesticks on the chimney-piece, where they glittered to the great admiration of Toussaint.

Moreover, Jean Valjean knew that he was delivered from Javert. The story had been told in his presence, and he had verified the fact in the Moniteur, how a police inspector named Javert had been found drowned under a boat belonging to some laundresses, between the Pont au Change and the Pont-Neuf, and that a writing left by this man, otherwise irreproachable and highly esteemed by his superiors, pointed to a fit of mental aberration and a suicide.— “In fact,” thought Jean Valjean, “since he left me at liberty, once having got me in his power, he must have been already mad.”

CHAPTER VI — THE TWO OLD MEN DO EVERYTHING, EACH ONE AFTER HIS OWN FASHION, TO RENDER COSETTE HAPPY

Everything was made ready for the wedding. The doctor, on being consulted, declared that it might take place in February. It was then December. A few ravishing weeks of perfect happiness passed.

The grandfather was not the least happy of them all. He remained for a quarter of an hour at a time gazing at Cosette.

“The wonderful, beautiful girl!” he exclaimed. “And she has so sweet and good an air! she is, without exception, the most charming girl that I have ever seen in my life. Later on, she’ll have virtues with an odor of violets. How graceful! one cannot live otherwise than nobly with such a creature. Marius, my boy, you are a Baron, you are rich, don’t go to pettifogging, I beg of you.”

Cosette and Marius had passed abruptly from the sepulchre to paradise. The transition had not been softened, and they would have been stunned, had they not been dazzled by it.

“Do you understand anything about it?” said Marius to Cosette.

“No,” replied Cosette, “but it seems to me that the good God is caring for us.”

Jean Valjean did everything, smoothed away every difficulty, arranged everything, made everything easy. He hastened towards Cosette’s happiness with as much ardor, and, apparently with as much joy, as Cosette herself.

As he had been a mayor, he understood how to solve that delicate problem, with the secret of which he alone was acquainted, Cosette’s civil status. If he were to announce her origin bluntly, it might prevent the marriage, who knows? He extricated Cosette from all difficulties. He concocted for her a family of dead people, a sure means of not encountering any objections. Cosette was the only scion of an extinct family; Cosette was not his own daughter, but the daughter of the other Fauchelevent. Two brothers Fauchelevent had been gardeners to the convent of the Petit-Picpus. Inquiry was made at that convent; the very best information and the most respectable references abounded; the good nuns, not very apt and but little inclined to fathom questions of paternity, and not attaching any importance to the matter, had never understood exactly of which of the two Fauchelevents Cosette was the daughter. They said what was wanted and they said it with zeal. An acte de notoriete was drawn up. Cosette became in the eyes of the law, Mademoiselle Euphrasie Fauchelevent. She was declared an orphan, both father and mother being dead. Jean Valjean so arranged it that he was appointed, under the name of Fauchelevent, as Cosette's guardian, with M. Gillenormand as supervising guardian over him.

As for the five hundred and eighty thousand francs, they constituted a legacy bequeathed to Cosette by a dead person, who desired to remain unknown. The original legacy had consisted of five hundred and ninety-four thousand francs; but ten thousand francs had been expended on the education of Mademoiselle Euphrasie, five thousand francs of that amount having been paid to the convent. This legacy, deposited in the hands of a third party, was to be turned over to Cosette at her majority, or at the date of her marriage. This, taken as a whole, was very acceptable, as the reader will perceive, especially when the sum due was half a million. There were some peculiarities here and there, it is true, but they were not noticed; one of the interested parties had his eyes blindfolded by love, the others by the six hundred thousand francs.

Cosette learned that she was not the daughter of that old man whom she had so long called father. He was merely a kinsman; another Fauchelevent was her real father. At any other time this would have broken her heart. But at the ineffable moment which she was then passing through, it cast but a slight shadow, a faint cloud, and she was so full of joy that the cloud did not last long. She had Marius. The young man arrived, the old man was effaced; such is life.

And then, Cosette had, for long years, been habituated to seeing enigmas around her; every being who has had a mysterious childhood is always prepared for certain renunciations.

Nevertheless, she continued to call Jean Valjean: Father.

Cosette, happy as the angels, was enthusiastic over Father Gillenormand. It is true that he overwhelmed her with gallant compliments and presents. While Jean Valjean was building up for Cosette a normal situation in society and an unassailable status, M. Gillenormand was superintending the basket of wedding gifts. Nothing so amused him as being magnificent. He had given to Cosette a robe of Binche guipure which had descended to him from his own grandmother.

"These fashions come up again," said he, "ancient things are the rage, and the young women of my old age dress like the old women of my childhood."

He rifled his respectable chests of drawers in Coromandel lacquer, with swelling fronts, which had not been opened for years.— "Let us hear the confession of these dowagers," he said, "let us see what they have in their paunches." He noisily violated the pot-bellied drawers of all his wives, of all his mistresses and of all his grandmothers. Pekins, damasks, lampas, painted moires, robes of shot gros de Tours, India kerchiefs embroidered in gold that could be washed, dauphines without a right or wrong side, in the piece, Genoa and Alencon point lace, parures in antique goldsmith's work, ivory bon-bon boxes ornamented with microscopic battles, gewgaws and ribbons — he lavished everything on Cosette. Cosette, amazed, desperately in love with Marius, and wild with gratitude towards M. Gillenormand, dreamed of a happiness without limit clothed in satin and velvet. Her wedding basket seemed to her to be upheld by seraphim. Her soul flew out into the azure depths, with wings of Mechlin lace.

The intoxication of the lovers was only equalled, as we have already said, by the ecstasy of the grandfather. A sort of flourish of trumpets went on in the Rue des Filles-du-Calvaire.

Every morning, a fresh offering of bric-a-brac from the grandfather to Cosette. All possible knickknacks glittered around her.

One day Marius, who was fond of talking gravely in the midst of his bliss, said, apropos of I know not what incident:

"The men of the revolution are so great, that they have the prestige of the ages, like Cato and like Phocion, and each one of them seems to me an antique memory."

"Moire antique!" exclaimed the old gentleman. "Thanks, Marius. That is precisely the idea of which I was in search."

And on the following day, a magnificent dress of tea-rose colored moire antique was added to Cosette's wedding presents.

From these fripperies, the grandfather extracted a bit of wisdom.

"Love is all very well; but there must be something else to go with it. The useless must be mingled with happiness. Happiness is only the necessary. Season that enormously with the superfluous for me. A palace and her heart. Her heart and the Louvre. Her heart and the grand waterworks of Versailles. Give me my shepherdess and try to make her a duchess. Fetch me Phyllis crowned with corn-flowers, and add a hundred thousand francs income. Open for me a bucolic perspective as far as you can see, beneath a marble colonnade. I consent to the bucolic and also to the fairy spectacle of marble and gold. Dry happiness resembles dry bread. One eats, but one does not dine. I want the superfluous, the useless, the extravagant, excess, that which serves no purpose. I remember to have seen, in the Cathedral of Strasburg, a clock, as tall as a three-story house which marked the hours, which had the kindness to indicate the hour, but which had not the air of being made for that; and which, after having struck midday, or midnight, — midday, the hour of the sun, or midnight, the hour of love, — or any other hour that you like, gave you the moon and the stars, the earth and the sea, birds and fishes, Phoebus and Phoebe, and a host of things which emerged from a niche, and the twelve apostles, and the Emperor Charles the Fifth, and Eponine, and Sabinus, and a throng of little gilded goodmen, who played on the trumpet to boot. Without reckoning delicious chimes which it sprinkled through the air, on every occasion, without any one's knowing why. Is a petty bald clock-face which merely tells the hour equal to that? For my part, I am of the opinion of the big clock of Strasburg, and I prefer it to the cuckoo clock from the Black Forest."

M. Gillenormand talked nonsense in connection with the wedding, and all the fripperies of the eighteenth century passed pell-mell through his dithyrambs.

"You are ignorant of the art of festivals. You do not know how to organize a day of enjoyment in this age," he exclaimed. "Your nineteenth century is weak. It lacks excess. It ignores the rich, it ignores the noble. In everything it is clean-shaven. Your third estate is insipid, colorless, odorless, and shapeless. The dreams of your bourgeois who set up, as they express it: a pretty boudoir freshly decorated, violet, ebony and calico. Make way! Make way! the Sieur Curmudgeon is marrying Mademoiselle Clutch-penny. Sumptuousness and splendor. A louis d'or has been stuck to a candle. There's the epoch for you. My demand is that I may flee from it beyond the Sarmatians. Ah! in 1787, I predict that all was lost, from the day when I beheld the Duc de Rohan, Prince de Leon, Duc de Chabot, Duc de Montbazon, Marquis de Sonbise, Vicomte de Thouars, peer of France, go to Longchamps in a tapecu! That has borne its fruits. In this century, men attend to business, they gamble on ’Change, they win money, they are stingy. People take care of their surfaces and varnish them; every one is dressed as though just out of a band-box, washed, soaped, scraped, shaved, combed, waked, smoothed, rubbed, brushed, cleaned on the outside, irreproachable, polished as a pebble, discreet, neat, and at the same time, death of my life, in the depths of their consciences they have dung-heaps and cesspools that are enough to make a cow-herd who blows his nose in his fingers, recoil. I grant to this age the device: ‘Dirty Cleanliness.’ Don’t be vexed, Marius, give me permission to speak; I say no evil of the people as you see, I am always harping on your people, but do look favorably on my dealing a bit of a slap to the bourgeoisie. I belong to it. He who loves well lashes well. Thereupon, I say plainly, that now-a-days people marry, but that they no longer know how to marry. Ah! it is true, I regret the grace of the ancient manners. I regret everything about them, their elegance, their chivalry, those courteous and delicate ways, that joyous luxury which every one possessed, music forming part of the wedding, a symphony above stairs, a beating of drums below stairs, the dances, the joyous faces round the table, the fine-spun gallant compliments, the songs, the fireworks, the frank laughter, the devil’s own row, the huge knots of ribbon. I regret the bride’s garter. The bride’s garter is cousin to the girdle of Venus. On what does the war of Troy turn? On Helen’s garter, parbleu! Why did they fight, why did Diomed the divine break over the head of Meriones that great brazen helmet of ten points? why did Achilles and Hector hew each other up with vast blows of their lances? Because Helen allowed Paris to take her garter. With Cosette’s garter, Homer would construct the Iliad. He would put in his poem, a loquacious old fellow, like me, and he would call him Nestor. My friends, in bygone days, in those amiable days of yore, people married wisely; they had a good contract, and then they had a good carouse. As soon as Cujas had taken his departure, Gamacho entered. But, in sooth! the stomach is an agreeable beast which demands its due, and which wants to have its wedding also. People supped well, and had at table a beautiful neighbor without a guimpe so that her throat was only moderately concealed. Oh! the large laughing mouths, and how gay we were in those days! youth was a bouquet; every young man terminated in a branch of lilacs or a tuft of roses; whether he was a shepherd or a warrior; and if, by chance, one was a captain of dragoons, one found means to call oneself Florian. People thought much of looking well. They embroidered and tinted themselves. A bourgeois had the air of a flower, a Marquis had the air of a precious stone. People had no straps to their boots, they had no boots. They were spruce, shining, waved, lustrous, fluttering, dainty, coquettish, which did not at all prevent their wearing swords by their sides. The humming-bird has beak and claws. That was the day of the Galland Indies. One of the sides of that century was delicate, the other was magnificent; and by the green cabbages! people amused themselves. To-day, people are serious. The bourgeois is avaricious, the bourgeoise is a prude; your century is unfortunate. People would drive away the Graces as being too low in the neck. Alas! beauty is concealed as though it were ugliness. Since the revolution, everything, including the ballet-dancers, has had its trousers; a mountebank dancer must be grave; your rigadoons are doctrinarian. It is necessary to be majestic. People would be greatly annoyed if they did not carry their chins in their cravats. The ideal of an urchin of twenty when he marries, is to resemble M. Royer-Collard. And do you know what one arrives at with that majesty? at being petty. Learn this: joy is not only joyous; it is great. But be in love gayly then, what the deuce! marry, when you marry, with fever and giddiness, and tumult, and the uproar of happiness! Be grave in church, well and good. But, as soon as the mass is finished, sarpejou! you must make a dream whirl around the bride. A marriage should be royal and chimerical; it should promenade its ceremony from the cathedral of Rheims to the pagoda of Chanteloup. I have a horror of a paltry wedding. Ventregoulette! be in Olympus for that one day, at least. Be one of the gods. Ah! people might be sylphs. Games and Laughter, argiraspides; they are stupids. My friends, every recently made bridegroom ought to be Prince Aldobrandini. Profit by that unique minute in life to soar away to the empyrean with the swans and the eagles, even if you do have to fall back on the morrow into the bourgeoisie of the frogs. Don’t economize on the nuptials, do not prune them of their splendors; don’t scrimp on the day when you beam. The wedding is not the housekeeping. Oh! if I were to carry out my fancy, it would be gallant, violins would be heard under the trees. Here is my programme: sky-blue and silver. I would mingle with the festival the rural divinities, I would convoke the Dryads and the Nereids. The nuptials of Amphitrite, a rosy cloud, nymphs with well dressed locks and entirely naked, an Academician offering quatrains to the goddess, a chariot drawn by marine monsters.

“Triton trottait devant, et tirait de sa conque

Des sons si ravissants qu’il ravissait quiconque!”

— there’s a festive programme, there’s a good one, or else I know nothing of such matters, deuce take it!”

While the grandfather, in full lyrical effusion, was listening to himself, Cosette and Marius grew intoxicated as they gazed freely at each other.

Aunt Gillenormand surveyed all this with her imperturbable placidity. Within the last five or six months she had experienced a certain amount of emotions. Marius returned, Marius brought back bleeding, Marius brought back from a barricade, Marius dead, then living, Marius reconciled, Marius betrothed, Marius wedding a poor girl, Marius wedding a millionairess. The six hundred thousand francs had been her last surprise. Then, her indifference of a girl taking her first communion returned to her. She went regularly to service, told her beads, read her euchology, mumbled Aves in one corner of the house, while I love you was being whispèred in the other, and she beheld Marius and Cosette in a vague way, like two shadows. The shadow was herself.

There is a certain state of inert asceticism in which the soul, neutralized by torpor, a stranger to that which may be designated as the business of living, receives no impressions, either human, or pleasant or painful, with the exception of earthquakes and catastrophes. This devotion, as Father Gillenormand said to his daughter, corresponds to a cold in the head. You smell nothing of life. Neither any bad, nor any good odor.

Moreover, the six hundred thousand francs had settled the elderly spinster’s indecision. Her father had acquired the habit of taking her so little into account, that he had not consulted her in the matter of consent to Marius’ marriage. He had acted impetuously, according to his wont, having, a despot-turned slave, but a single thought, — to satisfy Marius. As for the aunt, — it had not even occurred to him that the aunt existed, and that she could have an opinion of her own, and, sheep as she was, this had vexed her. Somewhat resentful in her inmost soul, but impassible externally, she had said to herself: “My father has settled the question of the marriage without reference to me; I shall settle the question of the inheritance without consulting him.” She was rich, in fact, and her father was not. She had reserved her decision on this point. It is probable that, had the match been a poor one, she would have left him poor. “So much the worse for my nephew! he is wedding a beggar, let him be a beggar himself!” But Cosette’s half-million pleased the aunt, and altered her inward situation so far as this pair of lovers were concerned. One owes some consideration to six hundred thousand francs, and it was evident that she could not do otherwise than leave her fortune to these young people, since they did not need it.

It was arranged that the couple should live with the grandfather — M. Gillenormand insisted on resigning to them his chamber, the finest in the house. “That will make me young again,” he said. “It’s an old plan of mine. I have always entertained the idea of having a wedding in my chamber.”

He furnished this chamber with a multitude of elegant trifles. He had the ceiling and walls hung with an extraordinary stuff, which he had by him in the piece, and which he believed to have emanated from Utrecht with a buttercup-colored satin ground, covered with velvet auricula blossoms.— “It was with that stuff,” said he, “that the bed of the Duchesse d’Anville at la Roche-Guyon was draped.” — On the chimney-piece, he set a little figure in Saxe porcelain, carrying a muff against her nude stomach.

M. Gillenormand’s library became the lawyer’s study, which Marius needed; a study, it will be remembered, being required by the council of the order.

CHAPTER VII — THE EFFECTS OF DREAMS MINGLED WITH HAPPINESS

The lovers saw each other every day. Cosette came with M. Fauchelevent. — “This is reversing things,” said Mademoiselle Gillenormand, “to have the bride come to the house to do the courting like this.” But Marius’ convalescence had caused the habit to become established, and the arm-chairs of the Rue des Filles-du-Calvaire, better adapted to interviews than the straw chairs of the Rue de l’Homme Arme, had rooted it. Marius and M. Fauchelevent saw each other, but did not address each other. It seemed as though this had been agreed upon. Every girl needs a chaperon. Cosette could not have come without M. Fauchelevent. In Marius’ eyes, M. Fauchelevent was the condition attached to Cosette. He accepted it. By dint of discussing political matters, vaguely and without precision, from the point of view of the general amelioration of the fate of all men, they came to say a little more than “yes” and “no.” Once, on the subject of education, which Marius wished to have free and obligatory, multiplied under all forms lavished on every one, like the air and the sun in a word, respirable for the entire population, they were in unison, and they almost conversed. M. Fauchelevent talked well, and even with a certain loftiness of language — still he lacked something indescribable. M. Fauchelevent possessed something less and also something more, than a man of the world.

Marius, inwardly, and in the depths of his thought, surrounded with all sorts of mute questions this M. Fauchelevent, who was to him simply benevolent and cold. There were moments when doubts as to his own recollections occurred to him. There was a void in his memory, a black spot, an abyss excavated by four months of agony. — Many things had been lost therein. He had come to the point of asking himself whether it were really a fact that he had seen M. Fauchelevent, so serious and so calm a man, in the barricade.

This was not, however, the only stupor which the apparitions and the disappearances of the past had left in his mind. It must not be supposed that he was delivered from all those obsessions of the memory which force us, even when happy, even when satisfied, to glance sadly behind us. The head which does not turn backwards towards horizons that have vanished contains neither thought nor love. At times, Marius clasped his face between his hands, and the vague and tumultuous past traversed the twilight which reigned in his brain. Again he beheld Mabeuf fall, he heard Gavroche singing amid the grape-shot, he felt beneath his lips the cold brow of Eponine; Enjolras, Courfeyrac, Jean Prouvaire, Combeferre, Bossuet, Grantaire, all his friends rose erect before him, then dispersed into thin air. Were all those dear, sorrowful, valiant, charming or tragic beings merely dreams? had they actually existed? The revolt had enveloped everything in its smoke. These great fevers create great dreams. He questioned himself; he felt himself; all these vanished realities made him dizzy. Where were they all then? was it really true that all were dead? A fall into the shadows had carried off all except himself. It all seemed to him to have disappeared as though behind the curtain of a theatre. There are curtains like this which drop in life. God passes on to the following act.

And he himself — was he actually the same man? He, the poor man, was rich; he, the abandoned, had a family; he, the despairing, was to marry Cosette. It seemed to him that he had traversed a tomb, and that he had entered into it black and had emerged from it white, and in that tomb the others had remained. At certain moments, all these beings of the past, returned and present, formed a circle around him, and overshadowed him; then he thought of Cosette, and recovered his serenity; but nothing less than this felicity could have sufficed to efface that catastrophe.

M. Fauchelevent almost occupied a place among these vanished beings. Marius hesitated to believe that the Fauchelevent of the barricade was the same as this Fauchelevent in flesh and blood, sitting so gravely beside Cosette. The first was, probably, one of those nightmares occasioned and brought back by his hours of delirium. However, the natures of both men were rigid, no question from Marius to M. Fauchelevent was possible. Such an idea had not even occurred to him. We have already indicated this characteristic detail.

Two men who have a secret in common, and who, by a sort of tacit agreement, exchange not a word on the subject, are less rare than is commonly supposed.

Once only, did Marius make the attempt. He introduced into the conversation the Rue de la Chanvrerie, and, turning to M. Fauchelevent, he said to him:

“Of course, you are acquainted with that street?”

“What street?”

“The Rue de la Chanvrerie.”

“I have no idea of the name of that street,” replied M. Fauchelevent, in the most natural manner in the world.

The response which bore upon the name of the street and not upon the street itself, appeared to Marius to be more conclusive than it really was.

“Decidedly,” thought he, “I have been dreaming. I have been subject to a hallucination. It was some one who resembled him. M. Fauchelevent was not there.”’

CHAPTER VIII — TWO MEN IMPOSSIBLE TO FIND

Marius’ enchantment, great as it was, could not efface from his mind other pre-occupations.

While the wedding was in preparation, and while awaiting the date fixed upon, he caused difficult and scrupulous retrospective researches to be made.

He owed gratitude in various quarters; he owed it on his father’s account, he owed it on his own.

There was Thenardier; there was the unknown man who had brought him, Marius, back to M. Gillenormand.

Marius endeavored to find these two men, not intending to marry, to be happy, and to forget them, and fearing that, were these debts of gratitude not discharged, they would leave a shadow on his life, which promised so brightly for the future.

It was impossible for him to leave all these arrears of suffering behind him, and he wished, before entering joyously into the future, to obtain a quittance from the past.

That Thenardier was a villain detracted nothing from the fact that he had saved Colonel Pontmercy. Thenardier was a ruffian in the eyes of all the world except Marius.

And Marius, ignorant of the real scene in the battle field of Waterloo, was not aware of the peculiar detail, that his father, so far as Thenardier was concerned was in the strange position of being indebted to the latter for his life, without being indebted to him for any gratitude.

None of the various agents whom Marius employed succeeded in discovering any trace of Thenardier. Obliteration appeared to be complete in that quarter. Madame Thenardier had died in prison pending the trial. Thenardier and his daughter Azelma, the only two remaining of that lamentable group, had plunged back into the gloom. The gulf of the social unknown had silently closed above those beings. On the surface there was not visible so much as that quiver, that trembling, those obscure concentric circles which announce that something has fallen in, and that the plummet may be dropped.

Madame Thenardier being dead, Boulatruelle being eliminated from the case, Claquesous having disappeared, the principal persons accused having escaped from prison, the trial connected with the ambush in the Gorbeau house had come to nothing.

That affair had remained rather obscure. The bench of Assizes had been obliged to content themselves with two subordinates. Panchaud, alias Printanier, alias Bigrenaille, and Demi-Liard, alias Deux-Milliards, who had been inconsistently condemned, after a hearing of both sides of the case, to ten years in the galleys. Hard labor for life had been the sentence pronounced against the escaped and contumacious accomplices.

Thenardier, the head and leader, had been, through contumacy, likewise condemned to death.

This sentence was the only information remaining about Thenardier, casting upon that buried name its sinister light like a candle beside a bier.

Moreover, by thrusting Thenardier back into the very remotest depths, through a fear of being re-captured, this sentence added to the density of the shadows which enveloped this man.

As for the other person, as for the unknown man who had saved Marius, the researches were at first to some extent successful, then came to an abrupt conclusion. They succeeded in finding the carriage which had brought Marius to the Rue des Filles-du-Calvaire on the evening of the 6th of June.

The coachman declared that, on the 6th of June, in obedience to the commands of a police-agent, he had stood from three o’clock in the afternoon until nightfall on the Quai des Champs-Elysees, above the outlet of the Grand Sewer; that, towards nine o’clock in the evening, the grating of the sewer, which abuts on the bank of the river, had opened; that a man had emerged therefrom, bearing on his shoulders another man, who seemed to be dead; that the agent, who was on the watch at that point, had arrested the living man and had seized the dead man; that, at the order of the police-agent, he, the coachman, had taken “all those folks” into his carriage; that they had first driven to the Rue des Filles-du-Calvaire; that they had there deposited the dead man; that the dead man was Monsieur Marius, and that he, the coachman, recognized him perfectly, although he was alive “this time”; that afterwards, they had entered the vehicle again, that he had whipped up his horses; a few paces from the gate of the Archives, they had called to him to halt; that there, in the street, they had paid him and left him, and that the police-agent had led the other man away; that he knew nothing more; that the night had been very dark.

Marius, as we have said, recalled nothing. He only remembered that he had been seized from behind by an energetic hand at the moment when he was falling backwards into the barricade; then, everything vanished so far as he was concerned.

He had only regained consciousness at M. Gillenormand's.

He was lost in conjectures.

He could not doubt his own identity. Still, how had it come to pass that, having fallen in the Rue de la Chanvrerie, he had been picked up by the police-agent on the banks of the Seine, near the Pont des Invalides?

Some one had carried him from the Quartier des Halles to the Champs-Elysees. And how? Through the sewer. Unheard-of devotion!

Some one? Who?

This was the man for whom Marius was searching.

Of this man, who was his savior, nothing; not a trace; not the faintest indication.

Marius, although forced to preserve great reserve, in that direction, pushed his inquiries as far as the prefecture of police. There, no more than elsewhere, did the information obtained lead to any enlightenment.

The prefecture knew less about the matter than did the hackney-coachman. They had no knowledge of any arrest having been made on the 6th of June at the mouth of the Grand Sewer.

No report of any agent had been received there upon this matter, which was regarded at the prefecture as a fable. The invention of this fable was attributed to the coachman.

A coachman who wants a gratuity is capable of anything, even of imagination. The fact was assured, nevertheless, and Marius could not doubt it, unless he doubted his own identity, as we have just said.

Everything about this singular enigma was inexplicable.

What had become of that man, that mysterious man, whom the coachman had seen emerge from the grating of the Grand Sewer bearing upon his back the unconscious Marius, and whom the police-agent on the watch had arrested in the very act of rescuing an insurgent? What had become of the agent himself?

Why had this agent preserved silence? Had the man succeeded in making his escape? Had he bribed the agent? Why did this man give no sign of life to Marius, who owed everything to him? His disinterestedness was no less tremendous than his devotion. Why had not that man appeared again? Perhaps he was above compensation, but no one is above gratitude. Was he dead? Who was the man? What sort of a face had he? No one could tell him this.

The coachman answered: “The night was very dark.” Basque and Nicolette, all in a flutter, had looked only at their young master all covered with blood.

The porter, whose candle had lighted the tragic arrival of Marius, had been the only one to take note of the man in question, and this is the description that he gave:

“That man was terrible.”

Marius had the blood-stained clothing which he had worn when he had been brought back to his grandfather preserved, in the hope that it would prove of service in his researches.

On examining the coat, it was found that one skirt had been torn in a singular way. A piece was missing.

One evening, Marius was speaking in the presence of Cosette and Jean Valjean of the whole of that singular adventure, of the innumerable inquiries which he had made, and of the fruitlessness of his efforts. The cold countenance of “Monsieur Fauchelevent” angered him.

He exclaimed, with a vivacity which had something of wrath in it:

“Yes, that man, whoever he may have been, was sublime. Do you know what he did, sir? He intervened like an archangel. He must have flung himself into the midst of the battle, have stolen me away, have opened the sewer, have dragged me into it and have carried me through it! He must have traversed more than a league and a half in those frightful subterranean galleries, bent over, weighed down, in the dark, in the cess-pool, — more than a league and a half, sir, with a corpse upon his back! And with what object? With the sole object of saving the corpse. And that corpse I was. He said to himself: ‘There may still be a glimpse of life there, perchance; I will risk my own existence for that miserable spark!’ And his existence he risked not once but twenty times! And every step was a danger. The proof of it is, that on emerging from the sewer, he was arrested. Do you know, sir, that that man did all this? And he had no recompense to expect. What was I? An insurgent. What was I? One of the conquered. Oh! if Cosette’s six hundred thousand francs were mine . . .”

“They are yours,” interrupted Jean Valjean.

“Well,” resumed Marius, “I would give them all to find that man once more.”

Jean Valjean remained silent.

BOOK SIXTH. — THE SLEEPLESS NIGHT

CHAPTER I — THE 16TH OF FEBRUARY, 1833

The night of the 16th to the 17th of February, 1833, was a blessed night. Above its shadows heaven stood open. It was the wedding night of Marius and Cosette.

The day had been adorable.

It had not been the grand festival dreamed by the grandfather, a fairy spectacle, with a confusion of cherubim and Cupids over the heads of the bridal pair, a marriage worthy to form the subject of a painting to be placed over a door; but it had been sweet and smiling.

The manner of marriage in 1833 was not the same as it is to-day. France had not yet borrowed from England that supreme delicacy of carrying off one's wife, of fleeing, on coming out of church, of hiding oneself with shame from one's happiness, and of combining the ways of a bankrupt with the delights of the Song of Songs. People had not yet grasped to the full the chastity, exquisiteness, and decency of jolting their paradise in a posting-chaise, of breaking up their mystery with clic-clacs, of taking for a nuptial bed the bed of an inn, and of leaving behind them, in a commonplace chamber, at so much a night, the most sacred of the souvenirs of life mingled pell-mell with the tete-a-tete of the conductor of the diligence and the maid-servant of the inn.

In this second half of the nineteenth century in which we are now living, the mayor and his scarf, the priest and his chasuble, the law and God no longer suffice; they must be eked out by the Postilion de Lonjumeau; a blue waistcoat turned up with red, and with bell buttons, a plaque like a vantbrace, knee-breeches of green leather, oaths to the Norman horses with their tails knotted up, false galloons, varnished hat, long powdered locks, an enormous whip and tall boots. France does not yet carry elegance to the length of doing like the English nobility, and raining down on the post-chaise of the bridal pair a hail storm of slippers trodden down at heel and of worn-out shoes, in memory of Churchill, afterwards Marlborough, or Malbrouck, who was assailed on his wedding-day by the wrath of an aunt which brought him good luck. Old shoes and slippers do not, as yet, form a part of our nuptial celebrations; but patience, as good taste continues to spread, we shall come to that.

In 1833, a hundred years ago, marriage was not conducted at a full trot.

Strange to say, at that epoch, people still imagined that a wedding was a private and social festival, that a patriarchal banquet does not spoil a domestic solemnity, that gayety, even in excess, provided it be honest, and decent, does happiness no harm, and that, in short, it is a good and a venerable thing that the fusion of these two destinies whence a family is destined to spring, should begin at home, and that the household should thenceforth have its nuptial chamber as its witness.

And people were so immodest as to marry in their own homes.

The marriage took place, therefore, in accordance with this now superannuated fashion, at M. Gillenormand's house.

Natural and commonplace as this matter of marrying is, the banns to publish, the papers to be drawn up, the mayoralty, and the church produce some complication. They could not get ready before the 16th of February.

Now, we note this detail, for the pure satisfaction of being exact, it chanced that the 16th fell on Shrove Tuesday. Hesitations, scruples, particularly on the part of Aunt Gillenormand.

"Shrove Tuesday!" exclaimed the grandfather, "so much the better. There is a proverb:

"'Mariage un Mardi gras
N'aura point enfants ingrats.'

Let us proceed. Here goes for the 16th! Do you want to delay, Marius?"

"No, certainly not!" replied the lover.

"Let us marry, then," cried the grandfather.

Accordingly, the marriage took place on the 16th, notwithstanding the public merrymaking. It rained that day, but there is always in the sky a tiny scrap of blue at the service of happiness, which lovers see, even when the rest of creation is under an umbrella.

On the preceding evening, Jean Valjean handed to Marius, in the presence of M. Gillenormand, the five hundred and eighty-four thousand francs.

As the marriage was taking place under the regime of community of property, the papers had been simple.

Henceforth, Toussaint was of no use to Jean Valjean; Cosette inherited her and promoted her to the rank of lady's maid.

As for Jean Valjean, a beautiful chamber in the Gillenormand house had been furnished expressly for him, and Cosette had said to him in such an irresistible manner: “Father, I entreat you,” that she had almost persuaded him to promise that he would come and occupy it.

A few days before that fixed on for the marriage, an accident happened to Jean Valjean; he crushed the thumb of his right hand. This was not a serious matter; and he had not allowed any one to trouble himself about it, nor to dress it, nor even to see his hurt, not even Cosette. Nevertheless, this had forced him to swathe his hand in a linen bandage, and to carry his arm in a sling, and had prevented his signing. M. Gillenormand, in his capacity of Cosette’s supervising-guardian, had supplied his place.

We will not conduct the reader either to the mayor’s office or to the church. One does not follow a pair of lovers to that extent, and one is accustomed to turn one’s back on the drama as soon as it puts a wedding nosegay in its buttonhole. We will confine ourselves to noting an incident which, though unnoticed by the wedding party, marked the transit from the Rue des Filles-du-Calvaire to the church of Saint-Paul.

At that epoch, the northern extremity of the Rue Saint-Louis was in process of repaving. It was barred off, beginning with the Rue du Parc-Royal. It was impossible for the wedding carriages to go directly to Saint-Paul. They were obliged to alter their course, and the simplest way was to turn through the boulevard. One of the invited guests observed that it was Shrove Tuesday, and that there would be a jam of vehicles.— “Why?” asked M. Gillenormand— “Because of the maskers.”— “Capital,” said the grandfather, “let us go that way. These young folks are on the way to be married; they are about to enter the serious part of life. This will prepare them for seeing a bit of the masquerade.”

They went by way of the boulevard. The first wedding coach held Cosette and Aunt Gillenormand, M. Gillenormand and Jean Valjean. Marius, still separated from his betrothed according to usage, did not come until the second. The nuptial train, on emerging from the Rue des Filles-du-Calvaire, became entangled in a long procession of vehicles which formed an endless chain from the Madeleine to the Bastille, and from the Bastille to the Madeleine. Maskers abounded on the boulevard. In spite of the fact that it was raining at intervals, Merry-Andrew, Pantaloon and Clown persisted. In the good humor of that winter of 1833, Paris had disguised itself as Venice. Such Shrove Tuesdays are no longer to be seen now-a-days.

Everything which exists being a scattered Carnival, there is no longer any Carnival.

The sidewalks were overflowing with pedestrians and the windows with curious spectators. The terraces which crown the peristyles of the theatres were bordered with spectators. Besides the maskers, they stared at that procession — peculiar to Shrove Tuesday as to Longchamps, — of vehicles of every description, citadines, tapissieres, carioles, cabriolets marching in order, rigorously riveted to each other by the police regulations, and locked into rails, as it were. Any one in these vehicles is at once a spectator and a spectacle. Police-sergeants maintained, on the sides of the boulevard, these two interminable parallel files, moving in contrary directions, and saw to it that nothing interfered with that double current, those two brooks of carriages, flowing, the one down stream, the other up stream, the one towards the Chaussée d'Antin, the other towards the Faubourg Saint-Antoine. The carriages of the peers of France and of the Ambassadors, emblazoned with coats of arms, held the middle of the way, going and coming freely. Certain joyous and magnificent trains, notably that of the Boeuf Gras, had the same privilege. In this gayety of Paris, England cracked her whip; Lord Seymour's post-chaise, harassed by a nickname from the populace, passed with great noise.

In the double file, along which the municipal guards galloped like sheep-dogs, honest family coaches, loaded down with great-aunts and grandmothers, displayed at their doors fresh groups of children in disguise, Clowns of seven years of age, Columbines of six, ravishing little creatures, who felt that they formed an official part of the public mirth, who were imbued with the dignity of their harlequinade, and who possessed the gravity of functionaries.

From time to time, a hitch arose somewhere in the procession of vehicles; one or other of the two lateral files halted until the knot was disentangled; one carriage delayed sufficed to paralyze the whole line. Then they set out again on the march.

The wedding carriages were in the file proceeding towards the Bastille, and skirting the right side of the Boulevard. At the top of the Pont-aux-Choux, there was a stoppage. Nearly at the same moment, the other file, which was proceeding towards the Madeleine, halted also. At that point of the file there was a carriage-load of maskers.

These carriages, or to speak more correctly, these wagon-loads of maskers are very familiar to Parisians. If they were missing on a Shrove Tuesday, or at the Mid-Lent, it would be taken in bad part, and people would say: “There’s something behind that. Probably the ministry is about to undergo a change.” A pile of Cassandras, Harlequins and Columbines, jolted along high above the passers-by, all possible grotesquenesses, from the Turk to the savage, Hercules supporting Marquises, fishwives who would have made Rabelais stop up his ears just as the Maenads made Aristophanes drop his eyes, tow wigs, pink tights, dandified hats, spectacles of a grimacer, three-cornered hats of Janot tormented with a butterfly, shouts directed at pedestrians, fists on hips, bold attitudes, bare shoulders, immodesty unchained; a chaos of shamelessness driven by a coachman crowned with flowers; this is what that institution was like.

Greece stood in need of the chariot of Thespis, France stands in need of the hackney-coach of Vade.

Everything can be parodied, even parody. The Saturnalia, that grimace of antique beauty, ends, through exaggeration after exaggeration, in Shrove Tuesday; and the Bacchanal, formerly crowned with sprays of vine leaves and grapes, inundated with sunshine, displaying her marble breast in a divine semi-nudity, having at the present day lost her shape under the soaked rags of the North, has finally come to be called the Jack-pudding.

The tradition of carriage-loads of maskers runs back to the most ancient days of the monarchy. The accounts of Louis XI. allot to the bailiff of the palace “twenty sous, Tournois, for three coaches of mascarades in the cross-roads.” In our day, these noisy heaps of creatures are accustomed to have themselves driven in some ancient cuckoo carriage, whose imperial they load down, or they overwhelm a hired landau, with its top thrown back, with their tumultuous groups. Twenty of them ride in a carriage intended for six. They cling to the seats, to the rumble, on the cheeks of the hood, on the shafts. They even bestride the carriage lamps. They stand, sit, lie, with their knees drawn up in a knot, and their legs hanging. The women sit on the men’s laps. Far away, above the throng of heads, their wild pyramid is visible. These carriage-loads form mountains of mirth in the midst of the rout. Colle, Panard and Piron flow from it, enriched with slang. This carriage which has become colossal through its freight, has an air of conquest. Uproar reigns in front, tumult behind. People vociferate, shout, howl, there they break forth and writhe with enjoyment; gayety roars;

sarcasm flames forth, joviality is flaunted like a red flag; two jades there drag farce blossomed forth into an apotheosis; it is the triumphal car of laughter.

A laughter that is too cynical to be frank. In truth, this laughter is suspicious. This laughter has a mission. It is charged with proving the Carnival to the Parisians.

These fishwife vehicles, in which one feels one knows not what shadows, set the philosopher to thinking. There is government therein. There one lays one's finger on a mysterious affinity between public men and public women.

It certainly is sad that turpitude heaped up should give a sum total of gayety, that by piling ignominy upon opprobrium the people should be enticed, that the system of spying, and serving as caryatids to prostitution should amuse the rabble when it confronts them, that the crowd loves to behold that monstrous living pile of tinsel rags, half dung, half light, roll by on four wheels howling and laughing, that they should clap their hands at this glory composed of all shames, that there would be no festival for the populace, did not the police promenade in their midst these sorts of twenty-headed hydras of joy. But what can be done about it? These be-ribboned and be-flowered tumbrils of mire are insulted and pardoned by the laughter of the public. The laughter of all is the accomplice of universal degradation. Certain unhealthy festivals disaggregate the people and convert them into the populace. And populaces, like tyrants, require buffoons. The King has Roquelaure, the populace has the Merry-Andrew. Paris is a great, mad city on every occasion that it is a great sublime city. There the Carnival forms part of politics. Paris, — let us confess it — willingly allows infamy to furnish it with comedy. She only demands of her masters — when she has masters — one thing: "Paint me the mud." Rome was of the same mind. She loved Nero. Nero was a titanic lighterman.

Chance ordained, as we have just said, that one of these shapeless clusters of masked men and women, dragged about on a vast calash, should halt on the left of the boulevard, while the wedding train halted on the right. The carriage-load of masks caught sight of the wedding carriage containing the bridal party opposite them on the other side of the boulevard.

"Hullo!" said a masker, "here's a wedding."

"A sham wedding," retorted another. "We are the genuine article."

And, being too far off to accost the wedding party, and fearing also, the rebuke of the police, the two maskers turned their eyes elsewhere.

At the end of another minute, the carriage-load of maskers had their hands full, the multitude set to yelling, which is the crowd's caress to masquerades; and the two maskers who had just spoken had to face the throng with their comrades, and did not find the entire repertory of projectiles of the fishmarkets too extensive to retort to the enormous verbal attacks of the populace. A frightful exchange of metaphors took place between the maskers and the crowd.

In the meanwhile, two other maskers in the same carriage, a Spaniard with an enormous nose, an elderly air, and huge black moustache, and a gaunt fishwife, who was quite a young girl, masked with a loup, had also noticed the wedding, and while their companions and the passers-by were exchanging insults, they had held a dialogue in a low voice.

Their aside was covered by the tumult and was lost in it. The gusts of rain had drenched the front of the vehicle, which was wide open; the breezes of February are not warm; as the fishwife, clad in a low-necked gown, replied to the Spaniard, she shivered, laughed and coughed.

Here is their dialogue:

"Say, now."

"What, daddy?"

"Do you see that old cove?"

"What old cove?"

"Yonder, in the first wedding-cart, on our side."

"The one with his arm hung up in a black cravat?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"I'm sure that I know him."

"Ah!"

"I'm willing that they should cut my throat, and I'm ready to swear that I never said either you, thou, or I, in my life, if I don't know that Parisian." [pantinois.]

"Paris in Pantin to-day."

"Can you see the bride if you stoop down?"

"No."

"And the bridegroom?"

"There's no bridegroom in that trap."

“Bah!”

“Unless it’s the old fellow.”

“Try to get a sight of the bride by stooping very low.”

“I can’t.”

“Never mind, that old cove who has something the matter with his paw I know, and that I’m positive.”

“And what good does it do to know him?”

“No one can tell. Sometimes it does!”

“I don’t care a hang for old fellows, that I don’t!”

“I know him.”

“Know him, if you want to.”

“How the devil does he come to be one of the wedding party?”

“We are in it, too.”

“Where does that wedding come from?”

“How should I know?”

“Listen.”

“Well, what?”

“There’s one thing you ought to do.”

“What’s that?”

“Get off of our trap and spin that wedding.”

“What for?”

“To find out where it goes, and what it is. Hurry up and jump down, trot, my girl, your legs are young.”

“I can’t quit the vehicle.”

“Why not?”

“I’m hired.”

“Ah, the devil!”

“I owe my fishwife day to the prefecture.”

“That’s true.”

“If I leave the cart, the first inspector who gets his eye on me will arrest me. You know that well enough.”

“Yes, I do.”

“I’m bought by the government for to-day.”

“All the same, that old fellow bothers me.”

“Do the old fellows bother you? But you’re not a young girl.”

“He’s in the first carriage.”

“Well?”

“In the bride’s trap.”

“What then?”

“So he is the father.”

“What concern is that of mine?”

“I tell you that he’s the father.”

“As if he were the only father.”

“Listen.”

“What?”

“I can’t go out otherwise than masked. Here I’m concealed, no one knows that I’m here. But to-morrow, there will be no more maskers. It’s Ash Wednesday. I run the risk of being nabbed. I must sneak back into my hole. But you are free.”

“Not particularly.”

“More than I am, at any rate.”

“Well, what of that?”

“You must try to find out where that wedding-party went to.”

“Where it went?”

“Yes.”

“I know.”

“Where is it going then?”

“To the Cadran-Bleu.”

“In the first place, it’s not in that direction.”

“Well! to la Rapée.”

“Or elsewhere.”

“It’s free. Wedding-parties are at liberty.”

“That’s not the point at all. I tell you that you must try to learn for me what that wedding is, who that old cove belongs to, and where that wedding pair lives.”

“I like that! that would be queer. It’s so easy to find out a wedding-party that passed through the street on a Shrove Tuesday, a week afterwards. A pin in a hay-mow! It ain’t possible!”

“That don’t matter. You must try. You understand me, Azelma.”

The two files resumed their movement on both sides of the boulevard, in opposite directions, and the carriage of the maskers lost sight of the “trap” of the bride.

CHAPTER II — JEAN VALJEAN STILL WEARS HIS ARM IN A SLING

To realize one’s dream. To whom is this accorded? There must be elections for this in heaven; we are all candidates, unknown to ourselves; the angels vote. Cosette and Marius had been elected.

Cosette, both at the mayor’s office and at church, was dazzling and touching. Toussaint, assisted by Nicolette, had dressed her.

Cosette wore over a petticoat of white taffeta, her robe of Binche guipure, a veil of English point, a necklace of fine pearls, a wreath of orange flowers; all this was white, and, from the midst of that whiteness she beamed forth. It was an exquisite candor expanding and becoming transfigured in the light. One would have pronounced her a virgin on the point of turning into a goddess.

Marius’ handsome hair was lustrous and perfumed; here and there, beneath the thick curls, pale lines — the scars of the barricade — were visible.

The grandfather, haughty, with head held high, amalgamating more than ever in his toilet and his manners all the elegances of the epoch of Barras, escorted Cosette. He took the place of Jean Valjean, who, on account of his arm being still in a sling, could not give his hand to the bride.

Jean Valjean, dressed in black, followed them with a smile.

“Monsieur Fauchelevent,” said the grandfather to him, “this is a fine day. I vote for the end of afflictions and sorrows. Henceforth, there must be no sadness anywhere. Pardieu, I decree joy! Evil has no right to exist. That there should be any unhappy men is, in sooth, a disgrace to the azure of the sky. Evil does not come from man, who is good at bottom. All human miseries have for their capital and central government hell, otherwise, known as the Devil’s Tuileries. Good, here I am uttering demagogical words! As far as I am concerned, I have no longer any political opinions; let all me be rich, that is to say, mirthful, and I confine myself to that.”

When, at the conclusion of all the ceremonies, after having pronounced before the mayor and before the priest all possible “yesses,” after having signed the registers at the municipality and at the sacristy, after having exchanged their rings, after having knelt side by side under the pall of white moire in the smoke of the censer, they arrived, hand in hand, admired and envied by all, Marius in black, she in white, preceded by the suisse, with the epaulets of a colonel, tapping the pavement with his halberd, between two rows of astonished spectators, at the portals of the church, both leaves of which were thrown wide open, ready to enter their carriage again, and all being finished, Cosette still could not believe that it was real. She looked at Marius, she looked at the crowd, she looked at the sky: it seemed as though she feared that she should wake up from her dream. Her amazed and uneasy air added something indescribably enchanting to her beauty. They entered the same carriage to return home, Marius beside Cosette; M. Gillenormand and Jean Valjean sat opposite them; Aunt Gillenormand had withdrawn one degree, and was in the second vehicle.

“My children,” said the grandfather, “here you are, Monsieur le Baron and Madame la Baronne, with an income of thirty thousand livres.”

And Cosette, nestling close to Marius, caressed his ear with an angelic whisper: “So it is true. My name is Marius. I am Madame Thou.”

These two creatures were resplendent. They had reached that irrevocable and irrecoverable moment, at the dazzling intersection of all youth and all joy. They realized the verses of Jean Prouvaire; they were forty years old taken together. It was marriage sublimated; these two children were two lilies. They did not see each other, they did not contemplate each other. Cosette perceived Marius in the midst of a glory; Marius perceived Cosette on an altar. And on that altar, and in that glory, the two apotheoses mingling, in the background, one knows not how, behind a cloud for Cosette, in a flash for Marius, there was the ideal thing, the real thing, the meeting of the kiss and the dream, the nuptial pillow. All the torments through which they had passed came back to them in intoxication. It seemed to them that their sorrows, their sleepless nights, their tears, their anguish, their terrors, their despair, converted into caresses and rays of light, rendered still more charming the charming hour which was approaching; and that their griefs were but so many handmaidens who were preparing the toilet of joy. How good it is to have suffered! Their unhappiness formed a halo round their happiness. The long agony of their love was terminating in an ascension.

It was the same enchantment in two souls, tinged with voluptuousness in Marius, and with modesty in Cosette. They said to each other in low tones:

"We will go back to take a look at our little garden in the Rue Plumet." The folds of Cosette's gown lay across Marius.

Such a day is an ineffable mixture of dream and of reality. One possesses and one supposes. One still has time before one to divine. The emotion on that day, of being at mid-day and of dreaming of midnight is indescribable. The delights of these two hearts overflowed upon the crowd, and inspired the passers-by with cheerfulness.

People halted in the Rue Saint-Antoine, in front of Saint-Paul, to gaze through the windows of the carriage at the orange-flowers quivering on Cosette's head.

Then they returned home to the Rue des Filles-du-Calvaire. Marius, triumphant and radiant, mounted side by side with Cosette the staircase up which he had been borne in a dying condition. The poor, who had trooped to the door, and who shared their purses, blessed them. There were flowers everywhere. The house was no less fragrant than the church; after the incense, roses. They thought they heard voices carolling in the infinite; they had God in their hearts; destiny appeared to them like a ceiling of stars; above their heads they beheld the light of a rising sun. All at once, the clock struck. Marius glanced at Cosette's charming bare arm, and at the rosy things which were vaguely visible through the lace of her bodice, and Cosette, intercepting Marius' glance, blushed to her very hair.

Quite a number of old family friends of the Gillenormand family had been invited; they pressed about Cosette. Each one vied with the rest in saluting her as Madame la Baronne.

The officer, Theodule Gillenormand, now a captain, had come from Chartres, where he was stationed in garrison, to be present at the wedding of his cousin Pontmercy. Cosette did not recognize him.

He, on his side, habituated as he was to have women consider him handsome, retained no more recollection of Cosette than of any other woman.

"How right I was not to believe in that story about the lancer!" said Father Gillenormand, to himself.

Cosette had never been more tender with Jean Valjean. She was in unison with Father Gillenormand; while he erected joy into aphorisms and maxims, she exhaled goodness like a perfume. Happiness desires that all the world should be happy.

She regained, for the purpose of addressing Jean Valjean, inflections of voice belonging to the time when she was a little girl. She caressed him with her smile.

A banquet had been spread in the dining-room.

Illumination as brilliant as the daylight is the necessary seasoning of a great joy. Mist and obscurity are not accepted by the happy. They do not consent to be black. The night, yes; the shadows, no. If there is no sun, one must be made.

The dining-room was full of gay things. In the centre, above the white and glittering table, was a Venetian lustre with flat plates, with all sorts of colored birds, blue, violet, red, and green, perched amid the candles; around the chandelier, girandoles, on the walls, sconces with triple and quintuple branches; mirrors, silverware, glassware, plate, porcelain, faience, pottery, gold and silversmith’s work, all was sparkling and gay. The empty spaces between the candelabra were filled in with bouquets, so that where there was not a light, there was a flower.

In the antechamber, three violins and a flute softly played quartettes by Haydn.

Jean Valjean had seated himself on a chair in the drawing-room, behind the door, the leaf of which folded back upon him in such a manner as to nearly conceal him. A few moments before they sat down to table, Cosette came, as though inspired by a sudden whim, and made him a deep courtesy, spreading out her bridal toilet with both hands, and with a tenderly roguish glance, she asked him:

“Father, are you satisfied?”

“Yes,” said Jean Valjean, “I am content!”

“Well, then, laugh.”

Jean Valjean began to laugh.

A few moments later, Basque announced that dinner was served.

The guests, preceded by M. Gillenormand with Cosette on his arm, entered the dining-room, and arranged themselves in the proper order around the table.

Two large arm-chairs figured on the right and left of the bride, the first for M. Gillenormand, the other for Jean Valjean. M. Gillenormand took his seat. The other arm-chair remained empty.

They looked about for M. Fauchelevent.

He was no longer there.

M. Gillenormand questioned Basque.

“Do you know where M. Fauchelevent is?”

“Sir,” replied Basque, “I do, precisely. M. Fauchelevent told me to say to you, sir, that he was suffering, his injured hand was paining him somewhat, and that he could not dine with Monsieur le Baron and Madame la Baronne. That he begged to be excused, that he would come to-morrow. He has just taken his departure.”

That empty arm-chair chilled the effusion of the wedding feast for a moment. But, if M. Fauchelevent was absent, M. Gillenormand was present, and the grandfather beamed for two. He affirmed that M. Fauchelevent had done well to retire early, if he were suffering, but that it was only a slight ailment. This declaration sufficed. Moreover, what is an obscure corner in such a submersion of joy? Cosette and Marius were passing through one of those egotistical and blessed moments when no other faculty is left to a person than that of receiving happiness. And then, an idea occurred to M. Gillenormand.— “Pardieu, this armchair is empty. Come hither, Marius. Your aunt will permit it, although she has a right to you. This armchair is for you. That is legal and delightful. Fortunatus beside Fortunata.” — Applause from the whole table. Marius took Jean Valjean’s place beside Cosette, and things fell out so that Cosette, who had, at first, been saddened by Jean Valjean’s absence, ended by being satisfied with it. From the moment when Marius took his place, and was the substitute, Cosette would not have regretted God himself. She set her sweet little foot, shod in white satin, on Marius’ foot.

The arm-chair being occupied, M. Fauchelevent was obliterated; and nothing was lacking.

And, five minutes afterward, the whole table from one end to the other, was laughing with all the animation of forgetfulness.

At dessert, M. Gillenormand, rising to his feet, with a glass of champagne in his hand — only half full so that the palsy of his eighty years might not cause an overflow, — proposed the health of the married pair.

“You shall not escape two sermons,” he exclaimed. “This morning you had one from the cure, this evening you shall have one from your grandfather. Listen to me; I will give you a bit of advice: Adore each other. I do not make a pack of gyrations, I go straight to the mark, be happy. In all creation, only the turtle-doves are wise. Philosophers say: ‘Moderate your joys.’ I say: ‘Give rein to your joys.’ Be as much smitten with each other as fiends. Be in a rage about it. The philosophers talk stuff and nonsense. I should like to stuff their philosophy down their gullets again. Can there be too many perfumes, too many open rose-buds, too many nightingales singing, too many green leaves, too much aurora in life? can people love each other too much? can people please each other too much? Take care, Estelle, thou art too pretty! Have a care, Nemorin, thou art too handsome! Fine stupidity, in sooth! Can people enchant each other too much, cajole each other too much, charm each other too much? Can one be too much alive, too happy? Moderate your joys. Ah, indeed! Down with the philosophers! Wisdom consists in jubilation. Make merry, let us make merry. Are we happy because we are good, or are we good because we are happy? Is the Sancy diamond called the Sancy because it belonged to Harley de Sancy, or because it weighs six hundred carats? I know nothing about it, life is full of such problems; the important point is to possess the Sancy and happiness. Let us be happy without quibbling and quirking. Let us obey the sun blindly. What is the sun? It is love. He who says love, says woman. Ah! ah! behold omnipotence — women. Ask that demagogue of a Marius if he is not the slave of that little tyrant of a Cosette. And of his own free will, too, the coward! Woman! There is no Robespierre who keeps his place but woman reigns. I am no longer Royalist except towards that royalty. What is Adam? The kingdom of Eve. No '89 for Eve. There has been the royal sceptre surmounted by a fleur-de-lys, there has been the imperial sceptre surmounted by a globe, there has been the sceptre of Charlemagne, which was of iron, there has been the sceptre of Louis the Great, which was of gold, — the revolution twisted them between its thumb and forefinger, ha'penny straws; it is done with, it is broken, it lies on the earth, there is no longer any sceptre, but make me a revolution against that little embroidered handkerchief, which smells of patchouli! I should like to see you do it. Try. Why is it so solid? Because it is a gewgaw. Ah! you are the nineteenth century? Well, what then? And we have been as foolish as you. Do not imagine that you have effected much change in the universe, because your trip-gallant is called the cholera-morbus, and because your pourree is called the cachuca. In fact, the women must always be loved. I defy you to escape from that. These friends are our angels. Yes, love, woman, the kiss forms a circle from which I defy you to escape; and, for my own part, I should be only too happy to re-enter it. Which of you has seen the planet Venus, the coquette of the abyss, the Celimene of the ocean, rise in the infinite, calming all here below? The ocean is a rough Alcestis. Well, grumble as he will, when Venus appears he is forced to smile. That brute beast submits. We are all made so. Wrath, tempest, claps of thunder, foam to the very ceiling. A woman enters on the scene, a planet rises; flat on your face! Marius was fighting six months ago; to-day he is married. That is well. Yes, Marius, yes, Cosette, you are in the right. Exist boldly for each other, make us burst with rage that we cannot do the same, idealize each other, catch in your beaks all the tiny blades of felicity that exist on earth, and arrange yourselves a nest for life. Pardi, to love, to be loved, what a fine miracle when one is young! Don't imagine that you have invented that. I, too, have had my dream, I, too, have meditated, I, too, have sighed; I, too, have had a moonlight soul. Love is a child six thousand years old. Love has the right to a long white beard. Methusalem is a street arab beside Cupid. For sixty centuries men and women have got out of their scrape by loving. The devil, who is cunning, took to hating man; man, who is still more cunning, took to loving woman. In this way he does more good than the devil does him harm. This craft was discovered in the days of the terrestrial paradise. The invention is old, my friends, but it is perfectly new. Profit by it. Be Daphnis and Chloe, while waiting to become Philemon and Baucis. Manage so that, when you are with each other, nothing shall be lacking to you, and that Cosette may be the sun for Marius, and that Marius may be the universe to Cosette. Cosette, let your fine weather be the smile of your husband; Marius, let your rain be your wife's tears. And let it never rain in your household. You have filched the winning number in the lottery; you have gained the great prize, guard it well, keep it under lock and key, do not squander it, adore each other and snap your fingers at all the rest. Believe what I say to you. It is good sense. And good sense cannot lie. Be a religion to each other. Each man has his own fashion of adoring God. Saperlotte! the best way to adore God is to love one's wife. I love thee! that's my catechism. He who loves is orthodox. The oath of Henri IV. places sanctity somewhere between feasting and drunkenness. Ventre-saint-gris! I don't belong to the religion of that oath. Woman is forgotten in it. This astonishes me on the part of Henri IV. My friends, long live women! I am old, they say; it's astonishing how much I feel in the mood to be young. I should like to go and listen to the bagpipes in the woods. Children who contrive to be beautiful and contented, — that intoxicates me. I would like greatly to get married, if any one would have me. It is impossible to imagine that God could have made us for anything but this: to idolize, to coo, to preen ourselves, to be dove-like, to be dainty, to bill and coo our loves from morn to night, to gaze at one's image in one's little wife, to be proud, to be triumphant, to plume oneself; that is the aim of life. There, let not that displease you which we used to think in our day, when we were young folks. Ah! vertu-bamboche! what charming women there were in those days, and what pretty little faces and what lovely lasses! I committed my ravages among them. Then love each other. If people did not love each other, I really do not see what use there would be in having any springtime; and for my own part, I should pray the good God to shut up all the beautiful things that he shows us, and to take away from us and put back in his box, the flowers, the birds, and the pretty maidens. My children, receive an old man's blessing."

The evening was gay, lively and agreeable. The grandfather's sovereign good humor gave the key-note to the whole feast, and each person regulated his conduct on that almost centenarian cordiality. They danced a little, they laughed a great deal; it was an amiable wedding. Goodman Days of Yore might have been invited to it. However, he was present in the person of Father Gillenormand.

There was a tumult, then silence.

The married pair disappeared.

A little after midnight, the Gillenormand house became a temple.

Here we pause. On the threshold of wedding nights stands a smiling angel with his finger on his lips.

The soul enters into contemplation before that sanctuary where the celebration of love takes place.

There should be flashes of light athwart such houses. The joy which they contain ought to make its escape through the stones of the walls in brilliancy, and vaguely illuminate the gloom. It is impossible that this sacred and fatal festival should not give off a celestial radiance to the infinite. Love is the sublime crucible wherein the fusion of the man and the woman takes place; the being one, the being triple, the being final, the human trinity proceeds from it. This birth of two souls into one, ought to be an emotion for the gloom. The lover is the priest; the ravished virgin is terrified. Something of that joy ascends to God. Where true marriage is, that is to say, where there is love, the ideal enters in. A nuptial bed makes a nook of dawn amid the shadows. If it were given to the eye of the flesh to scan the formidable and charming visions of the upper life, it is probable that we should behold the forms of night, the winged unknowns, the blue passers of the invisible, bend down, a throng of sombre heads, around the luminous house, satisfied, showering benedictions, pointing out to each other the virgin wife gently alarmed, sweetly terrified, and bearing the reflection of human bliss upon their divine countenances. If at that supreme hour, the wedded pair, dazzled with voluptuousness and believing themselves alone, were to listen, they would hear in their chamber a confused rustling of wings. Perfect happiness implies a mutual understanding with the angels. That dark little chamber has all heaven for its ceiling. When two mouths, rendered sacred by love, approach to create, it is impossible that there should not be, above that ineffable kiss, a quivering throughout the immense mystery of stars.

These felicities are the true ones. There is no joy outside of these joys. Love is the only ecstasy. All the rest weeps.

To love, or to have loved, — this suffices. Demand nothing more. There is no other pearl to be found in the shadowy folds of life. To love is a fulfilment.

CHAPTER III — THE INSEPARABLE

What had become of Jean Valjean?

Immediately after having laughed, at Cosette’s graceful command, when no one was paying any heed to him, Jean Valjean had risen and had gained the antechamber unperceived. This was the very room which, eight months before, he had entered black with mud, with blood and powder, bringing back the grandson to the grandfather. The old wainscoting was garlanded with foliage and flowers; the musicians were seated on the sofa on which they had laid Marius down. Basque, in a black coat, knee-breeches, white stockings and white gloves, was arranging roses round all of the dishes that were to be served. Jean Valjean pointed to his arm in its sling, charged Basque to explain his absence, and went away.

The long windows of the dining-room opened on the street. Jean Valjean stood for several minutes, erect and motionless in the darkness, beneath those radiant windows. He listened. The confused sounds of the banquet reached his ear. He heard the loud, commanding tones of the grandfather, the violins, the clatter of the plates, the bursts of laughter, and through all that merry uproar, he distinguished Cosette’s sweet and joyous voice.

He quitted the Rue des Filles-du-Calvaire, and returned to the Rue de l’Homme Arme.

In order to return thither, he took the Rue Saint-Louis, the Rue Culture-Sainte-Catherine, and the Blancs-Manteaux; it was a little longer, but it was the road through which, for the last three months, he had become accustomed to pass every day on his way from the Rue de l’Homme Arme to the Rue des Filles-du-Calvaire, in order to avoid the obstructions and the mud in the Rue Vielle-du-Temple.

This road, through which Cosette had passed, excluded for him all possibility of any other itinerary.

Jean Valjean entered his lodgings. He lighted his candle and mounted the stairs. The apartment was empty. Even Toussaint was no longer there. Jean Valjean’s step made more noise than usual in the chambers. All the cupboards stood open. He penetrated to Cosette’s bedroom. There were no sheets on the bed. The pillow, covered with ticking, and without a case or lace, was laid on the blankets folded up on the foot of the mattress, whose covering was visible, and on which no one was ever to sleep again. All the little feminine objects which Cosette was attached to had been carried away; nothing remained except the heavy furniture and the four walls. Toussaint's bed was despoiled in like manner. One bed only was made up, and seemed to be waiting some one, and this was Jean Valjean's bed.

Jean Valjean looked at the walls, closed some of the cupboard doors, and went and came from one room to another.

Then he sought his own chamber once more, and set his candle on a table.

He had disengaged his arm from the sling, and he used his right hand as though it did not hurt him.

He approached his bed, and his eyes rested, was it by chance? was it intentionally? on the inseparable of which Cosette had been jealous, on the little portmanteau which never left him. On his arrival in the Rue de l'Homme Arme, on the 4th of June, he had deposited it on a round table near the head of his bed. He went to this table with a sort of vivacity, took a key from his pocket, and opened the valise.

From it he slowly drew forth the garments in which, ten years before, Cosette had quitted Montfermeil; first the little gown, then the black fichu, then the stout, coarse child's shoes which Cosette might almost have worn still, so tiny were her feet, then the fustian bodice, which was very thick, then the knitted petticoat, next the apron with pockets, then the woollen stockings. These stockings, which still preserved the graceful form of a tiny leg, were no longer than Jean Valjean's hand. All this was black of hue. It was he who had brought those garments to Montfermeil for her. As he removed them from the valise, he laid them on the bed. He fell to thinking. He called up memories. It was in winter, in a very cold month of December, she was shivering, half-naked, in rags, her poor little feet were all red in their wooden shoes. He, Jean Valjean, had made her abandon those rags to clothe herself in these mourning habiliments. The mother must have felt pleased in her grave, to see her daughter wearing mourning for her, and, above all, to see that she was properly clothed, and that she was warm. He thought of that forest of Montfermeil; they had traversed it together, Cosette and he; he thought of what the weather had been, of the leafless trees, of the wood destitute of birds, of the sunless sky; it mattered not, it was charming. He arranged the tiny garments on the bed, the fichu next to the petticoat, the stockings beside the shoes, and he looked at them, one after the other. She was no taller than that, she had her big doll in her arms, she had put her louis d’or in the pocket of that apron, she had laughed, they walked hand in hand, she had no one in the world but him.

Then his venerable, white head fell forward on the bed, that stoical old heart broke, his face was engulfed, so to speak, in Cosette’s garments, and if any one had passed up the stairs at that moment, he would have heard frightful sobs.

CHAPTER IV — THE IMMORTAL LIVER

The old and formidable struggle, of which we have already witnessed so many phases, began once more.

Jacob struggled with the angel but one night. Alas! how many times have we beheld Jean Valjean seized bodily by his conscience, in the darkness, and struggling desperately against it!

Unheard-of conflict! At certain moments the foot slips; at other moments the ground crumbles away underfoot. How many times had that conscience, mad for the good, clasped and overthrown him! How many times had the truth set her knee inexorably upon his breast! How many times, hurled to earth by the light, had he begged for mercy! How many times had that implacable spark, lighted within him, and upon him by the Bishop, dazzled him by force when he had wished to be blind! How many times had he risen to his feet in the combat, held fast to the rock, leaning against sophism, dragged in the dust, now getting the upper hand of his conscience, again overthrown by it! How many times, after an equivoque, after the specious and treacherous reasoning of egotism, had he heard his irritated conscience cry in his ear: “A trip! you wretch!” How many times had his refractory thoughts rattled convulsively in his throat, under the evidence of duty! Resistance to God. Funereal sweats. What secret wounds which he alone felt bleed! What excoriations in his lamentable existence! How many times he had risen bleeding, bruised, broken, enlightened, despair in his heart, serenity in his soul! and, vanquished, he had felt himself the conqueror. And, after having dislocated, broken, and rent his conscience with red-hot pincers, it had said to him, as it stood over him, formidable, luminous, and tranquil: “Now, go in peace!”

But on emerging from so melancholy a conflict, what a lugubrious peace, alas!

Nevertheless, that night Jean Valjean felt that he was passing through his final combat.

A heart-rending question presented itself.

Predestinations are not all direct; they do not open out in a straight avenue before the predestined man; they have blind courts, impassable alleys, obscure turns, disturbing crossroads offering the choice of many ways. Jean Valjean had halted at that moment at the most perilous of these crossroads.

He had come to the supreme crossing of good and evil. He had that gloomy intersection beneath his eyes. On this occasion once more, as had happened to him already in other sad vicissitudes, two roads opened out before him, the one tempting, the other alarming.

Which was he to take?

He was counselled to the one which alarmed him by that mysterious index finger which we all perceive whenever we fix our eyes on the darkness.

Once more, Jean Valjean had the choice between the terrible port and the smiling ambush.

Is it then true? the soul may recover; but not fate. Frightful thing! an incurable destiny!

This is the problem which presented itself to him:

In what manner was Jean Valjean to behave in relation to the happiness of Cosette and Marius? It was he who had willed that happiness, it was he who had brought it about; he had, himself, buried it in his entrails, and at that moment, when he reflected on it, he was able to enjoy the sort of satisfaction which an armorer would experience on recognizing his factory mark on a knife, on withdrawing it, all smoking, from his own breast.

Cosette had Marius, Marius possessed Cosette. They had everything, even riches. And this was his doing.

But what was he, Jean Valjean, to do with this happiness, now that it existed, now that it was there? Should he force himself on this happiness? Should he treat it as belonging to him? No doubt, Cosette did belong to another; but should he, Jean Valjean, retain of Cosette all that he could retain? Should he remain the sort of father, half seen but respected, which he had hitherto been? Should he, without saying a word, bring his past to that future? Should he present himself there, as though he had a right, and should he seat himself, veiled, at that luminous fireside? Should he take those innocent hands into his tragic hands, with a smile? Should he place upon the peaceful fender of the Gillenormand drawing-room those feet of his, which dragged behind them the disgraceful shadow of the law? Should he enter into participation in the fair fortunes of Cosette and Marius? Should he render the obscurity on his brow and the cloud upon theirs still more dense? Should he place his catastrophe as a third associate in their felicity? Should he continue to hold his peace? In a word, should he be the sinister mute of destiny beside these two happy beings?

We must have become habituated to fatality and to encounters with it, in order to have the daring to raise our eyes when certain questions appear to us in all their horrible nakedness. Good or evil stands behind this severe interrogation point. What are you going to do? demands the sphinx.

This habit of trial Jean Valjean possessed. He gazed intently at the sphinx.

He examined the pitiless problem under all its aspects.

Cosette, that charming existence, was the raft of this shipwreck. What was he to do? To cling fast to it, or to let go his hold?

If he clung to it, he should emerge from disaster, he should ascend again into the sunlight, he should let the bitter water drip from his garments and his hair, he was saved, he should live.

And if he let go his hold?

Then the abyss.

Thus he took sad council with his thoughts. Or, to speak more correctly, he fought; he kicked furiously internally, now against his will, now against his conviction.

Happily for Jean Valjean that he had been able to weep. That relieved him, possibly. But the beginning was savage. A tempest, more furious than the one which had formerly driven him to Arras, broke loose within him. The past surged up before him facing the present; he compared them and sobbed. The silence of tears once opened, the despairing man writhed.

He felt that he had been stopped short.

Alas! in this fight to the death between our egotism and our duty, when we thus retreat step by step before our immutable ideal, bewildered, furious, exasperated at having to yield, disputing the ground, hoping for a possible flight, seeking an escape, what an abrupt and sinister resistance does the foot of the wall offer in our rear!

To feel the sacred shadow which forms an obstacle!

The invisible inexorable, what an obsession!

Then, one is never done with conscience. Make your choice, Brutus; make your choice, Cato. It is fathomless, since it is God. One flings into that well the labor of one’s whole life, one flings in one’s fortune, one flings in one’s riches, one flings in one’s success, one flings in one’s liberty or fatherland, one flings in one’s well-being, one flings in one’s repose, one flings in one’s joy! More! more! more! Empty the vase! tip the urn! One must finish by flinging in one’s heart.

Somewhere in the fog of the ancient hells, there is a tun like that.

Is not one pardonable, if one at last refuses! Can the inexhaustible have any right? Are not chains which are endless above human strength? Who would blame Sisyphus and Jean Valjean for saying: “It is enough!”

The obedience of matter is limited by friction; is there no limit to the obedience of the soul? If perpetual motion is impossible, can perpetual self-sacrifice be exacted?

The first step is nothing, it is the last which is difficult. What was the Champmathieu affair in comparison with Cosette’s marriage and of that which it entailed? What is a re-entrance into the galleys, compared to entrance into the void?

Oh, first step that must be descended, how sombre art thou! Oh, second step, how black art thou!

How could he refrain from turning aside his head this time?

Martyrdom is sublimation, corrosive sublimation. It is a torture which consecrates. One can consent to it for the first hour; one seats oneself on the throne of glowing iron, one places on one’s head the crown of hot iron, one accepts the globe of red hot iron, one takes the sceptre of red hot iron, but the mantle of flame still remains to be donned, and comes there not a moment when the miserable flesh revolts and when one abdicates from suffering?

At length, Jean Valjean entered into the peace of exhaustion.

He weighed, he reflected, he considered the alternatives, the mysterious balance of light and darkness.

Should he impose his galleys on those two dazzling children, or should he consummate his irremediable engulfment by himself? On one side lay the sacrifice of Cosette, on the other that of himself.

At what solution should he arrive? What decision did he come to?

What resolution did he take? What was his own inward definitive response to the unbribable interrogatory of fatality? What door did he decide to open? Which side of his life did he resolve upon closing and condemning? Among all the unfathomable precipices which surrounded him, which was his choice? What extremity did he accept? To which of the gulfs did he nod his head?

His dizzy revery lasted all night long.

He remained there until daylight, in the same attitude, bent double over that bed, prostrate beneath the enormity of fate, crushed, perchance, alas! with clenched fists, with arms outspread at right angles, like a man crucified who has been un-nailed, and flung face down on the earth. There he remained for twelve hours, the twelve long hours of a long winter’s night, ice-cold, without once raising his head, and without uttering a word. He was as motionless as a corpse, while his thoughts wallowed on the earth and soared, now like the hydra, now like the eagle. Any one to behold him thus motionless would have pronounced him dead; all at once he shuddered convulsively, and his mouth, glued to Cosette’s garments, kissed them; then it could be seen that he was alive.

Who could see? Since Jean Valjean was alone, and there was no one there.

The One who is in the shadows.

BOOK SEVENTH. — THE LAST DRAUGHT FROM THE CUP

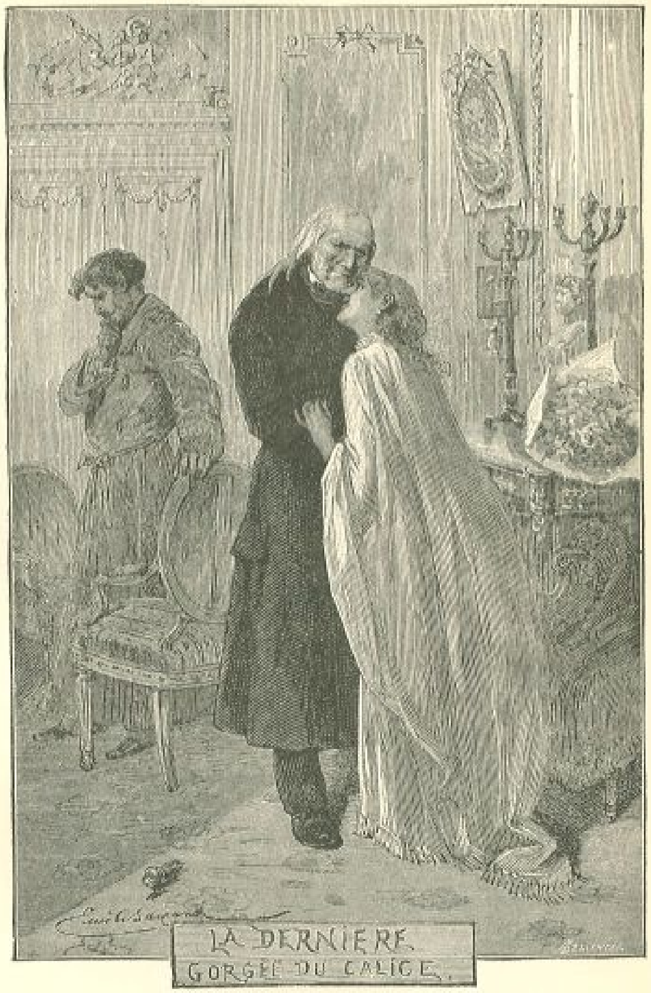
LA DERNIERE
GORGÉE DU CALICE.

THE LAST DROP IN THE CUP.

CHAPTER I — THE SEVENTH CIRCLE AND THE EIGHTH HEAVEN

The days that follow weddings are solitary. People respect the meditations of the happy pair. And also, their tardy slumbers, to some degree. The tumult of visits and congratulations only begins later on. On the morning of the 17th of February, it was a little past midday when Basque, with napkin and feather-duster under his arm, busy in setting his antechamber to rights, heard a light tap at the door. There had been no ring, which was discreet on such a day. Basque opened the door, and beheld M. Fauchelevent. He introduced him into the drawing-room, still encumbered and topsy-turvy, and which bore the air of a field of battle after the joys of the preceding evening.

“Dame, sir,” remarked Basque, “we all woke up late.”

“Is your master up?” asked Jean Valjean.

“How is Monsieur’s arm?” replied Basque.

“Better. Is your master up?”

“Which one? the old one or the new one?”

“Monsieur Pontmercy.”

“Monsieur le Baron,” said Basque, drawing himself up.

A man is a Baron most of all to his servants. He counts for something with them; they are what a philosopher would call, bespattered with the title, and that flatters them. Marius, be it said in passing, a militant republican as he had proved, was now a Baron in spite of himself. A small revolution had taken place in the family in connection with this title. It was now M. Gillenormand who clung to it, and Marius who detached himself from it. But Colonel Pontmercy had written: “My son will bear my title.” Marius obeyed. And then, Cosette, in whom the woman was beginning to dawn, was delighted to be a Baroness.

“Monsieur le Baron?” repeated Basque. “I will go and see. I will tell him that M. Fauchelevent is here.”

“No. Do not tell him that it is I. Tell him that some one wishes to speak to him in private, and mention no name.”

“Ah!” ejaculated Basque.

“I wish to surprise him.”

“Ah!” ejaculated Basque once more, emitting his second “ah!” as an explanation of the first.

And he left the room.

Jean Valjean remained alone.

The drawing-room, as we have just said, was in great disorder. It seemed as though, by lending an air, one might still hear the vague noise of the wedding. On the polished floor lay all sorts of flowers which had fallen from garlands and head-dresses. The wax candles, burned to stumps, added stalactites of wax to the crystal drops of the chandeliers. Not a single piece of furniture was in its place. In the corners, three or four arm-chairs, drawn close together in a circle, had the appearance of continuing a conversation. The whole effect was cheerful. A certain grace still lingers round a dead feast. It has been a happy thing. On the chairs in disarray, among those fading flowers, beneath those extinct lights, people have thought of joy. The sun had succeeded to the chandelier, and made its way gayly into the drawing-room.

Several minutes elapsed. Jean Valjean stood motionless on the spot where Basque had left him. He was very pale. His eyes were hollow, and so sunken in his head by sleeplessness that they nearly disappeared in their orbits. His black coat bore the weary folds of a garment that has been up all night. The elbows were whitened with the down which the friction of cloth against linen leaves behind it.

Jean Valjean stared at the window outlined on the polished floor at his feet by the sun.

There came a sound at the door, and he raised his eyes.

Marius entered, his head well up, his mouth smiling, an indescribable light on his countenance, his brow expanded, his eyes triumphant. He had not slept either.

“It is you, father!” he exclaimed, on catching sight of Jean Valjean; “that idiot of a Basque had such a mysterious air! But you have come too early. It is only half past twelve. Cosette is asleep.”

That word: “Father,” said to M. Fauchelevent by Marius, signified: supreme felicity. There had always existed, as the reader knows, a lofty wall, a coldness and a constraint between them; ice which must be broken or melted. Marius had reached that point of intoxication when the wall was lowered, when the ice dissolved, and when M. Fauchelevent was to him, as to Cosette, a father.

He continued: his words poured forth, as is the peculiarity of divine paroxysms of joy.

"How glad I am to see you! If you only knew how we missed you yesterday! Good morning, father. How is your hand? Better, is it not?"

And, satisfied with the favorable reply which he had made to himself, he pursued:

"We have both been talking about you. Cosette loves you so dearly! You must not forget that you have a chamber here, We want nothing more to do with the Rue de l'Homme Arme. We will have no more of it at all. How could you go to live in a street like that, which is sickly, which is disagreeable, which is ugly, which has a barrier at one end, where one is cold, and into which one cannot enter? You are to come and install yourself here. And this very day. Or you will have to deal with Cosette. She means to lead us all by the nose, I warn you. You have your own chamber here, it is close to ours, it opens on the garden; the trouble with the clock has been attended to, the bed is made, it is all ready, you have only to take possession of it. Near your bed Cosette has placed a huge, old, easy-chair covered with Utrecht velvet and she has said to it: 'Stretch out your arms to him.' A nightingale comes to the clump of acacias opposite your windows, every spring. In two months more you will have it. You will have its nest on your left and ours on your right. By night it will sing, and by day Cosette will prattle. Your chamber faces due South. Cosette will arrange your books for you, your Voyages of Captain Cook and the other, — Vancouver's and all your affairs. I believe that there is a little valise to which you are attached, I have fixed upon a corner of honor for that. You have conquered my grandfather, you suit him. We will live together. Do you play whist? you will overwhelm my grandfather with delight if you play whist. It is you who shall take Cosette to walk on the days when I am at the courts, you shall give her your arm, you know, as you used to, in the Luxembourg. We are absolutely resolved to be happy. And you shall be included in it, in our happiness, do you hear, father? Come, will you breakfast with us to-day?"

"Sir," said Jean Valjean, "I have something to say to you. I am an ex-convict."

The limit of shrill sounds perceptible can be overleaped, as well in the case of the mind as in that of the ear. These words: "I am an ex-convict," proceeding from the mouth of M. Fauchelevent and entering the ear of

Marius overshot the possible. It seemed to him that something had just been said to him; but he did not know what. He stood with his mouth wide open.

Then he perceived that the man who was addressing him was frightful. Wholly absorbed in his own dazzled state, he had not, up to that moment, observed the other man's terrible pallor.

Jean Valjean untied the black cravat which supported his right arm, unrolled the linen from around his hand, bared his thumb and showed it to Marius.

"There is nothing the matter with my hand," said he.

Marius looked at the thumb.

"There has not been anything the matter with it," went on Jean Valjean.

There was, in fact, no trace of any injury.

Jean Valjean continued:

"It was fitting that I should be absent from your marriage. I absented myself as much as was in my power. So I invented this injury in order that I might not commit a forgery, that I might not introduce a flaw into the marriage documents, in order that I might escape from signing."

Marius stammered.

"What is the meaning of this?"

"The meaning of it is," replied Jean Valjean, "that I have been in the galleys."

"You are driving me mad!" exclaimed Marius in terror.

"Monsieur Pontmercy," said Jean Valjean, "I was nineteen years in the galleys. For theft. Then, I was condemned for life for theft, for a second offence. At the present moment, I have broken my ban."

In vain did Marius recoil before the reality, refuse the fact, resist the evidence, he was forced to give way. He began to understand, and, as always happens in such cases, he understood too much. An inward shudder of hideous enlightenment flashed through him; an idea which made him quiver traversed his mind. He caught a glimpse of a wretched destiny for himself in the future.

"Say all, say all!" he cried. "You are Cosette's father!"

And he retreated a couple of paces with a movement of indescribable horror.

Jean Valjean elevated his head with so much majesty of attitude that he seemed to grow even to the ceiling.

"It is necessary that you should believe me here, sir; although our oath to others may not be received in law . . ."

Here he paused, then, with a sort of sovereign and sepulchral authority, he added, articulating slowly, and emphasizing the syllables:

". . . You will believe me. I the father of Cosette! before God, no. Monsieur le Baron Pontmercy, I am a peasant of Faverolles. I earned my living by pruning trees. My name is not Fauchelevent, but Jean Valjean. I am not related to Cosette. Reassure yourself."

Marius stammered:

"Who will prove that to me?"

"I. Since I tell you so."

Marius looked at the man. He was melancholy yet tranquil. No lie could proceed from such a calm. That which is icy is sincere. The truth could be felt in that chill of the tomb.

"I believe you," said Marius.

Jean Valjean bent his head, as though taking note of this, and continued:

"What am I to Cosette? A passer-by. Ten years ago, I did not know that she was in existence. I love her, it is true. One loves a child whom one has seen when very young, being old oneself. When one is old, one feels oneself a grandfather towards all little children. You may, it seems to me, suppose that I have something which resembles a heart. She was an orphan. Without either father or mother. She needed me. That is why I began to love her. Children are so weak that the first comer, even a man like me, can become their protector. I have fulfilled this duty towards Cosette. I do not think that so slight a thing can be called a good action; but if it be a good action, well, say that I have done it. Register this attenuating circumstance. To-day, Cosette passes out of my life; our two roads part. Henceforth, I can do nothing for her. She is Madame Pontmercy. Her providence has changed. And Cosette gains by the change. All is well. As for the six hundred thousand francs, you do not mention them to me, but I forestall your thought, they are a deposit. How did that deposit come into my hands? What does that matter? I restore the deposit. Nothing more can be demanded of me. I complete the restitution by announcing my true name. That concerns me. I have a reason for desiring that you should know who I am."

And Jean Valjean looked Marius full in the face.

All that Marius experienced was tumultuous and incoherent. Certain gusts of destiny produce these billows in our souls.

We have all undergone moments of trouble in which everything within us is dispersed; we say the first things that occur to us, which are not always precisely those which should be said. There are sudden revelations which one cannot bear, and which intoxicate like baleful wine. Marius was stupefied by the novel situation which presented itself to him, to the point of addressing that man almost like a person who was angry with him for this avowal.

“But why,” he exclaimed, “do you tell me all this? Who forces you to do so? You could have kept your secret to yourself. You are neither denounced, nor tracked nor pursued. You have a reason for wantonly making such a revelation. Conclude. There is something more. In what connection do you make this confession? What is your motive?”

“My motive?” replied Jean Valjean in a voice so low and dull that one would have said that he was talking to himself rather than to Marius. “From what motive, in fact, has this convict just said ‘I am a convict’? Well, yes! the motive is strange. It is out of honesty. Stay, the unfortunate point is that I have a thread in my heart, which keeps me fast. It is when one is old that that sort of thread is particularly solid. All life falls in ruin around one; one resists. Had I been able to tear out that thread, to break it, to undo the knot or to cut it, to go far away, I should have been safe. I had only to go away; there are diligences in the Rue Bouloy; you are happy; I am going. I have tried to break that thread, I have jerked at it, it would not break, I tore my heart with it. Then I said: ‘I cannot live anywhere else than here.’ I must stay. Well, yes, you are right, I am a fool, why not simply remain here? You offer me a chamber in this house, Madame Pontmercy is sincerely attached to me, she said to the arm-chair: ‘Stretch out your arms to him,’ your grandfather demands nothing better than to have me, I suit him, we shall live together, and take our meals in common, I shall give Cosette my arm . . . Madame Pontmercy, excuse me, it is a habit, we shall have but one roof, one table, one fire, the same chimney-corner in winter, the same promenade in summer, that is joy, that is happiness, that is everything. We shall live as one family. One family!”

At that word, Jean Valjean became wild. He folded his arms, glared at the floor beneath his feet as though he would have excavated an abyss therein, and his voice suddenly rose in thundering tones:

“As one family! No. I belong to no family. I do not belong to yours. I do not belong to any family of men. In houses where people are among themselves, I am superfluous. There are families, but there is nothing of the sort for me. I am an unlucky wretch; I am left outside. Did I have a father and mother? I almost doubt it. On the day when I gave that child in marriage, all came to an end. I have seen her happy, and that she is with a man whom she loves, and that there exists here a kind old man, a household of two angels, and all joys in that house, and that it was well, I said to myself: ‘Enter thou not.’ I could have lied, it is true, have deceived you all, and remained Monsieur Fauchelevent. So long as it was for her, I could lie; but now it would be for myself, and I must not. It was sufficient for me to hold my peace, it is true, and all would go on. You ask me what has forced me to speak? a very odd thing; my conscience. To hold my peace was very easy, however. I passed the night in trying to persuade myself to it; you questioned me, and what I have just said to you is so extraordinary that you have the right to do it; well, yes, I have passed the night in alleging reasons to myself, and I gave myself very good reasons, I have done what I could. But there are two things in which I have not succeeded; in breaking the thread that holds me fixed, riveted and sealed here by the heart, or in silencing some one who speaks softly to me when I am alone. That is why I have come hither to tell you everything this morning. Everything or nearly everything. It is useless to tell you that which concerns only myself; I keep that to myself. You know the essential points. So I have taken my mystery and have brought it to you. And I have disembowelled my secret before your eyes. It was not a resolution that was easy to take. I struggled all night long. Ah! you think that I did not tell myself that this was no Champmathieu affair, that by concealing my name I was doing no one any injury, that the name of Fauchelevent had been given to me by Fauchelevent himself, out of gratitude for a service rendered to him, and that I might assuredly keep it, and that I should be happy in that chamber which you offer me, that I should not be in any one’s way, that I should be in my own little corner, and that, while you would have Cosette, I should have the idea that I was in the same house with her. Each one of us would have had his share of happiness. If I continued to be Monsieur Fauchelevent, that would arrange everything. Yes, with the exception of my soul. There was joy everywhere upon my surface, but the bottom of my soul remained black. It is not enough to be happy, one must be content. Thus I should have remained Monsieur Fauchelevent, thus I should have concealed my true visage, thus, in the presence of your expansion, I should have had an enigma, thus, in the midst of your full noonday, I should have had shadows, thus, without crying ‘‘ware,’ I should have simply introduced the galleys to your fireside, I should have taken my seat at your table with the thought that if you knew who I was, you would drive me from it, I should have allowed myself to be served by domestics who, had they known, would have said: ‘How horrible!’ I should have touched you with my elbow, which you have a right to dislike, I should have filched your clasps of the hand! There would have existed in your house a division of respect between venerable white locks and tainted white locks; at your most intimate hours, when all hearts thought themselves open to the very bottom to all the rest, when we four were together, your grandfather, you two and myself, a stranger would have been present! I should have been side by side with you in your existence, having for my only care not to disarrange the cover of my dreadful pit. Thus, I, a dead man, should have thrust myself upon you who are living beings. I should have condemned her to myself forever. You and Cosette and I would have had all three of our heads in the green cap! Does it not make you shudder? I am only the most crushed of men; I should have been the most monstrous of men. And I should have committed that crime every day! And I should have had that face of night upon my visage every day! every day! And I should have communicated to you a share in my taint every day! every day! to you, my dearly beloved, my children, to you, my innocent creatures! Is it nothing to hold one’s peace? is it a simple matter to keep silence? No, it is not simple. There is a silence which lies. And my lie, and my fraud and my indignity, and my cowardice and my treason and my crime, I should have drained drop by drop, I should have spit it out, then swallowed it again, I should have finished at midnight and have begun again at midday, and my ‘good morning’ would have lied, and my ‘good night’ would have lied, and I should have slept on it, I should have eaten it, with my bread, and I should have looked Cosette in the face, and I should have responded to the smile of the angel by the smile of the damned soul, and I should have been an abominable villain! Why should I do it? in order to be happy. In order to be happy. Have I the right to be happy? I stand outside of life, Sir.”

Jean Valjean paused. Marius listened. Such chains of ideas and of anguishes cannot be interrupted. Jean Valjean lowered his voice once more, but it was no longer a dull voice — it was a sinister voice.

"You ask why I speak? I am neither denounced, nor pursued, nor tracked, you say. Yes! I am denounced! yes! I am tracked! By whom? By myself. It is I who bar the passage to myself, and I drag myself, and I push myself, and I arrest myself, and I execute myself, and when one holds oneself, one is firmly held."

And, seizing a handful of his own coat by the nape of the neck and extending it towards Marius:

"Do you see that fist?" he continued. "Don't you think that it holds that collar in such a wise as not to release it? Well! conscience is another grasp! If one desires to be happy, sir, one must never understand duty; for, as soon as one has comprehended it, it is implacable. One would say that it punished you for comprehending it; but no, it rewards you; for it places you in a hell, where you feel God beside you. One has no sooner lacerated his own entrails than he is at peace with himself."

And, with a poignant accent, he added:

"Monsieur Pontmercy, this is not common sense, I am an honest man. It is by degrading myself in your eyes that I elevate myself in my own. This has happened to me once before, but it was less painful then; it was a mere nothing. Yes, an honest man. I should not be so if, through my fault, you had continued to esteem me; now that you despise me, I am so. I have that fatality hanging over me that, not being able to ever have anything but stolen consideration, that consideration humiliates me, and crushes me inwardly, and, in order that I may respect myself, it is necessary that I should be despised. Then I straighten up again. I am a galley-slave who obeys his conscience. I know well that that is most improbable. But what would you have me do about it? it is the fact. I have entered into engagements with myself; I keep them. There are encounters which bind us, there are chances which involve us in duties. You see, Monsieur Pontmercy, various things have happened to me in the course of my life."

Again Jean Valjean paused, swallowing his saliva with an effort, as though his words had a bitter after-taste, and then he went on:

"When one has such a horror hanging over one, one has not the right to make others share it without their knowledge, one has not the right to make them slip over one's own precipice without their perceiving it, one has not the right to let one's red blouse drag upon them, one has no right to slyly encumber with one's misery the happiness of others. It is hideous to approach those who are healthy, and to touch them in the dark with one's ulcer. In spite of the fact that Fauchelevent lent me his name, I have no right to use it; he could give it to me, but I could not take it. A name is an *I*. You see, sir, that I have thought somewhat, I have read a little, although I am a peasant; and you see that I express myself properly. I understand things. I have procured myself an education. Well, yes, to abstract a name and to place oneself under it is dishonest. Letters of the alphabet can be filched, like a purse or a watch. To be a false signature in flesh and blood, to be a living false key, to enter the house of honest people by picking their lock, never more to look straightforward, to forever eye askance, to be infamous within the *I*, no! no! no! no! no! It is better to suffer, to bleed, to weep, to tear one's skin from the flesh with one's nails, to pass nights writhing in anguish, to devour oneself body and soul. That is why I have just told you all this. Wantonly, as you say."

He drew a painful breath, and hurled this final word:

"In days gone by, I stole a loaf of bread in order to live; to-day, in order to live, I will not steal a name."

"To live!" interrupted Marius. "You do not need that name in order to live?"

"Ah! I understand the matter," said Jean Valjean, raising and lowering his head several times in succession.

A silence ensued. Both held their peace, each plunged in a gulf of thoughts. Marius was sitting near a table and resting the corner of his mouth on one of his fingers, which was folded back. Jean Valjean was pacing to and fro. He paused before a mirror, and remained motionless. Then, as though replying to some inward course of reasoning, he said, as he gazed at the mirror, which he did not see:

"While, at present, I am relieved."

He took up his march again, and walked to the other end of the drawing-room. At the moment when he turned round, he perceived that Marius was watching his walk. Then he said, with an inexpressible intonation:

"I drag my leg a little. Now you understand why!"

Then he turned fully round towards Marius:

"And now, sir, imagine this: I have said nothing, I have remained Monsieur Fauchelevent, I have taken my place in your house, I am one of you, I am in my chamber, I come to breakfast in the morning in slippers, in the evening all three of us go to the play, I accompany Madame Pontmercy to the Tuileries, and to the Place Royale, we are together, you think me your equal; one fine day you are there, and I am there, we are conversing, we are laughing; all at once, you hear a voice shouting this name: ‘Jean Valjean!’ and behold, that terrible hand, the police, darts from the darkness, and abruptly tears off my mask!”

Again he paused; Marius had sprung to his feet with a shudder. Jean Valjean resumed:

“What do you say to that?”

Marius’ silence answered for him.

Jean Valjean continued:

“You see that I am right in not holding my peace. Be happy, be in heaven, be the angel of an angel, exist in the sun, be content therewith, and do not trouble yourself about the means which a poor damned wretch takes to open his breast and force his duty to come forth; you have before you, sir, a wretched man.”

Marius slowly crossed the room, and, when he was quite close to Jean Valjean, he offered the latter his hand.

But Marius was obliged to step up and take that hand which was not offered, Jean Valjean let him have his own way, and it seemed to Marius that he pressed a hand of marble.

“My grandfather has friends,” said Marius; “I will procure your pardon.”

“It is useless,” replied Jean Valjean. “I am believed to be dead, and that suffices. The dead are not subjected to surveillance. They are supposed to rot in peace. Death is the same thing as pardon.”

And, disengaging the hand which Marius held, he added, with a sort of inexorable dignity:

“Moreover, the friend to whom I have recourse is the doing of my duty; and I need but one pardon, that of my conscience.”

At that moment, a door at the other end of the drawing-room opened gently half way, and in the opening Cosette’s head appeared. They saw only her sweet face, her hair was in charming disorder, her eyelids were still swollen with sleep. She made the movement of a bird, which thrusts its head out of its nest, glanced first at her husband, then at Jean Valjean, and cried to them with a smile, so that they seemed to behold a smile at the heart of a rose:

“I will wager that you are talking politics. How stupid that is, instead of being with me!”

Jean Valjean shuddered.

"Cosette! . . ." stammered Marius.

And he paused. One would have said that they were two criminals.

Cosette, who was radiant, continued to gaze at both of them. There was something in her eyes like gleams of paradise.

"I have caught you in the very act," said Cosette. "Just now, I heard my father Fauchelevent through the door saying: 'Conscience . . . doing my duty . . .' That is politics, indeed it is. I will not have it. People should not talk politics the very next day. It is not right."

"You are mistaken. Cosette," said Marius, "we are talking business. We are discussing the best investment of your six hundred thousand francs . . ."

"That is not it at all," interrupted Cosette. "I am coming. Does any body want me here?"

And, passing resolutely through the door, she entered the drawing-room. She was dressed in a voluminous white dressing-gown, with a thousand folds and large sleeves which, starting from the neck, fell to her feet. In the golden heavens of some ancient gothic pictures, there are these charming sacks fit to clothe the angels.

She contemplated herself from head to foot in a long mirror, then exclaimed, in an outburst of ineffable ecstasy:

"There was once a King and a Queen. Oh! how happy I am!"

That said, she made a curtsey to Marius and to Jean Valjean.

"There," said she, "I am going to install myself near you in an easy-chair, we breakfast in half an hour, you shall say anything you like, I know well that men must talk, and I will be very good."

Marius took her by the arm and said lovingly to her:

"We are talking business."

"By the way," said Cosette, "I have opened my window, a flock of pierrots has arrived in the garden, — Birds, not maskers. To-day is Ash-Wednesday; but not for the birds."

"I tell you that we are talking business, go, my little Cosette, leave us alone for a moment. We are talking figures. That will bore you."

"You have a charming cravat on this morning, Marius. You are very dandified, monseigneur. No, it will not bore me."

"I assure you that it will bore you."

"No. Since it is you. I shall not understand you, but I shall listen to you. When one hears the voices of those whom one loves, one does not need to understand the words that they utter. That we should be here together — that is all that I desire. I shall remain with you, bah!”

“You are my beloved Cosette! Impossible.”

“Impossible!”

“Yes.”

“Very good,” said Cosette. “I was going to tell you some news. I could have told you that your grandfather is still asleep, that your aunt is at mass, that the chimney in my father Fauchelevent’s room smokes, that Nicolette has sent for the chimney-sweep, that Toussaint and Nicolette have already quarrelled, that Nicolette makes sport of Toussaint’s stammer. Well, you shall know nothing. Ah! it is impossible? you shall see, gentlemen, that I, in my turn, can say: It is impossible. Then who will be caught? I beseech you, my little Marius, let me stay here with you two.”

“I swear to you, that it is indispensable that we should be alone.”

“Well, am I anybody?”

Jean Valjean had not uttered a single word. Cosette turned to him:

“In the first place, father, I want you to come and embrace me. What do you mean by not saying anything instead of taking my part? who gave me such a father as that? You must perceive that my family life is very unhappy. My husband beats me. Come, embrace me instantly.”

Jean Valjean approached.

Cosette turned toward Marius.

“As for you, I shall make a face at you.”

Then she presented her brow to Jean Valjean.

Jean Valjean advanced a step toward her.

Cosette recoiled.

“Father, you are pale. Does your arm hurt you?”

“It is well,” said Jean Valjean.

“Did you sleep badly?”

“No.”

“Are you sad?”

“No.”

“Embrace me if you are well, if you sleep well, if you are content, I will not scold you.”

And again she offered him her brow.

Jean Valjean dropped a kiss upon that brow whereon rested a celestial gleam.

“Smile.”

Jean Valjean obeyed. It was the smile of a spectre.

“Now, defend me against my husband.”

“Cosette! . . .” ejaculated Marius.

“Get angry, father. Say that I must stay. You can certainly talk before me. So you think me very silly. What you say is astonishing! business, placing money in a bank a great matter truly. Men make mysteries out of nothing. I am very pretty this morning. Look at me, Marius.”

And with an adorable shrug of the shoulders, and an indescribably exquisite pout, she glanced at Marius.

“I love you!” said Marius.

“I adore you!” said Cosette.

And they fell irresistibly into each other’s arms.

“Now,” said Cosette, adjusting a fold of her dressing-gown, with a triumphant little grimace, “I shall stay.”

“No, not that,” said Marius, in a supplicating tone. “We have to finish something.”

“Still no?”

Marius assumed a grave tone:

“I assure you, Cosette, that it is impossible.”

“Ah! you put on your man’s voice, sir. That is well, I go. You, father, have not upheld me. Monsieur my father, monsieur my husband, you are tyrants. I shall go and tell grandpapa. If you think that I am going to return and talk platitudes to you, you are mistaken. I am proud. I shall wait for you now. You shall see, that it is you who are going to be bored without me. I am going, it is well.”

And she left the room.

Two seconds later, the door opened once more, her fresh and rosy head was again thrust between the two leaves, and she cried to them:

“I am very angry indeed.”

The door closed again, and the shadows descended once more.

It was as though a ray of sunlight should have suddenly traversed the night, without itself being conscious of it.

Marius made sure that the door was securely closed.

“Poor Cosette!” he murmured, “when she finds out . . .”

At that word Jean Valjean trembled in every limb. He fixed on Marius a bewildered eye.

“Cosette! oh yes, it is true, you are going to tell Cosette about this. That is right. Stay, I had not thought of that. One has the strength for one thing, but not for another. Sir, I conjure you, I entreat now, sir, give me your most sacred word of honor, that you will not tell her. Is it not enough that you should know it? I have been able to say it myself without being forced to it, I could have told it to the universe, to the whole world, — it was all one to me. But she, she does not know what it is, it would terrify her. What, a convict! we should be obliged to explain matters to her, to say to her: ‘He is a man who has been in the galleys.’ She saw the chain-gang pass by one day. Oh! My God!” . . . He dropped into an arm-chair and hid his face in his hands.

His grief was not audible, but from the quivering of his shoulders it was evident that he was weeping. Silent tears, terrible tears.

There is something of suffocation in the sob. He was seized with a sort of convulsion, he threw himself against the back of the chair as though to gain breath, letting his arms fall, and allowing Marius to see his face inundated with tears, and Marius heard him murmur, so low that his voice seemed to issue from fathomless depths:

“Oh! would that I could die!”

“Be at your ease,” said Marius, “I will keep your secret for myself alone.” x And, less touched, perhaps, than he ought to have been, but forced, for the last hour, to familiarize himself with something as unexpected as it was dreadful, gradually beholding the convict superposed before his very eyes, upon M. Fauchelevent, overcome, little by little, by that lugubrious reality, and led, by the natural inclination of the situation, to recognize the space which had just been placed between that man and himself, Marius added:

“It is impossible that I should not speak a word to you with regard to the deposit which you have so faithfully and honestly remitted. That is an act of probity. It is just that some recompense should be bestowed on you. Fix the sum yourself, it shall be counted out to you. Do not fear to set it very high.”

“I thank you, sir,” replied Jean Valjean, gently.

He remained in thought for a moment, mechanically passing the tip of his fore-finger across his thumb-nail, then he lifted up his voice:

“All is nearly over. But one last thing remains for me . . .”

“What is it?”

Jean Valjean struggled with what seemed a last hesitation, and, without voice, without breath, he stammered rather than said:

"Now that you know, do you think, sir, you, who are the master, that I ought not to see Cosette any more?"

"I think that would be better," replied Marius coldly.

"I shall never see her more," murmured Jean Valjean. And he directed his steps towards the door.

He laid his hand on the knob, the latch yielded, the door opened. Jean Valjean pushed it open far enough to pass through, stood motionless for a second, then closed the door again and turned to Marius.

He was no longer pale, he was livid. There were no longer any tears in his eyes, but only a sort of tragic flame. His voice had regained a strange composure.

"Stay, sir," he said. "If you will allow it, I will come to see her. I assure you that I desire it greatly. If I had not cared to see Cosette, I should not have made to you the confession that I have made, I should have gone away; but, as I desired to remain in the place where Cosette is, and to continue to see her, I had to tell you about it honestly. You follow my reasoning, do you not? it is a matter easily understood. You see, I have had her with me for more than nine years. We lived first in that hut on the boulevard, then in the convent, then near the Luxembourg. That was where you saw her for the first time. You remember her blue plush hat. Then we went to the Quartier des Invalides, where there was a railing on a garden, the Rue Plumet. I lived in a little back court-yard, whence I could hear her piano. That was my life. We never left each other. That lasted for nine years and some months. I was like her own father, and she was my child. I do not know whether you understand, Monsieur Pontmercy, but to go away now, never to see her again, never to speak to her again, to no longer have anything, would be hard. If you do not disapprove of it, I will come to see Cosette from time to time. I will not come often. I will not remain long. You shall give orders that I am to be received in the little waiting-room. On the ground floor. I could enter perfectly well by the back door, but that might create surprise perhaps, and it would be better, I think, for me to enter by the usual door. Truly, sir, I should like to see a little more of Cosette. As rarely as you please. Put yourself in my place, I have nothing left but that. And then, we must be cautious. If I no longer come at all, it would produce a bad effect, it would be considered singular. What I can do, by the way, is to come in the afternoon, when night is beginning to fall."

"You shall come every evening," said Marius, "and Cosette will be waiting for you."

"You are kind, sir," said Jean Valjean.

Marius saluted Jean Valjean, happiness escorted despair to the door, and these two men parted.

CHAPTER II — THE OBSCURITIES WHICH A REVELATION CAN CONTAIN

Marius was quite upset.

The sort of estrangement which he had always felt towards the man beside whom he had seen Cosette, was now explained to him. There was something enigmatic about that person, of which his instinct had warned him.

This enigma was the most hideous of disgraces, the galleys. This M. Fauchelevent was the convict Jean Valjean.

To abruptly find such a secret in the midst of one’s happiness resembles the discovery of a scorpion in a nest of turtledoves.

Was the happiness of Marius and Cosette thenceforth condemned to such a neighborhood? Was this an accomplished fact? Did the acceptance of that man form a part of the marriage now consummated? Was there nothing to be done?

Had Marius wedded the convict as well?

In vain may one be crowned with light and joy, in vain may one taste the grand purple hour of life, happy love, such shocks would force even the archangel in his ecstasy, even the demigod in his glory, to shudder.

As is always the case in changes of view of this nature, Marius asked himself whether he had nothing with which to reproach himself. Had he been wanting in divination? Had he been wanting in prudence? Had he involuntarily dulled his wits? A little, perhaps. Had he entered upon this love affair, which had ended in his marriage to Cosette, without taking sufficient precautions to throw light upon the surroundings? He admitted, — it is thus, by a series of successive admissions of ourselves in regard to ourselves, that life amends us, little by little, — he admitted the chimerical and visionary side of his nature, a sort of internal cloud peculiar to many organizations, and which, in paroxysms of passion and sorrow, dilates as the temperature of the soul changes, and invades the entire man, to such a degree as to render him nothing more than a conscience bathed in a mist. We have more than once indicated this characteristic element of Marius’ individuality.

He recalled that, in the intoxication of his love, in the Rue Plumet, during those six or seven ecstatic weeks, he had not even spoke to Cosette of that drama in the Gorbeau hovel, where the victim had taken up such a singular line of silence during the struggle and the ensuing flight. How had it happened that he had not mentioned this to Cosette? Yet it was so near and so terrible! How had it come to pass that he had not even named the Thenardiers, and, particularly, on the day when he had encountered Eponine? He now found it almost difficult to explain his silence of that time. Nevertheless, he could account for it. He recalled his benumbed state, his intoxication with Cosette, love absorbing everything, that catching away of each other into the ideal, and perhaps also, like the imperceptible quantity of reason mingled with this violent and charming state of the soul, a vague, dull instinct impelling him to conceal and abolish in his memory that redoubtable adventure, contact with which he dreaded, in which he did not wish to play any part, his agency in which he had kept secret, and in which he could be neither narrator nor witness without being an accuser.

Moreover, these few weeks had been a flash of lightning; there had been no time for anything except love.

In short, having weighed everything, turned everything over in his mind, examined everything, whatever might have been the consequences if he had told Cosette about the Gorbeau ambush, even if he had discovered that Jean Valjean was a convict, would that have changed him, Marius? Would that have changed her, Cosette? Would he have drawn back? Would he have adored her any the less? Would he have refrained from marrying her? No. Then there was nothing to regret, nothing with which he need reproach himself. All was well. There is a deity for those drunken men who are called lovers. Marius blind, had followed the path which he would have chosen had he been in full possession of his sight. Love had bandaged his eyes, in order to lead him whither? To paradise.

But this paradise was henceforth complicated with an infernal accompaniment.

Marius’ ancient estrangement towards this man, towards this Fauchelevent who had turned into Jean Valjean, was at present mingled with horror.

In this horror, let us state, there was some pity, and even a certain surprise.

This thief, this thief guilty of a second offence, had restored that deposit. And what a deposit! Six hundred thousand francs.

He alone was in the secret of that deposit. He might have kept it all, he had restored it all.

Moreover, he had himself revealed his situation. Nothing forced him to this. If any one learned who he was, it was through himself. In this avowal there was something more than acceptance of humiliation, there was acceptance of peril. For a condemned man, a mask is not a mask, it is a shelter. A false name is security, and he had rejected that false name. He, the galley-slave, might have hidden himself forever in an honest family; he had withstood this temptation. And with what motive? Through a conscientious scruple. He himself explained this with the irresistible accents of truth. In short, whatever this Jean Valjean might be, he was, undoubtedly, a conscience which was awakening. There existed some mysterious re-habilitation which had begun; and, to all appearances, scruples had for a long time already controlled this man. Such fits of justice and goodness are not characteristic of vulgar natures. An awakening of conscience is grandeur of soul.

Jean Valjean was sincere. This sincerity, visible, palpable, irrefragable, evident from the very grief that it caused him, rendered inquiries useless, and conferred authority on all that that man had said.

Here, for Marius, there was a strange reversal of situations. What breathed from M. Fauchelevent? distrust. What did Jean Valjean inspire? confidence.

In the mysterious balance of this Jean Valjean which the pensive Marius struck, he admitted the active principle, he admitted the passive principle, and he tried to reach a balance.

But all this went on as in a storm. Marius, while endeavoring to form a clear idea of this man, and while pursuing Jean Valjean, so to speak, in the depths of his thought, lost him and found him again in a fatal mist.

The deposit honestly restored, the probity of the confession — these were good. This produced a lightening of the cloud, then the cloud became black once more.

Troubled as were Marius’ memories, a shadow of them returned to him.

After all, what was that adventure in the Jondrette attic? Why had that man taken to flight on the arrival of the police, instead of entering a complaint?

Here Marius found the answer. Because that man was a fugitive from justice, who had broken his ban.

Another question: Why had that man come to the barricade?

For Marius now once more distinctly beheld that recollection which had re-appeared in his emotions like sympathetic ink at the application of heat. This man had been in the barricade. He had not fought there. What had he come there for? In the presence of this question a spectre sprang up and replied: “Javert.”

Marius recalled perfectly now that funereal sight of Jean Valjean dragging the pinioned Javert out of the barricade, and he still heard behind the corner of the little Rue Mondetour that frightful pistol shot. Obviously, there was hatred between that police spy and the galley-slave. The one was in the other’s way. Jean Valjean had gone to the barricade for the purpose of revenging himself. He had arrived late. He probably knew that Javert was a prisoner there. The Corsican vendetta has penetrated to certain lower strata and has become the law there; it is so simple that it does not astonish souls which are but half turned towards good; and those hearts are so constituted that a criminal, who is in the path of repentance, may be scrupulous in the matter of theft and unscrupulous in the matter of vengeance. Jean Valjean had killed Javert. At least, that seemed to be evident.

This was the final question, to be sure; but to this there was no reply. This question Marius felt like pincers. How had it come to pass that Jean Valjean’s existence had elbowed that of Cosette for so long a period?

What melancholy sport of Providence was that which had placed that child in contact with that man? Are there then chains for two which are forged on high? and does God take pleasure in coupling the angel with the demon? So a crime and an innocence can be room-mates in the mysterious galleys of wretchedness? In that defiling of condemned persons which is called human destiny, can two brows pass side by side, the one ingenuous, the other formidable, the one all bathed in the divine whiteness of dawn, the other forever blemished by the flash of an eternal lightning? Who could have arranged that inexplicable pairing off? In what manner, in consequence of what prodigy, had any community of life been established between this celestial little creature and that old criminal?

Who could have bound the lamb to the wolf, and, what was still more incomprehensible, have attached the wolf to the lamb? For the wolf loved the lamb, for the fierce creature adored the feeble one, for, during the space of nine years, the angel had had the monster as her point of support. Cosette's childhood and girlhood, her advent in the daylight, her virginal growth towards life and light, had been sheltered by that hideous devotion. Here questions exfoliated, so to speak, into innumerable enigmas, abysses yawned at the bottoms of abysses, and Marius could no longer bend over Jean Valjean without becoming dizzy. What was this man-precipice?

The old symbols of Genesis are eternal; in human society, such as it now exists, and until a broader day shall effect a change in it, there will always be two men, the one superior, the other subterranean; the one which is according to good is Abel; the other which is according to evil is Cain. What was this tender Cain? What was this ruffian religiously absorbed in the adoration of a virgin, watching over her, rearing her, guarding her, dignifying her, and enveloping her, impure as he was himself, with purity?

What was that cess-pool which had venerated that innocence to such a point as not to leave upon it a single spot? What was this Jean Valjean educating Cosette? What was this figure of the shadows which had for its only object the preservation of the rising of a star from every shadow and from every cloud?

That was Jean Valjean's secret; that was also God's secret.

In the presence of this double secret, Marius recoiled. The one, in some sort, reassured him as to the other. God was as visible in this affair as was Jean Valjean. God has his instruments. He makes use of the tool which he wills. He is not responsible to men. Do we know how God sets about the work? Jean Valjean had labored over Cosette. He had, to some extent, made that soul. That was incontestable. Well, what then? The workman was horrible; but the work was admirable. God produces his miracles as seems good to him. He had constructed that charming Cosette, and he had employed Jean Valjean. It had pleased him to choose this strange collaborator for himself. What account have we to demand of him? Is this the first time that the dung-heap has aided the spring to create the rose?

Marius made himself these replies, and declared to himself that they were good. He had not dared to press Jean Valjean on all the points which we have just indicated, but he did not confess to himself that he did not dare to do it. He adored Cosette, he possessed Cosette, Cosette was splendidly pure. That was sufficient for him. What enlightenment did he need? Cosette was a light. Does light require enlightenment? He had everything; what more could he desire? All, — is not that enough? Jean Valjean's personal affairs did not concern him.

And bending over the fatal shadow of that man, he clung fast, convulsively, to the solemn declaration of that unhappy wretch: "I am nothing to Cosette. Ten years ago I did not know that she was in existence."

Jean Valjean was a passer-by. He had said so himself. Well, he had passed. Whatever he was, his part was finished.

Henceforth, there remained Marius to fulfil the part of Providence to Cosette. Cosette had sought the azure in a person like herself, in her lover, her husband, her celestial male. Cosette, as she took her flight, winged and transfigured, left behind her on the earth her hideous and empty chrysalis, Jean Valjean.

In whatever circle of ideas Marius revolved, he always returned to a certain horror for Jean Valjean. A sacred horror, perhaps, for, as we have just pointed out, he felt a quid divinum in that man. But do what he would, and seek what extenuation he would, he was certainly forced to fall back upon this: the man was a convict; that is to say, a being who has not even a place in the social ladder, since he is lower than the very lowest rung. After the very last of men comes the convict. The convict is no longer, so to speak, in the semblance of the living. The law has deprived him of the entire quantity of humanity of which it can deprive a man.

Marius, on penal questions, still held to the inexorable system, though he was a democrat and he entertained all the ideas of the law on the subject of those whom the law strikes. He had not yet accomplished all progress, we admit. He had not yet come to distinguish between that which is written by man and that which is written by God, between law and right. He had not examined and weighed the right which man takes to dispose of the irrevocable and the irreparable. He was not shocked by the word vindicte. He found it quite simple that certain breaches of the written law should be followed by eternal suffering, and he accepted, as the process of civilization, social damnation. He still stood at this point, though safe to advance infallibly later on, since his nature was good, and, at bottom, wholly formed of latent progress.

In this stage of his ideas, Jean Valjean appeared to him hideous and repulsive. He was a man reproved, he was the convict. That word was for him like the sound of the trump on the Day of Judgment; and, after having reflected upon Jean Valjean for a long time, his final gesture had been to turn away his head. Vade retro.

Marius, if we must recognize and even insist upon the fact, while interrogating Jean Valjean to such a point that Jean Valjean had said: “You are confessing me,” had not, nevertheless, put to him two or three decisive questions.

It was not that they had not presented themselves to his mind, but that he had been afraid of them. The Jondrette attic? The barricade? Javert? Who knows where these revelations would have stopped? Jean Valjean did not seem like a man who would draw back, and who knows whether Marius, after having urged him on, would not have himself desired to hold him back?

Has it not happened to all of us, in certain supreme conjunctures, to stop our ears in order that we may not hear the reply, after we have asked a question? It is especially when one loves that one gives way to these exhibitions of cowardice. It is not wise to question sinister situations to the last point, particularly when the indissoluble side of our life is fatally intermingled with them. What a terrible light might have proceeded from the despairing explanations of Jean Valjean, and who knows whether that hideous glare would not have darted forth as far as Cosette? Who knows whether a sort of infernal glow would not have lingered behind it on the brow of that angel? The spattering of a lightning-flash is of the thunder also. Fatality has points of juncture where innocence itself is stamped with crime by the gloomy law of the reflections which give color. The purest figures may forever preserve the reflection of a horrible association. Rightly or wrongly, Marius had been afraid. He already knew too much. He sought to dull his senses rather than to gain further light.

In dismay he bore off Cosette in his arms and shut his eyes to Jean Valjean.

That man was the night, the living and horrible night. How should he dare to seek the bottom of it? It is a terrible thing to interrogate the shadow. Who knows what its reply will be? The dawn may be blackened forever by it.

In this state of mind the thought that that man would, henceforth, come into any contact whatever with Cosette was a heartrending perplexity to Marius.

He now almost reproached himself for not having put those formidable questions, before which he had recoiled, and from which an implacable and definitive decision might have sprung. He felt that he was too good, too gentle, too weak, if we must say the word. This weakness had led him to an imprudent concession. He had allowed himself to be touched. He had been in the wrong. He ought to have simply and purely rejected Jean Valjean. Jean Valjean played the part of fire, and that is what he should have done, and have freed his house from that man.

He was vexed with himself, he was angry with that whirlwind of emotions which had deafened, blinded, and carried him away. He was displeased with himself.

What was he to do now? Jean Valjean’s visits were profoundly repugnant to him. What was the use in having that man in his house? What did the man want? Here, he became dismayed, he did not wish to dig down, he did not wish to penetrate deeply; he did not wish to sound himself. He had promised, he had allowed himself to be drawn into a promise; Jean Valjean held his promise; one must keep one’s word even to a convict, above all to a convict. Still, his first duty was to Cosette. In short, he was carried away by the repugnance which dominated him.

Marius turned over all this confusion of ideas in his mind, passing from one to the other, and moved by all of them. Hence arose a profound trouble.

It was not easy for him to hide this trouble from Cosette, but love is a talent, and Marius succeeded in doing it.

However, without any apparent object, he questioned Cosette, who was as candid as a dove is white and who suspected nothing; he talked of her childhood and her youth, and he became more and more convinced that that convict had been everything good, paternal and respectable that a man can be towards Cosette. All that Marius had caught a glimpse of and had surmised was real. That sinister nettle had loved and protected that lily.

BOOK EIGHTH. — FADING AWAY OF THE TWILIGHT

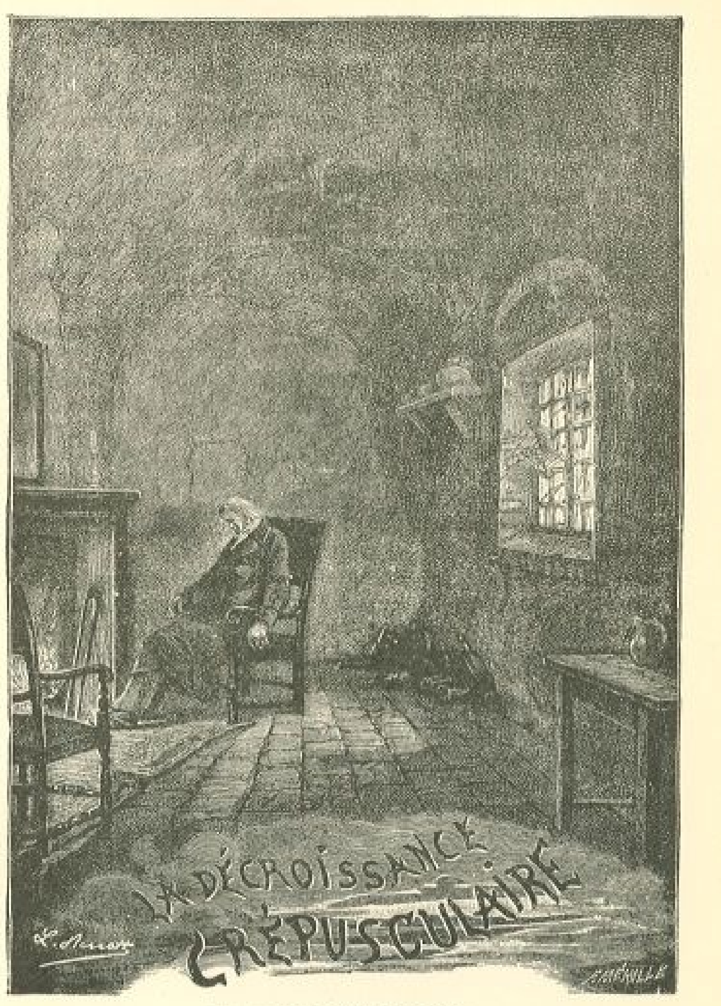
LA DÉCROISSANCE
CRÉPUSCULAIRE

THE TWILIGHT DECLINE.

CHAPTER I — THE LOWER CHAMBER

On the following day, at nightfall, Jean Valjean knocked at the carriage gate of the Gillenormand house. It was Basque who received him. Basque was in the courtyard at the appointed hour, as though he had received his orders. It sometimes happens that one says to a servant: “You will watch for Mr. So and So, when he arrives.”

Basque addressed Jean Valjean without waiting for the latter to approach him:

“Monsieur le Baron has charged me to inquire whether monsieur desires to go upstairs or to remain below?”

“I will remain below,” replied Jean Valjean.

Basque, who was perfectly respectful, opened the door of the waiting-room and said:

“I will go and inform Madame.”

The room which Jean Valjean entered was a damp, vaulted room on the ground floor, which served as a cellar on occasion, which opened on the street, was paved with red squares and was badly lighted by a grated window.

This chamber was not one of those which are harassed by the feather-duster, the pope’s head brush, and the broom. The dust rested tranquilly there. Persecution of the spiders was not organized there. A fine web, which spread far and wide, and was very black and ornamented with dead flies, formed a wheel on one of the window-panes. The room, which was small and low-ceiled, was furnished with a heap of empty bottles piled up in one corner.

The wall, which was daubed with an ochre yellow wash, was scaling off in large flakes. At one end there was a chimney-piece painted in black with a narrow shelf. A fire was burning there; which indicated that Jean Valjean’s reply: “I will remain below,” had been foreseen.

Two arm-chairs were placed at the two corners of the fireplace. Between the chairs an old bedside rug, which displayed more foundation thread than wool, had been spread by way of a carpet.

The chamber was lighted by the fire on the hearth and the twilight falling through the window.

Jean Valjean was fatigued. For days he had neither eaten nor slept. He threw himself into one of the arm-chairs.

Basque returned, set a lighted candle on the chimney-piece and retired. Jean Valjean, his head drooping and his chin resting on his breast, perceived neither Basque nor the candle.

All at once, he drew himself up with a start. Cosette was standing beside him.

He had not seen her enter, but he had felt that she was there.

He turned round. He gazed at her. She was adorably lovely. But what he was contemplating with that profound gaze was not her beauty but her soul.

"Well," exclaimed Cosette, "father, I knew that you were peculiar, but I never should have expected this. What an idea! Marius told me that you wish me to receive you here."

"Yes, it is my wish."

"I expected that reply. Good. I warn you that I am going to make a scene for you. Let us begin at the beginning. Embrace me, father."

And she offered him her cheek.

Jean Valjean remained motionless.

"You do not stir. I take note of it. Attitude of guilt. But never mind, I pardon you. Jesus Christ said: Offer the other cheek. Here it is."

And she presented her other cheek.

Jean Valjean did not move. It seemed as though his feet were nailed to the pavement.

"This is becoming serious," said Cosette. "What have I done to you? I declare that I am perplexed. You owe me reparation. You will dine with us."

"I have dined."

"That is not true. I will get M. Gillenormand to scold you. Grandfathers are made to reprimand fathers. Come. Go upstairs with me to the drawing-room. Immediately."

"Impossible."

Here Cosette lost ground a little. She ceased to command and passed to questioning.

"But why? and you choose the ugliest chamber in the house in which to see me. It's horrible here."

"Thou knowest . . ."

Jean Valjean caught himself up.

"You know, madame, that I am peculiar, I have my freaks."

Cosette struck her tiny hands together.

“Madame! . . . You know! . . . more novelties! What is the meaning of this?”

Jean Valjean directed upon her that heartrending smile to which he occasionally had recourse:

“You wished to be Madame. You are so.”

“Not for you, father.”

“Do not call me father.”

“What?”

“Call me ‘Monsieur Jean.’ ‘Jean,’ if you like.”

“You are no longer my father? I am no longer Cosette? ‘Monsieur Jean’? What does this mean? why, these are revolutions, aren’t they? what has taken place? come, look me in the face. And you won’t live with us! And you won’t have my chamber! What have I done to you? Has anything happened?”

“Nothing.”

“Well then?”

“Everything is as usual.”

“Why do you change your name?”

“You have changed yours, surely.”

He smiled again with the same smile as before and added:

“Since you are Madame Pontmercy, I certainly can be Monsieur Jean.”

“I don’t understand anything about it. All this is idiotic. I shall ask permission of my husband for you to be ‘Monsieur Jean.’ I hope that he will not consent to it. You cause me a great deal of pain. One does have freaks, but one does not cause one’s little Cosette grief. That is wrong. You have no right to be wicked, you who are so good.”

He made no reply.

She seized his hands with vivacity, and raising them to her face with an irresistible movement, she pressed them against her neck beneath her chin, which is a gesture of profound tenderness.

“Oh!” she said to him, “be good!”

And she went on:

“This is what I call being good: being nice and coming and living here, — there are birds here as there are in the Rue Plumet, — living with us, quitting that hole of a Rue de l’Homme Arme, not giving us riddles to guess, being like all the rest of the world, dining with us, breakfasting with us, being my father.”

He loosed her hands.

“You no longer need a father, you have a husband.”

Cosette became angry.

“I no longer need a father! One really does not know what to say to things like that, which are not common sense!”

“If Toussaint were here,” resumed Jean Valjean, like a person who is driven to seek authorities, and who clutches at every branch, “she would be the first to agree that it is true that I have always had ways of my own. There is nothing new in this. I always have loved my black corner.”

“But it is cold here. One cannot see distinctly. It is abominable, that it is, to wish to be Monsieur Jean! I will not have you say ‘you’ to me.

“Just now, as I was coming hither,” replied Jean Valjean, “I saw a piece of furniture in the Rue Saint Louis. It was at a cabinet-maker’s. If I were a pretty woman, I would treat myself to that bit of furniture. A very neat toilet table in the reigning style. What you call rosewood, I think. It is inlaid. The mirror is quite large. There are drawers. It is pretty.”

“Hou! the villainous bear!” replied Cosette.

And with supreme grace, setting her teeth and drawing back her lips, she blew at Jean Valjean. She was a Grace copying a cat.

“I am furious,” she resumed. “Ever since yesterday, you have made me rage, all of you. I am greatly vexed. I don’t understand. You do not defend me against Marius. Marius will not uphold me against you. I am all alone. I arrange a chamber prettily. If I could have put the good God there I would have done it. My chamber is left on my hands. My lodger sends me into bankruptcy. I order a nice little dinner of Nicolette. We will have nothing to do with your dinner, Madame. And my father Fauchelevent wants me to call him ‘Monsieur Jean,’ and to receive him in a frightful, old, ugly cellar, where the walls have beards, and where the crystal consists of empty bottles, and the curtains are of spiders’ webs! You are singular, I admit, that is your style, but people who get married are granted a truce. You ought not to have begun being singular again instantly. So you are going to be perfectly contented in your abominable Rue de l’Homme Arme. I was very desperate indeed there, that I was. What have you against me? You cause me a great deal of grief. Fi!”

And, becoming suddenly serious, she gazed intently at Jean Valjean and added:

"Are you angry with me because I am happy?"

Ingenuousness sometimes unconsciously penetrates deep. This question, which was simple for Cosette, was profound for Jean Valjean. Cosette had meant to scratch, and she lacerated.

Jean Valjean turned pale.

He remained for a moment without replying, then, with an inexpressible intonation, and speaking to himself, he murmured:

"Her happiness was the object of my life. Now God may sign my dismissal. Cosette, thou art happy; my day is over."

"Ah, you have said thou to me!" exclaimed Cosette.

And she sprang to his neck.

Jean Valjean, in bewilderment, strained her wildly to his breast. It almost seemed to him as though he were taking her back.

"Thanks, father!" said Cosette.

This enthusiastic impulse was on the point of becoming poignant for Jean Valjean. He gently removed Cosette's arms, and took his hat.

"Well?" said Cosette.

"I leave you, Madame, they are waiting for you."

And, from the threshold, he added:

"I have said thou to you. Tell your husband that this shall not happen again. Pardon me."

Jean Valjean quitted the room, leaving Cosette stupefied at this enigmatical farewell.

CHAPTER II — ANOTHER STEP BACKWARDS

On the following day, at the same hour, Jean Valjean came.

Cosette asked him no questions, was no longer astonished, no longer exclaimed that she was cold, no longer spoke of the drawing-room, she avoided saying either “father” or “Monsieur Jean.” She allowed herself to be addressed as you. She allowed herself to be called Madame. Only, her joy had undergone a certain diminution. She would have been sad, if sadness had been possible to her.

It is probable that she had had with Marius one of those conversations in which the beloved man says what he pleases, explains nothing, and satisfies the beloved woman. The curiosity of lovers does not extend very far beyond their own love.

The lower room had made a little toilet. Basque had suppressed the bottles, and Nicolette the spiders.

All the days which followed brought Jean Valjean at the same hour. He came every day, because he had not the strength to take Marius’ words otherwise than literally. Marius arranged matters so as to be absent at the hours when Jean Valjean came. The house grew accustomed to the novel ways of M. Fauchelevent. Toussaint helped in this direction: “Monsieur has always been like that,” she repeated. The grandfather issued this decree:— “He’s an original.” And all was said. Moreover, at the age of ninety-six, no bond is any longer possible, all is merely juxtaposition; a newcomer is in the way. There is no longer any room; all habits are acquired. M. Fauchelevent, M. Tranchelevent, Father Gillenormand asked nothing better than to be relieved from “that gentleman.” He added:— “Nothing is more common than those originals. They do all sorts of queer things. They have no reason. The Marquis de Canaples was still worse. He bought a palace that he might lodge in the garret. These are fantastic appearances that people affect.”

No one caught a glimpse of the sinister foundation. And moreover, who could have guessed such a thing? There are marshes of this description in India. The water seems extraordinary, inexplicable, rippling though there is no wind, and agitated where it should be calm. One gazes at the surface of these causeless ebullitions; one does not perceive the hydra which crawls on the bottom.

Many men have a secret monster in this same manner, a dragon which gnaws them, a despair which inhabits their night. Such a man resembles other men, he goes and comes. No one knows that he bears within him a frightful parasitic pain with a thousand teeth, which lives within the unhappy man, and of which he is dying. No one knows that this man is a gulf. He is stagnant but deep. From time to time, a trouble of which the onlooker understands nothing appears on his surface. A mysterious wrinkle is formed, then vanishes, then re-appears; an air-bubble rises and bursts. It is the breathing of the unknown beast.

Certain strange habits: arriving at the hour when other people are taking their leave, keeping in the background when other people are displaying themselves, preserving on all occasions what may be designated as the wall-colored mantle, seeking the solitary walk, preferring the deserted street, avoiding any share in conversation, avoiding crowds and festivals, seeming at one’s ease and living poorly, having one’s key in one’s pocket, and one’s candle at the porter’s lodge, however rich one may be, entering by the side door, ascending the private staircase, — all these insignificant singularities, fugitive folds on the surface, often proceed from a formidable foundation.

Many weeks passed in this manner. A new life gradually took possession of Cosette: the relations which marriage creates, visits, the care of the house, pleasures, great matters. Cosette’s pleasures were not costly, they consisted in one thing: being with Marius. The great occupation of her life was to go out with him, to remain with him. It was for them a joy that was always fresh, to go out arm in arm, in the face of the sun, in the open street, without hiding themselves, before the whole world, both of them completely alone.

Cosette had one vexation. Toussaint could not get on with Nicolette, the soldering of two elderly maids being impossible, and she went away. The grandfather was well; Marius argued a case here and there; Aunt Gillenormand peacefully led that life aside which sufficed for her, beside the new household. Jean Valjean came every day.

The address as thou disappeared, the you, the “Madame,” the “Monsieur Jean,” rendered him another person to Cosette. The care which he had himself taken to detach her from him was succeeding. She became more and more gay and less and less tender. Yet she still loved him sincerely, and he felt it.

One day she said to him suddenly: “You used to be my father, you are no longer my father, you were my uncle, you are no longer my uncle, you were Monsieur Fauchelevent, you are Jean. Who are you then? I don’t like all this. If I did not know how good you are, I should be afraid of you.”

He still lived in the Rue de l’Homme Arme, because he could not make up his mind to remove to a distance from the quarter where Cosette dwelt.

At first, he only remained a few minutes with Cosette, and then went away.

Little by little he acquired the habit of making his visits less brief. One would have said that he was taking advantage of the authorization of the days which were lengthening, he arrived earlier and departed later.

One day Cosette chanced to say “father” to him. A flash of joy illuminated Jean Valjean’s melancholy old countenance. He caught her up: “Say Jean.”— “Ah! truly,” she replied with a burst of laughter, “Monsieur Jean.”— “That is right,” said he. And he turned aside so that she might not see him wipe his eyes.

CHAPTER III — THEY RECALL THE GARDEN OF THE RUE PLUMET

This was the last time. After that last flash of light, complete extinction ensued. No more familiarity, no more good-morning with a kiss, never more that word so profoundly sweet: “My father!” He was at his own request and through his own complicity driven out of all his happinesses one after the other; and he had this sorrow, that after having lost Cosette wholly in one day, he was afterwards obliged to lose her again in detail.

The eye eventually becomes accustomed to the light of a cellar. In short, it sufficed for him to have an apparition of Cosette every day. His whole life was concentrated in that one hour.

He seated himself close to her, he gazed at her in silence, or he talked to her of years gone by, of her childhood, of the convent, of her little friends of those bygone days.

One afternoon, — it was on one of those early days in April, already warm and fresh, the moment of the sun’s great gayety, the gardens which surrounded the windows of Marius and Cosette felt the emotion of waking, the hawthorn was on the point of budding, a jewelled garniture of gillyflowers spread over the ancient walls, snapdragons yawned through the crevices of the stones, amid the grass there was a charming beginning of daisies, and buttercups, the white butterflies of the year were making their first appearance, the wind, that minstrel of the eternal wedding, was trying in the trees the first notes of that grand, auroral symphony which the old poets called the springtide, — Marius said to Cosette:— “We said that we would go back to take a look at our garden in the Rue Plumet. Let us go thither. We must not be ungrateful.” — And away they flitted, like two swallows towards the spring. This garden of the Rue Plumet produced on them the effect of the dawn. They already had behind them in life something which was like the springtime of their love. The house in the Rue Plumet being held on a lease, still belonged to Cosette. They went to that garden and that house. There they found themselves again, there they forgot themselves. That evening, at the usual hour, Jean Valjean came to the Rue des Filles-du-Calvaire.— “Madame went out with Monsieur and has not yet returned,” Basque said to him. He seated himself in silence, and waited an hour. Cosette did not return. He departed with drooping head.

Cosette was so intoxicated with her walk to “their garden,” and so joyous at having “lived a whole day in her past,” that she talked of nothing else on the morrow. She did not notice that she had not seen Jean Valjean.

“In what way did you go thither?” Jean Valjean asked her.”

“On foot.”

“And how did you return?”

“In a hackney carriage.”

For some time, Jean Valjean had noticed the economical life led by the young people. He was troubled by it. Marius’ economy was severe, and that word had its absolute meaning for Jean Valjean. He hazarded a query:

“Why do you not have a carriage of your own? A pretty coupe would only cost you five hundred francs a month. You are rich.”

“I don’t know,” replied Cosette.

“It is like Toussaint,” resumed Jean Valjean. “She is gone. You have not replaced her. Why?”

“Nicolette suffices.”

“But you ought to have a maid.”

“Have I not Marius?”

“You ought to have a house of your own, your own servants, a carriage, a box at the theatre. There is nothing too fine for you. Why not profit by your riches? Wealth adds to happiness.”

Cosette made no reply.

Jean Valjean’s visits were not abridged. Far from it. When it is the heart which is slipping, one does not halt on the downward slope.

When Jean Valjean wished to prolong his visit and to induce forgetfulness of the hour, he sang the praises of Marius; he pronounced him handsome, noble, courageous, witty, eloquent, good. Cosette outdid him. Jean Valjean began again. They were never weary. Marius — that word was inexhaustible; those six letters contained volumes. In this manner, Jean Valjean contrived to remain a long time.

It was so sweet to see Cosette, to forget by her side! It alleviated his wounds. It frequently happened that Basque came twice to announce: “M. Gillenormand sends me to remind Madame la Baronne that dinner is served.”

On those days, Jean Valjean was very thoughtful on his return home.

Was there, then, any truth in that comparison of the chrysalis which had presented itself to the mind of Marius? Was Jean Valjean really a chrysalis who would persist, and who would come to visit his butterfly?

One day he remained still longer than usual. On the following day he observed that there was no fire on the hearth.— “Hello!” he thought. “No fire.” — And he furnished the explanation for himself.— “It is perfectly simple. It is April. The cold weather has ceased.”

“Heavens! how cold it is here!” exclaimed Cosette when she entered.

“Why, no,” said Jean Valjean.

“Was it you who told Basque not to make a fire then?”

“Yes, since we are now in the month of May.”

“But we have a fire until June. One is needed all the year in this cellar.”

“I thought that a fire was unnecessary.”

“That is exactly like one of your ideas!” retorted Cosette.

On the following day there was a fire. But the two arm-chairs were arranged at the other end of the room near the door. “ — What is the meaning of this?” thought Jean Valjean.

He went for the arm-chairs and restored them to their ordinary place near the hearth.

This fire lighted once more encouraged him, however. He prolonged the conversation even beyond its customary limits. As he rose to take his leave, Cosette said to him:

“My husband said a queer thing to me yesterday.”

“What was it?”

“He said to me: ‘Cosette, we have an income of thirty thousand livres. Twenty-seven that you own, and three that my grandfather gives me.’ I replied: ‘That makes thirty.’ He went on: ‘Would you have the courage to live on the three thousand?’ I answered: ‘Yes, on nothing. Provided that it was with you.’ And then I asked: ‘Why do you say that to me?’ He replied: ‘I wanted to know.’”

Jean Valjean found not a word to answer. Cosette probably expected some explanation from him; he listened in gloomy silence. He went back to the Rue de l’Homme Arme; he was so deeply absorbed that he mistook the door and instead of entering his own house, he entered the adjoining dwelling. It was only after having ascended nearly two stories that he perceived his error and went down again.

His mind was swarming with conjectures. It was evident that Marius had his doubts as to the origin of the six hundred thousand francs, that he feared some source that was not pure, who knows? that he had even, perhaps, discovered that the money came from him, Jean Valjean, that he hesitated before this suspicious fortune, and was disinclined to take it as his own, — preferring that both he and Cosette should remain poor, rather than that they should be rich with wealth that was not clean.

Moreover, Jean Valjean began vaguely to surmise that he was being shown the door.

On the following day, he underwent something like a shock on entering the ground-floor room. The arm-chairs had disappeared. There was not a single chair of any sort.

“Ah, what’s this!” exclaimed Cosette as she entered, “no chairs! Where are the arm-chairs?”

“They are no longer here,” replied Jean Valjean.

“This is too much!”

Jean Valjean stammered:

“It was I who told Basque to remove them.”

“And your reason?”

“I have only a few minutes to stay to-day.”

“A brief stay is no reason for remaining standing.”

“I think that Basque needed the chairs for the drawing-room.”

“Why?”

“You have company this evening, no doubt.”

“We expect no one.”

Jean Valjean had not another word to say.

Cosette shrugged her shoulders.

“To have the chairs carried off! The other day you had the fire put out. How odd you are!”

“Adieu!” murmured Jean Valjean.

He did not say: “Adieu, Cosette.” But he had not the strength to say: “Adieu, Madame.”

He went away utterly overwhelmed.

This time he had understood.

On the following day he did not come. Cosette only observed the fact in the evening.

“Why,” said she, “Monsieur Jean has not been here today.”

And she felt a slight twinge at her heart, but she hardly perceived it, being immediately diverted by a kiss from Marius.

On the following day he did not come.

Cosette paid no heed to this, passed her evening and slept well that night, as usual, and thought of it only when she woke. She was so happy! She speedily despatched Nicolette to M. Jean’s house to inquire whether he were ill, and why he had not come on the previous evening. Nicolette brought back the reply of M. Jean that he was not ill. He was busy. He would come soon. As soon as he was able. Moreover, he was on the point of taking a little journey. Madame must remember that it was his custom to take trips from time to time. They were not to worry about him. They were not to think of him.

Nicolette on entering M. Jean’s had repeated to him her mistress’ very words. That Madame had sent her to inquire why M. Jean bad not come on the preceding evening.” — It is two days since I have been there,” said Jean Valjean gently.

But the remark passed unnoticed by Nicolette, who did not report it to Cosette.

CHAPTER IV — ATTRACTION AND EXTINCTION

During the last months of spring and the first months of summer in 1833, the rare passersby in the Marais, the petty shopkeepers, the loungers on thresholds, noticed an old man neatly clad in black, who emerged every day at the same hour, towards nightfall, from the Rue de l’Homme Arme, on the side of the Rue Sainte-Croix-de-la-Bretonnerie, passed in front of the Blancs Manteaux, gained the Rue Culture-Sainte-Catherine, and, on arriving at the Rue de l’Echarpe, turned to the left, and entered the Rue Saint-Louis.

There he walked at a slow pace, with his head strained forward, seeing nothing, hearing nothing, his eye immovably fixed on a point which seemed to be a star to him, which never varied, and which was no other than the corner of the Rue des Filles-du-Calvaire. The nearer he approached the corner of the street the more his eye lighted up; a sort of joy illuminated his pupils like an inward aurora, he had a fascinated and much affected air, his lips indulged in obscure movements, as though he were talking to some one whom he did not see, he smiled vaguely and advanced as slowly as possible. One would have said that, while desirous of reaching his destination, he feared the moment when he should be close at hand. When only a few houses remained between him and that street which appeared to attract him his pace slackened, to such a degree that, at times, one might have thought that he was no longer advancing at all. The vacillation of his head and the fixity of his eyeballs suggested the thought of the magnetic needle seeking the pole. Whatever time he spent on arriving, he was obliged to arrive at last; he reached the Rue des Filles-du-Calvaire; then he halted, he trembled, he thrust his head with a sort of melancholy timidity round the corner of the last house, and gazed into that street, and there was in that tragic look something which resembled the dazzling light of the impossible, and the reflection from a paradise that was closed to him. Then a tear, which had slowly gathered in the corner of his lids, and had become large enough to fall, trickled down his cheek, and sometimes stopped at his mouth. The old man tasted its bitter flavor. Thus he remained for several minutes as though made of stone, then he returned by the same road and with the same step, and, in proportion as he retreated, his glance died out.

Little by little, this old man ceased to go as far as the corner of the Rue des Filles-du-Calvaire; he halted half way in the Rue Saint-Louis; sometimes a little further off, sometimes a little nearer.

One day he stopped at the corner of the Rue Culture-Sainte-Catherine and looked at the Rue des Filles-du-Calvaire from a distance. Then he shook his head slowly from right to left, as though refusing himself something, and retraced his steps.

Soon he no longer came as far as the Rue Saint-Louis. He got as far as the Rue Pavee, shook his head and turned back; then he went no further than the Rue des Trois-Pavillons; then he did not overstep the Blancs-Manteaux. One would have said that he was a pendulum which was no longer wound up, and whose oscillations were growing shorter before ceasing altogether.

Every day he emerged from his house at the same hour, he undertook the same trip, but he no longer completed it, and, perhaps without himself being aware of the fact, he constantly shortened it. His whole countenance expressed this single idea: What is the use? — His eye was dim; no more radiance. His tears were also exhausted; they no longer collected in the corner of his eye-lid; that thoughtful eye was dry. The old man's head was still craned forward; his chin moved at times; the folds in his gaunt neck were painful to behold. Sometimes, when the weather was bad, he had an umbrella under his arm, but he never opened it.

The good women of the quarter said: “He is an innocent.” The children followed him and laughed.

BOOK NINTH. — SUPREME SHADOW, SUPREME DAWN

CHAPTER I — PITY FOR THE UNHAPPY, BUT INDULGENCE FOR THE HAPPY

It is a terrible thing to be happy! How content one is! How all-sufficient one finds it! How, being in possession of the false object of life, happiness, one forgets the true object, duty!

Let us say, however, that the reader would do wrong were he to blame Marius.

Marius, as we have explained, before his marriage, had put no questions to M. Fauchelevent, and, since that time, he had feared to put any to Jean Valjean. He had regretted the promise into which he had allowed himself to be drawn. He had often said to himself that he had done wrong in making that concession to despair. He had confined himself to gradually estranging Jean Valjean from his house and to effacing him, as much as possible, from Cosette's mind. He had, in a manner, always placed himself between Cosette and Jean Valjean, sure that, in this way, she would not perceive nor think of the latter. It was more than effacement, it was an eclipse.

Marius did what he considered necessary and just. He thought that he had serious reasons which the reader has already seen, and others which will be seen later on, for getting rid of Jean Valjean without harshness, but without weakness.

Chance having ordained that he should encounter, in a case which he had argued, a former employee of the Laffitte establishment, he had acquired mysterious information, without seeking it, which he had not been able, it is true, to probe, out of respect for the secret which he had promised to guard, and out of consideration for Jean Valjean's perilous position. He believed at that moment that he had a grave duty to perform: the restitution of the six hundred thousand francs to some one whom he sought with all possible discretion. In the meanwhile, he abstained from touching that money.

As for Cosette, she had not been initiated into any of these secrets; but it would be harsh to condemn her also.

There existed between Marius and her an all-powerful magnetism, which caused her to do, instinctively and almost mechanically, what Marius wished. She was conscious of Marius' will in the direction of "Monsieur Jean," she conformed to it. Her husband had not been obliged to say anything to her; she yielded to the vague but clear pressure of his tacit intentions, and obeyed blindly. Her obedience in this instance consisted in not remembering what Marius forgot. She was not obliged to make any effort to accomplish this. Without her knowing why herself, and without his having any cause to accuse her of it, her soul had become so wholly her husband's that that which was shrouded in gloom in Marius' mind became overcast in hers.

Let us not go too far, however; in what concerns Jean Valjean, this forgetfulness and obliteration were merely superficial. She was rather heedless than forgetful. At bottom, she was sincerely attached to the man whom she had so long called her father; but she loved her husband still more dearly. This was what had somewhat disturbed the balance of her heart, which leaned to one side only.

It sometimes happened that Cosette spoke of Jean Valjean and expressed her surprise. Then Marius calmed her: "He is absent, I think. Did not he say that he was setting out on a journey?"— "That is true," thought Cosette. "He had a habit of disappearing in this fashion. But not for so long." Two or three times she despatched Nicolette to inquire in the Rue de l'Homme Arme whether M. Jean had returned from his journey. Jean Valjean caused the answer "no" to be given.

Cosette asked nothing more, since she had but one need on earth, Marius.

Let us also say that, on their side, Cosette and Marius had also been absent. They had been to Vernon. Marius had taken Cosette to his father's grave.

Marius gradually won Cosette away from Jean Valjean. Cosette allowed it.

Moreover that which is called, far too harshly in certain cases, the ingratitude of children, is not always a thing so deserving of reproach as it is supposed. It is the ingratitude of nature. Nature, as we have elsewhere said, "looks before her." Nature divides living beings into those who are arriving and those who are departing. Those who are departing are turned towards the shadows, those who are arriving towards the light. Hence a gulf which is fatal on the part of the old, and involuntary on the part of the young. This breach, at first insensible, increases slowly, like all separations of branches. The boughs, without becoming detached from the trunk, grow away from it. It is no fault of theirs. Youth goes where there is joy, festivals, vivid lights, love. Old age goes towards the end. They do not lose sight of each other, but there is no longer a close connection. Young people feel the cooling off of life; old people, that of the tomb. Let us not blame these poor children.

CHAPTER II — LAST FLICKERINGS OF A LAMP WITHOUT OIL

One day, Jean Valjean descended his staircase, took three steps in the street, seated himself on a post, on that same stone post where Gavroche had found him meditating on the night between the 5th and the 6th of June; he remained there a few moments, then went up stairs again. This was the last oscillation of the pendulum. On the following day he did not leave his apartment. On the day after that, he did not leave his bed.

His portress, who prepared his scanty repasts, a few cabbages or potatoes with bacon, glanced at the brown earthenware plate and exclaimed:

“But you ate nothing yesterday, poor, dear man!”

“Certainly I did,” replied Jean Valjean.

“The plate is quite full.”

“Look at the water jug. It is empty.”

“That proves that you have drunk; it does not prove that you have eaten.”

“Well,” said Jean Valjean, “what if I felt hungry only for water?”

“That is called thirst, and, when one does not eat at the same time, it is called fever.”

“I will eat to-morrow.”

“Or at Trinity day. Why not to-day? Is it the thing to say: ‘I will eat to-morrow’? The idea of leaving my platter without even touching it! My ladyfinger potatoes were so good!”

Jean Valjean took the old woman’s hand:

“I promise you that I will eat them,” he said, in his benevolent voice.

“I am not pleased with you,” replied the portress.

Jean Valjean saw no other human creature than this good woman. There are streets in Paris through which no one ever passes, and houses to which no one ever comes. He was in one of those streets and one of those houses.

While he still went out, he had purchased of a coppersmith, for a few sous, a little copper crucifix which he had hung up on a nail opposite his bed. That gibbet is always good to look at.

A week passed, and Jean Valjean had not taken a step in his room. He still remained in bed. The portress said to her husband:— “The good man upstairs yonder does not get up, he no longer eats, he will not last long. That man has his sorrows, that he has. You won't get it out of my head that his daughter has made a bad marriage."

The porter replied, with the tone of marital sovereignty:

"If he's rich, let him have a doctor. If he is not rich, let him go without. If he has no doctor he will die."

"And if he has one?"

"He will die," said the porter.

The portress set to scraping away the grass from what she called her pavement, with an old knife, and, as she tore out the blades, she grumbled:

"It's a shame. Such a neat old man! He's as white as a chicken."

She caught sight of the doctor of the quarter as he passed the end of the street; she took it upon herself to request him to come up stairs.

"It's on the second floor," said she. "You have only to enter. As the good man no longer stirs from his bed, the door is always unlocked."

The doctor saw Jean Valjean and spoke with him.

When he came down again the portress interrogated him:

"Well, doctor?"

"Your sick man is very ill indeed."

"What is the matter with him?"

"Everything and nothing. He is a man who, to all appearances, has lost some person who is dear to him. People die of that."

"What did he say to you?"

"He told me that he was in good health."

"Shall you come again, doctor?"

"Yes," replied the doctor. "But some one else besides must come."

CHAPTER III — A PEN IS HEAVY TO THE MAN WHO LIFTED THE FAUCHELEVENT’S CART

One evening Jean Valjean found difficulty in raising himself on his elbow; he felt of his wrist and could not find his pulse; his breath was short and halted at times; he recognized the fact that he was weaker than he had ever been before. Then, no doubt under the pressure of some supreme preoccupation, he made an effort, drew himself up into a sitting posture and dressed himself. He put on his old workingman’s clothes. As he no longer went out, he had returned to them and preferred them. He was obliged to pause many times while dressing himself; merely putting his arms through his waistcoat made the perspiration trickle from his forehead.

Since he had been alone, he had placed his bed in the antechamber, in order to inhabit that deserted apartment as little as possible.

He opened the valise and drew from it Cosette’s outfit.

He spread it out on his bed.

The Bishop’s candlesticks were in their place on the chimney-piece. He took from a drawer two wax candles and put them in the candlesticks. Then, although it was still broad daylight, — it was summer, — he lighted them. In the same way candles are to be seen lighted in broad daylight in chambers where there is a corpse.

Every step that he took in going from one piece of furniture to another exhausted him, and he was obliged to sit down. It was not ordinary fatigue which expends the strength only to renew it; it was the remnant of all movement possible to him, it was life drained which flows away drop by drop in overwhelming efforts and which will never be renewed.

The chair into which he allowed himself to fall was placed in front of that mirror, so fatal for him, so providential for Marius, in which he had read Cosette’s reversed writing on the blotting book. He caught sight of himself in this mirror, and did not recognize himself. He was eighty years old; before Marius’ marriage, he would have hardly been taken for fifty; that year had counted for thirty. What he bore on his brow was no longer the wrinkles of age, it was the mysterious mark of death. The hollowing of that pitiless nail could be felt there. His cheeks were pendulous; the skin of his face had the color which would lead one to think that it already had earth upon it; the corners of his mouth drooped as in the mask which the ancients sculptured on tombs. He gazed into space with an air of reproach; one would have said that he was one of those grand tragic beings who have cause to complain of some one.

He was in that condition, the last phase of dejection, in which sorrow no longer flows; it is coagulated, so to speak; there is something on the soul like a clot of despair.

Night had come. He laboriously dragged a table and the old arm-chair to the fireside, and placed upon the table a pen, some ink and some paper.

That done, he had a fainting fit. When he recovered consciousness, he was thirsty. As he could not lift the jug, he tipped it over painfully towards his mouth, and swallowed a draught.

As neither the pen nor the ink had been used for a long time, the point of the pen had curled up, the ink had dried away, he was forced to rise and put a few drops of water in the ink, which he did not accomplish without pausing and sitting down two or three times, and he was compelled to write with the back of the pen. He wiped his brow from time to time.

Then he turned towards the bed, and, still seated, for he could not stand, he gazed at the little black gown and all those beloved objects.

These contemplations lasted for hours which seemed minutes.

All at once he shivered, he felt that a child was taking possession of him; he rested his elbows on the table, which was illuminated by the Bishop’s candles and took up the pen. His hand trembled. He wrote slowly the few following lines:

“Cosette, I bless thee. I am going to explain to thee. Thy husband was right in giving me to understand that I ought to go away; but there is a little error in what he believed, though he was in the right. He is excellent. Love him well even after I am dead. Monsieur Pontmercy, love my darling child well. Cosette, this paper will be found; this is what I wish to say to thee, thou wilt see the figures, if I have the strength to recall them, listen well, this money is really thine. Here is the whole matter: White jet comes from Norway, black jet comes from England, black glass jewellery comes from Germany. Jet is the lightest, the most precious, the most costly. Imitations can be made in France as well as in Germany. What is needed is a little anvil two inches square, and a lamp burning spirits of wine to soften the wax. The wax was formerly made with resin and lampblack, and cost four livres the pound. I invented a way of making it with gum shellac and turpentine. It does not cost more than thirty sous, and is much better. Buckles are made with a violet glass which is stuck fast, by means of this wax, to a little framework of black iron. The glass must be violet for iron jewellery, and black for gold jewellery. Spain buys a great deal of it. It is the country of jet . . .”

Here he paused, the pen fell from his fingers, he was seized by one of those sobs which at times welled up from the very depths of his being; the poor man clasped his head in both hands, and meditated.

“Oh!” he exclaimed within himself [lamentable cries, heard by God alone], “all is over. I shall never see her more. She is a smile which passed over me. I am about to plunge into the night without even seeing her again. Oh! one minute, one instant, to hear her voice, to touch her dress, to gaze upon her, upon her, the angel! and then to die! It is nothing to die, what is frightful is to die without seeing her. She would smile on me, she would say a word to me, would that do any harm to any one? No, all is over, and forever. Here I am all alone. My God! My God! I shall never see her again!” At that moment there came a knock at the door.

CHAPTER IV — A BOTTLE OF INK WHICH ONLY SUCCEEDED IN WHITENING

That same day, or to speak more accurately, that same evening, as Marius left the table, and was on the point of withdrawing to his study, having a case to look over, Basque handed him a letter saying: “The person who wrote the letter is in the antechamber.”

Cosette had taken the grandfather’s arm and was strolling in the garden.

A letter, like a man, may have an unprepossessing exterior. Coarse paper, coarsely folded — the very sight of certain missives is displeasing.

The letter which Basque had brought was of this sort.

Marius took it. It smelled of tobacco. Nothing evokes a memory like an odor. Marius recognized that tobacco. He looked at the superscription: “To Monsieur, Monsieur le Baron Pommerci. At his hotel.” The recognition of the tobacco caused him to recognize the writing as well. It may be said that amazement has its lightning flashes.

Marius was, as it were, illuminated by one of these flashes.

The sense of smell, that mysterious aid to memory, had just revived a whole world within him. This was certainly the paper, the fashion of folding, the dull tint of ink; it was certainly the well-known handwriting, especially was it the same tobacco.

The Jondrette garret rose before his mind.

Thus, strange freak of chance! one of the two scents which he had so diligently sought, the one in connection with which he had lately again exerted so many efforts and which he supposed to be forever lost, had come and presented itself to him of its own accord.

He eagerly broke the seal, and read:

> “Monsieur le Baron: — If the Supreme Being had given me the talents,
> I might have been baron Thenard, member of the Institute [academy
> of ciences], but I am not. I only bear the same as him, happy if
> this memory recommends me to the eccellence of your kindnesses.
> The benefit with which you will honor me will be reciprocle.
> I am in possession of a secret concerning an individual.
> This individual concerns you. I hold the secret at your disposal
> desiring to have the honor to be huseful to you. I will furnish

you with the simple means of driving from your honorabel family that individual who has no right there, madame la baronne being of lofty birth. The sanctuary of virtue cannot cohabit longer with crime without abdicating.

"I awate in the entichamber the orders of monsieur le baron.

"With respect."

The letter was signed "Thenard."

This signature was not false. It was merely a trifle abridged.

Moreover, the rigmarole and the orthography completed the revelation. The certificate of origin was complete.

Marius' emotion was profound. After a start of surprise, he underwent a feeling of happiness. If he could now but find that other man of whom he was in search, the man who had saved him, Marius, there would be nothing left for him to desire.

He opened the drawer of his secretary, took out several bank-notes, put them in his pocket, closed the secretary again, and rang the bell. Basque half opened the door.

"Show the man in," said Marius.

Basque announced:

"Monsieur Thenard."

A man entered.

A fresh surprise for Marius. The man who entered was an utter stranger to him.

This man, who was old, moreover, had a thick nose, his chin swathed in a cravat, green spectacles with a double screen of green taffeta over his eyes, and his hair was plastered and flattened down on his brow on a level with his eyebrows like the wigs of English coachmen in "high life." His hair was gray. He was dressed in black from head to foot, in garments that were very threadbare but clean; a bunch of seals depending from his fob suggested the idea of a watch. He held in his hand an old hat! He walked in a bent attitude, and the curve in his spine augmented the profundity of his bow.

The first thing that struck the observer was, that this personage's coat, which was too ample although carefully buttoned, had not been made for him.

Here a short digression becomes necessary.

There was in Paris at that epoch, in a low-lived old lodging in the Rue Beautreillis, near the Arsenal, an ingenious Jew whose profession was to change villains into honest men. Not for too long, which might have proved embarrassing for the villain. The change was on sight, for a day or two, at the rate of thirty sous a day, by means of a costume which resembled the honesty of the world in general as nearly as possible. This costumer was called "the Changer"; the pickpockets of Paris had given him this name and knew him by no other. He had a tolerably complete wardrobe. The rags with which he tricked out people were almost probable. He had specialties and categories; on each nail of his shop hung a social status, threadbare and worn; here the suit of a magistrate, there the outfit of a Curé, beyond the outfit of a banker, in one corner the costume of a retired military man, elsewhere the habiliments of a man of letters, and further on the dress of a statesman.

This creature was the costumer of the immense drama which knavery plays in Paris. His lair was the green-room whence theft emerged, and into which roguery retreated. A tattered knave arrived at this dressing-room, deposited his thirty sous and selected, according to the part which he wished to play, the costume which suited him, and on descending the stairs once more, the knave was a somebody. On the following day, the clothes were faithfully returned, and the Changer, who trusted the thieves with everything, was never robbed. There was one inconvenience about these clothes, they "did not fit"; not having been made for those who wore them, they were too tight for one, too loose for another and did not adjust themselves to any one. Every pickpocket who exceeded or fell short of the human average was ill at his ease in the Changer's costumes. It was necessary that one should not be either too fat or too lean. The changer had foreseen only ordinary men. He had taken the measure of the species from the first rascal who came to hand, who is neither stout nor thin, neither tall nor short. Hence adaptations which were sometimes difficult and from which the Changer's clients extricated themselves as best they might. So much the worse for the exceptions! The suit of the statesman, for instance, black from head to foot, and consequently proper, would have been too large for Pitt and too small for Castelcicala. The costume of a statesman was designated as follows in the Changer's catalogue; we copy:

“A coat of black cloth, trowsers of black wool, a silk waistcoat, boots and linen.” On the margin there stood: ex-ambassador, and a note which we also copy: “In a separate box, a neatly frizzed peruke, green glasses, seals, and two small quills an inch long, wrapped in cotton.” All this belonged to the statesman, the ex-ambassador. This whole costume was, if we may so express ourselves, debilitated; the seams were white, a vague button-hole yawned at one of the elbows; moreover, one of the coat buttons was missing on the breast; but this was only detail; as the hand of the statesman should always be thrust into his coat and laid upon his heart, its function was to conceal the absent button.

If Marius had been familiar with the occult institutions of Paris, he would instantly have recognized upon the back of the visitor whom Basque had just shown in, the statesman’s suit borrowed from the pick-me-down-that shop of the Changer.

Marius’ disappointment on beholding another man than the one whom he expected to see turned to the newcomer’s disadvantage.

He surveyed him from head to foot, while that personage made exaggerated bows, and demanded in a curt tone:

“What do you want?”

The man replied with an amiable grin of which the caressing smile of a crocodile will furnish some idea:

“It seems to me impossible that I should not have already had the honor of seeing Monsieur le Baron in society. I think I actually did meet monsieur personally, several years ago, at the house of Madame la Princesse Bagration and in the drawing-rooms of his Lordship the Vicomte Dambray, peer of France.”

It is always a good bit of tactics in knavery to pretend to recognize some one whom one does not know.

Marius paid attention to the manner of this man’s speech. He spied on his accent and gesture, but his disappointment increased; the pronunciation was nasal and absolutely unlike the dry, shrill tone which he had expected.

He was utterly routed.

“I know neither Madame Bagration nor M. Dambray,” said he. “I have never set foot in the house of either of them in my life.”

The reply was ungracious. The personage, determined to be gracious at any cost, insisted.

“Then it must have been at Chateaubriand’s that I have seen Monsieur! I know Chateaubriand very well. He is very affable. He sometimes says to me: ‘Thenard, my friend . . . won’t you drink a glass of wine with me?’”

Marius’ brow grew more and more severe:

“I have never had the honor of being received by M. de Chateaubriand. Let us cut it short. What do you want?”

The man bowed lower at that harsh voice.

“Monsieur le Baron, deign to listen to me. There is in America, in a district near Panama, a village called la Joya. That village is composed of a single house, a large, square house of three stories, built of bricks dried in the sun, each side of the square five hundred feet in length, each story retreating twelve feet back of the story below, in such a manner as to leave in front a terrace which makes the circuit of the edifice, in the centre an inner court where the provisions and munitions are kept; no windows, loopholes, no doors, ladders, ladders to mount from the ground to the first terrace, and from the first to the second, and from the second to the third, ladders to descend into the inner court, no doors to the chambers, trap-doors, no staircases to the chambers, ladders; in the evening the traps are closed, the ladders are withdrawn carbines and blunderbusses trained from the loopholes; no means of entering, a house by day, a citadel by night, eight hundred inhabitants, — that is the village. Why so many precautions? because the country is dangerous; it is full of cannibals. Then why do people go there? because the country is marvellous; gold is found there.”

“What are you driving at?” interrupted Marius, who had passed from disappointment to impatience.

“At this, Monsieur le Baron. I am an old and weary diplomat. Ancient civilization has thrown me on my own devices. I want to try savages.”

“Well?”

“Monsieur le Baron, egotism is the law of the world. The proletarian peasant woman, who toils by the day, turns round when the diligence passes by, the peasant proprietress, who toils in her field, does not turn round. The dog of the poor man barks at the rich man, the dog of the rich man barks at the poor man. Each one for himself. Self-interest — that’s the object of men. Gold, that’s the loadstone.”

“What then? Finish.”

“I should like to go and establish myself at la Joya. There are three of us. I have my spouse and my young lady; a very beautiful girl. The journey is long and costly. I need a little money."

"What concern is that of mine?" demanded Marius.

The stranger stretched his neck out of his cravat, a gesture characteristic of the vulture, and replied with an augmented smile.

"Has not Monsieur le Baron perused my letter?"

There was some truth in this. The fact is, that the contents of the epistle had slipped Marius' mind. He had seen the writing rather than read the letter. He could hardly recall it. But a moment ago a fresh start had been given him. He had noted that detail: "my spouse and my young lady."

He fixed a penetrating glance on the stranger. An examining judge could not have done the look better. He almost lay in wait for him.

He confined himself to replying:

"State the case precisely."

The stranger inserted his two hands in both his fobs, drew himself up without straightening his dorsal column, but scrutinizing Marius in his turn, with the green gaze of his spectacles.

"So be it, Monsieur le Baron. I will be precise. I have a secret to sell to you."

"A secret?"

"A secret."

"Which concerns me?"

"Somewhat."

"What is the secret?"

Marius scrutinized the man more and more as he listened to him.

"I commence gratis," said the stranger. "You will see that I am interesting."

"Speak."

"Monsieur le Baron, you have in your house a thief and an assassin."

Marius shuddered.

"In my house? no," said he.

The imperturbable stranger brushed his hat with his elbow and went on:

"An assassin and a thief. Remark, Monsieur le Baron, that I do not here speak of ancient deeds, deeds of the past which have lapsed, which can be effaced by limitation before the law and by repentance before God. I speak of recent deeds, of actual facts as still unknown to justice at this hour. I continue. This man has insinuated himself into your confidence, and almost into your family under a false name. I am about to tell you his real name. And to tell it to you for nothing.”

“I am listening.”

“His name is Jean Valjean.”

“I know it.”

“I am going to tell you, equally for nothing, who he is.”

“Say on.”

“He is an ex-convict.”

“I know it.”

“You know it since I have had the honor of telling you.”

“No. I knew it before.”

Marius’ cold tone, that double reply of “I know it,” his laconicism, which was not favorable to dialogue, stirred up some smouldering wrath in the stranger. He launched a furious glance on the sly at Marius, which was instantly extinguished. Rapid as it was, this glance was of the kind which a man recognizes when he has once beheld it; it did not escape Marius. Certain flashes can only proceed from certain souls; the eye, that vent-hole of the thought, glows with it; spectacles hide nothing; try putting a pane of glass over hell!

The stranger resumed with a smile:

“I will not permit myself to contradict Monsieur le Baron. In any case, you ought to perceive that I am well informed. Now what I have to tell you is known to myself alone. This concerns the fortune of Madame la Baronne. It is an extraordinary secret. It is for sale — I make you the first offer of it. Cheap. Twenty thousand francs.”

“I know that secret as well as the others,” said Marius.

The personage felt the necessity of lowering his price a trifle.

“Monsieur le Baron, say ten thousand francs and I will speak.”

“I repeat to you that there is nothing which you can tell me. I know what you wish to say to me.”

A fresh flash gleamed in the man’s eye. He exclaimed:

“But I must dine to-day, nevertheless. It is an extraordinary secret, I tell you. Monsieur le Baron, I will speak. I speak. Give me twenty francs.”

Marius gazed intently at him:

“I know your extraordinary secret, just as I knew Jean Valjean’s name, just as I know your name.”

“My name?”

“Yes.”

“That is not difficult, Monsieur le Baron. I had the honor to write to you and to tell it to you. Thenard.”

“ — Dier.”

“Hey?”

“Thenardier.”

“Who’s that?”

In danger the porcupine bristles up, the beetle feigns death, the old guard forms in a square; this man burst into laughter.

Then he flicked a grain of dust from the sleeve of his coat with a fillip.

Marius continued:

“You are also Jondrette the workman, Fabantou the comedian, Genflot the poet, Don Alvares the Spaniard, and Mistress Balizard.”

“Mistress what?”

“And you kept a pot-house at Montfermeil.”

“A pot-house! Never.”

“And I tell you that your name is Thenardier.”

“I deny it.”

“And that you are a rascal. Here.”

And Marius drew a bank-note from his pocket and flung it in his face.

“Thanks! Pardon me! five hundred francs! Monsieur le Baron!”

And the man, overcome, bowed, seized the note and examined it.

“Five hundred francs!” he began again, taken aback. And he stammered in a low voice: “An honest rustler.”

Then brusquely:

“Well, so be it!” he exclaimed. “Let us put ourselves at our ease.”

And with the agility of a monkey, flinging back his hair, tearing off his spectacles, and withdrawing from his nose by sleight of hand the two quills of which mention was recently made, and which the reader has also met with on another page of this book, he took off his face as the man takes off his hat.

His eye lighted up; his uneven brow, with hollows in some places and bumps in others, hideously wrinkled at the top, was laid bare, his nose had become as sharp as a beak; the fierce and sagacious profile of the man of prey reappeared.

“Monsieur le Baron is infallible,” he said in a clear voice whence all nasal twang had disappeared, “I am Thenardier.”

And he straightened up his crooked back.

Thenardier, for it was really he, was strangely surprised; he would have been troubled, had he been capable of such a thing. He had come to bring astonishment, and it was he who had received it. This humiliation had been worth five hundred francs to him, and, taking it all in all, he accepted it; but he was none the less bewildered.

He beheld this Baron Pontmercy for the first time, and, in spite of his disguise, this Baron Pontmercy recognized him, and recognized him thoroughly. And not only was this Baron perfectly informed as to Thenardier, but he seemed well posted as to Jean Valjean. Who was this almost beardless young man, who was so glacial and so generous, who knew people's names, who knew all their names, and who opened his purse to them, who bullied rascals like a judge, and who paid them like a dupe?

Thenardier, the reader will remember, although he had been Marius' neighbor, had never seen him, which is not unusual in Paris; he had formerly, in a vague way, heard his daughters talk of a very poor young man named Marius who lived in the house. He had written to him, without knowing him, the letter with which the reader is acquainted.

No connection between that Marius and M. le Baron Pontmercy was possible in his mind.

As for the name Pontmercy, it will be recalled that, on the battlefield of Waterloo, he had only heard the last two syllables, for which he always entertained the legitimate scorn which one owes to what is merely an expression of thanks.

However, through his daughter Azelma, who had started on the scent of the married pair on the 16th of February, and through his own personal researches, he had succeeded in learning many things, and, from the depths of his own gloom, he had contrived to grasp more than one mysterious clew. He had discovered, by dint of industry, or, at least, by dint of induction, he had guessed who the man was whom he had encountered on a certain day in the Grand Sewer. From the man he had easily reached the name. He knew that Madame la Baronne Pontmercy was Cosette. But he meant to be discreet in that quarter.

Who was Cosette? He did not know exactly himself. He did, indeed, catch an inkling of illegitimacy, the history of Fantine had always seemed to him equivocal; but what was the use of talking about that? in order to cause himself to be paid for his silence? He had, or thought he had, better wares than that for sale. And, according to all appearances, if he were to come and make to the Baron Pontmercy this revelation — and without proof: “Your wife is a bastard,” the only result would be to attract the boot of the husband towards the loins of the revealer.

From Thenardier’s point of view, the conversation with Marius had not yet begun. He ought to have drawn back, to have modified his strategy, to have abandoned his position, to have changed his front; but nothing essential had been compromised as yet, and he had five hundred francs in his pocket. Moreover, he had something decisive to say, and, even against this very well-informed and well-armed Baron Pontmercy, he felt himself strong. For men of Thenardier’s nature, every dialogue is a combat. In the one in which he was about to engage, what was his situation? He did not know to whom he was speaking, but he did know of what he was speaking, he made this rapid review of his inner forces, and after having said: “I am Thenardier,” he waited.

Marius had become thoughtful. So he had hold of Thenardier at last. That man whom he had so greatly desired to find was before him. He could honor Colonel Pontmercy’s recommendation.

He felt humiliated that that hero should have owned anything to this villain, and that the letter of change drawn from the depths of the tomb by his father upon him, Marius, had been protested up to that day. It also seemed to him, in the complex state of his mind towards Thenardier, that there was occasion to avenge the Colonel for the misfortune of having been saved by such a rascal. In any case, he was content. He was about to deliver the Colonel’s shade from this unworthy creditor at last, and it seemed to him that he was on the point of rescuing his father’s memory from the debtors’ prison. By the side of this duty there was another — to elucidate, if possible, the source of Cosette’s fortune. The opportunity appeared to present itself. Perhaps Thenardier knew something. It might prove useful to see the bottom of this man.

He commenced with this.

Thenardier had caused the “honest rustler” to disappear in his fob, and was gazing at Marius with a gentleness that was almost tender.

Marius broke the silence.

“Thenardier, I have told you your name. Now, would you like to have me tell you your secret — the one that you came here to reveal to me? I have information of my own, also. You shall see that I know more about it than you do. Jean Valjean, as you have said, is an assassin and a thief. A thief, because he robbed a wealthy manufacturer, whose ruin he brought about. An assassin, because he assassinated police-agent Javert."

"I don't understand, sir," ejaculated Thenardier.

"I will make myself intelligible. In a certain arrondissement of the Pas de Calais, there was, in 1822, a man who had fallen out with justice, and who, under the name of M. Madeleine, had regained his status and rehabilitated himself. This man had become a just man in the full force of the term. In a trade, the manufacture of black glass goods, he made the fortune of an entire city. As far as his personal fortune was concerned he made that also, but as a secondary matter, and in some sort, by accident. He was the foster-father of the poor. He founded hospitals, opened schools, visited the sick, dowered young girls, supported widows, and adopted orphans; he was like the guardian angel of the country. He refused the cross, he was appointed Mayor. A liberated convict knew the secret of a penalty incurred by this man in former days; he denounced him, and had him arrested, and profited by the arrest to come to Paris and cause the banker Laffitte, — I have the fact from the cashier himself, — by means of a false signature, to hand over to him the sum of over half a million which belonged to M. Madeleine. This convict who robbed M. Madeleine was Jean Valjean. As for the other fact, you have nothing to tell me about it either. Jean Valjean killed the agent Javert; he shot him with a pistol. I, the person who is speaking to you, was present."

Thenardier cast upon Marius the sovereign glance of a conquered man who lays his hand once more upon the victory, and who has just regained, in one instant, all the ground which he has lost. But the smile returned instantly. The inferior's triumph in the presence of his superior must be wheedling.

Thenardier contented himself with saying to Marius:

"Monsieur le Baron, we are on the wrong track."

And he emphasized this phrase by making his bunch of seals execute an expressive whirl.

"What!" broke forth Marius, "do you dispute that? These are facts."

"They are chimeras. The confidence with which Monsieur le Baron honors me renders it my duty to tell him so. Truth and justice before all things. I do not like to see folks accused unjustly. Monsieur le Baron, Jean Valjean did not rob M. Madeleine and Jean Valjean did not kill Javert."

“This is too much! How is this?”

“For two reasons.”

“What are they? Speak.”

“This is the first: he did not rob M. Madeleine, because it is Jean Valjean himself who was M. Madeleine.”

“What tale are you telling me?”

“And this is the second: he did not assassinate Javert, because the person who killed Javert was Javert.”

“What do you mean to say?”

“That Javert committed suicide.”

“Prove it! prove it!” cried Marius beside himself.

Thenardier resumed, scanning his phrase after the manner of the ancient Alexandrine measure:

“Police-agent-Ja-vert-was-found-drowned-un-der-a-boat-of-the-Pont-au-Change.”

“But prove it!”

Thenardier drew from his pocket a large envelope of gray paper, which seemed to contain sheets folded in different sizes.

“I have my papers,” he said calmly.

And he added:

“Monsieur le Baron, in your interests I desired to know Jean Valjean thoroughly. I say that Jean Valjean and M. Madeleine are one and the same man, and I say that Javert had no other assassin than Javert. If I speak, it is because I have proofs. Not manuscript proofs — writing is suspicious, handwriting is complaisant, — but printed proofs.”

As he spoke, Thenardier extracted from the envelope two copies of newspapers, yellow, faded, and strongly saturated with tobacco. One of these two newspapers, broken at every fold and falling into rags, seemed much older than the other.

“Two facts, two proofs,” remarked Thenardier. And he offered the two newspapers, unfolded, to Marius.

The reader is acquainted with these two papers. One, the most ancient, a number of the Drapeau Blanc of the 25th of July, 1823, the text of which can be seen in the first volume, established the identity of M. Madeleine and Jean Valjean.

The other, a Moniteur of the 15th of June, 1832, announced the suicide of Javert, adding that it appeared from a verbal report of Javert to the prefect that, having been taken prisoner in the barricade of the Rue de la Chanvrerie, he had owed his life to the magnanimity of an insurgent who, holding him under his pistol, had fired into the air, instead of blowing out his brains.

Marius read. He had evidence, a certain date, irrefragable proof, these two newspapers had not been printed expressly for the purpose of backing up Thenardier’s statements; the note printed in the Moniteur had been an administrative communication from the Prefecture of Police. Marius could not doubt.

The information of the cashier-clerk had been false, and he himself had been deceived.

Jean Valjean, who had suddenly grown grand, emerged from his cloud. Marius could not repress a cry of joy.

“Well, then this unhappy wretch is an admirable man! the whole of that fortune really belonged to him! he is Madeleine, the providence of a whole countryside! he is Jean Valjean, Javert’s savior! he is a hero! he is a saint!”

“He’s not a saint, and he’s not a hero!” said Thenardier. “He’s an assassin and a robber.”

And he added, in the tone of a man who begins to feel that he possesses some authority:

“Let us be calm.”

Robber, assassin — those words which Marius thought had disappeared and which returned, fell upon him like an ice-cold shower-bath.

“Again!” said he.

“Always,” ejaculated Thenardier. “Jean Valjean did not rob Madeleine, but he is a thief. He did not kill Javert, but he is a murderer.”

“Will you speak,” retorted Marius, “of that miserable theft, committed forty years ago, and expiated, as your own newspapers prove, by a whole life of repentance, of self-abnegation and of virtue?”

“I say assassination and theft, Monsieur le Baron, and I repeat that I am speaking of actual facts. What I have to reveal to you is absolutely unknown. It belongs to unpublished matter. And perhaps you will find in it the source of the fortune so skilfully presented to Madame la Baronne by Jean Valjean. I say skilfully, because, by a gift of that nature it would not be so very unskilful to slip into an honorable house whose comforts one would then share, and, at the same stroke, to conceal one’s crime, and to enjoy one’s theft, to bury one’s name and to create for oneself a family.”

“I might interrupt you at this point,” said Marius, “but go on.”

“Monsieur le Baron, I will tell you all, leaving the recompense to your generosity. This secret is worth massive gold. You will say to me: ‘Why do not you apply to Jean Valjean?’ For a very simple reason; I know that he has stripped himself, and stripped himself in your favor, and I consider the combination ingenious; but he has no longer a son, he would show me his empty hands, and, since I am in need of some money for my trip to la Joya, I prefer you, you who have it all, to him who has nothing. I am a little fatigued, permit me to take a chair.”

Marius seated himself and motioned to him to do the same.

Thenardier installed himself on a tufted chair, picked up his two newspapers, thrust them back into their envelope, and murmured as he pecked at the Drapeau Blanc with his nail: “It cost me a good deal of trouble to get this one.”

That done he crossed his legs and stretched himself out on the back of the chair, an attitude characteristic of people who are sure of what they are saying, then he entered upon his subject gravely, emphasizing his words:

“Monsieur le Baron, on the 6th of June, 1832, about a year ago, on the day of the insurrection, a man was in the Grand Sewer of Paris, at the point where the sewer enters the Seine, between the Pont des Invalides and the Pont de Jena.”

Marius abruptly drew his chair closer to that of Thenardier. Thenardier noticed this movement and continued with the deliberation of an orator who holds his interlocutor and who feels his adversary palpitating under his words:

“This man, forced to conceal himself, and for reasons, moreover, which are foreign to politics, had adopted the sewer as his domicile and had a key to it. It was, I repeat, on the 6th of June; it might have been eight o’clock in the evening. The man hears a noise in the sewer. Greatly surprised, he hides himself and lies in wait. It was the sound of footsteps, some one was walking in the dark, and coming in his direction. Strange to say, there was another man in the sewer besides himself. The grating of the outlet from the sewer was not far off. A little light which fell through it permitted him to recognize the newcomer, and to see that the man was carrying something on his back. He was walking in a bent attitude. The man who was walking in a bent attitude was an ex-convict, and what he was dragging on his shoulders was a corpse. Assassination caught in the very act, if ever there was such a thing. As for the theft, that is understood; one does not kill a man gratis. This convict was on his way to fling the body into the river. One fact is to be noticed, that before reaching the exit grating, this convict, who had come a long distance in the sewer, must, necessarily, have encountered a frightful quagmire where it seems as though he might have left the body, but the sewermen would have found the assassinated man the very next day, while at work on the quagmire, and that did not suit the assassin's plans. He had preferred to traverse that quagmire with his burden, and his exertions must have been terrible, for it is impossible to risk one's life more completely; I don't understand how he could have come out of that alive."

Marius' chair approached still nearer. Thenardier took advantage of this to draw a long breath. He went on:

"Monsieur le Baron, a sewer is not the Champ de Mars. One lacks everything there, even room. When two men are there, they must meet. That is what happened. The man domiciled there and the passer-by were forced to bid each other good-day, greatly to the regret of both. The passer-by said to the inhabitant:— "You see what I have on my back, I must get out, you have the key, give it to me." That convict was a man of terrible strength. There was no way of refusing. Nevertheless, the man who had the key parleyed, simply to gain time. He examined the dead man, but he could see nothing, except that the latter was young, well dressed, with the air of being rich, and all disfigured with blood. While talking, the man contrived to tear and pull off behind, without the assassin perceiving it, a bit of the assassinated man's coat. A document for conviction, you understand; a means of recovering the trace of things and of bringing home the crime to the criminal. He put this document for conviction in his pocket. After which he opened the grating, made the man go out with his embarrassment on his back, closed the grating again, and ran off, not caring to be mixed up with the remainder of the adventure and above all, not wishing to be present when the assassin threw the assassinated man into the river. Now you comprehend. The man who was carrying the corpse was Jean Valjean; the one who had the key is speaking to you at this moment; and the piece of the coat . . ."

Thenardier completed his phrase by drawing from his pocket, and holding, on a level with his eyes, nipped between his two thumbs and his two forefingers, a strip of torn black cloth, all covered with dark spots.

Marius had sprung to his feet, pale, hardly able to draw his breath, with his eyes riveted on the fragment of black cloth, and, without uttering a word, without taking his eyes from that fragment, he retreated to the wall and fumbled with his right hand along the wall for a key which was in the lock of a cupboard near the chimney.

He found the key, opened the cupboard, plunged his arm into it without looking, and without his frightened gaze quitting the rag which Thenardier still held outspread.

But Thenardier continued:

“Monsieur le Baron, I have the strongest of reasons for believing that the assassinated young man was an opulent stranger lured into a trap by Jean Valjean, and the bearer of an enormous sum of money.”

“The young man was myself, and here is the coat!” cried Marius, and he flung upon the floor an old black coat all covered with blood.

Then, snatching the fragment from the hands of Thenardier, he crouched down over the coat, and laid the torn morsel against the tattered skirt. The rent fitted exactly, and the strip completed the coat.

Thenardier was petrified.

This is what he thought: “I’m struck all of a heap.”

Marius rose to his feet trembling, despairing, radiant.

He fumbled in his pocket and stalked furiously to Thenardier, presenting to him and almost thrusting in his face his fist filled with bank-notes for five hundred and a thousand francs.

“You are an infamous wretch! you are a liar, a calumniator, a villain. You came to accuse that man, you have only justified him; you wanted to ruin him, you have only succeeded in glorifying him. And it is you who are the thief! And it is you who are the assassin! I saw you, Thenardier Jondrette, in that lair on the Rue de l’Hopital. I know enough about you to send you to the galleys and even further if I choose. Here are a thousand francs, bully that you are!”

And he flung a thousand franc note at Thenardier.

“Ah! Jondrette Thenardier, vile rascal! Let this serve you as a lesson, you dealer in second-hand secrets, merchant of mysteries, rummager of the shadows, wretch! Take these five hundred francs and get out of here! Waterloo protects you.”

“Waterloo!” growled Thenardier, pocketing the five hundred francs along with the thousand.

"Yes, assassin! You there saved the life of a Colonel. . ."

"Of a General," said Thenardier, elevating his head.

"Of a Colonel!" repeated Marius in a rage. "I wouldn't give a ha'penny for a general. And you come here to commit infamies! I tell you that you have committed all crimes. Go! disappear! Only be happy, that is all that I desire. Ah! monster! here are three thousand francs more. Take them. You will depart to-morrow, for America, with your daughter; for your wife is dead, you abominable liar. I shall watch over your departure, you ruffian, and at that moment I will count out to you twenty thousand francs. Go get yourself hung elsewhere!"

"Monsieur le Baron!" replied Thenardier, bowing to the very earth, "eternal gratitude." And Thenardier left the room, understanding nothing, stupefied and delighted with this sweet crushing beneath sacks of gold, and with that thunder which had burst forth over his head in bank-bills.

Struck by lightning he was, but he was also content; and he would have been greatly angered had he had a lightning rod to ward off such lightning as that.

Let us finish with this man at once.

Two days after the events which we are at this moment narrating, he set out, thanks to Marius' care, for America under a false name, with his daughter Azelma, furnished with a draft on New York for twenty thousand francs.

The moral wretchedness of Thenardier, the bourgeois who had missed his vocation, was irremediable. He was in America what he had been in Europe. Contact with an evil man sometimes suffices to corrupt a good action and to cause evil things to spring from it. With Marius' money, Thenardier set up as a slave-dealer.

As soon as Thenardier had left the house, Marius rushed to the garden, where Cosette was still walking.

"Cosette! Cosette!" he cried. "Come! come quick! Let us go. Basque, a carriage! Cosette, come. Ah! My God! It was he who saved my life! Let us not lose a minute! Put on your shawl."

Cosette thought him mad and obeyed.

He could not breathe, he laid his hand on his heart to restrain its throbbing. He paced back and forth with huge strides, he embraced Cosette:

"Ah! Cosette! I am an unhappy wretch!" said he.

Marius was bewildered. He began to catch a glimpse in Jean Valjean of some indescribably lofty and melancholy figure. An unheard-of virtue, supreme and sweet, humble in its immensity, appeared to him. The convict was transfigured into Christ.

Marius was dazzled by this prodigy. He did not know precisely what he beheld, but it was grand.

In an instant, a hackney-carriage stood in front of the door.

Marius helped Cosette in and darted in himself.

“Driver,” said he, “Rue de l’Homme Arme, Number 7.”

The carriage drove off.

“Ah! what happiness!” ejaculated Cosette. “Rue de l’Homme Arme, I did not dare to speak to you of that. We are going to see M. Jean.”

“Thy father! Cosette, thy father more than ever. Cosette, I guess it. You told me that you had never received the letter that I sent you by Gavroche. It must have fallen into his hands. Cosette, he went to the barricade to save me. As it is a necessity with him to be an angel, he saved others also; he saved Javert. He rescued me from that gulf to give me to you. He carried me on his back through that frightful sewer. Ah! I am a monster of ingratitude. Cosette, after having been your providence, he became mine. Just imagine, there was a terrible quagmire enough to drown one a hundred times over, to drown one in mire. Cosette! he made me traverse it. I was unconscious; I saw nothing, I heard nothing, I could know nothing of my own adventure. We are going to bring him back, to take him with us, whether he is willing or not, he shall never leave us again. If only he is at home! Provided only that we can find him, I will pass the rest of my life in venerating him. Yes, that is how it should be, do you see, Cosette? Gavroche must have delivered my letter to him. All is explained. You understand.”

Cosette did not understand a word.

“You are right,” she said to him.

Meanwhile the carriage rolled on.

CHAPTER V — A NIGHT BEHIND WHICH THERE IS DAY

Jean Valjean turned round at the knock which he heard on his door.

“Come in,” he said feebly.

The door opened.

Cosette and Marius made their appearance.

Cosette rushed into the room.

Marius remained on the threshold, leaning against the jamb of the door.

“Cosette!” said Jean Valjean.

And he sat erect in his chair, his arms outstretched and trembling, haggard, livid, gloomy, an immense joy in his eyes.

Cosette, stifling with emotion, fell upon Jean Valjean’s breast.

“Father!” said she.

Jean Valjean, overcome, stammered:

“Cosette! she! you! Madame! it is thou! Ah! my God!”

And, pressed close in Cosette’s arms, he exclaimed:

“It is thou! thou art here! Thou dost pardon me then!”

Marius, lowering his eyelids, in order to keep his tears from flowing, took a step forward and murmured between lips convulsively contracted to repress his sobs:

“My father!”

“And you also, you pardon me!” Jean Valjean said to him.

Marius could find no words, and Jean Valjean added:

“Thanks.”

Cosette tore off her shawl and tossed her hat on the bed.

“It embarrasses me,” said she.

And, seating herself on the old man’s knees, she put aside his white locks with an adorable movement, and kissed his brow.

Jean Valjean, bewildered, let her have her own way.

Cosette, who only understood in a very confused manner, redoubled her caresses, as though she desired to pay Marius’ debt.

Jean Valjean stammered:

“How stupid people are! I thought that I should never see her again. Imagine, Monsieur Pontmercy, at the very moment when you entered, I was saying to myself: ‘All is over. Here is her little gown, I am a miserable man, I shall never see Cosette again,’ and I was saying that at the very moment when you were mounting the stairs. Was not I an idiot? Just see how idiotic one can be! One reckons without the good God. The good God says:

“‘You fancy that you are about to be abandoned, stupid! No. No, things will not go so. Come, there is a good man yonder who is in need of an angel.’ And the angel comes, and one sees one’s Cosette again! and one sees one’s little Cosette once more! Ah! I was very unhappy.”

For a moment he could not speak, then he went on:

“I really needed to see Cosette a little bit now and then. A heart needs a bone to gnaw. But I was perfectly conscious that I was in the way. I gave myself reasons: ‘They do not want you, keep in your own course, one has not the right to cling eternally.’ Ah! God be praised, I see her once more! Dost thou know, Cosette, thy husband is very handsome? Ah! what a pretty embroidered collar thou hast on, luckily. I am fond of that pattern. It was thy husband who chose it, was it not? And then, thou shouldst have some cashmere shawls. Let me call her thou, Monsieur Pontmercy. It will not be for long.”

And Cosette began again:

“How wicked of you to have left us like that! Where did you go? Why have you stayed away so long? Formerly your journeys only lasted three or four days. I sent Nicolette, the answer always was: ‘He is absent.’ How long have you been back? Why did you not let us know? Do you know that you are very much changed? Ah! what a naughty father! he has been ill, and we have not known it! Stay, Marius, feel how cold his hand is!”

“So you are here! Monsieur Pontmercy, you pardon me!” repeated Jean Valjean.

At that word which Jean Valjean had just uttered once more, all that was swelling Marius’ heart found vent.

He burst forth:

“Cosette, do you hear? he has come to that! he asks my forgiveness! And do you know what he has done for me, Cosette? He has saved my life. He has done more — he has given you to me. And after having saved me, and after having given you to me, Cosette, what has he done with himself? He has sacrificed himself. Behold the man. And he says to me the ingrate, to me the forgetful, to me the pitiless, to me the guilty one: Thanks! Cosette, my whole life passed at the feet of this man would be too little. That barricade, that sewer, that furnace, that cesspool, — all that he traversed for me, for thee, Cosette! He carried me away through all the deaths which he put aside before me, and accepted for himself. Every courage, every virtue, every heroism, every sanctity he possesses! Cosette, that man is an angel!”

“Hush! hush!” said Jean Valjean in a low voice. “Why tell all that?”

“But you!” cried Marius with a wrath in which there was veneration, “why did you not tell it to me? It is your own fault, too. You save people’s lives, and you conceal it from them! You do more, under the pretext of unmasking yourself, you calumniate yourself. It is frightful.”

“I told the truth,” replied Jean Valjean.

“No,” retorted Marius, “the truth is the whole truth; and that you did not tell. You were Monsieur Madeleine, why not have said so? You saved Javert, why not have said so? I owed my life to you, why not have said so?”

“Because I thought as you do. I thought that you were in the right. It was necessary that I should go away. If you had known about that affair, of the sewer, you would have made me remain near you. I was therefore forced to hold my peace. If I had spoken, it would have caused embarrassment in every way.”

“It would have embarrassed what? embarrassed whom?” retorted Marius. “Do you think that you are going to stay here? We shall carry you off. Ah! good heavens! when I reflect that it was by an accident that I have learned all this. You form a part of ourselves. You are her father, and mine. You shall not pass another day in this dreadful house. Do not imagine that you will be here to-morrow.”

“To-morrow,” said Jean Valjean, “I shall not be here, but I shall not be with you.”

“What do you mean?” replied Marius. “Ah! come now, we are not going to permit any more journeys. You shall never leave us again. You belong to us. We shall not loose our hold of you.”

“This time it is for good,” added Cosette. “We have a carriage at the door. I shall run away with you. If necessary, I shall employ force.”

And she laughingly made a movement to lift the old man in her arms.

“Your chamber still stands ready in our house,” she went on. “If you only knew how pretty the garden is now! The azaleas are doing very well there. The walks are sanded with river sand; there are tiny violet shells. You shall eat my strawberries. I water them myself. And no more ‘madame,’ no more ‘Monsieur Jean,’ we are living under a Republic, everybody says thou, don’t they, Marius? The programme is changed. If you only knew, father, I have had a sorrow, there was a robin redbreast which had made her nest in a hole in the wall, and a horrible cat ate her. My poor, pretty, little robin red-breast which used to put her head out of her window and look at me! I cried over it. I should have liked to kill the cat. But now nobody cries any more. Everybody laughs, everybody is happy. You are going to come with us. How delighted grandfather will be! You shall have your plot in the garden, you shall cultivate it, and we shall see whether your strawberries are as fine as mine. And, then, I shall do everything that you wish, and then, you will obey me prettily.”

Jean Valjean listened to her without hearing her. He heard the music of her voice rather than the sense of her words; one of those large tears which are the sombre pearls of the soul welled up slowly in his eyes.

He murmured:

“The proof that God is good is that she is here.”

“Father!” said Cosette.

Jean Valjean continued:

“It is quite true that it would be charming for us to live together. Their trees are full of birds. I would walk with Cosette. It is sweet to be among living people who bid each other ‘good-day,’ who call to each other in the garden. People see each other from early morning. We should each cultivate our own little corner. She would make me eat her strawberries. I would make her gather my roses. That would be charming. Only . . .”

He paused and said gently:

“It is a pity.”

The tear did not fall, it retreated, and Jean Valjean replaced it with a smile.

Cosette took both the old man’s hands in hers.

“My God!” said she, “your hands are still colder than before. Are you ill? Do you suffer?”

“I? No,” replied Jean Valjean. “I am very well. Only . . .”

He paused.

“Only what?”

“I am going to die presently.”

Cosette and Marius shuddered.

“To die!” exclaimed Marius.

“Yes, but that is nothing,” said Jean Valjean.

He took breath, smiled and resumed:

“Cosette, thou wert talking to me, go on, so thy little robin red-breast is dead? Speak, so that I may hear thy voice.”

Marius gazed at the old man in amazement.

Cosette uttered a heartrending cry.

“Father! my father! you will live. You are going to live. I insist upon your living, do you hear?”

Jean Valjean raised his head towards her with adoration.

“Oh! yes, forbid me to die. Who knows? Perhaps I shall obey. I was on the verge of dying when you came. That stopped me, it seemed to me that I was born again.”

“You are full of strength and life,” cried Marius. “Do you imagine that a person can die like this? You have had sorrow, you shall have no more. It is I who ask your forgiveness, and on my knees! You are going to live, and to live with us, and to live a long time. We take possession of you once more. There are two of us here who will henceforth have no other thought than your happiness.”

“You see,” resumed Cosette, all bathed in tears, “that Marius says that you shall not die.”

Jean Valjean continued to smile.

“Even if you were to take possession of me, Monsieur Pontmercy, would that make me other than I am? No, God has thought like you and myself, and he does not change his mind; it is useful for me to go. Death is a good arrangement. God knows better than we what we need. May you be happy, may Monsieur Pontmercy have Cosette, may youth wed the morning, may there be around you, my children, lilacs and nightingales; may your life be a beautiful, sunny lawn, may all the enchantments of heaven fill your souls, and now let me, who am good for nothing, die; it is certain that all this is right. Come, be reasonable, nothing is possible now, I am fully conscious that all is over. And then, last night, I drank that whole jug of water. How good thy husband is, Cosette! Thou art much better off with him than with me.”

A noise became audible at the door.

It was the doctor entering.

“Good-day, and farewell, doctor,” said Jean Valjean. “Here are my poor children.”

Marius stepped up to the doctor. He addressed to him only this single word: “Monsieur? . . .” But his manner of pronouncing it contained a complete question.

The doctor replied to the question by an expressive glance.

“Because things are not agreeable,” said Jean Valjean, “that is no reason for being unjust towards God.”

A silence ensued.

All breasts were oppressed.

Jean Valjean turned to Cosette. He began to gaze at her as though he wished to retain her features for eternity.

In the depths of the shadow into which he had already descended, ecstasy was still possible to him when gazing at Cosette. The reflection of that sweet face lighted up his pale visage.

The doctor felt of his pulse.

“Ah! it was you that he wanted!” he murmured, looking at Cosette and Marius.

And bending down to Marius’ ear, he added in a very low voice:

“Too late.”

Jean Valjean surveyed the doctor and Marius serenely, almost without ceasing to gaze at Cosette.

These barely articulate words were heard to issue from his mouth:

“It is nothing to die; it is dreadful not to live.”

All at once he rose to his feet. These accesses of strength are sometimes the sign of the death agony. He walked with a firm step to the wall, thrusting aside Marius and the doctor who tried to help him, detached from the wall a little copper crucifix which was suspended there, and returned to his seat with all the freedom of movement of perfect health, and said in a loud voice, as he laid the crucifix on the table:

“Behold the great martyr.”

Then his chest sank in, his head wavered, as though the intoxication of the tomb were seizing hold upon him.

His hands, which rested on his knees, began to press their nails into the stuff of his trousers.

Cosette supported his shoulders, and sobbed, and tried to speak to him, but could not.

Among the words mingled with that mournful saliva which accompanies tears, they distinguished words like the following:

“Father, do not leave us. Is it possible that we have found you only to lose you again?”

It might be said that agony writhes. It goes, comes, advances towards the sepulchre, and returns towards life. There is groping in the action of dying.

Jean Valjean rallied after this semi-swoon, shook his brow as though to make the shadows fall away from it and became almost perfectly lucid once more.

He took a fold of Cosette’s sleeve and kissed it.

“He is coming back! doctor, he is coming back,” cried Marius.

“You are good, both of you,” said Jean Valjean. “I am going to tell you what has caused me pain. What has pained me, Monsieur Pontmercy, is that you have not been willing to touch that money. That money really belongs to your wife. I will explain to you, my children, and for that reason, also, I am glad to see you. Black jet comes from England, white jet comes from Norway. All this is in this paper, which you will read. For bracelets, I invented a way of substituting for slides of soldered sheet iron, slides of iron laid together. It is prettier, better and less costly. You will understand how much money can be made in that way. So Cosette’s fortune is really hers. I give you these details, in order that your mind may be set at rest.”

The portress had come upstairs and was gazing in at the half-open door. The doctor dismissed her.

But he could not prevent this zealous woman from exclaiming to the dying man before she disappeared: “Would you like a priest?”

“I have had one,” replied Jean Valjean.

And with his finger he seemed to indicate a point above his head where one would have said that he saw some one.

It is probable, in fact, that the Bishop was present at this death agony.

Cosette gently slipped a pillow under his loins.

Jean Valjean resumed:

“Have no fear, Monsieur Pontmercy, I adjure you. The six hundred thousand francs really belong to Cosette. My life will have been wasted if you do not enjoy them! We managed to do very well with those glass goods. We rivalled what is called Berlin jewellery. However, we could not equal the black glass of England. A gross, which contains twelve hundred very well cut grains, only costs three francs.”

When a being who is dear to us is on the point of death, we gaze upon him with a look which clings convulsively to him and which would fain hold him back.

Cosette gave her hand to Marius, and both, mute with anguish, not knowing what to say to the dying man, stood trembling and despairing before him.

Jean Valjean sank moment by moment. He was failing; he was drawing near to the gloomy horizon.

His breath had become intermittent; a little rattling interrupted it. He found some difficulty in moving his forearm, his feet had lost all movement, and in proportion as the wretchedness of limb and feebleness of body increased, all the majesty of his soul was displayed and spread over his brow. The light of the unknown world was already visible in his eyes.

His face paled and smiled. Life was no longer there, it was something else.

His breath sank, his glance grew grander. He was a corpse on which the wings could be felt.

He made a sign to Cosette to draw near, then to Marius; the last minute of the last hour had, evidently, arrived.

He began to speak to them in a voice so feeble that it seemed to come from a distance, and one would have said that a wall now rose between them and him.

“Draw near, draw near, both of you. I love you dearly. Oh! how good it is to die like this! And thou lovest me also, my Cosette. I knew well that thou still felt friendly towards thy poor old man. How kind it was of thee to place that pillow under my loins! Thou wilt weep for me a little, wilt thou not? Not too much. I do not wish thee to have any real griefs. You must enjoy yourselves a great deal, my children. I forgot to tell you that the profit was greater still on the buckles without tongues than on all the rest. A gross of a dozen dozens cost ten francs and sold for sixty. It really was a good business. So there is no occasion for surprise at the six hundred thousand francs, Monsieur Pontmercy. It is honest money. You may be rich with a tranquil mind. Thou must have a carriage, a box at the theatres now and then, and handsome ball dresses, my Cosette, and then, thou must give good dinners to thy friends, and be very happy. I was writing to Cosette a while ago. She will find my letter. I bequeath to her the two candlesticks which stand on the chimney-piece. They are of silver, but to me they are gold, they are diamonds; they change candles which are placed in them into wax-tapers. I do not know whether the person who gave them to me is pleased with me yonder on high. I have done what I could. My children, you will not forget that I am a poor man, you will have me buried in the first plot of earth that you find, under a stone to mark the spot. This is my wish. No name on the stone. If Cosette cares to come for a little while now and then, it will give me pleasure. And you too, Monsieur Pontmercy. I must admit that I have not always loved you. I ask your pardon for that. Now she and you form but one for me. I feel very grateful to you. I am sure that you make Cosette happy. If you only knew, Monsieur Pontmercy, her pretty rosy cheeks were my delight; when I saw her in the least pale, I was sad. In the chest of drawers, there is a bank-bill for five hundred francs. I have not touched it. It is for the poor. Cosette, dost thou see thy little gown yonder on the bed? dost thou recognize it? That was ten years ago, however. How time flies! We have been very happy. All is over. Do not weep, my children, I am not going very far, I shall see you from there, you will only have to look at night, and you will see me smile. Cosette, dost thou remember Montfermeil? Thou wert in the forest, thou wert greatly terrified; dost thou remember how I took hold of the handle of the water-bucket? That was the first time that I touched thy poor, little hand. It was so cold! Ah! your hands were red then, mademoiselle, they are very white now. And the big doll! dost thou remember? Thou didst call her Catherine. Thou regrettedest not having taken her to the convent! How thou didst make me laugh sometimes, my sweet angel! When it had been raining, thou didst float bits of straw on the gutters, and watch them pass away. One day I gave thee a willow battledore and a shuttlecock with yellow, blue and green feathers. Thou hast forgotten it. Thou wert roguish so young! Thou didst play. Thou didst put cherries in thy ears. Those are things of the past. The forests through which one has passed with one’s child, the trees under which one has strolled, the convents where one has concealed oneself, the games, the hearty laughs of childhood, are shadows. I imagined that all that belonged to me. In that lay my stupidity. Those Thenardiers were wicked. Thou must forgive them. Cosette, the moment has come to tell thee the name of thy mother. She was called Fantine. Remember that name — Fantine. Kneel whenever thou utterest it. She suffered much. She loved thee dearly. She had as much unhappiness as thou hast had happiness. That is the way God apportions things. He is there on high, he sees us all, and he knows what he does in the midst of his great stars. I am on the verge of departure, my children. Love each other well and always. There is nothing else but that in the world: love for each other. You will think sometimes of the poor old man who died here. Oh my Cosette, it is not my fault, indeed, that I have not seen thee all this time, it cut me to the heart; I went as far as the corner of the street, I must have produced a queer effect on the people who saw me pass, I was like a madman, I once went out without my hat. I no longer see clearly, my children, I had still other things to say, but never mind. Think a little of me. Come still nearer. I die happy. Give me your dear and well-beloved heads, so that I may lay my hands upon them."

Cosette and Marius fell on their knees, in despair, suffocating with tears, each beneath one of Jean Valjean's hands. Those august hands no longer moved.

He had fallen backwards, the light of the candles illuminated him.

His white face looked up to heaven, he allowed Cosette and Marius to cover his hands with kisses.

He was dead.

The night was starless and extremely dark. No doubt, in the gloom, some immense angel stood erect with wings outspread, awaiting that soul.

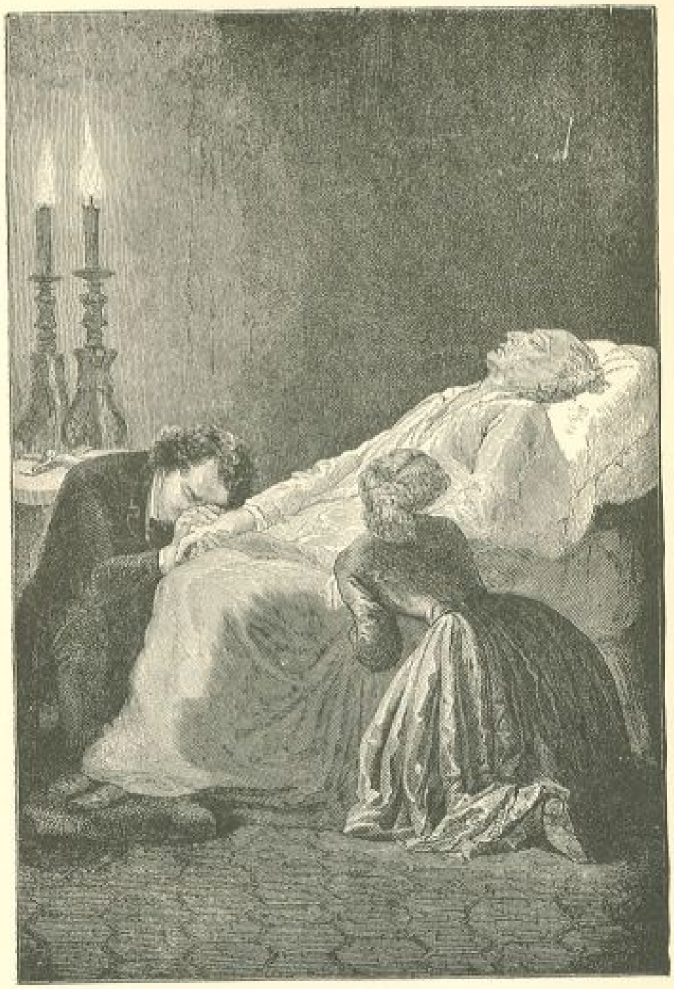

SUPREME DARKNESS — SUPREME DAWN.

CHAPTER VI — THE GRASS COVERS AND THE RAIN EFFACES

In the cemetery of Pere-Lachaise, in the vicinity of the common grave, far from the elegant quarter of that city of sepulchres, far from all the tombs of fancy which display in the presence of eternity all the hideous fashions of death, in a deserted corner, beside an old wall, beneath a great yew tree over which climbs the wild convolvulus, amid dandelions and mosses, there lies a stone. That stone is no more exempt than others from the leprosy of time, of dampness, of the lichens and from the defilement of the birds. The water turns it green, the air blackens it. It is not near any path, and people are not fond of walking in that direction, because the grass is high and their feet are immediately wet. When there is a little sunshine, the lizards come thither. All around there is a quivering of weeds. In the spring, linnets warble in the trees.

This stone is perfectly plain. In cutting it the only thought was the requirements of the tomb, and no other care was taken than to make the stone long enough and narrow enough to cover a man.

No name is to be read there.

Only, many years ago, a hand wrote upon it in pencil these four lines, which have become gradually illegible beneath the rain and the dust, and which are, to-day, probably effaced:

Il dort. Quoique le sort fut pour lui bien étrange,
Il vivait. Il mourut quand il n’eut plus son ange.
La chose simplement d’elle-même arriva,
Comme la nuit se fait lorsque le jour s’en va.

LETTER TO M. DAELLI

Publisher of the Italian translation of Les Misérables in Milan.

HAUTEVILLE-HOUSE, October 18, 1862.

You are right, sir, when you tell me that Les Misérables is written for all nations. I do not know whether it will be read by all, but I wrote it for all. It is addressed to England as well as to Spain, to Italy as well as to France, to Germany as well as to Ireland, to Republics which have slaves as well as to Empires which have serfs. Social problems overstep frontiers. The sores of the human race, those great sores which cover the globe, do not halt at the red or blue lines traced upon the map. In every place where man is ignorant and despairing, in every place where woman is sold for bread, wherever the child suffers for lack of the book which should instruct him and of the hearth which should warm him, the book of Les Misérables knocks at the door and says: “Open to me, I come for you.”

At the hour of civilization through which we are now passing, and which is still so sombre, the miserable’s name is Man; he is agonizing in all climes, and he is groaning in all languages.

Your Italy is no more exempt from the evil than is our France. Your admirable Italy has all miseries on the face of it. Does not banditism, that raging form of pauperism, inhabit your mountains? Few nations are more deeply eaten by that ulcer of convents which I have endeavored to fathom. In spite of your possessing Rome, Milan, Naples, Palermo, Turin, Florence, Sienna, Pisa, Mantua, Bologna, Ferrara, Genoa, Venice, a heroic history, sublime ruins, magnificent ruins, and superb cities, you are, like ourselves, poor. You are covered with marvels and vermin. Assuredly, the sun of Italy is splendid, but, alas, azure in the sky does not prevent rags on man.

Like us, you have prejudices, superstitions, tyrannies, fanaticisms, blind laws lending assistance to ignorant customs. You taste nothing of the present nor of the future without a flavor of the past being mingled with it. You have a barbarian, the monk, and a savage, the lazzarone. The social question is the same for you as for us. There are a few less deaths from hunger with you, and a few more from fever; your social hygiene is not much better than ours; shadows, which are Protestant in England, are Catholic in Italy; but, under different names, the vescovo is identical with the bishop, and it always means night, and of pretty nearly the same quality. To explain the Bible badly amounts to the same thing as to understand the Gospel badly.

Is it necessary to emphasize this? Must this melancholy parallelism be yet more completely verified? Have you not indigent persons? Glance below. Have you not parasites? Glance up. Does not that hideous balance, whose two scales, pauperism and parasitism, so mournfully preserve their mutual equilibrium, oscillate before you as it does before us? Where is your army of schoolmasters, the only army which civilization acknowledges?

Where are your free and compulsory schools? Does every one know how to read in the land of Dante and of Michael Angelo? Have you made public schools of your barracks? Have you not, like ourselves, an opulent war-budget and a paltry budget of education? Have not you also that passive obedience which is so easily converted into soldierly obedience? military establishment which pushes the regulations to the extreme of firing upon Garibaldi; that is to say, upon the living honor of Italy? Let us subject your social order to examination, let us take it where it stands and as it stands, let us view its flagrant offences, show me the woman and the child. It is by the amount of protection with which these two feeble creatures are surrounded that the degree of civilization is to be measured. Is prostitution less heartrending in Naples than in Paris? What is the amount of truth that springs from your laws, and what amount of justice springs from your tribunals? Do you chance to be so fortunate as to be ignorant of the meaning of those gloomy words: public prosecution, legal infamy, prison, the scaffold, the executioner, the death penalty? Italians, with you as with us, Beccaria is dead and Farinace is alive. And then, let us scrutinize your state reasons. Have you a government which comprehends the identity of morality and politics? You have reached the point where you grant amnesty to heroes! Something very similar has been done in France. Stay, let us pass miseries in review, let each one contribute his pile, you are as rich as we. Have you not, like ourselves, two condemnations, religious condemnation pronounced by the priest, and social condemnation decreed by the judge? Oh, great nation of Italy, thou resemblest the great nation of France! Alas! our brothers, you are, like ourselves, Misérables.

From the depths of the gloom wherein you dwell, you do not see much more distinctly than we the radiant and distant portals of Eden. Only, the priests are mistaken. These holy portals are before and not behind us.

I resume. This book, Les Misérables, is no less your mirror than ours. Certain men, certain castes, rise in revolt against this book, — I understand that. Mirrors, those revealers of the truth, are hated; that does not prevent them from being of use.

As for myself, I have written for all, with a profound love for my own country, but without being engrossed by France more than by any other nation. In proportion as I advance in life, I grow more simple, and I become more and more patriotic for humanity.

This is, moreover, the tendency of our age, and the law of radiance of the French Revolution; books must cease to be exclusively French, Italian, German, Spanish, or English, and become European, I say more, human, if they are to correspond to the enlargement of civilization.

Hence a new logic of art, and of certain requirements of composition which modify everything, even the conditions, formerly narrow, of taste and language, which must grow broader like all the rest.

In France, certain critics have reproached me, to my great delight, with having transgressed the bounds of what they call “French taste”; I should be glad if this eulogium were merited.

In short, I am doing what I can, I suffer with the same universal suffering, and I try to assuage it, I possess only the puny forces of a man, and I cry to all: “Help me!”

This, sir, is what your letter prompts me to say; I say it for you and for your country. If I have insisted so strongly, it is because of one phrase in your letter. You write: —

“There are Italians, and they are numerous, who say: ‘This book, Les Misérables, is a French book. It does not concern us. Let the French read it as a history, we read it as a romance.’” — Alas! I repeat, whether we be Italians or Frenchmen, misery concerns us all. Ever since history has been written, ever since philosophy has meditated, misery has been the garment of the human race; the moment has at length arrived for tearing off that rag, and for replacing, upon the naked limbs of the Man-People, the sinister fragment of the past with the grand purple robe of the dawn.

If this letter seems to you of service in enlightening some minds and in dissipating some prejudices, you are at liberty to publish it, sir. Accept, I pray you, a renewed assurance of my very distinguished sentiments.

VICTOR HUGO.

LES MISÉRABLES

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Tome I — FANTINE

Livre premier — Un juste

Chapitre I

Monsieur Myriel

En 1815, M. Charles-François-Bienvenu Myriel était évêque de Digne. C’était un vieillard d’environ soixante-quinze ans; il occupait le siège de Digne depuis 1806.

Quoique ce détail ne touche en aucune manière au fond même de ce que nous avons à raconter, il n’est peut-être pas inutile, ne fût-ce que pour être exact en tout, d’indiquer ici les bruits et les propos qui avaient couru sur son compte au moment où il était arrivé dans le diocèse. Vrai ou faux, ce qu’on dit des hommes tient souvent autant de place dans leur vie et surtout dans leur destinée que ce qu’ils font. M. Myriel était fils d’un conseiller au parlement d’Aix; noblesse de robe. On contait de lui que son père, le réservant pour hériter de sa charge, l’avait marié de fort bonne heure, à dix-huit ou vingt ans, suivant un usage assez répandu dans les familles parlementaires. Charles Myriel, nonobstant ce mariage, avait, disait-on, beaucoup fait parler de lui. Il était bien fait de sa personne, quoique d’assez petite taille, élégant, gracieux, spirituel; toute la première partie de sa vie avait été donnée au monde et aux galanteries. La révolution survint, les événements se précipitèrent, les familles parlementaires décimées, chassées, traquées, se dispersèrent. M. Charles Myriel, dès les premiers jours de la révolution, émigra en Italie. Sa femme y mourut d’une maladie de poitrine dont elle était atteinte depuis longtemps. Ils n’avaient point d’enfants. Que se passa-t-il ensuite dans la destinée de M. Myriel? L’écroulement de l’ancienne société française, la chute de sa propre famille, les tragiques spectacles de 93, plus effrayants encore peut-être pour les émigrés qui les voyaient de loin avec le grossissement de l’épouvante, firent-ils germer en lui des idées de renoncement et de solitude? Fut-il, au milieu d’une de ces distractions et de ces affections qui occupaient sa vie, subitement atteint d’un de ces coups mystérieux et terribles qui viennent quelquefois renverser, en le frappant au cœur, l’homme que les catastrophes publiques n’ébranleraient pas en le frappant dans son existence et dans sa fortune? Nul n’aurait pu le dire; tout ce qu’on savait, c’est que, lorsqu’il revint d’Italie, il était prêtre.

En 1804, M. Myriel était curé de Brignolles. Il était déjà vieux, et vivait dans une retraite profonde.

Vers l'époque du couronnement, une petite affaire de sa cure, on ne sait plus trop quoi, l'amena à Paris. Entre autres personnes puissantes, il alla solliciter pour ses paroissiens M. le cardinal Fesch. Un jour que l'empereur était venu faire visite à son oncle, le digne curé, qui attendait dans l'antichambre, se trouva sur le passage de sa majesté. Napoléon, se voyant regardé avec une certaine curiosité par ce vieillard, se retourna, et dit brusquement:

— Quel est ce bonhomme qui me regarde?

— Sire, dit M. Myriel, vous regardez un bonhomme, et moi je regarde un grand homme. Chacun de nous peut profiter.

L'empereur, le soir même, demanda au cardinal le nom de ce curé, et quelque temps après M. Myriel fut tout surpris d'apprendre qu'il était nommé évêque de Digne.

Qu'y avait-il de vrai, du reste, dans les récits qu'on faisait sur la première partie de la vie de M. Myriel? Personne ne le savait. Peu de familles avaient connu la famille Myriel avant la révolution.

M. Myriel devait subir le sort de tout nouveau venu dans une petite ville où il y a beaucoup de bouches qui parlent et fort peu de têtes qui pensent. Il devait le subir, quoiqu'il fût évêque et parce qu'il était évêque. Mais, après tout, les propos auxquels on mêlait son nom n'étaient peut-être que des propos; du bruit, des mots, des paroles; moins que des paroles, des *palabres*, comme dit l'énergique langue du midi.

Quoi qu'il en fût, après neuf ans d'épiscopat et de résidence à Digne, tous ces racontages, sujets de conversation qui occupent dans le premier moment les petites villes et les petites gens, étaient tombés dans un oubli profond. Personne n'eût osé en parler, personne n'eût même osé s'en souvenir.

M. Myriel était arrivé à Digne accompagné d'une vieille fille, mademoiselle Baptistine, qui était sa sœur et qui avait dix ans de moins que lui.

Ils avaient pour tout domestique une servante du même âge que mademoiselle Baptistine, et appelée madame Magloire, laquelle, après avoir été *la servante de M. le Curé*, prenait maintenant le double titre de femme de chambre de mademoiselle et femme de charge de monseigneur.

Mademoiselle Baptistine était une personne longue, pâle, mince, douce; elle réalisait l’idéal de ce qu’exprime le mot «respectable»; car il semble qu’il soit nécessaire qu’une femme soit mère pour être vénérable. Elle n’avait jamais été jolie; toute sa vie, qui n’avait été qu’une suite de saintes œuvres, avait fini par mettre sur elle une sorte de blancheur et de clarté; et, en vieillissant, elle avait gagné ce qu’on pourrait appeler la beauté de la bonté. Ce qui avait été de la maigreur dans sa jeunesse était devenu, dans sa maturité, de la transparence; et cette diaphanéité laissait voir l’ange. C’était une âme plus encore que ce n’était une vierge. Sa personne semblait faite d’ombre; à peine assez de corps pour qu’il y eût là un sexe; un peu de matière contenant une lueur; de grands yeux toujours baissés; un prétexte pour qu’une âme reste sur la terre.

Madame Magloire était une petite vieille, blanche, grasse, replète, affairée, toujours haletante, à cause de son activité d’abord, ensuite à cause d’un asthme.

À son arrivée, on installa M. Myriel en son palais épiscopal avec les honneurs voulus par les décrets impériaux qui classent l’évêque immédiatement après le maréchal de camp. Le maire et le président lui firent la première visite, et lui de son côté fit la première visite au général et au préfet.

L’installation terminée, la ville attendit son évêque à l’œuvre.

Chapitre II

Monsieur Myriel devient monseigneur Bienvenu

Le palais épiscopal de Digne était attenant à l’hôpital.

Le palais épiscopal était un vaste et bel hôtel bâti en pierre au commencement du siècle dernier par monseigneur Henri Puget, docteur en théologie de la faculté de Paris, abbé de Simore, lequel était évêque de Digne en 1712. Ce palais était un vrai logis seigneurial. Tout y avait grand air, les appartements de l’évêque, les salons, les chambres, la cour d’honneur, fort large, avec promenoirs à arcades, selon l’ancienne mode florentine, les jardins plantés de magnifiques arbres. Dans la salle à manger, longue et superbe galerie qui était au rez-de-chaussée et s’ouvrait sur les jardins, monseigneur Henri Puget avait donné à manger en cérémonie le 29 juillet 1714 à messeigneurs Charles Brûlart de Genlis, archevêque-prince d’Embrun, Antoine de Mesgrigny, capucin, évêque de Grasse, Philippe de Vendôme, grand prieur de France, abbé de Saint-Honoré de Lérins, François de Berton de Grillon, évêque-baron de Vence, César de Sabran de Forcalquier, évêque-seigneur de Glandève, et Jean Soanen, prêtre de l’oratoire, prédicateur ordinaire du roi, évêque-seigneur de Senez. Les portraits de ces sept révérends personnages décoraient cette salle, et cette date mémorable, 29 juillet 1714, y était gravée en lettres d’or sur une table de marbre blanc.

L’hôpital était une maison étroite et basse à un seul étage avec un petit jardin. Trois jours après son arrivée, l’évêque visita l’hôpital. La visite terminée, il fit prier le directeur de vouloir bien venir jusque chez lui.

— Monsieur le directeur de l’hôpital, lui dit-il, combien en ce moment avez-vous de malades?

— Vingt-six, monseigneur.

— C’est ce que j’avais compté, dit l’évêque.

— Les lits, reprit le directeur, sont bien serrés les uns contre les autres.

— C’est ce que j’avais remarqué.

— Les salles ne sont que des chambres, et l’air s’y renouvelle difficilement.

— C’est ce qui me semble.

— Et puis, quand il y a un rayon de soleil, le jardin est bien petit pour les convalescents.

— C’est ce que je me disais.

— Dans les épidémies, nous avons eu cette année le typhus, nous avons eu une suette militaire il y a deux ans, cent malades quelquefois; nous ne savons que faire.

— C’est la pensée qui m’était venue.

— Que voulez-vous, monseigneur? dit le directeur, il faut se résigner.

Cette conversation avait lieu dans la salle à manger-galerie du rez-de-chaussée. L’évêque garda un moment le silence, puis il se tourna brusquement vers le directeur de l’hôpital:

— Monsieur, dit-il, combien pensez-vous qu’il tiendrait de lits rien que dans cette salle?

— La salle à manger de monseigneur! s’écria le directeur stupéfait.

L’évêque parcourait la salle du regard et semblait y faire avec les yeux des mesures et des calculs.

— Il y tiendrait bien vingt lits! dit-il, comme se parlant à lui-même.

Puis élevant la voix:

— Tenez, monsieur le directeur de l’hôpital, je vais vous dire. Il y a évidemment une erreur. Vous êtes vingt-six personnes dans cinq ou six petites chambres. Nous sommes trois ici, et nous avons place pour soixante. Il y a erreur, je vous dis. Vous avez mon logis, et j’ai le vôtre. Rendez-moi ma maison. C’est ici chez vous.

Le lendemain, les vingt-six pauvres étaient installés dans le palais de l’évêque et l’évêque était à l’hôpital.

M. Myriel n’avait point de bien, sa famille ayant été ruinée par la révolution. Sa sœur touchait une rente viagère de cinq cents francs qui, au presbytère, suffisait à sa dépense personnelle. M. Myriel recevait de l’état comme évêque un traitement de quinze mille francs. Le jour même où il vint se loger dans la maison de l’hôpital, M. Myriel détermina l’emploi de cette somme une fois pour toutes de la manière suivante. Nous transcrivons ici une note écrite de sa main.

Note pour régler les dépenses de ma maison.

Pour le petit séminaire: quinze cents livres
Congrégation de la mission: cent livres
Pour les lazaristes de Montdidier: cent livres

Séminaire des missions étrangères à Paris: deux cents livres
Congrégation du Saint-Esprit: cent cinquante livres
Établissements religieux de la Terre-Sainte: cent livres
Sociétés de charité maternelle: trois cents livres
En sus, pour celle d'Arles: cinquante livres
OEuvre pour l'amélioration des prisons: quatre cents livres
OEuvre pour le soulagement et la délivrance des prisonniers: cinq cents livres
Pour libérer des pères de famille prisonniers pour dettes: mille livres
Supplément au traitement des pauvres maîtres d'école du diocèse: deux mille livres
Grenier d'abondance des Hautes-Alpes: cent livres
Congrégation des dames de Digne, de Manosque et de Sisteron,
pour l'enseignement gratuit des filles indigentes: quinze cents livres
Pour les pauvres: six mille livres
Ma dépense personnelle: mille livres

Total: *quinze mille livres*

Pendant tout le temps qu'il occupa le siège de Digne, M. Myriel ne changea presque rien à cet arrangement. Il appelait cela, comme on voit, *avoir réglé les dépenses de sa maison*.

Cet arrangement fut accepté avec une soumission absolue par mademoiselle Baptistine. Pour cette sainte fille, M. de Digne était tout à la fois son frère et son évêque, son ami selon la nature et son supérieur selon l'église. Elle l'aimait et elle le vénérait tout simplement. Quand il parlait, elle s'inclinait; quand il agissait, elle adhérait. La servante seule, madame Magloire, murmura un peu. M. l'évêque, on l'a pu remarquer, ne s'était réservé que mille livres, ce qui, joint à la pension de mademoiselle Baptistine, faisait quinze cents francs par an. Avec ces quinze cents francs, ces deux vieilles femmes et ce vieillard vivaient.

Et quand un curé de village venait à Digne, M. l'évêque trouvait encore moyen de le traiter, grâce à la sévère économie de madame Magloire et à l'intelligente administration de mademoiselle Baptistine.

Un jour — il était à Digne depuis environ trois mois — l'évêque dit:

— Avec tout cela je suis bien gêné!

— Je le crois bien! s'écria madame Magloire, Monseigneur n'a seulement pas réclamé la rente que le département lui doit pour ses frais de carrosse en ville et de tournées dans le diocèse. Pour les évêques d'autrefois c'était l'usage.

— Tiens! dit l'évêque, vous avez raison, madame Magloire.

Il fit sa réclamation.

Quelque temps après, le conseil général, prenant cette demande en considération, lui vota une somme annuelle de trois mille francs, sous cette rubrique: *Allocation à M. l'évêque pour frais de carrosse, frais de poste et frais de tournées pastorales*.

Cela fit beaucoup crier la bourgeoisie locale, et, à cette occasion, un sénateur de l'empire, ancien membre du conseil des cinq-cents favorable au dix-huit brumaire et pourvu près de la ville de Digne d'une sénatorerie magnifique, écrivit au ministre des cultes, M. Bigot de Préameneu, un petit billet irrité et confidentiel dont nous extrayons ces lignes authentiques:

« — Des frais de carrosse? pourquoi faire dans une ville de moins de quatre mille habitants? Des frais de poste et de tournées? à quoi bon ces tournées d'abord? ensuite comment courir la poste dans un pays de montagnes? Il n'y a pas de routes. On ne va qu'à cheval. Le pont même de la Durance à Château-Arnoux peut à peine porter des charrettes à bœufs. Ces prêtres sont tous ainsi. Avides et avares. Celui-ci a fait le bon apôtre en arrivant. Maintenant il fait comme les autres. Il lui faut carrosse et chaise de poste. Il lui faut du luxe comme aux anciens évêques. Oh! toute cette prêtraille! Monsieur le comte, les choses n'iront bien que lorsque l'empereur nous aura délivrés des calotins. À bas le pape! (les affaires se brouillaient avec Rome). Quant à moi, je suis pour César tout seul. Etc., etc.»

La chose, en revanche, réjouit fort madame Magloire.

— Bon, dit-elle à mademoiselle Baptistine, Monseigneur a commencé par les autres, mais il a bien fallu qu'il finît par lui-même. Il a réglé toutes ses charités. Voilà trois mille livres pour nous. Enfin!

Le soir même, l'évêque écrivit et remit à sa sœur une note ainsi conçue:

Frais de carrosse et de tournées.

Pour donner du bouillon de viande aux malades de l'hôpital: quinze cents livres

Pour la société de charité maternelle d'Aix: deux cent cinquante livres

Pour la société de charité maternelle de Draguignan: deux cent cinquante

livres
Pour les enfants trouvés: cinq cents livres
Pour les orphelins: cinq cents livres

Total: *trois mille livres*

Tel était le budget de M. Myriel.

Quant au casuel épiscopal, rachats de bans, dispenses, ondoiements, prédications, bénédictions d’églises ou de chapelles, mariages, etc., l’évêque le percevait sur les riches avec d’autant plus d’âpreté qu’il le donnait aux pauvres.

Au bout de peu de temps, les offrandes d’argent affluèrent. Ceux qui ont et ceux qui manquent frappaient à la porte de M. Myriel, les uns venant chercher l’aumône que les autres venaient y déposer. L’évêque, en moins d’un an, devint le trésorier de tous les bienfaits et le caissier de toutes les détresses. Des sommes considérables passaient par ses mains; mais rien ne put faire qu’il changeât quelque chose à son genre de vie et qu’il ajoutât le moindre superflu à son nécessaire.

Loin de là. Comme il y a toujours encore plus de misère en bas que de fraternité en haut, tout était donné, pour ainsi dire, avant d’être reçu; c’était comme de l’eau sur une terre sèche; il avait beau recevoir de l’argent, il n’en avait jamais. Alors il se dépouillait.

L’usage étant que les évêques énoncent leurs noms de baptême en tête de leurs mandements et de leurs lettres pastorales, les pauvres gens du pays avaient choisi, avec une sorte d’instinct affectueux, dans les noms et prénoms de l’évêque, celui qui leur présentait un sens, et ils ne l’appelaient que monseigneur Bienvenu. Nous ferons comme eux, et nous le nommerons ainsi dans l’occasion. Du reste, cette appellation lui plaisait.

— J’aime ce nom-là, disait-il. Bienvenu corrige monseigneur.

Nous ne prétendons pas que le portrait que nous faisons ici soit vraisemblable; nous nous bornons à dire qu’il est ressemblant.

Chapitre III

À bon évêque dur évêché

M. l’évêque, pour avoir converti son carrosse en aumônes, n’en faisait pas moins ses tournées. C’est un diocèse fatigant que celui de Digne. Il a fort peu de plaines, beaucoup de montagnes, presque pas de routes, on l’a vu tout à l’heure; trente-deux cures, quarante et un vicariats et deux cent quatre-vingt-cinq succursales. Visiter tout cela, c’est une affaire. M. l’évêque en venait à bout. Il allait à pied quand c’était dans le voisinage, en carriole dans la plaine, en cacolet dans la montagne. Les deux vieilles femmes l’accompagnaient. Quand le trajet était trop pénible pour elles, il allait seul.

Un jour, il arriva à Senez, qui est une ancienne ville épiscopale, monté sur un âne. Sa bourse, fort à sec dans ce moment, ne lui avait pas permis d’autre équipage. Le maire de la ville vint le recevoir à la porte de l’évêché et le regardait descendre de son âne avec des yeux scandalisés. Quelques bourgeois riaient autour de lui.

— Monsieur le maire, dit l’évêque, et messieurs les bourgeois, je vois ce qui vous scandalise; vous trouvez que c’est bien de l’orgueil à un pauvre prêtre de monter une monture qui a été celle de Jésus-Christ. Je l’ai fait par nécessité, je vous assure, non par vanité.

Dans ses tournées, il était indulgent et doux, et prêchait moins qu’il ne causait. Il ne mettait aucune vertu sur un plateau inaccessible. Il n’allait jamais chercher bien loin ses raisonnements et ses modèles. Aux habitants d’un pays il citait l’exemple du pays voisin. Dans les cantons où l’on était dur pour les nécessiteux, il disait:

— Voyez les gens de Briançon. Ils ont donné aux indigents, aux veuves et aux orphelins le droit de faire faucher leurs prairies trois jours avant tous les autres. Ils leur rebâtissent gratuitement leurs maisons quand elles sont en ruines. Aussi est-ce un pays béni de Dieu. Durant tout un siècle de cent ans, il n’y a pas eu un meurtrier.

Dans les villages âpres au gain et à la moisson, il disait:

— Voyez ceux d’Embrun. Si un père de famille, au temps de la récolte, a ses fils au service à l’armée et ses filles en service à la ville, et qu’il soit malade et empêché, le curé le recommande au prône; et le dimanche, après la messe, tous les gens du village, hommes, femmes, enfants, vont dans le champ du pauvre homme lui faire sa moisson, et lui rapportent paille et grain dans son grenier.

Aux familles divisées par des questions d'argent et d'héritage, il disait:

— Voyez les montagnards de Devoluy, pays si sauvage qu'on n'y entend pas le rossignol une fois en cinquante ans. Eh bien, quand le père meurt dans une famille, les garçons s'en vont chercher fortune, et laissent le bien aux filles, afin qu'elles puissent trouver des maris.

Aux cantons qui ont le goût des procès et où les fermiers se ruinent en papier timbré, il disait:

— Voyez ces bons paysans de la vallée de Queyras. Ils sont là trois mille âmes. Mon Dieu! c'est comme une petite république. On n'y connaît ni le juge, ni l'huissier. Le maire fait tout. Il répartit l'impôt, taxe chacun en conscience, juge les querelles gratis, partage les patrimoines sans honoraires, rend des sentences sans frais; et on lui obéit, parce que c'est un homme juste parmi des hommes simples.

Aux villages où il ne trouvait pas de maître d'école, il citait encore ceux de Queyras:

— Savez-vous comment ils font? disait-il. Comme un petit pays de douze ou quinze feux ne peut pas toujours nourrir un magister, ils ont des maîtres d'école payés par toute la vallée qui parcourent les villages, passant huit jours dans celui-ci, dix dans celui-là, et enseignant. Ces magisters vont aux foires, où je les ai vus. On les reconnaît à des plumes à écrire qu'ils portent dans la ganse de leur chapeau. Ceux qui n'enseignent qu'à lire ont une plume, ceux qui enseignent la lecture et le calcul ont deux plumes; ceux qui enseignent la lecture, le calcul et le latin ont trois plumes. Ceux-là sont de grands savants. Mais quelle honte d'être ignorants! Faites comme les gens de Queyras.

Il parlait ainsi, gravement et paternellement, à défaut d'exemples inventant des paraboles, allant droit au but, avec peu de phrases et beaucoup d'images, ce qui était l'éloquence même de Jésus-Christ, convaincu et persuadant.

Chapitre IV

Les œuvres semblables aux paroles

Sa conversation était affable et gaie. Il se mettait à la portée des deux vieilles femmes qui passaient leur vie près de lui; quand il riait, c'était le rire d'un écolier.

Madame Magloire l'appelait volontiers *Votre Grandeur*. Un jour, il se leva de son fauteuil et alla à sa bibliothèque chercher un livre. Ce livre était sur un des rayons d'en haut. Comme l'évêque était d'assez petite taille, il ne put y atteindre.

— Madame Magloire, dit-il, apportez-moi une chaise. Ma grandeur ne va pas jusqu'à cette planche.

Une de ses parentes éloignées, madame la comtesse de Lô, laissait rarement échapper une occasion d'énumérer en sa présence ce qu'elle appelait «les espérances» de ses trois fils. Elle avait plusieurs ascendants fort vieux et proches de la mort dont ses fils étaient naturellement les héritiers. Le plus jeune des trois avait à recueillir d'une grand'tante cent bonnes mille livres de rentes; le deuxième était substitué au titre de duc de son oncle; l'aîné devait succéder à la pairie de son aïeul. L'évêque écoutait habituellement en silence ces innocents et pardonnables étalages maternels. Une fois pourtant, il paraissait plus rêveur que de coutume, tandis que madame de Lô renouvelait le détail de toutes ces successions et de toutes ces «espérances». Elle s'interrompit avec quelque impatience:

— Mon Dieu, mon cousin! mais à quoi songez-vous donc?

— Je songe, dit l'évêque, à quelque chose de singulier qui est, je crois, dans saint Augustin: «Mettez votre espérance dans celui auquel on ne succède point.»

Une autre fois, recevant une lettre de faire-part du décès d'un gentilhomme du pays, où s'étalaient en une longue page, outre les dignités du défunt, toutes les qualifications féodales et nobiliaires de tous ses parents:

— Quel bon dos a la mort! s'écria-t-il. Quelle admirable charge de titres on lui fait allègrement porter, et comme il faut que les hommes aient de l'esprit pour employer ainsi la tombe à la vanité!

Il avait dans l'occasion une raillerie douce qui contenait presque toujours un sens sérieux. Pendant un carême, un jeune vicaire vint à Digne et prêcha dans la cathédrale. Il fut assez éloquent. Le sujet de son sermon était la charité. Il invita les riches à donner aux indigents, afin d'éviter l'enfer qu'il peignit le plus effroyable qu'il put et de gagner le paradis qu'il fit désirable et charmant. Il y avait dans l'auditoire un riche marchand retiré, un peu usurier, nommé M. Géborand, lequel avait gagné un demi-million à fabriquer de gros draps, des serges, des cadis et des gasquets. De sa vie M. Géborand n'avait fait l'aumône à un malheureux. À partir de ce sermon, on remarqua qu'il donnait tous les dimanches un sou aux vieilles mendiantes du portail de la cathédrale. Elles étaient six à se partager cela. Un jour, l'évêque le vit faisant sa charité et dit à sa sœur avec un sourire:

— Voilà monsieur Géborand qui achète pour un sou de paradis.

Quand il s'agissait de charité, il ne se rebutait pas, même devant un refus, et il trouvait alors des mots qui faisaient réfléchir. Une fois, il quêtait pour les pauvres dans un salon de la ville. Il y avait là le marquis de Champtercier, vieux, riche, avare, lequel trouvait moyen d'être tout ensemble ultra-royaliste et ultra-voltairien. Cette variété a existé. L'évêque, arrivé à lui, lui toucha le bras.

— Monsieur le marquis, il faut que vous me donniez quelque chose.

Le marquis se retourna et répondit sèchement:

— Monseigneur, j'ai mes pauvres.

— Donnez-les-moi, dit l'évêque.

Un jour, dans la cathédrale, il fit ce sermon.

«Mes très chers frères, mes bons amis, il y a en France treize cent vingt mille maisons de paysans qui n'ont que trois ouvertures, dix-huit cent dix-sept mille qui ont deux ouvertures, la porte et une fenêtre, et enfin trois cent quarante-six mille cabanes qui n'ont qu'une ouverture, la porte. Et cela, à cause d'une chose qu'on appelle l'impôt des portes et fenêtres. Mettez-moi de pauvres familles, des vieilles femmes, des petits enfants, dans ces logis-là, et voyez les fièvres et les maladies. Hélas! Dieu donne l'air aux hommes, la loi le leur vend. Je n'accuse pas la loi, mais je bénis Dieu. Dans l'Isère, dans le Var, dans les deux Alpes, les hautes et les basses, les paysans n'ont pas même de brouettes, ils transportent les engrais à dos d'hommes; ils n'ont pas de chandelles, et ils brûlent des bâtons résineux et des bouts de corde trempés dans la poix résine. C'est comme cela dans tout le pays haut du Dauphiné. Ils font le pain pour six mois, ils le font cuire avec de la bouse de vache séchée. L'hiver, ils cassent ce pain à coups de hache et ils le font tremper dans l'eau vingt-quatre heures pour pouvoir le manger. — Mes frères, ayez pitié! voyez comme on souffre autour de vous.»

Né provençal, il s'était facilement familiarisé avec tous les patois du midi. Il disait: «*Eh bé! moussu, sès sagé?*» comme dans le bas Languedoc. «*Onté anaras passa?*» comme dans les basses Alpes. «*Puerte un bouen moutou embe un bouen froumage grase*», comme dans le haut Dauphiné. Ceci plaisait au peuple, et n'avait pas peu contribué à lui donner accès près de tous les esprits. Il était dans la chaumière et dans la montagne comme chez lui. Il savait dire les choses les plus grandes dans les idiomes les plus vulgaires. Parlant toutes les langues, il entrait dans toutes les âmes. Du reste, il était le même pour les gens du monde et pour les gens du peuple. Il ne condamnait rien hâtivement, et sans tenir compte des circonstances environnantes. Il disait:

— Voyons le chemin par où la faute a passé.

Étant, comme il se qualifiait lui-même en souriant, un *ex-pécheur*, il n'avait aucun des escarpements du rigorisme, et il professait assez haut, et sans le froncement de sourcil des vertueux féroces, une doctrine qu'on pourrait résumer à peu près ainsi:

«L'homme a sur lui la chair qui est tout à la fois son fardeau et sa tentation. Il la traîne et lui cède.

«Il doit la surveiller, la contenir, la réprimer, et ne lui obéir qu'à la dernière extrémité. Dans cette obéissance-là, il peut encore y avoir de la faute; mais la faute, ainsi faite, est vénielle. C'est une chute, mais une chute sur les genoux, qui peut s'achever en prière.

«Être un saint, c'est l'exception; être un juste, c'est la règle. Errez, défaillez, péchez, mais soyez des justes.

«Le moins de péché possible, c'est la loi de l'homme. Pas de péché du tout est le rêve de l'ange. Tout ce qui est terrestre est soumis au péché. Le péché est une gravitation.»

Quand il voyait tout le monde crier bien fort et s'indigner bien vite:

— Oh! oh! disait-il en souriant, il y a apparence que ceci est un gros crime que tout le monde commet. Voilà les hypocrisies effarées qui se dépêchent de protester et de se mettre à couvert.

Il était indulgent pour les femmes et les pauvres sur qui pèse le poids de la société humaine. Il disait:

— Les fautes des femmes, des enfants, des serviteurs, des faibles, des indigents et des ignorants sont la faute des maris, des pères, des maîtres, des forts, des riches et des savants.

Il disait encore:

— À ceux qui ignorent, enseignez-leur le plus de choses que vous pourrez; la société est coupable de ne pas donner l'instruction gratis; elle répond de la nuit qu'elle produit. Cette âme est pleine d'ombre, le péché s'y commet. Le coupable n'est pas celui qui y fait le péché, mais celui qui y a fait l'ombre.

Comme on voit, il avait une manière étrange et à lui de juger les choses. Je soupçonne qu'il avait pris cela dans l'évangile.

Il entendit un jour conter dans un salon un procès criminel qu'on instruisait et qu'on allait juger. Un misérable homme, par amour pour une femme et pour l'enfant qu'il avait d'elle, à bout de ressources, avait fait de la fausse monnaie. La fausse monnaie était encore punie de mort à cette époque. La femme avait été arrêtée émettant la première pièce fausse fabriquée par l'homme. On la tenait, mais on n'avait de preuves que contre elle. Elle seule pouvait charger son amant et le perdre en avouant. Elle nia. On insista. Elle s'obstina à nier. Sur ce, le procureur du roi avait eu une idée. Il avait supposé une infidélité de l'amant, et était parvenu, avec des fragments de lettres savamment présentés, à persuader à la malheureuse qu'elle avait une rivale et que cet homme la trompait. Alors, exaspérée de jalousie, elle avait dénoncé son amant, tout avoué, tout prouvé. L'homme était perdu. Il allait être prochainement jugé à Aix avec sa complice. On racontait le fait, et chacun s'extasiait sur l'habileté du magistrat. En mettant la jalousie en jeu, il avait fait jaillir la vérité par la colère, il avait fait sortir la justice de la vengeance. L'évêque écoutait tout cela en silence. Quand ce fut fini, il demanda:

— Où jugera-t-on cet homme et cette femme?

— À la cour d'assises.

Il reprit:

— Et où jugera-t-on monsieur le procureur du roi?

Il arriva à Digne une aventure tragique. Un homme fut condamné à mort pour meurtre. C'était un malheureux pas tout à fait lettré, pas tout à fait ignorant, qui avait été bateleur dans les foires et écrivain public. Le procès occupa beaucoup la ville. La veille du jour fixé pour l'exécution du condamné, l'aumônier de la prison tomba malade. Il fallait un prêtre pour assister le patient à ses derniers moments. On alla chercher le curé. Il paraît qu'il refusa en disant: Cela ne me regarde pas. Je n'ai que faire de cette corvée et de ce saltimbanque; moi aussi, je suis malade; d'ailleurs ce n'est pas là ma place. On rapporta cette réponse à l'évêque qui dit:

— Monsieur le curé a raison. Ce n'est pas sa place, c'est la mienne.

Il alla sur-le-champ à la prison, il descendit au cabanon du «saltimbanque», il l'appela par son nom, lui prit la main et lui parla. Il passa toute la journée et toute la nuit près de lui, oubliant la nourriture et le sommeil, priant Dieu pour l'âme du condamné et priant le condamné pour la sienne propre. Il lui dit les meilleures vérités qui sont les plus simples. Il fut père, frère, ami; évêque pour bénir seulement. Il lui enseigna tout, en le rassurant et en le consolant. Cet homme allait mourir désespéré. La mort était pour lui comme un abîme. Debout et frémissant sur ce seuil lugubre, il reculait avec horreur. Il n'était pas assez ignorant pour être absolument indifférent. Sa condamnation, secousse profonde, avait en quelque sorte rompu çà et là autour de lui cette cloison qui nous sépare du mystère des choses et que nous appelons la vie. Il regardait sans cesse au dehors de ce monde par ces brèches fatales, et ne voyait que des ténèbres. L'évêque lui fit voir une clarté.

Le lendemain, quand on vint chercher le malheureux, l'évêque était là. Il le suivit. Il se montra aux yeux de la foule en camail violet et avec sa croix épiscopale au cou, côte à côte avec ce misérable lié de cordes.

Il monta sur la charrette avec lui, il monta sur l'échafaud avec lui. Le patient, si morne et si accablé la veille, était rayonnant. Il sentait que son âme était réconciliée et il espérait Dieu. L'évêque l'embrassa, et, au moment où le couteau allait tomber, il lui dit:

— Celui que l'homme tue, Dieu le ressuscite; celui que les frères chassent retrouve le Père. Priez, croyez, entrez dans la vie! le Père est là.

Quand il redescendit de l'échafaud, il avait quelque chose dans son regard qui fit ranger le peuple. On ne savait ce qui était le plus admirable de sa pâleur ou de sa sérénité. En rentrant à cet humble logis qu'il appelait en souriant son palais, il dit à sa sœur:

— Je viens d'officier pontificalement.

Comme les choses les plus sublimes sont souvent aussi les choses les moins comprises, il y eut dans la ville des gens qui dirent, en commentant cette conduite de l'évêque: «C'est de l'affectation.» Ceci ne fut du reste qu’un propos de salons. Le peuple, qui n’entend pas malice aux actions saintes, fut attendri et admira.

Quant à l’évêque, avoir vu la guillotine fut pour lui un choc, et il fut longtemps à s’en remettre.

L’échafaud, en effet, quand il est là, dressé et debout, a quelque chose qui hallucine. On peut avoir une certaine indifférence sur la peine de mort, ne point se prononcer, dire oui et non, tant qu’on n’a pas vu de ses yeux une guillotine; mais si l’on en rencontre une, la secousse est violente, il faut se décider et prendre parti pour ou contre. Les uns admirent, comme de Maistre; les autres exècrent, comme Beccaria. La guillotine est la concrétion de la loi; elle se nomme *vindicte;* elle n’est pas neutre, et ne vous permet pas de rester neutre. Qui l’aperçoit frissonne du plus mystérieux des frissons. Toutes les questions sociales dressent autour de ce couperet leur point d’interrogation. L’échafaud est vision. L’échafaud n’est pas une charpente, l’échafaud n’est pas une machine, l’échafaud n’est pas une mécanique inerte faite de bois, de fer et de cordes. Il semble que ce soit une sorte d’être qui a je ne sais quelle sombre initiative; on dirait que cette charpente voit, que cette machine entend, que cette mécanique comprend, que ce bois, ce fer et ces cordes veulent. Dans la rêverie affreuse où sa présence jette l’âme, l’échafaud apparaît terrible et se mêlant de ce qu’il fait. L’échafaud est le complice du bourreau; il dévore; il mange de la chair, il boit du sang. L’échafaud est une sorte de monstre fabriqué par le juge et par le charpentier, un spectre qui semble vivre d’une espèce de vie épouvantable faite de toute la mort qu’il a donnée.

Aussi l’impression fut-elle horrible et profonde; le lendemain de l’exécution et beaucoup de jours encore après, l’évêque parut accablé. La sérénité presque violente du moment funèbre avait disparu: le fantôme de la justice sociale l’obsédait. Lui qui d’ordinaire revenait de toutes ses actions avec une satisfaction si rayonnante, il semblait qu’il se fît un reproche. Par moments, il se parlait à lui-même, et bégayait à demi-voix des monologues lugubres. En voici un que sa sœur entendit un soir et recueillit:

— Je ne croyais pas que cela fût si monstrueux. C’est un tort de s’absorber dans la loi divine au point de ne plus s’apercevoir de la loi humaine. La mort n’appartient qu’à Dieu. De quel droit les hommes touchent-ils à cette chose inconnue?

Avec le temps ces impressions s’atténuèrent, et probablement s’effacèrent. Cependant on remarqua que l’évêque évitait désormais de passer sur la place des exécutions. On pouvait appeler M. Myriel à toute heure au chevet des malades et des mourants. Il n'ignorait pas que là était son plus grand devoir et son plus grand travail. Les familles veuves ou orphelines n'avaient pas besoin de le demander, il arrivait de lui-même. Il savait s'asseoir et se taire de longues heures auprès de l'homme qui avait perdu la femme qu'il aimait, de la mère qui avait perdu son enfant. Comme il savait le moment de se taire, il savait aussi le moment de parler. Ô admirable consolateur! il ne cherchait pas à effacer la douleur par l'oubli, mais à l'agrandir et à la dignifier par l'espérance. Il disait:

— Prenez garde à la façon dont vous vous tournez vers les morts. Ne songez pas à ce qui pourrit. Regardez fixement. Vous apercevrez la lueur vivante de votre mort bien-aimé au fond du ciel.

Il savait que la croyance est saine. Il cherchait à conseiller et à calmer l'homme désespéré en lui indiquant du doigt l'homme résigné, et à transformer la douleur qui regarde une fosse en lui montrant la douleur qui regarde une étoile.

Chapitre V

Que monseigneur Bienvenu faisait durer trop longtemps ses soutanes

La vie intérieure de M. Myriel était pleine des mêmes pensées que sa vie publique. Pour qui eût pu la voir de près, c'eût été un spectacle grave et charmant que cette pauvreté volontaire dans laquelle vivait M. l'évêque de Digne.

Comme tous les vieillards et comme la plupart des penseurs, il dormait peu. Ce court sommeil était profond. Le matin il se recueillait pendant une heure, puis il disait sa messe, soit à la cathédrale, soit dans son oratoire. Sa messe dite, il déjeunait d'un pain de seigle trempé dans le lait de ses vaches. Puis il travaillait.

Un évêque est un homme fort occupé; il faut qu'il reçoive tous les jours le secrétaire de l'évêché, qui est d'ordinaire un chanoine, presque tous les jours ses grands vicaires. Il a des congrégations à contrôler, des privilèges à donner, toute une librairie ecclésiastique à examiner, paroissiens, catéchismes diocésains, livres d'heures, etc., des mandements à écrire, des prédications à autoriser, des curés et des maires à mettre d'accord, une correspondance cléricale, une correspondance administrative, d'un côté l'état, de l'autre le Saint-Siège, mille affaires.

Le temps que lui laissaient ces mille affaires, ses offices et son bréviaire, il le donnait d'abord aux nécessiteux, aux malades et aux affligés; le temps que les affligés, les malades et les nécessiteux lui laissaient, il le donnait au travail. Tantôt il bêchait la terre dans son jardin, tantôt il lisait et écrivait. Il n'avait qu'un mot pour ces deux sortes de travail; il appelait cela *jardiner*.

— L'esprit est un jardin, disait-il.

À midi, il dînait. Le dîner ressemblait au déjeuner.

Vers deux heures, quand le temps était beau, il sortait et se promenait à pied dans la campagne ou dans la ville, entrant souvent dans les masures. On le voyait cheminer seul, tout à ses pensées, l'œil baissé, appuyé sur sa longue canne, vêtu de sa douillette violette ouatée et bien chaude, chaussé de bas violets dans de gros souliers, et coiffé de son chapeau plat qui laissait passer par ses trois cornes trois glands d'or à graine d'épinards.

C'était une fête partout où il paraissait. On eût dit que son passage avait quelque chose de réchauffant et de lumineux. Les enfants et les vieillards venaient sur le seuil des portes pour l’évêque comme pour le soleil. Il bénissait et on le bénissait. On montrait sa maison à quiconque avait besoin de quelque chose.

Çà et là, il s’arrêtait, parlait aux petits garçons et aux petites filles et souriait aux mères. Il visitait les pauvres tant qu’il avait de l’argent; quand il n’en avait plus, il visitait les riches.

Comme il faisait durer ses soutanes beaucoup de temps, et qu’il ne voulait pas qu’on s’en aperçût, il ne sortait jamais dans la ville autrement qu’avec sa douillette violette. Cela le gênait un peu en été.

Le soir à huit heures et demie il soupait avec sa sœur, madame Magloire debout derrière eux et les servant à table. Rien de plus frugal que ce repas. Si pourtant l’évêque avait un de ses curés à souper, madame Magloire en profitait pour servir à Monseigneur quelque excellent poisson des lacs ou quelque fin gibier de la montagne. Tout curé était un prétexte à bon repas; l’évêque se laissait faire. Hors de là, son ordinaire ne se composait guère que de légumes cuits dans l’eau et de soupe à l’huile. Aussi disait-on dans la ville:

— Quand l’évêque fait pas chère de curé, il fait chère de trappiste.

Après son souper, il causait pendant une demi-heure avec mademoiselle Baptistine et madame Magloire; puis il rentrait dans sa chambre et se remettait à écrire, tantôt sur des feuilles volantes, tantôt sur la marge de quelque in-folio. Il était lettré et quelque peu savant. Il a laissé cinq ou six manuscrits assez curieux; entre autres une dissertation sur le verset de la Genèse: *Au commencement l’esprit de Dieu flottait sur les eaux*. Il confronte avec ce verset trois textes: la version arabe qui dit: *Les vents de Dieu soufflaient;* Flavius Josèphe qui dit: *Un vent d’en haut se précipitait sur la terre*, et enfin la paraphrase chaldaïque d’Onkelos qui porte: *Un vent venant de Dieu soufflait sur la face des eaux*. Dans une autre dissertation, il examine les œuvres théologiques de Hugo, évêque de Ptolémaïs, arrière-grand-oncle de celui qui écrit ce livre, et il établit qu’il faut attribuer à cet évêque les divers opuscules publiés, au siècle dernier, sous le pseudonyme de Barleycourt.

Parfois au milieu d’une lecture, quel que fût le livre qu’il eût entre les mains, il tombait tout à coup dans une méditation profonde, d’où il ne sortait que pour écrire quelques lignes sur les pages mêmes du volume. Ces lignes souvent n’ont aucun rapport avec le livre qui les contient. Nous avons sous les yeux une note écrite par lui sur une des marges d’un in-quarto intitulé: *Correspondance du lord Germain avec les généraux Clinton, Cornwallis et les amiraux de la station de l'Amérique. À Versailles, chez Poinçot, libraire, et à Paris, chez Pissot, libraire, quai des Augustins*.

Voici cette note:

«Ô vous qui êtes!

«L'Ecclésiaste vous nomme Toute-Puissance, les Macchabées vous nomment Créateur, l'Épître aux Éphésiens vous nomme Liberté, Baruch vous nomme Immensité, les Psaumes vous nomment Sagesse et Vérité, Jean vous nomme Lumière, les Rois vous nomment Seigneur, l'Exode vous appelle Providence, le Lévitique Sainteté, Esdras Justice, la création vous nomme Dieu, l'homme vous nomme Père; mais Salomon vous nomme Miséricorde, et c'est là le plus beau de tous vos noms.»

Vers neuf heures du soir, les deux femmes se retiraient et montaient à leurs chambres au premier, le laissant jusqu'au matin seul au rez-de-chaussée.

Ici il est nécessaire que nous donnions une idée exacte du logis de M. l'évêque de Digne.

Chapitre VI

Par qui il faisait garder sa maison

La maison qu'il habitait se composait, nous l'avons dit, d'un rez-de-chaussée et d'un seul étage: trois pièces au rez-de-chaussée, trois chambres au premier, au-dessus un grenier. Derrière la maison, un jardin d'un quart d'arpent. Les deux femmes occupaient le premier. L'évêque logeait en bas. La première pièce, qui s'ouvrait sur la rue, lui servait de salle à manger, la deuxième de chambre à coucher, et la troisième d'oratoire. On ne pouvait sortir de cet oratoire sans passer par la chambre à coucher, et sortir de la chambre à coucher sans passer par la salle à manger. Dans l'oratoire, au fond, il y avait une alcôve fermée, avec un lit pour les cas d'hospitalité. M. l'évêque offrait ce lit aux curés de campagne que des affaires ou les besoins de leur paroisse amenaient à Digne.

La pharmacie de l'hôpital, petit bâtiment ajouté à la maison et pris sur le jardin, avait été transformée en cuisine et en cellier.

Il y avait en outre dans le jardin une étable qui était l'ancienne cuisine de l'hospice et où l'évêque entretenait deux vaches. Quelle que fût la quantité de lait qu'elles lui donnassent, il en envoyait invariablement tous les matins la moitié aux malades de l'hôpital. — Je paye ma dîme, disait-il.

Sa chambre était assez grande et assez difficile à chauffer dans la mauvaise saison. Comme le bois est très cher à Digne, il avait imaginé de faire faire dans l'étable à vaches un compartiment fermé d'une cloison en planches. C'était là qu'il passait ses soirées dans les grands froids. Il appelait cela son *salon d'hiver*.

Il n'y avait dans ce salon d'hiver, comme dans la salle à manger, d'autres meubles qu'une table de bois blanc, carrée, et quatre chaises de paille. La salle à manger était ornée en outre d'un vieux buffet peint en rose à la détrempe. Du buffet pareil, convenablement habillé de napperons blancs et de fausses dentelles, l'évêque avait fait l'autel qui décorait son oratoire.

Ses pénitentes riches et les saintes femmes de Digne s'étaient souvent cotisées pour faire les frais d'un bel autel neuf à l'oratoire de monseigneur; il avait chaque fois pris l'argent et l'avait donné aux pauvres.

— Le plus beau des autels, disait-il, c'est l'âme d'un malheureux consolé qui remercie Dieu.

Il avait dans son oratoire deux chaises prie-Dieu en paille, et un fauteuil à bras également en paille dans sa chambre à coucher. Quand par hasard il recevait sept ou huit personnes à la fois, le préfet, ou le général, ou l'état-major du régiment en garnison, ou quelques élèves du petit séminaire, on était obligé d'aller chercher dans l'étable les chaises du salon d'hiver, dans l'oratoire les prie-Dieu, et le fauteuil dans la chambre à coucher; de cette façon, on pouvait réunir jusqu'à onze sièges pour les visiteurs. À chaque nouvelle visite on démeublait une pièce.

Il arrivait parfois qu'on était douze; alors l'évêque dissimulait l'embarras de la situation en se tenant debout devant la cheminée si c'était l'hiver, ou en proposant un tour dans le jardin si c'était l'été.

Il y avait bien encore dans l'alcôve fermée une chaise, mais elle était à demi dépaillée et ne portait que sur trois pieds, ce qui faisait qu'elle ne pouvait servir qu'appuyée contre le mur. Mademoiselle Baptistine avait bien aussi dans sa chambre une très grande bergère en bois jadis doré et revêtue de pékin à fleurs, mais on avait été obligé de monter cette bergère au premier par la fenêtre, l'escalier étant trop étroit; elle ne pouvait donc pas compter parmi les en-cas du mobilier.

L'ambition de mademoiselle Baptistine eût été de pouvoir acheter un meuble de salon en velours d'Utrecht jaune à rosaces et en acajou à cou de cygne, avec canapé. Mais cela eût coûté au moins cinq cents francs, et, ayant vu qu'elle n'avait réussi à économiser pour cet objet que quarante-deux francs dix sous en cinq ans, elle avait fini par y renoncer. D'ailleurs qui est-ce qui atteint son idéal?

Rien de plus simple à se figurer que la chambre à coucher de l'évêque. Une porte-fenêtre donnant sur le jardin, vis-à-vis le lit; un lit d'hôpital, en fer avec baldaquin de serge verte; dans l'ombre du lit, derrière un rideau, les ustensiles de toilette trahissant encore les anciennes habitudes élégantes de l'homme du monde; deux portes, l'une près de la cheminée, donnant dans l'oratoire; l'autre, près de la bibliothèque, donnant dans la salle à manger; la bibliothèque, grande armoire vitrée pleine de livres; la cheminée, de bois peint en marbre, habituellement sans feu; dans la cheminée, une paire de chenets en fer ornés de deux vases à guirlandes et cannelures jadis argentés à l'argent haché, ce qui était un genre de luxe épiscopal; au-dessus, à l'endroit où d'ordinaire on met la glace, un crucifix de cuivre désargenté fixé sur un velours noir râpé dans un cadre de bois dédoré. Près de la porte-fenêtre, une grande table avec un encrier, chargée de papiers confus et de gros volumes. Devant la table, le fauteuil de paille. Devant le lit, un prie-Dieu, emprunté à l'oratoire.

Deux portraits dans des cadres ovales étaient accrochés au mur des deux côtés du lit. De petites inscriptions dorées sur le fond neutre de la toile à côté des figures indiquaient que les portraits représentaient, l'un, l'abbé de Chaliot, évêque de Saint-Claude, l'autre, l'abbé Tourteau, vicaire général d'Agde, abbé de Grand-Champ, ordre de Cîteaux, diocèse de Chartres. L'évêque, en succédant dans cette chambre aux malades de l'hôpital, y avait trouvé ces portraits et les y avait laissés. C'étaient des prêtres, probablement des donateurs: deux motifs pour qu'il les respectât. Tout ce qu'il savait de ces deux personnages, c'est qu'ils avaient été nommés par le roi, l'un à son évêché, l'autre à son bénéfice, le même jour, le 27 avril 1785. Madame Magloire ayant décroché les tableaux pour en secouer la poussière, l'évêque avait trouvé cette particularité écrite d'une encre blanchâtre sur un petit carré de papier jauni par le temps, collé avec quatre pains à cacheter derrière le portrait de l'abbé de Grand-Champ.

Il avait à sa fenêtre un antique rideau de grosse étoffe de laine qui finit par devenir tellement vieux que, pour éviter la dépense d'un neuf, madame Magloire fut obligée de faire une grande couture au beau milieu. Cette couture dessinait une croix. L'évêque le faisait souvent remarquer.

— Comme cela fait bien! disait-il.

Toutes les chambres de la maison, au rez-de-chaussée ainsi qu'au premier, sans exception, étaient blanchies au lait de chaux, ce qui est une mode de caserne et d'hôpital.

Cependant, dans les dernières années, madame Magloire retrouva, comme on le verra plus loin, sous le papier badigeonné, des peintures qui ornaient l'appartement de mademoiselle Baptistine. Avant d'être l'hôpital, cette maison avait été le parloir aux bourgeois. De là cette décoration. Les chambres étaient pavées de briques rouges qu'on lavait toutes les semaines, avec des nattes de paille tressée devant tous les lits. Du reste, ce logis, tenu par deux femmes, était du haut en bas d'une propreté exquise. C'était le seul luxe que l'évêque permit. Il disait:

— Cela ne prend rien aux pauvres.

Il faut convenir cependant qu'il lui restait de ce qu'il avait possédé jadis six couverts d'argent et une grande cuiller à soupe que madame Magloire regardait tous les jours avec bonheur reluire splendidement sur la grosse nappe de toile blanche. Et comme nous peignons ici l’évêque de Digne tel qu’il était, nous devons ajouter qu’il lui était arrivé plus d’une fois de dire:

— Je renoncerais difficilement à manger dans de l’argenterie.

Il faut ajouter à cette argenterie deux gros flambeaux d’argent massif qui lui venaient de l’héritage d’une grand’tante. Ces flambeaux portaient deux bougies de cire et figuraient habituellement sur la cheminée de l’évêque. Quand il avait quelqu’un à dîner, madame Magloire allumait les deux bougies et mettait les deux flambeaux sur la table.

Il y avait dans la chambre même de l’évêque, à la tête de son lit, un petit placard dans lequel madame Magloire serrait chaque soir les six couverts d’argent et la grande cuiller. Il faut dire qu’on n’en ôtait jamais la clef.

Le jardin, un peu gâté par les constructions assez laides dont nous avons parlé, se composait de quatre allées en croix rayonnant autour d’un puisard; une autre allée faisait tout le tour du jardin et cheminait le long du mur blanc dont il était enclos. Ces allées laissaient entre elles quatre carrés bordés de buis. Dans trois, madame Magloire cultivait des légumes; dans le quatrième, l’évêque avait mis des fleurs. Il y avait çà et là quelques arbres fruitiers.

Une fois madame Magloire lui avait dit avec une sorte de malice douce:

— Monseigneur, vous qui tirez parti de tout, voilà pourtant un carré inutile. Il vaudrait mieux avoir là des salades que des bouquets.

— Madame Magloire, répondit l’évêque, vous vous trompez. Le beau est aussi utile que l’utile.

Il ajouta après un silence:

— Plus peut-être.

Ce carré, composé de trois ou quatre plates-bandes, occupait M. l’évêque presque autant que ses livres. Il y passait volontiers une heure ou deux, coupant, sarclant, et piquant çà et là des trous en terre où il mettait des graines. Il n’était pas aussi hostile aux insectes qu’un jardinier l’eût voulu. Du reste, aucune prétention à la botanique; il ignorait les groupes et le solidisme; il ne cherchait pas le moins du monde à décider entre Tournefort et la méthode naturelle; il ne prenait parti ni pour les utricules contre les cotylédons, ni pour Jussieu contre Linné. Il n’étudiait pas les plantes; il aimait les fleurs. Il respectait beaucoup les savants, il respectait encore plus les ignorants, et, sans jamais manquer à ces deux respects, il arrosait ses plates-bandes chaque soir d’été avec un arrosoir de fer-blanc peint en vert.

La maison n’avait pas une porte qui fermât à clef. La porte de la salle à manger qui, nous l’avons dit, donnait de plain-pied sur la place de la cathédrale, était jadis armée de serrures et de verrous comme une porte de prison. L’évêque avait fait ôter toutes ces ferrures, et cette porte, la nuit comme le jour, n’était fermée qu’au loquet. Le premier passant venu, à quelque heure que ce fût, n’avait qu’à la pousser. Dans les commencements, les deux femmes avaient été fort tourmentées de cette porte jamais close; mais M. de Digne leur avait dit:

— Faites mettre des verrous à vos chambres, si cela vous plaît.

Elles avaient fini par partager sa confiance ou du moins par faire comme si elles la partageaient. Madame Magloire seule avait de temps en temps des frayeurs. Pour ce qui est de l’évêque, on peut trouver sa pensée expliquée ou du moins indiquée dans ces trois lignes écrites par lui sur la marge d’une bible: «Voici la nuance: la porte du médecin ne doit jamais être fermée; la porte du prêtre doit toujours être ouverte.» Sur un autre livre, intitulé *Philosophie de la science médicale*, il avait écrit cette autre note: «Est-ce que je ne suis pas médecin comme eux? Moi aussi j’ai mes malades; d’abord j’ai les leurs, qu’ils appellent les malades; et puis j’ai les miens, que j’appelle les malheureux.»

Ailleurs encore il avait écrit: «Ne demandez pas son nom à qui vous demande un gîte. C’est surtout celui-là que son nom embarrasse qui a besoin d’asile.»

Il advint qu’un digne curé, je ne sais plus si c’était le curé de Couloubroux ou le curé de Pompierry, s’avisa de lui demander un jour, probablement à l’instigation de madame Magloire, si Monseigneur était bien sûr de ne pas commettre jusqu’à un certain point une imprudence en laissant jour et nuit sa porte ouverte à la disposition de qui voulait entrer, et s’il ne craignait pas enfin qu’il n’arrivât quelque malheur dans une maison si peu gardée. L’évêque lui toucha l’épaule avec une gravité douce et lui dit:
— *Nisi Dominus custodierit domum, in vanum vigilant qui custodiunt eam.*

Puis il parla d’autre chose.

Il disait assez volontiers:

— Il y a la bravoure du prêtre comme il y a la bravoure du colonel de dragons. Seulement, ajoutait-il, la nôtre doit être tranquille.

Chapitre VII

Cravatte

Ici se place naturellement un fait que nous ne devons pas omettre, car il est de ceux qui font le mieux voir quel homme c’était que M. l’évêque de Digne.

Après la destruction de la bande de Gaspard Bès qui avait infesté les gorges d’Ollioules, un de ses lieutenants, Cravatte, se réfugia dans la montagne. Il se cacha quelque temps avec ses bandits, reste de la troupe de Gaspard Bès, dans le comté de Nice, puis gagna le Piémont, et tout à coup reparut en France, du côté de Barcelonnette. On le vit à Jauziers d’abord, puis aux Tuiles. Il se cacha dans les cavernes du Joug-de-l’Aigle, et de là il descendait vers les hameaux et les villages par les ravins de l’Ubaye et de l’Ubayette. Il osa même pousser jusqu’à Embrun, pénétra une nuit dans la cathédrale et dévalisa la sacristie. Ses brigandages désolaient le pays. On mit la gendarmerie à ses trousses, mais en vain. Il échappait toujours; quelquefois il résistait de vive force. C’était un hardi misérable. Au milieu de toute cette terreur, l’évêque arriva. Il faisait sa tournée. Au Chastelar, le maire vint le trouver et l’engagea à rebrousser chemin. Cravatte tenait la montagne jusqu’à l’Arche, et au-delà. Il y avait danger, même avec une escorte. C’était exposer inutilement trois ou quatre malheureux gendarmes.

— Aussi, dit l’évêque, je compte aller sans escorte.

— Y pensez-vous, monseigneur? s’écria le maire.

— J’y pense tellement, que je refuse absolument les gendarmes et que je vais partir dans une heure.

— Partir?

— Partir.

— Seul?

— Seul.

— Monseigneur! vous ne ferez pas cela.

— Il y a là, dans la montagne, reprit l’évêque, une humble petite commune grande comme ça, que je n’ai pas vue depuis trois ans. Ce sont mes bons amis. De doux et honnêtes bergers. Ils possèdent une chèvre sur trente qu’ils gardent. Ils font de fort jolis cordons de laine de diverses couleurs, et ils jouent des airs de montagne sur de petites flûtes à six trous.

Ils ont besoin qu'on leur parle de temps en temps du bon Dieu. Que diraient-ils d'un évêque qui a peur? Que diraient-ils si je n'y allais pas?

— Mais, monseigneur, les brigands! Si vous rencontrez les brigands!

— Tiens, dit l'évêque, j'y songe. Vous avez raison. Je puis les rencontrer. Eux aussi doivent avoir besoin qu'on leur parle du bon Dieu.

— Monseigneur! mais c'est une bande! c'est un troupeau de loups!

— Monsieur le maire, c'est peut-être précisément de ce troupeau que Jésus me fait le pasteur. Qui sait les voies de la Providence?

— Monseigneur, ils vous dévaliseront.

— Je n'ai rien.

— Ils vous tueront.

— Un vieux bonhomme de prêtre qui passe en marmottant ses momeries? Bah! à quoi bon?

— Ah! mon Dieu! si vous alliez les rencontrer!

— Je leur demanderai l'aumône pour mes pauvres.

— Monseigneur, n'y allez pas, au nom du ciel! vous exposez votre vie.

— Monsieur le maire, dit l'évêque, n'est-ce décidément que cela? Je ne suis pas en ce monde pour garder ma vie, mais pour garder les âmes.

Il fallut le laisser faire. Il partit, accompagné seulement d'un enfant qui s'offrit à lui servir de guide. Son obstination fit bruit dans le pays, et effraya très fort.

Il ne voulut emmener ni sa sœur ni madame Magloire. Il traversa la montagne à mulet, ne rencontra personne, et arriva sain et sauf chez ses «bons amis» les bergers. Il y resta quinze jours, prêchant, administrant, enseignant, moralisant. Lorsqu'il fut proche de son départ, il résolut de chanter pontificalement un *Te Deum*. Il en parla au curé. Mais comment faire? pas d'ornements épiscopaux. On ne pouvait mettre à sa disposition qu'une chétive sacristie de village avec quelques vieilles chasubles de damas usé ornées de galons faux.

— Bah! dit l'évêque. Monsieur le curé, annonçons toujours au prône notre *Te Deum*. Cela s'arrangera.

On chercha dans les églises d'alentour. Toutes les magnificences de ces humbles paroisses réunies n'auraient pas suffi à vêtir convenablement un chantre de cathédrale. Comme on était dans cet embarras, une grande caisse fut apportée et déposée au presbytère pour M. l'évêque par deux cavaliers inconnus qui repartirent sur-le-champ. On ouvrit la caisse; elle contenait une chape de drap d'or, une mitre ornée de diamants, une croix archiépiscopale, une crosse magnifique, tous les vêtements pontificaux volés un mois auparavant au trésor de Notre-Dame d'Embrun. Dans la caisse, il y avait un papier sur lequel étaient écrits ces mots: *Cravatte à monseigneur Bienvenu*.

— Quand je disais que cela s'arrangerait! dit l'évêque.

Puis il ajouta en souriant:

— À qui se contente d'un surplis de curé, Dieu envoie une chape d'archevêque.

— Monseigneur, murmura le curé en hochant la tête avec un sourire, Dieu, ou le diable.

L'évêque regarda fixement le curé et reprit avec autorité:

— Dieu!

Quand il revint au Chastelar, et tout le long de la route, on venait le regarder par curiosité. Il retrouva au presbytère du Chastelar mademoiselle Baptistine et madame Magloire qui l'attendaient, et il dit à sa sœur:

— Eh bien, avais-je raison? Le pauvre prêtre est allé chez ces pauvres montagnards les mains vides, il en revient les mains pleines. J'étais parti n'emportant que ma confiance en Dieu; je rapporte le trésor d'une cathédrale.

Le soir, avant de se coucher, il dit encore:

— Ne craignons jamais les voleurs ni les meurtriers. Ce sont là les dangers du dehors, les petits dangers. Craignons-nous nous-mêmes. Les préjugés, voilà les voleurs; les vices, voilà les meurtriers. Les grands dangers sont au dedans de nous. Qu'importe ce qui menace notre tête ou notre bourse! Ne songeons qu'à ce qui menace notre âme.

Puis se tournant vers sa sœur:

— Ma sœur, de la part du prêtre jamais de précaution contre le prochain. Ce que le prochain fait, Dieu le permet. Bornons-nous à prier Dieu quand nous croyons qu'un danger arrive sur nous. Prions-le, non pour nous, mais pour que notre frère ne tombe pas en faute à notre occasion.

Du reste, les événements étaient rares dans son existence. Nous racontons ceux que nous savons; mais d'ordinaire il passait sa vie à faire toujours les mêmes choses aux mêmes moments. Un mois de son année ressemblait à une heure de sa journée.

Quant à ce que devint «le trésor» de la cathédrale d'Embrun, on nous embarrasserait de nous interroger là-dessus. C'étaient là de bien belles choses, et bien tentantes, et bien bonnes à voler au profit des malheureux.

Volées, elles l’étaient déjà d’ailleurs. La moitié de l’aventure était accomplie; il ne restait plus qu’à changer la direction du vol, et qu’à lui faire faire un petit bout de chemin du côté des pauvres. Nous n’affirmons rien du reste à ce sujet. Seulement on a trouvé dans les papiers de l’évêque une note assez obscure qui se rapporte peut-être à cette affaire, et qui est ainsi conçue: *La question est de savoir si cela doit faire retour à la cathédrale ou à l’hôpital*.

Chapitre VIII

Philosophie après boire

Le sénateur dont il a été parlé plus haut était un homme entendu qui avait fait son chemin avec une rectitude inattentive à toutes ces rencontres qui font obstacle et qu’on nomme conscience, foi jurée, justice, devoir; il avait marché droit à son but et sans broncher une seule fois dans la ligne de son avancement et de son intérêt. C’était un ancien procureur, attendri par le succès, pas méchant homme du tout, rendant tous les petits services qu’il pouvait à ses fils, à ses gendres, à ses parents, même à des amis; ayant sagement pris de la vie les bons côtés, les bonnes occasions, les bonnes aubaines. Le reste lui semblait assez bête. Il était spirituel, et juste assez lettré pour se croire un disciple d’Épicure en n’étant peut-être qu’un produit de Pigault-Lebrun. Il riait volontiers, et agréablement, des choses infinies et éternelles, et des «billevesées du bonhomme évêque». Il en riait quelquefois, avec une aimable autorité, devant M. Myriel lui-même, qui écoutait.

À je ne sais plus quelle cérémonie demi-officielle, le comte*** (ce sénateur) et M. Myriel durent dîner chez le préfet. Au dessert, le sénateur, un peu égayé, quoique toujours digne, s’écria:

— Parbleu, monsieur l’évêque, causons. Un sénateur et un évêque se regardent difficilement sans cligner de l’œil. Nous sommes deux augures. Je vais vous faire un aveu. J’ai ma philosophie.

— Et vous avez raison, répondit l’évêque. Comme on fait sa philosophie on se couche. Vous êtes sur le lit de pourpre, monsieur le sénateur.

Le sénateur, encouragé, reprit:

— Soyons bons enfants.

— Bons diables même, dit l’évêque.

— Je vous déclare, reprit le sénateur, que le marquis d’Argens, Pyrrhon, Hobbes et M. Naigeon ne sont pas des maroufles. J’ai dans ma bibliothèque tous mes philosophes dorés sur tranche.

— Comme vous-même, monsieur le comte, interrompit l’évêque.

Le sénateur poursuivit:

— Je hais Diderot; c’est un idéologue, un déclamateur et un révolutionnaire, au fond croyant en Dieu, et plus bigot que Voltaire. Voltaire s’est moqué de Needham, et il a eu tort; car les anguilles de Needham prouvent que Dieu est inutile. Une goutte de vinaigre dans une cuillerée de pâte de farine supplée le *fiat lux*. Supposez la goutte plus grosse et la cuillerée plus grande, vous avez le monde. L’homme, c’est l’anguille. Alors à quoi bon le Père éternel? Monsieur l’évêque, l’hypothèse Jéhovah me fatigue. Elle n’est bonne qu’à produire des gens maigres qui songent creux. À bas ce grand Tout qui me tracasse! Vive Zéro qui me laisse tranquille! De vous à moi, et pour vider mon sac, et pour me confesser à mon pasteur comme il convient, je vous avoue que j’ai du bon sens. Je ne suis pas fou de votre Jésus qui prêche à tout bout de champ le renoncement et le sacrifice. Conseil d’avare à des gueux. Renoncement! pourquoi? Sacrifice! à quoi? Je ne vois pas qu’un loup s’immole au bonheur d’un autre loup. Restons donc dans la nature. Nous sommes au sommet; ayons la philosophie supérieure. Que sert d’être en haut, si l’on ne voit pas plus loin que le bout du nez des autres? Vivons gaîment. La vie, c’est tout. Que l’homme ait un autre avenir, ailleurs, là-haut, là-bas, quelque part, je n’en crois pas un traître mot. Ah! l’on me recommande le sacrifice et le renoncement, je dois prendre garde à tout ce que je fais, il faut que je me casse la tête sur le bien et le mal, sur le juste et l’injuste, sur le *fas* et le *nefas*. Pourquoi? parce que j’aurai à rendre compte de mes actions. Quand? après ma mort. Quel bon rêve! Après ma mort, bien fin qui me pincera. Faites donc saisir une poignée de cendre par une main d’ombre. Disons le vrai, nous qui sommes des initiés et qui avons levé la jupe d’Isis: il n’y a ni bien, ni mal; il y a de la végétation. Cherchons le réel. Creusons tout à fait. Allons au fond, que diable! Il faut flairer la vérité, fouiller sous terre, et la saisir. Alors elle vous donne des joies exquises. Alors vous devenez fort, et vous riez. Je suis carré par la base, moi. Monsieur l’évêque, l’immortalité de l’homme est un écoute-s’il-pleut. Oh! la charmante promesse! Fiez-vous-y. Le bon billet qu’a Adam! On est âme, on sera ange, on aura des ailes bleues aux omoplates. Aidez-moi donc, n’est-ce pas Tertullien qui dit que les bienheureux iront d’un astre à l’autre? Soit. On sera les sauterelles des étoiles. Et puis, on verra Dieu. Ta ta ta. Fadaises que tous ces paradis. Dieu est une sonnette monstre. Je ne dirais point cela dans le *Moniteur*, parbleu! mais je le chuchote entre amis. *Inter pocula*. Sacrifier la terre au paradis, c’est lâcher la proie pour l’ombre. Être dupe de l’infini! pas si bête. Je suis néant. Je m’appelle monsieur le comte Néant, sénateur. Étais-je avant ma naissance? Non. Serai-je après ma mort? Non. Que suis-je? un peu de poussière agrégée par un organisme. Qu’ai-je à faire sur cette terre? J’ai le choix. Souffrir ou jouir. Où me mènera la souffrance? Au néant. Mais j’aurai souffert. Où me mènera la jouissance? Au néant. Mais j’aurai joui. Mon choix est fait. Il faut être mangeant ou mangé. Je mange. Mieux vaut être la dent que l’herbe. Telle est ma sagesse. Après quoi, va comme je te pousse, le fossoyeur est là, le Panthéon pour nous autres, tout tombe dans le grand trou. Fin. *Finis*. Liquidation totale. Ceci est l’endroit de l’évanouissement. La mort est morte, croyez-moi. Qu’il y ait là quelqu’un qui ait quelque chose à me dire, je ris d’y songer. Invention de nourrices. Croquemitaine pour les enfants, Jéhovah pour les hommes. Non, notre lendemain est de la nuit. Derrière la tombe, il n’y a plus que des néants égaux. Vous avez été Sardanapale, vous avez été Vincent de Paul, cela fait le même rien. Voilà le vrai. Donc vivez, par-dessus tout. Usez de votre moi pendant que vous le tenez. En vérité, je vous le dis, monsieur l’évêque, j’ai ma philosophie, et j’ai mes philosophes. Je ne me laisse pas enguirlander par des balivernes. Après ça, il faut bien quelque chose à ceux qui sont en bas, aux va-nu-pieds, aux gagne-petit, aux misérables. On leur donne à gober les légendes, les chimères, l’âme, l’immortalité, le paradis, les étoiles. Ils mâchent cela. Ils le mettent sur leur pain sec. Qui n’a rien a le bon Dieu. C’est bien le moins. Je n’y fais point obstacle, mais je garde pour moi monsieur Naigeon. Le bon Dieu est bon pour le peuple.

L’évêque battit des mains.

— Voilà parler! s’écria-t-il. L’excellente chose, et vraiment merveilleuse, que ce matérialisme-là! Ne l’a pas qui veut. Ah! quand on l’a, on n’est plus dupe; on ne se laisse pas bêtement exiler comme Caton, ni lapider comme Étienne, ni brûler vif comme Jeanne d’Arc. Ceux qui ont réussi à se procurer ce matérialisme admirable ont la joie de se sentir irresponsables, et de penser qu’ils peuvent dévorer tout, sans inquiétude, les places, les sinécures, les dignités, le pouvoir bien ou mal acquis, les palinodies lucratives, les trahisons utiles, les savoureuses capitulations de conscience, et qu’ils entreront dans la tombe, leur digestion faite. Comme c’est agréable! Je ne dis pas cela pour vous, monsieur le sénateur. Cependant il m’est impossible de ne point vous féliciter. Vous autres grands seigneurs, vous avez, vous le dites, une philosophie à vous et pour vous, exquise, raffinée, accessible aux riches seuls, bonne à toutes les sauces, assaisonnant admirablement les voluptés de la vie. Cette philosophie est prise dans les profondeurs et déterrée par des chercheurs spéciaux. Mais vous êtes bons princes, et vous ne trouvez pas mauvais que la croyance au bon Dieu soit la philosophie du peuple, à peu près comme l’oie aux marrons est la dinde aux truffes du pauvre.

Chapitre IX

Le frère raconté par la sœur

Pour donner une idée du ménage intérieur de M. l'évêque de Digne et de la façon dont ces deux saintes filles subordonnaient leurs actions, leurs pensées, même leurs instincts de femmes aisément effrayées, aux habitudes et aux intentions de l'évêque, sans qu'il eût même à prendre la peine de parler pour les exprimer, nous ne pouvons mieux faire que de transcrire ici une lettre de mademoiselle Baptistine à madame la vicomtesse de Boischevron, son amie d'enfance. Cette lettre est entre nos mains.

«Digne, 16 décembre 18....

«Ma bonne madame, pas un jour ne se passe sans que nous parlions de vous. C'est assez notre habitude, mais il y a une raison de plus. Figurez-vous qu'en lavant et époussetant les plafonds et les murs, madame Magloire a fait des découvertes; maintenant nos deux chambres tapissées de vieux papier blanchi à la chaux ne dépareraient pas un château dans le genre du vôtre. Madame Magloire a déchiré tout le papier. Il y avait des choses dessous. Mon salon, où il n'y a pas de meubles, et dont nous nous servons pour étendre le linge après les lessives, a quinze pieds de haut, dix-huit de large carrés, un plafond peint anciennement avec dorure, des solives comme chez vous. C'était recouvert d'une toile, du temps que c'était l'hôpital. Enfin des boiseries du temps de nos grand'mères. Mais c'est ma chambre qu'il faut voir. Madame Magloire a découvert, sous au moins dix papiers collés dessus, des peintures, sans être bonnes, qui peuvent se supporter. C'est Télémaque reçu chevalier par Minerve, c'est lui encore dans les jardins. Le nom m'échappe. Enfin où les dames romaines se rendaient une seule nuit. Que vous dirai-je? j'ai des romains, des romaines (*ici un mot illisible*), et toute la suite. Madame Magloire a débarbouillé tout cela, et cet été elle va réparer quelques petites avaries, revenir le tout, et ma chambre sera un vrai musée. Elle a trouvé aussi dans un coin du grenier deux consoles en bois, genre ancien. On demandait deux écus de six livres pour les redorer, mais il vaut bien mieux donner cela aux pauvres; d'ailleurs c'est fort laid, et j'aimerais mieux une table ronde en acajou.

«Je suis toujours bien heureuse. Mon frère est si bon. Il donne tout ce qu'il a aux indigents et aux malades. Nous sommes très gênés. Le pays est dur l’hiver, et il faut bien faire quelque chose pour ceux qui manquent. Nous sommes à peu près chauffés et éclairés. Vous voyez que ce sont de grandes douceurs.

«Mon frère a ses habitudes à lui. Quand il cause, il dit qu’un évêque doit être ainsi. Figurez-vous que la porte de la maison n’est jamais fermée. Entre qui veut, et l’on est tout de suite chez mon frère. Il ne craint rien, même la nuit. C’est là sa bravoure à lui, comme il dit.

«Il ne veut pas que je craigne pour lui, ni que madame Magloire craigne. Il s’expose à tous les dangers, et il ne veut même pas que nous ayons l’air de nous en apercevoir. Il faut savoir le comprendre.

«Il sort par la pluie, il marche dans l’eau, il voyage en hiver. Il n’a pas peur de la nuit, des routes suspectes ni des rencontres.

«L’an dernier, il est allé tout seul dans un pays de voleurs. Il n’a pas voulu nous emmener. Il est resté quinze jours absent. À son retour, il n’avait rien eu, on le croyait mort, et il se portait bien, et il a dit: “Voilà comme on m’a volé!” Et il a ouvert une malle pleine de tous les bijoux de la cathédrale d’Embrun, que les voleurs lui avaient donnés.

«Cette fois-là, en revenant, comme j’étais allée à sa rencontre à deux lieues avec d’autres de ses amis, je n’ai pu m’empêcher de le gronder un peu, en ayant soin de ne parler que pendant que la voiture faisait du bruit, afin que personne autre ne pût entendre.

«Dans les premiers temps, je me disais: il n’y a pas de dangers qui l’arrêtent, il est terrible. À présent j’ai fini par m’y accoutumer. Je fais signe à madame Magloire pour qu’elle ne le contrarie pas. Il se risque comme il veut. Moi j’emmène madame Magloire, je rentre dans ma chambre, je prie pour lui, et je m’endors. Je suis tranquille, parce que je sais bien que s’il lui arrivait malheur, ce serait ma fin. Je m’en irais au bon Dieu avec mon frère et mon évêque. Madame Magloire a eu plus de peine que moi à s’habituer à ce qu’elle appelait ses imprudences. Mais à présent le pli est pris. Nous prions toutes les deux, nous avons peur ensemble, et nous nous endormons. Le diable entrerait dans la maison qu’on le laisserait faire. Après tout, que craignons-nous dans cette maison? Il y a toujours quelqu’un avec nous, qui est le plus fort. Le diable peut y passer, mais le bon Dieu l’habite.

«Voilà qui me suffit. Mon frère n’a plus même besoin de me dire un mot maintenant. Je le comprends sans qu’il parle, et nous nous abandonnons à la Providence.

«Voilà comme il faut être avec un homme qui a du grand dans l’esprit.

«J’ai questionné mon frère pour le renseignement que vous me demandez sur la famille de Faux. Vous savez comme il sait tout et comme il a des souvenirs, car il est toujours très bon royaliste. C’est de vrai une très ancienne famille normande de la généralité de Caen. Il y a cinq cents ans d’un Raoul de Faux, d’un Jean de Faux et d’un Thomas de Faux, qui étaient des gentilshommes, dont un seigneur de Rochefort. Le dernier était Guy-Étienne-Alexandre, et était maître de camp, et quelque chose dans les chevaux-légers de Bretagne. Sa fille Marie-Louise a épousé Adrien-Charles de Gramont, fils du duc Louis de Gramont, pair de France, colonel des gardes françaises et lieutenant général des armées. On écrit Faux, Fauq et Faoucq.

«Bonne madame, recommandez-nous aux prières de votre saint parent, M. le cardinal. Quant à votre chère Sylvanie, elle a bien fait de ne pas prendre les courts instants qu’elle passe près de vous pour m’écrire. Elle se porte bien, travaille selon vos désirs, m’aime toujours. C’est tout ce que je veux. Son souvenir par vous m’est arrivé. Je m’en trouve heureuse. Ma santé n’est pas trop mauvaise, et cependant je maigris tous les jours davantage. Adieu, le papier me manque et me force de vous quitter. Mille bonnes choses.

«Baptistine.

«P. S. Madame votre belle-sœur est toujours ici avec sa jeune famille. Votre petit-neveu est charmant. Savez-vous qu’il a cinq ans bientôt! Hier il a vu passer un cheval auquel on avait mis des genouillères, et il disait: “Qu’est-ce qu’il a donc aux genoux?” Il est si gentil, cet enfant! Son petit frère traîne un vieux balai dans l’appartement comme une voiture, et dit: “Hu!”

»Comme on le voit par cette lettre, ces deux femmes savaient se plier aux façons d’être de l’évêque avec ce génie particulier de la femme qui comprend l’homme mieux que l’homme ne se comprend. L’évêque de Digne, sous cet air doux et candide qui ne se démentait jamais, faisait parfois des choses grandes, hardies et magnifiques, sans paraître même s’en douter. Elles en tremblaient, mais elles le laissaient faire. Quelquefois madame Magloire essayait une remontrance avant; jamais pendant ni après. Jamais on ne le troublait, ne fût-ce que par un signe, dans une action commencée. À de certains moments, sans qu’il eût besoin de le dire, lorsqu’il n’en avait peut-être pas lui-même conscience, tant sa simplicité était parfaite, elles sentaient vaguement qu’il agissait comme évêque; alors elles n’étaient plus que deux ombres dans la maison. Elles le servaient passivement, et, si c’était obéir que de disparaître, elles disparaissaient. Elles savaient, avec une admirable délicatesse d’instinct, que certaines sollicitudes peuvent gêner. Aussi, même le croyant en péril, elles comprenaient, je ne dis pas sa pensée, mais sa nature, jusqu’au point de ne plus veiller sur lui. Elles le confiaient à Dieu.

D’ailleurs Baptistine disait, comme on vient de le lire, que la fin de son frère serait la sienne. Madame Magloire ne le disait pas, mais elle le savait.

Chapitre X

L’évêque en présence d’une lumière inconnue

À une époque un peu postérieure à la date de la lettre citée dans les pages précédentes, il fit une chose, à en croire toute la ville, plus risquée encore que sa promenade à travers les montagnes des bandits. Il y avait près de Digne, dans la campagne, un homme qui vivait solitaire. Cet homme, disons tout de suite le gros mot, était un ancien conventionnel. Il se nommait G.

On parlait du conventionnel G. dans le petit monde de Digne avec une sorte d’horreur. Un conventionnel, vous figurez-vous cela? Cela existait du temps qu’on se tutoyait et qu’on disait: citoyen. Cet homme était à peu près un monstre. Il n’avait pas voté la mort du roi, mais presque. C’était un quasi-régicide. Il avait été terrible. Comment, au retour des princes légitimes, n’avait-on pas traduit cet homme-là devant une cour prévôtale? On ne lui eût pas coupé la tête, si vous voulez, il faut de la clémence, soit; mais un bon bannissement à vie. Un exemple enfin! etc., etc. C’était un athée d’ailleurs, comme tous ces gens-là. — Commérages des oies sur le vautour.

Était-ce du reste un vautour que G.? Oui, si l’on en jugeait par ce qu’il y avait de farouche dans sa solitude. N’ayant pas voté la mort du roi, il n’avait pas été compris dans les décrets d’exil et avait pu rester en France.

Il habitait, à trois quarts d’heure de la ville, loin de tout hameau, loin de tout chemin, on ne sait quel repli perdu d’un vallon très sauvage. Il avait là, disait-on, une espèce de champ, un trou, un repaire. Pas de voisins; pas même de passants. Depuis qu’il demeurait dans ce vallon, le sentier qui y conduisait avait disparu sous l’herbe. On parlait de cet endroit-là comme de la maison du bourreau. Pourtant l’évêque songeait, et de temps en temps regardait l’horizon à l’endroit où un bouquet d’arbres marquait le vallon du vieux conventionnel, et il disait:

— Il y a là une âme qui est seule.

Et au fond de sa pensée il ajoutait: «Je lui dois ma visite.»

Mais, avouons-le, cette idée, au premier abord naturelle, lui apparaissait, après un moment de réflexion, comme étrange et impossible, et presque repoussante. Car, au fond, il partageait l’impression générale, et le conventionnel lui inspirait, sans qu’il s’en rendît clairement compte, ce sentiment qui est comme la frontière de la haine et qu'exprime si bien le mot éloignement.

Toutefois, la gale de la brebis doit-elle faire reculer le pasteur? Non. Mais quelle brebis!

Le bon évêque était perplexe. Quelquefois il allait de ce côté-là, puis il revenait. Un jour enfin le bruit se répandit dans la ville qu'une façon de jeune pâtre qui servait le conventionnel G. dans sa bauge était venu chercher un médecin; que le vieux scélérat se mourait, que la paralysie le gagnait, et qu'il ne passerait pas la nuit.

— Dieu merci! ajoutaient quelques-uns.

L'évêque prit son bâton, mit son pardessus à cause de sa soutane un peu trop usée, comme nous l'avons dit, et aussi à cause du vent du soir qui ne devait pas tarder à souffler, et partit.

Le soleil déclinait et touchait presque à l'horizon, quand l'évêque arriva à l'endroit excommunié. Il reconnut avec un certain battement de cœur qu'il était près de la tanière. Il enjamba un fossé, franchit une haie, leva un échalier, entra dans un courtil délabré, fit quelques pas assez hardiment, et tout à coup, au fond de la friche, derrière une haute broussaille, il aperçut la caverne.

C'était une cabane toute basse, indigente, petite et propre, avec une treille clouée à la façade.

Devant la porte, dans une vieille chaise à roulettes, fauteuil du paysan, il y avait un homme en cheveux blancs qui souriait au soleil.

Près du vieillard assis se tenait debout un jeune garçon, le petit pâtre. Il tendait au vieillard une jatte de lait.

Pendant que l'évêque regardait, le vieillard éleva la voix:

— Merci, dit-il, je n'ai plus besoin de rien.

Et son sourire quitta le soleil pour s'arrêter sur l'enfant.

L'évêque s'avança. Au bruit qu'il fit en marchant, le vieux homme assis tourna la tête, et son visage exprima toute la quantité de surprise qu'on peut avoir après une longue vie.

— Depuis que je suis ici, dit-il, voilà la première fois qu'on entre chez moi. Qui êtes-vous, monsieur?

L'évêque répondit:

— Je me nomme Bienvenu Myriel.

— Bienvenu Myriel! j'ai entendu prononcer ce nom. Est-ce que c'est vous que le peuple appelle monseigneur Bienvenu?

— C’est moi.

Le vieillard reprit avec un demi-sourire:

— En ce cas, vous êtes mon évêque?

— Un peu.

— Entrez, monsieur.

Le conventionnel tendit la main à l’évêque, mais l’évêque ne la prit pas. L’évêque se borna à dire:

— Je suis satisfait de voir qu’on m’avait trompé. Vous ne me semblez, certes, pas malade.

— Monsieur, répondit le vieillard, je vais guérir.

Il fit une pause et dit:

— Je mourrai dans trois heures.

Puis il reprit:

— Je suis un peu médecin; je sais de quelle façon la dernière heure vient. Hier, je n’avais que les pieds froids; aujourd’hui, le froid a gagné les genoux; maintenant je le sens qui monte jusqu’à la ceinture; quand il sera au cœur, je m’arrêterai. Le soleil est beau, n’est-ce pas? je me suis fait rouler dehors pour jeter un dernier coup d’œil sur les choses, vous pouvez me parler, cela ne me fatigue point. Vous faites bien de venir regarder un homme qui va mourir. Il est bon que ce moment-là ait des témoins. On a des manies; j’aurais voulu aller jusqu’à l’aube. Mais je sais que j’en ai à peine pour trois heures. Il fera nuit. Au fait, qu’importe! Finir est une affaire simple. On n’a pas besoin du matin pour cela. Soit. Je mourrai à la belle étoile.

Le vieillard se tourna vers le pâtre.

— Toi, va te coucher. Tu as veillé l’autre nuit. Tu es fatigué.

L’enfant rentra dans la cabane.

Le vieillard le suivit des yeux et ajouta comme se parlant à lui-même:

— Pendant qu’il dormira, je mourrai. Les deux sommeils peuvent faire bon voisinage.

L’évêque n’était pas ému comme il semble qu’il aurait pu l’être. Il ne croyait pas sentir Dieu dans cette façon de mourir. Disons tout, car les petites contradictions des grands cœurs veulent être indiquées comme le reste, lui qui, dans l’occasion, riait si volontiers de Sa Grandeur, il était quelque peu choqué de ne pas être appelé monseigneur, et il était presque tenté de répliquer: citoyen. Il lui vint une velléité de familiarité bourrue, assez ordinaire aux médecins et aux prêtres, mais qui ne lui était pas habituelle, à lui. Cet homme, après tout, ce conventionnel, ce représentant du peuple, avait été un puissant de la terre; pour la première fois de sa vie peut-être, l’évêque se sentit en humeur de sévérité.

Le conventionnel cependant le considérait avec une cordialité modeste, où l’on eût pu démêler l’humilité qui sied quand on est si près de sa mise en poussière.

L’évêque, de son côté, quoiqu’il se gardât ordinairement de la curiosité, laquelle, selon lui, était contiguë à l’offense, ne pouvait s’empêcher d’examiner le conventionnel avec une attention qui, n’ayant pas sa source dans la sympathie, lui eût été probablement reprochée par sa conscience vis-à-vis de tout autre homme. Un conventionnel lui faisait un peu l’effet d’être hors la loi, même hors la loi de charité.

G., calme, le buste presque droit, la voix vibrante, était un de ces grands octogénaires qui font l’étonnement du physiologiste. La révolution a eu beaucoup de ces hommes proportionnés à l’époque. On sentait dans ce vieillard l’homme à l’épreuve. Si près de sa fin, il avait conservé tous les gestes de la santé. Il y avait dans son coup d’œil clair, dans son accent ferme, dans son robuste mouvement d’épaules, de quoi déconcerter la mort. Azraël, l’ange mahométan du sépulcre, eût rebroussé chemin et eût cru se tromper de porte. G. semblait mourir parce qu’il le voulait bien. Il y avait de la liberté dans son agonie. Les jambes seulement étaient immobiles. Les ténèbres le tenaient par là. Les pieds étaient morts et froids, et la tête vivait de toute la puissance de la vie et paraissait en pleine lumière. G., en ce grave moment, ressemblait à ce roi du conte oriental, chair par en haut, marbre par en bas.

Une pierre était là. L’évêque s’y assit. L’exorde fut *ex abrupto*.

— Je vous félicite, dit-il du ton dont on réprimande. Vous n’avez toujours pas voté la mort du roi.

Le conventionnel ne parut pas remarquer le sous-entendu amer caché dans ce mot: toujours. Il répondit. Tout sourire avait disparu de sa face.

— Ne me félicitez pas trop, monsieur; j’ai voté la fin du tyran.

C’était l’accent austère en présence de l’accent sévère.

— Que voulez-vous dire? reprit l’évêque.

— Je veux dire que l’homme a un tyran, l’ignorance. J’ai voté la fin de ce tyran-là. Ce tyran-là a engendré la royauté qui est l’autorité prise dans le faux, tandis que la science est l’autorité prise dans le vrai. L’homme ne doit être gouverné que par la science.

— Et la conscience, ajouta l’évêque.

— C’est la même chose. La conscience, c’est la quantité de science innée que nous avons en nous.

Monseigneur Bienvenu écoutait, un peu étonné, ce langage très nouveau pour lui. Le conventionnel poursuivit:

— Quant à Louis XVI, j’ai dit non. Je ne me crois pas le droit de tuer un homme; mais je me sens le devoir d’exterminer le mal. J’ai voté la fin du tyran. C’est-à-dire la fin de la prostitution pour la femme, la fin de l’esclavage pour l’homme, la fin de la nuit pour l’enfant. En votant la république, j’ai voté cela. J’ai voté la fraternité, la concorde, l’aurore! J’ai aidé à la chute des préjugés et des erreurs. Les écroulements des erreurs et des préjugés font de la lumière. Nous avons fait tomber le vieux monde, nous autres, et le vieux monde, vase des misères, en se renversant sur le genre humain, est devenu une urne de joie.

— Joie mêlée, dit l’évêque.

— Vous pourriez dire joie troublée, et aujourd’hui, après ce fatal retour du passé qu’on nomme 1814, joie disparue. Hélas, l’œuvre a été incomplète, j’en conviens; nous avons démoli l’ancien régime dans les faits, nous n’avons pu entièrement le supprimer dans les idées. Détruire les abus, cela ne suffit pas; il faut modifier les mœurs. Le moulin n’y est plus, le vent y est encore.

— Vous avez démoli. Démolir peut être utile; mais je me défie d’une démolition compliquée de colère.

— Le droit a sa colère, monsieur l’évêque, et la colère du droit est un élément du progrès. N’importe, et quoi qu’on en dise, la révolution française est le plus puissant pas du genre humain depuis l’avènement du Christ. Incomplète, soit; mais sublime. Elle a dégagé toutes les inconnues sociales. Elle a adouci les esprits; elle a calmé, apaisé, éclairé; elle a fait couler sur la terre des flots de civilisation. Elle a été bonne. La révolution française, c’est le sacre de l’humanité.

L’évêque ne put s’empêcher de murmurer:

— Oui? 93!

Le conventionnel se dressa sur sa chaise avec une solennité presque lugubre, et, autant qu’un mourant peut s’écrier, il s’écria:

— Ah! vous y voilà! 93! J’attendais ce mot-là. Un nuage s’est formé pendant quinze cents ans. Au bout de quinze siècles, il a crevé. Vous faites le procès au coup de tonnerre.

L’évêque sentit, sans se l’avouer peut-être, que quelque chose en lui était atteint. Pourtant il fit bonne contenance. Il répondit:

— Le juge parle au nom de la justice; le prêtre parle au nom de la pitié, qui n’est autre chose qu’une justice plus élevée. Un coup de tonnerre ne doit pas se tromper.

Et il ajouta en regardant fixement le conventionnel.

— Louis XVII?

Le conventionnel étendit la main et saisit le bras de l’évêque:

— Louis XVII! Voyons, sur qui pleurez-vous? Est-ce sur l’enfant innocent? alors, soit. Je pleure avec vous. Est-ce sur l’enfant royal? je demande à réfléchir. Pour moi, le frère de Cartouche, enfant innocent, pendu sous les aisselles en place de Grève jusqu’à ce que mort s’ensuive, pour le seul crime d’avoir été le frère de Cartouche, n’est pas moins douloureux que le petit-fils de Louis XV, enfant innocent, martyrisé dans la tour du Temple pour le seul crime d’avoir été le petit-fils de Louis XV.

— Monsieur, dit l’évêque, je n’aime pas ces rapprochements de noms.

— Cartouche? Louis XV? pour lequel des deux réclamez-vous?

Il y eut un moment de silence. L’évêque regrettait presque d’être venu, et pourtant il se sentait vaguement et étrangement ébranlé.

Le conventionnel reprit:

— Ah! monsieur le prêtre, vous n’aimez pas les crudités du vrai. Christ les aimait, lui. Il prenait une verge et il époussetait le temple. Son fouet plein d’éclairs était un rude diseur de vérités. Quand il s’écriait: *Sinite parvulos*..., il ne distinguait pas entre les petits enfants. Il ne se fût pas gêné de rapprocher le dauphin de Barabbas du dauphin d’Hérode. Monsieur, l’innocence est sa couronne à elle-même. L’innocence n’a que faire d’être altesse. Elle est aussi auguste déguenillée que fleurdelysée.

— C’est vrai, dit l’évêque à voix basse.

— J’insiste, continua le conventionnel G. Vous m’avez nommé Louis XVII. Entendons-nous. Pleurons-nous sur tous les innocents, sur tous les martyrs, sur tous les enfants, sur ceux d’en bas comme sur ceux d’en haut? J’en suis. Mais alors, je vous l’ai dit, il faut remonter plus haut que 93, et c’est avant Louis XVII qu’il faut commencer nos larmes. Je pleurerai sur les enfants des rois avec vous, pourvu que vous pleuriez avec moi sur les petits du peuple.

— Je pleure sur tous, dit l’évêque.

— Également! s'écria G., et si la balance doit pencher, que ce soit du côté du peuple. Il y a plus longtemps qu'il souffre.

Il y eut encore un silence. Ce fut le conventionnel qui le rompit. Il se souleva sur un coude, prit entre son pouce et son index replié un peu de sa joue, comme on fait machinalement lorsqu'on interroge et qu'on juge, et interpella l'évêque avec un regard plein de toutes les énergies de l'agonie. Ce fut presque une explosion.

— Oui, monsieur, il y a longtemps que le peuple souffre. Et puis, tenez, ce n'est pas tout cela, que venez-vous me questionner et me parler de Louis XVII? Je ne vous connais pas, moi. Depuis que je suis dans ce pays, j'ai vécu dans cet enclos, seul, ne mettant pas les pieds dehors, ne vient personne que cet enfant qui m'aide. Votre nom est, il est vrai, arrivé confusément jusqu'à moi, et, je dois le dire, pas très mal prononcé; mais cela ne signifie rien; les gens habiles ont tant de manières d'en faire accroire à ce brave bonhomme de peuple. À propos, je n'ai pas entendu le bruit de votre voiture, vous l'aurez sans doute laissée derrière le taillis, là-bas, à l'embranchement de la route. Je ne vous connais pas, vous dis-je. Vous m'avez dit que vous étiez l'évêque, mais cela ne me renseigne point sur votre personne morale. En somme, je vous répète ma question. Qui êtes-vous? Vous êtes un évêque, c'est-à-dire un prince de l'église, un de ces hommes dorés, armoriés, rentés, qui ont de grosses prébendes — l'évêché de Digne, quinze mille francs de fixe, dix mille francs de casuel, total, vingt-cinq mille francs — , qui ont des cuisines, qui ont des livrées, qui font bonne chère, qui mangent des poules d'eau le vendredi, qui se pavanent, laquais devant, laquais derrière, en berline de gala, et qui ont des palais, et qui roulent carrosse au nom de Jésus-Christ qui allait pieds nus! Vous êtes un prélat; rentes, palais, chevaux, valets, bonne table, toutes les sensualités de la vie, vous avez cela comme les autres, et comme les autres vous en jouissez, c'est bien, mais cela en dit trop ou pas assez; cela ne m'éclaire pas sur votre valeur intrinsèque et essentielle, à vous qui venez avec la prétention probable de m'apporter de la sagesse. À qui est-ce que je parle? Qui êtes-vous?

L'évêque baissa la tête et répondit:

— *Vermis sum*.

— Un ver de terre en carrosse! grommela le conventionnel.

C'était le tour du conventionnel d'être hautain, et de l'évêque d'être humble.

L’évêque reprit avec douceur.

— Monsieur, soit. Mais expliquez-moi en quoi mon carrosse, qui est là à deux pas derrière les arbres, en quoi ma bonne table et les poules d’eau que je mange le vendredi, en quoi mes vingt-cinq mille livres de rentes, en quoi mon palais et mes laquais prouvent que la pitié n’est pas une vertu, que la clémence n’est pas un devoir, et que 93 n’a pas été inexorable.

Le conventionnel passa la main sur son front comme pour en écarter un nuage.

— Avant de vous répondre, dit-il, je vous prie de me pardonner. Je viens d’avoir un tort, monsieur. Vous êtes chez moi, vous êtes mon hôte. Je vous dois courtoisie. Vous discutez mes idées, il sied que je me borne à combattre vos raisonnements. Vos richesses et vos jouissances sont des avantages que j’ai contre vous dans le débat, mais il est de bon goût de ne pas m’en servir. Je vous promets de ne plus en user.

— Je vous remercie, dit l’évêque.

G. reprit:

— Revenons à l’explication que vous me demandiez. Où en étions-nous? Que me disiez-vous? que 93 a été inexorable?

— Inexorable, oui, dit l’évêque. Que pensez-vous de Marat battant des mains à la guillotine?

— Que pensez-vous de Bossuet chantant le *Te Deum* sur les dragonnades?

La réponse était dure, mais elle allait au but avec la rigidité d’une pointe d’acier. L’évêque en tressaillit; il ne lui vint aucune riposte, mais il était froissé de cette façon de nommer Bossuet. Les meilleurs esprits ont leurs fétiches, et parfois se sentent vaguement meurtris des manques de respect de la logique.

Le conventionnel commençait à haleter; l’asthme de l’agonie, qui se mêle aux derniers souffles, lui entrecoupait la voix; cependant il avait encore une parfaite lucidité d’âme dans les yeux. Il continua:

— Disons encore quelques mots çà et là, je veux bien. En dehors de la révolution qui, prise dans son ensemble, est une immense affirmation humaine, 93, hélas! est une réplique. Vous le trouvez inexorable, mais toute la monarchie, monsieur? Carrier est un bandit; mais quel nom donnez-vous à Montrevel? Fouquier-Tinville est un gueux, mais quel est votre avis sur Lamoignon-Bâville? Maillard est affreux, mais Saulx-Tavannes, s’il vous plaît? Le père Duchêne est féroce, mais quelle épithète m’accorderez-vous pour le père Letellier? Jourdan-Coupe-Tête est un monstre, mais moindre que M. le marquis de Louvois. Monsieur, monsieur, je plains Marie-Antoinette, archiduchesse et reine, mais je plains aussi cette pauvre femme huguenote qui, en 1685, sous Louis le Grand, monsieur, allaitant son enfant, fut liée, nue jusqu'à la ceinture, à un poteau, l'enfant tenu à distance; le sein se gonflait de lait et le cœur d'angoisse. Le petit, affamé et pâle, voyait ce sein, agonisait et criait, et le bourreau disait à la femme, mère et nourrice: «Abjure!» lui donnant à choisir entre la mort de son enfant et la mort de sa conscience. Que dites-vous de ce supplice de Tantale accommodé à une mère? Monsieur, retenez bien ceci: la révolution française a eu ses raisons. Sa colère sera absoute par l'avenir. Son résultat, c'est le monde meilleur. De ses coups les plus terribles, il sort une caresse pour le genre humain. J'abrège. Je m'arrête, j'ai trop beau jeu. D'ailleurs je me meurs.

Et, cessant de regarder l'évêque, le conventionnel acheva sa pensée en ces quelques mots tranquilles:

— Oui, les brutalités du progrès s'appellent révolutions. Quand elles sont finies, on reconnaît ceci: que le genre humain a été rudoyé, mais qu'il a marché.

Le conventionnel ne se doutait pas qu'il venait d'emporter successivement l'un après l'autre tous les retranchements intérieurs de l'évêque. Il en restait un pourtant, et de ce retranchement, suprême ressource de la résistance de monseigneur Bienvenu, sortit cette parole où reparut presque toute la rudesse du commencement:

— Le progrès doit croire en Dieu. Le bien ne peut pas avoir de serviteur impie. C'est un mauvais conducteur du genre humain que celui qui est athée.

Le vieux représentant du peuple ne répondit pas. Il eut un tremblement. Il regarda le ciel, et une larme germa lentement dans ce regard. Quand la paupière fut pleine, la larme coula le long de sa joue livide, et il dit presque en bégayant, bas et se parlant à lui-même, l'œil perdu dans les profondeurs:

— O toi! ô idéal! toi seul existes!

L'évêque eut une sorte d'inexprimable commotion. Après un silence, le vieillard leva un doigt vers le ciel, et dit:

— L'infini est. Il est là. Si l'infini n'avait pas de moi, le moi serait sa borne; il ne serait pas infini; en d'autres termes, il ne serait pas. Or il est. Donc il a un moi. Ce moi de l'infini, c'est Dieu.

Le mourant avait prononcé ces dernières paroles d'une voix haute et avec le frémissement de l'extase, comme s'il voyait quelqu'un. Quand il eut parlé, ses yeux se fermèrent. L'effort l'avait épuisé. Il était évident qu'il venait de vivre en une minute les quelques heures qui lui restaient. Ce qu'il venait de dire l'avait approché de celui qui est dans la mort. L'instant suprême arrivait.

L'évêque le comprit, le moment pressait, c'était comme prêtre qu'il était venu; de l'extrême froideur, il était passé par degrés à l'émotion extrême; il regarda ces yeux fermés, il prit cette vieille main ridée et glacée, et se pencha vers le moribond:

— Cette heure est celle de Dieu. Ne trouvez-vous pas qu'il serait regrettable que nous nous fussions rencontrés en vain?

Le conventionnel rouvrit les yeux. Une gravité où il y avait de l'ombre s'empreignit sur son visage.

— Monsieur l'évêque, dit-il, avec une lenteur qui venait peut-être plus encore de la dignité de l'âme que de la défaillance des forces, j'ai passé ma vie dans la méditation, l'étude et la contemplation. J'avais soixante ans quand mon pays m'a appelé, et m'a ordonné de me mêler de ses affaires. J'ai obéi. Il y avait des abus, je les ai combattus; il y avait des tyrannies, je les ai détruites; il y avait des droits et des principes, je les ai proclamés et confessés. Le territoire était envahi, je l'ai défendu; la France était menacée, j'ai offert ma poitrine. Je n'étais pas riche; je suis pauvre. J'ai été l'un des maîtres de l'État, les caves du Trésor étaient encombrées d'espèces au point qu'on était forcé d'étançonner les murs, prêts à se fendre sous le poids de l'or et de l'argent, je dînais rue de l'Arbre-Sec à vingt-deux sous par tête. J'ai secouru les opprimés, j'ai soulagé les souffrants. J'ai déchiré la nappe de l'autel, c'est vrai; mais c'était pour panser les blessures de la patrie. J'ai toujours soutenu la marche en avant du genre humain vers la lumière, et j'ai résisté quelquefois au progrès sans pitié. J'ai, dans l'occasion, protégé mes propres adversaires, vous autres. Et il y a à Peteghem en Flandre, à l'endroit même où les rois mérovingiens avaient leur palais d'été, un couvent d'urbanistes, l'abbaye de Sainte-Claire en Beaulieu, que j'ai sauvé en 1793. J'ai fait mon devoir selon mes forces, et le bien que j'ai pu. Après quoi j'ai été chassé, traqué, poursuivi, persécuté, noirci, raillé, conspué, maudit, proscrit. Depuis bien des années déjà, avec mes cheveux blancs, je sens que beaucoup de gens se croient sur moi le droit de mépris, j'ai pour la pauvre foule ignorante visage de damné, et j'accepte, ne haïssant personne, l'isolement de la haine. Maintenant, j'ai quatre-vingt-six ans; je vais mourir. Qu'est-ce que vous venez me demander?

— Votre bénédiction, dit l'évêque.

Et il s'agenouilla.

Quand l'évêque releva la tête, la face du conventionnel était devenue auguste. Il venait d'expirer.

L'évêque rentra chez lui profondément absorbé dans on ne sait quelles pensées. Il passa toute la nuit en prière. Le lendemain, quelques braves curieux essayèrent de lui parler du conventionnel G.; il se borna à montrer le ciel. À partir de ce moment, il redoubla de tendresse et de fraternité pour les petits et les souffrants.

Toute allusion à ce «vieux scélérat de G.» le faisait tomber dans une préoccupation singulière. Personne ne pourrait dire que le passage de cet esprit devant le sien et le reflet de cette grande conscience sur la sienne ne fût pas pour quelque chose dans son approche de la perfection.

Cette «visite pastorale» fut naturellement une occasion de bourdonnement pour les petites coteries locales:

— Était-ce la place d'un évêque que le chevet d'un tel mourant? Il n'y avait évidemment pas de conversion à attendre. Tous ces révolutionnaires sont relaps. Alors pourquoi y aller? Qu'a-t-il été regarder là? Il fallait donc qu'il fût bien curieux d'un emportement d'âme par le diable.

Un jour, une douairière, de la variété impertinente qui se croit spirituelle, lui adressa cette saillie:

— Monseigneur, on demande quand Votre Grandeur aura le bonnet rouge.

— Oh! oh! voilà une grosse couleur, répondit l'évêque. Heureusement que ceux qui la méprisent dans un bonnet la vénèrent dans un chapeau.

Chapitre XI

Une restriction

On risquerait fort de se tromper si l’on concluait de là que monseigneur Bienvenu fût «un évêque philosophe» ou «un curé patriote». Sa rencontre, ce qu’on pourrait presque appeler sa conjonction avec le conventionnel G., lui laissa une sorte d’étonnement qui le rendit plus doux encore. Voilà tout.

Quoique monseigneur Bienvenu n’ait été rien moins qu’un homme politique, c’est peut-être ici le lieu d’indiquer, très brièvement, quelle fut son attitude dans les événements d’alors, en supposant que monseigneur Bienvenu ait jamais songé à avoir une attitude. Remontons donc en arrière de quelques années.

Quelque temps après l’élévation de M. Myriel à l’épiscopat, l’empereur l’avait fait baron de l’empire, en même temps que plusieurs autres évêques. L’arrestation du pape eut lieu, comme on sait, dans la nuit du 5 au 6 juillet 1809; à cette occasion, M. Myriel fut appelé par Napoléon au synode des évêques de France et d’Italie convoqué à Paris. Ce synode se tint à Notre-Dame et s’assembla pour la première fois le 15 juin 1811 sous la présidence de M. le cardinal Fesch. M. Myriel fut du nombre des quatre-vingt-quinze évêques qui s’y rendirent. Mais il n’assista qu’à une séance et à trois ou quatre conférences particulières. Évêque d’un diocèse montagnard, vivant si près de la nature, dans la rusticité et le dénuement, il paraît qu’il apportait parmi ces personnages éminents des idées qui changeaient la température de l’assemblée. Il revint bien vite à Digne. On le questionna sur ce prompt retour, il répondit:

— Je les gênais. L’air du dehors leur venait par moi. Je leur faisais l’effet d’une porte ouverte.

Une autre fois il dit:

— Que voulez-vous? ces messeigneurs-là sont des princes. Moi, je ne suis qu’un pauvre évêque paysan.

Le fait est qu’il avait déplu. Entre autres choses étranges, il lui serait échappé de dire, un soir qu’il se trouvait chez un de ses collègues les plus qualifiés:

— Les belles pendules! les beaux tapis! les belles livrées! Ce doit être bien importun! Oh! que je ne voudrais pas avoir tout ce superflu-là à me crier sans cesse aux oreilles: Il y a des gens qui ont faim! il y a des gens qui ont froid! il y a des pauvres! il y a des pauvres!

Disons-le en passant, ce ne serait pas une haine intelligente que la haine du luxe. Cette haine impliquerait la haine des arts. Cependant, chez les gens d'église, en dehors de la représentation et des cérémonies, le luxe est un tort. Il semble révéler des habitudes peu réellement charitables. Un prêtre opulent est un contre-sens. Le prêtre doit se tenir près des pauvres. Or peut-on toucher sans cesse, et nuit et jour, à toutes les détresses, à toutes les infortunes, à toutes les indigences, sans avoir soi-même sur soi un peu de cette sainte misère, comme la poussière du travail? Se figure-t-on un homme qui est près d'un brasier, et qui n'a pas chaud? Se figure-t-on un ouvrier qui travaille sans cesse à une fournaise, et qui n'a ni un cheveu brûlé, ni un ongle noirci, ni une goutte de sueur, ni un grain de cendre au visage? La première preuve de la charité chez le prêtre, chez l'évêque surtout, c'est la pauvreté. C'était là sans doute ce que pensait M. l'évêque de Digne.

Il ne faudrait pas croire d'ailleurs qu'il partageait sur certains points délicats ce que nous appellerions «les idées du siècle». Il se mêlait peu aux querelles théologiques du moment et se taisait sur les questions où sont compromis l'Église et l'État; mais si on l'eût beaucoup pressé, il paraît qu'on l'eût trouvé plutôt ultramontain que gallican. Comme nous faisons un portrait et que nous ne voulons rien cacher, nous sommes forcé d'ajouter qu'il fut glacial pour Napoléon déclinant. À partir de 1813, il adhéra ou il applaudit à toutes les manifestations hostiles. Il refusa de le voir à son passage au retour de l'île d'Elbe, et s'abstint d'ordonner dans son diocèse les prières publiques pour l'empereur pendant les Cent-Jours.

Outre sa sœur, mademoiselle Baptistine, il avait deux frères: l'un général, l'autre préfet. Il écrivait assez souvent à tous les deux. Il tint quelque temps rigueur au premier, parce qu'ayant un commandement en Provence, à l'époque du débarquement de Cannes, le général s'était mis à la tête de douze cents hommes et avait poursuivi l'empereur comme quelqu'un qui veut le laisser échapper. Sa correspondance resta plus affectueuse pour l'autre frère, l'ancien préfet, brave et digne homme qui vivait retiré à Paris, rue Cassette.

Monseigneur Bienvenu eut donc, aussi lui, son heure d'esprit de parti, son heure d'amertume, son nuage. L'ombre des passions du moment traversa ce doux et grand esprit occupé des choses éternelles. Certes, un pareil homme eût mérité de n’avoir pas d’opinions politiques. Qu’on ne se méprenne pas sur notre pensée, nous ne confondons point ce qu’on appelle «opinions politiques» avec la grande aspiration au progrès, avec la sublime foi patriotique, démocratique et humaine, qui, de nos jours, doit être le fond même de toute intelligence généreuse. Sans approfondir des questions qui ne touchent qu’indirectement au sujet de ce livre, nous disons simplement ceci: Il eût été beau que monseigneur Bienvenu n’eût pas été royaliste et que son regard ne se fût pas détourné un seul instant de cette contemplation sereine où l’on voit rayonner distinctement, au-dessus du va-et-vient orageux des choses humaines, ces trois pures lumières, la Vérité, la Justice, la Charité.

Tout en convenant que ce n’était point pour une fonction politique que Dieu avait créé monseigneur Bienvenu, nous eussions compris et admiré la protestation au nom du droit et de la liberté, l’opposition fière, la résistance périlleuse et juste à Napoléon tout-puissant. Mais ce qui nous plaît vis-à-vis de ceux qui montent nous plaît moins vis-à-vis de ceux qui tombent. Nous n’aimons le combat que tant qu’il y a danger; et, dans tous les cas, les combattants de la première heure ont seuls le droit d’être les exterminateurs de la dernière. Qui n’a pas été accusateur opiniâtre pendant la prospérité doit se taire devant l’écroulement. Le dénonciateur du succès est le seul légitime justicier de la chute. Quant à nous, lorsque la Providence s’en mêle et frappe, nous la laissons faire. 1812 commence à nous désarmer. En 1813, la lâche rupture de silence de ce corps législatif taciturne enhardi par les catastrophes n’avait que de quoi indigner, et c’était un tort d’applaudir; en 1814, devant ces maréchaux trahissant, devant ce sénat passant d’une fange à l’autre, insultant après avoir divinisé, devant cette idolâtrie lâchant pied et crachant sur l’idole, c’était un devoir de détourner la tête; en 1815, comme les suprêmes désastres étaient dans l’air, comme la France avait le frisson de leur approche sinistre, comme on pouvait vaguement distinguer Waterloo ouvert devant Napoléon, la douloureuse acclamation de l’armée et du peuple au condamné du destin n’avait rien de risible, et, toute réserve faite sur le despote, un cœur comme l’évêque de Digne n’eût peut-être pas dû méconnaître ce qu’avait d’auguste et de touchant, au bord de l’abîme, l’étroit embrassement d’une grande nation et d’un grand homme.

À cela près, il était et il fut, en toute chose, juste, vrai, équitable, intelligent, humble et digne; bienfaisant, et bienveillant, ce qui est une autre bienfaisance. C’était un prêtre, un sage, et un homme. Même, il faut le dire, dans cette opinion politique que nous venons de lui reprocher et que nous sommes disposé à juger presque sévèrement, il était tolérant et facile, peut-être plus que nous qui parlons ici. — Le portier de la maison de ville avait été placé là par l'empereur. C'était un vieux sous-officier de la vieille garde, légionnaire d'Austerlitz, bonapartiste comme l'aigle. Il échappait dans l'occasion à ce pauvre diable de ces paroles peu réfléchies que la loi d'alors qualifiait *propos séditieux*. Depuis que le profil impérial avait disparu de la légion d'honneur, il ne s'habillait jamais *dans l'ordonnance*, comme il disait, afin de ne pas être forcé de porter sa croix. Il avait ôté lui-même dévotement l'effigie impériale de la croix que Napoléon lui avait donnée, cela faisait un trou, et il n'avait rien voulu mettre à la place. «Plutôt mourir, disait-il, que de porter sur mon cœur les trois crapauds!» Il raillait volontiers tout haut Louis XVIII. «Vieux goutteux à guêtres d'anglais!» disait-il, «qu'il s'en aille en Prusse avec son salsifis!» Heureux de réunir dans la même imprécation les deux choses qu'il détestait le plus, la Prusse et l'Angleterre. Il en fit tant qu'il perdit sa place. Le voilà sans pain sur le pavé avec femme et enfants. L'évêque le fit venir, le gronda doucement, et le nomma suisse de la cathédrale.

M. Myriel était dans le diocèse le vrai pasteur, l'ami de tous. En neuf ans, à force de saintes actions et de douces manières, monseigneur Bienvenu avait rempli la ville de Digne d'une sorte de vénération tendre et filiale. Sa conduite même envers Napoléon avait été acceptée et comme tacitement pardonnée par le peuple, bon troupeau faible, qui adorait son empereur, mais qui aimait son évêque.

Chapitre XII

Solitude de monseigneur Bienvenu

Il y a presque toujours autour d’un évêque une escouade de petits abbés comme autour d’un général une volée de jeunes officiers. C’est là ce que ce charmant saint François de Sales appelle quelque part «les prêtres blancs-becs». Toute carrière a ses aspirants qui font cortège aux arrivés. Pas une puissance qui n’ait son entourage; pas une fortune qui n’ait sa cour. Les chercheurs d’avenir tourbillonnent autour du présent splendide. Toute métropole a son état-major. Tout évêque un peu influent a près de lui sa patrouille de chérubins séminaristes, qui fait la ronde et maintient le bon ordre dans le palais épiscopal, et qui monte la garde autour du sourire de monseigneur. Agréer à un évêque, c’est le pied à l’étrier pour un sous-diacre. Il faut bien faire son chemin; l’apostolat ne dédaigne pas le canonicat.

De même qu’il y a ailleurs les gros bonnets, il y a dans l’église les grosses mitres. Ce sont les évêques bien en cour, riches, rentés, habiles, acceptés du monde, sachant prier, sans doute, mais sachant aussi solliciter, peu scrupuleux de faire faire antichambre en leur personne à tout un diocèse, traits d’union entre la sacristie et la diplomatie, plutôt abbés que prêtres, plutôt prélats qu’évêques. Heureux qui les approche! Gens en crédit qu’ils sont, ils font pleuvoir autour d’eux, sur les empressés et les favorisés, et sur toute cette jeunesse qui sait plaire, les grasses paroisses, les prébendes, les archidiaconats, les aumôneries et les fonctions cathédrales, en attendant les dignités épiscopales. En avançant eux-mêmes, ils font progresser leurs satellites; c’est tout un système solaire en marche. Leur rayonnement empourpre leur suite. Leur prospérité s’émiette sur la cantonade en bonnes petites promotions. Plus grand diocèse au patron, plus grosse cure au favori. Et puis Rome est là. Un évêque qui sait devenir archevêque, un archevêque qui sait devenir cardinal, vous emmène comme conclaviste, vous entrez dans la rote, vous avez le pallium, vous voilà auditeur, vous voilà camérier, vous voilà monsignor, et de la Grandeur à Imminence il n’y a qu’un pas, et entre Imminence et la Sainteté il n’y a que la fumée d’un scrutin. Toute calotte peut rêver la tiare. Le prêtre est de nos jours le seul homme qui puisse régulièrement devenir roi; et quel roi! le roi suprême. Aussi quelle pépinière d’aspirations qu’un séminaire! Que d’enfants de chœur rougissants, que de jeunes abbés ont sur la tête le pot au lait de Perrette! Comme l’ambition s’intitule aisément vocation, qui sait? de bonne foi peut-être et se trompant elle-même, béate qu’elle est!

Monseigneur Bienvenu, humble, pauvre, particulier, n’était pas compté parmi les grosses mitres. Cela était visible à l’absence complète de jeunes prêtres autour de lui. On a vu qu’à Paris «il n’avait pas pris». Pas un avenir ne songeait à se greffer sur ce vieillard solitaire. Pas une ambition en herbe ne faisait la folie de verdir à son ombre. Ses chanoines et ses grands vicaires étaient de bons vieux hommes, un peu peuple comme lui, murés comme lui dans ce diocèse sans issue sur le cardinafat, et qui ressemblaient à leur évêque, avec cette différence qu’eux étaient finis, et que lui était achevé.

On sentait si bien l’impossibilité de croître près de monseigneur Bienvenu qu’à peine sortis du séminaire, les jeunes gens ordonnés par lui se faisaient recommander aux archevêques d’Aix ou d’Auch, et s’en allaient bien vite. Car enfin, nous le répétons, on veut être poussé. Un saint qui vit dans un excès d’abnégation est un voisinage dangereux; il pourrait bien vous communiquer par contagion une pauvreté incurable, l’ankylose des articulations utiles à l’avancement, et, en somme, plus de renoncement que vous n’en voulez; et l’on fuit cette vertu galeuse. De là l’isolement de monseigneur Bienvenu. Nous vivons dans une société sombre. Réussir, voilà l’enseignement qui tombe goutte à goutte de la corruption en surplomb.

Soit dit en passant, c’est une chose assez hideuse que le succès. Sa fausse ressemblance avec le mérite trompe les hommes. Pour la foule, la réussite a presque le même profil que la suprématie. Le succès, ce ménechme du talent, a une dupe: l’histoire. Juvénal et Tacite seuls en bougonnent. De nos jours, une philosophie à peu près officielle est entrée en domesticité chez lui, porte la livrée du succès, et fait le service de son antichambre. Réussissez: théorie. Prospérité suppose Capacité. Gagnez à la loterie, vous voilà un habile homme. Qui triomphe est vénéré. Naissez coiffé, tout est là. Ayez de la chance, vous aurez le reste; soyez heureux, on vous croira grand. En dehors des cinq ou six exceptions immenses qui font l’éclat d’un siècle, l’admiration contemporaine n’est guère que myopie. Dorure est or. Être le premier venu, cela ne gâte rien, pourvu qu’on soit le parvenu. Le vulgaire est un vieux Narcisse qui s’adore lui-même et qui applaudit le vulgaire. Cette faculté énorme par laquelle on est Moïse, Eschyle, Dante, Michel-

Ange ou Napoléon, la multitude la décerne d'emblée et par acclamation à quiconque atteint son but dans quoi que ce soit. Qu'un notaire se transfigure en député, qu'un faux Corneille fasse *Tiridate*, qu'un eunuque parvienne à posséder un harem, qu'un Prud'homme militaire gagne par accident la bataille décisive d'une époque, qu'un apothicaire invente les semelles de carton pour l'armée de Sambre-et-Meuse et se construise, avec ce carton vendu pour du cuir, quatre cent mille livres de rente, qu'un porte-balle épouse l'usure et la fasse accoucher de sept ou huit millions dont il est le père et dont elle est la mère, qu'un prédicateur devienne évêque par le nasillement, qu'un intendant de bonne maison soit si riche en sortant de service qu'on le fasse ministre des finances, les hommes appellent cela Génie, de même qu'ils appellent Beauté la figure de Mousqueton et Majesté l'encolure de Claude. Ils confondent avec les constellations de l'abîme les étoiles que font dans la vase molle du bourbier les pattes des canards.

Chapitre XIII

Ce qu'il croyait

Au point de vue de l'orthodoxie, nous n'avons point à sonder M. l'évêque de Digne. Devant une telle âme, nous ne nous sentons en humeur que de respect. La conscience du juste doit être crue sur parole. D'ailleurs, de certaines natures étant données, nous admettons le développement possible de toutes les beautés de la vertu humaine dans une croyance différente de la nôtre.

Que pensait-il de ce dogme-ci ou de ce mystère-là? Ces secrets du for intérieur ne sont connus que de la tombe où les âmes entrent nues. Ce dont nous sommes certain, c'est que jamais les difficultés de foi ne se résolvaient pour lui en hypocrisie. Aucune pourriture n'est possible au diamant. Il croyait le plus qu'il pouvait. *Credo in Patrem*, s'écriait-il souvent. Puisant d'ailleurs dans les bonnes œuvres cette quantité de satisfaction qui suffit à la conscience, et qui vous dit tout bas: «Tu es avec Dieu.»

Ce que nous croyons devoir noter, c'est que, en dehors, pour ainsi dire, et au-delà de sa foi, l'évêque avait un excès d'amour. C'est par là, *quia multum amavit*, qu'il était jugé vulnérable par les «hommes sérieux», les «personnes graves» et les «gens raisonnables»; locutions favorites de notre triste monde où l'égoïsme reçoit le mot d'ordre du pédantisme. Qu'était-ce que cet excès d'amour? C'était une bienveillance sereine, débordant les hommes, comme nous l'avons indiqué déjà, et, dans l'occasion, s'étendant jusqu'aux choses. Il vivait sans dédain. Il était indulgent pour la création de Dieu. Tout homme, même le meilleur, a en lui une dureté irréfléchie qu'il tient en réserve pour l'animal. L'évêque de Digne n'avait point cette dureté-là, particulière à beaucoup de prêtres pourtant. Il n'allait pas jusqu'au bramine, mais il semblait avoir médité cette parole de l'Ecclésiaste: «Sait-on où va l'âme des animaux?» Les laideurs de l'aspect, les difformités de l'instinct, ne le troublaient pas et ne l'indignaient pas. Il en était ému, presque attendri. Il semblait que, pensif, il en allât chercher, au-delà de la vie apparente, la cause, l'explication ou l'excuse. Il semblait par moments demander à Dieu des commutations. Il examinait sans colère, et avec l'œil du linguiste qui déchiffre un palimpseste, la quantité de chaos qui est encore dans la nature. Cette rêverie faisait parfois sortir de lui des mots étranges.

Un matin, il était dans son jardin; il se croyait seul, mais sa sœur marchait derrière lui sans qu'il la vît; tout à coup, il s'arrêta, et il regarda quelque chose à terre; c'était une grosse araignée, noire, velue, horrible. Sa sœur l'entendit qui disait:

— Pauvre bête! ce n'est pas sa faute.

Pourquoi ne pas dire ces enfantillages presque divins de la bonté? Puérilités, soit; mais ces puérilités sublimes ont été celles de saint François d'Assise et de Marc-Aurèle. Un jour il se donna une entorse pour n'avoir pas voulu écraser une fourmi.

Ainsi vivait cet homme juste. Quelquefois, il s'endormait dans son jardin, et alors il n'était rien de plus vénérable.

Monseigneur Bienvenu avait été jadis, à en croire les récits sur sa jeunesse et même sur sa virilité, un homme passionné, peut-être violent. Sa mansuétude universelle était moins un instinct de nature que le résultat d'une grande conviction filtrée dans son cœur à travers la vie et lentement tombée en lui, pensée à pensée; car, dans un caractère comme dans un rocher, il peut y avoir des trous de gouttes d'eau. Ces creusements-là sont ineffaçables; ces formations-là sont indestructibles.

En 1815, nous croyons l'avoir dit, il atteignit soixante-quinze ans, mais il n'en paraissait pas avoir plus de soixante. Il n'était pas grand; il avait quelque embonpoint, et, pour le combattre, il faisait volontiers de longues marches à pied, il avait le pas ferme et n'était que fort peu courbé, détail d'où nous ne prétendons rien conclure; Grégoire XVI, à quatre-vingts ans, se tenait droit et souriant, ce qui ne l'empêchait pas d'être un mauvais évêque. Monseigneur Bienvenu avait ce que le peuple appelle «une belle tête», mais si aimable qu'on oubliait qu'elle était belle.

Quand il causait avec cette santé enfantine qui était une de ses grâces, et dont nous avons déjà parlé, on se sentait à l'aise près de lui, il semblait que de toute sa personne il sortît de la joie. Son teint coloré et frais, toutes ses dents bien blanches qu'il avait conservées et que son rire faisait voir, lui donnaient cet air ouvert et facile qui fait dire d'un homme: «C'est un bon enfant», et d'un vieillard: «C'est un bonhomme». C'était, on s'en souvient, l'effet qu'il avait fait à Napoléon. Au premier abord, et pour qui le voyait pour la première fois, ce n'était guère qu'un bonhomme en effet. Mais si l'on restait quelques heures près de lui, et pour peu qu'on le vît pensif, le bonhomme se transfigurait peu à peu et prenait je ne sais quoi d'imposant; son front large et sérieux, auguste par les cheveux blancs, devenait auguste aussi par la méditation; la majesté se dégageait de cette bonté, sans que la bonté cessât de rayonner; on éprouvait quelque chose de l'émotion qu'on aurait si l'on voyait un ange souriant ouvrir lentement ses ailes sans cesser de sourire. Le respect, un respect inexprimable, vous pénétrait par degrés et vous montait au cœur, et l'on sentait qu'on avait devant soi une de ces âmes fortes, éprouvées et indulgentes, où la pensée est si grande qu'elle ne peut plus être que douce.

Comme on l'a vu, la prière, la célébration des offices religieux, l'aumône, la consolation aux affligés, la culture d'un coin de terre, la fraternité, la frugalité, l'hospitalité, le renoncement, la confiance, l'étude, le travail remplissaient chacune des journées de sa vie. *Remplissaient* est bien le mot, et certes cette journée de l'évêque était bien pleine jusqu'aux bords de bonnes pensées, de bonnes paroles et de bonnes actions. Cependant elle n'était pas complète si le temps froid ou pluvieux l'empêchait d'aller passer, le soir, quand les deux femmes s'étaient retirées, une heure ou deux dans son jardin avant de s'endormir. Il semblait que ce fût une sorte de rite pour lui de se préparer au sommeil par la méditation en présence des grands spectacles du ciel nocturne. Quelquefois, à une heure même assez avancée de la nuit, si les deux vieilles filles ne dormaient pas, elles l'entendaient marcher lentement dans les allées. Il était là, seul avec lui-même, recueilli, paisible, adorant, comparant la sérénité de son cœur à la sérénité de l'éther, ému dans les ténèbres par les splendeurs visibles des constellations et les splendeurs invisibles de Dieu, ouvrant son âme aux pensées qui tombent de l'inconnu. Dans ces moments-là, offrant son cœur à l'heure où les fleurs nocturnes offrent leur parfum, allumé comme une lampe au centre de la nuit étoilée, se répandant en extase au milieu du rayonnement universel de la création, il n'eût pu peut-être dire lui-même ce qui se passait dans son esprit, il sentait quelque chose s'envoler hors de lui et quelque chose descendre en lui. Mystérieux échanges des gouffres de l'âme avec les gouffres de l'univers!

Il songeait à la grandeur et à la présence de Dieu; à l'éternité future, étrange mystère; à l'éternité passée, mystère plus étrange encore; à tous les infinis qui s'enfonçaient sous ses yeux dans tous les sens; et, sans chercher à comprendre l'incompréhensible, il le regardait. Il n'étudiait pas Dieu, il s'en éblouissait. Il considérait ces magnifiques rencontres des atomes qui donnent des aspects à la matière, révèlent les forces en les constatant, créent les individualités dans l'unité, les proportions dans l'étendue, l'innombrable dans l’infini, et par la lumière produisent la beauté. Ces rencontres se nouent et se dénouent sans cesse; de là la vie et la mort. Il s’asseyait sur un banc de bois adossé à une treille décrépite, et il regardait les astres à travers les silhouettes chétives et rachitiques de ses arbres fruitiers. Ce quart d’arpent, si pauvrement planté, si encombré de masures et de hangars, lui était cher et lui suffisait.

Que fallait-il de plus à ce vieillard, qui partageait le loisir de sa vie, où il y avait si peu de loisir, entre le jardinage le jour et la contemplation la nuit? Cet étroit enclos, ayant les cieux pour plafond, n’était-ce pas assez pour pouvoir adorer Dieu tour à tour dans ses œuvres les plus charmantes et dans ses œuvres les plus sublimes? N’est-ce pas là tout, en effet, et que désirer au-delà? Un petit jardin pour se promener, et l’immensité pour rêver. À ses pieds ce qu’on peut cultiver et cueillir; sur sa tête ce qu’on peut étudier et méditer; quelques fleurs sur la terre et toutes les étoiles dans le ciel.

Chapitre XIV

Ce qu’il pensait

Un dernier mot.

Comme cette nature de détails pourrait, particulièrement au moment où nous sommes, et pour nous servir d’une expression actuellement à la mode, donner à l’évêque de Digne une certaine physionomie «panthéiste», et faire croire, soit à son blâme, soit à sa louange, qu’il y avait en lui une de ces philosophies personnelles, propres à notre siècle, qui germent quelquefois dans les esprits solitaires et s’y construisent et y grandissent jusqu’à y remplacer les religions, nous insistons sur ceci que pas un de ceux qui ont connu monseigneur Bienvenu ne se fût cru autorisé à penser rien de pareil. Ce qui éclairait cet homme, c’était le cœur. Sa sagesse était faite de la lumière qui vient de là.

Point de systèmes, beaucoup d’œuvres. Les spéculations abstruses contiennent du vertige; rien n’indique qu’il hasardât son esprit dans les apocalypses. L’apôtre peut être hardi, mais l’évêque doit être timide. Il se fût probablement fait scrupule de sonder trop avant de certains problèmes réservés en quelque sorte aux grands esprits terribles. Il y a de l’horreur sacrée sous les porches de l’énigme; ces ouvertures sombres sont là béantes, mais quelque chose vous dit, à vous passant de la vie, qu’on n’entre pas. Malheur à qui y pénètre! Les génies, dans les profondeurs inouïes de l’abstraction et de la spéculation pure, situés pour ainsi dire au-dessus des dogmes, proposent leurs idées à Dieu. Leur prière offre audacieusement la discussion. Leur adoration interroge. Ceci est la religion directe, pleine d’anxiété et de responsabilité pour qui en tente les escarpements.

La méditation humaine n’a point de limite. À ses risques et périls, elle analyse et creuse son propre éblouissement. On pourrait presque dire que, par une sorte de réaction splendide, elle en éblouit la nature; le mystérieux monde qui nous entoure rend ce qu’il reçoit, il est probable que les contemplateurs sont contemplés. Quoi qu’il en soit, il y a sur la terre des hommes — sont-ce des hommes? — qui aperçoivent distinctement au fond des horizons du rêve les hauteurs de l’absolu, et qui ont la vision terrible de la montagne infinie. Monseigneur Bienvenu n’était point de ces hommes-là, monseigneur Bienvenu n’était pas un génie. Il eût redouté ces sublimités d’où quelques-uns, très grands même, comme Swedenborg et Pascal, ont glissé dans la démence. Certes, ces puissantes rêveries ont leur utilité morale, et par ces routes ardues on s’approche de la perfection idéale. Lui, il prenait le sentier qui abrège: l’évangile. Il n’essayait point de faire faire à sa chasuble les plis du manteau d’Élie, il ne projetait aucun rayon d’avenir sur le roulis ténébreux des événements, il ne cherchait pas à condenser en flamme la lueur des choses, il n’avait rien du prophète et rien du mage. Cette âme simple aimait, voilà tout.

Qu’il dilatât la prière jusqu’à une aspiration surhumaine, cela est probable; mais on ne peut pas plus prier trop qu’aimer trop; et, si c’était une hérésie de prier au-delà des textes, sainte Thérèse et saint Jérôme seraient des hérétiques.

Il se penchait sur ce qui gémit et sur ce qui expie. L’univers lui apparaissait comme une immense maladie; il sentait partout de la fièvre, il auscultait partout de la souffrance, et, sans chercher à deviner l’énigme, il tâchait de panser la plaie. Le redoutable spectacle des choses créées développait en lui l’attendrissement; il n’était occupé qu’à trouver pour lui-même et à inspirer aux autres la meilleure manière de plaindre et de soulager. Ce qui existe était pour ce bon et rare prêtre un sujet permanent de tristesse cherchant à consoler.

Il y a des hommes qui travaillent à l’extraction de l’or; lui, il travaillait à l’extraction de la pitié. L’universelle misère était sa mine. La douleur partout n’était qu’une occasion de bonté toujours. *Aimez-vous les uns les autres;* il déclarait cela complet, ne souhaitait rien de plus, et c’était là toute sa doctrine. Un jour, cet homme qui se croyait «philosophe», ce sénateur, déjà nommé, dit à l’évêque:

— Mais voyez donc le spectacle du monde; guerre de tous contre tous; le plus fort a le plus d’esprit. Votre *aimez-vous les uns les autres* est une bêtise.

— Eh bien, répondit monseigneur Bienvenu sans disputer, si c’est une bêtise, l’âme doit s’y enfermer comme la perle dans l’huître.

Il s’y enfermait donc, il y vivait, il s’en satisfaisait absolument, laissant de côté les questions prodigieuses qui attirent et qui épouvantent, les perspectives insondables de l’abstraction, les précipices de la métaphysique, toutes ces profondeurs convergentes, pour l’apôtre à Dieu, pour l’athée au néant: la destinée, le bien et le mal, la guerre de l’être contre l’être, la conscience de l’homme, le somnambulisme pensif de l’animal, la transformation par la mort, la récapitulation d’existences que contient le tombeau, la greffe incompréhensible des amours successifs sur le moi persistant, l’essence, la substance, le Nil et l’Ens, l’âme, la nature, la liberté, la nécessité; problèmes à pic, épaisseurs sinistres, où se penchent les gigantesques archanges de l’esprit humain; formidables abîmes que Lucrèce, Manou, saint Paul et Dante contemplent avec cet œil fulgurant qui semble, en regardant fixement l’infini, y faire éclore des étoiles.

Monseigneur Bienvenu était simplement un homme qui constatait du dehors les questions mystérieuses sans les scruter, sans les agiter, et sans en troubler son propre esprit, et qui avait dans l’âme le grave respect de l’ombre.

Livre deuxième — La chute

Chapitre I

Le soir d’un jour de marche

Dans les premiers jours du mois d’octobre 1815, une heure environ avant le coucher du soleil, un homme qui voyageait à pied entrait dans la petite ville de Digne. Les rares habitants qui se trouvaient en ce moment à leurs fenêtres ou sur le seuil de leurs maisons regardaient ce voyageur avec une sorte d’inquiétude. Il était difficile de rencontrer un passant d’un aspect plus misérable. C’était un homme de moyenne taille, trapu et robuste, dans la force de l’âge. Il pouvait avoir quarante-six ou quarante-huit ans. Une casquette à visière de cuir rabattue cachait en partie son visage, brûlé par le soleil et le hâle, et ruisselant de sueur. Sa chemise de grosse toile jaune, rattachée au col par une petite ancre d’argent, laissait voir sa poitrine velue; il avait une cravate tordue en corde, un pantalon de coutil bleu, usé et râpé, blanc à un genou, troué à l’autre, une vieille blouse grise en haillons, rapiécée à l’un des coudes d’un morceau de drap vert cousu avec de la ficelle, sur le dos un sac de soldat fort plein, bien bouclé et tout neuf, à la main un énorme bâton noueux, les pieds sans bas dans des souliers ferrés, la tête tondue et la barbe longue.

La sueur, la chaleur, le voyage à pied, la poussière, ajoutaient je ne sais quoi de sordide à cet ensemble délabré.

Les cheveux étaient ras, et pourtant hérissés; car ils commençaient à pousser un peu, et semblaient n’avoir pas été coupés depuis quelque temps.

Personne ne le connaissait. Ce n’était évidemment qu’un passant. D’où venait-il? Du midi. Des bords de la mer peut-être. Car il faisait son entrée dans Digne par la même rue qui, sept mois auparavant, avait vu passer l’empereur Napoléon allant de Cannes à Paris. Cet homme avait dû marcher tout le jour. Il paraissait très fatigué. Des femmes de l’ancien bourg qui est au bas de la ville l’avaient vu s’arrêter sous les arbres du boulevard Gassendi et boire à la fontaine qui est à l’extrémité de la promenade. Il fallait qu’il eût bien soif, car des enfants qui le suivaient le virent encore s’arrêter, et boire, deux cents pas plus loin, à la fontaine de la place du marché.

Arrivé au coin de la rue Poichevert, il tourna à gauche et se dirigea vers la mairie. Il y entra, puis sortit un quart d’heure après. Un gendarme était assis près de la porte sur le banc de pierre où le général Drouot monta le 4 mars pour lire à la foule effarée des habitants de Digne la proclamation du golfe Juan. L'homme ôta sa casquette et salua humblement le gendarme.

Le gendarme, sans répondre à son salut, le regarda avec attention, le suivit quelque temps des yeux, puis entra dans la maison de ville.

Il y avait alors à Digne une belle auberge à l'enseigne de *la Croix-de-Colbas*. Cette auberge avait pour hôtelier un nommé Jacquin Labarre, homme considéré dans la ville pour sa parenté avec un autre Labarre, qui tenait à Grenoble l'auberge des *Trois-Dauphins* et qui avait servi dans les guides. Lors du débarquement de l'empereur, beaucoup de bruits avaient couru dans le pays sur cette auberge des *Trois-Dauphins*. On contait que le général Bertrand, déguisé en charretier, y avait fait de fréquents voyages au mois de janvier, et qu'il y avait distribué des croix d'honneur à des soldats et des poignées de napoléons à des bourgeois. La réalité est que l'empereur, entré dans Grenoble, avait refusé de s'installer à l'hôtel de la préfecture; il avait remercié le maire en disant: *Je vais chez un brave homme que je connais*, et il était allé aux *Trois-Dauphins*. Cette gloire du Labarre des *Trois-Dauphins* se reflétait à vingt-cinq lieues de distance jusque sur le Labarre de la *Croix-de-Colbas*. On disait de lui dans la ville: *C'est le cousin de celui de Grenoble*.

L'homme se dirigea vers cette auberge, qui était la meilleure du pays. Il entra dans la cuisine, laquelle s'ouvrait de plain-pied sur la rue. Tous les fourneaux étaient allumés; un grand feu flambait gaîment dans la cheminée. L'hôte, qui était en même temps le chef, allait de l'âtre aux casseroles, fort occupé et surveillant un excellent dîner destiné à des rouliers qu'on entendait rire et parler à grand bruit dans une salle voisine. Quiconque a voyagé sait que personne ne fait meilleure chère que les rouliers. Une marmotte grasse, flanquée de perdrix blanches et de coqs de bruyère, tournait sur une longue broche devant le feu; sur les fourneaux cuisaient deux grosses carpes du lac de Lauzet et une truite du lac d'Alloz.

L'hôte, entendant la porte s'ouvrir et entrer un nouveau venu, dit sans lever les yeux de ses fourneaux:

— Que veut monsieur?

— Manger et coucher, dit l'homme.

— Rien de plus facile, reprit l'hôte.

En ce moment il tourna la tête, embrassa d'un coup d'œil tout l'ensemble du voyageur, et ajouta:

— ... en payant.

L’homme tira une grosse bourse de cuir de la poche de sa blouse et répondit:

— J’ai de l’argent.

— En ce cas on est à vous, dit l’hôte.

L’homme remit sa bourse en poche, se déchargea de son sac, le posa à terre près de la porte, garda son bâton à la main, et alla s’asseoir sur une escabelle basse près du feu. Digne est dans la montagne. Les soirées d’octobre y sont froides.

Cependant, tout en allant et venant, l’homme considérait le voyageur.

— Dîne-t-on bientôt? dit l’homme.

— Tout à l’heure, dit l’hôte.

Pendant que le nouveau venu se chauffait, le dos tourné, le digne aubergiste Jacquin Labarre tira un crayon de sa poche, puis il déchira le coin d’un vieux journal qui traînait sur une petite table près de la fenêtre. Sur la marge blanche il écrivit une ligne ou deux, plia sans cacheter et remit ce chiffon de papier à un enfant qui paraissait lui servir tout à la fois de marmiton et de laquais. L’aubergiste dit un mot à l’oreille du marmiton, et l’enfant partit en courant dans la direction de la mairie.

Le voyageur n’avait rien vu de tout cela.

Il demanda encore une fois:

— Dîne-t-on bientôt?

— Tout à l’heure, dit l’hôte.

L’enfant revint. Il rapportait le papier. L’hôte le déplia avec empressement, comme quelqu’un qui attend une réponse. Il parut lire attentivement, puis hocha la tête, et resta un moment pensif. Enfin il fit un pas vers le voyageur qui semblait plongé dans des réflexions peu sereines.

— Monsieur, dit-il, je ne puis vous recevoir.

L’homme se dressa à demi sur son séant.

— Comment! Avez-vous peur que je ne paye pas? Voulez-vous que je paye d’avance? J’ai de l’argent, vous dis-je.

— Ce n’est pas cela.

— Quoi donc?

— Vous avez de l’argent....

— Oui, dit l’homme.

— Et moi, dit l’hôte, je n’ai pas de chambre.

L’homme reprit tranquillement:

— Mettez-moi à l’écurie.

— Je ne puis.

— Pourquoi?

— Les chevaux prennent toute la place.

— Eh bien, repartit l’homme, un coin dans le grenier. Une botte de paille. Nous verrons cela après dîner.

— Je ne puis vous donner à dîner.

Cette déclaration, faite d’un ton mesuré, mais ferme, parut grave à l’étranger. Il se leva.

— Ah bah! mais je meurs de faim, moi. J’ai marché dès le soleil levé. J’ai fait douze lieues. Je paye. Je veux manger.

— Je n’ai rien, dit l’hôte.

L’homme éclata de rire et se tourna vers la cheminée et les fourneaux.

— Rien! et tout cela?

— Tout cela m’est retenu.

— Par qui?

— Par ces messieurs les rouliers.

— Combien sont-ils?

— Douze.

— Il y a là à manger pour vingt.

— Ils ont tout retenu et tout payé d’avance.

L’homme se rassit et dit sans hausser la voix:

— Je suis à l’auberge, j’ai faim, et je reste.

L’hôte alors se pencha à son oreille, et lui dit d’un accent qui le fit tressaillir:

— Allez-vous en.

Le voyageur était courbé en cet instant et poussait quelques braises dans le feu avec le bout ferré de son bâton, il se retourna vivement, et, comme il ouvrait la bouche pour répliquer, l’hôte le regarda fixement et ajouta toujours à voix basse:

— Tenez, assez de paroles comme cela. Voulez-vous que je vous dise votre nom? Vous vous appelez Jean Valjean. Maintenant voulez-vous que je vous dise qui vous êtes? En vous voyant entrer, je me suis douté de quelque chose, j’ai envoyé à la mairie, et voici ce qu’on m’a répondu. Savez-vous lire?

En parlant ainsi il tendait à l’étranger, tout déplié, le papier qui venait de voyager de l’auberge à la mairie, et de la mairie à l’auberge. L’homme y jeta un regard. L’aubergiste reprit après un silence:

— J’ai l’habitude d’être poli avec tout le monde. Allez-vous-en.

L’homme baissa la tête, ramassa le sac qu’il avait déposé à terre, et s’en alla. Il prit la grande rue. Il marchait devant lui au hasard, rasant de près les maisons, comme un homme humilié et triste. Il ne se retourna pas une seule fois. S’il s’était retourné, il aurait vu l’aubergiste de la *Croix-de-Colbas* sur le seuil de sa porte, entouré de tous les voyageurs de son auberge et de tous les passants de la rue, parlant vivement et le désignant du doigt, et, aux regards de défiance et d’effroi du groupe, il aurait deviné qu’avant peu son arrivée serait l’événement de toute la ville.

Il ne vit rien de tout cela. Les gens accablés ne regardent pas derrière eux. Ils ne savent que trop que le mauvais sort les suit.

Il chemina ainsi quelque temps, marchant toujours, allant à l’aventure par des rues qu’il ne connaissait pas, oubliant la fatigue, comme cela arrive dans la tristesse. Tout à coup il sentit vivement la faim. La nuit approchait. Il regarda autour de lui pour voir s’il ne découvrirait pas quelque gîte.

La belle hôtellerie s’était fermée pour lui; il cherchait quelque cabaret bien humble, quelque bouge bien pauvre.

Précisément une lumière s’allumait au bout de la rue; une branche de pin, pendue à une potence en fer, se dessinait sur le ciel blanc du crépuscule. Il y alla.

C’était en effet un cabaret. Le cabaret qui est dans la rue de Chaffaut.

Le voyageur s’arrêta un moment, et regarda par la vitre l’intérieur de la salle basse du cabaret, éclairée par une petite lampe sur une table et par un grand feu dans la cheminée. Quelques hommes y buvaient. L’hôte se chauffait. La flamme faisait bruire une marmite de fer accrochée à la crémaillère.

On entre dans ce cabaret, qui est aussi une espèce d’auberge, par deux portes. L’une donne sur la rue, l’autre s’ouvre sur une petite cour pleine de fumier.

Le voyageur n’osa pas entrer par la porte de la rue. Il se glissa dans la cour, s’arrêta encore, puis leva timidement le loquet et poussa la porte.

— Qui va là? dit le maître.

— Quelqu’un qui voudrait souper et coucher.

— C’est bon. Ici on soupe et on couche.

Il entra. Tous les gens qui buvaient se retournèrent. La lampe l’éclairait d’un côté, le feu de l’autre. On l’examina quelque temps pendant qu’il défaisait son sac.

L’hôte lui dit:

— Voilà du feu. Le souper cuit dans la marmite. Venez vous chauffer, camarade.

Il alla s’asseoir près de l’âtre. Il allongea devant le feu ses pieds meurtris par la fatigue; une bonne odeur sortait de la marmite. Tout ce qu’on pouvait distinguer de son visage sous sa casquette baissée prit une vague apparence de bien-être mêlée à cet autre aspect si poignant que donne l’habitude de la souffrance.

C’était d’ailleurs un profil ferme, énergique et triste. Cette physionomie était étrangement composée; elle commençait par paraître humble et finissait par sembler sévère. L’œil luisait sous les sourcils comme un feu sous une broussaille.

Cependant un des hommes attablés était un poissonnier qui, avant d’entrer au cabaret de la rue de Chaffaut, était allé mettre son cheval à l’écurie chez Labarre. Le hasard faisait que le matin même il avait rencontré cet étranger de mauvaise mine, cheminant entre Bras dasse et... j’ai oublié le nom. (Je crois que c’est Escoublon). Or, en le rencontrant, l’homme, qui paraissait déjà très fatigué, lui avait demandé de le prendre en croupe; à quoi le poissonnier n’avait répondu qu’en doublant le pas. Ce poissonnier faisait partie, une demi-heure auparavant, du groupe qui entourait Jacquin Labarre, et lui-même avait raconté sa désagréable rencontre du matin aux gens de *la Croix-de-Colbas*. Il fit de sa place au cabaretier un signe imperceptible. Le cabaretier vint à lui. Ils échangèrent quelques paroles à voix basse. L’homme était retombé dans ses réflexions.

Le cabaretier revint à la cheminée, posa brusquement sa main sur l’épaule de l’homme, et lui dit:

— Tu vas t’en aller d’ici.

L’étranger se retourna et répondit avec douceur.

— Ah! vous savez?

— Oui.

— On m’a renvoyé de l’autre auberge.

— Et l’on te chasse de celle-ci.

— Où voulez-vous que j’aille?

— Ailleurs.

L’homme prit son bâton et son sac, et s’en alla.

Comme il sortait, quelques enfants, qui l’avaient suivi depuis *la Croix-de-Colbas* et qui semblaient l’attendre, lui jetèrent des pierres. Il revint sur ses pas avec colère et les menaça de son bâton; les enfants se dispersèrent comme une volée d’oiseaux.

Il passa devant la prison. À la porte pendait une chaîne de fer attachée à une cloche. Il sonna.

Un guichet s’ouvrit.

— Monsieur le guichetier, dit-il en ôtant respectueusement sa casquette, voudriez-vous bien m’ouvrir et me loger pour cette nuit?

Une voix répondit:

— Une prison n’est pas une auberge. Faites-vous arrêter. On vous ouvrira.

Le guichet se referma.

Il entra dans une petite rue où il y a beaucoup de jardins. Quelques-uns ne sont enclos que de haies, ce qui égaye la rue. Parmi ces jardins et ces haies, il vit une petite maison d’un seul étage dont la fenêtre était éclairée. Il regarda par cette vitre comme il avait fait pour le cabaret. C’était une grande chambre blanchie à la chaux, avec un lit drapé d’indienne imprimée, et un berceau dans un coin, quelques chaises de bois et un fusil à deux coups accroché au mur. Une table était servie au milieu de la chambre. Une lampe de cuivre éclairait la nappe de grosse toile blanche, le broc d’étain luisant comme l’argent et plein de vin et la soupière brune qui fumait. À cette table était assis un homme d’une quarantaine d’années, à la figure joyeuse et ouverte, qui faisait sauter un petit enfant sur ses genoux. Près de lui, une femme toute jeune allaitait un autre enfant. Le père riait, l’enfant riait, la mère souriait.

L’étranger resta un moment rêveur devant ce spectacle doux et calmant. Que se passait-il en lui? Lui seul eût pu le dire. Il est probable qu’il pensa que cette maison joyeuse serait hospitalière, et que là où il voyait tant de bonheur il trouverait peut-être un peu de pitié.

Il frappa au carreau un petit coup très faible.

On n’entendit pas.

Il frappa un second coup.

Il entendit la femme qui disait:

— Mon homme, il me semble qu’on frappe.

— Non, répondit le mari.

Il frappa un troisième coup.

Le mari se leva, prit la lampe, et alla à la porte qu’il ouvrit.

C’était un homme de haute taille, demi-paysan, demi-artisan. Il portait un vaste tablier de cuir qui montait jusqu’à son épaule gauche, et dans lequel faisaient ventre un marteau, un mouchoir rouge, une poire à poudre, toutes sortes d’objets que la ceinture retenait comme dans une poche. Il renversait la tête en arrière; sa chemise largement ouverte et rabattue montrait son cou de taureau, blanc et nu. Il avait d’épais sourcils, d’énormes favoris noirs, les yeux à fleur de tête, le bas du visage en museau, et sur tout cela cet air d’être chez soi qui est une chose inexprimable.

— Monsieur, dit le voyageur, pardon. En payant, pourriez-vous me donner une assiettée de soupe et un coin pour dormir dans ce hangar qui est là dans ce jardin? Dites, pourriez-vous? En payant?

— Qui êtes-vous? demanda le maître du logis.

L’homme répondit:

— J’arrive de Puy-Moisson. J’ai marché toute la journée. J’ai fait douze lieues. Pourriez-vous? En payant?

— Je ne refuserais pas, dit le paysan, de loger quelqu’un de bien qui payerait. Mais pourquoi n’allez-vous pas à l’auberge.

— Il n’y a pas de place.

— Bah! pas possible. Ce n’est pas jour de foire ni de marché. Êtes-vous allé chez Labarre?

— Oui.

— Eh bien?

Le voyageur répondit avec embarras:

— Je ne sais pas, il ne m’a pas reçu.

— Êtes-vous allé chez chose, de la rue de Chaffaut?

L’embarras de l’étranger croissait. Il balbutia:

— Il ne m’a pas reçu non plus.

Le visage du paysan prit une expression de défiance, il regarda le nouveau venu de la tête aux pieds, et tout à coup il s’écria avec une sorte de frémissement:

— Est-ce que vous seriez l’homme?...

Il jeta un nouveau coup d’œil sur l’étranger, fit trois pas en arrière, posa la lampe sur la table et décrocha son fusil du mur.

Cependant aux paroles du paysan: *Est-ce que vous seriez l’homme?...* la femme s’était levée, avait pris ses deux enfants dans ses bras et s’était réfugiée précipitamment derrière son mari, regardant l’étranger avec épouvante, la gorge nue, les yeux effarés, en murmurant tout bas: *Tso-maraude*.

Tout cela se fit en moins de temps qu’il ne faut pour se le figurer. Après avoir examiné quelques instants l’homme comme on examine une vipère, le maître du logis revint à la porte et dit:

— Va-t’en.

— Par grâce, reprit l’homme, un verre d’eau.

— Un coup de fusil! dit le paysan.

Puis il referma la porte violemment, et l’homme l’entendit tirer deux gros verrous. Un moment après, la fenêtre se ferma au volet, et un bruit de barre de fer qu’on posait parvint au dehors.

La nuit continuait de tomber. Le vent froid des Alpes soufflait. À la lueur du jour expirant, l’étranger aperçut dans un des jardins qui bordent la rue une sorte de hutte qui lui parut maçonnée en mottes de gazon. Il franchit résolument une barrière de bois et se trouva dans le jardin. Il s’approcha de la hutte; elle avait pour porte une étroite ouverture très basse et elle ressemblait à ces constructions que les cantonniers se bâtissent au bord des routes. Il pensa sans doute que c’était en effet le logis d’un cantonnier; il souffrait du froid et de la faim; il s’était résigné à la faim, mais c’était du moins là un abri contre le froid. Ces sortes de logis ne sont habituellement pas occupés la nuit. Il se coucha à plat ventre et se glissa dans la hutte. Il y faisait chaud, et il y trouva un assez bon lit de paille. Il resta un moment étendu sur ce lit, sans pouvoir faire un mouvement tant il était fatigué. Puis, comme son sac sur son dos le gênait et que c’était d’ailleurs un oreiller tout trouvé, il se mit à déboucler une des courroies. En ce moment un grondement farouche se fit entendre. Il leva les yeux. La tête d’un dogue énorme se dessinait dans l’ombre à l’ouverture de la hutte.

C’était la niche d’un chien.

Il était lui-même vigoureux et redoutable; il s’arma de son bâton, il se fit de son sac un bouclier, et sortit de la niche comme il put, non sans élargir les déchirures de ses haillons.

Il sortit également du jardin, mais à reculons, obligé, pour tenir le dogue en respect, d’avoir recours à cette manœuvre du bâton que les maîtres en ce genre d’escrime appellent *la rose couverte*.

Quand il eut, non sans peine, repassé la barrière et qu’il se retrouva dans la rue, seul, sans gîte, sans toit, sans abri, chassé même de ce lit de paille et de cette niche misérable, il se laissa tomber plutôt qu’il ne s’assit sur une pierre, et il paraît qu’un passant qui traversait l’entendit s’écrier:

— Je ne suis pas même un chien!

Bientôt il se releva et se remit à marcher. Il sortit de la ville, espérant trouver quelque arbre ou quelque meule dans les champs, et s’y abriter.

Il chemina ainsi quelque temps, la tête toujours baissée. Quand il se sentit loin de toute habitation humaine, il leva les yeux et chercha autour de lui. Il était dans un champ; il avait devant lui une de ces collines basses couvertes de chaume coupé ras, qui après la moisson ressemblent à des têtes tondues.

L’horizon était tout noir; ce n’était pas seulement le sombre de la nuit; c’étaient des nuages très bas qui semblaient s’appuyer sur la colline même et qui montaient, emplissant tout le ciel. Cependant, comme la lune allait se lever et qu’il flottait encore au zénith un reste de clarté crépusculaire, ces nuages formaient au haut du ciel une sorte de voûte blanchâtre d’où tombait sur la terre une lueur.

La terre était donc plus éclairée que le ciel, ce qui est un effet particulièrement sinistre, et la colline, d’un pauvre et chétif contour, se dessinait vague et blafarde sur l’horizon ténébreux. Tout cet ensemble était hideux, petit, lugubre et borné. Rien dans le champ ni sur la colline qu’un arbre difforme qui se tordait en frissonnant à quelques pas du voyageur.

Cet homme était évidemment très loin d’avoir de ces délicates habitudes d’intelligence et d’esprit qui font qu’on est sensible aux aspects mystérieux des choses; cependant il y avait dans ce ciel, dans cette colline, dans cette plaine et dans cet arbre, quelque chose de si profondément désolé qu’après un moment d’immobilité et de rêverie, il rebroussa chemin brusquement. Il y a des instants où la nature semble hostile.

Il revint sur ses pas. Les portes de Digne étaient fermées. Digne, qui a soutenu des sièges dans les guerres de religion, était encore entourée en 1815 de vieilles murailles flanquées de tours carrées qu’on a démolies depuis. Il passa par une brèche et rentra dans la ville.

Il pouvait être huit heures du soir. Comme il ne connaissait pas les rues, il recommença sa promenade à l’aventure.

Il parvint ainsi à la préfecture, puis au séminaire. En passant sur la place de la cathédrale, il montra le poing à l’église.

Il y a au coin de cette place une imprimerie. C’est là que furent imprimées pour la première fois les proclamations de l’empereur et de la garde impériale à l’armée, apportées de l’île d’Elbe et dictées par Napoléon lui-même.

Épuisé de fatigue et n’espérant plus rien, il se coucha sur le banc de pierre qui est à la porte de cette imprimerie.

Une vieille femme sortait de l’église en ce moment. Elle vit cet homme étendu dans l’ombre.

— Que faites-vous là, mon ami? dit-elle.

Il répondit durement et avec colère:

— Vous le voyez, bonne femme, je me couche.

La bonne femme, bien digne de ce nom en effet, était madame la marquise de R.

— Sur ce banc? reprit-elle.

— J’ai eu pendant dix-neuf ans un matelas de bois, dit l’homme, j’ai aujourd’hui un matelas de pierre.

— Vous avez été soldat?

— Oui, bonne femme. Soldat.

— Pourquoi n’allez-vous pas à l’auberge?

— Parce que je n’ai pas d’argent.

— Hélas, dit madame de R., je n’ai dans ma bourse que quatre sous.

— Donnez toujours.

L’homme prit les quatre sous. Madame de R. continua:

— Vous ne pouvez vous loger avec si peu dans une auberge. Avez-vous essayé pourtant? Il est impossible que vous passiez ainsi la nuit. Vous avez sans doute froid et faim. On aurait pu vous loger par charité.

— J’ai frappé à toutes les portes.

— Eh bien?

— Partout on m’a chassé.

La «bonne femme» toucha le bras de l’homme et lui montra de l’autre côté de la place une petite maison basse à côté de l’évêché.

— Vous avez, reprit-elle, frappé à toutes les portes?

— Oui.

— Avez-vous frappé à celle-là?

— Non.

— Frappez-y.

Chapitre II

La prudence conseillée à la sagesse

Ce soir-là, M. l’évêque de Digne, après sa promenade en ville, était resté assez tard enfermé dans sa chambre. Il s’occupait d’un grand travail sur les *Devoirs*, lequel est malheureusement demeuré inachevé. Il dépouillait soigneusement tout ce que les Pères et les Docteurs ont dit sur cette grave matière. Son livre était divisé en deux parties; premièrement les devoirs de tous, deuxièmement les devoirs de chacun, selon la classe à laquelle il appartient. Les devoirs de tous sont les grands devoirs. Il y en a quatre. Saint Matthieu les indique: devoirs envers Dieu (Matth., VI), devoirs envers soi-même (Matth., V, 29, 30), devoirs envers le prochain (Matth., VII, 12), devoirs envers les créatures (Matth., VI, 20, 25). Pour les autres devoirs, l’évêque les avait trouvés indiqués et prescrits ailleurs; aux souverains et aux sujets, dans l’Épître aux Romains; aux magistrats, aux épouses, aux mères et aux jeunes hommes, par saint Pierre; aux maris, aux pères, aux enfants et aux serviteurs, dans l’Épître aux Éphésiens; aux fidèles, dans l’Épître aux Hébreux; aux vierges, dans l’Épître aux Corinthiens. Il faisait laborieusement de toutes ces prescriptions un ensemble harmonieux qu’il voulait présenter aux âmes.

Il travaillait encore à huit heures, écrivant assez incommodément sur de petits carrés de papier avec un gros livre ouvert sur ses genoux, quand madame Magloire entra, selon son habitude, pour prendre l’argenterie dans le placard près du lit. Un moment après, l’évêque, sentant que le couvert était mis et que sa sœur l’attendait peut-être, ferma son livre, se leva de sa table et entra dans la salle à manger.

La salle à manger était une pièce oblongue à cheminée, avec porte sur la rue (nous l’avons dit), et fenêtre sur le jardin.

Madame Magloire achevait en effet de mettre le couvert.

Tout en vaquant au service, elle causait avec mademoiselle Baptistine.

Une lampe était sur la table; la table était près de la cheminée. Un assez bon feu était allumé.

On peut se figurer facilement ces deux femmes qui avaient toutes deux passé soixante ans: madame Magloire petite, grasse, vive; mademoiselle Baptistine, douce, mince, frêle, un peu plus grande que son frère, vêtue d’une robe de soie puce, couleur à la mode en 1806, qu’elle avait achetée alors à Paris et qui lui durait encore. Pour emprunter des locutions vulgaires qui ont le mérite de dire avec un seul mot une idée qu’une page suffirait à peine à exprimer, madame Magloire avait l’air d’une *paysanne* et mademoiselle Baptistine d’une *dame*. Madame Magloire avait un bonnet blanc à tuyaux, au cou une jeannette d’or, le seul bijou de femme qu’il y eût dans la maison, un fichu très blanc sortant de la robe de bure noire à manches larges et courtes, un tablier de toile de coton à carreaux rouges et verts, noué à la ceinture d’un ruban vert, avec pièce d’estomac pareille rattachée par deux épingles aux deux coins d’en haut, aux pieds de gros souliers et des bas jaunes comme les femmes de Marseille. La robe de mademoiselle Baptistine était coupée sur les patrons de 1806, taille courte, fourreau étroit, manches à épaulettes, avec pattes et boutons. Elle cachait ses cheveux gris sous une perruque frisée dite à *l’enfant*. Madame Magloire avait l’air intelligent, vif et bon; les deux angles de sa bouche inégalement relevés et la lèvre supérieure plus grosse que la lèvre inférieure lui donnaient quelque chose de bourru et d’impérieux. Tant que monseigneur se taisait, elle lui parlait résolument avec un mélange de respect et de liberté; mais dès que monseigneur parlait, on a vu cela, elle obéissait passivement comme mademoiselle. Mademoiselle Baptistine ne parlait même pas. Elle se bornait à obéir et à complaire. Même quand elle était jeune, elle n’était pas jolie, elle avait de gros yeux bleus à fleur de tête et le nez long et busqué; mais tout son visage, toute sa personne, nous l’avons dit en commençant, respiraient une ineffable bonté. Elle avait toujours été prédestinée à la mansuétude; mais la foi, la charité, l’espérance, ces trois vertus qui chauffent doucement l’âme, avaient élevé peu à peu cette mansuétude jusqu’à la sainteté. La nature n’en avait fait qu’une brebis, la religion en avait fait un ange. Pauvre sainte fille! doux souvenir disparu! Mademoiselle Baptistine a depuis raconté tant de fois ce qui s’était passé à l’évêché cette soirée-là, que plusieurs personnes qui vivent encore s’en rappellent les moindres détails.

Au moment où M. l’évêque entra, madame Magloire parlait avec quelque vivacité. Elle entretenait *mademoiselle* d’un sujet qui lui était familier et auquel l’évêque était accoutumé. Il s’agissait du loquet de la porte d’entrée.

Il paraît que, tout en allant faire quelques provisions pour le souper, madame Magloire avait entendu dire des choses en divers lieux. On parlait d’un rôdeur de mauvaise mine; qu’un vagabond suspect serait arrivé, qu’il devait être quelque part dans la ville, et qu’il se pourrait qu’il y eût de méchantes rencontres pour ceux qui s’aviseraient de rentrer tard chez eux cette nuit-là. Que la police était bien mal faite du reste, attendu que M. le préfet et M. le maire ne s’aimaient pas, et cherchaient à se nuire en faisant arriver des événements. Que c’était donc aux gens sages à faire la police eux-mêmes et à se bien garder, et qu’il faudrait avoir soin de dûment clore, verrouiller et barricader sa maison, *et de bien fermer ses portes*.

Madame Magloire appuya sur ce dernier mot; mais l’évêque venait de sa chambre où il avait eu assez froid, il s’était assis devant la cheminée et se chauffait, et puis il pensait à autre chose. Il ne releva pas le mot à effet que madame Magloire venait de laisser tomber. Elle le répéta. Alors, mademoiselle Baptistine, voulant satisfaire madame Magloire sans déplaire à son frère, se hasarda à dire timidement:

— Mon frère, entendez-vous ce que dit madame Magloire?

— J’en ai entendu vaguement quelque chose, répondit l’évêque.

Puis tournant à demi sa chaise, mettant ses deux mains sur ses genoux, et levant vers la vieille servante son visage cordial et facilement joyeux, que le feu éclairait d’en bas:

— Voyons. Qu’y a-t-il? qu’y a-t-il? Nous sommes donc dans quelque gros danger?

Alors madame Magloire recommença toute l’histoire, en l’exagérant quelque peu, sans s’en douter. Il paraîtrait qu’un bohémien, un va-nu-pieds, une espèce de mendiant dangereux serait en ce moment dans la ville. Il s’était présenté pour loger chez Jacquin Labarre qui n’avait pas voulu le recevoir. On l’avait vu arriver par le boulevard Gassendi et rôder dans les rues à la brume. Un homme de sac et de corde avec une figure terrible.

— Vraiment? dit l’évêque.

Ce consentement à l’interroger encouragea madame Magloire; cela lui semblait indiquer que l’évêque n’était pas loin de s’alarmer; elle poursuivit triomphante:

— Oui, monseigneur. C’est comme cela. Il y aura quelque malheur cette nuit dans la ville. Tout le monde le dit. Avec cela que la police est si mal faite (répétition inutile). Vivre dans un pays de montagnes, et n’avoir pas même de lanternes la nuit dans les rues! On sort. Des fours, quoi! Et je dis, monseigneur, et mademoiselle que voilà dit comme moi....

— Moi, interrompit la sœur, je ne dis rien. Ce que mon frère fait est bien fait.

Madame Magloire continua comme s’il n’y avait pas eu de protestation:

— Nous disons que cette maison-ci n’est pas sûre du tout; que, si monseigneur le permet, je vais aller dire à Paulin Musebois, le serrurier, qu’il vienne remettre les anciens verrous de la porte; on les a là, c’est une minute; et je dis qu’il faut des verrous, monseigneur, ne serait-ce que pour cette nuit; car je dis qu’une porte qui s’ouvre du dehors avec un loquet, par le premier passant venu, rien n’est plus terrible; avec cela que monseigneur a l’habitude de toujours dire d’entrer, et que d’ailleurs, même au milieu de la nuit, ô mon Dieu! on n’a pas besoin d’en demander la permission....

En ce moment, on frappa à la porte un coup assez violent.

— Entrez, dit l’évêque.

Chapitre III

Héroïsme de l’obéissance passive

La porte s’ouvrit.

Elle s’ouvrit vivement, toute grande, comme si quelqu’un la poussait avec énergie et résolution.

Un homme entra.

Cet homme, nous le connaissons déjà. C’est le voyageur que nous avons vu tout à l’heure errer cherchant un gîte.

Il entra, fit un pas, et s’arrêta, laissant la porte ouverte derrière lui. Il avait son sac sur l’épaule, son bâton à la main, une expression rude, hardie, fatiguée et violente dans les yeux. Le feu de la cheminée l’éclairait. Il était hideux. C’était une sinistre apparition.

Madame Magloire n’eut pas même la force de jeter un cri. Elle tressaillit, et resta béante.

Mademoiselle Baptistine se retourna, aperçut l’homme qui entrait et se dressa à demi d’effarement, puis, ramenant peu à peu sa tête vers la cheminée, elle se mit à regarder son frère et son visage redevint profondément calme et serein.

L’évêque fixait sur l’homme un œil tranquille.

Comme il ouvrait la bouche, sans doute pour demander au nouveau venu ce qu’il désirait, l’homme appuya ses deux mains à la fois sur son bâton, promena ses yeux tour à tour sur le vieillard et les femmes, et, sans attendre que l’évêque parlât, dit d’une voix haute:

— Voici. Je m’appelle Jean Valjean. Je suis un galérien. J’ai passé dix-neuf ans au bagne. Je suis libéré depuis quatre jours et en route pour Pontarlier qui est ma destination. Quatre jours et que je marche depuis Toulon. Aujourd’hui, j’ai fait douze lieues à pied. Ce soir, en arrivant dans ce pays, j’ai été dans une auberge, on m’a renvoyé à cause de mon passeport jaune que j’avais montré à la mairie. Il avait fallu. J’ai été à une autre auberge. On m’a dit: Va-t-en! Chez l’un, chez l’autre. Personne n’a voulu de moi. J’ai été à la prison, le guichetier n’a pas ouvert. J’ai été dans la niche d’un chien. Ce chien m’a mordu et m’a chassé, comme s’il avait été un homme. On aurait dit qu’il savait qui j’étais. Je m’en suis allé dans les champs pour coucher à la belle étoile. Il n’y avait pas d’étoile. J’ai pensé qu’il pleuvrait, et qu’il n’y avait pas de bon Dieu pour empêcher de pleuvoir, et je suis rentré dans la ville pour y trouver le renfoncement d’une porte. Là, dans la place, j’allais me coucher sur une pierre. Une bonne femme m’a montré votre maison et m’a dit: «Frappe là». J’ai frappé. Qu’est-ce que c’est ici? Êtes-vous une auberge? J’ai de l’argent. Ma masse. Cent neuf francs quinze sous que j’ai gagnés au bagne par mon travail en dix-neuf ans. Je payerai. Qu’est-ce que cela me fait? J’ai de l’argent. Je suis très fatigué, douze lieues à pied, j’ai bien faim. Voulez-vous que je reste?

— Madame Magloire, dit l’évêque, vous mettrez un couvert de plus.

L’homme fit trois pas et s’approcha de la lampe qui était sur la table.

— Tenez, reprit-il, comme s’il n’avait pas bien compris, ce n’est pas ça. Avez-vous entendu? Je suis un galérien. Un forçat. Je viens des galères.

Il tira de sa poche une grande feuille de papier jaune qu’il déplia.

— Voilà mon passeport. Jaune, comme vous voyez. Cela sert à me faire chasser de partout où je suis. Voulez-vous lire? Je sais lire, moi. J’ai appris au bagne. Il y a une école pour ceux qui veulent. Tenez, voilà ce qu’on a mis sur le passeport: «Jean Valjean, forçat libéré, natif de... — cela vous est égal... — Est resté dix-neuf ans au bagne. Cinq ans pour vol avec effraction. Quatorze ans pour avoir tenté de s’évader quatre fois. Cet homme est très dangereux.» — Voilà! Tout le monde m’a jeté dehors. Voulez-vous me recevoir, vous? Est-ce une auberge? Voulez-vous me donner à manger et à coucher? Avez-vous une écurie?

— Madame Magloire, dit l’évêque, vous mettrez des draps blancs au lit de l’alcôve.

Nous avons déjà expliqué de quelle nature était l’obéissance des deux femmes.

Madame Magloire sortit pour exécuter ces ordres. L’évêque se tourna vers l’homme.

— Monsieur, asseyez-vous et chauffez-vous. Nous allons souper dans un instant, et l’on fera votre lit pendant que vous souperez.

Ici l’homme comprit tout à fait. L’expression de son visage, jusqu’alors sombre et dure, s’empreignit de stupéfaction, de doute, de joie, et devint extraordinaire. Il se mit à balbutier comme un homme fou:

— Vrai? quoi? vous me gardez? vous ne me chassez pas! un forçat! Vous m’appelez monsieur! vous ne me tutoyez pas! Va-t-en, chien! qu’on me dit toujours. Je croyais bien que vous me chasseriez. Aussi j’avais dit tout de suite qui je suis. Oh! la brave femme qui m’a enseigné ici! Je vais souper! un lit! Un lit avec des matelas et des draps! comme tout le monde! il y a dix-neuf ans que je n'ai couché dans un lit! Vous voulez bien que je ne m'en aille pas! Vous êtes de dignes gens! D'ailleurs j'ai de l'argent. Je payerai bien. Pardon, monsieur l'aubergiste, comment vous appelez-vous? Je payerai tout ce qu'on voudra. Vous êtes un brave homme. Vous êtes aubergiste, n'est-ce pas?

— Je suis, dit l'évêque, un prêtre qui demeure ici.

— Un prêtre! reprit l'homme. Oh! un brave homme de prêtre! Alors vous ne me demandez pas d'argent? Le curé, n'est-ce pas? le curé de cette grande église? Tiens! c'est vrai, que je suis bête! je n'avais pas vu votre calotte!

Tout en parlant, il avait déposé son sac et son bâton dans un coin, puis remis son passeport dans sa poche, et il s'était assis. Mademoiselle Baptistine le considérait avec douceur. Il continua:

— Vous êtes humain, monsieur le curé. Vous n'avez pas de mépris. C'est bien bon un bon prêtre. Alors vous n'avez pas besoin que je paye?

— Non, dit l'évêque, gardez votre argent. Combien avez-vous? ne m'avez-vous pas dit cent neuf francs?

— Quinze sous, ajouta l'homme.

— Cent neuf francs quinze sous. Et combien de temps avez-vous mis à gagner cela?

— Dix-neuf ans.

— Dix-neuf ans!

L'évêque soupira profondément.

L'homme poursuivit:

— J'ai encore tout mon argent. Depuis quatre jours je n'ai dépensé que vingt-cinq sous que j'ai gagnés en aidant à décharger des voitures à Grasse. Puisque vous êtes abbé, je vais vous dire, nous avions un aumônier au bagne. Et puis un jour j'ai vu un évêque. Monseigneur, qu'on appelle. C'était l'évêque de la Majore, à Marseille. C'est le curé qui est sur les curés. Vous savez, pardon, je dis mal cela, mais pour moi, c'est si loin! — Vous comprenez, nous autres! Il a dit la messe au milieu du bagne, sur un autel, il avait une chose pointue, en or, sur la tête. Au grand jour de midi, cela brillait. Nous étions en rang. Des trois côtés. Avec les canons, mèche allumée, en face de nous. Nous ne voyions pas bien. Il a parlé, mais il était trop au fond, nous n'entendions pas. Voilà ce que c'est qu'un évêque.

Pendant qu’il parlait, l’évêque était allé pousser la porte qui était restée toute grande ouverte.

Madame Magloire rentra. Elle apportait un couvert qu’elle mit sur la table.

— Madame Magloire, dit l’évêque, mettez ce couvert le plus près possible du feu.

Et se tournant vers son hôte:

— Le vent de nuit est dur dans les Alpes. Vous devez avoir froid, monsieur?

Chaque fois qu’il disait ce mot monsieur, avec sa voix doucement grave et de si bonne compagnie, le visage de l’homme s’illuminait. Monsieur à un forçat, c’est un verre d’eau à un naufragé de la Méduse. L’ignominie a soif de considération.

— Voici, reprit l’évêque, une lampe qui éclaire bien mal.

Madame Magloire comprit, et elle alla chercher sur la cheminée de la chambre à coucher de monseigneur les deux chandeliers d’argent qu’elle posa sur la table tout allumés.

— Monsieur le curé, dit l’homme, vous êtes bon. Vous ne me méprisez pas. Vous me recevez chez vous. Vous allumez vos cierges pour moi. Je ne vous ai pourtant pas caché d’où je viens et que je suis un homme malheureux.

L’évêque, assis près de lui, lui toucha doucement la main.

— Vous pouviez ne pas me dire qui vous étiez.

Ce n’est pas ici ma maison, c’est la maison de Jésus-Christ. Cette porte ne demande pas à celui qui entre s’il a un nom, mais s’il a une douleur. Vous souffrez; vous avez faim et soif; soyez le bienvenu. Et ne me remerciez pas, ne me dites pas que je vous reçois chez moi. Personne n’est ici chez soi, excepté celui qui a besoin d’un asile. Je vous le dis à vous qui passez, vous êtes ici chez vous plus que moi-même. Tout ce qui est ici est à vous. Qu’ai-je besoin de savoir votre nom? D’ailleurs, avant que vous me le disiez, vous en avez un que je savais.

L’homme ouvrit des yeux étonnés.

— Vrai? vous saviez comment je m’appelle?

— Oui, répondit l’évêque, vous vous appelez mon frère.

— Tenez, monsieur le curé! s’écria l’homme, j’avais bien faim en entrant ici; mais vous êtes si bon qu’à présent je ne sais plus ce que j’ai; cela m’a passé.

L’évêque le regarda et lui dit:

— Vous avez bien souffert?

— Oh! la casaque rouge, le boulet au pied, une planche pour dormir, le chaud, le froid, le travail, la chiourme, les coups de bâton! La double chaîne pour rien. Le cachot pour un mot. Même malade au lit, la chaîne. Les chiens, les chiens sont plus heureux! Dix-neuf ans! J’en ai quarante-six. À présent, le passeport jaune! Voilà.

— Oui, reprit l’évêque, vous sortez d’un lieu de tristesse. Écoutez. Il y aura plus de joie au ciel pour le visage en larmes d’un pécheur repentant que pour la robe blanche de cent justes. Si vous sortez de ce lieu douloureux avec des pensées de haine et de colère contre les hommes, vous êtes digne de pitié; si vous en sortez avec des pensées de bienveillance, de douceur et de paix, vous valez mieux qu’aucun de nous.

Cependant madame Magloire avait servi le souper. Une soupe faite avec de l’eau, de l’huile, du pain et du sel, un peu de lard, un morceau de viande de mouton, des figues, un fromage frais, et un gros pain de seigle. Elle avait d’elle-même ajouté à l’ordinaire de M. l’évêque une bouteille de vieux vin de Mauves.

Le visage de l’évêque prit tout à coup cette expression de gaîté propre aux natures hospitalières:

— À table! dit-il vivement.

Comme il en avait coutume lorsque quelque étranger soupait avec lui, il fit asseoir l’homme à sa droite. Mademoiselle Baptistine, parfaitement paisible et naturelle, prit place à sa gauche.

L’évêque dit le bénédicité, puis servit lui-même la soupe, selon son habitude. L’homme se mit à manger avidement.

Tout à coup l’évêque dit:

— Mais il me semble qu’il manque quelque chose sur cette table.

Madame Magloire en effet n’avait mis que les trois couverts absolument nécessaires. Or c’était l’usage de la maison, quand l’évêque avait quelqu’un à souper, de disposer sur la nappe les six couverts d’argent, étalage innocent. Ce gracieux semblant de luxe était une sorte d’enfantillage plein de charme dans cette maison douce et sévère qui élevait la pauvreté jusqu’à la dignité.

Madame Magloire comprit l’observation, sortit sans dire un mot, et un moment après les trois couverts réclamés par l’évêque brillaient sur la nappe, symétriquement arrangés devant chacun des trois convives.

Chapitre IV

Détails sur les fromageries de Pontarlier

Maintenant, pour donner une idée de ce qui se passa à cette table, nous ne saurions mieux faire que de transcrire ici un passage d'une lettre de mademoiselle Baptistine à madame de Boischevron, où la conversation du forçat et de l'évêque est racontée avec une minutie naïve:

«...Cet homme ne faisait aucune attention à personne. Il mangeait avec une voracité d'affamé. Cependant, après la soupe, il a dit:

« — Monsieur le curé du bon Dieu, tout ceci est encore bien trop bon pour moi, mais je dois dire que les rouliers qui n'ont pas voulu me laisser manger avec eux font meilleure chère que vous.

«Entre nous, l'observation m'a un peu choquée. Mon frère a répondu:

« — Ils ont plus de fatigue que moi.

« — Non, a repris cet homme, ils ont plus d'argent. Vous êtes pauvre. Je vois bien. Vous n'êtes peut-être pas même curé. Êtes-vous curé seulement? Ah! par exemple, si le bon Dieu était juste, vous devriez bien être curé.

« — Le bon Dieu est plus que juste, a dit mon frère.

«Un moment après il a ajouté:

« — Monsieur Jean Valjean, c'est à Pontarlier que vous allez?

« — Avec itinéraire obligé.

«Je crois bien que c'est comme cela que l'homme a dit. Puis il a continué:

« — Il faut que je sois en route demain à la pointe du jour. Il fait dur voyager. Si les nuits sont froides, les journées sont chaudes.

« — Vous allez là, a repris mon frère, dans un bon pays. À la révolution, ma famille a été ruinée, je me suis réfugié en Franche-Comté d'abord, et j'y ai vécu quelque temps du travail de mes bras. J'avais de la bonne volonté. J'ai trouvé à m'y occuper. On n'a qu'à choisir. Il y a des papeteries, des tanneries, des distilleries, des huileries, des fabriques d'horlogerie en grand, des fabriques d'acier, des fabriques de cuivre, au moins vingt usines de fer, dont quatre à Lods, à Châtillon, à Audincourt et à Beure qui sont très considérables....

«Je crois ne pas me tromper et que ce sont bien là les noms que mon frère a cités, puis il s’est interrompu et m’a adressé la parole:

« — Chère sœur, n’avons-nous pas des parents dans ce pays-là?

«J’ai répondu:

« — Nous en avions, entre autres M. de Lucenet qui était capitaine des portes à Pontarlier dans l’ancien régime.

« — Oui, a repris mon frère, mais en 93 on n’avait plus de parents, on n’avait que ses bras. J’ai travaillé. Ils ont dans le pays de Pontarlier, où vous allez, monsieur Valjean, une industrie toute patriarcale et toute charmante, ma sœur. Ce sont leurs fromageries qu’ils appellent fruitières.

«Alors mon frère, tout en faisant manger cet homme, lui a expliqué très en détail ce que c’étaient que les fruitières de Pontarlier; — qu’on en distinguait deux sortes: — les *grosses granges*, qui sont aux riches, et où il y a quarante ou cinquante vaches, lesquelles produisent sept à huit milliers de fromages par été; les *fruitières d’association*, qui sont aux pauvres; ce sont les paysans de la moyenne montagne qui mettent leurs vaches en commun et partagent les produits. — Ils prennent à leurs gages un fromager qu’ils appellent le grurin; — le grurin reçoit le lait des associés trois fois par jour et marque les quantités sur une taille double; — c’est vers la fin d’avril que le travail des fromageries commence; c’est vers la mi-juin que les fromagers conduisent leurs vaches dans la montagne.

«L’homme se ranimait tout en mangeant. Mon frère lui faisait boire de ce bon vin de Mauves dont il ne boit pas lui-même parce qu’il dit que c’est du vin cher. Mon frère lui disait tous ces détails avec cette gaîté aisée que vous lui connaissez, entremêlant ses paroles de façons gracieuses pour moi. Il est beaucoup revenu sur ce bon état de grurin, comme s’il eût souhaité que cet homme comprît, sans le lui conseiller directement et durement, que ce serait un asile pour lui. Une chose m’a frappée. Cet homme était ce que je vous ai dit. Eh bien! mon frère, pendant tout le souper, ni de toute la soirée, à l’exception de quelques paroles sur Jésus quand il est entré, n’a pas dit un mot qui pût rappeler à cet homme qui il était ni apprendre à cet homme qui était mon frère. C’était bien une occasion en apparence de faire un peu de sermon et d’appuyer l’évêque sur le galérien pour laisser la marque du passage. Il eût paru peut-être à un autre que c’était le cas, ayant ce malheureux sous la main, de lui nourrir l’âme en même temps que le corps et de lui faire quelque reproche assaisonné de morale et de conseil, ou bien un peu de commisération avec exhortation de se mieux conduire à l’avenir.

Mon frère ne lui a même pas demandé de quel pays il était, ni son histoire. Car dans son histoire il y a sa faute, et mon frère semblait éviter tout ce qui pouvait l'en faire souvenir. C'est au point qu'à un certain moment, comme mon frère parlait des montagnards de Pontarlier, qui ont *un doux travail près du ciel et qui,* ajoutait-il, *sont heureux parce qu'ils sont innocents,* il s'est arrêté court, craignant qu'il n'y eût dans ce mot qui lui échappait quelque chose qui pût froisser l'homme. À force d'y réfléchir, je crois avoir compris ce qui se passait dans le cœur de mon frère. Il pensait sans doute que cet homme, qui s'appelle Jean Valjean, n'avait que trop sa misère présente à l'esprit, que le mieux était de l'en distraire, et de lui faire croire, ne fût-ce qu'un moment, qu'il était une personne comme une autre, en étant pour lui tout ordinaire. N'est-ce pas là en effet bien entendre la charité? N'y a-t-il pas, bonne madame, quelque chose de vraiment évangélique dans cette délicatesse qui s'abstient de sermon, de morale et d'allusion, et la meilleure pitié, quand un homme a un point douloureux, n'est-ce pas de n'y point toucher du tout? Il m'a semblé que ce pouvait être là la pensée intérieure de mon frère. Dans tous les cas, ce que je puis dire, c'est que, s'il a eu toutes ces idées, il n'en a rien marqué, même pour moi; il a été d'un bout à l'autre le même homme que tous les soirs, et il a soupé avec ce Jean Valjean du même air et de la même façon qu'il aurait soupé avec M. Gédéon Le Prévost ou avec M. le curé de la paroisse.

«Vers la fin, comme nous étions aux figues, on a cogné à la porte. C'était la mère Gerbaud avec son petit dans ses bras. Mon frère a baisé l'enfant au front, et m'a emprunté quinze sous que j'avais sur moi pour les donner à la mère Gerbaud. L'homme pendant ce temps-là ne faisait pas grande attention. Il ne parlait plus et paraissait très fatigué. La pauvre vieille Gerbaud partie, mon frère a dit les grâces, puis il s'est tourné vers cet homme, et il lui a dit: Vous devez avoir bien besoin de votre lit. Madame Magloire a enlevé le couvert bien vite. J'ai compris qu'il fallait nous retirer pour laisser dormir ce voyageur, et nous sommes montées toutes les deux. J'ai cependant envoyé madame Magloire un instant après porter sur le lit de cet homme une peau de chevreuil de la Forêt-Noire qui est dans ma chambre. Les nuits sont glaciales, et cela tient chaud. C'est dommage que cette peau soit vieille; tout le poil s'en va. Mon frère l'a achetée du temps qu'il était en Allemagne, à Tottlingen, près des sources du Danube, ainsi que le petit couteau à manche d'ivoire dont je me sers à table.

«Madame Magloire est remontée presque tout de suite, nous nous sommes mises à prier Dieu dans le salon où l’on étend le linge, et puis nous sommes rentrées chacune dans notre chambre sans nous rien dire.»

Chapitre V

Tranquillité

Après avoir donné le bonsoir à sa sœur, monseigneur Bienvenu prit sur la table un des deux flambeaux d'argent, remit l'autre à son hôte, et lui dit:

— Monsieur, je vais vous conduire à votre chambre.

L'homme le suivit.

Comme on a pu le remarquer dans ce qui a été dit plus haut, le logis était distribué de telle sorte que, pour passer dans l'oratoire où était l'alcôve ou pour en sortir, il fallait traverser la chambre à coucher de l'évêque.

Au moment où ils traversaient cette chambre, madame Magloire serrait l'argenterie dans le placard qui était au chevet du lit. C'était le dernier soin qu'elle prenait chaque soir avant de s'aller coucher.

L'évêque installa son hôte dans l'alcôve. Un lit blanc et frais y était dressé. L'homme posa le flambeau sur une petite table.

— Allons, dit l'évêque, faites une bonne nuit. Demain matin, avant de partir, vous boirez une tasse de lait de nos vaches tout chaud.

— Merci, monsieur l'abbé, dit l'homme.

À peine eut-il prononcé ces paroles pleines de paix que, tout à coup et sans transition, il eut un mouvement étrange et qui eût glacé d'épouvante les deux saintes filles si elles en eussent été témoins. Aujourd'hui même il nous est difficile de nous rendre compte de ce qui le poussait en ce moment. Voulait-il donner un avertissement ou jeter une menace? Obéissait-il simplement à une sorte d'impulsion instinctive et obscure pour lui-même? Il se tourna brusquement vers le vieillard, croisa les bras, et, fixant sur son hôte un regard sauvage, il s'écria d'une voix rauque:

— Ah çà! décidément! vous me logez chez vous près de vous comme cela!

Il s'interrompit et ajouta avec un rire où il y avait quelque chose de monstrueux:

— Avez-vous bien fait toutes vos réflexions? Qui est-ce qui vous dit que je n'ai pas assassiné?

L'évêque leva les yeux vers le plafond et répondit:

— Cela regarde le bon Dieu.

Puis, gravement et remuant les lèvres comme quelqu'un qui prie ou qui se parle à lui-même, il dressa les deux doigts de sa main droite et bénit l'homme qui ne se courba pas, et, sans tourner la tête et sans regarder derrière lui, il rentra dans sa chambre.

Quand l'alcôve était habitée, un grand rideau de serge tiré de part en part dans l'oratoire cachait l'autel. L'évêque s'agenouilla en passant devant ce rideau et fit une courte prière.

Un moment après, il était dans son jardin, marchant, rêvant, contemplant, l'âme et la pensée tout entières à ces grandes choses mystérieuses que Dieu montre la nuit aux yeux qui restent ouverts.

Quant à l'homme, il était vraiment si fatigué qu'il n'avait même pas profité de ces bons draps blancs. Il avait soufflé sa bougie avec sa narine à la manière des forçats et s'était laissé tomber tout habillé sur le lit, où il s'était tout de suite profondément endormi.

Minuit sonnait comme l'évêque rentrait de son jardin dans son appartement.

Quelques minutes après, tout dormait dans la petite maison.

Chapitre VI

Jean Valjean

Vers le milieu de la nuit, Jean Valjean se réveilla.

Jean Valjean était d’une pauvre famille de paysans de la Brie. Dans son enfance, il n’avait pas appris à lire. Quand il eut l’âge d’homme, il était émondeur à Faverolles. Sa mère s’appelait Jeanne Mathieu; son père s’appelait Jean Valjean, ou Vlajean, sobriquet probablement, et contraction de *Voilà Jean*.

Jean Valjean était d’un caractère pensif sans être triste, ce qui est le propre des natures affectueuses. Somme toute, pourtant, c’était quelque chose d’assez endormi et d’assez insignifiant, en apparence du moins, que Jean Valjean. Il avait perdu en très bas âge son père et sa mère. Sa mère était morte d’une fièvre de lait mal soignée. Son père, émondeur comme lui, s’était tué en tombant d’un arbre. Il n’était resté à Jean Valjean qu’une sœur plus âgée que lui, veuve, avec sept enfants, filles et garçons. Cette sœur avait élevé Jean Valjean, et tant qu’elle eut son mari elle logea et nourrit son jeune frère. Le mari mourut. L’aîné des sept enfants avait huit ans, le dernier un an. Jean Valjean venait d’atteindre, lui, sa vingt-cinquième année. Il remplaça le père, et soutint à son tour sa sœur qui l’avait élevé. Cela se fit simplement, comme un devoir, même avec quelque chose de bourru de la part de Jean Valjean. Sa jeunesse se dépensait ainsi dans un travail rude et mal payé. On ne lui avait jamais connu de «bonne amie» dans le pays. Il n’avait pas eu le temps d’être amoureux.

Le soir il rentrait fatigué et mangeait sa soupe sans dire un mot. Sa sœur, mère Jeanne, pendant qu’il mangeait, lui prenait souvent dans son écuelle le meilleur de son repas, le morceau de viande, la tranche de lard le cœur de chou, pour le donner à quelqu’un de ses enfants; lui, mangeant toujours, penché sur la table, presque la tête dans sa soupe, ses longs cheveux tombant autour de son écuelle et cachant ses yeux, avait l’air de ne rien voir et laissait faire. Il y avait à Faverolles, pas loin de la chaumière Valjean, de l’autre côté de la ruelle, une fermière appelée Marie-Claude; les enfants Valjean, habituellement affamés, allaient quelquefois emprunter au nom de leur mère une pinte de lait à Marie-Claude, qu’ils buvaient derrière une haie ou dans quelque coin d’allée, s’arrachant le pot, et si hâtivement que les petites filles s’en répandaient sur leur tablier et dans leur goulotte. La mère, si elle eût su cette maraude, eût sévèrement corrigé les délinquants. Jean Valjean, brusque et bougon, payait en arrière de la mère la pinte de lait à Marie-Claude, et les enfants n’étaient pas punis.

Il gagnait dans la saison de l’émondage vingt-quatre sous par jour, puis il se louait comme moissonneur, comme manœuvre, comme garçon de ferme bouvier, comme homme de peine. Il faisait ce qu’il pouvait. Sa sœur travaillait de son côté, mais que faire avec sept petits enfants? C’était un triste groupe que la misère enveloppa et étreignit peu à peu. Il arriva qu’un hiver fut rude. Jean n’eut pas d’ouvrage. La famille n’eut pas de pain. Pas de pain. À la lettre. Sept enfants! Un dimanche soir, Maubert Isabeau, boulanger sur la place de l’Église, à Faverolles, se disposait à se coucher, lorsqu’il entendit un coup violent dans la devanture grillée et vitrée de sa boutique. Il arriva à temps pour voir un bras passé à travers un trou fait d’un coup de poing dans la grille et dans la vitre. Le bras saisit un pain et l’emporta. Isabeau sortit en hâte; le voleur s’enfuyait à toutes jambes; Isabeau courut après lui et l’arrêta. Le voleur avait jeté le pain, mais il avait encore le bras ensanglanté. C’était Jean Valjean.

Ceci se passait en 1795. Jean Valjean fut traduit devant les tribunaux du temps «pour vol avec effraction la nuit dans une maison habitée». Il avait un fusil dont il se servait mieux que tireur au monde, il était quelque peu braconnier; ce qui lui nuisit. Il y a contre les braconniers un préjugé légitime. Le braconnier, de même que le contrebandier, côtoie de fort près le brigand. Pourtant, disons-le en passant, il y a encore un abîme entre ces races d’hommes et le hideux assassin des villes. Le braconnier vit dans la forêt; le contrebandier vit dans la montagne ou sur la mer. Les villes font des hommes féroces parce qu’elles font des hommes corrompus. La montagne, la mer, la forêt, font des hommes sauvages. Elles développent le côté farouche, mais souvent sans détruire le côté humain.

Jean Valjean fut déclaré coupable. Les termes du code étaient formels. Il y a dans notre civilisation des heures redoutables; ce sont les moments où la pénalité prononce un naufrage. Quelle minute funèbre que celle où la société s’éloigne et consomme l’irréparable abandon d’un être pensant! Jean Valjean fut condamné à cinq ans de galères.

Le 22 avril 1796, on cria dans Paris la victoire de Montenotte remportée par le général en chef de l’année d’Italie, que le message du Directoire aux Cinq-Cents, du 2 floréal an IV, appelle Buona-Parte; ce même jour une grande chaîne fut ferrée à Bicêtre. Jean Valjean fit partie de cette chaîne. Un ancien guichetier de la prison, qui a près de quatre-vingt-dix ans aujourd'hui, se souvient encore parfaitement de ce malheureux qui fut ferré à l'extrémité du quatrième cordon dans l'angle nord de la cour. Il était assis à terre comme tous les autres. Il paraissait ne rien comprendre à sa position, sinon qu'elle était horrible. Il est probable qu'il y démêlait aussi, à travers les vagues idées d'un pauvre homme ignorant de tout, quelque chose d'excessif. Pendant qu'on rivait à grands coups de marteau derrière sa tête le boulon de son carcan, il pleurait, les larmes l'étouffaient, elles l'empêchaient de parler, il parvenait seulement à dire de temps en temps: *J'étais émondeur à Faverolles*. Puis, tout en sanglotant, il élevait sa main droite et l'abaissait graduellement sept fois comme s'il touchait successivement sept têtes inégales, et par ce geste on devinait que la chose quelconque qu'il avait faite, il l'avait faite pour vêtir et nourrir sept petits enfants.

Il partit pour Toulon. Il y arriva après un voyage de vingt-sept jours, sur une charrette, la chaîne au cou. À Toulon, il fut revêtu de la casaque rouge. Tout s'effaça de ce qui avait été sa vie, jusqu'à son nom; il ne fut même plus Jean Valjean; il fut le numéro 24601. Que devint la sœur? que devinrent les sept enfants? Qui est-ce qui s'occupe de cela? Que devient la poignée de feuilles du jeune arbre scié par le pied?

C'est toujours la même histoire. Ces pauvres êtres vivants, ces créatures de Dieu, sans appui désormais, sans guide, sans asile, s'en allèrent au hasard, qui sait même? chacun de leur côté peut-être, et s'enfoncèrent peu à peu dans cette froide brume où s'engloutissent les destinées solitaires, moines ténèbres où disparaissent successivement tant de têtes infortunées dans la sombre marche du genre humain. Ils quittèrent le pays. Le clocher de ce qui avait été leur village les oublia; la borne de ce qui avait été leur champ les oublia; après quelques années de séjour au bagne, Jean Valjean lui-même les oublia. Dans ce cœur où il y avait eu une plaie, il y eut une cicatrice. Voilà tout. À peine, pendant tout le temps qu'il passa à Toulon, entendit-il parler une seule fois de sa sœur. C'était, je crois, vers la fin de la quatrième année de sa captivité. Je ne sais plus par quelle voie ce renseignement lui parvint. Quelqu'un, qui les avait connus au pays, avait vu sa sœur. Elle était à Paris. Elle habitait une pauvre rue près de Saint-Sulpice, la rue du Geindre. Elle n'avait plus avec elle qu'un enfant, un petit garçon, le dernier. Où étaient les six autres? Elle ne le savait peut-être pas elle-même. Tous les matins elle allait à une imprimerie rue du Sabot, n° 3, où elle était plieuse et brocheuse. Il fallait être là à six heures du matin, bien avant le jour l’hiver. Dans la maison de l’imprimerie il y avait une école, elle menait à cette école son petit garçon qui avait sept ans. Seulement, comme elle entrait à l’imprimerie à six heures et que l’école n’ouvrait qu’à sept, il fallait que l’enfant attendît, dans la cour, que l’école ouvrit, une heure; l’hiver, une heure de nuit, en plein air. On ne voulait pas que l’enfant entrât dans l’imprimerie, parce qu’il gênait, disait-on. Les ouvriers voyaient le matin en passant ce pauvre petit être assis sur le pavé, tombant de sommeil, et souvent endormi dans l’ombre, accroupi et plié sur son panier. Quand il pleuvait, une vieille femme, la portière, en avait pitié; elle le recueillait dans son bouge où il n’y avait qu’un grabat, un rouet et deux chaises de bois, et le petit dormait là dans un coin, se serrant contre le chat pour avoir moins froid. À sept heures, l’école ouvrait et il y entrait. Voilà ce qu’on dit à Jean Valjean. On l’en entretint un jour, ce fut un moment, un éclair, comme une fenêtre brusquement ouverte sur la destinée de ces êtres qu’il avait aimés, puis tout se referma; il n’en entendit plus parler, et ce fut pour jamais. Plus rien n’arriva d’eux à lui; jamais il ne les revit, jamais il ne les rencontra, et, dans la suite de cette douloureuse histoire, on ne les retrouvera plus.

Vers la fin de cette quatrième année, le tour d’évasion de Jean Valjean arriva. Ses camarades l’aidèrent comme cela se fait dans ce triste lieu. Il s’évada. Il erra deux jours en liberté dans les champs; si c’est être libre que d’être traqué; de tourner la tête à chaque instant; de tressaillir au moindre bruit; d’avoir peur de tout, du toit qui fume, de l’homme qui passe, du chien qui aboie, du cheval qui galope, de l’heure qui sonne, du jour parce qu’on voit, de la nuit parce qu’on ne voit pas, de la route, du sentier, du buisson, du sommeil. Le soir du second jour, il fut repris. Il n’avait ni mangé ni dormi depuis trente-six heures. Le tribunal maritime le condamna pour ce délit à une prolongation de trois ans, ce qui lui fit huit ans. La sixième année, ce fut encore son tour de s’évader; il en usa, mais il ne put consommer sa fuite. Il avait manqué à l’appel. On tira le coup de canon, et à la nuit les gens de ronde le trouvèrent caché sous la quille d’un vaisseau en construction; il résista aux gardes-chiourme qui le saisirent. Évasion et rébellion. Ce fait prévu par le code spécial fut puni d’une aggravation de cinq ans, dont deux ans de double chaîne. Treize ans. La dixième année, son tour revint, il en profita encore. Il ne réussit pas mieux. Trois ans pour cette nouvelle tentative. Seize ans. Enfin, ce fut, je crois, pendant la treizième année qu'il essaya une dernière fois et ne réussit qu'à se faire reprendre après quatre heures d'absence. Trois ans pour ces quatre heures. Dix-neuf ans. En octobre 1815 il fut libéré; il était entré là en 1796 pour avoir cassé un carreau et pris un pain.

Place pour une courte parenthèse. C'est la seconde fois que, dans ses études sur la question pénale et sur la damnation par la loi, l'auteur de ce livre rencontre le vol d'un pain, comme point de départ du désastre d'une destinée. Claude Gueux avait volé un pain; Jean Valjean avait volé un pain. Une statistique anglaise constate qu'à Londres quatre vols sur cinq ont pour cause immédiate la faim.

Jean Valjean était entré au bagne sanglotant et frémissant; il en sortit impassible. Il y était entré désespéré; il en sortit sombre.

Que s'était-il passé dans cette âme?

Chapitre VII

Le dedans du désespoir

Essayons de le dire.

Il faut bien que la société regarde ces choses puisque c’est elle qui les fait.

C’était, nous l’avons dit, un ignorant; mais ce n’était pas un imbécile. La lumière naturelle était allumée en lui. Le malheur, qui a aussi sa clarté, augmenta le peu de jour qu’il y avait dans cet esprit. Sous le bâton, sous la chaîne, au cachot, à la fatigue, sous l’ardent soleil du bagne, sur le lit de planches des forçats, il se replia en sa conscience et réfléchit.

Il se constitua tribunal.

Il commença par se juger lui-même.

Il reconnut qu’il n’était pas un innocent injustement puni. Il s’avoua qu’il avait commis une action extrême et blâmable; qu’on ne lui eût peut-être pas refusé ce pain s’il l’avait demandé; que dans tous les cas il eût mieux valu l’attendre, soit de la pitié, soit du travail; que ce n’est pas tout à fait une raison sans réplique de dire: peut-on attendre quand on a faim? que d’abord il est très rare qu’on meure littéralement de faim; ensuite que, malheureusement ou heureusement, l’homme est ainsi fait qu’il peut souffrir longtemps et beaucoup, moralement et physiquement, sans mourir; qu’il fallait donc de la patience; que cela eût mieux valu même pour ces pauvres petits enfants; que c’était un acte de folie, à lui, malheureux homme chétif, de prendre violemment au collet la société tout entière et de se figurer qu’on sort de la misère par le vol; que c’était, dans tous les cas, une mauvaise porte pour sortir de la misère que celle par où l’on entre dans l’infamie; enfin qu’il avait eu tort.

Puis il se demanda:

S’il était le seul qui avait eu tort dans sa fatale histoire? Si d’abord ce n’était pas une chose grave qu’il eût, lui travailleur, manqué de travail, lui laborieux, manqué de pain. Si, ensuite, la faute commise et avouée, le châtiment n’avait pas été féroce et outré. S’il n’y avait pas plus d’abus de la part de la loi dans la peine qu’il n’y avait eu d’abus de la part du coupable dans la faute. S’il n’y avait pas excès de poids dans un des plateaux de la balance, celui où est l’expiation. Si la surcharge de la peine n’était point l’effacement du délit, et n’arrivait pas à ce résultat: de retourner la situation, de remplacer la faute du délinquant par la faute de la répression, de faire du coupable la victime et du débiteur le créancier, et de mettre définitivement le droit du côté de celui-là même qui l’avait violé. Si cette peine, compliquée des aggravations successives pour les tentatives d’évasion, ne finissait pas par être une sorte d’attentat du plus fort sur le plus faible, un crime de la société sur l’individu, un crime qui recommençait tous les jours, un crime qui durait dix-neuf ans.

Il se demanda si la société humaine pouvait avoir le droit de faire également subir à ses membres, dans un cas son imprévoyance déraisonnable, et dans l’autre cas sa prévoyance impitoyable, et de saisir à jamais un pauvre homme entre un défaut et un excès, défaut de travail, excès de châtiment. S’il n’était pas exorbitant que la société traitât ainsi précisément ses membres les plus mal dotés dans la répartition de biens que fait le hasard, et par conséquent les plus dignes de ménagements.

Ces questions faites et résolues, il jugea la société et la condamna.

Il la condamna sans haine.

Il la fit responsable du sort qu’il subissait, et se dit qu’il n’hésiterait peut-être pas à lui en demander compte un jour. Il se déclara à lui-même qu’il n’y avait pas équilibre entre le dommage qu’il avait causé et le dommage qu’on lui causait; il conclut enfin que son châtiment n’était pas, à la vérité, une injustice, mais qu’à coup sûr c’était une iniquité.

La colère peut être folle et absurde; on peut être irrité à tort; on n’est indigné que lorsqu’on a raison au fond par quelque côté. Jean Valjean se sentait indigné. Et puis, la société humaine ne lui avait fait que du mal. Jamais il n’avait vu d’elle que ce visage courroucé qu’elle appelle sa justice et qu’elle montre à ceux qu’elle frappe. Les hommes ne l’avaient touché que pour le meurtrir. Tout contact avec eux lui avait été un coup. Jamais, depuis son enfance, depuis sa mère, depuis sa sœur, jamais il n’avait rencontré une parole amie et un regard bienveillant. De souffrance en souffrance il arriva peu à peu à cette conviction que la vie était une guerre; et que dans cette guerre il était le vaincu. Il n’avait d’autre arme que sa haine. Il résolut de l’aiguiser au bagne et de l’emporter en s’en allant.

Il y avait à Toulon une école pour la chiourme tenue par des frères ignorantins où l’on enseignait le plus nécessaire à ceux de ces malheureux qui avaient de la bonne volonté. Il fut du nombre des hommes de bonne volonté. Il alla à l’école à quarante ans, et apprit à lire, à écrire, à compter. Il sentit que fortifier son intelligence, c'était fortifier sa haine. Dans certains cas, l'instruction et la lumière peuvent servir de rallonge au mal.

Cela est triste à dire, après avoir jugé la société qui avait fait son malheur, il jugea la providence qui avait fait la société.

Il la condamna aussi.

Ainsi, pendant ces dix-neuf ans de torture et d'esclavage, cette âme monta et tomba en même temps. Il y entra de la lumière d'un côté et des ténèbres de l'autre.

Jean Valjean n'était pas, on l'a vu, d'une nature mauvaise. Il était encore bon lorsqu'il arriva au bagne. Il y condamna la société et sentit qu'il devenait méchant, il y condamna la providence et sentit qu'il devenait impie.

Ici il est difficile de ne pas méditer un instant.

La nature humaine se transforme-t-elle ainsi de fond en comble et tout à fait? L'homme créé bon par Dieu peut-il être fait méchant par l'homme? L'âme peut-elle être refaite tout d'une pièce par la destinée, et devenir mauvaise, la destinée étant mauvaise? Le cœur peut-il devenir difforme et contracter des laideurs et des infirmités incurables sous la pression d'un malheur disproportionné, comme la colonne vertébrale sous une voûte trop basse? N'y a-t-il pas dans toute âme humaine, n'y avait-il pas dans l'âme de Jean Valjean en particulier, une première étincelle, un élément divin, incorruptible dans ce monde, immortel dans l'autre, que le bien peut développer, attiser, allumer, enflammer et faire rayonner splendidement, et que le mal ne peut jamais entièrement éteindre?

Questions graves et obscures, à la dernière desquelles tout physiologiste eût probablement répondu non, et sans hésiter, s'il eût vu à Toulon, aux heures de repos qui étaient pour Jean Valjean des heures de rêverie, assis, les bras croisés, sur la barre de quelque cabestan, le bout de sa chaîne enfoncé dans sa poche pour l'empêcher de traîner, ce galérien morne, sérieux, silencieux et pensif, paria des lois qui regardait l'homme avec colère, damné de la civilisation qui regardait le ciel avec sévérité.

Certes, et nous ne voulons pas le dissimuler, le physiologiste observateur eût vu là une misère irrémédiable, il eût plaint peut-être ce malade du fait de la loi, mais il n'eût pas même essayé de traitement; il eût détourné le regard des cavernes qu'il aurait entrevues dans cette âme; et, comme Dante de la porte de l'enfer, il eût effacé de cette existence le mot que le doigt de Dieu écrit pourtant sur le front de tout homme: *Espérance*!

Cet état de son âme que nous avons tenté d’analyser était-il aussi parfaitement clair pour Jean Valjean que nous avons essayé de le rendre pour ceux qui nous lisent? Jean Valjean voyait-il distinctement, après leur formation, et avait-il vu distinctement, à mesure qu’ils se formaient, tous les éléments dont se composait sa misère morale? Cet homme rude et illettré s’était-il bien nettement rendu compte de la succession d’idées par laquelle il était, degré à degré, monté et descendu jusqu’aux lugubres aspects qui étaient depuis tant d’années déjà l’horizon intérieur de son esprit? Avait-il bien conscience de tout ce qui s’était passé en lui et de tout ce qui s’y remuait? C’est ce que nous n’oserions dire; c’est même ce que nous ne croyons pas. Il y avait trop d’ignorance dans Jean Valjean pour que, même après tant de malheur, il n’y restât pas beaucoup de vague. Par moments il ne savait pas même bien au juste ce qu’il éprouvait. Jean Valjean était dans les ténèbres; il souffrait dans les ténèbres; il haïssait dans les ténèbres; on eût pu dire qu’il haïssait devant lui. Il vivait habituellement dans cette ombre, tâtonnant comme un aveugle et comme un rêveur. Seulement, par intervalles, il lui venait tout à coup, de lui-même ou du dehors, une secousse de colère, un surcroît de souffrance, un pâle et rapide éclair qui illuminait toute son âme, et faisait brusquement apparaître partout autour de lui, en avant et en arrière, aux lueurs d’une lumière affreuse, les hideux précipices et les sombres perspectives de sa destinée.

L’éclair passé, la nuit retombait, et où était-il? il ne le savait plus.

Le propre des peines de cette nature, dans lesquelles domine ce qui est impitoyable, c’est-à-dire ce qui est abrutissant. C’est de transformer peu à peu, par une sorte de transfiguration stupide, un homme en une bête fauve. Quelquefois en une bête féroce. Les tentatives d’évasion de Jean Valjean, successives et obstinées, suffiraient à prouver cet étrange travail fait par la loi sur l’âme humaine. Jean Valjean eût renouvelé ces tentatives, si parfaitement inutiles et folles, autant de fois que l’occasion s’en fût présentée, sans songer un instant au résultat, ni aux expériences déjà faites. Il s’échappait impétueusement comme le loup qui trouve la cage ouverte. L’instinct lui disait: sauve-toi! Le raisonnement lui eût dit: reste! Mais, devant une tentation si violente, le raisonnement avait disparu; il n’y avait plus que l’instinct. La bête seule agissait. Quand il était repris, les nouvelles sévérités qu’on lui infligeait ne servaient qu’à l’effarer davantage.

Un détail que nous ne devons pas omettre, c’est qu’il était d’une force physique dont n’approchait pas un des habitants du bagne. À la fatigue, pour filer un câble, pour virer un cabestan, Jean Valjean valait quatre hommes. Il soulevait et soutenait parfois d'énormes poids sur son dos, et remplaçait dans l'occasion cet instrument qu'on appelle cric et qu'on appelait jadis orgueil, d'où a pris nom, soit dit en passant, la rue Montorgueil près des halles de Paris. Ses camarades l'avaient surnommé Jean-le-Cric. Une fois, comme on réparait le balcon de l'hôtel de ville de Toulon, une des admirables cariatides de Puget qui soutiennent ce balcon se descella et faillit tomber. Jean Valjean, qui se trouvait là, soutint de l'épaule la cariatide et donna le temps aux ouvriers d'arriver.

Sa souplesse dépassait encore sa vigueur. Certains forçats, rêveurs perpétuels d'évasions, finissent par faire de la force et de l'adresse combinées une véritable science. C'est la science des muscles. Toute une statique mystérieuse est quotidiennement pratiquée par les prisonniers, ces éternels envieux des mouches et des oiseaux. Gravir une verticale, et trouver des points d'appui là où l'on voit à peine une saillie, était un jeu pour Jean Valjean. Étant donné un angle de mur, avec la tension de son dos et de ses jarrets, avec ses coudes et ses talons emboîtés dans les aspérités de la pierre, il se hissait comme magiquement à un troisième étage. Quelquefois il montait ainsi jusqu'au toit du bagne.

Il parlait peu. Il ne riait pas. Il fallait quelque émotion extrême pour lui arracher, une ou deux fois l'an, ce lugubre rire du forçat qui est comme un écho du rire du démon. À le voir, il semblait occupé à regarder continuellement quelque chose de terrible.

Il était absorbé en effet.

À travers les perceptions maladives d'une nature incomplète et d'une intelligence accablée, il sentait confusément qu'une chose monstrueuse était sur lui. Dans cette pénombre obscure et blafarde où il rampait, chaque fois qu'il tournait le cou et qu'il essayait d'élever son regard, il voyait, avec une terreur mêlée de rage, s'échafauder, s'étager et monter à perte de vue au-dessus de lui, avec des escarpements horribles, une sorte d'entassement effrayant de choses, de lois, de préjugés, d'hommes et de faits, dont les contours lui échappaient, dont la masse l'épouvantait, et qui n'était autre chose que cette prodigieuse pyramide que nous appelons la civilisation. Il distinguait çà et là dans cet ensemble fourmillant et difforme, tantôt près de lui, tantôt loin et sur des plateaux inaccessibles, quelque groupe, quelque détail vivement éclairé, ici l'argousin et son bâton, ici le gendarme et son sabre, là-bas l'archevêque mitré, tout en haut, dans une sorte de soleil, l’empereur couronné et éblouissant. Il lui semblait que ces splendeurs lointaines, loin de dissiper sa nuit, la rendaient plus funèbre et plus noire. Tout cela, lois, préjugés, faits, hommes, choses, allait et venait au-dessus de lui, selon le mouvement compliqué et mystérieux que Dieu imprime à la civilisation, marchant sur lui et l’écrasant avec je ne sais quoi de paisible dans la cruauté et d’inexorable dans l’indifférence. Âmes tombées au fond de l’infortune possible, malheureux hommes perdus au plus bas de ces limbes où l’on ne regarde plus, les réprouvés de la loi sentent peser de tout son poids sur leur tête cette société humaine, si formidable pour qui est dehors, si effroyable pour qui est dessous.

Dans cette situation, Jean Valjean songeait, et quelle pouvait être la nature de sa rêverie?

Si le grain de mil sous la meule avait des pensées, il penserait sans doute ce que pensait Jean Valjean.

Toutes ces choses, réalités pleines de spectres, fantasmagories pleines de réalités, avaient fini par lui créer une sorte d’état intérieur presque inexprimable.

Par moments, au milieu de son travail du bagne, il s’arrêtait. Il se mettait à penser. Sa raison, à la fois plus mûre et plus troublée qu’autrefois, se révoltait. Tout ce qui lui était arrivé lui paraissait absurde; tout ce qui l’entourait lui paraissait impossible. Il se disait: c’est un rêve. Il regardait l’argousin debout à quelques pas de lui; l’argousin lui semblait un fantôme; tout à coup le fantôme lui donnait un coup de bâton.

La nature visible existait à peine pour lui. Il serait presque vrai de dire qu’il n’y avait point pour Jean Valjean de soleil, ni de beaux jours d’été, ni de ciel rayonnant, ni de fraîches aubes d’avril. Je ne sais quel jour de soupirail éclairait habituellement son âme.

Pour résumer, en terminant, ce qui peut être résumé et traduit en résultats positifs dans tout ce que nous venons d’indiquer, nous nous bornerons à constater qu’en dix-neuf ans, Jean Valjean, l’inoffensif émondeur de Faverolles, le redoutable galérien de Toulon, était devenu capable, grâce à la manière dont le bagne l’avait façonné, de deux espèces de mauvaises actions: premièrement, d’une mauvaise action rapide, irréfléchie, pleine d’étourdissement, toute d’instinct, sorte de représaille pour le mal souffert; deuxièmement, d’une mauvaise action grave, sérieuse, débattue en conscience et méditée avec les idées fausses que peut donner un pareil malheur. Ses préméditations passaient par les trois phases successives que les natures d’une certaine trempe peuvent seules parcourir, raisonnement, volonté, obstination. Il avait pour mobiles l’indignation habituelle, l’amertume de l’âme, le profond sentiment des iniquités subies, la réaction, même contre les bons, les innocents et les justes, s’il y en a. Le point de départ comme le point d’arrivée de toutes ses pensées était la haine de la loi humaine; cette haine qui, si elle n’est arrêtée dans son développement par quelque incident providentiel, devient, dans un temps donné, la haine de la société, puis la haine du genre humain, puis la haine de la création, et se traduit par un vague et incessant et brutal désir de nuire, n’importe à qui, à un être vivant quelconque. Comme on voit, ce n’était pas sans raison que le passeport qualifiait Jean Valjean d’*homme très dangereux*.

D’année en année, cette âme s’était desséchée de plus en plus, lentement, mais fatalement. À cœur sec, œil sec. À sa sortie du bagne, il y avait dix-neuf ans qu’il n’avait versé une larme.

Chapitre VIII

L'onde et l'ombre

Un homme à la mer!

Qu'importe! le navire ne s'arrête pas. Le vent souffle, ce sombre navire-là a une route qu'il est forcé de continuer. Il passe.

L'homme disparaît, puis reparaît, il plonge et remonte à la surface, il appelle, il tend les bras, on ne l'entend pas; le navire, frissonnant sous l'ouragan, est tout à sa manœuvre, les matelots et les passagers ne voient même plus l'homme submergé; sa misérable tête n'est qu'un point dans l'énormité des vagues. Il jette des cris désespérés dans les profondeurs. Quel spectre que cette voile qui s'en va! Il la regarde, il la regarde frénétiquement. Elle s'éloigne, elle blêmit, elle décroît. Il était là tout à l'heure, il était de l'équipage, il allait et venait sur le pont avec les autres, il avait sa part de respiration et de soleil, il était un vivant. Maintenant, que s'est-il donc passé? Il a glissé, il est tombé, c'est fini.

Il est dans l'eau monstrueuse. Il n'a plus sous les pieds que de la fuite et de l'écroulement. Les flots déchirés et déchiquetés par le vent l'environnent hideusement, les roulis de l'abîme l'emportent, tous les haillons de l'eau s'agitent autour de sa tête, une populace de vagues crache sur lui, de confuses ouvertures le dévorent à demi; chaque fois qu'il enfonce, il entrevoit des précipices pleins de nuit; d'affreuses végétations inconnues le saisissent, lui nouent les pieds, le tirent à elles; il sent qu'il devient abîme, il fait partie de l'écume, les flots se le jettent de l'un à l'autre, il boit l'amertume, l'océan lâche s'acharne à le noyer, l'énormité joue avec son agonie. Il semble que toute cette eau soit de la haine.

Il lutte pourtant, il essaie de se défendre, il essaie de se soutenir, il fait effort, il nage. Lui, cette pauvre force tout de suite épuisée, il combat l'inépuisable.

Où donc est le navire? Là-bas. À peine visible dans les pâles ténèbres de l'horizon.

Les rafales soufflent; toutes les écumes l'accablent. Il lève les yeux et ne voit que les lividités des nuages. Il assiste, agonisant, à l'immense démence de la mer. Il est supplicié par cette folie. Il entend des bruits étrangers à l’homme qui semblent venir d’au delà de la terre et d’on ne sait quel dehors effrayant.

Il y a des oiseaux dans les nuées, de même qu’il y a des anges au-dessus des détresses humaines, mais que peuvent-ils pour lui? Cela vole, chante et plane, et lui, il râle.

Il se sent enseveli à la fois par ces deux infinis, l’océan et le ciel; l’un est une tombe, l’autre est un linceul.

La nuit descend, voilà des heures qu’il nage, ses forces sont à bout; ce navire, cette chose lointaine où il y avait des hommes, s’est effacé; il est seul dans le formidable gouffre crépusculaire, il enfonce, il se roidit, il se tord, il sent au-dessous de lui les vagues monstres de l’invisible; il appelle.

Il n’y a plus d’hommes. Où est Dieu?

Il appelle. Quelqu’un! quelqu’un! Il appelle toujours.

Rien à l’horizon. Rien au ciel.

Il implore l’étendue, la vague, l’algue, l’écueil; cela est sourd. Il supplie la tempête; la tempête imperturbable n’obéit qu’à l’infini.

Autour de lui, l’obscurité, la brume, la solitude, le tumulte orageux et inconscient, le plissement indéfini des eaux farouches. En lui l’horreur et la fatigue. Sous lui la chute. Pas de point d’appui. Il songe aux aventures ténébreuses du cadavre dans l’ombre illimitée. Le froid sans fond le paralyse. Ses mains se crispent et se ferment et prennent du néant. Vents, nuées, tourbillons, souffles, étoiles inutiles! Que faire? Le désespéré s’abandonne, qui est las prend le parti de mourir, il se laisse faire, il se laisse aller, il lâche prise, et le voilà qui roule à jamais dans les profondeurs lugubres de l’engloutissement.

Ô marche implacable des sociétés humaines! Pertes d’hommes et d’âmes chemin faisant! Océan où tombe tout ce que laisse tomber la loi! Disparition sinistre du secours! ô mort morale!

La mer, c’est l’inexorable nuit sociale où la pénalité jette ses damnés. La mer, c’est l’immense misère.

L’âme, à vau-l’eau dans ce gouffre, peut devenir un cadavre. Qui la ressuscitera?

Chapitre IX

Nouveaux griefs

Quand vint l’heure de la sortie du bagne, quand Jean Valjean entendit à son oreille ce mot étrange: *tu es libre*! le moment fut invraisemblable et inouï, un rayon de vive lumière, un rayon de la vraie lumière des vivants pénétra subitement en lui. Mais ce rayon ne tarda point à pâlir. Jean Valjean avait été ébloui de l’idée de la liberté. Il avait cru à une vie nouvelle. Il vit bien vite ce que c’était qu’une liberté à laquelle on donne un passeport jaune.

Et autour de cela bien des amertumes. Il avait calculé que sa masse, pendant son séjour au bagne, aurait dû s’élever à cent soixante et onze francs. Il est juste d’ajouter qu’il avait oublié de faire entrer dans ses calculs le repos forcé des dimanches et fêtes qui, pour dix-neuf ans, entraînait une diminution de vingt-quatre francs environ. Quoi qu’il en fût, cette masse avait été réduite, par diverses retenues locales, à la somme de cent neuf francs quinze sous, qui lui avait été comptée à sa sortie.

Il n’y avait rien compris, et se croyait lésé. Disons le mot, volé.

Le lendemain de sa libération, à Grasse, il vit devant la porte d’une distillerie de fleurs d’oranger des hommes qui déchargeaient des ballots. Il offrit ses services. La besogne pressait, on les accepta. Il se mit à l’ouvrage. Il était intelligent, robuste et adroit; il faisait de son mieux; le maître paraissait content. Pendant qu’il travaillait, un gendarme passa, le remarqua, et lui demanda ses papiers. Il fallut montrer le passeport jaune. Cela fait, Jean Valjean reprit son travail. Un peu auparavant, il avait questionné l’un des ouvriers sur ce qu’ils gagnaient à cette besogne par jour; on lui avait répondu: *trente sous*. Le soir venu, comme il était forcé de repartir le lendemain matin, il se présenta devant le maître de la distillerie et le pria de le payer. Le maître ne proféra pas une parole, et lui remit vingt-cinq sous. Il réclama. On lui répondit: cela est assez bon pour toi. Il insista. Le maître le regarda entre les deux yeux et lui dit: *Gare le bloc*.

Là encore il se considéra comme volé.

La société, l’état, en lui diminuant sa masse, l’avait volé en grand. Maintenant, c’était le tour de l’individu qui le volait en petit.

Libération n’est pas délivrance. On sort du bagne, mais non de la condamnation. Voilà ce qui lui était arrivé à Grasse. On a vu de quelle façon il avait été accueilli à Digne.

Chapitre X

L’homme réveillé

Donc, comme deux heures du matin sonnaient à l’horloge de la cathédrale, Jean Valjean se réveilla.

Ce qui le réveilla, c’est que le lit était trop bon. Il y avait vingt ans bientôt qu’il n’avait couché dans un lit, et quoiqu’il ne se fût pas déshabillé, la sensation était trop nouvelle pour ne pas troubler son sommeil.

Il avait dormi plus de quatre heures. Sa fatigue était passée. Il était accoutumé à ne pas donner beaucoup d’heures au repos.

Il ouvrit les yeux et regarda un moment dans l’obscurité autour de lui, puis il les referma pour se rendormir.

Quand beaucoup de sensations diverses ont agité la journée, quand des choses préoccupent l’esprit, on s’endort, mais on ne se rendort pas. Le sommeil vient plus aisément qu’il ne revient. C’est ce qui arriva à Jean Valjean. Il ne put se rendormir, et il se mit à penser.

Il était dans un de ces moments où les idées qu’on a dans l’esprit sont troubles. Il avait une sorte de va-et-vient obscur dans le cerveau. Ses souvenirs anciens et ses souvenirs immédiats y flottaient pêle-mêle et s’y croisaient confusément, perdant leurs formes, se grossissant démesurément, puis disparaissant tout à coup comme dans une eau fangeuse et agitée. Beaucoup de pensées lui venaient, mais il y en avait une qui se représentait continuellement et qui chassait toutes les autres. Cette pensée, nous allons la dire tout de suite: — Il avait remarqué les six couverts d’argent et la grande cuiller que madame Magloire avait posés sur la table.

Ces six couverts d’argent l’obsédaient. — Ils étaient là. — À quelques pas. — À l’instant où il avait traversé la chambre d’à côté pour venir dans celle où il était, la vieille servante les mettait dans un petit placard à la tête du lit. — Il avait bien remarqué ce placard. — À droite, en entrant par la salle à manger. — Ils étaient massifs. — Et de vieille argenterie. — Avec la grande cuiller, on en tirerait au moins deux cents francs. — Le double de ce qu’il avait gagné en dix-neuf ans. — Il est vrai qu’il eût gagné davantage si l’*administration* ne l’avait pas *volé*.

Son esprit oscilla toute une grande heure dans des fluctuations auxquelles se mêlait bien quelque lutte. Trois heures sonnèrent. Il rouvrit les yeux, se dressa brusquement sur son séant, étendit le bras et tâta son havresac qu'il avait jeté dans le coin de l'alcôve, puis il laissa pendre ses jambes et poser ses pieds à terre, et se trouva, presque sans savoir comment, assis sur son lit.

Il resta un certain temps rêveur dans cette attitude qui eût eu quelque chose de sinistre pour quelqu'un qui l'eût aperçu ainsi dans cette ombre, seul éveillé dans la maison endormie. Tout à coup il se baissa, ôta ses souliers et les posa doucement sur la natte près du lit, puis il reprit sa posture de rêverie et redevint immobile.

Au milieu de cette méditation hideuse, les idées que nous venons d'indiquer remuaient sans relâche son cerveau, entraient, sortaient, rentraient, faisaient sur lui une sorte de pesée; et puis il songeait aussi, sans savoir pourquoi, et avec cette obstination machinale de la rêverie, à un forçat nommé Brevet qu'il avait connu au bagne, et dont le pantalon n'était retenu que par une seule bretelle de coton tricoté. Le dessin en damier de cette bretelle lui revenait sans cesse à l'esprit.

Il demeurait dans cette situation, et y fût peut-être resté indéfiniment jusqu'au lever du jour, si l'horloge n'eût sonné un coup — le quart ou la demie. Il sembla que ce coup lui eût dit: allons!

Il se leva debout, hésita encore un moment, et écouta; tout se taisait dans la maison; alors il marcha droit et à petits pas vers la fenêtre qu'il entrevoyait. La nuit n'était pas très obscure; c'était une pleine lune sur laquelle couraient de larges nuées chassées par le vent. Cela faisait au dehors des alternatives d'ombre et de clarté, des éclipses, puis des éclaircies, et au dedans une sorte de crépuscule. Ce crépuscule, suffisant pour qu'on pût se guider, intermittent à cause des nuages, ressemblait à l'espèce de lividité qui tombe d'un soupirail de cave devant lequel vont et viennent des passants. Arrivé à la fenêtre, Jean Valjean l'examina. Elle était sans barreaux, donnait sur le jardin et n'était fermée, selon la mode du pays, que d'une petite clavette. Il l'ouvrit, mais, comme un air froid et vif entra brusquement dans la chambre, il la referma tout de suite. Il regarda le jardin de ce regard attentif qui étudie plus encore qu'il ne regarde. Le jardin était enclos d'un mur blanc assez bas, facile à escalader. Au fond, au-delà, il distingua des têtes d'arbres également espacées, ce qui indiquait que ce mur séparait le jardin d'une avenue ou d'une ruelle plantée.

Ce coup d'œil jeté, il fit le mouvement d'un homme déterminé, marcha à son alcôve, prit son havresac, l'ouvrit, le fouilla, en tira quelque chose qu'il posa sur le lit, mit ses souliers dans une des poches, referma le tout, chargea le sac sur ses épaules, se couvrit de sa casquette dont il baissa la visière sur ses yeux, chercha son bâton en tâtonnant, et l'alla poser dans l'angle de la fenêtre, puis revint au lit et saisit résolument l'objet qu'il y avait déposé. Cela ressemblait à une barre de fer courte, aiguisée comme un épieu à l'une de ses extrémités.

Il eût été difficile de distinguer dans les ténèbres pour quel emploi avait pu être façonné ce morceau de fer. C'était peut-être un levier? C'était peut-être une massue?

Au jour on eût pu reconnaître que ce n'était autre chose qu'un chandelier de mineur. On employait alors quelquefois les forçats à extraire de la roche des hautes collines qui environnent Toulon, et il n'était pas rare qu'ils eussent à leur disposition des outils de mineur. Les chandeliers des mineurs sont en fer massif, terminés à leur extrémité inférieure par une pointe au moyen de laquelle on les enfonce dans le rocher.

Il prit ce chandelier dans sa main droite, et retenant son haleine, assourdissant son pas, il se dirigea vers la porte de la chambre voisine, celle de l'évêque, comme on sait. Arrivé à cette porte, il la trouva entrebâillée. L'évêque ne l'avait point fermée.

Chapitre XI

Ce qu’il fait

Jean Valjean écouta. Aucun bruit.

Il poussa la porte.

Il la poussa du bout du doigt, légèrement, avec cette douceur furtive et inquiète d’un chat qui veut entrer.

La porte céda à la pression et fit un mouvement imperceptible et silencieux qui élargit un peu l’ouverture.

Il attendit un moment, puis poussa la porte une seconde fois, plus hardiment. Elle continua de céder en silence. L’ouverture était assez grande maintenant pour qu’il pût passer. Mais il y avait près de la porte une petite table qui faisait avec elle un angle gênant et qui barrait l’entrée.

Jean Valjean reconnut la difficulté. Il fallait à toute force que l’ouverture fût encore élargie.

Il prit son parti, et poussa une troisième fois la porte, plus énergiquement que les deux premières. Cette fois il y eut un gond mal huilé qui jeta tout à coup dans cette obscurité un cri rauque et prolongé.

Jean Valjean tressaillit. Le bruit de ce gond sonna dans son oreille avec quelque chose d’éclatant et de formidable comme le clairon du jugement dernier. Dans les grossissements fantastiques de la première minute, il se figura presque que ce gond venait de s’animer et de prendre tout à coup une vie terrible, et qu’il aboyait comme un chien pour avertir tout le monde et réveiller les gens endormis.

Il s’arrêta, frissonnant, éperdu, et retomba de la pointe du pied sur le talon. Il entendait ses artères battre dans ses tempes comme deux marteaux de forge, et il lui semblait que son souffle sortait de sa poitrine avec le bruit du vent qui sort d’une caverne. Il lui paraissait impossible que l’horrible clameur de ce gond irrité n’eût pas ébranlé toute la maison comme une secousse de tremblement de terre; la porte, poussée par lui, avait pris l’alarme et avait appelé; le vieillard allait se lever, les deux vieilles femmes allaient crier, on viendrait à l’aide; avant un quart d’heure, la ville serait en rumeur et la gendarmerie sur pied. Un moment il se crut perdu.

Il demeura où il était, pétrifié comme la statue de sel, n’osant faire un mouvement.

Quelques minutes s’écoulèrent. La porte s’était ouverte toute grande. Il se hasarda à regarder dans la chambre. Rien n’y avait bougé. Il prêta l’oreille. Rien ne remuait dans la maison. Le bruit du gond rouillé n’avait éveillé personne. Ce premier danger était passé, mais il y avait encore en lui un affreux tumulte. Il ne recula pas pourtant. Même quand il s’était cru perdu, il n’avait pas reculé. Il ne songea plus qu’à finir vite. Il fit un pas et entra dans la chambre.

Cette chambre était dans un calme parfait. On y distinguait çà et là des formes confuses et vagues qui, au jour, étaient des papiers épars sur une table, des in-folio ouverts, des volumes empilés sur un tabouret, un fauteuil chargé de vêtements, un prie-Dieu, et qui à cette heure n’étaient plus que des coins ténébreux et des places blanchâtres. Jean Valjean avança avec précaution en évitant de se heurter aux meubles. Il entendait au fond de la chambre la respiration égale et tranquille de l’évêque endormi.

Il s’arrêta tout à coup. Il était près du lit. Il y était arrivé plus tôt qu’il n’aurait cru.

La nature mêle quelquefois ses effets et ses spectacles à nos actions avec une espèce d’à-propos sombre et intelligent, comme si elle voulait nous faire réfléchir. Depuis près d’une demi-heure un grand nuage couvrait le ciel. Au moment où Jean Valjean s’arrêta en face du lit, ce nuage se déchira, comme s’il l’eût fait exprès, et un rayon de lune, traversant la longue fenêtre, vint éclairer subitement le visage pâle de l’évêque. Il dormait paisiblement. Il était presque vêtu dans son lit, à cause des nuits froides des Basses-Alpes, d’un vêtement de laine brune qui lui couvrait les bras jusqu’aux poignets. Sa tête était renversée sur l’oreiller dans l’attitude abandonnée du repos; il laissait pendre hors du lit sa main ornée de l’anneau pastoral et d’où étaient tombées tant de bonnes œuvres et de saintes actions. Toute sa face s’illuminait d’une vague expression de satisfaction, d’espérance et de béatitude. C’était plus qu’un sourire et presque un rayonnement. Il y avait sur son front l’inexprimable réverbération d’une lumière qu’on ne voyait pas. L’âme des justes pendant le sommeil contemple un ciel mystérieux.

Un reflet de ce ciel était sur l’évêque.

C’était en même temps une transparence lumineuse, car ce ciel était au dedans de lui. Ce ciel, c’était sa conscience.

Au moment où le rayon de lune vint se superposer, pour ainsi dire, à cette clarté intérieure, l’évêque endormi apparut comme dans une gloire.

Cela pourtant resta doux et voilé d’un demi-jour ineffable. Cette lune dans le ciel, cette nature assoupie, ce jardin sans un frisson, cette maison si calme, l’heure, le moment, le silence, ajoutaient je ne sais quoi de solennel et d’indicible au vénérable repos de ce sage, et enveloppaient d’une sorte d’auréole majestueuse et sereine ces cheveux blancs et ces yeux fermés, cette figure où tout était espérance et où tout était confiance, cette tête de vieillard et ce sommeil d’enfant.

Il y avait presque de la divinité dans cet homme ainsi auguste à son insu. Jean Valjean, lui, était dans l’ombre, son chandelier de fer à la main, debout, immobile, effaré de ce vieillard lumineux. Jamais il n’avait rien vu de pareil. Cette confiance l’épouvantait. Le monde moral n’a pas de plus grand spectacle que celui-là: une conscience troublée et inquiète, parvenue au bord d’une mauvaise action, et contemplant le sommeil d’un juste.

Ce sommeil, dans cet isolement, et avec un voisin tel que lui, avait quelque chose de sublime qu’il sentait vaguement, mais impérieusement.

Nul n’eût pu dire ce qui se passait en lui, pas même lui. Pour essayer de s’en rendre compte, il faut rêver ce qu’il y a de plus violent en présence de ce qu’il y a de plus doux. Sur son visage même on n’eût rien pu distinguer avec certitude. C’était une sorte d’étonnement hagard. Il regardait cela. Voilà tout. Mais quelle était sa pensée? Il eût été impossible de le deviner. Ce qui était évident, c’est qu’il était ému et bouleversé. Mais de quelle nature était cette émotion?

Son œil ne se détachait pas du vieillard. La seule chose qui se dégageât clairement de son attitude et de sa physionomie, c’était une étrange indécision. On eût dit qu’il hésitait entre les deux abîmes, celui où l’on se perd et celui où l’on se sauve. Il semblait prêt à briser ce crâne ou à baiser cette main.

Au bout de quelques instants, son bras gauche se leva lentement vers son front, et il ôta sa casquette, puis son bras retomba avec la même lenteur, et Jean Valjean rentra dans sa contemplation, sa casquette dans la main gauche, sa massue dans la main droite, ses cheveux hérissés sur sa tête farouche.

L’évêque continuait de dormir dans une paix profonde sous ce regard effrayant. Un reflet de lune faisait confusément visible au-dessus de la cheminée le crucifix qui semblait leur ouvrir les bras à tous les deux, avec une bénédiction pour l’un et un pardon pour l’autre.

Tout à coup Jean Valjean remit sa casquette sur son front, puis marcha rapidement, le long du lit, sans regarder l’évêque, droit au placard qu’il entrevoyait près du chevet; il leva le chandelier de fer comme pour forcer la serrure; la clef y était; il l’ouvrit; la première chose qui lui apparut fut le panier d’argenterie; il le prit, traversa la chambre à grands pas sans précaution et sans s’occuper du bruit, gagna la porte, rentra dans l’oratoire, ouvrit la fenêtre, saisit un bâton, enjamba l’appui du rez-de-chaussée, mit l’argenterie dans son sac, jeta le panier, franchit le jardin, sauta par-dessus le mur comme un tigre, et s’enfuit.

Chapitre XII

L'évêque travaille

Le lendemain, au soleil levant, monseigneur Bienvenu se promenait dans son jardin. Madame Magloire accourut vers lui toute bouleversée.

— Monseigneur, monseigneur, cria-t-elle, votre grandeur sait-elle où est le panier d'argenterie?

— Oui, dit l'évêque.

— Jésus-Dieu soit béni! reprit-elle. Je ne savais ce qu'il était devenu.

L'évêque venait de ramasser le panier dans une plate-bande. Il le présenta à madame Magloire.

— Le voilà.

— Eh bien? dit-elle. Rien dedans! et l'argenterie?

— Ah! repartit l'évêque. C'est donc l'argenterie qui vous occupe? Je ne sais où elle est.

— Grand bon Dieu! elle est volée! C'est l'homme d'hier soir qui l'a volée!

En un clin d'œil, avec toute sa vivacité de vieille alerte, madame Magloire courut à l'oratoire, entra dans l'alcôve et revint vers l'évêque. L'évêque venait de se baisser et considérait en soupirant un plant de cochléaria des Guillons que le panier avait brisé en tombant à travers la plate-bande. Il se redressa au cri de madame Magloire.

— Monseigneur, l'homme est parti! l'argenterie est volée!

Tout en poussant cette exclamation, ses yeux tombaient sur un angle du jardin où l'on voyait des traces d'escalade. Le chevron du mur avait été arraché.

— Tenez! c'est par là qu'il s'en est allé. Il a sauté dans la ruelle Cochefilet! Ah! l'abomination! Il nous a volé notre argenterie!

L'évêque resta un moment silencieux, puis leva son œil sérieux, et dit à madame Magloire avec douceur:

— Et d'abord, cette argenterie était-elle à nous?

Madame Magloire resta interdite. Il y eut encore un silence, puis l'évêque continua:

— Madame Magloire, je détenais à tort et depuis longtemps cette argenterie. Elle était aux pauvres. Qu'était-ce que cet homme? Un pauvre évidemment.

— Hélas Jésus! repartit madame Magloire. Ce n’est pas pour moi ni pour mademoiselle. Cela nous est bien égal. Mais c’est pour monseigneur. Dans quoi monseigneur va-t-il manger maintenant?

L’évêque la regarda d’un air étonné.

— Ah çà mais! est-ce qu’il n’y a pas des couverts d’étain?

Madame Magloire haussa les épaules.

— L’étain a une odeur.

— Alors, des couverts de fer.

Madame Magloire fit une grimace significative.

— Le fer a un goût.

— Eh bien, dit l’évêque, des couverts de bois.

Quelques instants après, il déjeunait à cette même table où Jean Valjean s’était assis la veille. Tout en déjeunant, monseigneur Bienvenu faisait gaîment remarquer à sa sœur qui ne disait rien et à madame Magloire qui grommelait sourdement qu’il n’est nullement besoin d’une cuiller ni d’une fourchette, même en bois, pour tremper un morceau de pain dans une tasse de lait.

— Aussi a-t-on idée! disait madame Magloire toute seule en allant et venant, recevoir un homme comme cela! et le loger à côté de soi! et quel bonheur encore qu’il n’ait fait que voler! Ah mon Dieu! cela fait frémir quand on songe!

Comme le frère et la sœur allaient se lever de table, on frappa à la porte.

— Entrez, dit l’évêque.

La porte s’ouvrit. Un groupe étrange et violent apparut sur le seuil. Trois hommes en tenaient un quatrième au collet. Les trois hommes étaient des gendarmes; l’autre était Jean Valjean.

Un brigadier de gendarmerie, qui semblait conduire le groupe, était près de la porte. Il entra et s’avança vers l’évêque en faisant le salut militaire.

— Monseigneur... dit-il.

À ce mot Jean Valjean, qui était morne et semblait abattu, releva la tête d’un air stupéfait.

— Monseigneur! murmura-t-il. Ce n’est donc pas le curé?...

— Silence! dit un gendarme. C’est monseigneur l’évêque.

Cependant monseigneur Bienvenu s’était approché aussi vivement que son grand âge le lui permettait.

— Ah! vous voilà! s’écria-t-il en regardant Jean Valjean. Je suis aise de vous voir. Et bien mais! je vous avais donné les chandeliers aussi, qui sont en argent comme le reste et dont vous pourrez bien avoir deux cents francs. Pourquoi ne les avez-vous pas emportés avec vos couverts?

Jean Valjean ouvrit les yeux et regarda le vénérable évêque avec une expression qu’aucune langue humaine ne pourrait rendre.

— Monseigneur, dit le brigadier de gendarmerie, ce que cet homme disait était donc vrai? Nous l’avons rencontré. Il allait comme quelqu’un qui s’en va. Nous l’avons arrêté pour voir. Il avait cette argenterie....

— Et il vous a dit, interrompit l’évêque en souriant, qu’elle lui avait été donnée par un vieux bonhomme de prêtre chez lequel il avait passé la nuit? Je vois la chose. Et vous l’avez ramené ici? C’est une méprise.

— Comme cela, reprit le brigadier, nous pouvons le laisser aller?

— Sans doute, répondit l’évêque.

Les gendarmes lâchèrent Jean Valjean qui recula.

— Est-ce que c’est vrai qu’on me laisse? dit-il d’une voix presque inarticulée et comme s’il parlait dans le sommeil.

— Oui, on te laisse, tu n’entends donc pas? dit un gendarme.

— Mon ami, reprit l’évêque, avant de vous en aller, voici vos chandeliers. Prenez-les.

Il alla à la cheminée, prit les deux flambeaux d’argent et les apporta à Jean Valjean. Les deux femmes le regardaient faire sans un mot, sans un geste, sans un regard qui pût déranger l’évêque.

Jean Valjean tremblait de tous ses membres. Il prit les deux chandeliers machinalement et d’un air égaré.

— Maintenant, dit l’évêque, allez en paix.

— À propos, quand vous reviendrez, mon ami, il est inutile de passer par le jardin. Vous pourrez toujours entrer et sortir par la porte de la rue. Elle n’est fermée qu’au loquet jour et nuit.

Puis se tournant vers la gendarmerie:

— Messieurs, vous pouvez vous retirer.

Les gendarmes s’éloignèrent.

Jean Valjean était comme un homme qui va s’évanouir.

L’évêque s’approcha de lui, et lui dit à voix basse:

— N’oubliez pas, n’oubliez jamais que vous m’avez promis d’employer cet argent à devenir honnête homme.

Jean Valjean, qui n’avait aucun souvenir d’avoir rien promis, resta interdit. L’évêque avait appuyé sur ces paroles en les prononçant. Il reprit avec une sorte de solennité:

— Jean Valjean, mon frère, vous n’appartenez plus au mal, mais au bien. C’est votre âme que je vous achète; je la retire aux pensées noires et à l’esprit de perdition, et je la donne à Dieu.

Chapitre XIII

Petit-Gervais

Jean Valjean sortit de la ville comme s'il s'échappait. Il se mit à marcher en toute hâte dans les champs, prenant les chemins et les sentiers qui se présentaient sans s'apercevoir qu'il revenait à chaque instant sur ses pas. Il erra ainsi toute la matinée, n'ayant pas mangé et n'ayant pas faim. Il était en proie à une foule de sensations nouvelles. Il se sentait une sorte de colère; il ne savait contre qui. Il n'eût pu dire s'il était touché ou humilié. Il lui venait par moments un attendrissement étrange qu'il combattait et auquel il opposait l'endurcissement de ses vingt dernières années. Cet état le fatiguait. Il voyait avec inquiétude s'ébranler au dedans de lui l'espèce de calme affreux que l'injustice de son malheur lui avait donné. Il se demandait qu'est-ce qui remplacerait cela. Parfois il eût vraiment mieux aimé être en prison avec les gendarmes, et que les choses ne se fussent point passées ainsi; cela l'eût moins agité. Bien que la saison fut assez avancée, il y avait encore çà et là dans les haies quelques fleurs tardives dont l'odeur, qu'il traversait en marchant, lui rappelait des souvenirs d'enfance. Ces souvenirs lui étaient presque insupportables, tant il y avait longtemps qu'ils ne lui étaient apparus.

Des pensées inexprimables s'amoncelèrent ainsi en lui toute la journée.

Comme le soleil déclinait au couchant, allongeant sur le sol l'ombre du moindre caillou, Jean Valjean était assis derrière un buisson dans une grande plaine rousse absolument déserte. Il n'y avait à l'horizon que les Alpes. Pas même le clocher d'un village lointain. Jean Valjean pouvait être à trois lieues de Digne. Un sentier qui coupait la plaine passait à quelques pas du buisson.

Au milieu de cette méditation qui n'eût pas peu contribué à rendre ses haillons effrayants pour quelqu'un qui l'eût rencontré, il entendit un bruit joyeux.

Il tourna la tête, et vit venir par le sentier un petit savoyard d'une dizaine d'années qui chantait, sa vielle au flanc et sa boîte à marmotte sur le dos; un de ces doux et gais enfants qui vont de pays en pays, laissant voir leurs genoux par les trous de leur pantalon.

Tout en chantant l’enfant interrompait de temps en temps sa marche et jouait aux osselets avec quelques pièces de monnaie qu’il avait dans sa main, toute sa fortune probablement. Parmi cette monnaie il y avait une pièce de quarante sous. L’enfant s’arrêta à côté du buisson sans voir Jean Valjean et fit sauter sa poignée de sous que jusque-là il avait reçue avec assez d’adresse tout entière sur le dos de sa main.

Cette fois la pièce de quarante sous lui échappa, et vint rouler vers la broussaille jusqu’à Jean Valjean.

Jean Valjean posa le pied dessus.

Cependant l’enfant avait suivi sa pièce du regard, et l’avait vu.

Il ne s’étonna point et marcha droit à l’homme.

C’était un lieu absolument solitaire. Aussi loin que le regard pouvait s’étendre, il n’y avait personne dans la plaine ni dans le sentier. On n’entendait que les petits cris faibles d’une nuée d’oiseaux de passage qui traversaient le ciel à une hauteur immense. L’enfant tournait le dos au soleil qui lui mettait des fils d’or dans les cheveux et qui empourprait d’une lueur sanglante la face sauvage de Jean Valjean.

— Monsieur, dit le petit savoyard, avec cette confiance de l’enfance qui se compose d’ignorance et d’innocence, — ma pièce?

— Comment t’appelles-tu? dit Jean Valjean.

— Petit-Gervais, monsieur.

— Va-t’en, dit Jean Valjean.

— Monsieur, reprit l’enfant, rendez-moi ma pièce.

Jean Valjean baissa la tête et ne répondit pas.

L’enfant recommença:

— Ma pièce, monsieur!

L’œil de Jean Valjean resta fixé à terre.

— Ma pièce! cria l’enfant, ma pièce blanche! mon argent! Il semblait que Jean Valjean n’entendit point. L’enfant le prit au collet de sa blouse et le secoua. Et en même temps il faisait effort pour déranger le gros soulier ferré posé sur son trésor.

— Je veux ma pièce! ma pièce de quarante sous!

L’enfant pleurait. La tête de Jean Valjean se releva. Il était toujours assis. Ses yeux étaient troubles. Il considéra l’enfant avec une sorte d’étonnement, puis il étendit la main vers son bâton et cria d’une voix terrible:

— Qui est là?

— Moi, monsieur, répondit l’enfant. Petit-Gervais! moi! moi! Rendez-moi mes quarante sous, s’il vous plaît! Ôtez votre pied, monsieur, s’il vous plaît!

Puis irrité, quoique tout petit, et devenant presque menaçant:

— Ah, çà, ôterez-vous votre pied? Ôtez donc votre pied, voyons.

— Ah! c’est encore toi! dit Jean Valjean, et se dressant brusquement tout debout, le pied toujours sur la pièce d’argent, il ajouta: — Veux-tu bien te sauver!

L’enfant effaré le regarda, puis commença à trembler de la tête aux pieds, et, après quelques secondes de stupeur, se mit à s’enfuir en courant de toutes ses forces sans oser tourner le cou ni jeter un cri.

Cependant à une certaine distance l’essoufflement le força de s’arrêter, et Jean Valjean, à travers sa rêverie, l’entendit qui sanglotait.

Au bout de quelques instants l’enfant avait disparu. Le soleil s’était couché. L’ombre se faisait autour de Jean Valjean. Il n’avait pas mangé de la journée; il est probable qu’il avait la fièvre.

Il était resté debout, et n’avait pas changé d’attitude depuis que l’enfant s’était enfui. Son souffle soulevait sa poitrine à des intervalles longs et inégaux. Son regard, arrêté à dix ou douze pas devant lui, semblait étudier avec une attention profonde la forme d’un vieux tesson de faïence bleue tombé dans l’herbe. Tout à coup il tressaillit; il venait de sentir le froid du soir.

Il raffermit sa casquette sur son front, chercha machinalement à croiser et à boutonner sa blouse, fit un pas, et se baissa pour reprendre à terre son bâton. En ce moment il aperçut la pièce de quarante sous que son pied avait à demi enfoncée dans la terre et qui brillait parmi les cailloux.

Ce fut comme une commotion galvanique. Qu’est-ce que c’est que ça? dit-il entre ses dents. Il recula de trois pas, puis s’arrêta, sans pouvoir détacher son regard de ce point que son pied avait foulé l’instant d’auparavant, comme si cette chose qui luisait là dans l’obscurité eût été un œil ouvert fixé sur lui.

Au bout de quelques minutes, il s’élança convulsivement vers la pièce d’argent, la saisit, et, se redressant, se mit à regarder au loin dans la plaine, jetant à la fois ses yeux vers tous les points de l’horizon, debout et frissonnant comme une bête fauve effarée qui cherche un asile.

Il ne vit rien. La nuit tombait, la plaine était froide et vague, de grandes brumes violettes montaient dans la clarté crépusculaire.

Il dit: «Ah!» et se mit à marcher rapidement dans une certaine direction, du côté où l'enfant avait disparu. Après une centaine de pas, il s'arrêta, regarda, et ne vit rien.

Alors il cria de toute sa force: «Petit-Gervais! Petit-Gervais!»

Il se tut, et attendit.

Rien ne répondit.

La campagne était déserte et morne. Il était environné de l'étendue. Il n'y avait rien autour de lui qu'une ombre où se perdait son regard et un silence où sa voix se perdait.

Une bise glaciale soufflait, et donnait aux choses autour de lui une sorte de vie lugubre. Des arbrisseaux secouaient leurs petits bras maigres avec une furie incroyable. On eût dit qu'ils menaçaient et poursuivaient quelqu'un.

Il recommença à marcher, puis il se mit à courir, et de temps en temps il s'arrêtait, et criait dans cette solitude, avec une voix qui était ce qu'on pouvait entendre de plus formidable et de plus désolé: «Petit-Gervais! Petit-Gervais!»

Certes, si l'enfant l'eût entendu, il eût eu peur et se fût bien gardé de se montrer. Mais l'enfant était sans doute déjà bien loin.

Il rencontra un prêtre qui était à cheval. Il alla à lui et lui dit:

— Monsieur le curé, avez-vous vu passer un enfant?

— Non, dit le prêtre.

— Un nommé Petit-Gervais?

— Je n'ai vu personne.

Il tira deux pièces de cinq francs de sa sacoche et les remit au prêtre.

— Monsieur le curé, voici pour vos pauvres. — Monsieur le curé, c'est un petit d'environ dix ans qui a une marmotte, je crois, et une vielle. Il allait. Un de ces savoyards, vous savez?

— Je ne l'ai point vu.

— Petit-Gervais? il n'est point des villages d'ici? pouvez-vous me dire?

— Si c'est comme vous dites, mon ami, c'est un petit enfant étranger. Cela passe dans le pays. On ne les connaît pas.

Jean Valjean prit violemment deux autres écus de cinq francs qu'il donna au prêtre.

— Pour vos pauvres, dit-il.

Puis il ajouta avec égarement:

— Monsieur l'abbé, faites-moi arrêter. Je suis un voleur.

Le prêtre piqua des deux et s’enfuit très effrayé.

Jean Valjean se remit à courir dans la direction qu’il avait d’abord prise.

Il fit de la sorte un assez long chemin, regardant, appelant, criant, mais il ne rencontra plus personne. Deux ou trois fois il courut dans la plaine vers quelque chose qui lui faisait l’effet d’un être couché ou accroupi; ce n’étaient que des broussailles ou des roches à fleur de terre. Enfin, à un endroit où trois sentiers se croisaient, il s’arrêta. La lune s’était levée. Il promena sa vue au loin et appela une dernière fois: «Petit-Gervais! Petit-Gervais! Petit-Gervais!» Son cri s’éteignit dans la brume, sans même éveiller un écho. Il murmura encore: «Petit-Gervais!» mais d’une voix faible et presque inarticulée. Ce fut là son dernier effort; ses jarrets fléchirent brusquement sous lui comme si une puissance invisible l’accablait tout à coup du poids de sa mauvaise conscience; il tomba épuisé sur une grosse pierre, les poings dans ses cheveux et le visage dans ses genoux, et il cria: «Je suis un misérable!»

Alors son cœur creva et il se mit à pleurer. C’était la première fois qu’il pleurait depuis dix-neuf ans.

Quand Jean Valjean était sorti de chez l’évêque, on l’a vu, il était hors de tout ce qui avait été sa pensée jusque-là. Il ne pouvait se rendre compte de ce qui se passait en lui. Il se raidissait contre l’action angélique et contre les douces paroles du vieillard. «Vous m’avez promis de devenir honnête homme. Je vous achète votre âme. Je la retire à l’esprit de perversité et je la donne au bon Dieu.» Cela lui revenait sans cesse. Il opposait à cette indulgence céleste l’orgueil, qui est en nous comme la forteresse du mal. Il sentait indistinctement que le pardon de ce prêtre était le plus grand assaut et la plus formidable attaque dont il eût encore été ébranlé; que son endurcissement serait définitif s’il résistait à cette clémence; que, s’il cédait, il faudrait renoncer à cette haine dont les actions des autres hommes avaient rempli son âme pendant tant d’années, et qui lui plaisait; que cette fois il fallait vaincre ou être vaincu, et que la lutte, une lutte colossale et décisive, était engagée entre sa méchanceté à lui et la bonté de cet homme.

En présence de toutes ces lueurs, il allait comme un homme ivre. Pendant qu’il marchait ainsi, les yeux hagards, avait-il une perception distincte de ce qui pourrait résulter pour lui de son aventure à Digne? Entendait-il tous ces bourdonnements mystérieux qui avertissent ou importunent l’esprit à de certains moments de la vie? Une voix lui disait-elle à l’oreille qu’il venait de traverser l’heure solennelle de sa destinée, qu’il n’y avait plus de milieu pour lui, que si désormais il n’était pas le meilleur des hommes il en serait le pire, qu’il fallait pour ainsi dire que maintenant il montât plus haut que l’évêque ou retombât plus bas que le galérien, que s’il voulait devenir bon il fallait qu’il devînt ange; que s’il voulait rester méchant il fallait qu’il devînt monstre?

Ici encore il faut se faire ces questions que nous nous sommes déjà faites ailleurs, recueillait-il confusément quelque ombre de tout ceci dans sa pensée? Certes, le malheur, nous l’avons dit, fait l’éducation de l’intelligence; cependant il est douteux que Jean Valjean fût en état de démêler tout ce que nous indiquons ici. Si ces idées lui arrivaient, il les entrevoyait plutôt qu’il ne les voyait, et elles ne réussissaient qu’à le jeter dans un trouble insupportable et presque douloureux. Au sortir de cette chose difforme et noire qu’on appelle le bagne, l’évêque lui avait fait mal à l’âme comme une clarté trop vive lui eût fait mal aux yeux en sortant des ténèbres. La vie future, la vie possible qui s’offrait désormais à lui toute pure et toute rayonnante le remplissait de frémissements et d’anxiété. Il ne savait vraiment plus où il en était. Comme une chouette qui verrait brusquement se lever le soleil, le forçat avait été ébloui et comme aveuglé par la vertu.

Ce qui était certain, ce dont il ne se doutait pas, c’est qu’il n’était déjà plus le même homme, c’est que tout était changé en lui, c’est qu’il n’était plus en son pouvoir de faire que l’évêque ne lui eût pas parlé et ne l’eût pas touché.

Dans cette situation d’esprit, il avait rencontré Petit-Gervais et lui avait volé ses quarante sous. Pourquoi? Il n’eût assurément pu l’expliquer; était-ce un dernier effet et comme un suprême effort des mauvaises pensées qu’il avait apportées du bagne, un reste d’impulsion, un résultat de ce qu’on appelle en statique la *force acquise*? C’était cela, et c’était aussi peut-être moins encore que cela. Disons-le simplement, ce n’était pas lui qui avait volé, ce n’était pas l’homme, c’était la bête qui, par habitude et par instinct, avait stupidement posé le pied sur cet argent, pendant que l’intelligence se débattait au milieu de tant d’obsessions inouïes et nouvelles. Quand l’intelligence se réveilla et vit cette action de la brute, Jean Valjean recula avec angoisse et poussa un cri d’épouvante.

C’est que, phénomène étrange et qui n’était possible que dans la situation où il était, en volant cet argent à cet enfant, il avait fait une chose dont il n’était déjà plus capable.

Quoi qu’il en soit, cette dernière mauvaise action eut sur lui un effet décisif; elle traversa brusquement ce chaos qu’il avait dans l’intelligence et le dissipa, mit d’un côté les épaisseurs obscures et de l’autre la lumière, et agit sur son âme, dans l’état où elle se trouvait, comme de certains réactifs chimiques agissent sur un mélange trouble en précipitant un élément et en clarifiant l’autre.

Tout d’abord, avant même de s’examiner et de réfléchir, éperdu, comme quelqu’un qui cherche à se sauver, il tâcha de retrouver l’enfant pour lui rendre son argent, puis, quand il reconnut que cela était inutile et impossible, il s’arrêta désespéré. Au moment où il s’écria: «je suis un misérable!» il venait de s’apercevoir tel qu’il était, et il était déjà à ce point séparé de lui-même, qu’il lui semblait qu’il n’était plus qu’un fantôme, et qu’il avait là devant lui, en chair et en os, le bâton à la main, la blouse sur les reins, son sac rempli d’objets volés sur le dos, avec son visage résolu et morne, avec sa pensée pleine de projets abominables, le hideux galérien Jean Valjean.

L’excès du malheur, nous l’avons remarqué, l’avait fait en quelque sorte visionnaire. Ceci fut donc comme une vision. Il vit véritablement ce Jean Valjean, cette face sinistre devant lui. Il fut presque au moment de se demander qui était cet homme, et il en eut horreur.

Son cerveau était dans un de ces moments violents et pourtant affreusement calmes où la rêverie est si profonde qu’elle absorbe la réalité. On ne voit plus les objets qu’on a autour de soi, et l’on voit comme en dehors de soi les figures qu’on a dans l’esprit.

Il se contempla donc, pour ainsi dire, face à face, et en même temps, à travers cette hallucination, il voyait dans une profondeur mystérieuse une sorte de lumière qu’il prit d’abord pour un flambeau. En regardant avec plus d’attention cette lumière qui apparaissait à sa conscience, il reconnut qu’elle avait la forme humaine, et que ce flambeau était l’évêque.

Sa conscience considéra tour à tour ces deux hommes ainsi placés devant elle, l’évêque et Jean Valjean. Il n’avait pas fallu moins que le premier pour détremper le second. Par un de ces effets singuliers qui sont propres à ces sortes d’extases, à mesure que sa rêverie se prolongeait, l’évêque grandissait et resplendissait à ses yeux, Jean Valjean s’amoindrissait et s’effaçait. À un certain moment il ne fut plus qu’une ombre. Tout à coup il disparut. L’évêque seul était resté.

Il remplissait toute l’âme de ce misérable d’un rayonnement magnifique. Jean Valjean pleura longtemps. Il pleura à chaudes larmes, il pleura à sanglots, avec plus de faiblesse qu’une femme, avec plus d’effroi qu’un enfant.

Pendant qu’il pleurait, le jour se faisait de plus en plus dans son cerveau, un jour extraordinaire, un jour ravissant et terrible à la fois. Sa vie passée, sa première faute, sa longue expiation, son abrutissement extérieur, son endurcissement intérieur, sa mise en liberté réjouie par tant de plans de vengeance, ce qui lui était arrivé chez l’évêque, la dernière chose qu’il avait faite, ce vol de quarante sous à un enfant, crime d’autant plus lâche et d’autant plus monstrueux qu’il venait après le pardon de l’évêque, tout cela lui revint et lui apparut, clairement, mais dans une clarté qu’il n’avait jamais vue jusque-là. Il regarda sa vie, et elle lui parut horrible; son âme, et elle lui parut affreuse. Cependant un jour doux était sur cette vie et sur cette âme. Il lui semblait qu’il voyait Satan à la lumière du paradis.

Combien d’heures pleura-t-il ainsi? que fit-il après avoir pleuré? où alla-t-il? on ne l’a jamais su. Il paraît seulement avéré que, dans cette même nuit, le voiturier qui faisait à cette époque le service de Grenoble et qui arrivait à Digne vers trois heures du matin, vit en traversant la rue de l’évêché un homme dans l’attitude de la prière, à genoux sur le pavé, dans l’ombre, devant la porte de monseigneur Bienvenu.

Livre troisième — En l’année 1817

Chapitre I

L’année 1817

1817 est l’année que Louis XVIII, avec un certain aplomb royal qui ne manquait pas de fierté, qualifiait la vingt-deuxième de son règne. C’est l’année où M. Bruguière de Sorsum était célèbre. Toutes les boutiques des perruquiers, espérant la poudre et le retour de l’oiseau royal, étaient badigeonnées d’azur et fleurdelysées. C’était le temps candide où le comte Lynch siégeait tous les dimanches comme marguillier au banc d’œuvre de Saint-Germain-des-Prés en habit de pair de France, avec son cordon rouge et son long nez, et cette majesté de profil particulière à un homme qui a fait une action d’éclat. L’action d’éclat commise par M. Lynch était ceci: avoir, étant maire de Bordeaux, le 12 mars 1814, donné la ville un peu trop tôt à M. le duc d’Angoulême. De là sa pairie. En 1817, la mode engloutissait les petits garçons de quatre à six ans sous de vastes casquettes en cuir maroquiné à oreillons assez ressemblantes à des mitres d’esquimaux. L’armée française était vêtue de blanc, à l’autrichienne; les régiments s’appelaient légions; au lieu de chiffres ils portaient les noms des départements. Napoléon était à Sainte-Hélène, et, comme l’Angleterre lui refusait du drap vert, il faisait retourner ses vieux habits. En 1817, Pellegrini chantait, mademoiselle Bigottini dansait; Potier régnait; Odry n’existait pas encore. Madame Saqui succédait à Forioso. Il y avait encore des Prussiens en France. M. Delalot était un personnage. La légitimité venait de s’affirmer en coupant le poing, puis la tête, à Pleignier, à Carbonneau et à Tolleron. Le prince de Talleyrand, grand chambellan, et l’abbé Louis, ministre désigné des finances, se regardaient en riant du rire de deux augures; tous deux avaient célébré, le 14 juillet 1790, la messe de la Fédération au Champ de Mars; Talleyrand l’avait dite comme évêque, Louis l’avait servie comme diacre. En 1817, dans les contre-allées de ce même Champ de Mars, on apercevait de gros cylindres de bois, gisant sous la pluie, pourrissant dans l’herbe, peints en bleu avec des traces d’aigles et d’abeilles dédorées. C’étaient les colonnes qui, deux ans auparavant, avaient soutenu l’estrade de l’empereur au Champ-de-Mai. Elles étaient noircies çà et là de la brûlure du bivouac des Autrichiens baraqués près du Gros-Caillou. Deux ou trois de ces colonnes avaient disparu dans les feux de ces bivouacs et avaient chauffé les larges mains des *kaiserlicks*. Le Champ de Mai avait eu cela de remarquable qu'il avait été tenu au mois de juin et au Champ de Mars. En cette année 1817, deux choses étaient populaires: le Voltaire-Touquet et la tabatière à la Charte. L'émotion parisienne la plus récente était le crime de Dautun qui avait jeté la tête de son frère dans le bassin du Marché-aux-Fleurs. On commençait à faire au ministère de la marine une enquête sur cette fatale frégate de la Méduse qui devait couvrir de honte Chaumareix et de gloire Géricault. Le colonel Selves allait en Égypte pour y devenir Soliman pacha. Le palais des Thermes, rue de la Harpe, servait de boutique à un tonnelier. On voyait encore sur la plate-forme de la tour octogone de l'hôtel de Cluny la petite logette en planches qui avait servi d'observatoire à Messier, astronome de la marine sous Louis XVI. La duchesse de Duras lisait à trois ou quatre amis, dans son boudoir meublé d'X en satin bleu ciel, *Ourika* inédite. On grattait les N au Louvre. Le pont d'Austerlitz abdiquait et s'intitulait pont du Jardin du Roi, double énigme qui déguisait à la fois le pont d'Austerlitz et le jardin des Plantes. Louis XVIII, préoccupé, tout en annotant du coin de l'ongle Horace, des héros qui se font empereurs et des sabotiers qui se font dauphins, avait deux soucis: Napoléon et Mathurin Bruneau. L'académie française donnait pour sujet de prix: *Le bonheur que procure l'étude*. M. Bellart était officiellement éloquent. On voyait germer à son ombre ce futur avocat général de Broè, promis aux sarcasmes de Paul-Louis Courier. Il y avait un faux Chateaubriand appelé Marchangy, en attendant qu'il y eut un faux Marchangy appelé d'Arlincourt. *Claire d'Albe* et *Malek-Adel* étaient des chefs-d'œuvre; madame Cottin était déclarée le premier écrivain de l'époque. L'institut laissait rayer de sa liste l'académicien Napoléon Bonaparte. Une ordonnance royale érigeait Angoulême en école de marine, car, le duc d'Angoulême étant grand amiral, il était évident que la ville d'Angoulême avait de droit toutes les qualités d'un port de mer, sans quoi le principe monarchique eût été entamé. On agitait en conseil des ministres la question de savoir si l'on devait tolérer les vignettes représentant des voltiges qui assaisonnaient les affiches de Franconi et qui attroupaient les polissons des rues. M. Paër, auteur de l'*Agnese*, bonhomme à la face carrée qui avait une verrue sur la joue, dirigeait les petits concerts intimes de la marquise de Sassenaye, rue de la Ville-l'Évêque. Toutes les jeunes filles chantaient *l'Ermite de Saint-Avelle*, paroles d'Edmond Géraud. *Le Nain jaune* se transformait en *Miroir*. Le café Lemblin tenait pour l'empereur contre le café Valois qui tenait pour les Bourbons. On venait de marier à une princesse de Sicile M. le duc de Berry, déjà regardé du fond de l'ombre par Louvel. Il y avait un an que madame de Staël était morte. Les gardes du corps sifflaient mademoiselle Mars. Les grands journaux étaient tout petits. Le format était restreint, mais la liberté était grande. *Le Constitutionnel* était constitutionnel. *La Minerve* appelait Chateaubriand *Chateaubriant*. Ce *t* faisait beaucoup rire les bourgeois aux dépens du grand écrivain. Dans des journaux vendus, des journalistes prostitués insultaient les proscrits de 1815; David n'avait plus de talent, Arnault n'avait plus d'esprit, Carnot n'avait plus de probité; Soult n'avait gagné aucune bataille; il est vrai que Napoléon n'avait plus de génie. Personne n'ignore qu'il est assez rare que les lettres adressées par la poste à un exilé lui parviennent, les polices se faisant un religieux devoir de les intercepter. Le fait n'est point nouveau; Descartes, banni, s'en plaignait. Or, David ayant, dans un journal belge, montré quelque humeur de ne pas recevoir les lettres qu'on lui écrivait, ceci paraissait plaisant aux feuilles royalistes qui bafouaient à cette occasion le proscrit. Dire: *les régicides*, ou dire: *les votants*, dire: *les ennemis*, ou dire: *les alliés*, dire: *Napoléon*, ou dire: *Buonaparte*, cela séparait deux hommes plus qu'un abîme. Tous les gens de bons sens convenaient que l'ère des révolutions était à jamais fermée par le roi Louis XVIII, surnommé «l'immortel auteur de la charte». Au terre-plein du Pont-Neuf, on sculptait le mot *Redivivus*, sur le piédestal qui attendait la statue de Henri IV. M. Piet ébauchait, rue Thérèse, n° 4, son conciliabule pour consolider la monarchie. Les chefs de la droite disaient dans les conjonctures graves: «Il faut écrire à Bacot». MM. Canuel, O'Mahony et de Chappedelaine esquissaient, un peu approuvés de Monsieur, ce qui devait être plus tard «la conspiration du bord de l'eau». L'Épingle Noire complotait de son côté. Delaverderie s'abouchait avec Trogoff. M. Decazes, esprit dans une certaine mesure libéral, dominait. Chateaubriand, debout tous les matins devant sa fenêtre du n° 27 de la rue Saint-Dominique, en pantalon à pieds et en pantoufles, ses cheveux gris coiffés d'un madras, les yeux fixés sur un miroir, une trousse complète de chirurgien dentiste ouverte devant lui, se curait les dents, qu'il avait charmantes, tout en dictant des variantes de *la Monarchie selon la Charte* à M. Pilorge, son secrétaire. La critique faisant autorité préférait Lafon à Talma. M. de Féletz signait A.; M. Hoffmann signait Z. Charles Nodier écrivait *Thérèse Aubert*. Le divorce était aboli. Les lycées s'appelaient collèges. Les collégiens, ornés au collet d'une fleur de lys d'or, s'y gourmaient à propos du roi de Rome. La contre-police du château dénonçait à son altesse royale Madame le portrait, partout exposé, de M. le duc d’Orléans, lequel avait meilleure mine en uniforme de colonel général des houzards que M. le duc de Berry en uniforme de colonel général des dragons; grave inconvénient. La ville de Paris faisait redorer à ses frais le dôme des Invalides. Les hommes sérieux se demandaient ce que ferait, dans telle ou telle occasion, M. de Trinquelague; M. Clausel de Montals se séparait, sur divers points, de M. Clausel de Coussergues; M. de Salaberry n’était pas content. Le comédien Picard, qui était de l’Académie dont le comédien Molière n’avait pu être, faisait jouer *les deux Philibert* à l’Odéon, sur le fronton duquel l’arrachement des lettres laissait encore lire distinctement: THÉÂTRE DE L’IMPÉRATRICE. On prenait parti pour ou contre Cugnet de Montarlot. Fabvier était factieux; Bavoux était révolutionnaire. Le libraire Pélicier publiait une édition de Voltaire, sous ce titre: *OEuvres de Voltaire*, de l’Académie française. «Cela fait venir les acheteurs», disait cet éditeur naïf. L’opinion générale était que M. Charles Loyson, serait le génie du siècle; l’envie commençait à le mordre, signe de gloire; et l’on faisait sur lui ce vers:

Même quand Loyson vole, on sent qu’il a des pattes.

Le cardinal Fesch refusant de se démettre, M. de Pins, archevêque d’Amasie, administrait le diocèse de Lyon. La querelle de la vallée des Dappes commençait entre la Suisse et la France par un mémoire du capitaine Dufour, depuis général. Saint-Simon, ignoré, échafaudait son rêve sublime. Il y avait à l’académie des sciences un Fourier célèbre que la postérité a oublié et dans je ne sais quel grenier un Fourier obscur dont l’avenir se souviendra. Lord Byron commençait à poindre; une note d’un poème de Millevoye l’annonçait à la France en ces termes: *un certain lord Baron*. David d’Angers s’essayait à pétrir le marbre. L’abbé Caron parlait avec éloge, en petit comité de séminaristes, dans le cul-de-sac des Feuillantines, d’un prêtre inconnu nommé Félicité Robert qui a été plus tard Lamennais. Une chose qui fumait et clapotait sur la Seine avec le bruit d’un chien qui nage allait et venait sous les fenêtres des Tuileries, du pont Royal au pont Louis XV c’était une mécanique bonne à pas grand’chose, une espèce de joujou, une rêverie d’inventeur songe-creux, une utopie: un bateau à vapeur. Les Parisiens regardaient cette inutilité avec indifférence. M. de Vaublanc, réformateur de l’Institut par coup d’État, ordonnance et fournée, auteur distingué de plusieurs académiciens, après en avoir fait, ne pouvait parvenir à l’être. Le faubourg Saint-Germain et la pavillon Marsan souhaitaient pour préfet de police M. Delaveau, à cause de sa dévotion. Dupuytren et Récamier se prenaient de querelle à l’amphithéâtre de l’École de médecine et se menaçaient du poing à propos de la divinité de Jésus-Christ. Cuvier, un œil sur la Genèse et l’autre sur la nature, s’efforçait de plaire à la réaction bigote en mettant les fossiles d’accord avec les textes et en faisant flatter Moïse par les mastodontes. M. François de Neufchâteau, louable cultivateur de la mémoire de Parmentier, faisait mille efforts pour que *pomme de terre* fût prononcée *parmentière*, et n’y réussissait point. L’abbé Grégoire, ancien évêque, ancien conventionnel, ancien sénateur, était passé dans la polémique royaliste à l’état «d’infâme Grégoire». Cette locution que nous venons d’employer: *passer à l’état de*, était dénoncée comme néologisme par M. Royer-Collard. On pouvait distinguer encore à sa blancheur, sous la troisième arche du pont d’Iéna, la pierre neuve avec laquelle, deux ans auparavant, on avait bouché le trou de mine pratiqué par Blücher pour faire sauter le pont. La justice appelait à sa barre un homme qui, en voyant entrer le comte d’Artois à Notre-Dame, avait dit tout haut: *Sapristi! je regrette le temps où je voyais Bonaparte et Talma entrer bras dessus bras dessous au Bal-Sauvage*. Propos séditieux. Six mois de prison. Des traîtres se montraient déboutonnés; des hommes qui avaient passé à l’ennemi la veille d’une bataille ne cachaient rien de la récompense et marchaient impudiquement en plein soleil dans le cynisme des richesses et des dignités; des déserteurs de Ligny et des Quatre-Bras, dans le débraillé de leur turpitude payée, étalaient leur dévouement monarchique tout nu; oubliant ce qui est écrit en Angleterre sur la muraille intérieure des water-closets publics: *Please adjust your dress before leaving*.

Voilà, pêle-mêle, ce qui surnage confusément de l’année 1817, oubliée aujourd’hui. L’histoire néglige presque toutes ces particularités, et ne peut faire autrement; l’infini l’envahirait. Pourtant ces détails, qu’on appelle à tort petits — il n’y a ni petits faits dans l’humanité, ni petites feuilles dans la végétation — sont utiles. C’est de la physionomie des années que se compose la figure des siècles.

En cette année 1817, quatre jeunes Parisiens firent «une bonne farce».

Chapitre II

Double quatuor

Ces Parisiens étaient l’un de Toulouse, l’autre de Limoges, le troisième de Cahors et le quatrième de Montauban; mais ils étaient étudiants, et qui dit étudiant dit parisien; étudier à Paris, c’est naître à Paris.

Ces jeunes gens étaient insignifiants; tout le monde a vu ces figures-là; quatre échantillons du premier venu; ni bons ni mauvais, ni savants ni ignorants, ni des génies ni des imbéciles; beaux de ce charmant avril qu’on appelle vingt ans. C’étaient quatre Oscars quelconques, car à cette époque les Arthurs n’existaient pas encore. *Brûlez pour lui les parfums d’Arabie,* s’écriait la romance, *Oscar s’avance, Oscar, je vais le voir*! On sortait d’Ossian, l’élégance était scandinave et calédonienne, le genre anglais pur ne devait prévaloir que plus tard, et le premier des Arthurs, Wellington, venait à peine de gagner la bataille de Waterloo.

Ces Oscars s’appelaient l’un Félix Tholomyès, de Toulouse; l’autre Listolier, de Cahors; l’autre Fameuil, de Limoges; le dernier Blachevelle, de Montauban. Naturellement chacun avait sa maîtresse. Blachevelle aimait Favourite, ainsi nommée parce qu’elle était allée en Angleterre; Listolier adorait Dahlia, qui avait pris pour nom de guerre un nom de fleur; Fameuil idolâtrait Zéphine, abrégé de Joséphine; Tholomyès avait Fantine, dite la Blonde à cause de ses beaux cheveux couleur de soleil.

Favourite, Dahlia, Zéphine et Fantine étaient quatre ravissantes filles, parfumées et radieuses, encore un peu ouvrières, n’ayant pas tout à fait quitté leur aiguille, dérangées par les amourettes, mais ayant sur le visage un reste de la sérénité du travail et dans l’âme cette fleur d’honnêteté qui dans la femme survit à la première chute. Il y avait une des quatre qu’on appelait la jeune, parce qu’elle était la cadette; et une qu’on appelait la vieille. La vieille avait vingt-trois ans. Pour ne rien celer, les trois premières étaient plus expérimentées, plus insouciantes et plus envolées dans le bruit de la vie que Fantine la Blonde, qui en était à sa première illusion.

Dahlia, Zéphine, et surtout Favourite, n’en auraient pu dire autant. Il y avait déjà plus d’un épisode à leur roman à peine commencé, et l’amoureux, qui s’appelait Adolphe au premier chapitre, se trouvait être Alphonse au second, et Gustave au troisième. Pauvreté et coquetterie sont deux conseillères fatales, l’une gronde, l’autre flatte; et les belles filles du peuple les ont toutes les deux qui leur parlent bas à l’oreille, chacune de son côté. Ces âmes mal gardées écoutent. De là les chutes qu’elles font et les pierres qu’on leur jette. On les accable avec la splendeur de tout ce qui est immaculé et inaccessible. Hélas! si la *Yungfrau* avait faim?

Favourite, ayant été en Angleterre, avait pour admiratrices Zéphine et Dahlia. Elle avait eu de très bonne heure un chez-soi. Son père était un vieux professeur de mathématiques brutal et qui gasconnait; point marié, courant le cachet malgré l’âge. Ce professeur, étant jeune, avait vu un jour la robe d’une femme de chambre s’accrocher à un garde-cendre; il était tombé amoureux de cet accident. Il en était résulté Favourite. Elle rencontrait de temps en temps son père, qui la saluait. Un matin, une vieille femme à l’air béguin était entrée chez elle et lui avait dit:

— Vous ne me connaissez pas, mademoiselle?

— Non.

— Je suis ta mère.

Puis la vieille avait ouvert le buffet, bu et mangé, fait apporter un matelas qu’elle avait, et s’était installée. Cette mère, grognon et dévote, ne parlait jamais à Favourite, restait des heures sans souffler mot, déjeunait, dînait et soupait comme quatre, et descendait faire salon chez le portier, où elle disait du mal de sa fille.

Ce qui avait entraîné Dahlia vers Listolier, vers d’autres peut-être, vers l’oisiveté, c’était d’avoir de trop jolis ongles roses. Comment faire travailler ces ongles-là? Qui veut rester vertueuse ne doit pas avoir pitié de ses mains. Quant à Zéphine, elle avait conquis Fameuil par sa petite manière mutine et caressante de dire: «Oui, monsieur».

Les jeunes gens étant camarades, les jeunes filles étaient amies. Ces amours-là sont toujours doublés de ces amitiés-là.

Sage et philosophe, c’est deux; et ce qui le prouve, c’est que, toutes réserves faites sur ces petits ménages irréguliers, Favourite, Zéphine et Dahlia étaient des filles philosophes, et Fantine une fille sage.

Sage, dira-t-on? et Tholomyès? Salomon répondrait que l’amour fait partie de la sagesse. Nous nous bornons à dire que l’amour de Fantine était un premier amour, un amour unique, un amour fidèle.

Elle était la seule des quatre qui ne fût tutoyée que par un seul.

Fantine était un de ces êtres comme il en éclôt, pour ainsi dire, au fond du peuple. Sortie des plus insondables épaisseurs de l’ombre sociale, elle avait au front le signe de l’anonyme et de l’inconnu. Elle était née à Montreuil-sur-mer. De quels parents? Qui pourrait le dire? On ne lui avait jamais connu ni père ni mère. Elle se nommait Fantine. Pourquoi Fantine? On ne lui avait jamais connu d’autre nom. À l’époque de sa naissance, le Directoire existait encore. Point de nom de famille, elle n’avait pas de famille; point de nom de baptême, l’église n’était plus là. Elle s’appela comme il plut au premier passant qui la rencontra toute petite, allant pieds nus dans la rue. Elle reçut un nom comme elle recevait l’eau des nuées sur son front quand il pleuvait. On l’appela la petite Fantine. Personne n’en savait davantage. Cette créature humaine était venue dans la vie comme cela. À dix ans, Fantine quitta la ville et s’alla mettre en service chez des fermiers des environs. À quinze ans, elle vint à Paris “chercher fortune”. Fantine était belle et resta pure le plus longtemps qu’elle put. C’était une jolie blonde avec de belles dents. Elle avait de l’or et des perles pour dot, mais son or était sur sa tête et ses perles étaient dans sa bouche.

Elle travailla pour vivre; puis, toujours pour vivre, car le cœur a sa faim aussi, elle aima.

Elle aima Tholomyès.

Amourette pour lui, passion pour elle. Les rues du quartier latin, qu’emplit le fourmillement des étudiants et des grisettes, virent le commencement de ce songe. Fantine, dans ces dédales de la colline du Panthéon, où tant d’aventures se nouent et se dénouent, avait fui longtemps Tholomyès, mais de façon à le rencontrer toujours. Il y a une manière d’éviter qui ressemble à chercher. Bref, l’églogue eut lieu.

Blachevelle, Listolier et Fameuil formaient une sorte de groupe dont Tholomyès était la tête. C’était lui qui avait l’esprit.

Tholomyès était l’antique étudiant vieux; il était riche; il avait quatre mille francs de rente; quatre mille francs de rente, splendide scandale sur la montagne Sainte-Geneviève. Tholomyès était un viveur de trente ans, mal conservé. Il était ridé et édenté; et il ébauchait une calvitie dont il disait lui-même sans tristesse: *crâne à trente ans, genou à quarante*. Il digérait médiocrement, et il lui était venu un larmoiement à un œil. Mais à mesure que sa jeunesse s’éteignait, il allumait sa gaîté; il remplaçait ses dents par des lazzis, ses cheveux par la joie, sa santé par l’ironie, et son œil qui pleurait riait sans cesse. Il était délabré, mais tout en fleurs. Sa jeunesse, pliant bagage bien avant l’âge, battait en retraite en bon ordre, éclatait de rire, et l’on n’y voyait que du feu. Il avait eu une pièce refusée au

Vaudeville. Il faisait çà et là des vers quelconques. En outre, il doutait supérieurement de toute chose, grande force aux yeux des faibles. Donc, étant ironique et chauve, il était le chef. *Iron* est un mot anglais qui veut dire fer. Serait-ce de là que viendrait ironie?

Un jour Tholomyès prit à part les trois autres, fît un geste d'oracle, et leur dit:

— Il y a bientôt un an que Fantine, Dahlia, Zéphine et Favourite nous demandent de leur faire une surprise. Nous la leur avons promise solennellement. Elles nous en parlent toujours, à moi surtout. De même qu'à Naples les vieilles femmes crient à saint Janvier: *Faccia gialluta, fa o miracolo*. Face jaune, fais ton miracle! nos belles me disent sans cesse: «Tholomyès, quand accoucheras-tu de ta surprise?» En même temps nos parents nous écrivent. Scie des deux côtés. Le moment me semble venu. Causons.

Sur ce, Tholomyès baissa la voix, et articula mystérieusement quelque chose de si gai qu'un vaste et enthousiaste ricanement sortit des quatre bouches à la fois et que Blachevelle s'écria:

— Ça, c'est une idée!

Un estaminet plein de fumée se présenta, ils y entrèrent, et le reste de leur conférence se perdit dans l'ombre.

Le résultat de ces ténèbres fut une éblouissante partie de plaisir qui eut lieu le dimanche suivant, les quatre jeunes gens invitant les quatre jeunes filles.

Chapitre III

Quatre à quatre

Ce qu'était une partie de campagne d'étudiants et de grisettes, il y a quarante-cinq ans, on se le représente malaisément aujourd'hui. Paris n'a plus les mêmes environs; la figure de ce qu'on pourrait appeler la vie circumparisienne a complètement changé depuis un demi-siècle; où il y avait le coucou, il y a le wagon; où il y avait la patache, il y a le bateau à vapeur; on dit aujourd'hui Fécamp comme on disait Saint-Cloud. Le Paris de 1862 est une ville qui a la France pour banlieue.

Les quatre couples accomplirent consciencieusement toutes les folies champêtres possibles alors. On entrait dans les vacances, et c'était une chaude et claire journée d'été. La veille, Favourite, la seule qui sût écrire, avait écrit ceci à Tholomyès au nom des quatre: «C'est un bonne heure de sortir de bonheur.» C'est pourquoi ils se levèrent à cinq heures du matin. Puis ils allèrent à Saint-Cloud par le coche, regardèrent la cascade à sec, et s'écrièrent: «Cela doit être bien beau quand il y a de l'eau!» déjeunèrent à la *Tête-Noire*, où Castaing n'avait pas encore passé, se payèrent une partie de bagues au quinconce du grand bassin, montèrent à la lanterne de Diogène, jouèrent des macarons à la roulette du pont de Sèvres, cueillirent des bouquets à Puteaux, achetèrent des mirlitons à Neuilly, mangèrent partout des chaussons de pommes, furent parfaitement heureux.

Les jeunes filles bruissaient et bavardaient comme des fauvettes échappées. C'était un délire. Elles donnaient par moments de petites tapes aux jeunes gens. Ivresse matinale de la vie! Adorables années! L'aile des libellules frissonne. Oh! qui que vous soyez, vous souvenez-vous? Avez-vous marché dans les broussailles, en écartant les branches à cause de la tête charmante qui vient derrière vous? Avez-vous glissé en riant sur quelque talus mouillé par la pluie avec une femme aimée qui vous retient par la main et qui s'écrie: «Ah! mes brodequins tout neufs! dans quel état ils sont!»

Disons tout de suite que cette joyeuse contrariété, une ondée, manqua à cette compagnie de belle humeur, quoique Favourite eût dit en partant, avec un accent magistral et maternel: *Les limaces se promènent dans les sentiers. Signe de pluie, mes enfants.*

Toutes quatre étaient follement jolies. Un bon vieux poète classique, alors en renom, un bonhomme qui avait une Éléonore, M. le chevalier de Labouïsse, errant ce jour-là sous les marronniers de Saint-Cloud, les vit passer vers dix heures du matin; il s'écria: *Il y en a une de trop*, songeant aux Grâces. Favourite, l'amie de Blachevelle, celle de vingt-trois ans, la vieille, courait en avant sous les grandes branches vertes, sautait les fossés, enjambait éperdument les buissons, et présidait cette gaîté avec une verve de jeune faunesse. Zéphine et Dahlia, que le hasard avait faites belles de façon qu'elles se faisaient valoir en se rapprochant et se complétaient, ne se quittaient point, par instinct de coquetterie plus encore que par amitié, et, appuyées l'une à l'autre, prenaient des poses anglaises; les premiers *keepsakes* venaient de paraître, la mélancolie pointait pour les femmes, comme, plus tard, le byronisme pour les hommes, et les cheveux du sexe tendre commençaient à s'éplorer. Zéphine et Dahlia étaient coiffées en rouleaux. Listolier et Fameuil, engagés dans une discussion sur leurs professeurs, expliquaient à Fantine la différence qu'il y avait entre M. Delvincourt et M. Blondeau.

Blachevelle semblait avoir été créé expressément pour porter sur son bras le dimanche le châle-ternaux boiteux de Favourite.

Tholomyès suivait, dominant le groupe. Il était très gai, mais on sentait en lui le gouvernement; il y avait de la dictature dans sa jovialité; son ornement principal était un pantalon jambes-d'éléphant, en nankin, avec sous-pieds de tresse de cuivre; il avait un puissant rotin de deux cents francs à la main, et, comme il se permettait tout, une chose étrange appelée cigare, à la bouche. Rien n'étant sacré pour lui, il fumait.

— Ce Tholomyès est étonnant, disaient les autres avec vénération. Quels pantalons! quelle énergie!

Quant à Fantine, c'était la joie. Ses dents splendides avaient évidemment reçu de Dieu une fonction, le rire. Elle portait à sa main plus volontiers que sur sa tête son petit chapeau de paille cousue, aux longues brides blanches. Ses épais cheveux blonds, enclins à flotter et facilement dénoués et qu'il fallait rattacher sans cesse, semblaient faits pour la fuite de Galatée sous les saules. Ses lèvres roses babillaient avec enchantement. Les coins de sa bouche voluptueusement relevés, comme aux mascarons antiques d'Érigone, avaient l'air d'encourager les audaces; mais ses longs cils pleins d'ombre s'abaissaient discrètement sur ce brouhaha du bas du visage comme pour mettre le holà. Toute sa toilette avait on ne sait quoi de chantant et de flambant. Elle avait une robe de barège mauve, de petits souliers-cothurnes mordorés dont les rubans traçaient des X sur son fin bas blanc à jour, et cette espèce de spencer en mousseline, invention marseillaise, dont le nom, canezou, corruption du mot *quinze août* prononcé à la Canebière, signifie beau temps, chaleur et midi. Les trois autres, moins timides, nous l'avons dit, étaient décolletées tout net, ce qui, l'été, sous des chapeaux couverts de fleurs, a beaucoup de grâce et d'agacerie; mais, à côté de ces ajustements hardis, le canezou de la blonde Fantine, avec ses transparences, ses indiscrétions et ses réticences, cachant et montrant à la fois, semblait une trouvaille provocante de la décence, et la fameuse cour d'amour, présidée par la vicomtesse de Cette aux yeux vert de mer, eût peut-être donné le prix de la coquetterie à ce canezou qui concourait pour la chasteté. Le plus naïf est quelquefois le plus savant. Cela arrive.

Éclatante de face, délicate de profil, les yeux d'un bleu profond, les paupières grasses, les pieds cambrés et petits, les poignets et les chevilles admirablement emboîtés, la peau blanche laissant voir çà et là les arborescences azurées des veines, la joue puérile et franche, le cou robuste des Junons éginétiques, la nuque forte et souple, les épaules modelées comme par Coustou, ayant au centre une voluptueuse fossette visible à travers la mousseline; une gaîté glacée de rêverie; sculpturale et exquise; telle était Fantine; et l'on devinait sous ces chiffons une statue, et dans cette statue une âme.

Fantine était belle, sans trop le savoir. Les rares songeurs, prêtres mystérieux du beau, qui confrontent silencieusement toute chose à la perfection, eussent entrevu en cette petite ouvrière, à travers la transparence de la grâce parisienne, l'antique euphonie sacrée. Cette fille de l'ombre avait de la race. Elle était belle sous les deux espèces, qui sont le style et le rythme. Le style est la forme de l'idéal; le rythme en est le mouvement.

Nous avons dit que Fantine était la joie, Fantine était aussi la pudeur.

Pour un observateur qui l'eût étudiée attentivement, ce qui se dégageait d'elle, à travers toute cette ivresse de l'âge, de la saison et de l'amourette, c'était une invincible expression de retenue et de modestie. Elle restait un peu étonnée. Ce chaste étonnement-là est la nuance qui sépare Psyché de Vénus. Fantine avait les longs doigts blancs et fins de la vestale qui remue les cendres du feu sacré avec une épingle d'or. Quoiqu'elle n'eût rien refusé, on ne le verra que trop, à Tholomyès, son visage, au repos, était souverainement virginal; une sorte de dignité sérieuse et presque austère l’envahissait soudainement à de certaines heures, et rien n’était singulier et troublant comme de voir la gaîté s’y éteindre si vite et le recueillement y succéder sans transition à l’épanouissement. Cette gravité subite, parfois sévèrement accentuée, ressemblait au dédain d’une déesse. Son front, son nez et son menton offraient cet équilibre de ligne, très distinct de l’équilibre de proportion, et d’où résulte l’harmonie du visage; dans l’intervalle si caractéristique qui sépare la base du nez de la lèvre supérieure, elle avait ce pli imperceptible et charmant, signe mystérieux de la chasteté qui rendit Barberousse amoureux d’une Diane trouvée dans les fouilles d’Icône.

L’amour est une faute; soit. Fantine était l’innocence surnageant sur la faute.

Chapitre IV

Tholomyès est si joyeux qu'il chante une chanson espagnole

Cette journée-là était d'un bout à l'autre faite d'aurore. Toute la nature semblait avoir congé, et rire. Les parterres de Saint-Cloud embaumaient; le souffle de la Seine remuait vaguement les feuilles; les branches gesticulaient dans le vent; les abeilles mettaient les jasmins au pillage; toute une bohème de papillons s'ébattait dans les achillées, les trèfles et les folles avoines; il y avait dans l'auguste parc du roi de France un tas de vagabonds, les oiseaux.

Les quatre joyeux couples, mêlés au soleil, aux champs, aux fleurs, aux arbres, resplendissaient.

Et, dans cette communauté de paradis, parlant, chantant, courant, dansant, chassant aux papillons, cueillant des liserons, mouillant leurs bas à jour roses dans les hautes herbes, fraîches, folles, point méchantes, toutes recevaient un peu çà et là les baisers de tous, excepté Fantine, enfermée dans sa vague résistance rêveuse et farouche, et qui aimait.

— Toi, lui disait Favourite, tu as toujours l'air chose.

Ce sont là les joies. Ces passages de couples heureux sont un appel profond à la vie et à la nature, et font sortir de tout la caresse et la lumière. Il y avait une fois une fée qui fit les prairies et les arbres exprès pour les amoureux. De là cette éternelle école buissonnière des amants qui recommence sans cesse et qui durera tant qu'il y aura des buissons et des écoliers. De là la popularité du printemps parmi les penseurs. Le patricien et le gagne-petit, le duc et pair et le robin, les gens de la cour et les gens de la ville, comme on parlait autrefois, tous sont sujets de cette fée. On rit, on se cherche, il y a dans l'air une clarté d'apothéose, quelle transfiguration que d'aimer! Les clercs de notaire sont des dieux. Et les petits cris, les poursuites dans l'herbe, les tailles prises au vol, ces jargons qui sont des mélodies, ces adorations qui éclatent dans la façon de dire une syllabe, ces cerises arrachées d'une bouche à l'autre, tout cela flamboie et passe dans des gloires célestes. Les belles filles font un doux gaspillage d'elles-mêmes. On croit que cela ne finira jamais. Les philosophes, les poètes, les peintres regardent ces extases et ne savent qu'en faire, tant cela les éblouit. Le départ pour Cythère! s'écrie Watteau; Lancret, le peintre de la roture, contemple ses bourgeois envolés dans le bleu; Diderot tend les bras à toutes ces amourettes, et d'Urfé y mêle des druides.

Après le déjeuner les quatre couples étaient allés voir, dans ce qu'on appelait alors le carré du roi, une plante nouvellement arrivée de l'Inde, dont le nom nous échappe en ce moment, et qui à cette époque attirait tout Paris à Saint-Cloud; c'était un bizarre et charmant arbrisseau haut sur tige, dont les innombrables branches fines comme des fils, ébouriffées, sans feuilles, étaient couvertes d'un million de petites rosettes blanches; ce qui faisait que l'arbuste avait l'air d'une chevelure pouilleuse de fleurs. Il y avait toujours foule à l'admirer.

L'arbuste vu, Tholomyès s'était écrié: «J'offre des ânes!» et, prix fait avec un ânier, ils étaient revenus par Vanves et Issy. À Issy, incident. Le parc, Bien National possédé à cette époque par le munitionnaire Bourguin, était d'aventure tout grand ouvert. Ils avaient franchi la grille, visité l'anachorète mannequin dans sa grotte, essayé les petits effets mystérieux du fameux cabinet des miroirs, lascif traquenard digne d'un satyre devenu millionnaire ou de Turcaret métamorphosé en Priape. Ils avaient robustement secoué le grand filet balançoire attaché aux deux châtaigniers célébrés par l'abbé de Bernis. Tout en y balançant ces belles l'une après l'autre, ce qui faisait, parmi les rires universels, des plis de jupe envolée où Greuze eût trouvé son compte, le toulousain Tholomyès, quelque peu espagnol, Toulouse est cousine de Tolosa, chantait, sur une mélopée mélancolique, la vieille chanson *gallega* probablement inspirée par quelque belle fille lancée à toute volée sur une corde entre deux arbres:

Soy de Badajoz.
Amor me llama.
Toda mi alma
Es en mi ojos
Porque enseñas
À tus piernas.

Fantine seule refusa de se balancer.

— Je n'aime pas qu'on ait du genre comme ça, murmura assez aigrement Favourite.

Les ânes quittés, joie nouvelle; on passa la Seine en bateau, et de Passy, à pied, ils gagnèrent la barrière de l'Étoile. Ils étaient, on s'en souvient, debout depuis cinq heures du matin; mais, bah! *il n'y a pas de lassitude le dimanche*, disait Favourite; *le dimanche, la fatigue ne travaille pas*. Vers trois heures les quatre couples, effarés de bonheur, dégringolaient aux montagnes russes, édifice singulier qui occupait alors les hauteurs Beaujon et dont on apercevait la ligne serpentante au-dessus des arbres des Champs-Élysées.

De temps en temps Favourite s’écriait:

— Et la surprise? je demande la surprise.

— Patience, répondait Tholomyès.

Chapitre V

Chez Bombarda

Les montagnes russes épuisées, on avait songé au dîner; et le radieux huitain, enfin un peu las, s'était échoué au cabaret Bombarda, succursale qu'avait établie aux Champs-Élysées ce fameux restaurateur Bombarda, dont on voyait alors l'enseigne rue de Rivoli à côté du passage Delorme.

Une chambre grande, mais laide, avec alcôve et lit au fond (vu la plénitude du cabaret le dimanche, il avait fallu accepter ce gîte); deux fenêtres d'où l'on pouvait contempler, à travers les ormes, le quai et la rivière; un magnifique rayon d'août effleurant les fenêtres; deux tables; sur l'une une triomphante montagne de bouquets mêlés à des chapeaux d'hommes et de femmes; à l'autre les quatre couples attablés autour d'un joyeux encombrement de plats, d'assiettes, de verres et de bouteilles; des cruchons de bière mêlés à des flacons de vin; peu d'ordre sur la table, quelque désordre dessous;

Ils faisaient sous la table

Un bruit, un trique-trac de pieds épouvantable

dit Molière.

Voilà où en était vers quatre heures et demie du soir la bergerade commencée à cinq heures du matin. Le soleil déclinait, l'appétit s'éteignait.

Les Champs-Élysées, pleins de soleil et de foule, n'étaient que lumière et poussière, deux choses dont se compose la gloire. Les chevaux de Marly, ces marbres hennissants, se cabraient dans un nuage d'or. Les carrosses allaient et venaient. Un escadron de magnifiques gardes du corps, clairon en tête, descendait l'avenue de Neuilly; le drapeau blanc, vaguement rose au soleil couchant, flottait sur le dôme des Tuileries. La place de la Concorde, redevenue alors place Louis XV, regorgeait de promeneurs contents. Beaucoup portaient la fleur de lys d'argent suspendue au ruban blanc moiré qui, en 1817, n'avait pas encore tout à fait disparu des boutonnières. Çà et là au milieu des passants faisant cercle et applaudissant, des rondes de petites filles jetaient au vent une bourrée bourbonienne alors célèbre, destinée à foudroyer les Cent-Jours, et qui avait pour ritournelle:

Rendez-nous notre père de Gand,

Rendez-nous notre père.

Des tas de faubouriens endimanchés, parfois même fleurdelysés comme les bourgeois, épars dans le grand carré et dans le carré Marigny, jouaient aux bagues et tournaient sur les chevaux de bois; d'autres buvaient; quelques-uns, apprentis imprimeurs, avaient des bonnets de papier; on entendait leurs rires. Tout était radieux. C'était un temps de paix incontestable et de profonde sécurité royaliste; c'était l'époque où un rapport intime et spécial du préfet de police Anglès au roi sur les faubourgs de Paris se terminait par ces lignes: «Tout bien considéré, sire, il n'y a rien à craindre de ces gens-là. Ils sont insouciants et indolents comme des chats. Le bas peuple des provinces est remuant, celui de Paris ne l'est pas. Ce sont tous petits hommes. Sire, il en faudrait deux bout à bout pour faire un de vos grenadiers. Il n'y a point de crainte du côté de la populace de la capitale. Il est remarquable que la taille a encore décru dans cette population depuis cinquante ans; et le peuple des faubourgs de Paris est plus petit qu'avant la révolution. Il n'est point dangereux. En somme, c'est de la canaille bonne.»

Qu'un chat puisse se changer en lion, les préfets de police ne le croient pas possible; cela est pourtant, et c'est là le miracle du peuple de Paris. Le chat d'ailleurs, si méprisé du comte Anglès, avait l'estime des républiques antiques; il incarnait à leurs yeux la liberté, et, comme pour servir de pendant à la Minerve aptère du Pirée, il y avait sur la place publique de Corinthe le colosse de bronze d'un chat. La police naïve de la restauration voyait trop «en beau» le peuple de Paris. Ce n'est point, autant qu'on le croit, de la «canaille bonne». Le Parisien est au Français ce que l'Athénien était au Grec; personne ne dort mieux que lui, personne n'est plus franchement frivole et paresseux que lui, personne mieux que lui n'a l'air d'oublier; qu'on ne s'y fie pas pourtant; il est propre à toute sorte de nonchalance, mais, quand il y a de la gloire au bout, il est admirable à toute espèce de furie. Donnez-lui une pique, il fera le 10 août; donnez-lui un fusil, vous aurez Austerlitz. Il est le point d'appui de Napoléon et la ressource de Danton. S'agit-il de la patrie? il s'enrôle; s'agit-il de la liberté? il dépave. Gare! ses cheveux pleins de colère sont épiques; sa blouse se drape en chlamyde. Prenez garde. De la première rue Greneta venue, il fera des fourches caudines. Si l’heure sonne, ce faubourien va grandir, ce petit homme va se lever, et il regardera d’une façon terrible, et son souffle deviendra tempête, et il sortira de cette pauvre poitrine grêle assez de vent pour déranger les plis des Alpes. C’est grâce au faubourien de Paris que la révolution, mêlée aux armées, conquiert l’Europe. Il chante, c’est sa joie. Proportionnez sa chanson à sa nature, et vous verrez! Tant qu’il n’a pour refrain que la Carmagnole, il ne renverse que Louis XVI; faites-lui chanter la Marseillaise, il délivrera le monde.

Cette note écrite en marge du rapport Anglès, nous revenons à nos quatre couples. Le dîner, comme nous l’avons dit, s’achevait.

Chapitre VI

Chapitre où l’on s’adore

Propos de table et propos d’amour; les uns sont aussi insaisissables que les autres; les propos d’amour sont des nuées, les propos de table sont des fumées.

Fameuil et Dahlia fredonnaient; Tholomyès buvait; Zéphine riait, Fantine souriait. Listolier soufflait dans une trompette de bois achetée à Saint-Cloud. Favourite regardait tendrement Blachevelle et disait:

— Blachevelle, je t’adore.

Ceci amena une question de Blachevelle:

— Qu’est-ce que tu ferais, Favourite, si je cessais de t’aimer?

— Moi! s’écria Favourite. Ah! ne dis pas cela, même pour rire! Si tu cessais de m’aimer, je te sauterais après, je te grifferais, je te gratignerais, je te jetterais de l’eau, je te ferais arrêter.

Blachevelle sourit avec la fatuité voluptueuse d’un homme chatouillé à l’amour-propre. Favourite reprit:

— Oui, je crierais à la garde! Ah! je me gênerais par exemple! Canaille!

Blachevelle, extasié, se renversa sur sa chaise et ferma orgueilleusement les deux yeux.

Dahlia, tout en mangeant, dit bas à Favourite dans le brouhaha:

— Tu l’idolâtres donc bien, ton Blachevelle?

— Moi, je le déteste, répondit Favourite du même ton en ressaisissant sa fourchette. Il est avare. J’aime le petit d’en face de chez moi. Il est très bien, ce jeune homme-là, le connais-tu? On voit qu’il a le genre d’être acteur. J’aime les acteurs. Sitôt qu’il rentre, sa mère dit: «Ah! mon Dieu! ma tranquillité est perdue. Le voilà qui va crier. Mais, mon ami, tu me casses la tête!» Parce qu’il va dans la maison, dans des greniers à rats, dans des trous noirs, si haut qu’il peut monter, — et chanter, et déclamer, est-ce que je sais, moi? qu’on l’entend d’en bas! Il gagne déjà vingt sous par jour chez un avoué à écrire de la chicane. Il est fils d’un ancien chantre de Saint-Jacques-du-Haut-Pas. Ah! il est très bien. Il m’idolâtre tant qu’un jour qu’il me voyait faire de la pâte pour des crêpes, il m’a dit: *Mamselle, faites des beignets de vos gants et je les mangerai*. Il n’y a que les artistes pour dire des choses comme ça. Ah! il est très bien. Je suis en train d’être insensée de ce petit-là. C’est égal, je dis à Blachevelle que je l’adore. Comme je mens! Hein? comme je mens!

Favourite fit une pause, et continua:

— Dahlia, vois-tu, je suis triste. Il n’a fait que pleuvoir tout l’été, le vent m’agace, le vent ne décolère pas, Blachevelle est très pingre, c’est à peine s’il y a des petits pois au marché, on ne sait que manger, j’ai le spleen, comme disent les Anglais, le beurre est si cher! et puis, vois, c’est une horreur, nous dînons dans un endroit où il y a un lit, ça me dégoûte de la vie.

Chapitre VII

Sagesse de Tholomyès

Cependant, tandis que quelques-uns chantaient, les autres causaient tumultueusement, et tous ensemble; ce n'était plus que du bruit. Tholomyès intervint:

— Ne parlons point au hasard ni trop vite, s'écria-t-il. Méditons si nous voulons être éblouissants. Trop d'improvisation vide bêtement l'esprit. Bière qui coule n'amasse point de mousse. Messieurs, pas de hâte. Mêlons la majesté à la ripaille; mangeons avec recueillement; festinons lentement. Ne nous pressons pas. Voyez le printemps; s'il se dépêche, il est flambé, c'est-à-dire gelé. L'excès de zèle perd les pêchers et les abricotiers. L'excès de zèle tue la grâce et la joie des bons dîners. Pas de zèle, messieurs! Grimod de la Reynière est de l'avis de Talleyrand.

Une sourde rébellion gronda dans le groupe.

— Tholomyès, laisse-nous tranquilles, dit Blachevelle.

— À bas le tyran! dit Fameuil.

— Bombarda, Bombance et Bamboche! cria Listolier.

— Le dimanche existe, reprit Fameuil.

— Nous sommes sobres, ajouta Listolier.

— Tholomyès, fit Blachevelle, contemple mon calme.

— Tu en es le marquis, répondit Tholomyès.

Ce médiocre jeu de mots fit l'effet d'une pierre dans une mare. Le marquis de Montcalm était un royaliste alors célèbre. Toutes les grenouilles se turent.

— Amis, s'écria Tholomyès, de l'accent d'un homme qui ressaisit l'empire, remettez-vous. Il ne faut pas que trop de stupeur accueille ce calembour tombé du ciel. Tout ce qui tombe de la sorte n'est pas nécessairement digne d'enthousiasme et de respect. Le calembour est la fiente de l'esprit qui vole. Le lazzi tombe n'importe où; et l'esprit, après la ponte d'une bêtise, s'enfonce dans l'azur. Une tache blanchâtre qui s'aplatit sur le rocher n'empêche pas le condor de planer. Loin de moi l'insulte au calembour! Je l'honore dans la proportion de ses mérites; rien de plus. Tout ce qu'il y a de plus auguste, de plus sublime et de plus charmant dans l'humanité, et peut-être hors de l'humanité, a fait des jeux de mots. Jésus-

Christ a fait un calembour sur saint Pierre, Moïse sur Isaac, Eschyle sur Polynice, Cléopâtre sur Octave. Et notez que ce calembour de Cléopâtre a précédé la bataille d'Actium, et que, sans lui, personne ne se souviendrait de la ville de Toryne, nom grec qui signifie cuiller à pot. Cela concédé, je reviens à mon exhortation. Mes frères, je le répète, pas de zèle, pas de tohu-bohu, pas d'excès, même en pointes, gaîtés, liesses et jeux de mots. Écoutez-moi, j'ai la prudence d'Amphiaraüs et la calvitie de César. Il faut une limite, même aux rébus. *Est modus in rebus*. Il faut une limite, même aux dîners. Vous aimez les chaussons aux pommes, mesdames, n'en abusez pas. Il faut, même en chaussons, du bon sens et de l'art. La gloutonnerie châtie le glouton. Gula punit Gulax. L'indigestion est chargée par le bon Dieu de faire de la morale aux estomacs. Et, retenez ceci: chacune de nos passions, même l'amour, a un estomac qu'il ne faut pas trop remplir. En toute chose il faut écrire à temps le mot *finis*, il faut se contenir, quand cela devient urgent, tirer le verrou sur son appétit, mettre au violon sa fantaisie et se mener soi-même au poste. Le sage est celui qui sait à un moment donné opérer sa propre arrestation. Ayez quelque confiance en moi. Parce que j'ai fait un peu mon droit, à ce que me disent mes examens, parce que je sais la différence qu'il y a entre la question mue et la question pendante, parce que j'ai soutenu une thèse en latin sur la manière dont on donnait la torture à Rome au temps où Munatius Demens était questeur du Parricide, parce que je vais être docteur, à ce qu'il paraît, il ne s'ensuit pas de toute nécessité que je sois un imbécile. Je vous recommande la modération dans vos désirs. Vrai comme je m'appelle Félix Tholomyès, je parle bien. Heureux celui qui, lorsque l'heure a sonné, prend un parti héroïque, et abdique comme Sylla, ou Origène!

Favourite écoutait avec une attention profonde.

— Félix! dit-elle, quel joli mot! j'aime ce nom-là. C'est en latin. Ça veut dire Prosper.

Tholomyès poursuivit:

— Quirites, gentlemen, Caballeros, mes amis! voulez-vous ne sentir aucun aiguillon et vous passer de lit nuptial et braver l'amour? Rien de plus simple. Voici la recette: la limonade, l'exercice outré, le travail forcé, éreintez-vous, traînez des blocs, ne dormez pas, veillez, gorgez-vous de boissons nitreuses et de tisanes de nymphaeas, savourez des émulsions de pavots et d'agnuscastus, assaisonnez-moi cela d'une diète sévère, crevez de faim, et joignez-y les bains froids, les ceintures d'herbes, l'application d’une plaque de plomb, les lotions avec la liqueur de Saturne et les fomentations avec l’oxycrat.

— J’aime mieux une femme, dit Listolier.

— La femme! reprit Tholomyès, méfiez-vous-en. Malheur à celui qui se livre au cœur changeant de la femme! La femme est perfide et tortueuse. Elle déteste le serpent par jalousie de métier. Le serpent, c’est la boutique en face.

— Tholomyès, cria Blachevelle, tu es ivre!

— Pardieu! dit Tholomyès.

— Alors sois gai, reprit Blachevelle.

Et, remplissant son verre, il se leva:

— Gloire au vin! *Nunc te, Bacche, canam*! Pardon, mesdemoiselles, c’est de l’espagnol. Et la preuve, señoras, la voici: tel peuple, telle futaille. L’arrobe de Castille contient seize litres, le cantaro d’Alicante douze, l’almude des Canaries vingt-cinq, le cuartin des Baléares vingt-six, la botte du czar Pierre trente. Vive ce czar qui était grand, et vive sa botte qui était plus grande encore! Mesdames, un conseil d’ami: trompez-vous de voisin, si bon vous semble. Le propre de l’amour, c’est d’errer. L’amourette n’est pas faite pour s’accroupir et s’abrutir comme une servante anglaise qui a le calus du scrobage aux genoux. Elle n’est pas faite pour cela, elle erre gaîment, la douce amourette! On a dit: l’erreur est humaine; moi je dis: l’erreur est amoureuse. Mesdames, je vous idolâtre toutes. Ô Zéphine, ô Joséphine, figure plus que chiffonnée, vous seriez charmante, si vous n’étiez de travers. Vous avez l’air d’un joli visage sur lequel, par mégarde, on s’est assis. Quant à Favourite, ô nymphes et muses! un jour que Blachevelle passait le ruisseau de la rue Guérin-Boisseau, il vit une belle fille aux bas blancs et bien tirés qui montrait ses jambes. Ce prologue lui plut, et Blachevelle aima. Celle qu’il aima était Favourite. Ô Favourite, tu as des lèvres ioniennes. Il y avait un peintre grec, appelé Euphorion, qu’on avait surnommé le peintre des lèvres. Ce Grec seul eût été digne de peindre ta bouche! Écoute! avant toi, il n’y avait pas de créature digne de ce nom. Tu es faite pour recevoir la pomme comme Vénus ou pour la manger comme Ève. La beauté commence à toi. Je viens de parler d’Ève, c’est toi qui l’as créée. Tu mérites le brevet d’invention de la jolie femme. Ô Favourite, je cesse de vous tutoyer, parce que je passe de la poésie à la prose. Vous parliez de mon nom tout à l’heure. Cela m’a attendri; mais, qui que nous soyons, méfions-nous des noms. Ils peuvent se tromper. Je me nomme Félix et ne suis pas heureux. Les mots sont des menteurs. N’acceptons pas aveuglément les indications qu’ils nous donnent. Ce serait une erreur d’écrire à Liège pour avoir des bouchons et à Pau pour avoir des gants. Miss Dahlia, à votre place, je m’appellerais Rosa. Il faut que la fleur sente bon et que la femme ait de l’esprit. Je ne dis rien de Fantine, c’est une songeuse, une rêveuse, une pensive, une sensitive; c’est un fantôme ayant la forme d’une nymphe et la pudeur d’une nonne, qui se fourvoie dans la vie de grisette, mais qui se réfugie dans les illusions, et qui chante, et qui prie, et qui regarde l’azur sans trop savoir ce qu’elle voit ni ce qu’elle fait, et qui, les yeux au ciel, erre dans un jardin où il y a plus d’oiseaux qu’il n’en existe! Ô Fantine, sache ceci: moi Tholomyès, je suis une illusion; mais elle ne m’entend même pas, la blonde fille des chimères! Du reste, tout en elle est fraîcheur, suavité, jeunesse, douce clarté matinale. Ô Fantine, fille digne de vous appeler marguerite ou perle, vous êtes une femme du plus bel orient. Mesdames, un deuxième conseil: ne vous mariez point; le mariage est une greffe; cela prend bien ou mal; fuyez ce risque. Mais, bah! qu’est-ce que je chante là? Je perds mes paroles. Les filles sont incurables sur l’épousaille; et tout ce que nous pouvons dire, nous autres sages, n’empêchera point les giletières et les piqueuses de bottines de rêver des maris enrichis de diamants. Enfin, soit; mais, belles, retenez ceci: vous mangez trop de sucre. Vous n’avez qu’un tort, ô femmes, c’est de grignoter du sucre. Ô sexe rongeur, tes jolies petites dents blanches adorent le sucre. Or, écoutez bien, le sucre est un sel. Tout sel est desséchant. Le sucre est le plus desséchant de tous les sels. Il pompe à travers les veines les liquides du sang; de là la coagulation, puis la solidification du sang; de là les tubercules dans le poumon; de là la mort. Et c’est pourquoi le diabète confine à la phthisie. Donc ne croquez pas de sucre, et vous vivrez! Je me tourne vers les hommes. Messieurs, faites des conquêtes. Pillez-vous les uns aux autres sans remords vos bien-aimées. Chassez-croisez. En amour, il n’y a pas d’amis. Partout où il y a une jolie femme l’hostilité est ouverte. Pas de quartier, guerre à outrance! Une jolie femme est un casus belli; une jolie femme est un flagrant délit. Toutes les invasions de l’histoire sont déterminées par des cotillons. La femme est le droit de l’homme. Romulus a enlevé les Sabines, Guillaume a enlevé les Saxonnes, César a enlevé les Romaines. L’homme qui n’est pas aimé plane comme un vautour sur les amantes d’autrui; et quant à moi, à tous ces infortunés qui sont veufs, je jette la proclamation sublime de Bonaparte à l'armée d'Italie: «Soldats, vous manquez de tout. L'ennemi en a.»

Tholomyès s'interrompit.

— Souffle, Tholomyès, dit Blachevelle.

En même temps, Blachevelle, appuyé de Listolier et de Fameuil, entonna sur un air de complainte une de ces chansons d'atelier composées des premiers mots venus, rimées richement et pas du tout, vides de sens comme le geste de l'arbre et le bruit du vent, qui naissent de la vapeur des pipes et se dissipent et s'envolent avec elle. Voici par quel couplet le groupe donna la réplique à la harangue de Tholomyès:

Les pères dindons donnèrent de l'argent à un agent pour que mons Clermont-Tonnerre fût fait pape à la Saint-Jean; Mais Clermont ne put pas être fait pape, n'étant pas prêtre.

Alors leur agent rageant leur rapporta leur argent.

Ceci n'était pas fait pour calmer l'improvisation de Tholomyès; il vida son verre, le remplit, et recommença.

— À bas la sagesse! oubliez tout ce que j'ai dit. Ne soyons ni prudes, ni prudents, ni prud'hommes. Je porte un toast à l'allégresse; soyons allègres! Complétons notre cours de droit par la folie et la nourriture. Indigestion et digeste. Que Justinien soit le mâle et que Ripaille soit la femelle! Joie dans les profondeurs! Vis, ô création! Le monde est un gros diamant! Je suis heureux. Les oiseaux sont étonnants. Quelle fête partout! Le rossignol est un Elleviou gratis. Été, je te salue. Ô Luxembourg, ô Géorgiques de la rue Madame et de l'allée de l'Observatoire! Ô pioupious rêveurs! ô toutes ces bonnes charmantes qui, tout en gardant des enfants, s'amusent à en ébaucher! Les pampas de l'Amérique me plairaient, si je n'avais les arcades de l'Odéon. Mon âme s'envole dans les forêts vierges et dans les savanes. Tout est beau. Les mouches bourdonnent dans les rayons. Le soleil a éternué le colibri. Embrasse-moi, Fantine!

Il se trompa, et embrassa Favourite.

Chapitre VIII

Mort d’un cheval

— On dîne mieux chez Edon que chez Bombarda, s’écria Zéphine.

— Je préfère Bombarda à Edon, déclara Blachevelle. Il a plus de luxe. C’est plus asiatique. Voyez la salle d’en bas. Il y a des glaces sur les murs.

— J’en aime mieux dans mon assiette, dit Favourite.

Blachevelle insista:

— Regardez les couteaux. Les manches sont en argent chez Bombarda, et en os chez Edon. Or, l’argent est plus précieux que l’os.

— Excepté pour ceux qui ont un menton d’argent, observa Tholomyès.

Il regardait en cet instant-là le dôme des Invalides, visible des fenêtres de Bombarda.

Il y eut une pause.

— Tholomyès, cria Fameuil, tout à l’heure, Listolier et moi, nous avions une discussion.

— Une discussion est bonne, répondit Tholomyès, une querelle vaut mieux.

— Nous disputions philosophie.

— Soit.

— Lequel préfères-tu de Descartes ou de Spinosa?

— Désaugiers, dit Tholomyès.

Cet arrêt rendu, il but et reprit:

— Je consens à vivre. Tout n’est pas fini sur la terre, puisqu’on peut encore déraisonner. J’en rends grâces aux dieux immortels. On ment, mais on rit. On affirme, mais on doute. L’inattendu jaillit du syllogisme. C’est beau. Il est encore ici-bas des humains qui savent joyeusement ouvrir et fermer la boîte à surprises du paradoxe. Ceci, mesdames, que vous buvez d’un air tranquille, est du vin de Madère, sachez-le, du cru de Coural das Freiras qui est à trois cent dix-sept toises au-dessus du niveau de la mer! Attention en buvant! trois cent dix-sept toises! et monsieur Bombarda, le magnifique restaurateur, vous donne ces trois cent dix-sept toises pour quatre francs cinquante centimes!

Fameuil interrompit de nouveau:

— Tholomyès, tes opinions font loi. Quel est ton auteur favori?

— Ber....

— Quin?

— Non. Choux.

Et Tholomyès poursuivit:

— Honneur à Bombarda! il égalerait Munophis d’Elephanta s’il pouvait me cueillir une almée, et Thygélion de Chéronée s’il pouvait m’apporter une hétaïre! car, ô mesdames, il y avait des Bombarda en Grèce et en Égypte. C’est Apulée qui nous l’apprend. Hélas! toujours les mêmes choses et rien de nouveau. Plus rien d’inédit dans la création du créateur! *Nil sub sole novum*, dit Salomon; *amor omnibus idem*, dit Virgile; et Carabine monte avec Carabin dans la galiote de Saint-Cloud, comme Aspasie s’embarquait avec Périclès sur la flotte de Samos. Un dernier mot. Savez-vous ce que c’était qu’Aspasie, mesdames? Quoiqu’elle vécût dans un temps où les femmes n’avaient pas encore d’âme, c’était une âme; une âme d’une nuance rose et pourpre, plus embrasée que le feu, plus franche que l’aurore. Aspasie était une créature en qui se touchaient les deux extrêmes de la femme; c’était la prostituée déesse. Socrate, plus Manon Lescaut. Aspasie fut créée pour le cas où il faudrait une catin à Prométhée.

Tholomyès, lancé, se serait difficilement arrêté, si un cheval ne se fût abattu sur le quai en cet instant-là même. Du choc, la charrette et l’orateur restèrent court. C’était une jument beauceronne, vieille et maigre et digne de l’équarrisseur, qui traînait une charrette fort lourde. Parvenue devant Bombarda, la bête, épuisée et accablée, avait refusé d’aller plus loin. Cet incident avait fait de la foule. À peine le charretier, jurant et indigné, avait-il eu le temps de prononcer avec l’énergie convenable le mot sacramentel: *mâtin*! appuyé d’un implacable coup de fouet, que la haridelle était tombée pour ne plus se relever. Au brouhaha des passants, les gais auditeurs de Tholomyès tournèrent la tête, et Tholomyès en profita pour clore son allocution par cette strophe mélancolique:

Elle était de ce monde où coucous et carrosses
Ont le même destin,
Et, rosse, elle a vécu ce que vivent les rosses,
L’espace d’un: mâtin!

— Pauvre cheval, soupira Fantine.

Et Dahlia s’écria:

— Voilà Fantine qui va se mettre à plaindre les chevaux! Peut-on être fichue bête comme ça!

En ce moment, Favourite, croisant les bras et renversant la tête en arrière, regarda résolûment Tholomyès et dit:

— Ah çà! et la surprise?

— Justement. L’instant est arrivé, répondit Tholomyès. Messieurs, l’heure de la surprise a sonné. Mesdames, attendez-nous un moment.

— Cela commence par un baiser, dit Blachevelle.

— Sur le front, ajouta Tholomyès.

Chacun déposa gravement un baiser sur le front de sa maîtresse; puis ils se dirigèrent vers la porte tous les quatre à la file, en mettant leur doigt sur la bouche.

Favourite battit des mains à leur sortie.

— C’est déjà amusant, dit-elle.

— Ne soyez pas trop longtemps, murmura Fantine. Nous vous attendons.

Chapitre IX

Fin joyeuse de la joie

Les jeunes filles, restées seules, s'accoudèrent deux à deux sur l'appui des fenêtres, jasant, penchant leur tête et se parlant d'une croisée à l'autre.

Elles virent les jeunes gens sortir du cabaret Bombarda bras dessus bras dessous; ils se retournèrent, leur firent des signes en riant, et disparurent dans cette poudreuse cohue du dimanche qui envahit hebdomadairement les Champs-Élysées.

— Ne soyez pas longtemps! cria Fantine.

— Que vont-ils nous rapporter? dit Zéphine.

— Pour sûr ce sera joli, dit Dahlia.

— Moi, reprit Favourite, je veux que ce soit en or.

Elles furent bientôt distraites par le mouvement du bord de l'eau qu'elles distinguaient dans les branches des grands arbres et qui les divertissait fort. C'était l'heure du départ des malles-poste et des diligences. Presque toutes les messageries du midi et de l'ouest passaient alors par les Champs-Élysées. La plupart suivaient le quai et sortaient par la barrière de Passy. De minute en minute, quelque grosse voiture peinte en jaune et en noir, pesamment chargée, bruyamment attelée, difforme à force de malles, de bâches et de valises, pleine de têtes tout de suite disparues, broyant la chaussée, changeant tous les pavés en briquets, se ruait à travers la foule avec toutes les étincelles d'une forge, de la poussière pour fumée, et un air de furie. Ce vacarme réjouissait les jeunes filles. Favourite s'exclamait:

— Quel tapage! on dirait des tas de chaînes qui s'envolent.

Il arriva une fois qu'une de ces voitures qu'on distinguait difficilement dans l'épaisseur des ormes, s'arrêta un moment, puis repartit au galop. Cela étonna Fantine.

— C'est particulier! dit-elle. Je croyais que la diligence ne s'arrêtait jamais. Favourite haussa les épaules.

— Cette Fantine est surprenante. Je viens la voir par curiosité. Elle s'éblouit des choses les plus simples. Une supposition; je suis un voyageur, je dis à la diligence: je vais en avant, vous me prendrez sur le quai en passant. La diligence passe, me voit, s'arrête, et me prend. Cela se fait tous les jours. Tu ne connais pas la vie, ma chère.

Un certain temps s’écoula ainsi. Tout à coup Favourite eut le mouvement de quelqu’un qui se réveille.

— Eh bien, fit-elle, et la surprise?

— À propos, oui, reprit Dahlia, la fameuse surprise?

— Ils sont bien longtemps! dit Fantine.

Comme Fantine achevait ce soupir, le garçon qui avait servi le dîner entra. Il tenait à la main quelque chose qui ressemblait à une lettre.

— Qu’est-ce que cela? demanda Favourite.

Le garçon répondit:

— C’est un papier que ces messieurs ont laissé pour ces dames.

— Pourquoi ne l’avoir pas apporté tout de suite?

— Parce que ces messieurs, reprit le garçon, ont commandé de ne le remettre à ces dames qu’au bout d’une heure.

Favourite arracha le papier des mains du garçon. C’était une lettre en effet.

— Tiens! dit-elle. Il n’y a pas d’adresse. Mais voici ce qui est écrit dessus:

Ceci est la surprise.

Elle décacheta vivement la lettre, l’ouvrit et lut (elle savait lire):

«Ô nos amantes!

«Sachez que nous avons des parents. Des parents, vous ne connaissez pas beaucoup ça. Ça s’appelle des pères et mères dans le code civil, puéril et honnête. Or, ces parents gémissent, ces vieillards nous réclament, ces bons hommes et ces bonnes femmes nous appellent enfants prodigues, ils souhaitent nos retours, et nous offrent de tuer des veaux. Nous leur obéissons, étant vertueux. À l’heure où vous lirez ceci, cinq chevaux fougueux nous rapporteront à nos papas et à nos mamans. Nous fichons le camp, comme dit Bossuet. Nous partons, nous sommes partis. Nous fuyons dans les bras de Laffitte et sur les ailes de Caillard. La diligence de Toulouse nous arrache à l’abîme, et l’abîme c’est vous, ô nos belles petites! Nous rentrons dans la société, dans le devoir et dans l’ordre, au grand trot, à raison de trois lieues à l’heure. Il importe à la patrie que nous soyons, comme tout le monde, préfets, pères de famille, gardes champêtres et conseillers d’État. Vénérez-nous. Nous nous sacrifions. Pleurez-nous rapidement et remplacez-nous vite. Si cette lettre vous déchire, rendez-le-lui. Adieu.

«Pendant près de deux ans, nous vous avons rendues heureuses. Ne nous en gardez pas rancune.

«Signé: Blachevelle.

«Fameuil.

«Listolier.

«Félix Tholomyès

«Post-scriptum. Le dîner est payé.»

Les quatre jeunes filles se regardèrent.

Favourite rompit la première le silence.

— Eh bien! s'écria-t-elle, c'est tout de même une bonne farce.

— C'est très drôle, dit Zéphine.

— Ce doit être Blachevelle qui a eu cette idée-là, reprit Favourite. Ça me rend amoureuse de lui. Sitôt parti, sitôt aimé. Voilà l'histoire.

— Non, dit Dahlia, c'est une idée à Tholomyès. Ça se reconnaît.

— En ce cas, reprit Favourite, mort à Blachevelle et vive Tholomyès!

— Vive Tholomyès! crièrent Dahlia et Zéphine.

Et elles éclatèrent de rire.

Fantine rit comme les autres.

Une heure après, quand elle fut rentrée dans sa chambre, elle pleura. C'était, nous l'avons dit, son premier amour; elle s'était donnée à ce Tholomyès comme à un mari, et la pauvre fille avait un enfant.

Livre quatrième — Confier, c’est quelquefois livrer

Chapitre I

Une mère qui en rencontre une autre

Il y avait, dans le premier quart de ce siècle, à Montfermeil, près de Paris, une façon de gargote qui n’existe plus aujourd’hui. Cette gargote était tenue par des gens appelés Thénardier, mari et femme. Elle était située dans la ruelle du Boulanger. On voyait au-dessus de la porte une planche clouée à plat sur le mur. Sur cette planche était peint quelque chose qui ressemblait à un homme portant sur son dos un autre homme, lequel avait de grosses épaulettes de général dorées avec de larges étoiles argentées; des taches rouges figuraient du sang; le reste du tableau était de la fumée et représentait probablement une bataille. Au bas on lisait cette inscription: *Au Sergent de Waterloo.*

Rien n’est plus ordinaire qu’un tombereau ou une charrette à la porte d’une auberge. Cependant le véhicule ou, pour mieux dire, le fragment de véhicule qui encombrait la rue devant la gargote du Sergent de Waterloo, un soir du printemps de 1818, eût certainement attiré par sa masse l’attention d’un peintre qui eût passé là.

C’était l’avant-train d’un de ces fardiers, usités dans les pays de forêts, et qui servent à charrier des madriers et des troncs d’arbres. Cet avant-train se composait d’un massif essieu de fer à pivot où s’emboîtait un lourd timon, et que supportaient deux roues démesurées. Tout cet ensemble était trapu, écrasant et difforme. On eût dit l’affût d’un canon géant. Les ornières avaient donné aux roues, aux jantes, aux moyeux, à l’essieu et au timon, une couche de vase, hideux badigeonnage jaunâtre assez semblable à celui dont on orne volontiers les cathédrales. Le bois disparaissait sous la boue et le fer sous la rouille. Sous l’essieu pendait en draperie une grosse chaîne digne de Goliath forçat. Cette chaîne faisait songer, non aux poutres qu’elle avait fonction de transporter, mais aux mastodontes et aux mammons qu’elle eût pu atteler; elle avait un air de bagne, mais de bagne cyclopéen et surhumain, et elle semblait détachée de quelque monstre. Homère y eût lié Polyphème et Shakespeare Caliban.

Pourquoi cet avant-train de fardier était-il à cette place dans la rue? D’abord, pour encombrer la rue; ensuite pour achever de se rouiller. Il y a dans le vieil ordre social une foule d'institutions qu'on trouve de la sorte sur son passage en plein air et qui n'ont pas pour être là d'autres raisons.

Le centre de la chaîne pendait sous l'essieu assez près de terre, et sur la courbure, comme sur la corde d'une balançoire, étaient assises et groupées, ce soir-là, dans un entrelacement exquis, deux petites filles, l'une d'environ deux ans et demi, l'autre de dix-huit mois, la plus petite dans les bras de la plus grande. Un mouchoir savamment noué les empêchait de tomber. Une mère avait vu cette effroyable chaîne, et avait dit: Tiens! voilà un joujou pour mes enfants.

Les deux enfants, du reste gracieusement attifées, et avec quelque recherche, rayonnaient; on eût dit deux roses dans de la ferraille; leurs yeux étaient un triomphe; leurs fraîches joues riaient. L'une était châtain, l'autre était brune. Leurs naïfs visages étaient deux étonnements ravis; un buisson fleuri qui était près de là envoyait aux passants des parfums qui semblaient venir d'elles; celle de dix-huit mois montrait son gentil ventre nu avec cette chaste indécence de la petitesse.

Au-dessus et autour de ces deux têtes délicates, pétries dans le bonheur et trempées dans la lumière, le gigantesque avant-train, noir de rouille, presque terrible, tout enchevêtré de courbes et d'angles farouches, s'arrondissait comme un porche de caverne. À quelques pas, accroupie sur le seuil de l'auberge, la mère, femme d'un aspect peu avenant du reste, mais touchante en ce moment-là, balançait les deux enfants au moyen d'une longue ficelle, les couvant des yeux de peur d'accident avec cette expression animale et céleste propre à la maternité; à chaque va-et-vient, les hideux anneaux jetaient un bruit strident qui ressemblait à un cri de colère; les petites filles s'extasiaient, le soleil couchant se mêlait à cette joie, et rien n'était charmant comme ce caprice du hasard, qui avait fait d'une chaîne de titans une escarpolette de chérubins.

Tout en berçant ses deux petites, la mère chantonnait d'une voix fausse une romance alors célèbre:

Il le faut, disait un guerrier.

Sa chanson et la contemplation de ses filles l'empêchaient d'entendre et de voir ce qui se passait dans la rue.

Cependant quelqu'un s'était approché d'elle, comme elle commençait le premier couplet de la romance, et tout à coup elle entendit une voix qui disait très près de son oreille:

— Vous avez là deux jolis enfants, madame, répondit la mère, continuant sa romance:

À la belle et tendre Imogine.

rèpondit la mère, continuant sa romance, puis elle tourna la tête.

Une femme était devant elle, à quelques pas. Cette femme, elle aussi, avait un enfant qu’elle portait dans ses bras.

Elle portait en outre un assez gros sac de nuit qui semblait fort lourd.

L’enfant de cette femme était un des plus divins êtres qu’on pût voir. C’était une fille de deux à trois ans. Elle eût pu jouter avec les deux autres pour la coquetterie de l’ajustement; elle avait un bavolet de linge fin, des rubans à sa brassière et de la valenciennes à son bonnet. Le pli de sa jupe relevée laissait voir sa cuisse blanche, potelée et ferme. Elle était admirablement rose et bien portante. La belle petite donnait envie de mordre dans les pommes de ses joues. On ne pouvait rien dire de ses yeux, sinon qu’ils devaient être très grands et qu’ils avaient des cils magnifiques. Elle dormait.

Elle dormait de ce sommeil d’absolue confiance propre à son âge. Les bras des mères sont faits de tendresse; les enfants y dorment profondément.

Quant à la mère, l’aspect en était pauvre et triste. Elle avait la mise d’une ouvrière qui tend à redevenir paysanne. Elle était jeune. Était-elle belle? peut-être; mais avec cette mise il n’y paraissait pas. Ses cheveux, d’où s’échappait une mèche blonde, semblaient fort épais, mais disparaissaient sévèrement sous une coiffe de béguine, laide, serrée, étroite, et nouée au menton. Le rire montre les belles dents quand on en a; mais elle ne riait point. Ses yeux ne semblaient pas être secs depuis très longtemps. Elle était pâle; elle avait l’air très lasse et un peu malade; elle regardait sa fille endormie dans ses bras avec cet air particulier d’une mère qui a nourri son enfant. Un large mouchoir bleu, comme ceux où se mouchent les invalides, plié en fichu, masquait lourdement sa taille. Elle avait les mains hâlées et toutes piquées de taches de rousseur, l’index durci et déchiqueté par l’aiguille, une Mante brune de laine bourrue, une robe de toile et de gros souliers. C’était Fantine.

C’était Fantine. Difficile à reconnaître. Pourtant, à l’examiner attentivement, elle avait toujours sa beauté. Un pli triste, qui ressemblait à un commencement d’ironie, ridait sa joue droite. Quant à sa toilette, cette aérienne toilette de mousseline et de rubans qui semblait faite avec de la gaîté, de la folie et de la musique, pleine de grelots et parfumée de lilas, elle s’était évanouie comme ces beaux givres éclatants qu’on prend pour des diamants au soleil; ils fondent et laissent la branche toute noire.

Dix mois s’étaient écoulés depuis «la bonne farce».

Que s’était-il passé pendant ces dix mois? on le devine.

Après l’abandon, la gêne. Fantine avait tout de suite perdu de vue Favourite, Zéphine et Dahlia; le lien, brisé du côté des hommes, s’était défait du côté des femmes; on les eût bien étonnées, quinze jours après, si on leur eût dit qu’elles étaient amies; cela n’avait plus de raison d’être. Fantine était restée seule. Le père de son enfant parti, — hélas! ces ruptures-là sont irrévocables, — elle se trouva absolument isolée, avec l’habitude du travail de moins et le goût du plaisir de plus. Entraînée par sa liaison avec Tholomyès à dédaigner le petit métier qu’elle savait, elle avait négligé ses débouchés; ils s’étaient fermés. Nulle ressource. Fantine savait à peine lire et ne savait pas écrire; on lui avait seulement appris dans son enfance à signer son nom; elle avait fait écrire par un écrivain public une lettre à Tholomyès, puis une seconde, puis une troisième. Tholomyès n’avait répondu à aucune. Un jour, Fantine entendit des commères dire en regardant sa fille:

— Est-ce qu’on prend ces enfants-là au sérieux? on hausse les épaules de ces enfants-là!

Alors elle songea à Tholomyès qui haussait les épaules de son enfant et qui ne prenait pas cet être innocent au sérieux; et son cœur devint sombre à l’endroit de cet homme. Quel parti prendre pourtant? Elle ne savait plus à qui s’adresser. Elle avait commis une faute, mais le fond de sa nature, on s’en souvient, était pudeur et vertu. Elle sentit vaguement qu’elle était à la veille de tomber dans la détresse, et de glisser dans le pire. Il fallait du courage; elle en eut, et se roidit. L’idée lui vint de retourner dans sa ville natale, à Montreuil-sur-mer. Là quelqu’un peut-être la connaîtrait et lui donnerait du travail. Oui; mais il faudrait cacher sa faute. Et elle entrevoyait confusément la nécessité possible d’une séparation plus douloureuse encore que la première. Son cœur se serra, mais elle prit sa résolution. Fantine, on le verra, avait la farouche bravoure de la vie.

Elle avait déjà vaillamment renoncé à la parure, s’était vêtue de toile, et avait mis toute sa soie, tous ses chiffons, tous ses rubans et toutes ses dentelles sur sa fille, seule vanité qui lui restât, et sainte celle-là. Elle vendit tout ce qu’elle avait, ce qui lui produisit deux cents francs; ses petites dettes payées, elle n’eut plus que quatre-vingts francs environ. À vingt-deux ans, par une belle matinée de printemps, elle quittait Paris, emportant son enfant sur son dos. Quelqu'un qui les eût vues passer toutes les deux eût pitié. Cette femme n'avait au monde que cet enfant, et cet enfant n'avait au monde que cette femme. Fantine avait nourri sa fille; cela lui avait fatigué la poitrine, et elle toussait un peu.

Nous n'aurons plus occasion de parler de M. Félix Tholomyès. Bornons-nous à dire que, vingt ans plus tard, sous le roi Louis-Philippe, c'était un gros avoué de province, influent et riche, électeur sage et juré très sévère; toujours homme de plaisir.

Vers le milieu du jour, après avoir, pour se reposer, cheminé de temps en temps, moyennant trois ou quatre sous par lieue, dans ce qu'on appelait alors les Petites Voitures des Environs de Paris, Fantine se trouvait à Montfermeil, dans la ruelle du Boulanger.

Comme elle passait devant l'auberge Thénardier, les deux petites filles, enchantées sur leur escarpolette monstre, avaient été pour elle une sorte d'éblouissement, et elle s'était arrêtée devant cette vision de joie.

Il y a des charmes. Ces deux petites filles en furent un pour cette mère.

Elle les considérait, toute émue. La présence des anges est une annonce de paradis. Elle crut voir au dessus de cette auberge le mystérieux ICI de la providence. Ces deux petites étaient si évidemment heureuses! Elle les regardait, elle les admirait, tellement attendrie qu'au moment où la mère reprenait haleine entre deux vers de sa chanson, elle ne put s'empêcher de lui dire ce mot qu'on vient de lire:

— Vous avez là deux jolis enfants, madame.

Les créatures les plus féroces sont désarmées par la caresse à leurs petits. La mère leva la tête et remercia, et fit asseoir la passante sur le banc de la porte, elle-même étant sur le seuil. Les deux femmes causèrent.

— Je m'appelle madame Thénardier, dit la mère des deux petites. Nous tenons cette auberge.

Puis, toujours à sa romance, elle reprit entre ses dents:

Il le faut, je suis chevalier,
Et je pars pour la Palestine.

Cette madame Thénardier était une femme rousse, charnue, anguleuse; le type femme-à-soldat dans toute sa disgrâce. Et, chose bizarre, avec un air penché qu'elle devait à des lectures romanesques. C'était une minaudière hommasse. De vieux romans qui se sont éraillés sur des imaginations de gargotières ont de ces effets-là. Elle était jeune encore; elle avait à peine trente ans. Si cette femme, qui était accroupie, se fût tenue droite, peut-être sa haute taille et sa carrure de colosse ambulant propre aux foires, eussent-elles dès l'abord effarouché la voyageuse, troublé sa confiance, et fait évanouir ce que nous avons à raconter. Une personne qui est assise au lieu d'être debout, les destinées tiennent à cela.

La voyageuse raconta son histoire, un peu modifiée:

Qu'elle était ouvrière; que son mari était mort; que le travail lui manquait à Paris, et qu'elle allait en chercher ailleurs; dans son pays; qu'elle avait quitté Paris, le matin même, à pied; que, comme elle portait son enfant, se sentant fatiguée, et ayant rencontré la voiture de Villemomble, elle y était montée; que de Villemomble elle était venue à Montfermeil à pied, que la petite avait un peu marché, mais pas beaucoup, c'est si jeune, et qu'il avait fallu la prendre, et que le bijou s'était endormi.

Et sur ce mot elle donna à sa fille un baiser passionné qui la réveilla. L'enfant ouvrit les yeux, de grands yeux bleus comme ceux de sa mère, et regarda, quoi? rien, tout, avec cet air sérieux et quelquefois sévère des petits enfants, qui est un mystère de leur lumineuse innocence devant nos crépuscules de vertus. On dirait qu'ils se sentent anges et qu'ils nous savent hommes. Puis l'enfant se mit à rire, et, quoique la mère la retint, glissa à terre avec l'indomptable énergie d'un petit être qui veut courir. Tout à coup elle aperçut les deux autres sur leur balançoire, s'arrêta court, et tira la langue, signe d'admiration.

La mère Thénardier détacha ses filles, les fit descendre de l'escarpolette, et dit:

— Amusez-vous toutes les trois.

Ces âges-là s'apprivoisent vite, et au bout d'une minute les petites Thénardier jouaient avec la nouvelle venue à faire des trous dans la terre, plaisir immense.

Cette nouvelle venue était très gaie; la bonté de la mère est écrite dans la gaîté du marmot; elle avait pris un brin de bois qui lui servait de pelle, et elle creusait énergiquement une fosse bonne pour une mouche. Ce que fait le fossoyeur devient riant, fait par l'enfant.

Les deux femmes continuaient de causer.

— Comment s'appelle votre mioche?

— Cosette.

Cosette, lisez Euphrasie. La petite se nommait Euphrasie. Mais d'Euphrasie la mère avait fait Cosette, par ce doux et gracieux instinct des mères et du peuple qui change Josefa en Pepita et Françoise en Sillette. C'est là un genre de dérivés qui dérange et déconcerte toute la science des étymologistes. Nous avons connu une grand'mère qui avait réussi à faire de Théodore, Gnon.

— Quel âge a-t-elle?

— Elle va sur trois ans.

— C'est comme mon aînée.

Cependant les trois petites filles étaient groupées dans une posture d'anxiété profonde et de béatitude; un événement avait lieu; un gros ver venait de sortir de terre; et elles avaient peur, et elles étaient en extase.

Leurs fronts radieux se touchaient; on eût dit trois têtes dans une auréole.

— Les enfants, s'écria la mère Thénardier, comme ça se connaît tout de suite! les voilà qu'on jurerait trois sœurs!

Ce mot fut l'étincelle qu'attendait probablement l'autre mère. Elle saisit la main de la Thénardier, la regarda fixement, et lui dit:

— Voulez-vous me garder mon enfant?

La Thénardier eut un de ces mouvements surpris qui ne sont ni le consentement ni le refus.

La mère de Cosette poursuivit:

— Voyez-vous, je ne peux pas emmener ma fille au pays. L'ouvrage ne le permet pas. Avec un enfant, on ne trouve pas à se placer. Ils sont si ridicules dans ce pays-là. C'est le bon Dieu qui m'a fait passer devant votre auberge. Quand j'ai vu vos petites si jolies et si propres et si contentes, cela m'a bouleversée. J'ai dit: voilà une bonne mère. C'est ça; ça fera trois sœurs. Et puis, je ne serai pas longtemps à revenir. Voulez-vous me garder mon enfant?

— Il faudrait voir, dit la Thénardier.

— Je donnerais six francs par mois.

Ici une voix d'homme cria du fond de la gargote:

— Pas à moins de sept francs. Et six mois payés d'avance.

— Six fois sept quarante-deux, dit la Thénardier.

— Je les donnerai, dit la mère.

— Et quinze francs en dehors pour les premiers frais, ajouta la voix d'homme.

— Total cinquante-sept francs, dit la madame Thénardier. Et à travers ces chiffres, elle chantonnait vaguement:

Il le faut, disait un guerrier.

— Je les donnerai, dit la mère, j’ai quatre-vingts francs. Il me restera de quoi aller au pays. En allant à pied. Je gagnerai de l’argent là-bas, et dès que j’en aurai un peu, je reviendrai chercher l’amour.

La voix d’homme reprit:

— La petite a un trousseau?

— C’est mon mari, dit la Thénardier.

— Sans doute elle a un trousseau, le pauvre trésor. J’ai bien vu que c’était votre mari. Et un beau trousseau encore! un trousseau insensé. Tout par douzaines; et des robes de soie comme une dame. Il est là dans mon sac de nuit.

— Il faudra le donner, repartit la voix d’homme.

— Je crois bien que je le donnerai! dit la mère. Ce serait cela qui serait drôle si je laissais ma fille toute nue!

La face du maître apparut.

— C’est bon, dit-il.

Le marché fut conclu. La mère passa la nuit à l’auberge, donna son argent et laissa son enfant, renoua son sac de nuit dégonflé du trousseau et léger désormais, et partit le lendemain matin, comptant revenir bientôt. On arrange tranquillement ces départs-là, mais ce sont des désespoirs.

Une voisine des Thénardier rencontra cette mère comme elle s’en allait, et s’en revint en disant:

— Je viens de voir une femme qui pleure dans la rue, que c’est un déchirement.

Quand la mère de Cosette fut partie, l’homme dit à la femme:

— Cela va me payer mon effet de cent dix francs qui échoit demain. Il me manquait cinquante francs. Sais-tu que j’aurais eu l’huissier et un protêt? Tu as fait là une bonne souricière avec tes petites.

— Sans m’en douter, dit la femme.

Chapitre II

Première esquisse de deux figures louches

La souris prise était bien chétive; mais le chat se réjouit même d'une souris maigre. Qu'était-ce que les Thénardier?

Disons-en un mot dès à présent. Nous compléterons le croquis plus tard.

Ces êtres appartenaient à cette classe bâtarde composée de gens grossiers parvenus et de gens intelligents déchus, qui est entre la classe dite moyenne et la classe dite inférieure, et qui combine quelques-uns des défauts de la seconde avec presque tous les vices de la première, sans avoir le généreux élan de l'ouvrier ni l'ordre honnête du bourgeois.

C'étaient de ces natures naines qui, si quelque feu sombre les chauffe par hasard, deviennent facilement monstrueuses. Il y avait dans la femme le fond d'une brute et dans l'homme l'étoffe d'un gueux. Tous deux étaient au plus haut degré susceptibles de l'espèce de hideux progrès qui se fait dans le sens du mal. Il existe des âmes écrevisses reculant continuellement vers les ténèbres, rétrogradant dans la vie plutôt qu'elles n'y avancent, employant l'expérience à augmenter leur difformité, empirant sans cesse, et s'empreignant de plus en plus d'une noirceur croissante. Cet homme et cette femme étaient de ces âmes-là.

Le Thénardier particulièrement était gênant pour le physionomiste. On n'a qu'à regarder certains hommes pour s'en défier, on les sent ténébreux à leurs deux extrémités. Ils sont inquiets derrière eux et menaçants devant eux. Il y a en eux de l'inconnu. On ne peut pas plus répondre de ce qu'ils ont fait que de ce qu'ils feront. L'ombre qu'ils ont dans le regard les dénonce. Rien qu'en les entendant dire un mot ou qu'en les voyant faire un geste on entrevoit de sombres secrets dans leur passé et de sombres mystères dans leur avenir.

Ce Thénardier, s'il fallait l'en croire, avait été soldat; sergent, disait-il; il avait fait probablement la campagne de 1815, et s'était même comporté assez bravement, à ce qu'il paraît. Nous verrons plus tard ce qu'il en était. L'enseigne de son cabaret était une allusion à l'un de ses faits d'armes. Il l'avait peinte lui-même, car il savait faire un peu de tout; mal.

C'était l'époque où l'antique roman classique, qui, après avoir été *Clélie*, n'était plus que *Lodoïska*, toujours noble, mais de plus en plus vulgaire, tombé de mademoiselle de Scudéri à madame Barthélemy-Hadot, et de madame de Lafayette à madame Bournon-Malarme, incendiait l’âme aimante des portières de Paris et ravageait même un peu la banlieue. Madame Thénardier était juste assez intelligente pour lire ces espèces de livres. Elle s’en nourrissait. Elle y noyait ce qu’elle avait de cervelle; cela lui avait donné, tant qu’elle avait été très jeune, et même un peu plus tard, une sorte d’attitude pensive près de son mari, coquin d’une certaine profondeur, ruffian lettré à la grammaire près, grossier et fin en même temps, mais, en fait de sentimentalisme, lisant Pigault-Lebrun, et pour «tout ce qui touche le sexe», comme il disait dans son jargon, butor correct et sans mélange. Sa femme avait quelque douze ou quinze ans de moins que lui. Plus tard, quand les cheveux romanesquement pleureurs commencèrent à grisonner, quand la Mégère se dégagea de la Paméla, la Thénardier ne fut plus qu’une grosse méchante femme ayant savouré des romans bêtes. Or on ne lit pas impunément des niaiseries. Il en résulta que sa fille aînée se nomma Eponine. Quant à la cadette, la pauvre petite faillit se nommer Gulnare; elle dut à je ne sais quelle heureuse diversion faite par un roman de Ducray-Duminil, de ne s’appeler qu’Azelma.

Au reste, pour le dire en passant, tout n’est pas ridicule et superficiel dans cette curieuse époque à laquelle nous faisons ici allusion, et qu’on pourrait appeler l’anarchie des noms de baptême. À côté de l’élément romanesque, que nous venons d’indiquer, il y a le symptôme social. Il n’est pas rare aujourd’hui que le garçon bouvier se nomme Arthur, Alfred ou Alphonse, et que le vicomte — s’il y a encore des vicomtes — se nomme Thomas, Pierre ou Jacques. Ce déplacement qui met le nom «élégant» sur le plébéien et le nom campagnard sur l’aristocrate n’est autre chose qu’un remous d’égalité. L’irrésistible pénétration du souffle nouveau est là comme en tout. Sous cette discordance apparente, il y a une chose grande et profonde: la révolution française.

Chapitre III

L’Alouette

Il ne suffit pas d’être méchant pour prospérer. La gargote allait mal.

Grâce aux cinquante-sept francs de la voyageuse, Thénardier avait pu éviter un protêt et faire honneur à sa signature. Le mois suivant ils eurent encore besoin d’argent; la femme porta à Paris et engagea au Mont-de-Piété le trousseau de Cosette pour une somme de soixante francs. Dès que cette somme fut dépensée, les Thénardier s’accoutumèrent à ne plus voir dans la petite fille qu’un enfant qu’ils avaient chez eux par charité, et la traitèrent en conséquence. Comme elle n’avait plus de trousseau, on l’habilla des vieilles jupes et des vieilles chemises des petites Thénardier, c’est-à-dire de haillons.

On la nourrit des restes de tout le monde, un peu mieux que le chien et un peu plus mal que le chat. Le chat et le chien étaient du reste ses commensaux habituels; Cosette mangeait avec eux sous la table dans une écuelle de bois pareille à la leur. La mère qui s’était fixée, comme on le verra plus tard, à Montreuil-sur-mer, écrivait, ou, pour mieux dire, faisait écrire tous les mois afin d’avoir des nouvelles de son enfant. Les Thénardier répondaient invariablement: Cosette est à merveille. Les six premiers mois révolus, la mère envoya sept francs pour le septième mois, et continua assez exactement ses envois de mois en mois. L’année n’était pas finie que le Thénardier dit:

— Une belle grâce qu’elle nous fait là! que veut-elle que nous fassions avec ses sept francs?

Et il écrivit pour exiger douze francs. La mère, à laquelle ils persuadaient que son enfant était heureuse “et venait bien”, se soumit et envoya les douze francs.

Certaines natures ne peuvent aimer d’un côté sans haïr de l’autre. La mère Thénardier aimait passionnément ses deux filles à elle, ce qui fit qu’elle détesta l’étrangère. Il est triste de songer que l’amour d’une mère peut avoir de vilains aspects. Si peu de place que Cosette tînt chez elle, il lui semblait que cela était pris aux siens, et que cette petite diminuait l’air que ses filles respiraient. Cette femme, comme beaucoup de femmes de sa sorte, avait une somme de caresses et une somme de coups et d’injures à dépenser chaque jour. Si elle n’avait pas eu Cosette, il est certain que ses filles, tout idolâtrées qu’elles étaient, auraient tout reçu; mais l’étrangère leur rendit le service de détourner les coups sur elle. Ses filles n’eurent que les caresses. Cosette ne faisait pas un mouvement qui ne fît pleuvoir sur sa tête une grêle de châtiments violents et immérités. Doux être faible qui ne devait rien comprendre à ce monde ni à Dieu, sans cesse punie, grondée, rudoyée, battue et voyant à côté d’elle deux petites créatures comme elle, qui vivaient dans un rayon d’aurore!

La Thénardier étant méchante pour Cosette, Éponine et Azelma furent méchantes. Les enfants, à cet âge, ne sont que des exemplaires de la mère. Le format est plus petit, voilà tout.

Une année s’écoula, puis une autre.

On disait dans le village:

— Ces Thénardier sont de braves gens. Ils ne sont pas riches, et ils élèvent un pauvre enfant qu’on leur a abandonné chez eux!

On croyait Cosette oubliée par sa mère.

Cependant le Thénardier, ayant appris par on ne sait quelles voies obscures que l’enfant était probablement bâtard et que la mère ne pouvait l’avouer, exigea quinze francs par mois, disant que «la créature» grandissait et «*mangeait*», et menaçant de la renvoyer. «Quelle ne m’embête pas! s’écriait-il, je lui bombarde son mioche tout au beau milieu de ses cachotteries. Il me faut de l’augmentation.» La mère paya les quinze francs.

D’année en année, l’enfant grandit, et sa misère aussi.

Tant que Cosette fut toute petite, elle fut le souffre-douleur des deux autres enfants; dès qu’elle se mit à se développer un peu, c’est-à-dire avant même qu’elle eût cinq ans, elle devint la servante de la maison.

Cinq ans, dira-t-on, c’est invraisemblable. Hélas, c’est vrai. La souffrance sociale commence à tout âge.

N’avons-nous pas vu, récemment, le procès d’un nommé Dumolard, orphelin devenu bandit, qui, dès l’âge de cinq ans, disent les documents officiels, étant seul au monde «travaillait pour vivre, et volait.»

On fit faire à Cosette les commissions, balayer les chambres, la cour, la rue, laver la vaisselle, porter même des fardeaux. Les Thénardier se crurent d’autant plus autorisés à agir ainsi que la mère qui était toujours à Montreuil-sur-mer commença à mal payer. Quelques mois restèrent en souffrance.

Si cette mère fût revenue à Montfermeil au bout de ces trois années, elle n’eût point reconnu son enfant. Cosette, si jolie et si fraîche à son arrivée dans cette maison, était maintenant maigre et blême. Elle avait je ne sais quelle allure inquiète. Sournoise! disaient les Thénardier.

L’injustice l’avait faite hargneuse et la misère l’avait rendue laide. Il ne lui restait plus que ses beaux yeux qui faisaient peine, parce que, grands comme ils étaient, il semblait qu’on y vît une plus grande quantité de tristesse.

C’était une chose navrante de voir, l’hiver, ce pauvre enfant, qui n’avait pas encore six ans, grelottant sous de vieilles loques de toile trouées, balayer la rue avant le jour avec un énorme balai dans ses petites mains rouges et une larme dans ses grands yeux.

Dans le pays on l’appelait l’Alouette. Le peuple, qui aime les figures, s’était plu à nommer de ce nom ce petit être pas plus gros qu’un oiseau, tremblant, effarouché et frissonnant, éveillé le premier chaque matin dans la maison et dans le village, toujours dans la rue ou dans les champs avant l’aube. Seulement la pauvre Alouette ne chantait jamais.

Livre cinquième — La descente

Chapitre I

Histoire d’un progrès dans les verroteries noires

Cette mère cependant qui, au dire des gens de Montfermeil, semblait avoir abandonné son enfant, que devenait-elle? où était-elle? que faisait-elle?

Après avoir laissé sa petite Cosette aux Thénardier, elle avait continué son chemin et était arrivée à Montreuil-sur-mer.

C’était, on se le rappelle, en 1818.

Fantine avait quitté sa province depuis une dizaine d’années. Montreuil-sur-mer avait changé d’aspect. Tandis que Fantine descendait lentement de misère en misère, sa ville natale avait prospéré.

Depuis deux ans environ, il s’y était accompli un de ces faits industriels qui sont les grands événements des petits pays.

Ce détail importe, et nous croyons utile de le développer; nous dirions presque, de le souligner.

De temps immémorial, Montreuil-sur-mer avait pour industrie spéciale l’imitation des jais anglais et des verroteries noires d’Allemagne. Cette industrie avait toujours végété, à cause de la cherté des matières premières qui réagissait sur la main-d’œuvre. Au moment où Fantine revint à Montreuil-sur-mer, une transformation inouïe s’était opérée dans cette production des «articles noirs». Vers la fin de 1815, un homme, un inconnu, était venu s’établir dans la ville et avait eu l’idée de substituer, dans cette fabrication, la gomme laque à la résine et, pour les bracelets en particulier, les coulants en tôle simplement rapprochée aux coulants en tôle soudée. Ce tout petit changement avait été une révolution.

Ce tout petit changement en effet avait prodigieusement réduit le prix de la matière première, ce qui avait permis, premièrement, d’élever le prix de la main-d’œuvre, bienfait pour le pays; deuxièmement, d’améliorer la fabrication, avantage pour le consommateur; troisièmement, de vendre à meilleur marché tout en triplant le bénéfice, profit pour le manufacturier.

Ainsi pour une idée trois résultats.

En moins de trois ans, l’auteur de ce procédé était devenu riche, ce qui est bien, et avait tout fait riche autour de lui, ce qui est mieux. Il était étranger au département. De son origine, on ne savait rien; de ses commencements, peu de chose.

On contait qu’il était venu dans la ville avec fort peu d’argent, quelques centaines de francs tout au plus.

C’est de ce mince capital, mis au service d’une idée ingénieuse, fécondé par l’ordre et par la pensée, qu’il avait tiré sa fortune et la fortune de tout ce pays.

À son arrivée à Montreuil-sur-mer, il n’avait que les vêtements, la tournure et le langage d’un ouvrier.

Il paraît que, le jour même où il faisait obscurément son entrée dans la petite ville de Montreuil-sur-mer, à la tombée d’un soir de décembre, le sac au dos et le bâton d’épine à la main, un gros incendie venait d’éclater à la maison commune. Cet homme s’était jeté dans le feu, et avait sauvé, au péril de sa vie, deux enfants qui se trouvaient être ceux du capitaine de gendarmerie; ce qui fait qu’on n’avait pas songé à lui demander son passeport. Depuis lors, on avait su son nom. Il s’appelait le *père Madeleine*.

Chapitre II

M. Madeleine

C’était un homme d’environ cinquante ans, qui avait l’air préoccupé et qui était bon. Voilà tout ce qu’on en pouvait dire.

Grâce aux progrès rapides de cette industrie qu’il avait si admirablement remaniée, Montreuil-sur-mer était devenu un centre d’affaires considérable. L’Espagne, qui consomme beaucoup de jais noir, y commandait chaque année des achats immenses. Montreuil-sur-mer, pour ce commerce, faisait presque concurrence à Londres et à Berlin. Les bénéfices du père Madeleine étaient tels que, dès la deuxième année, il avait pu bâtir une grande fabrique dans laquelle il y avait deux vastes ateliers, l’un pour les hommes, l’autre pour les femmes. Quiconque avait faim pouvait s’y présenter, et était sûr de trouver là de l’emploi et du pain. Le père Madeleine demandait aux hommes de la bonne volonté, aux femmes des mœurs pures, à tous de la probité. Il avait divisé les ateliers afin de séparer les sexes et que les filles et les femmes pussent rester sages. Sur ce point, il était inflexible. C’était le seul où il fût en quelque sorte intolérant. Il était d’autant plus fondé à cette sévérité que, Montreuil-sur-mer étant une ville de garnison, les occasions de corruption abondaient. Du reste sa venue avait été un bienfait, et sa présence était une providence. Avant l’arrivée du père Madeleine, tout languissait dans le pays; maintenant tout y vivait de la vie saine du travail. Une forte circulation échauffait tout et pénétrait partout. Le chômage et la misère étaient inconnus. Il n’y avait pas de poche si obscure où il n’y eût un peu d’argent, pas de logis si pauvre où il n’y eût un peu de joie.

Le père Madeleine employait tout le monde. Il n’exigeait qu’une chose: soyez honnête homme! soyez honnête fille!

Comme nous l’avons dit, au milieu de cette activité dont il était la cause et le pivot, le père Madeleine faisait sa fortune, mais, chose assez singulière dans un simple homme de commerce, il ne paraissait point que ce fût là son principal souci. Il semblait qu’il songeât beaucoup aux autres et peu à lui. En 1820, on lui connaissait une somme de six cent trente mille francs placée à son nom chez Laffitte; mais avant de se réserver ces six cent trente mille francs, il avait dépensé plus d’un million pour la ville et pour les pauvres.

L’hôpital était mal doté; il y avait fondé dix lits. Montreuil-sur-mer est divisé en ville haute et ville basse. La ville basse, qu’il habitait, n’avait qu’une école, méchante masure qui tombait en ruine; il en avait construit deux, une pour les filles, l’autre pour les garçons. Il allouait de ses deniers aux deux instituteurs une indemnité double de leur maigre traitement officiel, et un jour, à quelqu’un qui s’en étonnait, il dit: «Les deux premiers fonctionnaires de l’état, c’est la nourrice et le maître d’école.» Il avait créé à ses frais une salle d’asile, chose alors presque inconnue en France, et une caisse de secours pour les ouvriers vieux et infirmes. Sa manufacture étant un centre, un nouveau quartier où il y avait bon nombre de familles indigentes avait rapidement surgi autour de lui; il y avait établi une pharmacie gratuite.

Dans les premiers temps, quand on le vit commencer, les bonnes âmes dirent: C’est un gaillard qui veut s’enrichir. Quand on le vit enrichir le pays avant de s’enrichir lui-même, les mêmes bonnes âmes dirent: C’est un ambitieux. Cela semblait d’autant plus probable que cet homme était religieux, et même pratiquait dans une certaine mesure, chose fort bien vue à cette époque. Il allait régulièrement entendre une basse messe tous les dimanches. Le député local, qui flairait partout des concurrences, ne tarda pas à s’inquiéter de cette religion. Ce député, qui avait été membre du corps législatif de l’empire, partageait les idées religieuses d’un père de l’oratoire connu sous le nom de Fouché, duc d’Otrante, dont il avait été la créature et l’ami. À huis clos il riait de Dieu doucement. Mais quand il vit le riche manufacturier Madeleine aller à la basse messe de sept heures, il entrevit un candidat possible, et résolut de le dépasser; il prit un confesseur jésuite et alla à la grand’messe et à vêpres. L’ambition en ce temps-là était, dans l’acception directe du mot, une course au clocher. Les pauvres profitèrent de cette terreur comme le bon Dieu, car l’honorable député fonda aussi deux lits à l’hôpital; ce qui fit douze.

Cependant en 1819 le bruit se répandit un matin dans la ville que, sur la présentation de M. le préfet, et en considération des services rendus au pays, le père Madeleine allait être nommé par le roi maire de Montreuil-sur-mer. Ceux qui avaient déclaré ce nouveau venu «un ambitieux», saisirent avec transport cette occasion que tous les hommes souhaitent de s’écrier: «Là! qu’est-ce que nous avions dit?» Tout Montreuil-sur-mer fut en rumeur. Le bruit était fondé. Quelques jours après, la nomination parut dans *le Moniteur*. Le lendemain, le père Madeleine refusa.

Dans cette même année 1819, les produits du nouveau procédé inventé par Madeleine figurèrent à l'exposition de l'industrie; sur le rapport du jury, le roi nomma l'inventeur chevalier de la Légion d'honneur. Nouvelle rumeur dans la petite ville. Eh bien! c'est la croix qu'il voulait! Le père Madeleine refusa la croix.

Décidément cet homme était une énigme. Les bonnes âmes se tirèrent d'affaire en disant: Après tout, c'est une espèce d'aventurier.

On l'a vu, le pays lui devait beaucoup, les pauvres lui devaient tout; il était si utile qu'il avait bien fallu qu'on finît par l'honorer, et il était si doux qu'il avait bien fallu qu'on finît par l'aimer; ses ouvriers en particulier l'adoraient, et il portait cette adoration avec une sorte de gravité mélancolique. Quand il fut constaté riche, «les personnes de la société» le saluèrent, et on l'appela dans la ville monsieur Madeleine; ses ouvriers et les enfants continuèrent de l'appeler *le père Madeleine,* et c'était la chose qui le faisait le mieux sourire. À mesure qu'il montait, les invitations pleuvaient sur lui. «La société» le réclamait. Les petits salons guindés de Montreuil-sur-mer qui, bien entendu, se fussent dans les premiers temps fermés à l'artisan, s'ouvrirent à deux battants au millionnaire. On lui fit mille avances. Il refusa.

Cette fois encore les bonnes âmes ne furent point empêchées.

— C'est un homme ignorant et de basse éducation. On ne sait d'où cela sort. Il ne saurait pas se tenir dans le monde. Il n'est pas du tout prouvé qu'il sache lire.

Quand on l'avait vu gagner de l'argent, on avait dit: c'est un marchand. Quand on l'avait vu semer son argent, on avait dit: c'est un ambitieux. Quand on l'avait vu repousser les honneurs, on avait dit: c'est un aventurier. Quand on le vit repousser le monde, on dit: c'est une brute.

En 1820, cinq ans après son arrivée à Montreuil-sur-mer, les services qu'il avait rendus au pays étaient si éclatants, le vœu de la contrée fut tellement unanime, que le roi le nomma de nouveau maire de la ville. Il refusa encore, mais le préfet résista à son refus, tous les notables vinrent le prier, le peuple en pleine rue le suppliait, l'insistance fut si vive qu'il finit par accepter. On remarqua que ce qui parut surtout le déterminer, ce fut l'apostrophe presque irritée d'une vieille femme du peuple qui lui cria du seuil de sa porte avec humeur: *Un bon maire, c'est utile. Est-ce qu'on recule devant du bien qu'on peut faire?*

Ce fut là la troisième phase de son ascension. Le père Madeleine était devenu monsieur Madeleine, monsieur Madeleine devint monsieur le maire.

Chapitre III

Sommes déposées chez Laffitte

Du reste, il était demeuré aussi simple que le premier jour. Il avait les cheveux gris, l’œil sérieux, le teint hâlé d’un ouvrier, le visage pensif d’un philosophe. Il portait habituellement un chapeau à bords larges et une longue redingote de gros drap, boutonnée jusqu’au menton. Il remplissait ses fonctions de maire, mais hors de là il vivait solitaire. Il parlait à peu de monde. Il se dérobait aux politesses, saluait de côté, s’esquivait vite, souriait pour se dispenser de causer, donnait pour se dispenser de sourire. Les femmes disaient de lui: Quel bon ours! Son plaisir était de se promener dans les champs.

Il prenait ses repas toujours seul, avec un livre ouvert devant lui où il lisait. Il avait une petite bibliothèque bien faite. Il aimait les livres; les livres sont des amis froids et sûrs. À mesure que le loisir lui venait avec la fortune, il semblait qu’il en profitât pour cultiver son esprit. Depuis qu’il était à Montreuil-sur-mer, on remarquait que d’année en année son langage devenait plus poli, plus choisi et plus doux.

Il emportait volontiers un fusil dans ses promenades, mais il s’en servait rarement. Quand cela lui arrivait par aventure, il avait un tir infaillible qui effrayait. Jamais il ne tuait un animal inoffensif. Jamais il ne tirait un petit oiseau. Quoiqu’il ne fût plus jeune, on contait qu’il était d’une force prodigieuse. Il offrait un coup de main à qui en avait besoin, relevait un cheval, poussait à une roue embourbée, arrêtait par les cornes un taureau échappé. Il avait toujours ses poches pleines de monnaie en sortant et vides en rentrant. Quand il passait dans un village, les marmots déguenillés couraient joyeusement après lui et l’entouraient comme une nuée de moucherons.

On croyait deviner qu’il avait dû vivre jadis de la vie des champs, car il avait toutes sortes de secrets utiles qu’il enseignait aux paysans. Il leur apprenait à détruire la teigne des blés en aspergeant le grenier et en inondant les fentes du plancher d’une dissolution de sel commun, et à chasser les charançons en suspendant partout, aux murs et aux toits, dans les héberges et dans les maisons, de l’orviot en fleur. Il avait des “recettes” pour extirper d’un champ la luzette, la nielle, la vesce, la gaverolle, la queue-de-renard, toutes les herbes parasites qui mangent le blé. Il défendait une lapinière contre les rats rien qu'avec l'odeur d'un petit cochon de Barbarie qu'il y mettait. Un jour il voyait des gens du pays très occupés à arracher des orties. Il regarda ce tas de plantes déracinées et déjà desséchées, et dit:

— C'est mort. Cela serait pourtant bon si l'on savait s'en servir. Quand l'ortie est jeune, la feuille est un légume excellent; quand elle vieillit, elle a des filaments et des fibres comme le chanvre et le lin. La toile d'ortie vaut la toile de chanvre. Hachée, l'ortie est bonne pour la volaille; broyée, elle est bonne pour les bêtes à cornes. La graine de l'ortie mêlée au fourrage donne du luisant au poil des animaux; la racine mêlée au sel produit une belle couleur jaune. C'est du reste un excellent foin qu'on peut faucher deux fois. Et que faut-il à l'ortie? Peu de terre, nul soin, nulle culture. Seulement la graine tombe à mesure qu'elle mûrit, et est difficile à récolter. Voilà tout. Avec quelque peine qu'on prendrait, l'ortie serait utile; on la néglige, elle devient nuisible. Alors on la tue. Que d'hommes ressemblent à l'ortie!

Il ajouta après un silence:

— Mes amis, retenez ceci, il n'y a ni mauvaises herbes ni mauvais hommes. Il n'y a que de mauvais cultivateurs.

Les enfants l'aimaient encore parce qu'il savait faire de charmants petits ouvrages avec de la paille et des noix de coco.

Quand il voyait la porte d'une église tendue de noir, il entrait; il recherchait un enterrement comme d'autres recherchent un baptême. Le veuvage et le malheur d'autrui l'attiraient à cause de sa grande douceur; il se mêlait aux amis en deuil, aux familles vêtues de noir, aux prêtres gémissant autour d'un cercueil. Il semblait donner volontiers pour texte à ses pensées ces psalmodies funèbres pleines de la vision d'un autre monde. L'œil au ciel, il écoutait, avec une sorte d'aspiration vers tous les mystères de l'infini, ces voix tristes qui chantent sur le bord de l'abîme obscur de la mort.

Il faisait une foule de bonnes actions en se cachant comme on se cache pour les mauvaises. Il pénétrait à la dérobée, le soir, dans les maisons; il montait furtivement des escaliers. Un pauvre diable, en rentrant dans son galetas, trouvait que sa porte avait été ouverte, quelquefois même forcée, dans son absence. Le pauvre homme se récriait: quelque malfaiteur est venu! Il entrait, et la première chose qu'il voyait, c'était une pièce d'or oubliée sur un meuble. “Le malfaiteur” qui était venu, c’était le père Madeleine.

Il était affable et triste. Le peuple disait: «Voilà un homme riche qui n’a pas l’air fier. Voilà un homme heureux qui n’a pas l’air content.»

Quelques-uns prétendaient que c’était un personnage mystérieux, et affirmaient qu’on n’entrait jamais dans sa chambre, laquelle était une vraie cellule d’anachorète meublée de sabliers ailés et enjolivée de tibias en croix et de têtes de mort. Cela se disait beaucoup, si bien que quelques jeunes femmes élégantes et malignes de Montreuil-sur-mer vinrent chez lui un jour, et lui demandèrent:

— Monsieur le maire, montrez-nous donc votre chambre. On dit que c’est une grotte.

Il sourit, et les introduisit sur-le-champ dans cette «grotte». Elles furent bien punies de leur curiosité. C’était une chambre garnie tout bonnement de meubles d’acajou assez laids comme tous les meubles de ce genre et tapissée de papier à douze sous. Elles n’y purent rien remarquer que deux flambeaux de forme vieillie qui étaient sur la cheminée et qui avaient l’air d’être en argent, «car ils étaient contrôlés». Observation pleine de l’esprit des petites villes.

On n’en continua pas moins de dire que personne ne pénétrait dans cette chambre et que c’était une caverne d’ermite, un rêvoir, un trou, un tombeau.

On se chuchotait aussi qu’il avait des sommes «immenses» déposées chez Laffitte, avec cette particularité qu’elles étaient toujours à sa disposition immédiate, de telle sorte, ajoutait-on, que M. Madeleine pourrait arriver un matin chez Laffitte, signer un reçu et emporter ses deux ou trois millions en dix minutes. Dans la réalité ces «deux ou trois millions» se réduisaient, nous l’avons dit, à six cent trente ou quarante mille francs.

Chapitre IV

M. Madeleine en deuil

Au commencement de 1821, les journaux annoncèrent la mort de M. Myriel, évêque de Digne, «surnommé *monseigneur Bienvenu*», et trépassé en odeur de sainteté à l'âge de quatre-vingt-deux ans.

L'évêque de Digne, pour ajouter ici un détail que les journaux omirent, était, quand il mourut, depuis plusieurs années aveugle, et content d'être aveugle, sa sœur étant près de lui.

Disons-le en passant, être aveugle et être aimé, c'est en effet, sur cette terre où rien n'est complet, une des formes les plus étrangement exquises du bonheur. Avoir continuellement à ses côtés une femme, une fille, une sœur, un être charmant, qui est là parce que vous avez besoin d'elle et parce qu'elle ne peut se passer de vous, se savoir indispensable à qui nous est nécessaire, pouvoir incessamment mesurer son affection à la quantité de présence qu'elle nous donne, et se dire: puisqu'elle me consacre tout son temps, c'est que j'ai tout son cœur; voir la pensée à défaut de la figure, constater la fidélité d'un être dans l'éclipse du monde, percevoir le frôlement d'une robe comme un bruit d'ailes, l'entendre aller et venir, sortir, rentrer, parler, chanter, et songer qu'on est le centre de ces pas, de cette parole, de ce chant, manifester à chaque minute sa propre attraction, se sentir d'autant plus puissant qu'on est plus infirme, devenir dans l'obscurité, et par l'obscurité, l'astre autour duquel gravite cet ange, peu de félicités égalent celle-là. Le suprême bonheur de la vie, c'est la conviction qu'on est aimé; aimé pour soi-même, disons mieux, aimé malgré soi-même; cette conviction, l'aveugle l'a. Dans cette détresse, être servi, c'est être caressé. Lui manque-t-il quelque chose? Non. Ce n'est point perdre la lumière qu'avoir l'amour. Et quel amour! un amour entièrement fait de vertu. Il n'y a point de cécité où il y a certitude. L'âme à tâtons cherche l'âme, et la trouve. Et cette âme trouvée et prouvée est une femme. Une main vous soutient, c'est la sienne; une bouche effleure votre front, c'est sa bouche; vous entendez une respiration tout près de vous, c'est elle. Tout avoir d'elle, depuis son culte jusqu'à sa pitié, n'être jamais quitté, avoir cette douce faiblesse qui vous secourt, s'appuyer sur ce roseau inébranlable, toucher de ses mains la providence et pouvoir la prendre dans ses bras, Dieu palpable, quel ravissement! Le cœur, cette céleste fleur obscure, entre dans un épanouissement mystérieux. On ne donnerait pas cette ombre pour toute la clarté. L'âme ange est là, sans cesse là; si elle s'éloigne, c'est pour revenir; elle s'efface comme le rêve et reparaît comme la réalité. On sent de la chaleur qui approche, la voilà. On déborde de sérénité, de gaîté et d'extase; on est un rayonnement dans la nuit. Et mille petits soins. Des riens qui sont énormes dans ce vide. Les plus ineffables accents de la voix féminine employés à vous bercer, et suppléant pour vous à l'univers évanoui. On est caressé avec de l'âme. On ne voit rien, mais on se sent adoré. C'est un paradis de ténèbres.

C'est de ce paradis que monseigneur Bienvenu était passé à l'autre.

L'annonce de sa mort fut reproduite par le journal local de Montreuil-sur-mer. M. Madeleine parut le lendemain tout en noir avec un crêpe à son chapeau.

On remarqua dans la ville ce deuil, et l'on jasa. Cela parut une lueur sur l'origine de M. Madeleine. On en conclut qu'il avait quelque alliance avec le vénérable évêque. *Il drape pour l'évêque de Digne*, dirent les salons; cela rehaussa fort M. Madeleine, et lui donna subitement et d'emblée une certaine considération dans le monde noble de Montreuil-sur-mer. Le microscopique faubourg Saint-Germain de l'endroit songea à faire cesser la quarantaine de M. Madeleine, parent probable d'un évêque. M. Madeleine s'aperçut de l'avancement qu'il obtenait à plus de révérences des vieilles femmes et à plus de sourires des jeunes. Un soir, une doyenne de ce petit grand monde-là, curieuse par droit d'ancienneté, se hasarda à lui demander:

— Monsieur le maire est sans doute cousin du feu évêque de Digne?

Il dit:

— Non, madame.

— Mais, reprit la douairière, vous en portez le deuil?

Il répondit:

— C'est que dans ma jeunesse j'ai été laquais dans sa famille.

Une remarque qu'on faisait encore, c'est que, chaque fois qu'il passait dans la ville un jeune savoyard courant le pays et cherchant des cheminées à ramoner, M. le maire le faisait appeler, lui demandait son nom, et lui donnait de l'argent. Les petits savoyards se le disaient, et il en passait beaucoup.

Chapitre V

Vagues éclairs à l’horizon

Peu à peu, et avec le temps, toutes les oppositions étaient tombées. Il y avait eu d’abord contre M. Madeleine, sorte de loi que subissent toujours ceux qui s’élèvent, des noirceurs et des calomnies, puis ce ne fut plus que des méchancetés, puis ce ne fut que des malices, puis cela s’évanouit tout à fait; le respect devint complet, unanime, cordial, et il arriva un moment, vers 1821, où ce mot: monsieur le maire, fut prononcé à Montreuil-sur-mer presque du même accent que ce mot: monseigneur l’évêque, était prononcé à Digne en 1815. On venait de dix lieues à la ronde consulter M. Madeleine. Il terminait les différends, il empêchait les procès, il réconciliait les ennemis. Chacun le prenait pour juge de son bon droit. Il semblait qu’il eût pour âme le livre de la loi naturelle. Ce fut comme une contagion de vénération qui, en six ou sept ans et de proche en proche, gagna tout le pays.

Un seul homme, dans la ville et dans l’arrondissement, se déroba absolument à cette contagion, et, quoi que fît le père Madeleine, y demeura rebelle, comme si une sorte d’instinct, incorruptible et imperturbable, l’éveillait et l’inquiétait. Il semblerait en effet qu’il existe dans certains hommes un véritable instinct bestial, pur et intègre comme tout instinct, qui crée les antipathies et les sympathies, qui sépare fatalement une nature d’une autre nature, qui n’hésite pas, qui ne se trouble, ne se tait et ne se dément jamais, clair dans son obscurité, infaillible, impérieux, réfractaire à tous les conseils de l’intelligence et à tous les dissolvants de la raison, et qui, de quelque façon que les destinées soient faites, avertit secrètement l’homme-chien de la présence de l’homme-chat, et l’homme-renard de la présence de l’homme-lion.

Souvent, quand M. Madeleine passait dans une rue, calme, affectueux, entouré des bénédictions de tous, il arrivait qu’un homme de haute taille, vêtu d’une redingote gris de fer, armé d’une grosse canne et coiffé d’un chapeau rabattu, se retournait brusquement derrière lui, et le suivait des yeux jusqu’à ce qu’il eût disparu, croisant les bras, secouant lentement la tête, et haussant sa lèvre supérieure avec sa lèvre inférieure jusqu’à son nez, sorte de grimace significative qui pourrait se traduire par: «Mais qu’est-ce que c'est que cet homme-là? — Pour sûr je l'ai vu quelque part. — En tout cas, je ne suis toujours pas sa dupe.»

Ce personnage, grave d'une gravité presque menaçante, était de ceux qui, même rapidement entrevus, préoccupent l'observateur.

Il se nommait Javert, et il était de la police.

Il remplissait à Montreuil-sur-mer les fonctions pénibles, mais utiles, d'inspecteur. Il n'avait pas vu les commencements de Madeleine. Javert devait le poste qu'il occupait à la protection de M. Chabouillet, le secrétaire du ministre d'État, comte Anglès, alors préfet de police à Paris. Quand Javert était arrivé à Montreuil-sur-mer, la fortune du grand manufacturier était déjà faite, et le père Madeleine était devenu monsieur Madeleine.

Certains officiers de police ont une physionomie à part et qui se complique d'un air de bassesse mêlé à un air d'autorité. Javert avait cette physionomie, moins la bassesse.

Dans notre conviction, si les âmes étaient visibles aux yeux, on verrait distinctement cette chose étrange que chacun des individus de l'espèce humaine correspond à quelqu'une des espèces de la création animale; et l'on pourrait reconnaître aisément cette vérité à peine entrevue par le penseur, que, depuis l'huître jusqu'à l'aigle, depuis le porc jusqu'au tigre, tous les animaux sont dans l'homme et que chacun d'eux est dans un homme. Quelquefois même plusieurs d'entre eux à la fois.

Les animaux ne sont autre chose que les figures de nos vertus et de nos vices, errantes devant nos yeux, les fantômes visibles de nos âmes. Dieu nous les montre pour nous faire réfléchir. Seulement, comme les animaux ne sont que des ombres, Dieu ne les a point faits éducables dans le sens complet du mot; à quoi bon? Au contraire, nos âmes étant des réalités et ayant une fin qui leur est propre, Dieu leur a donné l'intelligence, c'est-à-dire l'éducation possible. L'éducation sociale bien faite peut toujours tirer d'une âme, quelle qu'elle soit, l'utilité qu'elle contient.

Ceci soit dit, bien entendu, au point de vue restreint de la vie terrestre apparente, et sans préjuger la question profonde de la personnalité antérieure et ultérieure des êtres qui ne sont pas l'homme. Le moi visible n'autorise en aucune façon le penseur à nier le moi latent. Cette réserve faite, passons.

Maintenant, si l'on admet un moment avec nous que dans tout homme il y a une des espèces animales de la création, il nous sera facile de dire ce que c'était que l'officier de paix Javert.

Les paysans asturiens sont convaincus que dans toute portée de louve il y a un chien, lequel est tué par la mère, sans quoi en grandissant il dévorerait les autres petits.

Donnez une face humaine à ce chien fils d'une louve, et ce sera Javert.

Javert était né dans une prison d'une tireuse de cartes dont le mari était aux galères. En grandissant, il pensa qu'il était en dehors de la société et désespéra d'y rentrer jamais. Il remarqua que la société maintient irrémissiblement en dehors d'elle deux classes d'hommes, ceux qui l'attaquent et ceux qui la gardent; il n'avait le choix qu'entre ces deux classes; en même temps il se sentait je ne sais quel fond de rigidité, de régularité et de probité, compliqué d'une inexprimable haine pour cette race de bohèmes dont il était. Il entra dans la police.

Il y réussit. À quarante ans il était inspecteur.

Il avait dans sa jeunesse été employé dans les chiourmes du midi.

Avant d'aller plus loin, entendons-nous sur ce mot face humaine que nous appliquions tout à l'heure à Javert.

La face humaine de Javert consistait en un nez camard, avec deux profondes narines vers lesquelles montaient sur ses deux joues d'énormes favoris. On se sentait mal à l'aise la première fois qu'on voyait ces deux forêts et ces deux cavernes. Quand Javert riait, ce qui était rare et terrible, ses lèvres minces s'écartaient, et laissaient voir, non seulement ses dents, mais ses gencives, et il se faisait autour de son nez un plissement épaté et sauvage comme sur un mufle de bête fauve. Javert sérieux était un dogue; lorsqu'il riait, c'était un tigre. Du reste, peu de crâne, beaucoup de mâchoire, les cheveux cachant le front et tombant sur les sourcils, entre les deux yeux un froncement central permanent comme une étoile de colère, le regard obscur, la bouche pincée et redoutable, l'air du commandement féroce.

Cet homme était composé de deux sentiments très simples, et relativement très bons, mais qu'il faisait presque mauvais à force de les exagérer: le respect de l'autorité, la haine de la rébellion; et à ses yeux le vol, le meurtre, tous les crimes, n'étaient que des formes de la rébellion. Il enveloppait dans une sorte de foi aveugle et profonde tout ce qui a une fonction dans l'État, depuis le premier ministre jusqu'au garde champêtre. Il couvrait de mépris, d'aversion et de dégoût tout ce qui avait franchi une fois le seuil légal du mal. Il était absolu et n'admettait pas d'exceptions. D'une part il disait:

— Le fonctionnaire ne peut se tromper; le magistrat n’a jamais tort.

D’autre part il disait:

— Ceux-ci sont irrémédiablement perdus. Rien de bon n’en peut sortir.

Il partageait pleinement l’opinion de ces esprits extrêmes qui attribuent à la loi humaine je ne sais quel pouvoir de faire ou, si l’on veut, de constater des damnés, et qui mettent un Styx au bas de la société. Il était stoïque, sérieux, austère; rêveur triste; humble et hautain comme les fanatiques. Son regard était une vrille. Cela était froid et cela perçait. Toute sa vie tenait dans ces deux mots: veiller et surveiller. Il avait introduit la ligne droite dans ce qu’il y a de plus tortueux au monde; il avait la conscience de son utilité, la religion de ses fonctions, et il était espion comme on est prêtre. Malheur à qui tombait sous sa main! Il eût arrêté son père s’évadant du bagne et dénoncé sa mère en rupture de ban. Et il l’eût fait avec cette sorte de satisfaction intérieure que donne la vertu. Avec cela une vie de privations, l’isolement, l’abnégation, la chasteté, jamais une distraction. C’était le devoir implacable, la police comprise comme les Spartiates comprenaient Sparte, un guet impitoyable, une honnêteté farouche, un mouchard marmoréen, Brutus dans Vidocq.

Toute la personne de Javert exprimait l’homme qui épie et qui se dérobe. L’école mystique de Joseph de Maistre, laquelle à cette époque assaisonnait de haute cosmogonie ce qu’on appelait les journaux ultras, n’eût pas manqué de dire que Javert était un symbole. On ne voyait pas son front qui disparaissait sous son chapeau, on ne voyait pas ses yeux qui se perdaient sous ses sourcils, on ne voyait pas son menton qui plongeait dans sa cravate, on ne voyait pas ses mains qui rentraient dans ses manches, on ne voyait pas sa canne qu’il portait sous sa redingote. Mais l’occasion venue, on voyait tout à coup sortir de toute cette ombre, comme d’une embuscade, un front anguleux et étroit, un regard funeste, un menton menaçant, des mains énormes; et un gourdin monstrueux.

À ses moments de loisir, qui étaient peu fréquents, tout en haïssant les livres, il lisait; ce qui fait qu’il n’était pas complètement illettré. Cela se reconnaissait à quelque emphase dans la parole.

Il n’avait aucun vice, nous l’avons dit. Quand il était content de lui, il s’accordait une prise de tabac. Il tenait à l’humanité par là.

On comprendra sans peine que Javert était l’effroi de toute cette classe que la statistique annuelle du ministère de la justice désigne sous la rubrique: *Gens sans aveu*. Le nom de Javert prononcé les mettait en déroute; la face de Javert apparaissant les pétrifiait.

Tel était cet homme formidable.

Javert était comme un œil toujours fixé sur M. Madeleine. Œil plein de soupçon et de conjectures. M. Madeleine avait fini par s’en apercevoir, mais il sembla que cela fût insignifiant pour lui. Il ne fit pas même une question à Javert, il ne le cherchait ni ne l’évitait, et il portait, sans paraître y faire attention, ce regard gênant et presque pesant. Il traitait Javert comme tout le monde, avec aisance et bonté.

À quelques paroles échappées à Javert, on devinait qu’il avait recherché secrètement, avec cette curiosité qui tient à la race et où il entre autant d’instinct que de volonté, toutes les traces antérieures que le père Madeleine avait pu laisser ailleurs. Il paraissait savoir, et il disait parfois à mots couverts, que quelqu’un avait pris certaines informations dans un certain pays sur une certaine famille disparue. Une fois il lui arriva de dire, se parlant à lui-même:

— Je crois que je le tiens!

Puis il resta trois jours pensif sans prononcer une parole. Il paraît que le fil qu’il croyait tenir s’était rompu. Du reste, et ceci est le correctif nécessaire à ce que le sens de certains mots pourrait présenter de trop absolu, il ne peut y avoir rien de vraiment infaillible dans une créature humaine, et le propre de l’instinct est précisément de pouvoir être troublé, dépisté et dérouté. Sans quoi il serait supérieur à l’intelligence, et la bête se trouverait avoir une meilleure lumière que l’homme.

Javert était évidemment quelque peu déconcerté par le complet naturel et la tranquillité de M. Madeleine.

Un jour pourtant son étrange manière d’être parut faire impression sur M. Madeleine. Voici à quelle occasion.

Chapitre VI

Le père Fauchelevent

M. Madeleine passait un matin dans une ruelle non pavée de Montreuil-sur-mer. Il entendit du bruit et vit un groupe à quelque distance. Il y alla. Un vieux homme, nommé le père Fauchelevent, venait de tomber sous sa charrette dont le cheval s'était abattu.

Ce Fauchelevent était un des rares ennemis qu'eût encore M. Madeleine à cette époque. Lorsque Madeleine était arrivé dans le pays, Fauchelevent, ancien tabellion et paysan presque lettré, avait un commerce qui commençait à aller mal. Fauchelevent avait vu ce simple ouvrier qui s'enrichissait, tandis que lui, maître, se ruinait. Cela l'avait rempli de jalousie, et il avait fait ce qu'il avait pu en toute occasion pour nuire à Madeleine. Puis la faillite était venue, et, vieux, n'ayant plus à lui qu'une charrette et un cheval, sans famille et sans enfants du reste, pour vivre il s'était fait charretier.

Le cheval avait les deux cuisses cassées et ne pouvait se relever. Le vieillard était engagé entre les roues. La chute avait été tellement malheureuse que toute la voiture pesait sur sa poitrine. La charrette était assez lourdement chargée. Le père Fauchelevent poussait des râles lamentables. On avait essayé de le tirer, mais en vain. Un effort désordonné, une aide maladroite, une secousse à faux pouvaient l'achever. Il était impossible de le dégager autrement qu'en soulevant la voiture par-dessous. Javert, qui était survenu au moment de l'accident, avait envoyé chercher un cric.

M. Madeleine arriva. On s'écarta avec respect.

— À l'aide! criait le vieux Fauchelevent. Qui est-ce qui est bon enfant pour sauver le vieux?

M. Madeleine se tourna vers les assistants:

— A-t-on un cric?

— On en est allé quérir un, répondit un paysan.

— Dans combien de temps l'aura-t-on?

— On est allé au plus près, au lieu Flachot, où il y a un maréchal; mais c'est égal, il faudra bien un bon quart d'heure.

— Un quart d'heure! s'écria Madeleine.

Il avait plu la veille, le sol était détrempé, la charrette s’enfonçait dans la terre à chaque instant et comprimait de plus en plus la poitrine du vieux charretier. Il était évident qu’avant cinq minutes il aurait les côtes brisées.

— Il est impossible d’attendre un quart d’heure, dit Madeleine aux paysans qui regardaient.

— Il faut bien!

— Mais il ne sera plus temps! Vous ne voyez donc pas que la charrette s’enfonce?

— Dame!

— Écoutez, reprit Madeleine, il y a encore assez de place sous la voiture pour qu’un homme s’y glisse et la soulève avec son dos. Rien qu’une demi-minute, et l’on tirera le pauvre homme. Y a-t-il ici quelqu’un qui ait des reins et du cœur? Cinq louis d’or à gagner!

Personne ne bougea dans le groupe.

— Dix louis, dit Madeleine.

Les assistants baissaient les yeux. Un d’eux murmura:

— Il faudrait être diablement fort. Et puis, on risque de se faire écraser!

— Allons! recommença Madeleine, vingt louis! Même silence.

— Ce n’est pas la bonne volonté qui leur manque, dit une voix.

M. Madeleine se retourna, et reconnut Javert. Il ne l’avait pas aperçu en arrivant. Javert continua:

— C’est la force. Il faudrait être un terrible homme pour faire la chose de lever une voiture comme cela sur son dos.

Puis, regardant fixement M. Madeleine, il poursuivit en appuyant sur chacun des mots qu’il prononçait:

— Monsieur Madeleine, je n’ai jamais connu qu’un seul homme capable de faire ce que vous demandez là.

Madeleine tressaillit.

Javert ajouta avec un air d’indifférence, mais sans quitter des yeux Madeleine:

— C’était un forçat.

— Ah! dit Madeleine.

— Du bagne de Toulon.

Madeleine devint pâle.

Cependant la charrette continuait à s’enfoncer lentement. Le père Fauchelevent râlait et hurlait:

— J’étouffe! Ça me brise les côtes! Un cric! quelque chose! Ah!

Madeleine regarda autour de lui:

— Il n’y a donc personne qui veuille gagner vingt louis et sauver la vie à ce pauvre vieux?

Aucun des assistants ne remua. Javert reprit:

— Je n’ai jamais connu qu’un homme qui pût remplacer un cric. C’était ce forçat.

— Ah! voilà que ça m’écrase! cria le vieillard.

Madeleine leva la tête, rencontra l’œil de faucon de Javert toujours attaché sur lui, regarda les paysans immobiles, et sourit tristement. Puis, sans dire une parole, il tomba à genoux, et avant même que la foule eût eu le temps de jeter un cri, il était sous la voiture.

Il y eut un affreux moment d’attente et de silence.

On vit Madeleine presque à plat ventre sous ce poids effrayant essayer deux fois en vain de rapprocher ses coudes de ses genoux. On lui cria:

— Père Madeleine! retirez-vous de là!

Le vieux Fauchelevent lui-même lui dit:

— Monsieur Madeleine! allez-vous-en! C’est qu’il faut que je meure, voyez-vous! Laissez-moi! Vous allez vous faire écraser aussi!

Madeleine ne répondit pas.

Les assistants haletaient. Les roues avaient continué de s’enfoncer, et il était déjà devenu presque impossible que Madeleine sortît de dessous la voiture.

Tout à coup on vit l’énorme masse s’ébranler, la charrette se soulevait lentement, les roues sortaient à demi de l’ornière. On entendit une voix étouffée qui criait:

— Dépêchez-vous! aidez!

C’était Madeleine qui venait de faire un dernier effort.

Ils se précipitèrent. Le dévouement d’un seul avait donné de la force et du courage à tous. La charrette fut enlevée par vingt bras. Le vieux Fauchelevent était sauvé.

Madeleine se releva. Il était blême, quoique ruisselant de sueur. Ses habits étaient déchirés et couverts de boue. Tous pleuraient. Le vieillard lui baisait les genoux et l’appelait le bon Dieu. Lui, il avait sur le visage je ne sais quelle expression de souffrance heureuse et céleste, et il fixait son œil tranquille sur Javert qui le regardait toujours.

Chapitre VII

Fauchelevent devient jardinier à Paris

Fauchelevent s’était démis la rotule dans sa chute. Le père Madeleine le fit transporter dans une infirmerie qu’il avait établie pour ses ouvriers dans le bâtiment même de sa fabrique et qui était desservie par deux sœurs de charité. Le lendemain matin, le vieillard trouva un billet de mille francs sur sa table de nuit, avec ce mot de la main du père Madeleine: *Je vous achète votre charrette et votre cheval*. La charrette était brisée et le cheval était mort. Fauchelevent guérit, mais son genou resta ankylosé. M. Madeleine, par les recommandations des sœurs et de son curé, fit placer le bonhomme comme jardinier dans un couvent de femmes du quartier Saint-Antoine à Paris.

Quelque temps après, M. Madeleine fut nommé maire. La première fois que Javert vit M. Madeleine revêtu de l’écharpe qui lui donnait toute autorité sur la ville, il éprouva cette sorte de frémissement qu’éprouverait un dogue qui flairerait un loup sous les habits de son maître. À partir de ce moment, il l’évita le plus qu’il put. Quand les besoins du service l’exigeaient impérieusement et qu’il ne pouvait faire autrement que de se trouver avec M. le maire, il lui parlait avec un respect profond.

Cette prospérité créée à Montreuil-sur-mer par le père Madeleine avait, outre les signes visibles que nous avons indiqués, un autre symptôme qui, pour n’être pas visible, n’était pas moins significatif. Ceci ne trompe jamais.

Quand la population souffre, quand le travail manque, quand le commerce est nul, le contribuable résiste à l’impôt par pénurie, épuise et dépasse les délais, et l’état dépense beaucoup d’argent en frais de contrainte et de rentrée. Quand le travail abonde, quand le pays est heureux et riche, l’impôt se paye aisément et coûte peu à l’état. On peut dire que la misère et la richesse publiques ont un thermomètre infaillible, les frais de perception de l’impôt. En sept ans, les frais de perception de l’impôt s’étaient réduits des trois quarts dans l’arrondissement de Montreuil-sur-mer, ce qui faisait fréquemment citer cet arrondissement entre tous par M. de Villèle, alors ministre des finances.

Telle était la situation du pays, lorsque Fantine y revint. Personne ne se souvenait plus d’elle. Heureusement la porte de la fabrique de M.

Madeleine était comme un visage ami. Elle s’y présenta, et fut admise dans l’atelier des femmes. Le métier était tout nouveau pour Fantine, elle n’y pouvait être bien adroite, elle ne tirait donc de sa journée de travail que peu de chose, mais enfin cela suffisait, le problème était résolu, elle gagnait sa vie.

Chapitre VIII

Madame Victurnien dépense trente-cinq francs pour la morale

Quand Fantine vit qu’elle vivait, elle eut un moment de joie. Vivre honnêtement de son travail, quelle grâce du ciel! Le goût du travail lui revint vraiment. Elle acheta un miroir, se réjouit d’y regarder sa jeunesse, ses beaux cheveux et ses belles dents, oublia beaucoup de choses, ne songea plus qu’à sa Cosette et à l’avenir possible, et fut presque heureuse. Elle loua une petite chambre et la meubla à crédit sur son travail futur; reste de ses habitudes de désordre.

Ne pouvant pas dire qu’elle était mariée, elle s’était bien gardée, comme nous l’avons déjà fait entrevoir, de parler de sa petite fille.

En ces commencements, on l’a vu, elle payait exactement les Thénardier. Comme elle ne savait que signer, elle était obligée de leur écrire par un écrivain public.

Elle écrivait souvent. Cela fut remarqué. On commença à dire tout bas dans l’atelier des femmes que Fantine «écrivait des lettres» et qu’«elle avait des allures».

Il n’y a rien de tel pour épier les actions des gens que ceux qu’elles ne regardent pas. — Pourquoi ce monsieur ne vient-il jamais qu’à la brune? pourquoi monsieur un tel n’accroche-t-il jamais sa clef au clou le jeudi? pourquoi prend-il toujours les petites rues? pourquoi madame descend-elle toujours de son fiacre avant d’arriver à la maison? pourquoi envoie-t-elle acheter un cahier de papier à lettres, quand elle en a «plein sa papeterie?» etc., etc. — Il existe des êtres qui, pour connaître le mot de ces énigmes, lesquelles leur sont du reste parfaitement indifférentes, dépensent plus d’argent, prodiguent plus de temps, se donnent plus de peine qu’il n’en faudrait pour dix bonnes actions; et cela, gratuitement, pour le plaisir, sans être payés de la curiosité autrement que par la curiosité. Ils suivront celui-ci ou celle-là des jours entiers, feront faction des heures à des coins de rue, sous des portes d’allées, la nuit, par le froid et par la pluie, corrompront des commissionnaires, griseront des cochers de fiacre et des laquais, achèteront une femme de chambre, feront acquisition d’un portier. Pourquoi? pour rien. Pur acharnement de voir, de savoir et de pénétrer. Pure démangeaison de dire. Et souvent ces secrets connus, ces mystères publiés, ces énigmes éclairées du grand jour, entraînent des catastrophes, des duels, des faillites, des familles ruinées, des existences brisées, à la grande joie de ceux qui ont «tout découvert» sans intérêt et par pur instinct. Chose triste.

Certaines personnes sont méchantes uniquement par besoin de parler. Leur conversation, causerie dans le salon, bavardage dans l'antichambre, est comme ces cheminées qui usent vite le bois; il leur faut beaucoup de combustible; et le combustible, c'est le prochain.

On observa donc Fantine.

Avec cela, plus d'une était jalouse de ses cheveux blonds et de ses dents blanches. On constata que dans l'atelier, au milieu des autres, elle se détournait souvent pour essuyer une larme. C'étaient les moments où elle songeait à son enfant; peut-être aussi à l'homme qu'elle avait aimé.

C'est un douloureux labeur que la rupture des sombres attaches du passé.

On constata qu'elle écrivait, au moins deux fois par mois, toujours à la même adresse, et qu'elle affranchissait la lettre. On parvint à se procurer l'adresse: *Monsieur, Monsieur Thénardier, aubergiste, à Montfermeil*. On fit jaser au cabaret l'écrivain public, vieux bonhomme qui ne pouvait pas emplir son estomac de vin rouge sans vider sa poche aux secrets. Bref, on sut que Fantine avait un enfant. «Ce devait être une espèce de fille.» Il se trouva une commère qui fit le voyage de Montfermeil, parla aux Thénardier, et dit à son retour: «Pour mes trente-cinq francs, j'en ai eu le cœur net. J'ai vu l'enfant!»

La commère qui fit cela était une gorgone appelée madame Victurnien, gardienne et portière de la vertu de tout le monde. Madame Victurnien avait cinquante-six ans, et doublait le masque de la laideur du masque de la vieillesse. Voix chevrotante, esprit capricant. Cette vieille femme avait été jeune, chose étonnante. Dans sa jeunesse, en plein 93, elle avait épousé un moine échappé du cloître en bonnet rouge et passé des bernardins aux jacobins. Elle était sèche, rêche, revêche, pointue, épineuse, presque venimeuse; tout en se souvenant de son moine dont elle était veuve, et qui l'avait fort domptée et pliée. C'était une ortie où l'on voyait le froissement du froc. À la restauration, elle s'était faite bigote, et si énergiquement que les prêtres lui avaient pardonné son moine. Elle avait un petit bien qu'elle léguait bruyamment à une communauté religieuse. Elle était fort bien vue à l'évêché d'Arras. Cette madame Victurnien donc alla à Montfermeil, et revint en disant: «J'ai vu l'enfant».

Tout cela prit du temps. Fantine était depuis plus d’un an à la fabrique, lorsqu’un matin la surveillante de l’atelier lui remit, de la part de M. le maire, cinquante francs, en lui disant qu’elle ne faisait plus partie de l’atelier et en l’engageant, de la part de M. le maire, à quitter le pays.

C’était précisément dans ce même mois que les Thénardier, après avoir demandé douze francs au lieu de six, venaient d’exiger quinze francs au lieu de douze.

Fantine fut atterrée. Elle ne pouvait s’en aller du pays, elle devait son loyer et ses meubles. Cinquante francs ne suffisaient pas pour acquitter cette dette. Elle balbutia quelques mots suppliants. La surveillante lui signifia qu’elle eût à sortir sur-le-champ de l’atelier. Fantine n’était du reste qu’une ouvrière médiocre. Accablée de honte plus encore que de désespoir, elle quitta l’atelier et rentra dans sa chambre. Sa faute était donc maintenant connue de tous!

Elle ne se sentit plus la force de dire un mot. On lui conseilla de voir M. le maire; elle n’osa pas. M. le maire lui donnait cinquante francs, parce qu’il était bon, et la chassait, parce qu’il était juste. Elle plia sous cet arrêt.

Chapitre IX

Succès de Madame Victurnien

La veuve du moine fut donc bonne à quelque chose.

Du reste, M. Madeleine n'avait rien su de tout cela. Ce sont là de ces combinaisons d'événements dont la vie est pleine. M. Madeleine avait pour habitude de n'entrer presque jamais dans l'atelier des femmes. Il avait mis à la tête de cet atelier une vieille fille, que le curé lui avait donnée, et il avait toute confiance dans cette surveillante, personne vraiment respectable, ferme, équitable, intègre, remplie de la charité qui consiste à donner, mais n'ayant pas au même degré la charité qui consiste à comprendre et à pardonner. M. Madeleine se remettait de tout sur elle. Les meilleurs hommes sont souvent forcés de déléguer leur autorité. C'est dans cette pleine puissance et avec la conviction qu'elle faisait bien, que la surveillante avait instruit le procès, jugé, condamné et exécuté Fantine.

Quant aux cinquante francs, elle les avait donnés sur une somme que M. Madeleine lui confiait pour aumônes et secours aux ouvrières et dont elle ne rendait pas compte.

Fantine s'offrit comme servante dans le pays; elle alla d'une maison à l'autre. Personne ne voulut d'elle. Elle n'avait pu quitter la ville. Le marchand fripier auquel elle devait ses meubles, quels meubles! lui avait dit: «Si vous vous en allez, je vous fais arrêter comme voleuse.» Le propriétaire auquel elle devait son loyer, lui avait dit:

«Vous êtes jeune et jolie, vous pouvez payer.» Elle partagea les cinquante francs entre le propriétaire et le fripier, rendit au marchand les trois quarts de son mobilier, ne garda que le nécessaire, et se trouva sans travail, sans état, n'ayant plus que son lit, et devant encore environ cent francs.

Elle se mit à coudre de grosses chemises pour les soldats de la garnison, et gagnait douze sous par jour. Sa fille lui en coûtait dix. C'est en ce moment qu'elle commença à mal payer les Thénardier.

Cependant une vieille femme qui lui allumait sa chandelle quand elle rentrait le soir, lui enseigna l'art de vivre dans la misère. Derrière vivre de peu, il y a vivre de rien. Ce sont deux chambres; la première est obscure, la seconde est noire.

Fantine apprit comment on se passe tout à fait de feu en hiver, comment on renonce à un oiseau qui vous mange un liard de millet tous les deux jours, comment on fait de son jupon sa couverture et de sa couverture son jupon, comment on ménage sa chandelle en prenant son repas à la lumière de la fenêtre d'en face. On ne sait pas tout ce que certains êtres faibles, qui ont vieilli dans le dénûment et l'honnêteté, savent tirer d'un sou. Cela finit par être un talent. Fantine acquit ce sublime talent et reprit un peu de courage.

À cette époque, elle disait à une voisine:

— Bah! je me dis: en ne dormant que cinq heures et en travaillant tout le reste à mes coutures, je parviendrai bien toujours à gagner à peu près du pain. Et puis, quand on est triste, on mange moins. Eh bien! des souffrances, des inquiétudes, un peu de pain d'un côté, des chagrins de l'autre, tout cela me nourrira.

Dans cette détresse, avoir sa petite fille eût été un étrange bonheur. Elle songea à la faire venir. Mais quoi! lui faire partager son dénûment! Et puis, elle devait aux Thénardier! comment s'acquitter? Et le voyage! comment le payer?

La vieille qui lui avait donné ce qu'on pourrait appeler des leçons de vie indigente était une sainte fille nommée Marguerite, dévote de la bonne dévotion, pauvre, et charitable pour les pauvres et même pour les riches, sachant tout juste assez écrire pour signer *Margueritte*, et croyant en Dieu, ce qui est la science.

Il y a beaucoup de ces vertus-là en bas; un jour elles seront en haut. Cette vie a un lendemain.

Dans les premiers temps, Fantine avait été si honteuse qu'elle n'avait pas osé sortir. Quand elle était dans la rue, elle devinait qu'on se retournait derrière elle et qu'on la montrait du doigt; tout le monde la regardait et personne ne la saluait; le mépris âcre et froid des passants lui pénétrait dans la chair et dans l'âme comme une bise.

Dans les petites villes, il semble qu'une malheureuse soit nue sous les sarcasmes et la curiosité de tous. À Paris, du moins, personne ne vous connaît, et cette obscurité est un vêtement. Oh! comme elle eût souhaité venir à Paris! Impossible.

Il fallut bien s'accoutumer à la déconsidération, comme elle s'était accoutumée à l'indigence. Peu à peu elle en prit son parti. Après deux ou trois mois elle secoua la honte et se remit à sortir comme si de rien n'était.

— Cela m’est bien égal, dit-elle.

Elle alla et vint, la tête haute, avec un sourire amer, et sentit qu’elle devenait effrontée.

Madame Victurnien quelquefois la voyait passer de sa fenêtre, remarquait la détresse de «cette créature», grâce à elle “remise à sa place”, et se félicitait. Les méchants ont un bonheur noir.

L’excès du travail fatiguait Fantine, et la petite toux sèche qu’elle avait augmenta. Elle disait quelquefois à sa voisine Marguerite: «Tâtez donc comme mes mains sont chaudes.»

Cependant le matin, quand elle peignait avec un vieux peigne cassé ses beaux cheveux qui ruisselaient comme de la soie floche, elle avait une minute de coquetterie heureuse.

Chapitre X

Suite du succès

Elle avait été congédiée vers la fin de l’hiver; l’été se passa, mais l’hiver revint. Jours courts, moins de travail. L’hiver, point de chaleur, point de lumière, point de midi, le soir touche au matin, brouillard, crépuscule, la fenêtre est grise, on n’y voit pas clair. Le ciel est un soupirail. Toute la journée est une cave. Le soleil a l’air d’un pauvre. L’affreuse saison! L’hiver change en pierre l’eau du ciel et le cœur de l’homme. Ses créanciers la harcelaient.

Fantine gagnait trop peu. Ses dettes avaient grossi. Les Thénardier, mal payés, lui écrivaient à chaque instant des lettres dont le contenu la désolait et dont le port la ruinait. Un jour ils lui écrivirent que sa petite Cosette était toute nue par le froid qu’il faisait, qu’elle avait besoin d’une jupe de laine, et qu’il fallait au moins que la mère envoyât dix francs pour cela. Elle reçut la lettre, et la froissa dans ses mains tout le jour. Le soir elle entra chez un barbier qui habitait le coin de la rue, et défit son peigne. Ses admirables cheveux blonds lui tombèrent jusqu’aux reins.

— Les beaux cheveux! s’écria le barbier.

— Combien m’en donneriez-vous? dit-elle.

— Dix francs.

— Coupez-les.

Elle acheta une jupe de tricot et l’envoya aux Thénardier.

Cette jupe fit les Thénardier furieux. C’était de l’argent qu’ils voulaient. Ils donnèrent la jupe à Eponine. La pauvre Alouette continua de frissonner.

Fantine pensa: «Mon enfant n’a plus froid. Je l’ai habillée de mes cheveux.» Elle mettait de petits bonnets ronds qui cachaient sa tête tondue et avec lesquels elle était encore jolie.

Un travail ténébreux se faisait dans le cœur de Fantine. Quand elle vit qu’elle ne pouvait plus se coiffer, elle commença à tout prendre en haine autour d’elle. Elle avait longtemps partagé la vénération de tous pour le père Madeleine; cependant, à force de se répéter que c’était lui qui l’avait chassée, et qu’il était la cause de son malheur, elle en vint à le haïr lui aussi, lui surtout. Quand elle passait devant la fabrique aux heures où les ouvriers sont sur la porte, elle affectait de rire et de chanter.

Une vieille ouvrière qui la vit une fois chanter et rire de cette façon dit:

— Voilà une fille qui finira mal.

Elle prit un amant, le premier venu, un homme qu’elle n’aimait pas, par bravade, avec la rage dans le cœur. C’était un misérable, une espèce de musicien mendiant, un oisif gueux, qui la battait, et qui la quitta comme elle l’avait pris, avec dégoût. Elle adorait son enfant.

Plus elle descendait, plus tout devenait sombre autour d’elle plus ce doux petit ange rayonnait dans le fond de son âme. Elle disait. Quand je serai riche, j’aurai ma Cosette avec moi; et elle riait. La toux ne la quittait pas, et elle avait des sueurs dans le dos.

Un jour elle reçut des Thénardier une lettre ainsi conçue:

«Cosette est malade d’une maladie qui est dans le pays. Une fièvre miliaire, qu’ils appellent. Il faut des drogues chères. Cela nous ruine et nous ne pouvons plus payer. Si vous ne nous envoyez pas quarante francs avant huit jours, la petite est morte.»

Elle se mit à rire aux éclats, et elle dit à sa vieille voisine:

— Ah! ils sont bons! quarante francs! que ça! ça fait deux napoléons! Où veulent-ils que je les prenne? Sont-ils bêtes, ces paysans!

Cependant elle alla dans l’escalier près d’une lucarne et relut la lettre.

Puis elle descendit l’escalier et sortit en courant et en sautant, riant toujours. Quelqu’un qui la rencontra lui dit:

— Qu’est-ce que vous avez donc à être si gaie?

Elle répondit:

— C’est une bonne bêtise que viennent de m’écrire des gens de la campagne. Ils me demandent quarante francs. Paysans, va!

Comme elle passait sur la place, elle vit beaucoup de monde qui entourait une voiture de forme bizarre sur l’impériale de laquelle pérorait tout debout un homme vêtu de rouge. C’était un bateleur dentiste en tournée, qui offrait au public des râteliers complets, des opiats, des poudres et des élixirs.

Fantine se mêla au groupe et se mit à rire comme les autres de cette harangue où il y avait de l’argot pour la canaille et du jargon pour les gens comme il faut. L’arracheur de dents vit cette belle fille qui riait, et s’écria tout à coup:

— Vous avez de jolies dents, la fille qui riez là. Si vous voulez me vendre vos deux palettes, je vous donne de chaque un napoléon d’or.

— Qu’est-ce que c’est que ça, mes palettes? demanda Fantine.

— Les palettes, reprit le professeur dentiste, c’est les dents de devant, les deux d’en haut.

— Quelle horreur! s’écria Fantine.

— Deux napoléons! grommela une vieille édentée qui était là. Qu’en voilà une qui est heureuse!

Fantine s’enfuit, et se boucha les oreilles pour ne pas entendre la voix enrouée de l’homme qui lui criait: Réfléchissez, la belle! deux napoléons, ça peut servir. Si le cœur vous en dit, venez ce soir à l’auberge du *Tillac d’argent*, vous m’y trouverez.

Fantine rentra, elle était furieuse et conta la chose à sa bonne voisine Marguerite:

— Comprenez-vous cela? ne voilà-t-il pas un abominable homme? comment laisse-t-on des gens comme cela aller dans le pays! M’arracher mes deux dents de devant! mais je serais horrible! Les cheveux repoussent, mais les dents! Ah! le monstre d’homme! j’aimerais mieux me jeter d’un cinquième la tête la première sur le pavé! Il m’a dit qu’il serait ce soir au *Tillac d’argent*.

— Et qu’est-ce qu’il offrait? demanda Marguerite.

— Deux napoléons.

— Cela fait quarante francs.

— Oui, dit Fantine, cela fait quarante francs.

Elle resta pensive, et se mit à son ouvrage. Au bout d’un quart d’heure, elle quitta sa couture et alla relire la lettre des Thénardier sur l’escalier.

En rentrant, elle dit à Marguerite qui travaillait près d’elle:

— Qu’est-ce que c’est donc que cela, une fièvre miliaire? Savez-vous?

— Oui, répondit la vieille fille, c’est une maladie.

— Ça a donc besoin de beaucoup de drogues?

— Oh! des drogues terribles.

— Où ça vous prend-il?

— C’est une maladie qu’on a comme ça.

— Cela attaque donc les enfants?

— Surtout les enfants.

— Est-ce qu’on en meurt?

— Très bien, dit Marguerite.

Fantine sortit et alla encore une fois relire la lettre sur l’escalier.

Le soir elle descendit, et on la vit qui se dirigeait du côté de la rue de Paris où sont les auberges.

Le lendemain matin, comme Marguerite entrait dans la chambre de Fantine avant le jour, car elles travaillaient toujours ensemble et de cette façon n’allumaient qu’une chandelle pour deux, elle trouva Fantine assise sur son lit, pâle, glacée. Elle ne s’était pas couchée. Son bonnet était tombé sur ses genoux. La chandelle avait brûlé toute la nuit et était presque entièrement consumée.

Marguerite s’arrêta sur le seuil, pétrifiée de cet énorme désordre, et s’écria:

— Seigneur! la chandelle qui est toute brûlée! il s’est passé des événements!

Puis elle regarda Fantine qui tournait vers elle sa tête sans cheveux.

Fantine depuis la veille avait vieilli de dix ans.

— Jésus! fit Marguerite, qu’est-ce que vous avez, Fantine?

— Je n’ai rien, répondit Fantine. Au contraire. Mon enfant ne mourra pas de cette affreuse maladie, faute de secours. Je suis contente.

En parlant ainsi, elle montrait à la vieille fille deux napoléons qui brillaient sur la table.

— Ah, Jésus Dieu! dit Marguerite. Mais c’est une fortune! Où avez-vous eu ces louis d’or?

— Je les ai eus, répondit Fantine.

En même temps elle sourit. La chandelle éclairait son visage. C’était un sourire sanglant. Une salive rougeâtre lui souillait le coin des lèvres, et elle avait un trou noir dans la bouche.

Les deux dents étaient arrachées.

Elle envoya les quarante francs à Montfermeil.

Du reste c’était une ruse des Thénardier pour avoir de l’argent. Cosette n’était pas malade.

Fantine jeta son miroir par la fenêtre. Depuis longtemps elle avait quitté sa cellule du second pour une mansarde fermée d’un loquet sous le toit; un de ces galetas dont le plafond fait angle avec le plancher et vous heurte à chaque instant la tête. Le pauvre ne peut aller au fond de sa chambre comme au fond de sa destinée qu’en se courbant de plus en plus. Elle n’avait plus de lit, il lui restait une loque qu’elle appelait sa couverture, un matelas à terre et une chaise dépaillée. Un petit rosier qu’elle avait s’était désséché dans un coin, oublié. Dans l’autre coin, il y avait un pot à beurre à mettre l’eau, qui gelait l’hiver, et où les différents niveaux de l’eau restaient longtemps marqués par des cercles de glace. Elle avait perdu la honte, elle perdit la coquetterie. Dernier signe. Elle sortait avec des bonnets sales. Soit faute de temps, soit indifférence, elle ne raccommodait plus son linge. À mesure que les talons s’usaient, elle tirait ses bas dans ses souliers. Cela se voyait à de certains plis perpendiculaires. Elle rapiéçait son corset, vieux et usé, avec des morceaux de calicot qui se déchiraient au moindre mouvement. Les gens auxquels elle devait, lui faisaient «des scènes», et ne lui laissaient aucun repos. Elle les trouvait dans la rue, elle les retrouvait dans son escalier. Elle passait des nuits à pleurer et à songer. Elle avait les yeux très brillants, et elle sentait une douleur fixe dans l’épaule, vers le haut de l’omoplate gauche. Elle toussait beaucoup. Elle haïssait profondément le père Madeleine, et ne se plaignait pas. Elle cousait dix-sept heures par jour; mais un entrepreneur du travail des prisons, qui faisait travailler les prisonnières au rabais, fit tout à coup baisser les prix, ce qui réduisit la journée des ouvrières libres à neuf sous. Dix-sept heures de travail, et neuf sous par jour! Ses créanciers étaient plus impitoyables que jamais. Le fripier, qui avait repris presque tous les meubles, lui disait sans cesse: Quand me payeras-tu, coquine? Que voulait-on d’elle, bon Dieu! Elle se sentait traquée et il se développait en elle quelque chose de la bête farouche. Vers le même temps, le Thénardier lui écrivit que décidément il avait attendu avec beaucoup trop de bonté, et qu’il lui fallait cent francs, tout de suite; sinon qu’il mettrait à la porte la petite Cosette, toute convalescente de sa grande maladie, par le froid, par les chemins, et qu’elle deviendrait ce qu’elle pourrait, et qu’elle crèverait, si elle voulait. «Cent francs, songea Fantine! Mais où y a-t-il un état à gagner cent sous par jour?»

— Allons! dit-elle, vendons le reste.

L’infortunée se fit fille publique.

Chapitre XI

Christus nos liberavit

Qu’est-ce que c’est que cette histoire de Fantine? C’est la société achetant une esclave.

À qui? À la misère.

À la faim, au froid, à l’isolement, à l’abandon, au dénûment. Marché douloureux. Une âme pour un morceau de pain. La misère offre, la société accepte.

La sainte loi de Jésus-Christ gouverne notre civilisation, mais elle ne la pénètre pas encore. On dit que l’esclavage a disparu de la civilisation européenne. C’est une erreur. Il existe toujours, mais il ne pèse plus que sur la femme, et il s’appelle prostitution.

Il pèse sur la femme, c’est-à-dire sur la grâce, sur la faiblesse, sur la beauté, sur la maternité. Ceci n’est pas une des moindres hontes de l’homme.

Au point de ce douloureux drame où nous sommes arrivés, il ne reste plus rien à Fantine de ce qu’elle a été autrefois. Elle est devenue marbre en devenant boue. Qui la touche a froid. Elle passe, elle vous subit et elle vous ignore; elle est la figure déshonorée et sévère. La vie et l’ordre social lui ont dit leur dernier mot. Il lui est arrivé tout ce qui lui arrivera. Elle a tout ressenti, tout supporté, tout éprouvé, tout souffert, tout perdu, tout pleuré. Elle est résignée de cette résignation qui ressemble à l’indifférence comme la mort ressemble au sommeil. Elle n’évite plus rien. Elle ne craint plus rien. Tombe sur elle toute la nuée et passe sur elle tout l’océan! que lui importe! c’est une éponge imbibée.

Elle le croit du moins, mais c’est une erreur de s’imaginer qu’on épuise le sort et qu’on touche le fond de quoi que ce soit.

Hélas! qu’est-ce que toutes ces destinées ainsi poussées pêle-mêle? où vont-elles? pourquoi sont-elles ainsi?

Celui qui sait cela voit toute l’ombre.

Il est seul. Il s’appelle Dieu.

Chapitre XII

Le désœuvrement de M. Bamatabois

Il y a dans toutes les petites villes, et il y avait à Montreuil-sur-mer en particulier, une classe de jeunes gens qui grignotent quinze cents livres de rente en province du même air dont leurs pareils dévorent à Paris deux cent mille francs par an. Ce sont des êtres de la grande espèce neutre; hongres, parasites, nuls, qui ont un peu de terre, un peu de sottise et un peu d’esprit, qui seraient des rustres dans un salon et se croient des gentilshommes au cabaret, qui disent: mes prés, mes bois, mes paysans, sifflent les actrices du théâtre pour prouver qu’ils sont gens de goût, querellent les officiers de la garnison pour montrer qu’ils sont gens de guerre, chassent, fument, bâillent, boivent, sentent le tabac, jouent au billard, regardent les voyageurs descendre de diligence, vivent au café, dînent à l’auberge, ont un chien qui mange les os sous la table et une maîtresse qui pose les plats dessus, tiennent à un sou, exagèrent les modes, admirent la tragédie, méprisent les femmes, usent leurs vieilles bottes, copient Londres à travers Paris et Paris à travers Pont-à-Mousson, vieillissent hébétés, ne travaillent pas, ne servent à rien et ne nuisent pas à grand’chose.

M. Félix Tholomyès, resté dans sa province et n’ayant jamais vu Paris, serait un de ces hommes-là.

S’ils étaient plus riches, on dirait: ce sont des élégants; s’ils étaient plus pauvres, on dirait: ce sont des fainéants. Ce sont tout simplement des désœuvrés. Parmi ces désœuvrés, il y a des ennuyeux, des ennuyés, des rêvasseurs, et quelques drôles.

Dans ce temps-là, un élégant se composait d’un grand col, d’une grande cravate, d’une montre à breloques, de trois gilets superposés de couleurs différentes, le bleu et le rouge en dedans, d’un habit couleur olive à taille courte, à queue de morue, à double rangée de boutons d’argent serrés les uns contre les autres et montant jusque sur l’épaule, et d’un pantalon olive plus clair, orné sur les deux coutures d’un nombre de côtes indéterminé, mais toujours impair, variant de une à onze, limite qui n’était jamais franchie. Ajoutez à cela des souliers-bottes avec de petits fers au talon, un chapeau à haute forme et à bords étroits, des cheveux en touffe, une énorme canne, et une conversation rehaussée des calembours de Potier. Sur le tout des éperons et des moustaches. À cette époque, des moustaches voulaient dire bourgeois et des éperons voulaient dire piéton.

L’élégant de province portait les éperons plus longs et les moustaches plus farouches. C’était le temps de la lutte des républiques de l’Amérique méridionale contre le roi d’Espagne, de Bolivar contre Morillo. Les chapeaux à petits bords étaient royalistes et se nommaient des morillos; les libéraux portaient des chapeaux à larges bords qui s’appelaient des bolivars.

Huit ou dix mois donc après ce qui a été raconté dans les pages précédentes, vers les premiers jours de janvier 1823, un soir qu’il avait neigé, un de ces élégants, un de ces désœuvrés, un “bien pensant”, car il avait un morillo, de plus chaudement enveloppé d’un de ces grands manteaux qui complétaient dans les temps froids le costume à la mode, se divertissait à harceler une créature qui rôdait en robe de bal et toute décolletée avec des fleurs sur la tête devant la vitre du café des officiers. Cet élégant fumait, car c’était décidément la mode.

Chaque fois que cette femme passait devant lui, il lui jetait, avec une bouffée de la fumée de son cigare, quelque apostrophe qu’il croyait spirituelle et gaie, comme: — Que tu es laide! — Veux-tu te cacher! — Tu n’as pas de dents! etc., etc. — Ce monsieur s’appelait monsieur Bamatabois. La femme, triste spectre paré qui allait et venait sur la neige, ne lui répondait pas, ne le regardait même pas, et n’en accomplissait pas moins en silence et avec une régularité sombre sa promenade qui la ramenait de cinq minutes en cinq minutes sous le sarcasme, comme le soldat condamné qui revient sous les verges. Ce peu d’effet piqua sans doute l’oisif qui, profitant d’un moment où elle se retournait, s’avança derrière elle à pas de loup et en étouffant son rire, se baissa, prit sur le pavé une poignée de neige et la lui plongea brusquement dans le dos entre ses deux épaules nues. La fille poussa un rugissement, se tourna, bondit comme une panthère, et se rua sur l’homme, lui enfonçant ses ongles dans le visage, avec les plus effroyables paroles qui puissent tomber du corps de garde dans le ruisseau. Ces injures, vomies d’une voix enrouée par l’eau-de-vie, sortaient hideusement d’une bouche à laquelle manquaient en effet les deux dents de devant. C’était la Fantine.

Au bruit que cela fit, les officiers sortirent en foule du café, les passants s’amassèrent, et il se forma un grand cercle riant, huant et applaudissant, autour de ce tourbillon composé de deux êtres où l’on avait peine à reconnaître un homme et une femme, l’homme se débattant, son chapeau à terre, la femme frappant des pieds et des poings, décoiffée, hurlant, sans dents et sans cheveux, livide de colère, horrible. Tout à coup un homme de haute taille sortit vivement de la foule, saisit la femme à son corsage de satin couvert de boue, et lui dit: Suis-moi!

La femme leva la tête; sa voix furieuse s’éteignit subitement. Ses yeux étaient vitreux, de livide elle était devenue pâle, et elle tremblait d’un tremblement de terreur. Elle avait reconnu Javert.

L’élégant avait profité de l’incident pour s’esquiver.

Chapitre XIII

Solution de quelques questions de police municipale

Javert écarta les assistants, rompit le cercle et se mit à marcher à grands pas vers le bureau de police qui est à l’extrémité de la place, traînant après lui la misérable. Elle se laissait faire machinalement. Ni lui ni elle ne disaient un mot. La nuée des spectateurs, au paroxysme de la joie, suivait avec des quolibets. La suprême misère, occasion d’obscénités. Arrivé au bureau de police qui était une salle basse chauffée par un poêle et gardée par un poste, avec une porte vitrée et grillée sur la rue, Javert ouvrit la porte, entra avec Fantine, et referma la porte derrière lui, au grand désappointement des curieux qui se haussèrent sur la pointe du pied et allongèrent le cou devant la vitre trouble du corps de garde, cherchant à voir. La curiosité est une gourmandise. Voir, c’est dévorer.

En entrant, la Fantine alla tomber dans un coin, immobile et muette, accroupie comme une chienne qui a peur.

Le sergent du poste apporta une chandelle allumée sur une table. Javert s’assit, tira de sa poche une feuille de papier timbré et se mit à écrire.

Ces classes de femmes sont entièrement remises par nos lois à la discrétion de la police. Elle en fait ce qu’elle veut, les punit comme bon lui semble, et confisque à son gré ces deux tristes choses qu’elles appellent leur industrie et leur liberté. Javert était impassible; son visage sérieux ne trahissait aucune émotion. Pourtant il était gravement et profondément préoccupé. C’était un de ces moments où il exerçait sans contrôle, mais avec tous les scrupules d’une conscience sévère, son redoutable pouvoir discrétionnaire. En cet instant, il le sentait, son escabeau d’agent de police était un tribunal. Il jugeait. Il jugeait, et il condamnait. Il appelait tout ce qu’il pouvait avoir d’idées dans l’esprit autour de la grande chose qu’il faisait. Plus il examinait le fait de cette fille, plus il se sentait révolté. Il était évident qu’il venait de voir commettre un crime. Il venait de voir, là dans la rue, la société, représentée par un propriétaire-électeur, insultée et attaquée par une créature en dehors de tout. Une prostituée avait attenté à un bourgeois. Il avait vu cela, lui Javert. Il écrivait en silence.

Quand il eut fini, il signa, plia le papier et dit au sergent du poste, en le lui remettant:

— Prenez trois hommes, et menez cette fille au bloc.

Puis se tournant vers la Fantine:

— Tu en as pour six mois.

La malheureuse tressaillit.

— Six mois! six mois de prison! Six mois à gagner sept sous par jour! Mais que deviendra Cosette? ma fille! ma fille! Mais je dois encore plus de cent francs aux Thénardier, monsieur l’inspecteur, savez-vous cela?

Elle se traîna sur la dalle mouillée par les bottes boueuses de tous ces hommes, sans se lever, joignant les mains, faisant de grands pas avec ses genoux.

— Monsieur Javert, dit-elle, je vous demande grâce. Je vous assure que je n’ai pas eu tort. Si vous aviez vu le commencement, vous auriez vu! je vous jure le bon Dieu que je n’ai pas eu tort. C’est ce monsieur le bourgeois que je ne connais pas qui m’a mis de la neige dans le dos. Est-ce qu’on a le droit de nous mettre de la neige dans le dos quand nous passons comme cela tranquillement sans faire de mal à personne? Cela m’a saisie. Je suis un peu malade, voyez-vous! Et puis il y avait déjà un peu de temps qu’il me disait des raisons. Tu es laide! tu n’as pas de dents! Je le sais bien que je n’ai plus mes dents. Je ne faisais rien, moi; je disais: c’est un monsieur qui s’amuse. J’étais honnête avec lui, je ne lui parlais pas. C’est à cet instant-là qu’il m’a mis de la neige. Monsieur Javert, mon bon monsieur l’inspecteur! est-ce qu’il n’y a personne là qui ait vu pour vous dire que c’est bien vrai? J’ai peut-être eu tort de me fâcher. Vous savez, dans le premier moment, on n’est pas maître. On a des vivacités. Et puis, quelque chose de si froid qu’on vous met dans le dos à l’heure que vous ne vous y attendez pas! J’ai eu tort d’abîmer le chapeau de ce monsieur. Pourquoi s’est-il en allé? Je lui demanderais pardon. Oh! mon Dieu, cela me serait bien égal de lui demander pardon. Faites-moi grâce pour aujourd’hui cette fois, monsieur Javert. Tenez, vous ne savez pas ça, dans les prisons on ne gagne que sept sous, ce n’est pas la faute du gouvernement, mais on gagne sept sous, et figurez-vous que j’ai cent francs à payer, ou autrement on me renverra ma petite. Ô mon Dieu! je ne peux pas l’avoir avec moi. C’est si vilain ce que je fais! Ô ma Cosette, ô mon petit ange de la bonne sainte Vierge, qu’est-ce qu’elle deviendra, pauvre loup! Je vais vous dire, c’est les Thénardier, des aubergistes, des paysans, ça n’a pas de raisonnement. Il leur faut de l’argent. Ne me mettez pas en prison! Voyez-vous, c’est une petite qu’on mettrait à même sur la grande route, va comme tu pourras, en plein cœur d’hiver, il faut avoir pitié de cette chose-là, mon bon monsieur Javert. Si c’était plus grand, ça gagnerait sa vie, mais ça ne peut pas, à ces âges-là. Je ne suis pas une mauvaise femme au fond. Ce n’est pas la lâcheté et la gourmandise qui ont fait de moi ça. J’ai bu de l’eau-de-vie, c’est par misère. Je ne l’aime pas, mais cela étourdit. Quand j’étais plus heureuse, on n’aurait eu qu’à regarder dans mes armoires, on aurait bien vu que je n’étais pas une femme coquette qui a du désordre. J’avais du linge, beaucoup de linge. Ayez pitié de moi, monsieur Javert!

Elle parlait ainsi, brisée en deux, secouée par les sanglots, aveuglée par les larmes, la gorge nue, se tordant les mains, toussant d’une toux sèche et courte, balbutiant tout doucement avec la voix de l’agonie. La grande douleur est un rayon divin et terrible qui transfigure les misérables. À ce moment-là, la Fantine était redevenue belle. À de certains instants, elle s’arrêtait et baisait tendrement le bas de la redingote du mouchard. Elle eût attendri un cœur de granit, mais on n’attendrit pas un cœur de bois.

— Allons! dit Javert, je t’ai écoutée. As-tu bien tout dit? Marche à présent! Tu as tes six mois; *le Père éternel en personne n’y pourrait plus rien*.

À cette solennelle parole, Le Père éternel en personne n’y pourrait plus rien, elle comprit que l’arrêt était prononcé. Elle s’affaissa sur elle-même en murmurant:

— Grâce!

Javert tourna le dos.

Les soldats la saisirent par les bras.

Depuis quelques minutes, un homme était entré sans qu’on eût pris garde à lui. Il avait refermé la porte, s’y était adossé, et avait entendu les prières désespérées de la Fantine. Au moment où les soldats mirent la main sur la malheureuse, qui ne voulait pas se lever, il fit un pas, sortit de l’ombre, et dit:

— Un instant, s’il vous plaît!

Javert leva les yeux et reconnut M. Madeleine. Il ôta son chapeau, et saluant avec une sorte de gaucherie fâchée:

— Pardon, monsieur le maire....

Ce mot, monsieur le maire, fit sur la Fantine un effet étrange. Elle se dressa debout tout d’une pièce comme un spectre qui sort de terre, repoussa les soldats des deux bras, marcha droit à M. Madeleine avant qu’on eût pu la retenir, et le regardant fixement, l’air égaré, elle cria:

— Ah! c’est donc toi qui es monsieur le maire!

Puis elle éclata de rire et lui cracha au visage.

M. Madeleine s’essuya le visage, et dit:

— Inspecteur Javert, mettez cette femme en liberté.

Javert se sentit au moment de devenir fou. Il éprouvait en cet instant, coup sur coup, et presque mêlées ensemble, les plus violentes émotions qu’il eût ressenties de sa vie. Voir une fille publique cracher au visage d’un maire, cela était une chose si monstrueuse que, dans ses suppositions les plus effroyables, il eût regardé comme un sacrilège de le croire possible. D’un autre côté, dans le fond de sa pensée, il faisait confusément un rapprochement hideux entre ce qu’était cette femme et ce que pouvait être ce maire, et alors il entrevoyait avec horreur je ne sais quoi de tout simple dans ce prodigieux attentat. Mais quand il vit ce maire, ce magistrat, s’essuyer tranquillement le visage et dire: *mettez cette femme en liberté*, il eut comme un éblouissement de stupeur; la pensée et la parole lui manquèrent également; la somme de l’étonnement possible était dépassée pour lui. Il resta muet.

Ce mot n’avait pas porté un coup moins étrange à la Fantine. Elle leva son bras nu et se cramponna à la clef du poêle comme une personne qui chancelle. Cependant elle regardait tout autour d’elle et elle se mit à parler à voix basse, comme si elle se parlait à elle-même.

— En liberté! qu’on me laisse aller! que je n’aille pas en prison six mois! Qui est-ce qui a dit cela? Il n’est pas possible qu’on ait dit cela. J’ai mal entendu. Ça ne peut pas être ce monstre de maire! Est-ce que c’est vous, mon bon monsieur Javert, qui avez dit qu’on me mette en liberté? Oh! voyez-vous! je vais vous dire et vous me laisserez aller. Ce monstre de maire, ce vieux gredin de maire, c’est lui qui est cause de tout. Figurez-vous, monsieur Javert, qu’il m’a chassée! à cause d’un tas de gueuses qui tiennent des propos dans l’atelier. Si ce n’est pas là une horreur! renvoyer une pauvre fille qui fait honnêtement son ouvrage! Alors je n’ai plus gagné assez, et tout le malheur est venu. D’abord il y a une amélioration que ces messieurs de la police devraient bien faire, ce serait d’empêcher les entrepreneurs des prisons de faire du tort aux pauvres gens. Je vais vous expliquer cela, voyez-vous. Vous gagnez douze sous dans les chemises, cela tombe à neuf sous, il n’y a plus moyen de vivre. Il faut donc devenir ce qu’on peut. Moi, j’avais ma petite Cosette, j’ai bien été forcée de devenir une mauvaise femme. Vous comprenez à présent, que c’est ce gueux de maire qui a tout fait le mal. Après cela, j'ai piétiné le chapeau de ce monsieur bourgeois devant le café des officiers. Mais lui, il m'avait perdu toute ma robe avec sa neige. Nous autres, nous n'avons qu'une robe de soie, pour le soir. Voyez-vous, je n'ai jamais fait de mal exprès, vrai, monsieur Javert, et je vois partout des femmes bien plus méchantes que moi qui sont bien plus heureuses. Ô monsieur Javert, c'est vous qui avez dit qu'on me mette dehors, n'est-ce pas? Prenez des informations, parlez à mon propriétaire, maintenant je paye mon terme, on vous dira bien que je suis honnête. Ah! mon Dieu, je vous demande pardon, j'ai touché, sans faire attention, à la clef du poêle, et cela fait fumer.

M. Madeleine l'écoutait avec une attention profonde. Pendant qu'elle parlait, il avait fouillé dans son gilet, en avait tiré sa bourse et l'avait ouverte. Elle était vide. Il l'avait remise dans sa poche. Il dit à la Fantine:

— Combien avez-vous dit que vous deviez?

La Fantine, qui ne regardait que Javert, se retourna de son côté:

— Est-ce que je te parle à toi!

Puis s'adressant aux soldats:

— Dites donc, vous autres, avez-vous vu comme je te vous lui ai craché à la figure? Ah! vieux scélérat de maire, tu viens ici pour me faire peur, mais je n'ai pas peur de toi. J'ai peur de monsieur Javert. J'ai peur de mon bon monsieur Javert!

En parlant ainsi elle se retourna vers l'inspecteur:

— Avec ça, voyez-vous, monsieur l'inspecteur, il faut être juste. Je comprends que vous êtes juste, monsieur l'inspecteur. Au fait, c'est tout simple, un homme qui joue à mettre un peu de neige dans le dos d'une femme, ça les faisait rire, les officiers, il faut bien qu'on se divertisse à quelque chose, nous autres nous sommes là pour qu'on s'amuse, quoi! Et puis, vous, vous venez, vous êtes bien forcé de mettre l'ordre, vous emmenez la femme qui a tort, mais en y réfléchissant, comme vous êtes bon, vous dites qu'on me mette en liberté, c'est pour la petite, parce que six mois en prison, cela m'empêcherait de nourrir mon enfant. Seulement n'y reviens plus, coquine! Oh! je n'y reviendrai plus, monsieur Javert! on me fera tout ce qu'on voudra maintenant, je ne bougerai plus. Seulement, aujourd'hui, voyez-vous, j'ai crié parce que cela m'a fait mal, je ne m'attendais pas du tout à cette neige de ce monsieur, et puis, je vous ai dit, je ne me porte pas très bien, je tousse, j'ai là dans l'estomac comme une boule qui me brûle, que le médecin me dit: soignez-vous. Tenez, tâtez, donnez votre main, n'ayez pas peur, c'est ici.

Elle ne pleurait plus, sa voix était caressante, elle appuyait sur sa gorge blanche et délicate la grosse main rude de Javert, et elle le regardait en souriant.

Tout à coup elle rajusta vivement le désordre de ses vêtements, fit retomber les plis de sa robe qui en se traînant s'était relevée presque à la hauteur du genou, et marcha vers la porte en disant à demi-voix aux soldats avec un signe de tête amical:

— Les enfants, monsieur l'inspecteur a dit qu'on me lâche, je m'en vas.

Elle mit la main sur le loquet. Un pas de plus, elle était dans la rue.

Javert jusqu'à cet instant était resté debout, immobile, l'œil fixé à terre, posé de travers au milieu de cette scène comme une statue dérangée qui attend qu'on la mette quelque part.

Le bruit que fit le loquet le réveilla. Il releva la tête avec une expression d'autorité souveraine, expression toujours d'autant plus effrayante que le pouvoir se trouve placé plus bas, féroce chez la bête fauve, atroce chez l'homme de rien.

— Sergent, cria-t-il, vous ne voyez pas que cette drôlesse s'en va! Qui est-ce qui vous a dit de la laisser aller?

— Moi, dit Madeleine.

La Fantine à la voix de Javert avait tremblé et lâché le loquet comme un voleur pris lâche l'objet volé. À la voix de Madeleine, elle se retourna, et à partir de ce moment, sans qu'elle prononçât un mot, sans qu'elle osât même laisser sortir son souffle librement, son regard alla tour à tour de Madeleine à Javert et de Javert à Madeleine, selon que c'était l'un ou l'autre qui parlait.

Il était évident qu'il fallait que Javert eût été, comme on dit, «jeté hors des gonds» pour qu'il se fût permis d'apostropher le sergent comme il l'avait fait, après l'invitation du maire de mettre Fantine en liberté. En était-il venu à oublier la présence de monsieur le maire? Avait-il fini par se déclarer à lui-même qu'il était impossible qu'une «autorité» eût donné un pareil ordre, et que bien certainement monsieur le maire avait dû dire sans le vouloir une chose pour une autre? Ou bien, devant les énormités dont il était témoin depuis deux heures, se disait-il qu'il fallait revenir aux suprêmes résolutions, qu'il était nécessaire que le petit se fit grand, que le mouchard se transformât en magistrat, que l'homme de police devînt homme de justice, et qu'en cette extrémité prodigieuse l'ordre, la loi, la morale, le gouvernement, la société tout entière, se personnifiaient en lui Javert?

Quoi qu'il en soit, quand M. Madeleine eut dit ce moi qu'on vient d'entendre, on vit l'inspecteur de police Javert se tourner vers monsieur le maire, pâle, froid, les lèvres bleues, le regard désespéré, tout le corps agité d'un tremblement imperceptible, et, chose inouïe, lui dire, l'œil baissé, mais la voix ferme:

— Monsieur le maire, cela ne se peut pas.

— Comment? dit M. Madeleine.

— Cette malheureuse a insulté un bourgeois.

— Inspecteur Javert, repartit M. Madeleine avec un accent conciliant et calme, écoutez. Vous êtes un honnête homme, et je ne fais nulle difficulté de m'expliquer avec vous. Voici le vrai. Je passais sur la place comme vous emmeniez cette femme, il y avait encore des groupes, je me suis informé, j'ai tout su, c'est le bourgeois qui a eu tort et qui, en bonne police, eût dû être arrêté.

Javert reprit:

— Cette misérable vient d'insulter monsieur le maire.

— Ceci me regarde, dit M. Madeleine. Mon injure est à moi peut-être. J'en puis faire ce que je veux.

— Je demande pardon à monsieur le maire. Son injure n'est pas à lui, elle est à la justice.

— Inspecteur Javert, répliqua M. Madeleine, la première justice, c'est la conscience. J'ai entendu cette femme. Je sais ce que je fais.

— Et moi, monsieur le maire, je ne sais pas ce que je vois.

— Alors contentez-vous d'obéir.

— J'obéis à mon devoir. Mon devoir veut que cette femme fasse six mois de prison.

M. Madeleine répondit avec douceur:

— Écoutez bien ceci. Elle n'en fera pas un jour.

À cette parole décisive, Javert osa regarder le maire fixement, et lui dit, mais avec un son de voix toujours profondément respectueux:

— Je suis au désespoir de résister à monsieur le maire, c'est la première fois de ma vie, mais il daignera me permettre de lui faire observer que je suis dans la limite de mes attributions. Je reste, puisque monsieur le maire le veut, dans le fait du bourgeois. J'étais là. C'est cette fille qui s'est jetée sur monsieur Bamatabois, qui est électeur et propriétaire de cette belle maison à balcon qui fait le coin de l'esplanade, à trois étages et toute en pierre de taille. Enfin, il y a des choses dans ce monde! Quoi qu'il en soit, monsieur le maire, cela, c'est un fait de police de la rue qui me regarde, et je retiens la femme Fantine.

Alors M. Madeleine croisa les bras et dit avec une voix sévère que personne dans la ville n'avait encore entendue:

— Le fait dont vous parlez est un fait de police municipale. Aux termes des articles neuf, onze, quinze et soixante-six du code d'instruction criminelle, j'en suis juge. J'ordonne que cette femme soit mise en liberté.

Javert voulut tenter un dernier effort.

— Mais, monsieur le maire....

— Je vous rappelle, à vous, l'article quatre-vingt-un de la loi du 13 décembre 1799 sur la détention arbitraire.

— Monsieur le maire, permettez....

— Plus un mot.

— Pourtant....

— Sortez, dit M. Madeleine.

Javert reçut le coup, debout, de face, et en pleine poitrine comme un soldat russe. Il salua jusqu'à terre monsieur le maire, et sortit.

Fantine se rangea de la porte et le regarda avec stupeur passer devant elle.

Cependant elle aussi était en proie à un bouleversement étrange. Elle venait de se voir en quelque sorte disputée par deux puissances opposées. Elle avait vu lutter devant ses yeux deux hommes tenant dans leurs mains sa liberté, sa vie, son âme, son enfant; l'un de ces hommes la tirait du côté de l'ombre, l'autre la ramenait vers la lumière. Dans cette lutte, entrevue à travers les grossissements de l'épouvante, ces deux hommes lui étaient apparus comme deux géants; l'un parlait comme son démon, l'autre parlait comme son bon ange. L'ange avait vaincu le démon, et, chose qui la faisait frissonner de la tête aux pieds, cet ange, ce libérateur, c'était précisément l'homme qu'elle abhorrait, ce maire qu'elle avait si longtemps considéré comme l'auteur de tous ses maux, ce Madeleine! et au moment même où elle venait de l'insulter d'une façon hideuse, il la sauvait! S'était-elle donc trompée? Devait-elle donc changer toute son âme?... Elle ne savait, elle tremblait. Elle écoutait éperdue, elle regardait effarée, et à chaque parole que disait M. Madeleine, elle sentait fondre et s'écrouler en elle les affreuses ténèbres de la haine et naître dans son cœur je ne sais quoi de réchauffant et d'ineffable qui était de la joie, de la confiance et de l'amour.

Quand Javert fut sorti, M. Madeleine se tourna vers elle, et lui dit avec une voix lente, ayant peine à parler comme un homme sérieux qui ne veut pas pleurer:

— Je vous ai entendue. Je ne savais rien de ce que vous avez dit. Je crois que c'est vrai, et je sens que c'est vrai. J'ignorais même que vous eussiez quitté mes ateliers. Pourquoi ne vous êtes-vous pas adressée à moi? Mais voici: je payerai vos dettes, je ferai venir votre enfant, ou vous irez la rejoindre. Vous vivrez ici, à Paris, où vous voudrez. Je me charge de votre enfant et de vous. Vous ne travaillerez plus, si vous voulez. Je vous donnerai tout l'argent qu'il vous faudra. Vous redeviendrez honnête en redevenant heureuse. Et même, écoutez, je vous le déclare dès à présent, si tout est comme vous le dites, et je n'en doute pas, vous n'avez jamais cessé d'être vertueuse et sainte devant Dieu. Oh! pauvre femme!

C'en était plus que la pauvre Fantine n'en pouvait supporter. Avoir Cosette! sortir de cette vie infâme! vivre libre, riche, heureuse, honnête, avec Cosette! voir brusquement s'épanouir au milieu de sa misère toutes ces réalités du paradis! Elle regarda comme hébétée cet homme qui lui parlait, et ne put que jeter deux ou trois sanglots: oh! oh! oh! Ses jarrets plièrent, elle se mit à genoux devant M. Madeleine, et, avant qu'il eût pu l'en empêcher, il sentit qu'elle lui prenait la main et que ses lèvres s'y posaient.

Puis elle s'évanouit.

Livre sixième — Javert

Chapitre I

Commencement du repos

M. Madeleine fit transporter la Fantine à cette infirmerie qu’il avait dans sa propre maison. Il la confia aux sœurs qui la mirent au lit. Une fièvre ardente était survenue. Elle passa une partie de la nuit à délirer et à parler haut. Cependant elle finit par s’endormir.

Le lendemain vers midi Fantine se réveilla, elle entendit une respiration tout près de son lit, elle écarta son rideau et vit M. Madeleine debout qui regardait quelque chose au-dessus de sa tête. Ce regard était plein de pitié et d’angoisse et suppliait. Elle en suivit la direction et vit qu’il s’adressait à un crucifix cloué au mur.

M. Madeleine était désormais transfiguré aux yeux de Fantine. Il lui paraissait enveloppé de lumière. Il était absorbé dans une sorte de prière. Elle le considéra longtemps sans oser l’interrompre. Enfin elle lui dit timidement:

— Que faites-vous donc là?

M. Madeleine était à cette place depuis une heure. Il attendait que Fantine se réveillât. Il lui prit la main, lui tâta le pouls, et répondit:

— Comment êtes-vous?

— Bien, j’ai dormi, dit-elle, je crois que je vais mieux. Ce ne sera rien.

Lui reprit, répondant à la question qu’elle lui avait adressée d’abord, comme s’il ne faisait que de l’entendre:

— Je priais le martyr qui est là-haut.

Et il ajouta dans sa pensée: «Pour la martyre qui est ici-bas.»

M. Madeleine avait passé la nuit et la matinée à s’informer. Il savait tout maintenant. Il connaissait dans tous ses poignants détails l’histoire de Fantine. Il continua:

— Vous avez bien souffert, pauvre mère. Oh! ne vous plaignez pas, vous avez à présent la dot des élus. C’est de cette façon que les hommes font des anges. Ce n’est point leur faute; ils ne savent pas s’y prendre autrement. Voyez-vous, cet enfer dont vous sortez est la première forme du ciel. Il fallait commencer par là.

Il soupira profondément. Elle cependant lui souriait avec ce sublime sourire auquel il manquait deux dents.

Javert dans cette même nuit avait écrit une lettre. Il remit lui-même cette lettre le lendemain matin au bureau de poste de Montreuil-sur-mer. Elle était pour Paris, et la suscription portait: À *monsieur Chabouillet, secrétaire de monsieur le préfet de police*. Comme l'affaire du corps de garde s'était ébruitée, la directrice du bureau de poste et quelques autres personnes qui virent la lettre avant le départ et qui reconnurent l'écriture de Javert sur l'adresse, pensèrent que c'était sa démission qu'il envoyait.

M. Madeleine se hâta d'écrire aux Thénardier. Fantine leur devait cent vingt francs. Il leur envoya trois cents francs en leur disant de se payer sur cette somme, et d'amener tout de suite l'enfant à Montreuil-sur-mer où sa mère malade la réclamait.

Ceci éblouit le Thénardier.

— Diable! dit-il à sa femme, ne lâchons pas l'enfant. Voilà que cette mauviette va devenir une vache à lait. Je devine. Quelque jocrisse se sera amouraché de la mère.

Il riposta par un mémoire de cinq cents et quelques francs fort bien fait. Dans ce mémoire figuraient pour plus de trois cents francs deux notes incontestables, l'une d'un médecin, l'autre d'un apothicaire, lesquels avaient soigné et médicamenté dans deux longues maladies Éponine et Azelma. Cosette, nous l'avons dit, n'avait pas été malade. Ce fut l'affaire d'une toute petite substitution de noms. Thénardier mit au bas du mémoire: *reçu à compte trois cents francs*.

M. Madeleine envoya tout de suite trois cents autres francs et écrivit: Dépêchez-vous d'amener Cosette.

— Christi! dit le Thénardier, ne lâchons pas l'enfant.

Cependant Fantine ne se rétablissait point. Elle était toujours à l'infirmerie. Les sœurs n'avaient d'abord reçu et soigné «cette fille» qu'avec répugnance. Qui a vu les bas-reliefs de Reims se souvient du gonflement de la lèvre inférieure des vierges sages regardant les vierges folles. Cet antique mépris des vestales pour les ambulaïes est un des plus profonds instincts de la dignité féminine; les sœurs l'avaient éprouvé, avec le redoublement qu'ajoute la religion. Mais, en peu de jours, Fantine les avait désarmées. Elle avait toutes sortes de paroles humbles et douces, et la mère qui était en elle attendrissait. Un jour les sœurs l'entendirent qui disait à travers la fièvre:

— J'ai été une pécheresse, mais quand j'aurai mon enfant près de moi, cela voudra dire que Dieu m'a pardonné. Pendant que j'étais dans le mal, je n’aurais pas voulu avoir ma Cosette avec moi, je n’aurais pas pu supporter ses yeux étonnés et tristes. C’était pour elle pourtant que je faisais le mal, et c’est ce qui fait que Dieu me pardonne. Je sentirai la bénédiction du bon Dieu quand Cosette sera ici. Je la regarderai, cela me fera du bien de voir cette innocente. Elle ne sait rien du tout. C’est un ange, voyez-vous, mes sœurs. À cet âge-là, les ailes, ça n’est pas encore tombé.

M. Madeleine l’allait voir deux fois par jour, et chaque fois elle lui demandait:

— Verrai-je bientôt ma Cosette?

Il lui répondait:

— Peut-être demain matin. D’un moment à l’autre elle arrivera, je l’attends.

Et le visage pâle de la mère rayonnait.

— Oh! disait-elle, comme je vais être heureuse!

Nous venons de dire qu’elle ne se rétablissait pas. Au contraire, son état semblait s’aggraver de semaine en semaine. Cette poignée de neige appliquée à nu sur la peau entre les deux omoplates avait déterminé une suppression subite de transpiration à la suite de laquelle la maladie qu’elle couvait depuis plusieurs années finit par se déclarer violemment. On commençait alors à suivre pour l’étude et le traitement des maladies de poitrine les belles indications de Laennec. Le médecin ausculta Fantine et hocha la tête.

M. Madeleine dit au médecin:

— Eh bien?

— N’a-t-elle pas un enfant qu’elle désire voir? dit le médecin.

— Oui.

— Eh bien, hâtez-vous de le faire venir.

M. Madeleine eut un tressaillement.

Fantine lui demanda:

— Qu’a dit le médecin?

M. Madeleine s’efforça de sourire.

— Il a dit de faire venir bien vite votre enfant. Que cela vous rendra la santé.

— Oh! reprit-elle, il a raison! Mais qu’est-ce qu’ils ont donc ces Thénardier à me garder ma Cosette! Oh! elle va venir. Voici enfin que je vois le bonheur tout près de moi!

Le Thénardier cependant ne «lâchait pas l’enfant» et donnait cent mauvaises raisons. Cosette était un peu souffrante pour se mettre en route l’hiver. Et puis il y avait un reste de petites dettes criardes dans le pays dont il rassemblait les factures, etc., etc.

— J’enverrai quelqu’un chercher Cosette, dit le père Madeleine. S’il le faut, j’irai moi-même.

Il écrivit sous la dictée de Fantine cette lettre qu’il lui fit signer:

«Monsieur Thénardier,

«Vous remettrez Cosette à la personne.

«On vous payera toutes les petites choses.

«J’ai l’honneur de vous saluer avec considération.

«Fantine.»

Sur ces entrefaites, il survint un grave incident. Nous avons beau tailler de notre mieux le bloc mystérieux dont notre vie est faite, la veine noire de la destinée y reparaît toujours.

Chapitre II

Comment Jean peut devenir Champ

Un matin, M. Madeleine était dans son cabinet, occupé à régler d'avance quelques affaires pressantes de la mairie pour le cas où il se déciderait à ce voyage de Montfermeil, lorsqu'on vint lui dire que l'inspecteur de police Javert demandait à lui parler. En entendant prononcer ce nom, M. Madeleine ne put se défendre d'une impression désagréable. Depuis l'aventure du bureau de police, Javert l'avait plus que jamais évité, et M. Madeleine ne l'avait point revu.

— Faites entrer, dit-il.

Javert entra.

M. Madeleine était resté assis près de la cheminée, une plume à la main, l'œil sur un dossier qu'il feuilletait et qu'il annotait, et qui contenait des procès-verbaux de contraventions à la police de la voirie. Il ne se dérangea point pour Javert. Il ne pouvait s'empêcher de songer à la pauvre Fantine, et il lui convenait d'être glacial.

Javert salua respectueusement M. le maire qui lui tournait le dos. M. le maire ne le regarda pas et continua d'annoter son dossier.

Javert fit deux ou trois pas dans le cabinet, et s'arrêta sans rompre le silence. Un physionomiste qui eût été familier avec la nature de Javert, qui eût étudié depuis longtemps ce sauvage au service de la civilisation, ce composé bizarre du Romain, du Spartiate, du moine et du caporal, cet espion incapable d'un mensonge, ce mouchard vierge, un physionomiste qui eût su sa secrète et ancienne aversion pour M. Madeleine, son conflit avec le maire au sujet de la Fantine, et qui eût considéré Javert en ce moment, se fût dit: que s'est-il passé? Il était évident, pour qui eût connu cette conscience droite, claire, sincère, probe, austère et féroce, que Javert sortait de quelque grand événement intérieur. Javert n'avait rien dans l'âme qu'il ne l'eût aussi sur le visage. Il était, comme les gens violents, sujet aux revirements brusques. Jamais sa physionomie n'avait été plus étrange et plus inattendue. En entrant, il s'était incliné devant M. Madeleine avec un regard où il n'y avait ni rancune, ni colère, ni défiance, il s'était arrêté à quelques pas derrière le fauteuil du maire; et maintenant il se tenait là, debout, dans une attitude presque disciplinaire, avec la rudesse naïve et froide d’un homme qui n’a jamais été doux et qui a toujours été patient; il attendait, sans dire un mot, sans faire un mouvement, dans une humilité vraie et dans une résignation tranquille, qu’il plût à monsieur le maire de se retourner, calme, sérieux, le chapeau à la main, les yeux baissés, avec une expression qui tenait le milieu entre le soldat devant son officier et le coupable devant son juge. Tous les sentiments comme tous les souvenirs qu’on eût pu lui supposer avaient disparu. Il n’y avait plus rien sur ce visage impénétrable et simple comme le granit, qu’une morne tristesse. Toute sa personne respirait l’abaissement et la fermeté, et je ne sais quel accablement courageux.

Enfin M. le maire posa sa plume et se tourna à demi.

— Eh bien! qu’est-ce? qu’y a-t-il, Javert?

Javert demeura un instant silencieux comme s’il se recueillait, puis éleva la voix avec une sorte de solennité triste qui n’excluait pourtant pas la simplicité:

— Il y a, monsieur le maire, qu’un acte coupable a été commis.

— Quel acte?

— Un agent inférieur de l’autorité a manqué de respect à un magistrat de la façon la plus grave. Je viens, comme c’est mon devoir, porter le fait à votre connaissance.

— Quel est cet agent? demanda M. Madeleine.

— Moi, dit Javert.

— Vous?

— Moi.

— Et quel est le magistrat qui aurait à se plaindre de l’agent?

— Vous, monsieur le maire.

M. Madeleine se dressa sur son fauteuil. Javert poursuivit, l’air sévère et les yeux toujours baissés:

— Monsieur le maire, je viens vous prier de vouloir bien provoquer près de l’autorité ma destitution.

M. Madeleine stupéfait ouvrit la bouche. Javert l’interrompit.

— Vous direz, j’aurais pu donner ma démission, mais cela ne suffit pas. Donner sa démission, c’est honorable. J’ai failli, je dois être puni. Il faut que je sois chassé.

Et après une pause, il ajouta:

— Monsieur le maire, vous avez été sévère pour moi l’autre jour injustement. Soyez-le aujourd’hui justement.

— Ah çà! pourquoi? s’écria M. Madeleine. Quel est ce galimatias? qu’est-ce que cela veut dire? où y a-t-il un acte coupable commis contre moi par vous? qu’est-ce que vous m’avez fait? quels torts avez-vous envers moi? Vous vous accusez, vous voulez être remplacé....

— Chassé, dit Javert.

— Chassé, soit. C’est fort bien. Je ne comprends pas.

— Vous allez comprendre, monsieur le maire.

Javert soupira du fond de sa poitrine et reprit toujours froidement et tristement:

— Monsieur le maire, il y a six semaines, à la suite de cette scène pour cette fille, j’étais furieux, je vous ai dénoncé.

— Dénoncé!

— À la préfecture de police de Paris.

M. Madeleine, qui ne riait pas beaucoup plus souvent que Javert, se mit à rire.

— Comme maire ayant empiété sur la police?

— Comme ancien forçat.

Le maire devint livide.

Javert, qui n’avait pas levé les yeux, continua:

— Je le croyais. Depuis longtemps j’avais des idées.

Une ressemblance, des renseignements que vous avez fait prendre à Faverolles, votre force des reins, l’aventure du vieux Fauchelevent, votre adresse au tir, votre jambe qui traîne un peu, est-ce que je sais, moi? des bêtises! mais enfin je vous prenais pour un nommé Jean Valjean.

— Un nommé?... Comment dites-vous ce nom-là?

— Jean Valjean. C’est un forçat que j’avais vu il y a vingt ans quand j’étais adjudant-garde-chiourme à Toulon. En sortant du bagne, ce Jean Valjean avait, à ce qu’il paraît, volé chez un évêque, puis il avait commis un autre vol à main armée, dans un chemin public, sur un petit savoyard. Depuis huit ans il s’était dérobé, on ne sait comment, et on le cherchait. Moi je m’étais figuré... Enfin, j’ai fait cette chose! La colère m’a décidé, je vous ai dénoncé à la préfecture.

M. Madeleine, qui avait ressaisi le dossier depuis quelques instants, reprit avec un accent de parfaite indifférence:

— Et que vous a-t-on répondu?

— Que j’étais fou.

— Eh bien?

— Eh bien, on avait raison.

— C’est heureux que vous le reconnaissiez!

— Il faut bien, puisque le véritable Jean Valjean est trouvé.

La feuille que tenait M. Madeleine lui échappa des mains, il leva la tête, regarda fixement Javert, et dit avec un accent inexprimable:

— Ah!

Javert poursuivit:

— Voilà ce que c’est, monsieur le maire. Il paraît qu’il y avait dans le pays, du côté d’Ailly-le-Haut-Clocher, une espèce de bonhomme qu’on appelait le père Champmathieu. C’était très misérable. On n’y faisait pas attention. Ces gens-là, on ne sait pas de quoi cela vit. Dernièrement, cet automne, le père Champmathieu a été arrêté pour un vol de pommes à cidre, commis chez... — enfin n’importe! Il y a eu vol, mur escaladé, branches de l’arbre cassées. On a arrêté mon Champmathieu. Il avait encore la branche de pommier à la main. On coffre le drôle. Jusqu’ici ce n’est pas beaucoup plus qu’une affaire correctionnelle. Mais voici qui est de la providence. La geôle étant en mauvais état, monsieur le juge d’instruction trouve à propos de faire transférer Champmathieu à Arras où est la prison départementale. Dans cette prison d’Arras, il y a un ancien forçat nommé Brevet qui est détenu pour je ne sais quoi et qu’on a fait guichetier de chambrée parce qu’il se conduit bien. Monsieur le maire, Champmathieu n’est pas plus tôt débarqué que voilà Brevet qui s’écrie: «Eh mais! je connais cet homme-là. C’est un fagot. Regardez-moi donc, bonhomme! Vous êtes Jean Valjean! — Jean Valjean! qui ça Jean Valjean? Le Champmathieu joue l’étonné. — Ne fais donc pas le sinvre, dit Brevet. Tu es Jean Valjean! Tu as été au bagne de Toulon. Il y a vingt ans. Nous y étions ensemble. — Le Champmathieu nie. Parbleu! vous comprenez. On approfondit. On me fouille cette aventure-là. Voici ce qu’on trouve: ce Champmathieu, il y a une trentaine d’années, a été ouvrier émondeur d’arbres dans plusieurs pays, notamment à Faverolles. Là on perd sa trace. Longtemps après, on le revoit en Auvergne, puis à Paris, où il dit avoir été charron et avoir eu une fille blanchisseuse, mais cela n’est pas prouvé; enfin dans ce pays-ci. Or, avant d’aller au bagne pour vol qualifié, qu’était Jean Valjean? émondeur. Où? à Faverolles. Autre fait. Ce Valjean s’appelait de son nom de baptême Jean et sa mère se nommait de son nom de famille Mathieu. Quoi de plus naturel que de penser qu’en sortant du bagne il aura pris le nom de sa mère pour se cacher et se sera fait appeler Jean Mathieu? Il va en Auvergne. De *Jean* la prononciation du pays fait *Chan*, on l’appelle Chan Mathieu. Notre homme se laisse faire et le voilà transformé en Champmathieu. Vous me suivez, n’est-ce pas? On s’informe à Faverolles. La famille de Jean Valjean n’y est plus. On ne sait plus où elle est. Vous savez, dans ces classes-là, il y a souvent de ces évanouissements d’une famille. On cherche, on ne trouve plus rien. Ces gens-là, quand ce n’est pas de la boue, c’est de la poussière. Et puis, comme le commencement de ces histoires date de trente ans, il n’y a plus personne à Faverolles qui ait connu Jean Valjean. On s’informe à Toulon. Avec Brevet, il n’y a plus que deux forçats qui aient vu Jean Valjean. Ce sont les condamnés à vie Cochepaille et Chenildieu. On les extrait du bagne et on les fait venir. On les confronte au prétendu Champmathieu. Ils n’hésitent pas. Pour eux comme pour Brevet, c’est Jean Valjean. Même âge, il a cinquante-quatre ans, même taille, même air, même homme enfin, c’est lui. C’est en ce moment-là même que j’envoyais ma dénonciation à la préfecture de Paris. On me répond que je perds l’esprit et que Jean Valjean est à Arras au pouvoir de la justice. Vous concevez si cela m’étonne, moi qui croyais tenir ici ce même Jean Valjean! J’écris à monsieur le juge d’instruction. Il me fait venir, on m’amène le Champmathieu....

— Eh bien? interrompit M. Madeleine.

Javert répondit avec son visage incorruptible et triste:

— Monsieur le maire, la vérité est la vérité. J’en suis fâché, mais c’est cet homme-là qui est Jean Valjean. Moi aussi je l’ai reconnu.

M. Madeleine reprit d’une voix très basse:

— Vous êtes sûr?

Javert se mit à rire de ce rire douloureux qui échappe à une conviction profonde:

— Oh, sûr!

Il demeura un moment pensif, prenant machinalement des pincées de poudre de bois dans la sébille à sécher l’encre qui était sur la table, et il ajouta:

— Et même, maintenant que je vois le vrai Jean Valjean, je ne comprends pas comment j’ai pu croire autre chose. Je vous demande pardon, monsieur le maire.

En adressant cette parole suppliante et grave à celui qui, six semaines auparavant, l’avait humilié en plein corps de garde et lui avait dit: «sortez!» Javert, cet homme hautain, était à son insu plein de simplicité et de dignité. M. Madeleine ne répondit à sa prière que par cette question brusque:

— Et que dit cet homme?

— Ah, dame! monsieur le maire, l’affaire est mauvaise. Si c’est Jean Valjean, il y a récidive. Enjamber un mur, casser une branche, chiper des pommes, pour un enfant, c’est une polissonnerie; pour un homme, c’est un délit; pour un forçat, c’est un crime. Escalade et vol, tout y est. Ce n’est plus la police correctionnelle, c’est la cour d’assises. Ce n’est plus quelques jours de prison, ce sont les galères à perpétuité. Et puis, il y a l’affaire du petit savoyard que j’espère bien qui reviendra. Diable! il y a de quoi se débattre, n’est-ce pas? Oui, pour un autre que Jean Valjean. Mais Jean Valjean est un sournois. C’est encore là que je le reconnais. Un autre sentirait que cela chauffe; il se démènerait, il crierait, la bouilloire chante devant le feu, il ne voudrait pas être Jean Valjean, et caetera. Lui, il n’a pas l’air de comprendre, il dit: Je suis Champmathieu, je ne sors pas de là! Il a l’air étonné, il fait la brute, c’est bien mieux. Oh! le drôle est habile. Mais c’est égal, les preuves sont là. Il est reconnu par quatre personnes, le vieux coquin sera condamné. C’est porté aux assises, à Arras. Je vais y aller pour témoigner. Je suis cité.

M. Madeleine s’était remis à son bureau, avait ressaisi son dossier, et le feuilletait tranquillement, lisant et écrivant tour à tour comme un homme affairé. Il se tourna vers Javert:

— Assez, Javert. Au fait, tous ces détails m’intéressent fort peu. Nous perdons notre temps, et nous avons des affaires pressées. Javert, vous allez vous rendre sur-le-champ chez la bonne femme Buseaupied qui vend des herbes là-bas au coin de la rue Saint-Saulve. Vous lui direz de déposer sa plainte contre le charretier Pierre Chesnelong. Cet homme est un brutal qui a failli écraser cette femme et son enfant. Il faut qu’il soit puni. Vous irez ensuite chez M. Charcellay, rue Montre-de-Champigny. Il se plaint qu’il y a une gouttière de la maison voisine qui verse l’eau de la pluie chez lui, et qui affouille les fondations de sa maison. Après vous constaterez des contraventions de police qu’on me signale rue Guibourg chez la veuve Doris, et rue du Garraud-Blanc chez madame Renée Le Bossé, et vous dresserez procès-verbal. Mais je vous donne là beaucoup de besogne. N’allez-vous pas être absent? ne m’avez-vous pas dit que vous alliez à Arras pour cette affaire dans huit ou dix jours?...

— Plus tôt que cela, monsieur le maire.

— Quel jour donc?

— Mais je croyais avoir dit à monsieur le maire que cela se jugeait demain et que je partais par la diligence cette nuit.

M. Madeleine fit un mouvement imperceptible.

— Et combien de temps durera l’affaire?

— Un jour tout au plus. L’arrêt sera prononcé au plus tard demain dans la nuit. Mais je n’attendrai pas l’arrêt, qui ne peut manquer. Sitôt ma déposition faite, je reviendrai ici.

— C’est bon, dit M. Madeleine.

Et il congédia Javert d’un signe de main. Javert ne s’en alla pas.

— Pardon, monsieur le maire, dit-il.

— Qu’est-ce encore? demanda M. Madeleine.

— Monsieur le maire, il me reste une chose à vous rappeler.

— Laquelle?

— C’est que je dois être destitué.

M. Madeleine se leva.

— Javert, vous êtes un homme d’honneur, et je vous estime. Vous vous exagérez votre faute. Ceci d’ailleurs est encore une offense qui me concerne. Javert, vous êtes digne de monter et non de descendre. J’entends que vous gardiez votre place.

Javert regarda M. Madeleine avec sa prunelle candide au fond de laquelle il semblait qu’on vit cette conscience peu éclairée, mais rigide et chaste, et il dit d’une voix tranquille:

— Monsieur le maire, je ne puis vous accorder cela.

— Je vous répète, répliqua M. Madeleine, que la chose me regarde.

Mais Javert, attentif à sa seule pensée, continua:

— Quant à exagérer, je n’exagère point. Voici comment je raisonne. Je vous ai soupçonné injustement. Cela, ce n’est rien. C’est notre droit à nous autres de soupçonner, quoiqu’il y ait pourtant abus à soupçonner au-dessus de soi. Mais, sans preuves, dans un accès de colère, dans le but de me venger, je vous ai dénoncé comme forçat, vous, un homme respectable, un maire, un magistrat! ceci est grave. Très grave. J’ai offensé l’autorité dans votre personne, moi, agent de l’autorité! Si l’un de mes subordonnés avait fait ce que j’ai fait, je l’aurais déclaré indigne du service, et chassé. Eh bien?

Tenez, monsieur le maire, encore un mot. J’ai souvent été sévère dans ma vie. Pour les autres. C’était juste. Je faisais bien. Maintenant, si je n’étais pas sévère pour moi, tout ce que j’ai fait de juste deviendrait injuste.

Est-ce que je dois m’épargner plus que les autres? Non. Quoi! je n’aurais été bon qu’à châtier autrui, et pas moi! mais je serais un misérable! mais ceux qui disent: ce gueux de Javert! auraient raison! Monsieur le maire, je ne souhaite pas que vous me traitiez avec bonté, votre bonté m’a fait faire assez de mauvais sang quand elle était pour les autres. Je n’en veux pas pour moi. La bonté qui consiste à donner raison à la fille publique contre le bourgeois, à l’agent de police contre le maire, à celui qui est en bas contre celui qui est en haut, c’est ce que j’appelle de la mauvaise bonté. C’est avec cette bonté-là que la société se désorganise. Mon Dieu! c’est bien facile d’être bon, le malaisé c’est d’être juste. Allez! si vous aviez été ce que je croyais, je n’aurais pas été bon pour vous, moi! vous auriez vu! Monsieur le maire, je dois me traiter comme je traiterais tout autre. Quand je réprimais des malfaiteurs, quand je sévissais sur des gredins, je me suis souvent dit à moi-même: toi, si tu bronches, si jamais je te prends en faute, sois tranquille! — J’ai bronché, je me prends en faute, tant pis! Allons, renvoyé, cassé, chassé! c’est bon. J’ai des bras, je travaillerai à la terre, cela m’est égal. Monsieur le maire, le bien du service veut un exemple. Je demande simplement la destitution de l’inspecteur Javert.

Tout cela était prononcé d’un accent humble, fier, désespéré et convaincu qui donnait je ne sais quelle grandeur bizarre à cet étrange honnête homme.

— Nous verrons, fit M. Madeleine.

Et il lui tendit la main.

Javert recula, et dit d’un ton farouche:

— Pardon, monsieur le maire, mais cela ne doit pas être. Un maire ne donne pas la main à un mouchard.

Il ajouta entre ses dents:

— Mouchard, oui; du moment où j’ai médusé de la police, je ne suis plus qu’un mouchard. Puis il salua profondément, et se dirigea vers la porte. Là il se retourna, et, les yeux toujours baissés:

— Monsieur le maire, dit-il, je continuerai le service jusqu’à ce que je sois remplacé.

Il sortit. M. Madeleine resta rêveur, écoutant ce pas ferme et assuré qui s’éloignait sur le pavé du corridor.

Livre septième — L’affaire Champmathieu

Chapitre I

La sœur Simplice

Les incidents qu’on va lire n’ont pas tous été connus à Montreuil-sur-mer, mais le peu qui en a percé a laissé dans cette ville un tel souvenir, que ce serait une grave lacune dans ce livre si nous ne les racontions dans leurs moindres détails.

Dans ces détails, le lecteur rencontrera deux ou trois circonstances invraisemblables que nous maintenons par respect pour la vérité.

Dans l’après-midi qui suivit la visite de Javert, M. Madeleine alla voir la Fantine comme d’habitude.

Avant de pénétrer près de Fantine, il fit demander la sœur Simplice. Les deux religieuses qui faisaient le service de l’infirmerie, dames lazaristes comme toutes les sœurs de charité, s’appelaient sœur Perpétue et sœur Simplice.

La sœur Perpétue était la première villageoise venue, grossièrement sœur de charité, entrée chez Dieu comme on entre en place. Elle était religieuse comme on est cuisinière. Ce type n’est point très rare. Les ordres monastiques acceptent volontiers cette lourde poterie paysanne, aisément façonnée en capucin ou en ursuline. Ces rusticités s’utilisent pour les grosses besognes de la dévotion. La transition d’un bouvier à un carme n’a rien de heurté; l’un devient l’autre sans grand travail; le fond commun d’ignorance du village et du cloître est une préparation toute faite, et met tout de suite le campagnard de plain-pied avec le moine. Un peu d’ampleur au sarrau, et voilà un froc. La sœur Perpétue était une forte religieuse, de Marines, près Pontoise, patoisant, psalmodiant, bougonnant, sucrant la tisane selon le bigotisme ou l’hypocrisie du grabataire, brusquant les malades, bourrue avec les mourants, leur jetant presque Dieu au visage, lapidant l’agonie avec des prières en colère, hardie, honnête et rougeaude.

La sœur Simplice était blanche d’une blancheur de cire. Près de sœur Perpétue, c’était le cierge à côté de la chandelle. Vincent de Paul a divinement fixé la figure de la sœur de charité dans ces admirables paroles où il mêle tant de liberté à tant de servitude: «Elles n’auront pour monastère que la maison des malades, pour cellule qu’une chambre de louage, pour chapelle que l’église de leur paroisse, pour cloître que les rues de la ville ou les salles des hôpitaux, pour clôture que l’obéissance, pour grille que la crainte de Dieu, pour voile que la modestie.» Cet idéal était vivant dans la sœur Simplice. Personne n’eût pu dire l’âge de la sœur Simplice; elle n’avait jamais été jeune et semblait ne devoir jamais être vieille. C’était une personne — nous n’osons dire une femme — calme, austère, de bonne compagnie, froide, et qui n’avait jamais menti. Elle était si douce qu’elle paraissait fragile; plus solide d’ailleurs que le granit. Elle touchait aux malheureux avec de charmants doigts fins et purs. Il y avait, pour ainsi dire, du silence dans sa parole; elle parlait juste le nécessaire, et elle avait un son de voix qui eût tout à la fois édifié un confessionnal et enchanté un salon. Cette délicatesse s’accommodait de la robe de bure, trouvant à ce rude contact un rappel continuel du ciel et de Dieu. Insistons sur un détail. N’avoir jamais menti, n’avoir jamais dit, pour un intérêt quelconque, même indifféremment, une chose qui ne fût la vérité, la sainte vérité, c’était le trait distinctif de la sœur Simplice; c’était l’accent de sa vertu. Elle était presque célèbre dans la congrégation pour cette véracité imperturbable. L’abbé Sicard parle de la sœur Simplice dans une lettre au sourd-muet Massieu. Si sincères, si loyaux et si purs que nous soyons, nous avons tous sur notre candeur au moins la fêlure du petit mensonge innocent. Elle, point. Petit mensonge, mensonge innocent, est-ce que cela existe? Mentir, c’est l’absolu du mal. Peu mentir n’est pas possible; celui qui ment, ment tout le mensonge; mentir, c’est la face même du démon; Satan a deux noms, il s’appelle Satan et il s’appelle Mensonge. Voilà ce qu’elle pensait. Et comme elle pensait, elle pratiquait. Il en résultait cette blancheur dont nous avons parlé, blancheur qui couvrait de son rayonnement même ses lèvres et ses yeux. Son sourire était blanc, son regard était blanc. Il n’y avait pas une toile d’araignée, pas un grain de poussière à la vitre de cette conscience. En entrant dans l’obédience de saint Vincent de Paul, elle avait pris le nom de Simplice par choix spécial. Simplice de Sicile, on le sait, est cette sainte qui aima mieux se laisser arracher les deux seins que de répondre, étant née à Syracuse, qu’elle était née à Ségeste, mensonge qui la sauvait. Cette patronne convenait à cette âme.

La sœur Simplice, en entrant dans l’ordre, avait deux défauts dont elle s’était peu à peu corrigée; elle avait eu le goût des friandises et elle avait aimé à recevoir des lettres. Elle ne lisait jamais qu’un livre de prières en gros caractères et en latin. Elle ne comprenait pas le latin, mais elle comprenait le livre.

La pieuse fille avait pris en affection Fantine, y sentant probablement de la vertu latente, et s'était dévouée à la soigner presque exclusivement.

M. Madeleine emmena à part la sœur Simplice et lui recommanda Fantine avec un accent singulier dont la sœur se souvint plus tard.

En quittant la sœur, il s'approcha de Fantine.

Fantine attendait chaque jour l'apparition de M. Madeleine comme on attend un rayon de chaleur et de joie. Elle disait aux sœurs:

— Je ne vis que lorsque monsieur le maire est là.

Elle avait ce jour-là beaucoup de fièvre. Dès qu'elle vit M. Madeleine, elle lui demanda:

— Et Cosette?

Il répondit en souriant:

— Bientôt.

M. Madeleine fut avec Fantine comme à l'ordinaire. Seulement il resta une heure au lieu d'une demi-heure, au grand contentement de Fantine. Il fît mille instances à tout le monde pour que rien ne manquât à la malade. On remarqua qu'il y eut un moment où son visage devint très sombre. Mais cela s'expliqua quand on sut que le médecin s'était penché à son oreille et lui avait dit:

— Elle baisse beaucoup.

Puis il rentra à la mairie, et le garçon de bureau le vit examiner avec attention une carte routière de France qui était suspendue dans son cabinet. Il écrivit quelques chiffres au crayon sur un papier.

Chapitre II

Perspicacité de maître Scaufflaire

De la mairie il se rendit au bout de la ville chez un Flamand, maître Scaufflaër, francisé Scaufflaire, qui louait des chevaux et des «cabriolets à volonté».

Pour aller chez ce Scaufflaire, le plus court était de prendre une rue peu fréquentée où était le presbytère de la paroisse que M. Madeleine habitait. Le curé était, disait-on, un homme digne et respectable, et de bon conseil. À l'instant où M. Madeleine arriva devant le presbytère, il n'y avait dans la rue qu'un passant, et ce passant remarqua ceci: M. le maire, après avoir dépassé la maison curiale, s'arrêta, demeura immobile, puis revint sur ses pas et rebroussa chemin jusqu'à la porte du presbytère, qui était une porte bâtarde avec marteau de fer. Il mit vivement la main au marteau, et le souleva; puis il s'arrêta de nouveau, et resta court, et comme pensif, et, après quelques secondes, au lieu de laisser bruyamment retomber le marteau, il le reposa doucement et reprit son chemin avec une sorte de hâte qu'il n'avait pas auparavant.

M. Madeleine trouva maître Scaufflaire chez lui occupé à repiquer un harnais.

— Maître Scaufflaire, demanda-t-il, avez-vous un bon cheval?

— Monsieur le maire, dit le Flamand, tous mes chevaux sont bons. Qu'entendez-vous par un bon cheval?

— J'entends un cheval qui puisse faire vingt lieues en un jour.

— Diable! fit le Flamand, vingt lieues!

— Oui.

— Attelé à un cabriolet?

— Oui.

— Et combien de temps se reposera-t-il après la course?

— Il faut qu'il puisse au besoin repartir le lendemain.

— Pour refaire le même trajet?

— Oui.

— Diable! diable! et c'est vingt lieues? M. Madeleine tira de sa poche le papier où il avait crayonné des chiffres. Il les montra au Flamand. C'étaient les chiffres 5, 6, 8-1/2.

— Vous voyez, dit-il. Total, dix-neuf et demi, autant dire vingt lieues.

— Monsieur le maire, reprit le Flamand, j’ai votre affaire. Mon petit cheval blanc. Vous avez dû le voir passer quelquefois. C’est une petite bête du bas Boulonnais. C’est plein de feu. On a voulu d’abord en faire un cheval de selle. Bah! il ruait, il flanquait tout le monde par terre. On le croyait vicieux, on ne savait qu’en faire. Je l’ai acheté. Je l’ai mis au cabriolet. Monsieur, c’est cela qu’il voulait; il est doux comme une fille, il va le vent. Ah! par exemple, il ne faudrait pas lui monter sur le dos. Ce n’est pas son idée d’être cheval de selle. Chacun a son ambition. Tirer, oui, porter, non; il faut croire qu’il s’est dit ça.

— Et il fera la course?

— Vos vingt lieues. Toujours au grand trot, et en moins de huit heures. Mais voici à quelles conditions.

— Dites.

— Premièrement, vous le ferez souffler une heure à moitié chemin; il mangera, et on sera là pendant qu’il mangera pour empêcher le garçon de l’auberge de lui voler son avoine; car j’ai remarqué que dans les auberges l’avoine est plus souvent bue par les garçons d’écurie que mangée par les chevaux.

— On sera là.

— Deuxièmement.... Est-ce pour monsieur le maire le cabriolet?

— Oui.

— Monsieur le maire sait conduire?

— Oui.

— Eh bien, monsieur le maire voyagera seul et sans bagage afin de ne point charger le cheval.

— Convenu.

— Mais monsieur le maire, n’ayant personne avec lui, sera obligé de prendre la peine de surveiller lui-même l’avoine.

— C’est dit.

— Il me faudra trente francs par jour. Les jours de repos payés. Pas un liard de moins, et la nourriture de la bête à la charge de monsieur le maire.

M. Madeleine tira trois napoléons de sa bourse et les mit sur la table.

— Voilà deux jours d’avance.

— Quatrièmement, pour une course pareille sur cabriolet serait trop lourd et fatiguerait le cheval. Il faudrait que monsieur le maire consentît à voyager dans un petit tilbury que j’ai.

— J’y consens.

— C’est léger, mais c’est découvert.

— Cela m’est égal.

— Monsieur le maire a-t-il réfléchi que nous sommes en hiver?...

M. Madeleine ne répondit pas. Le Flamand reprit:

— Qu’il fait très froid?

M. Madeleine garda le silence. Maître Scaufflaire continua:

— Qu’il peut pleuvoir?

M. Madeleine leva la tête et dit:

— Le tilbury et le cheval seront devant ma porte demain à quatre heures et demie du matin.

— C’est entendu, monsieur le maire, répondit Scaufflaire, puis, grattant avec l’ongle de son pouce une tache qui était dans le bois de la table, il reprit de cet air insouciant que les Flamands savent si bien mêler à leur finesse:

— Mais voilà que j’y songe à présent! monsieur le maire ne me dit pas où il va. Où est-ce que va monsieur le maire?

Il ne songeait pas à autre chose depuis le commencement de la conversation, mais il ne savait pourquoi il n’avait pas osé faire cette question.

— Votre cheval a-t-il de bonnes jambes de devant? dit M. Madeleine.

— Oui, monsieur le maire. Vous le soutiendrez un peu dans les descentes. Y a-t-il beaucoup de descentes d’ici où vous allez?

— N’oubliez pas d’être à ma porte à quatre heures et demie du matin, très précises, répondit M. Madeleine; et il sortit.

Le Flamand resta «tout bête», comme il disait lui-même quelque temps après.

Monsieur le maire était sorti depuis deux ou trois minutes, lorsque la porte se rouvrit; c’était M. le maire. Il avait toujours le même air impassible et préoccupé.

— Monsieur Scaufflaire, dit-il, à quelle somme estimez-vous le cheval et le tilbury que vous me louerez, l’un portant l’autre?

— L’un traînant l’autre, monsieur le maire, dit le Flamand avec un gros rire.

— Soit. Eh bien!

— Est-ce que monsieur le maire veut me les acheter?

— Non, mais à tout événement, je veux vous les garantir. À mon retour vous me rendrez la somme. Combien estimez-vous cabriolet et cheval?

— À cinq cents francs, monsieur le maire.

— Les voici.

M. Madeleine posa un billet de banque sur la table, puis sortit et cette fois ne rentra plus.

Maître Scaufflaire regretta affreusement de n’avoir point dit mille francs. Du reste le cheval et le tilbury, en bloc, valaient cent écus.

Le Flamand appela sa femme, et lui conta la chose. Où diable monsieur le maire peut-il aller? Ils tinrent conseil.

— Il va à Paris, dit la femme.

— Je ne crois pas, dit le mari.

M. Madeleine avait oublié sur la cheminée le papier où il avait tracé des chiffres. Le Flamand le prit et l’étudia.

— Cinq, six, huit et demi? cela doit marquer des relais de poste.

Il se tourna vers sa femme.

— J’ai trouvé.

— Comment?

— Il y a cinq lieues d’ici à Hesdin, six de Hesdin à Saint-Pol, huit et demie de Saint-Pol à Arras. Il va à Arras.

Cependant M. Madeleine était rentré chez lui.

Pour revenir de chez maître Scaufflaire, il avait pris le plus long, comme si la porte du presbytère avait été pour lui une tentation, et qu’il eût voulu l’éviter. Il était monté dans sa chambre et s’y était enfermé, ce qui n’avait rien que de simple, car il se couchait volontiers de bonne heure. Pourtant la concierge de la fabrique, qui était en même temps l’unique servante de M. Madeleine, observa que sa lumière s’éteignit à huit heures et demie, et elle le dit au caissier qui rentrait, en ajoutant:

— Est-ce que monsieur le maire est malade? je lui ai trouvé l’air un peu singulier.

Ce caissier habitait une chambre située précisément au-dessous de la chambre de M. Madeleine. Il ne prit point garde aux paroles de la portière, se coucha et s’endormit. Vers minuit, il se réveilla brusquement; il avait entendu à travers son sommeil un bruit au-dessus de sa tête. Il écouta. C’était un pas qui allait et venait, comme si l’on marchait dans la chambre en haut. Il écouta plus attentivement, et reconnut le pas de M. Madeleine. Cela lui parut étrange; habituellement aucun bruit ne se faisait dans la chambre de M. Madeleine avant l’heure de son lever. Un moment après le caissier entendit quelque chose qui ressemblait à une armoire qu’on ouvre et qu’on referme. Puis on dérangea un meuble, il y eut un silence, et le pas recommença. Le caissier se dressa sur son séant, s’éveilla tout à fait, regarda, et à travers les vitres de sa croisée aperçut sur le mur d’en face la réverbération rougeâtre d’une fenêtre éclairée. À la direction des rayons, ce ne pouvait être que la fenêtre de la chambre de M. Madeleine. La réverbération tremblait comme si elle venait plutôt d’un feu allumé que d’une lumière. L’ombre des châssis vitrés ne s’y dessinait pas, ce qui indiquait que la fenêtre était toute grande ouverte. Par le froid qu’il faisait, cette fenêtre ouverte était surprenante. Le caissier se rendormit. Une heure ou deux après, il se réveilla encore. Le même pas, lent et régulier, allait et venait toujours au-dessus de sa tête.

La réverbération se dessinait toujours sur le mur, mais elle était maintenant pâle et paisible comme le reflet d’une lampe ou d’une bougie. La fenêtre était toujours ouverte. Voici ce qui se passait dans la chambre de M. Madeleine.

Chapitre III

Une tempête sous un crâne

Le lecteur a sans doute deviné que M. Madeleine n’est autre que Jean Valjean.

Nous avons déjà regardé dans les profondeurs de cette conscience; le moment est venu d’y regarder encore. Nous ne le faisons pas sans émotion et sans tremblement. Il n’existe rien de plus terrifiant que cette sorte de contemplation. L’œil de l’esprit ne peut trouver nulle part plus d’éblouissements ni plus de ténèbres que dans l’homme; il ne peut se fixer sur aucune chose qui soit plus redoutable, plus compliquée, plus mystérieuse et plus infinie. Il y a un spectacle plus grand que la mer, c’est le ciel; il y a un spectacle plus grand que le ciel, c’est l’intérieur de l’âme.

Faire le poème de la conscience humaine, ne fût-ce qu’à propos d’un seul homme, ne fût-ce qu’à propos du plus infime des hommes, ce serait fondre toutes les épopées dans une épopée supérieure et définitive. La conscience, c’est le chaos des chimères, des convoitises et des tentatives, la fournaise des rêves, l’antre des idées dont on a honte; c’est le pandémonium des sophismes, c’est le champ de bataille des passions. À de certaines heures, pénétrez à travers la face livide d’un être humain qui réfléchit, et regardez derrière, regardez dans cette âme, regardez dans cette obscurité. Il y a là, sous le silence extérieur, des combats de géants comme dans Homère, des mêlées de dragons et d’hydres et des nuées de fantômes comme dans Milton, des spirales visionnaires comme chez Dante. Chose sombre que cet infini que tout homme porte en soi et auquel il mesure avec désespoir les volontés de son cerveau et les actions de sa vie!

Alighieri rencontra un jour une sinistre porte devant laquelle il hésita. En voici une aussi devant nous, au seuil de laquelle nous hésitons. Entrons pourtant.

Nous n’avons que peu de chose à ajouter à ce que le lecteur connaît déjà de ce qui était arrivé à Jean Valjean depuis l’aventure de Petit-Gervais. À partir de ce moment, on l’a vu, il fut un autre homme. Ce que l’évêque avait voulu faire de lui, il l’exécuta. Ce fut plus qu’une transformation, ce fut une transfiguration.

Il réussit à disparaître, vendit l’argenterie de l’évêque, ne gardant que les flambeaux, comme souvenir, se glissa de ville en ville, traversa la France, vint à Montreuil-sur-mer, eut l’idée que nous avons dite, accomplit ce que nous avons raconté, parvint à se faire insaisissable et inaccessible, et désormais, établi à Montreuil-sur-mer, heureux de sentir sa conscience attristée par son passé et la première moitié de son existence démentie par la dernière, il vécut paisible, rassuré et espérant, n’ayant plus que deux pensées: cacher son nom, et sanctifier sa vie; échapper aux hommes, et revenir à Dieu.

Ces deux pensées étaient si étroitement mêlées dans son esprit qu’elles n’en formaient qu’une seule; elles étaient toutes deux également absorbantes et impérieuses, et dominaient ses moindres actions. D’ordinaire elles étaient d’accord pour régler la conduite de sa vie; elles le tournaient vers l’ombre; elles le faisaient bienveillant et simple; elles lui conseillaient les mêmes choses. Quelquefois cependant il y avait conflit entre elles. Dans ce cas-là, on s’en souvient, l’homme que tout le pays de Montreuil-sur-mer appelait M. Madeleine ne balançait pas à sacrifier la première à la seconde, sa sécurité à sa vertu. Ainsi, en dépit de toute réserve et de toute prudence, il avait gardé les chandeliers de l’évêque, porté son deuil, appelé et interrogé tous les petits savoyards qui passaient, pris des renseignements sur les familles de Faverolles, et sauvé la vie au vieux Fauchelevent, malgré les inquiétantes insinuations de Javert. Il semblait, nous l’avons déjà remarqué, qu’il pensât, à l’exemple de tous ceux qui ont été sages, saints et justes, que son premier devoir n’était pas envers lui.

Toutefois, il faut le dire, jamais rien de pareil ne s’était encore présenté. Jamais les deux idées qui gouvernaient le malheureux homme dont nous racontons les souffrances n’avaient engagé une lutte si sérieuse. Il le comprit confusément, mais profondément, dès les premières paroles que prononça Javert, en entrant dans son cabinet.

Au moment où fut si étrangement articulé ce nom qu’il avait enseveli sous tant d’épaisseurs, il fut saisi de stupeur et comme enivré par la sinistre bizarrerie de sa destinée, et, à travers cette stupeur, il eut ce tressaillement qui précède les grandes secousses; il se courba comme un chêne à l’approche d’un orage, comme un soldat à l’approche d’un assaut. Il sentit venir sur sa tête des ombres pleines de foudres et d’éclairs. Tout en écoutant parler Javert, il eut une première pensée d’aller, de courir, de se dénoncer, de tirer ce Champmathieu de prison et de s’y mettre; cela fut douloureux et poignant comme une incision dans la chair vive, puis cela passa, et il se dit: «Voyons! voyons!» Il réprima ce premier mouvement généreux et recula devant l'héroïsme.

Sans doute, il serait beau qu'après les saintes paroles de l'évêque, après tant d'années de repentir et d'abnégation, au milieu d'une pénitence admirablement commencée, cet homme, même en présence d'une si terrible conjoncture, n'eût pas bronché un instant et eût continué de marcher du même pas vers ce précipice ouvert au fond duquel était le ciel; cela serait beau, mais cela ne fut pas ainsi. Il faut bien que nous rendions compte des choses qui s'accomplissaient dans cette âme, et nous ne pouvons dire que ce qui y était. Ce qui l'emporta tout d'abord, ce fut l'instinct de la conservation; il rallia en hâte ses idées, étouffa ses émotions, considéra la présence de Javert, ce grand péril, ajourna toute résolution avec la fermeté de l'épouvante, s'étourdit sur ce qu'il y avait à faire, et reprit son calme comme un lutteur ramasse son bouclier.

Le reste de la journée il fut dans cet état, un tourbillon au dedans, une tranquillité profonde au dehors; il ne prit que ce qu'on pourrait appeler «les mesures conservatoires». Tout était encore confus et se heurtait dans son cerveau; le trouble y était tel qu'il ne voyait distinctement la forme d'aucune idée; et lui-même n'aurait pu rien dire de lui-même, si ce n'est qu'il venait de recevoir un grand coup. Il se rendit comme d'habitude près du lit de douleur de Fantine et prolongea sa visite, par un instinct de bonté, se disant qu'il fallait agir ainsi et la bien recommander aux sœurs pour le cas où il arriverait qu'il eût à s'absenter. Il sentit vaguement qu'il faudrait peut-être aller à Arras, et, sans être le moins du monde décidé à ce voyage, il se dit qu'à l'abri de tout soupçon comme il l'était, il n'y avait point d'inconvénient à être témoin de ce qui se passerait, et il retint le tilbury de Scaufflaire, afin d'être préparé à tout événement.

Il dîna avec assez d'appétit.

Rentré dans sa chambre il se recueillit.

Il examina la situation et la trouva inouïe; tellement inouïe qu'au milieu de sa rêverie, par je ne sais quelle impulsion d'anxiété presque inexplicable, il se leva de sa chaise et ferma sa porte au verrou. Il craignait qu'il n'entrât encore quelque chose. Il se barricadait contre le possible.

Un moment après il souffla sa lumière. Elle le gênait.

Il lui semblait qu'on pouvait le voir.

Qui, on?

Hélas! ce qu’il voulait mettre à la porte était entré ce qu’il voulait aveugler, le regardait. Sa conscience.

Sa conscience, c’est-à-dire Dieu.

Pourtant, dans le premier moment, il se fit illusion; il eut un sentiment de sûreté et de solitude; le verrou tiré, il se crut imprenable; la chandelle éteinte, il se sentit invisible. Alors il prit possession de lui-même; il posa ses coudes sur la table, appuya la tête sur sa main, et se mit à songer dans les ténèbres.

— Où en suis-je? — Est-ce que je ne rêve pas? Que m’a-t-on dit? — Est-il bien vrai que j’aie vu ce Javert et qu’il m’ait parlé ainsi? — Que peut être ce Champmathieu? — Il me ressemble donc? — Est-ce possible? — Quand je pense qu’hier j’étais si tranquille et si loin de me douter de rien! — Qu’est-ce que je faisais donc hier à pareille heure? — Qu’y a-t-il dans cet incident? — Comment se dénouera-t-il? — Que faire?

Voilà dans quelle tourmente il était. Son cerveau avait perdu la force de retenir ses idées, elles passaient comme des ondes, et il prenait son front dans ses deux mains pour les arrêter.

De ce tumulte qui bouleversait sa volonté et sa raison, et dont il cherchait à tirer une évidence et une résolution, rien ne se dégageait que l’angoisse.

Sa tête était brûlante. Il alla à la fenêtre et l’ouvrit toute grande. Il n’y avait pas d’étoiles au ciel. Il revint s’asseoir près de la table.

La première heure s’écoula ainsi.

Peu à peu cependant des linéaments vagues commencèrent à se former et à se fixer dans sa méditation, et il put entrevoir avec la précision de la réalité, non l’ensemble de la situation, mais quelques détails.

Il commença par reconnaître que, si extraordinaire et si critique que fût cette situation, il en était tout à fait le maître.

Sa stupeur ne fit que s’en accroître.

Indépendamment du but sévère et religieux que se proposaient ses actions, tout ce qu’il avait fait jusqu’à ce jour n’était autre chose qu’un trou qu’il creusait pour y enfouir son nom. Ce qu’il avait toujours le plus redouté, dans ses heures de repli sur lui-même, dans ses nuits d’insomnie, c’était d’entendre jamais prononcer ce nom; il se disait que ce serait là pour lui la fin de tout; que le jour où ce nom reparaîtrait, il ferait évanouir autour de lui sa vie nouvelle, et qui sait même peut-être? au dedans de lui sa nouvelle âme. Il frémissait de la seule pensée que c’était possible. Certes, si quelqu’un lui eût dit en ces moments-là qu’une heure viendrait où ce nom retentirait à son oreille, où ce hideux mot, Jean Valjean, sortirait tout à coup de la nuit et se dresserait devant lui, où cette lumière formidable faite pour dissiper le mystère dont il s'enveloppait resplendirait subitement sur sa tête; et que ce nom ne le menacerait pas, que cette lumière ne produirait qu'une obscurité plus épaisse, que ce voile déchiré accroîtrait le mystère; que ce tremblement de terre consoliderait son édifice, que ce prodigieux incident n'aurait d'autre résultat, si bon lui semblait, à lui, que de rendre son existence à la fois plus claire et plus impénétrable, et que, de sa confrontation avec le fantôme de Jean Valjean, le bon et digne bourgeois monsieur Madeleine sortirait plus honoré, plus paisible et plus respecté que jamais, — si quelqu'un lui eût dit cela, il eût hoché la tête et regardé ces paroles comme insensées. Eh bien! tout cela venait précisément d'arriver, tout cet entassement de l'impossible était un fait, et Dieu avait permis que ces choses folles devinssent des choses réelles!

Sa rêverie continuait de s'éclaircir. Il se rendait de plus en plus compte de sa position. Il lui semblait qu'il venait de s'éveiller de je ne sais quel sommeil, et qu'il se trouvait glissant sur une pente au milieu de la nuit, debout, frissonnant, reculant en vain, sur le bord extrême d'un abîme. Il entrevoyait distinctement dans l'ombre un inconnu, un étranger, que la destinée prenait pour lui et poussait dans le gouffre à sa place. Il fallait, pour que le gouffre se refermât, que quelqu'un y tombât, lui ou l'autre.

Il n'avait qu'à laisser faire.

La clarté devint complète, et il s'avoua ceci: — Que sa place était vide aux galères, qu'il avait beau faire, qu'elle l'y attendait toujours, que le vol de Petit-Gervais l'y ramenait, que cette place vide l'attendrait et l'attirerait jusqu'à ce qu'il y fût, que cela était inévitable et fatal. — Et puis il se dit: — Qu'en ce moment il avait un remplaçant, qu'il paraissait qu'un nommé Champmathieu avait cette mauvaise chance, et que, quant à lui, présent désormais au bagne dans la personne de ce Champmathieu, présent dans la société sous le nom de M. Madeleine, il n'avait plus rien à redouter, pourvu qu'il n'empêchât pas les hommes de sceller sur la tête de ce Champmathieu cette pierre de l'infamie qui, comme la pierre du sépulcre, tombe une fois et ne se relève jamais.

Tout cela était si violent et si étrange qu'il se fit soudain en lui cette espèce de mouvement indescriptible qu'aucun homme n'éprouve plus de deux ou trois fois dans sa vie, sorte de convulsion de la conscience qui remue tout ce que le cœur a de douteux, qui se compose d'ironie, de joie et de désespoir, et qu'on pourrait appeler un éclat de rire intérieur.

Il ralluma brusquement sa bougie.

— Eh bien quoi! se dit-il, de quoi est-ce que j'ai peur? qu'est-ce que j'ai à songer comme cela? Me voilà sauvé. Tout est fini. Je n'avais plus qu'une porte entr'ouverte par laquelle mon passé pouvait faire irruption dans ma vie; cette porte, la voilà murée! à jamais! Ce Javert qui me trouble depuis si longtemps, ce redoutable instinct qui semblait m'avoir deviné, qui m'avait deviné, pardieu! et qui me suivait partout, cet affreux chien de chasse toujours en arrêt sur moi, le voilà dérouté, occupé ailleurs, absolument dépisté! Il est satisfait désormais, il me laissera tranquille, il tient son Jean Valjean! Qui sait même, il est probable qu'il voudra quitter la ville! Et tout cela s'est fait sans moi! Et je n'y suis pour rien! Ah çà, mais! qu'est-ce qu'il y a de malheureux dans ceci? Des gens qui me verraient, parole d'honneur! croiraient qu'il m'est arrivé une catastrophe! Après tout, s'il y a du mal pour quelqu'un, ce n'est aucunement de ma faute. C'est la providence qui a tout fait. C'est qu'elle veut cela apparemment!

Ai-je le droit de déranger ce qu'elle arrange? Qu'est-ce que je demande à présent? De quoi est-ce que je vais me mêler? Cela ne me regarde pas. Comment! je ne suis pas content! Mais qu'est-ce qu'il me faut donc? Le but auquel j'aspire depuis tant d'années, le songe de mes nuits, l'objet de mes prières au ciel, la sécurité, je l'atteins! C'est Dieu qui le veut. Je n'ai rien à faire contre la volonté de Dieu. Et pourquoi Dieu le veut-il? Pour que je continue ce que j'ai commencé, pour que je fasse le bien, pour que je sois un jour un grand et encourageant exemple, pour qu'il soit dit qu'il y a eu enfin un peu de bonheur attaché à cette pénitence que j'ai subie et à cette vertu où je suis revenu! Vraiment je ne comprends pas pourquoi j'ai eu peur tantôt d'entrer chez ce brave curé et de tout lui raconter comme à un confesseur, et de lui demander conseil, c'est évidemment là ce qu'il m'aurait dit. C'est décidé, laissons aller les choses! laissons faire le bon Dieu!

Il se parlait ainsi dans les profondeurs de sa conscience, penché sur ce qu'on pourrait appeler son propre abîme. Il se leva de sa chaise, et se mit à marcher dans la chambre. — Allons, dit-il, n'y pensons plus. Voilà une résolution prise! — Mais il ne sentit aucune joie.

Au contraire.

On n’empêche pas plus la pensée de revenir à une idée que la mer de revenir à un rivage. Pour le matelot, cela s’appelle la marée; pour le coupable, cela s’appelle le remords. Dieu soulève l’âme comme l’océan.

Au bout de peu d’instants, il eut beau faire, il reprit ce sombre dialogue dans lequel c’était lui qui parlait et lui qui écoutait, disant ce qu’il eût voulu taire, écoutant ce qu’il n’eût pas voulu entendre, cédant à cette puissance mystérieuse qui lui disait: pense! comme elle disait il y a deux mille ans à un autre condamné, marche!

Avant d’aller plus loin et pour être pleinement compris, insistons sur une observation nécessaire.

Il est certain qu’on se parle à soi-même, il n’est pas un être pensant qui ne l’ait éprouvé. On peut dire même que le verbe n’est jamais un plus magnifique mystère que lorsqu’il va, dans l’intérieur d’un homme, de la pensée à la conscience et qu’il retourne de la conscience à la pensée. C’est dans ce sens seulement qu’il faut entendre les mots souvent employés dans ce chapitre, il dit, il s’écria. On se dit, on se parle, on s’écrie en soi-même, sans que le silence extérieur soit rompu. Il y a un grand tumulte; tout parle en nous, excepté la bouche. Les réalités de l’âme, pour n’être point visibles et palpables, n’en sont pas moins des réalités.

Il se demanda donc où il en était. Il s’interrogea sur cette «résolution prise». Il se confessa à lui-même que tout ce qu’il venait d’arranger dans son esprit était monstrueux, que «laisser aller les choses, laisser faire le bon Dieu», c’était tout simplement horrible. Laisser s’accomplir cette méprise de la destinée et des hommes, ne pas l’empêcher, s’y prêter par son silence, ne rien faire enfin, c’était faire tout! c’était le dernier degré de l’indignité hypocrite! c’était un crime bas, lâche, sournois, abject, hideux!

Pour la première fois depuis huit années, le malheureux homme venait de sentir la saveur amère d’une mauvaise pensée et d’une mauvaise action.

Il la recracha avec dégoût.

Il continua de se questionner. Il se demanda sévèrement ce qu’il avait entendu par ceci: “Mon but est atteint!” Il se déclara que sa vie avait un but en effet. Mais quel but? cacher son nom? tromper la police? Était-ce pour une chose si petite qu’il avait fait tout ce qu’il avait fait? Est-ce qu’il n’avait pas un autre but, qui était le grand, qui était le vrai? Sauver, non sa personne, mais son âme. Redevenir honnête et bon. Être un juste! est-ce que ce n’était pas là surtout, là uniquement, ce qu’il avait toujours voulu, ce que l’évêque lui avait ordonné? — Fermer la porte à son passé? Mais il ne la fermait pas, grand Dieu! il la rouvrait en faisant une action infâme! mais il redevenait un voleur, et le plus odieux des voleurs! il volait à un autre son existence, sa vie, sa paix, sa place au soleil! il devenait un assassin! il tuait, il tuait moralement un misérable homme, il lui infligeait cette affreuse mort vivante, cette mort à ciel ouvert, qu'on appelle le bagne! Au contraire, se livrer, sauver cet homme frappé d'une si lugubre erreur, reprendre son nom, redevenir par devoir le forçat Jean Valjean, c'était là vraiment achever sa résurrection, et fermer à jamais l'enfer d'où il sortait! Y retomber en apparence, c'était en sortir en réalité! Il fallait faire cela! il n'avait rien fait s'il ne faisait pas cela! toute sa vie était inutile, toute sa pénitence était perdue, et il n'y avait plus qu'à dire: à quoi bon? Il sentait que l'évêque était là, que l'évêque était d'autant plus présent qu'il était mort, que l'évêque le regardait fixement, que désormais le maire Madeleine avec toutes ses vertus lui serait abominable, et que le galérien Jean Valjean serait admirable et pur devant lui. Que les hommes voyaient son masque, mais que l'évêque voyait sa face. Que les hommes voyaient sa vie, mais que l'évêque voyait sa conscience. Il fallait donc aller à Arras, délivrer le faux Jean Valjean, dénoncer le véritable! Hélas! c'était là le plus grand des sacrifices, la plus poignante des victoires, le dernier pas à franchir; mais il le fallait. Douloureuse destinée! il n'entrerait dans la sainteté aux yeux de Dieu que s'il rentrait dans l'infamie aux yeux des hommes!

— Eh bien, dit-il, prenons ce parti! faisons notre devoir! sauvons cet homme!

Il prononça ces paroles à haute voix, sans s'apercevoir qu'il parlait tout haut.

Il prit ses livres, les vérifia et les mit en ordre. Il jeta au feu une liasse de créances qu'il avait sur de petits commerçants gênés. Il écrivit une lettre qu'il cacheta et sur l'enveloppe de laquelle on aurait pu lire, s'il y avait eu quelqu'un dans sa chambre en cet instant: *À Monsieur Laffitte, banquier, rue d'Artois, à Paris*.

Il tira d'un secrétaire un portefeuille qui contenait quelques billets de banque et le passeport dont il s'était servi cette même année pour aller aux élections.

Qui l'eût vu pendant qu'il accomplissait ces divers actes auxquels se mêlait une méditation si grave, ne se fût pas douté de ce qui se passait en lui. Seulement par moments ses lèvres remuaient; dans d'autres instants il relevait la tête et fixait son regard sur un point quelconque de la muraille, comme s’il y avait précisément là quelque chose qu’il voulait éclaircir ou interroger.

La lettre à M. Laffitte terminée, il la mit dans sa poche ainsi que le portefeuille, et recommença à marcher.

Sa rêverie n’avait point dévié. Il continuait de voir clairement son devoir écrit en lettres lumineuses qui flamboyaient devant ses yeux et se déplaçaient avec son regard: — *Va! nomme-toi! dénonce-toi!*

Il voyait de même, et comme si elles se fussent mues devant lui avec des formes sensibles, les deux idées qui avaient été jusque-là la double règle de sa vie: cacher son nom, sanctifier son âme. Pour la première fois, elles lui apparaissaient absolument distinctes, et il voyait la différence qui les séparait. Il reconnaissait que l’une de ces idées était nécessairement bonne, tandis que l’autre pouvait devenir mauvaise; que celle-là était le dévouement et que celle-ci était la personnalité; que l’une disait: le *prochain*, et que l’autre disait: *moi*; que l’une venait de la lumière et que l’autre venait de la nuit.

Elles se combattaient, il les voyait se combattre. À mesure qu’il songeait, elles avaient grandi devant l’œil de son esprit; elles avaient maintenant des statures colossales; et il lui semblait qu’il voyait lutter au dedans de lui-même, dans cet infini dont nous parlions tout à l’heure, au milieu des obscurités et des lueurs, une déesse et une géante.

Il était plein d’épouvante, mais il lui semblait que la bonne pensée l’emportait.

Il sentait qu’il touchait à l’autre moment décisif de sa conscience et de sa destinée; que l’évêque avait marqué la première phase de sa vie nouvelle, et que ce Champmathieu en marquait la seconde. Après la grande crise, la grande épreuve.

Cependant la fièvre, un instant apaisée, lui revenait peu à peu. Mille pensées le traversaient, mais elles continuaient de le fortifier dans sa résolution.

Un moment il s’était dit: — qu’il prenait peut-être la chose trop vivement, qu’après tout ce Champmathieu n’était pas intéressant, qu’en somme il avait volé.

Il se répondit: — Si cet homme a en effet volé quelques pommes, c’est un mois de prison. Il y a loin de là aux galères. Et qui sait même? a-t-il volé? est-ce prouvé? Le nom de Jean Valjean l’accable et semble dispenser de preuves. Les procureurs du roi n'agissent-ils pas habituellement ainsi? On le croit voleur, parce qu'on le sait forçat.

Dans un autre instant, cette idée lui vint que, lorsqu'il se serait dénoncé, peut-être on considérerait l'héroïsme de son action, et sa vie honnête depuis sept ans, et ce qu'il avait fait pour le pays, et qu'on lui ferait grâce.

Mais cette supposition s'évanouit bien vite, et il sourit amèrement en songeant que le vol des quarante sous à Petit-Gervais le faisait récidiviste, que cette affaire reparaîtrait certainement et, aux termes précis de la loi, le ferait passible des travaux forcés à perpétuité.

Il se détourna de toute illusion, se détacha de plus en plus de la terre et chercha la consolation et la force ailleurs. Il se dit qu'il fallait faire son devoir; que peut-être même ne serait-il pas plus malheureux après avoir fait son devoir qu'après l'avoir éludé; que s'il *laissait faire*, s'il restait à Montreuil-sur-mer, sa considération, sa bonne renommée, ses bonnes œuvres, la déférence, la vénération, sa charité, sa richesse, sa popularité, sa vertu, seraient assaisonnées d'un crime; et quel goût auraient toutes ces choses saintes liées à cette chose hideuse! tandis que, s'il accomplissait son sacrifice, au bagne, au poteau, au carcan, au bonnet vert, au travail sans relâche, à la honte sans pitié, il se mêlerait une idée céleste!

Enfin il se dit qu'il y avait nécessité, que sa destinée était ainsi faite, qu'il n'était pas maître de déranger les arrangements d'en haut, que dans tous les cas il fallait choisir: ou la vertu au dehors et l'abomination au dedans, ou la sainteté au dedans et l'infamie au dehors.

À remuer tant d'idées lugubres, son courage ne défaillait pas, mais son cerveau se fatiguait. Il commençait à penser malgré lui à d'autres choses, à des choses indifférentes. Ses artères battaient violemment dans ses tempes. Il allait et venait toujours. Minuit sonna d'abord à la paroisse, puis à la maison de ville. Il compta les douze coups aux deux horloges, et il compara le son des deux cloches. Il se rappela à cette occasion que quelques jours auparavant il avait vu chez un marchand de ferrailles une vieille cloche à vendre sur laquelle ce nom était écrit: *Antoine Albin de Romainville*.

Il avait froid. Il alluma un peu de feu. Il ne songea pas à fermer la fenêtre.

Cependant il était retombé dans sa stupeur. Il lui fallait faire un assez grand effort pour se rappeler à quoi il songeait avant que minuit sonnât. Il y parvint enfin.

— Ah! oui, se dit-il, j'avais pris la résolution de me dénoncer.

Et puis tout à coup il pensa à la Fantine.

— Tiens! dit-il, et cette pauvre femme!

Ici une crise nouvelle se déclara.

Fantine, apparaissant brusquement dans sa rêverie, y fut comme un rayon d’une lumière inattendue. Il lui sembla que tout changeait d’aspect autour de lui, il s’écria:

— Ah çà, mais! jusqu’ici je n’ai considéré que moi! je n’ai eu égard qu’à ma convenance! Il me convient de me taire ou de me dénoncer, — cacher ma personne ou sauver mon âme, — être un magistrat méprisable et respecté ou un galérien infâme et vénérable, c’est moi, c’est toujours moi, ce n’est que moi! Mais, mon Dieu, c’est de l’égoïsme tout cela! Ce sont des formes diverses de l’égoïsme, mais c’est de l’égoïsme! Si je songeais un peu aux autres? La première sainteté est de penser à autrui. Voyons, examinons. Moi excepté, moi effacé, moi oublié, qu’arrivera-t-il de tout ceci? — Si je me dénonce? on me prend. On lâche ce Champmathieu, on me remet aux galères, c’est bien. Et puis? Que se passe-t-il ici? Ah! ici, il y a un pays, une ville, des fabriques, une industrie, des ouvriers, des hommes, des femmes, des vieux grands-pères, des enfants, des pauvres gens! J’ai créé tout ceci, je fais vivre tout cela; partout où il y a une cheminée qui fume, c’est moi qui ai mis le tison dans le feu et la viande dans la marmite; j’ai fait l’aisance, la circulation, le crédit; avant moi il n’y avait rien; j’ai relevé, vivifié, animé, fécondé, stimulé, enrichi tout le pays; moi de moins, c’est l’âme de moins. Je m’ôte, tout meurt. — Et cette femme qui a tant souffert, qui a tant de mérites dans sa chute, dont j’ai causé sans le vouloir tout le malheur! Et cet enfant que je voulais aller chercher, que j’ai promis à la mère! Est-ce que je ne dois pas aussi quelque chose à cette femme, en réparation du mal que je lui ai fait? Si je disparais, qu’arrive-t-il? La mère meurt. L’enfant devient ce qu’il peut. Voilà ce qui se passe, si je me dénonce. — Si je ne me dénonce pas? Voyons, si je ne me dénonce pas? Après s’être fait cette question, il s’arrêta; il eut comme un moment d’hésitation et de tremblement; mais ce moment dura peu, et il se répondit avec calme:

— Eh bien, cet homme va aux galères, c’est vrai, mais, que diable! il a volé! J’ai beau me dire qu’il n’a pas volé, il a volé! Moi, je reste ici, je continue. Dans dix ans j’aurai gagné dix millions, je les répands dans le pays, je n’ai rien à moi, qu’est-ce que cela me fait? Ce n’est pas pour moi ce que je fais! La prospérité de tous va croissant, les industries s’éveillent et s’excitent, les manufactures et les usines se multiplient, les familles, cent familles, mille familles! sont heureuses; la contrée se peuple; il naît des villages où il n’y a que des fermes, il naît des fermes où il n’y a rien; la misère disparaît, et avec la misère disparaissent la débauche, la prostitution, le vol, le meurtre, tous les vices, tous les crimes! Et cette pauvre mère élève son enfant! et voilà tout un pays riche et honnête! Ah çà, j’étais fou, j’étais absurde, qu’est-ce que je parlais donc de me dénoncer? Il faut faire attention, vraiment, et ne rien précipiter. Quoi! parce qu’il m’aura plu de faire le grand et le généreux, — c’est du mélodrame, après tout! — parce que je n’aurai songé qu’à moi, qu’à moi seul, quoi! pour sauver d’une punition peut-être un peu exagérée, mais juste au fond, on ne sait qui, un voleur, un drôle évidemment, il faudra que tout un pays périsse! il faudra qu’une pauvre femme crève à l’hôpital! qu’une pauvre petite fille crève sur le pavé! comme des chiens! Ah! mais c’est abominable! Sans même que la mère ait revu son enfant! sans que l’enfant ait presque connu sa mère! Et tout ça pour ce vieux gredin de voleur de pommes qui, à coup sûr, a mérité les galères pour autre chose, si ce n’est pour cela! Beaux scrupules qui sauvent un coupable et qui sacrifient des innocents, qui sauvent un vieux vagabond, lequel n’a plus que quelques années à vivre au bout du compte et ne sera guère plus malheureux au bagne que dans sa masure, et qui sacrifient toute une population, mères, femmes, enfants! Cette pauvre petite Cosette qui n’a que moi au monde et qui est sans doute en ce moment toute bleue de froid dans le bouge de ces Thénardier! Voilà encore des canailles ceux-là! Et je manquerais à mes devoirs envers tous ces pauvres êtres! Et je m’en irais me dénoncer! Et je ferais cette inepte sottise! Mettons tout au pis. Supposons qu’il y ait une mauvaise action pour moi dans ceci et que ma conscience me la reproche un jour, accepter, pour le bien d’autrui, ces reproches qui ne chargent que moi, cette mauvaise action qui ne compromet que mon âme, c’est là qu’est le dévouement, c’est là qu’est la vertu.

Il se leva, il se remit à marcher. Cette fois il lui semblait qu’il était content. On ne trouve les diamants que dans les ténèbres de la terre; on ne trouve les vérités que dans les profondeurs de la pensée. Il lui semblait qu’après être descendu dans ces profondeurs, après avoir longtemps tâtonné au plus noir de ces ténèbres, il venait enfin de trouver un de ces diamants, une de ces vérités, et qu’il la tenait dans sa main; et il s’éblouissait à la regarder.

— Oui, pensa-t-il, c’est cela. Je suis dans le vrai. J’ai la solution. Il faut finir par s’en tenir à quelque chose. Mon parti est pris. Laissons faire! Ne vacillons plus, ne reculons plus. Ceci est dans l’intérêt de tous, non dans le mien. Je suis Madeleine, je reste Madeleine. Malheur à celui qui est Jean Valjean! Ce n’est plus moi. Je ne connais pas cet homme, je ne sais plus ce que c’est, s’il se trouve que quelqu’un est Jean Valjean à cette heure, qu’il s’arrange! cela ne me regarde pas. C’est un nom de fatalité qui flotte dans la nuit, s’il s’arrête et s’abat sur une tête, tant pis pour elle!

Il se regarda dans le petit miroir qui était sur sa cheminée, et dit:

— Tiens! cela m’a soulagé de prendre une résolution! Je suis tout autre à présent.

Il marcha encore quelques pas, puis il s’arrêta court:

— Allons! dit-il, il ne faut hésiter devant aucune des conséquences de la résolution prise. Il y a encore des fils qui m’attachent à ce Jean Valjean. Il faut les briser! Il y a ici, dans cette chambre même, des objets qui m’accuseraient, des choses muettes qui seraient des témoins, c’est dit, il faut que tout cela disparaisse.

Il fouilla dans sa poche, en tira sa bourse, l’ouvrit, et y prit une petite clef.

Il introduisit cette clef dans une serrure dont on voyait à peine le trou, perdu qu’il était dans les nuances les plus sombres du dessin qui couvrait le papier collé sur le mur. Une cachette s’ouvrit, une espèce de fausse armoire ménagée entre l’angle de la muraille et le manteau de la cheminée. Il n’y avait dans cette cachette que quelques guenilles, un sarrau de toile bleue, un vieux pantalon, un vieux havresac, et un gros bâton d’épine ferré aux deux bouts. Ceux qui avaient vu Jean Valjean à l’époque où il traversait Digne, en octobre 1815, eussent aisément reconnu toutes les pièces de ce misérable accoutrement.

Il les avait conservées comme il avait conservé les chandeliers d’argent, pour se rappeler toujours son point de départ. Seulement il cachait ceci qui venait du bagne, et il laissait voir les flambeaux qui venaient de l’évêque.

Il jeta un regard furtif vers la porte, comme s’il eût craint qu’elle ne s’ouvrît malgré le verrou qui la fermait; puis d’un mouvement vif et brusque et d’une seule brassée, sans même donner un coup d’œil à ces choses qu’il avait si religieusement et si périlleusement gardées pendant tant d’années, il prit tout, haillons, bâton, havresac, et jeta tout au feu. Il referma la fausse armoire, et, redoublant de précautions, désormais inutiles puisqu’elle était vide, en cacha la porte derrière un gros meuble qu’il y poussa.

Au bout de quelques secondes, la chambre et le mur d’en face furent éclairés d’une grande réverbération rouge et tremblante. Tout brûlait. Le bâton d’épine pétillait et jetait des étincelles jusqu’au milieu de la chambre.

Le havresac, en se consumant avec d’affreux chiffons qu’il contenait, avait mis à nu quelque chose qui brillait dans la cendre. En se penchant, on eût aisément reconnu une pièce d’argent. Sans doute la pièce de quarante sous volée au petit savoyard.

Lui ne regardait pas le feu et marchait, allant et venant toujours du même pas.

Tout à coup ses yeux tombèrent sur les deux flambeaux d’argent que la réverbération faisait reluire vaguement sur la cheminée.

— Tiens! pensa-t-il, tout Jean Valjean est encore là-dedans. Il faut aussi détruire cela.

Il prit les deux flambeaux.

Il y avait assez de feu pour qu’on pût les déformer promptement et en faire une sorte de lingot méconnaissable.

Il se pencha sur le foyer et s’y chauffa un instant. Il eut un vrai bien-être. — La bonne chaleur! dit-il.

Il remua le brasier avec un des deux chandeliers. Une minute de plus, et ils étaient dans le feu. En ce moment il lui sembla qu’il entendait une voix qui criait au dedans de lui:

— Jean Valjean! Jean Valjean!

Ses cheveux se dressèrent, il devint comme un homme qui écoute une chose terrible.

— Oui, c’est cela, achève! disait la voix. Complète ce que tu fais! détruis ces flambeaux! anéantis ce souvenir! oublie l’évêque! oublie tout! perds ce Champmathieu! va, c’est bien. Applaudis-toi! Ainsi, c’est convenu, c’est résolu, c’est dit, voilà un homme, voilà un vieillard qui ne sait ce qu’on lui veut, qui n’a rien fait peut-être, un innocent, dont ton nom fait tout le malheur, sur qui ton nom pèse comme un crime, qui va être pris pour toi, qui va être condamné, qui va finir ses jours dans l’abjection et dans l’horreur! c’est bien. Sois honnête homme, toi. Reste monsieur le maire, reste honorable et honoré, enrichis la ville, nourris des indigents, élève des orphelins, vis heureux, vertueux et admiré, et pendant ce temps-là, pendant que tu seras ici dans la joie et dans la lumière, il y aura quelqu’un qui aura ta casaque rouge, qui portera ton nom dans l’ignominie et qui traînera ta chaîne au bagne! Oui, c’est bien arrangé ainsi! Ah! misérable!

La sueur lui coulait du front. Il attachait sur les flambeaux un œil hagard. Cependant ce qui parlait en lui n’avait pas fini. La voix continuait:

— Jean Valjean! il y aura autour de toi beaucoup de voix qui feront un grand bruit, qui parleront bien haut, et qui te béniront, et une seule que personne n’entendra et qui te maudira dans les ténèbres. Eh bien! écoute, infâme! toutes ces bénédictions retomberont avant d’arriver au ciel, et il n’y aura que la malédiction qui montera jusqu’à Dieu! Cette voix, d’abord toute faible et qui s’était élevée du plus obscur de sa conscience, était devenue par degrés éclatante et formidable, et il l’entendait maintenant à son oreille. Il lui semblait qu’elle était sortie de lui-même et qu’elle parlait à présent en dehors de lui. Il crut entendre les dernières paroles si distinctement qu’il regarda dans la chambre avec une sorte de terreur.

— Y a-t-il quelqu’un ici? demanda-t-il à haute voix, et tout égaré.

Puis il reprit avec un rire qui ressemblait au rire d’un idiot:

— Que je suis bête! il ne peut y avoir personne.

Il y avait quelqu’un; mais celui qui y était n’était pas de ceux que l’œil humain peut voir.

Il posa les flambeaux sur la cheminée.

Alors il reprit cette marche monotone et lugubre qui troublait dans ses rêves et réveillait en sursaut l’homme endormi au-dessous de lui.

Cette marche le soulageait et l’enivrait en même temps. Il semble que parfois dans les occasions suprêmes on se remue pour demander conseil à tout ce qu’on peut rencontrer en se déplaçant. Au bout de quelques instants il ne savait plus où il en était.

Il reculait maintenant avec une égale épouvante devant les deux résolutions qu’il avait prises tour à tour. Les deux idées qui le conseillaient lui paraissaient aussi funestes l’une que l’autre. — Quelle fatalité! quelle rencontre que ce Champmathieu pris pour lui! Être précipité justement par le moyen que la providence paraissait d’abord avoir employé pour l’affermir!

Il y eut un moment où il considéra l’avenir. Se dénoncer, grand Dieu! se livrer! Il envisagea avec un immense désespoir tout ce qu’il faudrait quitter, tout ce qu’il faudrait reprendre. Il faudrait donc dire adieu à cette existence si bonne, si pure, si radieuse, à ce respect de tous, à l’honneur, à la liberté! Il n’irait plus se promener dans les champs, il n’entendrait plus chanter les oiseaux au mois de mai, il ne ferait plus l’aumône aux petits enfants! Il ne sentirait plus la douceur des regards de reconnaissance et d’amour fixés sur lui! Il quitterait cette maison qu’il avait bâtie, cette chambre, cette petite chambre! Tout lui paraissait charmant à cette heure. Il ne lirait plus dans ces livres, il n’écrirait plus sur cette petite table de bois blanc! Sa vieille portière, la seule servante qu’il eût, ne lui monterait plus son café le matin. Grand Dieu! au lieu de cela, la chiourme, le carcan, la veste rouge, la chaîne au pied, la fatigue, le cachot, le lit de camp, toutes ces horreurs connues! À son âge, après avoir été ce qu’il était! Si encore il était jeune! Mais, vieux, être tutoyé par le premier venu, être fouillé par le garde-chiourme, recevoir le coup de bâton de l’argousin! avoir les pieds nus dans des souliers ferrés! tendre matin et soir sa jambe au marteau du rondier qui visite la manille! subir la curiosité des étrangers auxquels on dirait: *Celui-là, c’est le fameux Jean Valjean, qui a été maire à Montreuil-sur-mer*! Le soir, ruisselant de sueur, accablé de lassitude, le bonnet vert sur les yeux, remonter deux à deux, sous le fouet du sergent, l’escalier-échelle du bagne flottant! Oh! quelle misère! La destinée peut-elle donc être méchante comme un être intelligent et devenir monstrueuse comme le cœur humain!

Et, quoi qu’il fît, il retombait toujours sur ce poignant dilemme qui était au fond de sa rêverie: — rester dans le paradis, et y devenir démon! rentrer dans l’enfer, et y devenir ange!

Que faire, grand Dieu! que faire?

La tourmente dont il était sorti avec tant de peine se déchaîna de nouveau en lui. Ses idées recommencèrent à se mêler. Elles prirent ce je ne sais quoi de stupéfié et de machinal qui est propre au désespoir. Ce nom de Romainville lui revenait sans cesse à l’esprit avec deux vers d’une chanson qu’il avait entendue autrefois. Il songeait que Romainville est un petit bois près Paris où les jeunes gens amoureux vont cueillir des lilas au mois d’avril.

Il chancelait au dehors comme au dedans. Il marchait comme un petit enfant qu’on laisse aller seul.

À de certains moments, luttant contre sa lassitude, il faisait effort pour ressaisir son intelligence. Il tâchait de se poser une dernière fois, et définitivement, le problème sur lequel il était en quelque sorte tombé d’épuisement. Faut-il se dénoncer? Faut-il se taire? — Il ne réussissait à rien voir de distinct. Les vagues aspects de tous les raisonnements ébauchés par sa rêverie tremblaient et se dissipaient l’un après l’autre en fumée.

Seulement il sentait que, à quelque parti qu’il s’arrêtât, nécessairement, et sans qu’il fût possible d’y échapper, quelque chose de lui allait mourir; qu’il entrait dans un sépulcre à droite comme à gauche; qu’il accomplissait une agonie, l’agonie de son bonheur ou l’agonie de sa vertu.

Hélas! toutes ses irrésolutions l’avaient repris. Il n’était pas plus avancé qu’au commencement.

Ainsi se débattait sous l’angoisse cette malheureuse âme. Dix-huit cents ans avant cet homme infortuné, l’être mystérieux, en qui se résument toutes les saintetés et toutes les souffrances de l’humanité, avait aussi lui, pendant que les oliviers frémissaient au vent farouche de l’infini, longtemps écarté de la main l’effrayant calice qui lui apparaissait ruisselant d’ombre et débordant de ténèbres dans des profondeurs pleines d’étoiles.

Chapitre IV

Formes que prend la souffrance pendant le sommeil

Trois heures du matin venaient de sonner, et il y avait cinq heures qu'il marchait ainsi, presque sans interruption lorsqu'il se laissa tomber sur sa chaise.

Il s'y endormit et fit un rêve.

Ce rêve, comme la plupart des rêves, ne se rapportait à la situation que par je ne sais quoi de funeste et de poignant, mais il lui fit impression. Ce cauchemar le frappa tellement que plus tard il l'a écrit. C'est un des papiers écrits de sa main qu'il a laissés. Nous croyons devoir transcrire ici cette chose textuellement.

Quel que soit ce rêve, l'histoire de cette nuit serait incomplète si nous l'omettions. C'est la sombre aventure d'une âme malade.

Le voici. Sur l'enveloppe nous trouvons cette ligne écrite: *Le rêve que j'ai eu cette nuit-là.*

«J'étais dans une campagne. Une grande campagne triste où il n'y avait pas d'herbe. Il ne me semblait pas qu'il fît jour ni qu'il fît nuit.

«Je me promenais avec mon frère, le frère de mes années d'enfance, ce frère auquel je dois dire que je ne pense jamais et dont je ne me souviens presque plus.

«Nous causions, et nous rencontrions des passants. Nous parlions d'une voisine que nous avions eue autrefois, et qui, depuis qu'elle demeurait sur la rue, travaillait la fenêtre toujours ouverte. Tout en causant, nous avions froid à cause de cette fenêtre ouverte.

«Il n'y avait pas d'arbres dans la campagne.

«Nous vîmes un homme qui passa près de nous. C'était un homme tout nu, couleur de cendre, monté sur un cheval couleur de terre. L'homme n'avait pas de cheveux; on voyait son crâne et des veines sur son crâne. Il tenait à la main une baguette qui était souple comme un sarment de vigne et lourde comme du fer. Ce cavalier passa et ne nous dit rien.

«Mon frère me dit: Prenons par le chemin creux.

«Il y avait un chemin creux où l'on ne voyait pas une broussaille ni un brin de mousse. Tout était couleur de terre, même le ciel. Au bout de quelques pas, on ne me répondit plus quand je parlais. Je m’aperçus que mon frère n’était plus avec moi.

«J’entrai dans un village que je vis. Je songeai que ce devait être là Romainville (pourquoi Romainville?).

«La première rue où j’entrai était déserte. J’entrai dans une seconde rue. Derrière l’angle que faisaient les deux rues, il y avait un homme debout contre le mur. Je dis à cet homme: — Quel est ce pays? où suis-je? L’homme ne répondit pas. Je vis la porte d’une maison ouverte, j’y entrai.

«La première chambre était déserte. J’entrai dans la seconde. Derrière la porte de cette chambre, il y avait un homme debout contre le mur. Je demandai à cet homme: — À qui est cette maison? où suis-je? L’homme ne répondit pas. La maison avait un jardin.

«Je sortis de la maison et j’entrai dans le jardin. Le jardin était désert. Derrière le premier arbre, je trouvai un homme qui se tenait debout. Je dis à cet homme: — Quel est ce jardin? où suis-je? L’homme ne répondit pas.

«J’errai dans le village, et je m’aperçus que c’était une ville. Toutes les rues étaient désertes, toutes les portes étaient ouvertes. Aucun être vivant ne passait dans les rues, ne marchait dans les chambres ou ne se promenait dans les jardins. Mais il y avait derrière chaque angle de mur, derrière chaque porte, derrière chaque arbre, un homme debout qui se taisait. On n’en voyait jamais qu’un à la fois. Ces hommes me regardaient passer.

«Je sortis de la ville et je me mis à marcher dans les champs.

«Au bout de quelque temps, je me retournai, et je vis une grande foule qui venait derrière moi. Je reconnus tous les hommes que j’avais vus dans la ville. Ils avaient des têtes étranges. Ils ne semblaient pas se hâter, et cependant ils marchaient plus vite que moi. Ils ne faisaient aucun bruit en marchant. En un instant, cette foule me rejoignit et m’entoura. Les visages de ces hommes étaient couleur de terre.

«Alors le premier que j’avais vu et questionné en entrant dans la ville me dit: — Où allez-vous? Est-ce que vous ne savez pas que vous êtes mort depuis longtemps?

«J’ouvris la bouche pour répondre, et je m’aperçus qu’il n’y avait personne autour de moi.»

Il se réveilla. Il était glacé. Un vent qui était froid comme le vent du matin faisait tourner dans leurs gonds les châssis de la croisée restée ouverte. Le feu s’était éteint. La bougie touchait à sa fin. Il était encore nuit noire.

Il se leva, il alla à la fenêtre. Il n’y avait toujours pas d’étoiles au ciel.

De sa fenêtre on voyait la cour de la maison et la rue. Un bruit sec et dur qui résonna tout à coup sur le sol lui fit baisser les yeux.

Il vit au-dessous de lui deux étoiles rouges dont les rayons s’allongeaient et se raccourcissaient bizarrement dans l’ombre.

Comme sa pensée était encore à demi submergée dans la brume des rêves. — tiens! songea-t-il, il n’y en a pas dans le ciel. Elles sont sur la terre maintenant.

Cependant ce trouble se dissipa, un second bruit pareil au premier acheva de le réveiller; il regarda, et il reconnut que ces deux étoiles étaient les lanternes d’une voiture. À la clarté qu’elles jetaient, il put distinguer la forme de cette voiture. C’était un tilbury attelé d’un petit cheval blanc. Le bruit qu’il avait entendu, c’étaient les coups de pied du cheval sur le pavé.

— Qu’est-ce que c’est que cette voiture? se dit-il. Qui est-ce qui vient donc si matin? En ce moment on frappa un petit coup à la porte de sa chambre.

Il frissonna de la tête aux pieds, et cria d’une voix terrible:

— Qui est là?

Quelqu’un répondit:

— Moi, monsieur le maire.

Il reconnut la voix de la vieille femme, sa portière.

— Eh bien, reprit-il, qu’est-ce que c’est?

— Monsieur le maire, il est tout à l’heure cinq heures du matin.

— Qu’est-ce que cela me fait?

— Monsieur le maire, c’est le cabriolet.

— Quel cabriolet?

— Le tilbury.

— Quel tilbury?

— Est-ce que monsieur le maire n’a pas fait demander un tilbury?

— Non, dit-il.

— Le cocher dit qu’il vient chercher monsieur le maire.

— Quel cocher?

— Le cocher de M. Scaufflaire.

— M. Scaufflaire?

Ce nom le fit tressaillir comme si un éclair lui eût passé devant la face.

— Ah! oui! reprit-il, M. Scaufflaire.

Si la vieille femme l’eût pu voir en ce moment, elle eût été épouvantée.

Il se fit un assez long silence. Il examinait d’un air stupide la flamme de la bougie et prenait autour de la mèche de la cire brûlante qu’il roulait dans ses doigts.

La vieille attendait. Elle se hasarda pourtant à élever encore la voix:

— Monsieur le maire, que faut-il que je réponde?

— Dites que c’est bien, et que je descends.

Chapitre V

Bâtons dans les roues

Le service des postes d’Arras à Montreuil-sur-mer se faisait encore à cette époque par de petites malles du temps de l’empire. Ces malles étaient des cabriolets à deux roues, tapissés de cuir fauve au dedans, suspendus sur des ressorts à pompe, et n’ayant que deux places, l’une pour le courrier, l’autre pour le voyageur. Les roues étaient armées de ces longs moyeux offensifs qui tiennent les autres voitures à distance et qu’on voit encore sur les routes d’Allemagne. Le coffre aux dépêches, immense boîte oblongue, était placé derrière le cabriolet et faisait corps avec lui. Ce coffre était peint en noir et le cabriolet en jaune.

Ces voitures, auxquelles rien ne ressemble aujourd’hui, avaient je ne sais quoi de difforme et de bossu, et, quand on les voyait passer de loin et ramper dans quelque route à l’horizon, elles ressemblaient à ces insectes qu’on appelle, je crois, termites, et qui, avec un petit corsage, traînent un gros arrière-train. Elles allaient, du reste, fort vite. La malle partie d’Arras toutes les nuits à une heure, après le passage du courrier de Paris, arrivait à Montreuil-sur-mer un peu avant cinq heures du matin.

Cette nuit-là, la malle qui descendait à Montreuil-sur-mer par la route de Hesdin accrocha, au tournant d’une rue, au moment où elle entrait dans la ville, un petit tilbury attelé d’un cheval blanc, qui venait en sens inverse et dans lequel il n’y avait qu’une personne, un homme enveloppé d’un manteau. La roue du tilbury reçut un choc assez rude. Le courrier cria à cet homme d’arrêter, mais le voyageur n’écouta pas, et continua sa route au grand trot.

— Voilà un homme diablement pressé! dit le courrier.

L’homme qui se hâtait ainsi, c’est celui que nous venons de voir se débattre dans des convulsions dignes à coup sûr de pitié.

Où allait-il? Il n’eût pu le dire. Pourquoi se hâtait-il? Il ne savait. Il allait au hasard devant lui. Où? À Arras sans doute; mais il allait peut-être ailleurs aussi. Par moments il le sentait, et il tressaillait.

Il s’enfonçait dans cette nuit comme dans un gouffre. Quelque chose le poussait, quelque chose l’attirait. Ce qui se passait en lui, personne ne pourrait le dire, tous le comprendront. Quel homme n'est entré, au moins une fois en sa vie, dans cette obscure caverne de l'inconnu?

Du reste il n'avait rien résolu, rien décidé, rien arrêté, rien fait. Aucun des actes de sa conscience n'avait été définitif. Il était plus que jamais comme au premier moment. Pourquoi allait-il à Arras?

Il se répétait ce qu'il s'était déjà dit en retenant le cabriolet de Scaufflaire, — que, quel que dût être le résultat, il n'y avait aucun inconvénient à voir de ses yeux, à juger les choses par lui-même; — que cela même était prudent, qu'il fallait savoir ce qui se passerait; qu'on ne pouvait rien décider sans avoir observé et scruté; — que de loin on se faisait des montagnes de tout; qu'au bout du compte, lorsqu'il aurait vu ce Champmathieu, quelque misérable, sa conscience serait probablement fort soulagée de le laisser aller au bagne à sa place; — qu'à la vérité il y aurait là Javert, et ce Brevet, ce Chenildieu, ce Cochepaille, anciens forçats qui l'avaient connu; mais qu'à coup sûr ils ne le reconnaîtraient pas; — bah! quelle idée! — que Javert en était à cent lieues; — que toutes les conjectures et toutes les suppositions étaient fixées sur ce Champmathieu, et que rien n'est entêté comme les suppositions et les conjectures; — qu'il n'y avait donc aucun danger. Que sans doute c'était un moment noir, mais qu'il en sortirait; — qu'après tout il tenait sa destinée, si mauvaise qu'elle voulût être, dans sa main; — qu'il en était le maître. Il se cramponnait à cette pensée.

Au fond, pour tout dire, il eût mieux aimé ne point aller à Arras.

Cependant il y allait.

Tout en songeant, il fouettait le cheval, lequel trottait de ce bon trot réglé et sûr qui fait deux lieues et demie à l'heure.

À mesure que le cabriolet avançait, il sentait quelque chose en lui qui reculait.

Au point du jour il était en rase campagne; la ville de Montreuil-sur-mer était assez loin derrière lui. Il regarda l'horizon blanchir; il regarda, sans les voir, passer devant ses yeux toutes les froides figures d'une aube d'hiver. Le matin a ses spectres comme le soir. Il ne les voyait pas, mais, à son insu, et par une sorte de pénétration presque physique, ces noires silhouettes d'arbres et de collines ajoutaient à l'état violent de son âme je ne sais quoi de morne et de sinistre.

Chaque fois qu'il passait devant une de ces maisons isolées qui côtoient parfois les routes, il se disait: il y a pourtant là-dedans des gens qui dorment!

Le trot du cheval, les grelots du harnais, les roues sur le pavé, faisaient un bruit doux et monotone. Ces choses-là sont charmantes quand on est joyeux et lugubres quand on est triste. Il était grand jour lorsqu'il arriva à Hesdin. Il s'arrêta devant une auberge pour laisser souffler le cheval et lui faire donner l'avoine.

Ce cheval était, comme l'avait dit Scaufflaire, de cette petite race du Boulonnais qui a trop de tête, trop de ventre et pas assez d'encolure, mais qui a le poitrail ouvert, la croupe large, la jambe sèche et fine et le pied solide; race laide, mais robuste et saine. L'excellente bête avait fait cinq lieues en deux heures et n'avait pas une goutte de sueur sur la croupe.

Il n'était pas descendu du tilbury. Le garçon d'écurie qui apportait l'avoine se baissa tout à coup et examina la roue de gauche.

— Allez-vous loin comme cela? dit cet homme.

Il répondit, presque sans sortir de sa rêverie:

— Pourquoi?

— Venez-vous de loin? reprit le garçon.

— De cinq lieues d'ici.

— Ah!

— Pourquoi dites-vous: ah?

Le garçon se pencha de nouveau, resta un moment silencieux, l'œil fixé sur la roue, puis se redressa en disant:

— C'est que voilà une roue qui vient de faire cinq lieues, c'est possible, mais qui à coup sûr ne fera pas maintenant un quart de lieue.

Il sauta à bas du tilbury.

— Que dites-vous là, mon ami?

— Je dis que c'est un miracle que vous ayez fait cinq lieues sans rouler, vous et votre cheval, dans quelque fossé de la grande route. Regardez plutôt.

La roue en effet était gravement endommagée. Le choc de la malle-poste avait fendu deux rayons et labouré le moyeu dont l'écrou ne tenait plus.

— Mon ami, dit-il au garçon d'écurie, il y a un charron ici?

— Sans doute, monsieur.

— Rendez-moi le service de l'aller chercher.

— Il est là, à deux pas. Hé! maître Bourgaillard!

Maître Bourgaillard, le charron, était sur le seuil de sa porte. Il vint examiner la roue et fit la grimace d'un chirurgien qui considère une jambe cassée.

— Pouvez-vous raccommoder cette roue sur-le-champ?

— Oui, monsieur.

— Quand pourrai-je repartir?

— Demain.

— Demain!

— Il y a une grande journée d’ouvrage. Est-ce que monsieur est pressé?

— Très pressé. Il faut que je reparte dans une heure au plus tard.

— Impossible, monsieur.

— Je payerai tout ce qu’on voudra.

— Impossible.

— Eh bien! dans deux heures.

— Impossible pour aujourd’hui. Il faut refaire deux rais et un moyeu. Monsieur ne pourra repartir avant demain.

— L’affaire que j’ai ne peut attendre à demain. Si, au lieu de raccommoder cette roue, on la remplaçait?

— Comment cela?

— Vous êtes charron?

— Sans doute, monsieur.

— Est-ce que vous n’auriez pas une roue à me vendre? Je pourrais repartir tout de suite.

— Une roue de rechange?

— Oui.

— Je n’ai pas une roue toute faite pour votre cabriolet. Deux roues font la paire. Deux roues ne vont pas ensemble au hasard.

— En ce cas, vendez-moi une paire de roues.

— Monsieur, toutes les roues ne vont pas à tous les essieux.

— Essayez toujours.

— C’est inutile, monsieur. Je n’ai à vendre que des roues de charrette. Nous sommes un petit pays ici.

— Auriez-vous un cabriolet à me louer?

Le maître charron, du premier coup d’œil, avait reconnu que le tilbury était une voiture de louage. Il haussa les épaules.

— Vous les arrangez bien, les cabriolets qu’on vous loue! j’en aurais un que je ne vous le louerais pas.

— Eh bien, à me vendre?

— Je n’en ai pas.

— Quoi! pas une carriole? Je ne suis pas difficile, comme vous voyez.

— Nous sommes un petit pays. J’ai bien là sous la remise, ajouta le charron, une vieille calèche qui est à un bourgeois de la ville qui me l’a donnée en garde et qui s’en sert tous les trente-six du mois. Je vous la louerais bien, qu’est-ce que cela me fait? mais il ne faudrait pas que le bourgeois la vît passer; et puis, c’est une calèche, il faudrait deux chevaux.

— Je prendrai des chevaux de poste.

— Où va monsieur?

— À Arras.

— Et monsieur veut arriver aujourd’hui?

— Mais oui.

— En prenant des chevaux de poste?

— Pourquoi pas?

— Est-il égal à monsieur d’arriver cette nuit à quatre heures du matin?

— Non certes.

— C’est que, voyez-vous bien, il y a une chose à dire, en prenant des chevaux de poste....

— Monsieur a son passeport?

— Oui.

— Eh bien, en prenant des chevaux de poste, monsieur n’arrivera pas à Arras avant demain. Nous sommes un chemin de traverse. Les relais sont mal servis, les chevaux sont aux champs. C’est la saison des grandes charrues qui commence, il faut de forts attelages, et l’on prend les chevaux partout, à la poste comme ailleurs. Monsieur attendra au moins trois ou quatre heures à chaque relais. Et puis on va au pas. Il y a beaucoup de côtes à monter.

— Allons, j’irai à cheval. Dételez le cabriolet. On me vendra bien une selle dans le pays.

— Sans doute. Mais ce cheval-ci endure-t-il la selle?

— C’est vrai, vous m’y faites penser. Il ne l’endure pas.

— Alors....

— Mais je trouverai bien dans le village un cheval à louer?

— Un cheval pour aller à Arras d’une traite!

— Oui.

— Il faudrait un cheval comme on n’en a pas dans nos endroits. Il faudrait l’acheter d’abord, car on ne vous connaît pas. Mais ni à vendre ni à louer, ni pour cinq cents francs, ni pour mille, vous ne le trouveriez pas!

— Comment faire?

— Le mieux, là, en honnête homme, c’est que je raccommode la roue et que vous remettiez votre voyage à demain.

— Demain il sera trop tard.

— Dame!

— N’y a-t-il pas la malle-poste qui va à Arras? Quand passe-t-elle?

— La nuit prochaine. Les deux malles font le service la nuit, celle qui monte comme celle qui descend.

— Comment! il vous faut une journée pour raccommoder cette roue?

— Une journée, et une bonne!

— En mettant deux ouvriers?

— En en mettant dix!

— Si on liait les rayons avec des cordes?

— Les rayons, oui; le moyeu, non. Et puis la jante aussi est en mauvais état.

— Y a-t-il un loueur de voitures dans la ville?

— Non.

— Y a-t-il un autre charron?

Le garçon d’écurie et le maître charron répondirent en même temps en hochant la tête.

— Non.

Il sentit une immense joie.

Il était évident que la providence s’en mêlait. C’était elle qui avait brisé la roue du tilbury et qui l’arrêtait en route. Il ne s’était pas rendu à cette espèce de première sommation; il venait de faire tous les efforts possibles pour continuer son voyage; il avait loyalement et scrupuleusement épuisé tous les moyens; il n’avait reculé ni devant la saison, ni devant la fatigue, ni devant la dépense; il n’avait rien à se reprocher. S’il n’allait pas plus loin, cela ne le regardait plus. Ce n’était plus sa faute, c’était, non le fait de sa conscience, mais le fait de la providence.

Il respira. Il respira librement et à pleine poitrine pour la première fois depuis la visite de Javert. Il lui semblait que le poignet de fer qui lui serrait le cœur depuis vingt heures venait de le lâcher.

Il lui paraissait que maintenant Dieu était pour lui, et se déclarait.

Il se dit qu’il avait fait tout ce qu’il pouvait, et qu’à présent il n’avait qu’à revenir sur ses pas, tranquillement.

Si sa conversation avec le charron eût eu lieu dans une chambre de l’auberge, elle n’eût point eu de témoins, personne ne l’eût entendue, les choses en fussent restées là, et il est probable que nous n’aurions eu à raconter aucun des événements qu’on va lire; mais cette conversation s’était faite dans la rue. Tout colloque dans la rue produit inévitablement un cercle. Il y a toujours des gens qui ne demandent qu’à être spectateurs. Pendant qu’il questionnait le charron, quelques allants et venants s’étaient arrêtés autour d’eux. Après avoir écouté pendant quelques minutes, un jeune garçon, auquel personne n’avait pris garde, s’était détaché du groupe en courant.

Au moment où le voyageur, après la délibération intérieure que nous venons d’indiquer, prenait la résolution de rebrousser chemin, cet enfant revenait. Il était accompagné d’une vieille femme.

— Monsieur, dit la femme, mon garçon me dit que vous avez envie de louer un cabriolet. Cette simple parole, prononcée par une vieille femme que conduisait un enfant, lui fit ruisseler la sueur dans les reins. Il crut voir la main qui l’avait lâché reparaître dans l’ombre derrière lui, toute prête à le reprendre.

Il répondit:

— Oui, bonne femme, je cherche un cabriolet à louer.

Et il se hâta d’ajouter:

— Mais il n’y en a pas dans le pays.

— Si fait, dit la vieille.

— Où ça donc? reprit le charron.

— Chez moi, répliqua la vieille.

Il tressaillit. La main fatale l’avait ressaisi.

La vieille avait en effet sous un hangar une façon de carriole en osier. Le charron et le garçon d’auberge, désolés que le voyageur leur échappât, intervinrent.

— C’était une affreuse guimbarde, — cela était posé à cru sur l’essieu, — il est vrai que les banquettes étaient suspendues à l’intérieur avec des lanières de cuir, — il pleuvait dedans, — les roues étaient rouillées et rongées d’humidité, — cela n’irait pas beaucoup plus loin que le tilbury, — une vraie patache! — Ce monsieur aurait bien tort de s’y embarquer, — etc., etc.

Tout cela était vrai, mais cette guimbarde, cette patache, cette chose, quelle qu’elle fût, roulait sur ses deux roues et pouvait aller à Arras.

Il paya ce qu'on voulut, laissa le tilbury à réparer chez le charron pour l'y retrouver à son retour, fit atteler le cheval blanc à la carriole, y monta, et reprit la route qu'il suivait depuis le matin.

Au moment où la carriole s'ébranla, il s'avoua qu'il avait eu l'instant d'auparavant une certaine joie de songer qu'il n'irait point où il allait. Il examina cette joie avec une sorte de colère et la trouva absurde. Pourquoi de la joie à revenir en arrière? Après tout, il faisait ce voyage librement. Personne ne l'y forçait. Et, certainement, rien n'arriverait que ce qu'il voudrait bien.

Comme il sortait de Hesdin, il entendit une voix qui lui criait: arrêtez! arrêtez! Il arrêta la carriole d'un mouvement vif dans lequel il y avait encore je ne sais quoi de fébrile et de convulsif qui ressemblait à de l'espérance.

C'était le petit garçon de la vieille.

— Monsieur, dit-il, c'est moi qui vous ai procuré la carriole.

— Eh bien!

— Vous ne m'avez rien donné.

Lui qui donnait à tous et si facilement, il trouva cette prétention exorbitante et presque odieuse.

— Ah! c'est toi, drôle? dit-il, tu n'auras rien!

Il fouetta le cheval et repartit au grand trot.

Il avait perdu beaucoup de temps à Hesdin, il eût voulu le rattraper. Le petit cheval était courageux et tirait comme deux; mais on était au mois de février, il avait plu, les routes étaient mauvaises. Et puis, ce n'était plus le tilbury. La carriole était dure et très lourde. Avec cela force montées.

Il mit près de quatre heures pour aller de Hesdin à Saint-Pol. Quatre heures pour cinq lieues.

À Saint-Pol il détela à la première auberge venue, et fit mener le cheval à l'écurie. Comme il l'avait promis à Scaufflaire, il se tint près du râtelier pendant que le cheval mangeait. Il songeait à des choses tristes et confuses.

La femme de l'aubergiste entre dans l'écurie.

— Est-ce que monsieur ne veut pas déjeuner?

— Tiens, c'est vrai, dit-il, j'ai même bon appétit. Il suivit cette femme qui avait une figure fraîche et réjouie. Elle le conduisit dans une salle basse où il y avait des tables ayant pour nappes des toiles cirées.

— Dépêchez-vous, reprit-il, il faut que je reparte. Je suis pressé.

Une grosse servante flamande mit son couvert en toute hâte. Il regardait cette fille avec un sentiment de bien-être.

— C'est là ce que j'avais, pensa-t-il. Je n'avais pas déjeuné.

On le servit. Il se jeta sur le pain, mordit une bouchée, puis le reposa lentement sur la table et n'y toucha plus.

Un routier mangeait à une autre table. Il dit à cet homme:

— Pourquoi leur pain est-il donc si amer?

Le routier était allemand et n'entendit pas.

Il retourna dans l'écurie près du cheval.

Une heure après, il avait quitté Saint-Pol et se dirigeait vers Tinques qui n'est qu'à cinq lieues d'Arras.

Que faisait-il pendant ce trajet? À quoi pensait-il? Comme le matin, il regardait passer les arbres, les toits de chaume, les champs cultivés, et les évanouissements du paysage qui se disloque à chaque coude du chemin. C'est là une contemplation qui suffit quelquefois à l'âme et qui la dispense presque de penser. Voir mille objets pour la première et pour la dernière fois, quoi de plus mélancolique et de plus profond! Voyager, c'est naître et mourir à chaque instant. Peut-être, dans la région la plus vague de son esprit, faisait-il des rapprochements entre ces horizons changeants et l'existence humaine. Toutes les choses de la vie sont perpétuellement en fuite devant nous. Les obscurcissements et les clartés s'entremêlent: après un éblouissement, une éclipse; on regarde, on se hâte, on tend les mains pour saisir ce qui passe; chaque événement est un tournant de la route; et tout à coup on est vieux. On sent comme une secousse, tout est noir, on distingue une porte obscure, ce sombre cheval de la vie qui vous traînait s'arrête, et l'on voit quelqu'un de voilé et d'inconnu qui le dételle dans les ténèbres.

Le crépuscule tombait au moment où des enfants qui sortaient de l'école regardèrent ce voyageur entrer dans Tinques. Il est vrai qu'on était encore aux jours courts de l'année. Il ne s'arrêta pas à Tinques. Comme il débouchait du village, un cantonnier qui empierrait la route dressa la tête et dit:

— Voilà un cheval bien fatigué.

La pauvre bête en effet n'allait plus qu'au pas.

— Est-ce que vous allez à Arras? ajouta le cantonnier.

— Oui.

— Si vous allez de ce train, vous n'y arriverez pas de bonne heure.

Il arrêta le cheval et demanda au cantonnier:

— Combien y a-t-il encore d’ici à Arras?

— Près de sept grandes lieues.

— Comment cela? le livre de poste ne marque que cinq lieues et un quart.

— Ah! reprit le cantonnier, vous ne savez donc pas que la route est en réparation? Vous allez la trouver coupée à un quart d’heure d’ici. Pas moyen d’aller plus loin.

— Vraiment.

— Vous prendrez à gauche, le chemin qui va à Carency, vous passerez la rivière; et, quand vous serez à Camblin, vous tournerez à droite; c’est la route de Mont-Saint-Éloy qui va à Arras.

— Mais voilà la nuit, je me perdrai.

— Vous n’êtes pas du pays?

— Non.

— Avec ça, c’est tout chemins de traverse. Tenez, Monsieur, reprit le cantonnier, voulez-vous que je vous donne un conseil? Votre cheval est las, rentrez dans Tinques. Il y a une bonne auberge. Couchez-y. Vous irez demain à Arras.

— Il faut que j’y sois ce soir.

— C’est différent. Alors allez tout de même à cette auberge et prenez-y un cheval de renfort. Le garçon du cheval vous guidera dans la traverse.

Il suivit le conseil du cantonnier, rebroussa chemin, et une demi-heure après il repassait au même endroit, mais au grand trot, avec un bon cheval de renfort. Un garçon d’écurie qui s’intitulait postillon était assis sur le brancard de la carriole.

Cependant il sentait qu’il perdait du temps.

Il faisait tout à fait nuit.

Ils s’engagèrent dans la traverse. La route devint affreuse. La carriole tombait d’une ornière dans l’autre. Il dit au postillon:

— Toujours au trot, et double pourboire.

Dans un cahot le palonnier cassa.

— Monsieur, dit le postillon, voilà le palonnier cassé, je ne sais plus comment atteler mon cheval, cette route-ci est bien mauvaise la nuit; si vous vouliez revenir coucher à Tinques, nous pourrions être demain matin de bonne heure à Arras.

Il répondit:

— As-tu un bout de corde et un couteau?

— Oui, monsieur.

Il coupa une branche d’arbre et en fit un palonnier.

Ce fut encore une perte de vingt minutes; mais ils repartirent au galop.

La plaine était ténébreuse. Des brouillards bas, courts et noirs rampaient sur les collines et s’en arrachaient comme des fumées. Il y avait des lueurs blanchâtres dans les nuages. Un grand vent qui venait de la mer faisait dans tous les coins de l’horizon le bruit de quelqu’un qui remue des meubles. Tout ce qu’on entrevoyait avait des attitudes de terreur. Que de choses frissonnent sous ces vastes souffles de la nuit!

Le froid le pénétrait. Il n’avait pas mangé depuis la veille. Il se rappelait vaguement son autre course nocturne dans la grande plaine aux environs de Digne. Il y avait huit ans; et cela lui semblait hier.

Une heure sonna à quelque clocher lointain. Il demanda au garçon:

— Quelle est cette heure?

— Sept heures, monsieur. Nous serons à Arras à huit. Nous n’avons plus que trois lieues. En ce moment il fit pour la première fois cette réflexion — en trouvant étrange qu’elle ne lui fût pas venue plus tôt — que c’était peut-être inutile, toute la peine qu’il prenait; qu’il ne savait seulement pas l’heure du procès; qu’il aurait dû au moins s’en informer; qu’il était extravagant d’aller ainsi devant soi sans savoir si cela servirait à quelque chose. — Puis il ébaucha quelques calculs dans son esprit: — qu’ordinairement les séances des cours d’assises commençaient à neuf heures du matin; — que cela ne devait pas être long, cette affaire-là; — que le vol de pommes, ce serait très court; — qu’il n’y aurait plus ensuite qu’une question d’identité; — quatre ou cinq dépositions, peu de chose à dire pour les avocats; — qu’il allait arriver lorsque tout serait fini!

Le postillon fouettait les chevaux. Ils avaient passé la rivière et laissé derrière eux Mont-Saint-Éloy.

La nuit devenait de plus en plus profonde.

Chapitre VI

La sœur Simplice mise à l’épreuve

Cependant, en ce moment-là même, Fantine était dans la joie.

Elle avait passé une très mauvaise nuit. Toux affreuse, redoublement de fièvre; elle avait eu des songes. Le matin, à la visite du médecin, elle délirait. Il avait eu l’air alarmé et avait recommandé qu’on le prévînt dès que M. Madeleine viendrait.

Toute la matinée elle fut morne, parla peu, et fit des plis à ses draps en murmurant à voix basse des calculs qui avaient l’air d’être des calculs de distances. Ses yeux étaient caves et fixes. Ils paraissaient presque éteints, et puis, par moments, ils se rallumaient et resplendissaient comme des étoiles. Il semble qu’aux approches d’une certaine heure sombre, la clarté du ciel emplisse ceux que quitte la clarté de la terre.

Chaque fois que la sœur Simplice lui demandait comment elle se trouvait, elle répondait invariablement:

— Bien. Je voudrais voir monsieur Madeleine.

Quelques mois auparavant, à ce moment où Fantine venait de perdre sa dernière pudeur, sa dernière honte et sa dernière joie, elle était l’ombre d’elle-même; maintenant elle en était le spectre. Le mal physique avait complété l’œuvre du mal moral. Cette créature de vingt-cinq ans avait le front ridé, les joues flasques, les narines pincées, les dents déchaussées, le teint plombé, le cou osseux, les clavicules saillantes, les membres chétifs, la peau terreuse, et ses cheveux blonds poussaient mêlés de cheveux gris. Hélas! comme la maladie improvise la vieillesse! À midi, le médecin revint, il fit quelques prescriptions, s’informa si M. le maire avait paru à l’infirmerie, et branla la tête.

M. Madeleine venait d’habitude à trois heures voir la malade. Comme l’exactitude était de la bonté, il était exact.

Vers deux heures et demie, Fantine commença à s’agiter. Dans l’espace de vingt minutes, elle demanda plus de dix fois à la religieuse:

— Ma sœur, quelle heure est-il?

Trois heures sonnèrent. Au troisième coup, Fantine se dressa sur son séant, elle qui d’ordinaire pouvait à peine remuer dans son lit; elle joignit dans une sorte d’étreinte convulsive ses deux mains décharnées et jaunes, et la religieuse entendit sortir de sa poitrine un de ces soupirs profonds qui semblent soulever un accablement. Puis Fantine se tourna et regarda la porte.

Personne n’entra; la porte ne s’ouvrit point.

Elle resta ainsi un quart d’heure, l’œil attaché sur la porte, immobile et comme retenant son haleine. La sœur n’osait lui parler. L’église sonna trois heures un quart. Fantine se laissa retomber sur l’oreiller.

Elle ne dit rien et se remit à faire des plis à son drap. La demi-heure passa, puis l’heure. Personne ne vint.

Chaque fois que l’horloge sonnait, Fantine se dressait et regardait du côté de la porte, puis elle retombait.

On voyait clairement sa pensée, mais elle ne prononçait aucun nom, elle ne se plaignait pas, elle n’accusait pas. Seulement elle toussait d’une façon lugubre. On eût dit que quelque chose d’obscur s’abaissait sur elle. Elle était livide et avait les lèvres bleues. Elle souriait par moments.

Cinq heures sonnèrent. Alors la sœur l’entendit qui disait très bas et doucement:

— Mais puisque je m’en vais demain, il a tort de ne pas venir aujourd’hui!

La sœur Simplice elle-même était surprise du retard de M. Madeleine.

Cependant Fantine regardait le ciel de son lit. Elle avait l’air de chercher à se rappeler quelque chose. Tout à coup elle se mit à chanter d’une voix faible comme un souffle. La religieuse écouta. Voici ce que Fantine chantait:

Nous achèterons de bien belles choses
En nous promenant le long des faubourgs.
Les bleuets sont bleus, les roses sont roses,
Les bleuets sont bleus, j’aime mes amours.
La vierge Marie auprès de mon poêle
Est venue hier en manteau brodé,
Et m’a dit: — Voici, caché sous mon voile,
Le petit qu’un jour tu m’as demandé.
Courez à la ville, ayez de la toile,
Achetez du fil, achetez un dé.
Nous achèterons de bien belles choses
En nous promenant le long des faubourgs.
Bonne sainte Vierge, auprès de mon poêle

J’ai mis un berceau de rubans orné
Dieu me donnerait sa plus belle étoile,
J’aime mieux l’enfant que tu m’as donné.
— Madame, que faire avec cette toile?
— Faites un trousseau pour mon nouveau-né.
Les bleuets sont bleus, les roses sont roses,
Les bleuets sont bleus, j’aime mes amours.
— Lavez cette toile.
— Où? — Dans la rivière.
Faites-en, sans rien gâter ni salir,
Une belle jupe avec sa brassière
Que je veux broder et de fleurs emplir.
— L’enfant n’est plus là, madame, qu’en faire?
— Faites-en un drap pour m’ensevelir.
Nous achèterons de bien belles choses
En nous promenant le long des faubourgs.
Les bleuets sont bleus, les roses sont roses,
Les bleuets sont bleus, j’aime mes amours.

Cette chanson était une vieille romance de berceuse avec laquelle autrefois elle endormait sa petite Cosette, et qui ne s’était pas offerte à son esprit depuis cinq ans qu’elle n’avait plus son enfant. Elle chantait cela d’une voix si triste et sur un air si doux que c’était à faire pleurer, même une religieuse. La sœur, habituée aux choses austères, sentit une larme lui venir.

L’horloge sonna six heures. Fantine ne parut pas entendre. Elle semblait ne plus faire attention à aucune chose autour d’elle.

La sœur Simplice envoya une fille de service s’informer près de la portière de la fabrique si M. le maire était rentré et s’il ne monterait pas bientôt à l’infirmerie. La fille revint au bout de quelques minutes.

Fantine était toujours immobile et paraissait attentive à des idées qu’elle avait.

La servante raconta très bas à la sœur Simplice que M. le maire était parti le matin même avant six heures dans un petit tilbury attelé d’un cheval blanc, par le froid qu’il faisait, qu’il était parti seul, pas même de cocher, qu’on ne savait pas le chemin qu’il avait pris, que des personnes disaient l’avoir vu tourner par la route d’Arras, que d’autres assuraient l’avoir rencontré sur la route de Paris. Qu’en s’en allant il avait été comme à l'ordinaire très doux, et qu'il avait seulement dit à la portière qu'on ne l'attendît pas cette nuit.

Pendant que les deux femmes, le dos tourné au lit de la Fantine, chuchotaient, la sœur questionnant, la servante conjecturant, la Fantine, avec cette vivacité fébrile de certaines maladies organiques qui mêle les mouvements libres de la santé à l'effrayante maigreur de la mort, s'était mise à genoux sur son lit, ses deux poings crispés appuyés sur le traversin, et, la tête passée par l'intervalle des rideaux, elle écoutait. Tout à coup elle cria:

— Vous parlez là de monsieur Madeleine! pourquoi parlez-vous tout bas? Qu'est-ce qu'il fait? Pourquoi ne vient-il pas?

Sa voix était si brusque et si rauque que les deux femmes crurent entendre une voix d'homme; elles se retournèrent effrayées.

— Répondez donc! cria Fantine.

La servante balbutia:

— La portière m'a dit qu'il ne pourrait pas venir aujourd'hui.

— Mon enfant, dit la sœur, tenez-vous tranquille, recouchez-vous.

Fantine, sans changer d'attitude, reprit d'une voix haute et avec un accent tout à la fois impérieux et déchirant:

— Il ne pourra venir? Pourquoi cela? Vous savez la raison. Vous la chuchotiez là entre vous. Je veux la savoir.

La servante se hâta de dire à l'oreille de la religieuse:

— Répondez qu'il est occupé au conseil municipal.

La sœur Simplice rougit légèrement; c'était un mensonge que la servante lui proposait. D'un autre côté il lui semblait bien que dire la vérité à la malade ce serait sans doute lui porter un coup terrible et que cela était grave dans l'état où était Fantine. Cette rougeur dura peu. La sœur leva sur Fantine son œil calme et triste, et dit:

— Monsieur le maire est parti.

Fantine se redressa et s'assit sur ses talons. Ses yeux étincelèrent. Une joie inouïe rayonna sur cette physionomie douloureuse.

— Parti! s'écria-t-elle. Il est allé chercher Cosette!

Puis elle tendit ses deux mains vers le ciel et tout son visage devint ineffable. Ses lèvres remuaient; elle priait à voix basse.

Quand sa prière fut finie:

— Ma sœur, dit-elle, je veux bien me recoucher, je vais faire tout ce qu'on voudra; tout à l'heure j'ai été méchante, je vous demande pardon d’avoir parlé si haut, c’est très mal de parler haut, je le sais bien, ma bonne sœur, mais voyez-vous, je suis très contente. Le bon Dieu est bon, monsieur Madeleine est bon, figurez-vous qu’il est allé chercher ma petite Cosette à Montfermeil.

Elle se recoucha, aida la religieuse à arranger l’oreiller et baisa une petite croix d’argent qu’elle avait au cou et que la sœur Simplice lui avait donnée.

— Mon enfant, dit la sœur, tâchez de reposer maintenant, et ne parlez plus.

Fantine prit dans ses mains moites la main de la sœur, qui souffrait de lui sentir cette sueur.

— Il est parti ce matin pour aller à Paris. Au fait il n’a pas même besoin de passer par Paris. Montfermeil, c’est un peu à gauche en venant. Vous rappelez-vous comme il me disait hier quand je lui parlais de Cosette: bientôt, bientôt? C’est une surprise qu’il veut me faire. Vous savez? il m’avait fait signer une lettre pour la reprendre aux Thénardier. Ils n’auront rien à dire, pas vrai? Ils rendront Cosette. Puisqu’ils sont payés. Les autorités ne souffriraient pas qu’on garde un enfant quand on est payé. Ma sœur, ne me faites pas signe qu’il ne faut pas que je parle. Je suis extrêmement heureuse, je vais très bien, je n’ai plus de mal du tout, je vais revoir Cosette, j’ai même très faim. Il y a près de cinq ans que je ne l’ai vue. Vous ne vous figurez pas, vous, comme cela vous tient, les enfants! Et puis elle sera si gentille, vous verrez! Si vous saviez, elle a de si jolis petits doigts roses! D’abord elle aura de très belles mains. À un an, elle avait des mains ridicules. Ainsi! — Elle doit être grande à présent. Cela vous a sept ans. C’est une demoiselle. Je l’appelle Cosette, mais elle s’appelle Euphrasie. Tenez, ce matin, je regardais de la poussière qui était sur la cheminée et j’avais bien l’idée comme cela que je reverrais bientôt Cosette. Mon Dieu! comme on a tort d’être des années sans voir ses enfants! on devrait bien réfléchir que la vie n’est pas éternelle! Oh! comme il est bon d’être parti, monsieur le maire! C’est vrai ça, qu’il fait bien froid? avait-il son manteau au moins? Il sera ici demain, n’est-ce pas? Ce sera demain fête. Demain matin, ma sœur, vous me ferez penser à mettre mon petit bonnet qui a de la dentelle. Montfermeil, c’est un pays. J’ai fait cette route-là, à pied, dans le temps. Il y a eu bien loin pour moi. Mais les diligences vont très vite! Il sera ici demain avec Cosette. Combien y a-t-il d’ici Montfermeil?

La sœur, qui n’avait aucune idée des distances, répondit:

— Oh! je crois bien qu'il pourra être ici demain.

— Demain! demain! dit Fantine, je verrai Cosette demain! Voyez-vous, bonne sœur du bon Dieu, je ne suis plus malade. Je suis folle. Je danserais, si on voulait.

Quelqu'un qui l'eût vue un quart d'heure auparavant n'y eût rien compris. Elle était maintenant toute rose, elle parlait d'une voix vive et naturelle, toute sa figure n'était qu'un sourire. Par moments elle riait en se parlant tout bas. Joie de mère, c'est presque joie d'enfant.

— Eh bien, reprit la religieuse, vous voilà heureuse, obéissez-moi, ne parlez plus.

Fantine posa sa tête sur l'oreiller et dit à demi-voix:

— Oui, recouche-toi, sois sage puisque tu vas avoir ton enfant. Elle a raison, sœur Simplice. Tous ceux qui sont ici ont raison.

Et puis, sans bouger, sans remuer la tête, elle se mit à regarder partout avec ses yeux tout grands ouverts et un air joyeux, et elle ne dit plus rien.

La sœur referma ses rideaux, espérant qu'elle s'assoupirait.

Entre sept et huit heures le médecin vint. N'entendant aucun bruit, il crut que Fantine dormait, entra doucement et s'approcha du lit sur la pointe du pied. Il entrouvrit les rideaux, et à la lueur de la veilleuse il vit les grands yeux calmes de Fantine qui le regardaient.

Elle lui dit:

— Monsieur, n'est-ce pas, on me laissera la coucher à côté de moi dans un petit lit?

Le médecin crut qu'elle délirait. Elle ajouta:

— Regardez plutôt, il y a juste de la place.

Le médecin prit à part la sœur Simplice qui lui expliqua la chose, que M. Madeleine était absent pour un jour ou deux, et que, dans le doute, on n'avait pas cru devoir détromper la malade qui croyait monsieur le maire parti pour Montfermeil; qu'il était possible en somme qu'elle eût deviné juste. Le médecin approuva.

Il se rapprocha du lit de Fantine, qui reprit:

— C'est que, voyez-vous, le matin, quand elle s'éveillera, je lui dirai bonjour à ce pauvre chat, et la nuit, moi qui ne dors pas, je l'entendrai dormir. Sa petite respiration si douce, cela me fera du bien.

— Donnez-moi votre main, dit le médecin.

Elle tendit son bras, et s'écria en riant.

— Ah! tiens! au fait, c’est vrai, vous ne savez pas c’est que je suis guérie. Cosette arrive demain.

Le médecin fut surpris. Elle était mieux. L’oppression était moindre. Le pouls avait repris de la force. Une sorte de vie survenue tout à coup ranimait ce pauvre être épuisé.

— Monsieur le docteur, reprit-elle, la sœur vous a-t-elle dit que monsieur le maire était allé chercher le chiffon?

Le médecin recommanda le silence et qu’on évitât toute émotion pénible. Il prescrivit une infusion de quinquina pur, et, pour le cas où la fièvre reprendrait dans la nuit, une potion calmante. En s’en allant, il dit à la sœur:

— Cela va mieux. Si le bonheur voulait qu’en effet monsieur le maire arrivât demain avec l’enfant, qui sait? il y a des crises si étonnantes, on a vu de grandes joies arrêter court des maladies; je sais bien que celle-ci est une maladie organique, et bien avancée, mais c’est un tel mystère que tout cela! Nous la sauverions peut-être.

Chapitre VII

Le voyageur arrivé prend ses précautions pour repartir.

Il était près de huit heures du soir quand la carriole que nous avons laissée en route entra sous la porte cochère de l'hôtel de la Poste à Arras. L'homme que nous avons suivi jusqu'à ce moment en descendit, répondit d'un air distrait aux empressements des gens de l'auberge, renvoya le cheval de renfort, et conduisit lui-même le petit cheval blanc à l'écurie; puis il poussa la porte d'une salle de billard qui était au rez-de-chaussée, s'y assit, et s'accouda sur une table. Il avait mis quatorze heures à ce trajet qu'il comptait faire en six. Il se rendait la justice que ce n'était pas sa faute; mais au fond il n'en était pas fâché.

La maîtresse de l'hôtel entra.

— Monsieur couche-t-il? monsieur soupe-t-il?

Il fit un signe de tête négatif.

— Le garçon d'écurie dit que le cheval de monsieur est bien fatigué!

Ici il rompit le silence.

— Est-ce que le cheval ne pourra pas repartir demain matin?

— Oh! monsieur! il lui faut au moins deux jours de repos.

Il demanda:

— N'est-ce pas ici le bureau de poste?

— Oui, monsieur.

L'hôtesse le mena à ce bureau; il montra son passeport et s'informa s'il y avait moyen de revenir cette nuit même à Montreuil-sur-mer par la malle; la place à côté du courrier était justement vacante; il la retint et la paya.

— Monsieur, dit le buraliste, ne manquez pas d'être ici pour partir à une heure précise du matin.

Cela fait, il sortit de l'hôtel et se mit à marcher dans la ville.

Il ne connaissait pas Arras, les rues étaient obscures, et il allait au hasard. Cependant il semblait s'obstiner à ne pas demander son chemin aux passants. Il traversa la petite rivière Crinchon et se trouva dans un dédale de ruelles étroites où il se perdit. Un bourgeois cheminait avec un falot. Après quelque hésitation, il prit le parti de s'adresser à ce bourgeois, non sans avoir d'abord regardé devant et derrière lui, comme s'il craignait que quelqu'un n'entendit la question qu'il allait faire.

— Monsieur, dit-il, le palais de justice, s’il vous plaît?

— Vous n’êtes pas de la ville, monsieur? répondit le bourgeois qui était un assez vieux homme, eh bien, suivez-moi. Je vais précisément du côté du palais de justice, c’est-à-dire du côté de l’hôtel de la préfecture. Car on répare en ce moment le palais, et provisoirement les tribunaux ont leurs audiences à la préfecture.

— Est-ce là, demanda-t-il, qu’on tient les assises?

— Sans doute, monsieur. Voyez-vous, ce qui est la préfecture aujourd’hui était l’évêché avant la révolution. Monsieur de Conzié, qui était évêque en quatre-vingt-deux, y a fait bâtir une grande salle. C’est dans cette grande salle qu’on juge.

Chemin faisant, le bourgeois lui dit:

— Si c’est un procès que monsieur veut voir, il est un peu tard. Ordinairement les séances finissent à six heures.

Cependant, comme ils arrivaient sur la grande place, le bourgeois lui montra quatre longues fenêtres éclairées sur la façade d’un vaste bâtiment ténébreux.

— Ma foi, monsieur, vous arrivez à temps, vous avez du bonheur. Voyez-vous ces quatre fenêtres? c’est la cour d’assises. Il y a de la lumière. Donc ce n’est pas fini. L’affaire aura traîné en longueur et on fait une audience du soir. Vous vous intéressez à cette affaire? Est-ce que c’est un procès criminel? Est-ce que vous êtes témoin?

Il répondit:

— Je ne viens pour aucune affaire, j’ai seulement à parler à un avocat.

— C’est différent, dit le bourgeois. Tenez, monsieur, voici la porte. Où est le factionnaire. Vous n’aurez qu’à monter le grand escalier.

Il se conforma aux indications du bourgeois, et, quelques minutes après, il était dans une salle où il y avait beaucoup de monde et où des groupes mêlés d’avocats en robe chuchotaient çà et là.

C’est toujours une chose qui serre le cœur de voir ces attroupements d’hommes vêtus de noir qui murmurent entre eux à voix basse sur le seuil des chambres de justice. Il est rare que la charité et la pitié sortent de toutes ces paroles. Ce qui en sort le plus souvent, ce sont des condamnations faites d’avance. Tous ces groupes semblent à l’observateur qui passe et qui rêve autant de ruches sombres où des espèces d’esprits bourdonnants construisent en commun toutes sortes d’édifices ténébreux.

Cette salle, spacieuse et éclairée d’une seule lampe, était une ancienne antichambre de l’évêché et servait de salle des pas perdus. Une porte à deux battants, fermée en ce moment, la séparait de la grande chambre où siégeait la cour d’assises.

L’obscurité était telle qu’il ne craignit pas de s’adresser au premier avocat qu’il rencontra.

— Monsieur, dit-il, où en est-on?

— C’est fini, dit l’avocat.

— Fini!

Ce mot fut répété d’un tel accent que l’avocat se retourna.

— Pardon, monsieur, vous êtes peut-être un parent?

— Non. Je ne connais personne ici. Et y a-t-il eu condamnation?

— Sans doute. Cela n’était guère possible autrement.

— Aux travaux forcés?...

— À perpétuité.

Il reprit d’une voix tellement faible qu’on l’entendait à peine:

— L’identité a donc été constatée?

— Quelle identité? répondit l’avocat. Il n’y avait pas d’identité à constater. L’affaire était simple. Cette femme avait tué son enfant, l’infanticide a été prouvé, le jury a écarté la préméditation, on l’a condamnée à vie.

— C’est donc une femme? dit-il.

— Mais sûrement. La fille Limosin. De quoi me parlez-vous donc?

— De rien. Mais puisque c’est fini, comment se fait-il que la salle soit encore éclairée?

— C’est pour l’autre affaire qu’on a commencée il y a à peu près deux heures.

— Quelle autre affaire?

— Oh! celle-là est claire aussi. C’est une espèce de gueux, un récidiviste, un galérien, qui a volé. Je ne sais plus trop son nom. En voilà un qui vous a une mine de bandit. Rien que pour avoir cette figure-là, je l’enverrais aux galères.

— Monsieur, demanda-t-il, y a-t-il moyen de pénétrer dans la salle?

— Je ne crois vraiment pas. Il y a beaucoup de foule. Cependant l’audience est suspendue. Il y a des gens qui sont sortis, et, à la reprise de l’audience, vous pourrez essayer.

— Par où entre-t-on?

— Par cette grande porte.

L’avocat le quitta. En quelques instants, il avait éprouvé, presque en même temps, presque mêlées, toutes les émotions possibles. Les paroles de cet indifférent lui avaient tour à tour traversé le cœur comme des aiguilles de glace et comme des lames de feu. Quand il vit que rien n’était terminé, il respira; mais il n’eût pu dire si ce qu’il ressentait était du contentement ou de la douleur.

Il s’approcha de plusieurs groupes et il écouta ce qu’on disait. Le rôle de la session étant très chargé, le président avait indiqué pour ce même jour deux affaires simples et courtes. On avait commencé par l’infanticide, et maintenant on en était au forçat, au récidiviste, au “cheval de retour”. Cet homme avait volé des pommes, mais cela ne paraissait pas bien prouvé; ce qui était prouvé, c’est qu’il avait été déjà aux galères à Toulon. C’est ce qui faisait son affaire mauvaise. Du reste, l’interrogatoire de l’homme était terminé et les dépositions des témoins; mais il y avait encore les plaidoiries de l’avocat et le réquisitoire du ministère public; cela ne devait guère finir avant minuit. L’homme serait probablement condamné; l’avocat général était très bon — et ne manquait pas ses accusés — c’était un garçon d’esprit qui faisait des vers.

Un huissier se tenait debout près de la porte qui communiquait avec la salle des assises. Il demanda à cet huissier:

— Monsieur, la porte va-t-elle bientôt s’ouvrir?

— Elle ne s’ouvrira pas, dit l’huissier.

— Comment! on ne l’ouvrira pas à la reprise de l’audience? est-ce que l’audience n’est pas suspendue?

— L’audience vient d’être reprise, répondit l’huissier, mais la porte ne se rouvrira pas.

— Pourquoi?

— Parce que la salle est pleine.

— Quoi? il n’y a plus une place?

— Plus une seule. La porte est fermée. Personne ne peut plus entrer.

L’huissier ajouta après un silence:

— Il y a bien encore deux ou trois places derrière monsieur le président, mais monsieur le président n’y admet que les fonctionnaires publics.

Cela dit, l’huissier lui tourna le dos.

Il se retira la tête baissée, traversa l’antichambre et redescendit l’escalier lentement, comme hésitant à chaque marche. Il est probable qu’il tenait conseil avec lui-même. Le violent combat qui se livrait en lui depuis la veille n’était pas fini; et, à chaque instant, il en traversait quelque nouvelle péripétie. Arrivé sur le palier de l’escalier, il s’adossa à la rampe et croisa les bras. Tout à coup il ouvrit sa redingote, prit son portefeuille, en tira un crayon, déchira une feuille, et écrivit rapidement sur cette feuille à la lueur du réverbère cette ligne: — *M. Madeleine, maire de Montreuil-sur-mer*. Puis il remonta l’escalier à grands pas, fendit la foule, marcha droit à l’huissier, lui remit le papier, et lui dit avec autorité:

— Portez ceci à monsieur le président.

L’huissier prit le papier, y jeta un coup d’œil et obéit.

Chapitre VIII

Entrée de faveur

Sans qu'il s'en doutât, le maire de Montreuil-sur-mer avait une sorte de célébrité. Depuis sept ans que sa réputation de vertu remplissait tout le bas Boulonnais, elle avait fini par franchir les limites d'un petit pays et s'était répandue dans les deux ou trois départements voisins. Outre le service considérable qu'il avait rendu au chef-lieu en y restaurant l'industrie des verroteries noires, il n'était pas une des cent quarante et une communes de l'arrondissement de Montreuil-sur-mer qui ne lui dût quelque bienfait. Il avait su même au besoin aider et féconder les industries des autres arrondissements. C'est ainsi qu'il avait dans l'occasion soutenu de son crédit et de ses fonds la fabrique de tulle de Boulogne, la filature de lin à la mécanique de Frévent et la manufacture hydraulique de toiles de Boubers-sur-Canche. Partout on prononçait avec vénération le nom de M. Madeleine. Arras et Douai enviaient son maire à l'heureuse petite ville de Montreuil-sur-mer.

Le conseiller à la cour royale de Douai, qui présidait cette session des assises à Arras, connaissait comme tout le monde ce nom si profondément et si universellement honoré. Quand l'huissier, ouvrant discrètement la porte qui communiquait de la chambre du conseil à l'audience, se pencha derrière le fauteuil du président et lui remit le papier où était écrite la ligne qu'on vient de lire, en ajoutant: *Ce monsieur désire assister à l'audience*, le président fit un vif mouvement de déférence, saisit une plume, écrivit quelques mots au bas du papier, et le rendit à l'huissier en lui disant: Faites entrer.

L'homme malheureux dont nous racontons l'histoire était resté près de la porte de la salle à la même place et dans la même attitude où l'huissier l'avait quitté. Il entendit, à travers sa rêverie, quelqu'un qui lui disait: Monsieur veut-il bien me faire l'honneur de me suivre? C'était ce même huissier qui lui avait tourné le dos l'instant d'auparavant et qui maintenant le saluait jusqu'à terre. L'huissier en même temps lui remit le papier. Il le déplia, et, comme il se rencontrait qu'il était près de la lampe, il put lire:

«Le président de la cour d'assises présente son respect à M. Madeleine.»

Il froissa le papier entre ses mains, comme si ces quelques mots eussent eu pour lui un arrière-goût étrange et amer.

Il suivit l'huissier.

Quelques minutes après, il se trouvait seul dans une espèce de cabinet lambrissé, d'un aspect sévère, éclairé par deux bougies posées sur une table à tapis vert. Il avait encore dans l'oreille les dernières paroles de l'huissier qui venait de le quitter — «Monsieur, vous voici dans la chambre du conseil; vous n'avez qu'à tourner le bouton de cuivre de cette porte, et vous vous trouverez dans l'audience derrière le fauteuil de monsieur le président.» — Ces paroles se mêlaient dans sa pensée à un souvenir vague de corridors étroits et d'escaliers noirs qu'il venait de parcourir.

L'huissier l'avait laissé seul. Le moment suprême était arrivé. Il cherchait à se recueillir sans pouvoir y parvenir. C'est surtout aux heures où l'on aurait le plus besoin de les rattacher aux réalités poignantes de la vie que tous les fils de la pensée se rompent dans le cerveau. Il était dans l'endroit même où les juges délibèrent et condamnent. Il regardait avec une tranquillité stupide cette chambre paisible et redoutable où tant d'existences avaient été brisées, où son nom allait retentir tout à l'heure, et que sa destinée traversait en ce moment. Il regardait la muraille, puis il se regardait lui-même, s'étonnant que ce fût cette chambre et que ce fût lui.

Il n'avait pas mangé depuis plus de vingt-quatre heures, il était brisé par les cahots de la carriole, mais il ne le sentait pas; il lui semblait qu'il ne sentait rien.

Il s'approcha d'un cadre noir qui était accroché au mur et qui contenait sous verre une vieille lettre autographe de Jean-Nicolas Pache, maire de Paris et ministre, datée, sans doute par erreur, du *9 juin an II,* et dans laquelle Pache envoyait à la commune la liste des ministres et des députés tenus en arrestation chez eux. Un témoin qui l'eût pu voir et qui l'eût observé en cet instant eût sans doute imaginé Fantine et Cosette.

Tout en rêvant, il se retourna, et ses yeux rencontrèrent le bouton de cuivre de la porte qui le séparait de la salle des assises. Il avait presque oublié cette porte. Son regard, d'abord calme, s'y arrêta, resta attaché à ce bouton de cuivre, puis devint effaré et fixe, et s'empreignit peu à peu d'épouvante. Des gouttes de sueur lui sortaient d'entre les cheveux et ruisselaient sur ses tempes.

À un certain moment, il fit avec une sorte d'autorité mêlée de rébellion ce geste indescriptible qui veut dire et qui dit si bien: *Pardieu! qui est-ce* *qui m’y force?* Puis il se tourna vivement, vit devant lui la porte par laquelle il était entré, y alla, l’ouvrit, et sortit. Il n’était plus dans cette chambre, il était dehors, dans un corridor, un corridor long, étroit, coupé de degrés et de guichets, faisant toutes sortes d’angles, éclairé çà et là de réverbères pareils à des veilleuses de malades, le corridor par où il était venu. Il respira, il écouta; aucun bruit derrière lui, aucun bruit devant lui; il se mit à fuir comme si on le poursuivait.

Quand il eut doublé plusieurs des coudes de ce couloir, il écouta encore. C’était toujours le même silence et la même ombre autour de lui. Il était essoufflé, il chancelait, il s’appuya au mur. La pierre était froide, sa sueur était glacée sur son front, il se redressa en frissonnant.

Alors, là, seul, debout dans cette obscurité, tremblant de froid et d’autre chose peut-être, il songea.

Il avait songé toute la nuit, il avait songé toute la journée; il n’entendait plus en lui qu’une voix qui disait: hélas!

Un quart d’heure s’écoula ainsi. Enfin, il pencha la tête, soupira avec angoisse, laissa pendre ses bras, et revint sur ses pas. Il marchait lentement et comme accablé. Il semblait que quelqu’un l’eût atteint dans sa fuite et le ramenât.

Il rentra dans la chambre du conseil. La première chose qu’il aperçut, ce fut la gâchette de la porte. Cette gâchette, ronde et en cuivre poli, resplendissait pour lui comme une effroyable étoile. Il la regardait comme une brebis regarderait l’œil d’un tigre.

Ses yeux ne pouvaient s’en détacher.

De temps en temps il faisait un pas et se rapprochait de la porte.

S’il eût écouté, il eût entendu, comme une sorte de murmure confus, le bruit de la salle voisine; mais il n’écoutait pas, et il n’entendait pas.

Tout à coup, sans qu’il sût lui-même comment, il se trouva près de la porte. Il saisit convulsivement le bouton; la porte s’ouvrit.

Il était dans la salle d’audience.

Chapitre IX

Un lieu où des convictions sont en train de se former

Il fit un pas, referma machinalement la porte derrière lui, et resta debout, considérant ce qu'il voyait.

C'était une assez vaste enceinte à peine éclairée, tantôt pleine de rumeur, tantôt pleine de silence, où tout l'appareil d'un procès criminel se développait avec sa gravité mesquine et lugubre au milieu de la foule.

À un bout de la salle, celui où il se trouvait, des juges à l'air distrait, en robe usée, se rongeant les ongles ou fermant les paupières; à l'autre bout, une foule en haillons; des avocats dans toutes sortes d'attitudes; des soldats au visage honnête et dur; de vieilles boiseries tachées, un plafond sale, des tables couvertes d'une serge plutôt jaune que verte, des portes noircies par les mains; à des clous plantés dans le lambris, des quinquets d'estaminet donnant plus de fumée que de clarté; sur les tables, des chandelles dans des chandeliers de cuivre; l'obscurité, la laideur, la tristesse; et de tout cela se dégageait une impression austère et auguste, car on y sentait cette grande chose humaine qu'on appelle la loi et cette grande chose divine qu'on appelle la justice.

Personne dans cette foule ne fit attention à lui. Tous les regards convergeaient vers un point unique, un banc de bois adossé à une petite porte, le long de la muraille, à gauche du président. Sur ce banc, que plusieurs chandelles éclairaient, il y avait un homme entre deux gendarmes.

Cet homme, c'était l'homme.

Il ne le chercha pas, il le vit. Ses yeux allèrent là naturellement, comme s'ils avaient su d'avance où était cette figure.

Il crut se voir lui-même, vieilli, non pas sans doute absolument semblable de visage, mais tout pareil d'attitude et d'aspect, avec ces cheveux hérissés, avec cette prunelle fauve et inquiète, avec cette blouse, tel qu'il était le jour où il entrait à Digne, plein de haine et cachant dans son âme ce hideux trésor de pensées affreuses qu'il avait mis dix-neuf ans à ramasser sur le pavé du bagne.

Il se dit avec un frémissement:

— Mon Dieu! est-ce que je redeviendrai ainsi?

Cet être paraissait au moins soixante ans. Il avait je ne sais quoi de rude, de stupide et d’effarouché.

Au bruit de la porte, on s’était rangé pour lui faire place, le président avait tourné la tête, et comprenant que le personnage qui venait d’entrer était M. le maire de Montreuil-sur-mer, il l’avait salué. L’avocat général, qui avait vu M. Madeleine à Montreuil-sur-mer où des opérations de son ministère l’avaient plus d’une fois appelé, le reconnut, et salua également. Lui s’en aperçut à peine. Il était en proie à une sorte d’hallucination; il regardait.

Des juges, un greffier, des gendarmes, une foule de têtes cruellement curieuses, il avait déjà vu cela une fois, autrefois, il y avait vingt-sept ans. Ces choses funestes, il les retrouvait; elles étaient là, elles remuaient, elles existaient. Ce n’était plus un effort de sa mémoire, un mirage de sa pensée, c’étaient de vrais gendarmes et de vrais juges, une vraie foule et de vrais hommes en chair et en os. C’en était fait, il voyait reparaître et revivre autour de lui, avec tout ce que la réalité a de formidable, les aspects monstrueux de son passé.

Tout cela était béant devant lui.

Il en eut horreur, il ferma les yeux, et s’écria au plus profond de son âme: jamais!

Et par un jeu tragique de la destinée qui faisait trembler toutes ses idées et le rendait presque fou, c’était un autre lui-même qui était là! Cet homme qu’on jugeait, tous l’appelaient Jean Valjean!

Il avait sous les yeux, vision inouïe, une sorte de représentation du moment le plus horrible de sa vie, jouée par son fantôme.

Tout y était, c’était le même appareil, la même heure de nuit, presque les mêmes faces de juges, de soldats et de spectateurs. Seulement, au-dessus de la tête du président, il y avait un crucifix, chose qui manquait aux tribunaux du temps de sa condamnation. Quand on l’avait jugé, Dieu était absent.

Une chaise était derrière lui; il s’y laissa tomber, terrifié de l’idée qu’on pouvait le voir. Quand il fut assis, il profita d’une pile de cartons qui était sur le bureau des juges pour dérober son visage à toute la salle. Il pouvait maintenant voir sans être vu. Peu à peu il se remit. Il rentra pleinement dans le sentiment du réel; il arriva à cette phase de calme où l’on peut écouter.

M. Bamatabois était au nombre des jurés. Il chercha Javert, mais il ne le vit pas. Le banc des témoins lui était caché par la table du greffier. Et puis, nous venons de le dire, la salle était à peine éclairée.

Au moment où il était entré, l’avocat de l’accusé achevait sa plaidoirie. L’attention de tous était excitée au plus haut point; l’affaire durait depuis trois heures. Depuis trois heures, cette foule regardait plier peu à peu sous le poids d’une vraisemblance terrible un homme, un inconnu, une espèce d’être misérable, profondément stupide ou profondément habile. Cet homme, on le sait déjà, était un vagabond qui avait été trouvé dans un champ, emportant une branche chargée de pommes mûres, cassée à un pommier dans un clos voisin, appelé le clos Pierron. Qui était cet homme? Une enquête avait eu lieu; des témoins venaient d’être entendus, ils avaient été unanimes, des lumières avaient jailli de tout le débat. L’accusation disait:

— Nous ne tenons pas seulement un voleur de fruits, un maraudeur; nous tenons là, dans notre main, un bandit, un relaps en rupture de ban, un ancien forçat, un scélérat des plus dangereux, un malfaiteur appelé Jean Valjean que la justice recherche depuis longtemps, et qui, il y a huit ans, en sortant du bagne de Toulon, a commis un vol de grand chemin à main armée sur la personne d’un enfant savoyard appelé Petit-Gervais, crime prévu par l’article 383 du code pénal, pour lequel nous nous réservons de le poursuivre ultérieurement, quand l’identité sera judiciairement acquise. Il vient de commettre un nouveau vol. C’est un cas de récidive. Condamnez-le pour le fait nouveau; il sera jugé plus tard pour le fait ancien.

Devant cette accusation, devant l’unanimité des témoins, l’accusé paraissait surtout étonné. Il faisait des gestes et des signes qui voulaient dire non, ou bien il considérait le plafond. Il parlait avec peine, répondait avec embarras, mais de la tête aux pieds toute sa personne niait. Il était comme un idiot en présence de toutes ces intelligences rangées en bataille autour de lui, et comme un étranger au milieu de cette société qui le saisissait. Cependant il y allait pour lui de l’avenir le plus menaçant, la vraisemblance croissait à chaque minute, et toute cette foule regardait avec plus d’anxiété que lui-même cette sentence pleine de calamités qui penchait sur lui de plus en plus. Une éventualité laissait même entrevoir, outre le bagne, la peine de mort possible, si l’identité était reconnue et si l’affaire Petit-Gervais se terminait plus tard par une condamnation. Qu’était-ce que cet homme? De quelle nature était son apathie? Etait-ce imbécillité ou ruse? Comprenait-il trop, ou ne comprenait-il pas du tout? Questions qui divisaient la foule et semblaient partager le jury. Il y avait dans ce procès ce qui effraye et ce qui intrigue; le drame n’était pas seulement sombre, il était obscur. Le défenseur avait assez bien plaidé, dans cette langue de province qui a longtemps constitué l'éloquence du barreau et dont usaient jadis tous les avocats, aussi bien à Paris qu'à Romorantin ou à Montbrison, et qui aujourd'hui, étant devenue classique, n'est plus guère parlée que par les orateurs officiels du parquet, auxquels elle convient par sa sonorité grave et son allure majestueuse; langue où un mari s'appelle un époux, une femme, une épouse, Paris, le centre des arts et de la civilisation, le roi, le monarque, monseigneur l'évêque, un saint pontife, l'avocat général, l'éloquent interprète de la vindicte, la plaidoirie, les accents qu'on vient d'entendre, le siècle de Louis XIV, le grand siècle, un théâtre, le temple de Melpomène, la famille régnante, l'auguste sang de nos rois, un concert, une solennité musicale, monsieur le général commandant le département, l'illustre guerrier qui, etc., les élèves du séminaire, ces tendres lévites, les erreurs imputées aux journaux, l'imposture qui distille son venin dans les colonnes de ces organes, etc., etc. — L'avocat donc avait commencé par s'expliquer sur le vol des pommes, — chose malaisée en beau style; mais Bénigne Bossuet lui-même a été obligé de faire allusion à une poule en pleine oraison funèbre, et il s'en est tiré avec pompe. L'avocat avait établi que le vol de pommes n'était pas matériellement prouvé. — Son client, qu'en sa qualité de défenseur, il persistait à appeler Champmathieu, n'avait été vu de personne escaladant le mur ou cassant la branche. On l'avait arrêté nanti de cette branche (que l'avocat appelait plus volontiers rameau); mais il disait l'avoir trouvée à terre et ramassée. Où était la preuve du contraire? — Sans doute cette branche avait été cassée et dérobée après escalade, puis jetée là par le maraudeur alarmé; sans doute il y avait un voleur. Mais qu'est-ce qui prouvait que ce voleur était Champmathieu? Une seule chose. Sa qualité d'ancien forçat. L'avocat ne niait pas que cette qualité ne parût malheureusement bien constatée; l'accusé avait résidé à Faverolles; l'accusé y avait été émondeur; le nom de Champmathieu pouvait bien avoir pour origine Jean Mathieu; tout cela était vrai; enfin quatre témoins reconnaissaient sans hésiter et positivement Champmathieu pour être le galérien Jean Valjean; à ces indications, à ces témoignages, l'avocat ne pouvait opposer que la dénégation de son client, dénégation intéressée; mais en supposant qu'il fût le forçat Jean Valjean, cela prouvait-il qu'il fût le voleur des pommes? C'était une présomption, tout au plus; non une preuve. L'accusé, cela était vrai, et le défenseur «dans sa bonne foi» devait en convenir, avait adopté «un mauvais système de défense» — Il s'obstinait à nier tout, le vol et sa qualité de forçat. Un aveu sur ce dernier point eût mieux valu, à coup sûr, et lui eût concilié l’indulgence de ses juges; l’avocat le lui avait conseillé; mais l’accusé s’y était refusé obstinément, croyant sans doute sauver tout en n’avouant rien. C’était un tort; mais ne fallait-il pas considérer la brièveté de cette intelligence? Cet homme était visiblement stupide. Un long malheur au bagne, une longue misère hors du bagne, l’avaient abruti, etc., etc. Il se défendait mal, était-ce une raison pour le condamner? Quant à l’affaire Petit-Gervais, l’avocat n’avait pas à la discuter, elle n’était point dans la cause. L’avocat concluait en suppliant le jury et la cour, si l’identité de Jean Valjean leur paraissait évidente, de lui appliquer les peines de police qui s’adressent au condamné en rupture de ban, et non le châtiment épouvantable qui frappe le forçat récidiviste.

L’avocat général répliqua au défenseur. Il fut violent et fleuri, comme sont habituellement les avocats généraux.

Il félicita le défenseur de sa «loyauté», et profita habilement de cette loyauté. Il atteignit l’accusé par toutes les concessions que l’avocat avait faites. L’avocat semblait accorder que l’accusé était Jean Valjean. Il en prit acte. Cet homme était donc Jean Valjean. Ceci était acquis à l’accusation et ne pouvait plus se contester. Ici, par une habile antonomase, remontant aux sources et aux causes de la criminalité, l’avocat général tonna contre l’immoralité de l’école romantique, alors à son aurore sous le nom d’école satanique que lui avaient décerné les critiques de l’Oriflamme et de la Quotidienne, il attribua, non sans vraisemblance, à l’influence de cette littérature perverse le délit de Champmathieu, ou pour mieux dire, de Jean Valjean. Ces considérations épuisées, il passa à Jean Valjean lui-même. Qu’était-ce que Jean Valjean? Description de Jean Valjean. Un monstre vomi, etc. Le modèle de ces sortes de descriptions est dans le récit de Théramène, lequel n’est pas utile à la tragédie, mais rend tous les jours de grands services à l’éloquence judiciaire. L’auditoire et les jurés «frémirent». La description achevée, l’avocat général reprit, dans un mouvement oratoire fait pour exciter au plus haut point le lendemain matin l’enthousiasme du Journal de la Préfecture:

Et c’est un pareil homme, etc., etc., etc., vagabond, mendiant, sans moyens d’existence, etc., etc., — accoutumé par sa vie passée aux actions coupables et peu corrigé par son séjour au bagne, comme le prouve le crime commis sur Petit-Gervais, etc., etc., — c’est un homme pareil qui, trouvé sur la voie publique en flagrant délit de vol, à quelques pas d’un mur escaladé, tenant encore à la main l’objet volé, nie le flagrant délit, le vol, l’escalade, nie tout, nie jusqu’à son nom, nie jusqu’à son identité! Outre cent autres preuves sur lesquelles nous ne revenons pas, quatre témoins le reconnaissent, Javert, l’intègre inspecteur de police Javert, et trois de ses anciens compagnons d’ignominie, les forçats Brevet, Chenildieu et Cochepaille. Qu’oppose-t-il à cette unanimité foudroyante? Il nie. Quel endurcissement! Vous ferez justice, messieurs les jurés, etc., etc.

Pendant que l’avocat général parlait, l’accusé écoutait, la bouche ouverte, avec une sorte d’étonnement où il entrait bien quelque admiration. Il était évidemment surpris qu’un homme pût parler comme cela. De temps en temps, aux moments les plus «énergiques» du réquisitoire, dans ces instants où l’éloquence, qui ne peut se contenir, déborde dans un flux d’épithètes flétrissantes et enveloppe l’accusé comme un orage, il remuait lentement la tête de droite à gauche et de gauche à droite, sorte de protestation triste et muette dont il se contentait depuis le commencement des débats. Deux ou trois fois les spectateurs placés le plus près de lui l’entendirent dire à demi-voix:

— Voilà ce que c’est, de n’avoir pas demandé à M. Baloup!

L’avocat général fit remarquer au jury cette attitude hébétée, calculée évidemment, qui dénotait, non l’imbécillité, mais l’adresse, la ruse, l’habitude de tromper la justice, et qui mettait dans tout son jour «la profonde perversité» de cet homme. Il termina en faisant ses réserves pour l’affaire Petit-Gervais, et en réclamant une condamnation sévère.

C’était, pour l’instant, on s’en souvient, les travaux forcés à perpétuité.

Le défenseur se leva, commença par complimenter «monsieur l’avocat général» sur son «admirable parole», puis répliqua comme il put, mais il faiblissait; le terrain évidemment se dérobait sous lui.

Chapitre X

Le système de dénégations

L’instant de clore les débats était venu. Le président fit lever l’accusé et lui adressa la question d’usage:

— Avez-vous quelque chose à ajouter à votre défense?

L’homme, debout, roulant dans ses mains un affreux bonnet qu’il avait, sembla ne pas entendre.

Le président répéta la question.

Cette fois l’homme entendit. Il parut comprendre, il fit le mouvement de quelqu’un qui se réveille, promena ses yeux autour de lui, regarda le public, les gendarmes, son avocat, les jurés, la cour, posa son poing monstrueux sur le rebord de la boiserie placée devant son banc, regarda encore, et tout à coup, fixant sont regard sur l’avocat général, il se mit à parler. Ce fut comme une éruption. Il sembla, à la façon dont les paroles s’échappaient de sa bouche, incohérentes, impétueuses, heurtées, pêle-mêle, qu’elles s’y pressaient toutes à la fois pour sortir en même temps. Il dit:

— J’ai à dire ça. Que j’ai été charron à Paris, même que c’était chez monsieur Baloup. C’est un état dur. Dans la chose de charron, on travaille toujours en plein air, dans des cours, sous des hangars chez les bons maîtres, jamais dans des ateliers fermés, parce qu’il faut des espaces, voyez-vous. L’hiver, on a si froid qu’on se bat les bras pour se réchauffer; mais les maîtres ne veulent pas, ils disent que cela perd du temps. Manier du fer quand il y a de la glace entre les pavés, c’est rude. Ça vous use vite un homme. On est vieux tout jeune dans cet état-là. À quarante ans, un homme est fini. Moi, j’en avais cinquante-trois, j’avais bien du mal. Et puis c’est si méchant les ouvriers! Quand un bonhomme n’est plus jeune, on vous l’appelle pour tout vieux serin, vieille bête! Je ne gagnais plus que trente sous par jour, on me payait le moins cher qu’on pouvait, les maîtres profitaient de mon âge. Avec ça, j’avais ma fille qui était blanchisseuse à la rivière. Elle gagnait un peu de son côté. À nous deux, cela allait. Elle avait de la peine aussi. Toute la journée dans un baquet jusqu’à mi-corps, à la pluie, à la neige, avec le vent qui vous coupe la figure; quand il gèle, c’est tout de même, il faut laver; il y a des personnes qui n’ont pas beaucoup de linge et qui attendent après; si on ne lavait pas, on perdrait des pratiques.

Les planches sont mal jointes et il vous tombe des gouttes d'eau partout. On a ses jupes toutes mouillées, dessus et dessous. Ça pénètre. Elle a aussi travaillé au lavoir des Enfants-Rouges, où l'eau arrive par des robinets. On n'est pas dans le baquet. On lave devant soi au robinet et on rince derrière soi dans le bassin. Comme c'est fermé, on a moins froid au corps. Mais il y a une buée d'eau chaude qui est terrible et qui vous perd les yeux. Elle revenait à sept heures du soir, et se couchait bien vite; elle était si fatiguée. Son mari la battait. Elle est morte. Nous n'avons pas été bien heureux. C'était une brave fille qui n'allait pas au bal, qui était bien tranquille. Je me rappelle un mardi gras où elle était couchée à huit heures. Voilà. Je dis vrai. Vous n'avez qu'à demander. Ah, bien oui, demander! que je suis bête! Paris, c'est un gouffre. Qui est-ce qui connaît le père Champmathieu? Pourtant je vous dis monsieur Baloup. Voyez chez monsieur Baloup. Après ça, je ne sais pas ce qu'on me veut.

L'homme se tut, et resta debout. Il avait dit ces choses d'une voix haute, rapide, rauque, dure et enrouée, avec une sorte de naïveté irritée et sauvage. Une fois il s'était interrompu pour saluer quelqu'un dans la foule. Les espèces d'affirmations qu'il semblait jeter au hasard devant lui, lui venaient comme des hoquets, et il ajoutait à chacune d'elles le geste d'un bûcheron qui fend du bois. Quand il eut fini, l'auditoire éclata de rire. Il regarda le public, et voyant qu'on riait, et ne comprenant pas, il se mit à rire lui-même.

Cela était sinistre.

Le président, homme attentif et bienveillant, éleva la voix.

Il rappela à «messieurs les jurés» que «le sieur Baloup, l'ancien maître charron chez lequel l'accusé disait avoir servi, avait été inutilement cité. Il était en faillite, et n'avait pu être retrouvé.» Puis se tournant vers l'accusé, il l'engagea à écouter ce qu'il allait lui dire et ajouta:

— Vous êtes dans une situation où il faut réfléchir. Les présomptions les plus graves pèsent sur vous et peuvent entraîner des conséquences capitales. Accusé, dans votre intérêt, je vous interpelle une dernière fois, expliquez-vous clairement sur ces deux faits: — Premièrement, avez-vous, oui ou non, franchi le mur du clos Pierron, cassé la branche et volé les pommes, c'est-à-dire commis le crime de vol avec escalade? Deuxièmement, oui ou non, êtes-vous le forçat libéré Jean Valjean?

L'accusé secoua la tête d'un air capable, comme un homme qui a bien compris et qui sait ce qu'il va répondre. Il ouvrit la bouche, se tourna vers le président et dit:

— D’abord....

Puis il regarda son bonnet, il regarda le plafond, et se tut.

— Accusé, reprit l’avocat général d’une voix sévère, faites attention. Vous ne répondez à rien de ce qu’on vous demande. Votre trouble vous condamne. Il est évident que vous ne vous appelez pas Champmathieu, que vous êtes le forçat Jean Valjean caché d’abord sous le nom de Jean Mathieu qui était le nom de sa mère, que vous êtes allé en Auvergne, que vous êtes né à Faverolles où vous avez été émondeur. Il est évident que vous avez volé avec escalade des pommes mûres dans le clos Pierron. Messieurs les jurés apprécieront.

L’accusé avait fini par se rasseoir; il se leva brusquement quand l’avocat général eut fini, et s’écria:

— Vous êtes très méchant, vous! Voilà ce que je voulais dire. Je ne trouvais pas d’abord. Je n’ai rien volé. Je suis un homme qui ne mange pas tous les jours. Je venais d’Ailly, je marchais dans le pays après une ondée qui avait fait la campagne toute jaune, même que les mares débordaient et qu’il ne sortait plus des sables que de petits brins d’herbe au bord de la route, j’ai trouvé une branche cassée par terre où il y avait des pommes, j’ai ramassé la branche sans savoir qu’elle me ferait arriver de la peine. Il y a trois mois que je suis en prison et qu’on me trimballe. Après ça, je ne peux pas dire, on parle contre moi, on me dit: répondez! le gendarme, qui est bon enfant, me pousse le coude et me dit tout bas: réponds donc. Je ne sais pas expliquer, moi, je n’ai pas fait les études, je suis un pauvre homme. Voilà ce qu’on a tort de ne pas voir. Je n’ai pas volé, j’ai ramassé par terre des choses qu’il y avait. Vous dites Jean Valjean, Jean Mathieu! Je ne connais pas ces personnes-là. C’est des villageois. J’ai travaillé chez monsieur Baloup, boulevard de l’Hôpital. Je m’appelle Champmathieu. Vous êtes bien malins de me dire où je suis né. Moi, je l’ignore. Tout le monde n’a pas des maisons pour y venir au monde. Ce serait trop commode. Je crois que mon père et ma mère étaient des gens qui allaient sur les routes. Je ne sais pas d’ailleurs. Quand j’étais enfant, on m’appelait Petit, maintenant, on m’appelle Vieux. Voilà mes noms de baptême. Prenez ça comme vous voudrez. J’ai été en Auvergne, j’ai été à Faverolles, pardi! Eh bien? est-ce qu’on ne peut pas avoir été en Auvergne et avoir été à Faverolles sans avoir été aux galères? Je vous dis que je n’ai pas volé, et que je suis le père Champmathieu. J’ai été chez monsieur Baloup, j’ai été domicilié. Vous m’ennuyez avec vos bêtises à la fin! Pourquoi donc est-ce que le monde est après moi comme des acharnés!

L’avocat général était demeuré debout; il s’adressa au président:

— Monsieur le président, en présence des dénégations confuses, mais fort habiles de l’accusé, qui voudrait bien se faire passer pour idiot, mais qui n’y parviendra pas — nous l’en prévenons — nous requérons qu’il vous plaise et qu’il plaise à la cour appeler de nouveau dans cette enceinte les condamnés Brevet, Cochepaille et Chenildieu et l’inspecteur de police Javert, et les interpeller une dernière fois sur l’identité de l’accusé avec le forçat Jean Valjean.

— Je fais remarquer à monsieur l’avocat général, dit le président, que l’inspecteur de police Javert, rappelé par ses fonctions au chef-lieu d’un arrondissement voisin, a quitté l’audience et même la ville, aussitôt sa déposition faite. Nous lui en avons accordé l’autorisation, avec l’agrément de monsieur l’avocat général et du défenseur de l’accusé.

— C’est juste, monsieur le président, reprit l’avocat général. En l’absence du sieur Javert, je crois devoir rappeler à messieurs les jurés ce qu’il a dit ici-même, il y a peu d’heures. Javert est un homme estimé qui honore par sa rigoureuse et stricte probité des fonctions inférieures, mais importantes. Voici en quels termes il a déposé: — «Je n’ai pas même besoin des présomptions morales et des preuves matérielles qui démentent les dénégations de l’accusé. Je le reconnais parfaitement. Cet homme ne s’appelle pas Champmathieu; c’est un ancien forçat très méchant et très redouté nommé Jean Valjean. On ne l’a libéré à l’expiration de sa peine qu’avec un extrême regret. Il a subi dix-neuf ans de travaux forcés pour vol qualifié. Il avait cinq ou six fois tenté de s’évader. Outre le vol Petit-Gervais et le vol Pierron, je le soupçonne encore d’un vol commis chez sa grandeur le défunt évêque de Digne. Je l’ai souvent vu, à l’époque où j’étais adjudant garde-chiourme au bagne de Toulon. Je répète que je le reconnais parfaitement.» Cette déclaration si précise parut produire une vive impression sur le public et le jury. L’avocat général termina en insistant pour qu’à défaut de Javert, les trois témoins Brevet, Chenildieu et Cochepaille fussent entendus de nouveau et interpellés solennellement.

Le président transmit un ordre à un huissier, et un moment après la porte de la chambre des témoins s’ouvrit. L’huissier, accompagné d’un gendarme prêt à lui prêter main-forte, introduisit le condamné Brevet. L’auditoire était en suspens et toutes les poitrines palpitaient comme si elles n'eussent eu qu'une seule âme.

L'ancien forçat Brevet portait la veste noire et grise des maisons centrales. Brevet était un personnage d'une soixantaine d'années qui avait une espèce de figure d'homme d'affaires et l'air d'un coquin. Cela va quelquefois ensemble. Il était devenu, dans la prison où de nouveaux méfaits l'avaient ramené, quelque chose comme guichetier. C'était un homme dont les chefs disaient: Il cherche à se rendre utile. Les aumôniers portaient bon témoignage de ses habitudes religieuses. Il ne faut pas oublier que ceci se passait sous la restauration.

— Brevet, dit le président, vous avez subi une condamnation infamante et vous ne pouvez prêter serment....

Brevet baissa les yeux.

— Cependant, reprit le président, même dans l'homme que la loi a dégradé, il peut rester, quand la pitié divine le permet, un sentiment d'honneur et d'équité. C'est à ce sentiment que je fais appel à cette heure décisive. S'il existe encore en vous, et je l'espère, réfléchissez avant de me répondre, considérez d'une part cet homme qu'un mot de vous peut perdre, d'autre part la justice qu'un mot de vous peut éclairer. L'instant est solennel, et il est toujours temps de vous rétracter, si vous croyez vous être trompé. — Accusé, levez-vous.

— Brevet, regardez bien l'accusé, recueillez vos souvenirs, et dites-nous, en votre âme et conscience, si vous persistez à reconnaître cet homme pour votre ancien camarade de bagne Jean Valjean.

Brevet regarda l'accusé, puis se retourna vers la cour.

— Oui, monsieur le président. C'est moi qui l'ai reconnu le premier et je persiste. Cet homme est Jean Valjean. Entré à Toulon en 1796 et sorti en 1815. Je suis sorti l'an d'après. Il a l'air d'une brute maintenant, alors ce serait que l'âge l'a abruti; au bagne il était sournois. Je le reconnais positivement.

— Allez vous asseoir, dit le président. Accusé, restez debout.

On introduisit Chenildieu, forçat à vie, comme l'indiquaient sa casaque rouge et son bonnet vert. Il subissait sa peine au bagne de Toulon, d'où on l'avait extrait pour cette affaire. C'était un petit homme d'environ cinquante ans, vif, ridé, chétif, jaune, effronté, fiévreux, qui avait dans tous ses membres et dans toute sa personne une sorte de faiblesse maladive et dans le regard une force immense. Ses compagnons du bagne l’avaient surnommé Je-nie-Dieu.

Le président lui adressa à peu près les mêmes paroles qu’à Brevet. Au moment où il lui rappela que son infamie lui ôtait le droit de prêter serment, Chenildieu leva la tête et regarda la foule en face. Le président l’invita à se recueillir et lui demanda, comme à Brevet, s’il persistait à reconnaître l’accusé.

Chenildieu éclata de rire.

— Pardine! si je le reconnais! nous avons été cinq ans attachés à la même chaîne. Tu boudes donc, mon vieux?

— Allez vous asseoir, dit le président.

L’huissier amena Cochepaille. Cet autre condamné à perpétuité, venu du bagne et vêtu de rouge comme Chenildieu, était un paysan de Lourdes et un demi-ours des Pyrénées. Il avait gardé des troupeaux dans la montagne, et de pâtre il avait glissé brigand. Cochepaille n’était pas moins sauvage et paraissait plus stupide encore que l’accusé. C’était un de ces malheureux hommes que la nature a ébauchés en bêtes fauves et que la société termine en galériens.

Le président essaya de le remuer par quelques paroles pathétiques et graves et lui demanda, comme aux deux autres, s’il persistait, sans hésitation et sans trouble, à reconnaître l’homme debout devant lui.

— C’est Jean Valjean, dit Cochepaille. Même qu’on l’appelait Jean-le-Cric, tant il était fort.

Chacune des affirmations de ces trois hommes, évidemment sincères et de bonne foi, avait soulevé dans l’auditoire un murmure de fâcheux augure pour l’accusé, murmure qui croissait et se prolongeait plus longtemps chaque fois qu’une déclaration nouvelle venait s’ajouter à la précédente. L’accusé, lui, les avait écoutées avec ce visage étonné qui, selon l’accusation, était son principal moyen de défense. À la première, les gendarmes ses voisins l’avaient entendu grommeler entre ses dents: Ah bien! en voilà un! Après la seconde il dit un peu plus haut, d’un air presque satisfait: Bon! À la troisième il s’écria: Fameux!

Le président l’interpella.

— Accusé, vous avez entendu. Qu’avez-vous à dire?

Il répondit:

— Je dis — Fameux!

Une rumeur éclata dans le public et gagna presque le jury. Il était évident que l’homme était perdu.

— Huissiers, dit le président, faites faire silence. Je vais clore les débats.

En ce moment un mouvement se fit tout à côté du président. On entendit une voix qui criait:

— Brevet, Chenildieu, Cochepaille! regardez de ce côté-ci.

Tous ceux qui entendirent cette voix se sentirent glacés, tant elle était lamentable et terrible. Les yeux se tournèrent vers le point d’où elle venait. Un homme, placé parmi les spectateurs privilégiés qui étaient assis derrière la cour, venait de se lever, avait poussé la porte à hauteur d’appui qui séparait le tribunal du prétoire, et était debout au milieu de la salle. Le président, l’avocat général, M. Bamatabois, vingt personnes, le reconnurent, et s’écrièrent à la fois:

— Monsieur Madeleine!

Chapitre XI

Champmathieu de plus en plus étonné

C’était lui en effet. La lampe du greffier éclairait son visage. Il tenait son chapeau à la main, il n’y avait aucun désordre dans ses vêtements, sa redingote était boutonnée avec soin. Il était très pâle et il tremblait légèrement. Ses cheveux, gris encore au moment de son arrivée à Arras, étaient maintenant tout à fait blancs. Ils avaient blanchi depuis une heure qu’il était là.

Toutes les têtes se dressèrent. La sensation fut indescriptible. Il y eut dans l’auditoire un instant d’hésitation. La voix avait été si poignante, l’homme qui était là paraissait si calme, qu’au premier abord on ne comprit pas. On se demanda qui avait crié. On ne pouvait croire que ce fût cet homme tranquille qui eût jeté ce cri effrayant.

Cette indécision ne dura que quelques secondes. Avant même que le président et l’avocat général eussent pu dire un mot, avant que les gendarmes et les huissiers eussent pu faire un geste, l’homme que tous appelaient encore en ce moment M. Madeleine s’était avancé vers les témoins Cochepaille, Brevet et Chenildieu.

— Vous ne me reconnaissez pas? dit-il.

Tous trois demeurèrent interdits et indiquèrent par un signe de tête qu’ils ne le connaissaient point. Cochepaille intimidé fit le salut militaire. M. Madeleine se tourna vers les jurés et vers la cour et dit d’une voix douce:

— Messieurs les jurés, faites relâcher l’accusé. Monsieur le président, faites-moi arrêter. L’homme que vous cherchez, ce n’est pas lui, c’est moi. Je suis Jean Valjean. Pas une bouche ne respirait. À la première commotion de l’étonnement avait succédé un silence de sépulcre. On sentait dans la salle cette espèce de terreur religieuse qui saisit la foule lorsque quelque chose de grand s’accomplit.

Cependant le visage du président s’était empreint de sympathie et de tristesse; il avait échangé un signe rapide avec l’avocat et quelques paroles à voix basse avec les conseillers assesseurs. Il s’adressa au public, et demanda avec un accent qui fut compris de tous:

— Y a-t-il un médecin ici?

L’avocat général prit la parole:

— Messieurs les jurés, l’incident si étrange et si inattendu qui trouble l’audience ne nous inspire, ainsi qu’à vous, qu’un sentiment que nous n’avons pas besoin d’exprimer. Vous connaissez tous, au moins de réputation, l’honorable M. Madeleine, maire de Montreuil-sur-mer. S’il y a un médecin dans l’auditoire, nous nous joignons à monsieur le président pour le prier de vouloir bien assister monsieur Madeleine et le reconduire à sa demeure.

M. Madeleine ne laissa point achever l’avocat général.

Il l’interrompit d’un accent plein de mansuétude et d’autorité. Voici les paroles qu’il prononça; les voici littéralement, telles qu’elles furent écrites immédiatement après l’audience par un des témoins de cette scène; telles qu’elles sont encore dans l’oreille de ceux qui les ont entendues, il y a près de quarante ans aujourd’hui.

— Je vous remercie, monsieur l’avocat général, mais je ne suis pas fou. Vous allez voir. Vous étiez sur le point de commettre une grande erreur, lâchez cet homme, j’accomplis un devoir, je suis ce malheureux condamné. Je suis le seul qui voie clair ici, et je vous dis la vérité. Ce que je fais en ce moment, Dieu, qui est là-haut, le regarde, et cela suffit. Vous pouvez me prendre, puisque me voilà. J’avais pourtant fait de mon mieux. Je me suis caché sous un nom; je suis devenu riche, je suis devenu maire; j’ai voulu rentrer parmi les honnêtes gens. Il paraît que cela ne se peut pas. Enfin, il y a bien des choses que je ne puis pas dire, je ne vais pas vous raconter ma vie, un jour on saura. J’ai volé monseigneur l’évêque, cela est vrai; j’ai volé Petit-Gervais, cela est vrai. On a eu raison de vous dire que Jean Valjean était un malheureux très méchant. Toute la faute n’est peut-être pas à lui. Écoutez, messieurs les juges, un homme aussi abaissé que moi n’a pas de remontrance à faire à la providence ni de conseil à donner à la société; mais, voyez-vous, l’infamie d’où j’avais essayé de sortir est une chose nuisible. Les galères font le galérien. Recueillez cela, si vous voulez.

Avant le bagne, j’étais un pauvre paysan très peu intelligent, une espèce d’idiot; le bagne m’a changé. J’étais stupide, je suis devenu méchant; j’étais bûche, je suis devenu tison. Plus tard l’indulgence et la bonté m’ont sauvé, comme la sévérité m’avait perdu. Mais, pardon, vous ne pouvez pas comprendre ce que je dis là. Vous trouverez chez moi, dans les cendres de la cheminée, la pièce de quarante sous que j’ai volée il y a sept ans à Petit-Gervais. Je n’ai plus rien à ajouter. Prenez-moi. Mon Dieu! monsieur l’avocat général remue la tête, vous dites: M. Madeleine est devenu fou, vous ne me croyez pas! Voilà qui est affligeant. N'allez point condamner cet homme au moins! Quoi! ceux-ci ne me reconnaissent pas! Je voudrais que Javert fût ici. Il me reconnaîtrait, lui!

Rien ne pourrait rendre ce qu'il y avait de mélancolie bienveillante et sombre dans l'accent qui accompagnait ces paroles.

Il se tourna vers les trois forçats:

— Eh bien, je vous reconnais, moi! Brevet! vous rappelez-vous?...

Il s'interrompit, hésita un moment, et dit:

— Te rappelles-tu ces bretelles en tricot à damier que tu avais au bagne?

Brevet eut comme une secousse de surprise et le regarda de la tête aux pieds d'un air effrayé. Lui continua:

— Chenildieu, qui te surnommais toi-même Je-nie-Dieu, tu as toute l'épaule droite brûlée profondément, parce que tu t'es couché un jour l'épaule sur un réchaud plein de braise, pour effacer les trois lettres T. F. P., qu'on y voit toujours cependant. Réponds, est-ce vrai?

— C'est vrai, dit Chenildieu.

Il s'adressa à Cochepaille:

— Cochepaille, tu as près de la saignée du bras gauche une date gravée en lettres bleues avec de la poudre brûlée. Cette date, c'est celle du débarquement de l'empereur à Cannes, *1er mars 1815*. Relève ta manche.

Cochepaille releva sa manche, tous les regards se penchèrent autour de lui sur son bras nu. Un gendarme approcha une lampe; la date y était.

Le malheureux homme se tourna vers l'auditoire et vers les juges avec un sourire dont ceux qui l'ont vu sont encore navrés lorsqu'ils y songent. C'était le sourire du triomphe, c'était aussi le sourire du désespoir.

— Vous voyez bien, dit-il, que je suis Jean Valjean.

Il n'y avait plus dans cette enceinte ni juges, ni accusateurs, ni gendarmes; il n'y avait que des yeux fixes et des cœurs émus. Personne ne se rappelait plus le rôle que chacun pouvait avoir à jouer; l'avocat général oubliait qu'il était là pour requérir, le président qu'il était là pour présider, le défenseur qu'il était là pour défendre. Chose frappante, aucune question ne fut faite, aucune autorité n'intervint. Le propre des spectacles sublimes, c'est de prendre toutes les âmes et de faire de tous les témoins des spectateurs. Aucun peut-être ne se rendait compte de ce qu'il éprouvait; aucun, sans doute, ne se disait qu'il voyait resplendir là une grande lumière; tous intérieurement se sentaient éblouis.

Il était évident qu’on avait sous les yeux Jean Valjean. Cela rayonnait. L’apparition de cet homme avait suffi pour remplir de clarté cette aventure si obscure le moment d’auparavant. Sans qu’il fût besoin d’aucune explication désormais, toute cette foule, comme par une sorte de révélation électrique, comprit tout de suite et d’un seul coup d’œil cette simple et magnifique histoire d’un homme qui se livrait pour qu’un autre homme ne fût pas condamné à sa place. Les détails, les hésitations, les petites résistances possibles se perdirent dans ce vaste fait lumineux.

Impression qui passa vite, mais qui dans l’instant fut irrésistible.

— Je ne veux pas déranger davantage l’audience, reprit Jean Valjean. Je m’en vais, puisqu’on ne m’arrête pas. J’ai plusieurs choses à faire. Monsieur l’avocat général sait qui je suis, il sait où je vais, il me fera arrêter quand il voudra.

Il se dirigea vers la porte de sortie. Pas une voix ne s’éleva, pas un bras ne s’étendit pour l’empêcher. Tous s’écartèrent. Il avait en ce moment ce je ne sais quoi de divin qui fait que les multitudes reculent et se rangent devant un homme. Il traversa la foule à pas lents. On n’a jamais su qui ouvrit la porte, mais il est certain que la porte se trouva ouverte lorsqu’il y parvint. Arrivé là, il se retourna et dit:

— Monsieur l’avocat général, je reste à votre disposition.

Puis il s’adressa à l’auditoire:

— Vous tous, tous ceux qui sont ici, vous me trouvez digne de pitié, n’est-ce pas? Mon Dieu! quand je pense à ce que j’ai été sur le point de faire, je me trouve digne d’envie. Cependant j’aurais mieux aimé que tout ceci n’arrivât pas.

Il sortit, et la porte se referma comme elle avait été ouverte, car ceux qui font de certaines choses souveraines sont toujours sûrs d’être servis par quelqu’un dans la foule.

Moins d’une heure après, le verdict du jury déchargeait de toute accusation le nommé Champmathieu; et Champmathieu, mis en liberté immédiatement, s’en allait stupéfait, croyant tous les hommes fous et ne comprenant rien à cette vision.

Livre huitième — Contre-coup

Chapitre I

Dans quel miroir M. Madeleine regarde ses cheveux

Le jour commençait à poindre. Fantine avait eu une nuit de fièvre et d’insomnie, pleine d’ailleurs d’images heureuses; au matin, elle s’endormit. La sœur Simplice qui l’avait veillée profita de ce sommeil pour aller préparer une nouvelle potion de quinquina. La digne sœur était depuis quelques instants dans le laboratoire de l’infirmerie, penchée sur ses drogues et sur ses fioles et regardant de très près à cause de cette brume que le crépuscule répand sur les objets. Tout à coup elle tourna la tête et fit un léger cri. M. Madeleine était devant elle. Il venait d’entrer silencieusement.

— C’est vous, monsieur le maire! s’écria-t-elle.

Il répondit, à voix basse:

— Comment va cette pauvre femme?

— Pas mal en ce moment. Mais nous avons été bien inquiets, allez!

Elle lui expliqua ce qui s’était passé, que Fantine était bien mal la veille et que maintenant elle était mieux, parce qu’elle croyait que monsieur le maire était allé chercher son enfant à Montfermeil. La sœur n’osa pas interroger monsieur le maire, mais elle vit bien à son air que ce n’était point de là qu’il venait.

— Tout cela est bien, dit-il, vous avez eu raison de ne pas la détromper.

— Oui, reprit la sœur, mais maintenant, monsieur le maire, qu’elle va vous voir et qu’elle ne verra pas son enfant, que lui dirons-nous?

Il resta un moment rêveur.

— Dieu nous inspirera, dit-il.

— On ne pourrait cependant pas mentir, murmura la sœur à demi-voix.

Le plein jour s’était fait dans la chambre. Il éclairait en face le visage de M. Madeleine. Le hasard fit que la sœur leva les yeux.

— Mon Dieu, monsieur! s’écria-t-elle, que vous est-il donc arrivé? vos cheveux sont tout blancs!

— Blancs! dit-il.

La sœur Simplice n’avait point de miroir; elle fouilla dans une trousse et en tira une petite glace dont se servait le médecin de l’infirmerie pour constater qu’un malade était mort et ne respirait plus. M. Madeleine prit la glace, y considéra ses cheveux, et dit:

— Tiens!

Il prononça ce mot avec indifférence et comme s’il pensait à autre chose.

La sœur se sentit glacée par je ne sais quoi d’inconnu qu’elle entrevoyait dans tout ceci.

Il demanda:

— Puis-je la voir?

— Est-ce que monsieur le maire ne lui fera pas revenir son enfant? dit la sœur, osant à peine hasarder une question.

— Sans doute, mais il faut au moins deux ou trois jours.

— Si elle ne voyait pas monsieur le maire d’ici là, reprit timidement la sœur, elle ne saurait pas que monsieur le maire est de retour, il serait aisé de lui faire prendre patience, et quand l’enfant arriverait elle penserait tout naturellement que monsieur le maire est arrivé avec l’enfant. On n’aurait pas de mensonge à faire.

M. Madeleine parut réfléchir quelques instants, puis il dit avec sa gravité calme:

— Non, ma sœur, il faut que je la voie. Je suis peut-être pressé.

La religieuse ne sembla pas remarquer ce mot «peut-être», qui donnait un sens obscur et singulier aux paroles de M. le maire. Elle répondit en baissant les yeux et la voix respectueusement:

— En ce cas, elle repose, mais monsieur le maire peut entrer.

Il fit quelques observations sur une porte qui fermait mal, et dont le bruit pouvait réveiller la malade, puis il entra dans la chambre de Fantine, s’approcha du lit et entrouvrit les rideaux. Elle dormait. Son souffle sortait de sa poitrine avec ce bruit tragique qui est propre à ces maladies, et qui navre les pauvres mères lorsqu’elles veillent la nuit près de leur enfant condamné et endormi. Mais cette respiration pénible troublait à peine une sorte de sérénité ineffable, répandue sur son visage, qui la transfigurait dans son sommeil. Sa pâleur était devenue de la blancheur; ses joues étaient vermeilles. Ses longs cils blonds, la seule beauté qui lui fût restée de sa virginité et de sa jeunesse, palpitaient tout en demeurant clos et baissés. Toute sa personne tremblait de je ne sais quel déploiement d’ailes prêtes à s’entrouvrir et à l’emporter, qu’on sentait frémir, mais qu’on ne voyait pas. À la voir ainsi, on n’eût jamais pu croire que c’était là une malade presque désespérée. Elle ressemblait plutôt à ce qui va s’envoler qu’à ce qui va mourir.

La branche, lorsqu’une main s’approche pour détacher la fleur, frissonne, et semble à la fois se dérober et s’offrir. Le corps humain a quelque chose de ce tressaillement, quand arrive l’instant où les doigts mystérieux de la mort vont cueillir l’âme.

M. Madeleine resta quelque temps immobile près de ce lit, regardant tour à tour la malade et le crucifix, comme il faisait deux mois auparavant, le jour où il était venu pour la première fois la voir dans cet asile. Ils étaient encore là tous les deux dans la même attitude, elle dormant, lui priant; seulement maintenant, depuis ces deux mois écoulés, elle avait des cheveux gris et lui des cheveux blancs.

La sœur n’était pas entrée avec lui. Il se tenait près de ce lit, debout, le doigt sur la bouche, comme s’il y eût eu dans la chambre quelqu’un à faire taire.

Elle ouvrit les yeux, le vit, et dit paisiblement, avec un sourire:

— Et Cosette?

Chapitre II

Fantine heureuse

Elle n’eut pas un mouvement de surprise, ni un mouvement de joie; elle était la joie même. Cette simple question: «Et Cosette?» fut faite avec une foi si profonde, avec tant de certitude, avec une absence si complète d’inquiétude et de doute, qu’il ne trouva pas une parole. Elle continua:

— Je savais que vous étiez là. Je dormais, mais je vous voyais. Il y a longtemps que je vous vois. Je vous ai suivi des yeux toute la nuit. Vous étiez dans une gloire et vous aviez autour de vous toutes sortes de figures célestes.

Il leva son regard vers le crucifix.

— Mais, reprit-elle, dites-moi donc où est Cosette? Pourquoi ne l’avoir pas mise sur mon lit pour le moment où je m’éveillerais?

Il répondit machinalement quelque chose qu’il n’a jamais pu se rappeler plus tard.

Heureusement le médecin, averti, était survenu. Il vint en aide à M. Madeleine.

— Mon enfant, dit le médecin, calmez-vous. Votre enfant est là.

Les yeux de Fantine s’illuminèrent et couvrirent de clarté tout son visage. Elle joignit les mains avec une expression qui contenait tout ce que la prière peut avoir à la fois de plus violent et de plus doux.

— Oh! s’écria-t-elle, apportez-la-moi!

Touchante illusion de mère! Cosette était toujours pour elle le petit enfant qu’on apporte.

— Pas encore, reprit le médecin, pas en ce moment. Vous avez un reste de fièvre. La vue de votre enfant vous agiterait et vous ferait du mal. Il faut d’abord vous guérir. Elle l’interrompit impétueusement.

— Mais je suis guérie! je vous dis que je suis guérie! Est-il âne, ce médecin! Ah çà! je veux voir mon enfant, moi!

— Vous voyez, dit le médecin, comme vous vous emportez. Tant que vous serez ainsi, je m’opposerai à ce que vous ayez votre enfant. Il ne suffit pas de la voir, il faut vivre pour elle. Quand vous serez raisonnable, je vous l’amènerai moi-même.

La pauvre mère courba la tête.

— Monsieur le médecin, je vous demande pardon, je vous demande vraiment bien pardon. Autrefois, je n'aurais pas parlé comme je viens de faire, il m'est arrivé tant de malheurs que quelquefois je ne sais plus ce que je dis. Je comprends, vous craignez l'émotion, j'attendrai tant que vous voudrez, mais je vous jure que cela ne m'aurait pas fait de mal de voir ma fille. Je la vois, je ne la quitte pas des yeux depuis hier au soir. Savez-vous? on me l'apporterait maintenant que je me mettrais à lui parler doucement. Voilà tout. Est-ce que ce n'est pas bien naturel que j'aie envie de voir mon enfant qu'on a été me chercher exprès à Montfermeil? Je ne suis pas en colère. Je sais bien que je vais être heureuse. Toute la nuit j'ai vu des choses blanches et des personnes qui me souriaient. Quand monsieur le médecin voudra, il m'apportera ma Cosette. Je n'ai plus de fièvre, puisque je suis guérie; je sens bien que je n'ai plus rien du tout; mais je vais faire comme si j'étais malade et ne pas bouger pour faire plaisir aux dames d'ici. Quand on verra que je suis bien tranquille, on dira: il faut lui donner son enfant.

M. Madeleine s'était assis sur une chaise qui était à côté du lit. Elle se tourna vers lui; elle faisait visiblement effort pour paraître calme et «bien sage», comme elle disait dans cet affaiblissement de la maladie qui ressemble à l'enfance, afin que, la voyant si paisible, on ne fît pas difficulté de lui amener Cosette. Cependant, tout en se contenant, elle ne pouvait s'empêcher d'adresser à M. Madeleine mille questions.

— Avez-vous fait un bon voyage, monsieur le maire? Oh! comme vous êtes bon d'avoir été me la chercher! Dites-moi seulement comment elle est. A-t-elle bien supporté la route? Hélas! elle ne me reconnaîtra pas! Depuis le temps, elle m'a oubliée, pauvre chou! Les enfants, cela n'a pas de mémoire. C'est comme des oiseaux. Aujourd'hui cela voit une chose et demain une autre, et cela ne pense plus à rien. Avait-elle du linge blanc seulement? Ces Thénardier la tenaient-ils proprement? Comment la nourrissait-on? Oh! comme j'ai souffert, si vous saviez! de me faire toutes ces questions-là dans le temps de ma misère! Maintenant, c'est passé. Je suis joyeuse. Oh! que je voudrais donc la voir! Monsieur le maire, l'avez-vous trouvée jolie? N'est-ce pas qu'elle est belle, ma fille? Vous devez avoir eu bien froid dans cette diligence! Est-ce qu'on ne pourrait pas l'amener rien qu'un petit moment? On la remporterait tout de suite après. Dites! vous qui êtes le maître, si vous vouliez!

Il lui prit la main:

— Cosette est belle, dit-il, Cosette se porte bien, vous la verrez bientôt, mais apaisez-vous. Vous parlez trop vivement, et puis vous sortez vos bras du lit, et cela vous fait tousser.

En effet, des quintes de toux interrompaient Fantine presque à chaque mot.

Fantine ne murmura pas, elle craignait d’avoir compromis par quelques plaintes trop passionnées la confiance qu’elle voulait inspirer, et elle se mit à dire des paroles indifférentes.

— C’est assez joli, Montfermeil, n’est-ce-pas? L’été, on va y faire des parties de plaisir. Ces Thénardier font-ils de bonnes affaires? Il ne passe pas grand monde dans leur pays. C’est une espèce de gargote que cette auberge-là.

M. Madeleine lui tenait toujours la main, il la considérait avec anxiété; il était évident qu’il était venu pour lui dire des choses devant lesquelles sa pensée hésitait maintenant. Le médecin, sa visite faite, s’était retiré. La sœur Simplice était seule restée auprès d’eux.

Cependant, au milieu de ce silence, Fantine s’écria:

— Je l’entends! mon Dieu! je l’entends!

Elle étendit le bras pour qu’on se tût autour d’elle, retint son souffle, et se mit à écouter avec ravissement.

Il y avait un enfant qui jouait dans la cour; l’enfant de la portière ou d’une ouvrière quelconque. C’est là un de ces hasards qu’on retrouve toujours et qui semblent faire partie de la mystérieuse mise en scène des événements lugubres. L’enfant, c’était une petite fille, allait, venait, courait pour se réchauffer, riait et chantait à haute voix. Hélas! à quoi les jeux des enfants ne se mêlent-ils pas! C’était cette petite fille que Fantine entendait chanter.

— Oh! reprit-elle, c’est ma Cosette! je reconnais sa voix!

L’enfant s’éloigna comme il était venu, la voix s’éteignit, Fantine écouta encore quelque temps, puis son visage s’assombrit, et M. Madeleine l’entendit qui disait à voix basse:

— Comme ce médecin est méchant de ne pas me laisser voir ma fille! Il a une mauvaise figure, cet homme-là!

Cependant le fond riant de ses idées revint. Elle continua de se parler à elle-même, la tête sur l’oreiller.

— Comme nous allons être heureuses! Nous aurons un petit jardin, d’abord! M. Madeleine me l’a promis. Ma fille jouera dans le jardin. Elle doit savoir ses lettres maintenant. Je la ferai épeler. Elle courra dans l’herbe après les papillons. Je la regarderai. Et puis elle fera sa première communion. Ah çà! quand fera-t-elle sa première communion? Elle se mit à compter sur ses doigts.

— ... Un, deux, trois, quatre... elle a sept ans. Dans cinq ans. Elle aura un voile blanc, des bas à jour, elle aura l’air d’une petite femme. Ô ma bonne sœur, vous ne savez pas comme je suis bête, voilà que je pense à la première communion de ma fille! Et elle se mit à rire.

Il avait quitté la main de Fantine. Il écoutait ces paroles comme on écoute un vent qui souffle, les yeux à terre, l’esprit plongé dans des réflexions sans fond. Tout à coup elle cessa de parler, cela lui fit lever machinalement la tête. Fantine était devenue effrayante.

Elle ne parlait plus, elle ne respirait plus; elle s’était soulevée à demi sur son séant, son épaule maigre sortait de sa chemise, son visage, radieux le moment d’auparavant, était blême, et elle paraissait fixer sur quelque chose de formidable, devant elle, à l’autre extrémité de la chambre, son œil agrandi par la terreur.

— Mon Dieu! s’écria-t-il. Qu’avez-vous, Fantine?

Elle ne répondit pas, elle ne quitta point des yeux l’objet quelconque qu’elle semblait voir, elle lui toucha le bras d’une main et de l’autre lui fit signe de regarder derrière lui.

Il se retourna, et vit Javert.

Chapitre III

Javert content

Voici ce qui s’était passé.

Minuit et demi venait de sonner, quand M. Madeleine était sorti de la salle des assises d’Arras. Il était rentré à son auberge juste à temps pour repartir par la malle-poste où l’on se rappelle qu’il avait retenu sa place. Un peu avant six heures du matin, il était arrivé à Montreuil-sur-mer, et son premier soin avait été de jeter à la poste sa lettre à M. Laffitte, puis d’entrer à l’infirmerie et de voir Fantine.

Cependant, à peine avait-il quitté la salle d’audience de la cour d’assises, que l’avocat général, revenu du premier saisissement, avait pris la parole pour déplorer l’acte de folie de l’honorable maire de Montreuil-sur-mer, déclarer que ses convictions n’étaient en rien modifiées par cet incident bizarre qui s’éclaircirait plus tard, et requérir, en attendant, la condamnation de ce Champmathieu, évidemment le vrai Jean Valjean. La persistance de l’avocat général était visiblement en contradiction avec le sentiment de tous, du public, de la cour et du jury. Le défenseur avait eu peu de peine à réfuter cette harangue et à établir que, par suite des révélations de M. Madeleine, c’est-à-dire du vrai Jean Valjean, la face de l’affaire était bouleversée de fond en comble, et que le jury n’avait plus devant les yeux qu’un innocent. L’avocat avait tiré de là quelques épiphonèmes, malheureusement peu neufs, sur les erreurs judiciaires, etc., etc., le président dans son résumé s’était joint au défenseur, et le jury en quelques minutes avait mis hors de cause Champmathieu.

Cependant il fallait un Jean Valjean à l’avocat général, et, n’ayant plus Champmathieu, il prit Madeleine.

Immédiatement après la mise en liberté de Champmathieu, l’avocat général s’enferma avec le président. Ils conférèrent «de la nécessité de se saisir de la personne de M. le maire de Montreuil-sur-mer». Cette phrase, où il y a beaucoup de *de*, est de M. l’avocat général, entièrement écrite de sa main sur la minute de son rapport au procureur général. La première émotion passée, le président fit peu d’objections. Il fallait bien que justice eût son cours. Et puis, pour tout dire, quoique le président fût homme bon et assez intelligent, il était en même temps fort royaliste et presque ardent, et il avait été choqué que le maire de Montreuil-sur-mer, en parlant du débarquement à Cannes, eût dit l’*empereur* et non *Buonaparte*.

L’ordre d’arrestation fut donc expédié. L’avocat général l’envoya à Montreuil-sur-mer par un exprès, à franc étrier, et en chargea l’inspecteur de police Javert.

On sait que Javert était revenu à Montreuil-sur-mer immédiatement après avoir fait sa déposition.

Javert se levait au moment où l’exprès lui remit l’ordre d’arrestation et le mandat d’amener.

L’exprès était lui-même un homme de police fort entendu qui, en deux mots, mit Javert au fait de ce qui était arrivé à Arras. L’ordre d’arrestation, signé de l’avocat général, était ainsi conçu: — L’inspecteur Javert appréhendera au corps le sieur Madeleine, maire de Montreuil-sur-mer, qui, dans l’audience de ce jour, a été reconnu pour être le forçat libéré Jean Valjean.

Quelqu’un qui n’eût pas connu Javert et qui l’eût vu au moment où il pénétra dans l’antichambre de l’infirmerie n’eût pu rien deviner de ce qui se passait, et lui eût trouvé l’air le plus ordinaire du monde. Il était froid, calme, grave, avait ses cheveux gris parfaitement lissés sur les tempes et venait de monter l’escalier avec sa lenteur habituelle. Quelqu’un qui l’eût connu à fond et qui l’eût examiné attentivement eût frémi. La boucle de son col de cuir, au lieu d’être sur sa nuque, était sur son oreille gauche. Ceci révélait une agitation inouïe.

Javert était un caractère complet, ne laissant faire de pli ni à son devoir, ni à son uniforme; méthodique avec les scélérats, rigide avec les boutons de son habit.

Pour qu’il eût mal mis la boucle de son col, il fallait qu’il y eût en lui une de ces émotions qu’on pourrait appeler des tremblements de terre intérieurs.

Il était venu simplement, avait requis un caporal et quatre soldats au poste voisin, avait laissé les soldats dans la cour, et s’était fait indiquer la chambre de Fantine par la portière sans défiance, accoutumée qu’elle était à voir des gens armés demander monsieur le maire.

Arrivé à la chambre de Fantine, Javert tourna la clef, poussa la porte avec une douceur de garde-malade ou de mouchard, et entra.

À proprement parler, il n’entra pas. Il se tint debout dans la porte entrebâillée, le chapeau sur la tête, la main gauche dans sa redingote fermée jusqu’au menton. Dans le pli du coude on pouvait voir le pommeau de plomb de son énorme canne, laquelle disparaissait derrière lui.

Il resta ainsi près d’une minute sans qu’on s’aperçût de sa présence. Tout à coup Fantine leva les yeux, le vit, et fit retourner M. Madeleine.

À l’instant où le regard de Madeleine rencontra le regard de Javert, Javert, sans bouger, sans remuer, sans approcher, devint épouvantable. Aucun sentiment humain ne réussit à être effroyable comme la joie.

Ce fut le visage d’un démon qui vient de retrouver son damné.

La certitude de tenir enfin Jean Valjean fit apparaître sur sa physionomie tout ce qu’il avait dans l’âme. Le fond remué monta à la surface. L’humiliation d’avoir un peu perdu la piste et de s’être mépris quelques minutes sur ce Champmathieu, s’effaçait sous l’orgueil d’avoir si bien deviné d’abord et d’avoir eu si longtemps un instinct juste. Le contentement de Javert éclata dans son attitude souveraine. La difformité du triomphe s’épanouit sur ce front étroit. Ce fut tout le déploiement d’horreur que peut donner une figure satisfaite.

Javert en ce moment était au ciel. Sans qu’il s’en rendit nettement compte, mais pourtant avec une intuition confuse de sa nécessité et de son succès, il personnifiait, lui Javert, la justice, la lumière et la vérité dans leur fonction céleste d’écrasement du mal. Il avait derrière lui et autour de lui, à une profondeur infinie, l’autorité, la raison, la chose jugée, la conscience légale, la vindicte publique, toutes les étoiles; il protégeait l’ordre, il faisait sortir de la loi la foudre, il vengeait la société, il prêtait main-forte à l’absolu; il se dressait dans une gloire; il y avait dans sa victoire un reste de défi et de combat; debout, altier, éclatant, il étalait en plein azur la bestialité surhumaine d’un archange féroce; l’ombre redoutable de l’action qu’il accomplissait faisait visible à son poing crispé le vague flamboiement de l’épée sociale; heureux et indigné, il tenait sous son talon le crime, le vice, la rébellion, la perdition, l’enfer, il rayonnait, il exterminait, il souriait et il y avait une incontestable grandeur dans ce saint Michel monstrueux.

Javert, effroyable, n’avait rien d’ignoble.

La probité, la sincérité, la candeur, la conviction, l’idée du devoir, sont des choses qui, en se trompant, peuvent devenir hideuses, mais qui, même hideuses, restent grandes; leur majesté, propre à la conscience humaine, persiste dans l’horreur. Ce sont des vertus qui ont un vice, l’erreur. L’impitoyable joie honnête d’un fanatique en pleine atrocité conserve on ne sait quel rayonnement lugubrement vénérable. Sans qu’il s’en doutât, Javert, dans son bonheur formidable, était à plaindre comme tout ignorant qui triomphe. Rien n'était poignant et terrible comme cette figure où se montrait ce qu'on pourrait appeler tout le mauvais du bon.

Chapitre IV

L’autorité reprend ses droits

La Fantine n’avait point vu Javert depuis le jour où M. le maire l’avait arrachée à cet homme. Son cerveau malade ne se rendit compte de rien, seulement elle ne douta pas qu’il ne revint la chercher. Elle ne put supporter cette figure affreuse, elle se sentit expirer, elle cacha son visage de ses deux mains et cria avec angoisse:

— Monsieur Madeleine, sauvez-moi!

Jean Valjean — nous ne le nommerons plus désormais autrement — s’était levé. Il dit à Fantine de sa voix la plus douce et la plus calme:

— Soyez tranquille. Ce n’est pas pour vous qu’il vient.

Puis il s’adressa à Javert et lui dit:

— Je sais ce que vous voulez.

Javert répondit:

— Allons, vite!

Il y eut dans l’inflexion qui accompagna ces deux mots je ne sais quoi de fauve et de frénétique. Javert ne dit pas: «Allons, vite!» il dit: «Allonouaite!» Aucune orthographe ne pourrait rendre l’accent dont cela fut prononcé; ce n’était plus une parole humaine, c’était un rugissement.

Il ne fit point comme d’habitude; il n’entra point en matière; il n’exhiba point de mandat d’amener. Pour lui, Jean Valjean était une sorte de combattant mystérieux et insaisissable, un lutteur ténébreux qu’il étreignait depuis cinq ans sans pouvoir le renverser. Cette arrestation n’était pas un commencement, mais une fin. Il se borna à dire: «Allons, vite!»

En parlant ainsi, il ne fit point un pas; il lança sur Jean Valjean ce regard qu’il jetait comme un crampon, et avec lequel il avait coutume de tirer violemment les misérables à lui.

C’était ce regard que la Fantine avait senti pénétrer jusque dans la moelle de ses os deux mois auparavant.

Au cri de Javert, Fantine avait rouvert les yeux. Mais M. le maire était là. Que pouvait-elle craindre?

Javert avança au milieu de la chambre et cria:

— Ah çà! viendras-tu?

La malheureuse regarda autour d'elle. Il n'y avait personne que la religieuse et monsieur le maire. À qui pouvait s'adresser ce tutoiement abject? elle seulement. Elle frissonna.

Alors elle vit une chose inouïe, tellement inouïe que jamais rien de pareil ne lui était apparu dans les plus noirs délires de la fièvre.

Elle vit le mouchard Javert saisir au collet monsieur le maire; elle vit monsieur le maire courber la tête. Il lui sembla que le monde s'évanouissait.

Javert, en effet, avait pris Jean Valjean au collet.

— Monsieur le maire! cria Fantine.

Javert éclata de rire, de cet affreux rire qui lui déchaussait toutes les dents.

— Il n'y a plus de monsieur le maire ici!

Jean Valjean n'essaya pas de déranger la main qui tenait le col de sa redingote. Il dit:

— Javert....

Javert l'interrompit:

— Appelle-moi monsieur l'inspecteur.

— Monsieur, reprit Jean Valjean, je voudrais vous dire un mot en particulier.

— Tout haut! parle tout haut! répondit Javert; on me parle tout haut à moi!

Jean Valjean continua en baissant la voix:

— C'est une prière que j'ai à vous faire....

— Je te dis de parler tout haut.

— Mais cela ne doit être entendu que de vous seul....

— Qu'est-ce que cela me fait? je n'écoute pas!

Jean Valjean se tourna vers lui et lui dit rapidement et très bas:

— Accordez-moi trois jours! trois jours pour aller chercher l'enfant de cette malheureuse femme! Je payerai ce qu'il faudra. Vous m'accompagnerez si vous voulez.

— Tu veux rire! cria Javert. Ah çà! je ne te croyais pas bête! Tu me demandes trois jours pour t'en aller! Tu dis que c'est pour aller chercher l'enfant de cette fille! Ah! ah! c'est bon! voilà qui est bon! Fantine eut un tremblement.

— Mon enfant! s'écria-t-elle, aller chercher mon enfant! Elle n'est donc pas ici! Ma sœur, répondez-moi, où est Cosette? Je veux mon enfant! Monsieur Madeleine! monsieur le maire!

Javert frappa du pied.

— Voilà l’autre, à présent! Te tairas-tu, drôlesse! Gredin de pays où les galériens sont magistrats et où les filles publiques sont soignées comme des comtesses! Ah mais! tout ça va changer; il était temps!

Il regarda fixement Fantine et ajouta en reprenant à poignée la cravate, la chemise et le collet de Jean Valjean:

— Je te dis qu’il n’y a point de monsieur Madeleine et qu’il n’y a point de monsieur le maire. Il y a un voleur, il y a un brigand, il y a un forçat appelé Jean Valjean! c’est lui que je tiens! voilà ce qu’il y a!

Fantine se dressa en sursaut, appuyée sur ses bras roides et sur ses deux mains, elle regarda Jean Valjean, elle regarda Javert, elle regarda la religieuse, elle ouvrit la bouche comme pour parler, un râle sortit du fond de sa gorge, ses dents claquèrent, elle étendit les bras avec angoisse, ouvrant convulsivement les mains, et cherchant autour d’elle comme quelqu’un qui se noie, puis elle s’affaissa subitement sur l’oreiller. Sa tête heurta le chevet du lit et vint retomber sur sa poitrine, la bouche béante, les yeux ouverts et éteints.

Elle était morte.

Jean Valjean posa sa main sur la main de Javert qui le tenait, et l’ouvrit comme il eût ouvert la main d’un enfant, puis il dit à Javert:

— Vous avez tué cette femme.

— Finirons-nous! cria Javert furieux. Je ne suis pas ici pour entendre des raisons. Économisons tout ça. La garde est en bas. Marchons tout de suite, ou les poucettes!

Il y avait dans un coin de la chambre un vieux lit en fer en assez mauvais état qui servait de lit de camp aux sœurs quand elles veillaient. Jean Valjean alla à ce lit, disloqua en un clin d’œil le chevet déjà fort délabré, chose facile à des muscles comme les siens, saisit à poigne-main la maîtresse-tringle, et considéra Javert. Javert recula vers la porte.

Jean Valjean, sa barre de fer au poing, marcha lentement vers le lit de Fantine. Quand il y fut parvenu, il se retourna, et dit à Javert d’une voix qu’on entendait à peine:

— Je ne vous conseille pas de me déranger en ce moment.

Ce qui est certain, c’est que Javert tremblait.

Il eut l’idée d’aller appeler la garde, mais Jean Valjean pouvait profiter de cette minute pour s’évader. Il resta donc, saisit sa canne par le petit bout, et s’adossa au chambranle de la porte sans quitter du regard Jean Valjean.

Jean Valjean posa son coude sur la pomme du chevet du lit et son front sur sa main, et se mit à contempler Fantine immobile et étendue. Il demeura ainsi, absorbé, muet, et ne songeant évidemment plus à aucune chose de cette vie. Il n’y avait plus rien sur son visage et dans son attitude qu’une inexprimable pitié. Après quelques instants de cette rêverie, il se pencha vers Fantine et lui parla à voix basse.

Que lui dit-il? Que pouvait dire cet homme qui était réprouvé à cette femme qui était morte? Qu’était-ce que ces paroles? Personne sur la terre ne les a entendues. La morte les entendit-elle? Il y a des illusions touchantes qui sont peut-être des réalités sublimes. Ce qui est hors de doute, c’est que la sœur Simplice, unique témoin de la chose qui se passait, a souvent raconté qu’au moment où Jean Valjean parla à l’oreille de Fantine, elle vit distinctement poindre un ineffable sourire sur ces lèvres pâles et dans ces prunelles vagues, pleines de l’étonnement du tombeau.

Jean Valjean prit dans ses deux mains la tête de Fantine et l’arrangea sur l’oreiller comme une mère eût fait pour son enfant, il lui rattacha le cordon de sa chemise et rentra ses cheveux sous son bonnet. Cela fait, il lui ferma les yeux.

La face de Fantine en cet instant semblait étrangement éclairée.

La mort, c’est l’entrée dans la grande lueur.

La main de Fantine pendait hors du lit. Jean Valjean s’agenouilla devant cette main, la souleva doucement, et la baisa.

Puis il se redressa, et, se tournant vers Javert:

— Maintenant, dit-il, je suis à vous.

Chapitre V

Tombeau convenable

Javert déposa Jean Valjean à la prison de la ville.

L’arrestation de M. Madeleine produisit à Montreuil-sur-mer une sensation, ou pour mieux dire une commotion extraordinaire. Nous sommes triste de ne pouvoir dissimuler que sur ce seul mot: *c’était un galérien*, tout le monde à peu près l’abandonna. En moins de deux heures tout le bien qu’il avait fait fut oublié, et ce ne fut plus «qu’un galérien». Il est juste de dire qu’on ne connaissait pas encore les détails de l’événement d’Arras. Toute la journée on entendait dans toutes les parties de la ville des conversations comme celle-ci:

— Vous ne savez pas? c’était un forçat libéré! Qui ça? — Le maire. — Bah! M. Madeleine? — Oui. Vraiment? — Il ne s’appelait pas Madeleine, il a un affreux nom, Béjean, Bojean, Boujean. — Ah, mon Dieu! — Il est arrêté. — Arrêté! — En prison à la prison de la ville, en attendant qu’on le transfère. — Qu’on le transfère! On va le transférer! Où va-t-on le transférer? — Il va passer aux assises pour un vol de grand chemin qu’il a fait autrefois. — Eh bien! je m’en doutais. Cet homme était trop bon, trop parfait, trop confit. Il refusait la croix, il donnait des sous à tous les petits drôles qu’il rencontrait. J’ai toujours pensé qu’il y avait là-dessous quelque mauvaise histoire.

«Les salons» surtout abondèrent dans ce sens.

Une vieille dame, abonnée au *Drapeau blanc*, fit cette réflexion dont il est presque impossible de sonder la profondeur:

— Je n’en suis pas fâchée. Cela apprendra aux buonapartistes!

C’est ainsi que ce fantôme qui s’était appelé M. Madeleine se dissipa à Montreuil-sur-mer. Trois ou quatre personnes seulement dans toute la ville restèrent fidèles à cette mémoire. La vieille portière qui l’avait servi fut du nombre. Le soir de ce même jour, cette digne vieille était assise dans sa loge, encore tout effarée et réfléchissant tristement. La fabrique avait été fermée toute la journée, la porte cochère était verrouillée, la rue était déserte. Il n’y avait dans la maison que deux religieuses, sœur Perpétue et sœur Simplice, qui veillaient près du corps de Fantine.

Vers l’heure où M. Madeleine avait coutume de rentrer, la brave portière se leva machinalement, prit la clef de la chambre de M. Madeleine dans un tiroir et le bougeoir dont il se servait tous les soirs pour monter chez lui, puis elle accrocha la clef au clou où il la prenait d’habitude, et plaça le bougeoir à côté, comme si elle l’attendait. Ensuite elle se rassit sur sa chaise et se remit à songer. La pauvre bonne vieille avait fait tout cela sans en avoir conscience.

Ce ne fut qu’au bout de plus de deux heures qu’elle sortit de sa rêverie et s’écria: «Tiens! mon bon Dieu Jésus! moi qui ai mis sa clef au clou!»

En ce moment la vitre de la loge s’ouvrit, une main passa par l’ouverture, saisit la clef et le bougeoir et alluma la bougie à la chandelle qui brûlait.

La portière leva les yeux et resta béante, avec un cri dans le gosier qu’elle retint. Elle connaissait cette main, ce bras, cette manche de redingote.

C’était M. Madeleine.

Elle fut quelques secondes avant de pouvoir parler, saisie, comme elle le disait elle-même plus tard en racontant son aventure.

— Mon Dieu, monsieur le maire, s’écria-t-elle enfin, je vous croyais....

Elle s’arrêta, la fin de sa phrase eût manqué de respect au commencement. Jean Valjean était toujours pour elle monsieur le maire.

Il acheva sa pensée.

— En prison, dit-il. J’y étais. J’ai brisé un barreau d’une fenêtre, je me suis laissé tomber du haut d’un toit, et me voici. Je monte à ma chambre, allez me chercher la sœur Simplice. Elle est sans doute près de cette pauvre femme.

La vieille obéit en toute hâte.

Il ne lui fit aucune recommandation; il était bien sûr qu’elle le garderait mieux qu’il ne se garderait lui-même.

On n’a jamais su comment il avait réussi à pénétrer dans la cour sans faire ouvrir la porte cochère. Il avait, et portait toujours sur lui, un passe-partout qui ouvrait une petite porte latérale; mais on avait dû le fouiller et lui prendre son passe-partout. Ce point n’a pas été éclairci.

Il monta l’escalier qui conduisait à sa chambre. Arrivé en haut, il laissa son bougeoir sur les dernières marches de l’escalier, ouvrit sa porte avec peu de bruit, et alla fermer à tâtons sa fenêtre et son volet, puis il revint prendre sa bougie et rentra dans sa chambre.

La précaution était utile; on se souvient que sa fenêtre pouvait être aperçue de la rue. Il jeta un coup d’œil autour de lui, sur sa table, sur sa chaise, sur son lit qui n’avait pas été défait depuis trois jours. Il ne restait aucune trace du désordre de l’avant-dernière nuit. La portière avait «fait la chambre». Seulement elle avait ramassé dans les cendres et posé proprement sur la table les deux bouts du bâton ferré et la pièce de quarante sous noircie par le feu.

Il prit une feuille de papier sur laquelle il écrivit: *Voici les deux bouts de mon bâton ferré et la pièce de quarante sous volée à Petit-Gervais dont j’ai parlé à la cour d’assises*, et il posa sur cette feuille la pièce d’argent et les deux morceaux de fer, de façon que ce fût la première chose qu’on aperçût en entrant dans la chambre. Il tira d’une armoire une vieille chemise à lui qu’il déchira. Cela fit quelques morceaux de toile dans lesquels il emballa les deux flambeaux d’argent. Du reste il n’avait ni hâte ni agitation, et, tout en emballant les chandeliers de l’évêque, il mordait dans un morceau de pain noir. Il est probable que c’était le pain de la prison qu’il avait emporté en s’évadant.

Ceci a été constaté par les miettes de pain qui furent trouvées sur le carreau de la chambre, lorsque la justice plus tard fit une perquisition.

On frappa deux petits coups à la porte.

— Entrez, dit-il.

C’était la sœur Simplice.

Elle était pâle, elle avait les yeux rouges, la chandelle qu’elle tenait vacillait dans sa main. Les violences de la destinée ont cela de particulier que, si perfectionnés ou si refroidis que nous soyons, elles nous tirent du fond des entrailles la nature humaine et la forcent de reparaître au dehors. Dans les émotions de cette journée, la religieuse était redevenue femme. Elle avait pleuré, et elle tremblait.

Jean Valjean venait d’écrire quelques lignes sur un papier qu’il tendit à la religieuse en disant:

— Ma sœur, vous remettrez ceci à monsieur le curé.

Le papier était déplié. Elle y jeta les yeux.

— Vous pouvez lire, dit-il.

Elle lut. — «Je prie monsieur le curé de veiller sur tout ce que je laisse ici. Il voudra bien payer là-dessus les frais de mon procès et l’enterrement de la femme qui est morte aujourd’hui. Le reste sera aux pauvres.»

La sœur voulut parler, mais elle put à peine balbutier quelques sons inarticulés. Elle parvint cependant à dire:

— Est-ce que monsieur le maire ne désire pas revoir une dernière fois cette pauvre malheureuse?

— Non, dit-il, on est à ma poursuite, on n'aurait qu'à m'arrêter dans sa chambre, cela la troublerait.

Il achevait à peine qu'un grand bruit se fit dans l'escalier. Ils entendirent un tumulte de pas qui montaient, et la vieille portière qui disait de sa voix la plus haute et la plus perçante:

— Mon bon monsieur, je vous jure le bon Dieu qu'il n'est entré personne ici de toute la journée ni de toute la soirée, que même je n'ai pas quitté ma porte!

Un homme répondit:

— Cependant il y a de la lumière dans cette chambre.

Ils reconnurent la voix de Javert.

La chambre était disposée de façon que la porte en s'ouvrant masquait l'angle du mur à droite. Jean Valjean souffla la bougie et se mit dans cet angle.

La sœur Simplice tomba à genoux près de la table.

La porte s'ouvrit.

Javert entra.

On entendait le chuchotement de plusieurs hommes et les protestations de la portière dans le corridor.

La religieuse ne leva pas les yeux. Elle priait.

La chandelle était sur la cheminée et ne donnait que peu de clarté.

Javert aperçut la sœur et s'arrêta interdit.

On se rappelle que le fond même de Javert, son élément, son milieu respirable, c'était la vénération de toute autorité. Il était tout d'une pièce et n'admettait ni objection, ni restriction. Pour lui, bien entendu, l'autorité ecclésiastique était la première de toutes. Il était religieux, superficiel et correct sur ce point comme sur tous. À ses yeux un prêtre était un esprit qui ne se trompe pas, une religieuse était une créature qui ne pèche pas. C'étaient des âmes murées à ce monde avec une seule porte qui ne s'ouvrait jamais que pour laisser sortir la vérité.

En apercevant la sœur, son premier mouvement fut de se retirer.

Cependant il y avait aussi un autre devoir qui le tenait, et qui le poussait impérieusement en sens inverse. Son second mouvement fut de rester, et de hasarder au moins une question.

C’était cette sœur Simplice qui n’avait menti de sa vie. Javert le savait, et la vénérait particulièrement à cause de cela.

— Ma sœur, dit-il, êtes-vous seule dans cette chambre?

Il y eut un moment affreux pendant lequel la pauvre portière se sentit défaillir.

La sœur leva les yeux et répondit:

— Oui.

— Ainsi, reprit Javert, excusez-moi si j’insiste, c’est mon devoir, vous n’avez pas vu ce soir une personne, un homme. Il s’est évadé, nous le cherchons, ce nommé Jean Valjean, vous ne l’avez pas vu?

La sœur répondit:

— Non.

Elle mentit. Elle mentit deux fois de suite, coup sur coup, sans hésiter, rapidement, comme on se dévoue.

— Pardon, dit Javert, et il se retira en saluant profondément.

Ô sainte fille! vous n’êtes plus de ce monde depuis beaucoup d’années; vous avez rejoint dans la lumière vos sœurs les vierges et vos frères les anges; que ce mensonge vous soit compté dans le paradis!

L’affirmation de la sœur fut pour Javert quelque chose de si décisif qu’il ne remarqua même pas la singularité de cette bougie qu’on venait de souffler et qui fumait sur la table.

Une heure après, un homme, marchant à travers les arbres et les brumes, s’éloignait rapidement de Montreuil-sur-mer dans la direction de Paris. Cet homme était Jean Valjean. Il a été établi, par le témoignage de deux ou trois rouliers qui l’avaient rencontré, qu’il portait un paquet et qu’il était vêtu d’une blouse. Où avait-il pris cette blouse? On ne l’a jamais su. Cependant un vieux ouvrier était mort quelques jours auparavant à l’infirmerie de la fabrique, ne laissant que sa blouse. C’était peut-être celle-là.

Un dernier mot sur Fantine.

Nous avons tous une mère, la terre. On rendit Fantine à cette mère.

Le curé crut bien faire, et fit bien peut-être, en réservant, sur ce que Jean Valjean avait laissé, le plus d’argent possible aux pauvres. Après tout, de qui s’agissait-il? d’un forçat et d’une fille publique. C’est pourquoi il simplifia l’enterrement de Fantine, et le réduisit à ce strict nécessaire qu’on appelle la fosse commune.

Fantine fut donc enterrée dans ce coin gratis du cimetière qui est à tous et à personne, et où l’on perd les pauvres. Heureusement Dieu sait où retrouver l’âme. On coucha Fantine dans les ténèbres parmi les premiers os venus; elle subit la promiscuité des cendres. Elle fut jetée à la fosse publique. Sa tombe ressembla à son lit.

Livre premier — Waterloo

Chapitre I

Ce qu'on rencontre en venant de Nivelles

L'an dernier (1861), par une belle matinée de mai, un passant, celui qui raconte cette histoire, arrivait de Nivelles et se dirigeait vers La Hulpe. Il allait à pied. Il suivait, entre deux rangées d'arbres, une large chaussée pavée ondulant sur des collines qui viennent l'une après l'autre, soulèvent la route et la laissent retomber, et font là comme des vagues énormes. Il avait dépassé Lillois et Bois-Seigneur-Isaac. Il apercevait, à l'ouest, le clocher d'ardoise de Braine-l'Alleud qui a la forme d'un vase renversé. Il venait de laisser derrière lui un bois sur une hauteur, et, à l'angle d'un chemin de traverse, à côté d'une espèce de potence vermoulue portant l'inscription: *Ancienne barrière no 4*, un cabaret ayant sur sa façade cet écriteau: *Au quatre vents. Échabeau, café de particulier*.

Un demi-quart de lieue plus loin que ce cabaret, il arriva au fond d'un petit vallon où il y a de l'eau qui passe sous une arche pratiquée dans le remblai de la route. Le bouquet d'arbres, clairsemé mais très vert, qui emplit le vallon d'un côté de la chaussée, s'éparpille de l'autre dans les prairies et s'en va avec grâce et comme en désordre vers Braine-l'Alleud.

Il y avait là, à droite, au bord de la route, une auberge, une charrette à quatre roues devant la porte, un grand faisceau de perches à houblon, une charrue, un tas de broussailles sèches près d'une haie vive, de la chaux qui fumait dans un trou carré, une échelle le long d'un vieux hangar à cloisons de paille. Une jeune fille sarclait dans un champ où une grande affiche jaune, probablement du spectacle forain de quelque kermesse, volait au vent. À l'angle de l'auberge, à côté d'une mare où naviguait une flottille de canards, un sentier mal pavé s'enfonçait dans les broussailles. Ce passant y entra.

Au bout d'une centaine de pas, après avoir longé un mur du quinzième siècle surmonté d'un pignon aigu à briques contrariées, il se trouva en présence d'une grande porte de pierre cintrée, avec imposte rectiligne, dans le grave style de Louis XIV, accostée de deux médaillons planes. Une façade sévère dominait cette porte; un mur perpendiculaire à la façade venait presque toucher la porte et la flanquait d'un brusque angle droit. Sur le pré devant la porte gisaient trois herses à travers lesquelles poussaient pêle-mêle toutes les fleurs de mai. La porte était fermée. Elle avait pour clôture deux battants décrépits ornés d’un vieux marteau rouillé.

Le soleil était charmant; les branches avaient ce doux frémissement de mai qui semble venir des nids plus encore que du vent. Un brave petit oiseau, probablement amoureux, vocalisait éperdument dans un grand arbre.

Le passant se courba et considéra dans la pierre à gauche, au bas du pied-droit de la porte, une assez large excavation circulaire ressemblant à l’alvéole d’une sphère. En ce moment les battants s’écartèrent et une paysanne sortit.

Elle vit le passant et aperçut ce qu’il regardait.

— C’est un boulet français qui a fait ça, lui dit-elle. Et elle ajouta:

— Ce que vous voyez là, plus haut, dans la porte, près d’un clou, c’est le trou d’un gros biscayen. Le biscayen n’a pas traversé le bois.

— Comment s’appelle cet endroit-ci? demanda le passant.

— Hougomont, dit la paysanne.

Le passant se redressa. Il fit quelques pas et s’en alla regarder au-dessus des haies. Il aperçut à l’horizon à travers les arbres une espèce de monticule et sur ce monticule quelque chose qui, de loin, ressemblait à un lion.

Il était dans le champ de bataille de Waterloo.

Chapitre II

Hougomont

Hougomont, ce fut là un lieu funèbre, le commencement de l’obstacle, la première résistance que rencontra à Waterloo ce grand bûcheron de l’Europe qu’on appelait Napoléon; le premier nœud sous le coup de hache.

C’était un château, ce n’est plus qu’une ferme. Hougomont, pour l’antiquaire, c’est *Hugomons*. Ce manoir fut bâti par Hugo, sire de Somerel, le même qui dota la sixième chapellenie de l’abbaye de Villers.

Le passant poussa la porte, coudoya sous un porche une vieille calèche, et entra dans la cour.

La première chose qui le frappa dans ce préau, ce fut une porte du seizième siècle qui y simule une arcade, tout étant tombé autour d’elle. L’aspect monumental naît souvent de la ruine. Auprès de l’arcade s’ouvre dans un mur une autre porte avec claveaux du temps de Henri IV, laissant voir les arbres d’un verger. À côté de cette porte un trou à fumier, des pioches et des pelles, quelques charrettes, un vieux puits avec sa dalle et son tourniquet de fer, un poulain qui saute, un dindon qui fait la roue, une chapelle que surmonte un petit clocher, un poirier en fleur en espalier sur le mur de la chapelle, voilà cette cour dont la conquête fut un rêve de Napoléon. Ce coin de terre, s’il eût pu le prendre, lui eût peut-être donné le monde. Des poules y éparpillent du bec la poussière. On entend un grondement; c’est un gros chien qui montre les dents et qui remplace les Anglais.

Les Anglais là ont été admirables. Les quatre compagnies des gardes de Cooke y ont tenu tête pendant sept heures à l’achar-nement d’une armée.

Hougomont, vu sur la carte, en plan géométral, bâtiments et enclos compris, présente une espèce de rectangle irrégulier dont un angle aurait été entaillé. C’est à cet angle qu’est la porte méridionale, gardée par ce mur qui la fusille à bout portant. Hougomont a deux portes: la porte méridionale, celle du château, et la porte septentrionale, celle de la ferme. Napoléon envoya contre Hougomont son frère Jérôme; les divisions Guilleminot, Foy et Bachelu s’y heurtèrent, presque tout le corps de Reille y fut employé et y échoua, les boulets de Kellermann s’épuisèrent sur cet héroïque pan de mur.

Ce ne fut pas trop de la brigade Bauduin pour forcer Hougomont au nord, et la brigade Soye ne put que l’entamer au sud, sans le prendre.

Les bâtiments de la ferme bordent la cour au sud. Un morceau de la porte nord, brisée par les Français, pend accroché au mur. Ce sont quatre planches clouées sur deux traverses, et où l’on distingue les balafres de l’attaque.

La porte septentrionale, enfoncée par les Français, et à laquelle on a mis une pièce pour remplacer le panneau suspendu à la muraille, s’entre-bâille au fond du préau; elle est coupée carrément dans un mur, de pierre en bas, de brique en haut, qui ferme la cour au nord. C’est une simple porte charretière comme il y en a dans toutes les métairies, deux larges battants faits de planches rustiques; au delà, des prairies. La dispute de cette entrée a été furieuse. On a longtemps vu sur le montant de la porte toutes sortes d’empreintes de mains sanglantes. C’est là que Bauduin fut tué.

L’orage du combat est encore dans cette cour; l’horreur y est visible; le bouleversement de la mêlée s’y est pétrifié; cela vit, cela meurt; c’était hier. Les murs agonisent, les pierres tombent, les brèches crient; les trous sont des plaies; les arbres penchés et frissonnants semblent faire effort pour s’enfuir.

Cette cour, en 1815, était plus bâtie qu’elle ne l’est aujourd’hui. Des constructions qu’on a depuis jetées bas y faisaient des redans, des angles et des coudes d’équerre.

Les Anglais s’y étaient barricadés; les Français y pénétrèrent, mais ne purent s’y maintenir. À côté de la chapelle, une aile du château, le seul débris qui reste du manoir d’Hougomont, se dresse écroulée, on pourrait dire éventrée. Le château servit de donjon, la chapelle servit de blockhaus. On s’y extermina. Les Français, arquebuses de toutes parts, de derrière les murailles, du haut des greniers, du fond des caves, par toutes les croisées, par tous les soupiraux, par toutes les fentes des pierres, apportèrent des fascines et mirent le feu aux murs et aux hommes; la mitraille eut pour réplique l’incendie.

On entrevoit dans l’aile ruinée, à travers des fenêtres garnies de barreaux de fer, les chambres démantelées d’un corps de logis en brique; les gardes anglaises étaient embusquées dans ces chambres; la spirale de l’escalier, crevassé du rez-de-chaussée jusqu’au toit, apparaît comme l’intérieur d’un coquillage brisé. L’escalier a deux étages; les Anglais, assiégés dans l’escalier, et massés sur les marches supérieures, avaient coupé les marches inférieures. Ce sont de larges dalles de pierre bleue qui font un monceau dans les orties. Une dizaine de marches tiennent encore au mur; sur la première est entaillée l'image d'un trident. Ces degrés inaccessibles sont solides dans leurs alvéoles. Tout le reste ressemble à une mâchoire édentée. Deux vieux arbres sont là; l'un est mort, l'autre est blessé au pied, et reverdit en avril. Depuis 1815, il s'est mis à pousser à travers l'escalier.

On s'est massacré dans la chapelle. Le dedans, redevenu calme, est étrange. On n'y a plus dit la messe depuis le carnage. Pourtant l'autel y est resté, un autel de bois grossier adossé à un fond de pierre brute. Quatre murs lavés au lait de chaux, une porte vis-à-vis l'autel, deux petites fenêtres cintrées, sur la porte un grand crucifix de bois, au-dessus du crucifix un soupirail carré bouché d'une botte de foin, dans un coin, à terre, un vieux châssis vitré tout cassé, telle est cette chapelle. Près de l'autel est clouée une statue en bois de sainte Anne, du quinzième siècle; la tête de l'enfant Jésus a été emportée par un biscayen. Les Français, maîtres un moment de la chapelle, puis délogés, l'ont incendiée. Les flammes ont rempli cette masure; elle a été fournaise; la porte a brûlé, le plancher a brûlé, le Christ en bois n'a pas brûlé. Le feu lui a rongé les pieds dont on ne voit plus que les moignons noircis, puis s'est arrêté. Miracle, au dire des gens du pays. L'enfant Jésus, décapité, n'a pas été aussi heureux que le Christ.

Les murs sont couverts d'inscriptions. Près des pieds du Christ on lit ce nom: *Henquinez*. Puis ces autres: *Conde de Rio Maïor. Marques y Marquesa de Almagro (Habana)*. Il y a des noms français avec des points d'exclamation, signes de colère. On a reblanchi le mur en 1849. Les nations s'y insultaient.

C'est à la porte de cette chapelle qu'a été ramassé un cadavre qui tenait une hache à la main. Ce cadavre était le sous-lieutenant Legros.

On sort de la chapelle, et à gauche, on voit un puits. Il y en a deux dans cette cour. On demande: pourquoi n'y a-t-il pas de seau et de poulie à celui-ci? C'est qu'on n'y puise plus d'eau. Pourquoi n'y puise-t-on plus d'eau? Parce qu'il est plein de squelettes.

Le dernier qui ait tiré de l'eau de ce puits se nommait Guillaume Van Kylsom. C'était un paysan qui habitait Hougomont et y était jardinier. Le 18 juin 1815, sa famille prit la fuite et s'alla cacher dans les bois.

La forêt autour de l'abbaye de Villers abrita pendant plusieurs jours et plusieurs nuits toutes ces malheureuses populations dispersées. Aujourd'hui encore de certains vestiges reconnaissables, tels que de vieux troncs d’arbres brûlés, mar-quent la place de ces pauvres bivouacs tremblants au fond des halliers.

Guillaume Van Kylsom demeura à Hougomont «pour garder le château» et se blottit dans une cave. Les Anglais l’y découvrirent. On l’arracha de sa cachette, et, à coups de plat de sabre, les combattants se firent servir par cet homme effrayé. Ils avaient soif; ce Guillaume leur portait à boire. C’est à ce puits qu’il puisait l’eau. Beaucoup burent là leur dernière gorgée. Ce puits, où burent tant de morts, devait mourir lui aussi.

Après l’action, on eut une hâte, enterrer les cadavres. La mort a une façon à elle de harceler la victoire, et elle fait suivre la gloire par la peste. Le typhus est une annexe du triomphe. Ce puits était profond, on en fit un sépulcre. On y jeta trois cents morts. Peut-être avec trop d’empressement. Tous étaient-ils morts? la légende dit non. Il parait que, la nuit qui suivit l’ensevelissement, on entendit sortir du puits des voix faibles qui appelaient.

Ce puits est isolé au milieu de la cour. Trois murs mi-partis pierre et brique, repliés comme les feuilles d’un paravent et simulant une tourelle carrée, l’entourent de trois côtés. Le quatrième côté est ouvert. C’est par là qu’on puisait l’eau. Le mur du fond a une façon d’œil-de-bœuf informe, peut-être un trou d’obus. Cette tourelle avait un plafond dont il ne reste que les poutres. La ferrure de soutènement du mur de droite dessine une croix. On se penche, et l’œil se perd dans un profond cylindre de brique qu’emplit un entassement de ténèbres. Tout autour du puits, le bas des murs disparaît dans les orties.

Ce puits n’a point pour devanture la large dalle bleue qui sert de tablier à tous les puits de Belgique. La dalle bleue y est remplacée par une traverse à laquelle s’appuient cinq ou six difformes tronçons de bois noueux et ankylosés qui ressemblent à de grands ossements. Il n’a plus ni seau, ni chaîne, ni poulie; mais il a encore la cuvette de pierre qui servait de déversoir. L’eau des pluies s’y amasse, et de temps en temps un oiseau des forêts voisines vient y boire et s’envole.

Une maison dans cette ruine, la maison de la ferme, est encore habitée. La porte de cette maison donne sur la cour. À côté d’une jolie plaque de serrure gothique il y a sur cette porte une poignée de fer à trèfles, posée de biais. Au moment où le lieutenant hanovrien Wilda saisissait cette poignée pour se réfugier dans la ferme, un sapeur français lui abattit la main d’un coup de hache.

La famille qui occupe la maison a pour grand-père l’ancien jardinier Van Kylsom, mort depuis longtemps. Une femme en cheveux gris vous dit: «J’étais là. J’avais trois ans. Ma sœur, plus grande, avait peur et pleurait. On nous a emportées dans les bois. J’étais dans les bras de ma mère. On se collait l’oreille à terre pour écouter. Moi, j’imitais le canon, et je faisais *boum, boum*.»

Une porte de la cour, à gauche, nous l’avons dit, donne dans le verger.

Le verger est terrible.

Il est en trois parties, on pourrait presque dire en trois actes. La première partie est un jardin, la deuxième est le verger, la troisième est un bois. Ces trois parties ont une enceinte commune, du côté de l’entrée les bâtiments du château et de la ferme, à gauche une haie, à droite un mur, au fond un mur. Le mur de droite est en brique, le mur du fond est en pierre. On entre dans le jardin d’abord. Il est en contrebas, planté de groseilliers, encombré de végétations sauvages, fermé d’un terrassement monumental en pierre de taille avec balustres à double renflement. C’était un jardin seigneurial dans ce premier style français qui a précédé Lenôtre; ruine et ronce aujourd’hui. Les pilastres sont surmontés de globes qui semblent des boulets de pierre. On compte encore quarante-trois balustres sur leurs dés; les autres sont couchés dans l’herbe. Presque tous ont des éraflures de mousqueterie. Un balustre brisé est posé sur l’étrave comme une jambe cassée.

C’est dans ce jardin, plus bas que le verger, que six voltigeurs du 1er léger, ayant pénétré là et n’en pouvant plus sortir, pris et traqués comme des ours dans leur fosse, acceptèrent le combat avec deux compagnies hanovriennes, dont une était armée de carabines. Les hanovriens bordaient ces balustres et tiraient d’en haut. Ces voltigeurs, ripostant d’en bas, six contre deux cents, intrépides, n’ayant pour abri que les groseilliers, mirent un quart d’heure à mourir.

On monte quelques marches, et du jardin on passe dans le verger proprement dit. Là, dans ces quelques toises carrées, quinze cents hommes tombèrent en moins d’une heure. Le mur semble prêt à recommencer le combat. Les trente-huit meurtrières percées par les Anglais à des hauteurs irrégulières, y sont encore. Devant la seizième sont couchées deux tombes anglaises en granit. Il n’y a de meurtrières qu’au mur sud; l’attaque principale venait de là. Ce mur est caché au dehors par une grande haie vive; les Français arrivèrent, croyant n’avoir affaire qu’à la haie, la franchirent, et trouvèrent ce mur, obstacle et embuscade, les gardes anglaises derrière, les trente-huit meurtrières faisant feu à la fois, un orage de mitraille et de balles; et la brigade Soye s’y brisa. Waterloo commença ainsi.

Le verger pourtant fut pris. On n’avait pas d’échelles, les Français grimpèrent avec les ongles. On se battit corps à corps sous les arbres. Toute cette herbe a été mouillée de sang. Un bataillon de Nassau, sept cents hommes, fut foudroyé là. Au dehors le mur, contre lequel furent braquées les deux batteries de Kellermann, est rongé par la mitraille.

Ce verger est sensible comme un autre au mois de mai. Il a ses boutons d’or et ses pâquerettes, l’herbe y est haute, des chevaux de charrue y paissent, des cordes de crin où sèche du linge traversent les intervalles des arbres et font baisser la tête aux passants, on marche dans cette friche et le pied enfonce dans les trous de taupes. Au milieu de l’herbe on remarque un tronc déraciné, gisant, verdissant. Le major Blackman s’y est adossé pour expirer. Sous un grand arbre voisin est tombé le général allemand Duplat, d’une famille française réfugiée à la révocation de l’édit de Nantes. Tout à côté se penche un vieux pommier malade pansé avec un bandage de paille et de terre glaise. Presque tous les pommiers tombent de vieillesse. Il n’y en a pas un qui n’ait sa balle ou son biscaïen. Les squelettes d’arbres morts abondent dans ce verger. Les corbeaux volent dans les branches, au fond il y a un bois plein de violettes.

Bauduin tué, Foy blessé, l’incendie, le massacre, le carnage, un ruisseau fait de sang anglais, de sang allemand et de sang français, furieusement mêlés, un puits comblé de cadavres, le régiment de Nassau et le régiment de Brunswick détruits, Duplat tué, Blackman tué, les gardes anglaises mutilées, vingt bataillons français, sur les quarante du corps de Reille, décimés, trois mille hommes, dans cette seule masure de Hougomont, sabrés, écharpés, égorgés, fusillés, brûlés; et tout cela pour qu’aujourd’hui un paysan dise à un voyageur: *Monsieur, donnez-moi trois francs; si vous aimez, je vous expliquerai la chose de Waterloo!*

Chapitre III

Le 18 juin 1815

Retournons en arrière, c’est un des droits du narrateur, et replaçons-nous en l’année 1815, et même un peu avant l’époque où commence l’action racontée dans la première partie de ce livre.

S’il n’avait pas plu dans la nuit du 17 au 18 juin 1815, l’avenir de l’Europe était changé. Quelques gouttes d’eau de plus ou de moins ont fait pencher Napoléon. Pour que Waterloo fût la fin d’Austerlitz, la providence n’a eu besoin que d’un peu de pluie, et un nuage traversant le ciel à contre-sens de la saison a suffi pour l’écroulement d’un monde.

La bataille de Waterloo, et ceci a donné à Blücher le temps d’arriver, n’a pu commencer qu’à onze heures et demie. Pourquoi? Parce que la terre était mouillée. Il a fallu attendre un peu de raffermissement pour que l’artillerie pût manœuvrer.

Napoléon était officier d’artillerie, et il s’en ressentait. Le fond de ce prodigieux capitaine, c’était l’homme qui, dans le rapport au Directoire sur Aboukir, disait: *Tel de nos boulets a tué six hommes*. Tous ses plans de bataille sont faits pour le projectile. Faire converger l’artillerie sur un point donné, c’était là sa clef de victoire. Il traitait la stratégie du général ennemi comme une citadelle, et il la battait en brèche. Il accablait le point faible de mitraille; il nouait et dénouait les batailles avec le canon. Il y avait du tir dans son génie. Enfoncer les carrés, pulvériser les régiments, rompre les lignes, broyer et disperser les masses, tout pour lui était là, frapper, frapper, frapper sans cesse, et il confiait cette besogne au boulet. Méthode redoutable, et qui, jointe au génie, a fait invincible pendant quinze ans ce sombre athlète du pugilat de la guerre.

Le 18 juin 1815, il comptait d’autant plus sur l’artillerie qu’il avait pour lui le nombre. Wellington n’avait que cent cinquante-neuf bouches à feu; Napoléon en avait deux cent quarante.

Supposez la terre sèche, l’artillerie pouvant rouler, l’action commençait à six heures du matin. La bataille était gagnée et finie à deux heures, trois heures avant la péripétie prussienne.

Quelle quantité de faute y a-t-il de la part de Napoléon dans la perte de cette bataille? le naufrage est-il imputable au pilote?

Le déclin physique évident de Napoléon se compliquait-il à cette époque d’une certaine diminution intérieure? les vingt ans de guerre avaient-ils usé la lame comme le fourreau, l’âme comme le corps? le vétéran se faisait-il fâcheusement sentir dans le capitaine? en un mot, ce génie, comme beaucoup d’historiens considérables l’ont cru, s’éclipsait-il? entrait-il en frénésie pour se déguiser à lui-même son affaiblissement? commençait-il à osciller sous l’égarement d’un souffle d’aventure? devenait-il, chose grave dans un général, inconscient du péril? dans cette classe de grands hommes matériels qu’on peut appeler les géants de l’action, y a-t-il un âge pour la myopie du génie? La vieillesse n’a pas de prise sur les génies de l’idéal; pour les Dantes et les Michel-Anges, vieillir, c’est croître; pour les Annibals et les Bonapartes, est-ce décroître? Napoléon avait-il perdu le sens direct de la victoire? en était-il à ne plus reconnaître l’écueil, à ne plus deviner le piège, à ne plus discerner le bord croulant des abîmes? manquait-il du flair des catastrophes? lui qui jadis savait toutes les routes du triomphe et qui, du haut de son char d’éclairs, les indiquait d’un doigt souverain, avait-il maintenant cet ahurissement sinistre de mener aux précipices son tumultueux attelage de légions? était-il pris, à quarante-six ans, d’une folie suprême? ce cocher titanique du destin n’était-il plus qu’un immense casse-cou?

Nous ne le pensons point. Son plan de bataille était, de l’aveu de tous, un chef-d’œuvre. Aller droit au centre de la ligne alliée, faire un trou dans l’ennemi, le couper en deux, pousser la moitié britannique sur Hal et la moitié prussienne sur Tongres, faire de Wellington et de Blücher deux tronçons; enlever Mont-Saint-Jean, saisir Bruxelles, jeter l’Allemand dans le Rhin et l’Anglais dans la mer. Tout cela, pour Napoléon, était dans cette bataille. Ensuite on verrait.

Il va sans dire que nous ne prétendons pas faire ici l’histoire de Waterloo; une des scènes génératrices du drame que nous racontons se rattache à cette bataille; mais cette histoire n’est pas notre sujet; cette histoire d’ailleurs est faite, et faite magistralement, à un point de vue par Napoléon, à l’autre point de vue par toute une pléiade d’historiens. Quant à nous, nous laissons les historiens aux prises, nous ne sommes qu’un témoin à distance, un passant dans la plaine, un chercheur penché sur cette terre pétrie de chair humaine, prenant peut-être des apparences pour des réalités; nous n’avons pas le droit de tenir tête, au nom de la science, à un ensemble de faits où il y a sans doute du mirage, nous n’avons ni la pratique militaire ni la compétence stratégique qui autorisent un système; selon nous, un enchaînement de hasards domine à Waterloo les deux capitaines; et quand il s’agit du destin, ce mystérieux accusé, nous jugeons comme le peuple, ce juge naïf.

Chapitre IV

A

Ceux qui veulent se figurer nettement la bataille de Waterloo n’ont qu’à coucher sur le sol par la pensée un A majuscule. Le jambage gauche de l’A est la route de Nivelles, le jambage droit est la route de Genappe, la corde de l’A est le chemin creux d’Ohain à Braine-l’Alleud. Le sommet de l’A est Mont-Saint-Jean, là est Wellington; la pointe gauche inférieure est Hougomont, là est Reille avec Jérôme Bonaparte; la pointe droite inférieure est la Belle-Alliance, là est Napoléon. Un peu au-dessous du point où la corde de l’A rencontre et coupe le jambage droit est la Haie-Sainte. Au milieu de cette corde est le point précis où s’est dit le mot final de la bataille. C’est là qu’on a placé le lion, symbole involontaire du suprême héroïsme de la garde impériale.

Le triangle compris au sommet de l’A, entre les deux jambages et la corde, est le plateau de Mont-Saint-Jean. La dispute de ce plateau fut toute la bataille.

Les ailes des deux armées s’étendent à droite et à gauche des deux routes de Genappe et de Nivelles; d’Erlon faisant face à Picton, Reille faisant face à Hill.

Derrière la pointe de l’A, derrière le plateau de Mont-Saint-Jean, est la forêt de Soignes.

Quant à la plaine en elle-même, qu’on se représente un vaste terrain ondulant; chaque pli domine le pli suivant, et toutes les ondulations montent vers Mont-Saint-Jean, et y aboutissent à la forêt.

Deux troupes ennemies sur un champ de bataille sont deux lutteurs. C’est un bras-le-corps. L’une cherche à faire glisser l’autre. On se cramponne à tout; un buisson est un point d’appui; un angle de mur est un épaulement; faute d’une bicoque où s’adosser, un régiment lâche pied; un ravalement de la plaine, un mouvement de terrain, un sentier transversal à propos, un bois, un ravin, peuvent arrêter le talon de ce colosse qu’on appelle une armée et l’empêcher de reculer. Qui sort du champ est battu. De là, pour le chef responsable, la nécessité d’examiner la moindre touffe d’arbres, et d’approfondir le moindre relief.

Les deux généraux avaient attentivement étudié la plaine de Mont-Saint-Jean, dite aujourd’hui plaine de Waterloo. Dès l’année précédente, Wellington, avec une sagacité prévoyante, l’avait examinée comme un en-cas de grande bataille. Sur ce terrain et pour ce duel, le 18 juin, Wellington avait le bon côté, Napoléon le mauvais. L’armée anglaise était en haut, l’armée française en bas.

Esquisser ici l’aspect de Napoléon, à cheval, sa lunette à la main, sur la hauteur de Rossomme, à l’aube du 18 juin 1815, cela est presque de trop. Avant qu’on le montre, tout le monde l’a vu. Ce profil calme sous le petit chapeau de l’école de Brienne, cet uniforme vert, le revers blanc cachant la plaque, la redingote grise cachant les épaulettes, l’angle du cordon rouge sous le gilet, la culotte de peau, le cheval blanc avec sa housse de velours pourpre ayant aux coins des N couronnées et des aigles, les bottes à l’écuyère sur des bas de soie, les éperons d’argent, l’épée de Marengo, toute cette figure du dernier césar est debout dans les imaginations, acclamée des uns, sévèrement regardée par les autres.

Cette figure a été longtemps toute dans la lumière; cela tenait à un certain obscurcissement légendaire que la plupart des héros dégagent et qui voile toujours plus ou moins longtemps la vérité; mais aujourd’hui l’histoire et le jour se font.

Cette clarté, l’histoire, est impitoyable; elle a cela d’étrange et de divin que, toute lumière qu’elle est, et précisément parce qu’elle est lumière, elle met souvent de l’ombre là où l’on voyait des rayons; du même homme elle fait deux fantômes différents, et l’un attaque l’autre, et en fait justice, et les ténèbres du despote luttent avec l’éblouissement du capitaine. De là une mesure plus vraie dans l’appréciation définitive des peuples. Babylone violée diminue Alexandre; Rome enchaînée diminue César; Jérusalem tuée diminue Titus. La tyrannie suit le tyran. C’est un malheur pour un homme de laisser derrière lui de la nuit qui a sa forme.

Chapitre V

Le *quid obscurum* des batailles

Tout le monde connaît la première phase de cette bataille; début trouble, incertain, hésitant, menaçant pour les deux armées, mais pour les Anglais plus encore que pour les Français.

Il avait plu toute la nuit; la terre était défoncée par l’averse; l’eau s’était çà et là amassée dans les creux de la plaine comme dans des cuvettes; sur de certains points les équipages du train en avaient jusqu’à l’essieu; les sous-ventrières des attelages dégouttaient de boue liquide; si les blés et les seigles couchés par cette cohue de charrois en masse n’eussent comblé les ornières et fait litière sous les roues, tout mouvement, particulièrement dans les vallons du côté de Papelotte, eût été impossible.

L’affaire commença tard; Napoléon, nous l’avons expliqué, avait l’habitude de tenir toute l’artillerie dans sa main comme un pistolet, visant tantôt tel point, tantôt tel autre de la bataille, et il avait voulu attendre que les batteries attelées pussent rouler et galoper librement; il fallait pour cela que le soleil parût et séchât le sol. Mais le soleil ne parut pas. Ce n’était plus le rendez-vous d’Austerlitz. Quand le premier coup de canon fut tiré, le général anglais Colville regarda à sa montre et constata qu’il était onze heures trente-cinq minutes.

L’action s’engagea avec furie, plus de furie peut-être que l’empereur n’eût voulu, par l’aile gauche française sur Hougomont. En même temps Napoléon attaqua le centre en précipitant la brigade Quiot sur la Haie-Sainte, et Ney poussa l’aile droite française contre l’aile gauche anglaise qui s’appuyait sur Papelotte.

L’attaque sur Hougomont avait quelque simulation: attirer là Wellington, le faire pencher à gauche, tel était le plan. Ce plan eût réussi, si les quatre compagnies des gardes anglaises et les braves Belges de la division Perponcher n’eussent solidement gardé la position, et Wellington, au lieu de s’y masser, put se borner à y envoyer pour tout renfort quatre autres compagnies de gardes et un bataillon de Brunswick.

L’attaque de l’aile droite française sur Papelotte était à fond; culbuter la gauche anglaise, couper la route de Bruxelles, barrer le passage aux Prussiens possibles, forcer Mont-Saint-Jean, refouler Wellington sur

Hougomont, de là sur Braine-l'Alleud, de là sur Hal, rien de plus net. À part quelques incidents, cette attaque réussit. Papelotte fut pris; la Haie-Sainte fut enlevée.

Détail à noter. Il y avait dans l'infanterie anglaise, particulièrement dans la brigade de Kempt, force recrues. Ces jeunes soldats, devant nos redoutables fantassins, furent vaillants; leur inexpérience se tira intrépidement d'affaire; ils firent surtout un excellent service de tirailleurs; le soldat en tirailleur, un peu livré à lui-même, devient pour ainsi dire son propre général; ces recrues montrèrent quelque chose de l'invention et de la furie françaises. Cette infanterie novice eut de la verve. Ceci déplut à Wellington.

Après la prise de la Haie-Sainte, la bataille vacilla.

Il y a dans cette journée, de midi à quatre heures, un intervalle obscur; le milieu de cette bataille est presque indistinct et participe du sombre de la mêlée. Le crépuscule s'y fait. On aperçoit de vastes fluctuations dans cette brume, un mirage vertigineux, l'attirail de guerre d'alors presque inconnu aujourd'hui, les colbacks à flamme, les sabretaches flottantes, les buffleteries croisées, les gibernes à grenade, les dolmans des hussards, les bottes rouges à mille plis, les lourds shakos enguirlandés de torsades, l'infanterie presque noire de Brunswick mêlée à l'infanterie écarlate d'Angleterre, les soldats anglais ayant aux entournures pour épaulettes de gros bourrelets blancs circulaires, les chevau-légers hanovriens avec leur casque de cuir oblong à bandes de cuivre et à crinières de crins rouges, les Écossais aux genoux nus et aux plaids quadrillés, les grandes guêtres blanches de nos grenadiers, des tableaux, non des lignes stratégiques, ce qu'il faut à Salvator Rosa, non ce qu'il faut à Gribeauval.

Une certaine quantité de tempête se mêle toujours à une bataille. *Quid obscurum, quid divinum*. Chaque historien trace un peu le linéament qui lui plaît dans ces pêle-mêle. Quelle que soit la combinaison des généraux, le choc des masses armées a d'incalculables reflux; dans l'action, les deux plans des deux chefs entrent l'un dans l'autre et se déforment l'un par l'autre. Tel point du champ de bataille dévore plus de combattants que tel autre, comme ces sols plus ou moins spongieux qui boivent plus ou moins vite l'eau qu'on y jette. On est obligé de reverser là plus de soldats qu'on ne voudrait. Dépenses qui sont l'imprévu. La ligne de bataille flotte et serpente comme un fil, les traînées de sang ruissellent illogiquement, les fronts des armées ondoient, les régiments entrant ou sortant font des caps ou des golfes, tous ces écueils remuent continuellement les uns devant les autres; où était l’infanterie, l’artillerie arrive; où était l’artillerie, accourt la cavalerie; les bataillons sont des fumées. Il y avait là quelque chose, cherchez, c’est disparu; les éclaircies se déplacent; les plis sombres avancent et reculent; une sorte de vent du sépulcre pousse, refoule, enfle et disperse ces multitudes tragiques. Qu’est-ce qu’une mêlée? une oscillation. L’immobilité d’un plan mathématique exprime une minute et non une journée. Pour peindre une bataille, il faut de ces puissants peintres qui aient du chaos dans le pinceau; Rembrandt vaut mieux que Van Der Meulen. Van der Meulen, exact à midi, ment à trois heures. La géométrie trompe; l’ouragan seul est vrai. C’est ce qui donne à Folard le droit de contredire Polybe. Ajoutons qu’il y a toujours un certain instant où la bataille dégénère en combat, se particularise, et s’éparpille en d’innombrables faits de détails qui, pour emprunter l’expression de Napoléon lui-même, «appartiennent plutôt à la biographie des régiments qu’à l’histoire de l’armée». L’historien, en ce cas, a le droit évident de résumé. Il ne peut que saisir les contours principaux de la lutte, et il n’est donné à aucun narra-teur, si consciencieux qu’il soit, de fixer absolument la forme de ce nuage horrible, qu’on appelle une bataille.

Ceci, qui est vrai de tous les grands chocs armés, est particulièrement applicable à Waterloo.

Toutefois, dans l’après-midi, à un certain moment, la bataille se précisa.

Chapitre VI

Quatre heures de l’après-midi

Vers quatre heures, la situation de l’armée anglaise était grave. Le prince d’Orange commandait le centre, Hill l’aile droite, Picton l’aile gauche. Le prince d’Orange, éperdu et intrépide, criait aux Hollando-Belges: *Nassau! Brunswick! jamais en arrière!* Hill, affaibli, venait s’adosser à Wellington, Picton était mort. Dans la même minute où les Anglais avaient enlevé aux Français le drapeau du 105ème de ligne, les Français avaient tué aux Anglais le général Picton, d’une balle à travers la tête. La bataille, pour Wellington, avait deux points d’appui, Hougomont et la Hale-Sainte; Hougomont tenait encore, mais brûlait; la Haie-Sainte était prise. Du bataillon allemand qui la défendait, quarante-deux hommes seulement survivaient; tous les officiers, moins cinq, étaient morts ou pris. Trois mille combattants s’étaient massacrés dans cette grange. Un sergent des gardes anglaises, le premier boxeur de l’Angleterre, réputé par ses compagnons invulnérable, y avait été tué par un petit tambour français. Baring était délogé. Alten était sabré. Plusieurs drapeaux étaient perdus, dont un de la division Alten, et un du bataillon de Lunebourg porté par un prince de la famille de Deux-Ponts. Les Écossais gris n’existaient plus; les gros dragons de Ponsonby étaient hachés. Cette vaillante cavalerie avait plié sous les lanciers de Bro et sous les cuirassiers de Travers; de douze cents chevaux il en restait six cents; des trois lieutenants-colonels, deux étaient à terre, Hamilton blessé, Mater tué. Ponsonby était tombé, troué de sept coups de lance. Gordon était mort, Marsh était mort. Deux divisions, la cinquième et la sixième, étaient détruites.

Hougomont entamé, la Haie-Sainte prise, il n’y avait plus qu’un nœud, le centre. Ce nœud-là tenait toujours. Wellington le renforça. Il y appela Hill qui était à Merbe-Braine, il y appela Chassé qui était à Braine-l’Alleud.

Le centre de l’armée anglaise, un peu concave, très dense et très compact, était fortement situé. Il occupait le plateau de Mont-Saint-Jean, ayant derrière lui le village et devant lui la pente, assez âpre alors. Il s’adossait à cette forte maison de pierre, qui était à cette époque un bien domanial de Nivelles et qui marque l’intersection des routes, masse du seizième siècle si robuste que les boulets y ricochaient sans l’entamer. Tout autour du plateau, les Anglais avaient taillé çà et là les haies, fait des embrasures dans les aubépines, mis une gueule de canon entre deux branches, crénelé les buissons. Leur artillerie était en embuscade sous les broussailles. Ce travail punique, incontestablement autorisé par la guerre qui admet le piège, était si bien fait que Haxo, envoyé par l'empereur à neuf heures du matin pour reconnaître les batteries ennemies, n'en avait rien vu, et était revenu dire à Napoléon qu'il n'y avait pas d'obstacle, hors les deux barricades barrant les routes de Nivelles et de Genappe. C'était le moment où la moisson est haute; sur la lisière du plateau, un bataillon de la brigade de Kempt, le 951, armé de carabines, était couché dans les grands blés.

Ainsi assuré et contre-buté, le centre de l'armée anglo-hollandaise était en bonne posture.

Le péril de cette position était la forêt de Soignes, alors contiguë au champ de bataille et coupée par les étangs de Groe-nendael et de Boitsfort. Une armée n'eût pu y reculer sans se dissoudre; les régiments s'y fussent tout de suite désagrégés. L'artillerie s'y fût perdue dans les marais. La retraite, selon l'opinion de plusieurs hommes du métier, contestée par d'autres, il est vrai, eût été là un sauve-qui-peut.

Wellington ajouta à ce centre une brigade de Chassé, ôtée à l'aile droite, et une brigade de Wincke, ôtée à l'aile gauche, plus la division Clinton. À ses Anglais, aux régiments de Halkett, à la brigade de Mitchell, aux gardes de Maitland, il donna comme épaulements et contreforts l'infanterie de Brunswick, le contingent de Nassau, les Hanovriens de Kielmansegge et les Allemands d'Ompteda. Cela lui mit sous la main vingt-six bataillons. *L'aile droite*, comme dit Charras, *fut rabattue derrière le centre*. Une batterie énorme était masquée par des sacs à terre à l'endroit où est aujourd'hui ce qu'on appelle «le musée de Waterloo». Wellington avait en outre dans un pli de terrain les dragons-gardes de Somerset, quatorze cents chevaux. C'était l'autre moitié de cette cavalerie anglaise, si justement célèbre. Ponsonby détruit, restait Somerset.

La batterie, qui, achevée, eût été presque une redoute, était disposée derrière un mur de jardin très bas, revêtu à la hâte d'une chemise de sacs de sable et d'un large talus de terre. Cet ouvrage n'était pas fini; on n'avait pas eu le temps de le palissader.

Wellington, inquiet, mais impassible, était à cheval, et y demeura toute la journée dans la même attitude, un peu en avant du vieux moulin de Mont-Saint-Jean, qui existe encore, sous un orme qu'un Anglais, depuis, vandale enthousiaste, a acheté deux cents francs, scié et emporté. Wellington fut là froidement héroïque. Les boulets pleuvaient. L'aide de camp Gordon venait de tomber à côté de lui. Lord Hill, lui montrant un obus qui éclatait, lui dit: — Mylord, quelles sont vos instructions, et quels ordres nous laissez-vous si vous vous faites tuer? — *De faire comme moi*, répondit Wellington. À Clinton, il dit laconiquement: — *Tenir ici jusqu'au dernier homme*. — La journée visiblement tournait mal. Wellington criait à ses anciens compagnons de Talavera, de Vitoria et de Salamanque: — *Boys* (garçons)! *est-ce qu'on peut songer à lâcher pied? pensez à la vieille Angleterre!*

Vers quatre heures, la ligne anglaise s'ébranla en arrière. Tout à coup on ne vit plus sur la crête du plateau que l'artillerie et les tirailleurs, le reste disparut; les régiments, chassés par les obus et les boulets français, se replièrent dans le fond que coupe encore aujourd'hui le sentier de service de la ferme de Mont-Saint-Jean, un mouvement rétrograde se fit, le front de bataille anglais se déroba, Wellington recula. — Commencement de retraite! cria Napoléon.

Chapitre VII

Napoléon de belle humeur

L’empereur, quoique malade et gêné à cheval par une souffrance locale, n’avait jamais été de si bonne humeur que ce jour-là. Depuis le matin, son impénétrabilité souriait. Le 18 juin 1815, cette âme profonde, masquée de marbre, rayonnait aveuglément. L’homme qui avait été sombre à Austerlitz fut gai à Waterloo. Les plus grands prédestinés font de ces contre-sens. Nos joies sont de l’ombre. Le suprême sourire est à Dieu.

Ridet Caesar, Pompeius flebit, disaient les légionnaires de la légion Fulminatrix. Pompée cette fois ne devait pas pleurer, mais il est certain que César riait.

Dès la veille, la nuit, à une heure, explorant à cheval, sous l’orage et sous la pluie, avec Bertrand, les collines qui avoisinent Rossomme, satisfait de voir la longue ligne des feux anglais illuminant tout l’horizon de Frischemont à Braine-l’Alleud, il lui avait semblé que le destin, assigné par lui à jour fixe sur ce champ de Waterloo, était exact; il avait arrêté son cheval, et était demeuré quelque temps immobile, regardant les éclairs, écoutant le tonnerre, et on avait entendu ce fataliste jeter dans l’ombre cette parole mystérieuse: «Nous sommes d’accord.» Napoléon se trompait. Ils n’étaient plus d’accord.

Il n’avait pas pris une minute de sommeil, tous les instants de cette nuit-là avaient été marqués pour lui par une joie. Il avait parcouru toute la ligne des grand’gardes, en s’arrêtent çà et là pour parler aux vedettes. À deux heures et demie, près du bois d’Hougomont, il avait entendu le pas d’une colonne en marche; il avait cru un moment à la reculade de Wellington. Il avait dit à Bertrand: *C’est l’arrière-garde anglaise qui s’ébranle pour décamper. Je ferai prisonniers les six mille Anglais qui viennent d’arriver à Ostende*. Il causait avec expansion; il avait retrouvé cette verve du débarquement du 1er mars, quand il montrait au grand-maréchal le paysan enthousiaste du golfe Juan, en s’écriant: — *Eh bien, Bertrand, voilà déjà du renfort!* La nuit du 17 au 18 juin, il raillait Wellington. — *Ce petit Anglais a besoin d’une leçon*, disait Napoléon. La pluie redoublait, il tonnait pendant que l’empereur parlait.

À trois heures et demie du matin, il avait perdu une illusion; des officiers envoyés en reconnaissance lui avaient annoncé que l’ennemi ne faisait aucun mouvement. Rien ne bougeait; pas un feu de bivouac n’était éteint. L’armée anglaise dormait. Le silence était profond sur la terre; il n’y avait de bruit que dans le ciel. À quatre heures, un paysan lui avait été amené par les coureurs; ce paysan avait servi de guide à une brigade de cavalerie anglaise, probablement la brigade Vivian, qui allait prendre position au village d’Ohain, à l’extrême gauche. À cinq heures, deux déserteurs belges lui avaient rapporté qu’ils venaient de quitter leur régiment, et que l’armée anglaise attendait la bataille. *Tant mieux!* s’était écrié Napoléon. *J’aime encore mieux les culbuter que les refouler*.

Le matin, sur la berge qui fait l’angle du chemin de Plancenoit, il avait mis pied à terre dans la boue, s’était fait apporter de la ferme de Rossomme une table de cuisine et une chaise de paysan, s’était assis, avec une botte de paille pour tapis, et avait déployé sur la table la carte du champ de bataille, en disant à Soult: *Joli échiquier*!

Par suite des pluies de la nuit, les convois de vivres, empêtrés dans des routes défoncées, n’avaient pu arriver le matin, le soldat n’avait pas dormi, était mouillé, et était à jeun; cela n’avait pas empêché Napoléon de crier allégrement à Ney: *Nous avons quatre-vingt-dix chances sur cent*. À huit heures, on avait apporté le déjeuner de l’empereur. Il y avait invité plusieurs généraux. Tout en déjeunant, on avait raconté que Wellington était l’avant-veille au bal à Bruxelles, chez la duchesse de Richmond, et Soult, rude homme de guerre avec une figure d’archevêque, avait dit: *Le bal, c’est aujourd’hui*. L’empereur avait plaisanté Ney qui disait: *Wellington ne sera pas assez simple pour attendre Votre Majesté*. C’était là d’ailleurs sa manière. Il badinait volontiers, dit Fleury de Chaboulon. *Le fond de son caractère était une humeur enjouée*, dit Gourgaud. *Il abondait en plaisanteries, plutôt bizarres que spirituelles*, dit Benjamin Constant. Ces gaîtés de géant valent la peine qu’on y insiste. C’est lui qui avait appelé ses grenadiers «les grognards»; il leur pinçait l’oreille, il leur tirait la moustache. *L’empereur ne faisait que nous faire des niches;* ceci est un mot de l’un d’eux. Pendant le mystérieux trajet de l’île d’Elbe en France, le 27 février, en pleine mer, le brick de guerre français le *Zéphir* ayant rencontré le brick l’*Inconstant* où Napoléon était caché et ayant demandé à l’*Inconstant* des nouvelles de Napoléon, l’empereur, qui avait encore en ce moment-là à son chapeau la cocarde blanche et amarante semée d’abeilles, adoptée par lui à l’île d’Elbe, avait pris en riant le porte-voix et avait répondu lui-même: *L’empereur se porte bien*. Qui rit de la sorte est en familiarité avec les événements. Napoléon avait eu plusieurs accès de ce rire pendant le déjeuner de Waterloo. Après le déjeuner il s’était recueilli un quart d’heure, puis deux généraux s’étaient assis sur la botte de paille, une plume à la main, une feuille de papier sur le genou, et l’empereur leur avait dicté l’ordre de bataille.

À neuf heures, à l’instant où l’armée française, échelonnée et mise en mouvement sur cinq colonnes, s’était déployée, les divisions sur deux lignes, l’artillerie entre les brigades, musique en tête, battant aux champs, avec les roulements des tambours et les sonneries des trompettes, puissante, vaste, joyeuse, mer de casques, de sabres et de bayonnettes sur l’ho-rizon, l’empereur, ému, s’était écrié à deux reprises: *Magnifique! magnifique!*

De neuf heures à dix heures et demie, toute l’armée, ce qui semble incroyable, avait pris position et s’était rangée sur six lignes, formant, pour répéter l’expression de l’empereur, «la figure de six V». Quelques instants après la formation du front de bataille, au milieu de ce profond silence de commencement d’orage qui précède les mêlées, voyant défiler les trois batteries de douze, détachées sur son ordre des trois corps de d’Erlon, de Reille et de Lobau, et destinées à commencer l’action en battant Mont-Saint-Jean où est l’intersection des routes de Nivelles et de Genappe, l’empereur avait frappé sur l’épaule de Haxo en lui disant: *Voilà vingt-quatre belles filles, général*.

Sûr de l’issue, il avait encouragé d’un sourire, à son passage devant lui, la compagnie de sapeurs du premier corps, désignée par lui pour se barricader dans Mont-Saint-Jean, sitôt le village enlevé. Toute cette sérénité n’avait été traversée que par un mot de pitié hautaine; en voyant à sa gauche, à un endroit où il y a aujourd’hui une grande tombe, se masser avec leurs chevaux superbes ces admirables Écossais gris, il avait dit: *C’est dommage*.

Puis il était monté à cheval, s’était porté en avant de Rossomme, et avait choisi pour observatoire une étroite croupe de gazon à droite de la route de Genappe à Bruxelles, qui fut sa seconde station pendant la bataille. La troisième station, celle de sept heures du soir, entre la Belle-Alliance et la Haie-Sainte, est redoutable; c’est un tertre assez élevé qui existe encore et derrière lequel la garde était massée dans une déclivité de la plaine. Autour de ce tertre, les boulets ricochaient sur le pavé de la chaussée jusqu’à

Napoléon. Comme à Brienne, il avait sur sa tête le sifflement des balles et des biscayens. On a ramassé, presque à l'endroit où étaient les pieds de son cheval, des boulets vermoulus, de vieilles lames de sabre et des projectiles informes, mangés de rouille. *Scabra rubigine*. Il y a quelques années, on y a déterré un obus de soixante, encore chargé, dont la fusée s'était brisée au ras de la bombe. C'est à cette dernière station que l'empereur disait à son guide Lacoste, paysan hostile, effaré, attaché à la selle d'un hussard, se retournant à chaque paquet de mitraille, et tâchant de se cacher derrière lui: — *Imbécile! c'est honteux, tu vas te faire tuer dans le dos*. Celui qui écrit ces lignes, a trouvé lui-même dans le talus friable de ce tertre, en creusant le sable, les restes du col d'une bombe désagrégés par l'oxyde de quarante-six années, et de vieux tronçons de fer qui cassaient comme des bâtons de sureau entre ses doigts.

Les ondulations des plaines diversement inclinées où eut lieu la rencontre de Napoléon et de Wellington ne sont plus, personne ne l'ignore, ce qu'elles étaient le 18 juin 1815. En prenant à ce champ funèbre de quoi lui faire un monument, on lui a ôté son relief réel, et l'histoire, déconcertée, ne s'y reconnaît plus. Pour le glorifier, on l'a défiguré. Wellington, deux ans après, revoyant Waterloo, s'est écrié: *On m'a changé mon champ de bataille*. Là où est aujourd'hui la grosse pyramide de terre surmontée du lion, il y avait une crête qui, vers la route de Nivelles, s'abaissait en rampe praticable, mais qui, du côté de la chaussée de Genappe, était presque un escarpement. L'élévation de cet escarpement peut encore être mesurée aujourd'hui par la hauteur des deux tertres des deux grandes sépultures qui encaissent la route de Genappe à Bruxelles; l'une, le tombeau anglais, à gauche; l'autre, le tombeau allemand, à droite. Il n'y a point de tombeau français. Pour la France, toute cette plaine est sépulcre. Grâce aux mille et mille charretées de terre employées à la butte de cent cinquante pieds de haut et d'un demi-mille de circuit, le plateau de Mont-Saint-Jean est aujourd'hui accessible en pente douce; le jour de la bataille, surtout du côté de la Haie-Sainte, il était d'un abord âpre et abrupt. Le versant là était si incliné que les canons anglais ne voyaient pas au-dessous d'eux la ferme située au fond du vallon, centre du combat. Le 18 juin 1815, les pluies avaient encore raviné cette roideur, la fange compliquait la montée, et non seulement on gravissait, mais on s'embourbait. Le long de la crête du plateau courait une sorte de fossé impossible à deviner pour un observateur lointain.

Qu’était-ce que ce fossé? Disons-le. Braine-l’Alleud est un village de Belgique, Ohain en est un autre. Ces villages, cachés tous les deux dans des courbes de terrain, sont joints par un chemin d’une lieue et demie environ qui traverse une plaine à niveau ondulant, et souvent entre et s’enfonce dans des collines comme un sillon, ce qui fait que sur divers points cette route est un ravin. En 1815, comme aujourd’hui, cette route coupait la crête du plateau de Mont-Saint-Jean entre les deux chaussées de Genappe et de Nivelles; seulement, elle est aujourd’hui de plain-pied avec la plaine; elle était alors chemin creux. On lui a pris ses deux talus pour la butte-monument. Cette route était et est encore une tranchée dans la plus grande partie de son parcours; tranchée creuse quelquefois d’une douzaine de pieds et dont les talus trop escarpés s’écroulaient çà et là, surtout en hiver, sous les averses. Des accidents y arrivaient. La route était si étroite à l’entrée de Braine-l’Alleud qu’un passant y avait été broyé par un chariot, comme le constate une croix de pierre debout près du cimetière qui donne le nom du mort, *Monsieur Bernard Debrye, marchand à Bruxelles*, et la date de l’accident, *février 1637* . Elle était si profonde sur le plateau du Mont-Saint-Jean qu’un paysan, Mathieu Nicaise, y avait été écrasé en 1783 par un éboulement du talus, comme le constatait une autre croix de pierre dont le faîte a disparu dans les défrichements, mais dont le piédestal renversé est encore visible aujourd’hui sur la pente du gazon à gauche de la chaussée entre la Haie-Sainte et la ferme de Mont-Saint-Jean.

Un jour de bataille, ce chemin creux dont rien n’avertissait, bordant la crête de Mont-Saint-Jean, fossé au sommet de l’es-carpement, ornière cachée dans les terres, était invisible, c’est-à-dire terrible.

Chapitre VIII

L’empereur fait une question au guide Lacoste

Donc, le matin de Waterloo, Napoléon était content.

Il avait raison; le plan de bataille conçu par lui, nous l’avons constaté, était en effet admirable.

Une fois la bataille engagée, ses péripéties très diverses, la résistance d’Hougomont, la ténacité de la Haie-Sainte, Bauduin tué, Foy mis hors de combat, la muraille inattendue où s’était brisée la brigade Soye, l’étourderie fatale de Guilleminot n’ayant ni pétards ni sacs à poudre, l’embourbement des batteries, les quinze pièces sans escorte culbutées par Uxbridge dans un chemin creux, le peu d’effet des bombes tombant dans les lignes anglaises, s’y enfouissant dans le sol détrempé par les pluies et ne réussissant qu’à y faire des volcans de boue, de sorte que la mitraille se changeait en éclaboussure, l’inutilité de la démonstration de Piré sur Braine-l’Alleud, toute cette cavalerie, quinze escadrons, à peu près annulée, l’aile droite anglaise mal inquiétée, l’aile gauche mal entamée, l’étrange malentendu de Ney massant, au lieu de les échelonner, les quatre divisions du premier corps, des épaisseurs de vingt-sept rangs et des fronts de deux cents hommes livrés de la sorte à la mitraille, l’effrayante trouée des boulets dans ces masses, les colonnes d’attaque désunies, la batterie d’écharpe brusquement démasquée sur leur flanc Bourgeois, Donzelot et Durutte compromis, Quiot repoussé, le lieutenant Vieux, cet hercule sorti de l’école polytechnique, blessé au moment où il enfonçait à coups de hache la porte de la Haie-Sainte sous le feu plongeant de la barricade anglaise barrant le coude de la route de Genappe à Bruxelles, la division Marcognet, prise entre l’infanterie et la cavalerie, fusillée à bout portant dans les blés par Best et Pack, sabrée par Ponsonby, sa batterie de sept pièces enclouée, le prince de Saxe-Weimar tenant et gardant, malgré le comte d’Erlon, Frischemont et Smohain, le drapeau du 105ème pris, le drapeau du 45ème pris, ce hussard noir prussien arrêté par les coureurs de la colonne volante de trois cents chasseurs battant l’estrade entre Wavre et Plancenoit, les choses inquiétantes que ce prisonnier avait dites, le retard de Grouchy, les quinze cents hommes tués en moins d’une heure dans le verger d’Hougomont, les dix-huit cents hommes couchés en moins de temps encore autour de la Haie-Sainte, tous ces incidents orageux, passant comme les nuées de la bataille devant Napoléon, avaient à peine troublé son regard et n'avaient point assombri cette face impériale de la certitude. Napoléon était habitué à regarder la guerre fixement; il ne faisait jamais chiffre à chiffre l'addition poignante du détail; les chiffres lui importaient peu, pourvu qu'ils donnassent ce total: victoire; que les commencements s'égarassent, il ne s'en alarmait point, lui qui se croyait maître et possesseur de la fin; il savait attendre, se supposant hors de question, et il traitait le destin d'égal à égal. Il paraissait dire au sort: *tu n'oserais pas*.

Mi-parti lumière et ombre, Napoléon se sentait protégé dans le bien et toléré dans le mal. Il avait, ou croyait avoir pour lui, une connivence, on pourrait presque dire une complicité des événements, équivalente à l'antique invulnérabilité.

Pourtant, quand on a derrière soi la Bérésina, Leipsick et Fontainebleau, il semble qu'on pourrait se défier de Waterloo. Un mystérieux froncement de sourcil devient visible au fond du ciel.

Au moment où Wellington rétrograda, Napoléon tressaillit. Il vit subitement le plateau de Mont-Saint-Jean se dégarnir et le front de l'armée anglaise disparaître. Elle se ralliait, mais se dérobait. L'empereur se souleva à demi sur ses étriers. L'éclair de la victoire passa dans ses yeux.

Wellington acculé à la forêt de Soignes et détruit, c'était le terrassement définitif de l'Angleterre par la France; c'était Crécy, Poitiers, Malplaquet et Ramillies vengés. L'homme de Marengo raturait Azincourt.

L'empereur alors, méditant la péripétie terrible, promena une dernière fois sa lunette sur tous les points du champ de bataille. Sa garde, l'arme au pied derrière lui, l'observait d'en bas avec une sorte de religion. Il songeait; il examinait les versants, notait les pentes, scrutait le bouquet d'arbres, le carré de seigles, le sentier; il semblait compter chaque buisson. Il regarda avec quelque fixité les barricades anglaises des deux chaussées, deux larges abatis d'arbres, celle de la chaussée de Genappe au-dessus de la Haie-Sainte, armée de deux canons, les seuls de toute l'artillerie anglaise qui vissent le fond du champ de bataille, et celle de la chaussée de Nivelles où étincelaient les bayonnettes hollandaises de la brigade Chassé. Il remarqua près de cette barricade la vieille chapelle de Saint-Nicolas peinte en blanc qui est à l'angle de la traverse vers Braine-l'Alleud. Il se pencha et parla à demi-voix au guide Lacoste. Le guide fit un signe de tête négatif, probablement perfide.

L’empereur se redressa et se recueillit.

Wellington avait reculé. Il ne restait plus qu’à achever ce recul par un écrasement. Napoléon, se retournant brusquement, expédia une estafette à franc étrier à Paris pour y annoncer que la bataille était gagnée.

Napoléon était un de ces génies d’où sort le tonnerre.

Il venait de trouver son coup de foudre.

Il donna l’ordre aux cuirassiers de Milhaud d’enlever le plateau de Mont-Saint-Jean.

Chapitre IX

L'inattendu

Ils étaient trois mille cinq cents. Ils faisaient un front d'un quart de lieue. C'étaient des hommes géants sur des chevaux colosses. Ils étaient vingt-six escadrons; et ils avaient derrière eux, pour les appuyer, la division de Lefebvre-Desnouettes, les cent six gendarmes d'élite, les chasseurs de la garde, onze cent quatre-vingt-dix-sept hommes, et les lanciers de la garde, huit cent quatre-vingts lances. Ils portaient le casque sans crins et la cuirasse de fer battu, avec les pistolets d'arçon dans les fontes et le long sabre-épée. Le matin toute l'armée les avait admirés quand, à neuf heures, les clairons sonnant, toutes les musiques chantant *Veillons au salut de l'empire*, ils étaient venus, colonne épaisse, une de leurs batteries à leur flanc, l'autre à leur centre, se déployer sur deux rangs entre la chaussée de Genappe et Frischemont, et prendre leur place de bataille dans cette puissante deuxième ligne, si savamment composée par Napoléon, laquelle, ayant à son extrémité de gauche les cuirassiers de Kellermann et à son extrémité de droite les cuirassiers de Milhaud, avait, pour ainsi dire, deux ailes de fer.

L'aide de camp Bernard leur porta l'ordre de l'empereur. Ney tira son épée et prit la tête. Les escadrons énormes s'ébranlèrent.

Alors on vit un spectacle formidable.

Toute cette cavalerie, sabres levés, étendards et trompettes au vent, formée en colonne par division, descendit, d'un même mouvement et comme un seul homme, avec la précision d'un bélier de bronze qui ouvre une brèche, la colline de la Belle-Alliance, s'enfonça dans le fond redoutable où tant d'hommes déjà étaient tombés, y disparut dans la fumée, puis, sortant de cette ombre, reparut de l'autre côté du vallon, toujours compacte et serrée, montant au grand trot, à travers un nuage de mitraille crevant sur elle, l'épouvantable pente de boue du plateau de Mont-Saint-Jean. Ils montaient, graves, menaçants, imperturbables; dans les intervalles de la mousqueterie et de l'artillerie, on entendait ce piétinement colossal. Étant deux divisions, ils étaient deux colonnes; la division Wathier avait la droite, la division Delord avait la gauche. On croyait voir de loin s'allonger vers la crête du plateau deux immenses couleuvres d’acier. Cela traversa la bataille comme un prodige.

Rien de semblable ne s’était vu depuis la prise de la grande redoute de la Moskowa par la grosse cavalerie; Murat y manquait, mais Ney s’y retrouvait. Il semblait que cette masse était devenue monstre et n’eût qu’une âme. Chaque escadron ondulait et se gonflait comme un anneau du polype. On les apercevait à travers une vaste fumée déchirée çà et là. Pêle-mêle de casques, de cris, de sabres, bondissement orageux des croupes des chevaux dans le canon et la fanfare, tumulte discipliné et terrible; là-dessus les cuirasses, comme les écailles sur l’hydre.

Ces récits semblent d’un autre âge. Quelque chose de pareil à cette vision apparaissait sans doute dans les vieilles épopées orphiques racontant les hommes-chevaux, les antiques hippanthropes, ces titans à face humaine et à poitrail équestre dont le galop escalada l’Olympe, horribles, invulnérables, sublimes; dieux et bêtes.

Bizarre coïncidence numérique, vingt-six bataillons allaient recevoir ces vingt-six escadrons. Derrière la crête du plateau, à l’ombre de la batterie masquée, l’infanterie anglaise, formée en treize carrés, deux bataillons par carré, et sur deux lignes, sept sur la première, six sur la seconde, la crosse à l’épaule, couchant en joue ce qui allait venir, calme, muette, immobile, attendait. Elle ne voyait pas les cuirassiers et les cuirassiers ne la voyaient pas. Elle écoutait monter cette marée d’hommes. Elle entendait le grossissement du bruit des trois mille chevaux, le frappement alternatif et symétrique des sabots au grand trot, le froissement des cuirasses, le cliquetis des sabres, et une sorte de grand souffle farouche. Il y eut un silence redoutable, puis, subitement, une longue file de bras levés brandissant des sabres apparut au-dessus de la crête, et les casques, et les trompettes, et les étendards, et trois mille têtes à moustaches grises criant: *vive l’empereur*! toute cette cavalerie déboucha sur le plateau, et ce fut comme l’entrée d’un tremblement de terre.

Tout à coup, chose tragique, à la gauche des Anglais, à notre droite, la tête de colonne des cuirassiers se cabra avec une clameur effroyable. Parvenus au point culminant de la crête, effrénés, tout à leur furie et à leur course d’extermination sur les carrés et les canons, les cuirassiers venaient d’apercevoir entre eux et les Anglais un fossé, une fosse. C’était le chemin creux d’Ohain.

L’instant fut épouvantable. Le ravin était là, inattendu, béant, à pic sous les pieds des chevaux, profond de deux toises entre son double talus; le second rang y poussa le premier, et le troisième y poussa le second; les chevaux se dressaient, se rejetaient en arrière, tombaient sur la croupe, glissaient les quatre pieds en l’air, pilant et bouleversant les cavaliers, aucun moyen de reculer, toute la colonne n’était plus qu’un projectile, la force acquise pour écraser les Anglais écrasa les Français, le ravin inexorable ne pouvait se rendre que comblé, cavaliers et chevaux y roulèrent pêle-mêle se broyant les uns sur les autres, ne faisant qu’une chair dans ce gouffre, et, quand cette fosse fut pleine d’hommes vivants, on marcha dessus et le reste passa. Presque un tiers de la brigade Dubois croula dans cet abîme.

Ceci commença la perte de la bataille.

Une tradition locale, qui exagère évidemment, dit que deux mille chevaux et quinze cents hommes furent ensevelis dans le chemin creux d’Ohain. Ce chiffre vraisemblablement comprend tous les autres cadavres qu’on jeta dans ce ravin le lendemain du combat.

Notons en passant que c’était cette brigade Dubois, si funestement éprouvée, qui, une heure auparavant, chargeant à part, avait enlevé le drapeau du bataillon de Lunebourg.

Napoléon, avant d’ordonner cette charge des cuirassiers de Milhaud, avait scruté le terrain, mais n’avait pu voir ce chemin creux qui ne faisait pas même une ride à la surface du plateau. Averti pourtant et mis en éveil par la petite chapelle blanche qui en marque l’angle sur la chaussée de Nivelles, il avait fait, probablement sur l’éventualité d’un obstacle, une question au guide Lacoste. Le guide avait répondu non. On pourrait presque dire que de ce signe de tête d’un paysan est sortie la catastrophe de Napoléon.

D’autres fatalités encore devaient surgir.

Était-il possible que Napoléon gagnât cette bataille? Nous répondons non. Pourquoi? À cause de Wellington? à cause de Blü-cher? Non. À cause de Dieu.

Bonaparte vainqueur à Waterloo, ceci n’était plus dans la loi du dix-neuvième siècle. Une autre série de faits se préparait, où Napoléon n’avait plus de place. La mauvaise volonté des événements s’était annoncée de longue date.

Il était temps que cet homme vaste tombât.

L’excessive pesanteur de cet homme dans la destinée humaine troublait l’équilibre. Cet individu comptait à lui seul plus que le groupe universel. Ces pléthores de toute la vitalité humaine concentrée dans une seule tête, le monde montant au cerveau d’un homme, cela serait mortel à la civilisation si cela durait. Le moment était venu pour l’incorruptible équité suprême d’aviser. Probablement les principes et les éléments, d’où dépendent les gravitations régulières dans l’ordre moral comme dans l’ordre matériel, se plaignaient. Le sang qui fume, le trop-plein des cimetières, les mères en larmes, ce sont des plaidoyers redoutables. Il y a, quand la terre souffre d’une surcharge, de mystérieux gémissements de l’ombre, que l’abîme entend.

Napoléon avait été dénoncé dans l’infini, et sa chute était décidée.

Il gênait Dieu.

Waterloo n’est point une bataille; c’est le changement de front de l’univers.

Chapitre X

Le plateau de Mont Saint-Jean

En même temps que le ravin, la batterie s'était démasquée.

Soixante canons et les treize carrés foudroyèrent les cuirassiers à bout portant. L'intrépide général Delord fit le salut militaire à la batterie anglaise.

Toute l'artillerie volante anglaise était rentrée au galop dans les carrés. Les cuirassiers n'eurent pas même un temps d'arrêt. Le désastre du chemin creux les avait décimés, mais non découragés. C'étaient de ces hommes qui, diminués de nombre, grandissent de cœur.

La colonne Wathier seule avait souffert du désastre; la colonne Delord, que Ney avait fait obliquer à gauche, comme s'il pressentait l'embûche, était arrivée entière.

Les cuirassiers se ruèrent sur les carrés anglais.

Ventre à terre, brides lâchées, sabre aux dents, pistolets au poing, telle fut l'attaque.

Il y a des moments dans les batailles où l'âme durcit l'homme jusqu'à changer le soldat en statue, et où toute cette chair se fait granit. Les bataillons anglais, éperdument assaillis, ne bougèrent pas.

Alors ce fut effrayant.

Toutes les faces des carrés anglais furent attaquées à la fois. Un tournoiement frénétique les enveloppa. Cette froide infanterie demeura impassible. Le premier rang, genou en terre, recevait les cuirassiers sur les bayonnettes, le second rang les fusillait; derrière le second rang les canonniers chargeaient les pièces, le front du carré s'ouvrait, laissait passer une éruption de mitraille et se refermait. Les cuirassiers répondaient par l'écrasement. Leurs grands chevaux se cabraient, enjambaient les rangs, sautaient par-dessus les bayonnettes et tombaient, gigantesques, au milieu de ces quatre murs vivants. Les boulets faisaient des trouées dans les cuirassiers, les cuirassiers faisaient des brèches dans les carrés. Des files d'hommes disparaissaient broyées sous les chevaux. Les bayonnettes s'enfonçaient dans les ventres de ces centaures. De là une difformité de blessures qu'on n'a pas vue peut-être ailleurs. Les carrés, rongés par cette cavalerie forcenée, se rétrécissaient sans broncher. Inépuisables en mitraille, ils faisaient explosion au milieu des assaillants. La figure de ce combat était monstrueuse. Ces carrés n’étaient plus des bataillons, c’étaient des cratères; ces cuirassiers n’étaient plus une cavalerie, c’était une tempête. Chaque carré était un volcan attaqué par un nuage; la lave combattait la foudre.

Le carré extrême de droite, le plus exposé de tous, étant en l’air, fut presque anéanti dès les premiers chocs. Il était formé du 75ème régiment de highlanders. Le joueur de cornemuse au centre, pendant qu’on s’exterminait autour de lui, baissant dans une inattention profonde son œil mélancolique plein du reflet des forêts et des lacs, assis sur un tambour, son *pibroch* sous le bras, jouait les airs de la montagne. Ces Écossais mouraient en pensant au Ben Lothian, comme les Grecs en se souvenant d’Argos. Le sabre d’un cuirassier, abattant le *pibroch* et le bras qui le portait, fit cesser le chant en tuant le chanteur.

Les cuirassiers, relativement peu nombreux, amoindris par la catastrophe du ravin, avaient là contre eux presque toute l’armée anglaise, mais ils se multipliaient, chaque homme valant dix. Cependant quelques bataillons hanovriens plièrent. Wellington le vit, et songea à sa cavalerie. Si Napoléon, en ce moment-là même, eût songé à son infanterie, il eût gagné la bataille. Cet oubli fut sa grande faute fatale. Tout à coup les cuirassiers, assaillants, se sentirent assaillis. La cavalerie anglaise était sur leur dos. Devant eux les carrés, derrière eux Somerset; Somerset, c’étaient les quatorze cents dragons-gardes. Somerset avait à sa droite Dornberg avec les chevau-légers allemands, et à sa gauche Trip avec les carabiniers belges; les cuirassiers, attaqués en flanc et en tête, en avant et en arrière, par l’infanterie et par la cavalerie, durent faire face de tous les côtés. Que leur importait? ils étaient tourbillon. La bravoure devint inexprimable.

En outre, ils avaient derrière eux la batterie toujours tonnante. Il fallait cela pour que ces hommes fussent blessés dans le dos. Une de leurs cuirasses, trouée à l’omoplate gauche d’un biscayen, est dans la collection dite musée de Waterloo.

Pour de tels Français, il ne fallait pas moins que de tels Anglais.

Ce ne fut plus une mêlée, ce fut une ombre, une furie, un vertigineux emportement d’âmes et de courages, un ouragan d’épées éclairs. En un instant les quatorze cents dragons-gardes ne furent plus que huit cents; Fuller, leur lieutenant-colonel, tomba mort. Ney accourut avec les lanciers et les chasseurs de Lefebvre-Desnouettes. Le plateau de Mont-Saint-Jean fut pris, repris, pris encore. Les cuirassiers quittaient la cavalerie pour retourner à l’infanterie, ou, pour mieux dire, toute cette cohue formidable se colletait sans que l’un lâchât l’autre. Les carrés tenaient toujours. Il y eut douze assauts. Ney eut quatre chevaux tués sous lui. La moitié des cuirassiers resta sur le plateau. Cette lutte dura deux heures.

L’armée anglaise en fut profondément ébranlée. Nul doute que, s’ils n’eussent été affaiblis dans leur premier choc par le désastre du chemin creux, les cuirassiers n’eussent culbuté le centre et décidé la victoire. Cette cavalerie extraordinaire pétrifia Clinton qui avait vu Talavera et Badajoz. Wellington, aux trois quarts vaincu, admirait héroïquement. Il disait à demi-voix: *sublime*!

Les cuirassiers anéantirent sept carrés sur treize, prirent ou enclouèrent soixante pièces de canon, et enlevèrent aux régiments anglais six drapeaux, que trois cuirassiers et trois chasseurs de la garde allèrent porter à l’empereur devant la ferme de la Belle-Alliance.

La situation de Wellington avait empiré. Cette étrange bataille était comme un duel entre deux blessés acharnés qui, chacun de leur côté, tout en combattant et en se résistant toujours, perdent tout leur sang. Lequel des deux tombera le premier?

La lutte du plateau continuait.

Jusqu’où sont allés les cuirassiers? personne ne saurait le dire. Ce qui est certain, c’est que, le lendemain de la bataille, un cuirassier et son cheval furent trouvés morts dans la charpente de la bascule du pesage des voitures à Mont-Saint-Jean, au point même où s’entrecoupent et se rencontrent les quatre routes de Nivelles, de Genappe, de La Hulpe et de Bruxelles. Ce cavalier avait percé les lignes anglaises. Un des hommes qui ont relevé ce cadavre vit encore à Mont-Saint-Jean. Il se nomme Dehaze. Il avait alors dix-huit ans.

Wellington se sentait pencher. La crise était proche.

Les cuirassiers n’avaient point réussi, en ce sens que le centre n’était pas enfoncé. Tout le monde ayant le plateau, personne ne l’avait, et en somme il restait pour la plus grande part aux Anglais. Wellington avait le village et la plaine culminante; Ney n’avait que la crête et la pente. Des deux côtés on semblait enraciné dans ce sol funèbre.

Mais l’affaiblissement des Anglais paraissait irrémédiable. L’hémorragie de cette armée était horrible. Kempt, à l’aile gauche, réclamait du renfort. — *Il n’y en a pas,* répondait Wellington, *qu’il se fasse tuer*! — Presque à la même minute, rapprochement singulier qui peint l’épuisement des deux armées, Ney demandait de l’infanterie à Napoléon, et Napoléon s’écriait: *De l’infanterie! où veut-il que j’en prenne? Veut-il que j’en fasse?*

Pourtant l’armée anglaise était la plus malade. Les poussées furieuses de ces grands escadrons à cuirasses de fer et à poitrines d’acier avaient broyé l’infanterie. Quelques hommes autour d’un drapeau marquaient la place d’un régiment, tel bataillon n’était plus commandé que par un capitaine ou par un lieutenant; la division Alten, déjà si maltraitée à la Haie-Sainte, était presque détruite; les intrépides Belges de la brigade Van Kluze jonchaient les seigles le long de la route de Nivelles; il ne restait presque rien de ces grenadiers hollandais qui, en 1811, mêlés en Espagne à nos rangs, combattaient Wellington, et qui, en 1815, ralliés aux Anglais, combattaient Napoléon. La perte en officiers était considérable. Lord Uxbridge, qui le lendemain fit enterrer sa jambe, avait le genou fracassé. Si, du côté des Français, dans cette lutte des cuirassiers, Delord, Lhéritier, Colbert, Dnop, Travers et Blancard étaient hors de combat, du côté des Anglais, Alten était blessé, Barne était blessé, Delancey était tué, Van Merlen était tué, Ompteda était tué, tout l’état-major de Wellington était décimé, et l’Angleterre avait le pire partage dans ce sanglant équilibre. Le 2ème régiment des gardes à pied avait perdu cinq lieutenants-colonels, quatre capitaines et trois enseignes; le premier bataillon du 30ème d’infanterie avait perdu vingt-quatre officiers et cent douze soldats; le 79ème montagnards avait vingt-quatre officiers blessés, dix-huit officiers morts, quatre cent cinquante soldats tués. Les hussards hanovriens de Cumberland, un régiment tout entier, ayant à sa tête son colonel Hacke, qui devait plus tard être jugé et cassé, avaient tourné bride devant la mêlée et étaient en fuite dans la forêt de Soignes, semant la déroute jusqu’à Bruxelles. Les charrois, les prolonges, les bagages, les fourgons pleins de blessés, voyant les Français gagner du terrain et s’approcher de la forêt, s’y précipitaient; les Hollandais, sabrés par la cavalerie française, criaient: *alarme*! De Vert-Coucou jusqu’à Groenendael, sur une longueur de près de deux lieues dans la direction de Bruxelles, il y avait, au dire des témoins qui existent encore, un encombrement de fuyards. Cette panique fut telle qu’elle gagna le prince de Condé à Malines et Louis XVIII à Gand. À l’exception de la faible réserve échelonnée derrière l’ambulance établie dans la ferme de Mont-Saint-Jean et des brigades Vivian et Vandeleur qui flanquaient l’aile gauche, Wellington n’avait plus de cavalerie. Nombre de batteries gisaient démontées. Ces faits sont avoués par Siborne; et Pringle, exagérant le désastre, va jusqu’à dire que l’armée anglo-hollandaise était réduite à trente-quatre mille hommes. Le duc-de-fer demeurait calme, mais ses lèvres avaient blêmi. Le commissaire autrichien Vincent, le commissaire espagnol Alava, présents à la bataille dans l’état-major anglais, croyaient le duc perdu. À cinq heures, Wellington tira sa montre, et on l’entendit murmurer ce mot sombre: *Blücher, ou la nuit!*

Ce fut vers ce moment-là qu’une ligne lointaine de bayonnettes étincela sur les hauteurs du côté de Frischemont.

Ici est la péripétie de ce drame géant.

Chapitre XI

Mauvais guide à Napoléon, bon guide à Bülow

On connaît la poignante méprise de Napoléon: Grouchy espéré, Blücher survenant, la mort au lieu de la vie.

La destinée a de ces tournants; on s'attendait au trône du monde; on aperçoit Sainte-Hélène. Si le petit pâtre, qui servait de guide à Bülow, lieutenant de Blücher, lui eût conseillé de déboucher de la forêt au-dessus de Frischemont plutôt qu'au dessous de Plancenoit, la forme du dix-neuvième siècle eût peut-être été différente. Napoléon eût gagné la bataille de Waterloo. Par tout autre chemin qu'au-dessous de Plancenoit, l'armée prussienne aboutissait à un ravin infranchissable à l'artillerie, et Bülow n'arrivait pas.

Or, une heure de retard, c'est le général prussien Muffling qui le déclare, et Blücher n'aurait plus trouvé Wellington debout; «la bataille était perdue».

Il était temps, on le voit, que Bülow arrivât. Il avait du reste été fort retardé. Il avait bivouaqué à Dion-le-Mont et était parti dès l'aube. Mais les chemins étaient impraticables et ses divisions s'étaient embourbées. Les ornières venaient au moyeu des canons. En outre, il avait fallu passer la Dyle sur l'étroit pont de Wavre; la rue menant au pont avait été incendiée par les Français; les caissons et les fourgons de l'artillerie, ne pouvant passer entre deux rangs de maisons en feu, avaient dû attendre que l'incendie fût éteint. Il était midi que l'avant-garde de Bülow n'avait pu encore atteindre Chapelle-Saint-Lambert.

L'action, commencée deux heures plus tôt, eût été finie à quatre heures, et Blücher serait tombé sur la bataille gagnée par Napoléon. Tels sont ces immenses hasards, proportionnés à un infini qui nous échappe. Dès midi, l'empereur, le premier, avec sa longue-vue, avait aperçu à l'extrême horizon quelque chose qui avait fixé son attention. Il avait dit: — Je vois là-bas un nuage qui me paraît être des troupes. Puis il avait demandé au duc de Dalmatie: — Soult, que voyez-vous vers Chapelle-Saint-Lambert? — Le maréchal braquant sa lunette avait répondu: — Quatre ou cinq mille hommes, sire. Évidemment Grouchy. — Cependant cela restait immobile dans la brume. Toutes les lunettes de l'état-major avaient étudié «le nuage» signalé par l'empereur. Quelques-uns avaient dit: *Ce sont des colonnes qui* *font halte*. La plupart avaient dit: *Ce sont des arbres*. La vérité est que le nuage ne remuait pas. L'empereur avait détaché en reconnaissance vers ce point obscur la division de cavalerie légère de Domon.

Bülow en effet n'avait pas bougé. Son avant-garde était très faible, et ne pouvait rien. Il devait attendre le gros du corps d'armée, et il avait l'ordre de se concentrer avant d'entrer en ligne; mais à cinq heures, voyant le péril de Wellington, Blücher ordonna à Bülow d'attaquer et dit ce mot remarquable: «Il faut donner de l'air à l'armée anglaise.»

Peu après, les divisions Losthin, Hiller, Hacke et Ryssel se déployaient devant le corps de Lobau, la cavalerie du prince Guillaume de Prusse débouchait du bois de Paris, Plancenoit était en flammes, et les boulets prussiens commençaient à pleuvoir jusque dans les rangs de la garde en réserve derrière Napoléon.

Chapitre XII

La garde

On sait le reste: l’irruption d’une troisième armée, la bataille disloquée, quatre-vingt-six bouches à feu tonnant tout à coup, Pirch Ier survenant avec Bülow, la cavalerie de Zieten menée par Blücher en personne, les Français refoulés, Marcognet balayé du plateau d’Ohain, Durutte délogé de Papelotte, Donzelot et Quiot reculant, Lobau pris en écharpe, une nouvelle bataille se précipitant à la nuit tombante sur nos régiments démantelés, toute la ligne anglaise reprenant l’offensive et poussée en avant, la gigantesque trouée faite dans l’armée française, la mitraille anglaise et la mitraille prussienne s’entr’aidant, l’extermination, le désastre de front, le désastre en flanc, la garde entrant en ligne sous cet épouvantable écroulement.

Comme elle sentait qu’elle allait mourir, elle cria: *vive l’empereur*! L’histoire n’a rien de plus émouvant que cette agonie éclatant en acclamations.

Le ciel avait été couvert toute la journée. Tout à coup, en ce moment-là même, il était huit heures du soir, les nuages de l’horizon s’écartèrent et laissèrent passer, à travers les ormes de la route de Nivelles, la grande rougeur sinistre du soleil qui se couchait. On l’avait vu se lever à Austerlitz.

Chaque bataillon de la garde, pour ce dénouement, était commandé par un général. Friant, Michel, Roguet, Harlet, Mallet, Poret de Morvan, étaient là. Quand les hauts bonnets des grenadiers de la garde avec la large plaque à l’aigle apparurent, symétriques, alignés, tranquilles, superbes, dans la brume de cette mêlée, l’ennemi sentit le respect de la France; on crut voir vingt victoires entrer sur le champ de bataille, ailes déployées, et ceux qui étaient vainqueurs, s’estimant vaincus, reculèrent; mais Wellington cria: *Debout, gardes, et visez juste!* le régiment rouge des gardes anglaises, couché derrière les haies, se leva, une nuée de mitraille cribla le drapeau tricolore frissonnant autour de nos aigles, tous se ruèrent, et le suprême carnage commença. La garde impériale sentit dans l’ombre l’armée lâchant pied autour d’elle, et le vaste ébranlement de la déroute, elle entendit le *sauve-qui-peut*! qui avait remplacé le *vive l’empereur*! et, avec la fuite derrière elle, elle continua d’avancer, de plus en plus foudroyée et mourant davantage à chaque pas qu’elle faisait. Il n’y eut point d’hésitants ni de timides. Le soldat dans cette troupe était aussi héros que le général. Pas un homme ne manqua au suicide.

Ney, éperdu, grand de toute la hauteur de la mort acceptée, s’offrait à tous les coups dans cette tourmente. Il eut là son cinquième cheval tué sous lui. En sueur, la flamme aux yeux, l’écume aux lèvres, l’uniforme déboutonné, une de ses épaulettes à demi coupée par le coup de sabre d’un horse-guard, sa plaque de grand-aigle bosselée par une balle, sanglant, fangeux, magnifique, une épée cassée à la main, il disait: *Venez voir comment meurt un maréchal de France sur le champ de bataille!* Mais en vain; il ne mourut pas. Il était hagard et indigné. Il jetait à Drouet d’Erlon cette question: *Est-ce que tu ne te fais pas tuer, toi?* Il criait au milieu de toute cette artillerie écrasant une poignée d’hommes: — *Il n’y a donc rien pour moi! Oh! je voudrais que tous ces boulets anglais m’entrassent dans le ventre!* Tu étais réservé à des balles françaises, infortuné!

Chapitre XIII

La catastrophe

La déroute derrière la garde fut lugubre.

L’armée plia brusquement de tous les côtés à la fois, de Hougomont, de la Haie-Sainte, de Papelotte, de Plancenoit. Le cri *Trahison*! fut suivi du cri *Sauve-qui-peut*! Une armée qui se débande, c’est un dégel. Tout fléchit, se fêle, craque, flotte, roule, tombe, se heurte, se hâte, se précipite. Désagrégation inouïe. Ney emprunte un cheval, saute dessus, et, sans chapeau, sans cravate, sans épée, se met en travers de la chaussée de Bruxelles, arrêtant à la fois les Anglais et les Français. Il tâche de retenir l’armée, il la rappelle, il l’insulte, il se cramponne à la déroute. Il est débordé. Les soldats le fuient, en criant: *Vive le maréchal Ney!* Deux régiments de Durutte vont et viennent effarés et comme ballottés entre le sabre des uhlans et la fusillade des brigades de Kempt, de Best, de Pack et de Rylandt; la pire des mêlées, c’est la déroute, les amis s’entre-tuent pour fuir; les escadrons et les bataillons se brisent et se dispersent les uns contre les autres, énorme écume de la bataille. Lobau à une extrémité comme Reille à l’autre sont roulés dans le flot. En vain Napoléon fait des murailles avec ce qui lui reste de la garde; en vain il dépense à un dernier effort ses escadrons de service. Quiot recule devant Vivian, Kellermann devant Vandeleur, Lobau devant Bülow, Morand devant Pirch, Domon et Subervic devant le prince Guillaume de Prusse. Guyot, qui a mené à la charge les escadrons de l’empereur, tombe sous les pieds des dragons anglais. Napoléon court au galop le long des fuyards, les harangue, presse, menace, supplie. Toutes ces bouches qui criaient le matin *vive l’empereur*, restent béantes; c’est à peine si on le connaît. La cavalerie prussienne, fraîche venue, s’élance, vole, sabre, taille, hache, tue, extermine. Les attelages se ruent, les canons se sauvent; les soldats du train détellent les caissons et en prennent les chevaux pour s’échapper; des fourgons culbutés les quatre roues en l’air entravent la route et sont des occasions de massacre. On s’écrase, on se foule, on marche sur les morts et sur les vivants. Les bras sont éperdus. Une multitude vertigineuse emplit les routes, les sentiers, les ponts, les plaines, les collines, les vallées, les bois, encombrés par cette évasion de quarante mille hommes. Cris, désespoir, sacs et fusils jetés dans les seigles, passages frayés à coups d'épée, plus de camarades, plus d'officiers, plus de généraux, une inexprimable épouvante. Zieten sabrant la France à son aise. Les lions devenus chevreuils. Telle fut cette fuite.

À Genappe, on essaya de se retourner, de faire front, d'enrayer. Lobau rallia trois cents hommes. On barricada l'entrée du village; mais à la première volée de la mitraille prussienne, tout se remit à fuir, et Lobau fut pris. On voit encore aujourd'hui cette volée de mitraille empreinte sur le vieux pignon d'une masure en brique à droite de la route, quelques minutes avant d'entrer à Genappe. Les Prussiens s'élancèrent dans Genappe, furieux sans doute d'être si peu vainqueurs. La poursuite fut monstrueuse. Blücher ordonna l'extermination. Roguet avait donné ce lugubre exemple de menacer de mort tout grenadier français qui lui amènerait un prisonnier prussien. Blücher dépassa Roguet. Le général de la jeune garde, Ducesme, acculé sur la porte d'une auberge de Genappe, rendit son épée à un hussard de la mort qui prit l'épée et tua le prisonnier. La victoire s'acheva par l'assassinat des vaincus. Punissons, puisque nous sommes l'histoire: le vieux Blücher se déshonora. Cette férocité mit le comble au désastre. La déroute désespérée traversa Genappe, traversa les Quatre-Bras, traversa Gosselies, traversa Frasnes, traversa Charleroi, traversa Thuin, et ne s'arrêta qu'à la frontière. Hélas! et qui donc fuyait de la sorte? la grande armée.

Ce vertige, cette terreur, cette chute en ruine de la plus haute bravoure qui ait jamais étonné l'histoire, est-ce que cela est sans cause? Non. L'ombre d'une droite énorme se projette sur Waterloo. C'est la journée du destin. La force au-dessus de l'homme a donné ce jour-là. De là le pli épouvanté des têtes; de là toutes ces grandes âmes rendant leur épée. Ceux qui avaient vaincu l'Europe sont tombés terrassés, n'ayant plus rien à dire ni à faire, sentant dans l'ombre une présence terrible. *Hoc erat in fatis*. Ce jour-là, la perspective du genre humain a changé. Waterloo, c'est le gond du dix-neuvième siècle. La disparition du grand homme était nécessaire à l'avènement du grand siècle. Quelqu'un à qui on ne réplique pas s'en est chargé. La panique des héros s'explique. Dans la bataille de Waterloo, il y a plus du nuage, il y a du météore. Dieu a passé.

À la nuit tombante, dans un champ près de Genappe, Bernard et Bertrand saisirent par un pan de sa redingote et arrêtèrent un homme hagard, pensif, sinistre, qui, entraîné jusque-là par le courant de la déroute, venait de mettre pied à terre, avait passé sous son bras la bride de son cheval, et, l'œil égaré, s’en retournait seul vers Waterloo. C’était Napoléon essayant encore d’aller en avant, immense somnambule de ce rêve écroulé.

Chapitre XIV

Le dernier carré

Quelques carrés de la garde, immobiles dans le ruissellement de la déroute comme des rochers dans de l’eau qui coule, tinrent jusqu’à la nuit. La nuit venant, la mort aussi, ils attendirent cette ombre double, et, inébranlables, s’en laissèrent envelopper. Chaque régiment, isolé des autres et n’ayant plus de lien avec l’armée rompue de toutes parts, mourait pour son compte. Ils avaient pris position, pour faire cette dernière action, les uns sur les hauteurs de Rossomme, les autres dans la plaine de Mont-Saint-Jean. Là, abandonnés, vaincus, terribles, ces carrés sombres agonisaient formidablement. Ulm, Wagram, Iéna, Friedland, mouraient en eux.

Au crépuscule, vers neuf heures du soir, au bas du plateau de Mont-Saint-Jean, il en restait un. Dans ce vallon funeste, au pied de cette pente gravie par les cuirassiers, inondée maintenant par les masses anglaises, sous les feux convergents de l’artillerie ennemie victorieuse, sous une effroyable densité de projectiles, ce carré luttait. Il était commandé par un officier obscur nommé Cambronne. À chaque décharge, le carré diminuait, et ripostait. Il répliquait à la mitraille par la fusillade, rétrécissant continuellement ses quatre murs. De loin les fuyards s’arrêtaient par moment, essoufflés, écoutant dans les ténèbres ce sombre tonnerre décroissant.

Quand cette légion ne fut plus qu’une poignée, quand leur drapeau ne fut plus qu’une loque, quand leurs fusils épuisés de balles ne furent plus que des bâtons, quand le tas de cadavres fut plus grand que le groupe vivant, il y eut parmi les vainqueurs une sorte de terreur sacrée autour de ces mourants sublimes, et l’artillerie anglaise, reprenant haleine, fit silence. Ce fut une espèce de répit. Ces combattants avaient autour d’eux comme un fourmillement de spectres, des silhouettes d’hommes à cheval, le profil noir des canons, le ciel blanc aperçu à travers les roues et les affûts; la colossale tête de mort que les héros entrevoient toujours dans la fumée au fond de la bataille, s’avançait sur eux et les regardait. Ils purent entendre dans l’ombre crépusculaire qu’on chargeait les pièces, les mèches allumées pareilles à des yeux de tigre dans la nuit firent un cercle autour de leurs têtes, tous les boute-feu des batteries anglaises s’approchèrent des canons, et alors, ému, tenant la minute suprême suspendue au-dessus de ces hommes, un général anglais, Colville selon les uns, Maitland selon les autres, leur cria: *Braves Français, rendez-vous!* Cambronne répondit: *Merde!*

Chapitre XV

Cambronne

Le lecteur français voulant être respecté, le plus beau mot peut-être qu'un Français ait jamais dit ne peut lui être répété. Défense de déposer du sublime dans l'histoire.

À nos risques et périls, nous enfreignons cette défense.

Donc, parmi tous ces géants, il y eut un titan, Cambronne.

Dire ce mot, et mourir ensuite. Quoi de plus grand! car c'est mourir que de le vouloir, et ce n'est pas la faute de cet homme, si, mitraillé, il a survécu.

L'homme qui a gagné la bataille de Waterloo, ce n'est pas Napoléon en déroute, ce n'est pas Wellington pliant à quatre heures, désespéré à cinq, ce n'est pas Blücher qui ne s'est point battu; l'homme qui a gagné la bataille de Waterloo, c'est Cambronne.

Foudroyer d'un tel mot le tonnerre qui vous tue, c'est vaincre.

Faire cette réponse à la catastrophe, dire cela au destin, donner cette base au lion futur, jeter cette réplique à la pluie de la nuit, au mur traître de Hougomont, au chemin creux d'Ohain, au retard de Grouchy, à l'arrivée de Blücher, être l'ironie dans le sépulcre, faire en sorte de rester debout après qu'on sera tombé, noyer dans deux syllabes la coalition européenne, offrir aux rois ces latrines déjà connues des césars, faire du dernier des mots le premier en y mêlant l'éclair de la France, clore insolemment Waterloo par le mardi gras, compléter Léonidas par Rabelais, résumer cette victoire dans une parole suprême impossible à prononcer, perdre le terrain et garder l'histoire, après ce carnage avoir pour soi les rieurs, c'est immense. C'est l'insulte à la foudre. Cela atteint la grandeur eschylienne.

Le mot de Cambronne fait l'effet d'une fracture. C'est la fracture d'une poitrine par le dédain; c'est le trop plein de l'agonie qui fait explosion. Qui a vaincu? Est-ce Wellington? Non. Sans Blücher il était perdu. Est-ce Blücher? Non. Si Wellington n'eût pas commencé, Blücher n'aurait pu finir. Ce Cambronne, ce passant de la dernière heure, ce soldat ignoré, cet infiniment petit de la guerre, sent qu'il y a là un mensonge, un mensonge dans une catastrophe, redoublement poignant, et, au moment où il en éclate de rage, on lui offre cette dérision, la vie! Comment ne pas bondir? Ils sont là, tous les rois de l’Europe, les généraux heureux, les Jupiters tonnants, ils ont cent mille soldats victorieux, et derrière les cent mille, un million, leurs canons, mèche allumée, sont béants, ils ont sous leurs talons la garde impériale et la grande armée, ils viennent d’écraser Napoléon, et il ne reste plus que Cambronne; il n’y a plus pour protester que ce ver de terre. Il protestera. Alors il cherche un mot comme on cherche une épée. Il lui vient de l’écume, et cette écume, c’est le mot. Devant cette victoire prodigieuse et médiocre, devant cette victoire sans victorieux, ce désespéré se redresse; il en subit l’énormité, mais il en constate le néant; et il fait plus que cracher sur elle; et sous l’accablement du nombre, de la force et de la matière, il trouve à l’âme une expression, l’excrément. Nous le répétons. Dire cela, faire cela, trouver cela, c’est être le vainqueur.

L’esprit des grands jours entra dans cet homme inconnu à cette minute fatale. Cambronne trouve le mot de Waterloo comme Rouget de l’Isle trouve la Marseillaise, par visitation du souffle d’en haut. Un effluve de l’ouragan divin se détache et vient passer à travers ces hommes, et ils tressaillent, et l’un chante le chant suprême et l’autre pousse le cri terrible. Cette parole du dédain titanique, Cambronne ne la jette pas seulement à l’Europe au nom de l’empire, ce serait peu; il la jette au passé au nom de la révolution. On l’entend, et l’on reconnaît dans Cambronne la vieille âme des géants. Il semble que c’est Danton qui parle ou Kléber qui rugit.

Au mot de Cambronne, la voix anglaise répondit: *feu!* les batteries flamboyèrent, la colline trembla, de toutes ces bouches d’airain sortit un dernier vomissement de mitraille, épouvantable, une vaste fumée, vaguement blanchie du lever de la lune, roula, et quand la fumée se dissipa, il n’y avait plus rien. Ce reste formidable était anéanti; la garde était morte. Les quatre murs de la redoute vivante gisaient, à peine distinguait-on çà et là un tressaillement parmi les cadavres; et c’est ainsi que les légions françaises, plus grandes que les légions romaines, expirèrent à Mont-Saint-Jean sur la terre mouillée de pluie et de sang, dans les blés sombres, à l’endroit où passe maintenant, à quatre heures du matin, en sifflant et en fouettant gaîment son cheval, Joseph, qui fait le service de la malle-poste de Nivelles.

Chapitre XVI

Quot libras in duce?

La bataille de Waterloo est une énigme. Elle est aussi obscure pour ceux qui l’ont gagnée que pour celui qui l’a perdue. Pour Napoléon, c’est une panique. Blücher n’y voit que du feu; Wellington n’y comprend rien. Voyez les rapports. Les bulletins sont confus, les commentaires sont embrouillés. Ceux-ci balbutient, ceux-là bégayent. Jomini partage la bataille de Waterloo en quatre moments; Muffling la coupe en trois péripéties; Charras, quoique sur quelques points nous ayons une autre appréciation que lui, a seul saisi de son fier coup d’œil les linéaments caractéristiques de cette catastrophe du génie humain aux prises avec le hasard divin. Tous les autres historiens ont un certain éblouissement, et dans cet éblouissement ils tâtonnent. Journée fulgurante, en effet, écroulement de la monarchie militaire qui, à la grande stupeur des rois, a entraîné tous les royaumes, chute de la force, déroute de la guerre.

Dans cet événement, empreint de nécessité surhumaine, la part des hommes n’est rien.

Retirer Waterloo à Wellington et à Blücher, est-ce ôter quelque chose à l’Angleterre et à l’Allemagne? Non. Ni cette illustre Angleterre ni cette auguste Allemagne ne sont en question dans le problème de Waterloo. Grâce au ciel, les peuples sont grands en dehors des lugubres aventures de l’épée. Ni l’Allemagne, ni l’Angleterre, ni la France, ne tiennent dans un fourreau. Dans cette époque où Waterloo n’est qu’un cliquetis de sabres, au-dessus de Blücher l’Allemagne à Goethe et au-dessus de Wellington l’Angleterre à Byron. Un vaste lever d’idées est propre à notre siècle, et dans cette aurore l’Angleterre et l’Allemagne ont leur lueur magnifique. Elles sont majestueuses par ce qu’elles pensent. L’élévation de niveau qu’elles apportent à la civilisation leur est intrinsèque; il vient d’elles-mêmes, et non d’un accident. Ce qu’elles ont d’agrandissement au dix-neuvième siècle n’a point Waterloo pour source. Il n’y a que les peuples barbares qui aient des crues subites après une victoire. C’est la vanité passagère des torrents enflés d’un orage. Les peuples civilisés, surtout au temps où nous sommes, ne se haussent ni ne s’abaissent par la bonne ou mauvaise fortune d’un capitaine. Leur poids spécifique dans le genre humain résulte de quelque chose de plus qu'un combat. Leur honneur, Dieu merci, leur dignité, leur lumière, leur génie, ne sont pas des numéros que les héros et les conquérants, ces joueurs, peuvent mettre à la loterie des batailles. Souvent bataille perdue, progrès conquis. Moins de gloire, plus de liberté. Le tambour se tait, la raison prend la parole. C'est le jeu à qui perd gagne. Parlons donc de Waterloo froidement des deux côtés. Rendons au hasard ce qui est au hasard et à Dieu ce qui est à Dieu. Qu'est-ce que Waterloo? Une victoire? Non. Un quine.

Quine gagné par l'Europe, payé par la France.

Ce n'était pas beaucoup la peine de mettre là un lion.

Waterloo du reste est la plus étrange rencontre qui soit dans l'histoire. Napoléon et Wellington. Ce ne sont pas des ennemis, ce sont des contraires. Jamais Dieu, qui se plaît aux antithèses, n'a fait un plus saisissant contraste et une confrontation plus extraordinaire. D'un côté, la précision, la prévision, la géométrie, la prudence, la retraite assurée, les réserves ménagées, un sang-froid opiniâtre, une méthode imperturbable, la stratégie qui profite du terrain, la tactique qui équilibre les bataillons, le carnage tiré au cordeau, la guerre réglée montre en main, rien laissé volontairement au hasard, le vieux courage classique, la correction absolue; de l'autre l'intuition, la divination, l'étrangeté militaire, l'instinct surhumain, le coup d'œil flamboyant, on ne sait quoi qui regarde comme l'aigle et qui frappe comme la foudre, un art prodigieux dans une impétuosité dédaigneuse, tous les mystères d'une âme profonde, l'association avec le destin, le fleuve, la plaine, la forêt, la colline, sommés et en quelque sorte forcés d'obéir, le despote allant jusqu'à tyranniser le champ de bataille, la foi à l'étoile mêlée à la science stratégique, la grandissant, mais la troublant. Wellington était le *Barème* de la guerre, Napoléon en était le *Michel-Ange*; et cette fois le génie fut vaincu par le calcul.

Des deux côtés on attendait quelqu'un. Ce fut le calculateur exact qui réussit. Napoléon attendait Grouchy; il ne vint pas. Wellington attendait Blücher; il vint.

Wellington, c'est la guerre classique qui prend sa revanche. Bonaparte, à son aurore, l'avait rencontrée en Italie, et superbement battue. La vieille chouette avait fui devant le jeune vautour. L'ancienne tactique avait été non seulement foudroyée, mais scandalisée. Qu'était-ce que ce Corse de vingt-six ans, que signifiait cet ignorant splendide qui, ayant tout contre lui, rien pour lui, sans vivres, sans munitions, sans canons, sans souliers, presque sans armée, avec une poignée d’hommes contre des masses, se ruait sur l’Europe coalisée, et gagnait absurdement des victoires dans l’impossible? D’où sortait ce forcené foudroyant qui, presque sans reprendre haleine, et avec le même jeu de combattants dans la main, pulvérisait l’une après l’autre les cinq armées de l’empereur d’Allemagne, culbutant Beaulieu sur Alvinzi, Wurmser sur Beaulieu, Mélas sur Wurmser, Mack sur Mélas? Qu’était-ce que ce nouveau venu de la guerre ayant l’effronterie d’un astre? L’école académique militaire l’excommuniait en lâchant pied. De là une implacable rancune du vieux césarisme contre le nouveau, du sabre correct contre l’épée flamboyante, et de l’échiquier contre le génie. Le 18 juin 1815, cette rancune eut le dernier mot, et au-dessous de Lodi, de Montebello, de Montenotte, de Mantoue, de Marengo, d’Arcole, elle écrivit: Waterloo. Triomphe des médiocres, doux aux majorités. Le destin consentit à cette ironie. À son déclin, Napoléon retrouva devant lui Wurmser jeune.

Pour avoir Wurmser en effet, il suffît de blanchir les cheveux de Wellington.

Waterloo est une bataille du premier ordre gagnée par un capitaine du second.

Ce qu’il faut admirer dans la bataille de Waterloo, c’est l’Angleterre, c’est la fermeté anglaise, c’est la résolution anglaise, c’est le sang anglais; ce que l’Angleterre a eu là de superbe, ne lui en déplaise, c’est elle-même. Ce n’est pas son capitaine, c’est son armée.

Wellington, bizarrement ingrat, déclare dans une lettre à lord Bathurst que son armée, l’armée qui a combattu le 18 juin 1815, était une «détestable armée». Qu’en pense cette sombre mêlée d’ossements enfouis sous les sillons de Waterloo?

L’Angleterre a été trop modeste vis-à-vis de Wellington. Faire Wellington si grand, c’est faire l’Angleterre petite. Wellington n’est qu’un héros comme un autre. Ces Écossais gris, ces horse-guards, ces régiments de Maitland et de Mitchell, cette infanterie de Pack et de Kempt, cette cavalerie de Ponsonby et de Somerset, ces highlanders jouant du *pibroch* sous la mitraille, ces bataillons de Rylandt, ces recrues toutes fraîches qui savaient à peine manier le mousquet tenant tête aux vieilles bandes d’Essling et de Rivoli, voilà ce qui est grand. Wellington a été tenace, ce fut là son mérite, et nous ne le lui marchandons pas, mais le moindre de ses fantassins et de ses cavaliers a été tout aussi solide que lui. *L’iron-soldier* vaut *l’iron-duke*. Quant à nous, toute notre glorification va au soldat anglais, à l’armée anglaise, au peuple anglais. Si trophée il y a, c’est à l’Angleterre que le trophée est dû. La colonne de Waterloo serait plus juste si au lieu de la figure d’un homme, elle élevait dans la nue la statue d’un peuple. Mais cette grande Angleterre s’irritera de ce que nous disons ici. Elle a encore, après son 1688 et notre 1789, l’illusion féodale. Elle croit à l’hérédité et à la hiérarchie. Ce peuple, qu’aucun ne dépasse en puissance et en gloire, s’estime comme nation, non comme peuple. En tant que peuple, il se subordonne volontiers et prend un lord pour une tête. Workman, il se laisse dédaigner; soldat, il se laisse bâtonner. On se souvient qu’à la bataille d’Inkermann un sergent qui, à ce qu’il paraît, avait sauvé l’armée, ne put être mentionné par lord Raglan, la hiérarchie militaire anglaise ne permettant de citer dans un rapport aucun héros au-dessous du grade d’officier.

Ce que nous admirons par-dessus tout, dans une rencontre du genre de celle de Waterloo, c’est la prodigieuse habileté du hasard. Pluie nocturne, mur de Hougomont, chemin creux d’Ohain, Grouchy sourd au canon, guide de Napoléon qui le trompe, guide de Bülow qui l’éclaire; tout ce cataclysme est merveilleusement conduit.

Au total, disons-le, il y eut à Waterloo plus de massacre que de bataille.

Waterloo est de toutes les batailles rangées celle qui a le plus petit front sur un tel nombre de combattants. Napoléon, trois quarts de lieue, Wellington, une demi-lieue; soixante-douze mille combattants de chaque côté. De cette épaisseur vint le carnage.

On a fait ce calcul et établi cette proportion: Perte d’hommes: à Austerlitz, Français, quatorze pour cent; Russes, trente pour cent, Autrichiens, quarante-quatre pour cent. À Wagram, Français, treize pour cent; Autrichiens, quatorze. À la Moskowa, Français, trente-sept pour cent; Russes, quarante-quatre. À Bautzen, Français, treize pour cent; Russes et Prussiens, quatorze. À Waterloo, Français, cinquante-six pour cent; Alliés, trente et un. Total pour Waterloo, quarante et un pour cent. Cent quarante-quatre mille combattants; soixante mille morts. Le champ de Waterloo aujourd’hui a le calme qui appartient à la terre, support impassible de l’homme, et il ressemble à toutes les plaines.

La nuit pourtant une espèce de brume visionnaire s’en dégage, et si quelque voyageur s’y promène, s’il regarde, s’il écoute, s’il rêve comme Virgile devant les funestes plaines de Philippes, l’hallucination de la catastrophe le saisit. L’effrayant 18 juin revit; la fausse colline monument s’efface, ce lion quelconque se dissipe, le champ de bataille reprend sa réalité; des lignes d’infanterie ondulent dans la plaine, des galops furieux traversent l’horizon! le songeur effaré voit l’éclair des sabres, l’étincelle des bayonnettes, le flamboiement des bombes, l’entre-croisement monstrueux des tonnerres; il entend, comme un râle au fond d’une tombe, la clameur vague de la bataille fantôme; ces ombres, ce sont les grenadiers; ces lueurs, ce sont les cuirassiers; ce squelette, c’est Napoléon; ce squelette, c’est Wellington; tout cela n’est plus et se heurte et combat encore; et les ravins s’empourprent, et les arbres frissonnent, et il y a de la furie jusque dans les nuées, et, dans les ténèbres, toutes ces hauteurs farouches, Mont-Saint-Jean, Hougomont, Frischemont, Pape-lotte, Plancenoit, apparaissent confusément couronnées de tourbillons de spectres s’exterminant.

Chapitre XVII

Faut-il trouver bon Waterloo?

Il existe une école libérale très respectable qui ne hait point Waterloo. Nous n’en sommes pas. Pour nous, Waterloo n’est que la date stupéfaite de la liberté. Qu’un tel aigle sorte d’un tel œuf, c’est à coup sûr l’inattendu.

Waterloo, si l’on se place au point de vue culminant de la question, est intentionnellement une victoire contre-révolutionnaire. C’est l’Europe contre la France, c’est Pétersbourg, Berlin et Vienne contre Paris, c’est le *statu quo* contre l’initiative, c’est le 14 juillet 1789 attaqué à travers le 20 mars 1815, c’est le branle-bas des monarchies contre l’indomptable émeute française. Éteindre enfin ce vaste peuple en éruption depuis vingt-six ans, tel était le rêve. Solidarité des Brunswick, des Nassau, des Romanoff, des Hohenzollern, des Habsbourg, avec les Bourbons. Waterloo porte en croupe le droit divin. Il est vrai que, l’empire ayant été despotique, la royauté, par la réaction naturelle des choses, devait forcément être libérale, et qu’un ordre constitutionnel à contre-cœur est sorti de Waterloo, au grand regret des vainqueurs. C’est que la révolution ne peut être vraiment vaincue, et qu’étant providentielle et absolument fatale, elle reparaît toujours, avant Waterloo, dans Bonaparte jetant bas les vieux trônes, après Waterloo, dans Louis XVIII octroyant et subissant la Charte. Bonaparte met un postillon sur le trône de Naples et un sergent sur le trône de Suède, employant l’inégalité à démontrer l’égalité; Louis XVIII à Saint-Ouen contresigne la déclaration des droits de l’homme. Voulez-vous vous rendre compte de ce que c’est que la révolution, appelez-la *Progrès*; et voulez-vous vous rendre compte de ce que c’est que le progrès, appelez-le *Demain*. Demain fait irrésistiblement son œuvre, et il la fait dès aujourd’hui. Il arrive toujours à son but, étrangement. Il emploie Wellington à faire de Foy, qui n’était qu’un soldat, un orateur. Foy tombe à Hougomont et se relève à la tribune. Ainsi procède le progrès. Pas de mauvais outil pour cet ouvrier-là. Il ajuste à son travail divin, sans se déconcerter, l’homme qui a enjambé les Alpes, et le bon vieux malade chancelant du père Élysée. Il se sert du podagre comme du conquérant; du conquérant au dehors, du podagre au dedans. Waterloo, en coupant court à la démolition des trônes européens par l’épée, n’a eu d’autre effet que de faire continuer le travail révolutionnaire d’un autre côté.

Les sabreurs ont fini, c’est le tour des penseurs. Le siècle que Waterloo voulait arrêter a marché dessus et a poursuivi sa route. Cette victoire sinistre a été vaincue par la liberté.

En somme, et incontestablement, ce qui triomphait à Waterloo, ce qui souriait derrière Wellington, ce qui lui apportait tous les bâtons de maréchal de l’Europe, y compris, dit-on, le bâton de maréchal de France, ce qui roulait joyeusement les brouettées de terre pleine d’ossements pour élever la butte du lion, ce qui a triomphalement écrit sur ce piédestal cette date: *18 juin 1815*, ce qui encourageait Blücher sabrant la déroute, ce qui du haut du plateau de Mont-Saint-Jean se penchait sur la France comme sur une proie, c’était la contre-révolution. C’est la contre-révolution qui murmurait ce mot infâme: démembrement. Arrivée à Paris, elle a vu le cratère de près, elle a senti que cette cendre lui brûlait les pieds, et elle s’est ravisée. Elle est revenue au bégayement d’une charte.

Ne voyons dans Waterloo que ce qui est dans Waterloo. De liberté intentionnelle, point. La contre-révolution était involontairement libérale, de même que, par un phénomène correspondant, Napoléon était involontairement révolutionnaire. Le 18 juin 1815, Robespierre à cheval fut désarçonné.

Chapitre XVIII

Recrudescence du droit divin

Fin de la dictature. Tout un système d'Europe croula.
L'empire s'affaissa dans une ombre qui ressembla à celle du monde romain expirant. On revit de l'abîme comme au temps des barbares. Seulement la barbarie de 1815, qu'il faut nommer de son petit nom, la contre-révolution, avait peu d'haleine, s'essouffla vite, et resta court. L'empire, avouons-le, fut pleuré, et pleuré par des yeux héroïques. Si la gloire est dans le glaive fait sceptre, l'empire avait été la gloire même. Il avait répandu sur la terre toute la lumière que la tyrannie peut donner; lumière sombre. Disons plus: lumière obscure. Comparée au vrai jour, c'est de la nuit. Cette disparition de la nuit fit l'effet d'une éclipse.

Louis XVIII rentra dans Paris. Les danses en rond du 8 juillet effacèrent les enthousiasmes du 20 mars. Le Corse devint l'antithèse du Béarnais. Le drapeau du dôme des Tuileries fut blanc. L'exil trôna. La table de sapin de Hartwell prit place devant le fauteuil fleurdelysé de Louis XIV. On parla de Bouvines et de Fontenoy comme d'hier, Austerlitz ayant vieilli. L'autel et le trône fraternisèrent majestueusement. Une des formes les plus incontestées du salut de la société au dix-neuvième siècle s'établit sur la France et sur le continent. L'Europe prit la cocarde blanche. Trestaillon fut célèbre. La devise *non pluribus impar* reparut dans des rayons de pierre figurant un soleil sur la façade de la caserne du quai d'Orsay. Où il y avait eu une garde impériale, il y eut une maison rouge. L'arc du carrousel, tout chargé de victoires mal portées, dépaysé dans ces nouveautés, un peu honteux peut-être de Marengo et d'Arcole, se tira d'affaire avec la statue du duc d'Angoulême. Le cimetière de la Madeleine, redoutable fosse commune de 93, se couvrit de marbre et de jaspe, les os de Louis XVI et de Marie-Antoinette étant dans cette poussière. Dans le fossé de Vincennes, un cippe sépulcral sortit de terre, rappelant que le duc d'Enghien était mort dans le mois même où Napoléon avait été couronné. Le pape Pie VII, qui avait fait ce sacre très près de cette mort, bénit tranquillement la chute comme il avait béni l'élévation. Il y eut à Schoenbrunn une petite ombre âgée de quatre ans qu'il fut séditieux d'appeler le roi de Rome. Et ces choses se sont faites, et ces rois ont repris leurs trônes, et le maître de l'Europe a été mis dans une cage, et l'ancien régime est devenu le nouveau, et toute l'ombre et toute la lumière de la terre ont changé de place, parce que, dans l'après-midi d'un jour d'été, un pâtre a dit à un Prussien dans un bois: passez par ici et non par là!

Ce 1815 fut une sorte d'avril lugubre. Les vieilles réalités malsaines et vénéneuses se couvrirent d'apparences neuves. Le mensonge épousa 1789, le droit divin se masqua d'une charte, les fictions se firent constitutionnelles, les préjugés, les superstitions et les arrière-pensées, avec l'article 14 au cœur, se vernirent de libéralisme. Changement de peau des serpents.

L'homme avait été à la fois agrandi et amoindri par Napoléon. L'idéal, sous ce règne de la matière splendide, avait reçu le nom étrange d'idéologie. Grave imprudence d'un grand homme, tourner en dérision l'avenir. Les peuples cependant, cette chair à canon si amoureuse du canonnier, le cherchaient des yeux. Où est-il? Que fait-il? *Napoléon est mort*, disait un passant à un invalide de Marengo et de Waterloo. — *Lui mort!* s'écria ce soldat, *vous le connaissez bien!* Les imaginations déifiaient cet homme terrassé. Le fond de l'Europe, après Waterloo, fut ténébreux. Quelque chose d'énorme resta longtemps vide par l'évanouissement de Napoléon.

Les rois se mirent dans ce vide. La vieille Europe en profita pour se reformer. Il y eut une Sainte-Alliance. Belle-Alliance, avait dit d'avance le champ fatal de Waterloo.

En présence et en face de cette antique Europe refaite, les linéaments d'une France nouvelle s'ébauchèrent. L'avenir, raillé par l'empereur, fit son entrée. Il avait sur le front cette étoile, Liberté. Les yeux ardents des jeunes générations se tournèrent vers lui. Chose singulière, on s'éprit en même temps de cet avenir, Liberté, et de ce passé, Napoléon. La défaite avait grandi le vaincu. Bonaparte tombé semblait plus haut que Napoléon debout. Ceux qui avaient triomphé eurent peur. L'Angleterre le fit garder par Hudson Lowe et la France le fit guetter par Montchenu. Ses bras croisés devinrent l'inquiétude des trônes. Alexandre le nommait: mon insomnie. Cet effroi venait de la quantité de révolution qu'il avait en lui. C'est ce qui explique et excuse le libéralisme bonapartiste. Ce fantôme donnait le tremblement au vieux monde. Les rois régnèrent mal à leur aise, avec le rocher de Sainte-Hélène à l'horizon.

Pendant que Napoléon agonisait à Longwood, les soixante mille hommes tombés dans le champ de Waterloo pourrirent tranquillement, et quelque chose de leur paix se répandit dans le monde. Le congrès de Vienne en fit les traités de 1815, et l'Europe nomma cela la restauration.

Voilà ce que c'est que Waterloo.

Mais qu'importe à l'infini? Toute cette tempête, tout ce nuage, cette guerre, puis cette paix, toute cette ombre, ne troubla pas un moment la lueur de l'œil immense devant lequel un puceron sautant d'un brin d'herbe à l'autre égale l'aigle volant de clocher en clocher aux tours de Notre-Dame.

Chapitre XIX

Le champ de bataille la nuit

Revenons, c’est une nécessité de ce livre, sur ce fatal champ de bataille.

Le 18 juin 1815, c’était pleine lune. Cette clarté favorisa la poursuite féroce de Blücher, dénonça les traces des fuyards, livra cette masse désastreuse à la cavalerie prussienne acharnée, et aida au massacre. Il y a parfois dans les catastrophes de ces tragiques complaisances de la nuit.

Après le dernier coup de canon tiré, la plaine de Mont-Saint-Jean resta déserte.

Les Anglais occupèrent le campement des Français, c’est la constatation habituelle de la victoire; coucher dans le lit du vaincu. Ils établirent leur bivouac au delà de Rossomme. Les Prussiens, lâchés sur la déroute, poussèrent en avant. Wellington alla au village de Waterloo rédiger son rapport à lord Bathurst.

Si jamais le *sic vos non vobis* a été applicable, c’est à coup sûr à ce village de Waterloo. Waterloo n’a rien fait, et est resté à une demi-lieue de l’action. Mont-Saint-Jean a été canonné, Hougomont a été brûlé, Papelotte a été brûlé, Plancenoit a été brûlé, la Haie-Sainte a été prise d’assaut, la Belle-Alliance a vu l’embrasement des deux vainqueurs; on sait à peine ces noms, et Waterloo qui n’a point travaillé dans la bataille en a tout l’honneur.

Nous ne sommes pas de ceux qui flattent la guerre; quand l’occasion s’en présente, nous lui disons ses vérités. La guerre a d’affreuses beautés que nous n’avons point cachées; elle a aussi, convenons-en, quelques laideurs. Une des plus surprenantes, c’est le prompt dépouillement des morts après la victoire. L’aube qui suit une bataille se lève toujours sur des cadavres nus.

Qui fait cela? Qui souille ainsi le triomphe? Quelle est cette hideuse main furtive qui se glisse dans la poche de la victoire? Quels sont ces filous faisant leur coup derrière la gloire? Quelques philosophes, Voltaire entre autres, affirment que ce sont précisément ceux-là qui ont fait la gloire. *Ce sont les mêmes*, disent-ils, *il n’y a pas de rechange, ceux qui sont debout pillent ceux qui sont à terre*. *Le héros du jour est le vampire de la nuit.* On a bien le droit, après tout, de détrousser un peu un cadavre dont on est l’auteur. Quant à nous, nous ne le croyons pas. Cueillir des lauriers et voler les souliers d’un mort, cela nous semble impossible à la même main.

Ce qui est certain, c’est que, d’ordinaire, après les vainqueurs viennent les voleurs. Mais mettons le soldat, surtout le soldat contemporain, hors de cause.

Toute armée a une queue, et c’est là ce qu’il faut accuser. Des êtres chauves-souris, mi-partis brigands et valets, toutes les espèces de *vespertilio* qu’engendre ce crépuscule qu’on appelle la guerre, des porteurs d’uniformes qui ne combattent pas, de faux malades, des éclopés redoutables, des cantiniers interlopes trottant, quelquefois avec leurs femmes, sur de petites charrettes et volant ce qu’ils revendent, des mendiants s’offrant pour guides aux officiers, des goujats, des maraudeurs, les armées en marche autrefois, — nous ne parlons pas du temps présent, — traînaient tout cela, si bien que, dans la langue spéciale, cela s’appelait «les traînards». Aucune armée ni aucune nation n’étaient responsables de ces êtres; ils parlaient italien et suivaient les Allemands; ils parlaient français et suivaient les Anglais. C’est par un de ces misérables, traînard espagnol qui parlait français, que le marquis de Fervacques, trompé par son baragouin picard, et le prenant pour un des nôtres, fut tué en traître et volé sur le champ de bataille même, dans la nuit qui suivit la victoire de Cerisoles. De la maraude naissait le maraud. La détestable maxime: *vivre sur l’ennemi*, produisait cette lèpre, qu’une forte discipline pouvait seule guérir. Il y a des renommées qui trompent; on ne sait pas toujours pourquoi de certains généraux, grands d’ailleurs, ont été si populaires. Turenne était adoré de ses soldats parce qu’il tolérait le pillage; le mal permis fait partie de la bonté; Turenne était si bon qu’il a laissé mettre à feu et à sang le Palatinat. On voyait à la suite des armées moins ou plus de maraudeurs selon que le chef était plus ou moins sévère. Hoche et Marceau n’avaient point de traînards; Wellington, nous lui rendons volontiers cette justice, en avait peu.

Pourtant, dans la nuit du 18 au 19 juin, on dépouilla les morts. Wellington fut rigide; ordre de passer par les armes quiconque serait pris en flagrant délit; mais la rapine est tenace. Les maraudeurs volaient dans un coin du champ de bataille pendant qu’on les fusillait dans l’autre.

La lune était sinistre sur cette plaine.

Vers minuit, un homme rôdait, ou plutôt rampait, du côté du chemin creux d’Ohain. C’était, selon toute apparence, un de ceux que nous venons de caractériser, ni Anglais, ni Français, ni paysan, ni soldat, moins homme que goule, attiré par le flair des morts, ayant pour victoire le vol, venant dévaliser Waterloo. Il était vêtu d'une blouse qui était un peu une capote, il était inquiet et audacieux, il allait devant lui et regardait derrière lui. Qu'était-ce que cet homme? La nuit probablement en savait plus sur son compte que le jour. Il n'avait point de sac, mais évidemment de larges poches sous sa capote. De temps en temps, il s'arrêtait, examinait la plaine autour de lui comme pour voir s'il n'était pas observé, se penchait brusquement, dérangeait à terre quelque chose de silencieux et d'immobile, puis se redressait et s'esquivait. Son glissement, ses attitudes, son geste rapide et mystérieux le faisaient ressembler à ces larves crépusculaires qui hantent les ruines et que les anciennes légendes normandes appellent les Alleurs.

De certains échassiers nocturnes font de ces silhouettes dans les marécages.

Un regard qui eût sondé attentivement toute cette brume eût pu remarquer, à quelque distance, arrêté et comme caché derrière la masure qui borde sur la chaussée de Nivelles l'angle de la route de Mont-Saint-Jean à Braine-l'Alleud, une façon de petit fourgon de vivandier à coiffe d'osier goudronnée, attelé d'une haridelle affamée broutant l'ortie à travers son mors, et dans ce fourgon une espèce de femme assise sur des coffres et des paquets. Peut-être y avait-il un lien entre ce fourgon et ce rôdeur.

L'obscurité était sereine. Pas un nuage au zénith. Qu'importe que la terre soit rouge, la lune reste blanche. Ce sont là les indifférences du ciel. Dans les prairies, des branches d'arbre cassées par la mitraille mais non tombées et retenues par l'écorce se balançaient doucement au vent de la nuit. Une haleine, presque une respiration, remuait les broussailles. Il y avait dans l'herbe des frissons qui ressemblaient à des départs d'âmes.

On entendait vaguement au loin aller et venir les patrouilles et les rondes-major du campement anglais.

Hougomont et la Haie-Sainte continuaient de brûler, faisant, l'un à l'ouest, l'autre à l'est, deux grosses flammes auxquelles venait se rattacher, comme un collier de rubis dénoué ayant à ses extrémités deux escarboucles, le cordon de feux du bivouac anglais étalé en demi-cercle immense sur les collines de l'horizon.

Nous avons dit la catastrophe du chemin d'Ohain. Ce qu'avait été cette mort pour tant de braves, le cœur s'épouvante d'y songer.

Si quelque chose est effroyable, s’il existe une réalité qui dépasse le rêve, c’est ceci: vivre, voir le soleil, être en pleine possession de la force virile, avoir la santé et la joie, rire vaillamment, courir vers une gloire qu’on a devant soi, éblouissante, se sentir dans la poitrine un poumon qui respire, un cœur qui bat, une volonté qui raisonne, parler, penser, espérer, aimer, avoir une mère, avoir une femme, avoir des enfants, avoir la lumière, et tout à coup, le temps d’un cri, en moins d’une minute, s’effondrer dans un abîme, tomber, rouler, écraser, être écrasé, voir des épis de blé, des fleurs, des feuilles, des branches, ne pouvoir se retenir à rien, sentir son sabre inutile, des hommes sous soi, des chevaux sur soi, se débattre en vain, les os brisés par quelque ruade dans les ténèbres, sentir un talon qui vous fait jaillir les yeux, mordre avec rage des fers de chevaux, étouffer, hurler, se tordre, être là-dessous, et se dire: *tout à l’heure j’étais un vivant!*

Là où avait râlé ce lamentable désastre, tout faisait silence maintenant. L’encaissement du chemin creux était comble de chevaux et de cavaliers inextricablement amoncelés. Enchevêtrement terrible. Il n’y avait plus de talus. Les cadavres nivelaient la route avec la plaine et venaient au ras du bord comme un boisseau d’orge bien mesuré. Un tas de morts dans la partie haute, une rivière de sang dans la partie basse; telle était cette route le soir du 18 juin 1815. Le sang coulait jusque sur la chaussée de Nivelles et s’y extravasait en une large mare devant l’abatis d’arbres qui barrait la chaussée, à un endroit qu’on montre encore. C’est, on s’en souvient, au point opposé, vers la chaussée de Genappe, qu’avait eu lieu l’effondrement des cuirassiers. L’épaisseur des cadavres se proportionnait à la profondeur du chemin creux. Vers le milieu, à l’endroit où il devenait plein, là où avait passé la division Delord, la couche des morts s’amincissait.

Le rôdeur nocturne, que nous venons de faire entrevoir au lecteur, allait de ce côté. Il furetait cette immense tombe. Il regardait. Il passait on ne sait quelle hideuse revue des morts. Il marchait les pieds dans le sang.

Tout à coup il s’arrêta. À quelques pas devant lui, dans le chemin creux, au point où finissait le monceau des morts, de dessous cet amas d’hommes et de chevaux, sortait une main ouverte, éclairée par la lune.

Cette main avait au doigt quelque chose qui brillait, et qui était un anneau d’or.

L’homme se courba, demeura un moment accroupi, et quand il se releva, il n’y avait plus d’anneau à cette main.

Il ne se releva pas précisément; il resta dans une attitude fauve et effarouchée, tournant le dos au tas de morts, scrutant l'horizon, à genoux, tout l'avant du corps portant sur ses deux index appuyés à terre, la tête guettant par-dessus le bord du chemin creux. Les quatre pattes du chacal conviennent à de certaines actions.

Puis, prenant son parti, il se dressa.

En ce moment il eut un soubresaut. Il sentit que par derrière on le tenait.

Il se retourna; c'était la main ouverte qui s'était refermée et qui avait saisi le pan de sa capote.

Un honnête homme eût eu peur. Celui-ci se mit à rire.

— Tiens, dit-il, ce n'est que le mort. J'aime mieux un revenant qu'un gendarme.

Cependant la main défaillit et le lâcha. L'effort s'épuise vite dans la tombe.

— Ah çà! reprit le rôdeur, est-il vivant ce mort? Voyons donc. Il se pencha de nouveau, fouilla le tas, écarta ce qui faisait obstacle, saisit la main, empoigna le bras, dégagea la tête, tira le corps, et quelques instants après il traînait dans l'ombre du chemin creux un homme inanimé, au moins évanoui. C'était un cuirassier, un officier, un officier même d'un certain rang; une grosse épaulette d'or sortait de dessous la cuirasse; cet officier n'avait plus de casque. Un furieux coup de sabre balafrait son visage où l'on ne voyait que du sang. Du reste, il ne semblait pas qu'il eût de membre cassé, et par quelque hasard heureux, si ce mot est possible ici, les morts s'étaient arc-boutés au-dessus de lui de façon à le garantir de l'écrasement. Ses yeux étaient fermés.

Il avait sur sa cuirasse la croix d'argent de la Légion d'honneur.

Le rôdeur arracha cette croix qui disparut dans un des gouffres qu'il avait sous sa capote.

Après quoi, il tâta le gousset de l'officier, y sentit une montre et la prit. Puis il fouilla le gilet, y trouva une bourse et l'empocha.

Comme il en était à cette phase des secours qu'il portait à ce mourant, l'officier ouvrit les yeux.

— Merci, dit-il faiblement.

La brusquerie des mouvements de l'homme qui le maniait, la fraîcheur de la nuit, l'air respiré librement, l'avaient tiré de sa léthargie.

Le rôdeur ne répondit point. Il leva la tête. On entendait un bruit de pas dans la plaine; probablement quelque patrouille qui approchait.

L’officier murmura, car il y avait encore de l’agonie dans sa voix:

— Qui a gagné la bataille?

— Les Anglais, répondit le rôdeur.

L’officier reprit:

— Cherchez dans mes poches. Vous y trouverez une bourse et une montre. Prenez-les.

C’était déjà fait.

Le rôdeur exécuta le semblant demandé, et dit:

— Il n’y a rien.

— On m’a volé, reprit l’officier; j’en suis fâché. C’eût été pour vous.

Les pas de la patrouille devenaient de plus en plus distincts.

— Voici qu’on vient, dit le rôdeur, faisant le mouvement d’un homme qui s’en va.

L’officier, soulevant péniblement le bras, le retint:

— Vous m’avez sauvé la vie. Qui êtes-vous?

Le rôdeur répondit vite et bas:

— J’étais comme vous de l’armée française. Il faut que je vous quitte. Si l’on me prenait, on me fusillerait. Je vous ai sauvé la vie. Tirez-vous d’affaire maintenant.

— Quel est votre grade?

— Sergent.

— Comment vous appelez-vous?

— Thénardier.

— Je n’oublierai pas ce nom, dit l’officier. Et vous, retenez le mien. Je me nomme Pontmercy.

Livre deuxième — Le vaisseau *L'Orion*

Chapitre I

Le numéro 24601 devient le numéro 9430

Jean Valjean avait été repris.

On nous saura gré de passer rapidement sur des détails douloureux. Nous nous bornons à transcrire deux entrefilets publiés par les journaux du temps, quelques mois après les événements surprenants accomplis à Montreuil-sur-Mer.

Ces articles sont un peu sommaires. On se souvient qu'il n'existait pas encore à cette époque de *Gazette des Tribunaux*.

Nous empruntons le premier au *Drapeau blanc*. Il est daté du 25 juillet 1823:

«Un arrondissement du Pas-de-Calais vient d'être le théâtre d'un événement peu ordinaire. Un homme étranger au département et nommé Mr Madeleine avait relevé depuis quelques années, grâce à des procédés nouveaux, une ancienne industrie locale, la fabrication des jais et des verroteries noires. Il y avait fait sa fortune, et, disons-le, celle de l'arrondissement. En reconnaissance de ses services, on l'avait nommé maire. La police a découvert que ce Mr Madeleine n'était autre qu'un ancien forçat en rupture de ban, condamné en 1796 pour vol, et nommé Jean Valjean. Jean Valjean a été réintégré au bagne. Il paraît qu'avant son arrestation il avait réussi à retirer de chez Mr Laffitte une somme de plus d'un demi-million qu'il y avait placée, et qu'il avait, du reste, très légitimement, dit-on, gagnée dans son commerce. On n'a pu savoir où Jean Valjean avait caché cette somme depuis sa rentrée au bagne de Toulon.»

Le deuxième article, un peu plus détaillé, est extrait du *Journal de Paris*, même date.

«Un ancien forçat libéré, nommé Jean Valjean, vient de comparaître devant la cour d'assises du Var dans des circonstances faites pour appeler l'attention. Ce scélérat était parvenu à tromper la vigilance de la police; il avait changé de nom et avait réussi à se faire nommer maire d'une de nos petites villes du Nord. Il avait établi dans cette ville un commerce assez considérable. Il a été enfin démasqué et arrêté, grâce au zèle infatigable du ministère public. Il avait pour concubine une fille publique qui est morte de saisissement au moment de son arrestation. Ce misérable, qui est doué d’une force herculéenne, avait trouvé moyen de s’évader; mais, trois ou quatre jours après son évasion, la police mit de nouveau la main sur lui, à Paris même, au moment où il montait dans une de ces petites voitures qui font le trajet de la capitale au village de Montfermeil (Seine-et-Oise). On dit qu’il avait profité de l’intervalle de ces trois ou quatre jours de liberté pour rentrer en possession d’une somme considérable placée par lui chez un de nos principaux banquiers. On évalue cette somme à six ou sept cent mille francs. À en croire l’acte d’accusation, il l’aurait enfouie en un lieu connu de lui seul et l’on n’a pas pu la saisir. Quoi qu’il en soit, le nommé Jean Valjean vient d’être traduit aux assises du département du Var comme accusé d’un vol de grand chemin commis à main armée, il y a huit ans environ, sur la personne d’un de ces honnêtes enfants qui, comme l’a dit le patriarche de Ferney en vers immortels:

...De Savoie arrivent tous les ans
Et dont la main légèrement essuie
Ces longs canaux engorgés par la suie.

«Ce bandit a renoncé à se défendre. Il a été établi, par l’habile et éloquent organe du ministère public, que le vol avait été commis de complicité, et que Jean Valjean faisait partie d’une bande de voleurs dans le Midi. En conséquence Jean Valjean, déclaré coupable, a été condamné à la peine de mort. Ce criminel avait refusé de se pourvoir en cassation. Le roi, dans son inépuisable clémence, a daigné commuer sa peine en celle des travaux forcés à perpétuité. Jean Valjean a été immédiatement dirigé sur le bagne de Toulon.»

On n’a pas oublié que Jean Valjean avait à Montreuil-sur-Mer des habitudes religieuses. Quelques journaux, entre autres le *Constitutionnel*, présentèrent cette commutation comme un triomphe du parti prêtre.

Jean Valjean changea de chiffre au bagne. Il s’appela 9430.

Du reste, disons-le pour n’y plus revenir, avec Mr Madeleine la prospérité de Montreuil-sur-Mer disparut; tout ce qu’il avait prévu dans sa nuit de fièvre et d’hésitation se réalisa; lui de moins, ce fut en effet l’âme de moins. Après sa chute, il se fit à Montreuil-sur-Mer ce partage égoïste des grandes existences tombées, ce fatal dépècement des choses florissantes qui s’accomplit tous les jours obscurément dans la communauté humaine et que l’histoire n’a remarqué qu’une fois, parce qu’il s’est fait après la mort d’Alexandre. Les lieutenants se couronnent rois; les contre-maîtres s’improvisèrent fabricants. Les rivalités envieuses surgirent. Les vastes ateliers de Mr Madeleine furent fermés; les bâtiments tombèrent en ruine, les ouvriers se dispersèrent. Les uns quittèrent le pays, les autres quittèrent le métier. Tout se fit désormais en petit, au lieu de se faire en grand; pour le lucre, au lieu de se faire pour le bien. Plus de centre; la concurrence partout, et l'acharnement. Mr Madeleine dominait tout, et dirigeait. Lui tombé, chacun tira à soi; l'esprit de lutte succéda à l'esprit d'organisation, l'âpreté à la cordialité, la haine de l'un contre l'autre à la bienveillance du fondateur pour tous; les fils noués par Mr Madeleine se brouillèrent et se rompirent; on falsifia les procédés, on avilit les produits, on tua la confiance; les débouchés diminuèrent, moins de commandes; le salaire baissa, les ateliers chômèrent, la faillite vint. Et puis plus rien pour les pauvres. Tout s'évanouit.

L'état lui-même s'aperçut que quelqu'un avait été écrasé quelque part. Moins de quatre ans après l'arrêt de la cour d'assises constatant au profit du bagne l'identité de Mr Madeleine et de Jean Valjean, les frais de perception de l'impôt étaient doublés dans l'arrondissement de Montreuil-sur-Mer, et Mr de Villèle en faisait l'observation à la tribune au mois de février 1827.

Chapitre II

Où on lira deux vers qui sont peut-être du diable

Avant d’aller plus loin, il est à propos de raconter avec quelque détail un fait singulier qui se passa vers la même époque à Montfermeil et qui n’est peut-être pas sans coïncidence avec certaines conjectures du ministère public.

Il y a dans le pays de Montfermeil une superstition très ancienne, d’autant plus curieuse et d’autant plus précieuse qu’une superstition populaire dans le voisinage de Paris est comme un aloès en Sibérie. Nous sommes de ceux qui respectent tout ce qui est à l’état de plante rare. Voici donc la superstition de Montfermeil. On croit que le diable a, de temps immémorial, choisi la forêt pour y cacher ses trésors. Les bonnes femmes affirment qu’il n’est pas rare de rencontrer, à la chute du jour, dans les endroits écartés du bois, un homme noir, ayant la mine d’un charretier ou d’un bûcheron, chaussé de sabots, vêtu d’un pantalon et d’un sarrau de toile, et reconnaissable en ce qu’au lieu de bonnet ou de chapeau il a deux immenses cornes sur la tête. Ceci doit le rendre reconnaissable en effet. Cet homme est habituellement occupé à creuser un trou. Il y a trois manières de tirer parti de cette rencontre. La première, c’est d’aborder l’homme et de lui parler. Alors on s’aperçoit que cet homme est tout bonnement un paysan, qu’il paraît noir parce qu’on est au crépuscule, qu’il ne creuse pas le moindre trou, mais qu’il coupe de l’herbe pour ses vaches, et que ce qu’on avait pris pour des cornes n’est autre chose qu’une fourche à fumier qu’il porte sur son dos et dont les dents, grâce à la perspective du soir, semblaient lui sortir de la tête. On rentre chez soi, et l’on meurt dans la semaine. La seconde manière, c’est de l’observer, d’attendre qu’il ait creusé son trou, qu’il l’ait refermé et qu’il s’en soit allé; puis de courir bien vite à la fosse, de la rouvrir et d’y prendre le «trésor» que l’homme noir y a nécessairement déposé. En ce cas, on meurt dans le mois. Enfin la troisième manière, c’est de ne point parler à l’homme noir, de ne point le regarder, et de s’enfuir à toutes jambes. On meurt dans l’année. Comme les trois manières ont leurs inconvénients, la seconde, qui offre du moins quelques avantages, entre autres celui de posséder un trésor, ne fût-ce qu’un mois, est la plus généralement adoptée. Les hommes hardis, que toutes les chances tentent, ont donc, assez souvent, à ce qu'on assure, rouvert les trous creusés par l'homme noir et essayé de voler le diable. Il paraît que l'opération est médiocre. Du moins, s'il faut en croire la tradition et en particulier les deux vers énigmatiques en latin barbare qu'a laissés sur ce sujet un mauvais moine normand, un peu sorcier, appelé Tryphon. Ce Tryphon est enterré à l'abbaye de Saint-Georges de Bocherville près Rouen, et il naît des crapauds sur sa tombe.

On fait donc des efforts énormes, ces fosses-là sont ordinairement très creuses, on sue, on fouille, on travaille toute une nuit, car c'est la nuit que cela se fait, on mouille sa chemise, on brûle sa chandelle, on ébrèche sa pioche, et lorsqu'on est arrivé enfin au fond du trou, lorsqu'on met la main sur «le trésor», que trouve-t-on? qu'est-ce que c'est que le trésor du diable? Un sou, parfois un écu, une pierre, un squelette, un cadavre saignant, quelquefois un spectre plié en quatre comme une feuille de papier dans un portefeuille, quelquefois rien. C'est ce que semblent annoncer aux curieux indiscrets les vers de Tryphon:

Fodit, et in fossa thesauros condit opaca,
As, nummos, lapides, cadaver, simulacre, nihilque.

Il paraît que de nos jours on y trouve aussi, tantôt une poire à poudre avec des balles, tantôt un vieux jeu de cartes gras et roussi qui a évidemment servi aux diables. Tryphon n'enregistre point ces deux dernières trouvailles, attendu que Tryphon vivait au douzième siècle et qu'il ne semble point que le diable ait eu l'esprit d'inventer la poudre avant Roger Bacon et les cartes avant Charles VI.

Du reste, si l'on joue avec ces cartes, on est sûr de perdre tout ce qu'on possède; et quant à la poudre qui est dans la poire, elle a la propriété de vous faire éclater votre fusil à la figure.

Or, fort peu de temps après l'époque où il sembla au ministère public que le forçat libéré Jean Valjean, pendant son évasion de quelques jours, avait rôdé autour de Montfermeil, on remarqua dans ce même village qu'un certain vieux cantonnier appelé Boulatruelle avait «des allures» dans le bois. On croyait savoir dans le pays que ce Boulatruelle avait été au bagne; il était soumis à de certaines surveillances de police, et, comme il ne trouvait d'ouvrage nulle part, l'administration l'employait au rabais comme cantonnier sur le chemin de traverse de Gagny à Lagny.

Ce Boulatruelle était un homme vu de travers par les gens de l'endroit, trop respectueux, trop humble, prompt à ôter son bonnet à tout le monde, tremblant et souriant devant les gendarmes, probablement affilié à des bandes, disait-on, suspect d'embuscade au coin des taillis à la nuit tombante. Il n'avait que cela pour lui qu'il était ivrogne.

Voici ce qu'on croyait avoir remarqué:

Depuis quelque temps, Boulatruelle quittait de fort bonne heure sa besogne d'empierrement et d'entretien de la route et s'en allait dans la forêt avec sa pioche. On le rencontrait vers le soir dans les clairières les plus désertes, dans les fourrés les plus sauvages, ayant l'air de chercher quelque chose, quelquefois creusant des trous. Les bonnes femmes qui passaient le prenaient d'abord pour Belzébuth, puis elles reconnaissaient Boulatruelle, et n'étaient guère plus rassurées. Ces rencontres paraissaient contrarier vivement Boulatruelle. Il était visible qu'il cherchait à se cacher, et qu'il y avait un mystère dans ce qu'il faisait.

On disait dans le village: — C'est clair que le diable a fait quelque apparition. Boulatruelle l'a vu, et cherche. Au fait, il est fichu pour empoigner le magot de Lucifer. Les voltairiens ajoutaient: — Sera-ce Boulatruelle qui attrapera le diable, ou le diable qui attrapera Boulatruelle? Les vieilles femmes faisaient beaucoup de signes de croix.

Cependant les manèges de Boulatruelle dans le bois cessèrent, et il reprit régulièrement son travail de cantonnier. On parla d'autre chose.

Quelques personnes toutefois étaient restées curieuses, pensant qu'il y avait probablement dans ceci, non point les fabuleux trésors de la légende, mais quelque bonne aubaine, plus sérieuse et plus palpable que les billets de banque du diable, et dont le cantonnier avait sans doute surpris à moitié le secret. Les plus «intrigués» étaient le maître d'école et le gargotier Thénardier, lequel était l'ami de tout le monde et n'avait point dédaigné de se lier avec Boulatruelle.

— Il a été aux galères? disait Thénardier. Eh! mon Dieu! on ne sait ni qui y est, ni qui y sera.

Un soir le maître d'école affirmait qu'autrefois la justice se serait enquise de ce que Boulatruelle allait faire dans le bois, et qu'il aurait bien fallu qu'il parlât, et qu'on l'aurait mis à la torture au besoin, et que Boulatruelle n'aurait point résisté, par exemple, à la question de l'eau.

— Donnons-lui la question du vin, dit Thénardier.

On se mit à quatre et l'on fît boire le vieux cantonnier. Boulatruelle but énormément, et parla peu. Il combina, avec un art admirable et dans une proportion magistrale, la soif d'un goinfre avec la discrétion d'un juge.

Cependant, à force de revenir à la charge, et de rapprocher et de presser les quelques paroles obscures qui lui échappaient, voici ce que le Thénardier et le maître d'école crurent comprendre:

Boulatruelle, un matin, en se rendant au point du jour à son ouvrage, aurait été surpris de voir dans un coin du bois, sous une broussaille, une pelle et une pioche, *comme qui dirait cachées*. Cependant, il aurait pensé que c'étaient probablement la pelle et la pioche du père Six-Fours, le porteur d'eau, et il n'y aurait plus songé. Mais le soir du même jour, il aurait vu, sans pouvoir être vu lui-même, étant masqué par un gros arbre, se diriger de la route vers le plus épais du bois «un particulier qui n'était pas du tout du pays, et que lui, Boulatruelle, connaissait très bien». Traduction par Thénardier: *un camarade du bagne*. Boulatruelle s'était obstinément refusé à dire le nom. Ce particulier portait un paquet, quelque chose de carré, comme une grande boîte ou un petit coffre. Surprise de Boulatruelle. Ce ne serait pourtant qu'au bout de sept ou huit minutes que l'idée de suivre «le particulier» lui serait venue. Mais il était trop tard, le particulier était déjà dans le fourré, la nuit s'était faite, et Boulatruelle n'avait pu le rejoindre. Alors il avait pris le parti d'observer la lisière du bois. «Il faisait lune.» Deux ou trois heures après, Boulatruelle avait vu ressortir du taillis son particulier portant maintenant, non plus le petit coffre-malle, mais une pioche et une pelle. Boulatruelle avait laissé passer le particulier et n'avait pas eu l'idée de l'aborder, parce qu'il s'était dit que l'autre était trois fois plus fort que lui, et armé d'une pioche, et l'assommerait probablement en le reconnaissant et en se voyant reconnu. Touchante effusion de deux vieux camarades qui se retrouvent. Mais la pelle et la pioche avaient été un trait de lumière pour Boulatruelle; il avait couru à la broussaille du matin, et n'y avait plus trouvé ni pelle ni pioche. Il en avait conclu que son particulier, entré dans le bois, y avait creusé un trou avec la pioche, avait enfoui le coffre, et avait refermé le trou avec la pelle. Or, le coffre était trop petit pour contenir un cadavre, donc il contenait de l'argent. De là ses recherches. Boulatruelle avait exploré, sondé et fureté toute la forêt, et fouillé partout où la terre lui avait paru fraîchement remuée. En vain.

Il n'avait rien «déniché». Personne n'y pensa plus dans Montfermeil. Il y eut seulement quelques braves commères qui dirent: *Tenez pour certain que le cantonnier de Gagny n'a pas fait tout ce triquemaque pour rien; il est sûr que le diable est venu.*

Chapitre III

Qu’il fallait que la chaîne de la manille eut subit un certain travail préparatoire pour être ainsi brisée d’un coup de marteau

Vers la fin d’octobre de cette même année 1823, les habitants de Toulon virent rentrer dans leur port, à la suite d’un gros temps et pour réparer quelques avaries, le vaisseau l’ *Orion* qui a été plus tard employé à Brest comme vaisseau-école et qui faisait alors partie de l’escadre de la Méditerranée.

Ce bâtiment, tout éclopé qu’il était, car la mer l’avait malmené, fit de l’effet en entrant dans la rade. Il portait je ne sais plus quel pavillon qui lui valut un salut réglementaire de onze coups de canon, rendus par lui coup pour coup; total: vingt-deux. On a calculé qu’en salves, politesses royales et militaires, échanges de tapages courtois, signaux d’étiquette, formalités de rades et de citadelles, levers et couchers de soleil salués tous les jours par toutes les forteresses et tous les navires de guerre, ouvertures et fermetures de portes, etc., etc., le monde civilisé tirait à poudre par toute la terre, toutes les vingt-quatre heures, cent cinquante mille coups de canon inutiles. À six francs le coup de canon, cela fait neuf cent mille francs par jour, trois cents millions par an, qui s’en vont en fumée. Ceci n’est qu’un détail. Pendant ce temps-là les pauvres meurent de faim.

L’année 1823 était ce que la restauration a appelé «l’époque de la guerre d’Espagne.»

Cette guerre contenait beaucoup d’événements dans un seul, et force singularités. Une grosse affaire de famille pour la maison de Bourbon; la branche de France secourant et protégeant la branche de Madrid, c’est-à-dire faisant acte d’aînesse; un retour apparent à nos traditions nationales compliqué de servitude et de sujétion aux cabinets du nord; Mr le duc d’Angoulême, surnommé par les feuilles libérales *le héros d’Andujar*, comprimant, dans une attitude triomphale un peu contrariée par son air paisible, le vieux terrorisme fort réel du saint-office aux prises avec le terrorisme chimérique des libéraux; les sans-culottes ressuscités au grand effroi des douairières sous le nom de *descamisados;* le monarchisme faisant obstacle au progrès qualifié anarchie; les théories de 89 brusquement interrompues dans la sape; un holà européen intimé à l’idée française faisant son tour du monde; à côté du fils de France généralissime, le prince de Carignan, depuis Charles-Albert, s'enrôlant dans cette croisade des rois contre les peuples comme volontaire avec des épaulettes de grenadier en laine rouge; les soldats de l'empire se remettant en campagne, mais après huit années de repos, vieillis, tristes, et sous la cocarde blanche; le drapeau tricolore agité à l'étranger par une héroïque poignée de Français comme le drapeau blanc l'avait été à Coblentz trente ans auparavant; les moines mêlés à nos troupiers; l'esprit de liberté et de nouveauté mis à la raison par les bayonnettes; les principes matés à coups de canon; la France défaisant par ses armes ce qu'elle avait fait par son esprit; du reste, les chefs ennemis vendus, les soldats hésitants, les villes assiégées par des millions; point de périls militaires et pourtant des explosions possibles, comme dans toute mine surprise et envahie; peu de sang versé, peu d'honneur conquis, de la honte pour quelques-uns, de la gloire pour personne; telle fut cette guerre, faite par des princes qui descendaient de Louis XIV et conduite par des généraux qui sortaient de Napoléon. Elle eut ce triste sort de ne rappeler ni la grande guerre ni la grande politique.

Quelques faits d'armes furent sérieux; la prise du Trocadéro, entre autres, fut une belle action militaire; mais en somme, nous le répétons, les trompettes de cette guerre rendent un son fêlé, l'ensemble fut suspect, l'histoire approuve la France dans sa difficulté d'acceptation de ce faux triomphe. Il parut évident que certains officiers espagnols chargés de la résistance cédèrent trop aisément, l'idée de corruption se dégagea de la victoire; il sembla qu'on avait plutôt gagné les généraux que les batailles, et le soldat vainqueur rentra humilié. Guerre diminuante en effet où l'on put lire *Banque de France* dans les plis du drapeau. Des soldats de la guerre de 1808, sur lesquels s'était formidablement écroulée Saragosse, fronçaient le sourcil en 1823 devant l'ouverture facile des citadelles, et se prenaient à regretter Palafox. C'est l'humeur de la France d'aimer encore mieux avoir devant elle Rostopchine que Ballesteros.

À un point de vue plus grave encore, et sur lequel il convient d'insister aussi, cette guerre, qui froissait en France l'esprit militaire, indignait l'esprit démocratique. C'était une entreprise d'asservissement. Dans cette campagne, le but du soldat français, fils de la démocratie, était la conquête d'un joug pour autrui. Contresens hideux. La France est faite pour réveiller l'âme des peuples, non pour l'étouffer. Depuis 1792, toutes les révolutions de l'Europe sont la révolution française; la liberté rayonne de France. C'est là un fait solaire. Aveugle qui ne le voit pas! c'est Bonaparte qui l'a dit.

La guerre de 1823, attentat à la généreuse nation espagnole, était donc en même temps un attentat à la révolution française. Cette voie de fait monstrueuse, c'était la France qui la commettait; de force; car, en dehors des guerres libératrices, tout ce que font les armées, elles le font de force. Le mot *obéissance passive* l'indique. Une armée est un étrange chef-d'œuvre de combinaison où la force résulte d'une somme énorme d'impuissance. Ainsi s'explique la guerre, faite par l'humanité contre l'humanité malgré l'humanité.

Quant aux Bourbons, la guerre de 1823 leur fut fatale. Ils la prirent pour un succès. Ils ne virent point quel danger il y a à faire tuer une idée par une consigne. Ils se méprirent dans leur naïveté au point d'introduire dans leur établissement comme élément de force l'immense affaiblissement d'un crime. L'esprit de guet-apens entra dans leur politique. 1830 germa dans 1823. La campagne d'Espagne devint dans leurs conseils un argument pour les coups de force et pour les aventures de droit divin. La France, ayant rétabli *el rey neto* en Espagne, pouvait bien rétablir le roi absolu chez elle. Ils tombèrent dans cette redoutable erreur de prendre l'obéissance du soldat pour le consentement de la nation. Cette confiance-là perd les trônes. Il ne faut s'endormir, ni à l'ombre d'un mancenillier ni à l'ombre d'une armée.

Revenons au navire l' *Orion*.

Pendant les opérations de l'armée commandée par le prince-généralissime, une escadre croisait dans la Méditerranée. Nous venons de dire que l'*Orion* était de cette escadre et qu'il fut ramené par des événements de mer dans le port de Toulon.

La présence d'un vaisseau de guerre dans un port a je ne sais quoi qui appelle et qui occupe la foule. C'est que cela est grand, et que la foule aime ce qui est grand.

Un vaisseau de ligne est une des plus magnifiques rencontres qu'ait le génie de l'homme avec la puissance de la nature.

Un vaisseau de ligne est composé à la fois de ce qu'il y a de plus lourd et de ce qu'il y a de plus léger, parce qu'il a affaire en même temps aux trois formes de la substance, au solide, au liquide, au fluide, et qu'il doit lutter contre toutes les trois. Il a onze griffes de fer pour saisir le granit au fond de la mer, et plus d'ailes et plus d'antennes que la bigaille pour prendre le vent dans les nuées. Son haleine sort par ses cent vingt canons comme par des clairons énormes, et répond fièrement à la foudre. L’océan cherche à l’égarer dans l’effrayante similitude de ses vagues, mais le vaisseau a son âme, sa boussole, qui le conseille et lui montre toujours le nord. Dans les nuits noires ses fanaux suppléent aux étoiles. Ainsi, contre le vent il a la corde et la toile, contre l’eau le bois, contre le rocher le fer, le cuivre et le plomb, contre l’ombre la lumière, contre l’immensité une aiguille.

Si l’on veut se faire une idée de toutes ces proportions gigantesques dont l’ensemble constitue le vaisseau de ligne, on n’a qu’à entrer sous une des cales couvertes, à six étages, des ports de Brest ou de Toulon. Les vaisseaux en construction sont là sous cloche, pour ainsi dire. Cette poutre colossale, c’est une vergue; cette grosse colonne de bois couchée à terre à perte de vue, c’est le grand mât. À le prendre de sa racine dans la cale à sa cime dans la nuée, il est long de soixante toises, et il a trois pieds de diamètre à sa base. Le grand mât anglais s’élève à deux cent dix-sept pieds au-dessus de la ligne de flottaison. La marine de nos pères employait des câbles, la nôtre emploie des chaînes. Le simple tas de chaînes d’un vaisseau de cent canons a quatre pieds de haut, vingt pieds de large, huit pieds de profondeur. Et pour faire ce vaisseau, combien faut-il de bois? Trois mille stères. C’est une forêt qui flotte.

Et encore, qu’on le remarque bien, il ne s’agit ici que du bâtiment militaire d’il y a quarante ans, du simple navire à voiles; la vapeur, alors dans l’enfance, a depuis ajouté de nouveaux miracles à ce prodige qu’on appelle le vaisseau de guerre. À l’heure qu’il est, par exemple, le navire mixte à hélice est une machine surprenante traînée par une voilure de trois mille mètres carrés de surface et par une chaudière de la force de deux mille cinq cents chevaux.

Sans parler de ces merveilles nouvelles, l’ancien navire de Christophe Colomb et de Ruyter est un des grands chefs-d’œuvre de l’homme. Il est inépuisable en force comme l’infini en souffles, il emmagasine le vent dans sa voile, il est précis dans l’immense diffusion des vagues, il flotte et il règne.

Il vient une heure pourtant où la rafale brise comme une paille cette vergue de soixante pieds de long, où le vent ploie comme un jonc ce mât de quatre cents pieds de haut, où cette ancre qui pèse dix milliers se tord dans la gueule de la vague comme l’hameçon d’un pêcheur dans la mâchoire d’un brochet, où ces canons monstrueux poussent des rugissements plaintifs et inutiles que l’ouragan emporte dans le vide et dans la nuit, où toute cette puissance et toute cette majesté s’abîment dans une puissance et dans une majesté supérieures. Toutes les fois qu’une force immense se déploie pour aboutir à une immense faiblesse, cela fait rêver les hommes. De là, dans les ports, les curieux qui abondent, sans qu’ils s’expliquent eux-mêmes parfaitement pourquoi, autour de ces merveilleuses machines de guerre et de navigation.

Tous les jours donc, du matin au soir, les quais, les musoirs et les jetées du port de Toulon étaient couverts d’une quantité d’oisifs et de badauds, comme on dit à Paris, ayant pour affaire de regarder l’*Orion*.

L’*Orion* était un navire malade depuis longtemps. Dans ses navigations antérieures, des couches épaisses de coquillages s’étaient amoncelées sur sa carène au point de lui faire perdre la moitié de sa marche; on l’avait mis à sec l’année précédente pour gratter ces coquillages, puis il avait repris la mer. Mais ce grattage avait altéré les boulonnages de la carène. À la hauteur des Baléares, le bordé s’était fatigué et ouvert, et, comme le vaigrage ne se faisait pas alors en tôle, le navire avait fait de l’eau. Un violent coup d’équinoxe était survenu, qui avait défoncé à bâbord la poulaine et un sabord et endommagé le porte-haubans de misaine. À la suite de ces avaries, l’ *Orion* avait regagné Toulon.

Il était mouillé près de l’Arsenal. Il était en armement et on le réparait. La coque n’avait pas été endommagée à tribord, mais quelques bordages y étaient décloués çà et là, selon l’usage, pour laisser pénétrer de l’air dans la carcasse.

Un matin la foule qui le contemplait fut témoin d’un accident.

L’équipage était occupé à enverguer les voiles. Le gabier chargé de prendre l’empointure du grand hunier tribord perdit l’équilibre. On le vit chanceler, la multitude amassée sur le quai de l’Arsenal jeta un cri, la tête emporta le corps, l’homme tourna autour de la vergue, les mains étendues vers l’abîme; il saisit, au passage, le faux marchepied d’une main d’abord, puis de l’autre, et il y resta suspendu. La mer était au-dessous de lui à une profondeur vertigineuse. La secousse de sa chute avait imprimé au faux marchepied un violent mouvement d’escarpolette. L’homme allait et venait au bout de cette corde comme la pierre d’une fronde.

Aller à son secours, c’était courir un risque effrayant. Aucun des matelots, tous pêcheurs de la côte nouvellement levés pour le service, n’osait s’y aventurer. Cependant le malheureux gabier se fatiguait; on ne pouvait voir son angoisse sur son visage, mais on distinguait dans tous ses membres son épuisement. Ses bras se tendaient dans un tiraillement horrible. Chaque effort qu’il faisait pour remonter ne servait qu’à augmenter les oscillations du faux marchepied. Il ne criait pas de peur de perdre de la force. On n’attendait plus que la minute où il lâcherait la corde et par instants toutes les têtes se détournaient afin de ne pas le voir passer. Il y a des moments où un bout de corde, une perche, une branche d’arbre, c’est la vie même, et c’est une chose affreuse de voir un être vivant s’en détacher et tomber comme un fruit mûr.

Tout à coup, on aperçut un homme qui grimpait dans le gréement avec l’agilité d’un chat-tigre. Cet homme était vêtu de rouge, c’était un forçat; il avait un bonnet vert, c’était un forçat à vie. Arrivé à la hauteur de la hune, un coup de vent emporta son bonnet et laissa voir une tête toute blanche, ce n’était pas un jeune homme.

Un forçat en effet, employé à bord avec une corvée du bagne, avait dès le premier moment couru à l’officier de quart et au milieu du trouble et de l’hésitation de l’équipage, pendant que tous les matelots tremblaient et reculaient, il avait demandé à l’officier la permission de risquer sa vie pour sauver le gabier. Sur un signe affirmatif de l’officier, il avait rompu d’un coup de marteau la chaîne rivée à la manille de son pied, puis il avait pris une corde, et il s’était élancé dans les haubans. Personne ne remarqua en cet instant-là avec quelle facilité cette chaîne fut brisée. Ce ne fut que plus tard qu’on s’en souvint. En un clin d’œil il fut sur la vergue. Il s’arrêta quelques secondes et parut la mesurer du regard. Ces secondes, pendant lesquelles le vent balançait le gabier à l’extrémité d’un fil, semblèrent des siècles à ceux qui regardaient. Enfin le forçat leva les yeux au ciel, et fit un pas en avant. La foule respira. On le vit parcourir la vergue en courant. Parvenu à la pointe, il y attacha un bout de la corde qu’il avait apportée, et laissa pendre l’autre bout, puis il se mit à descendre avec les mains le long de cette corde, et alors ce fut une inexplicable angoisse, au lieu d’un homme suspendu sur le gouffre, on en vit deux.

On eût dit une araignée venant saisir une mouche; seulement ici l’araignée apportait la vie et non la mort. Dix mille regards étaient fixés sur ce groupe. Pas un cri, pas une parole, le même frémissement fronçait tous les sourcils. Toutes les bouches retenaient leur haleine, comme si elles eussent craint d’ajouter le moindre souffle au vent qui secouait les deux misérables.

Cependant le forçat était parvenu à s’affaler près du matelot. Il était temps; une minute de plus, l’homme, épuisé et désespéré, se laissait tomber dans l’abîme; le forçat l’avait amarré solidement avec la corde à laquelle il se tenait d’une main pendant qu’il travaillait de l’autre. Enfin on le vit remonter sur la vergue et y haler le matelot; il le soutint là un instant pour lui laisser reprendre des forces, puis il le saisit dans ses bras et le porta, en marchant sur la vergue jusqu’au chouquet, et de là dans la hune où il le laissa dans les mains de ses camarades.

À cet instant la foule applaudit; il y eut de vieux argousins de chiourme qui pleurèrent, les femmes s’embrassaient sur le quai, et l’on entendit toutes les voix crier avec une sorte de fureur attendrie: «La grâce de cet homme!»

Lui, cependant, s’était mis en devoir de redescendre immédiatement pour rejoindre sa corvée. Pour être plus promptement arrivé, il se laissa glisser dans le gréement et se mit à courir sur une basse vergue. Tous les yeux le suivaient. À un certain moment, on eut peur; soit qu’il fût fatigué, soit que la tête lui tournât, on crut le voir hésiter et chanceler. Tout à coup la foule poussa un grand cri, le forçat venait de tomber à la mer.

La chute était périlleuse. La frégate l’ *Algésiras* était mouillée auprès de l’ *Orion*, et le pauvre galérien était tombé entre les deux navires. Il était à craindre qu’il ne glissât sous l’un ou sous l’autre. Quatre hommes se jetèrent en hâte dans une embarcation. La foule les encourageait, l’anxiété était de nouveau dans toutes les âmes. L’homme n’était pas remonté à la surface. Il avait disparu dans la mer sans y faire un pli, comme s’il fût tombé dans une tonne d’huile. On sonda, on plongea. Ce fut en vain. On chercha jusqu’au soir; on ne retrouva pas même le corps.

Le lendemain, le journal de Toulon imprimait ces quelques livres: — «17 novembre 1823. — Hier, un forçat, de corvée à bord de l’*Orion*, en revenant de porter secours à un matelot, est tombé à la mer et s’est noyé. On n’a pu retrouver son cadavre. On présume qu’il se sera engagé sous le pilotis de la pointe de l’Arsenal. Cet homme était écroué sous le nº 9430 et se nommait Jean Valjean.»

Livre troisième — Accomplissement de la promesse faite à la morte

Chapitre I

La question de l’eau à Montfermeil

Montfermeil est situé entre Livry et Chelles, sur la lisière méridionale de ce haut plateau qui sépare l’Ourcq de la Marne. Aujourd’hui c’est un assez gros bourg orné, toute l’année, de villas en plâtre, et, le dimanche, de bourgeois épanouis. En 1823, il n’y avait à Montfermeil ni tant de maisons blanches ni tant de bourgeois satisfaits. Ce n’était qu’un village dans les bois. On y rencontrait bien çà et là quelques maisons de plaisance du dernier siècle, reconnaissables à leur grand air, à leurs balcons en fer tordu et à ces longues fenêtres dont les petits carreaux font sur le blanc des volets fermés toutes sortes de verts différents. Mais Montfermeil n’en était pas moins un village. Les marchands de drap retirés et les agréés en villégiature ne l’avaient pas encore découvert. C’était un endroit paisible et charmant, qui n’était sur la route de rien; on y vivait à bon marché de cette vie paysanne si abondante et si facile. Seulement l’eau y était rare à cause de l’élévation du plateau.

Il fallait aller la chercher assez loin. Le bout du village qui est du côté de Gagny puisait son eau aux magnifiques étangs qu’il y a là dans les bois; l’autre bout, qui entoure l’église et qui est du côté de Chelles, ne trouvait d’eau potable qu’à une petite source à mi-côte, près de la route de Chelles, à environ un quart d’heure de Montfermeil.

C’était donc une assez rude besogne pour chaque ménage que cet approvisionnement de l’eau. Les grosses maisons, l’aristocratie, la gargote Thénardier en faisait partie, payaient un liard par seau d’eau à un bonhomme dont c’était l’état et qui gagnait à cette entreprise des eaux de Montfermeil environ huit sous par jour; mais ce bonhomme ne travaillait que jusqu’à sept heures du soir l’été et jusqu’à cinq heures l’hiver, et une fois la nuit venue, une fois les volets des rez-de-chaussée clos, qui n’avait pas d’eau à boire en allait chercher ou s’en passait.

C’était là la terreur de ce pauvre être que le lecteur n’a peut-être pas oublié, de la petite Cosette. On se souvient que Cosette était utile aux Thénardier de deux manières, ils se faisaient payer par la mère et ils se faisaient servir par l’enfant. Aussi quand la mère cessa tout à fait de payer, on vient de lire pourquoi dans les chapitres précédents, les Thénardier gardèrent Cosette. Elle leur remplaçait une servante. En cette qualité, c'était elle qui courait chercher de l'eau quand il en fallait. Aussi l'enfant, fort épouvantée de l'idée d'aller à la source la nuit, avait-elle grand soin que l'eau ne manquât jamais à la maison.

La Noël de l'année 1823 fut particulièrement brillante à Montfermeil. Le commencement de l'hiver avait été doux; il n'avait encore ni gelé ni neigé. Des bateleurs venus de Paris avaient obtenu de Mr le maire la permission de dresser leurs baraques dans la grande rue du village, et une bande de marchands ambulants avait, sous la même tolérance, construit ses échoppes sur la place de l'église et jusque dans la ruelle du Boulanger, où était située, on s'en souvient peut-être, la gargote des Thénardier. Cela emplissait les auberges et les cabarets, et donnait à ce petit pays tranquille une vie bruyante et joyeuse. Nous devons même dire, pour être fidèle historien, que parmi les curiosités étalées sur la place, il y avait une ménagerie dans laquelle d'affreux paillasses, vêtus de loques et venus on ne sait d'où, montraient en 1823 aux paysans de Montfermeil un de ces effrayants vautours du Brésil que notre Muséum royal ne possède que depuis 1845, et qui ont pour œil une cocarde tricolore. Les naturalistes appellent, je crois, cet oiseau *Caracara Polyborus*: il est de l'ordre des apicides et de la famille des vautouriens. Quelques bons vieux soldats bonapartistes retirés dans le village allaient voir cette bête avec dévotion. Les bateleurs donnaient la cocarde tricolore comme un phénomène unique et fait exprès par le bon Dieu pour leur ménagerie.

Dans la soirée même de Noël, plusieurs hommes, rouliers et colporteurs, étaient attablés et buvaient autour de quatre ou cinq chandelles dans la salle basse de l'auberge Thénardier. Cette salle ressemblait à toutes les salles de cabaret; des tables, des brocs d'étain, des bouteilles, des buveurs, des fumeurs; peu de lumière, beaucoup de bruit. La date de l'année 1823 était pourtant indiquée par les deux objets à la mode alors dans la classe bourgeoise qui étaient sur une table, savoir un kaléidoscope et une lampe de fer-blanc moiré. La Thénardier surveillait le souper qui rôtissait devant un bon feu clair; le mari Thénardier buvait avec ses hôtes et parlait politique.

Outre les causeries politiques, qui avaient pour objets principaux la guerre d'Espagne et Mr le duc d'Angoulême, on entendait dans le brouhaha des parenthèses toutes locales comme celles-ci:

— Du côté de Nanterre et de Suresnes le vin a beaucoup donné. Où l'on comptait sur dix pièces on en a eu douze. Cela a beaucoup juté sous le pressoir. — Mais le raisin ne devait pas être mûr? — Dans ces pays-là il ne faut pas qu'on vendange mûr. Si l'on vendange mûr, le vin tourne au gras sitôt le printemps. — C'est donc tout petit vin? — C'est des vins encore plus petits que par ici. Il faut qu'on vendange vert.

Etc....

Ou bien, c'était un meunier qui s'écriait:

— Est-ce que nous sommes responsables de ce qu'il y a dans les sacs? Nous y trouvons un tas de petites graines que nous ne pouvons pas nous amuser à éplucher, et qu'il faut bien laisser passer sous les meules; c'est l'ivraie, c'est la luzette, la nielle, la vesce, le chènevis, la gaverolle, la queue-de-renard, et une foule d'autres drogues, sans compter les cailloux qui abondent dans de certains blés, surtout dans les blés bretons. Je n'ai pas l'amour de moudre du blé breton, pas plus que les scieurs de long de scier des poutres où il y a des clous. Jugez de la mauvaise poussière que tout cela fait dans le rendement. Après quoi on se plaint de la farine. On a tort. La farine n'est pas notre faute.

Dans un entre-deux de fenêtres, un faucheur, attablé avec un propriétaire qui faisait prix pour un travail de prairie à faire au printemps, disait:

— Il n'y a point de mal que l'herbe soit mouillée. Elle se coupe mieux. La rousée est bonne, monsieur. C'est égal, cette herbe-là, votre herbe, est jeune et bien difficile encore. Que voilà qui est si tendre, que voilà qui plie devant la planche de fer.

Etc....

Cosette était à sa place ordinaire, assise sur la traverse de la table de cuisine près de la cheminée. Elle était en haillons, elle avait ses pieds nus dans des sabots, et elle tricotait à la lueur du feu des bas de laine destinés aux petites Thénardier. Un tout jeune chat jouait sous les chaises. On entendait rire et jaser dans pièce voisine deux fraîches voix d'enfants; c'était Éponine et Azelma.

Au coin de la cheminée, un martinet était suspendu à un clou.

Par intervalles, le cri d'un très jeune enfant, qui était quelque part dans la maison, perçait au milieu du bruit du cabaret. C'était un petit garçon que la Thénardier avait eu un des hivers précédents, — «sans savoir pourquoi, disait-elle, effet du froid,» — et qui était âgé d'un peu plus de trois ans. La mère l'avait nourri, mais ne l'aimait pas. Quand la clameur acharnée du mioche devenait trop importune: — Ton fils piaille, disait Thénardier, va donc voir ce qu’il veut. — Bah! répondait la mère, il m’ennuie. — Et le petit abandonné continuait de crier dans les ténèbres.

Chapitre II

Deux portraits complétés

On n’a encore aperçu dans ce livre les Thénardier que de profil; le moment est venu de tourner autour de ce couple et de le regarder sous toutes ses faces.

Thénardier venait de dépasser ses cinquante ans; madame Thénardier touchait à la quarantaine, qui est la cinquantaine de la femme; de façon qu’il y avait équilibre d’âge entre la femme et le mari.

Les lecteurs ont peut-être, dès sa première apparition, conservé quelque souvenir de cette Thénardier grande, blonde, rouge, grasse, charnue, carrée, énorme et agile; elle tenait, nous l’avons dit, de la race de ces sauvagesses colosses qui se cambrent dans les foires avec des pavés pendus à leur chevelure. Elle faisait tout dans le logis, les lits, les chambres, la lessive, la cuisine, la pluie, le beau temps, le diable. Elle avait pour tout domestique Cosette; une souris au service d’un éléphant. Tout tremblait au son de sa voix, les vitres, les meubles et les gens. Son large visage, criblé de taches de rousseur, avait l’aspect d’une écumoire. Elle avait de la barbe. C’était l’idéal d’un fort de la halle habillé en fille. Elle jurait splendidement; elle se vantait de casser une noix d’un coup de poing. Sans les romans qu’elle avait lus, et qui, par moments, faisaient bizarrement reparaître la mijaurée sous l’ogresse, jamais l’idée ne fût venue à personne de dire d’elle: *c’est une femme*. Cette Thénardier était comme le produit de la greffe d’une donzelle sur une poissarde. Quand on l’entendait parler, on disait: *C’est un gendarme*; quand on la regardait boire, on disait: *C’est un charretier*; quand on la voyait manier Cosette, on disait: *C’est le bourreau*. Au repos, il lui sortait de la bouche une dent.

Le Thénardier était un homme petit, maigre, blême, anguleux, osseux, chétif, qui avait l’air malade et qui se portait à merveille; sa fourberie commençait là. Il souriait habituellement par précaution, et était poli à peu près avec tout le monde, même avec le mendiant auquel il refusait un liard. Il avait le regard d’une fouine et la mine d’un homme de lettres. Il ressemblait beaucoup aux portraits de l’abbé Delille. Sa coquetterie consistait à boire avec les rouliers. Personne n’avait jamais pu le griser. Il fumait dans une grosse pipe. Il portait une blouse et sous sa blouse un vieil habit noir. Il avait des prétentions à la littérature et au matérialisme. Il y avait des noms qu'il prononçait souvent, pour appuyer les choses quelconques qu'il disait, Voltaire, Raynal, Pamy, et, chose bizarre, saint Augustin. Il affirmait avoir «un système». Du reste fort escroc. Un filousophe. Cette nuance existe. On se souvient qu'il prétendait avoir servi; il contait avec quelque luxe qu'à Waterloo, étant sergent dans un 6ème ou un 9ème léger quelconque, il avait, seul contre un escadron de hussards de la Mort, couvert de son corps et sauvé à travers la mitraille «un général dangereusement blessé». De là, venait, pour son mur, sa flamboyante enseigne, et, pour son auberge, dans le pays, le nom de «cabaret du sergent de Waterloo». Il était libéral, classique et bonapartiste. Il avait souscrit pour le champ d'Asile. On disait dans le village qu'il avait étudié pour être prêtre.

Nous croyons qu'il avait simplement étudié en Hollande pour être aubergiste. Ce gredin de l'ordre composite était, selon les probabilités, quelque Flamand de Lille en Flandre, Français à Paris, Belge à Bruxelles, commodément à cheval sur deux frontières. Sa prouesse à Waterloo, on la connaît. Comme on voit, il l'exagérait un peu. Le flux et le reflux, le méandre, l'aventure, était l'élément de son existence; conscience déchirée entraîne vie décousue; et vraisemblablement, à l'orageuse époque du 18 juin 1815, Thénardier appartenait à cette variété de cantiniers maraudeurs dont nous avons parlé, battant l'estrade, vendant à ceux-ci, volant ceux-là, et roulant en famille, homme, femme et enfants, dans quelque carriole boiteuse, à la suite des troupes en marche, avec l'instinct de se rattacher toujours à l'armée victorieuse. Cette campagne faite, ayant, comme il disait, «du quibus», il était venu ouvrir gargote à Montfermeil. Ce *quibus*, composé des bourses et des montres, des bagues d'or et des croix d'argent récoltées au temps de la moisson dans les sillons ensemencés de cadavres, ne faisait pas un gros total et n'avait pas mené bien loin ce vivandier passé gargotier.

Thénardier avait ce je ne sais quoi de rectiligne dans le geste qui, avec un juron, rappelle la caserne et, avec un signe de croix, le séminaire. Il était beau parleur. Il se laissait croire savant. Néanmoins, le maître d'école avait remarqué qu'il faisait — «des cuirs». Il composait la carte à payer des voyageurs avec supériorité, mais des yeux exercés y trouvaient parfois des fautes d'orthographe. Thénardier était sournois, gourmand, flâneur et habile. Il ne dédaignait pas ses servantes, ce qui faisait que sa femme n'en avait plus. Cette géante était jalouse. Il lui semblait que ce petit homme maigre et jaune devait être l'objet de la convoitise universelle.

Thénardier, par-dessus tout, homme d'astuce et d'équilibre, était un coquin du genre tempéré. Cette espèce est la pire; l'hypocrisie s'y mêle.

Ce n'est pas que Thénardier ne fût dans l'occasion capable de colère au moins autant que sa femme; mais cela était très rare, et dans ces moments-là, comme il en voulait au genre humain tout entier, comme il avait en lui une profonde fournaise de haine, comme il était de ces gens qui se vengent perpétuellement, qui accusent tout ce qui passe devant eux de tout ce qui est tombé sur eux, et qui sont toujours prêts à jeter sur le premier venu, comme légitime grief, le total des déceptions, des banqueroutes et des calamités de leur vie, comme tout ce levain se soulevait en lui et lui bouillonnait dans la bouche et dans les yeux, il était épouvantable. Malheur à qui passait sous sa fureur alors!

Outre toutes ses autres qualités, Thénardier était attentif et pénétrant, silencieux ou bavard à l'occasion, et toujours avec une haute intelligence. Il avait quelque chose du regard des marins accoutumés à cligner des yeux dans les lunettes d'approche. Thénardier était un homme d'État.

Tout nouveau venu qui entrait dans la gargote disait en voyant la Thénardier: *Voilà le maître de la maison*. Erreur. Elle n'était même pas la maîtresse. Le maître et la maîtresse, c'était le mari. Elle faisait, il créait. Il dirigeait tout par une sorte d'action magnétique invisible et continuelle. Un mot lui suffisait, quelquefois un signe; le mastodonte obéissait. Le Thénardier était pour la Thénardier, sans qu'elle s'en rendit trop compte, une espèce d'être particulier et souverain. Elle avait les vertus de sa façon d'être; jamais, eût-elle été en dissentiment sur un détail avec «monsieur Thénardier», hypothèse du reste inadmissible, elle n'eût donné publiquement tort à son mari, sur quoi que ce soit. Jamais elle n'eût commis «devant des étrangers» cette faute que font si souvent les femmes, et qu'on appelle, en langage parlementaire, découvrir la couronne. Quoique leur accord n'eût pour résultat que le mal, il y avait de la contemplation dans la soumission de la Thénardier à son mari. Cette montagne de bruit et de chair se mouvait sous le petit doigt de ce despote frêle. C'était, vu par son côté nain et grotesque, cette grande chose universelle: l'adoration de la matière pour l'esprit; car de certaines laideurs ont leur raison d'être dans les profondeurs mêmes de la beauté éternelle. Il y avait de l'inconnu dans Thénardier; de là l'empire absolu de cet homme sur cette femme. À de certains moments, elle le voyait comme une chandelle allumée; dans d’autres, elle le sentait comme une griffe.

Cette femme était une créature formidable qui n’aimait que ses enfants et ne craignait que son mari. Elle était mère parce qu’elle était mammifère. Du reste, sa maternité s’arrêtait à ses filles, et, comme on le verra, ne s’étendait pas jusqu’aux garçons. Lui, l’homme, n’avait qu’une pensée: s’enrichir.

Il n’y réussissait point. Un digne théâtre manquait à ce grand talent. Thénardier à Montfermeil se ruinait, si la ruine est possible à zéro; en Suisse ou dans les Pyrénées, ce sans-le-sou serait devenu millionnaire. Mais où le sort attache l’aubergiste, il faut qu’il broute.

On comprend que le mot *aubergiste* est employé ici dans un sens restreint, et qui ne s’étend pas à une classe entière. En cette même année 1823, Thénardier était endetté d’environ quinze cents francs de dettes criardes, ce qui le rendait soucieux.

Quelle que fût envers lui l’injustice opiniâtre de la destinée, le Thénardier était un des hommes qui comprenaient le mieux, avec le plus de profondeur et de la façon la plus moderne, cette chose qui est une vertu chez les peuples barbares et une marchandise chez les peuples civilisés, l’hospitalité. Du reste braconnier admirable et cité pour son coup de fusil. Il avait un certain rire froid et paisible qui était particulièrement dangereux.

Ses théories d’aubergiste jaillissaient quelquefois de lui par éclairs. Il avait des aphorismes professionnels qu’il insérait dans l’esprit de sa femme. — «Le devoir de l’aubergiste, lui disait-il un jour violemment et à voix basse, c’est de vendre au premier venu du fricot, du repos, de la lumière, du feu, des draps sales, de la bonne, des puces, du sourire; d’arrêter les passants, de vider les petites bourses et d’alléger honnêtement les grosses, d’abriter avec respect les familles en route, de râper l’homme, de plumer la femme, d’éplucher l’enfant; de coter la fenêtre ouverte, la fenêtre fermée, le coin de la cheminée, le fauteuil, la chaise, le tabouret, l’escabeau, le lit de plume, le matelas et la botte de paille; de savoir de combien l’ombre use le miroir et de tarifer cela, et, par les cinq cent mille diables, de faire tout payer au voyageur, jusqu’aux mouches que son chien mange!»

Cet homme et cette femme, c’était ruse et rage mariés ensemble, attelage hideux et terrible.

Pendant que le mari ruminait et combinait, la Thénardier, elle, ne pensait pas aux créanciers absents, n’avait souci d’hier ni de demain, et vivait avec emportement, toute dans la minute.

Tels étaient ces deux êtres. Cosette était entre eux, subissant leur double pression, comme une créature qui serait à la fois broyée par une meule et déchiquetée par une tenaille. L’homme et la femme avaient chacun une manière différente; Cosette était rouée de coups, cela venait de la femme; elle allait pieds nus l’hiver, cela venait du mari.

Cosette montait, descendait, lavait, brossait, frottait, balayait, courait, trimait, haletait, remuait des choses lourdes, et, toute chétive, faisait les grosses besognes. Nulle pitié; une maîtresse farouche, un maître venimeux. La gargote Thénardier était comme une toile où Cosette était prise et tremblait. L’idéal de l’oppression était réalisé par cette domesticité sinistre. C’était quelque chose comme la mouche servante des araignées.

La pauvre enfant, passive, se taisait.

Quand elles se trouvent ainsi, dès l’aube, toutes petites, toutes nues, parmi les hommes, que se passe-t-il dans ces âmes qui viennent de quitter Dieu?

Chapitre III

Il faut du vin aux hommes et de l’eau aux chevaux

Il était arrivé quatre nouveaux voyageurs.

Cosette songeait tristement; car, quoiqu’elle n’eût que huit ans, elle avait déjà tant souffert qu’elle rêvait avec l’air lugubre d’une vieille femme.

Elle avait la paupière noire d’un coup de poing que la Thénardier lui avait donné, ce qui faisait dire de temps en temps à la Thénardier: — Est-elle laide avec son pochon sur l’œil!

Cosette pensait donc qu’il était nuit, très nuit, qu’il avait fallu remplir à l’improviste les pots et les carafes dans les chambres des voyageurs survenus, et qu’il n’y avait plus d’eau dans la fontaine.

Ce qui la rassurait un peu, c’est qu’on ne buvait pas beaucoup d’eau dans la maison Thénardier. Il ne manquait pas là de gens qui avaient soif; mais c’était de cette soif qui s’adresse plus volontiers au broc qu’à la cruche. Qui eût demandé un verre d’eau parmi ces verres de vin eût semblé un sauvage à tous ces hommes. Il y eut pourtant un moment où l’enfant trembla: la Thénardier souleva le couvercle d’une casserole qui bouillait sur le fourneau, puis saisit un verre et s’approcha vivement de la fontaine. Elle tourna le robinet, l’enfant avait levé la tête et suivait tous ses mouvements. Un maigre filet d’eau coula du robinet et remplit le verre à moitié.

— Tiens, dit-elle, il n’y a plus d’eau! puis elle eut un moment de silence.

L’enfant ne respirait pas.

— Bah, reprit la Thénardier en examinant le verre à demi plein, il y en aura assez comme cela.

Cosette se remit à son travail, mais pendant plus d’un quart d’heure elle sentit son cœur sauter comme un gros flocon dans sa poitrine.

Elle comptait les minutes qui s’écoulaient ainsi, et eût bien voulu être au lendemain matin.

De temps en temps, un des buveurs regardait dans la rue et s’exclamait: — Il fait noir comme dans un four! — Ou: — Il faut être chat pour aller dans la rue sans lanterne à cette heure-ci! — Et Cosette tressaillait.

Tout à coup, un des marchands colporteurs logés dans l’auberge entra, et dit d’une voix dure:

— On n’a pas donné à boire à mon cheval.

— Si fait vraiment, dit la Thénardier.

— Je vous dis que non, la mère, reprit le marchand.

Cosette était sortie de dessous la table.

— Oh! si! monsieur! dit-elle, le cheval a bu, il a bu dans le seau, plein le seau, et même que c’est moi qui lui ai porté à boire, et je lui ai parlé.

Cela n’était pas vrai. Cosette mentait.

— En voilà une qui est grosse comme le poing et qui ment gros comme la maison, s’écria le marchand. Je te dis qu’il n’a pas bu, petite drôlesse! Il a une manière de souffler quand il n’a pas bu que je connais bien.

Cosette persista, et ajouta d’une voix enrouée par l’angoisse et qu’on entendait à peine:

— Et même qu’il a bien bu!

— Allons, reprit le marchand avec colère, ce n’est pas tout ça, qu’on donne à boire à mon cheval et que cela finisse!

Cosette rentra sous la table.

— Au fait, c’est juste, dit la Thénardier, si cette bête n’a pas bu, il faut qu’elle boive.

Puis, regardant autour d’elle:

— Eh bien, où est donc cette autre?

Elle se pencha et découvrit Cosette blottie à l’autre bout de la table, presque sous les pieds des buveurs.

— Vas-tu venir? cria la Thénardier.

Cosette sortit de l’espèce de trou où elle s’était cachée. La Thénardier reprit:

— Mademoiselle Chien-faute-de-nom, va porter à boire à ce cheval.

— Mais, madame, dit Cosette faiblement, c’est qu’il n’y a pas d’eau.

La Thénardier ouvrit toute grande la porte de la rue.

— Eh bien, va en chercher!

Cosette baissa la tête, et alla prendre un seau vide qui était au coin de la cheminée.

Ce seau était plus grand qu’elle, et l’enfant aurait pu s’asseoir dedans et y tenir à l’aise.

La Thénardier se remit à son fourneau, et goûta avec une cuillère de bois ce qui était dans la casserole, tout en grommelant:

— Il y en a à la source. Ce n’est pas plus malin que ça. Je crois que j’aurais mieux fait de passer mes oignons.

Puis elle fouilla dans un tiroir où il y avait des sous, du poivre et des échalotes.

— Tiens, mamzelle Crapaud, ajouta-t-elle, en revenant tu prendras un gros pain chez le boulanger. Voilà une pièce de quinze sous.

Cosette avait une petite poche de côté à son tablier; elle prit la pièce sans dire un mot, et la mit dans cette poche.

Puis elle resta immobile, le seau à la main, la porte ouverte devant elle. Elle semblait attendre qu'on vînt à son secours.

— Va donc! cria la Thénardier.

Cosette sortit. La porte se referma.

Chapitre IV

Entrée en scène d’une poupée

La file de boutiques en plein vent qui partait de l’église se développait, on s’en souvient, jusqu’à l’auberge Thénardier. Ces boutiques, à cause du passage prochain des bourgeois allant à la messe de minuit, étaient toutes illuminées de chandelles brûlant dans des entonnoirs de papier, ce qui, comme le disait le maître d’école de Montfermeil attablé en ce moment chez Thénardier, faisait «un effet magique». En revanche, on ne voyait pas une étoile au ciel.

La dernière de ces baraques, établie précisément en face de la porte des Thénardier, était une boutique de bimbeloterie, toute reluisante de clinquants, de verroteries et de choses magnifiques en fer-blanc. Au premier rang, et en avant, le marchand avait placé, sur un fond de serviettes blanches, une immense poupée haute de près de deux pieds qui était vêtue d’une robe de crêpe rose avec des épis d’or sur la tête et qui avait de vrais cheveux et des yeux en émail. Tout le jour, cette merveille avait été étalée à l’ébahissement des passants de moins de dix ans, sans qu’il se fût trouvé à Montfermeil une mère assez riche, ou assez prodigue, pour la donner à son enfant. Éponine et Azelma avaient passé des heures à la contempler, et Cosette elle-même, furtivement, il est vrai, avait osé la regarder.

Au moment où Cosette sortit, son seau à la main, si morne et si accablée qu’elle fût, elle ne put s’empêcher de lever les yeux sur cette prodigieuse poupée, vers la dame, comme elle l’appelait. La pauvre enfant s’arrêta pétrifiée. Elle n’avait pas encore vu cette poupée de près. Toute cette boutique lui semblait un palais; cette poupée n’était pas une poupée, c’était une vision. C’étaient la joie, la splendeur, la richesse, le bonheur, qui apparaissaient dans une sorte de rayonnement chimérique à ce malheureux petit être englouti si profondément dans une misère funèbre et froide. Cosette mesurait avec cette sagacité naïve et triste de l’enfance l’abîme qui la séparait de cette poupée. Elle se disait qu’il fallait être reine ou au moins princesse pour avoir une «chose» comme cela. Elle considérait cette belle robe rose, ces beaux cheveux lisses, et elle pensait: *Comme elle doit être heureuse, cette poupée-là*! Ses yeux ne pouvaient se détacher de cette boutique fantastique. Plus elle regardait, plus elle s’éblouissait. Elle croyait voir le paradis. Il y avait d’autres poupées derrière la grande qui lui paraissaient des fées et des génies. Le marchand qui allait et venait au fond de sa baraque lui faisait un peu l’effet d’être le Père éternel.

Dans cette adoration, elle oubliait tout, même la commission dont elle était chargée. Tout à coup, la voix rude de la Thénardier la rappela à la réalité: — Comment, péronnelle, tu n’es pas partie! Attends! je vais à toi! Je vous demande un peu ce qu’elle fait là! Petit monstre, va!

La Thénardier avait jeté un coup d’œil dans la rue et aperçu Cosette en extase.

Cosette s’enfuit emportant son seau et faisant les plus grands pas qu’elle pouvait.

Chapitre V

La petite toute seule

Comme l'auberge Thénardier était dans cette partie du village qui est près de l'église, c'était à la source du bois du côté de Chelles que Cosette devait aller puiser de l'eau.

Elle ne regarda plus un seul étalage de marchand. Tant qu'elle fut dans la ruelle du Boulanger et dans les environs de l'église, les boutiques illuminées éclairaient le chemin, mais bientôt la dernière lueur de la dernière baraque disparut. La pauvre enfant se trouva dans l'obscurité. Elle s'y enfonça. Seulement, comme une certaine émotion la gagnait, tout en marchant elle agitait le plus qu'elle pouvait l'anse du seau. Cela faisait un bruit qui lui tenait compagnie.

Plus elle cheminait, plus les ténèbres devenaient épaisses. Il n'y avait plus personne dans les rues. Pourtant, elle rencontra une femme qui se retourna en la voyant passer, et qui resta immobile, marmottant entre ses lèvres: «Mais où peut donc aller cet enfant? Est-ce que c'est un enfant-garou?» Puis la femme reconnut Cosette. «Tiens, dit-elle, c'est l'Alouette!»

Cosette traversa ainsi le labyrinthe de rues tortueuses et désertes qui termine du côté de Chelles le village de Montfermeil. Tant qu'elle eut des maisons et même seulement des murs des deux côtés de son chemin, elle alla assez hardiment. De temps en temps, elle voyait le rayonnement d'une chandelle à travers la fente d'un volet, c'était de la lumière et de la vie, il y avait là des gens, cela la rassurait. Cependant, à mesure qu'elle avançait, sa marche se ralentissait comme machinalement. Quand elle eut passé l'angle de la dernière maison, Cosette s'arrêta. Aller au delà de la dernière boutique, cela avait été difficile; aller plus loin que la dernière maison, cela devenait impossible. Elle posa le seau à terre, plongea sa main dans ses cheveux et se mit à se gratter lentement la tête, geste propre aux enfants terrifiés et indécis. Ce n'était plus Montfermeil, c'étaient les champs. L'espace noir et désert était devant elle. Elle regarda avec désespoir cette obscurité où il n'y avait plus personne, où il y avait des bêtes, où il y avait peut-être des revenants. Elle regarda bien, et elle entendit les bêtes qui marchaient dans l'herbe, et elle vit distinctement les revenants qui remuaient dans les arbres. Alors elle ressaisit le seau, la peur lui donna de l’audace.

— Bah! dit-elle, je lui dirai qu’il n’y avait plus d’eau!

Et elle rentra résolument dans Montfermeil.

À peine eut-elle fait cent pas qu’elle s’arrêta encore, et se remit à se gratter la tête. Maintenant, c’était la Thénardier qui lui apparaissait; la Thénardier hideuse avec sa bouche d’hyène et la colère flamboyante dans les yeux. L’enfant jeta un regard lamentable en avant et en arrière. Que faire? que devenir? où aller? Devant elle le spectre de la Thénardier; derrière elle tous les fantômes de la nuit et des bois. Ce fut devant la Thénardier qu’elle recula. Elle reprit le chemin de la source et se mit à courir. Elle sortit du village en courant, elle entra dans le bois en courant, ne regardant plus rien, n’écoutant plus rien. Elle n’arrêta sa course que lorsque la respiration lui manqua, mais elle n’interrompit point sa marche. Elle allait devant elle, éperdue.

Tout en courant, elle avait envie de pleurer.

Le frémissement nocturne de la forêt l’enveloppait tout entière. Elle ne pensait plus, elle ne voyait plus. L’immense nuit faisait face à ce petit être. D’un côté, toute l’ombre; de l’autre, un atome.

Il n’y avait que sept ou huit minutes de la lisière du bois à la source. Cosette connaissait le chemin pour l’avoir fait bien souvent le jour. Chose étrange, elle ne se perdit pas. Un reste d’instinct la conduisait vaguement. Elle ne jetait cependant les yeux ni à droite ni à gauche, de crainte de voir des choses dans les branches et dans les broussailles. Elle arriva ainsi à la source.

C’était une étroite cuve naturelle creusée par l’eau dans un sol glaiseux, profonde d’environ deux pieds, entourée de mousses et de ces grandes herbes gaufrées qu’on appelle collerettes de Henri IV, et pavée de quelques grosses pierres. Un ruisseau s’en échappait avec un petit bruit tranquille.

Cosette ne prit pas le temps de respirer. Il faisait très noir, mais elle avait l’habitude de venir à cette fontaine. Elle chercha de la main gauche dans l’obscurité un jeune chêne incliné sur la source qui lui servait ordinairement de point d’appui, rencontra une branche, s’y suspendit, se pencha et plongea le seau dans l’eau. Elle était dans un moment si violent que ses forces étaient triplées. Pendant qu’elle était ainsi penchée, elle ne fît pas attention que la poche de son tablier se vidait dans la source. La pièce de quinze sous tomba dans l’eau. Cosette ne la vit ni ne l’entendit tomber. Elle retira le seau presque plein et le posa sur l’herbe.

Cela fait, elle s’aperçut qu’elle était épuisée de lassitude. Elle eût bien voulu repartir tout de suite; mais l’effort de remplir le seau avait été tel qu’il lui fut impossible de faire un pas. Elle fut bien forcée de s’asseoir. Elle se laissa tomber sur l’herbe et y demeura accroupie.

Elle ferma les yeux, puis elle les rouvrit, sans savoir pourquoi, mais ne pouvant faire autrement.

À côté d’elle l’eau agitée dans le seau faisait des cercles qui ressemblaient à des serpents de feu blanc.

Au-dessus de sa tête, le ciel était couvert de vastes nuages noirs qui étaient comme des pans de fumée. Le tragique masque de l’ombre semblait se pencher vaguement sur cet enfant. Jupiter se couchait dans les profondeurs. L’enfant regardait d’un œil égaré cette grosse étoile qu’elle ne connaissait pas et qui lui faisait peur. La planète, en effet, était en ce moment très près de l’horizon et traversait une épaisse couche de brume qui lui donnait une rougeur horrible. La brume, lugubrement empourprée, élargissait l’astre. On eût dit une plaie lumineuse.

Un vent froid soufflait de la plaine. Le bois était ténébreux, sans aucun froissement de feuilles, sans aucune de ces vagues et fraîches lueurs de l’été. De grands branchages s’y dressaient affreusement. Des buissons chétifs et difformes sifflaient dans les clairières. Les hautes herbes fourmillaient sous la bise comme des anguilles. Les ronces se tordaient comme de longs bras armés de griffes cherchant à prendre des proies; quelques bruyères sèches, chassées par le vent, passaient rapidement et avaient l’air de s’enfuir avec épouvante devant quelque chose qui arrivait. De tous les côtés il y avait des étendues lugubres.

L’obscurité est vertigineuse. Il faut à l’homme de la clarté. Quiconque s’enfonce dans le contraire du jour se sent le cœur serré. Quand l’œil voit noir, l’esprit voit trouble. Dans l’éclipse, dans la nuit, dans l’opacité fuligineuse, il y a de l’anxiété, même pour les plus forts. Nul ne marche seul la nuit dans la forêt sans tremblement. Ombres et arbres, deux épaisseurs redoutables. Une réalité chimérique apparaît dans la profondeur indistincte. L’inconcevable s’ébauche à quelques pas de vous avec une netteté spectrale. On voit flotter, dans l’espace ou dans son propre cerveau, on ne sait quoi de vague et d’insaisissable comme les rêves des fleurs endormies. Il y a des attitudes farouches sur l’horizon. On aspire les effluves du grand vide noir.

On a peur et envie de regarder derrière soi. Les cavités de la nuit, les choses devenues hagardes, des profils taciturnes qui se dissipent quand on avance, des échevellements obscurs, des touffes irritées, des flaques livides, le lugubre reflété dans le funèbre, l’immensité sépulcrale du silence, les êtres inconnus possibles, des penchements de branches mystérieux, d’effrayants torses d’arbres, de longues poignées d’herbes frémissantes, on est sans défense contre tout cela. Pas de hardiesse qui ne tressaille et qui ne sente le voisinage de l’angoisse. On éprouve quelque chose de hideux comme si l’âme s’amalgamait à l’ombre. Cette pénétration des ténèbres est inexprimablement sinistre dans un enfant.

Les forêts sont des apocalypses; et le battement d’ailes d’une petite âme fait un bruit d’agonie sous leur voûte monstrueuse.

Sans se rendre compte de ce qu’elle éprouvait, Cosette se sentait saisir par cette énormité noire de la nature. Ce n’était plus seulement de la terreur qui la gagnait, c’était quelque chose de plus terrible même que la terreur. Elle frissonnait. Les expressions manquent pour dire ce qu’avait d’étrange ce frisson qui la glaçait jusqu’au fond du cœur. Son œil était devenu farouche. Elle croyait sentir qu’elle ne pourrait peut-être pas s’empêcher de revenir là à la même heure le lendemain.

Alors, par une sorte d’instinct, pour sortir de cet état singulier qu’elle ne comprenait pas, mais qui l’effrayait, elle se mit à compter à haute voix un, deux, trois, quatre, jusqu’à dix, et, quand elle eut fini, elle recommença. Cela lui rendit la perception vraie des choses qui l’entouraient. Elle sentit le froid à ses mains qu’elle avait mouillées en puisant de l’eau. Elle se leva. La peur lui était revenue, une peur naturelle et insurmontable. Elle n’eut plus qu’une pensée, s’enfuir; s’enfuir à toutes jambes, à travers bois, à travers champs, jusqu’aux maisons, jusqu’aux fenêtres, jusqu’aux chandelles allumées. Son regard tomba sur le seau qui était devant elle. Tel était l’effroi que lui inspirait la Thénardier qu’elle n’osa pas s’enfuir sans le seau d’eau. Elle saisit l’anse à deux mains. Elle eut de la peine à soulever le seau.

Elle fit ainsi une douzaine de pas, mais le seau était plein, il était lourd, elle fut forcée de le reposer à terre. Elle respira un instant, puis elle enleva l’anse de nouveau, et se remit à marcher, cette fois un peu plus longtemps. Mais il fallut s’arrêter encore. Après quelques secondes de repos, elle repartit. Elle marchait penchée en avant, la tête baissée, comme une vieille; le poids du seau tendait et raidissait ses bras maigres; l’anse de fer achevait d’engourdir et de geler ses petites mains mouillées; de temps en temps elle était forcée de s’arrêter, et chaque fois qu’elle s’arrêtait l’eau froide qui débordait du seau tombait sur ses jambes nues. Cela se passait au fond d’un bois, la nuit, en hiver, loin de tout regard humain; c’était un enfant de huit ans. Il n’y avait que Dieu en ce moment qui voyait cette chose triste.

Et sans doute sa mère, hélas!

Car il est des choses qui font ouvrir les yeux aux mortes dans leur tombeau.

Elle soufflait avec une sorte de râlement douloureux; des sanglots lui serraient la gorge, mais elle n’osait pas pleurer, tant elle avait peur de la Thénardier, même loin. C’était son habitude de se figurer toujours que la Thénardier était là.

Cependant elle ne pouvait pas faire beaucoup de chemin de la sorte, et elle allait bien lentement. Elle avait beau diminuer la durée des stations et marcher entre chaque le plus longtemps possible, elle pensait avec angoisse qu’il lui faudrait plus d’une heure pour retourner ainsi à Montfermeil et que la Thénardier la battrait. Cette angoisse se mêlait à son épouvante d’être seule dans le bois la nuit. Elle était harassée de fatigue et n’était pas encore sortie de la forêt. Parvenue près d’un vieux châtaignier qu’elle connaissait, elle fit une dernière halte plus longue que les autres pour se bien reposer, puis elle rassembla toutes ses forces, reprit le seau et se remit à marcher courageusement. Cependant le pauvre petit être désespéré ne put s’empêcher de s’écrier: Ô mon Dieu! mon Dieu!

En ce moment, elle sentit tout à coup que le seau ne pesait plus rien. Une main, qui lui parut énorme, venait de saisir l’anse et la soulevait vigoureusement. Elle leva la tête. Une grande forme noire, droite et debout, marchait auprès d’elle dans l’obscurité. C’était un homme qui était arrivé derrière elle et qu’elle n’avait pas entendu venir. Cet homme, sans dire un mot, avait empoigné l’anse du seau qu’elle portait.

Il y a des instincts pour toutes les rencontres de la vie. L’enfant n’eut pas peur.

Chapitre VI

Qui peut-être prouve l’intelligence de Boulatruelle

Dans l’après-midi de cette même journée de Noël 1823, un homme se promena assez longtemps dans la partie la plus déserte du boulevard de l’Hôpital à Paris. Cet homme avait l’air de quelqu’un qui cherche un logement, et semblait s’arrêter de préférence aux plus modestes maisons de cette lisière délabrée du faubourg Saint-Marceau.

On verra plus loin que cet homme avait en effet loué une chambre dans ce quartier isolé.

Cet homme, dans son vêtement comme dans toute sa personne, réalisait le type de ce qu’on pourrait nommer le mendiant de bonne compagnie, l’extrême misère combinée avec l’extrême propreté. C’est là un mélange assez rare qui inspire aux cœurs intelligents ce double respect qu’on éprouve pour celui qui est très pauvre et pour celui qui est très digne. Il avait un chapeau rond fort vieux et fort brossé, une redingote râpée jusqu’à la corde en gros drap jaune d’ocre, couleur qui n’avait rien de trop bizarre à cette époque, un grand gilet à poches de forme séculaire, des culottes noires devenues grises aux genoux, des bas de laine noire et d’épais souliers à boucles de cuivre. On eût dit un ancien précepteur de bonne maison revenu de l’émigration. À ses cheveux tout blancs, à son front ridé, à ses lèvres livides, à son visage où tout respirait l’accablement et la lassitude de la vie, on lui eût supposé beaucoup plus de soixante ans. À sa démarche ferme, quoique lente, à la vigueur singulière empreinte dans tous ses mouvements, on lui en eût donné à peine cinquante. Les rides de son front étaient bien placées, et eussent prévenu en sa faveur quelqu’un qui l’eût observé avec attention. Sa lèvre se contractait avec un pli étrange, qui semblait sévère et qui était humble. Il y avait au fond de son regard on ne sait quelle sérénité lugubre. Il portait de la main gauche un petit paquet noué dans un mouchoir; de la droite il s’appuyait sur une espèce de bâton coupé dans une haie. Ce bâton avait été travaillé avec quelque soin, et n’avait pas trop méchant air; on avait tiré parti des nœuds, et on lui avait figuré un pommeau de corail avec de la cire rouge; c’était un gourdin, et cela semblait une canne.

Il y a peu de passants sur ce boulevard, surtout l’hiver. Cet homme, sans affectation pourtant, paraissait les éviter plutôt que les chercher.

À cette époque le roi Louis XVIII allait presque tous les jours à Choisy-le-Roi. C’était une de ses promenades favorites. Vers deux heures, presque invariablement, on voyait la voiture et la cavalcade royale passer ventre à terre sur le boulevard de l’Hôpital.

Cela tenait lieu de montre et d’horloge aux pauvresses du quartier qui disaient: — Il est deux heures, le voilà qui s’en retourne aux Tuileries.

Et les uns accouraient, et les autres se rangeaient; car un roi qui passe, c’est toujours un tumulte. Du reste l’apparition et la disparition de Louis XVIII faisaient un certain effet dans les rues de Paris. Cela était rapide, mais majestueux. Ce roi impotent avait le goût du grand galop; ne pouvant marcher, il voulait courir; ce cul-de-jatte se fût fait volontiers traîner par l’éclair. Il passait, pacifique et sévère, au milieu des sabres nus. Sa berline massive, toute dorée, avec de grosses branches de lys peintes sur les panneaux, roulait bruyamment. À peine avait-on le temps d’y jeter un coup d’œil. On voyait dans l’angle du fond à droite, sur des coussins capitonnés de satin blanc, une face large, ferme et vermeille, un front frais poudré à l’oiseau royal, un œil fier, dur et fin, un sourire de lettré, deux grosses épaulettes à torsades flottantes sur un habit bourgeois, la Toison d’or, la croix de Saint-Louis, la croix de la Légion d’honneur, la plaque d’argent du Saint-Esprit, un gros ventre et un large cordon bleu; c’était le roi. Hors de Paris, il tenait son chapeau à plumes blanches sur ses genoux emmaillotés de hautes guêtres anglaises; quand il rentrait dans la ville, il mettait son chapeau sur sa tête, saluant peu. Il regardait froidement le peuple, qui le lui rendait. Quand il parut pour la première fois dans le quartier Saint-Marceau, tout son succès fut ce mot d’un faubourien à son camarade: «C’est ce gros-là qui est le gouvernement.»

Cet infaillible passage du roi à la même heure était donc l’événement quotidien du boulevard de l’Hôpital.

Le promeneur à la redingote jaune n’était évidemment pas du quartier, et probablement pas de Paris, car il ignorait ce détail. Lorsqu’à deux heures la voiture royale, entourée d’un escadron de gardes du corps galonnés d’argent, déboucha sur le boulevard, après avoir tourné la Salpêtrière, il parut surpris et presque effrayé. Il n’y avait que lui dans la contre-allée, il se rangea vivement derrière un angle de mur d’enceinte, ce qui n’empêcha pas Mr le duc d’Havré de l’apercevoir. Mr le duc d’Havré, comme capitaine des gardes de service ce jour-là, était assis dans la voiture vis-à-vis du roi. Il dit à Sa Majesté: «Voilà un homme d’assez mauvaise mine.» Des gens de police, qui éclairaient le passage du roi, le remarquèrent également, et l’un d’eux reçut l’ordre de le suivre. Mais l’homme s’enfonça dans les petites rues solitaires du faubourg, et comme le jour commençait à baisser, l’agent perdit sa trace, ainsi que cela est constaté par un rapport adressé le soir même à Mr le comte Anglès, ministre d’État, préfet de police.

Quand l’homme à la redingote jaune eut dépisté l’agent, il doubla le pas, non sans s’être retourné bien des fois pour s’assurer qu’il n’était pas suivi. À quatre heures un quart, c’est-à-dire à la nuit close, il passait devant le théâtre de la Porte-Saint-Martin où l’on donnait ce jour-là les *Deux Forçats*. Cette affiche, éclairée par les réverbères du théâtre, le frappa, car, quoiqu’il marchât vite, il s’arrêta pour la lire. Un instant après, il était dans le cul-de-sac de la Planchette, et il entrait au *Plat d’étain*, où était alors le bureau de la voiture de Lagny. Cette voiture partait à quatre heures et demie. Les chevaux étaient attelés, et les voyageurs, appelés par le cocher, escaladaient en hâte le haut escalier de fer du coucou.

L’homme demanda:

— Avez-vous une place?

— Une seule, à côté de moi, sur le siège, dit le cocher.

— Je la prends.

— Montez.

Cependant, avant de partir, le cocher jeta un coup d’œil sur le costume médiocre du voyageur, sur la petitesse de son paquet, et se fit payer.

— Allez-vous jusqu’à Lagny? demanda le cocher.

— Oui, dit l’homme.

Le voyageur paya jusqu’à Lagny.

On partit. Quand on eut passé la barrière, le cocher essaya de nouer la conversation, mais le voyageur ne répondait que par monosyllabes. Le cocher prit le parti de siffler et de jurer après ses chevaux.

Le cocher s’enveloppa dans son manteau. Il faisait froid. L’homme ne paraissait pas y songer. On traversa ainsi Gournay et Neuilly-sur-Marne.

Vers six heures du soir on était à Chelles. Le cocher s’arrêta pour laisser souffler ses chevaux, devant l’auberge à rouliers installée dans les vieux bâtiments de l’abbaye royale.

— Je descends ici, dit l’homme.

Il prit son paquet et son bâton, et sauta à bas de la voiture.

Un instant après, il avait disparu.

Il n’était pas entré dans l’auberge.

Quand, au bout de quelques minutes, la voiture repartit pour Lagny, elle ne le rencontra pas dans la grande rue de Chelles.

Le cocher se tourna vers les voyageurs de l’intérieur.

— Voilà, dit-il, un homme qui n’est pas d’ici, car je ne le connais pas. Il a l’air de n’avoir pas le sou; cependant il ne tient pas à l’argent; il paye pour Lagny, et il ne va que jusqu’à Chelles. Il est nuit, toutes les maisons sont fermées, il n’entre pas à l’auberge, et on ne le retrouve plus. Il s’est donc enfoncé dans la terre.

L’homme ne s’était pas enfoncé dans la terre, mais il avait arpenté en hâte dans l’obscurité la grande rue de Chelles; puis il avait pris à gauche avant d’arriver à l’église le chemin vicinal qui mène à Montfermeil, comme quelqu’un qui eût connu le pays et qui y fût déjà venu.

Il suivit ce chemin rapidement. À l’endroit où il est coupé par l’ancienne route bordée d’arbres qui va de Gagny à Lagny, il entendit venir des passants. Il se cacha précipitamment dans un fossé, et y attendit que les gens qui passaient se fussent éloignés. La précaution était d’ailleurs presque superflue, car, comme nous l’avons déjà dit, c’était une nuit de décembre très noire. On voyait à peine deux ou trois étoiles au ciel.

C’est à ce point-là que commence la montée de la colline. L’homme ne rentra pas dans le chemin de Montfermeil; il prit à droite, à travers champs, et gagna à grands pas le bois.

Quand il fut dans le bois, il ralentit sa marche, et se mit à regarder soigneusement tous les arbres, avançant pas à pas, comme s’il cherchait et suivait une route mystérieuse connue de lui seul. Il y eut un moment où il parut se perdre et où il s’arrêta indécis. Enfin il arriva, de tâtonnements en tâtonnements, à une clairière où il y avait un monceau de grosses pierres blanchâtres. Il se dirigea vivement vers ces pierres et les examina avec attention à travers la brume de la nuit, comme s’il les passait en revue. Un gros arbre, couvert de ces excroissances qui sont les verrues de la végétation, était à quelques pas du tas de pierres. Il alla à cet arbre, et promena sa main sur l’écorce du tronc, comme s’il cherchait à reconnaître et à compter toutes les verrues.

Vis-à-vis de cet arbre, qui était un frêne, il y avait un châtaignier malade d’une décortication, auquel on avait mis pour pansement une bande de zinc clouée. Il se haussa sur la pointe des pieds et toucha cette bande de zinc.

Puis il piétina pendant quelque temps sur le sol dans l’espace compris entre l’arbre et les pierres, comme quelqu’un qui s’assure que la terre n’a pas été fraîchement remuée.

Cela fait, il s’orienta et reprit sa marche à travers le bois.

C’était cet homme qui venait de rencontrer Cosette.

En cheminant par le taillis dans la direction de Montfermeil, il avait aperçu cette petite ombre qui se mouvait avec un gémissement, qui déposait un fardeau à terre, puis le reprenait, et se remettait à marcher. Il s’était approché et avait reconnu que c’était un tout jeune enfant chargé d’un énorme seau d’eau. Alors il était allé à l’enfant, et avait pris silencieusement l’anse du seau.

Chapitre VII

Cosette côte à côte dans l'ombre avec l'inconnu

Cosette, nous l'avons dit, n'avait pas eu peur.

L'homme lui adressa la parole. Il parlait d'une voix grave et presque basse.

— Mon enfant, c'est bien lourd pour vous ce que vous portez là.

Cosette leva la tête et répondit:

— Oui, monsieur.

— Donnez, reprit l'homme. Je vais vous le porter.

Cosette lâcha le seau. L'homme se mit à cheminer près d'elle.

— C'est très lourd en effet, dit-il entre ses dents.

Puis il ajouta:

— Petite, quel âge as-tu?

— Huit ans, monsieur.

— Et viens-tu de loin comme cela?

— De la source qui est dans le bois.

— Et est-ce loin où tu vas? — À un bon quart d'heure d'ici.

L'homme resta un moment sans parler, puis il dit brusquement:

— Tu n'as donc pas de mère?

— Je ne sais pas, répondit l'enfant.

Avant que l'homme eût eu le temps de reprendre la parole, elle ajouta:

— Je ne crois pas. Les autres en ont. Moi, je n'en ai pas.

Et après un silence, elle reprit:

— Je crois que je n'en ai jamais eu.

L'homme s'arrêta, il posa le seau à terre, se pencha et mit ses deux mains sur les deux épaules de l'enfant, faisant effort pour la regarder et voir son visage dans l'obscurité.

La figure maigre et chétive de Cosette se dessinait vaguement à la lueur livide du ciel.

— Comment t'appelles-tu? dit l'homme.

— Cosette.

L'homme eut comme une secousse électrique. Il la regarda encore, puis il ôta ses mains de dessus les épaules de Cosette, saisit le seau, et se remit à marcher.

Au bout d’un instant il demanda:

— Petite, où demeures-tu?

— À Montfermeil, si vous connaissez.

— C’est là que nous allons?

— Oui, monsieur.

Il fit encore une pause, puis recommença:

— Qui est-ce donc qui t’a envoyée à cette heure chercher de l’eau dans le bois?

— C’est madame Thénardier.

L’homme repartit d’un son de voix qu’il voulait s’efforcer de rendre indifférent, mais où il y avait pourtant un tremblement singulier:

— Qu’est-ce qu’elle fait, ta madame Thénardier?

— C’est ma bourgeoise, dit l’enfant. Elle tient l’auberge.

— L’auberge? dit l’homme. Eh bien, je vais aller y loger cette nuit. Conduis-moi.

— Nous y allons, dit l’enfant.

L’homme marchait assez vite. Cosette le suivait sans peine. Elle ne sentait plus la fatigue. De temps en temps, elle levait les yeux vers cet homme avec une sorte de tranquillité et d’abandon inexprimables. Jamais on ne lui avait appris à se tourner vers la providence et à prier. Cependant elle sentait en elle quelque chose qui ressemblait à de l’espérance et à de la joie et qui s’en allait vers le ciel.

Quelques minutes s’écoulèrent. L’homme reprit:

— Est-ce qu’il n’y a pas de servante chez madame Thénardier?

— Non, monsieur.

— Est-ce que tu es seule?

— Oui, monsieur.

Il y eut encore une interruption. Cosette éleva la voix:

— C’est-à-dire il y a deux petites filles.

— Quelles petites filles?

— Ponine et Zelma.

L’enfant simplifiait de la sorte les noms romanesques chers à la Thénardier.

— Qu’est-ce que c’est que Ponine et Zelma?

— Ce sont les demoiselles de madame Thénardier. Comme qui dirait ses filles.

— Et que font-elles, celles-là? — Oh! dit l’enfant, elles ont de belles poupées, des choses où il y a de l’or, tout plein d’affaires. Elles jouent, elles s’amusent.

— Toute la journée?

— Oui, monsieur.

— Et toi?

— Moi, je travaille.

— Toute la journée?

L’enfant leva ses grands yeux où il y avait une larme qu’on ne voyait pas à cause de la nuit, et répondit doucement:

— Oui, monsieur.

Elle poursuivit après un intervalle de silence:

— Des fois, quand j’ai fini l’ouvrage et qu’on veut bien, je m’amuse aussi.

— Comment t’amuses-tu?

— Comme je peux. On me laisse. Mais je n’ai pas beaucoup de joujoux. Ponine et Zelma ne veulent pas que je joue avec leurs poupées. Je n’ai qu’un petit sabre en plomb, pas plus long que ça.

L’enfant montrait son petit doigt.

— Et qui ne coupe pas? — Si, monsieur, dit l’enfant, ça coupe la salade et les têtes de mouches.

Ils atteignirent le village; Cosette guida l’étranger dans les rues. Ils passèrent devant la boulangerie; mais Cosette ne songea pas au pain qu’elle devait rapporter. L’homme avait cessé de lui faire des questions et gardait maintenant un silence morne. Quand ils eurent laissé l’église derrière eux, l’homme, voyant toutes ces boutiques en plein vent, demanda à Cosette:

— C’est donc la foire ici?

— Non, monsieur, c’est Noël.

Comme ils approchaient de l’auberge, Cosette lui toucha le bras timidement.

— Monsieur?

— Quoi, mon enfant?

— Nous voilà tout près de la maison.

— Eh bien?

— Voulez-vous me laisser reprendre le seau à présent?

— Pourquoi?

— C’est que, si madame voit qu’on me l’a porté, elle me battra.

L’homme lui remit le seau. Un instant après, ils étaient à la porte de la gargote.

Chapitre VIII

Désagrément de recevoir chez soi un pauvre qui est peut-être un riche

Cosette ne put s’empêcher de jeter un regard de côté à la grande poupée toujours étalée chez le bimbelotier, puis elle frappa. La porte s’ouvrit. La Thénardier parut une chandelle à la main.

— Ah! c’est toi, petite gueuse! Dieu merci, tu y as mis le temps! elle se sera amusée, la drôlesse!

— Madame, dit Cosette toute tremblante, voilà un monsieur qui vient loger.

La Thénardier remplaça bien vite sa mine bourrue par sa grimace aimable, changement à vue propre aux aubergistes, et chercha avidement des yeux le nouveau venu.

— C’est monsieur? dit-elle.

— Oui, madame, répondit l’homme en portant la main à son chapeau.

Les voyageurs riches ne sont pas si polis. Ce geste et l’inspection du costume et du bagage de l’étranger que la Thénardier passa en revue d’un coup d’œil firent évanouir la grimace aimable et reparaître la mine bourrue. Elle reprit sèchement:

— Entrez, bonhomme.

Le «bonhomme» entra. La Thénardier lui jeta un second coup d’œil, examina particulièrement sa redingote qui était absolument râpée et son chapeau qui était un peu défoncé, et consulta d’un hochement de tête, d’un froncement de nez et d’un clignement d’yeux, son mari, lequel buvait toujours avec les rouliers. Le mari répondit par cette imperceptible agitation de l’index qui, appuyée du gonflement des lèvres, signifie en pareil cas: débine complète. Sur ce, la Thénardier s’écria:

— Ah! çà, brave homme, je suis bien fâchée, mais c’est que je n’ai plus de place.

— Mettez-moi où vous voudrez, dit l’homme, au grenier, à l’écurie. Je payerai comme si j’avais une chambre.

— Quarante sous.

— Quarante sous. Soit.

— À la bonne heure.

— Quarante sous! dit un routier bas à la Thénardier, mais ce n’est que vingt sous.

— C’est quarante sous pour lui, répliqua la Thénardier du même ton. Je ne loge pas des pauvres à moins.

— C’est vrai, ajouta le mari avec douceur, ça gâte une maison d’y avoir de ce monde-là.

Cependant l’homme, après avoir laissé sur un banc son paquet et son bâton, s’était assis à une table où Cosette s’était empressée de poser une bouteille de vin et un verre. Le marchand qui avait demandé le seau d’eau était allé lui-même le porter à son cheval. Cosette avait repris sa place sous la table de cuisine et son tricot. L’homme, qui avait à peine trempé ses lèvres dans le verre de vin qu’il s’était versé, considérait l’enfant avec une attention étrange.

Cosette était laide. Heureuse, elle eût peut-être été jolie. Nous avons déjà esquissé cette petite figure sombre. Cosette était maigre et blême. Elle avait près de huit ans, on lui en eût donné à peine six. Ses grands yeux enfoncés dans une sorte d’ombre profonde étaient presque éteints à force d’avoir pleuré. Les coins de sa bouche avaient cette courbe de l’angoisse habituelle, qu’on observe chez les condamnés et chez les malades désespérés. Ses mains étaient, comme sa mère l’avait deviné, «perdues d’engelures.» Le feu qui l’éclairait en ce moment faisait saillir les angles de ses os et rendait sa maigreur affreusement visible. Comme elle grelottait toujours, elle avait pris l’habitude de serrer ses deux genoux l’un contre l’autre. Tout son vêtement n’était qu’un haillon qui eût fait pitié l’été et qui faisait horreur l’hiver. Elle n’avait sur elle que de la toile trouée; pas un chiffon de laine. On voyait sa peau çà et là, et l’on y distinguait partout des taches bleues ou noires qui indiquaient les endroits où la Thénardier l’avait touchée. Ses jambes nues étaient rouges et grêles. Le creux de ses clavicules était à faire pleurer. Toute la personne de cette enfant, son allure, son attitude, le son de sa voix, ses intervalles entre un mot et l’autre, son regard, son silence, son moindre geste, exprimaient et traduisaient une seule idée: la crainte.

La crainte était répandue sur elle; elle en était pour ainsi dire couverte; la crainte ramenait ses coudes contre ses hanches, retirait ses talons sous ses jupes, lui faisait tenir le moins de place possible, ne lui laissait de souffle que le nécessaire, et était devenue ce qu’on pourrait appeler son habitude de corps, sans variation possible que d’augmenter. Il y avait au fond de sa prunelle un coin étonné où était la terreur.

Cette crainte était telle qu'en arrivant, toute mouillée comme elle était, Cosette n'avait pas osé s'aller sécher au feu et s'était remise silencieusement à son travail. L'expression du regard de cette enfant de huit ans était habituellement si morne et parfois si tragique qu'il semblait, à de certains moments, qu'elle fût en train de devenir une idiote ou un démon.

Jamais, nous l'avons dit, elle n'avait su ce que c'est que prier, jamais elle n'avait mis le pied dans une église.

«Est-ce que j'ai le temps?» disait la Thénardier.

L'homme à la redingote jaune ne quittait pas Cosette des yeux.

Tout à coup la Thénardier s'écria:

— À propos! et ce pain?

Cosette, selon sa coutume toutes les fois que la Thénardier élevait la voix, sortit bien vite de dessous la table.

Elle avait complètement oublié ce pain. Elle eut recours à l'expédient des enfants toujours effrayés. Elle mentit.

— Madame, le boulanger était fermé.

— Il fallait cogner.

— J'ai cogné, madame.

— Eh bien?

— Il n'a pas ouvert.

— Je saurai demain si c'est vrai, dit la Thénardier, et si tu mens, tu auras une fière danse. En attendant, rends-moi la pièce-quinze-sous.

Cosette plongea sa main dans la poche de son tablier, et devint verte. La pièce de quinze sous n'y était plus.

— Ah çà! dit la Thénardier, m'as-tu entendue?

Cosette retourna la poche, il n'y avait rien. Qu'est-ce que cet argent pouvait être devenu? La malheureuse petite ne trouva pas une parole. Elle était pétrifiée.

— Est-ce que tu l'as perdue, la pièce-quinze-sous? râla la Thénardier, ou bien est-ce que tu veux me la voler?

En même temps elle allongea le bras vers le martinet suspendu à la cheminée.

Ce geste redoutable rendit à Cosette la force de crier:

— Grâce! madame! madame! je ne le ferai plus.

La Thénardier détacha le martinet.

Cependant l'homme à la redingote jaune avait fouillé dans le gousset de son gilet, sans qu'on eût remarqué ce mouvement. D'ailleurs les autres voyageurs buvaient ou jouaient aux cartes et ne faisaient attention à rien.

Cosette se pelotonnait avec angoisse dans l'angle de la cheminée, tâchant de ramasser et de dérober ses pauvres membres demi-nus. La Thénardier leva le bras.

— Pardon, madame, dit l'homme, mais tout à l'heure j'ai vu quelque chose qui est tombé de la poche du tablier de cette petite et qui a roulé. C'est peut-être cela.

En même temps il se baissa et parut chercher à terre un instant.

— Justement. Voici, reprit-il en se relevant.

Et il tendit une pièce d'argent à la Thénardier.

— Oui, c'est cela, dit-elle.

Ce n'était pas cela, car c'était une pièce de vingt sous, mais la Thénardier y trouvait du bénéfice. Elle mit la pièce dans sa poche, et se borna à jeter un regard farouche à l'enfant en disant:

— Que cela ne t'arrive plus, toujours!

Cosette rentra dans ce que la Thénardier appelait «sa niche», et son grand œil, fixé sur le voyageur inconnu, commença à prendre une expression qu'il n'avait jamais eue. Ce n'était encore qu'un naïf étonnement, mais une sorte de confiance stupéfaite s'y mêlait.

— À propos, voulez-vous souper? demanda la Thénardier au voyageur.

Il ne répondit pas. Il semblait songer profondément.

— Qu'est-ce que c'est que cet homme-là? dit-elle entre ses dents. C'est quelque affreux pauvre. Cela n'a pas le sou pour souper. Me payera-t-il mon logement seulement? Il est bien heureux tout de même qu'il n'ait pas eu l'idée de voler l'argent qui était à terre.

Cependant une porte s'était ouverte et Éponine et Azelma étaient entrées.

C'étaient vraiment deux jolies petites filles, plutôt bourgeoises que paysannes, très charmantes, l'une avec ses tresses châtaines bien lustrées, l'autre avec ses longues nattes noires tombant derrière le dos, toutes deux vives, propres, grasses, fraîches et saines à réjouir le regard. Elles étaient chaudement vêtues, mais avec un tel art maternel, que l'épaisseur des étoffes n'ôtait rien à la coquetterie de l'ajustement. L'hiver était prévu sans que le printemps fût effacé. Ces deux petites dégageaient de la lumière. En outre, elles étaient régnantes. Dans leur toilette, dans leur gaîté, dans le bruit qu'elles faisaient, il y avait de la souveraineté. Quand elles entrèrent, la Thénardier leur dit d'un ton grondeur, qui était plein d'adoration:

— Ah! vous voilà donc, vous autres!

Puis, les attirant dans ses genoux l’une après l’autre, lissant leurs cheveux, renouant leurs rubans, et les lâchant ensuite avec cette douce façon de secouer qui est propre aux mères, elle s’écria:

— Sont-elles fagotées!

Elles vinrent s’asseoir au coin du feu. Elles avaient une poupée qu’elles tournaient et retournaient sur leurs genoux avec toutes sortes de gazouillements joyeux. De temps en temps, Cosette levait les yeux de son tricot, et les regardait jouer d’un air lugubre.

Éponine et Azelma ne regardaient pas Cosette. C’était pour elles comme le chien. Ces trois petites filles n’avaient pas vingt-quatre ans à elles trois, et elles représentaient déjà toute la société des hommes; d’un côté l’envie, de l’autre le dédain.

La poupée des sœurs Thénardier était très fanée et très vieille et toute cassée, mais elle n’en paraissait pas moins admirable à Cosette, qui de sa vie n’avait eu une poupée, *une vraie poupée*, pour nous servir d’une expression que tous les enfants comprendront.

Tout à coup la Thénardier, qui continuait d’aller et de venir dans la salle, s’aperçut que Cosette avait des distractions et qu’au lieu de travailler elle s’occupait des petites qui jouaient.

— Ah! je t’y prends! cria-t-elle. C’est comme cela que tu travailles! Je vais te faire travailler à coups de martinet, moi.

L’étranger, sans quitter sa chaise, se tourna vers la Thénardier.

— Madame, dit-il en souriant d’un air presque craintif, bah! laissez-la jouer!

De la part de tout voyageur qui eût mangé une tranche de gigot et bu deux bouteilles de vin à son souper et qui n’eût pas eu l’air d’*un affreux pauvre*, un pareil souhait eût été un ordre. Mais qu’un homme qui avait ce chapeau se permît d’avoir un désir et qu’un homme qui avait cette redingote se permît d’avoir une volonté, c’est ce que la Thénardier ne crut pas devoir tolérer. Elle repartit aigrement:

— Il faut qu’elle travaille, puisqu’elle mange. Je ne la nourris pas à rien faire.

— Qu’est-ce qu’elle fait donc? reprit l’étranger de cette voix douce qui contrastait si étrangement avec ses habits de mendiant et ses épaules de portefaix.

La Thénardier daigna répondre:

— Des bas, s’il vous plaît. Des bas pour mes petites filles qui n’en ont pas, autant dire, et qui vont tout à l’heure pieds nus.

L’homme regarda les pauvres pieds rouges de Cosette, et continua:

— Quand aura-t-elle fini cette paire de bas?

— Elle en a encore au moins pour trois ou quatre grands jours, la paresseuse.

— Et combien peut valoir cette paire de bas, quand elle sera faite?

La Thénardier lui jeta un coup d’œil méprisant.

— Au moins trente sous.

— La donneriez-vous pour cinq francs? reprit l’homme.

— Pardieu! s’écria avec un gros rire un routier qui écoutait, cinq francs? je crois fichtre bien! cinq balles!

Le Thénardier crut devoir prendre la parole.

— Oui, monsieur, si c’est votre fantaisie, on vous donnera cette paire de bas pour cinq francs. Nous ne savons rien refuser aux voyageurs.

— Il faudrait payer tout de suite, dit la Thénardier avec sa façon brève et péremptoire.

— J’achète cette paire de bas, répondit l’homme, et, ajouta-t-il en tirant de sa poche une pièce de cinq francs qu’il posa sur la table, — je la paye.

Puis il se tourna vers Cosette.

— Maintenant ton travail est à moi. Joue, mon enfant.

Le routier fut si ému de la pièce de cinq francs, qu’il laissa là son verre et accourut.

— C’est pourtant vrai! cria-t-il en l’examinant. Une vraie roue de derrière! et pas fausse!

Le Thénardier approcha et mit silencieusement la pièce dans son gousset.

La Thénardier n’avait rien à répliquer. Elle se mordit les lèvres, et son visage prit une expression de haine.

Cependant Cosette tremblait. Elle se risqua à demander:

— Madame, est-ce que c’est vrai? est-ce que je peux jouer?

— Joue! dit la Thénardier d’une voix terrible.

— Merci, madame, dit Cosette.

Et pendant que sa bouche remerciait la Thénardier, toute sa petite âme remerciait le voyageur.

Le Thénardier s’était remis à boire. Sa femme lui dit à l’oreille:

— Qu’est-ce que ça peut être que cet homme jaune?

— J’ai vu, répondit souverainement Thénardier, des millionnaires qui avaient des redingotes comme cela.

Cosette avait laissé là son tricot, mais elle n’était pas sortie de sa place. Cosette bougeait toujours le moins possible. Elle avait pris dans une boîte derrière elle quelques vieux chiffons et son petit sabre de plomb.

Éponine et Azelma ne faisaient aucune attention à ce qui se passait. Elles venaient d’exécuter une opération fort importante; elles s’étaient emparées du chat. Elles avaient jeté la poupée à terre, et Éponine, qui était l’aînée, emmaillotait le petit chat, malgré ses miaulements et ses contorsions, avec une foule de nippes et de guenilles rouges et bleues. Tout en faisant ce grave et difficile travail, elle disait à sa sœur dans ce doux et adorable langage des enfants dont la grâce, pareille à la splendeur de l’aile des papillons, s’en va quand on veut la fixer:

— Vois-tu, ma sœur, cette poupée-là est plus amusante que l’autre. Elle remue, elle crie, elle est chaude. Vois-tu, ma sœur, jouons avec. Ce serait ma petite fille. Je serais une dame. Je viendrais te voir et tu la regarderais. Peu à peu tu verrais ses moustaches, et cela t’étonnerait. Et puis tu verrais ses oreilles, et puis tu verrais sa queue, et cela t’étonnerait. Et tu me dirais: *Ah! mon Dieu*! et je te dirais: *Oui, madame, c’est une petite fille que j’ai comme ça. Les petites filles sont comme ça à présent*.

Azelma écoutait Éponine avec admiration.

Cependant, les buveurs s’étaient mis à chanter une chanson obscène dont ils riaient à faire trembler le plafond. Le Thénardier les encourageait et les accompagnait.

Comme les oiseaux font un nid avec tout, les enfants font une poupée avec n’importe quoi. Pendant qu’Éponine et Azelma emmaillotaient le chat, Cosette de son côté avait emmailloté le sabre. Cela fait, elle l’avait couché sur ses bras, et elle chantait doucement pour l’endormir.

La poupée est un des plus impérieux besoins et en même temps un des plus charmants instincts de l’enfance féminine. Soigner, vêtir, parer, habiller, déshabiller, rhabiller, enseigner, un peu gronder, bercer, dorloter, endormir, se figurer que quelque chose est quelqu’un, tout l’avenir de la femme est là. Tout en rêvant et tout en jasant, tout en faisant de petits trousseaux et de petites layettes, tout en cousant de petites robes, de petits corsages et de petites brassières, l’enfant devient jeune fille, la jeune fille devient grande fille, la grande fille devient femme. Le premier enfant continue la dernière poupée.

Une petite fille sans poupée est à peu près aussi malheureuse et tout à fait aussi impossible qu'une femme sans enfant.

Cosette s'était donc fait une poupée avec le sabre.

La Thénardier, elle, s'était rapprochée de l' *homme jaune*.

— Mon mari a raison, pensait-elle, c'est peut-être monsieur Laffitte. Il y a des riches si farces! Elle vint s'accouder à sa table.

— Monsieur... dit-elle.

À ce mot *monsieur*, l'homme se retourna. La Thénardier ne l'avait encore appelé que *brave homme* ou *bonhomme*.

— Voyez-vous, monsieur, poursuivit-elle en prenant son air douceâtre qui était encore plus fâcheux à voir que son air féroce, je veux bien que l'enfant joue, je ne m'y oppose pas, mais c'est bon pour une fois, parce que vous êtes généreux. Voyez-vous, cela n'a rien. Il faut que cela travaille.

— Elle n'est donc pas à vous, cette enfant? demanda l'homme.

— Oh mon Dieu non, monsieur! c'est une petite pauvre que nous avons recueillie comme cela, par charité. Une espèce d'enfant imbécile. Elle doit avoir de l'eau dans la tête. Elle a la tête grosse, comme vous voyez. Nous faisons pour elle ce que nous pouvons, car nous ne sommes pas riches. Nous avons beau écrire à son pays, voilà six mois qu'on ne nous répond plus. Il faut croire que sa mère est morte.

— Ah! dit l'homme, et il retomba dans sa rêverie.

— C'était une pas grand'chose que cette mère, ajouta la Thénardier. Elle abandonnait son enfant.

Pendant toute cette conversation, Cosette, comme si un instinct l'eût avertie qu'on parlait d'elle, n'avait pas quitté des yeux la Thénardier. Elle écoutait vaguement. Elle entendait çà et là quelques mots.

Cependant les buveurs, tous ivres aux trois quarts, répétaient leur refrain immonde avec un redoublement de gaîté. C'était une gaillardise de haut goût où étaient mêlés la Vierge et l'enfant Jésus. La Thénardier était allée prendre sa part des éclats de rire. Cosette, sous la table, regardait le feu qui se réverbérait dans son œil fixe; elle s'était remise à bercer l'espèce de maillot qu'elle avait fait, et, tout en le berçant, elle chantait à voix basse: «Ma mère est morte! ma mère est morte! ma mère est morte!»

Sur de nouvelles insistances de l'hôtesse, l'homme jaune, «le millionnaire», consentit enfin à souper.

— Que veut monsieur?

— Du pain et du fromage, dit l'homme.

— Décidément c’est un gueux, pensa la Thénardier.

Les ivrognes chantaient toujours leur chanson, et l’enfant, sous la table, chantait aussi la sienne.

Tout à coup Cosette s’interrompit. Elle venait de se retourner et d’apercevoir la poupée des petites Thénardier qu’elles avaient quittée pour le chat et laissée à terre à quelques pas de la table de cuisine.

Alors elle laissa tomber le sabre emmailloté qui ne lui suffisait qu’à demi, puis elle promena lentement ses yeux autour de la salle. La Thénardier parlait bas à son mari, et comptait de la monnaie, Ponine et Zelma jouaient avec le chat, les voyageurs mangeaient, ou buvaient, ou chantaient, aucun regard n’était fixé sur elle. Elle n’avait pas un moment à perdre. Elle sortit de dessous la table en rampant sur ses genoux et sur ses mains, s’assura encore une fois qu’on ne la guettait pas, puis se glissa vivement jusqu’à la poupée, et la saisit. Un instant après elle était à sa place, assise, immobile, tournée seulement de manière à faire de l’ombre sur la poupée qu’elle tenait dans ses bras. Ce bonheur de jouer avec une poupée était tellement rare pour elle qu’il avait toute la violence d’une volupté.

Personne ne l’avait vue, excepté le voyageur, qui mangeait lentement son maigre souper.

Cette joie dura près d’un quart d’heure.

Mais, quelque précaution que prit Cosette, elle ne s’apercevait pas qu’un des pieds de la poupée — *passait*, — et que le feu de la cheminée l’éclairait très vivement. Ce pied rose et lumineux qui sortait de l’ombre frappa subitement le regard d’Azelma qui dit à Éponine: — Tiens! ma sœur!

Les deux petites filles s’arrêtèrent, stupéfaites. Cosette avait osé prendre la poupée!

Éponine se leva, et, sans lâcher le chat, alla vers sa mère et se mit à la tirer par sa jupe.

— Mais laisse-moi donc! dit la mère. Qu’est-ce que tu me veux?

— Mère, dit l’enfant, regarde donc!

Et elle désignait du doigt Cosette.

Cosette, elle, tout entière aux extases de la possession, ne voyait et n’entendait plus rien.

Le visage de la Thénardier prit cette expression particulière qui se compose du terrible mêlé aux riens de la vie et qui a fait nommer ces sortes de femmes: mégères.

Cette fois, l'orgueil blessé exaspérait encore sa colère. Cosette avait franchi tous les intervalles, Cosette avait attenté à la poupée de «ces demoiselles».

Une czarine qui verrait un moujik essayer le grand cordon bleu de son impérial fils n'aurait pas une autre figure.

Elle cria d'une voix que l'indignation enrouait.

— Cosette!

Cosette tressaillit comme si la terre eût tremblé sous elle. Elle se retourna.

— Cosette, répéta la Thénardier.

Cosette prit la poupée et la posa doucement à terre avec une sorte de vénération mêlée de désespoir. Alors, sans la quitter des yeux, elle joignit les mains, et, ce qui est effrayant à dire dans un enfant de cet âge, elle se les tordit; puis, ce que n'avait pu lui arracher aucune des émotions de la journée, ni la course dans le bois, ni la pesanteur du seau d'eau, ni la perte de l'argent, ni la vue du martinet, ni même la sombre parole qu'elle avait entendu dire à la Thénardier, — elle pleura. Elle éclata en sanglots.

Cependant le voyageur s'était levé.

— Qu'est-ce donc? dit-il à la Thénardier.

— Vous ne voyez pas? dit la Thénardier en montrant du doigt le corps du délit qui gisait aux pieds de Cosette.

— Hé bien, quoi? reprit l'homme.

— Cette gueuse, répondit la Thénardier, s'est permis de toucher à la poupée des enfants!

— Tout ce bruit pour cela! dit l'homme. Eh bien, quand elle jouerait avec cette poupée?

— Elle y a touché avec ses mains sales! poursuivit la Thénardier, avec ses affreuses mains!

Ici Cosette redoubla ses sanglots.

— Te tairas-tu? cria la Thénardier.

L'homme alla droit à la porte de la rue, l'ouvrit et sortit.

Dès qu'il fut sorti, la Thénardier profita de son absence pour allonger sous la table à Cosette un grand coup de pied qui fit jeter à l'enfant les hauts cris.

La porte se rouvrit, l'homme reparut, il portait dans ses deux mains la poupée fabuleuse dont nous avons parlé, et que tous les marmots du village contemplaient depuis le matin, et il la posa debout devant Cosette en disant:

— Tiens, c’est pour toi.

Il faut croire que, depuis plus d’une heure qu’il était là, au milieu de sa rêverie, il avait confusément remarqué cette boutique de bimbeloterie éclairée de lampions et de chandelles si splendidement qu’on l’apercevait à travers la vitre du cabaret comme une illumination.

Cosette leva les yeux, elle avait vu venir l’homme à elle avec cette poupée comme elle eût vu venir le soleil, elle entendit ces paroles inouïes: *c’est pour toi*, elle le regarda, elle regarda la poupée, puis elle recula lentement, et s’alla cacher tout au fond sous la table dans le coin du mur.

Elle ne pleurait plus, elle ne criait plus, elle avait l’air de ne plus oser respirer.

La Thénardier, Éponine, Azelma étaient autant de statues. Les buveurs eux-mêmes s’étaient arrêtés. Il s’était fait un silence solennel dans tout le cabaret.

La Thénardier, pétrifiée et muette, recommençait ses conjectures: — Qu’est-ce que c’est que ce vieux? est-ce un pauvre? est-ce un millionnaire? C’est peut-être les deux, c’est-à-dire un voleur.

La face du mari Thénardier offrit cette ride expressive qui accentue la figure humaine chaque fois que l’instinct dominant y apparent avec toute sa puissance bestiale. Le gargotier considérait tour à tour la poupée et le voyageur; il semblait flairer cet homme comme il eût flairé un sac d’argent. Cela ne dura que le temps d’un éclair. Il s’approcha de sa femme et lui dit bas:

— Cette machine coûte au moins trente francs. Pas de bêtises. À plat ventre devant l’homme.

Les natures grossières ont cela de commun avec les natures naïves qu’elles n’ont pas de transitions. — Eh bien, Cosette, dit la Thénardier d’une voix qui voulait être douce et qui était toute composée de ce miel aigre des méchantes femmes, est-ce que tu ne prends pas ta poupée?

Cosette se hasarda à sortir de son trou.

— Ma petite Cosette, reprit la Thénardier d’un air caressant, monsieur te donne une poupée. Prends-la. Elle est à toi.

Cosette considérait la poupée merveilleuse avec une sorte de terreur. Son visage était encore inondé de larmes, mais ses yeux commençaient à s’emplir, comme le ciel au crépuscule du matin, des rayonnements étranges de la joie. Ce qu’elle éprouvait en ce moment-là était un peu pareil à ce qu’elle eût ressenti si on lui eût dit brusquement: *Petite, vous êtes la reine de France*.

Il lui semblait que si elle touchait à cette poupée, le tonnerre en sortirait.

Ce qui était vrai jusqu’à un certain point, car elle se disait que la Thénardier gronderait, et la battrait.

Pourtant l’attraction l’emporta. Elle finit par s’approcher, et murmura timidement en se tournant vers la Thénardier:

— Est-ce que je peux, madame?

Aucune expression ne saurait rendre cet air à la fois désespéré, épouvanté et ravi.

— Pardi! fit la Thénardier, c’est à toi. Puisque monsieur te la donne.

— Vrai, monsieur? reprit Cosette, est-ce que c’est vrai? c’est à moi, la dame?

L’étranger paraissait avoir les yeux pleins de larmes. Il semblait être à ce point d’émotion où l’on ne parle pas pour ne pas pleurer. Il fit un signe de tête à Cosette, et mit la main de «la dame» dans sa petite main.

Cosette retira vivement sa main, comme si celle de *la dame* la brûlait, et se mit à regarder le pavé. Nous sommes forcé d’ajouter qu’en cet instant-là elle tirait la langue d’une façon démesurée. Tout à coup elle se retourna et saisit la poupée avec emportement.

— Je l’appellerai Catherine, dit-elle.

Ce fut un moment bizarre que celui où les haillons de Cosette rencontrèrent et étreignirent les rubans et les fraîches mousselines roses de la poupée.

— Madame, reprit-elle, est-ce que je peux la mettre sur une chaise?

— Oui, mon enfant, répondit la Thénardier.

Maintenant c’étaient Éponine et Azelma qui regardaient Cosette avec envie.

Cosette posa Catherine sur une chaise, puis s’assit à terre devant elle, et demeura immobile, sans dire un mot dans l’attitude de la contemplation.

— Joue donc, Cosette, dit l’étranger.

— Oh! je joue, répondit l’enfant. Cet étranger, cet inconnu qui avait l’air d’une visite que la providence faisait à Cosette, était en ce moment-là ce que la Thénardier haïssait le plus au monde. Pourtant il fallait se contraindre. C’était plus d’émotions qu’elle n’en pouvait supporter, si habituée qu’elle fût à la dissimulation par la copie qu’elle tâchait de faire de son mari dans toutes ses actions. Elle se hâta d’envoyer ses filles coucher, puis elle demanda à l’homme jaune *la permission* d’y envoyer aussi Cosette, *qui a bien fatigué aujourd’hui*, ajouta-t-elle d’un air maternel. Cosette s’alla coucher emportant Catherine entre ses bras.

La Thénardier allait de temps en temps à l’autre bout de la salle où était son homme, *pour se soulager l’âme*, disait-elle. Elle échangeait avec son mari quelques paroles d’autant plus furieuses qu’elle n’osait les dire haut:

— Vieille bête! qu’est-ce qu’il a donc dans le ventre? Venir nous déranger ici! vouloir que ce petit monstre joue! lui donner des poupées! donner des poupées de quarante francs à une chienne que je donnerais moi pour quarante sous! Encore un peu il lui dirait votre majesté comme à la duchesse de Berry! Y a-t-il du bon sens? il est donc enragé, ce vieux mystérieux-là?

— Pourquoi? C’est tout simple, répliquait le Thénardier. Si ça l’amuse! Toi, ça t’amuse que la petite travaille, lui, ça l’amuse qu’elle joue. Il est dans son droit. Un voyageur, ça fait ce que ça veut quand ça paye. Si ce vieux est un philanthrope, qu’est-ce que ça te fait? Si c’est un imbécile, ça ne te regarde pas. De quoi te mêles-tu, puisqu’il a de l’argent?

Langage de maître et raisonnement d’aubergiste qui n’admettaient ni l’un ni l’autre la réplique.

L’homme s’était accoudé sur la table et avait repris son attitude de rêverie. Tous les autres voyageurs, marchands et rouliers, s’étaient un peu éloignés et ne chantaient plus. Ils le considéraient à distance avec une sorte de crainte respectueuse. Ce particulier si pauvrement vêtu, qui tirait de sa poche les roues de derrière avec tant d’aisance et qui prodiguait des poupées gigantesques à de petites souillons en sabots, était certainement un bonhomme magnifique et redoutable.

Plusieurs heures s’écoulèrent. La messe de minuit était dite, le réveillon était fini, les buveurs s’en étaient allés, le cabaret était fermé, la salle basse était déserte, le feu s’était éteint, l’étranger était toujours à la même place et dans la même posture. De temps en temps il changeait le coude sur lequel il s’appuyait. Voilà tout. Mais il n’avait pas dit un mot depuis que Cosette n’était plus là.

Les Thénardier seuls, par convenance et par curiosité, étaient restés dans la salle. — Est-ce qu’il va passer la nuit comme ça? grommelait la Thénardier. Comme deux heures du matin sonnaient, elle se déclara vaincue et dit à son mari: — Je vais me coucher. Fais-en ce que tu voudras. — Le mari s’assit à une table dans un coin, alluma une chandelle et se mit à lire le *Courrier français*.

Une bonne heure se passa ainsi. Le digne aubergiste avait lu au moins trois fois le *Courrier français*, depuis la date du numéro jusqu’au nom de l’imprimeur. L’étranger ne bougeait pas.

Le Thénardier remua, toussa, cracha, se moucha, fit craquer sa chaise. Aucun mouvement de l’homme. — Est-ce qu’il dort? pensa Thénardier. — L’homme ne dormait pas, mais rien ne pouvait l’éveiller.

Enfin Thénardier ôta son bonnet, s’approcha doucement, et s’aventura à dire:

— Est-ce que monsieur ne va pas reposer?

Ne va pas se coucher lui eût semblé excessif et familier. *Reposer* sentait le luxe et était du respect. Ces mots-là ont la propriété mystérieuse et admirable de gonfler le lendemain matin le chiffre de la carte à payer. Une chambre où l’on *couche* coûte vingt sous; une chambre où l’on *repose* coûte vingt francs.

— Tiens! dit l’étranger, vous avez raison. Où est votre écurie?

— Monsieur, fit le Thénardier avec un sourire, je vais conduire monsieur.

Il prit la chandelle, l’homme prit son paquet et son bâton, et Thénardier le mena dans une chambre au premier qui était d’une rare splendeur, toute meublée en acajou avec un lit-bateau et des rideaux de calicot rouge.

— Qu’est-ce que c’est que cela? dit le voyageur.

— C’est notre propre chambre de noce, dit l’aubergiste. Nous en habitons une autre, mon épouse et moi. On n’entre ici que trois ou quatre fois dans l’année.

— J’aurais autant aimé l’écurie, dit l’homme brusquement.

Le Thénardier n’eut pas l’air d’entendre cette réflexion peu obligeante.

Il alluma deux bougies de cire toutes neuves qui figuraient sur la cheminée. Un assez bon feu flambait dans l’âtre.

Il y avait sur cette cheminée, sous un bocal, une coiffure de femme en fils d’argent et en fleurs d’oranger.

— Et ceci, qu’est-ce que c’est? reprit l’étranger. — Monsieur, dit le Thénardier, c’est le chapeau de mariée de ma femme.

Le voyageur regarda l’objet d’un regard qui semblait dire: *il y a donc eu un moment où ce monstre a été une vierge*!

Du reste le Thénardier mentait. Quand il avait pris à bail cette bicoque pour en faire une gargote, il avait trouvé cette chambre ainsi garnie, et avait acheté ces meubles et brocanté ces fleurs d’oranger, jugeant que cela ferait une ombre gracieuse sur «son épouse», et qu’il en résulterait pour sa maison ce que les Anglais appellent de la respectabilité.

Quand le voyageur se retourna, l’hôte avait disparu. Le Thénardier s’était éclipsé discrètement, sans oser dire bonsoir, ne voulant pas traiter avec une cordialité irrespectueuse un homme qu’il se proposait d’écorcher royalement le lendemain matin.

L’aubergiste se retira dans sa chambre. Sa femme était couchée, mais elle ne dormait pas. Quand elle entendit le pas de son mari, elle se tourna et lui dit:

— Tu sais que je flanque demain Cosette à la porte.

Le Thénardier répondit froidement:

— Comme tu y vas!

Ils n’échangèrent pas d’autres paroles, et quelques minutes après leur chandelle était éteinte.

De son côté le voyageur avait déposé dans un coin son bâton et son paquet. L’hôte parti, il s’assit sur un fauteuil et resta quelque temps pensif. Puis il ôta ses souliers, prit une des deux bougies, souffla l’autre, poussa la porte et sortit de la chambre, regardant autour de lui comme quelqu’un qui cherche. Il traversa un corridor et parvint à l’escalier. Là il entendit un petit bruit très doux qui ressemblait à une respiration d’enfant. Il se laissa conduire par ce bruit et arriva à une espèce d’enfoncement triangulaire pratiqué sous l’escalier ou pour mieux dire formé par l’escalier même. Cet enfoncement n’était autre chose que le dessous des marches. Là, parmi toutes sortes de vieux paniers et de vieux tessons, dans la poussière et dans les toiles d’araignées, il y avait un lit; si l’on peut appeler lit une paillasse trouée jusqu’à montrer la paille et une couverture trouée jusqu’à laisser voir la paillasse. Point de draps. Cela était posé à terre sur le carreau. Dans ce lit Cosette dormait.

L’homme s’approcha, et la considéra.

Cosette dormait profondément. Elle était toute habillée. L’hiver elle ne se déshabillait pas pour avoir moins froid.

Elle tenait serrée contre elle la poupée dont les grands yeux ouverts brillaient dans l’obscurité. De temps en temps elle poussait un grand soupir comme si elle allait se réveiller, et elle étreignait la poupée dans ses bras presque convulsivement. Il n’y avait à côté de son lit qu’un de ses sabots.

Une porte ouverte près du galetas de Cosette laissait voir une assez grande chambre sombre. L’étranger y pénétra. Au fond, à travers une porte vitrée, on apercevait deux petits lits jumeaux très blancs. C’étaient ceux d’Azelma et d’Éponine. Derrière ces lits disparaissait à demi un berceau d’osier sans rideaux où dormait le petit garçon qui avait crié toute la soirée.

L’étranger conjectura que cette chambre communiquait avec celle des époux Thénardier. Il allait se retirer quand son regard rencontra la cheminée; une de ces vastes cheminées d’auberge où il y a toujours un si petit feu, quand il y a du feu, et qui sont si froides à voir. Dans celle-là il n’y avait pas de feu, il n’y avait pas même de cendre; ce qui y était attira pourtant l’attention du voyageur. C’étaient deux petits souliers d’enfant de forme coquette et de grandeur inégale; le voyageur se rappela la gracieuse et immémoriale coutume des enfants qui déposent leur chaussure dans la cheminée le jour de Noël pour y attendre dans les ténèbres quelque étincelant cadeau de leur bonne fée. Éponine et Azelma n’avaient eu garde d’y manquer, et elles avaient mis chacune un de leurs souliers dans la cheminée.

Le voyageur se pencha.

La fée, c’est-à-dire la mère, avait déjà fait sa visite, et l’on voyait reluire dans chaque soulier une belle pièce de dix sous toute neuve.

L’homme se relevait et allait s’en aller lorsqu’il aperçut au fond, à l’écart, dans le coin le plus obscur de l’âtre, un autre objet. Il regarda, et reconnut un sabot, un affreux sabot du bois le plus grossier, à demi brisé, et tout couvert de cendre et de boue desséchée. C’était le sabot de Cosette. Cosette, avec cette touchante confiance des enfants qui peut être trompée toujours sans se décourager jamais, avait mis, elle aussi, son sabot dans la cheminée.

C’est une chose sublime et douce que l’espérance dans un enfant qui n’a jamais connu que le désespoir.

Il n’y avait rien dans ce sabot.

L’étranger fouilla dans son gilet, se courba, et mit dans le sabot de Cosette un louis d’or.

Puis il regagna sa chambre à pas de loup.

Chapitre IX

Thénardier à la manœuvre

Le lendemain matin, deux heures au moins avant le jour, le mari Thénardier, attablé près d'une chandelle dans la salle basse du cabaret, une plume à la main, composait la carte du voyageur à la redingote jaune.

La femme debout, à demi courbée sur lui, le suivait des yeux. Ils n'échangeaient pas une parole. C'était, d'un côté, une méditation profonde, de l'autre, cette admiration religieuse avec laquelle on regarde naître et s'épanouir une merveille de l'esprit humain. On entendait un bruit dans la maison; c'était l'Alouette qui balayait l'escalier.

Après un bon quart d'heure et quelques ratures, le Thénardier produisit ce chef-d'œuvre.

Note du Monsieur du No 1.

Souper Fr. 3

Chambre Fr. 10

Bougie Fr. 5

Feu Fr. 4

Service Fr. 1

———— ———— ———— ————

Total Fr. 23

Service était écrit *servisse*.

— Vingt-trois francs! s'écria la femme avec un enthousiasme mêlé de quelque hésitation.

Comme tous les grands artistes, le Thénardier n'était pas content. — Peuh! fit-il.

C'était l'accent de Castlereagh rédigeant au congrès de Vienne la carte à payer de la France.

— Monsieur Thénardier, tu as raison, il doit bien cela, murmura la femme qui songeait à la poupée donnée à Cosette en présence de ses filles, c'est juste, mais c'est trop. Il ne voudra pas payer.

Le Thénardier fit son rire froid, et dit:

— Il payera.

Ce rire était la signification suprême de la certitude et de l'autorité. Ce qui était dit ainsi devait être. La femme n'insista point. Elle se mit à ranger les tables; le mari marchait de long en large dans la salle. Un moment après il ajouta:

— Je dois bien quinze cents francs, moi!

Il alla s’asseoir au coin de la cheminée, méditant, les pieds sur les cendres chaudes.

— Ah çà! reprit la femme, tu n’oublies pas que je flanque Cosette à la porte aujourd’hui? Ce monstre! elle me mange le cœur avec sa poupée! J’aimerais mieux épouser Louis XVIII que de la garder un jour de plus à la maison.

Le Thénardier alluma sa pipe et répondit entre deux bouffées.

— Tu remettras la carte à l’homme.

Puis il sortit.

Il était à peine hors de la salle que le voyageur y entra.

Le Thénardier reparut sur-le-champ derrière lui et demeura immobile dans la porte entre-bâillée, visible seulement pour sa femme.

L’homme jaune portait à la main son bâton et son paquet.

— Levé si tôt! dit la Thénardier, est-ce que monsieur nous quitte déjà?

Tout en parlant ainsi, elle tournait d’un air embarrassé la carte dans ses mains et y faisait des plis avec ses ongles. Son visage dur offrait une nuance qui ne lui était pas habituelle, la timidité et le scrupule.

Présenter une pareille note à un homme qui avait si parfaitement l’air d’«un pauvre», cela lui paraissait malaisé.

Le voyageur semblait préoccupé et distrait. Il répondit:

— Oui, madame. Je m’en vais.

— Monsieur, reprit-elle, n’avait donc pas d’affaires à Montfermeil?

— Non. Je passe par ici. Voilà tout. Madame, ajouta-t-il, qu’est-ce que je dois?

La Thénardier, sans répondre, lui tendit la carte pliée.

L’homme déplia le papier, le regarda, mais son attention était visiblement ailleurs.

— Madame, reprit-il, faites-vous de bonnes affaires dans ce Montfermeil?

— Comme cela, monsieur, répondit la Thénardier stupéfaite de ne point voir d’autre explosion.

Elle poursuivit d’un accent élégiaque et lamentable:

— Oh! monsieur, les temps sont bien durs! et puis nous avons si peu de bourgeois dans nos endroits! C’est tout petit monde, voyez-vous. Si nous n’avions pas par-ci par-là des voyageurs généreux et riches comme monsieur! Nous avons tant de charges. Tenez, cette petite nous coûte les yeux de la tête.

— Quelle petite?

— Eh bien, la petite, vous savez! Cosette! l’Alouette, comme on dit dans le pays!

— Ah! dit l’homme.

Elle continua:

— Sont-ils bêtes, ces paysans, avec leurs sobriquets! elle a plutôt l’air d’une chauve-souris que d’une alouette. Voyez-vous, monsieur, nous ne demandons pas la charité, mais nous ne pouvons pas la faire. Nous ne gagnons rien, et nous avons gros à payer. La patente, les impositions, les portes et fenêtres, les centimes! Monsieur sait que le gouvernement demande un argent terrible! Et puis j’ai mes filles, moi. Je n’ai pas besoin de nourrir l’enfant des autres. L’homme reprit, de cette voix qu’il s’efforçait de rendre indifférente et dans laquelle il y avait un tremblement:

— Et si l’on vous en débarrassait?

— De qui? de la Cosette?

— Oui.

La face rouge et violente de la gargotière s’illumina d’un épanouissement hideux.

— Ah, monsieur! mon bon monsieur! prenez-la, gardez-la, emmenez-la, emportez-la, sucrez-la, truffez-la, buvez-la, mangez-la, et soyez béni de la bonne sainte Vierge et de tous les saints du paradis!

— C’est dit.

— Vrai? vous l’emmenez?

— Je l’emmène.

— Tout de suite?

— Tout de suite. Appelez l’enfant.

— Cosette! cria la Thénardier.

— En attendant, poursuivit l’homme, je vais toujours vous payer ma dépense. Combien est-ce?

Il jeta un coup d’œil sur la carte et ne put réprimer un mouvement de surprise:

— Vingt-trois francs!

Il regarda la gargotière et répéta:

— Vingt-trois francs?

Il y avait dans la prononciation de ces deux mots ainsi répétés l’accent qui sépare le point d’exclamation du point d’interrogation.

La Thénardier avait eu le temps de se préparer au choc. Elle répondit avec assurance:

— Dame oui, monsieur! c’est vingt-trois francs.

L’étranger posa cinq pièces de cinq francs sur la table.

— Allez chercher la petite, dit-il.

En ce moment, le Thénardier s’avança au milieu de la salle et dit:

— Monsieur doit vingt-six sous.

— Vingt-six sous! s’écria la femme.

— Vingt sous pour la chambre, reprit le Thénardier froidement, et six sous pour le souper. Quant à la petite, j’ai besoin d’en causer un peu avec monsieur. Laisse-nous, ma femme. La Thénardier eut un de ces éblouissements que donnent les éclairs imprévus du talent. Elle sentit que le grand acteur entrait en scène, ne répliqua pas un mot, et sortit.

Dès qu’ils furent seuls, le Thénardier offrit une chaise au voyageur. Le voyageur s’assit; le Thénardier resta debout, et son visage prit une singulière expression de bonhomie et de simplicité.

— Monsieur, dit-il, tenez, je vais vous dire. C’est que je l’adore, moi, cette enfant.

L’étranger le regarda fixement.

— Quelle enfant?

Thénardier continua:

— Comme c’est drôle! on s’attache. Qu’est-ce que c’est que tout cet argent-là? reprenez donc vos pièces de cent sous. C’est une enfant que j’adore.

— Qui ça? demanda l’étranger.

— Hé, notre petite Cosette! ne voulez-vous pas nous l’emmener? Eh bien, je parle franchement, vrai comme vous êtes un honnête homme, je ne peux pas y consentir. Elle me ferait faute, cette enfant. J’ai vu ça tout petit. C’est vrai qu’elle nous coûte de l’argent, c’est vrai qu’elle a des défauts, c’est vrai que nous ne sommes pas riches, c’est vrai que j’ai payé plus de quatre cents francs en drogues rien que pour une de ses maladies! Mais il faut bien faire quelque chose pour le bon Dieu. Ça n’a ni père ni mère, je l’ai élevée. J’ai du pain pour elle et pour moi. Au fait j’y tiens, à cette enfant. Vous comprenez, on se prend d’affection; je suis une bonne bête, moi; je ne raisonne pas; je l’aime, cette petite; ma femme est vive, mais elle l’aime aussi. Voyez-vous, c’est comme notre enfant. J’ai besoin que ça babille dans la maison.

L’étranger le regardait toujours fixement. Il continua:

— Pardon, excuse, monsieur, mais on ne donne point son enfant comme ça à un passant. Pas vrai que j’ai raison? Après cela, je ne dis pas, vous êtes riche, vous avez l’air d’un bien brave homme, si c’était pour son bonheur? Mais il faudrait savoir. Vous comprenez? Une supposition que je la laisserais aller et que je me sacrifierais, je voudrais savoir où elle va, je ne voudrais pas la perdre de vue, je voudrais savoir chez qui elle est, pour l’aller voir de temps en temps, qu’elle sache que son bon père nourricier est là, qu’il veille sur elle. Enfin il y a des choses qui ne sont pas possibles. Je ne sais seulement pas votre nom? Vous l’emmèneriez, je dirais: *eh bien, l’Alouette? Où donc a-t-elle passé*? Il faudrait au moins voir quelque méchant chiffon de papier, un petit bout de passeport, quoi!

L’étranger, sans cesser de le regarder de ce regard qui va, pour ainsi dire, jusqu’au fond de la conscience, lui répondit d’un accent grave et ferme:

— Monsieur Thénardier, on n’a pas de passeport pour venir à cinq lieues de Paris. Si j’emmène Cosette, je l’emmènerai, voilà tout. Vous ne saurez pas mon nom, vous ne saurez pas ma demeure, vous ne saurez pas où elle sera, et mon intention est qu’elle ne vous revoie de sa vie. Je casse le fil qu’elle a au pied, et elle s’en va. Cela vous convient-il? Oui ou non.

De même que les démons et les génies reconnaissaient à de certains signes la présence d’un dieu supérieur, le Thénardier comprit qu’il avait affaire à quelqu’un de très fort. Ce fut comme une intuition; il comprit cela avec sa promptitude nette et sagace. La veille, tout en buvant avec les rouliers, tout en fumant, tout en chantant des gaudrioles, il avait passé la soirée à observer l’étranger, le guettant comme un chat et l’étudiant comme un mathématicien. Il l’avait à la fois épié pour son propre compte, pour le plaisir et par instinct, et espionné comme s’il eût été payé pour cela. Pas un geste, pas un mouvement de l’homme à la capote jaune ne lui était échappé. Avant même que l’inconnu manifestât si clairement son intérêt pour Cosette, le Thénardier l’avait deviné. Il avait surpris les regards profonds de ce vieux qui revenaient toujours à l’enfant. Pourquoi cet intérêt? Qu’était-ce que cet homme? Pourquoi, avec tant d’argent dans sa bourse, ce costume si misérable? Questions qu’il se posait sans pouvoir les résoudre et qui l’irritaient. Il y avait songé toute la nuit. Ce ne pouvait être le père de Cosette. Était-ce quelque grand-père? Alors pourquoi ne pas se faire connaître tout de suite? Quand on a un droit, on le montre. Cet homme évidemment n'avait pas de droit sur Cosette. Alors qu'était-ce? Le Thénardier se perdait en suppositions. Il entrevoyait tout, et ne voyait rien. Quoi qu'il en fût, en entamant la conversation avec l'homme, sûr qu'il y avait un secret dans tout cela, sûr que l'homme était intéressé à rester dans l'ombre, il se sentait fort; à la réponse nette et ferme de l'étranger, quand il vit que ce personnage mystérieux était mystérieux si simplement, il se sentit faible. Il ne s'attendait à rien de pareil. Ce fut la déroute de ses conjectures. Il rallia ses idées. Il pesa tout cela en une seconde. Le Thénardier était un de ces hommes qui jugent d'un coup d'œil une situation. Il estima que c'était le moment de marcher droit et vite. Il fit comme les grands capitaines à cet instant décisif qu'ils savent seuls reconnaître, il démasqua brusquement sa batterie.

— Monsieur, dit-il, il me faut quinze cents francs.

L'étranger prit dans sa poche de côté un vieux portefeuille en cuir noir, l'ouvrit et en tira trois billets de banque qu'il posa sur la table. Puis il appuya son large pouce sur ces billets, et dit au gargotier:

— Faites venir Cosette. Pendant que ceci se passait, que faisait Cosette?

Cosette, en s'éveillant, avait couru à son sabot. Elle y avait trouvé la pièce d'or. Ce n'était pas un napoléon, c'était une de ces pièces de vingt francs toutes neuves de la restauration sur l'effigie desquelles la petite queue prussienne avait remplacé la couronne de laurier. Cosette fut éblouie. Sa destinée commençait à l'enivrer. Elle ne savait pas ce que c'était qu'une pièce d'or, elle n'en avait jamais vu, elle la cacha bien vite dans sa poche comme si elle l'avait volée. Cependant elle sentait que cela était bien à elle, elle devinait d'où ce don lui venait, mais elle éprouvait une sorte de joie pleine de peur. Elle était contente; elle était surtout stupéfaite. Ces choses si magnifiques et si jolies ne lui paraissaient pas réelles. La poupée lui faisait peur, la pièce d'or lui faisait peur. Elle tremblait vaguement devant ces magnificences. L'étranger seul ne lui faisait pas peur. Au contraire, il la rassurait. Depuis la veille, à travers ses étonnements, à travers son sommeil, elle songeait dans son petit esprit d'enfant à cet homme qui avait l'air vieux et pauvre et si triste, et qui était si riche et si bon. Depuis qu'elle avait rencontré ce bonhomme dans le bois, tout était comme changé pour elle. Cosette, moins heureuse que la moindre hirondelle du ciel, n'avait jamais su ce que c'est que de se réfugier à l'ombre de sa mère et sous une aile. Depuis cinq ans, c'est-à-dire aussi loin que pouvaient remonter ses souvenirs, la pauvre enfant frissonnait et grelottait. Elle avait toujours été toute nue sous la bise aigre du malheur, maintenant il lui semblait qu’elle était vêtue. Autrefois son âme avait froid, maintenant elle avait chaud. Elle n’avait plus autant de crainte de la Thénardier. Elle n’était plus seule; il y avait quelqu’un là.

Elle s’était mise bien vite à sa besogne de tous les matins. Ce louis, qu’elle avait sur elle, dans ce même gousset de son tablier d’où la pièce de quinze sous était tombée la veille, lui donnait des distractions. Elle n’osait pas y toucher, mais elle passait des cinq minutes à le contempler, il faut le dire, en tirant la langue. Tout en balayant l’escalier, elle s’arrêtait, et restait là, immobile, oubliant le balai et l’univers entier, occupée à regarder cette étoile briller au fond de sa poche.

Ce fut dans une de ces contemplations que la Thénardier la rejoignit.

Sur l’ordre de son mari, elle l’était allée chercher. Chose inouïe, elle ne lui donna pas une tape et ne lui dit pas une injure.

— Cosette, dit-elle presque doucement, viens tout de suite.

Un instant après, Cosette entrait dans la salle basse.

L’étranger prit le paquet qu’il avait apporté et le dénoua. Ce paquet contenait une petite robe de laine, un tablier, une brassière de futaine, un jupon, un fichu, des bas de laine, des souliers, un vêtement complet pour une fille de huit ans. Tout cela était noir.

— Mon enfant, dit l’homme, prends ceci et va t’habiller bien vite.

Le jour paraissait lorsque ceux des habitants de Montfermeil qui commençaient à ouvrir leurs portes virent passer dans la rue de Paris un bonhomme pauvrement vêtu donnant la main à une petite fille tout en deuil qui portait une grande poupée rose dans ses bras. Ils se dirigeaient du côté de Livry.

C’étaient notre homme et Cosette.

Personne ne connaissait l’homme; comme Cosette n’était plus en guenilles, beaucoup ne la reconnurent pas.

Cosette s’en allait. Avec qui? elle l’ignorait. Où? elle ne savait. Tout ce qu’elle comprenait, c’est qu’elle laissait derrière elle la gargote Thénardier. Personne n’avait songé à lui dire adieu, ni elle à dire adieu à personne. Elle sortait de cette maison haïe et haïssant.

Pauvre doux être dont le cœur n’avait jusqu’à cette heure été que comprimé!

Cosette marchait gravement, ouvrant ses grands yeux et considérant le ciel. Elle avait mis son louis dans la poche de son tablier neuf. De temps en temps elle se penchait et lui jetait un coup d'œil, puis elle regardait le bonhomme. Elle sentait quelque chose comme si elle était près du bon Dieu.

Chapitre X

Qui cherche le mieux peut trouver le pire

La Thénardier, selon son habitude, avait laissé faire son mari. Elle s’attendait à de grands événements. Quand l’homme et Cosette furent partis, le Thénardier laissa s’écouler un grand quart d’heure, puis il la prit à part et lui montra les quinze cents francs.

— Que ça! dit-elle.

C’était la première fois, depuis le commencement de leur ménage, qu’elle osait critiquer un acte du maître.

Le coup porta.

— Au fait, tu as raison, dit-il, je suis un imbécile. Donne-moi mon chapeau.

Il plia les trois billets de banque, les enfonça dans sa poche et sortit en toute hâte, mais il se trompa et prit d’abord à droite. Quelques voisines auxquelles il s’informa le remirent sur la trace, l’Alouette et l’homme avaient été vus allant dans la direction de Livry. Il suivit cette indication, marchant à grands pas et monologuant.

— Cet homme est évidemment un million habillé en jaune, et moi je suis un animal. Il a d’abord donné vingt sous, puis cinq francs, puis cinquante francs, puis quinze cents francs, toujours aussi facilement. Il aurait donné quinze mille francs. Mais je vais le rattraper.

Et puis ce paquet d’habits préparés d’avance pour la petite, tout cela était singulier; il y avait bien des mystères là-dessous. On ne lâche pas des mystères quand on les tient. Les secrets des riches sont des éponges pleines d’or; il faut savoir les presser. Toutes ces pensées lui tourbillonnaient dans le cerveau.

— Je suis un animal, disait-il.

Quand on est sorti de Montfermeil et qu’on a atteint le coude que fait la route qui va à Livry, on la voit se développer devant soi très loin sur le plateau. Parvenu là, il calcula qu’il devait apercevoir l’homme et la petite. Il regarda aussi loin que sa vue put s’étendre, et ne vit rien. Il s’informa encore. Cependant il perdait du temps. Des passants lui dirent que l’homme et l’enfant qu’il cherchait s’étaient acheminés vers les bois du côté de Gagny. Il se hâta dans cette direction.

Ils avaient de l’avance sur lui, mais un enfant marche lentement, et lui il allait vite. Et puis le pays lui était bien connu.

Tout à coup il s’arrêta et se frappa le front comme un homme qui a oublié l’essentiel, et qui est prêt à revenir sur ses pas.

— J’aurais dû prendre mon fusil! se dit-il.

Thénardier était une de ces natures doubles qui passent quelquefois au milieu de nous à notre insu et qui disparaissent sans qu’on les ait connues parce que la destinée n’en a montré qu’un côté. Le sort de beaucoup d’hommes est de vivre ainsi à demi submergés. Dans une situation calme et plate, Thénardier avait tout ce qu’il fallait pour faire — nous ne disons pas pour être — ce qu’on est convenu d’appeler un honnête commerçant, un bon bourgeois. En même temps, certaines circonstances étant données, certaines secousses venant à soulever sa nature de dessous, il avait tout ce qu’il fallait pour être un scélérat. C’était un boutiquier dans lequel il y avait du monstre. Satan devait par moments s’accroupir dans quelque coin du bouge où vivait Thénardier et rêver devant ce chef-d’œuvre hideux. Après une hésitation d’un instant:

— Bah! pensa-t-il, ils auraient le temps d’échapper!

Et il continua son chemin, allant devant lui rapidement, et presque d’un air de certitude, avec la sagacité du renard flairant une compagnie de perdrix.

En effet, quand il eut dépassé les étangs et traversé obliquement la grande clairière qui est à droite de l’avenue de Bellevue, comme il arrivait à cette allée de gazon qui fait presque le tour de la colline et qui recouvre la voûte de l’ancien canal des eaux de l’abbaye de Chelles, il aperçut au-dessus d’une broussaille un chapeau sur lequel il avait déjà échafaudé bien des conjectures. C’était le chapeau de l’homme. La broussaille était basse. Le Thénardier reconnut que l’homme et Cosette étaient assis là. On ne voyait pas l’enfant à cause de sa petitesse, mais on apercevait la tête de la poupée.

Le Thénardier ne se trompait pas. L’homme s’était assis là pour laisser un peu reposer Cosette. Le gargotier tourna la broussaille et apparut brusquement aux regards de ceux qu’il cherchait.

— Pardon excuse, monsieur, dit-il tout essoufflé, mais voici vos quinze cents francs.

En parlant ainsi, il tendait à l’étranger les trois billets de banque.

L’homme leva les yeux.

— Qu’est-ce que cela signifie?

Le Thénardier répondit respectueusement:

— Monsieur, cela signifie que je reprends Cosette.

Cosette frissonna et se serra contre le bonhomme.

Lui, il répondit en regardant le Thénardier dans le fond des yeux et en espaçant toutes les syllabes.

— Vous re-pre-nez Cosette?

— Oui, monsieur, je la reprends. Je vais vous dire. J’ai réfléchi. Au fait, je n’ai pas le droit de vous la donner. Je suis un honnête homme, voyez-vous. Cette petite n’est pas à moi, elle est à sa mère. C’est sa mère qui me l’a confiée, je ne puis la remettre qu’à sa mère. Vous me direz: *Mais la mère est morte*. Bon. En ce cas je ne puis rendre l’enfant qu’à une personne qui m’apporterait un écrit signé de la mère comme quoi je dois remettre l’enfant à cette personne-là. Cela est clair.

L’homme, sans répondre, fouilla dans sa poche et le Thénardier vit reparaître le portefeuille aux billets de banque.

Le gargotier eut un frémissement de joie.

— Bon! pensa-t-il, tenons-nous. Il va me corrompre!

Avant d’ouvrir le portefeuille, le voyageur jeta un coup d’œil autour de lui. Le lieu était absolument désert. Il n’y avait pas une âme dans le bois ni dans la vallée. L’homme ouvrit le portefeuille et en tira, non la poignée de billets de banque qu’attendait Thénardier, mais un simple petit papier qu’il développa et présenta tout ouvert à l’aubergiste en disant:

— Vous avez raison. Lisez.

Le Thénardier prit le papier, et lut:

«Montreuil-sur-Mer, le 25 mars 1823

«Monsieur Thénardier,

Vous remettrez Cosette à la personne.

On vous payera toutes les petites choses.

J’ai l’honneur de vous saluer avec considération.

«Fantine.»

— Vous connaissez cette signature? reprit l’homme.

C’était bien la signature de Fantine. Le Thénardier la reconnut.

Il n’y avait rien à répliquer. Il sentit deux violents dépits, le dépit de renoncer à la corruption qu’il espérait, et le dépit d’être battu. L’homme ajouta:

— Vous pouvez garder ce papier pour votre décharge.

Le Thénardier se replia en bon ordre.

— Cette signature est assez bien imitée, grommela-t-il entre ses dents. Enfin, soit!

Puis il essaya un effort désespéré.

— Monsieur, dit-il, c’est bon. Puisque vous êtes la personne. Mais il faut me payer «toutes les petites choses». On me doit gros. L’homme se dressa debout, et dit en époussetant avec des chiquenaudes sa manche râpée où il y avait de la poussière.

— Monsieur Thénardier, en janvier la mère comptait qu’elle vous devait cent vingt francs; vous lui avez envoyé en février un mémoire de cinq cents francs; vous avez reçu trois cents francs fin février et trois cents francs au commencement de mars. Il s’est écoulé depuis lors neuf mois à quinze francs, prix convenu, cela fait cent trente-cinq francs. Vous aviez reçu cent francs de trop. Reste trente-cinq francs qu’on vous doit. Je viens de vous donner quinze cents francs.

Le Thénardier éprouva ce qu’éprouve le loup au moment où il se sent mordu et saisi par la mâchoire d’acier du piège.

— Quel est ce diable d’homme? pensa-t-il.

Il fit ce que fait le loup. Il donna une secousse. L’audace lui avait déjà réussi une fois.

— Monsieur-dont-je-ne-sais-pas-le-nom, dit-il résolument et mettant cette fois les façons respectueuses de côté, je reprendrai Cosette ou vous me donnerez mille écus.

L’étranger dit tranquillement.

— Viens, Cosette.

Il prit Cosette de la main gauche, et de la droite il ramassa son bâton qui était à terre.

Le Thénardier remarqua l’énormité de la trique et la solitude du lieu.

L’homme s’enfonça dans le bois avec l’enfant, laissant le gargotier immobile et interdit.

Pendant qu’ils s’éloignaient, le Thénardier considérait ses larges épaules un peu voûtées et ses gros poings.

Puis ses yeux, revenant à lui-même, retombaient sur ses bras chétifs et sur ses mains maigres.

— Il faut que je sois vraiment bien bête, pensait-il, de n’avoir pas pris mon fusil, puisque j’allais à la chasse!

Cependant l’aubergiste ne lâcha pas prise.

— Je veux savoir où il ira, dit-il.

Et il se mit à les suivre à distance. Il lui restait deux choses dans les mains, une ironie, le chiffon de papier signé *Fantine*, et une consolation, les quinze cents francs.

L'homme emmenait Cosette dans la direction de Livry et de Bondy. Il marchait lentement, la tête baissée, dans une attitude de réflexion et de tristesse. L'hiver avait fait le bois à claire-voie, si bien que le Thénardier ne les perdait pas de vue, tout en restant assez loin. De temps en temps l'homme se retournait et regardait si on ne le suivait pas. Tout à coup il aperçut Thénardier. Il entra brusquement avec Cosette dans un taillis où ils pouvaient tous deux disparaître.

— Diantre! dit le Thénardier.

Et il doubla le pas.

L'épaisseur du fourré l'avait forcé de se rapprocher d'eux. Quand l'homme fut au plus épais, il se retourna. Thénardier eut beau se cacher dans les branches; il ne put faire que l'homme ne le vît pas. L'homme lui jeta un coup d'œil inquiet, puis hocha la tête et reprit sa route. L'aubergiste se remit à le suivre. Ils firent ainsi deux ou trois cents pas. Tout à coup l'homme se retourna encore. Il aperçut l'aubergiste. Cette fois il le regarda d'un air si sombre que le Thénardier jugea «inutile» d'aller plus loin. Thénardier rebroussa chemin.

Chapitre XI

Le numéro 9430 reparaît et Cosette le gagne à la loterie

Jean Valjean n’était pas mort.

En tombant à la mer, ou plutôt en s’y jetant, il était, comme on l’a vu, sans fers. Il nagea entre deux eaux jusque sous un navire au mouillage, auquel était amarrée une embarcation. Il trouva moyen de se cacher dans cette embarcation jusqu’au soir. À la nuit, il se jeta de nouveau à la nage, et atteignit la côte à peu de distance du cap Brun. Là, comme ce n’était pas l’argent qui lui manquait, il put se procurer des vêtements. Une guinguette aux environs de Balaguier était alors le vestiaire des forçats évadés, spécialité lucrative. Puis, Jean Valjean, comme tous ces tristes fugitifs qui tâchent de dépister le guet de la loi et la fatalité sociale, suivit un itinéraire obscur et ondulant. Il trouva un premier asile aux Pradeaux, près Beausset. Ensuite il se dirigea vers le Grand-Villard, près Briançon, dans les Hautes-Alpes. Fuite tâtonnante et inquiète, chemin de taupe dont les embranchements sont inconnus. On a pu, plus tard, retrouver quelque trace de son passage dans l’Ain sur le territoire de Civrieux, dans les Pyrénées, à Accons au lieu dit la Grange-de-Doumecq, près du hameau de Chavailles, et dans les environs de Périgueux, à Brunies, canton de la Chapelle-Gonaguet. Il gagna Paris. On vient de le voir à Montfermeil.

Son premier soin, en arrivant à Paris, avait été d’acheter des habits de deuil pour une petite fille de sept à huit ans, puis de se procurer un logement. Cela fait, il s’était rendu à Montfermeil.

On se souvient que déjà, lors de sa précédente évasion, il y avait fait, ou dans les environs, un voyage mystérieux dont la justice avait eu quelque lueur.

Du reste on le croyait mort, et cela épaississait l’obscurité qui s’était faite sur lui. À Paris, il lui tomba sous la main un des journaux qui enregistraient le fait. Il se sentit rassuré et presque en paix comme s’il était réellement mort.

Le soir même du jour où Jean Valjean avait tiré Cosette des griffes des Thénardier, il rentrait dans Paris. Il y rentrait à la nuit tombante, avec l’enfant, par la barrière de Monceaux. Là il monta dans un cabriolet qui le conduisit à l’esplanade de l’Observatoire. Il y descendit, paya le cocher, prit

Cosette par la main, et tous deux, dans la nuit noire, par les rues désertes qui avoisinent l’Ourcine et la Glacière, se dirigèrent vers le boulevard de l’Hôpital.

La journée avait été étrange et remplie d’émotions pour Cosette; on avait mangé derrière des haies du pain et du fromage achetés dans des gargotes isolées, on avait souvent changé de voiture, on avait fait des bouts de chemin à pied, elle ne se plaignait pas, mais elle était fatiguée, et Jean Valjean s’en aperçut à sa main qu’elle tirait davantage en marchant. Il la prit sur son dos; Cosette, sans lâcher Catherine, posa sa tête sur l’épaule de Jean Valjean, et s’y endormit.

Livre quatrième — La masure Gorbeau

Chapitre I

Maître Gorbeau

Il y a quarante ans, le promeneur solitaire qui s’aventurait dans les pays perdus de la Salpêtrière, et qui montait par le boulevard jusque vers la barrière d’Italie, arrivait à des endroits où l’on eût pu dire que Paris disparaissait. Ce n’était pas la solitude, il y avait des passants; ce n’était pas la campagne, il y avait des maisons et des rues; ce n’était pas une ville, les rues avaient des ornières comme les grandes routes et l’herbe y poussait; ce n’était pas un village, les maisons étaient trop hautes. Qu’était-ce donc? C’était un lieu habité où il n’y avait personne, c’était un lieu désert où il y avait quelqu’un; c’était un boulevard de la grande ville, une rue de Paris, plus farouche la nuit qu’une forêt, plus morne le jour qu’un cimetière.

C’était le vieux quartier du Marché-aux-Chevaux.

Ce promeneur, s’il se risquait au delà des quatre murs caducs de ce Marché-aux-Chevaux, s’il consentait même à dépasser la rue du Petit-Banquier, après avoir laissé à sa droite un courtil gardé par de hautes murailles, puis un pré où se dressaient des meules de tan pareilles à des huttes de castors gigantesques, puis un enclos encombré de bois de charpente avec des tas de souches, de sciures et de copeaux en haut desquels aboyait un gros chien, puis un long mur bas tout en ruine, avec une petite porte noire et en deuil, chargé de mousses qui s’emplissaient de fleurs au printemps, puis, au plus désert, une affreuse bâtisse décrépite sur laquelle on lisait en grosses lettres: DEFENSE D’AFFICHER, ce promeneur hasardeux atteignait l’angle de la rue des Vignes-Saint-Marcel, latitudes peu connues. Là, près d’une usine et entre deux murs de jardins, on voyait en ce temps-là une masure qui, au premier coup d’œil, semblait petite comme une chaumière et qui en réalité était grande comme une cathédrale. Elle se présentait sur la voie publique de côté, par le pignon; de là son exiguïté apparente. Presque toute la maison était cachée. On n’en apercevait que la porte et une fenêtre.

Cette masure n’avait qu’un étage.

En l’examinant, le détail qui frappait d’abord, c’est que cette porte n’avait jamais pu être que la porte d’un bouge, tandis que cette croisée, si elle eût été coupée dans la pierre de taille au lieu de l’être dans le moellon, aurait pu être la croisée d’un hôtel.

La porte n’était autre chose qu’un assemblage de planches vermoulues grossièrement reliées par des traverses pareilles à des bûches mal équarries. Elle s’ouvrait immédiatement sur un roide escalier à hautes marches, boueux, plâtreux, poudreux, de la même largeur qu’elle, qu’on voyait de la rue monter droit comme une échelle et disparaître dans l’ombre entre deux murs. Le haut de la baie informe que battait cette porte était masqué d’une volige étroite au milieu de laquelle on avait scié un jour triangulaire, tout ensemble lucarne et vasistas quand la porte était fermée. Sur le dedans de la porte un pinceau trempé dans l’encre avait tracé en deux coups de poing le chiffre 52, et au-dessus de la volige le même pinceau avait barbouillé le numéro 50; de sorte qu’on hésitait. Où est-on? Le dessus de la porte dit: au numéro 50; le dedans réplique: non, au numéro 52. On ne sait quels chiffons couleur de poussière pendaient comme des draperies au vasistas triangulaire.

La fenêtre était large, suffisamment élevée, garnie de persiennes et de châssis à grands carreaux; seulement ces grands carreaux avaient des blessures variées, à la fois cachées et trahies par un ingénieux bandage en papier, et les persiennes, disloquées et descellées, menaçaient plutôt les passants qu’elles ne gardaient les habitants. Les abat-jour horizontaux y manquaient çà et là et étaient naïvement remplacés par des planches clouées perpendiculairement; si bien que la chose commençait en persienne et finissait en volet.

Cette porte qui avait l’air immonde et cette fenêtre qui avait l’air honnête, quoique délabrée, ainsi vues sur la même maison, faisaient l’effet de deux mendiants dépareillés qui iraient ensemble et marcheraient côte à côte avec deux mines différentes sous les mêmes haillons, l’un ayant toujours été un gueux, l’autre ayant été un gentilhomme.

L’escalier menait à un corps de bâtiment très vaste qui ressemblait à un hangar dont on aurait fait une maison. Ce bâtiment avait pour tube intestinal un long corridor sur lequel s’ouvraient, à droite et à gauche, des espèces de compartiments de dimensions variées, à la rigueur logeables et plutôt semblables à des échoppes qu’à des cellules. Ces chambres prenaient jour sur des terrains vagues des environs. Tout cela était obscur, fâcheux, blafard, mélancolique, sépulcral; traversé, selon que les fentes étaient dans le toit ou dans la porte, par des rayons froids ou par des bises glacées. Une particularité intéressante et pittoresque de ce genre d'habitation, c'est l'énormité des araignées.

À gauche de la porte d'entrée, sur le boulevard, à hauteur d'homme, une lucarne qu'on avait murée faisait une niche carrée pleine de pierres que les enfants y jetaient en passant.

Une partie de ce bâtiment a été dernièrement démolie. Ce qui en reste aujourd'hui peut encore faire juger de ce qu'il a été. Le tout, dans son ensemble, n'a guère plus d'une centaine d'années. Cent ans, c'est la jeunesse d'une église et la vieillesse d'une maison. Il semble que le logis de l'homme participe de sa brièveté et le logis de Dieu de son éternité.

Les facteurs de la poste appelaient cette masure le numéro 50-52; mais elle était connue dans le quartier sous le nom de maison Gorbeau. Disons d'où lui venait cette appellation.

Les collecteurs de petits faits, qui se font des herbiers d'anecdotes et qui piquent dans leur mémoire les dates fugaces avec une épingle, savent qu'il y avait à Paris, au siècle dernier, vers 1770, deux procureurs au Châtelet, appelés, l'un Corbeau, l'autre Renard. Deux noms prévus par La Fontaine. L'occasion était trop belle pour que la basoche n'en fît point gorge chaude. Tout de suite la parodie courut, en vers quelque peu boiteux, les galeries du Palais:

Maître Corbeau, sur un dossier perché,
Tenait dans son bec une saisie exécutoire;
Maître Renard, par l'odeur alléché,
Lui fit à peu près cette histoire:
Hé bonjour! etc.

Les deux honnêtes praticiens, gênés par les quolibets et contrariés dans leur port de tête par les éclats de rire qui les suivaient, résolurent de se débarrasser de leurs noms et prirent le parti de s'adresser au roi. La requête fut présentée à Louis XV le jour même où le nonce du pape, d'un côté, et le cardinal de La Roche-Aymon, de l'autre, dévotement agenouillés tous les deux, chaussèrent, en présence de sa majesté, chacun d'une pantoufle les deux pieds nus de madame Du Barry sortant du lit. Le roi, qui riait, continua de rire, passa gaîment des deux évêques aux deux procureurs, et fit à ces robins grâce de leurs noms, ou à peu près. Il fut permis, de par le roi, à maître Corbeau d'ajouter une queue à son initiale et de se nommer Gorbeau; maître Renard fut moins heureux, il ne put obtenir que de mettre un P devant son R et de s’appeler Prenard; si bien que le deuxième nom n’était guère moins ressemblant que le premier.

Or, selon la tradition locale, ce maître Gorbeau avait été propriétaire de la bâtisse numérotée 50-52 boulevard de l’Hôpital. Il était même l’auteur de la fenêtre monumentale. De là à cette masure le nom de maison Gorbeau.

Vis-à-vis le numéro 50-52 se dresse, parmi les plantations du boulevard, un grand orme aux trois quarts mort; presque en face s’ouvre la rue de la barrière des Gobelins, rue alors sans maisons, non pavée, plantée d’arbres mal venus, verte ou fangeuse selon la saison, qui allait aboutir carrément au mur d’enceinte de Paris. Une odeur de couperose sort par bouffées des toits d’une fabrique voisine.

La barrière était tout près. En 1823, le mur d’enceinte existait encore.

Cette barrière elle-même jetait dans l’esprit des figures funestes. C’était le chemin de Bicêtre. C’est par là que, sous l’Empire et la Restauration, rentraient à Paris les condamnés à mort le jour de leur exécution. C’est là que fut commis vers 1829 ce mystérieux assassinat dit «de la barrière de Fontainebleau» dont la justice n’a pu découvrir les auteurs, problème funèbre qui n’a pas été éclairci, énigme effroyable qui n’a pas été ouverte. Faites quelques pas, vous trouvez cette fatale rue Croulebarbe où Ulbach poignarda la chevrière d’Ivry au bruit du tonnerre, comme dans un mélodrame. Quelques pas encore, et vous arrivez aux abominables ormes étêtés de la barrière Saint-Jacques, cet expédient des philanthropes cachant l’échafaud, cette mesquine et honteuse place de Grève d’une société boutiquière et bourgeoise, qui a reculé devant la peine de mort, n’osant ni l’abolir avec grandeur, ni la maintenir avec autorité.

Il y a trente-sept ans, en laissant à part cette place Saint-Jacques qui était comme prédestinée et qui a toujours été horrible, le point le plus morne peut-être de tout ce morne boulevard était l’endroit, si peu attrayant encore aujourd’hui, où l’on rencontrait la masure 50-52.

Les maisons bourgeoises n’ont commencé à poindre là que vingt-cinq ans plus tard. Le lieu était morose. Aux idées funèbres qui vous y saisissaient, on se sentait entre la Salpêtrière dont on entrevoyait le dôme et Bicêtre dont on touchait la barrière; c’est-à-dire entre la folie de la femme et la folie de l’homme. Si loin que la vue pût s’étendre, on n’apercevait que les abattoirs, le mur d’enceinte et quelques rares façades d’usines, pareilles à des casernes ou à des monastères; partout des baraques et des plâtras, de vieux murs noirs comme des linceuls, des murs neufs blancs comme des suaires; partout des rangées d’arbres parallèles, des bâtisses tirées au cordeau, des constructions plates, de longues lignes froides, et la tristesse lugubre des angles droits. Pas un accident de terrain, pas un caprice d’architecture, pas un pli. C’était un ensemble glacial, régulier, hideux. Rien ne serre le cœur comme la symétrie. C’est que la symétrie, c’est l’ennui, et l’ennui est le fond même du deuil. Le désespoir bâille. On peut rêver quelque chose de plus terrible qu’un enfer où l’on souffre, c’est un enfer où l’on s’ennuierait. Si cet enfer existait, ce morceau du boulevard de l’Hôpital en eût pu être l’avenue.

Cependant, à la nuit tombante, au moment où la clarté s’en va, l’hiver surtout, à l’heure où la bise crépusculaire arrache aux ormes leurs dernières feuilles rousses, quand l’ombre est profonde et sans étoiles, ou quand la lune et le vent font des trous dans les nuages, ce boulevard devenait tout à coup effrayant. Les lignes droites s’enfonçaient et se perdaient dans les ténèbres comme des tronçons de l’infini. Le passant ne pouvait s’empêcher de songer aux innombrables traditions patibulaires du lieu. La solitude de cet endroit où il s’était commis tant de crimes avait quelque chose d’affreux. On croyait pressentir des pièges dans cette obscurité, toutes les formes confuses de l’ombre paraissaient suspectes, et les longs creux carrés qu’on apercevait entre chaque arbre semblaient des fosses. Le jour, c’était laid; le soir, c’était lugubre; la nuit, c’était sinistre.

L’été, au crépuscule, on voyait çà et là quelques vieilles femmes, assises au pied des ormes sur des bancs moisis par les pluies. Ces bonnes vieilles mendiaient volontiers.

Du reste ce quartier, qui avait plutôt l’air suranné qu’antique, tendait dès lors à se transformer. Dès cette époque, qui voulait le voir devait se hâter. Chaque jour quelque détail de cet ensemble s’en allait. Aujourd’hui, et depuis vingt ans, l’embarcadère du chemin de fer d’Orléans est là, à côté du vieux faubourg, et le travaille. Partout où l’on place, sur la lisière d’une capitale, l’embarcadère d’un chemin de fer, c’est la mort d’un faubourg et la naissance d’une ville. Il semble qu’autour de ces grands centres du mouvement des peuples, au roulement de ces puissantes machines, au souffle de ces monstrueux chevaux de la civilisation qui mangent du charbon et vomissent du feu, la terre pleine de germes tremble et s’ouvre pour engloutir les anciennes demeures des hommes et laisser sortir les nouvelles. Les vieilles maisons croulent, les maisons neuves montent.

Depuis que la gare du railway d’Orléans a envahi les terrains de la Salpêtrière, les antiques rues étroites qui avoisinent les fossés Saint-Victor et le Jardin des Plantes s’ébranlent, violemment traversées trois ou quatre fois chaque jour par ces courants de diligences, de fiacres et d’omnibus qui, dans un temps donné, refoulent les maisons à droite et à gauche; car il y a des choses bizarres à énoncer qui sont rigoureusement exactes, et de même qu’il est vrai de dire que dans les grandes villes le soleil fait végéter et croître les façades des maisons au midi, il est certain que le passage fréquent des voitures élargit les rues. Les symptômes d’une vie nouvelle sont évidents. Dans ce vieux quartier provincial, aux recoins les plus sauvages, le pavé se montre, les trottoirs commencent à ramper et à s’allonger, même là où il n’y a pas encore de passants. Un matin, matin mémorable, en juillet 1845, on y vit tout à coup fumer les marmites noires du bitume; ce jour-là on put dire que la civilisation était arrivée rue de Lourcine et que Paris était entré dans le faubourg Saint-Marceau.

Chapitre II

Nid pour hibou et fauvette

Ce fut devant cette masure Gorbeau que Jean Valjean s’arrêta. Comme les oiseaux fauves, il avait choisi le lieu le plus désert pour y faire son nid.

Il fouilla dans son gilet, y prit une sorte de passe-partout, ouvrit la porte, entra, puis la referma avec soin, et monta l’escalier, portant toujours Cosette.

Au haut de l’escalier, il tira de sa poche une autre clef avec laquelle il ouvrit une autre porte. La chambre où il entra et qu’il referma sur-le-champ était une espèce de galetas assez spacieux meublé d’un matelas posé à terre, d’une table et de quelques chaises. Un poêle allumé et dont on voyait la braise était dans un coin. Le réverbère du boulevard éclairait vaguement cet intérieur pauvre. Au fond il y avait un cabinet avec un lit de sangle. Jean Valjean porta l’enfant sur ce lit et l’y déposa sans qu’elle s’éveillât.

Il battit le briquet, et alluma une chandelle; tout cela était préparé d’avance sur la table; et, comme il l’avait fait la veille, il se mit à considérer Cosette d’un regard plein d’extase où l’expression de la bonté et de l’attendrissement allait presque jusqu’à l’égarement. La petite fille, avec cette confiance tranquille qui n’appartient qu’à l’extrême force et qu’à l’extrême faiblesse, s’était endormie sans savoir avec qui elle était, et continuait de dormir sans savoir où elle était.

Jean Valjean se courba et baisa la main de cette enfant.

Neuf mois auparavant il baisait la main de la mère qui, elle aussi, venait de s’endormir.

Le même sentiment douloureux, religieux, poignant, lui remplissait le cœur.

Il s’agenouilla près du lit de Cosette.

Il faisait grand jour que l’enfant dormait encore. Un rayon pâle du soleil de décembre traversait la croisée du galetas et traînait sur le plafond de longs filandres d’ombre et de lumière. Tout à coup une charrette de cartier, lourdement chargée, qui passait sur la chaussée du boulevard, ébranla la baraque comme un roulement d’orage et la fit trembler du haut en bas.

— Oui, madame! cria Cosette réveillée en sursaut, voilà! voilà!

Et elle se jeta à bas du lit, les paupières encore à demi fermées par la pesanteur du sommeil, étendant le bras vers l’angle du mur.

— Ah! mon Dieu! mon balai! dit-elle.

Elle ouvrit tout à fait les yeux, et vit le visage souriant de Jean Valjean.

— Ah! tiens, c’est vrai! dit l’enfant. Bonjour, monsieur.

Les enfants acceptent tout de suite et familièrement la joie et le bonheur, étant eux-mêmes naturellement bonheur et joie.

Cosette aperçut Catherine au pied de son lit, et s’en empara, et, tout en jouant, elle faisait cent questions à Jean Valjean. — Où elle était? Si c’était grand, Paris? Si madame Thénardier était bien loin? Si elle ne reviendrait pas? etc., etc. Tout à coup elle s’écria: — Comme c’est joli ici! C’était un affreux taudis; mais elle se sentait libre.

— Faut-il que je balaye? reprit-elle enfin.

— Joue, dit Jean Valjean.

La journée se passa ainsi. Cosette, sans s’inquiéter de rien comprendre, était inexprimablement heureuse entre cette poupée et ce bonhomme.

Chapitre III

Deux malheurs mêlés font du bonheur

Le lendemain au point du jour, Jean Valjean était encore près du lit de Cosette. Il attendit là, immobile, et il la regarda se réveiller.

Quelque chose de nouveau lui entrait dans l’âme.

Jean Valjean n’avait jamais rien aimé. Depuis vingt-cinq ans il était seul au monde. Il n’avait jamais été père, amant, mari, ami. Au bagne il était mauvais, sombre, chaste, ignorant et farouche. Le cœur de ce vieux forçat était plein de virginités. Sa sœur et les enfants de sa sœur ne lui avaient laissé qu’un souvenir vague et lointain qui avait fini par s’évanouir presque entièrement. Il avait fait tous ses efforts pour les retrouver, et, n’ayant pu les retrouver, il les avait oubliés. La nature humaine est ainsi faite. Les autres émotions tendres de sa jeunesse, s’il en avait, étaient tombées dans un abîme.

Quand il vit Cosette, quand il l’eut prise, emportée et délivrée, il sentit se remuer ses entrailles. Tout ce qu’il y avait de passionné et d’affectueux en lui s’éveilla et se précipita vers cet enfant. Il allait près du lit où elle dormait, et il y tremblait de joie; il éprouvait des épreintes comme une mère et il ne savait ce que c’était; car c’est une chose bien obscure et bien douce que ce grand et étrange mouvement d’un cœur qui se met à aimer.

Pauvre vieux cœur tout neuf!

Seulement, comme il avait cinquante-cinq ans et que Cosette en avait huit, tout ce qu’il aurait pu avoir d’amour dans toute sa vie se fondit en une sorte de lueur ineffable.

C’était la deuxième apparition blanche qu’il rencontrait. L’évêque avait fait lever à son horizon l’aube de la vertu; Cosette y faisait lever l’aube de l’amour.

Les premiers jours s’écoulèrent dans cet éblouissement.

De son côté, Cosette, elle aussi, devenait autre, à son insu, pauvre petit être! Elle était si petite quand sa mère l’avait quittée qu’elle ne s’en souvenait plus. Comme tous les enfants, pareils aux jeunes pousses de la vigne qui s’accrochent à tout, elle avait essayé d’aimer. Elle n’y avait pu réussir. Tous l’avaient repoussée, les Thénardier, leurs enfants, d’autres enfants. Elle avait aimé le chien, qui était mort. Après quoi, rien n’avait voulu d’elle, ni personne. Chose lugubre à dire, et que nous avons déjà indiquée, à huit ans elle avait le cœur froid. Ce n’était pas sa faute, ce n’était point la faculté d’aimer qui lui manquait; hélas! c’était la possibilité. Aussi, dès le premier jour, tout ce qui sentait et songeait en elle se mit à aimer ce bonhomme. Elle éprouvait ce qu’elle n’avait jamais ressenti, une sensation d’épanouissement.

Le bonhomme ne lui faisait même plus l’effet d’être vieux, ni d’être pauvre. Elle trouvait Jean Valjean beau, de même qu’elle trouvait le taudis joli.

Ce sont là des effets d’aurore, d’enfance, de jeunesse, de joie. La nouveauté de la terre et de la vie y est pour quelque chose. Rien n’est charmant comme le reflet colorant du bonheur sur le grenier. Nous avons tous ainsi dans notre passé un galetas bleu.

La nature, cinquante ans d’intervalle, avaient mis une séparation profonde entre Jean Valjean et Cosette; cette séparation, la destinée la combla. La destinée unit brusquement et fiança avec son irrésistible puissance ces deux existences déracinées, différentes par l’âge, semblables par le deuil. L’une en effet complétait l’autre. L’instinct de Cosette cherchait un père comme l’instinct de Jean Valjean cherchait un enfant. Se rencontrer, ce fut se trouver. Au moment mystérieux où leurs deux mains se touchèrent, elles se soudèrent. Quand ces deux âmes s’aperçurent, elles se reconnurent comme étant le besoin l’une de l’autre et s’embrassèrent étroitement.

En prenant les mots dans leur sens le plus compréhensif et le plus absolu, on pourrait dire que, séparés de tout par des murs de tombe, Jean Valjean était le Veuf comme Cosette était l’Orpheline. Cette situation fit que Jean Valjean devint d’une façon céleste le père de Cosette.

Et, en vérité, l’impression mystérieuse produite à Cosette, au fond du bois de Chelles, par la main de Jean Valjean saisissant la sienne dans l’obscurité, n’était pas une illusion, mais une réalité. L’entrée de cet homme dans la destinée de cet enfant avait été l’arrivée de Dieu.

Du reste, Jean Valjean avait bien choisi son asile. Il était là dans une sécurité qui pouvait sembler entière.

La chambre à cabinet qu’il occupait avec Cosette était celle dont la fenêtre donnait sur le boulevard. Cette fenêtre étant unique dans la maison, aucun regard de voisin n’était à craindre, pas plus de côté qu’en face.

Le rez-de-chaussée du numéro 50-52, espèce d’appentis délabré, servait de remise à des maraîchers, et n’avait aucune communication avec le premier. Il en était séparé par le plancher qui n’avait ni trappe ni escalier et qui était comme le diaphragme de la masure. Le premier étage contenait, comme nous l’avons dit, plusieurs chambres et quelques greniers, dont un seulement était occupé par une vieille femme qui faisait le ménage de Jean Valjean. Tout le reste était inhabité.

C’était cette vieille femme, ornée du nom de principale locataire et en réalité chargée des fonctions de portière, qui lui avait loué ce logis dans la journée de Noël. Il s’était donné à elle pour un rentier ruiné par les bons d’Espagne, qui allait venir demeurer là avec sa petite-fille. Il avait payé six mois d’avance et chargé la vieille de meubler la chambre et le cabinet comme on a vu. C’était cette bonne femme qui avait allumé le poêle et tout préparé le soir de leur arrivée.

Les semaines se succédèrent. Ces deux êtres menaient dans ce taudis misérable une existence heureuse.

Dès l’aube Cosette riait, jasait, chantait. Les enfants ont leur chant du matin comme les oiseaux.

Il arrivait quelquefois que Jean Valjean lui prenait sa petite main rouge et crevassée d’engelures et la baisait. La pauvre enfant, accoutumée à être battue, ne savait ce que cela voulait dire, et s’en allait toute honteuse.

Par moments elle devenait sérieuse et elle considérait sa petite robe noire. Cosette n’était plus en guenilles, elle était en deuil. Elle sortait de la misère et elle entrait dans la vie.

Jean Valjean s’était mis à lui enseigner à lire. Parfois, tout en faisant épeler l’enfant, il songeait que c’était avec l’idée de faire le mal qu’il avait appris à lire au bagne. Cette idée avait tourné à montrer à lire à un enfant. Alors le vieux galérien souriait du sourire pensif des anges.

Il sentait là une préméditation d’en haut, une volonté de quelqu’un qui n’est pas l’homme, et il se perdait dans la rêverie. Les bonnes pensées ont leurs abîmes comme les mauvaises.

Apprendre à lire à Cosette, et la laisser jouer, c’était à peu près là toute la vie de Jean Valjean. Et puis il lui parlait de sa mère et il la faisait prier. Elle l’appelait: père, et ne lui savait pas d’autre nom.

Il passait des heures à la contempler, habillant et déshabillant sa poupée, et à l’écouter gazouiller. La vie lui paraissait désormais pleine d’intérêt, les hommes lui semblaient bons et justes, il ne reprochait dans sa pensée plus rien à personne, il n’apercevait aucune raison de ne pas vieillir très vieux maintenant que cette enfant l’aimait. Il se voyait tout un avenir éclairé par

Cosette comme par une charmante lumière. Les meilleurs ne sont pas exempts d'une pensée égoïste. Par moments il songeait avec une sorte de joie qu'elle serait laide.

Ceci n'est qu'une opinion personnelle; mais pour dire notre pensée tout entière, au point où en était Jean Valjean quand il se mit à aimer Cosette, il ne nous est pas prouvé qu'il n'ait pas eu besoin de ce ravitaillement pour persévérer dans le bien. Il venait de voir sous de nouveaux aspects la méchanceté des hommes et la misère de la société, aspects incomplets et qui ne montraient fatalement qu'un côté du vrai, le sort de la femme résumé dans Fantine, l'autorité publique personnifiée dans Javert; il était retourné au bagne, cette fois pour avoir bien fait; de nouvelles amertumes l'avaient abreuvé; le dégoût et la lassitude le reprenaient; le souvenir même de l'évêque touchait peut-être à quelque moment d'éclipse, sauf à reparaître plus tard lumineux et triomphant; mais enfin ce souvenir sacré s'affaiblissait. Qui sait si Jean Valjean n'était pas à la veille de se décourager et de retomber? Il aima, et il redevint fort. Hélas! il n'était guère moins chancelant que Cosette. Il la protégea et elle l'affermit. Grâce à lui, elle put marcher dans la vie; grâce à elle, il put continuer dans la vertu. Il fut le soutien de cet enfant et cet enfant fut son point d'appui. O mystère insondable et divin des équilibres de la destinée!

Chapitre IV

Les remarques de la principale locataire

Jean Valjean avait la prudence de ne sortir jamais le jour. Tous les soirs, au crépuscule, il se promenait une heure ou deux, quelquefois seul, souvent avec Cosette, cherchant les contre-allées du boulevard les plus solitaires, ou entrant dans les églises à la tombée de la nuit. Il allait volontiers à Saint-Médard qui est l'église la plus proche. Quand il n'emmenait pas Cosette, elle restait avec la vieille femme; mais c'était la joie de l'enfant de sortir avec le bonhomme. Elle préférait une heure avec lui même aux tête-à-tête ravissants de Catherine. Il marchait en la tenant par la main et en lui disant des choses douces.

Il se trouva que Cosette était très gaie.

La vieille faisait le ménage et la cuisine et allait aux provisions.

Ils vivaient sobrement, ayant toujours un peu de feu, mais comme des gens très gênés. Jean Valjean n'avait rien changé au mobilier du premier jour; seulement il avait fait remplacer par une porte pleine la porte vitrée du cabinet de Cosette.

Il avait toujours sa redingote jaune, sa culotte noire et son vieux chapeau. Dans la rue on le prenait pour un pauvre. Il arrivait quelquefois que des bonnes femmes se retournaient et lui donnaient un sou. Jean Valjean recevait le sou et saluait profondément. Il arrivait aussi parfois qu'il rencontrait quelque misérable demandant la charité, alors il regardait derrière lui si personne ne le voyait, s'approchait furtivement du malheureux, lui mettait dans la main une pièce de monnaie, souvent une pièce d'argent, et s'éloignait rapidement. Cela avait ses inconvénients. On commençait à le connaître dans le quartier sous le nom du *mendiant qui fait l'aumône*. La vieille *principale locataire*, créature rechignée, toute pétrie vis-à-vis du prochain de l'attention des envieux, examinait beaucoup Jean Valjean, sans qu'il s'en doutât. Elle était un peu sourde, ce qui la rendait bavarde. Il lui restait de son passé deux dents, l'une en haut, l'autre en bas, qu'elle cognait toujours l'une contre l'autre. Elle avait fait des questions à Cosette qui, ne sachant rien, n'avait pu rien dire, sinon qu'elle venait de Montfermeil. Un matin, cette guetteuse aperçut Jean Valjean qui entrait, d'un air qui sembla à la commère particulier, dans un des compartiments inhabités de la masure. Elle le suivit du pas d’une vieille chatte, et put l’observer, sans en être vue, par la fente de la porte qui était tout contre. Jean Valjean, pour plus de précaution sans doute, tournait le dos à cette porte. La vieille le vit fouiller dans sa poche et y prendre un étui, des ciseaux et du fil, puis il se mit à découdre la doublure d’un pan de sa redingote et il tira de l’ouverture un morceau de papier jaunâtre qu’il déplia. La vieille reconnut avec épouvante que c’était un billet de mille francs. C’était le second ou le troisième qu’elle voyait depuis qu’elle était au monde. Elle s’enfuit très effrayée.

Un moment après, Jean Valjean l’aborda et la pria d’aller lui changer ce billet de mille francs, ajoutant que c’était le semestre de sa rente qu’il avait touché la veille. — Où? pensa la vieille. Il n’est sorti qu’à six heures du soir, et la caisse du gouvernement n’est certainement pas ouverte à cette heure-là. La vieille alla changer le billet et fit ses conjectures. Ce billet de mille francs, commenté et multiplié, produisit une foule de conversations effarées parmi les commères de la rue des Vignes-Saint-Marcel.

Les jours suivants, il arriva que Jean Valjean, en manches de veste, scia du bois dans le corridor. La vieille était dans la chambre et faisait le ménage. Elle était seule, Cosette étant occupée à admirer le bois qu’on sciait, la vieille vit la redingote accrochée à un clou, et la scruta: la doublure avait été recousue. La bonne femme la palpa attentivement, et crut sentir dans les pans et dans les entournures des épaisseurs de papier. D’autres billets de mille francs sans doute! Elle remarqua en outre qu’il y avait toutes sortes de choses dans les poches, non seulement les aiguilles, les ciseaux et le fil qu’elle avait vus, mais un gros portefeuille, un très grand couteau, et, détail suspect, plusieurs perruques de couleurs variées. Chaque poche de cette redingote avait l’air d’être une façon d’en-cas pour des événements imprévus.

Les habitants de la masure atteignirent ainsi les derniers jours de l’hiver.

Chapitre V

Une pièce de cinq francs qui tombe à terre fait du bruit

Il y avait près de Saint-Médard un pauvre qui s'accroupissait sur la margelle d'un puits banal condamné, et auquel Jean Valjean faisait volontiers la charité. Il ne passait guère devant cet homme sans lui donner quelques sous. Parfois il lui parlait. Les envieux de ce mendiant disaient qu'il était *de la police*. C'était un vieux bedeau de soixante-quinze ans qui marmottait continuellement des oraisons.

Un soir que Jean Valjean passait par là, il n'avait pas Cosette avec lui, il aperçut le mendiant à sa place ordinaire sous le réverbère qu'on venait d'allumer. Cet homme, selon son habitude, semblait prier et était tout courbé. Jean Valjean alla à lui et lui mit dans la main son aumône accoutumée. Le mendiant leva brusquement les yeux, regarda fixement Jean Valjean, puis baissa rapidement la tête. Ce mouvement fut comme un éclair, Jean Valjean eut un tressaillement. Il lui sembla qu'il venait d'entrevoir, à la lueur du réverbère, non le visage placide et béat du vieux bedeau, mais une figure effrayante et connue. Il eut l'impression qu'on aurait en se trouvant tout à coup dans l'ombre face à face avec un tigre. Il recula terrifié et pétrifié, n'osant ni respirer, ni parler, ni rester, ni fuir, considérant le mendiant qui avait baissé sa tête couverte d'une loque et paraissait ne plus savoir qu'il était là. Dans ce moment étrange, un instinct, peut-être l'instinct mystérieux de la conservation, fit que Jean Valjean ne prononça pas une parole. Le mendiant avait la même taille, les mêmes guenilles, la même apparence que tous les jours. — Bah!... dit Jean Valjean, je suis fou! je rêve! impossible! — Et il rentra profondément troublé.

C'est à peine s'il osait s'avouer à lui-même que cette figure qu'il avait cru voir était la figure de Javert.

La nuit, en y réfléchissant, il regretta de n'avoir pas questionné l'homme pour le forcer à lever la tête une seconde fois.

Le lendemain à la nuit tombante il y retourna. Le mendiant était à sa place. — Bonjour, bonhomme, dit résolument Jean Valjean en lui donnant un sou. Le mendiant leva la tête, et répondit d'une voix dolente: — Merci, mon bon monsieur. — C'était bien le vieux bedeau. Jean Valjean se sentit pleinement rassuré. Il se mit à rire. — Où diable ai-je été voir là Javert?

pensa-t-il. Ah çà, est-ce que je vais avoir la berlue à présent? — Il n’y songea plus.

Quelques jours après, il pouvait être huit heures du soir, il était dans sa chambre et il faisait épeler Cosette à haute voix, il entendit ouvrir, puis refermer la porte de la masure. Cela lui parut singulier. La vieille, qui seule habitait avec lui la maison, se couchait toujours à la nuit pour ne point user de chandelle. Jean Valjean fit signe à Cosette de se taire. Il entendit qu’on montait l’escalier. À la rigueur ce pouvait être la vieille qui avait pu se trouver malade et aller chez l’apothicaire. Jean Valjean écouta. Le pas était lourd et sonnait comme le pas d’un homme; mais la vieille portait de gros souliers et rien ne ressemble au pas d’un homme comme le pas d’une vieille femme. Cependant Jean Valjean souffla sa chandelle.

Il avait envoyé Cosette au lit en lui disant tout bas: — Couche-toi bien doucement; et, pendant qu’il la baisait au front, les pas s’étaient arrêtés. Jean Valjean demeura en silence, immobile, le dos tourné à la porte, assis sur sa chaise dont il n’avait pas bougé, retenant son souffle dans l’obscurité. Au bout d’un temps assez long, n’entendant plus rien, il se retourna sans faire de bruit, et, comme il levait les yeux vers la porte de sa chambre, il vit une lumière par le trou de la serrure. Cette lumière faisait une sorte d’étoile sinistre dans le noir de la porte et du mur. Il y avait évidemment là quelqu’un qui tenait une chandelle à la main, et qui écoutait. Quelques minutes s’écoulèrent, et la lumière s’en alla. Seulement il n’entendit plus aucun bruit de pas, ce qui semblait indiquer que celui qui était venu écouter à la porte avait ôté ses souliers.

Jean Valjean se jeta tout habillé sur son lit et ne put fermer l’œil de la nuit.

Au point du jour, comme il s’assoupissait de fatigue, il fut réveillé par le grincement d’une porte qui s’ouvrait à quelque mansarde du fond du corridor, puis il entendit le même pas d’homme qui avait monté l’escalier la veille. Le pas s’approchait. Il se jeta à bas du lit et appliqua son œil au trou de sa serrure, lequel était assez grand, espérant voir au passage l’être quelconque qui s’était introduit la nuit dans la masure et qui avait écouté à sa porte. C’était un homme en effet qui passa, cette fois sans s’arrêter, devant la chambre de Jean Valjean. Le corridor était encore trop obscur pour qu’on pût distinguer son visage; mais quand l’homme arriva à l’escalier, un rayon de la lumière du dehors le fit saillir comme une silhouette, et Jean Valjean le vit de dos complètement. L’homme était de haute taille, vêtu d'une redingote longue, avec un gourdin sous son bras. C'était l'encolure formidable de Javert.

Jean Valjean aurait pu essayer de le revoir par sa fenêtre sur le boulevard. Mais il eût fallu ouvrir cette fenêtre, il n'osa pas.

Il était évident que cet homme était entré avec une clef, et comme chez lui. Qui lui avait donné cette clef? qu'est-ce que cela voulait dire?

À sept heures du matin, quand la vieille vint faire le ménage, Jean Valjean lui jeta un coup d'œil pénétrant, mais il ne l'interrogea pas. La bonne femme était comme à l'ordinaire.

Tout en balayant, elle lui dit: — Monsieur a peut-être entendu quelqu'un qui entrait cette nuit?

À cet âge et sur ce boulevard, huit heures du soir, c'est la nuit la plus noire.

— À propos, c'est vrai, répondit-il de l'accent le plus naturel. Qui était-ce donc?

— C'est un nouveau locataire, dit la vieille, qu'il y a dans la maison.

— Et qui s'appelle?

— Je ne sais plus trop. Monsieur Dumont ou Daumont. Un nom comme cela.

— Et qu'est-ce qu'il est, ce monsieur Dumont.

La vieille le considéra avec ses petits yeux de fouine, et répondit:

— Un rentier, comme vous.

Elle n'avait peut-être aucune intention. Jean Valjean crut lui en démêler une.

Quant la vieille fut partie, il fit un rouleau d'une centaine de francs qu'il avait dans une armoire et le mit dans sa poche. Quelque précaution qu'il prit dans cette opération pour qu'on ne l'entendît pas remuer de l'argent, une pièce de cent sous lui échappa des mains et roula bruyamment sur le carreau.

À la brune, il descendit et regarda avec attention de tous les côtés sur le boulevard. Il n'y vit personne. Le boulevard semblait absolument désert. Il est vrai qu'on peut s'y cacher derrière les arbres.

Il remonta.

— Viens, dit-il à Cosette.

Il la prit par la main, et ils sortirent tous deux.

Livre cinquième — À chasse noire, meute muette

Chapitre I

Les zigzags de la stratégie

Ici, pour les pages qu'on va lire et pour d'autres encore qu'on rencontrera plus tard, une observation est nécessaire.

Voilà bien des années déjà que l'auteur de ce livre, forcé, à regret, de parler de lui, est absent de Paris. Depuis qu'il l'a quitté, Paris s'est transformé. Une ville nouvelle a surgi qui lui est en quelque sorte inconnue. Il n'a pas besoin de dire qu'il aime Paris; Paris est la ville natale de son esprit. Par suite des démolitions et des reconstructions, le Paris de sa jeunesse, ce Paris qu'il a religieusement emporté dans sa mémoire, est à cette heure un Paris d'autrefois. Qu'on lui permette de parler de ce Paris-là comme s'il existait encore. Il est possible que là où l'auteur va conduire les lecteurs en disant: «Dans telle rue il y a telle maison», il n'y ait plus aujourd'hui ni maison ni rue. Les lecteurs vérifieront, s'ils veulent en prendre la peine. Quant à lui, il ignore le Paris nouveau, et il écrit avec le Paris ancien devant les yeux dans une illusion qui lui est précieuse. C'est une douceur pour lui de rêver qu'il reste derrière lui quelque chose de ce qu'il voyait quand il était dans son pays, et que tout ne s'est pas évanoui. Tant qu'on va et vient dans le pays natal, on s'imagine que ces rues vous sont indifférentes, que ces fenêtres, ces toits et ces portes ne vous sont de rien, que ces murs vous sont étrangers, que ces arbres sont les premiers arbres venus, que ces maisons où l'on n'entre pas vous sont inutiles, que ces pavés où l'on marche sont des pierres. Plus tard, quand on n'y est plus, on s'aperçoit que ces rues vous sont chères, que ces toits, ces fenêtres et ces portes vous manquent, que ces murailles vous sont nécessaires, que ces arbres sont vos bien-aimés, que ces maisons où l'on n'entrait pas on y entrait tous les jours, et qu'on a laissé de ses entrailles, de son sang et de son cœur dans ces pavés. Tous ces lieux qu'on ne voit plus, qu'on ne reverra jamais peut-être, et dont on a gardé l'image, prennent un charme douloureux, vous reviennent avec la mélancolie d'une apparition, vous font la terre sainte visible, et sont, pour ainsi dire, la forme même de la France; et on les aime et on les invoque tels qu'ils sont, tels qu'ils étaient, et l'on s'y obstine, et l'on n'y veut rien changer, car on tient à la figure de la patrie comme au visage de sa mère.

Qu’il nous soit donc permis de parler du passé au présent. Cela dit, nous prions le lecteur d’en tenir note, et nous continuons.

Jean Valjean avait tout de suite quitté le boulevard et s’était engagé dans les rues, faisant le plus de lignes brisées qu’il pouvait, revenant quelquefois brusquement sur ses pas pour s’assurer qu’il n’était point suivi.

Cette manœuvre est propre au cerf traqué. Sur les terrains où la trace peut s’imprimer, cette manœuvre a, entre autres avantages, celui de tromper les chasseurs et les chiens par le contre-pied. C’est ce qu’en vénerie on appelle *faux rembuchement*.

C’était une nuit de pleine lune. Jean Valjean n’en fut pas fâché. La lune, encore très près de l’horizon, coupait dans les rues de grands pans d’ombre et de lumière. Jean Valjean pouvait se glisser le long des maisons et des murs dans le côté sombre et observer le côté clair. Il ne réfléchissait peut-être pas assez que le côté obscur lui échappait. Pourtant, dans toutes les ruelles désertes qui avoisinent la rue de Poliveau, il crut être certain que personne ne venait derrière lui.

Cosette marchait sans faire de questions. Les souffrances des six premières années de sa vie avaient introduit quelque chose de passif dans sa nature. D’ailleurs, et c’est là une remarque sur laquelle nous aurons plus d’une occasion de revenir, elle était habituée, sans trop s’en rendre compte, aux singularités du bonhomme et aux bizarreries de la destinée. Et puis elle se sentait en sûreté, étant avec lui.

Jean Valjean, pas plus que Cosette, ne savait où il allait. Il se confiait à Dieu comme elle se confiait à lui. Il lui semblait qu’il tenait, lui aussi, quelqu’un de plus grand que lui par la main; il croyait sentir un être qui le menait, invisible. Du reste il n’avait aucune idée arrêtée, aucun plan, aucun projet. Il n’était même pas absolument sûr que ce fût Javert, et puis ce pouvait être Javert sans que Javert sût que c’était lui Jean Valjean. N’était-il pas déguisé? ne le croyait-on pas mort? Cependant depuis quelques jours il se passait des choses qui devenaient singulières. Il ne lui en fallait pas davantage. Il était déterminé à ne plus rentrer dans la maison Gorbeau. Comme l’animal chassé du gîte, il cherchait un trou où se cacher, en attendant qu’il en trouvât un où se loger.

Jean Valjean décrivit plusieurs labyrinthes variés dans le quartier Mouffetard, déjà endormi comme s’il avait encore la discipline du moyen âge et le joug du couvre-feu; il combina de diverses façons, dans des stratégies savantes, la rue Censier et la rue Copeau, la rue du Battoir-Saint-

Victor et la rue du Puits-l'Ermite. Il y a par là des logeurs, mais il n'y entrait même pas, ne trouvant point ce qui lui convenait. Par exemple, il ne doutait pas que, si, par hasard, on avait cherché sa piste, on ne l'eût perdue.

Comme onze heures sonnaient à Saint-Etienne-du-Mont, il traversait la rue de Pontoise devant le bureau du commissaire de police qui est au no 14. Quelques instants après, l'instinct dont nous parlions plus haut fit qu'il se retourna. En ce moment, il vit distinctement, grâce à la lanterne du commissaire qui les trahissait, trois hommes qui le suivaient d'assez près passer successivement sous cette lanterne dans le côté ténébreux de la rue. L'un de ces trois hommes entra dans l'allée de la maison du commissaire. Celui qui marchait en tête lui parut décidément suspect. — Viens, enfant, dit-il à Cosette, et il se hâta de quitter la rue de Pontoise.

Il fit un circuit, tourna le passage des Patriarches qui était fermé à cause de l'heure, arpenta la rue de l'Épée-de-Bois et la rue de l'Arbalète et s'enfonça dans la rue des Postes.

Il y a là un carrefour, où est aujourd'hui le collège Rollin et où vient s'embrancher la rue Neuve-Sainte-Geneviève.

(Il va sans dire que la rue Neuve-Sainte-Geneviève est une vieille rue, et qu'il ne passe pas une chaise de poste tous les dix ans rue des Postes. Cette rue des Postes était au treizième siècle habitée par des potiers et son vrai nom est rue des Pots.)

La lune jetait une vive lumière dans ce carrefour. Jean Valjean s'embusqua sous une porte, calculant que si ces hommes le suivaient encore, il ne pourrait manquer de les très bien voir lorsqu'ils traverseraient cette clarté.

En effet, il ne s'était pas écoulé trois minutes que les hommes parurent. Ils étaient maintenant quatre; tous de haute taille, vêtus de longues redingotes brunes, avec des chapeaux ronds, et de gros bâtons à la main. Ils n'étaient pas moins inquiétants par leur grande stature et leurs vastes poings que par leur marche sinistre dans les ténèbres. On eût dit quatre spectres déguisés en bourgeois.

Ils s'arrêtèrent au milieu du carrefour et firent groupe, comme des gens qui se consultent. Ils avaient l'air indécis. Celui qui paraissait les conduire se tourna et désigna vivement de la main droite la direction où s'était engagé Jean Valjean; un autre semblait indiquer avec une certaine obstination la direction contraire. À l'instant où le premier se retourna, la lune éclaira en plein son visage. Jean Valjean reconnut parfaitement Javert.

Chapitre II

Il est heureux que le pont d’Austerlitz porte voitures

L’incertitude cessait pour Jean Valjean; heureusement elle durait encore pour ces hommes. Il profita de leur hésitation; c’était du temps perdu pour eux, gagné pour lui. Il sortit de dessous la porte où il s’était tapi, et poussa dans la rue des Postes vers la région du Jardin des Plantes. Cosette commençait à se fatiguer, il la prit dans ses bras, et la porta. Il n’y avait point un passant, et l’on n’avait pas allumé les réverbères à cause de la lune.

Il doubla le pas.

En quelques enjambées, il atteignit la poterie Goblet sur la façade de laquelle le clair de lune faisait très distinctement lisible la vieille inscription:

De Goblet fils c’est ici la fabrique;
Venez choisir des cruches et des brocs,
Des pots à fleurs, des tuyaux, de la brique.
À tout venant le Cœur vend des Carreaux.

Il laissa derrière lui la rue de la Clef, puis la fontaine Saint-Victor, longea le Jardin des Plantes par les rues basses, et arriva au quai. Là il se retourna. Le quai était désert. Les rues étaient désertes. Personne derrière lui. Il respira.

Il gagna le pont d’Austerlitz.

Le péage y existait encore à cette époque.

Il se présenta au bureau du péager, et donna un sou. — C’est deux sous, dit l’invalide du pont. Vous portez là un enfant qui peut marcher. Payez pour deux.

Il paya, contrarié que son passage eût donné lieu à une observation. Toute fuite doit être un glissement.

Une grosse charrette passait la Seine en même temps que lui et allait comme lui sur la rive droite. Cela lui fut utile. Il put traverser tout le pont dans l’ombre de cette charrette.

Vers le milieu du pont, Cosette, ayant les pieds engourdis, désira marcher. Il la posa à terre et la reprit par la main.

Le pont franchi, il aperçut un peu à droite des chantiers devant lui; il y marcha. Pour y arriver, il fallait s’aventurer dans un assez large espace découvert et éclairé. Il n’hésita pas. Ceux qui le traquaient étaient évidemment dépistés et Jean Valjean se croyait hors de danger. Cherché, oui; suivi, non.

Une petite rue, la rue du Chemin-Vert-Saint-Antoine, s’ouvrait entre deux chantiers enclos de murs. Cette rue était étroite, obscure, et comme faite exprès pour lui. Avant d’y entrer, il regarda en arrière.

Du point où il était, il voyait dans toute sa longueur le pont d’Austerlitz.

Quatre ombres venaient d’entrer sur le pont.

Ces ombres tournaient le dos au Jardin des Plantes et se dirigeaient vers la rive droite.

Ces quatre ombres, c’étaient les quatre hommes.

Jean Valjean eut le frémissement de la bête reprise.

Il lui restait une espérance; c’est que ces hommes peut-être n’étaient pas encore entrés sur le pont et ne l’avaient pas aperçu au moment où il avait traversé, tenant Cosette par la main, la grande place éclairée.

En ce cas-là, en s’enfonçant dans la petite rue qui était devant lui, s’il parvenait à atteindre les chantiers, les marais, les cultures, les terrains non bâtis, il pouvait échapper.

Il lui sembla qu’on pouvait se confier à cette petite rue silencieuse. Il y entra.

Chapitre III

Voir le plan de Paris de 1727

Au bout de trois cents pas, il arriva à un point où la rue se bifurquait. Elle se partageait en deux rues, obliquant l'une à gauche, l'autre à droite. Jean Valjean avait devant lui comme les deux branches d'un Y. Laquelle choisir?

Il ne balança point, il prit la droite.

Pourquoi?

C'est que la branche gauche allait vers le faubourg, c'est-à-dire vers les lieux habités, et la branche droite vers la campagne, c'est-à-dire vers les lieux déserts.

Cependant ils ne marchaient plus très rapidement. Le pas de Cosette ralentissait le pas de Jean Valjean.

Il se remit à la porter. Cosette appuyait sa tête sur l'épaule du bonhomme et ne disait pas un mot.

Il se retournait de temps en temps et regardait. Il avait soin de se tenir toujours du côté obscur de la rue. La rue était droite derrière lui. Les deux ou trois premières fois qu'il se retourna, il ne vit rien, le silence était profond, il continua sa marche un peu rassuré. Tout à coup, à un certain instant, s'étant retourné, il lui sembla voir dans la partie de la rue où il venait de passer, loin dans l'obscurité, quelque chose qui bougeait.

Il se précipita en avant, plutôt qu'il ne marcha, espérant trouver quelque ruelle latérale, s'évader par là, et rompre encore une fois sa piste.

Il arriva à un mur.

Ce mur pourtant n'était point une impossibilité d'aller plus loin; c'était une muraille bordant une ruelle transversale à laquelle aboutissait la rue où s'était engagé Jean Valjean.

Ici encore il fallait se décider; prendre à droite ou à gauche.

Il regarda à droite. La ruelle se prolongeait en tronçon entre des constructions qui étaient des hangars ou des granges, puis se terminait en impasse. On voyait distinctement le fond du cul-de-sac; un grand mur blanc.

Il regarda à gauche. La ruelle de ce côté était ouverte, et, au bout de deux cents pas environ, tombait dans une rue dont elle était l'affluent. C'était de ce côté-là qu'était le salut.

Au moment où Jean Valjean songeait à tourner à gauche, pour tâcher de gagner la rue qu'il entrevoyait au bout de la ruelle, il aperçut, à l'angle de la ruelle et de cette rue vers laquelle il allait se diriger, une espèce de statue noire, immobile.

C'était quelqu'un, un homme, qui venait d'être posté là évidemment, et qui, barrant le passage, attendait.

Jean Valjean recula.

Le point de Paris où se trouvait Jean Valjean, situé entre le faubourg Saint-Antoine et la Râpée, est un de ceux qu'ont transformés de fond en comble les travaux récents, enlaidissements selon les uns, transfiguration selon les autres. Les cultures, les chantiers et les vieilles bâtisses se sont effacés. Il y a là aujourd'hui de grandes rues toutes neuves, des arènes, des cirques, des hippodromes, des embarcadères de chemin de fer, une prison, Mazas; le progrès, comme on voit, avec son correctif. Il y a un demi-siècle, dans cette langue usuelle populaire, toute faite de traditions, qui s'obstine à appeler l'Institut *les Quatre-Nations* et l'Opéra-Comique *Feydeau*, l'endroit précis où était parvenu Jean Valjean se nommait *le Petit-Picpus*. La porte Saint-Jacques, la porte Paris, la barrière des Sergents, les Porcherons, la Galiote, les Célestins, les Capucins, le Mail, la Bourbe, l'Arbre-de-Cracovie, la Petite-Pologne, le Petit-Picpus, ce sont les noms du vieux Paris surnageant dans le nouveau. La mémoire du peuple flotte sur ces épaves du passé.

Le Petit-Picpus, qui du reste a existé à peine et n'a jamais été qu'une ébauche de quartier, avait presque l'aspect monacal d'une ville espagnole. Les chemins étaient peu pavés, les rues étaient peu bâties. Excepté les deux ou trois rues dont nous allons parler, tout y était muraille et solitude. Pas une boutique, pas une voiture; à peine çà et là une chandelle allumée aux fenêtres; toute lumière éteinte après dix heures. Des jardins, des couvents, des chantiers, des marais; de rares maisons basses, et de grands murs aussi hauts que les maisons.

Tel était ce quartier au dernier siècle. La révolution l'avait déjà fort rabroué. L'édilité républicaine l'avait démoli, percé, troué. Des dépôts de gravats y avaient été établis. Il y a trente ans, ce quartier disparaissait sous la rature des constructions nouvelles. Aujourd'hui il est biffé tout à fait. Le Petit-Picpus, dont aucun plan actuel n'a gardé trace, est assez clairement indiqué dans le plan de 1727, publié à Paris chez Denis Thierry, rue Saint-Jacques, vis-à-vis la rue du Plâtre, et à Lyon chez Jean Girin rue Mercière, à la Prudence. Le Petit-Picpus avait ce que nous venons d’appeler un Y de rues, formé par la rue du Chemin-Vert-Saint-Antoine s’écartant en deux branches et prenant à gauche le nom de petite rue Picpus et à droite le nom de rue Polonceau. Les deux branches de l’Y étaient réunies à leur sommet comme par une barre. Cette barre se nommait rue Droit-Mur. La rue Polonceau y aboutissait; la petite rue Picpus passait outre, et montait vers le marché Lenoir. Celui qui, venant de la Seine, arrivait à l’extrémité de la rue Polonceau, avait à sa gauche la rue Droit-Mur, tournant brusquement à angle droit, devant lui la muraille de cette rue, et à sa droite un prolongement tronqué de la rue Droit-Mur, sans issue, appelé le cul-de-sac Genrot.

C’est là qu’était Jean Valjean.

Comme nous venons de le dire, en apercevant la silhouette noire, en vedette à l’angle de la rue Droit-Mur et de la petite rue Picpus, il recula. Nul doute. Il était guetté par ce fantôme.

Que faire?

Il n’était plus temps de rétrograder. Ce qu’il avait vu remuer dans l’ombre à quelque distance derrière lui le moment d’auparavant, c’était sans doute Javert et son escouade. Javert était probablement déjà au commencement de la rue à la fin de laquelle était Jean Valjean. Javert, selon toute apparence, connaissait ce petit dédale, et avait pris ses précautions en envoyant un de ses hommes garder l’issue. Ces conjectures, si ressemblantes à des évidences, tourbillonnèrent tout de suite, comme une poignée de poussière qui s’envole à un vent subit, dans le cerveau douloureux de Jean Valjean. Il examina le cul-de-sac Genrot; là, barrage. Il examina la petite rue Picpus; là, une sentinelle. Il voyait cette figure sombre se détacher en noir sur le pavé blanc inondé de lune. Avancer, c’était tomber sur cet homme. Reculer, c’était se jeter dans Javert. Jean Valjean se sentait pris comme dans un filet qui se resserrait lentement. Il regarda le ciel avec désespoir.

Chapitre IV

Les tâtonnements de l’évasion

Pour comprendre ce qui va suivre, il faut se figurer d’une manière exacte la ruelle Droit-Mur, et en particulier l’angle qu’on laissait à gauche quand on sortait de la rue Polonceau pour entrer dans cette ruelle. La ruelle Droit-Mur était à peu près entièrement bordée à droite jusqu’à la petite rue Picpus par des maisons de pauvre apparence; à gauche par un seul bâtiment d’une ligne sévère composé de plusieurs corps de logis qui allaient se haussant graduellement d’un étage ou deux à mesure qu’ils approchaient de la petite rue Picpus; de sorte que ce bâtiment, très élevé du côté de la petite rue Picpus, était assez bas du côté de la rue Polonceau. Là, à l’angle dont nous avons parlé, il s’abaissait au point de n’avoir plus qu’une muraille. Cette muraille n’allait pas aboutir carrément à la rue; elle dessinait un pan coupé fort en retraite, dérobé par ses deux angles à deux observateurs qui eussent été l’un rue Polonceau, l’autre rue Droit-Mur.

À partir des deux angles du pan coupé, la muraille se prolongeait sur la rue Polonceau jusqu’à une maison qui portait le no 49 et sur la rue Droit-Mur, où son tronçon était beaucoup plus court, jusqu’au bâtiment sombre dont nous avons parlé et dont elle coupait le pignon, faisant ainsi dans la rue un nouvel angle rentrant. Ce pignon était d’un aspect morne; on n’y voyait qu’une seule fenêtre, ou, pour mieux dire, deux volets revêtus d’une feuille de zinc, et toujours fermés.

L’état de lieux que nous dressons ici est d’une rigoureuse exactitude et éveillera certainement un souvenir très précis dans l’esprit des anciens habitants du quartier.

Le pan coupé était entièrement rempli par une chose qui ressemblait à une porte colossale et misérable. C’était un vaste assemblage informe de planches perpendiculaires, celles d’en haut plus larges que celles d’en bas, reliées par de longues lanières de fer transversales. À côté il y avait une porte cochère de dimension ordinaire et dont le percement ne remontait évidemment pas à plus d’une cinquantaine d’années.

Un tilleul montrait son branchage au-dessus du pan coupé, et le mur était couvert de lierre du côté de la rue Polonceau.

Dans l’imminent péril où se trouvait Jean Valjean, ce bâtiment sombre avait quelque chose d’inhabité et de solitaire qui le tentait. Il le parcourut rapidement des yeux. Il se disait que s’il parvenait à y pénétrer, il était peut-être sauvé. Il eut d’abord une idée et une espérance.

Dans la partie moyenne de la devanture de ce bâtiment sur la rue Droit-Mur, il y avait à toutes les fenêtres des divers étages de vieilles cuvettes-entonnoirs en plomb. Les embranchements variés des conduits qui allaient d’un conduit central aboutir à toutes ces cuvettes dessinaient sur la façade une espèce d’arbre. Ces ramifications de tuyaux avec leurs cent coudes imitaient ces vieux ceps de vigne dépouillés qui se tordent sur les devantures des anciennes fermes.

Ce bizarre espalier aux branches de tôle et de fer fut le premier objet qui frappa le regard de Jean Valjean. Il assit Cosette le dos contre une borne en lui recommandant le silence et courut à l’endroit où le conduit venait toucher le pavé. Peut-être y avait-il moyen d’escalader par là et d’entrer dans la maison. Mais le conduit était délabré et hors de service et tenait à peine à son scellement. D’ailleurs toutes les fenêtres de ce logis silencieux étaient grillées d’épaisses barres de fer, même les mansardes du toit. Et puis la lune éclairait pleinement cette façade, et l’homme qui l’observait du bout de la rue aurait vu Jean Valjean faire l’escalade. Enfin que faire de Cosette? comment la hisser au haut d’une maison à trois étages?

Il renonça à grimper par le conduit et rampa le long du mur pour rentrer dans la rue Polonceau.

Quand il fut au pan coupé où il avait laissé Cosette, il remarqua que, là, personne ne pouvait le voir. Il échappait, comme nous venons de l’expliquer, à tous les regards, de quelque côté qu’ils vinssent. En outre il était dans l’ombre. Enfin il y avait deux portes. Peut-être pourrait-on les forcer. Le mur au-dessus duquel il voyait le tilleul et le lierre donnait évidemment dans un jardin où il pourrait tout au moins se cacher, quoiqu’il n’y eût pas encore de feuilles aux arbres, et passer le reste de la nuit.

Le temps s’écoulait. Il fallait faire vite.

Il tâta la porte cochère et reconnut tout de suite quelle était condamnée au dedans et au dehors. Il s’approcha de l’autre grande porte avec plus d’espoir. Elle était affreusement décrépite, son immensité même la rendait moins solide, les planches étaient pourries, les ligatures de fer, il n’y en avait que trois, étaient rouillées. Il semblait possible de percer cette clôture vermoulue.

En l’examinant, il vit que cette porte n’était pas une porte. Elle n’avait ni gonds, ni pentures, ni serrure, ni fente au milieu. Les bandes de fer la traversaient de part en part sans solution de continuité. Par les crevasses des planches il entrevit des moellons et des pierres grossièrement cimentés que les passants pouvaient y voir encore il y a dix ans. Il fut forcé de s’avouer avec consternation que cette apparence de porte était simplement le parement en bois d’une bâtisse à laquelle elle était adossée. Il était facile d’arracher une planche, mais on se trouvait face à face avec un mur.

Chapitre V

Qui serait impossible avec l’éclairage au gaz

En ce moment un bruit sourd et cadencé commença à se faire entendre à quelque distance. Jean Valjean risqua un peu son regard en dehors du coin de la rue. Sept ou huit soldats disposés en peloton venaient de déboucher dans la rue Polonceau. Il voyait briller les bayonnettes. Cela venait vers lui.

Ces soldats, en tête desquels il distinguait la haute stature de Javert, s’avançaient lentement et avec précaution. Ils s’arrêtaient fréquemment. Il était visible qu’ils exploraient tous les recoins des murs et toutes les embrasures de portes et d’allées.

C’était, et ici la conjecture ne pouvait se tromper, quelque patrouille que Javert avait rencontrée et qu’il avait requise.

Les deux acolytes de Javert marchaient dans leurs rangs.

Du pas dont ils marchaient, et avec les stations qu’ils faisaient, il leur fallait environ un quart d’heure pour arriver à l’endroit où se trouvait Jean Valjean. Ce fut un instant affreux. Quelques minutes séparaient Jean Valjean de cet épouvantable précipice qui s’ouvrait devant lui pour la troisième fois. Et le bagne maintenant n’était plus seulement le bagne, c’était Cosette perdue à jamais; c’est-à-dire une vie qui ressemblait au dedans d’une tombe.

Il n’y avait plus qu’une chose possible.

Jean Valjean avait cela de particulier qu’on pouvait dire qu’il portait deux besaces; dans l’une il avait les pensées d’un saint, dans l’autre les redoutables talents d’un forçat. Il fouillait dans l’une ou dans l’autre, selon l’occasion.

Entre autres ressources, grâce à ses nombreuses évasions du bagne de Toulon, il était, on s’en souvient, passé maître dans cet art incroyable de s’élever, sans échelles, sans crampons, par la seule force musculaire, en s’appuyant de la nuque, des épaules, des hanches et des genoux, en s’aidant à peine des rares reliefs de la pierre, dans l’angle droit d’un mur, au besoin jusqu’à la hauteur d’un sixième étage; art qui a rendu si effrayant et si célèbre le coin de la cour de la Conciergerie de Paris par où s’échappa, il y a une vingtaine d’années, le condamné Battemolle.

Jean Valjean mesura des yeux la muraille au-dessus de laquelle il voyait le tilleul. Elle avait environ dix-huit pieds de haut. L’angle qu’elle faisait avec le pignon du grand bâtiment était rempli, dans sa partie inférieure, d’un massif de maçonnerie de forme triangulaire, probablement destiné à préserver ce trop commode recoin des stations de ces stercoraires qu’on appelle les passants. Ce remplissage préventif des coins de mur est fort usité à Paris.

Ce massif avait environ cinq pieds de haut. Du sommet de ce massif l’espace à franchir pour arriver sur le mur n’était guère que de quatorze pieds.

Le mur était surmonté d’une pierre plate sans chevron.

La difficulté était Cosette. Cosette elle, ne savait pas escalader un mur. L’abandonner? Jean Valjean n’y songeait pas. L’emporter était impossible. Toutes les forces d’un homme lui sont nécessaires pour mener à bien ces étranges ascensions. Le moindre fardeau dérangerait son centre de gravité et le précipiterait.

Il aurait fallu une corde. Jean Valjean n’en avait pas. Où trouver une corde à minuit, rue Polonceau? Certes, en cet instant-là, si Jean Valjean avait eu un royaume, il l’eût donné pour une corde. Toutes les situations extrêmes ont leurs éclairs qui tantôt nous aveuglent, tantôt nous illuminent.

Le regard désespéré de Jean Valjean rencontra la potence du réverbère du cul-de-sac Genrot.

À cette époque il n’y avait point de becs de gaz dans les rues de Paris. À la nuit tombante on y allumait des réverbères placés de distance en distance, lesquels montaient et descendaient au moyen d’une corde qui traversait la rue de part en part et qui s’ajustait dans la rainure d’une potence. Le tourniquet où se dévidait cette corde était scellé au-dessous de la lanterne dans une petite armoire de fer dont l’allumeur avait la clef, et la corde elle-même était protégée jusqu’à une certaine hauteur par un étui de métal.

Jean Valjean, avec l’énergie d’une lutte suprême, franchit la rue d’un bond, entra dans le cul-de-sac, fit sauter le pêne de la petite armoire avec la pointe de son couteau, et un instant après il était revenu près de Cosette. Il avait une corde. Ils vont vite en besogne, ces sombres trouveurs d’expédients, aux prises avec la fatalité.

Nous avons expliqué que les réverbères n’avaient pas été allumés cette nuit-là. La lanterne du cul-de-sac Genrot se trouvait donc naturellement éteinte comme les autres, et l’on pouvait passer à côté sans même remarquer qu’elle n’était plus à sa place.

Cependant l’heure, le lieu, l’obscurité, la préoccupation de Jean Valjean, ses gestes singuliers, ses allées et venues, tout cela commençait à inquiéter Cosette. Tout autre enfant qu’elle aurait depuis longtemps jeté les hauts cris. Elle se borna à tirer Jean Valjean par le pan de sa redingote. On entendait toujours de plus en plus distinctement le bruit de la patrouille qui approchait.

— Père, dit-elle tout bas, j’ai peur. Qu’est-ce qui vient donc là?

— Chut! répondit le malheureux homme. C’est la Thénardier.

Cosette tressaillit. Il ajouta:

— Ne dis rien. Laisse-moi faire. Si tu cries, si tu pleures, la Thénardier te guette. Elle vient pour te ravoir.

Alors, sans se hâter, mais sans s’y reprendre à deux fois pour rien, avec une précision ferme et brève, d’autant plus remarquable en un pareil moment que la patrouille et Javert pouvaient survenir d’un instant à l’autre, il défit sa cravate, la passa autour du corps de Cosette sous les aisselles en ayant soin qu’elle ne pût blesser l’enfant, rattacha cette cravate à un bout de la corde au moyen de ce nœud que les gens de mer appellent nœud d’hirondelle, prit l’autre bout de cette corde dans ses dents, ôta ses souliers et ses bas qu’il jeta par-dessus la muraille, monta sur le massif de maçonnerie, et commença à s’élever dans l’angle du mur et du pignon avec autant de solidité et de certitude que s’il eût eu des échelons sous les talons et sous les coudes. Une demi-minute ne s’était pas écoulée qu’il était à genoux sur le mur.

Cosette le considérait avec stupeur, sans dire une parole. La recommandation de Jean Valjean et le nom de la Thénardier l’avaient glacée.

Tout à coup elle entendit la voix de Jean Valjean qui lui criait, tout en restant très basse:

— Adosse-toi au mur.

Elle obéit.

— Ne dis pas un mot et n’aie pas peur, reprit Jean Valjean.

Et elle se sentit enlever de terre.

Avant qu’elle eût eu le temps de se reconnaître, elle était au haut de la muraille.

Jean Valjean la saisit, la mit sur son dos, lui prit ses deux petites mains dans sa main gauche, se coucha à plat ventre et rampa sur le haut du mur jusqu'au pan coupé. Comme il l'avait deviné, il y avait là une bâtisse dont le toit partait du haut de la clôture en bois et descendait fort près de terre, selon un plan assez doucement incliné, en effleurant le tilleul.

Circonstance heureuse, car la muraille était beaucoup plus haute de ce côté que du côté de la rue. Jean Valjean n'apercevait le sol au-dessous de lui que très profondément.

Il venait d'arriver au plan incliné du toit et n'avait pas encore lâché la crête de la muraille lorsqu'un hourvari violent annonça l'arrivée de la patrouille. On entendit la voix tonnante de Javert:

— Fouillez le cul-de-sac! La rue Droit-Mur est gardée, la petite rue Picpus aussi. Je réponds qu'il est dans le cul-de-sac!

Les soldats se précipitèrent dans le cul-de-sac Genrot.

Jean Valjean se laissa glisser le long du toit, tout en soutenant Cosette, atteignit le tilleul et sauta à terre. Soit terreur, soit courage, Cosette n'avait pas soufflé. Elle avait les mains un peu écorchées.

Chapitre VI

Commencement d’une énigme

Jean Valjean se trouvait dans une espèce de jardin fort vaste et d’un aspect singulier; un de ces jardins tristes qui semblent faits pour être regardés l’hiver et la nuit. Ce jardin était d’une forme oblongue, avec une allée de grands peupliers au fond, des futaies assez hautes dans les coins, et un espace sans ombre au milieu, où l’on distinguait un très grand arbre isolé, puis quelques arbres fruitiers tordus et hérissés comme de grosses broussailles, des carrés de légumes, une melonnière dont les cloches brillaient à la lune, et un vieux puisard. Il y avait çà et là des bancs de pierre qui semblaient noirs de mousse. Les allées étaient bordées de petits arbustes sombres, et toutes droites. L’herbe en envahissait la moitié et une moisissure verte couvrait le reste.

Jean Valjean avait à côté de lui la bâtisse dont le toit lui avait servi pour descendre, un tas de fagots, et derrière les fagots, tout contre le mur, une statue de pierre dont la face mutilée n’était plus qu’un masque informe qui apparaissait vaguement dans l’obscurité.

La bâtisse était une sorte de ruine où l’on distinguait des chambres démantelées dont une, tout encombrée, semblait servir de hangar.

Le grand bâtiment de la rue Droit-Mur qui faisait retour sur la petite rue Picpus développait sur ce jardin deux façades en équerre. Ces façades du dedans étaient plus tragiques encore que celles du dehors. Toutes les fenêtres étaient grillées. On n’y entrevoyait aucune lumière. Aux étages supérieurs il y avait des hottes comme aux prisons. L’une de ces façades projetait sur l’autre son ombre qui retombait sur le jardin comme un immense drap noir.

On n’apercevait pas d’autre maison. Le fond du jardin se perdait dans la brume et dans la nuit. Cependant on y distinguait confusément des murailles qui s’entrecoupaient comme s’il y avait d’autres cultures au delà, et les toits bas de la rue Polonceau.

On ne pouvait rien se figurer de plus farouche et de plus solitaire que ce jardin. Il n’y avait personne, ce qui était tout simple à cause de l’heure; mais il ne semblait pas que cet endroit fût fait pour que quelqu’un y marchât, même en plein midi.

Le premier soin de Jean Valjean avait été de retrouver ses souliers et de se rechausser, puis d'entrer dans le hangar avec Cosette. Celui qui s'évade ne se croit jamais assez caché. L'enfant, songeant toujours à la Thénardier, partageait son instinct de se blottir le plus possible.

Cosette tremblait et se serrait contre lui. On entendait le bruit tumultueux de la patrouille qui fouillait le cul-de-sac et la rue, les coups de crosse contre les pierres, les appels de Javert aux mouchards qu'il avait postés, et ses imprécations mêlées de paroles qu'on ne distinguait point.

Au bout d'un quart d'heure, il sembla que cette espèce de grondement orageux commençait à s'éloigner. Jean Valjean ne respirait pas.

Il avait posé doucement sa main sur la bouche de Cosette.

Au reste la solitude où il se trouvait était si étrangement calme que cet effroyable tapage, si furieux et si proche, n'y jetait même pas l'ombre d'un trouble. Il semblait que ces murs fussent bâtis avec ces pierres sourdes dont parle l'Écriture.

Tout à coup, au milieu de ce calme profond, un nouveau bruit s'éleva; un bruit céleste, divin, ineffable, aussi ravissant que l'autre était horrible. C'était un hymne qui sortait des ténèbres, un éblouissement de prière et d'harmonie dans l'obscur et effrayant silence de la nuit; des voix de femmes, mais des voix composées à la fois de l'accent pur des vierges et de l'accent naïf des enfants, de ces voix qui ne sont pas de la terre et qui ressemblent à celles que les nouveau-nés entendent encore et que les moribonds entendent déjà. Ce chant venait du sombre édifice qui dominait le jardin. Au moment où le vacarme des démons s'éloignait, on eût dit un chœur d'anges qui s'approchait dans l'ombre.

Cosette et Jean Valjean tombèrent à genoux.

Ils ne savaient pas ce que c'était, ils ne savaient pas où ils étaient, mais ils sentaient tous deux, l'homme et l'enfant, le pénitent et l'innocent, qu'il fallait qu'ils fussent à genoux.

Ces voix avaient cela d'étrange qu'elles n'empêchaient pas que le bâtiment ne parût désert. C'était comme un chant surnaturel dans une demeure inhabitée.

Pendant que ces voix chantaient, Jean Valjean ne songeait plus à rien. Il ne voyait plus la nuit, il voyait un ciel bleu. Il lui semblait sentir s'ouvrir ces ailes que nous avons tous au dedans de nous.

Le chant s'éteignit. Il avait peut-être duré longtemps. Jean Valjean n'aurait pu le dire. Les heures de l'extase ne sont jamais qu'une minute.

Tout était retombé dans le silence. Plus rien dans la rue, plus rien dans le jardin. Ce qui menaçait, ce qui rassurait, tout s’était évanoui. Le vent froissait dans la crête du mur quelques herbes sèches qui faisaient un petit bruit doux et lugubre.

Chapitre VII

Suite de l’énigme

La bise de nuit s’était levée, ce qui indiquait qu’il devait être entre une et deux heures du matin. La pauvre Cosette ne disait rien. Comme elle s’était assise à terre à son côté et qu’elle avait penché sa tête sur lui, Jean Valjean pensa quelle s’était endormie. Il se baissa et la regarda. Cosette avait les yeux tout grands ouverts et un air pensif qui fit mal à Jean Valjean.

Elle tremblait toujours.

— As-tu envie de dormir? dit Jean Valjean.

— J’ai bien froid, répondit-elle.

Un moment après elle reprit:

— Est-ce qu’elle est toujours là?

— Qui? dit Jean Valjean.

— Madame Thénardier.

Jean Valjean avait déjà oublié le moyen dont il s’était servi pour faire garder le silence à Cosette.

— Ah! dit-il, elle est partie. Ne crains plus rien.

L’enfant soupira comme si un poids se soulevait de dessus sa poitrine.

La terre était humide, le hangar ouvert de toute part, la bise plus fraîche à chaque instant. Le bonhomme ôta sa redingote et en enveloppa Cosette.

— As-tu moins froid ainsi? dit-il.

— Oh oui, père!

— Eh bien, attends-moi un instant. Je vais revenir.

Il sortit de la ruine, et se mit à longer le grand bâtiment, cherchant quelque abri meilleur. Il rencontra des portes, mais elles étaient fermées. Il y avait des barreaux à toutes les croisées du rez-de-chaussée.

Comme il venait de dépasser l’angle intérieur de l’édifice, il remarqua qu’il arrivait à des fenêtres cintrées, et il y aperçut quelque clarté. Il se haussa sur la pointe du pied et regarda par l’une de ces fenêtres. Elles donnaient toutes dans une salle assez vaste, pavée de larges dalles, coupée d’arcades et de piliers, où l’on ne distinguait rien qu’une petite lueur et de grandes ombres. La lueur venait d’une veilleuse allumée dans un coin. Cette salle était déserte et rien n’y bougeait. Cependant, à force de regarder, il crut voir à terre, sur le pavé, quelque chose qui paraissait couvert d’un linceul et qui ressemblait à une forme humaine. Cela était étendu à plat ventre, la face contre la pierre, les bras en croix, dans l'immobilité de la mort. On eût dit, à une sorte de serpent qui traînait sur le pavé, que cette forme sinistre avait la corde au cou.

Toute la salle baignait dans cette brume des lieux à peine éclairés qui ajoute à l'horreur.

Jean Valjean a souvent dit depuis que, quoique bien des spectacles funèbres eussent traversé sa vie, jamais il n'avait rien vu de plus glaçant et de plus terrible que cette figure énigmatique accomplissant on ne sait quel mystère inconnu dans ce lieu sombre et ainsi entrevue dans la nuit. Il était effrayant de supposer que cela était peut-être mort, et plus effrayant encore de songer que cela était peut-être vivant.

Il eut le courage de coller son front à la vitre et d'épier si cette chose remuerait. Il eut beau rester un temps qui lui parut très long, la forme étendue ne faisait aucun mouvement. Tout à coup il se sentit pris d'une épouvante inexprimable, et il s'enfuit. Il se mit à courir vers le hangar sans oser regarder en arrière. Il lui semblait que s'il tournait la tête il verrait la figure marcher derrière lui à grands pas en agitant les bras.

Il arriva à la ruine haletant. Ses genoux pliaient; la sueur lui coulait dans les reins.

Où était-il? qui aurait jamais pu s'imaginer quelque chose de pareil à cette espèce de sépulcre au milieu de Paris? qu'était-ce que cette étrange maison? Édifice plein de mystères nocturnes, appelant les âmes dans l'ombre avec la voix des anges et, lorsqu'elles viennent, leur offrant brusquement cette vision épouvantable, promettant d'ouvrir la porte radieuse du ciel et ouvrant la porte horrible du tombeau! Et cela était bien en effet un édifice, une maison qui avait son numéro dans une rue! Ce n'était pas un rêve! Il avait besoin d'en toucher les pierres pour y croire.

Le froid, l'anxiété, l'inquiétude, les émotions de la soirée, lui donnaient une véritable fièvre, et toutes ces idées s'entre-heurtaient dans son cerveau.

Il s'approcha de Cosette. Elle dormait.

Chapitre VIII

L’énigme redouble

L’enfant avait posé sa tête sur une pierre et s’était endormie.

Il s’assit auprès d’elle et se mit à la considérer. Peu à peu, à mesure qu’il la regardait, il se calmait, et il reprenait possession de sa liberté d’esprit.

Il percevait clairement cette vérité, le fond de sa vie désormais, que tant qu’elle serait là, tant qu’il l’aurait près de lui, il n’aurait besoin de rien que pour elle, ni peur de rien qu’à cause d’elle. Il ne sentait même pas qu’il avait très froid, ayant quitté sa redingote pour l’en couvrir.

Cependant, à travers la rêverie où il était tombé, il entendait depuis quelque temps un bruit singulier. C’était comme un grelot qu’on agitait. Ce bruit était dans le jardin. On l’entendait distinctement, quoique faiblement. Cela ressemblait à la petite musique vague que font les clarines des bestiaux la nuit dans les pâturages.

Ce bruit fit retourner Jean Valjean.

Il regarda, et vit qu’il y avait quelqu’un dans le jardin.

Un être qui ressemblait à un homme marchait au milieu des cloches de la melonnière, se levant, se baissant, s’arrêtant, avec des mouvements réguliers, comme s’il traînait ou étendait quelque chose à terre. Cet être paraissait boiter.

Jean Valjean tressaillit avec ce tremblement continuel des malheureux. Tout leur est hostile et suspect. Ils se défient du jour parce qu’il aide à les voir et de la nuit parce qu’elle aide à les surprendre. Tout à l’heure il frissonnait de ce que le jardin était désert, maintenant il frissonnait de ce qu’il y avait quelqu’un.

Il retomba des terreurs chimériques aux terreurs réelles. Il se dit que Javert et les mouchards n’étaient peut-être pas partis, que sans doute ils avaient laissé dans la rue des gens en observation, que, si cet homme le découvrait dans ce jardin, il crierait au voleur, et le livrerait. Il prit doucement Cosette endormie dans ses bras et la porta derrière un tas de vieux meubles hors d’usage, dans le coin le plus reculé du hangar. Cosette ne remua pas.

De là il observa les allures de l’être qui était dans la melonnière. Ce qui était bizarre, c’est que le bruit du grelot suivait tous les mouvements de cet homme. Quand l’homme s’approchait, le bruit s’approchait; quand il s’éloignait, le bruit s’éloignait; s’il faisait quelque geste précipité, un trémolo accompagnait ce geste; quand il s’arrêtait, le bruit cessait. Il paraissait évident que le grelot était attaché à cet homme; mais alors qu’est-ce que cela pouvait signifier? qu’était-ce que cet homme auquel une clochette était suspendue comme à un bélier ou à un bœuf?

Tout en se faisant ces questions, il toucha les mains de Cosette. Elles étaient glacées.

— Ah mon Dieu! dit-il.

Il appela à voix basse:

— Cosette!

Elle n’ouvrit pas les yeux.

Il la secoua vivement.

Elle ne s’éveilla pas.

— Serait-elle morte! dit-il, et il se dressa debout, frémissant de la tête aux pieds.

Les idées les plus affreuses lui traversèrent l’esprit pêle-mêle. Il y a des moments où les suppositions hideuses nous assiègent comme une cohue de furies et forcent violemment les cloisons de notre cerveau. Quand il s’agit de ceux que nous aimons, notre prudence invente toutes les folies. Il se souvint que le sommeil peut être mortel en plein air dans une nuit froide.

Cosette, pâle, était retombée étendue à terre à ses pieds sans faire un mouvement.

Il écouta son souffle; elle respirait; mais d’une respiration qui lui paraissait faible et prête à s’éteindre.

Comment la réchauffer? comment la réveiller? Tout ce qui n’était pas ceci s’effaça de sa pensée. Il s’élança éperdu hors de la ruine.

Il fallait absolument qu’avant un quart d’heure Cosette fût devant un feu et dans un lit.

Chapitre IX

L’homme au grelot

Il marcha droit à l’homme qu’il apercevait dans le jardin. Il avait pris à sa main le rouleau d’argent qui était dans la poche de son gilet.

Cet homme baissait la tête et ne le voyait pas venir. En quelques enjambées, Jean Valjean fut à lui.

Jean Valjean l’aborda en criant:

— Cent francs!

L’homme fit un soubresaut et leva les yeux.

— Cent francs à gagner, reprit Jean Valjean, si vous me donnez asile pour cette nuit!

La lune éclairait en plein le visage effaré de Jean Valjean.

— Tiens, c’est vous, père Madeleine! dit l’homme.

Ce nom, ainsi prononcé, à cette heure obscure, dans ce lieu inconnu, par cet homme inconnu, fit reculer Jean Valjean.

Il s’attendait à tout, excepté à cela. Celui qui lui parlait était un vieillard courbé et boiteux, vêtu à peu près comme un paysan, qui avait au genou gauche une genouillère de cuir où pendait une assez grosse clochette. On ne distinguait pas son visage qui était dans l’ombre.

Cependant ce bonhomme avait ôté son bonnet, et s’écriait tout tremblant:

— Ah mon Dieu! comment êtes-vous ici, père Madeleine? Par où êtes-vous entré, Dieu Jésus? Vous tombez donc du ciel! Ce n’est pas l’embarras, si vous tombez jamais, c’est de là que vous tomberez. Et comme vous voilà fait! Vous n’avez pas de cravate, vous n’avez pas de chapeau, vous n’avez pas d’habit! Savez-vous que vous auriez fait peur à quelqu’un qui ne vous aurait pas connu? Mon Dieu Seigneur, est-ce que les saints deviennent fous à présent? Mais comment donc êtes-vous entré ici?

Un mot n’attendait pas l’autre. Le vieux homme parlait avec une volubilité campagnarde où il n’y avait rien d’inquiétant. Tout cela était dit avec un mélange de stupéfaction et de bonhomie naïve.

— Qui êtes-vous? et qu’est-ce que c’est que cette maison-ci? demanda Jean Valjean.

— Ah, pardieu, voilà qui est fort! s’écria le vieillard, je suis celui que vous avez fait placer ici, et cette maison est celle où vous m’avez fait placer.

Comment! vous ne me reconnaissez pas?

— Non, dit Jean Valjean. Et comment se fait-il que vous me connaissiez, vous?

— Vous m’avez sauvé la vie, dit l’homme.

Il se tourna, un rayon de lune lui dessina le profil, et Jean Valjean reconnut le vieux Fauchelevent.

— Ah.! dit Jean Valjean, c’est vous? oui, je vous reconnais.

— C’est bien heureux! fit le vieux d’un ton de reproche.

— Et que faites-vous ici? reprit Jean Valjean.

— Tiens! je couvre mes melons donc!

Le vieux Fauchelevent tenait en effet à la main, au moment où Jean Valjean l’avait accosté, le bout d’un paillasson qu’il était occupé à étendre sur la melonnière. Il en avait déjà ainsi posé un certain nombre depuis une heure environ qu’il était dans le jardin. C’était cette opération qui lui faisait faire les mouvements particuliers observés du hangar par Jean Valjean.

Il continua:

— Je me suis dit: la lune est claire, il va geler. Si je mettais à mes melons leurs carricks? Et, ajouta-t-il en regardant Jean Valjean avec un gros rire, vous auriez pardieu bien dû en faire autant! Mais comment donc êtes-vous ici?

Jean Valjean, se sentant connu par cet homme, du moins sous son nom de Madeleine, n’avançait plus qu’avec précaution. Il multipliait les questions. Chose bizarre, les rôles semblaient intervertis. C’était lui, intrus, qui interrogeait.

— Et qu’est-ce que c’est que cette sonnette que vous avez au genou?

— Ça? répondit Fauchelevent, c’est pour qu’on m’évite.

— Comment! pour qu’on vous évite?

Le vieux Fauchelevent cligna de l’œil d’un air inexprimable.

— Ah dame! il n’y a que des femmes dans cette maison-ci; beaucoup de jeunes filles. Il paraît que je serais dangereux à rencontrer. La sonnette les avertit. Quand je viens, elles s’en vont.

— Qu’est-ce que c’est que cette maison-ci?

— Tiens! vous savez bien.

— Mais non, je ne sais pas.

— Puisque vous m’y avez fait placer jardinier!

— Répondez-moi comme si je ne savais rien.

— Eh bien, c’est le couvent du Petit-Picpus donc!

Les souvenirs revenaient à Jean Valjean. Le hasard, c’est-à-dire la providence, l’avait jeté précisément dans ce couvent du quartier Saint-Antoine où le vieux Fauchelevent, estropié par la chute de sa charrette, avait été admis sur sa recommandation, il y avait deux ans de cela. Il répéta comme se parlant à lui-même:

— Le couvent du Petit-Picpus!

— Ah çà mais, au fait, reprit Fauchelevent, comment diable avez-vous fait pour y entrer, vous, père Madeleine? Vous avez beau être un saint, vous êtes un homme, et il n’entre pas d’hommes ici.

— Vous y êtes bien.

— Il n’y a que moi.

— Cependant, reprit Jean Valjean, il faut que j’y reste.

— Ah mon Dieu! s’écria Fauchelevent.

Jean Valjean s’approcha du vieillard et lui dit d’une voix grave:

— Père Fauchelevent, je vous ai sauvé la vie.

— C’est moi qui m’en suis souvenu le premier, répondit Fauchelevent.

— Eh bien, vous pouvez faire aujourd’hui pour moi ce que j’ai fait autrefois pour vous.

Fauchelevent prit dans ses vieilles mains ridées et tremblantes les deux robustes mains de Jean Valjean, et fut quelques secondes comme s’il ne pouvait parler. Enfin il s’écria:

— Oh! ce serait une bénédiction du bon Dieu si je pouvais vous rendre un peu cela! Moi! vous sauver la vie! Monsieur le maire, disposez du vieux bonhomme!

Une joie admirable avait comme transfiguré ce vieillard. Un rayon semblait lui sortir du visage.

— Que voulez-vous que je fasse? reprit-il.

— Je vous expliquerai cela. Vous avez une chambre?

— J’ai une baraque isolée, là, derrière la ruine du vieux couvent, dans un recoin que personne ne voit. Il y a trois chambres. La baraque était en effet si bien cachée derrière la ruine et si bien disposée pour que personne ne la vît, que Jean Valjean ne l’avait pas vue.

— Bien, dit Jean Valjean. Maintenant je vous demande deux choses.

— Lesquelles, monsieur le maire?

— Premièrement, vous ne direz à personne ce que vous savez de moi. Deuxièmement, vous ne chercherez pas à en savoir davantage.

— Comme vous voudrez. Je sais que vous ne pouvez rien faire que d’honnête et que vous avez toujours été un homme du bon Dieu. Et puis d’ailleurs, c’est vous qui m’avez mis ici. Ça vous regarde. Je suis à vous.

— C’est dit. À présent, venez avec moi. Nous allons chercher l’enfant.

— Ah! dit Fauchelevent. Il y a un enfant!

Il n’ajouta pas une parole et suivit Jean Valjean comme un chien suit son maître.

Moins d’une demi-heure après, Cosette, redevenue rose à la flamme d’un bon feu, dormait dans le lit du vieux jardinier. Jean Valjean avait remis sa cravate et sa redingote; le chapeau lancé par-dessus le mur avait été retrouvé et ramassé; pendant que Jean Valjean endossait sa redingote, Fauchelevent avait ôté sa genouillère à clochette, qui maintenant, accrochée à un clou près d’une hotte, ornait le mur. Les deux hommes se chauffaient accoudés sur une table où Fauchelevent avait posé un morceau de fromage, du pain bis, une bouteille de vin et deux verres, et le vieux disait à Jean Valjean en lui posant la main sur le genou:

— Ah! père Madeleine! vous ne m’avez pas reconnu tout de suite! Vous sauvez la vie aux gens, et après vous les oubliez! Oh! c’est mal! eux ils se souviennent de vous! vous êtes un ingrat!

Chapitre X

Où il est expliqué comment Javert a fait buisson creux

Les événements dont nous venons de voir, pour ainsi dire, l'envers, s'étaient accomplis dans les conditions les plus simples.

Lorsque Jean Valjean, dans la nuit même du jour où Javert l'arrêta près du lit de mort de Fantine, s'échappa de la prison municipale de Montreuil-sur-Mer, la police supposa que le forçat évadé avait dû se diriger vers Paris. Paris est un maelström où tout se perd, et tout disparaît dans ce nombril du monde comme dans le nombril de la mer. Aucune forêt ne cache un homme comme cette foule. Les fugitifs de toute espèce le savent. Ils vont à Paris comme à un engloutissement; il y a des engloutissements qui sauvent. La police aussi le sait, et c'est à Paris qu'elle cherche ce qu'elle a perdu ailleurs. Elle y chercha l'ex-maire de Montreuil-sur-Mer. Javert fut appelé à Paris afin d'éclairer les perquisitions. Javert en effet aida puissamment à reprendre Jean Valjean. Le zèle et l'intelligence de Javert en cette occasion furent remarqués de Mr Chabouillet, secrétaire de la préfecture sous le comte Anglès. Mr Chabouillet, qui du reste avait déjà protégé Javert, fit attacher l'inspecteur de Montreuil-sur-Mer à la police de Paris. Là Javert se rendit diversement et, disons-le, quoique le mot semble inattendu pour de pareils services, honorablement utile.

Il ne songeait plus à Jean Valjean, — à ces chiens toujours en chasse, le loup d'aujourd'hui fait oublier le loup d'hier, — lorsqu'en décembre 1823 il lut un journal, lui qui ne lisait jamais de journaux; mais Javert, homme monarchique, avait tenu à savoir les détails de l'entrée triomphale du «prince généralissime» à Bayonne. Comme il achevait l'article qui l'intéressait, un nom, le nom de Jean Valjean, au bas d'une page, appela son attention. Le journal annonçait que le forçat Jean Valjean était mort, et publiait le fait en termes si formels que Javert n'en douta pas. Il se borna à dire: *c'est là le bon écrou*. Puis il jeta le journal, et n'y pensa plus.

Quelque temps après il arriva qu'une note de police fut transmise par la préfecture de Seine-et-Oise à la préfecture de police de Paris sur l'enlèvement d'un enfant, qui avait eu lieu, disait-on, avec des circonstances particulières, dans la commune de Montfermeil. Une petite fille de sept à huit ans, disait la note, qui avait été confiée par sa mère à un aubergiste du pays, avait été volée par un inconnu; cette petite répondait au nom de Cosette et était l'enfant d'une fille nommée Fantine, morte à l'hôpital, on ne savait quand ni où. Cette note passa sous les yeux de Javert, et le rendit rêveur.

Le nom de Fantine lui était bien connu. Il se souvenait que Jean Valjean l'avait fait éclater de rire, lui Javert, en lui demandant un répit de trois jours pour aller chercher l'enfant de cette créature. Il se rappela que Jean Valjean avait été arrêté à Paris au moment où il montait dans la voiture de Montfermeil. Quelques indications avaient même fait songer à cette époque que c'était la seconde fois qu'il montait dans cette voiture, et qu'il avait déjà, la veille, fait une première excursion aux environs de ce village, car on ne l'avait point vu dans le village même. Qu'allait-il faire dans ce pays de Montfermeil? on ne l'avait pu deviner. Javert le comprenait maintenant. La fille de Fantine s'y trouvait. Jean Valjean l'allait chercher. Or, cette enfant venait d'être volée par un inconnu. Quel pouvait être cet inconnu? Serait-ce Jean Valjean? mais Jean Valjean était mort. Javert, sans rien dire à personne, prit le coucou du *Plat d'étain*, cul-de-sac de la Planchette, et fit le voyage de Montfermeil.

Il s'attendait à trouver là un grand éclaircissement; il y trouva une grande obscurité.

Dans les premiers jours, les Thénardier, dépités, avaient jasé. La disparition de l'Alouette avait fait bruit dans le village. Il y avait eu tout de suite plusieurs versions de l'histoire qui avait fini par être un vol d'enfant. De là, la note de police. Cependant, la première humeur passée, le Thénardier, avec son admirable instinct, avait très vite compris qu'il n'est jamais utile d'émouvoir monsieur le procureur du roi, et que ses plaintes à propos de l'*enlèvement* de Cosette auraient pour premier résultat de fixer sur lui, Thénardier, et sur beaucoup d'affaires troubles qu'il avait, l'étincelante prunelle de la justice. La première chose que les hiboux ne veulent pas, c'est qu'on leur apporte une chandelle. Et d'abord, comment se tirerait-il des quinze cents francs qu'il avait reçus? Il tourna court, mit un bâillon à sa femme, et fit l'étonné quand on lui parlait de l'*enfant volé*. Il n'y comprenait rien; sans doute il s'était plaint dans le moment de ce qu'on lui «enlevait» si vite cette chère petite; il eût voulu par tendresse la garder encore deux ou trois jours; mais c'était son «grand-père» qui était venu la chercher le plus naturellement du monde. Il avait ajouté le grand-père, qui faisait bien. Ce fut sur cette histoire que Javert tomba en arrivant à Montfermeil. Le grand-père faisait évanouir Jean Valjean.

Javert pourtant enfonça quelques questions, comme des sondes, dans l’histoire de Thénardier. — Qu’était-ce que ce grand-père, et comment s’appelait-il? — Thénardier répondit avec simplicité: — C’est un riche cultivateur. J’ai vu son passeport. Je crois qu’il s’appelle Mr Guillaume Lambert.

Lambert est un nom bonhomme et très rassurant. Javert s’en revint à Paris.

— Le Jean Valjean est bien mort, se dit-il, et je suis un jobard.

Il recommençait à oublier toute cette histoire, lorsque, dans le courant de mars 1824, il entendit parler d’un personnage bizarre qui habitait sur la paroisse de Saint-Médard et qu’on surnommait «le mendiant qui fait l’aumône». Ce personnage était, disait-on, un rentier dont personne ne savait au juste le nom et qui vivait seul avec une petite fille de huit ans, laquelle ne savait rien elle-même sinon qu’elle venait de Montfermeil. Montfermeil! ce nom revenait toujours, et fit dresser l’oreille à Javert. Un vieux mendiant mouchard, ancien bedeau, auquel ce personnage faisait la charité, ajoutait quelques autres détails. — Ce rentier était un être très farouche, — ne sortant jamais que le soir, — ne parlant à personne, — qu’aux pauvres quelquefois, — et ne se laissant pas approcher. Il portait une horrible vieille redingote jaune qui valait plusieurs millions, étant toute cousue de billets de banque. — Ceci piqua décidément la curiosité de Javert. Afin de voir ce rentier fantastique de très près sans l’effaroucher, il emprunta un jour au bedeau sa défroque et la place où le vieux mouchard s’accroupissait tous les soirs en nasillant des oraisons et en espionnant à travers la prière.

«L’individu suspect» vint en effet à Javert ainsi travesti, et lui fit l’aumône. En ce moment Javert leva la tête, et la secousse que reçut Jean Valjean en croyant reconnaître Javert, Javert la reçut en croyant reconnaître Jean Valjean.

Cependant l’obscurité avait pu le tromper; la mort de Jean Valjean était officielle; il restait à Javert des doutes, et des doutes graves; et dans le doute Javert, l’homme du scrupule, ne mettait la main au collet de personne.

Il suivit son homme jusqu’à la masure Gorbeau, et fit parler «la vieille», ce qui n’était pas malaisé. La vieille lui confirma le fait de la redingote doublée de millions, et lui conta l’épisode du billet de mille francs. Elle avait vu! elle avait touché! Javert loua une chambre. Le soir même il s’y installa. Il vint écouter à la porte du locataire mystérieux, espérant entendre le son de sa voix, mais Jean Valjean aperçut sa chandelle à travers la serrure et déjoua l’espion en gardant le silence.

Le lendemain Jean Valjean décampait. Mais le bruit de la pièce de cinq francs qu’il laissa tomber fut remarqué de la vieille qui, entendant remuer de l’argent, songea qu’on allait déménager et se hâta de prévenir Javert. À la nuit, lorsque Jean Valjean sortit, Javert l’attendait derrière les arbres du boulevard avec deux hommes.

Javert avait réclamé main-forte à la préfecture, mais il n’avait pas dit le nom de l’individu qu’il espérait saisir. C’était son secret; et il l’avait gardé pour trois raisons: d’abord, parce que la moindre indiscrétion pouvait donner l’éveil à Jean Valjean; ensuite, parce que mettre la main sur un vieux forçat évadé et réputé mort, sur un condamné que les notes de justice avaient jadis classé à jamais *parmi les malfaiteurs de l’espèce la plus dangereuse*, c’était un magnifique succès que les anciens de la police parisienne ne laisseraient certainement pas à un nouveau venu comme Javert, et qu’il craignait qu’on ne lui prît son galérien; enfin, parce que Javert, étant un artiste, avait le goût de l’imprévu. Il haïssait ces succès annoncés qu’on déflore en en parlant longtemps d’avance. Il tenait à élaborer ses chefs-d’œuvre dans l’ombre et à les dévoiler ensuite brusquement.

Javert avait suivi Jean Valjean d’arbre en arbre, puis de coin de rue en coin de rue, et ne l’avait pas perdu de vue un seul instant. Même dans les moments où Jean Valjean se croyait le plus en sûreté, l’œil de Javert était sur lui.

Pourquoi Javert n’arrêtait-il pas Jean Valjean? c’est qu’il doutait encore.

Il faut se souvenir qu’à cette époque la police n’était pas précisément à son aise; la presse libre la gênait. Quelques arrestations arbitraires, dénoncées par les journaux, avaient retenti jusqu’aux chambres, et rendu la préfecture timide. Attenter à la liberté individuelle était un fait grave. Les agents craignaient de se tromper; le préfet s’en prenait à eux; une erreur, c’était la destitution. Se figure-t-on l’effet qu’eût fait dans Paris ce bref entrefilet reproduit par vingt journaux: — Hier, un vieux grand-père en cheveux blancs, rentier respectable, qui se promenait avec sa petite-fille âgée de huit ans, a été arrêté et conduit au Dépôt de la Préfecture comme forçat évadé! Répétons en outre que Javert avait ses scrupules à lui; les recommandations de sa conscience s’ajoutaient aux recommandations du préfet. Il doutait réellement.

Jean Valjean tournait le dos et marchait dans l’obscurité.

La tristesse, l’inquiétude, l’anxiété, l’accablement, ce nouveau malheur d’être obligé de s’enfuir la nuit et de chercher un asile au hasard dans Paris pour Cosette et pour lui, la nécessité de régler son pas sur le pas d’un enfant, tout cela, à son insu même, avait changé la démarche de Jean Valjean et imprimé à son habitude de corps une telle sénilité que la police elle-même, incarnée dans Javert, pouvait s’y tromper, et s’y trompa. L’impossibilité d’approcher de trop près, son costume de vieux précepteur émigré, la déclaration de Thénardier qui le faisait grand-père, enfin la croyance de sa mort au bagne, ajoutaient encore aux incertitudes qui s’épaississaient dans l’esprit de Javert.

Il eut un moment l’idée de lui demander brusquement ses papiers. Mais si cet homme n’était pas Jean Valjean, et si cet homme n’était pas un bon vieux rentier honnête, c’était probablement quelque gaillard profondément et savamment mêlé à la trame obscure des méfaits parisiens, quelque chef de bande dangereux, faisant l’aumône pour cacher ses autres talents, vieille rubrique. Il avait des affidés, des complices, des logis en-cas où il allait se réfugier sans doute. Tous ces détours qu’il faisait dans les rues semblaient indiquer que ce n’était pas un simple bonhomme. L’arrêter trop vite, c’était «tuer la poule aux œufs d’or». Où était l’inconvénient d’attendre? Javert était bien sûr qu’il n’échapperait pas.

Il cheminait donc assez perplexe, en se posant cent questions sur ce personnage énigmatique.

Ce ne fut qu’assez tard, rue de Pontoise, que, grâce à la vive clarté que jetait un cabaret, il reconnut décidément Jean Valjean. Il y a dans ce monde deux êtres qui tressaillent profondément: la mère qui retrouve son enfant, et le tigre qui retrouve sa proie. Javert eut ce tressaillement profond.

Dès qu’il eut positivement reconnu Jean Valjean, le forçat redoutable, il s’aperçut qu’ils n’étaient que trois, et il fit demander du renfort au commissaire de police de la rue de Pontoise. Avant d’empoigner un bâton d’épines, on met des gants.

Ce retard et la station au carrefour Rollin pour se concerter avec ses agents faillirent lui faire perdre la piste. Cependant, il eut bien vite deviné que Jean Valjean voudrait placer la rivière entre ses chasseurs et lui. Il pencha la tête et réfléchit comme un limier qui met le nez à terre pour être juste à la voie. Javert, avec sa puissante rectitude d'instinct, alla droit au pont d'Austerlitz. Un mot au péager le mit au fait: — Avez-vous vu un homme avec une petite fille? — Je lui ai fait payer deux sous, répondit le péager. Javert arriva sur le pont à temps pour voir de l'autre côté de l'eau Jean Valjean traverser avec Cosette à la main l'espace éclairé par la lune. Il le vit s'engager dans la rue du Chemin-Vert-Saint-Antoine; il songea au cul-de-sac Genrot disposé là comme une trappe et à l'issue unique de la rue Droit-Mur sur la petite rue Picpus. Il *assura les grands devants,* comme parlent les chasseurs; il envoya en hâte par un détour un de ses agents garder cette issue. Une patrouille, qui rentrait au poste de l'Arsenal, ayant passé, il la requit et s'en fit accompagner. Dans ces parties-là, les soldats sont des atouts. D'ailleurs, c'est le principe que, pour venir à bout d'un sanglier, il faut faire science de veneur et force de chiens. Ces dispositions combinées, sentant Jean Valjean saisi entre l'impasse Genrot à droite, son agent à gauche, et lui Javert derrière, il prit une prise de tabac.

Puis il se mit à jouer. Il eut un moment ravissant et infernal; il laissa aller son homme devant lui, sachant qu'il le tenait, mais désirant reculer le plus possible le moment de l'arrêter, heureux de le sentir pris et de le voir libre, le couvant du regard avec cette volupté de l'araignée qui laisse voleter la mouche et du chat qui laisse courir la souris. La griffe et la serre ont une sensualité monstrueuse; c'est le mouvement obscur de la bête emprisonnée dans leur tenaille. Quel délice que cet étouffement!

Javert jouissait. Les mailles de son filet étaient solidement attachées. Il était sûr du succès; il n'avait plus maintenant qu'à fermer la main.

Accompagné comme il l'était, l'idée même de la résistance était impossible, si énergique, si vigoureux, et si désespéré que fût Jean Valjean.

Javert avança lentement, sondant et fouillant sur son passage tous les recoins de la rue comme les poches d'un voleur.

Quand il arriva au centre de sa toile, il n'y trouva plus la mouche.

On imagine son exaspération.

Il interrogea sa vedette des rues Droit-Mur et Picpus; cet agent, resté imperturbable à son poste, n'avait point vu passer l'homme.

Il arrive quelquefois qu'un cerf est brisé la tête couverte, c'est-à-dire s'échappe, quoique ayant la meute sur le corps, et alors les plus vieux chasseurs ne savent que dire. Duvivier, Ligniville et Desprez restent court. Dans une déconvenue de ce genre, Artonge s'écria: *Ce n'est pas un cerf, c'est un sorcier*.

Javert eût volontiers jeté le même cri.

Son désappointement tint un moment du désespoir et de la fureur. Il est certain que Napoléon fit des fautes dans la guerre de Russie, qu'Alexandre fit des fautes dans la guerre de l'Inde, que César fit des fautes dans la guerre d'Afrique, que Cyrus fit des fautes dans la guerre de Scythie, et que Javert fit des fautes dans cette campagne contre Jean Valjean. Il eut tort peut-être d'hésiter à reconnaître l'ancien galérien. Le premier coup d'œil aurait dû lui suffire. Il eut tort de ne pas l'appréhender purement et simplement dans la masure. Il eut tort de ne pas l'arrêter quand il le reconnut positivement rue de Pontoise. Il eut tort de se concerter avec ses auxiliaires en plein clair de lune dans le carrefour Rollin; certes, les avis sont utiles, et il est bon de connaître et d'interroger ceux des chiens qui méritent créance. Mais le chasseur ne saurait prendre trop de précautions quand il chasse des animaux inquiets, comme le loup et le forçat. Javert, en se préoccupant trop de mettre les limiers de meute sur la voie, alarma la bête en lui donnant vent du trait et la fit partir. Il eut tort surtout, dès qu'il eut retrouvé la piste au pont d'Austerlitz, de jouer ce jeu formidable et puéril de tenir un pareil homme au bout d'un fil. Il s'estima plus fort qu'il n'était, et crut pouvoir jouer à la souris avec un lion. En même temps, il s'estima trop faible quand il jugea nécessaire de s'adjoindre du renfort. Précaution fatale, perte d'un temps précieux. Javert commit toutes ces fautes, et n'en était pas moins un des espions les plus savants et les plus corrects qui aient existé. Il était, dans toute la force du terme, ce qu'en vénerie on appelle *un chien sage*. Mais qui est-ce qui est parfait?

Les grands stratégistes ont leurs éclipses.

Les fortes sottises sont souvent faites, comme les grosses cordes, d'une multitude de brins. Prenez le câble fil à fil, prenez séparément tous les petits motifs déterminants, vous les cassez l'un après l'autre, et vous dites: *Ce n'est que cela*! Tressez-les et tordez-les ensemble, c'est une énormité; c'est Attila qui hésite entre Marcien à l'Orient et Valentinien à l'Occident; c'est Annibal qui s'attarde à Capoue; c'est Danton qui s'endort à Arcis-sur-Aube. Quoi qu'il en soit, au moment même où il s'aperçut que Jean Valjean lui échappait, Javert ne perdit pas la tête. Sûr que le forçat en rupture de ban ne pouvait être bien loin, il établit des guets, il organisa des souricières et des embuscades et battit le quartier toute la nuit. La première chose qu'il vit, ce fut le désordre du réverbère, dont la corde était coupée. Indice précieux, qui l'égara pourtant en ce qu'il fit dévier toutes ses recherches vers le cul-de-sac Genrot. Il y a dans ce cul-de-sac des murs assez bas qui donnent sur des jardins dont les enceintes touchent à d’immenses terrains en friche. Jean Valjean avait dû évidemment s’enfuir par là. Le fait est que, s’il eût pénétré un peu plus avant dans le cul-de-sac Genrot, il l’eût fait probablement, et il était perdu. Javert explora ces jardins et ces terrains comme s’il y eût cherché une aiguille.

Au point du jour, il laissa deux hommes intelligents en observation et il regagna la préfecture de police, honteux comme un mouchard qu’un voleur aurait pris.

Livre sixième — Le Petit-Picpus

Chapitre I

Petite rue Picpus, numéro 62

Rien ne ressemblait plus, il y a un demi-siècle, à la première porte cochère venue que la porte cochère du numéro 62 de la petite rue Picpus. Cette porte, habituellement entrouverte de la façon la plus engageante, laissait voir deux choses qui n’ont rien de très funèbre, une cour entourée de murs tapissés de vigne et la face d’un portier qui flâne. Au-dessus du mur du fond on apercevait de grands arbres. Quand un rayon de soleil égayait la cour, quand un verre de vin égayait le portier, il était difficile de passer devant le numéro 62 de la petite rue Picpus sans en emporter une idée riante. C’était pourtant un lieu sombre qu’on avait entrevu.

Le seuil souriait; la maison priait et pleurait.

Si l’on parvenait, ce qui n’était point facile, à franchir le portier, — ce qui même pour presque tous était impossible, car il y avait un *sésame, ouvre-toi!* qu’il fallait savoir; — si, le portier franchi, on entrait à droite dans un petit vestibule où donnait un escalier resserré entre deux murs et si étroit qu’il n’y pouvait passer qu’une personne à la fois, si l’on ne se laissait pas effrayer par le badigeonnage jaune serin avec soubassement chocolat qui enduisait cet escalier, si l’on s’aventurait à monter, on dépassait un premier palier, puis un deuxième, et l’on arrivait au premier étage dans un corridor où la détrempe jaune et la plinthe chocolat vous suivaient avec un acharnement paisible. Escalier et corridor étaient éclairés par deux belles fenêtres. Le corridor faisait un coude et devenait obscur. Si l’on doublait ce cap, on parvenait après quelques pas devant une porte d’autant plus mystérieuse qu’elle n’était pas fermée. On la poussait, et l’on se trouvait dans une petite chambre d’environ six pieds carrés, carrelée, lavée, propre, froide, tendue de papier nankin à fleurettes vertes, à quinze sous le rouleau. Un jour blanc et mat venait d’une grande fenêtre à petits carreaux qui était à gauche et qui tenait toute la largeur de la chambre. On regardait, on ne voyait personne; on écoutait, on n’entendait ni un pas ni un murmure humain. La muraille était nue; la chambre n’était point meublée; pas une chaise.

On regardait encore, et l’on voyait au mur en face de la porte un trou quadrangulaire d’environ un pied carré, grillé d’une grille en fer à barreaux entre-croisés, noirs, noueux, solides, lesquels formaient des carreaux, j'ai presque dit des mailles, de moins d'un pouce et demi de diagonale. Les petites fleurettes vertes du papier nankin arrivaient avec calme et en ordre jusqu'à ces barreaux de fer, sans que ce contact funèbre les effarouchât et les fît tourbillonner. En supposant qu'un être vivant eût été assez admirablement maigre pour essayer d'entrer ou de sortir par le trou carré, cette grille l'en eût empêché. Elle ne laissait point passer le corps, mais elle laissait passer les yeux, c'est-à-dire l'esprit. Il semblait qu'on eût songé à cela, car on l'avait doublée d'une lame de fer-blanc sertie dans la muraille un peu en arrière et piquée de mille trous plus microscopiques que les trous d'une écumoire. Au bas de cette plaque était percée une ouverture tout à fait pareille à la bouche d'une boîte aux lettres. Un ruban de fil attaché à un mouvement de sonnette pendait à droite du trou grillé.

Si l'on agitait ce ruban, une clochette tintait et l'on entendait une voix, tout près de soi, ce qui faisait tressaillir.

— Qui est là? demandait la voix.

C'était une voix de femme, une voix douce, si douce qu'elle en était lugubre.

Ici encore il y avait un mot magique qu'il fallait savoir. Si on ne le savait pas, la voix se taisait, et le mur redevenait silencieux comme si l'obscurité effarée du sépulcre eût été de l'autre côté.

Si l'on savait le mot, la voix reprenait:

— Entrez à droite.

On remarquait alors à sa droite, en face de la fenêtre, une porte vitrée surmontée d'un châssis vitré et peinte en gris. On soulevait le loquet, on franchissait la porte, et l'on éprouvait absolument la même impression que lorsqu'on entre au spectacle dans une baignoire grillée avant que la grille soit baissée et que le lustre soit allumé. On était en effet dans une espèce de loge de théâtre, à peine éclairée par le jour vague de la porte vitrée, étroite, meublée de deux vieilles chaises et d'un paillasson tout démaillé, véritable loge avec sa devanture à hauteur d'appui qui portait une tablette en bois noir. Cette loge était grillée, seulement ce n'était pas une grille de bois doré comme à l'Opéra, c'était un monstrueux treillis de barres de fer affreusement enchevêtrées et scellées au mur par des scellements énormes qui ressemblaient à des poings fermés.

Les premières minutes passées, quand le regard commençait à se faire à ce demi-jour de cave, il essayait de franchir la grille, mais il n'allait pas plus loin que six pouces au delà. Là il rencontrait une barrière de volets noirs, assurés et fortifiés de traverses de bois peintes en jaune pain d'épice. Ces volets étaient à jointures, divisés en longues lames minces, et masquaient toute la longueur de la grille. Ils étaient toujours clos.

Au bout de quelques instants, on entendait une voix qui vous appelait de derrière ces volets et qui vous disait:

— Je suis là. Que me voulez-vous?

C'était une voix aimée, quelquefois une voix adorée. On ne voyait personne. On entendait à peine le bruit d'un souffle. Il semblait que ce fût une évocation qui vous parlait à travers la cloison de la tombe.

Si l'on était dans de certaines conditions voulues, bien rares, l'étroite lame d'un des volets s'ouvrait en face de vous, et l'évocation devenait une apparition. Derrière la grille, derrière le volet, on apercevait, autant que la grille permettait d'apercevoir, une tête dont on ne voyait que la bouche et le menton; le reste était couvert d'un voile noir. On entrevoyait une guimpe noire et une forme à peine distincte couverte d'un suaire noir. Cette tête vous parlait, mais ne vous regardait pas et ne vous souriait jamais.

Le jour qui venait de derrière vous était disposé de telle façon que vous la voyiez blanche et qu'elle vous voyait noir. Ce jour était un symbole.

Cependant les yeux plongeaient avidement par cette ouverture qui s'était faite dans ce lieu clos à tous les regards. Un vague profond enveloppait cette forme vêtue de deuil. Les yeux fouillaient ce vague et cherchaient à démêler ce qui était autour de l'apparition. Au bout de très peu de temps on s'apercevait qu'on ne voyait rien. Ce qu'on voyait, c'était la nuit, le vide, les ténèbres, une brume de l'hiver mêlée à une vapeur du tombeau, une sorte de paix effrayante, un silence où l'on ne recueillait rien, pas même des soupirs, une ombre où l'on ne distinguait rien, pas même des fantômes.

Ce qu'on voyait, c'était l'intérieur d'un cloître.

C'était l'intérieur de cette maison morne et sévère qu'on appelait le couvent des bernardines de l'Adoration Perpétuelle. Cette loge où l'on était, c'était le parloir. Cette voix, la première qui vous avait parlé, c'était la voix de la tourière qui était toujours assise, immobile et silencieuse, de l'autre côté du mur, près de l'ouverture carrée, défendue par la grille de fer et par la plaque à mille trous comme par une double visière.

L'obscurité où plongeait la loge grillée venait de ce que le parloir qui avait une fenêtre du côté du monde n'en avait aucune du côté du couvent. Les yeux profanes ne devaient rien voir de ce lieu sacré.

Pourtant il y avait quelque chose au delà de cette ombre, il y avait une lumière; il y avait une vie dans cette mort. Quoique ce couvent fût le plus muré de tous, nous allons essayer d’y pénétrer et d’y faire pénétrer le lecteur, et de dire, sans oublier la mesure, des choses que les raconteurs n’ont jamais vues et par conséquent jamais dites.

Chapitre II

L’obédience de Martin Verga

Ce couvent, qui en 1824 existait depuis longues années déjà petite rue Picpus, était une communauté de bernardines de l’obédience de Martin Verga.

Ces bernardines, par conséquent, se rattachaient non à Clairvaux, comme les bernardins, mais à Cîteaux, comme les bénédictins. En d’autres termes, elles étaient sujettes, non de saint Bernard, mais de saint Benoît.

Quiconque a un peu remué des in-folio sait que Martin Verga fonda en 1425 une congrégation de bernardines-bénédictines, ayant pour chef d’ordre Salamanque et pour succursale Alcala.

Cette congrégation avait poussé des rameaux dans tous les pays catholiques de l’Europe.

Ces greffes d’un ordre sur l’autre n’ont rien d’inusité dans l’église latine. Pour ne parler que du seul ordre de saint Benoît dont il est ici question, à cet ordre se rattachent, sans compter l’obédience de Martin Verga, quatre congrégations: deux en Italie, le Mont-Cassin et Sainte-Justine de Padoue, deux en France, Cluny et Saint-Maur; et neuf ordres, Valombrosa, Grammont, les célestins, les camaldules, les chartreux, les humiliés, les olivateurs, et les silvestrins, enfin Cîteaux; car Cîteaux lui-même, tronc pour d’autres ordres, n’est qu’un rejeton pour saint Benoît. Cîteaux date de saint Robert, abbé de Molesme dans le diocèse de Langres en 1098. Or c’est en 529 que le diable, retiré au désert de Subiaco (il était vieux; s’était-il fait ermite?), fut chassé de l’ancien temple d’Apollon où il demeurait, par saint Benoît, âgé de dix-sept ans.

Après la règle des carmélites, lesquelles vont pieds nus, portent une pièce d’osier sur la gorge et ne s’asseyent jamais, la règle la plus dure est celle des bernardines-bénédictines de Martin Verga. Elles sont vêtues de noir avec une guimpe qui, selon la prescription expresse de saint Benoît, monte jusqu’au menton. Une robe de serge à manches larges, un grand voile de laine, la guimpe qui monte jusqu’au menton coupée carrément sur la poitrine, le bandeau qui descend jusqu’aux yeux, voilà leur habit. Tout est noir, excepté le bandeau qui est blanc. Les novices portent le même habit, tout blanc. Les professes ont en outre un rosaire au côté.

Les bernardines-bénédictines de Martin Verga pratiquent l’Adoration Perpétuelle, comme les bénédictines dites dames du Saint-Sacrement, lesquelles, au commencement de ce siècle, avaient à Paris deux maisons, l’une au Temple, l’autre rue Neuve-Sainte-Geneviève. Du reste les bernardines-bénédictines du Petit-Picpus, dont nous parlons, étaient un ordre absolument autre que les dames du Saint-Sacrement cloîtrées rue Neuve-Sainte-Geneviève et au Temple. Il y avait de nombreuses différences dans la règle; il y en avait dans le costume. Les bernardines-bénédictines du Petit-Picpus portaient la guimpe noire, et les bénédictines du Saint-Sacrement et de la rue Neuve-Sainte-Geneviève la portaient blanche, et avaient de plus sur la poitrine un Saint-Sacrement d’environ trois pouces de haut en vermeil ou en cuivre doré. Les religieuses du Petit-Picpus ne portaient point ce Saint-Sacrement. L’Adoration Perpétuelle, commune à la maison du Petit-Picpus et à la maison du Temple, laisse les deux ordres parfaitement distincts. Il y a seulement ressemblance pour cette pratique entre les dames du Saint-Sacrement et les bernardines de Martin Verga, de même qu’il y avait similitude, pour l’étude et la glorification de tous les mystères relatifs à l’enfance, à la vie et à la mort de Jésus-Christ, et à la Vierge, entre deux ordres pourtant fort séparés et dans l’occasion ennemis, l’oratoire d’Italie, établi à Florence par Philippe de Néri, et l’oratoire de France, établi à Paris par Pierre de Bérulle. L’oratoire de Paris prétendait le pas, Philippe de Néri n’étant que saint, et Bérulle étant cardinal.

Revenons à la dure règle espagnole de Martin Verga.

Les bernardines-bénédictines de cette obédience font maigre toute l’année, jeûnent le carême et beaucoup d’autres jours qui leur sont spéciaux, se relèvent dans leur premier sommeil depuis une heure du matin jusqu’à trois pour lire le bréviaire et chanter matines, couchent dans des draps de serge en toute saison et sur la paille, n’usent point de bains, n’allument jamais de feu, se donnent la discipline tous les vendredis, observent la règle du silence, ne se parlent qu’aux récréations, lesquelles sont très courtes, et portent des chemises de bure pendant six mois, du 14 septembre, qui est l’exaltation de la sainte-croix, jusqu’à Pâques. Ces six mois sont une modération, la règle dit toute l’année; mais cette chemise de bure, insupportable dans les chaleurs de l’été, produisait des fièvres et des spasmes nerveux. Il a fallu en restreindre l’usage. Même avec cet adoucissement, le 14 septembre, quand les religieuses mettent cette chemise, elles ont trois ou quatre jours de fièvre. Obéissance, pauvreté, chasteté, stabilité sous clôture; voilà leurs vœux, fort aggravés par la règle.

La prieure est élue pour trois ans par les mères, qu’on appelle *mères vocales* parce qu’elles ont voix au chapitre. Une prieure ne peut être réélue que deux fois, ce qui fixe à neuf ans le plus long règne possible d’une prieure.

Elles ne voient jamais le prêtre officiant, qui leur est toujours caché par une serge tendue à neuf pieds de haut. Au sermon, quand le prédicateur est dans la chapelle, elles baissent leur voile sur leur visage. Elles doivent toujours parler bas, marcher les yeux à terre et la tête inclinée. Un seul homme peut entrer dans le couvent, l’archevêque diocésain.

Il y en a bien un autre, qui est le jardinier; mais c’est toujours un vieillard, et afin qu’il soit perpétuellement seul dans le jardin et que les religieuses soient averties de l’éviter, on lui attache une clochette au genou.

Elles sont soumises à la prieure d’une soumission absolue et passive. C’est la sujétion canonique dans toute son abnégation. Comme à la voix du Christ, *ut voci Christi,* au geste, au premier signe, *ad nutum, ad primum signum*, tout de suite, avec bonheur, avec persévérance, avec une certaine obéissance aveugle, *prompte, hilariter perseveranter et caeca quadam obedientia,* comme la lime dans la main de l’ouvrier, *quasi limam in manibus fabri,* ne pouvant lire ni écrire quoi que ce soit sans permission expresse, *legere vel scribere non addiscerit sine expressa superioris licentia*.

À tour de rôle chacune d’elles fait ce qu’elles appellent *la réparation*. La réparation, c’est la prière pour tous les péchés, pour toutes les fautes, pour tous les désordres, pour toutes les violations, pour toutes les iniquités, pour tous les crimes qui se commettent sur la terre. Pendant douze heures consécutives, de quatre heures du soir à quatre heures du matin, ou de quatre heures du matin à quatre heures du soir, la sœur qui fait *la réparation* reste à genoux sur la pierre devant le Saint-Sacrement, les mains jointes, la corde au cou. Quand la fatigue devient insupportable, elle se prosterne à plat ventre, la face contre terre, les bras en croix; c’est là tout son soulagement. Dans cette attitude, elle prie pour tous les coupables de l’univers. Ceci est grand jusqu’au sublime.

Comme cet acte s’accomplit devant un poteau au haut duquel brûle un cierge, on dit indistinctement *faire la réparation* ou *être au poteau*. Les religieuses préfèrent même, par humilité, cette dernière expression qui contient une idée de supplice et d’abaissement.

Faire la réparation est une fonction où toute l’âme s’absorbe. La sœur au poteau ne se retournerait pas pour le tonnerre tombant derrière elle.

En outre, il y a toujours une religieuse à genoux devant le Saint-Sacrement. Cette station dure une heure. Elles se relèvent comme des soldats en faction. C’est là l’Adoration Perpétuelle.

Les prieures et les mères portent presque toujours des noms empreints d’une gravité particulière, rappelant, non des saintes et des martyres, mais des moments de la vie de Jésus-Christ, comme la mère Nativité, la mère Conception, la mère Présentation, la mère Passion. Cependant les noms de saintes ne sont pas interdits.

Quand on les voit, on ne voit jamais que leur bouche. Toutes ont les dents jaunes. Jamais une brosse à dents n’est entrée dans le couvent. Se brosser les dents, est au haut d’une échelle au bas de laquelle il y a: perdre son âme.

Elles ne disent de rien *ma* ni *mon*. Elles n’ont rien à elles et ne doivent tenir à rien. Elles disent de toute chose *notre;* ainsi: notre voile, notre chapelet; si elles parlaient de leur chemise, elles diraient *notre chemise*. Quelquefois elles s’attachent à quelque petit objet, à un livre d’heures, à une relique, à une médaille bénite. Dès qu’elles s’aperçoivent qu’elles commencent à tenir à cet objet, elles doivent le donner. Elles se rappellent le mot de sainte Thérèse à laquelle une grande dame, au moment d’entrer dans son ordre, disait: Permettez, ma mère, que j’envoie chercher une sainte bible à laquelle je tiens beaucoup. — *Ah! vous tenez à quelque chose! En ce cas, n’entrez pas chez nous*.

Défense à qui que ce soit de s’enfermer, et d’avoir un *chez-soi*, une *chambre*. Elles vivent cellules ouvertes. Quand elles s’abordent, l’une dit: *Loué soit et adoré le très Saint-Sacrement de l’autel*! L’autre répond: *À jamais*. Même cérémonie quand l’une frappe à la porte de l’autre. À peine la porte a-t-elle été touchée qu’on entend de l’autre côté une voix douce dire précipitamment: À jamais! Comme toutes les pratiques, cela devient machinal par l’habitude; et l’une dit quelquefois *à jamais* avant que l’autre ait eu le temps de dire, ce qui est assez long d’ailleurs: *Loué soit et adoré le très Saint-Sacrement de l’autel*! Chez les visitandines, celle qui entre dit: *Ave Maria*, et celle chez laquelle on entre dit: *Gratiâ plena*. C’est leur bonjour, qui est «plein de grâce» en effet.

À chaque heure du jour, trois coups supplémentaires sonnent à la cloche de l’église du couvent. À ce signal, prieure, mères vocales, professes, converses, novices, postulantes, interrompent ce qu’elles disent, ce qu’elles font ou ce qu’elles pensent, et toutes disent à la fois, s’il est cinq heures, par exemple: — *À cinq heures et à toute heure, loué soit et adoré le très Saint-Sacrement de l’autel*! S’il est huit heures: — *À huit heures et à toute heure*, etc., et ainsi de suite, selon l’heure qu’il est.

Cette coutume, qui a pour but de rompre la pensée et de la ramener toujours à Dieu, existe dans beaucoup de communautés; seulement la formule varie. Ainsi, à l’Enfant-Jésus, on dit: — *À l’heure qu’il est et à toute heure que l’amour de Jésus enflamme mon cœur!*

Les bénédictines-bernardines de Martin Verga, cloîtrées il y a cinquante ans au Petit-Picpus, chantent les offices sur une psalmodie grave, plain-chant pur, et toujours à pleine voix toute la durée de l’office. Partout où il y a un astérisque dans le missel, elles font une pause et disent à voix basse: *Jésus-Marie-Joseph*. Pour l’office des morts, elles prennent le ton si bas, que c’est à peine si des voix de femmes peuvent descendre jusque-là. Il en résulte un effet saisissant et tragique.

Celles du Petit-Picpus avaient fait faire un caveau sous leur maître-autel pour la sépulture de leur communauté. *Le gouvernement*, comme elles disent, ne permit pas que ce caveau reçût les cercueils. Elles sortaient donc du couvent quand elles étaient mortes. Ceci les affligeait et les consternait comme une infraction.

Elles avaient obtenu, consolation médiocre, d’être enterrées à une heure spéciale et en un coin spécial dans l’ancien cimetière Vaugirard, qui était fait d’une terre appartenant jadis à leur communauté.

Le jeudi ces religieuses entendent la grand’messe, vêpres et tous les offices comme le dimanche. Elles observent en outre scrupuleusement toutes les petites fêtes, inconnues aux gens du monde, que l’église prodiguait autrefois en France et prodigue encore en Espagne et en Italie. Leurs stations à la chapelle sont interminables. Quant au nombre et à la durée de leurs prières, nous ne pouvons en donner une meilleure idée qu’en citant le mot naïf de l’une d’elles: *Les prières des postulantes sont effrayantes, les prières des novices encore pires, et les prières des professes encore pires*.

Une fois par semaine, on assemble le chapitre; la prieure préside, les mères vocales assistent. Chaque sœur vient à son tour s’agenouiller sur la pierre, et confesser à haute voix, devant toutes, les fautes et les péchés qu’elle a commis dans la semaine. Les mères vocales se consultent après chaque confession, et infligent tout haut les pénitences.

Outre la confession à haute voix, pour laquelle on réserve toutes les fautes un peu graves, elles ont pour les fautes vénielles ce qu’elles appellent *la coulpe*. Faire sa coulpe, c’est se prosterner à plat ventre durant l’office devant la prieure jusqu’à ce que celle-ci, qu’on ne nomme jamais que *notre mère*, avertisse la patiente par un petit coup frappé sur le bois de sa stalle qu’elle peut se relever. On fait sa coulpe pour très peu de chose, un verre cassé, un voile déchiré, un retard involontaire de quelques secondes à un office, une fausse note à l’église, etc., cela suffit, on fait sa coulpe. La coulpe est toute spontanée; c’est *la coupable* elle-même (ce mot est ici étymologiquement à sa place) qui se juge et qui se l’inflige. Les jours de fêtes et les dimanches il y a quatre mères chantres qui psalmodient les offices devant un grand lutrin à quatre pupitres. Un jour une mère chantre entonna un psaume qui commençait par *Ecce*, et, au lieu de *Ecce*, dit à haute voix ces trois notes: *ut, si, sol;* elle subit pour cette distraction une coulpe qui dura tout l’office. Ce qui rendait la faute énorme, c’est que le chapitre avait ri.

Lorsqu’une religieuse est appelée au parloir, fût-ce la prieure, elle baisse son voile de façon, l’on s’en souvient, à ne laisser voir que sa bouche.

La prieure seule peut communiquer avec des étrangers. Les autres ne peuvent voir que leur famille étroite, et très rarement. Si par hasard une personne du dehors se présente pour voir une religieuse qu’elle a connue ou aimée dans le monde, il faut toute une négociation. Si c’est une femme, l’autorisation peut être quelquefois accordée, la religieuse vient et on lui parle à travers les volets, lesquels ne s’ouvrent que pour une mère ou une sœur. Il va sans dire que la permission est toujours refusée aux hommes.

Telle est la règle de saint Benoît, aggravée par Martin Verga.

Ces religieuses ne sont point gaies, roses et fraîches comme le sont souvent les filles des autres ordres. Elles sont pâles et graves. De 1825 à 1830 trois sont devenues folles.

Chapitre III

Sévérités

On est au moins deux ans postulante, souvent quatre; quatre ans novice. Il est rare que les vœux définitifs puissent être prononcés avant vingt-trois ou vingt-quatre ans. Les bernardines-bénédictines de Martin Verga n'admettent point de veuves dans leur ordre.

Elles se livrent dans leurs cellules à beaucoup de macérations inconnues dont elles ne doivent jamais parler.

Le jour où une novice fait profession, on l'habille de ses plus beaux atours, on la coiffe de roses blanches, on lustre et on boucle ses cheveux, puis elle se prosterne; on étend sur elle un grand voile noir et l'on chante l'office des morts. Alors les religieuses se divisent en deux files, une file passe près d'elle en disant d'un accent plaintif: *notre sœur est morte*, et l'autre file répond d'une voix éclatante: *vivante en Jésus-Christ!*

À l'époque où se passe cette histoire, un pensionnat était joint au couvent. Pensionnat de jeunes filles nobles, la plupart riches, parmi lesquelles on remarquait mesdemoiselles de Sainte-Aulaire et de Bélissen et une anglaise portant l'illustre nom catholique de Talbot. Ces jeunes filles, élevées par ces religieuses entre quatre murs, grandissaient dans l'horreur du monde et du siècle. Une d'elles nous disait un jour: *Voir le pavé de la rue me faisait frissonner de la tête aux pieds*. Elles étaient vêtues de bleu avec un bonnet blanc et un Saint-Esprit de vermeil ou de cuivre fixé sur la poitrine. À de certains jours de grande fête, particulièrement à la Sainte-Marthe, on leur accordait, comme haute faveur et bonheur suprême, de s'habiller en religieuses et de faire les offices et les pratiques de saint Benoît pendant toute une journée. Dans les premiers temps, les religieuses leur prêtaient leurs vêtements noirs. Cela parut profane, et la prieure le défendit. Ce prêt ne fut permis qu'aux novices. Il est remarquable que ces représentations, tolérées sans doute et encouragées dans le couvent par un secret esprit de prosélytisme, et pour donner à ces enfants quelque avant-goût du saint habit, étaient un bonheur réel et une vraie récréation pour les pensionnaires. Elles s'en amusaient tout simplement. *C'était nouveau, cela les changeait*. Candides raisons de l'enfance qui ne réussissent pas d'ailleurs à faire comprendre à nous mondains cette félicité de tenir en main un goupillon et de rester debout des heures entières chantant à quatre devant un lutrin.

Les élèves, aux austérités près, se conformaient à toutes les pratiques du couvent. Il est telle jeune femme qui, entrée dans le monde et après plusieurs années de mariage, n'était pas encore parvenue à se déshabituer de dire en toute hâte chaque fois qu'on frappait à sa porte: *à jamais!* Comme les religieuses, les pensionnaires ne voyaient leurs parents qu'au parloir. Leurs mères elles-mêmes n'obtenaient pas de les embrasser. Voici jusqu'où allait la sévérité sur ce point. Un jour une jeune fille fut visitée par sa mère accompagnée d'une petite sœur de trois ans. La jeune fille pleurait, car elle eût bien voulu embrasser sa sœur. Impossible. Elle supplia du moins qu'il fût permis à l'enfant de passer à travers les barreaux sa petite main pour qu'elle pût la baiser. Ceci fut refusé presque avec scandale.

Chapitre IV

Gaîtés

Ces jeunes filles n’en ont pas moins rempli cette grave maison de souvenirs charmants.

À de certaines heures, l’enfance étincelait dans ce cloître. La récréation sonnait. Une porte tournait sur ses gonds. Les oiseaux disaient: Bon! voilà les enfants! Une irruption de jeunesse inondait ce jardin coupé d’une croix comme un linceul. Des visages radieux, des fronts blancs, des yeux ingénus pleins de gaie lumière, toutes sortes d’aurores, s’éparpillaient dans ces ténèbres. Après les psalmodies, les cloches, les sonneries, les glas, les offices, tout à coup éclatait ce bruit des petites filles, plus doux qu’un bruit d’abeilles. La ruche de la joie s’ouvrait, et chacune apportait son miel. On jouait, on s’appelait, on se groupait, on courait; de jolies petites dents blanches jasaient dans des coins; les voiles, de loin, surveillaient les rires, les ombres guettaient les rayons, mais qu’importe! on rayonnait et on riait. Ces quatre murs lugubres avaient leur minute d’éblouissement. Ils assistaient, vaguement blanchis du reflet de tant de joie, à ce doux tourbillonnement d’essaims. C’était comme une pluie de roses traversant ce deuil. Les jeunes filles folâtraient sous l’œil des religieuses; le regard de l’impeccabilité ne gêne pas l’innocence. Grâce à ces enfants, parmi tant d’heures austères, il y avait l’heure naïve. Les petites sautaient, les grandes dansaient. Dans ce cloître, le jeu était mêlé de ciel. Rien n’était ravissant et auguste comme toutes ces fraîches âmes épanouies. Homère fût venu rire là avec Perrault, et il y avait, dans ce jardin noir, de la jeunesse, de la santé, du bruit, des cris, de l’étourdissement, du plaisir, du bonheur, à dérider toutes les aïeules, celles de l’épopée comme celles du conte, celles du trône comme celles du chaume, depuis Hécube jusqu’à la Mère-Grand.

Il s’est dit dans cette maison, plus que partout ailleurs peut-être, de ces *mots d’enfants* qui ont tant de grâce et qui font rire d’un rire plein de rêverie. C’est entre ces quatre murs funèbres qu’une enfant de cinq ans s’écria un jour: — *Ma mère! une grande vient de me dire que je n’ai plus que neuf ans et dix mois à rester ici. Quel bonheur!*

C’est encore là qu’eut lieu ce dialogue mémorable:

Une mère vocale. — Pourquoi pleurez-vous, mon enfant?

L’enfant: (*six ans*), sanglotant: — J’ai dit à Alix que je savais mon histoire de France. Elle me dit que je ne la sais pas, et je la sais.

Alix (*la grande, neuf ans*). — Non. Elle ne la sait pas.

La mère. — Comment cela, mon enfant?

Alix. — Elle m’a dit d’ouvrir le livre au hasard et de lui faire une question qu’il y a dans le livre, et qu’elle répondrait.

— Eh bien?

— Elle n’a pas répondu.

— Voyons. Que lui avez-vous demandé?

— J’ai ouvert le livre au hasard comme elle disait, et je lui ai demandé la première demande que j’ai trouvée.

— Et qu’est-ce que c’était que cette demande?

— C’était: *Qu’arriva-t-il ensuite?*

C’est là qu’a été faite cette observation profonde sur une perruche un peu gourmande qui appartenait à une dame pensionnaire:

— *Est-elle gentille! elle mange le dessus de sa tartine, comme une personne!*

C’est sur une des dalles de ce cloître qu’a été ramassée cette confession, écrite d’avance, pour ne pas l’oublier, par une pécheresse âgée de sept ans:

« — Mon père, je m’accuse d’avoir été avarice.

« — Mon père, je m’accuse d’avoir été adultère.

« — Mon père, je m’accuse d’avoir élevé mes regards vers les monsieurs.»

C’est sur un des bancs de gazon de ce jardin qu’a été improvisé par une bouche rose de six ans ce conte écouté par des yeux bleus de quatre à cinq ans:

« — Il y avait trois petits coqs qui avaient un pays où il y avait beaucoup de fleurs. Ils ont cueilli les fleurs, et ils les ont mises dans leur poche. Après ça, ils ont cueilli les feuilles, et ils les ont mises dans leurs joujoux. Il y avait un loup dans le pays, et il y avait beaucoup de bois; et le loup était dans le bois; et il a mangé les petits coqs.»

Et encore cet autre poème:

« — Il est arrivé un coup de bâton.

«C’est Polichinelle qui l’a donné au chat.

«Ça ne lui a pas fait de bien, ça lui a fait du mal.

«Alors une dame a mis Polichinelle en prison.»

C’est là qu’a été dit, par une petite abandonnée, enfant trouvé que le couvent élevait par charité, ce mot doux et navrant. Elle entendait les autres parler de leurs mères, et elle murmura dans son coin:

— *Moi, ma mère n’était pas là quand je suis née!*

Il y avait une grosse tourière qu’on voyait toujours se hâter dans les corridors avec son trousseau de clefs et qui se nommait sœur Agathe. Les *grandes grandes*, au-dessus de dix ans, — l’appelaient *Agathoclès*.

Le réfectoire, grande pièce oblongue et carrée, qui ne recevait de jour que par un cloître à archivoltes de plain-pied avec le jardin, était obscur et humide, et, comme disent les enfants, — plein de bêtes. Tous les lieux circonvoisins y fournissaient leur contingent d’insectes. Chacun des quatre coins en avait reçu, dans le langage des pensionnaires, un nom particulier et expressif. Il y avait le coin des Araignées, le coin des Chenilles, le coin des Cloportes et le coin des Cricris. Le coin des Cricris était voisin de la cuisine et fort estimé. On y avait moins froid qu’ailleurs. Du réfectoire les noms avaient passé au pensionnat et servaient à y distinguer comme à l’ancien collège Mazarin quatre nations. Toute élève était de l’une de ces quatre nations selon le coin du réfectoire où elle s’asseyait aux heures des repas. Un jour, Mr l’archevêque, faisant la visite pastorale, vit entrer dans la classe où il passait une jolie petite fille toute vermeille avec d’admirables cheveux blonds, il demanda à une autre pensionnaire, charmante brune aux joues fraîches qui était près de lui:

— Qu’est-ce que c’est que celle-ci?

— C’est une araignée, monseigneur.

— Bah! et cette autre?

— C’est un cricri.

— Et celle-là?

— C’est une chenille.

— En vérité! et vous-même?

— Je suis un cloporte, monseigneur.

Chaque maison de ce genre a ses particularités. Au commencement de ce siècle, Écouen était un de ces lieux gracieux et sévères où grandit, dans une ombre presque auguste, l’enfance des jeunes filles. À Écouen, pour prendre rang dans la procession du Saint-Sacrement, on distinguait entre les vierges et les fleuristes. Il y avait aussi «les dais» et «les encensoirs», les unes portant les cordons du dais, les autres encensant le Saint-Sacrement. Les fleurs revenaient de droit aux fleuristes. Quatre “vierges” marchaient en avant. Le matin de ce grand jour, il n’était pas rare d’entendre demander dans le dortoir:

— Qui est-ce qui est vierge?

Madame Campan citait ce mot d’une «petite» de sept ans à une «grande» de seize, qui prenait la tête de la procession pendant qu’elle, la petite, restait à la queue:

— Tu es vierge, toi; moi, je ne le suis pas.

Chapitre V

Distractions

Au-dessus de la porte du réfectoire était écrite en grosses lettres noires cette prière qu'on appelait la *Patenôtre blanche*, et qui avait pour vertu de mener les gens droit en paradis:

«Petite patenôtre blanche, que Dieu fit, que Dieu dit, que Dieu mit en paradis. Au soir, m'allant coucher, je trouvis (*sic*) trois anges à mon lit couchés, un aux pieds, deux au chevet, la bonne vierge Marie au milieu, qui me dit que je m'y couchis, que rien ne doutis. Le bon Dieu est mon père, la bonne Vierge est ma mère, les trois apôtres sont mes frères, les trois vierges sont mes sœurs. La chemise où Dieu fut né, mon corps en est enveloppé; la croix Sainte-Marguerite à ma poitrine est écrite; madame la Vierge s'en va sur les champs, Dieu pleurant, rencontrit Mr saint Jean. Monsieur saint Jean, d'où venez-vous? Je viens d'*Ave Salus*. Vous n'avez pas vu le bon Dieu, si est? Il est dans l'arbre de la croix, les pieds pendants, les mains clouants, un petit chapeau d'épine blanche sur la tête. Qui la dira trois fois au soir, trois fois au matin, gagnera le paradis à la fin.»

En 1827, cette oraison caractéristique avait disparu du mur sous une triple couche de badigeon. Elle achève à cette heure de s'effacer dans la mémoire de quelques jeunes filles d'alors, vieilles femmes aujourd'hui.

Un grand crucifix accroché au mur complétait la décoration de ce réfectoire, dont la porte unique, nous croyons l'avoir dit, s'ouvrait sur le jardin. Deux tables étroites, côtoyées chacune de deux bancs de bois, faisaient deux longues lignes parallèles d'un bout à l'autre du réfectoire. Les murs étaient blancs, les tables étaient noires; ces deux couleurs du deuil sont le seul rechange des couvents. Les repas étaient revêches et la nourriture des enfants eux-mêmes sévère. Un seul plat, viande et légumes mêlés, ou poisson salé, tel était le luxe. Ce bref ordinaire, réservé aux pensionnaires seules, était pourtant une exception. Les enfants mangeaient et se taisaient sous le guet de la mère semainière qui, de temps en temps, si une mouche s'avisait de voler et de bourdonner contre la règle, ouvrait et fermait bruyamment un livre de bois. Ce silence était assaisonné de la vie des saints, lue à haute voix dans une petite chaire à pupitre située au pied du crucifix. La lectrice était une grande élève, de semaine. Il y avait de distance en distance sur la table nue des terrines vernies où les élèves lavaient elles-mêmes leur timbale et leur couvert, et quelquefois jetaient quelque morceau de rebut, viande dure ou poisson gâté; ceci était puni. On appelait ces terrines *ronds d'eau*.

L'enfant qui rompait le silence faisait une «croix de langue». Où? à terre. Elle léchait le pavé. La poussière, cette fin de toutes les joies, était chargée de châtier ces pauvres petites feuilles de rose, coupables de gazouillement.

Il y avait dans le couvent un livre qui n'a jamais été imprimé qu'*à exemplaire unique*, et qu'il est défendu de lire. C'est la règle de saint Benoît. Arcane où nul œil profane ne doit pénétrer. *Nemo regulas, seu constitutiones nostras, externis communicabit.*

Les pensionnaires parvinrent un jour à dérober ce livre, et se mirent à le lire avidement, lecture souvent interrompue par des terreurs d'être surprises qui leur faisaient refermer le volume précipitamment. Elles ne tirèrent de ce grand danger couru qu'un plaisir médiocre. Quelques pages inintelligibles sur les péchés des jeunes garçons, voilà ce qu'elles eurent de «plus intéressant».

Elles jouaient dans une allée du jardin, bordée de quelques maigres arbres fruitiers. Malgré l'extrême surveillance et la sévérité des punitions, quand le vent avait secoué les arbres, elles réussissaient quelquefois à ramasser furtivement une pomme verte, ou un abricot gâté, ou une poire habitée. Maintenant je laisse parler une lettre que j'ai sous les yeux, lettre écrite il y a vingt-cinq ans par une ancienne pensionnaire, aujourd'hui madame la duchesse de — , une des plus élégantes femmes de Paris. Je cite textuellement: «On cache sa poire ou sa pomme, comme on peut. Lorsqu'on monte mettre le voile sur le lit en attendant le souper, on les fourre sous son oreiller et le soir on les mange dans son lit, et lorsqu'on ne peut pas, on les mange dans les commodités.» C'était là une de leurs voluptés les plus vives.

Une fois, c'était encore à l'époque d'une visite de Mr l'archevêque au couvent, une des jeunes filles, mademoiselle Bouchard, qui était un peu Montmorency, gagea qu'elle lui demanderait un jour de congé, énormité dans une communauté si austère. La gageure fut acceptée, mais aucune de celles qui tenaient le pari n'y croyait. Au moment venu, comme l'archevêque passait devant les pensionnaires, mademoiselle Bouchard, à l'indescriptible épouvante de ses compagnes, sortit des rangs, et dit: «Monseigneur, un jour de congé.» Mademoiselle Bouchard était fraîche et grande, avec la plus jolie petite mine rose du monde. Mr de Quélen sourit et dit: *Comment donc, ma chère enfant, un jour de congé! Trois jours, s’il vous plaît. J’accorde trois jours.* La prieure n’y pouvait rien, l’archevêque avait parlé. Scandale pour le couvent, mais joie pour le pensionnat. Qu’on juge de l’effet.

Ce cloître bourru n’était pourtant pas si bien muré que la vie des passions du dehors, que le drame, que le roman même, n’y pénétrassent. Pour le prouver, nous nous bornerons à constater ici et à indiquer brièvement un fait réel et incontestable, qui d’ailleurs n’a en lui-même aucun rapport et ne tient par aucun fil à l’histoire que nous racontons. Nous mentionnons ce fait pour compléter dans l’esprit du lecteur la physionomie du couvent.

Vers cette époque donc, il y avait dans le couvent une personne mystérieuse qui n’était pas religieuse, qu’on traitait avec grand respect, et qu’on nommait *madame Albertine*. On ne savait rien d’elle sinon qu’elle était folle, et que dans le monde elle passait pour morte. Il y avait sous cette histoire, disait-on, des arrangements de fortune nécessaires pour un grand mariage.

Cette femme, de trente ans à peine, brune, assez belle, regardait vaguement avec de grands yeux noirs. Voyait-elle? On en doutait. Elle glissait plutôt qu’elle ne marchait; elle ne parlait jamais; on n’était pas bien sûr qu’elle respirât. Ses narines étaient pincées et livides comme après le dernier soupir. Toucher sa main, c’était toucher de la neige. Elle avait une étrange grâce spectrale. Là où elle entrait, on avait froid. Un jour une sœur, la voyant passer, dit à une autre: Elle passe pour morte. — Elle l’est peut-être, répondit l’autre.

On faisait sur madame Albertine cent récits. C’était l’éternelle curiosité des pensionnaires. Il y avait dans la chapelle une tribune qu’on appelait *l’Œiil-de-Bœuf*. C’est dans cette tribune qui n’avait qu’une baie circulaire, un *œil-de-bœuf*, que madame Albertine assistait aux offices. Elle y était habituellement seule, parce que de cette tribune, placée au premier étage, on pouvait voir le prédicateur ou l’officiant; ce qui était interdit aux religieuses. Un jour la chaire était occupée par un jeune prêtre de haut rang, Mr le duc de Rohan, pair de France, officier des mousquetaires rouges en 1815 lorsqu’il était prince de Léon, mort après 1830 cardinal et archevêque de Besançon. C’était la première fois que Mr de Rohan prêchait au couvent du Petit-Picpus. Madame Albertine assistait ordinairement aux sermons et aux offices dans un calme parfait et dans une immobilité complète. Ce jour-là, dès qu’elle aperçut Mr de Rohan, elle se dressa à demi, et dit à haute voix dans le silence de la chapelle: *Tiens! Auguste!* Toute la communauté stupéfaite tourna la tête, le prédicateur leva les yeux, mais madame Albertine était retombée dans son immobilité. Un souffle du monde extérieur, une lueur de vie avait passé un moment sur cette figure éteinte et glacée, puis tout s'était évanoui, et la folle était redevenue cadavre.

Ces deux mots cependant firent jaser tout ce qui pouvait parler dans le couvent. Que de choses dans ce *tiens*! *Auguste!* que de révélations! Mr de Rohan s'appelait en effet Auguste. Il était évident que madame Albertine sortait du plus grand monde, puisqu'elle connaissait Mr de Rohan, qu'elle y était elle-même haut placée, puisqu'elle parlait d'un si grand seigneur si familièrement, et qu'elle avait avec lui une relation, de parenté peut-être, mais à coup sûr bien étroite, puisqu'elle savait son «petit nom».

Deux duchesses très sévères, mesdames de Choiseul et de Sérent, visitaient souvent la communauté, où elles pénétraient sans doute en vertu du privilège *Magnates mulieres*, et faisaient grand'peur au pensionnat. Quand les deux vieilles dames passaient, toutes les pauvres jeunes filles tremblaient et baissaient les yeux.

M. de Rohan était du reste, à son insu, l'objet de l'attention des pensionnaires. Il venait à cette époque d'être fait, en attendant l'épiscopat, grand vicaire de l'archevêque de Paris. C'était une de ses habitudes de venir assez souvent chanter aux offices de la chapelle des religieuses du Petit-Picpus. Aucune des jeunes recluses ne pouvait l'apercevoir, à cause du rideau de serge, mais il avait une voix douce et un peu grêle, qu'elles étaient parvenues à reconnaître et à distinguer. Il avait été mousquetaire; et puis on le disait fort coquet, fort bien coiffé avec de beaux cheveux châtains arrangés en rouleau autour de la tête, et qu'il avait une large ceinture moire magnifique, et que sa soutane noire était coupée le plus élégamment du monde. Il occupait fort toutes ces imaginations de seize ans.

Aucun bruit du dehors ne pénétrait dans le couvent. Cependant il y eut une année où le son d'une flûte y parvint. Ce fut un événement, et les pensionnaires d'alors s'en souviennent encore.

C'était une flûte dont quelqu'un jouait dans le voisinage. Cette flûte jouait toujours le même air, un air aujourd'hui bien lointain: *Ma Zétulbé, viens régner sur mon âme*, et on l'entendait deux ou trois fois dans la journée. Les jeunes filles passaient des heures à écouter, les mères vocales étaient bouleversées, les cervelles travaillaient, les punitions pleuvaient. Cela dura plusieurs mois. Les pensionnaires étaient toutes plus ou moins amoureuses du musicien inconnu. Chacune se rêvait Zétulbé. Le bruit de flûte venait du côté de la rue Droit-Mur; elles auraient tout donné, tout compromis, tout tenté, pour voir, ne fût-ce qu’une seconde, pour entrevoir, pour apercevoir, le «jeune homme» qui jouait si délicieusement de cette flûte et qui, sans s’en douter, jouait en même temps de toutes ces âmes. Il y en eut qui s’échappèrent par une porte de service et qui montèrent au troisième sur la rue Droit-Mur, afin d’essayer de voir par les jours de souffrance. Impossible. Une alla jusqu’à passer son bras au-dessus de sa tête par la grille et agita son mouchoir blanc. Deux furent plus hardies encore. Elles trouvèrent moyen de grimper jusque sur un toit et s’y risquèrent et réussirent enfin à voir «le jeune homme». C’était un vieux gentilhomme émigré, aveugle et ruiné, qui jouait de la flûte dans son grenier pour se désennuyer.

Chapitre VI

Le petit couvent

Il y avait dans cette enceinte du Petit-Picpus trois bâtiments parfaitement distincts, le grand couvent qu'habitaient les religieuses, le pensionnat où logeaient les élèves, et enfin ce qu'on appelait le petit couvent. C'était un corps de logis avec jardin où demeuraient en commun toutes sortes de vieilles religieuses de divers ordres, restes des cloîtres détruits par la révolution; une réunion de toutes les bigarrures noires, grises et blanches, de toutes les communautés et de toutes les variétés possibles; ce qu'on pourrait appeler, si un pareil accouplement de mots était permis, une sorte de couvent-arlequin.

Dès l'Empire, il avait été accordé à toutes ces pauvres filles dispersées et dépaysées de venir s'abriter là sous les ailes des bénédictines-bernardines. Le gouvernement leur payait une petite pension; les dames du Petit-Picpus les avaient reçues avec empressement. C'était un pêle-mêle bizarre. Chacune suivait sa règle. On permettait quelquefois aux élèves pensionnaires, comme grande récréation, de leur rendre visite; ce qui fait que ces jeunes mémoires ont gardé entre autres le souvenir de la mère Saint-Basile, de la mère Sainte-Scolastique et de la mère Jacob.

Une de ces réfugiées se retrouvait presque chez elle. C'était une religieuse de Sainte-Aure, la seule de son ordre qui eût survécu. L'ancien couvent des dames de Sainte-Aure occupait dès le commencement du XVIIIème siècle précisément cette même maison du Petit-Picpus qui appartint plus tard aux bénédictines de Martin Verga. Cette sainte fille, trop pauvre pour porter le magnifique habit de son ordre, qui était une robe blanche avec le scapulaire écarlate, en avait revêtu pieusement un petit mannequin qu'elle montrait avec complaisance et qu'à sa mort elle a légué à la maison. En 1824, il ne restait de cet ordre qu'une religieuse; aujourd'hui il n'en reste qu'une poupée.

Outre ces dignes mères, quelques vieilles femmes du monde avaient obtenu de la prieure, comme madame Albertine, la permission de se retirer dans le petit couvent. De ce nombre étaient madame de Beaufort d'Hautpoul et madame la marquise Dufresne. Une autre n'a jamais été connue dans le couvent que par le bruit formidable qu’elle faisait en se mouchant. Les élèves l’appelaient madame Vacarmini.

Vers 1820 ou 1821, madame de Genlis, qui rédigeait à cette époque un petit recueil périodique intitulé *l’Intrépide*, demanda à entrer dame en chambre au couvent du Petit-Picpus. Mr le duc d’Orléans la recommandait. Rumeur dans la ruche; les mères vocales étaient toutes tremblantes. Madame de Genlis avait fait des romans. Mais elle déclara qu’elle était la première à les détester, et puis elle était arrivée à sa phase de dévotion farouche. Dieu aidant, et le prince aussi, elle entra. Elle s’en alla au bout de six ou huit mois, donnant pour raison que le jardin n’avait pas d’ombre. Les religieuses en furent ravies. Quoique très vieille, elle jouait encore de la harpe, et fort bien.

En s’en allant, elle laissa sa marque à sa cellule. Madame de Genlis était superstitieuse et latiniste. Ces deux mots donnent d’elle un assez bon profil. On voyait encore, il y a quelques années, collés dans l’intérieur d’une petite armoire de sa cellule où elle serrait son argent et ses bijoux, ces cinq vers latins écrits de sa main à l’encre rouge sur papier jaune, et qui, dans son opinion, avaient la vertu d’effaroucher les voleurs:

Imparibus meritis pendent tria corpora ramis:
Dismas et Gesmas, media est divina potestas;
Alta petit Dismas, infelix, infima, Gesmas.
Nos et res nostras conservet summa potestas.
Hos versus dicas, ne tu furto tua perdas.

Ces vers, en latin du sixième siècle, soulèvent la question de savoir si les deux larrons du calvaire s’appelaient, comme on le croit communément, Dimas et Gestas, ou Dismas et Gesmas. Cette orthographe eût pu contrarier les prétentions qu’avait, au siècle dernier, le vicomte de Gestas à descendre du mauvais larron. Du reste, la vertu utile attachée à ces vers fait article de foi dans l’ordre des hospitalières.

L’église de la maison, construite de manière à séparer, comme une véritable coupure, le grand couvent du pensionnat, était, bien entendu, commune au pensionnat, au grand couvent et au petit couvent. On y admettait même le public par une sorte d’entrée de lazaret ménagée sur la rue. Mais tout était disposé de façon qu’aucune des habitantes du cloître ne pût voir un visage du dehors. Supposez une église dont le chœur serait saisi par une main gigantesque, et plié de manière à former, non plus, comme dans les églises ordinaires un prolongement derrière l’autel, mais une sorte de salle ou de caverne obscure à la droite de l’officiant; supposez cette salle fermée par le rideau de sept pieds de haut dont nous avons déjà parlé; entassez dans l’ombre de ce rideau, sur des stalles de bois, les religieuses de chœur à gauche, les pensionnaires à droite, les converses et les novices au fond, et vous aurez quelque idée des religieuses du Petit-Picpus, assistant au service divin. Cette caverne, qu’on appelait le chœur, communiquait avec le cloître par un couloir. L’église prenait jour sur le jardin. Quand les religieuses assistaient à des offices où leur règle leur commandait le silence, le public n’était averti de leur présence que par le choc des miséricordes des stalles se levant ou s’abaissant avec bruit.

Chapitre VII

Quelques silhouettes de cette ombre

Pendant les six années qui séparent 1819 de 1825, la prieure du Petit-Picpus était mademoiselle de Blemeur qui en religion s’appelait mère Innocente. Elle était de la famille de la Marguerite de Blemeur, auteur de *la Vie des saints de l’ordre de Saint-Benoît*. Elle avait été réélue. C’était une femme d’une soixantaine d’années, courte, grosse, «chantant comme un pot fêlé», dit la lettre que nous avons déjà citée; du reste excellente, la seule gaie dans tout le couvent, et pour cela adorée.

Mère Innocente tenait de son ascendante Marguerite, la Dacier de l’Ordre. Elle était lettrée, érudite, savante, compétente, curieusement historienne, farcie de latin, bourrée de grec, pleine d’hébreu, et plutôt bénédictin que bénédictine.

La sous-prieure était une vieille religieuse espagnole presque aveugle, la mère Cineres.

Les plus comptées parmi les *vocales* étaient la mère Sainte-Honorine, trésorière, la mère Sainte-Gertrude, première maîtresse des novices, la mère Sainte-Ange, deuxième maîtresse, la mère Annonciation, sacristaine, la mère Saint-Augustin, infirmière, la seule dans tout le couvent qui fût méchante; puis mère Sainte-Mechtilde (Mlle Gauvain), toute jeune, ayant une admirable voix; mère des Anges (Mlle Drouet), qui avait été au couvent des Filles-Dieu et au couvent du Trésor entre Gisors et Magny; mère Saint-Joseph (Mlle de Cogolludo); mère Sainte-Adélaïde (Mlle d’Auverney); mère Miséricorde (Mlle de Cifuentes, qui ne put résister aux austérités); mère Compassion (Mlle de la Miltière, reçue à soixante ans, malgré la règle, très riche); mère Providence (Mlle de Laudinière); mère Présentation (Mlle de Siguenza), qui fut prieure en 1847; enfin, mère Sainte-Céligne (la sœur du sculpteur Ceracchi), devenue folle; mère Sainte-Chantal (Mlle de Suzon), devenue folle.

Il y avait encore parmi les plus jolies une charmante fille de vingt-trois ans, qui était de l’île Bourbon et descendante du chevalier Roze, qui se fût appelée dans le monde mademoiselle Roze et qui s’appelait mère Assomption.

La mère Sainte-Mechtilde, chargée du chant et du chœur, y employait volontiers les pensionnaires. Elle en prenait ordinairement une gamme complète, c'est-à-dire sept, de dix ans à seize inclusivement, voix et tailles assorties, qu'elle faisait chanter debout, alignées côte à côte par rang d'âge de la plus petite à la plus grande. Cela offrait aux regards quelque chose comme un pipeau de jeunes filles, une sorte de flûte de Pan vivante faite avec des anges.

Celles des sœurs converses que les pensionnaires aimaient le mieux, c'étaient la sœur Sainte-Euphrasie, la sœur Sainte-Marguerite, la sœur Sainte-Marthe, qui était en enfance, et la sœur Saint-Michel, dont le long nez les faisait rire.

Toutes ces femmes étaient douces pour tous ces enfants. Les religieuses n'étaient sévères que pour elles-mêmes. On ne faisait de feu qu'au pensionnat, et la nourriture, comparée à celle du couvent, y était recherchée. Avec cela mille soins. Seulement, quand un enfant passait près d'une religieuse et lui parlait, la religieuse ne répondait jamais.

Cette règle du silence avait engendré ceci que, dans tout le couvent, la parole était retirée aux créatures humaines et donnée aux objets inanimés. Tantôt c'était la cloche de l'église qui parlait, tantôt le grelot du jardinier. Un timbre très sonore, placé à côté de la tourière et qu'on entendait de toute la maison, indiquait par des sonneries variées, qui étaient une façon de télégraphe acoustique, toutes les actions de la vie matérielle à accomplir, et appelait au parloir, si besoin était, telle ou telle habitante de la maison. Chaque personne et chaque chose avait sa sonnerie. La prieure avait un et un; la sous-prieure un et deux. Six-cinq annonçait la classe, de telle sorte que les élèves ne disaient jamais rentrer en classe, mais aller à six-cinq. Quatre-quatre était le timbre de madame de Genlis. On l'entendait très souvent. *C'est le diable à quatre*, disaient celles qui n'étaient point charitables. Dix-neuf coups annonçaient un grand événement. C'était l'ouverture de la *porte de clôture*, effroyable planche de fer hérissée de verrous qui ne tournait sur ses gonds que devant l'archevêque.

Lui et le jardinier exceptés, nous l'avons dit, aucun homme n'entrait dans le couvent. Les pensionnaires en voyaient deux autres; l'aumônier, l'abbé Banès, vieux et laid, qu'il leur était donné de contempler au chœur à travers une grille; l'autre, le maître de dessin, Mr Ansiaux, que la lettre dont on a déjà lu quelques lignes appelle Mr *Anciot*, et qualifie *vieux affreux bossu*.

On voit que tous les hommes étaient choisis.
Telle était cette curieuse maison.

Chapitre VIII

Post corda lapides

Après en avoir esquissé la figure morale, il n’est pas inutile d’en indiquer en quelques mots la configuration matérielle. Le lecteur en a déjà quelque idée.

Le couvent du Petit-Picpus-Saint-Antoine emplissait presque entièrement le vaste trapèze qui résultait des intersections de la rue Polonceau, de la rue Droit-Mur, de la petite rue Picpus et de la ruelle condamnée nommée dans les vieux plans rue Aumarais. Ces quatre rues entouraient ce trapèze comme ferait un fossé. Le couvent se composait de plusieurs bâtiments et d’un jardin. Le bâtiment principal, pris dans son entier, était une juxtaposition de constructions hybrides qui, vues à vol d’oiseau, dessinaient assez exactement une potence posée sur le sol. Le grand bras de la potence occupait tout le tronçon de la rue Droit-Mur compris entre la petite rue Picpus et la rue Polonceau; le petit bras était une haute, grise et sévère façade grillée qui regardait la petite rue Picpus; la porte cochère nº 62 en marquait l’extrémité. Vers le milieu de cette façade, la poussière et la cendre blanchissaient une vieille porte basse cintrée où les araignées faisaient leur toile et qui ne s’ouvrait qu’une heure ou deux le dimanche et aux rares occasions où le cercueil d’une religieuse sortait du couvent. C’était l’entrée publique de l’église. Le coude de la potence était une salle carrée qui servait d’office et que les religieuses nommaient *la dépense*. Dans le grand bras étaient les cellules des mères et des sœurs et le noviciat. Dans le petit bras les cuisines, le réfectoire, doublé du cloître, et l’église. Entre la porte nº 62 et le coin de la ruelle fermée Aumarais était le pensionnat, qu’on ne voyait pas du dehors. Le reste du trapèze formait le jardin qui était beaucoup plus bas que le niveau de la rue Polonceau; ce qui faisait les murailles bien plus élevées encore au dedans qu’à l’extérieur. Le jardin, légèrement bombé, avait à son milieu, au sommet d’une butte, un beau sapin aigu et conique duquel partaient, comme du rond-point à pique d’un bouclier, quatre grandes allées, et, disposées deux par deux dans les embranchements des grandes, huit petites, de façon que, si l’enclos eût été circulaire, le plan géométral des allées eût ressemblé à une croix posée sur une roue. Les allées, venant toutes aboutir aux murs très irréguliers du jardin, étaient de longueurs inégales. Elles étaient bordées de groseilliers. Au fond une allée de grands peupliers allait des ruines du vieux couvent, qui était à l’angle de la rue Droit-Mur, à la maison du petit couvent, qui était à l’angle de la ruelle Aumarais. En avant du petit couvent, il y avait ce qu’on intitulait le petit jardin. Qu’on ajoute à cet ensemble une cour, toutes sortes d’angles variés que faisaient les corps de logis intérieurs, des murailles de prison, pour toute perspective et pour tout voisinage la longue ligne noire de toits qui bordait l’autre côté de la rue Polonceau, et l’on pourra se faire une image complète de ce qu’était, il y a quarante-cinq ans, la maison des bernardines du Petit-Picpus. Cette sainte maison avait été bâtie précisément sur l’emplacement d’un jeu de paume fameux du quatorzième au seizième siècle qu’on appelait le *tripot des onze mille diables*.

Toutes ces rues du reste étaient des plus anciennes de Paris. Ces noms, Droit-Mur et Aumarais, sont bien vieux; les rues qui les portent sont beaucoup plus vieilles encore. La ruelle Aumarais s’est appelée la ruelle Maugout; la rue Droit-Mur s’est appelée la rue des Églantiers, car Dieu ouvrait les fleurs avant que l’homme taillât les pierres.

Chapitre IX

Un siècle sous une guimpe

Puisque nous sommes en train de détails sur ce qu'était autrefois le couvent du Petit-Picpus et que nous avons osé ouvrir une fenêtre sur ce discret asile, que le lecteur nous permette encore une petite digression, étrangère au fond de ce livre, mais caractéristique et utile en ce qu'elle fait comprendre que le cloître lui-même a ses figures originales.

Il y avait dans le petit couvent une centenaire qui venait de l'abbaye de Fontevrault. Avant la révolution elle avait même été du monde. Elle parlait beaucoup de Mr de Miromesnil, garde des sceaux sous Louis XVI, et d'une présidente Duplat qu'elle avait beaucoup connue. C'était son plaisir et sa vanité de ramener ces deux noms à tout propos. Elle disait merveilles de l'abbaye de Fontevrault, que c'était comme une ville, et qu'il y avait des rues dans le monastère.

Elle parlait avec un parler picard qui égayait les pensionnaires. Tous les ans, elle renouvelait solennellement ses vœux, et, au moment de faire serment, elle disait au prêtre: Monseigneur saint François l'a baillé à monseigneur saint Julien, monseigneur saint Julien l'a baillé à monseigneur saint Eusèbe, monseigneur saint Eusèbe l'a baillé à monseigneur saint Procope, etc., etc.; ainsi je vous le baille, mon père. — Et les pensionnaires de rire, non sous cape, mais sous voile; charmants petits rires étouffés qui faisaient froncer le sourcil aux mères vocales.

Une autre fois, la centenaire racontait des histoires. Elle disait que *dans sa jeunesse les bernardins ne le cédaient pas aux mousquetaires*. C'était un siècle qui parlait, mais c'était le dix-huitième siècle. Elle contait la coutume champenoise et bourguignonne des quatre vins avant la révolution. Quand un grand personnage, un maréchal de France, un prince, un duc et pair, traversait une ville de Bourgogne ou de Champagne, le corps de ville venait le haranguer et lui présentait quatre gondoles d'argent dans lesquelles on avait versé de quatre vins différents. Sur le premier gobelet on lisait cette inscription: *vin de singe*, sur le deuxième: *vin de lion*, sur le troisième: *vin de mouton*, sur le quatrième: *vin de cochon*. Ces quatre légendes exprimaient les quatre degrés que descend l'ivrogne; la première ivresse, celle qui égaye; la deuxième, celle qui irrite; la troisième, celle qui hébète; la dernière enfin, celle qui abrutit.

Elle avait dans une armoire, sous clef, un objet mystérieux auquel elle tenait fort. La règle de Fontevrault ne le lui défendait pas. Elle ne voulait montrer cet objet à personne. Elle s’enfermait, ce que sa règle lui permettait, et se cachait chaque fois qu’elle voulait le contempler. Si elle entendait marcher dans le corridor, elle refermait l’armoire aussi précipitamment qu’elle le pouvait avec ses vieilles mains. Dès qu’on lui parlait de cela, elle se taisait, elle qui parlait si volontiers. Les plus curieuses échouèrent devant son silence et les plus tenaces devant son obstination. C’était aussi là un sujet de commentaires pour tout ce qui était désœuvré ou ennuyé dans le couvent. Que pouvait donc être cette chose si précieuse et si secrète qui était le trésor de la centenaire? Sans doute quelque saint livre? quelque chapelet unique? quelque relique prouvée? On se perdait en conjectures. À la mort de la pauvre vieille, on courut à l’armoire plus vite peut-être qu’il n’eût convenu, et on l’ouvrit. On trouva l’objet sous un triple linge comme une patène bénite. C’était un plat de Faënza représentant des amours qui s’envolent poursuivis par des garçons apothicaires armés d’énormes seringues. La poursuite abonde en grimaces et en postures comiques. Un des charmants petits amours est déjà tout embroché. Il se débat, agite ses petites ailes et essaye encore de voler, mais le matassin rit d’un rire satanique. Moralité: l’amour vaincu par la colique. Ce plat, fort curieux d’ailleurs, et qui a peut-être eu l’honneur de donner une idée à Molière, existait encore en septembre 1845; il était à vendre chez un marchand de bric-à-brac du boulevard Beaumarchais.

Cette bonne vieille ne voulait recevoir aucune visite du dehors, *à cause*, disait-elle, *que le parloir est trop triste*.

Chapitre X

Origine de l’Adoration Perpétuelle

Du reste, ce parloir presque sépulcral dont nous avons essayé de donner une idée est un fait tout local qui ne se reproduit pas avec la même sévérité dans d’autres couvents. Au couvent de la rue du Temple en particulier qui, à la vérité, était d’un autre ordre, les volets noirs étaient remplacés par des rideaux bruns, et le parloir lui-même était un salon parqueté dont les fenêtres s’encadraient de bonnes-grâces en mousseline blanche et dont les murailles admettaient toutes sortes de cadres, un portrait d’une bénédictine à visage découvert, des bouquets en peinture, et jusqu’à une tête de turc.

C’est dans le jardin du couvent de la rue du Temple que se trouvait ce marronnier d’Inde qui passait pour le plus beau et le plus grand de France et qui avait parmi le bon peuple du dix-huitième siècle la renommée d’être *le père de tous les marronniers du royaume*.

Nous l’avons dit, ce couvent du Temple était occupé par des bénédictines de l’Adoration Perpétuelle, bénédictines tout autres que celles qui relevaient de Cîteaux. Cet ordre de l’Adoration Perpétuelle n’est pas très ancien et ne remonte pas à plus de deux cents ans. En 1649, le Saint-Sacrement fut profané deux fois, à quelques jours de distance, dans deux églises de Paris, à Saint-Sulpice et à Saint-Jean en Grève, sacrilège effrayant et rare qui émut toute la ville. Mr le prieur grand vicaire de Saint-Germain-des-Prés ordonna une procession solennelle de tout son clergé où officia le nonce du pape. Mais l’expiation ne suffit pas à deux dignes femmes, madame Courtin, marquise de Boucs, et la comtesse de Châteauvieux. Cet outrage, fait au «très auguste sacrement de l’autel», quoique passager, ne sortait pas de ces deux saintes âmes, et leur parut ne pouvoir être réparé que par une «Adoration Perpétuelle» dans quelque monastère de filles. Toutes deux, l’une en 1652, l’autre en 1653, firent donation de sommes notables à la mère Catherine de Bar, dite du Saint-Sacrement, religieuse bénédictine, pour fonder, dans ce but pieux, un monastère de l’ordre de Saint-Benoît; la première permission pour cette fondation fut donnée à la mère Catherine de Bar par Mr de Metz, abbé de Saint-Germain, «à la charge qu’aucune fille ne pourrait être reçue, qu’elle n’apportât trois cents livres de pension, qui font six mille livres au principal». Après l’abbé de Saint-Germain, le roi accorda des lettres patentes, et le tout, charte abbatiale et lettres royales, fut homologué en 1654 à la chambre des comptes et au parlement.

Telle est l'origine et la consécration légale de l'établissement des bénédictines de l'Adoration Perpétuelle du Saint-Sacrement à Paris. Leur premier couvent fut «bâti à neuf», rue Cassette, des deniers de mesdames de Boucs et de Châteauvieux.

Cet ordre, comme on voit, ne se confondait point avec les bénédictines dites de Cîteaux. Il relevait de l'abbé de Saint-Germain des Prés, de la même manière que les dames du Sacré-Cœur relèvent du général des jésuites et les sœurs de charité du général des lazaristes.

Il était également tout à fait différent des bernardines du Petit-Picpus dont nous venons de montrer l'intérieur. En 1657, le pape Alexandre VII avait autorisé, par bref spécial, les bernardines du Petit-Picpus à pratiquer l'Adoration Perpétuelle comme les bénédictines du Saint-Sacrement. Mais les deux ordres n'en étaient pas moins restés distincts.

Chapitre XI

Fin du Petit-Picpus

Dès le commencement de la Restauration, le couvent du Petit-Picpus dépérissait; ce qui fait partie de la mort générale de l’ordre, lequel, après le dix-huitième siècle, s’en va comme tous les ordres religieux. La contemplation est, ainsi que la prière, un besoin de l’humanité; mais, comme tout ce que la Révolution a touché, elle se transformera, et, d’hostile au progrès social, lui deviendra favorable.

La maison du Petit-Picpus se dépeuplait rapidement. En 1840, le petit couvent avait disparu, le pensionnat avait disparu. Il n’y avait plus ni les vieilles femmes, ni les jeunes filles; les unes étaient mortes, les autres s’en étaient allées. *Volaverunt.*

La règle de l’Adoration Perpétuelle est d’une telle rigidité qu’elle épouvante; les vocations reculent, l’ordre ne se recrute pas. En 1845, il se faisait encore çà et là quelques sœurs converses; mais de religieuses de chœur, point. Il y a quarante ans, les religieuses étaient près de cent; il y a quinze ans, elles n’étaient plus que vingt-huit. Combien sont-elles aujourd’hui? En 1847, la prieure était jeune, signe que le cercle du choix se restreint. Elle n’avait pas quarante ans. À mesure que le nombre diminue, la fatigue augmente; le service de chacune devient plus pénible; on voyait dès lors approcher le moment où elles ne seraient plus qu’une douzaine d’épaules douloureuses et courbées pour porter la lourde règle de saint Benoît. Le fardeau est implacable et reste le même à peu comme à beaucoup. Il pesait, il écrase. Aussi elles meurent. Du temps que l’auteur de ce livre habitait encore Paris, deux sont mortes. L’une avait vingt-cinq ans, l’autre vingt-trois. Celle-ci peut dire comme Julia Alpinula: *Hic jaceo. Vvixi annos viginti et tres*. C’est à cause de cette décadence que le couvent a renoncé à l’éducation des filles.

Nous n’avons pu passer devant cette maison extraordinaire, inconnue, obscure, sans y entrer et sans y faire entrer les esprits qui nous accompagnent et qui nous écoutent raconter, pour l’utilité de quelques-uns peut-être, l’histoire mélancolique de Jean Valjean. Nous avons pénétré dans cette communauté toute pleine de ces vieilles pratiques qui semblent si nouvelles aujourd’hui. C’est le jardin fermé. *Hortus conclusus*. Nous avons parlé de ce lieu singulier avec détail, mais avec respect, autant du moins que le respect et le détail sont conciliables. Nous ne comprenons pas tout, mais nous n’insultons rien. Nous sommes à égale distance de l’hosanna de Joseph de Maistre qui aboutit à sacrer le bourreau et du ricanement de Voltaire qui va jusqu’à railler le crucifix.

Illogisme de Voltaire, soit dit en passant; car Voltaire eût défendu Jésus comme il défendait Calas; et, pour ceux-là mêmes qui nient les incarnations surhumaines, que représente le crucifix? Le sage assassiné.

Au dix-neuvième siècle, l’idée religieuse subit une crise. On désapprend de certaines choses, et l’on fait bien, pourvu qu’en désapprenant ceci, on apprenne cela. Pas de vide dans le cœur humain. De certaines démolitions se font, et il est bon qu’elles se fassent, mais à la condition d’être suivies de reconstructions.

En attendant, étudions les choses qui ne sont plus. Il est nécessaire de les connaître, ne fût-ce que pour les éviter. Les contrefaçons du passé prennent de faux noms et s’appellent volontiers l’avenir. Ce revenant, le passé, est sujet à falsifier son passeport. Mettons-nous au fait du piège. Défions-nous. Le passé a un visage, la superstition, et un masque, l’hypocrisie. Dénonçons le visage et arrachons le masque.

Quant aux couvents, ils offrent une question complexe. Question de civilisation, qui les condamne; question de liberté, qui les protège.

Livre septième — Parenthèse

Chapitre I

Le couvent, idée abstraite

Ce livre est un drame dont le premier personnage est l’infini.

L’homme est le second.

Cela étant, comme un couvent s’est trouvé sur notre chemin, nous avons dû y pénétrer. Pourquoi? C’est que le couvent, qui est propre à l’orient comme à l’occident, à l’antiquité comme aux temps modernes, au paganisme, au bouddhisme, au mahométisme, comme au christianisme, est un des appareils d’optique appliqués par l’homme sur l’infini.

Ce n’est point ici le lieu de développer hors de mesure de certaines idées; cependant, tout en maintenant absolument nos réserves, nos restrictions, et même nos indignations, nous devons le dire, toutes les fois que nous rencontrons dans l’homme l’infini, bien ou mal compris, nous nous sentons pris de respect. Il y a dans la synagogue, dans la mosquée, dans la pagode, dans le wigwam, un côté hideux que nous exécrons et un côté sublime que nous adorons. Quelle contemplation pour l’esprit et quelle rêverie sans fond! la réverbération de Dieu sur le mur humain.

Chapitre II

Le couvent, fait historique

Au point de vue de l’histoire, de la raison et de la vérité, le monachisme est condamné.

Les monastères, quand ils abondent chez une nation, sont des nœuds à la circulation, des établissements encombrants, des centres de paresse là où il faut des centres de travail. Les communautés monastiques sont à la grande communauté sociale ce que le gui est au chêne, ce que la verrue est au corps humain. Leur prospérité et leur embonpoint sont l’appauvrissement du pays. Le régime monacal, bon au début des civilisations, utile à produire la réduction de la brutalité par le spirituel, est mauvais à la virilité des peuples. En outre, lorsqu’il se relâche, et qu’il entre dans sa période de dérèglement, comme il continue à donner l’exemple il devient mauvais par toutes les raisons qui le faisaient salutaire dans sa période de pureté.

Les claustrations ont fait leur temps. Les cloîtres, utiles à la première éducation de la civilisation moderne, ont été gênants pour sa croissance et sont nuisibles à son développement. En tant qu’institution et que mode de formation pour l’homme, les monastères, bons au dixième siècle, discutables au quinzième, sont détestables au dix-neuvième. La lèpre monacale a presque rongé jusqu’au squelette deux admirables nations, l’Italie et l’Espagne, l’une la lumière, l’autre la splendeur de l’Europe pendant des siècles, et, à l’époque où nous sommes, ces deux illustres peuples ne commencent à guérir que grâce à la saine et vigoureuse hygiène de 1789.

Le couvent, l’antique couvent de femmes particulièrement, tel qu’il apparaît encore au seuil de ce siècle en Italie, en Autriche, en Espagne, est une des plus sombres concrétions du Moyen Age. Le cloître, ce cloître-là, est le point d’intersection des terreurs. Le cloître catholique proprement dit est tout rempli du rayonnement noir de la mort.

Le couvent espagnol surtout est funèbre. Là montent dans l’obscurité, sous des voûtes pleines de brume, sous des dômes vagues à force d’ombre, de massifs autels babéliques, hauts comme des cathédrales; là pendent à des chaînes dans les ténèbres d’immenses crucifix blancs; là s’étalent, nus sur l’ébène, de grands Christs d’ivoire; plus que sanglants, saignants; hideux et magnifiques, les coudes montrant les os, les rotules montrant les téguments, les plaies montrant les chairs, couronnés d’épines d’argent, cloués de clous d’or, avec des gouttes de sang en rubis sur le front et des larmes en diamants dans les yeux. Les diamants et les rubis semblent mouillés, et font pleurer en bas dans l’ombre des êtres voilés qui ont les flancs meurtris par le cilice et par le fouet aux pointes de fer, les seins écrasés par des claies d’osier, les genoux écorchés par la prière; des femmes qui se croient des épouses; des spectres qui se croient des séraphins. Ces femmes pensent-elles? non. Veulent-elles? non. Aiment-elles? non. Vivent-elles? non. Leurs nerfs sont devenus des os; leurs os sont devenus des pierres. Leur voile est de la nuit tissue. Leur souffle sous le voile ressemble à on ne sait quelle tragique respiration de la mort. L’abbesse, une larve, les sanctifie et les terrifie. L’immaculé est là, farouche. Tels sont les vieux monastères d’Espagne. Repaires de la dévotion terrible; antres de vierges; lieux féroces.

L’Espagne catholique était plus romaine que Rome même. Le couvent espagnol était par excellence le couvent catholique. On y sentait l’orient. L’archevêque, kislar-aga du ciel, verrouillait et espionnait ce sérail d’âmes réservé à Dieu. La nonne était l’odalisque, le prêtre était l’eunuque. Les ferventes étaient choisies en songe et possédaient Christ. La nuit, le beau jeune homme nu descendait de la croix et devenait l’extase de la cellule. De hautes murailles gardaient de toute distraction vivante la sultane mystique qui avait le crucifié pour sultan. Un regard dehors était une infidélité. L’ *in-pace* remplaçait le sac de cuir. Ce qu’on jetait à la mer en orient, on le jetait à la terre en occident. Des deux côtés, des femmes se tordaient les bras; la vague aux unes, la fosse aux autres; ici les noyées, là les enterrées. Parallélisme monstrueux.

Aujourd’hui les souteneurs du passé, ne pouvant nier ces choses, ont pris le parti d’en sourire. On a mis à la mode une façon commode et étrange de supprimer les révélations de l’histoire, d’infirmer les commentaires de la philosophie, et d’élider tous les faits gênants et toutes les questions sombres. *Matière à déclamations*, disent les habiles. Déclamations, répètent les niais. Jean-Jacques, déclamateur; Diderot, déclamateur; Voltaire sur Calas, Labarre et Sirven, déclamateur. Je ne sais qui a trouvé dernièrement que Tacite était un déclamateur, que Néron était une victime, et que décidément il fallait s’apitoyer «sur ce pauvre Holopherne».

Les faits pourtant sont malaisés à déconcerter, et s’obstinent. L’auteur de ce livre a vu, de ses yeux, à huit lieues de Bruxelles, c’est là du Moyen Age que tout le monde a sous la main, à l’abbaye de Villers, le trou des oubliettes au milieu du pré qui a été la cour du cloître et, au bord de la Dyle, quatre cachots de pierre, moitié sous terre, moitié sous l’eau. C’étaient des *in-pace*. Chacun de ces cachots a un reste de porte de fer, une latrine, et une lucarne grillée qui, dehors, est à deux pieds au-dessus de la rivière, et, dedans, à six pieds au-dessus du sol. Quatre pieds de rivière coulent extérieurement le long du mur. Le sol est toujours mouillé. L’habitant de l’ *in-pace* avait pour lit cette terre mouillée. Dans l’un des cachots, il y a un tronçon de carcan scellé au mur; dans un autre on voit une espèce de boîte carrée faite de quatre lames de granit, trop courte pour qu’on s’y couche, trop basse pour qu’on s’y dresse. On mettait là dedans un être avec un couvercle de pierre par-dessus. Cela est. On le voit. On le touche. Ces *in-pace*, ces cachots, ces gonds de fer, ces carcans, cette haute lucarne au ras de laquelle coule la rivière, cette boîte de pierre fermée d’un couvercle de granit comme une tombe, avec cette différence qu’ici le mort était un vivant, ce sol qui est de la boue, ce trou de latrines, ces murs qui suintent, quels déclamateurs!

Chapitre III

À quelle condition on peut respecter le passé

Le monachisme, tel qu'il existait en Espagne et tel qu'il existe au Thibet, est pour la civilisation une sorte de phtisie. Il arrête net la vie. Il dépeuple, tout simplement. Claustration, castration. Il a été fléau en Europe. Ajoutez à cela la violence si souvent faite à la conscience, les vocations forcées, la féodalité s'appuyant au cloître, l'aînesse versant dans le monachisme le trop-plein de la famille, les férocités dont nous venons de parler, les *in-pace*, les bouches closes, les cerveaux murés, tant d'intelligences infortunées mises au cachot des vœux éternels, la prise d'habit, enterrement des âmes toutes vives. Ajoutez les supplices individuels aux dégradations nationales, et, qui que vous soyez, vous vous sentirez tressaillir devant le froc et le voile, ces deux suaires d'invention humaine.

Pourtant, sur certains points et en certains lieux, en dépit de la philosophie, en dépit du progrès, l'esprit claustral persiste en plein dix-neuvième siècle, et une bizarre recrudescence ascétique étonne en ce moment le monde civilisé. L'entêtement des institutions vieillies à se perpétuer ressemble à l'obstination du parfum ranci qui réclamerait notre chevelure, à la prétention du poisson gâté qui voudrait être mangé, à la persécution du vêtement d'enfant qui voudrait habiller l'homme, et à la tendresse des cadavres qui reviendraient embrasser les vivants.

Ingrats! dit le vêtement, je vous ai protégés dans le mauvais temps, pourquoi ne voulez-vous plus de moi? Je viens de la pleine mer, dit le poisson. J'ai été la rose, dit le parfum. Je vous ai aimés, dit le cadavre. Je vous ai civilisés, dit le couvent.

À cela une seule réponse: Jadis.

Rêver la prolongation indéfinie des choses défuntes et le gouvernement des hommes par embaumement, restaurer les dogmes en mauvais état, redorer les châsses, recrépir les cloîtres, rebénir les reliquaires, remeubler les superstitions, ravitailler les fanatismes, remmancher les goupillons et les sabres, reconstituer le monachisme et le militarisme, croire au salut de la société par la multiplication des parasites, imposer le passé au présent, cela semble étrange. Il y a cependant des théoriciens pour ces théories-là. Ces théoriciens, gens d'esprit d'ailleurs, ont un procédé bien simple, ils appliquent sur le passé un enduit qu’ils appellent ordre social, droit divin, morale, famille, respect des aïeux, autorité antique, tradition sainte, légitimité, religion; et ils vont criant: — Voyez! prenez ceci, honnêtes gens. — Cette logique était connue des anciens. Les aruspices la pratiquaient. Ils frottaient de craie une génisse noire, et disaient: Elle est blanche. *Bos cretatus*.

Quant à nous, nous respectons çà et là et nous épargnons partout le passé, pourvu qu’il consente à être mort. S’il veut être vivant, nous l’attaquons, et nous tâchons de le tuer.

Superstitions, bigotismes, cagotismes, préjugés, ces larves, toutes larves qu’elles sont, sont tenaces à la vie, elles ont des dents et des ongles dans leur fumée, et il faut les étreindre corps à corps, et leur faire la guerre, et la leur faire sans trêve, car c’est une des fatalités de l’humanité d’être condamnée à l’éternel combat des fantômes. L’ombre est difficile à prendre à la gorge et à terrasser.

Un couvent en France, en plein midi du dix-neuvième siècle, c’est un collège de hiboux faisant face au jour. Un cloître, en flagrant délit d’ascétisme au beau milieu de la cité de 89, de 1830 et de 1848, Rome s’épanouissant dans Paris, c’est un anachronisme. En temps ordinaire, pour dissoudre un anachronisme et le faire évanouir, on n’a qu’à lui faire épeler le millésime. Mais nous ne sommes point en temps ordinaire.

Combattons.

Combattons, mais distinguons. Le propre de la vérité, c’est de n’être jamais excessive. Quel besoin a-t-elle d’exagérer? Il y a ce qu’il faut détruire, et il y a ce qu’il faut simplement éclairer et regarder. L’examen bienveillant et grave, quelle force! N’apportons point la flamme là où la lumière suffit.

Donc, le dix-neuvième siècle étant donné, nous sommes contraire, en thèse générale, et chez tous les peuples, en Asie comme en Europe, dans l’Inde comme en Turquie, aux claustrations ascétiques. Qui dit couvent dit marais. Leur putrescibilité est évidente, leur stagnation est malsaine, leur fermentation enfièvre les peuples et les étiole; leur multiplication devient plaie d’Égypte. Nous ne pouvons penser sans effroi à ces pays où les fakirs, les bonzes, les santons, les caloyers, les marabouts, les talapoins et les derviches pullulent jusqu’au fourmillement vermineux.

Cela dit, la question religieuse subsiste. Cette question a de certains côtés mystérieux, presque redoutables; qu’il nous soit permis de la regarder fixement.

Chapitre IV

Le couvent au point de vue des principes

Des hommes se réunissent et habitent en commun. En vertu de quel droit? en vertu du droit d’association.

Ils s’enferment chez eux. En vertu de quel droit? en vertu du droit qu’a tout homme d’ouvrir ou de fermer sa porte.

Ils ne sortent pas. En vertu de quel droit? en vertu du droit d’aller et de venir, qui implique le droit de rester chez soi.

Là, chez eux, que font-ils?

Ils parlent bas; ils baissent les yeux; ils travaillent. Ils renoncent au monde, aux villes, aux sensualités, aux plaisirs, aux vanités, aux orgueils, aux intérêts. Ils sont vêtus de grosse laine ou de grosse toile. Pas un d’eux ne possède en propriété quoi que ce soit. En entrant là, celui qui était riche se fait pauvre. Ce qu’il a, il le donne à tous. Celui qui était ce qu’on appelle noble, gentilhomme et seigneur, est l’égal de celui qui était paysan. La cellule est identique pour tous. Tous subissent la même tonsure, portent le même froc, mangent le même pain noir, dorment sur la même paille, meurent sur la même cendre. Le même sac sur le dos, la même corde autour des reins. Si le parti pris est d’aller pieds nus, tous vont pieds nus. Il peut y avoir là un prince, ce prince est la même ombre que les autres. Plus de titres. Les noms de famille même ont disparu. Ils ne portent que des prénoms. Tous sont courbés sous l’égalité des noms de baptême. Ils ont dissous la famille charnelle et constitué dans leur communauté la famille spirituelle. Ils n’ont plus d’autres parents que tous les hommes. Ils secourent les pauvres, ils soignent les malades. Ils élisent ceux auxquels ils obéissent. Ils se disent l’un à l’autre: mon frère. Vous m’arrêtez, et vous vous écriez: — Mais c’est là le couvent idéal!

Il suffit que ce soit le couvent possible, pour que j’en doive tenir compte.

De là vient que, dans le livre précédent, j’ai parlé d’un couvent avec un accent respectueux. Le moyen-âge écarté, l’Asie écartée, la question historique et politique réservée, au point de vue philosophique pur, en dehors des nécessités de la politique militante, à la condition que le monastère soit absolument volontaire et ne renferme que des consentements, je considérerai toujours la communauté claustrale avec une certaine gravité attentive et, à quelques égards, déférente. Là où il y a la communauté, il y a la commune; là où il y a la commune, il y a le droit. Le monastère est le produit de la formule: Égalité, Fraternité. Oh! que la Liberté est grande! et quelle transfiguration splendide! la Liberté suffit à transformer le monastère en république.

Continuons.

Mais ces hommes, ou ces femmes, qui sont derrière ces quatre murs, ils s’habillent de bure, ils sont égaux, ils s’appellent frères; c’est bien; mais ils font encore autre chose?

Oui.

Quoi?

Ils regardent l’ombre, ils se mettent à genoux, et ils joignent les mains.

Qu’est-ce que cela signifie?

Chapitre V

La prière

Ils prient.

Qui?

Dieu.

Prier Dieu, que veut dire ce mot?

Y a-t-il un infini hors de nous? Cet infini est-il un, immanent, permanent; nécessairement substantiel, puisqu'il est infini, et que, si la matière lui manquait, il serait borné là, nécessairement intelligent, puisqu'il est infini, et que, si l'intelligence lui manquait, il serait fini là? Cet infini éveille-t-il en nous l'idée d'essence, tandis que nous ne pouvons nous attribuer à nous-mêmes que l'idée d'existence? En d'autres termes, n'est-il pas l'absolu dont nous sommes le relatif?

En même temps qu'il y a un infini hors de nous, n'y a-t-il pas un infini en nous? Ces deux infinis (quel pluriel effrayant!) ne se superposent-ils pas l'un à l'autre? Le second infini n'est-il pas pour ainsi dire sous-jacent au premier? n'en est-il pas le miroir, le reflet, l'écho, abîme concentrique à un autre abîme? Ce second infini est-il intelligent lui aussi? Pense-t-il? aime-t-il? veut-il? Si les deux infinis sont intelligents, chacun d'eux a un principe voulant, et il y a un moi dans l'infini d'en haut comme il y a un moi dans l'infini d'en bas. Le moi d'en bas, c'est l'âme; le moi d'en haut, c'est Dieu.

Mettre par la pensée l'infini d'en bas en contact avec l'infini d'en haut, cela s'appelle prier.

Ne retirons rien à l'esprit humain; supprimer est mauvais. Il faut réformer et transformer. Certaines facultés de l'homme sont dirigées vers l'Inconnu; la pensée, la rêverie, la prière. L'Inconnu est un océan. Qu'est-ce que la conscience? C'est la boussole de l'Inconnu. Pensée, rêverie, prière, ce sont là de grands rayonnements mystérieux. Respectons-les. Où vont ces irradiations majestueuses de l'âme? à l'ombre; c'est-à-dire à la lumière.

La grandeur de la démocratie, c'est de ne rien nier et de ne rien renier de l'humanité. Près du droit de l'Homme, au moins à côté, il y a le droit de l'Âme.

Écraser les fanatismes et vénérer l'infini, telle est la loi. Ne nous bornons pas à nous prosterner sous l'arbre Création, et à contempler ses immenses branchages pleins d’astres. Nous avons un devoir: travailler à l’âme humaine, défendre le mystère contre le miracle, adorer l’incompréhensible et rejeter l’absurde, n’admettre, en fait d’inexplicable, que le nécessaire, assainir la croyance, ôter les superstitions de dessus la religion; écheniller Dieu.

Chapitre VI

Bonté absolue de la prière

Quant au mode de prier, tous sont bons, pourvu qu'ils soient sincères. Tournez votre livre à l'envers, et soyez dans l'infini.

Il y a, nous le savons, une philosophie qui nie l'infini. Il y a aussi une philosophie, classée pathologiquement, qui nie le soleil; cette philosophie s'appelle cécité.

Ériger un sens qui nous manque en source de vérité, c'est un bel aplomb d'aveugle.

Le curieux, ce sont les airs hautains, supérieurs et compatissants que prend, vis-à-vis de la philosophie qui voit Dieu, cette philosophie à tâtons. On croit entendre une taupe s'écrier: Ils me font pitié avec leur soleil!

Il y a, nous le savons, d'illustres et puissants athées. Ceux-là, au fond, ramenés au vrai par leur puissance même, ne sont pas bien sûrs d'être athées, ce n'est guère avec eux qu'une affaire de définition, et, dans tous les cas, s'ils ne croient pas Dieu, étant de grands esprits, ils prouvent Dieu.

Nous saluons en eux les philosophes, tout en qualifiant inexorablement leur philosophie.

Continuons.

L'admirable aussi, c'est la facilité à se payer de mots. Une école métaphysique du nord, un peu imprégnée de brouillard, a cru faire une révolution dans l'entendement humain en remplaçant le mot Force par le mot Volonté.

Dire: la plante veut; au lieu de: la plante croît; cela serait fécond, en effet, si l'on ajoutait: l'univers veut. Pourquoi? C'est qu'il en sortirait ceci: la plante veut, donc elle a un moi; l'univers veut, donc il a un Dieu.

Quant à nous, qui pourtant, au rebours de cette école, ne rejetons rien à priori, une volonté dans la plante, acceptée par cette école, nous paraît plus difficile à admettre qu'une volonté dans l'univers, niée par elle.

Nier la volonté de l'infini, c'est-à-dire Dieu, cela ne se peut qu'à la condition de nier l'infini. Nous l'avons démontré.

La négation de l'infini mène droit au nihilisme. Tout devient «une conception de l'esprit».

Avec le nihilisme pas de discussion possible. Car le nihilisme logique doute que son interlocuteur existe, et n’est pas bien sûr d’exister lui-même.

À son point de vue, il est possible qu’il ne soit lui-même pour lui-même qu’une «conception de son esprit».

Seulement, il ne s’aperçoit point que tout ce qu’il a nié, il l’admet en bloc, rien qu’en prononçant ce mot: Esprit.

En somme, aucune voie n’est ouverte pour la pensée par une philosophie qui fait tout aboutir au monosyllabe Non.

À: Non, il n’y a qu’une réponse: Oui.

Le nihilisme est sans portée.

Il n’y a pas de néant. Zéro n’existe pas. Tout est quelque chose. Rien n’est rien.

L’homme vit d’affirmation plus encore que de pain.

Voir et montrer, cela même ne suffit pas. La philosophie doit être une énergie; elle doit avoir pour effort et pour effet d’améliorer l’homme. Socrate doit entrer dans Adam et produire Marc-Aurèle; en d’autres termes, faire sortir de l’homme de la félicité l’homme de la sagesse. Changer l’Eden en Lycée. La science doit être un cordial. Jouir, quel triste but et quelle ambition chétive! La brute jouit. Penser, voilà le triomphe vrai de l’âme. Tendre la pensée à la soif des hommes, leur donner à tous en élixir la notion de Dieu, faire fraterniser en eux la conscience et la science, les rendre justes par cette confrontation mystérieuse, telle est la fonction de la philosophie réelle. La morale est un épanouissement de vérités. Contempler mène à agir. L’absolu doit être pratique. Il faut que l’idéal soit respirable, potable et mangeable à l’esprit humain. C’est l’idéal qui a le droit de dire: *Prenez, ceci est ma chair, ceci est mon sang*. La sagesse est une communion sacrée. C’est à cette condition qu’elle cesse d’être un stérile amour de la science pour devenir le mode un et souverain du ralliement humain, et que de philosophie elle est promue religion.

La philosophie ne doit pas être un encorbellement bâti sur le mystère pour le regarder à son aise, sans autre résultat que d’être commode à la curiosité.

Pour nous, en ajournant le développement de notre pensée à une autre occasion, nous nous bornons à dire que nous ne comprenons ni l’homme comme point de départ, ni le progrès comme but, sans ces deux forces qui sont les deux moteurs: croire et aimer.

Le progrès est le but, l’idéal est le type.

Qu’est-ce que l’idéal? C’est Dieu.
Idéal, absolu, perfection, infini; mots identiques.

Chapitre VII

Précautions à prendre dans le blâme

L’histoire et la philosophie ont d’éternels devoirs qui sont en même temps des devoirs simples; combattre Caïphe évêque, Dracon juge, Trimalcion législateur, Tibère empereur, cela est clair, direct et limpide, et n’offre aucune obscurité. Mais le droit de vivre à part, même avec ses inconvénients et ses abus, veut être constaté et ménagé. Le cénobitisme est un problème humain.

Lorsqu’on parle des couvents, ces lieux d’erreur, mais d’innocence, d’égarement, mais de bonne volonté, d’ignorance, mais de dévouement, de supplice, mais de martyre, il faut presque toujours dire oui et non.

Un couvent, c’est une contradiction. Pour but, le salut; pour moyen, le sacrifice. Le couvent, c’est le suprême égoïsme ayant pour résultante la suprême abnégation.

Abdiquer pour régner, semble être la devise du monachisme.

Au cloître, on souffre pour jouir. On tire une lettre de change sur la mort. On escompte en nuit terrestre la lumière céleste. Au cloître, l’enfer est accepté en avance d’hoirie sur le paradis.

La prise de voile ou de froc est un suicide payé d’éternité.

Il ne nous parait pas qu’en un pareil sujet la moquerie soit de mise. Tout y est sérieux, le bien comme le mal.

L’homme juste fronce le sourcil, mais ne sourit jamais du mauvais sourire. Nous comprenons la colère, non la malignité.

Chapitre VIII

Foi, loi

Encore quelques mots.

Nous blâmons l'Église quand elle est saturée d'intrigue, nous méprisons le spirituel âpre au temporel; mais nous honorons partout l'homme pensif.

Nous saluons qui s'agenouille.

Une foi; c'est là pour l'homme le nécessaire. Malheur à qui ne croit rien!

On n'est pas inoccupé parce qu'on est absorbé. Il y a le labeur visible et le labeur invisible.

Contempler, c'est labourer; penser, c'est agir. Les bras croisés travaillent, les mains jointes font. Le regard au ciel est une œuvre.

Thalès resta quatre ans immobile. Il fonda la philosophie.

Pour nous les cénobites ne sont pas des oisifs, et les solitaires ne sont pas des fainéants.

Songer à l'Ombre est une chose sérieuse.

Sans rien infirmer de ce que nous venons de dire, nous croyons qu'un perpétuel souvenir du tombeau convient aux vivants. Sur ce point le prêtre et le philosophe sont d'accord. *Il faut mourir*. L'abbé de La Trappe donne la réplique à Horace.

Mêler à sa vie une certaine présence du sépulcre, c'est la loi du sage; et c'est la loi de l'ascète. Sous ce rapport l'ascète et le sage convergent.

Il y a la croissance matérielle; nous la voulons. Il y a aussi la grandeur morale; nous y tenons.

Les esprits irréfléchis et rapides disent:

— À quoi bon ces figures immobiles du côté du mystère? À quoi servent-elles? qu'est-ce qu'elles font?

Hélas! en présence de l'obscurité qui nous environne et qui nous attend, ne sachant pas ce que la dispersion immense fera de nous, nous répondons: Il n'y a pas d'œuvre plus sublime peut-être que celle que font ces âmes. Et nous ajoutons: Il n'y a peut-être pas de travail plus utile.

Il faut bien ceux qui prient toujours pour ceux qui ne prient jamais.

Pour nous, toute la question est dans la quantité de pensée qui se mêle à la prière.

Leibniz priant, cela est grand; Voltaire adorant, cela est beau. *Deo erexit Voltaire*.

Nous sommes pour la religion contre les religions.

Nous sommes de ceux qui croient à la misère des oraisons et à la sublimité de la prière.

Du reste, dans cette minute que nous traversons, minute qui heureusement ne laissera pas au dix-neuvième siècle sa figure, à cette heure où tant d’hommes ont le front bas et l’âme peu haute, parmi tant de vivants ayant pour morale de jouir, et occupés des choses courtes et difformes de la matière, quiconque s’exile nous semble vénérable. Le monastère est un renoncement. Le sacrifice qui porte à faux est encore le sacrifice. Prendre pour devoir une erreur sévère, cela a sa grandeur.

Pris en soi, et idéalement, et pour tourner autour de la vérité jusqu’à épuisement impartial de tous les aspects, le monastère, le couvent de femmes surtout, car dans notre société c’est la femme qui souffre le plus, et dans cet exil du cloître il y a de la protestation, le couvent de femmes a incontestablement une certaine majesté.

Cette existence claustrale si austère et si morne, dont nous venons d’indiquer quelques linéaments, ce n’est pas la vie, car ce n’est pas la liberté; ce n’est pas la tombe, car ce n’est pas la plénitude; c’est le lieu étrange d’où l’on aperçoit, comme de la crête d’une haute montagne, d’un côté l’abîme où nous sommes, de l’autre l’abîme où nous serons; c’est une frontière étroite et brumeuse séparant deux mondes, éclairée et obscurcie par les deux à la fois, où le rayon affaibli de la vie se mêle au rayon vague de la mort; c’est la pénombre du tombeau.

Quant à nous, qui ne croyons pas ce que ces femmes croient, mais qui vivons comme elles par la foi, nous n’avons jamais pu considérer sans une espèce de terreur religieuse et tendre, sans une sorte de pitié pleine d’envie, ces créatures dévouées, tremblantes et confiantes, ces âmes humbles et augustes qui osent vivre au bord même du mystère, attendant, entre le monde qui est fermé et le ciel qui n’est pas ouvert, tournées vers la clarté qu’on ne voit pas, ayant seulement le bonheur de penser qu’elles savent où elle est, aspirant au gouffre et à l’inconnu, l’œil fixé sur l’obscurité immobile, agenouillées, éperdues, stupéfaites, frissonnantes, à demi soulevées à de certaines heures par les souffles profonds de l’éternité.

Livre huitième — Les cimetières prennent ce qu’on leur donne

Chapitre I

Où il est traité de la manière d’entrer au couvent

C’est dans cette maison que Jean Valjean était, comme avait dit Fauchelevent, «tombé du ciel».

Il avait franchi le mur du jardin qui faisait l’angle de la rue Polonceau. Cet hymne des anges qu’il avait entendu au milieu de la nuit, c’étaient les religieuses chantant matines; cette salle qu’il avait entrevue dans l’obscurité, c’était la chapelle; ce fantôme qu’il avait vu étendu à terre, c’était la sœur faisant la réparation; ce grelot dont le bruit l’avait si étrangement surpris, c’était le grelot du jardinier attaché au genou du père Fauchelevent.

Une fois Cosette couchée, Jean Valjean et Fauchelevent avaient, comme on l’a vu, soupé d’un verre de vin et d’un morceau de fromage devant un bon fagot flambant; puis, le seul lit qu’il y eût dans la baraque étant occupé par Cosette, ils s’étaient jetés chacun sur une botte de paille. Avant de fermer les yeux, Jean Valjean avait dit: — Il faut désormais que je reste ici. — Cette parole avait trotté toute la nuit dans la tête de Fauchelevent.

À vrai dire, ni l’un ni l’autre n’avaient dormi.

Jean Valjean, se sentant découvert et Javert sur sa piste, comprenait que lui et Cosette étaient perdus s’ils rentraient dans Paris. Puisque le nouveau coup de vent qui venait de souffler sur lui l’avait échoué dans ce cloître, Jean Valjean n’avait plus qu’une pensée, y rester. Or, pour un malheureux dans sa position, ce couvent était à la fois le lieu le plus dangereux et le plus sûr; le plus dangereux, car, aucun homme ne pouvant y pénétrer, si on l’y découvrait, c’était un flagrant délit, et Jean Valjean ne faisait qu’un pas du couvent à la prison; le plus sûr, car si l’on parvenait à s’y faire accepter et à y demeurer, qui viendrait vous chercher là? Habiter un lieu impossible, c’était le salut.

De son côté, Fauchelevent se creusait la cervelle. Il commençait par se déclarer qu’il n’y comprenait rien. Comment Mr Madeleine se trouvait-il là, avec les murs qu’il y avait? Des murs de cloître ne s’enjambent pas. Comment s’y trouvait-il avec un enfant? On n’escalade pas une muraille à pic avec un enfant dans ses bras. Qu’était-ce que cet enfant? D’où venaient-ils tous les deux? Depuis que Fauchelevent était dans le couvent, il n’avait plus entendu parler de Montreuil-sur-Mer, et il ne savait rien de ce qui s’était passé. Le père Madeleine avait cet air qui décourage les questions; et d’ailleurs Fauchelevent se disait: On ne questionne pas un saint. Mr Madeleine avait conservé pour lui tout son prestige. Seulement, de quelques mots échappés à Jean Valjean, le jardinier crut pouvoir conclure que Mr Madeleine avait probablement fait faillite par la dureté des temps, et qu’il était poursuivi par ses créanciers; ou bien qu’il était compromis dans une affaire politique et qu’il se cachait; ce qui ne déplut point à Fauchelevent, lequel, comme beaucoup de nos paysans du nord, avait un vieux fond bonapartiste. Se cachant, Mr Madeleine avait pris le couvent pour asile, et il était simple qu’il voulût y rester. Mais l’inexplicable, où Fauchelevent revenait toujours et où il se cassait la tête, c’était que Mr Madeleine fût là, et qu’il y fût avec cette petite. Fauchelevent les voyait, les touchait, leur parlait, et n’y croyait pas. L’incompréhensible venait de faire son entrée dans la cahute de Fauchelevent. Fauchelevent était à tâtons dans les conjectures, et ne voyait plus rien de clair sinon ceci: Mr Madeleine m’a sauvé la vie. Cette certitude unique suffisait, et le détermina. Il se dit à part lui: C’est mon tour. Il ajouta dans sa conscience: Mr Madeleine n’a pas tant délibéré quand il s’est agi de se fourrer sous la voiture pour m’en tirer. Il décida qu’il sauverait Mr Madeleine.

Il se fit pourtant diverses questions et diverses réponses: — Après ce qu’il a été pour moi, si c’était un voleur, le sauverais-je? Tout de même. Si c’était un assassin, le sauverais-je? Tout de même. Puisque c’est un saint, le sauverai-je? Tout de même.

Mais le faire rester dans le couvent, quel problème! Devant cette tentative presque chimérique, Fauchelevent ne recula point; ce pauvre paysan picard, sans autre échelle que son dévouement, sa bonne volonté, et un peu de cette vieille finesse campagnarde mise cette fois au service d’une intention généreuse, entreprit d’escalader les impossibilités du cloître et les rudes escarpements de la règle de saint Benoît. Le père Fauchelevent était un vieux qui toute sa vie avait été égoïste, et qui, à la fin de ses jours, boiteux, infirme, n’ayant plus aucun intérêt au monde, trouva doux d’être reconnaissant, et, voyant une vertueuse action à faire, se jeta dessus comme un homme qui, au moment de mourir, rencontrerait sous sa main un verre d’un bon vin dont il n’aurait jamais goûté et le boirait avidement. On peut ajouter que l’air qu’il respirait depuis plusieurs années déjà dans ce couvent avait détruit la personnalité en lui, et avait fini par lui rendre nécessaire une bonne action quelconque.

Il prit donc sa résolution: se dévouer à Mr Madeleine.

Nous venons de le qualifier *pauvre paysan picard*. La qualification est juste, mais incomplète. Au point de cette histoire où nous sommes, un peu de physiologie du père Fauchelevent devient utile. Il était paysan, mais il avait été tabellion, ce qui ajoutait de la chicane à sa finesse, et de la pénétration à sa naïveté. Ayant, pour des causes diverses, échoué dans ses affaires, de tabellion il était tombé charretier et manœuvre. Mais, en dépit des jurons et des coups de fouet, nécessaires aux chevaux, à ce qu'il paraît, il était resté du tabellion en lui. Il avait quelque esprit naturel; il ne disait ni j'ons ni j'avons; il causait, chose rare au village; et les autres paysans disaient de lui: Il parle quasiment comme un monsieur à chapeau. Fauchelevent était en effet de cette espèce que le vocabulaire impertinent et léger du dernier siècle qualifiait: *demi-bourgeois, demi-manant;* et que les métaphores tombant du château sur la chaumière étiquetaient dans le casier de la roture: *un peu rustre, un peu citadin; poivre et sel*. Fauchelevent, quoique fort éprouvé et fort usé par le sort, espèce de pauvre vieille âme montrant la corde, était pourtant homme de premier mouvement, et très spontané; qualité précieuse qui empêche qu'on soit jamais mauvais. Ses défauts et ses vices, car il en avait eu, étaient de surface; en somme, sa physionomie était de celles qui réussissent près de l'observateur. Ce vieux visage n'avait aucune de ces fâcheuses rides du haut du front qui signifient méchanceté ou bêtise.

Au point du jour, ayant énormément songé, le père Fauchelevent ouvrit les yeux et vit Mr Madeleine qui, assis sur sa botte de paille, regardait Cosette dormir. Fauchelevent se dressa sur son séant et dit:

— Maintenant que vous êtes ici, comment allez-vous faire pour y entrer?

Ce mot résumait la situation, et réveilla Jean Valjean de sa rêverie.

Les deux bonshommes tinrent conseil.

— D'abord, dit Fauchelevent, vous allez commencer par ne pas mettre les pieds hors de cette chambre. La petite ni vous. Un pas dans le jardin, nous sommes flambés.

— C'est juste.

— Monsieur Madeleine, reprit Fauchelevent, vous êtes arrivé dans un moment très bon, je veux dire très mauvais, il y a une de ces dames fort malade. Cela fait qu'on ne regardera pas beaucoup de notre côté. Il paraît qu'elle se meurt. On dit les prières de quarante heures. Toute la communauté est en l'air. Ça les occupe. Celle qui est en train de s'en aller est une sainte. Au fait, nous sommes tous des saints ici. Toute la différence entre elles et moi, c'est qu'elles disent: notre cellule, et que je dis: ma *piolle*. Il va y avoir l'oraison pour les agonisants, et puis l'oraison pour les morts. Pour aujourd'hui nous serons tranquilles ici; mais je ne réponds pas de demain.

— Pourtant, observa Jean Valjean, cette baraque est dans le rentrant du mur, elle est cachée par une espèce de ruine, il y a des arbres, on ne la voit pas du couvent.

— Et j'ajoute que les religieuses n'en approchent jamais.

— Eh bien? fit Jean Valjean.

Le point d'interrogation qui accentuait cet: eh bien, signifiait: il me semble qu'on peut y demeurer caché. C'est à ce point d'interrogation que Fauchelevent répondit:

— Il y a les petites.

— Quelles petites? demanda Jean Valjean.

Comme Fauchelevent ouvrait la bouche pour expliquer le mot qu'il venait de prononcer, une cloche sonna un coup.

— La religieuse est morte, dit-il. Voici le glas.

Et il fit signe à Jean Valjean d'écouter.

La cloche sonna un second coup.

— C'est le glas, monsieur Madeleine. La cloche va continuer de minute en minute pendant vingt-quatre heures jusqu'à la sortie du corps de l'église. Voyez-vous, ça joue. Aux récréations, il suffit qu'une balle roule pour qu'elles s'en viennent, malgré les défenses, chercher et fourbanser partout par ici. C'est des diables, ces chérubins-là.

— Qui? demanda Jean Valjean.

— Les petites. Vous seriez bien vite découvert, allez. Elles crieraient: Tiens! un homme! Mais il n'y a pas de danger aujourd'hui. Il n'y aura pas de récréation. La journée va être tout prières. Vous entendez la cloche. Comme je vous le disais, un coup par minute. C'est le glas.

— Je comprends, père Fauchelevent. Il y a des pensionnaires.

Et Jean Valjean pensa à part lui:

— Ce serait l'éducation de Cosette toute trouvée.

Fauchelevent s'exclama:

— Pardine! s'il y a des petites filles! Et qui piailleraient autour de vous! et qui se sauveraient! Ici, être homme, c'est avoir la peste. Vous voyez bien qu'on m'attache un grelot à la patte comme à une bête féroce.

Jean Valjean songeait de plus en plus profondément.

— Ce couvent nous sauverait, murmurait-il. Puis il éleva la voix:

— Oui, le difficile, c'est de rester.

— Non, dit Fauchelevent, c'est de sortir.

Jean Valjean sentit le sang lui refluer au cœur.

— Sortir!

— Oui, monsieur Madeleine, pour rentrer, il faut que vous sortiez.

Et, après avoir laissé passer un coup de cloche du glas, Fauchelevent poursuivit:

— On ne peut pas vous trouver ici comme ça. D'où venez-vous? Pour moi vous tombez du ciel, parce que je vous connais; mais des religieuses, ça a besoin qu'on entre par la porte.

Tout à coup on entendit une sonnerie assez compliquée d'une autre cloche.

— Ah! dit Fauchelevent, on sonne les mères vocales. Elles vont au chapitre. On tient toujours chapitre quand quelqu'un est mort. Elle est morte au point du jour. C'est ordinairement au point du jour qu'on meurt. Mais est-ce que vous ne pourriez pas sortir par où vous êtes entré? Voyons, ce n'est pas pour vous faire une question, par où êtes-vous entré?

Jean Valjean devint pâle. La seule idée de redescendre dans cette rue formidable le faisait frissonner. Sortez d'une forêt pleine de tigres, et, une fois dehors, imaginez-vous un conseil d'ami qui vous engage à y rentrer. Jean Valjean se figurait toute la police encore grouillante dans le quartier, des agents en observation, des vedettes partout, d'affreux poings tendus vers son collet, Javert peut-être au coin du carrefour.

— Impossible! dit-il. Père Fauchelevent, mettez que je suis tombé de là-haut.

— Mais je le crois, je le crois, reprit Fauchelevent. Vous n'avez pas besoin de me le dire. Le bon Dieu vous aura pris dans sa main pour vous regarder de près, et puis vous aura lâché. Seulement il voulait vous mettre dans un couvent d'hommes; il s'est trompé. Allons, encore une sonnerie. Celle-ci est pour avertir le portier d'aller prévenir la municipalité pour qu'elle aille prévenir le médecin des morts pour qu'il vienne voir qu'il y a une morte. Tout ça, c'est la cérémonie de mourir. Elles n'aiment pas beaucoup cette visite-là, ces bonnes dames. Un médecin, ça ne croit à rien. Il lève le voile. Il lève même quelquefois autre chose. Comme elles ont vite fait avertir le médecin, cette fois-ci! Qu’est-ce qu’il y a donc? Votre petite dort toujours. Comment se nomme-t-elle?

— Cosette.

— C’est votre fille? comme qui dirait: vous seriez son grand-père?

— Oui.

— Pour elle, sortir d’ici, ce sera facile. J’ai ma porte de service qui donne sur la cour. Je cogne. Le portier ouvre. J’ai ma hotte sur le dos, la petite est dedans. Je sors. Le père Fauchelevent sort avec sa hotte, c’est tout simple. Vous direz à la petite de se tenir bien tranquille. Elle sera sous la bâche. Je la déposerai le temps qu’il faudra chez une vieille bonne amie de fruitière que j’ai rue du Chemin-Vert, qui est sourde et où il y a un petit lit. Je crierai dans l’oreille à la fruitière que c’est une nièce à moi, et de me la garder jusqu’à demain. Puis la petite rentrera avec vous. Car je vous ferai rentrer. Il le faudra bien. Mais vous, comment ferez-vous pour sortir? Jean Valjean hocha la tête.

— Que personne ne me voie. Tout est là, père Fauchelevent. Trouvez moyen de me faire sortir comme Cosette dans une hotte et sous une bâche.

Fauchelevent se grattait le bas de l’oreille avec le médium de la main gauche, signe de sérieux embarras.

Une troisième sonnerie fit diversion.

— Voici le médecin des morts qui s’en va, dit Fauchelevent. Il a regardé, et dit: elle est morte, c’est bon. Quand le médecin a visé le passeport pour le paradis, les pompes funèbres envoient une bière. Si c’est une mère, les mères l’ensevelissent; si c’est une sœur, les sœurs l’ensevelissent. Après quoi, je cloue. Cela fait partie de mon jardinage. Un jardinier est un peu un fossoyeur. On la met dans une salle basse de l’église qui communique à la rue et où pas un homme ne peut entrer que le médecin des morts. Je ne compte pas pour des hommes les croque-morts et moi. C’est dans cette salle que je cloue la bière. Les croque-morts viennent la prendre, et fouette cocher! c’est comme cela qu’on s’en va au ciel. On apporte une boîte où il n’y a rien, on la remporte avec quelque chose dedans. Voilà ce que c’est qu’un enterrement. *De profundis*.

Un rayon de soleil horizontal effleurait le visage de Cosette endormie qui entrouvrait vaguement la bouche, et avait l’air d’un ange buvant de la lumière. Jean Valjean s’était mis à la regarder. Il n’écoutait plus Fauchelevent.

N’être pas écouté, ce n’est pas une raison pour se taire. Le brave vieux jardinier continuait paisiblement son rabâchage:

— On fait la fosse au cimetière Vaugirard. On prétend qu’on va le supprimer, ce cimetière Vaugirard. C’est un ancien cimetière qui est en dehors des règlements, qui n’a pas l’uniforme, et qui va prendre sa retraite. C’est dommage, car il est commode. J’ai là un ami, le père Mestienne, le fossoyeur. Les religieuses d’ici ont un privilège, c’est d’être portées à ce cimetière-là à la tombée de la nuit. Il y a un arrêté de la préfecture exprès pour elles. Mais que d’événements depuis hier! la mère Crucifixion est morte, et le père Madeleine....

— Est enterré, dit Jean Valjean souriant tristement.

Fauchelevent fit ricocher le mot.

— Dame! si vous étiez ici tout à fait, ce serait un véritable enterrement.

Une quatrième sonnerie éclata. Fauchelevent détacha vivement du clou la genouillère à grelot et la reboucla à son genou.

— Cette fois, c’est moi. La mère prieure me demande. Bon, je me pique à l’ardillon de ma boucle. Monsieur Madeleine, ne bougez pas, et attendez-moi. Il y a du nouveau. Si vous avez faim, il y a là le vin, le pain et le fromage.

Et il sortit de la cahute en disant: On y va! on y va!

Jean Valjean le vit se hâter à travers le jardin, aussi vite que sa jambe torse le lui permettait, tout en regardant de côté ses melonnières.

Moins de dix minutes après, le père Fauchelevent, dont le grelot mettait sur son passage les religieuses en déroute, frappait un petit coup à une porte, et une voix douce répondait: *À jamais. À jamais*, c’est-à-dire: *Entrez.*

Cette porte était celle du parloir réservé au jardinier pour les besoins du service. Ce parloir était contigu à la salle du chapitre. La prieure, assise sur l’unique chaise du parloir, attendait Fauchelevent.

Chapitre II

Fauchelevent en présence de la difficulté

Avoir l’air agité et grave, cela est particulier, dans les occasions critiques, à de certains caractères et à de certaines professions, notamment aux prêtres et aux religieux. Au moment où Fauchelevent entra, cette double forme de la préoccupation était empreinte sur la physionomie de la prieure, qui était cette charmante et savante Mlle de Blemeur, mère Innocente, ordinairement gaie.

Le jardinier fit un salut craintif, et resta sur le seuil de la cellule. La prieure, qui égrenait son rosaire, leva les yeux et dit:

— Ah! c’est vous, père Fauvent.

Cette abréviation avait été adoptée dans le couvent.

Fauchelevent recommença son salut.

— Père Fauvent, je vous ai fait appeler.

— Me voici, révérende mère.

— J’ai à vous parler.

— Et moi, de mon côté, dit Fauchelevent avec une hardiesse dont il avait peur intérieurement, j’ai quelque chose à dire à la très révérende mère.

La prieure le regarda.

— Ah! vous avez une communication à me faire.

— Une prière.

— Eh bien, parlez.

Le bonhomme Fauchelevent, ex-tabellion, appartenait à la catégorie des paysans qui ont de l’aplomb. Une certaine ignorance habile est une force; on ne s’en défie pas et cela vous prend. Depuis un peu plus de deux ans qu’il habitait le couvent, Fauchelevent avait réussi dans la communauté. Toujours solitaire, et tout en vaquant à son jardinage, il n’avait guère autre chose à faire que d’être curieux. À distance comme il était de toutes ces femmes voilées allant et venant, il ne voyait guère devant lui qu’une agitation d’ombres. À force d’attention et de pénétration, il était parvenu à remettre de la chair dans tous ces fantômes, et ces mortes vivaient pour lui. Il était comme un sourd dont la vue s’allonge et comme un aveugle dont l’ouïe s’aiguise. Il s’était appliqué à démêler le sens des diverses sonneries, et il y était arrivé, de sorte que ce cloître énigmatique et taciturne n’avait rien de caché pour lui; ce sphinx lui bavardait tous ses secrets à l'oreille. Fauchelevent, sachant tout, cachait tout. C'était là son art. Tout le couvent le croyait stupide. Grand mérite en religion. Les mères vocales faisaient cas de Fauchelevent. C'était un curieux muet. Il inspirait la confiance. En outre, il était régulier, et ne sortait que pour les nécessités démontrées du verger et du potager. Cette discrétion d'allures lui était comptée. Il n'en avait pas moins fait jaser deux hommes; au couvent, le portier, et il savait les particularités du parloir; et, au cimetière, le fossoyeur, et il savait les singularités de la sépulture; de la sorte, il avait, à l'endroit de ces religieuses, une double lumière, l'une sur la vie, l'autre sur la mort. Mais il n'abusait de rien. La congrégation tenait à lui. Vieux, boiteux, n'y voyant goutte, probablement un peu sourd, que de qualités! On l'eût difficilement remplacé.

Le bonhomme, avec l'assurance de celui qui se sent apprécié, entama, vis-à-vis de la révérende prieure, une harangue campagnarde assez diffuse et très profonde. Il parla longuement de son âge, de ses infirmités, de la surcharge des années comptant double désormais pour lui, des exigences croissantes du travail, de la grandeur du jardin, des nuits à passer, comme la dernière, par exemple, où il avait fallu mettre des paillassons sur les melonnières à cause de la lune, et il finit par aboutir à ceci: qu'il avait un frère, — (la prieure fit un mouvement) — un frère point jeune, — (second mouvement de la prieure, mais mouvement rassuré) — que, si on le voulait bien, ce frère pourrait venir loger avec lui et l'aider, qu'il était excellent jardinier, que la communauté en tirerait de bons services, meilleurs que les siens à lui; — que, autrement, si l'on n'admettait point son frère, comme, lui, l'aîné, il se sentait cassé, et insuffisant à la besogne, il serait, avec bien du regret, obligé de s'en aller; — et que son frère avait une petite fille qu'il amènerait avec lui, qui s'élèverait en Dieu dans la maison, et qui peut-être, qui sait? ferait une religieuse un jour.

Quand il eut fini de parler, la prieure interrompit le glissement de son rosaire entre ses doigts, et lui dit:

— Pourriez-vous, d'ici à ce soir, vous procurer une forte barre de fer?

— Pourquoi faire?

— Pour servir de levier.

— Oui, révérende mère, répondit Fauchelevent.

La prieure, sans ajouter une parole, se leva, et entra dans la chambre voisine, qui était la salle du chapitre et où les mères vocales étaient probablement assemblées. Fauchelevent demeura seul.

Chapitre III

Mère Innocente

Un quart d'heure environ s'écoula. La prieure rentra et revint s'asseoir sur la chaise.

Les deux interlocuteurs semblaient préoccupés. Nous sténographions de notre mieux le dialogue qui s'engagea.

— Père Fauvent?

— Révérende mère?

— Vous connaissez la chapelle?

— J'y ai une petite cage pour entendre la messe et les offices.

— Et vous êtes entré dans le chœur pour votre ouvrage?

— Deux ou trois fois.

— Il s'agit de soulever une pierre.

— Lourde?

— La dalle du pavé qui est à côté de l'autel.

— La pierre qui ferme le caveau?

— Oui.

— C'est là une occasion où il serait bon d'être deux hommes.

— La mère Ascension, qui est forte comme un homme, vous aidera.

— Une femme n'est jamais un homme.

— Nous n'avons qu'une femme pour vous aider. Chacun fait ce qu'il peut. Parce que dom Mabillon donne quatre cent dix-sept épîtres de saint Bernard et que Merlonus Horstius n'en donne que trois cent soixante-sept, je ne méprise point Merlonus Horstius.

— Ni moi non plus.

— Le mérite est de travailler selon ses forces. Un cloître n'est pas un chantier.

— Et une femme n'est pas un homme. C'est mon frère qui est fort!

— Et puis vous aurez un levier.

— C'est la seule espèce de clef qui aille à ces espèces de portes.

— Il y a un anneau à la pierre.

— J'y passerai le levier.

— Et la pierre est arrangée de façon à pivoter.

— C'est bien, révérende mère. J'ouvrirai le caveau.

— Et les quatre mères chantres vous assisteront.

— Et quand le caveau sera ouvert?

— Il faudra le refermer.

— Sera-ce tout?

— Non.

— Donnez-moi vos ordres, très révérende mère.

— Fauvent, nous avons confiance en vous.

— Je suis ici pour tout faire.

— Et pour tout taire.

— Oui, révérende mère.

— Quand le caveau sera ouvert....

— Je le refermerai.

— Mais auparavant....

— Quoi, révérende mère?

— Il faudra y descendre quelque chose.

Il y eut un silence. La prieure, après une moue de la lèvre inférieure qui ressemblait à de l'hésitation, le rompit.

— Père Fauvent?

— Révérende mère?

— Vous savez qu'une mère est morte ce matin.

— Non.

— Vous n'avez donc pas entendu la cloche?

— On n'entend rien au fond du jardin.

— En vérité?

— C'est à peine si je distingue ma sonnerie.

— Elle est morte à la pointe du jour.

— Et puis, ce matin, le vent ne portait pas de mon côté.

— C'est la mère Crucifixion. Une bienheureuse.

La prieure se tut, remua un moment les lèvres, comme pour une oraison mentale, et reprit:

— Il y a trois ans, rien que pour avoir vu prier la mère Crucifixion, une janséniste, madame de Béthune, s'est faite orthodoxe.

— Ah oui, j'entends le glas maintenant, révérende mère.

— Les mères l'ont portée dans la chambre des mortes qui donne dans l'église.

— Je sais.

— Aucun autre homme que vous ne peut et ne doit entrer dans cette chambre-là. Veillez-y bien. Il ferait beau voir qu’un homme entrât dans la chambre des mortes!

— Plus souvent!

— Hein?

— Plus souvent!

— Qu’est-ce que vous dites?

— Je dis plus souvent.

— Plus souvent que quoi?

— Révérende mère, je ne dis pas plus souvent que quoi, je dis plus souvent.

— Je ne vous comprends pas. Pourquoi dites-vous plus souvent?

— Pour dire comme vous, révérende mère.

— Mais je n’ai pas dit plus souvent.

— Vous ne l’avez pas dit, mais je l’ai dit pour dire comme vous.

En ce moment neuf heures sonnèrent.

— À neuf heures du matin et à toute heure loué soit et adoré le très Saint-Sacrement de l’autel, dit la prieure.

— Amen, dit Fauchelevent.

L’heure sonna à propos. Elle coupa court à Plus Souvent. Il est probable que sans elle la prieure et Fauchelevent ne se fussent jamais tirés de cet écheveau.

Fauchelevent s’essuya le front.

La prieure fit un nouveau petit murmure intérieur, probablement sacré, puis haussa la voix.

— De son vivant, mère Crucifixion faisait des conversions; après sa mort, elle fera des miracles.

— Elle en fera! répondit Fauchelevent emboîtant le pas, et faisant effort pour ne plus broncher désormais.

— Père Fauvent, la communauté a été bénie en la mère Crucifixion. Sans doute il n’est point donné à tout le monde de mourir comme le cardinal de Bérulle en disant la sainte messe, et d’exhaler son âme vers Dieu en prononçant ces paroles: *Hanc igitur oblationem*. Mais, sans atteindre à tant de bonheur, la mère Crucifixion a eu une mort très précieuse. Elle a eu sa connaissance jusqu’au dernier instant. Elle nous parlait, puis elle parlait aux anges. Elle nous a fait ses derniers commandements. Si vous aviez un peu plus de foi, et si vous aviez pu être dans sa cellule, elle vous aurait guéri votre jambe en y touchant. Elle souriait. On sentait qu'elle ressuscitait en Dieu. Il y a eu du paradis dans cette mort-là.

Fauchelevent crut que c'était une oraison qui finissait.

— Amen, dit-il.

— Père Fauvent, il faut faire ce que veulent les morts.

La prieure dévida quelques grains de son chapelet. Fauchelevent se taisait. Elle poursuivit.

— J'ai consulté sur cette question plusieurs ecclésiastiques travaillant en Notre-Seigneur qui s'occupent dans l'exercice de la vie cléricale et qui font un fruit admirable.

— Révérende mère, on entend bien mieux le glas d'ici que dans le jardin.

— D'ailleurs, c'est plus qu'une morte, c'est une sainte.

— Comme vous, révérende mère.

— Elle couchait dans son cercueil depuis vingt ans, par permission expresse de notre saint-père Pie VII.

— Celui qui a couronné l'emp.... Buonaparte.

Pour un habile homme comme Fauchelevent, le souvenir était malencontreux. Heureusement la prieure, toute à sa pensée, ne l'entendit pas. Elle continua:

— Père Fauvent?

— Révérende mère?

— Saint Diodore, archevêque de Cappadoce, voulut qu'on écrivît sur sa sépulture ce seul mot: *Acarus*, qui signifie ver de terre; cela fut fait. Est-ce vrai?

— Oui, révérende mère.

— Le bienheureux Mezzocane, abbé d'Aquila, voulut être inhumé sous la potence; cela fut fait.

— C'est vrai.

— Saint Térence, évêque de Port sur l'embouchure du Tibre dans la mer, demanda qu'on gravât sur sa pierre le signe qu'on mettait sur la fosse des parricides, dans l'espoir que les passants cracheraient sur son tombeau. Cela fut fait. Il faut obéir aux morts.

— Ainsi soit-il.

— Le corps de Bernard Guidonis, né en France près de Roche-Abeille, fut, comme il l'avait ordonné et malgré le roi de Castille, porté en l'église des Dominicains de Limoges, quoique Bernard Guidonis fût évêque de Tuy en Espagne. Peut-on dire le contraire?

— Pour ça non, révérende mère.

— Le fait est attesté par Plantavit de la Fosse.

Quelques grains du chapelet s'égrenèrent encore silencieusement. La prieure reprit:

— Père Fauvent, la mère Crucifixion sera ensevelie dans le cercueil où elle a couché depuis vingt ans.

— C'est juste.

— C'est une continuation de sommeil.

— J'aurai donc à la clouer dans ce cercueil-là?

— Oui.

— Et nous laisserons de côté la bière des pompes?

— Précisément.

— Je suis aux ordres de la très révérende communauté.

— Les quatre mères chantres vous aideront.

— À clouer le cercueil? Je n'ai pas besoin d'elles.

— Non. À le descendre.

— Où?

— Dans le caveau.

— Quel caveau?

— Sous l'autel.

Fauchelevent fit un soubresaut.

— Le caveau sous l'autel!

— Sous l'autel.

— Mais....

— Vous aurez une barre de fer.

— Oui, mais....

— Vous lèverez la pierre avec la barre au moyen de l'anneau.

— Mais....

— Il faut obéir aux morts. Être enterrée dans le caveau sous l'autel de la chapelle, ne point aller en sol profane, rester morte là où elle a prié vivante; ç'a été le vœu suprême de la mère Crucifixion. Elle nous l'a demandé, c'est-à-dire commandé.

— Mais c'est défendu.

— Défendu par les hommes, ordonné par Dieu.

— Si cela venait à se savoir?

— Nous avons confiance en vous.

— Oh, moi, je suis une pierre de votre mur.

— Le chapitre s’est assemblé. Les mères vocales, que je viens de consulter encore et qui sont en délibération, ont décidé que la mère Crucifixion serait, selon son vœu, enterrée dans son cercueil sous notre autel. Jugez, père Fauvent, s’il allait se faire des miracles ici! quelle gloire en Dieu pour la communauté! Les miracles sortent des tombeaux.

— Mais, révérende mère, si l’agent de la commission de salubrité....

— Saint Benoît II, en matière de sépulture, a résisté à Constantin Pogonat.

— Pourtant le commissaire de police....

— Chonodemaire, un des sept rois allemands qui entrèrent dans les Gaules sous l’empire de Constance, a reconnu expressément le droit des religieux d’être inhumés en religion, c’est-à-dire sous l’autel.

— Mais l’inspecteur de la préfecture....

— Le monde n’est rien devant la croix. Martin, onzième général des chartreux, a donné cette devise à son ordre: *Stat crux dum volvitur orbis*.

— Amen, dit Fauchelevent, imperturbable dans cette façon de se tirer d’affaire toutes les fois qu’il entendait du latin.

Un auditoire quelconque suffit à qui s’est tu trop longtemps. Le jour où le rhéteur Gymnastoras sortit de prison, ayant dans le corps beaucoup de dilemmes et de syllogismes rentrés, il s’arrêta devant le premier arbre qu’il rencontra, le harangua, et fit de très grands efforts pour le convaincre. La prieure, habituellement sujette au barrage du silence, et ayant du trop-plein dans son réservoir, se leva et s’écria avec une loquacité d’écluse lâchée:

— J’ai à ma droite Benoît et à ma gauche Bernard. Qu’est-ce que Bernard? c’est le premier abbé de Clairvaux. Fontaines en Bourgogne est un pays béni pour l’avoir vu naître. Son père s’appelait Técelin et sa mère Alèthe. Il a commencé par Cîteaux pour aboutir à Clairvaux; il a été ordonné abbé par l’évêque de Châlon-sur-Saône, Guillaume de Champeaux; il a eu sept cents novices et fondé cent soixante monastères; il a terrassé Abeilard au concile de Sens, en 1140, et Pierre de Bruys et Henry son disciple, et une autre sorte de dévoyés qu’on nommait les Apostoliques; il a confondu Arnaud de Bresce, foudroyé le moine Raoul, le tueur de juifs, dominé en 1148 le concile de Reims, fait condamner Gilbert de la Porée, évêque de Poitiers, fait condamner Eon de l’Étoile, arrangé les différends des princes, éclairé le roi Louis le Jeune, conseillé le pape Eugène III, réglé le Temple, prêché la croisade, fait deux cent cinquante miracles dans sa vie, et jusqu'à trente-neuf en un jour. Qu'est-ce que Benoît? c'est le patriarche de Mont-Cassin; c'est le deuxième fondateur de la sainteté claustrale, c'est le Basile de l'occident. Son ordre a produit quarante papes, deux cents cardinaux, cinquante patriarches, seize cents archevêques, quatre mille six cents évêques, quatre empereurs, douze impératrices, quarante-six rois, quarante et une reines, trois mille six cents saints canonisés, et subsiste depuis quatorze cents ans. D'un côté saint Bernard; de l'autre l'agent de la salubrité! D'un côté saint Benoît; de l'autre l'inspecteur de la voirie! L'état, la voirie, les pompes funèbres, les règlements, l'administration, est-ce que nous connaissons cela? Aucuns passants seraient indignés de voir comme on nous traite. Nous n'avons même pas le droit de donner notre poussière à Jésus-Christ! Votre salubrité est une invention révolutionnaire. Dieu subordonné au commissaire de police; tel est le siècle. Silence, Fauvent!

Fauchelevent, sous cette douche, n'était pas fort à son aise. La prieure continua.

— Le droit du monastère à la sépulture ne fait doute pour personne. Il n'y a pour le nier que les fanatiques et les errants. Nous vivons dans des temps de confusion terrible. On ignore ce qu'il faut savoir, et l'on sait ce qu'il faut ignorer. On est crasse et impie. Il y a dans cette époque des gens qui ne distinguent pas entre le grandissime saint Bernard et le Bernard dit des Pauvres Catholiques, certain bon ecclésiastique qui vivait dans le treizième siècle. D'autres blasphèment jusqu'à rapprocher l'échafaud de Louis XVI de la croix de Jésus-Christ. Louis XVI n'était qu'un roi. Prenons donc garde à Dieu! Il n'y a plus ni juste ni injuste. On sait le nom de Voltaire et l'on ne sait pas le nom de César de Bus. Pourtant César de Bus est un bienheureux et Voltaire est un malheureux. Le dernier archevêque, le cardinal de Périgord, ne savait même pas que Charles de Gondren a succédé à Bérulle, et François Bourgoin à Gondren, et Jean-François Senault à Bourgoin, et le père de Sainte-Marthe à Jean-François Senault. On connaît le nom du père Coton, non parce qu'il a été un des trois qui ont poussé à la fondation de l'Oratoire, mais parce qu'il a été matière à juron pour le roi huguenot Henri IV. Ce qui fait saint François de Sales aimable aux gens du monde, c'est qu'il trichait au jeu. Et puis on attaque la religion. Pourquoi? Parce qu'il y a eu de mauvais prêtres, parce que Sagittaire, évêque de Gap, était frère de Salone, évêque d'Embrun, et que tous les deux ont suivi Mommol. Qu'est-ce que cela fait? Cela empêche-t-il Martin de Tours d'être un saint et d’avoir donné la moitié de son manteau à un pauvre? On persécute les saints. On ferme les yeux aux vérités. Les ténèbres sont l’habitude. Les plus féroces bêtes sont les bêtes aveugles. Personne ne pense à l’enfer pour de bon. Oh! le méchant peuple! De par le Roi signifie aujourd’hui de par la Révolution. On ne sait plus ce qu’on doit, ni aux vivants, ni aux morts. Il est défendu de mourir saintement. Le sépulcre est une affaire civile. Ceci fait horreur. Saint Léon II a écrit deux lettres exprès, l’une à Pierre Notaire, l’autre au roi des Visigoths, pour combattre et rejeter, dans les questions qui touchent aux morts, l’autorité de l’exarque et la suprématie de l’empereur. Gautier, évêque de Châlons, tenait tête en cette matière à Othon, duc de Bourgogne. L’ancienne magistrature en tombait d’accord. Autrefois nous avions voix au chapitre même dans les choses du siècle. L’abbé de Cîteaux, général de l’ordre, était conseiller-né au parlement de Bourgogne. Nous faisons de nos morts ce que nous voulons. Est-ce que le corps de saint Benoît lui-même n’est pas en France dans l’abbaye de Fleury, dite Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire, quoiqu’il soit mort en Italie au Mont-Cassin, un samedi 21 du mois de mars de l’an 543? Tout ceci est incontestable. J’abhorre les psallants, je hais les prieurs, j’exècre les hérétiques, mais je détesterais plus encore quiconque me soutiendrait le contraire. On n’a qu’à lire Arnoul Wion, Gabriel Bucelin, Trithème, Maurolicus et dom Luc d’Achery.

La prieure respira, puis se tourna vers Fauchelevent:

— Père Fauvent, est-ce dit?

— C’est dit, révérende mère.

— Peut-on compter sur vous?

— J’obéirai.

— C’est bien.

— Je suis tout dévoué au couvent.

— C’est entendu. Vous fermerez le cercueil. Les sœurs le porteront dans la chapelle. On dira l’office des morts. Puis on rentrera dans le cloître. Entre onze heures et minuit, vous viendrez avec votre barre de fer. Tout se passera dans le plus grand secret. Il n’y aura dans la chapelle que les quatre mères chantres, la mère Ascension, et vous.

— Et la sœur qui sera au poteau?

— Elle ne se retournera pas.

— Mais elle entendra.

— Elle n'écoutera pas. D'ailleurs, ce que le cloître sait, le monde l'ignore.

Il y eut encore une pause. La prieure poursuivit:

— Vous ôterez votre grelot. Il est inutile que la sœur au poteau s'aperçoive que vous êtes là.

— Révérende mère?

— Quoi, père Fauvent?

— Le médecin des morts a-t-il fait sa visite?

— Il va la faire aujourd'hui à quatre heures. On a sonné la sonnerie qui fait venir le médecin des morts. Mais vous n'entendez donc aucune sonnerie?

— Je ne fais attention qu'à la mienne.

— Cela est bien, père Fauvent.

— Révérende mère, il faudra un levier d'au moins six pieds.

— Où le prendrez-vous?

— Où il ne manque pas de grilles, il ne manque pas de barres de fer. J'ai mon tas de ferrailles au fond du jardin.

— Trois quarts d'heure environ avant minuit; n'oubliez pas.

— Révérende mère?

— Quoi?

— Si jamais vous aviez d'autres ouvrages comme ça, c'est mon frère qui est fort. Un Turc!

— Vous ferez le plus vite possible.

— Je ne vais pas hardi vite. Je suis infirme; c'est pour cela qu'il me faudrait un aide. Je boite.

— Boiter n'est pas un tort, et peut être une bénédiction. L'empereur Henri II, qui combattit l'antipape Grégoire et rétablit Benoît VIII, a deux surnoms: le Saint et le Boiteux.

— C'est bien bon, deux surtout, murmura Fauchelevent, qui, en réalité, avait l'oreille un peu dure.

— Père Fauvent, j'y pense, prenons une heure entière. Ce n'est pas trop. Soyez près du maître-autel avec votre barre de fer à onze heures. L'office commence à minuit. Il faut que tout soit fini un bon quart d'heure auparavant.

— Je ferai tout pour prouver mon zèle à la communauté. Voilà qui est dit. Je clouerai le cercueil. À onze heures précises je serai dans la chapelle. Les mères chantres y seront, la mère Ascension y sera. Deux hommes, cela vaudrait mieux. Enfin, n’importe! J’aurai mon levier. Nous ouvrirons le caveau, nous descendrons le cercueil, et nous refermerons le caveau. Après quoi, plus trace de rien. Le gouvernement ne s’en doutera pas. Révérende mère, tout est arrangé ainsi?

— Non.

— Qu’y a-t-il donc encore?

— Il reste la bière vide.

Ceci fit un temps d’arrêt. Fauchelevent songeait. La prieure songeait.

— Père Fauvent, que fera-t-on de la bière?

— On la portera en terre.

— Vide?

Autre silence. Fauchelevent fit de la main gauche cette espèce de geste qui donne congé à une question inquiétante.

— Révérende mère, c’est moi qui cloue la bière dans la chambre basse de l’église, et personne n’y peut entrer que moi, et je couvrirai la bière du drap mortuaire.

— Oui, mais les porteurs, en la mettant dans le corbillard et en la descendant dans la fosse, sentiront bien qu’il n’y a rien dedans.

— Ah! di...! s’écria Fauchelevent.

La prieure commença un signe de croix, et regarda fixement le jardinier. *Able* lui resta dans le gosier.

Il se hâta d’improviser un expédient pour faire oublier le juron.

— Révérende mère, je mettrai de la terre dans la bière. Cela fera l’effet de quelqu’un.

— Vous avez raison. La terre, c’est la même chose que l’homme. Ainsi vous arrangerez la bière vide?

— J’en fais mon affaire.

Le visage de la prieure, jusqu’alors trouble et obscur, se rasséréna. Elle lui fit le signe du supérieur congédiant l’inférieur. Fauchelevent se dirigea vers la porte. Comme il allait sortir, la prieure éleva doucement la voix:

— Père Fauvent, je suis contente de vous; demain, après l’enterrement, amenez-moi votre frère, et dites-lui qu’il m’amène sa fille.

Chapitre IV

Où Jean Valjean a tout à fait l’air d’avoir lu Austin Castillejo

Des enjambées de boiteux sont comme des œillades de borgne; elles n’arrivent pas vite au but. En outre, Fauchelevent était perplexe. Il mit près d’un quart d’heure à revenir dans la baraque du jardin. Cosette était éveillée. Jean Valjean l’avait assise près du feu. Au moment où Fauchelevent entra, Jean Valjean lui montrait la hotte du jardinier accrochée au mur et lui disait:

— Écoute-moi bien, ma petite Cosette. Il faudra nous en aller de cette maison, mais nous y reviendrons et nous y serons très bien. Le bonhomme d’ici t’emportera sur son dos là-dedans. Tu m’attendras chez une dame. J’irai te retrouver. Surtout, si tu ne veux pas que la Thénardier te reprenne, obéis et ne dis rien!

Cosette fit un signe de tête d’un air grave.

Au bruit de Fauchelevent poussant la porte, Jean Valjean se retourna.

— Eh bien?

— Tout est arrangé, et rien ne l’est, dit Fauchelevent. J’ai permission de vous faire entrer; mais avant de vous faire entrer, il faut vous faire sortir. C’est là qu’est l’embarras de charrettes. Pour la petite, c’est aisé.

— Vous l’emporterez?

— Et elle se taira?

— J’en réponds.

— Mais vous, père Madeleine?

Et, après un silence où il y avait de l’anxiété, Fauchelevent s’écria:

— Mais sortez donc par où vous êtes entré!

Jean Valjean, comme la première fois, se borna à répondre:

— Impossible.

Fauchelevent, se parlant plus à lui-même qu’à Jean Valjean, grommela:

— Il y a une autre chose qui me tourmente. J’ai dit que j’y mettrais de la terre. C’est que je pense que de la terre là-dedans, au lieu d’un corps, ça ne sera pas ressemblant, ça n’ira pas, ça se déplacera, ça remuera. Les hommes le sentiront. Vous comprenez, père Madeleine, le gouvernement s’en apercevra.

Jean Valjean le considéra entre les deux yeux, et crut qu’il délirait.

Fauchelevent reprit:

— Comment di — antre allez-vous sortir? C’est qu’il faut que tout cela soit fait demain! C’est demain que je vous amène. La prieure vous attend.

Alors il expliqua à Jean Valjean que c’était une récompense pour un service que lui, Fauchelevent, rendait à la communauté. Qu’il entrait dans ses attributions de participer aux sépultures, qu’il clouait les bières et assistait le fossoyeur au cimetière. Que la religieuse morte le matin avait demandé d’être ensevelie dans le cercueil qui lui servait de lit et enterrée dans le caveau sous l’autel de la chapelle. Que cela était défendu par les règlements de police, mais que c’était une de ces mortes à qui l’on ne refuse rien. Que la prieure et les mères vocales entendaient exécuter le vœu de la défunte. Que tant pis pour le gouvernement. Que lui Fauchelevent clouerait le cercueil dans la cellule, lèverait la pierre dans la chapelle, et descendrait la morte dans le caveau. Et que, pour le remercier, la prieure admettait dans la maison son frère comme jardinier et sa nièce comme pensionnaire. Que son frère, c’était Mr Madeleine, et que sa nièce, c’était Cosette. Que la prieure lui avait dit d’amener son frère le lendemain soir, après l’enterrement postiche au cimetière. Mais qu’il ne pouvait pas amener du dehors Mr Madeleine, si Mr Madeleine n’était pas dehors. Que c’était là le premier embarras. Et puis qu’il avait encore un embarras, la bière vide.

— Qu’est-ce que c’est que la bière vide? demanda Jean Valjean.

Fauchelevent répondit:

— La bière de l’administration.

— Quelle bière? et quelle administration?

— Une religieuse meurt. Le médecin de la municipalité vient et dit: il y a une religieuse morte. Le gouvernement envoie une bière. Le lendemain il envoie un corbillard et des croque-morts pour reprendre la bière et la porter au cimetière. Les croque-morts viendront et soulèveront la bière; il n’y aura rien dedans.

— Mettez-y quelque chose.

— Un mort? je n’en ai pas.

— Non.

— Quoi donc?

— Un vivant.

— Quel vivant?

— Moi, dit Jean Valjean.

Fauchelevent, qui s’était assis, se leva comme si un pétard fût parti sous sa chaise.

— Vous!

— Pourquoi pas?

Jean Valjean eut un de ces rares sourires qui lui venaient comme une lueur dans un ciel d’hiver.

— Vous savez, Fauchelevent, que vous avez dit: La mère Crucifixion est morte, et j’ai ajouté: Et le père Madeleine est enterré. Ce sera cela.

— Ah, bon, vous riez. Vous ne parlez pas sérieusement.

— Très sérieusement. Il faut sortir d’ici?

— Sans doute.

— Je vous ai dit de me trouver pour moi aussi une hotte et une bâche.

— Eh bien?

— La hotte sera en sapin, et la bâche sera un drap noir.

— D’abord, un drap blanc. On enterre les religieuses en blanc.

— Va pour le drap blanc.

— Vous n’êtes pas un homme comme les autres, père Madeleine.

Voir de telles imaginations, qui ne sont pas autre chose que les sauvages et téméraires inventions du bagne, sortir des choses paisibles qui l’entouraient et se mêler à ce qu’il appelait le «petit train-train du couvent», c’était pour Fauchelevent une stupeur comparable à celle d’un passant qui verrait un goéland pêcher dans le ruisseau de la rue Saint-Denis.

Jean Valjean poursuivit:

— Il s’agit de sortir d’ici sans être vu. C’est un moyen. Mais d’abord renseignez-moi. Comment cela se passe-t-il? Où est cette bière?

— Celle qui est vide?

— Oui.

— En bas, dans ce qu’on appelle la salle des mortes. Elle est sur deux tréteaux et sous le drap mortuaire.

— Quelle est la longueur de la bière?

— Six pieds.

— Qu’est-ce que c’est que la salle des mortes?

— C’est une chambre du rez-de-chaussée qui a une fenêtre grillée sur le jardin qu’on ferme du dehors avec un volet, et deux portes; l’une qui va au couvent, l’autre qui va à l’église.

— Quelle église?

— L’église de la rue, l’église de tout le monde.

— Avez-vous les clefs de ces deux portes?

— Non. J’ai la clef de la porte qui communique au couvent; le concierge a la clef de la porte qui communique à l’église.

— Quand le concierge ouvre-t-il cette porte-là?

— Uniquement pour laisser entrer les croque-morts qui viennent chercher la bière. La bière sortie, la porte se referme.

— Qui est-ce qui cloue la bière?

— C’est moi.

— Qui est-ce qui met le drap dessus?

— C’est moi.

— Êtes-vous seul?

— Pas un autre homme, excepté le médecin de la police, ne peut entrer dans la salle des mortes. C’est même écrit sur le mur.

— Pourriez-vous, cette nuit, quand tout dormira dans le couvent, me cacher dans cette salle?

— Non. Mais je puis vous cacher dans un petit réduit noir qui donne dans la salle des mortes, où je mets mes outils d’enterrement, et dont j’ai la garde et la clef.

— À quelle heure le corbillard viendra-t-il chercher la bière demain?

— Vers trois heures du soir. L’enterrement se fait au cimetière Vaugirard, un peu avant la nuit. Ce n’est pas tout près.

— Je resterai caché dans votre réduit à outils toute la nuit et toute la matinée. Et à manger? J’aurai faim.

— Je vous porterai de quoi.

— Vous pourriez venir me clouer dans la bière à deux heures.

Fauchelevent recula et se fît craquer les os des doigts.

— Mais c’est impossible!

— Bah! prendre un marteau et clouer des clous dans une planche!

Ce qui semblait inouï à Fauchelevent était, nous le répétons, simple pour Jean Valjean. Jean Valjean avait traversé de pires détroits. Quiconque a été prisonnier sait l’art de se rapetisser selon le diamètre des évasions. Le prisonnier est sujet à la fuite comme le malade à la crise qui le sauve ou qui le perd. Une évasion, c’est une guérison. Que n’accepte-t-on pas pour guérir? Se faire clouer et emporter dans une caisse comme un colis, vivre longtemps dans une boîte, trouver de l’air où il n’y en a pas, économiser sa respiration des heures entières, savoir étouffer sans mourir, c’était là un des sombres talents de Jean Valjean.

Du reste, une bière dans laquelle il y a un être vivant, cet expédient de forçat, est aussi un expédient d'empereur. S'il faut en croire le moine Austin Castillejo, ce fut le moyen que Charles-Quint, voulant après son abdication revoir une dernière fois la Plombes, employa pour la faire entrer dans le monastère de Saint-Just et pour l'en faire sortir.

Fauchelevent, un peu revenu à lui, s'écria:

— Mais comment ferez-vous pour respirer?

— Je respirerai.

— Dans cette boîte! Moi, seulement d'y penser, je suffoque.

— Vous avez bien une vrille, vous ferez quelques petits trous autour de la bouche çà et là, et vous clouerez sans serrer la planche de dessus.

— Bon! Et s'il vous arrive de tousser ou d'éternuer?

— Celui qui s'évade ne tousse pas et n'éternue pas.

Et Jean Valjean ajouta:

— Père Fauchelevent, il faut se décider: ou être pris ici, ou accepter la sortie par le corbillard.

Tout le monde a remarqué le goût qu'ont les chats de s'arrêter et de flâner entre les deux battants d'une porte entre-bâillée. Qui n'a dit à un chat: Mais entre donc! Il y a des hommes qui, dans un incident entr'ouvert devant eux, ont aussi une tendance à rester indécis entre deux résolutions, au risque de se faire écraser par le destin fermant brusquement l'aventure. Les trop prudents, tout chats qu'ils sont, et parce qu'ils sont chats, courent quelquefois plus de danger que les audacieux. Fauchelevent était de cette nature hésitante. Pourtant le sang-froid de Jean Valjean le gagnait malgré lui. Il grommela:

— Au fait, c'est qu'il n'y a pas d'autre moyen.

Jean Valjean reprit:

— La seule chose qui m'inquiète, c'est ce qui se passera au cimetière.

— C'est justement cela qui ne m'embarrasse pas, s'écria Fauchelevent. Si vous êtes sûr de vous tirer de la bière, moi je suis sûr de vous tirer de la fosse. Le fossoyeur est un ivrogne de mes amis. C'est le père Mestienne. Un vieux de la vieille vigne. Le fossoyeur met les morts dans la fosse, et moi je mets le fossoyeur dans ma poche. Ce qui se passera je vais vous le dire. On arrivera un peu avant la brune, trois quarts d'heure avant la fermeture des grilles du cimetière. Le corbillard roulera jusqu'à la fosse. Je suivrai; c'est ma besogne. J'aurai un marteau, un ciseau et des tenailles dans ma poche. Le corbillard s'arrête, les croque-morts vous nouent une corde autour de votre bière et vous descendent. Le prêtre dit les prières, fait le signe de croix, jette l’eau bénite, et file. Je reste seul avec le père Mestienne. C’est mon ami, je vous dis. De deux choses l’une, ou il sera soûl, ou il ne sera pas soûl. S’il n’est pas soûl, je lui dis: Viens boire un coup pendant que le *Bon Coing* est encore ouvert. Je l’emmène, je le grise, le père Mestienne n’est pas long à griser, il est toujours commencé, je te le couche sous la table, je lui prends sa carte pour rentrer au cimetière, et je reviens sans lui. Vous n’avez plus affaire qu’à moi. S’il est soûl, je lui dis: Va-t’en, je vais faire ta besogne. Il s’en va, et je vous tire du trou.

Jean Valjean lui tendit sa main sur laquelle Fauchelevent se précipita avec une touchante effusion paysanne.

— C’est convenu, père Fauchelevent. Tout ira bien.

— Pourvu que rien ne se dérange, pensa Fauchelevent. Si cela allait devenir terrible!

Chapitre V

Il ne suffit pas d'être ivrogne pour être immortel

Le lendemain, comme le soleil déclinait, les allants et venants fort clairsemés du boulevard du Maine ôtaient leur chapeau au passage d'un corbillard vieux modèle, orné de têtes de mort, de tibias et de larmes. Dans ce corbillard il y avait un cercueil couvert d'un drap blanc sur lequel s'étalait une vaste croix noire, pareille à une grande morte dont les bras pendent. Un carrosse drapé, où l'on apercevait un prêtre en surplis et un enfant de chœur en calotte rouge, suivait. Deux croque-morts en uniforme gris à parements noirs marchaient à droite et à gauche du corbillard. Derrière venait un vieux homme en habits d'ouvrier, qui boitait. Ce cortège se dirigeait vers le cimetière Vaugirard.

On voyait passer de la poche de l'homme le manche d'un marteau, la lame d'un ciseau à froid et la double antenne d'une paire de tenailles.

Le cimetière Vaugirard faisait exception parmi les cimetières de Paris. Il avait ses usages particuliers, de même qu'il avait sa porte cochère et sa porte bâtarde que, dans le quartier, les vieilles gens, tenaces aux vieux mots, appelaient la porte cavalière et la porte piétonne. Les bernardines-bénédictines du Petit-Picpus avaient obtenu, nous l'avons dit, d'y être enterrées dans un coin à part et le soir, ce terrain ayant jadis appartenu à leur communauté. Les fossoyeurs, ayant de cette façon dans le cimetière un service du soir l'été et de nuit l'hiver, y étaient astreints à une discipline particulière. Les portes des cimetières de Paris se fermaient à cette époque au coucher du soleil, et, ceci étant une mesure d'ordre municipal, le cimetière Vaugirard y était soumis comme les autres. La porte cavalière et la porte piétonne étaient deux grilles contiguës, accostées d'un pavillon bâti par l'architecte Perronet et habité par le portier du cimetière. Ces grilles tournaient donc inexorablement sur leurs gonds à l'instant où le soleil disparaissait derrière le dôme des Invalides. Si quelque fossoyeur, à ce moment-là, était attardé dans le cimetière, il n'avait qu'une ressource pour sortir, sa carte de fossoyeur délivrée par l'administration des pompes funèbres. Une espèce de boîte aux lettres était pratiquée dans le volet de la fenêtre du concierge. Le fossoyeur jetait sa carte dans cette boîte, le concierge l'entendait tomber, tirait le cordon, et la porte piétonne s'ouvrait.

Si le fossoyeur n'avait pas sa carte, il se nommait, le concierge, parfois couché et endormi, se levait, allait reconnaître le fossoyeur, et ouvrait la porte avec la clef; le fossoyeur sortait, mais payait quinze francs d'amende.

Ce cimetière, avec ses originalités en dehors de la règle, gênait la symétrie administrative. On l'a supprimé peu après 1830. Le cimetière Montparnasse, dit cimetière de l'Est, lui a succédé, et a hérité de ce fameux cabaret mitoyen au cimetière Vaugirard qui était surmonté d'un coing peint sur une planche, et qui faisait angle, d'un côté sur les tables des buveurs, de l'autre sur les tombeaux, avec cette enseigne: *Au Bon Coing*.

Le cimetière Vaugirard était ce qu'on pourrait appeler un cimetière fané. Il tombait en désuétude. La moisissure l'envahissait, les fleurs le quittaient. Les bourgeois se souciaient peu d'être enterrés à Vaugirard; cela sentait le pauvre. Le Père-Lachaise, à la bonne heure! Être enterré au Père-Lachaise, c'est comme avoir des meubles en acajou. L'élégance se reconnaît là. Le cimetière Vaugirard était un enclos vénérable, planté en ancien jardin français. Des allées droites, des buis, des thuias, des houx, de vieilles tombes sous de vieux ifs, l'herbe très haute. Le soir y était tragique. Il y avait là des lignes très lugubres.

Le soleil n'était pas encore couché quand le corbillard au drap blanc et à la croix noire entra dans l'avenue du cimetière Vaugirard. L'homme boiteux qui le suivait n'était autre que Fauchelevent.

L'enterrement de la mère Crucifixion dans le caveau sous l'autel, la sortie de Cosette, l'introduction de Jean Valjean dans la salle des mortes, tout s'était exécuté sans encombre, et rien n'avait accroché.

Disons-le en passant, l'inhumation de la mère Crucifixion sous l'autel du couvent est pour nous chose parfaitement vénielle. C'est une de ces fautes qui ressemblent à un devoir. Les religieuses l'avaient accomplie, non seulement sans trouble, mais avec l'applaudissement de leur conscience. Au cloître, ce qu'on appelle «le gouvernement» n'est qu'une immixtion dans l'autorité, immixtion toujours discutable. D'abord la règle; quant au code, on verra. Hommes, faites des lois tant qu'il vous plaira, mais gardez-les pour vous. Le péage à César n'est jamais que le reste du péage à Dieu. Un prince n'est rien près d'un principe.

Fauchelevent boitait derrière le corbillard, très content. Ses deux complots jumeaux, l'un avec les religieuses, l'autre avec Mr Madeleine, l'un pour le couvent, l'autre contre, avaient réussi de front. Le calme de Jean Valjean était de ces tranquillités puissantes qui se communiquent.

Fauchelevent ne doutait plus du succès. Ce qui restait à faire n’était rien. Depuis deux ans, il avait grisé dix fois le fossoyeur, le brave père Mestienne, un bonhomme joufflu. Il en jouait, du père Mestienne. Il en faisait ce qu’il voulait. Il le coiffait de sa volonté et de sa fantaisie. La tête de Mestienne s’ajustait au bonnet de Fauchelevent. La sécurité de Fauchelevent était complète.

Au moment où le convoi entra dans l’avenue menant au cimetière, Fauchelevent, heureux, regarda le corbillard et se frotta ses grosses mains en disant à demi-voix:

— En voilà une farce!

Tout à coup le corbillard s’arrêta; on était à la grille. Il fallait exhiber le permis d’inhumer. L’homme des pompes funèbres s’aboucha avec le portier du cimetière. Pendant ce colloque, qui produit toujours un temps d’arrêt d’une ou deux minutes, quelqu’un, un inconnu, vint se placer derrière le corbillard à côté de Fauchelevent. C’était une espèce d’ouvrier qui avait une veste aux larges poches, et une pioche sous le bras.

Fauchelevent regarda cet inconnu.

— Qui êtes-vous? demanda-t-il.

L’homme répondit:

— Le fossoyeur.

Si l’on survivait à un boulet de canon en pleine poitrine, on ferait la figure que fit Fauchelevent.

— Le fossoyeur!

— Oui.

— Vous?

— Moi.

— Le fossoyeur, c’est le père Mestienne.

— C’était.

— Comment! c’était?

— Il est mort.

Fauchelevent s’était attendu à tout, excepté à ceci, qu’un fossoyeur pût mourir. C’est pourtant vrai; les fossoyeurs eux-mêmes meurent.

À force de creuser la fosse des autres, on ouvre la sienne.

Fauchelevent demeura béant. Il eut à peine la force de bégayer:

— Mais ce n’est pas possible!

— Cela est.

— Mais, reprit-il faiblement, le fossoyeur, c’est le père Mestienne.

— Après Napoléon, Louis XVIII. Après Mestienne, Gribier. Paysan, je m'appelle Gribier.

Fauchelevent, tout pâle, considéra ce Gribier.

C'était un homme long, maigre, livide, parfaitement funèbre. Il avait l'air d'un médecin manqué tourné fossoyeur.

Fauchelevent éclata de rire.

— Ah! comme il arrive de drôles de choses! le père Mestienne est mort. Le petit père Mestienne est mort, mais vive le petit père Lenoir! Vous savez ce que c'est que le petit père Lenoir? C'est le cruchon du rouge à six sur le plomb. C'est le cruchon du Suresne, morbigou! du vrai Suresne de Paris! Ah! il est mort, le vieux Mestienne! J'en suis fâché; c'était un bon vivant. Mais vous aussi, vous êtes un bon vivant. Pas vrai, camarade? Nous allons aller boire ensemble un coup, tout à l'heure.

L'homme répondit: — J'ai étudié. J'ai fait ma quatrième. Je ne bois jamais.

Le corbillard s'était remis en marche et roulait dans la grande allée du cimetière.

Fauchelevent avait ralenti son pas. Il boitait, plus encore d'anxiété que d'infirmité.

Le fossoyeur marchait devant lui.

Fauchelevent passa encore une fois l'examen du Gribier inattendu.

C'était un de ces hommes qui, jeunes, ont l'air vieux, et qui, maigres, sont très forts.

— Camarade! cria Fauchelevent.

L'homme se retourna.

— Je suis le fossoyeur du couvent.

— Mon collègue, dit l'homme.

Fauchelevent, illettré, mais très fin, comprit qu'il avait affaire à une espèce redoutable, à un beau parleur.

Il grommela:

— Comme ça, le père Mestienne est mort.

L'homme répondit:

— Complètement. Le bon Dieu a consulté son carnet d'échéances. C'était le tour du père Mestienne. Le père Mestienne est mort.

Fauchelevent répéta machinalement:

— Le bon Dieu....

— Le bon Dieu, fit l’homme avec autorité. Pour les philosophes, le Père éternel; pour les jacobins, l’Être suprême.

— Est-ce que nous ne ferons pas connaissance? balbutia Fauchelevent.

— Elle est faite. Vous êtes paysan, je suis parisien.

— On ne se connaît pas tant qu’on n’a pas bu ensemble. Qui vide son verre vide son cœur. Vous allez venir boire avec moi. Ça ne se refuse pas.

— D’abord la besogne.

Fauchelevent pensa: je suis perdu.

On n’était plus qu’à quelques tours de roue de la petite allée qui menait au coin des religieuses. Le fossoyeur reprit:

— Paysan, j’ai sept mioches qu’il faut nourrir. Comme il faut qu’ils mangent, il ne faut pas que je boive.

Et il ajouta avec la satisfaction d’un être sérieux qui fait une phrase:

— Leur faim est ennemie de ma soif.

Le corbillard tourna un massif de cyprès, quitta la grande allée, en prit une petite, entra dans les terres et s’enfonça dans un fourré. Ceci indiquait la proximité immédiate de la sépulture. Fauchelevent ralentissait son pas, mais ne pouvait ralentir le corbillard. Heureusement la terre meuble, et mouillée par les pluies d’hiver, engluait les roues et alourdissait la marche.

Il se rapprocha du fossoyeur.

— Il y a un si bon petit vin d’Argenteuil, murmura Fauchelevent.

— Villageois, reprit l’homme, cela ne devrait pas être que je sois fossoyeur. Mon père était portier au Prytanée. Il me destinait à la littérature. Mais il a eu des malheurs. Il a fait des pertes à la Bourse. J’ai dû renoncer à l’état d’auteur. Pourtant je suis encore écrivain public.

— Mais vous n’êtes donc pas fossoyeur? repartit Fauchelevent, se raccrochant à cette branche, bien faible.

— L’un n’empêche pas l’autre. Je cumule.

Fauchelevent ne comprit pas ce dernier mot.

— Venons boire, dit-il.

Ici une observation est nécessaire. Fauchelevent, quelle que fût son angoisse, offrait à boire, mais ne s’expliquait pas sur un point: qui payera? D’ordinaire Fauchelevent offrait, et le père Mestienne payait. Une offre à boire résultait évidemment de la situation nouvelle créée par le fossoyeur nouveau, et cette offre il fallait la faire, mais le vieux jardinier laissait, non sans intention, le proverbial quart d’heure, dit de Rabelais, dans l’ombre. Quant à lui, Fauchelevent, si ému qu’il fût, il ne se souciait point de payer.

Le fossoyeur poursuivit, avec un sourire supérieur:

— Il faut manger. J’ai accepté la survivance du père Mestienne. Quand on a fait presque ses classes, on est philosophe. Au travail de la main, j’ai ajouté le travail du bras. J’ai mon échoppe d’écrivain au marché de la rue de Sèvres. Vous savez? le marché aux Parapluies. Toutes les cuisinières de la Croix-Rouge s’adressent à moi. Je leur bâcle leurs déclarations aux tourlourous. Le matin j’écris des billets doux, le soir je creuse des fosses. Telle est la vie, campagnard.

Le corbillard avançait. Fauchelevent, au comble de l’inquiétude, regardait de tous les côtés autour de lui. De grosses larmes de sueur lui tombaient du front.

— Pourtant, continua le fossoyeur, on ne peut pas servir deux maîtresses. Il faudra que je choisisse de la plume ou de la pioche. La pioche me gâte la main.

Le corbillard s’arrêta.

L’enfant de chœur descendit de la voiture drapée, puis le prêtre.

Une des petites roues de devant du corbillard montait un peu sur un tas de terre au delà duquel on voyait une fosse ouverte.

— En voilà une farce! répéta Fauchelevent consterné.

Chapitre VI

Entre quatre planches

Qui était dans la bière? on le sait. Jean Valjean.

Jean Valjean s’était arrangé pour vivre là dedans, et il respirait à peu près.

C’est une chose étrange à quel point la sécurité de la conscience donne la sécurité du reste. Toute la combinaison préméditée par Jean Valjean marchait, et marchait bien, depuis la veille. Il comptait, comme Fauchelevent, sur le père Mestienne. Il ne doutait pas de la fin. Jamais situation plus critique, jamais calme plus complet.

Les quatre planches du cercueil dégagent une sorte de paix terrible. Il semblait que quelque chose du repos des morts entrât dans la tranquillité de Jean Valjean.

Du fond de cette bière, il avait pu suivre et il suivait toutes les phases du drame redoutable qu’il jouait avec la mort.

Peu après que Fauchelevent eut achevé de clouer la planche de dessus, Jean Valjean s’était senti emporter, puis rouler. À moins de secousses, il avait senti qu’on passait du pavé à la terre battue, c’est-à-dire qu’on quittait les rues et qu’on arrivait aux boulevards. À un bruit sourd, il avait deviné qu’on traversait le pont d’Austerlitz. Au premier temps d’arrêt, il avait compris qu’on entrait dans le cimetière; au second temps d’arrêt, il s’était dit: voici la fosse.

Brusquement il sentit que des mains saisissaient la bière, puis un frottement rauque sur les planches; il se rendit compte que c’était une corde qu’on nouait autour du cercueil pour le descendre dans l’excavation.

Puis il eut une espèce d’étourdissement.

Probablement les croque-morts et le fossoyeur avaient laissé basculer le cercueil et descendu la tête avant les pieds. Il revint pleinement à lui en se sentant horizontal et immobile. Il venait de toucher le fond.

Il sentit un certain froid.

Une voix s’éleva au-dessus de lui, glaciale et solennelle. Il entendit passer, si lentement qu’il pouvait les saisir l’un après l’autre, des mots latins qu’il ne comprenait pas:

— *Qui dormiunt in terrae pulvere, evigilabunt; alii in vitam aeternam, et alii in opprobrium, ut videant semper*.

Une voix d’enfant dit:

— *De profundis*.

La voix grave recommença:

— *Requiem aeternam dona ei, Domine*.

La voix d’enfant répondit:

— *Et lux perpetua luceat ei*.

Il entendit sur la planche qui le recouvrait quelque chose comme le frappement doux de quelques gouttes de pluie. C’était probablement l’eau bénite.

Il songea: Cela va être fini. Encore un peu de patience. Le prêtre va s’en aller. Fauchelevent emmènera Mestienne boire. On me laissera. Puis Fauchelevent reviendra seul, et je sortirai. Ce sera l’affaire d’une bonne heure.

La voix grave reprit:

— *Requiescat in pace*.

Et la voix d’enfant dit:

— *Amen*.

Jean Valjean, l’oreille tendue, perçut quelque chose comme des pas qui s’éloignaient.

— Les voilà qui s’en vont, pensa-t-il. Je suis seul.

Tout à coup il entendit sur sa tête un bruit qui lui sembla la chute du tonnerre.

C’était une pelletée de terre qui tombait sur le cercueil.

Une seconde pelletée de terre tomba.

Un des trous par où il respirait venait de se boucher.

Une troisième pelletée de terre tomba.

Puis une quatrième.

Il est des choses plus fortes que l’homme le plus fort. Jean Valjean perdit connaissance.

Chapitre VII

Où l'on trouvera l'origine du mot: ne pas perdre la carte

Voici ce qui se passait au-dessus de la bière où était Jean Valjean.

Quand le corbillard se fut éloigné, quand le prêtre et l'enfant de chœur furent remontés en voiture et partis, Fauchelevent, qui ne quittait pas des yeux le fossoyeur, le vit se pencher et empoigner sa pelle, qui était enfoncée droite dans le tas de terre.

Alors Fauchelevent prit une résolution suprême.

Il se plaça entre la fosse et le fossoyeur, croisa les bras, et dit:

— C'est moi qui paye!

Le fossoyeur le regarda avec étonnement, et répondit:

— Quoi, paysan?

Fauchelevent répéta:

— C'est moi qui paye!

— Quoi?

— Le vin.

— Quel vin?

— L'Argenteuil.

— Où ça l'Argenteuil?

— Au Bon Coing.

— Va-t'en au diable! dit le fossoyeur.

Et il jeta une pelletée de terre sur le cercueil.

La bière rendit un son creux. Fauchelevent se sentit chanceler et prêt à tomber lui-même dans la fosse. Il cria, d'une voix où commençait à se mêler l'étranglement du râle:

— Camarade, avant que le Bon Coing soit fermé!

Le fossoyeur reprit de la terre dans la pelle. Fauchelevent continua:

— Je paye!

Et il saisit le bras du fossoyeur.

— Écoutez-moi, camarade. Je suis le fossoyeur du couvent. Je viens pour vous aider. C'est une besogne qui peut se faire la nuit. Commençons donc par aller boire un coup.

Et tout en parlant, tout en se cramponnant à cette insistance désespérée, il faisait cette réflexion lugubre:

— Et quand il boirait! se griserait-il?

— Provincial, dit le fossoyeur, si vous le voulez absolument, j'y consens. Nous boirons. Après l'ouvrage, jamais avant.

Et il donna le branle à sa pelle. Fauchelevent le retint.

— C'est de l'Argenteuil à six!

— Ah çà, dit le fossoyeur, vous êtes sonneur de cloches. Din don, din don; vous ne savez dire que ça. Allez vous faire lanlaire.

Et il lança la seconde pelletée.

Fauchelevent arrivait à ce moment où l'on ne sait plus ce qu'on dit.

— Mais venez donc boire, cria-t-il, puisque c'est moi qui paye!

— Quand nous aurons couché l'enfant, dit le fossoyeur.

Il jeta la troisième pelletée.

Puis il enfonça la pelle dans la terre et ajouta:

— Voyez-vous, il va faire froid cette nuit, et la morte crierait derrière nous si nous la plantions là sans couverture.

En ce moment, tout en chargeant sa pelle, le fossoyeur se courbait et la poche de sa veste bâillait.

Le regard effaré de Fauchelevent tomba machinalement dans cette poche, et s'y arrêta.

Le soleil n'était pas encore caché par l'horizon; il faisait assez jour pour qu'on pût distinguer quelque chose de blanc au fond de cette poche béante.

Toute la quantité d'éclair que peut avoir l'œil d'un paysan picard traversa la prunelle de Fauchelevent. Il venait de lui venir une idée.

Sans que le fossoyeur, tout à sa pelletée de terre, s'en aperçût, il lui plongea par derrière la main dans la poche, et il retira de cette poche la chose blanche qui était au fond.

Le fossoyeur envoya dans la fosse la quatrième pelletée.

Au moment où il se retournait pour prendre la cinquième, Fauchelevent le regarda avec un profond calme et lui dit:

— À propos, nouveau, avez-vous votre carte?

Le fossoyeur s'interrompit.

— Quelle carte?

— Le soleil va se coucher.

— C'est bon, qu'il mette son bonnet de nuit.

— La grille du cimetière va se fermer.

— Eh bien, après?

— Avez-vous votre carte?

— Ah, ma carte! dit le fossoyeur.

Et il fouilla dans sa poche.

Une poche fouillée, il fouilla l’autre. Il passa aux goussets, explora le premier, retourna le second.

— Mais non, dit-il, je n’ai pas ma carte. Je l’aurai oubliée.

— Quinze francs d’amende, dit Fauchelevent.

Le fossoyeur devint vert. Le vert est la pâleur des gens livides.

— Ah Jésus-mon-Dieu-bancroche-à-bas-la-lune! s’écria-t-il. Quinze francs d’amende!

— Trois pièces-cent-sous, dit Fauchelevent.

Le fossoyeur laissa tomber sa pelle.

Le tour de Fauchelevent était venu.

— Ah çà, dit Fauchelevent, conscrit, pas de désespoir. Il ne s’agit pas de se suicider, et de profiter de la fosse. Quinze francs, c’est quinze francs, et d’ailleurs vous pouvez ne pas les payer. Je suis vieux, vous êtes nouveau. Je connais les trucs, les trocs, les trics et les tracs. Je vas vous donner un conseil d’ami. Une chose est claire, c’est que le soleil se couche, il touche au dôme, le cimetière va fermer dans cinq minutes.

— C’est vrai, répondit le fossoyeur.

— D’ici à cinq minutes, vous n’avez pas le temps de remplir la fosse, elle est creuse comme le diable, cette fosse, et d’arriver à temps pour sortir avant que la grille soit fermée.

— C’est juste.

— En ce cas quinze francs d’amende.

— Quinze francs.

— Mais vous avez le temps... — Où demeurez-vous?

— À deux pas de la barrière. À un quart d’heure d’ici. Rue de Vaugirard, numéro 87.

— Vous avez le temps, en pendant vos guiboles à votre cou, de sortir tout de suite.

— C’est exact.

— Une fois hors de la grille, vous galopez chez vous, vous prenez votre carte, vous revenez, le portier du cimetière vous ouvre. Ayant votre carte, rien à payer. Et vous enterrez votre mort. Moi, je vas vous le garder en attendant pour qu’il ne se sauve pas.

— Je vous dois la vie, paysan.

— Fichez-moi le camp, dit Fauchelevent.

Le fossoyeur, éperdu de reconnaissance, lui secoua la main, et partit en courant.

Quand le fossoyeur eut disparu dans le fourré, Fauchelevent écouta jusqu’à ce qu’il eût entendu le pas se perdre, puis il se pencha vers la fosse et dit à demi-voix:

— Père Madeleine!

Rien ne répondit. Fauchelevent eut un frémissement. Il se laissa rouler dans la fosse plutôt qu’il n’y descendit, se jeta sur la tête du cercueil et cria:

— Êtes-vous là?

Silence dans la bière.

Fauchelevent, ne respirant plus à force de tremblement, prit son ciseau à froid et son marteau, et fit sauter la planche de dessus. La face de Jean Valjean apparut dans le crépuscule, les yeux fermés, pâle.

Les cheveux de Fauchelevent se hérissèrent, il se leva debout, puis tomba adossé à la paroi de la fosse, prêt à s’affaisser sur la bière. Il regarda Jean Valjean.

Jean Valjean gisait, blême et immobile.

Fauchelevent murmura d’une voix basse comme un souffle:

— Il est mort!

Et se redressant, croisant les bras si violemment que ses deux poings fermés vinrent frapper ses deux épaules, il cria:

— Voilà comme je le sauve, moi!

Alors le pauvre bonhomme se mit à sangloter. Monologuant, car c’est une erreur de croire que le monologue n’est pas dans la nature. Les fortes agitations parlent souvent à haute voix.

— C’est la faute au père Mestienne. Pourquoi est-il mort, cet imbécile-là? qu’est-ce qu’il avait besoin de crever au moment où on ne s’y attend pas? c’est lui qui fait mourir monsieur Madeleine. Père Madeleine! Il est dans la bière. Il est tout porté. C’est fini.

— Aussi, ces choses-là, est-ce que ça a du bon sens? Ah! mon Dieu! il est mort! Eh bien, et sa petite, qu’est-ce que je vas en faire? qu’est-ce que la fruitière va dire? Qu’un homme comme çà meure comme ça, si c’est Dieu possible! Quand je pense qu’il s’était mis sous ma charrette! Père Madeleine! père Madeleine! Pardine, il a étouffé, je disais bien. Il n’a pas voulu me croire. Eh bien, voilà une jolie polissonnerie de faite! Il est mort, ce brave homme, le plus bon homme qu’il y eût dans les bonnes gens du bon Dieu! Et sa petite Ah! d’abord je ne rentre pas là-bas, moi. Je reste ici.

Avoir fait un coup comme çà! C’est bien la peine d’être deux vieux pour être deux vieux fous. Mais d’abord comment avait-il fait pour entrer dans le couvent? c’était déjà le commencement. On ne doit pas faire de ces choses-là. Père Madeleine! père Madeleine! Madeleine! monsieur Madeleine! monsieur le maire! Il ne m’entend pas. Tirez-vous donc de là à présent!

Et il s’arracha les cheveux.

On entendit au loin dans les arbres un grincement aigu. C’était la grille du cimetière qui se fermait.

Fauchelevent se pencha sur Jean Valjean, et tout à coup eut une sorte de rebondissement et tout le recul qu’on peut avoir dans une fosse. Jean Valjean avait les yeux ouverts, et le regardait.

Voir une mort est effrayant, voir une résurrection l’est presque autant. Fauchelevent devint comme de pierre, pâle, hagard, bouleversé par tous ces excès d’émotions, ne sachant s’il avait affaire à un vivant ou à un mort, regardant Jean Valjean qui le regardait.

— Je m’endormais, dit Jean Valjean.

Et il se mit sur son séant.

Fauchelevent tomba à genoux.

— Juste bonne Vierge! m’avez-vous fait peur!

Puis il se releva et cria:

— Merci, père Madeleine!

Jean Valjean n’était qu’évanoui. Le grand air l’avait réveillé.

La joie est le reflux de la terreur. Fauchelevent avait presque autant à faire que Jean Valjean pour revenir à lui.

— Vous n’êtes donc pas mort! Oh! comme vous avez de l’esprit, vous! Je vous ai tant appelé que vous êtes revenu. Quand j’ai vu vos yeux fermés, j’ai dit: bon! le voilà étouffé. Je serais devenu fou furieux, vrai fou à camisole. On m’aurait mis à Bicêtre. Qu’est-ce que vous voulez que je fasse si vous étiez mort? Et votre petite! c’est la fruitière qui n’y aurait rien compris! On lui campe l’enfant sur les bras, et le grand-père est mort! Quelle histoire! mes bons saints du paradis, quelle histoire! Ah! vous êtes vivant, voilà le bouquet.

— J’ai froid, dit Jean Valjean.

Ce mot rappela complètement Fauchelevent à la réalité, qui était urgente. Ces deux hommes, même revenus à eux, avaient, sans s’en rendre compte, l’âme trouble, et en eux quelque chose d’étrange qui était l’égarement sinistre du lieu.

— Sortons vite d’ici, s’écria Fauchelevent.

Il fouilla dans sa poche, et en tira une gourde dont il s’était pourvu.

— Mais d’abord la goutte! dit-il.

La gourde acheva ce que le grand air avait commencé. Jean Valjean but une gorgée d’eau-de-vie et reprit pleine possession de lui-même.

Il sortit de la bière, et aida Fauchelevent à en reclouer le couvercle.

Trois minutes après, ils étaient hors de la fosse.

Du reste Fauchelevent était tranquille. Il prit son temps. Le cimetière était fermé. La survenue du fossoyeur Gribier n’était pas à craindre. Ce «conscrit» était chez lui, occupé à chercher sa carte, et bien empêché de la trouver dans son logis puisqu’elle était dans la poche de Fauchelevent. Sans carte, il ne pouvait rentrer au cimetière.

Fauchelevent prit la pelle et Jean Valjean la pioche, et tous deux firent l’enterrement de la bière vide.

Quand la fosse fut comblée, Fauchelevent dit à Jean Valjean:

— Venons-nous-en. Je garde la pelle; emportez la pioche.

La nuit tombait.

Jean Valjean eut quelque peine à se remuer et à marcher. Dans cette bière, il s’était roidi et était devenu un peu cadavre. L’ankylose de la mort l’avait saisi entre ces quatre planches. Il fallut, en quelque sorte, qu’il se dégelât du sépulcre.

— Vous êtes gourd, dit Fauchelevent. C’est dommage que je sois bancal, nous battrions la semelle.

— Bah! répondit Jean Valjean, quatre pas me mettront la marche dans les jambes.

Ils s’en allèrent par les allées où le corbillard avait passé. Arrivés devant la grille fermée et le pavillon du portier, Fauchelevent, qui tenait à sa main la carte du fossoyeur, la jeta dans la boîte, le portier tira le cordon, la porte s’ouvrit, ils sortirent.

— Comme tout cela va bien! dit Fauchelevent; quelle bonne idée vous avez eue, père Madeleine!

Ils franchirent la barrière Vaugirard de la façon la plus simple du monde. Aux alentours d’un cimetière, une pelle et une pioche sont deux passeports.

La rue de Vaugirard était déserte.

— Père Madeleine, dit Fauchelevent tout en cheminant et en levant les yeux vers les maisons, vous avez de meilleurs yeux que moi. Indiquez-moi donc le numéro 87.

— Le voici justement, dit Jean Valjean.

— Il n’y a personne dans la rue, reprit Fauchelevent. Donnez-moi la pioche, et attendez-moi deux minutes.

Fauchelevent entra au numéro 87, monta tout en haut, guidé par l’instinct qui mène toujours le pauvre au grenier, et frappa dans l’ombre à la porte d’une mansarde. Une voix répondit:

— Entrez.

C’était la voix de Gribier.

Fauchelevent poussa la porte. Le logis du fossoyeur était, comme toutes ces infortunées demeures, un galetas démeublé et encombré. Une caisse d’emballage, — une bière peut-être, — y tenait lieu de commode, un pot à beurre y tenait lieu de fontaine, une paillasse y tenait lieu de lit, le carreau y tenait lieu de chaises et de table. Il y avait dans un coin, sur une loque qui était un vieux lambeau de tapis, une femme maigre et force enfants, faisant un tas. Tout ce pauvre intérieur portait les traces d’un bouleversement. On eût dit qu’il y avait eu là un tremblement de terre «pour un». Les couvercles étaient déplacés, les haillons étaient épars, la cruche était cassée, la mère avait pleuré, les enfants probablement avaient été battus; traces d’une perquisition acharnée et bourrue. Il était visible que le fossoyeur avait éperdument cherché sa carte, et fait tout responsable de cette perte dans le galetas, depuis sa cruche jusqu’à sa femme. Il avait l’air désespéré.

Mais Fauchelevent se hâtait trop vers le dénouement de l’aventure pour remarquer ce côté triste de son succès.

Il entra et dit:

— Je vous rapporte votre pioche et votre pelle.

Gribier le regarda stupéfait.

— C’est vous, paysan?

— Et demain matin chez le concierge du cimetière vous trouverez votre carte.

Et il posa la pelle et la pioche sur le carreau.

— Qu’est-ce que cela veut dire? demanda Gribier.

— Cela veut dire que vous aviez laissé tomber votre carte de votre poche, que je l’ai trouvée à terre quand vous avez été parti, que j’ai enterré le mort, que j’ai rempli la fosse, que j’ai fait votre besogne, que le portier vous rendra votre carte, et que vous ne payerez pas quinze francs. Voilà, conscrit.

— Merci, villageois! s’écria Gribier ébloui. La prochaine fois, c’est moi qui paye à boire.

Chapitre VIII

Interrogatoire réussi

Une heure après, par la nuit noire, deux hommes et un enfant se présentaient au numéro 62 de la petite rue Picpus. Le plus vieux de ces hommes levait le marteau et frappait.

C’étaient Fauchelevent, Jean Valjean et Cosette.

Les deux bonshommes étaient allés chercher Cosette chez la fruitière de la rue du Chemin-Vert où Fauchelevent l’avait déposée la veille. Cosette avait passé ces vingt-quatre heures à ne rien comprendre et à trembler silencieusement. Elle tremblait tant qu’elle n’avait pas pleuré. Elle n’avait pas mangé non plus, ni dormi. La digne fruitière lui avait fait cent questions, sans obtenir d’autre réponse qu’un regard morne, toujours le même. Cosette n’avait rien laissé transpirer de tout ce qu’elle avait entendu et vu depuis deux jours. Elle devinait qu’on traversait une crise. Elle sentait profondément qu’il fallait «être sage». Qui n’a éprouvé la souveraine puissance de ces trois mots prononcés avec un certain accent dans l’oreille d’un petit être effrayé: *Ne dis rien*! La peur est une muette. D’ailleurs, personne ne garde un secret comme un enfant.

Seulement, quand, après ces lugubres vingt-quatre heures, elle avait revu Jean Valjean, elle avait poussé un tel cri de joie, que quelqu’un de pensif qui l’eût entendu eût deviné dans ce cri la sortie d’un abîme.

Fauchelevent était du couvent et savait les mots de passe. Toutes les portes s’ouvrirent.

Ainsi fut résolu le double et effrayant problème: sortir, et entrer.

Le portier, qui avait ses instructions, ouvrit la petite porte de service qui communiquait de la cour au jardin, et qu’il y a vingt ans on voyait encore de la rue, dans le mur du fond de la cour, faisant face à la porte cochère. Le portier les introduisit tous les trois par cette porte, et de là, ils gagnèrent ce parloir intérieur réservé où Fauchelevent, la veille, avait pris les ordres de la prieure.

La prieure, son rosaire à la main, les attendait. Une mère vocale, le voile bas, était debout près d’elle. Une chandelle discrète éclairait, on pourrait presque dire faisait semblant d’éclairer le parloir.

La prieure passa en revue Jean Valjean. Rien n'examine comme un œil baissé.

Puis elle le questionna:

— C'est vous le frère?

— Oui, révérende mère, répondit Fauchelevent.

— Comment vous appelez-vous?

Fauchelevent répondit:

— Ultime Fauchelevent.

Il avait eu en effet un frère nommé Ultime qui était mort.

— De quel pays êtes-vous?

Fauchelevent répondit:

— De Picquigny, près Amiens.

— Quel âge avez-vous?

Fauchelevent répondit:

— Cinquante ans.

— Quel est votre état?

Fauchelevent répondit:

— Jardinier.

— Êtes-vous bon chrétien?

Fauchelevent répondit:

— Tout le monde l'est dans la famille.

— Cette petite est à vous?

Fauchelevent répondit:

— Oui, révérende mère.

— Vous êtes son père?

Fauchelevent répondit:

— Son grand-père.

La mère vocale dit à la prieure à demi-voix:

— Il répond bien.

Jean Valjean n'avait pas prononcé un mot.

La prieure regarda Cosette avec attention, et dit à demi-voix à la mère vocale:

— Elle sera laide.

Les deux mères causèrent quelques minutes très bas dans l'angle du parloir, puis la prieure se retourna et dit:

— Père Fauvent, vous aurez une autre genouillère avec grelot. Il en faut deux maintenant.

Le lendemain en effet on entendait deux grelots dans le jardin, et les religieuses ne résistaient pas à soulever un coin de leur voile. On voyait au fond sous les arbres deux hommes bêcher côte à côte, Fauvent et un autre. Événement énorme. Le silence fut rompu jusqu'à s'entre-dire: C'est un aide-jardinier.

Les mères vocales ajoutaient: C'est un frère au père Fauvent.

Jean Valjean en effet était régulièrement installé; il avait la genouillère de cuir, et le grelot; il était désormais officiel. Il s'appelait Ultime Fauchelevent.

La plus forte cause déterminante de l'admission avait été l'observation de la prieure sur Cosette: *Elle sera laide*.

La prieure, ce pronostic prononcé, prit immédiatement Cosette en amitié, et lui donna place au pensionnat comme élève de charité.

Ceci n'a rien que de très logique. On a beau n'avoir point de miroir au couvent, les femmes ont une conscience pour leur figure; or, les filles qui se sentent jolies se laissent malaisément faire religieuses; la vocation étant assez volontiers en proportion inverse de la beauté, on espère plus des laides que des belles. De là un goût vif pour les laiderons.

Toute cette aventure grandit le bon vieux Fauchelevent; il eut un triple succès; auprès de Jean Valjean qu'il sauva et abrita; auprès du fossoyeur Gribier qui se disait: il m'a épargné l'amende; auprès du couvent qui, grâce à lui, en gardant le cercueil de la mère Crucifixion sous l'autel, éluda César et satisfit Dieu. Il y eut une bière avec cadavre au Petit-Picpus et une bière sans cadavre au cimetière Vaugirard; l'ordre public en fut sans doute profondément troublé, mais ne s'en aperçut pas. Quant au couvent, sa reconnaissance pour Fauchelevent fut grande. Fauchelevent devint le meilleur des serviteurs et le plus précieux des jardiniers. À la plus prochaine visite de l'archevêque, la prieure conta la chose à Sa Grandeur, en s'en confessant un peu et en s'en vantant aussi. L'archevêque, au sortir du couvent, en parla, avec applaudissement et tout bas, à Mr de Latil, confesseur de Monsieur, plus tard archevêque de Reims et cardinal. L'admiration pour Fauchelevent fit du chemin, car elle alla à Rome. Nous avons eu sous les yeux un billet adressé par le pape régnant alors, Léon XII, à un de ses parents, monsignor dans la nonciature de Paris, et nommé comme lui Della Genga; on y lit ces lignes: «Il paraît qu'il y a dans un couvent de Paris un jardinier excellent, qui est un saint homme, appelé Fauvent.» Rien de tout ce triomphe ne parvint jusqu'à Fauchelevent dans sa baraque; il continua de greffer, de sarcler, et de couvrir ses melonnières, sans être au fait de son excellence et de sa sainteté. Il ne se douta pas plus de sa gloire que ne s’en doute un bœuf de Durham ou de Surrey dont le portrait est publié dans l’ *Illustrated London News* avec cette inscription: *Bœuf qui a remporté le prix au concours des bêtes à cornes*.

Chapitre IX

Clôture

Cosette au couvent continua de se taire.

Cosette se croyait tout naturellement la fille de Jean Valjean. Du reste, ne sachant rien, elle ne pouvait rien dire, et puis, dans tous les cas, elle n'aurait rien dit. Nous venons de le faire remarquer, rien ne dresse les enfants au silence comme le malheur. Cosette avait tant souffert qu'elle craignait tout, même de parler, même de respirer. Une parole avait si souvent fait crouler sur elle une avalanche! À peine commençait-elle à se rassurer depuis qu'elle était à Jean Valjean. Elle s'habitua assez vite au couvent. Seulement elle regrettait Catherine, mais elle n'osait pas le dire. Une fois pourtant elle dit à Jean Valjean:

— Père, si j'avais su, je l'aurais emmenée.

Cosette, en devenant pensionnaire du couvent, dut prendre l'habit des élèves de la maison. Jean Valjean obtint qu'on lui remît les vêtements qu'elle dépouillait. C'était ce même habillement de deuil qu'il lui avait fait revêtir lorsqu'elle avait quitté la gargote Thénardier. Il n'était pas encore très usé. Jean Valjean enferma ces nippes, plus les bas de laine et les souliers, avec force camphre et tous les aromates dont abondent les couvents, dans une petite valise qu'il trouva moyen de se procurer. Il mit cette valise sur une chaise près de son lit, et il en avait toujours la clef sur lui. — Père, lui demanda un jour Cosette, qu'est-ce que c'est donc que cette boîte-là qui sent si bon?

Le père Fauchelevent, outre cette gloire que nous venons de raconter et qu'il ignora, fut récompensé de sa bonne action; d'abord il en fut heureux; puis il eut beaucoup moins de besogne, la partageant. Enfin, comme il aimait beaucoup le tabac, il trouvait à la présence de Mr Madeleine cet avantage qu'il prenait trois fois plus de tabac que par le passé, et d'une manière infiniment plus voluptueuse, attendu que Mr Madeleine le lui payait.

Les religieuses n'adoptèrent point ce nom d'Ultime; elles appelèrent Jean Valjean *l'autre Fauvent*.

Si ces saintes filles avaient eu quelque chose du regard de Javert, elles auraient pu finir par remarquer que, lorsqu'il y avait quelque course à faire au dehors pour l’entretien du jardin, c’était toujours l’aîné Fauchelevent, le vieux, l’infirme, le bancal, qui sortait, et jamais l’autre; mais, soit que les yeux toujours fixés sur Dieu ne sachent pas espionner, soit qu’elles fussent, de préférence, occupées à se guetter entre elles, elles n’y firent point attention.

Du reste bien en prit à Jean Valjean de se tenir coi et de ne pas bouger. Javert observa le quartier plus d’un grand mois.

Ce couvent était pour Jean Valjean comme une île entourée de gouffres. Ces quatre murs étaient désormais le monde pour lui. Il y voyait le ciel assez pour être serein et Cosette assez pour être heureux.

Une vie très douce recommença pour lui.

Il habitait avec le vieux Fauchelevent la baraque du fond du jardin. Cette bicoque, bâtie en plâtras, qui existait encore en 1845, était composée, comme on sait, de trois chambres, lesquelles étaient toutes nues et n’avaient que les murailles. La principale avait été cédée de force, car Jean Valjean avait résisté en vain, par le père Fauchelevent à Mr Madeleine. Le mur de cette chambre, outre les deux clous destinés à l’accrochement de la genouillère et de la hotte, avait pour ornement un papier-monnaie royaliste de 93 appliqué à la muraille au-dessus de la cheminée et dont voici le fac-similé exact:

Cet assignat vendéen avait été cloué au mur par le précédent jardinier, ancien chouan qui était mort dans le couvent et que Fauchelevent avait remplacé.

Jean Valjean travaillait tous les jours dans le jardin et y était très utile. Il avait été jadis émondeur et se retrouvait volontiers jardinier. On se rappelle qu’il avait toutes sortes de recettes et de secrets de culture. Il en tira parti. Presque tous les arbres du verger étaient des sauvageons; il les écussonna et leur fit donner d’excellents fruits.

Cosette avait permission de venir tous les jours passer une heure près de lui. Comme les sœurs étaient tristes et qu’il était bon, l’enfant le comparait et l’adorait. À l’heure fixée, elle accourait vers la baraque. Quand elle entrait dans la masure, elle l’emplissait de paradis. Jean Valjean s’épanouissait, et sentait son bonheur s’accroître du bonheur qu’il donnait à Cosette. La joie que nous inspirons a cela de charmant que, loin de s’affaiblir comme tout reflet, elle nous revient plus rayonnante. Aux heures des récréations, Jean Valjean regardait de loin Cosette jouer et courir, et il distinguait son rire du rire des autres.

Car maintenant Cosette riait.

La figure de Cosette en était même jusqu'à un certain point changée. Le sombre en avait disparu. Le rire, c'est le soleil; il chasse l'hiver du visage humain.

La récréation finie, quand Cosette rentrait, Jean Valjean regardait les fenêtres de sa classe, et la nuit il se relevait pour regarder les fenêtres de son dortoir.

Du reste Dieu a ses voies; le couvent contribua, comme Cosette, à maintenir et à compléter dans Jean Valjean l'œuvre de l'évêque. Il est certain qu'un des côtés de la vertu aboutit à l'orgueil. Il y a là un pont bâti par le diable. Jean Valjean était peut-être à son insu assez près de ce côté-là et de ce pont-là, lorsque la providence le jeta dans le couvent du Petit-Picpus. Tant qu'il ne s'était comparé qu'à l'évêque, il s'était trouvé indigne et il avait été humble; mais depuis quelque temps il commençait à se comparer aux hommes, et l'orgueil naissait. Qui sait? il aurait peut-être fini par revenir tout doucement à la haine.

Le couvent l'arrêta sur cette pente.

C'était le deuxième lieu de captivité qu'il voyait. Dans sa jeunesse, dans ce qui avait été pour lui le commencement de la vie, et plus tard, tout récemment encore, il en avait vu un autre, lieu affreux, lieu terrible, et dont les sévérités lui avaient toujours paru être l'iniquité de la justice et le crime de la loi. Aujourd'hui après le bagne il voyait le cloître; et songeant qu'il avait fait partie du bagne et qu'il était maintenant, pour ainsi dire, spectateur du cloître, il les confrontait dans sa pensée avec anxiété.

Quelquefois il s'accoudait sur sa bêche et descendait lentement dans les spirales sans fond de la rêverie.

Il se rappelait ses anciens compagnons; comme ils étaient misérables; ils se levaient dès l'aube et travaillaient jusqu'à la nuit; à peine leur laissait-on le sommeil; ils couchaient sur des lits de camp, où l'on ne leur tolérait que des matelas de deux pouces d'épaisseur, dans des salles qui n'étaient chauffées qu'aux mois les plus rudes de l'année; ils étaient vêtus d'affreuses casaques rouges; on leur permettait, par grâce, un pantalon de toile dans les grandes chaleurs et une roulière de laine sur le dos dans les grands froids; ils ne buvaient de vin et ne mangeaient de viande que lorsqu'ils allaient «à la fatigue». Ils vivaient, n'ayant plus de noms, désignés seulement par des numéros et en quelque sorte faits chiffres, baissant les yeux, baissant la voix, les cheveux coupés, sous le bâton, dans la honte.

Puis son esprit retombait sur les êtres qu’il avait devant les yeux.

Ces êtres vivaient, eux aussi, les cheveux coupés, les yeux baissés, la voix basse, non dans la honte, mais au milieu des railleries du monde, non le dos meurtri par le bâton, mais les épaules déchirées par la discipline. À eux aussi, leur nom parmi les hommes s’était évanoui; ils n’existaient plus que sous des appellations austères. Ils ne mangeaient jamais de viande et ne buvaient jamais de vin; ils restaient souvent jusqu’au soir sans nourriture; ils étaient vêtus, non d’une veste rouge, mais d’un suaire noir, en laine, pesant l’été, léger l’hiver, sans pouvoir y rien retrancher ni y rien ajouter; sans même avoir, selon la saison, la ressource du vêtement de toile ou du surtout de laine; et ils portaient six mois de l’année des chemises de serge qui leur donnaient la fièvre. Ils habitaient, non des salles chauffées seulement dans les froids rigoureux, mais des cellules où l’on n’allumait jamais de feu; ils couchaient, non sur des matelas épais de deux pouces, mais sur la paille. Enfin on ne leur laissait pas même le sommeil; toutes les nuits, après une journée de labeur, il fallait, dans l’accablement du premier repos, au moment où l’on s’endormait et où l’on se réchauffait à peine, se réveiller, se lever, et s’en aller prier dans une chapelle glacée et sombre, les deux genoux sur la pierre.

À de certains jours, il fallait que chacun de ces êtres, à tour de rôle, restât douze heures de suite agenouillé sur la dalle ou prosterné la face contre terre et les bras en croix.

Les autres étaient des hommes; ceux-ci étaient des femmes.

Qu’avaient fait ces hommes? Ils avaient volé, violé, pillé, tué, assassiné. C’étaient des bandits, des faussaires, des empoisonneurs, des incendiaires, des meurtriers, des parricides. Qu’avaient fait ces femmes? Elles n’avaient rien fait.

D’un côté le brigandage, la fraude, le dol, la violence, la lubricité, l’homicide, toutes les espèces du sacrilège, toutes les variétés de l’attentat; de l’autre une seule chose, l’innocence.

L’innocence parfaite, presque enlevée dans une mystérieuse assomption, tenant encore à la terre par la vertu, tenant déjà au ciel par la sainteté.

D’un côté des confidences de crimes qu’on se fait à voix basse. De l’autre la confession des fautes qui se fait à voix haute. Et quels crimes! et quelles fautes!

D’un côté des miasmes, de l’autre un ineffable parfum. D’un côté une peste morale, gardée à vue, parquée sous le canon, et dévorant lentement ses pestiférés; de l’autre un chaste embrasement de toutes les âmes dans le même foyer. Là les ténèbres; ici l’ombre; mais une ombre pleine de clartés, et des clartés pleines de rayonnements.

Deux lieux d’esclavage; mais dans le premier la délivrance possible, une limite légale toujours entrevue, et puis l’évasion. Dans le second, la perpétuité; pour toute espérance, à l’extrémité lointaine de l’avenir, cette lueur de liberté que les hommes appellent la mort.

Dans le premier, on n’était enchaîné que par des chaînes; dans l’autre, on était enchaîné par sa foi.

Que se dégageait-il du premier? Une immense malédiction, le grincement de dents, la haine, la méchanceté désespérée, un cri de rage contre l’association humaine, un sarcasme au ciel.

Que sortait-il du second? La bénédiction et l’amour.

Et dans ces deux endroits si semblables et si divers, ces deux espèces d’êtres si différents accomplissaient la même œuvre, l’expiation.

Jean Valjean comprenait bien l’expiation des premiers; l’expiation personnelle, l’expiation pour soi-même. Mais il ne comprenait pas celle des autres, celle de ces créatures sans reproche et sans souillure, et il se demandait avec un tremblement: Expiation de quoi? quelle expiation?

Une voix répondait dans sa conscience: La plus divine des générosités humaines, l’expiation pour autrui.

Ici toute théorie personnelle est réservée, nous ne sommes que narrateur; c’est au point de vue de Jean Valjean que nous nous plaçons, et nous traduisons ses impressions.

Il avait sous les yeux le sommet sublime de l’abnégation, la plus haute cime de la vertu possible; l’innocence qui pardonne aux hommes leurs fautes et qui les expie à leur place; la servitude subie, la torture acceptée, le supplice réclamé par les âmes qui n’ont pas péché pour en dispenser les âmes qui ont failli; l’amour de l’humanité s’abîmant dans l’amour de Dieu, mais y demeurant distinct, et suppliant; de doux êtres faibles ayant la misère de ceux qui sont punis et le sourire de ceux qui sont récompensés.

Et il se rappelait qu’il avait osé se plaindre!

Souvent, au milieu de la nuit, il se relevait pour écouter le chant reconnaissant de ces créatures innocentes et accablées de sévérités, et il se sentait froid dans les veines en songeant que ceux qui étaient châtiés justement n’élevaient la voix vers le ciel que pour blasphémer, et que lui, misérable, il avait montré le poing à Dieu.

Chose frappante et qui le faisait rêver profondément comme un avertissement à voix basse de la providence même, l’escalade, les clôtures franchies, l’aventure acceptée jusqu’à la mort, l’ascension difficile et dure, tous ces mêmes efforts qu’il avait faits pour sortir de l’autre lieu d’expiation, il les avait faits pour entrer dans celui-ci. Était-ce un symbole de sa destinée?

Cette maison était une prison aussi, et ressemblait lugubrement à l’autre demeure dont il s’était enfui, et pourtant il n’avait jamais eu l’idée de rien de pareil.

Il revoyait des grilles, des verrous, des barreaux de fer, pour garder qui? Des anges.

Ces hautes murailles qu’il avait vues autour des tigres, il les revoyait autour des brebis.

C’était un lieu d’expiation, et non de châtiment; et pourtant il était plus austère encore, plus morne et plus impitoyable que l’autre. Ces vierges étaient plus durement courbées que les forçats. Un vent froid et rude, ce vent qui avait glacé sa jeunesse, traversait la fosse grillée et cadenassée des vautours; une bise plus âpre et plus douloureuse encore soufflait dans la cage des colombes. Pourquoi?

Quand il pensait à ces choses, tout ce qui était en lui s’abîmait devant ce mystère de sublimité.

Dans ces méditations l’orgueil s’évanouit. Il fit toutes sortes de retours sur lui-même; il se sentit chétif et pleura bien des fois. Tout ce qui était entré dans sa vie depuis six mois le ramenait vers les saintes injonctions de l’évêque, Cosette par l’amour, le couvent par l’humilité.

Quelquefois, le soir, au crépuscule, à l’heure où le jardin était désert, on le voyait à genoux au milieu de l’allée qui côtoyait la chapelle, devant la fenêtre où il avait regardé la nuit de son arrivée, tourné vers l’endroit où il savait que la sœur qui faisait la réparation était prosternée et en prière. Il priait, ainsi agenouillé devant cette sœur.

Il semblait qu’il n’osait s’agenouiller directement devant Dieu.

Tout ce qui l’entourait, ce jardin paisible, ces fleurs embaumées, ces enfants poussant des cris joyeux, ces femmes graves et simples, ce cloître silencieux, le pénétraient lentement, et peu à peu son âme se composait de silence comme ce cloître, de parfum comme ces fleurs, de paix comme ce jardin, de simplicité comme ces femmes, de joie comme ces enfants. Et puis il songeait que c’étaient deux maisons de Dieu qui l’avaient successivement recueilli aux deux instants critiques de sa vie, la première lorsque toutes les portes se fermaient et que la société humaine le repoussait, la deuxième au moment où la société humaine se remettait à sa poursuite et où le bagne se rouvrait; et que sans la première il serait retombé dans le crime et sans la seconde dans le supplice.

Tout son cœur se fondait en reconnaissance et il aimait de plus en plus.

Plusieurs années s'écoulèrent ainsi; Cosette grandissait.

Tome III — MARIUS

Livre premier — Paris étudié dans son atome

Chapitre I

Parvulus

Paris a un enfant et la forêt a un oiseau; l’oiseau s’appelle le moineau; l’enfant s’appelle le gamin.

Accouplez ces deux idées qui contiennent, l’une toute la fournaise, l’autre toute l’aurore, choquez ces étincelles, Paris, l’enfance; il en jaillit un petit être. *Homuncio,* dirait Plaute.

Ce petit être est joyeux. Il ne mange pas tous les jours et il va au spectacle, si bon lui semble, tous les soirs. Il n’a pas de chemise sur le corps, pas de souliers aux pieds, pas de toit sur la tête; il est comme les mouches du ciel qui n’ont rien de tout cela. Il a de sept à treize ans, vit par bandes, bat le pavé, loge en plein air, porte un vieux pantalon de son père qui lui descend plus bas que les talons, un vieux chapeau de quelque autre père qui lui descend plus bas que les oreilles, une seule bretelle en lisière jaune, court, guette, quête, perd le temps, culotte des pipes, jure comme un damné, hante le cabaret, connaît des voleurs, tutoie des filles, parle argot, chante des chansons obscènes, et n’a rien de mauvais dans le cœur. C’est qu’il a dans l’âme une perle, l’innocence, et les perles ne se dissolvent pas dans la boue. Tant que l’homme est enfant, Dieu veut qu’il soit innocent.

Si l’on demandait à l’énorme ville: Qu’est-ce que c’est que cela? elle répondrait: C’est mon petit.

Chapitre II

Quelques-uns de ses signes particuliers

Le gamin de Paris, c’est le nain de la géante.

N’exagérons point, ce chérubin du ruisseau a quelquefois une chemise mais alors il n’en a qu’une; il a quelquefois des souliers, mais alors ils n’ont point de semelles; il a quelquefois un logis, et il l’aime, car il y trouve sa mère; mais il préfère la rue, parce qu’il y trouve la liberté. Il a ses jeux à lui, ses malices à lui dont la haine des bourgeois fait le fond; ses métaphores à lui; être mort, cela s’appelle *manger des pissenlits par la racine;* ses métiers à lui, amener des fiacres, baisser les marchepieds des voitures, établir des péages d’un côté de la rue à l’autre dans les grosses pluies, ce qu’il appelle faire *des ponts des arts,* crier les discours prononcés par l’autorité en faveur du peuple français, gratter l’entre-deux des pavés; il a sa monnaie à lui, qui se compose de tous les petits morceaux de cuivre façonné qu’on peut trouver sur la voie publique. Cette curieuse monnaie, qui prend le nom de *loques*, a un cours invariable et fort bien réglé dans cette petite bohème d’enfants.

Enfin il a sa faune à lui, qu’il observe studieusement dans des coins; la bête à bon Dieu, le puceron tête-de-mort, le faucheux, le «diable», insecte noir qui menace en tordant sa queue armée de deux cornes. Il a son monstre fabuleux qui a des écailles sous le ventre et qui n’est pas un lézard, qui a des pustules sur le dos et qui n’est pas un crapaud, qui habite les trous des vieux fours à chaux et des puisards desséchés, noir, velu, visqueux, rampant, tantôt lent, tantôt rapide, qui ne crie pas, mais qui regarde, et qui est si terrible que personne ne l’a jamais vu; il nomme ce monstre «le sourd». Chercher des sourds dans les pierres, c’est un plaisir du genre redoutable. Autre plaisir, lever brusquement un pavé, et voir des cloportes. Chaque région de Paris est célèbre par les trouvailles intéressantes qu’on peut y faire. Il y a des perce-oreilles dans les chantiers des Ursulines, il y a des mille-pieds au Panthéon, il y a des têtards dans les fossés du Champ de Mars.

Quant à des mots, cet enfant en a comme Talleyrand. Il n’est pas moins cynique, mais il est plus honnête. Il est doué d’on ne sait quelle jovialité imprévue; il ahurit le boutiquier de son fou rire. Sa gamme va gaillardement de la haute comédie à la farce.

Un enterrement passe. Parmi ceux qui accompagnent le mort, il y a un médecin. — Tiens, s'écrie un gamin, depuis quand les médecins reportent-ils leur ouvrage?

Un autre est dans une foule. Un homme grave, orné de lunettes et de breloques, se retourne indigné: — Vaurien, tu viens de prendre «la taille» à ma femme.

— Moi, monsieur! fouillez-moi.

Chapitre III

Il est agréable

Le soir, grâce à quelques sous qu'il trouve toujours moyen de se procurer, l'*homuncio* entre dans un théâtre. En franchissant ce seuil magique, il se transfigure; il était le gamin, il devient le titi. Les théâtres sont des espèces de vaisseaux retournés qui ont la cale en haut. C'est dans cette cale que le titi s'entasse. Le titi est au gamin ce que la phalène est à la larve; le même être envolé et planant. Il suffit qu'il soit là, avec son rayonnement de bonheur, avec sa puissance d'enthousiasme et de joie, avec son battement de mains qui ressemble à un battement d'ailes, pour que cette cale étroite, fétide, obscure, sordide, malsaine, hideuse, abominable, se nomme le Paradis.

Donnez à un être l'inutile et ôtez-lui le nécessaire, vous aurez le gamin.

Le gamin n'est pas sans quelque intuition littéraire. Sa tendance, nous le disons avec la quantité de regret qui convient, ne serait point le goût classique. Il est, de sa nature, peu académique. Ainsi, pour donner un exemple, la popularité de mademoiselle Mars dans ce petit public d'enfants orageux était assaisonnée d'une pointe d'ironie. Le gamin l'appelait mademoiselle *Muche*.

Cet être braille, raille, gouaille, bataille, a des chiffons comme un bambin et des guenilles comme un philosophe, pêche dans l'égout, chasse dans le cloaque, extrait la gaîté de l'immondice, fouaille de sa verve les carrefours, ricane et mord, siffle et chante, acclame et engueule, tempère Alleluia par Matanturlurette, psalmodie tous les rythmes depuis le De Profundis jusqu'à la Chienlit, trouve sans chercher, sait ce qu'il ignore, est spartiate jusqu'à la filouterie, est fou jusqu'à la sagesse, est lyrique jusqu'à l'ordure, s'accroupirait sur l'Olympe, se vautre dans le fumier et en sort couvert d'étoiles. Le gamin de Paris, c'est Rabelais petit.

Il n'est pas content de sa culotte, s'il n'y a point de gousset de montre.

Il s'étonne peu, s'effraye encore moins, chansonne les superstitions, dégonfle les exagérations, blague les mystères, tire la langue aux revenants, dépoétise les échasses, introduit la caricature dans les grossissements épiques. Ce n'est pas qu'il est prosaïque; loin de là; mais il remplace la vision solennelle par la fantasmagorie farce. Si Adamastor lui apparaissait, le gamin dirait: Tiens! Croquemitaine!

Chapitre IV

Il peut être utile

Paris commence au badaud et finit au gamin, deux êtres dont aucune autre ville n'est capable; l'acceptation passive qui se satisfait de regarder, et l'initiative inépuisable; Prudhomme et Fouillou. Paris seul a cela dans son histoire naturelle. Toute la monarchie est dans le badaud. Toute l'anarchie est dans le gamin.

Ce pâle enfant des faubourgs de Paris vit et se développe, se noue et «se dénoue» dans la souffrance, en présence des réalités sociales et des choses humaines, témoin pensif. Il se croit lui-même insouciant; il ne l'est pas. Il regarde, prêt à rire; prêt à autre chose aussi. Qui que vous soyez qui vous nommez Préjugé, Abus, Ignominie, Oppression, Iniquité, Despotisme, Injustice, Fanatisme, Tyrannie, prenez garde au gamin béant.

Ce petit grandira.

De quelle argile est-il fait? de la première fange venue. Une poignée de boue, un souffle, et voilà Adam. Il suffît qu'un dieu passe. Un dieu a toujours passé sur le gamin. La fortune travaille à ce petit être. Par ce mot la fortune, nous entendons un peu l'aventure. Ce pygmée pétri à même dans la grosse terre commune, ignorant, illettré, ahuri, vulgaire, populacier, sera-ce un ionien ou un béotien? Attendez, *currit rota*, l'esprit de Paris, ce démon qui crée les enfants du hasard et les hommes du destin, au rebours du potier latin, fait de la cruche une amphore.

Chapitre V

Ses frontières

Le gamin aime la ville, il aime aussi la solitude, ayant du sage en lui. *Urbis amator*, comme Fuscus; *ruris amator*, comme Flaccus.

Errer songeant, c’est-à-dire flâner, est un bon emploi du temps pour le philosophe; particulièrement dans cette espèce de campagne un peu bâtarde, assez laide, mais bizarre et composée de deux natures, qui entoure certaines grandes villes, notamment Paris. Observer la banlieue, c’est observer l’amphibie. Fin des arbres, commencement des toits, fin de l’herbe, commencement du pavé, fin des sillons, commencement des boutiques, fin des ornières, commencement des passions, fin du murmure divin, commencement de la rumeur humaine; de là un intérêt extraordinaire.

De là, dans ces lieux peu attrayants, et marqués à jamais par le passant de l’épithète: *triste*, les promenades, en apparence sans but, du songeur.

Celui qui écrit ces lignes a été longtemps rôdeur de barrières à Paris, et c’est pour lui une source de souvenirs profonds. Ce gazon ras, ces sentiers pierreux, cette craie, ces marnes, ces plâtres, ces âpres monotonies des friches et des jachères, les plants de primeurs des maraîchers aperçus tout à coup dans un fond, ce mélange du sauvage et du bourgeois, ces vastes recoins déserts où les tambours de la garnison tiennent bruyamment école et font une sorte de bégayement de la bataille, ces thébaïdes le jour, coupe-gorge la nuit, le moulin dégingandé qui tourne au vent, les roues d’extraction des carrières, les guinguettes au coin des cimetières, le charme mystérieux des grands murs sombres coupant carrément d’immenses terrains vagues inondés de soleil et pleins de papillons, tout cela l’attirait.

Presque personne sur la terre ne connaît ces lieux singuliers, la Glacière, la Cunette, le hideux mur de Grenelle tigré de balles, le Mont-Parnasse, la Fosse-aux-Loups, les Aubiers sur la berge de la Marne, Montsouris, la Tombe-Issoire, la Pierre-Plate de Châtillon où il y a une vieille carrière épuisée qui ne sert plus qu’à faire pousser des champignons, et que ferme à fleur de terre une trappe en planches pourries. La campagne de Rome est une idée, la banlieue de Paris en est une autre; ne voir dans ce que nous offre un horizon rien que des champs, des maisons ou des arbres, c’est rester à la surface; tous les aspects des choses sont des pensées de Dieu. Le lieu où une plaine fait sa jonction avec une ville est toujours empreint d’on ne sait quelle mélancolie pénétrante. La nature et l’humanité vous y parlent à la fois. Les originalités locales y apparaissent.

Quiconque a erré comme nous dans ces solitudes contiguës à nos faubourgs qu’on pourrait nommer les limbes de Paris, y a entrevu çà et là, à l’endroit le plus abandonné, au moment le plus inattendu, derrière une haie maigre ou dans l’angle d’un mur lugubre, des enfants, groupés tumultueusement, fétides, boueux, poudreux, dépenaillés, hérissés, qui jouent à la pigoche couronnés de bleuets. Ce sont tous les petits échappés des familles pauvres. Le boulevard extérieur est leur milieu respirable; la banlieue leur appartient. Ils y font une éternelle école buissonnière. Ils y chantent ingénument leur répertoire de chansons malpropres. Ils sont là, ou pour mieux dire, ils existent là, loin de tout regard, dans la douce clarté de mai ou de juin, agenouillés autour d’un trou dans la terre, chassant des billes avec le pouce, se disputant des liards, irresponsables, envolés, lâchés, heureux; et, dès qu’ils vous aperçoivent, ils se souviennent qu’ils ont une industrie, et qu’il leur faut gagner leur vie, et ils vous offrent à vendre un vieux bas de laine plein de hannetons ou une touffe de lilas. Ces rencontres d’enfants étranges sont une des grâces charmantes, et en même temps poignantes, des environs de Paris.

Quelquefois, dans ces tas de garçons, il y a des petites filles, — sont-ce leurs sœurs? — presque jeunes filles, maigres, fiévreuses, gantées de hâle, marquées de taches de rousseur, coiffées d’épis de seigle et de coquelicots, gaies, hagardes, pieds nus. On en voit qui mangent des cerises dans les blés. Le soir on les entend rire. Ces groupes, chaudement éclairés de la pleine lumière de midi ou entrevus dans le crépuscule, occupent longtemps le songeur, et ces visions se mêlent à son rêve.

Paris, centre, la banlieue, circonférence; voilà pour ces enfants toute la terre. Jamais ils ne se hasardent au delà. Ils ne peuvent pas plus sortir de l’atmosphère parisienne que les poissons ne peuvent sortir de l’eau. Pour eux, à deux lieues des barrières, il n’y a plus rien. Ivry, Gentilly, Arcueil, Belleville, Aubervilliers, Ménilmontant Choisy-le-Roi, Billancourt, Meudon, Issy, Vanves, Sèvres, Puteaux, Neuilly, Gennevilliers, Colombes, Romainville, Chatou, Asnières, Bougival, Nanterre, Enghien, Noisy-le-Sec, Nogent, Gournay, Drancy, Gonesse, c’est là que finit l’univers.

Chapitre VI

Un peu d'histoire

À l'époque, d'ailleurs presque contemporaine, où se passe l'action de ce livre, il n'y avait pas, comme aujourd'hui, un sergent de ville à chaque coin de rue (bienfait qu'il n'est pas temps de discuter); les enfants errants abondaient dans Paris. Les statistiques donnent une moyenne de deux cent soixante enfants sans asile ramassés alors annuellement par les rondes de police dans les terrains non clos, dans les maisons en construction et sous les arches des ponts. Un de ces nids, resté fameux, a produit «les hirondelles du pont d'Arcole». C'est là, du reste, le plus désastreux des symptômes sociaux. Tous les crimes de l'homme commencent au vagabondage de l'enfant.

Exceptons Paris pourtant. Dans une mesure relative, et nonobstant le souvenir que nous venons de rappeler, l'exception est juste. Tandis que dans toute autre grande ville un enfant vagabond est un homme perdu, tandis que, presque partout, l'enfant livré à lui-même est en quelque sorte dévoué et abandonné à une sorte d'immersion fatale dans les vices publics qui dévore en lui l'honnêteté et la conscience, le gamin de Paris, insistons-y, si fruste, et si entamé à la surface, est intérieurement à peu près intact. Chose magnifique à constater et qui éclate dans la splendide probité de nos révolutions populaires, une certaine incorruptibilité résulte de l'idée qui est dans l'air de Paris comme du sel qui est dans l'eau de l'océan. Respirer Paris, cela conserve l'âme.

Ce que nous disons là n'ôte rien au serrement de cœur dont on se sent pris chaque fois qu'on rencontre un de ces enfants autour desquels il semble qu'on voie flotter les fils de la famille brisée. Dans la civilisation actuelle, si incomplète encore, ce n'est point une chose très anormale que ces fractures de familles se vidant dans l'ombre, ne sachant plus trop ce que leurs enfants sont devenus, et laissant tomber leurs entrailles sur la voie publique. De là des destinées obscures. Cela s'appelle, car cette chose triste a fait locution, «être jeté sur le pavé de Paris».

Soit dit en passant, ces abandons d'enfants n'étaient point découragés par l'ancienne monarchie. Un peu d'Égypte et de Bohême dans les basses régions accommodait les hautes sphères, et faisait l'affaire des puissants. La haine de l’enseignement des enfants du peuple était un dogme. À quoi bon les «demi-lumières»? Tel était le mot d’ordre. Or l’enfant errant est le corollaire de l’enfant ignorant.

D’ailleurs, la monarchie avait quelquefois besoin d’enfants, et alors elle écumait la rue. Sous Louis XIV, pour ne pas remonter plus haut, le roi voulait, avec raison, créer une flotte. L’idée était bonne. Mais voyons le moyen. Pas de flotte si, à côté du navire à voiles, jouet du vent, et pour le remorquer au besoin, on n’a pas le navire qui va où il veut, soit par la rame, soit par la vapeur; les galères étaient alors à la marine ce que sont aujourd’hui les steamers. Il fallait donc des galères; mais la galère ne se meut que par le galérien; il fallait donc des galériens. Colbert faisait faire par les intendants de province et par les parlements le plus de forçats qu’il pouvait. La magistrature y mettait beaucoup de complaisance. Un homme gardait son chapeau sur sa tête devant une procession, attitude huguenote; on l’envoyait aux galères. On rencontrait un enfant dans la rue, pourvu qu’il eût quinze ans et qu’il ne sût où coucher, on l’envoyait aux galères. Grand règne; grand siècle.

Sous Louis XV, les enfants disparaissaient dans Paris; la police les enlevait, on ne sait pour quel mystérieux emploi. On chuchotait avec épouvante de monstrueuses conjectures sur les bains de pourpre du roi. Barbier parle naïvement de ces choses. Il arrivait parfois que les exempts, à court d’enfants, en prenaient qui avaient des pères. Les pères, désespérés, couraient sus aux exempts. En ce cas-là, le parlement intervenait, et faisait pendre, qui? Les exempts? Non. Les pères.

Chapitre VII

Le gamin aurait sa place dans les classifications de l'Inde

La gaminerie parisienne est presque une caste. On pourrait dire: n'en est pas qui veut.

Ce mot, *gamin*, fut imprimé pour la première fois et arriva de la langue populaire dans la langue littéraire en 1834. C'est dans un opuscule intitulé *Claude Gueux* que ce mot fit son apparition. Le scandale fut vif. Le mot a passé.

Les éléments qui constituent la considération des gamins entre eux sont très variés. Nous en avons connu et pratiqué un qui était fort respecté et fort admiré pour avoir vu tomber un homme du haut des tours de Notre-Dame; un autre, pour avoir réussi à pénétrer dans l'arrière-cour où étaient momentanément déposées les statues du dôme des Invalides et leur avoir «chipé» du plomb; un troisième, pour avoir vu verser une diligence; un autre encore, parce qu'il «connaissait» un soldat qui avait manqué crever un œil à un bourgeois.

C'est ce qui explique cette exclamation d'un gamin parisien, épiphonème profond dont le vulgaire rit sans le comprendre: — *Dieu de Dieu! ai-je du malheur! dire que je n'ai pas encore vu quelqu'un tomber d'un cinquième!* (*Ai-je* se prononce *j'ai-t-y; cinquième* se prononce *cintième*.)

Certes, c'est un beau mot de paysan que celui-ci: Père un tel, votre femme est morte de sa maladie; pourquoi n'avez-vous pas envoyé chercher de médecin? Que voulez-vous, monsieur, nous autres pauvres gens, *j'nous mourons nous-mêmes*. Mais si toute la passivité narquoise du paysan est dans ce mot, toute l'anarchie libre-penseuse du mioche faubourien est, à coup sûr, dans cet autre. Un condamné à mort dans la charrette écoute son confesseur. L'enfant de Paris se récrie: — *Il parle à son calotin. Oh! le capon!*

Une certaine audace en matière religieuse rehausse le gamin. Être esprit fort est important.

Assister aux exécutions constitue un devoir. On se montre la guillotine et l'on rit. On l'appelle de toutes sortes de petits noms: — Fin de la soupe, — Grognon, — La mère au Bleu (au ciel), — La dernière bouchée, — etc., etc.

Pour ne rien perdre de la chose, on escalade les murs, on se hisse aux balcons, on monte aux arbres, on se suspend aux grilles, on s’accroche aux cheminées. Le gamin naît couvreur comme il naît marin. Un toit ne lui fait pas plus peur qu’un mât. Pas de fête qui vaille la Grève. Samson et l’abbé Montés sont les vrais noms populaires. On hue le patient pour l’encourager. On l’admire quelquefois. Lacenaire, gamin, voyant l’affreux Dautun mourir bravement, a dit ce mot où il y a un avenir: *J’en étais jaloux*. Dans la gaminerie, on ne connaît pas Voltaire, mais on connaît Papavoine. On mêle dans la même légende «les politiques» aux assassins. On a les traditions du dernier vêtement de tous. On sait que Tolleron avait un bonnet de chauffeur, Avril une casquette de loutre, Louvel un chapeau rond, que le vieux Delaporte était chauve et nu-tête, que Castaing était tout rose et très joli, que Bories avait une barbiche romantique, que Jean Martin avait gardé ses bretelles, que Lecouffé et sa mère se querellaient. — *Ne vous reprochez donc pas votre panier*, leur cria un gamin. Un autre, pour voir passer Debacker, trop petit dans la foule, avise la lanterne du quai et y grimpe. Un gendarme, de station là, fronce le sourcil. — Laissez-moi monter, m’sieu le gendarme, dit le gamin. Et pour attendrir l’autorité, il ajoute: Je ne tomberai pas. — Je m’importe peu que tu tombes, répond le gendarme.

Dans la gaminerie, un accident mémorable est fort compté. On parvient au sommet de la considération s’il arrive qu’on se coupe très profondément, «jusqu’à l’os».

Le poing n’est pas un médiocre élément de respect. Une des choses que le gamin dit le plus volontiers, c’est: *Je suis joliment fort, va!* — Être gaucher vous rend fort enviable. Loucher est une chose estimée.

Chapitre VIII

Où on lira un mot charmant du dernier roi

L’été, il se métamorphose en grenouille; et le soir, à la nuit tombante, devant les ponts d’Austerlitz et d’Iéna, du haut des trains à charbon et des bateaux de blanchisseuses, il se précipite tête baissée dans la Seine et dans toutes les infractions possibles aux lois de la pudeur et de la police. Cependant les sergents de ville veillent, et il en résulte une situation hautement dramatique qui a donné lieu une fois à un cri fraternel et mémorable; ce cri, qui fut célèbre vers 1830, est un avertissement stratégique de gamin à gamin; il se scande comme un vers d’Homère, avec une notation presque aussi inexprimable que la mélopée éleusiaque des Panathénées, et l’on y retrouve l’antique Évohé. Le voici: — *Ohé, Titi, ohéée! y a de la grippe, y a de la cogne, prends tes zardes et va-t’en, pâsse par l’égout!*

Quelquefois ce moucheron — c’est ainsi qu’il se qualifie lui-même — sait lire; quelquefois il sait écrire, toujours il sait barbouiller. Il n’hésite pas à se donner, par on ne sait quel mystérieux enseignement mutuel, tous les talents qui peuvent être utiles à la chose publique: de 1815 à 1830, il imitait le cri du dindon; de 1830 à 1848, il griffonnait une poire sur les murailles. Un soir d’été, Louis-Philippe, rentrant à pied, en vit un, tout petit, haut comme cela, qui suait et se haussait pour charbonner une poire gigantesque sur un des piliers de la grille de Neuilly; le roi, avec cette bonhomie qui lui venait de Henri IV, aida le gamin, acheva la poire, et donna un louis à l’enfant en lui disant: *La poire est aussi là-dessus*. Le gamin aime le hourvari. Un certain état violent lui plaît. Il exècre «les curés». Un jour, rue de l’université, un de ces jeunes drôles faisait un pied de nez à la porte cochère du numéro 69. — Pourquoi fais-tu cela à cette porte? lui demanda un passant. L’enfant répondit: Il y a là un curé. C’est là, en effet, que demeure le nonce du pape. Cependant, quel que soit le voltairianisme du gamin, si l’occasion se présente d’être enfant de chœur, il se peut qu’il accepte, et dans ce cas il sert la messe poliment. Il y a deux choses dont il est le Tantale et qu’il désire toujours sans y atteindre jamais: renverser le gouvernement et faire recoudre son pantalon.

Le gamin à l’état parfait possède tous les sergents de ville de Paris, et sait toujours, lorsqu’il en rencontre un, mettre le nom sous la figure. Il les dénombre sur le bout du doigt. Il étudie leurs mœurs et il a sur chacun des notes spéciales. Il lit à livre ouvert dans les âmes de la police. Il vous dira couramment et sans broncher: — «Un tel est *traître;* — un tel est *très méchant;* — un tel est *grand;* — un tel est *ridicule;*» (tous ces mots, traître, méchant, grand, ridicule, ont dans sa bouche une acception particulière) — «celui-ci s’imagine que le Pont-Neuf est à lui et empêche *le monde* de se promener sur la corniche en dehors des parapets; celui-là a la manie de tirer les oreilles aux *personnes* etc., etc...»

Chapitre IX

La vieille âme de la Gaule

Il y avait de cet enfant-là dans Poquelin, fils des Halles; il y en avait dans Beaumarchais. La gaminerie est une nuance de l'esprit gaulois. Mêlée au bon sens, elle lui ajoute parfois de la force, comme l'alcool au vin. Quelquefois elle est défaut. Homère rabâche, soit; on pourrait dire que Voltaire gamine. Camille Desmoulins était faubourien. Championnet, qui brutalisait les miracles, était sorti du pavé de Paris; il avait, tout petit, *inondé les portiques* de Saint-Jean de Beauvais et de Saint-Etienne du Mont; il avait assez tutoyé la châsse de sainte Geneviève pour donner des ordres à la fiole de saint Janvier.

Le gamin de Paris est respectueux, ironique et insolent. Il a de vilaines dents parce qu'il est mal nourri et que son estomac souffre, et de beaux yeux parce qu'il a de l'esprit. Jéhovah présent, il sauterait à cloche-pied les marches du paradis. Il est fort à la savate. Toutes les croissances lui sont possibles. Il joue dans le ruisseau et se redresse par l'émeute; son effronterie persiste devant la mitraille; c'était un polisson, c'est un héros; ainsi que le petit thébain, il secoue la peau du lion; le tambour Bara était un gamin de Paris; il crie: En avant! comme le cheval de l'Écriture dit: Vah! et en une minute, il passe du marmot au géant.

Cet enfant du bourbier est aussi l'enfant de l'idéal. Mesurez cette envergure qui va de Molière à Bara.

Somme toute, et pour tout résumer d'un mot, le gamin est un être qui s'amuse, parce qu'il est malheureux.

Chapitre X

Ecce Paris, ecce homo

Pour tout résumer encore, le gamin de Paris aujourd'hui, comme autrefois le *gracculus* de Rome, c'est le peuple enfant ayant au front la ride du monde vieux.

Le gamin est une grâce pour la nation, et en même temps une maladie. Maladie qu'il faut guérir. Comment? Par la lumière.

La lumière assainit.

La lumière allume.

Toutes les généreuses irradiations sociales sortent de la science, des lettres, des arts, de l'enseignement. Faites des hommes, faites des hommes. Éclairez-les pour qu'ils vous échauffent. Tôt ou tard la splendide question de l'instruction universelle se posera avec l'irrésistible autorité du vrai absolu; et alors ceux qui gouverneront sous la surveillance de l'idée française auront à faire ce choix: les enfants de la France, ou les gamins de Paris; des flammes dans la lumière ou des feux follets dans les ténèbres.

Le gamin exprime Paris, et Paris exprime le monde.

Car Paris est un total. Paris est le plafond du genre humain. Toute cette prodigieuse ville est un raccourci des mœurs mortes et des mœurs vivantes. Qui voit Paris croit voir le dessous de toute l'histoire avec du ciel et des constellations dans les intervalles. Paris a un Capitole, l'Hôtel de ville, un Parthénon, Notre-Dame, un Mont Aventin, le faubourg Saint-Antoine, un Asinarium, la Sorbonne, un Panthéon, le Panthéon, une Voie Sacrée, le boulevard des Italiens, une Tour des Vents, l'opinion; et il remplace les gémonies par le ridicule. Son majo s'appelle le faraud, son transtévérin s'appelle le faubourien, son hammal s'appelle le fort de la halle, son lazzarone s'appelle la pègre, son cockney s'appelle le gandin. Tout ce qui est ailleurs est à Paris. La poissarde de Dumarsais peut donner la réplique à la vendeuse d'herbes d'Euripide, le discobole Vejanus revit dans le danseur de corde Forioso, Therapontigonus Miles prendrait bras dessus bras dessous le grenadier Vadeboncœur, Damasippe le brocanteur serait heureux chez les marchands de bric-à-brac, Vincennes empoignerait Socrate tout comme l'Agora coffrerait Diderot, Grimod de la Reynière a découvert le roastbeef au suif comme Curtillus avait inventé le hérisson rôti, nous voyons reparaître sous le ballon de l’arc de l’Étoile le trapèze qui est dans Plaute, le mangeur d’épées du Poecile rencontré par Apulée est avaleur de sabres sur le Pont-Neuf, le neveu de Rameau et Curculion le parasite font la paire, Ergasile se ferait présenter chez Cambacérès par d’Aigrefeuille; les quatre muscadins de Rome, Alcesimarchus, Phoedromus, Diabolus et Argirippe descendent de la Courtille dans la chaise de poste de Labatut; Aulu-Gelle ne s’arrêtait pas plus longtemps devant Congrio que Charles Nodier devant Polichinelle; Marton n’est pas une tigresse, mais Pardalisca n’était point un dragon; Pantolabus le loustic blague au café anglais Nomentanus le viveur, Hermogène est ténor aux Champs-Élysées, et, autour de lui, Thrasius le gueux, vêtu en Bobèche, fait la quête; l’importun qui vous arrête aux Tuileries par le bouton de votre habit vous fait répéter après deux mille ans l’apostrophe de Thesprion: *quis properantem me prehendit pallio*? le vin de Suresnes parodie le vin d’Albe, le rouge bord de Desaugiers fait équilibre à la grande coupe de Balatron, le Père-Lachaise exhale sous les pluies nocturnes les mêmes lueurs que les Esquilies, et la fosse du pauvre achetée pour cinq ans vaut la bière de louage de l’Esclave.

Cherchez quelque chose que Paris n’ait pas. La cuve de Trophonius ne contient rien qui ne soit dans le baquet de Mesmer; Ergaphilos ressuscite dans Cagliostro; le brahmine Vâsaphantâ s’incarne dans le comte de Saint-Germain; le cimetière de Saint-Médard fait de tout aussi bons miracles que la mosquée Oumoumié de Damas.

Paris a un Ésope qui est Mayeux, et une Canidie qui est mademoiselle Lenormand. Il s’effare comme Delphes aux réalités fulgurantes de la vision; il fait tourner les tables comme Dodone les trépieds. Il met la grisette sur le trône comme Rome y met la courtisane; et, somme toute, si Louis XV est pire que Claude, madame Dubarry vaut mieux que Messaline. Paris combine dans un type inouï, qui a vécu et que nous avons coudoyé, la nudité grecque, l’ulcère hébraïque et le quolibet gascon. Il mêle Diogène, Job et Paillasse, habille un spectre de vieux numéros du *Constitutionnel*, et fait Chodruc Duclos.

Bien que Plutarque dise: *le tyran n’envieillit guère*, Rome, sous Sylla comme sous Domitien, se résignait et mettait volontiers de l’eau dans son vin. Le Tibre était un Léthé, s’il faut en croire l’éloge un peu doctrinaire qu’en faisait Varus Vibiscus: *Contra Gracchos Tiberim habemus. Bibere Tiberim, id est seditionem oblivisci*. Paris boit un million de litres d’eau par jour, mais cela ne l’empêche pas dans l’occasion de battre la générale et de sonner le tocsin.

À cela près, Paris est bon enfant. Il accepte royalement tout; il n’est pas difficile en fait de Vénus; sa callipyge est hottentote; pourvu qu’il rie, il amnistie; la laideur l’égaye, la difformité le désopile, le vice le distrait; soyez drôle, et vous pourrez être un drôle; l’hypocrisie même, ce cynisme suprême, ne le révolte pas; il est si littéraire qu’il ne se bouche pas le nez devant Basile, et il ne se scandalise pas plus de la prière de Tartuffe qu’Horace ne s’effarouche du «hoquet» de Priape. Aucun trait de la face universelle ne manque au profil de Paris. Le bal Mabille n’est pas la danse polymnienne du Janicule, mais la revendeuse à la toilette y couve des yeux la lorette exactement comme l’entremetteuse Staphyla guettait la vierge Planesium. La barrière du Combat n’est pas un Colisée, mais on y est féroce comme si César regardait. L’hôtesse syrienne a plus de grâce que la mère Saguet, mais, si Virgile hantait le cabaret romain, David d’Angers, Balzac et Charlet se sont attablés à la gargote parisienne. Paris règne. Les génies y flamboient, les queues rouges y prospèrent. Adonaï y passe sur son char aux douze roues de tonnerre et d’éclairs; Silène y fait son entrée sur sa bourrique. Silène, lisez Ramponneau.

Paris est synonyme de Cosmos. Paris est Athènes, Rome, Sybaris, Jérusalem, Pantin. Toutes les civilisations y sont en abrégé, toutes les barbaries aussi. Paris serait bien fâché de n’avoir pas une guillotine.

Un peu de place de Grève est bon. Que serait toute cette fête éternelle sans cet assaisonnement? Nos lois y ont sagement pourvu, et, grâce à elles, ce couperet s’égoutte sur ce mardi gras.

Chapitre XI

Railler, régner

De limite à Paris, point. Aucune ville n’a eu cette domination qui bafoue parfois ceux qu’elle subjugue. *Vous plaire, ô Athéniens!* s’écriait Alexandre. Paris fait plus que la loi, il fait la mode; Paris fait plus que la mode, il fait la routine. Paris peut être bête si bon lui semble, il se donne quelquefois ce luxe; alors l’univers est bête avec lui; puis Paris se réveille, se frotte les yeux, dit: Suis-je stupide! et éclate de rire à la face du genre humain. Quelle merveille qu’une telle ville! Chose étrange que ce grandiose et ce burlesque fassent bon voisinage, que toute cette majesté ne soit pas dérangée par toute cette parodie, et que la même bouche puisse souffler aujourd’hui dans le clairon du jugement dernier et demain dans la flûte à l’oignon! Paris a une jovialité souveraine. Sa gaîté est de la foudre et sa farce tient un sceptre. Son ouragan sort parfois d’une grimace. Ses explosions, ses journées, ses chefs-d’œuvre, ses prodiges, ses épopées, vont au bout de l’univers, et ses coq-à-l’âne aussi. Son rire est une bouche de volcan qui éclabousse toute la terre. Ses lazzis sont des flammèches. Il impose aux peuples ses caricatures aussi bien que son idéal; les plus hauts monuments de la civilisation humaine acceptent ses ironies et prêtent leur éternité à ses polissonneries. Il est superbe; il a un prodigieux 14 juillet qui délivre le globe; il fait faire le serment du Jeu de Paume à toutes les nations; sa nuit du 4 août dissout en trois heures mille ans de féodalité; il fait de sa logique le muscle de la volonté unanime; il se multiplie sous toutes les formes du sublime; il emplit de sa lueur Washington, Kosciusko, Bolivar, Botzaris, Riego, Bem, Manin, Lopez, John Brown, Garibaldi; il est partout où l’avenir s’allume, à Boston en 1779, à l’île de Léon en 1820, à Pesth en 1848, à Palerme en 1860; il chuchote le puissant mot d’ordre: *Liberté*, à l’oreille des abolitionnistes américains groupés au bac de Harper’s Ferry, et à l’oreille des patriotes d’Ancône assemblés dans l’ombre aux Archi, devant l’auberge Gozzi, au bord de la mer; il crée Canaris; il crée Quiroga; il crée Pisacane; il rayonne le grand sur la terre; c’est en allant où son souffle les pousse que Byron meurt à Missolonghi et que Mazet meurt à Barcelone; il est tribune sous les pieds de Mirabeau et cratère sous les pieds de Robespierre; ses livres, son théâtre, son art, sa science, sa littérature, sa philosophie, sont les manuels du genre humain; il a Pascal, Régnier, Corneille, Descartes, Jean-Jacques, Voltaire pour toutes les minutes, Molière pour tous les siècles; il fait parler sa langue à la bouche universelle, et cette langue devient verbe; il construit dans tous les esprits l'idée de progrès; les dogmes libérateurs qu'il forge sont pour les générations des épées de chevet, et c'est avec l'âme de ses penseurs et de ses poètes que sont faits depuis 1789 tous les héros de tous les peuples; cela ne l'empêche pas de gaminer; et ce génie énorme qu'on appelle Paris, tout en transfigurant le monde par sa lumière, charbonne le nez de Bouginier au mur du temple de Thésée et écrit *Crédeville voleur* sur les Pyramides.

Paris montre toujours les dents; quand il ne gronde pas, il rit.

Tel est ce Paris. Les fumées de ses toits sont les idées de l'univers. Tas de boue et de pierres si l'on veut, mais, par-dessus tout, être moral. Il est plus que grand, il est immense. Pourquoi? parce qu'il ose.

Oser; le progrès est à ce prix.

Toutes les conquêtes sublimes sont plus ou moins des prix de hardiesse. Pour que la révolution soit, il ne suffit pas que Montesquieu la pressente, que Diderot la prêche, que Beaumarchais l'annonce, que Condorcet la calcule, qu'Arouet la prépare, que Rousseau la prémédite; il faut que Danton l'ose.

Le cri: *Audace!* est un *Fiat Lux*. Il faut, pour la marche en avant du genre humain, qu'il y ait sur les sommets en permanence de fières leçons de courage. Les témérités éblouissent l'histoire et sont une des grandes clartés de l'homme. L'aurore ose quand elle se lève. Tenter, braver, persister, persévérer, s'être fidèle à soi-même, prendre corps à corps le destin, étonner la catastrophe par le peu de peur qu'elle nous fait, tantôt affronter la puissance injuste, tantôt insulter la victoire ivre, tenir bon, tenir tête; voilà l'exemple dont les peuples ont besoin, et la lumière qui les électrise. Le même éclair formidable va de la torche de Prométhée au brûle-gueule de Cambronne.

Chapitre XII

L’avenir latent dans le peuple

Quant au peuple parisien, même homme fait, il est toujours le gamin; peindre l’enfant, c’est peindre la ville; et c’est pour cela que nous avons étudié cet aigle dans ce moineau franc.

C’est surtout dans les faubourgs, insistons-y, que la race parisienne apparaît; là est le pur sang; là est la vraie physionomie; là ce peuple travaille et souffre, et la souffrance et le travail sont les deux figures de l’homme. Il y a là des quantités profondes d’êtres inconnus où fourmillent les types les plus étranges depuis le déchargeur de la Râpée jusqu’à l’équarrisseur de Montfaucon. *Fex urbis*, s’écrie Cicéron; *mob*, ajoute Burke indigné; tourbe, multitude, populace. Ces mots-là sont vite dits. Mais soit. Qu’importe? qu’est-ce que cela fait qu’ils aillent pieds nus? Ils ne savent pas lire; tant pis. Les abandonnerez-vous pour cela? leur ferez-vous de leur détresse une malédiction? la lumière ne peut-elle pénétrer ces masses? Revenons à ce cri: Lumière! et obstinons-nous-y! Lumière! lumière! — Qui sait si ces opacités ne deviendront pas transparentes? les révolutions ne sont-elles pas des transfigurations? Allez, philosophes, enseignez, éclairez, allumez, pensez haut, parlez haut, courez joyeux au grand soleil, fraternisez avec les places publiques, annoncez les bonnes nouvelles, prodiguez les alphabets, proclamez les droits, chantez les Marseillaises, semez les enthousiasmes, arrachez des branches vertes aux chênes. Faites de l’idée un tourbillon. Cette foule peut être sublimée. Sachons nous servir de ce vaste embrasement des principes et des vertus qui pétille, éclate et frissonne à de certaines heures. Ces pieds nus, ces bras nus, ces haillons, ces ignorances, ces abjections, ces ténèbres, peuvent être employés à la conquête de l’idéal. Regardez à travers le peuple et vous apercevrez la vérité. Ce vil sable que vous foulez aux pieds, qu’on le jette dans la fournaise, qu’il y fonde et qu’il y bouillonne, il deviendra cristal splendide, et c’est grâce à lui que Galilée et Newton découvriront les astres.

Chapitre XIII

Le petit Gavroche

Huit ou neuf ans environ après les évènements racontés dans la deuxième partie de cette histoire, on remarquait sur le boulevard du Temple et dans les régions du Château-d’Eau un petit garçon de onze à douze ans qui eût assez correctement réalisé cet idéal du gamin ébauché plus haut, si, avec le rire de son âge sur les lèvres, il n’eût pas eu le cœur absolument sombre et vide. Cet enfant était bien affublé d’un pantalon d’homme, mais il ne le tenait pas de son père, et d’une camisole de femme, mais il ne la tenait pas de sa mère. Des gens quelconques l’avaient habillé de chiffons par charité. Pourtant il avait un père et une mère. Mais son père ne songeait pas à lui et sa mère ne l’aimait point. C’était un de ces enfants dignes de pitié entre tous qui ont père et mère et qui sont orphelins.

Cet enfant ne se sentait jamais si bien que dans la rue. Le pavé lui était moins dur que le cœur de sa mère.

Ses parents l’avaient jeté dans la vie d’un coup de pied.

Il avait tout bonnement pris sa volée.

C’était un garçon bruyant, blême, leste, éveillé, goguenard, à l’air vivace et maladif. Il allait, venait, chantait, jouait à la fayousse, grattait les ruisseaux, volait un peu, mais comme les chats et les passereaux, gaîment, riait quand on l’appelait galopin, se fâchait quand on l’appelait voyou. Il n’avait pas de gîte, pas de pain, pas de feu, pas d’amour; mais il était joyeux parce qu’il était libre.

Quand ces pauvres êtres sont des hommes, presque toujours la meule de l’ordre social les rencontre et les broie, mais tant qu’ils sont enfants, ils échappent, étant petits. Le moindre trou les sauve.

Pourtant, si abandonné que fût cet enfant, il arrivait parfois, tous les deux ou trois mois, qu’il disait: Tiens, je vais voir maman! Alors il quittait le boulevard, le Cirque, la porte Saint-Martin, descendait aux quais, passait les ponts, gagnait les faubourgs, atteignait la Salpêtrière, et arrivait où? Précisément à ce double numéro 50-52 que le lecteur connaît, à la masure Gorbeau.

À cette époque, la masure 50-52, habituellement déserte et éternellement décorée de l’écriteau: «Chambres à louer», se trouvait, chose rare, habitée par plusieurs individus qui, du reste, comme cela est toujours à Paris, n’avaient aucun lien ni aucun rapport entre eux. Tous appartenaient à cette classe indigente qui commence à partir du dernier petit bourgeois gêné et qui se prolonge de misère en misère dans les bas-fonds de la société jusqu’à ces deux êtres auxquels toutes les choses matérielles de la civilisation viennent aboutir, l’égoutier qui balaye la boue et le chiffonnier qui ramasse les guenilles.

La «principale locataire» du temps de Jean Valjean était morte et avait été remplacée par toute pareille. Je ne sais quel philosophe a dit: On ne manque jamais de vieilles femmes.

Cette nouvelle vieille s’appelait madame Burgon, et n’avait rien de remarquable dans sa vie qu’une dynastie de trois perroquets, lesquels avaient successivement régné sur son âme.

Les plus misérables entre ceux qui habitaient la masure étaient une famille de quatre personnes, le père, la mère et deux filles déjà assez grandes, tous les quatre logés dans le même galetas, une de ces cellules dont nous avons déjà parlé.

Cette famille n’offrait au premier abord rien de très particulier que son extrême dénûment. Le père en louant la chambre avait dit s’appeler Jondrette. Quelque temps après son emménagement qui avait singulièrement ressemblé, pour emprunté l’expression mémorable de la principale locataire, à *l’entrée de rien du tout*, ce Jondrette avait dit à cette femme qui, comme sa devancière, était en même temps portière et balayait l’escalier: — Mère une telle, si quelqu’un venait par hasard demander un polonais ou un italien, ou peut-être un espagnol, ce serait moi.

Cette famille était la famille du joyeux va-nu-pieds. Il y arrivait et il y trouvait la pauvreté, la détresse, et, ce qui est plus triste, aucun sourire; le froid dans l’âtre et le froid dans les cœurs. Quand il entrait, on lui demandait: — D’où viens-tu? Il répondait: — De la rue. Quand il s’en allait, on lui demandait: — Où vas-tu? il répondait: — Dans la rue. Sa mère lui disait: — Qu’est-ce que tu viens faire ici?

Cet enfant vivait dans cette absence d’affection comme ces herbes pâles qui viennent dans les caves. Il ne souffrait pas d’être ainsi et n’en voulait à personne. Il ne savait pas au juste comment devaient être un père et une mère.

Du reste sa mère aimait ses sœurs.

Nous avons oublié de dire que sur le boulevard du Temple on nommait cet enfant le petit Gavroche. Pourquoi s’appelait-il Gavroche? Probablement parce que son père s’appelait Jondrette.

Casser le fil semble être l’instinct de certaines familles misérables.

La chambre que les Jondrette habitaient dans la masure Gorbeau était la dernière au bout du corridor. La cellule d’à côté était occupée par un jeune homme très pauvre qu’on nommait Marius.

Disons ce que c’était que monsieur Marius.

Livre deuxième — Le grand bourgeois

Chapitre I

Quatrevingt-dix ans et trente-deux dents

Rue Boucherat, rue de Normandie et rue de Saintonge, il existe encore quelques anciens habitants qui ont gardé le souvenir d’un bonhomme appelé M. Gillenormand, et qui en parlent avec complaisance. Ce bonhomme était vieux quand ils étaient jeunes. Cette silhouette, pour ceux qui regardent mélancoliquement ce vague fourmillement d’ombres qu’on nomme le passé, n’a pas encore tout à fait disparu du labyrinthe des rues voisines du Temple auxquelles, sous Louis XIV, on a attaché les noms de toutes les provinces de France, absolument comme on a donné de nos jours aux rues du nouveau quartier Tivoli les noms de toutes les capitales d’Europe; progression, soit dit en passant, où est visible le progrès.

M. Gillenormand, lequel était on ne peut plus vivant en 1831, était un de ces hommes devenus curieux à voir uniquement à cause qu’ils ont longtemps vécu, et qui sont étranges parce qu’ils ont jadis ressemblé à tout le monde et que maintenant ils ne ressemblent plus à personne. C’était un vieillard particulier, et bien véritablement l’homme d’un autre âge, le vrai bourgeois complet et un peu hautain du dix-huitième siècle, portant sa bonne vieille bourgeoisie de l’air dont les marquis portaient leur marquisat. Il avait dépassé quatre-vingt-dix ans, marchait droit, parlait haut, voyait clair, buvait sec, mangeait, dormait et ronflait. Il avait ses trente-deux dents. Il ne mettait de lunettes que pour lire. Il était d’humeur amoureuse, mais disait que depuis une dizaine d’années il avait décidément et tout à fait renoncé aux femmes. Il ne pouvait plus plaire, disait-il; il n’ajoutait pas: Je suis trop vieux, mais: Je suis trop pauvre. Il disait: Si je n’étais pas ruiné... hééé! — Il ne lui restait en effet qu’un revenu d’environ quinze mille livres. Son rêve était de faire un héritage et d’avoir cent mille francs de rente pour avoir des maîtresses. Il n’appartenait point, comme on voit, à cette variété malingre d’octogénaires qui, comme M. de Voltaire, ont été mourants toute leur vie; ce n’était pas une longévité de pot fêlé; ce vieillard gaillard s’était toujours bien porté. Il était superficiel, rapide, aisément courroucé. Il entrait en tempête à tout propos, le plus souvent à contre-sens du vrai. Quand on le contredisait, il levait la canne; il battait les gens, comme au grand siècle. Il avait une fille de cinquante ans passés, non mariée, qu’il rossait très fort quand il se mettait en colère, et qu'il eût volontiers fouettée. Elle lui faisait l'effet d'avoir huit ans. Il souffletait énergiquement ses domestiques et disait: Ah! carogne! Un de ses jurons était: *Par la pantoufloche de la pantouflochade!* Il avait des tranquillités singulières; il se faisait raser tous les jours par un barbier qui avait été fou, et qui le détestait, étant jaloux de M. Gillenormand à cause de sa femme, jolie barbière coquette. M. Gillenormand admirait son propre discernement en toute chose, et se déclarait très sagace; voici un de ses mots: «J'ai, en vérité, quelque pénétration; je suis de force à dire, quand une puce me pique, de quelle femme elle me vient.» Les mots qu'il prononçait le plus souvent, c'était: *l'homme sensible* et *la nature*. Il ne donnait pas à ce dernier mot la grande acception que notre époque lui a rendue. Mais il le faisait entrer à sa façon dans ses petites satires du coin du feu: — La nature, disait-il, pour que la civilisation ait un peu de tout, lui donne jusqu'à des spécimens de barbarie amusante. L'Europe a des échantillons de l'Asie et de l'Afrique, en petit format. Le chat est un tigre de salon, le lézard est un crocodile de poche. Les danseuses de l'Opéra sont des sauvagesses roses. Elles ne mangent pas les hommes, elles les grugent. Ou bien, les magiciennes! elles les changent en huîtres, et les avalent. Les caraïbes ne laissent que les os, elles ne laissent que l'écaille. Telles sont nos mœurs. Nous ne dévorons pas, nous rongeons; nous n'exterminons pas, nous griffons.

Chapitre II

Tel maître, tel logis

Il demeurait au Marais, rue des Filles-du-Calvaire, nº 6. La maison était à lui. Cette maison a été démolie et rebâtie depuis, et le chiffre en a probablement été changé dans ces révolutions de numérotage que subissent les rues de Paris. Il occupait un vieil et vaste appartement au premier, entre la rue et des jardins, meublé jusqu'aux plafonds de grandes tapisseries des Gobelins et de Beauvais représentant des bergerades; les sujets des plafonds et des panneaux étaient répétés en petit sur les fauteuils. Il enveloppait son lit d'un vaste paravent à neuf feuilles en laque de Coromandel. De longs rideaux diffus pendaient aux croisées et y faisaient de grands plis cassés très magnifiques. Le jardin immédiatement situé sous ses fenêtres se rattachait à celle d'entre elles qui faisait l'angle au moyen d'un escalier de douze ou quinze marches fort allégrement monté et descendu par ce bonhomme. Outre une bibliothèque contiguë à sa chambre, il avait un boudoir auquel il tenait fort, réduit galant tapissé d'une magnifique tenture de paille fleurdelysée et fleurie faite sur les galères de Louis XIV et commandée par M. de Vivonne à ses forçats pour sa maîtresse. M. Gillenormand avait hérité cela d'une farouche grand'tante maternelle, morte centenaire. Il avait eu deux femmes. Ses manières tenaient le milieu entre l'homme de cour qu'il n'avait jamais été et l'homme de robe qu'il aurait pu être. Il était gai, et caressant quand il voulait. Dans sa jeunesse, il avait été de ces hommes qui sont toujours trompés par leur femme et jamais par leur maîtresse, parce qu'ils sont à la fois les plus maussades maris et les plus charmants amants qu'il y ait. Il était connaisseur en peinture. Il avait dans sa chambre un merveilleux portrait d'on ne sait qui, peint par Jordaens, fait à grands coups de brosse, avec des millions de détails, à la façon fouillis et comme au hasard. Le vêtement de M. Gillenormand n'était pas l'habit Louis XV, ni même l'habit Louis XVI; c'était le costume des incroyables du Directoire. Il s'était cru tout jeune jusque-là et avait suivi les modes. Son habit était en drap léger, avec de spacieux revers, une longue queue de morue et de larges boutons d'acier. Avec cela la culotte course et les souliers à boucles. Il mettait toujours les mains dans ses goussets. Il disait avec autorité: *La Révolution française est un tas de chenapans*.

Chapitre III

Luc-Esprit

À l’âge de seize ans, un soir, à l’Opéra, il avait eu l’honneur d’être lorgné à la fois par deux beautés alors mûres et célèbres et chantées par Voltaire, la Camargo et la Sallé. Pris entre deux feux, il avait fait une retraite héroïque vers une petite danseuse, fillette appelée Nahenry, qui avait seize ans comme lui, obscure comme un chat, et dont il était amoureux. Il abondait en souvenirs. Il s’écriait: — Qu’elle était jolie, cette Guimard-Guimardini-Guimardinette, la dernière fois que je l’ai vue à Longchamps, frisée en sentiments soutenus, avec ses venez-y-voir en turquoises, sa robe couleur de gens nouvellement arrivés, et son manchon d’agitation! — Il avait porté dans son adolescence une veste de Nain-Londrin dont il parlait volontiers et avec effusion. — J’étais vêtu comme un turc du Levant levantin, disait-il. Mme de Boufflers, l’ayant vu par hasard quand il avait vingt ans, l’avait qualifié «un fol charmant». Il se scandalisait de tous les noms qu’il voyait dans la politique et au pouvoir, les trouvant bas et bourgeois. Il lisait les journaux, *les papiers nouvelles, les gazettes,* comme il disait, en étouffant des éclats de rire. Oh! disait-il, quelles sont ces gens-là! Corbière! Humann! Casimir-Perier! cela vous est ministre. Je me figure ceci dans un journal: M. Gillenormand, ministre! ce serait farce. Eh bien! ils sont si bêtes que ça irait! Il appelait allégrement toutes choses par le mot propre ou malpropre et ne se gênait pas devant les femmes. Il disait des grossièretés, des obscénités et des ordures avec je ne sais quoi de tranquille et de peu étonné qui était élégant. C’était le sans-façon de son siècle. Il est à remarquer que le temps des périphrases en vers a été le temps des crudités en prose. Son parrain avait prédit qu’il serait un homme de génie, et lui avait donné ces deux prénoms significatifs: Luc-Esprit.

Chapitre IV

Aspirant centenaire

Il avait eu des prix en son enfance au collège de Moulins où il était né, et il avait été couronné de la main du duc de Nivernais qu’il appelait le duc de Nevers. Ni la Convention ni la mort de Louis XVI, ni Napoléon, ni le retour des Bourbons, rien n’avait pu effacer le souvenir de ce couronnement. *Le duc de Nevers* était pour lui la grande figure du siècle. Quel charmant grand seigneur, disait-il, et qu’il avait bon air avec son cordon bleu! Aux yeux de M. Gillenormand, Catherine II avait réparé le crime du partage de la Pologne en achetant pour trois mille roubles le secret de l’élixir d’or à Bestuchef. Là-dessus, il s’animait: — L’élixir d’or, s’écriait-il, la teinture jaune de Bestuchef, les gouttes du général Lamotte, c’était, au dix-huitième siècle, à un louis le flacon d’une demi-once, le grand remède aux catastrophes de l’amour, la panacée contre Vénus. Louis XV en envoyait deux cents flacons au pape. — On l’eût fort exaspéré et mis hors des gonds si on lui eût dit que l’élixir d’or n’est autre chose que le perchlorure de fer. M. Gillenormand adorait les Bourbons et avait en horreur 1789; il racontait sans cesse de quelle façon il s’était sauvé dans la Terreur, et comment il lui avait fallu bien de la gaîté et bien de l’esprit pour ne pas avoir la tête coupée. Si quelque jeune homme s’avisait de faire devant lui l’éloge de la République, il devenait bleu et s’irritait à s’évanouir. Quelquefois il faisait allusion à son âge de quatrevingt-dix ans, et disait: *J’espère bien que je ne verrai pas deux fois quatrevingt-treize*. D’autres fois, il signifiait aux gens qu’il entendait vivre cent ans.

Chapitre V

Basque et Nicolette

Il avait des théories. En voici une: «Quand un homme aime passionnément les femmes, et qu’il a lui-même une femme à lui dont il se soucie peu, laide, revêche, légitime, pleine de droits, juchée sur le code et jalouse au besoin, il n’a qu’une façon de s’en tirer et d’avoir la paix, c’est de laisser à sa femme les cordons de la bourse. Cette abdication le fait libre. La femme s’occupe alors, se passionne au maniement des espèces, s’y vert-de-grise les doigts, entreprend l’élève des métayers et le dressage des fermiers, convoque les avoués, préside les notaires, harangue les tabellions, visite les robins, suit les procès, rédige les baux, dicte les contrats, se sent souveraine, vend, achète, règle, jordonne, promet et compromet, lie et résilie, cède, concède et rétrocède, arrange, dérange, thésaurise, prodigue, elle fait des sottises, bonheur magistral et personnel, et cela console. Pendant que son mari la dédaigne, elle a la satisfaction de ruiner son mari.» Cette théorie, M. Gillenormand se l’était appliquée, et elle était devenue son histoire. Sa femme, la deuxième, avait administré sa fortune de telle façon qu’il restait à M. Gillenormand, quand un beau jour il se trouva veuf, juste de quoi vivre, en plaçant presque tout en viager, une quinzaine de mille francs de rente dont les trois quarts devaient s’éteindre avec lui. Il n’avait pas hésité, peu préoccupé du souci de laisser un héritage. D’ailleurs il avait vu que les patrimoines avaient des aventures, et, par exemple, devenaient des *biens nationaux;* il avait assisté aux avatars du tiers consolidé, et il croyait peu au grand-livre. — *Rue Quincampoix que tout cela*! disait-il. Sa maison de la rue des Filles-du-Calvaire, nous l’avons dit, lui appartenait. Il avait deux domestiques, «un mâle et un femelle». Quand un domestique entrait chez lui, M. Gillenormand le rebaptisait. Il donnait aux hommes le nom de leur province: Nîmois, Comtois, Poitevin, Picard. Son dernier valet était un gros homme fourbu et poussif de cinquante-cinq ans, incapable de courir vingt pas, mais, comme il était né à Bayonne, M. Gillenormand l’appelait Basque. Quant aux servantes, toutes s’appelaient chez lui Nicolette (même la Magnon dont il sera question plus loin). Un jour une fière cuisinière, cordon bleu, de haute race de concierges, se présenta. — Combien voulez-vous gagner de gages par mois? lui demanda M. Gillenormand. — Trente francs.

— Comment vous nommez-vous? — Olympie. — Tu auras cinquante francs, et tu t’appelleras Nicolette.

Chapitre VI

Où l'on entrevoit la Magnon et ses deux petits

Chez M. Gillenormand la douleur se traduisait en colère; il était furieux d'être désespéré. Il avait tous les préjugés et prenait toutes les licences. Une des choses dont il composait son relief extérieur et sa satisfaction intime, c'était, nous venons de l'indiquer, d'être resté vert galant, et de passer énergiquement pour tel. Il appelait cela avoir «royale renommée». La royale renommée lui attirait parfois de singulières aubaines. Un jour on apporta chez lui dans une bourriche, comme une cloyère d'huîtres, un gros garçon nouveau-né, criant le diable et dûment emmitouflé de langes, qu'une servante chassée six mois auparavant lui attribuait. M. Gillenormand avait alors ses parfaits quatrevingt-quatre ans. Indignation et clameur dans l'entourage. Et à qui cette effrontée drôlesse espérait-elle faire accroire cela? Quelle audace! quelle abominable calomnie! M. Gillenormand, lui, n'eut aucune colère. Il regarda le maillot avec l'aimable sourire d'un bonhomme flatté de la calomnie, et dit à la cantonade: « — Eh bien quoi? qu'est-ce? qu'y a-t-il? qu'est-ce qu'il y a? vous vous ébahissez bellement, et, en vérité, comme aucunes personnes ignorantes. Monsieur le duc d'Angoulême, bâtard de sa majesté Charles IX, se maria à quatrevingt-cinq ans avec une péronnelle de quinze ans, monsieur Virginal, marquis d'Alluye, frère du cardinal de Sourdis, archevêque de Bordeaux, eut à quatrevingt-trois ans d'une fille de chambre de madame la présidente Jacquin un fils, un vrai fils d'amour, qui fut chevalier de Malte et conseiller d'état d'épée; un des grands hommes de ce siècle-ci, l'abbé Tabaraud, est fils d'un homme de quatrevingt-sept ans. Ces choses-là n'ont rien que d'ordinaire. Et la Bible donc! Sur ce, je déclare que ce petit monsieur n'est pas de moi. Qu'on en prenne soin. Ce n'est pas sa faute.» — Le procédé était débonnaire. La créature, celle-là qui se nommait Magnon, lui fit un deuxième envoi l'année d'après. C'était encore un garçon. Pour le coup, M. Gillenormand capitula. Il remit à la mère les deux mioches, s'engageant à payer pour leur entretien quatre-vingts francs par mois, à la condition que ladite mère ne recommencerait plus. Il ajouta: «J'entends que la mère les traite bien. Je les irai voir de temps en temps.» Ce qu'il fit. Il avait eu un frère prêtre, lequel avait été trente-trois ans recteur de l'académie de

Poitiers, et était mort à soixante-dix-neuf ans. *Je l’ai perdu jeune*, disait-il. Ce frère, dont il est resté peu de souvenir, était un paisible avare qui, étant prêtre, se croyait obligé de faire l’aumône aux pauvres qu’il rencontrait, mais il ne leur donnait jamais que des monnerons ou des sous démonétisés, trouvant ainsi moyen d’aller en enfer par le chemin du paradis. Quant à M. Gillenormand aîné, il ne marchandait pas l’aumône et donnait volontiers, et noblement. Il était bienveillant, brusque, charitable, et s’il eût été riche, sa pente eût été le magnifique. Il voulait que tout ce qui le concernait fût fait grandement, même les friponneries. Un jour, dans une succession, ayant été dévalisé par un homme d’affaires d’une manière grossière et visible, il jeta cette exclamation solennelle: — «Fi! c’est malproprement fait! j’ai vraiment honte de ces grivelleries. Tout a dégénéré dans ce siècle, même les coquins. Morbleu! ce n’est pas ainsi qu’on doit voler un homme de ma sorte. Je suis volé comme dans un bois, mais mal volé. *Sylvae sint consule dignae!*» — il avait eu, nous l’avons dit, deux femmes; de la première une fille qui était restée fille, et de la seconde une autre fille, morte vers l’âge de trente ans, laquelle avait épousé par amour ou hasard ou autrement un soldat de fortune qui avait servi dans les armées de la République et de l’Empire, avait eu la croix à Austerlitz et avait été fait colonel à Waterloo. *C’est la honte de ma famille*, disait le vieux bourgeois. Il prenait force tabac, et avait une grâce particulière à chiffonner son jabot de dentelle d’un revers de main. Il croyait fort peu en Dieu.

Chapitre VII

Règle: Ne recevoir personne que le soir

Tel était M. Luc-Esprit Gillenormand, lequel n’avait point perdu ses cheveux, plutôt gris que blancs, et était toujours coiffé en oreilles de chien. En somme, et avec tout cela, vénérable.

Il tenait du dix-huitième siècle: frivole et grand.

Dans les premières années de la Restauration, M. Gillenormand, qui était encore jeune, — il n’avait que soixante-quatorze ans en 1814, — avait habité le faubourg Saint-Germain, rue Servandoni, près Saint-Sulpice. Il ne s’était retiré au Marais qu’en sortant du monde, bien après ses quatre-vingts ans sonnés.

Et en sortant du monde, il s’était muré dans ses habitudes. La principale, et où il était invariable, c’était de tenir sa porte absolument fermée le jour, et de ne jamais recevoir qui que ce soit, pour quelque affaire que ce fût, que le soir. Il dînait à cinq heures, puis sa porte était ouverte. C’était la mode de son siècle, et il n’en voulait point démordre. — Le jour est canaille, disait-il, et ne mérite qu’un volet fermé. Les gens comme il faut allument leur esprit quand le zénith allume ses étoiles. — Et il se barricadait pour tout le monde, fût-ce pour le roi. Vieille élégance de son temps.

Chapitre VIII

Les deux ne font pas la paire

Quant aux deux filles de M. Gillenormand, nous venons d’en parler. Elles étaient nées à dix ans d’intervalle. Dans leur jeunesse elles s’étaient fort peu ressemblé, et, par le caractère comme par le visage, avaient été aussi peu sœurs que possible. La cadette était une charmante âme tournée vers tout ce qui est lumière, occupée de fleurs, de vers et de musique, envolée dans des espaces glorieux, enthousiaste, éthérée, fiancée dès l’enfance dans l’idéal à une vague figure héroïque. L’aînée avait aussi sa chimère; elle voyait dans l’azur un fournisseur, quelque bon gros munitionnaire bien riche, un mari splendidement bête, un million fait homme, ou bien, un préfet; les réceptions de la préfecture, un huissier d’antichambre chaîne au cou, les bals officiels, les harangues de la mairie, être «madame la préfète», cela tourbillonnait dans son imagination. Les deux sœurs s’égaraient ainsi, chacune dans son rêve, à l’époque où elles étaient jeunes filles. Toutes deux avaient des ailes, l’une comme un ange, l’autre comme une oie.

Aucune ambition ne se réalise pleinement, ici-bas du moins. Aucun paradis ne devient terrestre à l’époque où nous sommes. La cadette avait épousé l’homme de ses songes, mais elle était morte. L’aînée ne s’était pas mariée.

Au moment où elle fait son entrée dans l’histoire que nous racontons, c’était une vieille vertu, une prude incombustible, un des nez les plus pointus et un des esprits les plus obtus qu’on pût voir. Détail caractéristique: en dehors de la famille étroite, personne n’avait jamais su son petit nom. On l’appelait *mademoiselle Gillenormand l’aînée*.

En fait de cant, mademoiselle Gillenormand l’aînée eût rendu des points à une miss. C’était la pudeur poussée au noir. Elle avait un souvenir affreux dans sa vie; un jour, un homme avait vu sa jarretière.

L’âge n’avait fait qu’accroître cette pudeur impitoyable. Sa guimpe n’était jamais assez opaque, et ne montait jamais assez haut. Elle multipliait les agrafes et les épingles là où personne ne songeait à regarder. Le propre de la pruderie, c’est de mettre d’autant plus de factionnaires que la forteresse est moins menacée.

Pourtant, explique qui pourra ces vieux mystères d’innocence, elle se laissait embrasser sans déplaisir par un officier de lanciers qui était son petit-neveu et qui s’appelait Théodule.

En dépit de ce lancier favorisé, l’étiquette: *Prude*, sous laquelle nous l’avons classée, lui convenait absolument. Mlle Gillenormand était une espèce d’âme crépusculaire. La pruderie est une demi-vertu et un demi-vice.

Elle ajoutait à la pruderie le bigotisme, doublure assortie. Elle était de la confrérie de la Vierge, portait un voile blanc à de certaines fêtes, marmottait des oraisons spéciales, révérait «le saint sang», vénérait «le sacré cœur», restait des heures en contemplation devant un autel rococo-jésuite dans une chapelle fermée au commun des fidèles, et y laissait envoler son âme parmi de petites nuées de marbre et à travers de grands rayons de bois doré.

Elle avait une amie de chapelle, vieille vierge comme elle, appelée Mlle Vaubois, absolument hébétée, et près de laquelle Mlle Gillenormand avait le plaisir d’être un aigle. En dehors des agnus dei et des ave maria, Mlle Vaubois n’avait de lumières que sur les différentes façons de faire les confitures. Mlle Vaubois, parfaite en son genre, était l’hermine de la stupidité sans une seule tache d’intelligence.

Disons-le, en vieillissant Mlle Gillenormand avait plutôt gagné que perdu. C’est le fait des natures passives. Elle n’avait jamais été méchante, ce qui est une bonté relative; et puis, les années usent les angles, et l’adoucissement de la durée lui était venu. Elle était triste d’une tristesse obscure dont elle n’avait pas elle-même le secret. Il y avait dans toute sa personne la stupeur d’une vie finie qui n’a pas commencé.

Elle tenait la maison de son père. M. Gillenormand avait près de lui sa fille comme on a vu que monseigneur Bienvenu avait près de lui sa sœur. Ces ménages d’un vieillard et d’une vieille fille ne sont point rares et ont l’aspect toujours touchant de deux faiblesses qui s’appuient l’une sur l’autre.

Il y avait en outre dans la maison, entre cette vieille fille et ce vieillard, un enfant, un petit garçon toujours tremblant et muet devant M. Gillenormand. M. Gillenormand ne parlait jamais à cet enfant que d’une voix sévère et quelquefois la canne levée: — *Ici! monsieur! — Maroufle, polisson, approchez! — Répondez, drôle! — Que je vous voie, vaurien!* etc., etc. Il l’idolâtrait.

C’était son petit-fils. Nous retrouverons cet enfant.

Livre troisième — Le grand-père et le petit-fils

Chapitre I

Un ancien salon

Lorsque M. Gillenormand habitait la rue Servandoni, il hantait plusieurs salons très bons et très nobles. Quoique bourgeois, M. Gillenormand était reçu. Comme il avait deux fois de l’esprit, d’abord l’esprit qu’il avait, ensuite l’esprit qu’on lui prêtait, on le recherchait même, et on le fêtait. Il n’allait nulle part qu’à la condition d’y dominer. Il est des gens qui veulent à tout prix l’influence et qu’on s’occupe d’eux; là où ils ne peuvent être oracles, ils se font loustics. M. Gillenormand n’était pas de cette nature; sa domination dans les salons royalistes qu’il fréquentait ne coûtait rien à son respect de lui-même. Il était oracle partout. Il lui arrivait de tenir tête à M. de Bonald, et même à M. Bengy-Puy-Vallée.

Vers 1817, il passait invariablement deux après-midi par semaine dans une maison de son voisinage, rue Férou, chez madame la baronne de T., digne et respectable personne dont le mari avait été, sous Louis XVI, ambassadeur de France à Berlin. Le baron de T., qui de son vivant donnait passionnément dans les extases et les visions magnétiques, était mort ruiné dans l’émigration, laissant, pour toute fortune, en dix volumes manuscrits reliés en maroquin rouge et dorés sur tranche, des mémoires fort curieux sur Mesmer et son baquet. Madame de T. n’avait point publié les mémoires par dignité, et se soutenait d’une petite rente, qui avait surnagé on ne sait comment. Madame de T. vivait loin de la cour, *monde fort mêlé*, disait-elle, dans un isolement noble, fier et pauvre. Quelques amis se réunissaient deux fois par semaine autour de son feu de veuve et cela constituait un salon royaliste pur. On y prenait le thé, et l’on y poussait, selon que le vent était à l’élégie ou au dithyrambe, des gémissements ou des cris d’horreur sur le siècle, sur la charte, sur les buonapartistes, sur la prostitution du cordon bleu à des bourgeois, sur le jacobinisme de Louis XVIII, et l’on s’y entretenait tout bas des espérances que donnait Monsieur, depuis Charles X.

On y accueillait avec des transports de joie des chansons poissardes où Napoléon était appelé *Nicolas*. Des duchesses, les plus délicates et les plus charmantes femmes du monde, s’y extasiaient sur des couplets comme celui-ci adressé «aux fédérés»:

Renfoncez dans vos culottes

Le bout d'chemis' qui vous pend.
Qu'on n'dis'pas qu'les patriotes
Ont arboré l'drapeau blanc!

On s'y amusait à des calembours qu'on croyait terribles, à des jeux de mots innocents qu'on supposait venimeux, à des quatrains, même à des distiques; ainsi sur le ministère Dessolles, cabinet modéré dont faisaient partie MM. Decazes et Deserre:

Pour raffermir le trône ébranlé sur sa base,
Il faut changer de sol, et de serre et de case.

Ou bien on y façonnait la liste de la chambre des pairs, «chambre abominablement jacobine», et l'on combinait sur cette liste des alliances de noms, de manière à faire, par exemple, des phrases comme celle-ci: *Damas, Sabran, Gouvion Saint-Cyr*. Le tout gaîment.

Dans ce monde-là on parodiait la Révolution. On avait je ne sais quelles velléités d'aiguiser les mêmes colères en sens inverse. On chantait son petit *Ça ira*:

Ah! ça ira! ça ira! ça ira
Les buonapartist'à la lanterne!

Les chansons sont comme la guillotine; elles coupent indifféremment, aujourd'hui cette tête-ci, demain celle-là. Ce n'est qu'une variante.

Dans l'affaire Fualdès, qui est de cette époque, 1816, on prenait parti pour Bastide et Jausion, parce que Fualdès était «buonapartiste». On qualifiait les libéraux, *les frères et amis;* c'était le dernier degré de l'injure.

Comme certains clochers d'église, le salon de madame la baronne de T. avait deux coqs. L'un était M. Gillenormand, l'autre était le comte de Lamothe-Valois, duquel on se disait à l'oreille avec une sorte de considération: *Vous savez? C'est le Lamothe de l'affaire du collier*. Les partis ont de ces amnisties singulières.

Ajoutons ceci: dans la bourgeoisie, les situations honorées s'amoindrissent par des relations trop faciles; il faut prendre garde à qui l'on admet; de même qu'il y a perte de calorique dans le voisinage de ceux qui ont froid, il y a diminution de considération dans l'approche des gens méprisés. L'ancien monde d'en haut se tenait au-dessus de cette loi-là comme de toutes les autres. Marigny, frère de la Pompadour, a ses entrées chez M. le prince de Soubise. Quoique? non, parce que. Du Barry, parrain de la Vaubernier, est le très bien venu chez M. le maréchal de Richelieu. Ce monde-là, c'est l'olympe. Mercure et le prince de Guéménée y sont chez eux. Un voleur y est admis, pourvu qu'il soit dieu.

Le comte de Lamothe qui, en 1815, était un vieillard de soixante-quinze ans, n'avait de remarquable que son air silencieux et sentencieux, sa figure anguleuse et froide, ses manières parfaitement polies, son habit boutonné jusqu'à la cravate, et ses grandes jambes toujours croisées dans un long pantalon flasque couleur de terre de Sienne brûlée. Son visage était de la couleur de son pantalon.

Ce M. de Lamothe était «compté» dans ce salon, à cause de sa «célébrité», et, chose étrange à dire, mais exacte, à cause du nom de Valois.

Quant à M. Gillenormand, sa considération était absolument de bon aloi. Il faisait autorité. Il avait, tout léger qu'il était et sans que cela coûtât rien à sa gaîté, une certaine façon d'être, imposante, digne, honnête et bourgeoisement altière; et son grand âge s'y ajoutait. On n'est pas impunément un siècle. Les années finissent par faire autour d'une tête un échevellement vénérable.

Il avait en outre de ces mots qui sont tout à fait l'étincelle de la vieille roche. Ainsi quand le roi de Prusse, après avoir restauré Louis XVIII, vint lui faire visite sous le nom de comte de Ruppin, il fut reçu par le descendant de Louis XIV un peu comme marquis de Brandebourg et avec l'impertinence la plus délicate. M. Gillenormand approuva. — *Tous les rois qui ne sont pas le roi de France*, dit-il, *sont des rois de province*. On fit un jour devant lui cette demande et cette réponse: — À quoi donc a été condamné le rédacteur du *Courrier français*? — À être suspendu. — *Sus* est de trop, observa Gillenormand. Des paroles de ce genre fondent une situation.

À un *te deum* anniversaire du retour des Bourbons, voyant passer M. de Talleyrand, il dit: *Voilà son excellence le Mal*.

M. Gillenormand venait habituellement accompagné de sa fille, cette longue mademoiselle qui avait alors passé quarante ans et en semblait cinquante, et d'un beau petit garçon de sept ans, blanc, rose, frais, avec des yeux heureux et confiants, lequel n'apparaissait jamais dans ce salon sans entendre toutes les voix bourdonner autour de lui: Qu'il est joli! quel dommage! pauvre enfant! Cet enfant était celui dont nous avons dit un mot tout à l'heure. On l'appelait — pauvre enfant — parce qu'il avait pour père «un brigand de la Loire».

Ce brigand de la Loire était ce gendre de M. Gillenormand dont il a déjà été fait mention, et que M. Gillenormand qualifiait *la honte de sa famille*.

Chapitre II

Un des spectres rouges de ce temps-là

Quelqu’un qui aurait passé à cette époque dans la petite ville de Vernon et qui s’y serait promené sur ce beau pont monumental auquel succédera bientôt, espérons-le, quelque affreux pont en fil de fer, aurait pu remarquer, en laissant tomber ses yeux du haut du parapet, un homme d’une cinquantaine d’années coiffé d’une casquette de cuir, vêtu d’un pantalon et d’une veste de gros drap gris, à laquelle était cousu quelque chose de jaune qui avait été un ruban rouge, chaussé de sabots, hâlé par le soleil, la face presque noire et les cheveux presque blancs, une large cicatrice sur le front se continuant sur la joue, courbé, voûté, vieilli avant l’âge, se promenant à peu près tous les jours, une bêche et une serpe à la main, dans un de ces compartiments entourés de murs qui avoisinent le pont et qui bordent comme une chaîne de terrasses la rive gauche de la Seine, charmants enclos pleins de fleurs desquels on dirait, s’ils étaient beaucoup plus grands: ce sont des jardins, et, s’ils étaient un peu plus petits: ce sont des bouquets. Tous ces enclos aboutissent par un bout à la rivière et par l’autre à une maison. L’homme en veste et en sabots dont nous venons de parler habitait vers 1817 le plus étroit de ces enclos et la plus humble de ces maisons. Il vivait là seul, et solitaire, silencieusement et pauvrement, avec une femme ni jeune, ni vieille, ni belle, ni laide, ni paysanne, ni bourgeoise, qui le servait. Le carré de terre qu’il appelait son jardin était célèbre dans la ville pour la beauté des fleurs qu’il y cultivait. Les fleurs étaient son occupation.

À force de travail, de persévérance, d’attention et de seaux d’eau, il avait réussi à créer après le créateur, et il avait inventé de certaines tulipes et de certains dahlias qui semblaient avoir été oubliés par la nature. Il était ingénieux; il avait devancé Soulange Bodin dans la formation des petits massifs de terre de bruyère pour la culture des rares et précieux arbustes d’Amérique et de Chine. Dès le point du jour, en été, il était dans ses allées, piquant, taillant, sarclant, arrosant, marchant au milieu de ses fleurs avec un air de bonté, de tristesse et de douceur, quelquefois rêveur et immobile des heures entières, écoutant le chant d’un oiseau dans un arbre, le gazouillement d’un enfant dans une maison, ou bien les yeux fixés au bout d’un brin d’herbe sur quelque goutte de rosée dont le soleil faisait une escarboucle. Il avait une table fort maigre, et buvait plus de lait que de vin. Un marmot le faisait céder, sa servante le grondait. Il était timide jusqu'à sembler farouche, sortait rarement, et ne voyait personne que les pauvres qui frappaient à sa porte et son curé, l'abbé Mabeuf, bon vieux homme. Pourtant si des habitants de la ville ou des étrangers, les premiers venus, curieux de voir ses tulipes et ses roses, venaient sonner à sa petite maison, il ouvrait sa porte en souriant. C'était le brigand de la Loire.

Quelqu'un qui, dans le même temps, aurait lu les mémoires militaires, les biographies, le *Moniteur* et les bulletins de la grande Armée, aurait pu être frappé d'un nom qui y revient assez souvent, le nom de Georges Pontmercy. Tout jeune, ce Georges Pontmercy était soldat au régiment de Saintonge. La Révolution éclata. Le régiment de Saintonge fit partie de l'armée du Rhin. Car les anciens régiments de la monarchie gardèrent leurs noms de province, même après la chute de la monarchie, et ne furent embrigadés qu'en 1794. Pontmercy se battit à Spire, à Worms, à Neustadt, à Turkheim, à Alzey, à Mayence où il était des deux cents qui formaient l'arrière-garde de Houchard. Il tint, lui douzième, contre le corps du prince de Hesse, derrière le vieux rempart d'Andernach, et ne se replia sur le gros de l'armée que lorsque le canon ennemi eut ouvert la brèche depuis le cordon du parapet jusqu'au talus de plongée. Il était sous Kléber à Marchiennes et au combat du Mont-Palissel où il eut le bras cassé d'un biscaïen. Puis il passa à la frontière d'Italie, et il fut un des trente grenadiers qui défendirent le col de Tende avec Joubert. Joubert en fut nommé adjudant-général et Pontmercy sous-lieutenant. Pontmercy était à côté de Berthier au milieu de la mitraille dans cette journée de Lodi qui fit dire à Bonaparte: *Berthier a été canonnier, cavalier et grenadier*. Il vit son ancien général Joubert tomber à Novi, au moment où, le sabre levé, il criait: «En avant!» Ayant été embarqué avec sa compagnie pour les besoins de la campagne dans une péniche qui allait de Gênes à je ne sais plus quel petit port de la côte, il tomba dans un guêpier de sept ou huit voiles anglaises. Le commandant génois voulait jeter les canons à la mer, cacher les soldats dans l'entre-pont et se glisser dans l'ombre comme navire marchand. Pontmercy fit frapper les couleurs à la drisse du mât de pavillon, et passa fièrement sous le canon des frégates britanniques. À vingt lieues de là, son audace croissant, avec sa péniche il attaqua et captura un gros transport anglais qui portait des troupes en Sicile, si chargé d'hommes et de chevaux que le bâtiment était bondé jusqu'aux hiloires. En 1805, il était de cette division

Malher qui enleva Günzbourg à l’archiduc Ferdinand. À Weltingen, il reçut dans ses bras, sous une grêle de balles, le colonel Maupetit blessé mortellement à la tête du 9ème dragons. Il se distingua à Austerlitz dans cette admirable marche en échelons faite sous le feu de l’ennemi. Lorsque la cavalerie de la garde impériale russe écrasa un bataillon du 4ème de ligne, Pontmercy fut de ceux qui prirent la revanche et qui culbutèrent cette garde. L’empereur lui donna la croix. Pontmercy vit successivement faire prisonniers Wurmser dans Mantoue, Mélas dans Alexandrie, Mack dans Ulm. Il fit partie du huitième corps de la grande Armée que Mortier commandait et qui s’empara de Hambourg. Puis il passa dans le 55ème de ligne qui était l’ancien régiment de Flandre. À Eylau, il était dans le cimetière où l’héroïque capitaine Louis Hugo, oncle de l’auteur de ce livre, soutint seul avec sa compagnie de quatrevingt-trois hommes, pendant deux heures, tout l’effort de l’armée ennemie. Pontmercy fut un des trois qui sortirent de ce cimetière vivants. Il fut de Friedland. Puis il vit Moscou, puis la Bérésina, puis Lutzen, Bautzen, Dresde, Wachau, Leipsick, et les défilés de Gelenhausen; puis Montmirail, Château-Thierry, Craon, les bords de la Marne, les bords de l’Aisne et la redoutable position de Laon. À Arnay-le-Duc, étant capitaine, il sabra dix cosaques, et sauva, non son général, mais son caporal. Il fut haché à cette occasion, et on lui tira vingt-sept esquilles rien que du bras gauche. Huit jours avant la capitulation de Paris, il venait de permuter avec un camarade et d’entrer dans la cavalerie. Il avait ce qu’on appelait dans l’ancien régime *la double-main*, c’est-à-dire une aptitude égale à manier, soldat, le sabre ou le fusil, officier, un escadron ou un bataillon. C’est de cette aptitude, perfectionnée par l’éducation militaire, que sont nées certaines armes spéciales, les dragons, par exemple, qui sont tout ensemble cavaliers et fantassins. Il accompagna Napoléon à l’île d’Elbe. À Waterloo, il était chef d’escadron de cuirassiers dans la brigade Dubois. Ce fut lui qui prit le drapeau du bataillon de Lunebourg. Il vint jeter le drapeau aux pieds de l’empereur. Il était couvert de sang. Il avait reçu, en arrachant le drapeau, un coup de sabre à travers le visage. L’empereur, content, lui cria: *Tu es colonel, tu es baron, tu es officier de la légion d’honneur*! Pontmercy répondit: *Sire, je vous remercie pour ma veuve*. Une heure après, il tombait dans le ravin d’Ohain. Maintenant qu’était-ce que ce Georges Pontmercy? C’était ce même brigand de la Loire.

On a déjà vu quelque chose de son histoire. Après Waterloo, Pontmercy, tiré, on s’en souvient, du chemin creux d’Ohain, avait réussi à regagner l’armée, et s’était traîné d’ambulance en ambulance jusqu’aux cantonnements de la Loire.

La Restauration l’avait mis à la demi-solde, puis l’avait envoyé en résidence, c’est-à-dire en surveillance, à Vernon. Le roi Louis XVIII, considérant comme non avenu tout ce qui s’était fait dans les Cent-Jours, ne lui avait reconnu ni sa qualité d’officier de la légion d’honneur, ni son grade de colonel, ni son titre de baron. Lui de son côté ne négligeait aucune occasion de signer *le colonel baron Pontmercy*. Il n’avait qu’un vieil habit bleu, et il ne sortait jamais sans y attacher la rosette d’officier de la légion d’honneur. Le procureur du roi le fit prévenir que le parquet le poursuivrait pour «port illégal de cette décoration». Quand cet avis lui fut donné par un intermédiaire officieux, Pontmercy répondit avec un amer sourire: Je ne sais point si c’est moi qui n’entends plus le français, ou si c’est vous qui ne le parlez plus, mais le fait est que je ne comprends pas. — Puis il sortit huit jours de suite avec sa rosette. On n’osa point l’inquiéter. Deux ou trois fois le ministre de la guerre et le général commandant le département lui écrivirent avec cette suscription: *À monsieur le commandant Pontmercy*. Il renvoya les lettres non décachetées. En ce même moment, Napoléon à Sainte-Hélène traitait de la même façon les missives de sir Hudson Lowe adressées *au général Bonaparte*. Pontmercy avait fini, qu’on nous passe le mot, par avoir dans la bouche la même salive que son empereur.

Il y avait ainsi à Rome des soldats carthaginois prisonniers qui refusaient de saluer Flaminius et qui avaient un peu de l’âme d’Annibal.

Un matin, il rencontra le procureur du roi dans une rue de Vernon, alla à lui, et lui dit: — Monsieur le procureur du roi, m’est-il permis de porter ma balafre?

Il n’avait rien, que sa très chétive demi-solde de chef d’escadron. Il avait loué à Vernon la plus petite maison qu’il avait pu trouver. Il y vivait seul, on vient de voir comment. Sous l’Empire, entre deux guerres, il avait trouvé le temps d’épouser mademoiselle Gillenormand. Le vieux bourgeois, indigné au fond, avait consenti en soupirant et en disant: *Les plus grandes familles y sont forcées*. En 1815, madame Pontmercy, femme du reste de tout point admirable, élevée et rare et digne de son mari, était morte, laissant un enfant. Cet enfant eût été la joie du colonel dans sa solitude; mais l’aïeul avait impérieusement réclamé son petit-fils, déclarant que, si on ne le lui donnait pas, il le déshériterait. Le père avait cédé dans l’intérêt du petit, et, ne pouvant avoir son enfant, il s’était mis à aimer les fleurs.

Il avait du reste renoncé à tout, ne remuant ni ne conspirant. Il partageait sa pensée entre les choses innocentes qu'il faisait et les choses grandes qu'il avait faites. Il passait son temps à espérer un œillet ou à se souvenir d'Austerlitz.

M. Gillenormand n'avait aucune relation avec son gendre. Le colonel était pour lui «un bandit», et il était pour le colonel «une ganache». M. Gillenormand ne parlait jamais du colonel, si ce n'est quelquefois pour faire des allusions moqueuses à «sa baronnie». Il était expressément convenu que Pontmercy n'essayerait jamais de voir son fils ni de lui parler, sous peine qu'on le lui rendît chassé et déshérité. Pour les Gillenormand, Pontmercy était un pestiféré. Ils entendaient élever l'enfant à leur guise. Le colonel eut tort peut-être d'accepter ces conditions, mais il les subit, croyant bien faire et ne sacrifier que lui. L'héritage du père Gillenormand était peu de chose, mais l'héritage de Mlle Gillenormand aînée était considérable. Cette tante, restée fille, était fort riche du côté maternel, et le fils de sa sœur était son héritier naturel.

L'enfant, qui s'appelait Marius, savait qu'il avait un père, mais rien de plus. Personne ne lui en ouvrait la bouche. Cependant, dans le monde où son grand-père le menait, les chuchotements, les demi-mots, les clins d'yeux, s'étaient fait jour à la longue jusque dans l'esprit du petit, il avait fini par comprendre quelque chose, et comme il prenait naturellement, par une sorte d'infiltration et de pénétration lente, les idées et les opinions qui étaient, pour ainsi dire, son milieu respirable, il en vint peu à peu à ne songer à son père qu'avec honte et le cœur serré.

Pendant qu'il grandissait ainsi, tous les deux ou trois mois, le colonel s'échappait, venait furtivement à Paris comme un repris de justice qui rompt son ban, et allait se poster à Saint-Sulpice, à l'heure où la tante Gillenormand menait Marius à la messe. Là, tremblant que la tante ne se retournât, caché derrière un pilier, immobile, n'osant respirer, il regardait son enfant. Ce balafré avait peur de cette vieille fille.

De là même était venue sa liaison avec le curé de Vernon, M. l'abbé Mabeuf.

Ce digne prêtre était frère d'un marguillier de Saint-Sulpice, lequel avait plusieurs fois remarqué cet homme contemplant cet enfant, et la cicatrice qu'il avait sur la joue, et la grosse larme qu'il avait dans les yeux. Cet homme qui avait si bien l'air d'un homme et qui pleurait comme une femme avait frappé le marguillier. Cette figure lui était restée dans l'esprit.

Un jour, étant allé à Vernon voir son frère, il rencontra sur le pont le colonel Pontmercy et reconnut l'homme de Saint-Sulpice. Le marguillier en parla au curé, et tous deux sous un prétexte quelconque firent une visite au colonel. Cette visite en amena d'autres. Le colonel d'abord très fermé finit par s'ouvrir, et le curé et le marguillier arrivèrent à savoir toute l'histoire, et comment Pontmercy sacrifiait son bonheur à l'avenir de son enfant. Cela fit que le curé le prit en vénération et en tendresse, et le colonel de son côté prit en affection le curé. D'ailleurs, quand d'aventure ils sont sincères et bons tous les deux, rien ne se pénètre et ne s'amalgame plus aisément qu'un vieux prêtre et un vieux soldat. Au fond, c'est le même homme. L'un s'est dévoué pour la patrie d'en bas, l'autre pour la patrie d'en haut; pas d'autre différence.

Deux fois par an, au 1er janvier et à la Saint-Georges, Marius écrivait à son père des lettres de devoir que sa tante dictait, et qu'on eût dit copiées dans quelque formulaire; c'était tout ce que tolérait M. Gillenormand; et le père répondait des lettres fort tendres que l'aïeul fourrait dans sa poche sans les lire.

Chapitre III

Requiescant

Le salon de madame de T. était tout ce que Marius Pontmercy connaissait du monde. C'était la seule ouverture par laquelle il pût regarder dans la vie. Cette ouverture était sombre, et il lui venait par cette lucarne plus de froid que de chaleur, plus de nuit que de jour. Cet enfant, qui n'était que joie et lumière en entrant dans ce monde étrange, y devint en peu de temps triste, et, ce qui est plus contraire encore à cet âge, grave. Entouré de toutes ces personnes imposantes et singulières, il regardait autour de lui avec un étonnement sérieux. Tout se réunissait pour accroître en lui cette stupeur. Il y avait dans le salon de madame de T. de vieilles nobles dames très vénérables qui s'appelaient Mathan, Noé, Lévis qu'on prononçait Lévi, Cambis qu'on prononçait Cambyse. Ces antiques visages et ces noms bibliques se mêlaient dans l'esprit de l'enfant à son ancien testament qu'il apprenait par cœur, et quand elles étaient là toutes, assises en cercle autour d'un feu mourant, à peine éclairées par une lampe voilée de vert, avec leurs profils sévères, leurs cheveux gris ou blancs, leurs longues robes d'un autre âge dont on ne distinguait que les couleurs lugubres, laissant tomber à de rares intervalles des paroles à la fois majestueuses et farouches, le petit Marius les considérait avec des yeux effarés, croyant voir, non des femmes, mais des patriarches et des mages, non des êtres réels, mais des fantômes.

À ces fantômes se mêlaient plusieurs prêtres, habitués de ce salon vieux, et quelques gentilshommes; le marquis de Sassenaye, secrétaire des commandements de madame de Berry, le vicomte de Valory, qui publiait sous le pseudonyme de *Charles-Antoine* des odes monorimes, le prince de Beauffremont qui, assez jeune, avait un chef grisonnant et une jolie et spirituelle femme dont les toilettes de velours écarlate à torsades d'or, fort décolletées, effarouchaient ces ténèbres, le marquis de Coriolis d'Espinouse, l'homme de France qui savait le mieux «la politesse proportionnée», le comte d'Amendre, le bonhomme au menton bienveillant, et le chevalier de Port-de-Guy, pilier de la bibliothèque du Louvre, dite le cabinet du roi. M. de Port-de-Guy, chauve et plutôt vieilli que vieux, contait qu'en 1793, âgé de seize ans, on l'avait mis au bagne comme réfractaire, et ferré avec un octogénaire, l'évêque de Mirepoix, réfractaire aussi, mais comme prêtre, tandis que lui l’était comme soldat. C’était à Toulon. Leur fonction était d’aller la nuit ramasser sur l’échafaud les têtes et les corps des guillotinés du jour; ils emportaient sur leur dos ces troncs ruisselants, et leurs capes rouges de galériens avaient derrière leur nuque une croûte de sang, sèche le matin, humide le soir. Ces récits tragiques abondaient dans le salon de madame de T.; et à force d’y maudire Marat, on y applaudissait Trestaillon. Quelques députés du genre introuvable y faisaient leur whist, M. Thibord du Chalard, M. Lemarchant de Gomicourt, et le célèbre railleur de la droite, M. Cornet-Dincourt. Le bailli de Ferrette, avec ses culottes courtes et ses jambes maigres, traversait quelquefois ce salon en allant chez M. de Talleyrand. Il avait été le camarade de plaisir de M. le comte d’Artois, et, à l’inverse d’Aristote accroupi sous Campaspe, il avait fait marcher la Guimard à quatre pattes, et de la sorte montré aux siècles un philosophe vengé par un bailli.

Quant aux prêtres, c’étaient l’abbé Halma, le même à qui M. Larose, son collaborateur à *la Foudre*, disait: *Bah! qui est-ce qui n’a pas cinquante ans? quelques blancs-becs peut-être*! l’abbé Letourneur, prédicateur du roi, l’abbé Frayssinous, qui n’était encore ni comte, ni évêque, ni ministre, ni pair, et qui portait une vieille soutane où il manquait des boutons, et l’abbé Keravenant, curé de Saint-Germain des Prés; plus le nonce du pape, alors monsignor Macchi, archevêque de Nisibi, plus tard cardinal, remarquable par son long nez pensif, et un autre monsignor ainsi intitulé: abbate Palmieri, prélat domestique, un des sept protonotaires participants du saint-siège, chanoine de l’insigne basilique libérienne, avocat des saints, *postulatore di santi*, ce qui se rapporte aux affaires de canonisation et signifie à peu près maître des requêtes de la section du paradis; enfin deux cardinaux, M. de la Luzerne et M. de Clermont-Tonnerre. M. le cardinal de la Luzerne était un écrivain et devait avoir, quelques années plus tard, l’honneur de signer dans le *Conservateur* des articles côte à côte avec Chateaubriand; M. de Clermont-Tonnerre était archevêque de Toulouse, et venait souvent en villégiature à Paris chez son neveu le marquis de Tonnerre, qui a été ministre de la marine et de la guerre. Le cardinal de Clermont-Tonnerre était un petit vieillard gai montrant ses bas rouges sous sa soutane troussée; il avait pour spécialité de haïr l’encyclopédie et de jouer éperdument au billard, et les gens qui, à cette époque, passaient dans les soirs d’été rue Madame, où était alors l’hôtel de Clermont-Tonnerre, s’arrêtaient pour entendre le choc des billes, et la voix aiguë du cardinal criant à son conclaviste, monseigneur Cottret, évêque *in partibus* de Caryste: *Marque, l'abbé, je carambole*. Le cardinal de Clermont-Tonnerre avait été amené chez madame de T. par son ami le plus intime, M. de Roquelaure, ancien évêque de Senlis et l'un des quarante. M. de Roquelaure était considérable par sa haute taille et par son assiduité à l'académie; à travers la porte vitrée de la salle voisine de la bibliothèque où l'académie française tenait alors ses séances, les curieux pouvaient tous les jeudis contempler l'ancien évêque de Senlis, habituellement debout, poudré à frais, en bas violets, et tournant le dos à la porte, apparemment pour mieux faire voir son petit collet. Tous ces ecclésiastiques, quoique la plupart hommes de cour autant qu'hommes d'église, s'ajoutaient à la gravité du salon de T., dont cinq pairs de France, le marquis de Vibraye, le marquis de Talaru, le marquis d'Herbouville, le vicomte Dambray et le duc de Valentinois, accentuaient l'aspect seigneurial. Ce duc de Valentinois, quoique prince de Monaco, c'est-à-dire prince souverain étranger, avait une si haute idée de la France et de la pairie qu'il voyait tout à travers elles. C'était lui qui disait: *Les cardinaux sont les pairs de France de Rome, les lords sont les pairs de France d'Angleterre*. Au reste, car il faut en ce siècle que la révolution soit partout, ce salon féodal était, comme nous l'avons dit, dominé par un bourgeois. M. Gillenormand y régnait.

C'était là l'essence et la quintessence de la société parisienne blanche. On y tenait en quarantaine les renommées, même royalistes. Il y a toujours de l'anarchie dans la renommée. Chateaubriand, entrant là, eût fait l'effet du père Duchêne. Quelques ralliés pourtant pénétraient, par tolérance, dans ce monde orthodoxe. Le comte Beugnot y était reçu à correction.

Les salons «nobles» d'aujourd'hui ne ressemblent plus à ces salons-là. Le faubourg Saint-Germain d'à présent sent le fagot. Les royalistes de maintenant sont des démagogues, disons-le à leur louange.

Chez madame de T., le monde étant supérieur, le goût était exquis et hautain, sous une grande fleur de politesse. Les habitudes y comportaient toutes sortes de raffinements involontaires qui étaient l'ancien régime même, enterré, mais vivant. Quelques-unes de ces habitudes, dans le langage surtout, semblaient bizarres. Des connaisseurs superficiels eussent pris pour province ce qui n'était que vétusté. On appelait une femme *madame la générale*. *Madame la colonelle* n'était pas absolument inusité. La charmante madame de Léon, en souvenir sans doute des duchesses de Longueville et de Chevreuse, préférait cette appellation à son titre de princesse. La marquise de Créquy, elle aussi, s’était appelée *madame la colonelle*.

Ce fut ce petit haut monde qui inventa aux Tuileries le raffinement de dire toujours en parlant au roi dans l’intimité *le roi* à la troisième personne et jamais *votre majesté*, la qualification *votre majesté* ayant été «souillée par l’usurpateur».

On jugeait là les faits et les hommes. On raillait le siècle, ce qui dispensait de le comprendre. On s’entr’aidait dans l’étonnement. On se communiquait la quantité de clarté qu’on avait. Mathusalem renseignait Épiménide. Le sourd mettait l’aveugle au courant. On déclarait non avenu le temps écoulé depuis Coblentz. De même que Louis XVIII était, par la grâce de Dieu, à la vingt-cinquième année de son règne, les émigrés étaient, de droit, à la vingt-cinquième année de leur adolescence.

Tout était harmonieux; rien ne vivait trop; la parole était à peine un souffle; le journal, d’accord avec le salon, semblait un papyrus. Il y avait des jeunes gens, mais ils étaient un peu morts. Dans l’antichambre, les livrées étaient vieillottes. Ces personnages, complètement passés, étaient servis par des domestiques du même genre. Tout cela avait l’air d’avoir vécu il y a longtemps, et de s’obstiner contre le sépulcre. Conserver, Conservation, Conservateur, c’était là à peu près tout le dictionnaire. *Être en bonne odeur*, était la question. Il y avait en effet des aromates dans les opinions de ces groupes vénérables, et leurs idées sentaient le vétyver. C’était un monde momie. Les maîtres étaient embaumés, les valets étaient empaillés.

Une digne vieille marquise émigrée et ruinée, n’ayant plus qu’une bonne, continuait de dire: *Mes gens*.

Que faisait-on dans le salon de madame de T.? On était ultra.

Être ultra; ce mot, quoique ce qu’il représente n’ait peut-être pas disparu, ce mot n’a plus de sens aujourd’hui. Expliquons-le.

Être ultra, c’est aller au delà. C’est attaquer le sceptre au nom du trône et la mitre au nom de l’autel; c’est malmener la chose qu’on traîne; c’est ruer dans l’attelage; c’est chicaner le bûcher sur le degré de cuisson des hérétiques; c’est reprocher à l’idole son peu d’idolâtrie; c’est insulter par excès de respect; c’est trouver dans le pape pas assez de papisme, dans le roi pas assez de royauté, et trop de lumière à la nuit; c’est être mécontent de l’albâtre, de la neige, du cygne et du lys au nom de la blancheur; c’est être partisan des choses au point d'en devenir l'ennemi; c'est être si fort pour, qu'on est contre.

L'esprit ultra caractérise spécialement la première phase de la Restauration.

Rien dans l'histoire n'a ressemblé à ce quart d'heure qui commence à 1814 et qui se termine vers 1820 à l'avènement de M. de Villèle, l'homme pratique de la droite. Ces six années furent un moment extraordinaire, à la fois brillant et morne, riant et sombre, éclairé comme par le rayonnement de l'aube et tout couvert en même temps des ténèbres des grandes catastrophes qui emplissaient encore l'horizon et s'enfonçaient lentement dans le passé. Il y eut là, dans cette lumière et dans cette ombre, tout un petit monde nouveau et vieux, bouffon et triste, juvénile et sénile, se frottant les yeux; rien ne ressemble au réveil comme le retour; groupe qui regardait la France avec humeur et que la France regardait avec ironie; de bons vieux hiboux marquis plein les rues, les revenus et les revenants, des «ci-devant» stupéfaits de tout, de braves et nobles gentilshommes souriant d'être en France et en pleurant aussi, ravis de revoir leur patrie, désespérés de ne plus retrouver leur monarchie; la noblesse des croisades conspuant la noblesse de l'Empire, c'est-à-dire la noblesse de l'épée; les races historiques ayant perdu le sens de l'histoire; les fils des compagnons de Charlemagne dédaignant les compagnons de Napoléon. Les épées, comme nous venons de le dire, se renvoyaient l'insulte; l'épée de Fontenoy était risible et n'était qu'une rouillarde; l'épée de Marengo était odieuse et n'était qu'un sabre. Jadis méconnaissait Hier. On n'avait plus le sentiment de ce qui était grand, ni le sentiment de ce qui était ridicule. Il y eut quelqu'un qui appela Bonaparte Scapin. Ce monde n'est plus. Rien, répétons-le, n'en reste aujourd'hui. Quand nous en tirons par hasard quelque figure et que nous essayons de le faire revivre par la pensée, il nous semble étrange comme un monde antédiluvien. C'est qu'en effet il a été lui aussi englouti par un déluge. Il a disparu sous deux révolutions. Quels flots que les idées! Comme elles couvrent vite tout ce qu'elles ont mission de détruire et d'ensevelir, et comme elles font promptement d'effrayantes profondeurs!

Telle était la physionomie des salons de ces temps lointains et candides où M. Martainville avait plus d'esprit que Voltaire.

Ces salons avaient une littérature et une politique à eux. On y croyait en Fiévée. M. Agier y faisait loi. On y commentait M. Colnet, le publiciste bouquiniste du quai Malaquais. Napoléon y était pleinement Ogre de Corse.

Plus tard, l'introduction dans l'histoire de M. le marquis de Buonaparte, lieutenant général des armées du roi, fut une concession à l'esprit du siècle.

Ces salons ne furent pas longtemps purs. Dès 1818, quelques doctrinaires commencèrent à y poindre, nuance inquiétante. La manière de ceux-là était d'être royalistes et de s'en excuser. Là où les ultras étaient très fiers, les doctrinaires étaient un peu honteux. Ils avaient de l'esprit; ils avaient du silence; leur dogme politique était convenablement empesé de morgue; ils devaient réussir. Ils faisaient, utilement d'ailleurs, des excès de cravate blanche et d'habit boutonné. Le tort, ou le malheur, du parti doctrinaire a été de créer la jeunesse vieille. Ils prenaient des poses de sages. Ils rêvaient de greffer sur le principe absolu et excessif un pouvoir tempéré. Ils opposaient, et parfois avec une rare intelligence, au libéralisme démolisseur un libéralisme conservateur. On les entendait dire: «Grâce pour le royalisme! il a rendu plus d'un service. Il a rapporté la tradition, le culte, la religion, le respect. Il est fidèle, brave, chevaleresque, aimant, dévoué. Il vient mêler, quoique à regret, aux grandeurs nouvelles de la nation les grandeurs séculaires de la monarchie. Il a le tort de ne pas comprendre la Révolution, l'Empire, la gloire, la liberté, les jeunes idées, les jeunes générations, le siècle. Mais ce tort qu'il a envers nous, ne l'avons-nous pas quelquefois envers lui? La Révolution, dont nous sommes les héritiers, doit avoir l'intelligence de tout. Attaquer le royalisme, c'est le contre-sens du libéralisme. Quelle faute! et quel aveuglement! La France révolutionnaire manque de respect à la France historique, c'est-à-dire à sa mère, c'est-à-dire à elle-même. Après le 5 septembre, on traite la noblesse de la monarchie comme après le 8 juillet on traitait la noblesse de l'Empire. Ils ont été injustes pour l'aigle, nous sommes injustes pour la fleur de lys. On veut donc toujours avoir quelque chose à proscrire! Dédorer la couronne de Louis XIV, gratter l'écusson d'Henri IV, cela est-il bien utile? Nous raillons M. de Vaublanc qui effaçait les N du pont d'Iéna! Que faisait-il donc? Ce que nous faisons. Bouvines nous appartient comme Marengo. Les fleurs de lys sont à nous comme les N. C'est notre patrimoine. À quoi bon l'amoindrir? Il ne faut pas plus renier la patrie dans le passé que dans le présent. Pourquoi ne pas vouloir toute l'histoire? Pourquoi ne pas aimer toute la France?»

C'est ainsi que les doctrinaires critiquaient et protégeaient le royalisme, mécontent d'être critiqué et furieux d'être protégé.

Les ultras marquèrent la première époque du royalisme; la congrégation caractérisa la seconde. À la fougue succéda l'habileté. Bornons ici cette esquisse.

Dans le cours de ce récit, l'auteur de ce livre a trouvé sur son chemin ce moment curieux de l'histoire contemporaine; il a dû y jeter en passant un coup d'œil et retracer quelques-uns des linéaments singuliers de cette société aujourd'hui inconnue. Mais il le fait rapidement et sans aucune idée amère ou dérisoire. Des souvenirs, affectueux et respectueux, car ils touchent à sa mère, l'attachent à ce passé. D'ailleurs, disons-le, ce même petit monde avait sa grandeur. On en peut sourire, mais on ne peut ni le mépriser ni le haïr. C'était la France d'autrefois.

Marius Pontmercy fit comme tous les enfants des études quelconques. Quand il sortit des mains de la tante Gillenormand, son grand-père le confia à un digne professeur de la plus pure innocence classique. Cette jeune âme qui s'ouvrait passa d'une prude à un cuistre. Marius eut ses années de collège, puis il entra à l'école de droit. Il était royaliste, fanatique et austère. Il aimait peu son grand-père dont la gaîté et le cynisme le froissaient, et il était sombre à l'endroit de son père.

C'était du reste un garçon ardent et froid, noble, généreux, fier, religieux, exalté; digne jusqu'à la dureté, pur jusqu'à la sauvagerie.

Chapitre IV

Fin du brigand

L’achèvement des études classiques de Marius coïncida avec la sortie du monde de M. Gillenormand. Le vieillard dit adieu au faubourg Saint-Germain et au salon de madame de T., et vint s’établir au Marais dans sa maison de la rue des Filles-du-Calvaire. Il avait là pour domestiques, outre le portier, cette femme de chambre Nicolette qui avait succédé à la Magnon, et ce Basque essoufflé et poussif dont il a été parlé plus haut.

En 1827, Marius venait d’atteindre ses dix-sept ans. Comme il rentrait un soir, il vit son grand-père qui tenait une lettre à la main.

— Marius, dit M. Gillenormand, tu partiras demain pour Vernon.

— Pourquoi? dit Marius.

— Pour voir ton père.

Marius eut un tremblement. Il avait songé à tout, excepté à ceci, qu’il pourrait un jour se faire qu’il eût à voir son père. Rien ne pouvait être pour lui plus inattendu, plus surprenant, et, disons-le, plus désagréable. C’était l’éloignement contraint au rapprochement. Ce n’était pas un chagrin, non, c’était une corvée.

Marius, outre ses motifs d’antipathie politique, était convaincu que son père, le sabreur, comme l’appelait M. Gillenormand dans ses jours de douceur, ne l’aimait pas; cela était évident, puisqu’il l’avait abandonné ainsi et laissé à d’autres. Ne se sentant point aimé, il n’aimait point. Rien de plus simple, se disait-il.

Il fut si stupéfait qu’il ne questionna pas M. Gillenormand. Le grand-père reprit:

— Il paraît qu’il est malade. Il te demande.

Et après un silence il ajouta:

— Pars demain matin. Je crois qu’il y a cour des Fontaines une voiture qui part à six heures et qui arrive le soir. Prends la. Il dit que c’est pressé.

Puis il froissa la lettre et la mit dans sa poche. Marius aurait pu partir le soir même et être près de son père le lendemain matin. Une diligence de la rue du Bouloi faisait à cette époque le voyage de Rouen la nuit et passait par Vernon. Ni M. Gillenormand ni Marius ne songèrent à s’informer.

Le lendemain, à la brune, Marius arrivait à Vernon. Les chandelles commençaient à s’allumer. Il demanda au premier passant venu: *la maison de monsieur Pontmercy*. Car dans sa pensée il était de l’avis de la Restauration, et, lui non plus, ne reconnaissait son père ni baron ni colonel.

On lui indiqua le logis. Il sonna; une femme vint lui ouvrir, une petite lampe à la main.

— Monsieur Pontmercy? dit Marius.

La femme resta immobile.

— Est-ce ici? demanda Marius.

La femme fit de la tête un signe affirmatif.

— Pourrais-je lui parler?

La femme fit un signe négatif.

— Mais je suis son fils, reprit Marius. Il m’attend.

— Il ne vous attend plus, dit la femme.

Alors il s’aperçut qu’elle pleurait.

Elle lui désigna du doigt la porte d’une salle basse. Il entra.

Dans cette salle qu’éclairait une chandelle de suif posée sur la cheminée, il y avait trois hommes, un qui était debout, un qui était à genoux, et un qui était à terre et en chemise couché tout de son long sur le carreau. Celui qui était à terre était le colonel.

Les deux autres étaient un médecin et un prêtre, qui priait.

Le colonel était depuis trois jours atteint d’une fièvre cérébrale. Au début de la maladie, ayant un mauvais pressentiment, il avait écrit à M. Gillenormand pour demander son fils. La maladie avait empiré. Le soir même de l’arrivée de Marius à Vernon, le colonel avait eu un accès de délire; il s’était levé de son lit malgré la servante, en criant: — Mon fils n’arrive pas! je vais au-devant de lui! — Puis il était sorti de sa chambre et était tombé sur le carreau de l’antichambre. Il venait d’expirer.

On avait appelé le médecin et le curé. Le médecin était arrivé trop tard, le curé était arrivé trop tard. Le fils aussi était arrivé trop tard.

À la clarté crépusculaire de la chandelle, on distinguait sur la joue du colonel gisant et pâle une grosse larme qui avait coulé de son œil mort. L’œil était éteint, mais la larme n’était pas séchée. Cette larme, c’était le retard de son fils.

Marius considéra cet homme qu’il voyait pour la première fois, et pour la dernière, ce visage vénérable et mâle, ces yeux ouverts qui ne regardaient pas, ces cheveux blancs, ces membres robustes sur lesquels on distinguait çà et là des lignes brunes qui étaient des coups de sabre et des espèces d’étoiles rouges qui étaient des trous de balles. Il considéra cette gigantesque balafre qui imprimait l’héroïsme sur cette face où Dieu avait empreint la bonté. Il songea que cet homme était son père et que cet homme était mort, et il resta froid.

La tristesse qu’il éprouvait fut la tristesse qu’il aurait ressentie devant tout autre homme qu’il aurait vu étendu mort.

Le deuil, un deuil poignant, était dans cette chambre. La servante se lamentait dans un coin, le curé priait, et on l’entendait sangloter, le médecin s’essuyait les yeux; le cadavre lui-même pleurait.

Ce médecin, ce prêtre et cette femme regardaient Marius à travers leur affliction sans dire une parole; c’était lui qui était l’étranger. Marius, trop peu ému, se sentit honteux et embarrassé de son attitude; il avait son chapeau à la main, il le laissa tomber à terre, afin de faire croire que la douleur lui ôtait la force de le tenir.

En même temps il éprouvait comme un remords et il se méprisait d’agir ainsi. Mais était-ce sa faute? Il n’aimait pas son père, quoi!

Le colonel ne laissait rien. La vente du mobilier paya à peine l’enterrement. La servante trouva un chiffon de papier qu’elle remit à Marius. Il y avait ceci, écrit de la main du colonel:

« — *Pour mon fils*. — L’empereur m’a fait baron sur le champ de bataille de Waterloo. Puisque la Restauration me conteste ce titre que j’ai payé de mon sang, mon fils le prendra et le portera. Il va sans dire qu’il en sera digne.»

Derrière, le colonel avait ajouté:

«À cette même bataille de Waterloo, un sergent m’a sauvé la vie. Cet homme s’appelle Thénardier. Dans ces derniers temps, je crois qu’il tenait une petite auberge dans un village des environs de Paris, à Chelles ou à Montfermeil. Si mon fils le rencontre, il fera à Thénardier tout le bien qu’il pourra.»

Non par religion pour son père, mais à cause de ce respect vague de la mort qui est toujours si impérieux au cœur de l’homme, Marius prit ce papier et le serra.

Rien ne resta du colonel. M. Gillenormand fît vendre au fripier son épée et son uniforme. Les voisins dévalisèrent le jardin et pillèrent les fleurs rares. Les autres plantes devinrent ronces et broussailles, ou moururent.

Marius n’était demeuré que quarante-huit heures à Vernon. Après l’enterrement, il était revenu à Paris et s’était remis à son droit, sans plus songer à son père que s’il n’eût jamais vécu. En deux jours le colonel avait été enterré, et en trois jours oublié.

Marius avait un crêpe à son chapeau. Voilà tout.

Chapitre V

Utilité d’aller à la messe pour devenir révolutionnaire

Marius avait gardé les habitudes religieuses de son enfance. Un dimanche qu’il était allé entendre la messe à Saint-Sulpice, à cette même chapelle de la Vierge où sa tante le menait quand il était petit, étant ce jour-là distrait et rêveur plus qu’à l’ordinaire, il s’était placé derrière un pilier et agenouillé, sans y faire attention, sur une chaise en velours d’Utrecht au dossier de laquelle était écrit ce nom: *Monsieur Mabeuf, marguillier*. La messe commençait à peine qu’un vieillard se présenta et dit à Marius:

— Monsieur, c’est ma place.

Marius s’écarta avec empressement, et le vieillard reprit sa chaise.

La messe finie, Marius était resté pensif à quelques pas; le vieillard s’approcha de nouveau et lui dit:

— Je vous demande pardon, monsieur, de vous avoir dérangé tout à l’heure et de vous déranger encore en ce moment; mais vous avez dû me trouver fâcheux, il faut que je vous explique.

— Monsieur, dit Marius, c’est inutile.

— Si! reprit le vieillard, je ne veux pas que vous ayez mauvaise idée de moi. Voyez-vous, je tiens à cette place. Il me semble que la messe y est meilleure. Pourquoi? je vais vous le dire. C’est à cette place-là que j’ai vu venir pendant dix années, tous les deux ou trois mois régulièrement, un pauvre brave père qui n’avait pas d’autre occasion et pas d’autre manière de voir son enfant, parce que, pour des arrangements de famille, on l’en empêchait. Il venait à l’heure où il savait qu’on menait son fils à la messe. Le petit ne se doutait pas que son père était là. Il ne savait même peut-être pas qu’il avait un père, l’innocent! Le père, lui, se tenait derrière un pilier pour qu’on ne le vît pas. Il regardait son enfant, et il pleurait. Il adorait ce petit, ce pauvre homme! J’ai vu cela. Cet endroit est devenu comme sanctifié pour moi, et j’ai pris l’habitude de venir y entendre la messe. Je le préfère au banc d’œuvre où j’aurais droit d’être comme marguillier. J’ai même un peu connu ce malheureux monsieur. Il avait un beau-père, une tante riche, des parents, je ne sais plus trop, qui menaçaient de déshériter l’enfant si, lui le père, il le voyait. Il s’était sacrifié pour que son fils fût riche un jour et heureux. On l’en séparait pour opinion politique.

Certainement j’approuve les opinions politiques, mais il y a des gens qui ne savent pas s’arrêter. Mon Dieu! parce qu’un homme a été à Waterloo, ce n’est pas un monstre; on ne sépare point pour cela un père de son enfant. C’était un colonel de Bonaparte. Il est mort, je crois. Il demeurait à Vernon où j’ai mon frère curé, et il s’appelait quelque chose comme Pontmarie ou Montpercy.... — Il avait, ma foi, un beau coup de sabre.

— Pontmercy? dit Marius en pâlissant.

— Précisément. Pontmercy. Est-ce que vous l’avez connu?

— Monsieur, dit Marius, c’était mon père.

Le vieux marguillier joignit les mains, et s’écria:

— Ah! vous êtes l’enfant! Oui, c’est cela, ce doit être un homme à présent. Eh bien! pauvre enfant, vous pouvez dire que vous avez eu un père qui vous a bien aimé!

Marius offrit son bras au vieillard et le ramena jusqu’à son logis. Le lendemain, il dit à M. Gillenormand:

— Nous avons arrangé une partie de chasse avec quelques amis. Voulez-vous me permettre de m’absenter trois jours?

— Quatre! répondit le grand-père. Va, amuse-toi.

Et, clignant de l’œil, il dit bas à sa fille:

— Quelque amourette!

Chapitre VI

Ce que c’est que d’avoir rencontrer un marguillier

Où alla Marius, on le verra un peu plus loin.

Marius fut trois jours absent, puis il revint à Paris, alla droit à la bibliothèque de l’école de droit, et demanda la collection du *Moniteur*.

Il lut le *Moniteur*, il lut toutes les histoires de la République et de l’empire, le *Mémorial de Sainte-Hélène*, tous les mémoires, les journaux, les bulletins, les proclamations; il dévora tout. La première fois qu’il rencontra le nom de son père dans les bulletins de la grande Armée, il en eut la fièvre toute une semaine. Il alla voir les généraux sous lesquels Georges Pontmercy avait servi, entre autres le comte H. Le marguillier Mabeuf, qu’il était allé revoir, lui avait conté la vie de Vernon, la retraite du colonel, ses fleurs, sa solitude. Marius arriva à connaître pleinement cet homme rare, sublime et doux, cette espèce de lion-agneau qui avait été son père.

Cependant, occupé de cette étude qui lui prenait tous ses instants comme toutes ses pensées, il ne voyait presque plus les Gillenormand. Aux heures des repas, il paraissait; puis on le cherchait, il n’était plus là. La tante bougonnait. Le père Gillenormand souriait. Bah! bah! c’est le temps des fillettes! — Quelquefois le vieillard ajoutait: — Diable! je croyais que c’était une galanterie, il paraît que c’est une passion.

C’était une passion en effet. Marius était en train d’adorer son père.

En même temps un changement extraordinaire se faisait dans ses idées. Les phases de ce changement furent nombreuses et successives. Comme ceci est l’histoire de beaucoup d’esprits de notre temps, nous croyons utile de suivre ces phases pas à pas et de les indiquer toutes.

Cette histoire où il venait de mettre les yeux l’effarait.

Le premier effet fut l’éblouissement.

La République, l’empire, n’avaient été pour lui jusqu’alors que des mots monstrueux. La République, une guillotine dans un crépuscule; l’empire, un sabre dans la nuit. Il venait d’y regarder, et là où il s’attendait à ne trouver qu’un chaos de ténèbres, il avait vu, avec une sorte de surprise inouïe mêlée de crainte et de joie, étinceler des astres, Mirabeau, Vergniaud, Saint-Just, Robespierre, Camille Desmoulins, Danton, et se lever un soleil, Napoléon. Il ne savait où il en était. Il reculait aveuglé de clartés. Peu à peu, l'étonnement passé, il s'accoutuma à ces rayonnements, il considéra les actions sans vertige, il examina les personnages sans terreur; la révolution et l'empire se mirent lumineusement en perspective devant sa prunelle visionnaire; il vit chacun de ces deux groupes d'événements et d'hommes se résumer dans deux faits énormes; la République dans la souveraineté du droit civique restituée aux masses, l'empire dans la souveraineté de l'idée française imposée à l'Europe; il vit sortir de la révolution la grande figure du peuple et de l'empire la grande figure de la France. Il se déclara dans sa conscience que tout cela avait été bon.

Ce que son éblouissement négligeait dans cette première appréciation beaucoup trop synthétique, nous ne croyons pas nécessaire de l'indiquer ici. C'est l'état d'un esprit en marche que nous constatons. Les progrès ne se font pas tous en une étape. Cela dit, une fois pour toutes, pour ce qui précède comme pour ce qui va suivre, nous continuons.

Il s'aperçut alors que jusqu'à ce moment il n'avait pas plus compris son pays qu'il n'avait compris son père. Il n'avait connu ni l'un ni l'autre, et il avait eu une sorte de nuit volontaire sur les yeux. Il voyait maintenant; et d'un côté il admirait, de l'autre il adorait.

Il était plein de regrets, et de remords, et il songeait avec désespoir que tout ce qu'il avait dans l'âme, il ne pouvait plus le dire maintenant qu'à un tombeau! Oh! si son père avait existé, s'il l'avait eu encore, si Dieu dans sa compassion et dans sa bonté avait permis que ce père fût encore vivant, comme il aurait couru, comme il se serait précipité, comme il aurait crié à son père: Père! me voici! c'est moi! j'ai le même cœur que toi! je suis ton fils! Comme il aurait embrassé sa tête blanche, inondé ses cheveux de larmes, contemplé sa cicatrice, pressé ses mains, adoré ses vêtements, baisé ses pieds! Oh! pourquoi ce père était-il mort si tôt, avant l'âge, avant la justice, avant l'amour de son fils! Marius avait un continuel sanglot dans le cœur qui disait à tout moment: hélas! En même temps, il devenait plus vraiment sérieux, plus vraiment grave, plus sûr de sa foi et de sa pensée. À chaque instant des lueurs du vrai venaient compléter sa raison. Il se faisait en lui comme une croissance intérieure. Il sentait une sorte d'agrandissement naturel que lui apportaient ces deux choses, nouvelles pour lui, son père et sa patrie.

Comme lorsqu'on a une clef, tout s'ouvrait; il s'expliquait ce qu'il avait haï, il pénétrait ce qu'il avait abhorré; il voyait désormais clairement le sens providentiel, divin et humain, des grandes choses qu'on lui avait appris à détester et des grands hommes qu’on lui avait enseigné à maudire. Quand il songeait à ses précédentes opinions, qui n’étaient que d’hier et qui pourtant lui semblaient déjà si anciennes, il s’indignait et il souriait.

De la réhabilitation de son père il avait naturellement passé à la réhabilitation de Napoléon.

Pourtant, celle-ci, disons-le, ne s’était point faite sans labeur.

Dès l’enfance on l’avait imbu des jugements du parti de 1814 sur Bonaparte. Or, tous les préjugés de la Restauration, tous ses intérêts, tous ses instincts, tendaient à défigurer Napoléon. Elle l’exécrait plus encore que Robespierre. Elle avait exploité assez habilement la fatigue de la nation et la haine des mères. Bonaparte était devenu une sorte de monstre presque fabuleux, et, pour le peindre à l’imagination du peuple qui, comme nous l’indiquions tout à l’heure, ressemble à l’imagination des enfants, le parti de 1814 faisait apparaître successivement tous les masques effrayants, depuis ce qui est terrible en restant grandiose jusqu’à ce qui est terrible en devenant grotesque, depuis Tibère jusqu’à Croquemitaine. Ainsi, en parlant de Bonaparte, on était libre de sangloter ou de pouffer de rire, pourvu que la haine fît la basse. Marius n’avait jamais eu — sur cet homme, comme on l’appelait, — d’autres idées dans l’esprit. Elles s’étaient combinées avec la ténacité qui était dans sa nature. Il y avait en lui tout un petit homme têtu qui haïssait Napoléon.

En lisant l’histoire, en l’étudiant surtout dans les documents et les matériaux, le voile qui couvrait Napoléon aux yeux de Marius se déchira peu à peu. Il entrevit quelque chose d’immense, et soupçonna qu’il s’était trompé jusqu’à ce moment sur Bonaparte comme sur tout le reste; chaque jour il voyait mieux; et il se mit à gravir lentement, pas à pas, au commencement presque à regret, ensuite avec enivrement et comme attiré par une fascination irrésistible, d’abord les degrés sombres, puis les degrés vaguement éclairés, enfin les degrés lumineux et splendides de l’enthousiasme.

Une nuit, il était seul dans sa petite chambre située sous le toit. Sa bougie était allumée; il lisait accoudé sur sa table à côté de sa fenêtre ouverte. Toutes sortes de rêveries lui arrivaient de l’espace et se mêlaient à sa pensée. Quel spectacle que la nuit! on entend des bruits sourds sans savoir d’où ils viennent, on voit rutiler comme une braise Jupiter qui est douze cents fois plus gros que la terre, l’azur est noir, les étoiles brillent, c’est formidable.

Il lisait les bulletins de la grande Armée, ces strophes héroïques écrites sur le champ de bataille; il y voyait par intervalles le nom de son père, toujours le nom de l'empereur; tout le grand empire lui apparaissait; il sentait comme une marée qui se gonflait en lui et qui montait; il lui semblait par moments que son père passait près de lui comme un souffle, et lui parlait à l'oreille; il devenait peu à peu étrange; il croyait entendre les tambours, le canon, les trompettes, le pas mesuré des bataillons, le galop sourd et lointain des cavaleries; de temps en temps ses yeux se levaient vers le ciel et regardaient luire dans les profondeurs sans fond les constellations colossales, puis ils retombaient sur le livre et ils y voyaient d'autres choses colossales remuer confusément. Il avait le cœur serré. Il était transporté, tremblant, haletant; tout à coup, sans savoir lui-même ce qui était en lui et à quoi il obéissait, il se dressa, étendit ses deux bras hors de la fenêtre, regarda fixement l'ombre, le silence, l'infini ténébreux, l'immensité éternelle, et cria: Vive l'empereur!

À partir de ce moment, tout fut dit. L'ogre de Corse, — l'usurpateur, — le tyran, — le monstre qui était l'amant de ses sœurs, — l'histrion qui prenait des leçons de Talma, — l'empoisonneur de Jaffa, — le tigre, — Buonaparté, — tout cela s'évanouit, et fit place dans son esprit à un vague et éclatant rayonnement où resplendissait à une hauteur inaccessible le pâle fantôme de marbre de César. L'empereur n'avait été pour son père que le bien-aimé capitaine qu'on admire et pour qui l'on se dévoue; il fut pour Marius quelque chose de plus. Il fut le constructeur prédestiné du groupe français succédant au groupe romain dans la domination de l'univers. Il fut le prodigieux architecte d'un écroulement, le continuateur de Charlemagne, de Louis XI, de Henri IV, de Richelieu, de Louis XIV et du comité de salut public, ayant sans doute ses taches, ses fautes et même son crime, c'est-à-dire étant homme; mais auguste dans ses fautes, brillant dans ses taches, puissant dans son crime. Il fut l'homme prédestiné qui avait forcé toutes les nations à dire: — la grande nation. Il fut mieux encore; il fut l'incarnation même de la France, conquérant l'Europe par l'épée qu'il tenait et le monde par la clarté qu'il jetait. Marius vit en Bonaparte le spectre éblouissant qui se dressera toujours sur la frontière et qui gardera l'avenir. Despote, mais dictateur; despote résultant d'une République et résumant une révolution. Napoléon devint pour lui l'homme-peuple comme Jésus est l'homme-Dieu.

On le voit, à la façon de tous les nouveaux venus dans une religion, sa conversion l'enivrait, il se précipitait dans l'adhésion et il allait trop loin. Sa nature était ainsi: une fois sur une pente, il lui était presque impossible d'enrayer. Le fanatisme pour l'épée le gagnait et compliquait dans son esprit l'enthousiasme pour l'idée. Il ne s'apercevait point qu'avec le génie, et pêle-mêle, il admirait la force, c'est-à-dire qu'il installait dans les deux compartiments de son idolâtrie, d'un côté ce qui est divin, de l'autre ce qui est brutal. À plusieurs égards, il s'était mis à se tromper autrement. Il admettait tout. Il y a une manière de rencontrer l'erreur en allant à la vérité. Il avait une sorte de bonne foi violente qui prenait tout en bloc. Dans la voie nouvelle où il était entré, en jugeant les torts de l'ancien régime comme en mesurant la gloire de Napoléon, il négligeait les circonstances atténuantes.

Quoi qu'il en fût, un pas prodigieux était fait. Où il avait vu autrefois la chute de la monarchie, il voyait maintenant l'avènement de la France. Son orientation était changée. Ce qui avait été le couchant était le levant. Il s'était retourné.

Toutes ces révolutions s'accomplissaient en lui sans que sa famille s'en doutât.

Quand, dans ce mystérieux travail, il eut tout à fait perdu son ancienne peau de bourbonien et d'ultra, quand il eut dépouillé l'aristocrate, le jacobite et le royaliste, lorsqu'il fut pleinement révolutionnaire, profondément démocrate, et presque républicain, il alla chez un graveur du quai des Orfèvres et y commanda cent cartes portant ce nom: *le baron Marius Pontmercy*.

Ce qui n'était qu'une conséquence très logique du changement qui s'était opéré en lui, changement dans lequel tout gravitait autour de son père. Seulement, comme il ne connaissait personne, et qu'il ne pouvait semer ces cartes chez aucun portier, il les mit dans sa poche.

Par une autre conséquence naturelle, à mesure qu'il se rapprochait de son père, de sa mémoire, et des choses pour lesquelles le colonel avait combattu vingt-cinq ans, il s'éloignait de son grand-père. Nous l'avons dit, dès longtemps l'humeur de M. Gillenormand ne lui agréait point. Il y avait déjà entre eux toutes les dissonances de jeune homme grave à vieillard frivole. La gaîté de Géronte choque et exaspère la mélancolie de Werther. Tant que les mêmes opinions politiques et les mêmes idées leur avaient été communes, Marius s'était rencontré là avec M. Gillenormand comme sur un pont. Quand ce pont tomba, l'abîme se fit. Et puis, par-dessus tout, Marius éprouvait des mouvements de révolte inexprimables en songeant que c'était

M. Gillenormand qui, pour des motifs stupides, l'avait arraché sans pitié au colonel, privant ainsi le père de l'enfant et l'enfant du père.

À force de piété pour son père, Marius en était presque venu à l'aversion pour son aïeul.

Rien de cela du reste, nous l'avons dit, ne se trahissait au dehors. Seulement il était froid de plus en plus; laconique aux repas, et rare dans la maison. Quand sa tante l'en grondait, il était très doux et donnait pour prétexte ses études, les cours, les examens, des conférences, etc. Le grand-père ne sortait pas de son diagnostic infaillible: — Amoureux! Je m'y connais.

Marius faisait de temps en temps quelques absences.

Où va-t-il donc comme cela? demandait la tante.

Dans un de ces voyages, toujours très courts, il était allé à Montfermeil pour obéir à l'indication que son père lui avait laissée, et il avait cherché l'ancien sergent de Waterloo, l'aubergiste Thénardier. Thénardier avait fait faillite, l'auberge était fermée, et l'on ne savait ce qu'il était devenu. Pour ces recherches, Marius fut quatre jours hors de la maison.

— Décidément, dit le grand-père, il se dérange.

On avait cru remarquer qu'il portait sur sa poitrine et sous sa chemise quelque chose qui était attaché à son cou par un ruban noir.

Chapitre VII

Quelque cotillon

C’était un arrière-petit-neveu que M. Gillenormand avait du côté paternel, et qui menait, en dehors de la famille et loin de tous les foyers domestiques, la vie de garnison. Le lieutenant Théodule Gillenormand remplissait toutes les conditions voulues pour être ce qu’on appelle un joli officier. Il avait «une taille de demoiselle», une façon de traîner le sabre victorieuse, et la moustache en croc. Il venait fort rarement à Paris, si rarement que Marius ne l’avait jamais vu. Les deux cousins ne se connaissaient que de nom. Théodule était, nous croyons l’avoir dit, le favori de la tante Gillenormand, qui le préférait parce qu’elle ne le voyait pas. Ne pas voir les gens, cela permet de leur supposer toutes les perfections.

Un matin, Mlle Gillenormand ainée était rentrée chez elle aussi émue que sa placidité pouvait l’être. Marius venait encore de demander à son grand-père la permission de faire un petit voyage, ajoutant qu’il comptait partir le soir même. — Va! avait répondu le grand-père, et M. Gillenormand avait ajouté à part en poussant ses deux sourcils vers le haut de son front: Il découche avec récidive. Mlle Gillenormand était remontée dans sa chambre très intriguée, et avait jeté dans l’escalier ce point d’exclamation: C’est fort! et ce point d’interrogation: Mais où donc est-ce qu’il va? Elle entrevoyait quelque aventure de cœur plus ou moins illicite, une femme dans la pénombre, un rendez-vous, un mystère, et elle n’eût pas été fâchée d’y fourrer ses lunettes. La dégustation d’un mystère, cela ressemble à la primeur d’un esclandre; les saintes âmes ne détestent point cela. Il y a dans les compartiments secrets de la bigoterie quelque curiosité pour le scandale.

Elle était donc en proie au vague appétit de savoir une histoire.

Pour se distraire de cette curiosité qui l’agitait un peu au delà de ses habitudes, elle s’était réfugiée dans ses talents, et elle s’était mise à festonner avec du coton sur du coton une de ces broderies de l’Empire et de la Restauration où il y a beaucoup de roues de cabriolet. Ouvrage maussade, ouvrière revêche. Elle était depuis plusieurs heures sur sa chaise quand la porte s’ouvrit. Mlle Gillenormand leva le nez; le lieutenant Théodule était devant elle, et lui faisait le salut d’ordonnance. Elle poussa un cri de bonheur. On est vieille, on est prude, on est dévote, on est la tante; mais c'est toujours agréable de voir entrer dans sa chambre un lancier.

— Toi ici, Théodule! s'écria-t-elle.

— En passant, ma tante.

— Mais embrasse-moi donc.

— Voilà! dit Théodule.

Et il l'embrassa. La tante Gillenormand alla à son secrétaire, et l'ouvrit.

— Tu nous restes au moins toute la semaine?

— Ma tante, je repars ce soir.

— Pas possible!

— Mathématiquement!

— Reste, mon petit Théodule, je t'en prie.

— Le cœur dit oui, mais la consigne dit non. L'histoire est simple. On nous change de garnison; nous étions à Melun, on nous met à Gaillon. Pour aller de l'ancienne garnison à la nouvelle, il faut passer par Paris. J'ai dit: je vais aller voir ma tante.

— Et voici pour ta peine.

Elle lui mit dix louis dans la main.

— Vous voulez dire pour mon plaisir, chère tante.

Théodule l'embrassa une seconde fois, et elle eut la joie d'avoir le cou un peu écorché par les soutaches de l'uniforme.

— Est-ce que tu fais le voyage à cheval avec ton régiment? lui demanda-t-elle.

— Non, ma tante. J'ai tenu à vous voir. J'ai une permission spéciale. Mon Grosseur mène mon cheval; je vais par la diligence. Et à ce propos, il faut que je vous demande une chose.

— Quoi?

— Mon cousin Marius Pontmercy voyage donc aussi, lui?

— Comment sais-tu cela? fit la tante, subitement chatouillée au vif de la curiosité.

— En arrivant, je suis allé à la diligence retenir une place dans le coupé.

— Eh bien?

— Un voyageur était déjà venu retenir une place sur l'impériale. J'ai vu sur la feuille son nom.

— Quel nom?

— Marius Pontmercy.

— Le mauvais sujet! s’écria la tante. Ah! ton cousin n’est pas un garçon rangé comme toi. Dire qu’il va passer la nuit en diligence!

— Comme moi.

— Mais toi, c’est par devoir; lui, c’est par désordre.

— Bigre! fit Théodule.

Ici, il arriva un événement à Mlle Gillenormand aînée; elle eut une idée. Si elle eût été homme, elle se fût frappée le front. Elle apostropha Théodule:

— Sais-tu que ton cousin ne te connaît pas?

— Non. Je l’ai vu, moi; mais il n’a jamais daigné me remarquer.

— Vous allez donc voyager ensemble comme cela?

— Lui sur l’impériale, moi dans le coupé.

— Où va cette diligence?

— Aux Andelys.

— C’est donc là que va Marius?

— À moins que, comme moi, il ne s’arrête en route. Moi, je descends à Vernon pour prendre la correspondance de Gaillon. Je ne sais rien de l’itinéraire de Marius.

— Marius! quel vilain nom! Quelle idée a-t-on eue de l’appeler Marius! Tandis que toi, au moins, tu t’appelles Théodule!

— J’aimerais mieux m’appeler Alfred, dit l’officier.

— Écoute, Théodule.

— J’écoute, ma tante.

— Fais attention.

— Je fais attention.

— Y es-tu?

— Oui.

— Eh bien, Marius fait des absences.

— Eh! eh!

— Il voyage.

— Ah! ah!

— Il découche.

— Oh! oh!

— Nous voudrions savoir ce qu’il y a là-dessous.

Théodule répondit avec le calme d’un homme bronzé:

— Quelque cotillon.

Et avec ce rire entre cuir et chair qui décèle la certitude, il ajouta:

— Une fillette.

— C’est évident, s’écria la tante qui crut entendre parler M. Gillenormand, et qui sentit sa conviction sortir irrésistiblement de ce mot *fillette*, accentué presque de la même façon par le grand-oncle et par le petit-neveu. Elle reprit:

— Fais-nous un plaisir. Suis un peu Marius. Il ne te connaît pas, cela te sera facile. Puisque fillette il y a, tâche de voir la fillette. Tu nous écriras l’historiette. Cela amusera le grand-père.

Théodule n’avait point un goût excessif pour ce genre de guet; mais il était fort touché des dix louis, et il croyait leur voir une suite possible. Il accepta la commission et dit: — Comme il vous plaira, ma tante. Et il ajouta à part lui: — Me voilà duègne.

Mlle Gillenormand l’embrassa.

— Ce n’est pas toi, Théodule, qui ferais de ces frasques-là. Tu obéis à la discipline, tu es l’esclave de la consigne, tu es un homme de scrupule et de devoir, et tu ne quitterais pas ta famille pour aller voir une créature.

Le lancier fit la grimace satisfaite de Cartouche loué pour sa probité.

Marius, le soir qui suivit ce dialogue, monta en diligence sans se douter qu’il eût un surveillant. Quant au surveillant, la première chose qu’il fit, ce fut de s’endormir. Le sommeil fut complet et consciencieux. Argus ronfla toute la nuit.

Au point du jour, le conducteur de la diligence cria: — Vernon! relais de Vernon! les voyageurs pour Vernon! — Et le lieutenant Théodule se réveilla.

— Bon, grommela-t-il, à demi endormi encore, c’est ici que je descends.

Puis, sa mémoire se nettoyant par degrés, effet du réveil, il songea à sa tante, aux dix louis, et au compte qu’il s’était chargé de rendre des faits et gestes de Marius. Cela le fit rire.

Il n’est peut-être plus dans la voiture, pensa-t-il, tout en reboutonnant sa veste de petit uniforme. Il a pu s’arrêter à Poissy; il a pu s’arrêter à Triel; s’il n’est pas descendu à Meulan, il a pu descendre à Mantes, à moins qu’il ne soit descendu à Rolleboise, ou qu’il n’ait poussé jusqu’à Pacy, avec le choix de tourner à gauche sur Évreux ou à droite sur Laroche-Guyon. Cours après, ma tante. Que diable vais-je lui écrire, à la bonne vieille?

En ce moment un pantalon noir qui descendait de l’impériale apparut à la vitre du coupé.

— Serait-ce Marius? dit le lieutenant.

C’était Marius.

Une petite paysanne, au bas de la voiture, mêlée aux chevaux et aux postillons, offrait des fleurs aux voyageurs. — Fleurissez vos dames, criait-elle.

Marius s’approcha d’elle et lui acheta les plus belles fleurs de son éventaire.

— Pour le coup, dit Théodule sautant à bas du coupé, voilà qui me pique. À qui diantre va-t-il porter ces fleurs-là? Il faut une fièrement jolie femme pour un si beau bouquet. Je veux la voir.

Et, non plus par mandat maintenant, mais par curiosité personnelle, comme ces chiens qui chassent pour leur compte, il se mit à suivre Marius.

Marius ne faisait nulle attention à Théodule. Des femmes élégantes descendaient de la diligence; il ne les regarda pas. Il semblait ne rien voir autour de lui.

— Est-il amoureux! pensa Théodule.

Marius se dirigea vers l’église.

— À merveille, se dit Théodule. L’église! c’est cela. Les rendez-vous assaisonnés d’un peu de messe sont les meilleurs. Rien n’est exquis comme une œillade qui passe par-dessus le bon Dieu.

Parvenu à l’église, Marius n’y entra point, et tourna derrière le chevet. Il disparut à l’angle d’un des contreforts de l’abside.

— Le rendez-vous est dehors, dit Théodule. Voyons la fillette.

Et il s’avança sur la pointe de ses bottes vers l’angle où Marius avait tourné.

Arrivé là, il s’arrêta stupéfait.

Marius, le front dans ses deux mains, était agenouillé dans l’herbe sur une fosse. Il y avait effeuillé son bouquet. À l’extrémité de la fosse, à un renflement qui marquait la tête, il y avait une croix de bois noir avec ce nom en lettres blanches: *Colonel Baron Pontmercy*. On entendait Marius sangloter.

La fillette était une tombe.

Chapitre VIII

Marbre contre granit

C’était là que Marius était venu la première fois qu’il s’était absenté de Paris. C’était là qu’il revenait chaque fois que M. Gillenormand disait: Il découche.

Le lieutenant Théodule fut absolument décontenancé par ce coudoiement inattendu d’un sépulcre; il éprouva une sensation désagréable et singulière qu’il était incapable d’analyser, et qui se composait du respect d’un tombeau mêlé au respect d’un colonel. Il recula, laissant Marius seul dans le cimetière, et il y eut de la discipline dans cette reculade. La mort lui apparut avec de grosses épaulettes, et il lui fit presque le salut militaire. Ne sachant qu’écrire à la tante, il prit le parti de ne rien écrire du tout; et il ne serait probablement rien résulté de la découverte faite par Théodule sur les amours de Marius, si, par un de ces arrangements mystérieux si fréquents dans le hasard, la scène de Vernon n’eût eu presque immédiatement une sorte de contre-coup à Paris.

Marius revint de Vernon le troisième jour de grand matin, descendit chez son grand-père, et, fatigué de deux nuits passées en diligence, sentant le besoin de réparer son insomnie par une heure d’école de natation, monta rapidement à sa chambre, ne prit que le temps de quitter sa redingote de voyage et le cordon noir qu’il avait au cou, et s’en alla au bain.

M. Gillenormand, levé de bonne heure comme tous les vieillards qui se portent bien, l’avait entendu rentrer, et s’était hâté d’escalader, le plus vite qu’il avait pu avec ses vieilles jambes, l’escalier des combles où habitait Marius, afin de l’embrasser, et de le questionner dans l’embrassade, et de savoir un peu d’où il venait.

Mais l’adolescent avait mis moins de temps à descendre que l’octogénaire à monter, et quand le père Gillenormand entra dans la mansarde, Marius n’y était plus.

Le lit n’était pas défait, et sur le lit s’étalaient sans défiance la redingote et le cordon noir.

— J’aime mieux ça, dit M. Gillenormand.

Et un moment après il fit son entrée dans le salon où était déjà assise Mlle Gillenormand aînée, brodant ses roues de cabriolet.

L’entrée fut triomphante.

M. Gillenormand tenait d’une main la redingote et de l’autre le ruban de cou, et criait:

— Victoire! nous allons pénétrer le mystère! nous allons savoir le fin du fin, nous allons palper les libertinages de notre sournois! nous voici à même le roman. J’ai le portrait!

En effet, une boîte de chagrin noir, assez semblable à un médaillon, était suspendue au cordon.

Le vieillard prit cette boîte et la considéra quelque temps sans l’ouvrir, avec cet air de volupté, de ravissement et de colère d’un pauvre diable affamé regardant passer sous son nez un admirable dîner qui ne serait pas pour lui.

— Car c’est évidemment là un portrait. Je m’y connais. Cela se porte tendrement sur le cœur. Sont-ils bêtes! Quelque abominable goton, qui fait frémir probablement! Les jeunes gens ont si mauvais goût aujourd’hui!

— Voyons, mon père, dit la vieille fille.

La boîte s’ouvrait en pressant un ressort. Ils n’y trouvèrent rien qu’un papier soigneusement plié.

— *De la même au même*, dit M. Gillenormand éclatant de rire. Je sais ce que c’est. Un billet doux!

— Ah! lisons donc! dit la tante.

Et elle mit ses lunettes. Ils déplièrent le papier et lurent ceci:

« — *Pour mon fils*. — L’empereur m’a fait baron sur le champ de bataille de Waterloo. Puisque la Restauration me conteste ce titre que j’ai payé de mon sang, mon fils le prendra et le portera. Il va sans dire qu’il en sera digne.»

Ce que le père et la fille éprouvèrent ne saurait se dire. Ils se sentirent glacés comme par le souffle d’une tête de mort. Ils n’échangèrent pas un mot. Seulement M. Gillenormand dit à voix basse et comme se parlant à lui-même:

— C’est l’écriture de ce sabreur.

La tante examina le papier, le retourna dans tous les sens, puis le remit dans la boîte.

Au même moment, un petit paquet carré long enveloppé de papier bleu tomba d’une poche de la redingote. Mademoiselle Gillenormand le ramassa et développa le papier bleu. C’était le cent de cartes de Marius. Elle en passa une à M. Gillenormand qui lut: *Le baron Marius Pontmercy*.

Le vieillard sonna. Nicolette vint. M. Gillenormand prit le cordon, la boîte et la redingote, jeta le tout à terre au milieu du salon, et dit:

— Remportez ces nippes.

Une grande heure se passa dans le plus profond silence. Le vieux homme et la vieille fille s’étaient assis se tournant le dos l’un à l’autre, et pensaient, chacun de leur côté, probablement les mêmes choses. Au bout de cette heure, la tante Gillenormand dit:

— Joli!

Quelques instants après, Marius parut. Il rentrait. Avant même d’avoir franchi le seuil du salon, il aperçut son grand-père qui tenait à la main une de ses cartes et qui, en le voyant, s’écria avec son air de supériorité bourgeoise et ricanante qui était quelque chose d’écrasant:

— Tiens! tiens! tiens! tiens! tiens! tu es baron à présent. Je te fais mon compliment. Qu’est-ce que cela veut dire?

Marius rougit légèrement, et répondit:

— Cela veut dire que je suis le fils de mon père.

M. Gillenormand cessa de rire et dit durement:

— Ton père, c’est moi.

— Mon père, reprit Marius les yeux baissés et l’air sévère, c’était un homme humble et héroïque qui a glorieusement servi la République et la France, qui a été grand dans la plus grande histoire que les hommes aient jamais faite, qui a vécu un quart de siècle au bivouac, le jour sous la mitraille et sous les balles, la nuit dans la neige, dans la boue, sous la pluie, qui a pris deux drapeaux, qui a reçu vingt blessures, qui est mort dans l’oubli et dans l’abandon, et qui n’a jamais eu qu’un tort, c’est de trop aimer deux ingrats, son pays et moi!

C’était plus que M. Gillenormand n’en pouvait entendre. À ce mot, *la République*, il s’était levé, ou pour mieux dire, dressé debout. Chacune des paroles que Marius venait de prononcer avait fait sur le visage du vieux royaliste l’effet des bouffées d’un soufflet de forge sur un tison ardent. De sombre il était devenu rouge, de rouge pourpre, et de pourpre flamboyant.

— Marius! s’écria-t-il. Abominable enfant! je ne sais pas ce qu’était ton père! je ne veux pas le savoir! je n’en sais rien et je ne le sais pas! mais ce que je sais, c’est qu’il n’y a jamais eu que des misérables parmi tous ces gens-là! c’est que c’étaient tous des gueux, des assassins, des bonnets rouges, des voleurs! je dis tous! je dis tous! je ne connais personne! je dis tous! entends-tu, Marius! Vois-tu bien, tu es baron comme ma pantoufle!

C’étaient tous des bandits qui ont servi Robespierre! tous des brigands qui ont servi Bu — o — na — parté! tous des traîtres qui ont trahi, trahi, trahi, leur roi légitime! tous des lâches qui se sont sauvés devant les Prussiens et les Anglais à Waterloo! Voilà ce que je sais. Si monsieur votre père est là-dessous, je l’ignore, j’en suis fâché, tant pis, votre serviteur!

À son tour, c’était Marius qui était le tison, et M. Gillenormand qui était le soufflet. Marius frissonnait dans tous ses membres, il ne savait que devenir, sa tête flambait. Il était le prêtre qui regarde jeter au vent toutes ses hosties, le fakir qui voit un passant cracher sur son idole. Il ne se pouvait que de telles choses eussent été dites impunément devant lui. Mais que faire? Son père venait d’être foulé aux pieds et trépigné en sa présence, mais par qui? par son grand-père. Comment venger l’un sans outrager l’autre? Il était impossible qu’il insultât son grand-père, et il était également impossible qu’il ne vengeât point son père. D’un côté une tombe sacrée, de l’autre des cheveux blancs. Il fut quelques instants ivre et chancelant, ayant tout ce tourbillon dans la tête; puis il leva les yeux, regarda fixement son aïeul, et cria d’une voix tonnante:

— À bas les Bourbons, et ce gros cochon de Louis XVIII!

Louis XVIII était mort depuis quatre ans, mais cela lui était bien égal.

Le vieillard, d’écarlate qu’il était, devint subitement plus blanc que ses cheveux. Il se tourna vers un buste de M. le duc de Berry qui était sur la cheminée et le salua profondément avec une sorte de majesté singulière. Puis il alla deux fois, lentement et en silence, de la cheminée à la fenêtre et de la fenêtre à la cheminée, traversant toute la salle et faisant craquer le parquet comme une figure de pierre qui marche. À la seconde fois, il se pencha vers sa fille, qui assistait à ce choc avec la stupeur d’une vieille brebis, et lui dit en souriant d’un sourire presque calme.

— Un baron comme monsieur et un bourgeois comme moi ne peuvent rester sous le même toit.

Et tout à coup se redressant, blême, tremblant, terrible, le front agrandi par l’effrayant rayonnement de la colère, il étendit le bras vers Marius et lui cria:

— Va-t’en.

Marius quitta la maison.

Le lendemain, M. Gillenormand dit à sa fille:

— Vous enverrez tous les six mois soixante pistoles à ce buveur de sang, et vous ne m’en parlerez jamais.

Ayant un immense reste de fureur à dépenser et ne sachant qu’en faire, il continua de dire *vous* à sa fille pendant plus de trois mois.

Marius, de son côté, était sorti indigné. Une circonstance qu’il faut dire avait aggravé encore son exaspération. Il y a toujours de ces petites fatalités qui compliquent les drames domestiques. Les griefs s’en augmentent, quoique au fond les torts n’en soient pas accrus. En reportant précipitamment, sur l’ordre du grand-père, «les nippes» de Marius dans sa chambre, Nicolette avait, sans s’en apercevoir, laissé tomber, probablement dans l’escalier des combles, qui était obscur, le médaillon de chagrin noir où était le papier écrit par le colonel. Ce papier ni ce médaillon ne purent être retrouvés. Marius fut convaincu que «monsieur Gillenormand», à dater de ce jour il ne l’appela plus autrement, avait jeté «le testament de son père», au feu. Il savait par cœur les quelques lignes écrites par le colonel, et, par conséquent, rien n’était perdu. Mais le papier, l’écriture, cette relique sacrée, tout cela était son cœur même. Qu’en avait-on fait?

Marius s’en était allé, sans dire où il allait, et sans savoir où il allait, avec trente francs, sa montre, et quelques hardes dans un sac de nuit. Il était monté dans un cabriolet de place, l’avait pris à l’heure et s’était dirigé à tout hasard vers le pays latin.

Qu’allait devenir Marius?

Livre quatrième — Les amis de l’A B C

Chapitre I

Un groupe qui a failli devenir historique

À cette époque, indifférente en apparence, un certain frisson révolutionnaire courait vaguement. Des souffles, revenus des profondeurs de 89 et de 92, étaient dans l’air. La jeunesse était, qu’on nous passe le mot, en train de muer. On se transformait, presque sans s’en douter, par le mouvement même du temps. L’aiguille qui marche sur le cadran marche aussi dans les âmes. Chacun faisait en avant le pas qu’il avait à faire. Les royalistes devenaient libéraux, les libéraux devenaient démocrates.

C’était comme une marée montante compliquée de mille reflux; le propre des reflux, c’est de faire des mélanges; de là des combinaisons d’idées très singulières; on adorait à la fois Napoléon et la liberté. Nous faisons ici de l’histoire. C’étaient les mirages de ce temps-là. Les opinions traversent des phases. Le royalisme voltairien, variété bizarre, a eu un pendant non moins étrange, le libéralisme bonapartiste.

D’autres groupes d’esprits étaient plus sérieux. Là on sondait le principe; là on s’attachait au droit. On se passionnait pour l’absolu, on entrevoyait les réalisations infinies; l’absolu, par sa rigidité même, pousse les esprits vers l’azur et les fait flotter dans l’illimité. Rien n’est tel que le dogme pour enfanter le rêve. Et rien n’est tel que le rêve pour engendrer l’avenir. Utopie aujourd’hui, chair et os demain.

Les opinions avancées avaient des doubles fonds. Un commencement de mystère menaçait «l’ordre établi», lequel était suspect et sournois. Signe au plus haut point révolutionnaire. L’arrière-pensée du pouvoir rencontre dans la sape l’arrière-pensée du peuple. L’incubation des insurrections donne la réplique à la préméditation des coups d’État.

Il n’y avait pas encore en France alors de ces vastes organisations sous-jacentes comme le tugendbund allemand et le carbonarisme italien: mais çà et là des creusements obscurs, se ramifiant. La Cougourde s’ébauchait à Aix; il y avait à Paris, entre autres affiliations de ce genre, la société des Amis de l’A B C.

Qu’était-ce que les Amis de l’A B C? une société ayant pour but, en apparence, l’éducation des enfants, en réalité le redressement des hommes.

On se déclarait les amis de l’A B C. — *L’Abaissé*, c’était le peuple. On voulait le relever. Calembour dont on aurait tort de rire. Les calembours sont quelquefois graves en politique; témoin le *Castratus ad castra* qui fit de Narsès un général d’armée; témoin: *Barbari et Barberini*; témoin: *Fueros y Fuegos;* témoin: *Tu es Petrus et super hanc petram*, etc., etc.

Les amis de l’A B C étaient peu nombreux. C’était une société secrète à l’état d’embryon; nous dirions presque une coterie, si les coteries aboutissaient à des héros. Ils se réunissaient à Paris en deux endroits, près des halles, dans un cabaret appelé *Corinthe* dont il sera question plus tard, et près du Panthéon dans un petit café de la place Saint-Michel appelé *le café Musain*, aujourd’hui démoli; le premier de ces lieux de rendez-vous était contigu aux ouvriers, le deuxième, aux étudiants.

Les conciliabules habituels des Amis de l’A B C se tenaient dans une arrière-salle du café Musain.

Cette salle, assez éloignée du café, auquel elle communiquait par un très long couloir, avait deux fenêtres et une issue avec un escalier dérobé sur la petite rue des Grès. On y fumait, on y buvait, on y jouait, on y riait. On y causait très haut de tout, et à voix basse d’autre chose. Au mur était clouée, indice suffisant pour éveiller le flair d’un agent de police, une vieille carte de la France sous la République.

La plupart des amis de l’A B C étaient des étudiants, en entente cordiale avec quelques ouvriers. Voici les noms des principaux. Ils appartiennent dans une certaine mesure à l’histoire: Enjolras, Combeferre, Jean Prouvaire, Feuilly, Courfeyrac, Bahorel, Lesgle ou Laigle, Joly, Grantaire.

Ces jeunes gens faisaient entre eux une sorte de famille, à force d’amitié. Tous, Laigle excepté, étaient du midi.

Ce groupe était remarquable. Il s’est évanoui dans les profondeurs invisibles qui sont derrière nous. Au point de ce drame où nous sommes parvenus, il n’est pas inutile peut-être de diriger un rayon de clarté sur ces jeunes têtes avant que le lecteur les voie s’enfoncer dans l’ombre d’une aventure tragique.

Enjolras, que nous avons nommé le premier, on verra plus tard pourquoi, était fils unique et riche.

Enjolras était un jeune homme charmant, capable d’être terrible. Il était angéliquement beau. C’était Antinoüs farouche. On eût dit, à voir la réverbération pensive de son regard, qu’il avait déjà, dans quelque existence précédente, traversé l’apocalypse révolutionnaire. Il en avait la tradition comme un témoin. Il savait tous les petits détails de la grande chose. Nature pontificale et guerrière, étrange dans un adolescent. Il était officiant et militant; au point de vue immédiat, soldat de la démocratie; au-dessus du mouvement contemporain, prêtre de l'idéal. Il avait la prunelle profonde, la paupière un peu rouge, la lèvre inférieure épaisse et facilement dédaigneuse, le front haut. Beaucoup de front dans un visage, c'est comme beaucoup de ciel dans un horizon. Ainsi que certains jeunes hommes du commencement de ce siècle et de la fin du siècle dernier qui ont été illustres de bonne heure, il avait une jeunesse excessive, fraîche comme chez les jeunes filles, quoique avec des heures de pâleur. Déjà homme, il semblait encore enfant. Ses vingt-deux ans en paraissaient dix-sept. Il était grave, il ne semblait pas savoir qu'il y eût sur la terre un être appelé la femme. Il n'avait qu'une passion, le droit, qu'une pensée, renverser l'obstacle. Sur le mont Aventin, il eût été Gracchus; dans la Convention, il eût été Saint-Just. Il voyait à peine les roses, il ignorait le printemps, il n'entendait pas chanter les oiseaux; la gorge nue d'Évadné ne l'eût pas plus ému qu'Aristogiton; pour lui, comme pour Harmodius, les fleurs n'étaient bonnes qu'à cacher l'épée. Il était sévère dans les joies. Devant tout ce qui n'était pas la République, il baissait chastement les yeux. C'était l'amoureux de marbre de la Liberté. Sa parole était âprement inspirée et avait un frémissement d'hymne. Il avait des ouvertures d'ailes inattendues. Malheur à l'amourette qui se fût risquée de son côté! Si quelque grisette de la place Cambrai ou de la rue Saint-Jean-de-Beauvais, voyant cette figure d'échappé de collège, cette encolure de page, ces longs cils blonds, ces yeux bleus, cette chevelure tumultueuse au vent, ces joues roses, ces lèvres neuves, ces dents exquises, eût eu appétit de toute cette aurore, et fût venue essayer sa beauté sur Enjolras, un regard surprenant et redoutable lui eût montré brusquement l'abîme, et lui eût appris à ne pas confondre avec le chérubin galant de Baumarchais le formidable chérubin d'Ézéchiel.

À côté d'Enjolras qui représentait la logique de la révolution, Combeferre en représentait la philosophie. Entre la logique de la révolution et sa philosophie, il y a cette différence que sa logique peut conclure à la guerre, tandis que sa philosophie ne peut aboutir qu'à la paix. Combeferre complétait et rectifiait Enjolras. Il était moins haut et plus large. Il voulait qu'on versât aux esprits les principes étendus d'idées générales; il disait: Révolution, mais civilisation; et autour de la montagne à pic il ouvrait le vaste horizon bleu. De là, dans toutes les vues de Combeferre, quelque chose d’accessible et de praticable. La révolution avec Combeferre était plus respirable qu’avec Enjolras. Enjolras en exprimait le droit divin, et Combeferre le droit naturel. Le premier se rattachait à Robespierre; le second confinait à Condorcet. Combeferre vivait plus qu’Enjolras de la vie de tout le monde. S’il eût été donné à ces deux jeunes hommes d’arriver jusqu’à l’histoire, l’un eût été le juste, l’autre eût été le sage. Enjolras était plus viril, Combeferre était plus humain. *Homo* et *Vir*, c’était bien là en effet leur nuance. Combeferre était doux comme Enjolras était sévère, par blancheur naturelle. Il aimait le mot citoyen, mais il préférait le mot homme. Il eût volontiers dit: *Hombre*, comme les espagnols. Il lisait tout, allait aux théâtres, suivait les cours publics, apprenait d’Arago la polarisation de la lumière, se passionnait pour une leçon où Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire avait expliqué la double fonction de l’artère carotide externe et de l’artère carotide interne, l’une qui fait le visage, l’autre qui fait le cerveau; il était au courant, suivait la science pas à pas, confrontait Saint-Simon avec Fourier, déchiffrait les hiéroglyphes, cassait les cailloux qu’il trouvait et raisonnait géologie, dessinait de mémoire un papillon bombyx, signalait les fautes de français dans le Dictionnaire de l’Académie, étudiait Puységur et Deleuze, n’affirmait rien, pas même les miracles, ne niait rien, pas même les revenants, feuilletait la collection du *Moniteur*, songeait. Il déclarait que l’avenir est dans la main du maître d’école, et se préoccupait des questions d’éducation. Il voulait que la société travaillât sans relâche à l’élévation du niveau intellectuel et moral, au monnayage de la science, à la mise en circulation des idées, à la croissance de l’esprit dans la jeunesse, et il craignait que la pauvreté actuelle des méthodes, la misère du point de vue littéraire borné à deux ou trois siècles classiques, le dogmatisme tyrannique des pédants officiels, les préjugés scolastiques et les routines ne finissent par faire de nos collèges des huîtrières artificielles. Il était savant, puriste, précis, polytechnique, piocheur, et en même temps pensif «jusqu’à la chimère», disaient ses amis. Il croyait à tous les rêves: les chemins de fer, la suppression de la souffrance dans les opérations chirurgicales, la fixation de l’image de la chambre noire, le télégraphe électrique, la direction des ballons. Du reste peu effrayé des citadelles bâties de toutes parts contre le genre humain par les superstitions, les despotismes et les préjugés. Il était de ceux qui pensent que la science finira par tourner la position. Enjolras était un chef, Combeferre était un guide. On eût voulu combattre avec l’un et marcher avec l’autre. Ce n’est pas que Combeferre ne fût capable de combattre, il ne refusait pas de prendre corps à corps l’obstacle et de l’attaquer de vive force et par explosion; mais mettre peu à peu, par l’enseignement des axiomes et la promulgation des lois positives, le genre humain d’accord avec ses destinées, cela lui plaisait mieux; et, entre deux clartés, sa pente était plutôt pour l’illumination que pour l’embrasement. Un incendie peut faire une aurore sans doute, mais pourquoi ne pas attendre le lever du jour? Un volcan éclaire, mais l’aube éclaire encore mieux. Combeferre préférait peut-être la blancheur du beau au flamboiement du sublime. Une clarté troublée par de la fumée, un progrès acheté par de la violence, ne satisfaisaient qu’à demi ce tendre et sérieux esprit. Une précipitation à pic d’un peuple dans la vérité, un 93, l’effarait; cependant la stagnation lui répugnait plus encore, il y sentait la putréfaction et la mort; à tout prendre, il aimait mieux l’écume que le miasme, et il préférait au cloaque le torrent, et la chute du Niagara au lac de Montfaucon. En somme il ne voulait ni halte, ni hâte. Tandis que ses tumultueux amis, chevaleresquement épris de l’absolu, adoraient et appelaient les splendides aventures révolutionnaires, Combeferre inclinait à laisser faire le progrès, le bon progrès, froid peut-être, mais pur; méthodique, mais irréprochable; flegmatique, mais imperturbable. Combeferre se fût agenouillé et eût joint les mains pour que l’avenir arrivât avec toute sa candeur, et pour que rien ne troublât l’immense évolution vertueuse des peuples. *Il faut que le bien soit innocent*, répétait-il sans cesse. Et en effet, si la grandeur de la révolution, c’est de regarder fixement l’éblouissant idéal et d’y voler à travers les foudres, avec du sang et du feu à ses serres, la beauté du progrès, c’est d’être sans tache; et il y a entre Washington qui représente l’un et Danton qui incarne l’autre, la différence qui sépare l’ange aux ailes de cygne de l’ange aux ailes d’aigle.

Jean Prouvaire était une nuance plus adoucie encore que Combeferre. Il s’appelait Jehan, par cette petite fantaisie momentanée qui se mêlait au puissant et profond mouvement d’où est sortie l’étude si nécessaire du moyen-âge. Jean Prouvaire était amoureux, cultivait un pot de fleurs, jouait de la flûte, faisait des vers, aimait le peuple, plaignait la femme, pleurait sur l’enfant, confondait dans la même confiance l’avenir et Dieu, et blâmait la révolution d’avoir fait tomber une tête royale, celle d’André Chénier. Il avait la voix habituellement délicate et tout à coup virile. Il était lettré jusqu’à l’érudition, et presque orientaliste. Il était bon par-dessus tout; et, chose toute simple pour qui sait combien la bonté confine à la grandeur, en fait de poésie il préférait l’immense. Il savait l’italien, le latin, le grec et l’hébreu; et cela lui servait à ne lire que quatre poètes: Dante, Juvénal, Eschyle et Isaïe. En français, il préférait Corneille à Racine et Agrippa d’Aubigné à Corneille. Il flânait volontiers dans les champs de folle avoine et de bleuets, et s’occupait des nuages presque autant que des événements. Son esprit avait deux attitudes, l’une du côté de l’homme, l’autre du côté de Dieu; il étudiait, ou il contemplait. Toute la journée il approfondissait les questions sociales; le salaire, le capital, le crédit, le mariage, la religion, la liberté de penser, la liberté d’aimer, l’éducation, la pénalité, la misère, l’association, la propriété, la production et la répartition, l’énigme d’en bas qui couvre d’ombre la fourmilière humaine; et le soir, il regardait les astres, ces êtres énormes. Comme Enjolras, il était riche et fils unique. Il parlait doucement, penchait la tête, baissait les yeux, souriait avec embarras, se mettait mal, avait l’air gauche, rougissait de rien, était fort timide. Du reste, intrépide.

Feuilly était un ouvrier éventailliste, orphelin de père et de mère, qui gagnait péniblement trois francs par jour, et qui n’avait qu’une pensée, délivrer le monde. Il avait une autre préoccupation encore: s’instruire; ce qu’il appelait aussi se délivrer. Il s’était enseigné à lui-même à lire et à écrire; tout ce qu’il savait, il l’avait appris seul. Feuilly était un généreux cœur. Il avait l’embrassement immense. Cet orphelin avait adopté les peuples. Sa mère lui manquant, il avait médité sur la patrie. Il ne voulait pas qu’il y eût sur la terre un homme qui fût sans patrie. Il couvait en lui-même, avec la divination profonde de l’homme du peuple, ce que nous appelons aujourd’hui *l’idée des nationalités*. Il avait appris l’histoire exprès pour s’indigner en connaissance de cause. Dans ce jeune cénacle d’utopistes, surtout occupés de la France, il représentait le dehors. Il avait pour spécialité la Grèce, la Pologne, la Hongrie, la Roumanie, l’Italie. Il prononçait ces noms-là sans cesse, à propos et hors de propos, avec la ténacité du droit. La Turquie sur la Grèce et la Thessalie, la Russie sur Varsovie, l’Autriche sur Venise, ces viols l’exaspéraient. Entre toutes, la grande voie de fait de 1772 le soulevait. Le vrai dans l’indignation, il n’y a pas de plus souveraine éloquence, il était éloquent de cette éloquence-là. Il ne tarissait pas sur cette date infâme, 1772, sur ce noble et vaillant peuple supprimé par trahison, sur ce Crime à trois, sur ce guet-apens monstre, prototype et patron de toutes ces effrayantes suppressions d’états qui, depuis, ont frappé plusieurs nobles nations, et leur ont, pour ainsi dire, raturé leur acte de naissance. Tous les attentats sociaux contemporains dérivent du partage de la Pologne. Le partage de la Pologne est un théorème dont tous les forfaits politiques actuels sont les corollaires. Pas un despote, pas un traître, depuis tout à l'heure un siècle, qui n'ait visé, homologué, contre-signé et paraphé, *ne varietur*, le partage de la Pologne. Quand on compulse le dossier des trahisons modernes, celle-là apparaît la première. Le congrès de Vienne a consulté ce crime avant de consommer le sien. 1772 sonne l'hallali, 1815 est la curée. Tel était le texte habituel de Feuilly. Ce pauvre ouvrier s'était fait le tuteur de la justice, et elle le récompensait en le faisant grand. C'est qu'en effet il y a de l'éternité dans le droit. Varsovie ne peut pas plus être tartare que Venise ne peut être tudesque. Les rois y perdent leur peine, et leur honneur. Tôt ou tard, la patrie submergée flotte à la surface et reparaît. La Grèce redevient la Grèce; l'Italie redevient l'Italie. La protestation du droit contre le fait persiste à jamais. Le vol d'un peuple ne se prescrit pas. Ces hautes escroqueries n'ont point d'avenir. On ne démarque pas une nation comme un mouchoir.

Courfeyrac avait un père qu'on nommait M. de Courfeyrac. Une des idées fausses de la bourgeoisie de la Restauration en fait d'aristocratie et de noblesse, c'était de croire à la particule. La particule, on le sait, n'a aucune signification. Mais les bourgeois du temps de *la Minerve* estimaient si haut ce pauvre *de* qu'on se croyait obligé de l'abdiquer. M. de Chauvelin se faisait appeler M. Chauvelin, M. de Caumartin, M. Caumartin, M. de Constant de Rebecque, Benjamin Constant, M. de Lafayette, M. Lafayette. Courfeyrac n'avait pas voulu rester en arrière, et s'appelait Courfeyrac tout court.

Nous pourrions presque, en ce qui concerne Courfeyrac, nous en tenir là, et nous borner à dire quant au reste: Courfeyrac, voyez Tholomyès.

Courfeyrac en effet avait cette verve de jeunesse qu'on pourrait appeler la beauté du diable de l'esprit. Plus tard, cela s'éteint comme la gentillesse du petit chat, et toute cette grâce aboutit, sur deux pieds, au bourgeois, et, sur quatre pattes, au matou.

Ce genre d'esprit, les générations qui traversent les écoles, les levées successives de la jeunesse, se le transmettent, et se le passent de main en main, *quasi cursores*, à peu près toujours le même; de sorte que, ainsi que nous venons de l'indiquer, le premier venu qui eût écouté Courfeyrac en 1828 eût cru entendre Tholomyès en 1817. Seulement Courfeyrac était un brave garçon. Sous les apparentes similitudes de l'esprit extérieur, la différence entre Tholomyès et lui était grande. L’homme latent qui existait en eux était chez le premier tout autre que chez le second. Il y avait dans Tholomyès un procureur et dans Courfeyrac un paladin.

Enjolras était le chef. Combeferre était le guide, Courfeyrac était le centre. Les autres donnaient plus de lumière, lui il donnait plus de calorique; le fait est qu’il avait toutes les qualités d’un centre, la rondeur et le rayonnement.

Bahorel avait figuré dans le tumulte sanglant de juin 1822, à l’occasion de l’enterrement du jeune Lallemand.

Bahorel était un être de bonne humeur et de mauvaise compagnie, brave, panier percé, prodigue et rencontrant la générosité, bavard et rencontrant l’éloquence, hardi et rencontrant l’effronterie; la meilleure pâte de diable qui fût possible; ayant des gilets téméraires et des opinions écarlates; tapageur en grand, c’est-à-dire n’aimant rien tant qu’une querelle, si ce n’est une émeute, et rien tant qu’une émeute, si ce n’est une révolution; toujours prêt à casser un carreau, puis à dépaver une rue, puis à démolir un gouvernement, pour voir l’effet; étudiant de onzième année. Il flairait le droit, mais il ne le faisait pas. Il avait pris pour devise: *avocat jamais*, et pour armoiries une table de nuit dans laquelle on entrevoyait un bonnet carré. Chaque fois qu’il passait devant l’école de droit, ce qui lui arrivait rarement, il boutonnait sa redingote, le paletot n’était pas encore inventé, et il prenait des précautions hygiéniques. Il disait du portail de l’école: quel beau vieillard! et du doyen, M. Delvincourt: quel monument! Il voyait dans ses cours des sujets de chansons et dans ses professeurs des occasions de caricatures. Il mangeait à rien faire une assez grosse pension, quelque chose comme trois mille francs. Il avait des parents paysans auxquels il avait su inculquer le respect de leur fils.

Il disait d’eux: Ce sont des paysans, et non des bourgeois; c’est pour cela qu’ils ont de l’intelligence.

Bahorel, homme de caprice, était épars sur plusieurs cafés; les autres avaient des habitudes, lui n’en avait pas. Il flânait. Errer est humain, flâner est parisien. Au fond, esprit pénétrant, et penseur plus qu’il ne semblait.

Il servait de lien entre les Amis de l’A B C et d’autres groupes encore informes, mais qui devaient se dessiner plus tard.

Il y avait dans ce conclave de jeunes têtes un membre chauve.

Le marquis d’Avaray, que Louis XVIII fit duc pour l’avoir aidé à monter dans un cabriolet de place le jour où il émigra, racontait qu’en 1814, à son retour en France, comme le roi débarquait à Calais, un homme lui présenta un placet. — Que demandez-vous? dit le roi. — Sire, un bureau de poste. — Comment vous appelez-vous? — L’Aigle.

Le roi fronça le sourcil, regarda la signature du placet et vit le nom écrit ainsi: *Lesgle*. Cette orthographe peu bonapartiste toucha le roi et il commença à sourire. Sire, reprit l’homme au placet, j’ai pour ancêtre un valet de chiens, surnommé Lesgueules. Ce surnom a fait mon nom. Je m’appelle Lesgueules, par contraction Lesgle, et par corruption L’Aigle. — Ceci fit que le roi acheva son sourire. Plus tard il donna à l’homme le bureau de poste de Meaux, exprès ou par mégarde.

Le membre chauve du groupe était fils de ce Lesgle, ou Lègle, et signait Lègle (de Meaux). Ses camarades, pour abréger, l’appelaient Bossuet.

Bossuet était un garçon gai qui avait du malheur. Sa spécialité était de ne réussir à rien. Par contre, il riait de tout. À vingt-cinq ans, il était chauve. Son père avait fini par avoir une maison et un champ; mais lui, le fils, n’avait rien eu de plus pressé que de perdre dans une fausse spéculation ce champ et cette maison. Il ne lui était rien resté. Il avait de la science et de l’esprit, mais il avortait. Tout lui manquait, tout le trompait; ce qu’il échafaudait croulait sur lui. S’il fendait du bois, il se coupait un doigt. S’il avait une maîtresse, il découvrait bientôt qu’il avait aussi un ami. À tout moment quelque misère lui advenait; de là sa jovialité. Il disait: *J’habite sous le toit des tuiles qui tombent*. Peu étonné, car pour lui l’accident était le prévu, il prenait la mauvaise chance en sérénité et souriait des taquineries de la destinée comme quelqu’un qui entend la plaisanterie. Il était pauvre, mais son gousset de bonne humeur était inépuisable. Il arrivait vite à son dernier sou, jamais à son dernier éclat de rire. Quand l’adversité entrait chez lui, il saluait cordialement cette ancienne connaissance, il tapait sur le ventre aux catastrophes; il était familier avec la Fatalité au point de l’appeler par son petit nom. — Bonjour, Guignon, lui disait-il.

Ces persécutions du sort l’avaient fait inventif. Il était plein de ressources. Il n’avait point d’argent, mais il trouvait moyen de faire, quand bon lui semblait, «des dépenses effrénées». Une nuit, il alla jusqu’à manger «cent francs» dans un souper avec une péronnelle, ce qui lui inspira au milieu de l’orgie ce mot mémorable: *Fille de cinq louis, tire-moi mes bottes*.

Bossuet se dirigeait lentement vers la profession d’avocat; il faisait son droit, à la manière de Bahorel. Bossuet avait peu de domicile; quelquefois pas du tout. Il logeait tantôt chez l'un, tantôt chez l'autre, le plus souvent chez Joly. Joly étudiait la médecine. Il avait deux ans de moins que Bossuet.

Joly était le malade imaginaire jeune. Ce qu'il avait gagné à la médecine, c'était d'être plus malade que médecin. À vingt-trois ans, il se croyait valétudinaire et passait sa vie à regarder sa langue dans son miroir. Il affirmait que l'homme s'aimante comme une aiguille, et dans sa chambre il mettait son lit au midi et les pieds au nord, afin que, la nuit, la circulation de son sang ne fût pas contrariée par le grand courant magnétique du globe. Dans les orages, il se tâtait le pouls. Du reste, le plus gai de tous. Toutes ces incohérences, jeune, maniaque, malingre, joyeux, faisaient bon ménage ensemble, et il en résultait un être excentrique et agréable que ses camarades, prodigues de consonnes ailées, appelaient Jolllly. — Tu peux t'envoler sur quatre L, lui disait Jean Prouvaire.

Joly avait l'habitude de se toucher le nez avec le bout de sa canne, ce qui est l'indice d'un esprit sagace.

Tous ces jeunes gens, si divers, et dont, en somme, il ne faut parler que sérieusement, avaient une même religion: le Progrès.

Tous étaient les fils directs de la révolution française. Les plus légers devenaient solennels en prononçant cette date: 89. Leurs pères selon la chair étaient ou avaient été feuillants, royalistes, doctrinaires; peu importait; ce pêle-mêle antérieur à eux, qui étaient jeunes, ne les regardait point; le pur sang des principes coulait dans leurs veines. Ils se rattachaient sans nuance intermédiaire au droit incorruptible et au devoir absolu.

Affiliés et initiés, ils ébauchaient souterrainement l'idéal.

Parmi tous ces cœurs passionnés et tous ces esprits convaincus, il y avait un sceptique. Comment se trouvait-il là? Par juxtaposition. Ce sceptique s'appelait Grantaire, et signait habituellement de ce rébus: R. Grantaire était un homme qui se gardait bien de croire à quelque chose. C'était du reste un des étudiants qui avaient le plus appris pendant leurs cours à Paris; il savait que le meilleur café était au café Lemblin, et le meilleur billard au café Voltaire, qu'on trouvait de bonnes galettes et de bonnes filles à l'Ermitage sur le boulevard du Maine, des poulets à la crapaudine chez la mère Saguet, d'excellentes matelotes barrière de la Cunette, et un certain petit vin blanc barrière du Combat. Pour tout, il savait les bons endroits; en outre la savate et le chausson, quelques danses, et il était profond bâtonniste. Par-dessus le marché, grand buveur. Il était laid démesurément; la plus jolie piqueuse de bottines de ce temps-là, Irma Boissy, indignée de sa laideur, avait rendu cette sentence: *Grantaire est impossible;* mais la fatuité de Grantaire ne se déconcertait pas. Il regardait tendrement et fixement toutes les femmes, ayant l'air de dire de toutes: *si je voulais*! et cherchant à faire croire aux camarades qu'il était généralement demandé.

Tous ces mots: droit du peuple, droits de l'homme, contrat social, révolution française, République, démocratie, humanité, civilisation, religion, progrès, étaient, pour Grantaire, très voisins de ne rien signifier du tout. Il en souriait. Le scepticisme, cette carie de l'intelligence, ne lui avait pas laissé une idée entière dans l'esprit. Il vivait avec ironie. Ceci était son axiome: Il n'y a qu'une certitude, mon verre plein. Il raillait tous les dévouements dans tous les partis, aussi bien le frère que le père, aussi bien Robespierre jeune que Loizerolles. — Ils sont bien avancés d'être morts, s'écriait-il. Il disait du crucifix: Voilà une potence qui a réussi. Coureur, joueur, libertin, souvent ivre, il faisait à ces jeunes songeurs le déplaisir de chantonner sans cesse: *J'aimons les filles et j'aimons le bon vin.* Air: Vive Henri IV.

Du reste ce sceptique avait un fanatisme. Ce fanatisme n'était ni une idée ni un dogme, ni un art, ni une science; c'était un homme: Enjolras. Grantaire admirait, aimait et vénérait Enjolras. À qui se ralliait ce douteur anarchique dans cette phalange d'esprits absolus? Au plus absolu. De quelle façon Enjolras le subjuguait-il? Par les idées? Non. Par le caractère. Phénomène souvent observé. Un sceptique qui adhère à un croyant, cela est simple comme la loi des couleurs complémentaires. Ce qui nous manque nous attire. Personne n'aime le jour comme l'aveugle. La naine adore le tambour-major. Le crapaud a toujours les yeux au ciel; pourquoi? pour voir voler l'oiseau. Grantaire, en qui rampait le doute, aimait à voir dans Enjolras la foi planer. Il avait besoin d'Enjolras. Sans qu'il s'en rendît clairement compte et sans qu'il songeât à se l'expliquer à lui-même, cette nature chaste, saine, ferme, droite, dure, candide, le charmait. Il admirait, d'instinct, son contraire. Ses idées molles, fléchissantes, disloquées, malades, difformes, se rattachaient à Enjolras comme à une épine dorsale. Son rachis moral s'appuyait à cette fermeté. Grantaire, près d'Enjolras, redevenait quelqu'un. Il était lui-même d'ailleurs composé de deux éléments en apparence incompatibles. Il était ironique et cordial. Son indifférence aimait. Son esprit se passait de croyance et son cœur ne pouvait se passer d'amitié. Contradiction profonde; car une affection est une conviction. Sa nature était ainsi. Il y a des hommes qui semblent nés pour être le verso, l’envers, le revers. Ils sont Pollux, Patrocle, Nisus, Eudamidas, Éphestion, Pechméja. Ils ne vivent qu’à la condition d’être adossés à un autre; leur nom est une suite, et ne s’écrit que précédé de la conjonction *et*; leur existence ne leur est pas propre; elle est l’autre côté d’une destinée qui n’est pas la leur. Grantaire était un de ces hommes. Il était l’envers d’Enjolras.

On pourrait presque dire que les affinités commencent aux lettres de l’alphabet. Dans la série, O et P sont inséparables. Vous pouvez, à votre gré, prononcer O et P, ou Oreste et Pylade.

Grantaire, vrai satellite d’Enjolras, habitait ce cercle de jeunes gens; il y vivait; il ne se plaisait que là; il les suivait partout. Sa joie était de voir aller et venir ces silhouettes dans les fumées du vin. On le tolérait pour sa bonne humeur.

Enjolras, croyant, dédaignait ce sceptique, et, sobre, cet ivrogne. Il lui accordait un peu de pitié hautaine. Grantaire était un Pylade point accepté. Toujours rudoyé par Enjolras, repoussé durement, rejeté et revenant, il disait d’Enjolras: Quel beau marbre!

Chapitre II

Oraison funèbre de Blondeau, par Bossuet

Une certaine après-midi, qui avait, comme on va le voir, quelque coïncidence avec les événements racontés plus haut, Laigle de Meaux était mensuellement adossé au chambranle de la porte du café Musain. Il avait l'air d'une cariatide en vacances; il ne portait rien que sa rêverie. Il regardait la place Saint-Michel. S'adosser, c'est une manière d'être couché debout qui n'est point haïe des songeurs. Laigle de Meaux pensait, sans mélancolie, à une petite mésaventure qui lui était échue l'avant-veille à l'école de droit, et qui modifiait ses plans personnels d'avenir, plans d'ailleurs assez indistincts.

La rêverie n'empêche pas un cabriolet de passer, et le songeur de remarquer le cabriolet. Laigle de Meaux, dont les yeux erraient dans une sorte de flânerie diffuse, aperçut, à travers ce somnambulisme, un véhicule à deux roues cheminant dans la place, lequel allait au pas, et comme indécis. À qui en voulait ce cabriolet? pourquoi allait-il au pas? Laigle y regarda. Il y avait dedans, à côté du cocher, un jeune homme, et devant ce jeune homme un assez gros sac de nuit. Le sac montrait aux passants ce nom écrit en grosses lettres noires sur une carte cousue à l'étoffe: *Marius Pontmercy*.

Ce nom fit changer d'attitude à Laigle. Il se dressa et jeta cette apostrophe au jeune homme du cabriolet:

— Monsieur Marius Pontmercy!

Le cabriolet interpellé s'arrêta.

Le jeune homme qui, lui aussi, semblait songer profondément, leva les yeux.

— Hein? dit-il.

— Vous êtes monsieur Marius Pontmercy?

— Sans doute.

— Je vous cherchais, reprit Laigle de Meaux.

— Comment cela? demanda Marius; car c'était lui, en effet, qui sortait de chez son grand-père, et il avait devant lui une figure qu'il voyait pour la première fois. Je ne vous connais pas.

— Moi non plus, je ne vous connais point, répondit Laigle.

Marius crut à une rencontre de loustic, à un commencement de mystification en pleine rue. Il n’était pas d’humeur facile en ce moment-là. Il fronça le sourcil. Laigle de Meaux, imperturbable, poursuivit:

— Vous n’étiez pas avant-hier à l’école?

— Cela est possible.

— Cela est certain.

— Vous êtes étudiant? demanda Marius.

— Oui, monsieur. Comme vous. Avant-hier je suis entré à l’école par hasard. Vous savez, on a quelquefois de ces idées-là. Le professeur était en train de faire l’appel. Vous n’ignorez pas qu’ils sont très ridicules dans ce moment-ci. Au troisième appel manqué, on vous raye l’inscription. Soixante francs dans le gouffre.

Marius commençait à écouter. Laigle continua:

— C’était Blondeau qui faisait l’appel. Vous connaissez Blondeau, il a le nez fort pointu et fort malicieux, et il flaire avec délices les absents. Il a sournoisement commencé par la lettre P. Je n’écoutais pas, n’étant point compromis dans cette lettre-là. L’appel n’allait pas mal. Aucune radiation. L’univers était présent. Blondeau était triste. Je disais à part moi: Blondeau, mon amour, tu ne feras pas la plus petite exécution aujourd’hui. Tout à coup Blondeau appelle *Marius Pontmercy*. Personne ne répond. Blondeau, plein d’espoir, répète plus fort: *Marius Pontmercy*. Et il prend sa plume. Monsieur, j’ai des entrailles. Je me suis dit rapidement: Voilà un brave garçon qu’on va rayer. Attention. Ceci est un véritable vivant qui n’est pas exact. Ceci n’est pas un bon élève. Ce n’est point là un cul-de-plomb, un étudiant qui étudie, un blanc-bec pédant, fort en sciences, lettres, théologie et sapience, un de ces esprits bêtas tirés à quatre épingles; une épingle par faculté. C’est un honorable paresseux qui flâne, qui pratique la villégiature, qui cultive la grisette, qui fait la cour aux belles, qui est peut-être en cet instant-ci chez ma maîtresse. Sauvons-le. Mort à Blondeau! En ce moment, Blondeau a trempé dans l’encre sa plume noire de ratures, a promené sa prunelle fauve sur l’auditoire, et a répété pour la troisième fois: *Marius Pontmercy*! J’ai répondu: *Présent*! Cela fait que vous n’avez pas été rayé.

— Monsieur!... dit Marius.

— Et que, moi, je l’ai été, ajouta Laigle de Meaux.

— Je ne vous comprends pas, fit Marius.

Laigle reprit:

— Rien de plus simple. J’étais près de la chaire pour répondre et près de la porte pour m’enfuir. Le professeur me contemplait avec une certaine fixité. Brusquement, Blondeau, qui doit être le nez malin dont parle Boileau, saute à la lettre L. L, c’est ma lettre. Je suis de Meaux, et je m’appelle Lesgle.

— L’Aigle! interrompit Marius, quel beau nom!

— Monsieur, le Blondeau arrive à ce beau nom, et crie: *Laigle*! Je réponds: *Présent*! Alors Blondeau me regarde avec la douceur du tigre, sourit, et me dit: Si vous êtes Pontmercy, vous n’êtes pas Laigle. Phrase qui a l’air désobligeante pour vous, mais qui n’était lugubre que pour moi. Cela dit, il me raye.

Marius s’exclama.

— Monsieur, je suis mortifié...

— Avant tout, interrompit Laigle, je demande à embaumer Blondeau dans quelques phrases d’éloge senti. Je le suppose mort. Il n’y aurait pas grand’chose à changer à sa maigreur, à sa pâleur, à sa froideur, à sa roideur, et à son odeur. Et je dis: *Erudimini qui judicatis terram*. Ci-gît Blondeau, Blondeau le Nez, Blondeau Nasica, le bœuf de la discipline, *bos disciplinæ*, le molosse de la consigne, l’ange de l’appel, qui fut droit, carré, exact, rigide, honnête et hideux. Dieu le raya comme il m’a rayé.

Marius reprit:

— Je suis désolé...

— Jeune homme, dit Laigle de Meaux, que ceci vous serve de leçon. À l’avenir, soyez exact.

— Je vous fais vraiment mille excuses.

— Ne vous exposez plus à faire rayer votre prochain.

— Je suis désespéré...

Laigle éclata de rire.

— Et moi, ravi. J’étais sur la pente d’être avocat. Cette rature me sauve. Je renonce aux triomphes du barreau. Je ne défendrai point la veuve et je n’attaquerai point l’orphelin. Plus de toge, plus de stage. Voilà ma radiation obtenue. C’est à vous que je la dois, monsieur Pontmercy. J’entends vous faire solennellement une visite de remercîments. Où demeurez-vous?

— Dans ce cabriolet, dit Marius.

— Signe d’opulence, repartit Laigle avec calme. Je vous félicite. Vous avez là un loyer de neuf mille francs par an.

En ce moment Courfeyrac sortait du café.

Marius sourit tristement:

— Je suis dans ce loyer depuis deux heures et j’aspire à en sortir; mais c’est une histoire comme cela, je ne sais où aller.

— Monsieur, dit Courfeyrac, venez chez moi.

— J’aurais la priorité, observa Laigle, mais je n’ai pas de chez moi.

— Tais-toi, Bossuet, reprit Courfeyrac.

— Bossuet, fit Marius, mais il me semblait que vous vous appeliez Laigle.

— De Meaux, répondit Laigle; par métaphore, Bossuet.

Courfeyrac monta dans le cabriolet.

— Cocher, dit-il, hôtel de la Porte-Saint-Jacques.

Et le soir même, Marius était installé dans une chambre de l’hôtel de la Porte-Saint-Jacques, côte à côte avec Courfeyrac.

Chapitre III

Les étonnements de Marius

En quelques jours, Marius fut l'ami de Courfeyrac. La jeunesse est la saison des promptes soudures et des cicatrisations rapides. Marius près de Courfeyrac respirait librement, chose assez nouvelle pour lui. Courfeyrac ne lui fit pas de questions. Il n'y songea même pas. À cet âge, les visages disent tout de suite tout. La parole est inutile. Il y a tel jeune homme dont on pourrait dire que sa physionomie bavarde. On se regarde, on se connaît.

Un matin pourtant, Courfeyrac lui jeta brusquement cette interrogation:

— À propos, avez-vous une opinion politique?

— Tiens! dit Marius, presque offensé de la question.

— Qu'est-ce que vous êtes?

— Démocrate-bonapartiste.

— Nuance gris de souris rassurée, dit Courfeyrac.

Le lendemain, Courfeyrac introduisit Marius au café Musain. Puis il lui chuchota à l'oreille avec un sourire: Il faut que je vous donne vos entrées dans la révolution. Et il le mena dans la salle des Amis de l'A B C. Il le présenta aux autres camarades en disant à demi-voix ce simple moi que Marius ne comprit pas: Un élève.

Marius était tombé dans un guêpier d'esprits. Du reste, quoique silencieux et grave, il n'était ni le moins ailé ni le moins armé.

Marius, jusque-là solitaire et inclinant au monologue et à l'aparté par habitude et par goût, fut un peu effarouché de cette volée de jeunes gens autour de lui. Toutes ces initiatives diverses le sollicitaient à la fois, et le tiraillaient. Le va-et-vient tumultueux de tous ces esprits en liberté et en travail faisait tourbillonner ses idées. Quelquefois, dans le trouble, elles s'en allaient si loin de lui qu'il avait de la peine à les retrouver. Il entendait parler de philosophie, de littérature, d'art, d'histoire, de religion, d'une façon inattendue. Il entrevoyait des aspects étranges; et comme il ne les mettait point en perspective, il n'était pas sûr de ne pas voir le chaos. En quittant les opinions de son grand-père pour les opinions de son père, il s'était cru fixé; il soupçonnait maintenant, avec inquiétude et sans oser se l'avouer, qu'il ne l'était pas. L'angle sous lequel il voyait toute chose commençait de nouveau à se déplacer. Une certaine oscillation mettait en branle tous les horizons de son cerveau. Bizarre remue-ménage intérieur. Il en souffrait presque.

Il semblait qu’il n’y eût pas pour ces jeunes gens de «choses consacrées». Marius entendait, sur toute matière, des langages singuliers, gênants pour son esprit encore timide.

Une affiche de théâtre se présentait, ornée d’un titre de tragédie du vieux répertoire, dit classique. — À bas la tragédie chère aux bourgeois! criait Bahorel. Et Marius entendait Combeferre répliquer:

— Tu as tort, Bahorel. La bourgeoisie aime la tragédie, et il faut laisser sur ce point la bourgeoisie tranquille. La tragédie à perruque a sa raison d’être, et je ne suis pas de ceux qui, de par Eschyle, lui contestent le droit d’exister. Il y a des ébauches dans la nature; il y a, dans la création, des parodies toutes faites; un bec qui n’est pas un bec, des ailes qui ne sont pas des ailes, des nageoires qui ne sont pas des nageoires, des pattes qui ne sont pas des pattes, un cri douloureux qui donne envie de rire, voilà le canard. Or, puisque la volaille existe à côté de l’oiseau, je ne vois pas pourquoi la tragédie classique n’existerait point en face de la tragédie antique.

Ou bien le hasard faisait que Marius passait rue Jean-Jacques-Rousseau entre Enjolras et Courfeyrac.

Courfeyrac lui prenait le bras.

— Faites attention. Ceci est la rue Plâtrière, nommée aujourd’hui rue Jean-Jacques-Rousseau, à cause d’un ménage singulier qui l’habitait il y a une soixantaine d’années. C’étaient Jean-Jacques et Thérèse. De temps en temps, il naissait là de petits êtres. Thérèse les enfantait, Jean-Jacques les enfantrouvait.

Et Enjolras rudoyait Courfeyrac.

— Silence devant Jean-Jacques! Cet homme, je l’admire. Il a renié ses enfants, soit; mais il a adopté le peuple.

Aucun de ces jeunes gens n’articulait ce mot: l’empereur. Jean Prouvaire seul disait quelquefois Napoléon; tous les autres disaient Bonaparte. Enjolras prononçait *Buonaparte*. Marius s’étonnait vaguement. *Initium sapientiæ*.

Chapitre IV

L’arrière-salle du café Musain

Une des conversations entre ces jeunes gens, auxquelles Marius assistait et dans lesquelles il intervenait quelquefois, fut une véritable secousse pour son esprit.

Cela se passait dans l’arrière-salle du café Musain. À peu près tous les Amis de l’A B C étaient réunis ce soir-là. Le quinquet était solennellement allumé. On parlait de choses et d’autres, sans passion et avec bruit. Excepté Enjolras et Marius, qui se taisaient, chacun haranguait un peu au hasard. Les causeries entre camarades ont parfois de ces tumultes paisibles. C’était un jeu et un pêle-mêle autant qu’une conversation. On se jetait des mots qu’on rattrapait. On causait aux quatre coins.

Aucune femme n’était admise dans cette arrière-salle, excepté Louison, la laveuse de vaisselle du café, qui la traversait de temps en temps pour aller de la laverie au «laboratoire».

Grantaire, parfaitement gris, assourdissait le coin dont il s’était emparé. Il raisonnait et déraisonnait à tue-tête, il criait:

— J’ai soif. Mortels, je fais un rêve: que la tonne de Heidelberg ait une attaque d’apoplexie, et être de la douzaine de sangsues qu’on lui appliquera. Je voudrais boire. Je désire oublier la vie. La vie est une invention hideuse de je ne sais qui. Cela ne dure rien et cela ne vaut rien. On se casse le cou à vivre. La vie est un décor où il y a peu de praticables. Le bonheur est un vieux châssis peint d’un seul côté. L’Ecclésiaste dit: tout est vanité; je pense comme ce bonhomme qui n’a peut-être jamais existé. Zéro, ne voulant pas aller tout nu, s’est vêtu de vanité. Ô vanité! rhabillage de tout avec de grands mots! une cuisine est un laboratoire, un danseur est un professeur, un saltimbanque est un gymnaste, un boxeur est un pugiliste, un apothicaire est un chimiste, un perruquier est un artiste, un gâcheux est un architecte, un jockey est un sportsman, un cloporte est un ptérygibranche. La vanité a un envers et un endroit; l’endroit est bête, c’est le nègre avec ses verroteries; l’envers est sot, c’est le philosophe avec ses guenilles. Je pleure sur l’un et je ris de l’autre. Ce qu’on appelle honneurs et dignités, et même honneur et dignité, est généralement en chrysocale. Les rois font joujou avec l’orgueil humain. Caligula faisait consul un cheval; Charles II faisait chevalier un aloyau. Drapez-vous donc maintenant entre le consul Incitatus et le baronnet Roastbeef. Quant à la valeur intrinsèque des gens, elle n'est guère plus respectable. Écoutez le panégyrique que le voisin fait du voisin. Blanc sur blanc est féroce; si le lys parlait, comme il arrangerait la colombe! une bigote qui jase d'une dévote est plus venimeuse que l'aspic et le bongare bleu. C'est dommage que je sois un ignorant, car je vous citerais une foule de choses; mais je ne sais rien. Par exemple, j'ai toujours eu de l'esprit; quand j'étais élève chez Gros, au lieu de barbouiller des tableautins, je passais mon temps à chiper des pommes; rapin est le mâle de rapine. Voilà pour moi; quant à vous autres, vous me valez. Je me fiche de vos perfections, excellences et qualités. Toute qualité verse dans un défaut; l'économe touche à l'avare, le généreux confine au prodigue, le brave côtoie le bravache; qui dit très pieux dit un peu cagot; il y a juste autant de vices dans la vertu qu'il y a de trous au manteau de Diogène. Qui admirez-vous, le tué ou le tueur, César ou Brutus? Généralement on est pour le tueur. Vive Brutus! il a tué. C'est ça qui est la vertu. Vertu, soit, mais folie aussi. Il y a des taches bizarres à ces grands hommes-là. Le Brutus qui tua César était amoureux d'une statue de petit garçon. Cette statue était du statuaire grec Strongylion, lequel avait aussi sculpté cette figure d'amazone appelée Belle-Jambe, Eucnemos, que Néron emportait avec lui dans ses voyages. Ce Strongylion n'a laissé que deux statues qui ont mis d'accord Brutus et Néron; Brutus fut amoureux de l'une et Néron de l'autre. Toute l'histoire n'est qu'un long rabâchage. Un siècle est le plagiaire de l'autre. La bataille de Marengo copie la bataille de Pydna; le Tolbiac de Clovis et l'Austerlitz de Napoléon se ressemblent comme deux gouttes de sang. Je fais peu de cas de la victoire. Rien n'est stupide comme vaincre; la vraie gloire est convaincre. Mais tâchez donc de prouver quelque chose! Vous vous contentez de réussir, quelle médiocrité! et de conquérir, quelle misère! Hélas, vanité et lâcheté partout. Tout obéit au succès, même la grammaire. *Si volet usus*, dit Horace. Donc, je dédaigne le genre humain. Descendrons-nous du tout à la partie? Voulez-vous que je me mette à admirer les peuples? Quel peuple, s'il vous plaît? Est-ce la Grèce? Les Athéniens, ces Parisiens de jadis, tuaient Phocion, comme qui dirait Coligny, et flagornaient les tyrans au point qu'Anacéphore disait de Pisistrate: Son urine attire les abeilles. L'homme le plus considérable de la Grèce pendant cinquante ans a été ce grammairien Philetas, lequel était si petit et si menu qu'il était obligé de plomber ses souliers pour n'être pas emporté par le vent. Il y avait sur la plus grande place de Corinthe une statue sculptée par Silanion et cataloguée par Pline; cette statue représentait Épisthate. Qu'a fait Épisthate? il a inventé le croc-en-jambe. Ceci résume la Grèce et la gloire. Passons à d'autres. Admirerai-je l'Angleterre? Admirerai-je la France? La France? pourquoi? À cause de Paris? je viens de vous dire mon opinion sur Athènes. L'Angleterre? pourquoi? À cause de Londres? je hais Carthage. Et puis, Londres, métropole du luxe, est le chef-lieu de la misère. Sur la seule paroisse de Charing-Cross, il y a par an cent morts de faim. Telle est Albion. J'ajoute, pour comble, que j'ai vu une Anglaise danser avec une couronne de roses et des lunettes bleues. Donc un groing pour l'Angleterre! Si je n'admire pas John Bull, j'admirerai donc frère Jonathan? Je goûte peu ce frère à esclaves. Ôtez *time is money*, que reste-t-il de l'Angleterre? Ôtez *cotton is king*, que reste-t-il de l'Amérique? L'Allemagne, c'est la lymphe; l'Italie, c'est la bile. Nous extasierons-nous sur la Russie? Voltaire l'admirait. Il admirait aussi la Chine. Je conviens que la Russie a ses beautés, entre autres un fort despotisme; mais je plains les despotes. Ils ont une santé délicate. Un Alexis décapité, un Pierre poignardé, un Paul étranglé, un autre Paul aplati à coups de talon de botte, divers Ivans égorgés, plusieurs Nicolas et Basiles empoisonnés, tout cela indique que le palais des empereurs de Russie est dans une condition flagrante d'insalubrité. Tous les peuples civilisés offrent à l'admiration du penseur ce détail: la guerre; or la guerre, la guerre civilisée, épuise et totalise toutes les formes du banditisme, depuis le brigandage des trabucaires aux gorges du mont Jaxa jusqu'à la maraude des Indiens Comanches dans la Passe-Douteuse. Bah! me direz-vous, l'Europe vaut pourtant mieux que l'Asie? Je conviens que l'Asie est farce; mais je ne vois pas trop ce que vous avez à rire du grand lama, vous peuples d'occident qui avez mêlé à vos modes et à vos élégances toutes les ordures compliquées de majesté, depuis la chemise sale de la reine Isabelle jusqu'à la chaise percée du dauphin. Messieurs les humains, je vous dis bernique! C'est à Bruxelles que l'on consomme le plus de bière, à Stockholm le plus d'eau-de-vie, à Madrid le plus de chocolat, à Amsterdam le plus de genièvre, à Londres le plus de vin, à Constantinople le plus de café, à Paris le plus d'absinthe; voilà toutes les notions utiles. Paris l'emporte, en somme. À Paris, les chiffonniers mêmes sont des sybarites; Diogène eût autant aimé être chiffonnier place Maubert que philosophe au Pirée. Apprenez encore ceci: les cabarets des chiffonniers s'appellent bibines; les plus célèbres sont *la*

Casserole et *l’Abattoir*. Donc, ô guinguettes, goguettes, bouchons, caboulots, bouibouis, mastroquets, bastringues, manezingues, bibines des chiffonniers, caravansérails des califes, je vous atteste, je suis un voluptueux, je mange chez Richard à quarante sous par tête, il me faut des tapis de Perse à y rouler Cléopâtre nue! Où est Cléopâtre? Ah! c’est toi, Louison. Bonjour.

Ainsi se répandait en paroles, accrochant la laveuse de vaisselle au passage, dans son coin de l’arrière-salle Musain, Grantaire plus qu’ivre.

Bossuet, étendant la main vers lui, essayait de lui imposer silence, et Grantaire repartait de plus belle:

— Aigle de Meaux, à bas les pattes. Tu ne me fais aucun effet avec ton geste d’Hippocrate refusant le bric-à-brac d’Artaxerce. Je te dispense de me calmer. D’ailleurs je suis triste. Que voulez-vous que je vous dise? L’homme est mauvais, l’homme est difforme. Le papillon est réussi, l’homme est raté. Dieu a manqué cet animal-là. Une foule est un choix de laideurs. Le premier venu est un misérable. Femme rime à infâme. Oui, j’ai le spleen, compliqué de la mélancolie, avec la nostalgie, plus l’hypocondrie, et je bisque, et je rage, et je bâille, et je m’ennuie, et je m’assomme, et je m’embête! Que Dieu aille au diable!

— Silence donc, R majuscule! reprit Bossuet qui discutait un point de droit avec la cantonade, et qui était engagé plus qu’à mi-corps dans une phrase d’argot judiciaire dont voici la fin:

— ...Et quant à moi, quoique je sois à peine légiste et tout au plus procureur amateur, je soutiens ceci: qu’aux termes de la coutume de Normandie, à la Saint-Michel, et pour chaque année, un Équivalent devait être payé au profit du seigneur, sauf autrui droit, par tous et un chacun, tant les propriétaires que les saisis d’héritage, et ce, pour toutes emphytéoses, baux, alleux, contrats domaniaires et domaniaux, hypothécaires et hypothécaux....

— Échos, nymphes plaintives, fredonna Grantaire.

Tout près de Grantaire, sur une table presque silencieuse, une feuille de papier, un encrier et une plume entre deux petits verres annonçaient qu’un vaudeville s’ébauchait. Cette grosse affaire se traitait à voix basse, et les deux têtes en travail se touchaient:

— Commençons par trouver les noms. Quand on a les noms, on trouve le sujet.

— C’est juste. Dicte. J’écris.

— Monsieur Dorimon?

— Rentier?

— Sans doute.

— Sa fille, Célestine.

— ... tine. Après?

— Le colonel Sainval.

— Sainval est usé. Je dirais Valsin.

À côté des aspirants vaudevillistes, un autre groupe, qui, lui aussi, profitait du brouhaha pour parler bas, discutait un duel. Un vieux, trente ans, conseillait un jeune, dix-huit ans, et lui expliquait à quel adversaire il avait affaire:

— Diable! méfiez-vous. C’est une belle épée. Son jeu est net. Il a de l’attaque, pas de feintes perdues, du poignet, du pétillement, de l’éclair, la parade juste, et des ripostes mathématiques, bigre! et il est gaucher.

Dans l’angle opposé à Grantaire, Joly et Bahorel jouaient aux dominos et parlaient d’amour.

— Tu es heureux, toi, disait Joly. Tu as une maîtresse qui rit toujours.

— C’est une faute qu’elle fait, répondait Bahorel. La maîtresse qu’on a tort de rire. Ça encourage à la tromper. La voir gaie, cela vous ôte le remords; si on la voit triste, on se fait conscience.

— Ingrat! c’est si bon une femme qui rit! Et jamais vous ne vous querellez!

— Cela tient au traité que nous avons fait. En faisant notre petite sainte-alliance, nous nous sommes assigné à chacun notre frontière que nous ne dépassons jamais. Ce qui est situé du côté de bise appartient à Vaud, du côté de vent à Gex. De là la paix.

— La paix, c’est le bonheur digérant.

— Et toi, Jolllly, où en es-tu avec ta brouillerie avec mamselle... tu sais qui je veux dire?

— Elle me boude avec une patience cruelle.

— Tu es pourtant un amoureux attendrissant de maigreur.

— Hélas!

— À ta place, je la planterais là.

— C’est facile à dire.

— Et à faire. N’est-ce pas Musichetta qu’elle s’appelle?

— Oui. Ah! mon pauvre Bahorel, c’est une fille superbe, très littéraire, de petits pieds, de petites mains, se mettant bien, blanche, potelée, avec des yeux de tireuse de cartes. J’en suis fou.

— Mon cher, alors il faut lui plaire, être élégant, et faire des effets de rotule. Achète-moi chez Staub un bon pantalon de cuir de laine. Cela prête.

— À combien? cria Grantaire.

Le troisième coin était en proie à une discussion poétique. La mythologie païenne se gourmait avec la mythologie chrétienne. Il s’agissait de l’Olympe dont Jean Prouvaire, par romantisme même, prenait le parti. Jean Prouvaire n’était timide qu’au repos. Une fois excité, il éclatait, une sorte de gaîté accentuait son enthousiasme, et il était à la fois riant et lyrique:

— N’insultons pas les dieux, disait-il. Les dieux ne s’en sont peut-être pas allés. Jupiter ne me fait point l’effet d’un mort. Les dieux sont des songes, dites-vous. Eh bien, même dans la nature, telle qu’elle est aujourd’hui, après la fuite de ces songes, on retrouve tous les grands vieux mythes païens. Telle montagne à profil de citadelle, comme le Vignemale, par exemple, est encore pour moi la coiffure de Cybèle; il ne m’est pas prouvé que Pan ne vienne pas la nuit souffler dans le tronc creux des saules, en bouchant tour à tour les trous avec ses doigts; et j’ai toujours cru qu’Io était pour quelque chose dans la cascade de Pissevache.

Dans le dernier coin, on parlait politique. On malmenait la charte octroyée. Combeferre la soutenait mollement, Courfeyrac la battait en brèche énergiquement. Il y avait sur la table un malencontreux exemplaire de la fameuse Charte-Touquet. Courfeyrac l’avait saisie et la secouait, mêlant à ses arguments le frémissement de cette feuille de papier.

— Premièrement, je ne veux pas de rois. Ne fût-ce qu’au point de vue économique, je n’en veux pas; un roi est un parasite. On n’a pas de roi gratis. Écoutez ceci: Cherté des rois. À la mort de François Ier, la dette publique en France était de trente mille livres de rente; à la mort de Louis XIV, elle était de deux milliards six cents millions à vingt-huit livres le marc, ce qui équivalait en 1760, au dire de Desmarets, à quatre milliards cinq cents millions, et ce qui équivaudrait aujourd’hui à douze milliards. Deuxièmement, n’en déplaise à Combeferre, une charte octroyée est un mauvais expédient de civilisation. Sauver la transition, adoucir le passage, amortir la secousse, faire passer insensiblement la nation de la monarchie à la démocratie par la pratique des fictions constitutionnelles, détestables raisons que tout cela! Non! non! n’éclairons jamais le peuple à faux jour. Les principes s’étiolent et pâlissent dans votre cave constitutionnelle. Pas d’abâtardissement. Pas de compromis. Pas d’octroi du roi au peuple. Dans tous ces octrois-là, il y a un article 14. À côté de la main qui donne, il y a la griffe qui reprend. Je refuse net votre charte. Une charte est un masque; le mensonge est dessous. Un peuple qui accepte une charte abdique. Le droit n'est le droit qu'entier. Non! pas de charte!

On était en hiver; deux bûches pétillaient dans la cheminée. Cela était tentant, et Courfeyrac n'y résista pas. Il froissa dans son poing la pauvre Charte-Touquet, et la jeta au feu. Le papier flamba. Combeferre regarda philosophiquement brûler le chef-d'œuvre de Louis XVIII, et se contenta de dire:

— La charte métamorphosée en flamme.

Et les sarcasmes, les saillies, les quolibets, cette chose française qu'on appelle l'entrain, cette chose anglaise qu'on appelle l'humour, le bon et le mauvais goût, les bonnes et les mauvaises raisons, toutes les folles fusées du dialogue, montant à la fois et se croisant de tous les points de la salle, faisaient au-dessus des têtes une sorte de bombardement joyeux.

Chapitre V

Élargissement de l’horizon

Les chocs des jeunes esprits entre eux ont cela d’admirable qu’on ne peut jamais prévoir l’étincelle ni deviner l’éclair. Que va-t-il jaillir tout à l’heure? on l’ignore. L’éclat de rire part de l’attendrissement. Au moment bouffon, le sérieux fait son entrée. Les impulsions dépendent du premier mot venu. La verve de chacun est souveraine. Un lazzi suffit pour ouvrir le champ à l’inattendu. Ce sont des entretiens à brusques tournants où la perspective change tout à coup. Le hasard est le machiniste de ces conversations-là.

Une pensée sévère, bizarrement sortie d’un cliquetis de mots, traversa tout à coup la mêlée de paroles où ferraillaient confusément Grantaire, Bahorel, Prouvaire, Bossuet, Combeferre et Courfeyrac.

Comment une phrase survient-elle dans le dialogue? d’où vient qu’elle se souligne tout à coup d’elle-même dans l’attention de ceux qui l’entendent? Nous venons de le dire, nul n’en sait rien. Au milieu du brouhaha, Bossuet termina tout à coup une apostrophe quelconque à Combeferre par cette date.

— 18 juin 1815: Waterloo.

À ce nom, Waterloo, Marius, accoudé près d’un verre d’eau sur une table, ôta son poignet de dessous son menton, et commença à regarder fixement l’auditoire.

— Pardieu, s’écria Courfeyrac (*Parbleu*, à cette époque, tombait en désuétude), ce chiffre 18 est étrange, et me frappe. C’est le nombre fatal de Bonaparte. Mettez Louis devant et Brumaire derrière, vous avez toute la destinée de l’homme, avec cette particularité expressive que le commencement y est talonné par la fin.

Enjolras, jusque-là muet, rompit le silence, et adressa à Courfeyrac cette parole:

— Tu veux dire le crime par l’expiation.

Ce mot, *crime*, dépassait la mesure de ce que pouvait accepter Marius, déjà très ému par la brusque évocation de Waterloo.

Il se leva, il marcha lentement vers la carte de France étalée sur le mur et au bas de laquelle on voyait une île dans un compartiment séparé, il posa son doigt sur ce compartiment, et dit:

— La Corse. Une petite île qui a fait la France bien grande.

Ce fut le souffle d’air glacé. Tous s’interrompirent. On sentit que quelque chose allait commencer.

Bahorel, ripostant à Bossuet, était en train de prendre une pose de torse à laquelle il tenait. Il y renonça pour écouter.

Enjolras, dont l’œil bleu n’était attaché sur personne et semblait considérer le vide, répondit sans regarder Marius:

— La France n’a besoin d’aucune Corse pour être grande. La France est grande parce qu’elle est la France. *Quia nominor leo*.

Marius n’éprouva nulle velléité de reculer; il se tourna vers Enjolras, et sa voix éclata avec une vibration qui venait du tressaillement des entrailles:

— À Dieu ne plaise que je diminue la France! mais ce n’est point la diminuer que de lui amalgamer Napoléon. Ah çà, parlons donc. Je suis nouveau venu parmi vous, mais je vous avoue que vous m’étonnez. Où en sommes-nous? qui sommes-nous? qui êtes-vous? qui suis-je? Expliquons-nous sur l’empereur. Je vous entends dire Buonaparte en accentuant l’u comme des royalistes. Je vous préviens que mon grand-père fait mieux encore; il dit Buonaparté. Je vous croyais des jeunes gens. Où mettez-vous donc votre enthousiasme? et qu’est-ce que vous en faites? qui admirez-vous si vous n’admirez pas l’empereur? et que vous faut-il de plus?

Si vous ne voulez pas de ce grand homme-là, de quels grands hommes voudrez-vous? Il avait tout. Il était complet. Il avait dans son cerveau le cube des facultés humaines. Il faisait des codes comme Justinien, il dictait comme César, sa causerie mêlait l’éclair de Pascal au coup de foudre de Tacite, il faisait l’histoire et il l’écrivait, ses bulletins sont des Iliades, il combinait le chiffre de Newton avec la métaphore de Mahomet, il laissait derrière lui dans l’orient des paroles grandes comme les pyramides; à Tilsitt il enseignait la majesté aux empereurs, à l’académie des sciences il donnait la réplique à Laplace, au conseil d’état il tenait tête à Merlin, il donnait une âme à la géométrie des uns et à la chicane des autres, il était légiste avec les procureurs et sidéral avec les astronomes; comme Cromwell soufflant une chandelle sur deux, il s’en allait au Temple marchander un gland de rideau; il voyait tout, il savait tout; ce qui ne l’empêchait pas de rire d’un rire bonhomme au berceau de son petit enfant; et tout à coup, l’Europe effarée écoutait, des armées se mettaient en marche, des parcs d’artillerie roulaient, des ponts de bateaux s’allongeaient sur les fleuves, les nuées de la cavalerie galopaient dans l'ouragan, cris, trompettes, tremblement de trônes partout, les frontières des royaumes oscillaient sur la carte, on entendait le bruit d'un glaive surhumain qui sortait du fourreau, on le voyait, lui, se dresser debout sur l'horizon avec un flamboiement dans la main et un resplendissement dans les yeux, déployant dans le tonnerre ses deux ailes, la grande Armée et la vieille garde, et c'était l'archange de la guerre!

Tous se taisaient, et Enjolras baissait la tête. Le silence fait toujours un peu l'effet de l'acquiescement ou d'une sorte de mise au pied du mur. Marius, presque sans reprendre haleine, continua avec un surcroît d'enthousiasme:

— Soyons justes, mes amis! être l'empire d'un tel empereur, quelle splendide destinée pour un peuple, lorsque ce peuple est la France et qu'il ajoute son génie au génie de cet homme! Apparaître et régner, marcher et triompher, avoir pour étapes toutes les capitales, prendre ses grenadiers et en faire des rois, décréter des chutes de dynastie, transfigurer l'Europe au pas de charge, qu'on sente, quand vous menacez, que vous mettez la main sur le pommeau de l'épée de Dieu, suivre dans un seul homme Annibal, César et Charlemagne, être le peuple de quelqu'un qui mêle à toutes vos aubes l'annonce éclatante d'une bataille gagnée, avoir pour réveille-matin le canon des Invalides, jeter dans des abîmes de lumière des mots prodigieux qui flamboient à jamais, Marengo, Arcole, Austerlitz, Iéna, Wagram! faire à chaque instant éclore au zénith des siècles des constellations de victoires, donner l'empire français pour pendant à l'empire romain, être la grande nation et enfanter la grande Armée, faire envoler par toute la terre ses légions comme une montagne envoie de tous côtés ses aigles, vaincre, dominer, foudroyer, être en Europe une sorte de peuple doré à force de gloire, sonner à travers l'histoire une fanfare de titans, conquérir le monde deux fois, par la conquête et par l'éblouissement, cela est sublime; et qu'y a-t-il de plus grand?

— Être libre, dit Combeferre.

Marius à son tour baissa la tête. Ce mot simple et froid avait traversé comme une lame d'acier son effusion épique, et il la sentait s'évanouir en lui. Lorsqu'il leva les yeux, Combeferre n'était plus là. Satisfait probablement de sa réplique à l'apothéose, il venait de partir, et tous, excepté Enjolras, l'avaient suivi. La salle s'était vidée. Enjolras, resté seul avec Marius, le regardait gravement. Marius cependant, ayant un peu rallié ses idées, ne se tenait pas pour battu; il y avait en lui un reste de bouillonnement qui allait sans doute se traduire en syllogismes déployés contre Enjolras, quand tout à coup on entendit quelqu'un qui chantait dans l'escalier en s'en allant. C'était Combeferre, et voici ce qu'il chantait:

Si César m'avait donné
La gloire et la guerre,
Et qu'il me fallût quitter
L'amour de ma mère
Je dirais au grand César:
Reprends ton sceptre et ton char,
J'aime mieux ma mère, ô gué!
J'aime mieux ma mère.

L'accent tendre et farouche dont Combeferre le chantait donnait à ce couplet une sorte de grandeur étrange. Marius, pensif et l'œil au plafond, répéta presque machinalement: Ma mère?...

En ce moment, il sentit sur son épaule la main d'Enjolras.

— Citoyen, lui dit Enjolras, ma mère, c'est la République.

Chapitre VI

Res angusta

Cette soirée laissa à Marius un ébranlement profond, et une obscurité triste dans l’âme. Il éprouva ce qu’éprouve peut-être la terre au moment où on l’ouvre avec le fer pour y déposer le grain de blé; elle ne sent que la blessure; le tressaillement du germe et la joie du fruit n’arrivent que plus tard.

Marius fut sombre. Il venait à peine de se faire une foi; fallait-il donc déjà la rejeter? il s’affirma à lui-même que non. Il se déclara qu’il ne voulait pas douter, et il commença à douter malgré lui. Être entre deux religions, l’une dont on n’est pas encore sorti, l’autre où l’on n’est pas encore entré, cela est insupportable; et ces crépuscules ne plaisent qu’aux âmes chauves-souris. Marius était une prunelle franche, et il lui fallait de la vraie lumière. Les demi-jours du doute lui faisaient mal. Quel que fût son désir de rester où il était et de s’en tenir là, il était invinciblement contraint de continuer, d’avancer, d’examiner, de penser, de marcher plus loin. Où cela allait-il le conduire? il craignait, après avoir fait tant de pas qui l’avaient rapproché de son père, de faire maintenant des pas qui l’en éloigneraient. Son malaise croissait de toutes les réflexions qui lui venaient. L’escarpement se dessinait autour de lui. Il n’était d’accord ni avec son grand-père, ni avec ses amis; téméraire pour l’un, arriéré pour les autres; et il se reconnut doublement isolé, du côté de la vieillesse, et du côté de la jeunesse. Il cessa d’aller au café Musain.

Dans ce trouble où était sa conscience, il ne songeait plus guère à de certains côtés sérieux de l’existence. Les réalités de la vie ne se laissent pas oublier. Elles vinrent brusquement lui donner leur coup de coude.

Un matin, le maître de l’hôtel entra dans la chambre de Marius et lui dit:

— Monsieur Courfeyrac a répondu pour vous.

— Oui.

— Mais il me faudrait de l’argent.

— Priez Courfeyrac de venir me parler, dit Marius.

Courfeyrac venu, l’hôte les quitta. Marius lui conta ce qu’il n’avait pas songé à lui dire encore, qu’il était comme seul au monde et n’ayant pas de parents.

— Qu’allez-vous devenir? dit Courfeyrac.

— Je n’en sais rien, répondit Marius.

— Qu’allez-vous faire?

— Je n’en sais rien.

— Avez-vous de l’argent?

— Quinze francs.

— Voulez-vous que je vous en prête?

— Jamais.

— Avez-vous des habits?

— Voilà.

— Avez-vous des bijoux?

— Une montre.

— D’argent?

— D’or. La voici.

— Je sais un marchand d’habits qui vous prendra votre redingote et un pantalon.

— C’est bien.

— Vous n’aurez plus qu’un pantalon, un gilet, un chapeau et un habit.

— Et mes bottes.

— Quoi! vous n’irez pas pieds nus? quelle opulence!

— Ce sera assez.

— Je sais un horloger qui vous achètera votre montre.

— C’est bon.

— Non, ce n’est pas bon. Que ferez-vous après?

— Tout ce qu’il faudra. Tout l’honnête du moins.

— Savez-vous l’anglais?

— Non.

— Savez-vous l’allemand?

— Non.

— Tant pis.

— Pourquoi?

— C’est qu’un de mes amis, libraire, fait une façon d’encyclopédie pour laquelle vous auriez pu traduire des articles allemands ou anglais. C’est mal payé, mais on vit.

— J’apprendrai l’anglais et l’allemand.

— Et en attendant?

— En attendant je mangerai mes habits et ma montre.

On fit venir le marchand d’habits. Il acheta la défroque vingt francs. On alla chez l’horloger. Il acheta la montre quarante-cinq francs.

— Ce n’est pas mal, disait Marius à Courfeyrac en rentrant à l’hôtel, avec mes quinze francs, cela fait quatre-vingts francs.

— Et la note de l’hôtel? observa Courfeyrac.

— Tiens, j’oubliais, dit Marius.

L’hôte présenta sa note qu’il fallut payer sur-le-champ. Elle se montait à soixante-dix francs.

— Il me reste dix francs, dit Marius.

— Diable, fit Courfeyrac, vous mangerez cinq francs pendant que vous apprendrez l’anglais, et cinq francs pendant que vous apprendrez l’allemand. Ce sera avaler une langue bien vite ou une pièce de cent sous bien lentement.

Cependant la tante Gillenormand, assez bonne personne au fond dans les occasions tristes, avait fini par déterrer le logis de Marius. Un matin, comme Marius revenait de l’école, il trouva une lettre de sa tante et les *soixante pistoles*, c’est-à-dire six cents francs en or dans une boîte cachetée.

Marius renvoya les trente louis à sa tante avec une lettre respectueuse où il déclarait avoir des moyens d’existence et pouvoir suffire désormais à tous ses besoins. En ce moment-là il lui restait trois francs.

La tante n’informa point le grand-père de ce refus de peur d’achever de l’exaspérer. D’ailleurs n’avait-il pas dit: Qu’on ne me parle jamais de ce buveur de sang!

Marius sortit de l’hôtel de la porte Saint-Jacques, ne voulant pas s’y endetter.

Livre cinquième — Excellence du malheur

Chapitre I

Marius indigent

La vie devint sévère pour Marius. Manger ses habits et sa montre, ce n'était rien. Il mangea de cette chose inexprimable qu'on appelle *de la vache enragée*. Chose horrible, qui contient les jours sans pain, les nuits sans sommeil, les soirs sans chandelle, l'âtre sans feu, les semaines sans travail, l'avenir sans espérance, l'habit percé au coude, le vieux chapeau qui fait rire les jeunes filles, la porte qu'on trouve fermée le soir parce qu'on ne paye pas son loyer, l'insolence du portier et du gargotier, les ricanements des voisins, les humiliations, la dignité refoulée, les besognes quelconques acceptées, les dégoûts, l'amertume, l'accablement. Marius apprit comment on dévore tout cela, et comment ce sont souvent les seules choses qu'on ait à dévorer. À ce moment de l'existence où l'homme a besoin d'orgueil parce qu'il a besoin d'amour, il se sentit moqué parce qu'il était mal vêtu, et ridicule parce qu'il était pauvre. À l'âge où la jeunesse vous gonfle le cœur d'une fierté impériale, il abaissa plus d'une fois ses yeux sur ses bottes trouées, et il connut les hontes injustes et les rougeurs poignantes de la misère. Admirable et terrible épreuve dont les faibles sortent infâmes, dont les forts sortent sublimes. Creuset où la destinée jette un homme, toutes les fois qu'elle veut avoir un gredin ou un demi-dieu.

Car il se fait beaucoup de grandes actions dans les petites luttes. Il y a des bravoures opiniâtres et ignorées qui se défendent pied à pied dans l'ombre contre l'envahissement fatal des nécessités et des turpitudes. Nobles et mystérieux triomphes qu'aucun regard ne voit, qu'aucune renommée ne paye, qu'aucune fanfare ne salue. La vie, le malheur, l'isolement, l'abandon, la pauvreté, sont des champs de bataille qui ont leurs héros; héros obscurs plus grands parfois que les héros illustres.

De fermes et rares natures sont ainsi créées; la misère, presque toujours marâtre, est quelquefois mère; le dénûment enfante la puissance d'âme et d'esprit; la détresse est nourrice de la fierté; le malheur est un bon lait pour les magnanimes.

Il y eut un moment dans la vie de Marius où il balayait son palier, où il achetait un sou de fromage de Brie chez la fruitière, où il attendait que la brune tombât pour s'introduire chez le boulanger, et y acheter un pain qu'il emportait furtivement dans son grenier, comme s'il l'eût volé. Quelquefois on voyait se glisser dans la boucherie du coin, au milieu des cuisinières goguenardes qui le coudoyaient, un jeune homme gauche portant des livres sous son bras, qui avait l'air timide et furieux, qui en entrant ôtait son chapeau de son front où perlait la sueur, faisait un profond salut à la bouchère étonnée, un autre salut au garçon boucher, demandait une côtelette de mouton, la payait six ou sept sous, l'enveloppait de papier, la mettait sous son bras entre deux livres, et s'en allait. C'était Marius. Avec cette côtelette, qu'il faisait cuire lui-même, il vivait trois jours.

Le premier jour il mangeait la viande, le second jour il mangeait la graisse, le troisième jour il rongeait l'os.

À plusieurs reprises la tante Gillenormand fit des tentatives, et lui adressa les soixante pistoles. Marius les renvoya constamment, en disant qu'il n'avait besoin de rien.

Il était encore en deuil de son père quand la révolution que nous avons racontée s'était faite en lui. Depuis lors, il n'avait plus quitté les vêtements noirs. Cependant ses vêtements le quittèrent. Un jour vint où il n'eut plus d'habit. Le pantalon allait encore. Que faire? Courfeyrac, auquel il avait de son côté rendu quelques bons offices, lui donna un vieil habit. Pour trente sous, Marius le fit retourner par un portier quelconque, et ce fut un habit neuf. Mais cet habit était vert. Alors Marius ne sortit plus qu'après la chute du jour. Cela faisait que son habit était noir. Voulant toujours être en deuil, il se vêtissait de la nuit.

À travers tout cela, il se fit recevoir avocat. Il était censé habiter la chambre de Courfeyrac, qui était décente et où un certain nombre de bouquins de droit soutenus et complétés par des volumes de romans dépareillés figuraient la bibliothèque voulue par les règlements. Il se faisait adresser ses lettres chez Courfeyrac.

Quand Marius fut avocat, il en informa son grand-père par une lettre froide, mais pleine de soumission et de respect. M. Gillenormand prit la lettre avec un tremblement, la lut, et la jeta, déchirée en quatre, au panier. Deux ou trois jours après, mademoiselle Gillenormand entendit son père qui était seul dans sa chambre et qui parlait tout haut. Cela lui arrivait chaque fois qu'il était très agité. Elle prêta l'oreille; le vieillard disait: — Si tu n'étais pas un imbécile, tu saurais qu'on ne peut pas être à la fois baron et avocat.

Chapitre II

Marius pauvre

Il en est de la misère comme de tout. Elle arrive à devenir possible. Elle finit par prendre une forme et se composer. On végète, c'est-à-dire on se développe d'une certaine façon chétive, mais suffisante à la vie. Voici de quelle manière l'existence de Marius Pontmercy s'était arrangée:

Il était sorti du plus étroit, le défilé s'élargissait un peu devant lui. À force de labeur, de courage, de persévérance et de volonté, il était parvenu à tirer de son travail environ sept cents francs par an. Il avait appris l'allemand et l'anglais. Grâce à Courfeyrac qui l'avait mis en rapport avec son ami le libraire, Marius remplissait dans la littérature-librairie le modeste rôle d'*utilité*. Il faisait des prospectus, traduisait des journaux, annotait des éditions, compilait des biographies, etc. Produit net, bon an mal an, sept cents francs. Il en vivait. Pas mal. Comment? Nous l'allons dire.

Marius occupait dans la masure Gorbeau, moyennant le prix annuel de trente francs, un taudis sans cheminée qualifié cabinet où il n'y avait, en fait de meubles, que l'indispensable. Ces meubles étaient à lui. Il donnait trois francs par mois à la vieille principale locataire pour qu'elle vînt balayer le taudis et lui apporter chaque matin un peu d'eau chaude, un œuf frais et un pain d'un sou. De ce pain et de cet œuf, il déjeunait. Son déjeuner variait de deux à quatre sous selon que les œufs étaient chers ou bon marché. À six heures du soir, il descendait rue Saint-Jacques, dîner chez Rousseau, vis-à-vis Basset le marchand d'estampes du coin de la rue des Mathurins. Il ne mangeait pas de soupe. Il prenait un plat de viande de six sous, un demi-plat de légumes de trois sous, et un dessert de trois sous. Pour trois sous, du pain à discrétion. Quant au vin, il buvait de l'eau. En payant au comptoir, où siégeait majestueusement madame Rousseau, à cette époque toujours grasse et encore fraîche, il donnait un sou au garçon, et madame Rousseau lui donnait un sourire. Puis il s'en allait. Pour seize sous, il avait eu un sourire et un dîner.

Ce restaurant Rousseau, où l'on vidait si peu de bouteilles et tant de carafes, était un calmant plus encore qu'un restaurant. Il n'existe plus aujourd'hui. Le maître avait un beau surnom; on l'appelait *Rousseau l'aquatique*.

Ainsi, déjeuner quatre sous, dîner seize sous; sa nourriture lui coûtait vingt sous par jour; ce qui faisait trois cent soixante-cinq francs par an. Ajoutez les trente francs de loyer et les trente-six francs à la vieille, plus quelques menus frais; pour quatre cent cinquante francs, Marius était nourri, logé et servi. Son habillement lui coûtait cent francs, son linge cinquante francs, son blanchissage cinquante francs, le tout ne dépassait pas six cent cinquante francs. Il lui restait cinquante francs. Il était riche. Il prêtait dans l'occasion dix francs à un ami; Courfeyrac avait pu lui emprunter une fois soixante francs. Quant au chauffage, n'ayant pas de cheminée, Marius l'avait «simplifié».

Marius avait toujours deux habillements complets; l'un vieux, «pour tous les jours», l'autre tout neuf, pour les occasions. Les deux étaient noirs. Il n'avait que trois chemises, l'une sur lui, l'autre dans sa commode, la troisième chez la blanchisseuse. Il les renouvelait à mesure qu'elles s'usaient. Elles étaient habituellement déchirées, ce qui lui faisait boutonner son habit jusqu'au menton.

Pour que Marius en vînt à cette situation florissante, il avait fallu des années. Années rudes; difficiles, les unes à traverser, les autres à gravir. Marius n'avait point failli un seul jour. Il avait tout subi, en fait de dénûment; il avait tout fait, excepté des dettes. Il se rendait ce témoignage que jamais il n'avait dû un sou à personne. Pour lui, une dette, c'était le commencement de l'esclavage. Il se disait même qu'un créancier est pire qu'un maître; car un maître ne possède que votre personne, un créancier possède votre dignité et peut la souffleter. Plutôt que d'emprunter il ne mangeait pas. Il avait eu beaucoup de jours de jeûne. Sentant que toutes les extrémités se touchent et que, si l'on n'y prend garde, l'abaissement de fortune peut mener à la bassesse d'âme, il veillait jalousement sur sa fierté. Telle formule ou telle démarche qui, dans toute autre situation, lui eût paru déférence, lui semblait platitude, et il se redressait. Il ne hasardait rien, ne voulant pas reculer. Il avait sur le visage une sorte de rougeur sévère. Il était timide jusqu'à l'âpreté.

Dans toutes ses épreuves il se sentait encouragé et quelquefois même porté par une force secrète qu'il avait en lui. L'âme aide le corps, et à de certains moments le soulève. C'est le seul oiseau qui soutienne sa cage.

À côté du nom de son père, un autre nom était gravé dans le cœur de Marius, le nom de Thénardier. Marius, dans sa nature enthousiaste et grave, environnait d'une sorte d'auréole l'homme auquel, dans sa pensée, il devait la vie de son père, cet intrépide sergent qui avait sauvé le colonel au milieu des boulets et des balles de Waterloo. Il ne séparait jamais le souvenir de cet homme du souvenir de son père, et il les associait dans sa vénération. C’était une sorte de culte à deux degrés, le grand autel pour le colonel, le petit pour Thénardier. Ce qui redoublait l’attendrissement de sa reconnaissance, c’est l’idée de l’infortune où il savait Thénardier tombé et englouti. Marius avait appris à Montfermeil la ruine et la faillite du malheureux aubergiste. Depuis il avait fait des efforts inouïs pour saisir sa trace et tâcher d’arriver à lui dans ce ténébreux abîme de la misère où Thénardier avait disparu. Marius avait battu tout le pays; il était allé à Chelles, à Bondy, à Gournay, à Nogent, à Lagny. Pendant trois années il s’y était acharné, dépensant à ces explorations le peu d’argent qu’il épargnait. Personne n’avait pu lui donner de nouvelles de Thénardier; on le croyait passé en pays étranger. Ses créanciers l’avaient cherché aussi, avec moins d’amour que Marius, mais avec autant d’acharnement, et n’avaient pu mettre la main sur lui. Marius s’accusait et s’en voulait presque de ne pas réussir dans ses recherches. C’était la seule dette que lui eût laissée le Colonel, et Marius tenait à honneur de la payer. — Comment! pensait-il, quand mon père gisait mourant sur le champ de bataille, Thénardier, lui, a bien su le trouver à travers la fumée et la mitraille et l’emporter sur ses épaules, et il ne lui devait rien cependant, et moi qui dois tant à Thénardier, je ne saurais pas le rejoindre dans cette ombre où il agonise et le rapporter à mon tour de la mort à la vie! Oh! je le retrouverai! — Pour retrouver Thénardier en effet, Marius eût donné un de ses bras, et, pour le tirer de la misère, tout son sang. Revoir Thénardier, rendre un service quelconque à Thénardier, lui dire: Vous ne me connaissez pas, eh bien, moi, je vous connais! je suis là! disposez de moi! — c’était le plus doux et le plus magnifique rêve de Marius.

Chapitre III

Marius grandi

À cette époque, Marius avait vingt ans. Il y avait trois ans qu’il avait quitté son grand-père. On était resté dans les mêmes termes de part et d’autre, sans tenter de rapprochement et sans chercher à se revoir. D’ailleurs, se revoir, à quoi bon? pour se heurter? Lequel eût eu raison de l’autre? Marius était le vase d’airain, mais le père Gillenormand était le pot de fer.

Disons-le, Marius s’était mépris sur le cœur de son grand-père. Il s’était figuré que M. Gillenormand ne l’avait jamais aimé, et que ce bonhomme bref, dur et riant, qui jurait, criait, tempêtait et levait la canne, n’avait pour lui tout au plus que cette affection à la fois légère et sévère des Gérontes de comédie. Marius se trompait. Il y a des pères qui n’aiment pas leurs enfants; il n’existe point d’aïeul qui n’adore son petit-fils. Au fond, nous l’avons dit, M. Gillenormand idolâtrait Marius. Il l’idolâtrait à sa façon, avec accompagnement de bourrades et même de gifles; mais, cet enfant disparu, il se sentit un vide noir dans le cœur. Il exigea qu’on ne lui en parlât plus, en regrettant tout bas d’être si bien obéi. Dans les premiers temps il espéra que ce buonapartiste, ce jacobin, ce terroriste, ce septembriseur reviendrait. Mais les semaines se passèrent, les mois se passèrent, les années se passèrent; au grand désespoir de M. Gillenormand, le buveur de sang ne reparut pas. — Je ne pouvais pourtant pas faire autrement que de le chasser, se disait le grand-père, et il se demandait: si c’était à refaire, le referais-je? Son orgueil sur-le-champ répondait oui, mais sa vieille tête qu’il hochait en silence répondait tristement non. Il avait ses heures d’abattement. Marius lui manquait. Les vieillards ont besoin d’affections comme de soleil. C’est de la chaleur. Quelle que fût sa forte nature, l’absence de Marius avait changé quelque chose en lui. Pour rien au monde, il n’eût voulu faire un pas vers ce «petit drôle» mais il souffrait. Il ne s’informait jamais de lui, mais il y pensait toujours. Il vivait, de plus en plus retiré, au Marais. Il était encore, comme autrefois, gai et violent, mais sa gaîté avait une dureté convulsive comme si elle contenait de la douleur et de la colère, et ses violences se terminaient toujours par une sorte d’accablement doux et sombre. Il disait quelquefois: — Oh! s’il revenait, quel bon soufflet je lui donnerais!

Quant à la tante, elle pensait trop peu pour aimer beaucoup; Marius n’était plus pour elle qu’une espèce de silhouette noire et vague; et elle avait fini par s’en occuper beaucoup moins que du chat ou du perroquet qu’il est probable qu’elle avait.

Ce qui accroissait la souffrance secrète du père Gillenormand, c’est qu’il la renfermait tout entière et n’en laissait rien deviner. Son chagrin était comme ces fournaises nouvellement inventées qui brûlent leur fumée. Quelquefois, il arrivait que des officieux malencontreux lui parlaient de Marius, et lui demandaient: — Que fait, ou que devient monsieur votre petit-fils? — Le vieux bourgeois répondait, en soupirant, s’il était trop triste, ou en donnant une chiquenaude à sa manchette, s’il voulait paraître gai: — Monsieur le baron Pontmercy plaidaille dans quelque coin.

Pendant que le vieillard regrettait, Marius s’applaudissait. Comme à tous les bons cœurs, le malheur lui avait ôté l’amertume. Il ne pensait à M. Gillenormand qu’avec douceur, mais il avait tenu à ne plus rien recevoir de l’homme *qui avait été mal pour son père*. — C’était maintenant la traduction mitigée de ses premières indignations. En outre, il était heureux d’avoir souffert, et de souffrir encore. C’était pour son père. La dureté de sa vie le satisfaisait et lui plaisait. Il se disait avec une sorte de joie que — *c’était bien le moins*; que c’était — une expiation; — que, — sans cela, il eût été puni, autrement et plus tard, de son indifférence impie pour son père et pour un tel père; qu’il n’aurait pas été juste que son père eût eu toute la souffrance, et lui rien; — qu’était-ce d’ailleurs que ses travaux et son dénûment comparés à la vie héroïque du colonel? qu’enfin sa seule manière de se rapprocher de son père et de lui ressembler, c’était d’être vaillant contre l’indigence comme lui avait été brave contre l’ennemi; et que c’était là sans doute ce que le colonel avait voulu dire par ce mot: *il en sera digne*. — Paroles que Marius continuait de porter, non sur sa poitrine, l’écrit du colonel ayant disparu, mais dans son cœur.

Et puis, le jour où son grand-père l’avait chassé, il n’était encore qu’un enfant, maintenant il était un homme. Il le sentait. La misère, insistons-y, lui avait été bonne. La pauvreté dans la jeunesse, quand elle réussit, a cela de magnifique qu’elle tourne toute la volonté vers l’effort et toute l’âme vers l’aspiration. La pauvreté met tout de suite la vie matérielle à nu et la fait hideuse; de là d’inexprimables élans vers la vie idéale. Le jeune homme riche a cent distractions brillantes et grossières, les courses de chevaux, la chasse, les chiens, le tabac, le jeu, les bons repas, et le reste; occupations des bas côtés de l’âme aux dépens des côtés hauts et délicats. Le jeune homme pauvre se donne de la peine pour avoir son pain; il mange; quand il a mangé, il n’a plus que la rêverie. Il va aux spectacles gratis que Dieu donne; il regarde le ciel, l’espace, les astres, les fleurs, les enfants, l’humanité dans laquelle il souffre, la création dans laquelle il rayonne. Il regarde tant l’humanité qu’il voit l’âme, il regarde tant la création qu’il voit Dieu. Il rêve, et il se sent grand; il rêve encore, et il se sent tendre. De l’égoïsme de l’homme qui souffre, il passe à la compassion de l’homme qui médite. Un admirable sentiment éclate en lui, l’oubli de soi et la pitié pour tous. En songeant aux jouissances sans nombre que la nature offre, donne et prodigue aux âmes ouvertes et refuse aux âmes fermées, il en vient à plaindre, lui millionnaire de l’intelligence, les millionnaires de l’argent. Toute haine s’en va de son cœur à mesure que toute clarté entre dans son esprit. D’ailleurs est-il malheureux? Non. La misère d’un jeune homme n’est jamais misérable. Le premier jeune garçon venu, si pauvre qu’il soit, avec sa santé, sa force, sa marche vive, ses yeux brillants, son sang qui circule chaudement, ses cheveux noirs, ses joues fraîches, ses lèvres roses, ses dents blanches, son souffle pur, fera toujours envie à un vieil empereur. Et puis chaque matin il se remet à gagner son pain; et tandis que ses mains gagnent du pain, son épine dorsale gagne de la fierté, son cerveau gagne des idées. Sa besogne finie, il revient aux extases ineffables, aux contemplations, aux joies; il vit les pieds dans les afflictions, dans les obstacles, sur le pavé, dans les ronces, quelquefois dans la boue; la tête dans la lumière. Il est ferme, serein, doux, paisible, attentif, sérieux, content de peu, bienveillant; et il bénit Dieu de lui avoir donné ces deux richesses qui manquent à bien des riches, le travail qui le fait libre et la pensée qui le fait digne.

C’était là ce qui s’était passé en Marius. Il avait même, pour tout dire, un peu trop versé du côté de la contemplation. Du jour où il était arrivé à gagner sa vie à peu près sûrement, il s’était arrêté là, trouvant bon d’être pauvre, et retranchant au travail pour donner à la pensée. C’est-à-dire qu’il passait quelquefois des journées entières à songer, plongé et englouti comme un visionnaire dans les voluptés muettes de l’extase et du rayonnement intérieur. Il avait ainsi posé le problème de sa vie: travailler le moins possible du travail matériel pour travailler le plus possible du travail impalpable; en d’autres termes, donner quelques heures à la vie réelle, et jeter le reste dans l’infini. Il ne s’apercevait pas, croyant ne manquer de rien, que la contemplation ainsi comprise finit par être une des formes de la paresse; qu’il s’était contenté de dompter les premières nécessités de la vie, et qu’il se reposait trop tôt.

Il était évident que, pour cette nature énergique et généreuse, ce ne pouvait être là qu’un état transitoire, et qu’au premier choc contre les inévitables complications de la destinée, Marius se réveillerait.

En attendant, bien qu’il fût avocat et quoi qu’en pensât le père Gillenormand, il ne plaidait pas, il ne plaidaillait même pas. La rêverie l’avait détourné de la plaidoirie. Hanter les avoués, suivre le palais, chercher des causes, ennui. Pourquoi faire? Il ne voyait aucune raison pour changer de gagne-pain. Cette librairie marchande et obscure avait fini par lui faire un travail sûr, un travail de peu de labeur, qui, comme nous venons de l’expliquer, lui suffisait.

Un des libraires pour lesquels il travaillait, M. Magimel, je crois, lui avait offert de le prendre chez lui, de le bien loger, de lui fournir un travail régulier, et de lui donner quinze cents francs par an. Être bien logé! quinze cents francs! Sans doute. Mais renoncer à sa liberté! être un gagiste! une espèce d’homme de lettres commis! Dans la pensée de Marius, en acceptant, sa position devenait meilleure et pire en même temps, il gagnait du bien-être et perdait de la dignité; c’était un malheur complet et beau qui se changeait en une gêne laide et ridicule; quelque chose comme un aveugle qui deviendrait borgne. Il refusa.

Marius vivait solitaire. Par ce goût qu’il avait de rester en dehors de tout, et aussi pour avoir été par trop effarouché, il n’était décidément pas entré dans le groupe présidé par Enjolras. On était resté bons camarades; on était prêt à s’entr’aider dans l’occasion de toutes les façons possibles; mais rien de plus. Marius avait deux amis, un jeune, Courfeyrac, et un vieux, M. Mabeuf. Il penchait vers le vieux. D’abord il lui devait la révolution qui s’était faite en lui; il lui devait d’avoir connu et aimé son père. *Il m’a opéré de la cataracte*, disait-il.

Certes, ce marguillier avait été décisif.

Ce n’est pas pourtant que M. Mabeuf eût été dans cette occasion autre chose que l’agent calme et impassible de la providence. Il avait éclairé Marius par hasard et sans le savoir, comme fait une chandelle que quelqu’un apporte; il avait été la chandelle et non le quelqu’un.

Quant à la révolution politique intérieure de Marius, M. Mabeuf était tout à fait incapable de la comprendre, de la vouloir et de la diriger.

Comme on retrouvera plus tard M. Mabeuf, quelques mots ne sont pas inutiles.

Chapitre IV

M. Mabeuf

Le jour où M. Mabeuf disait à Marius: *Certainement, j'approuve les opinions politiques*, il exprimait le véritable état de son esprit. Toutes les opinions politiques lui étaient indifférentes, et il les approuvait toutes sans distinguer, pour qu'elles le laissassent tranquille, comme les Grecs appelaient les Furies «les belles, les bonnes, les charmantes», les *Euménides*. M. Mabeuf avait pour opinion politique d'aimer passionnément les plantes, et surtout les livres. Il possédait comme tout le monde sa terminaison en *iste*, sans laquelle personne n'aurait pu vivre en ce temps-là, mais il n'était ni royaliste, ni bonapartiste, ni chartiste, ni orléaniste, ni anarchiste; il était bouquiniste.

Il ne comprenait pas que les hommes s'occupassent à se haïr à propos de billevesées comme la charte, la démocratie, la légitimité, la monarchie, la République, etc., lorsqu'il y avait dans ce monde toutes sortes de mousses, d'herbes et d'arbustes qu'ils pouvaient regarder, et des tas d'in-folio et même d'in-trente-deux qu'ils pouvaient feuilleter. Il se gardait fort d'être inutile; avoir des livres ne l'empêchait pas de lire, être botaniste ne l'empêchait pas d'être jardinier. Quand il avait connu Pontmercy, il y avait eu cette sympathie entre le colonel et lui, que ce que le colonel faisait pour les fleurs, il le faisait pour les fruits. M. Mabeuf était parvenu à produire des poires de semis aussi savoureuses que les poires de Saint-Germain; c'est d'une de ses combinaisons qu'est née, à ce qu'il paraît, la mirabelle d'octobre, célèbre aujourd'hui, et non moins parfumée que la mirabelle d'été. Il allait à la messe plutôt par douceur que par dévotion, et puis parce qu'aimant le visage des hommes, mais haïssant leur bruit, il ne les trouvait qu'à l'église réunis et silencieux. Sentant qu'il fallait être quelque chose dans l'état, il avait choisi la carrière de marguillier. Du reste, il n'avait jamais réussi à aimer aucune femme autant qu'un oignon de tulipe ou aucun homme autant qu'un elzevir. Il avait depuis longtemps passé soixante ans lorsqu'un jour quelqu'un lui demanda: — Est-ce que vous ne vous êtes jamais marié? — J'ai oublié, dit-il. Quand il lui arrivait parfois — à qui cela n'arrive-t-il pas? — de dire: — Oh! si j'étais riche! — ce n'était pas en lorgnant une jolie fille, comme le père Gillenormand, c'était en contemplant un bouquin. Il vivait seul, avec une vieille gouvernante. Il était un peu chiragre, et quand il dormait ses vieux doigts ankylosés par le rhumatisme s’arc-boutaient dans les plis de ses draps. Il avait fait et publié une *Flore des environs de Cauteretz* avec planches coloriées, ouvrage assez estimé dont il possédait les cuivres et qu’il vendait lui-même. On venait deux ou trois fois par jour sonner chez lui, rue Mézières, pour cela. Il en tirait bien deux mille francs par an; c’était à peu près là toute sa fortune. Quoique pauvre, il avait eu le talent de se faire, à force de patience, de privations et de temps, une collection précieuse d’exemplaires rares en tous genres. Il ne sortait jamais qu’avec un livre sous le bras et il revenait souvent avec deux. L’unique décoration des quatre chambres au rez-de-chaussée qui, avec un petit jardin, composaient son logis, c’étaient des herbiers encadrés et des gravures de vieux maîtres. La vue d’un sabre ou d’un fusil le glaçait. De sa vie, il n’avait approché d’un canon, même aux Invalides. Il avait un estomac passable, un frère curé, les cheveux tout blancs, plus de dents ni dans la bouche ni dans l’esprit, un tremblement de tout le corps, l’accent picard, un rire enfantin, l’effroi facile, et l’air d’un vieux mouton. Avec cela point d’autre amitié ou d’autre habitude parmi les vivants qu’un vieux libraire de la porte Saint-Jacques appelé Royol. Il avait pour rêve de naturaliser l’indigo en France.

Sa servante était, elle aussi, une variété de l’innocence. La pauvre bonne vieille femme était vierge. Sultan, son matou, qui eût pu miauler le Miserere d’Allegri à la chapelle Sixtine, avait rempli son cœur et suffisait à la quantité de passion qui était en elle. Aucun de ses rêves n’était allé jusqu’à l’homme. Elle n’avait jamais pu franchir son chat. Elle avait, comme lui, des moustaches. Sa gloire était dans ses bonnets, toujours blancs. Elle passait son temps le dimanche après la messe à compter son linge dans sa malle et à étaler sur son lit des robes en pièce qu’elle achetait et qu’elle ne faisait jamais faire. Elle savait lire. M. Mabeuf l’avait surnommée *la mère Plutarque*.

M. Mabeuf avait pris Marius en gré, parce que Marius, étant jeune et doux, réchauffait sa vieillesse sans effaroucher sa timidité. La jeunesse avec la douceur fait aux vieillards l’effet du soleil sans le vent. Quand Marius était saturé de gloire militaire, de poudre à canon, de marches et de contre-marches, et de toutes ces prodigieuses batailles où son père avait donné et reçu de si grands coups de sabre, il allait voir M. Mabeuf, et M. Mabeuf lui parlait du héros au point de vue des fleurs.

Vers 1830, son frère le curé était mort, et presque tout de suite, comme lorsque la nuit vient, tout l’horizon s’était assombri pour M. Mabeuf. Une faillite — de notaire — lui enleva une somme de dix mille francs, qui était tout ce qu’il possédait du chef de son frère et du sien. La révolution de Juillet amena une crise dans la librairie. En temps de gêne, la première chose qui ne se vend pas, c’est une *Flore*. *La Flore des environs de Cauteretz* s’arrêta court. Des semaines s’écoulaient sans un acheteur. Quelquefois M. Mabeuf tressaillait à un coup de sonnette. — Monsieur, lui disait tristement la mère Plutarque, c’est le porteur d’eau. — Bref, un jour M. Mabeuf quitta la rue Mézières, abdiqua les fonctions de marguillier, renonça à Saint-Sulpice, vendit une partie, non de ses livres, mais de ses estampes, — ce à quoi il tenait le moins, — et s’alla installer dans une petite maison du boulevard Montparnasse, où du reste il ne demeura qu’un trimestre, pour deux raisons: premièrement, le rez-de-chaussée et le jardin coûtaient trois cents francs et il n’osait pas mettre plus de deux cents francs à son loyer; deuxièmement, étant voisin du tir Fatou, il entendait toute la journée des coups de pistolet, ce qui lui était insupportable.

Il emporta sa *Flore*, ses cuivres, ses herbiers, ses portefeuilles et ses livres, et s’établit près de la Salpêtrière dans une espèce de chaumière du village d’Austerlitz, où il avait pour cinquante écus par an trois chambres et un jardin clos d’une haie avec puits. Il profita de ce déménagement pour vendre presque tous ses meubles. Le jour de son entrée dans ce nouveau logis, il fut très gai et cloua lui-même les clous pour accrocher les gravures et les herbiers, il piocha son jardin le reste de la journée, et, le soir, voyant que la mère Plutarque avait l’air morne et songeait, il lui frappa sur l’épaule et lui dit en souriant: — Bah! nous avons l’indigo!

Deux seuls visiteurs, le libraire de la porte Saint-Jacques et Marius, étaient admis à le voir dans sa chaumière d’Austerlitz, nom tapageur qui lui était, pour tout dire, assez désagréable.

Du reste, comme nous venons de l’indiquer, les cerveaux absorbés dans une sagesse, ou dans une folie, ou, ce qui arrive souvent, dans les deux à la fois, ne sont que très lentement perméables aux choses de la vie. Leur propre destin leur est lointain. Il résulte de ces concentrations-là une passivité qui, si elle était raisonnée, ressemblerait à la philosophie. On décline, on descend, on s’écoule, on s’écroule même, sans trop s’en apercevoir. Cela finit toujours, il est vrai, par un réveil, mais tardif. En attendant, il semble qu’on soit neutre dans le jeu qui se joue entre notre bonheur et notre malheur. On est l’enjeu, et l’on regarde la partie avec indifférence.

C’est ainsi qu’à travers cet obscurcissement qui se faisait autour de lui, toutes ses espérances s’éteignant l’une après l’autre, M. Mabeuf était resté serein, un peu puérilement, mais très profondément. Ses habitudes d’esprit avaient le va-et-vient d’un pendule. Une fois monté par une illusion, il allait très longtemps, même quand l’illusion avait disparu. Une horloge ne s’arrête pas court au moment précis où l’on en perd la clef.

M. Mabeuf avait des plaisirs innocents. Ces plaisirs étaient peu coûteux et inattendus; le moindre hasard les lui fournissait. Un jour la mère Plutarque lisait un roman dans un coin de la chambre. Elle lisait haut, trouvant qu’elle comprenait mieux ainsi. Lire haut, c’est s’affirmer à soi-même sa lecture. Il y a des gens qui lisent très haut et qui ont l’air de se donner leur parole d’honneur de ce qu’ils lisent.

La mère Plutarque lisait avec cette énergie-là le roman qu’elle tenait à la main. M. Mabeuf entendait sans écouter.

Tout en lisant, la mère Plutarque arriva à cette phrase. Il était question d’un officier de dragons et d’une belle:

«...La belle bouda, et le dragon...»

Ici elle s’interrompit pour essuyer ses lunettes.

— Bouddha et le Dragon, reprit à mi-voix M. Mabeuf. Oui, c’est vrai, il y avait un dragon qui, du fond de sa caverne, jetait des flammes par la gueule et brûlait le ciel. Plusieurs étoiles avaient déjà été incendiées par ce monstre qui, en outre, avait des griffes de tigre. Bouddha alla dans son antre et réussit à convertir le dragon. C’est un bon livre que vous lisez là, mère Plutarque. Il n’y a pas de plus belle légende.

Et M. Mabeuf tomba dans une rêverie délicieuse.

Chapitre V

Pauvreté, bonne voisine de misère

Marius avait du goût pour ce vieillard candide qui se voyait lentement saisi par l'indigence, et qui arrivait à s'étonner peu à peu, sans pourtant s'attrister encore. Marius rencontrait Courfeyrac et cherchait M. Mabeuf. Fort rarement pourtant, une ou deux fois par mois, tout au plus.

Le plaisir de Marius était de faire de longues promenades seul sur les boulevards extérieurs, ou au Champ de Mars ou dans les allées les moins fréquentées du Luxembourg. Il passait quelquefois une demi-journée à regarder le jardin d'un maraîcher, les carrés de salade, les poules dans le fumier et le cheval tournant la roue de la noria. Les passants le considéraient avec surprise, et quelques-uns lui trouvaient une mise suspecte et une mine sinistre. Ce n'était qu'un jeune homme pauvre, rêvant sans objet.

C'est dans une de ses promenades qu'il avait découvert la masure Gorbeau, et, l'isolement et le bon marché le tentant, il s'y était logé. On ne l'y connaissait que sous le nom de monsieur Marius.

Quelques-uns des anciens généraux ou des anciens camarades de son père l'avaient invité, quand ils le connurent, à les venir voir. Marius n'avait point refusé. C'étaient des occasions de parler de son père. Il allait ainsi de temps en temps chez le comte Pajol, chez le général Bellavesne, chez le général Fririon, aux Invalides. On y faisait de la musique, on y dansait. Ces soirs-là Marius mettait son habit neuf. Mais il n'allait jamais à ces soirées ni à ces bals que les jours où il gelait à pierre fendre, car il ne pouvait payer une voiture et il ne voulait arriver qu'avec des bottes comme des miroirs.

Il disait quelquefois, mais sans amertume: — Les hommes sont ainsi faits que, dans un salon, vous pouvez être crotté partout, excepté sur les souliers. On ne vous demande là, pour vous bien accueillir, qu'une chose irréprochable; la conscience? non, les bottes.

Toutes les passions, autres que celles du cœur, se dissipent dans la rêverie. Les fièvres politiques de Marius s'y étaient évanouies. La révolution de 1830, en le satisfaisant, et en le calmant, y avait aidé. Il était resté le même, aux colères près. Il avait toujours les mêmes opinions, seulement elles s'étaient attendries. À proprement parler, il n'avait plus d’opinions, il avait des sympathies. De quel parti était-il? du parti de l’humanité. Dans l’humanité il choisissait la France; dans la nation il choisissait le peuple; dans le peuple il choisissait la femme. C’était là surtout que sa pitié allait. Maintenant il préférait une idée à un fait, un poète à un héros, et il admirait plus encore un livre comme Job qu’un événement comme Marengo. Et puis quand, après une journée de méditation, il s’en revenait le soir par les boulevards et qu’à travers les branches des arbres il apercevait l’espace sans fond, les lueurs sans nom, l’abîme, l’ombre, le mystère, tout ce qui n’est qu’humain lui semblait bien petit.

Il croyait être et il était peut-être en effet arrivé au vrai de la vie et de la philosophie humaine, et il avait fini par ne plus guère regarder que le ciel, seule chose que la vérité puisse voir du fond de son puits.

Cela ne l’empêchait pas de multiplier les plans, les combinaisons, les échafaudages, les projets d’avenir. Dans cet état de rêverie, un œil qui eût regardé au dedans de Marius, eût été ébloui de la pureté de cette âme. En effet, s’il était donné à nos yeux de chair de voir dans la conscience d’autrui, on jugerait bien plus sûrement un homme d’après ce qu’il rêve que d’après ce qu’il pense. Il y a de la volonté dans la pensée, il n’y en a pas dans le rêve. Le rêve, qui est tout spontané, prend et garde, même dans le gigantesque et l’idéal, la figure de notre esprit. Rien ne sort plus directement et plus sincèrement du fond même de notre âme que nos aspirations irréfléchies et démesurées vers les splendeurs de la destinée. Dans ces aspirations, bien plus que dans les idées composées, raisonnées et coordonnées, on peut retrouver le vrai caractère de chaque homme. Nos chimères sont ce qui nous ressemble le mieux. Chacun rêve l’inconnu et l’impossible selon sa nature.

Vers le milieu de cette année 1831, la vieille qui servait Marius lui conta qu’on allait mettre à la porte ses voisins, le misérable ménage Jondrette. Marius, qui passait presque toutes ses journées dehors, savait à peine qu’il eût des voisins.

— Pourquoi les renvoie-t-on? dit-il.

— Parce qu’ils ne payent pas leur loyer. Ils doivent deux termes.

— Combien est-ce?

— Vingt francs, dit la vieille.

Marius avait trente francs en réserve dans un tiroir.

— Tenez, dit-il à la vieille, voilà vingt-cinq francs. Payez pour ces pauvres gens, donnez-leur cinq francs, et ne dites pas que c’est moi.

Chapitre VI

Le remplaçant

Le hasard fit que le régiment dont était le lieutenant Théodule vint tenir garnison à Paris. Ceci fut l'occasion d'une deuxième idée pour la tante Gillenormand. Elle avait, une première fois, imaginé de faire surveiller Marius par Théodule; elle complota de faire succéder Théodule à Marius.

À toute aventure, et pour le cas où le grand-père aurait le vague besoin d'un jeune visage dans la maison, ces rayons d'aurore sont quelquefois doux aux ruines, il était expédient de trouver un autre Marius. Soit, pensa-t-elle, c'est un simple erratum comme j'en vois dans les livres; Marius, lisez Théodule.

Un petit-neveu est l'à peu près d'un petit-fils; à défaut d'un avocat, on prend un lancier.

Un matin, que M. Gillenormand était en train de lire quelque chose comme la *Quotidienne*, sa fille entra, et lui dit de sa voix la plus douce, car il s'agissait de son favori:

— Mon père, Théodule va venir ce matin vous présenter ses respects.

— Qui ça, Théodule?

— Votre petit-neveu.

— Ah! fit le grand-père.

Puis il se remit à lire, ne songea plus au petit-neveu qui n'était qu'un Théodule quelconque, et ne tarda pas à avoir beaucoup d'humeur, ce qui lui arrivait presque toujours quand il lisait. La «feuille», qu'il tenait, royaliste d'ailleurs, cela va de soi, annonçait pour le lendemain, sans aménité aucune, un des petits événements quotidiens du Paris d'alors:

— Que les élèves des écoles de droit et de médecine devaient se réunir sur la place du Panthéon à midi; — pour délibérer. — Il s'agissait d'une des questions du moment, de l'artillerie de la garde nationale, et d'un conflit entre le ministre de la guerre et «la milice citoyenne» au sujet des canons parqués dans la cour du Louvre. Les étudiants devaient «délibérer» là-dessus. Il n'en fallait pas beaucoup plus pour gonfler M. Gillenormand.

Il songea à Marius, qui était étudiant, et qui, probablement, irait, comme les autres, «délibérer, à midi, sur la place du Panthéon».

Comme il faisait ce songe pénible, le lieutenant Théodule entra, vêtu en bourgeois, ce qui était habile, et discrètement introduit par mademoiselle Gillenormand. Le lancier avait fait ce raisonnement: — Le vieux druide n'a pas tout placé en viager. Cela vaut bien qu'on se déguise en pékin de temps en temps.

Mademoiselle Gillenormand dit, haut, à son père:

— Théodule, votre petit-neveu.

Et, bas, au lieutenant:

— Approuve tout.

Et se retira.

Le lieutenant, peu accoutumé à des rencontres si vénérables, balbutia avec quelque timidité: Bonjour, mon oncle, et fit un salut mixte composé de l'ébauche involontaire et machinale du salut militaire achevée en salut bourgeois.

— Ah! c'est vous; c'est bien, asseyez-vous, dit l'aïeul.

Cela dit, il oublia parfaitement le lancier.

Théodule s'assit, et M. Gillenormand se leva.

M. Gillenormand se mit à marcher de long en large, les mains dans ses poches, parlant tout haut et tourmentant avec ses vieux doigts irrités les deux montres qu'il avait dans ses deux goussets.

— Ce tas de morveux! ça se convoque sur la place du Panthéon! Vertu de ma mie! Des galopins qui étaient hier en nourrice! Si on leur pressait le nez, il en sortirait du lait! Et ça délibère demain à midi! Où va-t-on? où va-t-on? Il est clair qu'on va à l'abîme. C'est là que nous ont conduits les descamisados! L'artillerie citoyenne! Délibérer sur l'artillerie citoyenne! S'en aller jaboter en plein air sur les pétarades de la garde nationale! Et avec qui vont-ils se trouver là? Voyez un peu où mène le jacobinisme. Je parie tout ce qu'on voudra, un million contre un fichtre, qu'il n'y aura là que des repris de justice et des forçats libérés. Les républicains et les galériens, ça ne fait qu'un nez et qu'un mouchoir. Carnot disait: Où veux-tu que j'aille, traître? Fouché répondait: Où tu voudras, imbécile! Voilà ce que c'est que les républicains.

— C'est juste, dit Théodule.

M. Gillenormand tourna la tête à demi, vit Théodule, et continua:

— Quand on pense que ce drôle a eu la scélératesse de se faire carbonaro! Pourquoi as-tu quitté ma maison? Pour t'aller faire républicain. Pssst! d'abord le peuple n'en veut pas de ta République, il n'en veut pas, il a du bon sens, il sait bien qu'il y a toujours eu des rois et qu'il y en aura toujours, il sait bien que le peuple, après tout, ce n'est que le peuple, il s'en hurle, de ta République, entends-tu, crétin! Est-ce assez horrible, ce caprice-là! S'amouracher du père Duchêne, faire les yeux doux à la guillotine, chanter des romances et jouer de la guitare sous le balcon de 93, c'est à cracher sur tous ces jeunes gens-là, tant ils sont bêtes! Ils en sont tous là. Pas un n'échappe. Il suffit de respirer l'air qui passe dans la rue pour être insensé. Le dix-neuvième siècle est du poison. Le premier polisson venu laisse pousser sa barbe de bouc, se croit un drôle pour de vrai, et vous plante là les vieux parents. C'est républicain, c'est romantique. Qu'est-ce que c'est que ça, romantique? faites-moi l'amitié de me dire ce que c'est que ça? Toutes les folies possibles. Il y a un an, ça vous allait à *Hernani*. Je vous demande un peu, *Hernani*! des antithèses! des abominations qui ne sont pas même écrites en français! Et puis on a des canons dans la cour du Louvre. Tels sont les brigandages de ce temps-ci.

— Vous avez raison, mon oncle, dit Théodule.

M. Gillenormand reprit:

— Des canons dans la cour du Muséum! pourquoi faire? Canon, que me veux-tu? Vous voulez donc mitrailler l'Apollon du Belvédère? Qu'est-ce que les gargousses ont à faire avec la Vénus de Médicis? Oh! ces jeunes gens d'à présent, tous des chenapans! Quel pas grand'chose que leur Benjamin Constant! Et ceux qui ne sont pas des scélérats sont des dadais! Ils font tout ce qu'ils peuvent pour être laids, ils sont mal habillés, ils ont peur des femmes, ils ont autour des cotillons un air de mendier qui fait éclater de rire les jeannetons; ma parole d'honneur, on dirait les pauvres honteux de l'amour. Ils sont difformes, et ils se complètent en étant stupides; ils répètent les calembours de Tiercelin et de Potier, ils ont des habits-sacs, des gilets de palefrenier, des chemises de grosse toile, des pantalons de gros drap, des bottes de gros cuir, et le ramage ressemble au plumage. On pourrait se servir de leur jargon pour ressemeler leurs savates. Et toute cette inepte marmaille vous a des opinions politiques. Il devrait être sévèrement défendu d'avoir des opinions politiques. Ils fabriquent des systèmes, ils refont la société, ils démolissent la monarchie, ils flanquent par terre toutes les lois, ils mettent le grenier à la place de la cave et mon portier à la place du roi, ils bousculent l'Europe de fond en comble, ils rebâtissent le monde, et ils ont pour bonne fortune de regarder sournoisement les jambes des blanchisseuses qui remontent dans leurs charrettes! Ah! Marius! ah! gueusard! aller vociférer en place publique! discuter, débattre, prendre des mesures! ils appellent cela des mesures, justes dieux! le désordre se rapetisse et devient niais. J'ai vu le chaos, je vois le gâchis. Des écoliers délibérer sur la garde nationale, cela ne se verrait pas chez les Ogibbewas et chez les Cadodaches! Les sauvages qui vont tout nus, la caboche coiffée comme un volant de raquette, avec une massue à la patte, sont moins brutes que ces bacheliers-là! Des marmousets de quatre sous! ça fait les entendus et les jordonnes! ça délibère et ratiocine! C'est la fin du monde. C'est évidemment la fin de ce misérable globe terraqué. Il fallait un hoquet final, la France le pousse. Délibérez, mes drôles! Ces choses-là arriveront tant qu'ils iront lire les journaux sous les arcades de l'Odéon. Cela leur coûte un sou, et leur bon sens, et leur intelligence, et leur cœur, et leur âme, et leur esprit. On sort de là, et l'on fiche le camp de chez sa famille. Tous les journaux sont de la peste; tous, même le *Drapeau blanc*! au fond Martainville était un jacobin! Ah! juste ciel! tu pourras te vanter d'avoir désespéré ton grand-père, toi!

— C'est évident, dit Théodule.

Et, profitant de ce que M. Gillenormand reprenait haleine, le lancier ajouta magistralement:

— Il ne devrait pas y avoir d'autre journal que le *Moniteur* et d'autre livre que l'*Annuaire militaire*.

M. Gillenormand poursuivit:

— C'est comme leur Sieyès! un régicide aboutissant à un sénateur! car c'est toujours par là qu'ils finissent. On se balafre avec le tutoiement citoyen pour arriver à se faire dire monsieur le comte. Monsieur le comte gros comme le bras, des assommeurs de septembre! Le philosophe Sieyès! Je me rends cette justice que je n'ai jamais fait plus de cas des philosophies de tous ces philosophes-là que des lunettes du grimacier de Tivoli! J'ai vu un jour les sénateurs passer sur le quai Malaquais en manteaux de velours violet semés d'abeilles avec des chapeaux à la Henri IV. Ils étaient hideux. On eût dit les singes de la cour du tigre. Citoyens, je vous déclare que votre progrès est une folie, que votre humanité est un rêve, que votre révolution est un crime, que votre République est un monstre, que votre jeune France pucelle sort du lupanar, et je vous le soutiens à tous, qui que vous soyez, fussiez-vous publicistes, fussiez-vous économistes, fussiez-vous légistes, fussiez-vous plus connaisseurs en liberté, en égalité et en fraternité que le couperet de la guillotine! Je vous signifie cela, mes bonshommes!

— Parbleu, cria le lieutenant, voilà qui est admirablement vrai.

M. Gillenormand interrompit un geste qu’il avait commencé, se retourna, regarda fixement le lancier Théodule entre les deux yeux, et lui dit:

— Vous êtes un imbécile.

Livre sixième — La conjonction de deux étoiles

Chapitre I

Le sobriquet: mode de formation des noms de familles

Marius à cette époque était un beau jeune homme de moyenne taille, avec d'épais cheveux très noirs, un front haut et intelligent, les narines ouvertes et passionnées, l'air sincère et calme, et sur tout son visage je ne sais quoi qui était hautain, pensif et innocent. Son profil, dont toutes les lignes étaient arrondies sans cesser d'être fermes, avait cette douceur germanique qui a pénétré dans la physionomie française par l'Alsace et la Lorraine, et cette absence complète d'angles qui rendait les Sicambres si reconnaissables parmi les romains et qui distingue la race léonine de la race aquiline. Il était à cette saison de la vie où l'esprit des hommes qui pensent se compose, presque à proportions égales, de profondeur et de naïveté. Une situation grave étant donnée, il avait tout ce qu'il fallait pour être stupide; un tour de clef de plus, il pouvait être sublime. Ses façons étaient réservées, froides, polies, peu ouvertes. Comme sa bouche était charmante, ses lèvres les plus vermeilles et ses dents les plus blanches du monde, son sourire corrigeait ce que toute sa physionomie avait de sévère. À de certains moments, c'était un singulier contraste que ce front chaste et ce sourire voluptueux. Il avait l'œil petit et le regard grand.

Au temps de sa pire misère, il remarquait que les jeunes filles se retournaient quand il passait, et il se sauvait ou se cachait, la mort dans l'âme. Il pensait qu'elles le regardaient pour ses vieux habits et qu'elles en riaient; le fait est qu'elles le regardaient pour sa grâce et qu'elles en rêvaient.

Ce muet malentendu entre lui et les jolies passantes l'avait rendu farouche. Il n'en choisit aucune, par l'excellente raison qu'il s'enfuyait devant toutes. Il vécut ainsi indéfiniment, — bêtement, disait Courfeyrac.

Courfeyrac lui disait encore: — N'aspire pas à être vénérable (car ils se tutoyaient; glisser au tutoiement est la pente des amitiés jeunes). Mon cher, un conseil. Ne lis pas tant dans les livres et regarde un peu plus les margotons. Les coquines ont du bon, ô Marius! À force de t'enfuir et de rougir, tu t'abrutiras.

D'autres fois Courfeyrac le rencontrait et lui disait:

— Bonjour, monsieur l'abbé.

Quand Courfeyrac lui avait tenu quelque propos de ce genre, Marius était huit jours à éviter plus que jamais les femmes, jeunes et vieilles, et il évitait par-dessus le marché Courfeyrac.

Il y avait pourtant dans toute l'immense création deux femmes que Marius ne fuyait pas et auxquelles il ne prenait point garde. À la vérité on l'eût fort étonné si on lui eût dit que c'étaient des femmes. L'une était la vieille barbue qui balayait sa chambre et qui faisait dire à Courfeyrac: Voyant que sa servante porte sa barbe, Marius ne porte point la sienne. L'autre était une espèce de petite fille qu'il voyait très souvent et qu'il ne regardait jamais.

Depuis plus d'un an, Marius remarquait dans une allée déserte du Luxembourg, l'allée qui longe le parapet de la Pépinière, un homme et une toute jeune fille presque toujours assis côte à côte sur le même banc, à l'extrémité la plus solitaire de l'allée, du côté de la rue de l'Ouest. Chaque fois que ce hasard qui se mêle aux promenades des gens dont l'œil est retourné en dedans amenait Marius dans cette allée, et c'était presque tous les jours, il y retrouvait ce couple. L'homme pouvait avoir une soixantaine d'années, il paraissait triste et sérieux; toute sa personne offrait cet aspect robuste et fatigué des gens de guerre retirés du service. S'il avait eu une décoration, Marius eût dit: c'est un ancien officier. Il avait l'air bon, mais inabordable, et il n'arrêtait jamais son regard sur le regard de personne. Il portait un pantalon bleu, une redingote bleue et un chapeau à bords larges, qui paraissaient toujours neufs, une cravate noire et une chemise de quaker, c'est-à-dire, éclatante de blancheur, mais de grosse toile. Une grisette passant un jour près de lui, dit: Voilà un veuf fort propre. Il avait les cheveux très blancs.

La première fois que la jeune fille qui l'accompagnait vint s'asseoir avec lui sur le banc qu'ils semblaient avoir adopté, c'était une façon de fille de treize ou quatorze ans, maigre, au point d'en être presque laide, gauche, insignifiante, et qui promettait peut-être d'avoir d'assez beaux yeux. Seulement ils étaient toujours levés avec une sorte d'assurance déplaisante. Elle avait cette mise à la fois vieille et enfantine des pensionnaires de couvent; une robe mal coupée de gros mérinos noir. Ils avaient l'air du père et de la fille.

Marius examina pendant deux ou trois jours cet homme vieux qui n'était pas encore un vieillard et cette petite fille qui n'était pas encore une personne, puis il n'y fit plus aucune attention. Eux de leur côté semblaient ne pas même le voir. Ils causaient entre eux d’un air paisible et indifférent. La fille jasait sans cesse, et gaîment. Le vieux homme parlait peu, et, par instants, il attachait sur elle des yeux remplis d’une ineffable paternité.

Marius avait pris l’habitude machinale de se promener dans cette allée. Il les y retrouvait invariablement.

Voici comment la chose se passait:

Marius arrivait le plus volontiers par le bout de l’allée opposé à leur banc. Il marchait toute la longueur de l’allée, passait devant eux, puis s’en retournait jusqu’à l’extrémité par où il était venu, et recommençait. Il faisait ce va-et-vient cinq ou six fois dans sa promenade, et cette promenade cinq ou six fois par semaine sans qu’ils en fussent arrivés, ces gens et lui, à échanger un salut. Ce personnage et cette jeune fille, quoiqu’ils parussent et peut-être parce qu’ils paraissaient éviter les regards, avaient naturellement quelque peu éveillé l’attention des cinq ou six étudiants qui se promenaient de temps en temps le long de la Pépinière, les studieux après leur cours, les autres après leur partie de billard. Courfeyrac, qui était un des derniers, les avait observés quelque temps, mais trouvant la fille laide, il s’en était bien vite et soigneusement écarté. Il s’était enfui comme un Parthe en leur décochant un sobriquet. Frappé uniquement de la robe de la petite et des cheveux du vieux, il avait appelé la fille *mademoiselle Lanoire* et le père *monsieur Leblanc*, si bien que, personne ne les connaissant d’ailleurs, en l’absence du nom, le surnom avait fait loi. Les étudiants disaient: — Ah! monsieur Leblanc est à son banc! et Marius, comme les autres, avait trouvé commode d’appeler ce monsieur inconnu M. Leblanc.

Nous ferons comme eux, et nous dirons M. Leblanc pour la facilité de ce récit.

Marius les vit ainsi presque tous les jours à la même heure pendant la première année. Il trouvait l’homme à son gré, mais la fille assez maussade.

Chapitre II

Lux facta est

La seconde année, précisément au point de cette histoire où le lecteur est parvenu, il arriva que cette habitude du Luxembourg s'interrompit, sans que Marius sût trop pourquoi lui-même, et qu'il fut près de six mois sans mettre les pieds dans son allée. Un jour enfin il y retourna. C'était par une sereine matinée d'été, Marius était joyeux comme on l'est quand il fait beau. Il lui semblait qu'il avait dans le cœur tous les chants d'oiseaux qu'il entendait et tous les morceaux du ciel bleu qu'il voyait à travers les feuilles des arbres.

Il alla droit à «son allée», et, quand il fut au bout, il aperçut, toujours sur le même banc, ce couple connu. Seulement, quand il approcha, c'était bien le même homme; mais il lui parut que ce n'était plus la même fille. La personne qu'il voyait maintenant était une grande et belle créature ayant toutes les formes les plus charmantes de la femme à ce moment précis où elles se combinent encore avec toutes les grâces les plus naïves de l'enfant; moment fugitif et pur que peuvent seuls traduire ces deux mots: quinze ans. C'étaient d'admirables cheveux châtains nuancés de veines dorées, un front qui semblait fait de marbre, des joues qui semblaient faites d'une feuille de rose, un incarnat pâle, une blancheur émue, une bouche exquise d'où le sourire sortait comme une clarté et la parole comme une musique, une tête que Raphaël eût donnée à Marie posée sur un cou que Jean Goujon eût donné à Vénus. Et, afin que rien ne manquât à cette ravissante figure, le nez n'était pas beau, il était joli; ni droit ni courbé, ni italien ni grec; c'était le nez parisien; c'est-à-dire quelque chose de spirituel, de fin, d'irrégulier et de pur, qui désespère les peintres et qui charme les poètes.

Quand Marius passa près d'elle, il ne put voir ses yeux qui étaient constamment baissés. Il ne vit que ses longs cils châtains pénétrés d'ombre et de pudeur.

Cela n'empêchait pas la belle enfant de sourire tout en écoutant l'homme à cheveux blancs qui lui parlait, et rien n'était ravissant comme ce frais sourire avec des yeux baissés.

Dans le premier moment, Marius pensa que c'était une autre fille du même homme, une sœur sans doute de la première. Mais, quand l'invariable habitude de la promenade le ramena pour la seconde fois près du banc, et qu’il l’eut examinée avec attention, il reconnut que c’était la même. En six mois la petite fille était devenue jeune fille; voilà tout. Rien n’est plus fréquent que ce phénomène. Il y a un instant où les filles s’épanouissent en un clin d’œil et deviennent des roses tout à coup. Hier on les a laissées enfants, aujourd’hui on les retrouve inquiétantes.

Celle-ci n’avait pas seulement grandi, elle s’était idéalisée. Comme trois jours en avril suffisent à de certains arbres pour se couvrir de fleurs, six mois lui avaient suffi pour se vêtir de beauté. Son avril à elle était venu.

On voit quelquefois des gens qui, pauvres et mesquins, semblent se réveiller, passent subitement de l’indigence au faste, font des dépenses de toutes sortes, et deviennent tout à coup éclatants, prodigues et magnifiques. Cela tient à une rente empochée; il y a eu échéance hier. La jeune fille avait touché son semestre.

Et puis ce n’était plus la pensionnaire avec son chapeau de peluche, sa robe de mérinos, ses souliers d’écolier et ses mains rouges; le goût lui était venu avec la beauté; c’était une personne bien mise avec une sorte d’élégance simple et riche et sans manière. Elle avait une robe de damas noir, un camail de même étoffe et un chapeau de crêpe blanc. Ses gants blancs montraient la finesse de sa main qui jouait avec le manche d’une ombrelle en ivoire chinois, et son brodequin de soie dessinait la petitesse de son pied. Quand on passait près d’elle, toute sa toilette exhalait un parfum jeune et pénétrant.

Quant à l’homme, il était toujours le même.

La seconde fois que Marius arriva près d’elle, la jeune fille leva les paupières. Ses yeux étaient d’un bleu céleste et profond, mais dans cet azur voilé il n’y avait encore que le regard d’un enfant. Elle regarda Marius avec indifférence, comme elle eût regardé le marmot qui courait sous les sycomores, ou le vase de marbre qui faisait de l’ombre sur le banc; et Marius de son côté continua sa promenade en pensant à autre chose.

Il passa encore quatre ou cinq fois près du banc où était la jeune fille, mais sans même tourner les yeux vers elle.

Les jours suivants, il revint comme à l’ordinaire au Luxembourg, comme à l’ordinaire, il y trouva «le père et la fille», mais il n’y fit plus attention. Il ne songea pas plus à cette fille quand elle fut belle qu’il n’y songeait lorsqu’elle était laide. Il passait fort près du banc où elle était, parce que c’était son habitude.

Chapitre III

Effet de printemps

Un jour, l’air était tiède, le Luxembourg était inondé d’ombre et de soleil, le ciel était pur comme si les anges l’eussent lavé le matin, les passereaux poussaient de petits cris dans les profondeurs des marronniers, Marius avait ouvert toute son âme à la nature, il ne pensait à rien, il vivait et il respirait, il passa près de ce banc, la jeune fille leva les yeux sur lui, leurs deux regards se rencontrèrent.

Qu’y avait-il cette fois dans le regard de la jeune fille? Marius n’eût pu le dire. Il n’y avait rien et il y avait tout. Ce fut un étrange éclair.

Elle baissa les yeux, et il continua son chemin.

Ce qu’il venait de voir, ce n’était pas l’œil ingénu et simple d’un enfant, c’était un gouffre mystérieux qui s’était entr’ouvert, puis brusquement refermé.

Il y a un jour où toute jeune fille regarde ainsi. Malheur à qui se trouve là!

Ce premier regard d’une âme qui ne se connaît pas encore est comme l’aube dans le ciel. C’est l’éveil de quelque chose de rayonnant et d’inconnu. Rien ne saurait rendre le charme dangereux de cette lueur inattendue qui éclaire vaguement tout-à-coup d’adorables ténèbres et qui se compose de toute l’innocence du présent et de toute la passion de l’avenir. C’est une sorte de tendresse indécise qui se révèle au hasard et qui attend. C’est un piège que l’innocence tend à son insu et où elle prend des cœurs sans le vouloir et sans le savoir. C’est une vierge qui regarde comme une femme.

Il est rare qu’une rêverie profonde ne naisse pas de ce regard là où il tombe. Toutes les puretés et toutes les candeurs se concentrent dans ce rayon céleste et fatal qui, plus que les œillades les mieux travaillées des coquettes, a le pouvoir magique de faire subitement éclore au fond d’une âme cette fleur sombre, pleine de parfums et de poisons, qu’on appelle l’amour.

Le soir, en rentrant dans son galetas, Marius jeta les yeux sur son vêtement, et s’aperçut pour la première fois qu’il avait la malpropreté, l’inconvenance et la stupidité inouïe d’aller se promener au Luxembourg avec ses habits «de tous les jours», c’est-à-dire avec un chapeau cassé près de la ganse, de grosses bottes de roulier, un pantalon noir blanc aux genoux et un habit noir pâle aux coudes.

Chapitre IV

Commencement d’une grande maladie

Le lendemain, à l’heure accoutumée, Marius tira de son armoire son habit neuf, son pantalon neuf, son chapeau neuf et ses bottes neuves; il se revêtit de cette panoplie complète, mit des gants, luxe prodigieux, et s’en alla au Luxembourg.

Chemin faisant, il rencontra Courfeyrac, et feignit de ne pas le voir. Courfeyrac en rentrant chez lui dit à ses amis. Je viens de rencontrer le chapeau neuf et l’habit neuf de Marius et Marius dedans. Il allait sans doute passer un examen. Il avait l’air tout bête.

Arrivé au Luxembourg, Marius fit le tour du bassin et considéra les cygnes, puis il demeura longtemps en contemplation devant une statue qui avait la tête toute noire de moisissure et à laquelle une hanche manquait. Il y avait près du bassin un bourgeois quadragénaire et ventru qui tenait par la main un petit garçon de cinq ans et lui disait: — Évite les excès. Mon fils, tiens-toi à égale distance du despotisme et de l’anarchie. — Marius écouta ce bourgeois. Puis il fit encore une fois le tour du bassin. Enfin il se dirigea vers «son allée», lentement et comme s’il y allait à regret. On eût dit qu’il était à la fois forcé et empêché d’y aller. Il ne se rendait aucun compte de tout cela, et croyait faire comme tous les jours.

En débouchant dans l’allée, il aperçut à l’autre bout «sur leur banc» M. Leblanc et la jeune fille. Il boutonna son habit jusqu’en haut, le tendit sur son torse pour qu’il ne fît pas de plis, examina avec une certaine complaisance les reflets lustrés de son pantalon, et marcha sur le banc. Il y avait de l’attaque dans cette marche et certainement une velléité de conquête. Je dis donc: il marcha sur le banc, comme je dirais: Annibal marcha sur Rome.

Du reste il n’y avait rien que de machinal dans tous ses mouvements, et il n’avait aucunement interrompu les préoccupations habituelles de son esprit et de ses travaux. Il pensait en ce moment-là que le *Manuel du Baccalauréat* était un livre stupide et qu’il fallait qu’il eût été rédigé par de rares crétins pour qu’on y analysât comme chef-d’œuvre de l’esprit humain trois tragédies de Racine et seulement une comédie de Molière. Il avait un sifflement aigu dans l’oreille. Tout en approchant du banc, il tendait les plis de son habit, et ses yeux se fixaient sur la jeune fille. Il lui semblait qu'elle emplissait toute l'extrémité de l'allée d'une vague lueur bleue.

À mesure qu'il approchait, son pas se ralentissait de plus en plus. Parvenu à une certaine distance du banc, bien avant d'être à la fin de l'allée, il s'arrêta, et il ne put savoir lui-même comment il se fit qu'il rebroussa chemin. Il ne se dit même point qu'il n'allait pas jusqu'au bout. Ce fut à peine si la jeune fille put l'apercevoir de loin et voir le bel air qu'il avait dans ses habits neufs. Cependant il se tenait très droit, pour avoir bonne mine dans le cas où quelqu'un qui serait derrière lui le regarderait.

Il atteignit le bout opposé, puis revint, et cette fois il s'approcha un peu plus près du banc. Il parvint même jusqu'à une distance de trois intervalles d'arbres, mais là il sentit je ne sais quelle impossibilité d'aller plus loin, et il hésita. Il avait cru voir le visage de la jeune fille se pencher vers lui. Cependant il fit un effort viril et violent, dompta l'hésitation, et continua d'aller en avant. Quelques secondes après, il passait devant le banc, droit et ferme, rouge jusqu'aux oreilles, sans oser jeter un regard à droite, ni à gauche, la main dans son habit comme un homme d'état. Au moment où il passa — sous le canon de la place — il éprouva un affreux battement de cœur. Elle avait comme la veille sa robe de damas et son chapeau de crêpe. Il entendit une voix ineffable qui devait être «sa voix». Elle causait tranquillement. Elle était bien jolie. Il le sentait, quoiqu'il n'essayât pas de la voir. — Elle ne pourrait cependant, pensait-il, s'empêcher d'avoir de l'estime et de la considération pour moi si elle savait que c'est moi qui suis le véritable auteur de la dissertation sur Marcos Obregon de la Ronda que monsieur François de Neufchâteau a mise, comme étant de lui, en tête de son édition de *Gil Blas*!

Il dépassa le banc, alla jusqu'à l'extrémité de l'allée qui était tout proche, puis revint sur ses pas et passa encore devant la belle fille. Cette fois il était très pâle. Du reste il n'éprouvait rien que de fort désagréable. Il s'éloigna du banc et de la jeune fille, et, tout en lui tournant le dos, il se figurait qu'elle le regardait, et cela le faisait trébucher.

Il n'essaya plus de s'approcher du banc, il s'arrêta vers la moitié de l'allée, et là, chose qu'il ne faisait jamais, il s'assit, jetant des regards de côté, et songeant, dans les profondeurs les plus indistinctes de son esprit, qu'après tout il était difficile que les personnes dont il admirait le chapeau blanc et la robe noire fussent absolument insensibles à son pantalon lustré et à son habit neuf.

Au bout d’un quart d’heure il se leva, comme s’il allait recommencer à marcher vers ce banc qu’une auréole entourait. Cependant il restait debout et immobile. Pour la première fois depuis quinze mois il se dit que ce monsieur qui s’asseyait là tous les jours avec sa fille l’avait sans doute remarqué de son côté et trouvait probablement son assiduité étrange.

Pour la première fois aussi il sentit quelque irrévérence à désigner cet inconnu, même dans le secret de sa pensée, par le sobriquet de M. Leblanc.

Il demeura ainsi quelques minutes la tête baissée, et faisant des dessins sur le sable avec une baguette qu’il avait à la main.

Puis il se tourna brusquement du côté opposé au banc, à M. Leblanc et à sa fille, et s’en revint chez lui.

Ce jour-là il oublia d’aller dîner. À huit heures du soir il s’en aperçut, et comme il était trop tard pour descendre rue Saint-Jacques, tiens dit-il, et il mangea un morceau de pain.

Il ne se coucha qu’après avoir brossé son habit et l’avoir plié avec soin.

Chapitre V

Divers coups de foudre tombent sur mame Bougon

Le lendemain, mame Bougon, — c'est ainsi que Courfeyrac nommait la vieille portière-principale-locataire-femme-de-ménage de la masure Gorbeau, elle s'appelait en réalité madame Burgon, nous l'avons constaté, mais ce brise-fer de Courfeyrac ne respectait rien, — mame Bougon, stupéfaite, remarqua que monsieur Marius sortait encore avec son habit neuf.

Il retourna au Luxembourg, mais il ne dépassa point son banc de la moitié de l'allée. Il s'y assit comme la veille, considérant de loin et voyant distinctement le chapeau blanc, la robe noire et surtout la lueur bleue. Il n'en bougea pas, et ne rentra chez lui que lorsqu'on ferma les portes du Luxembourg. Il ne vit pas M. Leblanc et sa fille se retirer. Il en conclut qu'ils étaient sortis du jardin par la grille de la rue de l'Ouest. Plus tard, quelques semaines après, quand il y songea, il ne put jamais se rappeler où il avait dîné ce soir-là.

Le lendemain, c'était le troisième jour, mame Bougon fut refoudroyée. Marius sortit avec son habit neuf.

— Trois jours de suite! s'écria-t-elle.

Elle essaya de le suivre, mais Marius marchait lestement et avec d'immenses enjambées; c'était un hippopotame entreprenant la poursuite d'un chamois. Elle le perdit de vue en deux minutes et rentra essoufflée, aux trois quarts étouffée par son asthme, furieuse. — Si cela a du bon sens, grommela-t-elle, de mettre ses beaux habits tous les jours et de faire courir les personnes comme cela!

Marius s'était rendu au Luxembourg.

La jeune fille y était avec M. Leblanc. Marius approcha le plus près qu'il put en faisant semblant de lire dans un livre, mais il resta encore fort loin, puis revint s'asseoir sur son banc où il passa quatre heures à regarder sauter dans l'allée les moineaux francs qui lui faisaient l'effet de se moquer de lui.

Une quinzaine s'écoula ainsi. Marius allait au Luxembourg non plus pour se promener, mais pour s'y asseoir toujours à la même place et sans savoir pourquoi. Arrivé là, il ne remuait plus. Il mettait chaque matin son habit neuf pour ne pas se montrer, et il recommençait le lendemain.

Elle était décidément d’une beauté merveilleuse. La seule remarque qu’on pût faire qui ressemblât à une critique, c’est que la contradiction entre son regard qui était triste et son sourire qui était joyeux donnait à son visage quelque chose d’un peu égaré, ce qui fait qu’à de certains moments ce doux visage devenait étrange sans cesser d’être charmant.

Chapitre VI

Fait prisonnier

Un des derniers jours de la seconde semaine, Marius était comme à son ordinaire assis sur son banc, tenant à la main un livre ouvert dont depuis deux heures il n’avait pas tourné une page. Tout à coup il tressaillit. Un événement se passait à l’extrémité de l’allée. M. Leblanc et sa fille venaient de quitter leur banc, la fille avait pris le bras du père, et tous deux se dirigeaient lentement vers le milieu de l’allée où était Marius. Marius ferma son livre, puis il le rouvrit, puis il s’efforça de lire. Il tremblait. L’auréole venait droit à lui. — Ah! Mon dieu! pensait-il, je n’aurai jamais le temps de prendre une attitude. — Cependant, l’homme à cheveux blancs et la jeune fille s’avançaient. Il lui paraissait que cela durait un siècle et que cela n’était qu’une seconde. — Qu’est-ce qu’ils viennent faire par ici? se demandait-il. Comment! elle va passer là! Ses pieds vont marcher sur ce sable, dans cette allée, à deux pas de moi! — Il était bouleversé, il eût voulu être très beau, il eût voulu avoir la croix! Il entendait s’approcher le bruit doux et mesuré de leurs pas. Il s’imaginait que M. Leblanc lui jetait des regards irrités. Est-ce que ce monsieur va me parler? pensait-il. Il baissa la tête; quand il la releva, ils étaient tout près de lui. La jeune fille passa, et en passant elle le regarda. Elle le regarda fixement, avec une douceur pensive qui fit frissonner Marius de la tête aux pieds. Il lui sembla qu’elle lui reprochait d’avoir été si longtemps sans venir jusqu’à elle et qu’elle lui disait: C’est moi qui viens. Marius resta ébloui devant ces prunelles pleines de rayons et d’abîmes.

Il se sentait un brasier dans le cerveau. Elle était venue à lui, quelle joie! Et puis, comme elle l’avait regardé! Elle lui parut plus belle qu’il ne l’avait encore vue. Belle d’une beauté tout ensemble féminine et angélique, d’une beauté complète qui eût fait chanter Pétrarque et agenouiller Dante. Il lui semblait qu’il nageait en plein ciel bleu. En même temps il était horriblement contrarié, parce qu’il avait de la poussière sur ses bottes.

Il croyait être sûr qu’elle avait regardé aussi ses bottes.

Il la suivit des yeux jusqu’à ce qu’elle eût disparu. Puis il se mit à marcher dans le Luxembourg comme un fou. Il est probable que par moments il riait tout seul et parlait haut. Il était si rêveur près des bonnes d’enfants que chacune le croyait amoureux d’elle.

Il sortit du Luxembourg, espérant la retrouver dans une rue.

Il se croisa avec Courfeyrac sous les arcades de l’Odéon et lui dit: Viens dîner avec moi. Ils s’en allèrent chez Rousseau, et dépensèrent six francs. Marius mangea comme un ogre. Il donna six sous au garçon. Au dessert il dit à Courfeyrac: As-tu lu le journal? Quel beau discours a fait Audry de Puyraveau!

Il était éperdument amoureux.

Après le dîner, il dit à Courfeyrac: Je te paye le spectacle. Ils allèrent à la Porte-Saint-Martin voir Frédérick dans *l’Auberge des Adrets*. Marius s’amusa énormément.

En même temps il eut un redoublement de sauvagerie. En sortant du théâtre, il refusa de regarder la jarretière d’une modiste qui enjambait un ruisseau, et Courfeyrac ayant dit: *Je mettrais volontiers cette femme dans ma collection,* lui fit presque horreur.

Courfeyrac l’avait invité à déjeuner au café Voltaire le lendemain. Marius y alla, et mangea encore plus que la veille. Il était tout pensif et très gai. On eût dit qu’il saisissait toutes les occasions de rire aux éclats. Il embrassa tendrement un provincial quelconque qu’on lui présenta. Un cercle d’étudiants s’était fait autour de la table et l’on avait parlé des niaiseries payées par l’état qui se débitent en chaire à la Sorbonne, puis la conversation était tombée sur les fautes et les lacunes des dictionnaires et des prosodies-Quicherat. Marius interrompit la discussion pour s’écrier: — C’est cependant bien agréable d’avoir la croix!

— Voilà qui est drôle! dit Courfeyrac bas à Jean Prouvaire.

— Non, répondit Jean Prouvaire, voilà qui est sérieux.

Cela était sérieux en effet. Marius en était à cette première heure violente et charmante qui commence les grandes passions.

Un regard avait fait tout cela.

Quand la mine est chargée, quand l’incendie est prêt, rien n’est plus simple. Un regard est une étincelle.

C’en était fait. Marius aimait une femme. Sa destinée entrait dans l’inconnu.

Le regard des femmes ressemble à de certains rouages tranquilles en apparence et formidables. On passe à côté tous les jours paisiblement et impunément et sans se douter de rien. Il vient un moment où l’on oublie même que cette chose est là. On va, on vient, on rêve, on parle, on rit. Tout à coup on se sent saisi. C’est fini. Le rouage vous tient, le regard vous a pris. Il vous a pris, n’importe par où ni comment, par une partie quelconque de votre pensée qui traînait, par une distraction que vous avez eue. Vous êtes perdu. Vous y passerez tout entier. Un enchaînement de forces mystérieuses s’empare de vous. Vous vous débattez en vain. Plus de secours humain possible. Vous allez tomber d’engrenage en engrenage, d’angoisse en angoisse, de torture en torture, vous, votre esprit, votre fortune, votre avenir, votre âme; et, selon que vous serez au pouvoir d’une créature méchante ou d’un noble cœur, vous ne sortirez de cette effrayante machine que défiguré par la honte ou transfiguré par la passion.

Chapitre VII

Aventures de la lettre U livrée aux conjectures

L’isolement, le détachement de tout, la fierté, l’indépendance, le goût de la nature, l’absence d’activité quotidienne et matérielle, la vie en soi, les luttes secrètes de la chasteté, l’extase bienveillante devant toute la création, avaient préparé Marius à cette possession qu’on nomme la passion. Son culte pour son père était devenu peu à peu une religion, et, comme toute religion, s’était retiré au fond de l’âme. Il fallait quelque chose sur le premier plan. L’amour vint.

Tout un grand mois s’écoula, pendant lequel Marius alla tous les jours au Luxembourg. L’heure venue, rien ne pouvait le retenir. — Il est de service, disait Courfeyrac. Marius vivait dans les ravissements. Il est certain que la jeune fille le regardait.

Il avait fini par s’enhardir, et il s’approchait du banc. Cependant il ne passait plus devant, obéissant à la fois à l’instinct de timidité et à l’instinct de prudence des amoureux. Il jugeait utile de ne point attirer «l’attention du père». Il combinait ses stations derrière les arbres et les piédestaux des statues avec un machiavélisme profond, de façon à se faire voir le plus possible à la jeune fille et à se laisser voir le moins possible du vieux monsieur. Quelquefois pendant des demi-heures entières, il restait immobile à l’ombre d’un Léonidas ou d’un Spartacus quelconque, tenant à la main un livre au-dessus duquel ses yeux, doucement levés, allaient chercher la belle fille, et elle, de son côté, détournait avec un vague sourire son charmant profil vers lui. Tout en causant le plus naturellement et le plus tranquillement du monde avec l’homme à cheveux blancs, elle appuyait sur Marius toutes les rêveries d’un œil virginal et passionné. Antique et immémorial manège qu’Ève savait dès le premier jour du monde et que toute femme sait dès le premier jour de la vie! Sa bouche donnait la réplique à l’un et son regard donnait la réplique à l’autre.

Il faut croire pourtant que M. Leblanc finissait par s’apercevoir de quelque chose, car souvent, lorsque Marius arrivait, il se levait et se mettait à marcher. Il avait quitté leur place accoutumée et avait adopté, à l’autre extrémité de l’allée, le banc voisin du Gladiateur, comme pour voir si Marius les y suivrait. Marius ne comprit point, et fit cette faute. Le «père» commença à devenir inexact, et n'amena plus «sa fille» tous les jours. Quelquefois il venait seul. Alors Marius ne restait pas. Autre faute.

Marius ne prenait point garde à ces symptômes. De la phase de timidité il avait passé, progrès naturel et fatal, à la phase d'aveuglement. Son amour croissait. Il en rêvait toutes les nuits. Et puis il lui était arrivé un bonheur inespéré, huile sur le feu, redoublement de ténèbres sur ses yeux. Un soir, à la brune, il avait trouvé sur le banc que «M. Leblanc et sa fille» venaient de quitter, un mouchoir. Un mouchoir tout simple et sans broderie, mais blanc, fin, et qui lui parut exhaler des senteurs ineffables. Il s'en empara avec transport. Ce mouchoir était marqué des lettres U. F.; Marius ne savait rien de cette belle enfant, ni sa famille, ni son nom, ni sa demeure; ces deux lettres étaient la première chose d'elle qu'il saisissait, adorables initiales sur lesquelles il commença tout de suite à construire son échafaudage. U était évidemment le prénom. Ursule! pensa-t-il, quel délicieux nom! Il baisa le mouchoir, l'aspira, le mit sur son cœur, sur sa chair, pendant le jour, et la nuit sous ses lèvres pour s'endormir.

— J'y sens toute son âme! s'écriait-il.

Ce mouchoir était au vieux monsieur qui l'avait tout bonnement laissé tomber de sa poche.

Les jours qui suivirent la trouvaille, il ne se montra plus au Luxembourg que baisant le mouchoir et l'appuyant sur son cœur. La belle enfant n'y comprenait rien et le lui marquait par des signes imperceptibles.

— Ô pudeur! disait Marius.

Chapitre VIII

Les invalides eux-mêmes peuvent être heureux

Puisque nous avons prononcé le mot *pudeur*, et puisque nous ne cachons rien, nous devons dire qu'une fois pourtant, à travers ses extases, «son Ursule» lui donna un grief très sérieux. C'était un de ces jours où elle déterminait M. Leblanc à quitter le banc et à se promener dans l'allée. Il faisait une vive brise de prairial qui remuait le haut des platanes. Le père et la fille, se donnant le bras, venaient de passer devant le banc de Marius. Marius s'était levé derrière eux et les suivait du regard, comme il convient dans cette situation d'âme éperdue.

Tout à coup un souffle de vent, plus en gaîté que les autres, et probablement chargé de faire les affaires du printemps, s'envola de la pépinière, s'abattit sur l'allée, enveloppa la jeune fille dans un ravissant frisson digne des nymphes de Virgile et des faunes de Théocrite, et souleva sa robe, cette robe plus sacrée que celle d'Isis, presque jusqu'à la hauteur de la jarretière. Une jambe d'une forme exquise apparut. Marius la vit. Il fut exaspéré et furieux.

La jeune fille avait rapidement baissé sa robe d'un mouvement divinement effarouché, mais il n'en fut pas moins indigné. — Il était seul dans l'allée, c'est vrai. Mais il pouvait y avoir eu quelqu'un. Et s'il y avait eu quelqu'un! Comprend-on une chose pareille! C'est horrible ce qu'elle vient de faire là! — Hélas! la pauvre enfant n'avait rien fait; il n'y avait qu'un coupable, le vent; mais Marius, en qui frémissait confusément le Bartholo qu'il y a dans Chérubin, était déterminé à être mécontent, et était jaloux de son ombre. C'est ainsi en effet que s'éveille dans le cœur humain, et que s'impose, même sans droit, l'âcre et bizarre jalousie de la chair. Du reste, en dehors même de cette jalousie, la vue de cette jambe charmante n'avait eu pour lui rien d'agréable; le bas blanc de la première femme venue lui eût fait plus de plaisir.

Quand «son Ursule», après avoir atteint l'extrémité de l'allée, revint sur ses pas avec M. Leblanc et passa devant le banc où Marius s'était rassis, Marius lui jeta un regard bourru et féroce. La jeune fille eut ce petit redressement en arrière accompagné d'un haussement de paupières qui signifie: Eh bien, qu'est-ce qu'il a donc?

Ce fut là leur «première querelle».

Marius achevait à peine de lui faire cette scène avec les yeux que quelqu’un traversa l’allée. C’était un invalide tout courbé, tout ridé et tout blanc, en uniforme Louis XV, ayant sur le torse la petite plaque ovale de drap rouge aux épées croisées, croix de Saint-Louis du soldat, et orné en outre d’une manche d’habit sans bras dedans, d’un menton d’argent et d’une jambe de bois. Marius crut distinguer que cet être avait l’air extrêmement satisfait. Il lui sembla même que le vieux cynique, tout en clopinant près de lui, lui avait adressé un clignement d’œil très fraternel et très joyeux, comme si un hasard quelconque avait fait qu’ils pussent être d’intelligence et qu’ils eussent savouré en commun quelque bonne aubaine. Qu’avait-il donc à être si content, ce débris de Mars? Que s’était-il donc passé entre cette jambe de bois et l’autre? Marius arriva au paroxysme de la jalousie. — Il était peut-être là! se dit-il; il a peut-être vu! — Et il eut envie d’exterminer l’invalide.

Le temps aidant, toute pointe s’émousse. Cette colère de Marius contre «Ursule», si juste et si légitime qu’elle fût, passa. Il finit par pardonner; mais ce fut un grand effort; il la bouda trois jours.

Cependant, à travers tout cela et à cause de tout cela, la passion grandissait et devenait folle.

Chapitre IX

Éclipse

On vient de voir comment Marius avait découvert ou cru découvrir qu'Elle s'appelait Ursule.

L'appétit vient en aimant. Savoir qu'elle se nommait Ursule, c'était déjà beaucoup; c'était peu. Marius en trois ou quatre semaines eut dévoré ce bonheur. Il en voulut un autre. Il voulut savoir où elle demeurait.

Il avait fait une première faute: tomber dans l'embûche du banc du Gladiateur. Il en avait fait une seconde: ne pas rester au Luxembourg quand M. Leblanc y venait seul. Il en fit une troisième. Immense. Il suivit «Ursule».

Elle demeurait rue de l'Ouest, à l'endroit de la rue le moins fréquenté, dans une maison neuve à trois étages d'apparence modeste.

À partir de ce moment, Marius ajouta à son bonheur de la voir au Luxembourg le bonheur de la suivre jusque chez elle.

Sa faim augmentait. Il savait comment elle s'appelait, son petit nom du moins, le nom charmant, le vrai nom d'une femme; il savait où elle demeurait; il voulut savoir qui elle était.

Un soir, après qu'il les eut suivis jusque chez eux et qu'il les eut vus disparaître sous la porte cochère, il entra à leur suite et dit vaillamment au portier:

— C'est le monsieur du premier qui vient de rentrer?

— Non, répondit le portier. C'est le monsieur du troisième.

Encore un pas de fait. Ce succès enhardit Marius.

— Sur le devant? demanda-t-il.

— Parbleu! fit le portier, la maison n'est bâtie que sur la rue.

— Et quel est l'état de ce monsieur? repartit Marius.

— C'est un rentier, monsieur. Un homme bien bon, et qui fait du bien aux malheureux, quoique pas riche.

— Comment s'appelle-t-il? reprit Marius.

Le portier leva la tête, et dit:

— Est-ce que monsieur est mouchard?

Marius s'en alla assez penaud, mais fort ravi. Il avançait.

— Bon, pensa-t-il. Je sais qu’elle s’appelle Ursule, qu’elle est fille d’un rentier, et qu’elle demeure là, au troisième, rue de l’Ouest.

Le lendemain M. Leblanc et sa fille ne firent au Luxembourg qu’une courte apparition; ils s’en allèrent qu’il faisait grand jour. Marius les suivit rue de l’Ouest comme il en avait pris l’habitude. En arrivant à la porte cochère, M. Leblanc fit passer sa fille devant puis s’arrêta avant de franchir le seuil, se retourna et regarda Marius fixement.

Le jour d’après, ils ne vinrent pas au Luxembourg. Marius attendit en vain toute la journée.

À la nuit tombée, il alla rue de l’Ouest, et vit de la lumière aux fenêtres du troisième. Il se promena sous ces fenêtres jusqu’à ce que cette lumière fût éteinte.

Le jour suivant, personne au Luxembourg. Marius attendit tout le jour, puis alla faire sa faction de nuit sous les croisées. Cela le conduisait jusqu’à dix heures du soir. Son dîner devenait ce qu’il pouvait. La fièvre nourrit le malade et l’amour l’amoureux.

Il se passa huit jours de la sorte. M. Leblanc et sa fille ne paraissaient plus au Luxembourg. Marius faisait des conjectures tristes; il n’osait guetter la porte cochère pendant le jour. Il se contentait d’aller à la nuit contempler la clarté rougeâtre des vitres. Il y voyait par moments passer des ombres, et le cœur lui battait.

Le huitième jour, quand il arriva sous les fenêtres, il n’y avait pas de lumière. — Tiens! dit-il, la lampe n’est pas encore allumée. Il fait nuit pourtant. Est-ce qu’ils seraient sortis? Il attendit. Jusqu’à dix heures. Jusqu’à minuit. Jusqu’à une heure du matin. Aucune lumière ne s’alluma aux fenêtres du troisième étage et personne ne rentra dans la maison. Il s’en alla très sombre.

Le lendemain, — car il ne vivait que de lendemains en lendemains, il n’y avait, pour ainsi dire, plus d’aujourd’hui pour lui, — le lendemain il ne trouva personne au Luxembourg, il s’y attendait; à la brune, il alla à la maison. Aucune lueur aux fenêtres; les persiennes étaient fermées; le troisième était tout noir.

Marius frappa à la porte cochère, entra et dit au portier:

— Le monsieur du troisième?

— Déménagé, répondit le portier.

Marius chancela et dit faiblement:

— Depuis quand donc?

— D’hier.

— Où demeure-t-il maintenant?

— Je n’en sais rien.

— Il n’a donc point laissé sa nouvelle adresse?

— Non.

Et le portier levant le nez reconnut Marius.

— Tiens! c’est vous! dit-il, mais vous êtes donc décidément quart-d’œil?

Livre septième — Patron-minette

Chapitre I

Les mines et les mineurs

Les sociétés humaines ont toutes ce qu'on appelle dans les théâtres *un troisième dessous*. Le sol social est partout miné, tantôt pour le bien, tantôt pour le mal. Ces travaux se superposent. Il y a les mines supérieures et les mines inférieures. Il y a un haut et un bas dans cet obscur sous-sol qui s'effondre parfois sous la civilisation, et que notre indifférence et notre insouciance foulent aux pieds. L'Encyclopédie, au siècle dernier, était une mine, presque à ciel ouvert. Les ténèbres, ces sombres couveuses du christianisme primitif, n'attendaient qu'une occasion pour faire explosion sous les Césars et pour inonder le genre humain de lumière. Car dans les ténèbres sacrées il y a de la lumière latente. Les volcans sont pleins d'une ombre capable de flamboiement. Toute lave commence par être nuit. Les catacombes, où s'est dite la première messe, n'étaient pas seulement la cave de Rome, elles étaient le souterrain du monde.

Il y a sous la construction sociale, cette merveille compliquée d'une masure, des excavations de toutes sortes. Il y a la mine religieuse, la mine philosophique, la mine politique, la mine économique, la mine révolutionnaire. Tel pioche avec l'idée, tel pioche avec le chiffre, tel pioche avec la colère. On s'appelle et on se répond d'une catacombe à l'autre. Les utopies cheminent sous terre dans ces conduits. Elles s'y ramifient en tous sens. Elles s'y rencontrent parfois, et y fraternisent. Jean-Jacques prête son pic à Diogène qui lui prête sa lanterne. Quelquefois elles s'y combattent. Calvin prend Socin aux cheveux. Mais rien n'arrête ni n'interrompt la tension de toutes ces énergies vers le but, et la vaste activité simultanée, qui va et vient, monte, descend et remonte dans ces obscurités, et qui transforme lentement le dessus par le dessous et le dehors par le dedans; immense fourmillement inconnu. La société se doute à peine de ce creusement qui lui laisse sa surface et lui change les entrailles. Autant d'étages souterrains, autant de travaux différents, autant d'extractions diverses. Que sort-il de toutes ces fouilles profondes? L'avenir.

Plus on s'enfonce, plus les travailleurs sont mystérieux. Jusqu'à un degré que le philosophe social sait reconnaître, le travail est bon; au delà de ce degré, il est douteux et mixte; plus bas, il devient terrible. À une certaine profondeur, les excavations ne sont plus pénétrables à l’esprit de civilisation, la limite respirable à l’homme est dépassée; un commencement de monstres est possible.

L’échelle descendante est étrange; et chacun de ces échelons correspond à un étage où la philosophie peut prendre pied, et où l’on rencontre un de ces ouvriers, quelquefois divins, quelquefois difformes. Au-dessous de Jean Huss, il y a Luther; au-dessous de Luther, il y a Descartes; au-dessous de Descartes, il y a Voltaire; au-dessous de Voltaire, il y a Condorcet; au-dessous de Condorcet, il y a Robespierre; au-dessous de Robespierre, il y a Marat; au-dessous de Marat, il y a Babeuf. Et cela continue. Plus bas, confusément, à la limite qui sépare l’indistinct de l’invisible, on aperçoit d’autres hommes sombres, qui peut-être n’existent pas encore. Ceux d’hier sont des spectres; ceux de demain sont des larves. L’œil de l’esprit les distingue obscurément. Le travail embryonnaire de l’avenir est une des visions du philosophe.

Un monde dans les limbes à l’état de foetus, quelle silhouette inouïe!

Saint-Simon, Owen, Fourier, sont là aussi, dans des sapes latérales.

Certes, quoiqu’une divine chaîne invisible lie entre eux à leur insu tous ces pionniers souterrains, qui, presque toujours, se croient isolés, et qui ne le sont pas, leurs travaux sont bien divers, et la lumière des uns contraste avec le flamboiement des autres. Les uns sont paradisiaques, les autres sont tragiques. Pourtant, quel que soit le contraste, tous ces travailleurs, depuis le plus haut jusqu’au plus nocturne, depuis le plus sage jusqu’au plus fou, ont une similitude, et la voici: le désintéressement. Marat s’oublie comme Jésus. Ils se laissent de côté, ils s’omettent, ils ne songent point à eux. Ils voient autre chose qu’eux-mêmes. Ils ont un regard, et ce regard cherche l’absolu. Le premier a tout le ciel dans les yeux; le dernier, si énigmatique qu’il soit, a encore sous le sourcil la pâle clarté de l’infini. Vénérez, quoi qu’il fasse, quiconque a ce signe: la prunelle étoile.

La prunelle ombre est l’autre signe.

À elle commence le mal. Devant qui n’a pas de regard songez et tremblez. L’ordre social a ses mineurs noirs.

Il y a un point où l’approfondissement est de l’ensevelissement, et où la lumière s’éteint.

Au-dessous de toutes ces mines que nous venons d’indiquer, au-dessous de toutes ces galeries, au-dessous de tout cet immense système veineux souterrain du progrès et de l’utopie, bien plus avant dans la terre, plus bas que Marat, plus bas que Babeuf, plus bas, beaucoup plus bas, et sans relation aucune avec les étages supérieurs, il y a la dernière sape. Lieu formidable. C’est ce que nous avons nommé le troisième dessous. C’est la fosse des ténèbres. C’est la cave des aveugles. *Inferi*.

Ceci communique aux abîmes.

Chapitre II

Le bas-fond

Là le désintéressement s'évanouit. Le démon s'ébauche vaguement; chacun pour soi. Le moi sans yeux hurle, cherche, tâtonne et ronge. L'Ugolin social est dans ce gouffre.

Les silhouettes farouches qui rôdent dans cette fosse, presque bêtes, presque fantômes, ne s'occupent pas du progrès universel, elles ignorent l'idée et le mot, elles n'ont souci que de l'assouvissement individuel. Elles sont presque inconscientes, et il y a au dedans d'elles une sorte d'effacement effrayant. Elles ont deux mères, toutes deux marâtres, l'ignorance et la misère. Elles ont un guide, le besoin; et, pour toutes les formes de la satisfaction, l'appétit. Elles sont brutalement voraces, c'est-à-dire féroces, non à la façon du tyran, mais à la façon du tigre. De la souffrance ces larves passent au crime; filiation fatale, engendrement vertigineux, logique de l'ombre. Ce qui rampe dans le troisième dessous social, ce n'est plus la réclamation étouffée de l'absolu; c'est la protestation de la matière. L'homme y devient dragon. Avoir faim, avoir soif, c'est le point de départ; être Satan, c'est le point d'arrivée. De cette cave sort Lacenaire.

On vient de voir tout à l'heure, au livre quatrième, un des compartiments de la mine supérieure, de la grande sape politique, révolutionnaire et philosophique. Là, nous venons de le dire, tout est noble, pur, digne, honnête. Là, certes, on peut se tromper, et l'on se trompe; mais l'erreur y est vénérable tant elle implique d'héroïsme. L'ensemble du travail qui se fait là a un nom: le Progrès.

Le moment est venu d'entrevoir d'autres profondeurs, les profondeurs hideuses.

Il y a sous la société, insistons-y, et, jusqu'au jour où l'ignorance sera dissipée, il y aura la grande caverne du mal.

Cette cave est au-dessous de toutes et est l'ennemie de toutes. C'est la haine sans exception. Cette cave ne connaît pas de philosophes. Son poignard n'a jamais taillé de plume. Sa noirceur n'a aucun rapport avec la noirceur sublime de l'écritoire. Jamais les doigts de la nuit qui se crispent sous ce plafond asphyxiant n'ont feuilleté un livre ni déplié un journal.

Babeuf est un exploiteur pour Cartouche! Marat est un aristocrate pour Schinderhannes. Cette cave a pour but l’effondrement de tout.

De tout. Y compris les sapes supérieures, qu’elle exècre. Elle ne mine pas seulement, dans son fourmillement hideux, l’ordre social actuel; elle mine la philosophie, elle mine la science, elle mine le droit, elle mine la pensée humaine, elle mine la civilisation, elle mine la révolution, elle mine le progrès. Elle s’appelle tout simplement vol, prostitution, meurtre et assassinat. Elle est ténèbres, et elle veut le chaos. Sa voûte est faite d’ignorance.

Toutes les autres, celles d’en haut, n’ont qu’un but, la supprimer. C’est là que tendent, par tous leurs organes à la fois, par l’amélioration du réel comme par la contemplation de l’absolu, la philosophie et le progrès. Détruisez la cave Ignorance, vous détruisez la taupe Crime.

Condensons en quelques mots une partie de ce que nous venons d’écrire. L’unique péril social, c’est l’Ombre.

Humanité, c’est identité. Tous les hommes sont la même argile. Nulle différence, ici-bas du moins, dans la prédestination. Même ombre avant, même chair pendant, même cendre après. Mais l’ignorance mêlée à la pâte humaine la noircit. Cette incurable noirceur gagne le dedans de l’homme et y devient le Mal.

Chapitre III

Babet, Gueulemer, Claquesous et Montparnasse

Un quatuor de bandits, Claquesous, Gueulemer, Babet et Montparnasse, gouvernait de 1830 à 1835 le troisième dessous de Paris.

Gueulemer était un Hercule déclassé. Il avait pour antre l'égout de l'Arche-Marion. Il avait six pieds de haut, des pectoraux de marbre, des biceps d'airain, une respiration de caverne, le torse d'un colosse, un crâne d'oiseau. On croyait voir l'Hercule Farnèse vêtu d'un pantalon de coutil et d'une veste de velours de coton. Gueulemer, bâti de cette façon sculpturale, aurait pu dompter les monstres; il avait trouvé plus court d'en être un. Front bas, tempes larges, moins de quarante ans et la patte d'oie, le poil rude et court, la joue en brosse, une barbe sanglière; on voit d'ici l'homme. Ses muscles sollicitaient le travail, sa stupidité n'en voulait pas. C'était une grosse force paresseuse. Il était assassin par nonchalance. On le croyait créole. Il avait probablement un peu touché au maréchal Brune, ayant été portefaix à Avignon en 1815. Après ce stage, il était passé bandit.

La diaphanéité de Babet contrastait avec la viande de Gueulemer. Babet était maigre et savant. Il était transparent, mais impénétrable. On voyait le jour à travers les os, mais rien à travers la prunelle. Il se déclarait chimiste. Il avait été pitre chez Bobèche et paillasse chez Bobino. Il avait joué le vaudeville à Saint-Mihiel. C'était un homme à intentions, beau parleur, qui soulignait ses sourires et guillemetait ses gestes. Son industrie était de vendre en plein vent des bustes de plâtre et des portraits du «chef de l'État». De plus, il arrachait les dents. Il avait montré des phénomènes dans les foires, et possédé une baraque avec trompette, et cette affiche: — Babet, artiste dentiste, membre des académies, fait des expériences physiques sur métaux et métalloïdes, extirpe les dents, entreprend les chicots abandonnés par ses confrères. Prix: une dent, un franc cinquante centimes; deux dents, deux francs; trois dents, deux francs cinquante. Profitez de l'occasion. — (Ce «profitez de l'occasion» signifiait: faites-vous-en arracher le plus possible.) Il avait été marié et avait eu des enfants. Il ne savait pas ce que sa femme et ses enfants étaient devenus. Il les avait perdus comme on perd son mouchoir. Haute exception dans le monde obscur dont il était, Babet lisait les journaux. Un jour, du temps qu'il avait sa famille avec lui dans sa baraque roulante, il avait lu dans le *Messager* qu'une femme venait d'accoucher d'un enfant suffisamment viable, ayant un mufle de veau, et il s'était écrié: *Voilà une fortune! ce n'est pas ma femme qui aurait l'esprit de me faire un enfant comme cela*!

Depuis, il avait tout quitté pour «entreprendre Paris». Expression de lui.

Qu'était-ce que Claquesous? C'était la nuit. Il attendait pour se montrer que le ciel se fût barbouillé de noir. Le soir il sortait d'un trou où il rentrait avant le jour. Où était ce trou? Personne ne le savait. Dans la plus complète obscurité, à ses complices, il ne parlait qu'en tournant le dos. S'appelait-il Claquesous? non. Il disait: Je m'appelle Pas-du-tout. Si une chandelle survenait, il mettait un masque. Il était ventriloque. Babet disait: *Claquesous est un nocturne à deux voix*. Claquesous était vague, errant, terrible. On n'était pas sûr qu'il eût un nom, Claquesous étant un sobriquet; on n'était pas sûr qu'il eût une voix, son ventre parlant plus souvent que sa bouche; on n'était pas sûr qu'il eût un visage, personne n'ayant jamais vu que son masque. Il disparaissait comme un évanouissement; ses apparitions étaient des sorties de terre.

Un être lugubre, c'était Montparnasse. Montparnasse était un enfant; moins de vingt ans, un joli visage, des lèvres qui ressemblaient à des cerises, de charmants cheveux noirs, la clarté du printemps dans les yeux; il avait tous les vices et aspirait à tous les crimes. La digestion du mal le mettait en appétit du pire. C'était le gamin tourné voyou, et le voyou devenu escarpe. Il était gentil, efféminé, gracieux, robuste, mou, féroce. Il avait le bord du chapeau relevé à gauche pour faire place à la touffe de cheveux, selon le style de 1829. Il vivait de voler violemment. Sa redingote était de la meilleure coupe, mais râpée. Montparnasse, c'était une gravure de modes ayant de la misère et commettant des meurtres. La cause de tous les attentats de cet adolescent était l'envie d'être bien mis. La première grisette qui lui avait dit: Tu es beau, lui avait jeté la tache des ténèbres dans le cœur, et avait fait un Caïn de cet Abel. Se trouvant joli, il avait voulu être élégant; or la première élégance, c'est l'oisiveté; l'oisiveté d'un pauvre, c'est le crime. Peu de rôdeurs étaient aussi redoutés que Montparnasse. À dix-huit ans, il avait déjà plusieurs cadavres derrière lui. Plus d'un passant les bras étendus gisait dans l'ombre de ce misérable, la face dans une mare de sang. Frisé, pommadé, pincé à la taille, des hanches de femme, un buste d'officier prussien, le murmure d'admiration des filles du boulevard autour de lui, la cravate savamment nouée, un casse-tête dans sa poche, une fleur à sa boutonnière; tel était ce mirliflore du sépulcre.

Chapitre IV

Composition de la troupe

À eux quatre, ces bandits formaient une sorte de Protée, serpentant à travers la police et s’efforçant d’échapper aux regards indiscrets de Vidocq «sous diverse figure, arbre, flamme, fontaine», s’entre-prêtant leurs noms et leurs trucs, se dérobant dans leur propre ombre, boîtes à secrets et asiles les uns pour les autres, défaisant leurs personnalités comme on ôte son faux nez au bal masqué, parfois se simplifiant au point de ne plus être qu’un, parfois se multipliant au point que Coco-Lacour lui-même les prenait pour une foule.

Ces quatre hommes n’étaient point quatre hommes; c’était une sorte de mystérieux voleur à quatre têtes travaillant en grand sur Paris; c’était le polype monstrueux du mal habitant la crypte de la société.

Grâce à leurs ramifications, et au réseau sous-jacent de leurs relations, Babet, Gueulemer, Claquesous et Montparnasse avaient l’entreprise générale des guets-apens du département de la Seine. Ils faisaient sur le passant le coup d’état d’en bas. Les trouveurs d’idées en ce genre, les hommes à imagination nocturne, s’adressaient à eux pour l’exécution. On fournissait aux quatre coquins le canevas, ils se chargeaient de la mise en scène. Ils travaillaient sur scénario. Ils étaient toujours en situation de prêter un personnel proportionné et convenable à tous les attentats ayant besoin d’un coup d’épaule et suffisamment lucratifs. Un crime étant en quête de bras, ils lui sous-louaient des complices. Ils avaient une troupe d’acteurs de ténèbres à la disposition de toutes les tragédies de cavernes.

Ils se réunissaient habituellement à la nuit tombante, heure de leur réveil, dans les steppes qui avoisinent la Salpêtrière. Là, ils conféraient. Ils avaient les douze heures noires devant eux; ils en réglaient l’emploi.

Patron-Minette, tel était le nom qu’on donnait dans la circulation souterraine à l’association de ces quatre hommes. Dans la vieille langue populaire fantasque qui va s’effaçant tous les jours, *Patron-Minette* signifie le matin, de même que *Entre chien et loup* signifie le soir. Cette appellation, *Patron-Minette*, venait probablement de l’heure à laquelle leur besogne finissait, l’aube étant l’instant de l’évanouissement des fantômes et de la séparation des bandits. Ces quatre hommes étaient connus sous cette rubrique. Quand le président des assises visita Lacenaire dans sa prison, il le questionna sur un méfait que Lacenaire niait. — Qui a fait cela? demanda le président. Lacenaire fit cette réponse, énigmatique pour le magistrat, mais claire pour la police: — C'est peut-être Patron-Minette.

On devine parfois une pièce sur l'énoncé des personnages; on peut de même presque apprécier une bande sur la liste des bandits. Voici, car ces noms-là surnagent dans les mémoires spéciales, à quelles appellations répondaient les principaux affiliés de Patron-Minette:

Panchaud, dit Printanier, dit Bigrenaille.
Brujon. (Il y avait une dynastie de Brujon; nous ne renonçons pas à en dire un mot.)
Boulatruelle, le cantonnier déjà entrevu.
Laveuve.
Finistère.
Homère Hogu, nègre.
Mardisoir.
Dépêche.
Fauntleroy, dit Bouquetière.
Glorieux, forçat libéré.
Barrecarrosse, dit monsieur Dupont.
Lesplanade-du-Sud.
Poussagrive.
Carmagnolet.
Kruideniers, dit Bizarro.
Mangedentelle.
Les-pieds-en-l'air.
Demi-liards, dit Deux-milliards.
Etc., etc.

Nous en passons, et non des pires. Ces noms ont des figures. Ils n'expriment pas seulement des êtres, mais des espèces. Chacun de ces noms répond à une variété de ces difformes champignons du dessous de la civilisation. Ces êtres, peu prodigues de leurs visages, n'étaient pas de ceux qu'on voit passer dans les rues. Le jour, fatigués des nuits farouches qu'ils avaient, ils s'en allaient dormir, tantôt dans les fours à plâtre, tantôt dans les carrières abandonnées de Montmartre ou de Montrouge, parfois dans les égouts. Ils se terraient.

Que sont devenus ces hommes? Ils existent toujours. Ils ont toujours existé. Horace en parle: *Ambubaiarum collegia, phannacopolae, mendici, mimae;* et, tant que la société sera ce qu’elle est, ils seront ce qu’ils sont. Sous l’obscur plafond de leur cave, ils renaissent à jamais du suintement social. Ils reviennent, spectres, toujours identiques; seulement ils ne portent plus les mêmes noms et ils ne sont plus dans les mêmes peaux.

Les individus extirpés, la tribu subsiste.

Ils ont toujours les mêmes facultés. Du truand au rôdeur, la race se maintient pure. Ils devinent les bourses dans les poches, ils flairent les montres dans les goussets. L’or et l’argent ont pour eux une odeur. Il y a des bourgeois naïfs dont on pourrait dire qu’ils ont l’air volables. Ces hommes suivent patiemment ces bourgeois. Au passage d’un étranger ou d’un provincial, ils ont des tressaillements d’araignée.

Ces hommes-là, quand, vers minuit, sur un boulevard désert, on les rencontre ou on les entrevoit, sont effrayants. Ils ne semblent pas des hommes, mais des formes faites de brume vivante; on dirait qu’ils font habituellement bloc avec les ténèbres, qu’ils n’en sont pas distincts, qu’ils n’ont pas d’autre âme que l’ombre, et que c’est momentanément, et pour vivre pendant quelques minutes d’une vie monstrueuse, qu’ils se sont désagrégés de la nuit.

Que faut-il pour faire évanouir ces larves? De la lumière. De la lumière à flots. Pas une chauve-souris ne résiste à l’aube. Éclairez la société en dessous.

Livre huitième — Le mauvais pauvre

Chapitre I

Marius, cherchant une fille en chapeau, rencontre un homme en casquette

L’été passa, puis l’automne; l’hiver vint. Ni M. Leblanc ni la jeune fille n’avaient remis les pieds au Luxembourg. Marius n’avait plus qu’une pensée, revoir ce doux et adorable visage. Il cherchait toujours, il cherchait partout; il ne trouvait rien. Ce n’était plus Marius le rêveur enthousiaste, l’homme résolu, ardent et ferme, le hardi provocateur de la destinée, le cerveau qui échafaudait avenir sur avenir, le jeune esprit encombré de plans, de projets, de fiertés, d’idées et de volontés; c’était un chien perdu. Il tomba dans une tristesse noire. C’était fini. Le travail le rebutait, la promenade le fatiguait, la solitude l’ennuyait; la vaste nature, si remplie autrefois de formes, de clartés, de voix, de conseils, de perspectives, d’horizons, d’enseignements, était maintenant vide devant lui. Il lui semblait que tout avait disparu.

Il pensait toujours, car il ne pouvait faire autrement; mais il ne se plaisait plus dans ses pensées. À tout ce qu’elles lui proposaient tout bas sans cesse, il répondait dans l’ombre: À quoi bon?

Il se faisait cent reproches. Pourquoi l’ai-je suivie? J’étais si heureux rien que de la voir! Elle me regardait, est-ce que ce n’était pas immense? Elle avait l’air de m’aimer. Est-ce que ce n’était pas tout? J’ai voulu avoir quoi? Il n’y a rien après cela. J’ai été absurde. C’est ma faute, etc., etc. Courfeyrac, auquel il ne confiait rien, c’était sa nature, mais qui devinait un peu tout, c’était sa nature aussi, avait commencé par le féliciter d’être amoureux, en s’en ébahissant d’ailleurs; puis, voyant Marius tombé dans cette mélancolie, il avait fini par lui dire: — Je vois que tu as été simplement un animal. Tiens, viens à la Chaumière!

Une fois, ayant confiance dans un beau soleil de septembre, Marius s’était laissé mener au bal de Sceaux par Courfeyrac, Bossuet et Grantaire, espérant, quel rêve! qu’il la retrouverait peut-être là. Bien entendu, il n’y vit pas celle qu’il cherchait. — C’est pourtant ici qu’on retrouve toutes les femmes perdues, grommelait Grantaire en aparté. Marius laissa ses amis au bal, et s’en retourna à pied, seul, las, fiévreux, les yeux troubles et tristes dans la nuit, ahuri de bruit et de poussière par les joyeux coucous pleins d’êtres chantants qui revenaient de la fête et passaient à côté de lui, découragé, aspirant pour se rafraîchir la tête l’âcre senteur des noyers de la route.

Il se remit à vivre de plus en plus seul, égaré, accablé, tout à son angoisse intérieure, allant et venant dans sa douleur comme le loup dans le piège, quêtant partout l’absente, abruti d’amour.

Une autre fois, il avait fait une rencontre qui lui avait produit un effet singulier. Il avait croisé dans les petites rues qui avoisinent le boulevard des Invalides un homme vêtu comme un ouvrier et coiffé d’une casquette à longue visière qui laissait passer des mèches de cheveux très blancs. Marius fut frappé de la beauté de ces cheveux blancs et considéra cet homme qui marchait à pas lents et comme absorbé dans une méditation douloureuse. Chose étrange, il lui parut reconnaître M. Leblanc. C’étaient les mêmes cheveux, le même profil, autant que la casquette le laissait voir, la même allure, seulement plus triste. Mais pourquoi ces habits d’ouvrier? qu’est-ce que cela voulait dire? que signifiait ce déguisement? Marius fut très étonné. Quand il revint à lui, son premier mouvement fut de se mettre à suivre cet homme; qui sait s’il ne tenait point enfin la trace qu’il cherchait? En tout cas, il fallait revoir l’homme de près et éclaircir l’énigme. Mais il s’avisa de cette idée trop tard, l’homme n’était déjà plus là. Il avait pris quelque petite rue latérale, et Marius ne put le retrouver. Cette rencontre le préoccupa quelques jours, puis s’effaça. — Après tout, se dit-il, ce n’est probablement qu’une ressemblance.

Chapitre II

Trouvaille

Marius n’avait pas cessé d’habiter la masure Gorbeau. Il n’y faisait attention à personne.

À cette époque, à la vérité, il n’y avait plus dans cette masure d’autres habitants que lui et ces Jondrette dont il avait une fois acquitté le loyer, sans avoir du reste jamais parlé ni au père, ni aux filles. Les autres locataires étaient déménagés ou morts, ou avaient été expulsés faute de payement.

Un jour de cet hiver-là, le soleil s’était un peu montré dans l’après-midi, mais c’était le 2 février, cet antique jour de la Chandeleur dont le Soleil traître, précurseur d’un froid de six semaines, a inspiré à Mathieu Laensberg ces deux vers restés justement classiques:

Qu’il luise ou qu’il luiserne,
L’ours rentre en sa caverne.

Marius venait de sortir de la sienne. La nuit tombait. C’était l’heure d’aller dîner; car il avait bien fallu se remettre à dîner, hélas! ô infirmités des passions idéales!

Il venait de franchir le seuil de sa porte que mame Bougon balayait en ce moment-là même tout en prononçant ce mémorable monologue:

— Qu’est-ce qui est bon marché à présent? tout est cher. Il n’y a que la peine du monde qui est bon marché; elle est pour rien, la peine du monde!

Marius montait à pas lents le boulevard vers la barrière afin de gagner la rue Saint-Jacques. Il marchait pensif, la tête baissée.

Tout à coup il se sentit coudoyé dans la brume; il se retourna, et vit deux jeunes filles en haillons, l’une longue et mince, l’autre un peu moins grande, qui passaient rapidement, essoufflées, effarouchées, et comme ayant l’air de s’enfuir; elles venaient à sa rencontre, ne l’avaient pas vu, et l’avaient heurté en passant. Marius distinguait dans le crépuscule leurs figures livides, leurs têtes décoiffées, leurs cheveux épars, leurs affreux bonnets, leurs jupes en guenilles et leurs pieds nus. Tout en courant, elles se parlaient. La plus grande disait d’une voix très basse:

— Les cognes sont venus. Ils ont manqué me pincer au demi-cercle.

L’autre répondait: — Je les ai vus. J’ai cavalé, cavalé, cavalé!

Marius comprit, à travers cet argot sinistre, que les gendarmes ou les sergents de ville avaient failli saisir ces deux enfants, et que ces enfants s’étaient échappées.

Elles s’enfoncèrent sous les arbres du boulevard derrière lui, et y firent pendant quelques instants dans l’obscurité une espèce de blancheur vague qui s’effaça.

Marius s’était arrêté un moment.

Il allait continuer son chemin, lorsqu’il aperçut un petit paquet grisâtre à terre à ses pieds. Il se baissa et le ramassa. C’était une façon d’enveloppe qui paraissait contenir des papiers.

— Bon, dit-il, ces malheureuses auront laissé tomber cela!

Il revint sur ses pas, il appela, il ne les retrouva plus; il pensa qu’elles étaient déjà loin, mit le paquet dans sa poche, et s’en alla dîner.

Chemin faisant, il vit dans une allée de la rue Mouffetard une bière d’enfant couverte d’un drap noir, posée sur trois chaises et éclairée par une chandelle. Les deux filles du crépuscule lui revinrent à l’esprit.

— Pauvres mères! pensa-t-il. Il y a une chose plus triste que de voir ses enfants mourir; c’est de les voir mal vivre.

Puis ces ombres qui variaient sa tristesse lui sortirent de la pensée, et il retomba dans ses préoccupations habituelles. Il se remit à songer à ses six mois d’amour et de bonheur en plein air et en pleine lumière sous les beaux arbres du Luxembourg.

— Comme ma vie est devenue sombre! se disait-il. Les jeunes filles m’apparaissent toujours. Seulement autrefois c’étaient les anges; maintenant ce sont les goules.

Chapitre III

Quadrifrons

Le soir, comme il se déshabillait pour se coucher, sa main rencontra dans la poche de son habit le paquet qu'il avait ramassé sur le boulevard. Il l'avait oublié. Il songea qu'il serait utile de l'ouvrir, et que ce paquet contenait peut-être l'adresse de ces jeunes filles, si, en réalité, il leur appartenait, et dans tous les cas les renseignements nécessaires pour le restituer à la personne qui l'avait perdu.

Il défit l'enveloppe.

Elle n'était pas cachetée et contenait quatre lettres, non cachetées également.

Les adresses y étaient mises.

Toutes quatre exhalaient une odeur d'affreux tabac.

La première lettre était adressée: *à Madame, madame la marquise de Grucheray, place vis-à-vis la chambre des députés, nº...*

Marius se dit qu'il trouverait probablement là les indications qu'il cherchait, et que d'ailleurs la lettre n'étant pas fermée, il était vraisemblable qu'elle pouvait être lue sans inconvénient.

Elle était ainsi conçue:

«Madame la marquise,

«La vertu de la clémence et pitié est celle qui unit plus étroitement la société. Promenez votre sentiment chrétien, et faites un regard de compassion sur cette infortuné español victime de la loyauté et d'attachement à la cause sacrée de la légitimé, qu'il a payé de son sang, consacrée sa fortune, toute, pour défendre cette cause, et aujourd'hui se trouve dans la plus grande misère. Il ne doute point que votre honorable personne l'accordera un secours pour conserver une existence extrêmement pénible pour un militaire d'éducation et d'honneur plein de blessures. Compte d'avance sur l'humanité qui vous animé et sur l'intérêt que Madame la marquise porte à une nation aussi malheureuse. Leur prière ne sera pas en vaine, et leur reconnaissance conservera sont charmant souvenir.

«De mes sentiments respectueux avec lesquelles j'ai l'honneur d'être,

«Madame,

«Don Alvarez, capitaine español de caballerie, royaliste refugié en France que se trouve en voyagé pour sa patrie et le manquent les réssources pour continuer son voyagé.»

Aucune adresse n’était jointe à la signature. Marius espéra trouver l’adresse dans la deuxième lettre dont la suscription portait: *à Madame, madame la contesse de Montvernet, rue Cassette, nº 9.*

Voici ce que Marius y lut:

«Madame la comtesse,

«C’est une malheureuse meré de famille de six enfants dont le dernier n’a que huit mois. Moi malade depuis ma dernière couche, abandonnée de mon mari depuis cinq mois n’aiyant aucune réssource au monde dans la plus affreuse indigance.

«Dans l’espoir de Madame la contesse, elle a l’honneur d’être, madame, avec un profond respect,

«Femme Balizard.»

Marius passa à la troisième lettre, qui était comme les précédentes une supplique; on y lisait:

«Monsieur Pabourgeot, électeur, négociant-bonnetier en gros, rue Saint-Denis au coin de la rue aux Fers.

«Je me permets de vous adresser cette lettre pour vous prier de m’accorder la faveur prétieuse de vos simpaties et de vous intéresser à un homme de lettres qui vient d’envoyer un drame au théâtre-français. Le sujet en est historique, et l’action se passe en Auvergne du temps de l’empire. Le style, je crois, en est naturel, laconique, et peut avoir quelque mérite. Il y a des couplets a chanter a quatre endroits. Le comique, le sérieux, l’imprévu, s’y mêlent à la variété des caractères et a une teinte de romantisme répandue légèrement dans toute l’intrigue qui marche mistérieusement, et va, par des péripessies frappantes, se denouer au milieu de plusieurs coups de scènes éclatants.

«Mon but principal est de satisfère le desir qui anime progresivement l’homme de notre siècle, c’est à dire, la mode, cette caprisieuse et bizarre girouette qui change presque à chaque nouveau vent.

«Malgré ces qualités j’ai lieu de craindre que la jalousie, l’égoïsme des auteurs privilégiés, obtienne mon exclusion du théâtre, car je n’ignore pas les déboires dont on abreuve les nouveaux venus.

«Monsieur Pabourgeot, votre juste réputation de protecteur éclairé des gants de lettres m’enhardit à vous envoyer ma fille qui vous exposera notre situation indigante, manquant de pain et de feu dans cette saison d’hyver. Vous dire que je vous prie d’agreer l’hommage que je désire vous faire de mon drame et de tous ceux que je ferai, c’est vous prouver combien j’ambicionne l’honneur de m’abriter sous votre égide, et de parer mes écrits de votre nom. Si vous daignez m’honorer de la plus modeste offrande, je m’occuperai aussitôt à faire une pièsse de vers pour vous payer mon tribu de reconnaissance. Cette pièsse, que je tacherai de rendre aussi parfaite que possible, vous sera envoyée avant d’être insérée au commencement du drame et débitée sur la scène.

«À Monsieur,

«Et Madame Pabourgeot,

«Mes hommages les plus respectueux.

«Genflot, homme de lettres.

«P. S. Ne serait-ce que quarante sous.

«Excusez-moi d’envoyer ma fille et de ne pas me présenter moi-même, mais de tristes motifs de toilette ne me permettent pas, hélas! de sortir...»

Marius ouvrit enfin la quatrième lettre. Il y avait sur l’adresse: *Au monsieur bienfaisant de l’église Saint-Jacques-du-Haut-Pas*. Elle contenait ces quelques lignes:

«Homme bienfaisant,

«Si vous daignez accompagner ma fille, vous verrez une calamité missérable, et je vous montrerai mes certificats.

«À l’aspect de ces écrits votre âme généreuse sera mue d’un sentiment de sensible bienveillance, car les vrais philosophes éprouvent toujours de vives émotions.

«Convenez, homme compatissant, qu’il faut éprouver le plus cruel besoin, et qu’il est bien douloureux, pour obtenir quelque soulagement, de le faire attester par l’autorité comme si l’on n’était pas libre de souffrir et de mourir d’inanition en attendant que l’on soulage notre misère. Les destins sont bien fatals pour d’aucuns et trop prodigue ou trop protecteur pour d’autres.

«J’attends votre présence ou votre offrande, si vous daignez la faire, et je vous prie de vouloir bien agréer les sentiments respectueux avec lesquels je m’honore d’être,

«homme vraiment magnanime,

«votre très humble

«et très obéissant serviteur,

«P. Fabantou, artiste dramatique.»

Après avoir lu ces quatre lettres, Marius ne se trouva pas beaucoup plus avancé qu’auparavant.

D’abord aucun des signataires ne donnait son adresse.

Ensuite elles semblaient venir de quatre individus différents, don Alvarès, la femme Balizard, le poète Genflot et l’artiste dramatique Fabantou, mais ces lettres offraient ceci d’étrange qu’elles étaient écrites toutes quatre de la même écriture.

Que conclure de là, sinon qu’elles venaient de la même personne?

En outre, et cela rendait la conjecture plus vraisemblable, le papier, grossier et jauni, était le même pour les quatre, l’odeur de tabac était la même, et, quoiqu’on eût évidemment cherché à varier le style, les mêmes fautes d’orthographe s’y reproduisaient avec une tranquillité profonde, et l’homme de lettres Genflot n’en était pas plus exempt que le capitaine español.

S’évertuer à deviner ce petit mystère était peine inutile. Si ce n’eût pas été une trouvaille, cela eût eu l’air d’une mystification. Marius était trop triste pour bien prendre même une plaisanterie du hasard et pour se prêter au jeu que paraissait vouloir jouer avec lui le pavé de la rue. Il lui semblait qu’il était à colin-maillard entre ces quatre lettres qui se moquaient de lui.

Rien n’indiquait d’ailleurs que ces lettres appartinssent aux jeunes filles que Marius avait rencontrées sur le boulevard. Après tout, c’étaient des paperasses évidemment sans aucune valeur.

Marius les remit dans l’enveloppe, jeta le tout dans un coin, et se coucha.

Vers sept heures du matin, il venait de se lever et de déjeuner, et il essayait de se mettre au travail lorsqu’on frappa doucement à sa porte.

Comme il ne possédait rien, il n’ôtait jamais sa clef, si ce n’est quelquefois, fort rarement, lorsqu’il travaillait à quelque travail pressé. Du reste, même absent, il laissait sa clef à sa serrure. — On vous volera, disait mame Bougon. — Quoi? disait Marius. — Le fait est pourtant qu’un jour on lui avait volé une vieille paire de bottes, au grand triomphe de mame Bougon.

On frappa un second coup, très doux comme le premier.

— Entrez, dit Marius.

La porte s’ouvrit.

— Qu’est-ce que vous voulez, mame Bougon? reprit Marius sans quitter des yeux les livres et les manuscrits qu’il avait sur sa table.

Une voix, qui n’était pas celle de mame Bougon, répondit:

— Pardon, monsieur....

C’était une voix sourde, cassée, étranglée, éraillée, une voix de vieux homme enroué d’eau-de-vie et de rogome.

Marius se tourna vivement, et vit une jeune fille.

Chapitre IV

Une rose dans la misère

Une toute jeune fille était debout dans la porte entrebâillée. La lucarne du galetas où le jour paraissait était précisément en face de la porte et éclairait cette figure d'une lumière blafarde. C'était une créature hâve, chétive, décharnée; rien qu'une chemise et une jupe sur une nudité frissonnante et glacée. Pour ceinture une ficelle, pour coiffure une ficelle, des épaules pointues sortant de la chemise, une pâleur blonde et lymphatique, des clavicules terreuses, des mains rouges, la bouche entr'ouverte et dégradée, des dents de moins, l'œil terne, hardi et bas, les formes d'une jeune fille avortée et le regard d'une vieille femme corrompue; cinquante ans mêlés à quinze ans; un de ces êtres qui sont tout ensemble faibles et horribles et qui font frémir ceux qu'ils ne font pas pleurer.

Marius s'était levé et considérait avec une sorte de stupeur cet être presque pareil aux formes de l'ombre qui traversent les rêves.

Ce qui était poignant surtout, c'est que cette fille n'était pas venue au monde pour être laide. Dans sa première enfance, elle avait dû même être jolie. La grâce de l'âge luttait encore contre la hideuse vieillesse anticipée de la débauche et de la pauvreté. Un reste de beauté se mourait sur ce visage de seize ans, comme ce pâle soleil qui s'éteint sous d'affreuses nuées à l'aube d'une journée d'hiver.

Ce visage n'était pas absolument inconnu à Marius. Il croyait se rappeler l'avoir vu quelque part.

— Que voulez-vous, mademoiselle? demanda-t-il.

La jeune fille répondit avec sa voix de galérien ivre:

— C'est une lettre pour vous, monsieur Marius.

Elle appelait Marius par son nom; il ne pouvait douter que ce ne fût à lui qu'elle eût affaire; mais qu'était-ce que cette fille? comment savait-elle son nom?

Sans attendre qu'il lui dît d'avancer, elle entra. Elle entra résolûment, regardant avec une sorte d'assurance qui serrait le cœur toute la chambre et le lit défait. Elle avait les pieds nus. De larges trous à son jupon laissaient voir ses longues jambes et ses genoux maigres. Elle grelottait.

Elle tenait en effet une lettre à la main qu'elle présenta à Marius.

Marius en ouvrant cette lettre remarqua que le pain à cacheter large et énorme était encore mouillé. Le message ne pouvait venir de bien loin. Il lut:

«Mon aimable voisin, jeune homme!

«J’ai apris vos bontés pour moi, que vous avez payé mon terme il y a six mois. Je vous bénis, jeune homme. Ma fille aînée vous dira que nous sommes sans un morceau de pain depuis deux jours, quatre personnes, et mon épouse malade. Si je ne suis point dessu dans ma pensée, je crois devoir espérer que votre cœur généreux s’humanisera à cet exposé et vous subjuguera le désir de m’être propice en daignant me prodiguer un léger bienfait.

«Je suis avec la considération distinguée qu’on doit aux bienfaiteurs de l’humanité,

«Jondrette.

«P. S. — Ma fille attendra vos ordres, cher monsieur Marius.»

Cette lettre, au milieu de l’aventure obscure qui occupait Marius depuis la veille au soir, c’était une chandelle dans une cave. Tout fut brusquement éclairé.

Cette lettre venait d’où venaient les quatre autres. C’était la même écriture, le même style, la même orthographe, le même papier, la même odeur de tabac.

Il y avait cinq missives, cinq histoires, cinq noms, cinq signatures, et un seul signataire. Le capitaine español don Alvarès, la malheureuse mère Balizard, le poëte dramatique Genflot, le vieux comédien Fabantou se nommaient tous les quatre Jondrette, si toutefois Jondrette lui-même s’appelait Jondrette.

Depuis assez longtemps déjà que Marius habitait la masure, il n’avait eu, nous l’avons dit, que de bien rares occasions de voir, d’entrevoir même son très infime voisinage. Il avait l’esprit ailleurs, et où est l’esprit est le regard. Il avait dû plus d’une fois croiser les Jondrette dans le corridor ou dans l’escalier; mais ce n’était pour lui que des silhouettes; il y avait pris si peu garde que la veille au soir il avait heurté sur le boulevard sans les reconnaître les filles Jondrette, car c’était évidemment elles, et que c’était à grand’peine que celle-ci, qui venait d’entrer dans sa chambre, avait éveillé en lui, à travers le dégoût et la pitié, un vague souvenir de l’avoir rencontrée ailleurs.

Maintenant il voyait clairement tout. Il comprenait que son voisin Jondrette avait pour industrie dans sa détresse d’exploiter la charité des personnes bienfaisantes, qu’il se procurait des adresses, et qu’il écrivait sous des noms supposés à des gens qu’il jugeait riches et pitoyables des lettres que ses filles portaient, à leurs risques et périls, car ce père en était là qu’il risquait ses filles; il jouait une partie avec la destinée et il les mettait au jeu. Marius comprenait que probablement, à en juger par leur fuite de la veille, par leur essoufflement, par leur terreur, et par ces mots d’argot qu’il avait entendus, ces infortunées faisaient encore on ne sait quels métiers sombres, et que de tout cela, il était résulté, au milieu de la société humaine telle qu’elle est faite, deux misérables êtres qui n’étaient ni des enfants, ni des filles, ni des femmes, espèces de monstres impurs et innocents produits par la misère.

Tristes créatures sans nom, sans âge, sans sexe, auxquelles ni le bien, ni le mal ne sont plus possibles, et qui, en sortant de l’enfance, n’ont déjà plus rien dans ce monde, ni la liberté, ni la vertu, ni la responsabilité. Âmes écloses hier, fanées aujourd’hui, pareilles à ces fleurs tombées dans la rue que toutes les boues flétrissent en attendant qu’une roue les écrase.

Cependant, tandis que Marius attachait sur elle un regard étonné et douloureux, la jeune fille allait et venait dans la mansarde avec une audace de spectre. Elle se démenait sans se préoccuper de sa nudité. Par instants, sa chemise défaite et déchirée lui tombait presque à la ceinture. Elle remuait les chaises, elle dérangeait les objets de toilette posés sur la commode, elle touchait aux vêtements de Marius, elle furetait ce qu’il y avait dans les coins.

— Tiens, dit-elle, vous avez un miroir!

Et elle fredonnait, comme si elle eût été seule, des bribes de vaudeville, des refrains folâtres que sa voix gutturale et rauque faisait lugubres. Sous cette hardiesse perçait je ne sais quoi de contraint, d’inquiet et d’humilié. L’effronterie est une honte.

Rien n’était plus morne que de la voir s’ébattre et pour ainsi dire voleter dans la chambre avec des mouvements d’oiseau que le jour effare, ou qui a l’aile cassée. On sentait qu’avec d’autres conditions d’éducation et de destinée, l’allure gaie et libre de cette jeune fille eût pu être quelque chose de doux et de charmant. Jamais parmi les animaux la créature née pour être une colombe ne se change en une orfraie. Cela ne se voit que parmi les hommes.

Marius songeait, et la laissait faire.

Elle s’approcha de la table.

— Ah! dit-elle, des livres!

Une lueur traversa son œil vitreux. Elle reprit, et son accent exprimait ce bonheur de se vanter de quelque chose, auquel nulle créature humaine n’est insensible:

— Je sais lire, moi.

Elle saisit vivement le livre ouvert sur la table, et lut assez couramment:

«...Le général Bauduin reçut l’ordre d’enlever avec les cinq bataillons de sa brigade le château de Hougomont qui est au milieu de la plaine de Waterloo...»

Elle s’interrompit:

— Ah! Waterloo! Je connais ça. C’est une bataille dans les temps. Mon père y était. Mon père a servi dans les armées. Nous sommes joliment bonapartistes chez nous, allez! C’est contre les Anglais Waterloo.

Elle posa le livre, prit une plume, et s’écria:

— Et je sais écrire aussi!

Elle trempa la plume dans l’encre, et se tournant vers Marius:

— Voulez-vous voir? Tenez, je vais écrire un mot pour voir.

Et avant qu’il eût eu le temps de répondre, elle écrivit sur une feuille de papier blanc qui était au milieu de la table: *Les cognes sont là*.

Puis, jetant la plume:

— Il n’y a pas de fautes d’orthographe. Vous pouvez regarder. Nous avons reçu de l’éducation, ma sœur et moi. Nous n’avons pas toujours été comme nous sommes. Nous n’étions pas faites....

Ici elle s’arrêta, fixa sa prunelle éteinte sur Marius, et éclata de rire en disant avec une intonation qui contenait toutes les angoisses étouffées par tous les cynismes:

— Bah!

Et elle se mit à fredonner ces paroles sur un air gai:

J’ai faim, mon père.
Pas de fricot.
J’ai froid, ma mère.
Pas de tricot.
Grelotte,
Lolotte!
Sanglote,

Jacquot!

À peine eut-elle achevé ce couplet qu'elle s'écria:

— Allez-vous quelquefois au spectacle, monsieur Marius? Moi, j'y vais. J'ai un petit frère qui est ami avec des artistes et qui me donne des fois des billets. Par exemple, je n'aime pas les banquettes de galeries. On y est gêné, on y est mal. Il y a quelquefois du gros monde; il y a aussi du monde qui sent mauvais.

Puis elle considéra Marius, prit un air étrange, et lui dit:

— Savez-vous, monsieur Marius, que vous êtes très joli garçon?

Et en même temps il leur vint à tous les deux la même pensée, qui la fit sourire et qui le fit rougir.

Elle s'approcha de lui, et lui posa une main sur l'épaule.

— Vous ne faites pas attention à moi, mais je vous connais, monsieur Marius. Je vous rencontre ici dans l'escalier, et puis je vous vois entrer chez un appelé le père Mabeuf qui demeure du côté d'Austerlitz, des fois, quand je me promène par là. Cela vous va très bien, vos cheveux ébouriffés.

Sa voix cherchait à être très douce et ne parvenait qu'à être basse. Une partie des mots se perdait dans le trajet du larynx aux lèvres comme sur un clavier où il manque des notes.

Marius s'était reculé doucement.

— Mademoiselle, dit-il avec sa gravité froide, j'ai là un paquet qui est, je crois, à vous. Permettez-moi de vous le remettre.

Et il lui tendit l'enveloppe qui renfermait les quatre lettres.

Elle frappa dans ses deux mains, et s'écria:

— Nous avons cherché partout!

Puis elle saisit vivement le paquet, et défit l'enveloppe, tout en disant:

— Dieu de Dieu! avons-nous cherché, ma sœur et moi! Et c'est vous qui l'aviez trouvé! Sur le boulevard, n'est-ce pas? ce doit être sur le boulevard? Voyez-vous, ça a tombé quand nous avons couru. C'est ma mioche de sœur qui a fait la bêtise. En rentrant nous ne l'avons plus trouvé. Comme nous ne voulions pas être battues, que cela est inutile, que cela est entièrement inutile, que cela est absolument inutile, nous avons dit chez nous que nous avions porté les lettres chez les personnes et qu'on nous avait dit nix! Les voilà, ces pauvres lettres! Et à quoi avez-vous vu qu'elles étaient à moi? Ah! oui, à l'écriture! C'est donc vous que nous avons cogné en passant hier au soir. On n'y voyait pas, quoi! J'ai dit à ma sœur: Est-ce que c'est un monsieur? Ma sœur m'a dit: Je crois que c'est un monsieur!

Cependant, elle avait déplié la supplique adressée «au monsieur bienfaisant de l’église Saint-Jacques-du-Haut-Pas».

— Tiens! dit-elle, c’est celle pour ce vieux qui va à la messe. Au fait, c’est l’heure. Je vas lui porter. Il nous donnera peut-être de quoi déjeuner.

Puis elle se remit à rire, et ajouta:

— Savez-vous ce que cela fera si nous déjeunons aujourd’hui? Cela fera que nous aurons eu notre déjeuner d’avant-hier, notre dîner d’avant-hier, notre déjeuner d’hier, notre dîner d’hier, tout ça en une fois, ce matin. Tiens! parbleu! si vous n’êtes pas contents, crevez, chiens!

Ceci fit souvenir Marius de ce que la malheureuse venait chercher chez lui.

Il fouilla dans son gilet, il n’y trouva rien.

La jeune fille continuait, et semblait parler comme si elle n’avait plus conscience que Marius fût là.

— Des fois je m’en vais le soir. Des fois je ne rentre pas. Avant d’être ici, l’autre hiver nous demeurions sous les arches des ponts. On se serrait pour ne pas geler. Ma petite sœur pleurait. L’eau, comme c’est triste! Quand je pensais à me noyer, je disais: Non, c’est trop froid. Je vais toute seule quand je veux, je dors des fois dans les fossés. Savez-vous, la nuit, quand je marche sur le boulevard, je vois les arbres comme des fourches, je vois des maisons toutes noires grosses comme les tours de Notre-Dame, je me figure que les murs blancs sont la rivière, je me dis: Tiens, il y a de l’eau là! Les étoiles sont comme des lampions d’illuminations, on dirait qu’elles fument et que le vent les éteint, je suis ahurie, comme si j’avais des chevaux qui me soufflent dans l’oreille; quoique ce soit la nuit, j’entends des orgues de Barbarie et les mécaniques des filatures, est-ce que je sais, moi? Je crois qu’on me jette des pierres, je me sauve sans savoir, tout tourne, tout tourne. Quand on n’a pas mangé, c’est très drôle.

Et elle le regarda d’un air égaré.

À force de creuser et d’approfondir ses poches, Marius avait fini par réunir cinq francs seize sous. C’était en ce moment tout ce qu’il possédait au monde. — Voilà toujours mon dîner d’aujourd’hui, pensa-t-il, demain nous verrons. — Il prit les seize sous et donna les cinq francs à la fille.

Elle saisit la pièce.

— Bon, dit-elle, il y a du soleil!

Et comme si ce soleil eût eu la propriété de faire fondre dans son cerveau des avalanches d’argot, elle poursuivit:

— Cinque francs! du luisant! un monarque! dans cette piolle! c’est chenâtre! Vous êtes un bon mion. Je vous fonce mon palpitant. Bravo les fanandels! deux jours de pivois! et de la viandemuche! et du fricotmar! on pitancera chenument! et de la bonne mouise!

Elle ramena sa chemise sur ses épaules, fit un profond salut à Marius, puis un signe familier de la main, et se dirigea vers la porte en disant:

— Bonjour, monsieur. C’est égal. Je vas trouver mon vieux.

En passant, elle aperçut sur la commode une croûte de pain desséchée qui y moisissait dans la poussière; elle se jeta dessus et y mordit en grommelant:

— C’est bon! c’est dur! ça me casse les dents!

Puis elle sortit.

Chapitre V

Le judas de la providence

Marius depuis cinq ans avait vécu dans la pauvreté, dans le dénûment, dans la détresse même, mais il s’aperçut qu’il n’avait point connu la vraie misère. La vraie misère, il venait de la voir. C’était cette larve qui venait de passer sous ses yeux. C’est qu’en effet qui n’a vu que la misère de l’homme n’a rien vu, il faut voir la misère de la femme; qui n’a vu que la misère de la femme n’a rien vu, il faut voir la misère de l’enfant.

Quand l’homme est arrivé aux dernières extrémités, il arrive en même temps aux dernières ressources. Malheur aux êtres sans défense qui l’entourent! Le travail, le salaire, le pain, le feu, le courage, la bonne volonté, tout lui manque à la fois. La clarté du jour semble s’éteindre au dehors, la lumière morale s’éteint au dedans; dans ces ombres, l’homme rencontre la faiblesse de la femme et de l’enfant, et les ploie violemment aux ignominies.

Alors toutes les horreurs sont possibles. Le désespoir est entouré de cloisons fragiles qui donnent toutes sur le vice ou sur le crime.

La santé, la jeunesse, l’honneur, les saintes et farouches délicatesses de la chair encore neuve, le cœur, la virginité, la pudeur, cet épiderme de l’âme, sont sinistrement maniés par ce tâtonnement qui cherche des ressources, qui rencontre l’opprobre, et qui s’en accommode. Pères, mères, enfants, frères, sœurs, hommes, femmes, filles, adhèrent, et s’agrègent presque comme une formation minérale, dans cette brumeuse promiscuité de sexes, de parentés, d’âges, d’infamies, d’innocences. Ils s’accroupissent, adossés les uns aux autres, dans une espèce de destin taudis. Ils s’entreregardent lamentablement. Ô les infortunés! comme ils sont pâles! comme ils ont froid! Il semble qu’ils soient dans une planète bien plus loin du soleil que nous.

Cette jeune fille fut pour Marius une sorte d’envoyée des ténèbres.

Elle lui révéla tout un côté hideux de la nuit.

Marius se reprocha presque les préoccupations de rêverie et de passion qui l’avaient empêché jusqu’à ce jour de jeter un coup d’œil sur ses voisins. Avoir payé leur loyer, c’était un mouvement machinal, tout le monde eût eu ce mouvement; mais lui Marius eût dû faire mieux. Quoi! un mur seulement le séparait de ces êtres abandonnés, qui vivaient à tâtons dans la nuit, en dehors du reste des vivants, il les coudoyait, il était en quelque sorte, lui, le dernier chaînon du genre humain qu'ils touchassent, il les entendait vivre ou plutôt râler à côté de lui, et il n'y prenait point garde! tous les jours à chaque instant, à travers la muraille, il les entendait marcher, aller, venir, parler, et il ne prêtait pas l'oreille! et dans ces paroles il y avait des gémissements, et il ne les écoutait même pas! sa pensée était ailleurs, à des songes, à des rayonnements impossibles, à des amours en l'air, à des folies; et cependant des créatures humaines, ses frères en Jésus-Christ, ses frères dans le peuple, agonisaient à côté de lui! agonisaient inutilement! Il faisait même partie de leur malheur, et il l'aggravait. Car s'ils avaient eu un autre voisin, un voisin moins chimérique et plus attentif, un homme ordinaire et charitable, évidemment leur indigence eût été remarquée, leurs signaux de détresse eussent été aperçus, et depuis longtemps déjà peut-être ils eussent été recueillis et sauvés! Sans doute ils paraissaient bien dépravés, bien corrompus, bien avilis, bien odieux même, mais ils sont rares, ceux qui sont tombés sans être dégradés; d'ailleurs il y a un point où les infortunés et les infâmes se mêlent et se confondent dans un seul mot, mot fatal, les misérables; de qui est-ce la faute? Et puis, est-ce que ce n'est pas quand la chute est plus profonde que la charité doit être plus grande?

Tout en se faisant cette morale, car il y avait des occasions où Marius, comme tous les cœurs vraiment honnêtes, était à lui-même son propre pédagogue, et se grondait plus qu'il ne le méritait, il considérait le mur qui le séparait des Jondrette, comme s'il eût pu faire passer à travers cette cloison son regard plein de pitié et en aller réchauffer ces malheureux. Le mur était une mince lame de plâtre soutenue par des lattes et des solives, et qui, comme on vient de le lire, laissait parfaitement distinguer le bruit des paroles et des voix. Il fallait être le songeur Marius pour ne pas s'en être encore aperçu. Aucun papier n'était collé sur ce mur ni du côté des Jondrette, ni du côté de Marius; on en voyait à nu la grossière construction. Sans presque en avoir conscience, Marius examinait cette cloison; quelquefois la rêverie examine, observe et scrute comme ferait la pensée. Tout à coup il se leva, il venait de remarquer vers le haut, près du plafond, un trou triangulaire résultant de trois lattes qui laissaient un vide entre elles. Le plâtras qui avait dû boucher ce vide était absent, et en montant sur la commode on pouvait voir par cette ouverture dans le galetas des Jondrette. La commisération a et doit avoir sa curiosité. Ce trou faisait une espèce de judas. Il est permis de regarder l’infortune en traître pour la secourir. — Voyons un peu ce que c’est que ces gens-là, pensa Marius, et où ils en sont.

Il escalada la commode, approcha sa prunelle de la crevasse et regarda.

Chapitre VI

L’homme fauve au gîte

Les villes, comme les forêts, ont leurs antres où se cachent tout ce qu’elles ont de plus méchant et de plus redoutable. Seulement, dans les villes, ce qui se cache ainsi est féroce, immonde et petit, c’est-à-dire laid; dans les forêts, ce qui se cache est féroce, sauvage et grand, c’est-à-dire beau. Repaires pour repaires, ceux des bêtes sont préférables à ceux des hommes. Les cavernes valent mieux que les bouges.

Ce que Marius voyait était un bouge.

Marius était pauvre et sa chambre était indigente; mais, de même que sa pauvreté était noble, son grenier était propre. Le taudis où son regard plongeait en ce moment était abject, sale, fétide, infect, ténébreux, sordide. Pour tous meubles, une chaise de paille, une table infirme, quelques vieux tessons, et dans deux coins deux grabats indescriptibles; pour toute clarté, une fenêtre-mansarde à quatre carreaux, drapée de toiles d’araignée. Il venait par cette lucarne juste assez de jour pour qu’une face d’homme parût une face de fantôme. Les murs avaient un aspect lépreux, et étaient couverts de coutures et de cicatrices comme un visage défiguré par quelque horrible maladie. Une humidité chassieuse y suintait. On y distinguait des dessins obscènes grossièrement charbonnés.

La chambre que Marius occupait avait un pavage de briques délabré; celle-ci n’était ni carrelée, ni planchéiée; on y marchait à cru sur l’antique plâtre de la masure devenu noir sous les pieds. Sur ce sol inégal, où la poussière était comme incrustée, et qui n’avait qu’une virginité, celle du balai, se groupaient capricieusement des constellations de vieux chaussons, de savates et de chiffons affreux; du reste cette chambre avait une cheminée; aussi la louait-on quarante francs par an. Il y avait de tout dans cette cheminée, un réchaud, une marmite, des planches cassées, des loques pendues à des clous, une cage d’oiseau, de la cendre, et même un peu de feu. Deux tisons y fumaient tristement.

Une chose qui ajoutait encore à l’horreur de ce galetas, c’est que c’était grand. Cela avait des saillies, des angles, des trous noirs, des dessous de toits, des baies et des promontoires. De là d’affreux coins insondables où il semblait que devaient se blottir des araignées grosses comme le poing, des cloportes larges comme le pied, et peut-être même on ne sait quels êtres humains monstrueux.

L’un des grabats était près de la porte, l’autre près de la fenêtre. Tous deux touchaient par une extrémité à la cheminée et faisaient face à Marius.

Dans un angle voisin de l’ouverture par où Marius regardait, était accrochée au mur dans un cadre de bois noir une gravure coloriée au bas de laquelle était écrit en grosses lettres: LE SONGE. Cela représentait une femme endormie et un enfant endormi, l’enfant sur les genoux de la femme, un aigle dans un nuage avec une couronne dans le bas, et la femme écartant la couronne de la tête de l’enfant, sans se réveiller d’ailleurs; au fond Napoléon dans une gloire s’appuyait sur une colonne gros bleu à chapiteau jaune ornée de cette inscription:

MARINGO. AUSTERLITS. IÉNA. WAGRAMME. ELOT.

Au-dessus de ce cadre, une espèce de panneau de bois plus long que large était posé à terre et appuyé en plan incliné contre le mur. Cela avait l’air d’un tableau retourné, d’un châssis probablement barbouillé de l’autre côté, de quelque trumeau détaché d’une muraille et oublié là en attendant qu’on le raccroche.

Près de la table, sur laquelle Marius apercevait une plume, de l’encre et du papier, était assis un homme d’environ soixante ans, petit, maigre, livide, hagard, l’air fin, cruel et inquiet; un gredin hideux.

Lavater, s’il eût considéré ce visage, y eût trouvé le vautour mêlé au procureur; l’oiseau de proie et l’homme de chicane s’enlaidissant et se complétant l’un par l’autre, l’homme de chicane faisant l’oiseau de proie ignoble, l’oiseau de proie faisant l’homme de chicane horrible.

Cet homme avait une longue barbe grise. Il était vêtu d’une chemise de femme qui laissait voir sa poitrine velue et ses bras nus hérissés de poils gris. Sous cette chemise, on voyait passer un pantalon boueux et des bottes dont sortaient les doigts de ses pieds.

Il avait une pipe à la bouche et il fumait. Il n’y avait plus de pain dans le taudis, mais il y avait encore du tabac.

Il écrivait, probablement quelque lettre comme celles que Marius avait lues.

Sur le coin de la table on apercevait un vieux volume rougeâtre dépareillé, et le format, qui était l’ancien in-12 des cabinets de lecture, révélait un roman. Sur la couverture, s’étalait ce titre imprimé en grosses majuscules: DIEU, LE ROI, L’HONNEUR ET LES DAMES, PAR DUCRAY-DUMINIL. 1814.

Tout en écrivant, l’homme parlait haut, et Marius entendait ses paroles:

— Dire qu’il n’y a pas d’égalité, même quand on est mort! Voyez un peu le Père-Lachaise! Les grands, ceux qui sont riches, sont en haut, dans l’allée des acacias, qui est pavée. Ils peuvent y arriver en voiture. Les petits, les pauvres gens, les malheureux, quoi! on les met dans le bas, où il y a de la boue jusqu’aux genoux, dans les trous, dans l’humidité. On les met là pour qu’ils soient plus vite gâtés! On ne peut pas aller les voir sans enfoncer dans la terre.

Ici il s’arrêta, frappa du poing sur la table, et ajouta en grinçant des dents:

— Oh! je mangerais le monde!

Une grosse femme qui pouvait avoir quarante ans ou cent ans était accroupie près de la cheminée sur ses talons nus.

Elle n’était vêtue, elle aussi, que d’une chemise et d’un jupon de tricot rapiécé avec des morceaux de vieux drap. Un tablier de grosse toile cachait la moitié du jupon. Quoique cette femme fût pliée et ramassée sur elle-même, on voyait qu’elle était de très haute taille. C’était une espèce de géante à côté de son mari. Elle avait d’affreux cheveux d’un blond roux grisonnants qu’elle remuait de temps en temps avec ses énormes mains luisantes à ongles plats.

À côté d’elle était posé à terre, tout grand ouvert, un volume du même format que l’autre, et probablement du même roman.

Sur un des grabats, Marius entrevoyait une espèce de longue petite fille blême assise, presque nue et les pieds pendants, n’ayant l’air ni d’écouter, ni de voir, ni de vivre.

La sœur cadette sans doute de celle qui était venue chez lui.

Elle paraissait onze ou douze ans. En l’examinant avec attention, on reconnaissait qu’elle en avait bien quatorze. C’était l’enfant qui disait la veille au soir sur le boulevard: *J’ai cavalé! cavalé! cavalé!*

Elle était de cette espèce malingre qui reste longtemps en retard, puis pousse vite et tout à coup. C’est l’indigence qui fait ces tristes plantes humaines. Ces créatures n’ont ni enfance ni adolescence. À quinze ans, elles en paraissent douze, à seize ans, elles en paraissent vingt. Aujourd’hui petites filles, demain femmes. On dirait qu’elles enjambent la vie, pour avoir fini plus vite.

En ce moment, cet être avait l'air d'un enfant.

Du reste, il ne se révélait dans ce logis la présence d'aucun travail; pas un métier, pas un rouet, pas un outil. Dans un coin quelques ferrailles d'un aspect douteux. C'était cette morne paresse qui suit le désespoir et qui précède l'agonie.

Marius considéra quelque temps cet intérieur funèbre plus effrayant que l'intérieur d'une tombe, car on y sentait remuer l'âme humaine et palpiter la vie.

Le galetas, la cave, la basse-fosse où de certains indigents rampent au plus bas de l'édifice social, n'est pas tout à fait le sépulcre, c'en est l'antichambre; mais, comme ces riches qui étalent leurs plus grandes magnificences à l'entrée de leur palais, il semble que la mort, qui est tout à côté, mette ses plus grandes misères dans ce vestibule.

L'homme s'était tu, la femme ne parlait pas, la jeune fille ne semblait pas respirer. On entendait crier la plume sur le papier.

L'homme grommela, sans cesser d'écrire:

— Canaille! canaille! tout est canaille!

Cette variante à l'épiphonème de Salomon arracha un soupir à la femme.

— Petit ami, calme-toi, dit-elle. Ne te fais pas de mal, chéri. Tu es trop bon d'écrire à tous ces gens-là, mon homme.

Dans la misère, les corps se serrent les uns contre les autres, comme dans le froid, mais les cœurs s'éloignent. Cette femme, selon toute apparence, avait dû aimer cet homme de la quantité d'amour qui était en elle; mais probablement, dans les reproches quotidiens et réciproques d'une affreuse détresse pesant sur tout le groupe, cela s'était éteint. Il n'y avait plus en elle pour son mari que de la cendre d'affection. Pourtant les appellations caressantes, comme cela arrive souvent, avaient survécu. Elle lui disait: *Chéri, petit ami, mon homme*, etc., de bouche, le cœur se taisant.

L'homme s'était remis à écrire.

Chapitre VII

Stratégie et tactique

Marius, la poitrine oppressée, allait redescendre de l'espèce d'observatoire qu'il s'était improvisé, quand un bruit attira son attention et le fit rester à sa place.

La porte du galetas venait de s'ouvrir brusquement.

La fille aînée parut sur le seuil.

Elle avait aux pieds de gros souliers d'homme tachés de boue qui avait jailli jusque sur ses chevilles rouges, et elle était couverte d'une vieille mante en lambeaux que Marius ne lui avait pas vue une heure auparavant, mais qu'elle avait probablement déposée à sa porte afin d'inspirer plus de pitié, et qu'elle avait dû reprendre en sortant. Elle entra, repoussa la porte derrière elle, s'arrêta pour reprendre haleine, car elle était tout essoufflée, puis cria avec une expression de triomphe et de joie:

— Il vient!

Le père tourna les yeux, la femme tourna la tête, la petite sœur ne bougea pas.

— Qui? demanda le père.

— Le monsieur!

— Le philanthrope?

— Oui.

— De l'église Saint-Jacques?

— Oui.

— Ce vieux?

— Oui.

— Et il va venir?

— Il me suit.

— Tu es sûre?

— Je suis sûre.

— Là, vrai, il vient?

— Il vient en fiacre.

— En fiacre. C'est Rothschild!

Le père se leva.

— Comment es-tu sûre? s’il vient en fiacre, comment se fait-il que tu arrives avant lui? Lui as-tu bien donné l’adresse au moins? lui as-tu bien dit la dernière porte au fond du corridor à droite? Pourvu qu’il ne se trompe pas! Tu l’as donc trouvé à l’église? a-t-il lu ma lettre? qu’est-ce qu’il t’a dit?

— Ta, ta, ta! dit la fille, comme tu galopes, bonhomme! Voici: je suis entrée dans l’église, il était à sa place d’habitude, je lui ai fait la révérence, et je lui ai remis la lettre, il a lu, et il m’a dit: Où demeurez-vous, mon enfant? J’ai dit: Monsieur, je vas vous mener. Il m’a dit: Non, donnez-moi votre adresse, ma fille a des emplettes à faire, je vais prendre une voiture, et j’arriverai chez vous en même temps que vous. Je lui ai donné l’adresse. Quand je lui ait dit la maison, il a paru surpris et qu’il hésitait un instant, puis il a dit: C’est égal, j’irai. La messe finie, je l’ai vu sortir de l’église avec sa fille, je les ai vus monter en fiacre. Et je lui ai bien dit la dernière porte au fond du corridor à droite.

— Et qu’est-ce qui te dit qu’il viendra?

— Je viens de voir le fiacre qui arrivait rue du Petit-Banquier. C’est ce qui fait que j’ai couru.

— Comment sais-tu que c’est le même fiacre?

— Parce que j’en avais remarqué le numéro donc!

— Quel est ce numéro?

— 440.

— Bien, tu es une fille d’esprit.

La fille regarda hardiment son père, et, montrant les chaussures qu’elle avait aux pieds: — Une fille d’esprit, c’est possible. Mais je dis que je ne mettrai plus ces souliers-là, et que je n’en veux plus, pour la santé d’abord, et pour la propreté ensuite. Je ne connais rien de plus agaçant que des semelles qui jutent et qui font ghi, ghi, ghi, tout le long du chemin. J’aime mieux aller nu-pieds.

— Tu as raison, répondit le père d’un ton de douceur qui contrastait avec la rudesse de la jeune fille, mais c’est qu’on ne te laisserait pas entrer dans les églises. Il faut que les pauvres aient des souliers. On ne va pas pieds nus chez le bon Dieu, ajouta-t-il amèrement. Puis revenant à l’objet qui le préoccupait: — Et tu es sûre, là, sûre, qu’il vient?

— Il est derrière mes talons, dit-elle.

L’homme se dressa. Il y avait une sorte d’illumination sur son visage.

— Ma femme! cria-t-il, tu entends. Voilà le philanthrope. Éteins le feu.

La mère stupéfaite ne bougea pas.

Le père, avec l’agilité d’un saltimbanque, saisit un pot égueulé qui était sur la cheminée et jeta de l’eau sur les tisons.

Puis s’adressant à sa fille aînée:

— Toi! dépaille la chaise!

Sa fille ne comprenait point.

Il empoigna la chaise et d’un coup de talon il en fit une chaise dépaillée. Sa jambe passa au travers.

Tout en retirant sa jambe, il demanda à sa fille:

— Fait-il froid?

— Très froid. Il neige.

Le père se tourna vers la cadette qui était sur le grabat près de la fenêtre et lui cria d’une voix tonnante:

— Vite! à bas du lit, fainéante! tu ne feras donc jamais rien! Casse un carreau!

La petite se jeta à bas du lit en frissonnant.

— Casse un carreau! reprit-il.

L’enfant demeura interdite.

— M’entends-tu? répéta le père, je te dis de casser un carreau!

L’enfant, avec une sorte d’obéissance terrifiée, se dressa sur la pointe du pied, et donna un coup de poing dans un carreau. La vitre se brisa et tomba à grand bruit.

— Bien, dit le père.

Il était grave et brusque. Son regard parcourait rapidement tous les recoins du galetas.

On eût dit un général qui fait les derniers préparatifs au moment où la bataille va commencer.

La mère, qui n’avait pas encore dit un mot, se souleva et demanda d’une voix lente et sourde et dont les paroles semblaient sortir comme figées:

— Chéri, qu’est-ce que tu veux faire?

— Mets-toi au lit répondit l’homme.

L’intonation n’admettait pas de délibération. La mère obéit et se jeta lourdement sur un des grabats.

Cependant on entendait un sanglot dans un coin.

— Qu’est-ce que c’est? cria le père.

La fille cadette, sans sortir de l’ombre où elle s’était blottie, montra son poing ensanglanté. En brisant la vitre elle s’était blessée; elle s’en était allée près du grabat de sa mère, et elle pleurait silencieusement.

Ce fut le tour de la mère de se redresser et de crier:

— Tu vois bien! les bêtises que tu fais! en cassant ton carreau, elle s’est coupée!

— Tant mieux! dit l’homme, c’était prévu.

— Comment? tant mieux? reprit la femme.

— Paix! répliqua le père, je supprime la liberté de la presse.

Puis, déchirant la chemise de femme qu’il avait sur le corps, il fit un lambeau de toile dont il enveloppa vivement le poignet sanglant de la petite.

Cela fait, son œil s’abaissa sur la chemise déchirée avec satisfaction.

— Et la chemise aussi, dit-il. Tout cela a bon air.

Une bise glacée sifflait à la vitre et entrait dans la chambre. La brume du dehors y pénétrait et s’y dilatait comme une ouate blanchâtre vaguement démêlée par des doigts invisibles. À travers le carreau cassé, on voyait tomber la neige. Le froid promis la veille par le soleil de la Chandeleur était en effet venu.

Le père promena un coup d’œil autour de lui comme pour s’assurer qu’il n’avait rien oublié. Il prit une vieille pelle et répandit de la cendre sur les tisons mouillés de façon à les cacher complètement.

Puis se relevant et s’adossant à la cheminée:

— Maintenant, dit-il, nous pouvons recevoir le philanthrope.

Chapitre VIII

Le rayon dans le bouge

La grande fille s’approcha et posa sa main sur celle de son père.

— Tâte comme j’ai froid, dit-elle.

— Bah! répondit le père, j’ai bien plus froid que cela.

La mère cria impétueusement:

— Tu as toujours tout mieux que les autres, toi! même le mal.

— À bas! dit l’homme.

La mère, regardée d’une certaine façon, se tut.

Il y eut dans le bouge un moment de silence. La fille aînée décrottait d’un air insouciant le bas de sa mante, la jeune sœur continuait de sangloter; la mère lui avait pris la tête dans ses deux mains et la couvrait de baisers en lui disant tout bas:

— Mon trésor, je t’en prie, ce ne sera rien, ne pleure pas, tu vas fâcher ton père.

— Non! cria le père, au contraire! sanglote! sanglote! cela fait bien.

Puis, revenant à l’aînée:

— Ah çà, mais! il n’arrive pas! S’il allait ne pas venir! j’aurais éteint mon feu, défoncé ma chaise, déchiré ma chemise et cassé mon carreau pour rien!

— Et blessé la petite! murmura la mère.

— Savez-vous, reprit le père, qu’il fait un froid de chien dans ce galetas du diable? Si cet homme ne venait pas! Oh! voilà! il se fait attendre! il se dit: Eh bien! ils m’attendront! ils sont là pour cela! — Oh! je les hais, et comme je les étranglerais avec jubilation, joie, enthousiasme et satisfaction, ces riches! tous ces riches! ces prétendus hommes charitables, qui font les conflits, qui vont à la messe, qui donnent dans la prêtraille, prêchi, prêcha, dans les calottes, et qui se croient au-dessus de nous, et qui viennent nous humilier, et nous apporter des vêtements! comme ils disent! des nippes qui ne valent pas quatre sous, et du pain! Ce n’est pas cela que je veux, tas de canailles! c’est de l’argent! Ah! de l’argent! jamais! parce qu’ils disent que nous l’irions boire, et que nous sommes des ivrognes et des fainéants! et eux! qu’est-ce qu’ils sont donc, et qu’est-ce qu’ils ont été dans leur temps? des voleurs! ils ne se seraient pas enrichis sans cela! Oh! l’on devrait prendre la société par les quatre coins de la nappe et tout jeter en l’air! tout se casserait, c’est possible, mais au moins personne n’aurait rien, ce serait cela de gagné! — Mais qu’est-ce qu’il fait donc, ton mufle de monsieur bienfaisant? viendra-t-il! L’animal a peut-être oublié l’adresse! Gageons que cette vieille bête....

En ce moment on frappa un léger coup à la porte; l’homme s’y précipita et l’ouvrit en s’écriant avec des salutations profondes et des sourires d’adoration:

— Entrez, monsieur! daignez entrer, mon respectable bienfaiteur, ainsi que votre charmante demoiselle.

Un homme d’un âge mûr et une jeune fille parurent sur le seuil du galetas.

Marius n’avait pas quitté sa place. Ce qu’il éprouva en ce moment échappe à la langue humaine.

C’était Elle.

Quiconque a aimé sait tous les sens rayonnants que contiennent les quatre lettres de ce mot: Elle.

C’était bien elle. C’est à peine si Marius la distinguait à travers la vapeur lumineuse qui s’était subitement répandue sur ses yeux. C’était ce doux être absent, cet astre qui lui avait lui pendant six mois, c’était cette prunelle, ce front, cette bouche, ce beau visage évanoui qui avait fait la nuit en s’en allant. La vision s’était éclipsée, elle reparaissait!

Elle reparaissait dans cette ombre, dans ce galetas, dans ce bouge difforme, dans cette horreur!

Marius frémissait éperdument. Quoi! c’était elle! les palpitations de son cœur lui troublaient la vue. Il se sentait prêt à fondre en larmes. Quoi! il la revoyait enfin après l’avoir cherchée si longtemps! il lui semblait qu’il avait perdu son âme et qu’il venait de la retrouver.

Elle était toujours la même, un peu pâle seulement; sa délicate figure s’encadrait dans un chapeau de velours violet, sa taille se dérobait sous une pelisse de satin noir. On entrevoyait sous sa longue robe son petit pied serré dans un brodequin de soie.

Elle était toujours accompagnée de M. Leblanc.

Elle avait fait quelques pas dans la chambre et avait déposé un assez gros paquet sur la table.

La Jondrette aînée s’était retirée derrière la porte et regardait d’un œil sombre ce chapeau de velours, cette mante de soie, et ce charmant visage heureux.

Chapitre IX

Jondrette pleure presque

Le taudis était tellement obscur que les gens qui venaient du dehors éprouvaient en y pénétrant un effet d’entrée de cave. Les deux nouveaux venus avancèrent donc avec une certaine hésitation, distinguant à peine des formes vagues autour d’eux, tandis qu’ils étaient parfaitement vus et examinés par les yeux des habitants du galetas, accoutumés à ce crépuscule.

M. Leblanc s’approcha avec son regard bon et triste, et dit au père Jondrette:

— Monsieur, vous trouverez dans ce paquet des hardes neuves, des bas et des couvertures de laine.

— Notre angélique bienfaiteur nous comble, dit Jondrette en s’inclinant jusqu’à terre. — Puis, se penchant à l’oreille de sa fille aînée, pendant que les deux visiteurs examinaient cet intérieur lamentable, il ajouta bas et rapidement:

— Hein? qu’est-ce que je disais? des nippes! pas d’argent. Ils sont tous les mêmes! À propos, comment la lettre à cette vieille ganache était-elle signée?

— Fabantou, répondit la fille.

— L’artiste dramatique, bon!

Bien en prit à Jondrette, car en ce moment-là même M. Leblanc se retournait vers lui, et lui disait de cet air de quelqu’un qui cherche le nom:

— Je vois que vous êtes bien à plaindre, monsieur....

— Fabantou, répondit vivement Jondrette.

— Monsieur Fabantou, oui, c’est cela, je me rappelle.

— Artiste dramatique, monsieur, et qui a eu des succès.

Ici Jondrette crut évidemment le moment venu de s’emparer du «philanthrope». Il s’écria avec un son de voix qui tenait tout à la fois de la gloriole du bateleur dans les foires et de l’humilité du mendiant sur les grandes routes:

— Élève de Talma, monsieur! je suis élève de Talma! La fortune m’a souri jadis. Hélas! maintenant c’est le tour du malheur. Voyez, mon bienfaiteur, pas de pain, pas de feu. Mes pauvres mômes n’ont pas de feu!

Mon unique chaise dépaillée! Un carreau cassé! par le temps qu'il fait! Mon épouse au lit! malade!

— Pauvre femme! dit M. Leblanc.

— Mon enfant blessée! ajouta Jondrette.

L'enfant, distraite par l'arrivée des étrangers, s'était mise à contempler «la demoiselle», et avait cessé de sangloter.

— Pleure donc! braille donc! lui dit Jondrette bas.

En même temps il lui pinça sa main malade. Tout cela avec un talent d'escamoteur.

La petite jeta les hauts cris.

L'adorable jeune fille que Marius nommait dans son cœur «son Ursule» s'approcha vivement:

— Pauvre chère enfant! dit-elle.

— Voyez, ma belle demoiselle, poursuivit Jondrette, son poignet ensanglanté! C'est un accident qui est arrivé en travaillant sous une mécanique pour gagner six sous par jour. On sera peut-être obligé de lui couper le bras!

— Vraiment? dit le vieux monsieur alarmé.

La petite fille, prenant cette parole au sérieux, se remit à sangloter de plus belle.

— Hélas, oui, mon bienfaiteur! répondit le père.

Depuis quelques instants, Jondrette considérait, «le philanthrope» d'une manière bizarre. Tout en parlant, il semblait le scruter avec attention comme s'il cherchait à recueillir des souvenirs. Tout à coup, profitant d'un moment où les nouveaux venus questionnaient avec intérêt la petite sur sa main blessée, il passa près de sa femme qui était dans son lit avec un air accablé et stupide, et lui dit vivement et très bas:

— Regarde donc cet homme-là!

Puis se retournant vers M. Leblanc, et continuant sa lamentation:

— Voyez, monsieur! je n'ai, moi, pour tout vêtement qu'une chemise de ma femme! et toute déchirée! au cœur de l'hiver. Je ne puis sortir faute d'un habit. Si j'avais le moindre habit, j'irais voir mademoiselle Mars qui me connaît et qui m'aime beaucoup. Ne demeure-t-elle pas toujours rue de la Tour-des-Dames? Savez-vous, monsieur? nous avons joué ensemble en province. J'ai partagé ses lauriers. Célimène viendrait à mon secours, monsieur! Elmire ferait l'aumône à Bélisaire! Mais non, rien! Et pas un sou dans la maison! Ma femme malade, pas un sou! Ma fille dangereusement blessée, pas un sou! Mon épouse a des étouffements. C’est son âge, et puis le système nerveux s’en est mêlé. Il lui faudrait des secours, et à ma fille aussi! Mais le médecin! mais le pharmacien! comment payer? pas un liard! Je m’agenouillerais devant un décime, monsieur! Voilà où les arts en sont réduits! Et savez-vous, ma charmante demoiselle, et vous, mon généreux protecteur, savez-vous, vous qui respirez la vertu et la bonté, et qui parfumez cette église où ma pauvre fille en venant faire sa prière vous aperçoit tous les jours?... Car j’élève mes filles dans la religion, monsieur. Je n’ai pas voulu qu’elles prissent le théâtre. Ah! les drôlesses; que je les voie broncher! Je ne badine pas, moi! Je leur flanque des bouzins sur l’honneur, sur la morale, sur la vertu! Demandez-leur. Il faut que ça marche droit. Elles ont un père. Ce ne sont pas de ces malheureuses qui commencent par n’avoir pas de famille et qui finissent par épouser le public. On est mamselle Personne, on devient madame Tout-le-Monde. Crebleur! pas de ça dans la famille Fabantou! J’entends les éduquer vertueusement, et que ça soit honnête, et que ça soit gentil, et que ça croie en Dieu! sacré nom! — Eh bien, monsieur, mon digne monsieur, savez-vous ce qui va se passer demain? Demain, c’est le 4 février, le jour fatal, le dernier délai que m’a donné mon propriétaire; si ce soir je ne l’ai pas payé, demain ma fille aînée, moi, mon épouse avec sa fièvre, mon enfant avec sa blessure, nous serons tous quatre chassés d’ici, et jetés dehors, dans la rue, sur le boulevard, sans abri, sous la pluie, sur la neige. Voilà, monsieur. Je dois quatre termes, une année! c’est-à-dire une soixantaine de francs.

Jondrette mentait. Quatre termes n’eussent fait que quarante francs, et il n’en pouvait devoir quatre, puisqu’il n’y avait pas six mois que Marius en avait payé deux.

M. Leblanc tira cinq francs de sa poche et les posa sur la table.

Jondrette eut le temps de grommeler à l’oreille de sa grande fille:

— Gredin! que veut-il que je fasse avec ses cinq francs? Cela ne me paye pas ma chaise et mon carreau! Faites donc des frais!

Cependant, M. Leblanc avait quitté une grande redingote brune qu’il portait par-dessus sa redingote bleue et l’avait jetée sur le dos de la chaise.

— Monsieur Fabantou, dit-il, je n’ai plus que ces cinq francs sur moi, mais je vais reconduire ma fille à la maison et je reviendrai ce soir; n’est-ce pas ce soir que vous devez payer?...

Le visage de Jondrette s’éclaira d’une expression étrange.

Il répondit vivement:

— Oui, mon respectable monsieur. À huit heures je dois être chez mon propriétaire.

— Je serai ici à six heures, et je vous apporterai les soixante francs.

— Mon bienfaiteur! cria Jondrette éperdu.

Et il ajouta tout bas:

— Regarde-le bien, ma femme!

M. Leblanc avait repris le bras de la belle jeune fille et se tournait vers la porte:

— À ce soir, mes amis, dit-il.

— Six heures? fit Jondrette.

— Six heures précises.

En ce moment le par-dessus resté sur la chaise frappa les yeux de la Jondrette aînée.

— Monsieur, dit-elle, vous oubliez votre redingote.

Jondrette dirigea vers sa fille un regard foudroyant accompagné d’un haussement d’épaules formidable.

M. Leblanc se retourna et répondit avec un sourire:

— Je ne l’oublie pas, je la laisse.

— Ô mon protecteur, dit Jondrette, mon auguste bienfaiteur, je fonds en larmes! Souffrez que je vous reconduise jusqu’à votre fiacre.

— Si vous sortez, repartit M. Leblanc, mettez ce par-dessus. Il fait vraiment très froid.

Jondrette ne se le fit pas dire deux fois. Il endossa vivement la redingote brune.

Et ils sortirent tous les trois, Jondrette précédant les deux étrangers.

Chapitre X

Tarif des cabriolets de régie: deux francs l’heure

Marius n’avait rien perdu de toute cette scène, et pourtant en réalité il n’en avait rien vu. Ses yeux étaient restés fixés sur la jeune fille, son cœur l’avait pour ainsi dire saisie et enveloppée tout entière dès son premier pas dans le galetas. Pendant tout le temps qu’elle avait été là, il avait vécu de cette vie de l’extase qui suspend les perceptions matérielles et précipite toute l’âme sur un seul point. Il contemplait, non pas cette fille, mais cette lumière qui avait une pelisse de satin et un chapeau de velours. L’étoile Sirius fût entrée dans la chambre qu’il n’eût pas été plus ébloui.

Tandis que la jeune fille ouvrait le paquet, dépliait les hardes et les couvertures, questionnait la mère malade avec bonté et la petite blessée avec attendrissement, il épiait tous ses mouvements, il tâchait d’écouter ses paroles. Il connaissait ses yeux, son front, sa beauté, sa taille, sa démarche, il ne connaissait pas le son de sa voix. Il avait cru en saisir quelques mots une fois au Luxembourg, mais il n’en était pas absolument sûr. Il eût donné dix ans de sa vie pour l’entendre, pour pouvoir emporter dans son âme un peu de cette musique. Mais tout se perdait dans les étalages lamentables et les éclats de trompette de Jondrette. Cela mêlait une vraie colère au ravissement de Marius. Il la couvait des yeux. Il ne pouvait s’imaginer que ce fût vraiment cette créature divine qu’il apercevait au milieu de ces êtres immondes dans ce taudis monstrueux. Il lui semblait voir un colibri parmi des crapauds.

Quand elle sortit, il n’eut qu’une pensée, la suivre, s’attacher à sa trace, ne la quitter que sachant où elle demeurait, ne pas la reperdre au moins après l’avoir si miraculeusement retrouvée! Il sauta à bas de la commode et prit son chapeau. Comme il mettait la main au pêne de la serrure et allait sortir, une réflexion l’arrêta. Le corridor était long, l’escalier roide, le Jondrette bavard, M. Leblanc n’était sans doute pas encore remonté en voiture; si, en se retournant dans le corridor, ou dans l’escalier, ou sur le seuil, il l’apercevait lui, Marius, dans cette maison, évidemment il s’alarmerait et trouverait moyen de lui échapper de nouveau, et ce serait encore une fois fini. Que faire? Attendre un peu? mais pendant cette attente, la voiture pouvait partir. Marius était perplexe. Enfin il se risqua, et sortit de sa chambre.

Il n'y avait plus personne dans le corridor. Il courut à l'escalier. Il n'y avait personne dans l'escalier. Il descendit en hâte, et il arriva sur le boulevard à temps pour voir un fiacre tourner le coin de la rue du Petit-Banquier et rentrer dans Paris.

Marius se précipita dans cette direction. Parvenu à l'angle du boulevard, il revit le fiacre qui descendait rapidement la rue Mouffetard; le fiacre était déjà très loin, aucun moyen de le rejoindre; quoi? courir après? impossible; et d'ailleurs de la voiture on remarquerait certainement un individu courant à toutes jambes à la poursuite du fiacre, et le père le reconnaîtrait. En ce moment, hasard inouï et merveilleux, Marius aperçut un cabriolet de régie qui passait à vide sur le boulevard. Il n'y avait qu'un parti à prendre, monter dans ce cabriolet, et suivre le fiacre. Cela était sûr, efficace et sans danger.

Marius fit signe au cocher d'arrêter, et lui cria:

— À l'heure!

Marius était sans cravate, il avait son vieil habit de travail auquel des boutons manquaient, sa chemise était déchirée à l'un des plis de la poitrine.

Le cocher s'arrêta, cligna de l'œil et étendit vers Marius sa main gauche en frottant doucement son index avec son pouce.

— Quoi? dit Marius.

— Payez d'avance, dit le cocher.

Marius se souvint qu'il n'avait sur lui que seize sous.

— Combien? demanda-t-il.

— Quarante sous.

— Je payerai en revenant.

Le cocher, pour toute réponse, siffla l'air de La Palisse et fouetta son cheval.

Marius regarda le cabriolet s'éloigner d'un air égaré. Pour vingt-quatre sous qui lui manquaient, il perdait sa joie, son bonheur, son amour! il retombait dans la nuit! il avait vu et il redevenait aveugle! il songea amèrement et, il faut bien le dire, avec un regret profond, aux cinq francs qu'il avait donnés le matin même à cette misérable fille. S'il avait eu ces cinq francs, il était sauvé, il renaissait, il sortait des limbes et des ténèbres, il sortait de l'isolement, du spleen, du veuvage; il renouait le fil noir de sa destinée à ce beau fil d'or qui venait de flotter devant ses yeux et de se casser encore une fois. Il rentra dans la masure désespéré.

Il aurait pu se dire que M. Leblanc avait promis de revenir le soir, et qu'il n'y aurait qu'à s'y mieux prendre cette fois pour le suivre; mais dans sa contemplation, c'est à peine s'il avait entendu.

Au moment de monter l'escalier, il aperçut de l'autre côté du boulevard, le long du mur désert de la rue de la Barrière des Gobelins, Jondrette enveloppé du par-dessus du «philanthrope», qui parlait à un de ces hommes de mine inquiétante qu'on est convenu d'appeler *rôdeurs de barrières;* gens à figures équivoques, à monologues suspects, qui ont un air de mauvaise pensée, et qui dorment assez habituellement de jour, ce qui fait supposer qu'ils travaillent la nuit.

Ces deux hommes, causant immobiles sous la neige qui tombait par tourbillons, faisaient un groupe qu'un sergent de ville eût à coup sûr observé, mais que Marius remarqua à peine.

Cependant, quelle que fût sa préoccupation douloureuse, il ne put s'empêcher de se dire que ce rôdeur de barrières à qui Jondrette parlait ressemblait à un certain Panchaud, dit Printanier, dit Bigrenaille, que Courfeyrac lui avait montré une fois et qui passait dans le quartier pour un promeneur nocturne assez dangereux. On a vu, dans le livre précédent, le nom de cet homme. Ce Panchaud, dit Printanier, dit Bigrenaille, a figuré plus tard dans plusieurs procès criminels et est devenu depuis un coquin célèbre. Il n'était encore alors qu'un fameux coquin. Aujourd'hui il est à l'état de tradition parmi les bandits et les escarpes. Il faisait école vers la fin du dernier règne. Et le soir, à la nuit tombante, à l'heure où les groupes se forment et se parlent bas, on en causait à la Force dans la fosse-aux-lions. On pouvait même, dans cette prison, précisément à l'endroit où passait sous le chemin de ronde ce canal des latrines qui servit à la fuite inouïe en plein jour de trente détenus en 1843, on pouvait, au-dessus de la date de ces latrines, lire son nom, PANCHAUD, audacieusement gravé par lui sur le mur de ronde dans une de ses tentatives d'évasion. En 1832, la police le surveillait déjà, mais il n'avait pas encore sérieusement débuté.

Chapitre XI

Offres de service de la misère à la douleur

Marius monta l’escalier de la masure à pas lents; à l’instant où il allait rentrer dans sa cellule, il aperçut derrière lui dans le corridor la Jondrette aînée qui le suivait. Cette fille lui fut odieuse à voir, c’était elle qui avait ses cinq francs, il était trop tard pour les lui redemander, le cabriolet n’était plus là, le fiacre était bien loin. D’ailleurs elle ne les lui rendrait pas. Quant à la questionner sur la demeure des gens qui étaient venus tout à l’heure, cela était inutile, il était évident qu’elle ne la savait point, puisque la lettre signée Fabantou était adressée *au monsieur bienfaisant de l’église Saint-Jacques-du-Haut-Pas*.

Marius entra dans sa chambre et poussa sa porte derrière lui.

Elle ne se ferma pas; il se retourna et vit une main qui retenait la porte entr’ouverte.

— Qu’est-ce que c’est? demanda-t-il, qui est là?

C’était la fille Jondrette.

— C’est vous? reprit Marius presque durement, toujours vous donc! Que me voulez-vous?

Elle semblait pensive et ne regardait pas. Elle n’avait plus son assurance du matin. Elle n’était pas entrée et se tenait dans l’ombre du corridor, où Marius l’apercevait par la porte entre-bâillée.

— Ah çà, répondrez-vous? fit Marius. Qu’est-ce que vous me voulez?

Elle leva sur lui son œil morne où une espèce de clarté semblait s’allumer vaguement, et lui dit:

— Monsieur Marius, vous avez l’air triste. Qu’est-ce que vous avez?

— Moi! dit Marius.

— Oui, vous.

— Je n’ai rien.

— Si!

— Non.

— Je vous dis que si!

— Laissez-moi tranquille!

Marius poussa de nouveau la porte, elle continua de la retenir.

— Tenez, dit-elle, vous avez tort. Quoique vous ne soyez pas riche, vous avez été bon ce matin. Soyez-le encore à présent. Vous m’avez donné de quoi manger, dites-moi maintenant ce que vous avez. Vous avez du chagrin, cela se voit. Je ne voudrais pas que vous eussiez du chagrin. Qu’est-ce qu’il faut faire pour cela? Puis-je servir à quelque chose? Employez-moi. Je ne vous demande pas vos secrets, vous n’aurez pas besoin de me dire, mais enfin je peux être utile. Je peux bien vous aider, puisque j’aide mon père. Quand il faut porter des lettres, aller dans les maisons, demander de porte en porte, trouver une adresse, suivre quelqu’un, moi je sers à ça. Eh bien, vous pouvez bien me dire ce que vous avez, j’irai parler aux personnes. Quelquefois quelqu’un qui parle aux personnes, ça suffit pour qu’on sache les choses, et tout s’arrange. Servez-vous de moi.

Une idée traversa l’esprit de Marius. Quelle branche dédaigne-t-on quand on se sent tomber?

Il s’approcha de la Jondrette.

— Écoute... lui dit-il.

Elle l’interrompit avec un éclair de joie dans les yeux.

— Oh! oui, tutoyez-moi! j’aime mieux cela.

— Eh bien, reprit-il, tu as amené ici ce vieux monsieur avec sa fille....

— Oui.

— Sais-tu leur adresse?

— Non.

— Trouve-la-moi.

L’œil de la Jondrette, de morne, était devenu joyeux, de joyeux il devint sombre.

— C’est là ce que vous voulez? demanda-t-elle.

— Oui.

— Est-ce que vous les connaissez?

— Non.

— C’est-à-dire, reprit-elle vivement, vous ne la connaissez pas, mais vous voulez la connaître.

Ce *les* qui était devenu *la* avait je ne sais quoi de significatif et d’amer.

— Enfin, peux-tu? dit Marius.

— Vous avoir l’adresse de la belle demoiselle?

Il y avait encore dans ces mots «la belle demoiselle» une nuance qui importuna Marius. Il reprit:

— Enfin n’importe! l’adresse du père et de la fille. Leur adresse, quoi!

Elle le regarda fixement.

— Qu’est-ce que vous me donnerez?

— Tout ce que tu voudras!

— Tout ce que je voudrai?

— Oui.

— Vous aurez l’adresse.

Elle baissa la tête, puis d’un mouvement brusque elle tira la porte qui se referma.

Marius se retrouva seul.

Il se laissa tomber sur une chaise, la tête et les deux coudes sur son lit, abîmé dans des pensées qu’il ne pouvait saisir et comme en proie à un vertige. Tout ce qui s’était passé depuis le matin, l’apparition de l’ange, sa disparition, ce que cette créature venait de lui dire, une lueur d’espérance flottant dans un désespoir immense, voilà ce qui emplissait confusément son cerveau.

Tout à coup il fut violemment arraché à sa rêverie.

Il entendit la voix haute et dure de Jondrette prononcer ces paroles pleines du plus étrange intérêt pour lui:

— Je te dis que j’en suis sûr et que je l’ai reconnu.

De qui parlait Jondrette? il avait reconnu qui? M. Leblanc? le père de «son Ursule»? quoi! est-ce que Jondrette le connaissait? Marius allait-il avoir de cette façon brusque et inattendue tous les renseignements sans lesquels sa vie était obscure pour lui-même? allait-il savoir enfin qui il aimait, qui était cette jeune fille? qui était son père? l’ombre si épaisse qui les couvrait était-elle au moment de s’éclaircir? Le voile allait-il se déchirer? Ah! ciel!

Il bondit, plutôt qu’il ne monta, sur la commode, et reprit sa place près de la petite lucarne de la cloison.

Il revoyait l’intérieur du bouge Jondrette.

Chapitre XII

Emploi de la pièce de cinq francs de M. Leblanc

Rien n’était changé dans l’aspect de la famille, sinon que la femme et les filles avaient puisé dans le paquet, et mis des bas et des camisoles de laine. Deux couvertures neuves étaient jetées sur les deux lits.

Le Jondrette venait évidemment de rentrer. Il avait encore l’essoufflement du dehors. Ses filles étaient près de la cheminée, assises à terre, l’aînée pansant la main de la cadette. Sa femme était comme affaissée sur le grabat voisin de la cheminée avec un visage étonné. Jondrette marchait dans le galetas de long en large à grands pas. Il avait les yeux extraordinaires.

La femme, qui semblait timide et frappée de stupeur devant son mari, se hasarda à lui dire:

— Quoi, vraiment? tu es sûr?

— Sûr! Il y a huit ans! mais je le reconnais! Ah! je le reconnais! je l’ai reconnu tout de suite! Quoi, cela ne t’a pas sauté aux yeux?

— Non.

— Mais je t’ai dit pourtant: fais attention! mais c’est la taille, c’est le visage, à peine plus vieux, il y a des gens qui ne vieillissent pas, je ne sais pas comment ils font; c’est le son de voix. Il est mieux mis, voilà tout! Ah! vieux mystérieux du diable, je te tiens, va!

Il s’arrêta et dit à ses filles:

— Allez-vous-en, vous autres! — C’est drôle que cela ne t’ait pas sauté aux yeux.

Elles se levèrent pour obéir.

La mère balbutia:

— Avec sa main malade?

— L’air lui fera du bien, dit Jondrette. Allez.

Il était visible que cet homme était de ceux auxquels on ne réplique pas. Les deux filles sortirent.

Au moment où elles allaient passer la porte, le père retint l’aînée par le bras et dit avec un accent particulier:

— Vous serez ici à cinq heures précises. Toutes les deux. J’aurai besoin de vous.

Marius redoubla d’attention.

Demeuré seul avec sa femme, Jondrette se remit à marcher dans la chambre et en fit deux ou trois fois le tour en silence. Puis il passa quelques minutes à faire rentrer et à enfoncer dans la ceinture de son pantalon le bas de la chemise de femme qu’il portait.

Tout à coup il se tourna vers la Jondrette, croisa les bras, et s’écria:

— Et veux-tu que je te dise une chose? La demoiselle....

— Eh bien quoi! repartit la femme, la demoiselle?

Marius n’en pouvait douter, c’était bien d’elle qu’on parlait. Il écoutait avec une anxiété ardente. Toute sa vie était dans ses oreilles.

Mais le Jondrette s’était penché, et avait parlé bas à sa femme. Puis il se releva et termina tout haut:

— C’est elle!

— Ça? dit la femme.

— Ça! dit le mari.

Aucune expression ne saurait rendre ce qu’il y avait dans le *ça* de la mère. C’était la surprise, la rage, la haine, la colère, mêlées et combinées dans une intonation monstrueuse. Il avait suffi de quelques mots prononcés, du nom sans doute, que son mari lui avait dit à l’oreille, pour que cette grosse femme assoupie se réveillât, et de repoussante devînt effroyable.

— Pas possible! s’écria-t-elle. Quand je pense que mes filles vont nu-pieds et n’ont pas une robe à mettre! Comment! une pelisse de satin, un chapeau de velours, des brodequins, et tout! pour plus de deux cents francs d’effets! qu’on croirait que c’est une dame! Non, tu te trompes! Mais d’abord l’autre était affreuse, celle-ci n’est pas mal! elle n’est vraiment pas mal! ce ne peut pas être elle!

— Je te dis que c’est elle. Tu verras.

À cette affirmation si absolue, la Jondrette leva sa large face rouge et blonde et regarda le plafond avec une expression difforme. En ce moment elle parut à Marius plus redoutable encore que son mari. C’était une truie avec le regard d’une tigresse.

— Quoi! reprit-elle, cette horrible belle demoiselle qui regardait mes filles d’un air de pitié, ce serait cette gueuse! Oh! je voudrais lui crever le ventre à coups de sabot!

Elle sauta à bas du lit, et resta un moment debout, décoiffée, les narines gonflées, la bouche entr’ouverte, les poings crispés et rejetés en arrière.

Puis elle se laissa retomber sur le grabat. L’homme allait et venait sans faire attention à sa femelle.

Après quelques instants de ce silence, il s’approcha de la Jondrette et s’arrêta devant elle, les bras croisés, comme le moment d’auparavant.

— Et veux-tu que je te dise encore une chose?

— Quoi? demanda-t-elle.

Il répondit d’une voix brève et basse:

— C’est que ma fortune est faite.

La Jondrette le considéra de ce regard qui veut dire: Est-ce que celui qui me parle deviendrait fou?

Lui continua:

— Tonnerre! voilà pas mal longtemps déjà que je suis paroissien de la paroisse-meurs-de-faim-si-tu-as-du-feu-meurs-de-froid-si-tu-as-du-pain! j’en ai assez eu de la misère! ma charge et la charge des autres! Je ne plaisante plus, je ne trouve plus ça comique, assez de calembours, bon Dieu! plus de farces, père éternel! Je veux manger à ma faim, je veux boire à ma soif! bâfrer! dormir! ne rien faire! je veux avoir mon tour, moi, tiens! avant de crever! je veux être un peu millionnaire.

Il fit le tour du bouge et ajouta:

— Comme les autres.

— Qu’est-ce que tu veux dire? demanda la femme.

Il secoua la tête, cligna de l’œil et haussa la voix comme un physicien de carrefour qui va faire une démonstration:

— Ce que je veux dire? écoute!

— Chut! grommela la Jondrette, pas si haut! si ce sont des affaires qu’il ne faut pas qu’on entende.

— Bah! qui ça? le voisin? je l’ai vu sortir tout à l’heure. D’ailleurs est-ce qu’il entend, ce grand bêta? Et puis je te dis que je l’ai vu sortir.

Cependant, par une sorte d’instinct, Jondrette baissa la voix, pas assez pourtant pour que ses paroles échappassent à Marius. Une circonstance favorable, et qui avait permis à Marius de ne rien perdre de cette conversation, c’est que la neige tombée assourdissait le bruit des voitures sur le boulevard.

Voici ce que Marius entendit:

— Écoute bien. Il est pris, le crésus! C’est tout comme. C’est déjà fait. Tout est arrangé. J’ai vu des gens. Il viendra ce soir à six heures. Apporter ses soixante francs, canaille! As-tu vu comme je vous ai débagoulé ça, mes soixante francs, mon propriétaire, mon 4 février! ce n'est seulement pas un terme! était-ce bête! Il viendra donc à six heures! c'est l'heure où le voisin est allé dîner. La mère Burgon lave la vaisselle en ville. Il n'y a personne dans la maison. Le voisin ne rentre jamais avant onze heures. Les petites feront le guet. Tu nous aideras. Il s'exécutera.

— Et s'il ne s'exécute pas? demanda la femme.

Jondrette fit un geste sinistre et dit:

— Nous l'exécuterons.

Et il éclata de rire.

C'était la première fois que Marius le voyait rire. Ce rire était froid et doux, et faisait frissonner.

Jondrette ouvrit un placard près de la cheminée et en tira une vieille casquette qu'il mit sur sa tête après l'avoir brossée avec sa manche.

— Maintenant, fit-il, je sors. J'ai encore des gens à voir. Des bons. Tu verras comme ça va marcher. Je serai dehors le moins longtemps possible. C'est un beau coup à jouer. Garde la maison.

Et, les deux poings dans les deux goussets de son pantalon, il resta un moment pensif, puis s'écria:

— Sais-tu qu'il est tout de même bien heureux qu'il ne m'ait pas reconnu, lui! S'il m'avait reconnu de son côté, il ne serait pas revenu. Il nous échappait! C'est ma barbe qui m'a sauvé! ma barbiche romantique! ma jolie petite barbiche romantique!

Et il se remit à rire.

Il alla à la fenêtre. La neige tombait toujours et rayait le gris du ciel.

— Quel chien de temps! dit-il.

Puis croisant la redingote:

— La pelure est trop large. — C'est égal, ajouta-t-il, il a diablement bien fait de me la laisser, le vieux coquin! Sans cela je n'aurais pas pu sortir et tout aurait encore manqué! À quoi les choses tiennent pourtant!

Et, enfonçant la casquette sur ses yeux, il sortit.

À peine avait-il eu le temps de faire quelques pas dehors que la porte se rouvrit et que son profil fauve et intelligent reparut par l'ouverture.

— J'oubliais, dit-il. Tu auras un réchaud de charbon.

Et il jeta dans le tablier de sa femme la pièce de cinq francs que lui avait laissée le «philanthrope».

— Un réchaud de charbon? demanda la femme.

— Oui.

— Combien de boisseaux?

— Deux bons.

— Cela fera trente sous. Avec le reste j’achèterai de quoi dîner.

— Diable, non.

— Pourquoi?

— Ne va pas dépenser la pièce-cent-sous.

— Pourquoi?

— Parce que j’aurai quelque chose à acheter de mon côté.

— Quoi?

— Quelque chose.

— Combien te faudra-t-il?

— Où y a-t-il un quincaillier par ici?

— Rue Mouffetard.

— Ah oui, au coin d’une rue, je vois la boutique.

— Mais dis-moi donc combien il te faudra pour ce que tu as à acheter?

— Cinquante sous-trois francs.

— Il ne restera pas gras pour le dîner.

— Aujourd’hui il ne s’agit pas de manger. Il y a mieux à faire.

— Ça suffit, mon bijou.

Sur ce mot de sa femme, Jondrette referma la porte, et cette fois Marius entendit son pas s’éloigner dans le corridor de la masure et descendre rapidement l’escalier.

Une heure sonnait en cet instant à Saint-Médard.

Chapitre XIII

Solus cum solo, in loco remoto, non cogitabuntur orare pater noster

Marius, tout songeur qu'il était, était, nous l'avons dit, une nature ferme et énergique. Les habitudes de recueillement solitaire, en développant en lui la sympathie et la compassion, avaient diminué peut-être la faculté de s'irriter, mais laissé intacte la faculté de s'indigner; il avait la bienveillance d'un brahme et la sévérité d'un juge; il avait pitié d'un crapaud, mais il écrasait une vipère. Or, c'était dans un trou de vipères que son regard venait de plonger; c'était un nid de monstres qu'il avait sous les yeux.

— Il faut mettre le pied sur ces misérables, dit-il.

Aucune des énigmes qu'il espérait voir dissiper ne s'était éclaircie; au contraire, toutes s'étaient épaissies peut-être; il ne savait rien de plus sur la belle enfant du Luxembourg et sur l'homme qu'il appelait M. Leblanc, sinon que Jondrette les connaissait. À travers les paroles ténébreuses qui avaient été dites, il n'entrevoyait distinctement qu'une chose, c'est qu'un guet-apens se préparait, un guet-apens obscur, mais terrible; c'est qu'ils couraient tous les deux un grand danger, elle probablement, son père à coup sûr; c'est qu'il fallait les sauver; c'est qu'il fallait déjouer les combinaisons hideuses des Jondrette et rompre la toile de ces araignées.

Il observa un moment la Jondrette. Elle avait tiré d'un coin un vieux fourneau de tôle et elle fouillait dans des ferrailles.

Il descendit de la commode le plus doucement qu'il put et en ayant soin de ne faire aucun bruit.

Dans son effroi de ce qui s'apprêtait et dans l'horreur dont les Jondrette l'avaient pénétré, il sentait une sorte de joie à l'idée qu'il lui serait peut-être donné de rendre un tel service à celle qu'il aimait.

Mais comment faire? Avertir les personnes menacées? où les trouver? Il ne savait pas leur adresse. Elles avaient reparu un instant à ses yeux, puis elles s'étaient replongées dans les immenses profondeurs de Paris. Attendre M. Leblanc à la porte le soir à six heures, au moment où il arriverait, et le prévenir du piège? Mais Jondrette et ses gens le verraient guetter, le lieu était désert, ils seraient plus forts que lui, ils trouveraient moyen de le saisir ou de l'éloigner, et celui que Marius voulait sauver serait perdu. Une heure venait de sonner, le guet-apens devait s'accomplir à six heures. Marius avait cinq heures devant lui.

Il n'y avait qu'une chose à faire.

Il mit son habit passable, se noua un foulard au cou, prit son chapeau, et sortit, sans faire plus de bruit que s'il eût marché sur de la mousse avec des pieds nus.

D'ailleurs la Jondrette continuait de fourgonner dans ses ferrailles.

Une fois hors de la maison, il gagna la rue du Petit-Banquier.

Il était vers le milieu de cette rue près d'un mur très bas qu'on peut enjamber à de certains endroits et qui donne dans un terrain vague, il marchait lentement, préoccupé qu'il était, la neige assourdissait ses pas; tout à coup il entendit des voix qui parlaient tout près de lui. Il tourna la tête, la rue était déserte, il n'y avait personne, c'était en plein jour, et cependant il entendait distinctement des voix.

Il eut l'idée de regarder par-dessus le mur qu'il côtoyait.

Il y avait là en effet deux hommes adossés à la muraille, assis dans la neige et se parlant bas.

Ces deux figures lui étaient inconnues. L'un était un homme barbu en blouse et l'autre un homme chevelu en guenilles. Le barbu avait une calotte grecque, l'autre la tête nue et de la neige dans les cheveux.

En avançant la tête au-dessus d'eux, Marius pouvait entendre.

Le chevelu poussait l'autre du coude et disait:

— Avec Patron-Minette, ça ne peut pas manquer.

— Crois-tu? dit le barbu; et le chevelu repartit:

— Ce sera pour chacun un fafiot de cinq cents balles, et le pire qui puisse arriver: cinq ans, six ans, dix ans au plus!

L'autre répondit avec quelque hésitation et en grelottant sous son bonnet grec:

— Ça, c'est une chose réelle. On ne peut pas aller à l'encontre de ces choses-là.

— Je te dis que l'affaire ne peut pas manquer, reprit le chevelu. La maringotte du père Chose sera attelée.

Puis ils se mirent à parler d'un mélodrame qu'ils avaient vu la veille à la Gaîté.

Marius continua son chemin.

Il lui semblait que les paroles obscures de ces hommes, si étrangement cachés derrière ce mur et accroupis dans la neige, n'étaient pas peut-être sans quelque rapport avec les abominables projets de Jondrette. Ce devait être là *l’affaire*.

Il se dirigea vers le faubourg Saint-Marceau et demanda à la première boutique qu’il rencontra où il y avait un commissaire de police.

On lui indiqua la rue de Pontoise et le numéro 14.

Marius s’y rendit.

Et passant devant un boulanger, il acheta un pain de deux sous et le mangea, prévoyant qu’il ne dînerait pas.

Chemin faisant, il rendit justice à la providence. Il songea que, s’il n’avait pas donné ses cinq francs le matin à la fille Jondrette, il aurait suivi le fiacre de M. Leblanc, et par conséquent tout ignoré, que rien n’aurait fait obstacle au guet-apens des Jondrette, et que M. Leblanc était perdu, et sans doute sa fille avec lui.

Chapitre XIV

Où un agent de police donne deux coups de poing à un avocat

Arrivé au numéro 14 de la rue de Pontoise, il monta au premier et demanda le commissaire de police.

— Monsieur le commissaire de police n'y est pas, dit un garçon de bureau quelconque; mais il y a un inspecteur qui le remplace. Voulez-vous lui parler? est-ce pressé?

— Oui, dit Marius.

Le garçon de bureau l'introduisit dans le cabinet du commissaire. Un homme de haute taille s'y tenait debout, derrière une grille, appuyé à un poêle, et relevant de ses deux mains les pans d'un vaste carrick à trois collets. C'était une figure carrée, une bouche mince et ferme, d'épais favoris grisonnants très farouches, un regard à retourner vos poches. On eût pu dire de ce regard, non qu'il pénétrait, mais qu'il fouillait.

Cet homme n'avait pas l'air beaucoup moins féroce ni beaucoup moins redoutable que Jondrette; le dogue quelquefois n'est pas moins inquiétant à rencontrer que le loup.

— Que voulez-vous? dit-il à Marius, sans ajouter monsieur.

— Monsieur le commissaire de police?

— Il est absent. Je le remplace.

— C'est pour une affaire très secrète.

— Alors parlez.

— Et très pressée.

— Alors, parlez vite.

Cet homme, calme et brusque, était tout à la fois effrayant et rassurant. Il inspirait la crainte et la confiance. Marius lui conta l'aventure. — Qu'une personne qu'il ne connaissait que de vue devait être attirée le soir même dans un guet-apens; — qu'habitant la chambre voisine du repaire il avait, lui Marius Pontmercy, avocat, entendu tout le complot à travers la cloison; — que le scélérat qui avait imaginé le piège était un nommé Jondrette; — qu'il aurait des complices, probablement des rôdeurs de barrières, entre autres un certain Panchaud, dit Printanier, dit Bigrenaille; — que les filles de Jondrette feraient le guet; — qu'il n'existait aucun moyen de prévenir l'homme menacé, attendu qu'on ne savait même pas son nom; — et qu’enfin tout cela devait s’exécuter à six heures du soir au point le plus désert du boulevard de l’Hôpital, dans la maison du numéro 50-52.

À ce numéro, l’inspecteur leva la tête, et dit froidement:

— C’est donc dans la chambre du fond du corridor?

— Précisément, fit Marius, et il ajouta: — Est-ce que vous connaissez cette maison?

L’inspecteur resta un moment silencieux, puis répondit en chauffant le talon de sa botte à la bouche du poêle:

— Apparemment.

Il continua dans ses dents, parlant moins à Marius qu’à sa cravate:

— Il doit y avoir un peu de Patron-Minette là dedans.

Ce mot frappa Marius.

— Patron-Minette, dit-il. J’ai en effet entendu prononcer ce mot-là.

Et il raconta à l’inspecteur le dialogue de l’homme chevelu et de l’homme barbu dans la neige derrière le mur de la rue du Petit-Banquier.

L’inspecteur grommela:

— Le chevelu doit être Brujon, et le barbu doit être Demi-Liard, dit Deux-Milliards.

Il avait de nouveau baissé les paupières, et il méditait.

— Quant au père Chose, je l’entrevois. Voilà que j’ai brûlé mon carrick. Ils font toujours trop de feu dans ces maudits poêles. Le numéro 50-52. Ancienne propriété Gorbeau.

Puis il regarda Marius.

— Vous n’avez vu que ce barbu et ce chevelu?

— Et Panchaud.

— Vous n’avez pas vu rôdailler par là une espèce de petit muscadin du diable?

— Non.

— Ni un grand gros massif matériel qui ressemble à l’éléphant du Jardin des Plantes?

— Non.

— Ni un malin qui a l’air d’une ancienne queue-rouge?

— Non.

— Quant au quatrième, personne ne le voit, pas même ses adjudants, commis et employés. Il est peu surprenant que vous ne l’ayez pas aperçu.

— Non. Qu’est-ce que c’est, demanda Marius, que tous ces êtres-là?

L’inspecteur répondit:

— D’ailleurs ce n’est pas leur heure.

Il retomba dans son silence, puis reprit:

— 50-52. Je connais la baraque. Impossible de nous cacher dans l’intérieur sans que les artistes s’en aperçoivent. Alors ils en seraient quittes pour décommander le vaudeville. Ils sont si modestes! le public les gêne. Pas de ça, pas de ça. Je veux les entendre chanter et les faire danser.

Ce monologue terminé, il se tourna vers Marius et lui demanda en le regardant fixement:

— Aurez-vous peur?

— De quoi? dit Marius.

— De ces hommes?

— Pas plus que de vous! répliqua rudement Marius qui commençait à remarquer que ce mouchard ne lui avait pas encore dit monsieur.

L’inspecteur regarda Marius plus fixement encore et reprit avec une sorte de solennité sentencieuse.

— Vous parlez là comme un homme brave et comme un homme honnête. Le courage ne craint pas le crime, et l’honnêteté ne craint pas l’autorité.

Marius l’interrompit:

— C’est bon; mais que comptez-vous faire?

L’inspecteur se borna à lui répondre:

— Les locataires de cette maison-là ont des passe-partout pour rentrer la nuit chez eux. Vous devez en avoir un?

— Oui, dit Marius.

— L’avez-vous sur vous?

— Oui.

— Donnez-le-moi, dit l’inspecteur.

Marius prit sa clef dans son gilet, la remit à l’inspecteur, et ajouta:

— Si vous m’en croyez, vous viendrez en force.

L’inspecteur jeta sur Marius le coup d’œil de Voltaire à un académicien de province qui lui eût proposé une rime; il plongea d’un seul mouvement ses deux mains, qui étaient énormes, dans les deux poches de son carrick, et en tira deux petits pistolets d’acier, de ces pistolets qu’on appelle coups de poing. Il les présenta à Marius en disant vivement et d’un ton bref:

— Prenez ceci. Rentrez chez vous. Cachez-vous dans votre chambre. Qu’on vous croie sorti. Ils sont chargés. Chacun de deux balles. Vous observerez, il y a un trou au mur, comme vous me l’avez dit. Les gens viendront. Laissez-les aller un peu. Quand vous jugerez la chose à point, et qu'il sera temps de l'arrêter, vous tirerez un coup de pistolet. Pas trop tôt. Le reste me regarde. Un coup de pistolet en l'air, au plafond, n'importe où. Surtout pas trop tôt. Attendez qu'il y ait commencement d'exécution, vous êtes avocat, vous savez ce que c'est.

Marius prit les pistolets et les mit dans la poche de côté de son habit.

— Cela fait une bosse comme cela, cela se voit, dit l'inspecteur. Mettez-les plutôt dans vos goussets.

Marius cacha les pistolets dans ses goussets.

— Maintenant, poursuivit l'inspecteur, il n'y a plus une minute à perdre pour personne. Quelle heure est-il? Deux heures et demie. C'est pour sept heures?

— Six heures, dit Marius.

— J'ai le temps, reprit l'inspecteur, mais je n'ai que le temps. N'oubliez rien de ce que je vous ai dit. Pan. Un coup de pistolet.

— Soyez tranquille, répondit Marius.

Et comme Marius mettait la main au loquet de la porte pour sortir l'inspecteur lui cria:

— À propos, si vous aviez besoin de moi d'ici-là, venez ou envoyez ici. Vous feriez demander l'inspecteur Javert.

Chapitre XV

Jondrette fait son emplette

Quelques instants après, vers trois heures, Courfeyrac passait par aventure rue Mouffetard en compagnie de Bossuet. La neige redoublait et emplissait l’espace. Bossuet était en train de dire à Courfeyrac:

— À voir tomber tous ces flocons de neige, on dirait qu’il y a au ciel une peste de papillons blancs. — Tout à coup, Bossuet aperçut Marius qui remontait la rue vers la barrière et avait un air particulier.

— Tiens! s’exclama Bossuet. Marius!

— Je l’ai vu, dit Courfeyrac. Ne lui parlons pas.

— Pourquoi?

— Il est occupé.

— À quoi?

— Tu ne vois donc pas la mine qu’il a?

— Quelle mine?

— Il a l’air de quelqu’un qui suit quelqu’un.

— C’est vrai, dit Bossuet.

— Vois donc les yeux qu’il fait! reprit Courfeyrac.

— Mais qui diable suit-il?

— Quelque mimi-goton-bonnet-fleuri! il est amoureux.

— Mais, observa Bossuet, c’est que je ne vois pas de mimi, ni de goton, ni de bonnet-fleuri dans la rue. Il n’y a pas une femme.

Courfeyrac regarda, et s’écria:

— Il suit un homme!

Un homme en effet, coiffé d’une casquette, et dont on distinguait la barbe grise quoiqu’on ne le vît que de dos, marchait à une vingtaine de pas en avant de Marius.

Cet homme était vêtu d’une redingote toute neuve trop grande pour lui et d’un épouvantable pantalon en loques tout noirci par la boue.

Bossuet éclata de rire.

— Qu’est-ce que c’est que cet homme-là?

— Ça? reprit Courfeyrac, c’est un poète. Les poètes portent assez volontiers des pantalons de marchands de peaux de lapin et des redingotes de pairs de France.

— Voyons où va Marius, fit Bossuet, voyons où va cet homme, suivons-les, hein?

— Bossuet! s'écria Courfeyrac, aigle de Meaux! vous êtes une prodigieuse brute. Suivre un homme qui suit un homme!

Ils rebroussèrent chemin.

Marius en effet avait vu passer Jondrette rue Mouffetard, et l'épiait.

Jondrette allait devant lui sans se douter qu'il y eût déjà un regard qui le tenait.

Il quitta la rue Mouffetard, et Marius le vit entrer dans une des plus affreuses bicoques de la rue Gracieuse, il y resta un quart d'heure environ, puis revint rue Mouffetard. Il s'arrêta chez un quincaillier qu'il y avait à cette époque au coin de la rue Pierre-Lombard, et, quelques minutes après, Marius le vit sortir de la boutique, tenant à la main un grand ciseau à froid emmanché de bois blanc qu'il cacha sous sa redingote. À la hauteur de la rue du Petit-Gentilly, il tourna à gauche et gagna rapidement la rue du Petit-Banquier. Le jour tombait, la neige qui avait cessé un moment venait de recommencer. Marius s'embusqua au coin même de la rue du Petit-Banquier qui était déserte comme toujours, et il n'y suivit pas Jondrette. Bien lui en prit, car, parvenu près du mur bas où Marius avait entendu parler l'homme chevelu et l'homme barbu, Jondrette se retourna, s'assura que personne ne le suivait et ne le voyait, puis enjamba le mur, et disparut.

Le terrain vague que ce mur bordait communiquait avec l'arrière-cour d'un ancien loueur de voitures mal famé qui avait fait faillite et qui avait encore quelques vieux berlingots sous des hangars.

Marius pensa qu'il était sage de profiter de l'absence de Jondrette pour rentrer; d'ailleurs l'heure avançait; tous les soirs mame Burgon, en partant pour aller laver la vaisselle en ville, avait coutume de fermer la porte de la maison qui était toujours close à la brune; Marius avait donné sa clef à l'inspecteur de police; il était donc important qu'il se hâtât.

Le soir était venu; la nuit était à peu près fermée; il n'y avait plus, sur l'horizon et dans l'immensité, qu'un point éclairé par le soleil, c'était la lune.

Elle se levait rouge derrière le dôme bas de la Salpêtrière.

Marius regagna à grands pas le nº 50-52. La porte était encore ouverte quand il arriva. Il monta l'escalier sur la pointe du pied et se glissa le long du mur du corridor jusqu'à sa chambre. Ce corridor, on s'en souvient, était bordé des deux côtés de galetas en ce moment tous à louer et vides. Mame

Burgon en laissait habituellement les portes ouvertes. En passant devant une de ces portes, Marius crut apercevoir dans la cellule inhabitée quatre têtes d'hommes immobiles que blanchissait vaguement un reste de jour tombant par une lucarne. Marius ne chercha pas à voir, ne voulant pas être vu. Il parvint à rentrer dans sa chambre sans être aperçu et sans bruit. Il était temps. Un moment après, il entendit mame Burgon qui s'en allait et la porte de la maison qui se fermait.

Chapitre XVI

Où l'on retrouvera la chanson sur un air anglais à la mode en 1832

Marius s'assit sur son lit. Il pouvait être cinq heures et demie. Une demi-heure seulement le séparait de ce qui allait arriver. Il entendait battre ses artères comme on entend le battement d'une montre dans l'obscurité. Il songeait à cette double marche qui se faisait en ce moment dans les ténèbres, le crime s'avançant d'un côté, la justice venant de l'autre. Il n'avait pas peur, mais il ne pouvait penser sans un certain tressaillement aux choses qui allaient se passer. Comme à tous ceux que vient assaillir soudainement une aventure surprenante, cette journée entière lui faisait l'effet d'un rêve, et, pour ne point se croire en proie à un cauchemar, il avait besoin de sentir dans ses goussets le froid des deux pistolets d'acier.

Il ne neigeait plus; la lune, de plus en plus claire, se dégageait des brumes, et sa lueur mêlée au reflet blanc de la neige tombée donnait à la chambre un aspect crépusculaire.

Il y avait de la lumière dans le taudis Jondrette. Marius voyait le trou de la cloison briller d'une clarté rouge qui lui paraissait sanglante.

Il était réel que cette clarté ne pouvait guère être produite par une chandelle. Du reste, aucun mouvement chez les Jondrette, personne n'y bougeait, personne n'y parlait, pas un souffle, le silence y était glacial et profond, et sans cette lumière on se fût cru à côté d'un sépulcre.

Marius ôta doucement ses bottes et les poussa sous son lit.

Quelques minutes s'écoulèrent. Marius entendit la porte d'en bas tourner sur ses gonds, un pas lourd et rapide monta l'escalier et parcourut le corridor, le loquet du bouge se souleva avec bruit; c'était Jondrette qui rentrait.

Tout de suite plusieurs voix s'élevèrent. Toute la famille était dans le galetas. Seulement elle se taisait en l'absence du maître comme les louveteaux en l'absence du loup.

— C'est moi, dit-il.

— Bonsoir, pèremuche! glapirent les filles.

— Eh bien? dit la mère.

— Tout va à la papa, répondit Jondrette, mais j'ai un froid de chien aux pieds. Bon, c'est cela, tu t'es habillée. Il faudra que tu puisses inspirer de la confiance.

— Toute prête à sortir.

— Tu n'oublieras rien de ce que je t'ai dit? Tu feras bien tout?

— Sois tranquille.

— C'est que... dit Jondrette. Et il n'acheva pas sa phrase.

Marius l'entendit poser quelque chose de lourd sur la table, probablement le ciseau qu'il avait acheté.

— Ah çà, reprit Jondrette, a-t-on mangé ici?

— Oui, dit la mère, j'ai eu trois grosses pommes de terre et du sel. J'ai profité du feu pour les faire cuire.

— Bon, repartit Jondrette. Demain je vous mène dîner avec moi. Il y aura un canard et des accessoires. Vous dînerez comme des Charles-Dix. Tout va bien!

Puis il ajouta en baissant la voix.

— La souricière est ouverte. Les chats sont là.

Il baissa encore la voix et dit:

— Mets ça dans le feu.

Marius entendit un cliquetis de charbon qu'on heurtait avec une pincette ou un outil en fer, et Jondrette continua:

— As-tu suifé les gonds de la porte pour qu'ils ne fassent pas de bruit?

— Oui, répondit la mère.

— Quelle heure est-il?

— Six heures bientôt. La demie vient de sonner à Saint-Médard.

— Diable! fit Jondrette. Il faut que les petites aillent faire le guet. Venez, vous autres, écoutez ici.

Il y eut un chuchotement.

La voix de Jondrette s'éleva encore:

— La Burgon est-elle partie?

— Oui, dit la mère.

— Es-tu sûre qu'il n'y a personne chez le voisin?

— Il n'est pas rentré de la journée, et tu sais bien que c'est l'heure de son dîner.

— Tu es sûre?

— Sûre.

— C'est égal, reprit Jondrette, il n'y a pas de mal à aller voir chez lui s'il y est. Ma fille, prends la chandelle et vas-y.

Marius se laissa tomber sur ses mains et ses genoux et rampa silencieusement sous son lit.

À peine y était-il blotti qu'il aperçut une lumière à travers les fentes de sa porte.

— P'pa, cria une voix, il est sorti.

Il reconnut la voix de la fille aînée.

— Es-tu entrée? demanda le père.

— Non, répondit la fille, mais puisque sa clef est à sa porte, il est sorti.

Le père cria:

— Entre tout de même.

La porte s'ouvrit, et Marius vit entrer la grande Jondrette, une chandelle à la main. Elle était comme le matin, seulement plus effrayante encore à cette clarté.

Elle marcha droit au lit, Marius eut un inexprimable moment d'anxiété, mais il y avait près du lit un miroir cloué au mur, c'était là qu'elle allait. Elle se haussa sur la pointe des pieds et s'y regarda. On entendait un bruit de ferrailles remuées dans la pièce voisine.

Elle lissa ses cheveux avec la paume de sa main et fit des sourires au miroir tout en chantonnant de sa voix cassée et sépulcrale:

Nos amours ont duré toute une semaine,
Ah! que du bonheur les instants sont courts!
S'adorer huit jours, c'était bien la peine!
Le temps des amours devrait durer toujours!
Devrait durer toujours! devrait durer toujours!

Cependant Marius tremblait. Il lui semblait impossible qu'elle n'entendît pas sa respiration.

Elle se dirigea vers la fenêtre et regarda dehors en parlant haut avec cet air à demi fou qu'elle avait.

— Comme Paris est laid quand il a mis une chemise blanche! dit-elle.

Elle revint au miroir et se fit de nouveau des mines, se contemplant successivement de face et de trois quarts.

— Eh bien! cria le père, qu'est-ce que tu fais donc?

— Je regarde sous le lit et sous les meubles, répondit-elle en continuant d'arranger ses cheveux, il n'y a personne.

— Cruche! hurla le père. Ici tout de suite! et ne perdons pas le temps.

— J'y vas! j'y vas! dit-elle. On n'a le temps de rien dans leur baraque!

Elle fredonna:

Vous me quittez pour aller à la gloire,
Mon triste cœur suivra partout vos pas.

Elle jeta un dernier coup d'œil au miroir et sortit en refermant la porte sur elle.

Un moment après, Marius entendit le bruit des pieds nus des deux jeunes filles dans le corridor et la voix de Jondrette qui leur criait:

— Faites bien attention! l'une du côté de la barrière, l'autre au coin de la rue du Petit-Banquier. Ne perdez pas de vue une minute la porte de la maison, et pour peu que vous voyiez quelque chose, tout de suite ici! quatre à quatre! Vous avez une clef pour rentrer.

La fille aînée grommela:

— Faire faction nu-pieds dans la neige!

— Demain vous aurez des bottines de soie couleur scarabée! dit le père.

Elles descendirent l'escalier, et, quelques secondes après, le choc de la porte d'en bas qui se refermait annonça qu'elles étaient dehors.

Il n'y avait plus dans la maison que Marius et les Jondrette; et probablement aussi les êtres mystérieux entrevus par Marius dans le crépuscule derrière la porte du galetas inhabité.

Chapitre XVII

Emploi de la pièce de cinq francs de Marius

Marius jugea que le moment était venu de reprendre sa place à son observatoire. En un clin d’œil, et avec la souplesse de son âge, il fut près du trou de la cloison.

Il regarda.

L’intérieur du logis Jondrette offrait un aspect singulier, et Marius s’expliqua la clarté étrange qu’il y avait remarquée. Une chandelle y brûlait dans un chandelier vert-de-grisé, mais ce n’était pas elle qui éclairait réellement la chambre. Le taudis tout entier était comme illuminé par la réverbération d’un assez grand réchaud de tôle placé dans la cheminée et rempli de charbon allumé; le réchaud que la Jondrette avait préparé le matin. Le charbon était ardent et le réchaud était rouge, une flamme bleue y dansait et aidait à distinguer la forme du ciseau acheté par Jondrette rue Pierre-Lombard, qui rougissait enfoncé dans la braise. On voyait dans un coin près de la porte, et comme disposés pour un usage prévu, deux tas qui paraissaient être l’un un tas de ferrailles, l’autre un tas de cordes. Tout cela, pour quelqu’un qui n’eût rien su de ce qui s’apprêtait, eût fait flotter l’esprit entre une idée très sinistre et une idée très simple. Le bouge ainsi éclairé ressemblait plutôt à une forge qu’à une bouche de l’enfer, mais Jondrette, à cette lueur, avait plutôt l’air d’un démon que d’un forgeron.

La chaleur du brasier était telle que la chandelle sur la table fondait du côté du réchaud et se consumait en biseau. Une vieille lanterne sourde en cuivre, digne de Diogène devenu Cartouche, était posée sur la cheminée.

Le réchaud, placé dans le foyer même, à côté des tisons à peu près éteints, envoyait sa vapeur dans le tuyau de la cheminée et ne répandait pas d’odeur.

La lune, entrant par les quatre carreaux de la fenêtre, jetait sa blancheur dans le galetas pourpre et flamboyant, et pour le poétique esprit de Marius, songeur même au moment de l’action, c’était comme une pensée du ciel mêlée aux rêves difformes de la terre.

Un souffle d’air, pénétrant par le carreau cassé, contribuait à dissiper l’odeur du charbon et à dissimuler le réchaud.

Le repaire Jondrette était, si l'on se rappelle ce que nous avons dit de la masure Gorbeau, admirablement choisi pour servir de théâtre à un fait violent et sombre et d'enveloppe à un crime. C'était la chambre la plus reculée de la maison la plus isolée du boulevard le plus désert de Paris. Si le guet-apens n'existait pas, on l'y eût inventé.

Toute l'épaisseur d'une maison et une foule de chambres inhabitées séparaient ce bouge du boulevard, et la seule fenêtre qu'il eût donnait sur de vastes terrains vagues enclos de murailles et de palissades.

Jondrette avait allumé sa pipe, s'était assis sur la chaise dépaillée, et fumait. Sa femme lui parlait bas.

Si Marius eût été Courfeyrac, c'est-à-dire un de ces hommes qui rient dans toutes les occasions de la vie, il eût éclaté de rire quand son regard tomba sur la Jondrette. Elle avait un chapeau noir avec des plumes assez semblable aux chapeaux des hérauts d'armes du sacre de Charles X, un immense châle tartan sur son jupon de tricot, et les souliers d'homme que sa fille avait dédaignés le matin. C'était cette toilette qui avait arraché à Jondrette l'exclamation: *Bon! tu t'es habillée! tu as bien fait. Il faut que tu puisses inspirer la confiance*!

Quant à Jondrette, il n'avait pas quitté le surtout neuf et trop large pour lui que M. Leblanc lui avait donné, et son costume continuait d'offrir ce contraste de la redingote et du pantalon qui constituait aux yeux de Courfeyrac l'idéal du poète.

Tout à coup Jondrette haussa la voix:

— À propos! j'y songe. Par le temps qu'il fait, il va venir en fiacre. Allume la lanterne, prend-là, et descends. Tu te tiendras derrière la porte en bas. Au moment où tu entendras la voiture s'arrêter, tu ouvriras tout de suite, il montera, tu l'éclaireras dans l'escalier et dans le corridor, et pendant qu'il entrera ici, tu redescendras bien vite, tu payeras le cocher, et tu renverras le fiacre.

— Et de l'argent? demanda la femme.

Jondrette fouilla dans son pantalon, et lui remit cinq francs.

— Qu'est-ce que c'est que ça? s'écria-t-elle.

Jondrette répondit avec dignité:

— C'est le monarque que le voisin a donné ce matin.

Et il ajouta:

— Sais-tu? il faudrait ici deux chaises.

— Pourquoi?

— Pour s’asseoir.

Marius sentit un frisson lui courir dans les reins en entendant la Jondrette faire cette réponse paisible:

— Pardieu! je vais t’aller chercher celles du voisin.

Et d’un mouvement rapide elle ouvrit la porte du bouge et sortit dans le corridor.

Marius n’avait pas matériellement le temps de descendre de la commode, d’aller jusqu’à son lit et de s’y cacher.

— Prends la chandelle, cria Jondrette.

— Non, dit-elle, cela m’embarrasserait, j’ai les deux chaises à porter. Il fait clair de lune.

Marius entendit la lourde main de la mère Jondrette chercher en tâtonnant sa clef dans l’obscurité. La porte s’ouvrit. Il resta cloué à sa place par le saisissement et la stupeur.

La Jondrette entra.

La lucarne mansardée laissait passer un rayon de lune entre deux grands pans d’ombre. Un de ces pans d’ombre couvrait entièrement le mur auquel était adossé Marius, de sorte qu’il y disparaissait.

La mère Jondrette leva les yeux, ne vit pas Marius, prit les deux chaises, les seules que Marius possédât, et s’en alla, en laissant la porte retomber bruyamment derrière elle.

Elle rentra dans le bouge:

— Voici les deux chaises.

— Et voilà la lanterne, dit le mari. Descends bien vite.

Elle obéit en hâte, et Jondrette resta seul.

Il disposa les deux chaises des deux côtés de la table, retourna le ciseau dans le brasier, mit devant la cheminée un vieux paravent, qui masquait le réchaud, puis alla au coin où était le tas de cordes et se baissa comme pour y examiner quelque chose. Marius reconnut alors que ce qu’il avait pris pour un tas informe était une échelle de corde très bien faite avec des échelons de bois et deux crampons pour l’accrocher.

Cette échelle et quelques gros outils, véritables masses de fer, qui étaient mêlés au monceau de ferrailles entassé derrière la porte, n’étaient point le matin dans le bouge Jondrette et y avaient été évidemment apportés dans l’après-midi, pendant l’absence de Marius.

— Ce sont des outils de taillandier, pensa Marius.

Si Marius eût été un peu plus lettré en ce genre, il eût reconnu, dans ce qu’il prenait pour des engins de taillandier, de certains instruments pouvant forcer une serrure ou crocheter une porte, et d’autres pouvant couper ou trancher, les deux familles d’outils sinistres que les voleurs appellent *les cadets* et *les fauchants*.

La cheminée et la table avec les deux chaises étaient précisément en face de Marius. Le réchaud étant caché, la chambre n’était plus éclairée que par la chandelle; le moindre tesson sur la table ou sur la cheminée faisait une grande ombre. Un pot à l’eau égueulé masquait la moitié d’un mur. Il y avait dans cette chambre je ne sais quel calme hideux et menaçant. On y sentait l’attente de quelque chose d’épouvantable.

Jondrette avait laissé sa pipe s’éteindre, grave signe de préoccupation, et était venu se rasseoir. La chandelle faisait saillir les angles farouches et fins de son visage. Il avait des froncements de sourcils et de brusques épanouissements de la main droite comme s’il répondait aux derniers conseils d’un sombre monologue intérieur. Dans une de ces obscures répliques qu’il se faisait à lui-même, il amena vivement à lui le tiroir de la table, y prit un long couteau de cuisine qui y était caché et en essaya le tranchant sur son ongle. Cela fait, il remit le couteau dans le tiroir, qu’il repoussa.

Marius de son côté saisit le pistolet qui était dans son gousset droit, l’en retira et l’arma.

Le pistolet en s’armant fit un petit bruit clair et sec.

Jondrette tressaillit et se souleva à demi sur sa chaise:

— Qui est là? cria-t-il.

Marius suspendit son haleine, Jondrette écouta un instant, puis se mit à rire en disant:

— Suis-je bête! C’est la cloison qui craque.

Marius garda le pistolet à sa main.

Chapitre XVIII

Les deux chaises de Marius se font vis-à-vis

Tout à coup la vibration lointaine et mélancolique d’une cloche ébranla les vitres. Six heures sonnaient à Saint-Médard.

Jondrette marqua chaque coup d’un hochement de tête. Le sixième sonné, il moucha la chandelle avec ses doigts.

Puis il se mit à marcher dans la chambre, écouta dans le corridor, marcha, écouta encore: — Pourvu qu’il vienne! grommela-t-il; puis il revint à sa chaise.

Il se rasseyait à peine que la porte s’ouvrit.

La mère Jondrette l’avait ouverte et restait dans le corridor faisant une horrible grimace aimable qu’un des trous de la lanterne sourde éclairait d’en bas.

— Entrez, monsieur, dit-elle.

— Entrez, mon bienfaiteur, répéta Jondrette se levant précipitamment.

M. Leblanc parut.

Il avait un air de sérénité qui le faisait singulièrement vénérable.

Il posa sur la table quatre louis.

— Monsieur Fabantou, dit-il, voici pour votre loyer et vos premiers besoins. Nous verrons ensuite.

— Dieu vous le rende, mon généreux bienfaiteur! dit Jondrette; et, s’approchant rapidement de sa femme:

— Renvoie le fiacre!

Elle s’esquiva pendant que son mari prodiguait les saluts et offrait une chaise à M. Leblanc. Un instant après elle revint et lui dit bas à l’oreille:

— C’est fait.

La neige qui n’avait cessé de tomber depuis le matin était tellement épaisse qu’on n’avait point entendu le fiacre arriver, et qu’on ne l’entendit pas s’en aller.

Cependant M. Leblanc s’était assis.

Jondrette avait pris possession de l’autre chaise en face de M. Leblanc.

Maintenant, pour se faire une idée de la scène qui va suivre, que le lecteur se figure dans son esprit la nuit glacée, les solitudes de la Salpêtrière couvertes de neige, et blanches au clair de lune comme d’immenses linceuls, la clarté de veilleuse des réverbères rougissant çà et là ces boulevards tragiques et les longues rangées des ormes noirs, pas un passant peut-être à un quart de lieue à la ronde, la masure Gorbeau à son plus haut point de silence, d’horreur et de nuit, dans cette masure, au milieu de ces solitudes, au milieu de cette ombre, le vaste galetas Jondrette éclairé d’une chandelle, et dans ce bouge deux hommes assis à une table, M. Leblanc tranquille, Jondrette souriant et effroyable, la Jondrette, la mère louve, dans un coin, et, derrière la cloison, Marius invisible, debout, ne perdant pas une parole, ne perdant pas un mouvement, l’œil au guet, le pistolet au poing.

Marius du reste n’éprouvait qu’une émotion d’horreur, mais aucune crainte. Il étreignait la crosse du pistolet et se sentait rassuré. — J’arrêterai ce misérable quand je voudrai, pensait-il.

Il sentait la police quelque part là en embuscade, attendant le signal convenu et toute prête à étendre le bras.

Il espérait du reste que de cette violente rencontre de Jondrette et de M. Leblanc quelque lumière jaillirait sur tout ce qu’il avait intérêt à connaître.

Chapitre XIX

Se préoccuper des fonds obscurs

À peine assis, M. Leblanc tourna les yeux vers les grabats qui étaient vides.

— Comment va la pauvre petite blessée? demanda-t-il.

— Mal, répondit Jondrette avec un sourire navré et reconnaissant, très mal, mon digne monsieur. Sa sœur aînée l’a menée à la Bourbe se faire panser. Vous allez les voir, elles vont rentrer tout à l’heure.

— Madame Fabantou me paraît mieux portante? reprit M. Leblanc en jetant les yeux sur le bizarre accoutrement de la Jondrette, qui, debout entre lui et la porte, comme si elle gardait déjà l’issue, le considérait dans une posture de menace et presque de combat.

— Elle est mourante, dit Jondrette. Mais que voulez-vous, monsieur? elle a tant de courage, cette femme-là! Ce n’est pas une femme, c’est un bœuf.

La Jondrette, touchée du compliment, se récria avec une minauderie de monstre flatté:

— Tu es toujours trop bon pour moi, monsieur Jondrette!

— Jondrette, dit M. Leblanc, je croyais que vous vous appeliez Fabantou?

— Fabantou dit Jondrette! reprit vivement le mari. Sobriquet d’artiste!

Et, jetant à sa femme un haussement d’épaules que M. Leblanc ne vit pas, il poursuivit avec une inflexion de voix emphatique et caressante:

— Ah! c’est que nous avons toujours fait bon ménage, cette pauvre chérie et moi! Qu’est-ce qu’il nous resterait, si nous n’avions pas cela! Nous sommes si malheureux, mon respectable monsieur! On a des bras, pas de travail! On a du cœur, pas d’ouvrage! Je ne sais pas comment le gouvernement arrange cela, mais, ma parole d’honneur, monsieur, je ne suis pas jacobin, monsieur, je ne suis pas bousingot, je ne lui veux pas de mal, mais si j’étais les ministres, ma parole la plus sacrée, cela irait autrement. Tenez, exemple, j’ai voulu faire apprendre le métier du cartonnage à mes filles. Vous me direz: Quoi! un métier? Oui! un métier! un simple métier! un gagne-pain! Quelle chute, mon bienfaiteur! Quelle dégradation quand on a été ce que nous étions! Hélas! il ne nous reste rien de notre temps de prospérité! Rien qu’une seule chose, un tableau auquel je tiens, mais dont je me déferais pourtant, car il faut vivre! item, il faut vivre!

Pendant que Jondrette parlait, avec une sorte de désordre apparent qui n'ôtait rien à l'expression réfléchie et sagace de sa physionomie, Marius leva les yeux et aperçut au fond de la chambre quelqu'un qu'il n'avait pas encore vu. Un homme venait d'entrer, si doucement qu'on n'avait pas entendu tourner les gonds de la porte. Cet homme avait un gilet de tricot violet, vieux, usé, taché, coupé et faisant des bouches ouvertes à tous ses plis, un large pantalon de velours de coton, des chaussons à sabots aux pieds, pas de chemise, le cou nu, les bras nus et tatoués, et le visage barbouillé de noir. Il s'était assis en silence et les bras croisés sur le lit le plus voisin, et, comme il se tenait derrière la Jondrette, on ne le distinguait que confusément.

Cette espèce d'instinct magnétique qui avertit le regard fit que M. Leblanc se tourna presque en même temps que Marius. Il ne put se défendre d'un mouvement de surprise qui n'échappa point à Jondrette.

— Ah! je vois! s'écria Jondrette en se boutonnant d'un air de complaisance, vous regardez votre redingote? Elle me va! ma foi, elle me va!

— Qu'est-ce que c'est que cet homme? dit M. Leblanc.

— Ça! fit Jondrette, c'est un voisin. Ne faites pas attention.

Le voisin était d'un aspect singulier. Cependant les fabriques de produits chimiques abondent dans le faubourg Saint-Marceau. Beaucoup d'ouvriers d'usines peuvent avoir le visage noir. Toute la personne de M. Leblanc respirait d'ailleurs une confiance candide et intrépide. Il reprit:

— Pardon, que me disiez-vous donc, monsieur Fabantou?

— Je vous disais, monsieur et cher protecteur, repartit Jondrette, en s'accoudant sur la table et en contemplant M. Leblanc avec des yeux fixes et tendres assez semblables aux yeux d'un serpent boa, je vous disais que j'avais un tableau à vendre.

Un léger bruit se fit à la porte. Un second homme venait d'entrer et de s'asseoir sur le lit, derrière la Jondrette. Il avait, comme le premier, les bras nus et un masque d'encre ou de suie.

Quoique cet homme se fût, à la lettre, glissé dans la chambre, il ne put faire que M. Leblanc ne l'aperçût.

— Ne prenez pas garde, dit Jondrette. Ce sont des gens de la maison. Je disais donc qu'il me restait un tableau, un tableau précieux.... — Tenez, monsieur, voyez.

Il se leva, alla à la muraille au bas de laquelle était posé le panneau dont nous avons parlé, et le retourna, tout en le laissant appuyé au mur. C’était quelque chose en effet qui ressemblait à un tableau et que la chandelle éclairait à peu près. Marius n’en pouvait rien distinguer, Jondrette étant placé entre le tableau et lui; seulement il entrevoyait un barbouillage grossier, et une espèce de personnage principal enluminé avec la crudité criarde des toiles foraines et des peintures de paravent.

— Qu’est-ce que c’est que cela? demanda M. Leblanc.

Jondrette s’exclama:

— Une peinture de maître, un tableau d’un grand prix, mon bienfaiteur! J’y tiens comme à mes deux filles, il me rappelle des souvenirs! mais, je vous l’ai dit et je ne m’en dédis pas, je suis si malheureux que je m’en déferais.

Soit hasard, soit qu’il eût quelque commencement d’inquiétude, tout en examinant le tableau, le regard de M. Leblanc revint vers le fond de la chambre. Il y avait maintenant quatre hommes, trois assis sur le lit, un debout près du chambranle de la porte, tous quatre bras nus, immobiles, le visage barbouillé de noir. Un de ceux qui étaient sur le lit s’appuyait au mur, les yeux fermés, et l’on eût dit qu’il dormait. Celui-là était vieux; ses cheveux blancs sur son visage noir étaient horribles. Les deux autres semblaient jeunes. L’un était barbu, l’autre chevelu. Aucun n’avait de souliers; ceux qui n’avaient pas de chaussons étaient pieds nus.

Jondrette remarqua que l’œil de M. Leblanc s’attachait à ces hommes.

— C’est des amis. Ça voisine, dit-il. C’est barbouillé parce que ça travaille dans le charbon. Ce sont des fumistes. Ne vous en occupez pas, mon bienfaiteur, mais achetez-moi mon tableau. Ayez pitié de ma misère. Je ne vous le vendrai pas cher. Combien l’estimez-vous?

— Mais, dit M. Leblanc en regardant Jondrette entre les deux yeux et comme un homme qui se met sur ses gardes, c’est quelque enseigne de cabaret. Cela vaut bien trois francs.

Jondrette répondit avec douceur:

— Avez-vous votre portefeuille là? je me contenterais de mille écus.

M. Leblanc se leva debout, s’adossa à la muraille et promena rapidement son regard dans la chambre. Il avait Jondrette à sa gauche du côté de la fenêtre et la Jondrette et les quatre hommes à sa droite du côté de la porte. Les quatre hommes ne bougeaient pas et n’avaient pas même l’air de le voir; Jondrette s’était remis à parler d’un accent plaintif, avec la prunelle si vague et l'intonation si lamentable que M. Leblanc pouvait croire que c'était tout simplement un homme devenu fou de misère qu'il avait devant les yeux.

— Si vous ne m'achetez pas mon tableau, cher bienfaiteur, disait Jondrette, je suis sans ressource, je n'ai plus qu'à me jeter à même la rivière. Quand je pense que j'ai voulu faire apprendre à mes deux filles le cartonnage demi-fin, le cartonnage des boîtes d'étrennes. Eh bien! il faut une table avec une planche au fond pour que les verres ne tombent pas par terre, il faut un fourneau fait exprès, un pot à trois compartiments pour les différents degrés de force que doit avoir la colle selon qu'on l'emploie pour le bois, pour le papier ou pour les étoffes, un tranchet pour couper le carton, un moule pour l'ajuster, un marteau pour clouer les aciers, des pinceaux, le diable, est-ce que je sais, moi? et tout cela pour gagner quatre sous par jour! et on travaille quatorze heures! et chaque boîte passe treize fois dans les mains de l'ouvrière! et mouiller le papier! et ne rien tacher! et tenir la colle chaude! le diable, je vous dis! quatre sous par jour! comment voulez-vous qu'on vive?

Tout en parlant, Jondrette ne regardait pas M. Leblanc qui l'observait. L'œil de M. Leblanc était fixé sur Jondrette et l'œil de Jondrette sur la porte. L'attention haletante de Marius allait de l'un à l'autre. M. Leblanc paraissait se demander: Est-ce un idiot? Jondrette répéta deux ou trois fois avec toutes sortes d'inflexions variées dans le genre traînant et suppliant: Je n'ai plus qu'à me jeter à la rivière! j'ai descendu l'autre jour trois marches pour cela du côté du pont d'Austerlitz!

Tout à coup sa prunelle éteinte s'illumina d'un flamboiement hideux, ce petit homme se dressa et devint effrayant, il fit un pas vers M. Leblanc et lui cria d'une voix tonnante:

— Il ne s'agit pas de tout cela! me reconnaissez-vous?

Chapitre XX

Le guet-apens

La porte du galetas venait de s’ouvrir brusquement, et laissait voir trois hommes en blouse de toile bleue, masqués de masques de papier noir. Le premier était maigre et avait une longue trique ferrée, le second, qui était une espèce de colosse, portait, par le milieu du manche et la cognée en bas, un merlin à assommer les bœufs. Le troisième, homme aux épaules trapues, moins maigre que le premier, moins massif que le second, tenait à plein poing une énorme clef volée à quelque porte de prison.

Il paraît que c’était l’arrivée de ces hommes que Jondrette attendait. Un dialogue rapide s’engagea entre lui et l’homme à la trique, le maigre.

— Tout est-il prêt? dit Jondrette.

— Oui, répondit l’homme maigre.

— Où donc est Montparnasse?

— Le jeune premier s’est arrêté pour causer avec ta fille.

— Laquelle?

— L’aînée.

— Il y a un fiacre en bas?

— Oui.

— La maringotte est attelée?

— Attelée.

— De deux bons chevaux?

— Excellents.

— Elle attend où j’ai dit qu’elle attendît?

— Oui.

— Bien, dit Jondrette.

M. Leblanc était très pâle. Il considérait tout dans le bouge autour de lui comme un homme qui comprend où il est tombé, et sa tête, tour à tour dirigée vers toutes les têtes qui l’entouraient, se mouvait sur son cou avec une lenteur attentive et étonnée, mais il n’y avait dans son air rien qui ressemblât à la peur. Il s’était fait de la table un retranchement improvisé; et cet homme qui, le moment d’auparavant, n’avait l’air que d’un bon vieux homme, était devenu subitement une sorte d’athlète, et posait son poing robuste sur le dossier de sa chaise avec un geste redoutable et surprenant.

Ce vieillard, si ferme et si brave devant un tel danger, semblait être de ces natures qui sont courageuses comme elles sont bonnes, aisément et simplement. Le père d’une femme qu’on aime n’est jamais un étranger pour nous. Marius se sentit fier de cet inconnu.

Trois des hommes aux bras nus dont Jondrette avait dit: *ce sont des fumistes*, avaient pris dans le tas de ferrailles, l’un une grande cisaille, l’autre une pince à faire des pesées, le troisième un marteau, et s’étaient mis en travers de la porte sans prononcer une parole. Le vieux était resté sur le lit, et avait seulement ouvert les yeux. La Jondrette s’était assise à côté de lui. Marius pensa qu’avant quelques secondes le moment d’intervenir serait arrivé, et il éleva sa main droite vers le plafond, dans la direction du corridor, prêt à lâcher son coup de pistolet.

Jondrette, son colloque avec l’homme à la trique terminé, se tourna de nouveau vers M. Leblanc et répéta sa question en l’accompagnant de ce rire bas, contenu et terrible qu’il avait:

— Vous ne me reconnaissez donc pas?

M. Leblanc le regarda en face et répondit:

— Non.

Alors Jondrette vint jusqu’à la table. Il se pencha par-dessus la chandelle, croisant les bras, approchant sa mâchoire anguleuse et féroce du visage calme de M. Leblanc, et avançant le plus qu’il pouvait sans que M. Leblanc reculât, et, dans cette posture de bête fauve qui va mordre, il cria:

— Je ne m’appelle pas Fabantou, je ne m’appelle pas Jondrette, je me nomme Thénardier! je suis l’aubergiste de Montfermeil! entendez-vous bien? Thénardier! Maintenant me reconnaissez-vous?

Une imperceptible rougeur passa sur le front de M. Leblanc, et il répondit sans que sa voix tremblât, ni s’élevât, avec sa placidité ordinaire:

— Pas davantage.

Marius n’entendit pas cette réponse. Qui l’eût vu en ce moment dans cette obscurité l’eût vu hagard, stupide et foudroyé. Au moment où Jondrette avait dit: *Je me nomme Thénardier*, Marius avait tremblé de tous ses membres et s’était appuyé au mur comme s’il eût senti le froid d’une lame d’épée à travers son cœur. Puis son bras droit, prêt à lâcher le coup de signal, s’était abaissé lentement, et au moment où Jondrette avait répété *Entendez-vous bien, Thénardier*? les doigts défaillants de Marius avaient laissé tomber le pistolet. Jondrette, en dévoilant qui il était, n’avait pas ému M. Leblanc, mais il avait bouleversé Marius. Ce nom de Thénardier, que M.

Leblanc ne semblait pas connaître, Marius le connaissait. Qu’on se rappelle ce que ce nom était pour lui! Ce nom, il l’avait porté sur son cœur, écrit dans le testament de son père! il le portait au fond de sa pensée, au fond de sa mémoire, dans cette recommandation sacrée: «Un nommé Thénardier m’a sauvé la vie. Si mon fils le rencontre, il lui fera tout le bien qu’il pourra.» Ce nom, on s’en souvient, était une des piétés de son âme; il le mêlait au nom de son père dans son culte. Quoi! c’était là ce Thénardier, c’était là cet aubergiste de Montfermeil qu’il avait vainement et si longtemps cherché! Il le trouvait enfin, et comment! ce sauveur de son père était un bandit! cet homme, auquel lui Marius brûlait de se dévouer, était un monstre! ce libérateur du colonel Pontmercy était en train de commettre un attentat dont Marius ne voyait pas encore bien distinctement la forme, mais qui ressemblait à un assassinat! et sur qui, grand Dieu! Quelle fatalité! quelle amère moquerie du sort! Son père lui ordonnait du fond de son cercueil de faire tout le bien possible à Thénardier, depuis quatre ans Marius n’avait pas d’autre idée que d’acquitter cette dette de son père, et, au moment où il allait faire saisir par la justice un brigand au milieu d’un crime, la destinée lui criait: c’est Thénardier! La vie de son père, sauvée dans une grêle de mitraille sur le champ héroïque de Waterloo, il allait enfin la payer à cet homme, et la payer de l’échafaud! Il s’était promis, si jamais il retrouvait ce Thénardier, de ne l’aborder qu’en se jetant à ses pieds, et il le retrouvait en effet, mais pour le livrer au bourreau! Son père lui disait: Secours Thénardier! et il répondait à cette voix adorée et sainte en écrasant Thénardier! Donner pour spectacle à son père dans son tombeau l’homme qui l’avait arraché à la mort au péril de sa vie, exécuté place Saint-Jacques par le fait de son fils, de ce Marius à qui il avait légué cet homme! et quelle dérision que d’avoir si longtemps porté sur sa poitrine les dernières volontés de son père écrites de sa main pour faire affreusement tout le contraire! Mais, d’un autre côté, assister à ce guet-apens et ne pas l’empêcher! quoi! condamner la victime et épargner l’assassin! est-ce qu’on pouvait être tenu à quelque reconnaissance envers un pareil misérable? Toutes les idées que Marius avait depuis quatre ans étaient comme traversées de part en part par ce coup inattendu. Il frémissait. Tout dépendait de lui. Il tenait dans sa main à leur insu ces êtres qui s’agitaient là sous ses yeux. S’il tirait le coup de pistolet, M. Leblanc était sauvé et Thénardier était perdu; s’il ne le tirait pas, M. Leblanc était sacrifié et, qui sait? Thénardier échappait. Précipiter l’un, ou laisser tomber l’autre! remords des deux côtés. Que faire? que choisir? manquer aux souvenirs les plus impérieux, à tant d'engagements profonds pris avec lui-même, au devoir le plus saint, au texte le plus vénéré! manquer au testament de son père, ou laisser s'accomplir un crime! Il lui semblait d'un côté entendre «son Ursule» le supplier pour son père, et de l'autre le colonel lui recommander Thénardier. Il se sentait fou. Ses genoux se dérobaient sous lui. Et il n'avait pas même le temps de délibérer, tant la scène qu'il avait sous les yeux se précipitait avec furie. C'était comme un tourbillon dont il s'était cru maître et qui l'emportait. Il fut au moment de s'évanouir.

Cependant Thénardier, nous ne le nommerons plus autrement désormais, se promenait de long en large devant la table dans une sorte d'égarement et de triomphe frénétique.

Il prit à plein poing la chandelle et la posa sur la cheminée avec un frappement si violent que la mèche faillit s'éteindre et que le suif éclaboussa le mur.

Puis il se tourna vers M. Leblanc, effroyable, et cracha ceci:

— Flambé! fumé! fricassé! à la crapaudine!

Et il se remit à marcher, en pleine explosion.

— Ah! criait-il, je vous retrouve enfin, monsieur le philanthrope! monsieur le millionnaire râpé! monsieur le donneur de poupées! vieux Jocrisse! Ah! vous ne me reconnaissez pas! Non, ce n'est pas vous qui êtes venu à Montfermeil, à mon auberge, il y a huit ans, la nuit de Noël 1823! ce n'est pas vous qui avez emmené de chez moi l'enfant de la Fantine, l'Alouette! ce n'est pas vous qui aviez un carrick jaune! non! et un paquet plein de nippes à la main comme ce matin chez moi! Dis donc, ma femme! c'est sa manie, à ce qu'il paraît, de porter dans les maisons des paquets pleins de bas de laine! vieux charitable, va! Est-ce que vous êtes bonnetier, monsieur le millionnaire? vous donnez aux pauvres votre fonds de boutique, saint homme! quel funambule! Ah! vous ne me reconnaissez pas? Eh bien, je vous reconnais, moi, je vous ai reconnu tout de suite dès que vous avez fourré votre mufle ici. Ah! on va voir enfin que ce n'est pas tout roses d'aller comme cela dans les maisons des gens, sous prétexte que ce sont des auberges, avec des habits minables, avec l'air d'un pauvre, qu'on lui aurait donné un sou, tromper les personnes, faire le généreux, leur prendre leur gagne-pain, et menacer dans les bois, et qu'on n'en est pas quitte pour rapporter après, quand les gens sont ruinés, une redingote trop large et deux méchantes couvertures d'hôpital, vieux gueux, voleur d'enfants!

Il s'arrêta, et parut un moment se parler à lui-même. On eût dit que sa fureur tombait comme le Rhône dans quelque trou; puis, comme s'il achevait tout haut des choses qu'il venait de se dire tout bas, il frappa un coup de poing sur la table et cria:

— Avec son air bonasse!

Et apostrophant M. Leblanc:

— Parbleu! vous vous êtes moqué de moi autrefois. Vous êtes cause de tous mes malheurs! Vous avez eu pour quinze cents francs une fille que j'avais, et qui était certainement à des riches, et qui m'avait déjà rapporté beaucoup d'argent, et dont je devais tirer de quoi vivre toute ma vie! une fille qui m'aurait dédommagé de tout ce que j'ai perdu dans cette abominable gargote où l'on faisait des sabbats sterlings et où j'ai mangé comme un imbécile tout mon saint-frusquin! Oh! je voudrais que tout le vin qu'on a bu chez moi fût du poison à ceux qui l'ont bu! Enfin n'importe! Dites donc! vous avez dû me trouver farce quand vous vous êtes en allé avec l'Alouette! Vous aviez votre gourdin dans la forêt! Vous étiez le plus fort. Revanche. C'est moi qui ai l'atout aujourd'hui! Vous êtes fichu, mon bonhomme! Oh mais, je ris. Vrai, je ris! Est-il tombé dans le panneau! Je lui ai dit que j'étais acteur, que je m'appelais Fabantou, que j'avais joué la comédie avec mamselle Mars, avec mamselle Muche, que mon propriétaire voulait être payé demain 4 février, et il n'a même pas vu que c'est le 8 janvier et non le 4 février qui est un terme! Absurde crétin! Et ces quatre méchants philippes qu'il m'apporte! Canaille! Il n'a même pas eu le cœur d'aller jusqu'à cent francs! Et comme il donnait dans mes platitudes! Ça m'amusait. Je me disais: Ganache! Va, je te tiens. Je te lèche les pattes ce matin! Je te rongerai le cœur ce soir!

Thénardier cessa. Il était essoufflé. Sa petite poitrine étroite haletait comme un soufflet de forge. Son œil était plein de cet ignoble bonheur d'une créature faible, cruelle et lâche, qui peut enfin terrasser ce qu'elle a redouté et insulter ce qu'elle a flatté, joie d'un nain qui mettrait le talon sur la tête de Goliath, joie d'un chacal qui commence à déchirer un taureau malade, assez mort pour ne plus se défendre, assez vivant pour souffrir encore.

M. Leblanc ne l'interrompit pas, mais lui dit lorsqu'il s'interrompit:

— Je ne sais ce que vous voulez dire. Vous vous méprenez. Je suis un homme très pauvre et rien moins qu’un millionnaire. Je ne vous connais pas. Vous me prenez pour un autre.

— Ah! râla Thénardier, la bonne balançoire! Vous tenez à cette plaisanterie! Vous pataugez, mon vieux! Ah! vous ne vous souvenez pas? Vous ne voyez pas qui je suis!

— Pardon, monsieur, répondit M. Leblanc avec un accent de politesse qui avait en un pareil moment quelque chose d’étrange et de puissant, je vois que vous êtes un bandit.

Qui ne l’a remarqué, les êtres odieux ont leur susceptibilité, les monstres sont chatouilleux. À ce mot de bandit, la femme Thénardier se jeta à bas du lit, Thénardier saisit sa chaise comme s’il allait la briser dans ses mains. — Ne bouge pas, toi! cria-t-il à sa femme; et, se tournant vers M. Leblanc:

— Bandit! oui, je sais que vous nous appelez comme cela, messieurs les gens riches! Tiens! c’est vrai, j’ai fait faillite, je me cache, je n’ai pas de pain, je n’ai pas le sou, je suis un bandit! Voilà trois jours que je n’ai pas mangé, je suis un bandit! Ah! vous vous chauffez les pieds, vous autres, vous avez des escarpins de Sakoski, vous avez des redingotes ouatées, comme des archevêques, vous logez au premier dans des maisons à portier, vous mangez des truffes, vous mangez des bottes d’asperges à quarante francs au mois de janvier, des petits pois, vous vous gavez, et, quand vous voulez savoir s’il fait froid, vous regardez dans le journal ce que marque le thermomètre de l’ingénieur Chevalier. Nous! c’est nous qui sommes les thermomètres! nous n’avons pas besoin d’aller voir sur le quai au coin de la tour de l’Horloge combien il y a de degrés de froid, nous sentons le sang se figer dans nos veines et la glace nous arriver au cœur, et nous disons: Il n’y a pas de Dieu! Et vous venez dans nos cavernes, oui, dans nos cavernes, nous appeler bandits! Mais nous vous mangerons! mais nous vous dévorerons, pauvres petits! Monsieur le millionnaire! sachez ceci: J’ai été un homme établi, j’ai été patenté, j’ai été électeur, je suis un bourgeois, moi! et vous n’en êtes peut-être pas un, vous!

Ici Thénardier fit un pas vers les hommes qui étaient près de la porte, et ajouta avec un frémissement:

— Quand je pense qu’il ose venir me parler comme à un savetier!

Puis s’adressant à M. Leblanc avec une recrudescence de frénésie:

— Et sachez encore ceci, monsieur le philanthrope! je ne suis pas un homme louche, moi! je ne suis pas un homme dont on ne sait point le nom et qui vient enlever des enfants dans les maisons! Je suis un ancien soldat français, je devrais être décoré! J'étais à Waterloo, moi! et j'ai sauvé dans la bataille un général appelé le comte de je ne sais quoi! Il m'a dit son nom; mais sa chienne de voix était si faible que je ne l'ai pas entendu. Je n'ai entendu que *Merci*. J'aurais mieux aimé son nom que son remercîment. Cela m'aurait aidé à le retrouver. Ce tableau que vous voyez, et qui a été peint par David à Bruqueselles, savez-vous qui il représente? il représente moi. David a voulu immortaliser ce fait d'armes. J'ai ce général sur mon dos, et je l'emporte à travers la mitraille. Voilà l'histoire. Il n'a même jamais rien fait pour moi, ce général-là; il ne valait pas mieux que les autres! Je ne lui en ai pas moins sauvé la vie au danger de la mienne, et j'en ai les certificats plein mes poches! Je suis un soldat de Waterloo, mille noms de noms! Et maintenant que j'ai eu la bonté de vous dire tout ça, finissons, il me faut de l'argent, il me faut beaucoup d'argent, il me faut énormément d'argent, ou je vous extermine, tonnerre du bon Dieu!

Marius avait repris quelque empire sur ses angoisses, et écoutait. La dernière possibilité de doute venait de s'évanouir. C'était bien le Thénardier du testament. Marius frissonna à ce reproche d'ingratitude adressé à son père et qu'il était sur le point de justifier si fatalement. Ses perplexités en redoublèrent. Du reste il y avait dans toutes ces paroles de Thénardier, dans l'accent, dans le geste, dans le regard qui faisait jaillir des flammes de chaque mot, il y avait dans cette explosion d'une mauvaise nature montrant tout, dans ce mélange de fanfaronnade et d'abjection, d'orgueil et de petitesse, de rage et de sottise, dans ce chaos de griefs réels et de sentiments faux, dans cette impudeur d'un méchant homme savourant la volupté de la violence, dans cette nudité effrontée d'une âme laide, dans cette conflagration de toutes les souffrances combinées avec toutes les haines, quelque chose qui était hideux comme le mal et poignant comme le vrai.

Le tableau de maître, la peinture de David dont il avait proposé l'achat à M. Leblanc, n'était, le lecteur l'a deviné, autre chose que l'enseigne de sa gargote, peinte, on s'en souvient, par lui-même, seul débris qu'il eût conservé de son naufrage de Montfermeil.

Comme il avait cessé d'intercepter le rayon visuel de Marius, Marius maintenant pouvait considérer cette chose, et dans ce badigeonnage il reconnaissait réellement une bataille, un fond de fumée, et un homme qui en portait un autre. C'était le groupe de Thénardier et de Pontmercy, le sergent sauveur, le colonel sauvé. Marius était comme ivre, ce tableau faisait en quelque sorte son père vivant, ce n'était plus l'enseigne du cabaret de Montfermeil, c'était une résurrection, une tombe s'y entr'ouvrait, un fantôme s'y dressait. Marius entendait son cœur tinter à ses tempes, il avait le canon de Waterloo dans les oreilles, son père sanglant vaguement peint sur ce panneau sinistre l'effarait, et il lui semblait que cette silhouette informe le regardait fixement.

Quand Thénardier eut repris haleine, il attacha sur M. Leblanc ses prunelles sanglantes, et lui dit d'une voix basse et brève:

— Qu'as-tu à dire avant qu'on te mette en brindesingues?

M. Leblanc se taisait. Au milieu de ce silence une voix éraillée lança du corridor ce sarcasme lugubre:

— S'il faut fendre du bois, je suis là, moi!

C'était l'homme au merlin qui s'égayait.

En même temps une énorme face hérissée et terreuse parut à la porte avec un affreux rire qui montrait non des dents, mais des crocs.

C'était la face de l'homme au merlin.

— Pourquoi as-tu ôté ton masque? lui cria Thénardier avec fureur.

— Pour rire, répliqua l'homme.

Depuis quelques instants, M. Leblanc semblait suivre et guetter tous les mouvements de Thénardier, qui, aveuglé et ébloui par sa propre rage, allait et venait dans le repaire avec la confiance de sentir la porte gardée, de tenir, armé, un homme désarmé, et d'être neuf contre un, en supposant que la Thénardier ne comptât que pour un homme. Dans son apostrophe à l'homme au merlin, il tournait le dos à M. Leblanc.

M. Leblanc saisit ce moment, repoussa du pied la chaise, du poing la table, et d'un bond, avec une agilité prodigieuse, avant que Thénardier eût eu le temps de se retourner, il était à la fenêtre. L'ouvrir, escalader l'appui, l'enjamber, ce fut une seconde. Il était à moitié dehors quand six poings robustes le saisirent et le ramenèrent énergiquement dans le bouge. C'étaient les trois «fumistes» qui s'étaient élancés sur lui. En même temps, la Thénardier l'avait empoigné aux cheveux.

Au piétinement qui se fit, les autres bandits accoururent du corridor. Le vieux qui était sur le lit et qui semblait pris de vin, descendit du grabat et arriva en chancelant, un marteau de cantonnier à la main.

Un des «fumistes» dont la chandelle éclairait le visage barbouillé, et dans lequel Marius, malgré ce barbouillage, reconnut Panchaud, dit Printanier, dit Bigrenaille, levait au-dessus de la tête de M. Leblanc une espèce d’assommoir fait de deux pommes de plomb aux deux bouts d’une barre de fer.

Marius ne put résister à ce spectacle. — Mon père, pensa-t-il, pardonne-moi! — Et son doigt chercha la détente du pistolet. Le coup allait partir lorsque la voix de Thénardier cria:

— Ne lui faites pas de mal!

Cette tentative désespérée de la victime, loin d’exaspérer Thénardier, l’avait calmé. Il y avait deux hommes en lui, l’homme féroce et l’homme adroit. Jusqu’à cet instant, dans le débordement du triomphe, devant la proie abattue et ne bougeant pas, l’homme féroce avait dominé; quand la victime se débattit et parut vouloir lutter, l’homme adroit reparut et prit le dessus.

— Ne lui faites pas de mal! répéta-t-il. Et, sans s’en douter, pour premier succès, il arrêta le pistolet prêt à partir et paralysa Marius pour lequel l’urgence disparut, et qui, devant cette phase nouvelle, ne vit point d’inconvénient à attendre encore. Qui sait si quelque chance ne surgirait pas qui le délivrerait de l’affreuse alternative de laisser périr le père d’Ursule ou de perdre le sauveur du colonel?

Une lutte herculéenne s’était engagée. D’un coup de poing en plein torse M. Leblanc avait envoyé le vieux rouler au milieu de la chambre, puis de deux revers de main avait terrassé deux autres assaillants, et il en tenait un sous chacun de ses genoux; les misérables râlaient sous cette pression comme sous une meule de granit; mais les quatre autres avaient saisi le redoutable vieillard aux deux bras et à la nuque et le tenaient accroupi sur les deux «fumistes» terrassés. Ainsi, maître des uns et maîtrisé par les autres, écrasant ceux d’en bas et étouffant sous ceux d’en haut, secouant vainement tous les efforts qui s’entassaient sur lui, M. Leblanc disparaissait sous le groupe horrible des bandits comme un sanglier sous un monceau hurlant de dogues et de limiers.

Ils parvinrent à le renverser sur le lit le plus proche de la croisée et l’y tinrent en respect. La Thénardier ne lui avait pas lâché les cheveux.

— Toi, dit Thénardier, ne t’en mêle pas. Tu vas déchirer ton châle.

La Thénardier obéit, comme la louve obéit au loup, avec un grondement.

— Vous autres, reprit Thénardier, fouillez-le.

M. Leblanc semblait avoir renoncé à la résistance. On le fouilla. Il n’avait rien sur lui qu’une bourse de cuir qui contenait six francs, et son mouchoir.

Thénardier mit le mouchoir dans sa poche.

— Quoi! pas de portefeuille? demanda-t-il.

— Ni de montre, répondit un des «fumistes».

— C'est égal, murmura avec une voix de ventriloque l'homme masqué qui tenait la grosse clef, c'est un vieux rude!

Thénardier alla au coin de la porte et y prit un paquet de cordes, qu'il leur jeta.

— Attachez-le au pied du lit, dit-il. Et, apercevant le vieux qui était resté étendu à travers la chambre du coup de poing de M. Leblanc et qui ne bougeait pas:

— Est-ce que Boulatruelle est mort? demanda-t-il.

— Non, répondit Bigrenaille, il est ivre.

— Balayez-le dans un coin, dit Thénardier.

— Deux des «fumistes» poussèrent l'ivrogne avec le pied près du tas de ferrailles.

— Babet, pourquoi en as-tu amené tant? dit Thénardier bas à l'homme à la trique, c'était inutile.

— Que veux-tu? répliqua l'homme à la trique, ils ont tous voulu en être. La saison est mauvaise. Il ne se fait pas d'affaires.

Le grabat où M. Leblanc avait été renversé était une façon de lit d'hôpital porté sur quatre montants grossiers en bois à peine équarri. M. Leblanc se laissa faire. Les brigands le lièrent solidement, debout et les pieds posant à terre, au montant du lit le plus éloigné de la fenêtre et le plus proche de la cheminée.

Quand le dernier nœud fut serré, Thénardier prit une chaise et vint s'asseoir presque en face de M. Leblanc. Thénardier ne se ressemblait plus, en quelques instants sa physionomie avait passé de la violence effrénée à la douceur tranquille et rusée. Marius avait peine à reconnaître dans ce sourire poli d'homme de bureau la bouche presque bestiale qui écumait le moment d'auparavant, il considérait avec stupeur cette métamorphose fantastique et inquiétante, et il éprouvait ce qu'éprouverait un homme qui verrait un tigre se changer en un avoué.

— Monsieur... fit Thénardier.

Et écartant du geste les brigands qui avaient encore la main sur M. Leblanc:

— Éloignez-vous un peu, et laissez-moi causer avec monsieur.

Tous se retirèrent vers la porte. Il reprit:

— Monsieur, vous avez eu tort de vouloir sauter par la fenêtre. Vous auriez pu vous casser une jambe. Maintenant, si vous le permettez, nous allons causer tranquillement. Il faut d'abord que je vous communique une remarque que j'ai faite, c'est que vous n'avez pas encore poussé le moindre cri.

Thénardier avait raison, ce détail était réel, quoiqu'il eût échappé à Marius dans son trouble. M. Leblanc avait à peine prononcé quelques paroles sans hausser la voix, et, même dans sa lutte près de la fenêtre avec les six bandits, il avait gardé le plus profond et le plus singulier silence. Thénardier poursuivit:

— Mon Dieu! vous auriez un peu crié au voleur, que je ne l'aurais pas trouvé inconvenant! À l'assassin! cela se dit dans l'occasion, et, quant à moi, je ne l'aurais point pris en mauvaise part. Il est tout simple qu'on fasse un peu de vacarme quand on se trouve avec des personnes qui ne vous inspirent pas suffisamment de confiance. Vous l'auriez fait qu'on ne vous aurait pas dérangé. On ne vous aurait même pas bâillonné. Et je vais vous dire pourquoi. C'est que cette chambre-ci est très sourde. Elle n'a que cela pour elle, mais elle a cela. C'est une cave. On y tirerait une bombe que cela ferait pour le corps de garde le plus prochain le bruit d'un ronflement d'ivrogne. Ici le canon ferait boum et le tonnerre ferait pouf. C'est un logement commode. Mais enfin vous n'avez pas crié, c'est mieux, je vous en fais mon compliment, et je vais vous dire ce que j'en conclus. Mon cher monsieur, quand on crie, qu'est-ce qui vient? la police. Et après la police? la justice. Eh bien, vous n'avez pas crié; c'est que vous ne vous souciez pas plus que nous de voir arriver la justice et la police. C'est que, — il y a longtemps que je m'en doute, — vous avez un intérêt quelconque à cacher quelque chose. De notre côté nous avons le même intérêt. Donc nous pouvons nous entendre.

Tout en parlant ainsi, il semblait que Thénardier, la prunelle attachée sur M. Leblanc, cherchât à enfoncer les pointes aiguës qui sortaient de ses yeux jusque dans la conscience de son prisonnier. Du reste son langage, empreint d'une sorte d'insolence modérée et sournoise, était réservé et presque choisi, et dans ce misérable qui n'était tout à l'heure qu'un brigand on sentait maintenant «l'homme qui a étudié pour être prêtre».

Le silence qu'avait gardé le prisonnier, cette précaution qui allait jusqu'à l'oubli même du soin de sa vie, cette résistance opposée au premier mouvement de la nature, qui est de jeter un cri, tout cela, il faut le dire, depuis que la remarque en avait été faite, était importun à Marius, et l’étonnait péniblement.

L’observation si fondée de Thénardier obscurcissait encore pour Marius les épaisseurs mystérieuses sous lesquelles se dérobait cette figure grave et étrange à laquelle Courfeyrac avait jeté le sobriquet de monsieur Leblanc. Mais, quel qu’il fût, lié de cordes, entouré de bourreaux, à demi plongé, pour ainsi dire, dans une fosse qui s’enfonçait sous lui d’un degré à chaque instant, devant la fureur comme devant la douceur de Thénardier, cet homme demeurait impassible; et Marius ne pouvait s’empêcher d’admirer en un pareil moment ce visage superbement mélancolique.

C’était évidemment une âme inaccessible à l’épouvante et ne sachant pas ce que c’est que d’être éperdue. C’était un de ces hommes qui dominent l’étonnement des situations désespérées. Si extrême que fût la crise, si inévitable que fût la catastrophe, il n’y avait rien là de l’agonie du noyé ouvrant sous l’eau des yeux horribles.

Thénardier se leva sans affectation, alla à la cheminée, déplaça le paravent qu’il appuya au grabat voisin, et démasqua ainsi le réchaud plein de braise ardente dans laquelle le prisonnier pouvait parfaitement voir le ciseau rougi à blanc et piqué çà et là de petites étoiles écarlates.

Puis Thénardier vint se rasseoir près de M. Leblanc.

— Je continue, dit-il. Nous pouvons nous entendre. Arrangeons ceci à l’amiable. J’ai eu tort de m’emporter tout à l’heure, je ne sais où j’avais l’esprit, j’ai été beaucoup trop loin, j’ai dit des extravagances. Par exemple, parce que vous êtes millionnaire, je vous ai dit que j’exigeais de l’argent, beaucoup d’argent, immensément d’argent. Cela ne serait pas raisonnable. Mon Dieu, vous avez beau être riche, vous avez vos charges, qui n’a pas les siennes? Je ne veux pas vous ruiner, je ne suis pas un happe-chair après tout. Je ne suis pas de ces gens qui, parce qu’ils ont l’avantage de la position, profitent de cela pour être ridicules. Tenez, j’y mets du mien et je fais un sacrifice de mon côté. Il me faut simplement deux cent mille francs.

M. Leblanc ne souffla pas un mot. Thénardier poursuivit:

— Vous voyez que je ne mets pas mal d’eau dans mon vin. Je ne connais pas l’état de votre fortune, mais je sais que vous ne regardez pas à l’argent, et un homme bienfaisant comme vous peut bien donner deux cent mille francs à un père de famille qui n’est pas heureux. Certainement vous êtes raisonnable aussi, vous ne vous êtes pas figuré que je me donnerais de la peine comme aujourd’hui, et que j’organiserais la chose de ce soir, qui est un travail bien fait, de l’aveu de tous ces messieurs, pour aboutir à vous demander de quoi aller boire du rouge à quinze et manger du veau chez Desnoyers. Deux cent mille francs, ça vaut ça. Une fois cette bagatelle sortie de votre poche, je vous réponds que tout est dit et que vous n’avez pas à craindre une pichenette. Vous me direz: Mais je n’ai pas deux cent mille francs sur moi. Oh! je ne suis pas exagéré. Je n’exige pas cela. Je ne vous demande qu’une chose. Ayez la bonté d’écrire ce que je vais vous dicter.

Ici Thénardier s’interrompit, puis il ajouta en appuyant sur les mots et en jetant un sourire du côté du réchaud:

— Je vous préviens que je n’admettrais pas que vous ne sachiez pas écrire.

Un grand inquisiteur eût pu envier ce sourire.

Thénardier poussa la table tout près de M. Leblanc, et prit l’encrier, une plume et une feuille de papier dans le tiroir qu’il laissa entr’ouvert et où luisait la longue lame du couteau.

Il posa la feuille de papier devant M. Leblanc.

— Écrivez, dit-il.

Le prisonnier parla enfin.

— Comment voulez-vous que j’écrive? je suis attaché.

— C’est vrai, pardon! fit Thénardier, vous avez bien raison.

Et se tournant vers Bigrenaille:

— Déliez le bras droit de monsieur.

Panchaud, dit Printanier, dit Bigrenaille, exécuta l’ordre de Thénardier. Quand la main droite du prisonnier fut libre, Thénardier trempa la plume dans l’encre et la lui présenta.

— Remarquez bien, monsieur, que vous êtes en notre pouvoir, à notre discrétion, absolument à notre discrétion, qu’aucune puissance humaine ne peut vous tirer d’ici, et que nous serions vraiment désolés d’être contraints d’en venir à des extrémités désagréables. Je ne sais ni votre nom, ni votre adresse; mais je vous préviens que vous resterez attaché jusqu’à ce que la personne chargée de porter la lettre que vous allez écrire soit revenue. Maintenant veuillez écrire.

— Quoi? demanda le prisonnier.

— Je dicte.

M. Leblanc prit la plume. Thénardier commença à dicter:

— «Ma fille...»

Le prisonnier tressaillit et leva les yeux sur Thénardier.

— Mettez «ma chère fille», dit Thénardier. M. Leblanc obéit. Thénardier continua:

— «Viens sur-le-champ...»

Il s'interrompit:

— Vous la tutoyez, n'est-ce pas?

— Qui? demanda M. Leblanc.

— Parbleu! dit Thénardier, la petite, l'Alouette.

M. Leblanc répondit sans la moindre émotion apparente:

— Je ne sais ce que vous voulez dire.

— Allez toujours, fit Thénardier; et il se remit à dicter:

— «Viens sur-le-champ. J'ai absolument besoin de toi. La personne qui te remettra ce billet est chargée de t'amener près de moi. Je t'attends. Viens avec confiance.»

M. Leblanc avait tout écrit. Thénardier reprit:

— Ah! effacez *viens avec confiance;* cela pourrait faire supposer que la chose n'est pas toute simple et que la défiance est possible.

M. Leblanc ratura les trois mots.

— À présent, poursuivit Thénardier, signez. Comment vous appelez-vous?

Le prisonnier posa la plume et demanda:

— Pour qui est cette lettre?

— Vous le savez bien, répondit Thénardier. Pour la petite. Je viens de vous le dire.

Il était évident que Thénardier évitait de nommer la jeune fille dont il était question. Il disait «l'Alouette», il disait «la petite», mais il ne prononçait pas le nom. Précaution d'habile homme gardant son secret devant ses complices. Dire le nom, c'eût été leur livrer toute «l'affaire», et leur en apprendre plus qu'ils n'avaient besoin d'en savoir.

Il reprit:

— Signez. Quel est votre nom?

— Urbain Fabre, dit le prisonnier.

Thénardier, avec le mouvement d'un chat, précipita sa main dans sa poche et en tira le mouchoir saisi sur M. Leblanc. Il en chercha la marque et l'approcha de la chandelle.

— U.F. C'est cela. Urbain Fabre. Eh bien, signez U.F.

Le prisonnier signa.

— Comme il faut les deux mains pour plier la lettre, donnez, je vais la plier.

Cela fait, Thénardier reprit:

— Mettez l'adresse. *Mademoiselle Fabre,* chez vous. Je sais que vous demeurez pas très loin d'ici, aux environs de Saint-Jacques-du-Haut-Pas, puisque c'est là que vous allez à la messe tous les jours, mais je ne sais pas dans quelle rue. Je vois que vous comprenez votre situation. Comme vous n'avez pas menti pour votre nom, vous ne mentirez pas pour votre adresse. Mettez-la vous-même.

Le prisonnier resta un moment pensif, puis il reprit la plume et écrivit:

— Mademoiselle Fabre, chez monsieur Urbain Fabre, rue Saint-Dominique-d'Enfer, n° 17.

Thénardier saisit la lettre avec une sorte de convulsion fébrile.

— Ma femme! cria-t-il.

La Thénardier accourut.

— Voici la lettre. Tu sais ce que tu as à faire. Un fiacre est en bas. Pars tout de suite, et reviens idem.

Et s'adressant à l'homme au merlin:

— Toi, puisque tu as ôté ton cache-nez, accompagne la bourgeoise. Tu monteras derrière le fiacre. Tu sais où tu as laissé la maringotte?

— Oui, dit l'homme.

Et, déposant son merlin dans un coin, il suivit la Thénardier.

Comme ils s'en allaient, Thénardier passa sa tête par la porte entrebâillée et cria dans le corridor:

— Surtout ne perds pas la lettre! songe que tu as deux cent mille francs sur toi.

La voix rauque de la Thénardier répondit:

— Sois tranquille. Je l'ai mise dans mon estomac.

Une minute ne s'était pas écoulée qu'on entendit le claquement d'un fouet qui décrut et s'éteignit rapidement.

— Bon! grommela Thénardier. Ils vont bon train. De ce galop-là la bourgeoise sera de retour dans trois quarts d'heure.

Il approcha une chaise de la cheminée et s'assit en croisant les bras et en présentant ses bottes boueuses au réchaud.

— J'ai froid aux pieds, dit-il.

Il ne restait plus dans le bouge avec Thénardier et le prisonnier que cinq bandits. Ces hommes, à travers les masques ou la glu noire qui leur couvrait la face et en faisait, au choix de la peur, des charbonniers, des nègres ou des démons, avaient des airs engourdis et mornes, et l'on sentait qu'ils exécutaient un crime comme une besogne, tranquillement, sans colère et sans pitié, avec une sorte d'ennui. Ils étaient dans un coin entassés comme des brutes et se taisaient. Thénardier se chauffait les pieds. Le prisonnier était retombé dans sa taciturnité. Un calme sombre avait succédé au vacarme farouche qui remplissait le galetas quelques instants auparavant.

La chandelle, où un large champignon s'était formé, éclairait à peine l'immense taudis, le brasier s'était terni, et toutes ces têtes monstrueuses faisaient des ombres difformes sur les murs et au plafond.

On n'entendait d'autre bruit que la respiration paisible du vieillard ivre qui dormait.

Marius attendait, dans une anxiété que tout accroissait. L'énigme était plus impénétrable que jamais. Qu'était-ce que cette «petite» que Thénardier avait aussi nommée l'Alouette? était-ce son «Ursule»? Le prisonnier n'avait pas paru ému à ce mot, l'Alouette, et avait répondu le plus naturellement du monde: Je ne sais ce que vous voulez dire. D'un autre côté, les deux lettres U.F. étaient expliquées, c'était Urbain Fabre, et Ursule ne s'appelait plus Ursule. C'est là ce que Marius voyait le plus clairement. Une sorte de fascination affreuse le retenait cloué à la place d'où il observait et dominait toute cette scène. Il était là, presque incapable de réflexion et de mouvement, comme anéanti par de si abominables choses vues de près. Il attendait, espérant quelque incident, n'importe quoi, ne pouvant rassembler ses idées et ne sachant quel parti prendre.

— Dans tous les cas, disait-il, si l'Alouette, c'est elle, je le verrai bien, car la Thénardier va l'amener ici. Alors tout sera dit, je donnerai ma vie et mon sang s'il le faut, mais je la délivrerai! Rien ne m'arrêtera.

Près d'une demi-heure passa ainsi. Thénardier paraissait absorbé par une méditation ténébreuse. Le prisonnier ne bougeait pas. Cependant Marius croyait par intervalles et depuis quelques instants entendre un petit bruit sourd du côté du prisonnier.

Tout à coup Thénardier apostropha le prisonnier:

— Monsieur Fabre, tenez, autant que je vous dise tout de suite.

Ces quelques mots semblaient commencer un éclaircissement. Marius prêta l'oreille. Thénardier continua:

— Mon épouse va revenir, ne vous impatientez pas. Je pense que l'Alouette est véritablement votre fille, et je trouve tout simple que vous la gardiez. Seulement, écoutez un peu. Avec votre lettre, ma femme ira la trouver. J’ai dit à ma femme de s’habiller, comme vous avez vu, de façon que votre demoiselle la suive sans difficulté. Elles monteront toutes deux dans le fiacre avec mon camarade derrière. Il y a quelque part en dehors d’une barrière une maringotte attelée de deux très bons chevaux. On y conduira votre demoiselle. Elle descendra du fiacre. Mon camarade montera avec elle dans la maringotte, et ma femme reviendra ici nous dire: C’est fait. Quant à votre demoiselle, on ne lui fera pas de mal, la maringotte la mènera dans un endroit où elle sera tranquille, et, dès que vous m’aurez donné les petits deux cent mille francs, on vous la rendra. Si vous me faites arrêter, mon camarade donnera le coup de pouce à l’Alouette. Voilà.

Le prisonnier n’articula pas une parole. Après une pause, Thénardier poursuivit:

— C’est simple, comme vous voyez, Il n’y aura pas de mal si vous ne voulez pas qu’il y ait du mal. Je vous conte la chose. Je vous préviens pour que vous sachiez.

Il s’arrêta, le prisonnier ne rompit pas le silence, et Thénardier reprit:

— Dès que mon épouse sera revenue et qu’elle m’aura dit: L’Alouette est en route, nous vous lâcherons, et vous serez libre d’aller coucher chez vous. Vous voyez que nous n’avions pas de mauvaises intentions.

Des images épouvantables passèrent devant la pensée de Marius. Quoi! cette jeune fille qu’on enlevait, on n’allait pas la ramener? Un de ces monstres allait l’emporter dans l’ombre? où?... Et si c’était elle! Et il était clair que c’était elle! Marius sentait les battements de son cœur s’arrêter. Que faire? Tirer le coup de pistolet? mettre aux mains de la justice tous ces misérables? Mais l’affreux homme au merlin n’en serait pas moins hors de toute atteinte avec la jeune fille, et Marius songeait à ces mots de Thénardier dont il entrevoyait la signification sanglante: *Si vous me faites arrêter, mon camarade donnera le coup de pouce à l’Alouette*.

Maintenant ce n’était pas seulement par le testament du colonel, c’était par son amour même, par le péril de celle qu’il aimait, qu’il se sentait retenu.

Cette effroyable situation, qui durait déjà depuis plus d’une heure, changeait d’aspect à chaque instant. Marius eut la force de passer successivement en revue toutes les plus poignantes conjectures, cherchant une espérance et ne la trouvant pas. Le tumulte de ses pensées contrastait avec le silence funèbre du repaire.

Au milieu de ce silence on entendit le bruit de la porte de l’escalier qui s’ouvrait, puis se fermait.

Le prisonnier fit un mouvement dans ses liens.

— Voici la bourgeoise, dit Thénardier.

Il achevait à peine qu’en effet la Thénardier se précipita dans la chambre, rouge, essoufflée, haletante, les yeux flambants, et cria en frappant de ses grosses mains sur ses deux cuisses à la fois:

— Fausse adresse!

Le bandit qu’elle avait emmené avec elle, parut derrière elle et vint reprendre son merlin.

— Fausse adresse? répéta Thénardier.

Elle reprit:

— Personne! Rue Saint-Dominique, numéro dix-sept, pas de monsieur Urbain Fabre! On ne sait pas ce que c’est!

Elle s’arrêta suffoquée, puis continua:

— Monsieur Thénardier! ce vieux t’a fait poser! Tu es trop bon, vois-tu! Moi, je te vous lui aurais coupé la margoulette en quatre pour commencer! et s’il avait fait le méchant, je l’aurais fait cuire tout vivant! Il aurait bien fallu qu’il parle, et qu’il dise où est la fille, et qu’il dise où est le magot! Voilà comment j’aurais mené cela, moi! On a bien raison de dire que les hommes sont plus bêtes que les femmes! Personne! numéro dix-sept! C’est une grande porte cochère! Pas de monsieur Fabre, rue Saint-Dominique! et ventre à terre, et pourboire au cocher, et tout! J’ai parlé au portier et à la portière, qui est une belle forte femme, ils ne connaissent pas ça!

Marius respira. Elle, Ursule, ou l’Alouette, celle qu’il ne savait plus comment nommer, était sauvée.

Pendant que sa femme exaspérée vociférait, Thénardier s’était assis sur la table; il resta quelques instants sans prononcer une parole, balançant sa jambe droite qui pendait, et considérant le réchaud d’un air de rêverie sauvage.

Enfin il dit au prisonnier avec une inflexion lente et singulièrement féroce:

— Une fausse adresse? qu’est-ce que tu as donc espéré?

— Gagner du temps! cria le prisonnier d’une voix éclatante.

Et au même instant il secoua ses liens; ils étaient coupés. Le prisonnier n’était plus attaché au lit que par une jambe.

Avant que les sept hommes eussent eu le temps de se reconnaître et de s'élancer, lui s'était penché sous la cheminée, avait étendu la main vers le réchaud, puis s'était redressé, et maintenant Thénardier, la Thénardier et les bandits, refoulés par le saisissement au fond du bouge, le regardaient avec stupeur élevant au-dessus de sa tête le ciseau rouge d'où tombait une lueur sinistre, presque libre et dans une attitude formidable.

L'enquête judiciaire, à laquelle le guet-apens de la masure Gorbeau donna lieu par la suite, a constaté qu'un gros sou, coupé et travaillé d'une façon particulière, fut trouvé dans le galetas, quand la police y fît une descente; ce gros sou était une de ces merveilles d'industrie que la patience du bagne engendre dans les ténèbres et pour les ténèbres, merveilles qui ne sont autre chose que des instruments d'évasion. Ces produits hideux et délicats d'un art prodigieux sont dans la bijouterie ce que les métaphores de l'argot sont dans la poésie. Il y a des Benvenuto Cellini au bagne, de même que dans la langue il y a des Villon. Le malheureux qui aspire à la délivrance trouve moyen, quelquefois sans outils, avec un eustache, avec un vieux couteau, de scier un sou en deux lames minces, de creuser ces deux lames sans toucher aux empreintes monétaires, et de pratiquer un pas de vis sur la tranche du sou de manière à faire adhérer les lames de nouveau. Cela se visse et se dévisse à volonté; c'est une boîte. Dans cette boîte, on cache un ressort de montre, et ce ressort de montre bien manié coupe des manilles de calibre et des barreaux de fer. On croit que ce malheureux forçat ne possède qu'un sou; point, il possède la liberté. C'est un gros sou de ce genre qui, dans des perquisitions de police ultérieures, fut trouvé ouvert et en deux morceaux dans le bouge sous le grabat près de la fenêtre. On découvrit également une petite scie en acier bleu qui pouvait se cacher dans le gros sou. Il est probable qu'au moment où les bandits fouillèrent le prisonnier, il avait sur lui ce gros sou qu'il réussit à cacher dans sa main, et qu'ensuite, ayant la main droite libre, il le dévissa, et se servit de la scie pour couper les cordes qui l'attachaient, ce qui expliquerait le bruit léger et les mouvements imperceptibles que Marius avait remarqués.

N'ayant pu se baisser de peur de se trahir, il n'avait point coupé les liens de sa jambe gauche.

Les bandits étaient revenus de leur première surprise.

— Sois tranquille, dit Bigrenaille à Thénardier. Il tient encore par une jambe, et il ne s'en ira pas. J'en réponds. C'est moi qui lui ai ficelé cette patte-là.

Cependant le prisonnier éleva la voix:

— Vous êtes des malheureux, mais ma vie ne vaut pas la peine d’être tant défendue. Quant à vous imaginer que vous me feriez parler, que vous me feriez écrire ce que je ne veux pas écrire, que vous me feriez dire ce que je ne veux pas dire....

Il releva la manche de son bras gauche et ajouta:

— Tenez.

En même temps il tendit son bras et posa sur la chair nue le ciseau ardent qu’il tenait dans sa main droite par le manche de bois.

On entendit le frémissement de la chair brûlée, l’odeur propre aux chambres de torture se répandit dans le taudis. Marius chancela éperdu d’horreur, les brigands eux-mêmes eurent un frisson, le visage de l’étrange vieillard se contracta à peine, et, tandis que le fer rouge s’enfonçait dans la plaie fumante, impassible et presque auguste, il attachait sur Thénardier son beau regard sans haine où la souffrance s’évanouissait dans une majesté sereine.

Chez les grandes et hautes natures les révoltes de la chair et des sens en proie à la douleur physique font sortir l’âme et la font apparaître sur le front, de même que les rébellions de la soldatesque forcent le capitaine à se montrer.

— Misérables, dit-il, n’ayez pas plus peur de moi que je n’ai peur de vous.

Et arrachant le ciseau de la plaie, il le lança par la fenêtre qui était restée ouverte, l’horrible outil embrasé disparut dans la nuit en tournoyant et alla tomber au loin et s’éteindre dans la neige.

Le prisonnier reprit:

— Faites de moi ce que vous voudrez.

Il était désarmé.

— Empoignez-le! dit Thénardier.

Deux des brigands lui posèrent la main sur l’épaule, et l’homme masqué à voix de ventriloque se tint en face de lui, prêt à lui faire sauter le crâne d’un coup de clef au moindre mouvement.

En même temps Marius entendit au-dessous de lui, au bas de la cloison, mais tellement près qu’il ne pouvait voir ceux qui parlaient, ce colloque échangé à voix basse:

— Il n’y a plus qu’une chose à faire.

— L’escarper!

— C’est cela.

C’étaient le mari et la femme qui tenaient conseil.

Thénardier marcha à pas lents vers la table, ouvrit le tiroir et y prit le couteau.

Marius tourmentait le pommeau du pistolet. Perplexité inouïe. Depuis une heure il y avait deux voix dans sa conscience, l’une lui disait de respecter le testament de son père, l’autre lui criait de secourir le prisonnier. Ces deux voix continuaient sans interruption leur lutte qui le mettait à l’agonie. Il avait vaguement espéré jusqu’à ce moment trouver un moyen de concilier ces deux devoirs, mais rien de possible n’avait surgi. Cependant le péril pressait, la dernière limite de l’attente était dépassée, à quelques pas du prisonnier Thénardier songeait, le couteau à la main.

Marius égaré promenait ses yeux autour de lui, dernière ressource machinale du désespoir.

Tout à coup il tressaillit.

À ses pieds, sur sa table, un vif rayon de pleine lune éclairait et semblait lui montrer une feuille de papier. Sur cette feuille il lut cette ligne écrite en grosses lettres le matin même par l’aînée des filles Thénardier:

— Les cognes sont là.

Une idée, une clarté traversa l’esprit de Marius; c’était le moyen qu’il cherchait, la solution de cet affreux problème qui le torturait, épargner l’assassin et sauver la victime. Il s’agenouilla sur la commode, étendit le bras, saisit la feuille de papier, détacha doucement un morceau de plâtre de la cloison, l’enveloppa dans le papier, et jeta le tout par la crevasse au milieu du bouge.

Il était temps. Thénardier avait vaincu ses dernières craintes ou ses derniers scrupules et se dirigeait vers le prisonnier.

— Quelque chose qui tombe! cria la Thénardier.

— Qu’est-ce? dit le mari.

La femme s’était élancée et avait ramassé le plâtras enveloppé du papier. Elle le remit à son mari.

— Par où cela est-il venu? demanda Thénardier.

— Pardié! fit la femme, par où veux-tu que cela soit entré? C’est venu par la fenêtre.

— Je l’ai vu passer, dit Bigrenaille.

Thénardier déplia rapidement le papier et l’approcha de la chandelle.

— C’est de l’écriture d’Éponine. Diable!

Il fit signe à sa femme, qui s’approcha vivement et il lui montra la ligne écrite sur la feuille de papier, puis il ajouta d’une voix sourde:

— Vite! l’échelle! laissons le lard dans la souricière et fichons le camp!

— Sans couper le cou à l’homme? demanda la Thénardier.

— Nous n’avons pas le temps.

— Par où? reprit Bigrenaille.

— Par la fenêtre, répondit Thénardier. Puisque Ponine a jeté la pierre par la fenêtre, c’est que la maison n’est pas cernée de ce côté-là.

Le masque à voix de ventriloque posa à terre sa grosse clef, éleva ses deux bras en l’air et ferma trois fois rapidement ses mains sans dire un mot. Ce fut comme le signal du branle-bas dans un équipage. Les brigands qui tenaient le prisonnier le lâchèrent; en un clin d’œil l’échelle de corde fut déroulée hors de la fenêtre et attachée solidement au rebord par les deux crampons de fer.

Le prisonnier ne faisait pas attention à ce qui se passait autour de lui. Il semblait rêver ou prier.

Sitôt l’échelle fixée, Thénardier cria.

— Viens! la bourgeoise!

Et il se précipita vers la croisée.

Mais comme il allait enjamber, Bigrenaille le saisit rudement au collet.

— Non pas, dis donc, vieux farceur! après nous!

— Après nous! hurlèrent les bandits.

— Vous êtes des enfants, dit Thénardier, nous perdons le temps. Les railles sont sur nos talons.

— Eh bien, dit un des bandits, tirons au sort à qui passera le premier.

Thénardier s’exclama:

— Êtes-vous fous! êtes-vous toqués! en voilà-t-il un tas de jobards! perdre le temps, n’est-ce pas? tirer au sort, n’est-ce pas? au doigt mouillé! à la courte paille! écrire nos noms! les mettre dans un bonnet!...

— Voulez-vous mon chapeau? cria une voix du seuil de la porte.

Tous se retournèrent. C’était Javert.

Il tenait son chapeau à la main, et le tendait en souriant.

Chapitre XXI

On devrait toujours commencer par arrêter les victimes

Javert, à la nuit tombante, avait aposté des hommes et s'était embusqué lui-même derrière les arbres de la rue de la Barrière des Gobelins qui fait face à la masure Gorbeau de l'autre côté du boulevard. Il avait commencé par ouvrir «sa poche», pour y fourrer les deux jeunes filles chargées de surveiller les abords du bouge. Mais il n'avait «coffré» qu'Azelma. Quant à Éponine, elle n'était pas à son poste, elle avait disparu et il n'avait pu la saisir. Puis Javert s'était mis en arrêt, prêtant l'oreille au signal convenu. Les allées et venues du fiacre l'avaient fort agité. Enfin il s'était impatienté, et, *sûr qu'il y avait un nid là*, sûr d'être *en bonne fortune*, ayant reconnu plusieurs des bandits qui étaient entrés, il avait fini par se décider à monter sans attendre le coup de pistolet.

On se souvient qu'il avait le passe-partout de Marius.

Il était arrivé à point.

Les bandits effarés se jetèrent sur les armes qu'ils avaient abandonnées dans tous les coins au moment de s'évader. En moins d'une seconde, ces sept hommes, épouvantables à voir, se groupèrent dans une posture de défense, l'un avec son merlin, l'autre avec sa clef, l'autre avec son assommoir, les autres avec les cisailles, les pinces et les marteaux, Thénardier son couteau au poing. La Thénardier saisit un énorme pavé qui était dans l'angle de la fenêtre et qui servait à ses filles de tabouret.

Javert remit son chapeau sur sa tête, et fit deux pas dans la chambre, les bras croisés, la canne sous le bras, l'épée dans le fourreau.

— Halte-là! dit-il. Vous ne passerez pas par la fenêtre, vous passerez par la porte. C'est moins malsain. Vous êtes sept, nous sommes quinze. Ne nous colletons pas comme des auvergnats. Soyons gentils.

Bigrenaille prit un pistolet qu'il tenait caché sous sa blouse et le mit dans la main de Thénardier en lui disant à l'oreille:

— C'est Javert. Je n'ose pas tirer sur cet homme-là. Oses-tu, toi?

— Parbleu! répondit Thénardier.

— Eh bien, tire.

Thénardier prit le pistolet, et ajusta Javert.

Javert, qui était à trois pas, le regarda fixement et se contenta de dire:

— Ne tire pas, va! ton coup va rater.

Thénardier pressa la détente. Le coup rata.

— Quand je te le disais! fit Javert.

Bigrenaille jeta son casse-tête aux pieds de Javert.

— Tu es l’empereur des diables! je me rends.

— Et vous? demanda Javert aux autres bandits.

Ils répondirent:

— Nous aussi.

Javert repartit avec calme:

— C’est ça, c’est bon, je le disais, on est gentil.

— Je ne demande qu’une chose, reprit le Bigrenaille, c’est qu’on ne me refuse pas du tabac pendant que je serai au secret.

— Accordé, dit Javert.

Et se retournant et appelant derrière lui:

— Entrez maintenant!

Une escouade de sergents de ville l’épée au poing et d’agents armés de casse-tête et de gourdins se rua à l’appel de Javert. On garrotta les bandits. Cette foule d’hommes à peine éclairés d’une chandelle emplissait d’ombre le repaire.

— Les poucettes à tous! cria Javert.

— Approchez donc un peu! cria une voix qui n’était pas une voix d’homme, mais dont personne n’eût pu dire: c’est une voix de femme.

La Thénardier s’était retranchée dans un des angles de la fenêtre, et c’était elle qui venait de pousser ce rugissement.

Les sergents de ville et les agents reculèrent.

Elle avait jeté son châle et gardé son chapeau; son mari, accroupi derrière elle, disparaissait presque sous le châle tombé, et elle le couvrait de son corps, élevant le pavé des deux mains au-dessus de sa tête avec le balancement d’une géante qui va lancer un rocher.

— Gare! cria-t-elle.

Tous se refoulèrent vers le corridor. Un large vide se fit au milieu du galetas.

La Thénardier jeta un regard aux bandits qui s’étaient laissé garrotter et murmura d’un accent guttural et rauque:

— Les lâches!

Javert sourit et s’avança dans l’espace vide que la Thénardier couvait de ses deux prunelles.

— N’approche pas, va-t’en, cria-t-elle, ou je t’écroule!

— Quel grenadier! fit Javert; la mère! tu as de la barbe comme un homme, mais j’ai des griffes comme une femme.

Et il continua de s’avancer.

La Thénardier, échevelée et terrible, écarta les jambes, se cambra en arrière et jeta éperdument le pavé à la tête de Javert. Javert se courba. Le pavé passa au-dessus de lui, heurta la muraille du fond dont il fit tomber un vaste plâtras et revint, en ricochant d’angle en angle à travers le bouge, heureusement presque vide, mourir sur les talons de Javert.

Au même instant Javert arrivait au couple Thénardier. Une de ses larges mains s’abattit sur l’épaule de la femme et l’autre sur la tête du mari.

— Les poucettes! cria-t-il.

Les hommes de police rentrèrent en foule, et en quelques secondes l’ordre de Javert fut exécuté.

La Thénardier, brisée, regarda ses mains garrottées et celles de son mari, se laissa tomber à terre et s’écria en pleurant:

— Mes filles!

— Elles sont à l’ombre, dit Javert.

Cependant les agents avaient avisé l’ivrogne endormi derrière la porte et le secouaient. Il s’éveilla en balbutiant:

— Est-ce fini, Jondrette?

— Oui, répondit Javert.

Les six bandits garrottés étaient debout; du reste, ils avaient encore leurs mines de spectres; trois barbouillés de noir, trois masqués.

— Gardez vos masques, dit Javert.

Et, les passant en revue avec le regard d’un Frédéric II à la parade de Potsdam, il dit aux trois «fumistes»:

— Bonjour, Bigrenaille. Bonjour, Brujon. Bonjour, Deux-Milliards.

Puis, se tournant vers les trois masques, il dit à l’homme au merlin:

— Bonjour, Gueulemer.

Et à l’homme à la trique:

— Bonjour, Babet.

Et au ventriloque:

— Salut, Claquesous.

En ce moment, il aperçut le prisonnier des bandits qui, depuis l’entrée des agents de police, n’avait pas prononcé une parole et se tenait tête baissée.

— Déliez monsieur! dit Javert, et que personne ne sorte!

Cela dit, il s’assit souverainement devant la table, où étaient restées la chandelle et l’écritoire, tira un papier timbré de sa poche et commença son procès-verbal.

Quand il eut écrit les premières lignes qui ne sont que des formules toujours les mêmes, il leva les yeux:

— Faites approcher ce monsieur que ces messieurs avaient attaché.

Les agents regardèrent autour d’eux.

— Eh bien, demanda Javert, où est-il donc?

Le prisonnier des bandits, M. Leblanc, M. Urbain Fabre, le père d’Ursule ou de l’Alouette, avait disparu.

La porte était gardée, mais la croisée ne l’était pas. Sitôt qu’il s’était vu délié, et pendant que Javert verbalisait, il avait profité du trouble, du tumulte, de l’encombrement, de l’obscurité, et d’un moment où l’attention n’était pas fixée sur lui, pour s’élancer par la fenêtre.

Un agent courut à la lucarne, et regarda. On ne voyait personne dehors.

L’échelle de corde tremblait encore.

— Diable! fit Javert entre ses dents, ce devait être le meilleur!

Chapitre XXII

Le petit qui criait au tome deux

Le lendemain du jour où ces événements s’étaient accomplis dans la maison du boulevard de l’Hôpital, un enfant, qui semblait venir du côté du pont d’Austerlitz, montait par la contre-allée de droite dans la direction de la barrière de Fontainebleau. Il était nuit close. Cet enfant était pâle, maigre, vêtu de loques, avec un pantalon de toile au mois de février, et chantait à tue-tête.

Au coin de la rue du Petit-Banquier, une vieille courbée fouillait dans un tas d’ordures à la lueur du réverbère; l’enfant la heurta en passant, puis recula en s’écriant:

— Tiens! moi qui avait pris ça pour un énorme, un énorme chien!

Il prononça le mot énorme pour la seconde fois avec un renflement de voix goguenarde que des majuscules exprimeraient assez bien: un énorme, un ÉNORME chien!

La vieille se redressa furieuse.

— Carcan de moutard! grommela-t-elle. Si je n’avais pas été penchée, je sais bien où je t’aurais flanqué mon pied!

L’enfant était déjà à distance.

— Kisss! kisss! fit-il. Après ça, je ne me suis peut-être pas trompé.

La vieille, suffoquée d’indignation, se dressa tout à fait, et le rougeoiement de la lanterne éclaira en plein sa face livide, toute creusée d’angles et de rides, avec des pattes d’oie rejoignant les coins de la bouche. Le corps se perdait dans l’ombre et l’on ne voyait que la tête. On eût dit le masque de la Décrépitude découpé par une lueur dans la nuit. L’enfant la considéra.

— Madame, dit-il, n’a pas le genre de beauté qui me conviendrait.

Il poursuivit son chemin et se remit à chanter:

Le roi Coupdesabot
S’en allait à la chasse,
À la chasse aux corbeaux...

Au bout de ces trois vers, il s’interrompit. Il était arrivé devant le numéro 50-52, et, trouvant la porte fermée, il avait commencé à la battre à coups de pied, coups de pied retentissants et héroïques, lesquels décelaient plutôt les souliers d’homme qu’il portait que les pieds d’enfant qu’il avait.

Cependant cette même vieille qu’il avait rencontrée au coin de la rue du Petit-Banquier accourait derrière lui poussant des clameurs et prodiguant des gestes démesurés.

— Qu’est-ce que c’est? qu’est-ce que c’est? Dieu Seigneur! on enfonce la porte! on défonce la maison!

Les coups de pied continuaient.

La vieille s’époumonait.

— Est-ce qu’on arrange les bâtiments comme ça à présent!

Tout à coup elle s’arrêta. Elle avait reconnu le gamin.

— Quoi! c’est ce satan!

— Tiens, c’est la vieille, dit l’enfant. Bonjour, la Burgonmuche. Je viens voir mes ancêtres.

La vieille répondit, avec une grimace composite, admirable improvisation de la haine tirant parti de la caducité et de la laideur, qui fut malheureusement perdue dans l’obscurité:

— Il n’y a personne, mufle.

— Bah! reprit l’enfant, où donc est mon père?

— À la Force.

— Tiens! et ma mère?

— À Saint-Lazare.

— Eh bien! et mes sœurs?

— Aux Madelonnettes.

L’enfant se gratta le derrière de l’oreille, regarda mame Burgon, et dit:

— Ah!

Puis il pirouetta sur ses talons, et, un moment après, la vieille restée sur le pas de la porte l’entendit qui chantait de sa voix claire et jeune en s’enfonçant sous les ormes noirs frissonnant au vent d’hiver:

Le roi Coupdesabot
S’en allait à la chasse,
À la chasse aux corbeaux,
Monté sur des échasses.
Quand on passait dessous
On lui payait deux sous.

Tome IV — L’IDYLLE RUE PLUMET ET L’ÉPOPÉE RUE SAINT-DENIS

Livre premier — Quelques pages d’histoire

Chapitre I

Bien coupé

1831 et 1832, les deux années qui se rattachent immédiatement à la Révolution de Juillet, sont un des moments les plus particuliers et les plus frappants de l’histoire. Ces deux années au milieu de celles qui les précèdent et qui les suivent sont comme deux montagnes. Elles ont la grandeur révolutionnaire. On y distingue des précipices. Les masses sociales, les assises mêmes de la civilisation, le groupe solide des intérêts superposés et adhérents, les profils séculaires de l’antique formation française, y apparaissent et y disparaissent à chaque instant à travers les nuages orageux des systèmes, des passions et des théories. Ces apparitions et ces disparitions ont été nommées la résistance et le mouvement. Par intervalles on y voit luire la vérité, ce jour de l’âme humaine.

Cette remarquable époque est assez circonscrite et commence à s’éloigner assez de nous pour qu’on puisse en saisir dès à présent les lignes principales.

Nous allons l’essayer.

La Restauration avait été une de ces phases intermédiaires difficiles à définir, où il y a de la fatigue, du bourdonnement, des murmures, du sommeil, du tumulte, et qui ne sont autre chose que l’arrivée d’une grande nation à une étape. Ces époques sont singulières et trompent les politiques qui veulent les exploiter. Au début, la nation ne demande que le repos; on n’a qu’une soif, la paix; on n’a qu’une ambition, être petit. Ce qui est la traduction de rester tranquille. Les grands événements, les grands hasards, les grandes aventures, les grands hommes, Dieu merci, on en a assez vu, on en a par-dessus la tête. On donnerait César pour Prusias et Napoléon pour le roi d’Yvetot.»Quel bon petit roi c’était là!» On a marché depuis le point du jour, on est au soir d’une longue et rude journée; on a fait le premier relais avec Mirabeau, le second avec Robespierre, le troisième avec Bonaparte, on est éreinté. Chacun demande un lit.

Les dévouements las, les héroïsmes vieillis, les ambitions repues, les fortunes faites cherchent, réclament, implorent, sollicitent, quoi? Un gîte. Ils l’ont. Ils prennent possession de la paix, de la tranquillité, du loisir; les voilà contents. Cependant en même temps de certains faits surgissent, se font reconnaître et frappent à la porte de leur côté. Ces faits sont sortis des révolutions et des guerres, ils sont, ils vivent, ils ont droit de s'installer dans la société et ils s'y installent; et la plupart du temps les faits sont des maréchaux des logis et des fourriers qui ne font que préparer le logement aux principes.

Alors voici ce qui apparaît aux philosophes politiques.

En même temps que les hommes fatigués demandent le repos, les faits accomplis demandent des garanties. Les garanties pour les faits, c'est la même chose que le repos pour les hommes.

C'est ce que l'Angleterre demandait aux Stuarts après le protecteur; c'est ce que la France demandait aux Bourbons après l'Empire.

Ces garanties sont une nécessité des temps. Il faut bien les accorder. Les princes les «octroient», mais en réalité c'est la force des choses qui les donne. Vérité profonde et utile à savoir, dont les Stuarts ne se doutèrent pas en 1660, que les Bourbons n'entrevirent même pas en 1814.

La famille prédestinée qui revint en France quand Napoléon s'écroula eut la simplicité fatale de croire que c'était elle qui donnait, et que ce qu'elle avait donné elle pouvait le reprendre; que la maison de Bourbon possédait le droit divin, que la France ne possédait rien; et que le droit politique concédé dans la charte de Louis XVIII n'était autre chose qu'une branche du droit divin, détachée par la maison de Bourbon et gracieusement donnée au peuple jusqu'au jour où il plairait au roi de s'en ressaisir. Cependant, au déplaisir que le don lui faisait, la maison de Bourbon aurait dû sentir qu'il ne venait pas d'elle.

Elle fut hargneuse au dix-neuvième siècle. Elle fit mauvaise mine à chaque épanouissement de la nation. Pour nous servir du mot trivial, c'est-à-dire populaire et vrai, elle rechigna. Le peuple le vit.

Elle crut qu'elle avait de la force parce que l'Empire avait été emporté devant elle comme un châssis de théâtre. Elle ne s'aperçut pas qu'elle avait été apportée elle-même de la même façon. Elle ne vit pas qu'elle aussi était dans cette main qui avait ôté de là Napoléon.

Elle crut qu'elle avait des racines parce qu'elle était le passé. Elle se trompait; elle faisait partie du passé, mais tout le passé c'était la France. Les racines de la société française n'étaient point dans les Bourbons, mais dans la nation. Ces obscures et vivaces racines ne constituaient point le droit d'une famille, mais l'histoire d'un peuple. Elles étaient partout, excepté sous le trône.

La maison de Bourbon était pour la France le nœud illustre et sanglant de son histoire, mais n'était plus l'élément principal de sa destinée et la base nécessaire de sa politique. On pouvait se passer des Bourbons; on s'en était passé vingt-deux ans; il y avait eu solution de continuité; ils ne s'en doutaient pas. Et comment s'en seraient-ils doutés, eux qui se figuraient que Louis XVII régnait le 9 thermidor et que Louis XVIII régnait le jour de Marengo? Jamais, depuis l'origine de l'histoire, les princes n'avaient été si aveugles en présence des faits et de la portion d'autorité divine que les faits contiennent et promulguent. Jamais cette prétention d'en bas qu'on appelle le droit des rois n'avait nié à ce point le droit d'en haut.

Erreur capitale qui amena cette famille à remettre la main sur les garanties «octroyées» en 1814, sur les concessions, comme elle les qualifiait. Chose triste! ce qu'elle nommait ses concessions, c'étaient nos conquêtes; ce qu'elle appelait nos empiétements, c'étaient nos droits.

Lorsque l'heure lui sembla venue, la Restauration, se supposant victorieuse de Bonaparte et enracinée dans le pays, c'est-à-dire se croyant forte et se croyant profonde, prit brusquement son parti et risqua son coup. Un matin elle se dressa en face de la France, et, élevant la voix, elle contesta le titre collectif et le titre individuel, à la nation la souveraineté, au citoyen la liberté. En d'autres termes, elle nia à la nation ce qui la faisait nation et au citoyen ce qui le faisait citoyen.

C'est là le fond de ces actes fameux qu'on appelle les Ordonnances de juillet.

La Restauration tomba.

Elle tomba justement. Cependant, disons-le, elle n'avait pas été absolument hostile à toutes les formes du progrès. De grandes choses s'étaient faites, elle étant à côté.

Sous la Restauration la nation s'était habituée à la discussion dans le calme, ce qui avait manqué à la République, et à la grandeur dans la paix, ce qui avait manqué à l'Empire. La France libre et forte avait été un spectacle encourageant pour les autres peuples de l'Europe. La révolution avait eu la parole sous Robespierre; le canon avait eu la parole sous Bonaparte; c'est sous Louis XVIII et Charles X que vint le tour de parole de l'intelligence. Le vent cessa, le flambeau se ralluma. On vit frissonner sur les cimes sereines la pure lumière des esprits. Spectacle magnifique, utile et charmant. On vit travailler pendant quinze ans, en pleine paix, en pleine place publique, ces grands principes, si vieux pour le penseur, si nouveaux pour l’homme d’État: l’égalité devant la loi, la liberté de la conscience, la liberté de la parole, la liberté de la presse, l’accessibilité de toutes les aptitudes à toutes les fonctions. Cela alla ainsi jusqu’en 1830. Les Bourbons furent un instrument de civilisation qui cassa dans les mains de la providence.

La chute des Bourbons fut pleine de grandeur, non de leur côté, mais du côté de la nation. Eux quittèrent le trône avec gravité, mais sans autorité; leur descente dans la nuit ne fut pas une de ces disparitions solennelles qui laissent une sombre émotion à l’histoire; ce ne fut ni le calme spectral de Charles I, ni le cri d’aigle de Napoléon. Ils s’en allèrent, voilà tout. Ils déposèrent la couronne et ne gardèrent pas d’auréole. Ils furent dignes, mais ils ne furent pas augustes. Ils manquèrent dans une certaine mesure à la majesté de leur malheur. Charles X, pendant le voyage de Cherbourg, faisant couper une table ronde en table carrée, parut plus soucieux de l’étiquette en péril que de la monarchie croulante. Cette diminution attrista les hommes dévoués qui aimaient leurs personnes et les hommes sérieux qui honoraient leur race. Le peuple, lui, fut admirable. La nation, attaquée un matin à main armée par une sorte d’insurrection royale, se sentit tant de force qu’elle n’eut pas de colère. Elle se défendit, se contint, remit les choses à leur place, le gouvernement dans la loi, les Bourbons dans l’exil, hélas! et s’arrêta. Elle prit le vieux roi Charles X sous ce dais qui avait abrité Louis XIV, et le posa à terre doucement. Elle ne toucha aux personnes royales qu’avec tristesse et précaution. Ce ne fut pas un homme, ce ne furent pas quelques hommes, ce fut la France, la France entière, la France victorieuse et enivrée de sa victoire, qui sembla se rappeler et qui pratiqua aux yeux du monde entier ces graves paroles de Guillaume du Vair après la journée des barricades: «Il est aysé à ceux qui ont accoutumé d’effleurer les faveurs des grands et saulter, comme un oiseau de branche en branche, d’une fortune affligée à une florissante, de se montrer hardis contre leur prince en son adversité; mais pour moi la fortune de mes roys me sera toujours vénérable, et principalement des affligés.»

Les Bourbons emportèrent le respect, mais non le regret. Comme nous venons de le dire, leur malheur fut plus grand qu’eux. Ils s’effacèrent à l’horizon.

La Révolution de Juillet eut tout de suite des amis et des ennemis dans le monde entier. Les uns se précipitèrent vers elle avec enthousiasme et joie, les autres s’en détournèrent, chacun selon sa nature. Les princes de l’Europe, au premier moment, hiboux de cette aube, fermèrent les yeux, blessés et stupéfaits, et ne les rouvrirent que pour menacer. Effroi qui se comprend, colère qui s’excuse. Cette étrange révolution avait à peine été un choc; elle n’avait pas même fait à la royauté vaincue l’honneur de la traiter en ennemie et de verser son sang. Aux yeux des gouvernements despotiques toujours intéressés à ce que la liberté se calomnie elle-même, la Révolution de Juillet avait le tort d’être formidable et de rester douce. Rien du reste ne fut tenté ni machiné contre elle. Les plus mécontents, les plus irrités, les plus frémissants, la saluaient; quels que soient nos égoïsmes et nos rancunes, un respect mystérieux sort des événements dans lesquels on sent la collaboration de quelqu’un qui travaille plus haut que l’homme.

La Révolution de Juillet est le triomphe du droit terrassant le fait. Chose pleine de splendeur.

Le droit terrassant le fait. De là l’éclat de la révolution de 1830, de là sa mansuétude aussi. Le droit qui triomphe n’a nul besoin d’être violent.

Le droit, c’est le juste et le vrai.

Le propre du droit, c’est de rester éternellement beau et pur. Le fait, même le plus nécessaire en apparence, même le mieux accepté des contemporains, s’il n’existe que comme fait et s’il ne contient que trop peu de droit ou point du tout de droit, est destiné infailliblement à devenir, avec la durée du temps, difforme, immonde, peut-être même monstrueux. Si l’on veut constater d’un coup à quel degré de laideur le fait peut arriver, vu à la distance des siècles, qu’on regarde Machiavel. Machiavel, ce n’est point un mauvais génie, ni un démon, ni un écrivain lâche et misérable; ce n’est rien que le fait. Et ce n’est pas seulement le fait italien, c’est le fait européen, le fait du seizième siècle. Il semble hideux, et il l’est, en présence de l’idée morale du dix-neuvième.

Cette lutte du droit et du fait dure depuis l’origine des sociétés. Terminer le duel, amalgamer l’idée pure avec la réalité humaine, faire pénétrer pacifiquement le droit dans le fait et le fait dans le droit, voilà le travail des sages.

Chapitre II

Mal cousu

Mais autre est le travail des sages, autre est le travail des habiles.

La révolution de 1830 s’était vite arrêtée.

Sitôt qu’une révolution a fait côte, les habiles dépècent l’échouement.

Les habiles, dans notre siècle, se sont décerné à eux-mêmes la qualification d’hommes d’État; si bien que ce mot, homme d’État, a fini par être un peu un mot d’argot. Qu’on ne l’oublie pas en effet, là où il n’y a qu’habileté, il y a nécessairement petitesse. Dire: les habiles, cela revient à dire: les médiocres.

De même que dire: les hommes d’État, cela équivaut quelquefois à dire: les traîtres.

À en croire les habiles donc, les révolutions comme la Révolution de Juillet sont des artères coupées; il faut une prompte ligature. Le droit, trop grandement proclamé, ébranle. Aussi, une fois le droit affirmé, il faut raffermir l’État. La liberté assurée, il faut songer au pouvoir.

Ici les sages ne se séparent pas encore des habiles, mais ils commencent à se défier. Le pouvoir, soit. Mais, premièrement, qu’est-ce que le pouvoir? deuxièmement, d’où vient-il?

Les habiles semblent ne pas entendre l’objection murmurée, et ils continuent leur manœuvre.

Selon ces politiques, ingénieux à mettre aux fictions profitables un masque de nécessité, le premier besoin d’un peuple après une révolution, quand ce peuple fait partie d’un continent monarchique, c’est de se procurer une dynastie. De cette façon, disent-ils, il peut avoir la paix après sa révolution, c’est-à-dire le temps de panser ses plaies et de réparer sa maison. La dynastie cache l’échafaudage et couvre l’ambulance.

Or, il n’est pas toujours facile de se procurer une dynastie.

À la rigueur, le premier homme de génie ou même le premier homme de fortune venu suffit pour faire un roi. Vous avez dans le premier cas Bonaparte et dans le second Iturbide.

Mais la première famille venue ne suffit pas pour faire une dynastie. Il y a nécessairement une certaine quantité d’ancienneté dans une race, et la ride des siècles ne s’improvise pas.

Si l’on se place au point de vue des «hommes d’État», sous toutes réserves, bien entendu, après une révolution, quelles sont les qualités du roi qui en sort? Il peut être et il est utile qu’il soit révolutionnaire, c’est-à-dire participant de sa personne à cette révolution, qu’il y ait mis la main, qu’il s’y soit compromis ou illustré, qu’il en ait touché la hache ou manié l’épée.

Quelles sont les qualités d’une dynastie? Elle doit être nationale, c’est-à-dire révolutionnaire à distance, non par des actes commis, mais par les idées acceptées. Elle doit se composer de passé et être historique, se composer d’avenir et être sympathique.

Tout ceci explique pourquoi les premières révolutions se contentent de trouver un homme, Cromwell ou Napoléon; et pourquoi les deuxièmes veulent absolument trouver une famille, la maison de Brunswick ou la maison d’Orléans.

Les maisons royales ressemblent à ces figuiers de l’Inde dont chaque rameau, en se courbant jusqu’à terre, y prend racine et devient un figuier. Chaque branche peut devenir une dynastie. À la seule condition de se courber jusqu’au peuple.

Telle est la théorie des habiles.

Voici donc le grand art: faire un peu rendre à un succès le son d’une catastrophe afin que ceux qui en profitent en tremblent aussi, assaisonner de peur un pas de fait, augmenter la courbe de la transition jusqu’au ralentissement du progrès, affadir cette aurore, dénoncer et retrancher les âpretés de l’enthousiasme, couper les angles et les ongles, ouater le triomphe, emmitoufler le droit, envelopper le géant peuple de flanelle et le coucher bien vite, imposer la diète à cet excès de santé, mettre Hercule en traitement de convalescence, délayer l’événement dans l’expédient, offrir aux esprits altérés d’idéal ce nectar étendu de tisane, prendre ses précautions contre le trop de réussite, garnir la révolution d’un abat-jour.

1830 pratiqua cette théorie, déjà appliquée à l’Angleterre par 1688.

1830 est une révolution arrêtée à mi-côte. Moitié de progrès; quasi-droit. Or la logique ignore l’à peu près; absolument comme le soleil ignore la chandelle.

Qui arrête les révolutions à mi-côte? La bourgeoisie.

Pourquoi?

Parce que la bourgeoisie est l’intérêt arrivé à satisfaction. Hier c’était l’appétit, aujourd’hui c’est la plénitude, demain ce sera la satiété.

Le phénomène de 1814 après Napoléon se reproduisit en 1830 après Charles X.

On a voulu, à tort, faire de la bourgeoisie une classe. La bourgeoisie est tout simplement la portion contentée du peuple. Le bourgeois, c'est l'homme qui a maintenant le temps de s'asseoir. Une chaise n'est pas une caste.

Mais, pour vouloir s'asseoir trop tôt, on peut arrêter la marche même du genre humain. Cela a été souvent la faute de la bourgeoisie.

On n'est pas une classe parce qu'on fait une faute. L'égoïsme n'est pas une des divisions de l'ordre social.

Du reste, il faut être juste même envers l'égoïsme, l'état auquel aspirait, après la secousse de 1830, cette partie de la nation qu'on nomme la bourgeoisie, ce n'était pas l'inertie, qui se complique d'indifférence et de paresse et qui contient un peu de honte, ce n'était pas le sommeil, qui suppose un oubli momentané accessible aux songes; c'était la halte.

La halte est un mot formé d'un double sens singulier et presque contradictoire: troupe en marche, c'est-à-dire mouvement; station, c'est-à-dire repos.

La halte, c'est la réparation des forces; c'est le repos armé et éveillé; c'est le fait accompli qui pose des sentinelles et se tient sur ses gardes. La halte suppose le combat hier et le combat demain.

C'est l'entre-deux de 1830 et de 1848.

Ce que nous appelons ici combat peut aussi s'appeler progrès.

Il fallait donc à la bourgeoisie, comme aux hommes d'État, un homme qui exprimait ce mot: halte. Un Quoique Parce que. Une individualité composite, signifiant révolution et signifiant stabilité, en d'autres termes affermissant le présent par la compatibilité évidente du passé avec l'avenir.

Cet homme était «tout trouvé». Il s'appelait Louis-Philippe d'Orléans.

Les 221 firent Louis-Philippe roi. Lafayette se chargea du sacre. Il le nomma *la meilleure des républiques*. L'hôtel de ville de Paris remplaça la cathédrale de Reims.

Cette substitution d'un demi-trône au trône complet fut «l'œuvre de 1830».

Quand les habiles eurent fini, le vice immense de leur solution apparut. Tout cela était fait en dehors du droit absolu. Le droit absolu cria: Je proteste! puis, chose redoutable, il rentra dans l'ombre.

Chapitre III

Louis-Philippe

Les révolutions ont le bras terrible et la main heureuse; elles frappent ferme et choisissent bien. Même incomplètes, même abâtardies et mâtinées, et réduites à l'état de révolution cadette, comme la révolution de 1830, il leur reste presque toujours assez de lucidité providentielle pour qu'elles ne puissent mal tomber. Leur éclipse n'est jamais une abdication.

Pourtant, ne nous vantons pas trop haut, les révolutions, elles aussi, se trompent, et de graves méprises se sont vues.

Revenons à 1830. 1830, dans sa déviation, eut du bonheur. Dans l'établissement qui s'appela l'ordre après la révolution coupée court, le roi valait mieux que la royauté. Louis-Philippe était un homme rare.

Fils d'un père auquel l'histoire accordera certainement les circonstances atténuantes, mais aussi digne d'estime que ce père avait été digne de blâme; ayant toutes les vertus privées et plusieurs des vertus publiques; soigneux de sa santé, de sa fortune, de sa personne, de ses affaires; connaissant le prix d'une minute et pas toujours le prix d'une année; sobre, serein, paisible, patient; bonhomme et bon prince; couchant avec sa femme, et ayant dans son palais des laquais chargés de faire voir le lit conjugal aux bourgeois, ostentation d'alcôve régulière devenue utile après les anciens étalages illégitimes de la branche aînée; sachant toutes les langues de l'Europe, et, ce qui est plus rare, tous les langages de tous les intérêts, et les parlant; admirable représentant de «la classe moyenne», mais la dépassant, et de toutes les façons plus grand qu'elle; ayant l'excellent esprit, tout en appréciant le sang dont il sortait, de se compter surtout pour sa valeur intrinsèque, et, sur la question même de sa race, très particulier, se déclarant Orléans et non Bourbon; très premier prince du sang tant qu'il n'avait été qu'altesse sérénissime, mais franc bourgeois le jour où il fut majesté; diffus en public, concis dans l'intimité; avare signalé, mais non prouvé; au fond, un de ces économes aisément prodigues pour leur fantaisie ou leur devoir; lettré, et peu sensible aux lettres; gentilhomme, mais non chevalier; simple, calme et fort; adoré de sa famille et de sa maison; causeur séduisant; homme d'État désabusé, intérieurement froid, dominé par l'intérêt immédiat, gouvernant toujours au plus près, incapable de rancune et de reconnaissance, usant sans pitié les supériorités sur les médiocrités, habile à faire donner tort par les majorités parlementaires à ces unanimités mystérieuses qui grondent sourdement sous les trônes; expansif, parfois imprudent dans son expansion, mais d’une merveilleuse adresse dans cette imprudence; fertile en expédients, en visages, en masques; faisant peur à la France de l’Europe et à l’Europe de la France; aimant incontestablement son pays, mais préférant sa famille; prisant plus la domination que l’autorité et l’autorité que la dignité, disposition qui a cela de funeste que, tournant tout au succès, elle admet la ruse et ne répudie pas absolument la bassesse, mais qui a cela de profitable qu’elle préserve la politique des chocs violents, l’État des fractures et la société des catastrophes; minutieux, correct, vigilant, attentif, sagace, infatigable, se contredisant quelquefois, et se démentant; hardi contre l’Autriche à Ancône, opiniâtre contre l’Angleterre en Espagne, bombardant Anvers et payant Pritchard; chantant avec conviction la Marseillaise; inaccessible à l’abattement, aux lassitudes, au goût du beau et de l’idéal, aux générosités téméraires, à l’utopie, à la chimère, à la colère, à la vanité, à la crainte; ayant toutes les formes de l’intrépidité personnelle; général à Valmy, soldat à Jemmapes; tâté huit fois par le régicide, et toujours souriant; brave comme un grenadier, courageux comme un penseur; inquiet seulement devant les chances d’un ébranlement européen, et impropre aux grandes aventures politiques; toujours prêt à risquer sa vie, jamais son œuvre; déguisant sa volonté en influence afin d’être plutôt obéi comme intelligence que comme roi; doué d’observation et non de divination; peu attentif aux esprits, mais se connaissant en hommes, c’est-à-dire ayant besoin de voir pour juger; bon sens prompt et pénétrant, sagesse pratique, parole facile, mémoire prodigieuse; puisant sans cesse dans cette mémoire, son unique point de ressemblance avec César, Alexandre et Napoléon; sachant les faits, les détails, les dates, les noms propres, ignorant les tendances, les passions, les génies divers de la foule, les aspirations intérieures, les soulèvements cachés et obscurs des âmes, en un mot, tout ce qu’on pourrait appeler les courants invisibles des consciences; accepté par la surface, mais peu d’accord avec la France de dessous; s’en tirant par la finesse; gouvernant trop et ne régnant pas assez; son premier ministre à lui-même; excellent à faire de la petitesse des réalités un obstacle à l’immensité des idées; mêlant à une vraie faculté créatrice de civilisation, d’ordre et d’organisation on ne sait quel esprit de procédure et de chicane; fondateur et procureur d’une dynastie; ayant quelque chose de

Charlemagne et quelque chose d’un avoué; en somme, figure haute et originale, prince qui sut faire du pouvoir malgré l’inquiétude de la France, et de la puissance malgré la jalousie de l’Europe, Louis-Philippe sera classé parmi les hommes éminents de son siècle, et serait rangé parmi les gouvernants les plus illustres de l’histoire, s’il eût un peu aimé la gloire et s’il eût eu le sentiment de ce qui est grand au même degré que le sentiment de ce qui est utile.

Louis-Philippe avait été beau, et, vieilli, était resté gracieux; pas toujours agréé de la nation, il l’était toujours de la foule; il plaisait. Il avait ce don, le charme. La majesté lui faisait défaut; il ne portait ni la couronne, quoique roi, ni les cheveux blancs, quoique vieillard. Ses manières étaient du vieux régime et ses habitudes du nouveau, mélange du noble et du bourgeois qui convenait à 1830; Louis-Philippe était la transition régnante; il avait conservé l’ancienne prononciation et l’ancienne orthographe qu’il mettait au service des opinions modernes; il aimait la Pologne et la Hongrie, mais il écrivait *les polonois* et il prononçait *les hongrais*. Il portait l’habit de la garde nationale comme Charles X, et le cordon de la Légion d’honneur comme Napoléon.

Il allait peu à la chapelle, point à la chasse, jamais à l’Opéra. Incorruptible aux sacristains, aux valets de chiens et aux danseuses; cela entrait dans sa popularité bourgeoise. Il n’avait point de cour. Il sortait avec son parapluie sous son bras, et ce parapluie a longtemps fait partie de son auréole. Il était un peu maçon, un peu jardinier et un peu médecin; il saignait un postillon tombé de cheval; Louis-Philippe n’allait pas plus sans sa lancette que Henri III sans son poignard. Les royalistes raillaient ce roi ridicule, le premier qui ait versé le sang pour guérir.

Dans les griefs de l’histoire contre Louis-Philippe, il y a une défalcation à faire; il y a ce qui accuse la royauté, ce qui accuse le règne, et ce qui accuse le roi; trois colonnes qui donnent chacune un total différent. Le droit démocratique confisqué, le progrès devenu le deuxième intérêt, les protestations de la rue réprimées violemment, l’exécution militaire des insurrections, l’émeute passée par les armes, la rue Transnonain, les conseils de guerre, l’absorption du pays réel par le pays légal, le gouvernement de compte à demi avec trois cent mille privilégiés, sont le fait de la royauté; la Belgique refusée, l’Algérie trop durement conquise, et, comme l’Inde par les Anglais, avec plus de barbarie que de civilisation, le manque de foi à Abd-el-Kader, Blaye, Deutz acheté, Pritchard payé, sont le fait du règne; la politique plus familiale que nationale est le fait du roi.

Comme on voit, le décompte opéré, la charge du roi s'amoindrit.

Sa grande faute, la voici: il a été modeste au nom de la France.

D'où vient cette faute?

Disons-le.

Louis-Philippe a été un roi trop père; cette incubation d'une famille qu'on veut faire éclore dynastie a peur de tout et n'entend pas être dérangée; de là des timidités excessives, importunes au peuple qui a le 14 juillet dans sa tradition civile et Austerlitz dans sa tradition militaire.

Du reste, si l'on fait abstraction des devoirs publics, qui veulent être remplis les premiers, cette profonde tendresse de Louis-Philippe pour sa famille, la famille la méritait. Ce groupe domestique était admirable. Les vertus y coudoyaient les talents. Une des filles de Louis-Philippe, Marie d'Orléans, mettait le nom de sa race parmi les artistes comme Charles d'Orléans l'avait mis parmi les poètes. Elle avait fait de son âme un marbre qu'elle avait nommé Jeanne d'Arc. Deux des fils de Louis-Philippe avaient arraché à Metternich cet éloge démagogique. *Ce sont des jeunes gens comme on n'en voit guère et des princes comme on n'en voit pas*.

Voilà, sans rien dissimuler, mais aussi sans rien aggraver, le vrai sur Louis-Philippe.

Être le prince égalité, porter en soi la contradiction de la Restauration et de la Révolution, avoir ce côté inquiétant du révolutionnaire qui devient rassurant dans le gouvernant, ce fut là la fortune de Louis-Philippe en 1830; jamais il n'y eut adaptation plus complète d'un homme à un événement; l'un entra dans l'autre, et l'incarnation se fit. Louis-Philippe, c'est 1830 fait homme. De plus il avait pour lui cette grande désignation au trône, l'exil. Il avait été proscrit, errant, pauvre. Il avait vécu de son travail. En Suisse, cet apanagiste des plus riches domaines princiers de France avait vendu un vieux cheval pour manger. À Reichenau, il avait donné des leçons de mathématiques pendant que sa sœur Adélaïde faisait de la broderie et cousait. Ces souvenirs mêlés à un roi enthousiasmaient la bourgeoisie. Il avait démoli de ses propres mains la dernière cage de fer du Mont Saint-Michel, bâtie par Louis XI et utilisée par Louis XV. C'était le compagnon de Dumouriez, c'était l'ami de Lafayette; il avait été du club des jacobins; Mirabeau lui avait frappé sur l'épaule; Danton lui avait dit: Jeune homme! À vingt-quatre ans, en 93, étant M. de Chartres, du fond d'une logette obscure de la Convention, il avait assisté au procès de Louis XVI, si bien nommé *ce pauvre tyran*. La clairvoyance aveugle de la Révolution, brisant la royauté dans le roi et le roi avec la royauté, sans presque remarquer l'homme dans le farouche écrasement de l'idée, le vaste orage de l'assemblée tribunal, la colère publique interrogeant, Capet ne sachant que répondre, l'effrayante vacillation stupéfaite de cette tête royale sous ce souffle sombre, l'innocence relative de tous dans cette catastrophe, de ceux qui condamnaient comme de celui qui était condamné, il avait regardé ces choses, il avait contemplé ces vertiges; il avait vu les siècles comparaître à la barre de la Convention; il avait vu, derrière Louis XVI, cet infortuné passant responsable, se dresser dans les ténèbres la formidable accusée, la monarchie; et il lui était resté dans l'âme l'épouvante respectueuse de ces immenses justices du peuple presque aussi impersonnelles que la justice de Dieu.

La trace que la Révolution avait laissée en lui était prodigieuse. Son souvenir était comme une empreinte vivante de ces grandes années minute par minute. Un jour, devant un témoin dont il nous est impossible de douter, il rectifia de mémoire toute la lettre A de la liste alphabétique de l'assemblée constituante.

Louis-Philippe a été un roi de plein jour. Lui régnant, la presse a été libre, la tribune a été libre, la conscience et la parole ont été libres. Les lois de septembre sont à claire-voie. Bien que sachant le pouvoir rongeur de la lumière sur les privilèges, il a laissé son trône exposé à la lumière. L'histoire lui tiendra compte de cette loyauté.

Louis-Philippe, comme tous les hommes historiques sortis de scène, est aujourd'hui mis en jugement par la conscience humaine. Son procès n'est encore qu'en première instance.

L'heure où l'histoire parle avec son accent vénérable et libre n'a pas encore sonné pour lui; le moment n'est pas venu de prononcer sur ce roi le jugement définitif; l'austère et illustre historien Louis Blanc a lui-même récemment adouci son premier verdict; Louis-Philippe a été l'élu de ces deux à peu près qu'on appelle les 221 et 1830; c'est-à-dire d'un demi-parlement et d'une demi-révolution; et dans tous les cas, au point de vue supérieur où doit se placer la philosophie, nous ne pourrions le juger ici, comme on a pu l'entrevoir plus haut, qu'avec de certaines réserves au nom du principe démocratique absolu; aux yeux de l'absolu, en dehors de ces deux droits, le droit de l'homme d'abord, le droit du peuple ensuite, tout est usurpation; mais ce que nous pouvons dire dès à présent, ces réserves faites, c'est que, somme toute et de quelque façon qu'on le considère, Louis-Philippe, pris en lui-même et au point de vue de la bonté humaine, demeurera, pour nous servir du vieux langage de l'ancienne histoire, un des meilleurs princes qui aient passé sur un trône.

Qu'a-t-il contre lui? Ce trône. Ôtez de Louis-Philippe le roi, il reste l'homme. Et l'homme est bon. Il est bon parfois jusqu'à être admirable. Souvent, au milieu des plus graves soucis, après une journée de lutte contre toute la diplomatie du continent, il rentrait le soir dans son appartement, et là, épuisé de fatigue, accablé de sommeil, que faisait-il? il prenait un dossier, et il passait sa nuit à réviser un procès criminel, trouvant que c'était quelque chose de tenir tête à l'Europe, mais que c'était une plus grande affaire encore d'arracher un homme au bourreau. Il s'opiniâtrait contre son garde des sceaux; il disputait pied à pied le terrain de la guillotine aux procureurs généraux, *ces bavards de la loi*, comme il les appelait. Quelquefois les dossiers empilés couvraient sa table; il les examinait tous; c'était une angoisse pour lui d'abandonner ces misérables têtes condamnées. Un jour il disait au même témoin que nous avons indiqué tout à l'heure: *Cette nuit, j'en ai gagné sept*. Pendant les premières années de son règne, la peine de mort fut comme abolie, et l'échafaud relevé fut une violence faite au roi. La Grève ayant disparu avec la branche aînée, une Grève bourgeoise fut instituée sous le nom de Barrière Saint-Jacques; les «hommes pratiques» sentirent le besoin d'une guillotine quasi légitime; et ce fut là une des victoires de Casimir Perier, qui représentait les côtés étroits de la bourgeoisie, sur Louis-Philippe, qui en représentait les côtés libéraux. Louis-Philippe avait annoté de sa main Beccaria. Après la machine Fieschi, il s'écriait: *Quel dommage que je n'aie pas été blessé! j'aurais pu faire grâce*. Une autre fois, faisant allusion aux résistances de ses ministres, il écrivait à propos d'un condamné politique qui est une des plus généreuses figures de notre temps: *Sa grâce est accordée, il ne me reste plus qu'à l'obtenir*. Louis-Philippe était doux comme Louis IX et bon comme Henri IV.

Or, pour nous, dans l'histoire où là bonté est la perle rare, qui a été bon passe presque avant qui a été grand.

Louis-Philippe ayant été apprécié sévèrement par les uns, durement peut-être par les autres, il est tout simple qu'un homme, fantôme lui-même aujourd'hui, qui a connu ce roi, vienne déposer pour lui devant l'histoire;

cette déposition, quelle qu’elle soit, est évidemment et avant tout désintéressée; une épitaphe écrite par un mort est sincère; une ombre peut consoler une autre ombre; le partage des mêmes ténèbres donne le droit de louange; et il est peu à craindre qu’on dise jamais de deux tombeaux dans l’exil: Celui-ci a flatté l’autre.

Chapitre IV

Lézardes sous la fondation

Au moment où le drame que nous racontons va pénétrer dans l’épaisseur d’un des nuages tragiques qui couvrent les commencements du règne de Louis-Philippe, il ne fallait pas d’équivoque, et il était nécessaire que ce livre s’expliquât sur ce roi.

Louis-Philippe était entré dans l’autorité royale sans violence, sans action directe de sa part, par le fait d’un virement révolutionnaire, évidemment fort distinct du but réel de la révolution, mais dans lequel lui, duc d’Orléans, n’avait aucune initiative personnelle. Il était né prince et se croyait élu roi. Il ne s’était point donné à lui-même ce mandat; il ne l’avait point pris; on le lui avait offert et il l’avait accepté; convaincu, à tort certes, mais convaincu que l’offre était selon le droit et que l’acceptation était selon le devoir. De là une possession de bonne foi. Or, nous le disons en toute conscience, Louis-Philippe étant de bonne foi dans sa possession, et la démocratie étant de bonne foi dans son attaque, la quantité d’épouvante qui se dégage des luttes sociales ne charge ni le roi, ni la démocratie. Un choc de principes ressemble à un choc d’éléments. L’océan défend l’eau, l’ouragan défend l’air; le roi défend la royauté, la démocratie défend le peuple; le relatif, qui est la monarchie, résiste à l’absolu, qui est la république; la société saigne sous ce conflit, mais ce qui est sa souffrance aujourd’hui sera plus tard son salut; et, dans tous les cas, il n’y a point ici à blâmer ceux qui luttent; un des deux partis évidemment se trompe; le droit n’est pas, comme le colosse de Rhodes, sur deux rivages à la fois, un pied dans la république, un pied dans la royauté; il est indivisible, et tout d’un côté; mais ceux qui se trompent se trompent sincèrement; un aveugle n’est pas plus un coupable qu’un Vendéen n’est un brigand. N’imputons donc qu’à la fatalité des choses ces collisions redoutables. Quelles que soient ces tempêtes, l’irresponsabilité humaine y est mêlée.

Achevons cet exposé.

Le gouvernement de 1830 eut tout de suite la vie dure. Il dut, né d’hier, combattre aujourd’hui. À peine installé, il sentait déjà partout de vagues mouvements de traction sur l’appareil de juillet encore si fraîchement posé et si peu solide.

La résistance naquit le lendemain; peut-être même était-elle née la veille.

De mois en mois, l'hostilité grandit, et de sourde devint patente.

La Révolution de Juillet, peu acceptée hors de France par les rois, nous l'avons dit, avait été en France diversement interprétée.

Dieu livre aux hommes ses volontés visibles dans les événements, texte obscur écrit dans une langue mystérieuse. Les hommes en font sur-le-champ des traductions; traductions hâtives, incorrectes, pleines de fautes, de lacunes et de contre-sens. Bien peu d'esprits comprennent la langue divine. Les plus sagaces, les plus calmes, les plus profonds, déchiffrent lentement, et, quand ils arrivent avec leur texte, la besogne est faite depuis longtemps; il y a déjà vingt traductions sur la place publique. De chaque traduction naît un parti, et de chaque contre-sens une faction; et chaque parti croit avoir le seul vrai texte, et chaque faction croit posséder la lumière.

Souvent le pouvoir lui-même est une faction.

Il y a dans les révolutions des nageurs à contre-courant; ce sont les vieux partis.

Pour les vieux partis qui se rattachent à l'hérédité par la grâce de Dieu, les révolutions étant sorties du droit de révolte, on a droit de révolte contre elles. Erreur. Car dans les révolutions le révolté, ce n'est pas le peuple, c'est le roi. Révolution est précisément le contraire de révolte. Toute révolution, étant un accomplissement normal, contient en elle sa légitimité, que de faux révolutionnaires déshonorent quelquefois, mais qui persiste, même souillée, qui survit, même ensanglantée. Les révolutions sortent, non d'un accident, mais de la nécessité. Une révolution est un retour du factice au réel. Elle est parce qu'il faut qu'elle soit.

Les vieux partis légitimistes n'en assaillaient pas moins la révolution de 1830 avec toutes les violences qui jaillissent du faux raisonnement. Les erreurs sont d'excellents projectiles. Ils la frappaient savamment là où elle était vulnérable, au défaut de sa cuirasse, à son manque de logique; ils attaquaient cette révolution dans sa royauté. Ils lui criaient: Révolution, pourquoi ce roi? Les factions sont des aveugles qui visent juste.

Ce cri, les républicains le poussaient également. Mais, venant d'eux, ce cri était logique. Ce qui était cécité chez les légitimistes était clairvoyance chez les démocrates. 1830 avait fait banqueroute au peuple. La démocratie indignée le lui reprochait.

Entre l'attaque du passé et l'attaque de l'avenir, l'établissement de juillet se débattait. Il représentait la minute, aux prises d'une part avec les siècles monarchiques, d'autre part avec le droit éternel.

En outre, au dehors, n'étant plus la révolution et devenant la monarchie, 1830 était obligé de prendre le pas de l'Europe. Garder la paix, surcroît de complication. Une harmonie voulue à contre-sens est souvent plus onéreuse qu'une guerre. De ce sourd conflit, toujours muselé, mais toujours grondant, naquit la paix armée, ce ruineux expédient de la civilisation suspecte à elle-même. La royauté de juillet se cabrait, malgré qu'elle en eût, dans l'attelage des cabinets européens. Metternich l'eût volontiers mise à la plate-longe. Poussée en France par le progrès, elle poussait en Europe les monarchies, ces tardigrades. Remorquée, elle remorquait.

Cependant, à l'intérieur, paupérisme, prolétariat, salaire, éducation, pénalité, prostitution, sort de la femme, richesse, misère, production, consommation, répartition, échange, monnaie, crédit, droit du capital, droit du travail, toutes ces questions se multipliaient au-dessus de la société; surplomb terrible.

En dehors des partis politiques proprement dits, un autre mouvement se manifestait. À la fermentation démocratique répondait la fermentation philosophique. L'élite se sentait troublée comme la foule; autrement, mais autant.

Des penseurs méditaient, tandis que le sol, c'est-à-dire le peuple, traversé par les courants révolutionnaires, tremblait sous eux avec je ne sais quelles vagues secousses épileptiques. Ces songeurs, les uns isolés, les autres réunis en familles et presque en communions, remuaient les questions sociales, pacifiquement, mais profondément; mineurs impassibles, qui poussaient tranquillement leurs galeries dans les profondeurs d'un volcan, à peine dérangés par les commotions sourdes et par les fournaises entrevues.

Cette tranquillité n'était pas le moins beau spectacle de cette époque agitée.

Ces hommes laissaient aux partis politiques la question des droits, ils s'occupaient de la question du bonheur.

Le bien-être de l'homme, voilà ce qu'ils voulaient extraire de la société.

Ils élevaient les questions matérielles, les questions d'agriculture, d'industrie, de commerce, presque à la dignité d'une religion. Dans la civilisation telle qu'elle se fait, un peu par Dieu, beaucoup par l'homme, les intérêts se combinent, s'agrègent et s'amalgament de manière à former une véritable roche dure, selon une loi dynamique patiemment étudiée par les économistes, ces géologues de la politique.

Ces hommes, qui se groupaient sous des appellations différentes, mais qu’on peut désigner tous par le titre générique de socialistes, tâchaient de percer cette roche et d’en faire jaillir les eaux vives de la félicité humaine.

Depuis la question de l’échafaud jusqu’à la question de la guerre, leurs travaux embrassaient tout. Au droit de l’homme, proclamé par la Révolution française, ils ajoutaient le droit de la femme et le droit de l’enfant.

On ne s’étonnera pas que, pour des raisons diverses, nous ne traitions pas ici à fond, au point de vue théorique, les questions soulevées par le socialisme. Nous nous bornons à les indiquer.

Tous les problèmes que les socialistes se proposaient, les visions cosmogoniques, la rêverie et le mysticisme écartés, peuvent être ramenés à deux problèmes principaux:

Premier problème: Produire la richesse.

Deuxième problème: La répartir.

Le premier problème contient la question du travail.

Le deuxième contient la question du salaire.

Dans le premier problème il s’agit de l’emploi des forces.

Dans le second de la distribution des jouissances.

Du bon emploi des forces résulte la puissance publique.

De la bonne distribution des jouissances résulte le bonheur individuel.

Par bonne distribution, il faut entendre non distribution égale, mais distribution équitable. La première égalité, c’est l’équité.

De ces deux choses combinées, puissance publique au dehors, bonheur individuel au dedans, résulte la prospérité sociale.

Prospérité sociale, cela veut dire l’homme heureux, le citoyen libre, la nation grande. L’Angleterre résout le premier de ces deux problèmes. Elle crée admirablement la richesse; elle la répartit mal. Cette solution qui n’est complète que d’un côté la mène fatalement à ces deux extrêmes: opulence monstrueuse, misère monstrueuse. Toutes les jouissances à quelques-uns, toutes les privations aux autres, c’est-à-dire au peuple; le privilège, l’exception, le monopole, la féodalité, naissent du travail même. Situation fausse et dangereuse qui assoit la puissance publique sur la misère privée, et qui enracine la grandeur de l’État dans les souffrances de l’individu. Grandeur mal composée où se combinent tous les éléments matériels et dans laquelle n’entre aucun élément moral.

Le communisme et la loi agraire croient résoudre le deuxième problème. Ils se trompent. Leur répartition tue la production. Le partage égal abolit l'émulation. Et par conséquent le travail. C'est une répartition faite par le boucher, qui tue ce qu'il partage. Il est donc impossible de s'arrêter à ces prétendues solutions. Tuer la richesse, ce n'est pas la répartir. Les deux problèmes veulent être résolus ensemble pour être bien résolus. Les deux solutions veulent être combinées et n'en faire qu'une.

Ne résolvez que le premier des deux problèmes, vous serez Venise, vous serez l'Angleterre. Vous aurez comme Venise une puissance artificielle, ou comme l'Angleterre une puissance matérielle; vous serez le mauvais riche. Vous périrez par une voie de fait, comme est morte Venise, ou par une banqueroute, comme tombera l'Angleterre. Et le monde vous laissera mourir et tomber, parce que le monde laisse tomber et mourir tout ce qui n'est que l'égoïsme, tout ce qui ne représente pas pour le genre humain une vertu ou une idée.

Il est bien entendu ici que par ces mots, Venise, l'Angleterre, nous désignons non des peuples, mais des constructions sociales, les oligarchies superposées aux nations, et non les nations elles-mêmes. Les nations ont toujours notre respect et notre sympathie. Venise, peuple, renaîtra; l'Angleterre, aristocratie, tombera, mais l'Angleterre, nation, est immortelle. Cela dit, nous poursuivons.

Résolvez les deux problèmes, encouragez le riche et protégez le pauvre, supprimez la misère, mettez un terme à l'exploitation injuste du faible par le fort, mettez un frein à la jalousie inique de celui qui est en route contre celui qui est arrivé, ajustez mathématiquement et fraternellement le salaire au travail, mêlez l'enseignement gratuit et obligatoire à la croissance de l'enfance et faites de la science la base de la virilité, développez les intelligences tout en occupant les bras, soyez à la fois un peuple puissant et une famille d'hommes heureux, démocratisez la propriété, non en l'abolissant, mais en l'universalisant, de façon que tout citoyen sans exception soit propriétaire, chose plus facile qu'on ne croit, en deux mots sachez produire la richesse et sachez la répartir; et vous aurez tout ensemble la grandeur matérielle et la grandeur morale; et vous serez dignes de vous appeler la France.

Voilà, en dehors et au-dessus de quelques sectes qui s'égaraient, ce que disait le socialisme; voilà ce qu'il cherchait dans les faits, voilà ce qu'il ébauchait dans les esprits.

Efforts admirables! tentatives sacrées!

Ces doctrines, ces théories, ces résistances, la nécessité inattendue pour l’homme d’État de compter avec les philosophes, de confuses évidences entrevues, une politique nouvelle à créer, d’accord avec le vieux monde sans trop de désaccord avec l’idéal révolutionnaire, une situation dans laquelle il fallait user Lafayette à défendre Polignac, l’intuition du progrès transparent sous l’émeute, les chambres et la rue, les compétitions à équilibrer autour de lui, sa foi dans la révolution, peut-être on ne sait quelle résignation éventuelle née de la vague acceptation d’un droit définitif et supérieur, sa volonté de rester de sa race, son esprit de famille, son sincère respect du peuple, sa propre honnêteté, préoccupaient Louis-Philippe presque douloureusement, et par instants, si fort et si courageux qu’il fût, l’accablaient sous la difficulté d’être roi.

Il sentait sous ses pieds une désagrégation redoutable, qui n’était pourtant pas une mise en poussière, la France étant plus France que jamais.

De ténébreux amoncellements couvraient l’horizon. Une ombre étrange gagnant de proche en proche, s’étendait peu à peu sur les hommes, sur les choses, sur les idées; ombre qui venait des colères et des systèmes. Tout ce qui avait été hâtivement étouffé remuait et fermentait. Parfois la conscience de l’honnête homme reprenait sa respiration tant il y avait de malaise dans cet air où les sophismes se mêlaient aux vérités. Les esprits tremblaient dans l’anxiété sociale comme les feuilles à l’approche d’un orage. La tension électrique était telle qu’à de certains instants le premier venu, un inconnu, éclairait. Puis l’obscurité crépusculaire retombait. Par intervalles, de profonds et sourds grondements pouvaient faire juger de la quantité de foudre qu’il y avait dans la nuée.

Vingt mois à peine s’étaient écoulés depuis la Révolution de Juillet, l’année 1832 s’était ouverte avec un aspect d’imminence et de détresse. La détresse du peuple, les travailleurs sans pain, le dernier prince de Condé disparu dans les ténèbres, Bruxelles chassant les Nassau comme Paris les Bourbons, la Belgique s’offrant à un prince français et donnée à un prince anglais, la haine russe de Nicolas, derrière nous deux démons du midi, Ferdinand en Espagne, Miguel en Portugal, la terre tremblant en Italie, Metternich étendant la main sur Bologne, la France brusquant l’Autriche à Ancône, au nord on ne sait quel sinistre bruit de marteau reclouant la Pologne dans son cercueil, dans toute l’Europe des regards irrités guettant la France, l’Angleterre, alliée suspecte, prête à pousser ce qui pencherait et à se jeter sur ce qui tomberait, la pairie s’abritant derrière Beccaria pour refuser quatre têtes à la loi, les fleurs de lys raturées sur la voiture du roi, la croix arrachée de Notre-Dame, Lafayette amoindri, Laffitte ruiné, Benjamin Constant mort dans l’indigence, Casimir Perier mort dans l’épuisement du pouvoir; la maladie politique et la maladie sociale se déclarant à la fois dans les deux capitales du royaume, l’une la ville de la pensée, l’autre la ville du travail; à Paris la guerre civile, à Lyon la guerre servile; dans les deux cités la même lueur de fournaise; une pourpre de cratère au front du peuple; le midi fanatisé, l’ouest troublé, la duchesse de Berry dans la Vendée, les complots, les conspirations, les soulèvements, le choléra, ajoutaient à la sombre rumeur des idées le sombre tumulte des événements.

Chapitre V

Faits d’où l’histoire sort et que l’histoire ignore

Vers la fin d’avril, tout s’était aggravé. La fermentation devenait du bouillonnement. Depuis 1830, il y avait eu çà et là de petites émeutes partielles, vite comprimées, mais renaissantes, signe d’une vaste conflagration sous-jacente. Quelque chose de terrible couvait. On entrevoyait les linéaments encore peu distincts et mal éclairés d’une révolution possible. La France regardait Paris; Paris regardait le faubourg Saint-Antoine.

Le faubourg Saint-Antoine, sourdement chauffé, entrait en ébullition.

Les cabarets de la rue de Charonne étaient, quoique la jonction de ces deux épithètes semble singulière appliquée à des cabarets, graves et orageux.

Le gouvernement y était purement et simplement mis en question. On y discutait publiquement *la chose pour se battre ou pour rester tranquille*. Il y avait des arrière-boutiques où l’on faisait jurer à des ouvriers qu’ils se trouveraient dans la rue au premier cri d’alarme, et «qu’ils se battraient sans compter le nombre des ennemis.» Une fois l’engagement pris, un homme assis dans un coin du cabaret»faisait une voix sonore» et disait: *Tu l’entends! tu l’as juré*! Quelquefois on montait au premier étage dans une chambre close, et là il se passait des scènes presque maçonniques. On faisait prêter à l’initié des serments *pour lui rendre service ainsi qu’aux pères de famille*. C’était la formule.

Dans les salles basses on lisait des brochures «subversives». *Ils crossaient le gouvernement,* dit un rapport secret du temps.

On y entendait des paroles comme celles-ci: — *Je ne sais pas les noms des chefs. Nous autres, nous ne saurons le jour que deux heures d’avance*. — Un ouvrier disait: — *Nous sommes trois cents, mettons chacun dix sous, cela fera cent cinquante francs pour fabriquer des balles et de la poudre*. — Un autre disait: — *Je ne demande pas six mois, je n’en demande pas deux. Avant quinze jours nous serons en parallèle avec le gouvernement. Avec vingt-cinq mille hommes on peut se mettre en face*. — Un autre disait: — *Je ne me couche pas parce que je fais des cartouches la nuit*. — De temps en temps des hommes «en bourgeois et en beaux habits» venaient, «faisant des embarras», et ayant l'air»de commander», donnaient des poignées de mains *aux plus importants*, et s'en allaient. Ils ne restaient jamais plus de dix minutes. On échangeait à voix basse des propos significatifs. — *Le complot est mûr, la chose est comble*. — «C'était bourdonné par tous ceux qui étaient là», pour emprunter l'expression même d'un des assistants. L'exaltation était telle qu'un jour, en plein cabaret, un ouvrier s'écria: *Nous n'avons pas d'armes*! — Un de ses camarades répondit: — *Les soldats en ont*! — parodiant ainsi, sans s'en douter, la proclamation de Bonaparte à l'armée d'Italie. — «Quand ils avaient quelque chose de plus secret, ajoute un rapport, ils ne se le communiquaient pas là.» On ne comprend guère ce qu'ils pouvaient cacher après avoir dit ce qu'ils disaient.

Les réunions étaient quelquefois périodiques. À de certaines, on n'était jamais plus de huit ou dix, et toujours les mêmes. Dans d'autres, entrait qui voulait, et la salle était si pleine qu'on était forcé de se tenir debout. Les uns s'y trouvaient par enthousiasme et passion; les autres parce que *c'était leur chemin pour aller au travail*. Comme pendant la révolution, il y avait dans ces cabarets des femmes patriotes qui embrassaient les nouveaux venus.

D'autres faits expressifs se faisaient jour.

Un homme entrait dans un cabaret, buvait et sortait en disant: *Marchand de vin, ce qui est dû, la révolution le payera*.

Chez un cabaretier en face de la rue de Charonne on nommait des agents révolutionnaires. Le scrutin se faisait dans des casquettes.

Des ouvriers se réunissaient chez un maître d'escrime qui donnait des assauts rue de Cotte. Il y avait là un trophée d'armes formé d'espadons en bois, de cannes, de bâtons et de fleurets. Un jour on démoucheta les fleurets. Un ouvrier disait: — *Nous sommes vingt-cinq, mais on ne compte pas sur moi, parce qu'on me regarde comme une machine*. — Cette machine a été plus tard Quénisset.

Les choses quelconques qui se préméditaient prenaient peu à peu on ne sait quelle étrange notoriété. Une femme balayant sa porte disait à une autre femme: — *Depuis longtemps on travaille à force à faire des cartouches*. — On lisait en pleine rue des proclamations adressées aux gardes nationales des départements. Une de ces proclamations était signée: *Burtot, marchand de vin*.

Un jour, à la porte d'un liquoriste du marché Lenoir, un homme ayant un collier de barbe et l'accent italien montait sur une borne et lisait à haute voix un écrit singulier qui semblait émaner d'un pouvoir occulte. Des groupes s’étaient formés autour de lui et applaudissaient. Les passages qui remuaient le plus la foule ont été recueillis et notés. — «...Nos doctrines sont entravées, nos proclamations sont déchirées, nos afficheurs sont guettés et jetés en prison...».»La débâcle qui vient d’avoir lieu dans les cotons nous a converti plusieurs juste-milieu.» — «...L’avenir des peuples s’élabore dans nos rangs obscurs.» — «...Voici les termes posés: action ou réaction, révolution ou contre-révolution. Car, à notre époque, on ne croit plus à l’inertie ni à l’immobilité. Pour le peuple ou contre le peuple, c’est la question. Il n’y en a pas d’autre.» — «...Le jour où nous ne vous conviendrons plus, cassez-nous, mais jusque-là aidez-nous à marcher.» Tout cela en plein jour.

D’autres faits, plus audacieux encore, étaient suspects au peuple à cause de leur audace même. Le 4 avril 1832, un passant montait sur la borne qui fait l’angle de la rue Sainte-Marguerite et criait: *Je suis babouviste*! Mais sous Babeuf le peuple flairait Gisquet.

Entre autres choses, ce passant disait:

— «À bas la propriété! L’opposition de gauche est lâche et traître. Quand elle veut avoir raison, elle prêche la révolution. Elle est démocrate pour n’être pas battue, et royaliste pour ne pas combattre. Les républicains sont des bêtes à plumes. Défiez-vous des républicains, citoyens travailleurs.»

— Silence, citoyen mouchard! cria un ouvrier.

Ce cri mit fin au discours.

Des incidents mystérieux se produisaient.

À la chute du jour, un ouvrier rencontrait près du canal»un homme bien mis» qui lui disait: — Où vas-tu, citoyen? — Monsieur, répondait l’ouvrier, je n’ai pas l’honneur de vous connaître. — Je te connais bien, moi. Et l’homme ajoutait: Ne crains pas. Je suis l’agent du comité. On te soupçonne de n’être pas bien sûr. Tu sais que si tu révélais quelque chose, on a l’œil sur toi. — Puis il donnait à l’ouvrier une poignée de main et s’en allait en disant: — Nous nous reverrons bientôt.

La police, aux écoutes, recueillait, non plus seulement dans les cabarets, mais dans la rue, des dialogues singuliers:

— Fais-toi recevoir bien vite, disait un tisserand à un ébéniste.

— Pourquoi?

— Il va y avoir un coup de feu à faire.

Deux passants en haillons échangeaient ces répliques remarquables, grosses d’une apparente jacquerie:

— Qui nous gouverne?

— C’est monsieur Philippe.

— Non, c’est la bourgeoisie.

On se tromperait si l’on croyait que nous prenons le mot jacquerie en mauvaise part. Les Jacques, c’étaient les pauvres. Or ceux qui ont faim ont droit.

Une autre fois, on entendait passer deux hommes dont l’un disait à l’autre: — Nous avons un bon plan d’attaque.

D’une conversation intime entre quatre hommes accroupis dans un fossé du rond-point de la barrière du Trône, on ne saisissait que ceci:

— On fera le possible pour qu’il ne se promène plus dans Paris.

Qui, *il*? Obscurité menaçante.

«Les principaux chefs», comme on disait dans le faubourg, se tenaient à l’écart. On croyait qu’ils se réunissaient, pour se concerter, dans un cabaret près de la pointe Saint-Eustache. Un nommé Aug. — , chef de la Société des Secours pour les tailleurs, rue Mondétour, passait pour servir d’intermédiaire central entre les chefs et le faubourg Saint-Antoine. Néanmoins, il y eut toujours beaucoup d’ombre sur ces chefs, et aucun fait certain ne put infirmer la fierté singulière de cette réponse faite plus tard par un accusé devant la Cour des pairs:

— Quel était votre chef?

— *Je n’en connaissais pas, et je n’en reconnaissais pas.*

Ce n’étaient guère encore que des paroles, transparentes, mais vagues; quelquefois des propos en l’air, des on-dit, des ouï-dire. D’autres indices survenaient.

Un charpentier, occupé rue de Reuilly à clouer les planches d’une palissade autour d’un terrain où s’élevait une maison en construction, trouvait dans ce terrain un fragment de lettre déchirée où étaient encore lisibles les lignes que voici:

— «...Il faut que le comité prenne des mesures pour empêcher le recrutement dans les sections pour les différentes sociétés...»

Et en post-scriptum:

«Nous avons appris qu’il y avait des fusils rue du Faubourg-Poissonnière, nº 5 (bis), au nombre de cinq ou six mille, chez un armurier, dans une cour. La section ne possède point d’armes.»

Ce qui fit que le charpentier s'émut et montra la chose à ses voisins, c'est qu'à quelques pas plus loin il ramassa un autre papier également déchiré et plus significatif encore, dont nous reproduisons la configuration à cause de l'intérêt historique de ces étranges documents:

Q C D E

u og a1 fe

Apprenez cette liste par cœur. Après, vous la déchirerez. Les hommes admis en feront autant lorsque vous leur aurez transmis des ordres.

Salut et fraternité.

L.

Les personnes qui furent alors dans le secret de cette trouvaille n'ont connu que plus tard le sous-entendu de ces quatre majuscules: *quinturions, centurions, décurions, éclaireurs*, et le sens de ces lettres: *u og a1 fe* qui était une date et qui voulait dire ce *15 avril 1832*. Sous chaque majuscule étaient inscrits des noms suivis d'indications très caractéristiques. Ainsi: — Q. *Bannerel*. 8 fusils. 83 cartouches. Homme sûr. — C. *Boubière*. 1 pistolet. 40 cartouches. — D. *Rollet*. 1 fleuret. 1 pistolet. 1 livre de poudre. — E. *Teissier*. 1 sabre. 1 giberne. Exact. — *Terreur* 8 fusils, Brave, etc.

Enfin ce charpentier trouva, toujours dans le même enclos, un troisième papier sur lequel était écrite au crayon, mais très lisiblement, cette espèce de liste énigmatique:

Unité. Blanchard. Arbre-sec. 6.
Barra. Soize. Salle-au-Comte.
Kosciusko. Aubry le boucher?
J. J. R.
Caïus Gracchus.
Droit de révision. Dufond. Four.
Chute des Girondins. Derbac. Maubuée.
Washington. Pinson. 1 pist. 86 cart.
Marseillaise.
Souver. du peuple. Michel. Quincampoix. Sabre.
Hoche.
Marceau. Platon. Arbre-sec.
Varsovie. Tilly, crieur du *Populaire*.

L'honnête bourgeois entre les mains duquel cette liste était demeurée en sut la signification. Il paraît que cette liste était la nomenclature complète des sections du quatrième arrondissement de la société des Droits de l’Homme, avec les noms et les demeures des chefs de sections. Aujourd’hui que tous ces faits restés dans l’ombre ne sont plus que de l’histoire, on peut les publier. Il faut ajouter que la fondation de la société des Droits de l’Homme semble avoir été postérieure à la date où ce papier fut trouvé. Peut-être n’était-ce qu’une ébauche.

Cependant, après les propos et les paroles, après les indices écrits, des faits matériels commençaient à percer.

Rue Popincourt, chez un marchand de bric-à-brac, on saisissait dans le tiroir d’une commode sept feuilles de papier gris toutes également pliées en long et en quatre; ces feuilles recouvraient vingt-six carrés de ce même papier gris pliés en forme de cartouche, et une carte sur laquelle on lisait ceci:

Salpêtre — 12 onces.

Soufre — 2 onces.

Charbon — 2 onces et demie.

Eau — 2 onces.

Le procès-verbal de saisie constatait que le tiroir exhalait une forte odeur de poudre.

Un maçon revenant, sa journée faite, oubliait un petit paquet sur un banc près du pont d’Austerlitz. Ce paquet était porté au corps de garde. On l’ouvrait et l’on y trouvait deux dialogues imprimés, signés *Lahautière*, une chanson intitulée: *Ouvriers, associez-vous*, et une boîte de fer-blanc pleine de cartouches.

Un ouvrier buvant avec un camarade lui faisait tâter comme il avait chaud, l’autre sentait un pistolet sous sa veste.

Dans un fossé sur le boulevard, entre le Père-Lachaise et la barrière du Trône, à l’endroit le plus désert, des enfants, en jouant, découvraient sous un tas de copeaux et d’épluchures un sac qui contenait un moule à balles, un mandrin en bois à faire des cartouches, une sébile dans laquelle il y avait des grains de poudre de chasse, et une petite marmite en fonte dont l’intérieur offrait des traces évidentes de plomb fondu.

Des agents de police, pénétrant à l’improviste à cinq heures du matin chez un nommé Pardon, qui fut plus tard sectionnaire de la section Barricade-Merry et se fit tuer dans l’insurrection d’avril 1834, le trouvaient debout près de son lit, tenant à la main des cartouches qu’il était en train de faire.

Vers l’heure où les ouvriers se reposent, deux hommes étaient vus se rencontrant entre la barrière Picpus et la barrière Charenton dans un petit chemin de ronde entre deux murs près d’un cabaretier qui a un jeu de Siam devant sa porte. L’un tirait de dessous sa blouse et remettait à l’autre un pistolet. Au moment de le lui remettre il s’apercevait que la transpiration de sa poitrine avait communiqué quelque humidité à la poudre. Il amorçait le pistolet et ajoutait de la poudre à celle qui était déjà dans le bassinet. Puis les deux hommes se quittaient.

Un nommé Gallais, tué plus tard rue Beaubourg dans l’affaire d’avril, se vantait d’avoir chez lui sept cents cartouches et vingt-quatre pierres à fusil.

Le gouvernement reçut un jour l’avis qu’il venait d’être distribué des armes au faubourg et deux cent mille cartouches. La semaine d’après trente mille cartouches furent distribuées. Chose remarquable, la police n’en put saisir aucune. Une lettre interceptée portait: — «Le jour n’est pas loin où en quatre heures d’horloge quatre-vingt mille patriotes seront sous les armes.»

Toute cette fermentation était publique, on pourrait presque dire tranquille. L’insurrection imminente apprêtait son orage avec calme en face du gouvernement. Aucune singularité ne manquait à cette crise encore souterraine, mais déjà perceptible. Les bourgeois parlaient paisiblement aux ouvriers de ce qui se préparait. On disait: Comment va l’émeute? du ton dont on eût dit: Comment va votre femme?

Un marchand de meubles, rue Moreau, demandait: — Eh bien, quand attaquez-vous?

Un autre boutiquier disait:

— On attaquera bientôt? je le sais. Il y a un mois vous étiez quinze mille, maintenant vous êtes vingt-cinq mille. — Il offrait son fusil, et un voisin offrait un petit pistolet qu’il voulait vendre sept francs.

Du reste, la fièvre révolutionnaire gagnait. Aucun point de Paris ni de la France n’en était exempt. L’artère battait partout. Comme ces membranes qui naissent de certaines inflammations et se forment dans le corps humain, le réseau des sociétés secrètes commençait à s’étendre sur le pays. De l’association des Amis du peuple, publique et secrète tout à la fois, naissait la société des Droits de l’Homme, qui datait ainsi un de ses ordres du jour: *Pluviôse, an 40 de l’ère républicaine,* qui devait survivre même à des arrêts de cour d’assises prononçant sa dissolution, et qui n’hésitait pas à donner à ses sections des noms significatifs tels que ceux-ci:

Des piques.

Tocsin.
Canon d’alarme.
Bonnet phrygien.
21 janvier.
Des Gueux.
Des Truands.
Marche en avant.
Robespierre.
Niveau.
Ça ira.

La société des Droits de l’Homme engendrait la société d’Action. C’étaient les impatients qui se détachaient et couraient devant. D’autres associations cherchaient à se recruter dans les grandes sociétés mères. Les sectionnaires se plaignaient d’être tiraillés. Ainsi *la société Gauloise* et *le Comité organisateur des municipalités*. Ainsi les associations pour *la liberté de la presse*, pour *la liberté individuelle*, pour *l’instruction du peuple, contre les impôts indirects*. Puis la société des Ouvriers égalitaires, qui se divisait en trois fractions, les égalitaires, les communistes, les réformistes. Puis l’Armée des Bastilles, une espèce de cohorte organisée militairement, quatre hommes commandés par un caporal, dix par un sergent, vingt par un sous-lieutenant, quarante par un lieutenant; il n’y avait jamais plus de cinq hommes qui se connussent. Création où la précaution est combinée avec l’audace et qui semble empreinte du génie de Venise. Le comité central, qui était la tête, avait deux bras, la société d’Action et l’Armée des Bastilles. Une association légitimiste, les Chevaliers de la Fidélité, remuait parmi ces affiliations républicaines. Elle y était dénoncée et répudiée.

Les sociétés parisiennes se ramifiaient dans les principales villes. Lyon, Nantes, Lille et Marseille avaient leur société des Droits de l’Homme, la Charbonnière, les Hommes libres. Aix avait une société révolutionnaire qu’on appelait la Cougourde. Nous avons déjà prononcé ce mot.

À Paris, le faubourg Saint-Marceau n’était guère moins bourdonnant que le faubourg Saint-Antoine, et les écoles pas moins émues que les faubourgs. Un café de la rue Saint-Hyacinthe et l’estaminet des Sept-Billards, rue des Mathurins-Saint-Jacques, servaient de lieux de ralliement aux étudiants. La société des Amis de l’A B C, affiliée aux mutuellistes d’Angers et à la Cougourde d’Aix, se réunissait, on l’a vu, au café Musain. Ces mêmes jeunes gens se retrouvaient aussi, nous l’avons dit, dans un restaurant cabaret près de la rue Mondétour qu’on appelait Corinthe. Ces réunions étaient secrètes. D’autres étaient aussi publiques que possible, et l’on peut juger de ces hardiesses par ce fragment d’un interrogatoire subi dans un des procès ultérieurs: — Où se tint cette réunion? — Rue de la Paix. — Chez qui? — Dans la rue. — Quelles sections étaient là? — Une seule. — Laquelle? — La section Manuel. — Qui était le chef? — Moi. — Vous êtes trop jeune pour avoir pris tout seul ce grave parti d’attaquer le gouvernement. D’où vous venaient vos instructions? — Du comité central.

L’armée était minée en même temps que la population, comme le prouvèrent plus tard les mouvements de Belfort, de Lunéville et d’Épinal. On comptait sur le cinquante-deuxième régiment, sur le cinquième, sur le huitième, sur le trente-septième, et sur le vingtième léger. En Bourgogne, et dans les villes du midi on plantait *l’arbre de la Liberté,* c’est-à-dire un mât surmonté d’un bonnet rouge.

Telle était la situation.

Cette situation, le faubourg Saint-Antoine, plus que tout autre groupe de population, comme nous l’avons dit en commençant, la rendait sensible et l’accentuait. C’est là qu’était le point de côté.

Ce vieux faubourg, peuplé comme une fourmilière, laborieux, courageux et colère comme une ruche, frémissait dans l’attente et dans le désir d’une commotion. Tout s’y agitait sans que le travail fût pour cela interrompu. Rien ne saurait donner l’idée de cette physionomie vive et sombre. Il y a dans ce faubourg de poignantes détresses cachées sous le toit des mansardes; il y a là aussi des intelligences ardentes et rares. C’est surtout en fait de détresse et d’intelligence qu’il est dangereux que les extrêmes se touchent.

Le faubourg Saint-Antoine avait encore d’autres causes de tressaillement; car il reçoit le contre-coup des crises commerciales, des faillites, des grèves, des chômages, inhérents aux grands ébranlements politiques. En temps de révolution la misère est à la fois cause et effet. Le coup qu’elle frappe lui revient. Cette population, pleine de vertu fière, capable au plus haut point de calorique latent, toujours prête aux prises d’armes, prompte aux explosions, irritée, profonde, minée, semblait n’attendre que la chute d’une flammèche. Toutes les fois que de certaines étincelles flottent sur l’horizon, chassées par le vent des événements, on ne peut s’empêcher de songer au faubourg Saint-Antoine et au redoutable hasard qui a placé aux portes de Paris cette poudrière de souffrances et d'idées.

Les cabarets du *faubourg Antoine*, qui se sont plus d'une fois dessinés dans l'esquisse qu'on vient de lire, ont une notoriété historique. En temps de troubles on s'y enivre de paroles plus que de vin. Une sorte d'esprit prophétique et un effluve d'avenir y circule, enflant les cœurs et grandissant les âmes. Les cabarets du faubourg Antoine ressemblent à ces tavernes du Mont Aventin bâties sur l'antre de la sibylle et communiquant avec les profonds souffles sacrés; tavernes dont les tables étaient presque des trépieds, et où l'on buvait ce qu'Ennius appelle *le vin sibyllin*.

Le faubourg Saint-Antoine est un réservoir de peuple. L'ébranlement révolutionnaire y fait des fissures par où coule la souveraineté populaire. Cette souveraineté peut mal faire, elle se trompe comme toute autre; mais, même fourvoyée, elle reste grande. On peut dire d'elle comme du cyclope aveugle, *Ingens*.

En 93, selon que l'idée qui flottait était bonne ou mauvaise, selon que c'était le jour du fanatisme ou de l'enthousiasme, il partait du faubourg Saint-Antoine tantôt des légions sauvages, tantôt des bandes héroïques.

Sauvages. Expliquons-nous sur ce mot. Ces hommes hérissés qui, dans les jours génésiaques du chaos révolutionnaire, déguenillés, hurlants, farouches, le casse-tête levé, la pique haute, se ruaient sur le vieux Paris bouleversé, que voulaient-ils? Ils voulaient la fin des oppressions, la fin des tyrannies, la fin du glaive, le travail pour l'homme, l'instruction pour l'enfant, la douceur sociale pour la femme, la liberté, l'égalité, la fraternité, le pain pour tous, l'idée pour tous, l'édénisation du monde, le progrès; et cette chose sainte, bonne et douce, le progrès, poussés à bout, hors d'eux-mêmes, ils la réclamaient terribles, demi-nus, la massue au poing, le rugissement à la bouche. C'étaient les sauvages, oui; mais les sauvages de la civilisation.

Ils proclamaient avec furie le droit; ils voulaient, fût-ce par le tremblement et l'épouvante, forcer le genre humain au paradis. Ils semblaient des barbares et ils étaient des sauveurs. Ils réclamaient la lumière avec le masque de la nuit.

En regard de ces hommes, farouches, nous en convenons, et effrayants, mais farouches et effrayants pour le bien, il y a d'autres hommes, souriants, brodés, dorés, enrubannés, constellés, en bas de soie, en plumes blanches, en gants jaunes, en souliers vernis, qui, accoudés à une table de velours au coin d’une cheminée de marbre, insistent doucement pour le maintien et la conservation du passé, du Moyen-Âge, du droit divin, du fanatisme, de l’ignorance, de l’esclavage, de la peine de mort, de la guerre, glorifiant à demi-voix et avec politesse le sabre, le bûcher et l’échafaud. Quant à nous, si nous étions forcé à l’option entre les barbares de la civilisation et les civilisés de la barbarie, nous choisirions les barbares.

Mais, grâce au ciel, un autre choix est possible. Aucune chute à pic n’est nécessaire, pas plus en avant qu’en arrière. Ni despotisme, ni terrorisme. Nous voulons le progrès en pente douce.

Dieu y pourvoit. L’adoucissement des pentes, c’est là toute la politique de Dieu.

Chapitre VI

Enjolras et ses lieutenants

À peu près vers cette époque, Enjolras, en vue de l'événement possible, fit une sorte de recensement mystérieux.

Tous étaient en conciliabule au café Musain.

Enjolras dit, en mêlant à ses paroles quelques métaphores demi-énigmatiques, mais significatives:

— Il convient de savoir où l'on en est et sur qui l'on peut compter. Si l'on veut des combattants, il faut en faire. Avoir de quoi frapper. Cela ne peut nuire. Ceux qui passent ont toujours plus de chance d'attraper des coups de corne quand il y a des bœufs sur la route que lorsqu'il n'y en a pas. Donc comptons un peu le troupeau. Combien sommes-nous? Il ne s'agit pas de remettre ce travail-là à demain. Les révolutionnaires doivent toujours être pressés; le progrès n'a pas de temps à perdre. Défions-nous de l'inattendu. Ne nous laissons pas prendre au dépourvu. Il s'agit de repasser sur toutes les coutures que nous avons faites et de voir si elles tiennent. Cette affaire doit être coulée à fond aujourd'hui. Courfeyrac, tu verras les polytechniciens. C'est leur jour de sortie. Aujourd'hui mercredi. Feuilly, n'est-ce pas? vous verrez ceux de la Glacière. Combeferre m'a promis d'aller à Picpus. Il y a là tout un fourmillement excellent. Bahorel visitera l'Estrapade. Prouvaire, les maçons s'attiédissent; tu nous rapporteras des nouvelles de la loge de la rue de Grenelle-Saint-Honoré. Joly ira à la clinique de Dupuytren et tâtera le pouls à l'école de médecine. Bossuet fera un petit tour au palais et causera avec les stagiaires. Moi, je me charge de la Cougourde.

— Voilà tout réglé, dit Courfeyrac.

— Non.

— Qu'y a-t-il donc encore?

— Une chose très importante.

— Qu'est-ce? demanda Combeferre.

— La barrière du Maine, répondit Enjolras.

Enjolras resta un moment comme absorbé dans ses réflexions, puis reprit:

— Barrière du Maine il y a des marbriers, des peintres, les praticiens des ateliers de sculpture. C’est une famille enthousiaste, mais sujette à refroidissement. Je ne sais pas ce qu’ils ont depuis quelque temps. Ils pensent à autre chose. Ils s’éteignent. Ils passent leur temps à jouer aux dominos. Il serait urgent d’aller leur parler un peu et ferme. C’est chez Richefeu qu’ils se réunissent. On les y trouverait entre midi et une heure. Il faudrait souffler sur ces cendres-là. J’avais compté pour cela sur ce distrait de Marius, qui en somme est bon, mais il ne vient plus. Il me faudrait quelqu’un pour la barrière du Maine. Je n’ai plus personne.

— Et moi, dit Grantaire, je suis là.

— Toi?

— Moi.

— Toi, endoctriner des républicains! toi, réchauffer, au nom des principes, des cœurs refroidis!

— Pourquoi pas?

— Est-ce que tu peux être bon à quelque chose?

— Mais j’en ai la vague ambition, dit Grantaire.

— Tu ne crois à rien.

— Je crois à toi.

— Grantaire, veux-tu me rendre un service?

— Tous. Cirer tes bottes.

— Eh bien, ne te mêle pas de nos affaires. Cuve ton absinthe.

— Tu es un ingrat, Enjolras.

— Tu serais homme à aller barrière du Maine! tu en serais capable!

— Je suis capable de descendre rue des Grès, de traverser la place Saint-Michel, d’obliquer par la rue Monsieur-le-Prince, de prendre la rue de Vaugirard, de dépasser les Carmes, de tourner rue d’Assas, d’arriver rue du Cherche-Midi, de laisser derrière moi le Conseil de guerre, d’arpenter la rue des Vieilles-Tuileries, d’enjamber le boulevard, de suivre la chaussée du Maine, de franchir la barrière, et d’entrer chez Richefeu. Je suis capable de cela. Mes souliers en sont capables.

— Connais-tu un peu ces camarades-là de chez Richefeu?

— Pas beaucoup. Nous nous tutoyons seulement.

— Qu’est-ce que tu leur diras?

— Je leur parlerai de Robespierre, pardi. De Danton. Des principes.

— Toi!

— Moi. Mais on ne me rend pas justice. Quand je m’y mets, je suis terrible. J’ai lu Prud’homme, je connais le Contrat social, je sais par cœur ma constitution de l’an Deux.»La liberté du citoyen finit où la liberté d’un autre citoyen commence.» Est-ce que tu me prends pour une brute? J’ai un vieil assignat dans mon tiroir. Les droits de l’Homme, la souveraineté du peuple, sapristi! Je suis même un peu hébertiste. Je puis rabâcher, pendant six heures d’horloge, montre en main, des choses superbes.

— Sois sérieux, dit Enjolras.

— Je suis farouche, répondit Grantaire.

Enjolras pensa quelques secondes, et fit le geste d’un homme qui prend son parti.

— Grantaire, dit-il gravement, je consens à t’essayer. Tu iras barrière du Maine.

Grantaire logeait dans un garni tout voisin du café Musain. Il sortit, et revint cinq minutes après. Il était allé chez lui mettre un gilet à la Robespierre.

— Rouge, dit-il en entrant, et en regardant fixement Enjolras.

Puis, d’un plat de main énergique, il appuya sur sa poitrine les deux pointes écarlates du gilet.

Et, s’approchant d’Enjolras, il lui dit à l’oreille:

— Sois tranquille.

Il enfonça son chapeau résolument et partit.

Un quart d’heure après, l’arrière-salle du café Musain était déserte. Tous les amis de l’A B C étaient allés, chacun de leur côté, à leur besogne. Enjolras, qui s’était réservé la Cougourde, sortit le dernier.

Ceux de la Cougourde d’Aix qui étaient à Paris se réunissaient alors plaine d’Issy, dans une des carrières abandonnées si nombreuses de ce côté de Paris.

Enjolras, tout en cheminant vers ce lieu de rendez-vous, passait en lui-même la revue de la situation. La gravité des événements était visible. Quand les faits, prodromes d’une espèce de maladie sociale latente, se meuvent lourdement, la moindre complication les arrête et les enchevêtre. Phénomène d’où sortent les écroulements et les renaissances. Enjolras entrevoyait un soulèvement lumineux sous les pans ténébreux de l’avenir. Qui sait? le moment approchait peut-être. Le peuple ressaisissant le droit, quel beau spectacle! la révolution reprenant majestueusement possession de la France, et disant au monde: La suite à demain! Enjolras était content. La fournaise chauffait. Il avait, dans ce même instant-là, une traînée de poudre d’amis éparse sur Paris. Il composait, dans sa pensée, avec l’éloquence philosophique et pénétrante de Combeferre, l’enthousiasme cosmopolite de Feuilly, la verve de Courfeyrac, le rire de Bahorel, la mélancolie de Jean Prouvaire, la science de Joly, les sarcasmes de Bossuet, une sorte de pétillement électrique prenant feu à la fois un peu partout. Tous à l’œuvre. À coup sûr le résultat répondrait à l’effort. C’était bien. Ceci le fit penser à Grantaire. — Tiens, se dit-il, la barrière du Maine me détourne à peine de mon chemin. Si je poussais jusque chez Richefeu? Voyons un peu ce que fait Grantaire, et où il en est.

Une heure sonnait au clocher de Vaugirard quand Enjolras arriva à la tabagie Richefeu. Il poussa la porte, entra, croisa les bras, laissant retomber la porte qui vint lui heurter les épaules, et regarda dans la salle pleine de tables, d’hommes et de fumée.

Une voix éclatait dans cette brume, vivement coupée par une autre voix. C’était Grantaire dialoguant avec un adversaire qu’il avait.

Grantaire était assis vis-à-vis d’une autre figure, à une table de marbre Sainte-Anne semée de grains de son et constellée de dominos, il frappait ce marbre du poing, et voici ce qu’Enjolras entendit:

— Double-six.

— Du quatre.

— Le porc! je n’en ai plus.

— Tu es mort. Du deux.

— Du six.

— Du trois.

— De l’as.

— À moi la pose.

— Quatre points.

— Péniblement.

— À toi.

— J’ai fait une faute énorme.

— Tu vas bien.

— Quinze.

— Sept de plus.

— Cela me fait vingt-deux. (Rêvant.) Vingt-deux!

— Tu ne t’attendais pas au double-six. Si je l’avais mis au commencement, cela changeait tout le jeu.

— Du deux même.

— De l’as.

— De l’as! Eh bien, du cinq.

— Je n’en ai pas.

— C’est toi qui as posé, je crois?

— Oui.

— Du blanc.

— A-t-il de la chance! Ah! tu as une chance! (Longue rêverie.) Du deux.

— De l’as.

— Ni cinq, ni as. C’est embêtant pour toi.

— Domino.

— Nom d’un caniche!

Livre deuxième — Éponine

Chapitre I

Le Champ de l’Alouette

Marius avait assisté au dénouement inattendu du guet-apens sur la trace duquel il avait mis Javert; mais à peine Javert eut-il quitté la masure, emmenant ses prisonniers dans trois fiacres, que Marius de son côté se glissa hors de la maison. Il n’était encore que neuf heures du soir. Marius alla chez Courfeyrac. Courfeyrac n’était plus l’imperturbable habitant du quartier latin; il était allé demeurer rue de la Verrerie «pour des raisons politiques»; ce quartier était de ceux où l’insurrection dans ce temps-là s’installait volontiers. Marius dit à Courfeyrac: Je viens coucher chez toi. Courfeyrac tira un matelas de son lit qui en avait deux, l’étendit à terre, et dit: Voilà.

Le lendemain, dès sept heures du matin, Marius revint à la masure, paya le terme et ce qu’il devait à mame Bougon, fit charger sur une charrette à bras ses livres, son lit, sa table, sa commode et ses deux chaises, et s’en alla sans laisser son adresse, si bien que, lorsque Javert revint dans la matinée afin de questionner Marius sur les événements de la veille, il ne trouva que mame Bougon qui lui répondit: Déménagé!

Mame Bougon fut convaincue que Marius était un peu complice des voleurs saisis dans la nuit. — Qui aurait dit cela? s’écria-t-elle chez les portières du quartier, un jeune homme, que ça vous avait l’air d’une fille!

Marius avait eu deux raisons pour ce déménagement si prompt. La première, c’est qu’il avait horreur maintenant de cette maison où il avait vu, de si près et dans tout son développement le plus repoussant et le plus féroce, une laideur sociale plus affreuse peut-être encore que le mauvais riche, le mauvais pauvre. La deuxième, c’est qu’il ne voulait pas figurer dans le procès quelconque qui s’ensuivrait probablement, et être amené à déposer contre Thénardier.

Javert crut que le jeune homme, dont il n’avait pas retenu le nom, avait eu peur et s’était sauvé ou n’était peut-être même pas rentré chez lui au moment du guet-apens; il fit pourtant quelques efforts pour le retrouver, mais il n’y parvint pas.

Un mois s’écoula, puis un autre. Marius était toujours chez Courfeyrac. Il avait su par un avocat stagiaire, promeneur habituel de la salle des pas perdus, que Thénardier était au secret. Tous les lundis, Marius faisait remettre au greffe de la Force cinq francs pour Thénardier.

Marius n’ayant plus d’argent, empruntait les cinq francs à Courfeyrac. C’était la première fois de sa vie qu’il empruntait de l’argent. Ces cinq francs périodiques étaient une double énigme pour Courfeyrac qui les donnait et pour Thénardier qui les recevait. — À qui cela peut-il aller? songeait Courfeyrac. — D’où cela peut-il me venir? se demandait Thénardier.

Marius du reste était navré. Tout était de nouveau rentré dans une trappe. Il ne voyait plus rien devant lui; sa vie était replongée dans ce mystère où il errait à tâtons. Il avait un moment revu de très près dans cette obscurité la jeune fille qu’il aimait, le vieillard qui semblait son père, ces êtres inconnus qui étaient son seul intérêt et sa seule espérance en ce monde; et au moment où il avait cru les saisir, un souffle avait emporté toutes ces ombres. Pas une étincelle de certitude et de vérité n’avait jailli même du choc le plus effrayant. Aucune conjecture possible. Il ne savait même plus le nom qu’il avait cru savoir. À coup sûr ce n’était plus Ursule. Et l’Alouette était un sobriquet. Et que penser du vieillard? Se cachait-il en effet de la police? L’ouvrier à cheveux blancs que Marius avait rencontré aux environs des Invalides lui était revenu à l’esprit. Il devenait probable maintenant que cet ouvrier et M. Leblanc étaient le même homme. Il se déguisait donc? Cet homme avait des côtés héroïques et des côtés équivoques. Pourquoi n’avait-il pas appelé au secours? pourquoi s’était-il enfui? était-il, oui ou non, le père de la jeune fille? enfin était-il réellement l’homme que Thénardier avait cru reconnaître? Thénardier avait pu se méprendre? Autant de problèmes sans issue. Tout ceci, il est vrai, n’ôtait rien au charme angélique de la jeune fille du Luxembourg. Détresse poignante; Marius avait une passion dans le cœur, et la nuit sur les yeux. Il était poussé, il était attiré, et il ne pouvait bouger. Tout s’était évanoui, excepté l’amour. De l’amour même, il avait perdu les instincts et les illuminations subites. Ordinairement cette flamme qui nous brûle nous éclaire aussi un peu, et nous jette quelque lueur utile au dehors. Ces sourds conseils de la passion, Marius ne les entendait même plus. Jamais il ne se disait: Si j’allais là? si j’essayais ceci? Celle qu’il ne pouvait plus nommer Ursule était évidemment quelque part; rien n’avertissait Marius du côté où il fallait chercher. Toute sa vie se résumait maintenant en deux mots: une incertitude absolue dans une brume impénétrable. La revoir, elle; il y aspirait toujours, il ne l’espérait plus.

Pour comble, la misère revenait. Il sentait tout près de lui, derrière lui, ce souffle glacé. Dans toutes ces tourmentes, et depuis longtemps déjà, il avait discontinué son travail, et rien n'est plus dangereux que le travail discontinué; c'est une habitude qui s'en va. Habitude facile à quitter, difficile à reprendre.

Une certaine quantité de rêverie est bonne, comme un narcotique à dose discrète. Cela endort les fièvres, quelquefois dures, de l'intelligence en travail, et fait naître dans l'esprit une vapeur molle et fraîche qui corrige les contours trop âpres de la pensée pure, comble çà et là des lacunes et des intervalles, lie les ensembles et estompe les angles des idées. Mais trop de rêverie submerge et noie. Malheur au travailleur par l'esprit qui se laisse tomber tout entier de la pensée dans la rêverie! Il croit qu'il remontera aisément, et il se dit qu'après tout c'est la même chose. Erreur!

La pensée est le labeur de l'intelligence, la rêverie en est la volupté. Remplacer la pensée par la rêverie, c'est confondre un poison avec une nourriture.

Marius, on s'en souvient, avait commencé par là. La passion était survenue, et avait achevé de le précipiter dans les chimères sans objet et sans fond. On ne sort plus de chez soi que pour aller songer. Enfantement paresseux. Gouffre tumultueux et stagnant. Et, à mesure que le travail diminuait, les besoins croissaient. Ceci est une loi. L'homme, à l'état rêveur, est naturellement prodigue et mou; l'esprit détendu ne peut pas tenir la vie serrée. Il y a, dans cette façon de vivre, du bien mêlé au mal, car si l'amollissement est funeste, la générosité est saine et bonne. Mais l'homme pauvre, généreux et noble, qui ne travaille pas, est perdu. Les ressources tarissent, les nécessités surgissent.

Pente fatale où les plus honnêtes et les plus fermes sont entraînés comme les plus faibles et les plus vicieux, et qui aboutit à l'un de ces deux trous, le suicide ou le crime.

À force de sortir pour aller songer, il vient un jour où l'on sort pour aller se jeter à l'eau.

L'excès de songe fait les Escousse et les Lebras.

Marius descendait cette pente à pas lents, les yeux fixés sur celle qu'il ne voyait plus. Ce que nous venons d'écrire là semble étrange et pourtant est vrai. Le souvenir d'un être absent s'allume dans les ténèbres du cœur; plus il a disparu, plus il rayonne; l'âme désespérée et obscure voit cette lumière à son horizon; étoile de la nuit intérieure. Elle, c'était là toute la pensée de

Marius. Il ne songeait pas à autre chose; il sentait confusément que son vieux habit devenait un habit impossible et que son habit neuf devenait un vieux habit, que ses chemises s’usaient, que son chapeau s’usait, que ses bottes s’usaient, c’est-à-dire que sa vie s’usait, et il se disait: Si je pouvais seulement la revoir avant de mourir!

Une seule idée douce lui restait, c’est qu’Elle l’avait aimé, que son regard le lui avait dit, qu’elle ne connaissait pas son nom, mais qu’elle connaissait son âme, et que peut-être là où elle était, quel que fût ce lieu mystérieux, elle l’aimait encore. Qui sait si elle ne songeait pas à lui comme lui songeait à elle? Quelquefois, dans des heures inexplicables comme en a tout cœur qui aime, n’ayant que des raisons de douleur et se sentant pourtant un obscur tressaillement de joie, il se disait: Ce sont ses pensées qui viennent à moi! — Puis il ajoutait: Mes pensées lui arrivent aussi peut-être.

Cette illusion, dont il hochait la tête le moment d’après, réussissait pourtant à lui jeter dans l’âme des rayons qui ressemblaient parfois à de l’espérance. De temps en temps, surtout à cette heure du soir qui attriste le plus les songeurs, il laissait tomber sur un cahier de papier où il n’y avait que cela, le plus pur, le plus impersonnel, le plus idéal des rêveries dont l’amour lui emplissait le cerveau. Il appelait cela «lui écrire».

Il ne faut pas croire que sa raison fût en désordre. Au contraire. Il avait perdu la faculté de travailler et de se mouvoir fermement vers un but déterminé, mais il avait plus que jamais la clairvoyance et la rectitude. Marius voyait à un jour calme et réel, quoique singulier, ce qui se passait sous ses yeux, même les faits ou les hommes les plus indifférents; il disait de tout le mot juste avec une sorte d’accablement honnête et de désintéressement candide. Son jugement, presque détaché de l’espérance, se tenait haut et planait.

Dans cette situation d’esprit rien ne lui échappait, rien ne le trompait, et il découvrait à chaque instant le fond de la vie, de l’humanité et de la destinée. Heureux, même dans les angoisses, celui à qui Dieu a donné une âme digne de l’amour et du malheur! Qui n’a pas vu les choses de ce monde et le cœur des hommes à cette double lumière n’a rien vu de vrai et ne sait rien.

L’âme qui aime et qui souffre est à l’état sublime.

Du reste les jours se succédaient et rien de nouveau ne se présentait. Il lui semblait seulement que l’espace sombre qui lui restait à parcourir se raccourcissait à chaque instant. Il croyait déjà entrevoir distinctement le bord de l’escarpement sans fond.

— Quoi! se répétait-il, est-ce que je ne la reverrai pas auparavant?

Quand on a monté la rue Saint-Jacques, laissé de côté la barrière et suivi quelque temps à gauche l’ancien boulevard intérieur, on atteint la rue de la Santé, puis la Glacière, et, un peu avant d’arriver à la petite rivière des Gobelins, on rencontre une espèce de champ, qui est, dans toute la longue et monotone ceinture des boulevards de Paris, le seul endroit où Ruisdael serait tenté de s’asseoir.

Ce je ne sais quoi d’où la grâce se dégage est là, un pré vert traversé de cordes tendues où des loques sèchent au vent, une vieille ferme à maraîchers bâtie du temps de Louis XIII avec son grand toit bizarrement percé de mansardes, des palissades délabrées, un peu d’eau entre des peupliers, des femmes, des rires, des voix; à l’horizon le Panthéon, l’arbre des Sourds-Muets, le Val-de-Grâce, noir, trapu, fantasque, amusant, magnifique, et au fond le sévère faîte carré des tours de Notre-Dame.

Comme le lieu vaut la peine d’être vu, personne n’y vient. À peine une charrette ou un routier tous les quarts d’heure.

Il arriva une fois que les promenades solitaires de Marius le conduisirent à ce terrain près de cette eau. Ce jour-là, il y avait sur ce boulevard une rareté, un passant. Marius, vaguement frappé du charme presque sauvage du lieu, demanda à ce passant: — Comment se nomme cet endroit-ci?

Le passant répondit: — C’est le champ de l’Alouette.

Et il ajouta: — C’est ici qu’Ulbach a tué la bergère d’Ivry.

Mais après ce mot: l’Alouette, Marius n’avait plus entendu. Il y a de ces congélations subites dans l’état rêveur qu’un mot suffit à produire. Toute la pensée se condense brusquement autour d’une idée, et n’est plus capable d’aucune autre perception. L’Alouette, c’était l’appellation qui, dans les profondeurs de la mélancolie de Marius, avait remplacé Ursule. — Tiens, dit-il, dans l’espèce de stupeur irraisonnée propre à ces apartés mystérieux, ceci est son champ. Je saurai ici où elle demeure.

Cela était absurde, mais irrésistible.

Et il vint tous les jours à ce champ de l’Alouette.

Chapitre II

Formation embryonnaire des crimes dans l'incubation des prisons

Le triomphe de Javert dans la masure Gorbeau avait semblé complet, mais ne l'avait pas été.

D'abord, et c'était là son principal souci, Javert n'avait point fait prisonnier le prisonnier. L'assassiné qui s'évade est plus suspect que l'assassin; et il est probable que ce personnage, si précieuse capture pour les bandits, n'était pas de moins bonne prise pour l'autorité.

Ensuite, Montparnasse avait échappé à Javert.

Il fallait attendre une autre occasion pour remettre la main sur ce «muscadin du diable». Montparnasse en effet, ayant rencontré Éponine qui faisait le guet sous les arbres du boulevard l'avait emmenée, aimant mieux être Némorin avec la fille que Schinderhannes avec le père. Bien lui en avait pris. Il était libre. Quant à Éponine, Javert l'avait fait «repincer». Consolation médiocre. Éponine avait rejoint Azelma aux Madelonnettes.

Enfin, dans le trajet de la masure Gorbeau à la Force, un des principaux arrêtés, Claquesous, s'était perdu. On ne savait comment cela s'était fait, les agents et les sergents «n'y comprenaient rien», il s'était changé en vapeur, il avait glissé entre les poucettes, il avait coulé entre les fentes de la voiture, le fiacre était fêlé, et avait fui; on ne savait que dire, sinon qu'en arrivant à la prison, plus de Claquesous. Il y avait là de la féerie, ou de la police. Claquesous avait-il fondu dans les ténèbres comme un flocon de neige dans l'eau? Y avait-il eu connivence inavouée des agents? Cet homme appartenait-il à la double énigme du désordre et de l'ordre? Était-il concentrique à l'infraction et à la répression? Ce sphinx avait-il les pattes de devant dans le crime et les pattes de derrière dans l'autorité? Javert n'acceptait point ces combinaisons-là, et se fût hérissé devant de tels compromis; mais son escouade comprenait d'autres inspecteurs que lui, plus initiés peut-être que lui-même, quoique ses subordonnés, aux secrets de la préfecture, et Claquesous était un tel scélérat qu'il pouvait être un fort bon agent. Être en de si intimes rapports d'escamotage avec la nuit, cela est excellent pour le brigandage et admirable pour la police. Il y a de ces coquins à deux tranchants. Quoi qu'il en fût, Claquesous égaré ne se retrouva pas. Javert en parut plus irrité qu'étonné.

Quant à Marius, «ce dadais d’avocat qui avait eu probablement peur», et dont Javert avait oublié le nom, Javert y tenait peu. D’ailleurs, un avocat, cela se retrouve toujours. Mais était-ce un avocat seulement?

L’information avait commencé.

Le juge d’instruction avait trouvé utile de ne point mettre un des hommes de la bande Patron-Minette au secret, espérant quelque bavardage. Cet homme était Brujon, le chevelu de la rue du Petit-Banquier. On l’avait lâché dans la cour Charlemagne, et l’œil des surveillants était ouvert sur lui.

Ce nom, Brujon, est un des souvenirs de la Force. Dans la hideuse cour dite du Bâtiment-Neuf, que l’administration appelait cour Saint-Bernard et que les voleurs appelaient fosse-aux-lions, sur cette muraille couverte de squames et de lèpres qui montait à gauche à la hauteur des toits, près d’une vieille porte de fer rouillée qui menait à l’ancienne chapelle de l’hôtel ducal de la Force devenue un dortoir de brigands, on voyait encore il y a douze ans une espèce de bastille grossièrement sculptée au clou dans la pierre, et au-dessous cette signature:

BRUJON, 1811.

Le Brujon de 1811 était le père du Brujon de 1832.

Ce dernier, qu’on n’a pu qu’entrevoir dans le guet-apens Gorbeau, était un jeune gaillard fort rusé et fort adroit, ayant l’air ahuri et plaintif. C’est sur cet air ahuri que le juge d’instruction l’avait lâché, le croyant plus utile dans la cour Charlemagne que dans la cellule du secret.

Les voleurs ne s’interrompent pas parce qu’ils sont entre les mains de la justice. On ne se gêne point pour si peu. Être en prison pour un crime n’empêche pas de commencer un autre crime. Ce sont des artistes qui ont un tableau au Salon et qui n’en travaillent pas moins à une nouvelle œuvre dans leur atelier.

Brujon semblait stupéfié par la prison. On le voyait quelquefois des heures entières dans la cour Charlemagne, debout près de la lucarne du cantinier, et contemplant comme un idiot cette sordide pancarte des prix de la cantine qui commençait par: *ail, 62 centimes*, et finissait par: *cigare, cinq centimes*. Ou bien il passait son temps à trembler, claquant des dents, disant qu’il avait la fièvre, et s’informant si l’un des vingt-huit lits de la salle des fiévreux était vacant.

Tout à coup, vers la deuxième quinzaine de février 1832, on sut que Brujon, cet endormi, avait fait faire, par des commissionnaires de la maison, pas sous son nom, mais sous le nom de trois de ses camarades, trois commissions différentes, lesquelles lui avaient coûté en tout cinquante sous, dépense exorbitante qui attira l'attention du brigadier de la prison.

On s'informa, et en consultant le tarif des commissions affiché dans le parloir des détenus, on arriva à savoir que les cinquante sous se décomposaient ainsi: trois commissions; une au Panthéon, dix sous; une au Val-de-Grâce, quinze sous; et une à la barrière de Grenelle, vingt-cinq sous. Celle-ci était la plus chère de tout le tarif. Or, au Panthéon, au Val-de-Grâce, à la barrière de Grenelle, se trouvaient précisément les domiciles de trois rôdeurs de barrières fort redoutés, Kruideniers, dit Bizarro, Glorieux, forçat libéré, et Barre-Carrosse, sur lesquels cet incident ramena le regard de la police. On croyait deviner que ces hommes étaient affiliés à Patron-Minette, dont on avait coffré deux chefs, Babet et Gueulemer. On supposa que dans les envois de Brujon, remis, non à des adresses de maisons, mais à des gens qui attendaient dans la rue, il devait y avoir des avis pour quelque méfait comploté. On avait d'autres indices encore; on mit la main sur les trois rôdeurs, et l'on crut avoir éventé la machination quelconque de Brujon.

Une semaine environ après ces mesures prises, une nuit, un surveillant de ronde, qui inspectait le dortoir d'en bas du Bâtiment-Neuf, au moment de mettre son marron dans la boîte à marrons, — c'est le moyen qu'on employait pour s'assurer que les surveillants faisaient exactement leur service; toutes les heures un marron devait tomber dans toutes les boîtes clouées aux portes des dortoirs; — un surveillant donc vit par le judas du dortoir Brujon sur son séant qui écrivait quelque chose dans son lit à la clarté de l'applique. Le gardien entra, on mit Brujon pour un mois au cachot, mais on ne put saisir ce qu'il avait écrit. La police n'en sut pas davantage.

Ce qui est certain, c'est que le lendemain «un postillon» fut lancé de la cour Charlemagne dans la fosse-aux-lions par-dessus le bâtiment à cinq étages qui séparait les deux cours.

Les détenus appellent postillon une boulette de pain artistement pétrie qu'on envoie *en Irlande*, c'est-à-dire par-dessus les toits d'une prison, d'une cour à l'autre. Étymologie: par-dessus l'Angleterre; d'une terre à l'autre; *en Irlande*. Cette boulette tombe dans la cour. Celui qui la ramasse l'ouvre et y trouve un billet adressé à quelque prisonnier de la cour. Si c'est un détenu qui fait la trouvaille, il remet le billet à sa destination; si c'est un gardien, ou l'un de ces prisonniers secrètement vendus qu'on appelle moutons dans les prisons et renards dans les bagnes, le billet est porté au greffe et livré à la police.

Cette fois, le postillon parvint à son adresse, quoique celui auquel le message était destiné fût en ce moment *au séparé*. Ce destinataire n'était rien moins que Babet, l'une des quatre têtes de Patron-Minette.

Le postillon contenait un papier roulé sur lequel il n'y avait que ces deux lignes:

— Babet. Il y a une affaire rue Plumet. Une grille sur un jardin.

C'était la chose que Brujon avait écrite dans la nuit.

En dépit des fouilleurs et des fouilleuses, Babet trouva moyen de faire passer le billet de la Force à la Salpêtrière à une «bonne amie» qu'il avait là, et qui y était enfermée. Cette fille à son tour transmit le billet à une autre qu'elle connaissait, une appelée Magnon, fort regardée par la police, mais pas encore arrêtée. Cette Magnon, dont le lecteur a déjà vu le nom, avait avec les Thénardier des relations qui seront précisées plus tard et pouvait, en allant voir Éponine, servir de pont entre la Salpêtrière et les Madelonnettes.

Il arriva justement qu'en ce moment-là même, les preuves manquant dans l'instruction dirigée contre Thénardier à l'endroit de ses filles, Éponine et Azelma furent relâchées.

Quand Éponine sortit, Magnon, qui la guettait à la porte des Madelonnettes, lui remit le billet de Brujon à Babet en la chargeant d'*éclairer* l'affaire.

Éponine alla rue Plumet, reconnut la grille et le jardin, observa la maison, épia, guetta, et, quelques jours après, porta à Magnon, qui demeurait rue Clocheperce, un biscuit que Magnon transmit à la maîtresse de Babet à la Salpêtrière. Un biscuit, dans le ténébreux symbolisme des prisons, signifie: *rien à faire*.

Si bien qu'en moins d'une semaine de là, Babet et Brujon se croisant dans le chemin de ronde de la Force, comme l'un allait «à l'instruction» et que l'autre en revenait: — Eh bien, demanda Brujon, la rue P? — Biscuit, répondit Babet.

Ainsi avorta ce foetus de crime enfanté par Brujon à la Force.

Cet avortement pourtant eut des suites, parfaitement étrangères au programme de Brujon. On les verra.

Souvent en croyant nouer un fil, on en lie un autre.

Chapitre III

Apparition au père Mabeuf

Marius n’allait plus chez personne, seulement il lui arrivait quelquefois de rencontrer le père Mabeuf.

Pendant que Marius descendait lentement ces degrés lugubres qu’on pourrait nommer l’escalier des caves et qui mènent dans les lieux sans lumière où l’on entend les heureux marcher au-dessus de soi, M. Mabeuf descendait de son côté.

La *Flore de Cauteretz* ne se vendait absolument plus. Les expériences sur l’indigo n’avaient point réussi dans le petit jardin d’Austerlitz qui était mal exposé. M. Mabeuf n’y pouvait cultiver que quelques plantes rares qui aiment l’humidité et l’ombre. Il ne se décourageait pourtant pas. Il avait obtenu un coin de terre au Jardin des plantes, en bonne exposition, pour y faire, «à ses frais», ses essais d’indigo. Pour cela il avait mis les cuivres de sa *Flore* au mont-de-piété. Il avait réduit son déjeuner à deux œufs, et il en laissait un à sa vieille servante dont il ne payait plus les gages depuis quinze mois. Et souvent son déjeuner était son seul repas. Il ne riait plus de son rire enfantin, il était devenu morose, et ne recevait plus de visites. Marius faisait bien de ne plus songer à venir. Quelquefois, à l’heure où M. Mabeuf allait au Jardin des plantes, le vieillard et le jeune homme se croisaient sur le boulevard de l’Hôpital. Ils ne parlaient pas et se faisaient un signe de tête tristement. Chose poignante, qu’il y ait un moment où la misère dénoue! On était deux amis, on est deux passants.

Le libraire Royol était mort. M. Mabeuf ne connaissait plus que ses livres, son jardin et son indigo; c’étaient les trois formes qu’avaient prises pour lui le bonheur, le plaisir et l’espérance. Cela lui suffisait pour vivre. Il se disait: — Quand j’aurai fait mes boules de bleu je serai riche, je retirerai mes cuivres du mont-de-piété, je remettrai ma *Flore* en vogue avec du charlatanisme, de la grosse caisse et des annonces dans les journaux, et j’achèterai, je sais bien où, un exemplaire de l’*Art de naviguer* de Pierre de Médine, avec bois, édition de 1559. — En attendant, il travaillait toute la journée à son carré d’indigo, et le soir il rentrait chez lui pour arroser son jardin, et lire ses livres. M. Mabeuf avait à cette époque fort près de quatre-vingts ans.

Un soir il eut une singulière apparition.

Il était rentré qu'il faisait grand jour encore. La mère Plutarque dont la santé se dérangeait était malade et couchée. Il avait dîné d'un os où il restait un peu de viande et d'un morceau de pain qu'il avait trouvé sur la table de cuisine, et s'était assis sur une borne de pierre renversée qui tenait lieu de banc dans son jardin.

Près de ce banc se dressait, à la mode des vieux jardins vergers, une espèce de grand bahut en solives et en planches fort délabré, clapier au rez-de-chaussée, fruitier au premier étage. Il n'y avait pas de lapins dans le clapier, mais il y avait quelques pommes dans le fruitier. Reste de la provision d'hiver.

M. Mabeuf s'était mis à feuilleter et à lire, à l'aide de ses lunettes, deux livres qui le passionnaient, et même, chose plus grave à son âge, le préoccupaient. Sa timidité naturelle le rendait propre à une certaine acceptation des superstitions. Le premier de ces livres était le fameux traité du président Delancre, *De l'inconstance des démons*, l'autre était l'in-quarto de Mutor de la Rubaudière. *Sur les diables de Vauvert et les gobelins de la Bièvre*. Ce dernier bouquin l'intéressait d'autant plus que son jardin avait été un des terrains anciennement hantés par les gobelins. Le crépuscule commençait à blanchir ce qui est en haut et à noircir ce qui est en bas. Tout en lisant, et par-dessus le livre qu'il tenait à la main, le père Mabeuf considérait ses plantes et entre autres un rhododendron magnifique qui était une de ses consolations; quatre jours de hâle, de vent et de soleil, sans une goutte de pluie, venaient de passer; les tiges se courbaient, les boutons penchaient, les feuilles tombaient, tout cela avait besoin d'être arrosé; le rhododendron surtout était triste. Le père Mabeuf était de ceux pour qui les plantes ont des âmes. Le vieillard avait travaillé toute la journée à son carré d'indigo, il était épuisé de fatigue, il se leva pourtant, posa ses livres sur le banc, et marcha tout courbé et à pas chancelants jusqu'au puits, mais quand il eut saisi la chaîne, il ne put même pas la tirer assez pour la décrocher. Alors il se retourna et leva un regard d'angoisse vers le ciel qui s'emplissait d'étoiles.

La soirée avait cette sérénité qui accable les douleurs de l'homme sous je ne sais quelle lugubre et éternelle joie. La nuit promettait d'être aussi aride que l'avait été le jour.

— Des étoiles partout! pensait le vieillard; pas la plus petite nuée! pas une larme d'eau!

Et sa tête, qui s’était soulevée un moment, retomba sur sa poitrine.

Il la releva et regarda encore le ciel en murmurant:

— Une larme de rosée! un peu de pitié!

Il essaya encore une fois de décrocher la chaîne du puits, et ne put.

En ce moment il entendit une voix qui disait:

— Père Mabeuf, voulez-vous que je vous arrose votre jardin?

En même temps un bruit de bête fauve qui passe se fit dans la haie, et il vit sortir de la broussaille une espèce de grande fille maigre qui se dressa devant lui en le regardant hardiment. Cela avait moins l’air d’un être humain que d’une forme qui venait d’éclore au crépuscule.

Avant que le père Mabeuf, qui s’effarait aisément et qui avait, comme nous avons dit, l’effroi facile, eût pu répondre une syllabe, cet être, dont les mouvements avaient dans l’obscurité une sorte de brusquerie bizarre, avait décroché la chaîne, plongé et retiré le seau, et rempli l’arrosoir, et le bonhomme voyait cette apparition qui avait les pieds nus et une jupe en guenilles courir dans les plates-bandes en distribuant la vie autour d’elle. Le bruit de l’arrosoir sur les feuilles remplissait l’âme du père Mabeuf de ravissement. Il lui semblait que maintenant le rhododendron était heureux.

Le premier seau vidé, la fille en tira un second, puis un troisième. Elle arrosa tout le jardin.

À la voir marcher ainsi dans les allées où sa silhouette apparaissait toute noire, agitant sur ses grands bras anguleux son fichu tout déchiqueté, elle avait je ne sais quoi d’une chauve-souris.

Quand elle eut fini, le père Mabeuf s’approcha les larmes aux yeux, et lui posa la main sur le front.

— Dieu vous bénira, dit-il, vous êtes un ange puisque vous avez soin des fleurs.

— Non, répondit-elle, je suis le diable, mais ça m’est égal.

Le vieillard s’écria, sans attendre et sans entendre sa réponse:

— Quel dommage que je sois si malheureux et si pauvre, et que je ne puisse rien faire pour vous!

— Vous pouvez quelque chose, dit-elle.

— Quoi?

— Me dire où demeure M. Marius.

Le vieillard ne comprit point.

— Quel monsieur Marius?

Il leva son regard vitreux et parut chercher quelque chose d’évanoui.

— Un jeune homme qui venait ici dans les temps.

Cependant M. Mabeuf avait fouillé dans sa mémoire.

— Ah! oui,... s’écria-t-il, je sais ce que vous voulez dire. Attendez donc! monsieur Marius... le baron Marius Pontmercy, parbleu! Il demeure... ou plutôt il ne demeure plus.... Ah bien, je ne sais pas.

Tout en parlant, il s’était courbé pour assujettir une branche du rhododendron, et il continuait:

— Tenez, je me souviens à présent. Il passe très souvent sur le boulevard et va du côté de la Glacière. Rue Croulebarbe. Le champ de l’Alouette. Allez par là. Il n’est pas difficile à rencontrer.

Quand M. Mabeuf se releva, il n’y avait plus personne, la fille avait disparu.

Il eut décidément un peu peur.

— Vrai, pensa-t-il, si mon jardin n’était pas arrosé, je croirais que c’est un esprit.

Une heure plus tard, quand il fut couché, cela lui revint, et, en s’endormant, à cet instant trouble où la pensée, pareille à cet oiseau fabuleux qui se change en poisson pour passer la mer, prend peu à peu la forme du songe pour traverser le sommeil, il se disait confusément:

— Au fait, cela ressemble beaucoup à ce que la Rubaudière raconte des gobelins. Serait-ce un gobelin?

Chapitre IV

Apparition à Marius

Quelques jours après cette visite d’un «esprit» au père Mabeuf, un matin, — c’était un lundi, le jour de la pièce de cent sous que Marius empruntait à Courfeyrac pour Thénardier, — Marius avait mis cette pièce de cent sous dans sa poche, et, avant de la porter au greffe, il était allé «se promener un peu», espérant qu’à son retour cela le ferait travailler. C’était d’ailleurs éternellement ainsi. Sitôt levé, il s’asseyait devant un livre et une feuille de papier pour bâcler quelque traduction; il avait à cette époque-là pour besogne la translation en français d’une célèbre querelle d’allemands, la controverse de Gans et de Savigny; il prenait Savigny, il prenait Gans, lisait quatre lignes, essayait d’en écrire une, ne pouvait, voyait une étoile entre son papier et lui, et se levait de sa chaise en disant: — Je vais sortir. Cela me mettra en train.

Et il allait au champ de l’Alouette.

Là il voyait plus que jamais l’étoile, et moins que jamais Savigny et Gans.

Il rentrait, essayait de reprendre son labeur, et n’y parvenait point; pas moyen de renouer un seul des fils cassés dans son cerveau; alors il disait: — Je ne sortirai pas demain. Cela m’empêche de travailler. — Et il sortait tous les jours.

Il habitait le champ de l’Alouette plus que le logis de Courfeyrac. Sa véritable adresse était celle-ci: boulevard de la Santé, au septième arbre après la rue Croulebarbe.

Ce matin-là, il avait quitté ce septième arbre, et s’était assis sur le parapet de la rivière des Gobelins. Un gai soleil pénétrait les feuilles fraîches épanouies et toutes lumineuses.

Il songeait à «Elle». Et sa songerie, devenant reproche, retombait sur lui; il pensait douloureusement à la paresse, paralysie de l’âme, qui le gagnait, et à cette nuit qui s’épaississait d’instant en instant devant lui au point qu’il ne voyait même déjà plus le soleil.

Cependant, à travers ce pénible dégagement d’idées indistinctes qui n’étaient pas même un monologue tant l’action s’affaiblissait en lui, et il n’avait plus même la force de vouloir se désoler, à travers cette absorption mélancolique, les sensations du dehors lui arrivaient. Il entendait derrière lui, au-dessous de lui, sur les deux bords de la rivière, les laveuses des Gobelins battre leur linge, et, au-dessus de sa tête, les oiseaux jaser et chanter dans les ormes. D'un côté le bruit de la liberté, de l'insouciance heureuse, du loisir qui a des ailes; de l'autre le bruit du travail. Chose qui le faisait rêver profondément, et presque réfléchir, c'étaient deux bruits joyeux.

Tout à coup, au milieu de son extase accablée, il entendit une voix connue qui disait:

— Tiens! le voilà!

Il leva les yeux, et reconnut cette malheureuse enfant qui était venue un matin chez lui, l'aînée des filles Thénardier, Éponine; il savait maintenant comment elle se nommait. Chose étrange, elle était appauvrie et embellie, deux pas qu'il ne semblait point qu'elle pût faire. Elle avait accompli un double progrès, vers la lumière et vers la détresse. Elle était pieds nus et en haillons comme le jour où elle était entrée si résolûment dans sa chambre, seulement ses haillons avaient deux mois de plus; les trous étaient plus larges, les guenilles plus sordides. C'était cette même voix enrouée, ce même front terni et ridé par le hâle, ce même regard libre, égaré et vacillant. Elle avait de plus qu'autrefois dans la physionomie ce je ne sais quoi d'effrayé et de lamentable que la prison traversée ajoute à la misère.

Elle avait des brins de paille et de foin dans les cheveux, non comme Ophélia pour être devenue folle à la contagion de la folie d'Hamlet, mais parce qu'elle avait couché dans quelque grenier d'écurie.

Et avec tout cela elle était belle. Quel astre vous êtes, ô jeunesse!

Cependant elle était arrêtée devant Marius avec un peu de joie sur son visage livide et quelque chose qui ressemblait à un sourire.

Elle fut quelques moments comme si elle ne pouvait parler.

— Je vous rencontre donc! dit-elle enfin. Le père Mabeuf avait raison, c'était sur ce boulevard-ci! Comme je vous ai cherché! si vous saviez! Savez-vous cela? j'ai été au bloc. Quinze jours! Ils m'ont lâchée! vu qu'il n'y avait rien sur moi et que d'ailleurs je n'avais pas l'âge du discernement. Il s'en fallait de deux mois. Oh! comme je vous ai cherché! Voilà six semaines. Vous ne demeurez donc plus là-bas?

— Non, dit Marius.

— Oh! je comprends. À cause de la chose. C'est désagréable ces esbroufes-là. Vous avez déménagé. Tiens! pourquoi donc portez-vous des vieux chapeaux comme ça? Un jeune homme comme vous, ça doit avoir de beaux habits. Savez-vous, monsieur Marius? le père Mabeuf vous appelle le baron Marius je ne sais plus quoi. Pas vrai que vous n’êtes pas baron? Les barons c’est des vieux, ça va au Luxembourg devant le château, où il y a le plus de soleil, ça lit la *Quotidienne* pour un sou. J’ai été une fois porter une lettre chez un baron qui était comme ça. Il avait plus de cent ans. Dites donc, où est-ce que vous demeurez à présent?

Marius ne répondit pas.

— Ah! continua-t-elle, vous avez un trou à votre chemise. Il faudra que je vous recouse cela.

Elle reprit avec une expression qui s’assombrissait peu à peu: Vous n’avez pas l’air content de me voir?

Marius se taisait; elle garda elle-même un instant le silence, puis s’écria:

— Si je voulais pourtant, je vous forcerais bien à avoir l’air content!

— Quoi? demanda Marius. Que voulez-vous dire?

— Ah! vous me disiez tu! reprit-elle.

— Eh bien, que veux-tu dire?

Elle se mordit la lèvre; elle semblait hésiter comme en proie à une sorte de combat intérieur. Enfin elle partit prendre son parti.

— Tant pis, c’est égal. Vous avez l’air triste, je veux que vous soyez content. Promettez-moi seulement que vous allez rire. Je veux vous voir rire et vous voir dire: Ah bien! c’est bon. Pauvre M. Marius! vous savez! vous m’avez promis que vous me donneriez tout ce que je voudrais....

— Oui! mais parle donc!

Elle regarda Marius dans le blanc des yeux et lui dit:

— J’ai l’adresse.

Marius pâlit. Tout son sang reflua à son cœur.

— Quelle adresse?

— L’adresse que vous m’avez demandée!

Elle ajouta comme si elle faisait effort:

— L’adresse... vous savez bien?

— Oui! bégaya Marius.

— De la demoiselle!

Ce mot prononcé, elle soupira profondément.

Marius sauta du parapet où il était assis et lui prit éperdument la main.

— Oh! eh bien! conduis-moi! dis-moi! demande-moi tout ce que tu voudras! Où est-ce?

— Venez avec moi, répondit-elle. Je ne sais pas bien la rue et le numéro; c’est tout de l’autre côté d’ici, mais je connais bien la maison, je vais vous conduire.

Elle retira sa main et reprit, d’un ton qui eût navré un observateur, mais qui n’effleura même pas Marius ivre et transporté:

— Oh! comme vous êtes content!

Un nuage passa sur le front de Marius. Il saisit Éponine par le bras.

— Jure-moi une chose!

— Jurer? dit-elle, qu’est-ce que cela veut dire? Tiens! vous voulez que je jure?

Et elle rit.

— Ton père! promets-moi, Éponine! jure-moi que tu ne diras pas cette adresse à ton père!

Elle se tourna vers lui d’un air stupéfait.

— Éponine! comment savez-vous que je m’appelle Éponine?

— Promets-moi ce que je te dis!

Mais elle semblait ne pas l’entendre.

— C’est gentil, ça! vous m’avez appelée Éponine! Marius lui prit les deux bras à la fois.

— Mais réponds-moi donc, au nom du ciel! fais attention à ce que je te dis, jure-moi que tu ne diras pas l’adresse que tu sais à ton père!

— Mon père? dit-elle. Ah oui, mon père! Soyez donc tranquille. Il est au secret. D’ailleurs est-ce que je m’occupe de mon père!

— Mais tu ne me promets pas! s’écria Marius.

— Mais lâchez-moi donc! dit-elle en éclatant de rire, comme vous me secouez! Si! si! je vous promets ça! je vous jure ça! qu’est-ce que cela me fait? je ne dirai pas l’adresse à mon père. Là! ça va-t-il? c’est-il ça?

— Ni à personne? fit Marius.

— Ni à personne.

— À présent, reprit Marius, conduis-moi.

— Tout de suite?

— Tout de suite.

— Venez. — Oh! comme il est content! dit-elle.

Après quelques pas, elle s’arrêta.

— Vous me suivez de trop près, monsieur Marius. Laissez-moi aller devant, et suivez-moi comme cela, sans faire semblant. Il ne faut pas qu’on voie un jeune homme bien, comme vous, avec une femme comme moi.

Aucune langue ne saurait dire tout ce qu’il y avait dans ce mot, femme, ainsi prononcé par cette enfant.

Elle fit une dizaine de pas, et s’arrêta encore; Marius la rejoignit. Elle lui adressa la parole de côté et sans se tourner vers lui:

— À propos, vous savez que vous m’avez promis quelque chose?

Marius fouilla dans sa poche. Il ne possédait au monde que les cinq francs destinés au père Thénardier. Il les prit, et les mit dans la main d’Éponine.

Elle ouvrit les doigts et laissa tomber la pièce à terre, et le regardant d’un air sombre:

— Je ne veux pas de votre argent, dit-elle.

Livre troisième — La maison de la rue Plumet

Chapitre I

La maison à secret

Vers le milieu du siècle dernier, un président à mortier au parlement de Paris ayant une maîtresse et s’en cachant, car à cette époque les grands seigneurs montraient leurs maîtresses et les bourgeois les cachaient, fit construire «une petite maison» faubourg Saint-Germain, dans la rue déserte de Blomet, qu’on nomme aujourd’hui rue Plumet, non loin de l’endroit qu’on appelait alors le *Combat des Animaux*.

Cette maison se composait d’un pavillon à un seul étage, deux salles au rez-de-chaussée, deux chambres au premier, en bas une cuisine, en haut un boudoir, sous le toit un grenier, le tout précédé d’un jardin avec large grille donnant sur la rue. Ce jardin avait environ un arpent. C’était là tout ce que les passants pouvaient entrevoir; mais en arrière du pavillon il y avait une cour étroite et au fond de la cour un logis bas de deux pièces sur cave, espèce d’en-cas destiné à dissimuler au besoin un enfant et une nourrice. Ce logis communiquait, par derrière, par une porte masquée et ouvrant à secret, avec un long couloir étroit, pavé, sinueux, à ciel ouvert, bordé de deux hautes murailles, lequel, caché avec un art prodigieux et comme perdu entre les clôtures des jardins et des cultures dont il suivait tous les angles et tous les détours, allait aboutir à une autre porte également à secret qui s’ouvrait à un demi-quart de lieue de là, presque dans un autre quartier, à l’extrémité solitaire de la rue de Babylone.

M. le président s’introduisait par là, si bien que ceux-là mêmes qui l’eussent épié et suivi et qui eussent observé que M. le président se rendait tous les jours mystérieusement quelque part, n’eussent pu se douter qu’aller rue de Babylone c’était aller rue Blomet. Grâce à d’habiles achats de terrains, l’ingénieux magistrat avait pu faire faire ce travail de voirie secrète chez lui, sur sa propre terre, et par conséquent sans contrôle. Plus tard il avait revendu par petites parcelles pour jardins et cultures les lots de terre riverains du corridor, et les propriétaires de ces lots de terre croyaient des deux côtés avoir devant les yeux un mur mitoyen, et ne soupçonnaient pas même l’existence de ce long ruban de pavé serpentant entre deux murailles parmi leurs plates-bandes et leurs vergers. Les oiseaux seuls voyaient cette curiosité. Il est probable que les fauvettes et les mésanges du siècle dernier avaient fort jasé sur le compte de M. le président.

Le pavillon, bâti en pierre dans le goût Mansart, lambrissé et meublé dans le goût Watteau, rocaille au dedans, perruque au dehors, muré d'une triple haie de fleurs, avait quelque chose de discret, de coquet et de solennel, comme il sied à un caprice de l'amour et de la magistrature.

Cette maison et ce couloir, qui ont disparu aujourd'hui, existaient encore il y a une quinzaine d'années. En 93, un chaudronnier avait acheté la maison pour la démolir, mais n'ayant pu en payer le prix, la nation le mit en faillite. De sorte que ce fut la maison qui démolit le chaudronnier. Depuis la maison resta inhabitée, et tomba lentement en ruine, comme toute demeure à laquelle la présence de l'homme ne communique plus la vie. Elle était restée meublée de ses vieux meubles et toujours à vendre ou à louer, et les dix ou douze personnes qui passent par an rue Plumet en étaient averties par un écriteau jaune et illisible accroché à la grille du jardin depuis 1810.

Vers la fin de la Restauration, ces mêmes passants purent remarquer que l'écriteau avait disparu, et que, même, les volets du premier étage étaient ouverts. La maison en effet était occupée. Les fenêtres avaient «des petits rideaux», signe qu'il y avait une femme.

Au mois d'octobre 1829, un homme d'un certain âge s'était présenté et avait loué la maison telle qu'elle était, y compris, bien entendu, l'arrière-corps de logis et le couloir qui allait aboutir à la rue de Babylone. Il avait fait rétablir les ouvertures à secret des deux portes de ce passage. La maison, nous venons de le dire, était encore à peu près meublée des vieux ameublements du président, le nouveau locataire avait ordonné quelques réparations, ajouté çà et là ce qui manquait, remis des pavés à la cour, des briques aux carrelages, des marches à l'escalier, des feuilles aux parquets et des vitres aux croisées, et enfin était venu s'installer avec une jeune fille et une servante âgée, sans bruit, plutôt comme quelqu'un qui se glisse que comme quelqu'un qui entre chez soi. Les voisins n'en jasèrent point, par la raison qu'il n'y avait pas de voisins.

Ce locataire peu à effet était Jean Valjean, la jeune fille était Cosette. La servante était une fille appelée Toussaint que Jean Valjean avait sauvée de l'hôpital et de la misère et qui était vieille, provinciale et bègue, trois qualités qui avaient déterminé Jean Valjean à la prendre avec lui. Il avait loué la maison sous le nom de M. Fauchelevent, rentier. Dans tout ce qui a été raconté plus haut, le lecteur a sans doute moins tardé encore que Thénardier à reconnaître Jean Valjean.

Pourquoi Jean Valjean avait-il quitté le couvent du Petit-Picpus? Que s’était-il passé?

Il ne s’était rien passé.

On s’en souvient. Jean Valjean était heureux dans le couvent, si heureux que sa conscience finit par s’inquiéter. Il voyait Cosette tous les jours, il sentait la paternité naître et se développer en lui de plus en plus, il couvait de l’âme cette enfant, il se disait qu’elle était à lui, que rien ne pouvait la lui enlever, que cela serait ainsi indéfiniment, que certainement elle se ferait religieuse, y étant chaque jour doucement provoquée, qu’ainsi le couvent était désormais l’univers pour elle comme pour lui, qu’il y vieillirait et qu’elle y grandirait, qu’elle y vieillirait et qu’il y mourrait, qu’enfin, ravissante espérance, aucune séparation n’était possible. En réfléchissant à ceci, il en vint à tomber dans des perplexités. Il s’interrogea. Il se demandait si tout ce bonheur-là était bien à lui, s’il ne se composait pas du bonheur d’un autre, du bonheur de cette enfant qu’il confisquait et qu’il dérobait, lui vieillard; si ce n’était point là un vol? Il se disait que cette enfant avait le droit de connaître la vie avant d’y renoncer, que lui retrancher, d’avance et en quelque sorte sans la consulter, toutes les joies sous prétexte de lui sauver toutes les épreuves, profiter de son ignorance et de son isolement pour lui faire germer une vocation artificielle, c’était dénaturer une créature humaine et mentir à Dieu. Et qui sait si, se rendant compte un jour de tout cela et religieuse à regret, Cosette n’en viendrait pas à le haïr? Dernière pensée, presque égoïste et moins héroïque que les autres, mais qui lui était insupportable. Il résolut de quitter le couvent.

Il le résolut, il reconnut avec désolation qu’il le fallait. Quant aux objections, il n’y en avait pas. Cinq ans de séjour entre ces quatre murs et de disparition avaient nécessairement détruit ou dispersé les éléments de crainte. Il pouvait rentrer parmi les hommes tranquillement. Il avait vieilli, et tout avait changé. Qui le reconnaîtrait maintenant? Et puis, à voir le pire, il n’y avait de danger que pour lui-même, et il n’avait pas le droit de condamner Cosette au cloître par la raison qu’il avait été condamné au bagne. D’ailleurs, qu’est-ce que le danger devant le devoir? Enfin, rien ne l’empêchait d’être prudent et de prendre ses précautions.

Quant à l’éducation de Cosette, elle était à peu près terminée et complète.

Une fois sa détermination arrêtée, il attendit l’occasion. Elle ne tarda pas à se présenter. Le vieux Fauchelevent mourut.

Jean Valjean demanda audience à la révérende prieure et lui dit qu’ayant fait à la mort de son frère un petit héritage qui lui permettait de vivre désormais sans travailler, il quittait le service du couvent, et emmenait sa fille; mais que, comme il n’était pas juste que Cosette, ne prononçant point ses vœux, eût été élevée gratuitement, il suppliait humblement la révérende prieure de trouver bon qu’il offrît à la communauté, comme indemnité des cinq années que Cosette y avait passées, une somme de cinq mille francs.

C’est ainsi que Jean Valjean sortit du couvent de l’Adoration Perpétuelle.

En quittant le couvent, il prit lui-même dans ses bras et ne voulut confier à aucun commissionnaire la petite valise dont il avait toujours la clef sur lui. Cette valise intriguait Cosette, à cause de l’odeur d’embaumement qui en sortait.

Disons tout de suite que désormais cette malle ne le quitta plus. Il l’avait toujours dans sa chambre. C’était la première et quelquefois l’unique chose qu’il emportait dans ses déménagements. Cosette en riait, et appelait cette valise *l’inséparable*, disant: J’en suis jalouse.

Jean Valjean du reste ne reparut pas à l’air libre sans une profonde anxiété.

Il découvrit la maison de la rue Plumet et s’y blottit. Il était désormais en possession du nom d’Ultime Fauchelevent.

En même temps il loua deux autres appartements dans Paris, afin de moins attirer l’attention que s’il fût toujours resté dans le même quartier, de pouvoir faire au besoin des absences à la moindre inquiétude qui le prendrait, et enfin de ne plus se trouver au dépourvu comme la nuit où il avait si miraculeusement échappé à Javert. Ces deux appartements étaient deux logis fort chétifs et d’apparence pauvre, dans deux quartiers très éloignés l’un de l’autre, l’un rue de l’Ouest, l’autre rue de l’Homme-Armé.

Il allait de temps en temps, tantôt rue de l’Homme-Armé, tantôt rue de l’Ouest, passer un mois ou six semaines avec Cosette sans emmener Toussaint. Il s’y faisait servir par les portiers et s’y donnait pour un rentier de la banlieue ayant un pied-à-terre en ville. Cette haute vertu avait trois domiciles dans Paris pour échapper à la police.

Chapitre II

Jean Valjean garde national

Du reste, à proprement parler, il vivait rue Plumet et il y avait arrangé son existence de la façon que voici:

Cosette avec la servante occupait le pavillon; elle avait la grande chambre à coucher aux trumeaux peints, le boudoir aux baguettes dorées, le salon du président meublé de tapisseries et de vastes fauteuils; elle avait le jardin. Jean Valjean avait fait mettre dans la chambre de Cosette un lit à baldaquin d’ancien damas à trois couleurs, et un vieux et beau tapis de Perse acheté rue du Figuier-Saint-Paul chez la mère Gaucher, et, pour corriger la sévérité de ces vieilleries magnifiques, il avait amalgamé à ce bric-à-brac tous les petits meubles gais et gracieux des jeunes filles, l’étagère, la bibliothèque et les livres dorés, la papeterie, le buvard, la table à ouvrage incrustée de nacre, le nécessaire de vermeil, la toilette en porcelaine du Japon. De longs rideaux de damas fond rouge à trois couleurs pareils au lit pendaient aux fenêtres du premier étage. Au rez-de-chaussée, des rideaux de tapisserie. Tout l’hiver la petite maison de Cosette était chauffée du haut en bas. Lui, il habitait l’espèce de loge de portier qui était dans la cour du fond avec un matelas sur un lit de sangle, une table de bois blanc, deux chaises de paille, un pot à l’eau de faïence, quelques bouquins sur une planche, sa chère valise dans un coin, jamais de feu. Il dînait avec Cosette, et il y avait un pain bis pour lui sur la table. Il avait dit à Toussaint lorsqu’elle était entrée: — C’est mademoiselle qui est la maîtresse de la maison. — Et vous, mo-onsieur? avait répliqué Toussaint stupéfaite. — Moi, je suis bien mieux que le maître, je suis le père.

Cosette au couvent avait été dressée au ménage et réglait la dépense qui était fort modeste. Tous les jours Jean Valjean prenait le bras de Cosette et la menait promener. Il la conduisait au Luxembourg, dans l’allée la moins fréquentée, et tous les dimanches à la messe, toujours à Saint-Jacques-du-Haut-Pas, parce que c’était fort loin. Comme c’est un quartier très pauvre, il y faisait beaucoup l’aumône, et les malheureux l’entouraient dans l’église, ce qui lui avait valu l’épître des Thénardier: *Au monsieur bienfaisant de l’église Saint-Jacques-du-Haut-Pas*. Il menait volontiers Cosette visiter les indigents et les malades. Aucun étranger n’entrait dans la maison de la rue

Plumet. Toussaint apportait les provisions, et Jean Valjean allait lui-même chercher l’eau à une prise d’eau qui était tout proche sur le boulevard. On mettait le bois et le vin dans une espèce de renfoncement demi-souterrain tapissé de rocailles qui avoisinait la porte de la rue de Babylone et qui autrefois avait servi de grotte à M. le président; car au temps des Folies et des Petites-Maisons, il n’y avait pas d’amour sans grotte.

Il y avait dans la porte bâtarde de la rue de Babylone une de ces boîtes tirelires destinées aux lettres et aux journaux; seulement, les trois habitants du pavillon de la rue Plumet ne recevant ni journaux ni lettres, toute l’utilité de la boîte, jadis entremetteuse d’amourettes et confidente d’un robin dameret, était maintenant limitée aux avis du percepteur des contributions et aux billets de garde. Car M. Fauchelevent, rentier, était de la garde nationale; il n’avait pu échapper aux mailles étroites du recensement de 1831. Les renseignements municipaux pris à cette époque étaient remontés jusqu’au couvent du Petit-Picpus, sorte de nuée impénétrable et sainte d’où Jean Valjean était sorti vénérable aux yeux de sa mairie, et, par conséquent, digne de monter sa garde.

Trois ou quatre fois l’an, Jean Valjean endossait son uniforme et faisait sa faction; très volontiers d’ailleurs; c’était pour lui un déguisement correct qui le mêlait à tout le monde en le laissant solitaire. Jean Valjean venait d’atteindre ses soixante ans, âge de l’exemption légale; mais il n’en paraissait pas plus de cinquante; d’ailleurs il n’avait aucune envie de se soustraire à son sergent-major et de chicaner le comte de Lobau; il n’avait pas d’état civil; il cachait son nom, il cachait son identité, il cachait son âge, il cachait tout; et, nous venons de le dire, c’était un garde national de bonne volonté. Ressembler au premier venu qui paye ses contributions, c’était là toute son ambition. Cet homme avait pour idéal, au dedans, l’ange, au dehors, le bourgeois.

Notons un détail pourtant. Quand Jean Valjean sortait avec Cosette, il s’habillait comme on l’a vu et avait assez l’air d’un ancien officier. Lorsqu’il sortait seul, et c’était le plus habituellement le soir, il était toujours vêtu d’une veste et d’un pantalon d’ouvrier, et coiffé d’une casquette qui lui cachait le visage. Était-ce précaution, ou humilité? Les deux à la fois. Cosette était accoutumée au côté énigmatique de sa destinée et remarquait à peine les singularités de son père. Quant à Toussaint, elle vénérait Jean Valjean, et trouvait bon tout ce qu’il faisait. — Un jour, son boucher, qui avait entrevu Jean Valjean, lui dit: C’est un drôle de corps. Elle répondit: C’est un-un saint.

Ni Jean Valjean, ni Cosette, ni Toussaint n’entraient et ne sortaient jamais que par la porte de la rue de Babylone. À moins de les apercevoir par la grille du jardin, il était difficile de deviner qu’ils demeuraient rue Plumet. Cette grille restait toujours fermée. Jean Valjean avait laissé le jardin inculte, afin qu’il n’attirât pas l’attention.

En cela il se trompait peut-être.

Chapitre III

Foliis ac frondibus

Ce jardin ainsi livré à lui-même depuis plus d’un demi-siècle était devenu extraordinaire et charmant. Les passant d’il y a quarante ans s’arrêtaient dans cette rue pour le contempler, sans se douter des secrets qu’il dérobait derrière ses épaisseurs fraîches et vertes. Plus d’un songeur à cette époque a laissé bien des fois ses yeux et sa pensée pénétrer indiscrètement à travers les barreaux de l’antique grille cadenassée, tordue, branlante, scellée à deux piliers verdis et moussus, bizarrement couronné d’un fronton d’arabesques indéchiffrables.

Il y avait un banc de pierre dans un coin, une ou deux statues moisies, quelques treillages décloués par le temps pourrissant sur le mur; du reste plus d’allées ni de gazon; du chiendent partout. Le jardinage était parti, et la nature était revenue. Les mauvaises herbes abondaient, aventure admirable pour un pauvre coin de terre. La fête des giroflées y était splendide. Rien dans ce jardin ne contrariait l’effort sacré des choses vers la vie; la croissance vénérable était là chez elle. Les arbres s’étaient baissés vers les ronces, les ronces étaient montées vers les arbres, la plante avait grimpé, la branche avait fléchi, ce qui rampe sur la terre avait été trouver ce qui s’épanouit dans l’air, ce qui flotte au vent s’était penché vers ce qui se traîne dans la mousse; troncs, rameaux, feuilles, fibres, touffes, vrilles, sarments, épines, s’étaient mêlés, traversés, mariés, confondus; la végétation, dans un embrassement étroit et profond, avait célébré et accompli là, sous l’œil satisfait du créateur, en cet enclos de trois cents pieds carrés, le saint mystère de sa fraternité, symbole de la fraternité humaine. Ce jardin n’était plus un jardin, c’était une broussaille colossale; c’est-à-dire quelque chose qui est impénétrable comme une forêt, peuplé comme une ville, frissonnant comme un nid, sombre comme une cathédrale, odorant comme un bouquet, solitaire comme une tombe, vivant comme une foule.

En floréal, cet énorme buisson, libre derrière sa grille et dans ses quatre murs, entrait en rut dans le sourd travail de la germination universelle, tressaillait au soleil levant presque comme une bête qui aspire les effluves de l’amour cosmique et qui sent la sève d’avril monter et bouillonner dans ses veines, et, secouant au vent sa prodigieuse chevelure verte, semait sur la terre humide, sur les statues frustes, sur le perron croulant du pavillon et jusque sur le pavé de la rue déserte, les fleurs en étoiles, la rosée en perles, la fécondité, la beauté, la vie, la joie, les parfums. À midi mille papillons blancs s'y réfugiaient, et c'était un spectacle divin de voir là tourbillonner en flocons dans l'ombre cette neige vivante de l'été. Là, dans ces gaies ténèbres de la verdure, une foule de voix innocentes parlaient doucement à l'âme, et ce que les gazouillements avaient oublié de dire, les bourdonnements le complétaient. Le soir une vapeur de rêverie se dégageait du jardin et l'enveloppait; un linceul de brume, une tristesse céleste et calme, le couvraient; l'odeur si enivrante des chèvrefeuilles et des liserons en sortait de toute part comme un poison exquis et subtil; on entendait les derniers appels des grimperaux et des bergeronnettes s'assoupissant sous les branchages; on y sentait cette intimité sacrée de l'oiseau et de l'arbre; le jour les ailes réjouissent les feuilles, la nuit les feuilles protègent les ailes.

L'hiver, la broussaille était noire, mouillée, hérissée, grelottante, et laissait un peu voir la maison. On apercevait, au lieu de fleurs dans les rameaux et de rosée dans les fleurs, les longs rubans d'argent des limaces sur le froid et épais tapis des feuilles jaunes; mais de toute façon, sous tout aspect, en toute saison, printemps, hiver, été, automne, ce petit enclos respirait la mélancolie, la contemplation, la solitude, la liberté, l'absence de l'homme, la présence de Dieu; et la vieille grille rouillée avait l'air de dire: ce jardin est à moi.

Le pavé de Paris avait beau être là tout autour, les hôtels classiques et splendides de la rue de Varenne à deux pas, le dôme des Invalides tout près, la Chambre des députés pas loin; les carrosses de la rue de Bourgogne et de la rue Saint-Dominique avaient beau rouler fastueusement dans le voisinage, les omnibus jaunes, bruns, blancs, rouges avaient beau se croiser dans le carrefour prochain, le désert était rue Plumet; et la mort des anciens propriétaires, une révolution qui avait passé, l'écroulement des antiques fortunes, l'absence, l'oubli, quarante ans d'abandon et de viduité, avaient suffi pour ramener dans ce lieu privilégié les fougères, les bouillons-blancs, les ciguës, les achillées, les digitales, les hautes herbes, les grandes plantes gaufrées aux larges feuilles de drap vert pâle, les lézards, les scarabées, les insectes inquiets et rapides; pour faire sortir des profondeurs de la terre et reparaître entre ces quatre murs je ne sais quelle grandeur sauvage et farouche; et pour que la nature, qui déconcerte les arrangements mesquins de l'homme et qui se répand toujours tout entière là où elle se répand, aussi bien dans la fourmi que dans l’aigle, en vînt à s’épanouir dans un méchant petit jardin parisien avec autant de rudesse et de majesté que dans une forêt vierge du Nouveau Monde.

Rien n’est petit en effet; quiconque est sujet aux pénétrations profondes de la nature, le sait. Bien qu’aucune satisfaction absolue ne soit donnée à la philosophie, pas plus de circonscrire la cause que de limiter l’effet, le contemplateur tombe dans des extases sans fond à cause de toutes ces décompositions de forces aboutissant à l’unité. Tout travaille à tout.

L’algèbre s’applique aux nuages; l’irradiation de l’astre profite à la rose; aucun penseur n’oserait dire que le parfum de l’aubépine est inutile aux constellations. Qui donc peut calculer le trajet d’une molécule? que savons-nous si des créations de mondes ne sont point déterminées par des chutes de grains de sable? qui donc connaît les flux et les reflux réciproques de l’infiniment grand et de l’infiniment petit, le retentissement des causes dans les précipices de l’être, et les avalanches de la création? Un ciron importe; le petit est grand, le grand est petit; tout est en équilibre dans la nécessité; effrayante vision pour l’esprit. Il y a entre les êtres et les choses des relations de prodige; dans cet inépuisable ensemble, de soleil à puceron, on ne se méprise pas; on a besoin les uns des autres. La lumière n’emporte pas dans l’azur les parfums terrestres sans savoir ce qu’elle en fait; la nuit fait des distributions d’essence stellaire aux fleurs endormies. Tous les oiseaux qui volent ont à la patte le fil de l’infini. La germination se complique de l’éclosion d’un météore et du coup de bec de l’hirondelle brisant l’œuf, et elle mène de front la naissance d’un ver de terre et l’avènement de Socrate. Où finit le télescope, le microscope commence. Lequel des deux a la vue la plus grande? Choisissez. Une moisissure est une pléiade de fleurs; une nébuleuse est une fourmilière d’étoiles. Même promiscuité, et plus inouïe encore, des choses de l’intelligence et des faits de la substance. Les éléments et les principes se mêlent, se combinent, s’épousent, se multiplient les uns par les autres, au point de faire aboutir le monde matériel et le monde moral à la même clarté. Le phénomène est en perpétuel repli sur lui-même. Dans les vastes échanges cosmiques, la vie universelle va et vient en quantités inconnues, roulant tout dans l’invisible mystère des effluves, employant tout, ne perdant pas un rêve de pas un sommeil, semant un animalcule ici, émiettant un astre là, oscillant et serpentant, faisant de la lumière une force et de la pensée un élément, disséminée et indivisible, dissolvant tout, excepté ce point géométrique, le moi; ramenant tout à l’âme atome; épanouissant tout en Dieu; enchevêtrant, depuis la plus haute jusqu’à la plus basse, toutes les activités dans l’obscurité d’un mécanisme vertigineux, rattachant le vol d’un insecte au mouvement de la terre, subordonnant, qui sait? ne fût-ce que par l’identité de la loi, l’évolution de la comète dans le firmament au tournoiement de l’infusoire dans la goutte d’eau. Machine faite d’esprit. Engrenage énorme dont le premier moteur est le moucheron et dont la dernière roue est le zodiaque.

Chapitre IV

Changement de grille

Il semblait que ce jardin, créé autrefois pour cacher les mystères libertins, se fût transformé et fût devenu propre à abriter les mystères chastes. Il n’avait plus ni berceaux, ni boulingrins, ni tonnelles, ni grottes; il avait une magnifique obscurité échevelée tombant comme un voile de toutes parts. Paphos s’était refait Éden. On ne sait quoi de repentant avait assaini cette retraite. Cette bouquetière offrait maintenant ses fleurs à l’âme. Ce coquet jardin, jadis fort compromis, était rentré dans la virginité et la pudeur. Un président assisté d’un jardinier, un bonhomme qui croyait continuer Lamoignon et un autre bonhomme qui croyait continuer Le Nôtre, l’avaient contourné, taillé, chiffonné, attifé, façonné pour la galanterie; la nature l’avait ressaisi, l’avait rempli d’ombre, et l’avait arrangé pour l’amour.

Il y avait aussi dans cette solitude un cœur qui était tout prêt. L’amour n’avait qu’à se montrer; il avait là un temple composé de verdures, d’herbe, de mousse, de soupirs d’oiseaux, de molles ténèbres, de branches agitées, et une âme faite de douceur, de foi, de candeur, d’espoir, d’aspiration et d’illusion.

Cosette était sortie du couvent encore presque enfant; elle avait un peu plus de quatorze ans, et elle était «dans l’âge ingrat»; nous l’avons dit, à part les yeux, elle semblait plutôt laide que jolie; elle n’avait cependant aucun trait disgracieux, mais elle était gauche, maigre, timide et hardie à la fois, une grande petite fille enfin.

Son éducation était terminée; C’est-à-dire on lui avait appris la religion, et même, et surtout la dévotion; puis «l’histoire», c’est-à-dire la chose qu’on appelle ainsi au couvent, la géographie, la grammaire, les participes, les rois de France, un peu de musique, à faire un nez, etc., mais du reste elle ignorait tout, ce qui est un charme et un péril. L’âme d’une jeune fille ne doit pas être laissée obscure; plus tard, il s’y fait des mirages trop brusques et trop vifs comme dans une chambre noire. Elle doit être doucement et discrètement éclairée, plutôt du reflet des réalités que de leur lumière directe et dure. Demi-jour utile et gracieusement austère qui dissipe les peurs puériles et empêche les chutes. Il n’y a que l’instinct maternel, intuition admirable où entrent les souvenirs de la vierge et l’expérience de la femme, qui sache comment et de quoi doit être fait ce demi-jour. Rien ne supplée à cet instinct. Pour former l'âme d'une jeune fille, toutes les religieuses du monde ne valent pas une mère.

Cosette n'avait pas eu de mère. Elle n'avait eu que beaucoup de mères au pluriel.

Quant à Jean Valjean, il y avait bien en lui toutes les tendresses à la fois, et toutes les sollicitudes; mais ce n'était qu'un vieux homme qui ne savait rien du tout.

Or, dans cette œuvre de l'éducation, dans cette grave affaire de la préparation d'une femme à la vie, que de science il faut pour lutter contre cette grande ignorance qu'on appelle l'innocence!

Rien ne prépare une jeune fille aux passions comme le couvent. Le couvent tourne la pensée du côté de l'inconnu. Le cœur, replié sur lui-même, se creuse, ne pouvant s'épancher, et s'approfondit, ne pouvant s'épanouir. De là des visions, des suppositions, des conjectures, des romans ébauchés, des aventures souhaitées, des constructions fantastiques, des édifices tout entiers bâtis dans l'obscurité intérieure de l'esprit, sombres et secrètes demeures où les passions trouvent tout de suite à se loger dès que la grille franchie leur permet d'entrer. Le couvent est une compression qui, pour triompher du cœur humain, doit durer toute la vie.

En quittant le couvent, Cosette ne pouvait rien trouver de plus doux et de plus dangereux que la maison de la rue Plumet. C'était la continuation de la solitude avec le commencement de la liberté; un jardin fermé, mais une nature âcre, riche, voluptueuse et odorante; les mêmes songes que dans le couvent, mais de jeunes hommes entrevus; une grille, mais sur la rue.

Cependant, nous le répétons, quand elle y arriva, elle n'était encore qu'un enfant. Jean Valjean lui livra ce jardin inculte. — Fais-y tout ce que tu voudras, lui disait-il. Cela amusait Cosette; elle en remuait toutes les touffes et toutes les pierres, elle y cherchait «des bêtes»; elle y jouait, en attendant qu'elle y rêvât; elle aimait ce jardin pour les insectes qu'elle y trouvait sous ses pieds à travers l'herbe, en attendant qu'elle l'aimât pour les étoiles qu'elle y verrait dans les branches au-dessus de sa tête.

Et puis, elle aimait son père, c'est-à-dire Jean Valjean, de toute son âme, avec une naïve passion filiale qui lui faisait du bonhomme un compagnon désiré et charmant. On se souvient que M. Madeleine lisait beaucoup, Jean Valjean avait continué; il en était venu à causer bien; il avait la richesse secrète et l'éloquence d'une intelligence humble et vraie qui s'est spontanément cultivée. Il lui était resté juste assez d’âpreté pour assaisonner sa bonté; c’était un esprit rude et un cœur doux. Au Luxembourg, dans leurs tête-à-tête, il faisait de longues explications de tout, puisant dans ce qu’il avait lu, puisant aussi dans ce qu’il avait souffert. Tout en l’écoutant, les yeux de Cosette erraient vaguement.

Cet homme simple suffisait à la pensée de Cosette, de même que ce jardin sauvage à ses yeux. Quand elle avait bien poursuivi les papillons, elle arrivait près de lui essoufflée et disait: Ah! comme j’ai couru! Il la baisait au front.

Cosette adorait le bonhomme. Elle était toujours sur ses talons. Là où était Jean Valjean était le bien-être. Comme Jean Valjean n’habitait ni le pavillon, ni le jardin, elle se plaisait mieux dans l’arrière-cour pavée que dans l’enclos plein de fleurs, et dans la petite loge meublée de chaises de paille que dans le grand salon tendu de tapisseries où s’adossaient des fauteuils capitonnés. Jean Valjean lui disait quelquefois, en souriant du bonheur d’être importuné: — Mais va-t’en chez toi! Laisse-moi donc un peu seul!

Elle lui faisait de ces charmantes gronderies tendres qui ont tant de grâce remontant de la fille au père:

— Père, j’ai très froid chez vous; pourquoi ne mettez-vous pas ici un tapis et un poêle?

— Chère enfant, il y a tant de gens qui valent mieux que moi et qui n’ont même pas un toit sur leur tête.

— Alors pourquoi y a-t-il du feu chez moi et tout ce qu’il faut?

— Parce que tu es une femme et un enfant.

— Bah! les hommes doivent donc avoir froid et être mal?

— Certains hommes.

— C’est bon, je viendrai si souvent ici que vous serez bien obligé d’y faire du feu.

Elle lui disait encore:

— Père, Pourquoi mangez-vous du vilain pain comme cela?

— Parce que..., ma fille.

— Eh bien, si vous en mangez, j’en mangerai.

Alors, pour que Cosette ne mangeât pas de pain noir, Jean Valjean mangeait du pain blanc.

Cosette ne se rappelait que confusément son enfance. Elle priait matin et soir pour sa mère qu’elle n’avait pas connue. Les Thénardier lui étaient restés comme deux figures hideuses à l'état de rêve. Elle se rappelait qu'elle avait été «un jour, la nuit» chercher de l'eau dans un bois. Elle croyait que c'était très loin de Paris. Il lui semblait qu'elle avait commencé à vivre dans un abîme et que c'était Jean Valjean qui l'en avait tirée. Son enfance lui faisait l'effet d'un temps où il n'y avait autour d'elle que des mille-pieds, des araignées, et des serpents. Quand elle songeait le soir avant de s'endormir, comme elle n'avait pas une idée très nette d'être la fille de Jean Valjean et qu'il fût son père, elle s'imaginait que l'âme de sa mère avait passé dans ce bonhomme et était venue demeurer auprès d'elle.

Lorsqu'il était assis, elle appuyait sa joue sur ses cheveux blancs et y laissait silencieusement tomber une larme en se disant: C'est peut-être ma mère, cet homme-là!

Cosette, quoique ceci soit étrange à énoncer, dans sa profonde ignorance de fille élevée au couvent, la maternité d'ailleurs étant absolument inintelligible à la virginité, avait fini par se figurer qu'elle avait eu aussi peu de mère que possible. Cette mère, elle ne savait pas même son nom. Toutes les fois qu'il lui arrivait de le demander à Jean Valjean, Jean Valjean se taisait. Si elle répétait sa question, il répondait par un sourire. Une fois elle insista; le sourire s'acheva par une larme.

Ce silence de Jean Valjean couvrait de nuit Fantine.

Etait-ce prudence? était-ce respect? était-ce crainte de livrer ce nom aux hasards d'une autre mémoire que la sienne?

Tant que Cosette avait été petite, Jean Valjean lui avait volontiers parlé de sa mère; quand elle fut jeune fille, cela lui fut impossible. Il lui sembla qu'il n'osait plus. Était-ce à cause de Cosette? était-ce à cause de Fantine? il éprouvait une sorte d'horreur religieuse à faire entrer cette ombre dans la pensée de Cosette, et à mettre la morte en tiers dans leur destinée. Plus cette ombre lui était sacrée, plus elle lui semblait redoutable. Il songeait à Fantine et se sentait accablé de silence. Il voyait vaguement dans les ténèbres quelque chose qui ressemblait à un doigt sur une bouche. Toute cette pudeur qui avait été dans Fantine et qui, pendant sa vie, était sortie d'elle violemment, était-elle revenue après sa mort se poser sur elle, veiller, indignée, sur la paix de cette morte, et, farouche, la garder dans sa tombe? Jean Valjean, à son insu, en subissait-il la pression? Nous qui croyons en la mort, nous ne sommes pas de ceux qui rejetteraient cette explication mystérieuse. De là l'impossibilité de prononcer, même pour Cosette, ce nom: Fantine.

Un jour Cosette lui dit:

— Père, j’ai vu cette nuit ma mère en songe. Elle avait deux grandes ailes. Ma mère dans sa vie doit avoir touché à la sainteté.

— Par le martyre, répondit Jean Valjean.

Du reste, Jean Valjean était heureux.

Quand Cosette sortait avec lui, elle s’appuyait sur son bras, fière, heureuse, dans la plénitude du cœur. Jean Valjean, à toutes ces marques d’une tendresse si exclusive et si satisfaite de lui seul, sentait sa pensée se fondre en délices. Le pauvre homme tressaillait inondé d’une joie angélique; il s’affirmait avec transport que cela durerait toute la vie; il se disait qu’il n’avait vraiment pas assez souffert pour mériter un si radieux bonheur, et il remerciait Dieu, dans les profondeurs de son âme, d’avoir permis qu’il fût ainsi aimé, lui misérable, par cet être innocent.

Chapitre V

La rose s’aperçoit qu’elle est une machine de guerre

Un jour Cosette se regarda par hasard dans son miroir et se dit: Tiens! Il lui semblait presque qu’elle était jolie. Ceci la jeta dans un trouble singulier. Jusqu’à ce moment elle n’avait point songé à sa figure. Elle se voyait dans son miroir, mais elle ne s’y regardait pas. Et puis, on lui avait souvent dit qu’elle était laide; Jean Valjean seul disait doucement: Mais non! mais non! Quoi qu’il en fût, Cosette s’était toujours crue laide, et avait grandi dans cette idée avec la résignation facile de l’enfance. Voici que tout d’un coup son miroir lui disait comme Jean Valjean: Mais non! Elle ne dormit pas de la nuit. — Si j’étais jolie? pensait-elle, comme cela serait drôle que je fusse jolie! — Et elle se rappelait celles de ses compagnes dont la beauté faisait effet dans le couvent, et elle se disait: Comment! je serais comme mademoiselle une telle!

Le lendemain elle se regarda, mais non par hasard, et elle douta: — Où avais-je l’esprit? dit-elle, non, je suis laide. — Elle avait tout simplement mal dormi, elle avait les yeux battus et elle était pâle. Elle ne s’était pas sentie très joyeuse la veille de croire à sa beauté, mais elle fut triste de n’y plus croire. Elle ne se regarda plus, et pendant plus de quinze jours elle tâcha de se coiffer tournant le dos au miroir.

Le soir, après le dîner, elle faisait assez habituellement de la tapisserie dans le salon, ou quelque ouvrage de couvent, et Jean Valjean lisait à côté d’elle. Une fois elle leva les yeux de son ouvrage et elle fut toute surprise de la façon inquiète dont son père la regardait.

Une autre fois, elle passait dans la rue, et il lui sembla que quelqu’un qu’elle ne vit pas disait derrière elle: Jolie femme! mais mal mise. — Bah! pensa-t-elle, ce n’est pas moi. Je suis bien mise et laide. — Elle avait alors son chapeau de peluche et sa robe de mérinos.

Un jour enfin, elle était dans le jardin, et elle entendit la pauvre vieille Toussaint qui disait: Monsieur, remarquez-vous comme mademoiselle devient jolie? Cosette n’entendit pas ce que son père répondit, les paroles de Toussaint furent pour elle une sorte de commotion. Elle s’échappa du jardin, monta à sa chambre, courut à la glace, il y avait trois mois qu’elle ne s’était regardée, et poussa un cri. Elle venait de s’éblouir elle-même.

Elle était belle et jolie; elle ne pouvait s’empêcher d’être de l’avis de Toussaint et de son miroir. Sa taille s’était faite, sa peau avait blanchi, ses cheveux s’étaient lustrés, une splendeur inconnue s’était allumée dans ses prunelles bleues. La conscience de sa beauté lui vint tout entière, en une minute, comme un grand jour qui se fait; les autres la remarquaient d’ailleurs, Toussaint le disait, c’était d’elle évidemment que le passant avait parlé, il n’y avait plus à douter; elle redescendit au jardin, se croyant reine, entendant les oiseaux chanter, c’était en hiver, voyant le ciel doré, le soleil dans les arbres, des fleurs dans les buissons, éperdue, folle, dans un ravissement inexprimable.

De son côté, Jean Valjean éprouvait un profond et indéfinissable serrement de cœur.

C’est qu’en effet, depuis quelque temps, il contemplait avec terreur cette beauté qui apparaissait chaque jour plus rayonnante sur le doux visage de Cosette. Aube riante pour tous, lugubre pour lui.

Cosette avait été belle assez longtemps avant de s’en apercevoir. Mais, du premier jour, cette lumière inattendue qui se levait lentement et enveloppait par degrés toute la personne de la jeune fille blessa la paupière sombre de Jean Valjean. Il sentit que c’était un changement dans une vie heureuse, si heureuse qu’il n’osait y remuer dans la crainte d’y déranger quelque chose. Cet homme qui avait passé par toutes les détresses, qui était encore tout saignant des meurtrissures de sa destinée, qui avait été presque méchant et qui était devenu presque saint, qui, après avoir traîné la chaîne du bagne, traînait maintenant la chaîne invisible, mais pesante, de l’infamie indéfinie, cet homme que la loi n’avait pas lâché et qui pouvait être à chaque instant ressaisi et ramené de l’obscurité de sa vertu au grand jour de l’opprobre public, cet homme acceptait tout, excusait tout, pardonnait tout, bénissait tout, voulait bien tout, et ne demandait à la providence, aux hommes, aux lois, à la société, à la nature, au monde, qu’une chose, que Cosette l’aimât!

Que Cosette continuât de l’aimer! que Dieu n’empêchât pas le cœur de cette enfant de venir à lui, et de rester à lui! Aimé de Cosette, il se trouvait guéri, reposé, apaisé, comblé, récompensé, couronné. Aimé de Cosette, il était bien! il n’en demandait pas davantage. On lui eût dit: Veux-tu être mieux? il eût répondu: Non. Dieu lui eût dit: Veux-tu le ciel? il eût répondu: J’y perdrais.

Tout ce qui pouvait effleurer cette situation, ne fût-ce qu'à la surface, le faisait frémir comme le commencement d'autre chose. Il n'avait jamais trop su ce que c'était que la beauté d'une femme; mais, par instinct, il comprenait que c'était terrible.

Cette beauté qui s'épanouissait de plus en plus triomphante et superbe à côté de lui, sous ses yeux, sur le front ingénu et redoutable de l'enfant, du fond de sa laideur, de sa vieillesse, de sa misère, de sa réprobation, de son accablement, il la regardait effaré.

Il se disait: Comme elle est belle! Qu'est-ce que je vais devenir, moi?

Là du reste était la différence entre sa tendresse et la tendresse d'une mère. Ce qu'il voyait avec angoisse, une mère l'eût vu avec joie.

Les premiers symptômes ne tardèrent pas à se manifester.

Dès le lendemain du jour où elle s'était dit: Décidément, je suis belle! Cosette fit attention à sa toilette. Elle se rappela le mot du passant: — Jolie, mais mal mise, — souffle d'oracle qui avait passé à côté d'elle et s'était évanoui après avoir déposé dans son cœur un des deux germes qui doivent plus tard emplir toute la vie de la femme, la coquetterie. L'amour est l'autre.

Avec la foi en sa beauté, toute l'âme féminine s'épanouit en elle. Elle eut horreur du mérinos et honte de la peluche. Son père ne lui avait jamais rien refusé. Elle sut tout de suite toute la science du chapeau, de la robe, du mantelet, du brodequin, de la manchette, de l'étoffe qui va, de la couleur qui sied, cette science qui fait de la femme parisienne quelque chose de si charmant, de si profond et de si dangereux. Le mot *femme capiteuse* a été inventé pour la Parisienne.

En moins d'un mois la petite Cosette fut dans cette thébaïde de la rue de Babylone une des femmes, non seulement les plus jolies, ce qui est quelque chose, mais «les mieux mises» de Paris, ce qui est bien davantage. Elle eût voulu rencontrer «son passant» pour voir ce qu'il dirait, et «pour lui apprendre!» Le fait est qu'elle était ravissante de tout point, et qu'elle distinguait à merveille un chapeau de Gérard d'un chapeau d'Herbaut.

Jean Valjean considérait ces ravages avec anxiété. Lui qui sentait qu'il ne pourrait jamais que ramper, marcher tout au plus, il voyait des ailes venir à Cosette.

Du reste, rien qu'à la simple inspection de la toilette de Cosette, une femme eût reconnu qu'elle n'avait pas de mère. Certaines petites bienséances, certaines conventions spéciales, n'étaient point observées par

Cosette. Une mère, par exemple, lui eût dit qu'une jeune fille ne s'habille point en damas.

Le premier jour que Cosette sortit avec sa robe et son camail de damas noir et son chapeau de crêpe blanc, elle vint prendre le bras de Jean Valjean, gaie, radieuse, rose, fière, éclatante. — Père, dit-elle, comment me trouvez-vous ainsi? Jean Valjean répondit d'une voix qui ressemblait à la voix amère d'un envieux: — Charmante! — Il fut dans la promenade comme à l'ordinaire. En rentrant il demanda à Cosette:

— Est-ce que tu ne remettras plus ta robe et ton chapeau, tu sais?

Ceci se passait dans la chambre de Cosette. Cosette se tourna vers le porte-manteau de la garde-robe où sa défroque de pensionnaire était accrochée.

— Ce déguisement! dit-elle. Père, que voulez-vous que j'en fasse? Oh! par exemple, non, je ne remettrai jamais ces horreurs. Avec ce machin-là sur la tête, j'ai l'air de madame Chien-fou.

Jean Valjean soupira profondément.

À partir de ce moment, il remarqua que Cosette, qui autrefois demandait toujours à rester, disant: Père, je m'amuse mieux ici avec vous, — demandait maintenant toujours à sortir. En effet, à quoi bon avoir une jolie figure et une délicieuse toilette, si on ne les montre pas?

Il remarqua aussi que Cosette n'avait plus le même goût pour l'arrière-cour. À présent, elle se tenait plus volontiers au jardin, se promenant sans déplaisir devant la grille. Jean Valjean, farouche, ne mettait pas les pieds dans le jardin. Il restait dans son arrière-cour, comme le chien.

Cosette, à se savoir belle, perdit la grâce de l'ignorer; grâce exquise, car la beauté rehaussée de naïveté est ineffable, et rien n'est adorable comme une innocente éblouissante qui marche tenant en main, sans le savoir, la clef d'un paradis. Mais ce qu'elle perdit en grâce ingénue, elle le regagna en charme pensif et sérieux. Toute sa personne, pénétrée des joies de la jeunesse, de l'innocence et de la beauté, respirait une mélancolie splendide.

Ce fut à cette époque que Marius, après six mois écoulés, la revit au Luxembourg.

Chapitre VI

La bataille commence

Cosette était dans son ombre, comme Marius dans la sienne, toute disposée pour l'embrasement. La destinée, avec sa patience mystérieuse et fatale, approchait lentement l'un de l'autre ces deux êtres tout chargés et tout languissants des orageuses électricités de la passion, ces deux âmes qui portaient l'amour comme deux nuages portent la foudre, et qui devaient s'aborder et se mêler dans un regard comme les nuages dans un éclair.

On a tant abusé du regard dans les romans d'amour qu'on a fini par le déconsidérer. C'est à peine si l'on ose dire maintenant que deux êtres se sont aimés parce qu'ils se sont regardés. C'est pourtant comme cela qu'on s'aime et uniquement comme cela. Le reste n'est que le reste, et vient après. Rien n'est plus réel que ces grandes secousses que deux âmes se donnent en échangeant cette étincelle.

À cette certaine heure où Cosette eut sans le savoir ce regard qui troubla Marius, Marius ne se douta pas que lui aussi eut un regard qui troubla Cosette.

Il lui fit le même mal et le même bien.

Depuis longtemps déjà elle le voyait et elle l'examinait comme les filles examinent et voient, en regardant ailleurs. Marius trouvait encore Cosette laide que déjà Cosette trouvait Marius beau. Mais comme il ne prenait point garde à elle, ce jeune homme lui était bien égal.

Cependant elle ne pouvait s'empêcher de se dire qu'il avait de beaux cheveux, de beaux yeux, de belles dents, un charmant son de voix quand elle l'entendait causer avec ses camarades, qu'il marchait en se tenant mal, si l'on veut, mais avec une grâce à lui, qu'il ne paraissait pas bête du tout, que toute sa personne était noble, douce, simple et fière, et qu'enfin il avait l'air pauvre, mais qu'il avait bon air.

Le jour où leurs yeux se rencontrèrent et se dirent enfin brusquement ces premières choses obscures et ineffables que le regard balbutie, Cosette ne comprit pas d'abord. Elle rentra pensive à la maison de la rue de l'Ouest où Jean Valjean, selon son habitude, était venu passer six semaines. Le lendemain, en s'éveillant, elle songea à ce jeune homme inconnu, si longtemps indifférent et glacé, qui semblait maintenant faire attention à elle, et il ne lui sembla pas le moins du monde que cette attention lui fût agréable. Elle avait plutôt un peu de colère contre ce beau dédaigneux. Un fond de guerre remua en elle. Il lui sembla, et elle en éprouvait une joie encore tout enfantine, qu'elle allait enfin se venger.

Se sachant belle, elle sentait bien, quoique d'une façon indistincte, qu'elle avait une arme. Les femmes jouent avec leur beauté comme les enfants avec leur couteau. Elles s'y blessent.

On se rappelle les hésitations de Marius, ses palpitations, ses terreurs. Il restait sur son banc et n'approchait pas. Ce qui dépitait Cosette. Un jour elle dit à Jean Valjean: — Père, promenons-nous donc un peu de ce côté-là. — Voyant que Marius ne venait point à elle, elle alla à lui. En pareil cas, toute femme ressemble à Mahomet. Et puis, chose bizarre, le premier symptôme de l'amour vrai chez un jeune homme, c'est la timidité, chez une jeune fille, c'est la hardiesse. Ceci étonne, et rien n'est plus simple pourtant. Ce sont les deux sexes qui tendent à se rapprocher et qui prennent les qualités l'un de l'autre.

Ce jour-là, le regard de Cosette rendit Marius fou, le regard de Marius rendit Cosette tremblante. Marius s'en alla confiant, et Cosette inquiète. À partir de ce jour, ils s'adorèrent.

La première chose que Cosette éprouva, ce fut une tristesse confuse et profonde. Il lui sembla que, du jour au lendemain, son âme était devenue noire. Elle ne la reconnaissait plus. La blancheur de l'âme des jeunes filles, qui se compose de froideur et de gaîté, ressemble à la neige. Elle fond à l'amour qui est son soleil.

Cosette ne savait pas ce que c'était que l'amour. Elle n'avait jamais entendu prononcer ce mot dans le sens terrestre. Sur les livres de musique profane qui entraient dans le couvent, *amour* était remplacé par *tambour* ou *pandour*. Cela faisait des énigmes qui exerçaient l'imagination des *grandes* comme: *Ah! que le tambour est agréable!* ou: *La pitié n'est pas un pandour*! Mais Cosette était sortie encore trop jeune pour s'être beaucoup préoccupée du «tambour». Elle n'eût donc su quel nom donner à ce qu'elle éprouvait maintenant. Est-on moins malade pour ignorer le nom de sa maladie?

Elle aimait avec d'autant plus de passion qu'elle aimait avec ignorance. Elle ne savait pas si cela est bon ou mauvais, utile ou dangereux, nécessaire ou mortel, éternel ou passager, permis ou prohibé; elle aimait. On l'eût bien étonnée si on lui eût dit: Vous ne dormez pas? mais c'est défendu! Vous ne mangez pas? mais c’est fort mal! Vous avez des oppressions et des battements de cœur? mais cela ne se fait pas! Vous rougissez et vous pâlissez quand un certain être vêtu de noir paraît au bout d’une certaine allée verte? mais c’est abominable! Elle n’eût pas compris, et elle eût répondu: Comment peut-il y avoir de ma faute dans une chose où je ne puis rien et où je ne sais rien?

Il se trouva que l’amour qui se présenta était précisément celui qui convenait le mieux à l’état de son âme. C’était une sorte d’adoration à distance, une contemplation muette, la déification d’un inconnu. C’était l’apparition de l’adolescence à l’adolescence, le rêve des nuits devenu roman et resté rêve, le fantôme souhaité enfin réalisé et fait chair, mais n’ayant pas encore de nom, ni de tort, ni de tache, ni d’exigence, ni de défaut; en un mot, l’amant lointain et demeuré dans l’idéal, une chimère ayant une forme. Toute rencontre plus palpable et plus proche eût à cette première époque effarouché Cosette, encore à demi plongée dans la brume grossissante du cloître. Elle avait toutes les peurs des enfants et toutes les peurs des religieuses, mêlées. L’esprit du couvent, dont elle s’était pénétrée pendant cinq ans, s’évaporait encore lentement de toute sa personne et faisait tout trembler autour d’elle. Dans cette situation, ce n’était pas un amant qu’il lui fallait, ce n’était pas même un amoureux, c’était une vision. Elle se mit à adorer Marius comme quelque chose de charmant, de lumineux et d’impossible.

Comme l’extrême naïveté touche à l’extrême coquetterie, elle lui souriait, tout franchement.

Elle attendait tous les jours l’heure de la promenade avec impatience, elle y trouvait Marius, se sentait indiciblement heureuse, et croyait sincèrement exprimer toute sa pensée en disant à Jean Valjean: — Quel délicieux jardin que ce Luxembourg!

Marius et Cosette étaient dans la nuit l’un pour l’autre. Ils ne se parlaient pas, ils ne se saluaient pas, ils ne se connaissaient pas; ils se voyaient; et comme les astres dans le ciel que des millions de lieues séparent, ils vivaient de se regarder.

C’est ainsi que Cosette devenait peu à peu une femme et se développait, belle et amoureuse, avec la conscience de sa beauté et l’ignorance de son amour. Coquette par-dessus le marché, par innocence.

Chapitre VII

À tristesse, tristesse et demie

Toutes les situations ont leurs instincts. La vieille et éternelle mère nature avertissait sourdement Jean Valjean de la présence de Marius. Jean Valjean tressaillait dans le plus obscur de sa pensée. Jean Valjean ne voyait rien, ne savait rien, et considérait pourtant avec une attention opiniâtre les ténèbres où il était, comme s'il sentait d'un côté quelque chose qui se construisait, et de l'autre quelque chose qui s'écroulait. Marius, averti aussi, et, ce qui est la profonde loi du bon Dieu, par cette même mère nature, faisait tout ce qu'il pouvait pour se dérober au «père». Il arrivait cependant que Jean Valjean l'apercevait quelquefois. Les allures de Marius n'étaient plus du tout naturelles. Il avait des prudences louches et des témérités gauches. Il ne venait plus tout près comme autrefois; il s'asseyait loin et restait en extase; il avait un livre et faisait semblant de lire; pourquoi faisait-il semblant? Autrefois il venait avec son vieux habit, maintenant il avait tous les jours son habit neuf; il n'était pas bien sûr qu'il ne se fît point friser, il avait des yeux tout drôles, il mettait des gants; bref, Jean Valjean détestait cordialement ce jeune homme.

Cosette ne laissait rien deviner. Sans savoir au juste ce qu'elle avait, elle avait bien le sentiment que c'était quelque chose et qu'il fallait le cacher.

Il y avait entre le goût de toilette qui était venu à Cosette et l'habitude d'habits neufs qui était poussée à cet inconnu un parallélisme importun à Jean Valjean. C'était un hasard peut-être, sans doute, à coup sûr, mais un hasard menaçant.

Jamais il n'ouvrait la bouche à Cosette de cet inconnu.

Un jour cependant, il ne put s'en tenir, et avec ce vague désespoir qui jette brusquement la sonde dans son malheur, il lui dit: — Que voilà un jeune homme qui a l'air pédant!

Cosette, l'année d'auparavant, petite fille indifférente, eût répondu: — Mais non, il est charmant. Dix ans plus tard, avec l'amour de Marius au cœur, elle eût répondu: — Pédant et insupportable à voir! vous avez bien raison! — Au moment de la vie et du cœur où elle était, elle se borna à répondre avec un calme suprême:

— Ce jeune homme-là!

Comme si elle le regardait pour la première fois de sa vie.

— Que je suis stupide! pensa Jean Valjean. Elle ne l’avait pas encore remarqué. C’est moi qui le lui montre.

Ô simplicité des vieux! profondeur des enfants!

C’est encore une loi de ces fraîches années de souffrance et de souci, de ces vives luttes du premier amour contre les premiers obstacles, la jeune fille ne se laisse prendre à aucun piège, le jeune homme tombe dans tous. Jean Valjean avait commencé contre Marius une sourde guerre que Marius, avec la bêtise sublime de sa passion et de son âge, ne devina point. Jean Valjean lui tendit une foule d’embûches; il changea d’heures, il changea de banc, il oublia son mouchoir, il vint seul au Luxembourg; Marius donna tête baissée dans tous les panneaux; et à tous ces points d’interrogation plantés sur sa route par Jean Valjean, il répondit ingénument oui. Cependant Cosette restait murée dans son insouciance apparente et dans sa tranquillité imperturbable, si bien que Jean Valjean arriva à cette conclusion: Ce dadais est amoureux fou de Cosette, mais Cosette ne sait seulement pas qu’il existe.

Il n’en avait pas moins dans le cœur un tremblement douloureux. La minute où Cosette aimerait pouvait sonner d’un instant à l’autre. Tout ne commence-t-il pas par l’indifférence?

Une seule fois Cosette fit une faute et l’effraya. Il se levait du banc pour partir après trois heures de station, elle dit: — Déjà!

Jean Valjean n’avait pas discontinué les promenades au Luxembourg, ne voulant rien faire de singulier et par-dessus tout redoutant de donner l’éveil à Cosette; mais pendant ces heures si douces pour les deux amoureux, tandis que Cosette envoyait son sourire à Marius enivré qui ne s’apercevait que de cela et maintenant ne voyait plus rien dans ce monde qu’un radieux visage adoré, Jean Valjean fixait sur Marius des yeux étincelants et terribles. Lui qui avait fini par ne plus se croire capable d’un sentiment malveillant, il y avait des instants où, quand Marius était là, il croyait redevenir sauvage et féroce, et il sentait se rouvrir et se soulever contre ce jeune homme ces vieilles profondeurs de son âme où il y avait eu jadis tant de colère. Il lui semblait presque qu’il se reformait en lui des cratères inconnus.

Quoi! il était là, cet être! que venait-il faire? il venait tourner, flairer, examiner, essayer! il venait dire: hein? pourquoi pas? il venait rôder autour de sa vie, à lui Jean Valjean! rôder autour de son bonheur, pour le prendre et l’emporter!

Jean Valjean ajoutait: — Oui, c'est cela! que vient-il chercher? une aventure! que veut-il? une amourette! Une amourette! et moi! Quoi! j'aurai été d'abord le plus misérable des hommes, et puis le plus malheureux, j'aurai fait soixante ans de la vie sur les genoux, j'aurai souffert tout ce qu'on peut souffrir, j'aurai vieilli sans avoir été jeune, j'aurai vécu sans famille, sans parents, sans amis, sans femme, sans enfants, j'aurai laissé de mon sang sur toutes les pierres, sur toutes les ronces, à toutes les bornes, le long de tous les murs, j'aurai été doux quoiqu'on fût dur pour moi et bon quoiqu'on fût méchant, je serai redevenu honnête homme malgré tout, je me serai repenti du mal que j'ai fait et j'aurai pardonné le mal qu'on m'a fait, et au moment où je suis récompensé, au moment où c'est fini, au moment où je touche au but, au moment où j'ai ce que je veux, c'est bon, c'est bien, je l'ai payé, je l'ai gagné, tout cela s'en ira, tout cela s'évanouira, et je perdrai Cosette, et je perdrai ma vie, ma joie, mon âme, parce qu'il aura plu à un grand niais de venir flâner au Luxembourg!

Alors ses prunelles s'emplissaient d'une clarté lugubre et extraordinaire. Ce n'était plus un homme qui regarde un homme; ce n'était pas un ennemi qui regarde un ennemi. C'était un dogue qui regarde un voleur.

On sait le reste. Marius continua d'être insensé. Un jour il suivit Cosette rue de l'Ouest, un autre jour il parla au portier. Le portier de son côté parla, et dit à Jean Valjean: — Monsieur, qu'est-ce que c'est donc qu'un jeune homme curieux qui vous a demandé? — Le lendemain Jean Valjean jeta à Marius ce coup d'œil dont Marius s'aperçut enfin. Huit jours après, Jean Valjean avait déménagé. Il se jura qu'il ne remettrait plus les pieds ni au Luxembourg, ni rue de l'Ouest. Il retourna rue Plumet.

Cosette ne se plaignit pas, elle ne dit rien, elle ne fit pas de questions, elle ne chercha à savoir aucun pourquoi; elle en était déjà à la période où l'on craint d'être pénétré et de se trahir. Jean Valjean n'avait aucune expérience de ces misères, les seules qui soient charmantes et les seules qu'il ne connût pas; cela fit qu'il ne comprit point la grave signification du silence de Cosette. Seulement il remarqua qu'elle était devenue triste, et il devint sombre. C'était de part et d'autre des inexpériences aux prises.

Une fois il fit un essai. Il demanda à Cosette:

— Veux-tu venir au Luxembourg?

Un rayon illumina le visage pâle de Cosette.

— Oui, dit-elle.

Ils y allèrent. Trois mois s'étaient écoulés. Marius n'y allait plus. Marius n'y était pas.

Le lendemain Jean Valjean redemanda à Cosette:

— Veux-tu venir au Luxembourg?

Elle répondit tristement et doucement:

— Non.

Jean Valjean fut froissé de cette tristesse et navré de cette douceur.

Que se passait-il dans cet esprit si jeune et déjà si impénétrable? Qu'est-ce qui était en train de s'y accomplir? qu'arrivait-il à l'âme de Cosette? Quelquefois, au lieu de se coucher, Jean Valjean restait assis près de son grabat la tête dans ses mains, et il passait des nuits entières à se demander: Qu'y a-t-il dans la pensée de Cosette? et à songer aux choses auxquelles elle pouvait songer.

Oh! dans ces moments-là, quels regards douloureux il tournait vers le cloître, ce sommet chaste, ce lieu des anges, cet inaccessible glacier de la vertu! Comme il contemplait avec un ravissement désespéré ce jardin du couvent, plein de fleurs ignorées et de vierges enfermées, où tous les parfums et toutes les âmes montent droit vers le ciel! Comme il adorait cet éden refermé à jamais, dont il était sorti volontairement et follement descendu! Comme il regrettait son abnégation et sa démence d'avoir ramené Cosette au monde, pauvre héros du sacrifice, saisi et terrassé par son dévouement même! comme il se disait: Qu'ai-je fait?

Du reste rien de ceci ne perçait pour Cosette. Ni humeur, ni rudesse. Toujours la même figure sereine et bonne. Les manières de Jean Valjean étaient plus tendres et plus paternelles que jamais. Si quelque chose eût pu faire deviner moins de joie, c'était plus de mansuétude.

De son côté, Cosette languissait. Elle souffrait de l'absence de Marius comme elle avait joui de sa présence, singulièrement, sans savoir au juste. Quand Jean Valjean avait cessé de la conduire aux promenades habituelles, un instinct de femme lui avait confusément murmuré au fond du cœur qu'il ne fallait pas paraître tenir au Luxembourg, et que si cela lui était indifférent, son père l'y ramènerait. Mais les jours, les semaines et les mois se succédèrent. Jean Valjean avait accepté tacitement le consentement tacite de Cosette. Elle le regretta. Il était trop tard. Le jour où elle retourna au Luxembourg, Marius n'y était plus. Marius avait donc disparu; c'était fini, que faire? le retrouverait-elle jamais? Elle se sentit un serrement de cœur que rien ne dilatait et qui s'accroissait chaque jour; elle ne sut plus si c'était l’hiver ou l’été, le soleil ou la pluie, si les oiseaux chantaient, si l’on était aux dahlias ou aux pâquerettes, si le Luxembourg était plus charmant que les Tuileries, si le linge que rapportait la blanchisseuse était trop empesé ou pas assez, si Toussaint avait fait bien ou mal «son marché», et elle resta accablée, absorbée, attentive à une seule pensée, l’œil vague et fixe, comme lorsqu’on regarde dans la nuit la place noire et profonde où une apparition s’est évanouie.

Du reste elle non plus ne laissa rien voir à Jean Valjean, que sa pâleur. Elle lui continua son doux visage.

Cette pâleur ne suffisait que trop pour occuper Jean Valjean. Quelquefois il lui demandait:

— Qu’as-tu?

Elle répondait:

— Je n’ai rien.

Et après un silence, comme elle le devinait triste aussi, elle reprenait:

— Et vous, père, est-ce que vous avez quelque chose?

— Moi? rien, disait-il.

Ces deux êtres qui s’étaient si exclusivement aimés, et d’un si touchant amour, et qui avaient vécu longtemps l’un pour l’autre, souffraient maintenant l’un à côté de l’autre, l’un à cause de l’autre, sans se le dire, sans s’en vouloir, et en souriant.

Chapitre VIII

La cadène

Le plus malheureux des deux, c'était Jean Valjean. La jeunesse, même dans ses chagrins, a toujours une clarté à elle.

À de certains moments, Jean Valjean souffrait tant qu'il devenait puéril. C'est le propre de la douleur de faire reparaître le côté enfant de l'homme. Il sentait invinciblement que Cosette lui échappait. Il eût voulu lutter, la retenir, l'enthousiasmer par quelque chose d'extérieur et d'éclatant. Ces idées, puériles, nous venons de le dire, et en même temps séniles, lui donnèrent, par leur enfantillage même, une notion assez juste de l'influence de la passementerie sur l'imagination des jeunes filles. Il lui arriva une fois de voir passer dans la rue un général à cheval en grand uniforme, le comte Coutard, commandant de Paris. Il envia cet homme doré; il se dit quel bonheur ce serait de pouvoir mettre cet habit-là qui était une chose incontestable, que si Cosette le voyait ainsi, cela l'éblouirait, que lorsqu'il donnerait le bras à Cosette et qu'il passerait devant la grille des Tuileries, on lui présenterait les armes, et que cela suffirait à Cosette et lui ôterait l'idée de regarder les jeunes gens.

Une secousse inattendue vint se mêler à ces pensées tristes.

Dans la vie isolée qu'ils menaient, et depuis qu'ils étaient venus se loger rue Plumet, ils avaient une habitude. Ils faisaient quelquefois la partie de plaisir d'aller voir se lever le soleil, genre de joie douce qui convient à ceux qui entrent dans la vie et à ceux qui en sortent.

Se promener de grand matin, pour qui aime la solitude, équivaut à se promener la nuit, avec la gaîté de la nature de plus. Les rues sont désertes, et les oiseaux chantent. Cosette, oiseau elle-même, s'éveillait volontiers de bonne heure. Ces excursions matinales se préparaient la veille. Il proposait, elle acceptait. Cela s'arrangeait comme un complot, on sortait avant le jour, et c'était autant de petits bonheurs pour Cosette. Ces excentricités innocentes plaisent à la jeunesse.

La pente de Jean Valjean était, on le sait, d'aller aux endroits peu fréquentés, aux recoins solitaires, aux lieux d'oubli. Il y avait alors aux environs des barrières de Paris des espèces de champs pauvres, presque mêlés à la ville, où il poussait, l'été, un blé maigre, et qui, l'automne, après la récolte faite, n’avaient pas l’air moissonnés, mais pelés. Jean Valjean les hantait avec prédilection. Cosette ne s’y ennuyait point. C’était la solitude pour lui, la liberté pour elle. Là, elle redevenait petite fille, elle pouvait courir et presque jouer, elle ôtait son chapeau, le posait sur les genoux de Jean Valjean, et cueillait des bouquets. Elle regardait les papillons sur les fleurs, mais ne les prenait pas; les mansuétudes et les attendrissements naissent avec l’amour, et la jeune fille, qui a en elle un idéal tremblant et fragile, a pitié de l’aile du papillon. Elle tressait en guirlandes des coquelicots qu’elle mettait sur sa tête, et qui, traversés et pénétrés de soleil, empourprés jusqu’au flamboiement, faisaient à ce frais visage rose une couronne de braises.

Même après que leur vie avait été attristée, ils avaient conservé leur habitude de promenades matinales.

Donc un matin d’octobre, tentés par la sérénité parfaite de l’automne de 1831, ils étaient sortis, et ils se trouvaient au petit jour près de la barrière du Maine. Ce n’était pas l’aurore, c’était l’aube; minute ravissante et farouche. Quelques constellations çà et là dans l’azur pâle et profond, la terre toute noire, le ciel tout blanc, un frisson dans les brins d’herbe, partout le mystérieux saisissement du crépuscule. Une alouette, qui semblait mêlée aux étoiles, chantait à une hauteur prodigieuse, et l’on eût dit que cet hymne de la petitesse à l’infini calmait l’immensité. À l’orient, le Val-de-Grâce découpait, sur l’horizon clair d’une clarté d’acier, sa masse obscure; Vénus éblouissante montait derrière ce dôme et avait l’air d’une âme qui s’évade d’un édifice ténébreux.

Tout était paix et silence; personne sur la chaussée; dans les bas côtés, quelques rares ouvriers, à peine entrevus, se rendant à leur travail.

Jean Valjean s’était assis dans la contre-allée sur des charpentes déposées à la porte d’un chantier. Il avait le visage tourné vers la route, et le dos tourné au jour; il oubliait le soleil qui allait se lever; il était tombé dans une de ces absorptions profondes où tout l’esprit se concentre, qui emprisonnent même le regard et qui équivalent à quatre murs. Il y a des méditations qu’on pourrait nommer verticales; quand on est au fond, il faut du temps pour revenir sur la terre. Jean Valjean était descendu dans une de ces songeries-là. Il pensait à Cosette, au bonheur possible si rien ne se mettait entre elle et lui, à cette lumière dont elle remplissait sa vie, lumière qui était la respiration de son âme. Il était presque heureux dans cette rêverie. Cosette, debout près de lui, regardait les nuages devenir roses.

Tout à coup, Cosette s’écria: Père, on dirait qu’on vient là-bas. Jean Valjean leva les yeux.

Cosette avait raison.

La chaussée qui mène à l’ancienne barrière du Maine prolonge, comme on sait, la rue de Sèvres, et est coupée à angle droit par le boulevard intérieur. Au coude de la chaussée et du boulevard, à l’endroit où se fait l’embranchement, on entendait un bruit difficile à expliquer à pareille heure, et une sorte d’encombrement confus apparaissait. On ne sait quoi d’informe, qui venait du boulevard, entrait dans la chaussée.

Cela grandissait, cela semblait se mouvoir avec ordre, pourtant c’était hérissé et frémissant; cela semblait une voiture, mais on n’en pouvait distinguer le chargement. Il y avait des chevaux, des roues, des cris; des fouets claquaient. Par degrés les linéaments se fixèrent, quoique noyés de ténèbres. C’était une voiture, en effet, qui venait de tourner du boulevard sur la route et qui se dirigeait vers la barrière près de laquelle était Jean Valjean; une deuxième, du même aspect, la suivit, puis une troisième, puis une quatrième; sept chariots débouchèrent successivement, la tête des chevaux touchant l’arrière des voitures. Des silhouettes s’agitaient sur ces chariots, on voyait des étincelles dans le crépuscule comme s’il y avait des sabres nus, on entendait un cliquetis qui ressemblait à des chaînes remuées, cela avançait, les voix grossissaient, et c’était une chose formidable comme il en sort de la caverne des songes.

En approchant, cela prit forme, et s’ébaucha derrière les arbres avec le blêmissement de l’apparition; la masse blanchit; le jour qui se levait peu à peu plaquait une lueur blafarde sur ce fourmillement à la fois sépulcral et vivant, les têtes de silhouettes devinrent des faces de cadavres, et voici ce que c’était:

Sept voitures marchaient à la file sur la route. Les six premières avaient une structure singulière. Elles ressemblaient à des haquets de tonneliers; c’étaient des espèces de longues échelles posées sur deux roues et formant brancard à leur extrémité antérieure. Chaque haquet, disons mieux, chaque échelle était attelée de quatre chevaux bout à bout. Sur ces échelles étaient traînées d’étranges grappes d’hommes. Dans le peu de jour qu’il faisait, on ne voyait pas ces hommes; on les devinait. Vingt-quatre sur chaque voiture, douze de chaque côté, adossés les uns aux autres, faisant face aux passants, les jambes dans le vide, ces hommes cheminaient ainsi; et ils avaient derrière le dos quelque chose qui sonnait et qui était une chaîne et au cou quelque chose qui brillait et qui était un carcan. Chacun avait son carcan, mais la chaîne était pour tous; de façon que ces vingt-quatre hommes, s’il leur arrivait de descendre du haquet et de marcher, étaient saisis par une sorte d’unité inexorable et devaient serpenter sur le sol avec la chaîne pour vertèbre à peu près comme le mille-pieds. À l’avant et à l’arrière de chaque voiture, deux hommes, armés de fusils, se tenaient debout, ayant chacun une des extrémités de la chaîne sous son pied. Les carcans étaient carrés. La septième voiture, vaste fourgon à ridelles, mais sans capote, avait quatre roues et six chevaux, et portait un tas sonore de chaudières de fer, de marmites de fonte, de réchauds et de chaînes, où étaient mêlés quelques hommes garrottés et couchés tout de leur long, qui paraissaient malades. Ce fourgon, tout à claire-voie, était garni de claies délabrées qui semblaient avoir servi aux vieux supplices.

Ces voitures tenaient le milieu du pavé. Des deux côtés marchaient en double haie des gardes d’un aspect infâme, coiffés de tricornes claques comme les soldats du Directoire, tachés, troués, sordides, affublés d’uniformes d’invalides et de pantalons de croque-morts, mi-partis gris et bleus, presque en lambeaux, avec des épaulettes rouges, des bandoulières jaunes, des coupe-choux, des fusils et des bâtons; espèces de soldats goujats. Ces sbires semblaient composés de l’abjection du mendiant et de l’autorité du bourreau. Celui qui paraissait leur chef tenait à la main un fouet de poste. Tous ces détails, estompés par le crépuscule, se dessinaient de plus en plus dans le jour grandissant. En tête et en queue du convoi, marchaient des gendarmes à cheval, graves, le sabre au poing.

Ce cortège était si long qu’au moment où la première voiture atteignait la barrière, la dernière débouchait à peine du boulevard.

Une foule, sortie on ne sait d’où et formée en un clin d’œil, comme cela est fréquent à Paris, se pressait des deux côtés de la chaussée et regardait. On entendait dans les ruelles voisines des cris de gens qui s’appelaient et les sabots des maraîchers qui accouraient pour voir.

Les hommes entassés sur les haquets se laissaient cahoter en silence. Ils étaient livides du frisson du matin. Ils avaient tous des pantalons de toile et les pieds nus dans des sabots. Le reste du costume était à la fantaisie de la misère. Leurs accoutrements étaient hideusement disparates; rien n’est plus funèbre que l’arlequin des guenilles. Feutres défoncés, casquettes goudronnées, d’affreux bonnets de laine, et, près du bourgeron, l’habit noir crevé aux coudes; plusieurs avaient des chapeaux de femme; d’autres étaient coiffés d’un panier; on voyait des poitrines velues, et à travers les déchirures des vêtements on distinguait des tatouages, des temples de l’amour, des cœurs enflammés, des Cupidons. On apercevait aussi des dartres et des rougeurs malsaines. Deux ou trois avaient une corde de paille fixée aux traverses du haquet, et suspendue au-dessous d’eux comme un étrier, qui leur soutenait les pieds. L’un d’eux tenait à la main et portait à sa bouche quelque chose qui avait l’air d’une pierre noire et qu’il semblait mordre; c’était du pain qu’il mangeait. Il n’y avait là que des yeux secs, éteints, ou lumineux d’une mauvaise lumière. La troupe d’escorte maugréait, les enchaînés ne soufflaient pas; de temps en temps on entendait le bruit d’un coup de bâton sur les omoplates ou sur les têtes; quelques-uns de ces hommes bâillaient; les haillons étaient terribles; les pieds pendaient, les épaules oscillaient; les têtes s’entre-heurtaient, les fers tintaient, les prunelles flambaient férocement, les poings se crispaient ou s’ouvraient inertes comme des mains de morts; derrière le convoi, une troupe d’enfants éclatait de rire.

Cette file de voitures, quelle qu’elle fût, était lugubre. Il était évident que demain, que dans une heure, une averse pouvait éclater, qu’elle serait suivie d’une autre, et d’une autre, et que les vêtements délabrés seraient traversés, qu’une fois mouillés, ces hommes ne se sécheraient plus, qu’une fois glacés, ils ne se réchaufferaient plus, que leurs pantalons de toile seraient collés par l’ondée sur leurs os, que l’eau emplirait leurs sabots, que les coups de fouet ne pourraient empêcher le claquement des mâchoires, que la chaîne continuerait de les tenir par le cou, que leurs pieds continueraient de pendre; et il était impossible de ne pas frémir en voyant ces créatures humaines liées ainsi et passives sous les froides nuées d’automne, et livrées à la pluie, à la bise, à toutes les furies de l’air, comme des arbres et comme des pierres.

Les coups de bâton n’épargnaient pas même les malades, qui gisaient noués de cordes et sans mouvement sur la septième voiture et qu’on semblait avoir jetés là comme des sacs pleins de misère.

Brusquement, le soleil parut; l’immense rayon de l’orient jaillit, et l’on eût dit qu’il mettait le feu à toutes ces têtes farouches. Les langues se délièrent; un incendie de ricanements, de jurements et de chansons fit explosion. La large lumière horizontale coupa en deux toute la file, illuminant les têtes et les torses, laissant les pieds et les roues dans l’obscurité. Les pensées apparurent sur les visages; ce moment fut épouvantable; des démons visibles, à masques tombés, des âmes féroces toutes nues. Éclairée, cette cohue resta ténébreuse. Quelques-uns, gais, avaient à la bouche des tuyaux de plume d'où ils soufflaient de la vermine sur la foule, choisissant les femmes; l'aurore accentuait par la noirceur des ombres ces profils lamentables; pas un de ces êtres qui ne fût difforme à force de misère; et c'était si monstrueux qu'on eût dit que cela changeait la clarté du soleil en lueur d'éclair. La voiturée qui ouvrait le cortège avait entonné et psalmodiait à tue-tête avec une jovialité hagarde un pot-pourri de Désaugiers, alors fameux, *la Vestale*, les arbres frémissaient lugubrement; dans les contre-allées, des faces de bourgeois écoutaient avec une béatitude idiote ces gaudrioles chantées par des spectres.

Toutes les détresses étaient dans ce cortège comme un chaos; il y avait là l'angle facial de toutes les bêtes, des vieillards, des adolescents, des crânes nus, des barbes grises, des monstruosités cyniques, des résignations hargneuses, des rictus sauvages, des attitudes insensées, des groins coiffés de casquettes, des espèces de têtes de jeunes filles avec des tire-bouchons sur les tempes, des visages enfantins et, à cause de cela, horribles, de maigres faces de squelettes auxquelles il ne manquait que la mort. On voyait sur la première voiture un nègre, qui, peut-être, avait été esclave et qui pouvait comparer les chaînes. L'effrayant niveau d'en bas, la honte, avait passé sur ces fronts; à ce degré d'abaissement, les dernières transformations étaient subies par tous dans les dernières profondeurs; et l'ignorance changée en hébétement était l'égale de l'intelligence, changée en désespoir. Pas de choix possible entre ces hommes qui apparaissaient aux regards comme l'élite de la boue. Il était clair que l'ordonnateur quelconque de cette procession immonde ne les avait pas classés. Ces êtres avaient été liés et accouplés pêle-mêle, dans le désordre alphabétique probablement, et chargés au hasard sur ces voitures. Cependant des horreurs groupées finissent toujours par dégager une résultante; toute addition de malheureux donne un total; il sortait de chaque chaîne une âme commune, et chaque charretée avait sa physionomie. À côté de celle qui chantait, il y en avait une qui hurlait; une troisième mendiait; on en voyait une qui grinçait des dents; une autre menaçait les passants, une autre blasphémait Dieu; la dernière se taisait comme la tombe. Dante eût cru voir les sept cercles de l'enfer en marche.

Marche des damnations vers les supplices, faite sinistrement, non sur le formidable char fulgurant de l'Apocalypse mais, chose plus sombre, sur la charrette des gémonies.

Un des gardes, qui avait un crochet au bout de son bâton, faisait de temps en temps mine de remuer ces tas d’ordure humains. Une vieille femme dans la foule les montrait du doigt à un petit garçon de cinq ans, et lui disait: *Gredin, cela t’apprendra*!

Comme les chants et les blasphèmes grossissaient, celui qui semblait le capitaine de l’escorte fit claquer son fouet, et, à ce signal, une effroyable bastonnade sourde et aveugle qui faisait le bruit de la grêle tomba sur les sept voiturées; beaucoup rugirent et écumèrent; ce qui redoubla la joie des gamins accourus, nuée de mouches sur ces plaies.

L’œil de Jean Valjean était devenu effrayant. Ce n’était plus une prunelle; c’était cette vitre profonde qui remplace le regard chez certains infortunés, qui semble inconsciente de la réalité, et où flamboie la réverbération des épouvantes et des catastrophes. Il ne regardait pas un spectacle; il subissait une vision. Il voulut se lever, fuir, échapper; il ne put remuer un pied. Quelquefois les choses qu’on voit vous saisissent et vous tiennent. Il demeura cloué, pétrifié, stupide, se demandant, à travers une confuse angoisse inexprimable, ce que signifiait cette persécution sépulcrale, et d’où sortait ce pandémonium qui le poursuivait. Tout à coup il porta la main à son front, geste habituel de ceux auxquels la mémoire revient subitement; il se souvint que c’était là l’itinéraire en effet, que ce détour était d’usage pour éviter les rencontres royales toujours possibles sur la route de Fontainebleau, et que, trente-cinq ans auparavant, il avait passé par cette barrière-là.

Cosette, autrement épouvantée, ne l’était pas moins. Elle ne comprenait pas; le souffle lui manquait; ce qu’elle voyait ne lui semblait pas possible; enfin elle s’écria:

— Père! qu’est-ce qu’il y a donc dans ces voitures-là?

Jean Valjean répondit:

— Des forçats.

— Où donc est-ce qu’ils vont?

— Aux galères.

En ce moment la bastonnade, multipliée par cent mains, fit du zèle, les coups de plat de sabre s’en mêlèrent, ce fut comme une rage de fouets et de bâtons; les galériens se courbèrent, une obéissance hideuse se dégagea du supplice, et tous se turent avec des regards de loups enchaînés. Cosette tremblait de tous ses membres; elle reprit:

— Père, est-ce que ce sont encore des hommes?

— Quelquefois, dit le misérable.

C'était la Chaîne en effet qui, partie avant le jour de Bicêtre, prenait la route du Mans pour éviter Fontainebleau où était alors le roi. Ce détour faisait durer l'épouvantable voyage trois ou quatre jours de plus; mais, pour épargner à la personne royale la vue d'un supplice, on peut bien le prolonger.

Jean Valjean rentra accablé. De telles rencontres sont des chocs et le souvenir qu'elles laissent ressemble à un ébranlement.

Pourtant Jean Valjean, en regagnant avec Cosette la rue de Babylone, ne remarqua point qu'elle lui fît d'autres questions au sujet de ce qu'ils venaient de voir; peut-être était-il trop absorbé lui-même dans son accablement pour percevoir ses paroles et pour lui répondre. Seulement le soir, comme Cosette le quittait pour s'aller coucher, il l'entendit qui disait à demi-voix et comme se parlant à elle-même: — Il me semble que si je trouvais sur mon chemin un de ces hommes-là, ô mon Dieu, je mourrais rien que de le voir de près!

Heureusement le hasard fit que le lendemain de ce jour tragique il y eut, à propos de je ne sais plus quelle solennité officielle, des fêtes dans Paris, revue au Champ de Mars, joutes sur la Seine, théâtres aux Champs-Élysées, feu d'artifice à l'Étoile, illuminations partout. Jean Valjean, faisant violence à ses habitudes, conduisit Cosette à ces réjouissances, afin de la distraire du souvenir de la veille et d'effacer sous le riant tumulte de tout Paris la chose abominable qui avait passé devant elle. La revue, qui assaisonnait la fête, faisait toute naturelle la circulation des uniformes; Jean Valjean mit son habit de garde national avec le vague sentiment intérieur d'un homme qui se réfugie. Du reste, le but de cette promenade sembla atteint. Cosette, qui se faisait une loi de complaire à son père et pour qui d'ailleurs tout spectacle était nouveau, accepta la distraction avec la bonne grâce facile et légère de l'adolescence, et ne fit pas une moue trop dédaigneuse devant cette gamelle de joie qu'on appelle une fête publique; si bien que Jean Valjean put croire qu'il avait réussi, et qu'il ne restait plus trace de la hideuse vision.

Quelques jours après, un matin, comme il faisait beau soleil et qu'ils étaient tous deux sur le perron du jardin, autre infraction aux règles que semblait s'être imposées Jean Valjean, et à l'habitude de rester dans sa chambre que la tristesse avait fait prendre à Cosette, Cosette, en peignoir, se tenait debout dans ce négligé de la première heure qui enveloppe adorablement les jeunes filles et qui a l’air du nuage sur l’astre; et, la tête dans la lumière, rose d’avoir bien dormi, regardée doucement par le bonhomme attendri, elle effeuillait une pâquerette. Cosette ignorait la ravissante légende *je t’aime, un peu, passionnément*, etc.; qui la lui eût apprise? Elle maniait cette fleur, d’instinct, innocemment, sans se douter qu’effeuiller une pâquerette, c’est éplucher un cœur. S’il y avait une quatrième Grâce appelée la Mélancolie, et souriante, elle eût eu l’air de cette Grâce-là. Jean Valjean était fasciné par la contemplation de ces petits doigts sur cette fleur, oubliant tout dans le rayonnement que cette enfant avait. Un rouge-gorge chuchotait dans la broussaille d’à côté. Des nuées blanches traversaient le ciel si gaîment qu’on eût dit qu’elles venaient d’être mises en liberté. Cosette continuait d’effeuiller sa fleur attentivement; elle semblait songer à quelque chose; mais cela devait être charmant; tout à coup elle tourna la tête sur son épaule avec la lenteur délicate du cygne, et dit à Jean Valjean: Père, qu’est-ce que c’est donc que cela, les galères?

Livre quatrième — Secours d’en bas peut être secours d’en haut

Chapitre I

Blessure au dehors, guérison au dedans

Leur vie s’assombrissait ainsi par degrés.

Il ne leur restait plus qu’une distraction qui avait été autrefois un bonheur, c’était d’aller porter du pain à ceux qui avaient faim et des vêtements à ceux qui avaient froid. Dans ces visites aux pauvres, où Cosette accompagnait souvent Jean Valjean, ils retrouvaient quelque reste de leur ancien épanchement; et, parfois, quand la journée avait été bonne, quand il y avait eu beaucoup de détresses secourues et beaucoup de petits enfants ranimés et réchauffés, Cosette, le soir, était un peu gaie. Ce fut à cette époque qu’ils firent visite au bouge Jondrette.

Le lendemain même de cette visite, Jean Valjean parut le matin dans le pavillon, calme comme à l’ordinaire, mais avec une large blessure au bras gauche, fort enflammée, fort venimeuse, qui ressemblait à une brûlure et qu’il expliqua d’une façon quelconque. Cette blessure fit qu’il fut plus d’un mois avec la fièvre sans sortir. Il ne voulut voir aucun médecin. Quand Cosette l’en pressait: Appelle le médecin des chiens, disait-il.

Cosette le pansait matin et soir avec un air si divin et un si angélique bonheur de lui être utile, que Jean Valjean sentait toute sa vieille joie lui revenir, ses craintes et ses anxiétés se dissiper, et contemplait Cosette en disant: Oh! la bonne blessure! Oh! le bon mal!

Cosette, voyant son père malade, avait déserté le pavillon, et avait repris goût à la petite logette et à l’arrière-cour. Elle passait presque toutes ses journées près de Jean Valjean, et lui lisait les livres qu’il voulait. En général, des livres de voyages. Jean Valjean renaissait; son bonheur revivait avec des rayons ineffables; le Luxembourg, le jeune rôdeur inconnu, le refroidissement de Cosette, toutes ces nuées de son âme s’effaçaient. Il en venait à se dire: J’ai imaginé tout cela. Je suis un vieux fou.

Son bonheur était tel, que l’affreuse trouvaille des Thénardier, faite au bouge Jondrette, et si inattendue, avait en quelque sorte glissé sur lui. Il avait réussi à s’échapper, sa piste, à lui, était perdue, que lui importait le reste! il n’y songeait que pour plaindre ces misérables. Les voilà en prison, et désormais hors d’état de nuire, pensait-il, mais quelle lamentable famille en détresse!

Quant à la hideuse vision de la barrière du Maine, Cosette n’en avait plus reparlé.

Au couvent, sœur Sainte-Mechtilde avait appris la musique à Cosette. Cosette avait la voix d’une fauvette qui aurait une âme, et quelquefois le soir, dans l’humble logis du blessé, elle chantait des chansons tristes qui réjouissaient Jean Valjean.

Le printemps arrivait, le jardin était si admirable dans cette saison de l’année, que Jean Valjean dit à Cosette: — Tu n’y vas jamais, je veux que tu t’y promènes. — Comme vous voudrez, père, dit Cosette.

Et, pour obéir à son père, elle reprit ses promenades dans son jardin, le plus souvent seule, car, comme nous l’avons indiqué, Jean Valjean, qui probablement craignait d’être aperçu par la grille, n’y venait presque jamais.

La blessure de Jean Valjean avait été une diversion.

Quand Cosette vit que son père souffrait moins, et qu’il guérissait, et qu’il semblait heureux, elle eut un contentement qu’elle ne remarqua même pas, tant il vint doucement et naturellement. Puis c’était le mois de mars, les jours allongeaient, l’hiver s’en allait, l’hiver emporte toujours avec lui quelque chose de nos tristesses; puis vint avril, ce point du jour de l’été, frais comme toutes les aubes, gai comme toutes les enfances; un peu pleureur parfois comme un nouveau-né qu’il est. La nature en ce mois-là a des lueurs charmantes qui passent du ciel, des nuages, des arbres, des prairies et des fleurs, au cœur de l’homme.

Cosette était trop jeune encore pour que cette joie d’avril qui lui ressemblait ne la pénétrât pas. Insensiblement, et sans qu’elle s’en doutât, le noir s’en alla de son esprit. Au printemps il fait clair dans les âmes tristes comme à midi il fait clair dans les caves. Cosette même n’était déjà plus très triste. Du reste, cela était ainsi, mais elle ne s’en rendait pas compte. Le matin, vers dix heures, après déjeuner, lorsqu’elle avait réussi à entraîner son père pour un quart d’heure dans le jardin, et qu’elle le promenait au soleil devant le perron en lui soutenant son bras malade, elle ne s’apercevait point qu’elle riait à chaque instant et qu’elle était heureuse.

Jean Valjean, enivré, la voyait redevenir vermeille et fraîche.

— Oh! la bonne blessure! répétait-il tout bas.

Et il était reconnaissant aux Thénardier.

Une fois sa blessure guérie, il avait repris ses promenades solitaires et crépusculaires.

Ce serait une erreur de croire qu’on peut se promener de la sorte seul dans les régions inhabitées de Paris sans rencontrer quelque aventure.

Chapitre II

La mère Plutarque n'est pas embarrassée pour expliquer un

Un soir le petit Gavroche n'avait point mangé; il se souvint qu'il n'avait pas non plus dîné la veille; cela devenait fatigant. Il prit la résolution d'essayer de souper. Il s'en alla rôder au delà de la Salpêtrière, dans les lieux déserts; c'est là que sont les aubaines; où il n'y a personne, on trouve quelque chose. Il parvint jusqu'à une peuplade qui lui parut être le village d'Austerlitz.

Dans une de ses précédentes flâneries, il avait remarqué là un vieux jardin hanté d'un vieux homme et d'une vieille femme, et dans ce jardin un pommier passable. À côté de ce pommier, il y avait une espèce de fruitier mal clos où l'on pouvait conquérir une pomme. Une pomme, c'est un souper; une pomme, c'est la vie. Ce qui a perdu Adam pouvait sauver Gavroche. Le jardin côtoyait une ruelle solitaire non pavée et bordée de broussailles en attendant les maisons; une haie l'en séparait.

Gavroche se dirigea vers le jardin; il retrouva la ruelle, il reconnut le pommier, il constata le fruitier, il examina la haie; une haie, c'est une enjambée. Le jour déclinait, pas un chat dans la ruelle, l'heure était bonne. Gavroche ébaucha l'escalade, puis s'arrêta tout à coup. On parlait dans le jardin. Gavroche regarda par une des claires-voies de la haie.

À deux pas de lui, au pied de la haie et de l'autre côté, précisément au point où l'eût fait déboucher la trouée qu'il méditait, il y avait une pierre couchée qui faisait une espèce de banc, et sur ce banc était assis le vieux homme du jardin, ayant devant lui la vieille femme debout. La vieille bougonnait. Gavroche, peu discret, écouta.

— Monsieur Mabeuf! disait la vieille.

— Mabeuf! pensa Gavroche, ce nom est farce.

Le vieillard interpellé ne bougeait point. La vieille répéta:

— Monsieur Mabeuf!

Le vieillard, sans quitter la terre des yeux, se décida à répondre:

— Quoi, mère Plutarque?

— Mère Plutarque! pensa Gavroche, autre nom farce.

La mère Plutarque reprit, et force fut au vieillard d'accepter la conversation.

— Le propriétaire n'est pas content.

— Pourquoi?

— On lui doit trois termes.

— Dans trois mois on lui en devra quatre.

— Il dit qu’il vous enverra coucher dehors.

— J’irai.

— La fruitière veut qu’on la paye. Elle ne lâche plus ses falourdes. Avec quoi vous chaufferez-vous cet hiver? Nous n’aurons point de bois.

— Il y a le soleil.

— Le boucher refuse crédit, il ne veut plus donner de viande.

— Cela se trouve bien. Je digère mal la viande. C’est trop lourd.

— Qu’est-ce qu’on aura pour dîner?

— Du pain.

— Le boulanger exige un acompte, et dit que pas d’argent, pas de pain.

— C’est bon.

— Qu’est-ce que vous mangerez?

— Nous avons les pommes du pommier.

— Mais, monsieur, on ne peut pourtant pas vivre comme ça sans argent.

— Je n’en ai pas.

La vieille s’en alla, le vieillard resta seul. Il se mit à songer. Gavroche songeait de son côté. Il faisait presque nuit.

Le premier résultat de la songerie de Gavroche, ce fut qu’au lieu d’escalader la haie, il s’accroupit dessous. Les branches s’écartaient un peu au bas de la broussaille.

— Tiens, s’écria intérieurement Gavroche, une alcôve! et il s’y blottit. Il était presque adossé au banc du père Mabeuf. Il entendait l’octogénaire respirer.

Alors, pour dîner, il tâcha de dormir.

Sommeil de chat, sommeil d’un œil. Tout en s’assoupissant, Gavroche guettait.

La blancheur du ciel crépusculaire blanchissait la terre, et la ruelle faisait une ligne livide entre deux rangées de buissons obscurs.

Tout à coup, sur cette bande blanchâtre deux silhouettes parurent. L’une venait devant, l’autre, à quelque distance, derrière.

— Voilà deux êtres, grommela Gavroche.

La première silhouette semblait quelque vieux bourgeois courbé et pensif, vêtu plus que simplement, marchant lentement à cause de l’âge, et flânant le soir aux étoiles.

La seconde était droite, ferme, mince. Elle réglait son pas sur le pas de la première; mais dans la lenteur volontaire de l’allure, on sentait de la souplesse et de l’agilité. Cette silhouette avait, avec on ne sait quoi de farouche et d’inquiétant, toute la tournure de ce qu’on appelait alors un élégant; le chapeau était d’une bonne forme, la redingote était noire, bien coupée, probablement de beau drap, et serrée à la taille. La tête se dressait avec une sorte de grâce robuste, et, sous le chapeau, on entrevoyait dans le crépuscule un pâle profil d’adolescent. Ce profil avait une rose à la bouche. Cette seconde silhouette était bien connue de Gavroche c’était Montparnasse.

Quant à l’autre, il n’en eût rien pu dire, sinon que c’était un vieux bonhomme.

Gavroche entra sur-le-champ en observation.

L’un de ces deux passants avait évidemment des projets sur l’autre. Gavroche était bien situé pour voir la suite. L’alcôve était fort à propos devenue cachette.

Montparnasse à la chasse, à une pareille heure, en un pareil lieu, cela était menaçant. Gavroche sentait ses entrailles de gamin s’émouvoir de pitié pour le vieux.

Que faire? intervenir? une faiblesse en secourant une autre! C’était de quoi rire pour Montparnasse. Gavroche ne se dissimulait pas que, pour ce redoutable bandit de dix-huit ans, le vieillard d’abord, l’enfant ensuite, c’étaient deux bouchées.

Pendant que Gavroche délibérait, l’attaque eut lieu, brusque et hideuse. Attaque de tigre à l’onagre, attaque d’araignée à la mouche. Montparnasse, à l’improviste, jeta la rose, bondit sur le vieillard, le colleta, l’empoigna et s’y cramponna, et Gavroche eut de la peine à retenir un cri. Un moment après, l’un de ces hommes était sous l’autre, accablé, râlant, se débattant, avec un genou de marbre sur la poitrine. Seulement ce n’était pas tout à fait ce à quoi Gavroche s’était attendu. Celui qui était à terre, c’était Montparnasse; celui qui était dessus, c’était le bonhomme.

Tout ceci se passait à quelques pas de Gavroche.

Le vieillard avait reçu le choc, et l’avait rendu, et rendu si terriblement qu’en un clin d’œil l’assaillant et l’assailli avaient changé de rôle.

— Voilà un fier invalide! pensa Gavroche.

Et il ne put s’empêcher de battre des mains. Mais ce fut un battement de mains perdu. Il n’arriva pas jusqu’aux deux combattants, absorbés et assourdis l’un par l’autre et mêlant leurs souffles dans la lutte.

Le silence se fit. Montparnasse cessa de se débattre. Gavroche eut cet aparté: Est-ce qu’il est mort?

Le bonhomme n’avait pas prononcé un mot ni jeté un cri. Il se redressa, et Gavroche l’entendit qui disait à Montparnasse:

— Relève-toi.

Montparnasse se releva, mais le bonhomme le tenait. Montparnasse avait l’attitude humiliée et furieuse d’un loup qui serait happé par un mouton.

Gavroche regardait et écoutait, faisant effort pour doubler ses yeux par ses oreilles. Il s’amusait énormément.

Il fut récompensé de sa consciencieuse anxiété de spectateur. Il put saisir au vol ce dialogue qui empruntait à l’obscurité on ne sait quel accent tragique. Le bonhomme questionnait. Montparnasse répondait.

— Quel âge as-tu?

— Dix-neuf ans.

— Tu es fort et bien portant. Pourquoi ne travailles-tu, pas?

— Ça m’ennuie.

— Quel est ton état?

— Fainéant.

— Parle sérieusement. Peut-on faire quelque chose pour toi? Qu’est-ce que tu veux être?

— Voleur.

Il y eut un silence. Le vieillard semblait profondément pensif. Il était immobile et ne lâchait point Montparnasse.

De moment en moment, le jeune bandit, vigoureux et leste, avait des soubresauts de bête prise au piège. Il donnait une secousse, essayait un croc-en-jambe, tordait éperdument ses membres, tâchait de s’échapper. Le vieillard n’avait pas l’air de s’en apercevoir, et lui tenait les deux bras d’une seule main avec l’indifférence souveraine d’une force absolue.

La rêverie du vieillard dura quelque temps, puis, regardant fixement Montparnasse, il éleva doucement la voix, et lui adressa, dans cette ombre où ils étaient, une sorte d’allocution solennelle dont Gavroche ne perdit pas une syllabe:

— Mon enfant tu entres par paresse dans la plus laborieuse des existences. Ah! tu te déclares fainéant! prépare-toi à travailler. As-tu vu une machine qui est redoutable? cela s’appelle le laminoir. Il faut y prendre garde, c’est une chose sournoise et féroce; si elle vous attrape le pan de votre habit, vous y passez tout entier. Cette machine, c’est l’oisiveté.... Arrête-toi, pendant qu’il en est temps encore, et sauve-toi! Autrement, c’est fini; avant peu tu seras dans l’engrenage. Une fois pris, n’espère plus rien. À la fatigue, paresseux! plus de repos. La main de fer du travail implacable t’a saisi. Gagner ta vie, avoir une tâche, accomplir un devoir, tu ne veux pas! être comme les autres, cela t’ennuie! Eh bien, tu seras autrement. Le travail est la loi; qui le repousse ennui, l’aura supplice. Tu ne veux pas être ouvrier, tu seras esclave. Le travail ne vous lâche d’un côté que pour vous reprendre de l’autre; tu ne veux pas être son ami, tu seras son nègre. Ah! tu n’as pas voulu de la lassitude honnête des hommes, tu vas avoir la sueur des damnés. Où les autres chantent, tu râleras. Tu verras de loin, d’en bas, les autres hommes travailler; il te semblera qu’ils se reposent. Le laboureur, le moissonneur, le matelot, le forgeron, t’apparaîtront dans la lumière comme les bienheureux d’un paradis. Quel rayonnement dans l’enclume! Mener la charrue, lier la gerbe, c’est de la joie. La barque en liberté dans le vent, quelle fête! Toi, paresseux, pioche, traîne, roule, marche! Tire ton licou, te voilà bête de somme dans l’attelage de l’enfer! Ah! ne rien faire, c’était là ton but. Eh bien! pas une semaine, pas une journée, pas une heure sans accablement. Tu ne pourras rien soulever qu’avec angoisse. Toutes les minutes qui passeront feront craquer tes muscles. Ce qui sera plume pour les autres sera pour toi rocher. Les choses les plus simple s’escarperont. La vie se fera monstre autour de toi. Aller, venir, respirer, autant de travaux terribles. Ton poumon te fera l’effet d’un poids de cent livres. Marcher ici plutôt que là, ce sera un problème à résoudre. Le premier venu qui veut sortir pousse sa porte, c’est fait, le voilà dehors. Toi, si tu veux sortir, il te faudra percer ton mur. Pour aller dans la rue, qu’est-ce que tout le monde fait? Tout le monde descend l’escalier; toi, tu déchireras tes draps de lit, tu en feras brin à brin une corde, puis tu passeras par ta fenêtre, et tu te suspendras à ce fil sur un abîme, et ce sera la nuit, dans l’orage, dans la pluie, dans l’ouragan, et, si la corde est trop courte, tu n’auras plus qu’une manière de descendre, tomber. Tomber au hasard, dans le gouffre, d’une hauteur quelconque sur, quoi? Sur ce qui est en bas, sur l’inconnu. Ou tu grimperas par un tuyau de cheminée, au risque de t’y brûler; ou tu ramperas par un conduit de latrines, au risque de t’y noyer. Je ne te parle pas des trous qu’il faut masquer, des pierres qu’il faut ôter et remettre vingt fois par jour, des plâtras qu’il faut cacher dans sa paillasse. Une serrure se présente; le bourgeois a dans sa poche sa clef fabriquée par un serrurier. Toi, si tu veux passer outre tu es condamné à faire un chef-d’œuvre effrayant, tu prendras un gros sou, tu le couperas en deux lames avec quels outils? tu les inventeras. Cela te regarde. Puis tu creuseras l’intérieur de ces deux lames, en ménageant soigneusement le dehors, et tu pratiqueras sur le bord tout autour un pas de vis, de façon qu’elles s’ajustent étroitement l’une sur l’autre comme un fond et comme un couvercle. Le dessous et le dessus ainsi vissés, on n’y devinera rien. Pour les surveillants, car tu seras guetté, ce sera un gros sou; pour toi, ce sera une boîte. Que mettras-tu dans cette boîte? Un petit morceau d’acier. Un ressort de montre auquel tu auras fait des dents et qui sera une scie. Avec cette scie, longue comme une épingle et cachée dans un sou, tu devras couper le pêne de la serrure, la mèche du verrou, l’anse du cadenas, et le barreau que tu auras à ta fenêtre, et la manille que tu auras à ta jambe. Ce chef-d’œuvre fait ce prodige accompli, tous ces miracles d’art, d’adresse, d’habileté, de patience, exécutés, si l’on vient à savoir que tu en es l’auteur, quelle sera ta récompense? le cachot. Voilà l’avenir. La paresse, le plaisir, quels précipices! Ne rien faire, c’est un lugubre parti pris, sais-tu bien? Vivre oisif de la substance sociale! être inutile, c’est-à-dire nuisible! cela mène droit au fond de la misère. Malheur à qui veut être parasite! il sera vermine. Ah! il ne te plaît pas de travailler? Ah! tu n’as qu’une pensée, bien boire, bien manger, bien dormir. Tu boiras de l’eau, tu mangeras du pain noir, tu dormiras sur une planche avec une ferraille rivée à tes membres et dont tu sentiras la nuit le froid sur ta chair? Tu briseras cette ferraille, tu t’enfuiras. C’est bon. Tu te traîneras sur le ventre dans les broussailles et tu mangeras de l’herbe comme les brutes des bois. Et tu seras repris. Et alors tu passeras des années dans une basse-fosse, scellé à une muraille, tâtonnant pour boire à ta cruche, mordant dans un affreux pain de ténèbres dont les chiens ne voudraient pas, mangeant des fèves que les vers auront mangées avant toi. Tu seras cloporte dans une cave. Ah! aie pitié de toi-même, misérable enfant, tout jeune, qui tétais ta nourrice il n’y a pas vingt ans, et qui as sans doute encore ta mère! je t’en conjure, écoute-moi. Tu veux de fin drap noir, des escarpins vernis, te friser, te mettre dans tes boucles de l’huile qui sent bon, plaire aux créatures, être joli. Tu seras tondu ras avec une casaque rouge et des sabots. Tu veux une bague au doigt, tu auras un carcan au cou. Et si tu regardes une femme, un coup de bâton. Et tu entreras là à vingt ans, et tu en sortiras à cinquante! Tu entreras jeune, rose, frais, avec tes yeux brillants et toutes tes dents blanches, et ta chevelure d’adolescent, tu sortiras cassé, courbé, ridé, édenté, horrible, en cheveux blancs! Ah! mon pauvre enfant, tu fais fausse route, la fainéantise te conseille mal; le plus rude des travaux, c'est le vol. Crois-moi, n'entreprends pas cette pénible besogne d'être un paresseux. Devenir un coquin, ce n'est pas commode. Il est moins malaisé d'être honnête homme. Va maintenant, et pense à ce que je t'ai dit. À propos, que voulais-tu de moi? Ma bourse. La voici.

Et le vieillard, lâchant Montparnasse, lui mit dans la main sa bourse, que Montparnasse soupesa un moment; après quoi, avec la même précaution machinale que s'il l'eût volée, Montparnasse la laissa glisser doucement dans la poche de derrière de sa redingote.

Tout cela dit et fait, le bonhomme tourna le dos et reprit tranquillement sa promenade.

— Ganache! murmura Montparnasse.

Qui était ce bonhomme? le lecteur l'a sans doute deviné.

Montparnasse, stupéfait, le regarda disparaître dans le crépuscule. Cette contemplation lui fut fatale.

Tandis que le vieillard s'éloignait, Gavroche s'approchait.

Gavroche, d'un coup d'œil de côté, s'était assuré que le père Mabeuf, endormi peut-être, était toujours assis sur le banc. Puis le gamin était sorti de sa broussaille, et s'était mis à ramper dans l'ombre en arrière de Montparnasse immobile. Il parvint ainsi jusqu'à Montparnasse sans en être vu ni entendu, insinua doucement sa main dans la poche de derrière de la redingote de fin drap noir, saisit la bourse, retira sa main, et, se remettant à ramper, fit une évasion de couleuvre dans les ténèbres. Montparnasse, qui n'avait aucune raison d'être sur ses gardes et qui songeait pour la première fois de sa vie, ne s'aperçut de rien. Gavroche, quand il fut revenu au point où était le père Mabeuf, jeta la bourse par-dessus la haie, et s'enfuit à toutes jambes.

La bourse tomba sur le pied du père Mabeuf. Cette commotion le réveilla. Il se pencha, et ramassa la bourse. Il n'y comprit rien, et l'ouvrit. C'était une bourse à deux compartiments; dans l'un, il y avait quelque monnaie; dans l'autre, il y avait six napoléons.

M. Mabeuf, fort effaré, porta la chose à sa gouvernante.

— Cela tombe du ciel, dit la mère Plutarque.

Livre cinquième — Dont la fin ne ressemble pas au commencement

Chapitre I

La solitude et la caserne combinées

La douleur de Cosette, si poignante encore et si vive quatre ou cinq mois auparavant, était, à son insu même, entrée en convalescence. La nature, le printemps, la jeunesse, l’amour pour son père, la gaîté des oiseaux et des fleurs faisaient filtrer peu à peu, jour à jour, goutte à goutte, dans cette âme si vierge et si jeune, on ne sait quoi qui ressemblait presque à l’oubli. Le feu s’y éteignait-il tout à fait? ou s’y formait-il seulement des couches de cendre? Le fait est qu’elle ne se sentait presque plus de point douloureux et brûlant.

Un jour elle pensa tout à coup à Marius: — Tiens! dit-elle, je n’y pense plus.

Dans cette même semaine elle remarqua, passant devant la grille du jardin, un fort bel officier de lanciers, taille de guêpe, ravissant uniforme, joues de jeune fille, sabre sous le bras, moustaches cirées, schapska verni. Du reste cheveux blonds, yeux bleus à fleur de tête, figure ronde, vaine, insolente et jolie; tout le contraire de Marius. Un cigare à la bouche. — Cosette songea que cet officier était sans doute du régiment caserné rue de Babylone.

Le lendemain, elle le vit encore passer. Elle remarqua l’heure.

À dater de ce moment, était-ce le hasard? presque tous les jours elle le vit passer.

Les camarades de l’officier s’aperçurent qu’il y avait là, dans ce jardin «mal tenu», derrière cette méchante grille rococo, une assez jolie créature qui se trouvait presque toujours là au passage du beau lieutenant, lequel n’est point inconnu au lecteur et s’appelait Théodule Gillenormand.

— Tiens! lui disaient-ils. Il y a une petite qui te fait de l’œil, regarde donc.

— Est-ce que j’ai le temps, répondait le lancier, de regarder toutes les filles qui me regardent?

C’était précisément l’instant où Marius descendait gravement vers l’agonie et disait: — Si je pouvais seulement la revoir avant de mourir! — Si son souhait eût été réalisé, s’il eût vu en ce moment-là Cosette regardant un lancier, il n’eût pas pu prononcer une parole et il eût expiré de douleur.

À qui la faute? À personne.

Marius était de ces tempéraments qui s’enfoncent dans le chagrin et qui y séjournent; Cosette était de ceux qui s’y plongent et qui en sortent.

Cosette du reste traversait ce moment dangereux, phase fatale de la rêverie féminine abandonnée à elle-même, où le cœur d’une jeune fille isolée ressemble à ces vrilles de la vigne qui s’accrochent, selon le hasard, au chapiteau d’une colonne de marbre ou au poteau d’un cabaret. Moment rapide et décisif, critique pour toute orpheline, qu’elle soit pauvre ou qu’elle soit riche, car la richesse ne défend pas du mauvais choix; on se mésallie très haut; la vraie mésalliance est celle des âmes; et, de même que plus d’un jeune homme inconnu, sans nom, sans naissance, sans fortune, est un chapiteau de marbre qui soutient un temple de grands sentiments et de grandes idées, de même tel homme du monde, satisfait et opulent, qui a des bottes polies et des paroles vernies, si l’on regarde, non le dehors, mais le dedans, c’est-à-dire ce qui est réservé à la femme, n’est autre chose qu’un soliveau stupide obscurément hanté par les passions violentes, immondes et avinées; le poteau d’un cabaret.

Qu’y avait-il dans l’âme de Cosette? De la passion calmée ou endormie; de l’amour à l’état flottant; quelque chose qui était limpide, brillant, trouble à une certaine profondeur, sombre plus bas. L’image du bel officier se reflétait à la surface. Y avait-il un souvenir au fond? — tout au fond? — Peut-être. Cosette ne savait pas.

Il survint un incident singulier.

Chapitre II

Peurs de Cosette

Dans la première quinzaine d’avril, Jean Valjean fit un voyage. Cela, on le sait, lui arrivait de temps en temps, à de très longs intervalles. Il restait absent un ou deux jours, trois jours au plus. Où allait-il? personne ne le savait, pas même Cosette. Une fois seulement, à un de ces départs, elle l’avait accompagné en fiacre jusqu’au coin d’un petit cul-de-sac sur l’angle duquel elle avait lu: *Impasse de la Planchette*. Là il était descendu, et le fiacre avait ramené Cosette rue de Babylone. C’était en général quand l’argent manquait à la maison que Jean Valjean faisait ces petits voyages.

Jean Valjean était donc absent. Il avait dit: Je reviendrai dans trois jours.

Le soir, Cosette était seule dans le salon. Pour se désennuyer, elle avait ouvert son piano-orgue et elle s’était mise à chanter, en s’accompagnant, le chœur d’Euryanthe: *Chasseurs égarés dans les bois*! qui est peut-être ce qu’il y a de plus beau dans toute la musique. Quand elle eut fini, elle demeura pensive.

Tout à coup il lui sembla qu’elle entendait marcher dans le jardin.

Ce ne pouvait être son père, il était absent; ce ne pouvait être Toussaint, elle était couchée. Il était dix heures du soir.

Elle alla près du volet du salon qui était fermé et y colla son oreille.

Il lui parut que c’était le pas d’un homme, et qu’on marchait très doucement.

Elle monta rapidement au premier, dans sa chambre, ouvrit un vasistas percé dans son volet, et regarda dans le jardin. C’était le moment de la pleine lune. On y voyait comme s’il eût fait jour.

Il n’y avait personne.

Elle ouvrit la fenêtre. Le jardin était absolument calme, et tout ce qu’on apercevait de la rue était désert comme toujours.

Cosette pensa qu’elle s’était trompée. Elle avait cru entendre ce bruit. C’était une hallucination produite par le sombre et prodigieux chœur de Weber qui ouvre devant l’esprit des profondeurs effarées, qui tremble au regard comme une forêt vertigineuse, et où l’on entend le craquement des branches mortes sous le pas inquiet des chasseurs entrevus dans le crépuscule.

Elle n’y songea plus.

D’ailleurs Cosette de sa nature n’était pas très effrayée. Il y avait dans ses veines du sang de bohémienne et d’aventurière qui va pieds nus. On s’en souvient, elle était plutôt alouette que colombe. Elle avait un fond farouche et brave.

Le lendemain, moins tard, à la tombée de la nuit, elle se promenait dans le jardin. Au milieu des pensées confuses qui l’occupaient, elle croyait bien percevoir par instants un bruit pareil au bruit de la veille, comme de quelqu’un qui marcherait dans l’obscurité sous les arbres pas très loin d’elle, mais elle se disait que rien ne ressemble à un pas qui marche dans l’herbe comme le froissement de deux branches qui se déplacent d’elles-mêmes, et elle n’y prenait pas garde. Elle ne voyait rien d’ailleurs.

Elle sortit de «la broussaille»; il lui restait à traverser une petite pelouse verte pour regagner le perron. La lune qui venait de se lever derrière elle, projeta, comme Cosette sortait du massif, son ombre devant elle sur cette pelouse.

Cosette s’arrêta terrifiée.

À côté de son ombre, la lune découpait distinctement sur le gazon une autre ombre singulièrement effrayante et terrible, une ombre qui avait un chapeau rond.

C’était comme l’ombre d’un homme qui eût été debout sur la lisière du massif à quelques pas en arrière de Cosette.

Elle fut une minute sans pouvoir parler, ni crier, ni appeler, ni bouger, ni tourner la tête.

Enfin elle rassembla tout son courage et se retourna résolument.

Il n’y avait personne.

Elle regarda à terre. L’ombre avait disparu.

Elle rentra dans la broussaille, fureta hardiment dans les coins, alla jusqu’à la grille, et ne trouva rien.

Elle se sentit vraiment glacée. Était-ce encore une hallucination? Quoi! deux jours de suite? Une hallucination, passe, mais deux hallucinations? Ce qui était inquiétant, c’est que l’ombre n’était assurément pas un fantôme. Les fantômes ne portent guère de chapeaux ronds.

Le lendemain Jean Valjean revint. Cosette lui conta ce qu’elle avait cru entendre et voir. Elle s’attendait à être rassurée et que son père hausserait les épaules et lui dirait: Tu es une petite fille folle.

Jean Valjean devint soucieux.

— Ce ne peut être rien, lui dit-il.

Il la quitta sous un prétexte et alla dans le jardin, et elle l’aperçut qui examinait la grille avec beaucoup d’attention.

Dans la nuit elle se réveilla; cette fois elle était sûre, elle entendait distinctement marcher tout près du perron au-dessous de sa fenêtre. Elle courut à son vasistas et l’ouvrit. Il y avait en effet dans le jardin un homme qui tenait un gros bâton à la main. Au moment où elle allait crier, la lune éclaira le profil de l’homme. C’était son père.

Elle se recoucha en se disant: — Il est donc bien inquiet!

Jean Valjean passa dans le jardin cette nuit-là et les deux nuits qui suivirent. Cosette le vit par le trou de son volet.

La troisième nuit, la lune décroissait et commençait à se lever plus tard, il pouvait être une heure du matin, elle entendit un grand éclat de rire et la voix de son père qui l’appelait.

— Cosette!

Elle se jeta à bas du lit, passa sa robe de chambre et ouvrit sa fenêtre.

Son père était en bas sur la pelouse.

— Je te réveille pour te rassurer, dit-il. Regarde. Voici ton ombre en chapeau rond.

Et il lui montrait sur le gazon une ombre portée que la lune dessinait et qui ressemblait en effet assez bien au spectre d’un homme qui eût eu un chapeau rond. C’était une silhouette produite par un tuyau de cheminée en tôle, à chapiteau, qui s’élevait au-dessus d’un toit voisin.

Cosette aussi se mit à rire, toutes ses suppositions lugubres tombèrent, et le lendemain, en déjeunant avec son père, elle s’égaya du sinistre jardin hanté par des ombres de tuyaux de poêle.

Jean Valjean redevint tout à fait tranquille; quant à Cosette, elle ne remarqua pas beaucoup si le tuyau de poêle était bien dans la direction de l’ombre qu’elle avait vue ou cru voir, et si la lune se trouvait au même point du ciel. Elle ne s’interrogea point sur cette singularité d’un tuyau de poêle qui craint d’être pris en flagrant délit et qui se retire quand on regarde son ombre, car l’ombre s’était effacée quand Cosette s’était retournée et Cosette avait bien cru en être sûre. Cosette se rasséréna pleinement. La démonstration lui parut complète, et qu’il pût y avoir quelqu’un qui marchait le soir ou la nuit dans le jardin, ceci lui sortit de la tête.

À quelques jours de là cependant un nouvel incident se produisit.

Chapitre III

Enrichies des commentaires de Toussaint

Dans le jardin, près de la grille sur la rue, il y avait un banc de pierre défendu par une charmille du regard des curieux, mais auquel pourtant, à la rigueur, le bras d'un passant pouvait atteindre à travers la grille et la charmille.

Un soir de ce même mois d'avril, Jean Valjean était sorti; Cosette, après le soleil couché, s'était assise sur ce banc. Le vent fraîchissait dans les arbres; Cosette songeait; une tristesse sans objet la gagnait peu à peu, cette tristesse invincible que donne le soir et qui vient peut-être, qui sait? du mystère de la tombe entr'ouvert à cette heure-là.

Fantine était peut-être dans cette ombre.

Cosette se leva, fit lentement le tour du jardin, marchant dans l'herbe inondée de rosée et se disant à travers l'espèce de somnambulisme mélancolique où elle était plongée: — Il faudrait vraiment des sabots pour le jardin à cette heure-ci. On s'enrhume.

Elle revint au banc.

Au moment de s'y rasseoir, elle remarqua à la place qu'elle avait quittée une assez grosse pierre qui n'y était évidemment pas l'instant d'auparavant.

Cosette considéra cette pierre, se demandant ce que cela voulait dire. Tout à coup l'idée que cette pierre n'était point venue sur ce banc toute seule, que quelqu'un l'avait mise là, qu'un bras avait passé à travers cette grille, cette idée lui apparut et lui fit peur. Cette fois ce fut une vraie peur; la pierre était là. Pas de doute possible; elle n'y toucha pas, s'enfuit sans oser regarder derrière elle, se réfugia dans la maison, et ferma tout de suite au volet, à la barre et au verrou la porte-fenêtre du perron. Elle demanda à Toussaint:

— Mon père est-il rentré?

— Pas encore, mademoiselle.

(Nous avons indiqué une fois pour toutes le bégayement de Toussaint. Qu'on nous permette de ne plus l'accentuer. Nous répugnons à la notation musicale d'une infirmité.)

Jean Valjean, homme pensif et promeneur nocturne, ne rentrait souvent qu'assez tard dans la nuit.

— Toussaint, reprit Cosette, vous avez soin de bien barricader le soir les volets sur le jardin au moins, avec les barres, et de bien mettre les petites choses en fer dans les petits anneaux qui ferment?

— Oh! soyez tranquille, mademoiselle.

Toussaint n’y manquait pas, et Cosette le savait bien, mais elle ne put s’empêcher d’ajouter:

— C’est que c’est si désert par ici!

— Pour ça, dit Toussaint, c’est vrai. On serait assassiné avant d’avoir le temps de dire ouf! Avec cela que monsieur ne couche pas dans la maison. Mais ne craignez rien, mademoiselle, je ferme les fenêtres comme des bastilles. Des femmes seules! je crois bien que cela fait frémir! Vous figurez-vous? voir entrer la nuit des hommes dans la chambre qui vous disent: — tais-toi! et qui se mettent à vous couper le cou. Ce n’est pas tant de mourir, on meurt, c’est bon, on sait bien qu’il faut qu’on meure, mais c’est l’abomination de sentir ces gens-là vous toucher. Et puis leurs couteaux, ça doit mal couper! Ah Dieu!

— Taisez-vous, dit Cosette. Fermez bien tout.

Cosette, épouvantée du mélodrame improvisé par Toussaint et peut-être aussi du souvenir des apparitions de l’autre semaine qui lui revenaient, n’osa même pas lui dire: — Allez donc voir la pierre qu’on a mise sur le banc! de peur de rouvrir la porte du jardin, et que «les hommes» n’entrassent. Elle fit clore soigneusement partout les portes et fenêtres, fit visiter par Toussaint toute la maison de la cave au grenier, s’enferma dans sa chambre, mit ses verrous, regarda sous son lit, se coucha, et dormit mal. Toute la nuit elle vit la pierre grosse comme une montagne et pleine de cavernes.

Au soleil levant, — le propre du soleil levant est de nous faire rire de toutes nos terreurs de la nuit, et le rire qu’on a est toujours proportionné à la peur qu’on a eue, — au soleil levant Cosette, en s’éveillant, vit son effroi comme un cauchemar, et se dit: — À quoi ai-je été songer? C’est comme ces pas que j’avais cru entendre l’autre semaine dans le jardin la nuit! c’est comme l’ombre du tuyau de poêle! Est-ce que je vais devenir poltronne à présent? — Le soleil, qui rutilait aux fentes de ses volets et faisait de pourpre les rideaux de damas, la rassura tellement que tout s’évanouit dans sa pensée, même la pierre.

— Il n’y avait pas plus de pierre sur le banc qu’il n’y avait d’homme en chapeau rond dans le jardin; j’ai rêvé la pierre comme le reste.

Elle s’habilla, descendit au jardin, courut au banc, et se sentit une sueur froide. La pierre y était.

Mais ce ne fut qu’un moment. Ce qui est frayeur la nuit est curiosité le jour.

— Bah! dit-elle, voyons donc.

Elle souleva cette pierre qui était assez grosse. Il y avait dessous quelque chose qui ressemblait à une lettre.

C’était une enveloppe de papier blanc. Cosette s’en saisit. Il n’y avait pas d’adresse d’un côté, pas de cachet de l’autre. Cependant l’enveloppe, quoique ouverte, n’était point vide. On entrevoyait des papiers dans l’intérieur.

Cosette y fouilla. Ce n’était plus de la frayeur, ce n’était plus de la curiosité; c’était un commencement d’anxiété.

Cosette tira de l’enveloppe ce qu’elle contenait, un petit cahier de papier dont chaque page était numérotée et portait quelques lignes écrites d’une écriture assez jolie, pensa Cosette, et très fine.

Cosette chercha un nom, il n’y en avait pas; une signature, il n’y en avait pas. À qui cela était-il adressé? À elle probablement, puisqu’une main avait déposé le paquet sur son banc. De qui cela venait-il? Une fascination irrésistible s’empara d’elle, elle essaya de détourner ses yeux de ces feuillets qui tremblaient dans sa main, elle regarda le ciel, la rue, les acacias tout trempés de lumière, des pigeons qui volaient sur un toit voisin, puis tout à coup son regard s’abaissa vivement sur le manuscrit, et elle se dit qu’il fallait qu’elle sût ce qu’il y avait là dedans.

Voici ce qu’elle lut:

Chapitre IV

Un cœur sous une pierre

La réduction de l'univers à un seul être, la dilatation d'un seul être jusqu'à Dieu, voilà l'amour.

L'amour, c'est la salutation des anges aux astres.

Comme l'âme est triste quand elle est triste par l'amour!

Quel vide que l'absence de l'être qui à lui seul remplit le monde! Oh! comme il est vrai que l'être aimé devient Dieu. On comprendrait que Dieu en fût jaloux si le Père de tout n'avait pas évidemment fait la création pour l'âme, et l'âme pour l'amour.

Il suffît d'un sourire entrevu là-bas sous un chapeau de crêpe blanc à bavolet lilas, pour que l'âme entre dans le palais des rêves.

Dieu est derrière tout, mais tout cache Dieu. Les choses sont noires, les créatures sont opaques. Aimer un être, c'est le rendre transparent.

De certaines pensées sont des prières. Il y a des moments où, quelle que soit l'attitude du corps, l'âme est à genoux.

Les amants séparés trompent l'absence par mille choses chimériques qui ont pourtant leur réalité. On les empêche de se voir, ils ne peuvent s'écrire; ils trouvent une foule de moyens mystérieux de correspondre. Ils s'envoient le chant des oiseaux, le parfum des fleurs, le rire des enfants, la lumière du soleil, les soupirs du vent, les rayons des étoiles, toute la création. Et pourquoi non? Toutes les œuvres de Dieu sont faites pour servir l'amour. L'amour est assez puissant pour charger la nature entière de ses messages.

O printemps, tu es une lettre que je lui écris.

L'avenir appartient encore bien plus aux cœurs qu'aux esprits. Aimer, voilà la seule chose qui puisse occuper et emplir l'éternité. À l'infini, il faut l'inépuisable.

L'amour participe de l'âme même. Il est de même nature qu'elle. Comme elle il est étincelle divine, comme elle il est incorruptible, indivisible, impérissable. C'est un point de feu qui est en nous, qui est immortel et infini, que rien ne peut borner et que rien ne peut éteindre. On le sent brûler jusque dans la moelle des os et on le voit rayonner jusqu'au fond du ciel.

Ô amour! adorations! volupté de deux esprits qui se comprennent, de deux cœurs qui s’échangent, de deux regards qui se pénètrent? Vous me viendrez, n’est-ce pas, bonheurs! Promenades à deux dans les solitudes! journées bénies et rayonnantes! J’ai quelquefois rêvé que de temps en temps des heures se détachaient de la vie des anges et venaient ici-bas traverser la destinée des hommes.

Dieu ne peut rien ajouter au bonheur de ceux qui s’aiment que de leur donner la durée sans fin. Après une vie d’amour, une éternité d’amour, c’est une augmentation en effet; mais accroître en son intensité même la félicité ineffable que l’amour donne à l’âme dès ce monde, c’est impossible, même à Dieu. Dieu, c’est la plénitude du ciel; l’amour, c’est la plénitude de l’homme.

Vous regardez une étoile pour deux motifs, parce qu’elle est lumineuse et parce qu’elle est impénétrable. Vous avez auprès de vous un plus doux rayonnement et un plus grand mystère, la femme.

Tous, qui ne nous soyons, nous avons nos êtres respirables. S’ils nous manquent, l’air nous manque, nous étouffons. Alors on meurt. Mourir par manque d’amour, c’est affreux! L’asphyxie de l’âme!

Quand l’amour a fondu et mêlé deux êtres dans une unité angélique et sacrée, le secret de la vie est trouvé pour eux; ils ne sont plus que les deux termes d’une même destinée; ils ne sont plus que les deux ailes d’un même esprit. Aimez, planez!

Le jour où une femme qui passe devant vous dégage de la lumière en marchant, vous êtes perdu, vous aimez. Vous n’avez plus qu’une chose à faire, penser à elle si fixement qu’elle soit contrainte de penser à vous.

Ce que l’amour commence ne peut être achevé que par Dieu.

L’amour vrai se désole et s’enchante pour un gant perdu ou pour un mouchoir trouvé, et il a besoin de l’éternité pour son dévouement et ses espérances. Il se compose à la fois de l’infiniment grand et de l’infiniment petit.

Si vous êtes pierre, soyez aimant; si vous êtes plante, soyez sensitive; si vous êtes homme, soyez amour.

Rien ne suffit à l’amour. On a le bonheur, on veut le paradis; on a le paradis, on veut le ciel.

Ô vous qui vous aimez, tout cela est dans l’amour. Sachez l’y trouver. L’amour a autant que le ciel, la contemplation, et de plus que le ciel, la volupté.

— Vient-elle encore au Luxembourg? — Non, monsieur. — C’est dans cette église qu’elle entend la messe, n’est-ce pas? — Elle n’y vient plus. — Habite-t-elle toujours cette maison? — Elle est déménagée. — Où est-elle allée demeurer? — Elle ne l’a pas dit.

Quelle chose sombre de ne pas savoir l’adresse de son âme!

L’amour a des enfantillages, les autres passions ont des petitesses. Honte aux passions qui rendent l’homme petit! Honneur à celle qui le fait enfant!

C’est une chose étrange, savez-vous cela? Je suis dans la nuit. Il y a un être qui en s’en allant a emporté le ciel.

Oh! être couchés côte à côte dans le même tombeau la main dans la main, et de temps en temps, dans les ténèbres, nous caresser doucement un doigt, cela suffirait à mon éternité.

Vous qui souffrez parce que vous aimez, aimez plus encore. Mourir d’amour, c’est en vivre.

Aimez. Une sombre transfiguration étoilée est mêlée à ce supplice. Il y a de l’extase dans l’agonie.

Ô joie des oiseaux! c’est parce qu’ils ont le nid qu’ils ont le chant.

L’amour est une respiration céleste de l’air du paradis.

Cœurs profonds, esprits sages, prenez la vie comme Dieu la faite; c’est une longue épreuve, une préparation inintelligible à la destinée inconnue. Cette destinée, la vraie, commence pour l’homme à la première marche de l’intérieur du tombeau. Alors il lui apparaît quelque chose, et il commence à distinguer le définitif. Le définitif, songez à ce mot. Les vivants voient l’infini; le définitif ne se laisse voir qu’aux morts. En attendant, aimez et souffrez, espérez et contemplez. Malheur, hélas! à qui n’aura aimé que des corps, des formes, des apparences! La mort lui ôtera tout. Tâchez d’aimer des âmes, vous les retrouverez.

J’ai rencontré dans la rue un jeune homme très pauvre qui aimait. Son chapeau était vieux, son habit était usé; il avait les coudes troués; l’eau passait à travers ses souliers et les astres à travers son âme.

Quelle grande chose, être aimé! Quelle chose plus grande encore, aimer! Le cœur devient héroïque à force de passion. Il ne se compose plus de rien que de pur; il ne s’appuie plus sur rien que d’élevé et de grand. Une pensée indigne n’y peut pas plus germer qu’une ortie sur un glacier. L’âme haute et sereine, inaccessible aux passions et aux émotions vulgaires, dominant les nuées et les ombres de ce monde, les folies, les mensonges, les haines, les vanités, les misères, habite le bleu du ciel, et ne sent plus que les ébranlements profonds et souterrains de la destinée, comme le haut des montagnes sent les tremblements de terre.

S’il n’y avait pas quelqu’un qui aime, le soleil s’éteindrait.

Chapitre V

Cosette après la lettre

Pendant cette lecture, Cosette entrait peu à peu en rêverie. Au moment où elle levait les yeux de la dernière ligne du cahier, le bel officier, c’était son heure, passa triomphant devant la grille. Cosette le trouva hideux.

Elle se remit à contempler le cahier. Il était écrit d’une écriture ravissante, pensa Cosette; de la même main, mais avec des encres diverses, tantôt très noires, tantôt blanchâtres, comme lorsqu’on met de l’eau dans l’encrier, et par conséquent à des jours différents. C’était donc une pensée qui s’était épanchée là, soupir à soupir, irrégulièrement, sans ordre, sans choix, sans but, au hasard. Cosette n’avait jamais rien lu de pareil. Ce manuscrit où elle voyait plus de clarté encore que d’obscurité, lui faisait l’effet d’un sanctuaire entr’ouvert. Chacune de ces lignes mystérieuses resplendissait à ses yeux et lui inondait le cœur d’une lumière étrange. L’éducation qu’elle avait reçue lui avait parlé toujours de l’âme et jamais de l’amour, à peu près comme qui parlerait du tison et point de la flamme. Ce manuscrit de quinze pages lui révélait brusquement et doucement tout l’amour, la douleur, la destinée, la vie, l’éternité, le commencement, la fin. C’était comme une main qui se serait ouverte et lui aurait jeté subitement une poignée de rayons. Elle sentait dans ces quelques lignes une nature passionnée, ardente, généreuse, honnête, une volonté sacrée, une immense douleur et un espoir immense, un cœur serré, une extase épanouie. Qu’était-ce que ce manuscrit? Une lettre. Lettre sans adresse, sans nom, sans date, sans signature, pressante et désintéressée, énigme composée de vérités, message d’amour fait pour être apporté par un ange et lu par une vierge, rendez-vous donné hors de la terre, billet doux d’un fantôme à une ombre. C’était un absent tranquille et accablé qui semblait prêt à se réfugier dans la mort et qui envoyait à l’absente le secret de la destinée, la clef de la vie, l’amour. Cela avait été écrit le pied dans le tombeau et le doigt dans le ciel. Ces lignes, tombées une à une sur le papier, étaient ce qu’on pourrait appeler des gouttes d’âme.

Maintenant ces pages, de qui pouvaient-elles venir? qui pouvait les avoir écrites?

Cosette n’hésita pas une minute. Un seul homme.

Lui!

Le jour s’était refait dans son esprit. Tout avait reparu. Elle éprouvait une joie inouïe et une angoisse profonde. C’était lui! lui qui lui écrivait! lui qui était là! lui dont le bras avait passé à travers cette grille! Pendant qu’elle l’oubliait, il l’avait retrouvée! Mais est-ce qu’elle l’avait oublié? Non! jamais! Elle était folle d’avoir cru cela un moment. Elle l’avait toujours aimé, toujours adoré. Le feu s’était couvert et avait couvé quelque temps, mais, elle le voyait bien, il n’avait fait que creuser plus avant, et maintenant il éclatait de nouveau et l’embrasait tout entière. Ce cahier était comme une flammèche tombée de cette autre âme dans la sienne. Elle sentait recommencer l’incendie. Elle se pénétrait de chaque mot du manuscrit. — Oh oui! disait-elle, comme je reconnais tout cela! C’est tout ce que j’avais déjà lu dans ses yeux.

Comme elle l’achevait pour la troisième fois, le lieutenant Théodule revint devant la grille et fit sonner ses éperons sur le pavé. Force fut à Cosette de lever les yeux. Elle le trouva fade, niais, sot, inutile, fat, déplaisant, impertinent, et très laid. L’officier crut devoir lui sourire. Elle se détourna honteuse et indignée. Elle lui aurait volontiers jeté quelque chose à la tête.

Elle s’enfuit, rentra dans la maison et s’enferma dans sa chambre pour relire le manuscrit, pour l’apprendre par cœur, et pour songer. Quand elle l’eut bien lu, elle le baisa et le mit dans son corset.

C’en était fait, Cosette était retombée dans le profond amour séraphique. L’abîme Éden venait de se rouvrir.

Toute la journée, Cosette fut dans une sorte d’étourdissement. Elle pensait à peine, ses idées étaient à l’état d’écheveau brouillé dans son cerveau, elle ne parvenait à rien conjecturer, elle espérait à travers un tremblement, quoi? des choses vagues. Elle n’osait rien se promettre, et ne voulait rien se refuser. Des pâleurs lui passaient sur le visage et des frissons sur le corps. Il lui semblait par moments qu’elle entrait dans le chimérique; elle se disait: est-ce réel? alors elle tâtait le papier bien-aimé sous sa robe, elle le pressait contre son cœur, elle en sentait les angles sur sa chair, et si Jean Valjean l’eût vue en ce moment, il eût frémi devant cette joie lumineuse et inconnue qui lui débordait des paupières. — Oh oui! pensait-elle. C’est bien lui! ceci vient de lui pour moi!

Et elle se disait qu’une intervention des anges, qu’un hasard céleste, le lui avait rendu.

Ô transfigurations de l’amour! ô rêves! ce hasard céleste, cette intervention des anges, c’était cette boulette de pain lancée par un voleur à un autre voleur, de la cour Charlemagne à la fosse-aux-lions, par-dessus les toits de la Force.

Chapitre VI

Les vieux sont faits pour sortir à propos

Le soir venu, Jean Valjean sortit, Cosette s’habilla. Elle arrangea ses cheveux de la manière qui lui allait le mieux, et elle mit une robe dont le corsage, qui avait reçu un coup de ciseau de trop, et qui, par cette échancrure, laissait voir la naissance du cou, était, comme disent les jeunes filles, «un peu indécent». Ce n’était pas le moins du monde indécent, mais c’était plus joli qu’autrement. Elle fit toute cette toilette sans savoir pourquoi.

Voulait-elle sortir? non.

Attendait-elle une visite? non.

À la brune, elle descendit au jardin. Toussaint était occupée à sa cuisine qui donnait sur l’arrière-cour.

Elle se mit à marcher sous les branches, les écartant de temps en temps avec la main, parce qu’il y en avait de très basses.

Elle arriva au banc.

La pierre y était restée.

Elle s’assit, et posa sa douce main blanche sur cette pierre comme si elle voulait la caresser et la remercier.

Tout à coup, elle eut cette impression indéfinissable qu’on éprouve, même sans voir, lorsqu’on a quelqu’un debout derrière soi.

Elle tourna la tête et se dressa.

C’était lui.

Il était tête nue. Il paraissait pâle et amaigri. On distinguait à peine son vêtement noir. Le crépuscule blêmissait son beau front et couvrait ses yeux de ténèbres. Il avait, sous un voile d’incomparable douceur, quelque chose de la mort et de la nuit. Son visage était éclairé par la clarté du jour qui se meurt et par la pensée d’une âme qui s’en va.

Il semblait que ce n’était pas encore le fantôme et que ce n’était déjà plus l’homme.

Son chapeau était jeté à quelques pas dans les broussailles.

Cosette, prête à défaillir, ne poussa pas un cri. Elle reculait lentement, car elle se sentait attirée. Lui ne bougeait point. À je ne sais quoi d’ineffable et de triste qui l’enveloppait, elle sentait le regard de ses yeux qu’elle ne voyait pas.

Cosette, en reculant, rencontra un arbre et s’y adossa. Sans cet arbre, elle fût tombée.

Alors elle entendit sa voix, cette voix qu’elle n’avait vraiment jamais entendue, qui s’élevait à peine au-dessus du frémissement des feuilles, et qui murmurait:

— Pardonnez-moi, je suis là. J’ai le cœur gonflé, je ne pouvais pas vivre comme j’étais, je suis venu. Avez-vous lu ce que j’avais mis là, sur ce banc? Me reconnaissez-vous un peu? N’ayez pas peur de moi. Voilà du temps déjà, vous rappelez-vous le jour où vous m’avez regardé? c’était dans le Luxembourg, près du Gladiateur. Et le jour où vous avez passé devant moi? C’étaient le 16 juin et le 2 juillet. Il va y avoir un an. Depuis bien longtemps, je ne vous ai plus vue. J’ai demandé à la loueuse de chaises, elle m’a dit qu’elle ne vous voyait plus. Vous demeuriez rue de l’Ouest au troisième sur le devant dans une maison neuve, vous voyez que je sais. Je vous suivais, moi. Qu’est-ce que j’avais à faire? Et puis vous avez disparu. J’ai cru vous voir passer une fois que je lisais les journaux sous les arcades de l’Odéon. J’ai couru. Mais non. C’était une personne qui avait un chapeau comme vous. La nuit, je viens ici. Ne craignez pas, personne ne me voit. Je viens regarder vos fenêtres de près. Je marche bien doucement pour que vous n’entendiez pas, car vous auriez peut-être peur. L’autre soir j’étais derrière vous, vous vous êtes retournée, je me suis enfui. Une fois je vous ai entendue chanter. J’étais heureux. Est-ce que cela vous fait quelque chose que je vous entende chanter à travers le volet? cela ne peut rien vous faire. Non, n’est-ce pas? Voyez-vous, vous êtes mon ange, laissez-moi venir un peu. Je crois que je vais mourir. Si vous saviez! je vous adore, moi! Pardonnez-moi, je vous parle, je ne sais pas ce que je vous dis, je vous fâche peut-être; est-ce que je vous fâche?

— Ô ma mère! dit-elle.

Et elle s’affaissa sur elle-même comme si elle se mourait.

Il la prit, elle tombait, il la prit dans ses bras, il la serra étroitement sans avoir conscience de ce qu’il faisait. Il la soutenait tout en chancelant. Il était comme s’il avait la tête pleine de fumée; des éclairs lui passaient entre les cils; ses idées s’évanouissaient; il lui semblait qu’il accomplissait un acte religieux et qu’il commettait une profanation. Du reste il n’avait pas le moindre désir de cette femme ravissante dont il sentait la forme contre sa poitrine. Il était éperdu d’amour.

Elle lui prit une main et la posa sur son cœur. Il sentit le papier qui y était. Il balbutia:

— Vous m’aimez donc?

Elle répondit d’une voix si basse que ce n’était plus qu’un souffle qu’on entendait à peine:

— Tais-toi! tu le sais!

Et elle cacha sa tête rouge dans le sein du jeune homme superbe et enivré.

Il tomba sur le banc, elle près de lui. Ils n’avaient plus de paroles. Les étoiles commençaient à rayonner. Comment se fit-il que leurs lèvres se rencontrèrent? Comment se fait-il que l’oiseau chante, que la neige fonde, que la rose s’ouvre, que mai s’épanouisse, que l’aube blanchisse derrière les arbres noirs au sommet frissonnant des collines?

Un baiser, et ce fut tout.

Tous deux tressaillirent, et ils se regardèrent dans l’ombre avec des yeux éclatants.

Ils ne sentaient ni la nuit fraîche, ni la pierre froide, ni la terre humide, ni l’herbe mouillée, ils se regardaient et ils avaient le cœur plein de pensées. Ils s’étaient pris les mains, sans savoir.

Elle ne lui demandait pas, elle n’y songeait pas même, par où il était entré et comment il avait pénétré dans le jardin. Cela lui paraissait si simple qu’il fût là.

De temps en temps le genou de Marius touchait le genou de Cosette, et tous deux frémissaient.

Par intervalles, Cosette bégayait une parole. Son âme tremblait à ses lèvres comme une goutte de rosée à une fleur.

Peu à peu ils se parlèrent. L’épanchement succéda au silence qui est la plénitude. La nuit était sereine et splendide au-dessus de leur tête. Ces deux êtres, purs comme des esprits, se dirent tout, leurs songes, leurs ivresses, leurs extases, leurs chimères, leurs défaillances, comme ils s’étaient adorés de loin, comme ils s’étaient souhaités, leur désespoir, quand ils avaient cessé de s’apercevoir. Ils se confièrent dans une intimité idéale, que rien déjà ne pouvait plus accroître, ce qu’ils avaient de plus caché et de plus mystérieux. Ils se racontèrent, avec une foi candide dans leurs illusions, tout ce que l’amour, la jeunesse et ce reste d’enfance qu’ils avaient leur mettaient dans la pensée. Ces deux cœurs se versèrent l’un dans l’autre, de sorte qu’au bout d’une heure, c’était le jeune homme qui avait l’âme de la jeune fille et la jeune fille qui avait l’âme du jeune homme. Ils se pénétrèrent, ils s’enchantèrent, ils s’éblouirent.

Quand ils eurent fini, quand ils se furent tout dit, elle posa sa tête sur son épaule et lui demanda:

— Comment vous appelez-vous?

— Je m’appelle Marius, dit-il. Et vous?

— Je m’appelle Cosette.

Livre sixième — Le petit Gavroche

Chapitre I

Méchante espièglerie du vent

Depuis 1823, tandis que la gargote de Montfermeil sombrait et s'engloutissait peu à peu, non dans l'abîme d'une banqueroute, mais dans le cloaque des petites dettes, les mariés Thénardier avaient eu deux autres enfants, mâles tous deux. Cela faisait cinq; deux filles et trois garçons. C'était beaucoup.

La Thénardier s'était débarrassée des deux derniers, encore en bas âge et tout petits, avec un bonheur singulier.

Débarrassée est le mot. Il n'y avait chez cette femme qu'un fragment de nature. Phénomène dont il y a du reste plus d'un exemple. Comme la maréchale de La Mothe-Houdancourt, la Thénardier n'était mère que jusqu'à ses filles. Sa maternité finissait là. Sa haine du genre humain commençait à ses garçons. Du côté de ses fils sa méchanceté était à pic, et son cœur avait à cet endroit un lugubre escarpement. Comme on l'a vu, elle détestait l'aîné; elle exécrait les deux autres. Pourquoi? Parce que. Le plus terrible des motifs et la plus indiscutable des réponses: Parce que. — Je n'ai pas besoin d'une tiaulée d'enfants, disait cette mère.

Expliquons comment les Thénardier étaient parvenus à s'exonérer de leurs deux derniers enfants, et même à en tirer profit.

Cette fille Magnon, dont il a été question quelques pages plus haut, était la même qui avait réussi à faire renter par le bonhomme Gillenormand les deux enfants qu'elle avait. Elle demeurait quai des Célestins, à l'angle de cette antique rue du Petit-Musc qui a fait ce qu'elle a pu pour changer en bonne odeur sa mauvaise renommée. On se souvient de la grande épidémie de croup qui désola, il y a trente-cinq ans, les quartiers riverains de la Seine à Paris, et dont la science profita pour expérimenter sur une large échelle l'efficacité des insufflations d'alun, si utilement remplacées aujourd'hui par la teinture externe d'iode. Dans cette épidémie, la Magnon perdit, le même jour, l'un le matin, l'autre le soir, ses deux garçons, encore en très bas âge. Ce fut un coup. Ces enfants étaient précieux à leur mère; ils représentaient quatre-vingts francs par mois. Ces quatre-vingts francs étaient fort exactement soldés, au nom de M. Gillenormand, par son receveur de rentes, M. Barge, huissier retiré, rue du Roi-de-Sicile. Les enfants morts, la rente était enterrée. La Magnon chercha un expédient. Dans cette ténébreuse maçonnerie du mal dont elle faisait partie, on sait tout, on se garde le secret, et l'on s'entr'aide. Il fallait deux enfants à la Magnon; la Thénardier en avait deux. Même sexe, même âge. Bon arrangement pour l'une, bon placement pour l'autre. Les petits Thénardier devinrent les petits Magnon. La Magnon quitta le quai des Célestins et alla demeurer rue Clocheperce. À Paris, l'identité qui lie un individu à lui-même se rompt d'une rue à l'autre.

L'état civil, n'étant averti de rien, ne réclama pas, et la substitution se fit le plus simplement du monde. Seulement le Thénardier exigea, pour ce prêt d'enfants, dix francs par mois que la Magnon promit, et même paya. Il va sans dire que M. Gillenormand continua de s'exécuter. Il venait tous les six mois voir les petits. Il ne s'aperçut pas du changement. — Monsieur, lui disait la Magnon, comme ils vous ressemblent!

Thénardier, à qui les avatars étaient aisés, saisit cette occasion de devenir Jondrette. Ses deux filles et Gavroche avaient à peine eu le temps de s'apercevoir qu'ils avaient deux petits frères. À un certain degré de misère, on est gagné par une sorte d'indifférence spectrale, et l'on voit les êtres comme des larves. Vos plus proches ne sont souvent pour vous que de vagues formes de l'ombre, à peine distinctes du fond nébuleux de la vie et facilement remêlées à l'invisible.

Le soir du jour où elle avait fait livraison de ses deux petits à la Magnon, avec la volonté bien expresse d'y renoncer à jamais, la Thénardier avait eu, ou fait semblant d'avoir, un scrupule. Elle avait dit à son mari: — Mais c'est abandonner ses enfants, cela! Thénardier, magistral et flegmatique, cautérisa le scrupule avec ce mot: Jean-Jacques Rousseau a fait mieux! Du scrupule la mère avait passé à l'inquiétude: — Mais si la police allait nous tourmenter? Ce que nous avons fait là, monsieur Thénardier, dis donc, est-ce que c'est permis? — Thénardier répondit: — Tout est permis. Personne n'y verra que de l'azur. D'ailleurs, dans des enfants qui n'ont pas le sou, nul n'a intérêt à y regarder de près.

La Magnon était une sorte d'élégante du crime. Elle faisait de la toilette. Elle partageait son logis, meublé d'une façon maniérée et misérable, avec une savante voleuse anglaise francisée. Cette Anglaise naturalisée parisienne, recommandable par des relations fort riches, intimement liée avec les médailles de la bibliothèque et les diamants de Mlle Mars, fut plus tard célèbre dans les sommiers judiciaires. On l'appelait *mamselle* Miss.

Les deux petits échus à la Magnon n’eurent pas à se plaindre. Recommandés par les quatre-vingts francs, ils étaient ménagés, comme tout ce qui est exploité; point mal vêtus, point mal nourris, traités presque comme «de petits messieurs», mieux avec la fausse mère qu’avec la vraie. La Magnon faisait la dame et ne parlait pas argot devant eux.

Ils passèrent ainsi quelques années. Le Thénardier en augurait bien. Il lui arriva un jour de dire à la Magnon qui lui remettait ses dix francs mensuels: — Il faudra que «le père» leur donne de l’éducation.

Tout à coup, ces deux pauvres enfants, jusque-là assez protégés, même par leur mauvais sort, furent brusquement jetés dans la vie, et forcés de la commencer.

Une arrestation en masse de malfaiteurs comme celle du galetas Jondrette, nécessairement compliquée de perquisitions et d’incarcérations ultérieures, est un véritable désastre pour cette hideuse contre-société occulte qui vit sous la société publique; une aventure de ce genre entraîne toutes sortes d’écroulements dans ce monde sombre. La catastrophe des Thénardier produisit la catastrophe de la Magnon.

Un jour, peu de temps après que la Magnon eut remis à Éponine le billet relatif à la rue Plumet, il se fit rue Clocheperce une subite descente de police; la Magnon fut saisie, ainsi que mamselle Miss, et toute la maisonnée, qui était suspecte, passa dans le coup de filet. Les deux petits garçons jouaient pendant ce temps-là dans une arrière-cour et ne virent rien de la razzia. Quand ils voulurent rentrer, ils trouvèrent la porte fermée et la maison vide. Un savetier d’une échoppe en face les appela et leur remit un papier que «leur mère» avait laissé pour eux. Sur le papier il y avait une adresse: M. Barge, receveur de rentes, rue du Roi-de-Sicile, nº 8. L’homme de l’échoppe leur dit: — Vous ne demeurez plus ici. Allez là. C’est tout près. La première rue à gauche. Demandez votre chemin avec ce papier-ci.

Les enfants partirent, l’aîné menant le cadet, et tenant à la main le papier qui devait les guider. Il avait froid, et ses petits doigts engourdis serraient peu et tenaient mal ce papier. Au détour de la rue Clocheperce, un coup de vent le lui arracha, et, comme la nuit tombait, l’enfant ne put le retrouver.

Ils se mirent à errer au hasard dans les rues.

Chapitre II

Où le petit Gavroche tire parti de Napoléon le Grand

Le printemps à Paris est assez souvent traversé par des bises aigres et dures dont on est, non pas précisément glacé, mais gelé; ces bises, qui attristent les plus belles journées, font exactement l'effet de ces souffles d'air froid qui entrent dans une chambre chaude par les fentes d'une fenêtre ou d'une porte mal fermée. Il semble que la sombre porte de l'hiver soit restée entrebâillée et qu'il vienne du vent par là. Au printemps de 1832, époque où éclata la première grande épidémie de ce siècle en Europe, ces bises étaient plus âpres et plus poignantes que jamais. C'était une porte plus glaciale encore que celle de l'hiver qui était entr'ouverte. C'était la porte du sépulcre. On sentait dans ces bises le souffle du choléra.

Au point de vue météorologique, ces vents froids avaient cela de particulier qu'ils n'excluaient point une forte tension électrique. De fréquents orages, accompagnés d'éclairs et de tonnerres, éclatèrent à cette époque.

Un soir que ces bises soufflaient rudement, au point que janvier semblait revenu et que les bourgeois avaient repris les manteaux, le petit Gavroche, toujours grelottant gaîment sous ses loques, se tenait debout et comme en extase devant la boutique d'un perruquier des environs de l'Orme-Saint-Gervais. Il était orné d'un châle de femme en laine, cueilli on ne sait où, dont il s'était fait un cache-nez. Le petit Gavroche avait l'air d'admirer profondément une mariée en cire, décolletée et coiffée de fleurs d'oranger, qui tournait derrière la vitre, montrant, entre deux quinquets, son sourire aux passants; mais en réalité il observait la boutique afin de voir s'il ne pourrait pas «chiper» dans la devanture un pain de savon, qu'il irait ensuite revendre un sou à un «coiffeur» de la banlieue. Il lui arrivait souvent de déjeuner d'un de ces pains-là. Il appelait ce genre de travail, pour lequel il avait du talent, «faire la barbe aux barbiers».

Tout en contemplant la mariée et tout en lorgnant le pain de savon, il grommelait entre ces dents ceci: — Mardi. — Ce n'est pas mardi. — Est-ce mardi? — C'est peut-être mardi. — Oui, c'est mardi.

On n'a jamais su à quoi avait trait ce monologue.

Si, par hasard, ce monologue se rapportait à la dernière fois où il avait dîné, il y avait trois jours, car on était au vendredi.

Le barbier, dans sa boutique chauffée d'un bon poêle, rasait une pratique et jetait de temps en temps un regard de côté à cet ennemi, à ce gamin gelé et effronté qui avait les deux mains dans ses poches, mais l'esprit évidemment hors du fourreau.

Pendant que Gavroche examinait la mariée, le vitrage et les Windsor-soaps, deux enfants de taille inégale, assez proprement vêtus, et encore plus petits que lui, paraissant l'un sept ans, l'autre cinq, tournèrent timidement le bec-de-cane et entrèrent dans la boutique en demandant on ne sait quoi, la charité peut-être, dans un murmure plaintif et qui ressemblait plutôt à un gémissement qu'à une prière. Ils parlaient tous deux à la fois, et leurs paroles étaient inintelligibles parce que les sanglots coupaient la voix du plus jeune et que le froid faisait claquer les dents de l'aîné. Le barbier se tourna avec un visage furieux, et sans quitter son rasoir, refoulant l'aîné de la main gauche et le petit du genou, les poussa tous deux dans la rue, et referma sa porte en disant:

— Venir refroidir le monde pour rien!

Les deux enfants se remirent en marche en pleurant. Cependant une nuée était venue; il commençait à pleuvoir.

Le petit Gavroche courut après eux et les aborda:

— Qu'est-ce que vous avez donc, moutards?

— Nous ne savons pas où coucher, répondit l'aîné.

— C'est ça? dit Gavroche. Voilà grand'chose. Est-ce qu'on pleure pour ça? Sont-ils serins donc!

Et prenant, à travers sa supériorité un peu goguenarde, un accent d'autorité attendrie et de protection douce:

— Momacques, venez avec moi.

— Oui, monsieur, fit l'aîné.

Et les deux enfants le suivirent comme ils auraient suivi un archevêque. Ils avaient cessé de pleurer.

Gavroche leur fit monter la rue Saint-Antoine dans la direction de la Bastille.

Gavroche, tout en cheminant, jeta un coup d'œil indigné et rétrospectif à la boutique du barbier.

— Ça n'a pas de cœur, ce merlan-là, grommela-t-il. C'est un angliche.

Une fille, les voyant marcher à la file tous les trois, Gavroche en tête, partit d'un rire bruyant. Ce rire manquait de respect au groupe.

— Bonjour, mamselle Omnibus, lui dit Gavroche.

Un instant après, le perruquier lui revenant, il ajouta:

— Je me trompe de bête; ce n'est pas un merlan, c'est un serpent. Perruquier, j'irai chercher un serrurier, et je te ferai mettre une sonnette à la queue.

Ce perruquier l'avait rendu agressif. Il apostropha, en enjambant un ruisseau, une portière barbue et digne de rencontrer Faust sur le Brocken, laquelle avait son balai à la main.

— Madame, lui dit-il, vous sortez donc avec votre cheval?

Et sur ce, il éclaboussa les bottes vernies d'un passant.

— Drôle! cria le passant furieux.

Gavroche leva le nez par-dessus son châle.

— Monsieur se plaint?

— De toi! fit le passant.

— Le bureau est fermé, dit Gavroche, je ne reçois plus de plaintes.

Cependant, en continuant de monter la rue, il avisa, toute glacée sous une porte cochère, une mendiante de treize ou quatorze ans, si court-vêtue qu'on voyait ses genoux. La petite commençait à être trop grande fille pour cela. La croissance vous joue de ces tours. La jupe devient courte au moment où la nudité devient indécente.

— Pauvre fille! dit Gavroche. Ça n'a même pas de culotte. Tiens, prends toujours ça.

Et, défaisant toute cette bonne laine qu'il avait autour du cou, il la jeta sur les épaules maigres et violettes de la mendiante, où le cache-nez redevint châle.

La petite le considéra d'un air étonné et reçut le châle en silence. À un certain degré de détresse, le pauvre, dans sa stupeur, ne gémit plus du mal et ne remercie plus du bien.

Cela fait:

— Brrr! dit Gavroche, plus frissonnant que saint Martin, qui, lui du moins, avait gardé la moitié de son manteau.

Sur ce brrr! l'averse, redoublant d'humeur, fit rage. Ces mauvais ciels-là punissent les bonnes actions.

— Ah çà! s'écria Gavroche, qu'est-ce que cela signifie? Il repleut! Bon Dieu, si cela continue, je me désabonne.

Et il se remit en marche.

— C’est égal, reprit-il en jetant un coup d’œil à la mendiante qui se pelotonnait sous le châle, en voilà une qui a une fameuse pelure.

Et, regardant la nuée, il cria:

— Attrapé!

Les deux enfants emboîtaient le pas derrière lui.

Comme ils passaient devant un de ces épais treillis grillés qui indiquent la boutique d’un boulanger, car on met le pain comme l’or derrière des grillages de fer, Gavroche se tourna:

— Ah çà, mômes, avons-nous dîné?

— Monsieur, répondit l’aîné, nous n’avons pas mangé depuis tantôt ce matin.

— Vous êtes donc sans père ni mère? reprit majestueusement Gavroche.

— Faites excuse, monsieur, nous avons papa et maman, mais nous ne savons pas où ils sont.

— Des fois, cela vaut mieux que de le savoir, dit Gavroche qui était un penseur.

— Voilà, continua l’aîné, deux heures que nous marchons, nous avons cherché des choses au coin des bornes, mais nous ne trouvons rien.

— Je sais, fit Gavroche. C’est les chiens qui mangent tout.

Il reprit après un silence:

— Ah! nous avons perdu nos auteurs. Nous ne savons plus ce que nous en avons fait. Ça ne se doit pas, gamins. C’est bête d’égarer comme ça des gens d’âge. Ah çà! il faut licher pourtant.

Du reste il ne leur fit pas de questions. Être sans domicile, quoi de plus simple?

L’aîné des deux mômes, presque entièrement revenu à la prompte insouciance de l’enfance, fit cette exclamation:

— C’est drôle tout de même. Maman qui avait dit qu’elle nous mènerait chercher du buis bénit le dimanche des rameaux.

— Neurs, répondit Gavroche.

— Maman, reprit l’aîné, est une dame qui demeure avec mamselle Miss.

— Tanflûte, repartit Gavroche.

Cependant il s’était arrêté, et depuis quelques minutes il tâtait et fouillait toutes sortes de recoins qu’il avait dans ses haillons.

Enfin il releva la tête d’un air qui ne voulait qu’être satisfait, mais qui était en réalité triomphant.

— Calmons-nous, les momignards. Voici de quoi souper pour trois.

Et il tira d’une de ses poches un sou.

Sans laisser aux deux petits le temps de s’ébahir, il les poussa tous deux devant lui dans la boutique du boulanger, et mit son sou sur le comptoir en criant:

— Garçon! cinque centimes de pain.

Le boulanger, qui était le maître en personne, prit un pain et un couteau.

— En trois morceaux, garçon! reprit Gavroche, et il ajouta avec dignité:

— Nous sommes trois.

Et voyant que le boulanger, après avoir examiné les trois soupeurs, avait pris un pain bis, il plongea profondément son doigt dans son nez avec une aspiration aussi impérieuse que s’il eût eu au bout du pouce la prise de tabac du grand Frédéric, et jeta au boulanger en plein visage cette apostrophe indignée:

— Keksekça?

Ceux de nos lecteurs qui seraient tentés de voir dans cette interpellation de Gavroche au boulanger un mot russe ou polonais, ou l’un de ces cris sauvages que les Yoways et les Botocudos se lancent du bord d’un fleuve à l’autre à travers les solitudes, sont prévenus que c’est un mot qu’ils disent tous les jours (eux nos lecteurs) et qui tient lieu de cette phrase: qu’est-ce que c’est que cela? Le boulanger comprit parfaitement et répondit:

— Eh mais! c’est du pain, du très bon pain de deuxième qualité.

— Vous voulez dire du larton brutal, reprit Gavroche, calme et froidement dédaigneux. Du pain blanc, garçon! du larton savonné! je régale.

Le boulanger ne put s’empêcher de sourire, et tout en coupant le pain blanc, il les considérait d’une façon compatissante qui choqua Gavroche.

— Ah çà, mitron! dit-il, qu’est-ce que vous avez donc à nous toiser comme ça?

Mis tous trois bout à bout, ils auraient fait à peine une toise.

Quand le pain fut coupé, le boulanger encaissa le sou, et Gavroche dit aux deux enfants:

— Morfilez.

Les petits garçons le regardèrent interdits.

Gavroche se mit à rire:

— Ah! tiens, c’est vrai, ça ne sait pas encore, c’est si petit.

Et il reprit:

— Mangez.

En même temps, il leur tendait à chacun un morceau de pain.

Et, pensant que l’aîné, qui lui paraissait plus digne de sa conversation, méritait quelque encouragement spécial et devait être débarrassé de toute hésitation à satisfaire son appétit, il ajouta en lui donnant la plus grosse part:

— Colle-toi ça dans le fusil.

Il y avait un morceau plus petit que les deux autres; il le prit pour lui.

Les pauvres enfants étaient affamés, y compris Gavroche. Tout en arrachant leur pain à belles dents, ils encombraient la boutique du boulanger qui, maintenant qu’il était payé, les regardait avec humeur.

— Rentrons dans la rue, dit Gavroche.

Ils reprirent la direction de la Bastille.

De temps en temps, quand ils passaient devant les devantures de boutiques éclairées, le plus petit s’arrêtait pour regarder l’heure à une montre en plomb suspendue à son cou par une ficelle.

— Voilà décidément un fort serin, disait Gavroche.

Puis, pensif, il grommelait entre ses dents:

— C’est égal, si j’avais des mômes, je les serrerais mieux que ça.

Comme ils achevaient leur morceau de pain et atteignaient l’angle de cette morose rue des Ballets au fond de laquelle on aperçoit le guichet bas et hostile de la Force:

— Tiens, c’est toi, Gavroche? dit quelqu’un.

— Tiens, c’est toi, Montparnasse? dit Gavroche.

C’était un homme qui venait d’aborder le gamin, et cet homme n’était autre que Montparnasse déguisé, avec des besicles bleues, mais reconnaissable pour Gavroche.

— Mâtin, poursuivit Gavroche, tu as une pelure couleur cataplasme de graine de lin et des lunettes bleues comme un médecin. Tu as du style, parole de vieux!

— Chut, fit Montparnasse, pas si haut!

Et il entraîna vivement Gavroche hors de la lumière des boutiques.

Les deux petits suivaient machinalement en se tenant par la main.

Quand ils furent sous l’archivolte noire d’une porte cochère, à l’abri des regards et de la pluie:

— Sais-tu où je vas? demanda Montparnasse.

— À l’abbaye de Monte-à-Regret, dit Gavroche.

— Farceur!

Et Montparnasse reprit:

— Je vas retrouver Babet.

— Ah! fit Gavroche, elle s’appelle Babet.

Montparnasse baissa la voix.

— Pas elle, lui.

— Ah! Babet!

— Oui, Babet.

— Je le croyais bouclé.

— Il a défait la boucle, répondit Montparnasse.

Et il conta rapidement au gamin que, le matin de ce même jour où ils étaient, Babet, ayant été transféré à la Conciergerie, s’était évadé en prenant à gauche au lieu de prendre à droite dans «le corridor de l’instruction».

Gavroche admira l’habileté.

— Quel dentiste! dit-il.

Montparnasse ajouta quelques détails sur l’évasion de Babet, et termina par:

— Oh! ce n’est pas tout.

Gavroche, tout en écoutant, s’était saisi d’une canne que Montparnasse tenait à la main; il en avait machinalement tiré la partie supérieure, et la lame d’un poignard avait apparu.

— Ah! fit-il en repoussant vivement le poignard, tu as emmené ton gendarme déguisé en bourgeois.

Montparnasse cligna de l’œil.

— Fichtre! reprit Gavroche, tu vas donc te colleter avec les cognes?

— On ne sait pas, répondit Montparnasse d’un air indifférent. Il est toujours bon d’avoir une épingle sur soi.

Gavroche insista:

— Qu’est-ce que tu vas donc faire cette nuit?

Montparnasse prit de nouveau la corde grave et dit en mangeant les syllabes:

— Des choses.

Et, changeant brusquement de conversation:

— À propos!

— Quoi?

— Une histoire de l’autre jour. Figure-toi. Je rencontre un bourgeois. Il me fait cadeau d’un sermon et de sa bourse. Je mets ça dans ma poche. Une minute après, je fouille dans ma poche. Il n’y avait plus rien.

— Que le sermon, fit Gavroche.

— Mais toi, reprit Montparnasse, où vas-tu donc maintenant?

Gavroche montra ses deux protégés et dit:

— Je vas coucher ces enfants-là.

— Où ça, coucher?

— Chez moi.

— Où ça chez toi?

— Chez moi.

— Tu loges donc?

— Oui, je loge.

— Et où loges-tu?

— Dans l’éléphant, dit Gavroche.

Montparnasse, quoique de sa nature peu étonné, ne put retenir une exclamation:

— Dans l’éléphant!

— Eh bien oui, dans l’éléphant! repartit Gavroche. Kekçaa?

Ceci est encore un mot de la langue que personne n’écrit et que tout le monde parle. Kekçaa signifie: qu’est-ce que cela a?

L’observation profonde du gamin ramena Montparnasse au calme et au bon sens. Il parut revenir à de meilleurs sentiments pour le logis de Gavroche.

— Au fait! dit-il, oui, l’éléphant. Y est-on bien?

— Très bien, fit Gavroche. Là, vrai, chenûment. Il n’y a pas de vents coulis comme sous les ponts.

— Comment y entres-tu?

— J’entre.

— E y a donc un trou? demanda Montparnasse.

— Parbleu! Mais il ne faut pas le dire. C’est entre les jambes de devant. Les coqueurs ne l’ont pas vu.

— Et tu grimpes? Oui, je comprends.

— Un tour de main, cric, crac, c’est fait, plus personne.

Après un silence, Gavroche ajouta:

— Pour ces petits j’aurai une échelle.

Montparnasse se mit à rire.

— Où diable as-tu pris ces mômes-là?

Gavroche répondit avec simplicité:

— C’est des momichards dont un perruquier m’a fait cadeau.

Cependant Montparnasse était devenu pensif.

— Tu m’as reconnu bien aisément, murmura-t-il.

Il prit dans sa poche deux petits objets qui n’étaient autre chose que deux tuyaux de plume enveloppés de coton et s’en introduisit un dans chaque narine. Ceci lui faisait un autre nez.

— Ça te change, dit Gavroche, tu es moins laid, tu devrais garder toujours ça.

Montparnasse était joli garçon, mais Gavroche était railleur.

— Sans rire, demanda Montparnasse, comment me trouves-tu?

C’était aussi un autre son de voix. En un clin d’œil, Montparnasse était devenu méconnaissable.

— Oh! fais-nous Porrichinelle! s’écria Gavroche.

Les deux petits, qui n’avaient rien écouté jusque-là, occupés qu’ils étaient eux-mêmes à fourrer leurs doigts dans leur nez, s’approchèrent à ce nom et regardèrent Montparnasse avec un commencement de joie et d’admiration.

Malheureusement Montparnasse était soucieux.

Il posa la main sur l’épaule de Gavroche et lui dit en appuyant sur les mots:

— Écoute ce que je te dis, garçon, si j’étais sur la place, avec mon dogue, ma dague et ma digue, et si vous me prodiguiez dix gros sous, je ne refuserais pas d’y goupiner, mais nous ne sommes pas le mardi gras.

Cette phrase bizarre produisit sur le gamin un effet singulier. Il se tourna vivement, promena avec une attention profonde ses petits yeux brillants autour de lui, et aperçut, à quelques pas, un sergent de ville qui leur tournait le dos. Gavroche laissa échapper un: ah, bon! qu’il réprima sur-le-champ, et, secouant la main de Montparnasse:

— Eh bien, bonsoir, fit-il, je m’en vas à mon éléphant avec mes mômes. Une supposition que tu aurais besoin de moi une nuit, tu viendrais me trouver là. Je loge à l’entresol. Il n’y a pas de portier. Tu demanderais monsieur Gavroche.

— C’est bon, dit Montparnasse.

Et ils se séparèrent, Montparnasse cheminant vers la Grève et Gavroche vers la Bastille. Le petit de cinq ans, traîné par son frère que traînait Gavroche, tourna plusieurs fois la tête en arrière pour voir s’en aller «Porrichinelle».

La phrase amphigourique par laquelle Montparnasse avait averti Gavroche de la présence du sergent de ville ne contenait pas d’autre talisman que l’assonance *dig* répétée cinq ou six fois sous des formes variées. Cette syllabe *dig,* non prononcée isolément, mais artistement mêlée aux mots d’une phrase, veut dire: — *Prenons garde, on ne peut pas parler librement.* — Il y avait en outre dans la phrase de Montparnasse une beauté littéraire qui échappa à Gavroche, *c’est mon dogue, ma dague et, ma digue,* locution de l’argot du Temple qui signifie, *mon chien, mon couteau et ma femme,* fort usité parmi les pitres et les queues-rouges du grand siècle où Molière écrivait et où Callot dessinait.

Il y a vingt ans, on voyait encore dans l’angle sud-est de la place de la Bastille près de la gare du canal creusée dans l’ancien fossé de la prison-citadelle, un monument bizarre qui s’est effacé déjà de la mémoire des Parisiens, et qui méritait d’y laisser quelque trace, car c’était une pensée du «membre de l’Institut, général en chef de l’armée d’Égypte».

Nous disons monument, quoique ce ne fût qu’une maquette. Mais cette maquette elle-même, ébauche prodigieuse, cadavre grandiose d’une idée de Napoléon que deux ou trois coups de vent successifs avaient emportée et jetée à chaque fois plus loin de nous, était devenue historique, et avait pris je ne sais quoi de définitif qui contrastait avec son aspect provisoire. C’était un éléphant de quarante pieds de haut, construit en charpente et en maçonnerie, portant sur son dos sa tour qui ressemblait à une maison, jadis peint en vert par un badigeonneur quelconque, maintenant peint en noir par le ciel, la pluie et le temps. Dans cet angle désert et découvert de la place, le large front du colosse, sa trompe, ses défenses, sa tour, sa croupe énorme, ses quatre pieds pareils à des colonnes faisaient, la nuit, sur le ciel étoilé, une silhouette surprenante et terrible. On ne savait ce que cela voulait dire. C’était une sorte de symbole de la force populaire. C’était sombre, énigmatique et immense. C’était on ne sait quel fantôme puissant, visible et debout à côté du spectre invisible de la Bastille.

Peu d’étrangers visitaient cet édifice, aucun passant ne le regardait. Il tombait en ruine; à chaque saison, des plâtras qui se détachaient de ses flancs lui faisaient des plaies hideuses. Les «édiles», comme on dit en patois élégant, l’avaient oublié depuis 1814. Il était là dans son coin, morne, malade, croulant, entouré d’une palissade pourrie, souillée à chaque instant par des cochers ivres; des crevasses lui lézardaient le ventre, une latte lui sortait de la queue, les hautes herbes lui poussaient entre les jambes; et comme le niveau de la place s’élevait depuis trente ans tout autour par ce mouvement lent et continu qui exhausse insensiblement le sol des grandes villes, il était dans un creux et il semblait que la terre s’enfonçât sous lui. Il était immonde, méprisé, repoussant et superbe, laid aux yeux du bourgeois, mélancolique aux yeux du penseur. Il avait quelque chose d’une ordure qu’on va balayer et quelque chose d’une majesté qu’on va décapiter.

Comme nous l’avons dit, la nuit l’aspect changeait. La nuit est le véritable milieu de tout ce qui est ombre. Dès que tombait le crépuscule, le vieil éléphant se transfigurait; il prenait une figure tranquille et redoutable dans la formidable sérénité des ténèbres. Étant du passé, il était de la nuit; et cette obscurité allait à sa grandeur.

Ce monument, rude, trapu, pesant, âpre, austère, presque difforme, mais à coup sûr majestueux et empreint d’une sorte de gravité magnifique et sauvage, a disparu pour laisser régner en paix l’espèce de poêle gigantesque, orné de son tuyau, qui a remplacé la sombre forteresse à neuf tours, à peu près comme la bourgeoisie remplace la féodalité. Il est tout simple qu’un poêle soit le symbole d’une époque dont une marmite contient la puissance. Cette époque passera, elle passe déjà; on commence à comprendre que, s’il peut y avoir de la force dans une chaudière, il ne peut y avoir de puissance que dans un cerveau; en d’autres termes, que ce qui mène et entraîne le monde, ce ne sont pas les locomotives, ce sont les idées. Attelez les locomotives aux idées, c’est bien; mais ne prenez pas le cheval pour le cavalier.

Quoi qu’il en soit, pour revenir à la place de la Bastille, l’architecte de l’éléphant avec du plâtre était parvenu à faire du grand; l’architecte du tuyau de poêle a réussi à faire du petit avec du bronze.

Ce tuyau de poêle, qu’on a baptisé d’un nom sonore et nommé la colonne de Juillet, ce monument manqué d’une révolution avortée, était encore enveloppé en 1832 d’une immense chemise en charpente que nous regrettons pour notre part, et d’un vaste enclos en planches, qui achevait d’isoler l’éléphant.

Ce fut vers ce coin de la place, à peine éclairé du reflet d’un réverbère éloigné, que le gamin dirigea les deux «mômes».

Qu’on nous permette de nous interrompre ici et de rappeler que nous sommes dans la simple réalité, et qu’il y a vingt ans les tribunaux correctionnels eurent à juger, sous prévention de vagabondage et de bris d’un monument public, un enfant qui avait été surpris couché dans l’intérieur même de l’éléphant de la Bastille.

Ce fait constaté, nous continuons.

En arrivant près du colosse, Gavroche comprit l’effet que l’infiniment grand peut produire sur l’infiniment petit, et dit:

— Moutards! n’ayez pas peur.

Puis il entra par une lacune de la palissade dans l’enceinte de l’éléphant et aida les mômes à enjamber la brèche. Les deux enfants, un peu effrayés, suivaient sans dire mot Gavroche et se confiaient à cette petite providence en guenilles qui leur avait donné du pain et leur avait promis un gîte.

Il y avait là, couchée le long de la palissade, une échelle qui servait le jour aux ouvriers du chantier voisin. Gavroche la souleva avec une singulière vigueur, et l’appliqua contre une des jambes de devant de l’éléphant. Vers le point où l’échelle allait aboutir, on distinguait une espèce de trou noir dans le ventre du colosse.

Gavroche montra l’échelle et le trou à ses hôtes et leur dit:

— Montez et entrez.

Les deux petits garçons se regardèrent terrifiés.

— Vous avez peur, mômes! s’écria Gavroche.

Et il ajouta:

— Vous allez voir.

Il étreignit le pied rugueux de l’éléphant, et en un clin d’œil, sans daigner se servir de l’échelle, il arriva à la crevasse. Il y entra comme une couleuvre qui se glisse dans une fente, il s’y enfonça, et un moment après les deux enfants virent vaguement apparaître, comme une forme blanchâtre et blafarde, sa tête pâle au bord du trou plein de ténèbres.

— Eh bien, cria-t-il, montez donc, les momignards! vous allez voir comme on est bien! — Monte, toi! dit-il à l’aîné, je te tends la main.

Les petits se poussèrent de l’épaule, le gamin leur faisait peur et les rassurait à la fois, et puis il pleuvait bien fort. L’aîné se risqua. Le plus jeune, en voyant monter son frère et lui resté tout seul entre les pattes de cette grosse bête, avait bien envie de pleurer, mais il n’osait.

L’aîné gravissait, tout en chancelant, les barreaux de l’échelle; Gavroche, chemin faisant, l’encourageait par des exclamations de maître d’armes à ses écoliers ou de muletier à ses mules:

— Aye pas peur!

— C’est ça!

— Va toujours!

— Mets ton pied là!

— Ta main ici.

— Hardi!

Et quand il fut à sa portée, il l’empoigna brusquement et vigoureusement par le bras et le tira à lui.

— Gobé! dit-il.

Le môme avait franchi la crevasse.

— Maintenant, fit Gavroche, attends-moi. Monsieur, prenez la peine de vous asseoir.

Et, sortant de la crevasse comme il y était entré, il se laissa glisser avec l’agilité d’un ouistiti le long de la jambe de l’éléphant, il tomba debout sur ses pieds dans l’herbe, saisit le petit de cinq ans à bras-le-corps et le planta au beau milieu de l’échelle, puis il se mit à monter derrière lui en criant à l’aîné:

— Je vas le pousser, tu vas le tirer.

En un instant le petit fut monté, poussé, traîné, tiré, bourré, fourré dans le trou sans avoir eu le temps de se reconnaître, et Gavroche, entrant après lui, repoussant d’un coup de talon l’échelle qui tomba sur le gazon, se mit à battre des mains et cria:

— Nous y v’là! Vive le général Lafayette!

Cette explosion passée, il ajouta:

— Les mioches, vous êtes chez moi.

Gavroche était en effet chez lui.

Ô utilité inattendue de l’inutile! charité des grandes choses! bonté des géants! Ce monument démesuré qui avait contenu une pensée de l’Empereur était devenu la boîte d’un gamin. Le môme avait été accepté et abrité par le colosse. Les bourgeois endimanchés qui passaient devant l’éléphant de la Bastille disaient volontiers en le toisant d’un air de mépris avec leurs yeux à fleur de tête: — À quoi cela sert-il? — Cela servait à sauver du froid, du givre, de la grêle, de la pluie, à garantir du vent d’hiver, à préserver du sommeil dans la boue qui donne la fièvre et du sommeil dans la neige qui donne la mort, un petit être sans père ni mère, sans pain, sans vêtements, sans asile. Cela servait à recueillir l’innocent que la société repoussait. Cela servait à diminuer la faute publique. C’était une tanière ouverte à celui auquel toutes les portes étaient fermées. Il semblait que le vieux mastodonte misérable, envahi par la vermine et par l’oubli, couvert de verrues, de moisissures et d’ulcères, chancelant, vermoulu, abandonné, condamné, espèce de mendiant colossal demandant en vain l’aumône d’un regard bienveillant au milieu du carrefour, avait eu pitié, lui, de cet autre mendiant, du pauvre pygmée qui s’en allait sans souliers aux pieds, sans plafond sur la tête, soufflant dans ses doigts, vêtu de chiffons, nourri de ce qu’on jette. Voilà à quoi servait l’éléphant de la Bastille. Cette idée de Napoléon, dédaignée par les hommes, avait été reprise par Dieu. Ce qui n’eût été qu’illustre était devenu auguste. Il eût fallu à l’Empereur, pour réaliser ce qu’il méditait, le porphyre, l’airain, le fer, l’or, le marbre; à Dieu le vieil assemblage de planches, de solives et de plâtras suffisait. L’Empereur avait eu un rêve de génie; dans cet éléphant titanique, armé, prodigieux, dressant sa trompe, portant sa tour, et faisant jaillir de toutes parts autour de lui des eaux joyeuses et vivifiantes, il voulait incarner le peuple; Dieu en avait fait une chose plus grande, il y logeait un enfant.

Le trou par où Gavroche était entré était une brèche à peine visible du dehors, cachée qu’elle était, nous l’avons dit, sous le ventre de l’éléphant, et si étroite qu’il n’y avait guère que des chats et des mômes qui pussent y passer.

— Commençons, dit Gavroche, par dire au portier que nous n’y sommes pas.

Et plongeant dans l’obscurité avec certitude comme quelqu’un qui connaît son appartement, il prit une planche et en boucha le trou.

Gavroche replongea dans l’obscurité. Les enfants entendirent le reniflement de l’allumette enfoncée dans la bouteille phosphorique. L’allumette chimique n’existait pas encore; le briquet Fumade représentait à cette époque le progrès.

Une clarté subite leur fit cligner les yeux; Gavroche venait d’allumer un de ces bouts de ficelle trempés dans la résine qu’on appelle rats de cave. Le rat de cave, qui fumait plus qu’il n’éclairait, rendait confusément visible le dedans de l’éléphant.

Les deux hôtes de Gavroche regardèrent autour d’eux et éprouvèrent quelque chose de pareil à ce qu’éprouverait quelqu’un qui serait enfermé dans la grosse tonne de Heidelberg, ou mieux encore à ce que dut éprouver Jonas dans le ventre biblique de la baleine. Tout un squelette gigantesque leur apparaissait et les enveloppait. En haut, une longue poutre brune d’où partaient de distance en distance de massives membrures cintrées figurait la colonne vertébrale avec les côtes, des stalactites de plâtre y pendaient comme des viscères, et d’un côté à l’autre de vastes toiles d’araignée faisaient des diaphragmes poudreux. On voyait çà et là dans les coins de grosses taches noirâtres qui avaient l'air de vivre et qui se déplaçaient rapidement avec un mouvement brusque et effaré.

Les débris tombés du dos de l'éléphant sur son ventre en avaient comblé la concavité, de sorte qu'on pouvait y marcher comme sur un plancher.

Le plus petit se rencogna contre son frère et dit à demi-voix:

— C'est noir.

Ce mot fit exclamer Gavroche. L'air pétrifié des deux mômes rendait une secousse nécessaire.

— Qu'est-ce que vous me fichez? s'écria-t-il. Blaguons-nous? faisons-nous les dégoûtés? vous faut-il pas les Tuileries? Seriez-vous des brutes? Dites-le. Je vous préviens que je ne suis pas du régiment des godiches. Ah çà, est-ce que vous êtes les moutards du moutardier du pape?

Un peu de rudoiement est bon dans l'épouvante. Cela rassure. Les deux enfants se rapprochèrent de Gavroche.

Gavroche, paternellement attendri de cette confiance, passa «du grave au doux» et s'adressant au plus petit:

— Bêta, lui dit-il en accentuant l'injure d'une nuance caressante, c'est dehors que c'est noir. Dehors il pleut, ici il ne pleut pas; dehors il fait froid, ici il n'y a pas une miette de vent; dehors il y a des tas de monde, ici il n'y a personne; dehors il n'y a pas même la lune, ici il y a ma chandelle, nom d'unch!

Les deux enfants commençaient à regarder l'appartement avec moins d'effroi; mais Gavroche ne leur laissa pas plus longtemps le loisir de la contemplation.

— Vite, dit-il.

Et il les poussa vers ce que nous sommes très heureux de pouvoir appeler le fond de la chambre.

Là était son lit.

Le lit de Gavroche était complet. C'est-à-dire qu'il y avait un matelas, une couverture et une alcôve avec rideaux.

Le matelas était une natte de paille, la couverture un assez vaste pagne de grosse laine grise fort chaud et presque neuf. Voici ce que c'était que l'alcôve:

Trois échalas assez longs enfoncés et consolidés dans les gravois du sol, c'est-à-dire du ventre de l'éléphant, deux en avant, un en arrière, et réunis par une corde à leur sommet, de manière à former un faisceau pyramidal. Ce faisceau supportait un treillage de fil de laiton qui était simplement posé dessus, mais artistement appliqué et maintenu par des attaches de fil de fer, de sorte qu'il enveloppait entièrement les trois échalas. Un cordon de grosses pierres fixait tout autour ce treillage sur le sol, de manière à ne rien laisser passer. Ce treillage n'était autre chose qu'un morceau de ces grillages de cuivre dont on revêt les volières dans les ménageries. Le lit de Gavroche était sous ce grillage comme dans une cage. L'ensemble ressemblait à une tente d'Esquimau.

C'est ce grillage qui tenait lieu de rideaux.

Gavroche dérangea un peu les pierres qui assujettissaient le grillage par devant; les deux pans du treillage qui retombaient l'un sur l'autre s'écartèrent.

— Mômes, à quatre pattes! dit Gavroche.

Il fit entrer avec précaution ses hôtes dans la cage, puis il y entra après eux, en rampant, rapprocha les pierres et referma hermétiquement l'ouverture.

Ils s'étaient étendus tous trois sur la natte.

Si petits qu'ils fussent, aucun d'eux n'eût pu se tenir debout dans l'alcôve. Gavroche avait toujours le rat de cave à sa main.

— Maintenant, dit-il, pioncez! Je vas supprimer le candélabre.

— Monsieur, demanda l'aîné des deux frères à Gavroche en montrant le grillage, qu'est-ce que c'est donc que ça?

— Ça, dit Gavroche gravement, c'est pour les rats. — Pioncez!

Cependant il se crut obligé d'ajouter quelques paroles pour l'instruction de ces êtres en bas âge, et il continua:

— C'est des choses du Jardin des plantes. Ça sert aux animaux féroces. *Gniena* (il y en a) plein un magasin. *Gnia* (il n'y a) qu'à monter par-dessus un mur, qu'à grimper par une fenêtre et qu'à passer sous une porte. On en a tant qu'on veut.

Tout en parlant, il enveloppait d'un pan de la couverture le tout petit qui murmura:

— Oh! c'est bon! c'est chaud!

Gavroche fixa un œil satisfait sur la couverture.

— C'est encore du Jardin des plantes, dit-il. J'ai pris ça aux singes.

Et montrant à l'aîné la natte sur laquelle il était couché, natte fort épaisse et admirablement travaillée, il ajouta:

— Ça, c'était à la girafe.

Après une pause, il poursuivit:

— Les bêtes avaient tout ça. Je le leur ai pris. Ça ne les a pas fâchées. Je leur ai dit: C’est pour l’éléphant.

Il fit encore un silence et reprit:

— On passe par-dessus les murs et on se fiche du gouvernement. V’là.

Les deux enfants considéraient avec un respect craintif et stupéfait cet être intrépide et inventif, vagabond comme eux, isolé comme eux, chétif comme eux, qui avait quelque chose d’admirable et de tout-puissant, qui leur semblait surnaturel, et dont la physionomie se composait de toutes les grimaces d’un vieux saltimbanque mêlées au plus naïf et au plus charmant sourire.

— Monsieur, fit timidement l’aîné, vous n’avez donc pas peur des sergents de ville?

Gavroche se borna à répondre:

— Môme! on ne dit pas les sergents de ville, on dit les cognes.

Le tout petit avait les yeux ouverts, mais il ne disait rien. Comme il était au bord de la natte, l’aîné étant au milieu, Gavroche lui borda la couverture comme eût fait une mère et exhaussa la natte sous sa tête avec de vieux chiffons de manière à faire au môme un oreiller. Puis il se tourna vers l’aîné.

— Hein? on est joliment bien, ici!

— Ah oui! répondit l’aîné en regardant Gavroche avec une expression d’ange sauvé.

Les deux pauvres petits enfants tout mouillés commençaient à se réchauffer.

— Ah çà, continua Gavroche, pourquoi donc est-ce que vous pleuriez?

Et montrant le petit à son frère:

— Un mioche comme ça, je ne dis pas; mais un grand comme toi, pleurer, c’est crétin; on a l’air d’un veau.

— Dame, fit l’enfant, nous n’avions plus du tout de logement où aller.

— Moutard! reprit Gavroche, on ne dit pas un logement, on dit une piolle.

— Et puis nous avions peur d’être tout seuls comme ça la nuit.

— On ne dit pas la nuit, on dit la sorgue.

— Merci, monsieur, dit l’enfant.

— Écoute, repartit Gavroche, il ne faut plus geindre jamais pour rien. J’aurai soin de vous. Tu verras comme on s’amuse. L’été, nous irons à la Glacière avec Navet, un camarade à moi, nous nous baignerons à la Gare, nous courrons tout nus sur les trains devant le pont d'Austerlitz, ça fait rager les blanchisseuses. Elles crient, elles bisquent, si tu savais comme elles sont farces! Nous irons voir l'homme squelette. Il est en vie. Aux Champs-Élysées. Il est maigre comme tout, ce paroissien-là. Et puis je vous conduirai au spectacle. Je vous mènerai à Frédérick-Lemaître. J'ai des billets, je connais des acteurs, j'ai même joué une fois dans une pièce. Nous étions des mômes comme ça, on courait sous une toile, ça faisait la mer. Je vous ferai engager à mon théâtre. Nous irons voir les sauvages. Ce n'est pas vrai, ces sauvages-là. Ils ont des maillots roses qui font des plis, et on leur voit aux coudes des reprises en fil blanc. Après ça, nous irons à l'Opéra. Nous entrerons avec les claqueurs. La claque à l'Opéra est très bien composée. Je n'irais pas avec la claque sur les boulevards. À l'Opéra, figure-toi, il y en a qui payent vingt sous, mais c'est des bêtas. On les appelle des lavettes. — Et puis nous irons voir guillotiner. Je vous ferai voir le bourreau. Il demeure rue des Marais. Monsieur Sanson. Il y a une boîte aux lettres à la porte. Ah! on s'amuse fameusement!

En ce moment, une goutte de cire tomba sur le doigt de Gavroche et le rappela aux réalités de la vie.

— Bigre! dit-il, v'là la mèche qui s'use. Attention! je ne peux pas mettre plus d'un sou par mois à mon éclairage. Quand on se couche, il faut dormir. Nous n'avons pas le temps de lire des romans de monsieur Paul de Kock. Avec ça que la lumière pourrait passer par les fentes de la porte cochère, et les cognes n'auraient qu'à voir.

— Et puis, observa timidement l'aîné qui seul osait causer avec Gavroche et lui donner la réplique, un fumeron pourrait tomber dans la paille, il faut prendre garde de brûler la maison.

— On ne dit pas brûler la maison, fit Gavroche, on dit riffauder le bocard.

L'orage redoublait. On entendait, à travers des roulements de tonnerre, l'averse battre le dos du colosse.

— Enfoncé, la pluie! dit Gavroche. Ça m'amuse d'entendre couler la carafe le long des jambes de la maison. L'hiver est une bête; il perd sa marchandise, il perd sa peine, il ne peut pas nous mouiller, et ça le fait bougonner, ce vieux porteur d'eau-là.

Cette allusion au tonnerre, dont Gavroche, en sa qualité de philosophe du dix-neuvième siècle, acceptait toutes les conséquences, fut suivie d'un large éclair, si éblouissant que quelque chose en entra par la crevasse dans le ventre de l'éléphant. Presque en même temps la foudre gronda, et très furieusement. Les deux petits poussèrent un cri, et se soulevèrent si vivement que le treillage en fut presque écarté; mais Gavroche tourna vers eux sa face hardie et profita du coup de tonnerre pour éclater de rire.

— Du calme, enfants. Ne bousculons pas l'édifice. Voilà du beau tonnerre, à la bonne heure! Ce n'est pas là de la gnognotte d'éclair. Bravo le bon Dieu! nom d'unch! c'est presque aussi bien qu'à l'Ambigu.

Cela dit, il refit l'ordre dans le treillage, poussa doucement les deux enfants sur le chevet du lit, pressa leurs genoux pour les bien étendre tout de leur long et s'écria:

— Puisque le bon Dieu allume sa chandelle, je peux souffler la mienne. Les enfants, il faut dormir, mes jeunes humains. C'est très mauvais de ne pas dormir. Ça vous ferait schlinguer du couloir, ou, comme on dit dans le grand monde, puer de la gueule. Entortillez-vous bien de la pelure! je vas éteindre. Y êtes-vous?

— Oui, murmura l'aîné, je suis bien. J'ai comme de la plume sous la tête.

— On ne dit pas la tête, cria Gavroche, on dit la tronche.

Les deux enfants se serrèrent l'un contre l'autre. Gavroche acheva de les arranger sur la natte et leur monta la couverture jusqu'aux oreilles, puis répéta pour la troisième fois l'injonction en langue hiératique:

— Pioncez!

Et il souffla le lumignon.

À peine la lumière était-elle éteinte qu'un tremblement singulier commença à ébranler le treillage sous lequel les trois enfants étaient couchés. C'était une multitude de frottements sourds qui rendaient un son métallique, comme si des griffes et des dents grinçaient sur le fil de cuivre. Cela était accompagné de toutes sortes de petits cris aigus.

Le petit garçon de cinq ans, entendant ce vacarme au-dessus de sa tête et glacé d'épouvante, poussa du coude son frère aîné, mais le frère aîné «pionçait» déjà, comme Gavroche le lui avait ordonné. Alors le petit, n'en pouvant plus de peur, osa interpeller Gavroche, mais tout bas, en retenant son haleine:

— Monsieur?

— Hein? fit Gavroche qui venait de fermer les paupières.

— Qu'est-ce que c'est donc que ça?

— C'est les rats, répondit Gavroche.

Et il remit sa tête sur la natte.

Les rats en effet, qui pullulaient par milliers dans la carcasse de l’éléphant et qui étaient ces taches noires vivantes dont nous avons parlé, avaient été tenus en respect par la flamme de la bougie tant qu’elle avait brillé, mais dès que cette caverne, qui était comme leur cité, avait été rendue à la nuit, sentant là ce que le bon conteur Perrault appelle «de la chair fraîche», ils s’étaient rués en foule sur la tente de Gavroche, avaient grimpé jusqu’au sommet, et en mordaient les mailles comme s’ils cherchaient à percer cette zinzelière d’un nouveau genre.

Cependant le petit ne s’endormait pas.

— Monsieur! reprit-il.

— Hein? fit Gavroche.

— Qu’est-ce que c’est donc que les rats?

— C’est des souris.

Cette explication rassura un peu l’enfant. Il avait vu dans sa vie des souris blanches et il n’en avait pas eu peur. Pourtant il éleva encore la voix:

— Monsieur?

— Hein? refit Gavroche.

— Pourquoi n’avez-vous pas un chat?

— J’en ai eu un, répondit Gavroche, j’en ai apporté un, mais ils me l’ont mangé.

Cette seconde explication défit l’œuvre de la première, et le petit recommença à trembler. Le dialogue entre lui et Gavroche reprit pour la quatrième fois.

— Monsieur!

— Hein?

— Qui ça qui a été mangé?

— Le chat.

— Qui ça qui a mangé le chat?

— Les rats.

— Les souris?

— Oui, les rats.

L’enfant, consterné de ces souris qui mangent les chats, poursuivit:

— Monsieur, est-ce qu’elles nous mangeraient, ces souris-là?

— Pardi! fit Gavroche.

La terreur de l’enfant était au comble. Mais Gavroche ajouta:

— N’eïlle pas peur! ils ne peuvent pas entrer. Et puis je suis là! Tiens, prends ma main. Tais-toi, et pionce!

Gavroche en même temps prit la main du petit par-dessus son frère. L’enfant serra cette main contre lui et se sentit rassuré. Le courage et la force ont de ces communications mystérieuses. Le silence s’était refait autour d’eux, le bruit des voix avait effrayé et éloigné les rats; au bout de quelques minutes ils eurent beau revenir et faire rage, les trois mômes, plongés dans le sommeil, n’entendaient plus rien.

Les heures de la nuit s’écoulèrent. L’ombre couvrait l’immense place de la Bastille, un vent d’hiver qui se mêlait à la pluie soufflait par bouffées, les patrouilles furetaient les portes, les allées, les enclos, les coins obscurs, et, cherchant les vagabonds nocturnes, passaient silencieusement devant l’éléphant; le monstre, debout, immobile, les yeux ouverts dans les ténèbres, avait l’air de rêver comme satisfait de sa bonne action, et abritait du ciel et des hommes les trois pauvres enfants endormis.

Pour comprendre ce qui va suivre, il faut se souvenir qu’à cette époque le corps de garde de la Bastille était situé à l’autre extrémité de la place, et que ce qui se passait près de l’éléphant ne pouvait être ni aperçu, ni entendu par la sentinelle.

Vers la fin de cette heure qui précède immédiatement le point du jour, un homme déboucha de la rue Saint-Antoine en courant, traversa la place, tourna le grand enclos de la colonne de Juillet, et se glissa entre les palissades jusque sous le ventre de l’éléphant. Si une lumière quelconque eût éclairé cet homme, à la manière profonde dont il était mouillé, on eût deviné qu’il avait passé la nuit sous la pluie. Arrivé sous l’éléphant, il fit entendre un cri bizarre qui n’appartient à aucune langue humaine et qu’une perruche seule pourrait reproduire. Il répéta deux fois ce cri dont l’orthographe que voici donne à peine quelque idée:

— Kirikikiou!

Au second cri, une voix claire, gaie et jeune, répondit du ventre de l’éléphant:

— Oui.

Presque immédiatement, la planche qui fermait le trou se dérangea et donna passage à un enfant qui descendit le long du pied de l’éléphant et vint lestement tomber près de l’homme. C’était Gavroche. L’homme était Montparnasse.

Quant à ce cri, *kirikikiou*, c’était là sans doute ce que l’enfant voulait dire par: *Tu demanderas monsieur Gavroche*.

En l’entendant, il s’était réveillé en sursaut, avait rampé hors de son «alcôve», en écartant un peu le grillage qu’il avait ensuite refermé soigneusement, puis il avait ouvert la trappe et était descendu.

L’homme et l’enfant se reconnurent silencieusement dans la nuit; Montparnasse se borna à dire:

— Nous avons besoin de toi. Viens nous donner un coup de main.

Le gamin ne demanda pas d’autre éclaircissement.

— Me v’là, dit-il.

Et tous deux se dirigèrent vers la rue Saint-Antoine, d’où sortait Montparnasse, serpentant rapidement à travers la longue file des charrettes de maraîchers qui descendent à cette heure-là vers la halle.

Les maraîchers accroupis dans leurs voitures parmi les salades et les légumes, à demi assoupis, enfouis jusqu’aux yeux dans leurs roulières à cause de la pluie battante, ne regardaient même pas ces étranges passants.

Chapitre III

Les péripéties de l’évasion

Voici ce qui avait eu lieu cette même nuit à la Force:

Une évasion avait été concertée entre Babet, Brujon, Gueulemer et Thénardier, quoique Thénardier fût au secret. Babet avait fait l’affaire pour son compte, le jour même, comme on a vu d’après le récit de Montparnasse à Gavroche. Montparnasse devait les aider du dehors.

Brujon, ayant passé un mois dans une chambre de punition, avait eu le temps, premièrement, d’y tresser une corde, deuxièmement, d’y mûrir un plan. Autrefois ces lieux sévères où la discipline de la prison livre le condamné à lui-même, se composaient de quatre murs de pierre, d’un plafond de pierre, d’un pavé de dalles, d’un lit de camp, d’une lucarne grillée, d’une porte doublée de fer, et s’appelaient *cachots;* mais le cachot a été jugé trop horrible; maintenant cela se compose d’une porte de fer, d’une lucarne grillée, d’un lit de camp, d’un pavé de dalles, d’un plafond de pierre, de quatre murs de pierre, et cela s’appelle *chambre de punition*. Il y fait un peu jour vers midi. L’inconvénient de ces chambres qui, comme on voit, ne sont pas des cachots, c’est de laisser songer des êtres qu’il faudrait faire travailler.

Brujon donc avait songé, et il était sorti de la chambre de punition avec une corde. Comme on le réputait fort dangereux dans la cour Charlemagne, on le mit dans le Bâtiment-Neuf. La première chose qu’il trouva dans le Bâtiment-Neuf, ce fut Gueulemer, la seconde, ce fut un clou; Gueulemer, c’est-à-dire le crime, un clou, c’est-à-dire la liberté.

Brujon, dont il est temps de se faire une idée complète, était, avec une apparence de complexion délicate et une langueur profondément préméditée, un gaillard poli, intelligent et voleur qui avait le regard caressant et le sourire atroce. Son regard résultait de sa volonté et son sourire résultait de sa nature. Ses premières études dans son art s’étaient dirigées vers les toits; il avait fait faire de grands progrès à l’industrie des arracheurs de plomb qui dépouillent les toitures et dépiautent les gouttières par le procédé dit *au gras-double*.

Ce qui achevait de rendre l’instant favorable pour une tentative d’évasion, c’est que les couvreurs remaniaient et rejointoyaient, en ce moment-là même, une partie des ardoises de la prison. La cour Saint-Bernard n’était plus absolument isolée de la cour Charlemagne et de la cour Saint-Louis. Il y avait par là-haut des échafaudages et des échelles; en d’autres termes, des ponts et des escaliers du côté de la délivrance.

Le Bâtiment-Neuf, qui était tout ce qu’on pouvait voir au monde de plus lézardé et de plus décrépit, était le point faible de la prison. Les murs en étaient à ce point rongés par le salpêtre qu’on avait été obligé de revêtir d’un parement de bois les voûtes des dortoirs, parce qu’il s’en détachait des pierres qui tombaient sur les prisonniers dans leurs lits. Malgré cette vétusté, on faisait la faute d’enfermer dans le Bâtiment-Neuf les accusés les plus inquiétants, d’y mettre «les fortes causes», comme on dit en langage de prison.

Le Bâtiment-Neuf contenait quatre dortoirs superposés et un comble qu’on appelait le Bel-Air. Un large tuyau de cheminée, probablement de quelque ancienne cuisine des ducs de La Force, partait du rez-de-chaussée, traversait les quatre étages, coupait en deux tous les dortoirs où il figurait une façon de pilier aplati, et allait trouer le toit.

Gueulemer et Brujon étaient dans le même dortoir. On les avait mis par précaution dans l’étage d’en bas. Le hasard faisait que la tête de leurs lits s’appuyait au tuyau de la cheminée.

Thénardier se trouvait précisément au-dessus de leur tête dans ce comble qualifié le Bel-Air.

Le passant qui s’arrête rue Culture-Sainte-Catherine, après la caserne des pompiers, devant la porte cochère de la maison des Bains, voit une cour pleine de fleurs et d’arbustes en caisses, au fond de laquelle se développe, avec deux ailes, une petite rotonde blanche égayée par des contrevents verts, le rêve bucolique de Jean-Jacques. Il n’y a pas plus de dix ans, au-dessus de cette rotonde s’élevait un mur noir, énorme, affreux, nu, auquel elle était adossée. C’était le mur du chemin de ronde de la Force.

Ce mur derrière cette rotonde, c’était Milton entrevu derrière Berquin.

Si haut qu’il fût, ce mur était dépassé par un toit plus noir encore qu’on apercevait au delà. C’était le toit du Bâtiment-Neuf. On y remarquait quatre lucarnes-mansardes armées de barreaux, c’étaient les fenêtres du Bel-Air. Une cheminée perçait ce toit; c’était la cheminée qui traversait les dortoirs.

Le Bel-Air, ce comble du Bâtiment-Neuf, était une espèce de grande halle mansardée, fermée de triples grilles et de portes doublées de tôle que constellaient des clous démesurés. Quand on y entrait par l’extrémité nord, on avait à sa gauche les quatre lucarnes, et à sa droite, faisant face aux lucarnes, quatre cages carrées assez vastes, espacées, séparées par des couloirs étroits, construites jusqu'à hauteur d'appui en maçonnerie et le reste jusqu'au toit en barreaux de fer.

Thénardier était au secret dans une de ces cages, depuis la nuit du 3 février. On n'a jamais pu découvrir comment, et par quelle connivence, il avait réussi à s'y procurer et à y cacher une bouteille de ce vin inventé, dit-on, par Desrues, auquel se mêle un narcotique et que la bande des *Endormeurs* a rendu célèbre.

Il y a dans beaucoup de prisons des employés traîtres, mi-partis geôliers et voleurs, qui aident aux évasions, qui vendent à la police une domesticité infidèle, et qui font danser l'anse du panier à salade.

Dans cette même nuit donc, où le petit Gavroche avait recueilli les deux enfants errants, Brujon et Gueulemer, qui savaient que Babet, évadé le matin même, les attendait dans la rue ainsi que Montparnasse, se levèrent doucement et se mirent à percer avec le clou que Brujon avait trouvé le tuyau de cheminée auquel leurs lits touchaient. Les gravois tombaient sur le lit de Brujon, de sorte qu'on ne les entendait pas. Les giboulées mêlées de tonnerre ébranlaient les portes sur leurs gonds et faisaient dans la prison un vacarme affreux et utile. Ceux des prisonniers qui se réveillèrent firent semblant de se rendormir et laissèrent faire Gueulemer et Brujon. Brujon était adroit; Gueulemer était vigoureux. Avant qu'aucun bruit fût parvenu au surveillant couché dans la cellule grillée qui avait jour sur le dortoir, le mur était percé, la cheminée escaladée, le treillis de fer qui fermait l'orifice supérieur du tuyau forcé, et les deux redoutables bandits sur le toit. La pluie et le vent redoublaient, le toit glissait.

— Quelle bonne sorgue pour une crampe! dit Brujon.

Un abîme de six pieds de large et de quatre-vingts pieds de profondeur les séparait du mur de ronde. Au fond de cet abîme ils voyaient reluire dans l'obscurité le fusil d'un factionnaire. Ils attachèrent par un bout aux tronçons des barreaux de la cheminée qu'ils venaient de tordre la corde que Brujon avait filée dans son cachot, lancèrent l'autre bout par-dessus le mur de ronde, franchirent d'un bond l'abîme, se cramponnèrent au chevron du mur, l'enjambèrent, se laissèrent glisser l'un après l'autre le long de la corde sur un petit toit qui touche à la maison des Bains, ramenèrent leur corde à eux, sautèrent dans la cour des Bains, la traversèrent, poussèrent le vasistas du portier, auprès duquel pendait son cordon, tirèrent le cordon, ouvrirent la porte cochère, et se trouvèrent dans la rue.

Il n'y avait pas trois quarts d'heure qu'ils s'étaient levés debout sur leurs lits dans les ténèbres, leur clou à la main, leur projet dans la tête.

Quelques instants après, ils avaient rejoint Babet et Montparnasse qui rôdaient dans les environs.

En tirant leur corde à eux, ils l'avaient cassée, et il en était resté un morceau attaché à la cheminée sur le toit. Ils n'avaient du reste d'autre avarie que de s'être à peu près entièrement enlevé la peau des mains.

Cette nuit-là, Thénardier était prévenu, sans qu'on ait pu éclaircir de quelle façon, et ne dormait pas.

Vers une heure du matin, la nuit étant très noire, il vit passer sur le toit, dans la pluie et dans la bourrasque, devant la lucarne qui était vis-à-vis de sa cage, deux ombres. L'une s'arrêta à la lucarne le temps d'un regard. C'était Brujon. Thénardier le reconnut, et comprit. Cela lui suffit.

Thénardier, signalé comme escarpe et détenu sous prévention de guet-apens nocturne à main armée, était gardé à vue. Un factionnaire, qu'on relevait de deux heures en deux heures, se promenait le fusil chargé devant sa cage. Le Bel-Air était éclairé par une applique. Le prisonnier avait aux pieds une paire de fers du poids de cinquante livres. Tous les jours à quatre heures de l'après-midi, un gardien escorté de deux dogues, — cela se faisait encore ainsi à cette époque, — entrait dans sa cage, déposait près de son lit un pain noir de deux livres, une cruche d'eau et une écuelle pleine d'un bouillon assez maigre où nageaient quelques gourganes, visitait ses fers et frappait sur les barreaux. Cet homme avec ses dogues revenait deux fois dans la nuit.

Thénardier avait obtenu la permission de conserver une espèce de cheville en fer dont il se servait pour clouer son pain dans une fente de la muraille, «afin, disait-il, de le préserver des rats». Comme on gardait Thénardier à vue, on n'avait point trouvé d'inconvénient à cette cheville. Cependant on se souvint plus tard qu'un gardien avait dit: — Il vaudrait mieux ne lui laisser qu'une cheville en bois.

À deux heures du matin on vint changer le factionnaire qui était un vieux soldat, et on le remplaça par un conscrit. Quelques instants après, l'homme aux chiens fit sa visite, et s'en alla sans avoir rien remarqué, si ce n'est la trop grande jeunesse et «l'air paysan» du «tourlourou». Deux heures après, à quatre heures, quand on vint relever le conscrit, on le trouva endormi et tombé à terre comme un bloc près de la cage de Thénardier. Quant à Thénardier, il n'y était plus. Ses fers brisés étaient sur le carreau. Il y avait un trou au plafond de sa cage, et, au-dessus, un autre trou dans le toit. Une planche de son lit avait été arrachée et sans doute emportée, car on ne la retrouva point. On saisit aussi dans la cellule une bouteille à moitié vidée qui contenait le reste du vin stupéfiant avec lequel le soldat avait été endormi. La bayonnette du soldat avait disparu.

Au moment où ceci fut découvert, on crut Thénardier hors de toute atteinte. La réalité est qu'il n'était plus dans le Bâtiment-Neuf, mais qu'il était encore fort en danger. Son évasion n'était point consommée.

Thénardier, en arrivant sur le toit du Bâtiment-Neuf, avait trouvé le reste de la corde de Brujon qui pendait aux barreaux de la trappe supérieure de la cheminée, mais ce bout cassé étant beaucoup trop court, il n'avait pu s'évader par-dessus le chemin de ronde comme avaient fait Brujon et Gueulemer.

Quand on détourne de la rue des Ballets dans la rue du Roi-de-Sicile, on rencontre presque tout de suite à droite un enfoncement sordide. Il y avait là au siècle dernier une maison dont il ne reste plus que le mur de fond, véritable mur de masure qui s'élève à la hauteur d'un troisième étage entre les bâtiments voisins. Cette ruine est reconnaissable à deux grandes fenêtres carrées qu'on y voit encore; celle du milieu, la plus proche du pignon de droite, est barrée d'une solive vermoulue ajustée en chevron d'étai. À travers ces fenêtres on distinguait autrefois une haute muraille lugubre qui était un morceau de l'enceinte du chemin de ronde de la Force.

Le vide que la maison démolie a laissé sur la rue est à moitié rempli par une palissade en planches pourries contrebutée de cinq bornes de pierre. Dans cette clôture se cache une petite baraque appuyée à la ruine restée debout. La palissade a une porte qui, il y a quelques années, n'était fermée que d'un loquet.

C'est sur la crête de cette ruine que Thénardier était parvenu un peu après trois heures du matin.

Comment était-il arrivé là? C'est ce qu'on n'a jamais pu expliquer ni comprendre. Les éclairs avaient dû tout ensemble le gêner et l'aider. S'était-il servi des échelles et des échafaudages des couvreurs pour gagner de toit en toit, de clôture en clôture, de compartiment en compartiment, les bâtiments de la cour Charlemagne, puis les bâtiments de la cour Saint-Louis, le mur de ronde, et de là la masure sur la rue du Roi-de-Sicile? Mais il y avait dans ce trajet des solutions de continuité qui semblaient le rendre impossible. Avait-il posé la planche de son lit comme un pont du toit du Bel-Air au mur du chemin de ronde, et s’était-il mis à ramper à plat ventre sur le chevron du mur de ronde tout autour de la prison jusqu’à la masure? Mais le mur du chemin de ronde de la Force dessinait une ligne crénelée et inégale, il montait et descendait, il s’abaissait à la caserne des pompiers, il se relevait à la maison des Bains, il était coupé par des constructions, il n’avait pas la même hauteur sur l’hôtel Lamoignon que sur la rue Pavée, il avait partout des chutes et des angles droits; et puis les sentinelles auraient dû voir la sombre silhouette du fugitif; de cette façon encore le chemin fait par Thénardier reste à peu près inexplicable. Des deux manières, fuite impossible. Thénardier, illuminé par cette effrayante soif de la liberté qui change les précipices en fossés, les grilles de fer en claies d’osier, un cul-de-jatte en athlète, un podagre en oiseau, la stupidité en instinct, l’instinct en intelligence et l’intelligence en génie, Thénardier avait-il inventé et improvisé une troisième manière? On ne l’a jamais su.

On ne peut pas toujours se rendre compte des merveilles de l’évasion. L’homme qui s’échappe, répétons-le, est un inspiré; il y a de l’étoile et de l’éclair dans la mystérieuse lueur de la fuite; l’effort vers la délivrance n’est pas moins surprenant que le coup d’aile vers le sublime; et l’on dit d’un voleur évadé: Comment a-t-il fait pour escalader ce toit? de même qu’on dit de Corneille: Où a-t-il trouvé *Qu’il mourût?*

Quoi qu’il en soit, ruisselant de sueur, trempé par la pluie, les vêtements en lambeaux, les mains écorchées, les coudes en sang, les genoux déchirés, Thénardier était arrivé sur ce que les enfants, dans leur langue figurée, appellent *le coupant* du mur de la ruine, il s’y était couché tout de son long, et là, la force lui avait manqué. Un escarpement à pic de la hauteur d’un troisième étage le séparait du pavé de la rue.

La corde qu’il avait était trop courte.

Il attendait là, pâle, épuisé, désespéré de tout l’espoir qu’il avait eu, encore couvert par la nuit, mais se disant que le jour allait venir, épouvanté de l’idée d’entendre avant quelques instants sonner à l’horloge voisine de Saint-Paul quatre heures, heure où l’on viendrait relever la sentinelle et où on la trouverait endormie sous le toit percé, regardant avec stupeur, à une profondeur terrible, à la lueur des réverbères, le pavé mouillé et noir, ce pavé désiré et effroyable qui était la mort et qui était la liberté.

Il se demandait si ses trois complices d'évasion avaient réussi, s'ils l'avaient attendu, et s'ils viendraient à son aide. Il écoutait. Excepté une patrouille, personne n'avait passé dans la rue depuis qu'il était là. Presque toute la descente des maraîchers de Montreuil, de Charonne, de Vincennes et de Bercy à la halle se fait par la rue Saint-Antoine.

Quatre heures sonnèrent. Thénardier tressaillit, peu d'instants après, cette rumeur effarée et confuse qui suit une évasion découverte éclata dans la prison. Le bruit des portes qu'on ouvre et qu'on ferme, le grincement des grilles sur leurs gonds, le tumulte du corps de garde, les appels rauques des guichetiers, le choc des crosses de fusil sur le pavé des cours, arrivaient jusqu'à lui. Des lumières montaient et descendaient aux fenêtres grillées des dortoirs, une torche courait sur le comble du Bâtiment-Neuf, les pompiers de la caserne d'à côté avaient été appelés. Leurs casques, que la torche éclairait dans la pluie, allaient et venaient le long des toits. En même temps Thénardier voyait du côté de la Bastille une nuance blafarde blanchir lugubrement le bas du ciel.

Lui était sur le haut d'un mur de dix pouces de large, étendu sous l'averse, avec deux gouffres à droite et à gauche, ne pouvant bouger, en proie au vertige d'une chute possible et à l'horreur d'une arrestation certaine, et sa pensée, comme le battant d'une cloche, allait de l'une de ces idées à l'autre: — Mort si je tombe, pris si je reste.

Dans cette angoisse, il vit tout à coup, la rue étant encore tout à fait obscure, un homme qui se glissait le long des murailles et qui venait du côté de la rue Pavée s'arrêter dans le renfoncement au-dessus duquel Thénardier était comme suspendu. Cet homme fût rejoint par un second qui marchait avec la même précaution, puis par un troisième, puis par un quatrième. Quand ces hommes furent réunis, l'un d'eux souleva le loquet de la porte de la palissade, et ils entrèrent tous quatre dans l'enceinte où est la baraque. Ils se trouvaient précisément au-dessous de Thénardier. Ces hommes avaient évidemment choisi ce renfoncement pour pouvoir causer sans être vus des passants ni de la sentinelle qui garde le guichet de la Force à quelques pas de là. Il faut dire aussi que la pluie tenait cette sentinelle bloquée dans sa guérite. Thénardier, ne pouvant distinguer leurs visages, prêta l'oreille à leurs paroles avec l'attention désespérée d'un misérable qui se sent perdu.

Thénardier vit passer devant ses yeux quelque chose qui ressemblait à l'espérance, ces hommes parlaient argot.

Le premier disait, bas, mais distinctement:

— Décarrons. Qu’est-ce que nous maquillons icigo?

Le second répondit:

— Allons nous en. Qu’est-ce que nous faisons ici?

— Il lansquine à éteindre le riffe du rabouin. Et puis les coqueurs vont passer, il y a là un grivier qui porte gaffe, nous allons nous faire emballer icicaille.

Ces deux mots, *icigo* et *icicaille*, qui tous deux veulent dire ici, et qui appartiennent, le premier à l’argot des barrières, le second à l’argot du Temple, furent des traits de lumière pour Thénardier. À icigo il reconnut Brujon, qui était rôdeur de barrières, et à icicaille Babet, qui, parmi tous ses métiers, avait été revendeur au Temple.

L’antique argot du grand siècle ne se parle plus qu’au Temple, et Babet était le seul même qui le parlât bien purement. Sans *icicaille*, Thénardier ne l’aurait point reconnu, car il avait tout à fait dénaturé sa voix.

Cependant le troisième était intervenu:

— Rien ne presse encore, attendons un peu. Qu’est-ce qui nous dit qu’il n’a pas besoin de nous?

À ceci, qui n’était que du français, Thénardier reconnut Montparnasse, lequel mettait son élégance à entendre tous les argots et à n’en parler aucun.

Quant au quatrième, il se taisait, mais ses vastes épaules le dénonçaient. Thénardier n’hésita pas. C’était Gueulemer.

Brujon répliqua presque impétueusement, mais toujours à voix basse:

— Qu’est-ce que tu nous bonis là? Le tapissier n’aura pas pu tirer sa crampe. Il ne sait pas le truc, quoi! Bouliner sa limace et faucher ses empaffes pour maquiller une tortouse, caler des boulins aux lourdes, braser des faffes, maquiller des caroubles, faucher les durs, balancer sa tortouse dehors, se planquer, se camoufler, il faut être mariol! Le vieux n’aura pas pu, il ne sait pas goupiner!

Babet ajouta, toujours dans ce sage argot classique que parlaient Poulailler et Cartouche, et qui est à l’argot hardi, nouveau, coloré et risqué dont usait Brujon ce que la langue de Racine est à la langue d’André Chénier:

— Ton orgue tapissier aura été fait marron dans l’escalier. Il faut être arcasien. C’est un galifard. Il se sera laissé jouer l’harnache par un roussin, peut-être même par un roussi, qui lui aura battu comtois. Prête l’oche, Montparnasse, entends-tu ces criblements dans le collège? Tu as vu toutes ces camoufles. Il est tombé, va! Il en sera quitte pour tirer ses vingt longes.

Je n’ai pas taf, je ne suis pas un taffeur, c’est colombé, mais il n’y a plus qu’à faire les lézards, ou autrement on nous la fera gambiller. Ne renaude pas, viens avec nousiergue, allons picter une rouillarde encible.

— On ne laisse pas les amis dans l’embarras, grommela Montparnasse.

— Je te bonis qu’il est malade, reprit Brujon. À l’heure qui toque, le tapissier ne vaut pas une broque! Nous n’y pouvons rien. Décarrons. Je crois à tout moment qu’un cogne me ceintre en pogne!

Montparnasse ne résistait plus que faiblement; le fait est que ces quatre hommes, avec cette fidélité qu’ont les bandits de ne jamais s’abandonner entre eux, avaient rôdé toute la nuit autour de la Force, quel que fût le péril, dans l’espérance de voir surgir au haut de quelque muraille Thénardier. Mais la nuit qui devenait vraiment trop belle, c’était une averse à rendre toutes les rues désertes, le froid qui les gagnait, leurs vêtements trempés, leurs chaussures percées, le bruit inquiétant qui venait d’éclater dans la prison, les heures écoulées, les patrouilles rencontrées, l’espoir qui s’en allait, la peur qui revenait, tout cela les poussait à la retraite. Montparnasse lui-même, qui était peut-être un peu le gendre de Thénardier, cédait. Un moment de plus, ils étaient partis. Thénardier haletait sur son mur comme les naufragés de la *Méduse* sur leur radeau en voyant le navire apparu s’évanouir à l’horizon.

Il n’osait les appeler, un cri entendu pouvait tout perdre, il eut une idée, une dernière, une lueur; il prit dans sa poche le bout de la corde de Brujon qu’il avait détaché de la cheminée du Bâtiment-Neuf, et le jeta dans l’enceinte de la palissade.

Cette corde tomba à leurs pieds.

— Une veuve, dit Babet.

— Ma tortouse! dit Brujon.

— L’aubergiste est là, dit Montparnasse.

Ils levèrent les yeux. Thénardier avança un peu la tête.

— Vite! dit Montparnasse, as-tu l’autre bout de la corde, Brujon?

— Oui.

— Noue les deux bouts ensemble, nous lui jetterons la corde, il la fixera au mur, il en aura assez pour descendre.

Thénardier se risqua à élever la voix.

— Je suis transi.

— On te réchauffera.

— Je ne puis plus bouger.

— Tu te laisseras glisser, nous te recevrons.

— J’ai les mains gourdes.

— Noue seulement la corde au mur.

— Je ne pourrai pas.

— Il faut que l’un de nous monte, dit Montparnasse.

— Trois étages! fit Brujon.

Un ancien conduit en plâtre, lequel avait servi à un poêle qu’on allumait jadis dans la baraque, rampait le long du mur et montait presque jusqu’à l’endroit où l’on apercevait Thénardier. Ce tuyau, alors fort lézardé et tout crevassé, est tombé depuis, mais on en voit encore les traces. Il était fort étroit.

— On pourrait monter par là, fit Montparnasse.

— Par ce tuyau? s’écria Babet, un orgue! jamais! il faudrait un mion.

— Il faudrait un môme, reprit Brujon.

— Où trouver un moucheron? dit Gueulemer.

— Attendez, dit Montparnasse. J’ai l’affaire.

Il entr’ouvrit doucement la porte de la palissade, s’assura qu’aucun passant ne traversait la rue, sortit avec précaution, referma la porte derrière lui, et partit en courant dans la direction de la Bastille.

Sept ou huit minutes s’écoulèrent, huit mille siècles pour Thénardier; Babet, Brujon et Gueulemer ne desserraient pas les dents; la porte se rouvrit enfin, et Montparnasse parut, essoufflé, et amenant Gavroche. La pluie continuait de faire la rue complètement déserte.

Le petit Gavroche entra dans l’enceinte et regarda ces figures de bandits d’un air tranquille. L’eau lui dégouttait des cheveux. Gueulemer lui adressa la parole:

— Mioche, es-tu un homme?

Gavroche haussa les épaules et répondit:

— Un môme comme mézig est un orgue, et des orgues comme vousailles sont des mômes.

— Comme le mion joue du crachoir! s’écria Babet.

— Le môme pantinois n’est pas maquillé de fertille lansquinée, ajouta Brujon.

— Qu’est-ce qu’il vous faut? dit Gavroche.

Montparnasse répondit:

— Grimper par ce tuyau.

— Avec cette veuve, fît Babet.

— Et ligoter la tortouse, continua Brujon.

— Au monté du montant, reprit Babet.

— Au pieu de la vanterne, ajouta Brujon.

— Et puis? dit Gavroche.

— Voilà! dit Gueulemer.

Le gamin examina la corde, le tuyau, le mur, les fenêtres, et fit cet inexprimable et dédaigneux bruit des lèvres qui signifie:

— Que ça!

— Il y a un homme là-haut que tu sauveras, reprit Montparnasse.

— Veux-tu? reprit Brujon.

— Serin! répondit l’enfant comme si la question lui paraissait inouïe; et il ôta ses souliers.

Gueulemer saisit Gavroche d’un bras, le posa sur le toit de la baraque, dont les planches vermoulues pliaient sous le poids de l’enfant, et lui remit la corde que Brujon avait renouée pendant l’absence de Montparnasse. Le gamin se dirigea vers le tuyau où il était facile d’entrer grâce à une large crevasse qui touchait au toit. Au moment où il allait monter, Thénardier, qui voyait le salut et la vie s’approcher, se pencha au bord du mur; la première lueur du jour blanchissait son front inondé de sueur, ses pommettes livides, son nez effilé et sauvage, sa barbe grise toute hérissée, et Gavroche le reconnut.

— Tiens! dit-il, c’est mon père!... Oh! cela n’empêche pas.

Et prenant la corde dans ses dents, il commença résolûment l’escalade.

Il parvint au haut de la masure, enfourcha le vieux mur comme un cheval, et noua solidement la corde à la traverse supérieure de la fenêtre.

Un moment après, Thénardier était dans la rue.

Dès qu’il eut touché le pavé, dès qu’il se sentit hors de danger, il ne fut plus ni fatigué, ni transi, ni tremblant; les choses terribles dont il sortait s’évanouirent comme une fumée, toute cette étrange et féroce intelligence se réveilla, et se trouva debout et libre, prête à marcher devant elle. Voici quel fut le premier mot de cet homme:

— Maintenant, qui allons-nous manger?

Il est inutile d’expliquer le sens de ce mot affreusement transparent qui signifie tout à la fois tuer, assassiner et dévaliser. *Manger*, sens vrai: *dévorer*.

— Rencognons-nous bien, dit Brujon. Finissons en trois mots, et nous nous séparerons tout de suite. Il y avait une affaire qui avait l’air bonne rue

Plumet, une rue déserte, une maison isolée, une vieille grille pourrie sur un jardin, des femmes seules.

— Eh bien! pourquoi pas? demanda Thénardier.

— Ta fée, Éponine, a été voir la chose, répondit Babet.

— Et elle a apporté un biscuit à Magnon, ajouta Gueulemer. Rien à maquiller là.

— La fée n’est pas loffe, fit Thénardier. Pourtant il faudra voir.

— Oui, oui, dit Brujon, il faudra voir.

Cependant aucun de ces hommes n’avait plus l’air de voir Gavroche qui, pendant ce colloque, s’était assis sur une des bornes de la palissade; il attendit quelques instants, peut-être que son père se tournât vers lui, puis il remit ses souliers, et dit:

— C’est fini? Vous n’avez plus besoin de moi, les hommes? vous voilà tirés d’affaire. Je m’en vas. Il faut que j’aille lever mes mômes.

Et il s’en alla.

Les cinq hommes sortirent l’un après l’autre de la palissade.

Quand Gavroche eut disparu au tournant de la rue des Ballets, Babet prit Thénardier à part:

— As-tu regardé ce mion? lui demanda-t-il.

— Quel mion?

— Le mion qui a grimpé au mur et t’a porté la corde.

— Pas trop.

— Eh bien, je ne sais pas, mais il me semble que c’est ton fils.

— Bah! dit Thénardier, crois-tu?

Et il s’en alla.

Livre septième — L’argot

Chapitre I

Origine

Pigritia est un mot terrible.

Il engendre un monde, *la pègre,* lisez: *le vol,* et un enfer, *la pégrenne,* lisez: *la faim*.

Ainsi la paresse est mère.

Elle a un fils, le vol, et une fille, la faim.

Où sommes-nous en ce moment? Dans l'argot.

Qu'est-ce que l'argot? C'est tout à la fois la nation et l'idiome; c'est le vol sous ses deux espèces, peuple et langue.

Lorsqu'il y a trente-quatre ans, le narrateur de cette grave et sombre histoire introduisait au milieu d'un ouvrage écrit dans le même but que celui-ci un voleur parlant argot, il y eut ébahissement et clameur. — Quoi! comment! l'argot? Mais l'argot est affreux! mais c'est la langue des chiourmes, des bagnes, des prisons, de tout ce que la société a de plus abominable! etc., etc., etc.

Nous n'avons jamais compris ce genre d'objections.

Depuis, deux puissants romanciers, dont l'un est un profond observateur du cœur humain, l'autre un intrépide ami du peuple, Balzac et Eugène Sue, ayant fait parler des bandits dans leur langue naturelle comme l'avait fait en 1828 l'auteur du *Dernier jour d'un condamné,* les mêmes réclamations se sont élevées. On a répété: — Que nous veulent les écrivains avec ce révoltant patois? l'argot est odieux! l'argot fait frémir!

Qui le nie? Sans doute.

Lorsqu'il s'agit de sonder une plaie, un gouffre ou une société, depuis quand est-ce un tort de descendre trop avant, d'aller au fond? Nous avions toujours pensé que c'était quelquefois un acte de courage, et tout au moins une action simple et utile, digne de l'attention sympathique que mérite le devoir accepté et accompli. Ne pas tout explorer, ne pas tout étudier, s'arrêter en chemin, pourquoi? S'arrêter est le fait de la sonde et non du sondeur.

Certes, aller chercher dans les bas-fonds de l'ordre social, là où la terre finit et où la boue commence, fouiller dans ces vagues épaisses, poursuivre, saisir et jeter tout palpitant sur le pavé cet idiome abject qui ruisselle de fange ainsi tiré au jour, ce vocabulaire pustuleux dont chaque mot semble un anneau immonde d'un monstre de la vase et des ténèbres, ce n'est ni une tâche attrayante, ni une tâche aisée. Rien n'est plus lugubre que de contempler ainsi à nu, à la lumière de la pensée, le fourmillement effroyable de l'argot. Il semble en effet que ce soit une sorte d'horrible bête faite pour la nuit qu'on vient d'arracher de son cloaque. On croit voir une affreuse broussaille vivante et hérissée qui tressaille, se meut, s'agite, redemande l'ombre, menace et regarde. Tel mot ressemble à une griffe, tel autre à un œil éteint et sanglant; telle phrase semble remuer comme une pince de crabe. Tout cela vit de cette vitalité hideuse des choses qui se sont organisées dans la désorganisation.

Maintenant, depuis quand l'horreur exclut-elle l'étude? depuis quand la maladie chasse-t-elle le médecin? Se figure-t-on un naturaliste qui refuserait d'étudier la vipère, la chauve-souris, le scorpion, la scolopendre, la tarentule, et qui les rejetterait dans leurs ténèbres en disant: Oh! que c'est laid! Le penseur qui se détournerait de l'argot ressemblerait à un chirurgien qui se détournerait d'un ulcère ou d'une verrue. Ce serait un philologue hésitant à examiner un fait de la langue, un philosophe hésitant à scruter un fait de l'humanité. Car, il faut bien le dire à ceux qui l'ignorent, l'argot est tout ensemble un phénomène littéraire et un résultat social. Qu'est-ce que l'argot proprement dit? L'argot est la langue de la misère.

Ici on peut nous arrêter; on peut généraliser le fait, ce qui est quelquefois une manière de l'atténuer, on peut nous dire que tous les métiers, toutes les professions, on pourrait presque ajouter tous les accidents de la hiérarchie sociale et toutes les formes de l'intelligence, ont leur argot. Le marchand qui dit: *Montpellier disponible; Marseille belle qualité*, l'agent de change qui dit: *report, prime, fin courant*, le joueur qui dit: *tiers et tout, refait de pique*, l'huissier des îles normandes qui dit: *l'affieffeur s'arrêtant à son fonds ne peut clâmer les fruits de ce fonds pendant la saisie héréditale des immeubles du renonciateur*, le vaudevilliste qui dit: *on a égayé l'ours*, le comédien qui dit: *j'ai fait four*, le philosophe qui dit: *triplicité phénoménale*, le chasseur qui dit: *voileci allais, voileci fuyant*, le phrénologue qui dit: *amativité, combativité, sécrétivité*, le fantassin qui dit: *ma clarinette*, le cavalier qui dit: *mon poulet d'Inde*, le maître d'armes qui dit: *tierce, quarte, rompez*, l'imprimeur qui dit: *parlons batio*, tous, imprimeur, maître d'armes, cavalier, fantassin, phrénologue, chasseur, philosophe, comédien, vaudevilliste, huissier, joueur, agent de change, marchand, parlent argot. Le peintre qui dit: *mon rapin*, le notaire qui dit: *mon saute-ruisseau*, le perruquier qui dit: *mon commis*, le savetier qui dit: *mon gniaf*, parlent argot. À la rigueur, et si on le veut absolument, toutes ces façons diverses de dire la droite et la gauche, le matelot *bâbord* et *tribord*, le machiniste, *côté cour* et *côté jardin*, le bedeau, *côté de l'épître* et *côté de l'évangile*, sont de l'argot. Il y a l'argot des mijaurées comme il y a eu l'argot des précieuses. L'hôtel de Rambouillet confinait quelque peu à la Cour des Miracles. Il y a l'argot des duchesses, témoin cette phrase écrite dans un billet doux par une très grande dame et très jolie femme de la Restauration: «Vous trouverez dans ces potains-là une foultitude de raisons pour que je me libertise.» Les chiffres diplomatiques sont de l'argot; la chancellerie pontificale, en disant 26 pour *Rome*, *grkztntgzyal* pour *envoi* et *abfxustgrnogrkzu tu XI* pour *duc de Modène*, parle argot. Les médecins du moyen âge qui, pour dire carotte, radis et navet, disaient: *opoponach, perfroschinum, reptitalmus, dracatholicum angelorum, postmegorum*, parlaient argot. Le fabricant de sucre qui dit: *vergeoise, tête, claircé, tape, lumps, mélis, bâtarde, commun, brûlé, plaque*, cet honnête manufacturier parle argot. Une certaine école de critique d'il y a vingt ans qui disait: — *La moitié de Shakespeare est jeux de mots et calembours*, — parlait argot. Le poète et l'artiste qui, avec un sens profond, qualifieront M. de Montmorency «un bourgeois», s'il ne se connaît pas en vers et en statues, parlent argot. L'académicien classique qui appelle les fleurs *Flore*, les fruits *Pomone*, la mer *Neptune*, l'amour *les feux*, la beauté *les appas*, un cheval *un coursier*, la cocarde blanche ou tricolore *la rose de Bellone*, le chapeau à trois cornes *le triangle de Mars*, l'académicien classique parle argot. L'algèbre, la médecine, la botanique, ont leur argot. La langue qu'on emploie à bord, cette admirable langue de la mer, si complète et si pittoresque, qu'ont parlée Jean Bart, Duquesne, Suffren et Duperré, qui se mêle au sifflement des agrès, au bruit des porte-voix, au choc des haches d'abordage, au roulis, au vent, à la rafale, au canon, est tout un argot héroïque et éclatant qui est au farouche argot de la pègre ce que le lion est au chacal.

Sans doute. Mais, quoi qu'on en puisse dire, cette façon de comprendre le mot argot est une extension, que tout le monde même n'admettra pas. Quant à nous, nous conservons à ce mot sa vieille acception précise, circonscrite et déterminée, et nous restreignons l'argot à l'argot. L'argot véritable, l'argot par excellence, Si ces deux mots peuvent s'accoupler, l’immémorial argot qui était un royaume, n’est autre chose, nous le répétons, que la langue laide, inquiète, sournoise, traître, venimeuse, cruelle, louche, vile, profonde, fatale, de la misère. Il y a, à l’extrémité de tous les abaissements et de toutes les infortunes, une dernière misère qui se révolte et qui se décide à entrer en lutte contre l’ensemble des faits heureux et des droits régnants; lutte affreuse où, tantôt rusée, tantôt violente, à la fois malsaine et féroce, elle attaque l’ordre social à coups d’épingle par le vice et à coup de massue par le crime. Pour les besoins de cette lutte, la misère a inventé une langue de combat qui est l’argot.

Faire surnager et soutenir au-dessus de l’oubli, au-dessus du gouffre, ne fût-ce qu’un fragment d’une langue quelconque que l’homme a parlée et qui se perdrait, c’est-à-dire un des éléments, bons ou mauvais, dont la civilisation se compose ou se complique, c’est étendre les données de l’observation sociale, c’est servir la civilisation même. Ce service, Plaute l’a rendu, le voulant ou ne le voulant pas, en faisant parler le phénicien à deux soldats carthaginois; ce service, Molière l’a rendu en faisant parler le levantin et toutes sortes de patois à tant de ses personnages. Ici les objections se raniment. Le phénicien, à merveille! le levantin, à la bonne heure! même le patois, passe! ce sont des langues qui ont appartenu à des nations ou à des provinces; mais l’argot? à quoi bon conserver l’argot? à quoi bon «faire surnager» l’argot?

À cela nous ne répondrons qu’un mot. Certes, si la langue qu’a parlée une nation ou une province est digne d’intérêt, il est une chose plus digne encore d’attention et d’étude, c’est la langue qu’a parlée une misère.

C’est la langue qu’a parlée en France, par exemple, depuis plus de quatre siècles, non seulement une misère, mais la misère, toute la misère humaine possible.

Et puis, nous y insistons, étudier les difformités et les infirmités sociales et les signaler pour les guérir, ce n’est point une besogne où le choix soit permis. L’historien des mœurs et des idées n’a pas une mission moins austère que l’historien des événements. Celui-ci a la surface de la civilisation, les luttes des couronnes, les naissances de princes, les mariages de rois, les batailles, les assemblées, les grands hommes publics, les révolutions au soleil, tout le dehors; l’autre historien a l’intérieur, le fond, le peuple qui travaille, qui souffre et qui attend, la femme accablée, l’enfant qui agonise, les guerres sourdes d’homme à homme, les férocités obscures, les préjugés, les iniquités convenues, les contre-coups souterrains de la loi, les évolutions secrètes des âmes, les tressaillements indistincts des multitudes, les meurt-de-faim, les va-nu-pieds, les bras-nus, les déshérités, les orphelins, les malheureux et les infâmes, toutes les larves qui errent dans l'obscurité. Il faut qu'il descende, le cœur plein de charité et de sévérité à la fois, comme un frère et comme un juge, jusqu'à ces casemates impénétrables où rampent pêle-mêle ceux qui saignent et ceux qui frappent, ceux qui pleurent et ceux qui maudissent, ceux qui jeûnent et ceux qui dévorent, ceux qui endurent le mal et ceux qui le font. Ces historiens des cœurs et des âmes ont-ils des devoirs moindres que les historiens des faits extérieurs? Croit-on qu'Alighieri ait moins de choses à dire que Machiavel? Le dessous de la civilisation, pour être plus profond et plus sombre, est-il moins important que le dessus? Connaît-on bien la montagne quand on ne connaît pas la caverne?

Disons-le du reste en passant, de quelques mots de ce qui précède on pourrait inférer entre les deux classes d'historiens une séparation tranchée qui n'existe pas dans notre esprit. Nul n'est bon historien de la vie patente, visible, éclatante et publique des peuples s'il n'est en même temps, dans une certaine mesure, historien de leur vie profonde et cachée; et nul n'est bon historien du dedans s'il ne sait être, toutes les fois que besoin est, historien du dehors. L'histoire des mœurs et des idées pénètre l'histoire des événements, et réciproquement. Ce sont deux ordres de faits différents qui se répondent, qui s'enchaînent toujours et s'engendrent souvent. Tous les linéaments que la providence trace à la surface d'une nation ont leurs parallèles sombres, mais distincts, dans le fond, et toutes les convulsions du fond produisent des soulèvements à la surface. La vraie histoire étant mêlée à tout, le véritable historien se mêle de tout.

L'homme n'est pas un cercle à un seul centre; c'est une ellipse à deux foyers. Les faits sont l'un, les idées sont l'autre.

L'argot n'est autre chose qu'un vestiaire où la langue, ayant quelque mauvaise action à faire, se déguise. Elle s'y revêt de mots masques et de métaphores haillons.

De la sorte elle devient horrible.

On a peine à la reconnaître. Est-ce bien la langue française, la grande langue humaine? La voilà prête à entrer en scène et à donner au crime la réplique, et propre à tous les emplois du répertoire du mal. Elle ne marche plus, elle clopine; elle boite sur la béquille de la Cour des miracles, béquille métamorphosable en massue; elle se nomme truanderie; tous les spectres, ses habilleurs, l’ont grimée; elle se traîne et se dresse, double allure du reptile. Elle est apte à tous les rôles désormais, faite louche par le faussaire, vert-de-grisée par l’empoisonneur, charbonnée de la suie de l’incendiaire; et le meurtrier lui met son rouge.

Quand on écoute, du côté des honnêtes gens, à la porte de la société, on surprend le dialogue de ceux qui sont dehors. On distingue des demandes et des réponses. On perçoit, sans le comprendre, un murmure hideux, sonnant presque comme l’accent humain, mais plus voisin du hurlement que de la parole. C’est l’argot. Les mots sont difformes, et empreints d’on ne sait quelle bestialité fantastique. On croit entendre des hydres parler.

C’est l’inintelligible dans le ténébreux. Cela grince et cela chuchote, complétant le crépuscule par l’énigme. Il fait noir dans le malheur, il fait plus noir encore dans le crime; ces deux noirceurs amalgamées composent l’argot. Obscurité dans l’atmosphère, obscurité dans les actes, obscurité dans les voix. Épouvantable langue crapaude qui va, vient, sautèle, rampe, bave, et se meut monstrueusement dans cette immense brume grise faite de pluie, de nuit, de faim, de vice, de mensonge, d’injustice, de nudité, d’asphyxie et d’hiver, plein midi des misérables.

Ayons compassion des châtiés. Hélas! qui sommes-nous nous-mêmes? qui suis-je, moi qui vous parle? qui êtes-vous, vous qui m’écoutez? d’où venons-nous? et est-il bien sûr que nous n’ayons rien fait avant d’être nés? La terre n’est point sans ressemblance avec une geôle. Qui sait si l’homme n’est pas un repris de justice divine?

Regardez la vie de près. Elle est ainsi faite qu’on y sent partout de la punition.

Êtes-vous ce qu’on appelle un heureux? Eh bien, vous êtes triste tous les jours. Chaque jour a son grand chagrin ou son petit souci. Hier, vous trembliez pour une santé qui vous est chère, aujourd’hui vous craignez pour la vôtre, demain ce sera une inquiétude d’argent, après-demain la diatribe d’un calomniateur, l’autre après-demain le malheur d’un ami; puis le temps qu’il fait, puis quelque chose de cassé ou de perdu, puis un plaisir que la conscience et la colonne vertébrale vous reprochent; une autre fois, la marche des affaires publiques. Sans compter les peines de cœur. Et ainsi de suite. Un nuage se dissipe, un autre se reforme. À peine un jour sur cent de pleine joie et de plein soleil. Et vous êtes de ce petit nombre qui a le bonheur! Quant aux autres hommes, la nuit stagnante est sur eux.

Les esprits réfléchis usent peu de cette locution: les heureux et les malheureux. Dans ce monde, vestibule d’un autre évidemment, il n’y a pas d’heureux.

La vraie division humaine est celle-ci: les lumineux et les ténébreux.

Diminuer le nombre des ténébreux, augmenter le nombre des lumineux, voilà le but. C’est pourquoi nous crions: enseignement! science! Apprendre à lire, c’est allumer du feu; toute syllabe épelée étincelle.

Du reste qui dit lumière ne dit pas nécessairement joie. On souffre dans la lumière; l’excès brûle. La flamme est ennemie de l’aile. Brûler sans cesser de voler, c’est là le prodige du génie.

Quand vous connaîtrez et quand vous aimerez, vous souffrirez encore. Le jour naît en larmes. Les lumineux pleurent, ne fût-ce que sur les ténébreux.

L’argot, est la langue des ténébreux.

Chapitre II

Racines

La pensée est émue dans ses plus sombres profondeurs, la philosophie sociale est sollicitée à ses méditations les plus poignantes, en présence de cet énigmatique dialecte à la fois flétri et révolté. C'est là qu'il y a du châtiment visible. Chaque syllabe y a l'air marquée. Les mots de la langue vulgaire y apparaissent comme froncés et racornis sous le fer rouge du bourreau. Quelques-uns semblent fumer encore. Telle phrase vous fait l'effet de l'épaule fleurdelysée d'un voleur brusquement mise à nu. L'idée refuse presque de se laisser exprimer par ces substantifs repris de justice. La métaphore y est parfois si effrontée qu'on sent qu'elle a été au carcan.

Du reste, malgré tout cela et à cause de tout cela, ce patois étrange a de droit son compartiment dans ce grand casier impartial où il y a place pour le liard oxydé comme pour la médaille d'or, et qu'on nomme la littérature. L'argot, qu'on y consente ou non, a sa syntaxe et sa poésie. C'est une langue. Si, à la difformité de certains vocables, on reconnaît qu'elle a été mâchée par Mandrin, à la splendeur de certaines métonymies, on sent que Villon l'a parlée.

Ce vers si exquis et si célèbre:

Mais où sont les neiges d'antan?

est un vers d'argot. Antan — *ante annum* — est un mot de l'argot de Thunes qui signifiait l'*an passé* et par extension *autrefois*. On pouvait encore lire il y a trente-cinq ans, à l'époque du départ de la grande chaîne de 1827, dans un des cachots de Bicêtre, cette maxime gravée au clou sur le mur par un roi de Thunes condamné aux galères: *Les dabs d'antan trimaient siempre pour la pierre du Coësre*. Ce qui veut dire: *Les rois d'autrefois allaient toujours se faire sacrer*. Dans la pensée de ce roi-là, le sacre, c'était le bagne.

Le mot *décarade,* qui exprime le départ d'une lourde voiture au galop, est attribué à Villon, et il en est digne. Ce mot, qui fait feu des quatre pieds, résume dans une onomatopée magistrale tout l'admirable vers de La Fontaine:

Six forts chevaux tiraient un coche.

Au point de vue purement littéraire, peu d'études seraient plus curieuses et plus fécondes que celle de l'argot. C'est toute une langue dans la langue, une sorte d'excroissance maladive, une greffe malsaine qui a produit une végétation, un parasite qui a ses racines dans le vieux tronc gaulois et dont le feuillage sinistre rampe sur tout un côté de la langue. Ceci est ce qu'on pourrait appeler le premier aspect, l'aspect vulgaire de l'argot. Mais, pour ceux qui étudient la langue ainsi qu'il faut l'étudier, c'est-à-dire comme les géologues étudient la terre, l'argot apparaît comme une véritable alluvion. Selon qu'on y creuse plus ou moins avant, on trouve dans l'argot, au-dessous du vieux français populaire, le provençal, l'espagnol, de l'italien, du levantin, cette langue des ports de la Méditerranée, de l'anglais et de l'allemand, du roman dans ses trois variétés, roman français, roman italien, roman roman, du latin, enfin du basque et du celte. Formation profonde et bizarre. Édifice souterrain bâti en commun par tous les misérables. Chaque race maudite a déposé sa couche, chaque souffrance a laissé tomber sa pierre, chaque cœur a donné son caillou. Une foule d'âmes mauvaises, basses ou irritées, qui ont traversé la vie et sont allées s'évanouir dans l'éternité, sont là presque entières et en quelque sorte visibles encore sous la forme d'un mot monstrueux.

Veut-on de l'espagnol? le vieil argot gothique en fourmille. Voici *boffette*, soufflet, qui vient de *bofeton; vantane*, fenêtre (plus tard vanterne), qui vient de *vantana; gat*, chat, qui vient de *gato; acite*, huile, qui vient de *aceyte*. Veut-on de l'italien? Voici *spade*, épée, qui vient de *spada; carvel*, bateau, qui vient de *caravella*. Veut-on de l'anglais? Voici le *bichot*, l'évêque, qui vient de *bishop; raille*, espion, qui vient de *rascal, rascalion*, coquin; *pilcker*, étui, qui vient de *pilcher*, fourreau. Veut-on de l'allemand? Voici le *caleur*, le garçon, *kellner;* le *hers*, le maître, *herzog* (duc). Veut-on du latin? Voici *frangir*, casser, *frangere; affurer*, voler, *fur; cadène*, chaîne, *catena*. Il y a un mot qui reparaît dans toutes les langues du continent avec une sorte de puissance et d'autorité mystérieuse, c'est le mot *magnus*; l'Écosse en fait son *mac*, qui désigne le chef du clan, Mac-Farlane, Mac-Callummore, le grand Farlane, le grand Callummore; l'argot en fait le *meck*, et plus tard, le *meg*, c'est-à-dire Dieu. Veut-on du basque? Voici *gahisto*, le diable, qui vient de *gaïztoa*, mauvais; *sorgabon*, bonne nuit, qui vient de *gabon*, bonsoir. Veut-on du celte? Voici *blavin*, mouchoir, qui vient de *blavet*, eau jaillissante; *ménesse*, femme (en mauvaise part), qui vient de *meinec*, plein de pierres; *barant*, ruisseau, de *baranton*, fontaine; *goffeur*, serrurier, de *goff*, forgeron; la *guédouze*, la mort, qui vient de *guenn-du*, blanche-noire. Veut-on de l'histoire enfin? L'argot appelle les écus *les maltèses*, souvenir de la monnaie qui avait cours sur les galères de Malte.

Outre les origines philologiques qui viennent d'être indiquées, l'argot a d'autres racines plus naturelles encore et qui sortent pour ainsi dire de l'esprit même de l'homme:

Premièrement, la création directe des mots. Là est le mystère des langues. Peindre par des mots qui ont, on ne sait comment ni pourquoi, des figures. Ceci est le fond primitif de tout langage humain, ce qu'on en pourrait nommer le granit. L'argot pullule de mots de ce genre, mots immédiats, créés de toute pièce on ne sait où ni par qui, sans étymologies, sans analogies, sans dérivés, mots solitaires, barbares, quelquefois hideux, qui ont une singulière puissance d'expression et qui vivent. — Le bourreau, *le taule;* — la forêt, *le sabri;* la peur, la fuite, *taf;* — le laquais, *le larbin;* — le général, le préfet, le ministre, *pharos;* — le diable, *le rabouin*. Rien n'est plus étrange que ces mots qui masquent et qui montrent. Quelques-uns, *le rabouin*, par exemple, sont en même temps grotesques et terribles, et vous font l'effet d'une grimace cyclopéenne.

Deuxièmement, la métaphore. Le propre d'une langue qui veut tout dire et tout cacher, c'est d'abonder en figures. La métaphore est une énigme où se réfugie le voleur qui complote un coup, le prisonnier qui combine une évasion. Aucun idiome n'est plus métaphorique que l'argot. — *Dévisser le coco*, tordre le cou, — *tortiller*, manger; — *être gerbé*, être jugé; — *un rat*, un voleur de pain; — *il lansquine*, il pleut, vieille figure frappante, qui porte en quelque sorte sa date avec elle, qui assimile les longues lignes obliques de la pluie aux piques épaisses et penchées des lansquenets, et qui fait tenir dans un seul mot la métonymie populaire: *il pleut des hallebardes*. Quelquefois, à mesure que l'argot va de la première époque à la seconde, des mots passent de l'état sauvage et primitif au sens métaphorique. Le diable cesse d'être *le rabouin* et devient *le boulanger*, celui qui enfourne. C'est plus spirituel, mais moins grand; quelque chose comme Racine après Corneille, comme Euripide après Eschyle. Certaines phrases d'argot, qui participent des deux époques et ont à la fois le caractère barbare et le caractère métaphorique, ressemblent à des fantasmagories. — *Les sorgueurs vont sollicer des gails à la lune* (les rôdeurs vont voler des chevaux la nuit). — Cela passe devant l'esprit comme un groupe de spectres. On ne sait ce qu'on voit.

Troisièmement, l’expédient. L’argot vit sur la langue. Il en use à sa fantaisie, il y puise au hasard, et il se borne souvent, quand le besoin surgit, à la dénaturer sommairement et grossièrement. Parfois, avec les mots usuels ainsi déformés, et compliqués de mots d’argot pur, il compose des locutions pittoresques où l’on sent le mélange des deux éléments précédents, la création directe et la métaphore: — *Le cab jaspine, je marronne que la roulotte de Pantin trime dans le sabri*; le chien aboie, je soupçonne que la diligence de Paris passe dans le bois. — *Le dab est sinve, la dabuge est merloussière, la fée est bative*; le bourgeois est bête, la bourgeoise est rusée, la fille est jolie. — Le plus souvent, afin de dérouter les écouteurs, l’argot se borne à ajouter indistinctement à tous les mots de la langue une sorte de queue ignoble, une terminaison en aille, en orgue, en iergue, ou en uche. Ainsi *Vousiergue trouvaille bonorgue ce gigotmuche*? Trouvez-vous ce gigot bon? Phrase adressée par Cartouche à un guichetier, afin de savoir si la somme offerte pour l’évasion lui convenait. — La terminaison en *mar* a été ajoutée assez récemment.

L’argot, étant l’idiome de la corruption, se corrompt vite. En outre, comme il cherche toujours à se dérober, sitôt qu’il se sent compris, il se transforme. Au rebours de toute autre végétation, tout rayon de jour y tue ce qu’il touche. Aussi l’argot va-t-il se décomposant et se recomposant sans cesse; travail obscur et rapide qui ne s’arrête jamais. Il fait plus de chemin en dix ans que la langue en dix siècles. Ainsi le larton devient le lartif; le gail devient le gaye; la fertanche, la fertille; le momignard, le momacque; les siques, les frusques; la chique, l’égrugeoir; le colabre, le colas. Le diable est d’abord gahisto, puis le rabouin, puis le boulanger; le prêtre est le ratichon, puis le sanglier; le poignard est le vingt-deux, puis le surin, puis le lingre; les gens de police sont des railles, puis des roussins, puis des rousses, puis des marchands de lacets, puis des coqueurs, puis des cognes; le bourreau est le taule, puis Charlot, puis l’atigeur, puis le becquillard. Au dix-septième siècle, se battre, c’était *se donner du tabac;* au dix-neuvième, c’est *se chiquer la gueule*. Vingt locutions différentes ont passé entre ces deux extrêmes. Cartouche parlerait hébreu pour Lacenaire. Tous les mots de cette langue sont perpétuellement en fuite comme les hommes qui les prononcent.

Cependant, de temps en temps, et à cause de ce mouvement même, l’ancien argot reparaît et redevient nouveau. Il a ses chefs-lieux où il se maintient. Le Temple conservait l’argot du dix-septième siècle; Bicêtre, lorsqu’il était prison, conservait l’argot de Thunes. On y entendait la terminaison en *anche* des vieux thuneurs. *Boyanches-tu* (bois-tu?)? *il croyanche* (il croit). Mais le mouvement perpétuel n’en reste pas moins la loi.

Si le philosophe parvient à fixer un moment, pour l’observer, cette langue qui s’évapore sans cesse, il tombe dans de douloureuses et utiles méditations. Aucune étude n’est plus efficace et plus féconde en enseignements. Pas une métaphore, pas une étymologie de l’argot qui ne contienne une leçon. — Parmi ces hommes, *battre* veut dire *feindre;* on *bat* une maladie; la ruse est leur force.

Pour eux l’idée de l’homme ne se sépare pas de l’idée de l’ombre. La nuit se dit la *sorgue*; l’homme, *l’orgue*. L’homme est un dérivé de la nuit.

Ils ont pris l’habitude de considérer la société comme une atmosphère qui les tue, comme une force fatale, et ils parlent de leur liberté comme on parlerait de sa santé. Un homme arrêté est un *malade;* un homme condamné est un *mort*.

Ce qu’il y a de plus terrible pour le prisonnier dans les quatre murs de pierre qui l’ensevelissent, c’est une sorte de chasteté glaciale; il appelle le cachot, le *castus*. — Dans ce lieu funèbre, c’est toujours sous son aspect le plus riant que la vie extérieure apparaît. Le prisonnier a des fers aux pieds; vous croyez peut-être qu’il songe que c’est avec les pieds qu’on marche? non, il songe que c’est avec les pieds qu’on danse; aussi, qu’il parvienne à scier ses fers, sa première idée est que maintenant il peut danser, et il appelle la scie un *bastringue*. — Un *nom* est un *centre;* profonde assimilation. — Le bandit a deux têtes, l’une qui raisonne ses actions et le mène pendant toute sa vie, l’autre qu’il a sur ses épaules, le jour de sa mort; il appelle la tête qui lui conseille le crime, la *sorbonne*, et la tête qui l’expie, la *tronche*. — Quand un homme n’a plus que des guenilles sur le corps et des vices dans le cœur, quand il est arrivé à cette double dégradation matérielle et morale que caractérise dans ses deux acceptions le mot *gueux*, il est à point pour le crime, il est comme un couteau bien affilé; il a deux tranchants, sa détresse et sa méchanceté; aussi l’argot ne dit pas «un gueux»; il dit un *réguisé*. — Qu’est-ce que le bagne? un brasier de damnation, un enfer. Le forçat s’appelle un *fagot*. — Enfin, quel nom les malfaiteurs donnent-ils à la prison? *le collège*. Tout un système pénitentiaire peut sortir de ce mot.

Le voleur a lui aussi sa chair à canon, la matière volable, vous, moi, quiconque passe; le *pantre*. (*Pan*, tout le monde.)

Veut-on savoir où sont écloses la plupart des chansons de bagne, ces refrains appelés dans le vocabulaire spécial les *lirlonfa*? Qu'on écoute ceci:

Il y avait au Châtelet de Paris une grande cave longue. Cette cave était à huit pieds en contre-bas au-dessous du niveau de la Seine. Elle n'avait ni fenêtres ni soupiraux, l'unique ouverture était la porte; les hommes pouvaient y entrer, l'air non. Cette cave avait pour plafond une voûte de pierre et pour plancher dix pouces de boue. Elle avait été dallée; mais sous le suintement des eaux, le dallage s'était pourri et crevassé. À huit pieds au-dessus du sol, une longue poutre massive traversait ce souterrain de part en part; de cette poutre tombaient, de distance en distance, des chaînes de trois pieds de long, et à l'extrémité de ces chaînes il y avait des carcans. On mettait dans cette cave les hommes condamnés aux galères jusqu'au jour du départ pour Toulon. On les poussait sous cette poutre où chacun avait son serrement oscillant dans les ténèbres qui l'attendait. Les chaînes, ces bras pendants, et les carcans, ces mains ouvertes, prenaient ces misérables par le cou. On les rivait et on les laissait là. La chaîne étant trop courte, ils ne pouvaient se coucher. Ils restaient immobiles dans cette cave, dans cette nuit, sous cette poutre, presque pendus, obligés à des efforts inouïs pour atteindre au pain ou à la cruche, la voûte sur la tête, la boue jusqu'à mi-jambe, leurs excréments coulant sur leurs jarrets, écartelés de fatigue, ployant aux hanches et aux genoux, s'accrochant par les mains à la chaîne pour se reposer, ne pouvant dormir que debout, et réveillés à chaque instant par l'étranglement du carcan; quelques-uns ne se réveillaient pas. Pour manger, ils faisaient monter avec leur talon le long de leur tibia jusqu'à leur main leur pain qu'on leur jetait dans la boue. Combien de temps demeuraient-ils ainsi? Un mois, deux mois, six mois quelquefois; un resta une année. C'était l'antichambre des galères. On était mis là pour un lièvre volé au roi. Dans ce sépulcre enfer, que faisaient-ils? Ce qu'on peut faire dans un sépulcre, ils agonisaient, et ce qu'on peut faire dans un enfer, ils chantaient. Car où il n'y a plus l'espérance, le chant reste. Dans les eaux de Malte, quand une galère approchait, on entendait le chant avant d'entendre les rames. Le pauvre braconnier Survincent qui avait traversé la prison-cave du Châtelet disait: *Ce sont les rimes qui m'ont soutenu*. Inutilité de la poésie. À quoi bon la rime? C'est dans cette cave que sont nées presque toutes les chansons d'argot. C'est de ce cachot du Grand-Châtelet de Paris que vient le mélancolique refrain de la galère de Montgomery: *Timaloumisaine, timoulamison*. La plupart de ces chansons sont lugubres; quelques-unes sont gaies; une est tendre:

Icicaille est le théâtre
Du petit dardant.

Vous aurez beau faire, vous n’anéantirez pas cet éternel reste du cœur de l’homme, l’amour.

Dans ce monde des actions sombres, on se garde le secret. Le secret, c’est la chose de tous. Le secret, pour ces misérables, c’est l’unité qui sert de base à l’union. Rompre le secret, c’est arracher à chaque membre de cette communauté farouche quelque chose de lui-même. Dénoncer, dans l’énergique langue d’argot, cela se dit: *manger le morceau*. Comme si le dénonciateur tirait à lui un peu de la substance de tous et se nourrissait d’un morceau de la chair de chacun.

Qu’est-ce que recevoir un soufflet? La métaphore banale répond: *C’est voir trente-six chandelles*. Ici l’argot intervient, et reprend: *Chandelle, camoufle*. Sur ce, le langage usuel donne au soufflet pour synonyme camouflet. Ainsi, par une sorte de pénétration de bas en haut, la métaphore, cette trajectoire incalculable, aidant, l’argot monte de la caverne à l’académie, et Poulailler disant: *J’allume ma camoufle,* fait écrire à Voltaire: *Langleviel La Beaumelle mérite cent camouflets*.

Une fouille dans l’argot, c’est la découverte à chaque pas. L’étude et l’approfondissement de cet étrange idiome mènent au mystérieux point d’intersection de la société régulière avec la société maudite.

L’argot, c’est le verbe devenu forçat.

Que le principe pensant de l’homme puisse être refoulé si bas, qu’il puisse être traîné et garrotté là par les obscures tyrannies de la fatalité, qu’il puisse être lié à on ne sait quelles attaches dans ce précipice, cela consterne.

Ô pauvre pensée des misérables!

Hélas! personne ne viendra-t-il au secours de l’âme humaine dans cette ombre? Sa destinée est-elle d’y attendre à jamais l’esprit, le libérateur, l’immense chevaucheur des pégases et des hippogriffes, le combattant couleur d’aurore qui descend de l’azur entre deux ailes, le radieux chevalier de l’avenir? Appellera-t-elle toujours en vain à son secours la lance de lumière de l’idéal? Est-elle condamnée à entendre venir épouvantablement dans l’épaisseur du gouffre le Mal, et à entrevoir, de plus en plus près d’elle, sous l’eau hideuse, cette tête draconienne, cette gueule mâchant l’écume, et cette ondulation serpentante de griffes, de gonflements et d’anneaux? Faut-il qu’elle reste là, sans une lueur, sans espoir, livrée à cette approche formidable, vaguement flairée du monstre, frissonnante, échevelée, se tordant les bras, à jamais enchaînée au rocher de la nuit, sombre Andromède blanche et nue dans les ténèbres!

Chapitre III

Argot qui pleure et argot qui rit

Comme on le voit, l’argot tout entier, l’argot d’il y a quatre cents ans comme l’argot d’aujourd’hui, est pénétré de ce sombre esprit symbolique qui donne à tous les mots tantôt une allure dolente, tantôt un air menaçant. On y sent la vieille tristesse farouche de ces truands de la Cour des Miracles qui jouaient aux cartes avec des jeux à eux, dont quelques-uns nous ont été conservés. Le huit de trèfle, par exemple, représentait un grand arbre portant huit énormes feuilles de trèfle, sorte de personnification fantastique de la forêt. Au pied de cet arbre on voyait un feu allumé où trois lièvres faisaient rôtir un chasseur à la broche, et derrière, sur un autre feu, une marmite fumante d’où sortait la tête du chien. Rien de plus lugubre que ces représailles en peinture, sur un jeu de cartes, en présence des bûchers à rôtir les contrebandiers et de la chaudière à bouillir les faux monnayeurs. Les diverses formes que prenait la pensée dans le royaume d’argot, même la chanson, même la raillerie, même la menace, avaient toutes ce caractère impuissant et accablé. Tous les chants, dont quelques mélodies ont été recueillies, étaient humbles et lamentables à pleurer. Le pègre s’appelle *le pauvre pègre*, et il est toujours le lièvre qui se cache, la souris qui se sauve, l’oiseau qui s’enfuit. À peine réclame-t-il, il se borne à soupirer; un de ses gémissements est venu jusqu’à nous: — *Je n’entrave que le dail comment meck, le daron des orgues, peut atiger ses mômes et ses momignards et les locher criblant sans être atigé lui-même*. — Le misérable, toutes les fois qu’il a le temps de penser, se fait petit devant la loi et chétif devant la société; il se couche à plat ventre, il supplie, il se tourne du côté de la pitié; on sent qu’il se sait dans son tort.

Vers le milieu du dernier siècle, un changement se fit. Les chants de prisons, les ritournelles de voleurs prirent, pour ainsi parler, un geste insolent et jovial. Le plaintif *maluré* fut remplacé par *larifla*. On retrouve au dix-huitième siècle, dans presque toutes les chansons des galères, des bagnes et des chiourmes, une gaîté diabolique et énigmatique. On y entend ce refrain strident et sautant qu’on dirait éclairé d’une lueur phosphorescente et qui semble jeté dans la forêt par un feu follet jouant du fifre:

Mirlababi, surlababo,
Mirliton ribon ribette,
Surlababi, mirlababo,
Mirliton ribon ribo.

Cela se chantait en égorgeant un homme dans une cave ou au coin d'un bois.

Symptôme sérieux. Au dix-huitième siècle l'antique mélancolie de ces classes mornes se dissipe. Elles se mettent à rire. Elles raillent le grand meg et le grand dab. Louis XV étant donné, elles appellent le roi de France «le marquis de Pantin». Les voilà presque gaies. Une sorte de lumière légère sort de ces misérables comme si la conscience ne leur pesait plus. Ces lamentables tribus de l'ombre n'ont plus seulement l'audace désespérée des actions, elles ont l'audace insouciante de l'esprit. Indice qu'elles perdent le sentiment de leur criminalité, et qu'elles se sentent jusque parmi les penseurs et les songeurs je ne sais quels appuis qui s'ignorent eux-mêmes. Indice que le vol et le pillage commencent à s'infiltrer jusque dans des doctrines et des sophismes, de manière à perdre un peu de leur laideur en en donnant beaucoup aux sophismes et aux doctrines. Indice enfin, si aucune diversion ne surgit, de quelque éclosion prodigieuse et prochaine.

Arrêtons-nous un moment. Qui accusons-nous ici? est-ce le dix-huitième siècle? est-ce sa philosophie? Non certes. L'œuvre du dix-huitième siècle est saine et bonne. Les encyclopédistes, Diderot en tête, les physiocrates, Turgot en tête, les philosophes, Voltaire en tête, les utopistes, Rousseau en tête, ce sont là quatre légions sacrées. L'immense avance de l'humanité vers la lumière leur est due. Ce sont les quatre avant-gardes du genre humain allant aux quatre points cardinaux du progrès, Diderot vers le beau, Turgot vers l'utile, Voltaire vers le vrai, Rousseau vers le juste. Mais, à côté et au-dessous des philosophes, il y avait les sophistes, végétation vénéneuse mêlée à la croissance salubre, ciguë dans la forêt vierge. Pendant que le bourreau brûlait sur le maître-escalier du palais de justice les grands livres libérateurs du siècle, des écrivains aujourd'hui oubliés publiaient, avec privilège du roi, on ne sait quels écrits étrangement désorganisateurs, avidement lus des misérables. Quelques-unes de ces publications, détail bizarre, patronnées par un prince, se retrouvent dans la *Bibliothèque secrète*. Ces faits, profonds mais ignorés, étaient inaperçus à la surface. Parfois c'est l'obscurité même d'un fait qui est son danger. Il est obscur parce qu’il est souterrain. De tous ces écrivains, celui peut-être qui creusa alors dans les masses la galerie la plus malsaine, c’est Restif de la Bretonne.

Ce travail, propre à toute l’Europe, fit plus de ravage en Allemagne que partout ailleurs. En Allemagne, pendant une certaine période, résumée par Schiller dans son drame fameux des *Brigands*, le vol et le pillage s’érigeaient en protestation contre la propriété et le travail, s’assimilaient de certaines idées élémentaires, spécieuses et fausses, justes en apparence, absurdes en réalité, s’enveloppaient de ces idées, y disparaissaient en quelque sorte, prenaient un nom abstrait et passaient à l’état de théorie, et de cette façon circulaient dans les foules laborieuses, souffrantes et honnêtes, à l’insu même des chimistes imprudents qui avaient préparé la mixture, à l’insu même des masses qui l’acceptaient. Toutes les fois qu’un fait de ce genre se produit, il est grave. La souffrance engendre la colère; et tandis que les classes prospères s’aveuglent, ou s’endorment, ce qui est toujours fermer les yeux, la haine des classes malheureuses allume sa torche à quelque esprit chagrin ou mal fait qui rêve dans un coin, et elle se met à examiner la société. L’examen de la haine, chose terrible!

De là, si le malheur des temps le veut, ces effrayantes commotions qu’on nommait jadis *jacqueries*, près desquelles les agitations purement politiques sont jeux d’enfants, qui ne sont plus la lutte de l’opprimé contre l’oppresseur, mais la révolte du malaise contre le bien-être. Tout s’écroule alors.

Les jacqueries sont des tremblements de peuple.

C’est à ce péril, imminent peut-être en Europe vers la fin du dix-huitième siècle, que vint couper court la Révolution française, cet immense acte de probité.

La Révolution française, qui n’est pas autre chose que l’idéal armé du glaive, se dressa, et, du même mouvement brusque, ferma la porte du mal et ouvrit la porte du bien.

Elle dégagea la question, promulgua la vérité, chassa le miasme, assainit le siècle, couronna le peuple.

On peut dire qu’elle a créé l’homme une deuxième fois, en lui donnant une seconde âme, le droit.

Le dix-neuvième siècle hérite et profite de son œuvre, et aujourd’hui la catastrophe sociale que nous indiquions tout à l’heure est simplement impossible. Aveugle qui la dénonce! niais qui la redoute! la révolution est la vaccine de la jacquerie.

Grâce à la révolution, les conditions sociales sont changées. Les maladies féodales et monarchiques ne sont plus dans notre sang. Il n’y a plus de moyen âge dans notre constitution. Nous ne sommes plus aux temps où d’effroyables fourmillements intérieurs faisaient irruption, où l’on entendait sous ses pieds la course obscure d’un bruit sourd, où apparaissaient à la surface de la civilisation on ne sait quels soulèvements de galeries de taupes, où le sol se crevassait, où le dessus des cavernes s’ouvrait, et où l’on voyait tout à coup sortir de terre des têtes monstrueuses.

Le sens révolutionnaire est un sens moral. Le sentiment du droit, développé, développe le sentiment du devoir. La loi de tous, c’est la liberté, qui finit où commence la liberté d’autrui, selon l’admirable définition de Robespierre. Depuis 89, le peuple tout entier se dilate dans l’individu sublimé; il n’y a pas de pauvre qui, ayant son droit, n’ait son rayon; le meurt-de-faim sent en lui l’honnêteté de la France; la dignité du citoyen est une armure intérieure; qui est libre est scrupuleux; qui vote règne. De là l’incorruptibilité; de là l’avortement des convoitises malsaines; de là les yeux héroïquement baissés devant les tentations. L’assainissement révolutionnaire est tel qu’un jour de délivrance, un 14 juillet, un 10 août, il n’y a plus de populace. Le premier cri des foules illuminées et grandissantes c’est: mort aux voleurs! Le progrès est honnête homme; l’idéal et l’absolu ne font pas le mouchoir. Par qui furent escortés en 1848 les fourgons qui contenaient les richesses des Tuileries? par les chiffonniers du faubourg Saint-Antoine. Le haillon monta la garde devant le trésor. La vertu fit ces déguenillés resplendissants. Il y avait là, dans ces fourgons, dans des caisses à peine fermées quelques-unes même entr’ouvertes, parmi cent écrins éblouissants, cette vieille couronne de France toute en diamants, surmontée de l’escarboucle de la royauté, du régent, qui valait trente millions. Ils gardaient, pieds nus, cette couronne.

Donc plus de jacquerie. J’en suis fâché pour les habiles. C’est là de la vieille peur qui a fait son dernier effet et qui ne pourrait plus désormais être employée en politique. Le grand ressort du spectre rouge est cassé. Tout le monde le sait maintenant. L’épouvantail n’épouvante plus. Les oiseaux prennent des familiarités avec le mannequin, les stercoraires s’y posent, les bourgeois rient dessus.

Chapitre IV

Les deux devoirs: veiller et espérer

Cela étant, tout danger social est-il dissipé? non certes. Point de jacquerie. La société peut se rassurer de ce côté, le sang ne lui portera plus à la tête; mais qu'elle se préoccupe de la façon dont elle respire. L'apoplexie n'est plus à craindre, mais la phtisie est là. La phtisie sociale s'appelle misère.

On meurt miné aussi bien que foudroyé.

Ne nous lassons pas de le répéter, songer, avant tout aux foules déshéritées et douloureuses, les soulager, les aérer, les éclairer, les aimer, leur élargir magnifiquement l'horizon, leur prodiguer sous toutes les formes l'éducation, leur offrir l'exemple du labeur, jamais l'exemple de l'oisiveté, amoindrir le poids du fardeau individuel en accroissant la notion du but universel, limiter la pauvreté sans limiter la richesse, créer de vastes champs d'activité publique et populaire, avoir comme Briarée cent mains à tendre de toutes parts aux accablés et aux faibles, employer la puissance collective à ce grand devoir d'ouvrir des ateliers à tous les bras, des écoles à toutes les aptitudes et des laboratoires à toutes les intelligences, augmenter le salaire, diminuer la peine, balancer le doit et l'avoir, c'est-à-dire proportionner la jouissance à l'effort et l'assouvissement au besoin, en un mot, faire dégager à l'appareil social, au profit de ceux qui souffrent et de ceux qui ignorent, plus de clarté et plus de bien-être, c'est là, que les âmes sympathiques ne l'oublient pas, la première des obligations fraternelles, c'est, que les cœurs égoïstes le sachent, la première des nécessités politiques.

Et, disons-le, tout cela, ce n'est encore qu'un commencement. La vraie question, c'est celle-ci: le travail ne peut être une loi sans être un droit.

Nous n'insistons pas, ce n'est point ici le lieu.

Si la nature s'appelle providence, la société doit s'appeler prévoyance.

La croissance intellectuelle et morale n'est pas moins indispensable que l'amélioration matérielle. Savoir est un viatique; penser est de première nécessité; la vérité est nourriture comme le froment. Une raison, à jeun de science et de sagesse, maigrit. Plaignons, à l'égal des estomacs, les esprits qui ne mangent pas. S'il y a quelque chose de plus poignant qu'un corps agonisant faute de pain, c'est une âme qui meurt de la faim de la lumière.

Le progrès tout entier tend du côté de la solution. Un jour on sera stupéfait. Le genre humain montant, les couches profondes sortiront tout naturellement de la zone de détresse. L'effacement de la misère se fera par une simple élévation de niveau.

Cette solution bénie, on aurait tort d'en douter.

Le passé, il est vrai, est très fort à l'heure où nous sommes. Il reprend. Ce rajeunissement d'un cadavre est surprenant. Le voici qui marche et qui vient. Il semble vainqueur; ce mort est un conquérant. Il arrive avec sa légion, les superstitions, avec son épée, le despotisme, avec son drapeau, l'ignorance; depuis quelque temps il a gagné dix batailles. Il avance, il menace, il rit, il est à nos portes. Quant à nous, ne désespérons pas. Vendons le champ où campe Annibal.

Nous qui croyons, que pouvons-nous craindre?

Il n'y a pas plus de reculs d'idées que de reculs de fleuves.

Mais que ceux qui ne veulent pas de l'avenir y réfléchissent. En disant non au progrès, ce n'est point l'avenir qu'ils condamnent, c'est eux-mêmes. Ils se donnent une maladie sombre; ils s'inoculent le passé. Il n'y a qu'une manière de refuser Demain, c'est de mourir.

Or, aucune mort, celle du corps le plus tard possible, celle de l'âme jamais, c'est là ce que nous voulons.

Oui, l'énigme dira son mot, le sphinx parlera, le problème sera résolu. Oui, le Peuple, ébauché par le dix-huitième siècle, sera achevé par le dix-neuvième. Idiot qui en douterait! L'éclosion future, l'éclosion prochaine du bien-être universel, est un phénomène divinement fatal.

D'immenses poussées d'ensemble régissent les faits humains et les amènent tous dans un temps donné à l'état logique, c'est-à-dire à l'équilibre, c'est-à-dire à l'équité. Une force composée de terre et de ciel résulte de l'humanité et la gouverne; cette force-là est une faiseuse de miracles; les dénoûments merveilleux ne lui sont pas plus difficiles que les péripéties extraordinaires. Aidée de la science qui vient de l'homme et de l'événement qui vient d'un autre, elle s'épouvante peu de ces contradictions dans la pose des problèmes, qui semblent au vulgaire impossibilités. Elle n'est pas moins habile à faire jaillir une solution du rapprochement des idées qu'un enseignement du rapprochement des faits, et l'on peut s'attendre à tout de la part de cette mystérieuse puissance du progrès qui, un beau jour, confronte l'orient et l'occident au fond d'un sépulcre et fait dialoguer les imans avec Bonaparte dans l'intérieur de la grande pyramide.

En attendant, pas de halte, pas d’hésitation, pas de temps d’arrêt dans la grandiose marche en avant des esprits. La philosophie sociale est essentiellement la science de la paix. Elle a pour but et doit avoir pour résultat de dissoudre les colères par l’étude des antagonismes. Elle examine, elle scrute, elle analyse; puis elle recompose. Elle procède par voie de réduction, retranchant de tout la haine.

Qu’une société s’abîme au vent qui se déchaîne sur les hommes, cela s’est vu plus d’une fois; l’histoire est pleine de naufrages de peuples et d’empires; mœurs, lois, religions, un beau jour cet inconnu, l’ouragan, passe et emporte tout cela. Les civilisations de l’Inde, de la Chaldée, de la Perse, de l’Assyrie, de l’Égypte, ont disparu l’une après l’autre. Pourquoi? nous l’ignorons. Quelles sont les causes de ces désastres? nous ne le savons pas. Ces sociétés auraient-elles pu être sauvées? y a-t-il de leur faute? se sont-elles obstinées dans quelque vice fatal qui les a perdues? quelle quantité de suicide y a-t-il dans ces morts terribles d’une nation et d’une race? Questions sans réponse. L’ombre couvre ces civilisations condamnées. Elles faisaient eau puisqu’elles s’engloutissent; nous n’avons rien de plus à dire; et c’est avec une sorte d’effarement que nous regardons, au fond de cette mer qu’on appelle le passé, derrière ces vagues colossales, les siècles, sombrer ces immenses navires, Babylone, Ninive, Tarse, Thèbes, Rome, sous le souffle effrayant qui sort de toutes les bouches des ténèbres. Mais ténèbres là, clarté ici. Nous ignorons les maladies des civilisations antiques, nous connaissons les infirmités de la nôtre. Nous avons partout sur elle le droit de lumière; nous contemplons ses beautés et nous mettons à nu ses difformités. Là où est le mal, nous sondons; et, une fois la souffrance constatée, l’étude de la cause mène à la découverte du remède. Notre civilisation, œuvre de vingt siècles, en est à la fois le monstre et le prodige; elle vaut la peine d’être sauvée. Elle le sera. La soulager, c’est déjà beaucoup; l’éclairer, c’est encore quelque chose. Tous les travaux de la philosophie sociale moderne doivent converger vers ce but. Le penseur aujourd’hui a un grand devoir, ausculter la civilisation.

Nous le répétons, cette auscultation encourage; et c’est par cette insistance dans l’encouragement que nous voulons finir ces quelques pages, entr’acte austère d’un drame douloureux. Sous la mortalité sociale on sent l’impérissabilité humaine. Pour avoir çà et là ces plaies, les cratères, et ces dartres, les solfatares, pour un volcan qui aboutit et qui jette son pus, le globe ne meurt pas. Des maladies de peuple ne tuent pas l’homme.

Et néanmoins, quiconque suit la clinique sociale hoche la tête par instants. Les plus forts, les plus tendres, les plus logiques ont leurs heures de défaillance.

L’avenir arrivera-t-il? il semble qu’on peut presque se faire cette question quand on voit tant d’ombre terrible. Sombre face-à-face des égoïstes et des misérables. Chez les égoïstes, les préjugés, les ténèbres de l’éducation riche, l’appétit croissant par l’enivrement, un étourdissement de prospérité qui assourdit, la crainte de souffrir qui, dans quelques-uns, va jusqu’à l’aversion des souffrants, une satisfaction implacable, le moi si enflé qu’il ferme l’âme; chez les misérables, la convoitise, l’envie, la haine de voir les autres jouir, les profondes secousses de la bête humaine vers les assouvissements, les cœurs pleins de brume, la tristesse, le besoin, la fatalité, l’ignorance impure et simple.

Faut-il continuer de lever les yeux vers le ciel? le point lumineux qu’on y distingue est-il de ceux qui s’éteignent? L’idéal est effrayant à voir, ainsi perdu dans les profondeurs, petit, isolé, imperceptible, brillant, mais entouré de toutes ces grandes menaces noires monstrueusement amoncelées autour de lui; pourtant pas plus en danger qu’une étoile dans les gueules des nuages.

Livre huitième — Les enchantements et les désolations

Chapitre I

Pleine lumière

Le lecteur a compris qu’Éponine, ayant reconnu à travers la grille l’habitante de cette rue Plumet où Magnon l’avait envoyée, avait commencé par écarter les bandits de la rue Plumet, puis y avait conduit Marius, et qu’après plusieurs jours d’extase devant cette grille, Marius, entraîné par cette force qui pousse le fer vers l’aimant et l’amoureux vers les pierres dont est faite la maison de celle qu’il aime, avait fini par entrer dans le jardin de Cosette comme Roméo dans le jardin de Juliette. Cela même lui avait été plus facile qu’à Roméo; Roméo était obligé d’escalader un mur, Marius n’eut qu’à forcer un peu un des barreaux de la grille décrépite qui vacillait dans son alvéole rouillé, à la manière des dents des vieilles gens. Marius était mince et passa aisément.

Comme il n’y avait jamais personne dans la rue et que d’ailleurs Marius ne pénétrait dans le jardin que la nuit, il ne risquait pas d’être vu.

À partir de cette heure bénie et sainte où un baiser fiança ces deux âmes, Marius vint là tous les soirs. Si, à ce moment de sa vie, Cosette était tombée dans l’amour d’un homme peu scrupuleux et libertin, elle était perdue; car il y a des natures généreuses qui se livrent, et Cosette en était une. Une des magnanimités de la femme, c’est de céder. L’amour, à cette hauteur où il est absolu, se complique d’on ne sait quel céleste aveuglement de la pudeur. Mais que de dangers vous courez, ô nobles âmes! Souvent, vous donnez le cœur, nous prenons le corps. Votre cœur vous reste, et vous le regardez dans l’ombre en frémissant. L’amour n’a point de moyen terme; ou il perd, ou il sauve. Toute la destinée humaine est ce dilemme-là. Ce dilemme, perte ou salut, aucune fatalité ne le pose plus inexorablement que l’amour. L’amour est la vie, s’il n’est pas la mort. Berceau; cercueil aussi. Le même sentiment dit oui et non dans le cœur humain. De toutes les choses que Dieu a faites, le cœur humain est celle qui dégage le plus de lumière, hélas! et le plus de nuit.

Dieu voulut que l’amour que Cosette rencontra fût un de ces amours qui sauvent.

Tant que dura le mois de mai de cette année 1832, il y eut là, toutes les nuits, dans ce pauvre jardin sauvage, sous cette broussaille chaque jour plus odorante et plus épaissie, deux êtres composés de toutes les chastetés et de toutes les innocences, débordant de toutes les félicités du ciel, plus voisins des archanges que des hommes, purs, honnêtes, enivrés, rayonnants, qui resplendissaient l'un pour l'autre dans les ténèbres. Il semblait à Cosette que Marius avait une couronne et à Marius que Cosette avait un nimbe. Ils se touchaient, ils se regardaient, ils se prenaient les mains, ils se serraient l'un contre l'autre; mais il y avait une distance qu'ils ne franchissaient pas. Non qu'ils la respectassent; ils l'ignoraient. Marius sentait une barrière, la pureté de Cosette, et Cosette sentait un appui, la loyauté de Marius. Le premier baiser avait été aussi le dernier. Marius, depuis, n'était pas allé au-delà d'effleurer de ses lèvres la main, ou le fichu, ou une boucle de cheveux de Cosette. Cosette était pour lui un parfum et non une femme. Il la respirait. Elle ne refusait rien et il ne demandait rien. Cosette était heureuse, et Marius était satisfait. Ils vivaient dans ce ravissant état qu'on pourrait appeler l'éblouissement d'une âme par une âme. C'était cet ineffable premier embrassement de deux virginités dans l'idéal. Deux cygnes se rencontrant sur la Jungfrau.

À cette heure-là de l'amour, heure où la volupté se tait absolument sous la toute-puissance de l'extase, Marius, le pur et séraphique Marius, eût été plutôt capable de monter chez une fille publique que de soulever la robe de Cosette à la hauteur de la cheville. Une fois, à un clair de lune, Cosette se pencha pour ramasser quelque chose à terre, son corsage s'entr'ouvrit et laissa voir la naissance de sa gorge, Marius détourna les yeux.

Que se passait-il entre ces deux êtres? Rien. Ils s'adoraient.

La nuit, quand ils étaient là, ce jardin semblait un lieu vivant et sacré. Toutes les fleurs s'ouvraient autour d'eux et leur envoyaient de l'encens; eux, ils ouvraient leurs âmes et les répandaient dans les fleurs. La végétation lascive et vigoureuse tressaillait pleine de sève et d'ivresse autour de ces deux innocents, et ils disaient des paroles d'amour dont les arbres frissonnaient.

Qu'étaient-ce que ces paroles? Des souffles. Rien de plus. Ces souffles suffisaient pour troubler et pour émouvoir toute cette nature. Puissance magique qu'on aurait peine à comprendre si on lisait dans un livre ces causeries faites pour être emportées et dissipées comme des fumées par le vent sous les feuilles. Ôtez à ces murmures de deux amants cette mélodie qui sort de l'âme et qui les accompagne comme une lyre, ce qui reste n'est plus qu'une ombre; vous dites: Quoi! ce n'est que cela! Eh oui, des enfantillages, des redites, des rires pour rien, des inutilités, des niaiseries, tout ce qu'il y a au monde de plus sublime et de plus profond! les seules choses qui vaillent la peine d'être dites et d'être écoutées!

Ces niaiseries-là, ces pauvretés-là, l'homme qui ne les a jamais entendues, l'homme qui ne les a jamais prononcées, est un imbécile et un méchant homme.

Cosette disait à Marius:

— Sais-tu?...

(Dans tout cela, et à travers cette céleste virginité, et sans qu'il fût possible à l'un et à l'autre de dire comment, le tutoiement était venu.)

— Sais-tu? Je m'appelle Euphrasie.

— Euphrasie? Mais non, tu t'appelles Cosette.

— Oh! Cosette est un assez vilain nom qu'on m'a donné comme cela quand j'étais petite. Mais mon vrai nom est Euphrasie. Est-ce que tu n'aimes pas ce nom-là, Euphrasie?

— Si... — Mais Cosette n'est pas vilain.

— Est-ce que tu l'aimes mieux qu'Euphrasie?

— Mais... — oui.

— Alors je l'aime mieux aussi. C'est vrai, c'est joli, Cosette. Appelle-moi Cosette.

Et le sourire qu'elle ajoutait faisait de ce dialogue une idylle digne d'un bois qui serait dans le ciel.

Une autre fois elle le regardait fixement et s'écriait:

— Monsieur, vous êtes beau, vous êtes joli, vous avez de l'esprit, vous n'êtes pas bête du tout, vous êtes bien plus savant que moi, mais je vous défie à ce mot-là: je t'aime!

Et Marius, en plein azur, croyait entendre une strophe chantée par une étoile.

Ou bien, elle lui donnait une petite tape parce qu'il toussait, et elle lui disait:

— Ne toussez pas, monsieur. Je ne veux pas qu'on tousse chez moi sans ma permission. C'est très laid de tousser et de m'inquiéter. Je veux que tu te portes bien, parce que d'abord, moi, si tu ne te portais pas bien, je serais très malheureuse. Qu'est-ce que tu veux que je fasse?

Et cela était tout simplement divin.

Une fois Marius dit à Cosette:

— Figure-toi, j'ai cru un temps que tu t'appelais Ursule.

Ceci les fit rire toute la soirée.

Au milieu d’une autre causerie, il lui arriva de s’écrier:

— Oh! un jour, au Luxembourg, j’ai eu envie d’achever de casser un invalide!

Mais il s’arrêta court et n’alla pas plus loin. Il aurait fallu parler à Cosette de sa jarretière, et cela lui était impossible. Il y avait là un côtoiement inconnu, la chair, devant lequel reculait, avec une sorte d’effroi sacré, cet immense amour innocent.

Marius se figurait la vie avec Cosette comme cela, sans autre chose; venir tous les soirs rue Plumet, déranger le vieux barreau complaisant de la grille du président, s’asseoir coude à coude sur ce banc, regarder à travers les arbres la scintillation de la nuit commençante, faire cohabiter le pli du genou de son pantalon avec l’ampleur de la robe de Cosette, lui caresser l’ongle du pouce, lui dire tu, respirer l’un après l’autre la même fleur, à jamais, indéfiniment. Pendant ce temps-là les nuages passaient au-dessus de leur tête. Chaque fois que le vent souffle, il emporte plus de rêves de l’homme que de nuées du ciel.

Que ce chaste amour presque farouche fût absolument sans galanterie, non.»Faire des compliments» à celle qu’on aime est la première façon de faire des caresses, demi-audace qui s’essaye. Le compliment, c’est quelque chose comme le baiser à travers le voile. La volupté y met sa douce pointe, tout en se cachant. Devant la volupté le cœur recule, pour mieux aimer. Les cajoleries de Marius, toutes saturées de chimère, étaient, pour ainsi dire, azurées. Les oiseaux, quand ils volent là-haut du côté des anges, doivent entendre de ces paroles-là. Il s’y mêlait pourtant la vie, l’humanité, toute la quantité de positif dont Marius était capable. C’était ce qui se dit dans la grotte, prélude de ce qui se dira dans l’alcôve; une effusion lyrique, la strophe et le sonnet mêlés, les gentilles hyperboles du roucoulement, tous les raffinements de l’adoration arrangés en bouquet et exhalant un subtil parfum céleste, un ineffable gazouillement de cœur à cœur.

— Oh! murmurait Marius, que tu es belle! Je n’ose pas te regarder. C’est ce qui fait que je te contemple. Tu es une grâce. Je ne sais pas ce que j’ai. Le bas de ta robe, quand le bout de ton soulier passe, me bouleverse. Et puis quelle lueur enchantée quand ta pensée s’entr’ouvre! Tu parles raison étonnamment. Il me semble par moments que tu es un songe. Parle, je t’écoute, je t’admire. Ô Cosette! comme c’est étrange et charmant! je suis vraiment fou. Vous êtes adorable, mademoiselle. J’étudie tes pieds au microscope et ton âme au télescope.

Et Cosette répondait:

— Je t’aime un peu plus de tout le temps qui s’est écoulé depuis ce matin.

Demandes et réponses allaient comme elles pouvaient dans ce dialogue, tombant toujours d’accord, sur l’amour, comme les figurines de sureau sur le clou.

Toute la personne de Cosette était naïveté, ingénuité, transparence, blancheur, candeur, rayon. On eût pu dire de Cosette qu’elle était claire. Elle faisait à qui la voyait une sensation d’avril et de point du jour. Il y avait de la rosée dans ses yeux. Cosette était une condensation de lumière aurorale en forme de femme.

Il était tout simple que Marius, l’adorant, l’admirât. Mais la vérité est que cette petite pensionnaire, fraîche émoulue du couvent, causait avec une pénétration exquise et disait par moments toutes sortes de paroles vraies et délicates. Son babil était de la conversation. Elle ne se trompait sur rien, et voyait juste. La femme sent et parle avec le tendre instinct du cœur, cette infaillibilité. Personne ne sait comme une femme dire des choses à la fois douces et profondes. La douceur et la profondeur, c’est là toute la femme; c’est là tout le ciel.

En cette pleine félicité, il leur venait à chaque instant des larmes aux yeux. Une bête à bon Dieu écrasée, une plume tombée d’un nid, une branche d’aubépine cassée, les apitoyait, et leur extase, doucement noyée de mélancolie, semblait ne demander pas mieux que de pleurer. Le plus souverain symptôme de l’amour, c’est un attendrissement parfois presque insupportable.

Et, à côté de cela, — toutes ces contradictions sont le jeu d’éclairs de l’amour, — ils riaient volontiers, et avec une liberté ravissante, et si familièrement qu’ils avaient parfois presque l’air de deux garçons. Cependant, l’insu même des cœurs ivres de chasteté, la nature inoubliable est toujours là. Elle est là, avec son but brutal et sublime, et, quelle que soit l’innocence des âmes, on sent, dans le tête-à-tête le plus pudique, l’adorable et mystérieuse nuance qui sépare un couple d’amants d’une paire d’amis.

Ils s’idolâtraient.

Le permanent et l’immuable subsistent. On s’aime, on se sourit, on se rit, on se fait des petites moues avec le bout des lèvres, on s’entrelace les doigts des mains, on se tutoie, et cela n’empêche pas l’éternité. Deux amants se cachent dans le soir, dans le crépuscule, dans l’invisible, avec les oiseaux, avec les roses, ils se fascinent l’un l’autre dans l’ombre avec leurs cœurs qu’ils mettent dans leurs yeux, ils murmurent, ils chuchotent, et pendant ce temps-là d’immenses balancements d’astres emplissent l’infini.

Chapitre II

L’étourdissement du bonheur complet

Ils existaient vaguement, effarés de bonheur. Ils ne s’apercevaient pas du choléra qui décimait Paris précisément en ce mois-là. Ils s’étaient fait le plus de confidences qu’ils avaient pu, mais cela n’avait pas été bien loin au-delà de leurs noms. Marius avait dit à Cosette qu’il était orphelin, qu’il s’appelait Marius Pontmercy, qu’il était avocat, qu’il vivait d’écrire des choses pour les libraires, que son père était colonel, que c’était un héros, et que lui Marius était brouillé avec son grand-père qui était riche. Il lui avait aussi un peu dit qu’il était baron; mais cela n’avait fait aucun effet à Cosette. Marius baron? elle n’avait pas compris. Elle ne savait pas ce que ce mot voulait dire. Marius était Marius. De son côté elle lui avait confié qu’elle avait été élevée au couvent du Petit-Picpus, que sa mère était morte comme à lui, que son père s’appelait M. Fauchelevent, qu’il était très bon, qu’il donnait beaucoup aux pauvres, mais qu’il était pauvre lui-même, et qu’il se privait de tout en ne la privant de rien.

Chose bizarre, dans l’espèce de symphonie où Marius vivait depuis qu’il voyait Cosette, le passé, même le plus récent, était devenu tellement confus et lointain pour lui que ce que Cosette lui conta le satisfit pleinement. Il ne songea même pas à lui parler de l’aventure nocturne de la masure, des Thénardier, de la brûlure, et de l’étrange attitude et de la singulière fuite de son père. Marius avait momentanément oublié tout cela; il ne savait même pas le soir ce qu’il avait fait le matin, ni où il avait déjeuné, ni qui lui avait parlé; il avait des chants dans l’oreille qui le rendaient sourd à toute autre pensée, il n’existait qu’aux heures où il voyait Cosette. Alors, comme il était dans le ciel, il était tout simple qu’il oubliât la terre. Tous deux portaient avec langueur le poids indéfinissables des voluptés immatérielles. Ainsi vivent ces somnambules qu’on appelle les amoureux.

Hélas! qui n’a éprouvé toutes ces choses? pourquoi vient-il une heure où l’on sort de cet azur, et pourquoi la vie continue-t-elle après?

Aimer remplace presque penser. L’amour est un ardent oubli du reste. Demandez donc de la logique à la passion. Il n’y a pas plus d’enchaînement logique absolu dans le cœur humain qu’il n’y a de figure géométrique parfaite dans la mécanique céleste. Pour Cosette et Marius rien n’existait plus que Marius et Cosette. L’univers autour d’eux était tombé dans un trou. Ils vivaient dans une minute d’or. Il n’y avait rien devant, rien derrière. C’est à peine si Marius songeait que Cosette avait un père. Il y avait dans son cerveau l’effacement de l’éblouissement. De quoi donc parlaient-ils, ces amants? On l’a vu, des fleurs, des hirondelles, du soleil couchant, du lever de la lune, de toutes les choses importantes. Ils s’étaient dit tout, excepté tout. Le tout des amoureux, c’est le rien. Mais le père, les réalités, ce bouge, ces bandits, cette aventure, à quoi bon? et était-il bien sûr que ce cauchemar eût existé? On était deux, on s’adorait, il n’y avait que cela. Toute autre chose n’était pas. Il est probable que cet évanouissement de l’enfer derrière nous est inhérent à l’arrivée au paradis. Est-ce qu’on a vu des démons? est-ce qu’il y en a? est-ce qu’on a tremblé? est-ce qu’on a souffert? On n’en sait plus rien. Une nuée rose est là-dessus.

Donc ces deux êtres vivaient ainsi, très haut, avec toute l’invraisemblance qui est dans la nature; ni au nadir, ni au zénith, entre l’homme et le séraphin, au-dessus de la fange, au-dessous de l’éther, dans le nuage; à peine os et chair, âme et extase de la tête aux pieds; déjà trop sublimés pour marcher à terre, encore trop chargés d’humanité pour disparaître dans le bleu, en suspension comme des atomes qui attendent le précipité; en apparence hors du destin; ignorant cette ornière, hier, aujourd’hui, demain; émerveillés, pâmés, flottants, par moments, assez allégés pour la fuite dans l’infini; presque prêts à l’envolement éternel.

Ils dormaient éveillés dans ce bercement. Ô léthargie splendide du réel accablé d’idéal!

Quelquefois, si belle que fût Cosette, Marius fermait les yeux devant elle. Les yeux fermés, c’est la meilleure manière de regarder l’âme.

Marius et Cosette ne se demandaient pas où cela les conduirait. Ils se regardaient comme arrivés. C’est une étrange prétention des hommes de vouloir que l’amour conduise quelque part.

Chapitre III

Commencement d’ombre

Jean Valjean, lui, ne se doutait de rien.

Cosette, un peu moins rêveuse que Marius, était gaie, et cela suffisait à Jean Valjean pour être heureux. Les pensées que Cosette avait, ses préoccupations tendres, l’image de Marius qui lui remplissait l’âme, n’ôtaient rien à la pureté incomparable de son beau front chaste et souriant. Elle était dans l’âge où la vierge porte son amour comme l’ange porte son lys. Jean Valjean était donc tranquille. Et puis, quand deux amants s’entendent, cela va toujours très bien, le tiers quelconque qui pourrait troubler leur amour est maintenu dans un parfait aveuglement par un petit nombre de précautions toujours les mêmes pour tous les amoureux. Ainsi jamais d’objections de Cosette à Jean Valjean. Voulait-il promener? Oui, mon petit père. Voulait-il rester? Très bien. Voulait-il passer la soirée près de Cosette? Elle était ravie. Comme il se retirait toujours à dix heures du soir, ces fois-là Marius ne venait au jardin que passé cette heure, lorsqu’il entendait de la rue Cosette ouvrir la porte-fenêtre du perron. Il va sans dire que le jour on ne rencontrait jamais Marius. Jean Valjean ne songeait même plus que Marius existât. Une fois seulement, un matin, il lui arriva de dire à Cosette: — Tiens, comme tu as du blanc derrière le dos! La veille au soir, Marius, dans un transport, avait pressé Cosette contre le mur.

La vieille Toussaint, qui se couchait de bonne heure, ne songeait qu’à dormir une fois sa besogne faite, et ignorait tout comme Jean Valjean.

Jamais Marius ne mettait le pied dans la maison. Quand il était avec Cosette, ils se cachaient dans un enfoncement près du perron afin de ne pouvoir être vus ni entendus de la rue, et s’asseyaient là, se contentant souvent, pour toute conversation, de se presser les mains vingt fois par minute en regardant les branches des arbres. Dans ces instants-là, le tonnerre fût tombé à trente pas d’eux qu’ils ne s’en fussent pas doutés, tant la rêverie de l’un s’absorbait et plongeait profondément dans la rêverie de l’autre.

Puretés limpides. Heures toutes blanches; presque toutes pareilles. Ce genre d’amours-là est une collection de feuilles de lys et de plumes de colombe.

Tout le jardin était entre eux et la rue. Chaque fois que Marius entrait ou sortait, il rajustait soigneusement le barreau de la grille de manière qu’aucun dérangement ne fût visible.

Il s’en allait habituellement vers minuit, et s’en retournait chez Courfeyrac. Courfeyrac disait à Bahorel:

— Croirais-tu? Marius rentre à présent à des une heure du matin!

Bahorel répondait:

— Que veux-tu? il y a toujours un pétard dans un séminariste.

Par moments Courfeyrac croisait les bras, prenait un air sérieux, et disait à Marius:

— Vous vous dérangez, jeune homme!

Courfeyrac, homme pratique, ne prenait pas en bonne part ce reflet d’un paradis invisible sur Marius; il avait peu l’habitude des passions inédites, il s’en impatientait, et il faisait par instants à Marius des sommations de rentrer dans le réel.

Un matin, il lui jeta cette admonition:

— Mon cher, tu me fais l’effet pour le moment d’être situé dans la lune, royaume du rêve, province de l’illusion, capitale Bulle de Savon. Voyons, sois bon enfant, comment s’appelle-t-elle?

Mais rien ne pouvait «faire parler» Marius. On lui eût arraché les ongles plutôt qu’une des trois syllabes sacrées dont se composait ce nom ineffable, *Cosette*. L’amour vrai est lumineux comme l’aurore et silencieux comme la tombe. Seulement il y avait, pour Courfeyrac, ceci de changé en Marius, qu’il avait une taciturnité rayonnante.

Pendant ce doux mois de mai Marius et Cosette connurent ces immenses bonheurs:

Se quereller et se dire vous, uniquement pour mieux se dire tu ensuite;

Se parler longuement, et dans les plus minutieux détails, de gens qui ne les intéressaient pas le moins du monde; preuve de plus que, dans ce ravissant opéra qu’on appelle l’amour, le libretto n’est presque rien;

Pour Marius, écouter Cosette parler chiffons;

Pour Cosette, écouter Marius parler politique;

Entendre, genou contre genou, rouler les voitures rue de Babylone;

Considérer la même planète dans l’espace ou le même ver luisant dans l’herbe;

Se taire ensemble; douceur plus grande encore que causer;

Etc., etc.

Cependant diverses complications approchaient.

Un soir, Marius s'acheminait au rendez-vous par le boulevard des Invalides; il marchait habituellement le front baissé; comme il allait tourner l'angle de la rue Plumet, il entendit qu'on disait tout près de lui:

— Bonsoir, monsieur Marius.

Il leva la tête, et reconnut Éponine.

Cela lui fit un effet singulier. Il n'avait pas songé une seule fois à cette fille depuis le jour où elle l'avait amené rue Plumet, il ne l'avait point revue, et elle lui était complètement sortie de l'esprit. Il n'avait que des motifs de reconnaissance pour elle, il lui devait son bonheur présent, et pourtant il lui était gênant de la rencontrer.

C'est une erreur de croire que la passion, quand elle est heureuse et pure, conduit l'homme à un état de perfection; elle le conduit simplement, nous l'avons constaté, à un état d'oubli. Dans cette situation, l'homme oublie d'être mauvais, mais il oublie aussi d'être bon. La reconnaissance, le devoir, les souvenirs essentiels et importuns, s'évanouissent. En tout autre temps Marius eût été bien autre pour Éponine. Absorbé par Cosette, il ne s'était même pas clairement rendu compte que cette Éponine s'appelait Éponine Thénardier, et qu'elle portait un nom écrit dans le testament de son père, ce nom pour lequel il se serait, quelques mois auparavant, si ardemment dévoué. Nous montrons Marius tel qu'il était. Son père lui-même disparaissait un peu dans son âme sous la splendeur de son amour.

Il répondit avec quelque embarras:

— Ah! c'est vous, Éponine?

— Pourquoi me dites-vous vous? Est-ce que je vous ai fait quelque chose?

— Non, répondit-il.

Certes, il n'avait rien contre elle. Loin de là. Seulement, il sentait qu'il ne pouvait faire autrement, maintenant qu'il disait tu à Cosette, que de dire vous à Éponine.

Comme il se taisait, elle s'écria:

— Dites donc....

Puis elle s'arrêta. Il semblait que les paroles manquaient à cette créature autrefois si insouciante et si hardie. Elle essaya de sourire et ne put. Elle reprit:

— Eh bien!...

Puis elle se tut encore et resta les yeux baissés.

— Bonsoir, monsieur Marius, dit-elle tout à coup brusquement, et elle s’en alla.

Chapitre IV

Cab roule en anglais et jappe en argot

Le lendemain, c’était le 3 juin, le 3 juin 1832, date qu’il faut indiquer à cause des événements graves qui étaient à cette époque suspendus sur l’horizon de Paris à l’état de nuages chargés, Marius à la nuit tombante suivait le même chemin que la veille avec les mêmes pensées de ravissement dans le cœur, lorsqu’il aperçut, entre les arbres du boulevard, Éponine qui venait à lui. Deux jours de suite, c’était trop. Il se détourna vivement, quitta le boulevard, changea de route, et s’en alla rue Plumet par la rue Monsieur.

Cela fit qu’Éponine le suivit jusqu’à la rue Plumet, chose qu’elle n’avait point faite encore. Elle s’était contentée jusque-là de l’apercevoir à son passage sur le boulevard sans même chercher à le rencontrer. La veille seulement, elle avait essayé de lui parler.

Éponine le suivit donc, sans qu’il s’en doutât. Elle le vit déranger le barreau de la grille, et se glisser dans le jardin.

— Tiens! dit-elle, il entre dans la maison!

Elle s’approcha de la grille, tâta les barreaux l’un après l’autre et reconnut facilement celui que Marius avait dérangé.

Elle murmura à demi-voix, avec un accent lugubre:

— Pas de ça, Lisette!

Elle s’assit sur le soubassement de la grille, tout à côté du barreau, comme si elle le gardait. C’était précisément le point où la grille venait toucher le mur voisin. Il y avait là un angle obscur où Éponine disparaissait entièrement.

Elle demeura ainsi plus d’une heure sans bouger et sans souffler, en proie à ses idées.

Vers dix heures du soir, un des deux ou trois passants de la rue Plumet, vieux bourgeois attardé qui se hâtait dans ce lieu désert et mal famé, côtoyant la grille du jardin, et arrivé à l’angle que la grille faisait avec le mur, entendit une voix sourde et menaçante qui disait:

— Je ne m’étonne plus s’il vient tous les soirs!

Le passant promena ses yeux autour de lui, ne vit personne, n’osa pas regarder dans ce coin noir et eut grand’peur. Il doubla le pas.

Ce passant eut raison de se hâter, car, très peu d’instants après, six hommes qui marchaient séparés et à quelque distance les uns des autres, le long des murs, et qu’on eût pu prendre pour une patrouille grise, entrèrent dans la rue Plumet.

Le premier qui arriva à la grille du jardin s’arrêta, et attendit les autres; une seconde après, ils étaient tous les six réunis.

Ces hommes se mirent à parler à voix basse.

— C’est icicaille, dit l’un d’eux.

— Y a-t-il un cab dans le jardin? demanda un autre.

— Je ne sais pas. En tout cas j’ai levé une boulette que nous lui ferons morfiler.

— As-tu du mastic pour frangir la vanterne?

— Oui.

— La grille est vieille, reprit un cinquième qui avait une voix de ventriloque.

— Tant mieux, dit le second qui avait parlé. Elle ne criblera pas tant sous la bastringue et ne sera pas si dure à faucher.

Le sixième, qui n’avait pas encore ouvert la bouche, se mit à visiter la grille comme avait fait Éponine une heure auparavant, empoignant successivement chaque barreau et les ébranlant avec précaution. Il arriva ainsi au barreau que Marius avait descellé. Comme il allait saisir ce barreau, une main sortant brusquement de l’ombre s’abattit sur son bras, il se sentit vivement repoussé par le milieu de la poitrine, et une voix enrouée lui dit sans crier:

— Il y a un cab.

En même temps il vit une fille pâle debout devant lui.

L’homme eut cette commotion que donne toujours l’inattendu. Il se hérissa hideusement; rien n’est formidable à voir comme les bêtes féroces inquiètes; leur air effrayé est effrayant. Il recula, et bégaya:

— Quelle est cette drôlesse?

— Votre fille.

C’était en effet Éponine qui parlait à Thénardier.

À l’apparition d’Éponine, les cinq autres, c’est-à-dire Claquesous, Gueulemer, Babet, Montparnasse et Brujon, s’étaient approchés sans bruit, sans précipitation, sans dire une parole, avec la lenteur sinistre propre à ces hommes de nuit.

On leur distinguait je ne sais quels hideux outils à la main. Gueulemer tenait une de ces pinces courbes que les rôdeurs appellent fanchons.

— Ah çà, qu'est-ce que tu fais là? qu'est-ce que tu nous veux? es-tu folle? s'écria Thénardier, autant qu'on peut s'écrier en parlant bas. Qu'est-ce que tu viens nous empêcher de travailler?

Éponine se mit à rire et lui sauta au cou.

— Je suis là, mon petit père, parce que je suis là. Est-ce qu'il n'est pas permis de s'asseoir sur les pierres, à présent? C'est vous qui ne devriez pas y être. Qu'est-ce que vous venez y faire, puisque c'est un biscuit? Je l'avais dit à Magnon. Il n'y a rien à faire ici. Mais embrassez-moi donc, mon bon petit père! Comme il y a longtemps que je ne vous ai vu! Vous êtes dehors, donc?

Le Thénardier essaya de se débarrasser des bras d'Éponine et grommela:

— C'est bon. Tu m'as embrassé. Oui, je suis dehors. Je ne suis pas dedans. À présent, va-t'en.

Mais Éponine ne lâchait pas prise et redoublait ses caresses.

— Mon petit père, comment avez-vous donc fait? Il faut que vous ayez bien de l'esprit pour vous être tiré de là.

Contez-moi ça! Et ma mère? où est ma mère? Donnez-moi donc des nouvelles de maman.

Thénardier répondit:

— Elle va bien, je ne sais pas, laisse-moi, je te dis va-t'en.

— Je ne veux pas m'en aller justement, fit Éponine avec une minauderie d'enfant gâté, vous me renvoyez que voilà quatre mois que je ne vous ai vu et que j'ai à peine eu le temps de vous embrasser.

Et elle reprit son père par le cou.

— Ah çà mais, c'est bête! dit Babet.

— Dépêchons! dit Gueulemer, les coqueurs peuvent passer.

La voix de ventriloque scanda ce distique:

Nous n'sommes pas le jour de l'an,
À bécoter papa maman.

Éponine se tourna vers les cinq bandits.

— Tiens, C'est monsieur Brujon. — Bonjour, monsieur Babet. Bonjour, monsieur Claquesous. — Est-ce que vous ne me reconnaissez pas, monsieur Gueulemer? — Comment ça va, Montparnasse?

— Si, on te reconnaît! fit Thénardier. Mais bonjour, bonsoir, au large! laisse-nous tranquilles.

— C’est l’heure des renards, et pas des poules, dit Montparnasse.

— Tu vois bien que nous avons à goupiner icigo, ajouta Babet.

Éponine prit la main de Montparnasse.

— Prends garde! dit-il, tu vas te couper, j’ai un lingre ouvert.

— Mon petit Montparnasse, répondit Éponine très doucement, il faut avoir confiance dans les gens. Je suis la fille de mon père peut-être. Monsieur Babet, monsieur Gueulemer, c’est moi qu’on a chargée d’éclairer l’affaire.

Il est remarquable qu’Éponine ne parlait pas argot. Depuis qu’elle connaissait Marius, cette affreuse langue lui était devenue impossible.

Elle pressa dans sa petite main osseuse et faible comme la main d’un squelette les gros doigts rudes de Gueulemer et continua:

— Vous savez bien que je ne suis pas sotte. Ordinairement on me croit. Je vous ai rendu service dans les occasions. Eh bien, j’ai pris des renseignements, vous vous exposeriez inutilement, voyez-vous. Je vous jure qu’il n’y a rien à faire dans cette maison-ci.

— Il y a des femmes seules, dit Gueulemer.

— Non. Les personnes sont déménagées.

— Les chandelles ne le sont pas, toujours! fit Babet.

Et il montra à Éponine, à travers le haut des arbres, une lumière qui se promenait dans la mansarde du pavillon. C’était Toussaint qui avait veillé pour étendre du linge à sécher.

Éponine tenta un dernier effort.

— Eh bien, dit-elle, c’est du monde très pauvre, et une baraque où ils n’ont pas le sou.

— Va-t’en au diable! cria Thénardier. Quand nous aurons retourné la maison, et que nous aurons mis la cave en haut et le grenier en bas, nous te dirons ce qu’il y a dedans, et si ce sont des balles, des ronds ou des broques.

Et il la poussa pour passer outre.

— Mon bon ami monsieur Montparnasse, dit Éponine, je vous en prie, vous qui êtes bon enfant, n’entrez pas!

— Prends donc garde, tu vas te couper! répliqua Montparnasse.

Thénardier reprit avec l’accent décisif qu’il avait:

— Décampe, la fée, et laisse les hommes faire leurs affaires.

Éponine lâcha la main de Montparnasse qu’elle avait ressaisie, et dit:

— Vous voulez donc entrer dans cette maison?

— Un peu! fit le ventriloque en ricanant.

Alors elle s’adossa à la grille, fit face aux six bandits armés jusqu’aux dents et à qui la nuit donnait des visages de démons, et dit d’une voix ferme et basse:

— Eh bien, moi, je ne veux pas.

Ils s’arrêtèrent stupéfaits. Le ventriloque pourtant acheva son ricanement. Elle reprit:

— Les amis! écoutez bien. Ce n’est pas ça. Maintenant je parle. D’abord, si vous entrez dans ce jardin, si vous touchez à cette grille, je crie, je cogne aux portes, je réveille le monde, je vous fais empoigner tous les six, j’appelle les sergents de ville.

— Elle le ferait, dit Thénardier bas à Brujon et au ventriloque.

Elle secoua la tête et ajouta:

— À commencer par mon père.

Thénardier s’approcha.

— Pas si près, bonhomme! dit-elle.

Il recula en grommelant dans ses dents: — Mais qu’est-ce qu’elle a donc? Et il ajouta:

— Chienne!

Elle se mit à rire d’une façon terrible.

— Comme vous voudrez, vous n’entrerez pas. Je ne suis pas la fille au chien, puisque je suis la fille au loup. Vous êtes six, qu’est-ce que cela me fait? Vous êtes des hommes. Eh bien, je suis une femme. Vous ne me faites pas peur, allez. Je vous dis que vous n’entrerez pas dans cette maison, parce que cela ne me plaît pas. Si vous approchez, j’aboie. Je vous l’ai dit, le cab c’est moi. Je me fiche pas mal de vous. Passez votre chemin, vous m’ennuyez! Allez où vous voudrez, mais ne venez pas ici, je vous le défends! Vous à coups de couteau, moi à coups de savate, ça m’est égal, avancez donc!

Elle fit un pas vers les bandits, elle était effrayante, elle se remit à rire.

— Pardine! je n’ai pas peur. Cet été, j’aurai faim, cet hiver, j’aurai froid. Sont-ils farces, ces bêtas d’hommes de croire qu’ils font peur à une fille! De quoi! peur? Ah ouiche, joliment! Parce que vous avez des chipies de maîtresses qui se cachent sous le lit quand vous faites la grosse voix, voilà-t-il pas. Moi je n’ai peur de rien!

Elle appuya sur Thénardier son regard fixe, et dit:

— Pas même de vous, mon père!

Puis elle poursuivit en promenant sur les bandits ses sanglantes prunelles de spectre:

— Qu’est-ce que ça me fait à moi qu’on me ramasse demain rue Plumet sur le pavé, tuée à coups de surin par mon père, ou bien qu’on me trouve dans un an dans les filets de Saint-Cloud ou à l’île des Cygnes au milieu des vieux bouchons pourris et des chiens noyés!

Force lui fut de s’interrompre, une toux sèche la prit, son souffle sortait comme un râle de sa poitrine étroite et débile.

Elle reprit:

— Je n’ai qu’à crier, on vient, patatras. Vous êtes six; moi je suis tout le monde.

Thénardier fit un mouvement vers elle.

— Prochez pas cria-t-elle.

Il s’arrêta, et lui dit avec douceur:

— Eh bien non. Je n’approcherai pas, mais ne parle pas si haut. Ma fille, tu veux donc nous empêcher de travailler? Il faut pourtant que nous gagnions notre vie. Tu n’as donc plus d’amitié pour ton père?

— Vous m’embêtez, dit Éponine.

— Il faut pourtant que nous vivions, que nous mangions....

— Crevez.

Cela dit, elle s’assit sur le soubassement de la grille en chantonnant:

Mon bras si dodu,
Ma jambe bien faite,
Et le temps perdu.

Elle avait le coude sur le genou et le menton dans sa main, et elle balançait son pied d’un air d’indifférence. Sa robe trouée laissait voir ses clavicules maigres. Le réverbère voisin éclairait son profil et son attitude. On ne pouvait rien voir de plus résolu et de plus surprenant.

Les six escarpes, interdits et sombres d’être tenus en échec par une fille, allèrent sous l’ombre portée de la lanterne et tinrent conseil avec des haussements d’épaule humiliés et furieux.

Elle cependant les regardait d’un air paisible et farouche.

— Elle a quelque chose, dit Babet. Une raison. Est-ce qu’elle est amoureuse du cab? C’est pourtant dommage de manquer ça. Deux femmes, un vieux qui loge dans une arrière-cour; il y a des rideaux pas mal aux fenêtres. Le vieux doit être un guinal. Je crois l’affaire bonne.

— Eh bien, entrez, vous autres, s'écria Montparnasse. Faites l'affaire. Je resterai là avec la fille, et si elle bronche....

Il fit reluire au réverbère le couteau qu'il tenait ouvert dans sa manche.

Thénardier ne disait mot et semblait prêt à ce qu'on voudrait.

Brujon, qui était un peu oracle et qui avait, comme on sait, «donné l'affaire», n'avait pas encore parlé. Il paraissait pensif. Il passait pour ne reculer devant rien, et l'on savait qu'il avait un jour dévalisé, rien que par bravade, un poste de sergents de ville. En outre il faisait des vers et des chansons, ce qui lui donnait une grande autorité.

Babet le questionna.

— Tu ne dis rien, Brujon?

Brujon resta encore un instant silencieux, puis il hocha la tête de plusieurs façons variées, et se décida enfin à élever la voix.

— Voici: j'ai rencontré ce matin deux moineaux qui se battaient; ce soir, je me cogne à une femme qui querelle. Tout ça est mauvais. Allons-nous-en.

Ils s'en allèrent.

Tout en s'en allant, Montparnasse murmura:

— C'est égal, si on avait voulu, j'aurais donné le coup de pouce.

Babet lui répondit:

— Moi pas. Je ne tape pas une dame.

Au coin de la rue, ils s'arrêtèrent et échangèrent à voix sourde ce dialogue énigmatique:

— Où irons-nous coucher ce soir?

— Sous Pantin.

— As-tu sur toi la clef de la grille, Thénardier?

— Pardi.

Éponine, qui ne les quittait pas des yeux, les vit reprendre le chemin par où ils étaient venus. Elle se leva et se mit à ramper derrière eux le long des murailles et des maisons. Elle les suivit ainsi jusqu'au boulevard. Là, ils se séparèrent, et elle vit ces six hommes s'enfoncer dans l'obscurité où ils semblèrent fondre.

Chapitre V

Choses de la nuit

Après le départ des bandits, la rue Plumet reprit son tranquille aspect nocturne.

Ce qui venait de se passer dans cette rue n'eût point étonné une forêt. Les futaies, les taillis, les bruyères, les branches âprement entre-croisées, les hautes herbes, existent d'une manière sombre; le fourmillement sauvage entrevoit là les subites apparitions de l'invisible; ce qui est au-dessous de l'homme y distingue à travers la brume ce qui est au-delà de l'homme; et les choses ignorées de nous vivants s'y confrontent dans la nuit. La nature hérissée et fauve s'effare à de certaines approches où elle croit sentir le surnaturel. Les forces de l'ombre se connaissent, et ont entre elles de mystérieux équilibres. Les dents et les griffes redoutent l'insaisissable. La bestialité buveuse de sang, les voraces appétits affamés en quête de la proie, les instincts armés d'ongles et de mâchoires qui n'ont pour source et pour but que le ventre, regardent et flairent avec inquiétude l'impassible linéament spectral rôdant sous un suaire, debout dans sa vague robe frissonnante, et qui leur semble vivre d'une vie morte et terrible. Ces brutalités, qui ne sont que matière, craignent confusément d'avoir affaire à l'immense obscurité condensée dans un être inconnu. Une figure noire barrant le passage arrête net la bête farouche. Ce qui sort du cimetière intimide et déconcerte ce qui sort de l'antre; le féroce a peur du sinistre; les loups reculent devant une goule rencontrée.

Chapitre VI

Marius redevient réel au point de donner son adresse à Cosette

Pendant que cette espèce de chienne à figure humaine montait la garde contre la grille et que les six bandits lâchaient pied devant une fille, Marius était près de Cosette.

Jamais le ciel n’avait été plus constellé et plus charmant, les arbres plus tremblants, la senteur des herbes plus pénétrante; jamais les oiseaux ne s’étaient endormis dans les feuilles avec un bruit plus doux; jamais toutes les harmonies de la sérénité universelle n’avaient mieux répondu aux musiques intérieures de l’amour; jamais Marius n’avait été plus épris, plus heureux, plus extasié. Mais il avait trouvé Cosette triste. Cosette avait pleuré. Elle avait les yeux rouges.

C’était le premier nuage dans cet admirable rêve.

Le premier mot de Marius avait été:

— Qu’as-tu?

Et elle avait répondu:

— Voilà.

Puis elle s’était assise sur le banc près du perron, et pendant qu’il prenait place tout tremblant auprès d’elle, elle avait poursuivi:

— Mon père m’a dit ce matin de me tenir prête, qu’il avait des affaires, et que nous allions peut-être partir.

Marius frissonna de la tête aux pieds.

Quand on est à la fin de la vie, mourir, cela veut dire partir; quand on est au commencement, partir, cela veut dire mourir.

Depuis six semaines, Marius, peu à peu, lentement, par degrés, prenait chaque jour possession de Cosette. Possession tout idéale, mais profonde. Comme nous l’avons expliqué déjà, dans le premier amour, on prend l’âme bien avant le corps; plus tard on prend le corps bien avant l’âme, quelquefois on ne prend pas l’âme du tout; les Faublas et les Prudhomme ajoutent: parce qu’il n’y en a pas; mais ce sarcasme est par bonheur un blasphème. Marius donc possédait Cosette, comme les esprits possèdent; mais il l’enveloppait de toute son âme et la saisissait jalousement avec une incroyable conviction. Il possédait son sourire, son haleine, son parfum, le rayonnement profond de ses prunelles bleues, la douceur de sa peau quand il lui touchait la main, le charmant signe qu'elle avait au cou, toutes ses pensées. Ils étaient convenus de ne jamais dormir sans rêver l'un de l'autre, et ils s'étaient tenus parole. Il possédait donc tous les rêves de Cosette. Il regardait sans cesse et il effleurait quelquefois de son souffle les petits cheveux qu'elle avait à la nuque, et il se déclarait qu'il n'y avait pas un de ces petits cheveux qui ne lui appartint à lui Marius. Il contemplait et il adorait les choses qu'elle mettait, son nœud de ruban, ses gants, ses manchettes, ses brodequins, comme des objets sacrés dont il était le maître. Il songeait qu'il était le seigneur de ces jolis peignes d'écaille qu'elle avait dans ses cheveux, et il se disait même, sourds et confus bégayements de la volupté qui se faisait jour, qu'il n'y avait pas un cordon de sa robe, pas une maille de ses bas, pas un pli de son corset, qui ne fût à lui. À côté de Cosette, il se sentait près de son bien, près de sa chose, près de son despote et de son esclave. Il semblait qu'ils eussent tellement mêlé leurs âmes que, s'ils eussent voulu les reprendre, il leur eût été impossible de les reconnaître. — Celle-ci est la mienne. — Non, c'est la mienne. — Je t'assure que tu te trompes. Voilà bien moi. — Ce que tu prends pour toi, c'est moi. — Marius était quelque chose qui faisait partie de Cosette et Cosette était quelque chose qui faisait partie de Marius. Marius sentait Cosette vivre en lui. Avoir Cosette, posséder Cosette, cela pour lui n'était pas distinct de respirer. Ce fut au milieu de cette foi, de cet enivrement, de cette possession virginale, inouïe et absolue, de cette souveraineté, que ces mots: «Nous allons partir», tombèrent tout à coup, et que la voix brusque de la réalité lui cria: Cosette n'est pas à toi!

Marius se réveilla. Depuis six semaines, Marius vivait, nous l'avons dit, hors de la vie; ce mot, partir! l'y fit rentrer durement.

Il ne trouva pas une parole. Cosette sentit seulement que sa main était très froide. Elle lui dit à son tour:

— Qu'as-tu?

Il répondit, si bas que Cosette l'entendait à peine:

— Je ne comprends pas ce que tu as dit.

Elle reprit:

— Ce matin mon père m'a dit de préparer toutes mes petites affaires et de me tenir prête, qu'il me donnerait son linge pour le mettre dans une malle, qu'il était obligé de faire un voyage, que nous allions partir, qu'il faudrait avoir une grande malle pour moi et une petite pour lui, de préparer tout cela d'ici à une semaine, et que nous irions peut-être en Angleterre.

— Mais c’est monstrueux! s’écria Marius.

Il est certain qu’en ce moment, dans l’esprit de Marius, aucun abus de pouvoir, aucune violence, aucune abomination des tyrans les plus prodigieux, aucune action de Busiris, de Tibère ou de Henri VIII n’égalait en férocité celle-ci: M. Fauchelevent emmenant sa fille en Angleterre parce qu’il a des affaires.

Il demanda d’une voix faible:

— Et quand partirais-tu?

— Il n’a pas dit quand.

— Et quand reviendrais-tu?

— Il n’a pas dit quand.

Marius se leva, et dit froidement:

— Cosette, irez-vous?

Cosette tourna vers lui ses beaux yeux pleins d’angoisse et répondit avec une sorte d’égarement:

— Où?

— En Angleterre? irez-vous?

— Pourquoi me dis-tu vous?

— Je vous demande si vous irez?

— Comment veux-tu que je fasse? dit-elle en joignant les mains.

— Ainsi vous irez?

— Si mon père y va?

— Ainsi, vous irez?

Cosette prit la main de Marius et l’étreignit sans répondre.

— C’est bon, dit Marius. Alors j’irai ailleurs.

Cosette sentit le sens de ce mot plus encore qu’elle ne le comprit. Elle pâlit tellement que sa figure devint blanche dans l’obscurité. Elle balbutia:

— Que veux-tu dire?

Marius la regarda, puis éleva lentement ses yeux vers le ciel et répondit:

— Rien.

Quand sa paupière s’abaissa, il vit Cosette qui lui souriait. Le sourire d’une femme qu’on aime a une clarté qu’on voit la nuit.

— Que nous sommes bêtes! Marius, j’ai une idée.

— Quoi?

— Pars si nous partons! Je te dirai où. Viens me rejoindre où je serai!

Marius était maintenant un homme tout à fait réveillé. Il était retombé dans la réalité. Il cria à Cosette:

— Partir avec vous! es-tu folle? Mais il faut de l’argent, et je n’en ai pas! Aller en Angleterre? Mais je dois maintenant, je ne sais pas, plus de dix louis à Courfeyrac, un de mes amis que tu ne connais pas! Mais j’ai un vieux chapeau qui ne vaut pas trois francs, j’ai un habit où il manque des boutons par devant, ma chemise est toute déchirée; j’ai les coudes percés, mes bottes prennent l’eau; depuis six semaines je n’y pense plus, et je ne te l’ai pas dit. Cosette! je suis un misérable. Tu ne me vois que la nuit, et tu me donnes ton amour; si tu me voyais le jour, tu me donnerais un sou! Aller en Angleterre! Eh! je n’ai pas de quoi payer le passeport!

Il se jeta contre un arbre qui était là, debout, les deux bras au-dessus de sa tête, le front contre l’écorce, ne sentant ni le bois qui lui écorchait la peau ni la fièvre qui lui martelait les tempes, immobile, et prêt à tomber, comme la statue du désespoir.

Il demeura longtemps ainsi. On resterait l’éternité dans ces abîmes-là. Enfin il se retourna. Il entendait derrière lui un petit bruit étouffé, doux et triste.

C’était Cosette qui sanglotait.

Elle pleurait depuis plus de deux heures à côté de Marius qui songeait.

Il vint à elle, tomba à genoux, et, se prosternant lentement, il prit le bout de son pied qui passait sous sa robe et le baisa.

Elle le laissa faire en silence. Il y a des moments où la femme accepte, comme une déesse sombre et résignée, la religion de l’amour.

— Ne pleure pas, dit-il.

Elle murmura:

— Puisque je vais peut-être m’en aller, et que tu ne peux pas venir!

Lui reprit:

— M’aimes-tu?

Elle lui répondit en sanglotant ce mot du paradis qui n’est jamais plus charmant qu’à travers les larmes:

— Je t’adore!

Il poursuivit avec un son de voix qui était une inexprimable caresse:

— Ne pleure pas. Dis, veux-tu faire cela pour moi de ne pas pleurer?

— M’aimes-tu, toi? dit-elle.

Il lui prit la main.

— Cosette, je n’ai jamais donné ma parole d’honneur à personne, parce que ma parole d’honneur me fait peur. Je sens que mon père est à côté. Eh bien, je te donne ma parole d’honneur la plus sacrée que, si tu t’en vas, je mourrai.

Il y eut dans l’accent dont il prononça ces paroles une mélancolie si solennelle et si tranquille que Cosette trembla. Elle sentit ce froid que donne une chose sombre et vraie qui passe. De saisissement elle cessa de pleurer.

— Maintenant écoute, dit-il. Ne m’attends pas demain.

— Pourquoi?

— Ne m’attends qu’après-demain.

— Oh! pourquoi?

— Tu verras.

— Un jour sans te voir! mais c’est impossible.

— Sacrifions un jour pour avoir peut-être toute la vie.

Et Marius ajouta à demi-voix et en aparté:

— C’est un homme qui ne change rien à ses habitudes, et il n’a jamais reçu personne que le soir.

— De quel homme parles-tu? demanda Cosette.

— Moi? je n’ai rien dit.

— Qu’est-ce que tu espères donc?

— Attends jusqu’à après-demain.

— Tu le veux?

— Oui, Cosette.

Elle lui prit la tête dans ses deux mains, se haussant sur la pointe des pieds pour être à sa taille, et cherchant à voir dans ses yeux son espérance.

Marius reprit:

— J’y songe, il faut que tu saches mon adresse, il peut arriver des choses, on ne sait pas, je demeure chez cet ami appelé Courfeyrac, rue de la Verrerie, numéro 16.

Il fouilla dans sa poche, en tira un couteau-canif, et avec la lame écrivit sur le plâtre du mur:

16, rue de la Verrerie.

Cosette cependant s’était remise à lui regarder dans les yeux.

— Dis-moi ta pensée. Marius, tu as une pensée. Dis-la-moi. Oh! dis-la-moi pour que je passe une bonne nuit!

— Ma pensée, la voici: c’est qu’il est impossible que Dieu veuille nous séparer. Attends-moi après-demain.

— Qu’est-ce que je ferai jusque-là? dit Cosette. Toi tu es dehors, tu vas, tu viens. Comme c’est heureux, les hommes! Moi, je vais rester toute seule.

Oh! que je vais être triste! Qu’est-ce que tu feras donc demain soir, dis?

— J’essayerai une chose.

— Alors je prierai Dieu et je penserai à toi d’ici là pour que tu réussisses. Je ne te questionne plus, puisque tu ne veux pas. Tu es mon maître. Je passerai ma soirée demain à chanter cette musique *d’Euryanthe* que tu aimes et que tu es venu entendre un soir derrière mon volet. Mais après-demain tu viendras de bonne heure. Je t’attendrai à la nuit, à neuf heures précises, je t’en préviens. Mon Dieu! que c’est triste que les jours soient longs! Tu entends, à neuf heures sonnant je serai dans le jardin.

— Et moi aussi.

Et sans se l’être dit, mus par la même pensée, entraînés par ces courants électriques qui mettent deux amants en communication continuelle, tous deux enivrés de volupté jusque dans leur douleur, ils tombèrent dans les bras l’un de l’autre, sans s’apercevoir que leurs lèvres s’étaient jointes pendant que leurs regards levés, débordant d’extase et pleins de larmes, contemplaient les étoiles.

Quand Marius sortit, la rue était déserte. C’était le moment où Éponine suivait les bandits jusque sur le boulevard.

Tandis que Marius rêvait, la tête appuyée contre l’arbre, une idée lui avait traversé l’esprit; une idée, hélas! qu’il jugeait lui-même insensée et impossible. Il avait pris un parti violent.

Chapitre VII

Le vieux cœur et le jeune cœur en présence

Le père Gillenormand avait à cette époque ses quatre-vingt-onze ans bien sonnés. Il demeurait toujours avec mademoiselle Gillenormand rue des Filles-du-Calvaire, n° 6, dans cette vieille maison qui était à lui. C'était, on s'en souvient, un de ces vieillards antiques qui attendent la mort tout droits, que l'âge charge sans les faire plier, et que le chagrin même ne courbe pas.

Cependant, depuis quelque temps, sa fille disait: mon père baisse. Il ne souffletait plus les servantes; il ne frappait plus de sa canne avec autant de verve le palier de l'escalier quand Basque tardait à lui ouvrir. La Révolution de Juillet l'avait à peine exaspéré pendant six mois. Il avait vu presque avec tranquillité dans le *Moniteur* cet accouplement de mots: M. Humblot-Conté, pair de France. Le fait est que le vieillard était rempli d'accablement. Il ne fléchissait pas, il ne se rendait pas, ce n'était pas plus dans sa nature physique que dans sa nature morale; mais il se sentait intérieurement défaillir. Depuis quatre ans il attendait Marius, de pied ferme, c'est bien le mot, avec la conviction que ce mauvais petit garnement sonnerait à la porte un jour ou l'autre; maintenant il en venait, dans de certaines heures mornes, à se dire que pour peu que Marius se fît encore attendre... — Ce n'était pas la mort qui lui était insupportable, c'était l'idée que peut-être il ne reverrait plus Marius. Ne plus revoir Marius, ceci n'était pas entré un seul instant dans son cerveau jusqu'à ce jour; à présent cette idée commençait à lui apparaître, et le glaçait. L'absence, comme il arrive toujours dans les sentiments naturels et vrais, n'avait fait qu'accroître son amour de grand-père pour l'enfant ingrat qui s'en était allé comme cela. C'est dans les nuits de décembre, par dix degrés de froid, qu'on pense le plus au soleil. M. Gillenormand était ou se croyait, par-dessus tout incapable de faire un pas, lui l'aïeul, vers son petit-fils; — je crèverais plutôt, disait-il. Il ne se trouvait aucun tort, mais il ne songeait à Marius qu'avec un attendrissement profond et le muet désespoir d'un vieux bonhomme qui s'en va dans les ténèbres.

Il commençait à perdre ses dents, ce qui s'ajoutait à sa tristesse.

M. Gillenormand, sans pourtant se l'avouer à lui-même, car il en eut été furieux et honteux, n'avait jamais aimé une maîtresse comme il aimait Marius.

Il avait fait placer dans sa chambre, devant le chevet de son lit, comme la première chose qu'il voulait voir en s'éveillant, un ancien portrait de son autre fille, celle qui était morte, madame Pontmercy, portrait fait lorsqu'elle avait dix-huit ans. Il regardait sans cesse ce portrait. Il lui arriva un jour de dire en le considérant:

— Je trouve qu'il lui ressemble.

— À ma sœur? reprit mademoiselle Gillenormand. Mais oui.

Le vieillard ajouta:

— Et à lui aussi.

Une fois, comme il était assis, les deux genoux l'un contre l'autre et l'œil presque fermé, dans une posture d'abattement, sa fille se risqua à lui dire:

— Mon père, est-ce que vous en voulez toujours autant?...

Elle s'arrêta, n'osant aller plus loin.

— À qui? demanda-t-il.

— À ce pauvre Marius?

Il souleva sa vieille tête, posa son poing amaigri et ridé sur la table, et cria de son accent le plus irrité et le plus vibrant:

— Pauvre Marius, vous dites! Ce monsieur est un drôle, un mauvais gueux, un petit vaniteux ingrat, sans cœur, sans âme, un orgueilleux, un méchant homme!

Et il se détourna pour que sa fille ne vît pas une larme qu'il avait dans les yeux.

Trois jours après, il sortit d'un silence qui durait depuis quatre heures pour dire à sa fille à brûle-pourpoint:

— J'avais eu l'honneur de prier mademoiselle Gillenormand de ne jamais m'en parler.

La tante Gillenormand renonça à toute tentative et porta ce diagnostic profond: — Mon père n'a jamais beaucoup aimé ma sœur depuis sa sottise. Il est clair qu'il déteste Marius.

«Depuis sa sottise», signifiait: depuis qu'elle avait épousé le colonel.

Du reste, comme on a pu le conjecturer, mademoiselle Gillenormand avait échoué dans sa tentative de substituer son favori, l'officier de lanciers, à Marius. Le remplaçant Théodule n'avait point réussi. M. Gillenormand n'avait pas accepté le quiproquo. Le vide du cœur ne s'accommode point d'un bouche-trou. Théodule, de son côté, tout en flairant l'héritage, répugnait à la corvée de plaire. Le bonhomme ennuyait le lancier, et le lancier choquait le bonhomme. Le lieutenant Théodule était gai sans doute, mais bavard; frivole, mais vulgaire; bon vivant, mais de mauvaise compagnie; il avait des maîtresses, c'est vrai, et il en parlait beaucoup, c'est vrai encore; mais il en parlait mal. Toutes ses qualités avaient un défaut. M. Gillenormand était excédé de l'entendre conter les bonnes fortunes quelconques qu'il avait autour de sa caserne, rue de Babylone. Et puis le lieutenant Gillenormand venait quelquefois en uniforme avec la cocarde tricolore. Ceci le rendait tout bonnement impossible. Le père Gillenormand avait fini par dire à sa fille: — J'en ai assez, du Théodule. J'ai peu de goût pour les gens de guerre en temps de paix. Reçois-les si tu veux. Je ne sais pas si je n'aime pas mieux encore les sabreurs que les traîneurs de sabre. Le cliquetis des lames dans la bataille est moins misérable, après tout, que le tapage des fourreaux sur le pavé. Et puis, se cambrer comme un matamore et se sangler comme une femmelette, avoir un corset sous une cuirasse, c'est être ridicule deux fois. Quand on est un véritable homme, on se tient à égale distance de la fanfaronnade et de la mièvrerie. Ni fier-à-bras, ni joli cœur. Garde ton Théodule pour toi.

Sa fille eut beau lui dire: — C'est pourtant votre petit-neveu, — il se trouva que M. Gillenormand, qui était grand-père jusqu'au bout des ongles, n'était pas grand-oncle du tout.

Au fond, comme il avait de l'esprit et qu'il comparait, Théodule n'avait servi qu'à lui faire mieux regretter Marius.

Un soir, c'était le 4 juin, ce qui n'empêchait pas que le père Gillenormand n'eût un très bon feu dans sa cheminée, il avait congédié sa fille qui cousait dans la pièce voisine. Il était seul dans sa chambre à bergerades, les pieds sur ses chenets, à demi enveloppé dans son vaste paravent de Coromandel à neuf feuilles, accoudé à sa table où brûlaient deux bougies sous un abat-jour vert, englouti dans son fauteuil de tapisserie, un livre à la main, mais ne lisant pas. Il était vêtu, selon sa mode, en *incroyable*, et ressemblait à un antique portrait de Garat. Cela l'eût fait suivre dans les rues, mais sa fille le couvrait toujours, lorsqu'il sortait, d'une vaste douillette d'évêque, qui cachait ses vêtements. Chez lui, excepté pour se lever et se coucher, il ne portait jamais de robe de chambre. — *Cela donne l'air vieux,* disait-il.

Le père Gillenormand songeait à Marius amoureusement et amèrement, et, comme d'ordinaire, l'amertume dominait. Sa tendresse aigrie finissait toujours par bouillonner et par tourner en indignation. Il en était à ce point où l'on cherche à prendre son parti et à accepter ce qui déchire. Il était en train de s'expliquer qu'il n'y avait maintenant plus de raison pour que Marius revînt, que s'il avait dû revenir, il l'aurait déjà fait, qu'il fallait y renoncer. Il essayait de s'habituer à l'idée que c'était fini, et qu'il mourrait sans revoir «ce monsieur». Mais toute sa nature se révoltait; sa vieille paternité n'y pouvait consentir. — Quoi! disait-il, c'était son refrain douloureux, il ne reviendra pas! — Sa tête chauve était tombée sur sa poitrine, et il fixait vaguement sur la cendre de son foyer un regard lamentable et irrité.

Au plus profond de cette rêverie, son vieux domestique, Basque, entra et demanda:

— Monsieur peut-il recevoir monsieur Marius?

Le vieillard se dressa sur son séant, blême et pareil à un cadavre qui se lève sous une secousse galvanique. Tout son sang avait reflué à son cœur. Il bégaya:

— Monsieur Marius quoi?

— Je ne sais pas, répondit Basque intimidé et décontenancé par l'air du maître, je ne l'ai pas vu. C'est Nicolette qui vient de me dire: Il y a là un jeune homme, dites que c'est monsieur Marius.

Le père Gillenormand balbutia à voix basse:

— Faites entrer.

Et il resta dans la même attitude, la tête branlante, l'œil fixé sur la porte. Elle se rouvrit. Un jeune homme entra. C'était Marius.

Marius s'arrêta à la porte comme attendant qu'on lui dît d'entrer.

Son vêtement presque misérable ne s'apercevait pas dans l'obscurité que faisait l'abat-jour. On ne distinguait que son visage calme et grave, mais étrangement triste.

Le père Gillenormand, hébété de stupeur et de joie, resta quelques instants sans voir autre chose qu'une clarté comme lorsqu'on est devant une apparition. Il était prêt à défaillir; il apercevait Marius à travers un éblouissement. C'était bien lui, c'était bien Marius!

Enfin! après quatre ans! Il le saisit, pour ainsi dire, tout entier d'un coup d'œil. Il le trouva beau, noble, distingué, grandi, homme fait, l'attitude convenable, l'air charmant. Il eut envie d'ouvrir ses bras, de l'appeler, de se précipiter, ses entrailles se fondirent en ravissement, les paroles affectueuses le gonflaient et débordaient de sa poitrine; enfin toute cette tendresse se fit jour et lui arriva aux lèvres, et par le contraste qui était le fond de sa nature, il en sortit une dureté. Il dit brusquement:

— Qu’est-ce que vous venez faire ici?

Marius répondit avec embarras:

— Monsieur....

M. Gillenormand eût voulu que Marius se jetât dans ses bras. Il fut mécontent de Marius et de lui-même. Il sentit qu’il était brusque et que Marius était froid. C’était pour le bonhomme une insupportable et irritante anxiété de se sentir si tendre et si éploré au dedans et de ne pouvoir être que dur au dehors. L’amertume lui revint. Il interrompit Marius avec un accent bourru:

— Alors pourquoi venez-vous?

Cet «alors» signifiait: *si vous ne venez pas m’embrasser*. Marius regarda son aïeul à qui la pâleur faisait un visage de marbre.

— Monsieur....

Le vieillard reprit d’une voix sévère:

— Venez-vous me demander pardon? avez-vous reconnu vos torts?

Il croyait mettre Marius sur la voie et que «l’enfant» allait fléchir. Marius frissonna; c’était le désaveu de son père qu’on lui demandait; il baissa les yeux et répondit:

— Non, monsieur.

— Et alors, s’écria impétueusement le vieillard avec une douleur poignante et pleine de colère, qu’est-ce que vous me voulez?

Marius joignit les mains, fit un pas et dit d’une voix faible et qui tremblait:

— Monsieur, ayez pitié de moi.

Ce mot remua M. Gillenormand; dit plus tôt, il l’eût attendri, mais il venait trop tard. L’aïeul se leva; il s’appuyait sur sa canne de ses deux mains, ses lèvres étaient blanches, son front vacillait, mais sa haute taille dominait Marius incliné.

— Pitié de vous, monsieur! C’est l’adolescent qui demande de la pitié au vieillard de quatre-vingt-onze ans! Vous entrez dans la vie, j’en sors; vous allez au spectacle, au bal, au café, au billard, vous avez de l’esprit, vous plaisez aux femmes, vous êtes joli garçon; moi je crache en plein été sur mes tisons; vous êtes riche des seules richesses qu’il y ait, moi j’ai toutes les pauvretés de la vieillesse, l’infirmité, l’isolement! vous avez vos trente-deux dents, un bon estomac, l’œil vif, la force, l’appétit, la santé, la gaîté, une forêt de cheveux noirs; moi je n’ai même plus de cheveux blancs, j’ai perdu mes dents, je perds mes jambes, je perds la mémoire, il y a trois noms de rues que je confonds sans cesse, la rue Charlot, la rue du Chaume et la rue Saint-Claude, j'en suis là; vous avez devant vous tout l'avenir plein de soleil, moi je commence à n'y plus voir goutte, tant j'avance dans la nuit; vous êtes amoureux, Ça va sans dire, moi, je ne suis aimé de personne au monde, et vous me demandez de la pitié! Parbleu, Molière a oublié ceci. Si c'est comme cela que vous plaisantez au palais, messieurs les avocats, je vous fais mon sincère compliment. Vous êtes drôles.

Et l'octogénaire reprit d'une voix courroucée et grave:

— Ah çà, qu'est-ce que vous me voulez?

— Monsieur, dit Marius, je sais que ma présence vous déplaît, mais je viens seulement pour vous demander une chose, et puis je vais m'en aller tout de suite.

Vous êtes un sot! dit le vieillard. Qui est-ce qui vous dit de vous en aller?

Ceci était la traduction de cette parole tendre qu'il avait au fond du cœur: *Mais demande-moi donc pardon! Jette-toi donc à mon cou*! M. Gillenormand sentait que Marius allait dans quelques instants le quitter, que son mauvais accueil le rebutait, que sa dureté le chassait, il se disait tout cela, et sa douleur s'en accroissait, et comme sa douleur se tournait immédiatement en colère, sa dureté en augmentait. Il eût voulu que Marius comprît, et Marius ne comprenait pas; ce qui rendait le bonhomme furieux. Il reprit:

— Comment! vous m'avez manqué, à moi, votre grand-père, vous avez quitté ma maison pour aller on ne sait où, vous avez désolé votre tante, vous avez été, cela se devine, c'est plus commode, mener la vie de garçon, faire le muscadin, rentrer à toutes les heures, vous amuser, vous ne m'avez pas donné signe de vie, vous avez fait des dettes sans même me dire de les payer, vous vous êtes fait casseur de vitres et tapageur, et, au bout de quatre ans, vous venez chez moi, et vous n'avez pas autre chose à me dire que cela!

Cette façon violente de pousser le petit-fils à la tendresse ne produisit que le silence de Marius. M. Gillenormand croisa les bras, geste qui, chez lui, était particulièrement impérieux, et apostropha Marius amèrement:

— Finissons. Vous venez me demander quelque chose, dites-vous? Eh bien quoi? qu'est-ce? Parlez.

— Monsieur, dit Marius avec le regard d'un homme qui sent qu'il va tomber dans un précipice, je viens vous demander la permission de me marier.

M. Gillenormand sonna. Basque entr'ouvrit la porte.

— Faites venir ma fille.

Une seconde après, la porte se rouvrit, mademoiselle Gillenormand n'entra pas, mais se montra; Marius était debout, muet, les bras pendants, avec une figure de criminel; M. Gillenormand allait et venait en long et en large dans la chambre. Il se tourna vers sa fille et lui dit:

— Rien. C'est monsieur Marius. Dites-lui bonjour. Monsieur veut se marier. Voilà. Allez-vous-en.

Le son de voix bref et rauque du vieillard annonçait une étrange plénitude d'emportement. La tante regarda Marius d'un air effaré, parut à peine le reconnaître, ne laissa pas échapper un geste ni une syllabe, et disparut au souffle de son père plus vite qu'un fétu devant l'ouragan.

Cependant le père Gillenormand était revenu s'adosser à la cheminée.

— Vous marier! à vingt et un ans! Vous avez arrangé cela! Vous n'avez plus qu'une permission à demander! une formalité. Asseyez-vous, monsieur. Eh bien, vous avez eu une révolution depuis que je n'ai eu l'honneur de vous voir. Les jacobins ont eu le dessus. Vous avez dû être content. N'êtes-vous pas républicain depuis que vous êtes baron? Vous accommodez cela. La république fait une sauce à la baronnie. Êtes-vous décoré de Juillet? avez-vous un peu pris le Louvre, monsieur? Il y a ici tout près, rue Saint-Antoine, vis-à-vis la rue des Nonaindières, un boulet incrusté dans le mur au troisième étage d'une maison avec cette inscription: 28 juillet 1830. Allez voir cela. Cela fait bon effet. Ah! ils font de jolies choses, vos amis! À propos, ne font-ils pas une fontaine à la place du monument de M. le duc de Berry? Ainsi vous voulez vous marier? à qui? peut-on sans indiscrétion demander à qui?

Il s'arrêta, et, avant que Marius eût eu le temps de répondre, il ajouta violemment:

— Ah çà, vous avez un état? une fortune faite? combien gagnez-vous dans votre métier d'avocat?

— Rien, dit Marius avec une sorte de fermeté et de résolution presque farouche.

— Rien? vous n'avez pour vivre que les douze cents livres que je vous fais?

Marius ne répondit point. M. Gillenormand continua:

— Alors, je comprends, c'est que la fille est riche?

— Comme moi.

— Quoi! pas de dot?

— Non.

— Des espérances?

— Je ne crois pas.

— Toute nue! et qu'est-ce que c'est que le père?

— Je ne sais pas.

— Et comment s'appelle-t-elle?

— Mademoiselle Fauchelevent.

— Fauchequoi?

— Fauchelevent.

— Pttt! fit le vieillard.

— Monsieur! s'écria Marius.

M. Gillenormand l'interrompit du ton d'un homme qui se parle à lui-même.

— C'est cela, vingt et un ans, pas d'état, douze cents livres par an, madame la baronne Pontmercy ira acheter deux sous de persil chez la fruitière.

— Monsieur, reprit Marius, dans l'égarement de la dernière espérance qui s'évanouit, je vous en supplie! je vous en conjure, au nom du ciel, à mains jointes, monsieur, je me mets à vos pieds, permettez-moi de l'épouser.

Le vieillard poussa un éclat de rire strident et lugubre à travers lequel il toussait et parlait.

— Ah! ah! ah! vous vous êtes dit: Pardine! je vais aller trouver cette vieille perruque, cette absurde ganache! Quel dommage que je n'aie pas mes vingt-cinq ans! comme je te vous lui flanquerais une bonne sommation respectueuse! comme je me passerais de lui! C'est égal, je lui dirai: Vieux crétin, tu es trop heureux de me voir, j'ai envie de me marier, j'ai envie d'épouser mamselle n'importe qui, fille de monsieur n'importe quoi, je n'ai pas de souliers, elle n'a pas de chemise, ça va, j'ai envie de jeter à l'eau ma carrière, mon avenir, ma jeunesse, ma vie, j'ai envie de faire un plongeon dans la misère avec une femme au cou, c'est mon idée, il faut que tu y consentes! et le vieux fossile consentira. Va, mon garçon, comme tu voudras, attache-toi ton pavé, épouse ta Pousselevent, ta Coupelevent... — Jamais, monsieur! jamais!

— Mon père!

— Jamais!

À l’accent dont ce «jamais» fut prononcé, Marius perdit tout espoir. Il traversa la chambre à pas lents, la tête ployée, chancelant, plus semblable encore à quelqu’un qui se meurt qu’à quelqu’un qui s’en va. M. Gillenormand le suivait des yeux, et au moment où la porte s’ouvrait et où Marius allait sortir, il fit quatre pas avec cette vivacité sénile des vieillards impérieux et gâtés, saisit Marius au collet, le ramena énergiquement dans la chambre, le jeta dans un fauteuil, et lui dit:

— Conte-moi ça!

C’était ce seul mot, *mon père*, échappé à Marius, qui avait fait cette révolution.

Marius le regarda égaré. Le visage mobile de M. Gillenormand n’exprimait plus rien qu’une rude et ineffable bonhomie. L’aïeul avait fait place au grand-père.

— Allons, voyons, parle, conte-moi tes amourettes, jabote, dis-moi tout! Sapristi! que les jeunes gens sont bêtes!

— Mon père! reprit Marius.

Toute la face du vieillard s’illumina d’un indicible rayonnement.

— Oui, c’est ça! appelle-moi ton père, et tu verras!

Il y avait maintenant quelque chose de si bon, de si doux, de si ouvert, de si paternel en cette brusquerie, que Marius, dans ce passage subit du découragement à l’espérance, en fut comme étourdi et enivré. Il était assis près de la table, la lumière des bougies faisait saillir le délabrement de son costume que le père Gillenormand considérait avec étonnement.

— Eh bien, mon père, dit Marius.

— Ah çà, interrompit M. Gillenormand, tu n’as donc vraiment pas le sou? Tu es mis comme un voleur.

Il fouilla dans un tiroir, et y prit une bourse qu’il posa sur la table:

— Tiens, voilà cent louis, achète-toi un chapeau.

— Mon père, poursuivit Marius, mon bon père, si vous saviez! je l’aime. Vous ne vous figurez pas, la première fois que je l’ai vue, c’était au Luxembourg, elle y venait; au commencement je n’y faisais pas grande attention, et puis je ne sais pas comment cela s’est fait, j’en suis devenu amoureux. Oh! comme cela m’a rendu malheureux! Enfin je la vois maintenant, tous les jours, chez elle, son père ne sait pas, imaginez qu’ils vont partir, c’est dans le jardin que nous nous voyons, le soir, son père veut l’emmener en Angleterre, alors je me suis dit: Je vais aller voir mon grand-père et lui conter la chose. Je deviendrais fou d’abord, je mourrais, je ferais une maladie, je me jetterais à l'eau. Il faut absolument que je l'épouse, puisque je deviendrais fou. Enfin voilà toute la vérité, je ne crois pas que j'aie oublié quelque chose. Elle demeure dans un jardin où il y a une grille, rue Plumet. C'est du côté des Invalides.

Le père Gillenormand s'était assis radieux près de Marius. Tout en l'écoutant et en savourant le son de sa voix, il savourait en même temps une longue prise de tabac. À ce mot, rue Plumet, il interrompit son aspiration, et laissa tomber le reste de son tabac sur ses genoux.

— Rue Plumet! tu dis rue plumet? — Voyons donc! — N'y a-t-il pas une caserne par là? — Mais oui, c'est ça. Ton cousin Théodule m'en a parlé. Le lancier, l'officier. — Une fillette, mon bon ami, une fillette! — Pardieu oui, rue Plumet. C'est ce qu'on appelait autrefois la rue Blomet. — Voilà que ça me revient. J'en ai entendu parler de cette petite de la grille de la rue Plumet. Dans un jardin. Une Paméla. Tu n'as pas mauvais goût. On la dit proprette. Entre nous, je crois que ce dadais de lancier lui a un peu fait la cour. Je ne sais pas jusqu'où cela a été. Enfin ça ne fait rien. D'ailleurs il ne faut pas le croire. Il se vante. Marius! je trouve ça très bien qu'un jeune homme comme toi soit amoureux. C'est de ton âge. Je t'aime mieux amoureux que jacobin. Je t'aime mieux épris d'un cotillon, sapristi! de vingt cotillons que de monsieur de Robespierre. Pour ma part, je me rends cette justice qu'en fait de sans-culottes, je n'ai jamais aimé que les femmes. Les jolies filles sont les jolies filles, que diable! il n'y a pas d'objection à ça. Quant à la petite, elle te reçoit en cachette du papa. C'est dans l'ordre. J'ai eu des histoires comme ça, moi aussi. Plus d'une. Sais-tu ce qu'on fait? On ne prend pas la chose avec férocité; on ne se précipite pas dans le tragique; on ne conclut pas au mariage et à monsieur le maire avec son écharpe. On est tout bêtement un garçon d'esprit. On a du bon sens. Glissez, mortels, n'épousez pas. On vient trouver le grand-père qui est bonhomme au fond, et qui a bien toujours quelques rouleaux de louis dans un vieux tiroir; on lui dit: Grand-père, voilà. Et le grand-père dit: C'est tout simple. Il faut que jeunesse se passe et que vieillesse se casse. J'ai été jeune, tu seras vieux. Va, mon garçon, tu rendras ça à ton petit-fils. Voilà deux cents pistoles. Amuse-toi, mordi! Rien de mieux! C'est ainsi que l'affaire doit se passer. On n'épouse point, mais ça n'empêche pas. Tu me comprends?

Marius, pétrifié et hors d'état d'articuler une parole, fit de la tête signe que non.

Le bonhomme éclata de rire, cligna sa vieille paupière, lui donna une tape sur le genou, le regarda entre deux yeux d'un air mystérieux et rayonnant, et lui dit avec le plus tendre des haussements d'épaules:

— Bêta! fais-en ta maîtresse.

Marius pâlit. Il n'avait rien compris à tout ce que venait de dire son grand-père. Ce rabâchage de rue Blomet, de Paméla, de caserne, de lancier, avait passé devant Marius comme une fantasmagorie. Rien de tout cela ne pouvait se rapporter à Cosette qui était un lys. Le bonhomme divaguait. Mais cette divagation avait abouti à un mot que Marius avait compris et qui était une mortelle injure à Cosette. Ce mot, *fais-en ta maîtresse*, entra dans le cœur du sévère jeune homme comme une épée.

Il se leva, ramassa son chapeau qui était à terre, et marcha vers la porte d'un pas assuré et ferme. Là il se retourna, s'inclina profondément devant son grand-père, redressa la tête, et dit:

— Il y a cinq ans, vous avez outragé mon père; aujourd'hui vous outragez ma femme. Je ne vous demande plus rien, monsieur. Adieu.

Le père Gillenormand, stupéfait, ouvrit la bouche, étendit les bras, essaya de se lever, et, avant qu'il eût pu prononcer un mot, la porte s'était refermée et Marius avait disparu.

Le vieillard resta quelques instants immobile et comme foudroyé sans pouvoir parler ni respirer, comme si un poing fermé lui serrait le gosier. Enfin il s'arracha de son fauteuil, courut à la porte autant qu'on peut courir à quatre-vingt-onze ans, l'ouvrit, et cria:

— Au secours! au secours!

Sa fille parut, puis les domestiques. Il reprit avec un râle lamentable:

— Courez après lui! rattrapez-le! Qu'est-ce que je lui ai fait? Il est fou! il s'en va! Ah! mon Dieu! ah! mon Dieu! cette fois il ne reviendra plus!

Il alla à la fenêtre qui donnait sur la rue, l'ouvrit de ses vieilles mains chevrotantes, se pencha plus d'à mi-corps pendant que Basque et Nicolette le retenaient par-derrière, et cria:

— Marius! Marius! Marius! Marius!

Mais Marius ne pouvait déjà plus entendre, et tournait en ce moment-là même l'angle de la rue Saint-Louis.

L'octogénaire porta deux ou trois fois ses deux mains à ses tempes avec une expression d'angoisse, recula en chancelant et s'affaissa sur un fauteuil, sans pouls, sans voix, sans larmes, branlant la tête et agitant les lèvres d'un air stupide, n’ayant plus rien dans les yeux et dans le cœur que quelque chose de morne et de profond qui ressemblait à la nuit.

Livre neuvième — Où vont-ils?

Chapitre I

Jean Valjean

Ce même jour, vers quatre heures de l’après-midi, Jean Valjean était assis seul sur le revers de l’un des talus les plus solitaires du Champ de Mars. Soit prudence, soit désir de se recueillir, soit tout simplement par suite d’un de ces insensibles changements d’habitudes qui s’introduisent peu à peu dans toutes les existences, il sortait maintenant assez rarement avec Cosette. Il avait sa veste d’ouvrier et un pantalon de toile grise, et sa casquette à longue visière lui cachait le visage. Il était à présent calme et heureux du côté de Cosette; ce qui l’avait quelque peu effrayé et troublé s’était dissipé; mais, depuis une semaine ou deux, des anxiétés d’une autre nature lui étaient venues. Un jour, en se promenant sur le boulevard, il avait aperçu Thénardier; grâce à son déguisement, Thénardier ne l’avait point reconnu; mais depuis lors Jean Valjean l’avait revu plusieurs fois, et il avait maintenant la certitude que Thénardier rôdait dans le quartier. Ceci avait suffi pour lui faire prendre un grand parti. Thénardier là, c’étaient tous les périls à la fois. En outre Paris n’était pas tranquille; les troubles politiques offraient cet inconvénient pour quiconque avait quelque chose à cacher dans sa vie que la police était devenue très inquiète et très ombrageuse, et qu’en cherchant à dépister un homme comme Pépin ou Morey, elle pouvait fort bien découvrir un homme comme Jean Valjean. Jean Valjean s’était décidé à quitter Paris, et même la France, et à passer en Angleterre. Il avait prévenu Cosette. Avant huit jours il voulait être parti. Il s’était assis sur le Champ de Mars, roulant dans son esprit toutes sortes de pensées, Thénardier, la police, le voyage, et la difficulté de se procurer un passeport.

À tous ces points de vue, il était soucieux.

Enfin, un fait inexplicable qui venait de le frapper, et dont il était encore tout chaud, avait ajouté à son éveil. Le matin de ce même jour, seul levé dans la maison, et se promenant dans le jardin avant que les volets de Cosette fussent ouverts, il avait aperçu tout à coup cette ligne gravée sur la muraille, probablement avec un clou.

16, rue de la Verrerie.

Cela était tout récent, les entailles étaient blanches dans le vieux mortier noir, une touffe d’ortie au pied du mur était poudrée de fin plâtre frais. Cela probablement avait été écrit là dans la nuit. Qu’était-ce? une adresse? un signal pour d’autres? un avertissement pour lui? Dans tous les cas, il était évident que le jardin était violé, et que des inconnus y pénétraient. Il se rappela les incidents bizarres qui avaient déjà alarmé la maison. Son esprit travailla sur ce canevas. Il se garda bien de parler à Cosette de la ligne écrite au clou sur le mur, de peur de l’effrayer.

Au milieu de ces préoccupations, il s’aperçut, à une ombre que le soleil projetait, que quelqu’un venait de s’arrêter sur la crête du talus immédiatement derrière lui. Il allait se retourner, lorsqu’un papier plié en quatre tomba sur ses genoux, comme si une main l’eût lâché au-dessus de sa tête. Il prit le papier, le déplia, et y lut ce mot écrit en grosses lettres au crayon:

DÉMÉNAGEZ.

Jean Valjean se leva vivement, il n’y avait plus personne sur le talus; il chercha autour de lui et aperçut une espèce d’être plus grand qu’un enfant, plus petit qu’un homme, vêtu d’une blouse grise et d’un pantalon de velours de coton couleur poussière, qui enjambait le parapet et se laissait glisser dans le fossé du Champ de Mars.

Jean Valjean rentra chez lui sur-le-champ, tout pensif.

Chapitre II

Marius

Marius était parti désolé de chez M. Gillenormand. Il y était entré avec une espérance bien petite; il en sortait avec un désespoir immense.

Du reste, et ceux qui ont observé les commencements du cœur humain le comprendront, le lancier, l'officier, le dadais, le cousin Théodule, n'avait laissé aucune ombre dans son esprit. Pas la moindre. Le poète dramatique pourrait en apparence espérer quelques complications de cette révélation faite à brûle-pourpoint au petit-fils par le grand-père. Mais ce que le drame y gagnerait, la vérité le perdrait. Marius était dans l'âge où, en fait de mal, on ne croit rien; plus tard vient l'âge où l'on croit tout. Les soupçons ne sont autre chose que des rides. La première jeunesse n'en a pas. Ce qui bouleverse Othello, glisse sur Candide. Soupçonner Cosette! il y a une foule de crimes que Marius eût faits plus aisément.

Il se mit à marcher dans les rues, ressource de ceux qui souffrent. Il ne pensa à rien dont il pût se souvenir. À deux heures du matin il rentra chez Courfeyrac et se jeta tout habillé sur son matelas. Il faisait grand soleil lorsqu'il s'endormit de cet affreux sommeil pesant qui laisse aller et venir les idées dans le cerveau. Quand il se réveilla, il vit debout dans la chambre, le chapeau sur la tête, tout prêts à sortir et très affairés, Courfeyrac, Enjolras, Feuilly et Combeferre.

Courfeyrac lui dit:

— Viens-tu à l'enterrement du général Lamarque?

Il lui sembla que Courfeyrac parlait chinois.

Il sortit quelque temps après eux. Il mit dans sa poche les pistolets que Javert lui avait confiés lors de l'aventure du 3 février et qui étaient restés entre ses mains. Ces pistolets étaient encore chargés. Il serait difficile de dire quelle pensée obscure il avait dans l'esprit en les emportant.

Toute la journée il rôda sans savoir où; il pleuvait par instants, il ne s'en apercevait point; il acheta pour son dîner une flûte d'un sou chez un boulanger, la mit dans sa poche et l'oublia. Il paraît qu'il prit un bain dans la Seine sans en avoir conscience. Il y a des moments où l'on a une fournaise sous le crâne. Marius était dans un de ces moments-là. Il n'espérait plus rien; il ne craignait plus rien; il avait fait ce pas depuis la veille. Il attendait le soir avec une impatience fiévreuse, il n’avait plus qu’une idée claire, — c’est qu’à neuf heures il verrait Cosette. Ce dernier bonheur était maintenant tout son avenir; après, l’ombre. Par intervalles, tout en marchant sur les boulevards les plus déserts, il lui semblait, entendre dans Paris des bruits étranges. Il sortait la tête hors de sa rêverie et disait: Est-ce qu’on se bat?

À la nuit tombante, à neuf heures précises, comme il l’avait promis à Cosette, il était rue Plumet. Quand il approcha de la grille, il oublia tout. Il y avait quarante-huit heures qu’il n’avait vu Cosette, il allait la revoir; toute autre pensée s’effaça et il n’eut plus qu’une joie inouïe et profonde. Ces minutes où l’on vit des siècles ont toujours cela de souverain et d’admirable qu’au moment où elles passent elles emplissent entièrement le cœur.

Marius dérangea la grille et se précipita dans le jardin. Cosette n’était pas à la place où elle l’attendait d’ordinaire. Il traversa le fourré et alla à l’enfoncement près du perron. — Elle m’attend là, dit-il. — Cosette n’y était pas. Il leva les yeux et vit que les volets de la maison étaient fermés. Il fit le tour du jardin, le jardin était désert. Alors il revint à la maison, et, insensé d’amour, ivre, épouvanté, exaspéré de douleur et d’inquiétude, comme un maître qui rentre chez lui à une mauvaise heure, il frappa aux volets. Il frappa, il frappa encore, au risque de voir la fenêtre s’ouvrir et la face sombre du père apparaître et lui demander: Que voulez-vous? Ceci n’était plus rien auprès de ce qu’il entrevoyait. Quand il eut frappé, il éleva la voix et appela Cosette. — Cosette! cria-t-il. Cosette! répéta-t-il impérieusement. On ne répondit pas. C’était fini. Personne dans le jardin; personne dans la maison.

Marius fixa ses yeux désespérés sur cette maison lugubre, aussi noire, aussi silencieuse et plus vide qu’une tombe. Il regarda le banc de pierre où il avait passé tant d’adorables heures près de Cosette. Alors il s’assit sur les marches du perron, le cœur plein de douceur et de résolution, il bénit son amour dans le fond de sa pensée, et il se dit que, puisque Cosette était partie, il n’avait plus qu’à mourir.

Tout à coup il entendit une voix qui paraissait venir de la rue et qui criait à travers les arbres:

— Monsieur Marius!

Il se dressa.

— Hein? dit-il.

— Monsieur Marius, êtes-vous là?

— Oui.

— Monsieur Marius, reprit la voix, vos amis vous attendent à la barricade de la rue de la Chanvrerie.

Cette voix ne lui était pas entièrement inconnue. Elle ressemblait à la voix enrouée et rude d'Éponine. Marius courut à la grille, écarta le barreau mobile, passa sa tête au travers et vit quelqu'un, qui lui parut être un jeune homme, s'enfoncer en courant dans le crépuscule.

Chapitre III

M. Mabeuf

La bourse de Jean Valjean fut inutile à M. Mabeuf. M. Mabeuf, dans sa vénérable austérité enfantine, n'avait point accepté le cadeau des astres; il n'avait point admis qu'une étoile pût se monnayer en louis d'or. Il n'avait pas deviné que ce qui tombait du ciel venait de Gavroche. Il avait porté la bourse au commissaire de police du quartier, comme objet perdu mis par le trouveur à la disposition des réclamants. La bourse fut perdue en effet. Il va sans dire que personne ne la réclama, et elle ne secourut point M. Mabeuf.

Du reste, M. Mabeuf avait continué de descendre.

Les expériences sur l'indigo n'avaient pas mieux réussi au Jardin des plantes que dans son jardin d'Austerlitz. L'année d'auparavant, il devait les gages de sa gouvernante; maintenant, on l'a vu, il devait les termes de son loyer. Le mont-de-piété, au bout des treize mois écoulés, avait vendu les cuivres de sa *Flore*. Quelque chaudronnier en avait fait des casseroles. Ses cuivres disparus, ne pouvant plus compléter même les exemplaires dépareillés de sa *Flore* qu'il possédait encore, il avait cédé à vil prix à un libraire-brocanteur planches et texte, comme *défets*. Il ne lui était plus rien resté de l'œuvre de toute sa vie. Il se mit à manger l'argent de ces exemplaires. Quand il vit que cette chétive ressource s'épuisait, il renonça à son jardin et le laissa en friche. Auparavant, et longtemps auparavant, il avait renoncé aux deux œufs et au morceau de bœuf qu'il mangeait de temps en temps. Il dînait avec du pain et des pommes de terre. Il avait vendu ses derniers meubles, puis tout ce qu'il avait en double en fait de literie, de vêtements et de couvertures, puis ses herbiers et ses estampes; mais il avait encore ses livres les plus précieux, parmi lesquels plusieurs d'une haute rareté, entre autres *les Quadrains historiques de la Bible*, édition de 1560, *la Concordance des Bibles* de Pierre de Besse, *les Marguerites de la Marguerite* de Jean de La Haye avec dédicace à la reine de Navarre, le livre *de la Charge et dignité de l'ambassadeur* par le sieur de Villiers-Hotman, un *Florilegium rabbinicum* de 1644, un Tibulle de 1567 avec cette splendide inscription: *Venetiis, in oedibus Manutianis;* enfin un Diogène Laërce, imprimé à Lyon en 1644, et où se trouvaient les fameuses variantes du manuscrit 411, treizième siècle, du Vatican, et celles des deux manuscrits de Venise, 393 et 394, si fructueusement consultés par Henri Estienne, et tous les passages en dialecte dorique qui ne se trouvent que dans le célèbre manuscrit du douzième siècle de la bibliothèque de Naples. M. Mabeuf ne faisait jamais de feu dans sa chambre et se couchait avec le jour pour ne pas brûler de chandelle. Il semblait qu'il n'eût plus de voisins, on l'évitait quand il sortait, il s'en apercevait. La misère d'un enfant intéresse une mère, la misère d'un jeune homme intéresse une jeune fille, la misère d'un vieillard n'intéresse personne. C'est de toutes les détresses la plus froide. Cependant le père Mabeuf n'avait pas entièrement perdu sa sérénité d'enfant. Sa prunelle prenait quelque vivacité lorsqu'elle se fixait sur ses livres, et il souriait lorsqu'il considérait le Diogène Laërce, qui était un exemplaire unique. Son armoire vitrée était le seul meuble qu'il eût conservé en dehors de l'indispensable.

Un jour la mère Plutarque lui dit:

— Je n'ai pas de quoi acheter le dîner.

Ce qu'elle appelait le dîner, c'était un pain et quatre ou cinq pommes de terre.

— À crédit? fit M. Mabeuf.

— Vous savez bien qu'on me refuse.

M. Mabeuf ouvrit sa bibliothèque, regarda longtemps tous ses livres l'un après l'autre, comme un père obligé de décimer ses enfants les regarderait avant de choisir, puis en prit un vivement, le mit sous son bras, et sortit. Il rentra deux heures après n'ayant plus rien sous le bras, posa trente sous sur la table et dit:

— Vous ferez à dîner.

À partir de ce moment, la mère Plutarque vit s'abaisser sur le candide visage du vieillard un voile sombre qui ne se releva plus.

Le lendemain, le surlendemain, tous les jours, il fallut recommencer. M. Mabeuf sortait avec un livre et rentrait avec une pièce d'argent. Comme les libraires brocanteurs le voyaient forcé de vendre, ils lui rachetaient vingt sous ce qu'il avait payé vingt francs, quelquefois aux mêmes libraires. Volume à volume, toute la bibliothèque y passait. Il disait par moments: J'ai pourtant quatre-vingts ans, comme s'il avait je ne sais quelle arrière-espérance d'arriver à la fin de ses jours avant d'arriver à la fin de ses livres. Sa tristesse croissait. Une fois pourtant il eut une joie. Il sortit avec un Robert Estienne qu'il vendit trente-cinq sous quai Malaquais et revint avec un Alde qu’il avait acheté quarante sous rue des Grès. — Je dois cinq sous, dit-il tout rayonnant à la mère Plutarque. Ce jour-là il ne dîna point.

Il était de la Société d’horticulture. On y savait son dénûment. Le président de cette société le vint voir, lui promit de parler de lui au ministre de l’Agriculture et du Commerce, et le fit. — Mais comment donc! s’écria le ministre. Je crois bien! Un vieux savant! un botaniste! un bonhomme inoffensif! Il faut faire quelque chose pour lui! Le lendemain M. Mabeuf reçut une invitation à dîner chez le ministre. Il montra en tremblant de joie la lettre à la mère Plutarque. — Nous sommes sauvés! dit-il. Au jour fixé, il alla chez le ministre. Il s’aperçut que sa cravate chiffonnée, son grand vieil habit carré et ses souliers cirés à l’œuf étonnaient les huissiers. Personne ne lui parla, pas même le ministre. Vers dix heures du soir, comme il attendait toujours une parole, il entendit la femme du ministre, belle dame décolletée dont il n’avait osé s’approcher, qui demandait: Quel est donc ce vieux monsieur? Il s’en retourna chez lui à pied, à minuit, par une pluie battante. Il avait vendu un Elzévir pour payer son fiacre en allant.

Tous les soirs avant de se coucher il avait pris l’habitude de lire quelques pages de son Diogène Laërce. Il savait assez de grec pour jouir des particularités du texte qu’il possédait. Il n’avait plus maintenant d’autre joie. Quelques semaines s’écoulèrent. Tout à coup la mère Plutarque tomba malade. Il est une chose plus triste que de n’avoir pas de quoi acheter du pain chez le boulanger, c’est de n’avoir pas de quoi acheter des drogues chez l’apothicaire. Un soir, le médecin avait ordonné une potion fort chère. Et puis, la maladie s’aggravait, il fallait une garde. M. Mabeuf ouvrit sa bibliothèque, il n’y avait plus rien. Le dernier volume était parti. Il ne lui restait que le Diogène Laërce.

Il mit l’exemplaire unique sous son bras et sortit, c’était le 4 juin 1832; il alla porte Saint-Jacques chez le successeur de Royol, et revint avec cent francs. Il posa la pile de pièces de cinq francs sur la table de nuit de la vieille servante et rentra dans sa chambre sans dire une parole.

Le lendemain, dès l’aube, il s’assit sur la borne renversée dans son jardin, et par-dessus la haie on put le voir toute la matinée immobile, le front baissé, l’œil vaguement fixé sur ses plates-bandes flétries. Il pleuvait par instants, le vieillard ne semblait pas s’en apercevoir. Dans l’après-midi, des bruits extraordinaires éclatèrent dans Paris. Cela ressemblait à des coups de fusil et aux clameurs d’une multitude.

Le père Mabeuf leva la tête. Il aperçut un jardinier qui passait, et demanda:

— Qu’est-ce que c’est?

Le jardinier répondit, sa bêche sur le dos, et de l’accent le plus paisible:

— Ce sont des émeutes.

— Comment! des émeutes?

— Oui. On se bat.

— Pourquoi se bat-on?

— Ah! dame! fit le jardinier.

— De quel côté? reprit M. Mabeuf.

— Du côté de l’Arsenal.

Le père Mabeuf rentra chez lui, prit son chapeau, chercha machinalement un livre pour le mettre sous son bras, n’en trouva point, dit: Ah c’est vrai et s’en alla d’un air égaré.

Livre dixième — Le 5 juin 1832

Chapitre I

La surface de la question

De quoi se compose l’émeute? De rien et de tout. D’une électricité dégagée peu à peu, d’une flamme subitement jaillie, d’une force qui erre, d’un souffle qui passe. Ce souffle rencontre des têtes qui parlent, des cerveaux qui rêvent, des âmes qui souffrent, des passions qui brûlent, des misères qui hurlent, et les emporte.

Où?

Au hasard. À travers l’État, à travers les lois, à travers la prospérité et l’insolence des autres.

Les convictions irritées, les enthousiasmes aigris, les indignations émues, les instincts de guerre comprimés, les jeunes courages exaltés, les aveuglements généreux; la curiosité, le goût du changement, la soif de l’inattendu, le sentiment qui fait qu’on se plaît à lire l’affiche d’un nouveau spectacle et qu’on aime au théâtre le coup de sifflet du machiniste; les haines vagues, les rancunes, les désappointements, toute vanité qui croit que la destinée lui a fait faillite; les malaises, les songes creux, les ambitions entourées d’escarpements; quiconque espère d’un écroulement une issue; enfin, au plus bas, la tourbe, cette boue qui prend feu, tels sont les éléments de l’émeute.

Ce qu’il y a de plus grand et ce qu’il y a de plus infime; les êtres qui rôdent en dehors de tout, attendant une occasion, bohèmes, gens sans aveu, vagabonds de carrefours, ceux qui dorment la nuit dans un désert de maisons sans autre toit que les froides nuées du ciel, ceux qui demandent chaque jour leur pain au hasard et non au travail, les inconnus de la misère et du néant, les bras nus, les pieds nus, appartiennent à l’émeute.

Quiconque a dans l’âme une révolte secrète contre un fait quelconque de l’État, de la vie ou du sort, confine à l’émeute, et, dès qu’elle paraît, commence à frissonner et à se sentir soulevé par le tourbillon.

L’émeute est une sorte de trombe de l’atmosphère sociale qui se forme brusquement dans de certaines conditions de température, et qui, dans son tournoiement, monte, court, tonne, arrache, rase, écrase, démolit, déracine, entraînant avec elle les grandes natures et les chétives, l’homme fort et l’esprit faible, le tronc d’arbre et le brin de paille.

Malheur à celui qu’elle emporte comme à celui qu’elle vient heurter! Elle les brise l’un contre l’autre.

Elle communique à ceux qu’elle saisit on ne sait quelle puissance extraordinaire. Elle emplit le premier venu de la force des événements; elle fait de tout des projectiles. Elle fait d’un moellon un boulet et d’un portefaix un général.

Si l’on en croit de certains oracles de la politique sournoise, au point de vue du pouvoir, un peu d’émeute est souhaitable. Système: l’émeute raffermit les gouvernements qu’elle ne renverse pas. Elle éprouve l’armée; elle concentre la bourgeoisie; elle étire les muscles de la police; elle constate la force de l’ossature sociale. C’est une gymnastique; c’est presque de l’hygiène. Le pouvoir se porte mieux après une émeute comme l’homme après une friction.

L’émeute, il y a trente ans, était envisagée à d’autres points de vue encore.

Il y a pour toute chose une théorie qui se proclame elle-même «le bon sens»; Philinte contre Alceste; médiation offerte entre le vrai et le faux; explication, admonition, atténuation un peu hautaine qui, parce qu’elle est mélangée de blâme et d’excuse, se croit la sagesse et n’est souvent que la pédanterie. Toute une école politique, appelée juste milieu, est sortie de là. Entre l’eau froide et l’eau chaude, c’est le parti de l’eau tiède. Cette école, avec sa fausse profondeur, toute de surface, qui dissèque les effets sans remonter aux causes, gourmande, du haut d’une demi-science, les agitations de la place publique.

À entendre cette école: «Les émeutes qui compliquèrent le fait de 1830 ôtèrent à ce grand événement une partie de sa pureté. La révolution de Juillet avait été un beau coup de vent populaire, brusquement suivi du ciel bleu. Elles firent reparaître le ciel nébuleux. Elles firent dégénérer en querelle cette révolution d’abord si remarquable par l’unanimité. Dans la révolution de Juillet, comme dans tout progrès par saccades, il y avait eu des fractures secrètes; l’émeute les rendit sensibles. On put dire: Ah! ceci est cassé. Après la révolution de Juillet, on ne sentait que la délivrance; après les émeutes, on sentit la catastrophe.

«Toute émeute ferme les boutiques, déprime le fonds, consterne la bourse, suspend le commerce, entrave les affaires, précipite les faillites; plus d’argent; les fortunes privées inquiètes, le crédit public ébranlé, l’industrie déconcertée, les capitaux reculant, le travail au rabais, partout la peur; des contre-coups dans toutes les villes. De là des gouffres. On a calculé que le premier jour d'émeute coûte à la France vingt millions, le deuxième quarante, le troisième soixante. Une émeute de trois jours coûte cent vingt millions, c'est-à-dire, à ne voir que le résultat financier, équivaut à un désastre, naufrage ou bataille perdue, qui anéantirait une flotte de soixante vaisseaux de ligne.

«Sans doute, historiquement, les émeutes eurent leur beauté; la guerre des pavés n'est pas moins grandiose et pas moins pathétique que la guerre des buissons; dans l'une il y a l'âme des forêts, dans l'autre le cœur des villes; l'une a Jean Chouan, l'autre a Jeanne. Les émeutes éclairèrent en rouge, mais splendidement, toutes les saillies les plus originales du caractère parisien, la générosité, le dévouement, la gaîté orageuse, les étudiants prouvant que la bravoure fait partie de l'intelligence, la garde nationale inébranlable, des bivouacs de boutiquiers, des forteresses de gamins, le mépris de la mort chez des passants. Écoles et légions se heurtaient. Après tout, entre les combattants, il n'y avait qu'une différence d'âge; c'est la même race; ce sont les mêmes hommes stoïques qui meurent à vingt ans pour leurs idées, à quarante ans pour leurs familles. L'armée, toujours triste dans les guerres civiles, opposait la prudence à l'audace. Les émeutes, en même temps qu'elles manifestèrent l'intrépidité populaire, firent l'éducation du courage bourgeois.

«C'est bien. Mais tout cela vaut-il le sang versé? Et au sang versé ajoutez l'avenir assombri, le progrès compromis, l'inquiétude parmi les meilleurs, les libéraux honnêtes désespérant, l'absolutisme étranger heureux de ces blessures faites à la révolution par elle-même, les vaincus de 1830 triomphant, et disant: Nous l'avions bien dit! Ajoutez Paris grandi peut-être, mais à coup sûr la France diminuée. Ajoutez, car il faut tout dire, les massacres qui déshonoraient trop souvent la victoire de l'ordre devenu féroce sur la liberté devenue folle. Somme toute, les émeutes ont été funestes.»

Ainsi parle cet à peu près de sagesse dont la bourgeoisie, cet à peu près de peuple, se contente si volontiers.

Quant à nous, nous rejetons ce mot trop large et par conséquent trop commode: les émeutes. Entre un mouvement populaire et un mouvement populaire, nous distinguons. Nous ne nous demandons pas si une émeute coûte autant qu'une bataille. D'abord pourquoi une bataille? Ici la question de la guerre surgit. La guerre est-elle moins fléau que l'émeute n'est calamité? Et puis, toutes les émeutes sont-elles calamités? Et quand le 14 juillet coûterait cent vingt millions? L'établissement de Philippe V en Espagne a coûté à la France deux milliards. Même à prix égal, nous préférerions le 14 juillet. D'ailleurs nous repoussons ces chiffres, qui semblent des raisons et qui ne sont que des mots. Une émeute étant donnée, nous l'examinons en elle-même. Dans tout ce que dit l'objection doctrinaire exposée plus haut, il n'est question que de l'effet, nous cherchons la cause.

Nous précisons.

Chapitre II

Le fond de la question

Il y a l’émeute, et il y a l’insurrection; ce sont deux colères; l’une a tort, l’autre a droit. Dans les états démocratiques, les seuls fondés en justice, il arrive quelquefois que la fraction usurpe; alors le tout se lève, et la nécessaire revendication de son droit peut aller jusqu’à la prise d’armes. Dans toutes les questions qui ressortissent à la souveraineté collective, la guerre du tout contre la fraction est insurrection, l’attaque de la fraction contre le tout est émeute; selon que les Tuileries contiennent le roi ou contiennent la Convention, elles sont justement ou injustement attaquées. Le même canon braqué contre la foule a tort le 10 août et raison le 14 vendémiaire. Apparence semblable, fond différent; les Suisses défendent le faux, Bonaparte défend le vrai. Ce que le suffrage universel a fait dans sa liberté et dans sa souveraineté, ne peut être défait par la rue. De même dans les choses de pure civilisation; l’instinct des masses, hier clairvoyant, peut demain être trouble. La même furie est légitime contre Terray et absurde contre Turgot. Les bris de machines, les pillages d’entrepôts, les ruptures de rails, les démolitions de docks, les fausses routes des multitudes, les dénis de justice du peuple au progrès, Ramus assassiné par les écoliers, Rousseau chassé de Suisse à coups de pierre, c’est l’émeute. Israël contre Moïse, Athènes contre Phocion, Rome contre Scipion, c’est l’émeute; Paris contre la Bastille, c’est l’insurrection. Les soldats contre Alexandre, les matelots contre Christophe Colomb, c’est la même révolte; révolte impie; pourquoi? C’est qu’Alexandre fait pour l’Asie avec l’épée ce que Christophe Colomb fait pour l’Amérique avec la boussole; Alexandre, comme Colomb, trouve un monde. Ces dons d’un monde à la civilisation sont de tels accroissements de lumière que toute résistance, là, est coupable. Quelquefois le peuple se fausse fidélité à lui-même. La foule est traître au peuple. Est-il, par exemple, rien de plus étrange que cette longue et sanglante protestation des faux saulniers, légitime révolte chronique, qui, au moment décisif, au jour du salut, à l’heure de la victoire populaire, épouse le trône, tourne chouannerie, et d’insurrection contre se fait émeute pour! Sombres chefs-d’œuvre de l’ignorance! Le faux saulnier échappe aux potences royales, et, un reste de corde au cou, arbore la cocarde blanche.

Mort aux gabelles accouche de Vive le roi. Tueurs de la Saint-Barthélemy, égorgeurs de Septembre, massacreurs d’Avignon, assassins de Coligny, assassins de madame de Lamballe, assassins de Brune, miquelets, verdets, cadenettes, compagnons de Jéhu, chevaliers du brassard, voilà l’émeute. La Vendée est une grande émeute catholique. Le bruit du droit en mouvement se reconnaît, il ne sort pas toujours du tremblement des masses bouleversées; il y a des rages folles, il y a des cloches fêlées; tous les tocsins ne sonnent pas le son du bronze. Le branle des passions et des ignorances est autre que la secousse du progrès. Levez-vous, soit, mais pour grandir. Montrez-moi de quel côté vous allez. Il n’y a d’insurrection qu’en avant. Toute autre levée est mauvaise. Tout pas violent en arrière est émeute; reculer est une voie de fait contre le genre humain. L’insurrection est l’accès de fureur de la vérité; les pavés que l’insurrection remue jettent l’étincelle du droit. Ces pavés ne laissent à l’émeute que leur boue. Danton contre Louis XVI, c’est l’insurrection; Hébert contre Danton, c’est l’émeute.

De là vient que, si l’insurrection, dans des cas donnés, peut être, comme a dit Lafayette, le plus saint des devoirs, l’émeute peut être le plus fatal des attentats.

Il y a aussi quelque différence dans l’intensité de calorique; l’insurrection est souvent volcan, l’émeute est souvent feu de paille.

La révolte, nous l’avons dit, est quelquefois dans le pouvoir. Polignac est un émeutier; Camille Desmoulins est un gouvernant.

Parfois, insurrection, c’est résurrection.

La solution de tout par le suffrage universel étant un fait absolument moderne, et toute l’histoire antérieure à ce fait étant, depuis quatre mille ans, remplie du droit violé et de la souffrance des peuples, chaque époque de l’histoire apporte avec elle la protestation qui lui est possible. Sous les Césars, il n’y avait pas d’insurrection, mais il y avait Juvénal.

Le *facit indignatio* remplace les Gracques.

Sous les Césars il y a l’exilé de Syène; il y a aussi l’homme des *Annales*.

Nous ne parlons pas de l’immense exilé de Pathmos qui, lui aussi, accable le monde réel d’une protestation au nom du monde idéal, fait de la vision une satire énorme, et jette sur Rome-Ninive, sur Rome-Babylone, sur Rome-Sodome, la flamboyante réverbération de l’Apocalypse.

Jean sur son rocher, c’est le sphinx sur son piédestal; on peut ne pas le comprendre; c’est un juif, et c’est de l’hébreu; mais l’homme qui écrit les

Annales est un latin; disons mieux, c'est un romain.

Comme les Nérons règnent à la manière noire, ils doivent être peints de même. Le travail au burin tout seul serait pâle; il faut verser dans l'entaille une prose concentrée qui morde.

Les despotes sont pour quelque chose dans les penseurs. Parole enchaînée, c'est parole terrible. L'écrivain double et triple son style quand le silence est imposé par un maître au peuple. Il sort de ce silence une certaine plénitude mystérieuse qui filtre et se fige en airain dans la pensée. La compression dans l'histoire produit la concision dans l'historien. La solidité granitique de telle prose célèbre n'est autre chose qu'un tassement fait par le tyran.

La tyrannie contraint l'écrivain à des rétrécissements de diamètre qui sont des accroissements de force. La période cicéronienne, à peine suffisante sur Verrès, s'émousserait sur Caligula. Moins d'envergure dans la phrase, plus d'intensité dans le coup. Tacite pense à bras raccourci.

L'honnêteté d'un grand cœur, condensée en justice et en vérité, foudroie.

Soit dit en passant, il est à remarquer que Tacite n'est pas historiquement superposé à César. Les Tibères lui sont réservés. César et Tacite sont deux phénomènes successifs dont la rencontre semble mystérieusement évitée par celui qui, dans la mise en scène des siècles, règle les entrées et les sorties. César est grand, Tacite est grand; Dieu épargne ces deux grandeurs en ne les heurtant pas l'une contre l'autre. Le justicier, frappant César, pourrait frapper trop, et être injuste. Dieu ne veut pas. Les grandes guerres d'Afrique et d'Espagne, les pirates de Cilicie détruits, la civilisation introduite en Gaule, en Bretagne, en Germanie, toute cette gloire couvre le Rubicon. Il y a là une sorte de délicatesse de la justice divine, hésitant à lâcher sur l'usurpateur illustre l'historien formidable, faisant à César grâce de Tacite, et accordant les circonstances atténuantes au génie.

Certes, le despotisme reste le despotisme, même sous le despote de génie. Il y a corruption sous les tyrans illustres, mais la peste morale est plus hideuse encore sous les tyrans infâmes. Dans Ces règnes-là rien ne voile la honte; et les faiseurs d'exemples, Tacite comme Juvénal, soufflettent plus utilement, en présence du genre humain, cette ignominie sans réplique.

Rome sent plus mauvais sous Vitellius que sous Sylla. Sous Claude et sous Domitien, il y a une difformité de bassesse correspondante à la laideur du tyran. La vilenie des esclaves est un produit direct du despote; un miasme s’exhale de ces consciences croupies où se reflète le maître; les pouvoirs publics sont immondes; les cœurs sont petits, les consciences sont plates, les âmes sont punaises; cela est ainsi sous Caracalla, cela est ainsi sous Commode, cela est ainsi sous Héliogabale, tandis qu’il ne sort du sénat romain sous César que l’odeur de fiente propre aux aires d’aigle.

De là la venue, en apparence tardive, des Tacite et des Juvénal; c’est à l’heure de l’évidence que le démonstrateur paraît.

Mais Juvénal et Tacite, de même qu’Isaïe aux temps bibliques, de même que Dante au moyen âge, c’est l’homme; l’émeute et l’insurrection, c’est la multitude, qui tantôt a tort, tantôt a raison.

Dans les cas les plus généraux, l’émeute sort d’un fait matériel; l’insurrection est toujours un phénomène moral. L’émeute, c’est Masaniello; l’insurrection, c’est Spartacus. L’insurrection confine à l’esprit, l’émeute à l’estomac. Gaster s’irrite; mais Gaster, certes, n’a pas toujours tort. Dans les questions de famine, l’émeute, Buzançais, par exemple, a un point de départ vrai, pathétique et juste. Pourtant elle reste émeute. Pourquoi? c’est qu’ayant raison au fond, elle a eu tort dans la forme. Farouche, quoique ayant droit, violente, quoique forte, elle a frappé au hasard; elle a marché comme l’éléphant aveugle, en écrasant; elle a laissé derrière elle des cadavres de vieillards, de femmes et d’enfants; elle a versé, sans savoir pourquoi, le sang des inoffensifs et des innocents. Nourrir le peuple est un bon but, le massacrer est un mauvais moyen.

Toutes les protestations armées, même les plus légitimes, même le 10 août, même le 14 juillet, débutent par le même trouble. Avant que le droit se dégage, il y a tumulte et écume. Au commencement l’insurrection est émeute, de même que le fleuve est torrent. Ordinairement elle aboutit à cet océan: révolution. Quelquefois pourtant, venue de ces hautes montagnes qui dominent l’horizon moral, la justice, la sagesse, la raison, le droit, faite de la plus pure neige de l’idéal, après une longue chute de roche en roche, après avoir reflété le ciel dans sa transparence et s’être grossie de cent affluents dans la majestueuse allure du triomphe, l’insurrection se perd tout à coup dans quelque fondrière bourgeoise, comme le Rhin dans un marais.

Tout ceci est du passé, l’avenir est autre. Le suffrage universel a cela d’admirable qu’il dissout l’émeute dans son principe, et qu’en donnant le vote à l’insurrection, il lui ôte l’arme. L’évanouissement des guerres, de la guerre des rues comme de la guerre des frontières, tel est l’inévitable progrès. Quel que soit aujourd’hui, la paix, c’est Demain.

Du reste, insurrection, émeute, en quoi la première diffère de la seconde, le bourgeois, proprement dit, connaît peu ces nuances. Pour lui tout est sédition, rébellion pure et simple, révolte du dogue contre le maître, essai de morsure qu'il faut punir de la chaîne et de la niche, aboiement, jappement; jusqu'au jour où la tête du chien, grossie tout à coup, s'ébauche vaguement dans l'ombre en face de lion.

Alors le bourgeois crie: Vive le peuple!

Cette explication donnée, qu'est-ce pour l'histoire que le mouvement de juin 1832? est-ce une émeute? est-ce une insurrection?

C'est une insurrection.

Il pourra nous arriver, dans cette mise en scène d'un événement redoutable, de dire parfois l'émeute, mais seulement pour qualifier les faits de surface, et en maintenant toujours la distinction entre la forme émeute et le fond insurrection.

Ce mouvement de 1832 a eu, dans son explosion rapide et dans son extinction lugubre, tant de grandeur que ceux-là mêmes qui n'y voient qu'une émeute n'en parlent pas sans respect. Pour eux, c'est comme un reste de 1830. Les imaginations émues, disent-ils, ne se calment pas en un jour. Une révolution ne se coupe pas à pic. Elle a toujours nécessairement quelques ondulations avant de revenir à l'état de paix comme une montagne en redescendant vers la plaine. Il n'y a point d'Alpes sans Jura, ni de Pyrénées sans Asturies.

Cette crise pathétique de l'histoire contemporaine que la mémoire des Parisiens appelle *l'époque des émeutes*, est à coup sûr une heure caractéristique parmi les heures orageuses de ce siècle.

Un dernier mot avant d'entrer dans le récit.

Les faits qui vont être racontés appartiennent à cette réalité dramatique et vivante que l'histoire néglige quelquefois, faute de temps et d'espace. Là pourtant, nous y insistons, là est la vie, la palpitation, le frémissement humain. Les petits détails, nous croyons l'avoir dit, sont, pour ainsi parler, le feuillage des grands événements et se perdent dans les lointains de l'histoire. L'époque dite *des émeutes* abonde en détails de ce genre. Les instructions judiciaires, par d'autres raisons que l'histoire, n'ont pas tout révélé, ni peut-être tout approfondi. Nous allons donc mettre en lumière, parmi les particularités connues et publiées, des choses qu'on n'a point sues, des faits sur lesquels a passé l'oubli des uns, la mort des autres. La plupart des acteurs de ces scènes gigantesques ont disparu; dès le lendemain ils se taisaient; mais ce que nous raconterons, nous pouvons dire: nous l’avons vu. Nous changerons quelques noms, car l’histoire raconte et ne dénonce pas, mais nous peindrons des choses vraies. Dans les conditions du livre que nous écrivons, nous ne montrerons qu’un côté et qu’un épisode, et à coup sûr le moins connu, des journées des 5 et 6 juin 1832; mais nous ferons en sorte que le lecteur entrevoie, sous le sombre voile que nous allons soulever, la figure réelle de cette effrayante aventure publique.

Chapitre III

Un enterrement: occasion de renaître

Au printemps de 1832, quoique depuis trois mois le choléra eût glacé les esprits et jeté sur leur agitation je ne sais quel morne apaisement, Paris était dès longtemps prêt pour une commotion. Ainsi que nous l'avons dit, la grande ville ressemble à une pièce de canon; quand elle est chargée, il suffit d'une étincelle qui tombe, le coup part. En juin 1832, l'étincelle fut la mort du général Lamarque.

Lamarque était un homme de renommée et d'action. Il avait eu successivement, sous l'Empire et sous la Restauration, les deux bravoures nécessaires aux deux époques, la bravoure des champs de bataille et la bravoure de la tribune. Il était éloquent comme il avait été vaillant; on sentait une épée dans sa parole. Comme Foy, son devancier, après avoir tenu haut le commandement, il tenait haut la liberté. Il siégeait entre la gauche et l'extrême gauche, aimé du peuple parce qu'il acceptait les chances de l'avenir, aimé de la foule parce qu'il avait bien servi l'Empereur. Il était, avec les comtes Gérard et Drouet, un des maréchaux *in petto* de Napoléon. Les traités de 1815 le soulevaient comme une offense personnelle. Il baissait Wellington d'une haine directe qui plaisait à la multitude; et depuis dix-sept ans, à peine attentif aux événements intermédiaires, il avait majestueusement gardé la tristesse de Waterloo. Dans son agonie, à sa dernière heure, il avait serré contre sa poitrine une épée que lui avaient décernée les officiers des Cent-Jours. Napoléon était mort en prononçant le mot *armée*, Lamarque en prononçant le mot *patrie*.

Sa mort, prévue, était redoutée du peuple comme une perte et du gouvernement comme une occasion. Cette mort fut un deuil. Comme tout ce qui est amer, le deuil peut se tourner en révolte. C'est ce qui arriva.

La veille et le matin du 5 juin, jour fixé pour l'enterrement de Lamarque, le faubourg Saint-Antoine, que le convoi devait venir toucher, prit un aspect redoutable. Ce tumultueux réseau de rues s'emplit de rumeurs. On s'y armait comme on pouvait. Des menuisiers emportaient le valet de leur établi «pour enfoncer les portes». Un d'eux s'était fait un poignard d'un crochet de chaussonnier en cassant le crochet et en aiguisant le tronçon. Un autre, dans la fièvre «d'attaquer», couchait depuis trois jours tout habillé. Un charpentier nommé Lombier rencontrait un camarade qui lui demandait: Où vas-tu? — Eh bien! je n’ai pas d’armes. — Et puis? Je vais à mon chantier chercher mon compas. — Pour quoi faire? — Je ne sais pas, disait Lombier. Un nommé Jacqueline, homme d’expédition, abordait les ouvriers quelconques qui passaient: — Viens, toi! — Il payait dix sous de vin, et disait: — As-tu de l’ouvrage? — Non. — Va chez Filspierre, entre la barrière Montreuil et la barrière Charonne, tu trouveras de l’ouvrage. On trouvait chez Filspierre des cartouches et des armes. Certains chefs connus *faisaient la poste,* c’est-à-dire couraient chez l’un et chez l’autre pour rassembler leur monde. Chez Barthélemy, près la barrière du Trône, chez Capel, au Petit-Chapeau, les buveurs s’accostaient d’un air grave. On les entendait se dire: — *Où as-tu ton pistolet? — Sous ma blouse. Et toi? — Sous ma chemise*, Rue Traversière, devant l’atelier Roland, et cour de la Maison-Brûlée devant l’atelier de l’outilleur Bernier, des groupes chuchotaient. On y remarquait, comme le plus ardent, un certain Mavot, qui ne faisait jamais plus d’une semaine dans un atelier, les maîtres le renvoyant «parce qu’il fallait tous les jours se disputer avec lui». Mavot fut tué le lendemain dans la barricade de la rue Ménilmontant. Pretot, qui devait mourir aussi dans la lutte, secondait Mavot, et à cette question: Quel est ton but? répondait: — *L’insurrection*. Des ouvriers rassemblés au coin de la rue de Bercy attendaient un nommé Lemarin, agent révolutionnaire pour le faubourg Saint-Marceau. Des mots d’ordre s’échangeaient presque publiquement.

Le 5 juin donc, par une journée mêlée de pluie et de soleil, le convoi du général Lamarque traversa Paris avec la pompe militaire officielle, un peu accrue par les précautions. Deux bataillons, tambours drapés, fusils renversés, dix mille gardes nationaux, le sabre au côté, les batteries de l’artillerie de la garde nationale, escortaient le cercueil. Le corbillard était traîné par des jeunes gens. Les officiers des Invalides le suivaient immédiatement, portant des branches de laurier. Puis venait une multitude innombrable, agitée, étrange, les sectionnaires des Amis du Peuple, l’École de droit, l’École de médecine, les réfugiés de toutes les nations, drapeaux espagnols, italiens, allemands, polonais, drapeaux tricolores horizontaux, toutes les bannières possibles, des enfants agitant des branches vertes, des tailleurs de pierre et des charpentiers qui faisaient grève en ce moment-là même, des imprimeurs reconnaissables à leurs bonnets de papier, marchant deux par deux, trois par trois, poussant des cris, agitant presque tous des bâtons, quelques-uns des sabres, sans ordre et pourtant avec une seule âme, tantôt une cohue, tantôt une colonne. Des pelotons se choisissaient des chefs; un homme, armé d'une paire de pistolets parfaitement visible, semblait en passer d'autres en revue dont les files s'écartaient devant lui. Sur les contre-allées des boulevards, dans les branches des arbres, aux balcons, aux fenêtres, sur les toits, les têtes fourmillaient, hommes, femmes, enfants; les yeux étaient pleins d'anxiété. Une foule armée passait, une foule effarée regardait.

De son côté le gouvernement observait. Il observait, la main sur la poignée de l'épée. On pouvait voir, tout prêts à marcher, gibernes pleines, fusils et mousquetons chargés, place Louis XV, quatre escadrons de carabiniers, en selle et clairons en tête, dans le pays latin et au Jardin des plantes, la garde municipale, échelonnée de rue en rue, à la Halle-aux-vins un escadron de dragons, à la Grève une moitié du 12ème léger, l'autre moitié à la Bastille, le 6ème dragons aux Célestins, de l'artillerie plein la cour du Louvre. Le reste des troupes était consigné dans les casernes, sans compter les régiments des environs de Paris. Le pouvoir inquiet tenait suspendus sur la multitude menaçante vingt-quatre mille soldats dans la ville et trente mille dans la banlieue.

Divers bruits circulaient dans le cortège. On parlait de menées légitimistes; on parlait du duc de Reichstadt, que Dieu marquait pour la mort à cette minute même où la foule le désignait pour l'empire. Un personnage resté inconnu annonçait qu'à l'heure dite deux contremaîtres gagnés ouvriraient au peuple les portes d'une fabrique d'armes. Ce qui dominait sur les fronts découverts de la plupart des assistants, c'était un enthousiasme mêlé d'accablement. On voyait aussi çà et là, dans cette multitude en proie à tant d'émotions violentes, mais nobles, de vrais visages de malfaiteurs et des bouches ignobles qui disaient: pillons! Il y a de certaines agitations qui remuent le fond des marais et qui font monter dans l'eau des nuages de boue. Phénomène auquel ne sont point étrangères les polices «bien faites».

Le cortège chemina, avec une lenteur fébrile, de la maison mortuaire par les boulevards jusqu'à la Bastille. Il pleuvait de temps en temps; la pluie ne faisait rien à cette foule. Plusieurs incidents, le cercueil promené autour de la colonne Vendôme, des pierres jetées au duc de Fitz-James aperçu à un balcon le chapeau sur la tête, le coq gaulois arraché d'un drapeau populaire et traîné dans la boue, un sergent de ville blessé d'un coup d'épée à la Porte

Saint-Martin, un officier du 12ème léger disant tout haut: Je suis républicain, l'École polytechnique survenant après sa consigne forcée, les cris: vive l'École polytechnique! vive la République! marquèrent le trajet du convoi. À la Bastille, les longues files de curieux redoutables qui descendaient du faubourg Saint-Antoine firent leur jonction avec le cortège et un certain bouillonnement terrible commença à soulever la foule.

On entendit un homme qui disait à un autre: — Tu vois bien celui-là avec sa barbiche rouge, c'est lui qui dira quand il faudra tirer. Il paraît que cette même barbiche rouge s'est retrouvée plus tard avec la même fonction dans une autre émeute, l'affaire Quénisset.

Le corbillard dépassa la Bastille, suivit le canal, traversa le petit pont et atteignit l'esplanade du pont d'Austerlitz. Là il s'arrêta. En ce moment cette foule vue à vol d'oiseau eût offert l'aspect d'une comète dont la tête était à l'esplanade et dont la queue développée sur le quai Bourdon couvrait la Bastille et se prolongeait sur le boulevard jusqu'à la porte Saint-Martin. Un cercle se traça autour du corbillard. La vaste cohue fit silence. Lafayette parla et dit adieu à Lamarque. Ce fut un instant touchant et auguste, toutes les têtes se découvrirent, tous les cœurs battaient. Tout à coup un homme à cheval, vêtu de noir, parut au milieu du groupe avec un drapeau rouge, d'autres disent avec une pique surmontée d'un bonnet rouge. Lafayette détourna la tête. Excelmans quitta le cortège.

Ce drapeau rouge souleva un orage et y disparut. Du boulevard Bourdon au pont d'Austerlitz une de ces clameurs qui ressemblent à des houles remua la multitude. Deux cris prodigieux s'élevèrent: — *Lamarque au Panthéon! — Lafayette à l'hôtel de ville*! — Des jeunes gens, aux acclamations de la foule, s'attelèrent et se mirent à traîner Lamarque dans le corbillard par le pont d'Austerlitz et Lafayette dans un fiacre par le quai Morland.

Dans la foule qui entourait et acclamait Lafayette, on remarquait et l'on se montrait un Allemand nommé Ludwig Snyder, mort centenaire depuis, qui avait fait lui aussi la guerre de 1776, et qui avait combattu à Trenton sous Washington, et sous Lafayette à Brandywine.

Cependant sur la rive gauche la cavalerie municipale s'ébranlait et venait barrer le pont, sur la rive droite les dragons sortaient des Célestins et se déployaient le long du quai Morland. Le peuple qui traînait Lafayette les aperçut brusquement au coude du quai et cria: les dragons! les dragons! Les dragons s’avançaient au pas, en silence, pistolets dans les fontes, sabres aux fourreaux, Mousquetons aux porte-crosse, avec un air d’attente sombre.

À deux cents pas du petit pont, ils firent halte. Le fiacre où était Lafayette chemina jusqu’à eux, ils ouvrirent les rangs, le laissèrent passer, et se refermèrent sur lui. En ce moment les dragons et la foule se touchaient. Les femmes s’enfuyaient avec terreur.

Que se passa-t-il dans cette minute fatale? personne ne saurait le dire. C’est le moment ténébreux où deux nuées se mêlent. Les uns racontent qu’une fanfare sonnant la charge fut entendue du côté de l’Arsenal, les autres qu’un coup de poignard fut donné par un enfant à un dragon. Le fait est que trois coups de feu partirent subitement, le premier tua le chef d’escadron Cholet, le second tua une vieille sourde qui fermait sa fenêtre rue Contrescarpe, le troisième brûla l’épaulette d’un officier; une femme cria: *On commence trop tôt!* et tout à coup on vit du côté opposé au quai Morland un escadron de dragons qui était resté dans la caserne déboucher au galop, le sabre nu, par la rue Bassompierre et le boulevard Bourdon, et balayer tout devant lui.

Alors tout est dit, la tempête se déchaîne, les pierres pleuvent, la fusillade éclate, beaucoup se précipitent au bas de la berge et passent le petit bras de la Seine aujourd’hui comblé; les chantiers de l’île Louviers, cette vaste citadelle toute faite, se hérissent de combattants; on arrache des pieux, on tire des coups de pistolet, une barricade s’ébauche, les jeunes gens refoulés passent le pont d’Austerlitz avec le corbillard au pas de course et chargent la garde municipale, les carabiniers accourent, les dragons sabrent, la foule se disperse dans tous les sens, une rumeur de guerre vole aux quatre coins de Paris, on crie: aux armes! on court, on culbute, on fuit, on résiste. La colère emporte l’émeute comme le vent emporte le feu.

Chapitre IV

Les bouillonnements d’autrefois

Rien n’est plus extraordinaire que le premier fourmillement d’une émeute. Tout éclate partout à la fois. Était-ce prévu? oui. Était-ce préparé? non. D’où cela sort-il? des pavés. D’où cela tombe-t-il? des nues. Ici l’insurrection a le caractère d’un complot; là d’une improvisation. Le premier venu s’empare d’un courant de la foule et le mène où il veut. Début plein d’épouvante où se mêle une sorte de gaîté formidable. Ce sont d’abord des clameurs, les magasins se ferment, les étalages des marchands disparaissent; puis des coups de feu isolés; des gens s’enfuient; des coups de crosse heurtent les portes cochères; on entend les servantes rire dans les cours des maisons et dire: *Il va y avoir du train!*

Un quart d’heure n’était pas écoulé, voici ce qui se passait presque en même temps sur vingt points de Paris différents.

Rue Sainte-Croix-de-la-Bretonnerie, une vingtaine de jeunes gens, à barbes et à cheveux longs, entraient dans un estaminet et en ressortaient un moment après, portant un drapeau tricolore horizontal couvert d’un crêpe et ayant à leur tête trois hommes armés, l’un d’un sabre, l’autre d’un fusil, le troisième d’une pique.

Rue des Nonaindières, un bourgeois bien vêtu, qui avait du ventre, la voix sonore, le crâne chauve, le front élevé, la barbe noire et une de ces moustaches rudes qui ne peuvent se rabattre, offrait publiquement des cartouches aux passants.

Rue Saint-Pierre-Montmartre, des hommes aux bras nus promenaient un drapeau noir où on lisait ces mots en lettres blanches: *République ou la mort*. Rue des Jeûneurs, rue du Cadran, rue Montorgueil, rue Mandar, apparaissaient des groupes agitant des drapeaux sur lesquels on distinguait des lettres d’or, le mot *section* avec un numéro. Un de ces drapeaux était rouge et bleu avec un imperceptible entre-deux blanc.

On pillait une fabrique d’armes, boulevard Saint-Martin, et trois boutiques d’armuriers, la première rue Beaubourg, la deuxième rue Michel-le-Comte, l’autre, rue du Temple. En quelques minutes les mille mains de la foule saisissaient et emportaient deux cent trente fusils, presque tous à deux coups, soixante-quatre sabres, quatre-vingt-trois pistolets. Afin d'armer plus de monde, l'un prenait le fusil, l'autre la bayonnette.

Vis-à-vis le quai de la Grève, des jeunes gens armés de mousquets, s'installaient chez des femmes pour tirer. L'un d'eux avait un mousquet à rouet. Ils sonnaient, entraient, et se mettaient à faire des cartouches. Une de ces femmes a raconté: *Je ne savais pas ce que c'était que des cartouches, c'est mon mari qui me l'a dit*.

Un rassemblement enfonçait une boutique de curiosités rue des Vieilles-Haudriettes et y prenait des yatagans et des armes turques.

Le cadavre d'un maçon tué d'un coup de fusil gisait rue de la Perle.

Et puis, rive droite, rive gauche, sur les quais, sur les boulevards, dans le pays latin, dans le quartier des halles, des hommes haletants, ouvriers, étudiants, sectionnaires, lisaient des proclamations, criaient: aux armes! brisaient les réverbères, dételaient les voitures, dépavaient les rues, enfonçaient les portes des maisons, déracinaient les arbres, fouillaient les caves, roulaient des tonneaux, entassaient pavés, moellons, meubles, planches, faisaient des barricades.

On forçait les bourgeois d'y aider. On entrait chez les femmes, on leur faisait donner le sabre et le fusil des maris absents, et l'on écrivait avec du blanc d'Espagne sur la porte: *les armes sont livrées*. Quelques-uns signaient «de leurs noms» des reçus du fusil et du sabre, et disaient: *envoyez-les chercher demain à la mairie*. On désarmait dans les rues les sentinelles isolées et les gardes nationaux allant à leur municipalité. On arrachait les épaulettes aux officiers. Rue du Cimetière-Saint-Nicolas, un officier de la garde nationale, poursuivi par une troupe armée de bâtons et de fleurets, se réfugia à grand'peine dans une maison d'où il ne put sortir qu'à la nuit, et déguisé.

Dans le quartier Saint-Jacques, les étudiants sortaient par essaims de leurs hôtels, et montaient rue Saint-Hyacinthe au café du Progrès ou descendaient au café des Sept-Billards, rue des Mathurins. Là, devant les portes, des jeunes gens debout sur des bornes distribuaient des armes. On pillait le chantier de la rue Transnonain pour faire des barricades. Sur un seul point, les habitants résistaient, à l'angle des rues Sainte-Avoye et Simon-le-Franc où ils détruisaient eux-mêmes la barricade. Sur un seul point, les insurgés pliaient; ils abandonnaient une barricade commencée rue du Temple après avoir fait feu sur un détachement de garde nationale, et s'enfuyaient par la rue de la Corderie. Le détachement ramassa dans la barricade un drapeau rouge, un paquet de cartouches et trois cents balles de pistolet. Les gardes nationaux déchirèrent le drapeau et en remportèrent les lambeaux à la pointe de leurs bayonnettes.

Tout ce que nous racontons ici lentement et successivement se faisait à la fois sur tous les points de la ville au milieu d’un vaste tumulte, comme une foule d’éclairs dans un seul roulement de tonnerre.

En moins d’une heure, vingt-sept barricades sortirent de terre dans le seul quartier des halles. Au centre était cette fameuse maison nº 50, qui fut la forteresse de Jeanne et de ses cent six compagnons, et qui, flanquée d’un côté par une barricade à Saint-Merry et de l’autre par une barricade à la rue Maubuée, commandait trois rues, la rue des Arcis, la rue Saint-Martin, et la rue Aubry-le-Boucher qu’elle prenait de front. Deux barricades en équerre se repliaient l’une de la rue Montorgueil sur la Grande-Truanderie, l’autre de la rue Geoffroy-Langevin sur la rue Sainte-Avoye. Sans compter d’innombrables barricades dans vingt autres quartiers de Paris, au Marais, à la montagne Sainte-Geneviève; une, rue Ménilmontant, où l’on voyait une porte cochère arrachée de ses gonds; une autre près du petit pont de l’Hôtel-Dieu faite avec une écossaise dételée et renversée, à trois cents pas de la préfecture de police.

À la barricade de la rue des Ménétriers, un homme bien mis distribuait de l’argent aux travailleurs. À la barricade de la rue Greneta, un cavalier parut et remit à celui qui paraissait le chef de la barricade un rouleau qui avait l’air d’un rouleau d’argent. — *Voilà*, dit-il, *pour payer les dépenses, le vin, et coetera*. Un jeune homme blond, sans cravate, allait d’une barricade à l’autre portant des mots d’ordre. Un autre, le sabre nu, un bonnet de police bleu sur la tête, posait des sentinelles. Dans l’intérieur, en deçà barricades, les cabarets et les loges de portiers étaient convertis en corps de garde. Du reste l’émeute se comportait selon la plus savante tactique militaire. Les rues étroites, inégales, sinueuses, pleines d’angles et de tournants, étaient admirablement choisies; les environs des halles en particulier, réseau de rues plus embrouillé qu’une forêt. La société des Amis du Peuple avait, disait-on, pris la direction de l’insurrection dans le quartier Sainte-Avoye. Un homme tué rue du Ponceau qu’on fouilla avait sur lui un plan de Paris.

Ce qui avait réellement pris la direction de l’émeute, c’était une sorte d’impétuosité inconnue qui était dans l’air. L’insurrection, brusquement, avait bâti les barricades d’une main et de l’autre saisi presque tous les postes de la garnison. En moins de trois heures, comme une traînée de poudre qui s’allume, les insurgés avaient envahi et occupé, sur la rive droite, l’Arsenal, la mairie de la place Royale, tout le Marais, la fabrique d’armes Popincourt, la Galiote, le Château-d’Eau, toutes les rues près des halles; sur la rive gauche, la caserne des Vétérans, Sainte-Pélagie, la place Maubert, la poudrière des Deux-Moulins, toutes les barrières. À cinq heures du soir ils étaient maîtres de la Bastille, de la Lingerie, des Blancs-Manteaux; leurs éclaireurs touchaient la place des Victoires, et menaçaient la Banque, la caserne des Petits-Pères, l’hôtel des Postes. Le tiers de Paris était à l’émeute.

Sur tous les points la lutte était gigantesquement engagée; et, des désarmements, des visites domiciliaires, des boutiques d’armuriers vivement envahies, il résultait ceci que le combat commencé à coups de pierres continuait à coups de fusil.

Vers six heures du soir, le passage du Saumon devenait champ de bataille. L’émeute était à un bout, la troupe au bout opposé. On se fusillait d’une grille à l’autre. Un observateur, un rêveur, l’auteur de ce livre, qui était allé voir le volcan de près, se trouva dans le passage pris entre les deux feux. Il n’avait pour se garantir des balles que le renflement des demi-colonnes qui séparent les boutiques; il fut près d’une demi-heure dans cette situation délicate.

Cependant le rappel battait, les gardes nationaux s’habillaient et s’armaient en hâte, les légions sortaient des mairies, les régiments sortaient des casernes. Vis-à-vis le passage de l’Ancre un tambour recevait un coup de poignard. Un autre, rue du Cygne, était assailli par une trentaine de jeunes gens qui lui crevaient sa caisse et lui prenaient son sabre. Un autre était tué rue Grenier-Saint-Lazare. Rue Michel-le-Comte, trois officiers tombaient morts l’un après l’autre. Plusieurs gardes municipaux, blessés rue des Lombards, rétrogradaient.

Devant la Cour-Batave, un détachement de gardes nationaux trouvait un drapeau rouge portant cette inscription: *Révolution républicaine,* n^{o} 127. Était-ce une révolution en effet?

L’insurrection s’était fait du centre de Paris une sorte de citadelle inextricable, tortueuse, colossale.

Là était le foyer, là était évidemment la question. Tout le reste n’était qu’escarmouches. Ce qui prouvait que tout se déciderait là, c’est qu’on ne s’y battait pas encore.

Dans quelques régiments, les soldats étaient incertains, ce qui ajoutait à l’obscurité effrayante de la crise. Ils se rappelaient l’ovation populaire qui avait accueilli en juillet 1830 la neutralité du 53ème de ligne. Deux hommes intrépides et éprouvés par les grandes guerres, le maréchal de Lobau et le général Bugeaud, commandaient, Bugeaud sous Lobau. D’énormes patrouilles, composées de bataillons de la ligne enfermés dans des compagnies entières de garde nationale, et précédées d’un commissaire de police en écharpe, allaient reconnaître les rues insurgées. De leur côté, les insurgés posaient des vedettes au coin des carrefours et envoyaient audacieusement des patrouilles hors des barricades. On s’observait des deux parts. Le gouvernement, avec une armée dans la main, hésitait; la nuit allait venir et l’on commençait à entendre le tocsin de Saint-Merry. Le ministre de la guerre d’alors, le maréchal Soult, qui avait vu Austerlitz, regardait cela d’un air sombre.

Ces vieux matelots-là, habitués à la manœuvre correcte et n’ayant pour ressource et pour guide que la tactique, cette boussole des batailles, sont tout désorientés en présence de cette immense écume qu’on appelle la colère publique. Le vent des révolutions n’est pas maniable.

Les gardes nationales de la banlieue accouraient en hâte et en désordre. Un bataillon du 12ème léger venait au pas de course de Saint-Denis, le 14ème de ligne arrivait de Courbevoie, les batteries de l’école militaire avaient pris position au Carrousel; des canons descendaient de Vincennes.

La solitude se faisait aux Tuileries, Louis-Philippe était plein de sérénité.

Chapitre V

Originalité de Paris

Depuis deux ans, nous l’avons dit, Paris avait vu plus d’une insurrection. Hors des quartiers insurgés, rien n’est d’ordinaire plus étrangement calme que la physionomie de Paris pendant une émeute. Paris s’accoutume très vite à tout, — ce n’est qu’une émeute, — et Paris a tant d’affaires qu’il ne se dérange pas pour si peu. Ces villes colossales peuvent seules donner de tels spectacles. Ces enceintes immenses peuvent seules contenir en même temps la guerre civile et on ne sait quelle bizarre tranquillité. D’habitude, quand l’insurrection commence, quand on entend le tambour, le rappel, la générale, le boutiquier se borne à dire:

— Il paraît qu’il y a du grabuge rue Saint-Martin.

Ou:

— Faubourg Saint-Antoine.

Souvent il ajoute avec insouciance:

— Quelque part par là.

Plus tard, quand on distingue le vacarme déchirant et lugubre de la mousqueterie et des feux de peloton, le boutiquier dit:

— Ça chauffe donc? Tiens, ça chauffe?

Un moment après, si l’émeute approche et gagne, il ferme précipitamment sa boutique et endosse rapidement son uniforme, c’est-à-dire met ses marchandises en sûreté et risque sa personne.

On se fusille dans un carrefour, dans un passage, dans un cul-de-sac; on prend, perd et reprend des barricades; le sang coule, la mitraille crible les façades des maisons, les balles tuent les gens dans leur alcôve, les cadavres encombrent le pavé. À quelques rues de là, on entend le choc des billes de billard dans les cafés.

Les curieux causent et rient à deux pas de ces rues pleines de guerre; les théâtres ouvrent leurs portes et jouent des vaudevilles. Les fiacres cheminent; les passants vont dîner en ville. Quelquefois dans le quartier même où l’on se bat. En 1831, une fusillade s’interrompit pour laisser passer une noce.

Lors de l’insurrection du 12 mai 1839, rue Saint-Martin, un petit vieux homme infirme traînant une charrette à bras surmontée d’un chiffon tricolore dans laquelle il y avait des carafes emplies d'un liquide quelconque, allait et venait de la barricade à la troupe et de la troupe à la barricade, offrant impartialement des verres de coco — tantôt au gouvernement, tantôt à l'anarchie.

Rien n'est plus étrange; et c'est là le caractère propre des émeutes de Paris qui ne se retrouve dans aucune autre capitale. Il faut pour cela deux choses, la grandeur de Paris, et sa gaîté. Il faut la ville de Voltaire et de Napoléon.

Cette fois cependant, dans la prise d'armes du 5 juin 1832, la grande ville sentit quelque chose qui était peut-être plus fort qu'elle. Elle eut peur. On vit partout, dans les quartiers les plus lointains et les plus «désintéressés», les portes, les fenêtres et les volets fermés en plein jour. Les courageux s'armèrent, les poltrons se cachèrent. Le passant insouciant et affairé disparut. Beaucoup de ces rues étaient vides comme à quatre heures du matin. On colportait des détails alarmants, on répandait des nouvelles fatales. — Qu'*ils* étaient maîtres de la Banque; — que, rien qu'au cloître de Saint-Merry, ils étaient six cents, retranchés et crénelés dans l'église; — que la ligne n'était pas sûre; — qu'Armand Carrel avait été voir le maréchal Clausel, et que le maréchal avait dit: *Ayez d'abord un régiment;* — que Lafayette était malade, mais qu'il leur avait dit pourtant: *Je suis à vous. Je vous suivrai partout où il y aura place pour une chaise;* — qu'il fallait se tenir sur ses gardes; qu'à la nuit il y aurait des gens qui pilleraient les maisons isolées dans les coins déserts de Paris (ici on reconnaissait l'imagination de la police, cette Anne Radcliffe mêlée au gouvernement); — qu'une batterie avait été établie rue Aubry-le-Boucher; — que Lobau et Bugeaud se concertaient et qu'à minuit, ou au point du jour au plus tard, quatre colonnes marcheraient à la fois sur le centre de l'émeute, la première venant de la Bastille, la deuxième de la porte Saint-Martin, la troisième de la Grève, la quatrième des halles; — que peut-être aussi les troupes évacueraient Paris et se retireraient au Champ de Mars; — qu'on ne savait ce qui arriverait, mais qu'à coup sûr, cette fois, c'était grave. — On se préoccupait des hésitations du maréchal Soult. — Pourquoi n'attaquait-il pas tout de suite? — Il est certain qu'il était profondément absorbé. Le vieux lion semblait flairer dans cette ombre un monstre inconnu.

Le soir vint, les théâtres n'ouvrirent pas; les patrouilles circulaient d'un air irrité; on fouillait les passants; on arrêtait les suspects. Il y avait à neuf heures plus de huit cents personnes arrêtées; la préfecture de police était encombrée, la Conciergerie encombrée, la Force encombrée. À la Conciergerie, en particulier, le long souterrain qu'on nomme la rue de Paris était jonché de bottes de paille sur lesquelles gisait un entassement de prisonniers, que l'homme de Lyon, Lagrange, haranguait avec vaillance. Toute cette paille, remuée par tous ces hommes, faisait le bruit d'une averse. Ailleurs les prisonniers couchaient en plein air dans les préaux les uns sur les autres. L'anxiété était partout, et un certain tremblement, peu habituel à Paris.

On se barricadait dans les maisons; les femmes et les mères s'inquiétaient; on n'entendait que ceci: *Ah mon Dieu! il n'est pas rentré!* Il y avait à peine au loin quelques rares roulements de voitures. On écoutait, sur le pas des portes, les rumeurs, les cris, les tumultes, les bruits sourds et indistincts, des choses dont on disait: *C'est la cavalerie*, ou: *Ce sont des caissons qui galopent*, les clairons, les tambours, la fusillade, et surtout ce lamentable tocsin de Saint-Merry. On attendait le premier coup de canon. Des hommes armés surgissaient au coin des rues et disparaissaient en criant: Rentrez chez vous! Et l'on se hâtait de verrouiller les portes. On disait: Comment cela finira-t-il? D'instant en instant, à mesure que la nuit tombait, Paris semblait se colorer plus lugubrement du flamboiement formidable de l'émeute.

Livre onzième — L'atome fraternise avec l'ouragan

Chapitre I

Quelques éclaircissements sur les origines de la poésie de Gavroche. Influence d'un académicien sur cette poésie

À l'instant où l'insurrection, surgissant du choc du peuple et de la troupe devant l'Arsenal, détermina un mouvement d'avant en arrière dans la multitude qui suivait le corbillard et qui, de toute la longueur des boulevards, pesait, pour ainsi dire, sur la tête du convoi, ce fut un effrayant reflux. La cohue s'ébranla, les rangs se rompirent, tous coururent, partirent, s'échappèrent, les uns avec les cris de l'attaque, les autres avec la pâleur de la fuite. Le grand fleuve qui couvrait les boulevards se divisa en un clin d'œil, déborda à droite et à gauche et se répandit en torrents dans deux cents rues à la fois avec le ruissellement d'une écluse lâchée. En ce moment un enfant déguenillé qui descendait par la rue Ménilmontant, tenant à la main une branche de faux-ébénier en fleur qu'il venait de cueillir sur les hauteurs de Belleville, avisa dans la devanture de boutique d'une marchande de bric-à-brac un vieux pistolet d'arçon. Il jeta sa branche fleurie sur le pavé, et cria:

— Mère chose, je vous emprunte votre machin.

Et il se sauva avec le pistolet.

Deux minutes après, un flot de bourgeois épouvantés qui s'enfuyait par la rue Amelot et la rue Basse, rencontra l'enfant qui brandissait son pistolet et qui chantait:

La nuit on ne voit rien,
Le jour on voit très bien,
D'un écrit apocryphe
Le bourgeois s'ébouriffe,
Pratiquez la vertu,
Tutu chapeau pointu!

C'était le petit Gavroche qui s'en allait en guerre.

Sur le boulevard il s'aperçut que le pistolet n'avait pas de chien.

De qui était ce couplet qui lui servait à ponctuer sa marche, et toutes les autres chansons que, dans l'occasion, il chantait volontiers? nous l’ignorons. Qui sait? de lui peut-être. Gavroche d’ailleurs était au courant de tout le fredonnement populaire en circulation, et il y mêlait son propre gazouillement. Farfadet et galopin, il faisait un pot-pourri des voix de la nature et des voix de Paris. Il combinait le répertoire des oiseaux avec le répertoire des ateliers. Il connaissait des rapins, tribu contiguë à la sienne. Il avait, à ce qu’il paraît, été trois mois apprenti imprimeur. Il avait fait un jour une commission pour monsieur Baour-Lormian, l’un des quarante. Gavroche était un gamin de lettres.

Gavroche du reste ne se doutait pas que dans cette vilaine nuit pluvieuse où il avait offert à deux mioches l’hospitalité de son éléphant, c’était pour ses propres frères qu’il avait fait office de providence. Ses frères le soir, son père le matin; voilà quelle avait été sa nuit. En quittant la rue des Ballets au petit jour, il était retourné en hâte à l’éléphant, en avait artistement extrait les deux mômes, avait partagé avec eux le déjeuner quelconque qu’il avait inventé, puis s’en était allé, les confiant à cette bonne mère la rue qui l’avait à peu près élevé lui-même. En les quittant, il leur avait donné rendez-vous pour le soir au même endroit, et leur avait laissé pour adieu ce discours: — *Je casse une canne, autrement dit je m’esbigne, ou, comme on dit à la cour, je file. Les mioches, si vous ne retrouvez pas papa maman, revenez ici ce soir. Je vous ficherai à souper et je vous coucherai*. Les deux enfants, ramassés par quelque sergent de ville et mis au dépôt, ou volés par quelque saltimbanque, ou simplement égarés dans l’immense casse-tête chinois parisien, n’étaient pas revenus. Les bas-fonds du monde social actuel sont pleins de ces traces perdues. Gavroche ne les avait pas revus. Dix ou douze semaines s’étaient écoulées depuis cette nuit-là. Il lui était arrivé plus d’une fois de se gratter le dessus de la tête et de dire: Où diable sont mes deux enfants?

Cependant, il était parvenu, son pistolet au poing, rue du Pont-aux-Choux. Il remarqua qu’il n’y avait plus, dans cette rue, qu’une boutique ouverte, et, chose digne de réflexion, une boutique de pâtissier. C’était une occasion providentielle de manger encore un chausson aux pommes avant d’entrer dans l’inconnu. Gavroche s’arrêta, tâta ses flancs, fouilla son gousset, retourna ses poches, n’y trouva rien, pas un sou, et se mit à crier: Au secours!

Il est dur de manquer le gâteau suprême.

Gavroche n’en continua pas moins son chemin.

Deux minutes après, il était rue Saint-Louis. En traversant la rue du Parc-Royal il sentit le besoin de se dédommager du chausson de pommes impossible, et il se donna l'immense volupté de déchirer en plein jour les affiches de spectacle.

Un peu plus loin, voyant passer un groupe d'êtres bien portants qui lui parurent des propriétaires, il haussa les épaules et cracha au hasard devant lui cette gorgée de bile philosophique:

— Ces rentiers, comme c'est gras! Ça se gave. Ça patauge dans les bons dîners. Demandez-leur ce qu'ils font de leur argent. Ils n'en savent rien. Ils le mangent, quoi! Autant en emporte le ventre.

Chapitre II

Gavroche en marche

L’agitation d’un pistolet sans chien qu’on tient à la main en pleine rue est une telle fonction publique que Gavroche sentait croître sa verve à chaque pas. Il criait, parmi des bribes de la Marseillaise qu’il chantait:

— Tout va bien. Je souffre beaucoup de la patte gauche, je me suis cassé mon rhumatisme, mais je suis content, citoyens. Les bourgeois n’ont qu’à se bien tenir, je vas leur éternuer des couplets subversifs. Qu’est-ce que c’est que les mouchards? c’est des chiens. Nom d’unch! ne manquons pas de respect aux chiens. Avec ça que je voudrais bien en avoir un à mon pistolet. Je viens du boulevard, mes amis, ça chauffe, ça jette un petit bouillon, ça mijote. Il est temps d’écumer le pot. En avant les hommes! qu’un sang impur inonde les sillons! Je donne mes jours pour la patrie, je ne reverrai plus ma concubine, n-i-ni, fini, oui, Nini! mais c’est égal, vive la joie! Battons-nous, crebleu! j’en ai assez du despotisme.

En cet instant, le cheval d’un garde national lancier qui passait s’étant abattu, Gavroche posa son pistolet sur le pavé, et releva l’homme, puis il aida à relever le cheval. Après quoi il ramassa son pistolet et reprit son chemin.

Rue de Thorigny, tout était paix et silence. Cette apathie, propre au Marais, contrastait avec la vaste rumeur environnante. Quatre commères causaient sur le pas d’une porte. L’Écosse a des trios de sorcières, mais Paris a des quatuor de commères; et le «tu seras roi» serait tout aussi lugubrement jeté à Bonaparte dans le carrefour Baudoyer qu’à Macbeth dans la bruyère d’Armuyr. Ce serait à peu près le même croassement.

Les commères de la rue de Thorigny ne s’occupaient que de leurs affaires. C’étaient trois portières et une chiffonnière avec sa hotte et son crochet.

Elles semblaient debout toutes les quatre aux quatre coins de la vieillesse qui sont la caducité, la décrépitude, la ruine et la tristesse.

La chiffonnière était humble. Dans ce monde en plein vent, la chiffonnière salue, la portière protège. Cela tient au coin de la borne qui est ce que veulent les concierges, gras ou maigre, selon la fantaisie de celui qui fait le tas. Il peut y avoir de la bonté dans le balai.

Cette chiffonnière était une hotte reconnaissante, et elle souriait, quel sourire! aux trois portières. Il se disait des choses comme ceci:

— Ah çà, votre chat est donc toujours méchant?

— Mon Dieu, les chats, vous le savez, naturellement sont l'ennemi des chiens. C'est les chiens qui se plaignent.

— Et le monde aussi.

— Pourtant les puces de chat ne vont pas après le monde.

— Ce n'est pas l'embarras, les chiens, c'est dangereux. Je me rappelle une année où il y avait tant de chiens qu'on a été obligé de le mettre dans les journaux. C'était du temps qu'il y avait aux Tuileries de grands moutons qui traînaient la petite voiture du roi de Rome. Vous rappelez-vous le roi de Rome?

— Moi, j'aimais bien le duc de Bordeaux.

— Moi, j'ai connu Louis XVII. J'aime mieux Louis XVII.

— C'est la viande qui est chère, mame Patagon!

— Ah! ne m'en parlez pas, la boucherie est une horreur. Une horreur horrible. On n'a plus que de la réjouissance.

Ici la chiffonnière intervint:

— Mesdames, le commerce ne va pas. Les tas d'ordures sont minables. On ne jette plus rien. On mange tout.

— Il y en a de plus pauvres que vous, la Vargoulême.

— Ah, Ça C'est vrai, répondit la chiffonnière avec déférence, moi j'ai un état.

Il y eut une pause, et la chiffonnière, cédant à ce besoin d'étalage qui est le fond de l'homme, ajouta:

— Le matin en rentrant, j'épluche l'hotte, je fais mon treillage (probablement triage). Ça fait des tas dans ma chambre. Je mets les chiffons dans un panier, les trognons dans un baquet, les linges dans mon placard, les lainages dans ma commode, les vieux papiers dans le coin de la fenêtre, les choses bonnes à manger dans mon écuelle, les morceaux de verre dans la cheminée, les savates derrière la porte, et les os sous mon lit.

Gavroche, arrêté derrière, écoutait:

— Les vieilles, dit-il, qu'est-ce que vous avez donc à parler politique?

Une bordée l'assaillit, composée d'une huée quadruple.

— En voilà encore un scélérat!

— Qu'est-ce qu'il a donc à son moignon? Un pistolet?

— Je vous demande un peu, ce gueux de môme!

— Ça n’est pas tranquille si ça ne renverse pas l’autorité.

Gavroche, dédaigneux, se borna, pour toute représaille, à soulever le bout de son nez avec son pouce en ouvrant sa main toute grande.

La chiffonnière cria:

— Méchant va-nu-pattes!

Celle qui répondait au nom de mame Patagon frappa ses deux mains l’une contre l’autre avec scandale:

— Il va y avoir des malheurs, c’est sûr. Le galopin d’à côté qui a une barbiche, je le voyais passer tous les matins avec une jeunesse en bonnet rose sous le bras, aujourd’hui je l’ai vu passer, il donnait le bras à un fusil. Mame Bacheux dit qu’il y a eu la semaine passée une révolution à... à... à... — où est le veau! — à Pontoise. Et puis le voyez-vous là avec un pistolet, cette horreur de polisson! Il paraît qu’il y a des canons tout plein les Célestins. Comment voulez-vous que fasse le gouvernement avec des garnements qui ne savent qu’inventer pour déranger le monde, quand on commençait à être un peu tranquille après tous les malheurs qu’il y a eu, bon Dieu Seigneur, cette pauvre reine que j’ai vue passer dans la charrette! Et tout ça va encore faire renchérir le tabac. C’est une infamie! Et certainement, j’irai te voir guillotiner, malfaiteur!

— Tu renifles, mon ancienne, dit Gavroche. Mouche ton promontoire.

Et il passa outre.

Quand il fut rue Pavée, la chiffonnière lui revint à l’esprit, et il eut ce soliloque:

— Tu as tort d’insulter les révolutionnaires, mère Coin-de-la-Borne. Ce pistolet-là, c’est dans ton intérêt. C’est pour que tu aies dans ta hotte plus de choses bonnes à manger.

Tout à coup il entendit du bruit derrière lui; c’était la portière Patagon qui l’avait suivi, et qui, de loin, lui montrait le poing en criant:

— Tu n’es qu’un bâtard!

— Ça, dit Gavroche, je m’en fiche d’une manière profonde.

Peu après, il passait devant l’hôtel Lamoignon. Là il poussa cet appel:

— En route pour la bataille!

Et il fut pris d’un accès de mélancolie. Il regarda son pistolet d’un air de reproche qui semblait essayer de l’attendrir.

— Je pars, lui dit-il, mais toi tu ne pars pas.

Un chien peut distraire d’un autre. Un caniche très maigre vint à passer. Gavroche s’apitoya.

— Mon pauvre toutou, lui dit-il, tu as donc avalé un tonneau qu'on te voit tous les cerceaux.

Puis il se dirigea vers l'Orme-Saint-Gervais.

Chapitre III

Juste indignation d'un perruquier

Le digne perruquier qui avait chassé les deux petits auxquels Gavroche avait ouvert l'intestin paternel de l'éléphant, était en ce moment dans sa boutique occupé à raser un vieux soldat légionnaire qui avait servi sous l'Empire. On causait. Le perruquier avait naturellement parlé au vétéran de l'émeute, puis du général Lamarque, et de Lamarque on était venu à l'Empereur. De là une conversation de barbier à soldat, que Prudhomme, s'il eût été présent, eût enrichie d'arabesques, et qu'il eût intitulée: *Dialogue du rasoir et du sabre*.

— Monsieur, disait le perruquier, comment l'Empereur montait-il à cheval?

— Mal. Il ne savait pas tomber. Aussi il ne tombait jamais.

— Avait-il de beaux chevaux? il devait avoir de beaux chevaux?

Le jour où il m'a donné la croix, j'ai remarqué sa bête. C'était une jument coureuse, toute blanche. Elle avait les oreilles très écartées, la selle profonde, une fine tête marquée d'une étoile noire, le cou très long, les genoux fortement articulés, les côtes saillantes, les épaules obliques, l'arrière-main puissante. Un peu plus de quinze palmes de haut.

— Joli cheval, fit le perruquier.

— C'était la bête de sa majesté.

Le perruquier sentit qu'après ce mot, un peu de silence était convenable, il s'y conforma, puis reprit:

— L'Empereur n'a été blessé qu'une fois, n'est-ce pas, monsieur?

Le vieux soldat répondit avec l'accent calme et souverain de l'homme qui y a été.

— Au talon. À Ratisbonne. Je ne l'ai jamais vu si bien mis que ce jour-là. Il était propre comme un sou.

— Et vous, monsieur le vétéran, vous avez dû être souvent blessé?

— Moi? dit le soldat, ah! pas grand'chose. J'ai reçu à Marengo deux coups de sabre sur la nuque, une balle dans le bras droit à Austerlitz, une autre dans la hanche gauche à Iéna, à Friedland un coup de bayonnette là, — à la Moskowa sept ou huit coups de lance n'importe où, à Lutzen un éclat d'obus qui m'a écrasé un doigt... — Ah! et puis à Waterloo un biscaïen dans la cuisse. Voilà tout.

— Comme c’est beau, s’écria le perruquier avec un accent pindarique, de mourir sur le champ de bataille! Moi! parole d’honneur, plutôt que de crever sur le grabat, de maladie, lentement, un peu tous les jours, avec les drogues, les cataplasmes, la seringue et le médecin, j’aimerais mieux recevoir dans le ventre un boulet de canon!

— Vous n’êtes pas dégoûté, fit le soldat.

Il achevait à peine qu’un effroyable fracas ébranla la boutique. Une vitre de la devanture venait de s’étoiler brusquement.

Le perruquier devint blême.

— Ah Dieu! cria-t-il, c’en est un!

— Quoi?

— Un boulet de canon.

— Le voici, dit le soldat.

Et il ramassa quelque chose qui roulait à terre. C’était un caillou.

Le perruquier courut à la vitre brisée et vit Gavroche qui s’enfuyait à toutes jambes vers le marché Saint-Jean. En passant devant la boutique du perruquier, Gavroche, qui avait les deux mômes sur le cœur, n’avait pu résister au désir de lui dire bonjour, et lui avait jeté une pierre dans ses carreaux.

— Voyez-vous! hurla le perruquier qui de blanc était devenu bleu, cela fait le mal pour le mal. Qu’est-ce qu’on lui a fait à ce gamin-là?

Chapitre IV

L’enfant s’étonne du vieillard

Cependant Gavroche, au marché Saint-Jean, dont le poste était déjà désarmé, venait — d’opérer sa jonction — avec une bande conduite par Enjolras, Courfeyrac, Combeferre et Feuilly. Ils étaient à peu près armés. Bahorel et Jean Prouvaire les avaient retrouvés et grossissaient le groupe. Enjolras avait un fusil de chasse à deux coups, Combeferre un fusil de garde national portant un numéro de légion, et dans sa ceinture deux pistolets que sa redingote déboutonnée laissait voir, Jean Prouvaire un vieux mousqueton de cavalerie, Bahorel une carabine; Courfeyrac agitait une canne à épée dégainée. Feuilly, un sabre nu au poing, marchait en avant en criant: «Vive la Pologne!»

Ils arrivaient du quai Morland, sans cravates, sans chapeaux, essoufflés, mouillés par la pluie, l’éclair dans les yeux. Gavroche les aborda avec calme.

— Où allons-nous?

— Viens, dit Courfeyrac.

Derrière Feuilly marchait, ou plutôt bondissait Bahorel, poisson dans l’eau de l’émeute. Il avait un gilet cramoisi et de ces mots qui cassent tout. Son gilet bouleversa un passant qui cria tout éperdu:

— Voilà les rouges!

— Le rouge, les rouges! répliqua Bahorel. Drôle de peur, bourgeois. Quant à moi, je ne tremble point devant un coquelicot, le petit chaperon rouge ne m’inspire aucune épouvante. Bourgeois, croyez-moi, laissons la peur du rouge aux bêtes à cornes.

Il avisa un coin de mur où était placardée la plus pacifique feuille de papier du monde, une permission de manger des œufs, un mandement de carême adressé par l’archevêque de Paris à ses «ouailles».

Bahorel s’écria:

— Ouailles; manière polie de dire oies.

Et il arracha du mur le mandement. Ceci conquit Gavroche. À partir de cet instant, Gavroche se mit à étudier Bahorel.

— Bahorel, observa Enjolras, tu as tort. Tu aurais dû laisser ce mandement tranquille, ce n’est pas à lui que nous avons affaire, tu dépenses inutilement de la colère. Garde ta provision. On ne fait pas feu hors des rangs, pas plus avec l’âme qu’avec le fusil.

— Chacun son genre, Enjolras, riposta Bahorel. Cette prose d’évêque me choque, je veux manger des œufs sans qu’on me le permette. Toi tu as le genre froid brûlant; moi je m’amuse. D’ailleurs, je ne me dépense pas, je prends de l’élan; et si j’ai déchiré ce mandement, Hercle! c’est pour me mettre en appétit.

Ce mot, *Hercle*, frappa Gavroche. Il cherchait toutes les occasions de s’instruire, et ce déchireur d’affiches-là avait son estime. Il lui demanda:

— Qu’est-ce que cela veut dire, *Hercle*?

Bahorel répondit:

— Cela veut dire sacré nom d’un chien en latin.

Ici Bahorel reconnut à une fenêtre un jeune homme pâle à barbe noire qui les regardait passer, probablement un ami de l’A B C. Il lui cria:

— Vite, des cartouches! *para bellum*.

— Bel homme! c’est vrai, dit Gavroche qui maintenant comprenait le latin.

Un cortège tumultueux les accompagnait, étudiants, artistes, jeunes gens affiliés à la Cougourde d’Aix, ouvriers, gens du port, armés de bâtons et de bayonnettes, quelques-uns, comme Combeferre, avec des pistolets entrés dans leurs pantalons. Un vieillard, qui paraissait très vieux, marchait dans cette bande. Il n’avait point d’arme, et se hâtait pour ne point rester en arrière, quoiqu’il eût l’air pensif. Gavroche l’aperçut:

— Keksekça? dit-il à Courfeyrac.

— C’est un vieux.

C’était M. Mabeuf.

Chapitre V

Le vieillard

Disons ce qui s’était passé:

Enjolras et ses amis étaient sur le boulevard Bourdon près des greniers d’abondance au moment où les dragons avaient chargé. Enjolras, Courfeyrac et Combeferre étaient de ceux qui avaient pris par la rue Bassompierre en criant: Aux barricades! Rue Lesdiguières ils avaient rencontré un vieillard qui cheminait.

Ce qui avait appelé leur attention, c’est que ce bonhomme marchait en zigzag comme s’il était ivre. En outre il avait son chapeau à la main, quoiqu’il eût plu toute la matinée et qu’il plût assez fort en ce moment-là même. Courfeyrac avait reconnu le père Mabeuf. Il le connaissait pour avoir maintes fois accompagné Marius jusqu’à sa porte. Sachant les habitudes paisibles et plus que timides du vieux marguillier bouquiniste, et stupéfait de le voir au milieu de ce tumulte, à deux pas des charges de cavalerie, presque au milieu d’une fusillade, décoiffé sous la pluie et se promenant parmi les balles, il l’avait abordé, et l’émeutier de vingt-cinq ans et l’octogénaire avaient échangé ce dialogue:

— Monsieur Mabeuf, rentrez chez vous.

— Pourquoi?

— Il va y avoir du tapage.

— C’est bon.

— Des coups de sabre, des coups de fusil, monsieur Mabeuf.

— C’est bon.

— Des coups de canon.

— C’est bon. Où allez-vous, vous autres?

— Nous allons flanquer le gouvernement par terre.

— C’est bon.

Et il s’était mis à les suivre. Depuis ce moment-là, il n’avait pas prononcé une parole. Son pas était devenu ferme tout à coup, des ouvriers lui avaient offert le bras, il avait refusé d’un signe de tête. Il s’avançait presque au premier rang de la colonne, ayant tout à la fois le mouvement d’un homme qui marche et le visage d’un homme qui dort.

— Quel bonhomme enragé! murmuraient les étudiants. Le bruit courait dans l’attroupement que c’était — un ancien conventionnel, — un vieux régicide.

Le rassemblement avait pris par la rue de la Verrerie. Le petit Gavroche marchait en avant avec ce chant à tue-tête qui faisait de lui une espèce de clairon. Il chantait:

Voici la lune qui paraît,
Quand irons-nous dans la forêt?
Demandait Charlot à Charlotte.

Tou tou tou
Pour Chatou.
Je n’ai qu’un Dieu, qu’un roi, qu’un liard et qu’une botte.

Pour avoir bu de grand matin
La rosée à même le thym,
Deux moineaux étaient en ribote.

Zi zi zi
Pour Passy.
Je n’ai qu’un Dieu, qu’un roi, qu’un liard et qu’une botte.

Et ces deux pauvres petits loups
Comme deux grives étaient soûls;
Un tigre en riait dans sa grotte.

Don don don
Pour Meudon.
Je n’ai qu’un Dieu, qu’un roi, qu’un liard et qu’une botte.

L’un jurait et l’autre sacrait.
Quand irons-nous dans la forêt?
Demandait Charlot à Charlotte.

Tin tin tin
Pour Pantin.
Je n’ai qu’un Dieu, qu’un roi, qu’un liard et qu’une botte.

Ils se dirigeaient vers Saint-Merry.

Chapitre VI

Recrues

La bande grossissait à chaque instant. Vers la rue des Billettes, un homme de haute taille, grisonnant, dont Courfeyrac, Enjolras et Combeferre remarquèrent la mine rude et hardie, mais qu'aucun d'eux ne connaissait, se joignit à eux. Gavroche occupé de chanter, de siffler, de bourdonner, d'aller en avant, et de cogner aux volets des boutiques avec la crosse de son pistolet sans chien, ne fit pas attention à cet homme.

Il se trouva que, rue de la Verrerie, ils passèrent devant la porte de Courfeyrac.

— Cela se trouve bien, dit Courfeyrac, j'ai oublié ma bourse, et j'ai perdu mon chapeau. Il quitta l'attroupement et monta chez lui quatre à quatre. Il prit un vieux chapeau et sa bourse. Il prit aussi un grand coffre carré de la dimension d'une grosse valise qui était caché dans son linge sale. Comme il redescendait en courant, la portière le héla.

— Monsieur de Courfeyrac!

— Portière, comment vous appelez-vous? riposta Courfeyrac.

La portière demeura ébahie.

— Mais vous le savez bien, je suis la concierge, je me nomme la mère Veuvain.

— Eh bien, si vous m'appelez encore monsieur de Courfeyrac, je vous appelle mère de Veuvain. Maintenant, parlez, qu'y a-t-il? qu'est-ce?

— Il y a là quelqu'un qui veut vous parler.

— Qui ça?

— Je ne sais pas.

— Où ça?

— Dans ma loge.

— Au diable! fit Courfeyrac.

— Mais ça attend depuis plus d'une heure que vous rentriez! reprit la portière.

En même temps, une espèce de jeune ouvrier, maigre, blême, petit, marqué de taches de rousseur, vêtu d'une blouse trouée et d'un pantalon de velours à côtes rapiécé, et qui avait plutôt l'air d'une fille accoutrée en garçon que d'un homme, sortit de la loge et dit à Courfeyrac d'une voix qui, par exemple, n'était pas le moins du monde une voix de femme:

— Monsieur Marius, s'il vous plaît?

— Il n'y est pas.

— Rentrera-t-il ce soir?

— Je n'en sais rien.

Et Courfeyrac ajouta: — Quant à moi, je ne rentrerai pas.

Le jeune homme le regarda fixement et lui demanda:

— Pourquoi cela?

— Parce que.

— Où allez-vous donc?

— Qu'est-ce que cela te fait?

— Voulez-vous que je vous porte votre coffre?

— Je vais aux barricades.

— Voulez-vous que j'aille avec vous?

— Si tu veux! répondit Courfeyrac. La rue est libre, les pavés sont à tout le monde.

Et il s'échappa en courant pour rejoindre ses amis. Quand il les eut rejoints, il donna le coffre à porter à l'un d'eux. Ce ne fut qu'un grand quart d'heure après qu'il s'aperçut que le jeune homme les avait en effet suivis.

Un attroupement ne va pas précisément où il veut. Nous avons expliqué que c'est un coup de vent qui l'emporte. Ils dépassèrent Saint-Merry et se trouvèrent, sans trop savoir comment, rue Saint-Denis.

Livre douzième — Corinthe

Chapitre I

Histoire de Corinthe depuis sa fondation

Les Parisiens qui, aujourd’hui, en entrant dans la rue Rambuteau du côté des halles, remarquent à leur droite, vis-à-vis la rue Mondétour, une boutique de vannier ayant pour enseigne un panier qui a la forme de l’empereur Napoléon le Grand avec cette inscription:

NAPOLEON EST
FAIT TOUT EN OSIER

ne se doutent guère des scènes terribles que ce même emplacement a vues, il y a à peine trente ans.

C’est là qu’étaient la rue de la Chanvrerie, que les anciens titres écrivent Chanverrerie, et le cabaret célèbre appelé Corinthe.

On se rappelle tout ce qui a été dit sur la barricade élevée en cet endroit et éclipsée d’ailleurs par la barricade Saint-Merry. C’est sur cette fameuse barricade de la rue de la Chanvrerie, aujourd’hui tombée dans une nuit profonde, que nous allons jeter un peu de lumière.

Qu’on nous permette de recourir, pour la clarté du récit, au moyen simple déjà employé par nous pour Waterloo. Les personnes qui voudront se représenter d’une manière assez exacte les pâtés de maisons qui se dressaient à cette époque près la pointe Saint-Eustache, à l’angle nord-est des halles de Paris, où est aujourd’hui l’embouchure de la rue Rambuteau, n’ont qu’à se figurer, touchant la rue Saint-Denis par le sommet et par la base les halles, une N dont les deux jambages verticaux seraient la rue de la Grande-Truanderie et la rue de la Chanvrerie et dont la rue de la Petite-Truanderie ferait le jambage transversal. La vieille rue Mondétour coupait les trois jambages selon les angles les plus tortus. Si bien que l’enchevêtrement dédaléen de ces quatre rues suffisait pour faire, sur un espace de cent toises carrées, entre les halles et la rue Saint-Denis d’une part, entre la rue du Cygne et la rue des Prêcheurs d’autre part, sept îlots de maisons, bizarrement taillés, de grandeurs diverses, posés de travers et comme au hasard, et séparés à peine, ainsi que les blocs de pierre dans le chantier, par des fentes étroites.

Nous disons fentes étroites, et nous ne pouvons pas donner une plus juste idée de ces ruelles obscures, resserrées, anguleuses, bordées de masures à huit étages. Ces masures étaient si décrépites que, dans les rues de la Chanvrerie et de la Petite-Truanderie, les façades s’étayaient de poutres allant d’une maison à l’autre. La rue était étroite et le ruisseau large, le passant y cheminait sur le pavé toujours mouillé, côtoyant des boutiques pareilles à des caves, de grosses bornes cerclées de fer, des tas d’ordures excessifs, des portes d’allées armées d’énormes grilles séculaires. La rue Rambuteau a dévasté tout cela.

Le nom Mondétour peint à merveille les sinuosités de toute cette voirie. Un peu plus loin, on les trouvait encore mieux exprimées par la *rue Pirouette* qui se jetait dans la rue Mondétour.

Le passant qui s’engageait de la rue Saint-Denis dans la rue de la Chanvrerie la voyait peu à peu se rétrécir devant lui, comme s’il fût entré dans un entonnoir allongé. Au bout de la rue, qui était fort courte, il trouvait le passage barré du côté des halles par une haute rangée de maisons, et il se fût cru dans un cul-de-sac, s’il n’eût aperçu à droite et à gauche deux tranchées noires par où il pouvait s’échapper. C’était la rue Mondétour, laquelle allait rejoindre d’un côté la rue des Prêcheurs, de l’autre la rue du Cygne et la Petite-Truanderie. Au fond de cette espèce de cul-de-sac, à l’angle de la tranchée de droite, on remarquait une maison moins élevée que les autres et formant une sorte de cap sur la rue.

C’est dans cette maison, de deux étages seulement, qu’était allégrement installé depuis trois cents ans un cabaret illustre. Ce cabaret faisait un bruit de joie au lieu même que le vieux Théophile a signalé dans ces deux vers:

Là branle le squelette horrible
D’un pauvre amant qui se pendit.

L’endroit étant bon, les cabaretiers s’y succédaient de père en fils.

Du temps de Mathurin Régnier, ce cabaret s’appelait le *Pot-aux-Roses*, et comme la mode était aux rébus, il avait pour enseigne un poteau peint en rose. Au siècle dernier, le digne Natoire, l’un des maîtres fantasques aujourd’hui dédaignés par l’école roide, s’étant grisé plusieurs fois dans ce cabaret à la table même où s’était soûlé Régnier, avait peint par reconnaissance une grappe de raisin de Corinthe sur le poteau rose. Le cabaretier, de joie, en avait changé son enseigne et avait fait dorer au-dessous de la grappe ces mots: *au Raisin de Corinthe*. De là ce nom, *Corinthe*. Rien n’est plus naturel aux ivrognes que les ellipses. L’ellipse est le zigzag de la phrase. Corinthe avait peu à peu détrôné le Pot-aux-Roses.

Le dernier cabaretier de la dynastie, le père Hucheloup, ne sachant même plus la tradition, avait fait peindre le poteau en bleu.

Une salle en bas où était le comptoir, une salle au premier où était le billard, un escalier de bois en spirale perçant le plafond, le vin sur les tables, la fumée sur les murs, des chandelles en plein jour, voilà quel était le cabaret. Un escalier à trappe dans la salle d’en bas conduisait à la cave. Au second était le logis des Hucheloup. On y montait par un escalier, échelle plutôt qu’escalier, n’ayant pour entrée qu’une porte dérobée dans la grande salle du premier. Sous le toit, deux greniers mansardes, nids de servantes. La cuisine partageait le rez-de-chaussée avec la salle du comptoir.

Le père Hucheloup était peut-être né chimiste, le fait est qu’il fut cuisinier; on ne buvait pas seulement dans son cabaret, on y mangeait. Hucheloup avait inventé une chose excellente qu’on ne mangeait que chez lui, c’étaient des carpes farcies qu’il appelait *carpes au gras*. On mangeait cela à la lueur d’une chandelle de suif ou d’un quinquet du temps de Louis XVI sur des tables où était clouée une toile cirée en guise de nappe. On y venait de loin. Hucheloup avait, un beau matin, avait jugé à propos d’avertir les passants de sa «spécialité»; il avait trempé un pinceau dans un pot de noir, et comme il avait une orthographe à lui, de même qu’une cuisine à lui, il avait improvisé sur son mur cette inscription remarquable:

CARPES HO GRAS

Un hiver, les averses et les giboulées avaient eu la fantaisie d’effacer l’S qui terminait le premier mot et le G qui commençait le troisième; et il était resté ceci:

CARPE HO RAS

Le temps et la pluie aidant, une humble annonce gastronomique était devenue un conseil profond.

De la sorte il s’était trouvé que, ne sachant pas le français, le père Hucheloup avait su le latin, qu’il avait fait sortir de la cuisine la philosophie, et que, voulant simplement effacer Carême, il avait égalé Horace. Et ce qui était frappant, c’est que cela aussi voulait dire: entrez dans mon cabaret.

Rien de tout cela n’existe aujourd’hui. Le dédale Mondétour était éventré et largement ouvert dès 1847, et probablement n’est plus à l’heure qu’il est. La rue de la Chanvrerie et Corinthe ont disparu sous le pavé de la rue Rambuteau.

Comme nous l’avons dit, Corinthe était un des lieux de réunion, sinon de ralliement, de Courfeyrac et de ses amis. C’est Grantaire qui avait découvert Corinthe. Il y était entré à cause de *Carpe Horas* et y était retourné à cause des *Carpes au Gras*. On y buvait, on y mangeait, on y criait; on y payait peu, on y payait mal, on n’y payait pas, on était toujours bienvenu. Le père Hucheloup était un bonhomme.

Hucheloup, bonhomme, nous venons de le dire, était un gargotier à moustaches; variété amusante. Il avait toujours la mine de mauvaise humeur, semblait vouloir intimider ses pratiques, bougonnait les gens qui entraient chez lui, et avait l’air plus disposé à leur chercher querelle qu’à leur servir la soupe. Et pourtant, nous maintenons le mot, on était toujours bienvenu. Cette bizarrerie avait achalandé sa boutique, et lui amenait des jeunes gens se disant: Viens donc voir *maronner* le père Hucheloup. Il avait été maître d’armes. Tout à coup il éclatait de rire. Grosse voix, bon diable. C’était un fond comique avec une apparence tragique; il ne demandait pas mieux que de vous faire peur; à peu près comme ces tabatières qui ont la forme d’un pistolet. La détonation éternue.

Il avait pour femme la mère Hucheloup, un être barbu, fort laid.

Vers 1830, le père Hucheloup mourut. Avec lui disparut le secret des carpes au gras. Sa veuve, peu consolable, continua le cabaret. Mais la cuisine dégénéra et devint exécrable, le vin, qui avait toujours été mauvais, fut affreux. Courfeyrac et ses amis continuèrent pourtant d’aller à Corinthe, — par piété, disait Bossuet.

La veuve Hucheloup était essoufflée et difforme avec des souvenirs champêtres. Elle leur ôtait la fadeur par la prononciation. Elle avait une façon à elle de dire les choses qui assaisonnait ses réminiscences villageoises et printanières. Ç’avait été jadis son bonheur, affirmait-elle, d’entendre «les loups-de-gorge chanter dans les ogrépines».

La salle du premier, où était le «restaurant» était une grande longue pièce encombrée de tabourets, d’escabeaux, de chaises, de bancs et de tables, et d’un vieux billard boiteux. On y arrivait par l’escalier en spirale qui aboutissait dans l’angle de la salle à un trou carré pareil à une écoutille de navire.

Cette salle, éclairée d’une seule fenêtre étroite et d’un quinquet toujours allumé, avait un air de galetas. Tous les meubles à quatre pieds se comportaient comme s’ils en avaient trois. Les murs blanchis à la chaux n'avaient pour tout ornement que ce quatrain en l'honneur de mame Hucheloup:

Elle étonne à dix pas, elle épouvante à deux.
Une verrue habite en son nez hasardeux;
On tremble à chaque instant qu'elle ne vous la mouche,
Et qu'un beau jour son nez ne tombe dans sa bouche.

Cela était charbonné sur la muraille.

Mame Hucheloup, ressemblante, allait et venait du matin au soir devant ce quatrain, avec une parfaite tranquillité. Deux servantes, appelées Matelote et Gibelotte, et auxquelles on n'a jamais connu d'autres noms, aidaient mame Hucheloup à poser sur les tables les cruchons de vin bleu et les brouets variés qu'on servait aux affamés dans des écuelles de poterie. Matelote, grosse, ronde, rousse et criarde, ancienne sultane favorite du défunt Hucheloup, était laide, plus que n'importe quel monstre mythologique; pourtant, comme il sied que la servante se tienne toujours en arrière de la maîtresse, elle était moins laide que mame Hucheloup. Gibelotte, longue, délicate, blanche d'une blancheur lymphatique, les yeux cernés, les paupières tombantes, toujours épuisée et accablée, atteinte de ce qu'on pourrait appeler la lassitude chronique, levée la première, couchée la dernière, servait tout le monde, même l'autre servante, en silence et avec douceur, en souriant sous la fatigue d'une sorte de vague sourire endormi.

Il y avait un miroir au-dessus du comptoir.

Avant d'entrer dans la salle-restaurant, on lisait sur la porte ce vers écrit à la craie par Courfeyrac:

Régale si tu peux et mange si tu l'oses.

Chapitre II

Gaîtés préalables

Laigle de Meaux, on le sait, demeurait plutôt chez Joly qu'ailleurs. Il avait un logis comme l'oiseau a une branche. Les deux amis vivaient ensemble, mangeaient ensemble, dormaient ensemble. Tout leur était commun, même un peu Musichetta. Ils étaient ce que, chez les frères chapeaux, on appelle *bini*. Le matin du 5 juin, ils s'en allèrent déjeuner à Corinthe. Joly, enchifrené, avait un fort coryza que Laigle commençait à partager. L'habit de Laigle était râpé, mais Joly était bien mis.

Il était environ neuf heures du matin quand ils poussèrent la porte de Corinthe.

Ils montèrent au premier.

Matelote et Gibelotte les reçurent.

— Huîtres, fromage et jambon, dit Laigle.

Et ils s'attablèrent.

Le cabaret était vide; il n'y avait qu'eux deux.

Gibelotte, reconnaissant Joly et Laigle, mit une bouteille de vin sur la table.

Comme ils étaient aux premières huîtres, une tête apparut à l'écoutille de l'escalier, et une voix dit:

— Je passais. J'ai senti, de la rue, une délicieuse odeur de fromage de Brie. J'entre.

C'était Grantaire.

Grantaire prit un tabouret et s'attabla.

Gibelotte, voyant Grantaire, mit deux bouteilles de vin sur la table.

Cela fit trois.

— Est-ce que tu vas boire ces deux bouteilles? demanda Laigle à Grantaire.

Grantaire répondit:

— Tous sont ingénieux, toi seul es ingénu. Deux bouteilles n'ont jamais étonné un homme.

Les autres avaient commencé par manger, Grantaire commença par boire. Une demi-bouteille fut vivement engloutie.

— Tu as donc un trou à l'estomac? reprit Laigle.

— Tu en as bien un au coude, dit Grantaire.

Et, après avoir vidé son verre, il ajouta:

— Ah ça, Laigle des oraisons funèbres, ton habit est vieux.

— Je l'espère, repartit Laigle. Cela fait que nous faisons bon ménage, mon habit et moi. Il a pris tous mes plis, il ne me gêne en rien, il s'est moulé sur mes difformités, il est complaisant à tous mes mouvements; je ne le sens que parce qu'il me tient chaud. Les vieux habits, c'est la même chose que les vieux amis.

— C'est vrai, s'écria Joly entrant dans le dialogue, un vieil habit est un vieil abi.

— Surtout, dit Grantaire, dans la bouche d'un homme enchifrené.

— Grantaire, demanda Laigle, viens-tu du boulevard?

— Non.

— Nous venons de voir passer la tête du cortège, Joly et moi.

— C'est un spectacle berveilleux, dit Joly.

— Comme cette rue est tranquille! s'écria Laigle. Qui est-ce qui se douterait que Paris est sens dessus dessous? Comme on voit que c'était jadis tout couvents par ici! Du Breul et Sauval en donnent la liste, et l'abbé Lebeuf. Il y en avait tout autour, ça fourmillait, des chaussés, des déchaussés, des tondus, des barbus, des gris, des noirs, des blancs, des franciscains, des minimes, des capucins, des carmes, des petits augustins, des grands augustins, des vieux augustins... — Ça pullulait.

— Ne parlons pas de moines, interrompit Grantaire, cela donne envie de se gratter.

Puis il s'exclama:

— Bouh! je viens d'avaler une mauvaise huître. Voilà l'hypocondrie qui me reprend. Les huîtres sont gâtées, les servantes sont laides. Je hais l'espèce humaine. J'ai passé tout à l'heure rue Richelieu devant la grosse librairie publique. Ce tas d'écailles d'huîtres qu'on appelle une bibliothèque me dégoûte de penser. Que de papier! que d'encre! que de griffonnage! On a écrit tout ça! quel maroufle a donc dit que l'homme était un bipède sans plume? Et puis, j'ai rencontré une jolie fille que je connais, belle comme le printemps, digne de s'appeler Floréal, et ravie, transportée, heureuse, aux anges, la misérable, parce que hier un épouvantable banquier tigré de petite vérole a daigné vouloir d'elle! Hélas! la femme guette le traitant non moins que le muguet; les chattes chassent aux souris comme aux oiseaux. Cette donzelle, il n'y a pas deux mois qu'elle était sage dans une mansarde, elle ajustait des petits ronds de cuivre à des œillets de corset, comment appelez-vous ça? elle cousait, elle avait un lit de sangle; elle demeurait auprès d'un pot de fleurs, elle était contente. La voilà banquière. Cette transformation s'est faite cette nuit. J'ai rencontré cette victime ce matin, toute joyeuse. Ce qui est hideux, c'est que la drôlesse était tout aussi jolie aujourd'hui qu'hier. Son financier ne paraissait pas sur sa figure. Les roses ont ceci de plus ou de moins que les femmes, que les traces que leur laissent les chenilles sont visibles. Ah! il n'y a pas de morale sur la terre, j'en atteste le myrte, symbole de l'amour, le laurier, symbole de la guerre, l'olivier, ce bêta, symbole de la paix, le pommier, qui a failli étrangler Adam avec son pépin, et le figuier, grand-père des jupons. Quant au droit, voulez-vous savoir ce que c'est que le droit? Les Gaulois convoitent Cluse, Rome protège Cluse, et leur demande quel tort Cluse leur a fait. Brennus répond: — Le tort que vous a fait Albe, le tort que vous a fait Fidèrie, le tort que vous ont fait les Èques, les Volsques et les Sabins. Ils étaient vos voisins. Les Clusiens sont les nôtres. Nous entendons le voisinage comme vous. Vous avez volé Albe, nous prenons Cluse. Rome dit: Vous ne prendrez pas Cluse. Brennus prit Rome. Puis il cria: *Voe victis*! Voilà ce qu'est le droit. Ah! dans ce monde, que de bêtes de proie! que d'aigles! J'en ai la chair de poule.

Il tendit son verre à Joly qui le remplit, puis il but, et poursuivit, sans presque avoir été interrompu par ce verre de vin dont personne ne s'aperçut, pas même lui:

— Brennus, qui prend Rome, est un aigle; le banquier, qui prend la grisette, est un aigle. Pas plus de pudeur ici que là. Donc ne croyons à rien. Il n'y a qu'une réalité: boire. Quelle que soit votre opinion, soyez pour le coq maigre comme le canton d'Uri ou pour le coq gras comme le canton de Glaris, peu importe, buvez. Vous me parlez du boulevard, du cortège, et caetera. Ah çà, il va donc encore y avoir une révolution? Cette indigence de moyens m'étonne de la part du bon Dieu. Il faut qu'à tout moment il se remette à suifer la rainure des événements. Ça accroche, ça ne marche pas. Vite une révolution. Le bon Dieu a toujours les mains noires de ce vilain cambouis-là. À sa place, je serais plus simple, je ne remonterais pas à chaque instant ma mécanique, je mènerais le genre humain rondement, je tricoterais les faits maille à maille sans casser le fil, je n'aurais point d'en-cas, je n'aurais pas de répertoire extraordinaire. Ce que vous autres appelez le progrès marche par deux moteurs, les hommes et les événements. Mais, chose triste, de temps en temps, l'exceptionnel est nécessaire. Pour les événements comme pour les hommes, la troupe ordinaire ne suffit pas; il faut parmi les hommes des génies, et parmi les événements des révolutions. Les grands accidents sont la loi; l'ordre des choses ne peut s'en passer; et, à voir les apparitions de comètes, on serait tenté de croire que le ciel lui-même a besoin d'acteurs en représentation. Au moment où l'on s'y attend le moins, Dieu placarde un météore sur la muraille du firmament. Quelque étoile bizarre survient, soulignée par une queue énorme. Et cela fait mourir César. Brutus lui donne un coup de couteau, et Dieu un coup de comète. Crac, voilà une aurore boréale, voilà une révolution, voilà un grand homme; 93 en grosses lettres, Napoléon en vedette, la comète de 1811 au haut de l'affiche. Ah! la belle affiche bleue, toute constellée de flamboiements inattendus! Boum! boum! spectacle extraordinaire. Levez les yeux, badauds. Tout est échevelé, l'astre comme le drame. Bon Dieu, c'est trop, et ce n'est pas assez. Ces ressources, prises dans l'exception, semblent magnificence et sont pauvreté. Mes amis, la providence en est aux expédients. Une révolution, qu'est-ce que cela prouve? Que Dieu est à court. Il fait un coup d'État, parce qu'il y a solution de continuité entre le présent et l'avenir, et parce que, lui Dieu, il n'a pas pu joindre les deux bouts. Au fait, cela me confirme dans mes conjectures sur la situation de fortune de Jéhovah; et à voir tant de malaise en haut et en bas, tant de mesquinerie et de pingrerie et de ladrerie et de détresse au ciel et sur la terre, depuis l'oiseau qui n'a pas un grain de mil jusqu'à moi qui n'ai pas cent mille livres de rente, à voir la destinée humaine, qui est fort usée, et même la destinée royale, qui montre la corde, témoin le prince de Condé pendu, à voir l'hiver, qui n'est pas autre chose qu'une déchirure au zénith par où le vent souffle, à voir tant de haillons dans la pourpre toute neuve du matin au sommet des collines, à voir les gouttes de rosée, ces perles fausses, à voir le givre, ce strass, à voir l'humanité décousue et les événements rapiécés, et tant de taches au soleil, et tant de trous à la lune, à voir tant de misère partout, je soupçonne que Dieu n'est pas riche. Il a de l'apparence, c'est vrai, mais je sens la gêne. Il donne une révolution, comme un négociant dont la caisse est vide donne un bal. Il ne faut pas juger des dieux sur l'apparence. Sous la dorure du ciel j'entrevois un univers pauvre. Dans la création il y a de la faillite. C'est pourquoi je suis mécontent. Voyez, c'est le cinq juin, il fait presque nuit; depuis ce matin j'attends que le jour vienne. Il n'est pas venu, et je gage qu'il ne viendra pas de la journée. C'est une inexactitude de commis mal payé. Oui, tout est mal arrangé, rien ne s'ajuste à rien, ce vieux monde est tout déjeté, je me range dans l'opposition. Tout va de guingois; l'univers est taquinant. C'est comme les enfants, ceux qui en désirent n'en ont pas, ceux qui n'en désirent pas en ont. Total: je bisque. En outre, Laigle de Meaux, ce chauve, m'afflige à voir. Cela m'humilie de penser que je suis du même âge que ce genou. Du reste, je critique, mais je n'insulte pas. L'univers est ce qu'il est. Je parle ici sans méchante intention et pour l'acquit de ma conscience. Recevez, Père éternel, l'assurance de ma considération distinguée. Ah! par tous les saints de l'Olympe et par tous les dieux du paradis, je n'étais pas fait pour être Parisien, c'est-à-dire pour ricocher à jamais, comme un volant entre deux raquettes, du groupe des flâneurs au groupe des tapageurs! J'étais fait pour être Turc, regardant toute la journée des péronnelles orientales exécuter ces exquises danses d'Égypte lubriques comme les songes d'un homme chaste, ou paysan beauceron, ou gentilhomme vénitien entouré de gentilles-donnes, ou petit prince allemand fournissant la moitié d'un fantassin à la confédération germanique, et occupant ses loisirs à faire sécher ses chaussettes sur sa haie, c'est-à-dire sur sa frontière! Voilà pour quels destins j'étais né! Oui, j'ai dit Turc, et je ne m'en dédis point. Je ne comprends pas qu'on prenne habituellement les Turcs en mauvaise part; Mahom a du bon; respect à l'inventeur des sérails à houris et des paradis à odalisques! N'insultons pas le mahométisme, la seule religion qui soit ornée d'un poulailler! Sur ce, j'insiste pour boire. La terre est une grosse bêtise. Et il paraît qu'ils vont se battre, tous ces imbéciles, se faire casser le profil, se massacrer, en plein été, au mois de juin, quand ils pourraient s'en aller, avec une créature sous le bras, respirer dans les champs l'immense tasse de thé des foins coupés! Vraiment, on fait trop de sottises. Une vieille lanterne cassée que j'ai vue tout à l'heure chez un marchand de bric-à-brac me suggère une réflexion: Il serait temps d'éclairer le genre humain. Oui, me revoilà triste! Ce que c'est que d'avaler une huître et une révolution de travers! Je redeviens lugubre. Oh! l'affreux vieux monde! On s'y évertue, on s'y destitue, on s'y prostitue, on s'y tue, on s'y habitue!

Et Grantaire, après cette quinte d'éloquence, eut une quinte de toux, méritée.

— À propos de révolution, dit Joly, il paraît que décidébent Barius est aboureux.

— Sait-on de qui? demanda Laigle.

— Don.

— Non?

— Don! je te dis!

— Les amours de Marius! s'écria Grantaire. Je vois ça d'ici. Marius est un brouillard, et il aura trouvé une vapeur. Marius est de la race poète. Qui dit poète dit fou. *Tymbræus Apollo*. Marius et sa Marie, ou sa Maria, ou sa Mariette, ou sa Marion, cela doit faire de drôles d'amants. Je me rends compte de ce que cela est. Des extases où l'on oublie le baiser. Chastes sur la terre, mais s'accouplant dans l'infini. Ce sont des âmes qui ont des sens. Ils couchent ensemble dans les étoiles.

Grantaire entamait sa seconde bouteille, et peut-être sa seconde harangue quand un nouvel être émergea du trou carré de l'escalier. C'était un garçon de moins de dix ans, déguenillé, très petit, jaune, le visage en museau, l'œil vif, énormément chevelu, mouillé de pluie, l'air content.

L'enfant, choisissant sans hésiter parmi les trois, quoiqu'il n'en connût évidemment aucun, s'adressa à Laigle de Meaux.

— Est-ce que vous êtes monsieur Bossuet? demanda-t-il.

— C'est mon petit nom, répondit Laigle. Que me veux-tu?

— Voilà. Un grand blond sur le boulevard m'a dit: Connais-tu la mère Hucheloup? J'ai dit: Oui, rue Chanvrerie, la veuve au vieux. Il m'a dit: Vas-y. Tu y trouveras monsieur Bossuet, et tu lui diras de ma part: A-B-C. C'est une farce qu'on vous fait, n'est-ce pas? Il m'a donné dix sous.

— Joly, prête-moi dix sous, dit Laigle; et se tournant vers Grantaire: Grantaire, prête-moi dix sous.

Cela fit vingt sous que Laigle donna à l'enfant.

— Merci, monsieur, dit le petit garçon.

— Comment t'appelles-tu? demanda Laigle.

— Navet, l'ami à Gavroche.

— Reste avec nous, dit Laigle.

— Déjeune avec nous, dit Grantaire.

L'enfant répondit:

— Je ne peux pas, je suis du cortège, c'est moi qui crie à bas Polignac.

Et tirant le pied longuement derrière lui, ce qui est le plus respectueux des saluts possibles, il s'en alla.

L'enfant parti, Grantaire prit la parole:

— Ceci est le gamin pur. Il y a beaucoup de variétés dans le genre gamin. Le gamin notaire s'appelle saute-ruisseau, le gamin cuisinier s'appelle marmiton, le gamin boulanger s'appelle mitron, le gamin laquais s’appelle groom, le gamin marin s’appelle mousse, le gamin soldat s’appelle tapin, le gamin peintre s’appelle rapin, le gamin négociant s’appelle trottin, le gamin courtisan s’appelle menin, le gamin roi s’appelle dauphin, le gamin dieu s’appelle bambino.

Cependant Laigle méditait; il dit à demi-voix:

— A-B-C, c’est-à-dire: Enterrement de Lamarque.

— Le grand blond, observa Grantaire, c’est Enjolras qui te fait avertir.

— Irons-nous? fit Bossuet.

— Il pleut, dit Joly. J’ai juré d’aller au feu, pas à l’eau. Je de veux pas b’enrhuber.

— Je reste ici, dit Grantaire. Je préfère un déjeuner à un corbillard.

— Conclusion: nous restons, reprit Laigle. Eh bien, buvons alors. D’ailleurs on peut manquer l’enterrement, sans manquer l’émeute.

— Ah! l’ébeute, j’en suis, s’écria Joly.

Laigle se frotta les mains:

— Voilà donc qu’on va retoucher à la révolution de 1830. Au fait elle gêne le peuple aux entournures.

— Cela m’est à peu près égal, votre révolution, dit Grantaire. Je n’exècre pas ce gouvernement-ci. C’est la couronne tempérée par le bonnet de coton. C’est un sceptre terminé en parapluie. Au fait, aujourd’hui, j’y songe, par le temps qu’il fait, Louis-Philippe pourra utiliser sa royauté à deux fins, étendre le bout sceptre contre le peuple et ouvrir le bout parapluie contre le ciel.

La salle était obscure, de grosses nuées achevaient de supprimer le jour. Il n’y avait personne dans le cabaret, ni dans la rue, tout le monde étant allé «voir les événements».

— Est-il midi ou minuit? cria Bossuet. On n’y voit goutte. Gibelotte, de la lumière!

Grantaire, triste, buvait.

— Enjolras me dédaigne, murmura-t-il. Enjolras a dit: Joly est malade, Grantaire est ivre. C’est à Bossuet qu’il a envoyé Navet. S’il était venu me prendre, je l’aurais suivi. Tant pis pour Enjolras! je n’irai pas à son enterrement.

Cette résolution prise, Bossuet, Joly et Grantaire ne bougèrent plus du cabaret. Vers deux heures de l’après-midi, la table où ils s’accoudaient était couverte de bouteilles vides. Deux chandelles y brûlaient, l’une dans un bougeoir de cuivre parfaitement vert, l’autre dans le goulot d’une carafe fêlée. Grantaire avait entraîné Joly et Bossuet vers le vin; Bossuet et Joly avaient ramené Grantaire vers la joie.

Quant à Grantaire, depuis midi, il avait dépassé le vin, médiocre source de rêves. Le vin, près des ivrognes sérieux, n’a qu’un succès d’estime. Il y a, en fait d’ébriété, la magie noire et la magie blanche; le vin n’est que la magie blanche. Grantaire était un aventureux buveur de songes. La noirceur d’une ivresse redoutable entr’ouverte devant lui, loin de l’arrêter l’attirait. Il avait laissé là les bouteilles et pris la chope. La chope, c’est le gouffre. N’ayant sous la main ni opium, ni haschisch, et voulant s’emplir le cerveau de crépuscule, il avait eu recours à cet effrayant mélange d’eau-de-vie, de stout et d’absinthe, qui produit des léthargies si terribles. C’est de ces trois vapeurs, bière, eau-de-vie, absinthe, qu’est fait le plomb de l’âme. Ce sont trois ténèbres; le papillon céleste s’y noie; et il s’y forme, dans une fumée membraneuse vaguement condensée en aile de chauve-souris, trois furies muettes, le Cauchemar, la Nuit, la Mort, voletant au-dessus de Psyché endormie.

Grantaire n’en était point encore à cette phase lugubre; loin de là. Il étai prodigieusement gai, et Bossuet et Joly lui donnaient la réplique. Ils trinquaient. Grantaire ajoutait à l’accentuation excentrique des mots et des idées la divagation du geste, il appuyait avec dignité son poing gauche sur son genou, son bras faisant l’équerre, et, la cravate défaite, à cheval sur un tabouret, son verre plein dans sa main droite, il jetait à la grosse servante Matelote ces paroles solennelles:

— Qu’on ouvre les portes du palais! que tout le monde soit de l’Académie française, et ait le droit d’embrasser madame Hucheloup! Buvons.

Et se tournant vers mame Hucheloup, il ajoutait:

— Femme antique et consacrée par l’usage, approche que je te contemple!

Et Joly s’écriait:

— Batelote et Gibelotte, de doddez plus à boire à Grantaire. Il bange des argents fous. Il a déjà dévoré depuis ce batin en prodigalités éperdues deux francs quatre-vingt-quinze centibes.

Et Grantaire reprenait:

— Qui donc a décroché les étoiles sans ma permission pour les mettre sur la table en guise de chandelles?

Bossuet, fort ivre, avait conservé son calme.

Il s’était assis sur l’appui de la fenêtre ouverte, mouillant son dos à la pluie qui tombait, et il contemplait ses deux amis.

Tout à coup il entendit derrière lui un tumulte, des pas précipités, des cris *aux armes*! Il se retourna, et aperçut, rue Saint-Denis, au bout de la rue de la Chanvrerie, Enjolras qui passait, la carabine à la main, et Gavroche avec son pistolet, Feuilly avec son sabre, Courfeyrac avec son épée, Jean Prouvaire avec son mousqueton, Combeferre avec son fusil, Bahorel avec son fusil, et tout le rassemblement armé et orageux qui les suivait.

La rue de la Chanvrerie n’était guère longue que d’une portée de carabine. Bossuet improvisa avec ses deux mains un porte-voix autour de sa bouche, et cria:

— Courfeyrac! Courfeyrac! hohée!

Courfeyrac entendit l’appel, aperçut Bossuet, et fit quelques pas dans la rue de la Chanvrerie, en criant un: que veux-tu? qui se croisa avec un: où vas-tu?

— Faire une barricade, répondit Courfeyrac.

— Eh bien, ici! la place est bonne! fais-la ici!

— C’est vrai, Aigle, dit Courfeyrac.

Et sur un signe de Courfeyrac, l’attroupement se précipita rue de la Chanvrerie.

Chapitre III

La nuit commence à se faire sur Grantaire

La place était en fait admirablement indiquée, l'entrée de la rue évasée, le fond rétréci et en cul-de-sac, Corinthe y faisant un étranglement, la rue Mondétour facile à barrer à droite et à gauche, aucune attaque possible que par la rue Saint-Denis, c'est-à-dire de front et à découvert. Bossuet gris avait eu le coup d'œil d'Annibal à jeun.

À l'irruption du rassemblement, l'épouvante avait pris toute la rue. Pas un passant qui ne se fût éclipsé. Le temps d'un éclair, au fond, à droite, à gauche, boutiques, établis, portes d'allées, fenêtres, persiennes, mansardes, volets de toute dimension, s'étaient fermés depuis les rez-de-chaussée jusque sur les toits. Une vieille femme effrayée avait fixé un matelas devant sa fenêtre à deux perches à sécher le linge, afin d'amortir la mousqueterie. La maison du cabaret était seule restée ouverte; et cela pour une bonne raison, c'est que l'attroupement s'y était rué. — Ah mon Dieu! ah mon Dieu! soupirait mame Hucheloup.

Bossuet était descendu au-devant de Courfeyrac.

Joly, qui s'était mis à la fenêtre, cria:

— Courfeyrac, tu aurais dû prendre un parapluie. Tu vas t'enrhuber.

Cependant, en quelques minutes, vingt barres de fer avaient été arrachées de la devanture grillée du cabaret, dix toises de rue avaient été dépavées; Gavroche et Bahorel avaient saisi au passage et renversé le haquet d'un fabricant de chaux appelé Anceau, ce haquet contenait trois barriques pleines de chaux qu'ils avaient placées sous des piles de pavés; Enjolras avait levé la trappe de la cave, et toutes les futailles vides de la veuve Hucheloup étaient allées flanquer les barriques de chaux; Feuilly, avec ses doigts habitués à enluminer les lames délicates des éventails, avait contre-buté les barriques et le haquet de deux massives piles de moellons. Moellons improvisés comme le reste, et pris on ne sait où. Des poutres d'étai avaient été arrachées à la façade d'une maison voisine et couchées sur les futailles. Quand Bossuet et Courfeyrac se retournèrent, la moitié de la rue était déjà barrée d'un rempart plus haut qu'un homme. Rien n'est tel que la main populaire pour bâtir tout ce qui se bâtit en démolissant.

Matelote et Gibelotte s'étaient mêlées aux travailleurs. Gibelotte allait et venait chargée de gravats. Sa lassitude aidait à la barricade. Elle servait des pavés comme elle eût servi du vin, l'air endormi.

Un omnibus qui avait deux chevaux blancs passa au bout de la rue.

Bossuet enjamba les pavés, courut, arrêta le cocher, fit descendre les voyageurs, donna la main «aux dames», congédia le conducteur et revint ramenant voiture et chevaux par la bride.

— Les omnibus, dit-il, ne passent pas devant Corinthe. *Non licet omnibus adire Corinthum*.

Un instant après, les chevaux dételés s'en allaient au hasard par la rue Mondétour, et l'omnibus couché sur le flanc complétait le barrage de la rue.

Mame Hucheloup, bouleversée, s'était réfugiée au premier étage.

Elle avait l'œil vague et regardait sans voir, criant tout bas. Ses cris épouvantés n'osaient sortir de son gosier.

— C'est la fin du monde, murmurait-elle.

Joly déposait un baiser sur le gros cou rouge et ridé de mame Hucheloup et disait à Grantaire: — Mon cher, j'ai toujours considéré le cou d'une femme comme une chose infiniment délicate.

Mais Grantaire atteignait les plus hautes régions du dithyrambe. Matelote étant remontée au premier, Grantaire l'avait saisie par la taille et poussait à la fenêtre de longs éclats de rire.

— Matelote est laide! criait-il. Matelote est la laideur rêve! Matelote est une chimère. Voici le secret de sa naissance: un Pygmalion gothique qui faisait des gargouilles de cathédrales tomba un beau matin amoureux de l'une d'elles, la plus horrible. Il supplia l'amour de l'animer, et cela fit Matelote. Regardez-la, citoyens! elle a les cheveux couleur chromate de plomb comme la maîtresse du Titien, et c'est une bonne fille. Je vous réponds qu'elle se battra bien. Toute bonne fille contient un héros. Quant à la mère Hucheloup, c'est une vieille brave. Voyez les moustaches qu'elle a! elle les a héritées de son mari. Une housarde, quoi! Elle se battra aussi. À elles deux elles feront peur à la banlieue. Camarades, nous renverserons le gouvernement, vrai comme il est vrai qu'il existe quinze acides intermédiaires entre l'acide margarique et l'acide formique. Du reste cela m'est parfaitement égal. Messieurs, mon père m'a toujours détesté parce que je ne pouvais comprendre les mathématiques. Je ne comprends que l'amour et la liberté. Je suis Grantaire le bon enfant! N'ayant jamais eu d'argent, je n'en ai pas pris l'habitude, ce qui fait que je n'en ai jamais manqué; mais si j’avais été riche, il n’y aurait plus eu de pauvres! on aurait vu! Oh! si les bons cœurs avaient les grosses bourses! comme tout irait mieux! Je me figure Jésus-Christ avec la fortune de Rothschild! Que de bien il ferait! Matelote, embrassez-moi! Vous êtes voluptueuse et timide! vous avez des joues qui appellent le baiser d’une sœur, et des lèvres qui réclament le baiser d’un amant!

— Tais-toi, futaille! dit Courfeyrac.

Grantaire répondit:

— Je suis capitoul et maître ès jeux floraux!

Enjolras qui était debout sur la crête du barrage, le fusil au poing, leva son beau visage austère. Enjolras, on le sait, tenait du spartiate et du puritain. Il fût mort aux Thermopyles avec Léonidas et eût brûlé Drogheda avec Cromwell.

— Grantaire! cria-t-il, va-t’en cuver ton vin hors d’ici. C’est la place de l’ivresse et non de l’ivrognerie. Ne déshonore pas la barricade!

Cette parole irritée produisit sur Grantaire un effet singulier. On eût dit qu’il recevait un verre d’eau froide à travers le visage. Il parut subitement dégrisé. Il s’assit, s’accouda sur une table près de la croisée, regarda Enjolras avec une inexprimable douceur, et lui dit:

— Tu sais que je crois en toi.

— Va-t’en.

— Laisse-moi dormir ici.

— Va dormir ailleurs, cria Enjolras.

Mais Grantaire, fixant toujours sur lui ses yeux tendres et troubles, répondit:

— Laisse-moi y dormir — jusqu’à ce que j’y meure.

Enjolras le considéra d’un œil dédaigneux:

— Grantaire, tu es incapable de croire, de penser, de vouloir, de vivre, et de mourir.

Grantaire répliqua d’une voix grave:

— Tu verras.

Il bégaya encore quelques mots inintelligibles, puis sa tête tomba pesamment sur la table, et, ce qui est un effet assez habituel de la seconde période de l’ébriété où Enjolras l’avait rudement et brusquement poussé, un instant après il était endormi.

Chapitre IV

Essai de consolation sur la veuve Hucheloup

Bahorel, extasié de la barricade, criait:

Voilà la rue décolletée! comme cela fait bien!

Courfeyrac, tout en démolissant un peu le cabaret, cherchait à consoler la veuve cabaretière.

— Mère Hucheloup, ne vous plaigniez-vous pas l’autre jour qu’on vous avait signifié procès-verbal et mise en contravention parce que Gibelotte avait secoué un tapis de lit par votre fenêtre?

— Oui, mon bon monsieur Courfeyrac. Ah! mon Dieu est-ce que vous allez me mettre aussi cette table-là dans votre horreur? Et même que, pour le tapis, et aussi pour un pot de fleurs qui était tombé de la mansarde dans la rue, le gouvernement m’a pris cent francs d’amende. Si ce n’est pas une abomination!

— Eh bien! mère Hucheloup, nous vous vengeons.

La mère Hucheloup, dans cette réparation qu’on lui faisait, ne semblait pas comprendre beaucoup son bénéfice. Elle était satisfaite à la manière de cette femme arabe qui, ayant reçu un soufflet de son mari, s’alla plaindre à son père, criant vengeance et disant: — Père, tu dois à mon mari affront pour affront. Le père demanda: — Sur quelle joue as-tu reçu le soufflet? Sur la joue gauche. Le père souffleta la joue droite et dit: — Te voilà contente. Va dire à ton mari qu’il a souffleté ma fille, mais que j’ai souffleté sa femme.

La pluie avait cessé. Des recrues étaient arrivées. Des ouvriers avaient apporté sous leurs blouses un baril de poudre, un panier contenant des bouteilles de vitriol, deux ou trois torches de carnaval et une bourriche pleine de lampions «restés de la fête du roi». Laquelle fête était toute récente, ayant eu lieu le 1er mai. On disait que ces munitions venaient de la part d’un épicier du faubourg Saint-Antoine nommé Pépin. On brisait l’unique réverbère de la rue de la Chanvrerie, la lanterne correspondante de la rue Saint-Denis, et toutes les lanternes des rues circonvoisines, de Mondétour, du Cygne, des Prêcheurs, et de la Grande et de la Petite-Truanderie.

Enjolras, Combeferre et Courfeyrac dirigeaient tout. Maintenant deux barricades se construisaient en même temps, toutes deux appuyées à la maison de Corinthe et faisant équerre; la plus grande fermait la rue de la Chanvrerie, l'autre fermait la rue Mondétour du côté de la rue du Cygne. Cette dernière barricade, très étroite, n'était construite que de tonneaux et de pavés. Ils étaient là environ cinquante travailleurs; une trentaine armés de fusils; car, chemin faisant, ils avaient fait un emprunt en bloc à une boutique d'armurier.

Rien de plus bizarre et de plus bigarré que cette troupe. L'un avait un habit-veste, un sabre de cavalerie et deux pistolets d'arçon, un autre était en manches de chemise avec un chapeau rond et une poire à poudre pendue au côté, un troisième plastronné de neuf feuilles de papier gris et armé d'une alène de sellier. Il y en avait un qui criait. *Exterminons jusqu'au dernier et mourons au bout de notre bayonnette!* Celui-là n'avait pas de bayonnette. Un autre étalait par-dessus sa redingote une buffleterie et une giberne de garde national avec le couvre-giberne orné de cette inscription en laine rouge: *Ordre public*. Force fusils portant des numéros de légions, peu de chapeaux, point de cravates, beaucoup de bras nus, quelques piques. Ajoutez à cela tous les âges, tous les visages, de petits jeunes gens pâles, des ouvriers du port bronzés. Tous se hâtaient, et, tout en s'entr'aidant, on causait des chances possibles, — qu'on aurait des secours vers trois heures du matin, — qu'on était sûr d'un régiment, — que Paris se soulèverait. Propos terribles auxquels se mêlait une sorte de jovialité cordiale. On eût dit des frères; ils ne savaient pas les noms les uns des autres. Les grands périls ont cela de beau qu'ils mettent en lumière la fraternité des inconnus.

Un feu avait été allumé dans la cuisine et l'on y fondait dans un moule à balles brocs, cuillers, fourchettes, toute l'argenterie d'étain du cabaret. On buvait à travers tout cela. Les capsules et les chevrotines traînaient pêle-mêle sur les tables avec les verres de vin. Dans la salle de billard, mame Hucheloup, Matelote et Gibelotte, diversement modifiées par la terreur, dont l'une était abrutie, l'autre essoufflée, l'autre éveillée, déchiraient de vieux torchons et faisaient de la charpie; trois insurgés les assistaient, trois gaillards chevelus, barbus et moustachus, qui épluchaient la toile avec des doigts de lingère et qui les faisaient trembler.

L'homme de haute stature que Courfeyrac, Combeferre et Enjolras avaient remarqué à l'instant où il abordait l'attroupement au coin de la rue des Billettes, travaillait à la petite barricade et s'y rendait utile. Gavroche travaillait à la grande. Quant au jeune homme qui avait attendu Courfeyrac chez lui et lui avait demandé monsieur Marius, il avait disparu à peu près vers le moment où l'on avait renversé l'omnibus.

Gavroche, complètement envolé et radieux, s'était chargé de la mise en train. Il allait, venait, montait, descendait, remontait, bruissait, étincelait. Il semblait être là pour l'encouragement de tous. Avait-il un aiguillon? oui, certes, sa misère; avait-il des ailes? oui, certes, sa joie. Gavroche était un tourbillonnement. On le voyait sans cesse, on l'entendait toujours. Il remplissait l'air, étant partout à la fois. C'était une espèce d'ubiquité presque irritante; pas d'arrêt possible avec lui. L'énorme barricade le sentait sur sa croupe. Il gênait les flâneurs, il excitait les paresseux, il ranimait les fatigués, il impatientait les pensifs, mettait les uns en gaîté, les autres en haleine, les autres en colère, tous en mouvement, piquait un étudiant, mordait un ouvrier; se posait, s'arrêtait, repartait, volait au-dessus du tumulte et de l'effort, sautait de ceux-ci à ceux-là, murmurait, bourdonnait, et harcelait tout l'attelage; mouche de l'immense Coche révolutionnaire.

Le mouvement perpétuel était dans ses petits bras et la clameur perpétuelle dans ses petits poumons:

— Hardi! encore des pavés! encore des tonneaux! encore des machins! où y en a-t-il? Une hottée de plâtras pour me boucher ce trou-là. C'est tout petit, votre barricade. Il faut que ça monte. Mettez-y tout, flanquez-y tout, fichez-y tout. Cassez la maison. Une barricade, c'est le thé de la mère Gibou. Tenez, voilà une porte vitrée.

Ceci fit exclamer les travailleurs.

— Une porte vitrée! qu'est-ce que tu veux qu'on fasse d'une porte vitrée, tubercule?

— Hercules vous-mêmes! riposta Gavroche. Une porte vitrée dans une barricade, c'est excellent. Ça n'empêche pas de l'attaquer, mais ça gêne pour la prendre. Vous n'avez donc jamais chipé des pommes pardessus un mur où il y avait des culs de bouteilles? Une porte vitrée, ça coupe les cors aux pieds de la garde nationale quand elle veut monter sur la barricade. Pardi! le verre est traître. Ah çà, vous n'avez pas une imagination effrénée, mes camarades!

Du reste, il était furieux de son pistolet sans chien. Il allait de l'un à l'autre, réclamant: — Un fusil! Je veux un fusil! Pourquoi ne me donne-t-on pas un fusil?

— Un fusil à toi! dit Combeferre.

— Tiens! répliqua Gavroche, pourquoi pas? J’en ai bien eu un en 1830 quand on s’est disputé avec Charles X!

Enjolras haussa les épaules.

— Quand il y en aura pour les hommes, on en donnera aux enfants.

Gavroche se tourna fièrement, et lui répondit:

— Si tu es tué avant moi, je te prends le tien.

— Gamin! dit Enjolras.

— Blanc-bec! dit Gavroche.

Un élégant fourvoyé qui flânait au bout de la rue, fit diversion.

Gavroche lui cria:

— Venez avec nous, jeune homme! Eh bien, cette vieille patrie, on ne fait donc rien pour elle?

L’élégant s’enfuit.

Chapitre V

Les préparatifs

Les journaux du temps qui ont dit que la barricade de la rue de la Chanvrerie, cette *construction presque inexpugnable*, comme ils l’appellent, atteignait au niveau d’un premier étage, se sont trompés. Le fait est qu’elle ne dépassait pas une hauteur moyenne de six ou sept pieds. Elle était bâtie de manière que les combattants pouvaient, à volonté, ou disparaître derrière, ou dominer le barrage et même en escalader la crête au moyen d’une quadruple rangée de pavés superposés et arrangés en gradins à l’intérieur. Au dehors le front de la barricade, composé de piles de pavés et de tonneaux reliés par des poutres et des planches qui s’enchevêtraient dans les roues de la charrette Anceau et de l’omnibus renversé, avait un aspect hérissé et inextricable. Une coupure suffisante pour qu’un homme y pût passer avait été ménagée entre le mur des maisons et l’extrémité de la barricade la plus éloignée du cabaret, de façon qu’une sortie était possible. La flèche de l’omnibus était dressée droite et maintenue avec des cordes, et un drapeau rouge, fixé à cette flèche, flottait sur la barricade.

La petite barricade Mondétour, cachée derrière la maison du cabaret, ne s’apercevait pas. Les deux barricades réunies formaient une véritable redoute. Enjolras et Courfeyrac n’avaient pas jugé à propos de barricader l’autre tronçon de la rue Mondétour qui ouvre par la rue des Prêcheurs une issue sur les halles, voulant sans doute conserver une communication possible avec le dehors et redoutant peu d’être attaqués par la dangereuse et difficile ruelle des Prêcheurs.

À cela près de cette issue restée libre, qui constituait ce que Folard, dans son style stratégique, eût appelé un boyau, et en tenant compte aussi de la coupure exiguë ménagée sur la rue de la Chanvrerie, l’intérieur de la barricade, où le cabaret faisait un angle saillant, présentait un quadrilatère irrégulier fermé de toutes parts. Il y avait une vingtaine de pas d’intervalle entre le grand barrage et les hautes maisons qui formaient le fond de la rue, en sorte qu’on pouvait dire que la barricade était adossée à ces maisons, toutes habitées, mais closes du haut en bas.

Tout ce travail se fit sans empêchement en moins d’une heure et sans que cette poignée d’hommes hardis vît surgir un bonnet à poil ni une bayonnette. Les bourgeois peu fréquents qui se hasardaient encore à ce moment de l’émeute dans la rue Saint-Denis jetaient un coup d’œil rue de la Chanvrerie, apercevaient la barricade, et doublaient le pas.

Les deux barricades terminées, le drapeau arboré, on traîna une table hors du cabaret? et Courfeyrac monta sur la table. Enjolras apporta le coffre carré et Courfeyrac l’ouvrit. Ce coffre était rempli de cartouches. Quand on vit les cartouches, il y eut un tressaillement parmi les plus braves et un moment de silence.

Courfeyrac les distribua en souriant.

Chacun reçut trente cartouches. Beaucoup avaient de la poudre et se mirent à en faire d’autres avec les balles qu’on fondait. Quant au baril de poudre, il était sur une table à part, près de la porte, et on le réserva.

Le rappel, qui parcourait tout Paris, ne discontinuait pas, mais cela avait fini par ne plus être qu’un bruit monotone auquel ils ne faisaient plus attention. Ce bruit tantôt s’éloignait, tantôt s’approchait, avec des ondulations lugubres.

On chargea les fusils et les carabines, tous ensemble, sans précipitation, avec une gravité solennelle. Enjolras alla placer trois sentinelles hors des barricades, l’une rue de la Chanvrerie, la seconde rue des Prêcheurs, la troisième au coin de la Petite-Truanderie.

Puis, les barricades bâties, les postes assignés, les fusils chargés, les vedettes posées, seuls dans ces rues redoutables où personne ne passait plus, entourés de ces maisons muettes et comme mortes où ne palpitait aucun mouvement humain, enveloppés des ombres croissantes du crépuscule qui commençait, au milieu de cette obscurité et de ce silence où l’on sentait s’avancer quelque chose et qui avaient je ne sais quoi de tragique et de terrifiant, isolés, armés, déterminés, tranquilles, ils attendirent.

Chapitre VI

En attendant

Dans ces heures d’attente, que firent-ils?

Il faut bien que nous le disions, puisque ceci est de l’histoire.

Tandis que les hommes faisaient des cartouches et les femmes de la charpie, tandis qu’une large casserole, pleine d’étain et de plomb fondu destinés au moule à balles, fumait sur un réchaud ardent, pendant que les vedettes veillaient l’arme au bras sur la barricade, pendant qu’Enjolras, impossible à distraire, veillait sur les vedettes, Combeferre, Courfeyrac, Jean Prouvaire, Feuilly, Bossuet, Joly, Bahorel, quelques autres encore, se cherchèrent et se réunirent, comme aux plus paisibles jours de leurs causeries d’écoliers, et dans un coin de ce cabaret changé en casemate, à deux pas de la redoute qu’ils avaient élevée, leurs carabines amorcées et chargées appuyées au dossier de leur chaise, ces beaux jeunes gens, si voisins d’une heure suprême, se mirent à dire des vers d’amour.

Quels vers? Les voici:

Vous rappelez-vous notre douce vie,
Lorsque nous étions si jeunes tous deux,
Et que nous n’avions au cœur d’autre envie
Que d’être bien mis et d’être amoureux!

Lorsqu’en ajoutant votre âge à mon âge,
Nous ne comptions pas à deux quarante ans,
Et que, dans notre humble et petit ménage,
Tout, même l’hiver, nous était printemps!

Beaux jours! Manuel était fier et sage,
Paris s’asseyait à de saints banquets,
Foy lançait la foudre, et votre corsage
Avait une épingle où je me piquais.

Tout vous contemplait. Avocat sans causes,
Quand je vous menais au Prado dîner,
Vous étiez jolie au point que les roses

Me faisaient l’effet de se retourner;

Je les entendais dire: Est-elle belle!
Comme elle sent bon! quels cheveux à flots!
Sous son mantelet elle cache une aile;
Son bonnet charmant est à peine éclos.

J’errais avec toi, pressant ton bras souple.
Les passants croyaient que l’amour charmé
Avait marié, dans notre heureux couple,
Le doux mois d’avril au beau mois de mai.

Nous vivions cachés, contents, porte close,
Dévorant l’amour, bon fruit défendu;
Ma bouche n’avait pas dit une chose
Que déjà ton cœur avait répondu.

Sorbonne était l’endroit bucolique
Où je t’adorais du soir au matin.
C’est ainsi qu’une âme amoureuse applique
La carte du Tendre au pays latin.

Ô place Maubert! Ô place Dauphine
Quand, dans le taudis frais et printanier,
Tu tirais ton bas sur ta jambe fine,
Je voyais un astre au fond du grenier.

J’ai fort lu Platon, mais rien ne m’en reste;
Mieux que Malebranche et que Lamennais,
Tu me démontrais la bonté céleste
Avec une fleur que tu me donnais.

Je t’obéissais, tu m’étais soumise.
Ô grenier doré! te lacer! te voir
Aller et venir dès l’aube en chemise,
Mirant ton front jeune à ton vieux miroir!

Et qui donc pourrait perdre la mémoire
De ces temps d'aurore et de firmament,
De rubans, de fleurs, de gaze et de moire,
Où l'amour bégaye un argot charmant?

Nos jardins étaient un pot de tulipe;
Tu masquais la vitre avec un jupon;
Je prenais le bol de terre de pipe,
Et je te donnais la tasse en japon.

Et ces grands malheurs qui nous faisaient rire!
Ton manchon brûlé, ton boa perdu!
Et ce cher portrait du divin Shakespeare
Qu'un soir pour souper nous avons vendu!

J'étais mendiant, et toi charitable.
Je baisais au vol tes bras frais et ronds.
Dante in-folio nous servait de table
Pour manger gaîment un cent de marrons.

La première fois qu'en mon joyeux bouge
Je pris un baiser à ta lèvre en feu,
Quand tu t'en allas décoiffée et rouge,
Je restai tout pâle et je crus en Dieu

Te rappelles-tu nos bonheurs sans nombre,
Et tous ces fichus changés en chiffons?
Oh! que de soupirs, de nos cœurs pleins d'ombre,
Se sont envolés dans les cieux profonds!

L'heure, le lieu, ces souvenirs de jeunesse rappelés, quelques étoiles qui commençaient à briller au ciel, le repos funèbre de ces rues désertes, l'imminence de l'aventure inexorable qui se préparait, donnaient un charme pathétique à ces vers murmurés à demi-voix dans le crépuscule par Jean Prouvaire qui, nous l'avons dit, était un doux poète.

Cependant on avait allumé un lampion dans la petite barricade, et, dans la grande, une de ces torches de cire comme on en rencontre le mardi gras en avant des voitures chargées de masques qui vont à la Courtille. Ces torches, on l’a vu, venaient du faubourg Saint-Antoine.

La torche avait été placée dans une espèce de cage de pavés fermée de trois côtés pour l’abriter du vent, et disposée de façon que toute la lumière tombait sur le drapeau. La rue et la barricade restaient plongées dans l’obscurité, et l’on ne voyait rien que le drapeau rouge formidablement éclairé comme par une énorme lanterne sourde.

Cette lumière ajoutait à l’écarlate du drapeau je ne sais quelle pourpre terrible.

Chapitre VII

L’homme recruté rue des Billettes

La nuit était tout à fait tombée, rien ne venait. On n’entendait que des rumeurs confuses, et par instants des fusillades, mais rares, peu nourries et lointaines. Ce répit, qui se prolongeait, était signe que le gouvernement prenait son temps et ramassait ses forces. Ces cinquante hommes en attendaient soixante mille.

Enjolras se sentit pris de cette impatience qui saisit les âmes fortes au seuil des événements redoutables. Il alla trouver Gavroche qui s’était mis à fabriquer des cartouches dans la salle basse à la clarté douteuse de deux chandelles, posées sur le comptoir par précaution à cause de la poudre répandue sur les tables. Ces deux chandelles ne jetaient aucun rayonnement au dehors. Les insurgés en outre avaient eu soin de ne point allumer de lumière dans les étages supérieurs.

Gavroche en ce moment était fort préoccupé, non pas précisément de ses cartouches.

L’homme de la rue des Billettes venait d’entrer dans la salle basse et était allé s’asseoir à la table la moins éclairée. Il lui était échu un fusil de munition grand modèle, qu’il tenait entre ses jambes. Gavroche jusqu’à cet instant, distrait par cent choses «amusantes», n’avait pas même vu cet homme.

Lorsqu’il entra, Gavroche le suivit machinalement des yeux, admirant son fusil, puis, brusquement, quand l’homme fut assis, le gamin se leva. Ceux qui auraient épié l’homme jusqu’à ce moment l’auraient vu tout observer dans la barricade et dans la bande des insurgés avec une attention singulière; mais depuis qu’il était entré dans la salle, il avait été pris d’une sorte de recueillement et semblait ne plus rien voir de ce qui se passait. Le gamin s’approcha de ce personnage pensif et se mit à tourner autour de lui sur la pointe du pied comme on marche auprès de quelqu’un qu’on craint de réveiller. En même temps, sur son visage enfantin, à la fois si effronté et si sérieux, si évaporé et si profond, si gai et si navrant, passaient toutes ces grimaces de vieux qui signifient: — Ah bah! — pas possible! — j’ai la berlue! — je rêve! — est-ce que ce serait?... — non, ce n’est pas! — mais si! — mais non! etc. Gavroche se balançait sur ses talons crispait ses deux poings dans ses poches, remuait le cou comme un oiseau, dépensait en une lippe démesurée toute la sagacité de sa lèvre inférieure. Il était stupéfait, incertain, incrédule, convaincu, ébloui. Il avait la mine du chef des eunuques au marché des esclaves découvrant une Vénus parmi des dondons, et l'air d'un amateur reconnaissant un Raphaël dans un tas de croûtes. Tout chez lui était en travail, l'instinct qui flaire et l'intelligence qui combine. Il était évident qu'il arrivait un événement à Gavroche.

C'est au plus fort de cette préoccupation qu'Enjolras l'aborda.

— Tu es petit, dit Enjolras, on ne te verra pas. Sors des barricades, glisse-toi le long des maisons, va un peu partout par les rues, et reviens me dire ce qui se passe.

Gavroche se haussa sur ses hanches.

— Les petits sont donc bons à quelque chose! c'est bien heureux! J'y vas. En attendant fiez-vous aux petits, méfiez-vous des grands... — Et Gavroche, levant la tête et baissant la voix, ajouta, en désignant l'homme de la rue des Billettes:

— Vous voyez bien ce grand-là?

— Eh bien?

— C'est un mouchard.

— Tu es sûr?

— Il n'y a pas quinze jours qu'il m'a enlevé par l'oreille de la corniche du pont Royal où je prenais l'air.

Enjolras quitta vivement le gamin et murmura quelques mots très bas à un ouvrier du port aux vins qui se trouvait là. L'ouvrier sortit de la salle et y rentra presque tout de suite accompagné de trois autres. Ces quatre hommes, quatre portefaix aux larges épaules, allèrent se placer, sans rien faire qui pût attirer son attention, derrière la table où était accoudé l'homme de la rue des Billettes. Ils étaient visiblement prêts à se jeter sur lui.

Alors Enjolras s'approcha de l'homme et lui demanda:

— Qui êtes-vous?

À cette question brusque, l'homme eut un soubresaut. Il plongea son regard jusqu'au fond de la prunelle candide d'Enjolras et parut y saisir sa pensée. Il sourit d'un sourire qui était tout ce qu'on peut voir au monde de plus dédaigneux, de plus énergique et de plus résolu, et répondit avec une gravité hautaine:

— Je vois ce que c'est.... Eh bien oui!

— Vous êtes mouchard?

— Je suis agent de l’autorité.

— Vous vous appelez?

— Javert.

Enjolras fit signe aux quatre hommes. En un clin d’œil, avant que Javert eût eu le temps de se retourner, il fut colleté, terrassé, garrotté, fouillé.

On trouva sur lui une petite carte ronde collée entre deux verres et portant d’un côté les armes de France, gravées, avec cette légende: *Surveillance et vigilance*, et de l’autre cette mention: JAVERT, inspecteur de police, âgé de cinquante-deux ans; et la signature du préfet de police d’alors, M. Gisquet.

Il avait en outre sa montre et sa bourse, qui contenait quelques pièces d’or. On lui laissa la bourse et la montre. Derrière la montre, au fond du gousset, on tâta et l’on saisit un papier sous enveloppe qu’Enjolras déplia et où il lut ces cinq lignes écrites de la main même du préfet de police:

«Sitôt sa mission politique remplie, l’inspecteur Javert s’assurera, par une surveillance spéciale, s’il est vrai que des malfaiteurs aient des allures sur la berge de la rive droite de la Seine, près le pont d’Iéna.»

Le fouillage terminé, on redressa Javert, on lui noua les bras derrière le dos et on l’attacha au milieu de la salle basse à ce poteau célèbre qui avait jadis donné son nom au cabaret.

Gavroche, qui avait assisté à toute la scène et tout approuvé d’un hochement de tête silencieux, s’approcha de Javert et lui dit:

— C’est la souris qui a pris le chat.

Tout cela s’était exécuté si rapidement que c’était fini quand on s’en aperçut autour du cabaret. Javert n’avait pas jeté un cri. En voyant Javert lié au poteau, Courfeyrac, Bossuet, Joly, Combeferre, et les hommes dispersés dans les deux barricades, accoururent.

Javert, adossé au poteau, et si entouré de cordes qu’il ne pouvait faire un mouvement, levait la tête avec la sérénité intrépide de l’homme qui n’a jamais menti.

— C’est un mouchard, dit Enjolras.

Et se tournant vers Javert:

— Vous serez fusillé deux minutes avant que la barricade soit prise.

Javert répliqua de son accent le plus impérieux:

— Pourquoi pas tout de suite?

— Nous ménageons la poudre.

— Alors finissez-en d’un coup de couteau.

— Mouchard, dit le bel Enjolras, nous sommes des juges et non des assassins.

Puis il appela Gavroche.

— Toi! va à ton affaire! Fais ce que je t'ai dit.

— J'y vas, cria Gavroche.

Et s'arrêtant au moment de partir:

— À propos, vous me donnerez son fusil! Et il ajouta: Je vous laisse le musicien, mais je veux la clarinette.

Le gamin fit le salut militaire et franchit gaîment la coupure de la grande barricade.

Chapitre VIII

Plusieurs points d'interrogation à propos d'un nommé Le Cabuc qui ne se nommait peut-être pas Le Cabuc

La peinture tragique que nous avons entreprise ne serait pas complète, le lecteur ne verrait pas dans leur relief exact et réel ces grandes minutes de gésine sociale et d'enfantement révolutionnaire où il y a de la convulsion mêlée à l'effort, si nous omettions, dans l'esquisse ébauchée ici, un incident plein d'une horreur épique et farouche qui survint presque aussitôt après le départ de Gavroche.

Les attroupements, comme on sait, font boule de neige et agglomèrent en roulant un tas d'hommes tumultueux. Ces hommes ne se demandent pas entre eux d'où ils viennent. Parmi les passants qui s'étaient réunis au rassemblement conduit par Enjolras, Combeferre et Courfeyrac, il y avait un être portant la veste du portefaix usée aux épaules, qui gesticulait et vociférait et avait la mine d'une espèce d'ivrogne sauvage. Cet homme, un nommé ou surnommé Le Cabuc, et du reste tout à fait inconnu de ceux qui prétendaient le connaître, très ivre, ou faisant semblant, s'était attablé avec quelques autres à une table qu'ils avaient tirée en dehors du cabaret. Ce Cabuc, tout en faisant boire ceux qui lui tenaient tête, semblait considérer d'un air de réflexion la grande maison du fond de la barricade dont les cinq étages dominaient toute la rue et faisaient face à la rue Saint-Denis. Tout à coup il s'écria:

— Camarades, savez-vous? c'est de cette maison-là qu'il faudrait tirer. Quand nous serons là aux croisées, du diable si quelqu'un avance dans la rue!

— Oui, mais la maison est fermée, dit un des buveurs.

— Cognons!

— On n’ouvrira pas.

— Enfonçons la porte!

Le Cabuc court à la porte qui avait un marteau fort massif, et frappe. La porte ne s’ouvre pas. Il frappe un second coup. Personne ne répond. Un troisième coup. Même silence.

— Y a-t-il quelqu’un ici? crie Le Cabuc.

Rien ne bouge.

Alors il saisit un fusil et commence à battre la porte à coups de crosse. C’était une vieille porte d’allée, cintrée, basse, étroite, solide, toute en chêne, doublée à l’intérieur d’une feuille de tôle et d’une armature de fer, une vraie poterne de bastille. Les coups de crosse faisaient trembler la maison, mais n’ébranlaient pas la porte.

Toutefois il est probable que les habitants s’étaient émus, car on vit enfin s’éclairer et s’ouvrir une petite lucarne carrée au troisième étage, et apparaître à cette lucarne une chandelle et la tête béate et effrayée d’un bonhomme en cheveux gris qui était le portier.

L’homme qui cognait s’interrompit.

— Messieurs, demanda le portier, que désirez-vous?

— Ouvre! dit Le Cabuc.

— Messieurs, cela ne se peut pas.

— Ouvre toujours!

— Impossible, messieurs!

Le Cabuc prit son fusil et coucha en joue le portier; mais comme il était en bas, et qu’il faisait très noir, le portier ne le vit point.

— Oui ou non, veux-tu ouvrir?

— Non, messieurs!

— Tu dis non?

— Je dis non, mes bons....

Le portier n’acheva pas. Le coup de fusil était lâché; la balle lui était entrée sous le menton et était sortie par la nuque après avoir traversé la jugulaire. Le vieillard s’affaissa sur lui-même sans pousser un soupir. La chandelle tomba et s’éteignit, et l’on ne vit plus rien qu’une tête immobile posée au bord de la lucarne et un peu de fumée blanchâtre qui s’en allait vers le toit.

— Voilà! dit Le Cabuc en laissant retomber sur le pavé la crosse de son fusil.

Il avait à peine prononcé ce mot qu’il sentit une main qui se posait sur son épaule avec la pesanteur d’une serre d’aigle, et il entendit une voix qui lui disait:

— À genoux.

Le meurtrier se retourna et vit devant lui la figure blanche et froide d’Enjolras. Enjolras avait un pistolet à la main.

À la détonation, il était arrivé.

Il avait empoigné de sa main gauche le collet, la blouse, la chemise et la bretelle du Cabuc.

— À genoux, répéta-t-il.

Et d’un mouvement souverain le frêle jeune homme de vingt ans plia comme un roseau le crocheteur trapu et robuste et l’agenouilla dans la boue. Le Cabuc essaya de résister, mais il semblait qu’il eût été saisi par un poing surhumain.

Pâle, le col nu, les cheveux épars, Enjolras, avec son visage de femme, avait en ce moment je ne sais quoi de la Thémis antique. Ses narines gonflées, ses yeux baissés donnaient à son implacable profil grec cette expression de colère et cette expression de chasteté qui, au point de vue de l’ancien monde, conviennent à la justice.

Toute la barricade était accourue, puis tous s’étaient rangés en cercle à distance, sentant qu’il était impossible de prononcer une parole devant la chose qu’ils allaient voir.

Le Cabuc, vaincu, n’essayait plus de se débattre et tremblait de tous ses membres. Enjolras le lâcha et tira sa montre.

— Recueille-toi, dit-il. Prie ou pense. Tu as une minute.

— Grâce, murmura le meurtrier; puis il baissa la tête et balbutia quelques jurements inarticulés.

Enjolras ne quitta pas la montre des yeux; il laissa passer la minute, puis il remit la montre dans son gousset. Cela fait, il prit par les cheveux Le Cabuc qui se pelotonnait contre ses genoux en hurlant et lui appuya sur l’oreille le canon de son pistolet. Beaucoup de ces hommes intrépides, qui étaient si tranquillement entrés dans la plus effrayante des aventures, détournèrent la tête.

On entendit l’explosion, l’assassin tomba sur le pavé le front en avant, et Enjolras se redressa et promena autour de lui son regard convaincu et sévère.

Puis il poussa du pied le cadavre et dit:

— Jetez cela dehors.

Trois hommes soulevèrent le corps du misérable qu’agitaient les dernières convulsions machinales de la vie expirée, et le jetèrent par-dessus la petite barricade dans la ruelle Mondétour.

Enjolras était demeuré pensif. On ne sait quelles ténèbres grandioses se répandaient lentement sur sa redoutable sérénité. Tout à coup il éleva la voix. On fit silence.

— Citoyens, dit Enjolras, ce que cet homme a fait est effroyable et ce que j’ai fait est horrible. Il a tué, c’est pourquoi je l’ai tué. J’ai dû le faire, car l’insurrection doit avoir sa discipline. L’assassinat est encore plus un crime ici qu’ailleurs; nous sommes sous le regard de la révolution, nous sommes les prêtres de la république, nous sommes les hosties du devoir, et il ne faut pas qu’on puisse calomnier notre combat. J’ai donc jugé et condamné à mort cet homme. Quant à moi, contraint de faire ce que j’ai fait, mais l’abhorrant, je me suis jugé aussi, et vous verrez tout à l’heure à quoi je me suis condamné.

Ceux qui écoutaient tressaillirent.

— Nous partagerons ton sort, cria Combeferre.

— Soit, reprit Enjolras. Encore un mot. En exécutant cet homme, j’ai obéi à la nécessité; mais la nécessité est un monstre du vieux monde; la nécessité s’appelle Fatalité. Or, la loi du progrès, c’est que les monstres disparaissent devant les anges, et que la fatalité s’évanouisse devant la fraternité. C’est un mauvais moment pour prononcer le mot amour. N’importe, je le prononce, et je le glorifie. Amour, tu as l’avenir. Mort, je me sers de toi, mais je te hais. Citoyens, il n’y aura dans l’avenir ni ténèbres, ni coups de foudre, ni ignorance féroce, ni talion sanglant. Comme il n’y aura plus de Satan, il n’y aura plus de Michel. Dans l’avenir personne ne tuera personne, la terre rayonnera, le genre humain aimera. Il viendra, citoyens, ce jour où tout sera concorde, harmonie, lumière, joie et vie, il viendra. Et c’est pour qu’il vienne que nous allons mourir.

Enjolras se tut. Ses lèvres de vierge se refermèrent; et il resta quelque temps debout à l’endroit où il avait versé le sang, dans une immobilité de marbre. Son œil fixe faisait qu’on parlait bas autour de lui.

Jean Prouvaire et Combeferre se serraient la main silencieusement, et, appuyés l’un sur l’autre à l’angle de la barricade, considéraient avec une admiration où il y avait de la compassion ce grave jeune homme, bourreau et prêtre, de lumière comme le cristal, et de roche aussi.

Disons tout de suite que plus tard, après l’action, quand les cadavres furent portés à la morgue et fouillés, on trouva sur Le Cabuc une carte d’agent de police. L’auteur de ce livre a eu entre les mains, en 1848, le rapport spécial fait à ce sujet au préfet de police de 1832.

Ajoutons que, s’il faut en croire une tradition de police étrange, mais probablement fondée, Le Cabuc, c’était Claquesous. Le fait est qu’à partir de la mort du Cabuc, il ne fut plus question de Claquesous. Claquesous n’a laissé nulle trace de sa disparition; il semblerait s’être amalgamé à l’invisible. Sa vie avait été ténèbres; sa fin fut nuit.

Tout le groupe insurgé était encore sous l’émotion de ce procès tragique si vite instruit et si vite terminé, quand Courfeyrac revit dans la barricade le petit jeune homme qui le matin avait demandé chez lui Marius.

Ce garçon, qui avait l’air hardi et insouciant, était venu à la nuit rejoindre les insurgés.

Livre treizième — Marius entre dans l’ombre

Chapitre I

De la rue Plumet au quartier Saint-Denis

Cette voix qui à travers le crépuscule avait appelé Marius à la barricade de la rue de la Chanvrerie lui avait fait l'effet de la voix de la destinée. Il voulait mourir, l'occasion s'offrait; il frappait à la porte du tombeau, une main dans l'ombre lui en tendait la clef. Ces lugubres ouvertures qui se font dans les ténèbres devant le désespoir sont tentantes, Marius écarta la grille qui l'avait tant de fois laissé passer, sortit du jardin et dit: allons!

Fou de douleur, ne se sentant plus rien de fixe et de solide dans le cerveau, incapable de rien accepter désormais du sort après ces deux mois passés dans les enivrements de la jeunesse et de l'amour, accablé à la fois par toutes les rêveries du désespoir, il n'avait plus qu'un désir, en finir bien vite.

Il se mit à marcher rapidement. Il se trouvait précisément qu'il était armé, ayant sur lui les pistolets de Javert.

Le jeune homme qu'il avait cru apercevoir s'était perdu à ses yeux dans les rues.

Marius, qui était sorti de la rue Plumet par le boulevard, traversa l'esplanade et le pont des Invalides, les Champs-Élysées, la place Louis XV, et gagna la rue de Rivoli. Les magasins y étaient ouverts, le gaz y brûlait sous les arcades, les femmes achetaient dans les boutiques, on prenait des glaces au café Laiter, on mangeait des petits gâteaux à la pâtisserie anglaise. Seulement quelques chaises de poste partaient au galop de l'hôtel des Princes et de l'hôtel Meurice.

Marius entra par le passage Delorme dans la rue Saint-Honoré. Les boutiques y étaient fermées, les marchands causaient devant leurs portes entr'ouvertes, les passants circulaient, les réverbères étaient allumés, à partir du premier étage toutes les croisées étaient éclairées comme à l'ordinaire. Il y avait de la cavalerie sur la place du Palais-Royal.

Marius suivit la rue Saint-Honoré. À mesure qu'il s'éloignait du Palais-Royal, il y avait moins de fenêtres éclairées; les boutiques étaient tout à fait closes, personne ne causait sur les seuils, la rue s'assombrissait et en même temps la foule s'épaississait. Car les passants maintenant étaient une foule.

On ne voyait personne parler dans cette foule, et pourtant il en sortait un bourdonnement sourd et profond.

Vers la fontaine de l'Arbre-Sec, il y avait «des rassemblements», espèces de groupes immobiles et sombres qui étaient parmi les allants et venants comme des pierres au milieu d'une eau courante.

À l'entrée de la rue des Prouvaires, la foule ne marchait plus. C'était un bloc résistant, massif, solide, compact, presque impénétrable, de gens entassés qui s'entretenaient tout bas. Il n'y avait là presque plus d'habits noirs ni de chapeaux ronds. Des sarraus, des blouses, des casquettes, des têtes hérissées et terreuses. Cette multitude ondulait confusément dans la brume nocturne. Son chuchotement avait l'accent rauque d'un frémissement. Quoique pas un ne marchât, on entendait un piétinement dans la boue. Au-delà de cette épaisseur de foule, dans la rue du Roule, dans la rue des Prouvaires, et dans le prolongement de la rue Saint-Honoré, il n'y avait plus une seule vitre où brillât une chandelle. On voyait s'enfoncer dans ces rues les files solitaires et décroissantes des lanternes. Les lanternes de ce temps-là ressemblaient à de grosses étoiles rouges pendues à des cordes et jetaient sur le pavé une ombre qui avait la forme d'une grande araignée. Ces rues n'étaient pas désertes. On y distinguait des fusils en faisceaux, des bayonnettes remuées et des troupes bivouaquant. Aucun curieux ne dépassait cette limite. Là cessait la circulation. Là finissait la foule et commençait l'armée.

Marius voulait avec la volonté de l'homme qui n'espère plus. On l'avait appelé, il fallait qu'il allât. Il trouva le moyen de traverser la foule et de traverser le bivouac des troupes, il se déroba aux patrouilles, il évita les sentinelles. Il fit un détour, gagna la rue de Béthisy, et se dirigea vers les halles. Au coin de la rue des Bourdonnais il n'y avait plus de lanternes.

Après avoir franchi la zone de la foule, il avait dépassé la lisière des troupes; il se trouvait dans quelque chose d'effrayant. Plus un passant, plus un soldat, plus une lumière; personne. La solitude, le silence, la nuit; je ne sais quel froid qui saisissait. Entrer dans une rue, c'était entrer dans une cave.

Il continua d'avancer.

Il fit quelques pas. Quelqu'un passa près de lui en courant. Était-ce un homme? une femme? étaient-ils plusieurs? Il n'eût pu le dire. Cela avait passé et s'était évanoui.

De circuit en circuit, il arriva dans une ruelle qu’il jugea être la rue de la Poterie; vers le milieu de cette ruelle il se heurta à un obstacle. Il étendit les mains. C’était une charrette renversée; son pied reconnut des flaques d’eau, des fondrières, des pavés épars et amoncelés. Il y avait là une barricade ébauchée et abandonnée. Il escalada les pavés et se trouva de l’autre côté du barrage. Il marchait très près des bornes et se guidait sur le mur des maisons. Un peu au delà de la barricade, il lui sembla entrevoir devant lui quelque chose de blanc. Il approcha, cela prit une forme. C’étaient deux chevaux blancs; les chevaux de l’omnibus dételé le matin par Bossuet, qui avaient erré au hasard de rue en rue toute la journée et avaient fini par s’arrêter là, avec cette patience accablée des brutes qui ne comprennent pas plus les actions de l’homme que l’homme ne comprend les actions de la providence.

Marius laissa les chevaux derrière lui. Comme il abordait une rue qui lui faisait l’effet d’être la rue du Contrat-Social, un coup de fusil, venu on ne sait d’où et qui traversait l’obscurité au hasard, siffla tout près de lui, et la balle perça au-dessus de sa tête un plat à barbe de cuivre suspendu à la boutique d’un coiffeur. On voyait encore, en 1846, rue du Contrat-Social, au coin des piliers des halles, ce plat à barbe troué.

Ce coup de fusil, c’était encore de la vie. À partir de cet instant, il ne rencontra plus rien.

Tout cet itinéraire ressemblait à une descente de marches noires.

Marius n’en alla pas moins en avant.

Chapitre II

Paris à vol de hibou

Un être qui eût plané sur Paris en ce moment avec l'aile de la chauve-souris ou de la chouette eût eu sous les yeux un spectacle morne.

Tout ce vieux quartier des halles, qui est comme une ville dans la ville, que traversent les rues Saint-Denis et Saint-Martin, où se croisent mille ruelles et dont les insurgés avaient fait leur redoute et leur place d'armes, lui eût apparu comme un énorme trou sombre creusé au centre de Paris. Là le regard tombait dans un abîme. Grâce aux réverbères brisés, grâce aux fenêtres fermées, là cessait tout rayonnement, toute vie, toute rumeur, tout mouvement. L'invisible police de l'émeute veillait partout, et maintenait l'ordre, c'est-à-dire la nuit. Noyer le petit nombre dans une vaste obscurité, multiplier chaque combattant par les possibilités que cette obscurité contient, c'est la tactique nécessaire de l'insurrection. À la chute du jour, toute croisée où une chandelle s'allumait avait reçu une balle. La lumière était éteinte, quelquefois l'habitant tué. Aussi rien ne bougeait. Il n'y avait rien là que l'effroi, le deuil, la stupeur dans les maisons; dans les rues une sorte d'horreur sacrée. On n'y apercevait même pas les longues rangées de fenêtres et d'étages, les dentelures des cheminées et des toits, les reflets vagues qui luisent sur le pavé boueux et mouillé. L'œil qui eût regardé d'en haut dans cet amas d'ombre eût entrevu peut-être çà et là, de distance en distance, des clartés indistinctes faisant saillir des lignes brisées et bizarres, des profils de constructions singulières, quelque chose de pareil à des lueurs allant et venant dans des ruines; c'est là qu'étaient les barricades. Le reste était un lac d'obscurité, brumeux, pesant, funèbre, au-dessus duquel se dressaient, silhouettes immobiles et lugubres, la tour Saint-Jacques, l'église Saint-Merry, et deux ou trois autres de ces grands édifices dont l'homme fait des géants et dont la nuit fait des fantômes.

Tout autour de ce labyrinthe désert et inquiétant, dans les quartiers où la circulation parisienne n'était pas anéantie et où quelques rares réverbères brillaient, l'observateur aérien eût pu distinguer la scintillation métallique des sabres et des bayonnettes, le roulement sourd de l'artillerie, et le fourmillement des bataillons silencieux grossissant de minute en minute;

ceinture formidable qui se serrait et se fermait lentement autour de l’émeute.

Le quartier investi n’était plus qu’une sorte de monstrueuse caverne; tout y paraissait endormi ou immobile, et, comme on vient de le voir, chacune des rues où l’on pouvait arriver n’offrait rien que de l’ombre.

Ombre farouche, pleine de pièges, pleine de chocs inconnus et redoutables, où il était effrayant de pénétrer et épouvantable de séjourner, où ceux qui entraient frissonnaient devant ceux qui les attendaient, où ceux qui attendaient tressaillaient devant ceux qui allaient venir. Des combattants invisibles retranchés à chaque coin de rue; les embûches du sépulcre cachées dans les épaisseurs de la nuit. C’était fini. Plus d’autre clarté à espérer là désormais que l’éclair des fusils, plus d’autre rencontre que l’apparition brusque et rapide de la mort. Où? comment? quand? On ne savait, mais c’était certain et inévitable. Là, dans ce lieu marqué pour la lutte, le gouvernement et l’insurrection, la garde nationale et les sociétés populaires, la bourgeoisie et l’émeute, allaient s’aborder à tâtons. Pour les uns comme pour les autres, la nécessité était la même. Sortir de là tués ou vainqueurs, seule issue possible désormais. Situation tellement extrême, obscurité tellement puissante, que les plus timides s’y sentaient pris de résolution et les plus hardis de terreur.

Du reste, des deux côtés, furie, acharnement, détermination égale. Pour les uns, avancer, c’était mourir, et personne ne songeait à reculer; pour les autres, rester, c’était mourir, et personne ne songeait à fuir.

Il était nécessaire que le lendemain tout fût terminé, que le triomphe fût ici ou là, que l’insurrection fût une révolution ou une échauffourée. Le gouvernement le comprenait comme les partis; le moindre bourgeois le sentait. De là une pensée d’angoisse qui se mêlait à l’ombre impénétrable de ce quartier où tout allait se décider; de là un redoublement d’anxiété autour de ce silence d’où allait sortir une catastrophe. On n’y entendait qu’un seul bruit, bruit déchirant comme un râle, menaçant comme une malédiction, le tocsin de Saint-Merry. Rien n’était glaçant comme la clameur de cette cloche éperdue et désespérée se lamentant dans les ténèbres.

Comme il arrive souvent, la nature semblait s’être mise d’accord avec ce que les hommes allaient faire. Rien ne dérangeait les funestes harmonies de cet ensemble. Les étoiles avaient disparu; des nuages lourds emplissaient tout l’horizon de leurs plis mélancoliques. Il y avait un ciel noir sur ces rues mortes, comme si un immense linceul se déployait sur cet immense tombeau.

Tandis qu’une bataille encore toute politique se préparait dans ce même emplacement qui avait vu déjà tant d’événements révolutionnaires, tandis que la jeunesse, les associations secrètes, les écoles, au nom des principes, et la classe moyenne, au nom des intérêts, s’approchaient pour se heurter, s’étreindre et se terrasser, tandis que chacun hâtait et appelait l’heure dernière et décisive de la crise, au loin et en dehors de ce quartier fatal, au plus profond des cavités insondables de ce vieux Paris misérable qui disparaît sous la splendeur du Paris heureux et opulent, on entendait gronder sourdement la sombre voix du peuple.

Voix effrayante et sacrée qui se compose du rugissement de la brute et de la parole de Dieu, qui terrifie les faibles et qui avertit les sages, qui vient tout à la fois d’en bas comme la voix du lion et d’en haut comme la voix du tonnerre.

Chapitre III

L’extrême bord

Marius était arrivé aux halles.

Là tout était plus calme, plus obscur et plus immobile encore que dans les rues voisines. On eût dit que la paix glaciale du sépulcre était sortie de terre et s’était répandue sous le ciel.

Une rougeur pourtant découpait sur ce fond noir la haute toiture des maisons qui barraient la rue de la Chanvrerie du côté de Saint-Eustache. C’était le reflet de la torche qui brûlait dans la barricade de Corinthe. Marius s’était dirigé sur cette rougeur. Elle l’avait amené au Marché-aux-Poirées, et il entrevoyait l’embouchure ténébreuse de la rue des Prêcheurs. Il y entra. La vedette des insurgés qui guettait à l’autre bout ne l’aperçut pas. Il se sentait tout près de ce qu’il était venu chercher, et il marchait sur la pointe du pied. Il arriva ainsi au coude de ce court tronçon de la ruelle Mondétour qui était, on s’en souvient, la seule communication conservée par Enjolras avec le dehors. Au coin de la dernière maison, à sa gauche, il avança la tête, et regarda dans le tronçon Mondétour.

Un peu au delà de l’angle noir de la ruelle et de la rue de la Chanvrerie qui jetait une large nappe d’ombre où il était lui-même enseveli, il aperçut quelque lueur sur les pavés, un peu du cabaret, et, derrière, un lampion clignotant dans une espèce de muraille informe, et des hommes accroupis ayant des fusils sur leurs genoux. Tout cela était à dix toises de lui. C’était l’intérieur de la barricade.

Les maisons qui bordaient la ruelle à droite lui cachaient le reste du cabaret, la grande barricade et le drapeau.

Marius n’avait plus qu’un pas à faire.

Alors le malheureux jeune homme s’assit sur une borne, croisa les bras, et songea à son père.

Il songea à cet héroïque colonel Pontmercy qui avait été un si fier soldat, qui avait gardé sous la République la frontière de France et touché sous l’empereur la frontière d’Asie, qui avait vu Gênes, Alexandrie, Milan, Turin, Madrid, Vienne, Dresde, Berlin, Moscou, qui avait laissé sur tous les champs de victoire de l’Europe des gouttes de ce même sang que lui Marius avait dans les veines, qui avait blanchi avant l’âge dans la discipline et le commandement, qui avait vécu le ceinturon bouclé, les épaulettes tombant sur la poitrine, la cocarde noircie par la poudre, le front plissé par le casque, sous la baraque, au camp, au bivouac, aux ambulances, et qui au bout de vingt ans était revenu des grandes guerres la joue balafrée, le visage souriant, simple, tranquille, admirable, pur comme un enfant, ayant tout fait pour la France et rien contre elle.

Il se dit que son jour à lui était venu aussi, que son heure avait enfin sonné, qu'après son père il allait, lui aussi, être brave, intrépide, hardi, courir au-devant des balles, offrir sa poitrine aux bayonnettes, verser son sang, chercher l'ennemi, chercher la mort, qu'il allait faire la guerre à son tour et descendre sur le champ de bataille, et que ce champ de bataille où il allait descendre, c'était la rue, et que cette guerre qu'il allait faire, c'était la guerre civile!

Il vit la guerre civile ouverte comme un gouffre devant lui et que c'était là qu'il allait tomber.

Alors il frissonna.

Il songea à cette épée de son père que son aïeul avait vendue à un brocanteur, et qu'il avait, lui, si douloureusement regrettée. Il se dit qu'elle avait bien fait, cette vaillante et chaste épée, de lui échapper et de s'en aller irritée dans les ténèbres; que si elle s'était enfuie ainsi, c'est qu'elle était intelligente et qu'elle prévoyait l'avenir; c'est qu'elle pressentait l'émeute, la guerre des ruisseaux, la guerre des pavés, les fusillades par les soupiraux des caves, les coups donnés et reçus par derrière; c'est que, venant de Marengo et de Friedland, elle ne voulait pas aller rue de la Chanvrerie, c'est qu'après ce qu'elle avait fait avec le père, elle ne voulait pas faire cela avec le fils! Il se dit que si cette épée était là, si, l'ayant recueillie au chevet de son père mort, il avait osé la prendre et l'emporter pour ce combat de nuit entre Français dans un carrefour, à coup sûr elle lui brûlerait les mains et se mettrait à flamboyer devant lui comme l'épée de l'ange! Il se dit qu'il était heureux qu'elle n'y fût pas et qu'elle eût disparu, que cela était bien, que cela était juste, que son aïeul avait été le vrai gardien de la gloire de son père, et qu'il valait mieux que l'épée du colonel eût été criée à l'encan, vendue au fripier, jetée aux ferrailles, que de faire aujourd'hui saigner le flanc de la patrie.

Et puis il se mit à pleurer amèrement.

Cela était horrible. Mais que faire? Vivre sans Cosette, il ne le pouvait. Puisqu'elle était partie, il fallait bien qu'il mourût. Ne lui avait-il pas donné sa parole d’honneur qu’il mourrait? Elle était partie sachant cela; c’est qu’il lui plaisait que Marius mourût. Et puis il était clair qu’elle ne l’aimait plus, puisqu’elle s’en était allée ainsi, sans l’avertir, sans un mot, sans une lettre, et elle savait son adresse! À quoi bon vivre et pourquoi vivre à présent? Et puis, quoi! être venu jusque-là et reculer! s’être approché du danger, et s’enfuir! être venu regarder dans la barricade, et s’esquiver! s’esquiver tout tremblant en disant: au fait, j’en ai assez comme cela, j’ai vu, cela suffit, c’est la guerre civile, je m’en vais! Abandonner ses amis qui l’attendaient! qui avaient peut-être besoin de lui! qui étaient une poignée contre une armée! Manquer à tout à la fois, à l’amour, à l’amitié, à sa parole! Donner à sa poltronnerie le prétexte du patriotisme! Mais cela était impossible, et si le fantôme de son père était là dans l’ombre et le voyait reculer, il lui fouetterait les reins du plat de son épée et lui crierait: Marche donc, lâche!

En proie au va-et-vient de ses pensées, il baissait la tête.

Tout à coup il la redressa. Une sorte de rectification splendide venait de se faire dans son esprit. Il y a une dilatation de pensée propre au voisinage de la tombe; être près de la mort, cela fait voir vrai. La vision de l’action dans laquelle il se sentait peut-être sur le point d’entrer lui apparut, non plus lamentable, mais superbe. La guerre de la rue se transfigura subitement, par on ne sait quel travail d’âme intérieur, devant l’œil de sa pensée. Tous les tumultueux points d’interrogation de la rêverie lui revinrent en foule, mais sans le troubler. Il n’en laissa aucun sans réponse.

Voyons, pourquoi son père s’indignerait-il? est-ce qu’il n’y a point des cas où l’insurrection monte à la dignité de devoir? qu’y aurait-il donc de diminuant pour le fils du colonel Pontmercy dans le combat qui s’engage? Ce n’est plus Montmirail ni Champaubert; c’est autre chose. Il ne s’agit plus d’un territoire sacré, mais d’une idée sainte. La patrie se plaint, soit; mais l’humanité applaudit. Est-il vrai d’ailleurs que la patrie se plaigne? La France saigne, mais la liberté sourit; et devant le sourire de la liberté, la France oublie sa plaie. Et puis, à voir les choses de plus haut encore, que viendrait-on parler de guerre civile?

La guerre civile? qu’est-ce à dire? Est-ce qu’il y a une guerre étrangère? Est-ce que toute guerre entre hommes n’est pas la guerre entre frères? La guerre ne se qualifie que par son but. Il n’y a ni guerre étrangère, ni guerre civile; il n’y a que la guerre injuste et la guerre juste. Jusqu’au jour où le grand concordat humain sera conclu, la guerre, celle du moins qui est l’effort de l’avenir qui se hâte contre le passé qui s’attarde, peut être nécessaire. Qu'a-t-on à reprocher à cette guerre-là? La guerre ne devient honte, l'épée ne devient poignard que lorsqu'elle assassine le droit, le progrès, la raison, la civilisation, la vérité. Alors, guerre civile ou guerre étrangère, elle est inique; elle s'appelle le crime. En dehors de cette chose sainte, la justice, de quel droit une forme de la guerre en mépriserait-elle une autre? de quel droit l'épée de Washington renierait-elle la pique de Camille Desmoulins? Léonidas contre l'étranger, Timoléon contre le tyran, lequel est le plus grand? l'un est le défenseur, l'autre est le libérateur. Flétrira-t-on, sans s'inquiéter du but, toute prise d'armes dans l'intérieur de la cité? alors notez d'infamie Brutus, Marcel, Arnould de Blankenheim, Coligny. Guerre de buissons? guerre de rues? Pourquoi pas? c'était la guerre d'Ambiorix, d'Artevelde, de Marnix, de Pélage. Mais Ambiorix luttait contre Rome, Artevelde contre la France, Marnix contre l'Espagne, Pélage contre les Maures; tous contre l'étranger. Eh bien, la monarchie, c'est l'étranger; l'oppression, c'est l'étranger; le droit divin, c'est l'étranger. Le despotisme viole la frontière morale, comme l'invasion viole la frontière géographique. Chasser le tyran ou chasser l'anglais, c'est, dans les deux cas, reprendre son territoire. Il vient une heure où protester ne suffit plus; après la philosophie il faut l'action; la vive force achève ce que l'idée a ébauché; *Prométhée enchaîné* commence, Aristogiton finit; l'Encyclopédie éclaire les âmes, le 10 août les électrise. Après Eschyle, Thrasybule; après Diderot, Danton. Les multitudes ont une tendance à accepter le maître. Leur masse dépose de l'apathie. Une foule se totalise aisément en obéissance. Il faut les remuer, les pousser, rudoyer les hommes par le bienfait même de leur délivrance, leur blesser les yeux par le vrai, leur jeter la lumière à poignées terribles. Il faut qu'ils soient eux-mêmes un peu foudroyés par leur propre salut; cet éblouissement les réveille. De là la nécessité des tocsins et des guerres. Il faut que de grands combattants se lèvent, illuminent les nations par l'audace, et secouent cette triste humanité que couvrent d'ombre le droit divin, la gloire césarienne, la force, le fanatisme, le pouvoir irresponsable et les majestés absolues; cohue stupidement occupée à contempler, dans leur splendeur crépusculaire, ces sombres triomphes de la nuit. À bas le tyran! Mais quoi? de qui parlez-vous? appelez-vous Louis-Philippe tyran? Non; pas plus que Louis XVI. Ils sont tous deux ce que l'histoire a coutume de nommer de bons rois; mais les principes ne se morcellent pas, la logique du vrai est rectiligne, le propre de la vérité c'est de manquer de complaisance; pas de concession donc; tout empiétement sur l’homme doit être réprimé; il y a le droit divin dans Louis XVI, il y a le *parce que Bourbon* dans Louis-Philippe; tous deux représentent dans une certaine mesure la confiscation du droit, et pour déblayer l’usurpation universelle, il faut les combattre; il le faut, la France étant toujours ce qui commence. Quand le maître tombe en France, il tombe partout. En somme, rétablir la vérité sociale, rendre son trône à la liberté, rendre le peuple au peuple, rendre à l’homme la souveraineté, replacer la pourpre sur la tête de la France, restaurer dans leur plénitude la raison et l’équité, supprimer tout germe d’antagonisme en restituant chacun à lui-même, anéantir l’obstacle que la royauté fait à l’immense concorde universelle, remettre le genre humain de niveau avec le droit, quelle cause plus juste, et, par conséquent, quelle guerre plus grande? Ces guerres-là construisent la paix. Une énorme forteresse de préjugés, de privilèges, de superstitions, de mensonges, d’exactions, d’abus, de violences, d’iniquités, de ténèbres, est encore debout sur le monde avec ses tours de haine. Il faut la jeter bas. Il faut faire crouler cette masse monstrueuse. Vaincre à Austerlitz, c’est grand, prendre la Bastille, c’est immense.

Il n’est personne qui ne l’ait remarqué sur soi-même, l’âme, et c’est là la merveille de son unité compliquée d’ubiquité, a cette aptitude étrange de raisonner presque froidement dans les extrémités les plus violentes, et il arrive souvent que la passion désolée et le profond désespoir, dans l’agonie même de leurs monologues les plus noirs, traitent des sujets et discutent des thèses. La logique se mêle à la convulsion, et le fil du syllogisme flotte sans se casser dans l’orage lugubre de la pensée. C’était là la situation d’esprit de Marius.

Tout en songeant ainsi, accablé, mais résolu, hésitant pourtant, et, en somme, frémissant devant ce qu’il allait faire, son regard errait dans l’intérieur de la barricade. Les insurgés y causaient à demi-voix, sans remuer, et l’on y sentait ce quasi-silence qui marque la dernière phase de l’attente. Au-dessus d’eux, à une lucarne d’un troisième étage, Marius distinguait une espèce de spectateur ou de témoin qui lui semblait singulièrement attentif. C’était le portier tué par Le Cabuc. D’en bas, à la réverbération de la torche enfouie dans les pavés, on apercevait cette tête vaguement. Rien n’était plus étrange, à cette clarté sombre et incertaine, que cette face livide, immobile, étonnée, avec ses cheveux hérissés, ses yeux ouverts et fixes et sa bouche béante, penchée sur la rue dans une attitude de curiosité.

On eût dit que celui qui était mort considérait ceux qui allaient mourir. Une longue traînée de sang qui avait coulé de cette tête descendait en filets rougeâtres de la lucarne jusqu'à la hauteur du premier étage où elle s'arrêtait.

Livre quatorzième — Les grandeurs du désespoir

Chapitre I

Le drapeau — Premier acte

Rien ne venait encore. Dix heures avaient sonné à Saint-Merry, Enjolras et Combeferre étaient allés s’asseoir, la carabine à la main, près de la coupure de la grande barricade. Ils ne se parlaient pas; ils écoutaient, cherchant à saisir même le bruit de marche le plus sourd et le plus lointain.

Subitement, au milieu de ce calme lugubre, une voix claire, jeune, gaie, qui semblait venir de la rue Saint-Denis, s’éleva et se mit à chanter distinctement sur le vieil air populaire *Au clair de la lune* cette poésie terminée par une sorte de cri pareil au chant du coq:

Mon nez est en larmes.
Mon ami Bugeaud,
Prêt’-moi tes gendarmes
Pour leur dire un mot.
En capote bleue,
La poule au shako,
Voici la banlieue!
Co-cocorico!

Ils se serrèrent la main.

— C’est Gavroche, dit Enjolras.

— Il nous avertit, dit Combeferre.

Une course précipitée troubla la rue déserte, on vit un être plus agile qu’un clown grimper par-dessus l’omnibus, et Gavroche bondit dans la barricade tout essoufflé, en disant:

— Mon fusil! Les voici.

Un frisson électrique parcourut toute la barricade, et l’on entendit le mouvement des mains cherchant les fusils.

— Veux-tu ma carabine? dit Enjolras au gamin.

— Je veux le grand fusil, répondit Gavroche.

Et il prit le fusil de Javert.

Deux sentinelles s’étaient repliées et étaient rentrées presque en même temps que Gavroche. C’était la sentinelle du bout de la rue et la vedette de la Petite-Truanderie. La vedette de la ruelle des Prêcheurs était restée à son poste, ce qui indiquait que rien ne venait du côté des ponts et des halles.

La rue de la Chanvrerie, dont quelques pavés à peine étaient visibles au reflet de la lumière qui se projetait sur le drapeau, offrait aux insurgés l'aspect d'un grand porche noir vaguement ouvert dans une fumée.

Chacun avait pris son poste de combat.

Quarante-trois insurgés, parmi lesquels Enjolras, Combeferre, Courfeyrac, Bossuet, Joly, Bahorel, et Gavroche, étaient agenouillés dans la grande barricade, les têtes à fleur de la crête du barrage, les canons des fusils et des carabines braqués sur les pavés comme à des meurtrières, attentifs, muets, prêts à faire feu. Six, commandés par Feuilly, s'étaient installés, le fusil en joue, aux fenêtres des deux étages de Corinthe.

Quelques instants s'écoulèrent encore, puis un bruit de pas, mesuré, pesant, nombreux, se fit entendre distinctement du côté de Saint-Leu. Ce bruit, d'abord faible, puis précis, puis lourd et sonore, s'approchait lentement, sans halte, sans interruption, avec une continuité tranquille et terrible. On n'entendait rien que cela. C'était tout ensemble le silence et le bruit de la statue du commandeur, mais ce pas de pierre avait on ne sait quoi d'énorme et de multiple qui éveillait l'idée d'une foule en même temps que l'idée d'un spectre. On croyait entendre marcher l'effrayante statue Légion. Ce pas approcha; il approcha encore, et s'arrêta. Il sembla qu'on entendît au bout de la rue le souffle de beaucoup d'hommes. On ne voyait rien pourtant, seulement on distinguait tout au fond, dans cette épaisse obscurité, une multitude de fils métalliques, fins comme des aiguilles et presque imperceptibles, qui s'agitaient, pareils à ces indescriptibles réseaux phosphoriques qu'au moment de s'endormir on aperçoit, sous ses paupières fermées, dans les premiers brouillards du sommeil. C'étaient les bayonnettes et les canons de fusils confusément éclairés par la réverbération lointaine de la torche.

Il y eut encore une pause, comme si des deux côtés on attendait. Tout à coup, du fond de cette ombre, une voix, d'autant plus sinistre qu'on ne voyait personne, et qu'il semblait que c'était l'obscurité elle-même qui parlait, cria:

— Qui vive?

En même temps on entendit le cliquetis des fusils qui s'abattent.

Enjolras répondit d'un accent vibrant et altier:

— Révolution française.

— Feu! dit la voix.

Un éclair empourpra toutes les façades de la rue comme si la porte d’une fournaise s’ouvrait et se fermait brusquement.

Une effroyable détonation éclata sur la barricade. Le drapeau rouge tomba. La décharge avait été si violente et si dense qu’elle en avait coupé la hampe; c’est-à-dire la pointe même du timon de l’omnibus. Des balles, qui avaient ricoché sur les corniches des maisons, pénétrèrent dans la barricade et blessèrent plusieurs hommes.

L’impression de cette première décharge fut glaçante. L’attaque était rude, et de nature à faire songer les plus hardis. Il était évident qu’on avait au moins affaire à un régiment tout entier.

— Camarades, cria Courfeyrac, ne perdons pas la poudre. Attendons pour riposter qu’ils soient engagés dans la rue.

— Et, avant tout, dit Enjolras, relevons le drapeau!

Il ramassa le drapeau qui était précisément tombé à ses pieds.

On entendait au dehors le choc des baguettes dans les fusils; la troupe rechargeait les armes.

Enjolras reprit:

— Qui est-ce qui a du cœur ici? qui est-ce qui replante le drapeau sur la barricade?

Pas un ne répondit. Monter sur la barricade au moment où sans doute elle était couchée en joue de nouveau, c’était simplement la mort. Le plus brave hésite à se condamner. Enjolras lui-même avait un frémissement. Il répéta:

— Personne ne se présente?

Chapitre II

Le drapeau — Deuxième acte

Depuis qu'on était arrivé à Corinthe et qu'on avait commencé à construire la barricade, on n'avait plus guère fait attention au père Mabeuf. M. Mabeuf pourtant n'avait pas quitté l'attroupement. Il était entré dans le rez-de-chaussée du cabaret et s'était assis derrière le comptoir. Là, il s'était pour ainsi dire anéanti en lui-même. Il semblait ne plus regarder et ne plus penser. Courfeyrac et d'autres l'avaient deux ou trois fois accosté, l'avertissant du péril, l'engageant à se retirer, sans qu'il parût les entendre. Quand on ne lui parlait pas, sa bouche remuait comme s'il répondait à quelqu'un, et dès qu'on lui adressait la parole, ses lèvres devenaient immobiles et ses yeux n'avaient plus l'air vivants. Quelques heures avant que la barricade fût attaquée, il avait pris une posture qu'il n'avait plus quittée, les deux poings sur ses deux genoux et la tête penchée en avant comme s'il regardait dans un précipice. Rien n'avait pu le tirer de cette attitude; il ne paraissait pas que son esprit fût dans la barricade. Quand chacun était allé prendre sa place de combat, il n'était plus resté dans la salle basse que Javert lié au poteau, un insurgé le sabre nu, veillant sur Javert, et lui Mabeuf. Au moment de l'attaque, à la détonation, la secousse physique l'avait atteint et comme réveillé, il s'était levé brusquement, il avait traversé la salle, et à l'instant où Enjolras répéta son appel: — Personne ne se présente? on vit le vieillard apparaître sur le seuil du cabaret.

Sa présence fit une sorte de commotion dans les groupes. Un cri s'éleva:

— C'est le votant! c'est le conventionnel! c'est le représentant du peuple!

Il est probable qu'il n'entendait pas.

Il marcha droit à Enjolras, les insurgés s'écartaient devant lui avec une crainte religieuse, il arracha le drapeau à Enjolras qui reculait pétrifié, et alors, sans que personne osât ni l'arrêter ni l'aider, ce vieillard de quatre-vingts ans, la tête branlante, le pied ferme, se mit à gravir lentement l'escalier de pavés pratiqué dans la barricade. Cela était si sombre et si grand que tous autour de lui crièrent: Chapeau bas! À chaque marche qu'il montait, c'était effrayant, ses cheveux blancs, sa face décrépite, son grand front chauve et ridé, ses yeux caves, sa bouche étonnée et ouverte, son vieux bras levant la bannière rouge, surgissaient de l’ombre et grandissaient dans la clarté sanglante de la torche, et l’on croyait voir le spectre de 93 sortir de terre, le drapeau de la terreur à la main.

Quand il fut au haut de la dernière marche, quand ce fantôme tremblant et terrible, debout sur ce monceau de décombres en présence de douze cents fusils invisibles, se dressa, en face de la mort et comme s’il était plus fort qu’elle, toute la barricade eut dans les ténèbres une figure surnaturelle et colossale.

Il y eut un de ces silences qui ne se font qu’autour des prodiges.

Au milieu de ce silence le vieillard agita le drapeau rouge et cria:

— Vive la Révolution! vive la République! fraternité! égalité! et la mort!

On entendit de la barricade un chuchotement bas et rapide pareil au murmure d’un prêtre pressé qui dépêche une prière. C’était probablement le commissaire de police qui faisait les sommations légales à l’autre bout de la rue.

Puis la même voix éclatante qui avait crié: qui vive? cria:

— Retirez-vous!

M. Mabeuf, blême, hagard, les prunelles illuminées des lugubres flammes de l’égarement, leva le drapeau au-dessus de son front et répéta:

— Vive la République!

— Feu! dit la voix.

Une seconde décharge, pareille à une mitraille, s’abattit sur la barricade.

Le vieillard fléchit sur ses genoux, puis se redressa, laissa échapper le drapeau et tomba en arrière à la renverse sur le pavé, comme une planche, tout de son long et les bras en croix.

Des ruisseaux de sang coulèrent de dessous lui. Sa vieille tête, pâle et triste, semblait regarder le ciel.

Une de ces émotions supérieures à l’homme qui font qu’on oublie même de se défendre, saisit les insurgés, et ils s’approchèrent du cadavre avec une épouvante respectueuse.

— Quels hommes que ces régicides! dit Enjolras.

Courfeyrac se pencha à l’oreille d’Enjolras:

— Ceci n’est que pour toi, et je ne veux pas diminuer l’enthousiasme. Mais ce n’était rien moins qu’un régicide. Je l’ai connu. Il s’appelait le père Mabeuf. Je ne sais pas ce qu’il avait aujourd’hui. Mais c’était une brave ganache. Regarde-moi sa tête.

— Tête de ganache et cœur de Brutus, répondit Enjolras.

Puis il éleva la voix:

— Citoyens! ceci est l'exemple que les vieux donnent aux jeunes. Nous hésitions, il est venu! nous reculions, il a avancé! Voilà ce que ceux qui tremblent de vieillesse enseignent à ceux qui tremblent de peur! Cet aïeul est auguste devant la patrie. Il a eu une longue vie et une magnifique mort! Maintenant abritons le cadavre, que chacun de nous défende ce vieillard mort comme il défendrait son père vivant, et que sa présence au milieu de nous fasse la barricade imprenable!

Un murmure d'adhésion morne et énergique suivit ces paroles.

Enjolras se courba, souleva la tête du vieillard, et, farouche, le baisa au front, puis, lui écartant les bras, et maniant ce mort avec une précaution tendre, comme s'il eût craint de lui faire du mal, il lui ôta son habit, en montra à tous les trous sanglants, et dit:

— Voilà maintenant notre drapeau.

Chapitre III

Gavroche aurait mieux fait d’accepter la carabine d’Enjolras

On jeta sur le père Mabeuf un long châle noir de la veuve Hucheloup. Six hommes firent de leurs fusils une civière, on y posa le cadavre, et on le porta, têtes nues, avec une lenteur solennelle, sur la grande table de la salle basse.

Ces hommes, tout entiers à la chose grave et sacrée qu’ils faisaient, ne songeaient plus à la situation périlleuse où ils étaient.

Quand le cadavre passa près de Javert toujours impassible, Enjolras dit à l’espion:

— Toi! tout à l’heure.

Pendant ce temps-là, le petit Gavroche, qui seul n’avait pas quitté son poste et était resté en observation, croyait voir des hommes s’approcher à pas de loup de la barricade. Tout à coup il cria:

— Méfiez-vous!

Courfeyrac, Enjolras, Jean Prouvaire, Combeferre, Joly, Bahorel, Bossuet, tous sortirent en tumulte du cabaret. Il n’était déjà presque plus temps. On apercevait une étincelante épaisseur de bayonnettes ondulant au-dessus de la barricade. Des gardes municipaux de haute taille, pénétraient, les uns en enjambant l’omnibus, les autres par la coupure, poussant devant eux le gamin qui reculait, mais ne fuyait pas.

L’instant était critique. C’était cette première redoutable minute de l’inondation, quand le fleuve se soulève an niveau de la levée et que l’eau commence à s’infiltrer par les fissures de la digue. Une seconde encore, et la barricade était prise.

Bahorel s’élança sur le premier garde municipal qui entrait et le tua à bout portant d’un coup de carabine; le second tua Bahorel d’un coup de bayonnette. Un autre avait déjà terrassé Courfeyrac qui criait: «À moi!» Le plus grand de tous, une espèce de colosse, marchait sur Gavroche la bayonnette en avant. Le gamin prit dans ses petits bras l’énorme fusil de Javert, coucha résolûment en joue le géant, et lâcha son coup. Rien ne partit. Javert n’avait pas chargé son fusil. Le garde municipal éclata de rire et leva la bayonnette sur l’enfant.

Avant que la bayonnette eût touché Gavroche, le fusil échappait des mains du soldat, une balle avait frappé le garde municipal au milieu du front et il tombait sur le dos. Une seconde balle frappait en pleine poitrine l’autre garde qui avait assailli Courfeyrac, et le jetait sur le pavé.

C’était Marius qui venait d’entrer dans la barricade.

Chapitre IV

Le baril de poudre

Marius, toujours caché dans le coude de la rue Mondétour, avait assisté à la première phase du combat, irrésolu et frissonnant. Cependant il n’avait pu résister longtemps à ce vertige mystérieux et souverain qu’on pourrirait nommer l’appel de l’abîme. Devant l’imminence du péril, devant la mort de M. Mabeuf, cette funèbre énigme, devant Bahorel tué, Courfeyrac criant: à moi! cet enfant menacé, ses amis à secourir ou à venger, toute hésitation s’était évanouie, et il s’était rué dans la mêlée ses deux pistolets à la main. Du premier coup il avait sauvé Gavroche et du second délivré Courfeyrac.

Aux coups de feu, aux cris des gardes frappés, les assaillants avaient gravi le retranchement, sur le sommet duquel on voyait maintenant se dresser plus d’à mi-corps, et en foule, des gardes municipaux, des soldats de la ligne, des gardes nationaux de la banlieue, le fusil au poing. Ils couvraient déjà plus des deux tiers du barrage, mais ils ne sautaient pas dans l’enceinte, comme s’ils balançaient, craignant quelque piège. Ils regardaient dans la barricade obscure comme on regarderait dans une tanière de lions. La lueur de la torche n’éclairait que les bayonnettes, les bonnets à poil et le haut des visages inquiets et irrités.

Marius n’avait plus d’armes, il avait jeté ses pistolets déchargés, mais il avait aperçu le baril de poudre dans la salle basse près de la porte.

Comme il se tournait à demi, regardant de ce côté, un soldat le coucha en joue. Au moment où le soldat ajustait Marius, une main se posa sur le bout du canon du fusil, et le boucha. C’était quelqu’un qui s’était élancé, le jeune ouvrier au pantalon de velours. Le coup partit, traversa la main, et peut-être aussi l’ouvrier, car il tomba, mais la balle n’atteignit pas Marius. Tout cela dans la fumée, plutôt entrevu que vu. Marius, qui entrait dans la salle basse, s’en aperçut à peine. Cependant il avait confusément vu ce canon de fusil dirigé sur lui et cette main qui l’avait bouché, et il avait entendu le coup. Mais dans des minutes comme celle-là, les choses qu’on voit vacillent et se précipitent, et l’on ne s’arrête à rien. On se sent obscurément poussé vers plus d’ombre encore, et tout est nuage.

Les insurgés, surpris, mais non effrayés, s’étaient ralliés. Enjolras avait crié: Attendez! ne tirez pas au hasard! Dans la première confusion en effet ils pouvaient se blesser les uns les autres. La plupart étaient montés à la fenêtre du premier étage et aux mansardes d’où ils dominaient les assaillants. Les plus déterminés, avec Enjolras, Courfeyrac, Jean Prouvaire et Combeferre, s’étaient fièrement adossés aux maisons du fond, à découvert et faisant face aux rangées de soldats et de gardes qui couronnaient la barricade.

Tout cela s’accomplit sans précipitation, avec cette gravité étrange et menaçante qui précède les mêlées. Des deux parts on se couchait en joue, à bout portant, on était si près qu’on pouvait se parler à portée de voix. Quand on fut à ce point où l’étincelle va jaillir, un officier en hausse-col et à grosses épaulettes étendit son épée et dit:

— Bas les armes!

— Feu! dit Enjolras.

Les deux détonations partirent en même temps, et tout disparut dans la fumée.

Fumée âcre et étouffante où se traînaient, avec des gémissements faibles et sourds, des mourants et des blessés.

Quand la fumée se dissipa, on vit des deux côtés les combattants, éclaircis, mais toujours aux mêmes places, qui rechargeaient les armes en silence.

Tout à coup, on entendit une voix tonnante qui criait:

— Allez-vous-en, ou je fais sauter la barricade!

Tous se retournèrent du côté d’où venait la voix.

Marius était entré dans la salle basse, y avait pris le baril de poudre, puis il avait profité de la fumée et de l’espèce de brouillard obscur qui emplissait l’enceinte retranchée, pour se glisser le long de la barricade jusqu’à cette cage de pavés où était fixée la torche. En arracher la torche, y mettre le baril de poudre, pousser la pile de pavés sous le baril, qui s’était sur-le-champ défoncé, avec une sorte d’obéissance terrible, tout cela avait été pour Marius le temps de se baisser et de se relever; et maintenant tous, gardes nationaux, gardes municipaux, officiers, soldats, pelotonnés à l’autre extrémité de la barricade, le regardaient avec stupeur le pied sur les pavés, la torche à la main, son fier visage éclairé par une résolution fatale, penchant la flamme de la torche vers ce monceau redoutable où l’on distinguait le baril de poudre brisé, et poussant ce cri terrifiant:

— Allez-vous-en, ou je fais sauter la barricade!

Marius sur cette barricade après l’octogénaire, c’était la vision de la jeune révolution après l’apparition de la vieille.

— Sauter la barricade! dit un sergent, et toi aussi!

Marius répondit:

— Et moi aussi.

Et il approcha la torche du baril de poudre.

Mais il n’y avait déjà plus personne sur le barrage. Les assaillants, laissant leurs morts et leurs blessés, refluaient pêle-mêle et en désordre vers l’extrémité de la rue et s’y perdaient de nouveau dans la nuit. Ce fut un sauve-qui-peut.

La barricade était dégagée.

Chapitre V

Fin des vers de Jean Prouvaire

Tous entourèrent Marius. Courfeyrac lui sauta au cou.

— Te voilà!

— Quel bonheur! dit Combeferre.

— Tu es venu à propos! fit Bossuet.

— Sans toi j’étais mort! reprit Courfeyrac.

— Sans vous j’étais gobé! ajouta Gavroche.

Marius demanda:

— Où est le chef?

— C’est toi, dit Enjolras.

Marius avait eu toute la journée une fournaise dans le cerveau, maintenant c’était un tourbillon. Ce tourbillon qui était en lui lui faisait l’effet d’être hors de lui et de l’emporter. Il lui semblait qu’il était déjà à une distance immense de la vie. Ses deux lumineux mois de joie et d’amour aboutissant brusquement à cet effroyable précipice, Cosette perdue pour lui, cette barricade, M. Mabeuf se faisant tuer pour la République, lui-même chef d’insurgés, toutes ces choses lui paraissaient un cauchemar monstrueux. Il était obligé de faire un effort d’esprit pour se rappeler que tout ce qui l’entourait était réel. Marius avait trop peu vécu encore pour savoir que rien n’est plus imminent que l’impossible, et que ce qu’il faut toujours prévoir, c’est l’imprévu. Il assistait à son propre drame comme à une pièce qu’on ne comprend pas.

Dans cette brume où était sa pensée, il ne reconnut pas Javert qui, lié à son poteau, n’avait pas fait un mouvement de la tête pendant l’attaque de la barricade et qui regardait s’agiter autour de lui la révolte avec la résignation d’un martyr et la majesté d’un juge. Marius ne l’aperçut même pas.

Cependant les assaillants ne bougeaient plus, on les entendait marcher et fourmiller au bout de la rue, mais ils ne s’y aventuraient pas, soit qu’ils attendissent des ordres, soit qu’avant de se ruer de nouveau sur cette imprenable redoute, ils attendissent des renforts. Les insurgés avaient posé des sentinelles, et quelques-uns qui étaient étudiants en médecine s’étaient mis à panser les blessés.

On avait jeté les tables hors du cabaret à l’exception de deux tables réservées à la charpie et aux cartouches, et de la table où gisait le père Mabeuf; on les avait ajoutées à la barricade, et on les avait remplacées dans la salle basse par les matelas des lits de la veuve Hucheloup et des servantes. Sur ces matelas on avait étendu les blessés. Quant aux trois pauvres créatures qui habitaient Corinthe, on ne savait ce qu’elles étaient devenues. On finit pourtant par les retrouver cachées dans la cave.

Une émotion poignante vint assombrir la joie de la barricade dégagée.

On fit l’appel. Un des insurgés manquait. Et qui? Un des plus chers, un des plus vaillants. Jean Prouvaire. On le chercha parmi les blessés, il n’y était pas. On le chercha parmi les morts, il n’y était pas. Il était évidemment prisonnier.

Combeferre dit à Enjolras:

— Ils ont notre ami; mais nous avons leur agent. Tiens-tu à la mort de ce mouchard?

— Oui, répondit Enjolras, mais moins qu’à la vie de Jean Prouvaire.

Ceci se passait dans la salle basse près du poteau de Javert.

— Eh bien, reprit Combeferre, je vais attacher mon mouchoir à ma canne, et aller en parlementaire leur offrir de leur donner leur homme pour le nôtre.

— Écoute, dit Enjolras en posant sa main sur le bras de Combeferre.

Il y avait au bout de la rue un cliquetis d’armes significatif.

On entendit une voix mâle crier:

— Vive la France! vive l’avenir!

On reconnut la voix de Prouvaire.

Un éclair passa et une détonation éclata.

Le silence se refit.

— Ils l’ont tué, s’écria Combeferre.

Enjolras regarda Javert et lui dit:

— Tes amis viennent de te fusiller.

Chapitre VI

L’agonie de la mort après l’agonie de la vie

Une singularité de ce genre de guerre, c’est que l’attaque des barricades se fait presque toujours de front, et qu’en général les assaillants s’abstiennent de tourner les positions, soit qu’ils redoutent des embuscades, soit qu’ils craignent de s’engager dans des rues tortueuses. Toute l’attention des insurgés se portait donc du côté de la grande barricade qui était évidemment le point toujours menacé et où devait recommencer infailliblement la lutte. Marius pourtant songea à la petite barricade et y alla. Elle était déserte et n’était gardée que par le lampion qui tremblait entre les pavés. Du reste la ruelle Mondétour et les embranchements de la Petite-Truanderie et du Cygne étaient profondément calmes.

Comme Marius, l’inspection faite, se retirait, il entendit son nom prononcé faiblement dans l’obscurité:

— Monsieur Marius!

Il tressaillit, car il reconnut la voix qui l’avait appelé deux heures auparavant à travers la grille de la rue Plumet.

Seulement cette voix maintenant semblait n’être plus qu’un souffle.

Il regarda autour de lui et ne vit personne.

Marius crut s’être trompé, et que c’était une illusion ajoutée par son esprit aux réalités extraordinaires qui se heurtaient autour de lui. Il fit un pas pour sortir de l’enfoncement reculé où était la barricade.

— Monsieur Marius! répéta la voix.

Cette fois il ne pouvait douter, il avait distinctement entendu; il regarda, et ne vit rien.

— À vos pieds, dit la voix.

Il se courba et vit dans l’ombre une forme qui se traînait vers lui. Cela rampait sur le pavé. C’était cela qui lui parlait.

Le lampion permettait de distinguer une blouse, un pantalon de gros velours déchiré, des pieds nus, et quelque chose qui ressemblait à une mare de sang. Marius entrevit une tête pâle qui se dressait vers lui et qui lui dit:

— Vous ne me reconnaissez pas?

— Non.

— Éponine.

Marius se baissa vivement. C’était en effet cette malheureuse enfant. Elle était habillée en homme.

— Comment êtes-vous ici? que faites-vous là?

— Je meurs, lui dit-elle.

Il y a des mots et des incidents qui réveillent les êtres accablés. Marius s’écria comme en sursaut:

— Vous êtes blessée! Attendez, je vais vous porter dans la salle. On va vous panser. Est-ce grave? comment faut-il vous prendre pour ne pas vous faire mal? où souffrez-vous? Du secours! mon Dieu! Mais qu’êtes-vous venue faire ici?

Et il essaya de passer son bras sous elle pour la soulever.

En la soulevant il rencontra sa main.

Elle poussa un cri faible.

— Vous ai-je fait mal? demanda Marius.

— Un peu.

— Mais je n’ai touché que votre main.

Elle leva sa main vers le regard de Marius, et Marius au milieu de cette main vit un trou noir.

— Qu’avez-vous donc à la main? dit-il.

— Elle est percée.

— Percée!

— Oui.

— De quoi?

— D’une balle.

— Comment?

— Avez-vous vu un fusil qui vous couchait en joue?

— Oui, et une main qui l’a bouché.

— C’était la mienne.

Marius eut un frémissement:

— Quelle folie! Pauvre enfant! Mais tant mieux, si c’est cela, ce n’est rien. Laissez-moi vous porter sur un lit. On va vous panser, on ne meurt pas d’une main percée.

Elle murmura:

— La balle a traversé la main, mais elle est sortie par le dos. C’est inutile de m’ôter d’ici. Je vais vous dire comment vous pouvez me panser, mieux qu’un chirurgien. Asseyez-vous près de moi sur cette pierre.

Il obéit; elle posa sa tête sur les genoux de Marius, et, sans le regarder, elle dit:

— Oh! que c'est bon! Comme on est bien! Voilà! Je ne souffre plus.

Elle demeura un moment en silence, puis elle tourna son visage avec effort et regarda Marius.

— Savez-vous, monsieur Marius? Cela me taquinait que vous entriez dans ce jardin, c'était bête, puisque c'était moi qui vous avais montré la maison, et puis enfin je devais bien me dire qu'un jeune homme comme vous....

Elle s'interrompit, et, franchissant les sombres transitions qui étaient sans doute dans son esprit, elle reprit avec un déchirant sourire:

— Vous me trouviez laide, n'est-ce pas?

Elle continua:

— Voyez-vous, vous êtes perdu! Maintenant personne ne sortira de la barricade. C'est moi qui vous ai amené ici, tiens! Vous allez mourir. J'y compte bien. Et pourtant, quand j'ai vu qu'on vous visait, j'ai mis la main sur la bouche du canon de fusil. Comme c'est drôle! Mais c'est que je voulais mourir avant vous. Quand j'ai reçu cette balle, je me suis traînée ici, on ne m'a pas vue, on ne m'a pas ramassée. Je vous attendais, je disais: Il ne viendra donc pas? Oh! si vous saviez, je mordais ma blouse, je souffrais tant! Maintenant je suis bien. Vous rappelez-vous le jour où je suis entrée dans votre chambre et où je me suis mirée dans votre miroir, et le jour où je vous ai rencontré sur le boulevard près des femmes en journée? Comme les oiseaux chantaient! Il n'y a pas bien longtemps. Vous m'avez donné cent sous, et je vous ai dit: Je ne veux pas de votre argent. Avez-vous ramassé votre pièce au moins? Vous n'êtes pas riche. Je n'ai pas pensé à vous dire de la ramasser. Il faisait beau soleil, on n'avait pas froid. Vous souvenez-vous, monsieur Marius? Oh! je suis heureuse! Tout le monde va mourir.

Elle avait un air insensé, grave et navrant. Sa blouse déchirée montrait sa gorge nue. Elle appuyait en parlant sa main percée sur sa poitrine où il y avait un autre trou, et d'où il sortait par instants un flot de sang comme le jet de vin d'une bonde ouverte.

Marius considérait cette créature infortunée avec une profonde compassion.

— Oh! reprit-elle tout à coup, cela revient. J'étouffe!

Elle prit sa blouse et la mordit, et ses jambes se raidissaient sur le pavé.

En ce moment la voix de jeune coq du petit Gavroche retentit dans la barricade. L'enfant était monté sur une table pour charger son fusil et chantait gaîment la chanson alors si populaire:

En voyant Lafayette,
Le gendarme répète:
Sauvons-nous! sauvons-nous! sauvons-nous!

Éponine se souleva, et écouta, puis elle murmura:

— C'est lui.

Et se tournant vers Marius:

— Mon frère est là. Il ne faut pas qu'il me voie. Il me gronderait.

— Votre frère? demanda Marius qui songeait dans le plus amer et le plus douloureux de son cœur aux devoirs que son père lui avait légués envers les Thénardier, qui est votre frère?

— Ce petit.

— Celui qui chante?

— Oui.

Marius fit un mouvement.

— Oh! ne vous en allez pas! dit-elle, cela ne sera pas long à présent.

Elle était presque sur son séant, mais sa voix était très basse et coupée de hoquets. Par intervalles le râle l'interrompait. Elle approchait le plus qu'elle pouvait son visage du visage de Marius. Elle ajouta avec une expression étrange:

— Écoutez, je ne veux pas vous faire une farce. J'ai dans ma poche une lettre pour vous. Depuis hier. On m'avait dit de la mettre à la poste. Je l'ai gardée. Je ne voulais pas qu'elle vous parvînt. Mais vous m'en voudriez peut-être quand nous allons nous revoir tout à l'heure. On se revoit, n'est-ce pas? Prenez votre lettre.

Elle saisit convulsivement la main de Marius avec sa main trouée, mais elle semblait ne plus percevoir la souffrance. Elle mit la main de Marius dans la poche de sa blouse. Marius y sentit en effet un papier.

— Prenez, dit-elle.

Marius prit la lettre.

Elle fit un signe de satisfaction et de consentement.

— Maintenant pour ma peine, promettez-moi....

Et elle s'arrêta.

— Quoi? demanda Marius.

— Promettez-moi!

— Je vous promets.

— Promettez-moi de me donner un baiser sur le front quand je serai morte. — Je le sentirai.

Elle laissa retomber sa tête sur les genoux de Marius et ses paupières se fermèrent. Il crut cette pauvre âme partie. Éponine restait immobile; tout à coup, à l’instant où Marius la croyait à jamais endormie, elle ouvrit lentement ses yeux où apparaissait la sombre profondeur de la mort, et lui dit avec un accent dont la douceur semblait déjà venir d’un autre monde:

— Et puis, tenez, monsieur Marius, je crois que j’étais un peu amoureuse de vous.

Elle essaya encore de sourire et expira.

Chapitre VII

Gavroche profond calculateur des distances

Marius tint sa promesse. Il déposa un baiser sur ce front livide où perlait une sueur glacée. Ce n’était pas une infidélité à Cosette; c’était un adieu pensif et doux à une malheureuse âme.

Il n’avait pas pris sans un tressaillement la lettre qu’Éponine lui avait donnée. Il avait tout de suite senti là un événement. Il était impatient de la lire. Le cœur de l’homme est ainsi fait, l’infortunée enfant avait à peine fermé les yeux que Marius songeait à déplier ce papier. Il la reposa doucement sur la terre et s’en alla. Quelque chose lui disait qu’il ne pouvait lire cette lettre devant ce cadavre.

Il s’approcha d’une chandelle dans la salle basse. C’était un petit billet plié et cacheté avec ce soin élégant des femmes. L’adresse était d’une écriture de femme et portait:

— À monsieur, monsieur Marius Pontmercy, chez M. Courfeyrac, rue de la Verrerie, nº 16.

Il défit le cachet, et lut:

«Mon bien-aimé, hélas! mon père veut que nous partions tout de suite. Nous serons ce soir rue de l’Homme-Armé, nº 7. Dans huit jours nous serons à Londres. COSETTE, 4 juin.»

Telle était l’innocence de ces amours que Marius ne connaissait même pas l’écriture de Cosette.

Ce qui s’était passé peut être dit en quelques mots. Éponine avait tout fait. Après la soirée du 3 juin, elle avait eu une double pensée, déjouer les projets de son père et des bandits sur la maison de la rue Plumet, et séparer Marius de Cosette. Elle avait changé de guenilles avec le premier jeune drôle venu qui avait trouvé amusant de s’habiller en femme pendant qu’Éponine se déguisait en homme. C’était elle qui au Champ de Mars avait donné à Jean Valjean l’avertissement expressif: *Déménagez*. Jean Valjean était rentré en effet et avait dit à Cosette: *Nous partons ce soir et nous allons rue de l’Homme-Armé avec Toussaint. La semaine prochaine nous serons à Londres*. Cosette, atterrée de ce coup inattendu, avait écrit en hâte deux lignes à Marius. Mais comment faire mettre la lettre à la poste? Elle ne sortait pas seule, et Toussaint, surprise d’une telle commission, eût à coup sûr montré la lettre à M. Fauchelevent. Dans cette anxiété, Cosette avait aperçu à travers la grille Éponine en habits d'homme, qui rôdait maintenant sans cesse autour du jardin. Cosette avait appelé «ce jeune ouvrier» et lui avait remis cinq francs et la lettre, en lui disant: Portez cette lettre tout de suite à son adresse. Éponine avait mis la lettre dans sa poche. Le lendemain 5 juin, elle était allée chez Courfeyrac demander Marius, non pour lui remettre la lettre, mais, chose que toute âme jalouse et aimante comprendra, «pour voir». Là elle avait attendu Marius, ou au moins Courfeyrac, — toujours pour voir. — Quand Courfeyrac lui avait dit: nous allons aux barricades, une idée lui avait traversé l'esprit. Se jeter dans cette mort-là comme elle se serait jetée dans toute autre, et y pousser Marius. Elle avait suivi Courfeyrac, s'était assurée de l'endroit où l'on construisait la barricade; et bien sûre, puisque Marius n'avait reçu aucun avis et qu'elle avait intercepté la lettre, qu'il serait à la nuit tombante au rendez-vous de tous les soirs, elle était allée rue Plumet, y avait attendu Marius, et lui avait envoyé, au nom de ses amis, cet appel qui devait, pensait-elle, l'amener à la barricade. Elle comptait sur le désespoir de Marius quand il ne trouverait pas Cosette; elle ne se trompait pas. Elle était retournée de son côté rue de la Chanvrerie. On vient de voir ce qu'elle y avait fait. Elle était morte avec cette joie tragique des cœurs jaloux qui entraînent l'être aimé dans leur mort, et qui disent: personne ne l'aura!

Marius couvrit de baisers la lettre de Cosette. Elle l'aimait donc! Il eut un instant l'idée qu'il ne devait plus mourir. Puis il se dit: Elle part. Son père l'emmène en Angleterre et mon grand-père se refuse au mariage. Rien n'est changé dans la fatalité. Les rêveurs comme Marius ont de ces accablements suprêmes, et il en sort des partis pris désespérés. La fatigue de vivre est insupportable; la mort, c'est plus tôt fait.

Alors il songea qu'il lui restait deux devoirs à accomplir: informer Cosette de sa mort et lui envoyer un suprême adieu, et sauver de la catastrophe imminente qui se préparait ce pauvre enfant, frère d'Éponine et fils de Thénardier.

Il avait sur lui un portefeuille; le même qui avait contenu le cahier où il avait écrit tant de pensées d'amour pour Cosette. Il en arracha une feuille et écrivit au crayon ces quelques lignes:

«Notre mariage était impossible. J'ai demandé à mon grand-père, il a refusé; je suis sans fortune, et toi aussi. J'ai couru chez toi, je ne t'ai plus trouvée, tu sais la parole que je t'avais donnée, je la tiens. Je meurs. Je t'aime. Quand tu liras ceci, mon âme sera près de toi, et te sourira.»

N'ayant rien pour cacheter cette lettre, il se borna à plier le papier en quatre et y mit cette adresse:

À Mademoiselle Cosette Fauchelevent, chez M. Fauchelevent, rue de l'Homme-Armé, nº 7.

La lettre pliée, il demeura un moment pensif, reprit son portefeuille, l'ouvrit, et écrivit avec le même crayon sur la première page ces quatre lignes:

«Je m'appelle Marius Pontmercy. Porter mon cadavre chez mon grand-père, M. Gillenormand, rue des Filles-du-Calvaire, nº 6, au Marais.»

Il remit le portefeuille dans la poche de son habit, puis il appela Gavroche. Le gamin, à la voix de Marius, accourut avec sa mine joyeuse et dévouée.

— Veux-tu faire quelque chose pour moi?

— Tout, dit Gavroche. Dieu du bon Dieu! sans vous, vrai, j'étais cuit.

— Tu vois bien cette lettre?

— Oui.

— Prends-la. Sors de la barricade sur-le-champ (Gavroche, inquiet, commença à se gratter l'oreille), et demain matin tu la remettras à son adresse, à mademoiselle Cosette chez M. Fauchelevent, rue de l'Homme-Armé, nº 7.

L'héroïque enfant répondit:

— Ah bien mais! pendant ce temps-là, on prendra la barricade, et je n'y serai pas.

— La barricade ne sera plus attaquée qu'au point du jour selon toute apparence et ne sera pas prise avant demain midi.

Le nouveau répit que les assaillants laissaient à la barricade se prolongeait en effet. C'était une de ces intermittences, fréquentes dans les combats nocturnes, qui sont toujours suivies d'un redoublement d'acharnement.

— Eh bien, dit Gavroche, si j'allais porter votre lettre demain matin?

— Il sera trop tard. La barricade sera probablement bloquée, toutes les rues seront gardées, et tu ne pourras sortir. Va tout de suite.

Gavroche ne trouva rien à répliquer, il restait là, indécis, et se grattant l'oreille tristement. Tout à coup, avec un de ces mouvements d'oiseau qu'il avait, il prit la lettre.

— C’est bon, dit-il.

Et il partit en courant par la ruelle Mondétour.

Gavroche avait eu une idée qui l’avait déterminé, mais qu’il n’avait pas dite, de peur que Marius n’y fît quelque objection.

Cette idée, la voici:

— Il est à peine minuit, la rue de l’Homme-Armé n’est pas loin, je vais porter la lettre tout de suite, et je serai revenu à temps.

Livre quinzième — La rue de l’Homme-Armé

Chapitre I

Buvard, bavard

Qu’est-ce que les convulsions d’une ville auprès des émeutes de l’âme? L’homme est une profondeur plus grande encore que le peuple. Jean Valjean, en ce moment-là même, était en proie à un soulèvement effrayants. Tous les gouffres s’étaient rouverts en lui. Lui aussi frissonnait, comme Paris, au seuil d’une révolution formidable et obscure. Quelques heures avaient suffi. Sa destinée et sa conscience s’étaient brusquement couvertes d’ombre. De lui aussi, comme de Paris, on pouvait dire: les deux principes sont en présence. L’ange blanc et l’ange noir vont se saisir corps à corps sur le pont de l’abîme. Lequel des deux précipitera l’autre? Qui l’emportera?

La veille de ce même jour 5 juin, Jean Valjean, accompagné de Cosette et de Toussaint, s’était installé rue de l’Homme-Armé. Une péripétie l’y attendait.

Cosette n’avait pas quitté la rue Plumet sans un essai de résistance. Pour la première fois depuis qu’ils existaient côte à côte, la volonté de Cosette et la volonté de Jean Valjean s’étaient montrées distinctes, et s’étaient, sinon heurtées, du moins contredites. Il y avait eu objection d’un côté et inflexibilité de l’autre. Le brusque conseil: *déménagez,* jeté par un inconnu à Jean Valjean, l’avait alarmé au point de le rendre absolu. Il se croyait dépisté et poursuivi. Cosette avait dû céder.

Tous deux étaient arrivés rue de l’Homme-Armé sans desserrer les dents et sans se dire un mot, absorbés chacun dans leur préoccupation personnelle; Jean Valjean si inquiet qu’il ne voyait pas la tristesse de Cosette, Cosette si triste qu’elle ne voyait pas l’inquiétude de Jean Valjean.

Jean Valjean avait emmené Toussaint, ce qu’il n’avait jamais fait dans ses précédentes absences. Il entrevoyait qu’il ne reviendrait peut-être pas rue Plumet, et il ne pouvait ni laisser Toussaint derrière lui, ni lui dire son secret. D’ailleurs il la sentait dévouée et sûre. De domestique à maître, la trahison commence par la curiosité. Or, Toussaint, comme si elle eût été prédestinée à être la servante de Jean Valjean, n’était pas curieuse. Elle disait à travers son bégayement, dans son parler de paysanne de Barneville: Je suis de même de même; je chose mon fait; le demeurant n’est pas mon travail. (Je suis ainsi; je fais ma besogne; le reste n’est pas mon affaire.)

Dans ce départ de la rue Plumet, qui avait été presque une fuite, Jean Valjean n'avait rien emporté que la petite valise embaumée baptisée par Cosette *l'inséparable*. Des malles pleines eussent exigé des commissionnaires, et des commissionnaires sont des témoins. On avait fait venir un fiacre à la porte de la rue de Babylone, et l'on s'en était allé.

C'est à grand'peine que Toussaint avait obtenu la permission d'empaqueter un peu de linge et de vêtements et quelques objets de toilette. Cosette, elle, n'avait emporté que sa papeterie et son buvard.

Jean Valjean, pour accroître la solitude et l'ombre de cette disparition, s'était arrangé de façon à ne quitter le pavillon de la rue Plumet qu'à la chute du jour, ce qui avait laissé à Cosette le temps d'écrire son billet à Marius. On était arrivé rue de l'Homme-Armé à la nuit close.

On s'était couché silencieusement.

Le logement de la rue de l'Homme-Armé était situé dans une arrière-cour, à un deuxième étage, et composé de deux chambres à coucher, d'une salle à manger et d'une cuisine attenante à la salle à manger, avec soupente où il y avait un lit de sangle qui échut à Toussaint. La salle à manger était en même temps l'antichambre et séparait les deux chambres à coucher. L'appartement était pourvu des ustensiles nécessaires.

On se rassure presque aussi follement qu'on s'inquiète; la nature humaine est ainsi. À peine Jean Valjean fut-il rue de l'Homme-Armé que son anxiété s'éclaircit, et, par degrés, se dissipa. Il y a des lieux calmants qui agissent en quelque sorte mécaniquement sur l'esprit. Rue obscure, habitants paisibles. Jean Valjean sentit on ne sait quelle contagion de tranquillité dans cette ruelle de l'ancien Paris, si étroite qu'elle est barrée aux voitures par un madrier transversal posé sur deux poteaux, muette et sourde au milieu de la ville en rumeur, crépusculaire en plein jour, et, pour ainsi dire, incapable d'émotions entre ses deux rangées de hautes maisons centenaires qui se taisent comme des vieillards qu'elles sont. Il y a dans cette rue de l'oubli stagnant. Jean Valjean y respira. Le moyen qu'on pût le trouver là?

Son premier soin fut de mettre *l'inséparable* à côté de lui.

Il dormit bien. La nuit conseille, on peut ajouter: la nuit apaise. Le lendemain matin, il s'éveilla presque gai. Il trouva charmante la salle à manger qui était hideuse, meublée d'une vieille table ronde, d'un buffet bas que surmontait un miroir penché, d'un fauteuil vermoulu et de quelques chaises encombrées des paquets de Toussaint. Dans un de ces paquets, on apercevait par un hiatus l’uniforme de garde national de Jean Valjean.

Quant à Cosette, elle s’était fait apporter par Toussaint un bouillon dans sa chambre, et ne parut que le soir.

Vers cinq heures, Toussaint, qui allait et venait, très occupée de ce petit emménagement, avait mis sur la table de la salle à manger une volaille froide que Cosette, par déférence pour son père, avait consenti à regarder.

Cela fait, Cosette, prétextant une migraine persistante, avait dit bonsoir à Jean Valjean et s’était enfermée dans sa chambre à coucher. Jean Valjean avait mangé une aile de poulet avec appétit, et accoudé sur la table, rasséréné peu à peu, rentrait en possession de sa sécurité.

Pendant qu’il faisait ce sobre dîner, il avait perçu confusément, à deux ou trois reprises, le bégayement de Toussaint qui lui disait: — Monsieur, il y a du train, on se bat dans Paris. Mais, absorbé dans une foule de combinaisons intérieures, il n’y avait point pris garde. À vrai dire, il n’avait pas entendu.

Il se leva, et se mit à marcher de la fenêtre à la porte et de la porte à la fenêtre, de plus en plus apaisé.

Avec le calme, Cosette, sa préoccupation unique, revenait dans sa pensée. Non qu’il s’émût de cette migraine, petite crise de nerfs, bouderie de jeune fille, nuage d’un moment, il n’y paraîtrait pas dans un jour ou deux; mais il songeait à l’avenir, et, comme d’habitude, il y songeait avec douceur. Après tout, il ne voyait aucun obstacle à ce que la vie heureuse reprît son cours. À de certaines heures, tout semble impossible; à d’autres heures, tout paraît aisé; Jean Valjean était dans une de ces bonnes heures. Elles viennent d’ordinaire après les mauvaises, comme le jour après la nuit, par cette loi de succession et de contraste qui est le fond même de la nature et que les esprits superficiels appellent antithèse. Dans cette paisible rue où il se réfugiait, Jean Valjean se dégageait de tout ce qui l’avait troublé depuis quelque temps. Par cela même qu’il avait vu beaucoup de ténèbres, il commençait à apercevoir un peu d’azur. Avoir quitté la rue Plumet sans complication et sans incident, c’était déjà un bon pas de fait. Peut-être serait-il sage de se dépayser, ne fût-ce que pour quelques mois, et d’aller à Londres. Eh bien, on irait. Être en France, être en Angleterre, qu’est-ce que cela faisait, pourvu qu’il eût près de lui Cosette? Cosette était sa nation. Cosette suffisait à son bonheur; l’idée qu’il ne suffisait peut-être pas, lui, au bonheur de Cosette, cette idée, qui avait été autrefois sa fièvre et son insomnie, ne se présentait même pas à son esprit. Il était dans le collapsus de toutes ses douleurs passées, et en plein optimisme. Cosette, étant près de lui, lui semblait à lui; effet d'optique que tout le monde a éprouvé. Il arrangeait en lui-même, et avec toutes sortes de facilités, le départ pour l'Angleterre avec Cosette, et il voyait sa félicité se reconstruire n'importe où dans les perspectives de sa rêverie.

Tout en marchant de long en large à pas lents, son regard rencontra tout à coup quelque chose d'étrange.

Il aperçut en face de lui, dans le miroir incliné qui surmontait le buffet, et il lut distinctement les quatre lignes que voici:

«Mon bien-aimé, hélas! mon père veut que nous partions tout de suite. Nous serons ce soir rue de l'Homme-Armé, nº 7. Dans huit jours nous serons à Londres. COSETTE. 4 juin.»

Jean Valjean s'arrêta hagard.

Cosette en arrivant avait posé son buvard sur le buffet devant le miroir, et, toute à sa douloureuse angoisse, l'avait oublié là, sans même remarquer qu'elle le laissait tout ouvert, et ouvert précisément à la page sur laquelle elle avait appuyé, pour les sécher, les quatre lignes écrites par elle et dont elle avait chargé le jeune ouvrier passant rue Plumet. L'écriture s'était imprimée sur le buvard.

Le miroir reflétait l'écriture.

Il en résultait ce qu'on appelle en géométrie l'image symétrique; de telle sorte que l'écriture renversée sur le buvard s'offrait redressée dans le miroir et présentait son sens naturel; et Jean Valjean avait sous les yeux la lettre écrite la veille par Cosette à Marius.

C'était simple et foudroyant.

Jean Valjean alla au miroir. Il relut les quatre lignes, mais il n'y crut point. Elles lui faisaient l'effet d'apparaître dans de la lueur d'éclair. C'était une hallucination. Cela était impossible. Cela n'était pas.

Peu à peu sa perception devint plus précise; il regarda le buvard de Cosette, et le sentiment du fait réel lui revint. Il prit le buvard et dit: Cela vient de là. Il examina fiévreusement les quatre lignes imprimées sur le buvard, le renversement des lettres en faisait un griffonnage bizarre, et il n'y vit aucun sens. Alors il se dit: Mais cela ne signifie rien, il n'y a rien d'écrit là. Et il respira à pleine poitrine avec un inexprimable soulagement. Qui n'a pas eu de ces joies bêtes dans les instants horribles? L'âme ne se rend pas au désespoir sans avoir épuisé toutes les illusions.

Il tenait le buvard à la main et le contemplait, stupidement heureux, presque prêt à rire de l’hallucination dont il avait été dupe. Tout à coup ses yeux retombèrent sur le miroir, et il revit la vision. Les quatre lignes s’y dessinaient avec une netteté inexorable. Cette fois ce n’était pas un mirage. La récidive d’une vision est une réalité, c’était palpable, c’était l’écriture redressée dans le miroir. Il comprit.

Jean Valjean chancela, laissa échapper le buvard, et s’affaissa dans le vieux fauteuil à côté du buffet, la tête tombante, la prunelle vitreuse, égaré. Il se dit que c’était évident, et que la lumière du monde était à jamais éclipsée, et que Cosette avait écrit cela à quelqu’un. Alors il entendit son âme, redevenue terrible, pousser dans les ténèbres un sourd rugissement. Allez donc ôter au lion le chien qu’il a dans sa cage!

Chose bizarre et triste, en ce moment-là, Marius n’avait pas encore la lettre de Cosette; le hasard l’avait portée en traître à Jean Valjean avant de la remettre à Marius.

Jean Valjean jusqu’à ce jour n’avait pas été vaincu par l’épreuve. Il avait été soumis à des essais affreux; pas une voie de fait de la mauvaise fortune ne lui avait été épargnée; la férocité du sort, armée de toutes les vindictes et de toutes les méprises sociales, l’avait pris pour sujet et s’était acharnée sur lui. Il n’avait reculé ni fléchi devant rien. Il avait accepté, quand il l’avait fallu, toutes les extrémités; il avait sacrifié son inviolabilité d’homme reconquise, livré sa liberté, risqué sa tête, tout perdu, tout souffert, et il était resté désintéressé et stoïque, au point que par moments on aurait pu le croire absent de lui-même comme un martyr. Sa conscience, aguerrie à tous les assauts possibles de l’adversité, pouvait sembler à jamais imprenable. Eh bien, quelqu’un qui eût vu son for intérieur eût été forcé de constater qu’à cette heure elle faiblissait.

C’est que de toutes les tortures qu’il avait subies dans cette longue question que lui donnait la destinée, celle-ci était la plus redoutable. Jamais pareille tenaille ne l’avait saisi. Il sentit le remuement mystérieux de toutes les sensibilités latentes. Il sentit le pincement de la fibre inconnue. Hélas, l’épreuve suprême, disons mieux, l’épreuve unique, c’est la perte de l’être aimé.

Le pauvre vieux Jean Valjean n’aimait, certes, pas Cosette autrement que comme un père; mais, nous l’avons fait remarquer plus haut, dans cette paternité la viduité même de sa vie avait introduit tous les amours; il aimait Cosette comme sa fille, et il l’aimait comme sa mère, et il l’aimait comme sa sœur; et, comme il n’avait jamais eu ni amante ni épouse, comme la nature est un créancier qui n’accepte aucun protêt, ce sentiment-là aussi, le plus imperdable de tous, était mêlé aux autres, vague, ignorant, pur de la pureté de l’aveuglement, inconscient, céleste, angélique, divin; moins comme un sentiment que comme un instinct, moins comme un instinct que comme un attrait, imperceptible et invisible, mais réel; et l’amour proprement dit était dans sa tendresse énorme pour Cosette comme le filon d’or est dans la montagne, ténébreux et vierge.

Qu’on se rappelle cette situation de cœur que nous avons indiquée déjà. Aucun mariage n’était possible entre eux, pas même celui des âmes; et cependant il est certain que leurs destinées s’étaient épousées. Excepté Cosette, c’est-à-dire excepté une enfance, Jean Valjean n’avait, dans toute sa longue vie, rien connu de ce qu’on peut aimer. Les passions et les amours qui se succèdent n’avaient point fait en lui de ces verts successifs, vert tendre sur vert sombre, qu’on remarque sur les feuillages qui passent l’hiver et sur les hommes qui passent la cinquantaine. En somme, et nous y avons plus d’une fois insisté, toute cette fusion intérieure, tout cet ensemble, dont la résultante était une haute vertu, aboutissait à faire de Jean Valjean un père pour Cosette. Père étrange forgé de l’aïeul, du fils, du frère et du mari qu’il y avait dans Jean Valjean; père dans lequel il y avait même une mère; père qui aimait Cosette et qui l’adorait, et qui avait cette enfant pour lumière, pour demeure, pour famille, pour patrie, pour paradis.

Aussi, quand il vit que c’était décidément fini, qu’elle lui échappait, qu’elle glissait de ses mains, qu’elle se dérobait, que c’était du nuage, que c’était de l’eau, quand il eut devant les yeux cette évidence écrasante: un autre est le but de son cœur, un autre est le souhait de sa vie; il y a le bien-aimé, je ne suis que le père; je n’existe plus; quand il ne put plus douter, quand il se dit: Elle s’en va hors de moi! la douleur qu’il éprouva dépassa le possible. Avoir fait tout ce qu’il avait fait pour en venir là! et, quoi donc! n’être rien! Alors, comme nous venons de le dire, il eut de la tête aux pieds un frémissement de révolte. Il sentit jusque dans la racine de ses cheveux l’immense réveil de l’égoïsme, et le moi hurla dans l’abîme de cet homme.

Il y a des effondrements intérieurs. La pénétration d’une certitude désespérante dans l’homme ne se fait point sans écarter et rompre de certains éléments profonds qui sont quelquefois l’homme lui-même. La douleur, quand elle arrive à ce degré, est un sauve-qui-peut de toutes les forces de la conscience. Ce sont là des crises fatales. Peu d’entre nous en sortent semblables à eux-mêmes et fermes dans le devoir. Quand la limite de la souffrance est débordée, la vertu la plus imperturbable se déconcerte. Jean Valjean reprit le buvard, et se convainquit de nouveau; il resta penché et comme pétrifié sur les quatre lignes irrécusables, l’œil fixe; et il se fit en lui un tel nuage qu’on eût pu croire que tout le dedans de cette âme s’écroulait.

Il examina cette révélation, à travers les grossissements de la rêverie, avec un calme apparent et effrayant, car c’est une chose redoutable quand le calme de l’homme arrive à la froideur de la statue.

Il mesura le pas épouvantable que sa destinée avait fait sans qu’il s’en doutât; il se rappela ses craintes de l’autre été, si follement dissipées; il reconnut le précipice; c’était toujours le même; seulement Jean Valjean n’était plus au seuil, il était au fond.

Chose inouïe et poignante, il y était tombé sans s’en apercevoir. Toute la lumière de sa vie s’en était allée, lui croyant voir toujours le soleil.

Son instinct n’hésita point. Il rapprocha certaines circonstances, certaines dates, certaines rougeurs et certaines pâleurs de Cosette, et il se dit: C’est lui. La divination du désespoir est une sorte d’arc mystérieux qui ne manque jamais son coup. Dès sa première conjecture, il atteignit Marius. Il ne savait pas le nom, mais il trouva tout de suite l’homme. Il aperçut distinctement, au fond de l’implacable évocation du souvenir, le rôdeur inconnu du Luxembourg, ce misérable chercheur d’amourettes, ce fainéant de romance, cet imbécile, ce lâche, car c’est une lâcheté de venir faire les yeux doux à des filles qui ont à côté d’elles leur père qui les aime.

Après qu’il eut bien constaté qu’au fond de cette situation il y avait ce jeune homme, et que tout venait de là, lui, Jean Valjean, l’homme régénéré, l’homme qui avait tant travaillé à son âme, l’homme qui avait fait tant d’efforts pour résoudre toute la vie, toute la misère et tout le malheur en amour, il regarda en lui-même et il y vit un spectre, la Haine.

Les grandes douleurs contiennent de l’accablement. Elles découragent d’être. L’homme chez lequel elles entrent sent quelque chose se retirer de lui. Dans la jeunesse, leur visite est lugubre; plus tard, elle est sinistre. Hélas, quand le sang est chaud, quand les cheveux sont noirs, quand la tête est droite sur le corps comme la flamme sur le flambeau, quand le rouleau de la destinée a encore presque toute son épaisseur, quand le cœur, plein d’un amour désirable, a encore des battements qu’on peut lui rendre, quand on a devant soi le temps de réparer, quand toutes les femmes sont là, et tous les sourires, et tout l'avenir, et tout l'horizon, quand la force de la vie est complète, si c'est une chose effroyable que le désespoir, qu'est-ce donc dans la vieillesse, quand les années se précipitent de plus en plus blêmissantes, à cette heure crépusculaire où l'on commence à voir les étoiles de la tombe!

Tandis qu'il songeait, Toussaint entra, Jean Valjean se leva, et lui demanda:

— De quel côté est-ce? savez-vous?

Toussaint, stupéfaite, ne put que lui répondre:

— Plaît-il?

Jean Valjean reprit:

— Ne m'avez-vous pas dit tout à l'heure qu'on se bat?

— Ah! oui, monsieur, répondit Toussaint. C'est du côté de Saint-Merry.

Il y a tel mouvement machinal qui nous vient, à notre insu même, de notre pensée la plus profonde. Ce fut sans doute sous l'impulsion d'un mouvement de ce genre, et dont il avait à peine conscience, que Jean Valjean se trouva cinq minutes après dans la rue.

Il était nu-tête, assis sur la borne de la porte de sa maison. Il semblait écouter.

La nuit était venue.

Chapitre II

Le gamin ennemi des lumières

Combien de temps passa-t-il ainsi? Quels furent les flux et les reflux de cette méditation tragique? se redressa-t-il? resta-t-il ployé? avait-il été courbé jusqu’à être brisé? pouvait-il se redresser encore et reprendre pied dans sa conscience sur quelque chose de solide? Il n’aurait probablement pu le dire lui-même.

La rue était déserte. Quelques bourgeois inquiets qui rentraient rapidement chez eux l’aperçurent à peine. Chacun pour soi dans les temps de péril. L’allumeur de nuit vint comme à l’ordinaire allumer le réverbère, qui était précisément placé en face de la porte du nº 7, et s’en alla. Jean Valjean, à qui l’eût examiné dans cette ombre, n’eût pas semblé un homme vivant. Il était là, assis sur la borne de sa porte, immobile comme une larve de glace. Il y a de la congélation dans le désespoir. On entendait le tocsin et de vagues rumeurs orageuses. Au milieu de toutes ces convulsions de la cloche mêlée à l’émeute, l’horloge de Saint-Paul sonna onze heures, gravement et sans se hâter; car le tocsin, c’est l’homme; l’heure, c’est Dieu. Le passage de l’heure ne fit rien à Jean Valjean; Jean Valjean ne remua pas. Cependant, à peu près vers ce moment-là, une brusque détonation éclata du côté des halles, une seconde la suivit, plus violente encore; c’était probablement cette attaque de la barricade de la rue de la Chanvrerie que nous venons de voir repoussée par Marius. À cette double décharge, dont la furie semblait accrue par la stupeur de la nuit, Jean Valjean tressaillit; il se dressa du côté d’où le bruit venait; puis il retomba sur la borne, il croisa les bras, et sa tête revint lentement se poser sur sa poitrine.

Il reprit son ténébreux dialogue avec lui-même.

Tout à coup, il leva les yeux, on marchait dans la rue, il entendait des pas près de lui, il regarda, et, à la lueur du réverbère, du côté de la rue qui aboutit aux Archives, il aperçut une figure livide, jeune et radieuse.

Gavroche venait d’arriver rue de l’Homme-Armé.

Gavroche regardait en l’air, et paraissait chercher. Il voyait parfaitement Jean Valjean, mais il ne s’en apercevait pas.

Gavroche, après avoir regardé en l’air, regardait en bas; il se haussait sur la pointe des pieds et tâtait les portes et les fenêtres des rez-de-chaussée;

elles étaient toutes fermées, verrouillées et cadenassées. Après avoir constaté cinq ou six devantures de maisons barricadées de la sorte, le gamin haussa les épaules, et entra en matière avec lui-même en ces termes:

— Pardi!

Puis il se remit à regarder en l'air.

Jean Valjean, qui, l'instant d'auparavant, dans la situation d'âme où il était, n'eût parlé ni même répondu à personne, se sentit irrésistiblement poussé à adresser la parole à cet enfant.

— Petit, dit-il, qu'est-ce que tu as?

— J'ai que j'ai faim, répondit Gavroche nettement. Et il ajouta: Petit vous-même.

Jean Valjean fouilla dans son gousset et en tira une pièce de cinq francs.

Mais Gavroche, qui était de l'espèce du hoche-queue et qui passait vite d'un geste à l'autre, venait de ramasser une pierre. Il avait aperçu le réverbère.

— Tiens, dit-il, vous avez encore vos lanternes ici. Vous n'êtes pas en règle, mes amis. C'est du désordre. Cassez-moi ça.

Et il jeta la pierre dans le réverbère dont la vitre tomba avec un tel fracas que des bourgeois, blottis sous leurs rideaux dans la maison d'en face, crièrent: Voilà Quatre-vingt-treize!

Le réverbère oscilla violemment et s'éteignit. La rue devint brusquement noire.

— C'est ça, la vieille rue, fit Gavroche, mets ton bonnet de nuit.

Et se tournant vers Jean Valjean:

— Comment est-ce que vous appelez ce monument gigantesque que vous avez là au bout de la rue? C'est les Archives, pas vrai? Il faudrait me chiffonner un peu ces grosses bêtes de colonnes-là, et en faire gentiment une barricade.

Jean Valjean s'approcha de Gavroche.

— Pauvre être, dit-il à demi-voix et se parlant à lui-même, il a faim.

Et il lui mit la pièce de cent sous dans la main.

Gavroche leva le nez, étonné de la grandeur de ce gros sou; il le regarda dans l'obscurité, et la blancheur du gros sou l'éblouit. Il connaissait les pièces de cinq francs par ouï-dire; leur réputation lui était agréable; il fut charmé d'en voir une de près. Il dit: contemplons le tigre.

Il le considéra quelques instants avec extase; puis, se retournant vers Jean Valjean, il lui tendit la pièce et lui dit majestueusement:

— Bourgeois, j’aime mieux casser les lanternes. Reprenez votre bête féroce. On ne me corrompt point. Ça a cinq griffes; mais ça ne m’égratigne pas.

— As-tu une mère? demanda Jean Valjean.

Gavroche répondit:

— Peut-être plus que vous.

— Eh bien, reprit Jean Valjean, garde cet argent pour ta mère.

Gavroche se sentit remué. D’ailleurs, il venait de remarquer que l’homme qui lui parlait n’avait pas de chapeau, et cela lui inspirait confiance.

— Vrai, dit-il, ce n’est pas pour m’empêcher de casser les réverbères?

— Casse tout ce que tu voudras.

— Vous êtes un brave homme, dit Gavroche.

Et il mit la pièce de cinq francs dans une de ses poches.

Sa confiance croissant, il ajouta:

— Êtes-vous de la rue?

— Oui, pourquoi?

— Pourriez-vous m’indiquer le numéro 7?

— Pourquoi faire le numéro 7?

Ici l’enfant s’arrêta, il craignit d’en avoir trop dit, il plongea énergiquement ses ongles dans ses cheveux, et se borna à répondre:

— Ah! voilà.

Une idée traversa l’esprit de Jean Valjean. L’angoisse a de ces lucidités-là. Il dit à l’enfant:

— Est-ce que c’est toi qui m’apportes la lettre que j’attends?

— Vous? dit Gavroche. Vous n’êtes pas une femme.

— La lettre est pour mademoiselle Cosette, n’est-ce pas?

— Cosette? grommela Gavroche. Oui, je crois que c’est ce drôle de nom-là.

— Eh bien, reprit Jean Valjean, c’est moi qui dois lui remettre la lettre. Donne.

— En ce cas, vous devez savoir que je suis envoyé de la barricade?

— Sans doute, dit Jean Valjean.

Gavroche engloutit son poing dans une autre de ses poches et en tira un papier plié en quatre.

Puis il fit le salut militaire.

— Respect à la dépêche, dit-il. Elle vient du gouvernement provisoire.

— Donne, dit Jean Valjean.

Gavroche tenait le papier élevé au-dessus de sa tête.

— Ne vous imaginez pas que c’est là un billet doux. C’est pour une femme, mais c’est pour le peuple. Nous autres, nous nous battons, et nous respectons le sexe. Nous ne sommes pas comme dans le grand monde où il y a des lions qui envoient des poulets à des chameaux.

— Donne.

— Au fait, continua Gavroche, vous m’avez l’air d’un brave homme.

— Donne vite.

— Tenez.

Et il remit le papier à Jean Valjean.

— Et dépêchez-vous, monsieur Chose, puisque mamselle Chosette attend.

Gavroche fut satisfait d’avoir produit ce mot.

Jean Valjean reprit:

— Est-ce à Saint-Merry qu’il faudra porter la réponse?

— Vous feriez là, s’écria Gavroche, une de ces pâtisseries vulgairement nommées brioches. Cette lettre vient de la barricade de la rue de la Chanvrerie et j’y retourne. Bonsoir, citoyen.

Cela dit, Gavroche s’en alla, ou, pour mieux dire, reprit vers le lieu d’où il venait son vol d’oiseau échappé. Il se replongea dans l’obscurité comme s’il y faisait un trou, avec la rapidité rigide d’un projectile; la ruelle de l’Homme-Armé redevint silencieuse et solitaire; en un clin d’œil, cet étrange enfant, qui avait de l’ombre et du rêve en lui, s’était enfoncé dans la brume de ces rangées de maisons noires, et s’y était perdu comme de la fumée dans des ténèbres; et l’on eût pu le croire dissipé et évanoui, si, quelques minutes après sa disparition, une éclatante cassure de vitre et le patatras splendide d’un réverbère croulant sur le pavé n’eussent brusquement réveillé de nouveau les bourgeois indignés. C’était Gavroche qui passait rue du Chaume.

Chapitre III

Pendant que Cosette et Toussaint dorment

Jean Valjean rentra avec la lettre de Marius.

Il monta l'escalier à tâtons, satisfait des ténèbres comme le hibou qui tient sa proie, ouvrit et referma doucement sa porte, écouta s'il n'entendait aucun bruit, constata que, selon toute apparence, Cosette et Toussaint dormaient, plongea dans la bouteille du briquet Fumade trois ou quatre allumettes avant de pouvoir faire jaillir l'étincelle, tant sa main tremblait; il y avait du vol dans ce qu'il venait de faire. Enfin, sa chandelle fut allumée, il s'accouda sur la table, déplia le papier, et lut.

Dans les émotions violentes, on ne lit pas, on terrasse pour ainsi dire le papier qu'on tient, on l'étreint comme une victime, on le froisse, on enfonce dedans les ongles de sa colère ou de son allégresse; on court à la fin, on saute au commencement; l'attention a la fièvre; elle comprend en gros, à peu près, l'essentiel; elle saisit un point, et tout le reste disparaît. Dans le billet de Marius à Cosette, Jean Valjean ne vit que ces mots:

«...Je meurs. Quand tu liras ceci, mon âme sera près de toi.»

En présence de ces deux lignes, il eut un éblouissement horrible; il resta un moment comme écrasé du changement d'émotion qui se faisait en lui, il regardait le billet de Marius avec une sorte d'étonnement ivre; il avait devant les yeux cette splendeur, la mort de l'être haï.

Il poussa un affreux cri de joie intérieure. — Ainsi, c'était fini. Le dénouement arrivait plus vite qu'on n'eût osé l'espérer. L'être qui encombrait sa destinée disparaissait. Il s'en allait de lui-même, librement, de bonne volonté. Sans que lui, Jean Valjean, eût rien fait pour cela, sans qu'il y eût de sa faute, «cet homme» allait mourir. Peut-être même était-il déjà mort. — Ici sa fièvre fit des calculs. — Non. Il n'est pas encore mort. La lettre a été visiblement écrite pour être lue par Cosette le lendemain matin; depuis ces deux décharges qu'on a entendues entre onze heures et minuit, il n'y a rien eu; la barricade ne sera sérieusement attaquée qu'au point du jour; mais c'est égal, du moment où «cet homme» est mêlé à cette guerre, il est perdu; il est pris dans l'engrenage. — Jean Valjean se sentait délivré. Il allait donc, lui, se retrouver seul avec Cosette. La concurrence cessait; l'avenir recommençait. Il n'avait qu'à garder ce billet dans sa poche. Cosette ne saurait jamais ce que «cet homme» était devenu. «Il n’y a qu’à laisser les choses s’accomplir. Cet homme ne peut échapper. S’il n’est pas mort encore, il est sûr qu’il va mourir. Quel bonheur!»

Tout cela dit en lui-même, il devint sombre.

Puis il descendit et réveilla le portier.

Environ une heure après, Jean Valjean sortait en habit complet de garde national et en armes. Le portier lui avait aisément trouvé dans le voisinage de quoi compléter son équipement. Il avait un fusil chargé et une giberne pleine de cartouches. Il se dirigea du côté des halles.

Chapitre IV

Les excès de zèle de Gavroche

Cependant il venait d'arriver une aventure à Gavroche.

Gavroche, après avoir consciencieusement lapidé le réverbère de la rue du Chaume, aborda la rue des Vieilles-Haudriettes, et n'y voyant pas «un chat», trouva l'occasion bonne pour entonner toute la chanson dont il était capable. Sa marche, loin de se ralentir par le chant, s'en accélérait. Il se mit à semer le long des maisons endormies ou terrifiées ces couplets incendiaires:

L'oiseau médit dans les charmilles
Et prétend qu'hier Atala
Avec un Russe s'en alla.

Où vont les belles filles,
Lon la.

Mon ami pierrot, tu babilles,
Parce que l'autre jour Mila
Cogna sa vitre, et m'appela.

Où vont les belles filles,
Lon la.

Les drôlesses sont fort gentilles;
Leur poison qui m'ensorcela
Griserait monsieur Orfila.

Où vont les belles filles,
Lon la.

J'aime l'amour et ses bisbilles,
J'aime Agnès, j'aime Paméla,
Lise en m'allumant se brûla.

Où vont les belles filles,
Lon la.

Jadis, quand je vis les mantilles
De Suzette et de Zéïla,
Mon âme à leurs plis se mêla.

Où vont les belles filles,
Lon la.

Amour, quand, dans l’ombre où tu brilles,
Tu coiffes de roses Lola,
Je me damnerais pour cela.

Où vont les belles filles,
Lon la.

Jeanne, à ton miroir tu t’habilles!
Mon cœur un beau jour s’envola;
Je crois que c’est Jeanne qui l’a.

Où vont les belles filles,
Lon la.

Le soir en sortant des quadrilles,
Je montre aux étoiles Stella
Et je leur dis: regardez-la.

Où vont les belles filles,
Lon la.

Gavroche, tout en chantant, prodiguait la pantomime. Le geste est le point d’appui du refrain. Son visage, inépuisable répertoire de masques, faisait des grimaces plus convulsives et plus fantasques que les bouches d’un linge troué dans un grand vent. Malheureusement, comme il était seul et dans la nuit, cela n’était ni vu, ni visible. Il y a de ces richesses perdues.

Soudain il s’arrêta court.

— Interrompons la romance, dit-il.

Sa prunelle féline venait de distinguer dans le renfoncement d’une porte cochère ce qu’on appelle en peinture un ensemble; c’est-à-dire un être et une chose; la chose était une charrette à bras, l’être était un Auvergnat qui dormait dedans.

Les bras de la charrette s’appuyaient sur le pavé et la tête de l’Auvergnat s’appuyait sur le tablier de la charrette. Son corps se pelotonnait sur ce plan incliné et ses pieds touchaient la terre.

Gavroche, avec son expérience des choses de ce monde, reconnut un ivrogne.

C’était quelque commissionnaire du coin qui avait trop bu et qui dormait trop.

— Voilà, pensa Gavroche, à quoi servent les nuits d’été. L’Auvergnat s’endort dans sa charrette. On prend la charrette pour la République et on laisse l’Auvergnat à la monarchie.

Son esprit venait d’être illuminé par la clarté que voici:

— Cette charrette ferait joliment bien sur notre barricade.

L’Auvergnat ronflait.

Gavroche tira doucement la charrette par l’arrière et l’Auvergnat par l’avant, c’est-à-dire par les pieds, et, au bout d’une minute, l’Auvergnat, imperturbable, reposait à plat sur le pavé.

La charrette était délivrée.

Gavroche, habitué à faire face de toutes parts à l’imprévu, avait toujours tout sur lui. Il fouilla dans une de ses poches, et en tira un chiffon de papier et un bout de crayon rouge chipé à quelque charpentier.

Il écrivit:

République française.

«Reçu ta charrette.»

Et il signa: «Gavroche.»

Cela fait, il mit le papier dans la poche du gilet de velours de l’Auvergnat toujours ronflant, saisit le brancard dans ses deux poings, et partit, dans la direction des halles, poussant devant lui la charrette au grand galop avec un glorieux tapage triomphal.

Ceci était périlleux. Il y avait un poste à l’Imprimerie royale. Gavroche n’y songeait pas. Ce poste était occupé par des gardes nationaux de la banlieue. Un certain éveil commençait à émouvoir l’escouade, et les têtes se soulevaient sur les lits de camp. Deux réverbères brisés coup sur coup, cette chanson chantée à tue-tête, cela était beaucoup pour des rues si poltronnes, qui ont envie de dormir au coucher du soleil, et qui mettent de si bonne heure leur éteignoir sur leur chandelle. Depuis une heure le gamin faisait dans cet arrondissement paisible le vacarme d'un moucheron dans une bouteille. Le sergent de la banlieue écoutait. Il attendait. C'était un homme prudent.

Le roulement forcené de la charrette combla la mesure de l'attente possible, et détermina le sergent à tenter une reconnaissance.

— Ils sont là toute une bande! dit-il, allons doucement.

Il était clair que l'Hydre de l'Anarchie était sortie de sa boîte et qu'elle se démenait dans le quartier.

Et le sergent se hasarda hors du poste à pas sourds.

Tout à coup, Gavroche, poussant sa charrette, au moment où il allait déboucher de la rue des Vieilles-Haudriettes, se trouva face à face avec un uniforme, un shako, un plumet et un fusil.

Pour la seconde fois, il s'arrêta net.

— Tiens, dit-il, c'est lui. Bonjour, l'ordre public.

Les étonnements de Gavroche étaient courts et dégelaient vite.

— Où vas-tu, voyou? cria le sergent.

— Citoyen, dit Gavroche, je ne vous ai pas encore appelé bourgeois. Pourquoi m'insultez-vous?

— Où vas-tu, drôle?

— Monsieur, reprit Gavroche, vous étiez peut-être hier un homme d'esprit, mais vous avez été destitué ce matin.

— Je te demande où tu vas, gredin?

Gavroche répondit:

— Vous parlez gentiment. Vrai, on ne vous donnerait pas votre âge. Vous devriez vendre tous vos cheveux cent francs la pièce. Cela vous ferait cinq cents francs.

— Où vas-tu? où vas-tu? où vas-tu, bandit?

Gavroche repartit:

— Voilà de vilains mots. La première fois qu'on vous donnera à téter, il faudra qu'on vous essuie mieux la bouche.

Le sergent croisa la bayonnette.

— Me diras-tu où tu vas, à la fin, misérable?

— Mon général, dit Gavroche, je vas chercher le médecin pour mon épouse qui est en couches.

— Aux armes! cria le sergent.

Se sauver par ce qui vous a perdu, c'est là le chef-d'œuvre des hommes forts; Gavroche mesura d'un coup d'œil toute la situation. C'était la charrette qui l'avait compromis, c'était à la charrette de le protéger.

Au moment où le sergent allait fondre sur Gavroche, la charrette, devenue projectile et lancée à tour de bras, roulait sur lui avec furie, et le sergent, atteint en plein ventre, tombait à la renverse dans le ruisseau pendant que son fusil partait en l'air.

Au cri du sergent, les hommes du poste étaient sortis pêle-mêle; le coup de fusil détermina une décharge générale au hasard, après laquelle on rechargea les armes et l'on recommença.

Cette mousquetade à colin-maillard dura un bon quart d'heure, et tua quelques carreaux de vitre.

Cependant Gavroche, qui avait éperdument rebroussé chemin, s'arrêtait à cinq ou six rues de là, et s'asseyait haletant sur la borne qui fait le coin des Enfants-Rouges.

Il prêtait l'oreille.

Après avoir soufflé quelques instants, il se tourna du côté où la fusillade faisait rage, éleva sa main gauche à la hauteur de son nez, et la lança trois fois en avant en se frappant de la main droite le derrière de la tête; geste souverain dans lequel la gaminerie parisienne a condensé l'ironie française, et qui est évidemment efficace, puisqu'il a déjà duré un demi-siècle.

Cette gaîté fut troublée par une réflexion amère.

— Oui, dit-il, je pouffe, je me tords, j'abonde en joie, mais je perds ma route, il va falloir faire un détour. Pourvu que j'arrive à temps à la barricade!

Là-dessus, il reprit sa course.

Et tout en courant:

— Ah çà, où en étais-je donc? dit-il.

Il se remit à chanter sa chanson en s'enfonçant rapidement dans les rues, et ceci décrut dans les ténèbres:

Mais il reste encor des bastilles,
Et je vais mettre le holà
Dans l'ordre public que voilà.

Où vont les belles filles,
Lon la.

Quelqu'un veut-il jouer aux quilles?
Tout l'ancien monde s'écroula
Quand la grosse boule roula.

Où vont les belles filles,
Lon la.

Vieux bon peuple, à coups de béquilles
Cassons ce Louvre où s'étala
La monarchie en falbala.

Où vont les belles filles,
Lon la.

Nous en avons forcé les grilles;
Le roi Charles Dix ce jour-là
Tenait mal et se décolla.

Où vont les belles filles,
Lon la.

La prise d'armes du poste ne fut point sans résultat. La charrette fut conquise, l'ivrogne fut fait prisonnier. L'une fut mise en fourrière; l'autre fut plus tard un peu poursuivi devant les conseils de guerre comme complice. Le ministère public d'alors fit preuve en cette circonstance de son zèle infatigable pour la défense de la société.

L'aventure de Gavroche, restée dans la tradition du quartier du Temple, est un des souvenirs les plus terribles des vieux bourgeois du Marais, et est intitulée dans leur mémoire: Attaque nocturne du poste de l'Imprimerie royale.

Tome V — JEAN VALJEAN

Livre premier — La guerre entre quatre murs

Chapitre I

La Charybde du faubourg Saint-Antoine et la Scylla du faubourg du Temple

Les deux plus mémorables barricades que l’observateur des maladies sociales puisse mentionner n’appartiennent point à la période où est placée l’action de ce livre. Ces deux barricades, symboles toutes les deux, sous deux aspects différents, d’une situation redoutable, sortirent de terre lors de la fatale insurrection de juin 1848, la plus grande guerre des rues qu’ait vue l’histoire.

Il arrive quelquefois que, même contre les principes, même contre la liberté, l’égalité et la fraternité, même contre le vote universel, même contre le gouvernement de tous par tous, du fond de ses angoisses, de ses découragements, de ses dénûments, de ses fièvres, de ses détresses, de ses miasmes, de ses ignorances, de ses ténèbres, cette grande désespérée, la canaille, proteste, et que la populace livre bataille au peuple.

Les gueux attaquent le droit commun; l’ochlocratie s’insurge contre le démos.

Ce sont là des journées lugubres; car il y a toujours une certaine quantité de droit même dans cette démence, il y a du suicide dans ce duel; et ces mots, qui veulent être des injures, gueux, canaille, ochlocratie, populace, constatent, hélas! plutôt la faute de ceux qui règnent que la faute de ceux qui souffrent; plutôt la faute des privilégiés que la faute des déshérités.

Quant à nous, ces mots-là, nous ne les prononçons jamais sans douleur et sans respect, car, lorsque la philosophie sonde les faits auxquels ils correspondent, elle y trouve souvent bien des grandeurs à côté des misères. Athènes était une ochlocratie; les gueux ont fait la Hollande; la populace a plus d’une fois sauvé Rome; et la canaille suivait Jésus-Christ.

Il n’est pas de penseur qui n’ait parfois contemplé les magnificences d’en bas.

C’est à cette canaille que songeait sans doute saint Jérôme, et à tous ces pauvres gens, et à tous ces vagabonds, et à tous ces misérables d’où sont sortis les apôtres et les martyrs, quand il disait cette parole mystérieuse: *Fex urbis, lex orbis.*

Les exaspérations de cette foule qui souffre et qui saigne, ses violences à contre-sens sur les principes qui sont sa vie, ses voies de fait contre le droit, sont des coups d’État populaires, et doivent être réprimés. L’homme probe s’y dévoue, et, par amour même pour cette foule, il la combat. Mais comme il la sent excusable tout en lui tenant tête! comme il la vénère tout en lui résistant! C’est là un de ces moments rares où, en faisant ce qu’on doit faire, on sent quelque chose qui déconcerte et qui déconseillerait presque d’aller plus loin; on persiste, il le faut; mais la conscience satisfaite est triste, et l’accomplissement du devoir se complique d’un serrement de cœur.

Juin 1848 fut, hâtons-nous de le dire, un fait à part, et presque impossible à classer dans la philosophie de l’histoire. Tous les mots que nous venons de prononcer doivent être écartés quand il s’agit de cette émeute extraordinaire où l’on sentit la sainte anxiété du travail réclamant ses droits. Il fallut la combattre, et c’était le devoir, car elle attaquait la République. Mais, au fond, que fut juin 1848? Une révolte du peuple contre lui-même.

Là où le sujet n’est point perdu de vue, il n’y a point de digression; qu’il nous soit donc permis d’arrêter un moment l’attention du lecteur sur les deux barricades absolument uniques dont nous venons de parler et qui ont caractérisé cette insurrection.

L’une encombrait l’entrée du faubourg Saint-Antoine; l’autre défendait l’approche du faubourg du Temple; ceux devant qui se sont dressés, sous l’éclatant ciel bleu de juin, ces deux effrayants chefs-d’œuvre de la guerre civile, ne les oublieront jamais.

La barricade Saint-Antoine était monstrueuse; elle était haute de trois étages et large de sept cents pieds. Elle barrait d’un angle à l’autre la vaste embouchure du faubourg, c’est-à-dire trois rues; ravinée, déchiquetée, dentelée, hachée, crénelée d’une immense déchirure, contre-butée de monceaux qui étaient eux-mêmes des bastions, poussant des caps çà et là, puissamment adossée aux deux grands promontoires de maisons du faubourg, elle surgissait comme une levée cyclopéenne au fond de la redoutable place qui a vu le 14 juillet. Dix-neuf barricades s’étageaient dans la profondeur des rues derrière cette barricade mère. Rien qu’à la voir, on sentait dans le faubourg l’immense souffrance agonisante arrivée à cette minute extrême où une détresse veut devenir une catastrophe. De quoi était faite cette barricade? De l’écroulement de trois maisons à six étages, démolies exprès, disaient les uns. Du prodige de toutes les colères, disaient les autres. Elle avait l’aspect lamentable de toutes les constructions de la haine: la ruine. On pouvait dire: qui a bâti cela? On pouvait dire aussi: qui a détruit cela? C’était l’improvisation du bouillonnement. Tiens! cette porte! cette grille! cet auvent! ce chambranle! ce réchaud brisé! cette marmite fêlée! Donnez tout! jetez tout! poussez, roulez, piochez, démantelez, bouleversez, écroulez tout! C’était la collaboration du pavé, du moellon, de la poutre, de la barre de fer, du chiffon, du carreau défoncé, de la chaise dépaillée, du trognon de chou, de la loque, de la guenille, et de la malédiction. C’était grand et c’était petit. C’était l’abîme parodié sur place par le tohu-bohu. La masse près de l’atome; le pan de mur arraché et l’écuelle cassée; une fraternisation menaçante de tous les débris; Sisyphe avait jeté là son rocher et Job son tesson. En somme, terrible. C’était l’acropole des va-nu-pieds. Des charrettes renversées accidentaient le talus; un immense haquet y était étalé en travers, l’essieu vers le ciel, et semblait une balafre sur cette façade tumultueuse, un omnibus, hissé gaîment à force de bras tout au sommet de l’entassement, comme si les architectes de cette sauvagerie eussent voulu ajouter la gaminerie à l’épouvante, offrait son timon dételé à on ne sait quels chevaux de l’air. Cet amas gigantesque, alluvion de l’émeute, figurait à l’esprit un Ossa sur Pélion de toutes les révolutions; 93 sur 89, le 9 thermidor sur le 10 août, le 18 brumaire sur le 21 janvier, vendémiaire sur prairial, 1848 sur 1830. La place en valait la peine, et cette barricade était digne d’apparaître à l’endroit même où la Bastille avait disparu. Si l’océan faisait des digues, c’est ainsi qu’il les bâtirait. La furie du flot était empreinte sur cet encombrement difforme. Quel flot? la foule. On croyait voir du vacarme pétrifié. On croyait entendre bourdonner, au-dessus de cette barricade, comme si elles eussent été là sur leur ruche, les énormes abeilles ténébreuses du progrès violent. Était-ce une broussaille? était-ce une bacchanale? était-ce une forteresse? Le vertige semblait avoir construit cela à coups d’aile. Il y avait du cloaque dans cette redoute et quelque chose d’olympien dans ce fouillis. On y voyait, dans un pêle-mêle plein de désespoir, des chevrons de toits, des morceaux de mansardes avec leur papier peint, des châssis de fenêtres avec toutes leurs vitres plantés dans les décombres, attendant le canon, des cheminées descellées, des armoires, des tables, des bancs, un sens dessus dessous hurlant, et ces mille choses indigentes, rebuts même du mendiant, qui contiennent à la fois de la fureur et du néant. On eût dit que c’était le haillon d’un peuple, haillon de bois, de fer, de bronze, de pierre, et que le faubourg Saint-Antoine l’avait poussé là à sa porte d’un colossal coup de balai, faisant de sa misère sa barricade. Des blocs pareils à des billots, des chaînes disloquées, des charpentes à tasseaux ayant forme de potences, des roues horizontales sortant des décombres, amalgamaient à cet édifice de l’anarchie la sombre figure des vieux supplices soufferts par le peuple. La barricade Saint-Antoine faisait arme de tout; tout ce que la guerre civile peut jeter à la tête de la société sortait de là; ce n’était pas du combat, c’était du paroxysme; les carabines qui défendaient cette redoute, parmi lesquelles il y avait quelques espingoles, envoyaient des miettes de faïence, des osselets, des boutons d’habit, jusqu’à des roulettes de tables de nuit, projectiles dangereux à cause du cuivre. Cette barricade était forcenée; elle jetait dans les nuées une clameur inexprimable; à de certains moments, provoquant l’armée, elle se couvrait de foule et de tempête, une cohue de têtes flamboyantes la couronnait; un fourmillement l’emplissait; elle avait une crête épineuse de fusils, de sabres, de bâtons, de haches, de piques et de bayonnettes; un vaste drapeau rouge y claquait dans le vent; on y entendait les cris du commandement, les chansons d’attaque, des roulements de tambours, des sanglots de femmes, et l’éclat de rire ténébreux des meurt-de-faim. Elle était démesurée et vivante; et, comme du dos d’une bête électrique, il en sortait un pétillement de foudres. L’esprit de révolution couvrait de son nuage ce sommet où grondait cette voix du peuple qui ressemble à la voix de Dieu; une majesté étrange se dégageait de cette titanique hottée de gravats. C’était un tas d’ordures et c’était le Sinaï.

Comme nous l’avons dit plus haut, elle attaquait au nom de la Révolution, quoi? la Révolution. Elle, cette barricade, le hasard, le désordre, l’effarement, le malentendu, l’inconnu, elle avait en face d’elle l’assemblée constituante, la souveraineté du peuple, le suffrage universel, la nation, la République; et c’était la *Carmagnole* défiant la *Marseillaise*.

Défi insensé, mais héroïque, car ce vieux faubourg est un héros.

Le faubourg et sa redoute se prêtaient main-forte. Le faubourg s’épaulait à la redoute, la redoute s’acculait au faubourg. La vaste barricade s’étalait comme une falaise où venait se briser la stratégie des généraux d’Afrique. Ses cavernes, ses excroissances, ses verrues, ses gibbosités, grimaçaient, pour ainsi dire, et ricanaient sous la fumée. La mitraille s’y évanouissait dans l’informe; les obus s’y enfonçaient, s’y engloutissaient, s’y engouffraient; les boulets n’y réussissaient qu’à trouer des trous; à quoi bon canonner le chaos? Et les régiments, accoutumés aux plus farouches visions de la guerre, regardaient d’un œil inquiet cette espèce de redoute bête fauve, par le hérissement sanglier, et par l’énormité montagne.

À un quart de lieue de là, de l’angle de la rue du Temple qui débouche sur le boulevard près du Château-d’Eau, si l’on avançait hardiment la tête en dehors de la pointe formée par la devanture du magasin Dallemagne, on apercevait au loin, au delà du canal, dans la rue qui monte les rampes de Belleville, au point culminant de la montée, une muraille étrange atteignant au deuxième étage des façades, sorte de trait d’union des maisons de droite aux maisons de gauche, comme si la rue avait replié d’elle-même son plus haut mur pour se fermer brusquement. Ce mur était bâti avec des pavés. Il était droit, correct, froid, perpendiculaire, nivelé à l’équerre, tiré au cordeau, aligné au fil à plomb. Le ciment y manquait sans doute, mais comme à de certains murs romains, sans troubler sa rigide architecture. À sa hauteur on devinait sa profondeur. L’entablement était mathématiquement parallèle au soubassement. On distinguait d’espace en espace, sur sa surface grise, des meurtrières presque invisibles qui ressemblaient à des fils noirs. Ces meurtrières étaient séparées les unes des autres par des intervalles égaux. La rue était déserte à perte de vue. Toutes les fenêtres et toutes les portes fermées. Au fond se dressait ce barrage qui faisait de la rue un cul-de-sac; mur immobile et tranquille; on n’y voyait personne, on n’y entendait rien; pas un cri, pas un bruit, pas un souffle. Un sépulcre.

L’éblouissant soleil de juin inondait de lumière cette chose terrible.

C’était la barricade du faubourg du Temple.

Dès qu’on arrivait sur le terrain et qu’on l’apercevait, il était impossible, même aux plus hardis, de ne pas devenir pensif devant cette apparition mystérieuse. C’était ajusté, emboîté, imbriqué, rectiligne, symétrique, et funèbre. Il y avait là de la science et des ténèbres. On sentait que le chef de cette barricade était un géomètre ou un spectre. On regardait cela et l’on parlait bas.

De temps en temps, si quelqu’un, soldat, officier ou représentant du peuple, se hasardait à traverser la chaussée solitaire, on entendait un sifflement aigu et faible, et le passant tombait blessé ou mort, ou, s’il échappait, on voyait s’enfoncer dans quelque volet fermé, dans un entre-deux de moellons, dans le plâtre d’un mur, une balle. Quelquefois un biscaïen. Car les hommes de la barricade s’étaient fait de deux tronçons de tuyaux de fonte du gaz bouchés à un bout avec de l’étoupe et de la terre à poêle, deux petits canons. Pas de dépense de poudre inutile. Presque tout coup portait. Il y avait quelques cadavres çà et là, et des flaques de sang sur les pavés. Je me souviens d’un papillon blanc qui allait et venait dans la rue. L’été n’abdique pas.

Aux environs, le dessous des portes cochères était encombré de blessés.

On se sentait là visé par quelqu’un qu’on ne voyait point, et l’on comprenait que toute la longueur de la rue était couchée en joue.

Massés derrière l’espèce de dos d’âne que fait à l’entrée du faubourg du Temple le pont cintré du canal, les soldats de la colonne d’attaque observaient, graves et recueillis, cette redoute lugubre, cette immobilité, cette impassibilité, d’où la mort sortait. Quelques-uns rampaient à plat ventre jusqu’au haut de la courbe du pont en ayant soin que leurs shakos ne passassent point.

Le vaillant colonel Monteynard admirait cette barricade avec un frémissement. — *Comme c’est bâti!* disait-il à un représentant. *Pas un pavé ne déborde de l’autre. C’est de la porcelaine.* — En ce moment une balle lui brisa sa croix sur sa poitrine, et il tomba.

— Les lâches! disait-on. Mais qu’ils se montrent donc! qu’on les voie! ils n’osent pas! ils se cachent! — La barricade du faubourg du Temple, défendue par quatre-vingts hommes, attaquée par dix mille, tint trois jours. Le quatrième, on fit comme à Zaatcha et à Constantine, on perça les maisons, on vint par les toits, la barricade fut prise. Pas un des quatre-vingts lâches ne songea à fuir; tous y furent tués, excepté le chef, Barthélemy, dont nous parlerons tout à l’heure.

La barricade Saint-Antoine était le tumulte des tonnerres; la barricade du Temple était le silence. Il y avait entre ces deux redoutes la différence du formidable au sinistre. L’une semblait une gueule; l’autre un masque.

En admettant que la gigantesque et ténébreuse insurrection de juin fût composée d’une colère et d’une énigme, on sentait dans la première barricade le dragon et derrière la seconde le sphinx.

Ces deux forteresses avaient été édifiées par deux hommes nommés, l’un Cournet, l’autre Barthélemy. Cournet avait fait la barricade Saint-Antoine; Barthélemy la barricade du Temple. Chacune d’elles était l’image de celui qui l’avait bâtie.

Cournet était un homme de haute stature; il avait les épaules larges, la face rouge, le poing écrasant, le cœur hardi, l’âme loyale, l’œil sincère et terrible. Intrépide, énergique, irascible, orageux; le plus cordial des hommes, le plus redoutable des combattants. La guerre, la lutte, la mêlée, étaient son air respirable et le mettaient de belle humeur. Il avait été officier de marine, et, à ses gestes et à sa voix, on devinait qu'il sortait de l'océan et qu'il venait de la tempête; il continuait l'ouragan dans la bataille. Au génie près, il y avait en Cournet quelque chose de Danton, comme, à la divinité près, il y avait en Danton quelque chose d'Hercule.

Barthélemy, maigre, chétif, pâle, taciturne, était une espèce de gamin tragique qui, souffleté par un sergent de ville, le guetta, l'attendit, et le tua, et, à dix-sept ans, fut mis au bagne. Il en sortit, et fît cette barricade.

Plus tard, chose fatale, à Londres, proscrits tous deux, Barthélemy tua Cournet. Ce fut un duel funèbre. Quelque temps après, pris dans l'engrenage d'une de ces mystérieuses aventures où la passion est mêlée, catastrophes où la justice française voit des circonstances atténuantes et où la justice anglaise ne voit que la mort, Barthélemy fut pendu. La sombre construction sociale est ainsi faite que, grâce au dénûment matériel, grâce à l'obscurité morale, ce malheureux être qui contenait une intelligence, ferme à coup sûr, grande peut-être, commença par le bagne en France et finit par le gibet en Angleterre. Barthélemy, dans les occasions, n'arborait qu'un drapeau; le drapeau noir.

Chapitre II

Que faire dans l’abîme à moins que l’on ne cause?

Seize ans comptent dans la souterraine éducation de l’émeute, et juin 1848 en savait plus long que juin 1832. Aussi la barricade de la rue de la Chanvrerie n’était-elle qu’une ébauche et qu’un embryon, comparée aux deux barricades colosses que nous venons d’esquisser; mais, pour l’époque, elle était redoutable.

Les insurgés, sous l’œil d’Enjolras, car Marius ne regardait plus rien, avaient mis la nuit à profit. La barricade avait été non seulement réparée, mais augmentée. On l’avait exhaussée de deux pieds. Des barres de fer plantées dans les pavés ressemblaient à des lances en arrêt. Toutes sortes de décombres ajoutés et apportés de toutes parts compliquaient l’enchevêtrement extérieur. La redoute avait été savamment refaite en muraille au dedans et en broussaille au dehors.

On avait rétabli l’escalier de pavés qui permettait d’y monter comme à un mur de citadelle.

On avait fait le ménage de la barricade, désencombré la salle basse, pris la cuisine pour ambulance, achevé le pansement des blessés, recueilli la poudre éparse à terre et sur les tables, fondu des balles, fabriqué des cartouches, épluché de la charpie, distribué les armes tombées, nettoyé l’intérieur de la redoute, ramassé les débris, emporté les cadavres.

On déposa les morts en tas dans la ruelle Mondétour dont on était toujours maître. Le pavé a été longtemps rouge à cet endroit. Il y avait parmi les morts quatre gardes nationaux de la banlieue. Enjolras fit mettre de côté leurs uniformes.

Enjolras avait conseillé deux heures de sommeil. Un conseil d’Enjolras était une consigne. Pourtant, trois ou quatre seulement en profitèrent. Feuilly employa ces deux heures à la gravure de cette inscription sur le mur qui faisait face au cabaret:

VIVENT LES PEUPLES!

Ces trois mots, creusés dans le moellon avec un clou, se lisaient encore sur cette muraille en 1848.

Les trois femmes avaient profité du répit de la nuit pour disparaître définitivement; ce qui faisait respirer les insurgés plus à l’aise.

Elles avaient trouvé moyen de se réfugier dans quelque maison voisine.

La plupart des blessés pouvaient et voulaient encore combattre. Il y avait, sur une litière de matelas et de bottes de paille, dans la cuisine devenue l'ambulance, cinq hommes gravement atteints, dont deux gardes municipaux. Les gardes municipaux furent pansés les premiers.

Il ne resta plus dans la salle basse que Mabeuf sous son drap noir et Javert lié au poteau.

— C'est ici la salle des morts, dit Enjolras.

Dans l'intérieur de cette salle, à peine éclairée d'une chandelle, tout au fond, la table mortuaire étant derrière le poteau comme une barre horizontale, une sorte de grande croix vague résultait de Javert debout et de Mabeuf couché.

Le timon de l'omnibus, quoique tronqué par la fusillade, était encore assez debout pour qu'on pût y accrocher un drapeau.

Enjolras, qui avait cette qualité d'un chef, de toujours faire ce qu'il disait, attacha à cette hampe l'habit troué et sanglant du vieillard tué.

Aucun repas n'était plus possible. Il n'y avait ni pain ni viande. Les cinquante hommes de la barricade, depuis seize heures qu'ils étaient là, avaient eu vite épuisé les maigres provisions du cabaret. À un instant donné, toute barricade qui tient devient inévitablement le radeau de la Méduse. Il fallut se résigner à la faim. On était aux premières heures de cette journée spartiate du 6 juin où, dans la barricade Saint-Merry, Jeanne, entouré d'insurgés qui demandaient du pain, à tous ces combattants criant: À manger! répondait: Pourquoi? il est trois heures. À quatre heures nous serons morts.

Comme on ne pouvait plus manger, Enjolras défendit de boire. Il interdit le vin et rationna l'eau-de-vie.

On avait trouvé dans la cave une quinzaine de bouteilles pleines, hermétiquement cachetées. Enjolras et Combeferre les examinèrent. Combeferre en remontant dit: — C'est du vieux fonds du père Hucheloup qui a commencé par être épicier. — Cela doit être du vrai vin, observa Bossuet. Il est heureux que Grantaire dorme. S'il était debout, on aurait de la peine à sauver ces bouteilles-là. — Enjolras, malgré les murmures, mit son veto sur les quinze bouteilles, et afin que personne n'y touchât et qu'elles fussent comme sacrées, il les fit placer sous la table où gisait le père Mabeuf.

Vers deux heures du matin, on se compta. Ils étaient encore trente-sept.

Le jour commençait à paraître. On venait d'éteindre la torche qui avait été replacée dans son alvéole de pavés. L'intérieur de la barricade, cette espèce de petite cour prise sur la rue, était noyé de ténèbres et ressemblait, à travers la vague horreur crépusculaire, au pont d'un navire désemparé. Les combattants allant et venant s'y mouvaient comme des formes noires. Au-dessus de cet effrayant nid d'ombre, les étages des maisons muettes s'ébauchaient lividement; tout en haut les cheminées blêmissaient. Le ciel avait cette charmante nuance indécise qui est peut-être le blanc et peut-être le bleu. Des oiseaux y volaient avec des cris de bonheur. La haute maison qui faisait le fond de la barricade, étant tournée vers le levant, avait sur son toit un reflet rose. À la lucarne du troisième étage, le vent du matin agitait les cheveux gris sur la tête de l'homme mort.

— Je suis charmé qu'on ait éteint la torche, disait Courfeyrac à Feuilly. Cette torche effarée au vent m'ennuyait. Elle avait l'air d'avoir peur. La lumière des torches ressemble à la sagesse des lâches; elle éclaire mal, parce qu'elle tremble.

L'aube éveille les esprits comme les oiseaux; tous causaient.

Joly, voyant un chat rôder sur une gouttière, en extrayait la philosophie.

— Qu'est-ce que le chat? s'écriait-il. C'est un correctif. Le bon Dieu, ayant fait la souris, a dit: Tiens, j'ai fait une bêtise. Et il a fait le chat. Le chat c'est l'erratum de la souris. La souris, plus le chat, c'est l'épreuve revue et corrigée de la création.

Combeferre, entouré d'étudiants et d'ouvriers, parlait des morts, de Jean Prouvaire, de Bahorel, de Mabeuf, et même du Cabuc, et de la tristesse sévère d'Enjolras. Il disait:

— Harmodius et Aristogiton, Brutus, Chéréas, Stephanus, Cromwell, Charlotte Corday, Sand, tous ont eu, après le coup, leur moment d'angoisse. Notre cœur est si frémissant et la vie humaine est un tel mystère que, même dans un meurtre civique, même dans un meurtre libérateur, s'il y en a, le remords d'avoir frappé un homme dépasse la joie d'avoir servi le genre humain.

Et, ce sont là les méandres de la parole échangée, une minute après, par une transition venue des vers de Jean Prouvaire, Combeferre comparait entre eux les traducteurs des Géorgiques, Raux à Cournand, Cournand à Delille, indiquant les quelques passages traduits par Malfilâtre, particulièrement les prodiges de la mort de César; et par ce mot, César, la causerie revenait à Brutus.

— César, dit Combeferre, est tombé justement. Cicéron a été sévère pour César, et il a eu raison. Cette sévérité-là n'est point la diatribe. Quand Zoïle insulte Homère, quand Mævius insulte Virgile, quand Visé insulte Molière, quand Pope insulte Shakespeare, quand Fréron insulte Voltaire, c'est une vieille loi d'envie et de haine qui s'exécute; les génies attirent l'injure, les grands hommes sont toujours plus ou moins aboyés. Mais Zoïle et Cicéron, c'est deux. Cicéron est un justicier par la pensée de même que Brutus est un justicier par l'épée. Je blâme, quant à moi, cette dernière justice-là, le glaive; mais l'antiquité l'admettait. César, violateur du Rubicon, conférant, comme venant de lui, les dignités qui venaient du peuple, ne se levant pas à l'entrée du sénat, faisait, comme dit Eutrope, des choses de roi et presque de tyran, *regia ac pene tyrannica*. C'était un grand homme; tant pis, ou tant mieux; la leçon est plus haute. Ses vingt-trois blessures me touchent moins que le crachat au front de Jésus-Christ. César est poignardé par les sénateurs; Christ est souffleté par les valets. À plus d'outrage, on sent le dieu.

Bossuet, dominant les causeurs du haut d'un tas de pavés, s'écriait, la carabine à la main:

— Ô Cydathenæum, ô Myrrhinus, ô Probalinthe, ô grâces de l'AEantide! Oh! qui me donnera de prononcer les vers d'Homère comme un Grec de Laurium ou d'Édaptéon!

Chapitre III

Éclaircissement et assombrissement

Enjolras était allé faire une reconnaissance. Il était sorti par la ruelle Mondétour en serpentant le long des maisons.

Les insurgés, disons-le, étaient pleins d'espoir. La façon dont ils avaient repoussé l'attaque de la nuit leur faisait presque dédaigner d'avance l'attaque du point du jour. Ils l'attendaient et en souriaient. Ils ne doutaient pas plus de leur succès que de leur cause. D'ailleurs un secours allait évidemment leur venir. Ils y comptaient. Avec cette facilité de prophétie triomphante qui est une des forces du Français combattant, ils divisaient en trois phases certaines la journée qui allait s'ouvrir: à six heures du matin, un régiment, «qu'on avait travaillé», tournerait; à midi, l'insurrection de tout Paris; au coucher du soleil, la révolution.

On entendait le tocsin de Saint-Merry qui ne s'était pas tu une minute depuis la veille; preuve que l'autre barricade, la grande, celle de Jeanne, tenait toujours.

Toutes ces espérances s'échangeaient d'un groupe à l'autre dans une sorte de chuchotement gai et redoutable qui ressemblait au bourdonnement de guerre d'une ruche d'abeilles.

Enjolras reparut. Il revenait de sa sombre promenade d'aigle dans l'obscurité extérieure. Il écouta un instant toute cette joie les bras croisés, une main sur sa bouche. Puis, frais et rose dans la blancheur grandissante du matin, il dit:

— Toute l'armée de Paris donne. Un tiers de cette armée pèse sur la barricade où vous êtes. De plus la garde nationale. J'ai distingué les shakos du cinquième de ligne et les guidons de la sixième légion. Vous serez attaqués dans une heure. Quant au peuple, il a bouillonné hier, mais ce matin il ne bouge pas. Rien à attendre, rien à espérer. Pas plus un faubourg qu'un régiment. Vous êtes abandonnés.

Ces paroles tombèrent sur le bourdonnement des groupes, et y firent l'effet que fait sur un essaim la première goutte de l'orage. Tous restèrent muets. Il y eut un moment d'inexprimable angoisse où l'on eût entendu voler la mort.

Ce moment fut court.

Une voix, du fond le plus obscur des groupes, cria à Enjolras:

— Soit. Élevons la barricade à vingt pieds de haut, et restons-y tous. Citoyens, faisons la protection des cadavres. Montrons que, si le peuple abandonne les républicains, les républicains n'abandonnent pas le peuple.

Cette parole dégageait du pénible nuage des anxiétés individuelles la pensée de tous. Une acclamation enthousiaste l'accueillit.

On n'a jamais su le nom de l'homme qui avait parlé ainsi; c'était quelque porte-blouse ignoré, un inconnu, un oublié, un passant héros, ce grand anonyme toujours mêlé aux crises humaines et aux genèses sociales qui, à un instant donné, dit d'une façon suprême le mot décisif, et qui s'évanouit dans les ténèbres après avoir représenté une minute, dans la lumière d'un éclair, le peuple et Dieu.

Cette résolution inexorable était tellement dans l'air du 6 juin 1832 que, presque à la même heure, dans la barricade de Saint-Merry, les insurgés poussaient cette clameur demeurée historique et consignée au procès: Qu'on vienne à notre secours ou qu'on n'y vienne pas, qu'importe! Faisons-nous tuer ici jusqu'au dernier.

Comme on voit, les deux barricades, quoique matériellement isolées, communiquaient.

Chapitre IV

Cinq de moins, un de plus

Après que l’homme quelconque, qui décrétait «la protestation des cadavres», eut parlé et donné la formule de l’âme commune, de toutes les bouches sortit un cri étrangement satisfait et terrible, funèbre par le sens et triomphal par l’accent:

— Vive la mort! Restons ici tous.

— Pourquoi tous? dit Enjolras.

— Tous! tous!

Enjolras reprit:

— La position est bonne, la barricade est belle. Trente hommes suffisent. Pourquoi en sacrifier quarante?

Ils répliquèrent:

— Parce que pas un ne voudra s’en aller.

— Citoyens, criait Enjolras, et il y avait dans sa voix une vibration presque irritée, la République n’est pas assez riche en hommes pour faire des dépenses inutiles. La gloriole est un gaspillage. Si, pour quelques-uns, le devoir est de s’en aller, ce devoir-là doit être fait comme un autre.

Enjolras, l’homme principe, avait sur ses coreligionnaires cette sorte de toute-puissance qui se dégage de l’absolu. Cependant, quelle que fût cette omnipotence, on murmura.

Chef jusque dans le bout des ongles, Enjolras, voyant qu’on murmurait, insista. Il reprit avec hauteur:

— Que ceux qui craignent de n’être plus que trente le disent.

Les murmures redoublèrent.

— D’ailleurs, observa une voix dans un groupe, s’en aller, c’est facile à dire. La barricade est cernée.

— Pas du côté des halles, dit Enjolras. La rue Mondétour est libre, et par la rue des Prêcheurs on peut gagner le marché des Innocents.

— Et là, reprit une autre voix du groupe, on sera pris. On tombera dans quelque grand’garde de la ligne ou de la banlieue. Ils verront passer un homme en blouse et en casquette. D’où viens-tu, toi? serais-tu pas de la barricade? Et on vous regarde les mains. Tu sens la poudre. Fusillé.

Enjolras, sans répondre, toucha l’épaule de Combeferre, et tous deux entrèrent dans la salle basse.

Ils ressortirent un moment après. Enjolras tenait dans ses deux mains étendues les quatre uniformes qu’il avait fait réserver. Combeferre le suivait portant les buffleteries et les shakos.

— Avec cet uniforme, dit Enjolras, on se mêle aux rangs et l’on s’échappe. Voici toujours pour quatre.

Et il jeta sur le sol dépavé les quatre uniformes.

Aucun ébranlement ne se faisait dans le stoïque auditoire. Combeferre prit la parole.

— Allons, dit-il, il faut avoir un peu de pitié. Savez-vous de quoi il est question ici? Il est question des femmes. Voyons. Y a-t-il des femmes, oui ou non? y a-t-il des enfants, oui ou non? y a-t-il, oui ou non, des mères, qui poussent des berceaux du pied et qui ont des tas de petits autour d’elles? Que celui de vous qui n’a jamais vu le sein d’une nourrice lève la main. Ah! vous voulez vous faire tuer, je le veux aussi, moi qui vous parle, mais je ne veux pas sentir des fantômes de femmes qui se tordent les bras autour de moi. Mourez, soit, mais ne faites pas mourir. Des suicides comme celui qui va s’accomplir ici sont sublimes, mais le suicide est étroit, et ne veut pas d’extension; et dès qu’il touche à vos proches, le suicide s’appelle meurtre. Songez aux petites têtes blondes, et songez aux cheveux blancs. Écoutez, tout à l’heure, Enjolras, il vient de me le dire, a vu au coin de la rue du Cygne une croisée éclairée, une chandelle à une pauvre fenêtre, au cinquième, et sur la vitre l’ombre toute branlante d’une tête de vieille femme qui avait l’air d’avoir passé la nuit et d’attendre. C’est peut-être la mère de l’un de vous. Eh bien, qu’il s’en aille, celui-là, et qu’il se dépêche d’aller dire à sa mère: Mère, me voilà! Qu’il soit tranquille, on fera la besogne ici tout de même. Quand on soutient ses proches de son travail, on n’a plus le droit de se sacrifier. C’est déserter la famille, cela. Et ceux qui ont des filles, et ceux qui ont des sœurs! Y pensez-vous? Vous vous faites tuer, vous voilà morts, c’est bon, et demain? Des jeunes filles qui n’ont pas de pain, cela est terrible. L’homme mendie, la femme vend. Ah! ces charmants êtres si gracieux et si doux qui ont des bonnets de fleurs, qui chantent, qui jasent, qui emplissent la maison de chasteté, qui sont comme un parfum vivant, qui prouvent l’existence des anges dans le ciel par la pureté des vierges sur la terre, cette Jeanne, cette Lise, cette Mimi, ces adorables et honnêtes créatures qui sont votre bénédiction et votre orgueil, ah mon Dieu, elles vont avoir faim! Que voulez-vous que je vous dise? Il y a un marché de chair humaine, et ce n’est pas avec vos mains d’ombres, frémissantes autour d’elles, que vous les empêcherez d’y entrer! Songez à la rue, songez au pavé couvert de passants, songez aux boutiques devant lesquelles des femmes vont et viennent décolletées et dans la boue. Ces femmes-là aussi ont été pures. Songez à vos sœurs, ceux qui en ont. La misère, la prostitution, les sergents de ville, Saint-Lazare, voilà où vont tomber ces délicates belles filles, ces fragiles merveilles de pudeur, de gentillesse et de beauté, plus fraîches que les lilas du mois de mai. Ah! vous vous êtes fait tuer! ah! vous n’êtes plus là! C’est bien; vous avez voulu soustraire le peuple à la royauté, vous donnez vos filles à la police. Amis, prenez garde, ayez de la compassion. Les femmes, les malheureuses femmes, on n’a pas l’habitude d’y songer beaucoup. On se fie sur ce que les femmes n’ont pas reçu l’éducation des hommes, on les empêche de lire, on les empêche de penser, on les empêche de s’occuper de politique; les empêcherez-vous d’aller ce soir à la morgue et de reconnaître vos cadavres? Voyons, il faut que ceux qui ont des familles soient bons enfants et nous donnent une poignée de main et s’en aillent, et nous laissent faire ici l’affaire tout seuls. Je sais bien qu’il faut du courage pour s’en aller, c’est difficile; mais plus c’est difficile, plus c’est méritoire. On dit: J’ai un fusil, je suis à la barricade, tant pis, j’y reste. Tant pis, c’est bientôt dit. Mes amis, il y a un lendemain, vous n’y serez pas à ce lendemain, mais vos familles y seront. Et que de souffrances! Tenez, un joli enfant bien portant qui a des joues comme une pomme, qui babille, qui jacasse, qui jabote, qui rit, qu’on sent frais sous le baiser, savez-vous ce que cela devient quand c’est abandonné? J’en ai vu un, tout petit, haut comme cela. Son père était mort. De pauvres gens l’avaient recueilli par charité, mais ils n’avaient pas de pain pour eux-mêmes. L’enfant avait toujours faim. C’était l’hiver. Il ne pleurait pas. On le voyait aller près du poêle où il n’y avait jamais de feu et dont le tuyau, vous savez, était mastiqué avec de la terre jaune. L’enfant détachait avec ses petits doigts un peu de cette terre et la mangeait. Il avait la respiration rauque, la face livide, les jambes molles, le ventre gros. Il ne disait rien. On lui parlait, il ne répondait pas. Il est mort. On l’a apporté mourir à l’hospice Necker, où je l’ai vu. J’étais interne à cet hospice-là. Maintenant, s’il y a des pères parmi vous, des pères qui ont pour bonheur de se promener le dimanche en tenant dans leur bonne main robuste la petite main de leur enfant, que chacun de ces pères se figure que cet enfant-là est le sien. Ce pauvre môme, je me le rappelle, il me semble que je le vois, quand il a été nu sur la table d'anatomie, ses côtes faisaient saillie sous sa peau comme les fosses sous l'herbe d'un cimetière. On lui a trouvé une espèce de boue dans l'estomac. Il avait de la cendre dans les dents. Allons, tâtons-nous en conscience et prenons conseil de notre cœur. Les statistiques constatent que la mortalité des enfants abandonnés est de cinquante-cinq pour cent. Je le répète, il s'agit des femmes, il s'agit des mères, il s'agit des jeunes filles, il s'agit des mioches. Est-ce qu'on vous parle de vous? On sait bien ce que vous êtes; on sait bien que vous êtes tous des braves, parbleu! on sait bien que vous avez tous dans l'âme la joie et la gloire de donner votre vie pour la grande cause; on sait bien que vous vous sentez élus pour mourir utilement et magnifiquement, et que chacun de vous tient à sa part du triomphe. À la bonne heure. Mais vous n'êtes pas seuls en ce monde. Il y a d'autres êtres auxquels il faut penser. Il ne faut pas être égoïstes.

Tous baissèrent la tête d'un air sombre.

Étranges contradictions du cœur humain à ses moments les plus sublimes! Combeferre, qui parlait ainsi, n'était pas orphelin. Il se souvenait des mères des autres, et il oubliait la sienne. Il allait se faire tuer. Il était «égoïste».

Marius, à jeun, fiévreux, successivement sorti de toutes les espérances, échoué dans la douleur, le plus sombre des naufrages, saturé d'émotions violentes, et sentant la fin venir, s'était de plus en plus enfoncé dans cette stupeur visionnaire qui précède toujours l'heure fatale volontairement acceptée.

Un physiologiste eût pu étudier sur lui les symptômes croissants de cette absorption fébrile connue et classée par la science, et qui est à la souffrance ce que la volupté est au plaisir. Le désespoir aussi a son extase. Marius en était là. Il assistait à tout comme du dehors; ainsi que nous l'avons dit, les choses qui se passaient devant lui, lui semblaient lointaines; il distinguait l'ensemble, mais n'apercevait point les détails. Il voyait les allants et venants à travers un flamboiement. Il entendait les voix parler comme au fond d'un abîme.

Cependant ceci l'émut. Il y avait dans cette scène une pointe qui perça jusqu'à lui, et qui le réveilla. Il n'avait plus qu'une idée, mourir, et il ne voulait pas s'en distraire; mais il songea, dans son somnambulisme funèbre, qu'en se perdant, il n'est pas défendu de sauver quelqu'un.

Il éleva la voix:

— Enjolras et Combeferre ont raison, dit-il; pas de sacrifice inutile. Je me joins à eux, et il faut se hâter. Combeferre vous a dit les choses décisives. Il y en a parmi vous qui ont des familles, des mères, des sœurs, des femmes, des enfants. Que ceux-là sortent des rangs.

Personne ne bougea.

— Les hommes mariés et les soutiens de famille hors des rangs! répéta Marius.

Son autorité était grande. Enjolras était bien le chef de la barricade, mais Marius en était le sauveur.

— Je l'ordonne! cria Enjolras.

— Je vous en prie, dit Marius.

Alors, remués par la parole de Combeferre, ébranlés par l'ordre d'Enjolras, émus par la prière de Marius, ces hommes héroïques commencèrent à se dénoncer les uns les autres. — C'est vrai, disait un jeune à un homme fait. Tu es père de famille. Va-t'en. — C'est plutôt toi, répondait l'homme, tu as tes deux sœurs que tu nourris. — Et une lutte inouïe éclatait. C'était à qui ne se laisserait pas mettre à la porte du tombeau.

— Dépêchons, dit Courfeyrac, dans un quart d'heure il ne serait plus temps.

— Citoyens, poursuivit Enjolras, c'est ici la République, et le suffrage universel règne. Désignez vous-mêmes ceux qui doivent s'en aller.

On obéit. Au bout de quelques minutes, cinq étaient unanimement désignés, et sortaient des rangs.

— Ils sont cinq! s'écria Marius.

Il n'y avait que quatre uniformes.

— Eh bien, reprirent les cinq, il faut qu'un reste.

Et ce fut à qui resterait, et à qui trouverait aux autres des raisons de ne pas rester. La généreuse querelle recommença.

— Toi, tu as une femme qui t'aime. — Toi, tu as ta vieille mère. — Toi, tu n'as plus ni père ni mère, qu'est-ce que tes trois petits frères vont devenir? — Toi, tu es père de cinq enfants. — Toi, tu as le droit de vivre, tu as dix-sept ans, c'est trop tôt.

Ces grandes barricades révolutionnaires étaient des rendez-vous d'héroïsmes. L'invraisemblable y était simple. Ces hommes ne s'étonnaient pas les uns les autres.

— Faites vite, répétait Courfeyrac.

On cria des groupes à Marius:

— Désignez, vous, celui qui doit rester.

— Oui, dirent les cinq, choisissez. Nous vous obéirons.

Marius ne croyait plus à une émotion possible. Cependant à cette idée, choisir un homme pour la mort, tout son sang reflua vers son cœur. Il eût pâli, s'il eût pu pâlir encore.

Il s'avança vers les cinq qui lui souriaient, et chacun, l'œil plein de cette grande flamme qu'on voit au fond de l'histoire sur les Thermopyles, lui criait.

— Moi! moi! moi!

Et Marius, stupidement, les compta; ils étaient toujours cinq! Puis son regard s'abaissa sur les quatre uniformes.

En cet instant, un cinquième uniforme tomba, comme du ciel, sur les quatre autres.

Le cinquième homme était sauvé.

Marius leva les yeux et reconnut M. Fauchelevent.

Jean Valjean venait d'entrer dans la barricade.

Soit renseignement pris, soit instinct, soit hasard, il arrivait par la ruelle Mondétour. Grâce à son habit de garde national, il avait passé aisément.

La vedette placée par les insurgés dans la rue Mondétour, n'avait point à donner le signal d'alarme pour un garde national seul. Elle l'avait laissé s'engager dans la rue en se disant: c'est un renfort probablement, ou au pis aller un prisonnier. Le moment était trop grave pour que la sentinelle pût se distraire de son devoir et de son poste d'observation.

Au moment où Jean Valjean était entré dans la redoute, personne ne l'avait remarqué, tous les yeux étant fixés sur les cinq choisis et sur les quatre uniformes. Jean Valjean, lui, avait vu et entendu, et, silencieusement, il s'était dépouillé de son habit et l'avait jeté sur le tas des autres.

L'émotion fut indescriptible.

— Quel est cet homme? demanda Bossuet.

— C'est, répondit Combeferre, un homme qui sauve les autres.

Marius ajouta d'une voix grave:

— Je le connais.

Cette caution suffisait à tous.

Enjolras se tourna vers Jean Valjean.

— Citoyen, soyez le bienvenu.

Et il ajouta:

— Vous savez qu’on va mourir.

Jean Valjean, sans répondre, aida l’insurgé qu’il sauvait à revêtir son uniforme.

Chapitre V

Quel horizon on voit du haut de la barricade

La situation de tous, dans cette heure fatale et dans ce lieu inexorable, avait comme résultante et comme sommet la mélancolie suprême d’Enjolras.

Enjolras avait en lui la plénitude de la révolution; il était incomplet pourtant, autant que l’absolu peut l’être; il tenait trop de Saint-Just, et pas assez d’Anacharsis Cloots; cependant son esprit, dans la société des Amis de l’A B C, avait fini par subir une certaine aimantation des idées de Combeferre; depuis quelque temps, il sortait peu à peu de la forme étroite du dogme et se laissait aller aux élargissements du progrès, et il en était venu à accepter, comme évolution définitive et magnifique, la transformation de la grande république française en immense république humaine. Quant aux moyens immédiats, une situation violente étant donnée, il les voulait violents; en cela, il ne variait pas; et il était resté de cette école épique et redoutable que résume ce mot: Quatre-vingt-treize.

Enjolras était debout sur l’escalier de pavés, un de ses coudes sur le canon de sa carabine. Il songeait; il tressaillait, comme à des passages de souffles; les endroits où est la mort ont de ces effets de trépieds. Il sortait de ses prunelles, pleines du regard intérieur, des espèces de feux étouffés. Tout à coup, il dressa la tête, ses cheveux blonds se renversèrent en arrière comme ceux de l’ange sur le sombre quadrige fait d’étoiles, ce fut comme une crinière de lion effarée en flamboiement d’auréole, et Enjolras s’écria:

— Citoyens, vous représentez-vous l’avenir? Les rues des villes inondées de lumières, des branches vertes sur les seuils, les nations sœurs, les hommes justes, les vieillards bénissant les enfants, le passé aimant le présent, les penseurs en pleine liberté, les croyants en pleine égalité, pour religion le ciel, Dieu prêtre direct, la conscience humaine devenue l’autel, plus de haines, la fraternité de l’atelier et de l’école, pour pénalité et pour récompense la notoriété, à tous le travail, pour tous le droit, sur tous la paix, plus de sang versé, plus de guerres, les mères heureuses! Dompter la matière, c’est le premier pas; réaliser l’idéal, c’est le second. Réfléchissez à ce qu’a déjà fait le progrès. Jadis les premières races humaines voyaient avec terreur passer devant leurs yeux l’hydre qui soufflait sur les eaux, le dragon qui vomissait du feu, le griffon qui était le monstre de l’air et qui volait avec les ailes d'un aigle et les griffes d'un tigre; bêtes effrayantes qui étaient au-dessus de l'homme. L'homme cependant a tendu ses pièges, les pièges sacrés de l'intelligence, et il a fini par y prendre les monstres.

Nous avons dompté l'hydre, et elle s'appelle le steamer; nous avons dompté le dragon, et il s'appelle la locomotive; nous sommes sur le point de dompter le griffon, nous le tenons déjà, et il s'appelle le ballon. Le jour où cette œuvre prométhéenne sera terminée et où l'homme aura définitivement attelé à sa volonté la triple Chimère antique, l'hydre, le dragon et le griffon, il sera maître de l'eau, du feu et de l'air, et il sera pour le reste de la création animée ce que les anciens dieux étaient jadis pour lui. Courage, et en avant! Citoyens, où allons-nous? À la science faite gouvernement, à la force des choses devenue seule force publique, à la loi naturelle ayant sa sanction et sa pénalité en elle-même et se promulguant par l'évidence, à un lever de vérité correspondant au lever du jour. Nous allons à l'union des peuples; nous allons à l'unité de l'homme. Plus de fictions; plus de parasites. Le réel gouverné par le vrai, voilà le but. La civilisation tiendra ses assises au sommet de l'Europe, et plus tard au centre des continents, dans un grand parlement de l'intelligence. Quelque chose de pareil s'est vu déjà. Les amphictyons avaient deux séances par an, l'une à Delphes, lieu des dieux, l'autre aux Thermopyles, lieu des héros. L'Europe aura ses amphictyons; le globe aura ses amphictyons. La France porte cet avenir sublime dans ses flancs. C'est là la gestation du dix-neuvième siècle. Ce qu'avait ébauché la Grèce est digne d'être achevé par la France. Écoute-moi, toi Feuilly, vaillant ouvrier, homme du peuple, hommes des peuples. Je te vénère. Oui, tu vois nettement les temps futurs, oui, tu as raison. Tu n'avais ni père ni mère, Feuilly; tu as adopté pour mère l'humanité et pour père le droit. Tu vas mourir ici, c'est-à-dire triompher. Citoyens, quoi qu'il arrive aujourd'hui, par notre défaite aussi bien que par notre victoire, c'est une révolution que nous allons faire. De même que les incendies éclairent toute la ville, les révolutions éclairent tout le genre humain. Et quelle révolution ferons-nous? Je viens de le dire, la révolution du Vrai. Au point de vue politique, il n'y a qu'un seul principe — la souveraineté de l'homme sur lui-même. Cette souveraineté de moi sur moi s'appelle Liberté. Là où deux ou plusieurs de ces souverainetés s'associent commence l'État. Mais dans cette association il n'y a nulle abdication. Chaque souveraineté concède une certaine quantité d'elle-même pour former le droit commun. Cette quantité est la même pour tous. Cette identité de concession que chacun fait à tous s'appelle Égalité.

Le droit commun n’est pas autre chose que la protection de tous rayonnant sur le droit de chacun. Cette protection de tous sur chacun s’appelle Fraternité. Le point d’intersection de toutes ces souverainetés qui s’agrègent s’appelle Société. Cette intersection étant une jonction, ce point est un nœud. De là ce qu’on appelle le lien social. Quelques-uns disent contrat social, ce qui est la même chose, le mot contrat étant étymologiquement formé avec l’idée de lien. Entendons-nous sur l’égalité; car, si la liberté est le sommet, l’égalité est la base. L’égalité, citoyens, ce n’est pas toute la végétation à niveau, une société de grands brins d’herbe et de petits chênes; un voisinage de jalousies s’entre-châtrant; c’est, civilement, toutes les aptitudes ayant la même ouverture; politiquement, tous les votes ayant le même poids; religieusement, toutes les consciences ayant le même droit. L’Égalité a un organe: l’instruction gratuite et obligatoire. Le droit à l’alphabet, c’est par là qu’il faut commencer. L’école primaire imposée à tous, l’école secondaire offerte à tous, c’est là la loi. De l’école identique sort la société égale. Oui, enseignement! Lumière! lumière! tout vient de la lumière et tout y retourne. Citoyens, le dix-neuvième siècle est grand, mais le vingtième siècle sera heureux. Alors plus rien de semblable à la vieille histoire; on n’aura plus à craindre, comme aujourd’hui, une conquête, une invasion, une usurpation, une rivalité de nations à main armée, une interruption de civilisation dépendant d’un mariage de rois, une naissance dans les tyrannies héréditaires, un partage de peuples par congrès, un démembrement par écroulement de dynastie, un combat de deux religions se rencontrant de front, comme deux boucs de l’ombre, sur le pont de l’infini; on n’aura plus à craindre la famine, l’exploitation, la prostitution par détresse, la misère par chômage, et l’échafaud, et le glaive, et les batailles, et tous les brigandages du hasard dans la forêt des événements. On pourrait presque dire: il n’y aura plus d’événements. On sera heureux. Le genre humain accomplira sa loi comme le globe terrestre accomplit la sienne; l’harmonie se rétablira entre l’âme et l’astre. L’âme gravitera autour de la vérité comme l’astre autour de la lumière. Amis, l’heure où nous sommes et où je vous parle est une heure sombre; mais ce sont là les achats terribles de l’avenir. Une révolution est un péage. Oh! le genre humain sera délivré, relevé et consolé! Nous le lui affirmons sur cette barricade. D’où poussera-t-on le cri d’amour, si ce n’est du haut du sacrifice? Ô mes frères, c’est ici le lieu de jonction de ceux qui pensent et de ceux qui souffrent; cette barricade n’est faite ni de pavés, ni de poutres, ni de ferrailles; elle est faite de deux monceaux, un monceau d’idées et un monceau de douleurs. La misère y rencontre l’idéal. Le jour y embrasse la nuit et lui dit: Je vais mourir avec toi et tu vas renaître avec moi. De l’étreinte de toutes les désolations jaillit la foi. Les souffrances apportent ici leur agonie, et les idées leur immortalité. Cette agonie et cette immortalité vont se mêler et composer notre mort. Frères, qui meurt ici meurt dans le rayonnement de l’avenir, et nous entrons dans une tombe toute pénétrée d’aurore.

Enjolras s’interrompit plutôt qu’il ne se tut; ses lèvres remuaient silencieusement comme s’il continuait de se parler à lui-même, ce qui fit qu’attentifs, et pour tâcher de l’entendre encore, ils le regardèrent. Il n’y eut pas d’applaudissements; mais on chuchota longtemps. La parole étant souffle, les frémissements d’intelligences ressemblent à des frémissements de feuilles.

Chapitre VI

Marius hagard, Javert laconique

Disons ce qui se passait dans la pensée de Marius.

Qu’on se souvienne de sa situation d’âme. Nous venons de le rappeler, tout n’était plus pour lui que vision. Son appréciation était trouble. Marius, insistons-y, était sous l’ombre des grandes ailes ténébreuses ouvertes sur les agonisants. Il se sentait entré dans le tombeau, il lui semblait qu’il était déjà de l’autre côté de la muraille, et il ne voyait plus les faces des vivants qu’avec les yeux d’un mort.

Comment M. Fauchelevent était-il là? Pourquoi y était-il? Qu’y venait-il faire? Marius ne s’adressa point toutes ces questions. D’ailleurs, notre désespoir ayant cela de particulier qu’il enveloppe autrui comme nous-mêmes, il lui semblait logique que tout le monde vînt mourir.

Seulement il songea à Cosette avec un serrement de cœur.

Du reste M. Fauchevelent ne lui parla pas, ne le regarda pas, et n’eut pas même l’air d’entendre lorsque Marius éleva la voix pour dire: Je le connais.

Quant à Marius, cette attitude de M. Fauchelevent le soulageait, et si l’on pouvait employer un tel mot pour de telles impressions, nous dirions, lui plaisait. Il s’était toujours senti une impossibilité absolue d’adresser la parole à cet homme énigmatique qui était à la fois pour lui équivoque et imposant. Il y avait en outre très longtemps qu’il ne l’avait vu; ce qui, pour la nature timide et réservée de Marius, augmentait encore l’impossibilité.

Les cinq hommes désignés sortirent de la barricade par la ruelle Mondétour; ils ressemblaient parfaitement à des gardes nationaux. Un d’eux s’en alla en pleurant. Avant de partir, ils embrassèrent ceux qui restaient.

Quand les cinq hommes renvoyés à la vie furent partis, Enjolras pensa au condamné à mort. Il entra dans la salle basse. Javert, lié au pilier, songeait.

— Te faut-il quelque chose? lui demanda Enjolras.

Javert répondit:

— Quand me tuerez-vous?

— Attends. Nous avons besoin de toutes nos cartouches en ce moment.

— Alors, donnez-moi à boire, dit Javert.

Enjolras lui présenta lui-même un verre d’eau, et, comme Javert était garrotté, il l’aida à boire.

— Est-ce là tout? reprit Enjolras.

— Je suis mal à ce poteau, répondit Javert. Vous n'êtes pas tendres de m'avoir laissé passer la nuit là. Liez-moi comme il vous plaira, mais vous pouvez bien me coucher sur une table comme l'autre.

Et d'un mouvement de tête il désignait le cadavre de M. Mabeuf.

Il y avait, on s'en souvient, au fond de la salle une grande et longue table sur laquelle on avait fondu des balles et fait des cartouches. Toutes les cartouches étant faites et toute la poudre étant employée, cette table était libre.

Sur l'ordre d'Enjolras, quatre insurgés délièrent Javert du poteau. Tandis qu'on le déliait, un cinquième lui tenait une bayonnette appuyée sur la poitrine. On lui laissa les mains attachées derrière le dos, on lui mit aux pieds une corde à fouet mince et solide qui lui permettait de faire des pas de quinze pouces comme à ceux qui vont monter à l'échafaud, et on le fit marcher jusqu'à la table au fond de la salle où on l'étendit, étroitement lié par le milieu du corps.

Pour plus de sûreté, au moyen d'une corde fixée au cou, on ajouta au système de ligatures qui lui rendaient toute évasion impossible cette espèce de lien, appelé dans les prisons martingale, qui part de la nuque, se bifurque sur l'estomac, et vient rejoindre les mains après avoir passé entre les jambes.

Pendant qu'on garrottait Javert, un homme, sur le seuil de la porte, le considérait avec une attention singulière. L'ombre que faisait cet homme fit tourner la tête à Javert. Il leva les yeux et reconnut Jean Valjean. Il ne tressaillit même pas, abaissa fièrement la paupière, et se borna à dire: C'est tout simple.

Chapitre VII

La situation s'aggrave

Le jour croissait rapidement. Mais pas une fenêtre ne s'ouvrait, pas une porte ne s'entre-bâillait; c'était l'aurore, non le réveil. L'extrémité de la rue de la Chanvrerie opposée à la barricade avait été évacuée par les troupes, comme nous l'avons dit; elle semblait libre et s'ouvrait aux passants avec une tranquillité sinistre. La rue Saint-Denis était muette comme l'avenue des Sphinx à Thèbes. Pas un être vivant dans les carrefours que blanchissait un reflet de soleil. Rien n'est lugubre comme cette clarté des rues désertes.

On ne voyait rien, mais on entendait. Il se faisait à une certaine distance un mouvement mystérieux. Il était évident que l'instant critique arrivait. Comme la veille au soir les vedettes se replièrent; mais cette fois toutes.

La barricade était plus forte que lors de la première attaque. Depuis le départ des cinq, on l'avait exhaussée encore.

Sur l'avis de la vedette qui avait observé la région des halles, Enjolras, de peur d'une surprise par derrière, prit une résolution grave. Il fit barricader le petit boyau de la ruelle Mondétour resté libre jusqu'alors. On dépava pour cela quelques longueurs de maisons de plus. De cette façon, la barricade, murée sur trois rues, en avant sur la rue de la Chanvrerie, à gauche sur la rue du Cygne et de la Petite-Truanderie, à droite sur la rue Mondétour, était vraiment presque inexpugnable; il est vrai qu'on y était fatalement enfermé. Elle avait trois fronts, mais n'avait plus d'issue. — Forteresse, mais souricière, dit Courfeyrac en riant.

Enjolras fit entasser près de la porte du cabaret une trentaine de pavés, «arrachés de trop», disait Bossuet.

Le silence était maintenant si profond du côté d'où l'attaque devait venir qu'Enjolras fit reprendre à chacun le poste de combat.

On distribua à tous une ration d'eau-de-vie.

Rien n'est plus curieux qu'une barricade qui se prépare à un assaut. Chacun choisit sa place comme au spectacle. On s'accote, on s'accoude, on s'épaule. Il y en a qui se font des stalles avec des pavés. Voilà un coin de mur qui gêne, on s'en éloigne; voici un redan qui peut protéger, on s'y abrite. Les gauchers sont précieux; ils prennent les places incommodes aux autres. Beaucoup s'arrangent pour combattre assis. On veut être à l'aise pour tuer et confortablement pour mourir. Dans la funeste guerre de juin 1848, un insurgé qui avait un tir redoutable et qui se battait du haut d'une terrasse sur un toit, s'y était fait apporter un fauteuil Voltaire; un coup de mitraille vint l'y trouver.

Sitôt que le chef a commandé le branle-bas de combat, tous les mouvements désordonnés cessent; plus de tiraillements de l'un à l'autre; plus de coteries; plus d'aparté; plus de bande à part; tout ce qui est dans les esprits converge et se change en attente de l'assaillant. Une barricade avant le danger, chaos; dans le danger, discipline. Le péril fait l'ordre.

Dès qu'Enjolras eut pris sa carabine à deux coups et se fut placé à une espèce de créneau qu'il s'était réservé, tous se turent. Un pétillement de petits bruits secs retentit confusément le long de la muraille de pavés. C'était les fusils qu'on armait.

Du reste, les attitudes étaient plus fières et plus confiantes que jamais; l'excès du sacrifice est un affermissement; ils n'avaient plus l'espérance, mais ils avaient le désespoir. Le désespoir, dernière arme, qui donne la victoire quelquefois; Virgile l'a dit. Les ressources suprêmes sortent des résolutions extrêmes. S'embarquer dans la mort, c'est parfois le moyen d'échapper au naufrage; et le couvercle du cercueil devient une planche de salut.

Comme la veille au soir, toutes les attentions étaient tournées, et on pourrait presque dire appuyées, sur le bout de la rue, maintenant éclairé et visible.

L'attente ne fut pas longue. Le remuement recommença distinctement du côté de Saint-Leu, mais cela ne ressemblait pas au mouvement de la première attaque. Un clapotement de chaînes, le cahotement inquiétant d'une masse, un cliquetis d'airain sautant sur le pavé, une sorte de fracas solennel, annoncèrent qu'une ferraille sinistre s'approchait. Il y eut un tressaillement dans les entrailles de ces vieilles rues paisibles, percées et bâties pour la circulation féconde des intérêts et des idées, et qui ne sont pas faites pour le roulement monstrueux des roues de la guerre.

La fixité des prunelles de tous les combattants sur l'extrémité de la rue devint farouche.

Une pièce de canon apparut.

Les artilleurs poussaient la pièce; elle était dans son encastrement de tir; l'avant-train avait été détaché; deux soutenaient l'affût, quatre étaient aux roues, d'autres suivaient avec le caisson. On voyait la mèche allumée.

— Feu! cria Enjolras.

Toute la barricade fit feu, la détonation fut effroyable; une avalanche de fumée couvrit et effaça la pièce et les hommes; après quelques secondes le nuage se dissipa, et le canon et les hommes reparurent; les servants de la pièce achevaient de la rouler en face de la barricade lentement, correctement, et sans se hâter. Pas un n'était atteint. Puis le chef de pièce, pesant sur la culasse pour élever le tir, se mit à pointer le canon avec la gravité d'un astronome qui braque une lunette.

— Bravo les canonniers! cria Bossuet.

Et toute la barricade battit des mains.

Un moment après, carrément posée au beau milieu de la rue, à cheval sur le ruisseau, la pièce était en batterie. Une gueule formidable était ouverte sur la barricade.

— Allons, gai! fit Courfeyrac. Voilà le brutal. Après la chiquenaude, le coup de poing. L'armée étend vers nous sa grosse patte. La barricade va être sérieusement secouée. La fusillade tâte, le canon prend.

— C'est une pièce de huit, nouveau modèle, en bronze, ajouta Combeferre. Ces pièces-là, pour peu qu'on dépasse la proportion de dix parties d'étain sur cent de cuivre, sont sujettes à éclater. L'excès d'étain les fait trop tendres. Il arrive alors qu'elles ont des caves et des chambres dans la lumière. Pour obvier à ce danger et pouvoir forcer la charge, il faudrait peut-être en revenir au procédé du quatorzième siècle, le cerclage, et émenaucher extérieurement la pièce d'une suite d'anneaux d'acier sans soudure, depuis la culasse jusqu'au tourillon. En attendant, on remédie comme on peut au défaut; on parvient à reconnaître où sont les trous et les caves dans la lumière d'un canon au moyen du chat. Mais il y a un meilleur moyen, c'est l'étoile mobile de Gribeauval.

— Au seizième siècle, observa Bossuet, on rayait les canons.

— Oui, répondit Combeferre, cela augmente la puissance balistique, mais diminue la justesse de tir. En outre, dans le tir à courte distance, la trajectoire n'a pas toute la roideur désirable, la parabole s'exagère, le chemin du projectile n'est plus assez rectiligne pour qu'il puisse frapper tous les objets intermédiaires, nécessité de combat pourtant, dont l'importance croît avec la proximité de l'ennemi et la précipitation du tir. Ce défaut de tension de la courbe du projectile dans les canons rayés du seizième siècle tenait à la faiblesse de la charge; les faibles charges, pour cette espèce d'engins, sont imposées par des nécessités balistiques, telles, par exemple, que la conservation des affûts. En somme, le canon, ce despote, ne peut pas tout ce qu’il veut; la force est une grosse faiblesse. Un boulet de canon ne fait que six cents lieues par heure; la lumière fait soixante-dix mille lieues par seconde. Telle est la supériorité de Jésus-Christ sur Napoléon.

— Rechargez les armes, dit Enjolras.

De quelle façon le revêtement de la barricade allait-il se comporter sous le boulet? Le coup ferait-il brèche? Là était la question. Pendant que les insurgés rechargeaient les fusils, les artilleurs chargeaient le canon.

L’anxiété était profonde dans la redoute.

Le coup partit, la détonation éclata.

— Présent! cria une voix joyeuse.

Et en même temps que le boulet sur la barricade, Gavroche s’abattit dedans.

Il arrivait du côté de la rue du Cygne et il avait lestement enjambé la barricade accessoire qui faisait front au dédale de la Petite-Truanderie.

Gavroche fit plus d’effet dans la barricade que le boulet.

Le boulet s’était perdu dans le fouillis des décombres. Il avait tout au plus brisé une roue de l’omnibus, et achevé la vieille charrette Anceau. Ce que voyant, la barricade se mit à rire.

— Continuez, cria Bossuet aux artilleurs.

Chapitre VIII

Les artilleurs se font prendre au sérieux

On entoura Gavroche.

Mais il n’eut le temps de rien raconter. Marius, frissonnant, le prit à part.

— Qu’est-ce que tu viens faire ici?

— Tiens! dit l’enfant. Et vous?

Et il regarda fixement Marius avec son effronterie épique. Ses deux yeux s’agrandissaient de la clarté fière qui était dedans.

Ce fut avec un accent sévère que Marius continua:

— Qui est-ce qui te disait de revenir? As-tu au moins remis ma lettre à son adresse?

Gavroche n’était point sans quelque remords à l’endroit de cette lettre. Dans sa hâte de revenir à la barricade, il s’en était défait plutôt qu’il ne l’avait remise. Il était forcé de s’avouer à lui-même qu’il l’avait confiée un peu légèrement à cet inconnu dont il n’avait même pu distinguer le visage. Il est vrai que cet homme était nu-tête, mais cela ne suffisait pas. En somme, il se faisait à ce sujet de petites remontrances intérieures et il craignait les reproches de Marius. Il prit, pour se tirer d’affaire, le procédé le plus simple; il mentit abominablement.

— Citoyen, j’ai remis la lettre au portier. La dame dormait. Elle aura la lettre en se réveillant.

Marius, en envoyant cette lettre, avait deux buts, dire adieu à Cosette et sauver Gavroche. Il dut se contenter de la moitié de ce qu’il voulait.

L’envoi de sa lettre, et la présence de M. Fauchelevent dans la barricade, ce rapprochement s’offrit à son esprit. Il montra à Gavroche M. Fauchelevent:

— Connais-tu cet homme?

— Non, dit Gavroche.

Gavroche, en effet, nous venons de le rappeler, n’avait vu Jean Valjean que la nuit.

Les conjectures troubles et maladives qui s’étaient ébauchées dans l’esprit de Marius se dissipèrent. Connaissait-il les opinions de M. Fauchelevent? M. Fauchelevent était républicain peut-être. De là sa présence toute simple dans ce combat.

Cependant Gavroche était déjà à l'autre bout de la barricade criant: mon fusil!

Courfeyrac le lui fit rendre.

Gavroche prévint «les camarades», comme il les appelait, que la barricade était bloquée. Il avait eu grand'peine à arriver. Un bataillon de ligne, dont les faisceaux étaient dans la Petite-Truanderie, observait le côté de la rue du Cygne; du côté opposé, la garde municipale occupait la rue des Prêcheurs. En face, on avait le gros de l'armée.

Ce renseignement donné, Gavroche ajouta: — Je vous autorise à leur flanquer une pile indigne. Cependant Enjolras à son créneau, l'oreille tendue, épiait.

Les assaillants, peu contents sans doute du coup à boulet, ne l'avaient pas répété.

Une compagnie d'infanterie de ligne était venue occuper l'extrémité de la rue, en arrière de la pièce. Les soldats dépavaient la chaussée et y construisaient avec les pavés une petite muraille basse, une façon d'épaulement qui n'avait guère plus de dix-huit pouces de hauteur et qui faisait front à la barricade. À l'angle de gauche de cet épaulement, on voyait la tête de colonne d'un bataillon de la banlieue, massé rue Saint-Denis.

Enjolras, au guet, crut distinguer le bruit particulier qui se fait quand on retire des caissons les boîtes à mitraille, et il vit le chef de pièce changer le pointage et incliner légèrement la bouche du canon à gauche. Puis les canonniers se mirent à charger la pièce. Le chef de pièce saisit lui-même le boutefeu et l'approcha de la lumière.

— Baissez la tête, ralliez le mur! cria Enjolras, et tous à genoux le long de la barricade!

Les insurgés, épars devant le cabaret et qui avaient quitté leur poste de combat à l'arrivée de Gavroche, se ruèrent pêle-mêle vers la barricade; mais avant que l'ordre d'Enjolras fût exécuté, la décharge se fit avec le râle effrayant d'un coup de mitraille. C'en était un en effet.

La charge avait été dirigée sur la coupure de la redoute, y avait ricoché sur le mur, et ce ricochet épouvantable avait fait deux morts et trois blessés.

Si cela continuait, la barricade n'était plus tenable. La mitraille entrait.

Il y eut une rumeur de consternation.

— Empêchons toujours le second coup, dit Enjolras.

Et, abaissant sa carabine, il ajusta le chef de pièce qui, en ce moment, penché sur la culasse du canon, rectifiait et fixait définitivement le pointage.

Ce chef de pièce était un beau sergent de canonniers, tout jeune, blond, à la figure très douce, avec l’air intelligent propre à cette arme prédestinée et redoutable qui, à force de se perfectionner dans l’horreur, doit finir par tuer la guerre.

Combeferre, debout près d’Enjolras, considérait ce jeune homme.

— Quel dommage! dit Combeferre. La hideuse chose que ces boucheries! Allons, quand il n’y aura plus de rois, il n’y aura plus de guerre. Enjolras, tu vises ce sergent, tu ne le regardes pas. Figure-toi que c’est un charmant jeune homme, il est intrépide, on voit qu’il pense, c’est très instruit, ces jeunes gens de l’artillerie; il a un père, une mère, une famille, il aime probablement, il a tout au plus vingt-cinq ans, il pourrait être ton frère.

— Il l’est, dit Enjolras.

— Oui, reprit Combeferre, et le mien aussi. Eh bien, ne le tuons pas.

— Laisse-moi. Il faut ce qu’il faut.

Et une larme coula lentement sur la joue de marbre d’Enjolras.

En même temps il pressa la détente de sa carabine. L’éclair jaillit. L’artilleur tourna deux fois sur lui-même, les bras étendus devant lui et la tête levée comme pour aspirer l’air, puis se renversa le flanc sur la pièce et y resta sans mouvement. On voyait son dos du centre duquel sortait tout droit un flot de sang. La balle lui avait traversé la poitrine de part en part. Il était mort.

Il fallut l’emporter et le remplacer. C’étaient en effet quelques minutes de gagnées.

Chapitre IX

Emploi de ce vieux talent de braconnier et de ce coup de fusil infaillible qui a influé sur la condamnation 1796

Les avis se croisaient dans la barricade. Le tir de la pièce allait recommencer. On n'en avait pas pour un quart d'heure avec cette mitraille. Il était absolument nécessaire d'amortir les coups.

Enjolras jeta ce commandement:

— Il faut mettre là un matelas.

— On n'en a pas, dit Combeferre, les blessés sont dessus.

Jean Valjean, assis à l'écart sur une borne, à l'angle du cabaret, son fusil entre les jambes, n'avait jusqu'à cet instant pris part à rien de ce qui se passait. Il semblait ne pas entendre les combattants dire autour de lui: Voilà un fusil qui ne fait rien.

À l'ordre donné par Enjolras, il se leva.

On se souvient qu'à l'arrivée du rassemblement rue de la Chanvrerie, une vieille femme, prévoyant les balles, avait mis son matelas devant sa fenêtre. Cette fenêtre, fenêtre de grenier, était sur le toit d'une maison à six étages située un peu en dehors de la barricade. Le matelas, posé en travers, appuyé par le bas sur deux perches à sécher le linge, était soutenu en haut par deux cordes qui, de loin, semblaient deux ficelles et qui se rattachaient à des clous plantés dans les chambranles de la mansarde. On voyait ces deux cordes distinctement sur le ciel comme des cheveux.

— Quelqu'un peut-il me prêter une carabine à deux coups? dit Jean Valjean.

Enjolras, qui venait de recharger la sienne, la lui tendit.

Jean Valjean ajusta la mansarde et tira.

Une des deux cordes du matelas était coupée.

Le matelas ne pendait plus que par un fil.

Jean Valjean lâcha le second coup. La deuxième corde fouetta la vitre de la mansarde. Le matelas glissa entre les deux perches et tomba dans la rue.

La barricade applaudit.

Toutes les voix crièrent:

— Voilà un matelas.

— Oui, dit Combeferre, mais qui l'ira chercher?

Le matelas en effet était tombé en dehors de la barricade, entre les assiégés et les assiégeants. Or, la mort du sergent de canonniers ayant exaspéré la troupe, les soldats, depuis quelques instants, s'étaient couchés à plat ventre derrière la ligne de pavés qu'ils avaient élevée, et, pour suppléer au silence forcé de la pièce qui se taisait en attendant que son service fût réorganisé, ils avaient ouvert le feu contre la barricade. Les insurgés ne répondaient pas à cette mousqueterie, pour épargner les munitions. La fusillade se brisait à la barricade; mais la rue, qu'elle remplissait de balles, était terrible.

Jean Valjean sortit de la coupure, entra dans la rue, traversa l'orage de balles, alla au matelas, le ramassa, le chargea sur son dos, et revint dans la barricade.

Lui-même mit le matelas dans la coupure. Il l'y fixa contre le mur de façon que les artilleurs ne le vissent pas.

Cela fait, on attendit le coup de mitraille.

Il ne tarda pas.

Le canon vomit avec un rugissement son paquet de chevrotines. Mais il n'y eut pas de ricochet. La mitraille avorta sur le matelas. L'effet prévu était obtenu. La barricade était préservée.

— Citoyen, dit Enjolras à Jean Valjean, la République vous remercie.

Bossuet admirait et riait. Il s'écria:

— C'est immoral qu'un matelas ait tant de puissance. Triomphe de ce qui plie sur ce qui foudroie. Mais c'est égal, gloire au matelas qui annule un canon!

Chapitre X

Aurore

En ce moment-là, Cosette se réveillait.

Sa chambre était étroite, propre, discrète, avec une longue croisée au levant sur l’arrière-cour de la maison.

Cosette ne savait rien de ce qui se passait dans Paris. Elle n’était point là la veille et elle était déjà rentrée dans sa chambre quand Toussaint avait dit: Il paraît qu’il y a du train.

Cosette avait dormi peu d’heures, mais bien. Elle avait eu de doux rêves, ce qui tenait peut-être un peu à ce que son petit lit était très blanc. Quelqu’un qui était Marius lui était apparu dans de la lumière. Elle se réveilla avec du soleil dans les yeux, ce qui d’abord lui fit l’effet de la continuation du songe.

Sa première pensée sortant de ce rêve fut riante. Cosette se sentit toute rassurée. Elle traversait, comme Jean Valjean quelques heures auparavant, cette réaction de l’âme qui ne veut absolument pas du malheur. Elle se mit à espérer de toutes ses forces sans savoir pourquoi. Puis un serrement de cœur lui vint. — Voilà trois jours qu’elle n’avait vu Marius. Mais elle se dit qu’il devait avoir reçu sa lettre, qu’il savait où elle était, et qu’il avait tant d’esprit, et qu’il trouverait moyen d’arriver jusqu’à elle. — Et cela certainement aujourd’hui, et peut-être ce matin même. — Il faisait grand jour, mais le rayon de lumière était très horizontal, elle pensa qu’il était de très bonne heure; qu’il fallait se lever pourtant; pour recevoir Marius.

Elle sentait qu’elle ne pouvait vivre sans Marius, et que par conséquent cela suffisait, et que Marius viendrait. Aucune objection n’était recevable. Tout cela était certain. C’était déjà assez monstrueux d’avoir souffert trois jours. Marius absent trois jours, c’était horrible au bon Dieu. Maintenant, cette cruelle taquinerie d’en haut était une épreuve traversée. Marius allait arriver, et apporterait une bonne nouvelle. Ainsi est faite la jeunesse; elle essuie vite ses yeux; elle trouve la douleur inutile et ne l’accepte pas. La jeunesse est le sourire de l’avenir devant un inconnu qui est lui-même. Il lui est naturel d’être heureuse. Il semble que sa respiration soit faite d’espérance.

Du reste, Cosette ne pouvait parvenir à se rappeler ce que Marius lui avait dit au sujet de cette absence qui ne devait durer qu’un jour, et quelle explication il lui en avait donnée. Tout le monde a remarqué avec quelle adresse une monnaie qu’on laisse tomber à terre court se cacher, et quel art elle a de se rendre introuvable. Il y a des pensées qui nous jouent le même tour; elles se blottissent dans un coin de notre cerveau; c’est fini; elles sont perdues; impossible de remettre la mémoire dessus. Cosette se dépitait quelque peu du petit effort inutile que faisait son souvenir. Elle se disait que c’était bien mal à elle et bien coupable d’avoir oublié des paroles prononcées par Marius.

Elle sortit du lit et fit les deux ablutions de l’âme et du corps, sa prière et sa toilette.

On peut à la rigueur introduire le lecteur dans une chambre nuptiale, non dans une chambre virginale. Le vers l’oserait à peine, la prose ne le doit pas.

C’est l’intérieur d’une fleur encore close, c’est une blancheur dans l’ombre, c’est la cellule intime d’un lis fermé qui ne doit pas être regardé par l’homme tant qu’il n’a pas été regardé par le soleil. La femme en bouton est sacrée. Ce lit innocent qui se découvre, cette adorable demi-nudité qui a peur d’elle-même, ce pied blanc qui se réfugie dans une pantoufle, cette gorge qui se voile devant un miroir comme si ce miroir était une prunelle, cette chemise qui se hâte de remonter et de cacher l’épaule pour un meuble qui craque ou pour une voiture qui passe, ces cordons noués, ces agrafes accrochées, ces lacets tirés, ces tressaillements, ces petits frissons de froid et de pudeur, cet effarouchement exquis de tous les mouvements, cette inquiétude presque ailée là où rien n’est à craindre, les phases successives du vêtement aussi charmantes que les nuages de l’aurore, il ne sied point que tout cela soit raconté, et c’est déjà trop de l’indiquer.

L’œil de l’homme doit être plus religieux encore devant le lever d’une jeune fille que devant le lever d’une étoile. La possibilité d’atteindre doit tourner en augmentation de respect. Le duvet de la pêche, la cendre de la prune, le cristal radié de la neige, l’aile du papillon poudrée de plumes, sont des choses grossières auprès de cette chasteté qui ne sait pas même qu’elle est chaste. La jeune fille n’est qu’une lueur de rêve et n’est pas encore une statue. Son alcôve est cachée dans la partie sombre de l’idéal. L’indiscret toucher du regard brutalise cette vague pénombre. Ici, contempler, c’est profaner.

Nous ne montrerons donc rien de tout ce suave petit remue-ménage du réveil de Cosette.

Un conte d'orient dit que la rose avait été faite par Dieu blanche, mais qu'Adam l'ayant regardée au moment où elle s'entrouvrait, elle eut honte et devint rose. Nous sommes de ceux qui se sentent interdits devant les jeunes filles et les fleurs, les trouvant vénérables.

Cosette s'habilla bien vite, se peigna, se coiffa, ce qui était fort simple en ce temps-là où les femmes n'enflaient pas leurs boucles et leurs bandeaux avec des coussinets et des tonnelets et ne mettaient point de crinolines dans leurs cheveux. Puis elle ouvrit la fenêtre et promena ses yeux partout autour d'elle, espérant découvrir quelque peu de la rue, un angle de maison, un coin de pavés, et pouvoir guetter là Marius. Mais on ne voyait rien du dehors. L'arrière-cour était enveloppée de murs assez hauts, et n'avait pour échappée que quelques jardins. Cosette déclara ces jardins hideux; pour la première fois de sa vie elle trouva des fleurs laides. Le moindre bout de ruisseau du carrefour eût été bien mieux son affaire. Elle prit le parti de regarder le ciel, comme si elle pensait que Marius pouvait venir aussi de là.

Subitement, elle fondit en larmes. Non que ce fût mobilité d'âme; mais, des espérances coupées d'accablement, c'était sa situation. Elle sentit confusément on ne sait quoi d'horrible. Les choses passent dans l'air en effet. Elle se dit qu'elle n'était sûre de rien, que se perdre de vue, c'était se perdre; et l'idée que Marius pourrait bien lui revenir du ciel, lui apparut, non plus charmante, mais lugubre.

Puis, tels sont ces nuages, le calme lui revint, et l'espoir, et une sorte de sourire inconscient, mais confiant en Dieu.

Tout le monde était encore couché dans la maison. Un silence provincial régnait. Aucun volet n'était poussé. La loge du portier était fermée. Toussaint n'était pas levée, et Cosette pensa tout naturellement que son père dormait. Il fallait qu'elle eût bien souffert, et qu'elle souffrit bien encore, car elle se disait que son père avait été méchant; mais elle comptait sur Marius. L'éclipse d'une telle lumière était décidément impossible. Elle pria. Par instants elle entendait à une certaine distance des espèces de secousses sourdes, et elle disait: C'est singulier qu'on ouvre et qu'on ferme les portes cochères de si bonne heure. C'étaient les coups de canon qui battaient la barricade.

Il y avait, à quelques pieds au-dessous de la croisée de Cosette, dans la vieille corniche toute noire du mur, un nid de martinets; l'encorbellement de ce nid faisait un peu saillie au-delà de la corniche si bien que d’en haut on pouvait voir le dedans de ce petit paradis. La mère y était, ouvrant ses ailes en éventail sur sa couvée; le père voletait, s’en allait, puis revenait, rapportant dans son bec de la nourriture et des baisers. Le jour levant dorait cette chose heureuse, la grande loi Multipliez était là souriante et auguste, et ce doux mystère s’épanouissait dans la gloire du matin. Cosette, les cheveux dans le soleil, l’âme dans les chimères, éclairée par l’amour au dedans et par l’aurore au dehors, se pencha comme machinalement, et, sans presque oser s’avouer qu’elle pensait en même temps à Marius, se mit à regarder ces oiseaux, cette famille, ce mâle et cette femelle, cette mère et ces petits, avec le profond trouble qu’un nid donne à une vierge.

Chapitre XI

Le coup de fusil qui ne manque rien et qui ne tue personne

Le feu des assaillants continuait. La mousqueterie et la mitraille alternaient, sans grand ravage à la vérité. Le haut de la façade de Corinthe souffrait seul; la croisée du premier étage et les mansardes du toit, criblées de chevrotines et de biscayens, se déformaient lentement. Les combattants qui s’y étaient postés avaient dû s’effacer. Du reste, ceci est une tactique de l’attaque des barricades; tirailler longtemps, afin d’épuiser les munitions des insurgés, s’ils font la faute de répliquer. Quand on s’aperçoit, au ralentissement de leur feu, qu’ils n’ont plus ni balles ni poudre, on donne l’assaut. Enjolras n’était pas tombé dans ce piège; la barricade ne ripostait point.

À chaque feu de peloton, Gavroche se gonflait la joue avec sa langue, signe de haut dédain.

— C’est bon, disait-il, déchirez de la toile. Nous avons besoin de charpie.

Courfeyrac interpellait la mitraille sur son peu d’effet et disait au canon:

— Tu deviens diffus, mon bonhomme.

Dans la bataille on s’intrigue comme au bal. Il est probable que ce silence de la redoute commençait à inquiéter les assiégeants et à leur faire craindre quelque incident inattendu, et qu’ils sentirent le besoin de voir clair à travers ce tas de pavés et de savoir ce qui se passait derrière cette muraille impassible qui recevait les coups sans y répondre. Les insurgés aperçurent subitement un casque qui brillait au soleil sur un toit voisin. Un pompier était adossé à une haute cheminée et semblait là en sentinelle. Son regard plongeait à pic dans la barricade.

— Voilà un surveillant gênant, dit Enjolras.

Jean Valjean avait rendu la carabine d’Enjolras, mais il avait son fusil.

Sans dire un mot, il ajusta le pompier, et, une seconde après, le casque, frappé d’une balle, tombait bruyamment dans la rue. Le soldat effaré se hâta de disparaître.

Un deuxième observateur prit sa place. Celui-ci était un officier. Jean Valjean, qui avait rechargé son fusil, ajusta le nouveau venu, et envoya le casque de l’officier rejoindre le casque du soldat. L’officier n’insista pas, et se retira très vite. Cette fois l’avis fut compris. Personne ne reparut sur le toit; et l’on renonça à espionner la barricade.

— Pourquoi n’avez-vous pas tué l’homme? demanda Bossuet à Jean Valjean.

Jean Valjean ne répondit pas.

Chapitre XII

Le désordre partisan de l’ordre

Bossuet murmura à l’oreille de Combeferre:

— Il n’a pas répondu à ma question.

— C’est un homme qui fait de la bonté à coups de fusil, dit Combeferre.

Ceux qui ont gardé quelque souvenir de cette époque déjà lointaine savent que la garde nationale de la banlieue était vaillante contre les insurrections. Elle fut particulièrement acharnée et intrépide aux journées de juin 1832. Tel bon cabaretier de Pantin, des Vertus ou de la Cunette, dont l’émeute faisait chômer «l’établissement», devenait léonin en voyant sa salle de danse déserte, et se faisait tuer pour sauver l’ordre représenté par la guinguette. Dans ce temps à la fois bourgeois et héroïque, en présence des idées qui avaient leurs chevaliers, les intérêts avaient leurs paladins. Le prosaïsme du mobile n’ôtait rien à la bravoure du mouvement. La décroissance d’une pile d’écus faisait chanter à des banquiers la *Marseillaise*. On versait lyriquement son sang pour le comptoir; et l’on défendait avec un enthousiasme lacédémonien la boutique, cet immense diminutif de la patrie.

Au fond, disons-le, il n’y avait rien dans tout cela que de très sérieux. C’étaient les éléments sociaux qui entraient en lutte, en attendant le jour où ils entreront en équilibre.

Un autre signe de ce temps, c’était l’anarchie mêlée au gouvernementalisme (nom barbare du parti correct). On était pour l’ordre avec indiscipline. Le tambour battait inopinément, sur le commandement de tel colonel de la garde nationale, des rappels de caprice; tel capitaine allait au feu par inspiration; tel garde national se battait «d’idée», et pour son propre compte. Dans les minutes de crise, dans les «journées», on prenait conseil moins de ses chefs que de ses instincts. Il y avait dans l’armée de l’ordre de véritables guérilleros, les uns d’épée comme Fannicot, les autres de plume comme Henri Fonfrède.

La civilisation, malheureusement représentée à cette époque plutôt par une agrégation d’intérêts que par un groupe de principes, était ou se croyait en péril; elle poussait le cri d’alarme; chacun, se faisant centre, la défendait, la secourait et la protégeait, à sa tête; et le premier venu prenait sur lui de sauver la société.

Le zèle parfois allait jusqu'à l'extermination. Tel peloton de gardes nationaux se constituait de son autorité privée conseil de guerre, et jugeait et exécutait en cinq minutes un insurgé prisonnier. C'est une improvisation de cette sorte qui avait tué Jean Prouvaire. Féroce loi de Lynch, qu'aucun parti n'a le droit de reprocher aux autres, car elle est appliquée par la république en Amérique comme par la monarchie en Europe. Cette loi de Lynch se compliquait de méprises. Un jour d'émeute, un jeune poète, nommé Paul-Aimé Garnier, fut poursuivi place Royale, la bayonnette aux reins, et n'échappa qu'en se réfugiant sous la porte cochère du numéro 6. On criait: — *En voilà encore un de ces Saint-Simoniens!* et l'on voulait le tuer. Or, il avait sous le bras un volume des mémoires du duc de *Saint-Simon*. Un garde national avait lu sur ce livre le mot: Saint-Simon, et avait crié: À mort!

Le 6 juin 1832, une compagnie de gardes nationaux de la banlieue, commandée par le capitaine Fannicot, nommé plus haut, se fit, par fantaisie et bon plaisir, décimer rue de la Chanvrerie. Le fait, si singulier qu'il soit, a été constaté par l'instruction judiciaire ouverte à la suite de l'insurrection de 1832. Le capitaine Fannicot, bourgeois impatient et hardi, espèce de condottiere de l'ordre, de ceux que nous venons de caractériser, gouvernementaliste fanatique et insoumis, ne put résister à l'attrait de faire feu avant l'heure et à l'ambition de prendre la barricade à lui tout seul, c'est-à-dire avec sa compagnie. Exaspéré par l'apparition successive du drapeau rouge et du vieil habit qu'il prit pour le drapeau noir, il blâmait tout haut les généraux et les chefs de corps, lesquels tenaient conseil, ne jugeaient pas que le moment de l'assaut décisif fût venu, et laissaient, suivant une expression célèbre de l'un d'eux, «l'insurrection cuire dans son jus». Quant à lui, il trouvait la barricade mûre, et, comme ce qui est mûr doit tomber, il essaya.

Il commandait à des hommes résolus comme lui, «à des enragés», a dit un témoin. Sa compagnie, celle-là même qui avait fusillé le poète Jean Prouvaire, était la première du bataillon posté à l'angle de la rue. Au moment où l'on s'y attendait le moins, le capitaine lança ses hommes contre la barricade. Ce mouvement, exécuté avec plus de bonne volonté que de stratégie, coûta cher à la compagnie Fannicot. Avant qu'elle fût arrivée aux deux tiers de la rue, une décharge générale de la barricade l'accueillit.

Quatre, les plus audacieux, qui couraient en tête, furent foudroyés à bout portant au pied même de la redoute, et cette courageuse cohue de gardes nationaux, gens très braves, mais qui n'avaient point la ténacité militaire, dut se replier, après quelque hésitation, en laissant quinze cadavres sur le pavé. L'instant d'hésitation donna aux insurgés le temps de recharger les armes, et une seconde décharge, très meurtrière, atteignit la compagnie avant qu'elle eût pu regagner l'angle de la rue, son abri. Un moment, elle fut prise entre deux mitrailles, et elle reçut la volée de la pièce en batterie qui, n'ayant pas d'ordre, n'avait pas discontinué son feu. L'intrépide et imprudent Fannicot fut un des morts de cette mitraille. Il fut tué par le canon, c'est-à-dire par l'ordre.

Cette attaque, plus furieuse que sérieuse, irrita Enjolras.

— Les imbéciles! dit-il. Ils font tuer leurs hommes, et ils nous usent nos munitions, pour rien.

Enjolras parlait comme un vrai général d'émeute qu'il était. L'insurrection et la répression ne luttent point à armes égales. L'insurrection, promptement épuisable, n'a qu'un nombre de coups à tirer et qu'un nombre de combattants à dépenser. Une giberne vidée, un homme tué, ne se remplacent pas. La répression, ayant l'armée, ne compte pas les hommes, et, ayant Vincennes, ne compte pas les coups. La répression a autant de régiments que la barricade a d'hommes, et autant d'arsenaux que la barricade a de cartouchières. Aussi sont-ce là des luttes d'un contre cent, qui finissent toujours par l'écrasement des barricades; à moins que la révolution, surgissant brusquement, ne vienne jeter dans la balance son flamboyant glaive d'archange. Cela arrive. Alors tout se lève, les pavés entrent en bouillonnement, les redoutes populaires pullulent, Paris tressaille souverainement, le *quid divinum* se dégage, un 10 août est dans l'air, un 29 juillet est dans l'air, une prodigieuse lumière apparaît, la gueule béante de la force recule, et l'armée, ce lion, voit devant elle, debout et tranquille, ce prophète, la France.

Chapitre XIII

Lueurs qui passent

Dans le chaos de sentiments et de passions qui défendent une barricade, il y a de tout; il y a de la bravoure, de la jeunesse, du point d'honneur, de l'enthousiasme, de l'idéal, de la conviction, de l'acharnement de joueur, et surtout, des intermittences d'espoir.

Une de ces intermittences, un de ces vagues frémissements d'espérance traversa subitement, à l'instant le plus inattendu, la barricade de la Chanvrerie.

— Écoutez, s'écria brusquement Enjolras toujours aux aguets, il me semble que Paris s'éveille.

Il est certain que, dans la matinée du 6 juin, l'insurrection eut, pendant une heure ou deux, une certaine recrudescence. L'obstination du tocsin de Saint-Merry ranima quelques velléités. Rue du Poirier, rue des Gravilliers, des barricades s'ébauchèrent. Devant la porte Saint-Martin, un jeune homme, armé d'une carabine, attaqua seul un escadron de cavalerie. À découvert, en plein boulevard, il mit un genou à terre, épaula son arme, tira, tua le chef d'escadron, et se retourna en disant: *En voilà encore un qui ne nous fera plus de mal*. Il fut sabré. Rue Saint-Denis, une femme tirait sur la garde municipale de derrière une jalousie baissée. On voyait à chaque coup trembler les feuilles de la jalousie. Un enfant de quatorze ans fut arrêté rue de la Cossonnerie avec ses poches pleines de cartouches. Plusieurs postes furent attaqués. À l'entrée de la rue Bertin-Poirée, une fusillade très vive et tout à fait imprévue accueillit un régiment de cuirassiers, en tête duquel marchait le général Cavaignac de Baragne. Rue Planche-Mibray, on jeta du haut des toits sur la troupe de vieux tessons de vaisselle et des ustensiles de ménage; mauvais signe; et quand on rendit compte de ce fait au maréchal Soult, le vieux lieutenant de Napoléon devint rêveur, se rappelant le mot de Suchet à Saragosse: *Nous sommes perdus quand les vieilles femmes nous vident leur pot de chambre sur la tête*.

Ces Symptômes généraux qui se manifestaient au moment où l'on croyait l'émeute localisée, cette fièvre de colère qui reprenait le dessus, ces flammèches qui volaient çà et là au-dessus de ces masses profondes de combustible qu'on nomme les faubourgs de Paris, tout cet ensemble inquiéta les chefs militaires. On se hâta d'éteindre ces commencements d'incendie. On retarda, jusqu'à ce que ces pétillements fussent étouffés, l'attaque des barricades Maubuée, de la Chanvrerie et de Saint-Merry, afin de n'avoir plus affaire qu'à elles, et de pouvoir tout finir d'un coup. Des colonnes furent lancées dans les rues en fermentation, balayant les grandes, sondant les petites, à droite, à gauche, tantôt avec précaution et lentement, tantôt au pas de charge. La troupe enfonçait les portes des maisons d'où l'on avait tiré; en même temps des manœuvres de cavalerie dispersaient les groupes des boulevards. Cette répression ne se fit pas sans rumeur et sans ce fracas tumultueux propre aux chocs d'armée et de peuple. C'était là ce qu'Enjolras, dans les intervalles de la canonnade et de la mousqueterie, saisissait. En outre, il avait vu au bout de la rue passer des blessés sur des civières, et il disait à Courfeyrac: — Ces blessés-là ne viennent pas de chez nous.

L'espoir dura peu; la lueur s'éclipsa vite. En moins d'une demi-heure, ce qui était dans l'air s'évanouit, ce fut comme un éclair sans foudre, et les insurgés sentirent retomber sur eux cette espèce de chape de plomb que l'indifférence du peuple jette sur les obstinés abandonnés.

Le mouvement général qui semblait s'être vaguement dessiné avait avorté; et l'attention du ministre de la guerre et la stratégie des généraux pouvaient se concentrer maintenant sur les trois ou quatre barricades restées debout.

Le soleil montait sur l'horizon.

Un insurgé interpella Enjolras:

— On a faim ici. Est-ce que vraiment nous allons mourir comme ça sans manger?

Enjolras, toujours accoudé à son créneau, sans quitter des yeux l'extrémité de la rue, fit un signe de tête affirmatif.

Chapitre XIV

Où on lira le nom de la maîtresse d’Enjolras

Courfeyrac, assis sur un pavé à côté d’Enjolras, continuait d’insulter le canon, et chaque fois que passait, avec son bruit monstrueux, cette sombre nuée de projectiles qu’on appelle la mitraille, il l’accueillait par une bouffée d’ironie.

— Tu t’époumones, mon pauvre vieux brutal, tu me fais de la peine, tu perds ton vacarme. Ce n’est pas du tonnerre, ça. C’est de la toux.

Et l’on riait autour de lui.

Courfeyrac et Bossuet, dont la vaillante belle humeur croissait avec le péril, remplaçaient, comme madame Scarron, la nourriture par la plaisanterie, et, puisque le vin manquait, versaient à tous de la gaîté.

— J’admire Enjolras, disait Bossuet. Sa témérité impassible m’émerveille. Il vit seul, ce qui le rend peut-être un peu triste; Enjolras se plaint de sa grandeur qui l’attache au veuvage. Nous autres, nous avons tous plus ou moins des maîtresses qui nous rendent fous, c’est-à-dire braves. Quand on est amoureux comme un tigre, c’est bien le moins qu’on se batte comme un lion. C’est une façon de nous venger des traits que nous font mesdames nos grisettes. Roland se fait tuer pour faire bisquer Angélique. Tous nos héroïsmes viennent de nos femmes. Un homme sans femme, c’est un pistolet sans chien; c’est la femme qui fait partir l’homme. Eh bien, Enjolras n’a pas de femme. Il n’est pas amoureux, et il trouve le moyen d’être intrépide. C’est une chose inouïe qu’on puisse être froid comme la glace et hardi comme le feu.

Enjolras ne paraissait pas écouter, mais quelqu’un qui eût été près de lui l’eût entendu murmurer à demi-voix: *Patria*.

Bossuet riait encore quand Courfeyrac s’écria:

— Du nouveau!

Et, prenant une voix d’huissier qui annonce, il ajouta:

— Je m’appelle Pièce de Huit.

En effet, un nouveau personnage venait d’entrer en scène. C’était une deuxième bouche à feu.

Les artilleurs firent rapidement la manœuvre de force, et mirent cette seconde pièce en batterie près de la première.

Ceci ébauchait le dénoûment.

Quelques instants après, les deux pièces, vivement servies, tiraient de front contre la redoute; les feux de peloton de la ligne et de la banlieue soutenaient l’artillerie.

On entendait une autre canonnade à quelque distance. En même temps que deux pièces s’acharnaient sur la redoute de la rue de la Chanvrerie, deux autres bouches à feu, braquées, l’une rue Saint-Denis, l’autre rue Aubry-le-Boucher, criblaient la barricade Saint-Merry. Les quatre canons se faisaient lugubrement écho.

Les aboiements des sombres chiens de la guerre se répondaient.

Des deux pièces qui battaient maintenant la barricade de la rue de la Chanvrerie, l’une tirait à mitraille, l’autre à boulet.

La pièce qui tirait à boulet était pointée un peu haut et le tir était calculé de façon que le boulet frappait le bord extrême de l’arête supérieure de la barricade, l’écrêtait, et émiettait les pavés sur les insurgés en éclats de mitraille.

Ce procédé de tir avait pour but d’écarter les combattants du sommet de la redoute, et de les contraindre à se pelotonner dans l’intérieur; c’est-à-dire que cela annonçait l’assaut.

Une fois les combattants chassés du haut de la barricade par le boulet et des fenêtres du cabaret par la mitraille, les colonnes d’attaque pourraient s’aventurer dans la rue sans être visées, peut-être même sans être aperçues, escalader brusquement la redoute, comme la veille au soir, et, qui sait? la prendre par surprise.

— Il faut absolument diminuer l’incommodité de ces pièces, dit Enjolras, et il cria: «Feu sur les artilleurs!» Tous étaient prêts. La barricade, qui se taisait depuis si longtemps, fit feu éperdument, sept ou huit décharges se succédèrent avec une sorte de rage et de joie, la rue s’emplit d’une fumée aveuglante, et, au bout de quelques minutes, à travers cette brume toute rayée de flamme, on put distinguer confusément les deux tiers des ailleurs couchés sous les roues des canons. Ceux qui étaient restés debout continuaient de servir les pièces avec une tranquillité sévère; mais le feu était ralenti.

— Voilà qui va bien, dit Bossuet à Enjolras. Succès.

Enjolras hocha la tête et répondit:

— Encore un quart d’heure de ce succès, et il n’y aura plus dix cartouches dans la barricade.

Il paraît que Gavroche entendit ce mot.

Chapitre XV

Gavroche dehors

Courfeyrac tout à coup aperçut quelqu’un au bas de la barricade, dehors, dans la rue, sous les balles.

Gavroche avait pris un panier à bouteilles, dans le cabaret, était sorti par la coupure, et était paisiblement occupé à vider dans son panier les gibernes pleines de cartouches des gardes nationaux tués sur le talus de la redoute.

— Qu’est-ce que tu fais là? dit Courfeyrac.

Gavroche leva le nez:

— Citoyen, j’emplis mon panier.

— Tu ne vois donc pas la mitraille?

Gavroche répondit:

— Eh bien, il pleut. Après?

Courfeyrac cria:

— Rentre!

— Tout à l’heure, fit Gavroche.

Et, d’un bond, il s’enfonça dans la rue.

On se souvient que la compagnie Fannicot, en se retirant, avait laissé derrière elle une traînée de cadavres.

Une vingtaine de morts gisaient çà et là dans toute la longueur de la rue sur le pavé. Une vingtaine de gibernes pour Gavroche. Une provision de cartouches pour la barricade.

La fumée était dans la rue comme un brouillard. Quiconque a vu un nuage tombé dans une gorge de montagnes entre deux escarpements à pic, peut se figurer cette fumée resserrée et comme épaissie par deux sombres lignes de hautes maisons. Elle montait lentement et se renouvelait sans cesse; de là un obscurcissement graduel qui blêmissait même le plein jour. C’est à peine si, d’un bout à l’autre de la rue, pourtant fort courte, les combattants s’apercevaient.

Cet obscurcissement, probablement voulu et calculé par les chefs qui devaient diriger l’assaut de la barricade, fut utile à Gavroche.

Sous les plis de ce voile de fumée, et grâce à sa petitesse, il put s’avancer assez loin dans la rue sans être vu. Il dévalisa les sept ou huit premières gibernes sans grand danger.

Il rampait à plat ventre, galopait à quatre pattes, prenait son panier aux dents, se tordait, glissait, ondulait, serpentait d’un mort à l’autre, et vidait la giberne ou la cartouchière comme un singe ouvre une noix.

De la barricade, dont il était encore assez près, on n’osait lui crier de revenir, de peur d’appeler l’attention sur lui.

Sur un cadavre, qui était un caporal, il trouva une poire à poudre.

— Pour la soif, dit-il, en la mettant dans sa poche. À force d’aller en avant, il parvint au point où le brouillard de la fusillade devenait transparent.

Si bien que les tirailleurs de la ligne rangés et à l’affût derrière leur levée de pavés, et les tirailleurs de la banlieue massés à l’angle de la rue, se montrèrent soudainement quelque chose qui remuait dans la fumée.

Au moment où Gavroche débarrassait de ses cartouches un sergent gisant près d’une borne, une balle frappa le cadavre.

— Fichtre! fit Gavroche. Voilà qu’on me tue mes morts.

Une deuxième balle fit étinceler le pavé à côté de lui. Une troisième renversa son panier.

Gavroche regarda, et vit que cela venait de la banlieue.

Il se dressa tout droit, debout, les cheveux au vent, les mains sur les hanches, l’œil fixé sur les gardes nationaux qui tiraient, et il chanta:

On est laid à Nanterre,
C’est la faute à Voltaire,
Et bête à Palaiseau,
C’est la faute à Rousseau.

Puis il ramassa son panier, y remit, sans en perdre une seule, les cartouches qui en étaient tombées, et, avançant vers la fusillade, alla dépouiller une autre giberne. Là une quatrième balle le manqua encore. Gavroche chanta:

Je ne suis pas notaire,
C’est la faute à Voltaire,
Je suis petit oiseau,
C’est la faute à Rousseau.

Une cinquième balle ne réussit qu’à tirer de lui un troisième couplet:

Joie est mon caractère,
C’est la faute à Voltaire,
Misère est mon trousseau,
C’est la faute à Rousseau.

Cela continua ainsi quelque temps.

Le spectacle était épouvantable et charmant. Gavroche, fusillé, taquinait la fusillade. Il avait l’air de s’amuser beaucoup. C’était le moineau becquetant les chasseurs. Il répondait à chaque décharge par un couplet. On le visait sans cesse, on le manquait toujours. Les gardes nationaux et les soldats riaient en l’ajustant. Il se couchait, puis se redressait, s’effaçait dans un coin de porte, puis bondissait, disparaissait, reparaissait, se sauvait, revenait, ripostait à la mitraille par des pieds de nez, et cependant pillait les cartouches, vidait les gibernes et remplissait son panier. Les insurgés, haletants d’anxiété, le suivaient des yeux. La barricade tremblait; lui, il chantait. Ce n’était pas un enfant, ce n’était pas un homme; c’était un étrange gamin fée. On eût dit le nain invulnérable de la mêlée. Les balles couraient après lui, il était plus leste qu’elles. Il jouait on ne sait quel effrayant jeu de cache-cache avec la mort; chaque fois que la face camarde du spectre s’approchait, le gamin lui donnait une pichenette.

Une balle pourtant, mieux ajustée ou plus traître que les autres, finit par atteindre l’enfant feu follet. On vit Gavroche chanceler, puis il s’affaissa. Toute la barricade poussa un cri; mais il y avait de l’Antée dans ce pygmée; pour le gamin toucher le pavé, c’est comme pour le géant toucher la terre; Gavroche n’était tombé que pour se redresser; il resta assis sur son séant, un long filet de sang rayait son visage, il éleva ses deux bras en l’air, regarda du côté d’où était venu le coup, et se mit à chanter.

Je suis tombé par terre,
C’est la faute à Voltaire,
Le nez dans le ruisseau,
C’est la faute à....

Il n’acheva point. Une seconde balle du même tireur l’arrêta court. Cette fois il s’abattit la face contre le pavé, et ne remua plus. Cette petite grande âme venait de s’envoler.

Chapitre XVI

Comment de frère on devient père

Il y avait en ce moment-là même dans le jardin du Luxembourg — car le regard du drame doit être présent partout, — deux enfants qui se tenaient par la main. L'un pouvait avoir sept ans, l'autre cinq. La pluie les ayant mouillés, ils marchaient dans les allées du côté du soleil; l'aîné conduisait le petit; ils étaient en haillons et pâles; ils avaient un air d'oiseaux fauves. Le plus petit disait: J'ai bien faim.

L'aîné, déjà un peu protecteur, conduisait son frère de la main gauche et avait une baguette dans sa main droite.

Ils étaient seuls dans le jardin. Le jardin était désert, les grilles étaient fermées par mesure de police à cause de l'insurrection. Les troupes qui y avaient bivouaqué en étaient sorties pour les besoins du combat.

Comment ces enfants étaient-ils là? Peut-être s'étaient-ils évadés de quelque corps de garde entrebâillé; peut-être aux environs, à la barrière d'Enfer, ou sur l'esplanade de l'Observatoire, ou dans le carrefour voisin dominé par le fronton où on lit: *invenerunt parvulum pannis involutum,* y avait-il quelque baraque de saltimbanques dont ils s'étaient enfuis; peut-être avaient-ils, la veille au soir, trompé l'œil des inspecteurs du jardin à l'heure de la clôture, et avaient-ils passé la nuit dans quelqu'une de ces guérites où on lit les journaux? Le fait est qu'ils étaient errants et qu'ils semblaient libres. Être errant et sembler libre, c'est être perdu. Ces pauvres petits étaient perdus en effet.

Ces deux enfants étaient ceux-là mêmes dont Gavroche avait été en peine, et que le lecteur se rappelle. Enfants des Thénardier, en location chez la Magnon, attribués à M. Gillenormand, et maintenant feuilles tombées de toutes ces branches sans racines, et roulées sur la terre par le vent.

Leurs vêtements, propres du temps de la Magnon et qui lui servaient de prospectus vis-à-vis de M. Gillenormand, étaient devenus guenilles.

Ces êtres appartenaient désormais à la statistique des «Enfants Abandonnés» que la police constate, ramasse, égare et retrouve sur le pavé de Paris.

Il fallait le trouble d'un tel jour pour que ces petits misérables fussent dans ce jardin. Si les surveillants les eussent aperçus, ils eussent chassé ces haillons. Les petits pauvres n’entrent pas dans les jardins publics: pourtant on devrait songer que, comme enfants, ils ont droit aux fleurs.

Ceux-ci étaient là, grâce aux grilles fermées. Ils étaient en contravention. Ils s’étaient glissés dans le jardin, et ils y étaient restés. Les grilles fermées ne donnent pas congé aux inspecteurs, la surveillance est censée continuer, mais elle s’amollit et se repose; et les inspecteurs, émus eux aussi par l’anxiété publique et plus occupés du dehors que du dedans, ne regardaient plus le jardin, et n’avaient pas vu les deux délinquants.

Il avait plu la veille, et même un peu le matin. Mais en juin les ondées ne comptent pas. C’est à peine si l’on s’aperçoit, une heure après un orage, que cette belle journée blonde a pleuré. La terre en été est aussi vite sèche que la joue d’un enfant.

À cet instant du solstice, la lumière du plein midi est, pour ainsi dire, poignante. Elle prend tout. Elle s’applique et se superpose à la terre avec une sorte de succion. On dirait que le soleil a soif. Une averse est un verre d’eau; une pluie est tout de suite bue. Le matin tout ruisselait, l’après-midi tout poudroie.

Rien n’est admirable comme une verdure débarbouillée par la pluie et essuyée par le rayon; c’est de la fraîcheur chaude. Les jardins et les prairies, ayant de l’eau dans leurs racines et du soleil dans leurs fleurs, deviennent des cassolettes d’encens et fument de tous leurs parfums à la fois. Tout rit, chante et s’offre. On se sent doucement ivre. Le printemps est un paradis provisoire; le soleil aide à faire patienter l’homme.

Il y a des êtres qui n’en demandent pas davantage; vivants qui, ayant l’azur du ciel, disent: c’est assez! songeurs absorbés dans le prodige, puisant dans l’idolâtrie de la nature l’indifférence du bien et du mal, contemplateurs du cosmos radieusement distraits de l’homme, qui ne comprennent pas qu’on s’occupe de la faim de ceux-ci, de la soif de ceux-là, de la nudité du pauvre en hiver, de la courbure lymphatique d’une petite épine dorsale, du grabat, du grenier, du cachot, et des haillons des jeunes filles grelottantes, quand on peut rêver sous les arbres; esprits paisibles et terribles, impitoyablement satisfaits. Chose étrange, l’infini leur suffît. Ce grand besoin de l’homme, le fini, qui admet l’embrassement, ils l’ignorent. Le fini, qui admet le progrès, ce travail sublime, ils n’y songent pas. L’indéfini, qui naît de la combinaison humaine et divine de l’infini et du fini, leur échappe. Pourvu qu’ils soient face à face avec l’immensité, ils sourient. Jamais la joie, toujours l’extase. S’abîmer, voilà leur vie. L’histoire de l’humanité pour eux n’est qu’un plan parcellaire; Tout n’y est pas; le vrai Tout reste en dehors; à quoi bon s’occuper de ce détail, l’homme? L’homme souffre, c’est possible; mais regardez donc Aldebaran qui se lève! La mère n’a plus de lait, le nouveau-né se meurt, je n’en sais rien, mais considérez donc cette rosace merveilleuse que fait une rondelle de l’aubier du sapin examinée au microscope! comparez-moi la plus belle malines à cela! Ces penseurs oublient d’aimer. Le zodiaque réussit sur eux au point de les empêcher de voir l’enfant qui pleure. Dieu leur éclipse l’âme. C’est là une famille d’esprits, à la fois petits et grands. Horace en était, Goethe en était, La Fontaine peut-être; magnifiques égoïstes de l’infini, spectateurs tranquilles de la douleur, qui ne voient pas Néron s’il fait beau, auxquels le soleil cache le bûcher, qui regarderaient guillotiner en y cherchant un effet de lumière, qui n’entendent ni le cri, ni le sanglot, ni le râle, ni le tocsin, pour qui tout est bien puisqu’il y a le mois de mai, qui, tant qu’il y aura des nuages de pourpre et d’or au-dessus de leur tête, se déclarent contents, et qui sont déterminés à être heureux jusqu’à épuisement du rayonnement des astres et du chant des oiseaux.

Ce sont de radieux ténébreux. Ils ne se doutent pas qu’ils sont à plaindre. Certes, ils le sont. Qui ne pleure pas ne voit pas. Il faut les admirer et les plaindre, comme on plaindrait et comme on admirerait un être à la fois nuit et jour qui n’aurait pas d’yeux sous les sourcils et qui aurait un astre au milieu du front.

L’indifférence de ces penseurs, c’est là, selon quelques-uns, une philosophie supérieure. Soit; mais dans cette supériorité il y a de l’infirmité. On peut être immortel et boiteux; témoin Vulcain. On peut être plus qu’homme et moins qu’homme. L’incomplet immense est dans la nature. Qui sait si le soleil n’est pas un aveugle?

Mais alors, quoi! à qui se fier? *Solem quis dicere falsum audeat*? Ainsi de certains génies eux-mêmes, de certains Très-Hauts humains, des hommes astres, pourraient se tromper? Ce qui est là-haut, au faîte, au sommet, au zénith, ce qui envoie sur la terre tant de clarté, verrait peu, verrait mal, ne verrait pas? Cela n’est-il pas désespérant? Non. Mais qu’y a-t-il donc au-dessus du soleil? Le dieu.

Le 6 juin 1832, vers onze heures du matin, le Luxembourg, solitaire et dépeuplé, était charmant. Les quinconces et les parterres s’envoyaient dans la lumière des baumes et des éblouissements. Les branches, folles à la clarté de midi, semblaient chercher à s’embrasser. Il y avait dans les sycomores un tintamarre de fauvettes, les passereaux triomphaient, les pique-bois grimpaient le long des marronniers en donnant de petits coups de bec dans les trous de l'écorce. Les plates-bandes acceptaient la royauté légitime des lys; le plus auguste des parfums, c'est celui qui sort de la blancheur. On respirait l'odeur poivrée des œillets. Les vieilles corneilles de Marie de Médicis étaient amoureuses dans les grands arbres. Le soleil dorait, empourprait et allumait les tulipes, qui ne sont autre chose que toutes les variétés de la flamme, faites fleurs. Tout autour des bancs de tulipes tourbillonnaient les abeilles, étincelles de ces fleurs flammes. Tout était grâce et gaîté, même la pluie prochaine; cette récidive, dont les muguets et les chèvrefeuilles devaient profiter, n'avait rien d'inquiétant; les hirondelles faisaient la charmante menace de voler bas. Qui était là aspirait du bonheur; la vie sentait bon; toute cette nature exhalait la candeur, le secours, l'assistance, la paternité, la caresse, l'aurore. Les pensées qui tombaient du ciel étaient douces comme une petite main d'enfant qu'on baise.

Les statues sous les arbres, nues et blanches, avaient des robes d'ombre trouées de lumière; ces déesses étaient toutes déguenillées de soleil; il leur pendait des rayons de tous les côtés. Autour du grand bassin, la terre était déjà séchée au point d'être presque brûlée. Il faisait assez de vent pour soulever çà et là de petites émeutes de poussière. Quelques feuilles jaunes, restées du dernier automne, se poursuivaient joyeusement, et semblaient gaminer.

L'abondance de la clarté avait on ne sait quoi de rassurant. Vie, sève, chaleur, effluves, débordaient; on sentait sous la création l'énormité de la source; dans tous ces souffles pénétrés d'amour, dans ce va-et-vient de réverbérations et de reflets, dans cette prodigieuse dépense de rayons, dans ce versement indéfini d'or fluide, on sentait la prodigalité de l'inépuisable; et, derrière cette splendeur comme derrière un rideau de flamme, on entrevoyait Dieu, ce millionnaire d'étoiles.

Grâce au sable, il n'y avait pas une tache de boue; grâce à la pluie, il n'y avait pas un grain de cendre. Les bouquets venaient de se laver; tous les velours, tous les satins, tous les vernis, tous les ors, qui sortent de la terre sous forme de fleurs, étaient irréprochables. Cette magnificence était propre. Le grand silence de la nature heureuse emplissait le jardin. Silence céleste compatible avec mille musiques, roucoulements de nids, bourdonnements d'essaims, palpitations du vent. Toute l'harmonie de la saison s'accomplissait dans un gracieux ensemble; les entrées et les sorties du printemps avaient lieu dans l’ordre voulu; les lilas finissaient, les jasmins commençaient; quelques fleurs étaient attardées, quelques insectes en avance; l’avant-garde des papillons rouges de juin fraternisait avec l’arrière-garde des papillons blancs de mai. Les platanes faisaient peau neuve. La brise creusait des ondulations dans l’énormité magnifique des marronniers. C’était splendide. Un vétéran de la caserne voisine qui regardait à travers la grille disait: Voilà le printemps au port d’armes et en grande tenue.

Toute la nature déjeunait; la création était à table; c’était l’heure; la grande nappe bleue était mise au ciel et la grande nappe verte sur la terre; le soleil éclairait à giorno. Dieu servait le repas universel. Chaque être avait sa pâture ou sa pâtée. Le ramier trouvait du chènevis, le pinson trouvait du millet, le chardonneret trouvait du mouron, le rouge-gorge trouvait des vers, l’abeille trouvait des fleurs, la mouche trouvait des infusoires, le verdier trouvait des mouches. On se mangeait bien un peu les uns les autres, ce qui est le mystère du mal mêlé au bien; mais pas une bête n’avait l’estomac vide.

Les deux petits abandonnés étaient parvenus près du grand bassin, et, un peu troublés par toute cette lumière, ils tâchaient de se cacher, instinct du pauvre et du faible devant la magnificence, même impersonnelle; et ils se tenaient derrière la baraque des cygnes.

Çà et là, par intervalles, quand le vent donnait, on entendait confusément des cris, une rumeur, des espèces de râles tumultueux qui étaient des fusillades, et des frappements sourds qui étaient des coups de canon. Il y avait de la fumée au-dessus des toits du côté des halles. Une cloche, qui avait l’air d’appeler, sonnait au loin.

Ces enfants ne semblaient pas percevoir ces bruits. Le petit répétait de temps en temps à demi-voix: J’ai faim.

Presque au même instant que les deux enfants, un autre couple s’approchait du grand bassin. C’était un bonhomme de cinquante ans qui menait par la main un bonhomme de six ans. Sans doute le père avec son fils. Le bonhomme de six ans tenait une grosse brioche.

À cette époque, de certaines maisons riveraines, rue Madame et rue d’Enfer, avaient une clef du Luxembourg dont jouissaient les locataires quand les grilles étaient fermées, tolérance supprimée depuis. Ce père et ce fils sortaient sans doute d’une de ces maisons-là.

Les deux petits pauvres regardèrent venir ce «monsieur» et se cachèrent un peu plus.

Celui-ci était un bourgeois. Le même peut-être qu'un jour Marius, à travers sa fièvre d'amour, avait entendu, près de ce même grand bassin, conseillant à son fils «d'éviter les excès». Il avait l'air affable et altier, et une bouche qui, ne se fermant pas, souriait toujours. Ce sourire mécanique, produit par trop de mâchoire et trop peu de peau, montre les dents plutôt que l'âme. L'enfant, avec sa brioche mordue qu'il n'achevait pas, semblait gavé. L'enfant était vêtu en garde national à cause de l'émeute, et le père était resté habillé en bourgeois à cause de la prudence.

Le père et le fils s'étaient arrêtés près du bassin où s'ébattaient les deux cygnes. Ce bourgeois paraissait avoir pour les cygnes une admiration spéciale. Il leur ressemblait en ce sens qu'il marchait comme eux.

Pour l'instant les cygnes nageaient, ce qui est leur talent principal, et ils étaient superbes.

Si les deux petits pauvres eussent écouté et eussent été d'âge à comprendre, ils eussent pu recueillir les paroles d'un homme grave. Le père disait au fils:

— Le sage vit content de peu. Regarde-moi, mon fils. Je n'aime pas le faste. Jamais on ne me voit avec des habits chamarrés d'or et de pierreries; je laisse ce faux éclat aux âmes mal organisées.

Ici les cris profonds qui venaient du côté des halles éclatèrent avec un redoublement de cloche et de rumeur.

— Qu'est-ce que c'est que cela? demanda l'enfant.

Le père répondit:

— Ce sont des saturnales.

Tout à coup, il aperçut les deux petits déguenillés, immobiles derrière la maisonnette verte des cygnes.

— Voilà le commencement, dit-il.

Et après un silence il ajouta:

— L'anarchie entre dans ce jardin.

Cependant le fils mordit la brioche, la recracha, et brusquement se mit à pleurer.

— Pourquoi pleures-tu? demanda le père.

— Je n'ai plus faim, dit l'enfant.

Le sourire du père s'accentua.

— On n'a pas besoin de faim pour manger un gâteau.

— Mon gâteau m'ennuie. Il est rassis.

— Tu n'en veux plus?

— Non.

Le père lui montra les cygnes.

— Jette-le à ces palmipèdes.

L’enfant hésita. On ne veut plus de son gâteau; ce n’est pas une raison pour le donner.

Le père poursuivit:

— Sois humain. Il faut avoir pitié des animaux.

Et, prenant à son fils le gâteau, il le jeta dans le bassin.

Le gâteau tomba assez près du bord.

Les cygnes étaient loin, au centre du bassin, et occupés à quelque proie. Ils n’avaient vu ni le bourgeois, ni la brioche.

Le bourgeois, sentant que le gâteau risquait de se perdre, et ému de ce naufrage inutile, se livra à une agitation télégraphique qui finit par attirer l’attention des cygnes.

Ils aperçurent quelque chose qui surnageait, virèrent de bord comme des navires qu’ils sont, et se dirigèrent vers la brioche lentement, avec la majesté béate qui convient à des bêtes blanches.

— Les cygnes comprennent les signes, dit le bourgeois, heureux d’avoir de l’esprit.

En ce moment le tumulte lointain de la ville eut encore un grossissement subit. Cette fois, ce fut sinistre. Il y a des bouffées de vent qui parlent plus distinctement que d’autres. Celle qui soufflait en cet instant-là apporta nettement des roulements de tambour, des clameurs, des feux de peloton, et les répliques lugubres du tocsin et du canon. Ceci coïncida avec un nuage noir qui cacha brusquement le soleil.

Les cygnes n’étaient pas encore arrivés à la brioche.

— Rentrons, dit le père, on attaque les Tuileries. Il ressaisit la main de son fils. Puis il continua:

— Des Tuileries au Luxembourg, il n’y a que la distance qui sépare la royauté de la pairie; ce n’est pas loin. Les coups de fusil vont pleuvoir.

Il regarda le nuage.

— Et peut-être aussi la pluie elle-même va pleuvoir; le ciel s’en mêle; la branche cadette est condamnée. Rentrons vite.

— Je voudrais voir les cygnes manger la brioche, dit l’enfant.

Le père répondit:

— Ce serait une imprudence.

Et il emmena son petit bourgeois.

Le fils, regrettant les cygnes, tourna la tête vers le bassin jusqu’à ce qu’un coude des quinconces le lui eût caché.

Cependant, en même temps que les cygnes, les deux petits errants s’étaient approchés de la brioche. Elle flottait sur l’eau. Le plus petit regardait le gâteau, le plus grand regardait le bourgeois qui s’en allait.

Le père et le fils entrèrent dans le labyrinthe d’allées qui mène au grand escalier du massif d’arbres du côté de la rue Madame.

Dès qu’ils ne furent plus en vue, l’aîné se coucha vivement à plat ventre sur le rebord arrondi du bassin, et, s’y cramponnant de la main gauche, penché sur l’eau, presque prêt à y tomber, étendit avec sa main droite sa baguette vers le gâteau. Les cygnes, voyant l’ennemi, se hâtèrent, et en se hâtant firent un effet de poitrail utile au petit pêcheur; l’eau devant les cygnes reflua, et l’une de ces molles ondulations concentriques poussa doucement la brioche vers la baguette de l’enfant. Comme les cygnes arrivaient, la baguette toucha le gâteau. L’enfant donna un coup vif, ramena la brioche, effraya les cygnes, saisit le gâteau, et se redressa. Le gâteau était mouillé; mais ils avaient faim et soif. L’aîné fit deux parts de la brioche, une grosse et une petite, prit la petite pour lui, donna la grosse à son petit frère, et lui dit:

— Colle-toi ça dans le fusil.

Chapitre XVII

Mortuus pater filium moriturum expectat

Marius s’était élancé hors de la barricade. Combeferre l’avait suivi. Mais il était trop tard. Gavroche était mort. Combeferre rapporta le panier de cartouches Marius rapporta l’enfant.

Hélas! pensait-il, ce que le père avait fait pour son père, il le rendait au fils; seulement Thénardier avait rapporté son père vivant; lui, il rapportait l’enfant mort.

Quand Marius rentra dans la redoute avec Gavroche dans ses bras, il avait, comme l’enfant, le visage inondé de sang.

À l’instant où il s’était baissé pour ramasser Gavroche, une balle lui avait effleuré le crâne; il ne s’en était pas aperçu.

Courfeyrac défit sa cravate et en banda le front de Marius.

On déposa Gavroche sur la même table que Mabeuf, et l’on étendit sur les deux corps le châle noir. Il y en eut assez pour le vieillard et pour l’enfant.

Combeferre distribua les cartouches du panier qu’il avait rapporté.

Cela donnait à chaque homme quinze coups à tirer.

Jean Valjean était toujours à la même place, immobile sur sa borne. Quand Combeferre lui présenta ses quinze cartouches, il secoua la tête.

— Voilà un rare excentrique, dit Combeferre bas à Enjolras. Il trouve moyen de ne pas se battre dans cette barricade.

— Ce qui ne l’empêche pas de la défendre, répondit Enjolras.

— L’héroïsme a ses originaux, reprit Combeferre.

Et Courfeyrac, qui avait entendu, ajouta:

— C’est un autre genre que le père Mabeuf.

Chose qu’il faut noter, le feu qui battait la barricade en troublait à peine l’intérieur. Ceux qui n’ont jamais traversé le tourbillon de ces sortes de guerre, ne peuvent se faire aucune idée des singuliers moments de tranquillité mêlés à ces convulsions. On va et vient, on cause, on plaisante, on flâne. Quelqu’un que nous connaissons a entendu un combattant lui dire au milieu de la mitraille: *Nous sommes ici comme à un déjeuner de garçons.* La redoute de la rue de la Chanvrerie, nous le répétons, semblait au dedans fort calme. Toutes les péripéties et toutes les phases avaient été ou allaient être épuisées. La position, de critique, était devenue menaçante, et, de menaçante, allait probablement devenir désespérée. À mesure que la situation s’assombrissait, la lueur héroïque empourprait de plus en plus la barricade. Enjolras, grave, la dominait, dans l’attitude d’un jeune Spartiate dévouant son glaive nu au sombre génie Epidotas.

Combeferre, le tablier sur le ventre, pansait les blessés; Bossuet et Feuilly faisaient des cartouches avec la poire à poudre cueillie par Gavroche sur le caporal mort, et Bossuet disait à Feuilly: *Nous allons bientôt prendre la diligence pour une autre planète*; Courfeyrac, sur les quelques pavés qu’il s’était réservés près d’Enjolras, disposait et rangeait tout un arsenal, sa canne à épée, son fusil, deux pistolets d’arçon et un coup de poing, avec le soin d’une jeune fille qui met en ordre un petit dunkerque. Jean Valjean, muet, regardait le mur en face de lui. Un ouvrier s’assujettissait sur la tête avec une ficelle un large chapeau de paille de la mère Hucheloup, de *peur des coups de soleil*, disait-il. Les jeunes gens de la Cougourde d’Aix devisaient gaîment entre eux, comme s’ils avaient hâte de parler patois une dernière fois. Joly, qui avait décroché le miroir de la veuve Hucheloup, y examinait sa langue. Quelques combattants, ayant découvert des croûtes de pain, à peu près moisies, dans un tiroir, les mangeaient avidement. Marius était inquiet de ce que son père allait lui dire.

Chapitre XVIII

Le vautour devenu proie

Insistons sur un fait psychologique propre aux barricades. Rien de ce qui caractérise cette surprenante guerre des rues ne doit être omis.

Quelle que soit cette étrange tranquillité intérieure dont nous venons de parler, la barricade, pour ceux qui sont dedans, n’en reste pas moins vision.

Il y a de l’apocalypse dans la guerre civile, toutes les brumes de l’inconnu se mêlent à ces flamboiements farouches, les révolutions sont sphinx, et quiconque a traversé une barricade croit avoir traversé un songe.

Ce qu’on ressent dans ces lieux-là, nous l’avons indiqué à propos de Marius, et nous en verrons les conséquences, c’est plus et c’est moins que de la vie. Sorti d’une barricade, on ne sait plus ce qu’on y a vu. On a été terrible, on l’ignore. On a été entouré d’idées combattantes qui avaient des faces humaines; on a eu la tête dans de la lumière d’avenir. Il y avait des cadavres couchés et des fantômes debout. Les heures étaient colossales et semblaient des heures d’éternité. On a vécu dans la mort. Des ombres ont passé. Qu’était-ce? On a vu des mains où il y avait du sang; c’était un assourdissement épouvantable, c’était aussi un affreux silence; il y avait des bouches ouvertes qui criaient, et d’autres bouches ouvertes qui se taisaient; on était dans de la fumée, dans de la nuit peut-être. On croit avoir touché au suintement sinistre des profondeurs inconnues; on regarde quelque chose de rouge qu’on a dans les ongles. On ne se souvient plus.

Revenons à la rue de la Chanvrerie.

Tout à coup, entre deux décharges, on entendit le son lointain d’une heure qui sonnait.

— C’est midi, dit Combeferre.

Les douze coups n’étaient pas sonnés qu’Enjolras se dressait tout debout, et jetait du haut de la barricade cette clameur tonnante:

— Montez des pavés dans la maison. Garnissez-en le rebord de la fenêtre et des mansardes. La moitié des hommes aux fusils, l’autre moitié aux pavés. Pas une minute à perdre.

Un peloton de sapeurs-pompiers, la hache à l’épaule, venait d’apparaître en ordre de bataille à l’extrémité de la rue.

Ceci ne pouvait être qu’une tête de colonne; et de quelle colonne? de la colonne d’attaque évidemment; les sapeurs-pompiers chargés de démolir la barricade devant toujours précéder les soldats chargés de l’escalader.

On touchait évidemment à l’instant que M. de Clermont-Tonnerre, en 1822, appelait «le coup de collier».

L’ordre d’Enjolras fut exécuté avec la hâte correcte propre aux navires et aux barricades, les deux seuls lieux de combat d’où l’évasion soit impossible. En moins d’une minute, les deux tiers des pavés qu’Enjolras avait fait entasser à la porte de Corinthe furent montés au premier étage et au grenier, et, avant qu’une deuxième minute fût écoulée, ces pavés, artistement posés l’un sur l’autre, muraient jusqu’à moitié de la hauteur la fenêtre du premier et les lucarnes des mansardes. Quelques intervalles, ménagés soigneusement par Feuilly, principal constructeur, pouvaient laisser passer des canons de fusil. Cet armement des fenêtres put se faire d’autant plus facilement que la mitraille avait cessé. Les deux pièces tiraient maintenant à boulet sur le centre du barrage afin d’y faire une trouée, et, s’il était possible, une brèche, pour l’assaut.

Quand les pavés, destinés à la défense suprême, furent en place, Enjolras fit porter au premier étage les bouteilles qu’il avait placées sous la table où était Mabeuf.

— Qui donc boira cela? lui demanda Bossuet.

— Eux, répondit Enjolras.

Puis on barricada la fenêtre d’en bas, et l’on tint toutes prêtes les traverses de fer qui servaient à barrer intérieurement la nuit la porte du cabaret.

La forteresse était complète. La barricade était le rempart, le cabaret était le donjon.

Des pavés qui restaient, on boucha la coupure.

Comme les défenseurs d’une barricade sont toujours obligés de ménager les munitions, et que les assiégeants le savent, les assiégeants combinent leurs arrangements avec une sorte de loisir irritant, s’exposent avant l’heure au feu, mais en apparence plus qu’en réalité, et prennent leurs aises. Les apprêts d’attaque se font toujours avec une certaine lenteur méthodique; après quoi, la foudre.

Cette lenteur permit à Enjolras de tout revoir et de tout perfectionner. Il sentait que puisque de tels hommes allaient mourir, leur mort devait être un chef-d’œuvre.

Il dit à Marius: — Nous sommes les deux chefs. Je vais donner les derniers ordres au dedans. Toi, reste dehors et observe.

Marius se posta en observation sur la crête de la barricade.

Enjolras fit clouer la porte de la cuisine qui, on s'en souvient, était l'ambulance.

— Pas d'éclaboussures sur les blessés, dit-il.

Il donna ses dernières instructions dans la salle basse d'une voix brève, mais profondément tranquille; Feuilly écoutait et répondait au nom de tous.

— Au premier étage, tenez des haches prêtes pour couper l'escalier. Les a-t-on?

— Oui, dit Feuilly.

— Combien?

— Deux haches et un merlin.

— C'est bien. Nous sommes vingt-six combattants debout. Combien y a-t-il de fusils?

— Trente-quatre.

— Huit de trop. Tenez ces fusils chargés comme les autres, et sous la main. Aux ceintures les sabres et les pistolets. Vingt hommes à la barricade. Six embusqués aux mansardes et à la fenêtre du premier pour faire feu sur les assaillants à travers les meurtrières des pavés. Qu'il ne reste pas ici un seul travailleur inutile. Tout à l'heure, quand le tambour battra la charge, que les vingt d'en bas se précipitent à la barricade. Les premiers arrivés seront les mieux placés.

Ces dispositions faites, il se tourna vers Javert, et lui dit:

— Je ne t'oublie pas.

Et, posant sur la table un pistolet, il ajouta:

— Le dernier qui sortira d'ici cassera la tête à cet espion.

— Ici? demanda une voix.

— Non, ne mêlons pas ce cadavre aux nôtres. On peut enjamber la petite barricade sur la ruelle Mondétour. Elle n'a que quatre pieds de haut. L'homme est bien garrotté. On l'y mènera, et on l'y exécutera.

Quelqu'un, en ce moment-là, était plus impassible qu'Enjolras; c'était Javert.

Ici Jean Valjean apparut.

Il était confondu dans le groupe des insurgés. Il en sortit, et dit à Enjolras:

— Vous êtes le commandant?

— Oui.

— Vous m’avez remercié tout à l’heure.

— Au nom de la République. La barricade a deux sauveurs: Marius Pontmercy et vous.

— Pensez-vous que je mérite une récompense?

— Certes.

— Eh bien, j’en demande une.

— Laquelle?

— Brûler moi-même la cervelle à cet homme-là.

Javert leva la tête, vit Jean Valjean, eut un mouvement imperceptible, et dit:

— C’est juste.

Quant à Enjolras, il s’était mis à recharger sa carabine; il promena ses yeux autour de lui:

— Pas de réclamations?

Et il se tourna vers Jean Valjean:

— Prenez le mouchard.

Jean Valjean, en effet, prit possession de Javert en s’asseyant sur l’extrémité de la table. Il saisit le pistolet, et un faible cliquetis annonça qu’il venait de l’armer.

Presque au même instant, on entendit une sonnerie de clairons.

— Alerte! cria Marius du haut de la barricade.

Javert se mit à rire de ce rire sans bruit qui lui était propre, et, regardant fixement les insurgés, leur dit:

— Vous n’êtes guère mieux portants que moi.

— Tous dehors! cria Enjolras.

Les insurgés s’élancèrent en tumulte, et, en sortant, reçurent dans le dos, qu’on nous passe l’expression, cette parole de Javert:

— À tout à l’heure!

Chapitre XIX

Jean Valjean se venge

Quand Jean Valjean fut seul avec Javert, il défit la corde qui assujettissait le prisonnier par le milieu du corps, et dont le nœud était sous la table. Après quoi, il lui fit signe de se lever.

Javert obéit, avec cet indéfinissable sourire où se condense la suprématie de l’autorité enchaînée.

Jean Valjean prit Javert par la martingale comme on prendrait une bête de somme par la bricole, et, l’entraînant après lui, sortit du cabaret, lentement, car Javert, entravé aux jambes, ne pouvait faire que de très petits pas.

Jean Valjean avait le pistolet au poing.

Ils franchirent ainsi le trapèze intérieur de la barricade. Les insurgés, tout à l’attaque imminente, tournaient le dos.

Marius, seul, placé de côté à l’extrémité gauche du barrage, les vit passer. Ce groupe du patient et du bourreau s’éclaira de la lueur sépulcrale qu’il avait dans l’âme.

Jean Valjean fit escalader, avec quelque peine, à Javert garrotté, mais sans le lâcher un seul instant, le petit retranchement de la ruelle Mondétour.

Quand ils eurent enjambé ce barrage, ils se trouvèrent seuls tous les deux dans la ruelle. Personne ne les voyait plus. Le coude des maisons les cachait aux insurgés. Les cadavres retirés de la barricade faisaient un monceau terrible à quelques pas.

On distinguait dans le tas des morts une face livide, une chevelure dénouée, une main percée, et un sein de femme demi-nu. C’était Éponine.

Javert considéra obliquement cette morte, et, profondément calme, dit à demi-voix:

— Il me semble que je connais cette fille-là.

Puis il se tourna vers Jean Valjean.

Jean Valjean mit le pistolet sous son bras, et fixa sur Javert un regard qui n’avait pas besoin de paroles pour dire: — Javert, c’est moi.

Javert répondit:

— Prends ta revanche.

Jean Valjean tira de son gousset un couteau, et l’ouvrit.

— Un surin! s'écria Javert. Tu as raison. Cela te convient mieux.

Jean Valjean coupa la martingale que Javert avait au cou, puis il coupa les cordes qu'il avait aux poignets, puis se baissant, il coupa la ficelle qu'il avait aux pieds et, se redressant, il lui dit:

— Vous êtes libre.

Javert n'était pas facile à étonner. Cependant, tout maître qu'il était de lui, il ne put se soustraire à une commotion. Il resta béant et immobile.

Jean Valjean poursuivit:

— Je ne crois pas que je sorte d'ici. Pourtant, si, par hasard, j'en sortais, je demeure, sous le nom de Fauchelevent, rue de l'Homme-Armé, numéro sept.

Javert eut un froncement de tige qui lui entrouvrit un coin de la bouche, et il murmura entre ses dents:

— Prends garde.

— Allez, dit Jean Valjean.

Javert reprit:

— Tu as dit Fauchelevent, rue de l'Homme-Armé?

— Numéro sept.

Javert répéta à demi-voix: — Numéro sept.

Il reboutonna sa redingote, remit de la roideur militaire entre ses deux épaules, fit demi-tour, croisa les bras en soutenant son menton dans une de ses mains, et se mit à marcher dans la direction des halles. Jean Valjean le suivait des yeux. Après quelques pas, Javert se retourna, et cria à Jean Valjean:

— Vous m'ennuyez. Tuez-moi plutôt.

Javert ne s'apercevait pas lui-même qu'il ne tutoyait plus Jean Valjean:

— Allez-vous-en, dit Jean Valjean.

Javert s'éloigna à pas lents. Un moment après, il tourna l'angle de la rue des Prêcheurs.

Quand Javert eut disparu, Jean Valjean déchargea le pistolet en l'air.

Puis il rentra dans la barricade et dit:

— C'est fait.

Cependant voici ce qui s'était passé:

Marius, plus occupé du dehors que du dedans, n'avait pas jusque-là regardé attentivement l'espion garrotté au fond obscur de la salle basse.

Quand il le vit au grand jour, enjambant la barricade pour aller mourir, il le reconnut. Un souvenir subit lui entra dans l'esprit. Il se rappela l'inspecteur de la rue de Pontoise, et les deux pistolets qu'il lui avait remis et dont il s'était servi lui Marius, dans cette barricade même; et non seulement il se rappela la figure, mais il se rappela le nom.

Ce souvenir pourtant était brumeux et trouble comme toutes ses idées. Ce ne fut pas une affirmation qu'il se fit, ce fut une question qu'il s'adressa: — Est-ce que ce n'est pas là cet inspecteur de police qui m'a dit s'appeler Javert?

Peut-être était-il encore temps d'intervenir pour cet homme? Mais il fallait d'abord savoir si c'était bien ce Javert.

Marius interpella Enjolras qui venait de se placer à l'autre bout de la barricade.

— Enjolras?

— Quoi?

— Comment s'appelle cet homme-là?

— Qui?

— L'agent de police. Sais-tu son nom?

— Sans doute. Il nous l'a dit.

— Comment s'appelle-t-il?

— Javert.

Marius se dressa.

En ce moment on entendit le coup de pistolet.

Jean Valjean reparut et cria: C'est fait.

Un froid sombre traversa le cœur de Marius.

Chapitre XX

Les morts ont raison et les vivants n’ont pas tort

L’agonie de la barricade allait commencer.

Tout concourait à la majesté tragique de cette minute suprême; mille fracas mystérieux dans l’air, le souffle des masses armées mises en mouvement dans des rues qu’on ne voyait pas, le galop intermittent de la cavalerie, le lourd ébranlement des artilleries en marche, les feux de peloton et les canonnades se croisant dans le dédale de Paris, les fumées de la bataille montant toutes dorées au-dessus des toits, on ne sait quels cris lointains vaguement terribles, des éclairs de menace partout, le tocsin de Saint-Merry qui maintenant avait l’accent du sanglot, la douceur de la saison, la splendeur du ciel plein de soleil et de nuages, la beauté du jour et l’épouvantable silence des maisons.

Car, depuis la veille, les deux rangées de maisons de la rue de la Chanvrerie étaient devenues deux murailles; murailles farouches. Portes fermées, fenêtres fermées, volets fermés.

Dans ces temps-là, si différents de ceux où nous sommes, quand l’heure était venue où le peuple voulait en finir avec une situation qui avait trop duré, avec une charte octroyée ou avec un pays légal, quand la colère universelle était diffuse dans l’atmosphère, quand la ville consentait au soulèvement de ses pavés, quand l’insurrection faisait sourire la bourgeoisie en lui chuchotant son mot d’ordre à l’oreille, alors l’habitant, pénétré d’émeute, pour ainsi dire, était l’auxiliaire du combattant, et la maison fraternisait avec la forteresse improvisée qui s’appuyait sur elle. Quand la situation n’était pas mûre, quand l’insurrection n’était décidément pas consentie, quand la masse désavouait le mouvement, c’en était fait des combattants, la ville se changeait en désert autour de la révolte, les âmes se glaçaient, les asiles se muraient, et la rue se faisait défilé pour aider l’armée à prendre la barricade.

On ne fait pas marcher un peuple par surprise plus vite qu’il ne veut. Malheur à qui tente de lui forcer la main! Un peuple ne se laisse pas faire. Alors il abandonne l’insurrection à elle-même. Les insurgés deviennent des pestiférés. Une maison est un escarpement, une porte est un refus, une façade est un mur. Ce mur voit, entend, et ne veut pas. Il pourrait s’entrouvrir et vous sauver. Non. Ce mur, c’est un juge. Il vous regarde et vous condamne. Quelle sombre chose que ces maisons fermées! Elles semblent mortes, elles sont vivantes. La vie, qui y est comme suspendue, y persiste. Personne n’en est sorti depuis vingt-quatre heures, mais personne n’y manque. Dans l’intérieur de cette roche, on va, on vient, on se couche, on se lève; on y est en famille; on y boit et on y mange; on y a peur, chose terrible! La peur excuse cette inhospitalité redoutable; elle y mêle l’effarement, circonstance atténuante. Quelquefois même, et cela s’est vu, la peur devient passion; l’effroi peut se changer en furie, comme la prudence en rage; de là ce mot si profond: *Les enragés de modérés*. Il y a des flamboiements d’épouvante suprême d’où sort, comme une fumée lugubre, la colère. — Que veulent ces gens-là? ils ne sont jamais contents. Ils compromettent les hommes paisibles. Comme si l’on n’avait pas assez de révolutions comme cela! Qu’est-ce qu’ils sont venus faire ici? Qu’ils s’en tirent. Tant pis pour eux. C’est leur faute. Ils n’ont que ce qu’ils méritent. Cela ne nous regarde pas. Voilà notre pauvre rue criblée de balles. C’est un tas de vauriens. Surtout n’ouvrez pas la porte. — Et la maison prend une figure de tombe. L’insurgé devant cette porte agonise; il voit arriver la mitraille et les sabres nus; s’il crie, il sait qu’on l’écoute, mais qu’on ne viendra pas; il y a là des murs qui pourraient le protéger, il y a là des hommes qui pourraient le sauver, et ces murs ont des oreilles de chair, et ces hommes ont des entrailles de pierre.

Qui accuser?

Personne, et tout le monde.

Les temps incomplets où nous vivons.

C’est toujours à ses risques et périls que l’utopie se transforme en insurrection, et se fait de protestation philosophique protestation armée, et de Minerve Pallas. L’utopie qui s’impatiente et devient émeute sait ce qui l’attend; presque toujours elle arrive trop tôt. Alors elle se résigne, et accepte stoïquement, au lieu du triomphe, la catastrophe. Elle sert, sans se plaindre, et en les disculpant même, ceux qui la renient, et sa magnanimité est de consentir à l’abandon. Elle est indomptable contre l’obstacle et douce envers l’ingratitude.

Est-ce l’ingratitude d’ailleurs?

Oui, au point de vue du genre humain.

Non, au point de vue de l’individu.

Le progrès est le mode de l’homme. La vie générale du genre humain s’appelle le Progrès; le pas collectif du genre humain s’appelle le Progrès. Le progrès marche; il fait le grand voyage humain et terrestre vers le céleste et le divin; il a ses haltes où il rallie le troupeau attardé; il a ses stations où il médite, en présence de quelque Chanaan splendide dévoilant tout à coup son horizon; il a ses nuits où il dort; et c’est une des poignantes anxiétés du penseur de voir l’ombre sur l’âme humaine et de tâter dans les ténèbres, sans pouvoir le réveiller, le progrès endormi.

— *Dieu est peut-être mort*, disait un jour à celui qui écrit ces lignes Gérard de Nerval, confondant le progrès avec Dieu, et prenant l’interruption du mouvement pour la mort de l’Être.

Qui désespère a tort. Le progrès se réveille infailliblement, et, en somme, on pourrait dire qu’il a marché même endormi, car il a grandi. Quand on le revoit debout, on le retrouve plus haut. Être toujours paisible, cela ne dépend pas plus du progrès que du fleuve; n’y élevez point de barrage, n’y jetez pas de rocher; l’obstacle fait écumer l’eau et bouillonner l’humanité. De là des troubles; mais après ces troubles, on reconnaît qu’il y a du chemin de fait. Jusqu’à ce que l’ordre, qui n’est autre chose que la paix universelle, soit établi, jusqu’à ce que l’harmonie et l’unité règnent, le progrès aura pour étapes les révolutions.

Qu’est-ce donc que le Progrès? Nous venons de le dire. La vie permanente des peuples.

Or, il arrive quelquefois que la vie momentanée des individus fait résistance à la vie éternelle du genre humain.

Avouons-le sans amertume, l’individu a son intérêt distinct, et peut sans forfaiture stipuler pour cet intérêt et le défendre; le présent a sa quantité excusable d’égoïsme; la vie momentanée a son droit, et n’est pas tenue de se sacrifier sans cesse à l’avenir. La génération qui a actuellement son tour de passage sur la terre n’est pas forcée de l’abréger pour les générations, ses égales après tout, qui auront leur tour plus tard. — J’existe, murmure ce quelqu’un qui se nomme Tous. Je suis jeune et je suis amoureux, je suis vieux et je veux me reposer, je suis père de famille, je travaille, je prospère, je fais de bonnes affaires, j’ai des maisons à louer, j’ai de l’argent sur l’État, je suis heureux, j’ai femme et enfants, j’aime tout cela, je désire vivre, laissez-moi tranquille. — De là, à de certaines heures, un froid profond sur les magnanimes avant-gardes du genre humain.

L’utopie d’ailleurs, convenons-en, sort de sa sphère radieuse en faisant la guerre. Elle, la vérité de demain, elle emprunte son procédé, la bataille, au mensonge d’hier. Elle, l’avenir, elle agit comme le passé. Elle, l’idée pure, elle devient voie de fait. Elle complique son héroïsme d’une violence dont il est juste qu’elle réponde; violence d’occasion et d’expédient, contraire aux principes, et dont elle est fatalement punie. L’utopie insurrection combat, le vieux code militaire au poing; elle fusille les espions, elle exécute les traîtres, elle supprime des êtres vivants et les jette dans les ténèbres inconnues. Elle se sert de la mort, chose grave. Il semble que l’utopie n’ait plus foi dans le rayonnement, sa force irrésistible et incorruptible. Elle frappe avec le glaive. Or, aucun glaive n’est simple. Toute épée a deux tranchants; qui blesse avec l’un se blesse à l’autre.

Cette réserve faite, et faite en toute sévérité, il nous est impossible de ne pas admirer, qu’ils réussissent ou non, les glorieux combattants de l’avenir, les confesseurs de l’utopie. Même quand ils avortent, ils sont vénérables, et c’est peut-être dans l’insuccès qu’ils ont plus de majesté. La victoire, quand elle est selon le progrès, mérite l’applaudissement des peuples; mais une défaite héroïque mérite leur attendrissement. L’une est magnifique, l’autre est sublime. Pour nous, qui préférons le martyre au succès, John Brown est plus grand que Washington, et Pisacane est plus grand que Garibaldi.

Il faut bien que quelqu’un soit pour les vaincus.

On est injuste pour ces grands essayeurs de l’avenir quand ils avortent.

On accuse les révolutionnaires de semer l’effroi. Toute barricade semble attentat. On incrimine leurs théories, on suspecte leur but, on redoute leur arrière-pensée, on dénonce leur conscience. On leur reproche d’élever, d’échafauder et d’entasser contre le fait social régnant un monceau de misères, de douleurs, d’iniquités, de griefs, de désespoirs, et d’arracher des bas-fonds des blocs de ténèbres pour s’y créneler et y combattre. On leur crie: Vous dépavez l’enfer! Ils pourraient répondre: C’est pour cela que notre barricade est faite de bonnes intentions.

Le mieux, certes, c’est la solution pacifique. En somme, convenons-en, lorsqu’on voit le pavé, on songe à l’ours, et c’est une bonne volonté dont la société s’inquiète. Mais il dépend de la société de se sauver elle-même; c’est à sa propre bonne volonté que nous faisons appel. Aucun remède violent n’est nécessaire. Étudier le mal à l’amiable, le constater, puis le guérir. C’est à cela que nous la convions.

Quoi qu’il en soit, même tombés, surtout tombés, ils sont augustes, ces hommes qui, sur tous les points de l’univers, l’œil fixé sur la France, luttent pour la grande œuvre avec la logique inflexible de l’idéal; ils donnent leur vie en pur don pour le progrès; ils accomplissent la volonté de la providence; ils font un acte religieux. À l’heure dite, avec autant de désintéressement qu’un acteur qui arrive à sa réplique, obéissant au scénario divin, ils entrent dans le tombeau. Et ce combat sans espérance, et cette disparition stoïque, ils l’acceptent pour amener à ses splendides et suprêmes conséquences universelles le magnifique mouvement humain irrésistiblement commencé le 14 juillet 1789. Ces soldats sont des prêtres. La Révolution française est un geste de Dieu.

Du reste il y a, et il convient d’ajouter cette distinction aux distinctions déjà indiquées dans un autre chapitre, il y a les insurrections acceptées qui s’appellent révolutions; il y a les révolutions refusées qui s’appellent émeutes. Une insurrection qui éclate, c’est une idée qui passe son examen devant le peuple. Si le peuple laisse tomber sa boule noire, l’idée est fruit sec, l’insurrection est échauffourée.

L’entrée en guerre à toute sommation et chaque fois que l’utopie le désire n’est pas le fait des peuples. Les nations n’ont pas toujours et à toute heure le tempérament des héros et des martyrs.

Elles sont positives. À priori, l’insurrection leur répugne; premièrement, parce qu’elle a souvent pour résultat une catastrophe, deuxièmement, parce qu’elle a toujours pour point de départ une abstraction.

Car, et ceci est beau, c’est toujours pour l’idéal, et pour l’idéal seul que se dévouent ceux qui se dévouent. Une insurrection est un enthousiasme. L’enthousiasme peut se mettre en colère; de là les prises d’armes. Mais toute insurrection qui couche en joue un gouvernement ou un régime vise plus haut. Ainsi, par exemple, insistons-y, ce que combattaient les chefs de l’insurrection de 1832, et en particulier les jeunes enthousiastes de la rue de la Chanvrerie, ce n’était pas précisément Louis-Philippe. La plupart, causant à cœur ouvert, rendaient justice aux qualités de ce roi mitoyen à la monarchie et à la révolution; aucun ne le haïssait. Mais ils attaquaient la branche cadette du droit divin dans Louis-Philippe comme ils en avaient attaqué la branche aînée dans Charles X; et ce qu’ils voulaient renverser en renversant la royauté en France, nous l’avons expliqué, c’était l’usurpation de l’homme sur l’homme et du privilège sur le droit dans l’univers entier. Paris sans roi a pour contre-coup le monde sans despotes. Ils raisonnaient de la sorte. Leur but était lointain sans doute, vague peut-être, et reculant devant l’effort; mais grand.

Cela est ainsi. Et l’on se sacrifie pour ces visions, qui, pour les sacrifiés, sont des illusions presque toujours, mais des illusions auxquelles, en somme, toute la certitude humaine est mêlée. L’insurgé poétise et dore l’insurrection. On se jette dans ces choses tragiques en se grisant de ce qu’on va faire. Qui sait? on réussira peut-être. On est le petit nombre; on a contre soi toute une armée; mais on défend le droit, la loi naturelle, la souveraineté de chacun sur soi-même qui n’a pas d’abdication possible, la justice, la vérité, et au besoin on mourra comme les trois cents Spartiates. On ne songe pas à Don Quichotte, mais à Léonidas. Et l’on va devant soi, et, une fois engagé, on ne recule plus, et l’on se précipite tête baissée, ayant pour espérance une victoire inouïe, la révolution complétée, le progrès remis en liberté, l’agrandissement du genre humain, la délivrance universelle; et pour pis aller les Thermopyles.

Ces passes d’armes pour le progrès échouent souvent, et nous venons de dire pourquoi. La foule est rétive à l’entraînement des paladins. Ces lourdes masses, les multitudes, fragiles à cause de leur pesanteur même, craignent les aventures; et il y a de l’aventure dans l’idéal.

D’ailleurs, qu’on ne l’oublie pas, les intérêts sont là, peu amis de l’idéal et du sentimental. Quelquefois l’estomac paralyse le cœur.

La grandeur et la beauté de la France, c’est qu’elle prend moins de ventre que les autres peuples; elle se noue plus aisément la corde aux reins. Elle est la première éveillée, la dernière endormie. Elle va en avant. Elle est chercheuse.

Cela tient à ce qu’elle est artiste.

L’idéal n’est autre chose que le point culminant de la logique, de même que le beau n’est autre chose que la cime du vrai. Les peuples artistes sont aussi les peuples conséquents. Aimer la beauté, c’est voir la lumière. C’est ce qui fait que le flambeau de l’Europe, c’est-à-dire de la civilisation, a été porté d’abord par la Grèce, qui l’a passé à l’Italie, qui l’a passé à la France. Divins peuples éclaireurs! *Vitaï lampada tradunt*.

Chose admirable, la poésie d’un peuple est l’élément de son progrès. La quantité de civilisation se mesure à la quantité d’imagination. Seulement un peuple civilisateur doit rester un peuple mâle. Corinthe, oui; Sybaris, non. Qui s’effémine s’abâtardit. Il ne faut être ni dilettante, ni virtuose; mais il faut être artiste. En matière de civilisation, il ne faut pas raffiner, mais il faut sublimer. À cette condition, on donne au genre humain le patron de l’idéal.

L’idéal moderne a son type dans l’art, et son moyen dans la science. C’est par la science qu’on réalisera cette vision auguste des poètes: le beau social. On refera l’Eden par A + B. Au point où la civilisation est parvenue, l’exact est un élément nécessaire du splendide, et le sentiment artiste est non seulement servi, mais complété par l’organe scientifique; le rêve doit calculer. L’art, qui est le conquérant, doit avoir pour point d’appui la science, qui est le marcheur. La solidité de la monture importe. L’esprit moderne, c’est le génie de la Grèce ayant pour véhicule le génie de l’Inde; Alexandre sur l’éléphant.

Les races pétrifiées dans le dogme ou démoralisées par le lucre sont impropres à la conduite de la civilisation. La génuflexion devant l’idole ou devant l’écu atrophie le muscle qui marche et la volonté qui va. L’absorption hiératique ou marchande amoindrit le rayonnement d’un peuple, abaisse son horizon en abaissant son niveau, et lui retire cette intelligence à la fois humaine et divine du but universel, qui fait les nations missionnaires. Babylone n’a pas d’idéal; Carthage n’a pas d’idéal. Athènes et Rome ont et gardent, même à travers toute l’épaisseur nocturne des siècles, des auréoles de civilisation.

La France est de la même qualité de peuple que la Grèce et l’Italie. Elle est athénienne par le beau et romaine par le grand. En outre, elle est bonne. Elle se donne. Elle est plus souvent que les autres peuples en humeur de dévouement et de sacrifice. Seulement, cette humeur la prend et la quitte. Et c’est là le grand péril pour ceux qui courent quand elle ne veut que marcher, ou qui marchent quand elle veut s’arrêter. La France a ses rechutes de matérialisme, et, à de certains instants, les idées qui obstruent ce cerveau sublime n’ont plus rien qui rappelle la grandeur française et sont de la dimension d’un Missouri et d’une Caroline du Sud. Qu’y faire? La géante joue la naine; l’immense France a ses fantaisies de petitesse. Voilà tout.

À cela rien à dire. Les peuples comme les astres ont le droit d’éclipse. Et tout est bien, pourvu que la lumière revienne et que l’éclipse ne dégénère pas en nuit. Aube et résurrection sont synonymes. La réapparition de la lumière est identique à la persistance du moi.

Constatons ces faits avec calme. La mort sur la barricade, ou la tombe dans l’exil, c’est pour le dévouement un en-cas acceptable. Le vrai nom du dévouement, c’est désintéressement. Que les abandonnés se laissent abandonner, que les exilés se laissent exiler, et bornons-nous à supplier les grands peuples de ne pas reculer trop loin quand ils reculent. Il ne faut pas, sous prétexte de retour à la raison, aller trop avant dans la descente.

La matière existe, la minute existe, les intérêts existent, le ventre existe; mais il ne faut pas que le ventre soit la seule sagesse. La vie momentanée a son droit, nous l'admettons, mais la vie permanente a le sien. Hélas! être monté, cela n'empêche pas de tomber. On voit ceci dans l'histoire plus souvent qu'on ne voudrait. Une nation est illustre; elle goûte à l'idéal, puis elle mord dans la fange, et elle trouve cela bon; et si on lui demande d'où vient qu'elle abandonne Socrate pour Falstaff, elle répond: C'est que j'aime les hommes d'état.

Un mot encore avant de rentrer dans la mêlée.

Une bataille comme celle que nous racontons en ce moment n'est autre chose qu'une convulsion vers l'idéal. Le progrès entravé est maladif, et il a de ces tragiques épilepsies. Cette maladie du progrès, la guerre civile, nous avons dû la rencontrer sur notre passage. C'est là une des phases fatales, à la fois acte et entr'acte, de ce drame dont le pivot est un damné social, et dont le titre véritable est: *le Progrès*.

Le Progrès!

Ce cri que nous jetons souvent est toute notre pensée; et, au point de ce drame où nous sommes, l'idée qu'il contient ayant encore plus d'une épreuve à subir, il nous est permis peut-être, sinon d'en soulever le voile, du moins d'en laisser transparaître nettement la lueur.

Le livre que le lecteur a sous les yeux en ce moment, c'est, d'un bout à l'autre, dans son ensemble et dans ses détails, quelles que soient les intermittences, les exceptions ou les défaillances, la marche du mal au bien, de l'injuste au juste, du faux au vrai, de la nuit au jour, de l'appétit à la conscience, de la pourriture à la vie, de la bestialité au devoir, de l'enfer au ciel, du néant à Dieu. Point de départ: la matière, point d'arrivée: l'âme. L'hydre au commencement, l'ange à la fin.

Chapitre XXI

Les héros

Tout à coup le tambour battit la charge.

L’attaque fut l’ouragan. La veille, dans l’obscurité, la barricade avait été approchée silencieusement comme par un boa. À présent, en plein jour, dans cette rue évasée, la surprise était décidément impossible, la vive force d’ailleurs s’était démasquée, le canon avait commencé le rugissement, l’armée se rua sur la barricade. La furie était maintenant l’habileté. Une puissante colonne d’infanterie de ligne, coupée à intervalles égaux de garde nationale et de garde municipale à pied, et appuyée sur des masses profondes qu’on entendait sans les voir, déboucha dans la rue au pas de course, tambour battant, clairon sonnant, bayonnettes croisées, sapeurs en tête, et, imperturbable sous les projectiles, arriva droit sur la barricade avec le poids d’une poutre d’airain sur un mur.

Le mur tint bon.

Les insurgés firent feu impétueusement. La barricade escaladée eut une crinière d’éclairs. L’assaut fut si forcené qu’elle fut un moment inondée d’assaillants; mais elle secoua les soldats ainsi que le lion les chiens, et elle ne se couvrit d’assiégeants que comme la falaise d’écume, pour reparaître l’instant d’après, escarpée, noire et formidable.

La colonne, forcée de se replier, resta massée dans la rue, à découvert, mais terrible, et riposta à la redoute par une mousqueterie effrayante. Quiconque a vu un feu d’artifice se rappelle cette gerbe faite d’un croisement de foudres qu’on appelle le bouquet. Qu’on se représente ce bouquet, non plus vertical, mais horizontal, portant une balle, une chevrotine ou un biscaïen à la pointe de chacun de ses jets de feu, et égrenant la mort dans ses grappes de tonnerres. La barricade était là-dessous.

Des deux parts résolution égale. La bravoure était là presque barbare et se compliquait d’une sorte de férocité héroïque qui commençait par le sacrifice de soi-même. C’était l’époque où un garde national se battait comme un zouave. La troupe voulait en finir; l’insurrection voulait lutter. L’acceptation de l’agonie en pleine jeunesse et en pleine santé fait de l’intrépidité une frénésie. Chacun dans cette mêlée avait le grandissement de l’heure suprême. La rue se jonchа de cadavres.

La barricade avait à l’une de ses extrémités Enjolras et à l’autre Marius. Enjolras, qui portait toute la barricade dans sa tête, se réservait et s’abritait; trois soldats tombèrent l’un après l’autre sous son créneau sans l’avoir même aperçu; Marius combattait à découvert. Il se faisait point de mire. Il sortait du sommet de la redoute plus qu’à mi-corps. Il n’y a pas de plus violent prodigue qu’un avare qui prend le mors aux dents; il n’y a pas d’homme plus effrayant dans l’action qu’un songeur. Marius était formidable et pensif. Il était dans la bataille comme dans un rêve. On eût dit un fantôme qui fait le coup de fusil.

Les cartouches des assiégés s’épuisaient; leurs sarcasmes non. Dans ce tourbillon du sépulcre où ils étaient, ils riaient.

Courfeyrac était nu-tête.

— Qu’est-ce que tu as donc fait de ton chapeau? lui demanda Bossuet.

Courfeyrac répondit:

— Ils ont fini par me l’emporter à coups de canon.

Ou bien ils disaient des choses hautaines.

— Comprend-on, s’écriait amèrement Feuilly, ces hommes — (et il citait les noms, des noms connus, célèbres même, quelques-uns de l’ancienne armée) — qui avaient promis de nous rejoindre et fait serment de nous aider, et qui s’y étaient engagés d’honneur, et qui sont nos généraux, et qui nous abandonnent!

Et Combeferre se bornait à répondre avec un grave sourire:

— Il y a des gens qui observent les règles de l’honneur comme on observe les étoiles, de très loin.

L’intérieur de la barricade était tellement semé de cartouches déchirées qu’on eût dit qu’il y avait neigé.

Les assaillants avaient le nombre; les insurgés avaient la position. Ils étaient au haut d’une muraille, et ils foudroyaient à bout portant les soldats trébuchant dans les morts et les blessés et empêtrés dans l’escarpement. Cette barricade, construite comme elle l’était et admirablement contre-butée, était vraiment une de ces situations où une poignée d’hommes tient en échec une légion. Cependant, toujours recrutée et grossissant sous la pluie de balles, la colonne d’attaque se rapprochait inexorablement, et maintenant, peu à peu, pas à pas, mais avec certitude, l’amenée serrait la barricade comme la vis le pressoir.

Les assauts se succédèrent. L’horreur alla grandissant.

Alors éclata, sur ce tas de pavés, dans cette rue de la Chanvrerie, une lutte digne d’une muraille de Troie. Ces hommes hâves, déguenillés, épuisés, qui n’avaient pas mangé depuis vingt-quatre heures, qui n’avaient pas dormi, qui n’avaient plus que quelques coups à tirer, qui tâtaient leurs poches vides de cartouches, presque tous blessés, la tête ou le bras bandé d’un linge rouillé et noirâtre, ayant dans leurs habits des trous d’où le sang coulait, à peine armés de mauvais fusils et de vieux sabres ébréchés, devinrent des Titans. La barricade fut dix fois abordée, assaillie, escaladée, et jamais prise.

Pour se faire une idée de cette lutte, il faudrait se figurer le feu mis à un tas de courages terribles, et qu’on regarde l’incendie. Ce n’était pas un combat, c’était le dedans d’une fournaise; les bouches y respiraient de la flamme; les visages y étaient extraordinaires, la forme humaine y semblait impossible, les combattants y flamboyaient, et c’était formidable de voir aller et venir dans cette fumée rouge ces salamandres de la mêlée. Les scènes successives et simultanées de cette tuerie grandiose, nous renonçons à les peindre. L’épopée seule a le droit de remplir douze mille vers avec une bataille.

On eût dit cet enfer du brahmanisme, le plus redoutable des dix-sept abîmes, que le Véda appelle la Forêt des Épées.

On se battait corps à corps, pied à pied, à coups de pistolet, à coups de sabre, à coups de poing, de loin, de près, d’en haut, d’en bas, de partout, des toits de la maison, des fenêtres du cabaret, des soupiraux des caves où quelques-uns s’étaient glissés. Ils étaient un contre soixante. La façade de Corinthe, à demi démolie, était hideuse. La fenêtre, tatouée de mitraille, avait perdu vitres et châssis, et n’était plus qu’un trou informe, tumultueusement bouché avec des pavés. Bossuet fut tué; Feuilly fut tué; Courfeyrac fut tué; Joly fut tué; Combeferre, traversé de trois coups de bayonnette dans la poitrine au moment où il relevait un soldat blessé, n’eut que le temps de regarder le ciel, et expira.

Marius, toujours combattant, était si criblé de blessures, particulièrement à la tête, que son visage disparaissait dans le sang et qu’on eût dit qu’il avait la face couverte d’un mouchoir rouge.

Enjolras seul n’était pas atteint. Quand il n’avait plus d’arme, il tendait la main à droite ou à gauche et un insurgé lui mettait une lame quelconque au poing. Il n’avait plus qu’un tronçon de quatre épées; une de plus que François Ier à Marignan.

Homère dit: «Diomède égorge Axyle, fils de Teuthranis, qui habitait l’heureuse Arisba; Euryale, fils de Mécistée, extermine Drésos, et Opheltios, Ésèpe, et ce Pédasus que la naïade Abarbarée conçut de l’irréprochable Boucolion; Ulysse renverse Pidyte de Percose; Antiloque, Ablère; Polypætès, Astyale; Polydamas, Otos de Cyllène, et Teucer, Arétaon. Méganthios meurt sous les coups de pique d’Euripyle. Agamemnon, roi des héros, terrasse Élatos né dans la ville escarpée que baigne le sonore fleuve Satnoïs.» Dans nos vieux poèmes de gestes, Esplandian attaque avec une bisaiguë de feu le marquis géant Swantibore, lequel se défend en lapidant le chevalier avec des tours qu’il déracine. Nos anciennes fresques murales nous montrent les deux ducs de Bretagne et de Bourbon, armés, armoriés et timbrés en guerre, à cheval, et s’abordant, la hache d’armes à la main, masqués de fer, bottés de fer, gantés de fer, l’un caparaçonné d’hermine, l’autre drapé d’azur; Bretagne avec son lion entre les deux cornes de sa couronne, Bourbon casqué d’une monstrueuse fleur de lys à visière. Mais pour être superbe, il n’est pas nécessaire de porter, comme Yvon, le morion ducal, d’avoir au poing, comme Esplandian, une flamme vivante, ou, comme Phylès, père de Polydamas, d’avoir rapporté d’Éphyre une bonne armure, présent du roi des hommes Euphète; il suffit de donner sa vie pour une conviction ou pour une loyauté. Ce petit soldat naïf, hier paysan de la Beauce ou du Limousin, qui rôde, le coupe-chou au côté, autour des bonnes d’enfants dans le Luxembourg, ce jeune étudiant pâle penché sur une pièce d’anatomie ou sur un livre, blond adolescent qui fait sa barbe avec des ciseaux, prenez-les tous les deux, soufflez-leur un souffle de devoir, mettez-les en face l’un de l’autre dans le carrefour Boucherat ou dans le cul-de-sac Planche-Mibray, et que l’un combatte pour son drapeau, et que l’autre combatte pour son idéal, et qu’ils s’imaginent tous les deux combattre pour la patrie; la lutte sera colossale; et l’ombre que feront, dans le grand champ épique où se débat l’humanité, ce pioupiou et ce carabin aux prises, égalera l’ombre que jette Mégaryon, roi de la Lycie pleine de tigres, étreignant corps à corps l’immense Ajax, égal aux dieux.

Chapitre XXII

Pied à pied

Quand il n'y eut plus de chefs vivants qu'Enjolras et Marius aux deux extrémités de la barricade, le centre, qu'avaient si longtemps soutenu Courfeyrac, Joly, Bossuet, Feuilly et Combeferre, plia. Le canon, sans faire de brèche praticable, avait assez largement échancré le milieu de la redoute; là, le sommet de la muraille avait disparu sous le boulet, et s'était écroulé; et les débris, qui étaient tombés, tantôt à l'intérieur, tantôt à l'extérieur, avaient fini, en s'amoncelant, par faire, des deux côtés du barrage, deux espèces de talus, l'un au dedans, l'autre au dehors. Le talus extérieur offrait à l'abordage un plan incliné.

Un suprême assaut y fut tenté et cet assaut réussit. La masse hérissée de bayonnettes et lancée au pas gymnastique arriva irrésistible, et l'épais front de bataille de la colonne d'attaque apparut dans la fumée au haut de l'escarpement. Cette fois c'était fini. Le groupe d'insurgés qui défendait le centre recula pêle-mêle.

Alors le sombre amour de la vie se réveilla chez quelques-uns. Couchés en joue par cette forêt de fusils, plusieurs ne voulurent plus mourir. C'est là une minute où l'instinct de la conservation pousse des hurlements et où la bête reparaît dans l'homme. Ils étaient acculés à la haute maison à six étages qui faisait le fond de la redoute. Cette maison pouvait être le salut. Cette maison était barricadée et comme murée du haut en bas. Avant que la troupe de ligne fût dans l'intérieur de la redoute, une porte avait le temps de s'ouvrir et de se fermer, la durée d'un éclair suffisait pour cela, et la porte de cette maison, entre-bâillée brusquement et refermée tout de suite, pour ces désespérés c'était la vie. En arrière de cette maison, il y avait les rues, la fuite possible, l'espace. Ils se mirent à frapper contre cette porte à coups de crosse et à coups de pied, appelant, criant, suppliant, joignant les mains. Personne n'ouvrit. De la lucarne du troisième étage, la tête morte les regardait.

Mais Enjolras et Marius, et sept ou huit ralliés autour d'eux, s'étaient élancés et les protégeaient. Enjolras avait crié aux soldats: N'avancez pas! et un officier n'ayant pas obéi, Enjolras avait tué l'officier. Il était maintenant dans la petite cour intérieure de la redoute, adossé à la maison de Corinthe, l’épée d’une main, la carabine de l’autre, tenant ouverte la porte du cabaret qu’il barrait aux assaillants. Il cria aux désespérés: — il n’y a qu’une porte ouverte. Celle-ci. — Et, les couvrant de son corps, faisant à lui seul face à un bataillon, il les fit passer derrière lui. Tous s’y précipitèrent. Enjolras, exécutant avec sa carabine, dont il se servait maintenant comme d’une canne, ce que les bâtonnistes appellent la rose couverte, rabattit les bayonnettes autour de lui et devant lui, et entra le dernier; et il y eut un instant horrible, les soldats voulant pénétrer, les insurgés voulant fermer. La porte fut close avec une telle violence qu’en se remboîtant dans son cadre, elle laissa voir coupés et collés à son chambranle les cinq doigts d’un soldat qui s’y était cramponné.

Marius était resté dehors. Un coup de feu venait de lui casser la clavicule; il sentit qu’il s’évanouissait et qu’il tombait. En ce moment, les yeux déjà fermés, il eut la commotion d’une main vigoureuse qui le saisissait, et son évanouissement, dans lequel il se perdit, lui laissa à peine le temps de cette pensée mêlée au suprême souvenir de Cosette: — Je suis fait prisonnier. Je serai fusillé.

Enjolras, ne voyant pas Marius parmi les réfugiés du cabaret, eut la même idée. Mais ils étaient à cet instant où chacun n’a que le temps de songer à sa propre mort. Enjolras assujettit la barre de la porte, et la verrouilla, et en ferma à double tour la serrure et le cadenas, pendant qu’on la battait furieusement au dehors, les soldats à coups de crosse, les sapeurs à coups de hache. Les assaillants s’étaient groupés sur cette porte. C’était maintenant le siège du cabaret qui commençait.

Les soldats, disons-le, étaient pleins de colère.

La mort du sergent d’artillerie les avait irrités, et puis, chose plus funeste, pendant les quelques heures qui avaient précédé l’attaque, il s’était dit parmi eux que les insurgés mutilaient les prisonniers, et qu’il y avait dans le cabaret le cadavre d’un soldat sans tête. Ce genre de rumeurs fatales est l’accompagnement ordinaire des guerres civiles, et ce fut un faux bruit de cette espèce qui causa plus tard la catastrophe de la rue Transnonain.

Quand la porte fut barricadée, Enjolras dit aux autres:

— Vendons-nous cher.

Puis il s’approcha de la table où étaient étendus Mabeuf et Gavroche. On voyait sous le drap noir deux formes droites et rigides, l’une grande, l’autre petite, et les deux visages se dessinaient vaguement sous les plis froids du suaire. Une main sortait de dessous le linceul et pendait vers la terre. C’était celle du vieillard.

Enjolras se pencha et baisa cette main vénérable, de même que la veille il avait baisé le front.

C’étaient les deux seuls baisers qu’il eût donnés dans sa vie.

Abrégeons. La barricade avait lutté comme une porte de Thèbes, le cabaret lutta comme une maison de Saragosse. Ces résistances-là sont bourrues. Pas de quartier. Pas de parlementaire possible. On veut mourir pourvu qu’on tue. Quand Suchet dit: — Capitulez, Palafox répond: «Après la guerre au canon, la guerre au couteau.» Rien ne manqua à la prise d’assaut du cabaret Hucheloup; ni les pavés pleuvant de la fenêtre et du toit sur les assiégeants et exaspérant les soldats par d’horribles écrasements, ni les coups de feu des caves et des mansardes, ni la fureur de l’attaque, ni la rage de la défense, ni enfin, quand la porte céda, les démences frénétiques de l’extermination. Les assaillants, en se ruant dans le cabaret, les pieds embarrassés dans les panneaux de la porte enfoncée et jetée à terre, n’y trouvèrent pas un combattant. L’escalier en spirale, coupé à coups de hache, gisait au milieu de la salle basse, quelques blessés achevaient d’expirer, tout ce qui n’était pas tué était au premier étage, et là, par le trou du plafond, qui avait été l’entrée de l’escalier, un feu terrifiant éclata. C’étaient les dernières cartouches. Quand elles furent brûlées, quand ces agonisants redoutables n’eurent plus ni poudre ni balles, chacun prit à la main deux de ces bouteilles réservées par Enjolras et dont nous avons parlé, et ils tinrent tête à l’escalade avec ces massues effroyablement fragiles. C’étaient des bouteilles d’eau-forte. Nous disons telles qu’elles sont ces choses sombres du carnage. L’assiégé, hélas, fait arme de tout. Le feu grégeois n’a pas déshonoré Archimède; la poix bouillante n’a pas déshonoré Bayard. Toute la guerre est de l’épouvante, et il n’y a rien à y choisir. La mousqueterie des assiégeants, quoique gênée et de bas en haut, était meurtrière. Le rebord du trou du plafond fut bientôt entouré de têtes mortes d’où ruisselaient de longs fils rouges et fumants. Le fracas était inexprimable; une fumée enfermée et brûlante faisait presque la nuit sur ce combat. Les mots manquent pour dire l’horreur arrivée à ce degré. Il n’y avait plus d’hommes dans cette lutte maintenant infernale. Ce n’étaient plus des géants contre des colosses. Cela ressemblait plus à Milton et à Dante qu’à Homère. Des démons attaquaient, des spectres résistaient.

C’était l’héroïsme monstre.

Chapitre XXIII

Oreste à jeun et Pylade ivre

Enfin, se faisant la courte échelle, s'aidant du squelette de l'escalier, grimpant aux murs, s'accrochant au plafond, écharpant, au bord de la trappe même, les derniers qui résistaient, une vingtaine d'assiégeants, soldats, gardes nationaux, gardes municipaux, pêle-mêle, la plupart défigurés par des blessures au visage dans cette ascension redoutable, aveuglés par le sang, furieux, devenus sauvages, firent irruption dans la salle du premier étage. Il n'y avait plus là qu'un seul qui fût debout, Enjolras. Sans cartouches, sans épée, il n'avait plus à la main que le canon de sa carabine dont il avait brisé la crosse sur la tête de ceux qui entraient. Il avait mis le billard entre les assaillants et lui; il avait reculé à l'angle de la salle, et là, l'œil fier, la tête haute, ce tronçon d'arme au poing, il était encore assez inquiétant pour que le vide se fût fait autour de lui. Un cri s'éleva:

— C'est le chef. C'est lui qui a tué l'artilleur. Puisqu'il s'est mis là, il y est bien. Qu'il y reste. Fusillons-le sur place.

— Fusillez-moi, dit Enjolras.

Et, jetant le tronçon de sa carabine, et croisant les bras, il présenta sa poitrine.

L'audace de bien mourir émeut toujours les hommes. Dès qu'Enjolras eut croisé les bras, acceptant la fin, l'assourdissement de la lutte cessa dans la salle, et ce chaos s'apaisa subitement dans une sorte de solennité sépulcrale. Il semblait que la majesté menaçante d'Enjolras désarmé et immobile pesât sur ce tumulte, et que, rien que par l'autorité de son regard tranquille, ce jeune homme, qui seul n'avait pas une blessure, superbe, sanglant, charmant, indifférent comme un invulnérable, contraignît cette cohue sinistre à le tuer avec respect. Sa beauté, en ce moment-là augmentée de sa fierté, était un resplendissement, et, comme s'il ne pouvait pas plus être fatigué que blessé, après les effrayantes vingt-quatre heures qui venaient de s'écouler, il était vermeil et rose. C'était de lui peut-être que parlait le témoin qui disait plus tard devant le conseil de guerre: «Il y avait un insurgé que j'ai entendu nommer Apollon.» Un garde national qui visait Enjolras abaissa son arme en disant: «Il me semble que je vais fusiller une fleur.»

Douze hommes se formèrent en peloton à l'angle opposé à Enjolras, et apprêtèrent leurs fusils en silence.

Puis un sergent cria: — Joue.

Un officier intervint.

— Attendez.

Et s'adressant à Enjolras:

— Voulez-vous qu'on vous bande les yeux?

— Non.

— Est-ce bien vous qui avez tué le sergent d'artillerie?

— Oui.

Depuis quelques instants Grantaire s'était réveillé.

Grantaire, on s'en souvient, dormait depuis la veille dans la salle haute du cabaret, assis sur une chaise, affaissé sur une table.

Il réalisait, dans toute son énergie, la vieille métaphore: ivre mort. Le hideux philtre absinthe-stout-alcool l'avait jeté en léthargie. Sa table étant petite et ne pouvant servir à la barricade, on la lui avait laissée. Il était toujours dans la même posture, la poitrine pliée sur la table, la tête appuyée à plat sur les bras, entouré de verres, de chopes et de bouteilles. Il dormait de cet écrasant sommeil de l'ours engourdi et de la sangsue repue. Rien n'y avait fait, ni la fusillade, ni les boulets, ni la mitraille qui pénétrait par la croisée dans la salle où il était, ni le prodigieux vacarme de l'assaut. Seulement, il répondait quelquefois au canon par un ronflement. Il semblait attendre là qu'une balle vînt lui épargner la peine de se réveiller. Plusieurs cadavres gisaient autour de lui; et, au premier coup d'œil, rien ne le distinguait de ces dormeurs profonds de la mort.

Le bruit n'éveille pas un ivrogne, le silence le réveille. Cette singularité a été plus d'une fois observée. La chute de tout, autour de lui, augmentait l'anéantissement de Grantaire; l'écroulement le berçait. — L'espèce de halte que fit le tumulte devant Enjolras fut une secousse pour ce pesant sommeil. C'est l'effet d'une voiture au galop qui s'arrête court. Les assoupis s'y réveillent. Grantaire se dressa en sursaut, étendit les bras, se frotta les yeux, regarda, bâilla, et comprit.

L'ivresse qui finit ressemble à un rideau qui se déchire. On voit, en bloc et d'un seul coup d'œil, tout ce qu'elle cachait. Tout s'offre subitement à la mémoire; et l'ivrogne qui ne sait rien de ce qui s'est passé depuis vingt-quatre heures, n'a pas achevé d'ouvrir les paupières, qu'il est au fait. Les idées lui reviennent avec une lucidité brusque; l'effacement de l'ivresse, sorte de buée qui aveuglait le cerveau, se dissipe, et fait place à la claire et nette obsession des réalités.

Relégué qu'il était dans son coin et comme abrité derrière le billard, les soldats, l'œil fixé sur Enjolras, n'avaient pas même aperçu Grantaire, et le sergent se préparait à répéter l'ordre: En joue! quand tout à coup ils entendirent une voix forte crier à côté d'eux:

— Vive la République! J'en suis.

Grantaire s'était levé.

L'immense lueur de tout le combat qu'il avait manqué, et dont il n'avait pas été, apparut dans le regard éclatant de l'ivrogne transfiguré.

Il répéta: Vive la République! traversa la salle d'un pas ferme, et alla se placer devant les fusils debout près d'Enjolras.

— Faites-en deux d'un coup, dit-il.

Et, se tournant vers Enjolras avec douceur, il lui dit:

— Permets-tu?

Enjolras lui serra la main en souriant.

Ce sourire n'était pas achevé que la détonation éclata.

Enjolras, traversé de huit coups de feu, resta adossé au mur comme si les balles l'y eussent cloué. Seulement il pencha la tête.

Grantaire, foudroyé, s'abattit à ses pieds.

Quelques instants après, les soldats délogeaient les derniers insurgés réfugiés au haut de la maison. Ils tiraillaient à travers un treillis de bois dans le grenier. On se battait dans les combles. On jetait des corps par les fenêtres, quelques-uns vivants. Deux voltigeurs, qui essayaient de relever l'omnibus fracassé, étaient tués de deux coups de carabine tirés des mansardes. Un homme en blouse en était précipité, un coup de bayonnette dans le ventre, et râlait à terre. Un soldat et un insurgé glissaient ensemble sur le talus de tuiles du toit, et ne voulaient pas se lâcher, et tombaient, se tenant embrassés d'un embrassement féroce. Lutte pareille dans la cave. Cris, coups de feu, piétinement farouche. Puis le silence. La barricade était prise.

Les soldats commencèrent la fouille des maisons d'alentour et la poursuite des fuyards.

Chapitre XXIV

Prisonnier

Marius était prisonnier en effet. Prisonnier de Jean Valjean.

La main qui l’avait étreint par derrière au moment où il tombait, et dont, en perdant connaissance, il avait senti le saisissement, était celle de Jean Valjean.

Jean Valjean n’avait pris au combat d’autre part que de s’y exposer. Sans lui, à cette phase suprême de l’agonie, personne n’eût songé aux blessés. Grâce à lui, partout présent dans le carnage comme une providence, ceux qui tombaient étaient relevés, transportés dans la salle basse, et pansés. Dans les intervalles, il réparait la barricade. Mais rien qui pût ressembler à un coup, à une attaque, ou même à une défense personnelle, ne sortit de ses mains. Il se taisait et secourait. Du reste, il avait à peine quelques égratignures. Les balles n’avaient pas voulu de lui. Si le suicide faisait partie de ce qu’il avait rêvé en venant dans ce sépulcre, de ce côté-là il n’avait point réussi. Mais nous doutons qu’il eût songé au suicide, acte irréligieux.

Jean Valjean, dans la nuée épaisse du combat, n’avait pas l’air de voir Marius; le fait est qu’il ne le quittait pas des yeux. Quand un coup de feu renversa Marius, Jean Valjean bondit avec une agilité de tigre, s’abattit sur lui comme sur une proie, et l’emporta.

Le tourbillon de l’attaque était en cet instant-là si violemment concentré sur Enjolras et sur la porte du cabaret que personne ne vit Jean Valjean, soutenant dans ses bras Marius évanoui, traverser le champ dépavé de la barricade et disparaître derrière l’angle de la maison de Corinthe.

On se rappelle cet angle qui faisait une sorte de cap dans la rue; il garantissait des balles et de la mitraille, et des regards aussi, quelques pieds carrés de terrain. Il y a ainsi parfois dans les incendies une chambre qui ne brûle point, et dans les mers les plus furieuses, en deçà d’un promontoire ou au fond d’un cul-de-sac d’écueils, un petit coin tranquille. C’était dans cette espèce de repli du trapèze intérieur de la barricade qu’Éponine avait agonisé.

Là Jean Valjean s’arrêta, il laissa glisser à terre Marius, s’adossa au mur et jeta les yeux autour de lui.

La situation était épouvantable.

Pour l’instant, pour deux ou trois minutes peut-être, ce pan de muraille était un abri; mais comment sortir de ce massacre? Il se rappelait l’angoisse où il s’était trouvé rue Polonceau, huit ans auparavant, et de quelle façon il était parvenu à s’échapper; c’était difficile alors, aujourd’hui c’était impossible. Il avait devant lui cette implacable et sourde maison à six étages qui ne semblait habitée que par l’homme mort penché à sa fenêtre; il avait à sa droite la barricade assez basse qui fermait la Petite-Truanderie; enjamber cet obstacle paraissait facile, mais on voyait au-dessus de la crête du barrage une rangée de pointes de bayonnettes. C’était la troupe de ligne, postée au delà de cette barricade, et aux aguets. Il était évident que franchir la barricade c’était aller chercher un feu de peloton, et que toute tête qui se risquerait à dépasser le haut de la muraille de pavés servirait de cible à soixante coups de fusil. Il avait à sa gauche le champ du combat. La mort était derrière l’angle du mur.

Que faire?

Un oiseau seul eût pu se tirer de là.

Et il fallait se décider sur-le-champ, trouver un expédient, prendre un parti. On se battait à quelques pas de lui; par bonheur tous s’acharnaient sur un point unique, sur la porte du cabaret; mais qu’un soldat, un seul, eût l’idée de tourner la maison, ou de l’attaquer en flanc, tout était fini.

Jean Valjean regarda la maison en face de lui, il regarda la barricade à côté de lui, puis il regarda la terre, avec la violence de l’extrémité suprême, éperdu, et comme s’il eût voulu y faire un trou avec ses yeux.

À force de regarder, on ne sait quoi de vaguement saisissable dans une telle agonie se dessina et prit forme à ses pieds, comme si c’était une puissance du regard de faire éclore la chose demandée. Il aperçut à quelques pas de lui, au bas du petit barrage si impitoyablement gardé et guetté au dehors, sous un écroulement de pavés qui la cachait en partie, une grille de fer posée à plat et de niveau avec le sol. Cette grille, faite de forts barreaux transversaux, avait environ deux pieds carrés. L’encadrement de pavés qui la maintenait avait été arraché, et elle était comme descellée. À travers les barreaux on entrevoyait une ouverture obscure, quelque chose de pareil au conduit d’une cheminée ou au cylindre d’une citerne. Jean Valjean s’élança. Sa vieille science des évasions lui monta au cerveau comme une clarté. Écarter les pavés, soulever la grille, charger sur ses épaules Marius inerte comme un corps mort, descendre, avec ce fardeau sur les reins, en s’aidant des coudes et des genoux, dans cette espèce de puits heureusement peu profond, laisser retomber au-dessus de sa tête la lourde trappe de fer sur laquelle les pavés ébranlés croulèrent de nouveau, prendre pied sur une surface dallée à trois mètres au-dessous du sol, cela fut exécuté comme ce qu’on fait dans le délire, avec une force de géant et une rapidité d’aigle; cela dura quelques minutes à peine.

Jean Valjean se trouva, avec Marius toujours évanoui, dans une sorte de long corridor souterrain.

Là, paix profonde, silence absolu, nuit.

L’impression qu’il avait autrefois éprouvée en tombant de la rue dans le couvent, lui revint. Seulement, ce qu’il emportait aujourd’hui, ce n’était plus Cosette; c’était Marius.

C’est à peine maintenant s’il entendait au-dessus de lui, comme un vague murmure, le formidable tumulte du cabaret pris d’assaut.

Livre deuxième — L’intestin de Léviathan

Chapitre I

La terre appauvrie par la mer

Paris jette par an vingt-cinq millions à l’eau. Et ceci sans métaphore. Comment, et de quelle façon? jour et nuit. Dans quel but? sans aucun but. Avec quelle pensée? sans y penser. Pourquoi faire? pour rien. Au moyen de quel organe? au moyen de son intestin. Quel est son intestin? c’est son égout.

Vingt-cinq millions, c’est le plus modéré des chiffres approximatifs que donnent les évaluations de la science spéciale.

La science, après avoir longtemps tâtonné, sait aujourd’hui que le plus fécondant et le plus efficace des engrais, c’est l’engrais humain. Les Chinois, disons-le à notre honte, le savaient avant nous. Pas un paysan chinois, c’est Eckeberg qui le dit, ne va à la ville sans rapporter, aux deux extrémités de son bambou, deux seaux pleins de ce que nous nommons immondices. Grâce à l’engrais humain, la terre en Chine est encore aussi jeune qu’au temps d’Abraham. Le froment chinois rend jusqu’à cent vingt fois la semence. Il n’est aucun guano comparable en fertilité au détritus d’une capitale. Une grande ville est le plus puissant des stercoraires. Employer la ville à fumer la plaine, ce serait une réussite certaine. Si notre or est fumier, en revanche, notre fumier est or.

Que fait-on de cet or fumier? On le balaye à l’abîme.

On expédie à grands frais des convois de navires afin de récolter au pôle austral la fiente des pétrels et des pingouins, et l’incalculable élément d’opulence qu’on a sous la main, on l’envoie à la mer. Tout l’engrais humain et animal que le monde perd, rendu à la terre au lieu d’être jeté à l’eau, suffirait à nourrir le monde.

Ces tas d’ordures du coin des bornes, ces tombereaux de boue cahotés la nuit dans les rues, ces affreux tonneaux de la voirie, ces fétides écoulements de fange souterraine que le pavé vous cache, savez-vous ce que c’est? C’est de la prairie en fleur, c’est de l’herbe verte, c’est du serpolet et du thym et de la sauge, c’est du gibier, c’est du bétail, c’est le mugissement satisfait des grands bœufs le soir, c’est du foin parfumé, c’est du blé doré, c’est du pain sur votre table, c’est du sang chaud dans vos veines, c’est de la santé, c'est de la joie, c'est de la vie. Ainsi le veut cette création mystérieuse qui est la transformation sur la terre et la transfiguration dans le ciel.

Rendez cela au grand creuset; votre abondance en sortira. La nutrition des plaines fait la nourriture des hommes.

Vous êtes maîtres de perdre cette richesse, et de me trouver ridicule par-dessus le marché. Ce sera là le chef-d'œuvre de votre ignorance.

La statistique a calculé que la France à elle seule fait tous les ans à l'Atlantique par la bouche de ses rivières un versement d'un demi-milliard. Notez ceci: avec ces cinq cents millions on payerait le quart des dépenses du budget. L'habileté de l'homme est telle qu'il aime mieux se débarrasser de ces cinq cents millions dans le ruisseau. C'est la substance même du peuple qu'emportent, ici goutte à goutte, là à flots, le misérable vomissement de nos égouts dans les fleuves et le gigantesque vomissement de nos fleuves dans l'océan. Chaque hoquet de nos cloaques nous coûte mille francs. À cela deux résultats: la terre appauvrie et l'eau empestée. La faim sortant du sillon et la maladie sortant du fleuve.

Il est notoire, par exemple, qu'à cette heure, la Tamise empoisonne Londres.

Pour ce qui est de Paris, on a dû, dans ces derniers temps, transporter la plupart des embouchures d'égouts en aval au-dessous du dernier pont.

Un double appareil tubulaire, pourvu de soupapes et d'écluses de chasse, aspirant et refoulant, un système de drainage élémentaire, simple comme le poumon de l'homme, et qui est déjà en pleine fonction dans plusieurs communes d'Angleterre, suffirait pour amener dans nos villes l'eau pure des champs et pour renvoyer dans nos champs l'eau riche des villes, et ce facile va-et-vient, le plus simple du monde, retiendrait chez nous les cinq cents millions jetés dehors. On pense à autre chose.

Le procédé actuel fait le mal en voulant faire le bien. L'intention est bonne, le résultat est triste. On croit expurger la ville, on étiole la population. Un égout est un malentendu. Quand partout le drainage, avec sa fonction double, restituant ce qu'il prend, aura remplacé l'égout, simple lavage appauvrissant, alors, ceci étant combiné avec les données d'une économie sociale nouvelle, le produit de la terre sera décuplé, et le problème de la misère sera singulièrement atténué. Ajoutez la suppression des parasitismes, il sera résolu.

En attendant, la richesse publique s'en va à la rivière, et le coulage a lieu. Coulage est le mot. L'Europe se ruine de la sorte par épuisement.

Quant à la France, nous venons de dire son chiffre. Or, Paris contenant le vingt-cinquième de la population française totale, et le guano parisien étant le plus riche de tous, on reste au-dessous de la vérité en évaluant à vingt-cinq millions la part de perte de Paris dans le demi-milliard que la France refuse annuellement. Ces vingt-cinq millions, employés en assistance et en jouissance, doubleraient la splendeur de Paris. La ville les dépense en cloaques. De sorte qu'on peut dire que la grande prodigalité de Paris, sa fête merveilleuse, sa Folie-Beaujon, son orgie, son ruissellement d'or à pleines mains, son faste, son luxe, sa magnificence, c'est son égout.

C'est de cette façon que, dans la cécité d'une mauvaise économie politique, on noie et on laisse aller à vau-l'eau et se perdre dans les gouffres le bien-être de tous. Il devrait y avoir des filets de Saint-Cloud pour la fortune publique.

Économiquement, le fait peut se résumer ainsi: Paris panier percé.

Paris, cette cité modèle, ce patron des capitales bien faites dont chaque peuple tâche d'avoir une copie, cette métropole de l'idéal, cette patrie auguste de l'initiative, de l'impulsion et de l'essai, ce centre et ce lieu des esprits, cette ville nation, cette ruche de l'avenir, ce composé merveilleux de Babylone et de Corinthe, ferait, au point de vue que nous venons de signaler, hausser les épaules à un paysan du Fo-Kian.

Imitez Paris, vous vous ruinerez.

Au reste, particulièrement en ce gaspillage immémorial et insensé, Paris lui-même imite.

Ces surprenantes inepties ne sont pas nouvelles; ce n'est point là de la sottise jeune. Les anciens agissaient comme les modernes. «Les cloaques de Rome, dit Liebig, ont absorbé tout le bien-être du paysan romain.» Quand la campagne de Rome fut ruinée par l'égout romain, Rome épuisa l'Italie, et quand elle eut mis l'Italie dans son cloaque, elle y versa la Sicile, puis la Sardaigne, puis l'Afrique. L'égout de Rome a engouffré le monde. Ce cloaque offrait son engloutissement à la cité et à l'univers. *Urbi et orbi*. Ville éternelle, égout insondable.

Pour ces choses-là comme pour d'autres, Rome donne l'exemple.

Cet exemple, Paris le suit, avec toute la bêtise propre aux villes d'esprit.

Pour les besoins de l'opération sur laquelle nous venons de nous expliquer, Paris a sous lui un autre Paris; un Paris d'égouts; lequel a ses rues, ses carrefours, ses places, ses impasses, ses artères, et sa circulation, qui est de la fange, avec la forme humaine de moins.

Car il ne faut rien flatter, pas même un grand peuple; là où il y a tout, il y a l'ignominie à côté de la sublimité; et, si Paris contient Athènes, la ville de lumière, Tyr, la ville de puissance, Sparte, la ville de vertu, Ninive, la ville de prodige, il contient aussi Lutèce, la ville de boue.

D'ailleurs le cachet de sa puissance est là aussi, et la titanique sentine de Paris réalise, parmi les monuments, cet idéal étrange réalisé dans l'humanité par quelques hommes tels que Machiavel, Bacon et Mirabeau, le grandiose abject.

Le sous-sol de Paris, si l'œil pouvait en pénétrer la surface, présenterait l'aspect d'un madrépore colossal. Une éponge n'a guère plus de pertuis et de couloirs que la motte de terre de six lieues de tour sur laquelle repose l'antique grande ville. Sans parler des catacombes, qui sont une cave à part, sans parler de l'inextricable treillis des conduits du gaz, sans compter le vaste système tubulaire de la distribution d'eau vive qui aboutit aux bornes-fontaines, les égouts à eux seuls font sous les deux rives un prodigieux réseau ténébreux; labyrinthe qui a pour fil sa pente.

Là apparaît, dans la brume humide, le rat, qui semble le produit de l'accouchement de Paris.

Chapitre II

L’histoire ancienne de l’égout

Qu’on s’imagine Paris ôté comme un couvercle, le réseau souterrain des égouts, vu à vol d’oiseau, dessinera sur les deux rives une espèce de grosse branche greffée au fleuve. Sur la rive droite l’égout de ceinture sera le tronc de cette branche, les conduits secondaires seront les rameaux et les impasses seront les ramuscules.

Cette figure n’est que sommaire et à demi exacte, l’angle droit, qui est l’angle habituel de ce genre de ramifications souterraines, étant très rare dans la végétation.

On se fera une image plus ressemblante de cet étrange plan géométral en supposant qu’on voie à plat sur un fond de ténèbres quelque bizarre alphabet d’orient brouillé comme un fouillis, et dont les lettres difformes seraient soudées les unes aux autres, dans un pêle-mêle apparent et comme au hasard, tantôt par leurs angles, tantôt par leurs extrémités.

Les sentines et les égouts jouaient un grand rôle au Moyen-Âge, au Bas-Empire et dans ce vieil Orient. La peste y naissait, les despotes y mouraient. Les multitudes regardaient presque avec une crainte religieuse ces lits de pourriture, monstrueux berceaux de la Mort. La fosse aux vermines de Bénarès n’est pas moins vertigineuse que la fosse aux lions de Babylone. Téglath-Phalasar, au dire des livres rabbiniques, jurait par la sentine de Ninive, C’est de l’égout de Munster que Jean de Leyde faisait sortir sa fausse lune, et c’est du puits-cloaque de Kekhscheb que son ménechme oriental, Mokannâ, le prophète voilé du Khorassan, faisait sortir son faux soleil.

L’histoire des hommes se reflète dans l’histoire des cloaques. Les gémonies racontaient Rome. L’égout de Paris a été une vieille chose formidable. Il a été sépulcre, il a été asile. Le crime, l’intelligence, la protestation sociale, la liberté de conscience, la pensée, le vol, tout ce que les lois humaines poursuivent ou ont poursuivi, s’est caché dans ce trou; les maillotins au quatorzième siècle, les tire-laine au quinzième, les huguenots au seizième, les illuminés de Morin au dix-septième, les chauffeurs au dix-huitième. Il y a cent ans, le coup de poignard nocturne en sortait, le filou en danger y glissait; le bois avait la caverne, Paris avait l’égout. La truanderie, cette *picareria* gauloise, acceptait l’égout comme succursale de la Cour des Miracles, et le soir, narquoise et féroce, rentrait sous le vomitoire Maubuée comme dans une alcôve.

Il était tout simple que ceux qui avaient pour lieu de travail quotidien le cul-de-sac Vide-Gousset ou la rue Coupe-Gorge eussent pour domicile nocturne le ponceau du Chemin-Vert ou le cagnard Hurepoix. De là un fourmillement de souvenirs. Toutes sortes de fantômes hantent ces longs corridors solitaires; partout la putridité et le miasme; çà et là un soupirail où Villon dedans cause avec Rabelais dehors.

L’égout, dans l’ancien Paris, est le rendez-vous de tous les épuisements et de tous les essais. L’économie politique y voit un détritus, la philosophie sociale y voit un résidu.

L’égout, c’est la conscience de la ville. Tout y converge, et s’y confronte. Dans ce lieu livide, il y a des ténèbres, mais il n’y a plus de secrets. Chaque chose a sa forme vraie, ou du moins sa forme définitive. Le tas d’ordures a cela pour lui qu’il n’est pas menteur. La naïveté s’est réfugiée là. Le masque de Basile s’y trouve, mais on en voit le carton, et les ficelles, et le dedans comme le dehors, et il est accentué d’une boue honnête. Le faux nez de Scapin l’avoisine. Toutes les malpropretés de la civilisation, une fois hors de service, tombent dans cette fosse de vérité où aboutit l’immense glissement social. Elles s’y engloutissent, mais elles s’y étalent. Ce pêle-mêle est une confession. Là, plus de fausse apparence, aucun plâtrage possible, l’ordure ôte sa chemise, dénudation absolue, déroute des illusions et des mirages, plus rien que ce qui est, faisant la sinistre figure de ce qui finit. Réalité et disparition. Là, un cul de bouteille avoue l’ivrognerie, une anse de panier raconte la domesticité; là, le trognon de pomme qui a eu des opinions littéraires redevient le trognon de pomme; l’effigie du gros sou se vert-de-grise franchement, le crachat de Caïphe rencontre le vomissement de Falstaff, le louis d’or qui sort du tripot heurte le clou où pend le bout de corde du suicide, un foetus livide roule enveloppé dans des paillettes qui ont dansé le mardi gras dernier à l’Opéra, une toque qui a jugé les hommes se vautre près d’une pourriture qui a été la jupe de Margoton; c’est plus que de la fraternité, c’est du tutoiement. Tout ce qui se fardait se barbouille. Le dernier voile est arraché. Un égout est un cynique. Il dit tout.

Cette sincérité de l’immondice nous plaît, et repose l’âme. Quand on a passé son temps à subir sur la terre le spectacle des grands airs que prennent la raison d’état, le serment, la sagesse politique, la justice humaine, les probités professionnelles, les austérités de situation, les robes incorruptibles, cela soulage d’entrer dans un égout et de voir de la fange qui en convient.

Cela enseigne en même temps. Nous l’avons dit tout à l’heure, l’histoire passe par l’égout. Les Saint-Barthélemy y filtrent goutte à goutte entre les pavés. Les grands assassinats publics, les boucheries politiques et religieuses, traversent ce souterrain de la civilisation et y poussent leurs cadavres. Pour l’œil du songeur, tous les meurtriers historiques sont là, dans la pénombre hideuse, à genoux, avec un pan de leur suaire pour tablier, épongeant lugubrement leur besogne. Louis XI y est avec Tristan, François Ier y est avec Duprat, Charles IX y est avec sa mère, Richelieu y est avec Louis XIII, Louvois y est, Letellier y est, Hébert et Maillard y sont, grattant les pierres et tâchant de faire disparaître la trace de leurs actions. On entend sous ces voûtes le balai de ces spectres. On y respire la fétidité énorme des catastrophes sociales. On voit dans des coins des miroitements rougeâtres. Il coule là une eau terrible où se sont lavées des mains sanglantes.

L’observateur social doit entrer dans ces ombres. Elles font partie de son laboratoire. La philosophie est le microscope de la pensée. Tout veut la fuir, mais rien ne lui échappe. Tergiverser est inutile. Quel côté de soi montre-t-on en tergiversant? le côté honte. La philosophie poursuit de son regard probe le mal, et ne lui permet pas de s’évader dans le néant. Dans l’effacement des choses qui disparaissent, dans le rapetissement des choses qui s’évanouissent, elle reconnaît tout. Elle reconstruit la pourpre d’après le haillon et la femme d’après le chiffon. Avec le cloaque elle refait la ville; avec la boue elle refait les mœurs. Du tesson elle conclut l’amphore, ou la cruche. Elle reconnaît à une empreinte d’ongle sur un parchemin la différence qui sépare la juiverie de la Judengasse de la juiverie du Ghetto. Elle retrouve dans ce qui reste ce qui a été, le bien, le mal, le faux, le vrai, la tache de sang du palais, le pâté d’encre de la caverne, la goutte de suif du lupanar, les épreuves subies, les tentations bien venues, les orgies vomies, le pli qu’ont fait les caractères en s’abaissant, la trace de la prostitution dans les âmes que leur grossièreté en faisait capables, et sur la veste des portefaix de Rome la marque du coup de coude de Messaline.

Chapitre III

Bruneseau

L'égout de Paris, au moyen âge, était légendaire. Au seizième siècle Henri II essaya un sondage qui avorta. Il n'y a pas cent ans, le cloaque, Mercier l'atteste, était abandonné à lui-même et devenait ce qu'il pouvait.

Tel était cet ancien Paris, livré aux querelles, aux indécisions et aux tâtonnements. Il fut longtemps assez bête. Plus tard, 89 montra comment l'esprit vient aux villes. Mais, au bon vieux temps, la capitale avait peu de tête; elle ne savait faire ses affaires ni moralement ni matériellement, et pas mieux balayer les ordures que les abus. Tout était obstacle, tout faisait question. L'égout, par exemple, était réfractaire à tout itinéraire. On ne parvenait pas plus à s'orienter dans la voirie qu'à s'entendre dans la ville; en haut l'inintelligible, en bas l'inextricable; sous la confusion des langues il y avait la confusion des caves; Dédale doublait Babel.

Quelquefois, l'égout de Paris se mêlait de déborder, comme si ce Nil méconnu était subitement pris de colère. Il y avait, chose infâme, des inondations d'égout. Par moments, cet estomac de la civilisation digérait mal, le cloaque refluait dans le gosier de la ville, et Paris avait l'arrière-goût de sa fange. Ces ressemblances de l'égout avec le remords avaient du bon; c'étaient des avertissements; fort mal pris du reste; la ville s'indignait que sa boue eût tant d'audace, et n'admettait pas que l'ordure revînt. Chassez-la mieux.

L'inondation de 1802 est un des souvenirs actuels des Parisiens de quatre-vingts ans. La fange se répandit en croix place des Victoires, où est la statue de Louis XIV; elle entra rue Saint-Honoré par les deux bouches d'égout des Champs-Élysées, rue Saint-Florentin par l'égout Saint-Florentin, rue Pierre-à-Poisson par l'égout de la Sonnerie, rue Popincourt par l'égout du Chemin-Vert, rue de la Roquette par l'égout de la rue de Lappe; elle couvrit le caniveau de la rue des Champs-Élysées jusqu'à une hauteur de trente-cinq centimètres; et, au midi, par le vomitoire de la Seine faisant sa fonction en sens inverse, elle pénétra rue Mazarine, rue de l'Échaudé, et rue des Marais, où elle s'arrêta à une longueur de cent neuf mètres, précisément à quelques pas de la maison qu'avait habitée Racine, respectant, dans le dix-septième siècle, le poète plus que le roi. Elle atteignit son maximum de profondeur rue Saint-Pierre où elle s’éleva à trois pieds au-dessus des dalles de la gargouille, et son maximum d’étendue rue Saint-Sabin où elle s’étala sur une longueur de deux cent trente-huit mètres.

Au commencement de ce siècle, l’égout de Paris était encore un lieu mystérieux. La boue ne peut jamais être bien famée; mais ici le mauvais renom allait jusqu’à l’effroi. Paris savait confusément qu’il avait sous lui une cave terrible. On en parlait comme de cette monstrueuse souille de Thèbes où fourmillaient des scolopendres de quinze pieds de long et qui eût pu servir de baignoire à Béhémoth. Les grosses bottes des égoutiers ne s’aventuraient jamais au delà de certains points connus. On était encore très voisin du temps où les tombereaux des boueurs, du haut desquels Sainte-Foix fraternisait avec le marquis de Créqui, se déchargeaient tout simplement dans l’égout. Quant au curage, on confiait cette fonction aux averses, qui encombraient plus qu’elles ne balayaient. Rome laissait encore quelque poésie à son cloaque et l’appelait Gémonies; Paris insultait le sien et l’appelait le Trou punais. La science et la superstition étaient d’accord pour l’horreur. Le Trou punais ne répugnait pas moins à l’hygiène qu’à la légende. Le Moine bourru était éclos sous la voussure fétide de l’égout Mouffetard; les cadavres des Marmousets avaient été jetés dans l’égout de la Barillerie; Fagon avait attribué la redoutable fièvre maligne de 1685 au grand hiatus de l’égout du Marais qui resta béant jusqu’en 1833 rue Saint-Louis presque en face de l’enseigne du Messager galant. La bouche d’égout de la rue de la Mortellerie était célèbre par les pestes qui en sortaient; avec sa grille de fer à pointes qui simulait une rangée de dents, elle était dans cette rue fatale comme une gueule de dragon soufflant l’enfer sur les hommes. L’imagination populaire assaisonnait le sombre évier parisien d’on ne sait quel hideux mélange d’infini. L’égout était sans fond. L’égout, c’était le barathrum. L’idée d’explorer ces régions lépreuses ne venait pas même à la police. Tenter cet inconnu, jeter la sonde dans cette ombre, aller à la découverte dans cet abîme, qui l’eût osé? C’était effrayant. Quelqu’un se présenta pourtant. Le cloaque eut son Christophe Colomb.

Un jour, en 1805, dans une de ces rares apparitions que l’empereur faisait à Paris, le ministre de l’intérieur, un Decrès ou un Crétet quelconque, vint au petit lever du maître. On entendait dans le Carrousel le traînement des sabres de tous ces soldats extraordinaires de la grande république et du grand empire; il y avait encombrement de héros à la porte de Napoléon; hommes du Rhin, de l’Escaut, de l’Adige et du Nil; compagnons de Joubert, de Desaix, de Marceau, de Hoche, de Kléber; aérostiers de Fleurus, grenadiers de Mayence, pontonniers de Gênes, hussards que les Pyramides avaient regardés, artilleurs qu'avait éclaboussés le boulet de Junot, cuirassiers qui avaient pris d'assaut la flotte à l'ancre dans le Zuyderzée; les uns avaient suivi Bonaparte sur le pont de Lodi, les autres avaient accompagné Murat dans la tranchée de Mantoue, les autres avaient devancé Lannes dans le chemin creux de Montebello. Toute l'armée d'alors était là, dans la cour des Tuileries, représentée par une escouade ou par un peloton, et gardant Napoléon au repos; et c'était l'époque splendide où la grande armée avait derrière elle Marengo et devant elle Austerlitz. — Sire, dit le ministre de l'intérieur à Napoléon, j'ai vu hier l'homme le plus intrépide de votre empire. — Qu'est-ce que cet homme? dit brusquement l'empereur, et qu'est-ce qu'il a fait? — Il veut faire une chose, sire. — Laquelle? — Visiter les égouts de Paris.

Cet homme existait et se nommait Bruneseau.

Chapitre IV

Détails ignorés

La visite eut lieu. Ce fut une campagne redoutable; une bataille nocturne contre la peste et l’asphyxie. Ce fut en même temps un voyage de découvertes. Un des survivants de cette exploration, ouvrier intelligent, très jeune alors, en racontait encore il y a quelques années les curieux détails que Bruneseau crut devoir omettre dans son rapport au préfet de police, comme indignes du style administratif. Les procédés désinfectants étaient à cette époque très rudimentaires. À peine Bruneseau eut-il franchi les premières articulations du réseau souterrain, que huit des travailleurs sur vingt refusèrent d’aller plus loin. L’opération était compliquée; la visite entraînait le curage; il fallait donc curer, et en même temps arpenter: noter les entrées d’eau, compter les grilles et les bouches, détailler les branchements, indiquer les courants à points de partage, reconnaître les circonscriptions respectives des divers bassins, sonder les petits égouts greffés sur l’égout principal, mesurer la hauteur sous clef de chaque couloir, et la largeur, tant à la naissance des voûtes qu’à fleur du radier, enfin déterminer les ordonnées du nivellement au droit de chaque entrée d’eau, soit du radier de l’égout, soit du sol de la rue. On avançait péniblement. Il n’était pas rare que les échelles de descente plongeassent dans trois pieds de vase. Les lanternes agonisaient dans les miasmes. De temps en temps on emportait un égoutier évanoui. À de certains endroits, précipice. Le sol s’était effondré, le dallage avait croulé, l’égout s’était changé en puits perdu; on ne trouvait plus le solide; un homme disparut brusquement; on eut grand’peine à le retirer. Par le conseil de Fourcroy, on allumait de distance en distance, dans les endroits suffisamment assainis, de grandes cages pleines d’étoupe imbibée de résine. La muraille, par places, était couverte de fongus difformes, et l’on eût dit des tumeurs, la pierre elle-même semblait malade dans ce milieu irrespirable.

Bruneseau, dans son exploration, procéda d’amont en aval. Au point de partage des deux conduites d’eau du Grand-Hurleur, il déchiffra sur une pierre en saillie la date 1550; cette pierre indiquait la limite où s’était arrêté Philibert Delorme, chargé par Henri II de visiter la voirie souterraine de Paris. Cette pierre était la marque du seizième siècle à l’égout. Bruneseau retrouva la main-d’œuvre du dix-septième dans le conduit du Ponceau et dans le conduit de la rue Vieille-du-Temple, voûtés entre 1600 et 1650, et la main-d’œuvre du dix-huitième dans la section ouest du canal collecteur, encaissée et voûtée en 1740. Ces deux voûtes, surtout la moins ancienne, celle de 1740, étaient plus lézardées et plus décrépites que la maçonnerie de l’égout de ceinture, laquelle datait de 1412, époque où le ruisseau d’eau vive de Ménilmontant fut élevé à la dignité de grand égout de Paris, avancement analogue à celui d’un paysan qui deviendrait premier valet de chambre du roi; quelque chose comme Gros-Jean transformé en Lebel.

On crut reconnaître çà et là, notamment sous le Palais de justice, des alvéoles d’anciens cachots pratiqués dans l’égout même. *In pace* hideux. Un carcan de fer pendait dans l’une de ces cellules. On les mura toutes. Quelques trouvailles furent bizarres; entre autres le squelette d’un orang-outang disparu du Jardin des plantes en 1800, disparition probablement connexe à la fameuse et incontestable apparition du diable rue des Bernardins dans la dernière année du dix-huitième siècle. Le pauvre diable avait fini par se noyer dans l’égout.

Sous le long couloir cintré qui aboutit à l’Arche-Marion, une hotte de chiffonnier, parfaitement conservée, fit l’admiration des connaisseurs. Partout, la vase, que les égoutiers en étaient venus à manier intrépidement, abondait en objets précieux, bijoux d’or et d’argent, pierreries, monnaies. Un géant qui eût filtré ce cloaque eût eu dans son tamis la richesse des siècles. Au point de partage des deux branchements de la rue du Temple et de la rue Sainte-Avoye, on ramassa une singulière médaille huguenote en cuivre, portant d’un côté un porc coiffé d’un chapeau de cardinal et de l’autre un loup la tiare en tête.

La rencontre la plus surprenante fut à l’entrée du Grand Égout. Cette entrée avait été autrefois fermée par une grille dont il ne restait plus que les gonds. À l’un de ces gonds pendait une sorte de loque informe et souillée qui, sans doute arrêtée là au passage, y flottait dans l’ombre et achevait de s’y déchiqueter. Bruneseau approcha sa lanterne et examina ce lambeau. C’était de la batiste très fine, et l’on distinguait à l’un des coins moins rongé que le reste une couronne héraldique brodée au-dessus de ces sept lettres: LAVBESP. La couronne était une couronne de marquis et les sept lettres signifiaient *Laubespine*. On reconnut que ce qu’on avait sous les yeux était un morceau du linceul de Marat. Marat, dans sa jeunesse, avait eu des amours. C’était quand il faisait partie de la maison du comte d’Artois en qualité de médecin des écuries. De ces amours, historiquement constatés, avec une grande dame, il lui était resté ce drap de lit. Épave ou souvenir. À sa mort, comme c'était le seul linge un peu fin qu'il eût chez lui, on l'y avait enseveli. De vieilles femmes avaient emmailloté pour la tombe, dans ce lange où il y avait eu de la volupté, le tragique Ami du Peuple.

Bruneseau passa outre. On laissa cette guenille où elle était; on ne l'acheva pas. Fut-ce mépris ou respect? Marat méritait les deux. Et puis, la destinée y était assez empreinte pour qu'on hésitât à y toucher. D'ailleurs, il faut laisser aux choses du sépulcre la place qu'elles choisissent. En somme, la relique était étrange. Une marquise y avait dormi; Marat y avait pourri; elle avait traversé le Panthéon pour aboutir aux rats d'égout. Ce chiffon d'alcôve, dont Watteau eût jadis joyeusement dessiné tous les plis, avait fini par être digne du regard fixe de Dante.

La visite totale de la voirie immonditielle souterraine de Paris dura sept ans, de 1805 à 1812. Tout en cheminant, Bruneseau désignait, dirigeait et mettait à fin des travaux considérables; en 1808, il abaissait le radier du Ponceau, et, créant partout des lignes nouvelles, il poussait l'égout, en 1809, sous la rue Saint-Denis jusqu'à la fontaine des Innocents; en 1810, sous la rue Froidmanteau et sous la Salpêtrière, en 1811, sous la rue Neuve-des-Petits-Pères, sous la rue du Mail, sous la rue de l'Écharpe, sous la place Royale, en 1812, sous la rue de la Paix et sous la chaussée d'Antin. En même temps, il faisait désinfecter et assainir tout le réseau. Dès la deuxième année, Bruneseau s'était adjoint son gendre Nargaud.

C'est ainsi qu'au commencement de ce siècle la vieille société cura son double-fond et fit la toilette de son égout. Ce fut toujours cela de nettoyé.

Tortueux, crevassé, dépavé, craquelé, coupé de fondrières, cahoté par des coudes bizarres, montant et descendant sans logique, fétide, sauvage, farouche, submergé d'obscurité, avec des cicatrices sur ses dalles et des balafres sur ses murs, épouvantable, tel était, vu rétrospectivement, l'antique égout de Paris. Ramifications en tous sens, croisements de tranchées, branchements, pattes d'oie, étoiles comme dans les sapes, cæcums, culs-de-sac, voûtes salpêtrées, puisards infects, suintements dartreux sur les parois, gouttes tombant des plafonds, ténèbres; rien n'égalait l'horreur de cette vieille crypte exutoire, appareil digestif de Babylone, antre, fosse, gouffre percé de rues, taupinière titanique où l'esprit croit voir rôder à travers l'ombre, dans de l'ordure qui a été de la splendeur, cette énorme taupe aveugle, le passé.

Ceci, nous le répétons, c’était l’égout d’autrefois.

Chapitre V

Progrès actuel

Aujourd’hui l’égout est propre, froid, droit, correct. Il réalise presque l’idéal de ce qu’on entend en Angleterre par le mot «respectable». Il est convenable et grisâtre; tiré au cordeau; on pourrait presque dire à quatre épingles. Il ressemble à un fournisseur devenu conseiller d’État. On y voit presque clair. La fange s’y comporte décemment. Au premier abord, on le prendrait volontiers pour un de ces corridors souterrains si communs jadis et si utiles aux fuites de monarques et de princes, dans cet ancien bon temps «où le peuple aimait ses rois». L’égout actuel est un bel égout; le style pur y règne; le classique alexandrin rectiligne qui, chassé de la poésie, paraît s’être réfugié dans l’architecture, semble mêlé à toutes les pierres de cette longue voûte ténébreuse et blanchâtre; chaque dégorgeoir est une arcade; la rue de Rivoli fait école jusque dans le cloaque. Au reste, si la ligne géométrique est quelque part à sa place, c’est à coup sûr dans la tranchée stercoraire d’une grande ville. Là, tout doit être subordonné au chemin le plus court. L’égout a pris aujourd’hui un certain aspect officiel. Les rapports mêmes de police dont il est quelquefois l’objet ne lui manquent plus de respect. Les mots qui le caractérisent dans le langage administratif sont relevés et dignes. Ce qu’on appelait boyau, on l’appelle galerie; ce qu’on appelait trou, on l’appelle regard. Villon ne reconnaîtrait plus son antique logis en-cas. Ce réseau de caves a bien toujours son immémoriale population de rongeurs, plus pullulante que jamais; de temps en temps, un rat, vieille moustache, risque sa tête à la fenêtre de l’égout et examine les Parisiens; mais cette vermine elle-même s’apprivoise, satisfaite qu’elle est de son palais souterrain. Le cloaque n’a plus rien de sa férocité primitive. La pluie, qui salissait l’égout d’autrefois, lave l’égout d’à présent. Ne vous y fiez pas trop pourtant. Les miasmes l’habitent encore. Il est plutôt hypocrite qu’irréprochable. La préfecture de police et la commission de salubrité ont eu beau faire. En dépit de tous les procédés d’assainissement, il exhale une vague odeur suspecte, comme Tartuffe après la confession.

Convenons-en, comme, à tout prendre, le balayage est un hommage que l’égout rend à la civilisation, et comme, à ce point de vue, la conscience de

Tartuffe est un progrès sur l’étable d’Augias, il est certain que l’égout de Paris s’est amélioré.

C’est plus qu’un progrès; c’est une transmutation. Entre l’égout ancien et l’égout actuel, il y a une révolution. Qui a fait cette révolution?

L’homme que tout le monde oublie et que nous avons nommé, Bruneseau.

Chapitre VI

Progrès futur

Le creusement de l’égout de Paris n’a pas été une petite besogne. Les dix derniers siècles y ont travaillé sans le pouvoir terminer, pas plus qu’ils n’ont pu finir Paris. L’égout, en effet, reçoit tous les contre-coups de la croissance de Paris. C’est, dans la terre, une sorte de polype ténébreux aux mille antennes qui grandit dessous en même temps que la ville dessus. Chaque fois que la ville perce une rue, l’égout allonge un bras. La vieille monarchie n’avait construit que vingt-trois mille trois cents mètres d’égouts; c’est là que Paris en était le 1er janvier 1806. À partir de cette époque, dont nous reparlerons tout à l’heure, l’œuvre a été utilement et énergiquement reprise et continuée; Napoléon a bâti, ces chiffres sont curieux, quatre mille huit cent quatre mètres; Louis XVIII, cinq mille sept cent neuf; Charles X, dix mille huit cent trente-six; Louis-Philippe, quatre-vingt-neuf mille vingt; la République de 1848, vingt-trois mille trois cent quatre-vingt-un; le régime actuel, soixante-dix mille cinq cents; en tout, à l’heure qu’il est, deux cent vingt-six mille six cent dix mètres, soixante lieues d’égout; entrailles énormes de Paris. Ramification obscure, toujours en travail; construction ignorée et immense.

Comme on le voit, le dédale souterrain de Paris est aujourd’hui plus que décuple de ce qu’il était au commencement du siècle. On se figure malaisément tout ce qu’il a fallu de persévérance et d’efforts pour amener ce cloaque au point de perfection relative où il est maintenant. C’était à grand’peine que la vieille prévôté monarchique et, dans les dix dernières années du dix-huitième siècle, la mairie révolutionnaire étaient parvenues à forer les cinq lieues d’égouts qui existaient avant 1806. Tous les genres d’obstacles entravaient cette opération, les uns propres à la nature du sol, les autres inhérents aux préjugés mêmes de la population laborieuse de Paris. Paris est bâti sur un gisement étrangement rebelle à la pioche, à la houe, à la sonde, au maniement humain. Rien de plus difficile à percer et à pénétrer que cette formation géologique à laquelle se superpose la merveilleuse formation historique nommée Paris; dès que, sous une forme quelconque, le travail s’engage et s’aventure dans cette nappe d’alluvions, les résistances souterraines abondent. Ce sont des argiles liquides, des sources vives, des roches dures, de ces vases molles et profondes que la science spéciale appelle moutardes. Le pic avance laborieusement dans des lames calcaires alternées de filets de glaises très minces et de couches schisteuses aux feuillets incrustés d'écailles d'huîtres contemporaines des océans préadamites. Parfois un ruisseau crève brusquement une voûte commencée et inonde les travailleurs; ou c'est une coulée de marne qui se fait jour et se rue avec la furie d'une cataracte, brisant comme verre les plus grosses poutres de soutènement. Tout récemment, à la Villette, quand il a fallu, sans interrompre la navigation et sans vider le canal, faire passer l'égout collecteur sous le canal Saint-Martin, une fissure s'est faite dans la cuvette du canal, l'eau a abondé subitement dans le chantier souterrain, au delà de toute la puissance des pompes d'épuisement; il a fallu faire chercher par un plongeur la fissure qui était dans le goulet du grand bassin, et on ne l'a point bouchée sans peine. Ailleurs, près de la Seine, et même assez loin du fleuve, comme par exemple à Belleville, Grande-Rue et passage Lumière, on rencontre des sables sans fond où l'on s'enlise et où un homme peut fondre à vue d'œil. Ajoutez l'asphyxie par les miasmes, l'ensevelissement par les éboulements, les effondrements subits. Ajoutez le typhus, dont les travailleurs s'imprègnent lentement. De nos jours, après avoir creusé la galerie de Clichy, avec banquette pour recevoir une conduite maîtresse d'eau de l'Ourcq, travail exécuté en tranchée, à dix mètres de profondeur; après avoir, à travers les éboulements, à l'aide des fouilles, souvent putrides, et des étrésillonnements, voûté la Bièvre du boulevard de l'Hôpital jusqu'à la Seine; après avoir, pour délivrer Paris des eaux torrentielles de Montmartre et pour donner écoulement à cette mare fluviale de neuf hectares qui croupissait près de la barrière des Martyrs; après avoir, disons-nous, construit la ligne d'égouts de la barrière Blanche au chemin d'Aubervilliers, en quatre mois, jour et nuit, à une profondeur de onze mètres; après avoir, chose qu'on n'avait pas vue encore, exécuté souterrainement un égout rue Barre-du-Bec, sans tranchée, à six mètres au-dessous du sol, le conducteur Monnot est mort. Après avoir voûté trois mille mètres d'égouts sur tous les points de la ville, de la rue Traversière-Saint-Antoine à la rue de Lourcine, après avoir, par le branchement de l'Arbalète, déchargé des inondations pluviales le carrefour Censier-Mouffetard, après avoir bâti l'égout Saint-Georges sur enrochement et béton dans des sables fluides, après avoir dirigé le redoutable abaissement de radier du branchement Notre-Dame-de-Nazareth, l'ingénieur Duleau est mort. Il n’y a pas de bulletin pour ces actes de bravoure-là, plus utiles pourtant que la tuerie bête des champs de bataille.

Les égouts de Paris, en 1832, étaient loin d’être ce qu’ils sont aujourd’hui. Bruneseau avait donné le branle, mais il fallait le choléra pour déterminer la vaste reconstruction qui a eu lieu depuis. Il est surprenant de dire, par exemple, qu’en 1821, une partie de l’égout de ceinture, dit Grand Canal, comme à Venise, croupissait encore à ciel ouvert, rue des Gourdes. Ce n’est qu’en 1823 que la ville de Paris a trouvé dans son gousset les deux cent soixante-six mille quatre-vingts francs six centimes nécessaires à la couverture de cette turpitude. Les trois puits absorbants du Combat, de la Cunette et de Saint-Mandé, avec leurs dégorgeoirs, leurs appareils, leurs puisards et leurs branchements dépuratoires, ne datent que de 1836. La voirie intestinale de Paris a été refaite à neuf et, comme nous l’avons dit, plus que décuplée depuis un quart de siècle.

Il y a trente ans, à l’époque de l’insurrection des 5 et 6 juin, c’était encore, dans beaucoup d’endroits, presque l’ancien égout. Un très grand nombre de rues, aujourd’hui bombées, étaient alors des chaussées fendues. On voyait très souvent, au point déclive où les versants d’une rue ou d’un carrefour aboutissaient, de larges grilles carrées à gros barreaux dont le fer luisait fourbu par les pas de la foule, dangereuses et glissantes aux voitures et faisant abattre les chevaux. La langue officielle des ponts et chaussées donnait à ces points déclives et à ces grilles le nom expressif de *cassis*. En 1832, dans une foule de rues, rue de l’Étoile, rue Saint-Louis, rue du Temple, rue Vieille-du-Temple, rue Notre-Dame-de-Nazareth, rue Folie-Méricourt, quai aux Fleurs, rue du Petit-Musc, rue de Normandie, rue Pont-aux-Biches, rue des Marais, faubourg Saint-Martin, rue Notre-Dame-des-Victoires, faubourg Montmartre, rue Grange-Batelière, aux Champs-Élysées, rue Jacob, rue de Tournon, le vieux cloaque gothique montrait encore cyniquement ses gueules. C’étaient d’énormes hiatus de pierre à cagnards, quelquefois entourés de bornes, avec une effronterie monumentale.

Paris, en 1806, en était encore presque au chiffre d’égouts constaté en mai 1663: cinq mille trois cent vingt-huit toises. Après Bruneseau, le 1^er^ janvier 1832, il en avait quarante mille trois cents mètres. De 1806 à 1831, on avait bâti annuellement, en moyenne, sept cent cinquante mètres; depuis on a construit tous les ans huit et même dix mille mètres de galeries, en maçonnerie de petits matériaux à bain de chaux hydraulique sur fondation de béton. À deux cents francs le mètre, les soixante lieues d’égouts du Paris actuel représentent quarante-huit millions.

Outre le progrès économique que nous avons indiqué en commençant, de graves problèmes d’hygiène publique se rattachent à cette immense question: l’égout de Paris.

Paris est entre deux nappes, une nappe d’eau et une nappe d’air. La nappe d’eau, gisante à une assez grande profondeur souterraine, mais déjà tâtée par deux forages, est fournie par la couche de grès vert située entre la craie et le calcaire jurassique; cette couche peut être représentée par un disque de vingt-cinq lieues de rayon; une foule de rivières et de ruisseaux y suintent; on boit la Seine, la Marne, l’Yonne, l’Oise, l’Aisne, le Cher, la Vienne et la Loire dans un verre d’eau du puits de Grenelle. La nappe d’eau est salubre, elle vient du ciel d’abord, de la terre ensuite; la nappe d’air est malsaine, elle vient de l’égout. Tous les miasmes du cloaque se mêlent à la respiration de la ville; de là cette mauvaise haleine. L’air pris au-dessus d’un fumier, ceci a été scientifiquement établi, est plus pur que l’air pris au-dessus de Paris. Dans un temps donné, le progrès aidant, les mécanismes se perfectionnant, et la clarté se faisant, on emploiera la nappe d’eau à purifier la nappe d’air. C’est-à-dire à laver l’égout. On sait que par lavage de l’égout, nous entendons restitution de la fange à la terre; renvoi du fumier au sol et de l’engrais aux champs. Il y aura, par ce simple fait, pour toute la communauté sociale, diminution de misère et augmentation de santé. À l’heure où nous sommes, le rayonnement des maladies de Paris va à cinquante lieues autour du Louvre, pris comme moyeu de cette route pestilentielle.

On pourrait dire que, depuis dix siècles, le cloaque est la maladie de Paris. L’égout est le vice que la ville a dans le sang. L’instinct populaire ne s’y est jamais trompé. Le métier d’égoutier était autrefois presque aussi périlleux, et presque aussi répugnant au peuple, que le métier d’équarrisseur si longtemps frappé d’horreur et abandonné au bourreau. Il fallait une haute paye pour décider un maçon à disparaître dans cette sape fétide; l’échelle du puisatier hésitait à s’y plonger; on disait proverbialement: *descendre dans l’égout, c’est entrer dans la fosse*; et toutes sortes de légendes hideuses, nous l’avons dit, couvraient d’épouvante ce colossal évier; sentine redoutée qui a la trace des révolutions du globe comme des révolutions des hommes, et où l’on trouve des vestiges de tous les cataclysmes depuis le coquillage du déluge jusqu’au haillon de Marat.

Livre troisième — La boue, mais l’âme

Chapitre I

Le cloaque et ses surprises

C’est dans l’égout de Paris que se trouvait Jean Valjean.

Ressemblance de plus de Paris avec la mer. Comme dans l’océan, le plongeur peut y disparaître.

La transition était inouïe. Au milieu même de la ville, Jean Valjean était sorti de la ville; et, en un clin d’œil, le temps de lever un couvercle et de le refermer, il avait passé du plein jour à l’obscurité complète, de midi à minuit, du fracas au silence, du tourbillon des tonnerres à la stagnation de la tombe, et, par une péripétie bien plus prodigieuse encore que celle de la rue Polonceau, du plus extrême péril à la sécurité la plus absolue.

Chute brusque dans une cave; disparition dans l’oubliette de Paris; quitter cette rue où la mort était partout pour cette espèce de sépulcre où il y avait la vie; ce fut un instant étrange. Il resta quelques secondes comme étourdi; écoutant, stupéfait. La chausse-trape du salut s’était subitement ouverte sous lui. La bonté céleste l’avait en quelque sorte pris par trahison. Adorables embuscades de la providence!

Seulement le blessé ne remuait point, et Jean Valjean ne savait pas si ce qu’il emportait dans cette fosse était un vivant ou un mort.

Sa première sensation fut l’aveuglement. Brusquement il ne vit plus rien. Il lui sembla aussi qu’en une minute il était devenu sourd. Il n’entendait plus rien. Le frénétique orage de meurtre qui se déchaînait à quelques pieds au-dessus de lui n’arrivait jusqu’à lui, nous l’avons dit, grâce à l’épaisseur de terre qui l’en séparait, qu’éteint et indistinct, et comme une rumeur dans une profondeur. Il sentait que c’était solide sous ses pieds; voilà tout; mais cela suffisait. Il étendit un bras, puis l’autre, et toucha le mur des deux côtés, et reconnut que le couloir était étroit; il glissa, et reconnut que la dalle était mouillée. Il avança un pied avec précaution, craignant un trou, un puisard, quelque gouffre; il constata que le dallage se prolongeait. Une bouffée de fétidité l’avertit du lieu où il était.

Au bout de quelques instants, il n’était plus aveugle. Un peu de lumière tombait du soupirail par où il s’était glissé, et son regard s’était fait à cette cave. Il commença à distinguer quelque chose. Le couloir où il s’était terré, nul autre mot n’exprime mieux la situation, était muré derrière lui. C’était un de ces culs-de-sac que la langue spéciale appelle branchements. Devant lui, il y avait un autre mur, un mur de nuit. La clarté du soupirail expirait à dix ou douze pas du point où était Jean Valjean, et faisait à peine une blancheur blafarde sur quelques mètres de la paroi humide de l’égout. Au delà l’opacité était massive; y pénétrer paraissait horrible, et l’entrée y semblait un engloutissement. On pouvait s’enfoncer pourtant dans cette muraille de brume, et il le fallait. Il fallait même se hâter. Jean Valjean songea que cette grille, aperçue par lui sous les pavés, pouvait l’être par les soldats, et que tout tenait à ce hasard. Ils pouvaient descendre eux aussi dans ce puits et le fouiller. Il n’y avait pas une minute à perdre. Il avait déposé Marius sur le sol, il le ramassa, ceci est encore le mot vrai, le reprit sur ses épaules et se mit en marche. Il entra résolument dans cette obscurité.

La réalité est qu’ils étaient moins sauvés que Jean Valjean ne le croyait. Des périls d’un autre genre et non moins grands les attendaient peut-être. Après le tourbillon fulgurant du combat, la caverne des miasmes et des pièges; après le chaos, le cloaque. Jean Valjean était tombé d’un cercle de l’enfer dans l’autre.

Quand il eut fait cinquante pas, il fallut s’arrêter. Une question se présenta. Le couloir aboutissait à un autre boyau qu’il rencontrait transversalement. Là s’offraient deux voies. Laquelle prendre? fallait-il tourner à gauche ou à droite? Comment s’orienter dans ce labyrinthe noir? Ce labyrinthe, nous l’avons fait remarquer, a un fil; c’est sa pente. Suivre la pente, c’est aller à la rivière.

Jean Valjean le comprit sur-le-champ.

Il se dit qu’il était probablement dans l’égout des Halles; que, s’il choisissait la gauche et suivait la pente, il arriverait avant un quart d’heure à quelque embouchure sur la Seine entre le Pont-au-Change et le Pont-Neuf, c’est-à-dire à une apparition en plein jour sur le point le plus peuplé de Paris. Peut-être aboutirait-il à quelque cagnard de carrefour. Stupeur des passants de voir deux hommes sanglants sortir de terre sous leurs pieds. Survenue des sergents de ville, prise d’armes du corps de garde voisin. On serait saisi avant d’être sorti. Il valait mieux s’enfoncer dans le dédale, se fier à cette noirceur, et s’en remettre à la providence quant à l’issue.

Il remonta la pente et prit à droite.

Quand il eut tourné l’angle de la galerie, la lointaine lueur du soupirail disparut, le rideau d’obscurité retomba sur lui et il redevint aveugle. Il n’en avança pas moins, et aussi rapidement qu’il put. Les deux bras de Marius étaient passés autour de son cou et les pieds pendaient derrière lui. Il tenait les deux bras d’une main et tâtait le mur de l’autre. La joue de Marius touchait la sienne et s’y collait, étant sanglante. Il sentait couler sur lui et pénétrer sous ses vêtements un ruisseau tiède qui venait de Marius. Cependant une chaleur humide à son oreille que touchait la bouche du blessé indiquait de la respiration, et par conséquent de la vie. Le couloir où Jean Valjean cheminait maintenant était moins étroit que le premier. Jean Valjean y marchait assez péniblement. Les pluies de la veille n’étaient pas encore écoulées et faisaient un petit torrent au centre du radier, et il était forcé de se serrer contre le mur pour ne pas avoir les pieds dans l’eau. Il allait ainsi ténébreusement. Il ressemblait aux êtres de nuit tâtonnant dans l’invisible et souterrainement perdus dans les veines de l’ombre.

Pourtant, peu à peu, soit que des soupiraux lointains envoyassent un peu de lueur flottante dans cette brume opaque, soit que ses yeux s’accoutumassent à l’obscurité, il lui revint quelque vision vague, et il recommença à se rendre confusément compte, tantôt de la muraille à laquelle il touchait, tantôt de la voûte sous laquelle il passait. La pupille se dilate dans la nuit et finit par y trouver du jour, de même que l’âme se dilate dans le malheur et finit par y trouver Dieu.

Se diriger était malaisé.

Le tracé des égouts répercute, pour ainsi dire, le tracé des rues qui lui est superposé. Il y avait dans le Paris d’alors deux mille deux cents rues. Qu’on se figure là-dessous cette forêt de branches ténébreuses qu’on nomme l’égout. Le système d’égouts existant à cette époque, mis bout à bout, eût donné une longueur de onze lieues. Nous avons dit plus haut que le réseau actuel, grâce à l’activité spéciale des trente dernières années, n’a pas moins de soixante lieues.

Jean Valjean commença par se tromper. Il crut être sous la rue Saint-Denis, et il était fâcheux qu’il n’y fût pas. Il y a sous la rue Saint-Denis un vieil égout en pierre qui date de Louis XIII et qui va droit à l’égout collecteur dit Grand Égout, avec un seul coude, à droite, à la hauteur de l’ancienne cour des Miracles, et un seul embranchement, l’égout Saint-Martin, dont les quatre bras se coupent en croix. Mais le boyau de la Petite-Truanderie dont l’entrée était près du cabaret de Corinthe n’a jamais communiqué avec le souterrain de la rue Saint-Denis; il aboutit à l’égout Montmartre et c’est là que Jean Valjean était engagé. Là, les occasions de se perdre abondaient. L’égout Montmartre est un des plus dédaléens du vieux réseau. Heureusement Jean Valjean avait laissé derrière lui l’égout des Halles dont le plan géométral figure une foule de mâts de perroquet enchevêtrés; mais il avait devant lui plus d’une rencontre embarrassante et plus d’un coin de rue — car ce sont des rues — s’offrant dans l’obscurité comme un point d’interrogation: premièrement, à sa gauche, le vaste égout Plâtrière, espèce de casse-tête chinois, poussant et brouillant son chaos de T et de Z sous l’hôtel des Postes et sous la rotonde de la halle aux blés jusqu’à la Seine où il se termine en Y; deuxièmement, à sa droite, le corridor courbe de la rue du Cadran avec ses trois dents qui sont autant d’impasses; troisièmement, à sa gauche, l’embranchement du Mail, compliqué, presque à l’entrée, d’une espèce de fourche, et allant de zigzag en zigzag aboutir à la grande crypte exutoire du Louvre tronçonnée et ramifiée dans tous les sens; enfin, à droite, le couloir cul-de-sac de la rue des Jeûneurs, sans compter de petits réduits çà et là, avant d’arriver à l’égout de ceinture, lequel seul pouvait le conduire à quelque issue assez lointaine pour être sûre.

Si Jean Valjean eût eu quelque notion de tout ce que nous indiquons ici, il se fût vite aperçu, rien qu’en tâtant la muraille, qu’il n’était pas dans la galerie souterraine de la rue Saint-Denis. Au lieu de la vieille pierre de taille, au lieu de l’ancienne architecture, hautaine et royale jusque dans l’égout, avec radier et assises courantes en granit et mortier de chaux grasse, laquelle coûtait huit cents livres la toise, il eût senti sous sa main le bon marché contemporain, l’expédient économique, la meulière à bain de mortier hydraulique sur couche de béton qui coûte deux cents francs le mètre, la maçonnerie bourgeoise dite à *petits matériaux*; mais il ne savait rien de tout cela.

Il allait devant lui, avec anxiété, mais avec calme, ne voyant rien, ne sachant rien, plongé dans le hasard, c’est-à-dire englouti dans la providence.

Par degrés, disons-le, quelque horreur le gagnait. L’ombre qui l’enveloppait entrait dans son esprit. Il marchait dans une énigme. Cet aqueduc du cloaque est redoutable; il s’entre-croise vertigineusement. C’est une chose lugubre d’être pris dans ce Paris de ténèbres. Jean Valjean était obligé de trouver et presque d’inventer sa route sans la voir. Dans cet inconnu, chaque pas qu’il risquait pouvait être le dernier. Comment sortirait-il de là? Trouverait-il une issue? La trouverait-il à temps? Cette colossale éponge souterraine aux alvéoles de pierre se laisserait-elle pénétrer et percer? Y rencontrerait-on quelque nœud inattendu d’obscurité? Arriverait-on à l’inextricable et à l’infranchissable? Marius y mourrait-il d’hémorragie, et lui de faim? Finiraient-ils par se perdre là tous les deux, et par faire deux squelettes dans un coin de cette nuit? Il l’ignorait. Il se demandait tout cela et ne pouvait se répondre. L’intestin de Paris est un précipice. Comme le prophète, il était dans le ventre du monstre.

Il eut brusquement une surprise. À l’instant le plus imprévu, et sans avoir cessé de marcher en ligne droite, il s’aperçut qu’il ne montait plus; l’eau du ruisseau lui battait les talons au lieu de lui venir sur la pointe des pieds. L’égout maintenant descendait. Pourquoi? Allait-il donc arriver soudainement à la Seine? Ce danger était grand, mais le péril de reculer l’était plus encore. Il continua d’avancer.

Ce n’était point vers la Seine qu’il allait. Le dos d’âne que fait le sol de Paris sur la rive droite vide un de ses versants dans la Seine et l’autre dans le Grand Égout. La crête de ce dos d’âne qui détermine la division des eaux dessine une ligne très capricieuse. Le point culminant, qui est le lieu de partage des écoulements, est, dans l’égout Sainte-Avoye, au delà de la rue Michel-le-Comte, dans l’égout du Louvre, près des boulevards, et dans l’égout Montmartre, près des Halles. C’est à ce point culminant que Jean Valjean était arrivé. Il se dirigeait vers l’égout de ceinture; il était dans le bon chemin. Mais il n’en savait rien.

Chaque fois qu’il rencontrait un embranchement, il en tâtait les angles, et s’il trouvait l’ouverture qui s’offrait moins large que le corridor où il était, il n’entrait pas et continuait sa route, jugeant avec raison que toute voie plus étroite devait aboutir à un cul-de-sac et ne pouvait que l’éloigner du but, c’est-à-dire de l’issue. Il évita ainsi le quadruple piège qui lui était tendu dans l’obscurité par les quatre dédales que nous venons d’énumérer.

À un certain moment il reconnut qu’il sortait de dessous le Paris pétrifié par l’émeute, où les barricades avaient supprimé la circulation et qu’il rentrait sous le Paris vivant et normal. Il eut subitement au-dessus de sa tête comme un bruit de foudre, lointain, mais continu. C’était le roulement des voitures.

Il marchait depuis une demi-heure environ, du moins au calcul qu’il faisait en lui-même, et n’avait pas encore songé à se reposer; seulement il avait changé la main qui soutenait Marius. L’obscurité était plus profonde que jamais, mais cette profondeur le rassurait.

Tout à coup il vit son ombre devant lui. Elle se découpait sur une faible rougeur presque indistincte qui empourprait vaguement le radier à ses pieds et la voûte sur sa tête, et qui glissait à sa droite et à sa gauche sur les deux murailles visqueuses du corridor. Stupéfait, il se retourna.

Derrière lui, dans la partie du couloir qu'il venait de dépasser, à une distance qui lui parut immense, flamboyait, rayant l'épaisseur obscure, une sorte d'astre horrible qui avait l'air de le regarder.

C'était la sombre étoile de la police qui se levait dans l'égout.

Derrière cette étoile remuaient confusément huit ou dix formes noires, droites, indistinctes, terribles.

Chapitre II

Explication

Dans la journée du 6 juin, une battue des égouts avait été ordonnée. On craignit qu'ils ne fussent pris pour refuge par les vaincus, et le préfet Gisquet dut fouiller le Paris occulte pendant que le général Bugeaud balayait le Paris public; double opération connexe qui exigea une double stratégie de la force publique représentée en haut par l'armée et en bas par la police. Trois pelotons d'agents et d'égoutiers explorèrent la voirie souterraine de Paris, le premier, rive droite, le deuxième, rive gauche, le troisième, dans la Cité.

Les agents étaient armés de carabines, de casse-tête, d'épées et de poignards.

Ce qui était en ce moment dirigé sur Jean Valjean, c'était la lanterne de la ronde de la rive droite.

Cette ronde venait de visiter la galerie courbe et les trois impasses qui sont sous la rue du Cadran. Pendant qu'elle promenait son falot au fond de ces impasses, Jean Valjean avait rencontré sur son chemin l'entrée de la galerie, l'avait reconnue plus étroite que le couloir principal et n'y avait point pénétré. Il avait passé outre. Les hommes de police, en ressortant de la galerie du Cadran, avaient cru entendre un bruit de pas dans la direction de l'égout de ceinture. C'étaient les pas de Jean Valjean en effet. Le sergent chef de ronde avait élevé sa lanterne, et l'escouade s'était mise à regarder dans le brouillard du côté d'où était venu le bruit.

Ce fut pour Jean Valjean une minute inexprimable.

Heureusement, s'il voyait bien la lanterne, la lanterne le voyait mal. Elle était la lumière et il était l'ombre. Il était très loin, et mêlé à la noirceur du lieu. Il se rencogna le long du mur et s'arrêta.

Du reste, il ne se rendait pas compte de ce qui se mouvait là derrière lui. L'insomnie, le défaut de nourriture, les émotions, l'avaient fait passer, lui aussi, à l'état visionnaire. Il voyait un flamboiement, et autour de ce flamboiement, des larves. Qu'était-ce? Il ne comprenait pas.

Jean Valjean s'étant arrêté, le bruit avait cessé.

Les hommes de la ronde écoutaient et n'entendaient rien, ils regardaient et ne voyaient rien. Ils se consultèrent.

Il y avait à cette époque sur ce point de l’égout Montmartre une espèce de carrefour dit *de service* qu’on a supprimé depuis à cause du petit lac intérieur qu’y formait en s’y engorgeant dans les forts orages, le torrent des eaux pluviales. La ronde put se pelotonner dans ce carrefour.

Jean Valjean vit ces larves faire une sorte de cercle. Ces têtes de dogues se rapprochèrent et chuchotèrent.

Le résultat de ce conseil tenu par les chiens de garde fut qu’on s’était trompé, qu’il n’y avait pas eu de bruit, qu’il n’y avait là personne, qu’il était inutile de s’engager dans l’égout de ceinture, que ce serait du temps perdu, mais qu’il fallait se hâter d’aller vers Saint-Merry, que s’il y avait quelque chose à faire et quelque «bousingot» à dépister, c’était dans ce quartier-là.

De temps en temps les partis remettent des semelles neuves à leurs vieilles injures. En 1832, le mot *bousingot* faisait l’intérim entre le mot *jacobin* qui était éculé, et le mot *démagogue* alors presque inusité et qui a fait depuis un si excellent service.

Le sergent donna l’ordre d’obliquer à gauche vers le versant de la Seine. S’ils eussent eu l’idée de se diviser en deux escouades et d’aller dans les deux sens, Jean Valjean était saisi. Cela tint à ce fil. Il est probable que les instructions de la préfecture, prévoyant un cas de combat et les insurgés en nombre, défendaient à la ronde de se morceler. La ronde se remit en marche, laissant derrière elle Jean Valjean. De tout ce mouvement Jean Valjean ne perçut rien, sinon l’éclipse de la lanterne qui se retourna subitement.

Avant de s’en aller, le sergent, pour l’acquit de la conscience de la police, déchargea sa carabine du côté qu’on abandonnait, dans la direction de Jean Valjean. La détonation roula d’écho en écho dans la crypte comme le borborygme de ce boyau titanique. Un plâtras qui tomba dans le ruisseau et fit clapoter l’eau à quelques pas de Jean Valjean, l’avertit que la balle avait frappé la voûte au-dessus de sa tête.

Des pas mesurés et lents résonnèrent quelque temps sur le radier, de plus en plus amortis par l’augmentation progressive de l’éloignement, le groupe des formes noires s’enfonça, une lueur oscilla et flotta, faisant à la voûte un cintre rougeâtre qui décrut, puis disparut, le silence redevint profond, l’obscurité redevint complète, la cécité et la surdité reprirent possession des ténèbres; et Jean Valjean, n’osant encore remuer, demeura longtemps adossé au mur, l’oreille tendue, la prunelle dilatée, regardant l’évanouissement de cette patrouille de fantômes.

Chapitre III

L’homme filé

Il faut rendre à la police de ce temps-là cette justice que, même dans les plus graves conjonctures publiques, elle accomplissait imperturbablement son devoir de voirie et de surveillance. Une émeute n’était point à ses yeux un prétexte pour laisser aux malfaiteurs la bride sur le cou, et pour négliger la société par la raison que le gouvernement était en péril. Le service ordinaire se faisait correctement à travers le service extraordinaire, et n’en était pas troublé. Au milieu d’un incalculable événement politique commencé, sous la pression d’une révolution possible, sans se laisser distraire par l’insurrection et la barricade, un agent «filait» un voleur.

C’était précisément quelque chose de pareil qui se passait dans l’après-midi du 6 juin au bord de la Seine, sur la berge de la rive droite, un peu au delà du pont des Invalides.

Il n’y a plus là de berge aujourd’hui. L’aspect des lieux a changé.

Sur cette berge, deux hommes séparés par une certaine distance semblaient s’observer, l’un évitant l’autre. Celui qui allait en avant tâchait de s’éloigner, celui qui venait par derrière tâchait de se rapprocher.

C’était comme une partie d’échecs qui se jouait de loin et silencieusement. Ni l’un ni l’autre ne semblait se presser, et ils marchaient lentement tous les deux, comme si chacun d’eux craignait de faire par trop de hâte doubler le pas à son partenaire.

On eût dit un appétit qui suit une proie, sans avoir l’air de le faire exprès. La proie était sournoise et se tenait sur ses gardes.

Les proportions voulues entre la fouine traquée et le dogue traqueur étaient observées. Celui qui tâchait d’échapper avait peu d’encolure et une chétive mine; celui qui tâchait d’empoigner, gaillard de haute stature, était de rude aspect et devait être de rude rencontre.

Le premier, se sentant le plus faible, évitait le second; mais il l’évitait d’une façon profondément furieuse; qui eût pu l’observer eût vu dans ses yeux la sombre hostilité de la fuite, et toute la menace qu’il y a dans la crainte.

La berge était solitaire; il n’y avait point de passant; pas même de batelier ni de débardeur dans les chalands amarrés çà et là.

On ne pouvait apercevoir aisément ces deux hommes que du quai en face, et pour qui les eût examinés à cette distance, l'homme qui allait devant eût apparu comme un être hérissé, déguenillé et oblique, inquiet et grelottant sous une blouse en haillons, et l'autre comme une personne classique et officielle, portant la redingote de l'autorité boutonnée jusqu'au menton.

Le lecteur reconnaîtrait peut-être ces deux hommes, s'il les voyait de plus près.

Quel était le but du dernier?

Probablement d'arriver à vêtir le premier plus chaudement.

Quand un homme habillé par l'État poursuit un homme en guenilles, c'est afin d'en faire aussi un homme habillé par l'État. Seulement la couleur est toute la question. Être habillé de bleu, c'est glorieux; être habillé de rouge, c'est désagréable.

Il y a une pourpre d'en bas.

C'est probablement quelque désagrément et quelque pourpre de ce genre que le premier désirait esquiver.

Si l'autre le laissait marcher devant et ne le saisissait pas encore, c'était, selon toute apparence, dans l'espoir de le voir aboutir à quelque rendez-vous significatif et à quelque groupe de bonne prise. Cette opération délicate s'appelle «la filature».

Ce qui rend cette conjecture tout à fait probable, c'est que l'homme boutonné, apercevant de la berge sur le quai un fiacre qui passait à vide, fit signe au cocher; le cocher comprit, reconnut évidemment à qui il avait affaire, tourna bride et se mit à suivre au pas du haut du quai les deux hommes. Ceci ne fut pas aperçu du personnage louche et déchiré qui allait en avant.

Le fiacre roulait le long des arbres des Champs-Élysées. On voyait passer au-dessus du parapet le buste du cocher, son fouet à la main.

Une des instructions secrètes de la police aux agents contient cet article: — «Avoir toujours à portée une voiture de place, en cas».

Tout en manœuvrant chacun de leur côté avec une stratégie irréprochable, ces deux hommes approchaient d'une rampe du quai descendant jusqu'à la berge qui permettait alors aux cochers de fiacre arrivant de Passy de venir à la rivière faire boire leurs chevaux. Cette rampe a été supprimée depuis, pour la symétrie; les chevaux crèvent de soif, mais l'œil est flatté.

Il était vraisemblable que l’homme en blouse allait monter par cette rampe afin d’essayer de s’échapper dans les Champs-Élysées, lieu orné d’arbres, mais en revanche fort croisé d’agents de police, et où l’autre aurait aisément main-forte.

Ce point du quai est fort peu éloigné de la maison apportée de Moret à Paris en 1824 par le colonel Brack, et dite maison de François Ier. Un corps de garde est là tout près.

À la grande surprise de son observateur, l’homme traqué ne prit point par la rampe de l’abreuvoir. Il continua de s’avancer sur la berge le long du quai.

Sa position devenait visiblement critique.

À moins de se jeter à la Seine, qu’allait-il faire?

Aucun moyen désormais de remonter sur le quai; plus de rampe et pas d’escalier; et l’on était tout près de l’endroit, marqué par le coude de la Seine vers le pont d’Iéna, où la berge, de plus en plus rétrécie, finissait en langue mince et se perdait sous l’eau. Là, il allait inévitablement se trouver bloqué entre le mur à pic à sa droite, la rivière à gauche et en face, et l’autorité sur ses talons.

Il est vrai que cette fin de la berge était masquée au regard par un monceau de déblais de six à sept pieds de haut, produit d’on ne sait quelle démolition. Mais cet homme espérait-il se cacher utilement derrière ce tas de gravats qu’il suffisait de tourner? L’expédient eût été puéril. Il n’y songeait certainement pas. L’innocence des voleurs ne va point jusque-là.

Le tas de déblais faisait au bord de l’eau une sorte d’éminence qui se prolongeait en promontoire jusqu’à la muraille du quai.

L’homme suivi arriva à cette petite colline et la doubla, de sorte qu’il cessa d’être aperçu par l’autre.

Celui-ci, ne voyant pas, n’était pas vu; il en profita pour abandonner toute dissimulation et pour marcher très rapidement. En quelques instants il fut au monceau de déblais et le tourna. Là, il s’arrêta stupéfait. L’homme qu’il chassait n’était plus là.

Éclipse totale de l’homme en blouse.

La berge n’avait guère à partir du monceau de déblais qu’une longueur d’une trentaine de pas, puis elle plongeait sous l’eau qui venait battre le mur du quai.

Le fuyard n’aurait pu se jeter à la Seine ni escalader le quai sans être vu par celui qui le suivait. Qu’était-il devenu?

L’homme à la redingote boutonnée marcha jusqu’à l’extrémité de la berge, et y resta un moment pensif, les poings convulsifs, l’œil furetant. Tout à coup il se frappa le front. Il venait d’apercevoir, au point où finissait la terre et où l’eau commençait, une grille de fer large et basse, cintrée, garnie d’une épaisse serrure et de trois gonds massifs. Cette grille, sorte de porte percée au bas du quai, s’ouvrait sur la rivière autant que sur la berge. Un ruisseau noirâtre passait dessous. Ce ruisseau se dégorgeait dans la Seine.

Au delà de ses lourds barreaux rouillés on distinguait une sorte de corridor voûté et obscur.

L’homme croisa les bras et regarda la grille d’un air de reproche.

Ce regard ne suffisant pas, il essaya de la pousser; il la secoua, elle résista solidement. Il était probable qu’elle venait d’être ouverte, quoiqu’on n’eût entendu aucun bruit, chose singulière d’une grille si rouillée; mais il était certain qu’elle avait été refermée. Cela indiquait que celui devant qui cette porte venait de tourner avait non un crochet, mais une clef.

Cette évidence éclata tout de suite à l’esprit de l’homme qui s’efforçait d’ébranler la grille et lui arracha cet épiphonème indigné:

— Voilà qui est fort! une clef du gouvernement!

Puis, se calmant immédiatement, il exprima tout un monde d’idées intérieures par cette bouffée de monosyllabes accentués presque ironiquement:

— Tiens! tiens! tiens! tiens!

Cela dit, espérant on ne sait quoi, ou voir ressortir l’homme, ou en voir entrer d’autres, il se posta aux aguets derrière le tas de déblais, avec la rage patiente du chien d’arrêt.

De son côté, le fiacre, qui se réglait sur toutes ses allures, avait fait halte au-dessus de lui près du parapet. Le cocher, prévoyant une longue station, emboîta le museau de ses chevaux dans le sac d’avoine humide en bas, si connu des Parisiens, auxquels les gouvernements, soit dit par parenthèse, le mettent quelquefois. Les rares passants du pont d’Iéna, avant de s’éloigner, tournaient la tête pour regarder un moment ces deux détails du paysage immobiles, l’homme sur la berge, le fiacre sur le quai.

Chapitre IV

Lui aussi porte sa croix

Jean Valjean avait repris sa marche et ne s’était plus arrêté. Cette marche était de plus en plus laborieuse. Le niveau de ces voûtes varie; la hauteur moyenne est d’environ cinq pieds six pouces, et a été calculée pour la taille d’un homme; Jean Valjean était forcé de se courber pour ne pas heurter Marius à la voûte; il fallait à chaque instant se baisser, puis se redresser, tâter sans cesse le mur. La moiteur des pierres et la viscosité du radier en faisaient de mauvais points d’appui, soit pour la main, soit pour le pied. Il trébuchait dans le hideux fumier de la ville. Les reflets intermittents des soupiraux n’apparaissaient qu’à de très longs intervalles, et si blêmes que le plein soleil y semblait clair de lune; tout le reste était brouillard, miasme, opacité, noirceur. Jean Valjean avait faim et soif; soif surtout; et c’est là, comme la mer, un lieu plein d’eau où l’on ne peut boire.

Sa force, qui était prodigieuse, on le sait, et fort peu diminuée par l’âge, grâce à sa vie chaste et sobre, commençait pourtant à fléchir. La fatigue lui venait, et la force en décroissant faisait croître le poids du fardeau. Marius, mort peut-être, pesait comme pèsent les corps inertes. Jean Valjean le soutenait de façon que la poitrine ne fût pas gênée et que la respiration pût toujours passer le mieux possible. Il sentait entre ses jambes le glissement rapide des rats. Un d’eux fut effaré au point de le mordre. Il lui venait de temps en temps par les bavettes des bouches de l’égout un souffle d’air frais qui le ranimait.

Il pouvait être trois heures de l’après-midi quand il arriva à l’égout de ceinture.

Il fut d’abord étonné de cet élargissement subit. Il se trouva brusquement dans une galerie dont ses mains étendues n’atteignaient point les deux murs et sous une voûte que sa tête ne touchait pas. Le Grand Égout en effet a huit pieds de large sur sept de haut.

Au point où l’égout Montmartre rejoint le Grand Égout, deux autres galeries souterraines, celle de la rue de Provence et celle de l’Abattoir, viennent faire un carrefour. Entre ces quatre voies, un moins sagace eût été indécis. Jean Valjean prit la plus large, c’est-à-dire l’égout de ceinture. Mais ici revenait la question: descendre, ou monter? Il pensa que la situation pressait, et qu’il fallait, à tout risque, gagner maintenant la Seine. En d’autres termes, descendre. Il tourna à gauche.

Bien lui en prit. Car ce serait une erreur de croire que l’égout de ceinture a deux issues, l’une vers Bercy, l’autre vers Passy, et qu’il est, comme l’indique son nom, la ceinture souterraine du Paris de la rive droite. Le Grand Égout, qui n’est, il faut s’en souvenir, autre chose que l’ancien ruisseau Ménilmontant, aboutit, si on le remonte, à un cul-de-sac, c’est-à-dire à son ancien point de départ, qui fut sa source, au pied de la butte Ménilmontant. Il n’a point de communication directe avec le branchement qui ramasse les eaux de Paris à partir du quartier Popincourt, et qui se jette dans la Seine par l’égout Amelot au-dessus de l’ancienne île Louviers. Ce branchement, qui complète l’égout collecteur, en est séparé, sous la rue Ménilmontant même, par un massif qui marque le point de partage des eaux en amont et en aval. Si Jean Valjean eût remonté la galerie, il fût arrivé, après mille efforts, épuisé de fatigue, expirant, dans les ténèbres, à une muraille. Il était perdu.

À la rigueur, en revenant un peu sur ses pas, en s’engageant dans le couloir des Filles-du-Calvaire, à la condition de ne pas hésiter à la patte d’oie souterraine du carrefour Boucherat, en prenant le corridor Saint-Louis, puis, à gauche, le boyau Saint-Gilles, puis en tournant à droite et en évitant la galerie Saint-Sébastien, il eût pu gagner l’égout Amelot, et de là, pourvu qu’il ne s’égarât point dans l’espèce d’F qui est sous la Bastille, atteindre l’issue sur la Seine près de l’Arsenal. Mais, pour cela, il eût fallu connaître à fond, et dans toutes ses ramifications et dans toutes ses percées, l’énorme madrépore de l’égout. Or, nous devons y insister, il ne savait rien de cette voirie effrayante où il cheminait; et, si on lui eût demandé dans quoi il était, il eût répondu: dans de la nuit.

Son instinct le servit bien. Descendre, c’était en effet le salut possible.

Il laissa à sa droite les deux couloirs qui se ramifient en forme de griffe sous la rue Laffitte et la rue Saint-Georges et le long corridor bifurqué de la chaussée d’Antin.

Un peu au-delà d’un affluent qui était vraisemblablement le branchement de la Madeleine, il fit halte. Il était très las. Un soupirail assez large, probablement le regard de la rue d’Anjou, donnait une lumière presque vive. Jean Valjean, avec la douceur de mouvements qu’aurait un frère pour son frère blessé, déposa Marius sur la banquette de l’égout. La face sanglante de Marius apparut sous la lueur blanche du soupirail comme au fond d’une tombe. Il avait les yeux fermés, les cheveux appliqués aux tempes comme des pinceaux séchés dans de la couleur rouge, les mains pendantes et mortes, les membres froids, du sang coagulé au coin des lèvres. Un caillot de sang s’était amassé dans le nœud de la cravate; la chemise entrait dans les plaies, le drap de l’habit frottait les coupures béantes de la chair vive. Jean Valjean, écartant du bout des doigts les vêtements, lui posa la main sur la poitrine; le cœur battait encore. Jean Valjean déchira sa chemise, banda les plaies le mieux qu’il put et arrêta le sang qui coulait; puis, se penchant dans ce demi-jour sur Marius toujours sans connaissance et presque sans souffle, il le regarda avec une inexprimable haine.

En dérangeant les vêtements de Marius, il avait trouvé dans les poches deux choses, le pain qui y était oublié depuis la veille, et le portefeuille de Marius. Il mangea le pain et ouvrit le portefeuille. Sur la première page, il trouva les quatre lignes écrites par Marius. On s’en souvient:

«Je m’appelle Marius Pontmercy. Porter mon cadavre chez mon grand-père M. Gillenormand, rue des Filles-du-Calvaire, no 6, au Marais.»

Jean Valjean lut, à la clarté du soupirail, ces quatre lignes, et resta un moment comme absorbé en lui-même, répétant à demi-voix: Rue des Filles-du-Calvaire, numéro six, monsieur Gillenormand. Il replaça le portefeuille dans la poche de Marius. Il avait mangé, la force lui était revenue; il reprit Marius sur son dos, lui appuya soigneusement la tête sur son épaule droite, et se remit à descendre l’égout.

Le Grand Égout, dirigé selon le thalweg de la vallée de Ménilmontant, a près de deux lieues de long. Il est pavé sur une notable partie de son parcours.

Ce flambeau du nom des rues de Paris dont nous éclairons pour le lecteur la marche souterraine de Jean Valjean, Jean Valjean ne l’avait pas. Rien ne lui disait quelle zone de la ville il traversait, ni quel trajet il avait fait. Seulement la pâleur croissante des flaques de lumière qu’il rencontrait de temps en temps lui indiqua que le soleil se retirait du pavé et que le jour ne tarderait pas à décliner; et le roulement des voitures au-dessus de sa tête, étant devenu de continu intermittent, puis ayant presque cessé, il en conclut qu’il n’était plus sous le Paris central et qu’il approchait de quelque région solitaire, voisine des boulevards extérieurs ou des quais extrêmes. Là où il y a moins de maisons et moins de rues, l’égout a moins de soupiraux.

L’obscurité s’épaississait autour de Jean Valjean. Il n’en continua pas moins d’avancer, tâtonnant dans l’ombre.

Cette ombre devint brusquement terrible.

Chapitre V

Pour le sable comme pour la femme il y a une finesse qui est perfidie

Il sentit qu’il entrait dans l’eau, et qu’il avait sous ses pieds, non plus du pavé, mais de la vase.

Il arrive parfois, sur de certaines côtes de Bretagne ou d’Écosse, qu’un homme, un voyageur ou un pêcheur, cheminant à marée basse sur la grève loin du rivage, s’aperçoit soudainement que depuis plusieurs minutes il marche avec quelque peine. La plage est sous ses pieds comme de la poix; la semelle s’y attache; ce n’est plus du sable, c’est de la glu. La grève est parfaitement sèche, mais à tous les pas qu’on fait, dès qu’on a levé le pied, l’empreinte qu’il laisse se remplit d’eau. L’œil, du reste, ne s’est aperçu d’aucun changement; l’immense plage est unie et tranquille, tout le sable a le même aspect, rien ne distingue le sol qui est solide du sol qui ne l’est plus; la petite nuée joyeuse des pucerons de mer continue de sauter tumultueusement sur les pieds du passant. L’homme suit sa route, va devant lui, appuie vers la terre, tâche de se rapprocher de la côte. Il n’est pas inquiet. Inquiet de quoi? Seulement il sent quelque chose comme si la lourdeur de ses pieds croissait à chaque pas qu’il fait. Brusquement, il enfonce. Il enfonce de deux ou trois pouces. Décidément il n’est pas dans la bonne route; il s’arrête pour s’orienter. Tout à coup il regarde à ses pieds. Ses pieds ont disparu. Le sable les couvre. Il retire ses pieds du sable, il veut revenir sur ses pas, il retourne en arrière; il enfonce plus profondément. Le sable lui vient à la cheville, il s’en arrache et se jette à gauche, le sable lui vient à mi-jambe, il se jette à droite, le sable lui vient aux jarrets. Alors il reconnaît avec une indicible terreur qu’il est engagé dans de la grève mouvante, et qu’il a sous lui le milieu effroyable où l’homme ne peut pas plus marcher que le poisson n’y peut nager. Il jette son fardeau s’il en a un, il s’allège comme un navire en détresse; il n’est déjà plus temps, le sable est au-dessus de ses genoux.

Il appelle, il agite son chapeau ou son mouchoir, le sable le gagne de plus en plus; si la grève est déserte, si la terre est trop loin, si le banc de sable est trop mal famé, s’il n’y a pas de héros dans les environs, c’est fini, il est condamné à l’enlisement. Il est condamné à cet épouvantable enterrement long, infaillible, implacable, impossible à retarder ni à hâter, qui dure des heures, qui n’en finit pas, qui vous prend debout, libre et en pleine santé, qui vous tire par les pieds, qui, à chaque effort que vous tentez, à chaque clameur que vous poussez, vous entraîne un peu plus bas, qui a l’air de vous punir de votre résistance par un redoublement d’étreinte, qui fait rentrer lentement l’homme dans la terre en lui laissant tout le temps de regarder l’horizon, les arbres, les campagnes vertes, les fumées des villages dans la plaine, les voiles des navires sur la mer, les oiseaux qui volent et qui chantent, le soleil, le ciel. L’enlisement, c’est le sépulcre qui se fait marée et qui monte du fond de la terre vers un vivant. Chaque minute est une ensevelisseuse inexorable. Le misérable essaye de s’asseoir, de se coucher, de ramper; tous les mouvements qu’il fait l’enterrent; il se redresse, il enfonce; il se sent engloutir; il hurle, implore, crie aux nuées, se tord les bras, désespère. Le voilà dans le sable jusqu’au ventre; le sable atteint la poitrine; il n’est plus qu’un buste. Il élève les mains, jette des gémissements furieux, crispe ses ongles sur la grève, veut se retenir à cette cendre, s’appuie sur les coudes pour s’arracher de cette gaine molle, sanglote frénétiquement; le sable monte. Le sable atteint les épaules, le sable atteint le cou; la face seule est visible maintenant. La bouche crie, le sable l’emplit; silence. Les yeux regardent encore, le sable les ferme; nuit. Puis le front décroît, un peu de chevelure frissonne au-dessus du sable; une main sort, troue la surface de la grève, remue et s’agite, et disparaît. Sinistre effacement d’un homme.

Quelquefois le cavalier s’enlise avec le cheval; quelquefois le charretier s’enlise avec la charrette; tout sombre sous la grève. C’est le naufrage ailleurs que dans l’eau. C’est la terre noyant l’homme. La terre, pénétrée d’océan, devient piège. Elle s’offre comme une plaine et s’ouvre comme une onde. L’abîme a de ces trahisons.

Cette funèbre aventure, toujours possible sur telle ou telle plage de la mer, était possible aussi, il y a trente ans, dans l’égout de Paris.

Avant les importants travaux commencés en 1833, la voirie souterraine de Paris était sujette à des effondrements subits.

L’eau s’infiltrait dans de certains terrains sous-jacents, particulièrement friables; le radier, qu’il fût de pavé, comme dans les anciens égouts, ou de chaux hydraulique sur béton, comme dans les nouvelles galeries, n’ayant plus de point d’appui, pliait. Un pli dans un plancher de ce genre, c’est une fente; une fente, c’est l’écroulement. Le radier croulait sur une certaine longueur. Cette crevasse, hiatus d’un gouffre de boue, s’appelait dans la langue spéciale *fontis*. Qu’est-ce qu’un fontis? C’est le sable mouvant des bords de la mer tout à coup rencontré sous terre; c’est la grève du mont Saint-Michel dans un égout. Le sol, détrempé, est comme en fusion; toutes ses molécules sont en suspension dans un milieu mou; ce n’est pas de la terre et ce n’est pas de l’eau. Profondeur quelquefois très grande. Rien de plus redoutable qu’une telle rencontre. Si l’eau domine, la mort est prompte, il y a engloutissement; si la terre domine, la mort est lente, il y a enlisement.

Se figure-t-on une telle mort? si l’enlisement est effroyable sur une grève de la mer, qu’est-ce dans le cloaque? Au lieu du plein air, de la pleine lumière, du grand jour, de ce clair horizon, de ces vastes bruits, de ces libres nuages d’où pleut la vie, de ces barques aperçues au loin, de cette espérance sous toutes les formes, des passants probables, du secours possible jusqu’à la dernière minute, au lieu de tout cela, la surdité, l’aveuglement, une voûte noire, un dedans de tombe déjà tout fait, la mort dans la bourbe sous un couvercle! l’étouffement lent par l’immondice, une boîte de pierre où l’asphyxie ouvre sa griffe dans la fange et vous prend à la gorge; la fétidité mêlée au râle; la vase au lieu de la grève, l’hydrogène sulfuré au lieu de l’ouragan, l’ordure au lieu de l’océan! et appeler, et grincer des dents, et se tordre, et se débattre, et agoniser, avec cette ville énorme qui n’en sait rien, et qu’on a au-dessus de sa tête!

Inexprimable horreur de mourir ainsi! La mort rachète quelquefois son atrocité par une certaine dignité terrible. Sur le bûcher, dans le naufrage, on peut être grand; dans la flamme comme dans l’écume, une attitude superbe est possible; on s’y transfigure en s’y abîmant. Mais ici point. La mort est malpropre. Il est humiliant d’expirer. Les suprêmes visions flottantes sont abjectes. Boue est synonyme de honte. C’est petit, laid, infâme. Mourir dans une tonne de malvoisie, comme Clarence, soit; dans la fosse du boueur, comme d’Escoubleau, c’est horrible. Se débattre là-dedans est hideux; en même temps qu’on agonise, on patauge. Il y a assez de ténèbres pour que ce soit l’enfer, et assez de fange pour que ce ne soit que le bourbier, et le mourant ne sait pas s’il va devenir spectre ou s’il va devenir crapaud.

Partout ailleurs le sépulcre est sinistre; ici il est difforme.

La profondeur des fontis variait, et leur longueur, et leur densité, en raison de la plus ou moins mauvaise qualité du sous-sol. Parfois un fontis était profond de trois ou quatre pieds, parfois de huit ou dix; quelquefois on ne trouvait pas le fond. La vase était ici presque solide, là presque liquide. Dans le fontis Lunière, un homme eût mis un jour à disparaître, tandis qu’il eût été dévoré en cinq minutes par le bourbier Phélippeaux. La vase porte plus ou moins selon son plus ou moins de densité. Une enfant se sauve où un homme se perd. La première loi de salut, c’est de se dépouiller de toute espèce de chargement. Jeter son sac d’outils, ou sa hotte ou son auge, c’était par là que commençait tout égoutier qui sentait le sol fléchir sous lui.

Les fontis avaient des causes diverses: friabilité du sol; quelque éboulement à une profondeur hors de la portée de l’homme; les violentes averses de l’été; l’ondée incessante de l’hiver; les longues petites pluies fines. Parfois le poids des maisons environnantes sur un terrain marneux ou sablonneux chassait les voûtes des galeries souterraines et les faisait gauchir, ou bien il arrivait que le radier éclatait et se fendait sous cette écrasante poussée. Le tassement du Panthéon a oblitéré de cette façon, il y a un siècle, une partie des caves de la montagne Sainte-Geneviève. Quand un égout s’effondrait sous la pression des maisons, le désordre, dans certaines occasions, se traduisait en haut dans la rue par une espèce d’écarts en dents de scie entre les pavés; cette déchirure se développait en ligne serpentante dans toute la longueur de la voûte lézardée, et alors, le mal étant visible, le remède pouvait être prompt. Il advenait aussi que souvent le ravage intérieur ne se révélait par aucune balafre au dehors. Et dans ce cas-là, malheur aux égoutiers. Entrant sans précaution dans l’égout défoncé, ils pouvaient s’y perdre. Les anciens registres font mention de quelques puisatiers ensevelis de la sorte dans les fontis. Ils donnent plusieurs noms; entre autres celui de l’égoutier qui s’enlisa dans un effondrement sous le cagnard de la rue Carême-Prenant, un nommé Blaise Poutrain; ce Blaise Poutrain était frère de Nicolas Poutrain qui fut le dernier fossoyeur du cimetière dit charnier des Innocents en 1785, époque où ce cimetière mourut.

Il y eut aussi ce jeune et charmant vicomte d’Escoubleau dont nous venons de parler, l’un des héros du siège de Lérida où l’on donna l’assaut en bas de soie, violons en tête. D’Escoubleau, surpris une nuit chez sa cousine, la duchesse de Sourdis, se noya dans une fondrière de l’égout Beautreillis où il s’était réfugié pour échapper au duc. Madame de Sourdis, quand on lui raconta cette mort, demanda son flacon, et oublia de pleurer à force de respirer des sels. En pareil cas, il n’y a pas d’amour qui tienne; le cloaque l’éteint. Héro refuse de laver le cadavre de Léandre. Thisbé se bouche le nez devant Pyrame et dit: Pouah!

Chapitre VI

Le fontis

Jean Valjean se trouvait en présence d’un fontis.

Ce genre d’écroulement était alors fréquent dans le sous-sol des Champs-Élysées, difficilement maniable aux travaux hydrauliques et peu conservateur des constructions souterraines à cause de son excessive fluidité. Cette fluidité dépasse l’inconsistance des sables même du quartier Saint-Georges, qui n’ont pu être vaincus que par un enrochement sur béton, et des couches glaiseuses infectées de gaz du quartier des Martyrs, si liquides que le passage n’a pu être pratiqué sous la galerie des Martyrs qu’au moyen d’un tuyau en fonte. Lorsqu’en 1836 on a démoli sous le faubourg Saint-Honoré, pour le reconstruire, le vieil égout en pierre où nous voyons en ce moment Jean Valjean engagé, le sable mouvant, qui est le sous-sol des Champs-Élysées jusqu’à la Seine, fit obstacle au point que l’opération dura près de six mois, au grand récri des riverains, surtout des riverains à hôtels et à carrosses. Les travaux furent plus que malaisés; ils furent dangereux. Il est vrai qu’il y eut quatre mois et demi de pluie et trois crues de la Seine.

Le fontis que Jean Valjean rencontrait avait pour cause l’averse de la veille. Un fléchissement du pavé mal soutenu par le sable sous-jacent avait produit un engorgement d’eau pluviale. L’infiltration s’étant faite, l’effondrement avait suivi. Le radier, disloqué, s’était affaissé dans la vase. Sur quelle longueur? Impossible de le dire. L’obscurité était là plus épaisse que partout ailleurs. C’était un trou de boue dans une caverne de nuit.

Jean Valjean sentit le pavé se dérober sous lui. Il entra dans cette fange. C’était de l’eau à la surface, de la vase au fond. Il fallait bien passer. Revenir sur ses pas était impossible. Marius était expirant, et Jean Valjean exténué. Où aller d’ailleurs? Jean Valjean avança. Du reste la fondrière parut peu profonde aux premiers pas. Mais à mesure qu’il avançait, ses pieds plongeaient. Il eut bientôt de la vase jusqu’à mi-jambe et de l’eau plus haut que les genoux. Il marchait, exhaussant de ses deux bras Marius le plus qu’il pouvait au-dessus de l’eau. La vase lui venait maintenant aux jarrets et l’eau à la ceinture. Il ne pouvait déjà plus reculer. Il enfonçait de plus en plus. Cette vase, assez dense pour le poids d’un homme, ne pouvait évidemment en porter deux. Marius et Jean Valjean eussent eu chance de s’en tirer, isolément. Jean Valjean continua d’avancer, soutenant ce mourant, qui était un cadavre peut-être.

L’eau lui venait aux aisselles; il se sentait sombrer; c’est à peine s’il pouvait se mouvoir dans la profondeur de bourbe où il était. La densité, qui était le soutien, était aussi l’obstacle. Il soulevait toujours Marius, et, avec une dépense de force inouïe, il avançait; mais il enfonçait. Il n’avait plus que la tête hors de l’eau, et ses deux bras élevant Marius. Il y a, dans les vieilles peintures du déluge, une mère qui fait ainsi de son enfant.

Il enfonça encore, il renversa sa face en arrière pour échapper à l’eau et pouvoir respirer; qui l’eût vu dans cette obscurité eût cru voir un masque flottant sur de l’ombre; il apercevait vaguement au-dessus de lui la tête pendante et le visage livide de Marius; il fit un effort désespéré, et lança son pied en avant; son pied heurta on ne sait quoi de solide. Un point d’appui. Il était temps.

Il se dressa et se tordit et s’enracina avec une sorte de furie sur ce point d’appui. Cela lui fit l’effet de la première marche d’un escalier remontant à la vie.

Ce point d’appui, rencontré dans la vase au moment suprême, était le commencement de l’autre versant du radier, qui avait plié sans se briser et s’était courbé sous l’eau comme une planche et d’un seul morceau. Les pavages bien construits font voûte et ont de ces fermetés-là. Ce fragment de radier, submergé en partie, mais solide, était une véritable rampe, et, une fois sur cette rampe, on était sauvé. Jean Valjean remonta ce plan incliné et arriva de l’autre côté de la fondrière.

En sortant de l’eau, il se heurta à une pierre et tomba sur les genoux. Il trouva que c’était juste, et y resta quelque temps, l’âme abîmée dans on ne sait quelle parole à Dieu.

Il se redressa, frissonnant, glacé, infect, courbé sous ce mourant qu’il traînait, tout ruisselant de fange, l’âme pleine d’une étrange clarté.

Chapitre VII

Quelque fois on échoue où l'on croit débarquer

Il se remit en route encore une fois.

Du reste, s'il n'avait pas laissé sa vie dans le fontis, il semblait y avoir laissé sa force. Ce suprême effort l'avait épuisé. Sa lassitude était maintenant telle, que tous les trois ou quatre pas, il était obligé de reprendre haleine, et s'appuyait au mur. Une fois, il dut s'asseoir sur la banquette pour changer la position de Marius, et il crut qu'il demeurerait là. Mais si sa vigueur était morte, son énergie ne l'était point. Il se releva.

Il marcha désespérément, presque vite, fit ainsi une centaine de pas, sans dresser la tête, presque sans respirer, et tout à coup se cogna au mur. Il était parvenu à un coude de l'égout, et, en arrivant tête basse au tournant, il avait rencontré la muraille. Il leva les yeux, et à l'extrémité du souterrain, là-bas, devant lui, loin, très loin, il aperçut une lumière. Cette fois, ce n'était pas la lumière terrible; c'était la lumière bonne et blanche. C'était le jour.

Jean Valjean voyait l'issue.

Une âme damnée qui, du milieu de la fournaise, apercevrait tout à coup la sortie de la géhenne, éprouverait ce qu'éprouva Jean Valjean. Elle volerait éperdument avec le moignon de ses ailes brûlées vers la porte radieuse. Jean Valjean ne sentit plus la fatigue, il ne sentit plus le poids de Marius, il retrouva ses jarrets d'acier, il courut plus qu'il ne marcha. À mesure qu'il approchait, l'issue se dessinait de plus en plus distinctement. C'était une arche cintrée, moins haute que la voûte qui se restreignait par degrés et moins large que la galerie qui se resserrait en même temps que la voûte s'abaissait. Le tunnel finissait en intérieur d'entonnoir; rétrécissement vicieux, imité des guichets de maisons de force, logique dans une prison, illogique dans un égout, et qui a été corrigé depuis.

Jean Valjean arriva à l'issue. Là, il s'arrêta.

C'était bien la sortie, mais on ne pouvait sortir.

L'arche était fermée d'une forte grille, et la grille, qui, selon toute apparence, tournait rarement sur ses gonds oxydés, était assujettie à son chambranle de pierre par une serrure épaisse qui, rouge de rouille, semblait une énorme brique. On voyait le trou de la clef, et le pêne robuste profondément plongé dans la gâche de fer. La serrure était visiblement fermée à double tour. C’était une de ces serrures de bastilles que le vieux Paris prodiguait volontiers.

Au delà de la grille, le grand air, la rivière, le jour, la berge très étroite, mais suffisante pour s’en aller, les quais lointains, Paris, ce gouffre où l’on se dérobe si aisément, le large horizon, la liberté. On distinguait à droite, en aval, le pont d’Iéna, et à gauche, en amont, le pont des Invalides; l’endroit eût été propice pour attendre la nuit et s’évader. C’était un des points les plus solitaires de Paris; la berge qui fait face au Gros-Caillou. Les mouches entraient et sortaient à travers les barreaux de la grille.

Il pouvait être huit heures et demie du soir. Le jour baissait.

Jean Valjean déposa Marius le long du mur sur la partie sèche du radier, puis marcha à la grille et crispa ses deux poings sur les barreaux; la secousse fut frénétique, l’ébranlement nul. La grille ne bougea pas. Jean Valjean saisit les barreaux l’un après l’autre, espérant pouvoir arracher le moins solide et s’en faire un levier pour soulever la porte ou pour briser la serrure. Aucun barreau ne remua. Les dents d’un tigre ne sont pas plus solides dans leurs alvéoles. Pas de levier; pas de pesée possible. L’obstacle était invincible. Aucun moyen d’ouvrir la porte.

Fallait-il donc finir là? Que faire? que devenir? Rétrograder; recommencer le trajet effrayant qu’il avait déjà parcouru; il n’en avait pas la force. D’ailleurs, comment traverser de nouveau cette fondrière d’où l’on ne s’était tiré que par miracle? Et après la fondrière, n’y avait-il pas cette ronde de police à laquelle, certes, on n’échapperait pas deux fois? Et puis, où aller? quelle direction prendre? Suivre la pente, ce n’était point aller au but. Arrivât-on à une autre issue, on la trouverait obstruée d’un tampon ou d’une grille. Toutes les sorties étaient indubitablement closes de cette façon. Le hasard avait descellé la grille par laquelle on était entré, mais évidemment toutes les autres bouches de l’égout étaient fermées. On n’avait réussi qu’à s’évader dans une prison.

C’était fini. Tout ce qu’avait fait Jean Valjean était inutile. L’épuisement aboutissait à l’avortement.

Ils étaient pris l’un et l’autre dans la sombre et immense toile de la mort, et Jean Valjean sentait courir sur ces fils noirs tressaillant dans les ténèbres l’épouvantable araignée.

Il tourna le dos à la grille, et tomba sur le pavé, plutôt terrassé qu’assis, près de Marius, toujours sans mouvement et sa tête s’affaissa entre ses genoux. Pas d’issue. C’était la dernière goutte de l’angoisse.

À qui songeait-il dans ce profond accablement? Ni à lui-même, ni à Marius. Il pensait à Cosette.

Chapitre VIII

Le pan de l’habit déchiré

Au milieu de cet anéantissement, une main se posa sur son épaule, et une voix qui parlait bas lui dit:

— Part à deux.

Quelqu’un dans cette ombre? Rien ne ressemble au rêve comme le désespoir. Jean Valjean crut rêver. Il n’avait point entendu de pas. Était-ce possible? Il leva les yeux.

Un homme était devant lui.

Cet homme était vêtu d’une blouse; il avait les pieds nus; il tenait ses souliers dans sa main gauche; il les avait évidemment ôtés pour pouvoir arriver jusqu’à Jean Valjean, sans qu’on l’entendît marcher.

Jean Valjean n’eut pas un moment d’hésitation. Si imprévue que fût la rencontre, cet homme lui était connu. Cet homme était Thénardier.

Quoique réveillé, pour ainsi dire, en sursaut, Jean Valjean, habitué aux alertes et aguerri aux coups inattendus qu’il faut parer vite, reprit possession sur-le-champ de toute sa présence d’esprit. D’ailleurs la situation ne pouvait empirer, un certain degré de détresse n’est plus capable de crescendo, et Thénardier lui-même ne pouvait ajouter de la noirceur à cette nuit.

Il y eut un instant d’attente.

Thénardier, élevant sa main droite à la hauteur de son front, s’en fit un abat-jour, puis il rapprocha les sourcils en clignant les yeux, ce qui, avec un léger pincement de la bouche, caractérise l’attention sagace d’un homme qui cherche à en reconnaître un autre. Il n’y réussit point. Jean Valjean, on vient de le dire, tournait le dos au jour, et était d’ailleurs si défiguré, si fangeux et si sanglant qu’en plein midi il eût été méconnaissable. Au contraire, éclairé de face par la lumière de la grille, clarté de cave, il est vrai, livide, mais précise dans sa lividité, Thénardier, comme dit l’énergique métaphore banale, sauta tout de suite aux yeux de Jean Valjean. Cette inégalité de conditions suffisait pour assurer quelque avantage à Jean Valjean dans ce mystérieux duel qui allait s’engager entre les deux situations et les deux hommes. La rencontre avait lieu entre Jean Valjean voilé et Thénardier démasqué.

Jean Valjean s’aperçut tout de suite que Thénardier ne le reconnaissait pas.

Ils se considérèrent un moment dans cette pénombre, comme s’ils se prenaient mesure. Thénardier rompit le premier le silence.

— Comment vas-tu faire pour sortir? Jean Valjean ne répondit pas.

Thénardier continua:

— Impossible de crocheter la porte. Il faut pourtant que tu t’en ailles d’ici.

— C’est vrai, dit Jean Valjean.

— Eh bien, part à deux.

— Que veux-tu dire?

— Tu as tué l’homme; c’est bien. Moi, j’ai la clef. Thénardier montrait du doigt Marius. Il poursuivit:

— Je ne te connais pas, mais je veux t’aider. Tu dois être un ami.

Jean Valjean commença à comprendre. Thénardier le prenait pour un assassin.

Thénardier reprit:

— Écoute, camarade. Tu n’as pas tué cet homme sans regarder ce qu’il avait dans ses poches. Donne-moi ma moitié. Je t’ouvre la porte.

Et, tirant à demi une grosse clef de dessous sa blouse toute trouée, il ajouta:

— Veux-tu voir comment est faite la clef des champs? Voilà.

Jean Valjean «demeura stupide», le mot est du vieux Corneille, au point de douter que ce qu’il voyait fût réel. C’était la providence apparaissant horrible, et le bon ange sortant de terre sous la forme de Thénardier.

Thénardier fourra son poing dans une large poche cachée sous sa blouse, en tira une corde et la tendit à Jean Valjean.

— Tiens, dit-il, je te donne la corde par-dessus le marché.

— Pourquoi faire, une corde?

— Il te faut aussi une pierre, mais tu en trouveras dehors. Il y a là un tas de gravats.

— Pourquoi faire, une pierre?

— Imbécile, puisque tu vas jeter le pantre à la rivière, il te faut une pierre et une corde, sans quoi ça flotterait sur l’eau.

Jean Valjean prit la corde. Il n’est personne qui n’ait de ces acceptations machinales.

Thénardier fit claquer ses doigts comme à l’arrivée d’une idée subite:

— Ah çà, camarade, comment as-tu fait pour te tirer là-bas de la fondrière? je n'ai pas osé m'y risquer. Peuh! tu ne sens pas bon.

Après une pause, il ajouta:

— Je te fais des questions, mais tu as raison de ne pas y répondre. C'est un apprentissage pour le fichu quart d'heure du juge d'instruction. Et puis, en ne parlant pas du tout, on ne risque pas de parler trop haut. C'est égal, parce que je ne vois pas ta figure et parce que je ne sais pas ton nom, tu aurais tort de croire que je ne sais pas qui tu es et ce que tu veux. Connu. Tu as un peu cassé ce monsieur; maintenant tu voudrais le serrer quelque part. Il te faut la rivière, le grand cache-sottise. Je vas te tirer d'embarras. Aider un bon garçon dans la peine, ça me botte.

Tout en approuvant Jean Valjean de se taire, il cherchait visiblement à le faire parler. Il lui poussa l'épaule, de façon à tâcher de le voir de profil, et s'écria sans sortir pourtant du médium où il maintenait sa voix:

— À propos de la fondrière, tu es un fier animal. Pourquoi n'y as-tu pas jeté l'homme?

Jean Valjean garda le silence.

Thénardier reprit en haussant jusqu'à sa pomme d'Adam la loque qui lui servait de cravate, geste qui complète l'air capable d'un homme sérieux:

— Au fait, tu as peut-être agi sagement. Les ouvriers demain en venant boucher le trou auraient, à coup sûr, trouvé le pantinois oublié là, et on aurait pu, fil à fil, brin à brin, pincer ta trace, et arriver jusqu'à toi. Quelqu'un a passé par l'égout. Qui? par où est-il sorti? l'a-t-on vu sortir? La police est pleine d'esprit. L'égout est traître, et vous dénonce. Une telle trouvaille est une rareté, cela appelle l'attention, peu de gens se servent de l'égout pour leurs affaires, tandis que la rivière est à tout le monde. La rivière, c'est la vraie fosse. Au bout d'un mois, on vous repêche l'homme aux filets de Saint-Cloud. Eh bien, qu'est-ce que cela fiche? c'est une charogne, quoi! Qui a tué cet homme? Paris. Et la justice n'informe même pas. Tu as bien fait.

Plus Thénardier était loquace, plus Jean Valjean était muet, Thénardier lui secoua de nouveau l'épaule.

— Maintenant, concluons l'affaire. Partageons. Tu as vu ma clef, montre-moi ton argent.

Thénardier était hagard, fauve, louche, un peu menaçant, pourtant amical.

Il y avait une chose étrange; les allures de Thénardier n’étaient pas simples; il n’avait pas l’air tout à fait à son aise; tout en n’affectant pas d’air mystérieux, il parlait bas; de temps en temps, il mettait son doigt sur sa bouche et murmurait: chut! Il était difficile de deviner pourquoi. Il n’y avait là personne qu’eux deux. Jean Valjean pensa que d’autres bandits étaient peut-être cachés dans quelque recoin, pas très loin, et que Thénardier ne se souciait pas de partager avec eux.

Thénardier reprit:

— Finissons. Combien le pantre avait-il dans ses profondes?

Jean Valjean se fouilla.

C’était, on s’en souvient, son habitude, d’avoir toujours de l’argent sur lui. La sombre vie d’expédients à laquelle il était condamné lui en faisait une loi. Cette fois pourtant il était pris au dépourvu. En mettant, la veille au soir, son uniforme de garde national, il avait oublié, lugubrement absorbé qu’il était, d’emporter son portefeuille. Il n’avait que quelque monnaie dans le gousset de son gilet. Cela se montait à une trentaine de francs. Il retourna sa poche, toute trempée de fange, et étala sur la banquette du radier un louis d’or, deux pièces de cinq francs et cinq ou six gros sous.

Thénardier avança la lèvre inférieure avec une torsion de cou significative.

— Tu l’as tué pour pas cher, dit-il.

Il se mit à palper, en toute familiarité, les poches de Jean Valjean et les poches de Marius. Jean Valjean, préoccupé surtout de tourner le dos au jour, le laissait faire. Tout en maniant l’habit de Marius, Thénardier, avec une dextérité d’escamoteur, trouva moyen d’en arracher, sans que Jean Valjean s’en aperçût, un lambeau qu’il cacha sous sa blouse, pensant probablement que ce morceau d’étoffe pourrait lui servir plus tard à reconnaître l’homme assassiné et l’assassin. Il ne trouva du reste rien de plus que les trente francs.

— C’est vrai, dit-il, l’un portant l’autre, vous n’avez pas plus que ça.

Et, oubliant son mot: *part à deux*, il prit tout.

Il hésita un peu devant les gros sous. Réflexion faite, il les prit aussi en grommelant:

— N’importe! c’est suriner les gens à trop bon marché.

Cela fait, il tira de nouveau la clef de dessous sa blouse.

— Maintenant, l’ami, il faut que tu sortes. C’est ici comme à la foire, on paye en sortant. Tu as payé, sors.

Et il se mit à rire.

Avait-il, en apportant à un inconnu l'aide de cette clef et en faisant sortir par cette porte un autre que lui, l'intention pure et désintéressée de sauver un assassin? c'est ce dont il est permis de douter.

Thénardier aida Jean Valjean à replacer Marius sur ses épaules, puis il se dirigea vers la grille sur la pointe de ses pieds nus, faisant signe à Jean Valjean de le suivre, il regarda au dehors, posa le doigt sur sa bouche, et demeura quelques secondes comme en suspens; l'inspection faite, il mit la clef dans la serrure. Le pêne glissa et la porte tourna. Il n'y eut ni craquement, ni grincement. Cela se fit très doucement. Il était visible que cette grille et ces gonds, huilés avec soin, s'ouvraient plus souvent qu'on ne l'eût pensé. Cette douceur était sinistre; on y sentait les allées et venues furtives, les entrées et les sorties silencieuses des hommes nocturnes, et les pas de loup du crime. L'égout était évidemment en complicité avec quelque bande mystérieuse. Cette grille taciturne était une receleuse.

Thénardier entre-bâilla la porte, livra tout juste passage à Jean Valjean, referma la grille, tourna deux fois la clef dans la serrure, et replongea dans l'obscurité, sans faire plus de bruit qu'un souffle. Il semblait marcher avec les pattes de velours du tigre. Un moment après, cette hideuse providence était rentrée dans l'invisible.

Jean Valjean se trouva dehors.

Chapitre IX

Marius fait l’effet d’être mort à quelqu’un qui s’y connaît

Il laissa glisser Marius sur la berge.

Ils étaient dehors!

Les miasmes, l’obscurité, l’horreur, étaient derrière lui. L’air salubre, pur, vivant, joyeux, librement respirable, l’inondait. Partout autour de lui le silence, mais le silence charmant du soleil couché en plein azur. Le crépuscule s’était fait; la nuit venait, la grande libératrice, l’amie de tous ceux qui ont besoin d’un manteau d’ombre pour sortir d’une angoisse. Le ciel s’offrait de toutes parts comme un calme énorme. La rivière arrivait à ses pieds avec le bruit d’un baiser. On entendait le dialogue aérien des nids qui se disaient bonsoir dans les ormes des Champs-Élysées. Quelques étoiles, piquant faiblement le bleu pâle du zénith et visibles à la seule rêverie, faisaient dans l’immensité de petits resplendissements imperceptibles. Le soir déployait sur la tête de Jean Valjean toutes les douceurs de l’infini.

C’était l’heure indécise et exquise qui ne dit ni oui ni non. Il y avait déjà assez de nuit pour qu’on pût s’y perdre à quelque distance, et encore assez de jour pour qu’on pût s’y reconnaître de près.

Jean Valjean fut pendant quelques secondes irrésistiblement vaincu par toute cette sérénité auguste et caressante; il y a de ces minutes d’oubli; la souffrance renonce à harceler le misérable; tout s’éclipse dans la pensée; la paix couvre le songeur comme une nuit; et sous le crépuscule qui rayonne, et à l’imitation du ciel qui s’illumine, l’âme s’étoile. Jean Valjean ne put s’empêcher de contempler cette vaste ombre claire qu’il avait au-dessus de lui; pensif, il prenait dans le majestueux silence du ciel éternel un bain d’extase et de prière. Puis, vivement, comme si le sentiment d’un devoir lui revenait, il se courba vers Marius, et, puisant de l’eau dans le creux de sa main, il lui en jeta doucement quelques gouttes sur le visage. Les paupières de Marius ne se soulevèrent pas; cependant sa bouche entrouverte respirait.

Jean Valjean allait plonger de nouveau sa main dans la rivière, quand tout à coup il sentit je ne sais quelle gêne, comme lorsqu’on a, sans le voir, quelqu’un derrière soi.

Nous avons déjà indiqué ailleurs cette impression, que tout le monde connaît.

Il se retourna.

Comme tout à l’heure, quelqu’un en effet était derrière lui.

Un homme de haute stature, enveloppé d’une longue redingote, les bras croisés, et portant dans son poing droit un casse-tête dont on voyait la pomme de plomb, se tenait debout à quelques pas en arrière de Jean Valjean accroupi sur Marius.

C’était, l’ombre aidant, une sorte d’apparition. Un homme simple en eût eu peur à cause du crépuscule, et un homme réfléchi à cause du casse-tête.

Jean Valjean reconnut Javert.

Le lecteur a deviné sans doute que le traqueur de Thénardier n’était autre que Javert. Javert, après sa sortie inespérée de la barricade, était allé à la préfecture de police, avait rendu verbalement compte au préfet en personne, dans une courte audience, puis avait repris immédiatement son service, qui impliquait, on se souvient de la note saisie sur lui, une certaine surveillance de la berge de la rive droite aux Champs-Élysées, laquelle depuis quelque temps éveillait l’attention de la police. Là, il avait aperçu Thénardier et l’avait suivi. On sait le reste.

On comprend aussi que cette grille, si obligeamment ouverte devant Jean Valjean, était une habileté de Thénardier. Thénardier sentait Javert toujours là; l’homme guetté a un flair qui ne le trompe pas; il fallait jeter un os à ce limier. Un assassin, quelle aubaine! C’était la part du feu, qu’il ne faut jamais refuser. Thénardier, en mettant dehors Jean Valjean à sa place, donnait une proie à la police, lui faisait lâcher sa piste, se faisait oublier dans une plus grosse aventure, récompensait Javert de son attente, ce qui flatte toujours un espion, gagnait trente francs, et comptait bien, quant à lui, s’échapper à l’aide de cette diversion.

Jean Valjean était passé d’un écueil à l’autre.

Ces deux rencontres coup sur coup, tomber de Thénardier en Javert, c’était rude.

Javert ne reconnut pas Jean Valjean qui, nous l’avons dit, ne se ressemblait plus à lui-même. Il ne décroisa pas les bras, assura son casse-tête dans son poing par un mouvement imperceptible, et dit d’une voix brève et calme:

— Qui êtes-vous?

— Moi.

— Qui, vous?

— Jean Valjean.

Javert mit le casse-tête entre ses dents, ploya les jarrets, inclina le torse, posa ses deux mains puissantes sur les épaules de Jean Valjean, qui s'y emboîtèrent comme dans deux étaux, l'examina, et le reconnut. Leurs visages se touchaient presque. Le regard de Javert était terrible.

Jean Valjean demeura inerte sous l'étreinte de Javert comme un lion qui consentirait à la griffe d'un lynx.

— Inspecteur Javert, dit-il, vous me tenez. D'ailleurs, depuis ce matin je me considère comme votre prisonnier. Je ne vous ai point donné mon adresse pour chercher à vous échapper. Prenez-moi. Seulement, accordez-moi une chose.

Javert semblait ne pas entendre. Il appuyait sur Jean Valjean sa prunelle fixe. Son menton froncé poussait ses lèvres vers son nez, signe de rêverie farouche. Enfin, il lâcha Jean Valjean, se dressa tout d'une pièce, reprit à plein poignet le casse-tête, et, comme dans un songe, murmura plutôt qu'il ne prononça cette question:

— Que faites-vous là? et qu'est-ce que c'est que cet homme?

Il continuait de ne plus tutoyer Jean Valjean.

Jean Valjean répondit, et le son de sa voix parut réveiller Javert:

— C'est de lui précisément que je voulais vous parler. Disposez de moi comme il vous plaira; mais aidez-moi d'abord à le rapporter chez lui. Je ne vous demande que cela.

La face de Javert se contracta comme cela lui arrivait toutes les fois qu'on semblait le croire capable d'une concession. Cependant il ne dit pas non.

Il se courba de nouveau, tira de sa poche un mouchoir qu'il trempa dans l'eau, et essuya le front ensanglanté de Marius.

— Cet homme était à la barricade, dit-il à demi-voix et comme se parlant à lui-même. C'est celui qu'on appelait Marius.

Espion de première qualité, qui avait tout observé, tout écouté, tout entendu et tout recueilli, croyant mourir; qui épiait même dans l'agonie, et qui, accoudé sur la première marche du sépulcre, avait pris des notes.

Il saisit la main de Marius, cherchant le pouls.

— C'est un blessé, dit Jean Valjean.

— C'est un mort, dit Javert.

Jean Valjean répondit:

— Non. Pas encore.

— Vous l’avez donc apporté de la barricade ici? observa Javert.

Il fallait que sa préoccupation fût profonde pour qu’il n’insistât point sur cet inquiétant sauvetage par l’égout, et pour qu’il ne remarquât même pas le silence de Jean Valjean après sa question.

Jean Valjean, de son côté, semblait avoir une pensée unique. Il reprit:

— Il demeure au Marais, rue des Filles-du-Calvaire, chez son aïeul.... — Je ne sais plus le nom.

Jean Valjean fouilla dans l’habit de Marius, en tira le portefeuille, l’ouvrit à la page crayonnée par Marius, et le tendit à Javert.

Il y avait encore dans l’air assez de clarté flottante pour qu’on pût lire. Javert, en outre, avait dans l’œil la phosphorescence féline des oiseaux de nuit. Il déchiffra les quelques lignes écrites par Marius, et grommela:

— Gillenormand, rue des Filles-du-Calvaire, numéro 6.

Puis il cria:

— Cocher!

On se rappelle le fiacre qui attendait, en cas.

Javert garda le portefeuille de Marius.

Un moment après, la voiture, descendue par la rampe de l’abreuvoir, était sur la berge, Marius était déposé sur la banquette du fond, et Javert s’asseyait près de Jean Valjean sur la banquette de devant.

La portière refermée, le fiacre s’éloigna rapidement, remontant les quais dans la direction de la Bastille.

Ils quittèrent les quais et entrèrent dans les rues. Le cocher, silhouette noire sur son siège, fouettait ses chevaux maigres. Silence glacial dans le fiacre. Marius, immobile, le torse adossé au coin du fond, la tête abattue sur la poitrine, les bras pendants, les jambes roides, paraissait ne plus attendre qu’un cercueil; Jean Valjean semblait fait d’ombre, et Javert de pierre; et dans cette voiture pleine de nuit, dont l’intérieur, chaque fois qu’elle passait devant un réverbère, apparaissait lividement blêmi comme par un éclair intermittent, le hasard réunissait et semblait confronter lugubrement les trois immobilités tragiques, le cadavre, le spectre, la statue.

Chapitre X

Rentrée de l’enfant prodigue de sa vie

À chaque cahot du pavé, une goutte de sang tombait des cheveux de Marius.

Il était nuit close quand le fiacre arriva au numéro 6 de la rue des Filles-du-Calvaire.

Javert mit pied à terre le premier, constata d’un coup d’œil le numéro au-dessus de la porte cochère, et, soulevant le lourd marteau de fer battu, historié à la vieille mode d’un bouc et d’un satyre qui s’affrontaient, frappa un coup violent. Le battant s’entr’ouvrit, et Javert le poussa. Le portier se montra à demi, bâillant, vaguement réveillé, une chandelle à la main.

Tout dormait dans la maison. On se couche de bonne heure au Marais; surtout les jours d’émeute. Ce bon vieux quartier, effarouché par la révolution, se réfugie dans le sommeil, comme les enfants, lorsqu’ils entendent venir Croquemitaine, cachent bien vite leur tête sous leur couverture.

Cependant Jean Valjean et le cocher tiraient Marius du fiacre, Jean Valjean le soutenant sous les aisselles et le cocher sous les jarrets.

Tout en portant Marius de la sorte, Jean Valjean glissa sa main sous les vêtements qui étaient largement déchirés, tâta la poitrine et s’assura que le cœur battait encore. Il battait même un peu moins faiblement, comme si le mouvement de la voiture avait déterminé une certaine reprise de la vie.

Javert interpella le portier du ton qui convient au gouvernement en présence du portier d’un factieux.

— Quelqu’un qui s’appelle Gillenormand?

— C’est ici. Que lui voulez-vous?

— On lui rapporte son fils.

— Son fils? dit le portier avec hébétement.

— Il est mort.

Jean Valjean, qui venait, déguenillé et souillé, derrière Javert, et que le portier regardait avec quelque horreur, lui fit signe de la tête que non.

Le portier ne parut comprendre ni le mot de Javert, ni le signe de Jean Valjean.

Javert continua:

— Il est allé à la barricade, et le voilà.

— À la barricade! s’écria le portier.

— Il s’est fait tuer. Allez réveiller le père.

Le portier ne bougeait pas.

— Allez donc! reprit Javert.

Et il ajouta:

— Demain il y aura ici de l’enterrement.

Pour Javert, les incidents habituels de la voie publique étaient classés catégoriquement, ce qui est le commencement de la prévoyance et de la surveillance, et chaque éventualité avait son compartiment; les faits possibles étaient en quelque sorte dans des tiroirs d’où ils sortaient, selon l’occasion, en quantités variables; il y avait, dans la rue, du tapage, de l’émeute, du carnaval, de l’enterrement.

Le portier se borna à réveiller Basque. Basque réveilla Nicolette; Nicolette réveilla la tante Gillenormand. Quant au grand-père, on le laissa dormir, pensant qu’il saurait toujours la chose assez tôt.

On monta Marius au premier étage, sans que personne, du reste, s’en aperçût dans les autres parties de la maison, et on le déposa sur un vieux canapé dans l’antichambre de M. Gillenormand; et, tandis que Basque allait chercher un médecin et que Nicolette ouvrait les armoires à linge, Jean Valjean sentit Javert qui lui touchait l’épaule. Il comprit, et redescendit, ayant derrière lui le pas de Javert qui le suivait.

Le portier les regarda partir comme il les avait regardés arriver, avec une somnolence épouvantée.

Ils remontèrent dans le fiacre, et le cocher sur son siège.

— Inspecteur Javert, dit Jean Valjean, accordez-moi encore une chose.

— Laquelle? demanda rudement Javert.

— Laissez-moi rentrer un moment chez moi. Ensuite vous ferez de moi ce que vous voudrez.

Javert demeura quelques instants silencieux, le menton rentré dans le collet de sa redingote, puis il baissa la vitre de devant.

— Cocher, dit-il, rue de l’Homme-Armé, numéro 7.

Chapitre XI

Ébranlement dans l’absolu

Ils ne desserrèrent plus les dents de tout le trajet.

Que voulait Jean Valjean? Achever ce qu’il avait commencé; avertir Cosette, lui dire où était Marius, lui donner peut-être quelque autre indication utile, prendre, s’il le pouvait, de certaines dispositions suprêmes. Quant à lui, quant à ce qui le concernait personnellement, c’était fini; il était saisi par Javert et n’y résistait pas; un autre que lui, en une telle situation, eût peut être vaguement songé à cette corde que lui avait donnée Thénardier et aux barreaux du premier cachot où il entrerait; mais, depuis l’évêque, il y avait dans Jean Valjean devant tout attentat, fût-ce contre lui-même, insistons-y, une profonde hésitation religieuse.

Le suicide, cette mystérieuse voie de fait sur l’inconnu, laquelle peut contenir dans une certaine mesure la mort de l’âme, était impossible à Jean Valjean.

À l’entrée de la rue de l’Homme-Armé, le fiacre s’arrêta, cette rue étant trop étroite pour que les voitures puissent y pénétrer. Javert et Jean Valjean descendirent.

Le cocher représenta humblement à «monsieur l’inspecteur» que le velours d’Utrecht de sa voiture était tout taché par le sang de l’homme assassiné et par la boue de l’assassin. C’était là ce qu’il avait compris. Il ajouta qu’une indemnité lui était due. En même temps, tirant de sa poche son livret, il pria monsieur l’inspecteur d’avoir la bonté de lui écrire dessus «un petit bout d’attestation comme quoi».

Javert repoussa le livret que lui tendait le cocher, et dit:

— Combien te faut-il, y compris ta station et la course?

— Il y a sept heures et quart, répondit le cocher, et mon velours était tout neuf. Quatre-vingts francs, monsieur l’inspecteur.

Javert tira de sa poche quatre napoléons et congédia le fiacre.

Jean Valjean pensa que l’intention de Javert était de le conduire à pied au poste des Blancs-Manteaux ou au poste des Archives, qui sont tout près.

Ils s’engagèrent dans la rue. Elle était, comme d’habitude, déserte. Javert suivait Jean Valjean. Ils arrivèrent au numéro 7. Jean Valjean frappa. La porte s’ouvrit.

— C’est bien, dit Javert. Montez.

Il ajouta avec une expression étrange et comme s’il faisait effort en parlant de la sorte:

— Je vous attends ici.

Jean Valjean regarda Javert. Cette façon de faire était peu dans les habitudes de Javert. Cependant, que Javert eût maintenant en lui une sorte de confiance hautaine, la confiance du chat qui accorde à la souris une liberté de la longueur de sa griffe, résolu qu’était Jean Valjean à se livrer et à en finir, cela ne pouvait le surprendre beaucoup. Il poussa la porte, entra dans la maison, cria au portier qui était couché et qui avait tiré le cordon de son lit: C’est moi! et monta l’escalier.

Parvenu au premier étage, il fit une pause. Toutes les voies douloureuses ont des stations. La fenêtre du palier, qui était une fenêtre-guillotine, était ouverte. Comme dans beaucoup d’anciennes maisons, l’escalier prenait jour et avait vue sur la rue. Le réverbère de la rue, situé précisément en face, jetait quelque lumière sur les marches, ce qui faisait une économie d’éclairage.

Jean Valjean, soit pour respirer, soit machinalement, mit la tête à cette fenêtre. Il se pencha sur la rue. Elle est courte et le réverbère l’éclairait d’un bout à l’autre. Jean Valjean eut un éblouissement de stupeur; il n’y avait plus personne.

Javert s’en était allé.

Chapitre XII

L'aïeul

Basque et le portier avaient transporté dans le salon Marius toujours étendu sans mouvement sur le canapé où on l'avait déposé en arrivant. Le médecin, qu'on avait été chercher, était accouru. La tante Gillenormand s'était levée.

La tante Gillenormand allait et venait, épouvantée, joignant les mains, et incapable de faire autre chose que de dire: Est-il Dieu possible! Elle ajoutait par moments: Tout va être confondu de sang! Quand la première horreur fut passée, une certaine philosophie de la situation se fit jour jusqu'à son esprit et se traduisit par cette exclamation: Cela devait finir comme ça! Elle n'alla point jusqu'au: *Je l'avais bien dit!* qui est d'usage dans les occasions de ce genre.

Sur l'ordre du médecin, un lit de sangle avait été dressé près du canapé. Le médecin examina Marius et, après avoir constaté que le pouls persistait, que le blessé n'avait à la poitrine aucune plaie pénétrante, et que le sang du coin des lèvres venait des fosses nasales, il le fit poser à plat sur le lit, sans oreiller, la tête sur le même plan que le corps, et même un peu plus basse, le buste nu, afin de faciliter la respiration. Mademoiselle Gillenormand, voyant qu'on déshabillait Marius, se retira. Elle se mit à dire son chapelet dans sa chambre.

Le torse n'était atteint d'aucune lésion intérieure; une balle, amortie par le portefeuille, avait dévié et fait le tour des côtes avec une déchirure hideuse, mais sans profondeur, et par conséquent sans danger. La longue marche souterraine avait achevé la dislocation de la clavicule cassée, et il y avait là de sérieux désordres. Les bras étaient sabrés. Aucune balafre ne défigurait le visage; la tête pourtant était comme couverte de hachures; que deviendraient ces blessures à la tête? s'arrêtaient-elles au cuir chevelu? entamaient-elles le crâne? On ne pouvait le dire encore. Un symptôme grave, c'est qu'elles avaient causé l'évanouissement, et l'on ne se réveille pas toujours de ces évanouissements-là. L'hémorragie, en outre, avait épuisé le blessé. À partir de la ceinture, le bas du corps avait été protégé par la barricade.

Basque et Nicolette déchiraient des linges et préparaient des bandes; Nicolette les cousait, Basque les roulait. La charpie manquant, le médecin avait provisoirement arrêté le sang des plaies avec des galettes d'ouate. À côté du lit, trois bougies brûlaient sur une table où la trousse de chirurgie était étalée. Le médecin lava le visage et les cheveux de Marius avec de l'eau froide. Un seau plein fut rouge en un instant. Le portier, sa chandelle à la main, éclairait.

Le médecin semblait songer tristement. De temps en temps, il faisait un signe de tête négatif, comme s'il répondait à quelque question qu'il s'adressait intérieurement. Mauvais signe pour le malade, ces mystérieux dialogues du médecin avec lui-même.

Au moment où le médecin essuyait la face et touchait légèrement du doigt les paupières toujours fermées, une porte s'ouvrit au fond du salon, et une longue figure pâle apparut.

C'était le grand-père.

L'émeute, depuis deux jours, avait fort agité, indigné et préoccupé M. Gillenormand. Il n'avait pu dormir la nuit précédente, et il avait eu la fièvre toute la journée. Le soir, il s'était couché de très bonne heure, recommandant qu'on verrouillât tout dans la maison, et, de fatigue, il s'était assoupi.

Les vieillards ont le sommeil fragile; la chambre de M. Gillenormand était contiguë au salon, et, quelques précautions qu'on eût prises, le bruit l'avait réveillé. Surpris de la fente de lumière qu'il voyait à sa porte, il était sorti de son lit et était venu à tâtons.

Il était sur le seuil, une main sur le bec-de-cane de la porte entre-bâillée, la tête un peu penchée en avant, et branlante, le corps serré dans une robe de chambre blanche, droite et sans plis comme un suaire, étonné; et il avait l'air d'un fantôme qui regarde dans un tombeau.

Il aperçut le lit, et sur le matelas ce jeune homme sanglant, blanc d'une blancheur de cire, les yeux fermés, la bouche ouverte, les lèvres blêmes, nu jusqu'à la ceinture, tailladé partout de plaies vermeilles, immobile, vivement éclairé.

L'aïeul eut de la tête aux pieds tout le frisson que peuvent avoir des membres ossifiés, ses yeux dont la cornée était jaune à cause du grand âge se voilèrent d'une sorte de miroitement vitreux, toute sa face prit en un instant les angles terreux d'une tête de squelette, ses bras tombèrent pendants comme si un ressort s'y fût brisé, et sa stupeur se traduisit par l'écartement des doigts de ses deux vieilles mains toutes tremblantes, ses genoux firent un angle en avant, laissant voir par l'ouverture de la robe de chambre ses pauvres jambes nues hérissées de poils blancs, et il murmura:

— Marius!

— Monsieur, dit Basque, on vient de rapporter monsieur. Il est allé à la barricade, et....

— Il est mort! cria le vieillard d'une voix terrible. Ah! le brigand!

Alors une sorte de transfiguration sépulcrale redressa ce centenaire droit comme un jeune homme.

— Monsieur, dit-il, c'est vous le médecin. Commencez par me dire une chose. Il est mort, n'est-ce pas?

Le médecin, au comble de l'anxiété, garda le silence.

M. Gillenormand se tordit les mains avec un éclat de rire effrayant.

— Il est mort! il est mort! Il s'est fait tuer aux barricades! en haine de moi! C'est contre moi qu'il a fait ça! Ah! buveur de sang! c'est comme cela qu'il me revient! Misère de ma vie, il est mort!

Il alla à la fenêtre, l'ouvrit toute grande comme s'il étouffait, et, debout devant l'ombre, il se mit à parler dans la rue à la nuit:

— Percé, sabré, égorgé, exterminé, déchiqueté, coupé en morceaux! voyez-vous ça, le gueux! Il savait bien que je l'attendais, et que je lui avais fait arranger sa chambre, et que j'avais mis au chevet de mon lit son portrait du temps qu'il était petit enfant! Il savait bien qu'il n'avait qu'à revenir, et que depuis des ans je le rappelais, et que je restais le soir au coin de mon feu les mains sur mes genoux ne sachant que faire, et que j'en étais imbécile! Tu savais bien cela, que tu n'avais qu'à rentrer, et qu'à dire: C'est moi, et que tu serais le maître de la maison, et que je t'obéirais, et que tu ferais tout ce que tu voudrais de ta vieille ganache de grand-père! Tu le savais bien, et tu as dit: Non, c'est un royaliste, je n'irai pas! Et tu es allé aux barricades, et tu t'es fait tuer par méchanceté! pour te venger de ce que je t'avais dit au sujet de monsieur le duc de Berry! C'est ça qui est infâme! Couchez-vous donc et dormez donc tranquillement! Il est mort. Voilà mon réveil.

Le médecin, qui commençait à être inquiet de deux côtés, quitta un moment Marius et alla à M. Gillenormand, et lui prit le bras. L'aïeul se retourna, le regarda avec des yeux qui semblaient agrandis et sanglants, et lui dit avec calme:

— Monsieur, je vous remercie. Je suis tranquille, je suis un homme, j'ai vu la mort de Louis XVI, je sais porter les événements. Il y a une chose qui est terrible, c’est de penser que ce sont vos journaux qui font tout le mal. Vous aurez des écrivassiers, des parleurs, des avocats, des orateurs, des tribunes, des discussions, des progrès, des lumières, des droits de l’homme, de la liberté de la presse, et voilà comment on vous rapportera vos enfants dans vos maisons! Ah! Marius! c’est abominable! Tué! mort avant moi! Une barricade! Ah! le bandit! Docteur, vous demeurez dans le quartier, je crois? Oh! je vous connais bien. Je vois de ma fenêtre passer votre cabriolet. Je vais vous dire. Vous auriez tort de croire que je suis en colère. On ne se met pas en colère contre un mort. Ce serait stupide. C’est un enfant que j’ai élevé. J’étais déjà vieux, qu’il était encore tout petit. Il jouait aux Tuileries avec sa petite pelle et sa petite chaise, et, pour que les inspecteurs ne grondassent pas, je bouchais à mesure avec ma canne les trous qu’il faisait dans la terre avec sa pelle. Un jour il a crié: À bas Louis XVIII! et s’en est allé. Ce n’est pas ma faute. Il était tout rose et tout blond. Sa mère est morte. Avez-vous remarqué que tous les petits enfants sont blonds? À quoi cela tient-il? C’est le fils d’un de ces brigands de la Loire, mais les enfants sont innocents des crimes de leurs pères. Je me le rappelle quand il était haut comme ceci. Il ne pouvait pas parvenir à prononcer les *d*. Il avait un parler si doux et si obscur qu’on eût cru un oiseau. Je me souviens qu’une fois, devant l’Hercule Farnèse, on faisait cercle pour s’émerveiller et l’admirer, tant il était beau, cet enfant! C’était une tête comme il y en a dans les tableaux. Je lui faisais ma grosse voix, je lui faisais peur avec ma canne, mais il savait bien que c’était pour rire. Le matin, quand il entrait dans ma chambre, je bougonnais, mais cela me faisait l’effet du soleil. On ne peut pas se défendre contre ces mioches-là. Ils vous prennent, ils vous tiennent, ils ne vous lâchent plus. La vérité est qu’il n’y avait pas d’amour comme cet enfant-là. Maintenant, qu’est-ce que vous dites de vos Lafayette, de vos Benjamin Constant, et de vos Tirecuir de Corcelles, qui me le tuent! Ça ne peut pas passer comme ça.

Il s’approcha de Marius toujours livide et sans mouvement, et auquel le médecin était revenu, et il recommença à se tordre les bras. Les lèvres blanches du vieillard remuaient, comme machinalement, et laissaient passer, comme des souffles dans un râle, des mots presque indistincts qu’on entendait à peine: — Ah! sans cœur! Ah! clubiste! Ah! scélérat! Ah! septembriseur! — Reproches à voix basse d’un agonisant à un cadavre.

Peu à peu, comme il faut toujours que les éruptions intérieures se fassent jour, l’enchaînement des paroles revint, mais l’aïeul paraissait n’avoir plus la force de les prononcer; sa voix était tellement sourde et éteinte qu'elle semblait venir de l'autre bord d'un abîme:

— Ça m'est bien égal, je vais mourir aussi, moi. Et dire qu'il n'y a pas dans Paris une drôlesse qui n'eût été heureuse de faire le bonheur de ce misérable! Un gredin qui, au lieu de s'amuser et de jouir de la vie, est allé se battre et s'est fait mitrailler comme une brute! Et pour qui, pourquoi? Pour la république! Au lieu d'aller danser à la Chaumière, comme c'est le devoir des jeunes gens! C'est bien la peine d'avoir vingt ans. La république, belle fichue sottise! Pauvres mères, faites donc de jolis garçons! Allons, il est mort. Ça fera deux enterrements sous la porte cochère. Tu t'es donc fait arranger comme cela pour les beaux yeux du général Lamarque! Qu'est-ce qu'il t'avait fait, ce général Lamarque! Un sabreur! un bavard! Se faire tuer pour un mort! S'il n'y a pas de quoi rendre fou! Comprenez cela! À vingt ans! Et sans retourner la tête pour regarder s'il ne laissait rien derrière lui! Voilà maintenant les pauvres vieux bonshommes qui sont forcés de mourir tout seuls. Crève dans ton coin, hibou! Eh bien, au fait, tant mieux, c'est ce que j'espérais, ça va me tuer net. Je suis trop vieux, j'ai cent ans, j'ai cent mille ans, il y a longtemps que j'ai le droit d'être mort. De ce coup-là, c'est fait. C'est donc fini, quel bonheur! À quoi bon lui faire respirer de l'ammoniaque et tout ce tas de drogues? Vous perdez votre peine, imbécile de médecin! Allez, il est mort, bien mort. Je m'y connais, moi qui suis mort aussi. Il n'a pas fait la chose à demi. Oui, ce temps-ci est infâme, infâme, infâme, et voilà ce que je pense de vous, de vos idées, de vos systèmes, de vos maîtres, de vos oracles, de vos docteurs, de vos garnements d'écrivains, de vos gueux de philosophes, et de toutes les révolutions qui effarouchent depuis soixante ans les nuées de corbeaux des Tuileries! Et puisque tu as été sans pitié en te faisant tuer comme cela, je n'aurai même pas de chagrin de ta mort, entends-tu, assassin!

En ce moment, Marius ouvrit lentement les paupières, et son regard, encore voilé par l'étonnement léthargique, s'arrêta sur M. Gillenormand.

— Marius! cria le vieillard. Marius! mon petit Marius! mon enfant! mon fils bien-aimé! Tu ouvres les yeux, tu me regardes, tu es vivant, merci!

Et il tomba évanoui.

Livre quatrième — Javert déraillé

Chapitre I

Javert déraillé

Javert s'était éloigné à pas lents de la rue de l'Homme-Armé.

Il marchait la tête baissée, pour la première fois de sa vie, et, pour la première fois de sa vie également, les mains derrière le dos.

Jusqu'à ce jour, Javert n'avait pris, dans les deux attitudes de Napoléon, que celle qui exprime la résolution, les bras croisés sur la poitrine, celle qui exprime l'incertitude, les mains derrière le dos, lui était inconnue. Maintenant, un changement s'était fait; toute sa personne, lente et sombre, était empreinte d'anxiété.

Il s'enfonça dans les rues silencieuses.

Cependant, il suivait une direction.

Il coupa par le plus court vers la Seine, gagna le quai des Ormes, longea le quai, dépassa la Grève, et s'arrêta, à quelque distance du poste de la place du Châtelet, à l'angle du pont Notre-Dame. La Seine fait là, entre le pont Notre-Dame et le Pont au Change d'une part, et d'autre part entre le quai de la Mégisserie et le quai aux Fleurs, une sorte de lac carré traversé par un rapide.

Ce point de la Seine est redouté des mariniers. Rien n'est plus dangereux que ce rapide, resserré à cette époque et irrité par les pilotis du moulin du pont, aujourd'hui démoli. Les deux ponts, si voisins l'un de l'autre, augmentent le péril; l'eau se hâte formidablement sous les arches. Elle y roule de larges plis terribles; elle s'y accumule et s'y entasse; le flot fait effort aux piles des ponts comme pour les arracher avec de grosses cordes liquides. Les hommes qui tombent là ne reparaissent pas; les meilleurs nageurs s'y noient.

Javert appuya ses deux coudes sur le parapet, son menton dans ses deux mains, et, pendant que ses ongles se crispaient machinalement dans l'épaisseur de ses favoris, il songea.

Une nouveauté, une révolution, une catastrophe, venait de se passer au fond de lui-même; et il y avait de quoi s'examiner.

Javert souffrait affreusement.

Depuis quelques heures Javert avait cessé d'être simple. Il était troublé; ce cerveau, si limpide dans sa cécité, avait perdu sa transparence; il y avait un nuage dans ce cristal. Javert sentait dans sa conscience le devoir se dédoubler, et il ne pouvait se le dissimuler. Quand il avait rencontré si inopinément Jean Valjean sur la berge de la Seine, il y avait eu en lui quelque chose du loup qui ressaisit sa proie et du chien qui retrouve son maître.

Il voyait devant lui deux routes également droites toutes deux, mais il en voyait deux; et cela le terrifiait, lui qui n'avait jamais connu dans sa vie qu'une ligne droite. Et, angoisse poignante, ces deux routes étaient contraires. L'une de ces deux lignes droites excluait l'autre. Laquelle des deux était la vraie?

Sa situation était inexprimable.

Devoir la vie à un malfaiteur, accepter cette dette et la rembourser, être, en dépit de soi-même, de plain-pied avec un repris de justice, et lui payer un service avec un autre service; se laisser dire: Va-t'en, et lui dire à son tour: Sois libre; sacrifier à des motifs personnels le devoir, cette obligation générale, et sentir dans ces motifs personnels quelque chose de général aussi, et de supérieur peut-être; trahir la société pour rester fidèle à sa conscience; que toutes ces absurdités se réalisassent et qu'elles vinssent s'accumuler sur lui-même, c'est ce dont il était atterré.

Une chose l'avait étonné, c'était que Jean Valjean lui eût fait grâce, et une chose l'avait pétrifié, c'était que, lui Javert, il eût fait grâce à Jean Valjean.

Où en était-il? Il se cherchait et ne se trouvait plus.

Que faire maintenant? Livrer Jean Valjean, c'était mal; laisser Jean Valjean libre, c'était mal. Dans le premier cas, l'homme de l'autorité tombait plus bas que l'homme du bagne; dans le second, un forçat montait plus haut que la loi et mettait le pied dessus. Dans les deux cas, déshonneur pour lui Javert. Dans tous les partis qu'on pouvait prendre, il y avait de la chute. La destinée a de certaines extrémités à pic sur l'impossible, et au delà desquelles la vie n'est plus qu'un précipice. Javert était à une de ces extrémités-là.

Une de ses anxiétés, c'était d'être contraint de penser. La violence même de toutes ces émotions contradictoires l'y obligeait. La pensée, chose inusitée pour lui, et singulièrement douloureuse.

Il y a toujours dans la pensée une certaine quantité de rébellion intérieure; et il s'irritait d'avoir cela en lui.

La pensée, sur n’importe quel sujet en dehors du cercle étroit de ses fonctions, eût été pour lui, dans tous les cas, une inutilité et une fatigue; mais la pensée sur la journée qui venait de s’écouler était une torture. Il fallait bien cependant regarder dans sa conscience après de telles secousses, et se rendre compte de soi-même à soi-même.

Ce qu’il venait de faire lui donnait le frisson. Il avait, lui Javert, trouvé bon de décider, contre tous les règlements de police, contre toute l’organisation sociale et judiciaire, contre le code tout entier, une mise en liberté; cela lui avait convenu; il avait substitué ses propres affaires aux affaires publiques; n’était-ce pas inqualifiable? Chaque fois qu’il se mettait en face de cette action sans nom qu’il avait commise, il tremblait de la tête aux pieds. À quoi se résoudre? Une seule ressource lui restait: retourner en hâte rue de l’Homme-Armé, et faire écrouer Jean Valjean. Il était clair que c’était cela qu’il fallait faire. Il ne pouvait.

Quelque chose lui barrait le chemin de ce côté-là.

Quelque chose? Quoi? Est-ce qu’il y a au monde autre chose que les tribunaux, les sentences exécutoires, la police et l’autorité? Javert était bouleversé.

Un galérien sacré! un forçat imprenable à la justice! et cela par le fait de Javert!

Que Javert et Jean Valjean, l’homme fait pour sévir, l’homme fait pour subir, que ces deux hommes, qui étaient l’un et l’autre la chose de la loi, en fussent venus à ce point de se mettre tous les deux au-dessus de la loi, est-ce que ce n’était pas effrayant?

Quoi donc! de telles énormités arriveraient et personne ne serait puni! Jean Valjean, plus fort que l’ordre social tout entier, serait libre, et lui Javert continuerait de manger le pain du gouvernement!

Sa rêverie devenait peu à peu terrible.

Il eût pu à travers cette rêverie se faire encore quelque reproche au sujet de l’insurgé rapporté rue des Filles-du-Calvaire; mais il n’y songeait pas. La faute moindre se perdait dans la plus grande. D’ailleurs cet insurgé était évidemment un homme mort, et, légalement, la mort éteint la poursuite.

Jean Valjean, c’était là le poids qu’il avait sur l’esprit.

Jean Valjean le déconcertait. Tous les axiomes qui avaient été les points d’appui de toute sa vie s’écroulaient devant cet homme. La générosité de Jean Valjean envers lui Javert l’accablait. D’autres faits, qu’il se rappelait et qu’il avait autrefois traités de mensonges et de folies, lui revenaient maintenant comme des réalités. M. Madeleine reparaissait derrière Jean Valjean, et les deux figures se superposaient de façon à n'en plus faire qu'une, qui était vénérable. Javert sentait que quelque chose d'horrible pénétrait dans son âme, l'admiration pour un forçat. Le respect d'un galérien, est-ce que c'est possible? Il en frémissait, et ne pouvait s'y soustraire. Il avait beau se débattre, il était réduit à confesser dans son for intérieur la sublimité de ce misérable. Cela était odieux.

Un malfaiteur bienfaisant, un forçat compatissant, doux, secourable, clément, rendant le bien pour le mal, rendant le pardon pour la haine, préférant la pitié à la vengeance, aimant mieux se perdre que de perdre son ennemi, sauvant celui qui l'a frappé, agenouillé sur le haut de la vertu, plus voisin de l'ange que de l'homme! Javert était contraint de s'avouer que ce monstre existait.

Cela ne pouvait durer ainsi.

Certes, et nous y insistons, il ne s'était pas rendu sans résistance à ce monstre, à cet ange infâme, à ce héros hideux, dont il était presque aussi indigné que stupéfait. Vingt fois, quand il était dans cette voiture face à face avec Jean Valjean, le titre légal avait rugi en lui. Vingt fois, il avait été tenté de se jeter sur Jean Valjean, de le saisir et de le dévorer, c'est-à-dire de l'arrêter. Quoi de plus simple en effet? Crier au premier poste devant lequel on passe: — Voilà un repris de justice en rupture de ban! appeler les gendarmes et leur dire: — Cet homme est pour vous! ensuite s'en aller, laisser là ce damné, ignorer le reste, et ne plus se mêler de rien. Cet homme est à jamais le prisonnier de la loi; la loi en fera ce qu'elle voudra. Quoi de plus juste? Javert s'était dit tout cela; il avait voulu passer outre, agir, appréhender l'homme, et, alors comme à présent, il n'avait pas pu; et chaque fois que sa main s'était convulsivement levée vers le collet de Jean Valjean, sa main, comme sous un poids énorme, était retombée, et il avait entendu au fond de sa pensée une voix, une étrange voix qui lui criait: — C'est bien. Livre ton sauveur. Ensuite fais apporter la cuvette de Ponce-Pilate, et lave-toi les griffes.

Puis sa réflexion tombait sur lui-même, et à côté de Jean Valjean grandi, il se voyait, lui Javert, dégradé.

Un forçat était son bienfaiteur!

Mais aussi pourquoi avait-il permis à cet homme de le laisser vivre? Il avait, dans cette barricade, le droit d'être tué. Il aurait dû user de ce droit.

Appeler les autres insurgés à son secours contre Jean Valjean, se faire fusiller de force, cela valait mieux.

Sa suprême angoisse, c’était la disparition de la certitude. Il se sentait déraciné. Le code n’était plus qu’un tronçon dans sa main. Il avait affaire à des scrupules d’une espèce inconnue. Il se faisait en lui une révélation sentimentale, entièrement distincte de l’affirmation légale, son unique mesure jusqu’alors. Rester dans l’ancienne honnêteté, cela ne suffisait plus. Tout un ordre de faits inattendus surgissait et le subjuguait. Tout un monde nouveau apparaissait à son âme, le bienfait accepté et rendu, le dévouement, la miséricorde, l’indulgence, les violences faites par la pitié à l’austérité, l’acception de personnes, plus de condamnation définitive, plus de damnation, la possibilité d’une larme dans l’œil de la loi, on ne sait quelle justice selon Dieu allant en sens inverse de la justice selon les hommes. Il apercevait dans les ténèbres l’effrayant lever d’un soleil moral inconnu; il en avait l’horreur et l’éblouissement. Hibou forcé à des regards d’aigle.

Il se disait que c’était donc vrai, qu’il y avait des exceptions, que l’autorité pouvait être décontenancée, que la règle pouvait rester court devant un fait, que tout ne s’encadrait pas dans le texte du code, que l’imprévu se faisait obéir, que la vertu d’un forçat pouvait tendre un piège à la vertu d’un fonctionnaire, que le monstrueux pouvait être divin, que la destinée avait de ces embuscades-là, et il songeait avec désespoir que lui-même n’avait pas été à l’abri d’une surprise.

Il était forcé de reconnaître que la bonté existait. Ce forçat avait été bon. Et lui-même, chose inouïe, il venait d’être bon. Donc il se dépravait.

Il se trouvait lâche. Il se faisait horreur.

L’idéal pour Javert, ce n’était pas d’être humain, d’être grand, d’être sublime; c’était d’être irréprochable.

Or, il venait de faillir.

Comment en était-il arrivé là? comment tout cela s’était-il passé? Il n’aurait pu se le dire à lui-même. Il prenait sa tête entre ses deux mains, mais il avait beau faire, il ne parvenait pas à se l’expliquer.

Il avait certainement toujours eu l’intention de remettre Jean Valjean à la loi, dont Jean Valjean était le captif, et dont lui, Javert, était l’esclave. Il ne s’était pas avoué un seul instant, pendant qu’il le tenait, qu’il eût la pensée de le laisser aller. C’était en quelque sorte à son insu que sa main s’était ouverte et l’avait lâché.

Toutes sortes de nouveautés énigmatiques s’entr’ouvraient devant ses yeux. Il s’adressait des questions, et il se faisait des réponses, et ses réponses l’effrayaient. Il se demandait: Ce forçat, ce désespéré, que j’ai poursuivi jusqu’à le persécuter, et qui m’a eu sous son pied, et qui pouvait se venger, et qui le devait tout à la fois pour sa rancune et pour sa sécurité, en me laissant la vie, en me faisant grâce, qu’a-t-il fait? Son devoir. Non. Quelque chose de plus. Et moi, en lui faisant grâce à mon tour, qu’ai-je fait? Mon devoir. Non. Quelque chose de plus. Il y a donc quelque chose de plus que le devoir? Ici il s’effarait; sa balance se disloquait; l’un des plateaux tombait dans l’abîme, l’autre s’en allait dans le ciel; et Javert n’avait pas moins d’épouvante de celui qui était en haut que de celui qui était en bas. Sans être le moins du monde ce qu’on appelle voltairien, ou philosophe, ou incrédule, respectueux au contraire, par instinct, pour l’église établie, il ne la connaissait que comme un fragment auguste de l’ensemble social; l’ordre était son dogme et lui suffisait; depuis qu’il avait l’âge d’homme et de fonctionnaire, il mettait dans la police à peu près toute sa religion; étant, et nous employons ici les mots sans la moindre ironie et dans leur acception la plus sérieuse, étant, nous l’avons dit, espion comme on est prêtre. Il avait un supérieur, M. Gisquet; il n’avait guère songé jusqu’à ce jour à cet autre supérieur, Dieu.

Ce chef nouveau, Dieu, il le sentait inopinément, et en était troublé.

Il était désorienté de cette présence inattendue; il ne savait que faire de ce supérieur-là, lui qui n’ignorait pas que le subordonné est tenu de se courber toujours, qu’il ne doit ni désobéir, ni blâmer, ni discuter, et que, vis-à-vis d’un supérieur qui l’étonne trop, l’inférieur n’a d’autre ressource que sa démission.

Mais comment s’y prendre pour donner sa démission à Dieu?

Quoi qu’il en fût, et c’était toujours là qu’il en revenait, un fait pour lui dominait tout, c’est qu’il venait de commettre une infraction épouvantable. Il venait de fermer les yeux sur un condamné récidiviste en rupture de ban. Il venait d’élargir un galérien. Il venait de voler aux lois un homme qui leur appartenait. Il avait fait cela. Il ne se comprenait plus. Il n’était pas sûr d’être lui-même. Les raisons mêmes de son action lui échappaient, il n’en avait que le vertige. Il avait vécu jusqu’à ce moment de cette foi aveugle qui engendre la probité ténébreuse. Cette foi le quittait, cette probité lui faisait défaut. Tout ce qu’il avait cru se dissipait. Des vérités dont il ne voulait pas l’obsédaient inexorablement. Il fallait désormais être un autre homme. Il souffrait les étranges douleurs d’une conscience brusquement opérée de la cataracte. Il voyait ce qu’il lui répugnait de voir. Il se sentait vidé, inutile, disloqué de sa vie passée, destitué, dissous. L’autorité était morte en lui. Il n’avait plus de raison d’être.

Situation terrible! être ému.

Être le granit, et douter! être la statue du châtiment fondue tout d’une pièce dans le moule de la loi, et s’apercevoir subitement qu’on a sous sa mamelle de bronze quelque chose d’absurde et de désobéissant qui ressemble presque à un cœur! en venir à rendre le bien pour le bien, quoiqu’on se soit dit jusqu’à ce jour que ce bien-là c’est le mal! être le chien de garde, et lécher! être la glace, et fondre! être la tenaille, et devenir une main! se sentir tout à coup des doigts qui s’ouvrent! lâcher prise, chose épouvantable!

L’homme projectile ne sachant plus sa route, et reculant!

Être obligé de s’avouer ceci: l’infaillibilité n’est pas infaillible, il peut y avoir de l’erreur dans le dogme, tout n’est pas dit quand un code a parlé, la société n’est pas parfaite, l’autorité est compliquée de vacillation, un craquement dans l’immuable est possible, les juges sont des hommes, la loi peut se tromper, les tribunaux peuvent se méprendre! voir une fêlure dans l’immense vitre bleue du firmament!

Ce qui se passait dans Javert, c’était le Fampoux d’une conscience rectiligne, la mise hors de voie d’une âme, l’écrasement d’une probité irrésistiblement lancée en ligne droite et se brisant à Dieu. Certes, cela était étrange. Que le chauffeur de l’ordre, que le mécanicien de l’autorité, monté sur l’aveugle cheval de fer à voie rigide, puisse être désarçonné par un coup de lumière! que l’incommutable, le direct, le correct, le géométrique, le passif, le parfait, puisse fléchir! qu’il y ait pour la locomotive un chemin de Damas!

Dieu, toujours intérieur à l’homme, et réfractaire, lui la vraie conscience, à la fausse, défense à l’étincelle de s’éteindre, ordre au rayon de se souvenir du soleil, injonction à l’âme de reconnaître le véritable absolu quand il se confronte avec l’absolu fictif, l’humanité imperdable, le cœur humain inamissible, ce phénomène splendide, le plus beau peut-être de nos prodiges intérieurs, Javert le comprenait-il? Javert le pénétrait-il? Javert s’en rendait-il compte? Évidemment non. Mais sous la pression de cet incompréhensible incontestable, il sentait son crâne s’entr’ouvrir.

Il était moins le transfiguré que la victime de ce prodige. Il le subissait, exaspéré. Il ne voyait dans tout cela qu'une immense difficulté d'être. Il lui semblait que désormais sa respiration était gênée à jamais.

Avoir sur sa tête de l'inconnu, il n'était pas accoutumé à cela.

Jusqu'ici tout ce qu'il avait au-dessus de lui avait été pour son regard une surface nette, simple, limpide; là rien d'ignoré, ni d'obscur; rien qui ne fût défini, coordonné, enchaîné, précis, exact, circonscrit, limité, fermé; tout prévu; l'autorité était une chose plane; aucune chute en elle, aucun vertige devant elle. Javert n'avait jamais vu de l'inconnu qu'en bas. L'irrégulier, l'inattendu, l'ouverture désordonnée du chaos, le glissement possible dans un précipice, c'était là le fait des régions inférieures, des rebelles, des mauvais, des misérables. Maintenant Javert se renversait en arrière, et il était brusquement effaré par cette apparition inouïe: un gouffre en haut.

Quoi donc! on était démantelé de fond en comble! on était déconcerté, absolument! À quoi se fier! Ce dont on était convaincu s'effondrait!

Quoi! le défaut de la cuirasse de la société pouvait être trouvé par un misérable magnanime! Quoi! un honnête serviteur de la loi pouvait se voir tout à coup pris entre deux crimes, le crime de laisser échapper un homme, et le crime de l'arrêter! Tout n'était pas certain dans la consigne donnée par l'état au fonctionnaire! Il pouvait y avoir des impasses dans le devoir! Quoi donc! tout cela était réel! était-il vrai qu'un ancien bandit, courbé sous les condamnations, pût se redresser et finir par avoir raison? était-ce croyable? y avait-il donc des cas où la loi devait se retirer devant le crime transfiguré en balbutiant des excuses?

Oui, cela était! et Javert le voyait! et Javert le touchait! et non seulement il ne pouvait le nier, mais il y prenait part. C'étaient des réalités. Il était abominable que les faits réels pussent arriver à une telle difformité.

Si les faits faisaient leur devoir, ils se borneraient à être les preuves de la loi; les faits, c'est Dieu qui les envoie. L'anarchie allait-elle donc maintenant descendre de là-haut?

Ainsi, — et dans le grossissement de l'angoisse, et dans l'illusion d'optique de la consternation, tout ce qui eût pu restreindre et corriger son impression s'effaçait, et la société, et le genre humain, et l'univers se résumaient désormais à ses yeux dans un linéament simple et terrible, — ainsi la pénalité, la chose jugée, la force due à la législation, les arrêts des cours souveraines, la magistrature, le gouvernement, la prévention et la répression, la sagesse officielle, l'infaillibilité légale, le principe d'autorité, tous les dogmes sur lesquels repose la sécurité politique et civile, la souveraineté, la justice, la logique découlant du code, l'absolu social, la vérité publique, tout cela, décombre, monceau, chaos; lui-même Javert, le guetteur de l'ordre, l'incorruptibilité au service de la police, la providence-dogue de la société, vaincu et terrassé; et sur toute cette ruine un homme debout, le bonnet vert sur la tête et l'auréole au front; voilà à quel bouleversement il en était venu; voilà la vision effroyable qu'il avait dans l'âme.

Que cela fût supportable. Non.

État violent, s'il en fut. Il n'y avait que deux manières d'en sortir. L'une d'aller résolûment à Jean Valjean, et de rendre au cachot l'homme du bagne. L'autre....

Javert quitta le parapet, et, la tête haute cette fois, se dirigea d'un pas ferme vers le poste indiqué par une lanterne à l'un des coins de la place du Châtelet.

Arrivé là, il aperçut par la vitre un sergent de ville, et entra. Rien qu'à la façon dont ils poussent la porte d'un corps de garde, les hommes de police se reconnaissent entre eux. Javert se nomma, montra sa carte au sergent, et s'assit à la table du poste où brûlait une chandelle. Il y avait sur la table une plume, un encrier de plomb, et du papier en cas pour les procès-verbaux éventuels et les consignations des rondes de nuit.

Cette table, toujours complétée par sa chaise de paille, est une institution; elle existe dans tous les postes de police; elle est invariablement ornée d'une soucoupe en buis pleine de sciure de bois et d'une grimace en carton pleine de pains à cacheter rouges, et elle est l'étage inférieur du style officiel. C'est à elle que commence la littérature de l'État.

Javert prit la plume et une feuille de papier et se mit à écrire. Voici ce qu'il écrivit:

QUELQUES OBSERVATIONS POUR LE BIEN DU SERVICE.

«Premièrement: je prie monsieur le préfet de jeter les yeux.

«Deuxièmement: les détenus arrivant de l'instruction ôtent leurs souliers et restent pieds nus sur la dalle pendant qu'on les fouille. Plusieurs toussent en rentrant à la prison. Cela entraîne des dépenses d'infirmerie.

«Troisièmement: la filature est bonne, avec relais des agents de distance en distance, mais il faudrait que, dans les occasions importantes, deux agents au moins ne se perdissent pas de vue, attendu que, si, pour une cause quelconque, un agent vient à faiblir dans le service, l’autre le surveille et le supplée.

«Quatrièmement: on ne s’explique pas pourquoi le règlement spécial de la prison des Madelonnettes interdit au prisonnier d’avoir une chaise, même en la payant.

«Cinquièmement: aux Madelonnettes, il n’y a que deux barreaux à la cantine, ce qui permet à la cantinière de laisser toucher sa main aux détenus.

«Sixièmement: les détenus, dits aboyeurs, qui appellent les autres détenus au parloir, se font payer deux sous par le prisonnier pour crier son nom distinctement. C’est un vol.

«Septièmement: pour un fil courant, on retient dix sous au prisonnier dans l’atelier des tisserands; c’est un abus de l’entrepreneur, puisque la toile n’est pas moins bonne.

«Huitièmement: il est fâcheux que les visitants de la Force aient à traverser la cour des mômes pour se rendre au parloir de Sainte-Marie-l’Égyptienne.

«Neuvièmement: il est certain qu’on entend tous les jours des gendarmes raconter dans la cour de la préfecture des interrogatoires de prévenus par les magistrats. Un gendarme, qui devrait être sacré, répéter ce qu’il a entendu dans le cabinet de l’instruction, c’est là un désordre grave.

«Dixièmement: Mme Henry est une honnête femme; sa cantine est fort propre; mais il est mauvais qu’une femme tienne le guichet de la souricière du secret. Cela n’est pas digne de la Conciergerie d’une grande civilisation.»

Javert écrivit ces lignes de son écriture la plus calme et la plus correcte, n’omettant pas une virgule, et faisant fermement crier le papier sous la plume. Au-dessous de la dernière ligne il signa:

«Javert.

«Inspecteur de 1ère classe.

«Au poste de la place du Châtelet.

«7 juin 1832, environ une heure du matin.»

Javert sécha l’encre fraîche sur le papier, le plia comme une lettre, le cacheta, écrivit au dos: *Note pour l’administration*, le laissa sur la table, et sortit du poste. La porte vitrée et grillée retomba derrière lui.

Il traversa de nouveau diagonalement la place du Châtelet, regagna le quai, et revint avec une précision automatique au point même qu’il avait quitté un quart d’heure auparavant; il s’y accouda, et se retrouva dans la même attitude sur la même dalle du parapet. Il semblait qu'il n'eût pas bougé.

L'obscurité était complète. C'était le moment sépulcral qui suit minuit. Un plafond de nuages cachait les étoiles. Le ciel n'était qu'une épaisseur sinistre. Les maisons de la Cité n'avaient plus une seule lumière; personne ne passait; tout ce qu'on apercevait des rues et des quais était désert; Notre-Dame et les tours du Palais de justice semblaient des linéaments de la nuit. Un réverbère rougissait la margelle du quai. Les silhouettes des ponts se déformaient dans la brume les unes derrière les autres. Les pluies avaient grossi la rivière.

L'endroit où Javert s'était accoudé était, on s'en souvient, précisément situé au-dessus du rapide de la Seine, à pic sur cette redoutable spirale de tourbillons qui se dénoue et se renoue comme une vis sans fin.

Javert pencha la tête et regarda. Tout était noir. On ne distinguait rien. On entendait un bruit d'écume; mais on ne voyait pas la rivière. Par instants, dans cette profondeur vertigineuse, une lueur apparaissait et serpentait vaguement, l'eau ayant cette puissance, dans la nuit la plus complète, de prendre la lumière on ne sait où et de la changer en couleuvre. La lueur s'évanouissait, et tout redevenait indistinct. L'immensité semblait ouverte là. Ce qu'on avait au-dessous de soi, ce n'était pas de l'eau, c'était du gouffre. Le mur du quai, abrupt, confus, mêlé à la vapeur, tout de suite dérobé, faisait l'effet d'un escarpement de l'infini.

On ne voyait rien, mais on sentait la froideur hostile de l'eau et l'odeur fade des pierres mouillées. Un souffle farouche montait de cet abîme. Le grossissement du fleuve plutôt deviné qu'aperçu, le tragique chuchotement du flot, l'énormité lugubre des arches du pont, la chute imaginable dans ce vide sombre, toute cette ombre était pleine d'horreur.

Javert demeura quelques minutes immobile, regardant cette ouverture de ténèbres; il considérait l'invisible avec une fixité qui ressemblait à de l'attention. L'eau bruissait. Tout à coup, il ôta son chapeau et le posa sur le rebord du quai. Un moment après, une figure haute et noire, que de loin quelque passant attardé eût pu prendre pour un fantôme, apparut debout sur le parapet, se courba vers la Seine, puis se redressa, et tomba droite dans les ténèbres; il y eut un clapotement sourd, et l'ombre seule fut dans le secret des convulsions de cette forme obscure disparue sous l'eau.

Livre cinquième — Le petit-fils et le grand-père

Chapitre I

Où l’on revoit l’arbre à l’emplâtre de zinc

Quelque temps après les événements que nous venons de raconter, le sieur Boulatruelle eut une émotion vive.

Le sieur Boulatruelle est ce cantonnier de Montfermeil qu’on a déjà entrevu dans les parties ténébreuses de ce livre.

Boulatruelle, on s’en souvient peut-être, était un homme occupé de choses troubles et diverses. Il cassait des pierres et endommageait des voyageurs sur la grande route. Terrassier et voleur, il avait un rêve, il croyait aux trésors enfouis dans la forêt de Montfermeil. Il espérait quelque jour trouver de l’argent dans la terre au pied d’un arbre; en attendant, il en cherchait volontiers dans les poches des passants.

Néanmoins, pour l’instant, il était prudent. Il venait de l’échapper belle. Il avait été, on le sait, ramassé dans le galetas Jondrette avec les autres bandits. Utilité d’un vice: son ivrognerie l’avait sauvé. On n’avait jamais pu éclaircir s’il était là comme voleur ou comme volé. Une ordonnance de non-lieu, fondée sur son état d’ivresse bien constaté dans la soirée du guet-apens, l’avait mis en liberté. Il avait repris la clef des bois. Il était revenu à son chemin de Gagny à Lagny faire, sous la surveillance administrative, de l’empierrement pour le compte de l’état, la mine basse, fort pensif, un peu refroidi pour le vol, qui avait failli le perdre, mais ne se tournant qu’avec plus d’attendrissement vers le vin, qui venait de le sauver.

Quant à l’émotion vive qu’il eut peu de temps après sa rentrée sous le toit de gazon de sa hutte de cantonnier, la voici:

Un matin, Boulatruelle, en se rendant comme d’habitude à son travail, et à son affût peut-être, un peu avant le point du jour, aperçut parmi les branches un homme dont il ne vit que le dos, mais dont l’encolure, à ce qui lui sembla, à travers la distance et le crépuscule, ne lui était pas tout à fait inconnue. Boulatruelle, quoique ivrogne, avait une mémoire correcte et lucide, arme défensive indispensable à quiconque est un peu en lutte avec l’ordre légal.

— Où diable ai-je vu quelque chose comme cet homme-là? se demanda-t-il.

Mais il ne put rien se répondre, sinon que cela ressemblait à quelqu'un dont il avait confusément la trace dans l'esprit.

Boulatruelle, du reste, en dehors de l'identité qu'il ne réussissait point à ressaisir, fit des rapprochements et des calculs. Cet homme n'était pas du pays. Il y arrivait. À pied, évidemment. Aucune voiture publique ne passe à ces heures-là à Montfermeil. Il avait marché toute la nuit. D'où venait-il? De pas loin. Car il n'avait ni havre-sac, ni paquet. De Paris sans doute. Pourquoi était-il dans ce bois? pourquoi y était-il à pareille heure? qu'y venait-il faire?

Boulatruelle songea au trésor. À force de creuser dans sa mémoire, il se rappela vaguement avoir eu déjà, plusieurs années auparavant, une semblable alerte au sujet d'un homme qui lui faisait bien l'effet de pouvoir être cet homme-là.

Tout en méditant, il avait, sous le poids même de sa méditation, baissé la tête, chose naturelle, mais peu habile. Quand il la releva, il n'y avait plus rien. L'homme s'était effacé dans la forêt et dans le crépuscule.

— Par le diantre, dit Boulatruelle, je le retrouverai.

Je découvrirai la paroisse de ce paroissien-là. Ce promeneur de patron-minette a un pourquoi, je le saurai. On n'a pas de secret dans mon bois sans que je m'en mêle.

Il prit sa pioche qui était fort aiguë.

— Voilà, grommela-t-il, de quoi fouiller la terre et un homme.

Et, comme on rattache un fil à un autre fil, emboîtant le pas de son mieux dans l'itinéraire que l'homme avait dû suivre, il se mit en marche à travers le taillis.

Quand il eut fait une centaine d'enjambées, le jour, qui commençait à se lever, l'aida. Des semelles empreintes sur le sable çà et là, des herbes foulées, des bruyères écrasées, de jeunes branches pliées dans les broussailles et se redressant avec une gracieuse lenteur comme les bras d'une jolie femme qui s'étire en se réveillant, lui indiquèrent une sorte de piste. Il la suivit puis il la perdit. Le temps s'écoulait. Il entra plus avant dans le bois et parvint sur une espèce d'éminence. Un chasseur matinal qui passait au loin sur un sentier en sifflant l'air de Guillery lui donna l'idée de grimper dans un arbre. Quoique vieux il était agile. Il y avait là un hêtre de grande taille, digne de Tityre et de Boulatruelle. Boulatruelle monta sur le hêtre, le plus haut qu'il put.

L’idée était bonne. En explorant la solitude du côté où le bois est tout à fait enchevêtré et farouche, Boulatruelle aperçut tout à coup l’homme.

À peine l’eut-il aperçu qu’il le perdit de vue.

L’homme entra, ou plutôt se glissa, dans une clairière assez éloignée, masquée par de grands arbres, mais que Boulatruelle connaissait très bien, pour y avoir remarqué près d’un gros tas de pierres meulières, un châtaignier malade pansé avec une plaque de zinc clouée à même sur l’écorce. Cette clairière est celle qu’on appelait autrefois le fonds Blaru. Le tas de pierres, destiné à on ne sait quel emploi, qu’on y voyait il y a trente ans, y est sans doute encore. Rien n’égale la longévité d’un tas de pierres, si ce n’est celle d’une palissade en planches. C’est là provisoirement. Quelle raison pour durer!

Boulatruelle, avec la rapidité de la joie, se laissa tomber de l’arbre plutôt qu’il n’en descendit. Le gîte était trouvé, il s’agissait de saisir la bête. Ce fameux trésor rêvé était probablement là.

Ce n’était pas une petite affaire d’arriver à cette clairière. Par les sentiers battus, qui font mille zigzags taquinants, il fallait un bon quart d’heure. En ligne droite, par le fourré, qui est là singulièrement épais, très épineux et très agressif, il fallait une grande demi-heure. C’est ce que Boulatruelle eut le tort de ne point comprendre. Il crut à la ligne droite; illusion d’optique respectable, mais qui perd beaucoup d’hommes. Le fourré, si hérissé qu’il fût, lui parut le bon chemin.

— Prenons par la rue de Rivoli des loups, dit-il.

Boulatruelle, accoutumé à aller de travers, fit cette fois la faute d’aller droit.

Il se jeta résolument dans la mêlée des broussailles.

Il eut affaire à des houx, à des orties, à des aubépines, à des églantiers, à des chardons, à des ronces fort irascibles. Il fut très égratigné.

Au bas du ravin, il trouva de l’eau qu’il fallut traverser.

Il arriva enfin à la clairière Blaru, au bout de quarante minutes, suant, mouillé, essoufflé, griffé, féroce.

Personne dans la clairière.

Boulatruelle courut au tas de pierres. Il était à sa place. On ne l’avait pas emporté.

Quant à l’homme, il s’était évanoui dans la forêt. Il s’était évadé. Où? de quel côté? dans quel fourré? Impossible de le deviner.

Et, chose poignante, il y avait derrière le tas de pierres, devant l’arbre à la plaque de zinc, de la terre toute fraîche remuée, une pioche oubliée ou abandonnée, et un trou.

Ce trou était vide.

— Voleur! cria Boulatruelle en montrant les deux poings à l’horizon.

Chapitre II

Marius, en sortant de la guerre civile, s’apprête à la guerre domestique

Marius fut longtemps ni mort, ni vivant. Il eut durant plusieurs semaines une fièvre accompagnée de délire, et d’assez graves symptômes cérébraux causés plutôt encore par les commotions des blessures à la tête que par les blessures elles-mêmes.

Il répéta le nom de Cosette pendant des nuits entières dans la loquacité lugubre de la fièvre et avec la sombre opiniâtreté de l’agonie. La largeur de certaines lésions fut un sérieux danger, la suppuration des plaies larges pouvant toujours se résorber, et par conséquent tuer le malade, sous de certaines influences atmosphériques; à chaque changement de temps, au moindre orage, le médecin était inquiet. — Surtout que le blessé n’ait aucune émotion, répétait-il. Les pansements étaient compliqués et difficiles, la fixation des appareils et des linges par le sparadrap n’ayant pas encore été imaginée à cette époque. Nicolette dépensa en charpie un drap de lit «grand comme un plafond», disait-elle. Ce ne fut pas sans peine que les lotions chlorurées et le nitrate d’argent vinrent à bout de la gangrène. Tant qu’il y eut péril, M. Gillenormand, éperdu au chevet de son petit-fils, fut comme Marius; ni mort ni vivant.

Tous les jours, et quelquefois deux fois par jour, un monsieur en cheveux blancs, fort bien mis, tel était le signalement donné par le portier, venait savoir des nouvelles du blessé, et déposait pour les pansements un gros paquet de charpie.

Enfin, le 7 septembre, quatre mois, jour pour jour, après la douloureuse nuit où on l’avait rapporté mourant chez son grand-père, le médecin déclara qu’il répondait de lui. La convalescence s’ébaucha. Marius dut pourtant rester encore plus de deux mois étendu sur une chaise longue à cause des accidents produits par la fracture de la clavicule. Il y a toujours comme cela une dernière plaie qui ne veut pas se fermer et qui éternise les pansements, au grand ennui du malade.

Du reste, cette longue maladie et cette longue convalescence le sauvèrent des poursuites. En France, il n’y a pas de colère, même publique, que six mois n’éteignent. Les émeutes, dans l’état où est la société, sont tellement la faute de tout le monde qu’elles sont suivies d’un certain besoin de fermer les yeux.

Ajoutons que l’inqualifiable ordonnance Gisquet, qui enjoignait aux médecins de dénoncer les blessés, ayant indigné l’opinion, et non seulement l’opinion, mais le roi tout le premier, les blessés furent couverts et protégés par cette indignation; et, à l’exception de ceux qui avaient été faits prisonniers dans le combat flagrant, les conseils de guerre n’osèrent en inquiéter aucun. On laissa donc Marius tranquille.

M. Gillenormand traversa toutes les angoisses d’abord, et ensuite toutes les extases. On eut beaucoup de peine à l’empêcher de passer toutes les nuits près du blessé; il fit apporter son grand fauteuil à côté du lit de Marius; il exigea que sa fille prît le plus beau linge de la maison pour en faire des bandes. Mademoiselle Gillenormand, en personne sage et aînée, trouva moyen d’épargner le beau linge, tout en laissant croire à l’aïeul qu’il était obéi. M. Gillenormand ne permit pas qu’on lui expliquât que pour faire de la charpie la batiste ne vaut pas la grosse toile, ni la toile neuve la toile usée. Il assistait à tous les pansements dont mademoiselle Gillenormand s’absentait pudiquement. Quand on coupait les chairs mortes avec des ciseaux, il disait: aïe! aïe! Rien n’était touchant comme de le voir tendre au blessé une tasse de tisane avec son doux tremblement sénile. Il accablait le médecin de questions. Il ne s’apercevait pas qu’il recommençait toujours les mêmes.

Le jour où le médecin lui annonça que Marius était hors de danger, le bonhomme fut en délire. Il donna trois louis de gratification à son portier. Le soir, en rentrant dans sa chambre, il dansa une gavotte, en faisant des castagnettes avec son pouce et son index, et il chanta une chanson que voici:

Jeanne est née à Fougère,
Vrai nid d’une bergère;
J’adore son jupon
Fripon.

Amour, tu viens en elle,
Car c’est dans sa prunelle
Que tu mets ton carquois,
Narquois!

Moi, je la chante, et j'aime
Plus que Diane même
Jeanne et ses durs tétons
Bretons.

Puis il se mit à genoux sur une chaise, et Basque, qui l'observait par la porte entrouverte, crut être sûr qu'il priait.

Jusque-là, il n'avait guère cru en Dieu.

À chaque nouvelle phase du mieux, qui allait se dessinant de plus en plus, l'aïeul extravaguait. Il faisait un tas d'actions machinales pleines d'allégresse, il montait et descendait les escaliers sans savoir pourquoi. Une voisine, jolie du reste, fut toute stupéfaite de recevoir un matin un gros bouquet; c'était M. Gillenormand qui le lui envoyait. Le mari fit une scène de jalousie. M. Gillenormand essayait de prendre Nicolette sur ses genoux. Il appelait Marius monsieur le baron. Il criait: Vive la république!

À chaque instant, il demandait au médecin: N'est-ce pas qu'il n'y a plus de danger? Il regardait Marius avec des yeux de grand'mère. Il le couvait quand il mangeait. Il ne se connaissait plus, il ne se comptait plus, Marius était le maître de la maison, il y avait de l'abdication dans sa joie, il était le petit-fils de son petit-fils.

Dans cette allégresse où il était, c'était le plus vénérable des enfants. De peur de fatiguer ou d'importuner le convalescent, il se mettait derrière lui pour lui sourire. Il était content, joyeux, ravi, charmant, jeune. Ses cheveux blancs ajoutaient une majesté douce à la lumière gaie qu'il avait sur le visage. Quand la grâce se mêle aux rides, elle est adorable. Il y a on ne sait quelle aurore dans la vieillesse épanouie.

Quant à Marius, tout en se laissant panser et soigner, il avait une idée fixe, Cosette.

Depuis que la fièvre et le délire l'avaient quitté, il ne prononçait plus ce nom, et l'on aurait pu croire qu'il n'y songeait plus. Il se taisait, précisément parce que son âme était là.

Il ne savait ce que Cosette était devenue, toute l'affaire de la rue de la Chanvrerie était comme un nuage dans son souvenir; des ombres presque indistinctes flottaient dans son esprit, Éponine, Gavroche, Mabeuf, les Thénardier, tous ses amis lugubrement mêlés à la fumée de la barricade; l'étrange passage de M. Fauchelevent dans cette aventure sanglante lui faisait l'effet d'une énigme dans une tempête; il ne comprenait rien à sa propre vie, il ne savait comment ni par qui il avait été sauvé, et personne ne le savait autour de lui; tout ce qu'on avait pu lui dire, c'est qu'il avait été rapporté la nuit dans un fiacre rue des Filles-du-Calvaire; passé, présent, avenir, tout n'était plus en lui que le brouillard d'une idée vague, mais il y avait dans cette brume un point immobile, un linéament net et précis, quelque chose qui était en granit, une résolution, une volonté: retrouver Cosette. Pour lui, l'idée de la vie n'était pas distincte de l'idée de Cosette, il avait décrété dans son cœur qu'il n'accepterait pas l'une sans l'autre, et il était inébranlablement décidé à exiger de n'importe qui voudrait le forcer à vivre, de son grand-père, du sort, de l'enfer, la restitution de son éden disparu.

Les obstacles, il ne se les dissimulait pas.

Soulignons ici un détail: il n'était point gagné et était peu attendri par toutes les sollicitudes et toutes les tendresses de son grand-père. D'abord il n'était pas dans le secret de toutes; ensuite, dans ses rêveries de malade, encore fiévreuses peut-être, il se défiait de ces douceurs-là comme d'une chose étrange et nouvelle ayant pour but de le dompter. Il y restait froid. Le grand-père dépensait en pure perte son pauvre vieux sourire. Marius se disait que c'était bon tant que lui Marius ne parlait pas et se laissait faire; mais que, lorsqu'il s'agirait de Cosette, il trouverait un autre visage, et que la véritable attitude de l'aïeul se démasquerait. Alors ce serait rude; recrudescence des questions de famille, confrontation des positions, tous les sarcasmes et toutes les objections à la fois, Fauchelevent, Coupelevent, la fortune, la pauvreté, la misère, la pierre au cou, l'avenir. Résistance violente; conclusion, refus. Marius se roidissait d'avance.

Et puis, à mesure qu'il reprenait vie, ses anciens griefs reparaissaient, les vieux ulcères de sa mémoire se rouvraient, il resongeait au passé, le colonel Pontmercy se replaçait entre M. Gillenormand et lui Marius, il se disait qu'il n'avait aucune vraie bonté à espérer de qui avait été si injuste et si dur pour son père. Et avec la santé il lui revenait une sorte d'âpreté contre son aïeul. Le vieillard en souffrait doucement.

M. Gillenormand, sans en rien témoigner d'ailleurs, remarquait que Marius, depuis qu'il avait été rapporté chez lui et qu'il avait repris connaissance, ne lui avait pas dit une seule fois mon père. Il ne disait point monsieur, cela est vrai; mais il trouvait moyen de ne dire ni l'un ni l'autre, par une certaine manière de tourner ses phrases.

Une crise approchait évidemment.

Comme il arrive presque toujours en pareil cas, Marius, pour s’essayer, escarmoucha avant de livrer bataille. Cela s’appelle tâter le terrain. Un matin il advint que M. Gillenormand, à propos d’un journal qui lui était tombé sous la main, parla légèrement de la Convention et lâcha un épiphonème royaliste sur Danton, Saint-Just et Robespierre.

— Les hommes de 93 étaient des géants, dit Marius avec sévérité. Le vieillard se tut et ne souffla point du reste de la journée.

Marius, qui avait toujours présent à l’esprit l’inflexible grand-père de ses premières années, vit dans ce silence une profonde concentration de colère, en augura une lutte acharnée, et augmenta dans les arrière-recoins de sa pensée ses préparatifs de combat.

Il arrêta qu’en cas de refus il arracherait ses appareils, disloquerait sa clavicule, mettrait à nu et à vif ce qu’il lui restait de plaies, et repousserait toute nourriture. Ses plaies, c’étaient ses munitions. Avoir Cosette ou mourir.

Il attendit le moment favorable avec la patience sournoise des malades.

Ce moment arriva.

Chapitre III

Marius attaque

Un jour, M. Gillenormand, tandis que sa fille mettait en ordre les fioles et les tasses sur le marbre de la commode, était penché sur Marius, et lui disait de son accent le plus tendre:

— Vois-tu, mon petit Marius, à ta place je mangerais maintenant plutôt de la viande que du poisson. Une sole frite, cela est excellent pour commencer une convalescence, mais, pour mettre le malade debout, il faut une bonne côtelette.

Marius, dont presque toutes les forces étaient revenues, les rassembla, se dressa sur son séant, appuya ses deux poings crispés sur les draps de son lit, regarda son grand-père en face, prit un air terrible et dit:

— Ceci m'amène à vous dire une chose.

— Laquelle?

— C'est que je veux me marier.

— Prévu, dit le grand-père. Et il éclata de rire.

— Comment, prévu?

— Oui, prévu. Tu l'auras, ta fillette.

Marius, stupéfait et accablé par l'éblouissement, trembla de tous ses membres.

M. Gillenormand continua:

— Oui, tu l'auras, ta belle jolie petite fille. Elle vient tous les jours sous la forme d'un vieux monsieur savoir de tes nouvelles. Depuis que tu es blessé, elle passe son temps à pleurer et à faire de la charpie. Je me suis informé. Elle demeure rue de l'Homme-Armé, numéro sept. Ah, nous y voilà! Ah! tu la veux. Eh bien, tu l'auras. Ça t'attrape. Tu avais fait ton petit complot, tu t'étais dit: — Je vais lui signifier cela carrément à ce grand-père, à cette momie de la régence et du directoire, à cet ancien beau, à ce Dorante devenu Géronte; il a eu ses légèretés aussi, lui, et ses amourettes, et ses grisettes, et ses Cosettes; il a fait son frou-frou, il a eu ses ailes, il a mangé du pain du printemps; il faudra bien qu'il s'en souvienne. Nous allons voir. Bataille. Ah! Tu prends le hanneton par les cornes. C'est bon. Je t'offre une côtelette, et tu me réponds: À propos, je veux me marier. C'est ça qui est une transition! Ah! tu avais compté sur de la bisbille. Tu ne savais pas que j’étais un vieux lâche. Qu’est-ce que tu dis de ça? Tu bisques. Trouver ton grand-père encore plus bête que toi, tu ne t’y attendais pas, tu perds le discours que tu devais me faire, monsieur l’avocat, c’est taquinant. Eh bien, tant pis, rage. Je fais ce que tu veux, ça te la coupe, imbécile! Écoute. J’ai pris des renseignements, moi aussi je suis sournois; elle est charmante, elle est sage, le lancier n’est pas vrai, elle a fait des tas de charpie, c’est un bijou; elle t’adore. Si tu étais mort, nous aurions été trois; sa bière aurait accompagné la mienne. J’avais bien eu l’idée, dès que tu as été mieux, de te la camper tout bonnement à ton chevet, mais il n’y a que dans les romans qu’on introduit tout de go les jeunes filles près du lit des jolis blessés qui les intéressent. Ça ne se fait pas. Qu’aurait dit ta tante? Tu étais tout nu les trois quarts du temps, mon bonhomme. Demande à Nicolette, qui ne t’a pas quitté une minute, s’il y avait moyen qu’une femme fût là. Et puis qu’aurait dit le médecin? Ça ne guérit pas la fièvre, une jolie fille. Enfin, c’est bon, n’en parlons plus, c’est dit, c’est fait, c’est bâclé, prends-la. Telle est ma férocité. Vois-tu, j’ai vu que tu ne m’aimais pas, j’ai dit: Qu’est-ce que je pourrais donc faire pour que cet animal-là m’aime? J’ai dit: Tiens, j’ai ma petite Cosette sous la main, je vais la lui donner, il faudra bien qu’il m’aime alors un peu, ou qu’il dise pourquoi. Ah! tu croyais que le vieux allait tempêter, faire la grosse voix, crier non, et lever la canne sur toute cette aurore. Pas du tout. Cosette, soit. Amour, soit. Je ne demande pas mieux. Monsieur, prenez la peine de vous marier. Sois heureux, mon enfant bien-aimé.

Cela dit, le vieillard éclata en sanglots.

Et il prit la tête de Marius, et il la serra dans ses deux bras contre sa vieille poitrine, et tous deux se mirent à pleurer. C’est là une des formes du bonheur suprême.

— Mon père! s’écria Marius.

— Ah! tu m’aimes donc? dit le vieillard.

Il y eut un moment ineffable. Ils étouffaient et ne pouvaient parler.

Enfin le vieillard bégaya:

— Allons! le voilà débouché. Il m’a dit: Mon père.

Marius dégagea sa tête des bras de l’aïeul, et dit doucement:

— Mais, mon père, à présent que je me porte bien, il me semble que je pourrais la voir.

— Prévu encore, tu la verras demain.

— Mon père!

— Quoi?

— Pourquoi pas aujourd'hui?

— Eh bien, aujourd'hui. Va pour aujourd'hui. Tu m'as dit trois fois «mon père», ça vaut bien ça. Je vais m'en occuper. On te l'amènera. Prévu, te dis-je. Ceci a déjà été mis en vers. C'est le dénouement de l'élégie du *Jeune malade* d'André Chénier, d'André Chénier qui a été égorgé par les scélér... — par les géants de 93.

M. Gillenormand crut apercevoir un léger froncement du sourcil de Marius, qui, en vérité, nous devons le dire, ne l'écoutait plus, envolé qu'il était dans l'extase, et pensant beaucoup plus à Cosette qu'à 1793. Le grand-père, tremblant d'avoir introduit si mal à propos André Chénier, reprit précipitamment:

— Égorgé n'est pas le mot. Le fait est que les grands génies révolutionnaires, qui n'étaient pas méchants, cela est incontestable, qui étaient des héros, pardi! trouvaient qu'André Chénier les gênait un peu, et qu'ils l'ont fait guillot.... — C'est-à-dire que ces grands hommes, le sept thermidor, dans l'intérêt du salut public, ont prié André Chénier de vouloir bien aller....

M. Gillenormand, pris à la gorge par sa propre phrase, ne put continuer; ne pouvant ni la terminer, ni la rétracter, pendant que sa fille arrangeait derrière Marius l'oreiller, bouleversé de tant d'émotions, le vieillard se jeta, avec autant de vitesse que son âge le lui permit, hors de la chambre à coucher, en repoussa la porte derrière lui, et, pourpre, étranglant, écumant, les yeux hors de la tête, se trouva nez à nez avec l'honnête Basque qui cirait les bottes dans l'antichambre. Il saisit Basque au collet et lui cria en plein visage avec fureur: — Par les cent mille Javottes du diable, ces brigands l'ont assassiné!

— Qui, monsieur?

— André Chénier!

— Oui, monsieur, dit Basque épouvanté.

Chapitre IV

Mademoiselle Gillenormand finit par ne plus trouver mauvais que M. Fauchelevent soit entré avec quelque chose sous le bras

Cosette et Marius se revirent.

Ce que fut l'épreuve, nous renonçons à le dire. Il y a des choses qu'il ne faut pas essayer de peindre; le soleil est du nombre.

Toute la famille, y compris Basque et Nicolette, était réunie dans la chambre de Marius au moment où Cosette entra.

Elle apparut sur le seuil; il semblait qu'elle était dans un nimbe.

Précisément à cet instant-là, le grand-père allait se moucher, il resta court, tenant son nez dans son mouchoir et regardant Cosette par-dessus.

— Adorable! s'écria-t-il.

Puis il se moucha bruyamment.

Cosette était enivrée, ravie, effrayée, au ciel. Elle était aussi effarouchée qu'on peut l'être par le bonheur. Elle balbutiait, toute pâle, toute rouge, voulant se jeter dans les bras de Marius, et n'osant pas. Honteuse d'aimer devant tout ce monde. On est sans pitié pour les amants heureux; on reste là quand ils auraient le plus envie d'être seuls. Ils n'ont pourtant pas du tout besoin des gens.

Avec Cosette et derrière elle, était entré un homme en cheveux blancs, grave, souriant néanmoins, mais d'un vague et poignant sourire. C'était «monsieur Fauchelevent»; c'était Jean Valjean.

Il était *très bien mis*, comme avait dit le portier, entièrement vêtu de noir et de neuf et en cravate blanche.

Le portier était à mille lieues de reconnaître dans ce bourgeois correct, dans ce notaire probable, l'effrayant porteur de cadavre qui avait surgi à sa porte dans la nuit du 7 juin, déguenillé, fangeux, hideux, hagard, la face masquée de sang et de boue, soutenant sous les bras Marius évanoui; cependant son flair de portier était éveillé. Quand M. Fauchelevent était arrivé avec Cosette, le portier n'avait pu s'empêcher de confier à sa femme cet aparté: Je ne sais pourquoi je me figure toujours que j'ai déjà vu ce visage-là.

M. Fauchelevent, dans la chambre de Marius, restait comme à l'écart près de la porte. Il avait sous le bras un paquet assez semblable à un volume in-octavo, enveloppé dans du papier. Le papier de l’enveloppe était verdâtre et semblait moisi.

— Est-ce que ce monsieur a toujours comme cela des livres sous le bras? demanda à voix basse à Nicolette mademoiselle Gillenormand qui n’aimait point les livres.

— Eh bien, répondit du même ton M. Gillenormand qui l’avait entendue, c’est un savant. Après? Est-ce sa faute? M. Boulard, que j’ai connu, ne marchait jamais sans un livre, lui non plus, et avait toujours comme cela un bouquin contre son cœur.

Et, saluant, il dit à haute voix:

— Monsieur Tranchelevent....

Le père Gillenormand ne le fit pas exprès, mais l’inattention aux noms propres était chez lui une manière aristocratique.

— Monsieur Tranchelevent, j’ai l’honneur de vous demander pour mon petit-fils, monsieur le baron Marius Pontmercy, la main de mademoiselle.

«Monsieur Tranchelevent» s’inclina.

— C’est dit, fit l’aïeul.

Et, se tournant vers Marius et Cosette, les deux bras étendus et bénissant, il cria:

— Permission de vous adorer.

Ils ne se le firent pas dire deux fois. Tant pis! le gazouillement commença. Ils se parlaient bas, Marius accoudé sur sa chaise longue, Cosette debout près de lui. — Ô mon Dieu! murmurait Cosette, je vous revois. C’est toi, c’est vous! Être allé se battre comme cela! Mais pourquoi? C’est horrible. Pendant quatre mois, j’ai été morte. Oh! que c’est méchant d’avoir été à cette bataille! Qu’est-ce que je vous avais fait? Je vous pardonne, mais vous ne le ferez plus. Tout à l’heure, quand on est venu nous dire de venir, j’ai encore cru que j’allais mourir, mais c’était de joie. J’étais si triste! Je n’ai pas pris le temps de m’habiller, je dois faire peur. Qu’est-ce que vos parents diront de me voir une collerette toute chiffonnée? Mais parlez donc! Vous me laissez parler toute seule. Nous sommes toujours rue de l’Homme-Armé. Il paraît que votre épaule, c’était terrible. On m’a dit qu’on pouvait mettre le poing dedans. Et puis il paraît qu’on a coupé les chairs avec des ciseaux. C’est ça qui est affreux. J’ai pleuré, je n’ai plus d’yeux. C’est drôle qu’on puisse souffrir comme cela. Votre grand-père a l’air très bon! Ne vous dérangez pas, ne vous mettez pas sur le coude, prenez garde, vous allez vous faire du mal. Oh! comme je suis heureuse!

C’est donc fini, le malheur! Je suis toute sotte. Je voulais vous dire des choses que je ne sais plus du tout. M’aimez-vous toujours? Nous demeurons rue de l’Homme-Armé. Il n’y a pas de jardin. J’ai fait de la charpie tout le temps; tenez, monsieur, regardez, c’est votre faute, j’ai un durillon aux doigts. — Ange! disait Marius.

Ange est le seul mot de la langue qui ne puisse s’user. Aucun autre mot ne résisterait à l’emploi impitoyable qu’en font les amoureux.

Puis, comme il y avait des assistants, ils s’interrompirent et ne dirent plus un mot, se bornant à se toucher tout doucement la main.

M. Gillenormand se tourna vers tous ceux qui étaient dans la chambre et cria:

— Parlez donc haut, vous autres. Faites du bruit, la cantonade. Allons, un peu de brouhaha, que diable! que ces enfants puissent jaser à leur aise.

Et, s’approchant de Marius et de Cosette, il leur dit tout bas:

— Tutoyez-vous. Ne vous gênez pas.

La tante Gillenormand assistait avec stupeur à cette irruption de lumière dans son intérieur vieillot. Cette stupeur n’avait rien d’agressif; ce n’était pas le moins du monde le regard scandalisé et envieux d’une chouette à deux ramiers; c’était l’œil bête d’une pauvre innocente de cinquante-sept ans; c’était la vie manquée regardant ce triomphe, l’amour.

— Mademoiselle Gillenormand aînée, lui disait son père, je t’avais bien dit que cela t’arriverait.

Il resta un moment silencieux et ajouta:

— Regarde le bonheur des autres.

Puis il se tourna vers Cosette:

— Qu’elle est jolie! qu’elle est jolie! C’est un Greuze. Tu vas donc avoir cela pour toi seul, polisson! Ah! mon coquin, tu l’échappes belle avec moi, tu es heureux, si je n’avais pas quinze ans de trop, nous nous battrions à l’épée à qui l’aurait. Tiens! je suis amoureux de vous, mademoiselle. C’est tout simple. C’est votre droit. Ah! la belle jolie charmante petite noce que cela va faire! C’est Saint-Denis du Saint-Sacrement qui est notre paroisse, mais j’aurai une dispense pour que vous vous épousiez à Saint-Paul. L’église est mieux. C’est bâti par les jésuites. C’est plus coquet. C’est vis-à-vis la fontaine du cardinal de Birague. Le chef-d’œuvre de l’architecture jésuite est à Namur. Ça s’appelle Saint-Loup. Il faudra y aller quand vous serez mariés. Cela vaut le voyage. Mademoiselle, je suis tout à fait de votre parti, je veux que les filles se marient, c’est fait pour ça. Il y a une certaine sainte Catherine que je voudrais voir toujours décoiffée. Rester fille, c’est beau, mais c’est froid. La Bible dit: Multipliez. Pour sauver le peuple, il faut Jeanne d’Arc; mais, pour faire le peuple, il faut la mère Gigogne. Donc, mariez-vous, les belles. Je ne vois vraiment pas à quoi bon rester fille? Je sais bien qu’on a une chapelle à part dans l’église et qu’on se rabat sur la confrérie de la Vierge; mais, sapristi, un joli mari, brave garçon, et, au bout d’un an, un gros mioche blond qui vous tette gaillardement, et qui a de bons plis de graisse aux cuisses, et qui vous tripote le sein à poignées dans ses petites pattes roses en riant comme l’aurore, cela vaut pourtant mieux que de tenir un *cierge* à vêpres et de chanter *Turris eburnea*!

Le grand-père fit une pirouette sur ses talons de quatre-vingt-dix ans, et se remit à parler, comme un ressort qui repart:

— Ainsi, bornant le cours de tes rêvasseries, Alcippe, il est donc vrai, dans peu tu te maries.

«À propos!

— Quoi? mon père?

— N’avais-tu pas un ami intime?

— Oui, Courfeyrac.

— Qu’est-il devenu?

— Il est mort.

— Ceci est bon.

Il s’assit près d’eux, fit asseoir Cosette, et prit leurs quatre mains dans ses vieilles mains ridées.

— Elle est exquise, cette mignonne. C’est un chef-d’œuvre, cette Cosette-là! Elle est très petite fille et très grande dame. Elle ne sera que baronne, c’est déroger; elle est née marquise. Vous a-t-elle des cils! Mes enfants, fichez-vous bien dans la caboche que vous êtes dans le vrai. Aimez-vous. Soyez-en bêtes. L’amour, c’est la bêtise des hommes et l’esprit de Dieu. Adorez-vous. Seulement, ajouta-t-il rembruni tout à coup, quel malheur! Voilà que j’y pense! Plus de la moitié de ce que j’ai est en viager; tant que je vivrai, cela ira encore, mais après ma mort, dans une vingtaine d’années d’ici, ah! mes pauvres enfants, vous n’aurez pas le sou! Vos belles mains blanches, madame la baronne, feront au diable l’honneur de le tirer par la queue.

Ici on entendit une voix grave et tranquille qui disait:

— Mademoiselle Euphrasie Fauchelevent a six cent mille francs.

C’était la voix de Jean Valjean.

Il n’avait pas encore prononcé une parole, personne ne semblait même plus savoir qu’il était là, et il se tenait debout et immobile derrière tous ces gens heureux.

— Qu’est-ce que c’est que mademoiselle Euphrasie en question? demanda le grand-père effaré.

— C’est moi, reprit Cosette.

— Six cent mille francs! répondit Gillenormand.

— Moins quatorze ou quinze mille francs peut-être, dit Jean Valjean.

Et il posa sur la table le paquet que la tante Gillenormand avait pris pour un livre.

Jean Valjean ouvrit lui-même le paquet; c’était une liasse de billets de banque. On les feuilleta et on les compta. Il y avait cinq cents billets de mille francs et cent soixante-huit de cinq cents. En tout cinq cent quatre-vingt-quatre mille francs.

— Voilà un bon livre, dit M. Gillenormand.

— Cinq cent quatre-vingt-quatre mille francs! murmura la tante.

— Ceci arrange bien des choses, n’est-ce pas, mademoiselle Gillenormand aînée, reprit l’aïeul. Ce diable de Marius, il vous a déniché dans l’arbre des rêves une grisette millionnaire! Fiez-vous donc maintenant aux amourettes des jeunes gens! Les étudiants trouvent des étudiantes de six cent mille francs. Chérubin travaille mieux que Rothschild.

— Cinq cent quatre-vingt-quatre mille francs! répétait à demi-voix mademoiselle Gillenormand. Cinq cent quatre-vingt-quatre! autant dire six cent mille, quoi!

Quant à Marius et à Cosette, ils se regardaient pendant ce temps-là; ils firent à peine attention à ce détail.

Chapitre V

Déposez plutôt votre argent dans telle forêt que chez tel notaire

On a sans doute compris, sans qu'il soit nécessaire de l'expliquer longuement, que Jean Valjean, après l'affaire Champmathieu, avait pu, grâce à sa première évasion de quelques jours, venir à Paris, et retirer à temps de chez Laffitte la somme gagnée par lui, sous le nom de monsieur Madeleine, à Montreuil-sur-Mer; et que, craignant d'être repris, ce qui lui arriva en effet peu de temps après, il avait caché et enfoui cette somme dans la forêt de Montfermeil au lieu dit le fonds Blaru. La somme, six cent trente mille francs, toute en billets de banque, avait peu de volume et tenait dans une boîte; seulement, pour préserver la boîte de l'humidité, il l'avait placée dans un coffret en chêne plein de copeaux de châtaignier. Dans le même coffret, il avait mis son autre trésor, les chandeliers de l'évêque. On se souvient qu'il avait emporté ces chandeliers en s'évadant de Montreuil-sur-mer. L'homme aperçu un soir une première fois par Boulatruelle, c'était Jean Valjean. Plus tard, chaque fois que Jean Valjean avait besoin d'argent, il venait en chercher à la clairière Blaru. De là les absences dont nous avons parlé. Il avait une pioche quelque part dans les bruyères, dans une cachette connue de lui seul. Lorsqu'il vit Marius convalescent, sentant que l'heure approchait où cet argent pourrait être utile, il était allé le chercher; et c'était encore lui que Boulatruelle avait vu dans le bois, mais cette fois le matin et non le soir. Boulatruelle hérita de la pioche.

La somme réelle était cinq cent quatre-vingt-quatre mille cinq cents francs. Jean Valjean retira les cinq cents francs pour lui. — Nous verrons après, pensa-t-il.

La différence entre cette somme et les six cent trente mille francs retirés de chez Laffitte représentait la dépense de dix années, de 1823 à 1833. Les cinq années de séjour au couvent n'avaient coûté que cinq mille francs.

Jean Valjean mit les deux flambeaux d'argent sur la cheminée où ils resplendirent à la grande admiration de Toussaint.

Du reste, Jean Valjean se savait délivré de Javert. On avait raconté devant lui, et il avait vérifié le fait dans le *Moniteur*, qui l'avait publié, qu'un inspecteur de police nommé Javert avait été trouvé noyé sous un bateau de blanchisseuses entre le Pont au Change et le Pont-Neuf, et qu'un écrit laissé par cet homme, d’ailleurs irréprochable et fort estimé de ses chefs, faisait croire à un accès d’aliénation mentale et à un suicide. — Au fait, pensa Jean Valjean, puisque, me tenant, il m’a laissé en liberté, c’est qu’il fallait qu’il fût déjà fou.

Chapitre VI

Les deux vieillards font tout, chacun à leur façon, pour que Cosette soit heureuse

On prépara tout pour le mariage. Le médecin consulté déclara qu'il pourrait avoir lieu en février. On était en décembre. Quelques ravissantes semaines de bonheur parfait s'écoulèrent.

Le moins heureux n'était pas le grand-père. Il restait des quarts d'heure en contemplation devant Cosette.

— L'admirable jolie fille! s'écriait-il. Et elle a l'air si douce et si bonne! Il n'y a pas à dire mamie mon cœur, c'est la plus charmante fille que j'aie vue de ma vie. Plus tard, ça vous aura des vertus avec odeur de violette. C'est une grâce, quoi! On ne peut que vivre noblement avec une telle créature. Marius, mon garçon, tu es baron, tu es riche, n'avocasse pas, je t'en supplie.

Cosette et Marius étaient passés brusquement du sépulcre au paradis. La transition avait été peu ménagée, et ils en auraient été étourdis s'ils n'en avaient été éblouis.

— Comprends-tu quelque chose à cela? disait Marius à Cosette.

— Non, répondait Cosette, mais il me semble que le bon Dieu nous regarde.

Jean Valjean fit tout, aplanit tout, concilia tout, rendit tout facile. Il se hâtait vers le bonheur de Cosette avec autant d'empressement, et, en apparence, de joie, que Cosette elle-même.

Comme il avait été maire, il sut résoudre un problème délicat, dans le secret duquel il était seul, l'état civil de Cosette. Dire crûment l'origine, qui sait? cela eût pu empêcher le mariage. Il tira Cosette de toutes les difficultés. Il lui arrangea une famille de gens morts, moyen sûr de n'encourir aucune réclamation. Cosette était ce qui restait d'une famille éteinte. Cosette n'était pas sa fille à lui, mais la fille d'un autre Fauchelevent. Deux frères Fauchelevent avaient été jardiniers au couvent du Petit-Picpus. On alla à ce couvent; les meilleurs renseignements et les plus respectables témoignages abondèrent; les bonnes religieuses, peu aptes et peu enclines à sonder les questions de paternité, et n'y entendant pas malice, n'avaient jamais su bien au juste duquel des deux Fauchelevent la petite Cosette était la fille. Elles dirent ce qu’on voulut, et le dirent avec zèle. Un acte de notoriété fut dressé. Cosette devint devant la loi mademoiselle Euphrasie Fauchelevent. Elle fut déclarée orpheline de père et de mère. Jean Valjean s’arrangea de façon à être désigné, sous le nom de Fauchelevent, comme tuteur de Cosette, avec M. Gillenormand comme subrogé tuteur.

Quant aux cinq cent quatre-vingt-quatre mille francs, c’était un legs fait à Cosette par une personne morte qui désirait rester inconnue. Le legs primitif avait été de cinq cent quatre-vingt-quatorze mille francs; mais dix mille francs avaient été dépensés pour l’éducation de mademoiselle Euphrasie, dont cinq mille francs payés au couvent même. Ce legs, déposé dans les mains d’un tiers, devait être remis à Cosette à sa majorité ou à l’époque de son mariage. Tout cet ensemble était fort acceptable, comme on voit, surtout avec un appoint de plus d’un demi-million. Il y avait bien çà et là quelques singularités, mais on ne les vit pas; un des intéressés avait les yeux bandés par l’amour, les autres par les six cent mille francs.

Cosette apprit qu’elle n’était pas la fille de ce vieux homme qu’elle avait si longtemps appelé père. Ce n’était qu’un parent; un autre Fauchelevent était son père véritable. Dans tout autre moment, cela l’eût navrée. Mais à l’heure ineffable où elle était, ce ne fut qu’un peu d’ombre, un rembrunissement, et elle avait tant de joie que ce nuage dura peu. Elle avait Marius. Le jeune homme arrivait, le bonhomme s’effaçait; la vie est ainsi.

Et puis, Cosette était habituée depuis de longues années à voir autour d’elle des énigmes; tout être qui a eu une enfance mystérieuse est toujours prêt à de certains renoncements.

Elle continua pourtant de dire à Jean Valjean: Père.

Cosette, aux anges, était enthousiasmée du père Gillenormand. Il est vrai qu’il la comblait de madrigaux et de cadeaux. Pendant que Jean Valjean construisait à Cosette une situation normale dans la société et une possession d’état inattaquable, M. Gillenormand veillait à la corbeille de noces. Rien ne l’amusait comme d’être magnifique. Il avait donné à Cosette une robe de guipure de Binche qui lui venait de sa propre grand’mère à lui. — Ces modes-là renaissent, disait-il, les antiquailles font fureur, et les jeunes femmes de ma vieillesse s’habillent comme les vieilles femmes de mon enfance.

Il dévalisait ses respectables commodes de laque de Coromandel à panse bombée qui n’avaient pas été ouvertes depuis des ans. — Confessons ces douairières, disait-il; voyons ce qu'elles ont dans la bedaine. Il violait bruyamment des tiroirs ventrus pleins des toilettes de toutes ses femmes, de toutes ses maîtresses, et de toutes ses aïeules. Pékins, damas, lampas, moires peintes, robes de gros de Tours flambé, mouchoirs des Indes brodés d'un or qui peut se laver, dauphines sans envers en pièces, points de Gênes et d'Alençon, parures en vieille orfèvrerie, bonbonnières d'ivoire ornées de batailles microscopiques, nippes, rubans, il prodiguait tout à Cosette. Cosette, émerveillée, éperdue d'amour pour Marius et effarée de reconnaissance pour M. Gillenormand, rêvait un bonheur sans bornes vêtu de satin et de velours. Sa corbeille de noces lui apparaissait soutenue par les séraphins. Son âme s'envolait dans l'azur avec des ailes de dentelle de Malines.

L'ivresse des amoureux n'était égalée, nous l'avons dit, que par l'extase du grand-père. Il y avait comme une fanfare dans la rue des Filles-du-Calvaire.

Chaque matin, nouvelle offrande de bric-à-brac du grand-père à Cosette. Tous les falbalas possibles s'épanouissaient splendidement autour d'elle.

Un jour Marius, qui, volontiers, causait gravement à travers son bonheur, dit à propos de je ne sais quel incident:

— Les hommes de la révolution sont tellement grands, qu'ils ont déjà le prestige des siècles, comme Caton et comme Phocion, et chacun d'eux semble une mémoire antique.

— Moire antique! s'écria le vieillard. Merci, Marius. C'est précisément l'idée que je cherchais.

Et le lendemain une magnifique robe de moire antique couleur thé s'ajoutait à la corbeille de Cosette.

Le grand-père extrayait de ces chiffons une sagesse.

— L'amour, c'est bien; mais il faut cela avec. Il faut de l'inutile dans le bonheur. Le bonheur, ce n'est que le nécessaire. Assaisonnez-le-moi énormément de superflu. Un palais et son cœur. Son cœur et le Louvre. Son cœur et les grandes eaux de Versailles. Donnez-moi ma bergère, et tâchez qu'elle soit duchesse. Amenez-moi Philis couronnée de bleuets et ajoutez-lui cent mille livres de rente. Ouvrez-moi une bucolique à perte de vue sous une colonnade de marbre. Je consens à la bucolique et aussi à la féerie de marbre et d'or. Le bonheur sec ressemble au pain sec. On mange, mais on ne dîne pas. Je veux du superflu, de l'inutile, de l'extravagant, du trop, de ce qui ne sert à rien. Je me souviens d'avoir vu dans la cathédrale de

Strasbourg une horloge haute comme une maison à trois étages qui marquait l’heure, qui avait la bonté de marquer l’heure, mais qui n’avait pas l’air faite pour cela; et qui, après avoir sonné midi ou minuit, midi, l’heure du soleil, minuit, l’heure de l’amour, ou toute autre heure qu’il vous plaira, vous donnait la lune et les étoiles, la terre et la mer, les oiseaux et les poissons, Phébus et Phébé, et une ribambelle de choses qui sortaient d’une niche, et les douze apôtres, et l’empereur Charles-Quint, et Éponine et Sabinus, et un tas de petits bonshommes dorés qui jouaient de la trompette, par-dessus le marché. Sans compter de ravissants carillons qu’elle éparpillait dans l’air à tout propos sans qu’on sût pourquoi. Un méchant cadran tout nu qui ne dit que les heures vaut-il cela? Moi je suis de l’avis de la grosse horloge de Strasbourg, et je la préfère au coucou de la Forêt-Noire.

M. Gillenormand déraisonnait spécialement à propos de la noce, et tous les trumeaux du dix-huitième siècle passaient pêle-mêle dans ses dithyrambes.

— Vous ignorez l’art des fêtes. Vous ne savez pas faire un jour de joie dans ce temps-ci, s’écriait-il. Votre dix-neuvième siècle est veule. Il manque d’excès. Il ignore le riche, il ignore le noble. En toute chose, il est tondu ras. Votre tiers état est insipide, incolore, inodore et informe. Rêves de vos bourgeoises qui s’établissent, comme elles disent: un joli boudoir fraîchement décoré, palissandre et calicot. Place! place! le sieur Grigou épouse la demoiselle Grippesou. Somptuosité et splendeur! on a collé un louis d’or à un cierge. Voilà l’époque. Je demande à m’enfuir au delà des sarmates. Ah! dès 1787, j’ai prédit que tout était perdu, le jour où j’ai vu le duc de Rohan, prince de Léon, duc de Chabot, duc de Montbazon, marquis de Soubise, vicomte de Thouars, pair de France, aller à Longchamp en tapecul! Cela a porté ses fruits. Dans ce siècle on fait des affaires, on joue à la Bourse, on gagne de l’argent, et l’on est pingre. On soigne et on vernit sa surface; on est tiré à quatre épingles, lavé, savonné, ratissé, rasé, peigné, ciré, lissé, frotté, brossé, nettoyé au dehors, irréprochable, poli comme un caillou, discret, propret, et en même temps, vertu de ma mie! on a au fond de la conscience des fumiers et des cloaques à faire reculer une vachère qui se mouche dans ses doigts. J’octroie à ce temps-ci cette devise: Propreté sale. Marius, ne te fâche pas, donne-moi la permission de parler, je ne dis pas de mal du peuple, tu vois, j’en ai plein la bouche de ton peuple, mais trouve bon que je flanque un peu une pile à la bourgeoisie. J’en suis. Qui aime bien cingle bien. Sur ce, je le dis tout net, aujourd’hui on se marie, mais on ne sait plus se marier. Ah! c’est vrai, je regrette la gentillesse des anciennes mœurs. J’en regrette tout. Cette élégance, cette chevalerie, ces façons courtoises et mignonnes, ce luxe réjouissant que chacun avait, la musique faisant partie de la noce, symphonie en haut, tambourinage en bas, les danses, les joyeux visages attablés, les madrigaux alambiqués, les chansons, les fusées d’artifice, les francs rires, le diable et son train, les gros nœuds de rubans. Je regrette la jarretière de la mariée. La jarretière de la mariée est cousine de la ceinture de Vénus. Sur quoi roule la guerre de Troie? Parbleu, sur la jarretière d’Hélène. Pourquoi se bat-on, pourquoi Diomède le divin fracasse-t-il sur la tête de Mérionée ce grand casque d’airain à dix pointes, pourquoi Achille et Hector se pignochent-ils à grands coups de pique? Parce que Hélène a laissé prendre à Pâris sa jarretière. Avec la jarretière de Cosette, Homère ferait l’*Iliade*. Il mettrait dans son poème un vieux bavard comme moi, et il le nommerait Nestor. Mes amis, autrefois, dans cet aimable autrefois, on se mariait savamment; on faisait un bon contrat, et ensuite une bonne boustifaille. Sitôt Cujas sorti, Gamache entrait. Mais, dame! c’est que l’estomac est une bête agréable qui demande son dû, et qui veut avoir sa noce aussi. On soupait bien, et l’on avait à table une belle voisine sans guimpe qui ne cachait sa gorge que modérément! Oh! les larges bouches riantes, et comme on était gai dans ce temps-là! la jeunesse était un bouquet; tout jeune homme se terminait par une branche de lilas ou par une touffe de roses; fût-on guerrier, on était berger; et si, par hasard, on était capitaine de dragons, on trouvait moyen de s’appeler Florian. On tenait à être joli. On se brodait, on s’empourprait. Un bourgeois avait l’air d’une fleur, un marquis avait l’air d’une pierrerie. On n’avait pas de sous-pieds, on n’avait pas de bottes. On était pimpant, lustré, moiré, mordoré, voltigeant, mignon, coquet, ce qui n’empêchait pas d’avoir l’épée au côté. Le colibri a bec et ongles. C’était le temps des *Indes galantes*. Un des côtés du siècle était le délicat, l’autre était le magnifique; et, par la vertu-chou! on s’amusait. Aujourd’hui on est sérieux. Le bourgeois est avare, la bourgeoise est prude; votre siècle est infortuné. On chasserait les Grâces comme trop décolletées. Hélas! on cache la beauté comme une laideur. Depuis la révolution, tout a des pantalons, même les danseuses; une baladine doit être grave; vos rigodons sont doctrinaires. Il faut être majestueux. On serait bien fâché de ne pas avoir le menton dans sa cravate. L’idéal d’un galopin de vingt ans qui se marie, c’est de ressembler à monsieur Royer-Collard. Et savez-vous à quoi l’on arrive avec cette majesté là? à être petit. Apprenez ceci: la joie n'est pas seulement joyeuse; elle est grande. Mais soyez donc amoureux gaîment, que diable! mariez-vous donc, quand vous vous mariez, avec la fièvre et l'étourdissement et le vacarme et le tohu-bohu du bonheur! De la gravité à l'église, soit. Mais, sitôt la messe finie, sarpejeu! il faudrait faire tourbillonner un songe autour de l'épousée. Un mariage doit être royal et chimérique; il doit promener sa cérémonie de la cathédrale de Reims à la pagode de Chanteloup. J'ai horreur d'une noce pleutre. Ventregoulette! soyez dans l'olympe, au moins ce jour-là. Soyez des dieux. Ah! l'on pourrait être des sylphes, des Jeux et des Ris, des argyraspides; on est des galoupiats! Mes amis, tout nouveau marié doit être le prince Aldobrandini. Profitez de cette minute unique de la vie pour vous envoler dans l'empyrée avec les cygnes et les aigles, quitte à retomber le lendemain dans la bourgeoisie des grenouilles. N'économisez point sur l'hyménée, ne lui rognez pas ses splendeurs; ne liardez pas le jour où vous rayonnez. La noce n'est pas le ménage. Oh! si je faisais à ma fantaisie, ce serait galant. On entendrait des violons dans les arbres. Voici mon programme: bleu de ciel et argent. Je mêlerais à la fête les divinités agrestes, je convoquerais les dryades et les néréides. Les noces d'Amphitrite, une nuée rose, des nymphes bien coiffées et toutes nues, un académicien offrant des quatrains à la déesse, un char traîné par des monstres marins.

Triton trottait devant, et tirait de sa conque
Des sons si ravissants qu'il ravissait quiconque!

— Voilà un programme de fête, en voilà un, ou je ne m'y connais pas, sac à papier!

Pendant que le grand-père, en pleine effusion lyrique, s'écoutait lui-même, Cosette et Marius s'enivraient de se regarder librement.

La tante Gillenormand considérait tout cela avec sa placidité imperturbable. Elle avait eu depuis cinq ou six mois une certaine quantité d'émotions; Marius revenu, Marius rapporté sanglant, Marius rapporté d'une barricade, Marius mort, puis vivant, Marius réconcilié, Marius fiancé, Marius se mariant avec une pauvresse, Marius se mariant avec une millionnaire. Les six cent mille francs avaient été sa dernière surprise. Puis son indifférence de première communiante lui était revenue. Elle allait régulièrement aux offices, égrenait son rosaire, lisait son eucologe, chuchotait dans un coin de la maison des *Ave* pendant qu'on chuchotait dans l’autre des *I love you*, et, vaguement, voyait Marius et Cosette comme deux ombres. L’ombre, c’était elle.

Il y a un certain état d’ascétisme inerte où l’âme, neutralisée par l’engourdissement, étrangère à ce qu’on pourrait appeler l’affaire de vivre, ne perçoit, à l’exception des tremblements de terre et des catastrophes, aucune des impressions humaines, ni les impressions plaisantes, ni les impressions pénibles. — Cette dévotion-là, disait le père Gillenormand à sa fille, correspond au rhume de cerveau. Tu ne sens rien de la vie. Pas de mauvaise odeur, mais pas de bonne.

Du reste, les six cent mille francs avaient fixé les indécisions de la vieille fille. Son père avait pris l’habitude de la compter si peu qu’il ne l’avait pas consultée sur le consentement au mariage de Marius. Il avait agi de fougue, selon sa mode, n’ayant, despote devenu esclave, qu’une pensée, satisfaire Marius. Quant à la tante, que la tante existât, et qu’elle pût avoir un avis, il n’y avait pas même songé, et, toute moutonne qu’elle était, ceci l’avait froissée. Quelque peu révoltée dans son for intérieur, mais extérieurement impassible, elle s’était dit: Mon père résout la question du mariage sans moi; je résoudrai la question de l’héritage sans lui. Elle était riche, en effet, et le père ne l’était pas. Elle avait donc réservé là-dessus sa décision. Il est probable que si le mariage eût été pauvre, elle l’eût laissé pauvre. Tant pis pour monsieur mon neveu! Il épouse une gueuse, qu’il soit gueux. Mais le demi-million de Cosette plut à la tante et changea sa situation intérieure à l’endroit de cette paire d’amoureux. On doit de la considération à six cent mille francs, et il était évident qu’elle ne pouvait faire autrement que de laisser sa fortune à ces jeunes gens, puisqu’ils n’en avaient plus besoin.

Il fut arrangé que le couple habiterait chez le grand-père. M. Gillenormand voulut absolument leur donner sa chambre, la plus belle de la maison. — *Cela me rajeunira*, déclarait-il. *C’est un ancien projet. J’avais toujours eu l’idée de faire la noce dans ma chambre*. Il meubla cette chambre d’un tas de vieux bibelots galants. Il la fit plafonner et tendre d’une étoffe extraordinaire qu’il avait en pièce et qu’il croyait d’Utrecht, fond satiné bouton-d’or avec fleurs de velours oreilles-d’ours. — C’est de cette étoffe-là, disait-il, qu’était drapé le lit de la duchesse d’Anville à La Roche-Guyon. — Il mit sur la cheminée une figurine de Saxe portant un manchon sur son ventre nu.

La bibliothèque de M. Gillenormand devint le cabinet d’avocat dont avait besoin Marius; un cabinet, on s’en souvient, étant exigé par le conseil de l’ordre.

Chapitre VII

Les effets de rêve mêlés au bonheur

Les amoureux se voyaient tous les jours. Cosette venait avec M. Fauchelevent. — C’est le renversement des choses, disait mademoiselle Gillenormand, que la future vienne à domicile se faire faire la cour comme ça. — Mais la convalescence de Marius avait fait prendre l’habitude, et les fauteuils de la rue des Filles-du-Calvaire, meilleurs aux tête-à-tête que les chaises de paille de la rue de l’Homme-Armé, l’avaient enracinée. Marius et M. Fauchelevent se voyaient, mais ne se parlaient pas. Il semblait que cela fût convenu. Toute fille a besoin d’un chaperon. Cosette n’aurait pu venir sans M. Fauchelevent. Pour Marius, M. Fauchelevent était la condition de Cosette. Il l’acceptait. En mettant sur le tapis, vaguement et sans préciser, les matières de la politique, au point de vue de l’amélioration générale du sort de tous, ils parvenaient à se dire un peu plus que oui ou non. Une fois, au sujet de l’enseignement, que Marius voulait gratuit et obligatoire, multiplié sous toutes les formes, prodigué à tous comme l’air et le soleil, en un mot, respirable au peuple tout entier, ils furent à l’unisson et causèrent presque. Marius remarqua à cette occasion que M. Fauchelevent parlait bien, et même avec une certaine élévation de langage. Il lui manquait pourtant on ne sait quoi. M. Fauchelevent avait quelque chose de moins qu’un homme du monde, et quelque chose de plus.

Marius, intérieurement et au fond de sa pensée, entourait de toutes sortes de questions muettes ce M. Fauchelevent qui était pour lui simplement bienveillant et froid. Il lui venait par moments des doutes sur ses propres souvenirs. Il y avait dans sa mémoire un trou, en endroit noir, un abîme creusé par quatre mois d’agonie. Beaucoup de choses s’y étaient perdues. Il en était à se demander s’il était bien réel qu’il eût vu M. Fauchelevent, un tel homme si sérieux et si calme, dans la barricade.

Ce n’était pas d’ailleurs la seule stupeur que les apparitions et les disparitions du passé lui eussent laissée dans l’esprit. Il ne faudrait pas croire qu’il fût délivré de toutes ces obsessions de la mémoire qui nous forcent, même heureux, même satisfaits, à regarder mélancoliquement en arrière. La tête qui ne se retourne pas vers les horizons effacés ne contient ni pensée ni amour. Par moments, Marius prenait son visage dans ses mains et le passé tumultueux et vague traversait le crépuscule qu'il avait dans le cerveau. Il revoyait tomber Mabeuf, il entendait Gavroche chanter sous la mitraille, il sentait sous sa lèvre le froid du front d'Éponine, Enjolras, Courfeyrac, Jean Prouvaire, Combeferre, Bossuet, Grantaire, tous ses amis, se dressaient devant lui, puis se dissipaient. Tous ces êtres chers, douloureux, vaillants, charmants ou tragiques, étaient-ce des songes? avaient-ils en effet existé? L'émeute avait tout roulé dans sa fumée. Ces grandes fièvres ont de grands rêves. Il s'interrogeait; il se tâtait; il avait le vertige de toutes ces réalités évanouies. Où étaient-ils donc tous? était-ce bien vrai que tout fût mort? Une chute dans les ténèbres avait tout emporté, excepté lui. Tout cela lui semblait avoir disparu comme derrière une toile de théâtre. Il y a de ces rideaux qui s'abaissent dans la vie. Dieu passe à l'acte suivant.

Et lui-même, était-il bien le même homme? Lui, le pauvre, il était riche; lui, l'abandonné, il avait une famille; lui, le désespéré, il épousait Cosette. Il lui semblait qu'il avait traversé une tombe, et qu'il y était entré noir, et qu'il en était sorti blanc. Et cette tombe, les autres y étaient restés. À de certains instants, tous ces êtres du passé, revenus et présents, faisaient cercle autour de lui et l'assombrissaient; alors il songeait à Cosette, et redevenait serein; mais il ne fallait rien moins que cette félicité pour effacer cette catastrophe.

M. Fauchelevent avait presque place parmi ces êtres évanouis. Marius hésitait à croire que le Fauchelevent de la barricade fût le même que ce Fauchelevent en chair et en os, si gravement assis près de Cosette. Le premier était probablement un de ces cauchemars apportés et remportés par ses heures de délire. Du reste, leurs deux natures étant escarpées, aucune question n'était possible de Marius à M. Fauchelevent. L'idée ne lui en fût pas même venue. Nous avons indiqué déjà ce détail caractéristique.

Deux hommes qui ont un secret commun, et qui, par une sorte d'accord tacite, n'échangent pas une parole à ce sujet, cela est moins rare qu'on ne pense.

Une fois seulement, Marius tenta un essai. Il fit venir dans la conversation la rue de la Chanvrerie, et, se tournant vers M. Fauchelevent, il lui dit:

— Vous connaissez bien cette rue-là?

— Quelle rue?

— La rue de la Chanvrerie?

— Je n’ai aucune idée du nom de cette rue-là, répondit M. Fauchelevent du ton le plus naturel du monde.

La réponse, qui portait sur le nom de la rue, et point sur la rue elle-même, parut à Marius plus concluante qu’elle ne l’était.

— Décidément, pensa-t-il, j’ai rêvé. J’ai eu une hallucination. C’est quelqu’un qui lui ressemblait. M. Fauchelevent n’y était pas.

Chapitre VIII

Deux hommes impossibles à retrouver

L’enchantement, si grand qu’il fût, n’effaça point dans l’esprit de Marius d’autres préoccupations.

Pendant que le mariage s’apprêtait et en attendant l’époque fixée, il fit faire de difficiles et scrupuleuses recherches rétrospectives.

Il devait de la reconnaissance de plusieurs côtés; il en devait pour son père, il en devait pour lui-même.

Il y avait Thénardier; il y avait l’inconnu qui l’avait rapporté, lui Marius, chez M. Gillenormand.

Marius tenait à retrouver ces deux hommes, n’entendant point se marier, être heureux et les oublier, et craignant que ces dettes du devoir non payées ne fissent ombre sur sa vie, si lumineuse désormais. Il lui était impossible de laisser tout cet arriéré en souffrance derrière lui, et il voulait, avant d’entrer joyeusement dans l’avenir, avoir quittance du passé.

Que Thénardier fût un scélérat, cela n’ôtait rien à ce fait qu’il avait sauvé le colonel Pontmercy. Thénardier était un bandit pour tout le monde, excepté pour Marius.

Et Marius, ignorant la véritable scène du champ de bataille de Waterloo, ne savait pas cette particularité, que son père était vis-à-vis de Thénardier dans cette situation étrange de lui devoir la vie sans lui devoir de reconnaissance.

Aucun des divers agents que Marius employa ne parvint à saisir la piste de Thénardier. L’effacement semblait complet de ce côté-là. La Thénardier était morte en prison pendant l’instruction du procès. Thénardier et sa fille Azelma, les deux seuls qui restassent de ce groupe lamentable, avaient replongé dans l’ombre. Le gouffre de l’inconnu social s’était silencieusement refermé sur ces êtres. On ne voyait même plus à la surface ce frémissement, ce tremblement, ces obscurs cercles concentriques qui annoncent que quelque chose est tombé là, et qu’on peut y jeter la sonde.

La Thénardier étant morte, Boulatruelle étant mis hors de cause, Claquesous ayant disparu, les principaux accusés s’étant échappés de prison, le procès du guet-apens de la masure Gorbeau avait à peu près avorté. L’affaire était restée assez obscure. Le banc des assises avait dû se contenter de deux subalternes, Panchaud, dit Printanier, dit Bigrenaille, et Demi-Liard, dit Deux-Milliards, qui avaient été condamnés contradictoirement à dix ans de galères. Les travaux forcés à perpétuité avaient été prononcés contre leurs complices évadés et contumaces. Thénardier, chef et meneur, avait été, par contumace également, condamné à mort. Cette condamnation était la seule chose qui restât sur Thénardier, jetant sur ce nom enseveli sa lueur sinistre, comme une chandelle à côté d'une bière.

Du reste, en refoulant Thénardier dans les dernières profondeurs par la crainte d'être ressaisi, cette condamnation ajoutait à l'épaississement ténébreux qui couvrait cet homme.

Quant à l'autre, quant à l'homme ignoré qui avait sauvé Marius, les recherches eurent d'abord quelque résultat, puis s'arrêtèrent court. On réussit à retrouver le fiacre qui avait rapporté Marius rue des Filles-du-Calvaire dans la soirée du 6 juin. Le cocher déclara que le 6 juin, d'après l'ordre d'un agent de police, il avait «stationné» depuis trois heures de l'après-midi jusqu'à la nuit, sur le quai des Champs-Élysées, au-dessus de l'issue du Grand Égout; que, vers neuf heures du soir, la grille de l'égout qui donne sur la berge de la rivière s'était ouverte; qu'un homme en était sorti, portant sur ses épaules un autre homme, qui semblait mort; que l'agent, lequel était en observation sur ce point, avait arrêté l'homme vivant et saisi l'homme mort; que, sur l'ordre de l'agent, lui cocher avait reçu «tout ce monde-là» dans son fiacre; qu'on était allé d'abord rue des Filles-du-Calvaire; qu'on y avait déposé l'homme mort; que l'homme mort, c'était monsieur Marius, et que lui cocher le reconnaissait bien, quoiqu'il fût vivant «cette fois-ci»; qu'ensuite on était remonté dans sa voiture, qu'il avait fouetté ses chevaux, que, à quelques pas de la porte des Archives, on lui avait crié de s'arrêter, que là, dans la rue, on l'avait payé et quitté, et que l'agent avait emmené l'autre homme; qu'il ne savait rien de plus; que la nuit était très noire.

Marius, nous l'avons dit, ne se rappelait rien. Il se souvenait seulement d'avoir été saisi en arrière par une main énergique au moment où il tombait à la renverse dans la barricade; puis tout s'effaçait pour lui. Il n'avait repris connaissance que chez M. Gillenormand.

Il se perdait en conjectures.

Il ne pouvait douter de sa propre identité. Comment se faisait-il pourtant que, tombé rue de la Chanvrerie, il eût été ramassé par l'agent de police sur la berge de la Seine, près du pont des Invalides? Quelqu'un l'avait emporté du quartier des halles aux Champs-Élysées. Et comment? Par l'égout. Dévouement inouï!

Quelqu'un? Qui?

C'était cet homme que Marius cherchait.

De cet homme, qui était son sauveur, rien; nulle trace; pas le moindre indice.

Marius, quoique obligé de ce côté-là à une grande réserve, poussa ses recherches jusqu'à la préfecture de police. Là, pas plus qu'ailleurs, les renseignements pris n'aboutirent à aucun éclaircissement. La préfecture en savait moins que le cocher de fiacre. On n'y avait connaissance d'aucune arrestation opérée le 6 juin à la grille du Grand Égout; on n'y avait reçu aucun rapport d'agent sur ce fait qui, à la préfecture, était regardé comme une fable. On y attribuait l'invention de cette fable au cocher. Un cocher qui veut un pourboire est capable de tout, même d'imagination. Le fait, pourtant, était certain, et Marius n'en pouvait douter, à moins de douter de sa propre identité, comme nous venons de le dire.

Tout, dans cette étrange énigme, était inexplicable.

Cet homme, ce mystérieux homme, que le cocher avait vu sortir de la grille du Grand Égout portant sur son dos Marius évanoui, et que l'agent de police aux aguets avait arrêté en flagrant délit de sauvetage d'un insurgé, qu'était-il devenu? qu'était devenu l'agent lui-même? Pourquoi cet agent avait-il gardé le silence? l'homme avait-il réussi à s'évader? avait-il corrompu l'agent? Pourquoi cet homme ne donnait-il aucun signe de vie à Marius qui lui devait tout? Le désintéressement n'était pas moins prodigieux que le dévouement. Pourquoi cet homme ne reparaissait-il pas? Peut-être était-il au-dessus de la récompense, mais personne n'est au-dessus de la reconnaissance. Était-il mort? quel homme était-ce? quelle figure avait-il? Personne ne pouvait le dire. Le cocher répondait: La nuit était très noire. Basque et Nicolette, ahuris, n'avaient regardé que leur jeune maître tout sanglant. Le portier, dont la chandelle avait éclairé la tragique arrivée de Marius, avait seul remarqué l'homme en question, et voici le signalement qu'il en donnait: «Cet homme était épouvantable.»

Dans l'espoir d'en tirer parti pour ses recherches, Marius fit conserver les vêtements ensanglantés qu'il avait sur le corps, lorsqu'on l'avait ramené chez son aïeul. En examinant l'habit, on remarqua qu'un pan était bizarrement déchiré. Un morceau manquait.

Un soir, Marius parlait, devant Cosette et Jean Valjean, de toute cette singulière aventure, des informations sans nombre qu'il avait prises et de l'inutilité de ses efforts. Le visage froid de «monsieur Fauchelevent» l'impatientait. Il s'écria avec une vivacité qui avait presque la vibration de la colère:

— Oui, cet homme-là, quel qu'il soit, a été sublime. Savez-vous ce qu'il a fait, monsieur? Il est intervenu comme l'archange. Il a fallu qu'il se jetât au milieu du combat, qu'il me dérobât, qu'il ouvrît l'égout, qu'il m'y traînât, qu'il m'y portât! Il a fallu qu'il fît plus d'une lieue et demie dans d'affreuses galeries souterraines, courbé, ployé, dans les ténèbres, dans le cloaque, plus d'une lieue et demie, monsieur, avec un cadavre sur le dos! Et dans quel but? Dans l'unique but de sauver ce cadavre. Et ce cadavre, c'était moi. Il s'est dit: Il y a encore là peut-être une lueur de vie; je vais risquer mon existence à moi pour cette misérable étincelle! Et son existence, il ne l'a pas risquée une fois, mais vingt! Et chaque pas était un danger. La preuve, c'est qu'en sortant de l'égout il a été arrêté. Savez-vous, monsieur, que cet homme a fait tout cela? Et aucune récompense à attendre. Qu'étais-je? Un insurgé. Qu'étais-je? Un vaincu. Oh! si les six cent mille francs de Cosette étaient à moi....

— Ils sont à vous, interrompit Jean Valjean.

— Eh bien, reprit Marius, je les donnerais pour retrouver cet homme!

Jean Valjean garda le silence.

Livre sixième — La nuit blanche

Chapitre I

Le 16 février 1833

La nuit du 16 au 17 février 1833 fut une nuit bénie. Elle eut au-dessus de son ombre le ciel ouvert. Ce fut la nuit de noces de Marius et de Cosette.

La journée avait été adorable.

Ce n’avait pas été la fête bleue rêvée par le grand-père, une féerie avec une confusion de chérubins et de cupidons au-dessus de la tête des mariés, un mariage digne de faire un dessus de porte; mais cela avait été doux et riant.

La mode du mariage n’était pas en 1833 ce qu’elle est aujourd’hui. La France n’avait pas encore emprunté à l’Angleterre cette délicatesse suprême d’enlever sa femme, de s’enfuir en sortant de l’église, de se cacher avec honte de son bonheur, et de combiner les allures d’un banqueroutier avec les ravissements du cantique des cantiques. On n’avait pas encore compris tout ce qu’il y a de chaste, d’exquis et de décent à cahoter son paradis en chaise de poste, à entrecouper son mystère de clic-clacs, à prendre pour lit nuptial un lit d’auberge, et à laisser derrière soi, dans l’alcôve banale à tant par nuit, le plus sacré des souvenirs de la vie pêle-mêle avec le tête-à-tête du conducteur de diligence et de la servante d’auberge.

Dans cette seconde moitié du dix-neuvième siècle où nous sommes, le maire et son écharpe, le prêtre et sa chasuble, la loi et Dieu, ne suffisent plus; il faut les compléter par le postillon de Longjumeau; veste bleue aux retroussis rouges et aux boutons grelots, plaque en brassard, culotte de peau verte, jurons aux chevaux normands à la queue nouée, faux galons, chapeau ciré, gros cheveux poudrés, fouet énorme et bottes fortes. La France ne pousse pas encore l’élégance jusqu’à faire, comme la nobility anglaise, pleuvoir sur la calèche de poste des mariés une grêle de pantoufles éculées et de vieilles savates, en souvenir de Churchill, depuis Marlborough, ou Malbrouck, assailli le jour de son mariage par une colère de tante qui lui porta bonheur. Les savates et les pantoufles ne font point encore partie de nos célébrations nuptiales; mais patience, le bon goût continuant à se répandre, on y viendra.

En 1833, il y a cent ans, on ne pratiquait pas le mariage au grand trot.

On s’imaginait encore à cette époque, chose bizarre, qu’un mariage est une fête intime et sociale, qu’un banquet patriarcal ne gâte point une solennité domestique, que la gaîté, fût-elle excessive, pourvu qu’elle soit honnête, ne fait aucun mal au bonheur, et qu’enfin il est vénérable et bon que la fusion de ces deux destinées d’où sortira une famille commence dans la maison, et que le ménage ait désormais pour témoin la chambre nuptiale.

Et l’on avait l’impudeur de se marier chez soi.

Le mariage se fit donc, suivant cette mode maintenant caduque, chez M. Gillenormand.

Si naturelle et si ordinaire que soit cette affaire de se marier, les bans à publier, les actes à dresser, la mairie, l’église, ont toujours quelque complication. On ne put être prêt avant le 16 février.

Or, nous notons ce détail pour la pure satisfaction d’être exact, il se trouva que le 16 était un mardi gras. Hésitations, scrupules, particulièrement de la tante Gillenormand.

— Un mardi gras! s’écria l’aïeul, tant mieux. Il y a un proverbe:

Mariage un mardi gras
N’aura point d’enfants ingrats.

Passons outre. Va pour le 16! Est-ce que tu veux retarder, toi, Marius?

— Non, certes! répondit l’amoureux.

— Marions-nous, fit le grand-père.

Le mariage se fit donc le 16, nonobstant la gaîté publique. Il pleuvait ce jour-là, mais il y a toujours dans le ciel un petit coin d’azur au service du bonheur, que les amants voient, même quand le reste de la création serait sous un parapluie.

La veille, Jean Valjean avait remis à Marius, en présence de M. Gillenormand, les cinq cent quatre-vingt-quatre mille francs.

Le mariage se faisant sous le régime de la communauté, les actes avaient été simples.

Toussaint était désormais inutile à Jean Valjean; Cosette en avait hérité et l’avait promue au grade de femme de chambre.

Quant à Jean Valjean, il y avait dans la maison Gillenormand une belle chambre meublée exprès pour lui, et Cosette lui avait si irrésistiblement dit: «Père, je vous en prie», qu’elle lui avait fait à peu près promettre qu’il viendrait l’habiter.

Quelques jours avant le jour fixé pour le mariage, il était arrivé un accident à Jean Valjean; il s’était un peu écrasé le pouce de la main droite.

Ce n’était point grave; et il n’avait pas permis que personne s’en occupât, ni le pansât, ni même vit son mal, pas même Cosette. Cela pourtant l’avait forcé de s’emmitoufler la main d’un linge, et de porter le bras en écharpe, et l’avait empêché de rien signer. M. Gillenormand, comme subrogé tuteur de Cosette, l’avait suppléé.

Nous ne mènerons le lecteur ni à la mairie ni à l’église. On ne suit guère deux amoureux jusque-là, et l’on a l’habitude de tourner le dos au drame dès qu’il met à sa boutonnière un bouquet de marié. Nous nous bornerons à noter un incident qui, d’ailleurs inaperçu de la noce, marqua le trajet de la rue des Filles-du-Calvaire à l’église Saint-Paul.

On repavait à cette époque l’extrémité nord de la rue Saint-Louis. Elle était barrée à partir de la rue du Parc-Royal. Il était impossible aux voitures de la noce d’aller directement à Saint-Paul. Force était de changer l’itinéraire, et le plus simple était de tourner par le boulevard. Un des invités fit observer que c’était le mardi gras, et qu’il y aurait là encombrement de voitures. — Pourquoi? demanda M. Gillenormand. — À cause des masques. — À merveille, dit le grand-père. Allons par là. Ces jeunes gens se marient; ils vont entrer dans le sérieux de la vie. Cela les préparera de voir un peu de mascarade.

On prit par le boulevard. La première des berlines de la noce contenait Cosette et la tante Gillenormand, M. Gillenormand et Jean Valjean. Marius, encore séparé de sa fiancée, selon l’usage, ne venait que dans la seconde. Le cortège nuptial, au sortir de la rue des Filles-du-Calvaire, s’engagea dans la longue procession de voitures qui faisait la chaîne sans fin de la Madeleine à la Bastille et de la Bastille à la Madeleine.

Les masques abondaient sur le boulevard. Il avait beau pleuvoir par intervalles, Paillasse, Pantalon et Gille s’obstinaient. Dans la bonne humeur de cet hiver de 1833, Paris s’était déguisé en Venise. On ne voit plus de ces mardis gras-là aujourd’hui. Tout ce qui existe étant un carnaval répandu, il n’y a plus de carnaval.

Les contre-allées regorgeaient de passants et les fenêtres de curieux. Les terrasses qui couronnent les péristyles des théâtres étaient bordées de spectateurs. Outre les masques, on regardait ce défilé, propre au mardi gras comme à Longchamps, de véhicules de toutes sortes, citadines, tapissières, carrioles, cabriolets, marchant en ordre, rigoureusement rivés les uns aux autres par les règlements de police et comme emboîtés dans des rails. Quiconque est dans un de ces véhicules-là est tout à la fois spectateur et spectacle. Des sergents de ville maintenaient sur les bas côtés du boulevard ces deux interminables files parallèles se mouvant en mouvement contrarié, et surveillaient, pour que rien n'entravât leur double courant, ces deux ruisseaux de voitures coulant, l'un en aval, l'autre en amont, l'un vers la chaussée d'Antin, l'autre vers le faubourg Saint-Antoine. Les voitures armoriées des pairs de France et des ambassadeurs tenaient le milieu de la chaussée, allant et venant librement. De certains cortèges magnifiques et joyeux, notamment le Bœuf Gras, avaient le même privilège. Dans cette gaîté de Paris, l'Angleterre faisait claquer son fouet; la chaise de poste de lord Seymour, harcelée d'un sobriquet populacier, passait à grand bruit.

Dans la double file, le long de laquelle des gardes municipaux galopaient comme des chiens de berger, d'honnêtes berlingots de famille, encombrés de grand'tantes et d'aïeules, étalaient à leurs portières de frais groupes d'enfants déguisés, pierrots de sept ans, pierrettes de six ans, ravissants petits êtres, sentant qu'ils faisaient officiellement partie de l'allégresse publique, pénétrés de la dignité de leur arlequinade et ayant une gravité de fonctionnaires.

De temps en temps un embarras survenait quelque part dans la procession des véhicules; l'une ou l'autre des deux files latérales s'arrêtait jusqu'à ce que le nœud fût dénoué; une voiture empêchée suffisait pour paralyser toute la ligne. Puis on se remettait en marche.

Les carrosses de la noce étaient dans la file allant vers la Bastille et longeant le côté droit du boulevard. À la hauteur de la rue du Pont-aux-Choux, il y eut un temps d'arrêt. Presque au même instant, sur l'autre bas côté, l'autre file qui allait vers la Madeleine s'arrêta également. Il y avait à ce point-là de cette file une voiture de masques.

Ces voitures, ou, pour mieux dire, ces charretées de masques sont bien connues des Parisiens. Si elles manquaient à un mardi gras ou à une mi-carême, on y entendrait malice, et l'on dirait: *Il y a quelque chose là-dessous. Probablement le ministère va changer*. Un entassement de Cassandres, d'Arlequins et de Colombines, cahoté au-dessus des passants, tous les grotesques possibles depuis le turc jusqu'au sauvage, des hercules supportant des marquises, des poissardes qui feraient boucher les oreilles à Rabelais de même que les ménades faisaient baisser les yeux à Aristophane, perruques de filasse, maillots roses, chapeaux de faraud, lunettes de grimacier, tricornes de Janot taquinés par un papillon, cris jetés aux piétons, poings sur les hanches, postures hardies, épaules nues, faces masquées, impudeurs démuselées; un chaos d’effronteries promené par un cocher coiffé de fleurs; voilà ce que c’est que cette institution.

La Grèce avait besoin du chariot de Thespis, la France a besoin du fiacre de Vadé.

Tout peut être parodié, même la parodie. La saturnale, cette grimace de la beauté antique, arrive, de grossissement en grossissement, au mardi gras; et la bacchanale, jadis couronnée de pampres, inondée de soleil, montrant des seins de marbre dans une demi-nudité divine, aujourd’hui avachie sous la guenille mouillée du nord, a fini par s’appeler la chie-en-lit.

La tradition des voitures de masques remonte aux plus vieux temps de la monarchie. Les comptes de Louis XI allouent au bailli du palais «vingt sous tournois pour trois coches de mascarades ès carrefours». De nos jours, ces monceaux bruyants de créatures se font habituellement charrier par quelque ancien coucou dont ils encombrent l’impériale, ou accablent de leur tumultueux groupe un landau de régie dont les capotes sont rabattues. Ils sont vingt dans une voiture de six. Il y en a sur le siège, sur le strapontin, sur les joues des capotes, sur le timon. Ils enfourchent jusqu’aux lanternes de la voiture. Ils sont debout, couchés, assis, jarrets recroquevillés, jambes pendantes. Les femmes occupent les genoux des hommes. On voit de loin sur le fourmillement des têtes leur pyramide forcenée. Ces carrossées font des montagnes d’allégresse au milieu de la cohue. Collé, Panard et Piron en découlent, enrichis d’argot. On crache de là-haut sur le peuple le catéchisme poissard. Ce fiacre, devenu démesuré par son chargement, a un air de conquête. Brouhaha est à l’avant, Tohubohu est à l’arrière. On y vocifère, on y vocalise, on y hurle, on y éclate, on s’y tord de bonheur; la gaîté y rugit, le sarcasme y flamboie, la jovialité s’y étale comme une pourpre; deux haridelles y traînent la farce épanouie en apothéose; c’est le char du triomphe du Rire.

Rire trop cynique pour être franc. Et en effet ce rire est suspect. Ce rire a une mission. Il est chargé de prouver aux parisiens le carnaval.

Ces voitures poissardes, où l’on sent on ne sait quelles ténèbres, font songer le philosophe. Il y a du gouvernement là-dedans. On touche là du doigt une affinité mystérieuse entre les hommes publics et les femmes publiques.

Que des turpitudes échafaudées donnent un total de gaîté, qu’en étageant l’ignominie sur l’opprobre on affriande un peuple, que l’espionnage servant de cariatide à la prostitution amuse les cohues en les affrontant, que la foule aime à voir passer sur les quatre roues d'un fiacre ce monstrueux tas vivant, clinquant-haillon, mi-parti ordure et lumière, qui aboie et qui chante, qu'on batte des mains à cette gloire faite de toutes les hontes, qu'il n'y ait pas de fête pour les multitudes si la police ne promène au milieu d'elles ces espèces d'hydres de joie à vingt têtes, certes, cela est triste. Mais qu'y faire? Ces tombereaux de fange enrubannée et fleurie sont insultés et amnistiés par le rire public. Le rire de tous est complice de la dégradation universelle. De certaines fêtes malsaines désagrègent le peuple et le font populace; et aux populaces comme aux tyrans il faut des bouffons. Le roi a Roquelaure, le peuple a Paillasse. Paris est la grande ville folle, toutes les fois qu'il n'est pas la grande cité sublime. Le carnaval y fait partie de la politique. Paris, avouons-le, se laisse volontiers donner la comédie par l'infamie. Il ne demande à ses maîtres, — quand il a des maîtres, — qu'une chose: fardez-moi la boue. Rome était de la même humeur. Elle aimait Néron. Néron était un débardeur titan.

Le hasard fit, comme nous venons de le dire, qu'une de ces difformes grappes de femmes et d'hommes masqués, trimballés dans une vaste calèche, s'arrêta à gauche du boulevard pendant que le cortège de la noce s'arrêtait à droite. D'un bord du boulevard à l'autre, la voiture où étaient les masques aperçut vis-à-vis d'elle la voiture où était la mariée.

— Tiens! dit un masque, une noce.

— Une fausse noce, reprit un autre. C'est nous qui sommes la vraie.

Et, trop loin pour pouvoir interpeller la noce, craignant d'ailleurs le holà des sergents de ville, les deux masques regardèrent ailleurs.

Toute la carrossée masquée eut fort à faire au bout d'un instant, la multitude se mit à la huer, ce qui est la caresse de la foule aux mascarades; et les deux masques qui venaient de parler durent faire front à tout le monde avec leurs camarades, et n'eurent pas trop de tous les projectiles du répertoire des halles pour répondre aux énormes coups de gueule du peuple. Il se fit entre les masques et la foule un effrayant échange de métaphores.

Cependant, deux autres masques de la même voiture, un espagnol au nez démesuré avec un air vieillot et d'énormes moustaches noires, et une poissarde maigre, et toute jeune fille, masquée d'un loup, avaient remarqué la noce, eux aussi, et, pendant que leurs compagnons et les passants s'insultaient, avaient un dialogue à voix basse.

Leur aparté était couvert par le tumulte et s'y perdait. Les bouffées de pluie avaient mouillé la voiture toute grande ouverte; le vent de février n'est pas chaud; tout en répondant à l’Espagnol, la poissarde, décolletée, grelottait, riait, et toussait.

Voici le dialogue:

— Dis donc.

— Quoi, daron?

— Vois-tu ce vieux?

— Quel vieux?

— Là, dans la première roulotte de la noce, de notre côté.

— Qui a le bras accroché dans une cravate noire?

— Oui.

— Eh bien?

— Je suis sûr que je le connais.

— Ah!

— Je veux qu’on me fauche le colabre et n’avoir de ma vioc dit vousaille, tonorgue ni mézig, si je ne colombe pas ce pantinois-là.

— C’est aujourd’hui que Paris est Pantin.

— Peux-tu voir la mariée, en te penchant?

— Non.

— Et le marié?

— Il n’y a pas de marié dans cette roulotte-là.

— Bah!

— À moins que ce ne soit l’autre vieux.

— Tâche donc de voir la mariée en te penchant bien.

— Je ne peux pas.

— C’est égal, ce vieux qui a quelque chose à la patte, j’en suis sûr, je connais ça.

— Et à quoi ça te sert-il de le connaître?

— On ne sait pas. Des fois!

— Je me fiche pas mal des vieux, moi.

— Je le connais.

— Connais-le à ton aise.

— Comment diable est-il à la noce?

— Nous y sommes bien, nous.

— D’où vient-elle, cette noce?

— Est-ce que je sais?

— Écoute.

— Quoi?

— Tu devrais faire une chose.

— Quoi?

— Descendre de notre roulotte et filer cette noce-là.

— Pourquoi faire?

— Pour savoir où elle va, et ce qu’elle est. Dépêche-toi de descendre, cours, ma fée, toi qui es jeune.

— Je ne peux pas quitter la voiture.

— Pourquoi ça?

— Je suis louée.

— Ah fichtre!

— Je dois ma journée de poissarde à la préfecture.

— C’est vrai.

— Si je quitte la voiture, le premier inspecteur qui me voit m’arrête. Tu sais bien.

— Oui, je sais.

— Aujourd’hui, je suis achetée par Pharos.

— C’est égal. Ce vieux m’embête.

— Les vieux t’embêtent. Tu n’es pourtant pas une jeune fille.

— Il est dans la première voiture.

— Eh bien?

— Dans la roulotte de la mariée.

— Après?

— Donc il est le père.

— Qu’est-ce que cela me fait?

— Je te dis qu’il est le père.

— Il n’y a pas que ce père-là.

— Écoute.

— Quoi?

— Moi, je ne peux guère sortir que masqué. Ici, je suis caché, on ne sait pas que j’y suis. Mais demain, il n’y a plus de masques. C’est mercredi des cendres. Je risque de tomber. Il faut que je rentre dans mon trou. Toi, tu es libre.

— Pas trop.

— Plus que moi toujours.

— Eh bien, après?

— Il faut que tu tâches de savoir où est allée cette noce-là?

— Où elle va?

— Oui.

— Je le sais.

— Où va-t-elle donc?

— Au Cadran Bleu.

— D’abord ce n’est pas de ce côté-là.

— Eh bien! à la Râpée.

— Ou ailleurs.

— Elle est libre. Les noces sont libres.

— Ce n’est pas tout ça. Je te dis qu’il faut que tu tâches de me savoir ce que c’est que cette noce-là, dont est ce vieux, et où cette noce-là demeure.

— Plus souvent! voilà qui sera drôle. C’est commode de retrouver, huit jours après, une noce qui a passé dans Paris le mardi gras. Une tiquante dans un grenier à foin! Est-ce que c’est possible?

— N’importe, il faudra tâcher. Entends-tu, Azelma?

Les deux files reprirent des deux côtés du boulevard leur mouvement en sens inverse, et la voiture des masques perdit de vue «la roulotte» de la mariée.

Chapitre II

Jean Valjean a toujours son bras en écharpe

Réaliser son rêve. À qui cela est-il donné? Il doit y avoir des élections pour cela dans le ciel; nous sommes tous candidats à notre insu; les anges votent. Cosette et Marius avaient été élus.

Cosette, à la mairie et dans l'église, était éclatante et touchante. C'était Toussaint, aidée de Nicolette, qui l'avait habillée.

Cosette avait sur une jupe de taffetas blanc sa robe de guipure de Binche, un voile de point d'Angleterre, un collier de perles fines, une couronne de fleurs d'oranger; tout cela était blanc, et, dans cette blancheur, elle rayonnait. C'était une candeur exquise se dilatant et se transfigurant dans la clarté. On eût dit une vierge en train de devenir déesse.

Les beaux cheveux de Marius étaient lustrés et parfumés; on entrevoyait çà et là, sous l'épaisseur des boucles, des lignes pâles qui étaient les cicatrices de la barricade.

Le grand-père, superbe, la tête haute, amalgamant plus que jamais dans sa toilette et dans ses manières toutes les élégances du temps de Barras, conduisait Cosette. Il remplaçait Jean Valjean qui, à cause de son bras en écharpe, ne pouvait donner la main à la mariée.

Jean Valjean, en noir, suivait et souriait.

— Monsieur Fauchelevent, lui disait l'aïeul, voilà un beau jour. Je vote la fin des afflictions et des chagrins! Il ne faut plus qu'il y ait de tristesse nulle part désormais. Pardieu! je décrète la joie! Le mal n'a pas le droit d'être. Qu'il y ait des hommes malheureux, en vérité, cela est honteux pour l'azur du ciel. Le mal ne vient pas de l'homme qui, au fond, est bon. Toutes les misères humaines ont pour chef-lieu et pour gouvernement central l'enfer, autrement dit les Tuileries du diable. Bon, voilà que je dis des mots démagogiques à présent! Quant à moi, je n'ai plus d'opinion politique; que tous les hommes soient riches, c'est-à-dire joyeux, voilà à quoi je me borne.

Quand, à l'issue de toutes les cérémonies, après avoir prononcé devant le maire et devant le prêtre tous les oui possibles, après avoir signé sur les registres à la municipalité et à la sacristie, après avoir échangé leurs anneaux, après avoir été à genoux coude à coude sous le poêle de moire blanche dans la fumée de l'encensoir, ils arrivèrent se tenant par la main, admirés et enviés de tous, Marius en noir, elle en blanc, précédés du suisse à épaulettes de colonel frappant les dalles de sa hallebarde, entre deux haies d’assistants émerveillés, sous le portail de l’église ouvert à deux battants, prêts à remonter en voiture et tout étant fini, Cosette ne pouvait encore y croire. Elle regardait Marius, elle regardait la foule, elle regardait le ciel; il semblait qu’elle eût peur de se réveiller. Son air étonné et inquiet lui ajoutait on ne sait quoi d’enchanteur. Pour s’en retourner, ils montèrent ensemble dans la même voiture, Marius près de Cosette; M. Gillenormand et Jean Valjean leur faisaient vis-à-vis. La tante Gillenormand avait reculé d’un plan, et était dans la seconde voiture. — Mes enfants, disait le grand-père, vous voilà monsieur le baron et madame la baronne avec trente mille livres de rente. Et Cosette, se penchant tout contre Marius, lui caressa l’oreille de ce chuchotement angélique: — C’est donc vrai. Je m’appelle Marius. Je suis madame Toi.

Ces deux êtres resplendissaient. Ils étaient à la minute irrévocable et introuvable, à l’éblouissant point d’intersection de toute la jeunesse et de toute la joie. Ils réalisaient le vers de Jean Prouvaire; à eux deux, ils n’avaient pas quarante ans. C’était le mariage sublimé; ces deux enfants étaient deux lys. Ils ne se voyaient pas, ils se contemplaient. Cosette apercevait Marius dans une gloire; Marius apercevait Cosette sur un autel. Et sur cet autel et dans cette gloire, les deux apothéoses se mêlant, au fond, on ne sait comment, derrière un nuage pour Cosette, dans un flamboiement pour Marius, il y avait la chose idéale, la chose réelle, le rendez-vous du baiser et du songe, l’oreiller nuptial.

Tout le tourment qu’ils avaient eu leur revenait en enivrement. Il leur semblait que les chagrins, les insomnies, les larmes, les angoisses, les épouvantes, les désespoirs, devenus caresses et rayons, rendaient plus charmante encore l’heure charmante qui approchait; et que les tristesses étaient autant de servantes qui faisaient la toilette de la joie. Avoir souffert, comme c’est bon! Leur malheur faisait auréole à leur bonheur. La longue agonie de leur amour aboutissait à une ascension.

C’était dans ces deux âmes le même enchantement, nuancé de volupté dans Marius et de pudeur dans Cosette. Ils se disaient tout bas: Nous irons revoir notre petit jardin de la rue Plumet. Les plis de la robe de Cosette étaient sur Marius.

Un tel jour est un mélange ineffable de rêve et de certitude. On possède et on suppose. On a encore du temps devant soi pour deviner. C’est une indicible émotion ce jour-là d’être à midi et de songer à minuit. Les délices de ces deux cœurs débordaient sur la foule et donnaient de l’allégresse aux passants.

On s’arrêtait rue Saint-Antoine devant Saint-Paul pour voir à travers la vitre de la voiture trembler les fleurs d’oranger sur la tête de Cosette.

Puis ils rentrèrent rue des Filles-du-Calvaire, chez eux. Marius, côte à côte avec Cosette, monta, triomphant et rayonnant, cet escalier où on l’avait traîné mourant. Les pauvres, attroupés devant la porte et se partageant leurs bourses, les bénissaient. Il y avait partout des fleurs. La maison n’était pas moins embaumée que l’église; après l’encens, les roses. Ils croyaient entendre des voix chanter dans l’infini; ils avaient Dieu dans le cœur; la destinée leur apparaissait comme un plafond d’étoiles; ils voyaient au-dessus de leurs têtes une lueur de soleil levant. Tout à coup l’horloge sonna. Marius regarda le charmant bras nu de Cosette et les choses roses qu’on apercevait vaguement à travers les dentelles de son corsage, et Cosette, voyant le regard de Marius, se mit à rougir jusqu’au blanc des yeux.

Bon nombre d’anciens amis de la famille Gillenormand avaient été invités; on s’empressait autour de Cosette. C’était à qui l’appellerait madame la baronne.

L’officier Théodule Gillenormand, maintenant capitaine, était venu de Chartres, où il tenait garnison, pour assister à la noce de son cousin Pontmercy. Cosette ne le reconnut pas.

Lui, de son côté, habitué à être trouvé joli par les femmes, ne se souvint pas plus de Cosette que d’une autre.

— Comme j’ai eu raison de ne pas croire à cette histoire du lancier! disait à part soi le père Gillenormand.

Cosette n’avait jamais été plus tendre avec Jean Valjean. Elle était à l’unisson du père Gillenormand; pendant qu’il érigeait la joie en aphorismes et en maximes, elle exhalait l’amour et la bonté comme un parfum. Le bonheur veut tout le monde heureux.

Elle retrouvait, pour parler à Jean Valjean, des inflexions de voix du temps qu’elle était petite fille. Elle le caressait du sourire.

Un banquet avait été dressé dans la salle à manger.

Un éclairage à giorno est l’assaisonnement nécessaire d’une grande joie. La brume et l’obscurité ne sont point acceptées par les heureux. Ils ne consentent pas à être noirs. La nuit, oui; les ténèbres, non. Si l’on n’a pas de soleil, il faut en faire un.

La salle à manger était une fournaise de choses gaies. Au centre, au-dessus de la table blanche et éclatante, un lustre de Venise à lames plates, avec toutes sortes d'oiseaux de couleur, bleus, violets, rouges, verts, perchés au milieu des bougies; autour du lustre des girandoles, sur le mur des miroirs-appliques à triples et quintuples branches; glaces, cristaux, verreries, vaisselles, porcelaines, faïences, poteries, orfèvreries, argenteries, tout étincelait et se réjouissait. Les vides entre les candélabres étaient comblés par les bouquets, en sorte que, là où il n'y avait pas une lumière, il y avait une fleur.

Dans l'antichambre trois violons et une flûte jouaient en sourdine des quatuors de Haydn.

Jean Valjean s'était assis sur une chaise dans le salon derrière la porte, dont le battant se repliait sur lui de façon à le cacher presque. Quelques instants avant qu'on se mît à table, Cosette vint, comme par coup de tête, lui faire une grande révérence en étalant de ses deux mains sa toilette de mariée, et, avec un regard tendrement espiègle, elle lui demanda:

— Père, êtes-vous content?

— Oui, dit Jean Valjean, je suis content.

— Eh bien, riez alors.

Jean Valjean se mit à rire.

Quelques instants après, Basque annonça que le dîner était servi.

Les convives, précédés de M. Gillenormand donnant le bras à Cosette, entrèrent dans la salle à manger, et se répandirent, selon l'ordre voulu, autour de la table.

Deux grands fauteuils y figuraient, à droite et à gauche de la mariée, le premier pour M. Gillenormand, le second pour Jean Valjean. M. Gillenormand s'assit. L'autre fauteuil resta vide.

On chercha des yeux «monsieur Fauchelevent».

Il n'était plus là.

M. Gillenormand interpella Basque.

— Sais-tu où est monsieur Fauchelevent?

— Monsieur, répondit Basque. Précisément. Monsieur Fauchelevent m'a dit de dire à monsieur qu'il souffrait un peu de sa main malade, et qu'il ne pourrait dîner avec monsieur le baron et madame la baronne. Qu'il priait qu'on l'excusât. Qu'il viendrait demain matin. Il vient de sortir.

Ce fauteuil vide refroidit un moment l'effusion du repas de noces. Mais, M. Fauchelevent absent, M. Gillenormand était là, et le grand-père rayonnait pour deux. Il affirma que M. Fauchelevent faisait bien de se coucher de bonne heure, s'il souffrait, mais que ce n'était qu'un «bobo». Cette déclaration suffit. D'ailleurs, qu'est-ce qu'un coin obscur dans une telle submersion de joie? Cosette et Marius étaient dans un de ces moments égoïstes et bénis où l'on n'a pas d'autre faculté que de percevoir le bonheur. Et puis, M. Gillenormand eut une idée. — Pardieu, ce fauteuil est vide. Viens-y, Marius. Ta tante, quoiqu'elle ait droit à toi, te le permettra. Ce fauteuil est pour toi. C'est légal, et c'est gentil. Fortunatus près de Fortunata. — Applaudissement de toute la table. Marius prit près de Cosette la place de Jean Valjean; et les choses s'arrangèrent de telle sorte que Cosette, d'abord triste de l'absence de Jean Valjean, finit par en être contente. Du moment où Marius était le remplaçant, Cosette n'eût pas regretté Dieu. Elle mit son doux petit pied chaussé de satin blanc sur le pied de Marius.

Le fauteuil occupé, M. Fauchelevent fut effacé; et rien ne manqua. Et, cinq minutes après, la table entière riait d'un bout à l'autre avec toute la verve de l'oubli.

Au dessert, M. Gillenormand debout, un verre de vin de champagne en main, à demi plein pour que le tremblement de ses quatre-vingt-douze ans ne le fît pas déborder, porta la santé des mariés.

— Vous n'échapperez pas à deux sermons, s'écria-t-il. Vous avez eu le matin celui du curé, vous aurez le soir celui du grand-père. Écoutez-moi; je vais vous donner un conseil: adorez-vous. Je ne fais pas un tas de giries, je vais au but, soyez heureux. Il n'y a pas dans la création d'autres sages que les tourtereaux. Les philosophes disent: Modérez vos joies. Moi je dis: Lâchez-leur la bride, à vos joies. Soyez épris comme des diables. Soyez enragés. Les philosophes radotent. Je voudrais leur faire rentrer leur philosophie dans la gargoine. Est-ce qu'il peut y avoir trop de parfums, trop de boutons de rose ouverts, trop de rossignols chantants, trop de feuilles vertes, trop d'aurore dans la vie? est-ce qu'on peut trop s'aimer? est-ce qu'on peut trop se plaire l'un à l'autre? Prends garde, Estelle, tu es trop jolie! Prends garde, Némorin, tu es trop beau! La bonne balourdise! Est-ce qu'on peut trop s'enchanter, trop se cajoler, trop se charmer? est-ce qu'on peut trop être vivant? est-ce qu'on peut trop être heureux? Modérez vos joies. Ah ouiche! À bas les philosophes! La sagesse, c'est la jubilation. Jubilez, jubilons. Sommes-nous heureux parce que nous sommes bons, ou sommes-nous bons parce que nous sommes heureux? Le Sancy s'appelle-t-il le Sancy parce qu'il a appartenu à Harlay de Sancy, ou parce qu'il pèse cent six carats? Je n'en sais rien; la vie est pleine de ces problèmes-là; l'important c'est d'avoir le Sancy, et le bonheur. Soyons heureux sans chicaner. Obéissons aveuglément au soleil. Qu'est-ce que le soleil? C'est l'amour. Qui dit amour, dit femme. Ah! ah! voilà une toute-puissance, c'est la femme. Demandez à ce démagogue de Marius s'il n'est pas l'esclave de cette petite tyranne de Cosette. Et de son plein gré, le lâche! La femme! Il n'y a pas de Robespierre qui tienne, la femme règne. Je ne suis plus royaliste que de cette royauté-là. Qu'est-ce qu'Adam? C'est le royaume d'Ève. Pas de 89 pour Ève. Il y avait le sceptre royal surmonté d'une fleur de lys, il y avait le sceptre impérial surmonté d'un globe, il y avait le sceptre de Charlemagne qui était en fer, il y avait le sceptre de Louis le Grand qui était en or, la révolution les a tordus entre son pouce et son index, comme des fétus de paille de deux liards; c'est fini, c'est cassé, c'est par terre, il n'y a plus de sceptre; mais faites-moi donc des révolutions contre ce petit mouchoir brodé qui sent le patchouli! Je voudrais vous y voir. Essayez. Pourquoi est-ce solide? Parce que c'est un chiffon. Ah! vous êtes le dix-neuvième siècle? Eh bien, après? Nous étions le dix-huitième, nous! Et nous étions aussi bêtes que vous. Ne vous imaginez pas que vous ayez changé grand'chose à l'univers, parce que votre trousse-galant s'appelle le choléra morbus, et parce que votre bourrée s'appelle la cachucha. Au fond, il faudra bien toujours aimer les femmes. Je vous défie de sortir de là. Ces diablesses sont nos anges. Oui, l'amour, la femme, le baiser, c'est un cercle dont je vous défie de sortir; et, quant à moi, je voudrais bien y rentrer. Lequel de vous a vu se lever dans l'infini, apaisant tout au-dessous d'elle, regardant les flots comme une femme, l'étoile Vénus, la grande coquette de l'abîme, la Célimène de l'océan? L'océan, voilà un rude Alceste. Eh bien, il a beau bougonner, Vénus paraît, il faut qu'il sourie. Cette bête brute se soumet. Nous sommes tous ainsi. Colère, tempête, coups de foudre, écume jusqu'au plafond. Une femme entre en scène, une étoile se lève; à plat ventre! Marius se battait il y a six mois; il se marie aujourd'hui. C'est bien fait. Oui, Marius, oui, Cosette, vous avez raison. Existez hardiment l'un pour l'autre, faites-vous des mamours, faites-nous crever de rage de n'en pouvoir faire autant, idolâtrez-vous. Prenez dans vos deux becs tous les petits brins de félicité qu'il y a sur la terre, et arrangez-vous en un nid pour la vie. Pardi, aimer, être aimé, le beau miracle quand on est jeune! Ne vous figurez pas que vous ayez inventé cela. Moi aussi, j'ai rêvé, j'ai songé, j'ai soupiré; moi aussi, j’ai eu une âme clair de lune. L’amour est un enfant de six mille ans. L’amour a droit à une longue barbe blanche. Mathusalem est un gamin près de Cupidon. Depuis soixante siècles, l’homme et la femme se tirent d’affaire en aimant. Le diable, qui est malin, s’est mis à haïr l’homme; l’homme, qui est plus malin, s’est mis à aimer la femme. De cette façon, il s’est fait plus de bien que le diable ne lui a fait de mal. Cette finesse-là a été trouvée dès le paradis terrestre. Mes amis, l’invention est vieille, mais elle est toute neuve. Profitez-en. Soyez Daphnis et Chloé en attendant que vous soyiez Philémon et Baucis. Faites en sorte que, quand vous êtes l’un avec l’autre, rien ne vous manque, et que Cosette soit le soleil pour Marius, et que Marius soit l’univers pour Cosette. Cosette, que le beau temps, ce soit le sourire de votre mari; Marius, que la pluie, ce soit les larmes de ta femme. Et qu’il ne pleuve jamais dans votre ménage. Vous avez chipé à la loterie le bon numéro, l’amour dans le sacrement; vous avez le gros lot, gardez-le bien, mettez-le sous clef, ne le gaspillez pas, adorez-vous, et fichez-vous du reste. Croyez ce que je dis là. C’est du bon sens. Bon sens ne peut mentir. Soyez-vous l’un pour l’autre une religion. Chacun a sa façon d’adorer Dieu. Saperlotte! la meilleure manière d’adorer Dieu, c’est d’aimer sa femme. Je t’aime! voilà mon catéchisme. Quiconque aime est orthodoxe. Le juron de Henri IV met la sainteté entre la ripaille et l’ivresse. Ventre-saint-gris! je ne suis pas de la religion de ce juron-là. La femme y est oubliée. Cela m’étonne de la part du juron de Henri IV. Mes amis, vive la femme! je suis vieux, à ce qu’on dit; c’est étonnant comme je me sens en train d’être jeune. Je voudrais aller écouter des musettes dans les bois. Ces enfants-là qui réussissent à être beaux et contents, cela me grise. Je me marierais bellement si quelqu’un voulait. Il est impossible de s’imaginer que Dieu nous ait faits pour autre chose que ceci: idolâtrer, roucouler, adoniser, être pigeon, être coq, becqueter ses amours du matin au soir, se mirer dans sa petite femme, être fier, être triomphant, faire jabot; voilà le but de la vie. Voilà, ne vous en déplaise, ce que nous pensions, nous autres, dans notre temps dont nous étions les jeunes gens. Ah! vertu-bamboche! qu’il y en avait donc de charmantes femmes, à cette époque-là, et des minois, et des tendrons! J’y exerçais mes ravages. Donc aimez-vous. Si l’on ne s’aimait pas, je ne vois pas vraiment à quoi cela servirait qu’il y eût un printemps; et, quant à moi, je prierais le bon Dieu de serrer toutes les belles choses qu’il nous montre, et de nous les reprendre, et de remettre dans sa boîte les fleurs, les oiseaux et les jolies filles. Mes enfants, recevez la bénédiction du vieux bonhomme.

La soirée fut vive, gaie, aimable. La belle humeur souveraine du grand-père donna l’ut à toute la fête, et chacun se régla sur cette cordialité presque centenaire. On dansa un peu, on rit beaucoup; ce fut une noce bonne enfant. On eût pu y convier le bonhomme Jadis. Du reste il y était dans la personne du père Gillenormand.

Il y eut tumulte, puis silence. Les mariés disparurent.

Un peu après minuit la maison Gillenormand devint un temple.

Ici nous nous arrêtons. Sur le seuil des nuits de noce un ange est debout, souriant, un doigt sur la bouche.

L’âme entre en contemplation devant ce sanctuaire où se fait la célébration de l’amour.

Il doit y avoir des lueurs au-dessus de ces maisons-là. La joie qu’elles contiennent doit s’échapper à travers les pierres des murs en clarté et rayer vaguement les ténèbres. Il est impossible que cette fête sacrée et fatale n’envoie pas un rayonnement céleste à l’infini. L’amour, c’est le creuset sublime où se fait la fusion de l’homme et de la femme; l’être un, l’être triple, l’être final, la trinité humaine en soit. Cette naissance de deux âmes en une doit être une émotion pour l’ombre. L’amant est prêtre; la vierge ravie s’épouvante. Quelque chose de cette joie va à Dieu. Là où il y a vraiment mariage, c’est-à-dire où il y a amour, l’idéal s’en mêle. Un lit nuptial fait dans les ténèbres un coin d’aurore. S’il était donné à la prunelle de chair de percevoir les visions redoutables et charmantes de la vie supérieure, il est probable qu’on verrait les formes de la nuit, les inconnus ailés, les passants bleus de l’invisible, se pencher, foule de têtes sombres, autour de la maison lumineuse, satisfaits, bénissants, se montrant les uns aux autres la vierge épouse, doucement effarés, et ayant le reflet de la félicité humaine sur leurs visages divins. Si, à cette heure suprême, les époux éblouis de volupté, et qui se croient seuls, écoutaient, ils entendraient dans leur chambre un bruissement d’ailes confuses. Le bonheur parfait implique la solidarité des anges. Cette petite alcôve obscure a pour plafond tout le ciel. Quand deux bouches, devenues sacrées par l’amour, se rapprochent pour créer, il est impossible qu’au-dessus de ce baiser ineffable il n’y ait pas un tressaillement dans l’immense mystère des étoiles.

Ces félicités sont les vraies. Pas de joie hors de ces joies-là. L’amour, c’est là l’unique extase. Tout le reste pleure.

Aimer ou avoir aimé, cela suffit. Ne demandez rien ensuite. On n’a pas d’autre perle à trouver dans les plis ténébreux de la vie. Aimer est un accomplissement.

Chapitre III

L’inséparable

Qu’était devenu Jean Valjean?

Immédiatement après avoir ri, sur la gentille injonction de Cosette, personne ne faisant attention à lui, Jean Valjean s’était levé, et, inaperçu, il avait gagné l’antichambre. C’était cette même salle où, huit mois auparavant, il était entré noir de boue, de sang et de poudre, rapportant le petit-fils à l’aïeul. La vieille boiserie était enguirlandée de feuillages et de fleurs; les musiciens étaient assis sur le canapé où l’on avait déposé Marius. Basque en habit noir, en culotte courte, en bas blancs et en gants blancs, disposait des couronnes de roses autour de chacun des plats qu’on allait servir. Jean Valjean lui avait montré son bras en écharpe, l’avait chargé d’expliquer son absence, et était sorti.

Les croisées de la salle à manger donnaient sur la rue. Jean Valjean demeura quelques minutes debout et immobile dans l’obscurité sous ces fenêtres radieuses. Il écoutait. Le bruit confus du banquet venait jusqu’à lui. Il entendait la parole haute et magistrale du grand-père, les violons, le cliquetis des assiettes et des verres, les éclats de rire, et dans toute cette rumeur gaie il distinguait la douce voix joyeuse de Cosette.

Il quitta la rue des Filles-du-Calvaire et s’en revint rue de l’Homme-Armé.

Pour s’en retourner, il prit par la rue Saint-Louis, la rue Culture-Sainte-Catherine et les Blancs-Manteaux; c’était un peu le plus long, mais c’était le chemin par où, depuis trois mois, pour éviter les encombrements et les boues de la rue Vieille-du-Temple, il avait coutume de venir tous les jours de la rue de l’Homme-Armé à la rue des Filles-du-Calvaire, avec Cosette.

Ce chemin où Cosette avait passé excluait pour lui tout autre itinéraire.

Jean Valjean rentra chez lui. Il alluma sa chandelle et monta. L’appartement était vide. Toussaint elle-même n’y était plus. Le pas de Jean Valjean faisait dans les chambres plus de bruit qu’à l’ordinaire. Toutes les armoires étaient ouvertes. Il pénétra dans la chambre de Cosette. Il n’y avait pas de draps au lit. L’oreiller de coutil, sans taie et sans dentelles, était posé sur les couvertures pliées au pied des matelas dont on voyait la toile et où personne ne devait plus coucher. Tous les petits objets féminins auxquels tenait Cosette avaient été emportés; il ne restait que les gros meubles et les quatre murs. Le lit de Toussaint était également dégarni. Un seul lit était fait et semblait attendre quelqu'un; c'était celui de Jean Valjean.

Jean Valjean regarda les murailles, ferma quelques portes d'armoires, alla et vint d'une chambre à l'autre.

Puis il se retrouva dans sa chambre, et il posa sa chandelle sur une table.

Il avait dégagé son bras de l'écharpe, et il se servait de la main droite comme s'il n'en souffrait pas.

Il s'approcha de son lit, et ses yeux s'arrêtèrent, fut-ce par hasard? fut-ce avec intention? sur l'*inséparable*, dont Cosette avait été jalouse, sur la petite malle qui ne le quittait jamais. Le 4 juin, en arrivant rue de l'Homme-Armé, il l'avait déposée sur un guéridon près de son chevet. Il alla à ce guéridon avec une sorte de vivacité, prit dans sa poche une clef, et ouvrit la valise.

Il en tira lentement les vêtements avec lesquels, dix ans auparavant, Cosette avait quitté Montfermeil; d'abord la petite robe noire, puis le fichu noir, puis les bons gros souliers d'enfant que Cosette aurait presque pu mettre encore, tant elle avait le pied petit, puis la brassière de futaine bien épaisse, puis le jupon de tricot, puis le tablier à poches, puis les bas de laine. Ces bas, où était encore gracieusement marquée la forme d'une petite jambe, n'étaient guère plus longs que la main de Jean Valjean. Tout cela était de couleur noire. C'était lui qui avait apporté ces vêtements pour elle à Montfermeil. À mesure qu'il les ôtait de la valise, il les posait sur le lit. Il pensait. Il se rappelait. C'était en hiver, un mois de décembre très froid, elle grelottait à demi nue dans des guenilles, ses pauvres petits pieds tout rouges dans des sabots. Lui Jean Valjean, il lui avait fait quitter ces haillons pour lui faire mettre cet habillement de deuil. La mère avait dû être contente dans sa tombe de voir sa fille porter son deuil, et surtout de voir qu'elle était vêtue et qu'elle avait chaud. Il pensait à cette forêt de Montfermeil; ils l'avaient traversée ensemble, Cosette et lui; il pensait au temps qu'il faisait, aux arbres sans feuilles, au bois sans oiseaux, au ciel sans soleil; c'est égal, c'était charmant. Il rangea les petites nippes sur le lit, le fichu près du jupon, les bas à côté des souliers, la brassière à côté de la robe, et il les regarda l'une après l'autre. Elle n'était pas plus haute que cela, elle avait sa grande poupée dans ses bras, elle avait mis son louis d'or dans la poche de ce tablier, elle riait, ils marchaient tous les deux se tenant par la main, elle n'avait que lui au monde.

Alors sa vénérable tête blanche tomba sur le lit, ce vieux cœur stoïque se brisa, sa face s’abîma pour ainsi dire dans les vêtements de Cosette, et si quelqu’un eût passé dans l’escalier en ce moment, on eût entendu d’effrayants sanglots.

Chapitre IV

Immortale jecur

La vieille lutte formidable, dont nous avons déjà vu plusieurs phases, recommença.

Jacob ne lutta avec l'ange qu'une nuit. Hélas! combien de fois avons-nous vu Jean Valjean saisi corps à corps dans les ténèbres par sa conscience et luttant éperdument contre elle!

Lutte inouïe! À de certains moments, c'est le pied qui glisse; à d'autres instants, c'est le sol qui croule. Combien de fois cette conscience, forcenée au bien, l'avait-elle étreint et accablé! Combien de fois la vérité, inexorable, lui avait-elle mis le genou sur la poitrine! Combien de fois, terrassé par la lumière, lui avait-il crié grâce! Combien de fois cette lumière implacable, allumée en lui et sur lui par l'évêque, l'avait-elle ébloui de force alors qu'il souhaitait être aveuglé! Combien de fois s'était-il redressé dans le combat, retenu au rocher, adossé au sophisme, traîné dans la poussière, tantôt renversant sa conscience sous lui, tantôt renversé par elle! Combien de fois, après une équivoque, après un raisonnement traître et spécieux de l'égoïsme, avait-il entendu sa conscience irritée lui crier à l'oreille: Croc-en-jambe! misérable! Combien de fois sa pensée réfractaire avait-elle râlé convulsivement sous l'évidence du devoir! Résistance à Dieu. Sueurs funèbres. Que de blessures secrètes, que lui seul sentait saigner! Que d'écorchures à sa lamentable existence! Combien de fois s'était-il relevé sanglant, meurtri, brisé, éclairé, le désespoir au cœur, la sérénité dans l'âme? et, vaincu, il se sentait vainqueur. Et, après l'avoir disloqué, tenaillé et rompu, sa conscience, debout au-dessus de lui, redoutable, lumineuse, tranquille, lui disait: Maintenant, va en paix!

Mais, au sortir d'une si sombre lutte, quelle paix lugubre, hélas!

Cette nuit-là pourtant, Jean Valjean sentit qu'il livrait son dernier combat.

Une question se présentait, poignante.

Les prédestinations ne sont pas toutes droites, elles ne se développent pas en avenue rectiligne devant le prédestiné; elles ont des impasses, des cæcums, des tournants obscurs, des carrefours inquiétants offrant plusieurs voies. Jean Valjean faisait halte en ce moment au plus périlleux de ces carrefours.

Il était parvenu au suprême croisement du bien et du mal. Il avait cette ténébreuse intersection sous les yeux. Cette fois encore, comme cela lui était déjà arrivé dans d'autres péripéties douloureuses, deux routes s'ouvraient devant lui; l'une tentante, l'autre effrayante. Laquelle prendre?

Celle qui effrayait était conseillée par le mystérieux doigt indicateur que nous apercevons tous chaque fois que nous fixons nos yeux sur l'ombre.

Jean Valjean avait, encore une fois, le choix entre le port terrible et l'embûche souriante.

Cela est-il donc vrai? l'âme peut guérir; le sort, non. Chose affreuse! une destinée incurable!

La question qui se présentait, la voici:

De quelle façon Jean Valjean allait-il se comporter avec le bonheur de Cosette et de Marius? Ce bonheur, c'était lui qui l'avait voulu, c'était lui qui l'avait fait; il se l'était lui-même enfoncé dans les entrailles, et à cette heure, en le considérant, il pouvait avoir l'espèce de satisfaction qu'aurait un armurier qui reconnaîtrait sa marque de fabrique sur un couteau, en se le retirant tout fumant de la poitrine.

Cosette avait Marius, Marius possédait Cosette. Ils avaient tout, même la richesse. Et c'était son œuvre. Mais ce bonheur, maintenant qu'il existait, maintenant qu'il était là, qu'allait-il en faire, lui Jean Valjean? S'imposerait-il à ce bonheur? Le traiterait-il comme lui appartenant? Sans doute Cosette était à un autre; mais lui Jean Valjean retiendrait-il de Cosette tout ce qu'il en pourrait retenir? Resterait-il l'espèce de père, entrevu, mais respecté, qu'il avait été jusqu'alors? S'introduirait-il tranquillement dans la maison de Cosette? Apporterait-il, sans dire mot, son passé à cet avenir? Se présenterait-il là comme ayant droit, et viendrait-il s'asseoir, voilé, à ce lumineux foyer? Prendrait-il, en leur souriant, les mains de ces innocents dans ses deux mains tragiques? Poserait-il sur les paisibles chenets du salon Gillenormand ses pieds qui traînaient derrière eux l'ombre infamante de la loi? Entrerait-il en participation de chances avec Cosette et Marius? Épaissirait-il l'obscurité sur son front et le nuage dans le leur? Mettrait-il en tiers avec deux félicités sa catastrophe? Continuerait-il de se taire? En un mot serait-il, près de ces deux êtres heureux, le sinistre muet de la destinée?

Il faut être habitué à la fatalité et à ses rencontres pour oser lever les yeux quand de certaines questions nous apparaissent dans leur nudité horrible. Le bien ou le mal sont derrière ce sévère point d'interrogation. Que vas-tu faire? demanda le sphinx.

Cette habitude de l'épreuve, Jean Valjean l'avait. Il regarda le sphinx fixement.

Il examina l'impitoyable problème sous toutes ses faces.

Cosette, cette existence charmante, était le radeau de ce naufragé. Que faire? S'y cramponner, ou lâcher prise?

S'il s'y cramponnait, il sortait du désastre, il remontait au soleil, il laissait ruisseler de ses vêtements et de ses cheveux l'eau amère, il était sauvé, il vivait.

Allait-il lâcher prise?

Alors, l'abîme.

Il tenait ainsi douloureusement conseil avec sa pensée. Ou, pour mieux dire, il combattait; il se ruait, furieux, au dedans de lui-même, tantôt contre sa volonté, tantôt contre sa conviction.

Ce fut un bonheur pour Jean Valjean d'avoir pu pleurer. Cela l'éclaira peut-être. Pourtant le commencement fut farouche. Une tempête, plus furieuse que celle qui autrefois l'avait poussé vers Arras, se déchaîna en lui. Le passé lui revenait en regard du présent; il comparait et il sanglotait. Une fois l'écluse des larmes ouvertes, le désespéré se tordit.

Il se sentait arrêté.

Hélas! dans ce pugilat à outrance entre notre égoïsme et notre devoir, quand nous reculons ainsi pas à pas devant notre idéal incommutable, égarés, acharnés, exaspérés de céder, disputant le terrain, espérant une fuite possible, cherchant une issue, quelle brusque et sinistre résistance derrière nous que le pied du mur!

Sentir l'ombre sacrée qui fait obstacle!

L'invisible inexorable, quelle obsession!

Donc avec la conscience on n'a jamais fini. Prends-en ton parti, Brutus; prends-en ton parti, Caton. Elle est sans fond, étant Dieu. On jette dans ce puits le travail de toute sa vie, on y jette sa fortune, on y jette sa richesse, on y jette son succès, on y jette sa liberté ou sa patrie, on y jette son bien-être, on y jette son repos, on y jette sa joie. Encore! encore! Videz le vase! penchez l'urne! Il faut finir par y jeter son cœur.

Il y a quelque part dans la brume des vieux enfers un tonneau comme cela.

N’est-on pas pardonnable de refuser enfin? Est-ce que l’inépuisable peut avoir un droit? Est-ce que les chaînes sans fin ne sont pas au-dessus de la force humaine? Qui donc blâmerait Sisyphe et Jean Valjean de dire: c’est assez!

L’obéissance de la matière est limitée par le frottement; est-ce qu’il n’y a pas une limite à l’obéissance de l’âme? Si le mouvement perpétuel est impossible, est-ce que le dévouement perpétuel est exigible?

Le premier pas n’est rien; c’est le dernier qui est difficile. Qu’était-ce que l’affaire Champmathieu à côté du mariage de Cosette et de ce qu’il entraînait? Qu’est-ce que ceci: entrer dans le bagne, à côté de ceci: entrer dans le néant?

Ô première marche à descendre, que tu es sombre! Ô seconde marche, que tu es noire!

Comment ne pas détourner la tête cette fois?

Le martyre est une sublimation, sublimation corrosive. C’est une torture qui sacre. On peut y consentir la première heure; on s’assied sur le trône de fer rouge, on met sur son front la couronne de fer rouge, on accepte le globe de fer rouge, on prend le sceptre de fer rouge, mais il reste encore à vêtir le manteau de flamme, et n’y a-t-il pas un moment où la chair misérable se révolte, et où l’on abdique le supplice?

Enfin Jean Valjean entra dans le calme de l’accablement.

Il pesa, il songea, il considéra les alternatives de la mystérieuse balance de lumière et d’ombre.

Imposer son bagne à ces deux enfants éblouissants, ou consommer lui-même son irrémédiable engloutissement. D’un côté le sacrifice de Cosette, de l’autre le sien propre.

À quelle solution s’arrêta-t-il?

Quelle détermination prit-il? Quelle fut, au dedans de lui-même, sa réponse définitive à l’incorruptible interrogatoire de la fatalité? Quelle porte se décida-t-il à ouvrir? Quel côté de sa vie prit-il le parti de fermer et de condamner? Entre tous ces escarpements insondables qui l’entouraient, quel fut son choix? Quelle extrémité accepta-t-il? Auquel de ces gouffres fit-il un signe de tête?

Sa rêverie vertigineuse dura toute la nuit.

Il resta là jusqu’au jour, dans la même attitude, ployé en deux sur ce lit, prosterné sous l’énormité du sort, écrasé peut-être, hélas! les poings crispés, les bras étendus à angle droit comme un crucifié décloué qu’on aurait jeté la face contre terre. Il demeura douze heures, les douze heures d’une longue nuit d’hiver, glacé, sans relever la tête et sans prononcer une parole. Il était immobile comme un cadavre, pendant que sa pensée se roulait à terre et s’envolait, tantôt comme l’hydre, tantôt comme l’aigle. À le voir ainsi sans mouvement on eût dit un mort; tout à coup il tressaillait convulsivement et sa bouche, collée aux vêtements de Cosette, les baisait; alors on voyait qu’il vivait.

Qui? on? puisque Jean Valjean était seul et qu’il n’y avait personne là?

Le On qui est dans les ténèbres.

Livre septième — La dernière gorgée du calice

Chapitre I

Le septième cercle et le huitième ciel

Les lendemains de noce sont solitaires. On respecte le recueillement des heureux. Et aussi un peu leur sommeil attardé. Le brouhaha des visites et des félicitations ne commence que plus tard. Le matin du 17 février, il était un peu plus de midi quand Basque, la serviette et le plumeau sous le bras, occupé «à faire son antichambre», entendit un léger frappement à la porte. On n'avait point sonné, ce qui est discret un pareil jour. Basque ouvrit et vit M. Fauchelevent. Il l'introduisit dans le salon, encore encombré et sens dessus dessous, et qui avait l'air du champ de bataille des joies de la veille.

— Dame, monsieur, observa Basque, nous nous sommes réveillés tard.

— Votre maître est-il levé? demanda Jean Valjean.

— Comment va le bras de monsieur? répondit Basque.

— Mieux. Votre maître est-il levé?

— Lequel? l'ancien ou le nouveau?

— Monsieur Pontmercy.

— Monsieur le baron? fit Basque en se redressant.

On est surtout baron pour ses domestiques. Il leur en revient quelque chose; ils ont ce qu'un philosophe appellerait l'éclaboussure du titre, et cela les flatte. Marius, pour le dire en passant, républicain militant, et il l'avait prouvé, était maintenant baron malgré lui. Une petite révolution s'était faite dans la famille sur ce titre. C'était à présent M. Gillenormand qui y tenait et Marius qui s'en détachait. Mais le colonel Pontmercy avait écrit: *Mon fils portera mon titre*. Marius obéissait. Et puis Cosette, en qui la femme commençait à poindre, était ravie d'être baronne.

— Monsieur le baron? répéta Basque. Je vais voir. Je vais lui dire que monsieur Fauchelevent est là.

— Non. Ne lui dites pas que c'est moi. Dites-lui que quelqu'un demande à lui parler en particulier, et ne lui dites pas de nom.

— Ah! fit Basque.

— Je veux lui faire une surprise.

— Ah! reprit Basque, se donnant à lui-même son second ah! comme explication du premier.

Et il sortit.

Jean Valjean resta seul.

Le salon, nous venons de le dire, était tout en désordre. Il semblait qu’en prêtant l’oreille on eût pu y entendre encore la vague rumeur de la noce. Il y avait sur le parquet toutes sortes de fleurs tombées des guirlandes et des coiffures. Les bougies brûlées jusqu’au tronçon ajoutaient aux cristaux des lustres des stalactites de cire. Pas un meuble n’était à sa place. Dans des coins, trois ou quatre fauteuils, rapprochés les uns des autres et faisant cercle, avaient l’air de continuer une causerie. L’ensemble était riant. Il y a encore une certaine grâce dans une fête morte. Cela a été heureux. Sur ces chaises en désarroi, parmi ces fleurs qui se fanent, sous ces lumières éteintes, on a pensé de la joie. Le soleil succédait au lustre, et entrait gaîment dans le salon.

Quelques minutes s’écoulèrent. Jean Valjean était immobile à l’endroit où Basque l’avait quitté. Il était très pâle. Ses yeux étaient creux et tellement enfoncés par l’insomnie sous l’orbite qu’ils y disparaissaient presque. Son habit noir avait les plis fatigués d’un vêtement qui a passé la nuit. Les coudes étaient blanchis de ce duvet que laisse au drap le frottement du linge. Jean Valjean regardait à ses pieds la fenêtre dessinée sur le parquet par le soleil.

Un bruit se fit à la porte, il leva les yeux.

Marius entra, la tête haute, la bouche riante, on ne sait quelle lumière sur le visage, le front épanoui, l’œil triomphant. Lui aussi n’avait pas dormi.

— C’est vous, père! s’écria-t-il en apercevant Jean Valjean; cet imbécile de Basque qui avait un air mystérieux! Mais vous venez de trop bonne heure. Il n’est encore que midi et demi. Cosette dort.

Ce mot: Père, dit à M. Fauchelevent par Marius, signifiait: Félicité suprême. Il y avait toujours eu, on le sait, escarpement, froideur et contrainte entre eux; glace à rompre ou à fondre. Marius en était à ce point d’enivrement que l’escarpement s’abaissait, que la glace se dissolvait, et que M. Fauchelevent était pour lui, comme pour Cosette, un père.

Il continua; les paroles débordaient de lui, ce qui est propre à ces divins paroxysmes de la joie:

— Que je suis content de vous voir! Si vous saviez comme vous nous avez manqué hier! Bonjour, père. Comment va votre main? Mieux, n’est-ce pas?

Et, satisfait de la bonne réponse qu’il se faisait à lui-même, il poursuivit:

— Nous avons bien parlé de vous tous les deux. Cosette vous aime tant! Vous n’oubliez pas que vous avez votre chambre ici. Nous ne voulons plus de la rue de l’Homme-Armé. Nous n’en voulons plus du tout. Comment aviez-vous pu aller demeurer dans une rue comme ça, qui est malade, qui est grognon, qui est laide, qui a une barrière à un bout, où l’on a froid, où l’on ne peut pas entrer? Vous viendrez vous installer ici. Et dès aujourd’hui. Ou vous aurez affaire à Cosette. Elle entend nous mener tous par le bout du nez, je vous en préviens. Vous avez vu votre chambre, elle est tout près de la nôtre; elle donne sur des jardins; on a fait arranger ce qu’il y avait à la serrure, le lit est fait, elle est toute prête, vous n’avez qu’à arriver. Cosette a mis près de votre lit une grande vieille bergère en velours d’Utrecht, à qui elle a dit: tends-lui les bras. Tous les printemps, dans le massif d’acacias qui est en face de vos fenêtres, il vient un rossignol. Vous l’aurez dans deux mois. Vous aurez son nid à votre gauche et le nôtre à votre droite. La nuit il chantera, et le jour Cosette parlera. Votre chambre est en plein midi. Cosette vous y rangera vos livres, votre voyage du capitaine Cook, et l’autre, celui de Vancouver, toutes vos affaires. Il y a, je crois, une petite valise à laquelle vous tenez, j’ai disposé un coin d’honneur pour elle. Vous avez conquis mon grand-père, vous lui allez. Nous vivrons ensemble. Savez-vous le whist? vous comblerez mon grand-père si vous savez le whist. C’est vous qui mènerez promener Cosette mes jours de palais, vous lui donnerez le bras, vous savez, comme au Luxembourg autrefois. Nous sommes absolument décidés à être très heureux. Et vous en serez, de notre bonheur, entendez-vous, père? Ah çà, vous déjeunez avec nous aujourd’hui?

— Monsieur, dit Jean Valjean, j’ai une chose à vous dire. Je suis un ancien forçat.

La limite des sons aigus perceptibles peut être tout aussi bien dépassée pour l’esprit que pour l’oreille. Ces mots: *Je suis un ancien forçat,* sortant de la bouche de M. Fauchelevent et entrant dans l’oreille de Marius, allaient au delà du possible. Marius n’entendit pas. Il lui sembla que quelque chose venait de lui être dit; mais il ne sut quoi. Il resta béant.

Il s’aperçut alors que l’homme qui lui parlait était effrayant. Tout à son éblouissement, il n’avait pas jusqu’à ce moment remarqué cette pâleur terrible.

Jean Valjean dénoua la cravate noire qui lui soutenait le bras droit, défit le linge roulé autour de sa main, mit son pouce à nu et le montra à Marius.

— Je n’ai rien à la main, dit-il.

Marius regarda le pouce.

— Je n'y ai jamais rien eu, reprit Jean Valjean.

Il n'y avait en effet aucune trace de blessure.

Jean Valjean poursuivit:

— Il convenait que je fusse absent de votre mariage. Je me suis fait absent le plus que j'ai pu. J'ai supposé cette blessure pour ne point faire un faux, pour ne pas introduire de nullité dans les actes du mariage, pour être dispensé de signer.

Marius bégaya:

— Qu'est-ce que cela veut dire?

— Cela veut dire, répondit Jean Valjean, que j'ai été aux galères.

— Vous me rendez fou! s'écria Marius épouvanté.

— Monsieur Pontmercy, dit Jean Valjean, j'ai été dix-neuf ans aux galères. Pour vol. Puis j'ai été condamné à perpétuité. Pour vol. Pour récidive. À l'heure qu'il est, je suis en rupture de ban.

Marius avait beau reculer devant la réalité, refuser le fait, résister à l'évidence, il fallait s'y rendre. Il commença à comprendre, et comme cela arrive toujours en pareil cas, il comprit au delà. Il eut le frisson d'un hideux éclair intérieur; une idée, qui le fit frémir, lui traversa l'esprit. Il entrevit dans l'avenir, pour lui-même, une destinée difforme.

— Dites tout, dites tout! cria-t-il. Vous êtes le père de Cosette!

Et il fit deux pas en arrière avec un mouvement d'indicible horreur.

Jean Valjean redressa la tête dans une telle majesté d'attitude qu'il sembla grandir jusqu'au plafond.

— Il est nécessaire que vous me croyiez ici, monsieur; et, quoique notre serment à nous autres ne soit pas reçu en justice....

Ici il fit un silence, puis, avec une sorte d'autorité souveraine et sépulcrale, il ajouta en articulant lentement et en pesant sur les syllabes:

— ...Vous me croirez. Le père de Cosette, moi! devant Dieu, non. Monsieur le baron Pontmercy, je suis un paysan de Faverolles. Je gagnais ma vie à émonder des arbres. Je ne m'appelle pas Fauchelevent, je m'appelle Jean Valjean. Je ne suis rien à Cosette. Rassurez-vous.

Marius balbutia:

— Qui me prouve?....

— Moi. Puisque je le dis.

Marius regarda cet homme. Il était lugubre et tranquille. Aucun mensonge ne pouvait sortir d'un tel calme. Ce qui est glacé est sincère. On sentait le vrai dans cette froideur de tombe.

— Je vous crois, dit Marius.

Jean Valjean inclina la tête comme pour prendre acte, et continua:

— Que suis-je pour Cosette? un passant. Il y a dix ans, je ne savais pas qu'elle existât. Je l'aime, c'est vrai. Une enfant qu'on a vue petite, étant soi-même déjà vieux, on l'aime. Quand on est vieux, on se sent grand-père pour tous les petits enfants. Vous pouvez, ce me semble, supposer que j'ai quelque chose qui ressemble à un cœur. Elle était orpheline. Sans père ni mère. Elle avait besoin de moi. Voilà pourquoi je me suis mis à l'aimer. C'est si faible les enfants, que le premier venu, même un homme comme moi, peut être leur protecteur. J'ai fait ce devoir-là vis-à-vis de Cosette. Je ne crois pas qu'on puisse vraiment appeler si peu de chose une bonne action; mais si c'est une bonne action, eh bien, mettez que je l'ai faite. Enregistrez cette circonstance atténuante. Aujourd'hui Cosette quitte ma vie; nos deux chemins se séparent. Désormais je ne puis plus rien pour elle. Elle est madame Pontmercy. Sa providence a changé. Et Cosette gagne au change. Tout est bien. Quant aux six cent mille francs, vous ne m'en parlez pas, mais je vais au-devant de votre pensée, c'est un dépôt. Comment ce dépôt était-il entre mes mains? Qu'importe? Je rends le dépôt. On n'a rien de plus à me demander. Je complète la restitution en disant mon vrai nom. Ceci encore me regarde. Je tiens, moi, à ce que vous sachiez qui je suis.

Et Jean Valjean regarda Marius en face.

Tout ce qu'éprouvait Marius était tumultueux et incohérent. De certains coups de vent de la destinée font de ces vagues dans notre âme.

Nous avons tous eu de ces moments de trouble dans lesquels tout se disperse en nous; nous disons les premières choses venues, lesquelles ne sont pas toujours précisément celles qu'il faudrait dire. Il y a des révélations subites qu'on ne peut porter et qui enivrent comme un vin funeste. Marius était stupéfié de la situation nouvelle qui lui apparaissait, au point de parler à cet homme presque comme quelqu'un qui lui en aurait voulu de cet aveu.

— Mais enfin, s'écria-t-il, pourquoi me dites-vous tout cela? Qu'est-ce qui vous y force? Vous pouviez vous garder le secret à vous-même. Vous n'êtes ni dénoncé, ni poursuivi, ni traqué? Vous avez une raison pour faire, de gaîté de cœur, une telle révélation. Achevez. Il y a autre chose. À quel propos faites-vous cet aveu? Pour quel motif?

— Pour quel motif? répondit Jean Valjean d'une voix si basse et si sourde qu'on eût dit que c'était à lui-même qu'il parlait plus qu'à Marius.

Pour quel motif, en effet, ce forçat vient-il dire: Je suis un forçat? Eh bien oui! le motif est étrange. C'est par honnêteté. Tenez, ce qu'il y a de malheureux, c'est un fil que j'ai là dans le cœur et qui me tient attaché. C'est surtout quand on est vieux que ces fils-là sont solides. Toute la vie se défait alentour; ils résistent. Si j'avais pu arracher ce fil, le casser, dénouer le nœud ou le couper, m'en aller bien loin, j'étais sauvé, je n'avais qu'à partir; il y a des diligences rue du Bouloy; vous êtes heureux, je m'en vais. J'ai essayé de le rompre, ce fil, j'ai tiré dessus, il a tenu bon, il n'a pas cassé, je m'arrachais le cœur avec. Alors j'ai dit: Je ne puis pas vivre ailleurs que là. Il faut que je reste. Eh bien oui, mais vous avez raison, je suis un imbécile, pourquoi ne pas rester tout simplement? Vous m'offrez une chambre dans la maison, madame Pontmercy m'aime bien, elle dit à ce fauteuil: tends-lui les bras, votre grand-père ne demande pas mieux que de m'avoir, je lui vas, nous habiterons tous ensemble, repas en commun, je donnerai le bras à Cosette... — à madame Pontmercy, pardon, c'est l'habitude, — nous n'aurons qu'un toit, qu'une table, qu'un feu, le même coin de cheminée l'hiver, la même promenade l'été, c'est la joie cela, c'est le bonheur cela, c'est tout, cela. Nous vivrons en famille. En famille!

À ce mot, Jean Valjean devint farouche. Il croisa les bras, considéra le plancher à ses pieds comme s'il voulait y creuser un abîme, et sa voix fut tout à coup éclatante:

— En famille! non. Je ne suis d'aucune famille, moi. Je ne suis pas de la vôtre. Je ne suis pas de celle des hommes. Les maisons où l'on est entre soi, j'y suis de trop. Il y a des familles, mais ce n'est pas pour moi. Je suis le malheureux; je suis dehors. Ai-je eu un père et une mère? j'en doute presque. Le jour où j'ai marié cette enfant, cela a été fini, je l'ai vue heureuse, et qu'elle était avec l'homme qu'elle aime, et qu'il y avait là un bon vieillard, un ménage de deux anges, toutes les joies dans cette maison, et que c'était bien, et je me suis dit: Toi, n'entre pas. Je pouvais mentir, c'est vrai, vous tromper tous, rester monsieur Fauchelevent. Tant que cela a été pour elle, j'ai pu mentir; mais maintenant ce serait pour moi, je ne le dois pas. Il suffisait de me taire, c'est vrai, et tout continuait. Vous me demandez ce qui me force à parler? une drôle de chose, ma conscience. Me taire, c'était pourtant bien facile. J'ai passé la nuit à tâcher de me le persuader; vous me confessez, et ce que je viens vous dire est si extraordinaire que vous en avez le droit; eh bien oui, j'ai passé la nuit à me donner des raisons, je me suis donné de très bonnes raisons, j'ai fait ce que j’ai pu, allez. Mais il y a deux choses où je n’ai pas réussi; ni à casser le fil qui me tient par le cœur fixé, rivé et scellé ici, ni à faire taire quelqu’un qui me parle bas quand je suis seul. C’est pourquoi je suis venu vous avouer tout ce matin. Tout, ou à peu près tout. Il y a de l’inutile à dire qui ne concerne que moi; je le garde pour moi. L’essentiel, vous le savez. Donc j’ai pris mon mystère, et je vous l’ai apporté. Et j’ai éventré mon secret sous vos yeux. Ce n’était pas une résolution aisée à prendre. Toute la nuit je me suis débattu. Ah! vous croyez que je ne me suis pas dit que ce n’était point là l’affaire Champmathieu, qu’en cachant mon nom je ne faisais de mal à personne, que le nom de Fauchelevent m’avait été donné par Fauchelevent lui-même en reconnaissance d’un service rendu, et que je pouvais bien le garder, et que je serais heureux dans cette chambre que vous m’offrez, que je ne gênerais rien, que je serais dans mon petit coin, et que, tandis que vous auriez Cosette, moi j’aurais l’idée d’être dans la même maison qu’elle. Chacun aurait eu son bonheur proportionné. Continuer d’être monsieur Fauchelevent, cela arrangeait tout. Oui, excepté mon âme. Il y avait de la joie partout sur moi, le fond de mon âme restait noir. Ce n’est pas assez d’être heureux, il faut être content. Ainsi je serais resté monsieur Fauchelevent, ainsi mon vrai visage, je l’aurais caché, ainsi, en présence de votre épanouissement, j’aurais eu une énigme, ainsi, au milieu de votre plein jour, j’aurais eu des ténèbres; ainsi, sans crier gare, tout bonnement, j’aurais introduit le bagne à votre foyer, je me serais assis à votre table avec la pensée que, si vous saviez qui je suis, vous m’en chasseriez, je me serais laissé servir par des domestiques qui, s’ils avaient su, auraient dit: Quelle horreur! Je vous aurais touché avec mon coude dont vous avez droit de ne pas vouloir, je vous aurais filouté vos poignées de main! Il y aurait eu dans votre maison un partage de respect entre des cheveux blancs vénérables et des cheveux blancs flétris; à vos heures les plus intimes, quand tous les cœurs se seraient crus ouverts jusqu’au fond les uns pour les autres, quand nous aurions été tous quatre ensemble, votre aïeul, vous deux, et moi, il y aurait eu là un inconnu! J’aurais été côte à côte avec vous dans votre existence, ayant pour unique soin de ne jamais déranger le couvercle de mon puits terrible. Ainsi, moi, un mort, je me serais imposé à vous qui êtes des vivants. Elle, je l’aurais condamnée à moi à perpétuité. Vous, Cosette et moi, nous aurions été trois têtes dans le bonnet vert! Est-ce que vous ne frissonnez pas? Je ne suis que le plus accablé des hommes, j’en aurais été le plus monstrueux. Et ce crime, je l’aurais commis tous les jours! Et ce mensonge, je l'aurais fait tous les jours! Et cette face de nuit, je l'aurais eue sur mon visage tous les jours! Et ma flétrissure, je vous en aurais donné votre part tous les jours! tous les jours! à vous mes bien-aimés, à vous mes enfants, à vous mes innocents! Se taire n'est rien? garder le silence est simple? Non, ce n'est pas simple. Il y a un silence qui ment. Et mon mensonge, et ma fraude, et mon indignité, et ma lâcheté, et ma trahison, et mon crime, je l'aurais bu goutte à goutte, je l'aurais recraché, puis rebu, j'aurais fini à minuit et recommencé à midi, et mon bonjour aurait menti, et mon bonsoir aurait menti, et j'aurais dormi là-dessus, et j'aurais mangé cela avec mon pain, et j'aurais regardé Cosette en face, et j'aurais répondu au sourire de l'ange par le sourire du damné, et j'aurais été un fourbe abominable! Pourquoi faire? pour être heureux. Pour être heureux, moi! Est-ce que j'ai le droit d'être heureux? Je suis hors de la vie, monsieur.

Jean Valjean s'arrêta. Marius écoutait. De tels enchaînements d'idées et d'angoisses ne se peuvent interrompre. Jean Valjean baissa la voix de nouveau, mais ce n'était plus la voix sourde, c'était la voix sinistre.

— Vous demandez pourquoi je parle? je ne suis ni dénoncé, ni poursuivi, ni traqué, dites-vous. Si! je suis dénoncé! si! je suis poursuivi! si! je suis traqué! Par qui? par moi. C'est moi qui me barre à moi-même le passage, et je me traîne, et je me pousse, et je m'arrête, et je m'exécute, et quand on se tient soi-même, on est bien tenu.

Et, saisissant son propre habit à poigne-main et le tirant vers Marius:

— Voyez donc ce poing-ci, continua-t-il. Est-ce que vous ne trouvez pas qu'il tient ce collet-là de façon à ne pas le lâcher? Eh bien! c'est bien un autre poignet, la conscience! Il faut, si l'on veut être heureux, monsieur, ne jamais comprendre le devoir; car, dès qu'on l'a compris, il est implacable. On dirait qu'il vous punit de le comprendre; mais non; il vous en récompense; car il vous met dans un enfer où l'on sent à côté de soi Dieu. On ne s'est pas sitôt déchiré les entrailles qu'on est en paix avec soi-même.

Et, avec une accentuation poignante, il ajouta:

— Monsieur Pontmercy, cela n'a pas le sens commun, je suis un honnête homme. C'est en me dégradant à vos yeux que je m'élève aux miens. Ceci m'est déjà arrivé une fois, mais c'était moins douloureux; ce n'était rien. Oui, un honnête homme. Je ne le serais pas si vous aviez, par ma faute, continué de m'estimer; maintenant que vous me méprisez, je le suis. J'ai cette fatalité sur moi que, ne pouvant jamais avoir que de la considération volée, cette considération m'humilie et m'accable intérieurement, et que, pour que je me respecte, il faut qu'on me méprise. Alors je me redresse. Je suis un galérien qui obéit à sa conscience. Je sais bien que cela n'est pas ressemblant. Mais que voulez-vous que j'y fasse? cela est. J'ai pris des engagements envers moi-même; je les tiens. Il y a des rencontres qui nous lient, il y a des hasards qui nous entraînent dans des devoirs. Voyez-vous, monsieur Pontmercy, il m'est arrivé des choses dans ma vie.

Jean Valjean fit encore une pause, avalant sa salive avec effort comme si ses paroles avaient un arrière-goût amer, et il reprit:

— Quand on a une telle horreur sur soi, on n'a pas le droit de la faire partager aux autres à leur insu, on n'a pas le droit de leur communiquer sa peste, on n'a pas le droit de les faire glisser dans son précipice sans qu'ils s'en aperçoivent, on n'a pas le droit de laisser traîner sa casaque rouge sur eux, on n'a pas le droit d'encombrer sournoisement de sa misère le bonheur d'autrui. S'approcher de ceux qui sont sains et les toucher dans l'ombre avec son ulcère invisible, c'est hideux. Fauchelevent a eu beau me prêter son nom, je n'ai pas le droit de m'en servir; il a pu me le donner, je n'ai pas pu le prendre. Un nom, c'est un moi. Voyez-vous, monsieur, j'ai un peu pensé, j'ai un peu lu, quoique je sois un paysan; et je me rends compte des choses. Vous voyez que je m'exprime convenablement. Je me suis fait une éducation à moi. Eh bien oui, soustraire un nom et se mettre dessous, c'est déshonnête. Des lettres de l'alphabet, cela s'escroque comme une bourse ou comme une montre. Être une fausse signature en chair et en os, être une fausse clef vivante, entrer chez d'honnêtes gens en trichant leur serrure, ne plus jamais regarder, loucher toujours, être infâme au dedans de moi, non! non! non! non! Il vaut mieux souffrir, saigner, pleurer, s'arracher la peau de la chair avec les ongles, passer les nuits à se tordre dans les angoisses, se ronger le ventre et l'âme. Voilà pourquoi je viens vous raconter tout cela. De gaîté de cœur, comme vous dites.

Il respira péniblement, et jeta ce dernier mot:

— Pour vivre, autrefois, j'ai volé un pain; aujourd'hui, pour vivre, je ne veux pas voler un nom.

— Pour vivre! interrompit Marius. Vous n'avez pas besoin de ce nom pour vivre?

— Ah! je m'entends, répondit Jean Valjean, en levant et en abaissant la tête lentement plusieurs fois de suite.

Il y eut un silence. Tous deux se taisaient, chacun abîmé dans un gouffre de pensées. Marius s'était assis près d'une table et appuyait le coin de sa bouche sur un de ses doigts replié. Jean Valjean allait et venait. Il s'arrêta devant une glace et demeura sans mouvement. Puis, comme s'il répondait à un raisonnement intérieur, il dit en regardant cette glace où il ne se voyait pas:

— Tandis qu'à présent je suis soulagé!

Il se remit à marcher et alla à l'autre bout du salon. À l'instant où il se retourna, il s'aperçut que Marius le regardait marcher. Alors il lui dit avec un accent inexprimable:

— Je traîne un peu la jambe. Vous comprenez maintenant pourquoi.

Puis il acheva de se tourner vers Marius:

— Et maintenant, monsieur, figurez-vous ceci: Je n'ai rien dit, je suis resté monsieur Fauchelevent, j'ai pris ma place chez vous, je suis des vôtres, je suis dans ma chambre, je viens déjeuner le matin, en pantoufles, les soirs nous allons au spectacle tous les trois, j'accompagne madame Pontmercy aux Tuileries et à la place Royale, nous sommes ensemble, vous me croyez votre semblable; un beau jour, je suis là, vous êtes là, nous causons, nous rions, tout à coup vous entendez une voix crier ce nom: Jean Valjean! et voilà que cette main épouvantable, la police, sort de l'ombre et m'arrache mon masque brusquement!

Il se tut encore; Marius s'était levé avec un frémissement. Jean Valjean reprit:

— Qu'en dites-vous?

Le silence de Marius répondait.

Jean Valjean continua:

— Vous voyez bien que j'ai raison de ne pas me taire. Tenez, soyez heureux, soyez dans le ciel, soyez l'ange d'un ange, soyez dans le soleil, et contentez-vous-en, et ne vous inquiétez pas de la manière dont un pauvre damné s'y prend pour s'ouvrir la poitrine et faire son devoir; vous avez un misérable homme devant vous, monsieur.

Marius traversa lentement le salon, et quand il fut près de Jean Valjean, lui tendit la main.

Mais Marius dut aller prendre cette main qui ne se présentait point, Jean Valjean se laissa faire, et il sembla à Marius qu'il étreignait une main de marbre.

— Mon grand-père a des amis, dit Marius; je vous aurai votre grâce.

— C’est inutile, répondit Jean Valjean. On me croit mort, cela suffit. Les morts ne sont pas soumis à la surveillance. Ils sont censés pourrir tranquillement. La mort, c’est la même chose que la grâce.

Et, dégageant sa main que Marius tenait, il ajouta avec une sorte de dignité inexorable:

— D’ailleurs, faire mon devoir, voilà l’ami auquel j’ai recours; et je n’ai besoin que d’une grâce, celle de ma conscience.

En ce moment, à l’autre extrémité du salon, la porte s’entrouvrit doucement et dans l’entre-bâillement la tête de Cosette apparut. On n’apercevait que son doux visage, elle était admirablement décoiffée, elle avait les paupières encore gonflées de sommeil. Elle fit le mouvement d’un oiseau qui passe sa tête hors du nid, regarda d’abord son mari, puis Jean Valjean, et leur cria en riant, on croyait voir un sourire au fond d’une rose:

— Parions que vous parlez politique! Comme c’est bête, au lieu d’être avec moi!

Jean Valjean tressaillit.

— Cosette!... balbutia Marius. — Et il s’arrêta. On eût dit deux coupables.

Cosette, radieuse, continuait de les regarder tour à tour tous les deux. Il y avait dans ses yeux comme des échappées de paradis.

— Je vous prends en flagrant délit, dit Cosette. Je viens d’entendre à travers la porte mon père Fauchelevent qui disait: — La conscience.... — Faire son devoir.... — C’est de la politique, ça. Je ne veux pas. On ne doit pas parler politique dès le lendemain. Ce n’est pas juste.

— Tu te trompes, Cosette, répondit Marius. Nous parlons affaires. Nous parlons du meilleur placement à trouver pour tes six cent mille francs....

— Ce n’est pas tout ça, interrompit Cosette. Je viens. Veut-on de moi ici?

Et, passant résolûment la porte, elle entra dans le salon. Elle était vêtue d’un large peignoir blanc à mille plis et à grandes manches qui, partant du cou, lui tombait jusqu’aux pieds. Il y a, dans les ciels d’or des vieux tableaux gothiques, de ces charmants sacs à mettre un ange.

Elle se contempla de la tête aux pieds dans une grande glace, puis s’écria avec une explosion d’extase ineffable:

— Il y avait une fois un roi et une reine. Oh! comme je suis contente!

Cela dit, elle fit la révérence à Marius et à Jean Valjean.

— Voilà, dit-elle, je vais m’installer près de vous sur un fauteuil, on déjeune dans une demi-heure, vous direz tout ce que vous voudrez, je sais bien qu’il faut que les hommes parlent, je serai bien sage.

Marius lui prit le bras, et lui dit amoureusement:

— Nous parlons affaires.

— À propos, répondit Cosette, j’ai ouvert ma fenêtre, il vient d’arriver un tas de pierrots dans le jardin. Des oiseaux, pas des masques. C’est aujourd’hui mercredi des cendres; mais pas pour les oiseaux.

— Je te dis que nous parlons affaires, va, ma petite Cosette, laisse-nous un moment. Nous parlons chiffres. Cela t’ennuierait.

— Tu as mis ce matin une charmante cravate, Marius. Vous êtes fort coquet, monseigneur. Non, cela ne m’ennuiera pas.

— Je t’assure que cela t’ennuiera.

— Non. Puisque c’est vous. Je ne vous comprendrai pas, mais je vous écouterai. Quand on entend les voix qu’on aime, on n’a pas besoin de comprendre les mots qu’elles disent. Être là ensemble, c’est tout ce que je veux. Je reste avec vous, bah!

— Tu es ma Cosette bien-aimée! Impossible.

— Impossible!

— Oui.

— C’est bon, reprit Cosette. Je vous aurais dit des nouvelles. Je vous aurais dit que mon grand-père dort encore, que votre tante est à la messe, que la cheminée de la chambre de mon père Fauchelevent fume, que Nicolette a fait venir le ramoneur, que Toussaint et Nicolette se sont déjà disputées, que Nicolette se moque du bégayement de Toussaint. Eh bien, vous ne saurez rien! Ah! c’est impossible? Moi aussi, à mon tour, vous verrez, monsieur, je dirai: c’est impossible. Qui est-ce qui sera attrapé? Je t’en prie, mon petit Marius, laisse-moi ici avec vous deux.

— Je te jure qu’il faut que nous soyons seuls.

— Eh bien, est-ce que je suis quelqu’un?

Jean Valjean ne prononçait pas une parole. Cosette se tourna vers lui:

— D’abord, père, vous, je veux que vous veniez m’embrasser. Qu’est-ce que vous faites là à ne rien dire au lieu de prendre mon parti? qui est-ce qui m’a donné un père comme ça? Vous voyez bien que je suis très malheureuse en ménage. Mon mari me bat. Allons, embrassez-moi tout de suite.

Jean Valjean s’approcha.

Cosette se retourna vers Marius.

— Vous, je vous fais la grimace.

Puis elle tendit son front à Jean Valjean.

Jean Valjean fit un pas vers elle.

Cosette recula.

— Père, vous êtes pâle. Est-ce que votre bras vous fait mal?

— Il est guéri, dit Jean Valjean.

— Est-ce que vous avez mal dormi?

— Non.

— Est-ce que vous êtes triste?

— Non.

— Embrassez-moi. Si vous vous portez bien, si vous dormez bien, si vous êtes content, je ne vous gronderai pas.

Et de nouveau elle lui tendit son front.

Jean Valjean déposa un baiser sur ce front où il y avait un reflet céleste.

— Souriez.

Jean Valjean obéit. Ce fut le sourire d'un spectre.

— Maintenant, défendez-moi contre mon mari.

— Cosette!... fit Marius.

— Fâchez-vous, père. Dites-lui qu'il faut que je reste. On peut bien parler devant moi. Vous me trouvez donc bien sotte. C'est donc bien étonnant ce que vous dites! des affaires, placer de l'argent à une banque, voilà grand'chose. Les hommes font les mystérieux pour rien. Je veux rester. Je suis très jolie ce matin; regarde-moi, Marius.

Et avec un haussement d'épaules adorable et on ne sait quelle bouderie exquise, elle regarda Marius. Il y eut comme un éclair entre ces deux êtres. Que quelqu'un fût là, peu importait.

— Je t'aime! dit Marius.

— Je t'adore! dit Cosette.

Et ils tombèrent irrésistiblement dans les bras l'un de l'autre.

— À présent, reprit Cosette en rajustant un pli de son peignoir avec une petite moue triomphante, je reste.

— Cela, non, répondit Marius d'un ton suppliant. Nous avons quelque chose à terminer.

— Encore non?

Marius prit une inflexion de voix grave:

— Je t'assure, Cosette, que c'est impossible.

— Ah! vous faites votre voix d’homme, monsieur. C’est bon, on s’en va. Vous, père, vous ne m’avez pas soutenue. Monsieur mon mari, monsieur mon papa, vous êtes des tyrans. Je vais le dire à grand-père. Si vous croyez que je vais revenir et vous faire des platitudes, vous vous trompez. Je suis fière. Je vous attends à présent. Vous allez voir que c’est vous qui allez vous ennuyer sans moi. Je m’en vais, c’est bien fait.

Et elle sortit.

Deux secondes après, la porte se rouvrit, sa fraîche tête vermeille passa encore une fois entre les deux battants, et elle leur cria:

— Je suis très en colère.

La porte se referma et les ténèbres se refirent.

Ce fut comme un rayon de soleil fourvoyé qui, sans s’en douter, aurait traversé brusquement de la nuit.

Marius s’assura que la porte était bien refermée.

— Pauvre Cosette! murmura-t-il, quand elle va savoir....

À ce mot, Jean Valjean trembla de tous ses membres. Il fixa sur Marius un œil égaré.

— Cosette! oh oui, c’est vrai, vous allez dire cela à Cosette. C’est juste. Tiens, je n’y avais pas pensé. On a de la force pour une chose, on n’en a pas pour une autre. Monsieur, je vous en conjure, je vous en supplie, monsieur, donnez-moi votre parole la plus sacrée, ne le lui dites pas. Est-ce qu’il ne suffit pas que vous le sachiez, vous? J’ai pu le dire de moi-même sans y être forcé, je l’aurais dit à l’univers, à tout le monde, ça m’était égal. Mais elle, elle ne sait pas ce que c’est, cela l’épouvanterait. Un forçat, quoi! on serait forcé de lui expliquer, de lui dire: C’est un homme qui a été aux galères. Elle a vu un jour passer la chaîne. Oh mon Dieu!

Il s’affaissa sur un fauteuil et cacha son visage dans ses deux mains. On ne l’entendait pas, mais aux secousses de ses épaules, on voyait qu’il pleurait. Pleurs silencieux, pleurs terribles.

Il y a de l’étouffement dans le sanglot. Une sorte de convulsion le prit, il se renversa en arrière sur le dossier du fauteuil comme pour respirer, laissant pendre ses bras et laissant voir à Marius sa face inondée de larmes, et Marius l’entendit murmurer si bas que sa voix semblait être dans une profondeur sans fond: — Oh, je voudrais mourir!

— Soyez tranquille, dit Marius, je garderai votre secret pour moi seul.

Et, moins attendri peut-être qu’il n’aurait dû l’être, mais obligé depuis une heure de se familiariser avec un inattendu effroyable, voyant par degrés un forçat se superposer sous ses yeux à M. Fauchelevent, gagné peu à peu par cette réalité lugubre, et amené par la pente naturelle de la situation à constater l’intervalle qui venait de se faire entre cet homme et lui, Marius ajouta:

— Il est impossible que je ne vous dise pas un mot du dépôt que vous avez si fidèlement et si honnêtement remis. C’est là un acte de probité. Il est juste qu’une récompense vous soit donnée. Fixez la somme vous-même, elle vous sera comptée. Ne craignez pas de la fixer très haut.

— Je vous en remercie, monsieur, répondit Jean Valjean avec douceur.

Il resta pensif un moment, passant machinalement le bout de son index sur l’ongle de son pouce, puis il éleva la voix:

— Tout est à peu près fini. Il me reste une dernière chose....

— Laquelle?

Jean Valjean eut comme une suprême hésitation, et, sans voix, presque sans souffle, il balbutia plus qu’il ne dit:

— À présent que vous savez, croyez-vous, monsieur, vous qui êtes le maître, que je ne dois plus voir Cosette?

— Je crois que ce serait mieux, répondit froidement Marius.

— Je ne la verrai plus, murmura Jean Valjean.

Et il se dirigea vers la porte.

Il mit la main sur le bec-de-cane, le pêne céda, la porte s’entre-bâilla, Jean Valjean l’ouvrit assez pour pouvoir passer, demeura une seconde immobile, puis referma la porte et se retourna vers Marius.

Il n’était plus pâle, il était livide, il n’y avait plus de larmes dans ses yeux, mais une sorte de flamme tragique. Sa voix était redevenue étrangement calme.

— Tenez, monsieur, dit-il, si vous voulez, je viendrai la voir. Je vous assure que je le désire beaucoup. Si je n’avais pas tenu à voir Cosette, je ne vous aurais pas fait l’aveu que je vous ai fait, je serais parti; mais voulant rester dans l’endroit où est Cosette et continuer de la voir, j’ai dû honnêtement tout vous dire. Vous suivez mon raisonnement, n’est-ce pas? c’est là une chose qui se comprend. Voyez-vous, il y a neuf ans passés que je l’ai près de moi. Nous avons demeuré d’abord dans cette masure du boulevard, ensuite dans le couvent, ensuite près du Luxembourg. C’est là que vous l’avez vue pour la première fois. Vous vous rappelez son chapeau de peluche bleue. Nous avons été ensuite dans le quartier des Invalides où il y avait une grille et un jardin. Rue Plumet. J’habitais une petite arrière-cour d’où j’entendais son piano. Voilà ma vie. Nous ne nous quittions jamais. Cela a duré neuf ans et des mois. J’étais comme son père, et elle était mon enfant. Je ne sais pas si vous me comprenez, monsieur Pontmercy, mais s’en aller à présent, ne plus la voir, ne plus lui parler, n’avoir plus rien, ce serait difficile. Si vous ne le trouvez pas mauvais, je viendrai de temps en temps voir Cosette. Je ne viendrais pas souvent. Je ne resterais pas longtemps. Vous diriez qu’on me reçoive dans la petite salle basse. Au rez-de-chaussée. J’entrerais bien par la porte de derrière, qui est pour les domestiques, mais cela étonnerait peut-être. Il vaut mieux, je crois, que j’entre par la porte de tout le monde. Monsieur, vraiment. Je voudrais bien voir encore un peu Cosette. Aussi rarement qu’il vous plaira. Mettez-vous à ma place, je n’ai plus que cela. Et puis, il faut prendre garde. Si je ne venais plus du tout, il y aurait un mauvais effet, on trouverait cela singulier. Par exemple, ce que je puis faire, c’est de venir le soir, quand il commence à être nuit.

— Vous viendrez tous les soirs, dit Marius, et Cosette vous attendra.

— Vous êtes bon, monsieur, dit Jean Valjean.

Marius salua Jean Valjean, le bonheur reconduisit jusqu’à la porte le désespoir, et ces deux hommes se quittèrent.

Chapitre II

Les obscurités que peut contenir une révélation

Marius était bouleversé.

L'espèce d'éloignement qu'il avait toujours eu pour l'homme près duquel il voyait Cosette, lui était désormais expliqué. Il y avait dans ce personnage un on ne sait quoi énigmatique dont son instinct l'avertissait. Cette énigme, c'était la plus hideuse des hontes, le bagne. Ce M. Fauchelevent était le forçat Jean Valjean.

Trouver brusquement un tel secret au milieu de son bonheur, cela ressemble à la découverte d'un scorpion dans un nid de tourterelles.

Le bonheur de Marius et de Cosette était-il condamné désormais à ce voisinage? Était-ce là un fait accompli? L'acceptation de cet homme faisait-elle partie du mariage consommé? N'y avait-il plus rien à faire?

Marius avait-il épousé aussi le forçat?

On a beau être couronné de lumière et de joie, on a beau savourer la grande heure de pourpre de la vie, l'amour heureux, de telles secousses forceraient même l'archange dans son extase, même le demi-dieu dans sa gloire, au frémissement.

Comme il arrive toujours dans les changements à vue de cette espèce, Marius se demandait s'il n'avait pas de reproche à se faire à lui-même? Avait-il manqué de divination? Avait-il manqué de prudence? S'était-il étourdi involontairement? Un peu, peut-être. S'était-il engagé, sans assez de précaution pour éclairer les alentours, dans cette aventure d'amour qui avait abouti à son mariage avec Cosette? Il constatait, — c'est ainsi, par une série de constatations successives de nous-mêmes sur nous-mêmes, que la vie nous amende peu à peu, — il constatait le côté chimérique et visionnaire de sa nature, sorte de nuage intérieur propre à beaucoup d'organisations, et qui, dans les paroxysmes de la passion et de la douleur, se dilate, la température de l'âme changeant, et envahit l'homme tout entier, au point de n'en plus faire qu'une conscience baignée d'un brouillard. Nous avons plus d'une fois indiqué cet élément caractéristique de l'individualité de Marius. Il se rappelait que, dans l'enivrement de son amour, rue Plumet, pendant ces six ou sept semaines extatiques, il n'avait pas même parlé à Cosette de ce drame énigmatique du bouge Gorbeau où la victime avait eu un si étrange parti pris de silence pendant la lutte et d’évasion après. Comment se faisait-il qu’il n’en eût point parlé à Cosette? Cela pourtant était si proche et si effroyable! Comment se faisait-il qu’il ne lui eût pas même nommé les Thénardier, et, particulièrement, le jour où il avait rencontré Éponine? Il avait presque peine à s’expliquer maintenant son silence d’alors. Il s’en rendait compte cependant. Il se rappelait son étourdissement, son ivresse de Cosette, l’amour absorbant tout, cet enlèvement de l’un par l’autre dans l’idéal, et peut-être aussi, comme la quantité imperceptible de raison mêlée à cet état violent et charmant de l’âme, un vague et sourd instinct de cacher et d’abolir dans sa mémoire cette aventure redoutable dont il craignait le contact, où il ne voulait jouer aucun rôle, à laquelle il se dérobait, et où il ne pouvait être ni narrateur ni témoin sans être accusateur. D’ailleurs, ces quelques semaines avaient été un éclair; on n’avait eu le temps de rien, que de s’aimer. Enfin, tout pesé, tout retourné, tout examiné, quand il eût raconté le guet-apens Gorbeau à Cosette, quand il lui eût nommé les Thénardier, quelles qu’eussent été les conséquences, quand même il eût découvert que Jean Valjean était un forçat, cela l’eût-il changé, lui Marius? cela l’eût-il changée, elle Cosette? Eût-il reculé? L’eût-il moins adorée? L’eût-il moins épousée? Non. Cela eût-il changé quelque chose à ce qui s’était fait? Non. Rien donc à regretter, rien à se reprocher. Tout était bien. Il y a un dieu pour ces ivrognes qu’on appelle les amoureux. Aveugle, Marius avait suivi la route qu’il eût choisie clairvoyant. L’amour lui avait bandé les yeux, pour le mener où? Au paradis.

Mais ce paradis était compliqué désormais d’un côtoiement infernal.

L’ancien éloignement de Marius pour cet homme, pour ce Fauchelevent devenu Jean Valjean, était à présent mêlé d’horreur.

Dans cette horreur, disons-le, il y avait quelque pitié, et même une certaine surprise.

Ce voleur, ce voleur récidiviste, avait restitué un dépôt. Et quel dépôt? Six cent mille francs. Il était seul dans le secret du dépôt. Il pouvait tout garder, il avait tout rendu.

En outre, il avait révélé de lui-même sa situation. Rien ne l’y obligeait. Si l’on savait qui il était, c’était par lui. Il y avait dans cet aveu plus que l’acceptation de l’humiliation, il y avait l’acceptation du péril. Pour un condamné, un masque n’est pas un masque, c’est un abri. Il avait renoncé à cet abri. Un faux nom, c’est de la sécurité; il avait rejeté ce faux nom. Il pouvait, lui galérien, se cacher à jamais dans une famille honnête; il avait résisté à cette tentation. Et pour quel motif? par scrupule de conscience. Il l’avait expliqué lui-même avec l’irrésistible accent de la réalité. En somme, quel que fût ce Jean Valjean, c’était incontestablement une conscience qui se réveillait. Il y avait là on ne sait quelle mystérieuse réhabilitation commencée; et, selon toute apparence, depuis longtemps déjà le scrupule était maître de cet homme. De tels accès du juste et du bien ne sont pas propres aux natures vulgaires. Réveil de conscience, c’est grandeur d’âme.

Jean Valjean était sincère. Cette sincérité, visible, palpable, irréfragable, évidente même par la douleur qu’elle lui faisait, rendait les informations inutiles et donnait autorité à tout ce que disait cet homme. Ici, pour Marius, interversion étrange des situations. Que sortait-il de M. Fauchelevent? la défiance. Que se dégageait-il de Jean Valjean? la confiance.

Dans le mystérieux bilan de ce Jean Valjean que Marius pensif dressait, il constatait l’actif, il constatait le passif, et il tâchait d’arriver à une balance. Mais tout cela était comme dans un orage. Marius, s’efforçant de se faire une idée nette de cet homme, et poursuivant, pour ainsi dire, Jean Valjean au fond de sa pensée, le perdait et le retrouvait dans une brume fatale.

Le dépôt honnêtement rendu, la probité de l’aveu, c’était bien. Cela faisait comme une éclaircie dans la nuée, puis la nuée redevenait noire.

Si troubles que fussent les souvenirs de Marius, il lui en revenait quelque ombre.

Qu’était-ce décidément que cette aventure du galetas Jondrette? Pourquoi, à l’arrivée de la police, cet homme, au lieu de se plaindre, s’était-il évadé? ici Marius trouvait la réponse. Parce que cet homme était un repris de justice en rupture de ban.

Autre question: Pourquoi cet homme était-il venu dans la barricade? Car à présent Marius revoyait distinctement ce souvenir, reparu dans ces émotions comme l’encre sympathique au feu. Cet homme était dans la barricade. Il n’y combattait pas. Qu’était-il venu y faire? Devant cette question un spectre se dressait, et faisait la réponse. Javert. Marius se rappelait parfaitement à cette heure la funèbre vision de Jean Valjean entraînant hors de la barricade Javert garrotté, et il entendait encore derrière l’angle de la petite rue Mondétour l’affreux coup de pistolet. Il y avait, vraisemblablement, haine entre cet espion et ce galérien. L’un gênait l’autre. Jean Valjean était allé à la barricade pour se venger. Il y était arrivé tard. Il savait probablement que Javert y était prisonnier. La vendette corse a pénétré dans de certains bas-fonds et y fait loi; elle est si simple qu'elle n'étonne pas les âmes même à demi retournées vers le bien; et ces cœurs-là sont ainsi faits qu'un criminel, en voie de repentir, peut être scrupuleux sur le vol et ne l'être pas sur la vengeance. Jean Valjean avait tué Javert. Du moins, cela semblait évident.

Dernière question enfin; mais à celle-ci pas de réponse. Cette question, Marius la sentait comme une tenaille. Comment se faisait-il que l'existence de Jean Valjean eût coudoyé si longtemps celle de Cosette? Qu'était-ce que ce sombre jeu de la providence qui avait mis cet enfant en contact avec cet homme? Y a-t-il donc aussi des chaînes à deux forgées là-haut, et Dieu se plaît-il à accoupler l'ange avec le démon? Un crime et une innocence peuvent donc être camarades de chambrée dans le mystérieux bagne des misères? Dans ce défilé de condamnés qu'on appelle la destinée humaine, deux fronts peuvent passer l'un près de l'autre, l'un naïf, l'autre formidable, l'un tout baigné des divines blancheurs de l'aube, l'autre à jamais blêmi par la lueur d'un éternel éclair? Qui avait pu déterminer cet appareillement inexplicable? De quelle façon, par suite de quel prodige, la communauté de vie avait-elle pu s'établir entre cette céleste petite et ce vieux damné? Qui avait pu lier l'agneau au loup, et, chose plus incompréhensible encore, attacher le loup à l'agneau? Car le loup aimait l'agneau, car l'être farouche adorait l'être faible, car, pendant neuf années, l'ange avait eu pour point d'appui le monstre. L'enfance et l'adolescence de Cosette, sa venue au jour, sa virginale croissance vers la vie et la lumière, avaient été abritées par ce dévouement difforme. Ici, les questions s'exfoliaient, pour ainsi parler, en énigmes innombrables, les abîmes s'ouvraient au fond des abîmes, et Marius ne pouvait plus se pencher sur Jean Valjean sans vertige. Qu'était-ce donc que cet homme précipice?

Les vieux symboles génésiaques sont éternels; dans la société humaine, telle qu'elle existe, jusqu'au jour où une clarté plus grande la changera, il y a à jamais deux hommes, l'un supérieur, l'autre souterrain; celui qui est selon le bien, c'est Abel; celui qui est selon le mal, c'est Caïn. Qu'était-ce que ce Caïn tendre? Qu'était-ce que ce bandit religieusement absorbé dans l'adoration d'une vierge, veillant sur elle, l'élevant, la gardant, la dignifiant, et l'enveloppant, lui impur, de pureté? Qu'était-ce que ce cloaque qui avait vénéré cette innocence au point de ne pas lui laisser une tache? Qu'était-ce que ce Jean Valjean faisant l'éducation de Cosette? Qu'était-ce que cette figure de ténèbres ayant pour unique soin de préserver de toute ombre et de tout nuage le lever d'un astre?

Là était le secret de Jean Valjean; là aussi était le secret de Dieu.

Devant ce double secret, Marius reculait. L'un en quelque sorte le rassurait sur l'autre. Dieu était dans cette aventure aussi visible que Jean Valjean. Dieu a ses instruments. Il se sert de l'outil qu'il veut. Il n'est pas responsable devant l'homme. Savons-nous comment Dieu s'y prend? Jean Valjean avait travaillé à Cosette. Il avait un peu fait cette âme. C'était incontestable. Eh bien, après? L'ouvrier était horrible; mais l'œuvre était admirable. Dieu produit ses miracles comme bon lui semble. Il avait construit cette charmante Cosette, et il avait employé Jean Valjean. Il lui avait plu de se choisir cet étrange collaborateur. Quel compte avons-nous à lui demander? Est-ce la première fois que le fumier aide le printemps à faire la rose?

Marius se faisait ces réponses-là et se déclarait à lui-même qu'elles étaient bonnes. Sur tous les points que nous venons d'indiquer, il n'avait pas osé presser Jean Valjean sans s'avouer à lui-même qu'il ne l'osait pas. Il adorait Cosette, il possédait Cosette, Cosette était splendidement pure. Cela lui suffisait. De quel éclaircissement avait-il besoin? Cosette était une lumière. La lumière a-t-elle besoin d'être éclaircie? Il avait tout; que pouvait-il désirer? Tout, est-ce que ce n'est pas assez? Les affaires personnelles de Jean Valjean ne le regardaient pas. En se penchant sur l'ombre fatale de cet homme, il se cramponnait à cette déclaration solennelle du misérable: *Je ne suis rien à Cosette. Il y a dix ans, je ne savais pas qu'elle existât*.

Jean Valjean était un passant. Il l'avait dit lui-même. Eh bien, il passait. Quel qu'il fût, son rôle était fini. Il y avait désormais Marius pour faire les fonctions de la providence près de Cosette. Cosette était venue retrouver dans l'azur son pareil, son amant, son époux, son mâle céleste. En s'envolant, Cosette, ailée et transfigurée, laissait derrière elle à terre, vide et hideuse, sa chrysalide, Jean Valjean.

Dans quelque cercle d'idées que tournât Marius, il en revenait toujours à une certaine horreur de Jean Valjean. Horreur sacrée peut-être, car, nous venons de l'indiquer, il sentait un *quid divinum* dans cet homme. Mais, quoi qu'on fit, et quelque atténuation qu'on y cherchât, il fallait bien toujours retomber sur ceci: c'était un forçat; c'est-à-dire l'être qui, dans l'échelle sociale, n'a même pas de place, étant au-dessous du dernier échelon. Après le dernier des hommes vient le forçat. Le forçat n’est plus, pour ainsi dire, le semblable des vivants. La loi l’a destitué de toute la quantité d’humanité qu’elle peut ôter à un homme. Marius, sur les questions pénales, en était encore, quoique démocrate, au système inexorable, et il avait, sur ceux que la loi frappe, toutes les idées de la loi. Il n’avait pas encore accompli, disons-le, tous les progrès. Il n’en était pas encore à distinguer entre ce qui est écrit par l’homme et ce qui est écrit par Dieu, entre la loi et le droit. Il n’avait point examiné et pesé le droit que prend l’homme de disposer de l’irrévocable et de l’irréparable. Il n’était pas révolté du mot *vindicte*. Il trouvait simple que de certaines effractions de la loi écrite fussent suivies de peines éternelles, et il acceptait, comme procédé de civilisation, la damnation sociale. Il en était encore là, sauf à avancer infailliblement plus tard, sa nature étant bonne, et au fond toute faite de progrès latent.

Dans ce milieu d’idées, Jean Valjean lui apparaissait difforme et repoussant. C’était le réprouvé. C’était le forçat. Ce mot était pour lui comme un son de trompette du jugement; et, après avoir considéré longtemps Jean Valjean, son dernier geste était de détourner la tête. *Vade retro*.

Marius, il faut le reconnaître et même y insister, tout en interrogeant Jean Valjean au point que Jean Valjean lui avait dit: *vous me confessez*, ne lui avait pourtant pas fait deux ou trois questions décisives. Ce n’était pas qu’elles ne se fussent présentées à son esprit, mais il en avait eu peur. Le galetas Jondrette? La barricade? Javert? Qui sait où se fussent arrêtées les révélations? Jean Valjean ne semblait pas homme à reculer, et qui sait si Marius, après l’avoir poussé, n’aurait pas souhaité le retenir? Dans de certaines conjonctures suprêmes, ne nous est-il pas arrivé à tous, après avoir fait une question, de nous boucher les oreilles pour ne pas entendre la réponse? C’est surtout quand on aime qu’on a de ces lâchetés-là. Il n’est pas sage de questionner à outrance les situations sinistres, surtout quand le côté indissoluble de notre propre vie y est fatalement mêlé. Des explications désespérées de Jean Valjean, quelque épouvantable lumière pouvait sortir, et qui sait si cette clarté hideuse n’aurait pas rejailli jusqu’à Cosette? Qui sait s’il n’en fût pas resté une sorte de lueur infernale sur le front de cet ange? L’éclaboussure d’un éclair, c’est encore de la foudre. La fatalité a de ces solidarités-là, où l’innocence elle-même s’empreint de crime par la sombre loi des reflets colorants. Les plus pures figures peuvent garder à jamais la réverbération d’un voisinage horrible. À tort ou à raison, Marius avait eu peur. Il en savait déjà trop. Il cherchait plutôt à s'étourdir qu'à s'éclairer. Éperdu, il emportait Cosette dans ses bras en fermant les yeux sur Jean Valjean.

Cet homme était de la nuit, de la nuit vivante et terrible. Comment oser en chercher le fond? C'est une épouvante de questionner l'ombre. Qui sait ce qu'elle va répondre? L'aube pourrait en être noircie pour jamais.

Dans cette situation d'esprit, c'était pour Marius une perplexité poignante de penser que cet homme aurait désormais un contact quelconque avec Cosette. Ces questions redoutables, devant lesquelles il avait reculé, et d'où aurait pu sortir une décision implacable et définitive, il se reprochait presque à présent de ne pas les avoir faites. Il se trouvait trop bon, trop doux, disons le mot, trop faible. Cette faiblesse l'avait entraîné à une concession imprudente. Il s'était laissé toucher. Il avait eu tort. Il aurait dû purement et simplement rejeter Jean Valjean. Jean Valjean était la part du feu, il aurait dû la faire, et débarrasser sa maison de cet homme. Il s'en voulait, il en voulait à la brusquerie de ce tourbillon d'émotions qui l'avait assourdi, aveuglé, et entraîné. Il était mécontent de lui-même.

Que faire maintenant? Les visites de Jean Valjean lui répugnaient profondément. À quoi bon cet homme chez lui? que faire? Ici il s'étourdissait, il ne voulait pas creuser, il ne voulait pas approfondir; il ne voulait pas se sonder lui-même. Il avait promis, il s'était laissé entraîner à promettre; Jean Valjean avait sa promesse; même à un forçat, surtout à un forçat, on doit tenir sa parole. Toutefois, son premier devoir était envers Cosette. En somme, une répulsion, qui dominait tout, le soulevait.

Marius roulait confusément tout cet ensemble d'idées dans son esprit, passant de l'une à l'autre, et remué par toutes. De là un trouble profond. Il ne lui fut pas aisé de cacher ce trouble à Cosette, mais l'amour est un talent, et Marius y parvint.

Du reste, il fit, sans but apparent, des questions à Cosette, candide comme une colombe est blanche, et ne se doutant de rien; il lui parla de son enfance et de sa jeunesse, et il se convainquit de plus en plus que tout ce qu'un homme peut être de bon, de paternel et de respectable, ce forçat l'avait été pour Cosette. Tout ce que Marius avait entrevu et supposé était réel. Cette ortie sinistre avait aimé et protégé ce lys.

Livre huitième — La décroissance crépusculaire

Chapitre I

La chambre d’en bas

Le lendemain, à la nuit tombante, Jean Valjean frappait à la porte cochère de la maison Gillenormand. Ce fut Basque qui le reçut. Basque se trouvait dans la cour à point nommé, et comme s’il avait eu des ordres. Il arrive quelquefois qu’on dit à un domestique: Vous guetterez monsieur un tel, quand il arrivera.

Basque, sans attendre que Jean Valjean vînt à lui, lui adressa la parole:

— Monsieur le baron m’a chargé de demander à monsieur s’il désire monter ou rester en bas?

— Rester en bas, répondit Jean Valjean.

Basque, d’ailleurs absolument respectueux, ouvrit la porte de la salle basse et dit: Je vais prévenir madame.

La pièce où Jean Valjean entra était un rez-de-chaussée voûté et humide, servant de cellier dans l’occasion, donnant sur la rue, carrelé de carreaux rouges, et mal éclairé d’une fenêtre à barreaux de fer.

Cette chambre n’était pas de celles que harcèlent le houssoir, la tête de loup et le balai. La poussière y était tranquille. La persécution des araignées n’y était pas organisée. Une telle toile, largement étalée, bien noire, ornée de mouches mortes, faisait la roue sur une des vitres de la fenêtre. La salle, petite et basse, était meublée d’un tas de bouteilles vides amoncelées dans un coin. La muraille, badigeonnée d’un badigeon d’ocre jaune, s’écaillait par larges plaques. Au fond, il y avait une cheminée de bois peinte en noir à tablette étroite. Un feu y était allumé; ce qui indiquait qu’on avait compté sur la réponse de Jean Valjean: *Rester en bas*.

Deux fauteuils étaient placés aux deux coins de la cheminée. Entre les fauteuils était étendue, en guise de tapis, une vieille descente de lit montrant plus de corde que de laine.

La chambre avait pour éclairage le feu de la cheminée et le crépuscule de la fenêtre.

Jean Valjean était fatigué. Depuis plusieurs jours il ne mangeait ni ne dormait. Il se laissa tomber sur un des fauteuils.

Basque revint, posa sur la cheminée une bougie allumée et se retira. Jean Valjean, la tête ployée et le menton sur la poitrine, n’aperçut ni Basque, ni la bougie.

Tout à coup, il se dressa comme en sursaut. Cosette était derrière lui.

Il ne l’avait pas vue entrer, mais il avait senti qu’elle entrait. Il se retourna. Il la contempla. Elle était adorablement belle. Mais ce qu’il regardait de ce profond regard, ce n’était pas la beauté, c’était l’âme.

— Ah bien, s’écria Cosette, voilà une idée! père, je savais que vous étiez singulier, mais jamais je ne me serais attendue à celle-là. Marius me dit que c’est vous qui voulez que je vous reçoive ici.

— Oui, c’est moi.

— Je m’attendais à la réponse. Tenez-vous bien. Je vous préviens que je vais vous faire une scène. Commençons par le commencement. Père, embrassez-moi.

Et elle tendit sa joue.

Jean Valjean demeura immobile.

— Vous ne bougez pas. Je le constate. Attitude de coupable. Mais c’est égal, je vous pardonne. Jésus-Christ a dit: Tendez l’autre joue. La voici.

Et elle tendit l’autre joue.

Jean Valjean ne remua pas. Il semblait qu’il eût les pieds cloués dans le pavé.

— Ceci devient sérieux, dit Cosette. Qu’est-ce que je vous ai fait? Je me déclare brouillée. Vous me devez mon raccommodement. Vous dînez avec nous.

— J’ai dîné.

— Ce n’est pas vrai. Je vous ferai gronder par monsieur Gillenormand. Les grands-pères sont faits pour tancer les pères. Allons. Montez avec moi dans le salon. Tout de suite.

— Impossible.

Cosette ici perdit un peu de terrain. Elle cessa d’ordonner et passa aux questions.

— Mais pourquoi? Et vous choisissez pour me voir la chambre la plus laide de la maison. C’est horrible ici.

— Tu sais....

Jean Valjean se reprit.

— Vous savez, madame, je suis particulier, j’ai mes lubies.

Cosette frappa ses petites mains l’une contre l’autre.

— Madame!... vous savez!... encore du nouveau! Qu’est-ce que cela veut dire?

Jean Valjean attacha sur elle ce sourire navrant auquel il avait parfois recours.

— Vous avez voulu être madame. Vous l’êtes.

— Pas pour vous, père.

— Ne m’appelez plus père.

— Comment?

— Appelez-moi monsieur Jean. Jean, si vous voulez.

— Vous n’êtes plus père? je ne suis plus Cosette? monsieur Jean? Qu’est-ce que cela signifie? mais c’est des révolutions, ça! que s’est-il donc passé? Regardez-moi donc un peu en face. Et vous ne voulez pas demeurer avec nous! Et vous ne voulez pas de ma chambre! Qu’est-ce que je vous ai fait? Qu’est-ce que je vous ai fait? Il y a donc eu quelque chose?

— Rien.

— Eh bien alors?

— Tout est comme à l’ordinaire.

— Pourquoi changez-vous de nom?

— Vous en avez bien changé, vous.

Il sourit encore de ce même sourire et ajouta:

— Puisque vous êtes madame Pontmercy, je puis bien être monsieur Jean.

— Je n’y comprends rien. Tout cela est idiot. Je demanderai à mon mari la permission que vous soyez monsieur Jean. J’espère qu’il n’y consentira pas. Vous me faites beaucoup de peine. On a des lubies, mais on ne fait pas du chagrin à sa petite Cosette. C’est mal. Vous n’avez pas le droit d’être méchant, vous qui êtes bon.

Il ne répondit pas.

Elle lui prit vivement les deux mains, et, d’un mouvement irrésistible, les élevant vers son visage, elle les pressa contre son cou sous son menton, ce qui est un profond geste de tendresse.

— Oh! lui dit-elle, soyez bon!

Et elle poursuivit:

— Voici ce que j’appelle être bon: être gentil, venir demeurer ici, reprendre nos bonnes petites promenades, il y a des oiseaux ici comme rue Plumet, vivre avec nous, quitter ce trou de la rue de l’Homme-Armé, ne pas nous donner des charades à deviner, être comme tout le monde, dîner avec nous, déjeuner avec nous, être mon père.

Il dégagea ses mains.

— Vous n’avez plus besoin de père, vous avez un mari.

Cosette s’emporta.

— Je n’ai plus besoin de père! Des choses comme çà qui n’ont pas le sens commun, on ne sait que dire vraiment!

— Si Toussaint était là, reprit Jean Valjean comme quelqu’un qui en est à chercher des autorités et qui se rattache à toutes les branches, elle serait la première à convenir que c’est vrai que j’ai toujours eu mes manières à moi. Il n’y a rien de nouveau. J’ai toujours aimé mon coin noir.

— Mais il fait froid ici. On n’y voit pas clair. C’est abominable, ça, de vouloir être monsieur Jean. Je ne veux pas que vous me disiez vous.

— Tout à l’heure, en venant, répondit Jean Valjean, j’ai vu rue Saint-Louis un meuble. Chez un ébéniste. Si j’étais une jolie femme, je me donnerais ce meuble-là. Une toilette très bien; genre d’à présent. Ce que vous appelez du bois de rose, je crois. C’est incrusté. Une glace assez grande. Il y a des tiroirs. C’est joli.

— Hou! le vilain ours! répliqua Cosette.

Et avec une gentillesse suprême, serrant les dents et écartant les lèvres, elle souffla contre Jean Valjean. C’était une Grâce copiant une chatte.

— Je suis furieuse, reprit-elle. Depuis hier vous me faites tous rager. Je bisque beaucoup. Je ne comprends pas. Vous ne me défendez pas contre Marius. Marius ne me soutient pas contre vous. Je suis toute seule. J’arrange une chambre gentiment. Si j’avais pu y mettre le bon Dieu, je l’y aurais mis. On me laisse ma chambre sur les bras. Mon locataire me fait banqueroute. Je commande à Nicolette un bon petit dîner. On n’en veut pas de votre dîner, madame. Et mon père Fauchelevent veut que je l’appelle monsieur Jean, et que je le reçoive dans une affreuse vieille laide cave moisie où les murs ont de la barbe, et où il y a, en fait de cristaux, des bouteilles vides, et en fait de rideaux, des toiles d’araignées! Vous êtes singulier, j’y consens, c’est votre genre, mais on accorde une trêve à des gens qui se marient. Vous n’auriez pas dû vous remettre à être singulier tout de suite. Vous allez donc être bien content dans votre abominable rue de l’Homme-Armé. J’y ai été bien désespérée, moi! Qu’est-ce que vous avez contre moi? Vous me faites beaucoup de peine. Fi!

Et, sérieuse subitement, elle regarda fixement Jean Valjean, et ajouta:

— Vous m’en voulez donc de ce que je suis heureuse?

La naïveté, à son insu, pénètre quelquefois très avant. Cette question, simple pour Cosette, était profonde pour Jean Valjean. Cosette voulait égratigner; elle déchirait.

Jean Valjean pâlit. Il resta un moment sans répondre, puis, d’un accent inexprimable et se parlant à lui-même, il murmura:

— Son bonheur, c’était le but de ma vie. À présent Dieu peut me signer ma sortie. Cosette, tu es heureuse; mon temps est fait.

— Ah! vous m’avez dit *tu*! s’écria Cosette.

Et elle lui sauta au cou.

Jean Valjean, éperdu, l’étreignit contre sa poitrine avec égarement. Il lui sembla presque qu’il la reprenait.

— Merci, père! lui dit Cosette.

L’entraînement allait devenir poignant pour Jean Valjean. Il se retira doucement des bras de Cosette, et prit son chapeau.

— Eh bien? dit Cosette.

Jean Valjean répondit:

— Je vous quitte, madame, on vous attend.

Et, du seuil de la porte, il ajouta:

— Je vous ai dit tu. Dites à votre mari que cela ne m’arrivera plus. Pardonnez-moi.

Jean Valjean sortit, laissant Cosette stupéfaite de cet adieu énigmatique.

Chapitre II

Autre pas en arrière

Le jour suivant, à la même heure, Jean Valjean revint.

Cosette ne lui fit pas de questions, ne s’étonna plus, ne s’écria plus qu’elle avait froid, ne parla plus du salon; elle évita de dire ni père ni monsieur Jean. Elle se laissa dire vous. Elle se laissa appeler madame. Seulement elle avait une certaine diminution de joie. Elle eût été triste, si la tristesse lui eût été possible.

Il est probable qu’elle avait eu avec Marius une de ces conversations dans lesquelles l’homme aimé dit ce qu’il veut, n’explique rien, et satisfait la femme aimée. La curiosité des amoureux ne va pas très loin au delà de leur amour.

La salle basse avait fait un peu de toilette. Basque avait supprimé les bouteilles, et Nicolette les araignées.

Tous les lendemains qui suivirent ramenèrent à la même heure Jean Valjean. Il vint tous les jours, n’ayant pas la force de prendre les paroles de Marius autrement qu’à la lettre. Marius s’arrangea de manière à être absent aux heures où Jean Valjean venait. La maison s’accoutuma à la nouvelle manière d’être de M. Fauchelevent. Toussaint y aida. *Monsieur a toujours été comme ça*, répétait-elle. Le grand-père rendit ce décret: — C’est un original. Et tout fut dit. D’ailleurs, à quatre-vingt-dix ans il n’y a plus de liaison possible; tout est juxtaposition; un nouveau venu est une gêne. Il n’y a plus de place, toutes les habitudes sont prises. M. Fauchelevent, M. Tranchelevent, le père Gillenormand ne demanda pas mieux que d’être dispensé de «ce monsieur». Il ajouta: — Rien n’est plus commun que ces originaux-là. Ils font toutes sortes de bizarreries. De motif, point. Le marquis de Canaples était pire. Il acheta un palais pour loger dans le grenier. Ce sont des apparences fantasques qu’ont les gens.

Personne n’entrevit le dessous sinistre. Qui eût d’ailleurs pu deviner une telle chose? Il y a de ces marais dans l’Inde; l’eau semble extraordinaire, inexplicable, frissonnante sans qu’il y ait de vent, agitée là où elle devrait être calme. On regarde à la superficie ces bouillonnements sans cause; on n’aperçoit pas l’hydre qui se traîne au fond.

Beaucoup d’hommes ont ainsi un monstre secret, un mal qu’ils nourrissent, un dragon qui les ronge, un désespoir qui habite leur nuit. Tel homme ressemble aux autres, va, vient. On ne sait pas qu’il a en lui une effroyable douleur parasite aux mille dents, laquelle vit dans ce misérable, qui en meurt. On ne sait pas que cet homme est un gouffre. Il est stagnant, mais profond. De temps en temps un trouble auquel on ne comprend rien se fait à sa surface. Une ride mystérieuse se plisse, puis s’évanouit, puis reparaît; une bulle d’air monte et crève. C’est peu de chose, c’est terrible. C’est la respiration de la bête inconnue.

De certaines habitudes étranges, arriver à l’heure où les autres partent, s’effacer pendant que les autres s’étalent, garder dans toutes les occasions ce qu’on pourrait appeler le manteau couleur de muraille, chercher l’allée solitaire, préférer la rue déserte, ne point se mêler aux conversations, éviter les foules et les fêtes, sembler à son aise et vivre pauvrement, avoir, tout riche qu’on est, sa clef dans sa poche et sa chandelle chez le portier, entrer par la petite porte, monter par l’escalier dérobé, toutes ces singularités insignifiantes, rides, bulles d’air, plis fugitifs à la surface, viennent souvent d’un fond formidable.

Plusieurs semaines se passèrent ainsi. Une vie nouvelle s’empara peu à peu de Cosette; les relations que crée le mariage, les visites, le soin de la maison, les plaisirs, ces grandes affaires. Les plaisirs de Cosette n’étaient pas coûteux; ils consistaient en un seul: être avec Marius. Sortir avec lui, rester avec lui, c’était là la grande occupation de sa vie. C’était pour eux une joie toujours toute neuve de sortir bras dessus bras dessous, à la face du soleil, en pleine rue, sans se cacher, devant tout le monde, tous les deux tout seuls. Cosette eut une contrariété. Toussaint ne put s’accorder avec Nicolette, le soudage de deux vieilles filles étant impossible, et s’en alla. Le grand-père se portait bien; Marius plaidait çà et là quelques causes; la tante Gillenormand menait paisiblement près du nouveau ménage cette vie latérale qui lui suffisait. Jean Valjean venait tous les jours.

Le tutoiement disparu, le vous, le madame, le monsieur Jean, tout cela le faisait autre pour Cosette. Le soin qu’il avait pris lui-même à la détacher de lui, lui réussissait. Elle était de plus en plus gaie et de moins en moins tendre. Pourtant elle l’aimait toujours bien, et il le sentait. Un jour elle lui dit tout à coup: vous étiez mon Père, vous n’êtes plus mon père, vous étiez mon oncle, vous n’êtes plus mon oncle, vous étiez monsieur Fauchelevent, vous êtes Jean. Qui êtes-vous donc? Je n’aime pas tout ça. Si je ne vous savais pas si bon, j’aurais peur de vous.

Il demeurait toujours rue de l’Homme-Armé, ne pouvant se résoudre à s’éloigner du quartier qu’habitait Cosette.

Dans les premiers temps il ne restait près de Cosette que quelques minutes, puis s’en allait.

Peu à peu il prit l’habitude de faire ses visites moins courtes. On eût dit qu’il profitait de l’autorisation des jours qui s’allongeaient; il arriva plus tôt et partit plus tard.

Un jour il échappa à Cosette de lui dire: Père. Un éclair de joie illumina le vieux visage sombre de Jean Valjean. Il la reprit: Dites Jean, — Ah! c’est vrai, répondit-elle avec un éclat de rire, monsieur Jean. — C’est bien, dit-il. Et il se détourna pour qu’elle ne le vît pas essuyer ses yeux.

Chapitre III

Ils se souviennent du jardin de la rue Plumet

Ce fut la dernière fois. À partir de cette dernière lueur, l’extinction complète se fit. Plus de familiarité, plus de bonjour avec un baiser, plus jamais ce mot si profondément doux: mon père! il était, sur sa demande et par sa propre complicité, successivement chassé de tous ses bonheurs; et il avait cette misère qu’après avoir perdu Cosette tout entière en un jour, il lui avait fallu ensuite la reperdre en détail.

L’œil finit par s’habituer aux jours de cave. En somme, avoir tous les jours une apparition de Cosette, cela lui suffisait. Toute sa vie se concentrait dans cette heure-là. Il s’asseyait près d’elle, il la regardait en silence, ou bien il lui parlait des années d’autrefois, de son enfance, du couvent, de ses petites amies d’alors.

Une après-midi, — c’était une des premières journées d’avril, déjà chaude, encore fraîche, le moment de la grande gaîté du soleil, les jardins qui environnaient les fenêtres de Marius et de Cosette avaient l’émotion du réveil, l’aubépine allait poindre, une bijouterie de giroflées s’étalait sur les vieux murs, les gueules-de-loup roses bâillaient dans les fentes des pierres, il y avait dans l’herbe un charmant commencement de pâquerettes et de boutons-d’or, les papillons blancs de l’année débutaient, le vent, ce ménétrier de la noce éternelle, essayait dans les arbres les premières notes de cette grande symphonie aurorale que les vieux poètes appelaient le renouveau, — Marius dit à Cosette: — Nous avons dit que nous irions revoir notre jardin de la rue Plumet. Allons-y. Il ne faut pas être ingrats. — Et ils s’envolèrent comme deux hirondelles vers le printemps. Ce jardin de la rue Plumet leur faisait l’effet de l’aube. Ils avaient déjà derrière eux quelque chose qui était comme le printemps de leur amour. La maison de la rue Plumet, étant prise à bail, appartenait encore à Cosette. Ils allèrent à ce jardin et à cette maison. Ils s’y retrouvèrent, ils s’y oublièrent. Le soir, à l’heure ordinaire, Jean Valjean vint rue des Filles-du-Calvaire. — Madame est sortie avec monsieur, et n’est pas rentrée encore, lui dit Basque. Il s’assit en silence et attendit une heure. Cosette ne rentra point. Il baissa la tête et s’en alla.

Cosette était si enivrée de sa promenade à «leur jardin» et si joyeuse d’avoir «vécu tout un jour dans son passé» qu’elle ne parla pas d’autre chose le lendemain.

Elle ne s’aperçut pas qu’elle n’avait point vu Jean Valjean.

— De quelle façon êtes-vous allés là? lui demanda Jean Valjean.

— À pied.

— Et comment êtes-vous revenus?

— En fiacre.

Depuis quelque temps Jean Valjean remarquait la vie étroite que menait le jeune couple. Il en était importuné. L’économie de Marius était sévère, et le mot pour Jean Valjean avait son sens absolu. Il hasarda une question:

— Pourquoi n’avez-vous pas une voiture à vous? Un joli coupé ne vous coûterait que cinq cents francs par mois. Vous êtes riches.

— Je ne sais pas, répondit Cosette.

— C’est comme Toussaint, reprit Jean Valjean. Elle est partie. Vous ne l’avez pas remplacée. Pourquoi?

— Nicolette suffit.

— Mais il vous faudrait une femme de chambre.

— Est-ce que je n’ai pas Marius?

— Vous devriez avoir une maison à vous, des domestiques à vous, une voiture, loge au spectacle. Il n’y a rien de trop beau pour vous. Pourquoi ne pas profiter de ce que vous êtes riches? La richesse, cela s’ajoute au bonheur.

Cosette ne répondit rien.

Les visites de Jean Valjean ne s’abrégeaient point. Loin de là. Quand c’est le cœur qui glisse, on ne s’arrête pas sur la pente.

Lorsque Jean Valjean voulait prolonger sa visite et faire oublier l’heure, il faisait l’éloge de Marius; il le trouvait beau, noble, courageux, spirituel, éloquent, bon. Cosette enchérissait. Jean Valjean recommençait. On ne tarissait pas. Marius, ce mot était inépuisable; il y avait des volumes dans ces six lettres. De cette façon Jean Valjean parvenait à rester longtemps. Voir Cosette, oublier près d’elle, cela lui était si doux! C’était le pansement de sa plaie. Il arriva plusieurs fois que Basque vint dire à deux reprises: Monsieur Gillenormand m’envoie rappeler à Madame la baronne que le dîner est servi.

Ces jours-là, Jean Valjean rentrait chez lui très pensif.

Y avait-il donc du vrai dans cette comparaison de la chrysalide qui s’était présentée à l’esprit de Marius? Jean Valjean était-il en effet une chrysalide qui s’obstinerait, et qui viendrait faire des visites à son papillon?

Un jour il resta plus longtemps encore qu’à l’ordinaire. Le lendemain, il remarqua qu’il n’y avait point de feu dans la cheminée. — Tiens! pensa-t-il. Pas de feu. — Et il se donna à lui-même cette explication: — C’est tout simple. Nous sommes en avril. Les froids ont cessé.

— Dieu! qu’il fait froid ici! s’écria Cosette en entrant.

— Mais non, dit Jean Valjean.

— C’est donc vous qui avez dit à Basque de ne pas faire de feu?

— Oui. Nous sommes en mai tout à l’heure.

— Mais on fait du feu jusqu’au mois de juin. Dans cette cave-ci, il en faut toute l’année.

— J’ai pensé que le feu était inutile.

— C’est bien là une de vos idées! reprit Cosette.

Le jour d’après, il y avait du feu. Mais les deux fauteuils étaient rangés à l’autre bout de la salle près de la porte. — Qu’est-ce que cela veut dire? pensa Jean Valjean.

Il alla chercher les fauteuils, et les remit à leur place ordinaire près de la cheminée.

Ce feu rallumé l’encouragea pourtant. Il fit durer la causerie plus longtemps encore que d’habitude. Comme il se levait pour s’en aller, Cosette lui dit:

— Mon mari m’a dit une drôle de chose hier.

— Quelle chose donc?

— Il m’a dit: Cosette, nous avons trente mille livres de rente. Vingt-sept que tu as, trois que me fait mon grand-père. J’ai répondu: Cela fait trente. Il a repris: Aurais-tu le courage de vivre avec les trois mille? J’ai répondu: Oui, avec rien. Pourvu que ce soit avec toi. Et puis j’ai demandé: Pourquoi me dis-tu ça? Il m’a répondu: Pour savoir.

Jean Valjean ne trouva pas une parole. Cosette attendait probablement de lui quelque explication; il l’écouta dans un morne silence. Il s’en retourna rue de l’Homme-Armé; il était si profondément absorbé qu’il se trompa de porte, et qu’au lieu de rentrer chez lui, il entra dans la maison voisine. Ce ne fut qu’après avoir monté presque deux étages qu’il s’aperçut de son erreur et qu’il redescendit.

Son esprit était bourrelé de conjectures. Il était évident que Marius avait des doutes sur l’origine de ces six cent mille francs, qu’il craignait quelque source non pure, qui sait? qu’il avait même peut-être découvert que cet argent venait de lui Jean Valjean, qu’il hésitait devant cette fortune suspecte, et répugnait à la prendre comme sienne, aimant mieux rester pauvres, lui et Cosette, que d’être riches d’une richesse trouble.

En outre, vaguement, Jean Valjean commençait à se sentir éconduit.

Le jour suivant, il eut, en pénétrant dans la salle basse, comme une secousse. Les fauteuils avaient disparu. Il n’y avait pas même une chaise.

— Ah çà, s’écria Cosette en entrant, pas de fauteuils! Où sont donc les fauteuils?

— Ils n’y sont plus, répondit Jean Valjean.

— Voilà qui est fort!

Jean Valjean bégaya:

— C’est moi qui ai dit à Basque de les enlever.

— Et la raison?

— Je ne reste que quelques minutes aujourd’hui.

— Rester peu, ce n’est pas une raison pour rester debout.

— Je crois que Basque avait besoin des fauteuils pour le salon.

— Pourquoi?

— Vous avez sans doute du monde ce soir.

— Nous n’avons personne.

Jean Valjean ne put dire un mot de plus.

Cosette haussa les épaules.

— Faire enlever les fauteuils! L’autre jour vous faites éteindre le feu. Comme vous êtes singulier!

— Adieu, murmura Jean Valjean.

Il ne dit pas: Adieu, Cosette. Mais il n’eut pas la force de dire: Adieu, madame.

Il sortit accablé.

Cette fois il avait compris.

Le lendemain il ne vint pas. Cosette ne le remarqua que le soir.

— Tiens, dit-elle, monsieur Jean n’est pas venu aujourd’hui.

Elle eut comme un léger serrement de cœur, mais elle s’en aperçut à peine, tout de suite distraite par un baiser de Marius.

Le jour d’après, il ne vint pas.

Cosette n’y prit pas garde, passa sa soirée et dormit sa nuit, comme à l’ordinaire, et n’y pensa qu’en se réveillant. Elle était si heureuse! Elle envoya bien vite Nicolette chez monsieur Jean savoir s’il était malade, et pourquoi il n’était pas venu la veille. Nicolette rapporta la réponse de monsieur Jean. Il n’était point malade. Il était occupé. Il viendrait bientôt. Le plus tôt qu’il pourrait. Du reste, il allait faire un petit voyage. Que madame devait se souvenir que c’était son habitude de faire des voyages de temps en temps. Qu’on n’eût pas d’inquiétude. Qu’on ne songeât point à lui.

Nicolette, en entrant chez monsieur Jean, lui avait répété les propres paroles de sa maîtresse. Que madame envoyait savoir «pourquoi monsieur Jean n’était pas venu la veille». Il y a deux jours que je ne suis venu, dit Jean Valjean avec douceur.

Mais l’observation glissa sur Nicolette qui n’en rapporta rien à Cosette.

Chapitre IV

L’attraction et l’extinction

Pendant les derniers mois du printemps et les premiers mois de l’été de 1833, les passants clairsemés du Marais, les marchands des boutiques, les oisifs sur le pas des portes, remarquaient un vieillard proprement vêtu de noir, qui, tous les jours, vers la même heure, à la nuit tombante, sortait de la rue de l’Homme-Armé, du côté de la rue Sainte-Croix-de-la-Bretonnerie, passait devant les Blancs-Manteaux, gagnait la rue Culture-Sainte-Catherine, et, arrivé à la rue de l’Écharpe, tournait à gauche, et entrait dans la rue Saint-Louis.

Là il marchait à pas lents, la tête tendue en avant, ne voyant rien, n’entendant rien, l’œil immuablement fixé sur un point toujours le même, qui semblait pour lui étoilé, et qui n’était autre que l’angle de la rue des Filles-du-Calvaire. Plus il approchait de ce coin de rue, plus son œil s’éclairait; une sorte de joie illuminait ses prunelles comme une aurore intérieure il avait l’air fasciné et attendri, ses lèvres faisaient des mouvements obscurs, comme s’il parlait à quelqu’un qu’il ne voyait pas, il souriait vaguement, et il avançait le plus lentement qu’il pouvait. On eût dit que, tout en souhaitant d’arriver, il avait peur du moment où il serait tout près. Lorsqu’il n’y avait plus que quelques maisons entre lui et cette rue qui paraissait l’attirer, son pas se ralentissait au point que par instants on pouvait croire qu’il ne marchait plus. La vacillation de sa tête et la fixité de sa prunelle faisaient songer à l’aiguille qui cherche le pôle. Quelque temps qu’il mît à faire durer l’arrivée, il fallait bien arriver; il atteignait la rue des Filles-du-Calvaire; alors il s’arrêtait, il tremblait, il passait sa tête avec une sorte de timidité sombre au delà du coin de la dernière maison, et il regardait dans cette rue, et il y avait dans ce tragique regard quelque chose qui ressemblait à l’éblouissement de l’impossible et à la réverbération d’un paradis fermé. Puis une larme, qui s’était peu à peu amassée dans l’angle des paupières, devenue assez grosse pour tomber, glissait sur sa joue, et quelquefois s’arrêtait à sa bouche. Le vieillard en sentait la saveur amère. Il restait ainsi quelques minutes comme s’il eût été de pierre; puis il s’en retournait par le même chemin et du même pas, et, à mesure qu’il s’éloignait son regard s’éteignait.

Peu à peu, ce vieillard cessa d'aller jusqu'à l'angle de la rue des Filles-du-Calvaire; il s'arrêtait à mi-chemin dans la rue Saint-Louis; tantôt un peu plus loin, tantôt un peu plus près. Un jour, il resta au coin de la rue Culture-Sainte-Catherine et regarda la rue des Filles-du-Calvaire de loin. Puis il hocha silencieusement la tête de droite à gauche, comme s'il se refusait quelque chose, et rebroussa chemin.

Bientôt, il ne vint même plus jusqu'à la rue Saint-Louis. Il arrivait jusqu'à la rue Pavée, secouait le front, et s'en retournait; puis il n'alla plus au delà de la rue des Trois-Pavillons; puis il ne dépassa plus les Blancs-Manteaux. On eût dit un pendule qu'on ne remonte plus et dont les oscillations s'abrègent en attendant qu'elles s'arrêtent.

Tous les jours il sortait de chez lui à la même heure, il entreprenait le même trajet, mais il ne l'achevait plus, et, peut-être sans qu'il en eût conscience, il le raccourcissait sans cesse. Tout son visage exprimait cette unique idée: À quoi bon? La prunelle était éteinte; plus de rayonnement. La larme aussi était tarie; elle ne s'amassait plus dans l'angle des paupières; cet œil pensif était sec. La tête du vieillard était toujours tendue en avant; le menton par moments remuait; les plis de son cou maigre faisaient de la peine. Quelquefois, quand le temps était mauvais, il avait sous le bras un parapluie, qu'il n'ouvrait point. Les bonnes femmes du quartier disaient: C'est un innocent. Les enfants le suivaient en riant.

Livre neuvième — Suprême ombre, suprême aurore

Chapitre I

Pitié pour les malheureux, mais indulgence pour les heureux

C’est une terrible chose d’être heureux! Comme on s’en contente! Comme on trouve que cela suffit! Comme, étant en possession du faux but de la vie, le bonheur, on oublie le vrai but, le devoir!

Disons-le pourtant, on aurait tort d’accuser Marius.

Marius, nous l’avons expliqué, avant son mariage, n’avait pas fait de questions à M. Fauchelevent, et, depuis, il avait craint d’en faire à Jean Valjean. Il avait regretté la promesse à laquelle il s’était laissé entraîner. Il s’était beaucoup dit qu’il avait eu tort de faire cette concession au désespoir. Il s’était borné à éloigner peu à peu Jean Valjean de sa maison et à l’effacer le plus possible dans l’esprit de Cosette. Il s’était en quelque sorte toujours placé entre Cosette et Jean Valjean, sûr que de cette façon elle ne l’apercevrait pas et n’y songerait point. C’était plus que l’effacement, c’était l’éclipse.

Marius faisait ce qu’il jugeait nécessaire et juste. Il croyait avoir, pour écarter Jean Valjean, sans dureté, mais sans faiblesse, des raisons sérieuses qu’on a vues déjà et d’autres encore qu’on verra plus tard. Le hasard lui ayant fait rencontrer, dans un procès qu’il avait plaidé, un ancien commis de la maison Laffitte, il avait eu, sans les chercher, de mystérieux renseignements qu’il n’avait pu, à la vérité, approfondir, par respect même pour ce secret qu’il avait promis de garder, et par ménagement pour la situation périlleuse de Jean Valjean. Il croyait, en ce moment-là même, avoir un grave devoir à accomplir, la restitution des six cent mille francs à quelqu’un qu’il cherchait le plus discrètement possible. En attendant, il s’abstenait de toucher à cet argent.

Quant à Cosette, elle n’était dans aucun de ces secrets-là; mais il serait dur de la condamner, elle aussi.

Il y avait de Marius à elle un magnétisme tout-puissant, qui lui faisait faire, d’instinct et presque machinalement, ce que Marius souhaitait. Elle sentait, du côté de «monsieur Jean», une volonté de Marius; elle s’y conformait. Son mari n’avait eu rien à lui dire; elle subissait la pression vague, mais claire, de ses intentions tacites, et obéissait aveuglément. Son obéissance ici consistait à ne pas se souvenir de ce que Marius oubliait. Elle n’avait aucun effort à faire pour cela. Sans qu’elle sût elle-même pourquoi, et sans qu’il y ait à l’en accuser, son âme était tellement devenue celle de son mari, que ce qui se couvrait d’ombre dans la pensée de Marius s’obscurcissait dans la sienne.

N’allons pas trop loin cependant; en ce qui concerne Jean Valjean, cet oubli et cet effacement n’étaient que superficiels. Elle était plutôt étourdie qu’oublieuse. Au fond, elle aimait bien celui qu’elle avait si longtemps nommé son père. Mais elle aimait plus encore son mari. C’est ce qui avait un peu faussé la balance de ce cœur, penchée d’un seul côté.

Il arrivait parfois que Cosette parlait de Jean Valjean et s’étonnait. Alors Marius la calmait: — Il est absent, je crois. N’a-t-il pas dit qu’il partait pour un voyage? C’est vrai, pensait Cosette. Il avait l’habitude de disparaître ainsi. Mais pas si longtemps. — Deux ou trois fois elle envoya Nicolette rue de l’Homme-Armé s’informer si monsieur Jean était revenu de son voyage. Jean Valjean fit répondre que non.

Cosette n’en demanda pas davantage, n’ayant sur la terre qu’un besoin, Marius.

Disons encore que, de leur côté, Marius et Cosette avaient été absents. Ils étaient allés à Vernon. Marius avait mené Cosette au tombeau de son père.

Marius avait peu à peu soustrait Cosette à Jean Valjean. Cosette s’était laissé faire.

Du reste, ce qu’on appelle beaucoup trop durement, dans de certains cas, l’ingratitude des enfants, n’est pas toujours une chose aussi reprochable qu’on le croit. C’est l’ingratitude de la nature. La nature, nous l’avons dit ailleurs, «regarde devant elle». La nature divise les êtres vivants en arrivants et en partants. Les partants sont tournés vers l’ombre, les arrivants vers la lumière. De là un écart qui, du côté des vieux, est fatal, et, du côté des jeunes, involontaire. Cet écart, d’abord insensible, s’accroît lentement comme toute séparation de branches. Les rameaux, sans se détacher du tronc, s’en éloignent. Ce n’est pas leur faute. La jeunesse va où est la joie, aux fêtes, aux vives clartés, aux amours. La vieillesse va à la fin. On ne se perd pas de vue, mais il n’y a plus d’étreinte. Les jeunes gens sentent le refroidissement de la vie; les vieillards celui de la tombe. N’accusons pas ces pauvres enfants.

Chapitre II

Dernières palpitations de la lampe sans huile

Jean Valjean un jour descendit son escalier, fit trois pas dans la rue, s’assit sur une borne, sur cette même borne où Gavroche, dans la nuit du 5 au 6 juin, l’avait trouvé songeant; il resta là quelques minutes, puis remonta. Ce fut la dernière oscillation du pendule. Le lendemain, il ne sortit pas de chez lui. Le surlendemain, il ne sortit pas de son lit.

Sa portière, qui lui apprêtait son maigre repas, quelques choux ou quelques pommes de terre avec un peu de lard, regarda dans l’assiette de terre brune et s’exclama:

— Mais vous n’avez pas mangé hier, pauvre cher homme!

— Si fait, répondit Jean Valjean.

— L’assiette est toute pleine.

— Regardez le pot à l’eau. Il est vide.

— Cela prouve que vous avez bu; cela ne prouve pas que vous avez mangé.

— Eh bien, fît Jean Valjean, si je n’ai eu faim que d’eau?

— Cela s’appelle la soif, et, quand on ne mange pas en même temps, cela s’appelle la fièvre.

— Je mangerai demain.

— Ou à la Trinité. Pourquoi pas aujourd’hui? Est-ce qu’on dit: Je mangerai demain! Me laisser tout mon plat sans y toucher! Mes viquelottes qui étaient si bonnes!

Jean Valjean prit la main de la vieille femme:

— Je vous promets de les manger, lui dit-il de sa voix bienveillante.

— Je ne suis pas contente de vous, répondit la portière.

Jean Valjean ne voyait guère d’autre créature humaine que cette bonne femme. Il y a dans Paris des rues où personne ne passe et des maisons où personne ne vient. Il était dans une de ces rues-là et dans une de ces maisons-là.

Du temps qu’il sortait encore, il avait acheté à un chaudronnier pour quelques sous un petit crucifix de cuivre qu’il avait accroché à un clou en face de son lit. Ce gibet-là est toujours bon à voir.

Une semaine s’écoula sans que Jean Valjean fît un pas dans sa chambre. Il demeurait toujours couché. La portière disait à son mari: — Le bonhomme de là-haut ne se lève plus, il ne mange plus, il n’ira pas loin. Ça a des chagrins, ça. On ne m’ôtera pas de la tête que sa fille est mal mariée.

Le portier répliqua avec l’accent de la souveraineté maritale:

— S’il est riche, qu’il ait un médecin. S’il n’est pas riche, qu’il n’en ait pas. S’il n’a pas de médecin, il mourra.

— Et s’il en a un?

— Il mourra, dit le portier.

La portière se mit à gratter avec un vieux couteau de l’herbe qui poussait dans ce qu’elle appelait son pavé, et tout en arrachant l’herbe, elle grommelait:

— C’est dommage. Un vieillard qui est si propre! Il est blanc comme un poulet.

Elle aperçut au bout de la rue un médecin du quartier qui passait; elle prit sur elle de le prier de monter.

— C’est au deuxième, lui dit-elle. Vous n’aurez qu’à entrer. Comme le bonhomme ne bouge plus de son lit, la clef est toujours à la porte.

Le médecin vit Jean Valjean et lui parla.

Quand il redescendit, la portière l’interpella:

— Eh bien, docteur?

— Votre malade est bien malade.

— Qu’est-ce qu’il a?

— Tout et rien. C’est un homme qui, selon toute apparence, a perdu une personne chère. On meurt de cela.

— Qu’est-ce qu’il vous a dit?

— Il m’a dit qu’il se portait bien.

— Reviendrez-vous, docteur?

— Oui, répondit le médecin. Mais il faudrait qu’un autre que moi revînt.

Chapitre III

Une plume pèse à qui soulevait la charrette Fauchelevent

Un soir Jean Valjean eut de la peine à se soulever sur le coude; il se prit la main et ne trouva pas son pouls; sa respiration était courte et s’arrêtait par instants; il reconnut qu’il était plus faible qu’il ne l’avait encore été. Alors, sans doute sous la pression de quelque préoccupation suprême, il fit un effort, se dressa sur son séant, et s’habilla. Il mit son vieux vêtement d’ouvrier. Ne sortant plus, il y était revenu, et il le préférait. Il dut s’interrompre plusieurs fois en s’habillant; rien que pour passer les manches de la veste, la sueur lui coulait du front.

Depuis qu’il était seul, il avait mis son lit dans l’antichambre, afin d’habiter le moins possible cet appartement désert.

Il ouvrit la valise et en tira le trousseau de Cosette.

Il l’étala sur son lit.

Les chandeliers de l’évêque étaient à leur place sur la cheminée. Il prit dans un tiroir deux bougies de cire et les mit dans les chandeliers. Puis, quoiqu’il fît encore grand jour, c’était en été, il les alluma. On voit ainsi quelquefois des flambeaux allumés en plein jour dans les chambres où il y a des morts.

Chaque pas qu’il faisait en allant d’un meuble à l’autre l’exténuait, et il était obligé de s’asseoir. Ce n’était point de la fatigue ordinaire qui dépense la force pour la renouveler; c’était le reste des mouvements possibles; C’était la vie épuisée qui s’égoutte dans des efforts accablants qu’on ne recommencera pas.

Une des chaises où il se laissa tomber était placée devant le miroir, si fatal pour lui, si providentiel pour Marius, où il avait lu sur le buvard l’écriture renversée de Cosette. Il se vit dans ce miroir, et ne se reconnut pas. Il avait quatre-vingts ans; avant le mariage de Marius, on lui eût à peine donné cinquante ans; cette année avait compté trente. Ce qu’il avait sur le front, ce n’était plus la ride de l’âge, c’était la marque mystérieuse de la mort. On sentait là le creusement de l’ongle impitoyable. Ses joues pendaient; la peau de son visage avait cette couleur qui ferait croire qu’il y a déjà de la terre dessus; les deux coins de sa bouche s’abaissaient comme dans ce masque que les anciens sculptaient sur les tombeaux; il regardait le vide avec un air de reproche; on eût dit un de ces grands êtres tragiques qui ont à se plaindre de quelqu'un.

Il était dans cette situation, la dernière phase de l'accablement, où la douleur ne coule plus; elle est, pour ainsi dire, coagulée; il y a sur l'âme comme un caillot de désespoir.

La nuit était venue. Il traîna laborieusement une table et le vieux fauteuil près de la cheminée, et posa sur la table une plume, de l'encre et du papier.

Cela fait, il eut un évanouissement. Quand il reprit connaissance, il avait soif. Ne pouvant soulever le pot à l'eau, il le pencha péniblement vers sa bouche, et but une gorgée.

Puis il se tourna vers le lit, et, toujours assis, car il ne pouvait rester debout, il regarda la petite robe noire et tous ces chers objets.

Ces contemplations-là durent des heures qui semblent des minutes. Tout à coup il eut un frisson, il sentit que le froid lui venait; il s'accouda à la table que les flambeaux de l'évêque éclairaient, et prit la plume.

Comme la plume ni l'encre n'avaient servi depuis longtemps, le bec de la plume était recourbé, l'encre était desséchée, il fallut qu'il se levât et qu'il mît quelques gouttes d'eau dans l'encre, ce qu'il ne put faire sans s'arrêter et s'asseoir deux ou trois fois, et il fut forcé d'écrire avec le dos de la plume. Il s'essuyait le front de temps en temps.

Sa main tremblait. Il écrivit lentement quelques lignes que voici:

«Cosette, je te bénis. Je vais t'expliquer. Ton mari a eu raison de me faire comprendre que je devais m'en aller; cependant il y a un peu d'erreur dans ce qu'il a cru, mais il a eu raison. Il est excellent. Aime-le toujours bien quand je serai mort. Monsieur Pontmercy, aimez toujours mon enfant bien-aimé. Cosette, on trouvera ce papier-ci, voici ce que je veux te dire, tu vas voir les chiffres, si j'ai la force de me les rappeler, écoute bien, cet argent est bien à toi. Voici toute la chose: Le jais blanc vient de Norvège, le jais noir vient d'Angleterre, la verroterie noire vient d'Allemagne. Le jais est plus léger, plus précieux, plus cher. On peut faire en France des imitations comme en Allemagne. Il faut une petite enclume de deux pouces carrés et une lampe à esprit de vin pour amollir la cire. La cire autrefois se faisait avec de la résine et du noir de fumée et coûtait quatre francs la livre. J'ai imaginé de la faire avec de la gomme laque et de la térébenthine. Elle ne coûte plus que trente sous, et elle est bien meilleure. Les boucles se font avec un verre violet qu'on colle au moyen de cette cire sur une petite membrure en fer noir. Le verre doit être violet pour les bijoux de fer et noir pour les bijoux d'or. L'Espagne en achète beaucoup. C'est le pays du jais...»

Ici il s'interrompit, la plume tomba de ses doigts, il lui vint un de ces sanglots désespérés qui montaient par moments des profondeurs de son être, le pauvre homme prit sa tête dans ses deux mains, et songea.

— Oh! s'écria-t-il au dedans de lui-même (cris lamentables, entendus de Dieu seul), c'est fini. Je ne la verrai plus. C'est un sourire qui a passé sur moi. Je vais entrer dans la nuit sans même la revoir. Oh! une minute, un instant, entendre sa voix, toucher sa robe, la regarder, elle, l'ange! et puis mourir! Ce n'est rien de mourir, ce qui est affreux, c'est de mourir sans la voir. Elle me sourirait, elle me dirait un mot. Est-ce que cela ferait du mal à quelqu'un? Non, c'est fini, jamais. Me voilà tout seul. Mon Dieu! mon Dieu! je ne la verrai plus.

En ce moment on frappa à sa porte.

Chapitre IV

Bouteille d’encre qui ne réussit qu’à blanchir

Ce même jour, ou, pour mieux dire, ce même soir, comme Marius sortait de table et venait de se retirer dans son cabinet, ayant un dossier à étudier, Basque lui avait remis une lettre en disant: La personne qui a écrit la lettre est dans l’antichambre.

Cosette avait pris le bras du grand-père et faisait un tour dans le jardin.

Une lettre peut, comme un homme, avoir mauvaise tournure. Gros papier, pli grossier, rien qu’à les voir, de certaines missives déplaisent. La lettre qu’avait apportée Basque était de cette espèce.

Marius la prit. Elle sentait le tabac. Rien n’éveille un souvenir comme une odeur. Marius reconnut ce tabac. Il regarda la suscription: *À monsieur, monsieur le baron Pommerci. En son hôtel*. Le tabac reconnu lui fit reconnaître l’écriture. On pourrait dire que l’étonnement a des éclairs. Marius fut comme illuminé d’un de ces éclairs-là.

L’odorat, ce mystérieux aide-mémoire, venait de faire revivre en lui tout un monde. C’était bien là le papier, la façon de plier, la teinte blafarde de l’encre, c’était bien là l’écriture connue; surtout c’était là le tabac. Le galetas Jondrette lui apparaissait.

Ainsi, étrange coup de tête du hasard! une des deux pistes qu’il avait tant cherchées, celle pour laquelle dernièrement encore il avait fait tant d’efforts et qu’il croyait à jamais perdue, venait d’elle-même s’offrir à lui.

Il décacheta avidement la lettre, et il lut:

«Monsieur le baron,

«Si l’Être Suprême m’en avait donné les talents, j’aurais pu être le baron Thénard, membre de l’institut (académie des sciences), mais je ne le suis pas. Je porte seulement le même nom que lui, heureux si ce souvenir me recommande à l’excellence de vos bontés. Le bienfait dont vous m’honorerez sera réciproque. Je suis en possession d’un secret consernant un individu. Cet individu vous conserne. Je tiens le secret à votre disposition désirant avoir l’honneur de vous être hutile. Je vous donnerai le moyen simple de chaser de votre honorable famille cet individu qui n’y a pas droit, madame la baronne étant de haute naissance. Le sanctuaire de la vertu ne pourrait coabiter plus longtemps avec le crime sans abdiquer.

«J’atends dans l’antichambre les ordres de monsieur le baron.

«Avec respect.»

La lettre était signée «Thénard».

Cette signature n’était pas fausse. Elle était seulement un peu abrégée.

Du reste l’amphigouri et l’orthographe achevaient la révélation. Le certificat d’origine était complet. Aucun doute n’était possible.

L’émotion de Marius fut profonde. Après le mouvement de surprise, il eut un mouvement de bonheur. Qu’il trouvât maintenant l’autre homme qu’il cherchait, celui qui l’avait sauvé lui Marius, et il n’aurait plus rien à souhaiter.

Il ouvrit un tiroir de son secrétaire, y prit quelques billets de banque, les mit dans sa poche, referma le secrétaire et sonna. Basque entre-bâilla la porte.

— Faites entrer, dit Marius.

Basque annonça:

— Monsieur Thénard.

Un homme entra.

Nouvelle surprise pour Marius. L’homme qui entra lui était parfaitement inconnu.

Cet homme, vieux du reste, avait le nez gros, le menton dans la cravate, des lunettes vertes à double abat-jour de taffetas vert sur les yeux, les cheveux lissés et aplatis sur le front au ras des sourcils comme la perruque des cochers anglais de high life. Ses cheveux étaient gris. Il était vêtu de noir de la tête aux pieds, d’un noir très râpé, mais propre; un trousseau de breloques, sortant de son gousset, y faisait supposer une montre. Il tenait à la main un vieux chapeau. Il marchait voûté, et la courbure de son dos s’augmentait de la profondeur de son salut.

Ce qui frappait au premier abord, c’est que l’habit de ce personnage, trop ample, quoique soigneusement boutonné, ne semblait pas fait pour lui. Ici une courte digression est nécessaire.

Il y avait à Paris, à cette époque, dans un vieux logis borgne, rue Beautreillis, près de l’Arsenal, un juif ingénieux qui avait pour profession de changer un gredin en honnête homme. Pas pour trop longtemps, ce qui eût pu être gênant pour le gredin. Le changement se faisait à vue, pour un jour ou deux, à raison de trente sous par jour, au moyen d’un costume ressemblant le plus possible à l’honnêteté de tout le monde. Ce loueur de costumes s’appelait *le Changeur*; les filous parisiens lui avaient donné ce nom, et ne lui en connaissaient pas d'autre. Il avait un vestiaire assez complet. Les loques dont il affublait les gens étaient à peu près possibles. Il avait des spécialités et des catégories; à chaque clou de son magasin pendait, usée et fripée, une condition sociale; ici l'habit de magistrat, là l'habit de curé, là l'habit de banquier, dans un coin l'habit de militaire en retraite, ailleurs l'habit d'homme de lettres, plus loin l'habit d'homme d'État. Cet être était le costumier du drame immense que la friponnerie joue à Paris. Son bouge était la coulisse d'où le vol sortait et où l'escroquerie rentrait. Un coquin déguenillé arrivait à ce vestiaire, déposait trente sous, et choisissait, selon le rôle qu'il voulait jouer ce jour-là, l'habit qui lui convenait, et, en redescendant l'escalier, le coquin était quelqu'un. Le lendemain les nippes étaient fidèlement rapportées, et le Changeur, qui confiait tout aux voleurs, n'était jamais volé. Ces vêtements avaient un inconvénient, ils «n'allaient pas»; n'étant point faits pour ceux qui les portaient, ils étaient collants pour celui-ci, flottants pour celui-là, et ne s'ajustaient à personne. Tout filou qui dépassait la moyenne humaine en petitesse ou en grandeur, était mal à l'aise dans les costumes du Changeur. Il ne fallait être ni trop gras ni trop maigre. Le Changeur n'avait prévu que les hommes ordinaires. Il avait pris mesure à l'espèce dans la personne du premier gueux venu, lequel n'est ni gros, ni mince, ni grand, ni petit. De là des adaptations quelquefois difficiles dont les pratiques du Changeur se tiraient comme elles pouvaient. Tant pis pour les exceptions! L'habit d'homme d'État, par exemple, noir du haut en bas, et par conséquent convenable, eût été trop large pour Pitt et trop étroit pour Castelcicala. Le vêtement d'*homme d'état* était désigné comme il suit dans le catalogue du Changeur; nous copions: «Un habit de drap noir, un pantalon de laine noire, un gilet de soie, des bottes et du linge.» Il y avait en marge: *Ancien ambassadeur*, et une note que nous transcrivons également: «Dans une boîte séparée, une perruque proprement frisée, des lunettes vertes, des breloques, et deux petits tuyaux de plume d'un pouce de long enveloppés de coton.» Tout cela revenait à l'homme d'État, ancien ambassadeur. Tout ce costume était, si l'on peut parler ainsi, exténué; les coutures blanchissaient, une vague boutonnière s'entrouvrait à l'un des coudes; en outre, un bouton manquait à l'habit sur la poitrine; mais ce n'est qu'un détail; la main de l'homme d'État, devant toujours être dans l'habit et sur le cœur, avait pour fonction de cacher le bouton absent.

Si Marius avait été familier avec les institutions occultes de Paris, il eût tout de suite reconnu, sur le dos du visiteur que Basque venait d'introduire, l'habit d'homme d'État emprunté au Décroche-moi-ça du Changeur.

Le désappointement de Marius, en voyant entrer un homme autre que celui qu'il attendait, tourna en disgrâce pour le nouveau venu. Il l'examina des pieds à la tête, pendant que le personnage s'inclinait démesurément, et lui demanda d'un ton bref:

— Que voulez-vous?

L'homme répondit avec un rictus aimable dont le sourire caressant d'un crocodile donnerait quelque idée:

— Il me semble impossible que je n'aie pas déjà eu l'honneur de voir monsieur le baron dans le monde. Je crois bien l'avoir particulièrement rencontré, il y a quelques années, chez madame la princesse Bagration et dans les salons de sa seigneurie le vicomte Dambray, pair de France.

C'est toujours une bonne tactique en coquinerie que d'avoir l'air de reconnaître quelqu'un qu'on ne connaît point.

Marius était attentif au parler de cet homme. Il épiait l'accent et le geste, mais son désappointement croissait; c'était une prononciation nasillarde, absolument différente du son de voix aigre et sec auquel il s'attendait. Il était tout à fait dérouté.

— Je ne connais, dit-il, ni madame Bagration, ni M. Dambray. Je n'ai de ma vie mis le pied ni chez l'un ni chez l'autre.

La réponse était bourrue. Le personnage, gracieux quand même, insista.

— Alors, ce sera chez Chateaubriand que j'aurai vu monsieur! Je connais beaucoup Chateaubriand. Il est très affable. Il me dit quelquefois: Thénard, mon ami... est-ce que vous ne buvez pas un verre avec moi?

Le front de Marius devint de plus en plus sévère:

— Je n'ai jamais eu l'honneur d'être reçu chez monsieur de Chateaubriand. Abrégeons. Qu'est-ce que vous voulez?

L'homme, devant la voix plus dure, salua plus bas.

— Monsieur le baron, daignez m'écouter. Il y a en Amérique, dans un pays qui est du côté de Panama, un village appelé la Joya. Ce village se compose d'une seule maison. Une grande maison carrée de trois étages en briques cuites au soleil, chaque côté du carré long de cinq cents pieds, chaque étage en retraite de douze pieds sur l'étage inférieur de façon à laisser devant soi une terrasse qui fait le tour de l'édifice, au centre une cour intérieure où sont les provisions et les munitions, pas de fenêtres, des meurtrières, pas de porte, des échelles, des échelles pour monter du sol à la première terrasse, et de la première à la seconde, et de la seconde à la troisième, des échelles pour descendre dans la cour intérieure, pas de portes aux chambres, des trappes, pas d'escaliers aux chambres, des échelles; le soir on ferme les trappes, on retire les échelles, on braque des tromblons et des carabines aux meurtrières; nul moyen d'entrer; une maison le jour, une citadelle la nuit, huit cents habitants, voilà ce village. Pourquoi tant de précautions? c'est que ce pays est dangereux; il est plein d'anthropophages. Alors pourquoi y va-t-on? c'est que ce pays est merveilleux; on y trouve de l'or.

— Où voulez-vous en venir? interrompit Marius qui du désappointement passait à l'impatience.

— À ceci, monsieur le baron. Je suis un ancien diplomate fatigué. La vieille civilisation m'a mis sur les dents. Je veux essayer des sauvages.

— Après?

— Monsieur le baron, l'égoïsme est la loi du monde. La paysanne prolétaire qui travaille à la journée se retourne quand la diligence passe, la paysanne propriétaire qui travaille à son champ ne se retourne pas. Le chien du pauvre aboie après le riche, le chien du riche aboie après le pauvre. Chacun pour soi. L'intérêt, voilà le but des hommes. L'or, voilà l'aimant.

— Après? Concluez.

— Je voudrais aller m'établir à la Joya. Nous sommes trois. J'ai mon épouse et ma demoiselle; une fille qui est fort belle. Le voyage est long et cher. Il me faut un peu d'argent.

— En quoi cela me regarde-t-il? demanda Marius.

L'inconnu tendit le cou hors de sa cravate, geste propre au vautour, et répliqua avec un redoublement de sourire:

— Est-ce que monsieur le baron n'a pas lu ma lettre?

Cela était à peu près vrai. Le fait est que le contenu de l'épître avait glissé sur Marius. Il avait vu l'écriture plus qu'il n'avait lu la lettre. Il s'en souvenait à peine. Depuis un moment un nouvel éveil venait de lui être donné. Il avait remarqué ce détail: mon épouse et ma demoiselle. Il attachait sur l'inconnu un œil pénétrant. Un juge d'instruction n'eût pas mieux regardé. Il le guettait presque. Il se borna à lui répondre:

— Précisez.

L'inconnu inséra ses deux mains dans ses deux goussets, releva sa tête sans redresser son épine dorsale, mais en scrutant de son côté Marius avec le regard vert de ses lunettes.

— Soit, monsieur le baron. Je précise. J’ai un secret à vous vendre.

— Un secret?

— Un secret.

— Qui me concerne?

— Un peu.

— Quel est ce secret?

Marius examinait de plus en plus l’homme, tout en l’écoutant.

— Je commence gratis, dit l’inconnu. Vous allez voir que je suis intéressant.

— Parlez.

— Monsieur le baron, vous avez chez vous un voleur et un assassin.

Marius tressaillit.

— Chez moi? non, dit-il.

L’inconnu, imperturbable, brossa son chapeau du coude, et poursuivit:

— Assassin et voleur. Remarquez, monsieur le baron, que je ne parle pas ici de faits anciens, arriérés, caducs, qui peuvent être effacés par la prescription devant la loi et par le repentir devant Dieu. Je parle de faits récents, de faits actuels, de faits encore ignorés de la justice à cette heure. Je continue. Cet homme s’est glissé dans votre confiance, et presque dans votre famille, sous un faux nom. Je vais vous dire son nom vrai. Et vous le dire pour rien.

— J’écoute.

— Il s’appelle Jean Valjean.

— Je le sais.

— Je vais vous dire, également pour rien, qui il est.

— Dites.

— C’est un ancien forçat.

— Je le sais.

— Vous le savez depuis que j’ai eu l’honneur de vous le dire.

— Non. Je le savais auparavant.

Le ton froid de Marius, cette double réplique *je le sais*, son laconisme réfractaire au dialogue, remuèrent dans l’inconnu quelque colère sourde. Il décocha à la dérobée à Marius un regard furieux, tout de suite éteint. Si rapide qu’il fût, ce regard était de ceux qu’on reconnaît quand on les a vus une fois; il n’échappa point à Marius. De certains flamboiements ne peuvent venir que de certaines âmes; la prunelle, ce soupirail de la pensée, s’en embrase; les lunettes ne cachent rien; mettez donc une vitre à l’enfer.

L’inconnu reprit, en souriant:

— Je ne me permets pas de démentir monsieur le baron. Dans tous les cas, vous devez voir que je suis renseigné. Maintenant ce que j’ai à vous apprendre n’est connu que de moi seul. Cela intéresse la fortune de madame la baronne. C’est un secret extraordinaire. Il est à vendre. C’est à vous que je l’offre d’abord. Bon marché. Vingt mille francs.

— Je sais ce secret-là comme je sais les autres, dit Marius.

Le personnage sentit le besoin de baisser un peu son prix:

— Monsieur le baron, mettez dix mille francs, et je parle.

— Je vous répète que vous n’avez rien à m’apprendre. Je sais ce que vous voulez me dire.

Il y eut dans l’œil de l’homme un nouvel éclair. Il s’écria:

— Il faut pourtant que je dîne aujourd’hui. C’est un secret extraordinaire, vous dis-je. Monsieur le baron, je vais parler. Je parle. Donnez-moi vingt francs.

Marius le regarda fixement:

— Je sais votre secret extraordinaire; de même que je savais le nom de Jean Valjean, de même que je sais votre nom.

— Mon nom?

— Oui.

— Ce n’est pas difficile, monsieur le baron. J’ai eu l’honneur de vous l’écrire et de vous le dire. Thénard.

— Dier.

— Hein?

— Thénardier.

— Qui ça?

Dans le danger, le porc-épic se hérisse, le scarabée fait le mort, la vieille garde se forme en carré; cet homme se mit à rire.

Puis il épousseta d’une chiquenaude un grain de poussière sur la manche de son habit.

Marius continua:

— Vous êtes aussi l’ouvrier Jondrette, le comédien Fabantou, le poète Genflot, l’espagnol don Alvarès, et la femme Balizard.

— La femme quoi?

— Et vous avez tenu une gargote à Montfermeil.

— Une gargote! Jamais.

— Et je vous dis que vous êtes Thénardier.

— Je le nie.

— Et que vous êtes un gueux. Tenez.

Et Marius, tirant de sa poche un billet de banque, le lui jeta à la face.

— Merci! pardon! cinq cents francs! monsieur le baron!

Et l’homme, bouleversé, saluant, saisissant le billet, l’examina.

— Cinq cents francs! reprit-il, ébahi. Et il bégaya à demi-voix: Un fafiot sérieux!

Puis brusquement:

— Eh bien soit, s’écria-t-il. Mettons-nous à notre aise.

Et, avec une prestesse de singe, rejetant ses cheveux en arrière, arrachant ses lunettes, retirant de son nez et escamotant les deux tuyaux de plume dont il a été question tout à l’heure, et qu’on a d’ailleurs déjà vus à une autre page de ce livre, il ôta son visage comme on ôte son chapeau.

L’œil s’alluma; le front inégal, raviné, bossu par endroits, hideusement ridé en haut, se dégagea, le nez redevint aigu comme un bec; le profil féroce et sagace de l’homme de proie reparut.

— Monsieur le baron est infaillible, dit-il d’une voix nette et d’où avait disparu tout nasillement, je suis Thénardier.

Et il redressa son dos voûté.

Thénardier, car c’était bien lui, était étrangement surpris; il eût été troublé s’il avait pu l’être. Il était venu apporter de l’étonnement, et c’était lui qui en recevait. Cette humiliation lui était payée cinq cents francs, et, à tout prendre, il l’acceptait; mais il n’en était pas moins abasourdi.

Il voyait pour la première fois ce baron Pontmercy, et, malgré son déguisement, ce baron Pontmercy le reconnaissait, et le reconnaissait à fond. Et non seulement ce baron était au fait de Thénardier, mais il semblait au fait de Jean Valjean. Qu’était-ce que ce jeune homme presque imberbe, si glacial et si généreux, qui savait les noms des gens, qui savait tous leurs noms, et qui leur ouvrait sa bourse, qui malmenait les fripons comme un juge et qui les payait comme une dupe?

Thénardier, on se le rappelle, quoique ayant été voisin de Marius, ne l’avait jamais vu, ce qui est fréquent à Paris; il avait autrefois entendu vaguement ses filles parler d’un jeune homme très pauvre appelé Marius qui demeurait dans la maison. Il lui avait écrit, sans le connaître, la lettre qu’on sait. Aucun rapprochement n’était possible dans son esprit entre ce Marius-là et M. le baron Pontmercy.

Quant au nom de Pontmercy, on se rappelle que, sur le champ de bataille de Waterloo, il n’en avait entendu que les deux dernières syllabes, pour lesquelles il avait toujours eu le légitime dédain qu’on doit à ce qui n’est qu’un remercîment.

Du reste, par sa fille Azelma, qu’il avait mise à la piste des mariés du 16 février, et par ses fouilles personnelles, il était parvenu à savoir beaucoup de choses, et, du fond de ses ténèbres, il avait réussi à saisir plus d’un fil mystérieux. Il avait, à force d’industrie, découvert, ou, tout au moins, à force d’inductions, deviné, quel était l’homme qu’il avait rencontré un certain jour dans le Grand Égout. De l’homme, il était facilement arrivé au nom. Il savait que madame la baronne Pontmercy, c’était Cosette. Mais de ce côté-là, il comptait être discret. Qui était Cosette? Il ne le savait pas au juste lui-même. Il entrevoyait bien quelque bâtardise, l’histoire de Fantine lui avait toujours semblé louche, mais à quoi bon en parler? Pour se faire payer son silence? Il avait, ou croyait avoir, à vendre mieux que cela. Et, selon toute apparence, venir faire, sans preuve, cette révélation au baron Pontmercy: *Votre femme est bâtarde*, cela n’eût réussi qu’à attirer la botte du mari vers les reins du révélateur.

Dans la pensée de Thénardier, la conversation avec Marius n’avait pas encore commencé. Il avait dû reculer, modifier sa stratégie, quitter une position, changer de front; mais rien d’essentiel n’était encore compromis, et il avait cinq cents francs dans sa poche. En outre, il avait quelque chose de décisif à dire, et même contre ce baron Pontmercy si bien renseigné et si bien armé, il se sentait fort. Pour les hommes de la nature de Thénardier, tout dialogue est un combat. Dans celui qui allait s’engager, quelle était sa situation? Il ne savait pas à qui il parlait, mais il savait de quoi il parlait. Il fit rapidement cette revue intérieure de ses forces, et après avoir dit: *Je suis Thénardier*, il attendit.

Marius était resté pensif. Il tenait donc enfin Thénardier. Cet homme, qu’il avait tant désiré retrouver, était là. Il allait donc pouvoir faire honneur à la recommandation du colonel Pontmercy. Il était humilié que ce héros dût quelque chose à ce bandit, et que la lettre de change tirée du fond du tombeau par son père sur lui Marius fût jusqu’à ce jour protestée. Il lui paraissait aussi, dans la situation complexe où était son esprit vis-à-vis de Thénardier, qu’il y avait lieu de venger le colonel du malheur d’avoir été sauvé par un tel gredin. Quoi qu'il en fût, il était content. Il allait donc enfin délivrer de ce créancier indigne l'ombre du colonel, et il lui semblait qu'il allait retirer de la prison pour dettes la mémoire de son père.

À côté de ce devoir, il en avait un autre, éclaircir, s'il se pouvait, la source de la fortune de Cosette. L'occasion semblait se présenter. Thénardier savait peut-être quelque chose. Il pouvait être utile de voir le fond de cet homme. Il commença par là.

Thénardier avait fait disparaître le «fafiot sérieux» dans son gousset, et regardait Marius avec une douceur presque tendre.

Marius rompit le silence.

— Thénardier, je vous ai dit votre nom. À présent, votre secret, ce que vous veniez m'apprendre, voulez-vous que je vous le dise? J'ai mes informations aussi, moi. Vous allez voir que j'en sais plus long que vous. Jean Valjean, comme vous l'avez dit, est un assassin et un voleur. Un voleur, parce qu'il a volé un riche manufacturier dont il a causé la ruine, M. Madeleine. Un assassin, parce qu'il a assassiné l'agent de police Javert.

— Je ne comprends pas, monsieur le baron, fît Thénardier.

— Je vais me faire comprendre. Écoutez. Il y avait, dans un arrondissement du Pas-de-Calais, vers 1822, un homme qui avait eu quelque ancien démêlé avec la justice, et qui, sous le nom de M. Madeleine, s'était relevé et réhabilité. Cet homme était devenu, dans toute la force du terme, un juste. Avec une industrie, la fabrique des verroteries noires, il avait fait la fortune de toute une ville. Quant à sa fortune personnelle, il l'avait faite aussi, mais secondairement et, en quelque sorte, par occasion. Il était le père nourricier des pauvres. Il fondait des hôpitaux, ouvrait des écoles, visitait les malades, dotait les filles, soutenait les veuves, adoptait les orphelins; il était comme le tuteur du pays. Il avait refusé la croix, on l'avait nommé maire. Un forçat libéré savait le secret d'une peine encourue autrefois par cet homme; il le dénonça et le fit arrêter, et profita de l'arrestation pour venir à Paris et se faire remettre par le banquier Laffitte, — Je tiens le fait du caissier lui-même, — au moyen d'une fausse signature, une somme de plus d'un demi-million qui appartenait à M. Madeleine. Ce forçat, qui a volé M. Madeleine, c'est Jean Valjean. Quant à l'autre fait, vous n'avez rien non plus à m'apprendre. Jean Valjean a tué l'agent Javert; il l'a tué d'un coup de pistolet. Moi qui vous parle, j'étais présent.

Thénardier jeta à Marius le coup d'œil souverain d'un homme battu qui remet la main sur la victoire et qui vient de regagner en une minute tout le terrain qu'il avait perdu. Mais le sourire revint tout de suite; l'inférieur vis-à-vis du supérieur doit avoir le triomphe câlin, et Thénardier se borna à dire à Marius:

— Monsieur le baron, nous faisons fausse route.

Et il souligna cette phrase en faisant faire à son trousseau de breloques un moulinet expressif.

— Quoi! repartit Marius, contestez-vous cela? Ce sont des faits.

— Ce sont des chimères. La confiance dont monsieur le baron m'honore me fait un devoir de le lui dire. Avant tout la vérité et la justice. Je n'aime pas voir accuser les gens injustement. Monsieur le baron, Jean Valjean n'a point volé M. Madeleine, et Jean Valjean n'a point tué Javert.

— Voilà qui est fort! comment cela?

— Pour deux raisons.

— Lesquelles? parlez.

— Voici la première: il n'a pas volé M. Madeleine, attendu que c'est lui-même Jean Valjean qui est M. Madeleine.

— Que me contez-vous là?

— Et voici la seconde: il n'a pas assassiné Javert, attendu que celui qui a tué Javert, c'est Javert.

— Que voulez-vous dire?

— Que Javert s'est suicidé.

— Prouvez! prouvez! cria Marius hors de lui.

Thénardier reprit en scandant sa phrase à la façon d'un alexandrin antique:

— L'agent-de-police-Ja-vert-a-été-trouvé-noyé-sous-un-bateau-du-Pont-au-Change.

— Mais prouvez donc!

Thénardier tira de sa poche de côté une large enveloppe de papier gris qui semblait contenir des feuilles pliées de diverses grandeurs.

— J'ai mon dossier, dit-il avec calme.

Et il ajouta:

— Monsieur le baron, dans votre intérêt, j'ai voulu connaître à fond mon Jean Valjean. Je dis que Jean Valjean et Madeleine, c'est le même homme, et je dis que Javert n'a eu d'autre assassin que Javert, et quand je parle, c'est que j'ai des preuves. Non des preuves manuscrites, l'écriture est suspecte, l'écriture est complaisante, mais des preuves imprimées.

Tout en parlant, Thénardier extrayait de l’enveloppe deux numéros de journaux jaunis, fanés, et fortement saturés de tabac. L’un de ces deux journaux, cassé à tous les plis et tombant en lambeaux carrés, semblait beaucoup plus ancien que l’autre.

— Deux faits, deux preuves, fit Thénardier. Et il tendit à Marius les deux journaux déployés.

Ces deux journaux, le lecteur les connaît. L’un, le plus ancien, un numéro du *Drapeau blanc* du 25 juillet 1823, dont on a pu voir le texte à la page 148 du tome troisième de ce livre, établissait l’identité de M. Madeleine et de Jean Valjean. L’autre, un *Moniteur* du 15 juin 1832, constatait le suicide de Javert, ajoutant qu’il résultait d’un rapport verbal de Javert au préfet que, fait prisonnier dans la barricade de la rue de la Chanvrerie, il avait dû la vie à la magnanimité d’un insurgé qui, le tenant sous son pistolet, au lieu de lui brûler la cervelle, avait tiré en l’air.

Marius lut. Il y avait évidence, date certaine, preuve irréfragable, ces deux journaux n’avaient pas été imprimés exprès pour appuyer les dires de Thénardier; la note publiée dans le *Moniteur* était communiquée administrativement par la préfecture de police. Marius ne pouvait douter. Les renseignements du commis-caissier étaient faux et lui-même s’était trompé. Jean Valjean, grandi brusquement, sortait du nuage. Marius ne put retenir un cri de joie:

— Eh bien alors, ce malheureux est un admirable homme! toute cette fortune était vraiment à lui! c’est Madeleine, la providence de tout un pays! c’est Jean Valjean, le sauveur de Javert! c’est un héros! c’est un saint!

— Ce n’est pas un saint, et ce n’est pas un héros, dit Thénardier. C’est un assassin et un voleur.

Et il ajouta du ton d’un homme qui commence à se sentir quelque autorité: — Calmons-nous.

Voleur, assassin, ces mots que Marius croyait disparus, et qui revenaient, tombèrent sur lui comme une douche de glace.

— Encore! dit-il.

— Toujours, fit Thénardier. Jean Valjean n’a pas volé Madeleine, mais c’est un voleur. Il n’a pas tué Javert, mais c’est un meurtrier.

— Voulez-vous parler, reprit Marius, de ce misérable vol d’il y a quarante ans, expié, cela résulte de vos journaux mêmes, par toute une vie de repentir, d’abnégation et de vertu?

— Je dis assassinat et vol, monsieur le baron. Et je répète que je parle de faits actuels. Ce que j'ai à vous révéler est absolument inconnu. C'est de l'inédit. Et peut-être y trouverez-vous la source de la fortune habilement offerte par Jean Valjean à madame la baronne. Je dis habilement, car, par une donation de ce genre, se glisser dans une honorable maison dont on partagera l'aisance, et, du même coup, cacher son crime, jouir de son vol, enfouir son nom, et se créer une famille, ce ne serait pas très maladroit.

— Je pourrais vous interrompre ici, observa Marius, mais continuez.

— Monsieur le baron, je vais vous dire tout, laissant la récompense à votre générosité. Ce secret vaut de l'or massif. Vous me direz: Pourquoi ne t'es-tu pas adressé à Jean Valjean? Par une raison toute simple; je sais qu'il s'est dessaisi, et dessaisi en votre faveur, et je trouve la combinaison ingénieuse; mais il n'a plus le sou, il me montrerait ses mains vides, et, puisque j'ai besoin de quelque argent pour mon voyage à la Joya, je vous préfère, vous qui avez tout, à lui qui n'a rien. Je suis un peu fatigué, permettez-moi de prendre une chaise.

Marius s'assit et lui fit signe de s'asseoir.

Thénardier s'installa sur une chaise capitonnée, reprit les deux journaux, les replongea dans l'enveloppe, et murmura en becquetant avec son ongle le *Drapeau blanc*: Celui-ci m'a donné du mal pour l'avoir. Cela fait, il croisa les jambes et s'étala sur le dos, attitude propre aux gens sûrs de ce qu'ils disent, puis entra en matière, gravement et en appuyant sur les mots:

— Monsieur le baron, le 6 juin 1832, il y a un an environ, le jour de l'émeute, un homme était dans le Grand Égout de Paris, du côté où l'égout vient rejoindre la Seine, entre le pont des Invalides et le pont d'Iéna.

Marius rapprocha brusquement sa chaise de celle de Thénardier. Thénardier remarqua ce mouvement et continua avec la lenteur d'un orateur qui tient son interlocuteur et qui sent la palpitation de son adversaire sous ses paroles:

— Cet homme, forcé de se cacher, pour des raisons du reste étrangères à la politique, avait pris l'égout pour domicile et en avait une clef. C'était, je le répète, le 6 juin; il pouvait être huit heures du soir. L'homme entendit du bruit dans l'égout. Très surpris, il se blottit, et guetta. C'était un bruit de pas, on marchait dans l'ombre, on venait de son côté. Chose étrange, il y avait dans l'égout un autre homme que lui. La grille de sortie de l'égout n'était pas loin. Un peu de lumière qui en venait lui permit de reconnaître le nouveau venu et de voir que cet homme portait quelque chose sur son dos.

Il marchait courbé. L'homme qui marchait courbé était un ancien forçat, et ce qu'il traînait sur ses épaules était un cadavre. Flagrant délit d'assassinat, s'il en fut. Quant au vol, il va de soi; on ne tue pas un homme gratis. Ce forçat allait jeter ce cadavre à la rivière. Un fait à noter, c'est qu'avant d'arriver à la grille de sortie, ce forçat, qui venait de loin dans l'égout, avait nécessairement rencontré une fondrière épouvantable où il semble qu'il eût pu laisser le cadavre; mais, dès le lendemain, les égoutiers, en travaillant à la fondrière, y auraient retrouvé l'homme assassiné, et ce n'était pas le compte de l'assassin. Il avait mieux aimé traverser la fondrière, avec son fardeau, et ses efforts ont dû être effrayants, il est impossible de risquer plus complètement sa vie; je ne comprends pas qu'il soit sorti de là vivant.

La chaise de Marius se rapprocha encore. Thénardier en profita pour respirer longuement. Il poursuivit:

— Monsieur le baron, un égout n'est pas le Champ de Mars. On y manque de tout, et même de place. Quand deux hommes sont là, il faut qu'ils se rencontrent. C'est ce qui arriva. Le domicilié et le passant furent forcés de se dire bonjour, à regret l'un et l'autre. Le passant dit au domicilié: — *Tu vois ce que j'ai sur le dos, il faut que je sorte, tu as la clef, donne-la-moi*. Ce forçat était un homme d'une force terrible. Il n'y avait pas à refuser. Pourtant celui qui avait la clef parlementa, uniquement pour gagner du temps. Il examina ce mort, mais il ne put rien voir, sinon qu'il était jeune, bien mis, l'air d'un riche, et tout défiguré par le sang. Tout en causant, il trouva moyen de déchirer et d'arracher par derrière, sans que l'assassin s'en aperçût, un morceau de l'habit de l'homme assassiné. Pièce à conviction, vous comprenez; moyen de ressaisir la trace des choses et de prouver le crime au criminel. Il mit la pièce à conviction dans sa poche. Après quoi il ouvrit la grille, fit sortir l'homme avec son embarras sur le dos, referma la grille et se sauva, se souciant peu d'être mêlé au surplus de l'aventure et surtout ne voulant pas être là quand l'assassin jetterait l'assassiné à la rivière. Vous comprenez à présent. Celui qui portait le cadavre, c'est Jean Valjean; celui qui avait la clef vous parle en ce moment; et le morceau de l'habit....

Thénardier acheva la phrase en tirant de sa poche et en tenant, à la hauteur de ses yeux, pincé entre ses deux pouces et ses deux index, un lambeau de drap noir déchiqueté, tout couvert de taches sombres.

Marius s'était levé, pâle, respirant à peine, l'œil fixé sur le morceau de drap noir, et, sans prononcer une parole, sans quitter ce haillon du regard, il reculait vers le mur et, de sa main droite étendue derrière lui, cherchait en tâtonnant sur la muraille une clef qui était à la serrure d'un placard près de la cheminée. Il trouva cette clef, ouvrit le placard, et y enfonça son bras sans y regarder, et sans que sa prunelle effarée se détachât du chiffon que Thénardier tenait déployé.

Cependant Thénardier continuait:

— Monsieur le baron, j'ai les plus fortes raisons de croire que le jeune homme assassiné était un opulent étranger attiré par Jean Valjean dans un piège et porteur d'une somme énorme.

— Le jeune homme c'était moi, et voici l'habit! cria Marius, et il jeta sur le parquet un vieil habit noir tout sanglant.

Puis, arrachant le morceau des mains de Thénardier, il s'accroupit sur l'habit, et rapprocha du pan déchiqueté le morceau déchiré. La déchirure s'adaptait exactement, et le lambeau complétait l'habit.

Thénardier était pétrifié. Il pensa ceci: Je suis épaté.

Marius se redressa frémissant, désespéré, rayonnant.

Il fouilla dans sa poche, et marcha, furieux, vers Thénardier, lui présentant et lui appuyant presque sur le visage son poing rempli de billets de cinq cents francs et de mille francs.

— Vous êtes un infâme! vous êtes un menteur, un calomniateur, un scélérat. Vous veniez accuser cet homme, vous l'avez justifié; vous vouliez le perdre, vous n'avez réussi qu'à le glorifier. Et c'est vous qui êtes un voleur! Et c'est vous qui êtes un assassin! Je vous ai vu, Thénardier Jondrette, dans ce bouge du boulevard de l'Hôpital. J'en sais assez sur vous pour vous envoyer au bagne, et plus loin même, si je voulais. Tenez, voilà mille francs, sacripant que vous êtes!

Et il jeta un billet de mille francs à Thénardier.

— Ah! Jondrette Thénardier, vil coquin! que ceci vous serve de leçon, brocanteur de secrets, marchand de mystères, fouilleur de ténèbres, misérable! Prenez ces cinq cents francs, et sortez d'ici! Waterloo vous protège.

— Waterloo! grommela Thénardier, en empochant les cinq cents francs avec les mille francs.

— Oui, assassin! vous y avez sauvé la vie à un colonel....

— À un général, dit Thénardier, en relevant la tête.

— À un colonel! reprit Marius avec emportement. Je ne donnerais pas un liard pour un général. Et vous veniez ici faire des infamies! Je vous dis que vous avez commis tous les crimes. Partez! disparaissez! Soyez heureux seulement, c’est tout ce que je désire. Ah! monstre! Voilà encore trois mille francs. Prenez-les. Vous partirez dès demain, pour l’Amérique, avec votre fille; car votre femme est morte, abominable menteur! Je veillerai à votre départ, bandit, et je vous compterai à ce moment-là vingt mille francs. Allez vous faire pendre ailleurs!

— Monsieur le baron, répondit Thénardier en saluant jusqu’à terre, reconnaissance éternelle.

Et Thénardier sortit, n’y concevant rien, stupéfait et ravi de ce doux écrasement sous des sacs d’or et de cette foudre éclatant sur sa tête en billets de banque.

Foudroyé, il l’était, mais content aussi; et il eût été très fâché d’avoir un paratonnerre contre cette foudre-là.

Finissons-en tout de suite avec cet homme. Deux jours après les événements que nous racontons en ce moment, il partit, par les soins de Marius, pour l’Amérique, sous un faux nom, avec sa fille Azelma, muni d’une traite de vingt mille francs sur New York. La misère morale de Thénardier, ce bourgeois manqué, était irrémédiable; il fut en Amérique ce qu’il était en Europe. Le contact d’un méchant homme suffit quelquefois pour pourrir une bonne action et pour en faire sortir une chose mauvaise. Avec l’argent de Marius, Thénardier se fit négrier.

Dès que Thénardier fut dehors, Marius courut au jardin où Cosette se promenait encore.

— Cosette! Cosette! cria-t-il. Viens! viens vite. Partons. Basque, un fiacre! Cosette, viens. Ah! mon Dieu! C’est lui qui m’avait sauvé la vie! Ne perdons pas une minute! Mets ton châle.

Cosette le crut fou, et obéit.

Il ne respirait pas, il mettait la main sur son cœur pour en comprimer les battements. Il allait et venait à grands pas, il embrassait Cosette: — Ah! Cosette! je suis un malheureux! disait-il.

Marius était éperdu. Il commençait à entrevoir dans ce Jean Valjean on ne sait quelle haute et sombre figure. Une vertu inouïe lui apparaissait, suprême et douce, humble dans son immensité. Le forçat se transfigurait en Christ. Marius avait l’éblouissement de ce prodige. Il ne savait pas au juste ce qu’il voyait, mais c’était grand.

En un instant, un fiacre fut devant la porte. Marius y fit monter Cosette et s’y élança.

— Cocher, dit-il, rue de l’Homme-Armé, numéro 7. Le fiacre partit.

— Ah! quel bonheur! fit Cosette, rue de l’Homme-Armé. Je n’osais plus t’en parler. Nous allons voir monsieur Jean.

— Ton père, Cosette! ton père plus que jamais. Cosette, je devine. Tu m’as dit que tu n’avais jamais reçu la lettre que je t’avais envoyée par Gavroche. Elle sera tombée dans ses mains. Cosette, il est allé à la barricade, pour me sauver. Comme c’est son besoin d’être un ange, en passant, il en a sauvé d’autres; il a sauvé Javert. Il m’a tiré de ce gouffre pour me donner à toi. Il m’a porté sur son dos dans cet effroyable égout. Ah! je suis un monstrueux ingrat. Cosette, après avoir été ta providence, il a été la mienne. Figure-toi qu’il y avait une fondrière épouvantable, à s’y noyer cent fois, à se noyer dans la boue, Cosette! il me l’a fait traverser. J’étais évanoui je ne voyais rien, je n’entendais rien, je ne pouvais rien savoir de ma propre aventure. Nous allons le ramener, le prendre avec nous, qu’il le veuille ou non, il ne nous quittera plus. Pourvu qu’il soit chez lui! Pourvu que nous le trouvions! Je passerai le reste de ma vie à le vénérer. Oui, ce doit être cela, vois-tu, Cosette? C’est à lui que Gavroche aura remis ma lettre. Tout s’explique. Tu comprends.

Cosette ne comprenait pas un mot.

— Tu as raison, lui dit-elle.

Cependant le fiacre roulait.

Chapitre V

Nuit derrière laquelle il y a le jour

Au coup qu'il entendit frapper à sa porte, Jean Valjean se retourna.

— Entrez, dit-il faiblement.

La porte s'ouvrit. Cosette et Marius parurent.

Cosette se précipita dans la chambre.

Marius resta sur le seuil, debout, appuyé contre le montant de la porte.

— Cosette! dit Jean Valjean, et il se dressa sur sa chaise, les bras ouverts et tremblants, hagard, livide, sinistre, une joie immense dans les yeux.

Cosette, suffoquée d'émotion, tomba sur la poitrine de Jean Valjean.

— Père! dit-elle.

Jean Valjean, bouleversé, bégayait:

— Cosette! elle! vous, madame! c'est toi! Ah mon Dieu!

Et, serré dans les bras de Cosette, il s'écria:

— C'est toi! tu es là! Tu me pardonnes donc!

Marius, baissant les paupières pour empêcher ses larmes de couler, fit un pas et murmura entre ses lèvres contractées convulsivement pour arrêter les sanglots:

— Mon père!

— Et vous aussi, vous me pardonnez! dit Jean Valjean.

Marius ne put trouver une parole, et Jean Valjean ajouta: — Merci.

Cosette arracha son châle et jeta son chapeau sur le lit.

— Cela me gêne, dit-elle.

Et, s'asseyant sur les genoux du vieillard, elle écarta ses cheveux blancs d'un mouvement adorable, et lui baisa le front.

Jean Valjean se laissait faire, égaré.

Cosette, qui ne comprenait que très confusément, redoublait ses caresses, comme si elle voulait payer la dette de Marius.

Jean Valjean balbutiait:

— Comme on est bête! Je croyais que je ne la verrais plus. Figurez-vous, monsieur Pontmercy, qu'au moment où vous êtes entré, je me disais: C'est fini. Voilà sa petite robe, je suis un misérable homme, je ne verrai plus Cosette, je disais cela au moment même où vous montiez l'escalier. Étais-je idiot! Voilà comme on est idiot! Mais on compte sans le bon Dieu. Le bon

Dieu dit: Tu t’imagines qu’on va t’abandonner, bêta! Non, non, ça ne se passera pas comme ça. Allons, il y a là un pauvre bonhomme qui a besoin d’un ange. Et l’ange vient; et l’on revoit sa Cosette, et l’on revoit sa petite Cosette! Ah! j’étais bien malheureux!

Il fut un moment sans pouvoir parler, puis il poursuivit:

— J’avais vraiment besoin de voir Cosette une petite fois de temps en temps. Un cœur, cela veut un os à ronger. Cependant je sentais bien que j’étais de trop. Je me donnais des raisons: Ils n’ont pas besoin de toi, reste dans ton coin, on n’a pas le droit de s’éterniser. Ah! Dieu béni, je la revois! Sais-tu, Cosette, que ton mari est très beau? Ah! tu as un joli col brodé, à la bonne heure. J’aime ce dessin-là. C’est ton mari qui l’a choisi, n’est-ce pas? Et puis, il te faudra des cachemires. Monsieur Pontmercy, laissez-moi la tutoyer. Ce n’est pas pour longtemps.

Et Cosette reprenait:

— Quelle méchanceté de nous avoir laissés comme cela! Où êtes-vous donc allé? pourquoi avez-vous été si longtemps? Autrefois vos voyages ne duraient pas plus de trois ou quatre jours. J’ai envoyé Nicolette, on répondait toujours: Il est absent. Depuis quand êtes-vous revenu? Pourquoi ne pas nous l’avoir fait savoir? Savez-vous que vous êtes très changé? Ah! le vilain père! il a été malade, et nous ne l’avons pas su! Tiens, Marius, tâte sa main comme elle est froide!

— Ainsi vous voilà! Monsieur Pontmercy, vous me pardonnez! répéta Jean Valjean.

À ce mot, que Jean Valjean venait de redire, tout ce qui se gonflait dans le cœur de Marius trouva une issue, il éclata:

— Cosette, entends-tu? il en est là! il me demande pardon. Et sais-tu ce qu’il m’a fait, Cosette? Il m’a sauvé la vie. Il a fait plus. Il t’a donnée à moi. Et après m’avoir sauvé et après t’avoir donnée à moi, Cosette, qu’a-t-il fait de lui-même? il s’est sacrifié. Voilà l’homme. Et, à moi l’ingrat, à moi l’oublieux, à moi l’impitoyable, à moi le coupable, il me dit: Merci! Cosette, toute ma vie passée aux pieds de cet homme, ce sera trop peu. Cette barricade, cet égout, cette fournaise, ce cloaque, il a tout traversé pour moi, pour toi, Cosette! Il m’a emporté à travers toutes les morts qu’il écartait de moi et qu’il acceptait pour lui. Tous les courages, toutes les vertus, tous les héroïsmes, toutes les saintetés, il les a! Cosette, cet homme-là, c’est l’ange!

— Chut! chut! dit tout bas Jean Valjean. Pourquoi dire tout cela?

— Mais vous! s’écria Marius avec une colère où il y avait de la vénération, pourquoi ne l’avez-vous pas dit? C’est votre faute aussi. Vous sauvez la vie aux gens, et vous le leur cachez! Vous faites plus, sous prétexte de vous démasquer, vous vous calomniez. C’est affreux.

— J’ai dit la vérité, répondit Jean Valjean.

— Non, reprit Marius, la vérité, c’est toute la vérité; et vous ne l’avez pas dite. Vous étiez monsieur Madeleine, pourquoi ne pas l’avoir dit? Vous aviez sauvé Javert, pourquoi ne pas l’avoir dit? Je vous devais la vie, pourquoi ne pas l’avoir dit?

— Parce que je pensais comme vous. Je trouvais que vous aviez raison. Il fallait que je m’en allasse. Si vous aviez su cette affaire de l’égout, vous m’auriez fait rester près de vous. Je devais donc me taire. Si j’avais parlé, cela aurait tout gêné.

— Gêné quoi! gêné qui! repartit Marius. Est-ce que vous croyez que vous allez rester ici? Nous vous emmenons. Ah! mon Dieu! quand je pense que c’est par hasard que j’ai appris tout cela! Nous vous emmenons. Vous faites partie de nous-mêmes. Vous êtes son père et le mien. Vous ne passerez pas dans cette affreuse maison un jour de plus. Ne vous figurez pas que vous serez demain ici.

— Demain, dit Jean Valjean, je ne serai pas ici, mais je ne serai pas chez vous.

— Que voulez-vous dire? répliqua Marius. Ah çà, nous ne permettons plus de voyage. Vous ne nous quitterez plus. Vous nous appartenez. Nous ne vous lâchons pas.

— Cette fois-ci, c’est pour de bon, ajouta Cosette. Nous avons une voiture en bas. Je vous enlève. S’il le faut, j’emploierai la force.

Et, riant, elle fit le geste de soulever le vieillard dans ses bras.

— Il y a toujours votre chambre dans notre maison, poursuivit-elle. Si vous saviez comme le jardin est joli dans ce moment-ci! Les azalées y viennent très bien. Les allées sont sablées avec du sable de rivière; il y a de petits coquillages violets. Vous mangerez de mes fraises. C’est moi qui les arrose. Et plus de madame, et plus de monsieur Jean, nous sommes en république, tout le monde se dit *tu*, n’est-ce pas, Marius? Le programme est changé. Si vous saviez, père, j’ai eu un chagrin, il y avait un rouge-gorge qui avait fait son nid dans un trou du mur, un horrible chat me l’a mangé. Mon pauvre joli petit rouge-gorge qui mettait sa tête à sa fenêtre et qui me regardait! J’en ai pleuré. J’aurais tué le chat! Mais maintenant personne ne pleure plus. Tout le monde rit, tout le monde est heureux. Vous allez venir avec nous. Comme le grand-père va être content! Vous aurez votre carré dans le jardin, vous le cultiverez, et nous verrons si vos fraises sont aussi belles que les miennes. Et puis, je ferai tout ce que vous voudrez, et puis, vous m'obéirez bien.

Jean Valjean l'écoutait sans l'entendre. Il entendait la musique de sa voix plutôt que le sens de ses paroles; une de ces grosses larmes, qui sont les sombres perles de l'âme, germait lentement dans son œil. Il murmura:

— La preuve que Dieu est bon, c'est que la voilà.

— Mon père! dit Cosette.

Jean Valjean continua:

— C'est bien vrai que ce serait charmant de vivre ensemble. Ils ont des oiseaux plein leurs arbres. Je me promènerais avec Cosette. Être des gens qui vivent, qui se disent bonjour, qui s'appellent dans le jardin, c'est doux. On se voit dès le matin. Nous cultiverions chacun un petit coin. Elle me ferait manger ses fraises, je lui ferais cueillir mes roses. Ce serait charmant. Seulement....

Il s'interrompit, et dit doucement:

— C'est dommage.

La larme ne tomba pas, elle rentra, et Jean Valjean la remplaça par un sourire.

Cosette prit les deux mains du vieillard dans les siennes.

— Mon Dieu! dit-elle, vos mains sont encore plus froides. Est-ce que vous êtes malade? Est-ce que vous souffrez?

— Moi? non, répondit Jean Valjean, je suis très bien. Seulement....

Il s'arrêta.

— Seulement quoi?

— Je vais mourir tout à l'heure.

Cosette et Marius frissonnèrent.

— Mourir! s'écria Marius.

— Oui, mais ce n'est rien, dit Jean Valjean.

Il respira, sourit, et reprit:

— Cosette, tu me parlais, continue, parle encore, ton petit rouge-gorge est donc mort, parle, que j'entende ta voix!

Marius pétrifié regardait le vieillard.

Cosette poussa un cri déchirant.

— Père! mon père! vous vivrez. Vous allez vivre. Je veux que vous viviez, entendez-vous!

Jean Valjean leva la tête vers elle avec adoration.

— Oh oui, défends-moi de mourir. Qui sait? j'obéirai peut-être. J'étais en train de mourir quand vous êtes arrivés. Cela m'a arrêté, il m'a semblé que je renaissais.

— Vous êtes plein de force et de vie, s'écria Marius. Est-ce que vous vous imaginez qu'on meurt comme cela? Vous avez eu du chagrin, vous n'en aurez plus. C'est moi qui vous demande pardon, et à genoux encore! Vous allez vivre, et vivre avec nous, et vivre longtemps. Nous vous reprenons. Nous sommes deux ici qui n'aurons désormais qu'une pensée, votre bonheur!

— Vous voyez bien, reprit Cosette tout en larmes, que Marius dit que vous ne mourrez pas.

Jean Valjean continuait de sourire.

— Quand vous me reprendriez, monsieur Pontmercy, cela ferait-il que je ne sois pas ce que je suis? Non, Dieu a pensé comme vous et moi, et il ne change pas d'avis; il est utile que je m'en aille. La mort est un bon arrangement. Dieu sait mieux que nous ce qu'il nous faut. Que vous soyez heureux, que monsieur Pontmercy ait Cosette, que la jeunesse épouse le matin, qu'il y ait autour de vous, mes enfants, des lilas et des rossignols, que votre vie soit une belle pelouse avec du soleil, que tous les enchantements du ciel vous remplissent l'âme, et maintenant, moi qui ne suis bon à rien, que je meure, il est sûr que tout cela est bien. Voyez-vous, soyons raisonnables, il n'y a plus rien de possible maintenant, je sens tout à fait que c'est fini. Il y a une heure, j'ai eu un évanouissement. Et puis, cette nuit, j'ai bu tout ce pot d'eau qui est là. Comme ton mari est bon, Cosette! tu es bien mieux qu'avec moi.

Un bruit se fit à la porte. C'était le médecin qui entrait.

— Bonjour et adieu, docteur, dit Jean Valjean. Voici mes pauvres enfants.

Marius s'approcha du médecin. Il lui adressa ce seul mot: Monsieur?... mais dans la manière de le prononcer, il y avait une question complète.

Le médecin répondit à la question par un coup d'œil expressif.

— Parce que les choses déplaisent, dit Jean Valjean, ce n'est pas une raison pour être injuste envers Dieu.

Il y eut un silence. Toutes les poitrines étaient oppressées.

Jean Valjean se tourna vers Cosette. Il se mit à la contempler comme s’il voulait en prendre pour l’éternité. À la profondeur d’ombre où il était déjà descendu, l’extase lui était encore possible en regardant Cosette. La réverbération de ce doux visage illuminait sa face pâle. Le sépulcre peut avoir son éblouissement.

Le médecin lui tâta le pouls.

— Ah! c’est vous qu’il lui fallait! murmura-t-il en regardant Cosette et Marius.

Et, se penchant à l’oreille de Marius, il ajouta très bas:

— Trop tard.

Jean Valjean, presque sans cesser de regarder Cosette, considéra Marius et le médecin avec sérénité. On entendit sortir de sa bouche cette parole à peine articulée:

— Ce n’est rien de mourir; c’est affreux de ne pas vivre.

Tout à coup il se leva. Ces retours de force sont quelquefois un signe même de l’agonie. Il marcha d’un pas ferme à la muraille, écarta Marius et le médecin qui voulaient l’aider, détacha du mur le petit crucifix de cuivre qui y était suspendu, revint s’asseoir avec toute la liberté de mouvement de la pleine santé, et dit d’une voix haute en posant le crucifix sur la table:

— Voilà le grand martyr.

Puis sa poitrine s’affaissa, sa tête eut une vacillation, comme si l’ivresse de la tombe le prenait, et ses deux mains, posées sur ses genoux, se mirent à creuser de l’ongle l’étoffe de son pantalon.

Cosette lui soutenait les épaules, et sanglotait, et tâchait de lui parler sans pouvoir y parvenir. On distinguait, parmi les mots mêlés à cette salive lugubre qui accompagne les larmes, des paroles comme celles-ci: — Père! ne nous quittez pas. Est-il possible que nous ne vous retrouvions que pour vous perdre?

On pourrait dire que l’agonie serpente. Elle va, vient, s’avance vers le sépulcre, et se retourne vers la vie. Il y a du tâtonnement dans l’action de mourir.

Jean Valjean, après cette demi-syncope, se raffermit, secoua son front comme pour en faire tomber les ténèbres, et redevint presque pleinement lucide. Il prit un pan de la manche de Cosette et le baisa.

— Il revient! docteur, il revient! cria Marius.

— Vous êtes bons tous les deux, dit Jean Valjean. Je vais vous dire ce qui m’a fait de la peine. Ce qui m’a fait de la peine, monsieur Pontmercy, c’est que vous n’ayez pas voulu toucher à l’argent. Cet argent-là est bien à votre femme. Je vais vous expliquer, mes enfants, c’est même pour cela que je suis content de vous voir. Le jais noir vient d’Angleterre, le jais blanc vient de Norvège. Tout ceci est dans le papier que voilà, que vous lirez. Pour les bracelets, j’ai inventé de remplacer les coulants en tôle soudée par des coulants en tôle rapprochée. C’est plus joli, meilleur, et moins cher. Vous comprenez tout l’argent qu’on peut gagner. La fortune de Cosette est donc bien à elle. Je vous donne ces détails-là pour que vous ayez l’esprit en repos.

La portière était montée et regardait par la porte entre-bâillée. Le médecin la congédia, mais il ne put empêcher qu’avant de disparaître cette bonne femme zélée ne criât au mourant:

— Voulez-vous un prêtre?

— J’en ai un, répondit Jean Valjean.

Et, du doigt, il sembla désigner un point au-dessus de sa tête où l’on eût dit qu’il voyait quelqu’un.

Il est probable que l’évêque en effet assistait à cette agonie.

Cosette, doucement, lui glissa un oreiller sous les reins.

Jean Valjean reprit:

— Monsieur Pontmercy, n’ayez pas de crainte, je vous en conjure. Les six cent mille francs sont bien à Cosette. J’aurais donc perdu ma vie si vous n’en jouissiez pas! Nous étions parvenus à faire très bien cette verroterie-là. Nous rivalisions avec ce qu’on appelle les bijoux de Berlin. Par exemple, on ne peut pas égaler le verre noir d’Allemagne. Une grosse, qui contient douze cents grains très bien taillés, ne coûte que trois francs.

Quand un être qui nous est cher va mourir, on le regarde avec un regard qui se cramponne à lui et qui voudrait le retenir. Tous deux, muets d’angoisse, ne sachant que dire à la mort, désespérés et tremblants, étaient debout devant lui, Cosette donnant la main à Marius.

D’instant en instant, Jean Valjean déclinait. Il baissait; il se rapprochait de l’horizon sombre. Son souffle était devenu intermittent; un peu de râle l’entrecoupait. Il avait de la peine à déplacer son avant-bras, ses pieds avaient perdu tout mouvement, et en même temps que la misère des membres et l’accablement du corps croissait, toute la majesté de l’âme montait et se déployait sur son front. La lumière du monde inconnu était déjà visible dans sa prunelle.

Sa figure blêmissait et en même temps souriait. La vie n’était plus là, il y avait autre chose. Son haleine tombait, son regard grandissait. C’était un cadavre auquel on sentait des ailes.

Il fit signe à Cosette d’approcher, puis à Marius; c’était évidemment la dernière minute de la dernière heure, et il se mit à leur parler d’une voix si faible quelle semblait venir de loin, et qu’on eût dit qu’il y avait dès à présent une muraille entre eux et lui.

— Approche, approchez tous deux. Je vous aime bien. Oh! c’est bon de mourir comme cela! Toi aussi, tu m’aimes, ma Cosette. Je savais bien que tu avais toujours de l’amitié pour ton vieux bonhomme. Comme tu es gentille de m’avoir mis ce coussin sous les reins! Tu me pleureras un peu, n’est-ce pas? Pas trop. Je ne veux pas que tu aies de vrais chagrins. Il faudra vous amuser beaucoup, mes enfants. J’ai oublié de vous dire que sur les boucles sans ardillons on gagnait encore plus que sur tout le reste. La grosse, les douze douzaines, revenait à dix francs, et se vendait soixante. C’était vraiment un bon commerce. Il ne faut donc pas s’étonner des six cent mille francs, monsieur Pontmercy. C’est de l’argent honnête. Vous pouvez être riches tranquillement. Il faudra avoir une voiture, de temps en temps une loge aux théâtres, de belles toilettes de bal, ma Cosette, et puis donner de bons dîners à vos amis, être très heureux. J’écrivais tout à l’heure à Cosette. Elle trouvera ma lettre. C’est à elle que je lègue les deux chandeliers qui sont sur la cheminée. Ils sont en argent; mais pour moi ils sont en or, ils sont en diamant; ils changent les chandelles qu’on y met, en cierges. Je ne sais pas si celui qui me les a donnés est content de moi là-haut. J’ai fait ce que j’ai pu. Mes enfants, vous n’oublierez pas que je suis un pauvre, vous me ferez enterrer dans le premier coin de terre venu sous une pierre pour marquer l’endroit. C’est là ma volonté. Pas de nom sur la pierre. Si Cosette veut venir un peu quelquefois, cela me fera plaisir. Vous aussi, monsieur Pontmercy. Il faut que je vous avoue que je ne vous ai pas toujours aimé; je vous en demande pardon. Maintenant, elle et vous, vous n’êtes qu’un pour moi. Je vous suis très reconnaissant. Je sens que vous rendez Cosette heureuse. Si vous saviez, monsieur Pontmercy, ses belles joues roses, c’était ma joie; quand je la voyais un peu pâle, j’étais triste. Il y a dans la commode un billet de cinq cents francs. Je n’y ai pas touché. C’est pour les pauvres. Cosette, vois-tu ta petite robe, là, sur le lit? la reconnais-tu? Il n’y a pourtant que dix ans de cela. Comme le temps passe! Nous avons été bien heureux. C’est fini. Mes enfants, ne pleurez pas, je ne vais pas très loin. Je vous verrai de là. Vous n'aurez qu'à regarder quand il fera nuit, vous me verrez sourire. Cosette, te rappelles-tu Montfermeil? Tu étais dans le bois, tu avais bien peur; te rappelles-tu quand j'ai pris l'anse du seau d'eau? C'est la première fois que j'ai touché ta pauvre petite main. Elle était si froide! Ah! vous aviez les mains rouges dans ce temps-là, mademoiselle, vous les avez bien blanches maintenant. Et la grande poupée! te rappelles-tu? Tu la nommais Catherine. Tu regrettais de ne pas l'avoir emmenée au couvent! Comme tu m'as fait rire des fois, mon doux ange! Quand il avait plu, tu embarquais sur les ruisseaux des brins de paille, et tu les regardais aller. Un jour, je t'ai donné une raquette en osier, et un volant avec des plumes jaunes, bleues, vertes. Tu l'as oublié, toi. Tu étais si espiègle toute petite! Tu jouais. Tu te mettais des cerises aux oreilles. Ce sont là des choses du passé. Les forêts où l'on a passé avec son enfant, les arbres où l'on s'est promené, les couvents où l'on s'est caché, les jeux, les bons rires de l'enfance, c'est de l'ombre. Je m'étais imaginé que tout cela m'appartenait. Voilà où était ma bêtise. Ces Thénardier ont été méchants. Il faut leur pardonner. Cosette, voici le moment venu de te dire le nom de ta mère. Elle s'appelait Fantine. Retiens ce nom-là: — Fantine. Mets-toi à genoux toutes les fois que tu le prononceras. Elle a bien souffert. Elle t'a bien aimée. Elle a eu en malheur tout ce que tu as en bonheur. Ce sont les partages de Dieu. Il est là-haut, il nous voit tous, et il sait ce qu'il fait au milieu de ses grandes étoiles. Je vais donc m'en aller, mes enfants. Aimez-vous bien toujours. Il n'y a guère autre chose que cela dans le monde: s'aimer. Vous penserez quelquefois au pauvre vieux qui est mort ici. Ô ma Cosette! ce n'est pas ma faute, va, si je ne t'ai pas vue tous ces temps-ci, cela me fendait le cœur; j'allais jusqu'au coin de ta rue, je devais faire un drôle d'effet aux gens qui me voyaient passer, j'étais comme fou, une fois je suis sorti sans chapeau. Mes enfants, voici que je ne vois plus très clair, j'avais encore des choses à dire, mais c'est égal. Pensez un peu à moi. Vous êtes des êtres bénis. Je ne sais pas ce que j'ai, je vois de la lumière. Approchez encore. Je meurs heureux. Donnez-moi vos chères têtes bien-aimées, que je mette mes mains dessus.

Cosette et Marius tombèrent à genoux, éperdus, étouffés de larmes, chacun sur une des mains de Jean Valjean. Ces mains augustes ne remuaient plus.

Il était renversé en arrière, la lueur des deux chandeliers l'éclairait; sa face blanche regardait le ciel, il laissait Cosette et Marius couvrir ses mains de baisers; il était mort.

La nuit était sans étoiles et profondément obscure. Sans doute, dans l’ombre, quelque ange immense était debout, les ailes déployées, attendant l’âme.

Chapitre VI

L’herbe cache et la pluie efface

Il y a, au cimetière du Père-Lachaise, aux environs de la fosse commune, loin du quartier élégant de cette ville des sépulcres, loin de tous ces tombeaux de fantaisie qui étalent en présence de l’éternité les hideuses modes de la mort, dans un angle désert, le long d’un vieux mur, sous un grand if auquel grimpent les liserons, parmi les chiendents et les mousses, une pierre. Cette pierre n’est pas plus exempte que les autres des lèpres du temps, de la moisissure, du lichen, et des fientes d’oiseaux. L’eau la verdit, l’air la noircit. Elle n’est voisine d’aucun sentier, et l’on n’aime pas aller de ce côté-là, parce que l’herbe est haute et qu’on a tout de suite les pieds mouillés. Quand il y a un peu de soleil, les lézards y viennent. Il y a, tout autour, un frémissement de folles avoines. Au printemps, les fauvettes chantent dans l’arbre.

Cette pierre est toute nue. On n’a songé en la taillant qu’au nécessaire de la tombe, et l’on n’a pris d’autre soin que de faire cette pierre assez longue et assez étroite pour couvrir un homme.

On n’y lit aucun nom.

Seulement, voilà de cela bien des années déjà, une main y a écrit au crayon ces quatre vers qui sont devenus peu à peu illisibles sous la pluie et la poussière, et qui probablement sont aujourd’hui effacés:

Il dort. Quoique le sort fût pour lui bien étrange,
Il vivait. Il mourut quand il n’eut plus son ange,
La chose simplement d’elle-même arriva,
Comme la nuit se fait lorsque le jour s’en va.

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TOILERS OF THE SEA

Translated by W. Moy Thomas

This novel was first published in Brussels in 1866, as Hugo was in exile from France at the time. An English translation quickly appeared in New York later that year, under the title *The Toilers of the Sea*, which is the translation featured in this collection. W. Moy Thomas was a renowned translator, as well as an acquaintance of Charles Dickens and a contributor to *Household Words.*

The novel is dedicated to the island of Guernsey, where Hugo spent 15 years in exile, and concerns a local man named Gilliatt, a social outcast who falls in love with Deruchette, the niece of a local shipowner. When Lethierry's ship is wrecked on the Roches Douvres, a perilous reef, Deruchette promises to marry whomever can salvage the ship's steam engine.

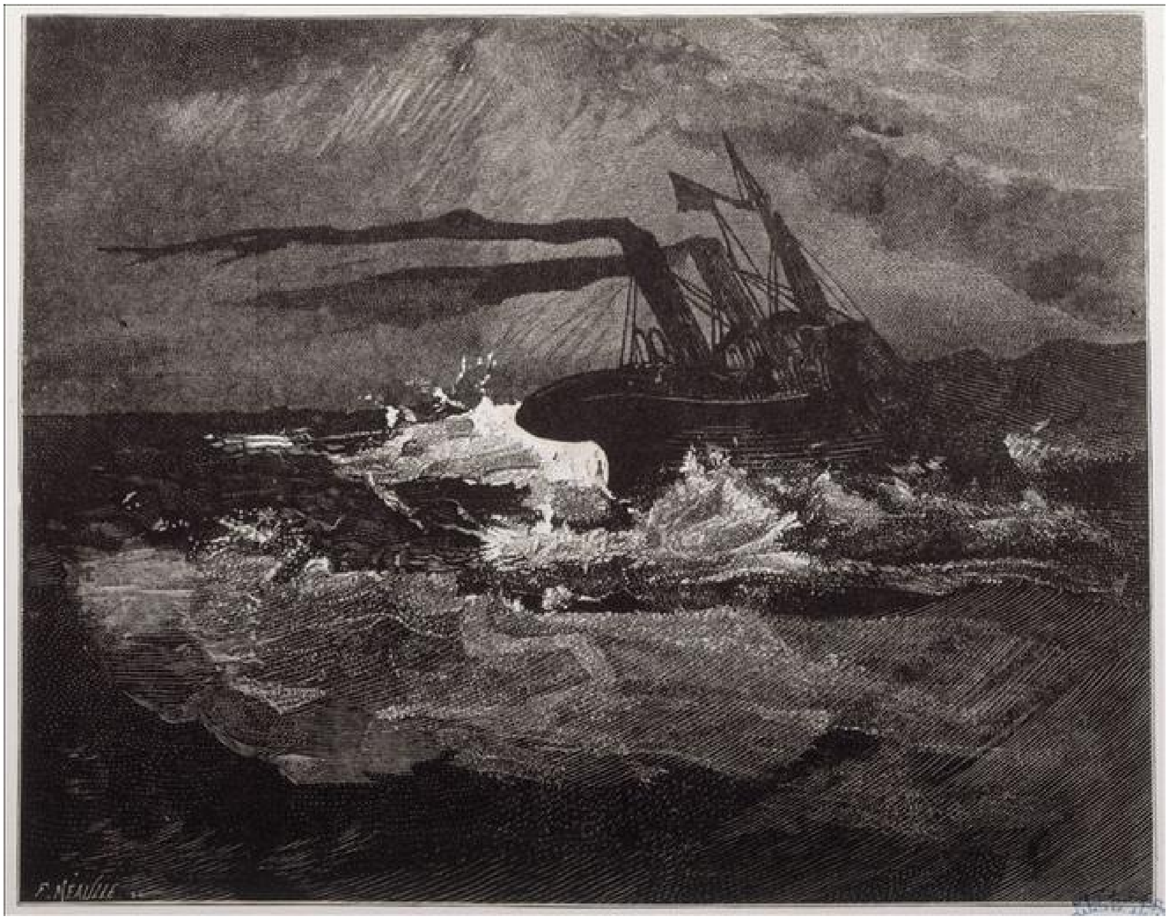

One of the original illustrations

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INTRODUCTION

Victor Hugo was thinking much of Æschylus and his Prometheus at the time he conceived the figure of Gilliatt, heroic warrer with the elements. But it is to a creature of the Gothic mind like Byron’s Manfred, and not to any earlier, or classic, type of the eternal rebellion against fate or time or circumstance, that Hugo’s readers will be tempted to turn for the fellow to his Guernsey hero:

“My joy was in the wilderness — to breathe
The difficult air of the iced mountain’s top,
Where the birds dare not build — nor insects wing
Flit o’er the herbless granite; or to plunge
Into the torrent, and to roll along
On the swift whirl of the new-breaking wave
Of river-stream, or ocean, in their flow.”

The island of Guernsey was Gilliatt’s Alp and sea-solitude, where he, too, had his avalanches waiting to fall “like foam from the round ocean of old Hell.” And as Byron figured his own revolt against the bonds in Manfred, so Hugo, being in exile, put himself with lyrical and rhetorical impetuosity into the island marcou and child of destiny that he concocted with “a little sand and a little blood and a deal of fantasy” in the years 1864 and 1865. There is a familiar glimpse of the Hugo household to be had in the first winter of its transference to the Channel Islands, years before *Les Travailleurs* was written, which betrays the mood from which finally sprang this concrete fable of the man-at-odds. It was the end of November 1852, and a father and his younger son sat in a room of a house of Marine Terrace, Jersey — a plain, unpicturesque house; square, hard in outline, and newly whitewashed, — Methodism, said Hugo, in stones and mortar. Outside its windows the rain fell and the wind blew: the house was like a thing benumbed by the angry noise. The two inmates sat plunged in thought, possibly thinking of the sad significance of these beginnings of winter and of exile which had arrived together. At length the son (François Hugo) asked the father what he meant to do during their exile, which he had already predicted would be long? The father said, “I shall look at the sea.”

Then came a silence, broken by a question as to what the son would do? To which he replied that he would translate Shakespeare.

Victor Hugo’s own study or eulogy of Shakespeare was written as a preamble to his son’s translation of the plays. It is not too much to connect the new and ample creative work that followed, including his great novel of Revolution, *Les Misérables*, and his poems in *La Légende des Siècles* (first series) with the double artistic stimulus gained from this conditioned solitude and his closer acquaintance with the dramatic mind of that “giant of the great art of the ages,” as he termed our English poet in the book already quoted from.

The Shakespeare book is dated from Hauteville House, 1864. *Les Travailleurs* from the same quarters, March 1866. The Hugos had perforce suddenly left Jersey for Guernsey in 1855, owing to the gibes and flouts of an unlucky revolutionary Jersey journal, *L’Homme*, at the two governments: Victor Hugo being already a marked man for his pains. The Guernsey house he inhabited for so many years had a spacious study in its upper story, with a large window, free to the sun and to the sea. Here he wrote, tirelessly, tremendously, as his custom was: beginning betimes in the early morning, and writing on till the time for his *déjeuner*: standing at a tall desk to write in his sea-tower. You must turn to certain of his poems and to the pages of *Les Misérables* and *Les Travailleurs* for the mental colours and phantasmagoria of those days and years.

It would be easy to point out, resuming an immense amount of criticism of his romances and of this story in particular, the defects on the side of dramatic and true life-likeness to be found in Hugo’s prose-narrative. But it is more helpful in turning to a story-book to know what has been said unreservedly in its favour. Hugo’s greatest appreciator was superlative in his praise, and it need hardly be explained that it was Swinburne who brought his tribute to the romance of Gilliatt also, after positing the parallel claims of Hugo’s five chief romances. Of the five, they were not, he said, to be comparatively classified in order of merit. “But I may perhaps be permitted to say without fear of deserved rebuke that none is to me personally a treasure of greater price than *Les Travailleurs de la Mer*. The splendid energy of the book makes the superhuman energy of the hero seem not only possible but natural, and his triumph over all physical impossibilities not only natural but inevitable.” Swinburne’s love for the

Channel Islands, and his poems inspired by them, were mainly due as we know to Hugo’s life and his books lived and written there.

E.R.

PREFACE

Religion, Society, and Nature! these are the three struggles of man. They constitute at the same time his three needs. He has need of a faith; hence the temple. He must create; hence the city. He must live; hence the plough and the ship. But these three solutions comprise three perpetual conflicts. The mysterious difficulty of life results from all three. Man strives with obstacles under the form of superstition, under the form of prejudice, and under the form of the elements. A triple ἀναγκη weighs upon us. There is the fatality of dogmas, the oppression of human laws, the inexorability of nature. In *Notre Dame de Paris* the author denounced the first; in the *Misérables* he exemplified the second; in this book he indicates the third. With these three fatalities mingles that inward fatality — the supreme ἀναγκη, the human heart.

Hauteville House,
March, *1866*.

I DEDICATE THIS BOOK
TO THE
ROCK OF HOSPITALITY AND LIBERTY
TO THAT PORTION OF OLD NORMAN GROUND
INHABITED BY
THE NOBLE LITTLE NATION OF THE SEA
TO THE ISLAND OF GUERNSEY
SEVERE YET KIND, MY PRESENT ASYLUM
PERHAPS MY TOMB
V.H.

TOILERS OF THE SEA

PART I. — SIEUR CLUBIN

BOOK I

THE HISTORY OF A BAD REPUTATION

I

A WORD WRITTEN ON A WHITE PAGE

Christmas Day in the year 182- was somewhat remarkable in the island of Guernsey. Snow fell on that day. In the Channel Islands a frosty winter is uncommon, and a fall of snow is an event.

On that Christmas morning, the road which skirts the seashore from St. Peter’s Port to the Vale was clothed in white. From midnight till the break of day the snow had been falling. Towards nine o’clock, a little after the rising of the wintry sun, as it was too early yet for the Church of England folks to go to St. Sampson’s, or for the Wesleyans to repair to Eldad Chapel, the road was almost deserted. Throughout that portion of the highway which separates the first from the second tower, only three foot-passengers could be seen. These were a child, a man, and a woman. Walking at a distance from each other, these wayfarers had no visible connection. The child, a boy of about eight years old, had stopped, and was looking curiously at the wintry scene. The man walked behind the woman, at a distance of about a hundred paces. Like her he was coming from the direction of the church of St. Sampson. The appearance of the man, who was still young, was something between that of a workman and a sailor. He wore his working-day clothes — a kind of Guernsey shirt of coarse brown stuff, and trousers partly concealed by tarpaulin leggings — a costume which seemed to indicate that, notwithstanding the holy day, he was going to no place of worship. His heavy shoes of rough leather, with their soles covered with large nails, left upon the snow, as he walked, a print more like that of a prison lock than the foot of a man. The woman, on the contrary, was evidently dressed for church. She wore a large mantle of black silk, wadded, under which she had coquettishly adjusted a dress of Irish poplin, trimmed alternately with white and pink; but for her red stockings, she might have been taken for a Parisian. She walked on with a light and free step, so little suggestive of the burden of life that it might easily be seen that she was young. Her movements possessed that subtle grace which indicates the most delicate of all transitions — that soft intermingling, as it were, of two twilights — the passage from the condition of a child to that of womanhood. The man seemed to take no heed of her.

Suddenly, near a group of oaks at the corner of a field, and at the spot called the Basses Maisons, she turned, and the movement seemed to attract the attention of the man. She stopped, seemed to reflect a moment, then stooped, and the man fancied that he could discern that she was tracing with her finger some letters in the snow. Then she rose again, went on her way at a quicker pace, turned once more, this time smiling, and disappeared to the left of the roadway, by the footpath under the hedges which leads to the Ivy Castle. When she had turned for the second time, the man had recognised her as Déruchette, a charming girl of that neighbourhood.

The man felt no need of quickening his pace; and some minutes later he found himself near the group of oaks. Already he had ceased to think of the vanished Déruchette; and if, at that moment, a porpoise had appeared above the water, or a robin had caught his eye in the hedges, it is probable that he would have passed on his way. But it happened that his eyes were fixed upon the ground; his gaze fell mechanically upon the spot where the girl had stopped. Two little footprints were there plainly visible; and beside them he read this word, evidently written by her in the snow —

“GILLIATT.”

It was his own name.

He lingered for awhile motionless, looking at the letters, the little footprints, and the snow; and then walked on, evidently in a thoughtful mood.

II

THE BÛ DE LA RUE

Gilliatt lived in the parish of St. Sampson. He was not liked by his neighbours; and there were reasons for that fact.

To begin with, he lived in a queer kind of “haunted” dwelling. In the islands of Jersey and Guernsey, sometimes in the country, but often in streets with many inhabitants, you will come upon a house the entrance to which is completely barricaded. Holly bushes obstruct the doorway, hideous boards, with nails, conceal the windows below; while the casements of the upper stories are neither closed nor open: for all the window-frames are barred, but the glass is broken. If there is a little yard, grass grows between its stones; and the parapet of its wall is crumbling away. If there is a garden, it is choked with nettles, brambles, and hemlock, and strange insects abound in it. The chimneys are cracked, the roof is falling in; so much as can be seen from without of the rooms presents a dismantled appearance. The woodwork is rotten; the stone mildewed. The paper of the walls has dropped away and hangs loose, until it presents a history of the bygone fashions of paper-hangings — the scrawling patterns of the time of the Empire, the crescent-shaped draperies of the Directory, the balustrades and pillars of the days of Louis XVI. The thick draperies of cobwebs, filled with flies, indicate the quiet reign long enjoyed by innumerable spiders. Sometimes a broken jug may be noticed on a shelf. Such houses are considered to be haunted. Satan is popularly believed to visit them by night. Houses are like the human beings who inhabit them. They become to their former selves what the corpse is to the living body. A superstitious belief among the people is sufficient to reduce them to this state of death. Then their aspect is terrible. These ghostly houses are common in the Channel Islands.

The rural and maritime populations are easily moved with notions of the active agency of the powers of evil. Among the Channel Isles, and on the neighbouring coast of France, the ideas of the people on this subject are deeply rooted. In their view, Beelzebub has his ministers in all parts of the earth. It is certain that Belphegor is the ambassador from the infernal regions in France, Hutgin in Italy, Belial in Turkey, Thamuz in Spain, Martinet in Switzerland, and Mammon in England. Satan is an Emperor just like any other: a sort of Satan Cæsar. His establishment is well organised. Dagon is grand almoner, Succor Benoth chief of the Eunuchs; Asmodeus, banker at the gaming-table; Kobal, manager of the theatre, and Verdelet, grand-master of the ceremonies. Nybbas is the court-fool; Wierus, a savant, a good strygologue, and a man of much learning in demonology, calls Nybbas the great parodist.

The Norman fishermen, who frequent the Channel, have many precautions to take at sea, by reason of the illusions with which Satan environs them. It has long been an article of popular faith, that Saint Maclou inhabited the great square rock called Ortach, in the sea between Aurigny and the Casquets; and many old sailors used to declare that they had often seen him there, seated and reading in a book. Accordingly the sailors, as they passed, were in the habit of kneeling many times before the Ortach rock, until the day when the fable was destroyed, and the truth took its place. For it has been discovered, and is now well established, that the lonely inhabitant of the rock is not a saint, but a devil. This evil spirit, whose name is Jochmus, had the impudence to pass himself off, for many centuries, as Saint Maclou. Even the Church herself is not proof against snares of this kind. The demons Raguhel, Oribel, and Tobiel, were regarded as saints until the year 745; when Pope Zachary, having at length exposed them, turned them out of saintly company. This sort of weeding of the saintly calendar is certainly very useful; but it can only be practised by very accomplished judges of devils and their ways.

The old inhabitants of these parts relate — though all this refers to bygone times — that the Catholic population of the Norman Archipelago was once, though quite involuntarily, even in more intimate correspondence with the powers of darkness than the Huguenots themselves. How this happened, however, we do not pretend to say; but it is certain that the people suffered considerable annoyance from this cause. It appears that Satan had taken a fancy to the Catholics, and sought their company a good deal; a circumstance which has given rise to the belief that the devil is more Catholic than Protestant. One of his most insufferable familiarities consisted in paying nocturnal visits to married Catholics in bed, just at the moment when the husband had fallen fast asleep, and the wife had begun to doze; a fruitful source of domestic trouble. Patouillet was of opinion that a faithful biography of Voltaire ought not to be without some allusion to this practice of the evil one. The truth of all this is perfectly well known, and described in the forms of excommunication in the rubric *de erroribus nocturnis et de semine diabolorum*. The practice was raging particularly at St. Helier's towards the end of the last century, probably as a punishment for the Revolution; for the evil consequences of revolutionary excesses are incalculable. However this may have been, it is certain that this possibility of a visit from the demon at night, when it is impossible to see distinctly, or even in slumber, caused much embarrassment among orthodox dames. The idea of giving to the world a Voltaire was by no means a pleasant one. One of these, in some anxiety, consulted her confessor on this extremely difficult subject, and the best mode for timely discovery of the cheat. The confessor replied, "In order to be sure that it is your husband by your side, and not a demon, place your hand upon his head. If you find horns, you may be sure there is something wrong." But this test was far from satisfactory to the worthy dame.

Gilliatt's house had been haunted, but it was no longer in that condition; it was for that reason, however, only regarded with more suspicion. No one learned in demonology can be unaware of the fact that, when a sorcerer has installed himself in a haunted dwelling, the devil considers the house sufficiently occupied, and is polite enough to abstain from visiting there, unless called in, like the doctor, on some special occasion.

This house was known by the name of the Bû de la Rue. It was situated at the extremity of a little promontory, rather of rock than of land, forming a small harbourage apart in the creek of Houmet Paradis. The water at this spot is deep. The house stood quite alone upon the point, almost separated from the island, and with just sufficient ground about it for a small garden, which was sometimes inundated by the high tides. Between the port of St. Sampson and the creek of Houmet Paradis, rises a steep hill, surmounted by the block of towers covered with ivy, and known as Vale Castle, or the Château de l'Archange; so that, at St. Sampson, the Bû de la Rue was shut out from sight.

Nothing is commoner than sorcerers in Guernsey. They exercise their profession in certain parishes, in profound indifference to the enlightenment of the nineteenth century. Some of their practices are downright criminal. They set gold boiling, they gather herbs at midnight, they cast sinister looks upon the people's cattle. When the people consult them they send for bottles containing "water of the sick," and they are heard to mutter mysteriously, “the water has a sad look.” In March, 1857, one of them discovered, in water of this kind, seven demons. They are universally feared. Another only lately bewitched a baker “as well as his oven.” Another had the diabolical wickedness to wafer and seal up envelopes “containing nothing inside.” Another went so far as to have on a shelf three bottles labelled “B.” These monstrous facts are well authenticated. Some of these sorcerers are obliging, and for two or three guineas will take on themselves the complaint from which you are suffering. Then they are seen to roll upon their beds, and to groan with pain; and while they are in these agonies the believer exclaims, “There! I am well again.” Others cure all kinds of diseases, by merely tying a handkerchief round the patient’s loins, a remedy so simple that it is astonishing that no one had yet thought of it. In the last century, the Cour Royale of Guernsey bound such folks upon a heap of fagots and burnt them alive. In these days it condemns them to eight weeks’ imprisonment; four weeks on bread and water, and the remainder of the term in solitary confinement. *Amant alterna catenæ.*

The last instance of burning sorcerers in Guernsey took place in 1747. The city authorities devoted one of its squares, the Carrefour du Bordage, to that ceremony. Between 1565 and 1700, eleven sorcerers thus suffered at this spot. As a rule the criminals made confession of their guilt. Torture was used to assist their confession. The Carrefour du Bordage has indeed rendered many other services to society and religion. It was here that heretics were brought to the stake. Under Queen Mary, among other Huguenots burnt here, were a mother and two daughters. The name of this mother was Perrotine Massy. One of the daughters was *enceinte*, and was delivered of a child even in the midst of the flames. As the old chronicle expresses it, “*Son ventre éclata*.” The new-born infant rolled out of the fiery furnace. A man named House took it in his arms; but Helier Gosselin the bailli, like a good Catholic as he was, sternly commanded the child to be cast again into the fire.

III

FOR YOUR WIFE: WHEN YOU MARRY

We must return to Gilliatt.

The country people told how, towards the close of the great Revolution, a woman, bringing with her a little child, came to live in Guernsey. She was English, or perhaps French. She had a name which the Guernsey pronunciation and the country folks' bad spelling had finally converted into "Gilliatt." She lived alone with the child, which, according to some, was a nephew; according to others, a son or grandson; according to others, again, a strange child whom she was protecting. She had some means; enough to struggle on in a poor way. She had purchased a small plot of ground at La Sergentée, and another at La Roque Crespel, near Rocquaine. The house of the Bû de la Rue was haunted at this period. For more than thirty years no one had inhabited it. It was falling into ruins. The garden, so often invaded by the sea, could produce nothing. Besides noises and lights seen there at night-time, the house had this mysterious peculiarity: any one who should leave there in the evening, upon the mantelpiece, a ball of worsted, a few needles, and a plate filled with soup, would assuredly find, in the morning, the soup consumed, the plate empty, and a pair of mittens ready knitted. The house, demon included, was offered for sale for a few pounds sterling. The stranger woman became the purchaser, evidently tempted by the devil, or by the advantageous bargain.

She did more than purchase the house; she took up her abode there with the child; and from that moment peace reigned within its walls. The Bû de la Rue has found a fit tenant, said the country people. The haunting ceased. There was no longer any light seen there, save that of the tallow candle of the new comer. "Witch's candle is as good as devil's torch." The proverb satisfied the gossips of the neighbourhood.

The woman cultivated some acres of land which belonged to her. She had a good cow, of the sort which produces yellow butter. She gathered her white beans, cauliflowers, and "Golden drop" potatoes. She sold, like other people, her parsnips by the tonneau, her onions by the hundred, and her beans by the denerel. She did not go herself to market, but disposed of her crops through the agency of Guilbert Falliot, at the sign of the Abreveurs of

St. Sampson. The register of Falliot bears evidence that Falliot sold for her, on one occasion, as much as twelve bushels of rare early potatoes.

The house had been meanly repaired; but sufficiently to make it habitable. It was only in very bad weather that the rain-drops found their way through the ceilings of the rooms. The interior consisted of a ground-floor suite of rooms, and a granary overhead. The ground-floor was divided into three rooms; two for sleeping, and one for meals. A ladder connected it with the granary above. The woman attended to the kitchen and taught the child to read. She did not go to church or chapel, which, all things considered, led to the conclusion that she must be French not to go to a place of worship. The circumstance was grave. In short, the new comers were a puzzle to the neighbourhood.

That the woman was French seemed probable. Volcanoes cast forth stones, and revolutions men, so families are removed to distant places; human beings come to pass their lives far from their native homes; groups of relatives and friends disperse and decay; strange people fall, as it were, from the clouds — some in Germany, some in England, some in America. The people of the country view them with surprise and curiosity. Whence come these strange faces? Yonder mountain, smoking with revolutionary fires, casts them out. These barren aërolites, these famished and ruined people, these footballs of destiny, are known as refugees, émigrés, adventurers. If they sojourn among strangers, they are tolerated; if they depart, there is a feeling of relief. Sometimes these wanderers are harmless, inoffensive people, strangers — at least, as regards the women — to the events which have led to their exile, objects of persecution, helpless and astonished at their fate. They take root again somewhere as they can. They have done no harm to any one, and scarcely comprehend the destiny that has befallen them. So thus I have seen a poor tuft of grass uprooted and carried away by the explosion of a mine. No great explosion was ever followed by more of such strays than the first French Revolution.

The strange woman whom the Guernsey folks called “Gilliatt” was, possibly, one of these human strays.

The woman grew older; the child became a youth. They lived alone and avoided by all; but they were sufficient for each other. *Louve et louveteau se pourlèchent.* This was another of the generous proverbs which the neighbourhood applied to them. Meanwhile, the youth grew to manhood; and then, as the old and withered bark falls from the tree, the mother died.

She left to her son the little field of Sergentée, the small property called La Roque Crespel, and the house known as the Bû de la Rue; with the addition, as the official inventory said, of “one hundred guineas in gold in the *pid d’une cauche*,” that is to say, in the foot of a stocking. The house was already sufficiently furnished with two oaken chests, two beds, six chairs and a table, besides necessary household utensils. Upon a shelf were some books, and in the corner a trunk, by no means of a mysterious character, which had to be opened for the inventory. This trunk was of drab leather, ornamented with brass nails and little stars of white metal, and it contained a bride’s outfit, new and complete, of beautiful Dunkirk linen — chemises and petticoats, and some silk dresses — with a paper on which was written, in the handwriting of the deceased, —

“For your wife: when you marry.”

The loss of his mother was a terrible blow for the young man. His disposition had always been unsociable; he became now moody and sullen. The solitude around him was complete. Hitherto it had been mere isolation; now his life was a blank. While we have only one companion, life is endurable; left alone, it seems as if it is impossible to struggle on, and we fall back in the race, which is the first sign of despair. As time rolls on, however, we discover that duty is a series of compromises; we contemplate life, regard its end, and submit; but it is a submission which makes the heart bleed.

Gilliatt was young; and his wound healed with time. At that age sorrows cannot be lasting. His sadness, disappearing by slow degrees, seemed to mingle itself with the scenes around him, to draw him more and more towards the face of nature, and further and further from the need of social converse; and, finally, to assimilate his spirit more completely to the solitude in which he lived.

IV

AN UNPOPULAR MAN

Gilliatt, as we have said, was not popular in the parish. Nothing could be more natural than that antipathy among his neighbours. The reasons for it were abundant. To begin with, as we have already explained, there was the strange house he lived in; then there was his mysterious origin. Who could that woman have been? and what was the meaning of this child? Country people do not like mysteries, when they relate to strange sojourners among them. Then his clothes were the clothes of a workman, while he had, although certainly not rich, sufficient to live without labour. Then there was his garden, which he succeeded in cultivating, and from which he produced crops of potatoes, in spite of the stormy equinoxes; and then there were the big books which he kept upon a shelf, and read from time to time.

More reasons: why did he live that solitary life? The Bû de la Rue was a kind of lazaretto, in which Gilliatt was kept in a sort of moral quarantine. This, in the popular judgment, made it quite simple that people should be astonished at his isolation, and should hold him responsible for the solitude which society had made around his home.

He never went to chapel. He often went out at night-time. He held converse with sorcerers. He had been seen, on one occasion, sitting on the grass with an expression of astonishment on his features. He haunted the druidical stones of the Ancresse, and the fairy caverns which are scattered about in that part. It was generally believed that he had been seen politely saluting the Roque qui Chante, or Crowing Rock. He bought all birds which people brought to him, and having bought them, set them at liberty. He was civil to the worthy folks in the streets of St. Sampson, but willingly turned out of his way to avoid them if he could. He often went out on fishing expeditions, and always returned with fish. He trimmed his garden on Sundays. He had a bagpipe which he had bought from one of the Highland soldiers who are sometimes in Guernsey, and on which he played occasionally at twilight, on the rocks by the seashore. He had been seen to make strange gestures, like those of one sowing seeds. What kind of treatment could be expected for a man like that?

As regards the books left by the deceased woman, which he was in the habit of reading, the neighbours were particularly suspicious. The Reverend Jaquemin Hérode, rector of St. Sampson, when he visited the house at the time of the woman's funeral, had read on the backs of these books the titles *Rosier's Dictionary*, *Candide*, by Voltaire, *Advice to the People on Health*, by Tissot. A French noble, an émigré, who had retired to St. Sampson, remarked that this Tissot, "must have been the Tissot who carried the head of the Princess de Lamballe upon a pike."

The Reverend gentleman had also remarked upon one of these books, the highly fantastic and terribly significant title, *De Rhubarbaro*.

In justice to Gilliatt, however, it must be added that this volume being in Latin — a language which it is doubtful if he understood — the young man had possibly never read it.

But it is just those books which a man possesses, but does not read, which constitute the most suspicious evidence against him. The Spanish Inquisition have deliberated on that point, and have come to a conclusion which places the matter beyond further doubt.

The book in question, however, was no other than the treatise of Doctor Tilingius upon the rhubarb plant, published in Germany in 1679.

It was by no means certain that Gilliatt did not prepare philters and unholy decoctions. He was undoubtedly in possession of certain phials.

Why did he walk abroad at evening, and sometimes even at midnight, on the cliffs? Evidently to hold converse with the evil spirits who, by night, frequent the seashores, enveloped in smoke.

On one occasion he had aided a witch at Torteval to clean her chaise: this was an old woman named Moutonne Gahy.

When a census was taken in the island, in answer to a question about his calling, he replied, "Fisherman; when there are fish to catch." Imagine yourself in the place of Gilliatt's neighbours, and admit that there is something unpleasant in answers like this.

Poverty and wealth are comparative terms. Gilliatt had some fields and a house, his own property; compared with those who had nothing, he was not poor. One day, to test this, and perhaps, also as a step towards a correspondence — for there are base women who would marry a demon for the sake of riches — a young girl of the neighbourhood said to Gilliatt, "When are you going to take a wife, neighbour?" He answered, "I will take a wife when the Roque qui Chante takes a husband."

This Roque qui Chante is a great stone, standing in a field near Mons. Lemézurier de Fry's. It is a stone of a highly suspicious character. No one knows what deeds are done around it. At times you may hear there a cock crowing, when no cock is near — an extremely disagreeable circumstance. Then it is commonly asserted that this stone was originally placed in the field by the elfin people known as *Sarregousets*, who are the same as the *Sins*.

At night, when it thunders, if you should happen to see men flying in the lurid light of the clouds, or on the rolling waves of the air, these are no other than the Sarregousets. A woman who lives at the Grand Mielles knows them well. One evening, when some Sarregousets happened to be assembled at a crossroad, this woman cried out to a man with a cart, who did not know which route to take, "Ask them your way. They are civil folks, and always ready to direct a stranger." There can be little doubt that this woman was a sorceress.

The learned and judicious King James I. had women of this kind boiled, and then tasting the water of the cauldron, was able to say from its flavour, "That was a sorceress;" or "That was not one."

It is to be regretted that the kings of these latter days no longer possess a talent which placed in so strong a light the utility of monarchical institutions.

It was not without substantial grounds that Gilliatt lived in this odour of sorcery. One midnight, during a storm, Gilliatt being at sea alone in a bark, on the coast by La Sommeilleuse, he was heard to ask —

"Is there a passage sufficient for me?"

And a voice cried from the heights above:

"Passage enough: steer boldly."

To whom could he have been speaking, if not to those who replied to him? This seems something like evidence.

Another time, one stormy evening, when it was so dark that nothing could be distinguished, Gilliatt was near the Catiau Roque — a double row of rocks where witches, goats, and other diabolical creatures assemble and dance on Fridays — and here, it is firmly believed, that the voice of Gilliatt was heard mingling in the following terrible conversation: —

"How is Vesin Brovard?" (This was a mason who had fallen from the roof of a house.)

"He is getting better."

“Ver dia! he fell from a greater height than that of yonder peak. It is delightful to think that he was not dashed to pieces.”

“Our folks had a fine time for the seaweed gathering last week.”

“Ay, finer than to-day.”

“I believe you. There will be little fish at the market to-day.”

“It blows too hard.”

“They can’t lower their nets.”

“How is Catherine?”

“She is charming.”

Catherine was evidently the name of a Sarregouset.

According to all appearance, Gilliatt had business on hand at night: at least none doubted it.

Sometimes he was seen with a pitcher in his hand, pouring water on the ground. Now water, cast upon the ground, is known to make a shape like that of devils.

On the road to St. Sampson, opposite the Martello tower, number 1, stand three stones, arranged in the form of steps. Upon the platform of those stones, now empty, stood anciently a cross, or perhaps a gallows. These stones are full of evil influences.

Staid and worthy people, and perfectly credible witnesses, testified to having seen Gilliatt at this spot conversing with a toad. Now there are no toads at Guernsey. The share of Guernsey in the reptiles of the Channel Isles consisting exclusively of the snakes. It is Jersey that has all the toads. This toad, then, must have swum from the neighbouring island, in order to hold converse with Gilliatt. The converse was of a friendly kind.

These facts were clearly established; and the proof is that the three stones are there to this day. Those who doubt it may go and see them; and at a little distance, there is also a house on which the passer-by may read this inscription: —

“Dealer in cattle, alive and dead, old cordage, iron, bones, and tobacco for chewing, prompt payment for goods, and every attention given to orders.”

A man must be sceptical indeed to contest the existence of those stones, and of the house in question. Now both these circumstances were injurious to the reputation of Gilliatt.

Only the most ignorant are unaware of the fact that the greatest danger of the coasts of the Channel Islands is the King of the Auxcriniers. No inhabitant of the seas is more redoubtable. Whoever has seen him is certain to be wrecked between one St. Michel and the other. He is little, being in fact a dwarf; and is deaf, in his quality of king. He knows the names of all those who have been drowned in the seas, and the spots where they lie. He has a profound knowledge of that great graveyard which stretches far and wide beneath the waters of the ocean. A head, massive in the lower part and narrow in the forehead; a squat and corpulent figure; a skull, covered with warty excrescences; long legs, long arms, fins for feet, claws for hands, and a sea-green countenance; such are the chief characteristics of this king of the waves. His claws have palms like hands; his fins human nails. Imagine a spectral fish with the face of a human being. No power could check his career unless he could be exorcised, or mayhap, fished up from the sea. Meanwhile he continues his sinister operations. Nothing is more unpleasant than an interview with this monster: amid the rolling waves and breakers, or in the thick of the mist, the sailor perceives, sometimes, a strange creature with a beetle brow, wide nostrils, flattened ears, an enormous mouth, gap-toothed jaws, peaked eyebrows, and great grinning eyes. When the lightning is livid, he appears red; when it is purple, he looks wan. He has a stiff spreading beard, running with water, and overlapping a sort of pelerine, ornamented with fourteen shells, seven before and seven behind. These shells are curious to those who are learned in conchology. The King of the Auxcriniers is only seen in stormy seas. He is the terrible harbinger of the tempest. His hideous form traces itself in the fog, in the squall, in the tempest of rain. His breast is hideous. A coat of scales covers his sides like a vest. He rises above the waves which fly before the wind, twisting and curling like thin shavings of wood beneath the carpenter’s plane. Then his entire form issues out of the foam, and if there should happen to be in the horizon any vessels in distress, pale in the twilight, or his face lighted up with a sinister smile, he dances terrible and uncouth to behold. It is an evil omen indeed to meet him on a voyage.

At the period when the people of St. Sampson were particularly excited on the subject of Gilliatt, the last persons who had seen the King of the Auxcriniers declared that his pelerine was now ornamented with only thirteen shells. Thirteen! He was only the more dangerous. But what had become of the fourteenth? Had he given it to some one? No one would say positively; and folks confined themselves to conjecture. But it was an undoubted fact that a certain Mons. Lupin Mabier, of Godaines, a man of property, paying a good sum to the land tax, was ready to depose on oath, that he had once seen in the hands of Gilliatt a very remarkable kind of shell.

It was not uncommon to hear dialogues like the following among the country people: —

“I have a fine bull here, neighbour, what do you say?”

“Very fine, neighbour?”

“It is a fact, tho’ ’tis I who say it; he is better though for tallow than for meat.”

“Ver dia!”

“Are you sure that Gilliatt hasn’t cast his eye upon it?”

Gilliatt would stop sometimes beside a field where some labourers were assembled, or near gardens in which gardeners were engaged, and would perhaps hear these mysterious words:

“When the *mors du diable* flourishes, reap the winter rye.”

(The *mors du diable* is the scabwort plant.)

“The ash tree is coming out in leaf. There will be no more frost.”

“Summer solstice, thistle in flower.”

“If it rain not in June, the wheat will turn white. Look out for mildew.”

“When the wild cherry appears, beware of the full moon.”

“If the weather on the sixth day of the new moon is like that of the fourth, or like that of the fifth day, it will be the same nine times out of twelve, in the first case, and eleven times out of twelve in the second, during the whole month.”

“Keep your eye on neighbours who go to law with you. Beware of malicious influences. A pig which has had warm milk given to it will die. A cow which has had its teeth rubbed with leeks will eat no more.”

“Spawning time with the smelts; beware of fevers.”

“When frogs begin to appear, sow your melons.”

“When the liverwort flowers, sow your barley.”

“When the limes are in bloom, mow the meadows.”

“When the elm-tree flowers, open the hot-bed frames.”

“When tobacco fields are in blossom, close your greenhouses.”

And, fearful to relate, these occult precepts were not without truth. Those who put faith in them could vouch for the fact.

One night, in the month of June, when Gilliatt was playing upon his bagpipe, upon the sand-hills on the shore of the Demie de Fontenelle, it had happened that the mackerel fishing had failed.

One evening, at low water, it came to pass that a cart filled with seaweed for manure overturned on the beach, in front of Gilliatt's house. It is most probable that he was afraid of being brought before the magistrates, for he took considerable trouble in helping to raise the cart, and he filled it again himself.

A little neglected child of the neighbourhood being troubled with vermin, he had gone himself to St. Peter's Port, and had returned with an ointment, with which he rubbed the child's head. Thus Gilliatt had removed the pest from the poor child, which was an evidence that Gilliatt himself had originally given it; for everybody knows that there is a certain charm for giving vermin to people.

Gilliatt was suspected of looking into wells — a dangerous practice with those who have an evil eye; and, in fact, at Arculons, near St. Peter's Port, the water of a well became unwholesome. The good woman to whom this well belonged said to Gilliatt:

"Look here, at this water;" and she showed him a glassful. Gilliatt acknowledged it.

"The water is thick," he said; "that is true."

The good woman, who dreaded him in her heart, said, "Make it sweet again for me."

Gilliatt asked her some questions: whether she had a stable? whether the stable had a drain? whether the gutter of the drain did not pass near the well? The good woman replied "Yes." Gilliatt went into the stable; worked at the drain; turned the gutter in another direction; and the water became pure again. People in the country round might think what they pleased. A well does not become foul one moment and sweet the next without good cause; the bottom of the affair was involved in obscurity; and, in short, it was difficult to escape the conclusion that Gilliatt himself had bewitched the water.

On one occasion, when he went to Jersey, it was remarked that he had taken a lodging in the street called the Rue des Alleurs. Now the word *alleurs* signifies spirits from the other world.

In villages it is the custom to gather together all these little hints and indications of a man's career; and when they are gathered together, the total constitutes his reputation among the inhabitants.

It happened that Gilliatt was once caught with blood issuing from his nose. The circumstances appeared grave. The master of a barque who had sailed almost entirely round the world, affirmed that among the Tongusians all sorcerers were subject to bleeding at the nose. In fact, when you see a man in those parts bleeding at the nose, you know at once what is in the wind. Moderate reasoners, however, remarked that the characteristics of sorcerers among the Tongusians may possibly not apply in the same degree to the sorcerers of Guernsey.

In the environs of one of the St. Michels, he had been seen to stop in a close belonging to the Huriaux, skirting the highway from the Videclins. He whistled in the field, and a moment afterwards a crow alighted there; a moment later, a magpie. The fact was attested by a worthy man who has since been appointed to the office of Douzenier of the Douzaine, as those are called who are authorised to make a new survey and register of the fief of the king.

At Hamel, in the Vingtaine of L'Epine, there lived some old women who were positive of having heard one morning a number of swallows distinctly calling "Gilliatt."

Add to all this that he was of a malicious temper.

One day, a poor man was beating an ass. The ass was obstinate. The poor man gave him a few kicks in the belly with his wooden shoe, and the ass fell. Gilliatt ran to raise the unlucky beast, but he was dead. Upon this Gilliatt administered to the poor man a sound thrashing.

Another day, Gilliatt seeing a boy come down from a tree with a brood of little birds, newly hatched and unfledged, he took the brood away from the boy, and carried his malevolence so far as even to take them back and replace them in the tree.

Some passers-by took up the boy's complaint; but Gilliatt made no reply, except to point to the old birds, who were hovering and crying plaintively over the tree, as they looked for their nest. He had a weakness for birds — another sign by which the people recognise a magician.

Children take a pleasure in robbing the nests of birds along the cliff. They bring home quantities of yellow, blue, and green eggs, with which they make rosaries for mantelpiece ornaments. As the cliffs are peaked, they sometimes slip and are killed. Nothing is prettier than shutters decorated with sea-birds' eggs. Gilliatt's mischievous ingenuity had no end. He would climb, at the peril of his own life, into the steep places of the sea rocks, and hang up bundles of hay, old hats, and all kinds of scarecrows, to deter the birds from building there, and, as a consequence, to prevent the children from visiting those spots.

These are some of the reasons why Gilliatt was disliked throughout the country. Perhaps nothing less could have been expected.

V

MORE SUSPICIOUS FACTS ABOUT GILLIATT

Public opinion was not yet quite settled with regard to Gilliatt.

In general he was regarded as a *Marcou*: some went so far as to believe him to be a *Cambion*. A cambion is the child of a woman begotten by a devil.

When a woman bears to her husband seven male children consecutively, the seventh is a marcou. But the series must not be broken by the birth of any female child.

The marcou has a natural fleur-de-lys imprinted upon some part of his body; for which reason he has the power of curing scrofula, exactly the same as the King of France. Marcous are found in all parts of France, but particularly in the Orléanais. Every village of Gâtinais has its marcou. It is sufficient for the cure of the sick that the marcou should breathe upon their wounds, or let them touch his fleur-de-lys. The night of Good Friday is particularly favourable to these ceremonies. Ten years ago there lived, at Ormes in Gâtinais, one of these creatures who was nicknamed the Beau Marcou, and consulted by all the country of Beauce. He was a cooper, named Foulon, who kept a horse and vehicle. To put a stop to his miracles, it was found necessary to call in the assistance of the gendarmes. His fleur-de-lys was on the left breast; other marcous have it in different parts.

There are marcous at Jersey, Auvigny, and at Guernsey. This fact is doubtless in some way connected with the rights possessed by France over Normandy: or why the fleur-de-lys?

There are also, in the Channel Islands, people afflicted with scrofula; which of course necessitates a due supply of these marcous.

Some people, who happened to be present one day when Gilliatt was bathing in the sea, had fancied that they could perceive upon him a fleur-de-lys. Interrogated on that subject he made no reply, but merely burst into laughter. For he laughed sometimes like other men. From that time, however, no one ever saw him bathe: he bathed thenceforth only in perilous and solitary places; probably by moonlight: a thing in itself somewhat suspicious.

Those who obstinately regarded him as a cambion, or son of the devil, were evidently in error. They ought to have known that cambions scarcely exist out of Germany. But The Vale and St. Sampson were, fifty years ago, places remarkable for the ignorance of their inhabitants.

To fancy that a resident of the island of Guernsey could be the son of a devil was evidently absurd.

Gilliatt, for the very reason that he caused disquietude among the people, was sought for and consulted. The peasants came in fear, to talk to him of their diseases. That fear itself had in it something of faith in his powers; for in the country, the more the doctor is suspected of magic, the more certain is the cure. Gilliatt had certain remedies of his own, which he had inherited from the deceased woman. He communicated them to all who had need of them, and would never receive money for them. He cured whitlows with applications of herbs. A liquor in one of his phials allayed fever. The chemist of St. Sampson, or *pharmacien*, as they would call him in France, thought that this was probably a decoction of Jesuits' bark. The more generous among his censors admitted that Gilliatt was not so bad a demon in his dealings with the sick, so far as regarded his ordinary remedies. But in his character of a marcou, he would do nothing. If persons afflicted with scrofula came to him to ask to touch the fleur-de-lys on his skin, he made no other answer than that of shutting the door in their faces. He persistently refused to perform any miracles — a ridiculous position for a sorcerer. No one is bound to be a sorcerer; but when a man is one, he ought not to shirk the duties of his position.

One or two exceptions might be found to this almost universal antipathy. Sieur Landoys, of the Clos-Landés, was clerk and registrar of St. Peter's Port, custodian of the documents, and keeper of the register of births, marriages, and deaths. This Landoys was vain of his descent from Peter Landoys, treasurer of the province of Brittany, who was hanged in 1485. One day, when Sieur Landoys was bathing in the sea, he ventured to swim out too far, and was on the point of drowning: Gilliatt plunged into the water, narrowly escaping drowning himself, and succeeded in saving him. From that day Landoys never spoke an evil word of Gilliatt. To those who expressed surprise at this change, he replied, "Why should I detest a man who never did me any harm, and who has rendered me a service?" The parish clerk and registrar even came at last to feel a sort of friendship for Gilliatt. This public functionary was a man without prejudices. He had no faith in sorcerers. He laughed at people who went in fear of ghostly visitors. As for him, he had a boat in which he amused himself by making fishing excursions in his leisure hours; but he had never seen anything extraordinary, unless it was on one occasion — a woman clothed in white, who rose about the waters in the light of the moon — and even of this circumstance he was not quite sure. Moutonne Gahy, the old witch of Torteval, had given him a little bag to be worn under the cravat, as a protection against evil spirits: he ridiculed the bag, and knew not what it contained, though, to be sure, he carried it about him, feeling more security with this charm hanging on his neck.

Some courageous persons, emboldened by the example of Landoys, ventured to cite, in Gilliatt's favour, certain extenuating circumstances; a few signs of good qualities, as his sobriety, his abstinence from spirits and tobacco; and sometimes they went so far as to pass this elegant eulogium upon him: "He neither smokes, drinks, chews tobacco, or takes snuff."

Sobriety, however, can only count as a virtue when there are other virtues to support it.

The ban of public opinion lay heavily upon Gilliatt.

In any case, as a marcou, Gilliatt had it in his power to render great services. On a certain Good Friday, at midnight, a day and an hour propitious to this kind of cure, all the scrofulous people of the island, either by sudden inspiration, or by concerted action, presented themselves in a crowd at the Bû de la Rue, and with pitiable sores and imploring gestures, called on Gilliatt to make them clean. But he refused; and herein the people found another proof of his malevolence.

VI

THE DUTCH SLOOP

Such was the character of Gilliatt.

The young women considered him ugly.

Ugly he was not. He might, perhaps, have been called handsome. There was something in his profile of rude but antique grace. In repose it had some resemblance to that of a sculptured Dacian on the Trajan column. His ears were small, delicate, without lobes, and of an admirable form for hearing. Between his eyes he had that proud vertical line which indicates in a man boldness and perseverance. The corners of his mouth were depressed, giving a slight expression of bitterness. His forehead had a calm and noble roundness. The clear pupils of his eyes possessed a steadfast look, although troubled a little with that involuntary movement of the eyelids which fishermen contract from the glitter of the waves. His laugh was boyish and pleasing. No ivory could be of a finer white than his teeth; but exposure to the sun had made him swarthy as a moor. The ocean, the tempest, and the darkness cannot be braved with impunity. At thirty he looked already like a man of forty-five. He wore the sombre mask of the wind and the sea.

The people had nicknamed him “Malicious Gilliatt.”

There is an Indian fable to the effect that one day the god Brahma inquired of the Spirit of Power, “Who is stronger than thee?” and the spirit replied “Cunning.” A Chinese proverb says, “What could not the lion do, if he was the monkey also?” Gilliatt was neither the lion nor the monkey; but his actions gave some evidence of the truth of the Chinese proverb, and of the Hindoo fable. Although only of ordinary height and strength, he was enabled, so inventive and powerful was his dexterity, to lift burdens that might have taxed a giant, and to accomplish feats which would have done credit to an athlete.

He had in him something of the power of the gymnast. He used, with equal address, his left hand and his right.

He never carried a gun; but was often seen with his net. He spared the birds, but not the fish. Ill-luck to these dumb creatures! He was an excellent swimmer.

Solitude either develops the mental powers, or renders men dull and vicious. Gilliatt sometimes presented himself under both these aspects. At times, when his features wore that air of strange surprise already mentioned, he might have been taken for a man of mental powers scarcely superior to the savage. At other moments an indescribable air of penetration lighted up his face. Ancient Chaldea possessed some men of this stamp. At certain times the dullness of the shepherd mind became transparent, and revealed the inspired sage.

After all, he was but a poor man; uninstructed, save to the extent of reading and writing. It is probable that the condition of his mind was at that limit which separates the dreamer from the thinker. The thinker wills, the dreamer is a passive instrument. Solitude sinks deeply into pure natures, and modifies them in a certain degree. They become, unconsciously, penetrated with a kind of sacred awe. The shadow in which the mind of Gilliatt constantly dwelt was composed in almost equal degrees of two elements, both obscure, but very different. Within himself all was ignorance and weakness; without, infinity and mysterious power.

By dint of frequent climbing on the rocks, of escalading the rugged cliffs, of going to and fro among the islands in all weathers, of navigating any sort of craft which came to hand, of venturing night and day in difficult channels, he had become, without taking count of his other advantages, and merely in following his fancy and pleasure, a seaman of extraordinary skill.

He was a born pilot. The true pilot is the man who navigates the bed of the ocean even more than its surface. The waves of the sea are an external problem, continually modified by the submarine conditions of the waters in which the vessel is making her way. To see Gilliatt guiding his craft among the reefs and shallows of the Norman Archipelago, one might have fancied that he carried in his head a plan of the bottom of the sea. He was familiar with it all, and feared nothing.

He was better acquainted with the buoys in the channels than the cormorants who make them their resting-places. The almost imperceptible differences which distinguish the four upright buoys of the Creux, Alligande, the Trémies, and the Sardrette, were perfectly visible and clear to him, even in misty weather. He hesitated neither at the oval, apple-headed buoy of Anfré, nor at the triple iron point of the Rousse, nor at the white ball of the Corbette, nor at the black ball of Longue Pierre; and there was no fear of his confounding the cross of Goubeau with the sword planted in earth at La Platte, nor the hammer-shaped buoy of the Barbées with the curled-tail buoy of the Moulinet.

His rare skill in seamanship showed itself in a striking manner one day at Guernsey, on the occasion of one of those sea tournaments which are called regattas. The feat to be performed was to navigate alone a boat with four sails from St. Sampson to the Isle of Herm, at one league distance, and to bring the boat back from Herm to St. Sampson. To manage, without assistance, a boat with four sails, is a feat which every fisherman is equal to, and the difficulty seemed little; but there was a condition which rendered it far from simple. The boat, to begin with, was one of those large and heavy sloops of bygone times which the sailors of the last century knew by the name of “Dutch Belly Boats.” This ancient style of flat, pot-bellied craft, carrying on the larboard and starboard sides, in compensation for the want of a keel, two wings, which lowered themselves, sometimes the one, sometimes the other, according to the wind, may occasionally be met with still at sea. In the second place, there was the return from Herm, a journey which was rendered more difficult by a heavy ballasting of stones. The conditions were to go empty, but to return loaded. The sloop was the prize of the contest. It was dedicated beforehand to the winner. This “Dutch Belly Boat” had been employed as a pilot-boat. The pilot who had rigged and worked it for twenty years was the most robust of all the sailors of the channel. When he died no one had been found capable of managing the sloop; and it was, in consequence, determined to make it the prize of the regatta. The sloop, though not decked, had some sea qualities, and was a tempting prize for a skilful sailor. Her mast was somewhat forward, which increased the motive-power of her sails; besides having the advantage of not being in the way of her pilot. It was a strong-built vessel, heavy, but roomy, and taking the open sea well; in fact, a good, serviceable craft. There was eager anxiety for the prize; the task was a rough one, but the reward of success was worth having. Seven or eight fishermen, among the most vigorous of the island, presented themselves. One by one they essayed; but not one could succeed in reaching Herm. The last one who tried his skill was known for having crossed, in a rowing-boat, the terrible narrow sea between Sark and Brecq-Hou. Sweating with his exertions, he brought back the sloop, and said, “It is impossible.” Gilliatt then entered the bark, seized first of all the oar, then the mainsail, and pushed out to sea. Then, without either making fast the boom, which would have been imprudent, or letting it go, which kept the sail under his direction, and leaving the boom to move with the wind without drifting, he held the tiller with his left hand. In three quarters of an hour he was at Herm. Three hours later, although a strong breeze had sprung up and was blowing across the roads, the sloop, guided by Gilliatt, returned to St. Sampson with its load of stones. He had, with an extravagant display of his resources, even added to the cargo the little bronze cannon at Herm, which the people were in the habit of firing off on the 5th of November, by way of rejoicing over the death of Guy Fawkes.

Guy Fawkes, by the way, has been dead two hundred and sixty years; a remarkably long period of rejoicing.

Gilliatt, thus burdened and encumbered, although he had the Guy Fawkes'-day cannon in the boat and the south wind in his sails, steered, or rather brought back, the heavy craft to St. Sampson.

Seeing which, Mess Lethierry exclaimed, “There's a bold sailor for you!”

And he held out his hand to Gilliatt.

We shall have occasion to speak again of Mess Lethierry.

The sloop was awarded to Gilliatt.

This adventure detracted nothing from his evil reputation.

Several persons declared that the feat was not at all astonishing, for that Gilliatt had concealed in the boat a branch of wild medlar. But this could not be proved.

From that day forward, Gilliatt navigated no boat except the old sloop. In this heavy craft he went on his fishing avocation. He kept it at anchor in the excellent little shelter which he had all to himself, under the very wall of his house of the Bû de la Rue. At nightfall, he cast his nets over his shoulder, traversed his little garden, climbed over the parapet of dry stones, stepped lightly from rock to rock, and jumping into the sloop, pushed out to sea.

He brought home heavy takes of fish; but people said that his medlar branch was always hanging up in the boat. No one had ever seen this branch, but every one believed in its existence.

When he had more fish than he wanted, he did not sell it, but gave it away.

The poor people took his gift, but were little grateful, for they knew the secret of his medlar branch. Such devices cannot be permitted. It is unlawful to trick the sea out of its treasures.

He was a fisherman; but he was something more. He had, by instinct, or for amusement, acquired a knowledge of three or four trades. He was a carpenter, worker in iron, wheelwright, boat-caulker, and, to some extent, an engineer. No one could mend a broken wheel better than he could. He manufactured, in a fashion of his own, all the things which fishermen use. In a corner of the Bû de la Rue he had a small forge and an anvil; and the sloop having but one anchor, he had succeeded, without help, in making another. The anchor was excellent. The ring had the necessary strength; and Gilliatt, though entirely uninstructed in this branch of the smith's art, had found the exact dimensions of the stock for preventing the over-balancing of the fluke ends.

He had patiently replaced all the nails in the planks by rivets; which rendered rust in the holes impossible.

In this way he had much improved the sea-going qualities of the sloop. He employed it sometimes when he took a fancy to spend a month or two in some solitary islet, like Chousey or the Casquets. People said, "Ay! ay! Gilliatt is away;" but this was a circumstance which nobody regretted.

VII

A FIT TENANT FOR A HAUNTED HOUSE

Gilliatt was a man of dreams, hence his daring, hence also his timidity. He had ideas on many things which were peculiarly his own.

There was in his character, perhaps, something of the visionary and the transcendentalist. Hallucinations may haunt the poor peasant like Martin, no less than the king like Henry IV. There are times when the unknown reveals itself in a mysterious way to the spirit of man. A sudden rent in the veil of darkness will make manifest things hitherto unseen, and then close again upon the mysteries within. Such visions have occasionally the power to effect a transfiguration in those whom they visit. They convert a poor camel-driver into a Mahomet; a peasant girl tending her goats into a Joan of Arc. Solitude generates a certain amount of sublime exaltation. It is like the smoke arising from the burning bush. A mysterious lucidity of mind results, which converts the student into a seer, and the poet into a prophet: herein we find a key to the mysteries of Horeb, Kedron, Ombos; to the intoxication of Castilian laurels, the revelations of the month Busion. Hence, too, we have Peleia at Dodona, Phemonoe at Delphos, Trophonius in Lebadea, Ezekiel on the Chebar, and Jerome in the Thetais.

More frequently this visionary state overwhelms and stupefies its victim. There is such a thing as a divine besottedness. The Hindoo fakir bears about with him the burden of his vision, as the Cretin his goître. Luther holding converse with devils in his garret at Wittenburg; Pascal shutting out the view of the infernal regions with the screen of his cabinet; the African Obi conversing with the white-faced god Bossum; are each and all the same phenomenon, diversely interpreted by the minds in which they manifest themselves, according to their capacity and power. Luther and Pascal were grand, and are grand still; the Obi is simply a poor half-witted creature.

Gilliatt was neither so exalted nor so low. He was a dreamer: nothing more.

Nature presented itself to him under a somewhat strange aspect.

Just as he had often found in the perfectly limpid water of the sea strange creatures of considerable size and of various shapes, of the Medusa genus, which out of the water bore a resemblance to soft crystal, and which, cast again into the sea, became lost to sight in that medium by reason of their identity in transparency and colour, so he imagined that other transparencies, similar to these almost invisible denizens of the ocean, might probably inhabit the air around us. The birds are scarcely inhabitants of the air, but rather amphibious creatures passing much of their lives upon the earth. Gilliatt could not believe the air a mere desert. He used to say, “Since the water is filled with life, why not the atmosphere?” Creatures colourless and transparent like the air would escape from our observation. What proof have we that there are no such creatures? Analogy indicates that the liquid fields of air must have their swimming habitants, even as the waters of the deep. These aerial fish would, of course, be diaphanous; a provision of their wise Creator for our sakes as well as their own. Allowing the light to pass through their forms, casting no shadow, having no defined outline, they would necessarily remain unknown to us, and beyond the grasp of human sense. Gilliatt indulged the wild fancy that if it were possible to exhaust the earth of its atmosphere, or if we could fish the air as we fish the depths of the sea, we should discover the existence of a multitude of strange animals. And then, he would add in his reverie, many things would be made clear.

Reverie, which is thought in its nebulous state, borders closely upon the land of sleep, by which it is bounded as by a natural frontier. The discovery of a new world, in the form of an atmosphere filled with transparent creatures, would be the beginning of a knowledge of the vast unknown. But beyond opens up the illimitable domain of the possible, teeming with yet other beings, and characterised by other phenomena. All this would be nothing supernatural, but merely the occult continuation of the infinite variety of creation. In the midst of that laborious idleness, which was the chief feature in his existence, Gilliatt was singularly observant. He even carried his observations into the domain of sleep. Sleep has a close relation with the possible, which we call also the *invraisemblable*. The world of sleep has an existence of its own. Night-time, regarded as a separate sphere of creation, is a universe in itself. The material nature of man, upon which philosophers tell us that a column of air forty-five miles in height continually presses, is wearied out at night, sinks into lassitude, lies down, and finds repose. The eyes of the flesh are closed; but in that drooping head, less inactive than is supposed, other eyes are opened. The unknown reveals itself. The shadowy existences of the invisible world become more akin to man; whether it be that there is a real communication, or whether things far off in the unfathomable abyss are mysteriously brought nearer, it seems as if the impalpable creatures inhabiting space come then to contemplate our natures, curious to comprehend the denizens of the earth. Some phantom creation ascends or descends to walk beside us in the dim twilight: some existence altogether different from our own, composed partly of human consciousness, partly of something else, quits his fellows and returns again, after presenting himself for a moment to our inward sight; and the sleeper, not wholly slumbering, nor yet entirely conscious, beholds around him strange manifestations of life — pale spectres, terrible or smiling, dismal phantoms, uncouth masks, unknown faces, hydra-headed monsters, undefined shapes, reflections of moonlight where there is no moon, vague fragments of monstrous forms. All these things which come and go in the troubled atmosphere of sleep, and to which men give the name of dreams, are, in truth, only realities invisible to those who walk about the daylight world. The dream-world is the Aquarium of Night.

So, at least, thought Gilliatt.

VIII

THE GILD-HOLM-’UR SEAT

The curious visitor, in these days, would seek in vain in the little bay of Houmet for the house in which Gilliatt lived, or for his garden, or the creek in which he sheltered the Dutch sloop. The Bû de la Rue no longer exists. Even the little peninsula on which his house stood has vanished, levelled by the pickaxe of the quarryman, and carried away, cart-load by cart-load, by dealers in rock and granite. It must be sought now in the churches, the palaces, and the quays of a great city. All that ridge of rocks has been long ago conveyed to London.

These long lines of broken cliffs in the sea, with their frequent gaps and crevices, are like miniature chains of mountains. They strike the eye with the impression which a giant may be supposed to have in contemplating the Cordilleras. In the language of the country they are called “Banques.” These banques vary considerably in form. Some resemble a long spine, of which each rock forms one of the vertebræ; others are like the backbone of a fish; while some bear an odd resemblance to a crocodile in the act of drinking.

At the extremity of the ridge on which the Bû de la Rue was situate, was a large rock, which the fishing people of Houmet called the “Beast’s Horn.” This rock, a sort of pyramid, resembled, though less in height, the “Pinnacle” of Jersey. At high water the sea divided it from the ridge, and the Horn stood alone; at low water it was approached by an isthmus of rocks. The remarkable feature of this “Beast’s Horn” was a sort of natural seat on the side next the sea, hollowed out by the water, and polished by the rains. The seat, however, was a treacherous one. The stranger was insensibly attracted to it by “the beauty of the prospect,” as the Guernsey folks said. Something detained him there in spite of himself, for there is a charm in a wide view. The seat seemed to offer itself for his convenience; it formed a sort of niche in the peaked *façade* of the rock. To climb up to it was easy, for the sea, which had fashioned it out of its rocky base, had also cast beneath it, at convenient distances, a kind of natural stairs composed of flat stones. The perilous abyss is full of these snares; beware, therefore, of its proffered aids. The spot was tempting: the stranger mounted and sat down. There he found himself at his ease; for his seat he had the granite rounded and hollowed out by the foam; for supports, two rocky elbows which seemed made expressly for him; against his back, the high vertical wall of rock which he looked up to and admired, without thinking of the impossibility of scaling it. Nothing could be more simple than to fall into reverie in that convenient resting-place. All around spread the wide sea; far off the ships were seen passing to and fro. It was possible to follow a sail with the eye, till it sank in the horizon beyond the Casquets. The stranger was entranced: he looked around, enjoying the beauty of the scene, and the light touch of wind and wave. There is a sort of bat found at Cayenne, which has the power of fanning people to sleep in the shade with a gentle beating of its dusky wings. Like this strange creature the wind wanders about, alternately ravaging or lulling into security. So the stranger would continue contemplating the sea, listening for a movement in the air, and yielding himself up to dreamy indolence. When the eyes are satiated with light and beauty, it is a luxury to close them for awhile. Suddenly the loiterer would arouse; but it was too late. The sea had crept up step by step; the waters surrounded the rock; the stranger had been lured on to his death.

A terrible rock was this in a rising sea.

The tide gathers at first insensibly, then with violence; when it touches the rocks a sudden wrath seems to possess it, and it foams. Swimming is difficult in the breakers: excellent swimmers have been lost at the Horn of the Bû de la Rue.

In certain places, and at certain periods, the aspect of the sea is dangerous — fatal; as at times is the glance of a woman.

Very old inhabitants of Guernsey used to call this niche, fashioned in the rock by the waves, “Gild-Holm-’Ur” seat, or Kidormur; a Celtic word, say some authorities, which those who understand Celtic cannot interpret, and which all who understand French can— “*Qui-dort-meurt:*” such is the country folks’ translation.

The reader may choose between the translation, *Qui-dort-meurt,* and that given in 1819, I believe in *The Armorican,* by M. Athenas. According to this learned Celtic scholar, Gild-Holm-’Ur signifies “The resting-place of birds.”

There is, at Aurigny, another seat of this kind, called the Monk’s Chair, so well sculptured by the waves, and with steps of rock so conveniently placed, that it might be said that the sea politely sets a footstool for those who rest there.

In the open sea, at high water, the Gild-Holm-’Ur was no longer visible; the water covered it entirely.

The Gild-Holm-’Ur was a neighbour of the Bû de la Rue. Gilliatt knew it well, and often seated himself there. Was it his meditating place? No. We have already said he did not meditate, but dream. The sea, however, never entrapped him there.

BOOK II

MESS LETHIERRY

I

A TROUBLED LIFE, BUT A QUIET CONSCIENCE

Mess Lethierry, a conspicuous man in St. Sampson, was a redoubtable sailor. He had voyaged a great deal. He had been a cabin-boy, seaman, topmast-man, second mate, mate, pilot, and captain. He was at this period a ship-owner. There was not a man to compare with him for general knowledge of the sea. He was brave in putting off to ships in distress. In foul weather he would take his way along the beach, scanning the horizon. “What have we yonder?” he would say; “some craft in trouble?” Whether it were an interloping Weymouth fisherman, a cutter from Aurigny, a bisquine from Courseulle, the yacht of some nobleman, an English craft or a French one — poor or rich, mattered little. He jumped into a boat, called together two or three strong fellows, or did without them, as the case might be, pushed out to sea, rose and sank, and rose again on rolling waves, plunged into the storm, and encountered the danger face to face. Then afar off, amid the rain and lightning, and drenched with water, he was sometimes seen upright in his boat like a lion with a foaming mane. Often he would pass whole days in danger amidst the waves, the hail, and the wind, making his way to the sides of foundering vessels during the tempest, and rescuing men and merchandise. At night, after feats like these, he would return home, and pass his time in knitting stockings.

For fifty years he led this kind of life — from ten years of age to sixty — so long did he feel himself still young. At sixty, he began to discover that he could no longer lift with one hand the great anvil at the forge of Varclin. This anvil weighed three hundredweight. At length rheumatic pains compelled him to be a prisoner; he was forced to give up his old struggle with the sea, to pass from the heroic into the patriarchal stage, to sink into the condition of a harmless, worthy old fellow.

Happily his rheumatism attacks happened at the period when he had secured a comfortable competency. These two consequences of labour are natural companions. At the moment when men become rich, how often comes paralysis — the sorrowful crowning of a laborious life!

Old and weary men say among themselves, “Let us rest and enjoy life.”

The population of islands like Guernsey is composed of men who have passed their lives in going about their little fields or in sailing round the world. These are the two classes of the labouring people; the labourers on the land, and the toilers of the sea. Mess Lethierry was of the latter class; he had had a life of hard work. He had been upon the continent; was for some time a ship carpenter at Rochefort, and afterwards at Cette. We have just spoken of sailing round the world; he had made the circuit of all France, getting work as a journeyman carpenter; and had been employed at the great salt works of Franche-Comte. Though a humble man, he had led a life of adventure. In France he had learned to read, to think, to have a will of his own. He had had a hand in many things, and in all he had done had kept a character for probity. At bottom, however, he was simply a sailor. The water was his element; he used to say that he lived with the fish when really at home. In short, his whole existence, except two or three years, had been devoted to the ocean. Flung into the water, as he said, he had navigated the great oceans both of the Atlantic and the Pacific, but he preferred the Channel. He used to exclaim enthusiastically, “That is the sea for a rough time of it!” He was born at sea, and at sea would have preferred to end his days. After sailing several times round the world, and seeing most countries, he had returned to Guernsey, and never permanently left the island again. Henceforth his great voyages were to Granville and St. Malo.

Mess Lethierry was a Guernsey man — that peculiar amalgamation of Frenchman and Norman, or rather English. He had within himself this quadruple extraction, merged and almost lost in that far wider country, the ocean. Throughout his life and wheresoever he went, he had preserved the habits of a Norman fisherman.

All this, however, did not prevent his looking now and then into some old book; of taking pleasure in reading, in knowing the names of philosophers and poets, and in talking a little now and then in all languages.

II

A CERTAIN PREDILECTION

Gilliatt was a child of Nature. Mess Lethierry was the same.

Lethierry's uncultivated nature, however, was not without certain refinements.

He was fastidious upon the subject of women's hands. In his early years, while still a lad, passing from the stage of cabin-boy to that of sailor, he had heard the Admiral de Suffren say, "There goes a pretty girl; but what horrible great red hands." An observation from an admiral on any subject is a command, a law, an authority far above that of an oracle. The exclamation of Admiral de Suffren had rendered Lethierry fastidious and exacting in the matter of small and white hands. His own hand, a large club fist of the colour of mahogany, was like a mallet or a pair of pincers for a friendly grasp, and, tightly closed, would almost break a paving-stone.

He had never married; he had either no inclination for matrimony, or had never found a suitable match. That, perhaps, was due to his being a stickler for hands like those of a duchess. Such hands are, indeed, somewhat rare among the fishermen's daughters at Portbail.

It was whispered, however, that at Rochefort, on the Charente, he had, once upon a time, made the acquaintance of a certain grisette, realising his ideal. She was a pretty girl with graceful hands; but she was a vixen, and had also a habit of scratching. Woe betide any one who attacked her! yet her nails, though capable at a pinch of being turned into claws, were of a cleanliness which left nothing to be desired. It was these peculiarly bewitching nails which had first enchanted and then disturbed the peace of Lethierry, who, fearing that he might one day become no longer master of his mistress, had decided not to conduct that young lady to the nuptial altar.

Another time he met at Aurigny a country girl who pleased him. He thought of marriage, when one of the inhabitants of the place said to him, "I congratulate you; you will have for your wife a good fuel maker." Lethierry asked the meaning of this. It appeared that the country people at Aurigny have a certain custom of collecting manure from their cow-houses, which they throw against a wall, where it is left to dry and fall to the ground. Cakes of dried manure of this kind are used for fuel, and are called *coipiaux*. A country girl of Aurigny has no chance of getting a husband if she is not a good fuel maker; but the young lady’s especial talent only inspired disgust in Lethierry.

Besides, he had in his love matters a kind of rough country folks’ philosophy, a sailor-like sort of habit of mind. Always smitten but never enslaved, he boasted of having been in his youth easily conquered by a petticoat, or rather a *cotillon*; for what is now-a-days called a crinoline, was in his time called a *cotillon*; a term which, in his use of it, signifies both something more and something less than a wife.

These rude seafaring men of the Norman Archipelago, have a certain amount of shrewdness. Almost all can read and write. On Sundays, little cabin-boys may be seen in those parts, seated upon a coil of ropes, reading, with book in hand. From all time these Norman sailors have had a peculiar satirical vein, and have been famous for clever sayings. It was one of these men, the bold pilot Quéripel, who said to Montgomery, when he sought refuge in Jersey after the unfortunate accident in killing Henry II. at a tournament, with a blow of his lance, “*Tête folle a cassé tête vide*.” Another one, Touzeau, a sea-captain at St. Brélade, was the author of that philosophical pun, erroneously attributed to Camus, “*Après la mort, les papes deviennent papillons, et les sires deviennent cirons*.”

III

THE OLD SEA LANGUAGE

The mariners of the Channel are the true ancient Gauls. The islands, which in these days become rapidly more and more English — preserved for many ages their old French character. The peasant in Sark speaks the language of Louis XIV. Forty years ago, the old classical nautical language was to be found in the mouths of the sailors of Jersey and Aurigny. When amongst them, it was possible to imagine oneself carried back to the sea life of the seventeenth century. From that speaking trumpet which terrified Admiral Hidde, a philologist might have learnt the ancient technicalities of manœuvring and giving orders at sea, in the very words which were roared out to his sailors by Jean Bart. The old French maritime vocabulary is now almost entirely changed, but was still in use in Jersey in 1820. A ship that was a good plyer was *bon boulinier*; one that carried a weather-helm in spite of her foresails and rudder was *un vaisseau ardent*; to get under way was *prendre aire*; to lie to in a storm, *capeyer*; to make fast running rigging was *faire dormant*; to get to windward, *faire chapelle*; to keep the cable tight, *faire teste*; to be out of trim, *être en pantenne*; to keep the sails full, *porter plain*. These expressions have fallen out of use. To-day we say *louvoyer* for to beat to windward, they said *leauvoyer*; for *naviguer*, sail, they said *naviger*; for *virer vent devant,* to tack, *donner vent devant*; for *aller de l'avant,* to make headway, *tailler de l'avant*; for *tirez d'accord*, haul together, *halez d'accord*; for *dérapez,* to weigh anchor, *deplantez*; for *embraquez,* to haul tight, *abraquez*; for *taquets,* cleats, *bittons*; for *burins*, toggles, *tappes*; for *balancine,* fore-lift, main-lift, etc., *valancine*; for *tribord*, starboard, *stribord*; for *les hommes de quart à bâbord*, men of the larboard watch, *les basbourdis*. Tourville wrote to Hocquincourt: *nous avons singlét* (sailed), for *cinglé*. Instead of *la rafale*, squall, *le raffal*; instead of *bossoir*, cat-head, *boussoir*; instead of *drosse*, truss, *drousse*; instead of *loffer*, to luff, *faire une olofée*; instead of *elonger*, to lay alongside, *alonger*; instead of *forte brise,* stiff breeze, *survent*; instead of *jouail,* stock of an anchor, *jas;* instead of *soute*, store-room, *fosse*.

Such, at the beginning of this century, was the maritime dialect of the Channel Islands. Ango would have been startled had he heard the speech of a Jersey pilot. Whilst everywhere else the sails *faseyaient* (shivered), in these islands they *barbeyaient*. A *saute de vent*, sudden shift of wind, was a *folle-vente*. The old methods of mooring known as *la valture* and *la portugaise* were alone used, and such commands as *jour-et-chaque!* and *bosse et vilte!* might still be heard. While a sailor of Granville was already employing the word *clan* for sheave-hold, one of St. Aubin or of St. Sampson still stuck to his *canal de pouliot*. What was called *bout d'alonge* (upper fultock) at St. Malo, was *oreille d'âne* at St. Helier. Mess Lethierry, as did the Duke de Vibonne, called the sheer of the decks *la tonture*, and the caulker's chisel *la patarasse*.

It was with this uncouth sea dialect in his mouth that Duquesne beat De Ruyter, that Duguay Trouin defeated Wasnaer, and that Tourville, in 1681, poured a broadside into the first galley which bombarded Algiers. It is now a dead language. The idiom of the sea is altogether different. Duperré would not be able to understand Suffren.

The language of French naval signals is not less transformed; there is a long distance between the four pennants, red, white, yellow, and blue, of Labourdonnaye, and the eighteen flags of these days, which, hoisted two and two, three and three, or four and four, furnish, for distant communication, sixty-six thousand combinations, are never deficient, and, so to speak, foresee the unforeseen.

IV

ONE IS VULNERABLE WHERE ONE LOVES

Mess Lethierry’s heart and hand were always ready — a large heart and a large hand. His failing was that admirable one, self-confidence. He had a certain fashion of his own of undertaking to do a thing. It was a solemn fashion. He said, “I give my word of honour to do it, with God’s help.” That said, he went through with his duty. He put his faith in God — nothing more. His rare churchgoing was merely formal. At sea he was superstitious.

Nevertheless, the storm had never yet arisen which could daunt him. One reason of this was his impatience of opposition. He could tolerate it neither from the ocean nor anything else. He meant to have his way; so much the worse for the sea if it thwarted him. It might try, if it would, but Mess Lethierry would not give in. A refractory wave could no more stop him than an angry neighbour. What he had said was said; what he planned out was done. He bent neither before an objection nor before the tempest. The word “no” had no existence for him, whether it was in the mouth of a man or in the angry muttering of a thunder-cloud. In the teeth of all he went on in his way. He would take no refusals. Hence his obstinacy in life, and his intrepidity on the ocean.

He seasoned his simple meal of fish soup for himself, knowing the quantities of pepper, salt, and herbs which it required, and was as well pleased with the cooking as with the meal. To complete the sketch of Lethierry’s peculiarities, the reader must conjure a being to whom the putting on of a surtout would amount to a transfiguration; whom a landsman’s greatcoat would convert into a strange animal; one who, standing with his locks blown about by the wind, might have represented old Jean Bart, but who, in the landsman’s round hat, would have looked an idiot; awkward in cities, wild and redoubtable at sea; a man with broad shoulders, fit for a porter; one who indulged in no oaths, was rarely in anger, whose voice had a soft accent, which became like thunder in a speaking-trumpet; a peasant who had read something of the philosophy of Diderot and D’Alembert; a Guernsey man who had seen the great Revolution; a learned ignoramus, free from bigotry, but indulging in visions, with more faith in the White Lady than in the Holy Virgin;

possessing the strength of Polyphemus, the perseverance of Columbus, with a little of the bull in his nature, and a little of the child. Add to these physical and mental peculiarities a somewhat flat nose, large cheeks, a set of teeth still perfect, a face filled with wrinkles, and which seemed to have been buffeted by the waves and subjected to the beating of the winds of forty years, a brow in which the storm and tempest were plainly written — an incarnation of a rock in the open sea. Add to this, too, a good-tempered smile always ready to light up his weather-beaten countenance, and you have before you Mess Lethierry.

Mess Lethierry had two special objects of affection only. Their names were Durande and Déruchette.

BOOK III

DURANDE AND DÉRUCHETTE

I

PRATTLE AND SMOKE

The human body might well be regarded as a mere simulacrum; but it envelopes our reality, it darkens our light, and broadens the shadow in which we live. The soul is the reality of our existence. Strictly speaking, the human visage is a mask. The true man is that which exists under what is called man. If that being, which thus exists sheltered and secreted behind that illusion which we call the flesh, could be approached, more than one strange revelation would be made. The vulgar error is to mistake the outward husk for the living spirit. Yonder maiden, for example, if we could see her as she really is, might she not figure as some bird of the air?

A bird transmuted into a young maiden, what could be more exquisite? Picture it in your own home, and call it Déruchette. Delicious creature! One might be almost tempted to say, “Good-morning, Mademoiselle Goldfinch.” The wings are invisible, but the chirping may still be heard. Sometimes, too, she pipes a clear, loud song. In her childlike prattle, the creature is, perhaps, inferior; but in her song, how superior to humanity! When womanhood dawns, this angel flies away; but sometimes returns, bringing back a little one to a mother. Meanwhile, she who is one day to be a mother is for a long while a child; the girl becomes a maiden, fresh and joyous as the lark. Noting her movements, we feel as if it was good of her not to fly away. The dear familiar companion moves at her own sweet will about the house; flits from branch to branch, or rather from room to room; goes to and fro; approaches and retires; plumes her wings, or rather combs her hair, and makes all kinds of gentle noises — murmurings of unspeakable delight to certain ears. She asks a question, and is answered; is asked something in return, and chirps a reply. It is delightful to chat with her when tired of serious talk; for this creature carries with her something of her skyey element. She is, as it were, a thread of gold interwoven with your sombre thoughts; you feel almost grateful to her for her kindness in not making herself invisible, when it would be so easy for her to be even impalpable; for the beautiful is a necessary of life. There is, in this world, no function more important than that of being charming. The forest-glade would be incomplete without the humming-bird. To shed joy around, to radiate happiness, to cast light upon dark days, to be the golden thread of our destiny, and the very spirit of grace and harmony, is not this to render a service? Does not beauty confer a benefit upon us, even by the simple fact of being beautiful? Here and there we meet with one who possesses that fairy-like power of enchanting all about her; sometimes she is ignorant herself of this magical influence, which is, however, for that reason, only the more perfect. Her presence lights up the home; her approach is like a cheerful warmth; she passes by; and we are content; she stays awhile, and we are happy. To behold her is to live: she is the Aurora with a human face. She has no need to do more than simply to be: she makes an Eden of the house; Paradise breathes from her; and she communicates this delight to all, without taking any greater trouble than that of existing beside them. Is it not a thing divine to have a smile which, none know how, has the power to lighten the weight of that enormous chain which all the living, in common, drag behind them? Déruchette possessed this smile: we may even say that this smile was Déruchette herself. There is one thing which has more resemblance to ourselves than even our face, and that is our expression: but there is yet another thing which more resembles us than this, and that is our smile. Déruchette smiling was simply Déruchette.

There is something peculiarly attractive in the Jersey and Guernsey race. The women, particularly the young, are remarkable for a pure and exquisite beauty. Their complexion is a combination of the Saxon fairness, with the proverbial ruddiness of the Norman people — rosy cheeks and blue eyes; but the eyes want brilliancy. The English training dulls them. Their liquid glances will be irresistible whenever the secret is found of giving them that depth which is the glory of the Parisienne. Happily Englishwomen are not yet quite transformed into the Parisian type. Déruchette was not a Parisian; yet she was certainly not a Guernesiaise. Lethierry had brought her up to be neat and delicate and pretty; and so she was.

Déruchette had, at times, an air of bewitching langour, and a certain mischief in the eye, which were altogether involuntary. She scarcely knew, perhaps, the meaning of the word love, and yet not unwillingly ensnared those about her in the toils. But all this in her was innocent. She never thought of marrying.

Déruchette had the prettiest little hands in the world, and little feet to match them. Sweetness and goodness reigned throughout her person; her family and fortune were her uncle Mess Lethierry; her occupation was only to live her daily life; her accomplishments were the knowledge of a few songs; her intellectual gifts were summed up in her simple innocence; she had the graceful repose of the West Indian woman, mingled at times with giddiness and vivacity, with the teasing playfulness of a child, yet with a dash of melancholy. Her dress was somewhat rustic, and like that peculiar to her country — elegant, though not in accordance with the fashions of great cities; for she wore flowers in her bonnet all the year round. Add to all this an open brow, a neck supple and graceful, chestnut hair, a fair skin slightly freckled with exposure to the sun, a mouth somewhat large, but well-defined, and visited from time to time by a dangerous smile. This was Déruchette.

Sometimes in the evening, a little after sunset, at the moment when the dusk of the sky mingles with the dusk of the sea, and twilight invests the waves with a mysterious awe, the people beheld, entering the harbour of St. Sampson, upon the dark rolling waters, a strange, undefined thing, a monstrous form which puffed and blew; a horrid machine which roared like a wild beast, and smoked like a volcano; a species of Hydra foaming among the breakers, and leaving behind it a dense cloud, as it rushed on towards the town with a frightful beating of its fins, and a throat belching forth flame. This was Durande.

II

THE OLD STORY OF UTOPIA

A steamboat was a prodigious novelty in the waters of the Channel in 182-. The whole coast of Normandy was long strangely excited by it. Now-a-days, ten or a dozen steam vessels, crossing and recrossing within the bounds of the horizon, scarcely attract a glance from loiterers on the shore. At the most, some persons, whose interest or business it is to note such things, will observe the indications in their smoke of whether they burn Welsh or Newcastle coal. They pass, and that is all. “Welcome,” if coming home; “a pleasant passage,” if outward bound.

Folks were less calm on the subject of these wonderful inventions in the first quarter of the present century; and the new and strange machines, and their long lines of smoke regarded with no good-will by the Channel Islanders. In that Puritanical Archipelago, where the Queen of England has been censured for violating the Scriptures by using chloroform during her accouchments, the first steam-vessel which made its appearance received the name of the “Devil Boat.” In the eyes of these worthy fishermen, once Catholics, now Calvinists, but always bigots, it seemed to be a portion of the infernal regions which had been somehow set afloat. A local preacher selected for his discourse the question of “Whether man has the right to make fire and water work together when God had divided them. This beast, composed of iron and fire, did it not resemble Leviathan? Was it not an attempt to bring chaos again into the universe? This is not the only occasion on which the progress of civilisation has been stigmatised as a return to chaos.

“A mad notion — a gross delusion — an absurdity!” Such was the verdict of the Academy of Sciences when consulted by Napoleon on the subject of steamboats, early in the present century. The poor fishermen of St. Sampson may be excused for not being, in scientific matters, any wiser than the mathematicians of Paris; and in religious matters, a little island like Guernsey is not bound to be more enlightened than a great continent like America. In the year 1807, when the first steamboat of Fulton, commanded by Livingston, furnished with one of Watt’s engines, sent from England, and manœuvred, besides her ordinary crew, by two Frenchmen only, André

Michaux and another, made her first voyage from New York to Albany, it happened that she set sail on the 17th of August. The Methodists took up this important fact, and in numberless chapels, preachers were heard calling down a malediction on the machine, and declaring that this number 17 was no other than the total of the ten horns and seven heads of the beast of the Apocalypse. In America, they invoked against the steamboats the beast from the book of Revelation; in Europe, the reptile of the book of Genesis. This was the simple difference.

The savants had rejected steamboats as impossible; the priests had anathematised them as impious. Science had condemned, and religion consigned them to perdition. Fulton was a new incarnation of Lucifer. The simple people on the coasts and in the villages were confirmed in their prejudice by the uneasiness which they felt at the outlandish sight. The religious view of steamboats may be summed up as follows: Water and fire were divorced at the creation. This divorce was enjoined by God himself. Man has no right to join what his Maker has put asunder; to reunite what he has disunited. The peasants' view was simply, "I don't like the look of this thing."

No one but Mess Lethierry, perhaps, could have been found at that early period daring enough to dream of such an enterprise as the establishment of a steam-vessel between Guernsey and St. Malo. He, alone, as an independent thinker, was capable of conceiving such an idea, or, as a hardy mariner, of carrying it out. The French part of his nature, probably, conceived the idea; the English part supplied the energy to put it in execution.

How and when this was, we are about to inform the reader.

III

RANTAINE

About forty years before the period of the commencement of our narrative, there stood in the suburbs of Paris, near the city wall, between the Fosse-aux-Loups and the Tombe-Issoire, a house of doubtful reputation. It was a lonely, ruinous building, evidently a place for dark deeds on an occasion. Here lived, with his wife and child, a species of town bandit; a man who had been clerk to an attorney practising at the Châtelet — he figured somewhat later at the Assize Court; the name of this family was Rantaine. On a mahogany chest of drawers in the old house were two china cups, ornamented with flowers, on one of which appeared, in gilt letters, the words, “A souvenir of friendship;” on the other, “A token of esteem.” The child lived in an atmosphere of vice in this miserable home. The father and mother having belonged to the lower middle class, the boy had learnt to read, and they brought it up in a fashion. The mother, pale and almost in rags, gave “instruction,” as she called it, mechanically, to the little one, heard it spell a few words to her, and interrupted the lesson to accompany her husband on some criminal expedition, or to earn the wages of prostitution. Meanwhile, the book remained open on the table as she had left it, and the boy sat beside it, meditating in his way.

The father and mother, detected one day in one of their criminal enterprises, suddenly vanished into that obscurity in which the penal laws envelop convicted malefactors. The child, too, disappeared.

Lethierry, in his wanderings about the world, stumbled, one day, on an adventurer like himself; helped him out of some scrape; rendered him a kindly service, and was apparently repaid with gratitude. He took a fancy to the stranger, picked him up, and brought him to Guernsey, where, finding him intelligent in learning the duties of a sailor aboard a coasting vessel, he made him a companion. This stranger was the little Rantaine, now grown up to manhood.

Rantaine, like Lethierry, had a bull neck, a large and powerful breadth of shoulders for carrying burdens, and loins like those of the Farnese Hercules. Lethierry and he had a remarkable similarity of appearance: Rantaine was the taller. People who saw their forms behind as they were walking side by side along the port, exclaimed, “There are two brothers.” On looking them in the face the effect was different: all that was open in the countenance of Lethierry was reserved and cautious in that of Rantaine. Rantaine was an expert swordsman, played on the harmonica, could snuff a candle at twenty paces with a pistol-ball, could strike a tremendous blow with the fist, recite verses from Voltaire’s *Henriade*, and interpret dreams; he knew by heart *Les Tombeaux de Saint Denis*, by Treneuil. He talked sometimes of having had relations with the Sultan of Calicut, “whom the Portuguese call the Zamorin.” If any one had seen the little memorandum-book which he carried about with him, he would have found notes and jottings of this kind: “At Lyons in a fissure of the wall of one of the cells in the prison of St. Joseph, a file.” He spoke always with a grave deliberation; he called himself the son of a Chevalier de Saint Louis. His linen was of a miscellaneous kind, and marked with different initials. Nobody was ever more tender than he was on the point of honour; he fought and killed his man. The mother of a pretty actress could not have an eye more watchful for an insult.

He might have stood for the personification of subtlety under an outer garb of enormous strength.

It was the power of his fist, applied one day at a fair, upon a *cabeza de moro*, which had originally taken the fancy of Lethierry. No one in Guernsey knew anything of his adventures. They were of a chequered kind. If the great theatre of destiny had a special wardrobe, Rantaine ought to have taken the dress of harlequin. He had lived, and had seen the world. He had run through the gamut of possible trades and qualities; had been a cook at Madagascar, trainer of birds at Honolulu, a religious journalist at the Galapagos Islands, a poet at Oomrawuttee, a freeman at Haiti. In this latter character he had delivered at Grand Goave a funeral oration, of which the local journals have preserved this fragment: “Farewell, then, noble spirit. In the azure vault of the heavens, where thou wingest now thy flight, thou wilt, no doubt, rejoin the good Abbé Leander Crameau, of Little Goave. Tell him that, thanks to ten years of glorious efforts, thou hast completed the church of the *Ansa-à-Veau*. Adieu! transcendent genius, model mason!” His freemason’s mask did not prevent him, as we see, wearing a little of the Roman Catholic. The former won to his side the men of progress, and the latter the men of order. He declared himself a white of pure caste, and hated the negroes; though, for all that, he would certainly have been an admirer of the Emperor Soulouque. In 1815, at Bordeaux, the glow of his royalist enthusiasm broke forth in the shape of a huge white feather in his cap. His life had been a series of eclipses — of appearances, disappearances, and reappearances. He was a sort of revolving light upon the coasts of scampdom. He knew a little Turkish: instead of “guillotined,” would say “*néboïssé*.” He had been a slave in Tripoli, in the house of a Thaleb, and had learnt Turkish by dint of blows with a stick. His employment had been to stand at evenings at the doors of the mosque, there to read aloud to the faithful the Koran inscribed upon slips of wood, or pieces of camel leather. It is not improbable that he was a renegade.

He was capable of everything, and something worse.

He had a trick of laughing loud and knitting his brows at the same time. He used to say, “In politics, I esteem only men inaccessible to influences;” or, “I am for decency and good morals;” or, “The pyramid must be replaced upon its base.” His manner was rather cheerful and cordial than otherwise. The expression of his mouth contradicted the sense of his words. His nostrils had an odd way of distending themselves. In the corners of his eyes he had a little network of wrinkles, in which all sorts of dark thoughts seemed to meet together. It was here alone that the secret of his physiognomy could be thoroughly studied. His flat foot was a vulture’s claw. His skull was low at the top and large about the temples. His ill-shapen ear, bristled with hair, seemed to say, “Beware of speaking to the animal in this cave.”

One fine day, in Guernsey, Rantaine was suddenly missing.

Lethierry’s partner had absconded, leaving the treasury of their partnership empty.

In this treasury there was some money of Rantaine’s, no doubt, but there were also fifty thousand francs belonging to Lethierry.

By forty years of industry and probity as a coaster and ship carpenter, Lethierry had saved one hundred thousand francs. Rantaine robbed him of half the sum.

Half ruined, Lethierry did not lose heart, but began at once to think how to repair his misfortune. A stout heart may be ruined in fortune, but not in spirit. It was just about that time that people began to talk of the new kind of boat to be moved by steam-engines. Lethierry conceived the idea of trying Fulton’s invention, so much disputed about; and by one of these fire-boats to connect the Channel Islands with the French coast. He staked his all upon this idea; he devoted to it the wreck of his savings. Accordingly, six months after Rantaine’s flight, the astonished people of St. Sampson beheld, issuing from the port, a vessel discharging huge volumes of smoke, and looking like a ship a-fire at sea. This was the first steam-vessel to navigate the Channel.

This vessel, to which the people in their dislike and contempt for novelty immediately gave the nickname of “Lethierry’s Galley,” was announced as intended to maintain a constant communication between Guernsey and St. Malo.

IV

CONTINUATION OF THE STORY OF UTOPIA

It may be well imagined that the new enterprise did not prosper much at first. The owners of cutters passing between the Island of Guernsey and the French coast were loud in their outcries. They denounced this attack upon the Holy Scriptures and their monopoly. The chapels began to fulminate against it. One reverend gentleman, named Elihu, stigmatised the new steam-vessel as an “atheistical construction,” and the sailing-boat was declared the only orthodox craft. The people saw the horns of the devil among the beasts which the fireship carried to and fro. This storm of protest continued a considerable time. At last, however, it began to be perceived that these animals arrived less tired and sold better, their meat being superior; that the sea risk was less also for passengers; that this mode of travelling was less expensive, shorter, and more sure; that they started at a fixed time, and arrived at a fixed time; that consignments of fish travelling faster arrived fresher, and that it was now possible to find a sale in the French markets for the surplus of great takes of fish so common in Guernsey. The butter, too, from the far-famed Guernsey cows, made the passage quicker in the “Devil Boat” than in the old sailing vessels, and lost nothing of its good quality, insomuch that Dinan, in Brittany, began to become a customer for it, as well as St. Brieuc and Rennes. In short, thanks to what they called “Lethierry’s Galley,” the people enjoyed safe travelling, regular communication, prompt and easy passages to and fro, an increase of circulation, an extension of markets and of commerce, and, finally, it was felt that it was necessary to patronise this “Devil Boat,” which flew in the face of the Holy Scriptures, and brought wealth to the island. Some daring spirits even went so far as to express a positive satisfaction at it. Sieur Landoys, the registrar, bestowed his approval upon the vessel — an undoubted piece of impartiality on his part, as he did not like Lethierry. For, first of all, Lethierry was entitled to the dignity of “Mess,” while Landoys was merely “Sieur Landoys.” Then, although registrar of St. Peter’s Port, Landoys was a parishioner of St. Sampson. Now, there was not in the entire parish another man besides them devoid of prejudices. It seemed little enough, therefore, to indulge themselves with a detestation of each other. Two of a trade, says the proverb, rarely agree.

Sieur Landoys, however, had the honesty to support the steamboat. Others followed Landoys. By little and little, these facts multiplied. The growth of opinion is like the rising tide. Time and the continued and increasing success of the venture, with the evidence of real service rendered and the improvement in the general welfare, gradually converted the people; and the day at length arrived when, with the exception of a few wiseacres, every one admired “Lethierry’s Galley.”

It would probably win less admiration now-a-days. This steamboat of forty years since would doubtless provoke a smile among our modern boat-builders; for this marvel was ill-shaped; this prodigy was clumsy and infirm.

The distance between our grand Atlantic steam-vessels of the present day and the boats with wheel-paddles which Denis Papin floated on the Fulda in 1707, is not greater than that between a three-decker, like the *Montebello*, 200 feet long, having a mainyard of 115 feet, carrying a weight of 3000 tons, 1100 men, 120 guns, 10,000 cannon-balls, and 160 packages of canister, belching forth at every broadside, when in action, 3300 pounds of iron, and spreading to the wind, when it moves, 5600 square mètres of canvas, and the old Danish galley of the second century, discovered, full of stone hatchets, and bows and clubs, in the mud of the seashore, at Wester-Satrup, and preserved at the Hotel de Ville at Flensburg.

Exactly one hundred years — from 1707 to 1807 — separate the first paddle-boat of Papin from the first steamboat of Fulton. “Lethierry’s Galley” was assuredly a great improvement upon those two rough sketches; but it was itself only a sketch. For all that, it was a masterpiece in its way. Every scientific discovery in embryo presents that double aspect — a monster in the fœtus, a marvel in the germ.

V

THE DEVIL BOAT

“Lethierry’s Galley” was not masted with a view to sailing well; a fact which was not a defect; it is, indeed, one of the laws of naval construction. Besides, her motive power being steam, her sails were only accessory. A paddle steamboat, moreover, is almost insensible to sails. The new steam-vessel was too short, round, and thick-set. She had too much bow, and too great a breadth of quarter. The daring of inventors had not yet reached the point of making a steam-vessel light; Lethierry’s boat had some of the defects of Gilliatt’s Dutch sloop. She pitched very little, but she rolled a good deal. Her paddle-boxes were too high. She had too much beam for her length. The massive machinery encumbered her, and to make her capable of carrying a heavy cargo, her constructors had raised her bulwarks to an unusual height, giving to the vessel the defects of old seventy-fours, a bastard model which would have to be cut down to render them really seaworthy, or fit to go into action. Being short, she ought to have been able to veer quickly — the time employed in a manœuvre of that kind being in proportion to the length of the vessel — but her weight deprived her of the advantage of her shortness. Her midship-frame was too broad, a fact which retarded her; the resistance of the sea being proportioned to the largest section below the water-line, and to the square of the speed. Her prow was vertical, which would not be regarded as a fault at the present day, but at that period this portion of the construction was invariably sloped at an angle of forty-five degrees. All the curving lines of the hull agreed well together, but it was not long enough for oblique sailing, or for lying parallel with the water displaced, which should always be thrown off laterally. In rough weather she drew too much water, sometimes fore, sometimes aft, which showed that her centre of gravity was not rightly adjusted. Owing to the weight of the engine, the cargo shifted, so that the centre of gravity was often aft of the mainmast, and then steam power had to be resorted to, for at such times the mainsail had to be furled as it only made the vessel fall off. If close to the wind, very careful manœuvring was required. The rudder was the old-fashioned bar-rudder, not the wheeled one of the present time. Two skiffs, a species of *you-yous*, were suspended to the davits. The vessel had four anchors; the sheet-anchor, the second or working anchor, and two bower-anchors. These four anchors, slung by chains, were moved, according to the occasion, by the great capstan of the poop, or by the small capstan at the prow. At that period the pump windlass had not superseded the intermitting efforts of the old handspike. Having only two bower-anchors, one on the starboard and the other on the larboard side, the vessel could not move conveniently in certain winds, though she could aid herself at such times with the second anchor. Her buoys were normal, and so constructed that they carried the weight of the buoy-ropes without dipping. The launch was of a useful size, of service in all cases of need, and able to raise the main anchor. A novelty about her was that she was rigged with chains, which in no way detracted, however, from the mobility of the running rigging, or from the firmness of the standing rigging. The masts, yards, etc., although not of first-rate quality, were not in any way amiss, and the rigging at the mast-head was not very noticeable. The ribs were solid, but coarse, less delicacy of wood being required for steam than for sail. Her speed was six knots an hour. When lying-to she rode well. Take her as she was, “Lethierry’s Galley” was a good sea boat; but people felt, that in moments of danger from reefs or waterspouts, she would be hardly manageable. Unhappily her build made her roll about on the waves, with a perpetual creaking like that of a new shoe.

She was, above all, a merchandise boat, and, like all ships built more for commerce than for fighting, was constructed exclusively with a view to stowage. She carried few passengers. The transport of cattle rendered stowage difficult and very peculiar. Vessels carried bullocks at that time in the hold, which was a complication of the difficulty. At the present day they are stowed on the fore-deck. The paddle-boxes of Lethierry’s “Devil Boat” were painted white, the hull, down to the water-line, red, and all the rest of the vessel black, according to the somewhat ugly fashion of this century. When empty she drew seven feet of water, and when laden fourteen.

With regard to the engine, it was of considerable power. To speak exactly, its power was equal to that of one horse to every three tons burden, which is almost equal to that of a tugboat. The paddles were well placed, a little in advance of the centre of gravity of the vessel. The maximum pressure of the engine was equal to two atmospheres. It consumed a great deal of coal, although it was constructed on the condensation and expansion principles. It had no fly-wheel on account of the instability of the point of support, but this was then, as now, compensated for by two cranks at the extremities of the revolving shaft, so arranged that one was always at right angles when the other was at dead-point. The whole rested on a single sheet of cast-iron, so that even in case of any serious damage, no shock of the waves could upset its equilibrium, and even if the hull were injured the engine would remain intact. To render it stronger still, the connecting-rod had been placed near the steam-cylinders, so that the centre of oscillation of the working-beam was transferred from the middle to the end. Since then oscillating cylinders have been invented which do away with the necessity of connecting-rods, but in those days the placing of the connecting-rod near the cylinder was thought a triumph of engineering. The boiler was in sections and provided with a salt-water pump. The wheels were very large, which lessened the loss of power; the smoke-stack was lofty, which increased the draught. On the other hand, the size of the wheels exposed them to the force of the waves, and the height of the smoke-stack to the violence of the wind. Wooden paddle-floats, iron clamps, bosses of cast-iron — such were the wheels, which, well constructed, could, strange though it may seem, be taken to pieces. Three floats were always under water. The speed of the centre of the floats only exceeded by a sixth the speed of the vessel itself; this was the chief defect of the wheels. Moreover, the cranks were too long, and the slide-valve caused too much friction in the admission of steam into the cylinder. For that period the engine seemed, and indeed was, admirable. It had been constructed in France, at the works at Bercy. Mess Lethierry had roughly sketched it: the engineer who had constructed it in accordance with his diagram was dead, so that the engine was unique, and probably could not have been replaced. The designer still lived, but the constructor was no more.

The engine had cost forty thousand francs.

Lethierry had himself constructed the “Devil Boat” upon the great covered stocks by the side of the first tower between St. Peter’s Port and St. Sampson. He had been to Brême to buy the wood. All his skill as a shipwright was exhausted in its construction; his ingenuity might be seen in the planks, the seams of which were straight and even, and covered with sarangousti, an Indian mastic, better than resin. The sheathing was well beaten. To remedy the roundness of the hull, Lethierry had fitted out a boom at the bowsprit, which allowed him to add a false spritsail to the regular one. On the day of the launch, he cried aloud, “At last I am afloat!” The vessel was successful, in fact, as the reader has already learnt.

Either by chance or design she had been launched on the 14th of July, the anniversary of the taking of the Bastille. On that day, mounted upon the bridge between the two paddle-boxes, looked Lethierry upon the sea, and exclaimed, “It is your turn now! The Parisians took the Bastille, now science takes the sea.”

Lethierry’s boat made the voyage from Guernsey to St. Malo once a week. She started on the Tuesday morning, and returned on the Friday evening, in time for the Saturday market. She was a stronger craft than any of the largest coasting sloops in all the Archipelago, and her capacity being in proportion to her dimensions, one of her voyages was equal to four voyages of an ordinary boat in the same trade; hence they were very profitable. The reputation of a vessel depends on its stowage, and Lethierry was an admirable stower of cargo. When he was no longer able to work himself, he trained up a sailor to undertake this duty. At the end of two years, the steamboat brought in a clear seven hundred and fifty pounds sterling a year, or eighteen thousand francs. The pound sterling of Guernsey is worth twenty-four francs only, that of England twenty-five, and that of Jersey twenty-six. These differences are less unimportant than they seem: the banks, at all events, know how to turn them to advantage.

VI

LETHIERRY’S EXALTATION

The “Devil Boat” prospered. Mess Lethierry began to look forward to the time when he should be called “Monsieur.” At Guernsey, people do not become “Monsieurs” at one bound. Between the plain man and the gentleman, there is quite a scale to climb. To begin with, we have the simple name, plain “Peter,” let us suppose; the second step is “Neighbour Peter;” the third, “Father Peter;” the fourth, “Sieur Peter;” the fifth, “Mess Peter;” and then we reach the summit in “Monsieur Peter.”

This scale ascending thus from the ground is carried to still greater heights. All the upper classes of England join on and continue it. Here are the various steps, becoming more and more glorious. Above the Monsieur, or “Mr.,” there is the “Esquire;” above the squire, the knight; above the knight, still rising, we have the baronet, the Scotch laird, the baron, the viscount, the earl (called count in France, and jarl in Norway); the marquis, the duke, the prince of the blood royal, and the king: so, by degrees, we ascend from the people to the middle class, from the middle class to the baronetage, from the baronetage to the peerage, from the peerage to royalty.

Thanks to his successful ingenuity, thanks to steam, and his engines, and the “Devil Boat,” Mess Lethierry was fast becoming an important personage. When building his vessel he had been compelled to borrow money. He had become indebted at Brême, he had become indebted at St. Malo; but every year he diminished his obligations.

He had, moreover, purchased on credit, at the very entrance to the port of St. Sampson, a pretty stone-built house, entirely new, situate between the sea and a garden. On the corner of this house was inscribed the name of the “Bravées.” Its front formed a part of the wall of the port itself, and it was remarkable for a double row of windows: on the north, alongside a little enclosure filled with flowers, and on the south commanding a view of the ocean. It had thus two *façades*, one open to the tempest and the sea, the other looking into a garden filled with roses.

These two frontages seemed made for the two inmates of the house — Mess Lethierry and Déruchette.

The “Bravées” was popular at St. Sampson, for Mess Lethierry had at length become a popular man. This popularity was due partly to his good nature, his devotedness, and his courage; partly to the number of lives he had saved; and a great deal to his success, and to the fact that he had awarded to St. Sampson the honour of being the port of the departure and arrival of the new steamboat. Having made the discovery that the “Devil Boat” was decidedly a success, St. Peter’s, the capital, desired to obtain it for that port, but Lethierry held fast to St. Sampson. It was his native town. “It was there that I was first pitched into the water,” he used to say; hence his great local popularity. His position as a small landed proprietor paying land-tax, made him, what they call in Guernsey, an *unhabitant*. He was chosen douzenier. The poor sailor had mounted five out of six steps of the Guernsey social scale; he had attained the dignity of “Mess”; he was rapidly approaching the Monsieur; and who could predict whether he might not even rise higher than that? who could say that they might not one day find in the almanack of Guernsey, under the heading of “Nobility and Gentry,” the astonishing and superb inscription, — *Lethierry, Esq.*?

But Mess Lethierry had nothing of vanity in his nature, or he had no sense of it; or if he had, disdained it: to know that he was useful was his greatest pleasure; to be popular touched him less than being necessary; he had, as we have already said, only two objects of delight, and consequently only two ambitions: the Durande and Déruchette.

However this may have been, he had embarked in the lottery of the sea, and had gained the chief prize.

This chief prize was the Durande steaming away in all her pride.

VII

THE SAME GODFATHER AND THE SAME PATRON SAINT

Having created his steamboat, Lethierry had christened it: he had called it Durande— “La Durande.” We will speak of her henceforth by no other name; we will claim the liberty, also, in spite of typographical usage, of not italicising this name Durande; conforming in this to the notion of Mess Lethierry, in whose eyes La Durande was almost a living person.

Durande and Déruchette are the same name. Déruchette is the diminutive.

This diminutive is very common in France.

In the country the names of saints are endowed with all these diminutives as well as all their augmentatives. One might suppose there were several persons when there is, in fact, only one. This system of patrons and patronesses under different names is by no means rare. Lise, Lisette, Lisa, Elisa, Isabelle, Lisbeth, Betsy, all these are simply Elizabeth. It is probable that Mahout, Maclou, Malo, and Magloire are the same saint: this, however, we do not vouch for.

Saint Durande is a saint of l’Angoumois, and of the Charente; whether she is an orthodox member of the calendar is a question for the Bollandists: orthodox or not, she has been made the patron saint of numerous chapels.

It was while Lethierry was a young sailor at Rochefort that he had made the acquaintance of this saint, probably in the person of some pretty Charantaise, perhaps in that of the grisette with the white nails. The saint had remained sufficiently in his memory for him to give the name to the two things which he loved most — Durande to the steamboat, Déruchette to the girl.

Of one he was the father, of the other the uncle.

Déruchette was the daughter of a brother who had died: she was an orphan child: he had adopted her, and had taken the place both of father and mother.

Déruchette was not only his niece, she was his godchild; he had held her in his arms at the baptismal font; it was he who had chosen her patron saint, Durande, and her Christian name, Déruchette.

Déruchette, as we have said, was born at St. Peter's Port. Her name was inscribed at its date on the register of the parish.

As long as the niece was a child, and the uncle poor, nobody took heed of her appellation of Déruchette; but when the little girl became a miss, and the sailor a gentleman, the name of Déruchette shocked the feelings of Guernsey society. The uncouthness of the sound astonished every one. Folks asked Mess Lethierry "why Déruchette?" He answered, "It is a very good name in its way." Several attempts were made to get him to obtain a change in the baptismal name, but he would be no party to them. One day, a fine lady of the upper circle of society in St. Sampson, the wife of a rich retired ironfounder, said to Mess Lethierry, "In future, I shall call your daughter Nancy."

"If names of country towns are in fashion," said he, "why not Lons le Saulnier?" The fine lady did not yield her point, and on the morrow said, "We are determined not to have it Déruchette; I have found for your daughter a pretty name — *Marianne*." "A very pretty name, indeed," replied Mess Lethierry, "composed of two words which signify — a husband and an ass." He held fast to Déruchette.

It would be a mistake to infer from Lethierry's pun that he had no wish to see his niece married. He desired to see her married, certainly; but in his own way: he intended her to have a husband after his own heart, one who would work hard, and whose wife would have little to do. He liked rough hands in a man, and delicate ones in a woman. To prevent Déruchette spoiling her pretty hands he had always brought her up like a young lady; he had provided her with a music-master, a piano, a little library, and a few needles and threads in a pretty work-basket. She was, indeed, more often reading than stitching; more often playing than reading. This was as Mess Lethierry wished it. To be charming was all that he expected of her. He had reared the young girl like a flower. Whoever has studied the character of sailors will understand this: rude and hard in their nature, they have an odd partiality for grace and delicacy. To realise the idea of the uncle, the niece ought to have been rich; so indeed felt Mess Lethierry. His steamboat voyaged for this end. The mission of Durande was to provide a marriage portion for Déruchette.

VIII

“BONNIE DUNDEE”

Déruchette occupied the prettiest room at the Bravées. It had two windows, was furnished with various articles made of fine-grained mahogany, had a bed with four curtains, green and white, and looked out upon the garden, and beyond it towards the high hill, on which stands the Vale Castle. Gilliatt’s house, the Bû de la Rue, was on the other side of this hill.

Déruchette had her music and piano in this chamber; she accompanied herself on the instrument when singing the melody which she preferred — the melancholy Scottish air of “Bonnie Dundee.” The very spirit of night breathes in this melody; but her voice was full of the freshness of dawn. The contrast was quaint and pleasing; people said, “Miss Déruchette is at her piano.”

The passers-by at the foot of the hill stopped sometimes before the wall of the garden of the Bravées to listen to that sweet voice and plaintive song.

Déruchette was the very embodiment of joy as she went to and fro in the house. She brought with her a perpetual spring. She was beautiful, but more pretty than beautiful; and still more graceful than pretty. She reminded the good old pilots, friends of Mess Lethierry, of that princess in the song which the soldiers and sailors sing, who was so beautiful:

“Qu’elle passait pour telle dans le regiment.”

Mess Lethierry used to say, “She has a head of hair like a ship’s cable.”

From her infancy she had been remarkable for beauty. The learned in such matters had grave doubts about her nose, but the little one having probably determined to be pretty, had finally satisfied their requirements. She grew to girlhood without any serious loss of beauty; her nose became neither too long nor too short; and when grown up, her critics admitted her to be charming.

She never addressed her uncle otherwise than as father.

Lethierry allowed her to soil her fingers a little in gardening, and even in some kind of household duties: she watered her beds of pink hollyhocks, purple foxgloves, perennial phloxes, and scarlet herb bennets. She took good advantage of the climate of Guernsey, so favourable to flowers. She had, like many other persons there, aloes in the open ground, and, what is more difficult, she succeeded in cultivating the Nepaulese cinquefoil. Her little kitchen-garden was scientifically arranged; she was able to produce from it several kinds of rare vegetables. She sowed Dutch cauliflower and Brussels cabbages, which she thinned out in July, turnips for August, endive for September, short parsnip for the autumn, and rampions for winter. Mess Lethierry did not interfere with her in this, so long as she did not handle the spade and rake too much, or meddle with the coarser kinds of garden labour. He had provided her with two servants, one named Grace, and the other Douce, which are favourite names in Guernsey. Grace and Douce did the hard work of the house and garden, and they had the right to have red hands.

With regard to Mess Lethierry, his room was a little retreat with a view over the harbour, and communicating with the great lower room of the ground floor, on which was situated the door of the house, near which the various staircases met.

His room was furnished with his hammock, his chronometer, and his pipe: there were also a table and a chair. The ceiling had been whitewashed, as well as the four walls. A fine marine map, bearing the inscription *W. Faden*, 5 Charing Cross, Geographer to His Majesty, and representing the Channel Islands, was nailed up at the side of the door, and on the left, stretched out and fastened with other nails, appeared one of those large cotton handkerchiefs on which are printed, in colours, the signals of all countries in the world, having at the four corners the standards of France, Russia, Spain, and the United States, and in the centre the union-jack of England.

Douce and Grace were two faithful creatures within certain limits. Douce was good-natured enough, and Grace was probably good-looking. Douce was unmarried, and had secretly “a gallant.” In the Channel Islands the word is common, as indeed is the fact itself. The two girl’s regarded as servants had something of the Creole in their character, a sort of slowness in their movements, not out of keeping with the Norman spirit pervading the relations of servant and master in the Channel Islands. Grace, coquettish and good-looking, was always scanning the future with a nervous anxiety. This arose from the fact of her not only having, like Douce, “a gallant,” but also, as the scandal-loving averred, a sailor husband, whose return one day was a thing she dreaded. This, however, does not concern us. In a household less austere and less innocent, Douce would have continued to be the servant, but Grace would have become the *soubrette*. The dangerous talents of Grace were lost upon a young mistress so pure and good as Déruchette. For the rest, the intrigues of Douce and Grace were cautiously concealed. Mess Lethierry knew nothing of such matters, and no token of them had ever reached Déruchette.

The lower room of the ground floor, a hall with a large fireplace and surrounded with benches and tables, had served in the last century as a meeting-place for a conventicle of French Protestant refugees. The sole ornament of the bare stone wall was a sheet of parchment, set in a frame of black wood, on which were represented some of the charitable deeds of the great Bossuet, Bishop of Meaux. Some poor diocesans of this famous orator, surnamed the “Eagle,” persecuted by him at the time of the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, and driven to take shelter at Guernsey, had hung this picture on the wall to preserve the remembrance of those facts. The spectator who had the patience to decipher a rude handwriting in faded ink might have learnt the following facts, which are but little known: —”29th October, 1685, Monsieur the Bishop of Meaux, appeals to the king to destroy the temples of Morcef and Nanteuil”—”2nd April, 1686, Arrest of Cochard, father and son, for their religious opinions, at the request of Monsieur the Bishop of Meaux. Released: the Cochards having recanted.”—”28th October, 1699, Monsieur the Bishop of Meaux sent to Mde. Pontchartrain a petition of remonstrance, pointing out that it will be necessary to place the young ladies named Chalandes and de Neuville, who are of the reformed religion, in the House of the ‘New Catholics’ at Paris.”—”7th July, 1703, the king’s order executed as requested by Monsieur the Bishop of Meaux, for shutting up in an asylum Baudouin and his wife, two bad Catholics of Fublaines.”

At the end of the hall, near the door of Mess Lethierry’s room, was a little corner with a wooden partition, which had been the Huguenot’s sanctum, and had become, thanks to its row of rails and a small hole to pass paper or money through, the steamboat office; that is to say, the office of the Durande, kept by Mess Lethierry in person. Upon the old oaken reading-desk, where once rested the Holy Bible, lay a great ledger with its alternate pages headed Dr. and Cr.

IX

THE MAN WHO DISCOVERED RANTAINE'S CHARACTER

As long as Mess Lethierry had been able to do duty, he had commanded the Durande, and had had no other pilot or captain but himself; but a time had come, as we have said, when he had been compelled to find a successor. He had chosen for that purpose Sieur Clubin, of Torteval, a taciturn man. Sieur Clubin had a character upon the coast for strict probity. He became the *alter ego*, the double, of Mess Lethierry.

Sieur Clubin, although he had rather the look of a notary than of a sailor, was a mariner of rare skill. He had all the talents which are required to meet dangers of every kind. He was a skilful stower, a safe man aloft, an able and careful boatswain, a powerful steersman, an experienced pilot, and a bold captain. He was prudent, and he carried his prudence sometimes to the point of daring, which is a great quality at sea. His natural apprehensiveness of danger was tempered by a strong instinct of what was possible in an emergency. He was one of those mariners who will face risks to a point perfectly well known to themselves, and who generally manage to come successfully out of every peril. Every certainty which a man can command, dealing with so fickle an element as the sea, he possessed. Sieur Clubin, moreover, was a renowned swimmer; he was one of that race of men broken into the buffeting of the waves, who can remain as long as they please in the water — who can start from the Havre-des-Pas at Jersey, double the Colettes, swim round the Hermitage and Castle Elizabeth, and return in two hours to the point from which they started. He came from Torteval, where he had the reputation of often having swum across the passage so much dreaded, from the Hanway rocks to the point of Pleinmont.

One circumstance which had recommended Sieur Clubin to Mess Lethierry more than any other, was his having judged correctly the character of Rantaine. He had pointed out to Lethierry the dishonesty of the man, and had said "Rantaine will rob you." His prediction was verified. More than once — in matters, it is true, not very important — Mess Lethierry had put his ever-scrupulous honesty to the proof; and he freely communicated with him on the subject of his affairs. Mess Lethierry used to say, "A good conscience expects to be treated with perfect confidence."

X

LONG YARNS

Mess Lethierry, for the sake of his own ease, always wore his seafaring clothes, and preferred his tarpaulin overcoat to his pilot jacket. Déruchette felt vexed, occasionally, about this peculiarity. Nothing is prettier than a pouting beauty. She laughed and scolded. “My dear father,” she would say, “what a smell of pitch!” and she would give him a gentle tap upon his broad shoulders.

This good old seaman had gathered from his voyages many wonderful stories. He had seen at Madagascar birds’ feathers, three of which sufficed to make a roof of a house. He had seen in India, field sorrel, the stalks of which were nine inches high. In New Holland he had seen troops of turkeys and geese led about and guarded by a bird, like a flock by a shepherd’s dog; this bird was called the Agami. He had visited elephants’ cemeteries. In Africa, he had encountered gorillas, a terrible species of man-monkey. He knew the ways of all the ape tribe, from the wild dog-faced monkey, which he called the Macaco-bravo, to the howling monkey or *Macaco-barbado*. In Chili, he had seen a pouched monkey move the compassion of the huntsman by showing its little one. He had seen in California a hollow trunk of a tree fall to the ground, so vast that a man on horseback could ride one hundred paces inside. In Morocco, he had seen the Mozabites and the Bisskris fighting with matraks and bars of iron — the Bisskris, because they had been called *kelbs*, which means dogs; and the Mozabites, because they had been treated as *khamsi*, which means people of the fifth sect. He had seen in China the pirate Chanh-thong-quan-larh-Quoi cut to pieces for having assassinated the Ap of a village. At Thu-dan-mot, he had seen a lion carry off an old woman in the open market-place. He was present at the arrival of the Great Serpent brought from Canton to Saigon to celebrate in the pagoda of Cho-len the fête of Quan-nam, the goddess of navigators. He had beheld the great Quan-Sû among the Moi. At Rio de Janeiro, he had seen the Brazilian ladies in the evening put little balls of gauze into their hair, each containing a beautiful kind of firefly; and the whole forming a head-dress of little twinkling lights. He had combated in Paraguay with swarms of enormous ants and spiders, big and downy as an infant’s head, and compassing with their long legs a third of a yard, and attacking men by pricking them with their bristles, which enter the skin as sharp as arrows, and raise painful blisters. On the river Arinos, a tributary of the Tocantins, in the virgin forests to the north of Diamantina, he had determined the existence of the famous bat-shaped people, the Murcilagos, or men who are born with white hair and red eyes, who live in the shady solitudes of the woods, sleep by day, awake by night, and fish and hunt in the dark, seeing better then than by the light of the moon. He told how, near Beyrout, once in an encampment of an expedition of which he formed part, a rain gauge belonging to one of the party happened to be stolen from a tent. A wizard, wearing two or three strips of leather only, and looking like a man having nothing on but his braces, thereupon rang a bell at the end of a horn so violently, that a hyena finally answered the summons by bringing back the missing instrument. The hyena was, in fact, the thief. These veritable histories bore a strong resemblance to fictions; but they amused Déruchette.

The *poupée* or "doll" of the Durande, as the people of the Channel Islands call the figure-head of a ship, was the connecting link between the vessel and Lethierry's niece. In the Norman Islands the figure-head of a ship, a roughly-carved wooden statue, is called the Poupée. Hence the local saying, meaning to sail, "*être entre poupe et poupée*."

The *poupée* of the Durande was particularly dear to Mess Lethierry. He had instructed the carver to make it resemble Déruchette. It looked like a rude attempt to cut out a face with a hatchet; or like a clumsy log trying hard to look like a girl.

This unshapely block produced a great effect upon Mess Lethierry's imagination. He looked upon it with an almost superstitious admiration. His faith in it was complete. He was able to trace in it an excellent resemblance to Déruchette. Thus the dogma resembles the truth, and the idol the deity.

Mess Lethierry had two grand fête days in every week; one was Tuesday, the other Friday. His first delight consisted in seeing the Durande weigh anchor; his second in seeing her enter the port again. He leaned upon his elbows at the window contemplating his work, and was happy.

On Fridays, the presence of Mess Lethierry at his window was a signal. When people passing the Bravées saw him lighting his pipe, they said, "Ay! the steamboat is in sight." One kind of smoke was the herald of the other.

The Durande, when she entered the port, made her cable fast to a huge iron ring under Mess Lethierry's window, and fixed in the basement of the house. On those nights Lethierry slept soundly in his hammock, with a soothing consciousness of the presence of Déruchette asleep in her room near him, and of the Durande moored opposite.

The moorings of the Durande were close to the great bell of the port. A little strip of quay passed thence before the door of the Bravées.

The quay, the Bravées and its house, the garden, the alleys bordered with edges, and the greater part even of the surrounding houses, no longer exist. The demand for Guernsey granite has invaded these too. The whole of this part of the town is now occupied by stone-cutters’ yards.

XI

MATRIMONIAL PROSPECTS

Déruchette was approaching womanhood, and was still unmarried.

Mess Lethierry in bringing her up to have white hands had also rendered her somewhat fastidious. A training of that kind has its disadvantages; but Lethierry was himself still more fastidious. He would have liked to have provided at the same time for both his idols; to have found in the guide and companion of the one a commander for the other. What is a husband but the pilot on the voyage of matrimony? Why not then the same conductor for the vessel and for the girl? The affairs of a household have their tides, their ebbs and flows, and he who knows how to steer a bark, ought to know how to guide a woman's destiny, subject as both are to the influences of the moon and the wind. Sieur Clubin being only fifteen years younger than Lethierry, would necessarily be only a provisional master for the Durande. It would be necessary to find a young captain, a permanent master, a true successor of the founder, inventor, and creator of the first channel steamboat. A captain for the Durande who should come up to his ideal, would have been, already, almost a son-in-law in Lethierry's eyes. Why not make him son-in-law in a double sense? The idea pleased him. The husband *in posse* of Déruchette haunted his dreams. His ideal was a powerful seaman, tanned and browned by weather, a sea athlete. This, however, was not exactly the ideal of Déruchette. Her dreams, if dreams they could even be called, were of a more ethereal character.

The uncle and the niece were at all events agreed in not being in haste to seek a solution of these problems. When Déruchette began to be regarded as a probable heiress, a crowd of suitors had presented themselves. Attentions under these circumstances are not generally worth much. Mess Lethierry felt this. He would grumble out the old French proverb, "*A maiden of gold, a suitor of brass*." He politely showed the fortune-seekers to the door. He was content to wait, and so was Déruchette.

It was, perhaps, a singular fact, that he had little inclination for the local aristocracy. In that respect Mess Lethierry showed himself not entirely English. It will hardly be believed that he even refused for Déruchette a Ganduel of Jersey, and a Bugnet Nicolin of Sark. People were bold enough to affirm, although we doubt if this were possible, that he had even declined the proposals of a member of the family of Edou, which is evidently descended from “Edou-ard” (Anglicè Edward) the Confessor.

XII

AN ANOMALY IN THE CHARACTER OF LETHIERRY

Mess Lethierry had a failing, and a serious one. He detested a priest; though not as an individual, but as an institution. Reading one day — for he used to read — in a work of Voltaire — for he would even read Voltaire — the remark, that priests “have something cat-like in their nature,” he laid down the book and was heard to mutter, “Then, I suppose, I have something dog-like in mine.”

It must be remembered that the priests — Lutheran and Calvinist, as well as Catholic — had vigorously combated the new “Devil Boat,” and had persecuted its inventor. To be a sort of revolutionist in the art of navigation, to introduce a spirit of progress in the Norman Archipelago, to disturb the peace of the poor little island of Guernsey with a new invention, was in their eyes, as we have not concealed from the reader, an abominable and most condemnable rashness. Nor had they omitted to condemn it pretty loudly. It must not be forgotten that we are now speaking of the Guernsey clergy of a bygone generation, very different from that of the present time, who in almost all the local places of worship display a laudable sympathy with progress. They had embarrassed Lethierry in a hundred ways; every sort of resisting force which can be found in sermons and discourses had been employed against him. Detested by the churchmen, he naturally came to detest them in his turn. Their hatred was the extenuating circumstance to be taken into account in judging of his.

But it must be confessed that his dislike for priests was, in some degree, in his very nature. It was hardly necessary for them to hate him in order to inspire him with aversion. As he said, he moved among them like the dog among cats. He had an antipathy to them, not only in idea, but in what is more difficult to analyse, his instincts. He felt their secret claws, and showed his teeth; sometimes, it must be confessed, a little at random and out of season. It is a mistake to make no distinctions: a dislike in the mass is a prejudice. The good Savoyard curé would have found no favour in his eyes. It is not certain that a worthy priest was even a possible thing in Lethierry’s mind. His philosophy was carried so far that his good sense sometimes abandoned him. There is such a thing as the intolerance of tolerants, as well as the violence of moderates. But Lethierry was at bottom too good-natured to be a thorough hater. He did not attack so much as avoid. He kept the church people at a distance. He suffered evil at their hands; but he confined himself to not wishing them any good. The shade of difference, in fact, between his aversion and theirs, lay in the fact that they bore animosity, while he had only a strong antipathy. Small as is the island of Guernsey, it has, unfortunately, plenty of room for differences of religion; there, to take the broad distinction, is the Catholic faith and the Protestant faith; every form of worship has its temple or chapel. In Germany, at Heidelberg, for example, people are not so particular; they divide a church in two, one half for St. Peter, the other half for Calvin, and between the two is a partition to prevent religious variances terminating in fisticuffs. The shares are equal; the Catholics have three altars, the Huguenots three altars. As the services are at the same hours, one bell summonses both denominations to prayers; it rings, in fact, both for God and for Satan, according as each pleases to regard it. Nothing can be more simple.

The phlegmatic character of the Germans favours, I suppose, this peculiar arrangement, but in Guernsey every religion has its own domicile; there is the orthodox parish and the heretic parish; the individual may choose. “Neither one nor the other” was the choice of Mess Lethierry.

This sailor, workman, philosopher, and parvenu trader, though a simple man in appearance, was by no means simple at bottom. He had his opinions and his prejudices. On the subject of the priests he was immovable; he would have entered the lists with Montlosier.

Occasionally he indulged in rather disrespectful jokes upon this subject. He had certain odd expressions thereupon peculiar to himself, but significant enough. Going to confession he called “combing one’s conscience.” The little learning that he had — a certain amount of reading picked up here and there between the squalls at sea — did not prevent his making blunders in spelling. He made also mistakes in pronunciation, some of which, however, gave a double sense to his words, which might have been suspected of a sly intention. After peace had been brought about by Waterloo between the France of Louis XVIII. and the England of Wellington, Mess Lethierry was heard to say, “Bour mont a été le traître d’union entre les deux camps.” On one occasion he wrote *pape ôté* for *papauté*. We do not think these puns were intentional.

Though he was a strong anti-papist, that circumstance was far from conciliating the Anglicans. He was no more liked by the Protestant rectors than by the Catholic curés. The enunciation of the greatest dogmas did not prevent his anti-theological temper bursting forth. Accident, for example, having once brought him to hear a sermon on eternal punishment, by the Reverend Jaquemin Hérode — a magnificent discourse, filled from one end to the other with sacred texts, proving the everlasting pains, the tortures, the torments, the perditions, the inexorable chastisements, the burnings without end, the inextinguishable maledictions, the wrath of the Almighty, the celestial fury, the divine vengeance, and other incontestable realities — he was heard to say as he was going out in the midst of the faithful flock, "You see, I have an odd notion of my own on this matter; I imagine God as a merciful being."

This leaven of atheism was doubtless due to his sojourn in France.

Although a Guernsey man of pure extraction, he was called in the island "the Frenchman;" but chiefly on account of his "improper" manner of speaking. He did not indeed conceal the truth from himself. He was impregnated with ideas subversive of established institutions. His obstinacy in constructing the "Devil Boat" had proved that. He used to say, "I was suckled by the '89" — a bad sort of nurse. These were not his only indiscretions. In France "to preserve appearances," in England "to be respectable," is the chief condition of a quiet life. To be respectable implies a multitude of little observances, from the strict keeping of Sunday down to the careful tying of a cravat. "To act so that nobody may point at you;" this is the terrible social law. To be pointed at with the finger is almost the same thing as an anathematisation. Little towns, always hotbeds of gossip, are remarkable for that isolating malignancy, which is like the tremendous malediction of the Church seen through the wrong end of the telescope. The bravest are afraid of this ordeal. They are ready to confront the storm, the fire of cannon, but they shrink at the glance of "Mrs. Grundy." Mess Lethierry was more obstinate than logical; but under pressure even his obstinacy would bend. He put — to use another of his phrases, eminently suggestive of latent compromises, not always pleasant to avow— "a little water in his wine." He kept aloof from the clergy, but he did not absolutely close his door against them. On official occasions, and at the customary epochs of pastoral visits, he received with sufficiently good grace both the Lutheran rector and the Papist chaplain. He had even, though at distant intervals, accompanied Déruchette to the Anglican parish church, to which Déruchette herself, as we have said, only went on the four great festivals of the year.

On the whole, these little concessions, which always cost him a pang, irritated him; and far from inclining him towards the Church people, only increased his inward disinclination to them. He compensated himself by more raillery. His nature, in general so devoid of bitterness, had no uncharitable side except this. To alter him, however, was impossible.

In fact, this was in his very temperament, and was beyond his own power to control.

Every sort of priest or clergyman was distasteful to him. He had a little of the old revolutionary want of reverence. He did not distinguish between one form of worship and another. He did not do justice to that great step in the progress of ideas, the denial of the real presence. His shortsightedness in these matters even prevented his perceiving any essential difference between a minister and an abbé. A reverend doctor and a reverend father were pretty nearly the same to him. He used to say, "Wesley is not more to my taste than Loyola." When he saw a reverend pastor walking with his wife, he would turn to look at them, and mutter, "a married priest," in a tone which brought out all the absurdity which those words had in the ears of Frenchmen at that time. He used to relate how, on his last voyage to England, he had seen the "Bishop*ess*" of London. His dislike for marriages of that sort amounted almost to disgust. "Gown and gown do not mate well," he would say. The sacerdotal function was to him in the nature of a distinct sex. It would have been natural to him to have said, "Neither a man nor a woman, only a priest;" and he had the bad taste to apply to the Anglican and the Roman Catholic clergy the same disdainful epithets. He confounded the two cassocks in the same phraseology. He did not take the trouble to vary in favour of Catholics or Lutherans, or whatever they might be, the figures of speech common among military men of that period. He would say to Déruchette, "Marry whom you please, provided you do not marry a parson."

XIII

THOUGHTLESSNESS ADDS A GRACE TO BEAUTY

A word once said, Mess Lethierry remembered it: a word once said, Déruchette soon forgot it. Here was another difference between the uncle and the niece.

Brought up in the peculiar way already described, Déruchette was little accustomed to responsibility. There is a latent danger in an education not sufficiently serious, which cannot be too much insisted on. It is perhaps unwise to endeavour to make a child happy too soon.

So long as she was happy, Déruchette thought all was well. She knew, too, that it was always a pleasure to her uncle to see her pleased. The religious sentiment in her nature was satisfied with going to the parish church four times in the year. We have seen her in her Christmas-day toilet. Of life, she was entirely ignorant. She had a disposition which one day might lead her to love passionately. Meanwhile she was contented.

She sang by fits and starts, chatted by fits and starts, enjoyed the hour as it passed, fulfilled some little duty, and was gone again, and was delightful in all. Add to all this the English sort of liberty which she enjoyed. In England the very infants go alone, girls are their own mistresses, and adolescence is almost wholly unrestrained. Such are the differences of manners. Later, how many of these free maidens become female slaves? I use the word in its least odious sense; I mean that they are free in the development of their nature, but slaves to duty.

Déruchette awoke every morning with little thought of her actions of the day before. It would have troubled her a good deal to have had to give an account of how she had spent her time the previous week. All this, however, did not prevent her having certain hours of strange disquietude; times when some dark cloud seemed to pass over the brightness of her joy. Those azure depths are subject to such shadows! But clouds like these soon passed away. She quickly shook off such moods with a cheerful laugh, knowing neither why she had been sad, nor why she had regained her serenity. She was always at play. As a child, she would take delight in teasing the passers-by. She played practical jokes upon the boys. If the fiend himself had passed that way, she would hardly have spared him some ingenious trick. She was pretty and innocent; and she could abuse the immunity accorded to such qualities. She was ready with a smile, as a cat with a stroke of her claws. So much the worse for the victim of her scratches. She thought no more of them. Yesterday had no existence for her. She lived in the fullness of to-day. Such it is to have too much happiness fall to one’s lot! With Déruchette impressions vanished like the melted snow.

BOOK IV

THE BAGPIPE

I

STREAKS OF FIRE ON THE HORIZON

Gilliatt had never spoken to Déruchette; he knew her from having seen her at a distance, as men know the morning star.

At the period when Déruchette had met Gilliatt on the road leading from St. Peter’s Port to Vale, and had surprised him by tracing his name in the snow, she was just sixteen years of age. Only the evening before Mess Lethierry had said to her, “Come, no more childish tricks; you are a great girl.”

That word “Gilliatt,” written by the young maiden, had sunk into an unfathomed depth.

What were women to Gilliatt? He could not have answered that question himself. When he met one he generally inspired her with something of the timidity which he felt himself. He never spoke to a woman except from urgent necessity. He had never played the part of a “gallant” to any one of the country girls. When he found himself alone on the road, and perceived a woman coming towards him, he would climb over a fence, or bury himself in some copse: he even avoided old women. Once in his life he had seen a Parisian lady. A *Parisienne* on the wing was a strange event in Guernsey at that distant epoch; and Gilliatt had heard this gentle lady relate her little troubles in these words: “I am very much annoyed; I have got some spots of rain upon my bonnet. Pale buff is a shocking colour for rain.” Having found, some time afterwards, between the leaves of a book, an old engraving, representing “a lady of the Chaussée d’Antin” in full dress, he had stuck it against the wall at home as a souvenir of this remarkable apparition.

On that Christmas morning when he had met Déruchette, and when she had written his name and disappeared laughing, he returned home, scarcely conscious of why he had gone out. That night he slept little; he was dreaming of a thousand things: that it would be well to cultivate black radishes in the garden; that he had not seen the boat from Sark pass by; had anything happened to it? Then he remembered that he had seen the white stonecrop in flower, a rare thing at that season. He had never known exactly who was the woman who had reared him, and he made up his mind that she must have been his mother, and thought of her with redoubled tenderness. He called to mind the lady's clothing in the old leathern trunk. He thought that the Reverend Jaquemin Hérode would probably one day or other be appointed dean of St. Peter's Port and surrogate of the bishop, and that the rectory of St. Sampson would become vacant. Next, he remembered that the morrow of Christmas would be the twenty-seventh day of the moon, and that consequently high water would be at twenty-one minutes past three, the half-ebb at a quarter past seven, low water at thirty-three minutes past nine, and half flood at thirty-nine minutes past twelve. He recalled, in the most trifling details, the costume of the Highlander who had sold him the bagpipe; his bonnet with a thistle ornament, his claymore, his close-fitting short jacket, his philabeg ornamented with a pocket, and his snuff-horn, his pin set with a Scottish stone, his two girdles, his sash and belts, his sword, cutlass, dirk, and skene-dhu — his black-sheathed knife, with its black handle ornamented with two cairngorms — and the bare knees of the soldier; his socks, gaiters, and buckled shoes. This highly-equipped figure became a spectre in his imagination, which pursued him with a sense of feverishness as he sunk into oblivion. When he awoke it was full daylight, and his first thought was of Déruchette.

The next night he slept more soundly, but he was dreaming again of the Scottish soldier. In the midst of his sleep he remembered that the after-Christmas sittings of the Chief Law Court would commence on the 21st of January. He dreamed also about the Reverend Jaquemin Hérode. He thought of Déruchette, and seemed to be in violent anger with her. He wished he had been a child again to throw stones at her windows. Then he thought that if he were a child again he should have his mother by his side, and he began to sob.

Gilliatt had a project at this time of going to pass three months at Chousey, or at the Miriquiers; but he did not go.

He walked no more along the road to St. Peter's Port.

He had an odd fancy that his name of "Gilliatt" had remained there traced upon the ground, and that the passers-by stopped to read it.

II

THE UNKNOWN UNFOLDS ITSELF BY DEGREES

On the other hand, Gilliatt had the satisfaction of seeing the Bravées every day. By some accident he was continually passing that way. His business seemed always to lead him by the path which passed under the wall of Déruchette’s garden.

One morning, as he was walking along this path, he heard a market-woman who was returning from the Bravées, say to another: “Mess Lethierry is fond of sea-kale.”

He dug in his garden of the Bû de la Rue a trench for sea-kale. The sea-kale is a vegetable which has a flavour like asparagus.

The wall of the garden of the Bravées was very low; it would have been easy to scale it. The idea of scaling it would have appeared, to him, terrible. But there was nothing to hinder his hearing, as any one else might, the voices of persons talking as he passed, in the rooms or in the garden. He did not listen, but he heard them. Once he could distinguish the voices of the two servants, Grace and Douce, disputing. It was a sound which belonged to the house, and their quarrel remained in his ears like a remembrance of music.

On another occasion, he distinguished a voice which was different, and which seemed to him to be the voice of Déruchette. He quickened his pace, and was soon out of hearing.

The words uttered by that voice, however, remained fixed in his memory. He repeated them at every instant. They were, “Will you please give me the little broom?”

By degrees he became bolder. He had the daring to stay awhile. One day it happened that Déruchette was singing at her piano, altogether invisible from without, although her window was open. The air was that of “Bonnie Dundee.” He grew pale, but he screwed his courage to the point of listening.

Springtide came. One day Gilliatt enjoyed a beatific vision. The heavens were opened, and there, before his eyes, appeared Déruchette, watering lettuces in her little garden.

Soon afterwards he look to doing more than merely listening there. He watched her habits, observed her hours, and waited to catch a glimpse of her.

In all this he was very careful not to be seen.

The year advanced; the time came when the trellises were heavy with roses, and haunted by the butterflies. By little and little, he had come to conceal himself for hours behind her wall, motionless and silent, seen by no one, and holding his breath as Déruchette passed in and out of her garden. Men grow accustomed to poison by degrees.

From his hiding-place he could often hear the sound of Déruchette conversing with Mess Lethierry under a thick arch of leaves, in a spot where there was a garden-seat. The words came distinctly to his ears.

What a change had come over him! He had even descended to watch and listen. Alas! there is something of the character of a spy in every human heart.

There was another garden-seat, visible to him, and nearer Déruchette would sit there sometimes.

From the flowers that he had observed her gathering he had guessed her taste in the matter of perfumes. The scent of the bindweed was her favourite, then the pink, then the honeysuckle, then the jasmine. The rose stood only fifth in the scale. She looked at the lilies, but did not smell them.

Gilliatt figured her in his imagination from this choice of odours. With each perfume he associated some perfection.

The very idea of speaking to Déruchette would have made his hair stand on end. A poor old rag-picker, whose wandering brought her, from time to time, into the little road leading under the inclosure of the Bravées, had occasionally remarked Gilliatt's assiduity beside the wall, and his devotion for this retired spot. Did she connect the presence of a man before this wall with the possibility of a woman behind it? Did she perceive that vague, invisible thread? Was she, in her decrepit mendicancy, still youthful enough to remember something of the old happier days? And could she, in this dark night and winter of her wretched life, still recognise the dawn? We know not: but it appears that, on one occasion, passing near Gilliatt at his post, she brought to bear upon him something as like a smile as she was still capable of, and muttered between her teeth, “It is getting warmer.”

Gilliatt heard the words, and was struck by them. “It warms one,” he muttered, with an inward note of interrogation. “It is getting warmer.” What did the old woman mean?

He repeated the phrase mechanically all day, but he could not guess its meaning.

III

THE AIR “BONNIE DUNDEE” FINDS AN ECHO ON THE HILL

It was in a spot behind the enclosure of the garden of the Bravées, at an angle of the wall, half concealed with holly and ivy, and covered with nettles, wild mallow, and large white mullen growing between the blocks of stone, that he passed the greater part of that summer. He watched there, lost in deep thought. The lizards grew accustomed to his presence, and basked in the sun among the same stones. The summer was bright and full of dreamy indolence: overhead the light clouds came and went. Gilliatt sat upon the grass. The air was full of the songs of birds. He held his two hands up to his forehead, sometimes trying to recollect himself: “Why should she write my name in the snow?” From a distance the sea breeze came up in gentle breaths, at intervals the horn of the quarrymen sounded abruptly, warning the passers-by to take shelter, as they shattered some mass with gunpowder. The Port of St. Sampson was not visible from this place, but he could see the tips of masts above the trees. The sea-gulls flew wide and afar. Gilliatt had heard his mother say that women could love men; that such things happened sometimes. He remembered it; and said within himself, “Who knows, may not Déruchette love me?” Then a feeling of sadness would come upon him; he would say, “She, too, thinks of me in her turn. It is well.” He remembered that Déruchette was rich, and that he was poor: and then the new boat appeared to him an execrable invention. He could never remember what day of the month it was. He would stare listlessly at the great bees, with their yellow bodies and their short wings, as they entered with a buzzing noise into the holes in the wall.

One evening Déruchette went in-doors to retire to bed. She approached her window to close it. The night was dark. Suddenly, something caught her ear, and she listened. Somewhere in the darkness there was a sound of music. It was some one, perhaps, on the hill-side, or at the foot of the towers of Vale Castle, or, perhaps, further still, playing an air upon some instrument. Déruchette recognised her favourite melody, “Bonnie Dundee,” played upon the bagpipe. She thought little of it.

From that night the music might be heard again from time to time at the same hours, particularly when the nights were very dark.

Déruchette was not much pleased with all this.

IV

“A serenade by night may please a lady fair,
the troubadour beware.”
Unpublished Comedy

Four years passed away.

Déruchette was approaching her twenty-first year, and was still unmarried. Some writer has said that a fixed idea is a sort of gimlet; every year gives it another turn. To pull out the first year is like plucking out the hair by the roots; in the second year, like tearing the skin; in the third, like breaking the bones; and in the fourth, like removing the very brain itself.

Gilliatt had arrived at this fourth stage.

He had never yet spoken a word to Déruchette. He lived and dreamed near that delightful vision. This was all.

It happened one day that, finding himself by chance at St. Sampson, he had seen Déruchette talking with Mess Lethierry at the door of the Bravées, which opens upon the roadway of the port. Gilliatt ventured to approach very near. He fancied that at the very moment of his passing she had smiled. There was nothing impossible in that.

Déruchette still heard, from time to time, the sound of the bagpipe.

Mess Lethierry had also heard this bagpipe. By degrees he had come to remark this persevering musician under Déruchette’s window. A tender strain, too; all the more suspicious. A nocturnal gallant was a thing not to his taste. His wish was to marry Déruchette in his own time, when she was willing and he was willing, purely and simply, without any romance, or music, or anything of that sort. Irritated at it, he had at last kept a watch, and he fancied that he had detected Gilliatt. He passed his fingers through his beard — a sign of anger — and grumbled out, “What has that fellow got to pipe about? He is in love with Déruchette, that is clear. You waste your time, young man. Any one who wants Déruchette must come to me, and not loiter about playing the flute.”

An event of importance, long foreseen, occurred soon afterwards. It was announced that the Reverend Jaquemin Hérode was appointed surrogate of the Bishop of Winchester, dean of the island, and rector of St. Peter’s Port, and that he would leave St. Sampson for St. Peter’s immediately after his successor should be installed.

It could not be long to the arrival of the new rector. He was a gentleman of Norman extraction, Monsieur Ebenezer Caudray.

Some facts were known about the new rector, which the benevolent and malevolent interpreted in a contrary sense. He was known to be young and poor, but his youth was tempered with much learning, and his poverty by good expectations. In the dialect specially invented for the subject of riches and inheritances, death goes by the name of “expectations.” He was the nephew and heir of the aged and opulent dean of St. Asaph. At the death of this old gentleman he would be a rich man. M. Caudray had distinguished relations. He was almost entitled to the quality of “Honourable.” As regarded his doctrine, people judged differently. He was an Anglican, but, according to the expression of Bishop Tillotson, a “libertine” — that is, in reality, one who was very severe. He repudiated all pharisaism. He was a friend rather of the Presbytery than the Episcopacy. He dreamed of the Primitive Church of the days when even Adam had the right to choose his Eve, and when Frumentinus, Bishop of Hierapolis, carried off a young maiden to make her his wife, and said to her parents, “Her will is such, and such is mine. You are no longer her mother, and you are no longer her father. I am the Bishop of Hierapolis, and this is my wife. Her father is in heaven.” If the common belief could be trusted, M. Caudray subordinated the text, “Honour thy father and thy mother,” to that other text, in his eyes of higher significance, “The woman is the flesh of the man. She shall leave her father and mother to follow her husband.” This tendency, however, to circumscribe the parental authority and to favour religiously every mode of forming the conjugal tie, is peculiar to all Protestantism, particularly in England, and singularly so in America.

V

A DESERVED SUCCESS HAS ALWAYS ITS DETRACTORS

At this period the affairs of Mess Lethierry were in this position: — The Durande had well fulfilled all his expectations. He had paid his debts, repaired his misfortunes, discharged his obligations at Brême, met his acceptances at St. Malo. He had paid off the mortgage upon his house at the Bravées, and had bought up all the little local rent charges upon the property. He was also the proprietor of a great productive capital. This was the Durande herself. The net revenue from the boat was about a thousand pounds sterling per annum, and the traffic was constantly increasing. Strictly speaking, the Durande constituted his entire fortune. She was also the fortune of the island. The carriage of cattle being one of the most profitable portions of her trade, he had been obliged, in order to facilitate the stowage, and the embarking and disembarking of animals, to do away with the luggage-boxes and the two boats. It was, perhaps, imprudent. The Durande had but one boat — namely, her long-boat; but this was an excellent one.

Ten years had elapsed since Rantaine’s robbery.

This prosperity of the Durande had its weak point. It inspired no confidence. People regarded it as a risk. Lethierry’s good fortune was looked upon as exceptional. He was considered to have gained by a lucky rashness. Some one in the Isle of Wight who had imitated him had not succeeded. The enterprise had ruined the shareholders. The engines, in fact, were badly constructed. But people shook their heads. Innovations have always to contend with the difficulty that few wish them well. The least false step compromises them.

One of the commercial oracles of the Channel Islands, a certain banker from Paris, named Jauge, being consulted upon a steamboat speculation, was reported to have turned his back, with the remark, “An investment is it you propose to me? Exactly; an investment in smoke.”

On the other hand, the sailing vessels had no difficulty in finding capitalists to take shares in a venture. Capital, in fact, was obstinately in favour of sails, and as obstinately against boilers and paddle-wheels. At Guernsey, the Durande was indeed a fact, but steam was not yet an established principle. Such is the fanatical spirit of conservatism in opposition to progress. They said of Lethierry, “It is all very well; but he could not do it a second time.” Far from encouraging, his example inspired timidity. Nobody would have dared to risk another Durande.

VI

THE SLOOP “CASHMERE” SAVES A SHIPWRECKED CREW

The equinoctial gales begin early in the Channel. The sea there is narrow, and the winds disturb it easily. The westerly gales begin from the month of February, and the waves are beaten about from every quarter. Navigation becomes an anxious matter. The people on the coasts look to the signal-post, and begin to watch for vessels in distress. The sea is then like a cut-throat in ambush for his victim. An invisible trumpet sounds the alarm of war with the elements, furious blasts spring up from the horizon, and a terrible wind soon begins to blow. The dark night whistles and howls. In the depth of the clouds the black tempest distends its cheeks, and the storm arises.

The wind is one danger; the fogs are another.

Fogs have from all time been the terror of mariners. In certain fogs microscopic prisms of ice are found in suspension, to which Mariotte attributes halos, mock suns, and paraselenes. Storm-fogs are of a composite character; various gases of unequal specific gravity combine with the vapour of water, and arrange themselves, layer over layer, in an order which divides the dense mist into zones. Below ranges the iodine; above the iodine is the sulphur; above the sulphur the brome; above the brome the phosphorus. This, in a certain manner, and making allowance for electric and magnetic tension, explains several phenomena, as the St. Elmo’s Fire of Columbus and Magellan, the flying stars moving about the ships, of which Seneca speaks; the two flames, Castor and Pollux, mentioned by Plutarch; the Roman legion, whose spears appeared to Cæsar to take fire; the peak of the Chateau of Duino in Friuli which the sentinel made to sparkle by touching it with his lance; and perhaps even those fulgurations from the earth which the ancients called Satan’s terrestrial lightnings. At the equator, an immense mist seems permanently to encircle the globe. It is known as the cloud-ring. The function of the cloud-ring is to temper the heat of the tropics, as that of the Gulf-stream is to mitigate the coldness of the Pole. Under the cloud-ring fogs are fatal. These are what are called *horse latitudes*. It was here that navigators of bygone ages were accustomed to cast their horses into the sea to lighten the ship in stormy weather, and to economise the fresh water when becalmed. Columbus said, “*Nube abaxo ex muerte*,” death lurks in the low cloud. The Etruscans, who bear the same relation to meteorology which the Chaldeans did to astronomy, had two high priests — the high priest of the thunder, and the high priest of the clouds. The “fulgurators” observed the lightning, and the weather sages watched the mists. The college of Priest-Augurs was consulted by the Syrians, the Phœnicians, the Pelasgi, and all the primitive navigators of the ancient *Mare Internum*. The origin of tempests was, from that time forward, partially understood. It is intimately connected with the generation of fogs, and is, properly speaking, the same phenomenon. There exist upon the ocean three regions of fogs, one equatorial and two polar. The mariners give them but one name, the *pitch-pot*.

In all latitudes, and particularly in the Channel, the equinoctial fogs are dangerous. They shed a sudden darkness over the sea. One of the perils of fogs, even when not very dense, arises from their preventing the mariners perceiving the change of the bed of the sea by the variations of the colour of the water. The result is a dangerous concealment of the approach of sands and breakers. The vessel steers towards the shoals without receiving any warning. Frequently the fogs leave a ship no resource except to lie-to, or to cast anchor. There are as many shipwrecks from the fogs as from the winds.

After a very violent squall succeeding one of these foggy days, the mail-boat *Cashmere* arrived safely from England. It entered at St. Peter’s Port as the first gleam of day appeared upon the sea, and at the very moment when the cannon of Castle Cornet announced the break of day. The sky had cleared: the sloop *Cashmere* was anxiously expected, as she was to bring the new rector of St. Sampson.

A little after the arrival of the sloop, a rumour ran through the town that she had been hailed during the night at sea by a long-boat containing a shipwrecked crew.

VII

HOW AN IDLER HAD THE GOOD FORTUNE TO BE SEEN BY A FISHERMAN

On that very night, at the moment when the wind abated, Gilliatt had gone out with his nets, without, however, taking his famous old Dutch boat too far from the coast.

As he was returning with the rising tide, towards two o’clock in the afternoon, the sun was shining brightly, and he passed before the Beast’s Horn to reach the little bay of the Bû de la Rue. At that moment he fancied that he saw, in the projection of the “Gild-Holm-’Ur” seat a shadow, which was not that of the rock. He steered his vessel nearer, and was able to perceive a man sitting in the “Gild-Holm-’Ur.” The sea was already very high, the rock encircled by the waves, and escape entirely cut off. Gilliatt made signs to the man. The stranger remained motionless. Gilliatt drew nearer; the man was asleep.

He was attired in black. “He looks like a priest,” thought Gilliatt. He approached still nearer, and could distinguish the face of a young man.

The features were unknown to him.

The rock, happily, was peaked; there was a good depth. Gilliatt wore off, and succeeded in skirting the rocky wall. The tide raised the bark so high that Gilliatt, by standing upon the gunwale of the sloop, could touch the man’s feet. He raised himself upon the planking, and stretched out his hands. If he had fallen at that moment, it is doubtful if he would have risen again on the water; the waves were rolling in between the boat and the rock, and destruction would have been inevitable. He pulled the foot of the sleeping man. “Ho! there. What are you doing in this place?”

The man aroused, and muttered —

“I was looking about.”

He was now completely awake, and continued —

“I have just arrived in this part. I came this way on a pleasure trip. I have passed the night on the sea: the view from here seemed beautiful. I was weary, and fell asleep.”

“Ten minutes later, and you would have been drowned.”

“Ha!”

“Jump into my bark.”

Gilliatt kept the bark fast with his foot, clutched the rock with one hand, and stretched out the other to the stranger in black, who sprang quickly into the boat. He was a fine young man.

Gilliatt seized the tiller, and in two minutes his boat entered the bay of the Bû de la Rue.

The young man wore a round hat and a white cravat; and his long black frock-coat was buttoned up to the neck. He had fair hair, which he wore *en couronne*. He had a somewhat feminine cast of features, a clear eye, a grave manner.

Meanwhile the boat had touched the ground. Gilliatt passed the cable through the mooring-ring, then turned and perceived the young man holding out a sovereign in a very white hand.

Gilliatt moved the hand gently away.

There was a pause. The young man was the first to break the silence.

“You have saved me from death.”

“Perhaps,” replied Gilliatt.

The moorings were made fast, and they went ashore.

The stranger continued —

“I owe you my life, sir.”

“No matter.”

This reply from Gilliatt was again followed by a pause.

“Do you belong to this parish?”

“No,” replied Gilliatt.

“To what parish, then?”

Gilliatt lifted up his right hand, pointed to the sky, and said —

“To that yonder.”

The young man bowed, and left him.

After walking a few paces, the stranger stopped, felt in his pocket, drew out a book, and returning towards Gilliatt, offered it to him.

“Permit me to make you a present of this.”

Gilliatt took the volume.

It was a Bible.

An instant after, Gilliatt, leaning upon the parapet, was following the young man with his eyes as he turned the angle of the path which led to St. Sampson.

By little and little he lowered his gaze, forgot all about the stranger — knew no more whether the “Gild-Holm-’Ur” existed. Everything disappeared before him in the bottomless depth of a reverie.

There was one abyss which swallowed up all his thought. This was Déruchette.

A voice calling him, aroused him from this dream.

“Ho there, Gilliatt!”

He recognised the voice and looked up.

“What is the matter, Sieur Landoys?”

It was, in fact, Sieur Landoys, who was passing along the road about one hundred paces from the Bû de la Rue in his phaeton, drawn by one little horse. He had stopped to hail Gilliatt, but he seemed hurried.

“There is news, Gilliatt.”

“Where is that?”

“At the Bravées.”

“What is it?”

“I am too far off to tell you the story.”

Gilliatt shuddered.

“Is Miss Déruchette going to be married?”

“No; but she had better look out for a husband.”

“What do you mean?”

“Go up to the house, and you will learn.”

And Sieur Landoys whipped on his horse.

BOOK V

THE REVOLVER

I

CONVERSATIONS AT THE JEAN AUBERGE

Sieur Clubin was a man who bided his time. He was short in stature, and his complexion was yellow. He had the strength of a bull. His sea life had not tanned his skin; his flesh had a sallow hue; it was the colour of a wax candle, of which his eyes, too, had something of the steady light. His memory was peculiarly retentive. With him, to have seen a man once, was to have him like a note in a note-book. His quiet glance took possession of you. The pupil of his eye received the impression of a face, and kept it like a portrait. The face might grow old, but Sieur Clubin never lost it; it was impossible to cheat that tenacious memory. Sieur Clubin was curt in speech, grave in manner, bold in action. No gestures were ever indulged in by him. An air of candour won everybody to him at first; many people thought him artless. He had a wrinkle in the corner of his eye, astonishingly expressive of simplicity. As we have said, no abler mariner existed; no one like him for reefing a sail, for keeping a vessel's head to the wind, or the sails well set. Never did reputation for religion and integrity stand higher than his. To have suspected him would have been to bring yourself under suspicion. He was on terms of intimacy with Monsieur Rébuchet, a money-changer at St. Malo, who lived in the Rue St. Vincent, next door to the armourer's; and Monsieur Rébuchet would say, "I would leave my shop in Clubin's hands."

Sieur Clubin was a widower; his wife, like himself, had enjoyed a high reputation for probity. She had died with a fame for incorruptible virtue. If the bailli had whispered gallant things in her ear, she would have impeached him before the king. If a saint had made love to her, she would have told it to the priest. This couple, Sieur and Dame Clubin, had realised in Torteval the ideal of the English epithet "respectable." Dame Clubin's reputation was as the snowy whiteness of the swan; Sieur Clubin's like that of ermine itself — a spot would have been fatal to him. He could hardly have picked up a pin without making inquiries for the owner. He would send round the town-crier about a box of matches. One day he went into a wine-shop at St. Servan, and said to the man who kept it, “Three years ago I breakfasted here; you made a mistake in the bill;” and he returned the man thirteen sous. He was the very personification of probity, with a certain compression of the lips indicative of watchfulness.

He seemed, indeed, always on the watch — for what? For rogues probably.

Every Tuesday he commanded the Durande on her passage from Guernsey to St. Malo. He arrived at St. Malo on the Tuesday evening, stayed two days there to discharge and take in a new cargo, and started again for Guernsey on Friday morning.

There was at that period, at St. Malo, a little tavern near the harbour, which was called the “Jean Auberge.”

The construction of the modern quays swept away this house. At this period, the sea came up as far as the St. Vincent and Dinan gates. St. Merlan and St. Servan communicated with each other by covered carts and other vehicles, which passed to and fro among vessels lying high and dry, avoiding the buoys, the anchors, and cables, and running the risk now and then of smashing their leathern hoods against the lowered yards, or the end of a jibboom. Between the tides, the coachmen drove their horses over those sands, where, six hours afterwards, the winds would be beating the rolling waves. The four-and-twenty carrying dogs of St. Malo, who tore to pieces a naval officer in 1770, were accustomed to prowl about this beach. This excess of zeal on their part led to the destruction of the pack. Their nocturnal barkings are no longer heard between the little and the great Talard.

Sieur Clubin was accustomed to stay at the Jean Auberge. The French office of the Durande was held there.

The custom-house officers and coast-guardmen came to take their meals and to drink at the Jean Auberge. They had their separate tables. The custom-house officers of Binic found it convenient for the service to meet there with their brother officers of St. Malo.

Captains of vessels came there also; but they ate at another table.

Sieur Clubin sat sometimes at one, sometimes at the other table, but preferred the table of the custom-house men to that of the sea captains. He was always welcome at either.

The tables were well served. There were strange drinks especially provided for foreign sailors. A dandy sailor from Bilboa could have been supplied there with a *helada*. People drank stout there, as at Greenwich; or brown *gueuse*, as at Antwerp.

Masters of vessels who came from long voyages and privateersmen sometimes appeared at the captains' table, where they exchanged news. "How are sugars? That commission is only for small lots. — The brown kinds, however, are going off. Three thousand bags of East India, and five hundred hogsheads of Sagua. — Take my word, the opposition will end by defeating Villèle. — What about indigo? Only seven serons of Guatemala changed hands. — The *Nanino-Julia* is in the roads; a pretty three-master from Brittany. — The two cities of La Plata are at loggerheads again. — When Monte Video gets fat, Buenos Ayres grows lean. — It has been found necessary to transfer the cargo of the *Regina-Cœli*, which has been condemned at Callao. — Cocoas go off briskly. — Caraque bags are quoted at one hundred and thirty-four, and Trinidad's at seventy-three. — It appears that at the review in the Champ de Mars, the people cried, 'Down with the ministers!' — The raw salt Saladeros hides are selling — ox-hides at sixty francs, and cows' at forty-eight. — Have they passed the Balkan? — What is Diebitsch about? — Aniseed is in demand at San Francisco. Plagniol olive oil is quiet. — Gruyère cheese, in bulk, is thirty-two francs the quintal. — Well, is Leon XII. dead?" etc., etc.

All these things were talked about and commented on aloud. At the table of the custom-house and coast-guard officers they spoke in a lower key.

Matters of police and revenue on the coast and in the ports require, in fact, a little more privacy, and a little less clearness in the conversation.

The sea-captains' table was presided over by an old captain of a large vessel, M. Gertrais-Gaboureau. M. Gertrais-Gaboureau could hardly be regarded as a man; he was rather a living barometer. His long life at sea had given him a surprising power of prognosticating the state of the weather. He seemed to issue a decree for the weather to-morrow. He sounded the winds, and felt the pulse, as it were, of the tides. He might be imagined requesting the clouds to show their tongue — that is to say, their forked lightnings. He was the physician of the wave, the breeze, and the squall. The ocean was his patient. He had travelled round the world like a doctor going his visits, examining every kind of climate in its good and bad condition. He was profoundly versed in the pathology of the seasons. Sometimes he would be heard delivering himself in this fashion— “The barometer descended in 1796 to three degrees below tempest point.” He was a sailor from real love of the sea. He hated England as much as he liked the ocean. He had carefully studied English seamanship, and considered himself to have discovered its weak point. He would explain how the *Sovereign* of 1637 differed from the *Royal William* of 1670, and from the *Victory* of 1775. He compared their build as to their forecastles and quarter-decks. He looked back with regret to the towers upon the deck, and the funnel-shaped tops of the *Great Harry* of 1514 — probably regarding them from the point of view of convenient lodging-places for French cannon-balls. In his eyes, nations only existed for their naval institutions. He indulged in some odd figures of speech on this subject. He considered the term “The Trinity House” as sufficiently indicating England. The “Northern Commissioners” were in like manner synonymous in his mind with Scotland; the “Ballast Board,” with Ireland. He was full of nautical information. He was, in himself, a marine alphabet and almanack, a tariff and low-water mark, all combined. He knew by heart all the lighthouse dues — particularly those of the English coast — one penny per ton for passing before this; one farthing before that. He would tell you that the Small Rock Light which once used to burn two hundred gallons of oil, now consumes fifteen hundred. Once, aboard ship, he was attacked by a dangerous disease, and was believed to be dying. The crew assembled round his hammock, and in the midst of his groans and agony he addressed the chief carpenter with the words, “You had better make a mortise in each side of the main caps, and put in a bit of iron to help pass the top ropes through.” His habit of command had given to his countenance an expression of authority.

It was rare that the subjects of conversation at the captains’ table and at that of the custom-house men were the same. This, however, did happen to be the case in the first days of that month of February to which the course of this history has now brought us. The three-master *Tamaulipas*, Captain Zuela, arrived from Chili, and bound thither again, was the theme of discussion at both tables.

At the captains’ table they were talking of her cargo; and at that of the custom-house people, of certain circumstances connected with her recent proceedings.

Captain Zuela, of Copiapo, was partly a Chilian and partly a Columbian. He had taken a part in the War of Independence in a true independent fashion, adhering sometimes to Bolivar, sometimes to Morillo, according as he had found it to his interest. He had enriched himself by serving all causes. No man in the world could have been more Bourbonist, more Bonapartist, more absolutist, more liberal, more atheistical, or more devoutly catholic. He belonged to that great and renowned party which may be called the Lucrative party. From time to time he made his appearance in France on commercial voyages; and if report spoke truly, he willingly gave a passage to fugitives of any kind — bankrupts or political refugees, it was all the same to him, provided they could pay. His mode of taking them aboard was simple. The fugitive waited upon a lonely point of the coast, and at the moment of setting sail, Zuela would detach a small boat to fetch him. On his last voyage he had assisted in this way an outlaw and fugitive from justice, named Berton; and on this occasion he was suspected of being about to aid the flight of the men implicated in the affair of the Bidassoa. The police were informed, and had their eye upon him.

This period was an epoch of flights and escapes. The Restoration in France was a reactionary movement. Revolutions are fruitful of voluntary exile; and restorations of wholesale banishments. During the first seven or eight years which followed the return of the Bourbons, panic was universal — in finance, in industry, in commerce, men felt the ground tremble beneath them. Bankruptcies were numerous in the commercial world; in the political, there was a general rush to escape. Lavalette had taken flight, Lefebvre Desnouettes had taken flight, Delon had taken flight. Special tribunals were again in fashion — *plus* Treetaillon. People instinctively shunned the Pont de Saumur, the Esplanade de la Réole, the wall of the Observatoire in Paris, the tower of Taurias d’Avignon — dismal landmarks in history where the period of reaction has left its sign-spots, on which the marks of that blood-stained hand are still visible. In London the Thistlewood affair, with its ramifications in France: in Paris the Trogoff trial, with its ramifications in Belgium, Switzerland, and Italy, had increased the motives for anxiety and flight, and given an impetus to that mysterious rout which left so many gaps in the social system of that day. To find a place of safety, this was the general care. To be implicated was to be ruined. The spirit of the military tribunals had survived their institution. Sentences were matters of favour. People fled to Texas, to the Rocky Mountains, to Peru, to Mexico. The men of the Loire, traitors then, but now regarded as patriots, had founded the *Champ d'Asile*. Béranger in one of his songs says —

“Barbarians! we are Frenchmen born;
Pity us, glorious, yet forlorn.”

Self-banishment was the only resource left. Nothing, perhaps, seems simpler than flight, but that monosyllable has a terrible significance. Every obstacle is in the way of the man who slips away. Taking to flight necessitates disguise. Persons of importance — even illustrious characters — were reduced to these expedients, only fit for malefactors. Their independent habits rendered it difficult for them to escape through the meshes of authority. A rogue who violates the conditions of his ticket-of-leave comports himself before the police as innocently as a saint; but imagine innocence constrained to act a part; virtue disguising its voice; a glorious reputation hiding under a mask. Yonder passer-by is a man of well-earned celebrity; he is in quest of a false passport. The equivocal proceedings of one absconding from the reach of the law is no proof that he is not a hero. Ephemeral but characteristic features of the time of which our so-called regular history takes no note, but which the true painter of the age will bring out into relief. Under cover of these flights and concealments of honest men, genuine rogues, less watched and suspected, managed often to get clear off. A scoundrel, who found it convenient to disappear, would take advantage of the general pell-mell, tack himself on to the political refugees, and, thanks to his greater skill in the art, would contrive to appear in that dim twilight more honest even than his honest neighbours. Nothing looks more awkward and confused sometimes than honesty unjustly condemned. It is out of its element, and is almost sure to commit itself.

It is a curious fact, that this voluntary expatriation, particularly with honest folks, appeared to lead to every strange turn of fortune. The modicum of civilisation which a scamp brought with him from London or Paris became, perhaps, a valuable stock in trade in some primitive country, ingratiated him with the people, and enabled him to strike into new paths. There is nothing impossible in a man's escaping thus from the laws, to reappear elsewhere as a dignitary among the priesthood. There was something phantasmagorial in these sudden disappearances; and more than one such flight has led to events like the marvels of a dream. An escapade of this kind, indeed, seemed to end naturally in the wild and wonderful; as when some broken bankrupt suddenly decamps to turn up again twenty years later as Grand Vizier to the Mogul, or as a king in Tasmania.

Rendering assistance to these fugitives was an established trade, and, looking to the abundance of business of that kind, was a highly profitable one. It was generally carried on as a supplementary branch of certain recognised kinds of commerce. A person, for instance, desiring to escape to England, applied to the smugglers; one who desired to get to America, had recourse to sea-captains like Zuela.

II

CLUBIN OBSERVES SOMEONE

Zuela came sometimes to take refreshment at the Jean Auberge. Clubin knew him by sight.

For that matter Clubin was not proud. He did not disdain even to know scamps by sight. He went so far sometimes as to cultivate even a closer acquaintance with them; giving his hand in the open street, or saying good-day to them. He talked English with the smugglers, and jabbered Spanish with the *contrebandistas*. On this subject he had at command a number of apologetic phrases. “Good,” he said, “can be extracted out of the knowledge of evil. The gamekeeper may find advantage in knowing the poacher. The good pilot may sound the depths of a pirate, who is only a sort of hidden rock. I test the quality of a scoundrel as a doctor will test a poison.” There was no answering a battery of proverbs like this. Everybody gave Clubin credit for his shrewdness. People praised him for not indulging in a ridiculous delicacy. Who, then, should dare to speak scandal of him on this point? Everything he did was evidently “for the good of the service.” With him, all was straightforward. Nothing could stain his good fame. Crystal might more easily become sullied. This general confidence in him was the natural reward of a long life of integrity, the crowning advantage of a settled reputation. Whatever Clubin might do, or appear to do, was sure to be interpreted favourably. He had attained almost to a state of impeccability. Over and above this, “he is very wary,” people said: and from a situation which in others would have given rise to suspicion, his integrity would extricate itself, with a still greater halo of reputation for ability. This reputation for ability mingled harmoniously with his fame for perfect simplicity of character. Great simplicity and great talents in conjunction are not uncommon. The compound constitutes one of the varieties of the virtuous man, and one of the most valuable. Sieur Clubin was one of those men who might be found in intimate conversation with a sharper or a thief, without suffering any diminution of respect in the minds of their neighbours.

The *Tamaulipas* had completed her loading. She was ready for sea, and was preparing to sail very shortly.

One Tuesday evening the Durande arrived at St. Malo while it was still broad daylight. Sieur Clubin, standing upon the bridge of the vessel, and superintending the manœuvres necessary for getting her into port, perceived upon the sandy beach near the Petit-Bey, two men, who were conversing between the rocks, in a solitary spot. He observed them with his sea-glass, and recognised one of the men. It was Captain Zuela. He seemed to recognise the other also.

This other was a person of high stature, a little grey. He wore the broad-brimmed hat and the sober clothing of the Society of Friends. He was probably a Quaker. He lowered his gaze with an air of extreme diffidence.

On arriving at the Jean Auberge, Sieur Clubin learnt that the *Tamaulipas* was preparing to sail in about ten days.

It has since become known that he obtained information on some other points.

That night he entered the gunsmith’s shop in the St. Vincent Street, and said to the master:

“Do you know what a revolver is?”

“Yes,” replied the gunsmith. “It is an American weapon.”

“It is a pistol with which a man can carry on a conversation.”

“Exactly: an instrument which comprises in itself both the question and the answer.”

“And the rejoinder too.”

“Precisely, Monsieur Clubin. A rotatory clump of barrels.”

“I shall want five or six balls.”

The gunmaker twisted the corner of his lip, and made that peculiar noise with which, when accompanied by a toss of the head, Frenchmen express admiration.

“The weapon is a good one, Monsieur Clubin.”

“I want a revolver with six barrels.”

“I have not one.”

“What! and you a gunmaker!”

“I do not keep such articles yet. You see, it is a new thing. It is only just coming into vogue. French makers, as yet, confine themselves to the simple pistol.”

“Nonsense.”

“It has not yet become an article of commerce.”

“Nonsense, I say.”

“I have excellent pistols.”

“I want a revolver.”

“I agree that it is more useful. Stop, Monsieur Clubin!”

“What?”

“I believe I know where there is one at this moment in St. Malo; to be had a bargain.”

“A revolver?”

“Yes.”

“For sale?”

“Yes.”

“Where is that?”

“I believe I know; or I can find out.”

“When can you give me an answer?”

“A bargain; but of good quality.”

“When shall I return?”

“If I procure you a revolver, remember, it will be a good one.”

“When will you give me an answer?”

“After your next voyage.”

“Do not mention that it is for me,” said Clubin.

III

CLUBIN CARRIES AWAY SOMETHING AND BRINGS BACK NOTHING

Sieur Clubin completed the loading of the Durande, embarked a number of cattle and some passengers, and left St. Malo for Guernsey, as usual, on the Friday morning.

On that same Friday, when the vessel had gained the open, which permits the captain to absent himself a moment from the place of command, Clubin entered his cabin, shut himself in, took a travelling bag which he kept there, put into one of its compartments some biscuit, some boxes of preserves, a few pounds of chocolate in sticks, a chronometer, and a sea telescope, and passed through the handles a cord, ready prepared to sling it if necessary. Then he descended into the hold, went into the compartment where the cables are kept, and was seen to come up again with one of those knotted ropes heavy with pieces of metal, which are used for ship caulkers at sea and by robbers ashore. Cords of this kind are useful in climbing.

Having arrived at Guernsey, Clubin repaired to Torteval. He took with him the travelling bag and the knotted cord, but did not bring them back again.

Let us repeat once for all, the Guernsey which we are describing is that ancient Guernsey which no longer exists, and of which it would be impossible to find a parallel now anywhere except in the country. There it is still flourishing, but in the towns it has passed away. The same remarks apply to Jersey. St. Helier’s is as civilised as Dieppe, St. Peter’s Port as L’Orient. Thanks to the progress of civilisation, thanks to the admirably enterprising spirit of that brave island people, everything has been changed during the last forty years in the Norman Archipelago. Where there was darkness there is now light. With these premises let us proceed.

At that period, then, which is already so far removed from us as to have become historical, smuggling was carried on very extensively in the Channel. The smuggling vessels abounded, particularly on the western coast of Guernsey. People of that peculiarly clever kind who know, even in the smallest details, what went on half a century ago, will even cite you the names of these suspicious craft, which were almost always Austrians or

Guiposeans. It is certain that a week scarcely ever passed without one or two being seen either in Saint's Bay or at Pleinmont. Their coming and going had almost the character of a regular service. A cavern in the cliffs at Sark was called then, and is still called, the "Shops" ("Les Boutiques"), from its being the place where these smugglers made their bargains with the purchasers of their merchandise. This sort of traffic had in the Channel a dialect of its own, a vocabulary of contraband technicalities now forgotten, and which was to the Spanish what the "Levantine" is to the Italian.

On many parts of the English coast smuggling had a secret but cordial understanding with legitimate and open commerce. It had access to the house of more than one great financier, by the back-stairs it is true; and its influence extended itself mysteriously through all the commercial world, and the intricate ramifications of manufacturing industry. Merchant on one side, smuggler on the other; such was the key to the secret of many great fortunes. Séguin affirmed it of Bourgain, Bourgain of Séguin. We do not vouch for their accusations; it is possible that they were calumniating each other. However this may have been, it is certain that the contraband trade, though hunted down by the law, was flourishing enough in certain financial circles. It had relations with "the very best society." Thus the brigand Mandrin, in other days, found himself occasionally *tête-à-tête* with the Count of Charolais; for this underhand trade often contrived to put on a very respectable appearance; kept a house of its own with an irreproachable exterior.

All this necessitated a host of manœuvres and connivances, which required impenetrable secrecy. A contrabandist was entrusted with a good many things, and knew how to keep them secret. An inviolable confidence was the condition of his existence. The first quality, in fact, in a smuggler was strict honour in his own circle. No discreetness, no smuggling. Fraud has its secrets like the priest's confessional.

These secrets were indeed, as a rule, faithfully kept. The contrabandist swore to betray nothing, and he kept his word; nobody was more trustworthy than the genuine smuggler. The Judge Alcade of Oyarzun captured a smuggler one day, and put him to torture to compel him to disclose the name of the capitalist who secretly supported him. The smuggler refused to tell. The capitalist in question was the Judge Alcade himself. Of these two accomplices, the judge and the smuggler, the one had been compelled, in order to appear in the eyes of the world to fulfil the law, to put the other to the torture, which the other had patiently borne for the sake of his oath.

The two most famous smugglers who haunted Pleinmont at that period were Blasco and Blasquito. They were *Tocayos*. This was a sort of Spanish or Catholic relationship which consisted in having the same patron saint in heaven; a thing, it will be admitted, not less worthy of consideration than having the same father upon earth.

When a person was initiated into the furtive ways of the contraband business, nothing was more easy, or, from a certain point of view, more troublesome. It was sufficient to have no fear of dark nights, to repair to Pleinmont, and to consult the oracle located there.

IV

PLEINMONT

Pleinmont, near Torteval, is one of the three corners of the island of Guernsey. At the extremity of the cape there rises a high turfy hill, which looks over the sea.

The height is a lonely place. All the more lonely from there being one solitary house there.

This house adds a sense of terror to that of solitude.

It is popularly believed to be haunted.

Haunted or not, its aspect is singular.

Built of granite, and rising only one story high, it stands in the midst of the grassy solitude. It is in a perfectly good condition as far as exterior is concerned; the walls are thick and the roof is sound. Not a stone is wanting in the sides, not a tile upon the roof. A brick-built chimney-stack forms the angle of the roof. The building turns its back to the sea, being on that side merely a blank wall. On examining this wall, however, attentively, the visitor perceives a little window bricked up. The two gables have three dormer windows, one fronting the east, the others fronting the west, but both are bricked up in like manner. The front, which looks inland, has alone a door and windows. This door, too, is walled in, as are also the two windows of the ground-floor. On the first floor — and this is the feature which is most striking as you approach — there are two open windows; but these are even more suspicious than the blind windows. Their open squares look dark even in broad day, for they have no panes of glass, or even window-frames. They open simply upon the dusk within. They strike the imagination like hollow eye-sockets in a human face. Inside all is deserted. Through the gaping casements you may mark the ruin within. No panellings, no woodwork; all bare stone. It is like a windowed sepulchre, giving liberty to the spectres to look out upon the daylight world. The rains sap the foundations on the seaward side. A few nettles, shaken by the breeze, flourish in the lower part of the walls. Far around the horizon there is no other human habitation. The house is a void; the abode of silence: but if you place your ear against the wall and listen, you may distinguish a confused noise now and then, like the flutter of wings. Over the walled door, upon the stone which forms its architrave, are sculptured these letters, “Elm-Pbilg,” with the date “1780.”

The dark shadow of night and the mournful light of the moon find entrance there.

The sea completely surrounds the house. Its situation is magnificent; but for that reason its aspect is more sinister. The beauty of the spot becomes a puzzle. Why does not a human family take up its abode here? The place is beautiful, the house well-built. Whence this neglect? To these questions, obvious to the reason, succeed others, suggested by the reverie which the place inspires. Why is this cultivatable garden uncultivated? No master for it; and the bricked-up doorway? What has happened to the place? Why is it shunned by men? What business is done here? If none, why is there no one here? Is it only when all the rest of the world are asleep that some one in this spot is awake? Dark squalls, wild winds, birds of prey, strange creatures, unknown forms, present themselves to the mind, and connect themselves somehow with this deserted house. For what class of wayfarers can this be the hostelry? You imagine to yourself whirlwinds of rain and hail beating in at the open casements, and wandering through the rooms. Tempests have left their vague traces upon the interior walls. The chambers, though walled and covered in, are visited by the hurricanes. Has the house been the scene of some great crime? You may almost fancy that this spectral dwelling, given up to solitude and darkness, might be heard calling aloud for succour. Does it remain silent? Do voices indeed issue from it? What business has it on hand in this lonely place? The mystery of the dark hours rests securely here. Its aspect is disquieting at noonday; what must it be at midnight? The dreamer asks himself — for dreams have their coherence — what this house may be between the dusk of evening and the twilight of approaching dawn? Has the vast supernatural world some relation with this deserted height, which sometimes compels it to arrest its movements here, and to descend and to become visible? Do the scattered elements of the spirit world whirl around it? Does the impalpable take form and substance here? Insoluble riddles! A holy awe is in the very stones; that dim twilight has surely relations with the infinite Unknown. When the sun has gone down, the song of the birds will be hushed, the goatherd behind the hills will go homeward with his goats; reptiles, taking courage from the gathering darkness, will creep through the fissures of rocks; the stars will begin to appear, night will come, but yonder two blank casements will still be staring at the sky. They open to welcome spirits and apparitions; for it is by the names of apparitions, ghosts, phantom faces vaguely distinct, masks in the lurid light, mysterious movements of minds, and shadows, that the popular faith, at once ignorant and profound, translates the sombre relations of this dwelling with the world of darkness.

The house is “haunted;” the popular phrase comprises everything.

Credulous minds have their explanation; common-sense thinkers have theirs also. “Nothing is more simple,” say the latter, “than the history of the house. It is an old observatory of the time of the revolutionary wars and the days of smuggling. It was built for such objects. The wars being ended, the house was abandoned; but it was not pulled down, as it might one day again become useful. The door and windows have been walled to prevent people entering, or doing injury to the interior. The walls of the windows, on the three sides which face the sea, have been bricked up against the winds of the south and south-west. That is all.”

The ignorant and the credulous, however, are not satisfied. In the first place, the house was not built at the period of the wars of the Revolution. It bears the date “1780,” which was anterior to the Revolution. In the next place it was not built for an observatory. It bears the letters “Elm-Pbilg,” which are the double monogram of two families, and which indicate, according to usage, that the house was built for the use of a newly-married couple. Then it has certainly been inhabited: why then should it be abandoned? If the door and windows were bricked up to prevent people entering the house only, why were two windows left open? Why are there no shutters, no window-frames, no glass? Why were the walls bricked in on one side if not on the other? The wind is prevented from entering from the south; but why is it allowed to enter from the north?

The credulous are wrong, no doubt; but it is clear that the common-sense thinkers have not discovered the key to the mystery. The problem remains still unsolved.

It is certain that the house is generally believed to have been more useful than inconvenient to the smugglers.

The growth of superstitious terror tends to deprive facts of their true proportions. Without doubt, many of the nocturnal phenomena which have, by little and little, secured to the building the reputation of being haunted, might be explained by obscure and furtive visits, by brief sojourns of sailors near the spot, and sometimes by the precaution, sometimes by the daring, of men engaged in certain suspicious occupations concealing themselves for their dark purposes, or allowing themselves to be seen in order to inspire dread.

At this period, already a remote one, many daring deeds were possible. The police — particularly in small places — was by no means as efficient as in these days.

Add to this, that if the house was really, as was said, a resort of the smugglers, their meetings there must, up to a certain point, have been safe from interruptions precisely because the house was dreaded by the superstitious people of the country. Its ghostly reputation prevented its being visited for other reasons. People do not generally apply to the police, or officers of customs, on the subject of spectres. The superstitious rely on making the sign of the cross; not on magistrates and indictments. There is always a tacit connivance, involuntary it may be, but not the less real, between the objects which inspire fear and their victims. The terror-stricken feel a sort of culpability in having encountered their terrors; they imagine themselves to have unveiled a secret; and they have an inward fear, unknown even to themselves, of aggravating their guilt, and exciting the anger of the apparitions. All this makes them discreet. And over and above this reason, the very instinct of the credulous is silence; dread is akin to dumbness; the terrified speak little; horror seems always to whisper, “Hush!”

It must be remembered that this was a period when the Guernsey peasants believed that the Mystery of the Holy Manger is repeated by oxen and asses every year on a fixed day; a period when no one would have dared to enter a stable at night for fear of coming upon the animals on their knees.

If the local legends and stories of the people can be credited, the popular superstition went so far as to fasten to the walls of the house at Pleinmont things of which the traces are still visible — rats without feet, bats without wings, and bodies of other dead animals. Here, too, were seen toads crushed between the pages of a Bible, bunches of yellow lupins, and other strange offerings, placed there by imprudent passers-by at night, who, having fancied that they had seen something, hoped by these small sacrifices to obtain pardon, and to appease the ill-humours of were-wolves and evil spirits. In all times, believers of this kind have flourished; some even in very high places. Cæsar consulted Saganius, and Napoleon Mademoiselle

Lenormand. There are a kind of consciences so tender, that they must seek indulgences even from Beelzebub. “May God do, and Satan not undo,” was one of the prayers of Charles the Fifth. They come to persuade themselves that they may commit sins even against the Evil One; and one of their cherished objects was, to be irreproachable even in the eyes of Satan. We find here an explanation of those adorations sometimes paid to infernal spirits. It is only one more species of fanaticism. Sins against the devil certainly exist in certain morbid imaginations. The fancy that they have violated the laws of the lower regions torments certain eccentric casuists; they are haunted with scruples even about offending the demons. A belief in the efficacy of devotions to the spirits of the Brocken or Armuyr, a notion of having committed sins against hell, visionary penances for imaginary crimes, avowals of the truth to the spirit of falsehood, self-accusation before the origin of all evil, and confessions in an inverted sense — are all realities, or things at least which have existed. The annals of criminal procedure against witchcraft and magic prove this in every page. Human folly unhappily extends even thus far: when terror seizes upon a man he does not stop easily. He dreams of imaginary faults, imaginary purifications, and clears out his conscience with the old witches’ broom.

Be this as it may, if the house at Pleinmont had its secrets, it kept them to itself; except by some rare chance, no one went there to see. It was left entirely alone. Few people, indeed, like to run the risk of an encounter with the other world.

Owing to the terror which it inspired, and which kept at a distance all who could observe or bear testimony on the subject, it had always been easy to obtain an entrance there at night by means of a rope ladder, or even by the use of the first ladder coming to hand in one of the neighbouring fields. A consignment of goods or provisions left there might await in perfect safety the time and opportunity for a furtive embarkation. Tradition relates that forty years ago a fugitive — for political offences as some affirm, for commercial as others say — remained for some time concealed in the haunted house at Pleinmont; whence he finally succeeded in embarking in a fishing-boat for England. From England a passage is easily obtained to America.

Tradition also avers that provisions deposited in this house remain there untouched, Lucifer and the smugglers having an interest in inducing whoever places them there to return.

From the summit of the house, there is a view to the south of the Hanway Rocks, at about a mile from the shore.

These rocks are famous. They have been guilty of all the evil deeds of which rocks are capable. They are the most ruthless destroyers of the sea. They lie in a treacherous ambush for vessels in the night. They have contributed to the enlargement of the cemeteries at Torteval and Rocquaine.

A lighthouse was erected upon these rocks in 1862. At the present day, the Hanways light the way for the vessels which they once lured to destruction; the destroyer in ambush now bears a lighted torch in his hand; and mariners seek in the horizon, as a protector and a guide, the rock which they used to fly as a pitiless enemy. It gives confidence by night in that vast space where it was so long a terror — like a robber converted into a gendarme.

There are three Hanways: the Great Hanway, the Little Hanway, and the Mauve. It is upon the Little Hanway that the red light is placed at the present time.

This reef of rocks forms part of a group of peaks, some beneath the sea, some rising out of it. It towers above them all; like a fortress, it has advanced works: on the side of the open sea, a chain of thirteen rocks; on the north, two breakers — the High Fourquiés, the Needles, and a sandbank called the Hérouée. On the south, three rocks — the Cat Rock, the Percée, and the Herpin Rock; then two banks — the South Bank and the Muet: besides which, there is, on the side opposite Pleinmont, the Tas de Pois d’Aval.

To swim across the channel from the Hanways to Pleinmont is difficult, but not impossible. We have already said that this was one of the achievements of Clubin. The expert swimmer who knows this channel can find two resting-places, the Round Rock, and further on, a little out of the course, to the left, the Red Rock.

V

THE BIRDS'-NESTERS

It was near the period of that Saturday which was passed by Sieur Clubin at Torteval that a curious incident occurred, which was little heard of at the time, and which did not generally transpire till a long time afterwards. For many things, as we have already observed, remain undivulged, simply by reason of the terror which they have caused in those who have witnessed them.

In the night-time between Saturday and Sunday — we are exact in the matter of the date, and we believe it to be correct — three boys climbed up the hill at Pleinmont. The boys returned to the village: they came from the seashore. They were what are called, in the corrupt French of that part, "déniquoiseaux," or birds'-nesters. Wherever there are cliffs and cleft-rocks overhanging the sea, the young birds'-nesters abound. The reader will remember that Gilliatt interfered in this matter for the sake of the birds as well as for the sake of the children.

The "déniquoiseaux" are a sort of sea-urchins, and are not a very timid species.

The night was very dark. Dense masses of cloud obscured the zenith. Three o'clock had sounded in the steeple of Torteval which is round and pointed like a magician's hat.

Why did the boys return so late? Nothing more simple. They had been searching for sea-gulls' nests in the Tas de Pois d'Aval. The season having been very mild, the pairing of the birds had begun very early. The children watching the fluttering of the male and female about their nests, and excited by the pursuit, had forgotten the time. The waters had crept up around them; they had no time to regain the little bay in which they had moored their boat, and they were compelled to wait upon one of the peaks of the Tas de Pois for the ebb of the tide. Hence their late return. Mothers wait on such occasions in feverish anxiety for the return of their children, and when they find them safe, give vent to their joy in the shape of anger, and relieve their tears by dealing them a sound drubbing. The boys accordingly hastened their steps, but in fear and trembling. Their haste was of that sort which is glad of an excuse for stopping, and which is not inconsistent with a reluctance to reach their destination; for they had before them the prospect of warm embraces, to be followed with an inevitable thrashing.

One only of the boys had nothing of this to fear. He was an orphan: a French boy, without father or mother, and perfectly content just then with his motherless condition; for nobody taking any interest in him, his back was safe from the dreaded blows. The two others were natives of Guernsey, and belonged to the parish of Torteval.

Having climbed the grassy hill, the three birds'-nesters reached the tableland on which was situate the haunted house.

They began by being in fear, which is the proper frame of mind of every passer-by; and particularly of every child at that hour and in that place.

They had a strong desire to take to their heels as fast as possible, and a strong desire, also, to stay and look.

They did stop.

They looked towards the solitary building.

It was all dark and terrible.

It stood in the midst of the solitary plain — an obscure block, a hideous but symmetrical excrescence; a high square mass with right-angled corners, like an immense altar in the darkness.

The first thought of the boys was to run: the second was to draw nearer. They had never seen this house before. There is such a thing as a desire to be frightened arising from curiosity. They had a little French boy with them, which emboldened them to approach.

It is well known that the French have no fear.

Besides, it is reassuring to have company in danger; to be frightened in the company of two others is encouraging.

And then they were a sort of hunters accustomed to peril. They were children; they were used to search, to rummage, to spy out hidden things. They were in the habit of peeping into holes; why not into this hole? Hunting is exciting. Looking into birds' nests perhaps gives an itch for looking a little into a nest of ghosts. A rummage in the dark regions. Why not?

From prey to prey, says the proverb, we come to the devil. After the birds, the demons. The boys were on the way to learn the secret of those terrors of which their parents had told them. To be on the track of hobgoblin tales — nothing could be more attractive. To have long stories to tell like the good housewives. The notion was tempting.

All this mixture of ideas, in their state of half-confusion, half-instinct, in the minds of the Guernsey birds’-nesters, finally screwed their courage to the point. They approached the house.

The little fellow who served them as a sort of moral support in the adventure was certainly worthy of their confidence. He was a bold boy — an apprentice to a ship-caulker; one of those children who have already become men. He slept on a little straw in a shed in the ship-caulker’s yard, getting his own living, having red hair, and a loud voice; climbing easily up walls and trees, not encumbered with prejudices in the matter of property in the apples within his reach; a lad who had worked in the repairing dock for vessels of war — a child of chance, a happy orphan, born in France, no one knew exactly where; ready to give a centime to a beggar; a mischievous fellow, but a good one at heart; one who had talked to Parisians. At this time he was earning a shilling a day by caulking the fishermen’s boats under repair at the Pêqueries. When he felt inclined he gave himself a holiday, and went birds’-nesting. Such was the little French boy.

The solitude of the place impressed them with a strange feeling of dread. They felt the threatening aspect of the silent house. It was wild and savage. The naked and deserted plateau terminated in a precipice at a short distance from its steep incline. The sea below was quiet. There was no wind. Not a blade of grass stirred.

The birds’-nesters advanced by slow steps, the French boy at their head, and looking towards the house.

One of them, afterwards relating the story, or as much of it as had remained in his head, added, “It did not speak.”

They came nearer, holding their breath, as one might approach a savage animal.

They had climbed the hill at the side of the house which descended to seaward towards a little isthmus of rocks almost inaccessible. Thus they had come pretty near to the building; but they saw only the southern side, which was all walled up. They did not dare to approach by the other side, where the terrible windows were.

They grew bolder, however; the caulker’s apprentice whispered, “Let’s veer to larboard. That’s the handsome side. Let’s have a look at the black windows.”

The little band accordingly “veered to larboard,” and came round to the other side of the house.

The two windows were lighted up.

The boys took to their heels.

When they had got to some distance, the French boy, however, returned.

“Hillo!” said he, “the lights have vanished.”

The light at the windows had, indeed, disappeared. The outline of the building was seen as sharply defined as if stamped out with a punch against the livid sky.

Their fear was not abated, but their curiosity had increased. The birds’-nesters approached.

Suddenly the light reappeared at both windows at the same moment.

The two young urchins from Torteval took to their heels and vanished. The daring French boy did not advance, but he kept his ground.

He remained motionless, confronting the house and watching it.

The light disappeared, and appeared again once more. Nothing could be more horrible. The reflection made a vague streak of light upon the grass, wet with the night dew. All of a moment the light cast upon the walls of the house two huge dark profiles, and the shadows of enormous heads.

The house, however, being without ceilings, and having nothing left but its four walls and roof, one window could not be lighted without the other.

Perceiving that the caulker’s apprentice kept his ground, the other birds’-nesters returned, step by step, and one after the other, trembling and curious. The caulker’s apprentice whispered to them, “There are ghosts in the house. I have seen the nose of one.” The two Torteval boys got behind their companion, standing tiptoe against his shoulder; and thus sheltered, and taking him for their shield, felt bolder and watched also.

The house on its part seemed also to be watching them. There it stood in the midst of that vast darkness and silence, with its two glaring eyes. These were its upper windows. The light vanished, reappeared, and vanished again, in the fashion of these unearthly illuminations. These sinister intermissions had, probably, some connection with the opening and shutting of the infernal regions. The air-hole of a sepulchre has thus been seen to produce effects like those from a dark lantern.

Suddenly a dark form, like that of a human being, ascended to one of the windows, as if from without, and plunged into the interior of the house.

To enter by the window is the custom with spirits.

The light was for a moment more brilliant, then went out, and appeared no more. The house became dark. The noises resembled voices. This is always the case. When there was anything to be seen it is silent. When all became invisible again, noises were heard.

There is a silence peculiar to night-time at sea. The repose of darkness is deeper on the water than on the land. When there is neither wind nor wave in that wild expanse, over which, in ordinary time, even the flight of eagles makes no sound, the movement of a fly could be heard. This sepulchral quiet gave a dismal relief to the noises which issued from the house.

“Let us look,” said the French boy.

And he made a step towards the house.

The others were so frightened that they resolved to follow him. They did not dare even to run away alone.

Just as they had passed a heap of fagots, which for some mysterious reason seemed to inspire them with a little courage in that solitude, a white owl flew towards them from a bush. The owls have a suspicious sort of flight, a sidelong skim which is suggestive of mischief afloat. The bird passed near the boys, fixing upon them its round eyes, bright amidst the darkness.

A shudder ran through the group behind the French boy.

He looked up at the owl and said:

“Too late, my bird; I *will* look.”

And he advanced.

The crackling sound made by his thick-nailed boots among the furze bushes did not prevent his hearing the noise in the house, which rose and fell with the continuousness and the calm accent of a dialogue.

A moment afterwards the boy added:

“Besides, it is only fools who believe in spirits.”

Insolence in the face of danger rallies the cowardly, and inspirits them to go on.

The two Torteval lads resumed their march, quickening their steps behind the caulker’s apprentice.

The haunted house seemed to them to grow larger before their eyes. This optical illusion of fear is founded in reality. The house did indeed grow larger, for they were coming nearer to it.

Meanwhile the voices in the house took a tone more and more distinct. The children listened. The ear, too, has its power of exaggerating. It was different to a murmur, more than a whispering, less than an uproar. Now and then one or two words, clearly articulated, could be caught. These words, impossible to be understood, sounded strangely. The boys stopped and listened; then went forward again.

“It’s the ghosts talking,” said the caulker’s apprentice; “but I don’t believe in ghosts.”

The Torteval boys were sorely tempted to shrink behind the heap of fagots, but they had already left it far behind; and their friend the caulker continued to advance towards the house. They trembled at remaining with him; but they dared not leave him.

Step by step, and perplexed, they followed. The caulker’s apprentice turned towards them and said —

“You know it isn’t true. There are no such things.”

The house grew taller and taller. The voices became more and more distinct.

They drew nearer.

And now they could perceive within the house something like a muffled light. It was a faint glimmer, like one of those effects produced by dark lanterns, already referred to, and which are common at the midnight meetings of witches.

When they were close to the house they halted.

One of the two Torteval boys ventured on an observation:

“It isn’t spirits: it is ladies dressed in white.”

“What’s that hanging from the window?” asked the other.

“It looks like a rope.”

“It’s a snake.”

“It is only a hangman’s rope,” said the French boy, authoritatively. “That’s what they use. Only I don’t believe in them.”

And in three bounds, rather than steps, he found himself against the wall of the building.

The two others, trembling, imitated him, and came pressing against him, one on his right side, the other on his left. The boys applied their ears to the wall. The sounds continued.

The following was the conversation of the phantoms: —

“Asi, entendido esta?”
“Entendido.”
“Dicho?”
“Dicho.”
“Aqui esperara un hombre, y podra marcharse en Inglaterra con Blasquito.”
“Pagando?”

“So that is understood?”

“Perfectly.”

“As is arranged?”

“As is arranged.”

“A man will wait here, and can accompany Blasquito to England.”

“Paying the expense?”

"Pagando."
"Blasquito tomara al hombre en su barca."
"Sin buscar para conocer a su pais?"
"No nos toca."
"Ni a su nombre del hombre?"
"No se pide el nombre, pero se pesa la bolsa."

"Bien: esperara el hombre en esa casa."

"Tenga que comer."

"Tendra."

"Onde?"

"En este saco que he llevado."

"Muy bien."

"Puedo dexar el saco aqui?"

"Los contrabandistas no son ladrones."

"Y vosotros, cuando marchais?"

"Mañana por la mañana. Si su hombre de usted parado podria venir con nosotros."

"Parado no esta."

"Hacienda suya."

"Cuantos dias esperara alli?"

“Paying the expense.”
“Blasquito will take the man in his bark.”
“Without seeking to know what country he belongs to?”
“That is no business of ours.”
“Without asking his name?”
“We do not ask for names; we only feel the weight of the purse.”
“Good: the man shall wait in this house.”
“He must have provisions.”
“He will be furnished with them.”
“How?”
“From this bag which I have brought.”
“Very good.”
“Can I leave this bag here?”
“Smugglers are not robbers.”
“And when do you go?”
“To-morrow morning. If your man was ready he could come with us.”
“He is not prepared.”
“That is his affair.”
“How many days will he have to wait in this house?”

“Dos, tres, quatro dias; menos o mas.”

“Es cierto que el Blasquito vendra?”

“Cierto.”

“En est Plainmont?”

“En est Plainmont.”

“A qual semana?”

“La que viene.”

“A qual dia?”

“Viernes, o sabado, o domingo.”

“No peuede faltar?”

“Es mi tocayo.”

“Por qualquiera tiempo viene?”

“Qualquiera. No tieme. Soy el Blasco, es el Blasquito.”

“Asi, no puede faltar de venir en Guernesey?”

“Vengo a un mes, y viene al otro mes.”

“Entiendo.”

“A cuentar del otro sabado, desde hoy en ocho, no se parasan cinco dias sin que venga el Blasquito.”

“Pero un muy malo mar?”

“Egurraldia gaiztoa.”

“Two, three, or four days; more or less.”

“Is it certain that Blasquito will come?”

“Certain.”

“Here to Pleinmont?”

“To Pleinmont.”

“When?”

“Next week.”

“What day?”

“Friday, Saturday, or Sunday.”

“May he not fail?”

“He is my Tocayo.”

“Will he come in any weather?”

“At any time. He has no fear. My name is Blasco, his Blasquito.”

“So he cannot fail to come to Guernsey?”

“I come one month — he the other.”

“I understand.”

“Counting from Saturday last, one week from to-day, five days cannot elapse without bringing Blasquito.”

“But if there is much sea?”

“Bad weather?”

“Si.”

“No vendria el Blasquito tan pronto, pero vendria.”

“Donde vendra?”

“De Vilvao.”

“Onde ira?”

“En Portland.”

“Bien.”

“O en Tor Bay.”

“Mejor.”

“Su humbre de usted puede estarse quieto.”

“No traidor sera, el Blasquito?”

“Los cobardes son traidores. Somos valientes. El mar es la iglesia del invierno. La traicion es la iglesia del infierno.”

“No se entiende a lo que dicemos?”

“Escuchar a nosotros y mirar a nosotros es imposible. La espanta hace alli el desierto.”

“Lo sè.”

“Quien se atravesaria a escuchar?”

“Es verdad.”

“Y escucharian que no entiendrian. Hablamos a una

“Yes.”

“Blasquito will not come so quickly, but he will come.”

“Whence will he come?”

“From Bilbao.”

“Where will he be going?”

“To Portland.”

“Good.”

“Or to Torbay.”

“Better still.”

“Your man may rest easy.”

“Blasquito will betray nothing?”

“Cowards are the only traitors. We are men of courage. The sea is the church of winter. Treason is the church of hell.”

“No one hears what we say?”

“It is impossible to be seen or overheard. The people’s fear of this spot makes it deserted.”

“I know it.”

“Who is there who would dare to listen here?”

“True.”

“Besides, if they listened, none would understand. We

lengua fiera y nuestra que no se conoce. Despues que la sabeis, eries con nosotros.”

“Soy viendo para componer las haciendas con ustedes.”

“Bueno.”

“Y allora me voy.”

“Mucho.”

“Digame usted, hombre. Si el pasagero quiere que el Blasquito le lleven en unguna otra parte que Portland o Tor Bay?”

“Tenga onces.”

“El Blasquito hara lo que querra el hombre?”

“El Blasquito hace lo que quieren las onces.”

“Es menester mucho tiempo para ir en Tor Bay?”

“Como quiere el viento.”

“Ocho horas?”

“Menos, o mas.”

“El Blasquito obedecera al pasagero?”

“Si le obedece el mar al Blasquito.”

“Bien pagado sera.”

“El oro es el oro. El viento es el viento.”

“Mucho.”

speak a wild language of our own, which nobody knows hereabouts. As you know it, you are one of us."

"I came only to make these arrangements with you."

"Very good."

"I must now take my leave."

"Be it so."

"Tell me; suppose the passenger should wish Blasquito to take him anywhere else than to Portland or Torbay?"

"Let him bring some gold coins."

"Will Blasquito consult the stranger's convenience?"

"Blasquito will do whatever the gold coins command."

"Does it take long to go to Torbay?"

"That is as it pleases the winds."

"Eight hours?"

"More or less."

"Will Blasquito obey the passenger?"

"If the sea will obey Blasquito."

"He will be well rewarded."

"Gold is gold; and the sea is the sea."

"That is true."

“El hombre hace lo que puede con el oro. Dios con el viento hace lo que quiere.”

“Aqui sera viernes el que desea marcharse con Blasquito.”

“Pues.”

“A qual momento llega Blasquito.”

“A la noche. A la noche se llega, a la noche se marcha. Tenemos una muger quien se llama el mar, y una quien se llama la noche.”

“La muger puede faltar, la hermana no.”

“Todo dicho esta. Abour, hombres.”

“Buenas tardes. Un golpe de aquardiente?”

“Gracias.”

“Es mejor que xarope.”

“Tengo vuestra palabra.”

“Mi nombre es Pundonor.”

“Sea usted con Dios.”

“Ereis gentleman, y soy caballero.”

“Man with his gold does what he can. Heaven with its winds does what it will.”

“The man who is to accompany Blasquito will be here on Friday.”

“Good.”

“At what hour will Blasquito appear?”

“In the night. We arrive by night; and sail by night. We have a wife who is called the sea, and a sister called night. The wife betrays sometimes; but the sister never.”

“All is settled, then. Good-night, my men.”

“Good-night. A drop of brandy first?”

“Thank you.”

“That is better than a syrup.”

“I have your word.”

“My name is Point-of-Honour.”

“Adieu.”

“You are a gentleman: I am a caballero.”

It was clear that only devils could talk in this way. The children did not listen long. This time they took to flight in earnest; the French boy, convinced at last, running even quicker than the others.

On the Tuesday following this Saturday, Sieur Clubin returned to St. Malo, bringing back the Durande.

The *Tamaulipas* was still at anchor in the roads.

Sieur Clubin, between the whiffs of his pipe, said to the landlord of the Jean Auberge:

“Well; and when does the *Tamaulipas* get under way?”

“The day after to-morrow — Thursday,” replied the landlord.

On that evening, Clubin supped at the coast-guard officers’ table; and, contrary to his habit, went out after his supper. The consequence of his absence was, that he could not attend to the office of the Durande, and thus lost a little in the matter of freights. This fact was remarked in a man ordinarily punctual.

It appeared that he had chatted a few moments with his friend the money-changer.

He returned two hours after Noguette had sounded the Curfew bell. The Brazilian bell sounds at ten o’clock. It was therefore midnight.

VI

THE JACRESSADE

Forty years ago, St. Malo possessed an alley known by the name of the "Ruelle Coutanchez." This alley no longer exists, having been removed for the improvements of the town.

It was a double row of houses, leaning one towards the other, and leaving between them just room enough for a narrow rivulet, which was called the street. By stretching the legs, it was possible to walk on both sides of the stream, touching with head or elbows, as you went, the houses either on the right or the left. These old relics of mediæval Normandy have almost a human interest. Tumbledown houses and sorcerers always go together. Their leaning stories, their overhanging walls, their bowed penthouses, and their old thick-set irons, seem like lips, chin, nose, and eyebrows. The garret window is the blind eye. The walls are the wrinkled and blotchy cheeks. The opposite houses lay their foreheads together as if they were plotting some malicious deed. All those words of ancient villany — like cut-throat, "slit-weazand," and the like — are closely connected with architecture of this kind.

One of these houses in the alley — the largest and the most famous, or notorious — was known by the name of the Jacressade.

The Jacressade was a lodging-house for people who do not lodge. In all towns, and particularly in sea-ports, there is always found beneath the lowest stratum of society a sort of residuum: vagabonds who are more than a match for justice; rovers after adventures; chemists of the swindling order, who are always dropping their lives into the melting-pot; people in rags of every shape, and in every style of wearing them; withered fruits of roguery; bankrupt existences; consciences that have filed their schedule; men who have failed in the house-breaking trade (for the great masters of burglary move in a higher sphere); workmen and workwomen in the trade of wickedness; oddities, male and female; men in coats out at elbows; scoundrels reduced to indigence; rogues who have missed the wages of roguery; men who have been hit in the social duel; harpies who have no longer any prey; petty larceners; *queux* in the double and unhappy meaning of that word. Such are the constituents of that living mass. Human nature is here reduced to something bestial. It is the refuse of the social state, heaped up in an obscure corner, where from time to time descends that dreaded broom which is known by the name of police. In St. Malo, the Jacressade was the name of this corner.

It is not in dens of this sort that we find the high-class criminals — the robbers, forgers, and other great products of ignorance and poverty. If murder is represented here, it is generally in the person of some coarse drunkard; in the matter of robbery, the company rarely rise higher than the mere sharper. The vagrant is there; but not the highwayman. It would not, however, be safe to trust this distinction. This last stage of vagabondage may have its extremes of scoundrelism. It was on an occasion, when casting their nets into the Epi-scié — which was in Paris what the Jacressade was in St. Malo — that the police captured the notorious Lacenaire.

These lurking-places refuse nobody. To fall in the social scale has a tendency to bring men to one level. Sometimes honesty in tatters found itself there. Virtue and probity have been known before now to be brought to strange passes. We must not judge always by appearances, even in the palace or at the galleys. Public respect, as well as universal reprobation, requires testing. Surprising results sometimes spring from this principle. An angel may be discovered in the stews; a pearl in the dunghill. Such sad and dazzling discoveries are not altogether unknown.

The Jacressade was rather a courtyard than a house; and more of a well than a courtyard. It had no stories looking on the street. Its façade was simply a high wall, with a low gateway. You raised the latch, pushed the gate, and were at once in the courtyard.

In the midst of this yard might be perceived a round hole, encircled with a margin of stones, and even with the ground. The yard was small, the well large. A broken pavement surrounded it.

The courtyard was square, and built on three sides only. On the side of the street was only the wall; facing you as you entered the gateway stood the house, the two wings of which formed the sides to right and left.

Any one entering there after nightfall, at his own risk and peril, would have heard a confused murmur of voices; and, if there had been moonlight or starlight enough to give shape to the obscure forms before his eyes, this is what he would have seen.

The courtyard: the well. Around the courtyard, in front of the gate, a lean-to or shed, in a sort of horse-shoe form, but with square corners; a rotten gallery, with a roof of joists supported by stone pillars at unequal distances. In the centre, the well; around the well, upon a litter of straw, a kind of circular chaplet, formed of the soles of boots and shoes; some trodden down at heel, some showing the toes of the wearers, some the naked heels. The feet of men, women, and children, all asleep.

Beyond these feet, the eye might have distinguished, in the shadow of the shed, bodies, drooping heads, forms stretched out lazily, bundles of rags of both sexes, a promiscuous assemblage, a strange and revolting mass of life. The accommodation of this sleeping chamber was open to all, at the rate of two sous a week. On a stormy night the rain fell upon the feet, the whirling snow settled on the bodies of those wretched sleepers.

Who were these people? The unknown. They came there at night, and departed in the morning. Creatures of this kind form part of the social fabric. Some stole in during the darkness, and paid nothing. The greater part had scarcely eaten during the day. All kinds of vice and baseness, every sort of moral infection, every species of distress were there. The same sleep settled down upon all in this bed of filth. The dreams of all these companions in misery went on side by side. A dismal meeting-place, where misery and weakness, half-sobered debauchery, weariness from long walking to and fro, with evil thoughts, in quest of bread, pallor with closed eyelids, remorse, envy, lay mingled and festering in the same miasma, with faces that had the look of death, and dishevelled hair mixed with the filth and sweepings of the streets. Such was the putrid heap of life fermenting in this dismal spot. An unlucky turn of the wheel of fortune, a ship arrived on the day before, a discharge from prison, a dark night, or some other chance, had cast them here, to find a miserable shelter. Every day brought some new accumulation of such misery. Let him enter who would, sleep who could, speak who dared; for it was a place of whispers. The new comers hastened to bury themselves in the mass, or tried to seek oblivion in sleep, since there was none in the darkness of the place. They snatched what little of themselves they could from the jaws of death. They closed their eyes in that confusion of horrors which every day renewed. They were the embodiment of misery, thrown off from society, as the scum is from the sea.

It was not every one who could even get a share of the straw. More than one figure was stretched out naked upon the flags. They lay down worn out with weariness, and awoke paralysed. The well, without lid or parapet, and thirty feet in depth, gaped open night and day. Rain fell around it; filth accumulated about, and the gutters of the yard ran down and filtered through its sides. The pail for drawing the water stood by the side. Those who were thirsty drank there; some, disgusted with life, drowned themselves in it — slipped from their slumber in the filthy shed into that profounder sleep. In the year 1819, the body of a boy, of fourteen years old, was taken up out of this well.

To be safe in this house, it was necessary to be of the “right sort.” The uninitiated were regarded with suspicion.

Did these miserable wretches, then, know each other? No; yet they scented out the genuine guest of the Jacressade.

The mistress of the house was a young and rather pretty woman, wearing a cap trimmed with ribbons. She washed herself now and then with water from the well. She had a wooden leg.

At break of day, the courtyard became empty. Its inmates dispersed.

An old cock and some other fowls were kept in the courtyard, where they raked among the filth of the place all day long. A long horizontal beam, supported by posts, traversed the yard — a gibbet-shaped erection, not out of keeping with the associations of the place. Sometimes on the morrow of a rainy-day, a silk dress, mudded and wet, would be seen hanging out to dry upon this beam. It belonged to the woman with the wooden leg.

Over the shed, and like it, surrounding the yard, was a story, and above this story a loft. A rotten wooden ladder, passing through a hole in the roof of the shed, conducted to this story; and up this ladder the woman would climb, sometimes staggering while its crazy rounds creaked beneath her.

The occasional lodgers, whether by the week or the night, slept in the courtyard; the regular inmates lived in the house.

Windows without a pane of glass, door-frames with no door, fireplaces without stoves; such were the chief features of the interior. You might pass from one room to the other, indifferently, by a long square aperture which had been the door, or by a triangular hole between the joists of the partitions. The fallen plaster of the ceiling lay about the floor. It was difficult to say how the old house still stood erect. The high winds indeed shook it. The lodgers ascended as they could by the worn and slippery steps of the ladder. Everything was open to the air. The wintry atmosphere was absorbed into the house, like water into a sponge. The multitude of spiders seemed alone to guarantee the place against falling to pieces immediately.

There was no sign of furniture. Two or three paillasses were in the corner, their ticking torn in parts, and showing more dust than straw within. Here and there were a water-pot and an earthen pipkin. A close, disagreeable odour haunted the rooms.

The windows looked out upon the square yard. The scene was like the interior of a scavenger's cart. The things, not to speak of the human beings, which lay rusting, mouldering, and putrefying there, were indescribable. The fragments seemed to fraternise together. Some fell from the walls, others from the living tenants of the place. The débris were sown with their tatters.

Besides the floating population which bivouacked nightly in the square yard, the Jacressade had three permanent lodgers — a charcoal man, a rag-picker, and a "gold-maker." The charcoal man and the rag-picker occupied two of the paillasses of the first story; the "gold-maker," a chemist, lodged in the loft, which was called, no one knew why, the garret. Nobody knew where the woman slept. The "gold-maker" was a poet in a small way. He inhabited a room in the roof, under the tiles — a chamber with a narrow window, and a large stone fireplace forming a gulf, in which the wind howled at will. The garret window having no frame, he had nailed across it a piece of iron sheathing, part of the wreck of a ship. This sheathing left little room for the entrance of light and much for the entrance of cold. The charcoal-man paid rent from time to time in the shape of a sack of charcoal; the rag-picker paid with a bowl of grain for the fowls every week; the "gold-maker" did not pay at all. Meanwhile the latter consumed the very house itself for fuel. He had pulled down the little woodwork which remained; and every now and then he took from the wall or the roof a lath or some scantling, to heat his crucible. Upon the partition, above the rag-picker's mattress, might have been seen two columns of figures, marked in chalk by the rag-picker himself from week to week — a column of threes, and a column of fives — according as the bowl of grain had cost him three liards or five centimes. The gold-pot of the "chemist" was an old fragment of a bomb-shell, promoted by him to the dignity of a crucible, in which he mixed his ingredients. The transmutation of metals absorbed all his thoughts. He was determined before he died to revenge himself by breaking the windows of orthodox science with the real philosopher's stone. His furnace consumed a good deal of wood. The hand-rail of the stairs had disappeared. The house was slowly burning away. The landlady said to him, “You will leave us nothing but the shell.” He mollified her by addressing her in verses.

Such was the Jacressade.

A boy of twelve, or, perhaps, sixteen — for he was like a dwarf, with a large wen upon his neck, and always carrying a broom in his hand — was the domestic of the place.

The habitués entered by the gateway of the courtyard; the public entered by the shop.

In the high wall, facing the street, and to the right of the entrance to the courtyard, was a square opening, serving at once as a door and a window. This was the shop. The square opening had a shutter and a frame — the only shutter in all the house which had hinges and bolts. Behind this square aperture, which was open to the street, was a little room, a compartment obtained by curtailing the sleeping shed in the courtyard. Over the door, passers-by read the inscription in charcoal, “Curiosities sold here.” On three boards, forming the shop front, were several china pots without ears, a Chinese parasol made of goldbeater’s skin, and ornamented with figures, torn here and there, and impossible to open or shut; fragments of iron, and shapeless pieces of old pottery, and dilapidated hats and bonnets, three or four shells, some packets of old bone and metal buttons, a tobacco-box with a portrait of Marie-Antoinette, and a dog’s-eared volume of Boisbertrand’s *Algebra*. Such was the stock of the shop; this assortment completed the “curiosities.” The shop communicated by a back door with the yard in which was the well. It was furnished with a table and a stool. The woman with a wooden leg presided at the counter.

VII

NOCTURNAL BUYERS AND MYSTERIOUS SELLERS

Clubin had been absent from the Jean Auberge all the evening of Tuesday. On the Wednesday night he was absent again.

In the dusk of that evening, two strangers penetrated into the mazes of the Ruelle Coutanchez. They stopped in front of the Jacressade. One of them knocked at the window; the door of the shop opened, and they entered. The woman with the wooden leg met them with the smile which she reserved for respectable citizens. There was a candle on the table.

The strangers were, in fact, respectable citizens. The one who had knocked said, "Good-day, mistress. I have come for that affair."

The woman with the wooden leg smiled again, and went out by the back-door leading to the courtyard, and where the well was. A moment afterwards the back-door was opened again, and a man stood in the doorway. He wore a cap and a blouse. It was easy to see the shape of something under his blouse. He had bits of old straw in his clothes, and looked as if he had just been aroused from sleep.

He advanced and exchanged glances with the strangers. The man in the blouse looked puzzled, but cunning; he said —

"You are the gunsmith?"

The one who had tapped at the window replied —

"Yes; you are the man from Paris?"

"Known as Redskin. Yes."

"Show me the thing."

The man took from under his blouse a weapon extremely rare at that period in Europe. It was a revolver.

The weapon was new and bright. The two strangers examined it. The one who seemed to know the house, and whom the man in the blouse had called "the gunsmith," tried the mechanism. He passed the weapon to the other, who appeared less at home there, and kept his back turned to the light.

The gunsmith continued —

"How much?"

The man in the blouse replied —

"I have just brought it from America. Some people bring monkeys, parrots, and other animals, as if the French people were savages. For myself I brought this. It is a useful invention."

"How much?" inquired the gunsmith again.

"It is a pistol which turns and turns."

"How much?"

"Bang! the first fire. Bang! the second fire. Bang! the third fire. What a hailstorm of bullets! That will do some execution."

"The price?"

"There are six barrels."

"Well, well, what do you want for it?"

"Six barrels; that is six Louis."

"Will you take five?"

"Impossible. One Louis a ball. That is the price."

"Come, let us do business together. Be reasonable."

"I have named a fair price. Examine the weapon, Mr. Gunsmith."

"I have examined it."

"The barrel twists and turns like Talleyrand himself. The weapon ought to be mentioned in the *Dictionary of Weathercocks*. It is a gem."

"I have looked at it."

"The barrels are of Spanish make."

"I see they are."

"They are twisted. This is how this twisting is done. They empty into a forge the basket of a collector of old iron. They fill it full of these old scraps, with old nails, and broken horseshoes swept out of farriers' shops."

"And old sickle-blades."

"I was going to say so, Mr. Gunsmith. They apply to all this rubbish a good sweating heat, and this makes a magnificent material for gun-barrels."

"Yes; but it may have cracks, flaws, or crosses."

"True; but they remedy the crosses by little twists, and avoid the risk of doublings by beating hard. They bring their mass of iron under the great hammer; give it two more good sweating heats. If the iron has been heated too much, they re-temper it with dull heats, and lighter hammers. And then they take out their stuff and roll it well; and with this iron they manufacture you a weapon like this."

"You are in the trade, I suppose?"

"I am of all trades."

“The barrels are pale-coloured.”

“That’s the beauty of them, Mr. Gunsmith. The tint is obtained with antimony.”

“It is settled, then, that we give you five Louis?”

“Allow me to observe that I had the honour of saying six.”

The gunsmith lowered his voice.

“Hark you, master. Take advantage of the opportunity. Get rid of this thing. A weapon of this kind is of no use to a man like you. It will make you remarked.”

“It is very true,” said the Parisian. “It is rather conspicuous. It is more suited to a gentleman.”

“Will you take five Louis?”

“No, six; one for every shot.”

“Come, six Napoleons.”

“I will have six Louis.”

“You are not a Bonapartist, then. You prefer a Louis to a Napoleon.”

The Parisian nicknamed “Redskin” smiled.

“A Napoleon is greater,” said he, “but a Louis is worth more.”

“Six Napoleons.”

“Six Louis. It makes a difference to me of four-and-twenty francs.”

“The bargain is off in that case.”

“Good: I keep the toy.”

“Keep it.”

“Beating me down! a good idea! It shall never be said that I got rid like that of a wonderful specimen of ingenuity.”

“Good-night, then.”

“It marks a whole stage in the progress of making pistols, which the Chesapeake Indians call Nortay-u-Hah.”

“Five Louis, ready money. Why, it is a handful of gold.”

“‘Nortay-u-Hah,’ that signifies ‘short gun.’ A good many people don’t know that.”

“Will you take five Louis, and just a bit of silver?”

“I said six, master.”

The man who kept his back to the candle, and who had not yet spoken, was spending his time during the dialogue in turning and testing the mechanism of the pistol. He approached the armourer’s ear and whispered —

“Is it a good weapon?”

“Excellent.”

“I will give the six Louis.”

Five minutes afterwards, while the Parisian nicknamed “Redskin” was depositing the six Louis which he had just received in a secret slit under the breast of his blouse, the armourer and his companion carrying the revolver in his trousers pocket, stepped out into the straggling street.

VIII

A “CANNON” OFF THE RED BALL AND THE BLACK

On the morrow, which was a Thursday, a tragic circumstance occurred at a short distance from St. Malo, near the peak of the “Décollé,” a spot where the cliff is high and the sea deep.

A line of rocks in the form of the top of a lance, and connecting themselves with the land by a narrow isthmus, stretch out there into the water, ending abruptly with a large peak-shaped breaker. Nothing is commoner in the architecture of the sea. In attempting to reach the plateau of the peaked rock from the shore, it was necessary to follow an inclined plane, the ascent of which was here and there somewhat steep.

It was upon a plateau of this kind, towards four o’clock in the afternoon, that a man was standing, enveloped in a large military cape, and armed; a fact easy to be perceived from certain straight and angular folds in his mantle. The summit on which this man was resting was a rather extensive platform, dotted with large masses of rock, like enormous paving-stones, leaving between them narrow passages. This platform, on which a kind of thick, short grass grew here and there, came to an end on the sea side in an open space, leading to a perpendicular escarpment. The escarpment, rising about sixty feet above the level of the sea, seemed cut down by the aid of a plumb-line. Its left angle, however, was broken away, and formed one of those natural staircases common to granite cliffs worn by the sea, the steps of which are somewhat inconvenient, requiring sometimes the strides of a giant or the leaps of an acrobat. These stages of rock descended perpendicularly to the sea, where they were lost. It was a break-neck place. However, in case of absolute necessity, a man might succeed in embarking there, under the very wall of the cliff.

A breeze was sweeping the sea. The man wrapped in his cape and standing firm, with his left hand grasping his right shoulder, closed one eye, and applied the other to a telescope. He seemed absorbed in anxious scrutiny. He had approached the edge of the escarpment, and stood there motionless, his gaze immovably fixed on the horizon. The tide was high; the waves were beating below against the foot of the cliffs.

The object which the stranger was observing was a vessel in the offing, and which was manœuvring in a strange manner. The vessel, which had hardly left the port of St. Malo an hour, had stopped behind the Banquetiers. It had not cast anchor, perhaps because the bottom would only have permitted it to bear to leeward on the edge of the cable, and because the ship would have strained on her anchor under the cutwater. Her captain had contented himself with lying-to.

The stranger, who was a coast-guardman, as was apparent from his uniform cape, watched all the movements of the three-master, and seemed to note them mentally. The vessel was lying-to, a little off the wind, which was indicated by the backing of the small topsail, and the bellying of the main-topsail. She had squared the mizen, and set the topmast as close as possible, and in such a manner as to work the sails against each other, and to make little way either on or off shore. Her captain evidently did not care to expose his vessel much to the wind, for he had only braced up the small mizen-topsail. In this way, coming crossway on, he did not drift at the utmost more than half a league an hour.

It was still broad daylight, particularly on the open sea, and on the heights of the cliff. The shores below were becoming dark.

The coast-guardman, still engaged in his duty, and carefully scanning the offing, had not thought of observing the rocks at his side and at his feet. He turned his back towards the difficult sort of causeway which formed the communication between his resting-place and the shore. He did not, therefore, remark that something was moving in that direction. Behind a fragment of rock, among the steps of that causeway, something like the figure of a man had been concealed, according to all appearances, since the arrival of the coast-guardman. From time to time a head issued from the shadow behind the rock; looked up and watched the watcher. The head, surmounted by a wide-brimmed American hat, was that of the Quaker-looking man, who, ten days before, was talking among the stones of the Petit-Bey to Captain Zuela.

Suddenly, the curiosity of the coast-guardman seemed to be still more strongly awakened. He polished the glass of his telescope quickly with his sleeve, and brought it to bear closely upon the three-master.

A little black spot seemed to detach itself from her side.

The black spot, looking like a small insect upon the water, was a boat.

The boat seemed to be making for the shore. It was manned by several sailors, who were pulling vigorously.

She pulled crosswise by little and little, and appeared to be approaching the Pointe du Décollé.

The gaze of the coast-guardman seemed to have reached its most intense point. No movement of the boat escaped it. He had approached nearer still to the verge of the rock.

At that instant a man of large stature appeared on one of the rocks behind him. It was the Quaker. The officer did not see him.

The man paused an instant, his arms at his sides, but with his fists doubled; and with the eye of a hunter, watching for his prey, he observed the back of the officer.

Four steps only separated them. He put one foot forward, then stopped; took a second step, and stopped again. He made no movement except the act of walking; all the rest of his body was motionless as a statue. His foot fell upon the tufts of grass without noise. He made a third step, and paused again. He was almost within reach of the coast-guard, who stood there still motionless with his telescope. The man brought his two closed fists to a level with his collar-bone, then struck out his arms sharply, and his two fists, as if thrown from a sling, struck the coast-guardman on the two shoulders. The shock was decisive. The coast-guardman had not the time to utter a cry. He fell head first from the height of the rock into the sea. His boots appeared in the air about the time occupied by a flash of lightning. It was like the fall of a stone in the sea, which instantly closed over him.

Two or three circles widened out upon the dark water.

Nothing remained but the telescope, which had dropped from the hands of the man, and lay upon the turf.

The Quaker leaned over the edge of the escarpment a moment, watched the circles vanishing on the water, waited a few minutes, and then rose again, singing in a low voice:

“The captain of police is dead,
Through having lost his life.”

He knelt down a second time. Nothing reappeared. Only at the spot where the officer had been engulfed, he observed on the surface of the water a sort of dark spot, which became diffused with the gentle lapping of the waves. It seemed probable that the coast-guardman had fractured his skull against some rock under water, and that his blood caused the spot in the foam. The Quaker, while considering the meaning of this spot, began to sing again:

"Not very long before he died,
The luckless man was still alive."

He did not finish his song.

He heard an extremely soft voice behind him, which said:

"Is that you, Rantaine? Good-day. You have just killed a man!"

He turned. About fifteen paces behind him, in one of the passages between the rocks, stood a little man holding a revolver in his hand.

The Quaker answered:

"As you see. Good-day, Sieur Clubin."

The little man started.

"You know me?"

"You knew me very well," replied Rantaine.

Meanwhile they could hear a sound of oars on the sea. It was the approach of the boat which the officer had observed.

Sieur Clubin said in a low tone, as if speaking to himself:

"It was done quickly."

"What can I do to oblige you?" asked Rantaine.

"Oh, a trifling matter! It is very nearly ten years since I saw you. You must have been doing well. How are you?"

"Well enough," answered Rantaine. "How are you?"

"Very well," replied Clubin.

Rantaine advanced a step towards Clubin.

A little sharp click caught his ear. It was Sieur Clubin who was cocking his revolver.

"Rantaine, there are about fifteen paces between us. It is a nice distance. Remain where you are."

"Very well," said Rantaine. "What do you want with me?"

"I! Oh, I have come to have a chat with you."

Rantaine did not offer to move again. Sieur Clubin continued:

"You assassinated a coast-guardman just now."

Rantaine lifted the flap of his hat, and replied:

"You have already done me the honour to mention it."

"Exactly; but in terms less precise. I said a man: I say now, a coast-guardman. The man wore the number 619. He was the father of a family; leaves a wife and five children."

"That is no doubt correct," said Rantaine.

There was a momentary pause.

"They are picked men — those coast-guard people," continued Clubin; "almost all old sailors."

"I have remarked," said Rantaine, "that people generally do leave a wife and five children."

Sieur Clubin continued:

"Guess how much this revolver cost me?"

"It is a pretty tool," said Rantaine.

"What do you guess it at?"

"I should guess it at a good deal."

"It cost me one hundred and forty-four francs."

"You must have bought that," said Rantaine, "at the shop in the Ruelle Coutanchez."

Clubin continued:

"He did not cry out. The fall stopped his voice, no doubt."

"Sieur Clubin, there will be a breeze to-night."

"I am the only one in the secret."

"Do you still stay at the Jean Auberge?"

"Yes: you are not badly served there."

"I remember getting some excellent sour-krout there."

"You must be exceedingly strong, Rantaine. What shoulders you have! I should be sorry to get a tap from you. I, on the other hand, when I came into the world, looked so spare and sickly, that they despaired of rearing me."

"They succeeded though; which was lucky."

"Yes: I still stay at the Jean Auberge."

"Do you know, Sieur Clubin, how I recognised you? It was from your having recognised me. I said to myself, there is nobody like Sieur Clubin for that."

And he advanced a step.

"Stand back where you were, Rantaine."

Rantaine fell back, and said to himself:

"A fellow becomes like a child before one of those weapons."

Sieur Clubin continued:

"The position of affairs is this: we have on our right, in the direction of St. Enogat, at about three hundred paces from here, another coast-guardman — his number is 618 — who is still alive; and on our left, in the direction of

St. Lunaire — a customs station. That makes seven armed men who could be here, if necessary, in five minutes. The rock would be surrounded; the way hither guarded. Impossible to elude them. There is a corpse at the foot of this rock.”

Rantaine took a side-way glance at the revolver.

“As you say, Rantaine, it is a pretty tool. Perhaps it is only loaded with powder; but what does that matter? A report would be enough to bring an armed force — and I have six barrels here.”

The measured sound of the oars became very distinct. The boat was not far off.

The tall man regarded the little man curiously. Sieur Clubin spoke in a voice more and more soft and subdued.

“Rantaine, the men in the boat which is coming, knowing what you did here just now, would lend a hand and help to arrest you. You are to pay Captain Zuela ten thousand francs for your passage. You would have made a better bargain, by the way, with the smugglers of Pleinmont; but they would only have taken you to England; and besides, you cannot risk going to Guernsey, where they have the pleasure of knowing you. To return, then, to the position of affairs — if I fire, you are arrested. You are to pay Zuela for your passage ten thousand francs. You have already paid him five thousand in advance. Zuela would keep the five thousand and be gone. These are the facts. Rantaine, you have managed your masquerading very well. That hat — that queer coat — and those gaiters make a wonderful change. You forgot the spectacles; but did right to let your whiskers grow.”

Rantaine smiled spasmodically. Clubin continued:

“Rantaine, you have on a pair of American breeches, with a double fob. In one side you keep your watch. Take care of it.”

“Thank you, Sieur Clubin.”

“In the other is a little box made of wrought iron, which opens and shuts with a spring. It is an old sailor’s tobacco-box. Take it out of your pocket, and throw it over to me.”

“Why, this is robbery.”

“You are at liberty to call the coast-guardman.”

And Clubin fixed his eye on Rantaine.

“Stay, Mess Clubin,” said Rantaine, making a slight forward movement, and holding out his open hand.

The title “Mess” was a delicate flattery.

"Stay where you are, Rantaine."

"Mess Clubin, let us come to terms. I offer you half."

Clubin crossed his arms, still showing the barrels of his revolver.

"Rantaine, what do you take me for? I am an honest man."

And he added after a pause:

"I must have the whole."

Rantaine muttered between his teeth, "This fellow's of a stern sort."

The eye of Clubin lighted up, his voice became clear and sharp as steel. He cried:

"I see that you are labouring under a mistake. Robbery is your name, not mine. My name is Restitution. Hark you, Rantaine. Ten years ago you left Guernsey one night, taking with you the cash-box of a certain partnership concern, containing fifty thousand francs which belonged to you, but forgetting to leave behind you fifty thousand francs which were the property of another. Those fifty thousand francs, the money of your partner, the excellent and worthy Mess Lethierry, make at present, at compound interest, calculated for ten years, eighty thousand six hundred and sixty-six francs. You went into a money-changer's yesterday. I'll give you his name — Rébuchet, in St. Vincent Street. You counted out to him seventy-six thousand francs in French bank-notes; in exchange for which he gave you three notes of the Bank of England for one thousand pounds sterling each, plus the exchange. You put these bank-notes in the iron tobacco-box, and the iron tobacco-box into your double fob on the right-hand side. On the part of Mess Lethierry, I shall be content with that. I start to-morrow for Guernsey, and intend to hand it to him. Rantaine, the three-master lying-to out yonder is the *Tamaulipas*. You have had your luggage put aboard there with the other things belonging to the crew. You want to leave France. You have your reasons. You are going to Arequipa. The boat is coming to fetch you. You are awaiting it. It is at hand. You can hear it. It depends on me whether you go or stay. No more words. Fling me the tobacco-box."

Rantaine dipped his hand in the fob, drew out a little box, and threw it to Clubin. It was the iron tobacco-box. It fell and rolled at Clubin's feet.

Clubin knelt without lowering his gaze; felt about for the box with his left hand, keeping all the while his eyes and the six barrels of the revolver fixed upon Rantaine.

Then he cried:

"Turn your back, my friend."

Rantaine turned his back.

Sieur Clubin put the revolver under one arm, and touched the spring of the tobacco-box. The lid flew open.

It contained four bank-notes; three of a thousand pounds, and one of ten pounds.

He folded up the three bank-notes of a thousand pounds each, replaced them in the iron tobacco-box, shut the lid again, and put it in his pocket.

Then he picked up a stone, wrapped it in the ten-pound note, and said:

“You may turn round again.”

Rantaine turned.

Sieur Clubin continued:

“I told you I would be contented with three thousand pounds. Here, I return you ten pounds.”

And he threw to Rantaine the note enfolding the stone.

Rantaine, with a movement of his foot, sent the bank-note and the stone into the sea.

“As you please,” said Clubin. “You must be rich. I am satisfied.”

The noise of oars, which had been continually drawing nearer during the dialogue, ceased. They knew by this that the boat had arrived at the base of the cliff.

“Your vehicle waits below. You can go, Rantaine.”

Rantaine advanced towards the steps of stones, and rapidly disappeared.

Clubin moved cautiously towards the edge of the escarpment, and watched him descending.

The boat had stopped near the last stage of the rocks, at the very spot where the coast-guardman had fallen.

Still observing Rantaine stepping from stone to stone, Clubin muttered:

“A good number 619. He thought himself alone. Rantaine thought there were only two there. I alone knew that there were three.”

He perceived at his feet the telescope which had dropped from the hands of the coast-guardman.

The sound of oars was heard again. Rantaine had stepped into the boat, and the rowers had pushed out to sea.

When Rantaine was safely in the boat, and the cliff was beginning to recede from his eyes, he arose again abruptly. His features were convulsed with rage; he clenched his fist and cried:

“Ha! he is the devil himself; a villain!”

A few seconds later, Clubin, from the top of the rock, while bringing his telescope to bear upon the boat, heard distinctly the following words articulated by a loud voice, and mingling with the noise of the sea:

“Sieur Clubin, you are an honest man; but you will not be offended if I write to Lethierry to acquaint him with this matter; and we have here in the boat a sailor from Guernsey, who is one of the crew of the *Tamaulipas*; his name is Ahier-Tostevin, and he will return to St. Malo on Zuela’s next voyage, to bear testimony to the fact of my having returned to you, on Mess Lethierry’s account, the sum of three thousand pounds sterling.”

It was Rantaine’s voice.

Clubin rarely did things by halves. Motionless as the coast-guardman had been, and in the exact same place, his eye still at the telescope, he did not lose sight of the boat for one moment. He saw it growing less amidst the waves; watched it disappear and reappear, and approach the vessel, which was lying-to; finally he recognised the tall figure of Rantaine on the deck of the *Tamaulipas*.

When the boat was raised, and slung again to the davits, the *Tamaulipas* was in motion once more. The land-breeze was fresh, and she spread all her sails. Clubin’s glass continued fixed upon her outline growing more and more indistinct; until half an hour later, when the *Tamaulipas* had become only a dark shape upon the horizon, growing smaller and smaller against the pale twilight in the sky.

IX

USEFUL INFORMATION FOR PERSONS WHO EXPECT OR FEAR THE ARRIVAL OF LETTERS FROM BEYOND SEA

On that evening, Sieur Clubin returned late.

One of the causes of his delay was, that before going to his inn, he had paid a visit to the Dinan gate of the town, a place where there were several wine-shops. In one of these wine-shops, where he was not known, he had bought a bottle of brandy, which he placed in the pocket of his overcoat, as if he desired to conceal it. Then, as the Durande was to start on the following morning, he had taken a turn aboard to satisfy himself that everything was in order.

When Sieur Clubin returned to the Jean Auberge, there was no one left in the lower room except the old sea-captain, M. Gertrais-Gaboureau, who was drinking a jug of ale and smoking his pipe.

M. Gertrais-Gaboureau saluted Sieur Clubin between a whiff and a draught of ale.

“How d’ye do, Captain Clubin?”

“Good evening, Captain Gertrais.”

“Well, the *Tamaulipas* is gone.”

“Ah!” said Clubin, “I did not observe.”

Captain Gertrais-Gaboureau expectorated, and said:

“Zuela has decamped.”

“When was that?”

“This evening.”

“Where is he gone?”

“To the devil.”

“No doubt; but where is that?”

“To Arequipa.”

“I knew nothing of it,” said Clubin.

He added:

“I am going to bed.”

He lighted his candle, walked towards the door, and returned.

“Have you ever been at Arequipa, Captain?”

“Yes; some years ago.”

“Where do they touch on that voyage?”

“A little everywhere; but the *Tamaulipas* will touch nowhere.”

M. Gertrais-Gaboureau emptied his pipe upon the corner of a plate and continued:

“You know the lugger called the *Trojan Horse*, and that fine three-master, the *Trentemouzin*, which are gone to Cardiff? I was against their sailing on account of the weather. They have returned in a fine state. The lugger was laden with turpentine; she sprang a leak, and in working the pumps they pumped up with the water all her cargo. As to the three-master, she has suffered most above water. Her cutwater, her headrail, the stock of her larboard anchor are broken. Her standing jibboom is gone clean by the cap. As for the jib-shrouds and bobstays, go and see what they look like. The mizenmast is not injured, but has had a severe shock. All the iron of the bowsprit has given way; and it is an extraordinary fact that, though the bowsprit itself is not scratched, it is completely stripped. The larboard-bow of the vessel is stove in a good three feet square. This is what comes of not taking advice.”

Clubin had placed the candle on the table, and had begun to readjust a row of pins which he kept in the collar of his overcoat. He continued:

“Didn’t you say, Captain, that the *Tamaulipas* would not touch anywhere?”

“Yes; she goes direct to Chili.”

“In that case, she can send no news of herself on the voyage.”

“I beg your pardon, Captain Clubin. In the first place, she can send any letters by vessels she may meet sailing for Europe.”

“That is true.”

“Then there is the ocean letter-box.”

“What do you mean by the ocean letter-box?”

“Don’t you know what that is, Captain Clubin?”

“No.”

“When you pass the straits of Magellan — —”

“Well.”

“Snow all round you; always bad weather; ugly down-easters, and bad seas.”

“Well.”

“When you have doubled Cape Monmouth — —”

“Well, what next?”

“Then you double Cape Valentine.”

“And then?”

“Why, then you double Cape Isidore.”

“And afterwards?”

“You double Point Anne.”

“Good. But what is it you call the ocean letter-box?”

“We are coming to that. Mountains on the right, mountains on the left. Penguins and stormy petrels all about. A terrible place. Ah! by Jove, what a howling and what cracks you get there! The hurricane wants no help. That’s the place for holding on to the sheer-rails; for reefing topsails. That’s where you take in the mainsail, and fly the jibsail; or take in the jibsail and try the stormjib. Gusts upon gusts! And then, sometimes four, five, or six days of scudding under bare poles. Often only a rag of canvas left. What a dance! Squalls enough to make a three-master skip like a flea. I saw once a cabin-boy hanging on to the jibboom of an English brig, the *True Blue*, knocked, jibboom and all, to ten thousand nothings. Fellows are swept into the air there like butterflies. I saw the second mate of the *Revenue*, a pretty schooner, knocked from under the forecross-tree, and killed dead. I have had my sheer-rails smashed, and come out with all my sails in ribbons. Frigates of fifty guns make water like wicker baskets. And the damnable coast! Nothing can be imagined more dangerous. Rocks all jagged-edged. You come, by and by, to Port Famine. There it’s worse and worse. The worst seas I ever saw in my life. The devil’s own latitudes. All of a sudden you spy the words, painted in red, ‘Post Office.’”

“What do you mean, Captain Gertrais?”

“I mean, Captain Clubin, that immediately after doubling Point Anne you see, on a rock, a hundred feet high, a great post with a barrel suspended to the top. This barrel is the letter-box. The English sailors must needs go and write up there ‘Post Office.’ What had they to do with it? It is the ocean post-office. It isn’t the property of that worthy gentleman, the King of England. The box is common to all. It belongs to every flag. *Post Office!* there’s a crack-jaw word for you. It produces an effect on me as if the devil had suddenly offered me a cup of tea. I will tell you now how the postal arrangements are carried out. Every vessel which passes sends to the post a boat with despatches. A vessel coming from the Atlantic, for instance, sends there its letters for Europe; and a ship coming from the Pacific, its letters for New Zealand or California. The officer in command of the boat puts his packet into the barrel, and takes away any packet he finds there. You take charge of these letters, and the ship which comes after you takes charge of yours. As ships are always going to and fro, the continent whence you come is that to which I am going. I carry your letters; you carry mine. The barrel is made fast to the post with a chain. And it rains, snows and hails! A pretty sea. The imps of Satan fly about on every side. The *Tamaulipas* will pass there. The barrel has a good lid with a hinge, but no padlock. You see, a fellow can write to his friends this way. The letters come safely."

"It is very curious," muttered Clubin thoughtfully.

Captain Gertrais-Gaboureau returned to his bottle of ale.

"If that vagabond Zuela should write (continued Clubin aside), the scoundrel puts his scrawl into the barrel at Magellan, and in four months I have his letter."

"Well, Captain Clubin, do you start to-morrow?"

Clubin, absorbed in a sort of somnambulism, did not notice the question; and Captain Gertrais repeated it.

Clubin woke up.

"Of course, Captain Gertrais. It is my day. I must start to-morrow morning."

"If it was my case, I shouldn't, Captain Clubin. The hair of the dog's coat feels damp. For two nights past, the sea-birds have been flying wildly round the lanthorn of the lighthouse. A bad sign. I have a storm-glass, too, which gives me a warning. The moon is at her second quarter; it is the maximum of humidity. I noticed to-day some pimpernels with their leaves shut, and a field of clover with its stalks all stiff. The worms come out of the ground to-day; the flies sting; the bees keep close to their hives; the sparrows chatter together. You can hear the sound of bells from far off. I heard to-night the Angelus at St. Lunaire. And then the sun set angry. There will be a good fog to-morrow, mark my words. I don't advise you to put to sea. I dread the fog a good deal more than a hurricane. It's a nasty neighbour that."

BOOK VI

THE DRUNKEN STEERSMAN AND THE SOBER CAPTAIN

I

THE DOUVRES

At about five leagues out, in the open sea, to the south of Guernsey, opposite Pleinmont Point, and between the Channel Islands and St. Malo, there is a group of rocks, called the Douvres. The spot is dangerous.

This term Douvres, applied to rocks and cliffs, is very common. There is, for example, near the *Côtes du Nord,* a Douvre, on which a lighthouse is now being constructed, a dangerous reef; but one which must not be confounded with the rock above referred to.

The nearest point on the French coast to the Douvres is Cape Bréhat. The Douvres are a little further from the coast of France than from the nearest of the Channel Islands. The distance from Jersey may be pretty nearly measured by the extreme length of Jersey. If the island of Jersey could be turned round upon Corbière, as upon a hinge, St. Catherine’s Point would almost touch the Douvres, at a distance of more than four leagues.

In these civilised regions the wildest rocks are rarely desert places. Smugglers are met with at Hagot, custom-house men at Binic, Celts at Bréhat, oyster-dredgers at Cancale, rabbit-shooters at Césambre or Cæsar’s Island, crab-gatherers at Brecqhou, trawlers at the Minquiers, dredgers at Ecréhou, but no one is ever seen upon the Douvres.

The sea birds alone make their home there.

No spot in the ocean is more dreaded. The Casquets, where it is said the *Blanche Nef* was lost; the Bank of Calvados; the Needles in the Isle of Wight; the Ronesse, which makes the coast of Beaulieu so dangerous; the sunken reefs at Préel, which block the entrance to Merquel, and which necessitates the red-painted beacon in twenty fathoms of water, the treacherous approaches to Etables and Plouha; the two granite Druids to the south of Guernsey, the Old Anderlo and the Little Anderlo, the Corbière, the Hanways, the Isle of Ras, associated with terror in the proverb:

“Si jamais tu passes le Ras,
Si tu ne meurs, tu trembleras.”

the Mortes-Femmes, the Déroute between Guernsey and Jersey, the Hardent between the Minquiers and Chousey, the Mauvais Cheval between Bouley Bay and Barneville, have not so evil a reputation. It would be preferable to have to encounter all these dangers, one after the other, than the Douvres once.

In all that perilous sea of the Channel, which is the Egean of the West, the Douvres have no equal in their terrors, except the Paternoster between Guernsey and Sark.

From the Paternoster, however, it is possible to give a signal — a ship in distress there may obtain succour. To the north rises Dicard or D’Icare Point, and to the south Grosnez. From the Douvres you can see nothing.

Its associations are the storm, the cloud, the wild sea, the desolate waste, the uninhabited coast. The blocks of granite are hideous and enormous — everywhere perpendicular wall — the severe inhospitality of the abyss.

It is in the open sea; the water about is very deep. A rock completely isolated like the Douvres attracts and shelters creatures which shun the haunts of men. It is a sort of vast submarine cave of fossil coral branches — a drowned labyrinth. There, at a depth to which divers would find it difficult to descend, are caverns, haunts, and dusky mazes, where monstrous creatures multiply and destroy each other. Huge crabs devour fish and are devoured in their turn. Hideous shapes of living things, not created to be seen by human eyes, wander in this twilight. Vague forms of antennæ, tentacles, fins, open jaws, scales, and claws, float about there, quivering, growing larger, or decomposing and perishing in the gloom, while horrible swarms of swimming things prowl about seeking their prey.

To gaze into the depths of the sea is, in the imagination, like beholding the vast unknown, and from its most terrible point of view. The submarine gulf is analogous to the realm of night and dreams. There also is sleep, unconsciousness, or at least apparent unconsciousness, of creation. There, in the awful silence and darkness, the rude first forms of life, phantom-like, demoniacal, pursue their horrible instincts.

Forty years ago, two rocks of singular form signalled the Douvres from afar to passers on the ocean. They were two vertical points, sharp and curved — their summits almost touching each other. They looked like the two tusks of an elephant rising out of the sea; but they were tusks, high as tall towers, of an elephant huge as a mountain. These two natural towers, rising out of the obscure home of marine monsters, only left a narrow passage between them, where the waves rushed through. This passage, tortuous and full of angles, resembled a straggling street between high walls. The two twin rocks are called the Douvres. There was the Great Douvre and the Little Douvre; one was sixty feet high, the other forty. The ebb and flow of the tide had at last worn away part of the base of the towers, and a violent equinoctial gale on the 26th of October, 1859, overthrew one of them. The smaller one, which still remains, is worn and tottering.

One of the most singular of the Douvres is a rock known as “The Man.” This still exists. Some fisherman in the last century visiting this spot found on the height of the rock a human body. By its side were a number of empty sea-shells. A sailor escaped from shipwreck had found a refuge there; had lived some time upon rock limpets, and had died. Hence its name of “The Man.”

The solitudes of the sea are peculiarly dismal. The things which pass there seem to have no relation to the human race; their objects are unknown. Such is the isolation of the Douvres. All around, as far as eye can reach, spreads the vast and restless sea.

II

AN UNEXPECTED FLASK OF BRANDY

On the Friday morning, the day after the departure of the *Tamaulipas*, the Durande started again for Guernsey.

She left St. Malo at nine o'clock. The weather was fine; no haze. Old Captain Gertrais-Gaboureau was evidently in his dotage.

Sieur Clubin's numerous occupations had decidedly been unfavourable to the collection of freight for the Durande. He had only taken aboard some packages of Parisian articles for the fancy shops of St. Peter's Port; three cases for the Guernsey hospital, one containing yellow soap and long candles, and the other French shoe leather for soles, and choice Cordovan skins. He brought back from his last cargo a case of crushed sugar and three chests of congou tea, which the French custom-house would not permit to pass. He had embarked very few cattle; some bullocks only. These bullocks were in the hold loosely tethered.

There were six passengers aboard; a Guernsey man, two inhabitants of St. Malo, dealers in cattle: a "tourist," — a phrase already in vogue at this period — a Parisian citizen, probably travelling on commercial affairs, and an American, engaged in distributing Bibles.

Without reckoning Clubin, the crew of the Durande amounted to seven men; a helmsman, a stoker, a ship's carpenter, and a cook — serving as sailors in case of need — two engineers, and a cabin boy. One of the two engineers was also a practical mechanic. This man, a bold and intelligent Dutch negro, who had originally escaped from the sugar plantations of Surinam, was named Imbrancam. The negro, Imbrancam, understood and attended admirably to the engine. In the early days of the "Devil Boat," his black face, appearing now and then at the top of the engine-room stairs, had contributed not a little to sustain its diabolical reputation.

The helmsman, a native of Guernsey, but of a family originally from Cotentin, bore the name of Tangrouille. The Tangrouilles were an old noble family.

This was strictly true. The Channel Islands are like England, an aristocratic region. Castes exist there still. The castes have their peculiar ideas, which are, in fact, their protection. These notions of caste are everywhere similar; in Hindostan, as in Germany, nobility is won by the sword; lost by soiling the hands with labour: but preserved by idleness. To do nothing, is to live nobly; whoever abstains from work is honoured. A trade is fatal. In France, in old times, there was no exception to this rule, except in the case of glass manufacturers. Emptying bottles being then one of the glories of gentlemen, making them was probably, for that reason, not considered dishonourable. In the Channel archipelago, as in Great Britain, he who would remain noble must contrive to be rich. A working man cannot possibly be a gentleman. If he has ever been one, he is so no longer. Yonder sailor, perhaps, descends from the Knights Bannerets, but is nothing but a sailor. Thirty years ago, a real Gorges, who would have had rights over the Seigniory of Gorges, confiscated by Philip Augustus, gathered seaweed, naked-footed, in the sea. A Carteret is a waggoner in Sark. There are at Jersey a draper, and at Guernsey a shoemaker, named Gruchy, who claim to be Grouchys, and cousins of the Marshal of Waterloo. The old registers of the Bishopric of Coutances make mention of a Seigniory of Tangroville, evidently from Tancarville on the lower Seine, which is identical with Montmorency. In the fifteenth century, Johan de Héroudeville, archer and *étoffe* of the Sire de Tangroville, bore behind him “*son corset et ses autres harnois*.” In May, 1371, at Pontorson, at the review of Bertrand du Guesclin, Monsieur de Tangroville rendered his homage as Knight Bachelor. In the Norman islands, if a noble falls into poverty, he is soon eliminated from the order. A mere change of pronunciation is enough. Tangroville becomes Tangrouille: and the thing is done.

This had been the fate of the helmsman of the Durande.

At the Bordagé of St. Peter’s Port, there is a dealer in old iron named Ingrouille, who is probably an Ingroville. Under Lewis le Gros the Ingrovilles possessed three parishes in the district of Valognes. A certain Abbé Trigan has written an Ecclesiastical History of Normandy. This chronicler Trigan was the curé of the Seigniory of Digoville. The Sire of Digoville, if he had sunk to a lower grade, would have been called Digouille.

Tangrouille, this probable Tancarville, and possible Montmorency, had an ancient noble quality, but a grave failing for a steersman; he got drunk occasionally.

Sieur Clubin had obstinately determined to retain him. He answered for his conduct to Mess Lethierry.

Tangrouille the helmsman never left the vessel; he slept aboard.

On the eve of their departure, when Sieur Clubin came at a late hour to inspect the vessel, the steersman was in his hammock asleep.

In the night Tangrouille awoke. It was his nightly habit. Every drunkard who is not his own master has his secret hiding-place. Tangrouille had his, which he called his store. The secret store of Tangrouille was in the hold. He had placed it there to put others off the scent. He thought it certain that his hiding-place was known only to himself. Captain Clubin, being a sober man himself, was strict. The little rum or gin which the helmsman could conceal from the vigilant eyes of the captain, he kept in reserve in this mysterious corner of the hold, and nearly every night he had a stolen interview with the contents of this store. The surveillance was rigorous, the orgie was a poor one, and Tangrouille's nightly excesses were generally confined to two or three furtive draughts. Sometimes it happened that the store was empty. This night Tangrouille had found there an unexpected bottle of brandy. His joy was great; but his astonishment greater. From what cloud had it fallen? He could not remember when or how he had ever brought it into the ship. He soon, however, consumed the whole of it; partly from motives of prudence, and partly from a fear that the brandy might be discovered and seized. The bottle he threw overboard. In the morning, when he took the helm, Tangrouille exhibited a slight oscillation of the body.

He steered, however, pretty nearly as usual.

With regard to Clubin, he had gone, as the reader knows, to sleep at the Jean Auberge.

Clubin always wore, under his shirt, a leathern travelling belt, in which he kept a reserve of twenty guineas; he took this belt off only at night. Inside the belt was his name "Clubin," written by himself on the rough leather, with thick lithographer's ink, which is indelible.

On rising, just before his departure, he put into this girdle the iron box containing the seventy-five thousand francs in bank-notes; then, as he was accustomed to do, he buckled the belt round his body.

III

CONVERSATIONS INTERRUPTED

The Durande started pleasantly. The passengers, as soon as their bags and portmanteaus were installed upon and under the benches, took that customary survey of the vessel which seems indispensable under the circumstances. Two of the passengers — the tourist and the Parisian — had never seen a steam-vessel before, and from the moment the paddles began to revolve, they stood admiring the foam. Then they looked with wonderment at the smoke. Then they examined one by one, and almost piece by piece upon the upper and lower deck, all those naval appliances such as rings, grapnels, hooks and bolts, which, with their nice precision and adaptation, form a kind of colossal *bijouterie* — a sort of iron jewellery, fantastically gilded with rust by the weather. They walked round the little signal gun upon the upper deck. “Chained up like a sporting dog,” observed the tourist. “And covered with a waterproof coat to prevent its taking cold,” added the Parisian. As they left the land further behind, they indulged in the customary observations upon the view of St. Malo. One passenger laid down the axiom that the approach to a place by sea is always deceptive; and that at a league from the shore, for example, nothing could more resemble Ostend than Dunkirk. He completed his series of remarks on Dunkirk by the observation that one of its two floating lights painted red was called *Ruytingen*, and the other *Mardyck*.

St. Malo, meanwhile, grew smaller in the distance, and finally disappeared from view.

The aspect of the sea was a vast calm. The furrow left in the water by the vessel was a long double line edged with foam, and stretching straight behind them as far as the eye could see.

A straight line drawn from St. Malo in France to Exeter in England would touch the island of Guernsey. The straight line at sea is not always the one chosen. Steam-vessels, however, have, to a certain extent, a power of following the direct course denied to sailing ships.

The wind in co-operation with the sea is a combination of forces. A ship is a combination of appliances. Forces are machines of infinite power. Machines are forces of limited power. That struggle which we call navigation is between these two organisations, the one inexhaustible, the other intelligent.

Mind, directing the mechanism, forms the counterbalance to the infinite power of the opposing forces. But the opposing forces, too, have their organisation. The elements are conscious of where they go, and what they are about. No force is merely blind. It is the function of man to keep watch upon these natural agents, and to discover their laws.

While these laws are still in great part undiscovered, the struggle continues, and in this struggle navigation, by the help of steam, is a perpetual victory won by human skill every hour of the day, and upon every point of the sea. The admirable feature in steam navigation is, that it disciplines the very ship herself. It diminishes her obedience to the winds, and increases her docility to man.

The Durande had never worked better at sea than on that day. She made her way marvellously.

Towards eleven o’clock, a fresh breeze blowing from the nor’-nor’-west, the Durande was off the Minquiers, under little steam, keeping her head to the west, on the starboard tack, and close up to the wind. The weather was still fine and clear. The trawlers, however, were making for shore.

By little and little, as if each one was anxious to get into port, the sea became clear of the boats.

It could not be said that the Durande was keeping quite her usual course. The crew gave no thought to such matters. The confidence in the captain was absolute; yet, perhaps through the fault of the helmsman, there was a slight deviation. The Durande appeared to be making rather towards Jersey than Guernsey. A little after eleven the captain rectified the vessel’s course, and put her head fair for Guernsey. It was only a little time lost, but in short days time lost has its inconveniences. It was a February day, but the sun shone brightly.

Tangrouille, in his half-intoxicated state, had not a very sure arm, nor a very firm footing. The result was, that the helmsman lurched pretty often, which also retarded progress.

The wind had almost entirely fallen.

The Guernsey passenger, who had a telescope in his hand, brought it to bear from time to time upon a little cloud of grey mist, lightly moved by the wind, in the extreme western horizon. It resembled a fleecy down sprinkled with dust.

Captain Clubin wore his ordinary austere, Puritan-like expression of countenance. He appeared to redouble his attention.

All was peaceful and almost joyous on board the Durande. The passengers chatted. It is possible to judge of the state of the sea in a passage with the eyes closed, by noting the *tremolo* of the conversation about you. The full freedom of mind among the passengers answers to the perfect tranquillity of the waters.

It is impossible, for example, that a conversation like the following could take place otherwise than on a very calm sea.

“Observe that pretty green and red fly.”

“It has lost itself out at sea, and is resting on the ship.”

“Flies do not soon get tired.”

“No doubt; they are light; the wind carries them.”

“An ounce of flies was once weighed, and afterwards counted; and it was found to comprise no less than six thousand two hundred and sixty-eight.”

The Guernsey passenger with the telescope had approached the St. Malo cattle dealers; and their talk was something in this vein:

“The Aubrac bull has a round and thick buttock, short legs, and a yellowish hide. He is slow at work by reason of the shortness of his legs.”

“In that matter the Salers beats the Aubrac.”

“I have seen, sir, two beautiful bulls in my life. The first has the legs low, the breast thick, the rump full, the haunches large, a good length of neck to the udder, withers of good height, the skin easy to strip. The second had all the signs of good fattening, a thick-set back, neck and shoulders strong, coat white and brown, rump sinking.”

“That’s the Cotentin race.”

“Yes; with a slight cross with the Angus or Suffolk bull.”

“You may believe it if you please, sir, but I assure you in the south they hold shows of donkeys.”

“Shows of donkeys?”

“Of donkeys, on my honour. And the ugliest are the most admired.”

“Ha! it is the same as with the mule shows. The ugly ones are considered best.”

“Exactly. Take also the Poitevin mares; large belly, thick legs.”

“The best mule known is a sort of barrel upon four posts.”

“Beauty in beasts is a different thing from beauty in men.”

“And particularly in women.”

“That is true.”

“As for me, I like a woman to be pretty.”

“I am more particular about her being well dressed.”

“Yes; neat, clean, and well set off.”

“Looking just new. A pretty girl ought always to appear as if she had just been turned out by a jeweller.”

“To return to my bulls; I saw these two sold at the market at Thouars.”

“The market at Thouars; I know it very well. The Bonneaus of La Rochelle, and the Babas corn merchants at Marans, I don’t know whether you have heard of them attending that market.”

The tourist and the Parisian were conversing with the American of the Bibles.

“Sir,” said the tourist, “I will tell you the tonnage of the civilised world. France 716,000 tons; Germany 1,000,000; the United States, 5,000,000; England, 5,500,000; add the small vessels. Total 12,904,000 tons, carried in 145,000 vessels scattered over the waters of the globe.”

The American interrupted:

“It is the United States, sir, which have 5,500,000.”

“I agree,” said the tourist. “You are an American?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I agree again.”

There was a pause. The American missionary was considering whether this was a case for the offer of a Bible.

“Is it true, sir,” asked the tourist, “that you have a passion for nicknames in America, so complete, that you confer them upon all your celebrated men, and that you call your famous Missouri banker, Thomas Benton, ‘Old Lingot’?”

“Yes; just as we call Zachary Taylor ‘Old Zach.’”

“And General Harrison, ‘Old Tip;’ am I right? and General Jackson, ‘Old Hickory?’”

“Because Jackson is hard as hickory wood; and because Harrison beat the redskins at *Tippecanoe*.”

“It is an odd fashion that of yours.”

“It is our custom. We call Van Buren ‘The Little Wizard;’ Seward, who introduced the small bank-notes, ‘Little Billy;’ and Douglas, the democrat senator from Illinois, who is four feet high and very eloquent, ‘The Little Giant.’ You may go from Texas to the State of Maine without hearing the name of Mr. Cass. They say the ‘Great Michiganer.’ Nor the name of Clay; they say ‘The miller’s boy with the scar.’ Clay is the son of a miller.”

“I should prefer to say ‘Clay’ or ‘Cass,’” said the Parisian. “It’s shorter.”

“Then you would be out of the fashion. We call Corwin, who is the Secretary of the Treasury, ‘The Waggoner-boy;’ Daniel Webster, ‘Black Dan.’ As to Winfield Scott, as his first thought after beating the English at Chippeway, was to sit down to dine, we call him ‘Quick — a basin of soup.’”

The small white mist perceived in the distance had become larger. It filled now a segment of fifteen degrees above the horizon. It was like a cloud loitering along the water for want of wind to stir it. The breeze had almost entirely died away. The sea was glassy. Although it was not yet noon, the sun was becoming pale. It lighted but seemed to give no warmth.

“I fancy,” said the tourist, “that we shall have a change of weather.”

“Probably rain,” said the Parisian.

“Or fog,” said the American.

“In Italy,” remarked the tourist, “Molfetta is the place where there falls the least rain; and Tolmezzo, where there falls the most.”

At noon, according to the usage of the Channel Islands, the bell sounded for dinner. Those dined who desired. Some passengers had brought with them provisions, and were eating merrily on the after-deck. Clubin did not eat.

While this eating was going on, the conversations continued.

The Guernsey man, having probably a scent for Bibles, approached the American. The latter said to him:

“You know this sea?”

“Very well; I belong to this part.”

“And I, too,” said one of the St. Malo men.

The native of Guernsey followed with a bow and continued:

“We are fortunately well out at sea now; I should not have liked a fog when we were off the Minquiers.”

The American said to the St. Malo man:

“Islanders are more at home on the sea than the folks of the coast.”

“True; we coast people are only half dipped in salt water.”

“What are the Minquiers?” asked the American.

The St. Malo man replied:

“They are an ugly reef of rocks.”

"There are also the Grelets," said the Guernsey man.

"Parblus!" ejaculated the other.

"And the Chouas," added the Guernsey man.

The inhabitant of St. Malo laughed.

"As for that," said he, "there are the Savages also."

"And the Monks," observed the Guernsey man.

"And the Duck," cried the St. Maloite.

"Sir," remarked the inhabitant of Guernsey, "you have an answer for everything."

The tourist interposed with a question:

"Have we to pass all that legion of rocks?"

"No; we have left it to the sou'-south-east. It is behind us."

And the Guernsey passenger continued:

"Big and little rocks together, the Grelets have fifty-seven peaks."

"And the Minquiers forty-eight," said the other.

The dialogue was now confined to the St. Malo and the Guernsey passenger.

"It strikes me, Monsieur St. Malo, that there are three rocks which you have not included."

"I mentioned all."

"From the Derée to the Maître Ile."

"And Les Maisons?"

"Yes; seven rocks in the midst of the Minquiers."

"I see you know the very stones."

"If I didn't know the stones, I should not be an inhabitant of St. Malo."

"It is amusing to hear French people's reasonings."

The St. Malo man bowed in his turn, and said:

"The Savages are three rocks."

"And the Monks two."

"And the Duck one."

"*The* Duck; this is only one, of course."

"No: for *the* Suarde consists of four rocks."

"What do you mean by the Suarde?" asked the inhabitant of Guernsey.

"We call the Suarde what you call the Chouas."

"It is a queer passage, that between the Chouas and the Duck."

"It is impassable except for the birds."

"And the fish."

“Scarcely: in bad weather they give themselves hard knocks against the walls.”

“There is sand near the Minquiers?”

“Around the Maisons.”

“There are eight rocks visible from Jersey.”

“Visible from the strand of Azette; that’s correct: but not eight; only seven.”

“At low water you can walk about the Minquiers?”

“No doubt; there would be sand above water.”

“And what of the Dirouilles?”

“The Dirouilles bear no resemblance to the Minquiers.”

“They are very dangerous.”

“They are near Granville.”

“I see that you St. Malo people, like us, enjoy sailing in these seas.”

“Yes,” replied the St. Malo man, “with the difference that we say, ‘We have the habit,’ you, ‘We are fond.’”

“You make good sailors.”

“I am myself a cattle merchant.”

“Who was that famous sailor born of St. Malo?”

“Surcouf?”

“Another?”

“Duguay-Trouin.”

Here the Parisian commercial man chimed in:

“Duguay-Trouin? He was captured by the English. He was as agreeable as he was brave. A young English lady fell in love with him. It was she who procured him his liberty.”

At this moment a voice like thunder was heard crying out:

“You are drunk, man!”

IV

CAPTAIN CLUBIN DISPLAYS ALL HIS GREAT QUALITIES

Everybody turned.

It was the captain calling to the helmsman.

Sieur Clubin’s tone and manner evidenced that he was extremely angry, or that he wished to appear so.

A well-timed burst of anger sometimes removes responsibility, and sometimes shifts it on to other shoulders.

The captain, standing on the bridge between the two paddle-boxes, fixed his eyes on the helmsman. He repeated, between his teeth, “Drunkard.” The unlucky Tangrouille hung his head.

The fog had made progress. It filled by this time nearly one-half of the horizon. It seemed to advance from every quarter at the same time. There is something in a fog of the nature of a drop of oil upon the water. It enlarged insensibly. The light wind moved it onward slowly and silently. By little and little it took possession of the ocean. It was coming chiefly from the north-west, dead ahead: the ship had it before her prow, like a line of cliff moving vast and vague. It rose from the sea like a wall. There was an exact point where the wide waters entered the fog, and were lost to sight.

This line of the commencement of the fog was still above half-a-league distant. The interval was visibly growing less and less. The Durande made way; the fog made way also. It was drawing nearer to the vessel, while the vessel was drawing nearer to it.

Clubin gave the order to put on more steam, and to hold off the coast.

Thus for some time they skirted the edge of the fog; but still it advanced. The vessel, meanwhile, sailed in broad sunlight.

Time was lost in these manœuvres, which had little chance of success. Nightfall comes quickly in February. The native of Guernsey was meditating upon the subject of this fog. He said to the St. Malo men:

“It will be thick!”

“An ugly sort of weather at sea,” observed one of the St. Malo men.

The other added:

“A kind of thing which spoils a good passage.”

The Guernsey passenger approached Clubin, and said:

“I’m afraid, Captain, that the fog will catch us.”

Clubin replied:

“I wished to stay at St. Malo, but I was advised to go.”

“By whom?”

“By some old sailors.”

“You were certainly right to go,” said the Guernsey man. “Who knows whether there will not be a tempest to-morrow? At this season you may wait and find it worse.”

A few moments later, the Durande entered the fog bank.

The effect was singular. Suddenly those who were on the after-deck could not see those forward. A soft grey medium divided the ship in two.

Then the entire vessel passed into the fog. The sun became like a dull red moon. Everybody suddenly shivered. The passengers put on their overcoats, and the sailors their tarpaulins. The sea, almost without a ripple, was the more menacing from its cold tranquillity. All was pale and wan. The black funnel and the heavy smoke struggled with the dewy mist which enshrouded the vessel.

Dropping to westward was now useless. The captain kept the vessel’s head again towards Guernsey, and gave orders to put on the steam.

The Guernsey passenger, hanging about the engine-room hatchway, heard the negro Imbrancam talking to his engineer comrade. The passenger listened. The negro said:

“This morning, in the sun, we were going half steam on; now, in the fog, we put on steam.”

The Guernsey man returned to Clubin.

“Captain Clubin, a look-out is useless; but have we not too much steam on?”

“What can I do, sir? We must make up for time lost through the fault of that drunkard of a helmsman.”

“True, Captain Clubin.”

And Clubin added:

“I am anxious to arrive. It is foggy enough by day: it would be rather too much at night.”

The Guernsey man rejoined his St. Malo fellow-passengers, and remarked:

“We have an excellent captain.”

At intervals, great waves of mist bore down heavily upon them, and blotted out the sun; which again issued out of them pale and sickly. The little that could be seen of the heavens resembled the long strips of painted sky, dirty and smeared with oil, among the old scenery of a theatre.

The Durande passed close to a cutter which had cast anchor for safety. It was the *Shealtiel* of Guernsey. The master of the cutter remarked the high speed of the steam-vessel. It struck him also, that she was not in her exact course. She seemed to him to bear to westward too much. The apparition of this vessel under full steam in the fog surprised him.

Towards two o'clock the weather had become so thick that the captain was obliged to leave the bridge, and plant himself near the steersman. The sun had vanished, and all was fog. A sort of ashy darkness surrounded the ship. They were navigating in a pale shroud. They could see neither sky nor water.

There was not a breath of wind.

The can of turpentine suspended under the bridge, between the paddle-boxes, did not even oscillate.

The passengers had become silent.

The Parisian, however, hummed between his teeth the song of Béranger — "*Un jour le bon Dieu s'éveillant.*"

One of the St. Malo passengers addressed him:

"You are from Paris, sir?"

"Yes, sir. *Il mit la tête à la fenêtre.*"

"What do they do in Paris?"

"*Leur planète a péri, peut-être.* — In Paris, sir, things are going on very badly."

"Then it's the same ashore as at sea."

"It is true; we have an abominable fog here."

"One which might involve us in misfortunes."

The Parisian exclaimed:

"Yes; and why all these misfortunes in the world? Misfortunes! What are they sent for, these misfortunes? What use do they serve? There was the fire at the Odéon theatre, and immediately a number of families thrown out of employment. Is that just? I don't know what is your religion, sir, but I am puzzled by all this."

"So am I," said the St. Malo man.

"Everything that happens here below," continued the Parisian, "seems to go wrong. It looks as if Providence, for some reason, no longer watched over the world."

The St. Malo man scratched the top of his head, like one making an effort to understand. The Parisian continued:

"Our guardian angel seems to be absent. There ought to be a decree against celestial absenteeism. He is at his country-house, and takes no notice of us; so all gets in disorder. It is evident that this guardian is not in the government; he is taking holiday, leaving some vicar — some seminarist angel, some wretched creature with sparrows'-wings — to look after affairs."

Captain Clubin, who had approached the speakers during this conversation, laid his hand upon the shoulder of the Parisian.

"Silence, sir," he said. "Keep a watch upon your words. We are upon the sea."

No one spoke again aloud.

After a pause of five minutes, the Guernsey man, who had heard all this, whispered in the ear of the St. Malo passenger:

"A religious man, our captain."

It did not rain, but all felt their clothing wet. The crew took no heed of the way they were making; but there was increased sense of uneasiness. They seemed to have entered into a doleful region. The fog makes a deep silence on the sea; it calms the waves, and stifles the wind. In the midst of this silence, the creaking of the Durande communicated a strange, indefinable feeling of melancholy and disquietude.

They passed no more vessels. If afar off, in the direction of Guernsey or in that of St. Malo, any vessels were at sea outside the fog, the Durande, submerged in the dense cloud, must have been invisible to them; while her long trail of smoke attached to nothing, looked like a black comet in the pale sky.

Suddenly Clubin roared out:

"Hang-dog! you have played us an ugly trick. You will have done us some damage before we are out of this. You deserve to be put in irons. Get you gone, drunkard!"

And he seized the helm himself.

The steersman, humbled, shrunk away to take part in the duties forward.

The Guernsey man said:

“That will save us.”

The vessel was still making way rapidly.

Towards three o’clock, the lower part of the fog began to clear, and they could see the sea again.

A mist can only be dispersed by the sun or the wind. By the sun is well; by the wind is not so well. At three o’clock in the afternoon, in the month of February, the sun is always weak. A return of the wind at this critical point in a voyage is not desirable. It is often the forerunner of a hurricane.

If there was any breeze, however, it was scarcely perceptible.

Clubin with his eye on the binnacle, holding the tiller and steering, muttered to himself some words like the following, which reached the ears of the passengers:

“No time to be lost; that drunken rascal has retarded us.”

His visage, meanwhile, was absolutely without expression.

The sea was less calm under the mist. A few waves were distinguishable. Little patches of light appeared on the surface of the water. These luminous patches attract the attention of the sailors. They indicate openings made by the wind in the overhanging roof of fog. The cloud rose a little, and then sunk heavier. Sometimes the density was perfect. The ship was involved in a sort of foggy iceberg. At intervals this terrible circle opened a little, like a pair of pincers; showed a glimpse of the horizon, and then closed again.

Meanwhile the Guernsey man, armed with his spyglass, was standing like a sentinel in the fore part of the vessel.

An opening appeared for a moment, and was blotted out again.

The Guernsey man returned alarmed.

“Captain Clubin!”

“What is the matter?”

“We are steering right upon the Hanways.”

“You are mistaken,” said Clubin, coldly.

The Guernsey man insisted.

“I am sure of it.”

“Impossible.”

“I have just seen the rock in the horizon.”

“Where?”

“Out yonder.”

“It is the open sea there. Impossible.”

And Clubin kept the vessel’s head to the point indicated by the passenger.

The Guernsey man seized his spyglass again.

A moment later he came running aft again.

“Captain!”

“Well.”

“Tack about!”

“Why?”

“I am certain of having seen a very high rock just ahead. It is the Great Hanway.”

“You have seen nothing but a thicker bank of fog.”

“It is the Great Hanway. Tack, in the name of Heaven!”

Clubin gave the helm a turn.

V

CLUBIN REACHES THE CROWNING-POINT OF GLORY

A crash was heard. The ripping of a vessel's side upon a sunken reef in open sea is the most dismal sound of which man can dream. The Durande's course was stopped short.

Several passengers were knocked down with the shock and rolled upon the deck.

The Guernsey man raised his hands to heaven:

"We are on the Hanways. I predicted it."

A long cry went up from the ship.

"We are lost."

The voice of Clubin, dry and short, was heard above all.

"No one is lost! Silence!"

The black form of Imbrancam, naked down to the waist, issued from the hatchway of the engine-room.

The negro said with self-possession:

"The water is gaining, Captain. The fires will soon be out."

The moment was terrible.

The shock was like that of a suicide. If the disaster had been wilfully sought, it could not have been more terrible. The Durande had rushed upon her fate as if she had attacked the rock itself. A point had pierced her sides like a wedge. More than six feet square of planking had gone; the stem was broken, the prow smashed, and the gaping hull drank in the sea with a horrible gulping noise. It was an entrance for wreck and ruin. The rebound was so violent that it had shattered the rudder pendants; the rudder itself hung unhinged and flapping. The rock had driven in her keel. Round about the vessel nothing was visible except a thick, compact fog, now become sombre. Night was gathering fast.

The Durande plunged forward. It was like the effort of a horse pierced through the entrails by the horns of a bull. All was over with her.

Tangrouille was sobered. Nobody is drunk in the moment of a shipwreck. He came down to the quarter-deck, went up again, and said:

"Captain, the water is gaining rapidly in the hold. In ten minutes it will be up to the scupper-holes."

The passengers ran about bewildered, wringing their hands, leaning over the bulwarks, looking down in the engine-room, and making every other sort of useless movement in their terror. The tourist had fainted.

Clubin made a sign with his hand, and they were silent. He questioned Imbrancam:

"How long will the engines work yet?"

"Five or six minutes, sir."

Then he interrogated the Guernsey passenger:

"I was at the helm. You saw the rock. On which bank of the Hanways are we?"

"On the Mauve. Just now, in the opening in the fog, I saw it clearly."

"If we're on the Mauve," remarked Clubin, "we have the Great Hanway on the port side, and the Little Hanway on the starboard bow; we are a mile from the shore."

The crew and passengers listened, fixing their eyes anxiously and attentively on the captain.

Lightening the ship would have been of no avail, and indeed would have been hardly possible. In order to throw the cargo overboard, they would have had to open the ports and increase the chance of the water entering. To cast anchor would have been equally useless: they were stuck fast. Besides, with such a bottom for the anchor to drag, the chain would probably have fouled. The engines not being injured, and being workable while the fires were not extinguished, that is to say, for a few minutes longer, they could have made an effort, by help of steam and her paddles, to turn her astern off the rocks; but if they had succeeded, they must have settled down immediately. The rock, indeed, in some degree stopped the breach and prevented the entrance of the water. It was at least an obstacle; while the hole once freed, it would have been impossible to stop the leak or to work the pumps. To snatch a poniard from a wound in the heart is instant death to the victim. To free the vessel from the rock would have been simply to founder.

The cattle, on whom the water was gaining in the hold, were lowing piteously.

Clubin issued orders:

"Launch the long boat."

Imbrancam and Tangrouille rushed to execute the order. The boat was eased from her fastenings. The rest of the crew looked on stupefied.

“All hands to assist,” cried Clubin.

This time all obeyed.

Clubin, self-possessed, continued to issue his orders in that old sea dialect, which French sailors of the present day would scarcely understand.

“Haul in a rope — Get a cable if the capstan does not work — Stop heaving — Keep the blocks clear — Lower away there — Bring her down stern and bows — Now then, all together, lads — Take care she don’t lower stern first — There’s too much strain on there — Hold the laniard of the stock tackle — Stand by there!”

The long boat was launched.

At that instant the Durande’s paddles stopped, and the smoke ceased — the fires were drowned.

The passengers slipped down the ladder, and dropped hurriedly into the long boat. Imbrancam lifted the fainting tourist, carried him into the boat, and then boarded the vessel again.

The crew made a rush after the passengers — the cabin boy was knocked down, and the others were trampling upon him.

Imbrancam barred their passage.

“Not a man before the lad,” he said.

He kept off the sailors with his two black arms, picked up the boy, and handed him down to the Guernsey man, who was standing upright in the boat.

The boy saved, Imbrancam made way for the others, and said:

“Pass on!”

Meanwhile Clubin had entered his cabin, and had made up a parcel containing the ship’s papers and instruments. He took the compass from the binnacle, handed the papers and instruments to Imbrancam, and the compass to Tangrouille, and said to them:

“Get aboard the boat.”

They obeyed. The crew had taken their places before them.

“Now,” cried Clubin, “push off.”

A cry arose from the long boat.

“What about yourself, Captain?”

“I will remain here.”

Shipwrecked people have little time to deliberate, and not much for indulging in tender feeling. Those who were in the long boat and in comparative safety, however, felt an emotion which was not altogether selfish. All the voices shouted together:

“Come with us, Captain.”

“No: I remain here.”

The Guernsey man, who had some experience of the sea, replied:

“Listen to me, Captain. You are wrecked on the Hanways. Swimming, you would have only a mile to cross to Pleinmont. In a boat you can only land at Rocquaine, which is two miles. There are breakers, and there is the fog. Our boat will not get to Rocquaine in less than two hours. It will be a dark night. The sea is rising — the wind getting fresh. A squall is at hand. We are now ready to return and bring you off; but if bad weather comes on, that will be out of our power. You are lost if you stay there. Come with us.”

The Parisian chimed in:

“The long boat is full — too full, it is true, and one more will certainly be one too many; but we are thirteen — a bad number for the boat, and it is better to overload her with a man than to take an ominous number. Come, Captain.”

Tangrouille added:

“It was all my fault — not yours, Captain. It isn’t fair for you to be left behind.”

“I have decided to remain here,” said Clubin. “The vessel must inevitably go to pieces in the tempest to-night. I won’t leave her. When the ship is lost, the captain is already dead. People shall not say I didn’t do my duty to the end. Tangrouille, I forgive you.”

Then, folding his arms, he cried:

“Obey orders! Let go the rope, and push off.”

The long-boat swayed to and fro. Imbrancam had seized the tiller. All the hands which were not rowing were raised towards the captain — every mouth cried, “Cheers for Captain Clubin.”

“An admirable fellow!” said the American.

“Sir,” replied the Guernsey man, “he is one of the worthiest seamen afloat.”

Tangrouille shed tears.

“If I had had the courage,” he said, “I would have stayed with him.”

The long-boat pushed away, and was lost in the fog.

Nothing more was visible.

The beat of the oars grew fainter, and died away.

Clubin remained alone.

VI

THE INTERIOR OF AN ABYSS SUDDENLY REVEALED

When Clubin found himself upon this rock, in the midst of the fog and the wide waters, far from all sound of human life, left for dead, alone with the tide rising around him, and night settling down rapidly, he experienced a feeling of profound satisfaction.

He had succeeded.

His dream was realised. The acceptance which he had drawn upon destiny at so long a date had fallen due at last.

With him, to be abandoned there was, in fact, to be saved.

He was on the Hanways, one mile from the shore; he had about him seventy-five thousand francs. Never was shipwreck more scientifically accomplished. Nothing had failed. It is true, everything had been foreseen. From his early years Clubin had had an idea to stake his reputation for honesty at life’s gaming-table; to pass as a man of high honour, and to make that reputation his fulcrum for other things; to bide his time, to watch his opportunity; not to grope about blindly, but to seize boldly; to venture on one great stroke, only one; and to end by sweeping off the stakes, leaving fools behind him to gape and wonder. What stupid rogues fail in twenty times, he meant to accomplish at the first blow; and while they terminated a career on the gallows, he intended to finish with a fortune. The meeting with Rantaine had been a new light to him. He had immediately laid his plan — to compel Rantaine to disgorge; to frustrate his threatened revelations by disappearing; to make the world believe him dead, the best of all modes of concealment; and for this purpose to wreck the Durande. The shipwreck was necessary to his designs. Lastly, he had the satisfaction of vanishing, leaving behind him a great renown, the crowning point of his existence. As he stood meditating on these things amid the wreck, Clubin might have been taken for some demon in a pleasant mood.

He had lived a lifetime for the sake of this one minute.

His whole exterior was expressive of the two words, “At last.” A devilish tranquillity reigned in that sallow countenance.

His dull eye, the depth of which generally seemed to be impenetrable, became clear and terrible. The inward fire of his dark spirit was reflected there.

Man’s inner nature, like that external world about him, has its electric phenomena. An idea is like a meteor; at the moment of its coming, the confused meditations which preceded it open a way, and a spark flashes forth. Bearing within oneself a power of evil, feeling an inward prey, brings to some minds a pleasure which is like a sparkle of light. The triumph of an evil purpose brightens up their visages. The success of certain cunning combinations, the attainment of certain cherished objects, the gratification of certain ferocious instincts, will manifest themselves in sinister but luminous appearances in their eyes. It is like a threatening dawn, a gleam of joy drawn out of the heart of a storm. These flashes are generated in the conscience in its states of cloud and darkness.

Some such signs were then exhibiting themselves in the pupils of those eyes. They were like nothing else that can be seen shining either above or here below.

All Clubin’s pent-up wickedness found full vent now.

He gazed into the vast surrounding darkness, and indulged in a low, irrepressible laugh, full of sinister significance.

He was rich at last! rich at last!

The unknown future of his life was at length unfolding; the problem was solved.

Clubin had plenty of time before him. The sea was rising, and consequently sustained the Durande, and even raised her at last a little. The vessel kept firmly in its place among the rocks; there was no danger of her foundering. Besides, he determined to give the long-boat time to get clear off — to go to the bottom, perhaps. Clubin hoped it might.

Erect upon the deck of the shipwrecked vessel, he folded his arms, apparently enjoying that forlorn situation in the dark night.

Hypocrisy had weighed upon this man for thirty years. He had been evil itself, yoked with probity for a mate. He detested virtue with the feeling of one who has been trapped into a hateful match. He had always had a wicked premeditation; from the time when he attained manhood he had worn the cold and rigid armour of appearances. Underneath this was the demon of self. He had lived like a bandit in the disguise of an honest citizen. He had been the soft-spoken pirate; the bond-slave of honesty. He had been confined in garments of innocence, as in oppressive mummy cloths; had worn those angel wings which the devils find so wearisome in their fallen state. He had been overloaded with public esteem. It is arduous passing for a shining light. To preserve a perpetual equilibrium amid these difficulties, to think evil, to speak goodness — here had been indeed a labour. Such a life of contradictions had been Clubin's fate. It had been his lot — not the less onerous because he had chosen it himself — to preserve a good exterior, to be always presentable, to foam in secret, to smile while grinding his teeth. Virtue presented itself to his mind as something stifling. He had felt, sometimes, as if he could have gnawed those finger-ends which he was compelled to keep before his mouth.

To live a life which is a perpetual falsehood is to suffer unknown tortures. To be premeditating indefinitely a diabolical act, to have to assume austerity; to brood over secret infamy seasoned with outward good fame; to have continually to put the world off the scent; to present a perpetual illusion, and never to be one's self — is a burdensome task. To be constrained to dip the brush in that dark stuff within, to produce with it a portrait of candour; to fawn, to restrain and suppress one's self, to be ever on the *qui vive*; watching without ceasing to mask latent crimes with a face of healthy innocence: to transform deformity into beauty; to fashion wickedness into the shape of perfection; to tickle, as it were, with the point of a dagger, to put sugar with poison, to keep a bridle on every gesture and keep a watch over every tone, not even to have a countenance of one's own — what can be harder, what can be more torturing. The odiousness of hypocrisy is obscurely felt by the hypocrite himself. Drinking perpetually of his own imposture is nauseating. The sweetness of tone which cunning gives to scoundrelism is repugnant to the scoundrel compelled to have it ever in the mouth; and there are moments of disgust when villainy seems on the point of vomiting its secret. To have to swallow that bitter saliva is horrible. Add to this picture his profound pride. There are strange moments in the history of such a life, when hypocrisy worships itself. There is always an inordinate egotism in roguery. The worm has the same mode of gliding along as the serpent, and the same manner of raising its head. The treacherous villain is the despot curbed and restrained, and only able to attain his ends by resigning himself to play a secondary part. He is summed-up littleness capable of enormities. The perfect hypocrite is a Titan dwarfed.

Clubin had a genuine faith that he had been ill-used. Why had not he the right to have been born rich? It was from no fault of his that it was otherwise. Deprived as he had been of the higher enjoyments of life, why had he been forced to labour — in other words, to cheat, to betray, to destroy? Why had he been condemned to this torture of flattering, cringing, fawning; to be always labouring for men’s respect and friendship, and to wear night and day a face which was not his own? To be compelled to dissimulate was in itself to submit to a hardship. Men hate those to whom they have to lie. But now the disguise was at an end. Clubin had taken his revenge.

On whom? On all! On everything!

Lethierry had never done him any but good services; so much the greater his spleen. He was revenged upon Lethierry.

He was revenged upon all those in whose presence he had felt constraint. It was his turn to be free now. Whoever had thought well of him was his enemy. He had felt himself their captive long enough.

Now he had broken through his prison walls. His escape was accomplished. That which would be regarded as his death, would be, in fact, the beginning of his life. He was about to begin the world again. The true Clubin had stripped off the false. In one hour the spell was broken. He had kicked Rantaine into space; overwhelmed Lethierry in ruin; human justice in night, and opinion in error. He had cast off all humanity; blotted out the whole world.

The name of God, that word of three letters, occupied his mind but little.

He had passed for a religious man. What was he now?

There are secret recesses in hypocrisy; or rather the hypocrite is himself a secret recess.

When Clubin found himself quite alone, that cavern in which his soul had so long lain hidden, was opened. He enjoyed a moment of delicious liberty. He revelled for that moment in the open air. He gave vent to himself in one long breath.

The depth of evil within him revealed itself in his visage. He expanded, as it were, with diabolical joy. The features of Rantaine by the side of his at that moment would have shown like the innocent expression of a new-born child.

What a deliverance was this plucking off of the old mask. His conscience rejoiced in the sight of its own monstrous nakedness, as it stepped forth to take its hideous bath of wickedness. The long restraint of men’s respect seemed to have given him a peculiar relish for infamy. He experienced a certain lascivious enjoyment of wickedness. In those frightful moral abysses so rarely sounded, such natures find atrocious delights — they are the obscenities of rascality. The long-endured insipidity of the false reputation for virtue gave him a sort of appetite for shame. In this state of mind men disdain their fellows so much that they even long for the contempt which marks the ending of their unmerited homage. They feel a satisfaction in the freedom of degradation, and cast an eye of envy at baseness, sitting at its ease, clothed in ignominy and shame. Eyes that are forced to droop modestly are familiar with these stealthy glances at sin. From Messalina to Marie-Alacoque the distance is not great. Remember the histories of La Cadière and the nun of Louviers. Clubin, too, had worn the veil. Effrontery had always been the object of his secret admiration. He envied the painted courtesan, and the face of bronze of the professional ruffian. He felt a pride in surpassing her in artifices, and a disgust for the trick of passing for a saint. He had been the Tantalus of cynicism. And now, upon this rock, in the midst of this solitude, he could be frank and open. A bold plunge into wickedness — what a voluptuous sense of relief it brought with it. All the delights known to the fallen angels are summed up in this; and Clubin felt them in that moment. The long arrears of dissimulations were paid at last. Hypocrisy is an investment; the devil reimburses it. Clubin gave himself up to the intoxication of the idea, having no longer any eye upon him but that of Heaven. He whispered within himself, “I am a scoundrel,” and felt profoundly satisfied.

Never had human conscience experienced such a full tide of emotions.

He was glad to be entirely alone, and yet would not have been sorry to have had some one there. He would have been pleased to have had a witness of his fiendish joy; gratified to have had opportunity of saying to society, “Thou fool.”

The solitude, indeed, assured his triumph; but it made it less.

He was not himself to be spectator of his glory. Even to be in the pillory has its satisfaction, for everybody can see your infamy.

To compel the crowd to stand and gape is, in fact, an exercise of power. A malefactor standing upon a platform in the market-place, with the collar of iron around his neck, is master of all the glances which he constrains the multitude to turn towards him. There is a pedestal on yonder scaffolding. To be there — the centre of universal observation — is not this, too, a triumph? To direct the pupil of the public eye, is this not another form of supremacy? For those who worship an ideal wickedness, opprobrium is glory. It is a height from whence they can look down; a superiority at least of some kind; a pre-eminence in which they can display themselves royally. A gallows standing high in the gaze of all the world is not without some analogy with a throne. To be exposed is, at least, to be seen and studied.

Herein we have evidently the key to the wicked reigns of history. Nero burning Rome, Louis Quatorze treacherously seizing the Palatinate, the Prince Regent killing Napoleon slowly, Nicholas strangling Poland before the eyes of the civilised world, may have felt something akin to Clubin's joy. Universal execration derives a grandeur even from its vastness.

To be unmasked is a humiliation; but to unmask one's self is a triumph. There is an intoxication in the position, an insolent satisfaction in its contempt for appearances, a flaunting insolence in the nakedness with which it affronts the decencies of life.

These ideas in a hypocrite appear to be inconsistent, but in reality are not. All infamy is logical. Honey is gall. A character like that of Escobar has some affinity with that of the Marquis de Sade. In proof, we have Léotade. A hypocrite, being a personification of vice complete, includes in himself the two poles of perversity. Priest-like on one side, he resembles the courtesan on the other. The sex of his diabolical nature is double. It engenders and transforms itself. Would you see it in its pleasing shape? Look at it. Would you see it horrible? Turn it round.

All this multitude of ideas was floating confusedly in Clubin's mind. He analysed them little, but he felt them much.

A whirlwind of flakes of fire borne up from the pit of hell into the dark night, might fitly represent the wild succession of ideas in his soul.

Clubin remained thus some time pensive and motionless. He looked down upon his cast-off virtues as a serpent on its old skin.

Everybody had had faith in that virtue; even he himself a little.

He laughed again.

Society would imagine him dead, while he was rich. They would believe him drowned, while he was saved. What a capital trick to have played off on the stupidity of the world.

Rantaine, too, was included in that universal stupidity. Clubin thought of Rantaine with an unmeasured disdain: the disdain of the marten for the tiger. The trick had failed with Rantaine; it had succeeded with him. —Rantaine had slunk away abashed; Clubin disappeared in triumph. He had substituted himself for Rantaine — stepped between him and his mistress, and carried off her favours.

As to the future, he had no well-settled plan. In the iron tobacco-box in his girdle he had the three bank-notes. The knowledge of that fact was enough. He would change his name. There are plenty of countries where sixty thousand francs are equal to six hundred thousand. It would be no bad solution to go to one of those corners of the world, and live there honestly on the money disgorged by that scoundrel Rantaine. To speculate, to embark in commerce, to increase his capital, to become really a millionaire, that, too, would be no bad termination to his career.

For example. The great trade in coffee from Costa Rica was just beginning to be developed. There were heaps of gold to be made. He would see.

It was of little consequence. He had plenty of time to think of it. The hardest part of the enterprise was accomplished. Stripping Rantaine, and disappearing with the wreck of the Durande, were the grand achievements. All the rest was for him simple. No obstacle henceforth was likely to stop him. He had nothing more to fear. He could reach the shore with certainty by swimming. He would land at Pleinmont in the darkness; ascend the cliffs; go straight to the old haunted house; enter it easily by the help of the knotted cord, concealed beforehand in a crevice of the rocks; would find in the house his travelling-bag containing provisions and dry clothing. There he could await his opportunity. He had information. A week would not pass without the Spanish smugglers, Blasquito probably, touching at Pleinmont. For a few guineas he would obtain a passage, not to Torbay — as he had said to Blasco, to confound conjecture, and put him off the scent — but to Bilbao or Passages. Thence he could get to Vera Cruz or New Orleans. But the moment had come for taking to the water. The long boat was far enough by this time. An hour’s swimming was nothing for Clubin. The distance of a mile only separated him from the land, as he was on the Hanways.

At this point in Clubin’s meditations, a clear opening appeared in the fog bank, the formidable Douvres rocks stood before him.

VII

AN UNEXPECTED DENOUEMENT

Clubin, haggard, stared straight ahead.

It was indeed those terrible and solitary rocks.

It was impossible to mistake their misshapen outlines. The two twin Douvres reared their forms aloft, hideously revealing the passage between them, like a snare, a cut-throat in ambush in the ocean.

They were quite close to him. The fog, like an artful accomplice, had hidden them until now.

Clubin had mistaken his course in the dense mist. Notwithstanding all his pains, he had experienced the fate of two other great navigators, Gonzalez who discovered Cape Blanco, and Fernandez, who discovered Cape Verd. The fog had bewildered him. It had seemed to him, in the confidence of his seamanship, to favour admirably the execution of his project; but it had its perils. In veering to westward he had lost his reckoning. The Guernsey man, who fancied that he recognised the Hanways, had decided his fate, and determined him to give the final turn to the tiller. Clubin had never doubted that he had steered the vessel on the Hanways.

The Durande, stove in by one of the sunken rocks of the group, was only separated from the two Douvres by a few cables' lengths.

At two hundred fathoms further was a massive block of granite. Upon the steep sides of this rock were some hollows and small projections, which might help a man to climb. The square corners of those rude walls at right angles indicated the existence of a plateau on the summit.

It was the height known by the name of "The Man."

"The Man Rock" rose even higher still than the Douvres. Its platform commanded a view over their two inaccessible peaks. This platform, crumbling at its edges, had every kind of irregularity of shape. No place more desolate or more dangerous could be imagined. The hardly perceptible waves of the open sea lapped gently against the square sides of that dark enormous mass; a sort of rest-place for the vast spectres of the sea and darkness.

All around was calm. Scarcely a breath of air or a ripple. The mind guessed darkly the hidden life and vastness of the depths beneath that quiet surface.

Clubin had often seen the Douvres from afar.

He satisfied himself that he was indeed there.

He could not doubt it.

A sudden and hideous change of affairs. The Douvres instead of the Hanways. Instead of one mile, five leagues of sea! The Douvres to the solitary shipwrecked sailor is the visible and palpable presence of death, the extinction of all hope of reaching land.

Clubin shuddered. He had placed himself voluntarily in the jaws of destruction. No other refuge was left to him than “The Man Rock.” It was probable that a tempest would arise in the night, and that the long-boat, overloaded as she was, would sink. No news of the shipwreck then would come to land. It would not even be known that Clubin had been left upon the Douvres. No prospect was now before him but death from cold and hunger. His seventy-five thousand francs would not purchase him a mouthful of bread. All the scaffolding he had built up had brought him only to this snare. He alone was the laborious architect of this crowning catastrophe. No resource — no possible escape; his triumph transformed into a fatal precipice. Instead of deliverance, a prison; instead of the long prosperous future, agony. In the glance of an eye, in the moment which the lightning occupies in passing, all his construction had fallen into ruins. The paradise dreamed of by this demon had changed to its true form of a sepulchre.

Meanwhile there had sprung up a movement in the air. The wind was rising. The fog, shaken, driven in, and rent asunder, moved towards the horizon in vast shapeless masses. As quickly as it had disappeared before, the sea became once more visible.

The cattle, more and more invaded by the waters, continued to bellow in the hold.

Night was approaching, probably bringing with it a storm.

The Durande, filling slowly with the rising tide, swung from right to left, then from left to right, and began to turn upon the rock as upon a pivot.

The moment could be foreseen when a wave must move her from her fixed position, and probably roll her over on her beam-ends.

It was not even so dark as at the instant of her striking the rocks. Though the day was more advanced, it was possible to see more clearly. The fog had carried away with it some part of the darkness. The west was without a cloud. Twilight brings a pale sky. Its vast reflection glimmered on the sea.

The Durande’s bows were lower than her stern. Her stern was, in fact, almost out of the water. Clubin mounted on the taffrail, and fixed his eyes on the horizon.

It is the nature of hypocrisy to be sanguine. The hypocrite is one who waits his opportunity. Hypocrisy is nothing, in fact, but a horrible hopefulness; the very foundation of its revolting falsehood is composed of that virtue transformed into a vice.

Strange contradiction. There is a certain trustfulness in hypocrisy. The hypocrite confides in some power, unrevealed even to himself, which permits the course of evil.

Clubin looked far and wide over the ocean.

The position was desperate, but that evil spirit did not yet despair.

He knew that after the fog, vessels that had been lying-to or riding at anchor would resume their course; and he thought that perhaps one would pass within the horizon.

And, as he had anticipated, a sail appeared.

She was coming from the east and steering towards the west.

As it approached the cut of the vessel became visible. It had but one mast, and was schooner-rigged. Her bowsprit was almost horizontal. It was a cutter.

Before a half-hour she must pass not very far from the Douvres.

Clubin said within himself, “I am saved!”

In a moment like this, a man thinks at first of nothing but his life.

The cutter was probably a strange craft. Might it not be one of the smuggling vessels on its way to Pleinmont? It might even be Blasquito himself. In that case, not only life, but fortune, would be saved; and the accident of the Douvres, by hastening the conclusion, by dispensing with the necessity for concealment in the haunted house, and by bringing the adventure to a dénouement at sea, would be turned into a happy incident.

All his original confidence of success returned fanatically to his sombre mind.

It is remarkable how easily knaves are persuaded that they deserve to succeed.

There was but one course to take.

The Durande, entangled among the rocks, necessarily mingled her outline with them, and confounded herself with their irregular shapes, among which she formed only one more mass of lines. Thus become indistinct and lost, she would not suffice, in the little light which remained, to attract the attention of the crew of the vessel which was approaching.

But a human form standing up, black against the pale twilight of the sky, upon “the Man Rock,” and making signs of distress, would doubtless be perceived, and the cutter would then send a boat to take the shipwrecked man aboard.

“The Man” was only two hundred fathoms off. To reach it by swimming was simple, to climb it easy.

There was not a minute to lose.

The bows of the Durande being low between the rocks, it was from the height of the poop where Clubin stood that he had to jump into the sea. He began by taking a sounding, and discovered that there was great depth just under the stern of the wrecked vessel. The microscopic shells of foraminifera which the adhesive matter on the lead-line brought up were intact, indicating the presence of very hollow caves under the rocks, in which the water was tranquil, however great the agitation of the surface.

He undressed, leaving his clothing on the deck. He knew that he would be able to get clothing when aboard the cutter.

He retained nothing but his leather belt.

As soon as he was stripped he placed his hand upon this belt, buckled it more securely, felt for the iron tobacco-box, took a rapid survey in the direction which he would have to follow among the breakers and the waves to gain “the Man Rock;” then precipitating himself head first, he plunged into the sea.

As he dived from a height, he plunged heavily.

He sank deep in the water, touched the bottom, skirted for a moment the submarine rocks, then struck out to regain the surface.

At that moment he felt himself seized by one foot.

BOOK VII

THE DANGER OF OPENING A BOOK AT RANDOM

I

THE PEARL AT THE FOOT OF THE PRECIPICE

A few moments after his short colloquy with Sieur Landoys, Gilliatt was at St. Sampson.

He was troubled, even anxious. What could it be that had happened.

There was a murmur in St. Sampson like that of a startled hive. Everybody was at his door. The women were talking loud. There were people who seemed relating some occurrence and who were gesticulating. A group had gathered around them. The words could be heard, “What a misfortune!” Some faces wore a smile.

Gilliatt interrogated no one. It was not in his nature to ask questions. He was, moreover, too much moved to speak to strangers. He had no confidence in rumours. He preferred to go direct to the Bravées.

His anxiety was so great that he was not even deterred from entering the house.

The door of the great lower room opening upon the Quay, moreover, stood quite open. There was a swarm of men and women on the threshold. Everybody was going in, and Gilliatt went with the rest.

Entering he found Sieur Landoys standing near the doorposts.

“You have heard, no doubt, of this event?”

“No.”

“I did not like to call it out to you on the road. It makes me like a bird of evil omen.”

“What has happened?”

“The Durande is lost.”

There was a crowd in the great room.

The various groups spoke low, like people in a sick chamber.

The assemblage, which consisted of neighbours, the first comers, curious to learn the news, huddled together near the door with a sort of timidity, leaving clear the bottom of the room, where appeared Déruchette sitting and in tears. Mess Lethierry stood beside her.

His back was against the wall at the end of the room. His sailor's cap came down over his eyebrows. A lock of grey hair hung upon his cheek. He said nothing. His arms were motionless; he seemed scarcely to breathe. He had the look of something lifeless placed against the wall.

It was easy to see in his aspect a man whose life had been crushed within him. The Durande being gone, Lethierry had no longer any object in his existence. He had had a being on the sea; that being had suddenly foundered. What could he do now? Rise every morning: go to sleep every night. Never more to await the coming of the Durande; to see her get under way, or steer again into the port. What was a remainder of existence without object? To drink, to eat, and then? — He had crowned the labours of his life by a masterpiece: won by his devotion a new step in civilisation. The step was lost; the masterpiece destroyed. To live a few vacant years longer! where would be the good? Henceforth nothing was left for him to do. At his age men do not begin life anew. Besides, he was ruined. Poor old man!

Déruchette, sitting near him on a chair and weeping, held one of Mess Lethierry's hands in hers. Her hands were joined: his hand was clenched fast. It was the sign of the shade of difference in their two sorrows. In joined hands there is still some token of hope, in the clenched fist none.

Mess Lethierry gave up his arm to her, and let her do with it what she pleased. He was passive. Struck down by a thunderbolt, he had scarcely a spark of life left within him.

There is a degree of overwhelmment which abstracts the mind entirely from its fellowship with man. The forms which come and go within your room become confused and indistinct. They pass by, even touch you, but never really come near you. You are far away; inaccessible to them, as they to you. The intensities of joy and despair differ in this. In despair, we take cognisance of the world only as something dim and afar off: we are insensible to the things before our eyes; we lose the feeling of our own existence. It is in vain, at such times, that we are flesh and blood; our consciousness of life is none the more real: we are become, even to ourselves, nothing but a dream.

Mess Lethierry’s gaze indicated that he had reached this state of absorption.

The various groups were whispering together. They exchanged information as far as they had gathered it. This was the substance of their news.

The Durande had been wrecked the day before in the fog on the Douvres, about an hour before sunset. With the exception of the captain, who refused to leave his vessel, the crew and passengers had all escaped in the long-boat. A squall from the south-west springing up as the fog had cleared, had almost wrecked them a second time, and had carried them out to sea beyond Guernsey. In the night they had had the good fortune to meet with the *Cashmere,* which had taken them aboard and landed them at St. Peter’s Port. The disaster was entirely the fault of the steersman Tangrouille, who was in prison. Clubin had behaved nobly.

The pilots, who had mustered in great force, pronounced the words “The Douvres” with a peculiar emphasis. “A dreary half-way house that,” said one.

A compass and a bundle of registers and memorandum-books lay on the table; they were doubtless the compass of the Durande and the ship’s papers, handed by Clubin to Imbrancam and Tangrouille at the moment of the departure of the long-boat. They were the evidences of the magnificent self-abnegation of that man who had busied himself with saving these documents even in the presence of death itself — a little incident full of moral grandeur; an instance of sublime self-forgetfulness never to be forgotten.

They were unanimous in their admiration of Clubin; unanimous also in believing him to be saved after all. The *Shealtiel* cutter had arrived some hours after the *Cashmere*. It was this vessel which had brought the last items of intelligence. She had passed four-and-twenty hours in the same waters as the Durande. She had lain-to in the fog, and tacked about during the squall. The captain of the *Shealtiel* was present among the company.

This captain had just finished his narrative to Lethierry as Gilliatt entered. The narrative was a true one. Towards the morning, the storm having abated, and the wind becoming manageable, the captain of the *Shealtiel* had heard the lowing of oxen in the open sea. This rural sound in the midst of the waves had naturally startled him. He steered in that direction, and perceived the Durande among the Douvres. The sea had sufficiently subsided for him to approach. He hailed the wreck; the bellowing of the cattle was the sole reply. The captain of the *Shealtiel* was confident that there was no one aboard the Durande. The wreck still held together well, and notwithstanding the violence of the squall, Clubin could have passed the night there. He was not the man to leave go his hold very easily. He was not there, however; and therefore he must have been rescued. It was certain that several sloops and luggers, from Granville and St. Malo, must, after laying-to in the fog on the previous evening, have passed pretty near the rocks. It was evident that one of these had taken Clubin aboard. It was to be remembered that the long-boat of the Durande was full when it left the unlucky vessel; that it was certain to encounter great risks; that another man aboard would have overloaded her, and perhaps caused her to founder; and that these circumstances had no doubt weighed with Clubin in coming to his determination to remain on the wreck. His duty, however, once fulfilled, and a vessel at hand, Clubin assuredly would not have scrupled to avail himself of its aid. A hero is not necessarily an idiot. The idea of a suicide was absurd in connection with a man of Clubin’s irreproachable character. The culprit, too, was Tangrouille, not Clubin. All this was conclusive. The captain of the *Shealtiel* was evidently right, and everybody expected to see Clubin reappear very shortly. There was a project abroad to carry him through the town in triumph.

Two things appeared certain from the narrative of the captain: Clubin was saved, the Durande lost.

As regarded the Durande, there was nothing for it but to accept the fact; the catastrophe was irremediable. The captain of the *Shealtiel* had witnessed the last moments of the wreck. The sharp rock on which the vessel had been, as it were, nailed, had held her fast during the night, and resisted the shock of the tempest as if reluctant to part with its prey; but in the morning, at the moment when the captain of the *Shealtiel* had convinced himself that there was no one aboard to be saved, and was about to wear off again, one of those seas which are like the last angry blows of a tempest had struck her. The wave lifted her violently from her place, and with the swiftness and directness of an arrow from a bow had thrown her against the two Douvres rocks. “An infernal crash was heard,” said the captain. The vessel, lifted by the wave to a certain height, had plunged between the two rocks up to her midship frame. She had stuck fast again; but more firmly than on the submarine rocks. She must have remained there suspended, and exposed to every wind and sea.

The Durande, according to the statements of the crew of the *Shealtiel*, was already three parts broken up. She would evidently have foundered during the night, if the rocks had not kept her up. The captain of the *Shealtiel* had watched her a long time with his spyglass. He gave, with naval precision, the details of her disaster. The starboard quarter beaten in, the masts maimed, the sails blown from the bolt-ropes, the shrouds torn away, the cabin sky-lights smashed by the falling of one of the booms, the dome of the cuddy-house beaten in, the chocks of the long-boat struck away, the round-house overturned, the hinges of the rudder broken, the trusses wrenched away, the quarter-cloths demolished, the bits gone, the cross-beam destroyed, the shear-rails knocked off, the stern-post broken. As to the parts of the cargo made fast before the foremast, all destroyed, made a clean sweep of, gone to ten thousand shivers, with top ropes, iron pulleys, and chains. The Durande had broken her back; the sea now must break her up piecemeal. In a few days there would be nothing of her remaining.

It appeared that the engine was scarcely injured by all these ravages — a remarkable fact, and one which proved its excellence. The captain of the *Shealtiel* thought he could affirm that the crank had received no serious injury. The vessel’s masts had given way, but the funnel had resisted everything. Only the iron guards of the captain’s gangway were twisted; the paddle boxes had suffered, the frames were bruised, but the paddles had not a float missing. The machinery was intact. Such was the conviction of the captain of the *Shealtiel*. Imbrancam, the engineer, who was among the crowd, had the same conviction. The negro, more intelligent than many of his white companions, was proud of his engines. He lifted up his arms, opening the ten fingers of his black hands, and said to Lethierry, as he sat there silent, “Master, the machinery is alive still!”

The safety of Clubin seeming certain, and the hull of the Durande being already sacrificed, the engines became the topic of conversation among the crowd. They took an interest in it as in a living thing. They felt a delight in praising its good qualities. “That’s what I call a well-built machine,” said a French sailor. “Something like a good one,” cried a Guernsey fisherman. “She must have some good stuff in her,” said the captain of the *Shealtiel*, “to come out of that affair with only a few scratches.”

By degrees the machinery of the Durande became the absorbing object of their thoughts. Opinions were warm for and against. It had its enemies and its friends. More than one who possessed a good old sailing cutter, and who hoped to get a share of the business of the Durande, was not sorry to find that the Douvres rock had disposed of the new invention. The whispering became louder. The discussion grew noisy, though the hubbub was evidently a little restrained; and now and then there was a simultaneous lowering of voices out of respect to Lethierry's death-like silence.

The result of the colloquy, so obstinately maintained on all sides, was as follows: —

The engines were the vital part of the vessel. To rescue the Durande was impossible; but the machinery might still be saved. These engines were unique. To construct others similar, the money was wanting; but to find the artificer would have been still more difficult. It was remembered that the constructor of the machinery was dead. It had cost forty thousand francs. No one would risk again such a sum upon such a chance: particularly as it was now discovered that steamboats could be lost like other vessels. The accident of the Durande destroyed the prestige of all her previous success. Still, it was deplorable to think that at that very moment this valuable mechanism was still entire and in good condition, and that in five or six days it would probably go to pieces, like the vessel herself. As long as this existed, it might almost be said that there was no shipwreck. The loss of the engines was alone irreparable. To save the machinery would be almost to repair the disaster.

Save the machinery! It was easy to talk of it; but who would undertake to do it? Was it possible, even? To scheme and to execute are two different things; as different as to dream and to do. Now if ever a dream had appeared wild and impracticable, it was that of saving the engines then embedded between the Douvres. The idea of sending a ship and a crew to work upon those rocks was absurd. It could not be thought of. It was the season of heavy seas. In the first gale the chains of the anchors would be worn away and snapped upon the submarine peaks, and the vessel must be shattered on the rocks. That would be to send a second shipwreck to the relief of the first. On the miserable narrow height where the legend of the place described the shipwrecked sailor as having perished of hunger, there was scarcely room for one person. To save the engines, therefore, it would be necessary for a man to go to the Douvres, to be alone in that sea, alone in that desert, alone at five leagues from the coast, alone in that region of terrors, alone for entire weeks, alone in the presence of dangers foreseen and unforeseen — without supplies in the face of hunger and nakedness, without succour in the time of distress, without token of human life around him save the bleached bones of the miserable being who had perished there in his misery, without companionship save that of death. And besides, how was it possible to extricate the machinery? It would require not only a sailor, but an engineer; and for what trials must he not prepare. The man who would attempt such a task must be more than a hero. He must be a madman: for in certain enterprises, in which superhuman power appears necessary, there is a sort of madness which is more potent than courage. And after all, would it not be a folly to immolate oneself for a mass of rusted iron. No: it was certain that nobody would undertake to go to the Douvres on such an errand. The engine must be abandoned like the rest. The engineer for such a task would assuredly not be forthcoming. Where, indeed, should they look for such a man?

All this, or similar observations, formed the substance of the confused conversations of the crowd.

The captain of the *Shealtiel*, who had been a pilot, summed up the views of all by exclaiming aloud: —

“No; it is all over. The man does not exist who could go there and rescue the machinery of the Durande.”

“If I don’t go,” said Imbrancam, “it is because nobody could do it.”

The captain of the *Shealtiel* shook his left hand in the air with that sudden movement which expresses a conviction that a thing is impossible.

“If he existed—” continued the captain.

Déruchette turned her head impulsively, and interrupted.

“I would marry him,” she said, innocently.

There was a pause.

A man made his way out of the crowd, and standing before her, pale and anxious, said:

“You would marry him, Miss Déruchette?”

It was Gilliatt.

All eyes were turned towards him. Mess Lethierry had just before stood upright, and gazed about him. His eyes glittered with a strange light.

He took off his sailor’s cap, and threw it on the ground: then looked solemnly before him, and without seeing any of the persons present, said:

“Déruchette should be his. I pledge myself to it in God’s name.”

II

MUCH ASTONISHMENT ON THE WESTERN COAST

The full moon rose at ten o’clock on the following night; but however fine the night, however favourable the wind and sea, no fisherman thought of going out that evening either from Hogue la Perre, or Bourdeaux harbour, or Houmet Benet, or Platon, or Port Grat, or Vazon Bay, or Perrelle Bay, or Pezeries, or the Tielles or Saints’ Bay, or Little Bo, or any other port or little harbour in Guernsey; and the reason was very simple. A cock had been heard to crow at noonday.

When the cock is heard to crow at an extraordinary hour, fishing is suspended.

At dusk on that evening, however, a fisherman returning to Omptolle, met with a remarkable adventure. On the height above Houmet Paradis, beyond the Two Brayes and the Two Grunes, stands to the left the beacon of the Plattes Tougères, representing a tub reversed; and to the right, the beacon of St. Sampson, representing the face of a man. Between these two, the fisherman thought that he perceived for the first time a third beacon. What could be the meaning of this beacon? When had it been erected on that point? What shoal did it indicate? The beacon responded immediately to these interrogations. It moved, it was a mast. The astonishment of the fisherman did not diminish. A beacon would have been remarkable; a mast was still more so: it could not be a fishing-boat. When everybody else was returning, some boat was going out. Who could it be? and what was he about?

Ten minutes later the vessel, moving slowly, came within a short distance of the Omptolle fisherman. He did not recognise it. He heard the sound of rowing: there were evidently only two oars. There was probably, then, only one man aboard. The wind was northerly. The man, therefore, was evidently paddling along in order to take the wind off Point Fontenelle. There he would probably take to his sails. He intended then to double the Ancresse and Mount Crevel. What could that mean?

The vessel passed, the fisherman returned home. On that same night, at different hours, and at different points, various persons scattered and isolated on the western coast of Guernsey, observed certain facts.

As the Omptolle fisherman was mooring his bark, a carter of seaweed about half-a-mile off, whipping his horses along the lonely road from the Clôtures near the Druid stones, and in the neighbourhood of the Martello Towers 6 and 7, saw far off at sea, in a part little frequented, because it requires much knowledge of the waters, and in the direction of North Rock and the Jablonneuse, a sail being hoisted. He paid little attention to the circumstance, not being a seaman, but a carter of seaweed.

Half-an-hour had perhaps elapsed since the carter had perceived this vessel, when a plasterer returning from his work in the town, and passing round Pelée Pool, found himself suddenly opposite a vessel sailing boldly among the rocks of the Quenon, the Rousse de Mer, and the Gripe de Rousse. The night was dark, but the sky was light over the sea, an effect common enough; and he could distinguish a great distance in every direction. There was no sail visible except this vessel.

A little lower, a gatherer of crayfish, preparing his fish wells on the beach which separates Port Soif from the Port Enfer, was puzzled to make out the movements of a vessel between the Boue Corneille and the Moubrette. The man must have been a good pilot, and in great haste to reach some destination to risk his boat there.

Just as eight o’clock was striking at the Catel, the tavern-keeper at Cobo Bay observed with astonishment a sail out beyond the Boue du Jardin and the Grunettes, and very near the Susanne and the Western Grunes.

Not far from Cobo Bay, upon the solitary point of the Houmet of Vason Bay, two lovers were lingering, hesitating before they parted for the night. The young woman addressed the young man with the words, “I am not going because I don’t care to stay with you: I’ve a great deal to do.” Their farewell kiss was interrupted by a good sized sailing boat which passed very near them, making for the direction of the Messellettes.

Monsieur le Peyre des Norgiots, an inhabitant of Cotillon Pipet, was engaged about nine o’clock in the evening in examining a hole made by some trespassers in the hedge of his property called La Jennerotte, and his “*friquet* planted with trees.” Even while ascertaining the amount of the damage, he could not help observing a fishing-boat audaciously making its way round the Crocq Point at that hour of night.

On the morrow of a tempest, when there is always some agitation upon the sea, that route was extremely unsafe. It was rash to choose it, at least, unless the steersman knew all the channels by heart.

At half-past nine o'clock, at L'Equerrier, a trawler carrying home his net stopped for a time to observe between Colombelle and the Soufleresse something which looked like a boat. The boat was in a dangerous position. Sudden gusts of wind of a very dangerous kind are very common in that spot. The *Soufleresse*, or Blower, derives its name from the sudden gusts of wind which it seems to direct upon the vessels, which by rare chance find their way thither.

At the moment when the moon was rising, the tide being high and the sea being quiet, in the little strait of Li-Hou, the solitary keeper of the island of Li-Hou was considerably startled. A long black object slowly passed between the moon and him. This dark form, high and narrow, resembled a winding-sheet spread out and moving. It glided along the line of the top of the wall formed by the ridges of rock. The keeper of Li-Hou fancied that he had beheld the Black Lady.

The White Lady inhabits the Tau de Pez d'Amont; the Grey Lady, the Tau de Pez d'Aval; the Red Lady, the Silleuse, to the north of the Marquis Bank; and the Black Lady, the Grand Etacré, to the west of Li-Houmet. At night, when the moon shines, these ladies stalk abroad, and sometimes meet.

That dark form might undoubtedly be a sail. The long groups of rocks on which she appeared to be walking, might in fact be concealing the hull of a bark navigating behind them, and allowing only her sail to be seen. But the keeper asked himself, what bark would dare, at that hour, to venture herself between Li-Hou and the Pécheresses, and the Anguillières and Lérée Point? And what object could she have? It seemed to him much more probable that it was the Black Lady.

As the moon was passing the clock-tower of St. Peter in the Wood, the serjeant at Castle Rocquaine, while in the act of raising the drawbridge of the castle, distinguished at the end of the bay beyond the Haute Canée, but nearer than the Sambule, a sailing-vessel which seemed to be steadily dropping down from north to south.

On the southern coast of Guernsey behind Pleinmont, in the curve of a bay composed entirely of precipices and rocky walls rising peak-shaped from the sea, there is a singular landing-place, to which a French gentleman, a resident of the island since 1855, has given the name of "The Port on the Fourth Floor," a name now generally adopted. This port, or landing-place, which was then called the Moie, is a rocky plateau half-formed by nature, half by art, raised about forty feet above the level of the waves, and communicating with the water by two large beams laid parallel in the form of an inclined plane. The fishing-vessels are hoisted up there by chains and pulleys from the sea, and are let down again in the same way along these beams, which are like two rails. For the fishermen there is a ladder. The port was, at the time of our story, much frequented by the smugglers. Being difficult of access, it was well suited to their purposes.

Towards eleven o'clock, some smugglers — perhaps the same upon whose aid Clubin had counted — stood with their bales of goods on the summit of this platform of the Moie. A smuggler is necessarily a man on the look out, it is part of his business to watch. They were astonished to perceive a sail suddenly make its appearance beyond the dusky outline of Cape Pleinmont. It was moonlight. The smugglers observed the sail narrowly, suspecting that it might be some coast-guard cutter about to lie in ambush behind the Great Hanway. But the sail left the Hanways behind, passed to the north-west of the Boue Blondel, and was lost in the pale mists of the horizon out at sea.

"Where the devil can that boat be sailing?" asked the smuggler.

That same evening, a little after sunset, some one had been heard knocking at the door of the old house of the Bû de la Rue. It was a boy wearing brown clothes and yellow stockings, a fact that indicated that he was a little parish clerk. An old fisherwoman prowling about the shore with a lantern in her hand, had called to the boy, and this dialogue ensued between the fisherwoman and the little clerk, before the entrance to the Bû de la Rue: —

"What d'ye want, lad?"

"The man of this place."

"He's not there."

"Where is he?"

"I don't know."

"Will he be there to-morrow?"

"I don't know."

"Is he gone away?"

"I don't know."

"I've come, good woman, from the new rector of the parish, the Reverend Ebenezer Caudray, who desires to pay him a visit."

"I don't know where he is."

“The rector sent me to ask if the man who lives at the Bû de la Rue would be at home to-morrow morning.”

“I don’t know.”

III

A QUOTATION FROM THE BIBLE

During the twenty-four hours which followed, Mess Lethierry slept not, ate nothing, drank nothing. He kissed Déruchette on the forehead, asked after Clubin, of whom there was as yet no news, signed a declaration certifying that he had no intention of preferring a charge against anyone, and set Tangrouille at liberty.

All the morning of the next day he remained half supporting himself on the table of the office of the Durande, neither standing nor sitting: answering kindly when anyone spoke to him. Curiosity being satisfied, the Bravées had become a solitude. There is a good deal of curiosity generally mingled with the haste of condolences. The door had closed again, and left the old man again alone with Déruchette. The strange light that had shone in Lethierry's eyes was extinguished. The mournful look which filled them after the first news of the disaster had returned.

Déruchette, anxious for his sake, had, on the advice of Grace and Douce, laid silently beside him a pair of stockings, which he had been knitting, sailor fashion, when the bad news had arrived.

He smiled bitterly, and said:

"They must think me foolish."

After a quarter of an hour's silence, he added:

"These things are well when you are happy."

Déruchette carried away the stockings, and took advantage of the opportunity to remove also the compass and the ship's papers which Lethierry had been brooding over too long.

In the afternoon, a little before tea-time, the door opened and two strangers entered, attired in black. One was old, the other young.

The young one has, perhaps, already been observed in the course of this story.

The two men had each a grave air; but their gravity appeared different. The old man possessed what might be called state gravity; the gravity of the young man was in his nature. Habit engenders the one; thought the other.

They were, as their costume indicated, two clergymen, each belonging to the Established Church.

The first fact in the appearance of the younger man which might have first struck the observer was, that his gravity, though conspicuous in the expression of his features, and evidently springing from the mind, was not indicated by his person. Gravity is not inconsistent with passion, which it exalts by purifying it; but the idea of gravity could with difficulty be associated with an exterior remarkable above all for personal beauty. Being in holy orders, he must have been at least four-and-twenty, but he seemed scarcely more than eighteen. He possessed those gifts at once in harmony with, and in opposition to, each other. A soul which seemed created for exalted passion, and a body created for love. He was fair, rosy-fresh, slim, and elegant in his severe attire, and he had the cheeks of a young girl, and delicate hands. His movements were natural and lively, though subdued. Everything about him was pleasing, elegant, almost voluptuous. The beauty of his expression served to correct this excess of personal attraction. His open smile, which showed his teeth, regular and white as those of a child, had something in it pensive, even devotional. He had the gracefulness of a page, mingled with the dignity of a bishop.

His fair hair, so fair and golden as to be almost effeminate, clustered over his white forehead, which was high and well-formed. A slight double line between the eyebrows awakened associations with studious thought.

Those who saw him felt themselves in the presence of one of those natures, benevolent, innocent, and pure, whose progress is in inverse sense with that of vulgar minds; natures whom illusion renders wise, and whom experience makes enthusiasts.

His older companion was no other than Doctor Jaquemin Hérode. Doctor Jaquemin Hérode belonged to the High Church; a party whose system is a sort of popery without a pope. The Church of England was at that epoch labouring with the tendencies which have since become strengthened and condensed in the form of Puseyism. Doctor Jaquemin Hérode belonged to that shade of Anglicanism which is almost a variety of the Church of Rome. He was haughty, precise, stiff, and commanding. His inner sight scarcely penetrated outwardly. He possessed the letter in the place of the spirit. His manner was arrogant; his presence imposing. He had less the appearance of a “Reverend” than of a *Monsignore*. His frock-coat was cut somewhat in the fashion of a cassock. His true centre would have been Rome. He was a born Prelate of the Antechamber. He seemed to have been created expressly to fill a part in the Papal Court, to walk behind the Pontifical litter, with all the

Court of Rome in *abitto paonazzo*. The accident of his English birth and his theological education, directed more towards the Old than the New Testament, had deprived him of that destiny. All his splendours were comprised in his preferments as Rector of St. Peter’s Port, Dean of the Island of Guernsey, and Surrogate of the Bishop of Winchester. These were, undoubtedly, not without their glories. These glories did not prevent M. Jaquemin Hérode being, on the whole, a worthy man.

As a theologian he was esteemed by those who were able to judge of such matters; he was almost an authority in the Court of Arches — that Sorbonne of England.

He had the true air of erudition; a learned contraction of the eyes; bristling nostrils; teeth which showed themselves at all times; a thin upper lip and a thick lower one. He was the possessor of several learned degrees, a valuable prebend, titled friends, the confidence of the bishop, and a Bible, which he carried always in his pocket.

Mess Lethierry was so completely absorbed that the entrance of the two priests produced no effect upon him, save a slight movement of the eyebrows.

M. Jaquemin Hérode advanced, bowed, alluded in a few sober and dignified words to his recent promotion, and mentioned that he came according to custom to introduce among the inhabitants, and to Mess Lethierry in particular, his successor in the parish, the new Rector of St. Sampson, the Rev. Ebenezer Caudray, henceforth the pastor of Mess Lethierry.

Déruchette rose.

The young clergyman, who was the Rev. Ebenezer, saluted her.

Mess Lethierry regarded Monsieur Ebenezer Caudray, and muttered, “A bad sailor.”

Grace placed chairs. The two visitors seated themselves near the table.

Doctor Hérode commenced a discourse. It had reached his ears that a serious misfortune had befallen his host. The Durande had been lost. He came as Lethierry’s pastor to offer condolence and advice. This shipwreck was unfortunate, and yet not without compensations. Let us examine our own hearts. Are we not puffed up with prosperity? The waters of felicity are dangerous. Troubles must be submitted to cheerfully. The ways of Providence are mysterious. Mess Lethierry was ruined, perhaps. But riches were a danger. You may have false friends; poverty will disperse them, and leave you alone. The Durande was reported to have brought a revenue of one thousand pounds sterling per annum. It was more than enough for the wise. Let us fly from temptations; put not our faith in gold; bow the head to losses and neglect. Isolation is full of good fruits. It was in solitude that Ajah discovered the warm springs while leading the asses of his father Zibeon. Let us not rebel against the inscrutable decrees of Providence. The holy man Job, after his misery, had put faith in riches. Who can say that the loss of the Durande may not have its advantages even of a temporal kind. He, for instance, Doctor Jaquemin Hérode had invested some money in an excellent enterprise, now in progress at Sheffield. If Mess Lethierry, with the wealth which might still remain to him, should choose to embark in the same affair, he might transfer his capital to that town. It was an extensive manufactory of arms for the supply of the Czar, now engaged in repressing insurrection in Poland. There was a good prospect of obtaining three hundred per cent. profit.

The word Czar appeared to awaken Lethierry. He interrupted Dr. Hérode.

“I want nothing to do with the Czar.”

The Reverend Jaquemin Hérode replied:

“Mess Lethierry, princes are recognised by God. It is written, ‘Render unto Cæsar the things which are Cæsar’s.’ The Czar is Cæsar.”

Lethierry partly relapsed into his dream and muttered:

“Cæsar? who is Cæsar? I don’t know.”

The Rev. Jaquemin Hérode continued his exhortations. He did not press the question of Sheffield.

To contemn a Cæsar was republicanism. He could understand a man being a republican. In that case he could turn his thoughts towards a republic. Mess Lethierry might repair his fortune in the United States, even better than in England. If he desired to invest what remained to him at great profit, he had only to take shares in the great company for developing the resources of Texas, which employed more than twenty thousand negroes.

“I want nothing to do with slavery,” said Lethierry.

“Slavery,” replied the Reverend Hérode, “is an institution recognised by Scripture. It is written, ‘If a man smite his slave, he shall not be punished, for he is his money.’”

Grace and Douce at the door of the room listened in a sort of ecstacy to the words of the Reverend Doctor.

The doctor continued. He was, all things considered, as we have said, a worthy man; and whatever his differences, personal or connected with caste, with Mess Lethierry, he had come very sincerely to offer him that spiritual and even temporal aid which he, Doctor Jaquemin Hérode, dispensed.

If Mess Lethierry's fortune had been diminished to that point that he was unable to take a beneficial part in any speculation, Russian or American, why should he not obtain some government appointment suited to him? There were many very respectable places open to him, and the reverend gentleman was ready to recommend him. The office of Deputy-Vicomte was just vacant. Mess Lethierry was popular and respected, and the Reverend Jaquemin Hérode, Dean of Guernsey and Surrogate of the Bishop, would make an effort to obtain for Mess Lethierry this post. The Deputy-Vicomte is an important officer. He is present as the representative of His Majesty at the holding of the Sessions, at the debates of the *Cohue*, and at executions of justice.

Lethierry fixed his eye upon Doctor Hérode.

"I don't like hanging," he said.

Doctor Hérode, who, up to this point, had pronounced his words with the same intonation, had now a fit of severity; his tone became slightly changed.

"Mess Lethierry, the pain of death is of divine ordination. God has placed the sword in the hands of governors. It is written, 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.'"

The Reverend Ebenezer imperceptibly drew his chair nearer to the Reverend Doctor and said, so as to be heard only by him:

"What this man says, is dictated to him."

"By whom? By what?" demanded the Reverend Jaquemin Hérode, in the same tone.

The young man replied in a whisper, "By his conscience."

The Reverend Jaquemin Hérode felt in his pocket, drew out a thick little bound volume with clasps, and said aloud:

"Conscience is here."

The book was a Bible.

Then Doctor Hérode's tone became softer. "His wish was to render a service to Mess Lethierry, whom he respected much. As his pastor, it was his right and duty to offer counsel. Mess Lethierry, however, was free."

Mess Lethierry, plunged once more in his overwhelming absorption, no longer listened. Déruchette, seated near him, and thoughtful, also did not raise her eyes, and by her silent presence somewhat increased the embarrassment of a conversation not very animated. A witness who says nothing is a species of indefinable weight. Doctor Hérode, however, did not appear to feel it.

Lethierry no longer replying, Doctor Hérode expatiated freely. Counsel is from man; inspiration is from God. In the counsels of the priests there is inspiration. It is good to accept, dangerous to refuse them. Sochoh was seized by eleven devils for disdaining the exhortations of Nathaniel. Tiburianus was struck with a leprosy for having driven from his house the Apostle Andrew. Barjesus, a magician though he was, was punished with blindness for having mocked at the words of St. Paul. Elxai and his sisters, Martha and Martena, are in eternal torments for despising the warnings of Valentianus, who proved to them clearly that their Jesus Christ, thirty-eight leagues in height, was a demon. Aholibamah, who is also called Judith, obeyed the Councils, Reuben and Peniel listened to the counsels from on high, as their names indeed indicate. Reuben signifies son of the vision; and Peniel, “the face of God.”:

Mess Lethierry struck the table with his fist.

“Parbleu!” he cried; “it was my fault.”

“What do you mean?” asked M. Jaquemin Hérode.

“I say that it is my fault.”

“Your fault? Why?”

“Because I allowed the Durande to return on Fridays.”

M. Jaquemin Hérode whispered in Caudray’s ear:

“This man is superstitious.”

He resumed, raising his voice, and in a didactic tone:

“Mess Lethierry, it is puerile to believe in Fridays. You ought not to put faith in fables. Friday is a day just like any other. It is very often a propitious day. Melendez founded the city of Saint Augustin on a Friday; it was on a Friday that Henry the Seventh gave his commission to John Cabot; the Pilgrims of the *Mayflower* landed at Province Town on a Friday. Washington was born on Friday, the 22nd of February 1732; Christopher Columbus discovered America on Friday, the 12th of October 1492.”

Having delivered himself of these remarks, he rose.

Caudray, whom he had brought with him, rose also.

Grace and Douce, perceiving that the two clergymen were about to take their leave, opened the folding-doors.

Mess Lethierry saw nothing; heard nothing.

M. Jaquemin Hérode said, apart to M. Caudray:

“He does not even salute us. This is not sorrow; it is vacancy. He must have lost his reason.”

He took his little Bible, however, from the table, and held it between his hands outstretched, as one holds a bird in fear that it may fly away. This attitude awakened among the persons present a certain amount of attention. Grace and Douce leaned forward eagerly.

His voice assumed all the solemnity of which it was capable.

“Mess Lethierry,” he began, “let us not part without reading a page of the Holy Book. It is from books that wise men derive consolation in the troubles of life. The profane have their oracles; but believers have their ready resource in the Bible. The first book which comes to hand, opened by chance may afford counsel; but the Bible, opened at any page, yields a revelation. It is, above all, a boon to the afflicted. Yes, Holy Scripture is an unfailing balm for their wounds. In the presence of affliction, it is good to consult its sacred pages — to open even without choosing the place, and to read with faith the passage which we find. What man does not choose is chosen by God. He knoweth best what suiteth us. His finger pointeth invisibly to that which we read. Whatever be the page, it will infallibly enlighten. Let us seek, then, no other light; but hold fast to His. It is the word from on high. In the text which is evoked with confidence and reverence, often do we find a mysterious significance in our present troubles. Let us hearken, then, and obey. Mess Lethierry, you are in affliction, but I hold here the book of consolation. You are sick at heart, but I have here the book of spiritual health.”

The Reverend Jaquemin Hérode touched the spring of the clasp, and let his finger slip between the leaves. Then he placed his hand a moment upon the open volume, collected his thoughts, and, raising his eyes impressively, began to read in a loud voice.

The passage which he had lighted on was as follows:

“And Isaac went out to meditate in the field at the eventide, and he lifted up his eyes and saw and beheld the camels were coming.

“And Rebekah lifted up her eyes, and when she saw Isaac she lighted off the camel.

“For she had said unto the servant, What man is this that walketh in the field to meet us?

“And Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah’s tent, and took Rebekah, and she became his wife, and he loved her; and Isaac was comforted after his mother’s death.”

Caudray and Déruchette glanced at each other.

PART II. — MALICIOUS GILLIATT

BOOK I

THE ROCK

I

THE PLACE WHICH IS DIFFICULT TO REACH, AND DIFFICULT TO LEAVE

The bark which had been observed at so many points on the coast of Guernsey on the previous evening was, as the reader has guessed, the old Dutch barge or sloop. Gilliatt had chosen the channel along the coast among the rocks. It was the most dangerous way, but it was the most direct. To take the shortest route was his only thought. Shipwrecks will not wait; the sea is a pressing creditor; an hour's delay may be irreparable. His anxiety was to go quickly to the rescue of the machinery in danger.

One of his objects in leaving Guernsey was to avoid arousing attention. He set out like one escaping from justice, and seemed anxious to hide from human eyes. He shunned the eastern coast, as if he did not care to pass in sight of St. Sampson and St. Peter's Port, and glided silently along the opposite coast, which is comparatively uninhabited. Among the breakers, it was necessary to ply the oars; but Gilliatt managed them on scientific principles; taking the water quietly, and dropping it with exact regularity, he was able to move in the darkness with as little noise and as rapidly as possible. So stealthy were his movements, that he might have seemed to be bent upon some evil errand.

In truth, though embarking desperately in an enterprise which might well be called impossible, and risking his life with nearly every chance against him, he feared nothing but the possibility of some rival in the work which he had set before him.

As the day began to break, those unknown eyes which look down upon the world from boundless space might have beheld, at one of the most dangerous and solitary spots at sea, two objects, the distance between which was gradually decreasing, as the one was approaching the other. One, which was almost imperceptible in the wide movement of the waters, was a sailing boat. In this was a man. It was the sloop. The other, black, motionless, colossal, rose above the waves, a singular form. Two tall pillars issuing from the sea bore aloft a sort of cross-beam which was like a bridge between them. This bridge, so singular in shape that it was impossible to imagine what it was from a distance, touched each of the two pillars. It resembled a vast portal. Of what use could such an erection be in that open plain, the sea, which stretched around it far and wide? It might have been imagined to be a Titanic Cromlech, planted there in mid-ocean by an imperious whim, and built up by hands accustomed to proportion their labours to the great deep. Its wild outline stood well-defined against the clear sky.

The morning light was growing stronger in the east; the whiteness in the horizon deepened the shadow on the sea. In the opposite sky the moon was sinking.

The two perpendicular forms were the Douvres. The huge mass held fast between them, like an architrave between two pillars, was the wreck of the Durande.

The rock, thus holding fast and exhibiting its prey, was terrible to behold. Inanimate things look sometimes as if endowed with a dark and hostile spirit towards man. There was a menace in the attitude of the rocks. They seemed to be biding their time.

Nothing could be more suggestive of haughtiness and arrogance than their whole appearance: the conquered vessel; the triumphant abyss. The two rocks, still streaming with the tempest of the day before, were like two wrestlers sweating from a recent struggle. The wind had sunk; the sea rippled gently; here and there the presence of breakers might be detected in the graceful streaks of foam upon the surface of the waters. A sound came from the sea like the murmuring of bees. All around was level except the Douvres, rising straight, like two black columns. Up to a certain height they were completely bearded with seaweed; above this their steep haunches glittered at points like polished armour. They seemed ready to commence the strife again. The beholder felt that they were rooted deep in mountains whose summits were beneath the sea. Their aspect was full of a sort of tragic power.

Ordinarily the sea conceals her crimes. She delights in privacy. Her unfathomable deeps keep silence. She wraps herself in a mystery which rarely consents to give up its secrets. We know her savage nature, but who can tell the extent of her dark deeds? She is at once open and secret; she hides away carefully, and cares not to divulge her actions; wrecks a vessel, and, covering it with the waves, engulfs it deep, as if conscious of her guilt. Among her crimes is hypocrisy. She slays and steals, conceals her booty, puts on an air of unconsciousness, and smiles.

Here, however, was nothing of the kind. The Douvres, lifting above the level of the waters the shattered hull of the Durande, had an air of triumph. The imagination might have pictured them as two monstrous arms, reaching upwards from the gulf, and exhibiting to the tempest the lifeless body of the ship. Their aspect was like that of an assassin boasting of his evil deeds.

The solemnity of the hour contributed something to the impression of the scene. There is a mysterious grandeur in the dawn, as of the border-land between the region of consciousness and the world of our dreams. There is something spectral in that confused transition time. The immense form of the two Douvres, like a capital letter H, the Durande forming its cross stroke, appeared against the horizon in all their twilight majesty.

Gilliatt was attired in his seaman’s clothing: a Guernsey shirt, woollen stockings, thick shoes, a homespun jacket, trousers of thick stuff, with pockets, and a cap upon his head of red worsted, of a kind then much in use among sailors, and known in the last century as a *galérienne*.

He recognised the rocks, and steered towards them.

The situation of the Durande was exactly the contrary of that of a vessel gone to the bottom: it was a vessel suspended in the air.

No problem more strange was ever presented to a salvor.

It was broad daylight when Gilliatt arrived in the waters about the rock.

As we have said, there was but little sea. The slight agitation of the water was due almost entirely to its confinement among the rocks. Every passage, small or large, is subject to this chopping movement. The inside of a channel is always more or less white with foam. Gilliatt did not approach the Douvres without caution.

He cast the sounding lead several times.

He had a cargo to disembark.

Accustomed to long absences, he had at home a number of necessaries always ready. He had brought a sack of biscuit, another of rye-meal, a basket of salt fish and smoked beef, a large can of fresh water; a Norwegian chest painted with flowers, containing several coarse woollen shirts, his tarpaulin and his waterproof overalls, and a sheepskin which he was accustomed to throw at night over his clothes. On leaving the Bû de la Rue he had put all these things hastily into the barge, with the addition of a large loaf. In his hurry he had brought no other tools but his huge forge-hammer, his chopper and hatchet, and a knotted rope. Furnished with a grappling-iron and with a ladder of that sort, the steepest rocks become accessible, and a good sailor will find it possible to scale the rudest escarpment. In the island of Sark the visitor may see what the fishermen of the Havre Gosselin can accomplish with a knotted cord.

His nets and lines and all his fishing apparatus were in the barge. He had placed them there mechanically and by habit; for he intended, if his enterprise continued, to sojourn for some time in an archipelago of rocks and breakers, where fishing nets and tackle are of little use.

At the moment when Gilliatt was skirting the great rock the sea was retiring; a circumstance favourable to his purpose. The departing tide laid bare, at the foot of the smaller Douvre, one or two table-rocks, horizontal, or only slightly inclined, and bearing a fanciful resemblance to boards supported by crows. These table-rocks, sometimes narrow, sometimes broad, standing at unequal distances along the side of the great perpendicular column, were continued in the form of a thin cornice up to a spot just beneath the Durande, the hull of which stood swelling out between the two rocks. The wreck was held fast there as in a vice.

This series of platforms was convenient for approaching and surveying the position. It was convenient also for disembarking the contents of the barge provisionally; but it was necessary to hasten, for it was only above water for a few hours. With the rising tide the table-rocks would be again beneath the foam.

It was before these table-rocks, some level, some slanting, that Gilliatt pushed in and brought the barge to a stand. A thick mass of wet and slippery sea-wrack covered them, rendered more slippery here and there by their inclined surfaces.

Gilliatt pulled off his shoes and sprang bare-footed on to the slimy weeds, and made fast the barge to a point of rock.

Then he advanced as far as he could along the granite cornice, reached the rock immediately beneath the wreck, looked up, and examined it.

The Durande had been caught suspended, and, as it were, fitted in between the two rocks, at about twenty feet above the water. It must have been a heavy sea which had cast her there.

Such effects from furious seas have nothing surprising for those who are familiar with the ocean. To cite one example only: — On the 25th January 1840, in the Gulf of Stora, a tempest struck with its expiring force a brig, and casting it almost intact completely over the broken wreck of the corvette *La Marne*, fixed it immovable, bowsprit first, in a gap between the cliffs.

The Douvres, however, held only a part of the Durande.

The vessel snatched from the waves had been, as it were, uprooted from the waters by the hurricane. A whirlwind had wrenched it against the counteracting force of the rolling waves, and the vessel thus caught in contrary directions by the two claws of the tempest had snapped like a lath. The after-part with the engine and the paddles, lifted out of the foam and driven by all the fury of the cyclone into the defile of the Douvres, had plunged in up to her midship beam, and remained there. The blow had been well directed. To drive it in this fashion between the two rocks, the storm had struck it as with an enormous hammer. The forecastle carried away and rolled down by the sea, had gone to fragments among the breakers.

The hold, broken in, had scattered out the bodies of the drowned cattle upon the sea.

A large portion of the forward side and bulwarks still hung to the riders by the larboard paddle-box, and by some shattered braces easy to strike off with the blow of a hatchet.

Here and there, among beams, planks, rags of canvas, pieces of chains, and other remains of wreck were seen lying about among the rugged fragments of shattered rock.

Gilliatt surveyed the Durande attentively. The keel formed a roofing over his head.

A serene sky stretched far and wide over the waters, scarcely wrinkled with a passing breath. The sun rose gloriously in the midst of the vast azure circle.

From time to time a drop of water was detached from the wreck and fell into the sea.

II

A CATALOGUE OF DISASTERS

The Douvres differed in shape as well as in height.

Upon the Little Douvre, which was curved and pointed, long veins of reddish-coloured rock, of a comparatively soft kind, could be seen branching out and dividing the interior of the granite. At the edges of these red dykes were fractures, favourable to climbing. One of these fractures, situated a little above the wreck, had been so laboriously worn and scooped out by the splashing of the waves, that it had become a sort of niche, in which it would have been quite possible to place a statue. The granite of the Little Douvre was rounded at the surface, and, to the feel at least, soft like touchstone; but this feeling detracted nothing from its durability. The Little Douvre terminated in a point like a horn. The Great Douvre, polished, smooth, glossy, perpendicular, and looking as if cut out by the builder's square, was in one piece, and seemed made of black ivory. Not a hole, not a break in its smooth surface. The escarpment looked inhospitable. A convict could not have used it for escape, nor a bird for a place for its nest. On the summit there was a horizontal surface as upon "The Man Rock;" but the summit of the Great Douvre was inaccessible.

It was possible to scale the Little Douvre, but not to remain on the summit; it would have been possible to rest on the summit of the Great Douvre, but impossible to scale it.

Gilliatt, having rapidly surveyed the situation of affairs, returned to the barge, landed its contents upon the largest of the horizontal cornice rocks, made of the whole compact mass a sort of bale, which he rolled up in tarpaulin, fitted a sling rope to it with a hoisting block, pushed the package into a corner of the rocks where the waves could not reach it, and then clutching the Little Douvre with his hands, and holding on with his naked feet, he clambered from projection to projection, and from niche to niche, until he found himself level with the wrecked vessel high up in the air.

Having reached the height of the paddles, he sprang upon the poop.

The interior of the wreck presented a mournful aspect.

Traces of a great struggle were everywhere visible. There were plainly to be seen the frightful ravages of the sea and wind. The action of the tempest resembles the violence of a band of pirates. Nothing is more like the victim of a criminal outrage than a wrecked ship violated and stripped by those terrible accomplices, the storm-cloud, the thunder, the rain, the squall, the waves, and the breakers.

Standing upon the dismantled deck, it was natural to dream of the presence of something like a furious stamping of the spirits of the storm. Everywhere around were the marks of their rage. The strange contortions of certain portions of the ironwork bore testimony to the terrific force of the winds. The between-decks were like the cell of a lunatic, in which everything has been broken.

No wild beast can compare with the sea for mangling its prey. The waves are full of talons. The north wind bites, the billows devour, the waves are like hungry jaws. The ocean strikes like a lion with its heavy paw, seizing and dismembering at the same moment.

The ruin conspicuous in the Durande presented the peculiarity of being detailed and minute. It was a sort of horrible stripping and plucking. Much of it seemed done with design. The beholder was tempted to exclaim, “What wanton mischief!” The ripping of the planking was edged here and there artistically. This peculiarity is common with the ravages of the cyclone. To chip and tear away is the caprice of the great devastator. Its ways are like those of the professional torturer. The disasters which it causes wear a look of ingenious punishments. One might fancy it actuated by the worst passions of man. It refines in cruelty like a savage. While it is exterminating it dissects bone by bone. It torments its victim, avenges itself, and takes delight in its work. It even appears to descend to petty acts of malice.

Cyclones are rare in our latitudes, and are, for that reason, the more dangerous, being generally unexpected. A rock in the path of a heavy wind may become the pivot of a storm. It is probable that the squall had thus rotated upon the point of the Douvres, and had turned suddenly into a waterspout on meeting the shock of the rocks, a fact which explained the casting of the vessel so high among them. When the cyclone blows, a vessel is of no more weight in the wind than a stone in a sling.

The damage received by the Durande was like the wound of a man cut in twain. It was a divided trunk from which issued a mass of *débris* like the entrails of a body. Various kinds of cordage hung floating and trembling, chains swung chattering; the fibres and nerves of the vessel were there naked and exposed. What was not smashed was disjointed.

Fragments of the sheeting resembled currycombs bristling with nails; everything bore the appearance of ruin; a handspike had become nothing but a piece of iron; a sounding-lead, nothing but a lump of metal; a dead-eye had become a mere piece of wood; a halliard, an end of rope; a strand of cord, a tangled skein; a bolt-rope, a thread in the hem of a sail. All around was the lamentable work of demolition. Nothing remained that was not unhooked, unnailed, cracked, wasted, warped, pierced with holes, destroyed: nothing hung together in the dreadful mass, but all was torn, dislocated, broken. There was that air of drift which characterises the scene of all struggles — from the melées of men, which are called battles, to the melées of the elements, to which we give the name of chaos. Everything was sinking and dropping away; a rolling mass of planks, panelling, ironwork, cables, and beams had been arrested just at the great fracture of the hull, whence the least additional shock must have precipitated them into the sea. What remained of her powerful frame, once so triumphant, was cracked here and there, showing through large apertures the dismal gloom within.

The foam from below spat its flakes contemptuously upon this broken and forlorn outcast of the sea.

III

SOUND; BUT NOT SAFE

Gilliatt did not expect to find only a portion of the ship existing. Nothing in the description, in other respects so precise, of the captain of the *Shealtiel* had led him to anticipate this division of the vessel in the centre. It was probable that the “diabolical crash” heard by the captain of the *Shealtiel* marked the moment when this destruction had taken place under the blows of a tremendous sea. The captain had, doubtless, worn ship just before this last heavy squall; and what he had taken for a great sea was probably a waterspout. Later, when he drew nearer to observe the wreck, he had only been able to see the stern of the vessel — the remainder, that is to say, the large opening where the fore-part had given way, having been concealed from him among the masses of rock.

With that exception, the information given by the captain of the *Shealtiel* was strictly correct. The hull was useless, but the engine remained intact.

Such chances are common in the history of shipwreck. The logic of disaster at sea is beyond the grasp of human science.

The masts having snapped short, had fallen over the side; the chimney was not even bent. The great iron plating which supported the machinery had kept it together, and in one piece. The planks of the paddle-boxes were disjointed, like the leaves of wooden sunblinds; but through their apertures the paddles themselves could be seen in good condition. A few of their floats only were missing.

Besides the machinery, the great stern capstan had resisted the destruction. Its chain was there, and, thanks to its firm fixture in a frame of joists, might still be of service, unless the strain of the voyal should break away the planking. The flooring of the deck bent at almost every point, and was tottering throughout.

On the other hand, the trunk of the hull, fixed between the Douvres, held together, as we have already said, and it appeared strong.

There was something like derision in this preservation of the machinery; something which added to the irony of the misfortune. The sombre malice of the unseen powers of mischief displays itself sometimes in such bitter mockeries. The machinery was saved, but its preservation did not make it any the less lost. The ocean seemed to have kept it only to demolish it at leisure. It was like the playing of the cat with her prey.

Its fate was to suffer there and to be dismembered day by day. It was to be the plaything of the savage amusements of the sea. It was slowly to dwindle, and, as it were, to melt away. For what could be done? That this vast block of mechanism and gear, at once massive and delicate, condemned to fixity by its weight, delivered up in that solitude to the destructive elements, exposed in the gripe of the rock to the action of the wind and wave, could, under the frown of that implacable spot, escape from slow destruction, seemed a madness even to imagine.

The Durande was the captive of the Douvres.

How could she be extricated from that position?

How could she be delivered from her bondage?

The escape of a man is difficult; but what a problem was this — the escape of a vast and cumbrous machine.

IV

A PRELIMINARY SURVEY

Gilliatt was pressed on all sides by demands upon his labours. The most pressing, however, was to find a safe mooring for the barge; then a shelter for himself.

The Durande having settled down more on the larboard than on the starboard side, the right paddle-box was higher than the left.

Gilliatt ascended the paddle-box on the right. From that position, although the gut of rocks stretching in abrupt angles behind the Douvres had several elbows, he was able to study the ground-plan of the group.

This survey was the preliminary step of his operations.

The Douvres, as we have already described them, were like two high gable-ends, forming the narrow entrance to a straggling alley of small cliffs with perpendicular faces. It is not rare to find in primitive submarine formations these singular kinds of passages, which seem cut out with a hatchet.

This defile was extremely tortuous, and was never without water even in the low tides. A current, much agitated, traversed it at all times from end to end. The sharpness of its turnings was favourable or unfavourable, according to the nature of the prevailing wind; sometimes it broke the swell and caused it to fall; sometimes it exasperated it. This latter effect was the most frequent. An obstacle arouses the anger of the sea, and pushes it to excesses. The foam is the exaggeration of the waves.

The stormy winds in these narrow and tortuous passages between the rocks are subjected to a similar compression, and acquire the same malignant character. The tempest frets in its sudden imprisonment. Its bulk is still immense, but sharpened and contracted; and it strikes with the massiveness of a huge club and the keenness of an arrow. It pierces even while it strikes down. It is a hurricane contracted, like the draught through the crevice of a door.

The two chains of rocks, leaving between them this kind of street in the sea, formed stages at a lower level than the Douvres, gradually decreasing, until they sunk together at a certain distance beneath the waves.

There was another such gullet of less height than the gullet of the Douvres, but narrower still, and which formed the eastern entrance of the defile. It was evident that the double prolongation of the ridge of rocks continued the kind of street under the water as far as “The Man Rock,” which stood like a square citadel at the extremity of the group.

At low water, indeed, which was the time at which Gilliatt was observing them, the two rows of sunken rock showed their tips, some high and dry, and all visible and preserving their parallel without interruption.

“The Man” formed the boundary, and buttressed on the eastern side the entire mass of the group, which was protected on the opposite side by the two Douvres.

The whole, from a bird’s-eye view, appeared like a winding chaplet of rocks, having the Douvres at one extremity and “The Man” at the other.

The Douvres, taken together, were merely two gigantic shafts of granite protruding vertically and almost touching each other, and forming the crest of one of the mountainous ranges lying beneath the ocean. Those immense ridges are not only found rising out of the unfathomable deep. The surf and the squall had broken them up and divided them like the teeth of a saw. Only the tip of the ridge was visible; this was the group of rocks. The remainder, which the waves concealed, must have been enormous. The passage in which the storm had planted the Durande was the way between these two colossal shafts.

This passage, zigzag in form as the forked lightning, was of about the same width in all parts. The ocean had so fashioned it. Its eternal commotion produces sometimes those singular regularities. There is a sort of geometry in the action of the sea.

From one extremity to the other of the defile, the two parallel granite walls confronted each other at a distance which the midship frame of the Durande measured exactly. Between the two Douvres, the widening of the Little Douvre, curved and turned back as it was, had formed a space for the paddles. In any other part they must have been shattered to fragments.

The high double façade of rock within the passage was hideous to the sight. When, in the exploration of the desert of water which we call the ocean, we come upon the unknown world of the sea, all is uncouth and shapeless. So much as Gilliatt could see of the defile from the height of the wreck, was appalling. In the rocky gorges of the ocean we may often trace a strange permanent impersonation of shipwreck. The defile of the Douvres was one of these gorges, and its effect was exciting to the imagination. The oxydes of the rock showed on the escarpment here and there in red places, like marks of clotted blood; it resembled the splashes on the walls of an abattoir. Associations of the charnel-house haunted the place. The rough marine stones, diversely tinted — here by the decomposition of metallic amalgams mingling with the rock, there by the mould of dampness, manifested in places by purple scales, hideous green blotches, and ruddy splashes, awakened ideas of murder and extermination. It was like the unwashed walls of a chamber which had been the scene of an assassination; or it might have been imagined that men had been crushed to death there, leaving traces of their fate. The peaked rocks produced an indescribable impression of accumulated agonies. Certain spots appeared to be still dripping with the carnage; here the wall was wet, and it looked impossible to touch it without leaving the fingers bloody. The blight of massacre seemed everywhere. At the base of the double parallel escarpment, scattered along the water's edge, or just below the waves, or in the worn hollows of the rocks, were monstrous rounded masses of shingle, some scarlet, others black or purple, which bore a strange resemblance to internal organs of the body; they might have been taken for human lungs, or heart, or liver, scattered and putrefying in that dismal place. Giants might have been disembowelled there. From top to bottom of the granite ran long red lines, which might have been compared to oozings from a funeral bier.

Such aspects are frequent in sea caverns.

V

A WORD UPON THE SECRET CO-OPERATIONS OF THE ELEMENTS

Those who, by the disastrous chances of sea-voyages, happen to be condemned to a temporary habitation upon a rock in mid-ocean, find that the form of their inhospitable refuge is by no means a matter of indifference. There is the pyramidal-shaped rock, a single peak rising from the water; there is the circle rock somewhat resembling a round of great stones; and there is the corridor-rock. The latter is the most alarming of all. It is not only the ceaseless agony of the waves between its walls, or the tumult of the imprisoned sea; there are also certain obscure meteorological characteristics which appear to appertain to this parallelism of two marine rocks. The two straight sides seem a veritable electric battery.

The first result of the peculiar position of these corridor-rocks is an action upon the air and the water. The corridor-rock acts upon the waves and the wind mechanically by its form; galvanically, by the different magnetic action rendered possible by its vertical height, its masses in juxtaposition and contrary to each other.

This form of rock attracts to itself all the forces scattered in the winds, and exercises over the tempest a singular power of concentration.

Hence there is in the neighbourhood of these breakers a certain accentuation of storms.

It must be borne in mind that the wind is composite. The wind is believed to be simple; but it is by no means simple. Its power is not merely dynamic, it is chemical also; but this is not all, it is magnetic. Its effects are often inexplicable. The wind is as much electrical as aerial. Certain winds coincide with the *aurores boreales*. The wind blowing from the bank of the Aiguilles rolls the waves one hundred feet high; a fact observed with astonishment by Dumont-d’Urville. The corvette, he says, “knew not what to obey.”

In the south seas the waters will sometimes become inflated like an outbreak of immense tumours; and at such times the ocean becomes so terrible that the savages fly to escape the sight of it. The blasts in the north seas are different. They are mingled with sharp points of ice; and their gusts, unfit to breathe, will blow the sledges of the Esquimaux backwards in the snow. Other winds burn. The simoon of Africa is the typhoon of China and the samiel of India. Simoon, typhoon, and samiel, are believed to be the names of demons. They descend from the heights of the mountains. A storm vitrified the volcano of Toluca. This hot wind, a whirlwind of inky colour, rushing upon red clouds, is alluded to in the Vedas: "Behold the black god, who comes to steal the red cows." In all these facts we trace the presence of the electric mystery.

The wind indeed is full of it; so are the waves. The sea, too, is composite in its nature. Under its waves of water which we see, it has its waves of force which are invisible. Its constituents are innumerable. Of all the elements the ocean is the most indivisible and the most profound.

Endeavour to conceive this chaos so enormous that it dwarfs all other things to one level. It is the universal recipient, reservoir of germs of life, and mould of transformations. It amasses and then disperses, it accumulates and then sows, it devours and then creates. It receives all the waste and refuse waters of the earth, and converts them into treasure. It is solid in the iceberg, liquid in the wave, fluid in the estuary. Regarded as matter, it is a mass; regarded as a force, it is an abstraction. It equalises and unites all phenomena. It may be called the infinite in combination. By force and disturbance, it arrives at transparency. It dissolves all differences, and absorbs them into its own unity. Its elements are so numerous that it becomes identity. One of its drops is complete, and represents the whole. From the abundance of its tempests, it attains equilibrium. Plato beheld the mazy dances of the spheres. Strange fact, though not the less real, the ocean, in the vast terrestrial journey round the sun, becomes, with its flux and reflux, the balance of the globe.

In a phenomenon of the sea, all other phenomena are resumed. The sea is blown out of a waterspout as from a syphon; the storm observes the principle of the pump; the lightning issues from the sea as from the air. Aboard ships dull shocks are sometimes felt, and an odour of sulphur issues from the receptacles of chain cables. The ocean boils. "The devil has put the sea in his cauldron," said De Ruyter. In certain tempests, which characterise the equinoxes and the return to equilibrium of the prolific power of nature, vessels breasting the foam seem to give out a kind of fire, phosphoric lights chase each other along the rigging, so close sometimes to the sailors at their work that the latter stretch forth their hands and try to catch, as they fly, these birds of flame. After the great earthquake of Lisbon, a blast of hot air, as from a furnace, drove before it towards the city a wave sixty feet high. The oscillation of the ocean is closely related to the convulsions of the earth.

These immeasurable forces produce sometimes extraordinary inundations. At the end of the year 1864, one of the Maldive Islands, at a hundred leagues from the Malabar coast, actually foundered in the sea. It sunk to the bottom like a shipwrecked vessel. The fishermen who sailed from it in the morning, found nothing when they returned at night; scarcely could they distinguish their villages under the sea. On this occasion boats were the spectators of the wrecks of houses.

In Europe, where nature seems restrained by the presence of civilisation, such events are rare and are thought impossible. Nevertheless, Jersey and Guernsey originally formed part of Gaul, and at the moment while we are writing these lines, an equinoctial gale has demolished a great portion of the cliff of the Firth of Forth in Scotland.

Nowhere do these terrific forces appear more formidably conjoined than in the surprising strait known as the Lyse-Fiord. The Lyse-Fiord is the most terrible of all the gut rocks of the ocean. Their terrors are there complete. It is in the northern sea, near the inhospitable Gulf of Stavanger, and in the 59th degree of latitude. The water is black and heavy, and subject to intermitting storms. In this sea, and in the midst of this solitude, rises a great sombre street — a street for no human footsteps. None ever pass through there; no ship ever ventures in. It is a corridor ten leagues in length, between two rocky walls of three thousand feet in height. Such is the passage which presents an entrance to the sea. The defile has its elbows and angles like all these streets of the sea — never straight, having been formed by the irregular action of the water. In the Lyse-Fiord, the sea is almost always tranquil; the sky above is serene; the place terrible. Where is the wind? Not on high. Where is the thunder? Not in the heavens. The wind is under the sea; the lightnings within the rock. Now and then there is a convulsion of the water. At certain moments, when there is perhaps not a cloud in the sky, nearly half way up the perpendicular rock, at a thousand or fifteen hundred feet above the water, and rather on the southern than on the northern side, the rock suddenly thunders, lightnings dart forth, and then retire like those toys which lengthen out and spring back again in the hands of children. They contract and enlarge; strike the opposite cliff, re-enter the rock, issue forth again, recommence their play, multiply their heads and tips of flame, grow bristling with points, strike wherever they can, recommence again, and then are extinguished with a sinister abruptness. Flocks of birds fly wide in terror. Nothing is more mysterious than that artillery issuing out of the invisible. One cliff attacks the other, raining lightning blows from side to side. Their war concerns not man. It signals the ancient enmity of two rocks in the impassable gulf.

In the Lyse-Fiord, the wind whirls like the water in an estuary; the rock performs the function of the clouds; and the thunder breaks forth like volcanic fire. This strange defile is a voltaic pile; the plates of which are the double line of cliffs.

VI

A STABLE FOR THE HORSE

Gilliatt was sufficiently familiar with marine rocks to grapple in earnest with the Douvres. Before all, as we have just said, it was necessary to find a safe shelter for the barge.

The double row of reefs, which stretched in a sinuous form behind the Douvres, connected itself here and there with other rocks, and suggested the existence of blind passages and hollows opening out into the straggling way, and joining again to the principal defile like branches to a trunk.

The lower part of these rocks was covered with kelp, the upper part with lichens. The uniform level of the seaweed marked the line of the water at the height of the tide, and the limit of the sea in calm weather. The points which the water had not touched presented those silver and golden hues communicated to marine granite by the white and yellow lichen.

A crust of conoidical shells covered the rock at certain points, the dry rot of the granite.

At other points in the retreating angles, where fine sand had accumulated, ribbed on its surface rather by the wind than by the waves, appeared tufts of blue thistles.

In the indentations, sheltered from the winds, could be traced the little perforations made by the sea-urchin. This shelly mass of prickles, which moves about a living ball, by rolling on its spines, and the armour of which is composed of ten thousand pieces, artistically adjusted and welded together — the sea-urchin, which is popularly called, for some unknown reason, “Aristotle’s lantern,” wears away the granite with his five teeth, and lodges himself in the hole. It is in such holes that the samphire gatherers find them. They cut them in halves and eat them raw, like an oyster. Some steep their bread in the soft flesh. Hence its other name, “Sea-egg.”

The tips of the further reefs, left out of the water by the receding tide, extended close under the escarpment of “The Man” to a sort of creek, enclosed nearly on all sides by rocky walls. Here was evidently a possible harbourage. It had the form of a horse-shoe, and opened only on one side to the east wind, which is the least violent of all winds in that sea labyrinth.

The water was shut in there, and almost motionless. The shelter seemed comparatively safe. Gilliatt, moreover, had not much choice.

If he wished to take advantage of the low water, it was important to make haste.

The weather continued to be fine and calm. The insolent sea was for a while in a gentle mood.

Gilliatt descended, put on his shoes again, unmoored the cable, re-embarked, and pushed out into the water. He used the oars, coasting the side of the rock.

Having reached “The Man Rock,” he examined the entrance to the little creek.

A fixed, wavy line in the motionless sea, a sort of wrinkle, imperceptible to any eye but that of a sailor, marked the channel.

Gilliatt studied for a moment its lineament, almost indistinct under the water; then he held off a little in order to veer at ease, and steer well into channel; and suddenly with a stroke of the oars he entered the little bay.

He sounded.

The anchorage appeared to be excellent.

The sloop would be protected there against almost any of the contingencies of the season.

The most formidable reefs have quiet nooks of this sort. The ports which are thus found among the breakers are like the hospitality of the fierce Bedouin — friendly and sure.

Gilliatt placed the sloop as near as he could to “The Man,” but still far enough to escape grazing the rock; and he cast his two anchors.

That done, he crossed his arms, and reflected on his position.

The sloop was sheltered. Here was one problem solved. But another remained. Where could he now shelter himself?

He had the choice of two places: the sloop itself, with its corner of cabin, which was scarcely habitable, and the summit of “The Man Rock,” which was not difficult to scale.

From one or other of these refuges it was possible at low water, by jumping from rock to rock, to gain the passage between the Douvres where the Durande was fixed, almost without wetting the feet.

But low water lasts but a short while, and all the rest of the time he would be cut off either from his shelter or from the wreck by more than two hundred fathoms. Swimming among breakers is difficult at all times; if there is the least commotion in the sea it is impossible.

He was driven to give up the idea of shelter in the sloop or on “The Man.”

No resting-place was possible among the neighbouring rocks.

The summits of the lower ones disappeared twice a day beneath the rising tide.

The summits of the higher ones were constantly swept by the flakes of foam, and promised nothing but an inhospitable drenching.

No choice remained but the wreck itself.

Was it possible to seek refuge there?

Gilliatt hoped it might be.

VII

A CHAMBER FOR THE VOYAGER

Half-an-hour afterwards, Gilliatt having returned to the wreck, climbed to the deck, went below, and descended into the hold, completing the summary survey of his first visit.

By the help of the capstan he had raised to the deck of the Durande the package which he had made of the lading of the sloop. The capstan had worked well. Bars for turning it were not wanting. Gilliatt had only to take his choice among the heap of wreck.

He found among the fragments a chisel, dropped, no doubt, from the carpenter’s box, and which he added to his little stock of tools.

Besides this — for in poverty of appliances so complete everything counts for a little — he had his jack-knife in his pocket.

Gilliatt worked the whole day long on the wreck, clearing away, propping, arranging.

At nightfall he observed the following facts:

The entire wreck shook in the wind. The carcass trembled at every step he took. There was nothing stable or strong except the portion of the hull jammed between the rocks which contained the engine. There the beams were powerfully supported by the granite walls.

Fixing his home in the Durande would be imprudent. It would increase the weight; but far from adding to her burden, it was important to lighten it. To burden the wreck in any way was indeed the very contrary of what he wanted.

The mass of ruin required, in fact, the most careful management. It was like a sick man at the approach of dissolution. The wind would do sufficient to help it to its end.

It was, moreover, unfortunate enough to be compelled to work there. The amount of disturbance which the wreck would have to withstand would necessarily distress it, perhaps beyond its strength.

Besides, if any accident should happen in the night while Gilliatt was sleeping, he must necessarily perish with the vessel. No assistance was possible; all would be over. In order to help the shattered vessel, it was absolutely necessary to remain outside it.

How to be outside and yet near it, this was the problem.

The difficulty became more complicated as he considered it.

Where could he find a shelter under such conditions?

Gilliatt reflected.

There remained nothing but the two Douvres. They seemed hopeless enough.

From below, it was possible to distinguish upon the upper plateau of the Great Douvre a sort of protuberance.

High rocks with flattened summits, like the Great Douvre and “The Man,” are a sort of decapitated peaks. They abound among the mountains and in the ocean. Certain rocks, particularly those which are met with in the open sea, bear marks like half-felled trees. They have the appearance of having received blows from a hatchet. They have been subjected, in fact, to the blows of the gale, that indefatigable pioneer of the sea.

There are other still more profound causes of marine convulsions. Hence the innumerable bruises upon these primeval masses of granite. Some of these sea giants have their heads struck off.

Sometimes these heads, from some inexplicable cause, do not fall, but remain shattered on the summit of the mutilated trunk. This singularity is by no means rare. The Devil’s Rock, at Guernsey, and the Table, in the Valley of Anweiler, illustrate some of the most surprising features of this strange geological enigma.

Some such phenomena had probably fashioned the summit of the Great Douvre.

If the protuberance which could be observed on the plateau were not a natural irregularity in the stone, it must necessarily be some remaining fragment of the shattered summit.

Perhaps the fragment might contain some excavation — some hole into which a man could creep for cover. Gilliatt asked for no more.

But how could he reach the plateau? How could he scale that perpendicular wall, hard and polished as a pebble, half covered with the growth of glutinous confervæ, and having the slippery look of a soapy surface?

The ridge of the plateau was at least thirty feet above the deck of the Durande.

Gilliatt took out of his box of tools the knotted cord, hooked it to his belt by the grapnel, and set to work to scale the Little Douvre. The ascent became more difficult as he climbed. He had forgotten to take off his shoes, a fact which increased the difficulty. With great labour and straining, however, he reached the point. Safely arrived there, he raised himself and stood erect. There was scarcely room for his two feet. To make it his lodging would be difficult. A Stylite might have contented himself there; Gilliatt, more luxurious in his requirements, wanted something more commodious.

The Little Douvre, leaning towards the great one, looked from a distance as if it was saluting it, and the space between the Douvres, which was some score of feet below, was only eight or ten at the highest points.

From the spot to which he had climbed, Gilliatt saw more distinctly the rocky excrescence which partly covered the plateau of the Great Douvre.

This plateau rose three fathoms at least above his head.

A precipice separated him from it. The curved escarpment of the Little Douvre sloped away out of sight beneath him.

He detached the knotted rope from his belt, took a rapid glance at the dimensions of the rock, and slung the grapnel up to the plateau.

The grapnel scratched the rock, and slipped. The knotted rope with the hooks at its end fell down beneath his feet, swinging against the side of the little Douvre.

He renewed the attempt; slung the rope further, aiming at the granite protuberance, in which he could perceive crevices and scratches.

The cast was, this time, so neat and skilful, that the hooks caught.

He pulled from below. A portion of the rock broke away, and the knotted rope with its heavy iron came down once more, striking the escarpment beneath his feet.

He slung the grapnel a third time.

It did not fall.

He put a strain upon the rope; it resisted. The grapnel was firmly anchored.

The hooks had caught in some fracture of the plateau which he could not see.

It was necessary to trust his life to that unknown support.

He did not hesitate.

The matter was urgent. He was compelled to take the shortest route.

Moreover, to descend again to the deck of the Durande, in order to devise some other step, was impossible. A slip was probable, and a fall almost certain. It was easier to climb than to descend.

Gilliatt’s movements were decisive, as are those of all good sailors. He never wasted force. He always proportioned his efforts to the work in hand. Hence the prodigies of strength which he executed with ordinary muscles. His biceps were no more powerful than that of ordinary men; but his heart was firmer. He added, in fact, to strength which is physical, energy which belongs to the moral faculties.

The feat to be accomplished was appalling.

It was to cross the space between the two Douvres, hanging only by this slender line.

Oftentimes in the path of duty and devotedness, the figure of death rises before men to present these terrible questions:

Wilt thou do this? asks the shadow.

Gilliatt tested the cord again; the grappling-iron held firm.

Wrapping his left hand in his handkerchief, he grasped the knotted cord with his right hand, which he covered with his left; then stretching out one foot, and striking out sharply with the other against the rock, in order that the impetus might prevent the rope twisting, he precipitated himself from the height of the Little Douvre on to the escarpment of the great one.

The shock was severe.

There was a rebound.

His clenched fists struck the rocks in their turn; the handkerchief had loosened, and they were scratched; they had indeed narrowly escaped being crushed.

Gilliatt remained hanging there a moment dizzy.

He was sufficiently master of himself not to let go his hold of the cord.

A few moments passed in jerks and oscillations before he could catch the cord with his feet; but he succeeded at last.

Recovering himself, and holding the cord at last between his naked feet as with two hands, he gazed into the depth below.

He had no anxiety about the length of the cord, which had many a time served him for great heights. The cord, in fact, trailed upon the deck of the Durande.

Assured of being able to descend again, he began to climb hand over hand, and still clinging with his feet.

In a few moments he had gained the summit.

Never before had any creature without wings found a footing there. The plateau was covered in parts with the dung of birds. It was an irregular trapezium, a mass struck off from the colossal granitic prism of the Great Douvre. This block was hollowed in the centre like a basin — a work of the rain.

Gilliatt, in fact, had guessed correctly.

At the southern angle of the block, he found a mass of superimposed rocks, probably fragments of the fallen summit. These rocks, looking like a heap of giant paving-stones, would have left room for a wild beast, if one could have found its way there, to secrete himself between them. They supported themselves confusedly one against the other, leaving interstices like a heap of ruins. They formed neither grottoes nor caves, but the pile was full of holes like a sponge. One of these holes was large enough to admit a man.

This recess had a flooring of moss and a few tufts of grass. Gilliatt could fit himself in it as in a kind of sheath. The recess at its entrance was about two feet high. It contracted towards the bottom. Stone coffins sometimes have this form. The mass of rocks behind lying towards the south-west, the recess was sheltered from the showers, but was open to the cold north wind.

Gilliatt was satisfied with the place.

The two chief problems were solved; the sloop had a harbour, and he had found a shelter.

The chief merit of his cave was its accessibility from the wreck.

The grappling-iron of the knotted cord having fallen between two blocks, had become firmly hooked, but Gilliatt rendered it more difficult to give way by rolling a huge stone upon it.

He was now free to operate at leisure upon the Durande.

Henceforth he was at home.

The Great Douvre was his dwelling; the Durande was his workshop.

Nothing was more simple for him than going to and fro, ascending and descending.

He dropped down easily by the knotted cord on to the deck.

The day’s work was a good one, the enterprise had begun well; he was satisfied, and began to feel hungry.

He untied his basket of provisions, opened his knife, cut a slice of smoked beef, took a bite out of his brown loaf, drank a draught from his can of fresh water, and supped admirably.

To do well and eat well are two satisfactions. A full stomach resembles an easy conscience.

This supper was ended, and there was still before him a little more daylight. He took advantage of it to begin the lightening of the wreck — an urgent necessity.

He had passed part of the day in gathering up the fragments. He put on one side, in the strong compartment which contained the machine, all that might become of use to him, such as wood, iron, cordage, and canvas. What was useless he cast into the sea.

The cargo of the sloop hoisted on to the deck by the capstan, compact as he had made it, was an encumbrance. Gilliatt surveyed the species of niche, at a height within his reach, in the side of the Little Douvre. These natural closets, not shut in, it is true, are often seen in the rocks. It struck him that it was possible to trust some stores to this depôt, and he accordingly placed in the back of the recess his two boxes containing his tools and his clothing, and his two bags holding the rye-meal and the biscuit. In the front — a little too near the edge perhaps, but he had no other place — he rested his basket of provisions.

He had taken care to remove from the box of clothing his sheepskin, his loose coat with a hood, and his waterproof overalls.

To lessen the hold of the wind upon the knotted cord, he made the lower extremity fast to one of the riders of the Durande.

The Durande being much driven in, this rider was bent a good deal, and it held the end of the cord as firmly as a tight hand.

There was still the difficulty of the upper end of the cord. To control the lower part was well, but at the summit of the escarpment at the spot where the knotted cord met the ridge of the plateau, there was reason to fear that it would be fretted and worn away by the sharp angle of the rock.

Gilliatt searched in the heap of rubbish in reserve, and took from it some rags of sail-cloth, and from a bunch of old cables he pulled out some strands of rope-yarn with which he filled his pockets.

A sailor would have guessed that he intended to bind with these pieces of sail-cloth and ends of yarn the part of the knotted rope upon the edge of the rock, so as to preserve it from all friction — an operation which is called “keckling.”

Having provided himself with these things, he drew on his overalls over his legs, put on his waterproof coat over his jacket, drew its hood over his red cap, hung the sheepskin round his neck by the two legs, and clothed in this complete panoply, he grasped the cord, now firmly fixed to the side of the Great Douvre, and mounted to the assault of that sombre citadel in the sea.

In spite of his scratched hands, Gilliatt easily regained the summit.

The last pale tints of sunset were fading in the sky. It was night upon the sea below. A little light still lingered upon the height of the Douvre.

Gilliatt took advantage of this remains of daylight to bind the knotted rope. He wound it round again and again at the part which passed over the edge of the rock, with a bandage of several thicknesses of canvas strongly tied at every turn. The whole resembled in some degree the padding which actresses place upon their knees, to prepare them for the agonies and supplications of the fifth act.

This binding completely accomplished, Gilliatt rose from his stooping position.

For some moments, while he had been busied in his task, he had had a confused sense of a singular fluttering in the air.

It resembled, in the silence of the evening, the noise which an immense bat might make with the beating of its wings.

Gilliatt raised his eyes.

A great black circle was revolving over his head in the pale twilight sky.

Such circles are seen in pictures round the heads of saints. These, however, are golden on a dark ground, while the circle around Gilliatt was dark upon a pale ground. The effect was strange. It spread round the Great Douvre like the aureole of night.

The circle drew nearer, then retired; grew narrower, and then spread wide again.

It was an immense flight of gulls, seamews, and cormorants; a vast multitude of affrighted sea birds.

The Great Douvre was probably their lodging, and they were coming to rest for the night. Gilliatt had taken a chamber in their home. It was evident that their unexpected fellow-lodger disturbed them.

A man there was an object they had never beheld before.

Their wild flutter continued for some time.

They seemed to be waiting for the stranger to leave the place.

Gilliatt followed them dreamily with his eyes.

The flying multitude seemed at last to give up their design. The circle suddenly took a spiral form, and the cloud of sea birds came down upon “The Man Rock” at the extremity of the group, where they seemed to be conferring and deliberating.

Gilliatt, after settling down in his alcove of granite, and covering a stone for a pillow for his head, could hear the birds for a long time chattering one after the other, or croaking, as if in turns.

Then they were silent, and all were sleeping — the birds upon their rock, Gilliatt upon his.

VIII

IMPORTUNÆQUE VOLUCRES

Gilliatt slept well; but he was cold, and this awoke him from time to time. He had naturally placed his feet at the bottom, and his head at the entrance to his cave. He had not taken the precaution to remove from his couch a number of angular stones, which did not by any means conduce to sleep.

Now and then he half-opened his eyes.

At intervals he heard loud noises. It was the rising tide entering the caverns of the rocks with a sound like the report of a cannon.

All the circumstances of his position conspired to produce the effect of a vision. Hallucinations seemed to surround him. The vagueness of night increased this effect; and Gilliatt felt himself plunged into some region of unrealities. He asked himself if all were not a dream?

Then he dropped to sleep again; and this time, in a veritable dream, found himself at the Bû de la Rue, at the Bravées, at St. Sampson. He heard Déruchette singing; he was among realities. While he slept he seemed to wake and live; when he awoke again he appeared to be sleeping.

In truth, from this time forward he lived in a dream.

Towards the middle of the night a confused murmur filled the air. Gilliatt had a vague consciousness of it even in his sleep. It was perhaps a breeze arising.

Once, when awakened by a cold shiver, he opened his eyes a little wider than before. Clouds were moving in the zenith; the moon was flying through the sky, with one large star following closely in her footsteps.

Gilliatt’s mind was full of the incidents of his dreams. The wild outlines of things in the darkness were exaggerated by this confusion with the impressions of his sleeping hours.

At daybreak he was half-frozen; but he slept soundly.

The sudden daylight aroused him from a slumber which might have been dangerous. The alcove faced the rising sun.

Gilliatt yawned, stretched himself, and sprang out of his sleeping place.

His sleep had been so deep that he could not at first recall the circumstances of the night before.

By degrees the feeling of reality returned, and he began to think of breakfast.

The weather was calm; the sky cool and serene. The clouds were gone; the night wind had cleared the horizon, and the sun rose brightly. Another fine day was commencing. Gilliatt felt joyful.

He threw off his overcoat and his leggings; rolled them up in the sheepskin with the wool inside, fastened the roll with a length of rope-yarn, and pushed it into the cavern for a shelter in case of rain.

This done, he made his bed — an operation which consisted in removing the stones which had annoyed him in the night.

His bed made, he slid down the cord on to the deck of the Durande, and approached the niche where he had placed his basket of provisions. As it was very near the edge, the wind in the night had swept it down, and rolled it into the sea.

It was evident that it would not be easy to recover it. There was a spirit of mischief and malice in a wind which had sought out his basket in that position.

It was the commencement of hostilities. Gilliatt understood the token.

To those who live in a state of rude familiarity with the sea, it becomes natural to regard the wind as an individuality, and the rocks as sentient beings.

Nothing remained but the biscuit and the rye-meal, except the shell-fish, on which the shipwrecked sailor had supported a lingering existence upon "The Man Rock."

It was useless to think of subsisting by net or line fishing. Fish are naturally averse to the neighbourhood of rocks. The drag and bow net fishers would waste their labour among the breakers, the points of which would be destructive only to their nets.

Gilliatt breakfasted on a few limpets which he plucked with difficulty from the rocks. He narrowly escaped breaking his knife in the attempt.

While he was making his spare meal, he was sensible of a strange disturbance on the sea. He looked around.

It was a swarm of gulls and seamews which had just alighted upon some low rocks, and were beating their wings, tumbling over each other, screaming, and shrieking. All were swarming noisily upon the same point. This horde with beaks and talons were evidently pillaging something.

It was Gilliatt's basket.

Rolled down upon a sharp point by the wind, the basket had burst open. The birds had gathered round immediately. They were carrying off in their beaks all sorts of fragments of provisions. Gilliatt recognised from the distance his smoked beef and his salted fish.

It was their turn now to be aggressive. The birds had taken to reprisals. Gilliatt had robbed them of their lodging, they deprived him of his supper.

IX

THE ROCK, AND HOW GILLIATT USED IT

A week passed.

Although it was in the rainy season no rain fell, a fact for which Gilliatt felt thankful. But the work he had entered upon surpassed, in appearance at least, the power of human hand or skill. Success appeared so improbable that the attempt seemed like madness.

It is not until a task is fairly grappled with that its difficulties and perils become fully manifest. There is nothing like making a commencement for making evident how difficult it will be to come to the end. Every beginning is a struggle against resistance. The first step is an exorable undeceiver. A difficulty which we come to touch pricks like a thorn.

Gilliatt found himself immediately in the presence of obstacles.

In order to raise the engine of the Durande from the wreck in which it was three-fourths buried, with any chance of success — in order to accomplish a salvage in such a place and in such a season, it seemed almost necessary to be a legion of men. Gilliatt was alone; a complete apparatus of carpenters' and engineers' tools and implements were wanted. Gilliatt had a saw, a hatchet, a chisel, and a hammer. He wanted both a good workshop and a good shed; Gilliatt had not a roof to cover him. Provisions, too, were necessary, but he had not even bread.

Any one who could have seen Gilliatt working on the rock during all that first work might have been puzzled to determine the nature of his operations. He seemed to be no longer thinking either of the Durande or the two Douvres. He was busy only among the breakers: he seemed absorbed in saving the smaller parts of the shipwreck. He took advantage of every high tide to strip the reefs of everything which the shipwreck had distributed among them. He went from rock to rock, picking up whatever the sea had scattered — tatters of sail-cloth, pieces of iron, splinters of panels, shattered planking, broken yards — here a beam, there a chain, there a pulley.

At the same time he carefully surveyed all the recesses of the rocks. To his great disappointment none were habitable. He had suffered from the cold in the night, where he lodged between the stones on the summit of the rock, and he would gladly have found some better refuge.

Two of those recesses were somewhat extensive. Although the natural pavement of rock was almost everywhere oblique and uneven it was possible to stand upright, and even to walk within them. The wind and the rain wandered there at will, but the highest tides did not reach them. They were near the Little Douvre, and were approachable at any time. Gilliatt decided that one should serve him as a storehouse, the other as a forge.

With all the sail, rope-bands, and all the reef-earrings he could collect, he made packages of the fragments of wreck, tying up the wood and iron in bundles, and the canvas in parcels. He lashed all these together carefully. As the rising tide approached these packages, he began to drag them across the reefs to his storehouse. In the hollow of the rocks he had found a top rope, by means of which he had been able to haul even the large pieces of timber. In the same manner he dragged from the sea the numerous portions of chains which he found scattered among the breakers.

Gilliatt worked at these tasks with astonishing activity and tenacity. He accomplished whatever he attempted — nothing could withstand his ant-like perseverance.

At the end of the week he had gathered into this granite warehouse of marine stores, and ranged into order, all this miscellaneous and shapeless mass of salvage. There was a corner for the tacks of sails and a corner for sheets. Bow-lines were not mixed with halliards; parrels were arranged according to their number of holes. The coverings of rope-yarn, unwound from the broken anchorings, were tied in bunches; the dead-eyes without pulleys were separated from the tackle-blocks. Belaying-pins, bullseyes, preventer-shrouds, down-hauls, snatch-blocks, pendents, kevels, trusses, stoppers, sailbooms, if they were not completely damaged by the storm, occupied different compartments. All the cross-beams, timber-work, uprights, stanchions, mast-heads, binding-strakes, portlids, and clamps, were heaped up apart. Wherever it was possible, he had fixed the fragments of planks, from the vessel’s bottom, one in the other. There was no confusion between reef-points and nippers of the cable, nor of crow’s-feet with towlines; nor of pulleys of the small with pulleys of the large ropes; nor of fragments from the waist with fragments from the stern. A place had been reserved for a portion of the cat-harpings of the Durande, which had supported the shrouds of the topmast and the futtock-shrouds. Every portion had its place. The entire wreck was there classed and ticketed. It was a sort of chaos in a storehouse.

A stay-sail, fixed by huge stones, served, though torn and damaged, to protect what the rain might have injured.

Shattered as were the bows of the wreck, he had succeeded in saving the two cat-heads with their three pulley-blocks.

He had found the bowsprit too, and had had much trouble in unrolling its gammoning; it was very hard and tight, having been, according to custom, made by the help of the windlass, and in dry weather. Gilliatt, however, persevered until he had detached it, this thick rope promising to be very useful to him.

He had been equally successful in discovering the little anchor which had become fast in the hollow of a reef, where the receding tide had left it uncovered.

In what had been Tangrouille's cabin he had found a piece of chalk, which he preserved carefully. He reflected that he might have some marks to make.

A fire-bucket and several pails in pretty good condition completed this stock of working materials.

All that remained of the store of coal of the Durande he carried into the warehouse.

In a week this salvage of débris was finished; the rock was swept clean, and the Durande was lightened. Nothing remained now to burden the hull except the machinery.

The portion of the fore-side bulwarks which hung to it did not distress the hull. The mass hung without dragging, being partly sustained by a ledge of rock. It was, however, large and broad, and heavy to drag, and would have encumbered his warehouse too much. This bulwarking looked something like a boat-builder's stocks. Gilliatt left it where it was.

He had been profoundly thoughtful during all this labour. He had sought in vain for the figure-head — the "doll," as the Guernsey folks called it, of the Durande. It was one of the things which the waves had carried away for ever. Gilliatt would have given his hands to find it — if he had not had such peculiar need of them at that time.

At the entrance to the storehouse and outside were two heaps of refuse — a heap of iron good for forging, and a heap of wood good for burning.

Gilliatt was always at work at early dawn. Except his time of sleep, he did not take a moment of repose.

The wild sea birds, flying hither and thither, watched him at his work.

X

THE FORGE

The warehouse completed, Gilliatt constructed his forge.

The other recess which he had chosen had within it a species of passage like a gallery in a mine of pretty good depth. He had had at first an idea of making this his lodging, but the draught was so continuous and so persevering in this passage that he had been compelled to give it up. This current of air, incessantly renewed, first gave him the notion of the forge. Since it could not be his chamber, he was determined that this cabin should be his smithy. To bend obstacles to our purposes is a great step towards triumph. The wind was Gilliatt's enemy. He had set about making it his servant.

The proverb applied to certain kinds of men— "Fit for everything, good for nothing" — may also be applied to the hollows of rocks. They give no advantages gratuitously. On one side we find a hollow fashioned conveniently in the shape of a bath; but it allows the water to run away through a fissure. Here is a rocky chamber, but without a roof; here a bed of moss, but oozy with wet; here an arm-chair, but one of hard stone.

The forge which Gilliatt intended was roughly sketched out by nature; but nothing could be more troublesome than to reduce this rough sketch to manageable shape, to transform this cavern into a laboratory and smith's shop. With three or four large rocks, shaped like a funnel, and ending in a narrow fissure, chance had constructed there a species of vast ill-shapen blower, of very different power to those huge old forge bellows of fourteen feet long, which poured out at every breath ninety-eight thousand inches of air. This was quite a different sort of construction. The proportions of the hurricane cannot be definitely measured.

This excess of force was an embarrassment. The incessant draught was difficult to regulate.

The cavern had two inconveniences; the wind traversed it from end to end; so did the water.

This was not the water of the sea, but a continual little trickling stream, more like a spring than a torrent.

The foam, cast incessantly by the surf upon the rocks and sometimes more than a hundred feet in the air, had filled with sea water a natural cave situated among the high rocks overlooking the excavation. The overflowings of this reservoir caused, a little behind the escarpment, a fall of water of about an inch in breadth, and descending four or five fathoms. An occasional contribution from the rains also helped to fill the reservoir. From time to time a passing cloud dropped a shower into the rocky basin, always overflowing. The water was brackish, and unfit to drink, but clear. This rill of water fell in graceful drops from the extremities of the long marine grasses, as from the ends of a length of hair.

He was struck with the idea of making this water serve to regulate the draught in the cave. By the means of a funnel made of planks roughly and hastily put together to form two or three pipes, one of which was fitted with a valve, and of a large tub arranged as a lower reservoir, without checks or counterweight, and completed solely by air-tight stuffing above and air-holes below, Gilliatt, who, as we have already said, was handy at the forge and at the mechanic's bench, succeeded in constructing, instead of the forge-bellows, which he did not possess, an apparatus less perfect than what is known now-a-days by the name of a "cagniardelle," but less rude than what the people of the Pyrenees anciently called a "trompe."

He had some rye-meal, and he manufactured with it some paste. He had also some white rope, which picked out into tow. With this paste and tow, and some bits of wood, he stopped all the crevices of the rock, leaving only a little air passage made of a powder-flask which he had found aboard the Durande, and which had served for loading the signal gun. This powder-flask was directed horizontally to a large stone, which Gilliatt made the hearth of the forge. A stopper made of a piece of tow served to close it in case of need.

After this, he heaped up the wood and coal upon the hearth, struck his steel against the bare rock, caught a spark upon a handful of loose tow, and having ignited it, soon lighted his forge fire.

He tried the blower: it worked well.

Gilliatt felt the pride of a Cyclops: he was the master of air, water, and fire. Master of the air; for he had given a kind of lungs to the wind, and changed the rude draught into a useful blower. Master of water, for he had converted the little cascade into a "trompe." Master of fire, for out of this moist rock he had struck a flame.

The cave being almost everywhere open to the sky, the smoke issued freely, blackening the curved escarpment. The rocks which seemed destined for ever to receive only the white foam, became now familiar with the blackening smoke.

Gilliatt selected for an anvil a large smooth round stone, of about the required shape and dimensions. It formed a base for the blows of his hammer; but one that might fly and was very dangerous. One of the extremities of this block, rounded and ending in a point, might, for want of anything better, serve instead of a conoid bicorn; but the other kind of bicorn of the pyramidal form was wanting. It was the ancient stone anvil of the Troglodytes. The surface, polished by the waves, had almost the firmness of steel.

He regretted not having brought his anvil. As he did not know that the Durande had been broken in two by the tempest, he had hoped to find the carpenter's chest and all his tools generally kept in the forehold. But it was precisely the fore-part of the vessel which had been carried away.

These two excavations which he had found in the rock were contiguous. The warehouse and the forge communicated with each other.

Every evening, when his work was ended, he supped on a little biscuit, moistened in water, a sea-urchin or a crab, or a few *châtaignes de mer*, the only food to be found among those rocks; and shivering like his knotted cord, mounted again to sleep in his cell upon the Great Douvre.

The very materialism of his daily occupation increased the kind of abstraction in which he lived. To be steeped too deeply in realities is in itself a cause of visionary moods. His bodily labour, with its infinite variety of details, detracted nothing from the sensation of stupor which arose from the strangeness of his position and his work. Ordinary bodily fatigue is a thread which binds man to the earth; but the very peculiarity of the enterprise he was engaged in kept him in a sort of ideal twilight region. There were times when he seemed to be striking blows with his hammer in the clouds. At other moments his tools appeared to him like arms. He had a singular feeling, as if he was repressing or providing against some latent danger of attack. Untwisting ropes, unravelling threads of yarn in a sail, or propping up a couple of beams, appeared to him at such times like fashioning engines of war. The thousand minute pains which he took about his salvage operations produced at last in his mind the effect of precautions against aggressions little concealed, and easy to anticipate. He did not know the words which express the ideas, but he perceived them. His instincts became less and less those of the worker; his habits more and more those of the savage man.

His business there was to subdue and direct the powers of nature. He had an indistinct perception of it. A strange enlargement of his ideas!

Around him, far as eye could reach, was the vast prospect of endless labour wasted and lost. Nothing is more disturbing to the mind than the contemplation of the diffusion of forces at work in the unfathomable and illimitable space of the ocean. The mind tends naturally to seek the object of these forces. The unceasing movement in space, the unwearying sea, the clouds that seem ever hurrying somewhere, the vast mysterious prodigality of effort, all this is a problem. Whither does this perpetual movement tend? What do these winds construct? What do these giant blows build up? These howlings, shocks, and sobbings of the storm, what do they end in? and what is the business of this tumult? The ebb and flow of these questionings is eternal, as the flux and reflux of the sea itself. Gilliatt could answer for himself; his work he knew, but the agitation which surrounded him far and wide at all times perplexed him confusedly with its eternal questionings. Unknown to himself, mechanically, by the mere pressure of external things, and without any other effect than a strange, unconscious bewilderment, Gilliatt, in this dreamy mood, blended his own toil somehow with the prodigious wasted labour of the sea-waves. How, indeed, in that position, could he escape the influence of that mystery of the dread, laborious ocean? how do other than meditate, so far as meditation was possible, upon the vacillation of the waves, the perseverance of the foam, the imperceptible wearing down of rocks, the furious beatings of the four winds? How terrible that perpetual recommencement, that ocean bed, those Danaïdes-like clouds, all that travail and weariness for no end!

For no end? Not so! But for what? O Thou Infinite Unknown, Thou only knowest!

XI

DISCOVERY

A rock near the coast is sometimes visited by men; a rock in mid-ocean never. What object could any one have there? No supplies can be drawn thence; no fruit-trees are there, no pasturage, no beasts, no springs of water fitted for man’s use. It stands aloft, a rock with its steep sides and summits above water, and its sharp points below. Nothing is to be found there but inevitable shipwreck.

This kind of rocks, which in the old sea dialect were called *Isolés*, are, as we have said, strange places. The sea is alone there; she works her own will. No token of terrestrial life disturbs her. Man is a terror to the sea; she is shy of his approach, and hides from him her deeds. But she is bolder among the lone sea rocks. The everlasting soliloquy of the waves is not troubled there. She labours at the rock, repairs its damage, sharpens its peaks, makes them rugged or renews them. She pierces the granite, wears down the soft stone, and denudes the hard; she rummages, dismembers, bores, perforates, and grooves; she fills the rock with cells, and makes it sponge-like, hollows out the inside, or sculptures it without. In that secret mountain which is hers, she makes to herself caves, sanctuaries, palaces. She has her splendid and monstrous vegetation, composed of floating plants which bite, and of monsters which take root; and she hides away all this terrible magnificence in the twilight of her deeps. Among the isolated rocks no eye watches over her; no spy embarrasses her movements. It is there that she develops at liberty her mysterious side, which is inaccessible to man. Here she keeps all strange secretions of life. Here that the unknown wonders of the sea are assembled.

Promontories, forelands, capes, headlands, breakers, and shoals are veritable constructions. The geological changes of the earth are trifling compared with the vast operations of the ocean. These breakers, these habitations in the sea, these pyramids, and spouts of the foam are the practicers of a mysterious art which the author of this book has somewhere called “the Art of Nature.” Their style is known by its vastness. The effects of chance seem here design. Its works are multiform. They abound in the mazy entanglement of the rock-coral groves, the sublimity of the cathedral, the extravagance of the pagoda, the amplitude of the mountain, the delicacy of the jeweller’s work, the horror of the sepulchre. They are filled with cells like the wasps’ nest, with dens like menageries, with subterranean passages like the haunts of moles, with dungeons like Bastiles, with ambuscades like a camp. They have their doors, but they are barricaded; their columns, but they are shattered; their towers, but they are tottering; their bridges, but they are broken. Their compartments are unaccommodating; these are fitted for the birds only, those only for fish. They are impassable. Their architectural style is variable and inconsistent; it regards or disregards at will the laws of equilibrium, breaks off, stops short, begins in the form of an archivolt, and ends in an architrave, block on block. Enceladus is the mason. A wondrous science of dynamics exhibits here its problems ready solved. Fearful overhanging blocks threaten, but fall not: the human mind cannot guess what power supports their bewildering masses. Blind entrances, gaps, and ponderous suspensions multiply and vary infinitely. The laws which regulate this Babel baffle human induction. The great unknown architect plans nothing, but succeeds in all. Rocks massed together in confusion form a monstrous monument, defy reason, yet maintain equilibrium. Here is something more than strength; it is eternity. But order is wanting. The wild tumult of the waves seems to have passed into the wilderness of stone. It is like a tempest petrified and fixed for ever. Nothing is more impressive than that wild architecture; always standing, yet always seeming to fall; in which everything appears to give support, and yet to withdraw it. A struggle between opposing lines has resulted in the construction of an edifice, filled with traces of the efforts of those old antagonists, the ocean and the storm.

This architecture has its terrible masterpieces, of which the Douvres rock was one.

The sea had fashioned and perfected it with a sinister solicitude. The snarling waters licked it into shape. It was hideous, treacherous, dark, full of hollows.

It had a complete system of submarine caverns ramifying and losing themselves in unfathomed depths. Some of the orifices of this labyrinth of passages were left exposed by the low tides. A man might enter there, but at his risk and peril.

Gilliatt determined to explore all these grottoes, for the purpose of his salvage labour. There was not one which was not repulsive. Everywhere about the caverns that strange aspect of an abattoir, those singular traces of slaughter, appeared again in all the exaggeration of the ocean. No one who has not seen in excavations of this kind, upon the walls of everlasting granite, these hideous natural frescoes, can form a notion of their singularity.

These pitiless caverns, too, were false and sly. Woe betide him who would loiter there. The rising tide filled them to their roofs.

Rock limpets and edible mosses abounded among them.

They were obstructed by quantities of shingle, heaped together in their recesses. Some of their huge smooth stones weighed more than a ton. They were of every proportion, and of every hue; but the greater part were blood coloured. Some, covered with a hairy and glutinous seaweed, seemed like large green moles boring a way into the rock.

Several of the caverns terminated abruptly in the form of a demi-cupola. Others, main arteries of a mysterious circulation, lengthened out in the rock in dark and tortuous fissures. They were the alleys of the submarine city; but they gradually contracted from their entrances, and at length left no way for a man to pass. Peering in by the help of a lighted torch, he could see nothing but dark hollows dripping with moisture.

One day, Gilliatt, exploring, ventured into one of these fissures. The state of the tide favoured the attempt. It was a beautiful day of calm and sunshine. There was no fear of any accident from the sea to increase the danger.

Two necessities, as we have said, compelled him to undertake these explorations. He had to gather fragments of wreck and other things to aid him in his labour, and to search for crabs and crayfish for his food. Shell-fish had begun to fail him on the rocks.

The fissure was narrow, and the passage difficult. Gilliatt could see daylight beyond. He made an effort, contorted himself as much as he could, and penetrated into the cave as far as he was able.

He had reached, without suspecting it, the interior of the rock, upon the point of which Clubin had steered the Durande. Though abrupt and almost inaccessible without, it was hollowed within. It was full of galleries, pits, and chambers, like the tomb of an Egyptian king. This network of caverns was one of the most complicated of all that labyrinth, a labour of the water, the undermining of the restless sea. The branches of the subterranean maze probably communicated with the sea without by more than one issue, some gaping at the level of the waves, the others profound and invisible. It was near here, but Gilliatt knew it not, that Clubin had dived into the sea.

In this crocodile cave — where crocodiles, it is true, were not among the dangers — Gilliatt wound about, clambered, struck his head occasionally, bent low and rose again, lost his footing and regained it many times, advancing laboriously. By degrees the gallery widened; a glimmer of daylight appeared, and he found himself suddenly at the entrance to a cavern of a singular kind.

XII

THE INTERIOR OF AN EDIFICE UNDER THE SEA

The gleam of daylight was fortunate.

One step further, and Gilliatt must have fallen into a pool, perhaps without bottom. The waters of these cavern pools are so cold and paralysing as to prove fatal to the strongest swimmers.

There is, moreover, no means of remounting or of hanging on to any part of their steep walls.

He stopped short. The crevice from which he had just issued ended in a narrow and slippery projection, a species of corbel in the peaked wall. He leaned against the side and surveyed it.

He was in a large cave. Over his head was a roofing not unlike the inside of a vast skull, which might have been imagined to have been recently dissected. The dripping ribs of the striated indentations of the roof seemed to imitate the branching fibres and jagged sutures of the bony cranium. A stony ceiling and a watery floor. The rippled waters between the four walls of the cave were like wavy paving tiles. The grotto was shut in on all sides. Not a window, not even an air-hole visible. No breach in the wall, no crack in the roof. The light came from below and through the water, a strange, sombre light.

Gilliatt, the pupils of whose eyes had contracted during his explorations of the dusky corridor, could distinguish everything about him in the pale glimmer.

He was familiar, from having often visited them, with the caves of Plémont in Jersey, the Creux-Maillé at Guernsey, the Boutiques at Sark; but none of these marvellous caverns could compare with the subterranean and submarine chamber into which he had made his way.

Under the water at his feet he could see a sort of drowned arch. This arch, a natural ogive, fashioned by the waves, was glittering between its two dark and profound supports. It was by this submerged porch that the daylight entered into the cavern from the open sea. A strange light shooting upward from a gulf.

The glimmer spread out beneath the waters like a large fan, and was reflected on the rocks. Its direct rays, divided into long, broad shafts, appeared in strong relief against the darkness below, and becoming brighter or more dull from one rock to another, looked as if seen here and there through plates of glass. There was light in that cave it is true; but it was the light that was unearthly. The beholder might have dreamed that he had descended in some other planet. The glimmer was an enigma, like the glaucous light from the eye-pupil of a Sphinx. The whole cave represented the interior of a death’s-head of enormous proportions, and of a strange splendour. The vault was the hollow of the brain, the arch the mouth; the sockets of the eyes were wanting. The cavern, alternately swallowing and rendering up the flux and reflux through its mouth wide opened to the full noonday without, seemed to drink in the light and vomit forth bitterness; a type of some beings intelligent and evil. The light, in traversing this inlet through the vitreous medium of the sea-water, became green, like a ray of starlight from Aldebaran. The water, filled with the moist light, appeared like a liquid emerald. A tint of aqua-marina of marvellous delicacy spread a soft hue throughout the cavern. The roof, with its cerebral lobes, and its rampant ramifications, like the fibres of nerves, gave out a tender reflection of chrysoprase. The ripples reflected on the roof were falling in order and dissolving again incessantly, and enlarging and contracting their glittering scales in a mysterious and mazy dance. They gave the beholder an impression of something weird and spectral: he wondered what prey secured, or what expectation about to be realised, moved with a joyous thrill this magnificent network of living fire. From the projections of the vault, and the angles of the rock, hung lengths of delicate fibrous plants, bathing their roots probably through the granite in some upper pool of water, and distilling from their silky ends one after the other, a drop of water like a pearl. These drops fell in the water now and then with a gentle splash. The effect of the scene was singular. Nothing more beautiful could be imagined; nothing more mournful could anywhere be found.

It was a wondrous palace, in which death sat smiling and content.

XIII

WHAT WAS SEEN THERE; AND WHAT PERCEIVED DIMLY

A place of shade, which yet was dazzling to the eyes — such was this surprising cavern.

The beating of the sea made itself felt throughout the cavern. The oscillation without raised and depressed the level of the waters within, with the regularity of respiration. A mysterious spirit seemed to fill this great organism, as it swelled and subsided in silence.

The water had a magical transparency, and Gilliatt distinguished at various depths submerged recesses, and surfaces of jutting rocks ever of a deeper and a deeper green. Certain dark hollows, too, were there, probably too deep for soundings.

On each side of the submarine porch, rude elliptical arches, filled with shallows, indicated the position of small lateral caves, low alcoves of the central cavern, accessible, perhaps, at certain tides. These openings had roofs in the form of inclined planes, and at angles more or less acute. Little sandy beaches of a few feet wide, laid bare by the action of the water, stretched inward, and were lost in these recesses.

Here and there seaweeds of more than a fathom in length undulated beneath the water, like the waving of long tresses in the wind; and there were glimpses of a forest of sea plants.

Above and below the surface of the water, the wall of the cavern from top to bottom — from the vault down to the depth at which it became invisible — was tapestried with that prodigious efflorescence of the sea, rarely perceived by human eyes, which the old Spanish navigators called *praderias del mar*. A luxuriant moss, having all the tints of the olive, enlarged and concealed the protuberances of granite. From all the jutting points swung the thin fluted strips of varech, which sailors use as their barometers. The light breath which stirred in the cavern waved to and fro their glossy bands.

Under these vegetations there showed themselves from time to time some of the rarest *bijoux* of the casket of the ocean; ivory shells, strombi, purple-fish, univalves, struthiolaires, turriculated cerites. The bell-shaped limpet shells, like tiny huts, were everywhere adhering to the rocks, distributed in settlements, in the alleys between which prowled oscabrions, those beetles of the sea. A few large pebbles found their way into the cavern; shell-fish took refuge there. The crustacea are the grandees of the sea, who, in their lacework and embroidery, avoid the rude contact of the pebbly crowd. The glittering heap of their shells, in certain spots under the wave, gave out singular irradiations, amidst which the eye caught glimpses of confused azure and gold, and mother-of-pearl, of every tint of the water.

Upon the side of the cavern, a little above the water-line, a magnificent and singular plant, attaching itself, like a fringe, to the border of seaweed, continued and completed it. This plant, thick, fibrous, inextricably intertwined, and almost black, exhibited to the eye large confused and dusky festoons, everywhere dotted with innumerable little flowers of the colour of lapis-lazuli. In the water they seemed to glow like small blue flames. Out of the water they were flowers; beneath it they were sapphires. The water rising and inundating the basement of the grotto clothed with these plants, seemed to cover the rock with gems.

At every swelling of the wave these flowers increased in splendour, and at every subsidence grew dull again. So it is with the destiny of man; aspiration is life, the outbreathing of the spirit is death.

One of the marvels of the cavern was the rock itself. Forming here a wall, there an arch, and here again a pillar or pilaster, it was in places rough and bare, and sometimes close beside, was wrought with the most delicate natural carving. Strange evidences of mind mingled with the massive stolidity of the granite. It was the wondrous art-work of the ocean. Here a sort of panel, cut square, and covered with round embossments in various positions, simulated a vague bas-relief. Before this sculpture, with its obscure designs, a man might have dreamed of Prometheus roughly sketching for Michael Angelo. It seemed as if that great genius with a few blows of his mallet could have finished the indistinct labours of the giant. In other places the rock was damasked like a Saracen buckler, or engraved like a Florentine vase. There were portions which appeared like Corinthian brass, then like arabesques, as on the door of a mosque; then like Runic stones with obscure and mystic prints of claws. Plants with twisted creepers and tendrils, crossing and recrossing upon the groundwork of golden lichens, covered it with filigree. The grotto resembled in some wise a Moorish palace. It was a union of barbarism and of goldsmith’s work, with the imposing and rugged architecture of the elements.

The magnificent stains and moulderings of the sea covered, as with velvet, the angles of granite. The escarpments were festooned with large-flowered bindweed, sustaining itself with graceful ease, and ornamenting the walls as by intelligent design. Wall-pellitories showed their strange clusters in tasteful arrangement. The wondrous light which came from beneath the water, at once a submarine twilight and an Elysian radiance, softened down and blended all harsh lineaments. Every wave was a prism. The outlines of things under these rainbow-tinted undulations produced the chromatic effects of optical glasses made too convex. Solar spectra shot through the waters. Fragments of rainbows seemed floating in that transparent dawn. Elsewhere — in other corners — there was discernible a kind of moonlight in the water. Every kind of splendour seemed to mingle there, forming a strange sort of twilight. Nothing could be more perplexing or enigmatical than the sumptuous beauties of this cavern. Enchantment reigned over all. The fantastic vegetation, the rude masonry of the place seemed to harmonise. It was a happy marriage this, between these strange wild things. The branches seeming but to touch one another clung closely each to each. The stern rock and the pale flower met in a passionate embrace. Massive pillars had capitals and entwining wreaths of delicate garlands, that quivered through every fibre, suggestive of fairy fingers tickling the feet of a Behemoth, and the rock upheld the plant, and the plant clasped the rock with unnatural joy of attraction.

The effect produced by the mysterious reconciliation of these strange forms was of a supreme and inexpressible beauty.

The works of nature, not less than the works of genius, contain the absolute, and produce an impression of awe. Something unexpected about them imperiously insists on our mental submission; we are conscious of a premeditation beyond our human scope, and at no time are they more startling than when we suddenly become aware of the beauty that is mingled with their terror.

This hidden grotto was, if we may use the expression, siderealised. There was everything in it to surprise and overwhelm. An apocalyptic light illuminated this crypt. One could not tell if that which the eyes looked upon was a reality, for reality bore the impress of the impossible. One could see, and touch, and know that one was standing there, and yet it was difficult to believe in it all.

Was it daylight which entered by this casement beneath the sea? Was it indeed water which trembled in this dusky pool? Were not these arched roofs and porches fashioned out of sunset clouds to imitate a cavern to men’s eyes? What stone was that beneath the feet? Was not this solid shaft about to melt and pass into thin air? What was that cunning jewellery of glittering shells, half seen beneath the wave? How far away were life, and the green earth, and human faces? What strange enchantment haunted that mystic twilight? What blind emotion, mingling its sympathies with the uneasy restlessness of plants beneath the wave?

At the extremity of the cavern, which was oblong, rose a Cyclopean archivolte, singularly exact in form. It was a species of cave within a cave, of tabernacle within a sanctuary. Here, behind a sheet of bright verdure, interposed like the veil of a temple, arose a stone out of the waves, having square sides, and bearing some resemblance to an altar. The water surrounded it in all parts. It seemed as if a goddess had just descended from it. One might have dreamed there that some celestial form beneath that crypt or upon that altar dwelt for ever pensive in naked beauty, but grew invisible at the approach of mortals. It was hard to conceive that majestic chamber without a vision within. The day-dream of the intruder might evoke again the marvellous apparition. A flood of chaste light falling upon white shoulders scarcely seen; a forehead bathed with the light of dawn; an Olympian visage oval-shaped; a bust full of mysterious grace; arms modestly drooping; tresses unloosened in the aurora; a body delicately modelled of pure whiteness, half-wrapped in a sacred cloud, with the glance of a virgin; a Venus rising from the sea, or Eve issuing from chaos; such was the dream which filled the mind.

It seemed improbable that no phantom figure haunted this abode. Some woman’s form, the embodiment of a star, had no doubt but shortly left the altar. Enveloped in this atmosphere of mute adoration the mind pictured an Amphitryon, a Tethys, some Diana capable of passion, some idealistic figure formed of light, looking softly down in the surrounding dusk. It was she who had left behind in the cave this perfumed luminosity, an emanation from her star-body. The dazzling phantom was no longer visible, she was only revealed by the invisible, and the sense of her presence lingered, setting the whole being voluptuously a-quiver. The goddess had departed, but divinity remained.

The beauty of the recess seemed made for this celestial presence. It was for the sake of this deity, this fairy of the pearl caverns, this queen of the Zephyrs, this Grace born of the waves, it was for her — as the mind, at least, imagined — that this subterranean dwelling had been thus religiously walled in, so that nothing might ever trouble the reverent shadows and the majestic silence round about that divine spirit.

Gilliatt, who was a kind of seer amid the secrets of nature, stood there musing, and sensible of confused emotions.

Suddenly, at a few feet below him, in the delightful transparence of that water like liquid jewels, he became sensible of the approach of something of mystic shape. A species of long ragged band was moving amidst the oscillation of the waves. It did not float, but darted about of its own will. It had an object; was advancing somewhere rapidly. The object had something of the form of a jester's bauble with points, which hung flabby and undulating. It seemed covered with a dust incapable of being washed away by the water. It was more than horrible; it was foul. The beholder felt that it was something monstrous. It was a living thing; unless, indeed, it were but an illusion. It seemed to be seeking the darker portion of the cavern, where at last it vanished. The heavy shadows grew darker as its sinister form glided into them, and disappeared.

BOOK II

THE LABOUR

I

THE RESOURCES OF ONE WHO HAS NOTHING

The cavern did not easily part with its explorers. The entry had been difficult; going back was more difficult still. Gilliatt, however, succeeded in extricating himself; but he did not return there. He had found nothing of what he was in quest of, and he had not the time to indulge curiosity.

He put the forge in operation at once. Tools were wanting; he set to work and made them.

For fuel he had the wreck; for motive force the water; for his bellows the wind; for his anvil a stone; for art his instinct; for power his will.

He entered with ardour upon his sombre labours.

The weather seemed to smile upon his work. It continued to be dry and free from equinoctial gales. The month of March had come, but it was tranquil. The days grew longer. The blue of the sky, the gentleness of all the movements of the scene, the serenity of the noontide, seemed to exclude the idea of mischief. The waves danced merrily in the sunlight. A Judas kiss is the first step to treachery; of such caresses the ocean is prodigal. Her smile, like that of woman's sometimes, cannot be trusted.

There was little wind. The hydraulic bellows worked all the better for that reason. Much wind would have embarrassed rather than aided it. Gilliatt had a saw; he manufactured for himself a file. With the saw he attacked the wood; with the file the metal. Then he availed himself of the two iron hands of the smith — the pincers and the pliers. The pincers gripe, the pliers handle; the one is like the closed hand, the other like the fingers. By degrees he made for himself a number of auxiliaries, and constructed his armour. With a piece of hoop-wood he made a screen for his forge-fire.

One of his principal labours was the sorting and repair of pulleys. He mended both the blocks and the sheaves of tackle. He cut down the irregularities of all broken joists, and reshaped the extremities. He had, as we have said, for the necessities of his carpentry, a quantity of pieces of wood, stored away, and arranged according to the forms, the dimensions, and the nature of their grain; the oak on one side, the pine on the other; the short pieces like riders, separated from the straight pieces like binding strakes. This formed his reserve of supports and levers, of which he might stand in great need at any moment.

Any one who intends to construct hoisting tackle ought to provide himself with beams and small cables. But that is not sufficient. He must have cordage. Gilliatt restored the cables, large and small. He frayed out the tattered sails, and succeeded in converting them into an excellent yarn, of which he made twine. With this he joined the ropes. The joins, however, were liable to rot. It was necessary, therefore, to hasten to make use of these cables. He had only been able to make white tow, for he was without tar.

The ropes mended, he proceeded to repair the chains.

Thanks to the lateral point of the stone anvil, which served the part of the conoid bicorn, he was able to forge rings rude in shape but strong. With these he fastened together the severed lengths of chains, and made long pieces.

To work at a forge without assistance is something more than troublesome. He succeeded nevertheless. It is true that he had only to forge and shape articles of comparatively small size, which he was able to handle with the pliers in one hand, while he hammered with the other.

He cut into lengths the iron bars of the captain’s bridge on which Clubin used to pass to and fro from paddle-box to paddle-box giving his orders; forged at one extremity of each piece a point, and at the other a flat head. By this means he manufactured large nails of about a foot in length. These nails, much used in pontoon making, are useful in fixing anything in rocks.

What was his object in all these labours? We shall see.

He was several times compelled to renew the blade of his hatchet and the teeth of his saw. For renotching the saw he had manufactured a three-sided file.

Occasionally he made use of the capstan of the Durande. The hook of the chain broke: he made another.

By the aid of his pliers and pincers, and by using his chisel as a screwdriver, he set to work to remove the two paddle-wheels of the vessel; an object which he accomplished. This was rendered practicable by reason of a peculiarity in their construction. The paddle-boxes which covered them served him to stow them away. With the planks of these paddle-boxes, he made two cases in which he deposited the two paddles, piece by piece, each part being carefully numbered.

His lump of chalk became precious for this purpose.

He kept the two cases upon the strongest part of the wreck.

When these preliminaries were completed, he found himself face to face with the great difficulty. The problem of the engine of the Durande was now clearly before him.

Taking the paddle-wheels to pieces had proved practicable. It was very different with the machinery.

In the first place, he was almost entirely ignorant of the details of the mechanism. Working thus blindly he might do some irreparable damage. Then, even in attempting to dismember it, if he had ventured on that course, far other tools would be necessary than such as he could fabricate with a cavern for a forge, a wind-draught for bellows, and a stone for an anvil. In attempting, therefore, to take to pieces the machinery, there was the risk of destroying it.

The attempt seemed at first sight wholly impracticable.

The apparent impossibility of the project rose before him like a stone wall, blocking further progress.

What was to be done?

II

WHEREIN SHAKESPEARE AND ÆSCHYLUS MEET

Gilliatt had a notion.

Since the time of the carpenter-mason of Salbris, who, in the sixteenth century, in the dark ages of science — long before Amontons had discovered the first law of electricity, or Lahire the second, or Coulomb the third — without other helper than a child, his son, with ill-fashioned tools, in the chamber of the great clock of La Charité-sur-Loire, resolved at one stroke five or six problems in statics and dynamics inextricably intervolved like the wheels in a block of carts and waggons — since the time of that grand and marvellous achievement of the poor workman, who found means, without breaking a single piece of wire, without throwing one of the teeth of the wheels out of gear, to lower in one piece, by a marvellous simplification, from the second story of the clock-tower to the first, that massive monitor of the hours, made all of iron and brass, "large as the room in which the man watches at night from the tower," with its motion, its cylinders, its barrels, its drum, its hooks, and its weights, the barrel of its spring steel-yard, its horizontal pendulum, the holdfasts of its escapement, its reels of large and small chains, its stone weights, one of which weighed five hundred pounds, its bells, its peals, its jacks that strike the hours — since the days, I say, of the man who accomplished this miracle, and of whom posterity knows not even the name — nothing that could be compared with the project which Gilliatt was meditating had ever been attempted.

The ponderousness, the delicacy, the involvement of the difficulties were not less in the machinery of the Durande than in the clock of La Charité-sur-Loire.

The untaught mechanic had his helpmate — his son; Gilliatt was alone.

A crowd gathered together from Meung-sur-Loire, from Nevers, and even from Orleans, able at time of need to assist the mason of Salbris, and to encourage him with their friendly voices. Gilliatt had around him no voices but those of the wind; no crowd but the assemblage of waves.

There is nothing more remarkable than the timidity of ignorance, unless it be its temerity. When ignorance becomes daring, she has sometimes a sort of compass within herself — the intuition of the truth, clearer oftentimes in a simple mind than in a learned brain.

Ignorance invites to an attempt. It is a state of wonderment, which, with its concomitant curiosity, forms a power. Knowledge often enough disconcerts and makes over-cautious. Gama, had he known what lay before him, would have recoiled before the Cape of Storms. If Columbus had been a great geographer, he might have failed to discover America.

The second successful climber of Mont Blanc was the savant, Saussure; the first the goatherd, Balmat.

These instances I admit are exceptions, which detract nothing from science, which remains the rule. The ignorant man may discover; it is the learned who invent.

The sloop was still at anchor in the creek of “The Man Rock,” where the sea left it in peace. Gilliatt, as will be remembered, had arranged everything for maintaining constant communication with it. He visited the sloop and measured her beam carefully in several parts, but particularly her midship frame. Then he returned to the Durande and measured the diameter of the floor of the engine-room. This diameter, of course, without the paddles, was two feet less than the broadest part of the deck of his bark. The machinery, therefore, might be put aboard the sloop.

But how could it be got there?

III

GILLIATT'S MASTERPIECE COMES TO THE RESCUE OF THAT OF LETHIERRY

Any fisherman who had been mad enough to loiter in that season in the neighbourhood of Gilliatt's labours about this time would have been repaid for his hardihood, by a singular sight between the two Douvres.

Before his eyes would have appeared four stout beams, at equal distances, stretching from one Douvre to the other, and apparently forced into the rock, which is the firmest of all holds. On the Little Douvre, their extremities were laid and buttressed upon the projections of rock. On the Great Douvre, they had been driven in by blows of a hammer, by the powerful hand of a workman standing upright upon the beam itself. These supports were a little longer than the distance between the rocks. Hence the firmness of their hold; and hence, also, their slanting position. They touched the Great Douvre at an acute, and the Little Douvre at an obtuse angle. Their inclination was only slight; but it was unequal, which was a defect. But for this defect, they might have been supposed to be prepared to receive the planking of a deck. To these four beams were attached four sets of hoisting apparatus, each having its pendent and its tackle-fall, with the bold peculiarity of having the tackle-blocks with two sheaves at one extremity of the beam, and the simple pulleys at the opposite end. This distance, which was too great not to be perilous, was necessitated by the operations to be effected. The blocks were firm, and the pulleys strong. To this tackle-gear cables were attached, which from a distance looked like threads; while beneath this apparatus of tackle and carpentry, in the air, the massive hull of the Durande seemed suspended by threads.

She was not yet suspended, however. Under the cross beams, eight perpendicular holes had been made in the deck, four on the port, and four on the starboard side of the engine; eight other holes had been made beneath them through the keel. The cables, descending vertically from the four tackle-blocks, through the deck, passed out at the keel, and under the machinery, re-entered the ship by the holes on the other side, and passing again upward through the deck, returned, and were wound round the beams. Here a sort of jigger-tackle held them in a bunch bound fast to a single cable, capable of being directed by one arm. The single cable passed over a hook, and through a dead-eye, which completed the apparatus, and kept it in check. This combination compelled the four tacklings to work together, and acting as a complete restraint upon the suspending powers, became a sort of dynamical rudder in the hand of the pilot of the operation, maintaining the movements in equilibrium. The ingenious adjustment of this system of tackling had some of the simplifying qualities of the Weston pulley of these times, with a mixture of the antique polyspaston of Vitruvius. Gilliatt had discovered this, although he knew nothing of the dead Vitruvius or of the still unborn Weston. The length of the cables varied, according to the unequal declivity of the cross-beams. The ropes were dangerous, for the untarred hemp was liable to give way. Chains would have been better in this respect, but chains would not have passed well through the tackle-blocks.

The apparatus was full of defects; but as the work of one man, it was surprising. For the rest, it will be understood that many details are omitted which would render the construction perhaps intelligible to practical mechanics, but obscure to others.

The top of the funnel passed between the two beams in the middle.

Gilliatt, without suspecting it, had reconstructed, three centuries later, the mechanism of the Salbris carpenter — a mechanism rude and incorrect, and hazardous for him who would dare to use it.

Here let us remark, that the rudest defects do not prevent a mechanism from working well or ill. It may limp, but it moves. The obelisk in the square of St. Peter’s at Rome is erected in a way which offends against all the principles of statics. The carriage of the Czar Peter was so constructed that it appeared about to overturn at every step; but it travelled onward for all that. What deformities are there in the machinery of Marly! Everything that is heterodox in hydraulics. Yet it did not supply Louis XIV. any the less with water.

Come what might, Gilliatt had faith. He had even anticipated success so confidently as to fix in the bulwarks of the sloop, on the day when he measured its proportions, two pairs of corresponding iron rings on each side, exactly at the same distances as the four rings on board the Durande, to which were attached the four chains of the funnel.

He had in his mind a very complete and settled plan. All the chances being against him, he had evidently determined that all the precautions at least should be on his side.

He did some things which seemed useless; a sign of attentive premeditation.

His manner of proceeding would, as we have said, have puzzled an observer, even though familiar with mechanical operations.

A witness of his labour who had seen him, for example, with enormous efforts, and at the risk of breaking his neck, driving with blows of his hammer eight or ten great nails which he had forged into the base of the two Douvres at the entrance of the defile between them, would have had some difficulty in understanding the object of these nails, and would probably have wondered what could be the use of all that trouble.

If he had then seen him measuring the portion of the fore bulwark which had remained, as we have described it, hanging on by the wreck, then attaching a strong cable to the upper edge of that portion, cutting away with strokes of his hatchet the dislocated fastenings which held it, then dragging it out of the defile, pushing the lower part by the aid of the receding tide, while he dragged the upper part; finally, by great labour, fastening with the cable this heavy mass of planks and piles wider than the entrance of the defile itself, with the nails driven into the base of the Little Douvre, the observer would perhaps have found it still more difficult to comprehend, and might have wondered why Gilliatt, if he wanted for the purpose of his operations to disencumber the space between the two rocks of this mass, had not allowed it to fall into the sea, where the tide would have carried it away.

Gilliatt had probably his reasons.

In fixing the nails in the basement of the rocks, he had taken advantage of all the cracks in the granite, enlarged them where needful, and driven in first of all wedges of wood, in which he fixed the nails. He made a rough commencement of similar preparations in the two rocks which rose at the other extremity of the narrow passage on the eastern side. He furnished with plugs of wood all the crevices, as if he desired to keep these also ready to hold nails or clamps; but this appeared to be a simple precaution, for he did not use them further. He was compelled to economise, and only to use his materials as he had need, and at the moment when the necessity for them came. This was another addition to his numerous difficulties.

As fast as one labour was accomplished another became necessary. Gilliatt passed without hesitation from task to task, and resolutely accomplished his giant strides.

IV

SUB RE

The aspect of the man who accomplished all these labours became terrible. Gilliatt in his multifarious tasks expended all his strength at once, and regained it with difficulty.

Privations on the one hand, lassitude on the other, had much reduced him. His hair and beard had grown long. He had but one shirt which was not in rags. He went about bare-footed, the wind having carried away one of his shoes and the sea the other. Fractures of the rude and dangerous stone anvil which he used had left small wounds upon his hands and arms, the marks of labour. These wounds, or rather scratches, were superficial; but the keen air and the salt sea irritated them continually.

He was generally hungry, thirsty, and cold.

His store of fresh water was gone; his rye-meal was used or eaten. He had nothing left but a little biscuit.

This he broke with his teeth, having no water in which to steep it.

By little and little, and day by day, his powers decreased.

The terrible rocks were consuming his existence.

How to obtain food was a problem; how to get drink was a problem; how to find rest was a problem.

He ate when he was fortunate enough to find a crayfish or a crab; he drank when he chanced to see a sea-bird descend upon a point of rock; for on climbing up to the spot he generally found there a hollow with a little fresh water. He drank from it after the bird; sometimes with the bird; for the gulls and seamews had become accustomed to him, and no longer flew away at his approach. Even in his greatest need of food he did not attempt to molest them. He had, as will be remembered, a superstition about birds. The birds on their part — now that his hair was rough and wild and his beard long — had no fear of him. The change in his face gave them confidence; he had lost resemblance to men, and taken the form of the wild beast.

The birds and Gilliatt, in fact, had become good friends. Companions in poverty, they helped each other. As long as he had had any meal, he had crumbled for them some little bits of the cakes he made. In his deeper distress they showed him in their turn the places where he might find the little pools of water.

He ate the shell-fish raw. Shell-fish help in a certain degree to quench the thirst. The crabs he cooked. Having no kettle, he roasted them between two stones made red-hot in his fire, after the manner of the savages of the Feroe islands.

Meanwhile signs of the equinoctial season had begun to appear. There came rain — an angry rain. No showers or steady torrents, but fine, sharp, icy, penetrating points which pierced to his skin through his clothing, and to his bones through his skin. It was a rain which yielded little water for drinking, but which drenched him none the less.

Chary of assistance, prodigal of misery — such was the character of these rains. During one week Gilliatt suffered from them all day and all night.

At night, in his rocky recess, nothing but the overpowering fatigue of his daily work enabled him to get sleep. The great sea-gnats stung him, and he awakened covered with blisters.

He had a kind of low fever, which sustained him; this fever is a succour which destroys. By instinct he chewed the mosses, or sucked the leaves of wild cochlearia, scanty tufts of which grew in the dry crevices of the rocks. Of his suffering, however, he took little heed. He had no time to spare from his work to the consideration of his own privations. The rescue of the machinery of the Durande was progressing well. That sufficed for him.

Every now and then, for the necessities of his work, he jumped into the water, swam to some point, and gained a footing again. He simply plunged into the sea and left it, as a man passes from one room in his dwelling to another.

His clothing was never dry. It was saturated with rain water, which had no time to evaporate, and with sea water, which never dries. He lived perpetually wet.

Living in wet clothing is a habit which may be acquired. The poor groups of Irish people — old men, mothers, girls almost naked, and infants — who pass the winter in the open air, under the snow and rain, huddled together, sometimes at the corners of houses in the streets of London, live and die in this condition.

To be soaked with wet, and yet to be thirsty: Gilliatt grew familiar with this strange torture. There were times when he was glad to suck the sleeve of his loose coat.

The fire which he made scarcely warmed him. A fire in open air yields little comfort. It burns on one side, and freezes on the other.

Gilliatt often shivered even while sweating over his forge.

Everywhere about him rose resistance amidst a terrible silence. He felt himself the enemy of an unseen combination. There is a dismal *non possumus* in nature. The inertia of matter is like a sullen threat. A mysterious persecution environed him. He suffered from heats and shiverings. The fire ate into his flesh; the water froze him; feverish thirst tormented him; the wind tore his clothing; hunger undermined the organs of the body. The oppression of all these things was constantly exhausting him. Obstacles silent, immense, seemed to converge from all points, with the blind irresponsibility of fate, yet full of a savage unanimity. He felt them pressing inexorably upon him. No means were there of escaping from them. His sufferings produced the impression of some living persecutor. He had a constant sense of something working against him, of a hostile form ever present, ever labouring to circumvent and to subdue him. He could have fled from the struggle; but since he remained, he had no choice but to war with this impenetrable hostility. He asked himself what it was. It took hold of him, grasped him tightly, overpowered him, deprived him of breath. The invisible persecutor was destroying him by slow degrees. Every day the oppression became greater, as if a mysterious screw had received another turn.

His situation in this dreadful spot resembled a duel, in which a suspicion of some treachery haunts the mind of one of the combatants.

Now it seemed a coalition of obscure forces which surrounded him. He felt that there was somewhere a determination to be rid of his presence. It is thus that the glacier chases the loitering ice-block.

Almost without seeming to touch him this latent coalition had reduced him to rags; had left him bleeding, distressed, and, as it were, *hors de combat*, even before the battle. He laboured, indeed, not the less — without pause or rest; but as the work advanced, the workman himself lost ground. It might have been fancied that Nature, dreading his bold spirit, adopted the plan of slowly undermining his bodily power. Gilliatt kept his ground, and left the rest to the future. The sea had begun by consuming him; what would come next?

The double Douvres — that dragon made of granite, and lying in ambush in mid-ocean — had sheltered him. It had allowed him to enter, and to do his will; but its hospitality resembled the welcome of devouring jaws.

The desert, the boundless surface, the unfathomable space around him and above, so full of negatives to man’s will; the mute, inexorable determination of phenomena following their appointed course; the grand general law of things, implacable and passive; the ebbs and flows; the rocks themselves, dark Pleiades whose points were each a star amid vortices, a centre of an irradiation of currents; the strange, indefinable conspiracy to stifle with indifference the temerity of a living being; the wintry winds, the clouds, and the beleaguering waves enveloped him, closed round him slowly, and in a measure shut him in, and separated him from companionship, like a dungeon built up by degrees round a living man. All against him; nothing for him; he felt himself isolated, abandoned, enfeebled, sapped, forgotten. His storehouse empty, his tools broken or defective; he was tormented with hunger and thirst by day, with cold by night. His sufferings had left him with wounds and tatters, rags covering sores, torn hands, bleeding feet, wasted limbs, pallid cheeks, and eyes bright with a strange light; but this was the steady flame of his determination.

The virtue of a man is betrayed by his eyes. How much of the man there is in us may be read in their depths. We make ourselves known by the light that gleams beneath our brows. The petty natures wink at us, the larger send forth flashes. If there is no brilliancy under the lids, there is no thought in the brain, no love in the heart. Those who love desire, and those who desire sparkle and flash. Determination gives a fire to the glance, a magnificent fire that consumes all timid thoughts.

It is the self-willed ones who are sublime. He who is only brave, has but a passing fit, he who is only valiant has temperament and nothing more, he who is courageous has but one virtue. He who persists in the truth is the grand character. The secret of great hearts may be summed up in the word: Perseverando. Perseverance is to courage what the wheel is to the lever; it is the continual renewing of the centre of support. Let the desired goal be on earth or in heaven, only make for the goal. Everything is in that; in the first case one is a Columbus, in the second a god. Not to allow conscience to argue or the will to fail — this is the way to suffering and glory. In the world of ethics to fall does not exclude the possibility of soaring, rather does it give impetus to flight. The mediocrities allow themselves to be dissuaded by the specious obstacles — the great ones never. To perish is their perhaps, to conquer their conviction. You may propose many good reasons to the martyr why he should not allow himself to be stoned to death. Disdain of every reasonable objection begets that sublime victory of the vanquished which we call martyrdom.

All his efforts seemed to tend to the impossible. His success was trifling and slow. He was compelled to expend much labour for very little results. This it was that gave to his struggle its noble and pathetic character.

That it should have required so many preparations, so much toil, so many cautious experiments, such nights of hardship, and such days of danger, merely to set up four beams over a shipwrecked vessel, to divide and isolate the portion that could be saved, and to adjust to that wreck within a wreck four tackle-blocks with their cables was only the result of his solitary labour. Fate had decreed him the work, and necessity obliged him to carry it out.

That solitary position Gilliatt had more than accepted; he had deliberately chosen it. Dreading a competitor, because a competitor might have proved a rival, he had sought for no assistance. The overwhelming enterprise, the risk, the danger, the toil multiplied by itself, the possible destruction of the salvor in his work, famine, fever, nakedness, distress — he had chosen all these for himself! Such was his selfishness. He was like a man placed in some terrible chamber which is being slowly exhausted of air. His vitality was leaving him by little and little. He scarcely perceived it.

Exhaustion of the bodily strength does not necessarily exhaust the will. Faith is only a secondary power; the will is the first. The mountains, which faith is proverbially said to move, are nothing beside that which the will can accomplish. All that Gilliatt lost in vigour, he gained in tenacity. The destruction of the physical man under the oppressive influence of that wild surrounding sea, and rock, and sky, seemed only to reinvigorate his moral nature.

Gilliatt felt no fatigue; or, rather, would not yield to any. The refusal of the mind to recognise the failings of the body is in itself an immense power.

He saw nothing, except the steps in the progress of his labours.

His object — now seeming so near attainment — wrapped him in perpetual illusions.

He endured all this suffering without any other thought than is comprised in the word “Forward.” His work flew to his head; the strength of the will is intoxicating. Its intoxication is called heroism.

He had become a kind of Job, having the ocean for the scene of his sufferings. But he was a Job wrestling with difficulty, a Job combating and making head against afflictions; a Job conquering! a combination of Job and Prometheus, if such names are not too great to be applied to a poor sailor and fisher of crabs and crayfish.

V

SUB UMBRA

Sometimes in the night-time Gilliatt woke and peered into the darkness.

He felt a strange emotion.

His eyes were opened upon the black night; the situation was dismal; full of disquietude.

There is such a thing as the pressure of darkness.

A strange roof of shadow; a deep obscurity, which no diver can explore; a light mingled with that obscurity, of a strange, subdued, and sombre kind; floating atoms of rays, like a dust of seeds or of ashes; millions of lamps, but no illumining; a vast sprinkling of fire, of which no man knows the secret; a diffusion of shining points, like a drift of sparks arrested in their course; the disorder of the whirlwind, with the fixedness of death; a mysterious and abyssmal depth; an enigma, at once showing and concealing its face; the Infinite in its mask of darkness — these are the synonyms of night. Its weight lies heavily on the soul of man.

This union of all mysteries — the mystery of the Cosmos and the mystery of Fate — oppresses human reason.

The pressure of darkness acts in inverse proportion upon different kinds of natures. In the presence of night man feels his own incompleteness. He perceives the dark void and is sensible of infirmity. It is like the vacancy of blindness. Face to face with night, man bends, kneels, prostrates himself, crouches on the earth, crawls towards a cave, or seeks for wings. Almost always he shrinks from that vague presence of the Infinite Unknown. He asks himself what it is; he trembles and bows the head. Sometimes he desires to go to it.

To go whither?

He can only answer, “Yonder.”

But what is that? and what is there?

This curiosity is evidently forbidden to the spirit of man; for all around him the roads which bridge that gulf are broken up or gone. No arch exists for him to span the Infinite. But there is attraction in forbidden knowledge, as in the edge of the abyss. Where the footstep cannot tread, the eye may reach; where the eye can penetrate no further, the mind may soar. There is no man, however feeble or insufficient his resources, who does not essay. According to his nature he questions or recoils before that mystery. With some it has the effect of repressing; with others it enlarges the soul. The spectacle is sombre, indefinite.

Is the night calm and cloudless? It is then a depth of shadow. Is it stormy? It is then a sea of cloud. Its limitless deeps reveal themselves to us, and yet baffle our gaze: close themselves against research, but open to conjecture. Its innumerable dots of light only make deeper the obscurity beyond. Jewels, scintillations, stars; existences revealed in the unknown universes; dread defiances to man's approach; landmarks of the infinite creation; boundaries there, where there are no bounds; sea-marks impossible, and yet real, numbering the fathoms of those infinite deeps. One microscopic glittering point; then another; then another; imperceptible, yet enormous. Yonder light is a focus; that focus is a star; that star is a sun; that sun is a universe; that universe is nothing. For all numbers are as zero in the presence of the Infinite.

These worlds, which yet are nothing, exist. Through this fact we feel the difference which separates the *being nothing* from the *not to be*.

The inaccessible joined to the inexplicable, such is the universe. From the contemplation of the universe is evolved a sublime phenomenon: the soul growing vast through its sense of wonder. A reverent fear is peculiar to man; the beasts know no such fear.

His intelligence becomes conscious in this august terror of its own power and its own weakness.

Darkness has unity, hence arises horror; at the same time it is complex, and hence terror. Its unity weighs on the spirit and destroys all desire of resistance. Its complexity causes us to look around on all sides; apparently we have reason to fear sudden happenings. We yield and yet are on guard. We are in presence of the whole, hence submission; and of the many, hence defiance.

The unity of darkness contains a multiple, a mysterious plurality — visible in matter, realised in thought. Silence rules all; another reason for watchfulness.

Night — and he who writes this has said it elsewhere — is the right and normal condition of that special part of creation to which we belong. Light, brief of duration here as throughout space, is but the nearness of a star. This universal, prodigious night does not fulfil itself, without friction, and all such friction in such a mechanism means what we call evil. We feel this darkness to be evil, a latent denial of divine order, the implicit blasphemy of the real rebelling against the ideal. Evil complicates, by one knows not what hydra-headed monstrosity, the vast, cosmic whole.

Everywhere it arises and resists.

It is the tempest, and hinders the hastening ship; it is chaos, and trammels the birth of a world. Good is one; evil is ubiquitous. Evil dislocates the logic of Life. It causes the bird to devour the fly and the comet to destroy the planet. Evil is a blot on the page of creation.

The darkness of night is full of vertiginous uncertainty.

Whoso would sound its depths is submerged, and struggles therein.

What fatigue to be compared to this contemplation of shadows. It is the study of annihilation.

There is no sure hold on which the soul may rest. There are ports of departure, and no havens for arrival. The interlacing of contradictory solutions; all the branches of doubt seen at a glance; the ramifications of phenomena budding limitlessly from some undefined impulse; laws intersecting each other; an incomprehensible promiscuity causing the mineral to become vegetable; the vegetable to rise to higher life; thought to gather weight; love to shine and gravitation to attract; the immense range presented to view by all questions, extending itself into the limitless obscurity; the half seen, suggesting the unknown; the cosmic correlation appearing clearly, not to sight but to intelligence, in the vast, dim space; the invisible become visible — these are the great overshadowing! Man lives beneath it. He is ignorant of detail, but he carries, in such proportion as he is able to bear, the weight of the monstrous whole. This obsession prompted the astronomy of the Chaldean shepherds. Involuntary revelations flow from creation; hints of science fall from it unconsciously and are absorbed by the ignorant. Every solitary, impregnated in this mysterious way, becomes, without being aware of it, a natural philosopher.

The darkness is indivisible. It is inhabited. Inhabited by the changeless absolute; inhabited also by change. Action exists there, disquieting thought! An awful creative will works out its phases. Premeditations, Powers, fore-ordained Destinies, elaborate there together an incommensurable work. A life of horror and terror is hidden therein. There are vast evolutions of suns; the stellar family, the planetary family; zodiacal pollen; the *Quid Divinum* of currents; effluvia, polarisations, and attractions; there are embraces and antagonisms; a magnificent flux and reflux of universal antithesis; the imponderable, free-floating around fixed centres; there is the sap of globes and light beyond globes; the wandering atom, the scattered germ, the processes of fecundity, meetings for union and for combat; unimagined profusion, distances which are as a dream, vertiginous orbits, the rush of worlds into the incalculable; marvels following each other in the obscurity. One mechanism works throughout in the breath of fleeing spheres, and the wheels that we know are turning. The sage conjectures; the ignorant man believes and trembles. These things exist and yet are hidden; they are inexpugnable, beyond reach, beyond approach.

We are convinced and oppressed — we feel, we know not what dark evidence within us; we realise nothing, but are crushed by the impalpable.

All is incomprehensible, but nothing is unintelligible.

And add to all that, the tremendous question: Is this immanent universe a Being?

We exist beneath the shadow. We look; we listen. And meanwhile the dark earth rolls onward. The flowers are conscious of this tremendous motion; the one opens at eleven in the evening and the other at five in the morning. Astounding sense of law! And in other depths of wonder, the drop of water is a world; the infusoria breed; animalculæ display gigantic fecundity, the imperceptible reveals its grandeur, immensity manifests itself, in an inverse sense; there are algæ that produce in an hour thirteen hundred millions of their kind. Every enigma is propounded in one. The irreducible is before us. Hence we are constrained to some kind of faith. An involuntary belief is the result. But belief does not ensure peace of mind. Faith has an extraordinary desire to take shape. Hence religions. Nothing is so overwhelming as a formless faith.

And despite of thought or desire or inward resistance, to look at the darkness is to fall into profound and wondering meditation. What can we make of these phenomena! How should we act beneath their united forces? To divide such weight of oppression is impossible. What reverie can follow all these mystic vistas? What abstruse revelations arise, stammering, and are obscure from their very mass, as a hesitating speech. Darkness is silence, but such a silence suggests everything. One majestic thought is the result: God — God is the irrepressible idea that springs within man’s soul. Syllogisms, feuds, negations, systems, religions cannot destroy it. This idea is affirmed by the whole dark universe. Yet unrest is everywhere in fearful immanence. The wondrous correlation of forces is manifested in the upholding of the balanced darkness. The universe is suspended and nothing falls. Incessant and immeasurable changes operate without accident or destruction. Man participates in the constant changes, and in experiencing such he names them Destiny. But where does destiny begin? And where does nature end? What difference is there between an event and a season? between a sorrow and a rainfall? between a virtue and a star? An hour, is it not a rolling wave? The wheels of creation revolve mechanically regardless of man. The starry sky is a vision of wheels, pendulums, and counterpoise.

He who contemplates it cannot but ponder upon it.

It is the whole reality and yet the whole abstraction. And nothing more. We are in prison and at the mercy of the darkness, and no evasion is possible.

We are an integral part of the working of this unknown whole; and we feel the mystery within us fraternising with the mystery beyond us. Hence the sublimity of Death. What anguish! And yet what bliss to belong to the Infinite, and through the sense of the Infinite to recognise our inevitable immortality, the possibility of an eternity; to grasp amid this prodigious deluge of universal life, the persistent, imperishable *Me*; to look at the stars and say, The living soul within me is akin to you; to gaze into darkness and cry, I am as unfathomable as thou! Such immensity is of night, and, added to solitude, weighed heavily on Gilliatt’s mind.

Did he understand it? No.

Did he feel it? Yes.

All these vague imaginings, increased and intensified by solitude, weighed upon Gilliatt.

He understood them little, but he felt them. His was a powerful intellect clouded; a great spirit wild and untaught.

VI

GILLIATT PLACES THE SLOOP IN READINESS

This rescue of the machinery of the wreck as meditated by Gilliatt was, as we have already said, like the escape of a criminal from a prison — necessitating all the patience and industry recorded of such achievements; industry carried to the point of a miracle, patience only to be compared with a long agony. A certain prisoner named Thomas, at the Mont Saint Michel, found means of secreting the greater part of a wall in his paillasse. Another at Tulle, in 1820, cut away a quantity of lead from the terrace where the prisoners walked for exercise. With what kind of knife? No one would guess. And melted this lead with what fire? None have ever discovered; but it is known that he cast it in a mould made of the crumbs of bread. With this lead and this mould he made a key, and with this key succeeded in opening a lock of which he had never seen anything but the keyhole. Some of this marvellous ingenuity Gilliatt possessed. He had once climbed and descended from the cliff at Boisrosé. He was the Baron Trenck of the wreck, and the Latude of her machinery.

The sea, like a jailor, kept watch over him.

For the rest, mischievous and inclement as the rain had been, he had contrived to derive some benefit from it. He had in part replenished his stock of fresh water; but his thirst was inextinguishable, and he emptied his can as fast as he filled it.

One day — it was on the last day of April or the first of May — all was at length ready for his purpose.

The engine-room was, as it were, enclosed between the eight cables hanging from the tackle-blocks, four on one side, four on the other. The sixteen holes upon the deck and under the keel, through which the cables passed, had been hooped round by sawing. The planking had been sawed, the timber cut with the hatchet, the ironwork with a file, the sheathing with the chisel. The part of the keel immediately under the machinery was cut squarewise, and ready to descend with it while still supporting it. All this frightful swinging mass was held only by one chain, which was itself only kept in position by a filed notch. At this stage, in such a labour and so near its completion, haste is prudence.

The water was low; the moment favourable.

Gilliatt had succeeded in removing the axle of the paddles, the extremities of which might have proved an obstacle and checked the descent. He had contrived to make this heavy portion fast in a vertical position within the engine-room itself.

It was time to bring his work to an end. The workman, as we have said, was not weary, for his will was strong; but his tools were. The forge was by degrees becoming impracticable. The blower had begun to work badly. The little hydraulic fall being of sea-water, saline deposits had encrusted the joints of the apparatus, and prevented its free action.

Gilliatt visited the creek of “The Man Rock,” examined the sloop, and assured himself that all was in good condition, particularly the four rings fixed to starboard and to larboard; then he weighed anchor, and worked the heavy barge-shaped craft with the oars till he brought it alongside the two Douvres. The defile between the rocks was wide enough to admit it. There was also depth enough. On the day of his arrival he had satisfied himself that it was possible to push the sloop under the Durande.

The feat, however, was difficult; it required the minute precision of a watchmaker. The operation was all the more delicate from the fact that, for his objects, he was compelled to force it in by the stern, rudder first. It was necessary that the mast and the ringing of the sloop should project beyond the wreck in the direction of the sea.

These embarrassments rendered all Gilliatt’s operations awkward. It was not like entering the creek of “The Man,” where it was a mere affair of the tiller. It was necessary here to push, drag, row, and take soundings all together. Gilliatt consumed but a quarter of an hour in these manœuvres; but he was successful.

In fifteen or twenty minutes the sloop was adjusted under the wreck. It was almost wedged in there. By means of his two anchors he moored the boat by head and stern. The strongest of the two was placed so as to be efficient against the strongest wind that blows, which was that from the south-west. Then by the aid of a lever and the capstan, he lowered into the sloop the two cases containing the pieces of the paddle-wheel, the slings of which were all ready. The two cases served as ballast.

Relieved of these encumbrances, he fastened to the hook of the chain of the capstan the sling of the regulating tackle-gear, intending to check the pulleys.

Owing to the peculiar objects of this labour, the defects of the old sloop became useful qualities. It had no deck; her burden therefore would have greater depth, and could rest upon the hold. Her mast was very forward — too far forward indeed for general purposes; her contents therefore would have more room, and the mast standing thus beyond the mass of the wreck, there would be nothing to hinder its disembarkation. It was a mere shell, or case for receiving it; but nothing is more stable than this on the sea.

While engaged in these operations, Gilliatt suddenly perceived that the sea was rising. He looked around to see from what quarter the wind was coming.

VII

SUDDEN DANGER

The breeze was scarcely perceptible; but what there was came from the west. A disagreeable habit of the winds during the equinoxes.

The rising sea varies much in its effects upon the Douvres rocks, depending upon the quarter of the wind.

According to the gale which drives them before it, the waves enter the rocky corridor either from the east or from the west. Entering from the east, the sea is comparatively gentle; coming from the west, it is always furious. The reason of this is, that the wind from the east blowing from the land has not had time to gather force; while the westerly winds, coming from the Atlantic, blow unchecked from a vast ocean. Even a very slight breeze, if it comes from the west, is serious. It rolls the huge billows from the illimitable space and dashes the waves against the narrow defile in greater bulk than can find entrance there.

A sea which rolls into a gulf is always terrible. It is the same with a crowd of people: a multitude is a sort of fluid body. When the quantity which can enter is less than the quantity endeavouring to force a way, there is a fatal crush among the crowd, a fierce convulsion on the water. As long as the west wind blows, however slight the breeze, the Douvres are twice a day subjected to that rude assault. The sea rises, the tide breasts up, the narrow gullet gives little entrance, the waves, driven against it violently, rebound and roar, and a tremendous surf beats the two sides of the gorge. Thus the Douvres, during the slightest wind from the west, present the singular spectacle of a sea comparatively calm without, while within the rocks a storm is raging. This tumult of waters, altogether confined and circumscribed, has nothing of the character of a tempest. It is a mere local outbreak among the waves, but a terrible one. As regards the winds from the north and south, they strike the rocks crosswise, and cause little surf in the passage. The entrance by the east, a fact which must be borne in mind, was close to “The Man Rock.” The dangerous opening to the west was at the opposite extremity, exactly between the two Douvres.

It was at this western entrance that Gilliatt found himself with the wrecked Durande, and the sloop made fast beneath it.

A catastrophe seemed inevitable. There was not much wind, but it was sufficient for the impending mischief.

Before many hours, the swell which was rising would be rushing with full force into the gorge of the Douvres. The first waves were already breaking. This swell, and eddy of the entire Atlantic, would have behind it the immense sea. There would be no squall; no violence, but a simple overwhelming wave, which commencing on the coasts of America, rolls towards the shores of Europe with an impetus gathered over two thousand leagues. This wave, a gigantic ocean barrier, meeting the gap of the rocks, must be caught between the two Douvres, standing like watch-towers at the entrance, or like pillars of the defile. Thus swelled by the tide, augmented by resistance, driven back by the shoals, and urged on by the wind, it would strike the rock with violence, and with all the contortions from the obstacles it had encountered, and all the frenzy of a sea confined in limits, would rush between the rocky walls, where it would reach the sloop and the Durande, and, in all probability, destroy them.

A shield against this danger was wanting. Gilliatt had one.

The problem was to prevent the sea reaching it at one bound; to obstruct it from striking, while allowing it to rise; to bar the passage without refusing it admission; to prevent the compression of the water in the gorge, which was the whole danger; to turn an eruption into a simple flood; to extract as it were from the waves all their violence, and constrain the furies to be gentle; it was, in fact, to substitute an obstacle which will appease, for an obstacle which irritates.

Gilliatt, with all that dexterity which he possessed, and which is so much more efficient than mere force, sprang upon the rocks like a chamois among the mountains or a monkey in the forest; using for his tottering and dizzy strides the smallest projecting stone; leaping into the water, and issuing from it again; swimming among the shoals and clambering the rocks, with a rope between his teeth and a mallet in his hand. Thus he detached the cable which kept suspended and also fast to the basement of the Little Douvre the end of the forward side of the Durande; fashioned out of some ends of hawsers a sort of hinges, holding this bulwark to the huge nails fixed in the granite; swung this apparatus of planks upon them, like the gates of a great dock, and turned their sides, as he would turn a rudder, outward to the waves, which pushed the extremities upon the Great Douvre, while the rope hinges detained the other extremities upon the Little Douvre; next he contrived, by means of the huge nails placed beforehand for the purpose, to fix the same kind of fastenings upon the Great Douvre as on the little one; made completely fast the vast mass of woodwork against the two pillars of the gorge, slung a chain across this barrier like a baldric upon a cuirass; and in less than an hour, this barricade against the sea was complete and the gullet of the rocks closed as by a folding-door.

This powerful apparatus, a heavy mass of beams and planks, which laid flat would have made a raft, and upright formed a wall, had by the aid of the water been handled by Gilliatt with the adroitness of a juggler. It might almost have been said that the obstruction was complete before the rising sea had the time to perceive it.

It was one of those occasions on which Jean Bart would have employed the famous expression which he applied to the sea every time he narrowly escaped shipwreck. "We have cheated the Englishman;" for it is well known that when that famous admiral meant to speak contemptuously of the ocean he called it "the Englishman."

The entrance to the defile being thus protected, Gilliatt thought of the sloop. He loosened sufficient cable for the two anchors to allow her to rise with the tide; an operation similar to what the mariners of old called "*mouiller avec des embossures*." In all this, Gilliatt was not taken the least by surprise; the necessity had been foreseen. A seaman would have perceived it by the two pulleys of the top ropes cut in the form of snatch-blocks, and fixed behind the sloop, through which passed two ropes, the ends of which were slung through the rings of the anchors.

Meanwhile the tide was rising fast; the half flood had arrived, a moment when the shock of the waves, even in comparatively moderate weather, may become considerable. Exactly what Gilliatt expected came to pass. The waves rolled violently against the barrier, struck it, broke heavily and passed beneath. Outside was the heavy swell; within, the waters ran quietly. He had devised a sort of marine *Furculæ caudinæ*. The sea was conquered.

VIII

MOVEMENT RATHER THAN PROGRESS

The moment so long dreaded had come.

The problem now was to place the machinery in the bark.

Gilliatt remained thoughtful for some moments, holding the elbow of his left arm in his right hand, and applying his left hand to his forehead.

Then he climbed upon the wreck, one part of which, containing the engine, was to be parted from it, while the other remained.

He severed the four slings which fixed the four chains from the funnel on the larboard and the starboard sides. The slings being only of cord, his knife served him well enough for this purpose.

The four chains set free, hung down along the sides of the funnel.

From the wreck he climbed up to the apparatus which he had constructed, stamped with his feet upon the beams, inspected the tackle-blocks, looked to the pulleys, handled the cables, examined the eking-pieces, assured himself that the untarred hemp was not saturated through, found that nothing was wanting and nothing giving way; then springing from the height of the suspending props on to the deck, he took up his position near the capstan, in the part of the Durande which he intended to leave jammed in between the two Douvres. This was to be his post during his labours.

Earnest, but troubled with no impulses but what were useful to his work, he took a final glance at the hoisting-tackle, then seized a file and began to saw with it through the chain which held the whole suspended.

The rasping of the file was audible amidst the roaring of the sea.

The chain from the capstan, attached to the regulating gear, was within his reach, quite near his hand.

Suddenly there was a crash. The link which he was filing snapped when only half cut through: the whole apparatus swung violently. He had only just time sufficient to seize the regulating gear.

The severed chain beat against the rock; the eight cables strained; the huge mass, sawed and cut through, detached itself from the wreck; the belly of the hull opened, and the iron flooring of the engine-room was visible below the keel.

If he had not seized the regulating tackle at that instant it would have fallen. But his powerful hand was there, and it descended steadily.

When the brother of Jean Bart, Peter Bart, that powerful and sagacious toper, that poor Dunkirk fisherman, who used to talk familiarly with the Grand Admiral of France, went to the rescue of the galley *Langeron*, in distress in the Bay of Ambleteuse, endeavouring to save the heavy floating mass in the midst of the breakers of that furious bay, he rolled up the mainsail, tied it with sea-reeds, and trusted to the ties to break away of themselves, and give the sail to the wind at the right moment. Just so Gilliatt trusted to the breaking of the chain; and the same eccentric feat of daring was crowned with the same success.

The tackle, taken in hand by Gilliatt, held out and worked well. Its function, as will be remembered, was to moderate the powers of the apparatus, thus reduced from many to one, by bringing them into united action. The gear had some similarity to a bridle of a bowline, except that instead of trimming a sail it served to balance a complicated mechanism.

Erect, and with his hand upon the capstan, Gilliatt, so to speak, was enabled to feel the pulse of the apparatus.

It was here that his inventive genius manifested itself.

A remarkable coincidence of forces was the result.

While the machinery of the Durande, detached in a mass, was lowering to the sloop, the sloop rose slowly to receive it. The wreck and the salvage vessel assisting each other in opposite ways, saved half the labour of the operation.

The tide swelling quietly between the two Douvres raised the sloop and brought it nearer to the Durande. The sea was more than conquered; it was tamed and broken in. It became, in fact, part and parcel of the organisation of power.

The rising waters lifted the vessel without any sort of shock, gently, and almost with precaution, as one would handle porcelain.

Gilliatt combined and proportioned the two labours, that of the water and that of the apparatus; and standing steadfast at the capstan, like some terrible statue obeyed by all the movement around it at the same moment, regulated the slowness of the descent by the slow rise of the sea.

There was no jerk given by the waters, no slip among the tackle. It was a strange collaboration of all the natural forces subdued. On one side, gravitation lowering the huge bulk, on the other the sea raising the bark.

The attraction of heavenly bodies which causes the tide, and the attractive force of the earth, which men call weight, seemed to conspire together to aid his plans. There was no hesitation, no stoppage in their service; under the dominance of mind these passive forces became active auxiliaries. From minute to minute the work advanced; the interval between the wreck and the sloop diminished insensibly. The approach continued in silence, and as in a sort of terror of the man who stood there. The elements received his orders and fulfilled them.

Nearly at the moment when the tide ceased to raise it, the cable ceased to slide. Suddenly, but without commotion, the pulleys stopped. The vast machine had taken its place in the bark, as if placed there by a powerful hand. It stood straight, upright, motionless, firm. The iron floor of the engine-room rested with its four corners evenly upon the hold.

The work was accomplished.

Gilliatt contemplated it, lost in thought.

He was not the spoiled child of success. He bent under the weight of his great joy. He felt his limbs, as it were, sinking; and contemplating his triumph, he, who had never been shaken by danger, began to tremble.

He gazed upon the sloop under the wreck and at the machinery in the sloop. He seemed to feel it hard to believe it true. It might have been supposed that he had never looked forward to that which he had accomplished. A miracle had been wrought by his hands, and he contemplated it in bewilderment.

His reverie lasted but a short time.

Starting like one awakening from a deep sleep, he seized his saw, cut the eight cables, separated now from the sloop, thanks to the rising of the tide, by only about ten feet; sprang aboard, took a bunch of cord, made four slings, passed them through the rings prepared beforehand, and fixed on both sides aboard the sloop the four chains of the funnel which only an hour before had been still fastened to their places aboard the Durande.

The funnel being secured, he disengaged the upper part of the machinery. A square portion of the planking of the Durande was adhering to it; he struck off the nails and relieved the sloop of this encumbrance of planks and beams; which fell over on to the rocks — a great assistance in lightening it.

For the rest, the sloop, as has been foreseen, behaved well under the burden of the machinery. It had sunk in the water, but only to a good water-line. Although massive, the engine of the Durande was less heavy than the pile of stones and the cannon which he had once brought back from Herm in the sloop.

All then was ended; he had only to depart.

IX

A SLIP BETWEEN CUP AND LIP

All was not ended.

To re-open the gorge thus closed by the portion of the Durande’s bulwarks, and at once to push out with the sloop beyond the rocks, nothing could appear more clear and simple. On the ocean every minute is urgent. There was little wind; scarcely a wrinkle on the open sea. The afternoon was beautiful, and promised a fine night. The sea, indeed, was calm, but the ebb had begun. The moment was favourable for starting. There would be the ebb-tide for leaving the Douvres; and the flood would carry him into Guernsey. It would be possible to be at St. Sampson’s at daybreak.

But an unexpected obstacle presented itself. There was a flaw in his arrangements which had baffled all his foresight.

The machinery was freed; but the chimney was not.

The tide, by raising the sloop to the wreck suspended in the air, had diminished the dangers of the descent, and abridged the labour. But this diminution of the interval had left the top of the funnel entangled in the kind of gaping frame formed by the open hull of the Durande. The funnel was held fast there as between four walls.

The services rendered by the sea had been accompanied by that unfortunate drawback. It seemed as if the waves, constrained to obey, had avenged themselves by a malicious trick.

It is true that what the flood-tide had done, the ebb would undo.

The funnel, which was rather more than three fathoms in height, was buried more than eight feet in the wreck. The water-level would fall about twelve feet. Thus the funnel descending with the falling tide would have four feet of room to spare, and would clear itself easily.

But how much time would elapse before that release would be completed? Six hours.

In six hours it would be near midnight. What means would there be of attempting to start at such an hour? What channel could he find among all those breakers, so full of dangers even by day? How was he to risk his vessel in the depth of black night in that inextricable labyrinth, that ambuscade of shoals?

There was not help for it. He must wait for the morrow. These six hours lost, entailed a loss of twelve hours at least.

He could not even advance the labour by opening the mouth of the gorge. His breakwater was necessary against the next tide.

He was compelled to rest. Folding his arms was almost the only thing which he had not yet done since his arrival on the rocks.

This forced inaction irritated, almost vexed him with himself, as if it had been his fault. He thought “what would Déruchette say of me if she saw me thus doing nothing?”

And yet this interval for regaining his strength was not unnecessary.

The sloop was now at his command; he determined to pass the night in it.

He mounted once more to fetch his sheepskin upon the Great Douvre; descended again, supped off a few limpets and *châtaignes de mer,* drank, being very thirsty, a few draughts of water from his can, which was nearly empty, enveloped himself in the skin, the wool of which felt comforting, lay down like a watch-dog beside the engine, drew his red cap over his eyes and slept.

His sleep was profound. It was such sleep as men enjoy who have completed a great labour.

X

SEA-WARNINGS

In the middle of the night he awoke suddenly and with a jerk like the recoil of a spring.

He opened his eyes.

The Douvres, rising high over his head, were lighted up as by the white glow of burning embers. Over all the dark escarpment of the rock there was a light like the reflection of a fire.

Where could this fire come from?

It was from the water.

The aspect of the sea was extraordinary.

The water seemed a-fire. As far as the eye could reach, among the reefs and beyond them, the sea ran with flame. The flame was not red; it had nothing in common with the grand living fires of volcanic craters or of great furnaces. There was no sparkling, no glare, no purple edges, no noise. Long trails of a pale tint simulated upon the water the folds of a winding-sheet. A trembling glow was spread over the waves. It was the spectre of a great fire, rather than the fire itself. It was in some degree like the glow of unearthly flames lighting the inside of a sepulchre. A burning darkness.

The night itself, dim, vast, and wide-diffused, was the fuel of that cold flame. It was a strange illumination issuing out of blindness. The shadows even formed part of that phantom-fire.

The sailors of the Channel are familiar with those indescribable phosphorescences, full of warning for the navigator. They are nowhere more surprising than in the “Great V,” near Isigny.

By this light, surrounding objects lose their reality. A spectral glimmer renders them, as it were, transparent. Rocks become no more than outlines. Cables of anchors look like iron bars heated to a white heat. The nets of the fishermen beneath the water seem webs of fire. The half of the oar above the waves is dark as ebony, the rest in the sea like silver. The drops from the blades uplifted from the water fall in starry showers upon the sea. Every boat leaves a furrow behind it like a comet’s tail. The sailors, wet and luminous, seem like men in flames. If you plunge a hand into the water, you withdraw it clothed in flame. The flame is dead, and is not felt. Your arm becomes a firebrand. You see the forms of things in the sea roll beneath the waves as in liquid fire. The foam twinkles. The fish are tongues of fire, or fragments of the forked lightning, moving in the depths.

The reflection of this brightness had passed over the closed eyelids of Gilliatt in the sloop. It was this that had awakened him.

His awakening was opportune.

The ebb tide had run out, and the waters were beginning to rise again. The funnel, which had become disengaged during his sleep, was about to enter again into the yawning hollow above it.

It was rising slowly.

A rise of another foot would have entangled it in the wreck again. A rise of one foot is equivalent to half-an-hour's tide. If he intended, therefore, to take advantage of that temporary deliverance once more within his reach, he had just half-an-hour before him.

He leaped to his feet.

Urgent as the situation was, he stood for a few moments meditative, contemplating the phosphorescence of the waves.

Gilliatt knew the sea in all its phases. Notwithstanding all her tricks, and often as he had suffered from her terrors, he had long been her companion. That mysterious entity which we call the ocean had nothing in its secret thoughts which he could not divine. Observation, meditation, and solitude, had given him a quick perception of coming changes, of wind, or cloud, or wave.

Gilliatt hastened to the top ropes and payed out some cable; then being no longer held fast by the anchors, he seized the boat-hook of the sloop, and pushed her towards the entrance to the gorge some fathoms from the Durande, and quite near to the breakwater. Here, as the Guernsey sailors say, it had *du rang*. In less than ten minutes the sloop was withdrawn from beneath the carcase of the wreck. There was no further danger of the funnel being caught in a trap. The tide might rise now.

And yet Gilliatt's manner was not that of one about to take his departure.

He stood considering the light upon the sea once more; but his thoughts were not of starting. He was thinking of how to fix the sloop again, and how to fix it more firmly than ever, though near to the exit from the defile.

Up to this time he had only used the two anchors of the sloop and had not yet employed the little anchor of the Durande, which he had found, as will be remembered, among the breakers. This anchor had been deposited by him in readiness for any emergency, in a corner of the sloop, with a quantity of hawsers, and blocks of top-ropes, and his cable, all furnished beforehand with large knots, which prevented its dragging. He now let go this third anchor, taking care to fasten the cable to a rope, one end of which was slung through the anchor ring, while the other was attached to the windlass of the sloop. In this manner he made a kind of triangular, triple anchorage, much stronger than the moorings with two anchors. All this indicated keen anxiety, and a redoubling of precautions. A sailor would have seen in this operation something similar to an anchorage in bad weather, when there is fear of a current which might carry the vessel under the wind.

The phosphorescence which he had been observing, and upon which his eye was now fixed once more, was threatening, but serviceable at the same time. But for it he would have been held fast locked in sleep, and deceived by the night. The strange appearance upon the sea had awakened him, and made things about him visible.

The light which it shed among the rocks was, indeed, ominous; but disquieting as it appeared to be to Gilliatt, it had served to show him the dangers of his position, and had rendered possible his operations in extricating the sloop. Henceforth, whenever he should be able to set sail, the vessel, with its freight of machinery, would be free.

And yet the idea of departing was further than ever from his mind. The sloop being fixed in its new position, he went in quest of the strongest chain which he had in his store-cavern, and attaching it to the nails driven into the two Douvres, he fortified from within with this chain the rampart of planks and beams, already protected from without by the cross chain. Far from opening the entrance to the defile, he made the barrier more complete.

The phosphorescence lighted him still, but it was diminishing. The day, however, was beginning to break.

Suddenly he paused to listen.

XI

A WORD TO THE WISE IS ENOUGH

A feeble, indistinct sound seemed to reach his ear from somewhere in the far distance.

At certain hours the great deeps give forth a murmuring noise.

He listened a second time. The distant noise recommenced. Gilliatt shook his head like one who recognises at last something familiar to him.

A few minutes later he was at the other extremity of the alley between the rocks, at the entrance facing the east, which had remained open until then, and by heavy blows of his hammer was driving large nails into the sides of the gullet near “The Man Rock,” as he had done at the gullet of the Douvres.

The crevices of these rocks were prepared and well furnished with timber, almost all of which was heart of oak. The rock on this side being much broken up, there were abundant cracks, and he was able to fix even more nails there than in the base of the two Douvres.

Suddenly, and as if some great breath had passed over it, the luminous appearance on the waters vanished. The twilight becoming paler every moment, assumed its functions.

The nails being driven, Gilliatt dragged beams and cords, and then chains to the spot; and without taking his eyes off his work, or permitting his mind to be diverted for a moment, he began to construct across the gorge of “The Man” with beams fixed horizontally, and made fast by cables, one of those open barriers which science has now adopted under the name of breakwaters.

Those who have witnessed, for example, at La Rocquaine in Guernsey, or at Bourg-d’Eau in France, the effect produced by a few posts fixed in the rock, will understand the power of these simple preparations. This sort of breakwater is a combination of what is called in France *épi* with what is known in England as “a dam.” The breakwater is the chevaux-de-frise of fortifications against tempests. Man can only struggle against the sea by taking advantage of this principle of dividing its forces.

Meanwhile, the sun had risen, and was shining brightly. The sky was clear, the sea calm.

Gilliatt pressed on his work. He, too, was calm; but there was anxiety in his haste. He passed with long strides from rock to rock, and returned dragging wildly sometimes a rider, sometimes a binding strake. The utility of all this preparation of timbers now became manifest. It was evident that he was about to confront a danger which he had foreseen.

A strong iron bar served him as a lever for moving the beams.

The work was executed so fast that it was rather a rapid growth than a construction. He who has never seen a military pontooner at his work can scarcely form an idea of this rapidity.

The eastern gullet was still narrower than the western. There were but five or six feet of interval between the rocks. The smallness of this opening was an assistance. The space to be fortified and closed up being very little, the apparatus would be stronger, and might be more simple. Horizontal beams, therefore, sufficed, the upright ones being useless.

The first cross pieces of the breakwater being fixed, Gilliatt mounted upon them and listened once more.

The murmurs had become significant.

He continued his construction. He supported it with the two cat-heads of the Durande, bound to the frame of beams by cords passed through the three pulley-sheaves. He made the whole fast by chains.

The construction was little more than a colossal hurdle, having beams for rods and chains in the place of wattles.

It seemed woven together, quite as much as built.

He multiplied the fastenings, and added nails where they were necessary.

Having obtained a great quantity of bar iron from the wreck, he had been able to make a large number of these heavy nails.

While still at work, he broke some biscuit with his teeth. He was thirsty, but he could not drink, having no more fresh water. He had emptied the can at his meal of the evening before.

He added afterwards four or five more pieces of timber; then climbed again upon the barrier and listened.

The noises from the horizon had ceased; all was still.

The sea was smooth and quiet; deserving all those complimentary phrases which worthy citizens bestow upon it when satisfied with a trip. “A mirror,” “a pond,” “like oil,” and so forth. The deep blue of the sky responded to the deep green tint of the ocean. The sapphire and the emerald hues vied with each other. Each were perfect. Not a cloud on high, not a line of foam below. In the midst of all this splendour, the April sun rose magnificently. It was impossible to imagine a lovelier day.

On the verge of the horizon a flight of birds of passage formed a long dark line against the sky. They were flying fast as if alarmed.

Gilliatt set to work again to raise the breakwater.

He raised it as high as he could; as high, indeed, as the curving of the rocks would permit.

Towards noon the sun appeared to him to give more than its usual warmth. Noon is the critical time of the day. Standing upon the powerful frame which he had built up, he paused again to survey the wide expanse.

The sea was more than tranquil. It was a dull dead calm. No sail was visible. The sky was everywhere clear; but from blue it had become white. The whiteness was singular. To the west, and upon the horizon, was a little spot of a sickly hue. The spot remained in the same place, but by degrees grew larger. Near the breakers the waves shuddered; but very gently.

Gilliatt had done well to build his breakwater.

A tempest was approaching.

The elements had determined to give battle.

BOOK III

THE STRUGGLE

I

EXTREMES MEET

Nothing is more threatening than a late equinox.

The appearance of the sea presents a strange phenomenon, resulting from what may be called the arrival of the ocean winds.

In all seasons, but particularly at the epoch of the Syzygies, at the moment when least expected, the sea sometimes becomes singularly tranquil. That vast perpetual movement ceases; a sort of drowsiness and languor overspreads it; and it seems weary and about to rest. Every rag of bunting, from the tiny streamer of the fishing-boat to the great flag of ships of war, droops against the mast. The admiral’s flag, the Royal and Imperial ensigns sleep alike.

Suddenly all these streamers begin to flutter gently.

If there happen to be clouds, the moment has then come for marking the formation of the *cirri*; if the sun is setting, for observing the red tints of the horizon; or if it be night and there is a moon, for looking attentively for the halo.

It is then that the captain or commander of a squadron, if he happen to possess one of those storm indicators, the inventor of which is unknown, notes his instrument carefully and takes his precautions against the south wind, if the clouds have an appearance like dissolved sugar; or against the north, if they exfoliate in crystallisations like brakes of brambles, or like fir woods. Then, too, the poor Irish or Breton fisherman, after having consulted some mysterious gnomon engraved by the Romans or by demons upon one of those straight enigmatical stones, which are called in Brittany *Menhir*, and in Ireland *Cruach*, hauls his boat up on the shore.

Meanwhile the serenity of sky and ocean continues. The day dawns radiant, and Aurora smiles. It was this which filled the old poets and seers with religious horror; for men dared to suspect the falsity of the sun. *Solem quis dicere falsum audeat?*

The sombre vision of nature’s secret laws is interdicted to man by the fatal opacity of surrounding things. The most terrible and perfidious of her aspects is that which masks the convulsions of the deep.

Some hours, and even days sometimes, pass thus. Pilots raise their telescopes here and there. The faces of old seamen have always an expression of severity left upon them by the vexation of perpetually looking out for changes.

Suddenly a great confused murmur is heard. A sort of mysterious dialogue takes place in the air.

Nothing unusual is seen.

The wide expanse is tranquil.

Yet the noises increase. The dialogue becomes more audible.

There is something beyond the horizon.

Something terrible. It is the wind.

The wind; or rather that populace of Titans which we call the gale. The unseen multitude.

India knew them as the Maroubs, Judea as the Keroubim, Greece as the Aquilones. They are the invisible winged creatures of the Infinite. Their blasts sweep over the earth.

II

THE OCEAN WINDS

They come from the immeasurable deep. Their wide wings need the breadth of the ocean gulf; the spaciousness of desert solitudes. The Atlantic, the Pacific — those vast blue plains — are their delight. They hasten thither in flocks. Commander Page witnessed, far out at sea, seven waterspouts at once. They wander there, wild and terrible! The ever-ending yet eternal flux and reflux is their work. The extent of their power, the limits of their will, none know. They are the Sphinxes of the abyss: Gama was their [OE]dipus. In that dark, ever-moving expanse, they appear with faces of cloud. He who perceives their pale lineaments in that wide dispersion, the horizon of the sea, feels himself in presence of an unsubduable power. It might be imagined that the proximity of human intelligence disquieted them, and that they revolted against it. The mind of man is invincible, but the elements baffle him. He can do nothing against the power which is everywhere, and which none can bind. The gentle breath becomes a gale, smites with the force of a war-club, and then becomes gentle again. The winds attack with a terrible crash, and defend themselves by fading into nothingness. He who would encounter them must use artifice. Their varying tactics, their swift redoubled blows, confuse. They fly as often as they attack. They are tenacious and impalpable. Who can circumvent them? The prow of the *Argo*, cut from an oak of Dodona's grove, that mysterious pilot of the bark, spoke to them, and they insulted that pilot-goddess. Columbus, beholding their approach at *La Pinta*, mounted upon the poop, and addressed them with the first verses of St. John's Gospel. Surcouf defied them: "Here come the gang," he used to say. Napier greeted them with cannon-balls. They assume the dictatorship of chaos.

Chaos is theirs, in which to wreak their mysterious vengeance: the den of the winds is more monstrous than that of lions. How many corpses lie in its deep recesses, where the howling gusts sweep without pity over that obscure and ghastly mass! The winds are heard wheresoever they go, but they give ear to none. Their acts resemble crimes. None know on whom they cast their hoary surf; with what ferocity they hover over shipwrecks, looking at times as if they flung their impious foam-flakes in the face of heaven. They are the tyrants of unknown regions. “*Luoghi spaventosi,*” murmured the Venetian mariners.

The trembling fields of space are subjected to their fierce assaults. Things unspeakable come to pass in those deserted regions. Some horseman rides in the gloom; the air is full of a forest sound; nothing is visible; but the tramp of cavalcades is heard. The noonday is overcast with sudden night; a tornado passes. Or it is midnight, which suddenly becomes bright as day; the polar lights are in the heavens. Whirlwinds pass in opposite ways, and in a sort of hideous dance, a stamping of the storms upon the waters. A cloud overburdened opens and falls to earth. Other clouds, filled with red light, flash and roar; then frown again ominously. Emptied of their lightnings, they are but as spent brands. Pent-up rains dissolve in mists. Yonder sea appears a fiery furnace in which the rains are falling: flames seem to issue from the waves. The white gleam of the ocean under the shower is reflected to marvellous distances. The different masses transform themselves into uncouth shapes. Monstrous whirlpools make strange hollows in the sky. The vapours revolve, the waves spin, the giddy Naiads roll; sea and sky are livid; noises as of cries of despair are in the air.

Great sheaves of shadow and darkness are gathered up, trembling in the far depths of the sky. Now and then there is a convulsion. The rumour becomes tumult as the wave becomes surge. The horizon, a confused mass of strata, oscillating ceaselessly, murmurs in a continual undertone. Strange and sudden outbursts break through the monotony. Cold airs rush forth, succeeded by warm blasts. The trepidation of the sea betokens anxious expectation, agony, terror profound. Suddenly the hurricane comes down, like a wild beast, to drink of the ocean: a monstrous draught! The sea rises to the invisible mouth; a mound of water is formed; the swell increases, and the waterspout appears; the Prester of the ancients, stalactite above, stalagmite below, a whirling double-inverted cone, a point in equilibrium upon another, the embrace of two mountains — a mountain of foam ascending, a mountain of vapour descending — terrible coition of the cloud and the wave. Like the column in Holy Writ, the waterspout is dark by day and luminous by night. In its presence the thunder itself is silent and seems cowed.

The vast commotion of those solitudes has its gamut, a terrible crescendo. There are the gust, the squall, the storm, the gale, the tempest, the whirlwind, the waterspout — the seven chords of the lyre of the winds, the seven notes of the firmament. The heavens are a clear space, the sea a vast round; but a breath passes, they have vanished, and all is fury and wild confusion.

Such are these inhospitable realms.

The winds rush, fly, swoop down, dwindle away, commence again; hover above, whistle, roar, and smile; they are frenzied, wanton, unbridled, or sinking at ease upon the raging waves. Their howlings have a harmony of their own. They make all the heavens sonorous. They blow in the cloud as in a trumpet; they sing through the infinite space with the mingled tones of clarions, horns, bugles, and trumpets — a sort of Promethean fanfare.

Such was the music of ancient Pan. Their harmonies are terrible. They have a colossal joy in the darkness. They drive and disperse great ships. Night and day, in all seasons, from the tropics to the pole, there is no truce; sounding their fatal trumpet through the tangled thickets of the clouds and waves, they pursue the grim chase of vessels in distress. They have their packs of bloodhounds, and take their pleasure, setting them to bark among the rocks and billows. They huddle the clouds together, and drive them diverse. They mould and knead the supple waters as with a million hands.

The water is supple because it is incompressible. It slips away without effort. Borne down on one side, it escapes on the other. It is thus that waters become waves, and that the billows are a token of their liberty.

III

THE NOISES EXPLAINED

The grand descent of winds upon the world takes place at the equinoxes. At this period the balance of tropic and pole librates, and the vast atmospheric tides pour their flood upon one hemisphere and their ebb upon another. The signs of Libra and Aquarius have reference to these phenomena.

It is the time of tempests.

The sea awaits their coming, keeping silence.

Sometimes the sky looks sickly. Its face is wan. A thick dark veil obscures it. The mariners observe with uneasiness the angry aspect of the clouds.

But it is its air of calm contentment which they dread the most. A smiling sky in the equinoxes is the tempest in gay disguise. It was under skies like these that “The Tower of Weeping Women,” in Amsterdam, was filled with wives and mothers scanning the far horizon.

When the vernal or autumnal storms delay to break, they are gathering strength; hoarding up their fury for more sure destruction. Beware of the gale that has been long delayed. It was Angot who said that “the sea pays well old debts.”

When the delay is unusually long, the sea betokens her impatience only by a deeper calm, but the magnetic intensity manifests itself by what might be called a fiery humour in the sea. Fire issues from the waves; electric air, phosphoric water. The sailors feel a strange lassitude. This time is particularly perilous for iron vessels; their hulls are then liable to produce variations of the compass, leading them to destruction. The transatlantic steam-vessel *Iowa* perished from this cause.

To those who are familiar with the sea, its aspect at these moments is singular. It may be imagined to be both desiring and fearing the approach of the cyclone. Certain unions, though strongly urged by nature, are attended by this strange conjunction of terror and desire. The lioness in her tenderest moods flies from the lion. Thus the sea, in the fire of her passion, trembles at the near approach of her union with the tempest. The nuptials are prepared. Like the marriages of the ancient emperors, they are celebrated with immolations. The fête is heralded with disasters.

Meanwhile, from yonder deeps, from the great open sea, from the unapproachable latitudes, from the lurid horizon of the watery waste, from the utmost bounds of the free ocean, the winds pour down.

Listen; for this is the famous equinox.

The storm prepares mischief. In the old mythology these entities were recognised, indistinctly moving, in the grand scene of nature. Eolus plotted with Boreas. The alliance of element with element is necessary; they divide their task. One has to give impetus to the wave, the cloud, the stream: night is an auxiliary, and must be employed. There are compasses to be falsified, beacons to be extinguished, lanterns of lighthouses to be masked, stars to be hidden. The sea must lend her aid. Every storm is preceded by a murmur. Behind the horizon line there is a premonitory whispering among the hurricanes.

This is the noise which is heard afar off in the darkness amidst the terrible silence of the sea.

It was this significant whispering which Gilliatt had noted. The phosphorescence on the water had been the first warning: this murmur the second.

If the demon Legion exists, he is assuredly no other than the wind.

The wind is complex, but the air is one.

Hence it follows that all storms are mixed — a principle which results from the unity of the air.

The entire abyss of heaven takes part in a tempest: the entire ocean also. The totality of its forces is marshalled for the strife. A wave is the ocean gulf; a gust is a gulf of the atmosphere. A contest with a storm is a contest with all the powers of sea and sky.

It was Messier, that great authority among naval men, the pensive astronomer of the little lodge at Cluny, who said, “The wind comes from everywhere and is everywhere.” He had no faith in the idea of winds imprisoned even in inland seas. With him there were no Mediterranean winds; he declared that he recognised them as they wandered about the earth. He affirmed that on a certain day, at a certain hour, the Föhn of the Lake of Constance, the ancient Favonius of Lucretius, had traversed the horizon of Paris; on another day, the Bora of the Adriatic; on another day, the whirling Notus, which is supposed to be confined in the round of the Cyclades. He indicated their currents. He did not believe it impossible that the “Autan,” which circulates between Corsica and the Balearic Isles, could escape from its bounds. He did not admit the theory of winds imprisoned like bears in their dens. It was he, too, who said that “every rain comes from the tropics, and every flash of lightning from the pole.” The wind, in fact, becomes saturated with electricity at the intersection of the colures which marks the extremity of the axis, and with water at the equator; bringing moisture from the equatorial line and the electric fluid from the poles.

The wind is ubiquitous.

It is certainly not meant by this that the winds never move in zones. Nothing is better established than the existence of those continuous air currents; and aerial navigation by means of the wind boats, to which the passion for Greek terminology has given the name of “aeroscaphes,” may one day succeed in utilising the chief of these streams of wind. The regular course of air streams is an incontestable fact. There are both rivers of wind and rivulets of wind, although their branches are exactly the reverse of water currents: for in the air it is the rivulets which flow out of the rivers, and the smaller rivers which flow out of the great streams instead of falling into them. Hence instead of concentration we have dispersion.

The united action of the winds and the unity of the atmosphere result from this dispersion. The displacement of one molecule produces the displacement of another. The vast body of air becomes subject to one agitation. To these profound causes of coalition we must add the irregular surface of the earth, whose mountains furrow the atmosphere, contorting and diverting the winds from their course, and determining the directions of counter currents in infinite radiations.

The phenomenon of the wind is the oscillation of two oceans one against the other; the ocean of air, superimposed upon the ocean of water, rests upon these currents, and is convulsed with this vast agitation.

The indivisible cannot produce separate action. No partition divides wave from wave. The islands of the Channel feel the influence of the Cape of Good Hope. Navigation everywhere contends with the same monster; the sea is one hydra. The waves cover it as with a coat of scales. The ocean is Ceto.

Upon that unity reposes an infinite variety.

IV

TURBA TURMA

According to the compass there are thirty-two winds, that is to say, thirty-two points. But these directions may be subdivided indefinitely. Classed by its directions, the wind is incalculable; classed by its kinds, it is infinite. Homer himself would have shrunk from the task of enumerating them.

The polar current encounters the tropical current. Heat and cold are thus combined; the equilibrium is distributed by a shock, the wave of wind issues forth and is distended, scattered and broken up in every direction in fierce streams. The dispersion of the gusts shakes the streaming locks of the wind upon the four corners of the horizon.

All the winds which blow are there. The wind of the Gulf Stream, which disgorges the great fogs of Newfoundland; the wind of Peru, in the region of silent heavens, where no man ever heard the thunder roar; the wind of Nova Scotia, where flies the great auk (*Alca impennis*) with his furrowed beak; the iron whirlwinds of the Chinese seas; the wind of Mozambique, which destroys the canoes and junks; the electric wind, which the people of Japan denounce by the beating of a gong; the African wind, which blows between Table Mountain and the Devil’s Peak, where it gains its liberty; the currents of the equator, which pass over the trade winds, describing a parabola, the summit of which is always to the west; the Plutonian wind, which issues from craters, the terrible breath of flames; the singular wind peculiar to the volcano Awa, which occasions a perpetual olive tint in the north; the Java monsoon, against which the people construct those casemates known as hurricane houses; the branching north winds called by the English “Bush winds;” the curved squalls of the Straits of Malacca, observed by Horsburgh; the powerful south-west wind, called Pampero in Chili, and Rebojo at Buenos Ayres, which carries the great condor out to sea, and saves him from the pit where the Indian, concealed under a bullock-hide newly stripped, watches for him, lying on his back and bending his great bow with his feet; the chemical wind, which, according to Lemery, produces thunder-bolts from the clouds; the Harmattan of the Caffres; the Polar snow-driver, which harnesses itself to the everlasting icebergs; the wind of the Gulf of Bengal, which sweeps over a continent to pillage the triangular town of wooden booths at Nijni-Novogorod, in which is held the great fair of Asia; the wind of the Cordilleras, agitator of great waves and forests; the wind of the Australian Archipelago, where the bee-hunters take the wild hives hidden under the forks of the branches of the giant eucalyptus; the Sirocco, the Mistral, the Hurricane, the dry winds, the inundating and diluvian winds, the torrid winds, which scatter dust from the plains of Brazil upon the streets of Genoa, which both obey and revolt against diurnal rotation, and of which Herrara said, "*Malo viento torna contra el sol*;" those winds which hunt in couples, conspiring mischief, the one undoing the work of the other; and those old winds which assailed Columbus on the coast of Veragua, and which during forty days, from the 21st of October to the 28th of November 1520, delayed and nearly frustrated Magellan's approach to the Pacific; and those which dismasted the Armada and confounded Philip II. Others, too, there are, of the names of which there is no end. The winds, for instance, which carry showers of frogs and locusts, and drive before them clouds of living things across the ocean; those which blow in what are called "Wind-leaps," and whose function is to destroy ships at sea; those which at a single blast throw the cargo out of trim, and compel the vessel to continue her course half broadside over; the winds which construct the circum-cumuli; the winds which mass together the circum-strati; the dark heavy winds swelled with rains; the winds of the hailstorms; the fever winds, whose approach sets the salt springs and sulphur springs of Calabria boiling; those which give a glittering appearance to the fur of African panthers, prowling among the bushes of Cape Ferro; those which come shaking from the cloud, like the tongue of a trigonocephal, the terrible forked lightning; and those which bring whirlwinds of black snow. Such is the legion of winds.

The Douvres rock heard their distant tramp at the moment when Gilliatt was constructing his breakwater.

As we have said, the wind means the combination of all the winds of the earth.

V

GILLIATT'S ALTERNATIVES

The mysterious forces had chosen their time well.

Chance, if chance exists, is sometimes far-seeing.

While the sloop had been anchored in the little creek of "The Man Rock," and as long as the machinery had been prisoned in the wreck, Gilliatt's position had been impregnable. The sloop was in safety; the machinery sheltered. The Douvres, which held the hull of the Durande fast, condemned it to slow destruction, but protected it against unexpected accidents. In any event, one resource had remained to him. If the engine had been destroyed, Gilliatt would have been uninjured. He had still the sloop by which to escape.

But to wait till the sloop was removed from the anchorage where she was inaccessible; to allow it to be fixed in the defile of the Douvres; to watch until the sloop, too, was, as it were, entangled in the rocks; to permit him to complete the salvage, the moving, and the final embarkation of the machinery; to do no damage to that wonderful construction by which one man was enabled to put the whole aboard his bark; to acquiesce, in fact, in the success of his exploits so far; this was but the trap which the elements had laid for him. Now for the first time he began to perceive in all its sinister characteristics the trick which the sea had been meditating so long.

The machinery, the sloop, and their master were all now within the gorge of the rocks. They formed but a single point. One blow, and the sloop might be dashed to pieces on the rock, the machinery destroyed, and Gilliatt drowned.

The situation could not have been more critical.

The sphinx, which men have imagined concealing herself in the cloud, seemed to mock him with a dilemma.

"Go or stay."

To go would have been madness; to remain was terrible.

VI

THE COMBAT

Gilliatt ascended to the summit of the Great Douvre.

From hence he could see around the horizon.

The western side was appalling. A wall of cloud spread across it, barring the wide expanse from side to side, and ascending slowly from the horizon towards the zenith. This wall, straight lined, vertical, without a crevice in its height, without a rent in its structure, seemed built by the square and measured by the plumb-line. It was cloud in the likeness of granite. Its escarpment, completely perpendicular at the southern extremity, curved a little towards the north, like a bent sheet of iron, presenting the steep slippery face of an inclined plane. The dark wall enlarged and grew; but its entablature never ceased for a moment to be parallel with the horizon line, which was almost indistinguishable in the gathering darkness. Silently, and altogether, the airy battlements ascended. No undulation, no wrinkle, no projection changed its shape or moved its place. The aspect of this immobility in movement was impressive. The sun, pale in the midst of a strange sickly transparence, lighted up this outline of the Apocalypse. Already the cloudy bank had blotted out one half the space of the sky: shelving like the fearful talus of the abyss. It was the uprising of a dark mountain between earth and heaven.

It was night falling suddenly upon midday.

There was a heat in the air as from an oven door, coming from that mysterious mass on mass. The sky, which from blue had become white, was now turning from white to a slatey grey. The sea beneath was leaden-hued and dull. There was no breath, no wave, no noise. Far as eye could reach, the desert ocean. No sail was visible on any side. The birds had disappeared. Some monstrous treason seemed abroad.

The wall of cloud grew visibly larger.

This moving mountain of vapours, which was approaching the Douvres, was one of those clouds which might be called the clouds of battle. Sinister appearances; some strange, furtive glance seemed cast upon the beholder through that obscure mass up-piled.

The approach was terrible.

Gilliatt observed it closely, and muttered to himself, “I am thirsty enough, but you will give me plenty to drink.”

He stood there motionless a few moments, his eye fixed upon the cloud bank, as if mentally taking a sounding of the tempest.

His *galérienne* was in the pocket of his jacket; he took it out and placed it on his head. Then he fetched from the cave, which had so long served him for a sleeping-place, a few things which he had kept there in reserve; he put on his overalls, and attired himself in his waterproof overcoat, like a knight who puts on his armour at the moment of battle. He had no shoes; but his naked feet had become hardened to the rocks.

This preparation for the storm being completed, he looked down upon his breakwater, grasped the knotted cord hurriedly, descended from the plateau of the Douvre, stepped on to the rocks below, and hastened to his store cavern. A few moments later he was at work. The vast silent cloud might have heard the strokes of his hammer. With the nails, ropes, and beams which still remained, he constructed for the eastern gullet a second frame, which he succeeded in fixing at ten or twelve feet from the other.

The silence was still profound. The blades of grass between the cracks of the rocks were not stirred.

The sun disappeared suddenly. Gilliatt looked up.

The rising cloud had just reached it. It was like the blotting out of day, succeeded by a mingled pale reflection.

The immense wall of cloud had changed its appearance. It no longer retained its unity. It had curved on reaching the zenith, whence it spread horizontally over the rest of the heavens. It had now its various stages. The tempest formation was visible, like the strata in the side of a trench. It was possible to distinguish the layers of the rain from the beds of hail. There was no lightning, but a horrible, diffused glare; for the idea of horror may be attached to light. The vague breathing of the storm was audible; the silence was broken by an obscure palpitation. Gilliatt, silent also, watched the giant blocks of vapour grouping themselves overhead forming the shapeless mass of clouds. Upon the horizon brooded and lengthened out a band of mist of ashen hue; in the zenith, another band of lead colour. Pale, ragged fragments of cloud hung from the great mass above upon the mist below. The pile of cloud which formed the background was wan, dull, gloomy. A thin, whitish transverse cloud, coming no one could tell whither, cut the high dark wall obliquely from north to south. One of the extremities of this cloud trailed along the surface of the sea. At the point where it touched the waters, a dense red vapour was visible in the midst of the darkness. Below it, smaller clouds, quite black and very low, were flying as if bewildered or moved by opposite currents of air. The immense cloud beyond increased from all points at once, darkened the eclipse, and continued to spread its sombre pall. In the east, behind Gilliatt, there was only one clear porch in the heavens, which was rapidly being closed. Without any feeling of wind abroad, a strange flight of grey downy particles seemed to pass; they were fine and scattered as if some gigantic bird had been plucked of its plumage behind the bank of cloud. A dark compact roof had gradually formed itself, which on the verge of the horizon touched the sea, and mingled in darkness with it. The beholder had a vague sense of something advancing steadily towards him. It was vast, heavy, ominous. Suddenly an immense peal of thunder burst upon the air.

Gilliatt himself felt the shock. The rude reality in the midst of that visionary region has something in it terrific. The listener might fancy that he hears something falling in the chamber of giants. No electric flash accompanied the report. It was a blind peal. The silence was profound again. There was an interval, as when combatants take up their position. Then appeared slowly, one after the other, great shapeless flashes; these flashes were silent. The wall of cloud was now a vast cavern, with roofs and arches. Outlines of forms were traceable among them; monstrous heads were vaguely shadowed forth; rocks seemed to stretch out; elephants bearing turrets, seen for a moment, vanished. A column of vapour, straight, round, and dark, and surmounted by a white mist, simulated the form of a colossal steam-vessel engulfed, hissing, and smoking beneath the waves. Sheets of cloud undulated like folds of giant flags. In the centre, under a thick purple pall, a nucleus of dense fog sunk motionless, inert, impenetrable by the electric fires; a sort of hideous fœtus in the bosom of the tempest.

Suddenly Gilliatt felt a breath moving his hair. Two or three large spots of rain fell heavily around him on the rock. Then there was a second thunder-clap. The wind was rising.

The terror of darkness was at its highest point. The first peal of thunder had shaken the sea; the second rent the wall of cloud from top to base; breach was visible; the pent-up deluge rushed towards it; the rent became like a gulf filled with rain. The outpouring of the tempest had begun.

The moment was terrible.

Rain, wind, lightnings, thunder, waves swirling upwards to the clouds, foam, hoarse noises, whistlings, mingled together like monsters suddenly unloosened.

For a solitary man, imprisoned with an overloaded vessel, between two dangerous rocks in mid-ocean, no crisis could have been more menacing. The danger of the tide, over which he had triumphed, was nothing compared with the danger of the tempest.

Surrounded on all sides by dangers, Gilliatt, at the last moment, and before the crowning peril, had developed an ingenious strategy. He had secured his basis of operations in the enemies' territory; had pressed the rock into his service. The Douvres, originally his enemy, had become his second in that immense duel. Out of that sepulchre he had constructed a fortress. He was built up among those formidable sea ruins. He was blockaded, but well defended. He had, so to speak, set his back against the wall, and stood face to face with the hurricane. He had barricaded the narrow strait, that highway of the waves. This, indeed, was the only possible course. It seemed as if the ocean, like other despots, might be brought to reason by the aid of barricades. The sloop might be considered secure on three sides. Closely wedged between the two interior walls of the rock, made fast by three anchorings, she was sheltered from the north by the Little Douvre, on the south by the Great one; terrible escarpments, more accustomed to wreck vessels than to save them. On the western side she was protected by the frame of timbers made fast and nailed to the rocks — a tried barrier which had withstood the rude flood-tide of the sea; a veritable citadel-gate, having for its sides the columns of the rock — the two Douvres themselves. Nothing was to be feared from that side. It was on the eastern side only that there was danger.

On that side there was no protection but the breakwater. A breakwater is an apparatus for dividing and distributing. It requires at least two frames. Gilliatt had only had time to construct one. He was compelled to build the second in the very presence of the tempest.

Fortunately the wind came from the north-west. The wind is not always adroit in its attacks. The north-west wind, which is the ancient "galerno," had little effect upon the Douvres. It assailed the rocks in flank, and drove the waves neither against the one nor the other of the two gullets; so that instead of rushing into a defile, they dashed themselves against a wall.

But the currents of the wind are curved, and it was probable that there would be some sudden change. If it should veer to the east before the second frame could be constructed the peril would be great. The irruption of the sea into the gorge would be complete, and all would probably be lost.

The wildness of the storm went on increasing. The essence of a tempest is the rapid succession of its blows. That is its strength; but it is also its weakness. Its fury gives the opportunity to human intelligence, and man spies its weak points for his defence; but under what overwhelming assaults! No respite, no interruption, no truce, no pause for taking breath. There seems an unspeakable cowardice in that prodigality of inexhaustible resources.

All the tumult of the wide expanse rushed towards the Douvres. Voices were heard in the darkness. What could they be? The ancient terror of the sea was there. At times they seemed to speak as if some one was uttering words of command. There were clamours, strange trepidations, and then that majestic roar which the mariners call the “Ocean cry.” The indefinite and flying eddies of the wind whistled, while curling the waves and flinging them like giant quoits, cast by invisible athletes, against the breakers. The enormous surf streamed over all the rocks; torrents above; foam below. Then the roaring was redoubled. No uproar of men or beasts could yield an idea of that din which mingled with the incessant breaking of the sea. The clouds cannonaded, the hailstones poured their volleys, the surf mounted to the assault. As far as eye could reach, the sea was white; ten leagues of yeasty water filled the horizon. Doors of fire were opened, clouds seemed burnt by clouds, and showed like smoke above a nebulous red mass, resembling burning embers. Floating conflagrations rushed together and amalgamated, each changing the shape of the other. From the midst of the dark roof a terrible arsenal appeared to be emptied out, hurling downward from the gulf, pell-mell, waterspouts, hail torrents, purple fire, phosphoric gleams, darkness, and lightnings.

Meanwhile Gilliatt seemed to pay no attention to the storm. His head was bent over his work. The second framework began to approach completion. To every clap of thunder he replied with a blow of his hammer, making a cadence which was audible even amidst that tumult. He was bareheaded, for a gust had carried away his *galérienne*.

He suffered from a burning thirst. Little pools of rain had formed in the rocks around him. From time to time he took some water in the hollow of his hand and drank. Then, without even looking upward to observe the storm, he applied himself anew to his task.

All might depend upon a moment. He knew the fate that awaited him if his breakwater should not be completed in time. Of what avail could it be to lose a moment in looking for the approach of death?

The turmoil around him was like that of a vast bubbling cauldron. Crash and uproar were everywhere. Sometimes the lightning seemed to descend a sort of ladder. The electric flame returned incessantly to the same points of the rock, where there were probably metallic veins. Hailstones fell of enormous size. Gilliatt was compelled to shake the folds of his overcoat, even the pockets of which became filled with hail.

The storm had now rotated to the west, and was expending its fury upon the barricades of the two Douvres. But Gilliatt had faith in his breakwaters, and with good reason. These barricades, made of a great portion of the forepart of the Durande, took the shock of the waves easily. Elasticity is a resistance. The experiments of Stephenson establish the fact that against the waves, which are themselves elastic, a raft of timber, joined and chained together in a certain fashion, will form a more powerful obstacle than a breakwater of masonry. The barriers of the Douvres fulfilled these conditions. They were, moreover, so ingeniously made fast, that the waves striking them beneath were like hammers beating in nails, pressing and consolidating the work upon the rocks. To demolish them it would have been necessary to overthrow the Douvres themselves. The surf, in fact, was only able to cast over upon the sloop some flakes of foam. On that side, thanks to the barrier, the tempest ended only in harmless insult. Gilliatt turned his back upon the scene. He heard composedly its useless rage upon the rocks behind him.

The foam-flakes coming from all sides were like flights of down. The vast irritated ocean deluged the rocks, dashed over them and raged within, penetrated into the network of their interior fissures, and issued again from the granitic masses by the narrow chinks, forming a kind of inexhaustible fountains playing peacefully in the midst of that deluge. Here and there a silvery network fell gracefully from these spouts in the sea.

The second frame of the eastern barrier was nearly completed. A few more knots of rope and ends of chains and this new rampart would be ready to play its part in barring out the storm.

Suddenly there was a great brightness; the rain ceased; the clouds rolled asunder; the wind had just shifted; a sort of high, dark window opened in the zenith, and the lightnings were extinguished. The end seemed to have come. It was but the commencement.

The change of wind was from the north-west to the north-east.

The storm was preparing to burst forth again with a new legion of hurricanes. The north was about to mount to the assault. Sailors call this dreaded moment of transition the “Return storm.” The southern wind brings most rain, the north wind most lightning.

The attack, coming now from the east, was directed against the weak point of the position.

This time Gilliatt interrupted his work and looked around him.

He stood erect, upon a curved projection of the rock behind the second barrier, which was nearly finished. If the first frame had been carried away, it would have broken down the second, which was not yet consolidated, and must have crushed him. Gilliatt, in the place that he had chosen, must in that case have been destroyed before seeing the sloop, the machinery, and all his work shattered and swallowed up in the gulf. Such was the possibility which awaited him. He accepted it, and contemplated it sternly.

In that wreck of all his hope, to die at once would have been his desire; to die first, as he would have regarded it — for the machinery produced in his mind the effect of a living being. He moved aside his hair, which was beaten over his eyes by the wind, grasped his trusty mallet, drew himself up in a menacing attitude, and awaited the event.

He was not kept long in suspense.

A flash of lightning gave the signal; the livid opening in the zenith closed; a driving torrent of rain fell; then all became dark, save where the lightnings broke forth once more. The attack had recommenced in earnest.

A heavy swell, visible from time to time in the blaze of the lightning, was rolling in the east beyond “The Man Rock.” It resembled a huge wall of glass. It was green and without foam, and it stretched across the wide expanse. It was advancing towards the breakwater, increasing as it approached. It was a singular kind of gigantic cylinder, rolling upon the ocean. The thunder kept up a hollow rumbling.

The great wave struck “The Man Rock,” broke in twain, and passed beyond. The broken wave, rejoined, formed a mountain of water, and instead of advancing in parallel line as before, came down perpendicularly upon the breakwater.

The shock was terrific: the whole wave became a roaring surf.

It is impossible for those who have not witnessed them to imagine those snowy avalanches which the sea thus precipitates, and under which it engulfs for the moment rocks of more than a hundred feet in height, such, for example, as the Great Anderlo at Guernsey, and the Pinnacle at Jersey. At Saint Mary of Madagascar it passes completely over the promontory of Tintingue.

For some moments the sea drowned everything. Nothing was visible except the furious waters, an enormous breadth of foam, the whiteness of a winding-sheet blowing in the draught of a sepulchre; nothing was heard but the roaring storm working devastation around.

When the foam subsided, Gilliatt was still standing at his post.

The barrier had stood firm. Not a chain was broken, not a nail displaced. It had exhibited under the trial the two chief qualities of a breakwater; it had proved flexible as a hurdle and firm as a wall. The surf falling upon it had dissolved into a shower of drops.

A river of foam rushing along the zigzags of the defile subsided as it approached the sloop.

The man who had put this curb upon the fury of the ocean took no rest.

The storm fortunately turned aside its fury for a moment. The fierce attack of the waves was renewed upon the wall of the rock. There was a respite, and Gilliatt took advantage of it to complete the interior barrier.

The daylight faded upon his labours. The hurricane continued its violence upon the flank of the rocks with a mournful solemnity. The stores of fire and water in the sky poured out incessantly without exhausting themselves. The undulations of the wind above and below were like the movements of a dragon.

Nightfall brought scarcely any deeper night. The change was hardly felt, for the darkness was never complete. Tempests alternately darkening and illumining by their lightnings, are merely intervals of the visible and invisible. All is pale glare, and then all is darkness. Spectral shapes issue forth suddenly, and return as suddenly into the deep shade.

A phosphoric zone, tinged with the hue of the aurora borealis, appeared like ghastly flames behind the dense clouds, giving to all things a wan aspect, and making the rain-drifts luminous.

This uncertain light aided Gilliatt, and directed him in his operations. By its help he was enabled to raise the forward barrier. The breakwater was now almost complete. As he was engaged in making fast a powerful cable to the last beam, the gale blew directly in his face. This compelled him to raise his head. The wind had shifted abruptly to the north-east. The assault upon the eastern gullet recommenced. Gilliatt cast his eyes around the horizon. Another great wall of water was approaching.

The wave broke with a great shock; a second followed; then another and another still; then five or six almost together; then a last shock of tremendous force.

This last wave, which was an accumulation of forces, had a singular resemblance to a living thing. It would not have been difficult to imagine in the midst of that swelling mass the shapes of fins and gill-coverings. It fell heavily and broke upon the barriers. Its almost animal form was torn to pieces in the shape of spouts and gushes, resembling the crushing to death of some sea hydra upon that block of rocks and timbers. The swell rushed through, subsiding but devastating as it went. The huge wave seemed to bite and cling to its victim as it died. The rock shook to its base. A savage howling mingled with the roar; the foam flew far like the spouting of a leviathan.

The subsidence exhibited the extent of the ravages of the surf. This last escalade had not been ineffectual. The breakwater had suffered this time. A long and heavy beam, torn from the first barrier, had been carried over the second, and hurled violently upon the projecting rock on which Gilliatt had stood but a moment before. By good fortune he had not returned there. Had he done so, his death had been inevitable.

There was a remarkable circumstance in the fall of this beam, which by preventing the framework rebounding, saved Gilliatt from greater dangers. It even proved useful to him, as will be seen, in another way.

Between the projecting rock and the interior wall of the defile there was a large interval, something like the notch of an axe, or the split of a wedge. One of the extremities of the timber hurled into the air by the waves had stuck fast into this notch in falling. The gap had become enlarged.

Gilliatt was struck with an idea. It was that of bearing heavily on the other extremity.

The beam caught by one end in the nook, which it had widened, projected from it straight as an outstretched arm. This species of arm projected parallel with the anterior wall of the defile, and the disengaged end stretched from its resting place about eighteen or twenty inches. A good distance for the object to be attained.

Gilliatt raised himself by means of his hands, feet, and knees to the escarpment, and then turned his back, pressing both his shoulders against the enormous lever. The beam was long, which increased its raising power. The rock was already loosened; but he was compelled to renew his efforts again and again. The sweat-drops rolled from his forehead as rapidly as the spray. The fourth attempt exhausted all his powers. There was a cracking noise; the gap spreading in the shape of a fissure, opened its vast jaws, and the heavy mass fell into the narrow space of the defile with a noise like the echo of the thunder.

The mass fell straight, and without breaking; resting in its bed like a Druid cromlech precipitated in one piece.

The beam which had served as a lever descended with the rock, and Gilliatt, stumbling forward as it gave way, narrowly escaped falling.

The bed of the pass at this part was full of huge round stones, and there was little water. The monolith lying in the boiling foam, the flakes of which fell on Gilliatt where he stood, stretched from side to side of the great parallel rocks of the defile, and formed a transversal wall, a sort of cross-stroke between the two escarpments. Its two ends touched the rocks. It had been a little too long to lie flat, but its summit of soft rock was struck off with the fall. The result of this fall was a singular sort of *cul-de-sac*, which may still be seen. The water behind this stony barrier is almost always tranquil.

This was a rampart more invincible still than the forward timbers of the Durande fixed between the two Douvres.

The barrier came opportunely.

The assaults of the sea had continued. The obstinacy of the waves is always increased by an obstacle. The first frame began to show signs of breaking up. One breach, however small, in a breakwater, is always serious. It inevitably enlarges, and there is no means of supplying its place, for the sea would sweep away the workmen.

A flash which lighted up the rocks revealed to Gilliatt the nature of the mischief; the beams broken down, the ends of rope and fragments of chain swinging in the winds, and a rent in the centre of the apparatus. The second frame was intact.

Though the block of stone so powerfully overturned by Gilliatt in the defile behind the breakwater was the strongest possible barrier, it had a defect. It was too low. The surge could not destroy, but could sweep over it.

It was useless to think of building it higher. Nothing but masses of rock could avail upon a barrier of stone; but how could such masses be detached? or, if detached, how could they be moved, or raised, or piled, or fixed? Timbers may be added, but rocks cannot.

Gilliatt was not Enceladus.

The very little height of this rocky isthmus rendered him anxious.

The effects of this fault were not long in showing themselves. The assaults upon the breakwater were incessant; the heavy seas seemed not merely to rage, but to attack with determination to destroy it. A sort of trampling noise was heard upon the jolted framework.

Suddenly the end of a binding strake, detached from the dislocated frame, was swept away over the second barrier and across the transversal rock, falling in the defile, where the water seized and carried it into the sinuosities of the pass. Gilliatt lost sight of it. It seemed probable that it would do some injury to the sloop. Fortunately, the water in the interior of the rocks, shut in on all sides, felt little of the commotion without. The waves there were comparatively trifling, and the shock was not likely to be very severe. For the rest, he had little time to spare for reflection upon this mishap. Every variety of danger was arising at once; the tempest was concentrated upon the vulnerable point; destruction was imminent.

The darkness was profound for a moment: the lightnings paused — a sort of sinister connivance. The cloud and the sea became one: there was a dull peal.

This was followed by a terrible outburst. The frame which formed the front of the barriers was swept away. The fragments of beams were visible in the rolling waters. The sea was using the first breakwater as an engine for making a breach in the second.

Gilliatt experienced the feeling of a general who sees his advanced guard driven in.

The second construction of beams resisted the shock. The apparatus behind it was powerfully secured and buttressed. But the broken frame was heavy, and was at the mercy of the waves, which were incessantly hurling it forward and withdrawing it. The ropes and chains which remained unsevered prevented its entirely breaking up, and the qualities which

Gilliatt had given it as a means of defence made it, in the end, a more effective weapon of destruction. Instead of a buckler, it had become a battering-ram. Besides this, it was now full of irregularities from breaking; ends of timbers projected from all parts; and it was, as it were, covered with teeth and spikes. No sort of arm could have been more effective, or more fitted for the handling of the tempest. It was the projectile, while the sea played the part of the catapult.

The blows succeeded each other with a dismal regularity. Gilliatt, thoughtful and anxious, behind that barricaded portal, listened to the sound of death knocking loudly for admittance.

He reflected with bitterness that, but for the fatal entanglement of the funnel of the Durande in the wreck, he would have been at that very moment, and even since the morning, once more at Guernsey, in the port, with the sloop out of danger and with the machinery saved.

The dreaded moment arrived. The destruction was complete. There was a sound like a death-rattle. The entire frame of the breakwater, the double apparatus crushed and mingled confusedly, came in a whirl of foam, rushing upon the stone barricade like chaos upon a mountain, where it stopped. Here the fragments lay together, a mass of beams penetrable by the waves, but still breaking their force. The conquered barrier struggled nobly against destruction. The waves had shattered it, and in their turn were shattered against it. Though overthrown, it still remained in some degree effective. The rock which barred its passage, an immovable obstacle held it fast. The defile, as we have said, was very narrow at that point; the victorious whirlwind had driven forward, mingled and piled up the wreck of the breakwater in this narrow pass. The very violence of the assault, by heaping up the mass and driving the broken ends one into the other, had contributed to make the pile firm. It was destroyed, but immovable. A few pieces of timber only were swept away and dispersed by the waves. One passed through the air very near to Gilliatt. He felt the counter current upon his forehead.

Some waves, however, of that kind which in great tempests return with an imperturbable regularity, swept over the ruins of the breakwater. They fell into the defile, and in spite of the many angles of the passage, set the waters within in commotion. The waters began to roll through the gorge ominously. The mysterious embraces of the waves among the rocks were audible.

What means were there of preventing this agitation extending as far as the sloop? It would not require a long time for the blast of wind to create a tempest through all the windings of the pass. A few heavy seas would be sufficient to stave in the sloop and scatter her burden.

Gilliatt shuddered as he reflected.

But he was not disconcerted. No defeat could daunt his soul.

The hurricane had now discovered the true plan of attack, and was rushing fiercely between the two walls of the strait.

Suddenly a crash was heard, resounding and prolonging itself through the defile at some distance behind him: a crash more terrible than any he had yet heard.

It came from the direction of the sloop.

Something disastrous was happening there.

Gilliatt hastened towards it.

From the eastern gullet where he was, he could not see the sloop on account of the sharp turns of the pass. At the last turn he stopped and waited for the lightning.

The first flash revealed to him the position of affairs.

The rush of the sea through the eastern entrance had been met by a blast of wind from the other end. A disaster was near at hand.

The sloop had received no visible damage; anchored as she was, the storm had little power over her, but the carcase of the Durande was distressed.

In such a tempest, the wreck presented a considerable surface. It was entirely out of the sea in the air, exposed. The breach which Gilliatt had made, and which he had passed the engine through, had rendered the hull still weaker. The keelson was snapped, the vertebral column of the skeleton was broken.

The hurricane had passed over it. Scarcely more than this was needed to complete its destruction. The planking of the deck had bent like an opened book. The dismemberment had begun. It was the noise of this dislocation which had reached Gilliatt’s ears in the midst of the tempest.

The disaster which presented itself as he approached appeared almost irremediable.

The square opening which he had cut in the keel had become a gaping wound. The wind had converted the smooth-cut hole into a ragged fracture. This transverse breach separated the wreck in two. The after-part, nearest to the sloop, had remained firm in its bed of rocks. The forward portion which faced him was hanging. A fracture, while it holds, is a sort of hinge. The whole mass oscillated, as the wind moved it, with a doleful noise. Fortunately the sloop was no longer beneath it.

But this swinging movement shook the other portion of the hull, still wedged and immovable as it was between the two Douvres. From shaking to casting down the distance is not far. Under the obstinate assaults of the gale, the dislocated part might suddenly carry away the other portion, which almost touched the sloop. In this case, the whole wreck, together with the sloop and the engine, must be swept into the sea and swallowed up.

All this presented itself to his eyes. It was the end of all. How could it be prevented?

Gilliatt was one of those who are accustomed to snatch the means of safety out of danger itself. He collected his ideas for a moment. Then he hastened to his arsenal and brought his hatchet.

The mallet had served him well, it was now the turn of the axe.

He mounted upon the wreck, got a footing on that part of the planking which had not given way, and leaning over the precipice of the pass between the Douvres, he began to cut away the broken joists and the planking which supported the hanging portion of the hull.

His object was to effect the separation of the two parts of the wreck, to disencumber the half which remained firm, to throw overboard what the waves had seized, and thus share the prey with the storm. The hanging portion of the wreck, borne down by the wind and by its own weight, adhered only at one or two points. The entire wreck resembled a folding-screen, one leaf of which, half-hanging, beat against the other. Five or six pieces of the planking only, bent and started, but not broken, still held. Their fractures creaked and enlarged at every gust, and the axe, so to speak, had but to help the labour of the wind. This more than half-severed condition, while it increased the facility of the work, also rendered it dangerous. The whole might give way beneath him at any moment.

The tempest had reached its highest point. The convulsion of the sea reached the heavens. Hitherto the storm had been supreme, it had seemed to work its own imperious will, to give the impulse, to drive the waves to frenzy, while still preserving a sort of sinister lucidity. Below was fury — above, anger. The heavens are the breath, the ocean only foam, hence the authority of the wind. But the intoxication of its own horrors had confused it. It had become a mere whirlwind; it was a blindness leading to night. There are times when tempests become frenzied, when the heavens are attacked with a sort of delirium; when the firmament raves and hurls its lightnings blindly. No terror is greater than this. It is a hideous moment. The trembling of the rock was at its height. Every storm has a mysterious course, but now it loses its appointed path. It is the most dangerous point of the tempest. “At that moment,” says Thomas Fuller, “the wind is a furious maniac.” It is at that instant that that continuous discharge of electricity takes place which Piddington calls “the cascade of lightnings.” It is at that instant that in the blackest spot of the clouds, none know why, unless it be to spy the universal terror, a circle of blue light appears, which the Spanish sailors of ancient times called the eye of the tempest, *el ojo de la tempestad*. That terrible eye looked down upon Gilliatt.

Gilliatt on his part was surveying the heavens. He raised his head now. After every stroke of his hatchet he stood erect and gazed upwards, almost haughtily. He was, or seemed to be, too near destruction not to feel self-sustained. Would he despair? No! In the presence of the wildest fury of the ocean he was watchful as well as bold. He planted his feet only where the wreck was firm. He ventured his life, and yet was careful; for his determined spirit, too, had reached its highest point. His strength had grown tenfold greater. He had become heated with his own intrepidity. The strokes of his hatchet were like blows of defiance. He seemed to have gained in directness what the tempest had lost. A pathetic struggle! On the one hand, an indefatigable will; on the other, inexhaustible power. It was a contest with the elements for the prize at his feet. The clouds took the shape of Gorgon masks in the immensity of the heavens; every possible form of terror appeared; the rain came from the sea, the surf from the cloud; phantoms of the wind bent down; meteoric faces revealed themselves and were again eclipsed, leaving the darkness more monstrous: then there was nothing seen but the torrents coming from all sides — a boiling sea; cumuli heavy with hail, ashen-hued, ragged-edged, appeared seized with a sort of whirling frenzy; strange rattlings filled the air; the inverse currents of electricity observed by Volta darted their sudden flashes from cloud to cloud. The prolongation of the lightnings was terrible; the flashes passed near to Gilliatt. The very ocean seemed astonished. He passed to and fro upon the tottering wreck, making the deck tremble under his steps, striking, cutting, hacking with the hatchet in his hand, pallid in the gleam of the lightning, his long hair streaming, his feet naked, in rags, his face covered with the foam of the sea, but grand still amid that maelstrom of the thunderstorm.

Against these furious powers man has no weapon but his invention. Invention was Gilliatt’s triumph. His object was to allow all the dislocated portions of the wreck to fall together. For this reason he cut away the broken portions without entirely separating them, leaving some parts on which they still swung. Suddenly he stopped, holding his axe in the air. The operation was complete. The entire portion went with a crash.

The mass rolled down between the two Douvres, just below Gilliatt, who stood upon the wreck, leaning over and observing the fall. It fell perpendicularly into the water, struck the rocks, and stopped in the defile before touching the bottom. Enough remained out of the water to rise more than twelve feet above the waves. The vertical mass of planking formed a wall between the two Douvres; like the rock overturned crosswise higher up the defile, it allowed only a slight stream of foam to pass through at its two extremities, and thus was a fifth barricade improvised by Gilliatt against the tempest in that passage of the seas.

The hurricane itself, in its blind fury, had assisted in the construction of this last barrier.

It was fortunate that the proximity of the two walls had prevented the mass of wreck from falling to the bottom. This circumstance gave the barricade greater height; the water, besides, could flow under the obstacle, which diminished the power of the waves. That which passes below cannot pass over. This is partly the secret of the floating breakwater.

Henceforth, let the storm do what it might, there was nothing to fear for the sloop or the machinery. The water around them could not become agitated again. Between the barrier of the Douvres, which covered them on the west, and the barricade which protected them from the east, no heavy sea or wind could reach them.

Gilliatt had plucked safety out of the catastrophe itself. The storm had been his fellow-labourer in the work.

This done, he took a little water in the palm of his hand from one of the rain-pools, and drank: and then, looking upward at the storm, said with a smile, “Bungler!”

Human intelligence combating with brute force experiences an ironical joy in demonstrating the stupidity of its antagonist, and compelling it to serve the very objects of its fury, and Gilliatt felt something of that immemorial desire to insult his invisible enemy, which is as old as the heroes of the *Iliad*.

He descended to the sloop and examined it by the gleam of the lightning. The relief which he had been able to give to his distressed bark was well-timed. She had been much shaken during the last hour, and had begun to give way. A hasty glance revealed no serious injury. Nevertheless, he was certain that the vessel had been subjected to violent shocks. As soon as the waves had subsided, the hull had righted itself; the anchors had held fast; as to the machine, the four chains had supported it admirably.

While Gilliatt was completing this survey, something white passed before his eyes and vanished in the gloom. It was a sea-mew.

No sight could be more welcome in tempestuous weather. When the birds reappear the storm is departing. The thunder redoubled; another good sign.

The violent efforts of the storm had broken its force. All mariners know that the last ordeal is severe, but short. The excessive violence of the thunderstorm is the herald of the end.

The rain stopped suddenly. Then there was only a surly rumbling in the heavens. The storm ceased with the suddenness of a plank falling to the ground. The immense mass of clouds became disorganised. A strip of clear sky appeared between them. Gilliatt was astonished: it was broad daylight.

The tempest had lasted nearly twenty hours.

The wind which had brought the storm carried it away. A dark pile was diffused over the horizon, the broken clouds were flying in confusion across the sky. From one end to the other of the line there was a movement of retreat: a long muttering was heard, gradually decreasing, a few last drops of rain fell, and all those dark masses charged with thunder, departed like a terrible multitude of chariots.

Suddenly the wide expanse of sky became blue.

Gilliatt perceived that he was wearied. Sleep swoops down upon the exhausted frame like a bird upon its prey. He drooped and sank upon the deck of the bark without choosing his position, and there slept. Stretched at length and inert, he remained thus for some hours, scarcely distinguishable from the beams and joists among which he lay.

BOOK IV

PITFALLS IN THE WAY

I

HE WHO IS HUNGRY IS NOT ALONE

When he awakened he was hungry.

The sea was growing calmer. But there was still a heavy swell, which made his departure, for the present at least, impossible. The day, too, was far advanced. For the sloop with its burden to get to Guernsey before midnight, it was necessary to start in the morning.

Although pressed by hunger, Gilliatt began by stripping himself, the only means of getting warmth. His clothing was saturated by the storm, but the rain had washed out the sea-water, which rendered it possible to dry them.

He kept nothing on but his trousers, which he turned up nearly to the knees.

His overcoat, jacket, overalls, and sheepskin he spread out and fixed with large round stones here and there.

Then he thought of eating.

He had recourse to his knife, which he was careful to sharpen, and to keep always in good condition; and he detached from the rocks a few limpets, similar in kind to the *clonisses* of the Mediterranean. It is well known that these are eaten raw: but after so many labours, so various and so rude, the pittance was meagre. His biscuit was gone; but of water he had now abundance.

He took advantage of the receding tide to wander among the rocks in search of crayfish. There was extent enough of rock to hope for a successful search.

But he had not reflected that he could do nothing with these without fire to cook them. If he had taken the trouble to go to his store-cavern, he would have found it inundated with the rain. His wood and coal were drowned, and of his store of tow, which served him for tinder, there was not a fibre which was not saturated. No means remained of lighting a fire.

For the rest, his blower was completely disorganised. The screen of the hearth of his forge was broken down; the storm had sacked and devastated his workshop. With what tools and apparatus had escaped the general wreck, he could still have done carpentry work; but he could not have accomplished any of the labours of the smith. Gilliatt, however, never thought of his workshop for a moment.

Drawn in another direction by the pangs of hunger, he had pursued without much reflection his search for food. He wandered, not in the gorge of the rocks, but outside among the smaller breakers. It was there that the Durande, ten weeks previously, had first struck upon the sunken reef.

For the search that Gilliatt was prosecuting, this part was more favourable than the interior. At low water the crabs are accustomed to crawl out into the air. They seem to like to warm themselves in the sun, where they swarm sometimes to the disgust of loiterers, who recognise in these creatures, with their awkward sidelong gait, climbing clumsily from crack to crack the lower stages of the rocks like the steps of a staircase, a sort of sea vermin.

For two months Gilliatt had lived upon these vermin of the sea.

On this day, however, the crayfish and crabs were both wanting. The tempest had driven them into their solitary retreats; and they had not yet mustered courage to venture abroad. Gilliatt held his open knife in his hand, and from time to time scraped a cockle from under the bunches of seaweed, which he ate while still walking.

He could not have been far from the very spot where Sieur Clubin had perished.

As Gilliatt was determining to content himself with the sea-urchins and the *châtaignes de mer*, a little clattering noise at his feet aroused his attention. A large crab, startled by his approach, had just dropped into a pool. The water was shallow, and he did not lose sight of it.

He chased the crab along the base of the rock; the crab moved fast.

Suddenly it was gone.

It had buried itself in some crevice under the rock.

Gilliatt clutched the projections of the rock, and stretched out to observe where it shelved away under the water.

As he suspected, there was an opening there in which the creature had evidently taken refuge. It was more than a crevice; it was a kind of porch.

The sea entered beneath it, but was not deep. The bottom was visible, covered with large pebbles. The pebbles were green and clothed with *confervæ*, indicating that they were never dry. They were like the tops of a number of heads of infants, covered with a kind of green hair.

Holding his knife between his teeth, Gilliatt descended, by the help of feet and hands, from the upper part of the escarpment, and leaped into the water. It reached almost to his shoulders.

He made his way through the porch, and found himself in a blind passage, with a roof in the form of a rude arch over his head. The walls were polished and slippery. The crab was nowhere visible. He gained his feet and advanced in daylight growing fainter, so that he began to lose the power to distinguish objects.

At about fifteen paces the vaulted roof ended overhead. He had penetrated beyond the blind passage. There was here more space, and consequently more daylight. The pupils of his eyes, moreover, had dilated; he could see pretty clearly. He was taken by surprise.

He had made his way again into the singular cavern which he had visited in the previous month. The only difference was that he had entered by the way of the sea.

It was through the submarine arch, that he had remarked before, that he had just entered. At certain low tides it was accessible.

His eyes became more accustomed to the place. His vision became clearer and clearer. He was astonished. He found himself again in that extraordinary palace of shadows; saw again before his eyes that vaulted roof, those columns, those purple and blood-like stains, that vegetation rich with gems, and at the farther end, that crypt or sanctuary, and that altar-like stone. He took little notice of these details, but their impression was in his mind, and he saw that the place was unchanged.

He observed before him, at a certain height in the wall, the crevice through which he had penetrated the first time, and which, from the point where he now stood, appeared inaccessible.

Near the moulded arch, he remarked those low dark grottoes, a sort of caves within a cavern, which he had already observed from a distance. He now stood nearer to them. The entrance to the nearest to him was out of the water, and easily approachable. Nearer still than this recess he noticed, above the level of the water, and within reach of his hand, a horizontal fissure. It seemed to him probable that the crab had taken refuge there, and he plunged his hand in as far as he was able, and groped about in that dusky aperture.

Suddenly he felt himself seized by the arm. A strange indescribable horror thrilled through him.

Some living thing, thin, rough, flat, cold, slimy, had twisted itself round his naked arm, in the dark depth below. It crept upward towards his chest. Its pressure was like a tightening cord, its steady persistence like that of a screw. In less than a moment some mysterious spiral form had passed round his wrist and elbow, and had reached his shoulder. A sharp point penetrated beneath the armpit.

Gilliatt recoiled; but he had scarcely power to move! He was, as it were, nailed to the place. With his left hand, which was disengaged, he seized his knife, which he still held between his teeth, and with that hand, holding the knife, he supported himself against the rocks, while he made a desperate effort to withdraw his arm. He succeeded only in disturbing his persecutor, which wound itself still tighter. It was supple as leather, strong as steel, cold as night.

A second form, sharp, elongated, and narrow, issued out of the crevice, like a tongue out of monstrous jaws. It seemed to lick his naked body. Then suddenly stretching out, it became longer and thinner, as it crept over his skin, and wound itself round him. At the same time a terrible sense of pain, comparable to nothing he had ever known, compelled all his muscles to contract. He felt upon his skin a number of flat rounded points. It seemed as if innumerable suckers had fastened to his flesh and were about to drink his blood.

A third long undulating shape issued from the hole in the rock; seemed to feel its way about his body; lashed round his ribs like a cord, and fixed itself there.

Agony when at its height is mute. Gilliatt uttered no cry. There was sufficient light for him to see the repulsive forms which had entangled themselves about him. A fourth ligature, but this one swift as an arrow, darted towards his stomach, and wound around him there.

It was impossible to sever or tear away the slimy bands which were twisted tightly round his body, and were adhering by a number of points. Each of the points was the focus of frightful and singular pangs. It was as if numberless small mouths were devouring him at the same time.

A fifth long, slimy, riband-shaped strip issued from the hole. It passed over the others, and wound itself tightly around his chest. The compression increased his sufferings. He could scarcely breathe.

These living thongs were pointed at their extremities, but broadened like a blade of a sword towards its hilt. All belonged evidently to the same centre. They crept and glided about him; he felt the strange points of pressure, which seemed to him like mouths, change their places from time to time.

Suddenly a large, round, flattened, glutinous mass issued from beneath the crevice. It was the centre; the five thongs were attached to it like spokes to the nave of a wheel. On the opposite side of this disgusting monster appeared the commencement of three other tentacles, the ends of which remained under the rock. In the middle of this slimy mass appeared two eyes.

The eyes were fixed on Gilliatt.

He recognised the Devil-Fish.

II

THE MONSTER

It is difficult for those who have not seen it to believe in the existence of the devil-fish.

Compared to this creature, the ancient hydras are insignificant.

At times we are tempted to imagine that the vague forms which float in our dreams may encounter in the realm of the Possible attractive forces, having power to fix their lineaments, and shape living beings, out of these creatures of our slumbers. The Unknown has power over these strange visions, and out of them composes monsters. Orpheus, Homer, and Hesiod imagined only the Chimera: Providence has created this terrible creature of the sea.

Creation abounds in monstrous forms of life. The wherefore of this perplexes and affrights the religious thinker.

If terror were the object of its creation, nothing could be imagined more perfect than the devil-fish.

The whale has enormous bulk, the devil-fish is comparatively small; the jararaca makes a hissing noise, the devil-fish is mute; the rhinoceros has a horn, the devil-fish has none; the scorpion has a dart, the devil-fish has no dart; the shark has sharp fins, the devil-fish has no fins; the vespertilio-bat has wings with claws, the devil-fish has no wings; the porcupine has his spines, the devil-fish has no spines; the sword-fish has his sword, the devil-fish has none; the torpedo has its electric spark, the devil-fish has none; the toad has its poison, the devil-fish has none; the viper has its venom, the devil-fish has no venom; the lion has its talons, the devil-fish has no talons; the griffon has its beak, the devil-fish has no beak; the crocodile has its jaws, the devil-fish has no teeth.

The devil-fish has no muscular organisation, no menacing cry, no breastplate, no horn, no dart, no claw, no tail with which to hold or bruise; no cutting fins, or wings with nails, no prickles, no sword, no electric discharge, no poison, no talons, no beak, no teeth. Yet he is of all creatures the most formidably armed.

What, then, is the devil-fish? It is the sea vampire.

The swimmer who, attracted by the beauty of the spot, ventures among breakers in the open sea, where the still waters hide the splendours of the deep, or in the hollows of unfrequented rocks, in unknown caverns abounding in sea plants, testacea, and crustacea, under the deep portals of the ocean, runs the risk of meeting it. If that fate should be yours, be not curious, but fly. The intruder enters there dazzled; but quits the spot in terror.

This frightful apparition, which is always possible among the rocks in the open sea, is a greyish form which undulates in the water. It is of the thickness of a man’s arm, and in length nearly five feet. Its outline is ragged. Its form resembles an umbrella closed, and without handle. This irregular mass advances slowly towards you. Suddenly it opens, and eight radii issue abruptly from around a face with two eyes. These radii are alive: their undulation is like lambent flames; they resemble, when opened, the spokes of a wheel, of four or five feet in diameter. A terrible expansion! It springs upon its prey.

The devil-fish harpoons its victim.

It winds around the sufferer, covering and entangling him in its long folds. Underneath it is yellow; above, a dull, earthy hue: nothing could render that inexplicable shade dust coloured. Its form is spider-like, but its tints are like those of the chamelion. When irritated it becomes violet. Its most horrible characteristic is its softness.

Its folds strangle, its contact paralyses.

It has an aspect like gangrened or scabrous flesh. It is a monstrous embodiment of disease.

It adheres closely to its prey, and cannot be torn away; a fact which is due to its power of exhausting air. The eight antennæ, large at their roots, diminish gradually, and end in needle-like points. Underneath each of these feelers range two rows of pustules, decreasing in size, the largest ones near the head, the smaller at the extremities. Each row contains twenty-five of these. There are, therefore, fifty pustules to each feeler, and the creature possesses in the whole four hundred. These pustules are capable of acting like cupping-glasses. They are cartilaginous substances, cylindrical, horny, and livid. Upon the large species they diminish gradually from the diameter of a five-franc piece to the size of a split pea. These small tubes can be thrust out and withdrawn by the animal at will. They are capable of piercing to a depth of more than an inch.

This sucking apparatus has all the regularity and delicacy of a key-board. It stands forth at one moment and disappears the next. The most perfect sensitiveness cannot equal the contractibility of these suckers; always proportioned to the internal movement of the animal, and its exterior circumstances. The monster is endowed with the qualities of the sensitive plant.

This animal is the same as those which mariners call Poulps; which science designates Cephalopteræ, and which ancient legends call Krakens. It is the English sailors who call them "Devil-fish," and sometimes Bloodsuckers. In the Channel Islands they are called *pieuvres*.

They are rare at Guernsey, very small at Jersey; but near the island of Sark are numerous as well as very large.

An engraving in Sonnini's edition of Buffon represents a Cephaloptera crushing a frigate. Denis Montfort, in fact, considers the Poulp, or Octopod, of high latitudes, strong enough to destroy a ship. Bory Saint Vincent doubts this; but he shows that in our regions they will attack men. Near Brecq-Hou, in Sark, they show a cave where a devil-fish a few years since seized and drowned a lobster-fisher. Peron and Lamarck are in error in their belief that the "poulp" having no fins cannot swim. He who writes these lines has seen with his own eyes, at Sark, in the cavern called the Boutiques, a pieuvre swimming and pursuing a bather. When captured and killed, this specimen was found to be four English feet broad, and it was possible to count its four hundred suckers. The monster thrust them out convulsively in the agony of death.

According to Denis Montfort, one of those observers whose marvellous intuition sinks or raises them to the level of magicians, the poulp is almost endowed with the passions of man: it has its hatreds. In fact, in the Absolute to be hideous is to hate.

Hideousness struggles under the natural law of elimination, which necessarily renders it hostile.

When swimming, the devil-fish rests, so to speak, in its sheath. It swims with all its parts drawn close. It may be likened to a sleeve sewn up with a closed fist within. The protuberance, which is the head, pushes the water aside and advances with a vague undulatory movement. Its two eyes, though large, are indistinct, being of the colour of the water.

When in ambush, or seeking its prey, it retires into itself, grows smaller and condenses itself. It is then scarcely distinguishable in the submarine twilight.

At such times, it looks like a mere ripple in the water. It resembles anything except a living creature.

The devil-fish is crafty. When its victim is unsuspicious, it opens suddenly.

A glutinous mass, endowed with a malignant will, what can be more horrible?

It is in the most beautiful azure depths of the limpid water that this hideous, voracious polyp delights. It always conceals itself, a fact which increases its terrible associations. When they are seen, it is almost invariably after they have been captured.

At night, however, and particularly in the hot season, it becomes phosphorescent. These horrible creatures have their passions; their submarine nuptials. Then it adorns itself, burns and illumines; and from the height of some rock, it may be seen in the deep obscurity of the waves below, expanding with a pale irradiation — a spectral sun.

The devil-fish not only swims, it walks. It is partly fish, partly reptile. It crawls upon the bed of the sea. At these times, it makes use of its eight feelers, and creeps along in the fashion of a species of swift-moving caterpillar.

It has no blood, no bones, no flesh. It is soft and flabby; a skin with nothing inside. Its eight tentacles may be turned inside out like the fingers of a glove.

It has a single orifice in the centre of its radii, which appears at first to be neither the vent nor the mouth. It is, in fact, both one and the other. The orifice performs a double function. The entire creature is cold.

The jelly-fish of the Mediterranean is repulsive. Contact with that animated gelatinous substance which envelopes the bather, in which the hands sink, and the nails scratch ineffectively; which can be torn without killing it, and which can be plucked off without entirely removing it — that fluid and yet tenacious creature which slips through the fingers, is disgusting; but no horror can equal the sudden apparition of the devil-fish, that Medusa with its eight serpents.

No grasp is like the sudden strain of the cephaloptera.

It is with the sucking apparatus that it attacks. The victim is oppressed by a vacuum drawing at numberless points: it is not a clawing or a biting, but an indescribable scarification. A tearing of the flesh is terrible, but less terrible than a sucking of the blood. Claws are harmless compared with the horrible action of these natural air-cups. The talons of the wild beast enter into your flesh; but with the cephaloptera it is you who enter into the creature. The muscles swell, the fibres of the body are contorted, the skin cracks under the loathsome oppression, the blood spurts out and mingles horribly with the lymph of the monster, which clings to its victim by innumerable hideous mouths. The hydra incorporates itself with the man; the man becomes one with the hydra. The spectre lies upon you: the tiger can only devour you; the devil-fish, horrible, sucks your life-blood away. He draws you to him, and into himself; while bound down, glued to the ground, powerless, you feel yourself gradually emptied into this horrible pouch, which is the monster itself.

These strange animals, Science, in accordance with its habit of excessive caution even in the face of facts, at first rejects as fabulous; then she decides to observe them; then she dissects, classifies, catalogues, and labels; then procures specimens, and exhibits them in glass cases in museums. They enter then into her nomenclature; are designated mollusks, invertebrata, radiata: she determines their position in the animal world a little above the calamaries, a little below the cuttle-fish; she finds for these hydras of the sea an analogous creature in fresh water called the argyronecte: she divides them into great, medium, and small kinds; she admits more readily the existence of the small than of the large species, which is, however, the tendency of science in all countries, for she is by nature more microscopic than telescopic. She regards them from the point of view of their construction, and calls them Cephaloptera; counts their antennæ, and calls them Octopedes. This done, she leaves them. Where science drops them, philosophy takes them up.

Philosophy in her turn studies these creatures. She goes both less far and further. She does not dissect, but meditate. Where the scalpel has laboured, she plunges the hypothesis. She seeks the final cause. Eternal perplexity of the thinker. These creatures disturb his ideas of the Creator. They are hideous surprises. They are the death’s-head at the feast of contemplation. The philosopher determines their characteristics in dread. They are the concrete forms of evil. What attitude can he take towards this treason of creation against herself? To whom can he look for the solution of these riddles? The Possible is a terrible matrix. Monsters are mysteries in their concrete form. Portions of shade issue from the mass, and something within detaches itself, rolls, floats, condenses, borrows elements from the ambient darkness, becomes subject to unknown polarisations, assumes a kind of life, furnishes itself with some unimagined form from the obscurity, and with some terrible spirit from the miasma, and wanders ghostlike among living things. It is as if night itself assumed the forms of animals. But for what good? with what object? Thus we come again to the eternal questioning.

These animals are indeed phantoms as much as monsters. They are proved and yet improbable. Their fate is to exist in spite of *à priori* reasonings. They are the amphibia of the shore which separates life from death. Their unreality makes their existence puzzling. They touch the frontier of man's domain and people the region of chimeras. We deny the possibility of the vampire, and the cephaloptera appears. Their swarming is a certainty which disconcerts our confidence. Optimism, which is nevertheless in the right, becomes silenced in their presence. They form the visible extremity of the dark circles. They mark the transition of our reality into another. They seem to belong to that commencement of terrible life which the dreamer sees confusedly through the loophole of the night.

That multiplication of monsters, first in the Invisible, then in the Possible, has been suspected, perhaps perceived by magi and philosophers in their austere ecstasies and profound contemplations. Hence the conjecture of a material hell. The demon is simply the invisible tiger. The wild beast which devours souls has been presented to the eyes of human beings by St. John, and by Dante in his vision of Hell.

If, in truth, the invisible circles of creation continue indefinitely, if after one there is yet another, and so forth in illimitable progression; if that chain, which for our part we are resolved to doubt, really exist, the cephaloptera at one extremity proves Satan at the other. It is certain that the wrongdoer at one end proves the existence of wrong at the other.

Every malignant creature, like every perverted intelligence, is a sphinx. A terrible sphinx propounding a terrible riddle; the riddle of the existence of Evil.

It is this perfection of evil which has sometimes sufficed to incline powerful intellects to a faith in the duality of the Deity, towards that terrible bifrons of the Manichæans.

A piece of silk stolen during the last war from the palace of the Emperor of China represents a shark eating a crocodile, who is eating a serpent, who is devouring an eagle, who is preying on a swallow, who in his turn is eating a caterpillar.

All nature which is under our observation is thus alternately devouring and devoured. The prey prey on each other.

Learned men, however, who are also philosophers, and therefore optimists in their view of creation, find, or believe they find, an explanation. Among others, Bonnet of Geneva, that mysterious exact thinker, who was opposed to Buffon, as in later times Geoffrey St. Hilaire has been to Cuvier, was struck with the idea of the final object. His notions may be summed up thus: universal death necessitates universal sepulture; the devourers are the sextons of the system of nature. All created things enter into and form the elements of other. To decay is to nourish. Such is the terrible law from which not even man himself escapes.

In our world of twilight this fatal order of things produces monsters. You ask for what purpose. We find the solution here.

But *is* this the solution? Is this the answer to our questionings? And if so, why not some different order of things? Thus the question returns.

Let us live: be it so.

But let us endeavour that death shall be progress. Let us aspire to an existence in which these mysteries shall be made clear. Let us follow that conscience which leads us thither.

For let us never forget that the highest is only attained through the high.

III

ANOTHER KIND OF SEA-COMBAT

Such was the creature in whose power Gilliatt had fallen for some minutes.

The monster was the inhabitant of the grotto; the terrible genii of the place. A kind of sombre demon of the water.

All the splendours of the cavern existed for it alone.

On the day of the previous month when Gilliatt had first penetrated into the grotto, the dark outline, vaguely perceived by him in the ripples of the secret waters, was this monster. It was here in its home.

When entering for the second time into the cavern in pursuit of the crab, he had observed the crevice in which he supposed that the crab had taken refuge, the pieuvre was there lying in wait for prey.

Is it possible to imagine that secret ambush?

No bird would brood, no egg would burst to life, no flower would dare to open, no breast to give milk, no heart to love, no spirit to soar, under the influence of that apparition of evil watching with sinister patience in the dusk.

Gilliatt had thrust his arm deep into the opening; the monster had snapped at it. It held him fast, as the spider holds the fly.

He was in the water up to his belt; his naked feet clutching the slippery roundness of the huge stones at the bottom; his right arm bound and rendered powerless by the flat coils of the long tentacles of the creature, and his body almost hidden under the folds and cross folds of this horrible bandage.

Of the eight arms of the devil-fish three adhered to the rock, while five encircled Gilliatt. In this way, clinging to the granite on the one hand, and with the other to its human prey, it enchained him to the rock. Two hundred and fifty suckers were upon him, tormenting him with agony and loathing. He was grasped by gigantic hands, the fingers of which were each nearly a yard long, and furnished inside with living blisters eating into the flesh.

As we have said, it is impossible to tear oneself from the folds of the devil-fish. The attempt ends only in a firmer grasp. The monster clings with more determined force. Its effort increases with that of its victim; every struggle produces a tightening of its ligatures.

Gilliatt had but one resource, his knife.

His left hand only was free; but the reader knows with what power he could use it. It might have been said that he had two right hands.

His open knife was in his hand.

The antenna of the devil-fish cannot be cut; it is a leathery substance impossible to divide with the knife, it slips under the edge; its position in attack also is such that to cut it would be to wound the victim’s own flesh.

The creature is formidable, but there is a way of resisting it. The fishermen of Sark know this, as does any one who has seen them execute certain movements in the sea. The porpoises know it also; they have a way of biting the cuttle-fish which decapitates it. Hence the frequent sight on the sea of pen-fish, poulps, and cuttle-fish without heads.

The cephaloptera, in fact, is only vulnerable through the head.

Gilliatt was not ignorant of this fact.

He had never seen a devil-fish of this size. His first encounter was with one of the larger species. Another would have been powerless with terror.

With the devil-fish, as with a furious bull, there is a certain moment in the conflict which must be seized. It is the instant when the bull lowers the neck; it is the instant when the devil-fish advances its head. The movement is rapid. He who loses that moment is destroyed.

The things we have described occupied only a few moments. Gilliatt, however, felt the increasing power of its innumerable suckers.

The monster is cunning; it tries first to stupefy its prey. It seizes and then pauses awhile.

Gilliatt grasped his knife; the sucking increased.

He looked at the monster, which seemed to look at him.

Suddenly it loosened from the rock its sixth antenna, and darting it at him, seized him by the left arm.

At the same moment it advanced its head with a violent movement. In one second more its mouth would have fastened on his breast. Bleeding in the sides, and with his two arms entangled, he would have been a dead man.

But Gillian was watchful. He avoided the antenna, and at the moment when the monster darted forward to fasten on his breast, he struck it with the knife clenched in his left hand. There were two convulsions in opposite directions; that of the devil-fish and that of its prey. The movement was rapid as a double flash of lightnings.

He had plunged the blade of his knife into the flat slimy substance, and by a rapid movement, like the flourish of a whip in the air, describing a circle round the two eyes, he wrenched the head off as a man would draw a tooth.

The struggle was ended. The folds relaxed. The monster dropped away, like the slow detaching of bands. The four hundred suckers, deprived of their sustaining power, dropped at once from the man and the rock. The mass sank to the bottom of the water.

Breathless with the struggle, Gilliatt could perceive upon the stones at his feet two shapeless, slimy heaps, the head on one side, the remainder of the monster on the other.

Fearing, nevertheless, some convulsive return of his agony, he recoiled to avoid the reach of the dreaded tentacles.

But the monster was quite dead.

Gilliatt closed his knife.

IV

NOTHING IS HIDDEN, NOTHING LOST

It was time that he killed the devil-fish. He was almost suffocated. His right arm and his chest were purple. Numberless little swellings were distinguishable upon them; the blood flowed from them here and there. The remedy for these wounds is sea-water. Gilliatt plunged into it, rubbing himself at the same time with the palms of his hands. The swellings disappeared under the friction.

By stepping further into the waters he had, without perceiving, approached to the species of recess already observed by him near the crevice where he had been attacked by the devil-fish.

This recess stretched obliquely under the great walls of the cavern, and was dry. The large pebbles which had become heaped up there had raised the bottom above the level of ordinary tides. The entrance was a rather large elliptical arch; a man could enter by stooping. The green light of the submarine grotto penetrated into it and lighted it feebly.

It happened that, while hastily rubbing his skin, Gilliatt raised his eyes mechanically.

He was able to see far into the cavern.

He shuddered.

He fancied that he perceived, in the furthest depth of the dusky recess, something smiling.

Gilliatt had never heard the word “hallucination,” but he was familiar with the idea. Those mysterious encounters with the invisible, which, for the sake of avoiding the difficulty of explaining them, we call hallucinations, are in nature. Illusions or realities, visions are a fact. He who has the gift will see them. Gilliatt, as we have said, was a dreamer. He had, at times, the faculty of a seer. It was not in vain that he had spent his days in musing among solitary places.

He imagined himself the dupe of one of those mirages which he had more than once beheld when in his dreamy moods.

The opening was somewhat in the shape of a chalk-burner’s oven. It was a low niche with projections like basket-handles. Its abrupt groins contracted gradually as far as the extremity of the crypt, where the heaps of round stones and the rocky roof joined.

Gilliatt entered, and lowering his head, advanced towards the object in the distance.

There was indeed something smiling.

It was a death’s head; but it was not only the head. There was the entire skeleton. A complete human skeleton was lying in the cavern.

In such a position a bold man will continue his researches.

Gilliatt cast his eyes around. He was surrounded by a multitude of crabs. The multitude did not stir. They were but empty shells.

These groups were scattered here and there among the masses of pebbles in irregular constellations.

Gilliatt, having his eyes fixed elsewhere, had walked among them without perceiving them.

At this extremity of the crypt, where he had now penetrated, there was a still greater heap of remains. It was a confused mass of legs, antennæ, and mandibles. Claws stood wide open; bony shells lay still under their bristling prickles; some reversed showed their livid hollows. The heap was like a *mêlée* of besiegers who had fallen, and lay massed together.

The skeleton was partly buried in this heap.

Under this confused mass of scales and tentacles, the eye perceived the cranium with its furrows, the vertebræ, the thigh bones, the tibias, and the long-jointed finger bones with their nails. The frame of the ribs was filled with crabs. Some heart had once beat there. The green mould of the sea had settled round the sockets of the eyes. Limpets had left their slime upon the bony nostrils. For the rest, there were not in this cave within the rocks either sea-gulls, or weeds, or a breath of air. All was still. The teeth grinned.

The sombre side of laughter is that strange mockery of expression which is peculiar to a human skull.

This marvellous palace of the deep, inlaid and incrusted with all the gems of the sea, had at length revealed and told its secret. It was a savage haunt; the devil-fish inhabited it; it was also a tomb, in which the body of a man reposed.

The skeleton and the creatures around it oscillated vaguely in the reflections of the subterranean water which trembled upon the roof and wall. The horrible multitude of crabs looked as if finishing their repast.

These crustacea seemed to be devouring the carcase. Nothing could be more strange than the aspect of the dead vermin upon their dead prey.

Gilliatt had beneath his eyes the storehouse of the devil-fish.

It was a dismal sight. The crabs had devoured the man: the devil-fish had devoured the crabs.

There were no remains of clothing anywhere visible. The man must have been seized naked.

Gilliatt, attentively examining, began to remove the shells from the skeleton. What had this man been? The body was admirably dissected; it looked as if prepared for the study of anatomy; all the flesh was stripped; not a muscle remained; not a bone was missing. If Gilliatt had been learned in science, he might have demonstrated the fact. The periostea, denuded of their covering, were white and smooth, as if they had been polished. But for some green mould of sea-mosses here and there, they would have been like ivory. The cartilaginous divisions were delicately inlaid and arranged. The tomb sometimes produces this dismal mosaic work.

The body was, as it were, interred under the heap of dead crabs. Gilliatt disinterred it.

Suddenly he stooped, and examined more closely.

He had perceived around the vertebral column a sort of belt.

It was a leathern girdle, which had evidently been worn buckled upon the waist of the man when alive.

The leather was moist; the buckle rusty.

Gilliatt pulled the girdle; the vertebra of the skeleton resisted, and he was compelled to break through them in order to remove it. A crust of small shells had begun to form upon it.

He felt it, and found a hard substance within, apparently of square form. It was useless to endeavour to unfasten the buckle, so he cut the leather with his knife.

The girdle contained a little iron box and some pieces of gold. Gilliatt counted twenty guineas.

The iron box was an old sailor’s tobacco-box, opening and shutting with a spring. It was very tight and rusty. The spring being completely oxidised would not work.

Once more the knife served Gilliatt in a difficulty. A pressure with the point of the blade caused the lid to fly up.

The box was open.

There was nothing inside but pieces of paper.

A little roll of very thin sheets, folded in four, was fitted in the bottom of the box. They were damp, but not injured. The box, hermetically sealed, had preserved them. Gilliatt unfolded them.

They were three bank-notes of one thousand pounds sterling each; making together seventy-five thousand francs.

Gilliatt folded them again, replaced them in the box, taking advantage of the space which remained to add the twenty guineas; and then reclosed the box as well as he could.

Next he examined the girdle.

The leather, which had originally been polished outside, was rough within. Upon this tawny ground some letters had been traced in black thick ink. Gilliatt deciphered them, and read the words, “Sieur Clubin.”

V

THE FATAL DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SIX INCHES AND TWO FEET

Gilliatt replaced the box in the girdle, and placed the girdle in the pocket of his trousers.

He left the skeleton among the crabs, with the remains of the devil-fish beside it.

While he had been occupied with the devil-fish and the skeleton, the rising tide had submerged the entrance to the cave. He was only enabled to leave it by plunging under the arched entrance. He got through without difficulty; for he knew the entrance well, and was master of these gymnastics in the sea.

It is easy to understand the drama which had taken place there during the ten weeks preceding. One monster had preyed upon another; the devil-fish had seized Clubin.

These two embodiments of treachery had met in the inexorable darkness. There had been an encounter at the bottom of the sea between these two compounds of mystery and watchfulness; the monster had destroyed the man: a horrible fulfilment of justice.

The crab feeds on carrion, the devil-fish on crabs. The devil-fish seizes as it passes any swimming animal — an otter, a dog, a man if it can — sucks the blood, and leaves the body at the bottom of the water. The crabs are the spider-formed scavengers of the sea. Putrefying flesh attracts them; they crowd round it, devour the body, and are in their turn consumed by the devil-fish. Dead creatures disappear in the crab, the crab disappears in the pieuvre. This is the law which we have already pointed out.

The devil-fish had laid hold of him, and drowned him. Some wave had carried his body into the cave, and deposited it at the extremity of the inner cavern, where Gilliatt had discovered it.

He returned searching among the rocks for sea-urchins and limpets. He had no desire for crabs; to have eaten them now would have seemed to him like feeding upon human flesh.

For the rest, he thought of nothing but of eating what he could before starting. Nothing now interposed to prevent his departure. Great tempests are always followed by a calm, which lasts sometimes several days. There was, therefore, no danger from the sea. Gilliatt had resolved to leave the rocks on the following day. It was important, on account of the tide, to keep the barrier between the two Douvres during the night, but he intended to remove it at daybreak, to push the sloop out to sea, and set sail for St. Sampson. The light breeze which was blowing came from the south-west, which was precisely the wind which he would want.

It was in the first quarter of the moon, in the month of May; the days were long.

When Gilliatt, having finished his wanderings among the rocks, and appeased his appetite to some extent, returned to the passage between the two Douvres, where he had left the sloop, the sun had set, the twilight was increased by that pale light which comes from a crescent moon; the tide had attained its height, and was beginning to ebb. The funnel standing upright above the sloop had been covered by the foam during the tempest with a coating of salt which glittered white in the light of the moon.

This circumstance reminded Gilliatt that the storm had inundated the sloop, both with surf and rain-water, and that if he meant to start in the morning, it would be necessary to bail it out.

Before leaving to go in quest of crabs, he had ascertained that it had about six inches of water in the hold. The scoop which he used for the purpose would, he thought, be sufficient for throwing the water overboard.

On arriving at the barrier, Gilliatt was struck with terror. There were nearly two feet of water in the sloop. A terrible discovery; the bark had sprung a leak.

She had been making water gradually during his absence. Burdened as she was, two feet of water was a perilous addition. A little more, and she must inevitably founder. If he had returned but an hour later, he would probably have found nothing above water but the funnel and the mast.

There was not a minute to be lost in deliberation. It was absolutely necessary to find the leakage, stop it, and then empty the vessel, or at all events, lighten it. The pumps of the Durande had been lost in the break-up of the wreck. He was reduced to use the scoop of the bark.

To find the leak was the most urgent necessity.

Gilliatt set to work immediately, and without even giving himself time to dress. He shivered; but he no longer felt either hunger or cold.

The water continued to gain upon his vessel. Fortunately there was no wind. The slightest swell would have been fatal.

The moon went down.

Bent low, and plunged in the water deeper than his waist he groped about for a long time. He discovered the mischief at last.

During the gale, at the critical moment when the sloop had swerved, the strong bark had bumped and grazed rather violently on the rocks. One of the projections of the Little Douvre had made a fracture in the starboard side of the hull.

The leak unluckily — it might almost have been said, maliciously — had been made near the joint of the two riders, a fact which, joined with the fury of the hurricane, had prevented him perceiving it during his dark and rapid survey in the height of the storm.

The fracture was alarming on account of its size; but fortunately, although the vessel was sunk lower than usual by the weight of water, it was still above the ordinary water-line.

At the moment when the accident had occurred, the waves had rolled heavily into the defile, and had flooded through the breach; and the vessel had sunk a few inches under the additional weight, so that, even after the subsidence of the water, the weight having raised the water-line, had kept the hole still under the surface. Hence the imminence of the danger. But if he could succeed in stopping the leak, he could empty the sloop; the hole once staunched, the vessel would rise to its usual water-line, the fracture would be above water, and in this position the repair would be easy, or at least possible. He had still, as we have already said, his carpenters’ tools in good condition.

But meanwhile what uncertainty must he not endure! What perils, what chances of accidents! He heard the water rising inexorably. One shock, and all would have perished. What misery seemed in store for him. Perhaps his endeavours were even now too late.

He reproached himself bitterly. He thought that he ought to have seen the damage immediately. The six inches of water in the hold ought to have suggested it to him. He had been stupid enough to attribute these six inches of water to the rain and the foam. He was angry with himself for having slept and eaten; he taxed himself even with his weariness, and almost with the storm and the dark night. All seemed to him to have been his own fault.

These bitter self-reproaches filled his mind while engaged in his labour, but they did not prevent his considering well the work he was engaged in.

The leak had been found; that was the first step: to staunch it was the second. That was all that was possible for the moment. Joinery work cannot be carried on under water.

It was a favourable circumstance that the breach in the hull was in the space between the two chains which held the funnel fast on the starboard side. The stuffing with which it was necessary to stop it could be fixed to these chains.

The water meanwhile was gaining. Its depth was now between two and three feet; and it reached above his knees.

VI

DE PROFUNDIS AD ALTUM

Gilliatt had to his hand among his reserve of rigging for the sloop a pretty large tarpaulin, furnished with long laniards at the four corners.

He took this tarpaulin, made fast the two corners by the laniards to the two rings of the chains of the funnel on the same side as the leak, and threw it over the gunwale. The tarpaulin hung like a sheet between the Little Douvre and the bark, and sunk in the water. The pressure of the water endeavouring to enter into the hold, kept it close to the hull upon the gap. The heavier the pressure the closer the sail adhered. It was stuck by the water itself right upon the fracture. The wound of the bark was staunched.

The tarred canvas formed an effectual barrier between the interior of the hold and the waves without. Not a drop of water entered. The leak was masked, but was not stopped. It was a respite only.

Gilliatt took the scoop and began to bale the sloop. It was time that she were lightened. The labour warmed him a little, but his weariness was extreme. He was forced to acknowledge to himself that he could not complete the work of staunching the hold. He had scarcely eaten anything, and he had the humiliation of feeling himself exhausted.

He measured the progress of his work by the sinking of the level of water below his knees. The fall was slow.

Moreover, the leakage was only interrupted; the evil was moderated, not repaired. The tarpaulin pushed into the gap began to bulge inside; looking as if a fist were under the canvas, endeavouring to force it through. The canvas, strong and pitchy, resisted; but the swelling and the tension increased; it was not certain that it would not give way, and at any moment the swelling might become a rent. The irruption of water must then recommence.

In such a case, as the crews of vessels in distress know well, there is no other remedy than stuffing. The sailors take rags of every kind which they can find at hand, everything, in fact, which in their language is called “service;” and with this they push the bulging sail-cloth as far as they can into the leak.

Of this “service,” Gilliatt had none. All the rags and tow which he had stored up had been used in his operations, or carried away by the storm.

If necessary, he might possibly have been able to find some remains by searching among the rocks. The sloop was sufficiently lightened for him to leave it with safety for a quarter of an hour; but how could he make this search without a light? The darkness was complete. There was no longer any moon; nothing but the starry sky. He had no dry tow with which to make a match, no tallow to make a candle, no fire to light one, no lantern to shelter it from the wind. In the sloop and among the rocks all was confused and indistinct. He could hear the water lapping against the wounded hull, but he could not even see the crack. It was with his hands that he had ascertained the bulging of the tarpaulin. In that darkness it was impossible to make any useful search for rags of canvas or pieces of tow scattered among the breakers. Who could glean these waifs and strays without being able to see his path? Gilliatt looked sorrowfully at the sky; all those stars, he thought, and yet no light!

The water in the bark having diminished, the pressure from without increased. The bulging of the canvas became larger, and was still increasing, like a frightful abscess ready to burst. The situation, which had been improved for a short time, began to be threatening.

Some means of stopping it effectually was absolutely necessary. He had nothing left but his clothes, which he had stretched to dry upon the projecting rocks of the Little Douvre.

He hastened to fetch them, and placed them upon the gunwale of the sloop.

Then he took his tarpaulin overcoat, and kneeling in the water, thrust it into the crevice, and pushing the swelling of the sail outward, emptied it of water. To the tarpaulin coat he added the sheepskin, then his Guernsey shirt, and then his jacket. The hole received them all. He had nothing left but his sailor’s trousers, which he took off, and pushed in with the other articles. This enlarged and strengthened the stuffing.

The stopper was made, and it appeared to be sufficient.

These clothes passed partly through the gap, the sail-cloth outside enveloping them. The sea making an effort to enter, pressed against the obstacle, spread it over the gap, and blocked it. It was a sort of exterior compression.

Inside, the centre only of the bulging having been driven out, there remained all around the gap and the stuffing just thrust through a sort of circular pad formed by the tarpaulin, which was rendered still firmer by the irregularities of the fracture with which it had become entangled.

The leak was staunched, but nothing could be more precarious. Those sharp splinters of the gap which fixed the tarpaulin might pierce it and make holes, by which the water would enter; while he would not even perceive it in the darkness. There was little probability of the stoppage lasting until daylight. Gilliatt's anxiety changed its form; but he felt it increasing at the same time that he found his strength leaving him.

He had again set to work to bale out the hold, but his arms, in spite of all his efforts, could scarcely lift a scoopfull of water. He was naked and shivering. He felt as if the end were now at hand.

One possible chance flashed across his mind. There might be a sail in sight. A fishing-boat which should by any accident be in the neighbourhood of the Douvres, might come to his assistance. The moment had arrived when a helpmate was absolutely necessary. With a man and a lantern all might yet be saved. If there were two persons, one might easily bale the vessel. Since the leak was temporarily staunched, as soon as she could be relieved of this burden, she would rise, and regain her ordinary water-line. The leak would then be above the surface of the water, the repairs would be practicable, and he would be able immediately to replace the stuff by a piece of planking, and thus substitute for the temporary stoppage a complete repair. If not, it would be necessary to wait till daylight — to wait the whole night long; a delay which might prove ruinous. If by chance some ship's lantern should be in sight, Gilliatt would be able to signal it from the height of the Great Douvre. The weather was calm, there was no wind or rolling sea; there was a possibility of the figure of a man being observed moving against the background of the starry sky. A captain of a ship, or even the master of a fishing-boat, would not be at night in the waters of the Douvres without directing his glass upon the rock, by way of precaution.

Gilliatt hoped that some one might perceive him.

He climbed upon the wreck, grasped the knotted rope, and mounted upon the Great Douvre.

Not a sail was visible around the horizon; not a boat's lantern. The wide expanse, as far as eye could reach, was a desert. No assistance was possible, and no resistance possible.

Gilliatt felt himself without resources; a feeling which he had not felt until then.

A dark fatality was now his master. With all his labour, all his success, all his courage, he and his bark, and its precious burden, were about to become the sport of the waves. He had no other means of continuing the struggle; he became listless. How could he prevent the tide from returning, the water from rising, the night from continuing? The temporary stoppage which he had made was his sole reliance. He had exhausted and stripped himself in constructing and completing it; he could neither fortify nor add to it. The stopgap was such that it must remain as it was; and every further effort was useless. The apparatus, hastily constructed, was at the mercy of the waves. How would this inert obstacle work? It was this obstacle now, not Gilliatt, which had to sustain the combat, that handfull of rags, not that intelligence. The swell of a wave would suffice to re-open the fracture. More or less of pressure; the whole question was comprised in that formula.

All depended upon a brute struggle between two mechanical quantities. Henceforth he could neither aid his auxiliary, nor stop his enemy. He was no longer any other than a mere spectator of this struggle, which was one for him of life or death. He who had ruled over it, a supreme intelligence, was at the last moment compelled to resign all to a mere blind resistance.

No trial, no terror that he had yet undergone, could bear comparison with this.

From the time when he had taken up his abode upon the Douvres, he had found himself environed, and, as it were, possessed by solitude. This solitude more than surrounded, it enveloped him. A thousand menaces at once had met him face to face. The wind was always there, ready to become furious; the sea, ready to roar. There was no stopping that terrible mouth the wind, no imprisoning that dread monster the sea. And yet he had striven, he, a solitary man, had combated hand to hand with the ocean, had wrestled even with the tempest.

Many other anxieties, many other necessities had he made head against. There was no form of distress with which he had not become familiar. He had been compelled to execute great works without tools, to move vast burdens without aid, without science to resolve problems, without provisions to find food, without bed or roof to cover it, to find shelter and sleep.

Upon that solitary rock he had been subjected by turns to all the varied and cruel tortures of nature; oftentimes a gentle mother, not less often a pitiless destroyer.

He had conquered his isolation, conquered hunger, conquered thirst, conquered cold, conquered fever, conquered labour, conquered sleep. He had encountered a mighty coalition of obstacles formed to bar his progress. After his privations there were the elements; after the sea the tempest, after the tempest the devil-fish, after the monster the spectre.

A dismal irony was then the end of all. Upon this rock, whence he had thought to arise triumphant, the spectre of Clubin had only arisen to mock him with a hideous smile.

The grin of the spectre was well founded. Gilliatt saw himself ruined; saw himself no less than Clubin in the grasp of death.

Winter, famine, fatigue, the dismemberment of the wreck, the removal of the machinery, the equinoctial gale, the thunder, the monster, were all as nothing compared with this small fracture in a vessel’s planks. Against the cold one could procure — and he had procured — fire; against hunger, the shell-fish of the rocks; against thirst, the rain; against the difficulties of his great task, industry and energy; against the sea and the storm, the breakwater; against the devil-fish, the knife; but against the terrible leak he had no weapon.

The hurricane had bequeathed him this sinister farewell. The last struggle, the traitorous thrust, the treacherous side blow of the vanquished foe. In its flight the tempest had turned and shot this arrow in the rear. It was the final and deadly stab of his antagonist.

It was possible to combat with the tempest, but how could he struggle with that insidious enemy who now attacked him.

If the stoppage gave way, if the leak re-opened, nothing could prevent the sloop foundering. It would be the bursting of the ligature of the artery; and once under the water with its heavy burden, no power could raise it. The noble struggle, with two months’ Titanic labour, ended then in annihilation. To recommence would be impossible. He had neither forge nor materials. At daylight, in all probability, he was about to see all his work sink slowly and irrecoverably into the gulf. Terrible, to feel that sombre power beneath. The sea snatched his prize from his hands.

With his bark engulfed, no fate awaited him but to perish of hunger and cold, like the poor shipwrecked sailor on “The Man Rock.”

During two long months the intelligences which hover invisibly over the world had been the spectators of these things; on one hand the wide expanse, the waves, the winds, the lightnings, the meteors; on the other a man. On one hand the sea, on the other a human mind; on the one hand the infinite, on the other an atom.

The battle had been fierce, and behold the abortive issue of these prodigies of valour.

Thus did this heroism without parallel end in powerlessness; thus ended in despair that formidable struggle; that struggle of a nothing against all; that Iliad against one.

Gilliatt gazed wildly into space.

He had no clothing. He stood naked in the midst of that immensity.

Then overwhelmed by the sense of that unknown infinity, like one bewildered by a strange persecution, confronting the shadows of night, in the presence of that impenetrable darkness, in the midst of the murmur of the waves, the swell, the foam, the breeze, under the clouds, under that vast diffusion of force, under that mysterious firmament of wings, of stars, of gulfs, having around him and beneath him the ocean, above him the constellations, under the great unfathomable deep, he sank, gave up the struggle, lay down upon the rock, his face towards the stars, humbled, and uplifting his joined hands towards the terrible depths, he cried aloud, “Have mercy.”

Weighed down to earth by that immensity, he prayed.

He was there alone, in the darkness upon the rock, in the midst of that sea, stricken down with exhaustion like one smitten by lightning, naked like the gladiator in the circus, save that for circus he had the vast horizon, instead of wild beasts the shadows of darkness, instead of the faces of the crowd the eyes of the Unknown, instead of the Vestals the stars, instead of Cæsar the All-powerful.

His whole being seemed to dissolve in cold, fatigue, powerlessness, prayer, and darkness, and his eyes closed.

VII

THE APPEAL IS HEARD

Some hours passed.

The sun rose in an unclouded sky.

Its first ray shone upon a motionless form upon the Great Douvre. It was Gilliatt.

He was still outstretched upon the rock.

He was naked, cold, and stiff; but he did not shiver. His closed eyelids were wan. It would have been difficult for a beholder to say whether the form before him was not a corpse.

The sun seemed to look upon him.

If he were not dead, he was already so near death that the slightest cold wind would have sufficed to extinguish life.

The wind began to breathe, warm and animating: it was the opening breath of May.

Meanwhile the sun ascended in the deep blue sky; its rays, less horizontal, flushed the sky. Its light became warmth. It enveloped the slumbering form.

Gilliatt moved not. If he breathed, it was only that feeble respiration which could scarcely tarnish the surface of a mirror.

The sun continued its ascent; its rays striking less and less obliquely upon the naked man. The gentle breeze which had been merely tepid became hot.

The rigid and naked body remained still without movement; but the skin seemed less livid.

The sun, approaching the zenith, shone almost perpendicularly upon the plateau of the Douvres. A flood of light descended from the heavens; the vast reflection from the glassy sea increased its splendour: the rock itself imbibed the rays and warmed the sleeper.

A sigh raised his breast.

He lived.

The sun continued its gentle offices. The wind, which was already the breath of summer and of noon, approached him like loving lips that breathed upon him softly.

Gilliatt moved.

The peaceful calm upon the sea was perfect. Its murmur was like the droning of the nurse beside the sleeping infant. The rock seemed cradled in the waves.

The sea-birds, who knew that form, fluttered above it; not with their old wild astonishment, but with a sort of fraternal tenderness. They uttered plaintive cries: they seemed to be calling to him. A sea-mew, who no doubt knew him, was tame enough to come near him. It began to caw as if speaking to him. The sleeper seemed not to hear. The bird hopped upon his shoulder, and pecked his lips softly.

Gilliatt opened his eyes.

The birds dispersed, chattering wildly.

Gilliatt arose, stretched himself like a roused lion, ran to the edge of the platform, and looked down into the space between the two Douvres.

The sloop was there, intact; the stoppage had held out; the sea had probably disturbed it but little.

All was saved.

He was no longer weary. His powers had returned. His swoon had ended in a deep sleep.

He descended and baled out the sloop, emptied the hold, raised the leakage above the water-line, dressed himself, ate, drank some water, and was joyful.

The gap in the side of his vessel, examined in broad daylight, proved to require more labour than he had thought. It was a serious fracture. The entire day was not too much for its repair.

At daybreak on the morrow, after removing the barrier and re-opening the entrance to the defile, dressed in the tattered clothing which had served to stop the leak, having about him Clubin’s girdle and the seventy-five thousand francs, standing erect in the sloop, now repaired, by the side of the machinery which he had rescued, with a favourable breeze and a good sea, Gilliatt pushed off from the Douvres.

He put the sloop’s head for Guernsey.

At the moment of his departure from the rocks, any one who had been there might have heard him singing, in an undertone, the air of “Bonnie Dundee.”

PART III. — DÉRUCHETTE

BOOK I

NIGHT AND THE MOON

I

THE HARBOUR BELL

The St. Sampson of the present day is almost a city; the St. Sampson of forty years since was almost a village.

When the winter evenings were ended and spring had come, the inhabitants were not long out of bed after sundown. St. Sampson was an ancient parish which had long been accustomed to the sound of the curfew-bell, and which had a traditional habit of blowing out the candle at an early hour. Those old Norman villages are famous for early roosting, and the villagers are generally great rearers of poultry.

The people of St. Sampson, except a few rich families among the townsfolk, are also a population of quarriers and carpenters. The port is a port of ship repairing. The quarrying of stone and the fashioning of timber go on all day long; here the labourer with the pickaxe, there the workman with the mallet. At night they sink with fatigue, and sleep like lead. Rude labours bring heavy slumbers.

One evening, in the commencement of the month of May, after watching the crescent moon for some instants through the trees, and listening to the step of Déruchette, walking alone in the cool air in the garden of the Bravées, Mess Lethierry had returned to his room looking on the harbour, and had retired to rest; Douce and Grace were already a-bed. Except Déruchette, the whole household were sleeping. Doors and shutters were everywhere closed. Footsteps were silent in the streets. Some few lights, like winking eyes about to close in rest, showed here and there in windows in the roofs, indicating the hour of domestics going to bed. Nine had already struck in the old Romanesque belfry, surrounded by ivy, which shares with the church of St. Brélade at Jersey the peculiarity of having for its date four ones (IIII), which are used to signify eleven hundred and eleven.

The popularity of Mess Lethierry at St. Sampson had been founded on his success. The success at an end, there had come a void. It might be imagined that ill-fortune is contagious, and that the unsuccessful have a plague, so rapidly are they put in quarantine. The young men of well-to-do families avoided Déruchette. The isolation around the Bravées was so complete that its inmates had not even yet heard the news of the great local event which had that day set all St. Sampson in a ferment. The rector of the parish, the Rev. Ebenezer Caudray, had become rich. His uncle, the magnificent Dean of St. Asaph, had just died in London. The news had been brought by the mail sloop, the *Cashmere*, arrived from England that very morning, and the mast of which could be perceived in the roads of St. Peter's Port. The *Cashmere* was to depart for Southampton at noon on the morrow, and, so the rumour ran, to convey the reverend gentleman, who had been suddenly summoned to England, to be present at the official opening of the will, not to speak of other urgent matters connected with an important inheritance. All day long St. Sampson had been conversing on this subject. The *Cashmere*, the Rev. Ebenezer, his deceased uncle, his riches, his departure, his possible preferment in the future, had formed the foundations of that perpetual buzzing. A solitary house, still uninformed on these matters, had remained at peace. This was the Bravées.

Mess Lethierry had jumped into his hammock, and lay down in his clothing.

Since the catastrophe of the Durande, to get into his hammock had been his resource. Every captive has recourse to stretching himself upon his pallet, and Mess Lethierry was the captive of his grief. To go to bed was a truce, a gain in breathing time, a suspension of ideas. He neither slept nor watched. Strictly speaking, for two months and a half — for so long was it since his misfortune — Mess Lethierry had been in a sort of somnambulism. He had not yet regained possession of his faculties. He was in that cloudy and confused condition of intellect with which those are familiar who have undergone overwhelming afflictions. His reflections were not thought, his sleep was no repose. By day he was not awake, by night not asleep. He was up, and then gone to rest, that was all. When he was in his hammock forgetfulness came to him a little. He called that sleeping. Chimeras floated about him, and within him. The nocturnal cloud, full of confused faces, traversed his brain. Sometimes it was the Emperor Napoleon dictating to him the story of his life; sometimes there were several Déruchettes; strange birds were in the trees; the streets of Lons-le-Saulnier became serpents. Nightmares were the brief respites of despair. He passed his nights in dreaming, and his days in reverie.

Sometimes he remained all the afternoon at the window of his room, which looked out upon the port, with his head drooping, his elbows on the stone, his ears resting on his fists, his back turned to the whole world, his eye fixed on the old massive iron ring fastened in the wall of the house, at only a few feet from his window, where in the old days he used to moor the Durande. He was looking at the rust which gathered on the ring.

He was reduced to the mere mechanical habit of living.

The bravest men, when deprived of their most cherished idea, will come to this. His life had become a void. Life is a voyage; the idea is the itinerary. The plan of their course gone, they stop. The object is lost, the strength of purpose gone. Fate has a secret discretionary power. It is able to touch with its rod even our moral being. Despair is almost the destitution of the soul. Only the greatest minds resist, and for what?

Mess Lethierry was always meditating, if absorption can be called meditation, in the depth of a sort of cloudy abyss. Broken words sometimes escaped him like these, “There is nothing left for me now, but to ask yonder for leave to go.”

There was a certain contradiction in that nature, complex as the sea, of which Mess Lethierry was, so to speak, the product. Mess Lethierry’s grief did not seek relief in prayer.

To be powerless is a certain strength. In the presence of our two great expressions of this blindness — destiny and nature — it is in his powerlessness that man has found his chief support in prayer.

Man seeks succour from his terror; his anxiety bids him kneel. Prayer, that mighty force of the soul, akin to mystery. Prayer addresses itself to the magnanimity of the Shades; prayer regards mystery with eyes themselves overshadowed by it, and beneath the power of its fixed and appealing gaze, we feel the possibility of the great Unknown unbending to reply.

The mere thought of such a possibility becomes a consolation.

But Mess Lethierry prayed not.

In the time when he was happy, God existed for him almost in visible contact. Lethierry addressed Him, pledged his word to Him, seemed at times to hold familiar intercourse with Him. But in the hour of his misfortune, a phenomenon not infrequent — the idea of God had become eclipsed in his mind. This happens when the mind has created for itself a deity clothed with human qualities.

In the state of mind in which he existed, there was for Lethierry only one clear vision — the smile of Déruchette. Beyond this all was dark.

For some time, apparently on account of the loss of the Durande, and of the blow which it had been to them, this pleasant smile had been rare. She seemed always thoughtful. Her birdlike playfulness, her childlike ways, were gone. She was never seen now in the morning, at the sound of the cannon which announced daybreak, saluting the rising sun with "Boom! Daylight! Come in, please!" At times her expression was very serious, a sad thing for that sweet nature. She made an effort, however, sometimes to laugh before Mess Lethierry and to divert him; but her cheerfulness grew tarnished from day to day — gathered dust like the wing of a butterfly with a pin through its body. Whether through sorrow for her uncle's sorrow — for there are griefs which are the reflections of other griefs — or whether for any other reasons, she appeared at this time to be much inclined towards religion. In the time of the old rector, M. Jaquemin Hérode, she scarcely went to church, as has been already said, four times a year. Now she was, on the contrary, assiduous in her attendance. She missed no service, neither of Sunday nor of Thursday. Pious souls in the parish remarked with satisfaction that amendment. For it is a great blessing when a girl who runs so many dangers in the world turns her thoughts towards God. That enables the poor parents at least to be easy on the subject of love-making and what not.

In the evening, whenever the weather permitted, she walked for an hour or two in the garden of the Bravées. She was almost as pensive there as Mess Lethierry, and almost always alone. Déruchette went to bed last. This, however, did not prevent Douce and Grace watching her a little, by that instinct for spying which is common to servants; spying is such a relaxation after household work.

As to Mess Lethierry, in the abstracted state of his mind, these little changes in Déruchette's habits escaped him. Moreover, his nature had little in common with the Duenna. He had not even remarked her regularity at the church. Tenacious of his prejudices against the clergy and their sermons, he would have seen with little pleasure these frequent attendances at the parish church. It was not because his own moral condition was not undergoing change. Sorrow is a cloud which changes form.

Robust natures, as we have said, are sometimes almost overthrown by sudden great misfortunes; but not quite. Manly characters such as Lethierry's experience a reaction in a given time. Despair has its backward stages. From overwhelmment we rise to dejection; from dejection to affliction; from affliction to melancholy. Melancholy is a twilight state; suffering melts into it and becomes a sombre joy. Melancholy is the pleasure of being sad.

These elegiac moods were not made for Lethierry. Neither the nature of his temperament nor the character of his misfortune suited those delicate shades. But at the moment at which we have returned to him, the reverie of his first despair had for more than a week been tending to disperse; without, however, leaving him less sad. He was more inactive, was always dull; but he was no longer overwhelmed. A certain perception of events and circumstances was returning to him, and he began to experience something of that phenomenon which may be called the return to reality.

Thus by day in the great lower room, he did not listen to the words of those about him, but he heard them. Grace came one morning quite triumphant to tell Déruchette that he had undone the cover of a newspaper.

This half acceptance of realities is in itself a good symptom, a token of convalescence. Great afflictions produce a stupor; it is by such little acts that men return to themselves. This improvement, however, is at first only an aggravation of the evil. The dreamy condition of mind in which the sufferer has lived, has served, while it lasted, to blunt his grief. His sight before was thick. He felt little. Now his view is clear, nothing escapes him; and his wounds re-open. Each detail that he perceives serves to remind him of his sorrow. He sees everything again in memory, every remembrance is a regret. All kinds of bitter aftertastes lurk in that return to life. He is better, and yet worse. Such was the condition of Lethierry. In returning to full consciousness, his sufferings had become more distinct.

A sudden shock first recalled him to a sense of reality.

One afternoon, between the 15th and 20th of April, a double-knock at the door of the great lower room of the Bravées had signalled the arrival of the postman. Douce had opened the door; there was a letter.

The letter came from beyond sea; it was addressed to Mess Lethierry, and bore the postmark "Lisbon."

Douce had taken the letter to Mess Lethierry, who was in his room. He had taken it, placed it mechanically upon the table, and had not looked at it.

The letter remained an entire week upon the table without being unsealed.

It happened, however, one morning that Douce said to Mess Lethierry:

“Shall I brush the dust off your letter, sir?”

Lethierry seemed to arouse from his lethargy.

“Ay, ay! You are right,” he said; and he opened the letter, and read as follows: —

“At Sea, *10th March*.

“To Mess Lethierry of St. Sampson.

“You will be gratified to receive news of me. I am aboard the *Tamaulipas*, bound for the port of ‘No-return.’ Among the crew is a sailor named Ahier-Tostevin, from Guernsey, who will return and will have some facts to communicate to you. I take the opportunity of our speaking a vessel, the *Herman Cortes*, bound for Lisbon, to forward you this letter.

“You will be astonished to learn that I am going to be honest.

“As honest as Sieur Clubin.

“I am bound to believe that you know of certain recent occurrences; nevertheless, it is, perhaps, not altogether superfluous to send you a full account of them,

“To proceed then.

“I have returned you your money.

“Some years ago, I borrowed from you, under somewhat irregular circumstances, the sum of fifty thousand francs. Before leaving St. Malo lately, I placed in the hands of your confidential man of business, Sieur Clubin, on your account three bank-notes of one thousand pounds each; making together seventy-five thousand francs. You will no doubt find this reimbursement sufficient.

“Sieur Clubin acted for you, and received your money, including interest, in a remarkably energetic manner. He appeared to me, indeed, singularly zealous. This is, in fact, my reason for apprising you of the facts.

“Your other confidential man of business,

“Rantaine.

“*Postscript* — Sieur Clubin was in possession of a revolver, which will explain to you the circumstance of my having no receipt.”

He who has ever touched a torpedo, or a Leyden-jar fully charged, may have a notion of the effect produced on Mess Lethierry by the reading of this letter.

Under that envelope, in that sheet of paper folded in four, to which he had at first paid so little attention, lay the elements of an extraordinary commotion.

He recognised the writing and the signature. As to the facts which the letter contained, at first he understood nothing.

The excitement of the event, however, soon gave movement to his faculties.

The effective part of the shock he had received lay in the phenomenon of the seventy-five thousand francs entrusted by Rantaine to Clubin; this was a riddle which compelled Lethierry's brain to work. Conjecture is a healthy occupation for the mind. Reason is awakened: logic is called into play.

For some time past public opinion in Guernsey had been undergoing a reaction on the subject of Clubin: that man of such high reputation for honour during many years; that man so unanimously regarded with esteem. People had begun to question and to doubt; there were wagers pro and con. Some light had been thrown on the question in singular ways. The figure of Clubin began to become clearer, that is to say, he began to be blacker in the eyes of the world.

A judicial inquiry had taken place at St. Malo, for the purpose of ascertaining what had become of the coast-guardman, number 619. Legal perspicacity had got upon a false scent, a thing which happens not unfrequently. It had started with the hypothesis that the man had been enticed by Zuela, and shipped aboard the *Tamaulipas* for Chili. This ingenious supposition had led to a considerable amount of wasted conjecture. The shortsightedness of justice had failed to take note of Rantaine; but in the progress of inquiry the authorities had come upon other clues. The affair, so obscure, became complicated. Clubin had become mixed up with the enigma. A coincidence, perhaps a direct connection, had been found between the departure of the *Tamaulipas* and the loss of the Durande. At the wine-shop near the Dinan Gate, where Clubin thought himself entirely unknown, he had been recognised. The wine-shop keeper had talked; Clubin had bought a bottle of brandy that night. For whom? The gunsmith of St. Vincent Street, too, had talked. Clubin had purchased a revolver. For what object? The landlord of the "Jean Auberge" had talked.

Clubin had absented himself in an inexplicable manner. Captain Gertrais-Gaboureau had talked; Clubin had determined to start, although warned, and knowing that he might expect a great fog. The crew of the Durande had talked. In fact, the collection of the freight had been neglected, and the stowage badly arranged, a negligence easy to comprehend, if the captain had determined to wreck the ship. The Guernsey passenger, too, had spoken. Clubin had evidently imagined that he had run upon the Hanways. The Torteval people had spoken. Clubin had visited that neighbourhood a few days before the loss of the Durande, and had been seen walking in the direction of Pleinmont, near the Hanways. He had with him a travelling-bag. "He had set out with it, and come back without it." The birds'-nesters had spoken: their story seemed to be possibly connected with Clubin's disappearance, if instead of ghosts they supposed smugglers. Finally, the haunted house of Pleinmont itself had spoken. Persons who had determined to get information had climbed and entered the windows, and had found inside — what? The very travelling-bag which had been seen in Sieur Clubin's possession. The authorities of the *Douzaine* of Torteval had taken possession of the bag and had it opened. It was found to contain provisions, a telescope, a chronometer, a man's clothing, and linen marked with Clubin's initials. All this in the gossip of St. Malo and Guernsey became more and more like a case of fraud. Obscure hints were brought together; there appeared to have been a singular disregard of advice; a willingness to encounter the dangers of the fog; a suspected negligence in the stowage of the cargo. Then there was the mysterious bottle of brandy; a drunken helmsman; a substitution of the captain for the helmsman; a management of the rudder, to say the least, unskilful. The heroism of remaining behind upon the wreck began to look like roguery. Clubin besides had evidently been deceived as to the rock he was on. Granted an intention to wreck the vessel, it was easy to understand the choice of the Hanways, the shore easily reached by swimming, and the intended concealment in the haunted house awaiting the opportunity for flight. The travelling-bag, that suspicious preparative, completed the demonstration. By what link this affair connected itself with the other affair of the disappearance of the coast-guardman nobody knew. People imagined some connection, and that was all. They had a glimpse in their minds of the look-out-man, number 619, alongside of the mysterious Clubin — quite a tragic drama. Clubin possibly was not an actor in it, but his presence was visible in the side scenes.

The supposition of a wilful destruction of the Durande did not explain everything. There was a revolver in the story, with no part yet assigned to it. The revolver, probably, belonged to the other affair.

The scent of the public is keen and true. Its instinct excels in those discoveries of truth by pieces and fragments. Still, amidst these facts, which seemed to point pretty clearly to a case of barratry, there were serious difficulties.

Everything was consistent; everything coherent; but a basis was wanting.

People do not wreck vessels for the pleasure of wrecking them. Men do not run all those risks of fog, rocks, swimming, concealment, and flight without an interest. What could have been Clubin’s interest?

The act seemed plain, but the motive was puzzling.

Hence a doubt in many minds. Where there is no motive, it is natural to infer that there was no act.

The missing link was important. The letter from Rantaine seemed to supply it.

This letter furnished a motive for Clubin’s supposed crime: seventy-five thousand francs to be appropriated.

Rantaine was the *Deus ex machinâ*. He had descended from the clouds with a lantern in his hand. His letter was the final light upon the affair. It explained everything, and even promised a witness in the person of Ahier-Tostevin.

The part which it at once suggested for the revolver was decisive. Rantaine was undoubtedly well informed. His letter pointed clearly the explanation of the mystery.

There could be no possible palliation of Clubin’s crime. He had premeditated the shipwreck; the proofs were the preparations discovered in the haunted house. Even supposing him innocent, and admitting the wreck to have been accidental, would he not, at the last moment, when he had determined to sacrifice himself with the vessel, have entrusted the seventy-five thousand francs to the men who escaped in the long-boat. The evidence was strikingly complete. Now what had become of Clubin? He had probably been the victim of his blunder. He had doubtless perished upon the Douvres.

All this construction of surmises, which were not far from the reality, had for several days occupied the mind of Mess Lethierry. The letter from Rantaine had done him the service of setting him to think. He was at first shaken by his surprise; then he made an effort to reflect. He made another effort more difficult still, that of inquiry. He was induced to listen, and even seek conversation. At the end of a week, he had become, to a certain degree, in the world again; his thoughts had regained their coherence, and he was almost restored. He had emerged from his confused and troubled state.

Rantaine’s letter, even admitting that Mess Lethierry could ever have entertained any hope of the reimbursement of his money, destroyed that last chance.

It added to the catastrophe of the Durande this new wreck of seventy-five thousand francs. It put him in possession of that amount just so far as to make him sensible of its loss. The letter revealed to him the extreme point in his ruin.

Hence he experienced a new and very painful sensation, which we have already spoken of. He began to take an interest in his household — what it was to be in the future — how he was to set things in order; matters of which he had taken no heed for two months past. These trifling cares wounded him with a thousand tiny points, worse in their aggregate than the old despair. A sorrow is doubly burdensome which has to be endured in each item, and while disputing inch by inch with fate for ground already lost. Ruin is endurable in the mass, but not in the dust and fragments of the fallen edifice. The great fact may overwhelm, but the details torture. The catastrophe which lately fell like a thunderbolt, becomes now a cruel persecution. Humiliation comes to aggravate the blow. A second desolation succeeds the first, with features more repulsive. You descend one degree nearer to annihilation. The winding-sheet becomes changed to sordid rags.

No thought is more bitter than that of one’s own gradual fall from a social position.

Ruin is simple enough. A violent shock; a cruel turn of fate; a catastrophe once for all. Be it so. We submit, and all is over. You are ruined: it is well; you are dead? No; you are still living. On the morrow you know it well. By what? By the pricking of a pin. Yonder passer-by omits to recognise you; the tradesmen’s bills rain down upon you; and yonder is one of your enemies, who is smiling. Perhaps he is thinking of Arnal’s last pun; but it is all the same. The pun would not have appeared to him so inimitable but for your ruin. You read your own sudden insignificance even in looks of indifference. Friends who used to dine at your table become of opinion that three courses were an extravagance. Your faults are patent to the eyes of everybody; ingratitude having nothing more to expect, proclaims itself openly; every idiot has foreseen your misfortunes. The malignant pull you to pieces; the more malignant profess to pity. And then come a hundred paltry details. Nausea succeeds to grief. You have been wont to indulge in wine; you must now drink cider. Two servants, too! Why, one will be too many. It will be necessary to discharge this one, and get rid of that. Flowers in your garden are superfluous; you will plant it with potatoes. You used to make presents of your fruits to friends; you will send them henceforth to market. As to the poor, it will be absurd to think of giving anything to them. Are you not poor yourself? And then there is the painful question of dress. To have to refuse a wife a new ribbon, what a torture! To have to refuse one who has made you a gift of her beauty a trifling article; to haggle over such matters, like a miser! Perhaps she will say to you, “What! rob my garden of its flowers, and now refuse one for my bonnet!” Ah me! to have to condemn her to shabby dresses. The family table is silent. You fancy that those around it think harshly of you. Beloved faces have become clouded. This is what is meant by falling fortunes. It is to die day by day. To be struck down is like the blast of the furnace; to decay like this is the torture of the slow fire.

An overwhelming blow is a sort of Waterloo, a slow decay, a St. Helena. Destiny, incarnate in the form of Wellington, has still some dignity; but how sordid in the shape of Hudson Lowe. Fate becomes then a paltry huckster. We find the man of Campo Formio quarrelling about a pair of stockings; we see that dwarfing of Napoleon which makes England less. Waterloo and St. Helena! Reduced to humbler proportions, every ruined man has traversed those two phases.

On the evening we have mentioned, and which was one of the first evenings in May, Lethierry, leaving Déruchette to walk by moonlight in the garden, had gone to bed more depressed than ever.

All these mean and repulsive details, peculiar to worldly misfortune; all these trifling cares, which are at first insipid, and afterwards harassing, were revolving in his mind. A sullen load of miseries! Mess Lethierry felt that his fall was irremediable. What could he do? What would become of them? What sacrifices should he be compelled to impose on Déruchette? Whom should he discharge — Douce or Grace? Would they have to sell the Bravées? Would they not be compelled to leave the island? To be nothing where he had been everything; it was a terrible fall indeed.

And to know that the old times had gone for ever! To recall those journeys to and fro, uniting France with those numberless islands; the Tuesday’s departure, the Friday’s return, the crowd on the quay, those great cargoes, that industry, that prosperity, that proud direct navigation, that machinery embodying the will of man, that all-powerful boiler, that smoke, all that reality! The steamboat had been the final crown of the compass; the needle indicating the direct track, the steam-vessel following it. One proposing, the other executing. Where was she now, his Durande, that mistress of the seas, that queen who had made him a king? To have been so long the man of ideas in his own country, the man of success, the man who revolutionised navigation; and then to have to give up all, to abdicate! To cease to exist, to become a bye-word, an empty bag which once was full. To belong to the past, after having so long represented the future. To come down to be an object of pity to fools, to witness the triumph of routine, obstinacy, conservatism, selfishness, ignorance. To see the old barbarous sailing cutters crawling to and fro upon the sea: the outworn old-world prejudices young again; to have wasted a whole life; to have been a light, and to suffer this eclipse. Ah! what a sight it was upon the waves, that noble funnel, that prodigious cylinder, that pillar with its capital of smoke, that column grander than any in the Place Vendôme, for on that there was only a man, while on this stood Progress. The ocean was subdued; it was certainty upon the open sea. And had all this been witnessed in that little island, in that little harbour, in that little town of St. Sampson? Yes; it had been witnessed. And could it be that, having seen it, all had vanished to be seen no more.

All this series of regrets tortured Lethierry. There is such a thing as a mental sobbing. Never, perhaps, had he felt his misfortune more bitterly. A certain numbness follows this acute suffering. Under the weight of his sorrow he gradually dosed.

For about two hours he remained in this state, feverish, sleeping a little, meditating much. Such torpors are accompanied by an obscure labour of the brain, which is inexpressibly wearying. Towards the middle of the night, about midnight, a little before or a little after, he shook off his lethargy. He aroused, and opened his eyes. His window was directly in front of his hammock. He saw something extraordinary.

A form was before the window; a marvellous form. It was the funnel of a steam-vessel.

Mess Lethierry started, and sat upright in his bed. The hammock oscillated like a swing in a tempest. Lethierry stared. A vision filled the window-frame. There was the harbour flooded with the light of the moon, and against that glitter, quite close to his house, stood forth, tall, round, and black, a magnificent object.

The funnel of a steam-vessel was there.

Lethierry sprang out of his hammock, ran to the window, lifted the sash, leaned out, and recognised it.

The funnel of the Durande stood before him.

It was in the old place.

Its four chains supported it, made fast to the bulwarks of a vessel in which, beneath the funnel, he could distinguish a dark mass of irregular outline.

Lethierry recoiled, turned his back to the window, and dropped in a sitting posture into his hammock again.

Then he returned, and once more he saw the vision.

An instant afterwards, or in about the time occupied by a flash of lightning, he was out upon the quay, with a lantern in his hand.

A bark carrying a little backward a massive block from which issued the straight funnel before the window of the Bravées, was made fast to the mooring-ring of the Durande. The bows of the bark stretched beyond the corner of the wall of the house, and were level with the quay.

There was no one aboard.

The vessel was of a peculiar shape. All Guernsey would have recognised it. It was the old Dutch sloop.

Lethierry jumped aboard; and ran forward to the block which he saw beyond the mast.

It was there, entire, complete, intact, standing square and firm upon its cast-iron flooring; the boiler had all its rivets, the axle of the paddle-wheels was raised erect, and made fast near the boiler; the brine-pump was in its place; nothing was wanting.

Lethierry examined the machinery.

The lantern and the moon helped him in his examination. He went over every part of the mechanism.

He noticed the two cases at the sides. He examined the axle of the wheels.

He went into the little cabin; it was empty.

He returned to the engine, and felt it, looked into the boiler, and knelt down to examine it inside.

He placed his lantern within the furnace, where the light, illuminating all the machinery, produced almost the illusion of an engine-room with its fire.

Then he burst into a wild laugh, sprang to his feet, and with his eye fixed on the engine, and his arms outstretched towards the funnel, he cried aloud, “Help.”

The harbour bell was upon the quay, at a few paces distance. He ran to it, seized the chain, and began to pull it violently.

II

THE HARBOUR BELL AGAIN

Gilliatt, in fact, after a passage without accident, but somewhat slow on account of the heavy burden of the sloop, had arrived at St. Sampson after dark, and nearer ten than nine o’clock.

He had calculated the time. The half-flood had arrived. There was plenty of water, and the moon was shining; so that he was able to enter the port.

The little harbour was silent. A few vessels were moored there, with their sails brailed up to the yards, their tops over, and without lanterns. At the far end a few others were visible, high and dry in the careenage, where they were undergoing repairs; large hulls dismasted and stripped, with their planking open at various parts, lifting high the ends of their timbers, and looking like huge dead beetles lying on their backs with their legs in the air.

As soon as he had cleared the harbour mouth, Gilliatt examined the port and the quay. There was no light to be seen either at the Bravées or elsewhere. The place was deserted, save, perhaps, by some one going to or returning from the parsonage-house; nor was it possible to be sure even of this; for the night blurred every outline, and the moonlight always gives to objects a vague appearance. The distance added to the indistinctness. The parsonage-house at that period was situated on the other side of the harbour, where there stands at the present day an open mast-house.

Gilliatt had approached the Bravées quietly, and had made the sloop fast to the ring of the Durande, under Mess Lethierry’s window.

He leaped over the bulwarks, and was ashore.

Leaving the sloop behind him by the quay, he turned the angle of the house, passed along a little narrow street, then along another, did not even notice the pathway which branched off leading to the Bû de la Rue, and in a few minutes found himself at that corner of the wall where there were wild mallows with pink flowers in June, with holly, ivy, and nettles. Many a time concealed behind the bushes, seated on a stone, in the summer days, he had watched here through long hours, even for whole months, often tempted to climb the wall, over which he contemplated the garden of the Bravées and the two windows of a little room seen through the branches of the trees. The stone was there still; the bushes, the low wall, the angle, as quiet and dark as ever. Like an animal returning to its hole, gliding rather than walking, he made his way in. Once seated there, he made no movement. He looked around; saw again the garden, the pathways, the beds of flowers, the house, the two windows of the chamber. The moonlight fell upon this dream. He felt it horrible to be compelled to breathe, and did what he could to prevent it.

He seemed to be gazing on a vision of paradise, and was afraid that all would vanish. It was almost impossible that all these things could be really before his eyes; and if they were, it could only be with that imminent danger of melting into air which belongs to things divine. A breath, and all must be dissipated. He trembled with the thought.

Before him, not far off, at the side of one of the alleys in the garden, was a wooden seat painted green. The reader will remember this seat.

Gilliatt looked up at the two windows. He thought of the slumber of some one possibly in that room. Behind that wall she was no doubt sleeping. He wished himself elsewhere, yet would sooner have died than go away. He thought of a gentle breathing moving a woman’s breast. It was she, that vision, that purity in the clouds, that form haunting him by day and night. She was there! He thought of her so far removed, and yet so near as to be almost within reach of his delight; he thought of that impossible ideal drooping in slumber, and like himself, too, visited by visions; of that being so long desired, so distant, so impalpable — her closed eyelids, her face resting on her hand; of the mystery of sleep in its relations with that pure spirit, of what dreams might come to one who was herself a dream. He dared not think beyond, and yet he did. He ventured on those familiarities which the fancy may indulge in; the notion of how much was feminine in that angelic being disturbed his thoughts. The darkness of night emboldens timid imaginations to take these furtive glances. He was vexed within himself, feeling on reflection as if it were profanity to think of her so boldly; yet still constrained, in spite of himself, he tremblingly gazed into the invisible. He shuddered almost with a sense of pain as he imagined her room, a petticoat on a chair, a mantle fallen on the carpet, a band unbuckled, a handkerchief. He imagined her corset with its lace hanging to the ground, her stockings, her boots. His soul was among the stars.

The stars are made for the human heart of a poor man like Gilliatt not less than for that of the rich and great. There is a certain degree of passion by which every man becomes wrapped in a celestial light. With a rough and primitive nature, this truth is even more applicable. An uncultivated mind is easily touched with dreams.

Delight is a fulness which overflows like any other. To see those windows was almost too much happiness for Gilliatt.

Suddenly, he looked and saw her.

From the branches of a clump of bushes, already thickened by the spring, there issued with a spectral slowness a celestial figure, a dress, a divine face, almost a shining light beneath the moon.

Gilliatt felt his powers failing him: it was Déruchette.

Déruchette approached. She stopped. She walked back a few paces, stopped again, then returned and sat upon the wooden bench. The moon was in the trees, a few clouds floated among the pale stars; the sea murmured to the shadows in an undertone, the town was sleeping, a thin haze was rising from the horizon, the melancholy was profound. Déruchette inclined her head, with those thoughtful eyes which look attentive yet see nothing. She was seated sideways, and had nothing on her head but a little cap untied, which showed upon her delicate neck the commencement of her hair. She twirled mechanically a ribbon of her cap around one of her fingers; the half light showed the outline of her hands like those of a statue; her dress was of one of those shades which by night looked white: the trees stirred as if they felt the enchantment which she shed around her. The tip of one of her feet was visible. Her lowered eyelids had that vague contraction which suggests a tear checked in its course, or a thought suppressed. There was a charming indecision in the movements of her arms, which had no support to lean on; a sort of floating mingled with every posture. It was rather a gleam than a light — rather a grace than a goddess; the folds of her dress were exquisite; her face which might inspire adoration, seemed meditative, like portraits of the Virgin. It was terrible to think how near she was: Gilliatt could hear her breathe.

A nightingale was singing in the distance. The stirring of the wind among the branches set in movement, the inexpressible silence of the night. Déruchette, beautiful, divine, appeared in the twilight like a creation from those rays and from the perfumes in the air. That widespread enchantment seemed to concentre and embody itself mysteriously in her; she became its living manifestation. She seemed the outblossoming of all that shadow and silence.

But the shadow and silence which floated lightly about her weighed heavily on Gilliatt. He was bewildered; what he experienced is not to be told in words. Emotion is always new, and the word is always enough. Hence the impossibility of expressing it. Joy is sometimes overwhelming. To see Déruchette, to see herself, to see her dress, her cap, her ribbon, which she twined around her finger, was it possible to imagine it? Was it possible to be thus near her; to hear her breathe? She breathed! then the stars might breathe also. Gilliatt felt a thrill through him. He was the most miserable and yet the happiest of men. He knew not what to do. His delirious joy at seeing her annihilated him. Was it indeed Déruchette there, and he so near? His thoughts, bewildered and yet fixed, were fascinated by that figure as by a dazzling jewel. He gazed upon her neck — her hair. He did not even say to himself that all that would now belong to him, that before long — to-morrow, perhaps — he would have the right to take off that cap, to unknot that ribbon. He would not have conceived for a moment the audacity of thinking even so far. Touching in idea is almost like touching with the hand. Love was with Gilliatt like honey to the bear. He thought confusedly; he knew not what possessed him. The nightingale still sang. He felt as if about to breathe his life out.

The idea of rising, of jumping over the wall, of speaking to Déruchette, never came into his mind. If it had he would have turned and fled. If anything resembling a thought had begun to dawn in his mind, it was this: that Déruchette was there, that he wanted nothing more, and that eternity had begun.

A noise aroused them both — her from her reverie — him from his ecstasy.

Some one was walking in the garden. It was not possible to see who was approaching on account of the trees. It was the footstep of a man.

Déruchette raised her eyes.

The steps drew nearer, then ceased. The person walking had stopped. He must have been quite near. The path beside which was the bench wound between two clumps of trees. The stranger was there in the alley between the trees, at a few paces from the seat.

Accident had so placed the branches, that Déruchette could see the newcomer while Gilliatt could not.

The moon cast on the ground beyond the trees a shadow which reached to the garden seat.

Gilliatt could see this shadow.

He looked at Déruchette.

She was quite pale; her mouth was partly open, as with a suppressed cry of surprise. She had just half risen from the bench, and sunk again upon it. There was in her attitude a mixture of fascination with a desire to fly. Her surprise was enchantment mingled with timidity. She had upon her lips almost the light of a smile, with the fulness of tears in her eyes. She seemed as if transfigured by that presence; as if the being whom she saw before her belonged not to this earth. The reflection of an angel was in her look.

The stranger, who was to Gilliatt only a shadow, spoke. A voice issued from the trees, softer than the voice of a woman; yet it was the voice of a man. Gilliatt heard these words:

“I see you, mademoiselle, every Sunday and every Thursday. They tell me that once you used not to come so often. It is a remark that has been made. I ask your pardon. I have never spoken to you; it was my duty; but I come to speak to you to-day, for it is still my duty. It is right that I speak to you first. The *Cashmere* sails to-morrow. This is why I have come. You walk every evening in your garden. It would be wrong of me to know your habits so well, if I had not the thought that I have. Mademoiselle, you are poor; since this morning I am rich. Will you have me for your husband?”

Déruchette joined her two hands in a suppliant attitude, and looked at the speaker, silent, with fixed eyes, and trembling from head to foot.

The voice continued:

“I love you. God made not the heart of man to be silent. He has promised him eternity with the intention that he should not be alone. There is for me but one woman upon earth. It is you. I think of you as of a prayer. My faith is in God, and my hope in you. What wings I have you bear. You are my life, and already my supreme happiness.”

“Sir,” said Déruchette, “there is no one to answer in the house!”

The voice rose again:

“Yes, I have encouraged that dream. Heaven has not forbidden us to dream. You are like a glory in my eyes. I love you deeply, mademoiselle. To me you are holy innocence. I know it is the hour at which your household have retired to rest, but I had no choice of any other moment. Do you remember that passage of the Bible which some one read before us; it was the twenty-fifth chapter of Genesis. I have thought of it often since. M. Hérode said to me, you must have a rich wife. I replied no, I must have a poor wife. I speak to you, mademoiselle, without venturing to approach you; I would step even further back if it was your wish that my shadow should not touch your feet. You alone are supreme. You will come to me if such is your will. I love and wait. You are the living form of a benediction.”

“I did not know, sir,” stammered Déruchette, “that any one remarked me on Sundays and Thursdays.”

The voice continued:

“We are powerless against celestial things. The whole Law is love. Marriage is Canaan; you are to me the promised land of beauty.”

Déruchette replied, “I did not think I did wrong any more than other persons who are strict.”

The voice continued:

“God manifests his will in the flowers, in the light of dawn, in the spring; and love is of his ordaining. You are beautiful in this holy shadow of night. This garden has been tended by you; in its perfumes there is something of your breath. The affinities of our souls do not depend on us. They cannot be counted with our sins. You were there, that was all. I was there, that was all. I did nothing but feel that I loved you. Sometimes my eyes rested upon you. I was wrong, but what could I do. It was through looking at you that all happened. I could not restrain my gaze. There are mysterious impulses which are above our search. The heart is the chief of all temples. To have your spirit in my house — this is the terrestrial paradise for which I hope. Say, will you be mine. As long as I was poor, I spoke not. I know your age. You are twenty-one; I am twenty-six. I go to-morrow; if you refuse me I return no more. Oh, be my betrothed; will you not? More than once have my eyes, in spite of myself, addressed to you that question. I love you; answer me. I will speak to your uncle as soon as he is able to receive me; but I turn first to you. To Rebecca I plead for Rebecca; unless you love me not.”

Déruchette hung her head, and murmured:

“Oh! I worship him.”

The words were spoken in a voice so low, that only Gilliatt heard them.

She remained with her head lowered as if by shading her face she hoped to conceal her thoughts.

There was a pause. No leaf among the trees was stirred. It was that solemn and peaceful moment when the slumber of external things mingles with the sleep of living creatures; and night seems to listen to the beating of

Nature’s heart. In the midst of that retirement, like a harmony making the silence more complete, rose the wide murmur of the sea.

The voice was heard again.

“Mademoiselle!”

Déruchette started.

Again the voice spoke.

“You are silent.”

“What would you have me say?”

“I wait for your reply.”

“God has heard it,” said Déruchette.

Then the voice became almost sonorous, and at the same time softer than before, and these words issued from the leaves as from a burning bush:

“You are my betrothed. Come then to me. Let the blue sky, with all its stars, be witness of this taking of my soul to thine; and let our first embrace be mingled with that firmament.”

Déruchette arose, and remained an instant motionless, looking straight before her, doubtless in another’s eyes. Then, with slow steps, with head erect, her arms drooping, but with the fingers of her hands wide apart, like one who leans on some unseen support, she advanced towards the trees, and was out of sight.

A moment afterwards, instead of the one shadow upon the gravelled walk, there were two. They mingled together. Gilliatt saw at his feet the embrace of those two shadows.

In certain moments of crisis, time flows from us as his sands from the hour-glass, and we have no feeling of his flight. That pair on the one hand, who were ignorant of the presence of a witness, and saw him not; on the other, that witness of their joy who could not see them, but who knew of their presence — how many minutes did they remain thus in that mysterious suspension of themselves? It would be impossible to say. Suddenly a noise burst forth at a distance. A voice was heard crying “Help!” and the harbour bell began to sound. It is probable that in those celestial transports of delight they heard no echo of that tumult.

The bell continued to ring. Any one who had sought Gilliatt then in the angle of the wall would have found him no longer there.

BOOK II

GRATITUDE AND DESPOTISM

I

JOY SURROUNDED BY TORTURES

Mess Lethierry pulled the bell furiously, then stopped abruptly. A man had just turned the corner of the quay. It was Gilliatt.

Lethierry ran towards him, or rather flung himself upon him; seized his hand between his own, and looked him in the face for a moment, silent. It was the silence of an explosion struggling to find an issue.

Then pulling and shaking him with violence, and squeezing him in his arms, he compelled him to enter the lower room of the Bravées, pushed back with his heel the door which had remained half opened, sat down, or sank into a chair beside a great table lighted by the moon, the reflection of which gave a vague pallor to Gilliatt’s face, and with a voice of intermingled laughter and tears, cried:

“Ah! my son; my player of the bagpipe! I knew well that it was you. The sloop, *parbleu*! Tell me the story. You went there, then. Why, they would have burnt you a hundred years ago! It is magic! There isn’t a screw missing. I have looked at everything already, recognised everything, handled everything. I guessed that the paddles were in the two cases. And here you are once more! I have been looking for you in the little cabin. I rang the bell. I was seeking for you. I said to myself, ‘Where is he, that I may devour him?’ You must admit that wonderful things do come to pass. He has brought back life to me. *Tonnerre!* you are an angel! Yes, yes; it is my engine. Nobody will believe it; people will see it, and say, ‘It can’t be true.’ Not a tap, not a pin missing. The feed-pipe has never budged an inch. It is incredible that there should have been no more damage. We have only to put a little oil. But how did you accomplish it? To think that the Durande will be moving again. The axle of the wheels must have been taken to pieces by some watchmaker. Give me your word that I am not crazy.”

He sprang to his feet, breathed a moment, and continued:

“Assure me of that. What a revolution! I pinched myself to be certain I was not dreaming. You are my child, you are my son, you are my Providence. Brave lad! To go and fetch my good old engine. In the open sea, among those cut-throat rocks. I have seen some strange things in my life; nothing like that. I have known Parisians, who were veritable demons, but I’ll defy them to have done that. It beats the Bastille. I have seen the *gauchos* labouring in the *Pampas*, with a crooked branch of a tree for a plough and a bundle of thorn-bushes for a harrow, dragged by a leathern strap; they get harvests of wheat that way, with grains as big as hedgenuts. But that is a trifle compared with your feats. You have performed a miracle — a real one. Ah! *gredin!* let me hug you. How they will gossip in St. Sampson. I shall set to work at once to build the boat. It is astonishing that the crank is all right. Gentlemen, he has been to the Douvres; I say to the Douvres. He went alone. The Douvres! I defy you to find a worse spot. Do you know, have they told you, that it’s proved that Clubin sent the Durande to the bottom to swindle me out of money which he had to bring me? He made Tangrouille drunk. It’s a long story. I’ll tell you another day of his piratical tricks. I, stupid idiot, had confidence in Clubin. But he trapped himself, the villain, for he couldn’t have got away. There is a God above, scoundrel! Do you see, Gilliatt, bang! bang! the irons in the fire; we’ll begin at once to rebuild the Durande. We’ll have her twenty feet longer. They build them longer now than they did. I’ll buy the wood from Dantzic and Brême. Now I have got the machinery they will give me credit again. They’ll have confidence now.”

Mess Lethierry stopped, lifted his eyes with that look which sees the heavens through the roof, and muttered, “Yes, there is a power on high!”

Then he placed the middle finger of his right hand between his two eyebrows, and tapped with his nail there, an action which indicates a project passing through the mind, and he continued:

“Nevertheless, to begin again, on a grand scale, a little ready money would have been useful. Ah! if I only had my three bank-notes, the seventy-five thousand francs that that robber Rantaine returned, and that vagabond Clubin stole.”

Gilliatt silently felt in his pocket, and drew out something which he placed before him. It was the leathern belt that he had brought back. He opened, and spread it out upon the table; in the inside the word “Clubin” could be deciphered in the light of the moon. He then took out of the pocket of the belt a box, and out of the box three pieces of paper, which he unfolded and offered to Lethierry.

Lethierry examined them. It was light enough to read the figures “1000,” and the word “thousand” was also perfectly visible. Mess Lethierry took the three notes, placed them on the table one beside the other, looked at them, looked at Gilliatt, stood for a moment dumb; and then began again, like an eruption after an explosion:

“These too! You are a marvel. My bank-notes! all three. A thousand pounds each. My seventy-five thousand francs. Why, you must have gone down to the infernal regions. It is Clubin’s belt. Pardieu! I can read his vile name. Gilliatt has brought back engine and money too. There will be something to put in the papers. I will buy some timber of the finest quality. I guess how it was; you found his carcase; Clubin mouldering away in some corner. We’ll have some Dantzic pine and Brême oak; we’ll have a first-rate planking — oak within and pine without. In old times they didn’t build so well, but their work lasted longer; the wood was better seasoned, because they did not build so much. We’ll build the hull perhaps of elm. Elm is good for the parts in the water. To be dry sometimes, and sometimes wet, rots the timbers; the elm requires to be always wet; it’s a wood that feeds upon water. What a splendid Durande we’ll build. The lawyers will not trouble me again. I shall want no more credit. I have some money of my own. Did ever any one see a man like Gilliatt. I was struck down to the ground, I was a dead man. He comes and sets me up again as firm as ever. And all the while I was never thinking about him. He had gone clean out of my mind; but I recollect everything now. Poor lad! Ah! by the way, you know you are to marry Déruchette.”

Gilliatt leaned with his back against the wall, like one who staggers, and said in a tone very low, but distinct:

“No.”

Mess Lethierry started.

“How, no!”

Gilliatt replied:

“I do not love her.”

Mess Lethierry went to the window, opened and reclosed it, took the three bank-notes, folded them, placed the iron box on top, scratched his head, seized Clubin’s belt, flung it violently against the wall, and exclaimed:

“You must be mad.”

He thrust his fists into his pockets, and exclaimed:

“You don’t love Déruchette? What! was it at me, then, that you used to play the bagpipe?”

Gilliatt, still supporting himself by the wall, turned pale, as a man near his end. As he became pale, Lethierry became redder.

“There’s an idiot for you! He doesn’t love Déruchette. Very good; make up your mind to love her, for she shall never marry any but you. A devilish pretty story that; and you think that I believe you. If there is anything really the matter with you, send for a doctor; but don’t talk nonsense. You can’t have had time to quarrel, or get out of temper with her. It is true that lovers are great fools sometimes. Come now, what are your reasons? If you have any, say. People don’t make geese of themselves without reasons. But, I have wool in my ears; perhaps I didn’t understand. Repeat to me what you said.”

Gilliatt replied:

“I said, No!”

“You said, No. He holds to it, the lunatic! You must be crazy. You said, No. Here’s a stupidity beyond anything ever heard of. Why, people have had their heads shaved for much less than that. What! you don’t like Déruchette? Oh, then, it was out of affection for the old man that you did all these things? It was for the sake of papa that you went to the Douvres, that you endured cold and heat, and was half dead with hunger and thirst, and ate the limpets off the rocks, and had the fog, the rain, and the wind for your bedroom, and brought me back my machine, just as you might bring a pretty woman her little canary that had escaped from its cage. And the tempest that we had three days ago. Do you think I don’t bear it in mind? You must have had a time of it! It was in the midst of all this misery, alongside of my old craft, that you shaped, and cut, and turned, and twisted, and dragged about, and filed, and sawed, and carpentered, and schemed, and performed more miracles there by yourself than all the saints in paradise. Ah! you annoyed me enough once with your bagpipe. They call it a *biniou* in Brittany. Always the same tune too, silly fellow. And yet you don’t love Déruchette? I don’t know what is the matter with you. I recollect it all now. I was there in the corner; Déruchette said, ‘He shall be my husband;’ and so you shall. You don’t love her! Either you must be mad, or else I am mad. And you stand there, and speak not a word. I tell you you are not at liberty to do all the things you have done, and then say, after all, ‘I don’t love Déruchette.’ People don’t do others services in order to put them in a passion. Well; if you don’t marry her, she shall be single all her life. In the first place, I shall want you. You must be the pilot of the Durande. Do you imagine I mean to part with you like that? No, no, my brave boy; I don’t let you go. I have got you now; I’ll not even listen to you. Where will they find a sailor like you? You are the man I want. But why don’t you speak?”

Meanwhile the harbour bell had aroused the household and the neighbourhood. Douce and Grace had risen, and had just entered the lower room, silent and astonished. Grace had a candle in her hand. A group of neighbours, townspeople, sailors, and peasants, who had rushed out of their houses, were outside on the quay, gazing in wonderment at the funnel of the Durande in the sloop. Some, hearing Lethierry’s voice in the lower room, began to glide in by the half-opened door. Between the faces of two worthy old women appeared that of Sieur Landoys, who had the good fortune always to find himself where he would have regretted to have been absent.

Men feel a satisfaction in having witnesses of their joys. The sort of scattered support which a crowd presents pleases them at such times; their delight draws new life from it. Mess Lethierry suddenly perceived that there were persons about him; and he welcomed the audience at once.

“Ah! you are here, my friends? I am very glad to see you. You know the news? That man has been there, and brought it back. How d’ye do, Sieur Landoys? When I woke up just now, the first thing I spied was the funnel. It was under my window. There’s not a nail missing. They make pictures of Napoleon’s deeds; but I think more of that than of the battle of Austerlitz. You have just left your beds, my good friends. The Durande has found you sleeping. While you are putting on your night-caps and blowing out your candles there are others working like heroes. We are a set of cowards and do-nothings; we sit at home rubbing our rheumatisms; but happily that does not prevent there being some of another stamp. The man of the Bû de la Rue has arrived from the Douvres rocks. He has fished up the Durande from the bottom of the sea; and fished up my money out of Clubin’s pocket, from a greater depth still. But how did you contrive to do it? All the powers of darkness were against you — the wind and the sea — the sea and the wind. It’s true enough that you are a magician. Those who say that are not so stupid after all. The Durande is back again. The tempests may rage now;

that cuts the ground from under them. My friends, I can inform you that there was no shipwreck after all. I have examined all the machinery. It is like new, perfect. The valves go as easily as rollers. You would think them made yesterday. You know that the waste water is carried away by a tube inside another tube, through which come the waters from the boilers; this was to economise the heat. Well; the two tubes are there as good as ever. The complete engine, in fact. She is all there, her wheels and all. Ah! you shall marry her.”

“Marry the complete engine?” asked Sieur Landoys.

“No; Déruchette; yes; the engine. Both of them. He shall be my double son-in-law. He shall be her captain. Good day, Captain Gilliatt; for there will soon be a captain of the Durande. We are going to do a world of business again. There will be trade, circulation, cargoes of oxen and sheep. I wouldn’t give St. Sampson for London now. And there stands the author of all this. It was a curious adventure, I can tell you. You will read about it on Saturday in old Mauger’s *Gazette*. Malicious Gilliatt is very malicious. What’s the meaning of these Louis-d’ors here?”

Mess Lethierry had just observed, through the opening of the lid, that there was some gold in the box upon the notes. He seized it, opened and emptied it into the palm of his hand, and put the handful of guineas on the table.

“For the poor, Sieur Landoys. Give those sovereigns from me to the constable of St. Sampson. You recollect Rantaine’s letter. I showed it to you. Very well; I’ve got the bank-notes. Now we can buy some oak and fir, and go to work at carpentering. Look you! Do you remember the weather of three days ago? What a hurricane of wind and rain! Gilliatt endured all that upon the Douvres. That didn’t prevent his taking the wreck to pieces, as I might take my watch. Thanks to him, I am on my legs again. Old ‘Lethierry’s galley’ is going to run again, ladies and gentlemen. A nut-shell with a couple of wheels and a funnel. I always had that idea. I used to say to myself, one day I will do it. That was a good long time back. It was an idea that came in my head at Paris, at the coffee-house at the corner of the Rue Christine and the Rue Dauphine, when I was reading a paper which had an account of it. Do you know that Gilliatt would think nothing of putting the machine at Marly in his pocket, and walking about with it? He is wrought-iron, that man; tempered steel, a mariner of invaluable qualities, an excellent smith, an extraordinary fellow, more astonishing than the Prince of Hohenlohe. That is what I call a man with brains. We are children by the side of him. Sea-wolves we may think ourselves; but the sea-lion is there. Hurrah for Gilliatt! I do not know how he has done it; but certainly he must have been the devil. And how can I do other than give him Déruchette.”

For some minutes Déruchette had been in the room. She had not spoken or moved since she entered. She had glided in like a shadow, had sat down almost unperceived behind Mess Lethierry, who stood before her, loquacious, stormy, joyful, abounding in gestures, and talking in a loud voice. A little while after her another silent apparition had appeared. A man attired in black, with a white cravat, holding his hat in his hand, stood in the doorway. There were now several candles among the group, which had gradually increased in number. These lights were near the man attired in black. His profile and youthful and pleasing complexion showed itself against the dark background with the clearness of an engraving on a medal. He leaned with his shoulder against the framework of the door, and held his left hand to his forehead, an attitude of unconscious grace, which contrasted the breadth of his forehead with the smallness of his hand. There was an expression of anguish in his contracted lips, as he looked on and listened with profound attention. The standers-by having recognised M. Caudray, the rector of the parish, had fallen back to allow him to pass; but he remained upon the threshold. There was hesitation in his posture, but decision in his looks, which now and then met those of Déruchette. With regard to Gilliatt, whether by chance or design, he was in shadow, and was only perceived indistinctly.

At first Mess Lethierry did not observe Caudray, but he saw Déruchette. He went to her and kissed her fervently upon the forehead; stretching forth his hand at the same time towards the dark corner where Gilliatt was standing.

“Déruchette,” he said, “we are rich again; and there is your future husband.”

Déruchette raised her head, and looked into the dusky corner bewildered.

Mess Lethierry continued:

“The marriage shall take place immediately, if it can; they shall have a licence; the formalities here are not very troublesome; the dean can do what he pleases; people are married before they have time to turn round. It is not as in France, where you must have bans, and publications, and delays, and all that fuss. You will be able to boast of being the wife of a brave man. No one can say he is not. I thought so from the day when I saw him come back from Herm with the little cannon. But now he comes back from the Douvres with his fortune and mine, and the fortune of this country. A man of whom the world will talk a great deal more one day. You said once, ‘I will marry him;’ and you shall marry him, and you shall have little children, and I will be grandpapa; and you will have the good fortune to be the wife of a noble fellow, who can work, who can be useful to his fellow-men; a surprising fellow, worth a hundred others; a man who can rescue other people’s inventions, a providence! At all events, you will not have married, like so many other silly girls about here, a soldier or a priest, that is, a man who kills or a man who lies. But what are you doing there, Gilliatt? Nobody can see you. Douce, Grace, everybody there! Bring a light, I say. Light up my son-in-law for me. I betroth you to each other, my children: here stands your husband, here my son, Gilliatt of the Bû de la Rue, that noble fellow, that great seaman; I will have no other son-in-law, and you no other husband. I pledge my word to that once more in God’s name. Ah! you are there, Monsieur the Curé. You will marry these young people for us.”

Lethierry’s eye had just fallen upon Caudray.

Douce and Grace had done as they were directed. Two candles placed upon the table cast a light upon Gilliatt from head to foot.

“There’s a fine fellow,” said Mess Lethierry.

Gilliatt’s appearance was hideous.

He was in the condition in which he had that morning set sail from the rocks; in rags, his bare elbows showing through his sleeves; his beard long, his hair rough and wild; his eyes bloodshot, his skin peeling, his hands covered with wounds; his feet naked. Some of the blisters left by the devil-fish were still visible upon his arms.

Lethierry gazed at him.

“This is my son-in-law,” he said. “How he has struggled with the sea. He is all in rags. What shoulders; what hands. There’s a splendid fellow!”

Grace ran to Déruchette and supported her head. She had fainted.

II

THE LEATHERN TRUNK

At break of day St. Sampson was on foot, and all the people of St. Peter’s Port began to flock there. The resurrection of the Durande caused a commotion in the island not unlike what was caused by the *Salette* in the south of France. There was a crowd on the quay staring at the funnel standing erect in the sloop. They were anxious to see and handle the machinery; but Lethierry, after making a new and triumphant survey of the whole by daylight, had placed two sailors aboard with instructions to prevent any one approaching it. The funnel, however, furnished food enough for contemplation. The crowd gaped with astonishment. They talked of nothing but Gilliatt. They remarked on his surname of “malicious Gilliatt;” and their admiration wound up with the remark, “It is not pleasant to have people in the island who can do things like that.”

Mess Lethierry was seen from outside the house, seated at a table before the window, writing, with one eye on the paper and another on the sloop. He was so completely absorbed that he had only once stopped to call Douce and ask after Déruchette. Douce replied, “Mademoiselle has risen and is gone out.” Mess Lethierry replied, “She is right to take the air. She was a little unwell last night, owing to the heat. There was a crowd in the room. This and her surprise and joy, and the windows being all closed, overcame her. She will have a husband to be proud of.” And he had gone on with his writing. He had already finished and sealed two letters, addressed to the most important shipbuilders at Brême. He now finished the sealing of a third.

The noise of a wheel upon the quay induced him to look up. He leaned out of the window, and observed coming from the path which led to the Bû de la Rue a boy pushing a wheelbarrow. The boy was going towards St. Peter’s Port. In the barrow was a portmanteau of brown leather, studded with nails of brass and white metal.

Mess Lethierry called to the boy:

“Where are you going, my lad?”

The boy stopped, and replied:

“To the *Cashmere*.”

"What for?"

"To take this trunk aboard."

"Very good; you shall take these three letters too."

Mess Lethierry opened the drawer of his table, took a piece of string, tied the three letters which he had just written across and across, and threw the packet to the boy, who caught it between his hands.

"Tell the captain of the *Cashmere* they are my letters, and to take care of them. They are for Germany — Brême *viâ* London."

"I can't speak to the captain, Mess Lethierry."

"Why not?"

"The *Cashmere* is not at the quay."

"Ah!"

"She is in the roads."

"Ay, true; on account of the sea."

"I can only speak to the man who takes the things aboard."

"You will tell him, then, to look to the letters."

"Very well, Mess Lethierry."

"At what time does the *Cashmere* sail?"

"At twelve."

"The tide will flow at noon; she will have it against her."

"But she will have the wind," answered the lad.

"Boy," said Mess Lethierry, pointing with his forefinger at the engine in the sloop, "do you see that? There is something which laughs at winds and tides."

The boy put the letters in his pocket, took up the handles of the barrow again, and went on his way towards the town. Mess Lethierry called "Douce! Grace!"

Grace opened the door a little way.

"What is it, Mess?"

"Come in and wait a moment."

Mess Lethierry took a sheet of paper, and began to write. If Grace, standing behind him, had been curious, and had leaned forward while he was writing, she might have read as follows: —

"I have written to Brême for the timber. I have appointments all the morning with carpenters for the estimate. The rebuilding will go on fast. You must go yourself to the Deanery for a licence. It is my wish that the marriage should take place as soon as possible; immediately would be better. I am busy about the Durande. Do you be busy about Déruchette.”

He dated it and signed “Lethierry.” He did not take the trouble to seal it, but merely folded it in four, and handed it to Grace, saying:

“Take that to Gilliatt.”

“To the Bû de la Rue?”

“To the Bû de la Rue.”

BOOK III

THE DEPARTURE OF THE *CASHMERE*

I

THE HAVELET NEAR THE CHURCH

When there is a crowd at St. Sampson, St. Peter’s Port is soon deserted. A point of curiosity at a given place is like an air-pump. News travel fast in small places. Going to see the funnel of the Durande under Mess Lethierry’s window had been, since sunrise, the business of the Guernsey folks. Every other event was eclipsed by this. The death of the Dean of St. Asaph was forgotten, together with the question of the Rev. Mr. Caudray, his sudden riches, and the departure of the *Cashmere*. The machinery of the Durande brought back from the Douvres rocks was the order of the day. People were incredulous. The shipwreck had appeared extraordinary, the salvage seemed impossible. Everybody hastened to assure himself of the truth by the help of his own eyes. Business of every kind was suspended. Long strings of townsfolk with their families, from the “Vesin” up to the “Mess,” men and women, gentlemen, mothers with children, infants with dolls, were coming by every road or pathway to see “the thing to be seen” at the Bravées, turning their backs upon St. Peter’s Port. Many shops at St. Peter’s Port were closed. In the Commercial Arcade there was an absolute stagnation in buying and selling. The Durande alone obtained attention. Not a single shopkeeper had had a “handsell” that morning, except a jeweller, who was surprised at having sold a wedding-ring to “a sort of man who appeared in a great hurry, and who asked for the house of the Dean.” The shops which remained open were centres of gossip, where loiterers discussed the miraculous salvage. There was not a foot-passenger at the “Hyvreuse,” which is known in these days, nobody knows why, as Cambridge Park; no one was in the High Street, then called the Grande Rue; nor in Smith Street, known then only as the Rue des Forges; nobody in Hauteville. The Esplanade itself was deserted. One might have guessed it to be Sunday. A visit from a Royal personage to review the militia at the Ancresse could not have emptied the town more completely. All this hubbub about “a nobody” like Gilliatt, caused a good deal of shrugging of the shoulders among persons of grave and correct habits.

The church of St. Peter’s Port, with its three gable-ends placed side by side, its transept and its steeple, stands at the water’s side at the end of the harbour, and nearly on the landing place itself, where it welcomes those who arrive, and gives the departing “God speed.” It represents the capital letter at the beginning of that long line which forms the front of the town towards the sea.

It is both the parish church of St. Peter’s Port and the chief place of the Deanery of the whole island. Its officiating minister is the surrogate of the bishop, a clergyman in full orders.

The harbour of St. Peter’s Port, a very fine and large port at the present day, was at that epoch, and even up to ten years ago, less considerable than the harbour of St. Sampson. It was enclosed by two enormous thick walls, beginning at the water’s edge on both sides, and curving till they almost joined again at the extremities, where there stood a little white lighthouse. Under this lighthouse, a narrow gullet, bearing still the two rings of the chain with which it was the custom to bar the passage in ancient times, formed the entrance for vessels. The harbour of St. Peter’s Port might be well compared with the claws of a huge lobster opened a little way. This kind of pincers took from the ocean a portion of the sea, which it compelled to remain calm. But during the easterly winds the waves rolled heavily against the narrow entrance, the port was agitated, and it was better not to enter. This is what had happened with the *Cashmere* that day, which had accordingly anchored in the roads.

The vessels, during the easterly winds, preferred this course, which besides saved them the port dues. On these occasions the boatmen of the town, a hardy race of mariners whom the new port has thrown out of employment, came in their boats to fetch passengers at the landing-place or at stations on the shore, and carried them with their luggage, often in heavy seas, but always without accident, to the vessels about to sail. The east wind blows off the shore, and is very favourable for the passage to England; the vessel at such times rolls, but does not pitch.

When a vessel happened to be in the port, everybody embarked from the quay. When it was in the roads they took their choice, and embarked from any point of the coast near the moorings. The “Havelet” was one of these creeks. This little harbour (which is the signification of the word) was near the town, but was so solitary that it seemed far off. This solitude was owing to the shelter of the high cliffs of Fort St. George, which overlooked this retired inlet. The Havelet was accessible by several paths. The most direct was along the water's side. It had the advantage of leading to the town and to the church in five minutes' walk, and the disadvantage of being covered by the sea twice a day. The other paths were more or less abrupt, and led down to the creek through gaps in the steep rocks. Even in broad daylight, it was dusk in the Havelet. Huge blocks overhanging it on all sides, and thick bushes and brambles cast a sort of soft twilight upon the rocks and waves below. Nothing could be more peaceful than this spot in calm weather; nothing more tumultuous during heavy seas. There were ends of branches there which were always wet with the foam. In the spring time, the place was full of flowers, of nests, of perfumes, of birds, of butterflies, and bees. Thanks to recent improvements, this wild nook no longer exists. Fine, straight lines have taken the place of these wild features; masonry, quays, and little gardens, have made their appearance; earthwork has been the rage, and taste has finally subdued the eccentricities of the cliff, and the irregularities of the rocks below.

II

DESPAIR CONFRONTS DESPAIR

It was a little before ten o’clock in the morning. The crowd at St. Sampson, according to all appearance, was increasing. The multitude, feverish with curiosity, was moving towards the north; and the Havelet, which is in the south, was more deserted than ever.

Notwithstanding this, there was a boat there and a boatman. In the boat was a travelling bag. The boatman seemed to be waiting for some one.

The *Cashmere* was visible at anchor in roads, as she did not start till midday; there was as yet no sign of moving aboard.

A passer-by, who had listened from one of the ladder-paths up the cliffs overhead, would have heard a murmur of words in the Havelet, and if he had leaned over the overhanging cliff might have seen, at some distance from the boat, in a corner among the rocks and branches, where the eye of the boatman could not reach them, a man and a woman. It was Caudray and Déruchette.

These obscure nooks on the seashore, the chosen places of lady bathers, are not always so solitary as is believed. Persons are sometimes observed and heard there. Those who seek shelter and solitude in them may easily be followed through the thick bushes, and, thanks to the multiplicity and entanglement of the paths, the granite and the shrubs which favour the stolen interview may also favour the witness.

Caudray and Déruchette stood face to face, looking into each other’s eyes, and holding each other by the hand. Déruchette was speaking. Caudray was silent. A tear that had gathered upon his eyelash hung there and did not fall.

Grief and strong passion were imprinted in his calm, religious countenance. A painful resignation was there too — a resignation hostile to faith, though springing from it. Upon that face, simply devout until then, there was the commencement of a fatal expression. He who had hitherto meditated only on doctrine, had begun to meditate on Fate, an unhealthy meditation for a priest. Faith dissolves under its action. Nothing disturbs the religious mind more than that bending under the weight of the unknown. Life seems a perpetual succession of events, to which man submits. We never know from which direction the sudden blow will come. Misery and happiness enter or make their exit, like unexpected guests. Their laws, their orbit, their principle of gravitation, are beyond man’s grasp. Virtue conducts not to happiness, nor crime to retribution: conscience has one logic, fate another; and neither coincide. Nothing is foreseen. We live confusedly, and from hand to mouth. Conscience is the straight line, life is the whirlwind, which creates above man’s head either black chaos or the blue sky. Fate does not practise the art of gradations. Her wheel turns sometimes so fast that we can scarcely distinguish the interval between one revolution and another, or the link between yesterday and to-day. Caudray was a believer whose faith did not exclude reason, and whose priestly training did not shut him out from passion. Those religious systems which impose celibacy on the priesthood are not without reason for it. Nothing really destroys the individuality of the priest more than love. All sorts of clouds seemed to darken Caudray’s soul. He looked too long into Déruchette’s eyes. These two beings worshipped each other.

There was in Caudray’s eye the mute adoration of despair.

Déruchette spoke.

“You must not leave me. I shall not have strength. I thought I could bid you farewell. I cannot. Why did you come yesterday? You should not have come if you were going so soon. I never spoke to you. I loved you; but knew it not. Only that day, when M. Hérode read to us the story of Rebecca, and when your eyes met mine, my cheeks were like fire, and I thought only of how Rebecca’s face must have burnt like mine; and yet, if any one had told me yesterday that I loved you, I might have laughed at it. This is what is so terrible. It has been like a treason. I did not take heed. I went to the church, I saw you, I thought everybody there was like myself. I do not reproach you; you did nothing to make me love you; you did nothing but look at me; it is not your fault if you look at people; and yet that made me love you so much. I did not even suspect it. When you took up the book it was a flood of light; when others took it, it was but a book. You raised your eyes sometimes; you spoke of archangels; oh! you were my archangel. What you said penetrated my thoughts at once. Before then, I know not even whether I believed in God. Since I have known you, I have learnt to pray. I used to say to Douce, dress me quickly, lest I should be late at the service; and I hastened to the church. Such it was with me to love some one. I did not know the cause. I said to myself, how devout I am becoming. It is from you that I have learnt that I do not go to church for God’s service. It is true; I went for your sake. You spoke so well, and when you raised your arms to heaven, you seemed to hold my heart within your two white hands. I was foolish; but I did not know it. Shall I tell you your fault? It was your coming to me in the garden; it was your speaking to me. If you had said nothing, I should have known nothing. If you had gone, I should, perhaps, have been sad, but now I should die. Since I know that I love you, you cannot leave me. Of what are you thinking? You do not seem to listen to me.”

Caudray replied:

“You heard what was said last night?”

“Ah, me!”

“What can I do against that?”

They were silent for a moment. Caudray continued:

“There is but one duty left to me. It is to depart.”

“And mine to die. Oh! how I wish there was no sea, but only sky. It seems to me as if that would settle all, and that our departure would be the same. It was wrong to speak to me; why did you speak to me? Do not go. What will become of me? I tell you I shall die. You will be far off when I shall be in my grave. Oh! my heart will break. I am very wretched; yet my uncle is not unkind.”

It was the first time in her life that Déruchette had ever said “my uncle.” Until then she had always said “my father.”

Caudray stepped back, and made a sign to the boatman. Déruchette heard the sound of the boat-hook among the shingle, and the step of the man on the gunwale of the boat.

“No! no!” cried Déruchette.

“It must be, Déruchette,” replied Caudray.

“No! never! For the sake of an engine — impossible. Did you see that horrible man last night? You cannot abandon me thus. You are wise; you can find a means. It is impossible that you bade me come here this morning with the idea of leaving me. I have never done anything to deserve this; you can have no reproach to make me. Is it by that vessel that you intended to sail? I will not let you go. You shall not leave me. Heaven does not open thus to close so soon. I know you will remain. Besides, it is not yet time. Oh! how I love you.”

And pressing closely to him, she interlaced the fingers of each hand behind his neck, as if partly to make a bond of her two arms for detaining him, and partly with her joined hands to pray. He moved away this gentle restraint, while Déruchette resisted as long as she could.

Déruchette sank upon a projection of the rock covered with ivy, lifting by an unconscious movement the sleeve of her dress up to the elbow, and exhibiting her graceful arm. A pale suffused light was in her eyes. The boat was approaching.

Caudray held her head between his hands. He touched her hair with a sort of religious care, fixed his eyes upon her for some moments, then kissed her on the forehead fervently, and in an accent trembling with anguish, and in which might have been traced the uprooting of his soul, he uttered the word which has so often resounded in the depths of the human heart, “Farewell!”

Déruchette burst into loud sobs.

At this moment they heard a voice near them, which said solemnly and deliberately:

“Why should you not be man and wife?”

Caudray raised his head. Déruchette looked up.

Gilliatt stood before them.

He had approached by a bye-path.

He was no longer the same man that he had appeared on the previous night. He had arranged his hair, shaved his beard, put on shoes, and a white shirt, with a large collar turned over, sailor fashion. He wore a sailor’s costume, but all was new. A gold ring was on his little finger. He seemed profoundly calm. His sunburnt skin had become pale: a hue of sickly bronze overspread it.

They looked at him astonished. Though so changed, Déruchette recognised him. But the words which he had spoken were so far from what was passing in their minds at that moment, that they had left no distinct impression.

Gilliatt spoke again:

“Why should you say farewell? Be man and wife, and go together.”

Déruchette started. A trembling seized her from head to foot.

Gilliatt continued:

“Miss Lethierry is a woman. She is of age. It depends only on herself. Her uncle is but her uncle. You love each other — —”

Déruchette interrupted in a gentle voice, and asked, “How came you here?”

“Make yourselves one,” repeated Gilliatt.

Déruchette began to have a sense of the meaning of his words. She stammered out:

“My poor uncle!”

“If the marriage was yet to be,” said Gilliatt, “he would refuse. When it is over he will consent. Besides, you are going to leave here. When you return he will forgive.”

Gilliatt added, with a slight touch of bitterness, “And then he is thinking of nothing just now but the rebuilding of his boat. This will occupy his mind during your absence. The Durande will console him.”

“I cannot,” said Déruchette, in a state of stupor which was not without its gleam of joy. “I must not leave him unhappy.”

“It will be but for a short time,” answered Gilliatt.

Caudray and Déruchette had been, as it were, bewildered. They recovered themselves now. The meaning of Gilliatt’s words became plainer as their surprise diminished. There was a slight cloud still before them; but their part was not to resist. We yield easily to those who come to save. Objections to a return into Paradise are weak. There was something in the attitude of Déruchette, as she leaned imperceptibly upon her lover, which seemed to make common cause with Gilliatt’s words. The enigma of the presence of this man, and of his utterances, which, in the mind of Déruchette in particular, produced various kinds of astonishment, was a thing apart. He said to them, “Be man and wife!” This was clear; if there was responsibility, it was his. Déruchette had a confused feeling that, for many reasons, he had the right to decide upon her fate. Caudray murmured, as if plunged in thought, “An uncle is not a father.”

His resolution was corrupted by the sudden and happy turn in his ideas. The probable scruples of the clergyman melted, and dissolved in his heart’s love for Déruchette.

Gilliatt’s tone became abrupt and harsh, and like the pulsations of fever.

“There must be no delay,” he said. “You have time, but that is all. Come.”

Caudray observed him attentively; and suddenly exclaimed:

“I recognise you. It was you who saved my life.”

Gilliatt replied:

"I think not."

"Yonder," said Caudray, "at the extremity of the Banques."

"I do not know the place," said Gilliatt.

"It was on the very day that I arrived here."

"Let us lose no time," interrupted Gilliatt.

"And if I am not deceived, you are the man whom we met last night."

"Perhaps."

"What is your name?"

Gilliatt raised his voice:

"Boatman! wait there for us. We shall return soon. You asked me, Miss Lethierry, how I came to be here. The answer is very simple. I walked behind you. You are twenty-one. In this country, when persons are of age, and depend only on themselves, they may be married immediately. Let us take the path along the water-side. It is passable; the tide will not rise here till noon. But lose no time. Come with me."

Déruchette and Caudray seemed to consult each other by a glance. They were standing close together motionless. They were intoxicated with joy. There are strange hesitations sometimes on the edge of the abyss of happiness. They understood, as it were, without understanding.

"His name is Gilliatt," whispered Déruchette.

Gilliatt interrupted them with a sort of tone of authority.

"What do you linger for?" he asked. "I tell you to follow me."

"Whither?" asked Caudray.

"There!"

And Gilliatt pointed with his finger towards the spire of the church.

Gilliatt walked on before, and they followed him. His step was firm; but they walked unsteadily.

As they approached the church, an expression dawned upon those two pure and beautiful countenances, which was soon to become a smile. The approach to the church lighted them up. In the hollow eyes of Gilliatt there was the darkness of night. The beholder might have imagined that he saw a spectre leading two souls to Paradise.

Caudray and Déruchette scarcely took count of what had happened. The interposition of this man was like the branch clutched at by the drowning. They followed their guide with the docility of despair, leaning on the first comer. Those who feel themselves near death easily accept the accident which seems to save. Déruchette, more ignorant of life, was more confident.

Caudray was thoughtful. Déruchette was of age, it was true. The English formalities of marriage are simple, especially in primitive parts, where the clergyman has almost a discretionary power; but would the Dean consent to celebrate the marriage without even inquiring whether the uncle consented? This was the question. Nevertheless, they could learn. In any case there would be but a delay.

But what was this man? and if it was really he whom Lethierry the night before had declared should be his son-in-law, what could be the meaning of his actions? The very obstacle itself had become a providence. Caudray yielded; but his yielding was only the rapid and tacit assent of a man who feels himself saved from despair.

The pathway was uneven, and sometimes wet and difficult to pass. Caudray, absorbed in thought, did not observe the occasional pools of water or the heaps of shingle. But from time to time Gilliatt turned and said to him, “Take heed of those stones. Give her your hand.”

III

THE FORETHOUGHT OF SELF-SACRIFICE

It struck ten as they entered the church.

By reason of the early hour, and also on account of the desertion of the town that day, the church was empty.

At the farther end, however, near the table which in the reformed church fulfils the place of the altar, there were three persons. They were the Dean, his evangelist, and the registrar. The Dean, who was the Reverend Jaquemin Hérode, was seated; the evangelist and the registrar stood beside him.

A book was open upon the table.

Beside him, upon a credence-table, was another book. It was the parish register, and also open; and an attentive eye might have remarked a page on which was some writing, of which the ink was not yet dry. By the side of the register were a pen and a writing-desk.

The Reverend Jaquemin Hérode rose on perceiving Caudray.

“I have been expecting you,” he said. “All is ready.”

The Dean, in fact, wore his officiating robes.

Caudray looked towards Gilliatt.

The Reverend Doctor added, “I am at your service, brother;” and he bowed.

It was a bow which neither turned to right or left. It was evident from the direction of the Dean’s gaze that he did not recognise the existence of any one but Caudray, for Caudray was a clergyman and a gentleman. Neither Déruchette, who stood aside, nor Gilliatt, who was in the rear, were included in the salutation. His look was a sort of parenthesis in which none but Caudray were admitted. The observance of these little niceties constitutes an important feature in the maintenance of order and the preservation of society.

The Dean continued, with a graceful and dignified urbanity:

“I congratulate you, my colleague, from a double point of view. You have lost your uncle, and are about to take a wife; you are blessed with riches on the one hand, and happiness on the other. Moreover, thanks to the boat which they are about to rebuild, Mess Lethierry will also be rich; which is as it should be. Miss Lethierry was born in this parish; I have verified the date of her birth in the register. She is of age, and at her own disposal. Her uncle, too, who is her only relative, consents. You are anxious to be united immediately on account of your approaching departure. This I can understand; but this being the marriage of the rector of the parish, I should have been gratified to have seen it associated with a little more solemnity. I will consult your wishes by not detaining you longer than necessary. The essentials will be soon complied with. The form is already drawn up in the register, and it requires only the names to be filled in. By the terms of the law and custom, the marriage may be celebrated immediately after the inscription. The declaration necessary for the licence has been duly made. I take upon myself a slight irregularity; for the application for the licence ought to have been registered seven days in advance; but I yield to necessity and the urgency of your departure. Be it so, then. I will proceed with the ceremony. My evangelist will be the witness for the bridegroom; as regards the witness for the bride — —"

The Dean turned towards Gilliatt. Gilliatt made a movement of his head.

"That is sufficient," said the Dean.

Caudray remained motionless; Déruchette was happy, but no less powerless to move.

"Nevertheless," continued the Dean, "there is still an obstacle."

Déruchette started.

The Dean continued:

"The representative here present of Mess Lethierry applied for the licence for you, and has signed the declaration on the register." And with the thumb of his left hand the Dean pointed to Gilliatt, which prevented the necessity of his remembering his name. "The messenger from Mess Lethierry," he added, "has informed me this morning that being too much occupied to come in person, Mess Lethierry desired that the marriage should take place immediately. This desire, expressed verbally, is not sufficient. In consequence of having to grant the licence, and of the irregularity which I take upon myself, I cannot proceed so rapidly without informing myself from Mess Lethierry personally, unless some one can produce his signature. Whatever might be my desire to serve you, I cannot be satisfied with a mere message. I must have some written document."

"That need not delay us," said Gilliatt. And he presented a paper to the Dean. The Dean took it, perused it by a glance, seemed to pass over some lines as unimportant, and read aloud: "Go to the Dean for the licence. I wish the marriage to take place as soon as possible. Immediately would be better.”

He placed the paper on the table, and proceeded:

“It is signed, Lethierry. It would have been more respectful to have addressed himself to me. But since I am called on to serve a colleague, I ask no more.”

Caudray glanced again at Gilliatt. There are moments when mind and mind comprehend each other. Caudray felt that there was some deception; he had not the strength of purpose, perhaps he had not the idea of revealing it. Whether in obedience to a latent heroism, of which he had begun to obtain a glimpse; or whether from a deadening of the conscience, arising from the suddenness of the happiness placed within his reach, he uttered no word.

The Dean took the pen, and aided by the clerk, filled up the spaces in the page of the register; then he rose, and by a gesture invited Caudray and Déruchette to approach the table.

The ceremony commenced. It was a strange moment. Caudray and Déruchette stood beside each other before the minister. He who has ever dreamed of a marriage in which he himself was chief actor, may conceive something of the feeling which they experienced.

Gilliatt stood at a little distance in the shadow of the pillars.

Déruchette, on rising in the morning, desperate, thinking only of death and its associations, had dressed herself in white. Her attire, which had been associated in her mind with mourning, was suited to her nuptials. A white dress is all that is necessary for the bride.

A ray of happiness was visible upon her face. Never had she appeared more beautiful. Her features were remarkable for prettiness rather than what is called beauty. Their fault, if fault it be, lay in a certain excess of grace. Déruchette in repose, that is, neither disturbed by passion or grief, was graceful above all. The ideal virgin is the transfiguration of a face like this. Déruchette, touched by her sorrow and her love, seemed to have caught that higher and more holy expression. It was the difference between the field daisy and the lily.

The tears had scarcely dried upon her cheeks; one perhaps still lingered in the midst of her smiles. Traces of tears indistinctly visible form a pleasing but sombre accompaniment of joy.

The Dean, standing near the table, placed his finger upon the open book, and asked in a distinct voice whether they knew of any impediment to their union.

There was no reply.

"Amen!" said the Dean.

Caudray and Déruchette advanced a step or two towards the table.

"Joseph Ebenezer Caudray, wilt thou have this woman to be thy wedded wife?"

Caudray replied "I will."

The Dean continued:

"Durande Déruchette Lethierry, wilt thou have this man to be thy wedded husband?"

Déruchette, in an agony of soul, springing from her excess of happiness, murmured rather than uttered —

"I will."

Then followed the beautiful form of the Anglican marriage service. The Dean looked around, and in the twilight of the church uttered the solemn words:

"Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?"

Gilliatt answered, "I do!"

There was an interval of silence. Caudray and Déruchette felt a vague sense of oppression in spite of their joy.

The Dean placed Déruchette's right hand in Caudray's; and Caudray repeated after him:

"I take thee, Durande Déruchette to be my wedded wife, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish till death do us part; and thereto I plight thee my troth."

The Dean then placed Caudray's right hand in that of Déruchette, and Déruchette said after him:

"I take thee to be my wedded husband for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness or in health, to love and to cherish till death do us part; and thereto I plight thee my troth."

The Dean asked, "Where is the ring?" The question took them by surprise. Caudray had no ring; but Gilliatt took off the gold ring which he wore upon his little finger. It was probably the wedding-ring which had been sold that morning by the jeweller in the Commercial Arcade.

The Dean placed the ring upon the book; then handed it to Caudray, who took Déruchette’s little trembling left hand, passed the ring over her fourth finger, and said:

“With this ring I thee wed!”

“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost,” continued the Dean.

“Amen,” said his evangelist.

Then the Dean said, “Let us pray.”

Caudray and Déruchette turned towards the table, and knelt down.

Gilliatt, standing by, inclined his head.

So they knelt before God; while he seemed to bend under the burden of his fate.

IV

FOR YOUR WIFE: WHEN YOU MARRY

As they left the church they could see the *Cashmere* making preparations for her departure.

“You are in time,” said Gilliatt.

They chose again the path leading to the Havelet.

Caudray and Déruchette went before, Gilliatt this time walking behind them. They were two somnambulists. Their bewilderment had not passed away, but only changed in form. They took no heed of whither they were going, or of what they did. They hurried on mechanically, scarcely remembering the existence of anything, feeling that they were united for ever, but scarcely able to connect two ideas in their minds. In ecstasy like theirs it is as impossible to think as it is to swim in a torrent. In the midst of their trouble and darkness they had been plunged in a whirlpool of delight; they bore a paradise within themselves. They did not speak, but conversed with each other by the mysterious sympathy of their souls. Déruchette pressed Caudray’s arm to her side.

The footsteps of Gilliatt behind them reminded them now and then that he was there. They were deeply moved, but could find no words. The excess of emotion results in stupor. Theirs was delightful, but overwhelming. They were man and wife: every other idea was postponed to that. What Gilliatt had done was well; that was all that they could grasp. They experienced towards their guide a deep but vague gratitude in their hearts. Déruchette felt that there was some mystery to be explained, but not now. Meanwhile they accepted their unexpected happiness. They felt themselves controlled by the abruptness and decision of this man who conferred on them so much happiness with a kind of authority. To question him, to talk with him seemed impossible. Too many impressions rushed into their minds at once for that. Their absorption was pardonable.

Events succeed each other sometimes with the rapidity of hailstones. Their effect is overpowering; they deaden the senses. Falling upon existences habitually calm, they render incidents rapidly unintelligible even to those whom they chiefly concern; we become scarcely conscious of our own adventures; we are overwhelmed without guessing the cause, or crowned with happiness without comprehending it. For some hours Déruchette had been subjected to every kind of emotion: at first, surprise and delight at meeting Caudray in the garden; then horror at the monster whom her uncle had presented as her husband; then her anguish when the angel of her dreams spread his wings and seemed about to depart; and now her joy, a joy such as she had never known before, founded on an inexplicable enigma; the monster of last night himself restoring her lover; marriage arising out of her torture; this Gilliatt, the evil destiny of last night, become to-day her saviour! She could explain nothing to her own mind. It was evident that all the morning Gilliatt had had no other occupation than that of preparing the way for their marriage: he had done all: he had answered for Mess Lethierry, seen the Dean, obtained the licence, signed the necessary declaration; and thus the marriage had been rendered possible. But Déruchette understood it not. If she had, she could not have comprehended the reasons. They did nothing but close their eyes to the world, and — grateful in their hearts — yield themselves up to the guidance of this good demon. There was no time for explanations, and expressions of gratitude seemed too insignificant. They were silent in their trance of love.

The little power of thought which they retained was scarcely more than sufficient to guide them on their way — to enable them to distinguish the sea from the land, and the *Cashmere* from every other vessel.

In a few minutes they were at the little creek.

Caudray entered the boat first. At the moment when Déruchette was about to follow, she felt her sleeve held gently. It was Gilliatt, who had placed his finger upon a fold of her dress.

“Madam,” he said, “you are going on a journey unexpectedly. It has struck me that you would have need of dresses and clothes. You will find a trunk aboard the *Cashmere*, containing a lady’s clothing. It came to me from my mother. It was intended for my wife if I should marry. Permit me to ask your acceptance of it.”

Déruchette, partially aroused from her dream, turned towards him. Gilliatt continued, in a voice which was scarcely audible:

“I do not wish to detain you, madam, but I feel that I ought to give you some explanation. On the day of your misfortune, you were sitting in the lower room; you uttered certain words; it is easy to understand that you have forgotten them. We are not compelled to remember every word we speak. Mess Lethierry was in great sorrow. It was certainly a noble vessel, and one that did good service. The misfortune was recent; there was a great commotion. Those are things which one naturally forgets. It was only a vessel wrecked among the rocks; one cannot be always thinking of an accident. But what I wished to tell you was, that as it was said that no one would go, I went. They said it was impossible; but it was not. I thank you for listening to me a moment. You can understand, madam, that if I went there, it was not with the thought of displeasing you. This is a thing, besides, of old date. I know that you are in haste. If there was time, if we could talk about this, you might perhaps remember. But this is all useless now. The history of it goes back to a day when there was snow upon the ground. And then on one occasion that I passed you, I thought that you looked kindly on me. This is how it was. With regard to last night, I had not had time to go to my home. I came from my labour; I was all torn and ragged; I startled you, and you fainted. I was to blame; people do not come like that to strangers' houses; I ask your forgiveness. This is nearly all I had to say. You are about to sail. You will have fine weather; the wind is in the east. Farewell. You will not blame me for troubling you with these things. This is the last minute."

"I am thinking of the trunk you spoke of," replied Déruchette. "Why do you not keep it for your wife, when you marry?"

"It is most likely, madam," replied Gilliatt, "that I shall never marry."

"That would be a pity," said Déruchette; "you are so good."

And Déruchette smiled. Gilliatt returned her smile.

Then he assisted her to step into the boat.

In less than a quarter of an hour afterwards Caudray and Déruchette were aboard the *Cashmere* in the roads.

V

THE GREAT TOMB

Gilliatt walked along the water-side, passed rapidly through St. Peter’s Port, and then turned towards St. Sampson by the seashore. In his anxiety to meet no one whom he knew, he avoided the highways now filled with foot-passengers by his great achievement.

For a long time, as the reader knows, he had had a peculiar manner of traversing the country in all parts without being observed. He knew the bye-paths, and favoured solitary and winding routes; he had the shy habits of a wild beast who knows that he is disliked, and keeps at a distance. When quite a child, he had been quick to feel how little welcome men showed in their faces at his approach, and he had gradually contracted that habit of being alone which had since become an instinct.

He passed through the Esplanade, then by the Salerie. Now and then he turned and looked behind him at the *Cashmere* in the roads, which was beginning to set her sails. There was little wind; Gilliatt went faster than the *Cashmere*. He walked with downcast eyes among the lower rocks at the water’s edge. The tide was beginning to rise.

Suddenly he stopped, and, turning his back, contemplated for some minutes a group of oaks beyond the rocks which concealed the road to Vale. They were the oaks at the spot called the Basses Maisons. It was there that Déruchette once wrote with her finger the name of Gilliatt in the snow. Many a day had passed since that snow had melted away.

Then he pursued his way.

The day was beautiful; more beautiful than any that had yet been seen that year. It was one of those spring days when May suddenly pours forth all its beauty, and when nature seems to have no thought but to rejoice and be happy. Amidst the many murmurs from forest and village, from the sea and the air, a sound of cooing could be distinguished. The first butterflies of the year were resting on the early roses. Everything in nature seemed new — the grass, the mosses, the leaves, the perfumes, the rays of light. The sun shone as if it had never shone before. The pebbles seemed bathed in coolness. Birds but lately fledged sang out their deep notes from the trees, or fluttered among the boughs in their attempts to use their new-found wings. There was a chattering all together of goldfinches, pewits, tomtits, woodpeckers, bullfinches, and thrushes. The blossoms of lilacs, May lilies, daphnes, and melilots mingled their various hues in the thickets. A beautiful kind of water-weed peculiar to Guernsey covered the pools with an emerald green; where the kingfishers and the water-wagtails, which make such graceful little nests, came down to bathe their wings. Through every opening in the branches appeared the deep blue sky. A few lazy clouds followed each other in the azure depths. The ear seemed to catch the sound of kisses sent from invisible lips. Every old wall had its tufts of wallflowers. The plum-trees and laburnums were in blossom; their white and yellow masses gleamed through the interlacing boughs. The spring showered all her gold and silver on the woods. The new shoots and leaves were green and fresh. Calls of welcome were in the air; the approaching summer opened her hospitable doors for birds coming from afar. It was the time of the arrival of the swallows. The clusters of furze-bushes bordered the steep sides of hollow roads in anticipation of the clusters of the hawthorn. The pretty and the beautiful reigned side by side; the magnificent and the graceful, the great and the little, had each their place. No note in the great concert of nature was lost. Green microscopic beauties took their place in the vast universal plan in which all seemed distinguishable as in limpid water. Everywhere a divine fulness, a mysterious sense of expansion, suggested the unseen effort of the sap in movement. Guttering things glittered more than ever; loving natures became more tender. There was a hymn in the flowers, and a radiance in the sounds of the air. The wide-diffused harmony of nature burst forth on every side. All things which felt the dawn of life invited others to put forth shoots. A movement coming from below, and also from above, stirred vaguely all hearts susceptible to the scattered and subterranean influence of germination. The flower shadowed forth the fruit; young maidens dreamed of love. It was nature’s universal bridal. It was fine, bright, and warm; through the hedges in the meadows children were seen laughing and playing at their games. The fruit-trees filled the orchards with their heaps of white and pink blossom. In the fields were primroses, cowslips, milfoil, daffodils, daisies, speedwell, jacinths, and violets. Blue borage and yellow irises swarmed with those beautiful little pink stars which flower always in groups, and are hence called “companions.” Creatures with golden scales glided between the stones. The flowering houseleek covered the thatched roofs with purple patches. Women were plaiting hives in the open air; and the bees were abroad, mingling their humming with the murmurs from the sea. Nature, sensitive to the touch of spring, exhaled delight.

When Gilliatt arrived at St. Sampson, the water had not yet risen at the further end of the harbour, and he was able to cross it dry-footed unperceived behind the hulls of vessels fixed for repair. A number of flat stones were placed there at regular distances to make a causeway.

He was not observed. The crowd was at the other end of the port, near the narrow entrance, by the Bravées. There his name was in every mouth. They were, in fact, speaking about him so much that none paid attention to him. He passed, sheltered in some degree by the very commotion that he had caused.

He saw from afar the sloop in the place where he had moored it, with the funnel standing between its four chains; observed a movement of carpenters at their work, and confused outlines of figures passing to and fro; and he could distinguish the loud and cheery voice of Mess Lethierry giving orders.

He threaded the narrow alleys behind the Bravées. There was no one there beside him. All curiosity was concentrated on the front of the house. He chose the footpath alongside the low wall of the garden, but stopped at the angle where the wild mallow grew. He saw once more the stone where he used to pass his time; saw once more the wooden garden seat where Déruchette was accustomed to sit, and glanced again at the pathway of the alley where he had seen the embrace of two shadows which had vanished.

He soon went on his way, climbed the hill of Vale Castle, descended again, and directed his steps towards the Bû de la Rue.

The Houmet-Paradis was a solitude.

His house was in the same state in which he had left it in the morning, after dressing himself to go to St. Peter’s Port.

A window was open, through which his bagpipe might have been seen hanging to a nail upon the wall.

Upon the table was the little Bible given to him in token of gratitude by the stranger whom he now knew as Caudray.

The key was in the door. He approached; placed his hand upon it; turned it twice in the lock, put the key in his pocket, and departed.

He walked not in the direction of the town, but towards the sea.

He traversed his garden diagonally, taking the shortest way without regard to the beds, but taking care not to tread upon the plants which he placed there, because he had heard that they were favourites with Déruchette.

He crossed the parapet wall, and let himself down upon the rocks.

Going straight on, he began to follow the long ridge of rocks which connected the Bû de la Rue with the great natural obelisk of granite rising erect from the sea, which was known as the Beast’s Horn. This was the place of the Gild-Holm-’Ur seat.

He strode on from block to block like a giant among mountains. To make long strides upon a row of breakers is like walking upon the ridge of a roof.

A fisherwoman with dredge-nets, who had been walking naked-footed among the pools of sea-water at some distance, and had just regained the shore, called to him, “Take care; the tide is coming.” But he held on his way.

Having arrived at the great rock of the point, the Horn, which rises like a pinnacle from the sea, he stopped. It was the extremity of the promontory.

He looked around.

Out at sea a few sailing boats at anchor were fishing. Now and then rivulets of silver glittered among them in the sun: it was the water running from the nets. The *Cashmere* was not yet off St. Sampson. She had set her main-topsail, and was between Herm and Jethou.

Gilliatt rounded the rock, and came under the Gild-Holm-’Ur seat, at the foot of that kind of abrupt stairs where, less than three months before, he had assisted Caudray to come down. He ascended.

The greater number of the steps were already under water. Two or three only were still dry, by which he climbed.

The steps led up to the Gild-Holm-’Ur seat. He reached the niche, contemplated it for a moment, pressed his hand upon his eyes, and let it glide gently from one eyelid to the other — a gesture by which he seemed to obliterate the memory of the past — then sat down in the hollow, with the perpendicular wall behind him, and the ocean at his feet.

The *Cashmere* at that moment was passing the great round half-submerged tower, defended by one sergeant and a cannon, which marks the half way in the roads between Herm and St. Peter’s Port.

A few flowers stirred among the crevices in the rock about Gilliatt’s head. The sea was blue as far as eye could reach. The wind came from the east; there was a little surf in the direction of the island of Sark, of which only the western side is visible from Guernsey. In the distance appeared the coast of France like a mist, with the long yellow strips of sand about Carteret. Now and then a white butterfly fluttered by. The butterflies frequently fly out to sea.

The breeze was very slight. The blue expanse, both above and below, was tranquil. Not a ripple agitated those species of serpents, of an azure more or less dark, which indicate on the surface of the sea the lines of sunken rocks.

The *Cashmere*, little moved by the wind, had set her topsail and studding-sails to catch the breeze. All her canvas was spread, but the wind being a side one, her studding-sails only compelled her to hug the Guernsey coast more closely. She had passed the beacon of St. Sampson, and was off the hill of Vale Castle. The moment was approaching when she would double the point of the Bû de la Rue.

Gilliatt watched her approach.

The air and sea were still. The tide rose not by waves, but by an imperceptible swell. The level of the water crept upward without a palpitation. The subdued murmur from the open sea was soft as the breathing of a child.

In the direction of the harbour of St. Sampson, faint echoes could be heard of carpenters' hammers. The carpenters were probably the workmen constructing the tackle, gear, and apparatus for removing the engine from the sloop. The sounds, however, scarcely reached Gilliatt by reason of the mass of granite at his back.

The *Cashmere* approached with the slowness of a phantom.

Gilliatt watched it still.

Suddenly a touch and a sensation of cold caused him to look down. The sea had reached his feet.

He lowered his eyes, then raised them again.

The *Cashmere* was quite near.

The rock in which the rains had hollowed out the Gild-Holm-'Ur seat was so completely vertical, and there was so much water at its base, that in calm weather vessels were able to pass without danger within a few cables' lengths.

The *Cashmere* was abreast of the rock. It rose straight upwards as if it had grown out of the water; or like the lengthening out of a shadow. The rigging showed black against the heavens and in the magnificent expanse of the sea. The long sails, passing for a moment over the sun, became lighted up with a singular glory and transparence. The water murmured indistinctly; but no other noise marked the majestic gliding of that outline. The deck was as visible as if he had stood upon it.

The steersman was at the helm; a cabin-boy was climbing the shrouds; a few passengers leaning on the bulwarks were contemplating the beauty of the scene. The captain was smoking; but nothing of all this was seen by Gilliatt.

There was a spot on the deck on which the broad sunlight fell. It was on this corner that his eyes were fixed. In this sunlight were Déruchette and Caudray. They were sitting together side by side, like two birds, warming themselves in the noonday sun, upon one of those covered seats with a little awning which well-ordered packet-boats provided for passengers, and upon which was the inscription, when it happened to be an English vessel, "For ladies only." Déruchette's head was leaning upon Caudray's shoulder; his arm was around her waist; they held each other's hands with their fingers interwoven. A celestial light was discernible in those two faces formed by innocence. Their chaste embrace was expressive of their earthly union and their purity of soul. The seat was a sort of alcove, almost a nest; it was at the same time a glory round them; the tender aureola of love passing into a cloud.

The silence was like the calm of heaven.

Caudray's gaze was fixed in contemplation. Déruchette's lips moved; and, amidst that perfect silence, as the wind carried the vessel near shore, and it glided within a few fathoms of the Gild-Holm-'Ur seat, Gilliatt heard the tender and musical voice of Déruchette exclaiming:

"Look yonder. It seems as if there were a man upon the rock."

The vessel passed.

Leaving the promontory of the Bû de la Rue behind, the *Cashmere* glided on upon the waters. In less than a quarter of an hour, her masts and sails formed only a white obelisk, gradually decreasing against the horizon. Gilliatt felt that the water had reached his knees.

He contemplated the vessel speeding on her way.

The breeze freshened out at sea. He could see the *Cashmere* run out her lower studding-sails and her staysails, to take advantage of the rising wind.

She was already clear of the waters of Guernsey. Gilliatt followed the vessel with his eyes.

The waves had reached his waist.

The tide was rising: time was passing away.

The seamews and cormorants flew about him restlessly, as if anxious to warn him of his danger. It seemed as if some of his old companions of the Douvres rocks flying there had recognised him.

An hour had passed.

The wind from the sea was scarcely felt in the roads; but the form of the *Cashmere* was rapidly growing less. The sloop, according to all appearance, was sailing fast. It was already nearly off the Casquets.

There was no foam around the Gild-Holm-'Ur; no wave beat against its granite sides. The water rose peacefully. It was nearly level with Gilliatt's shoulders.

Another hour had passed.

The *Cashmere* was beyond the waters of Aurigny. The Ortach rock concealed it for a moment; it passed behind it, and came forth again as from an eclipse. The sloop was veering to the north upon the open sea. It was now only a point glittering in the sun.

The birds were hovering about Gilliatt, uttering short cries. Only his head was now visible. The tide was nearly at the full. Evening was approaching. Behind him, in the roads, a few fishing-boats were making for the harbour.

Gilliatt's eyes continued fixed upon the vessel in the horizon. Their expression resembled nothing earthly. A strange lustre shone in their calm and tragic depths. There was in them the peace of vanished hopes, the calm but sorrowful acceptance of an end far different from his dreams. By degrees the dusk of heaven began to darken in them, though gazing still upon the point in space. At the same moment the wide waters round the Gild-Holm-'Ur and the vast gathering twilight closed upon them.

The *Cashmere*, now scarcely perceptible, had become a mere spot in the thin haze.

Gradually, the spot, which was but a shape, grew paler.

Then it dwindled, and finally disappeared.

At the moment when the vessel vanished on the line of the horizon, the head of Gilliatt disappeared. Nothing was visible now but the sea.

LES TRAVAILLEURS DE LA MER

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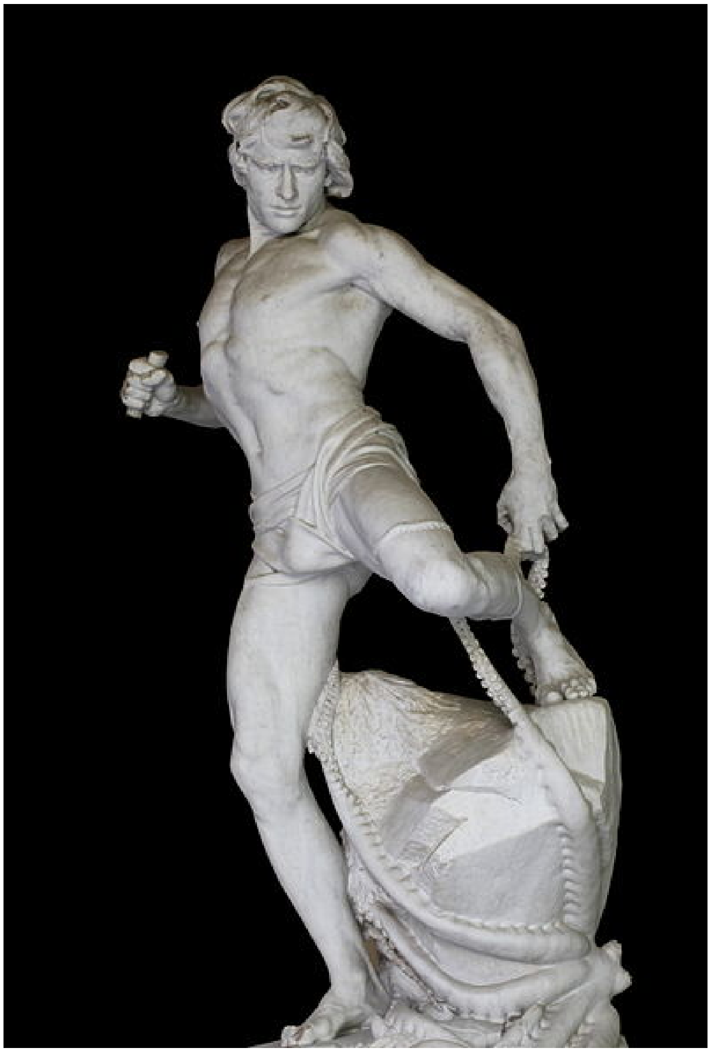

Gilliat et la pieuvre, J. Carlier

Dédicace

Je dédie ce livre au rocher d'hospitalité et de liberté, à ce coin de vieille terre normande où vit le noble petit peuple de la mer, à l'île de Guernesey, sévère et douce, mon asile actuel, mon tombeau probable.

V. H.

PREFACE

La religion, la société, la nature; telles sont les trois luttes de l’homme. Ces trois luttes sont en même temps ses trois besoins; il faut qu’il croie, de là le temple; il faut qu’il crée, de là la cité; il faut qu’il vive, de là la charrue et le navire. Mais ces trois solutions contiennent trois guerres. La mystérieuse difficulté de la vie sort de toutes les trois. L’homme a affaire à l’obstacle sous la forme superstition, sous la forme préjugé, et sous la forme élément. Un triple anankè pèse sur nous, l’anankè des dogmes, l’anankè des lois, l’anankè des choses. Dans *Notre-Dame de Paris*, l’auteur a dénoncé le premier; dans *les Misérables*, il a signalé le second; dans ce livre, il indique le troisième.

À ces trois fatalités qui enveloppent l’homme se mêle la fatalité intérieure, l’anankè suprême, le cœur humain.

Hauteville House, mars 1866.

PREMIÈRE PARTIE

SIEUR CLUBIN

LIVRE PREMIER

DE QUOI SE COMPOSE UNE MAUVAISE REPUTATION

I

UN MOT ÉCRIT SUR UNE PAGE BLANCHE

La Christmas de 182. fut remarquable à Guernesey. Il neigea ce jour-là. Dans les îles de la Manche, un hiver où il gèle à glace est mémorable, et la neige fait événement.

Le matin de cette Christmas, la route qui longe la mer de Saint-Pierre-Port au Valle était toute blanche. Il avait neigé depuis minuit jusqu'à l'aube. Vers neuf heures, peu après le lever du soleil, comme ce n'était pas encore le moment pour les anglicans d'aller à l'église de Saint-Sampson et pour les wesleyens d'aller à la chapelle Eldad, le chemin était à peu près désert. Dans tout le tronçon de route qui sépare la première tour de la seconde tour, il n'y avait que trois passants, un enfant, un homme et une femme. Ces trois passants, marchant à distance les uns des autres, n'avaient visiblement aucun lien entre eux. L'enfant, d'une huitaine d'années, s'était arrêté, et regardait la neige avec curiosité. L'homme venait derrière la femme, à une centaine de pas d'intervalle. Il allait comme elle du côté de Saint-Sampson. L'homme, jeune encore, semblait quelque chose comme un ouvrier ou un matelot. Il avait ses habits de tous les jours, une vareuse de gros drap brun, et un pantalon à jambières goudronnées, ce qui paraissait indiquer qu'en dépit de la fête il n'irait à aucune chapelle. Ses épais souliers de cuir brut, aux semelles garnies de gros clous, laissaient sur la neige une empreinte plus ressemblante à une serrure de prison qu'à un pied d'homme. La passante, elle, avait évidemment déjà sa toilette d'église; elle portait une large mante ouatée de soie noire à faille, sous laquelle elle était fort coquettement ajustée d'une robe de popeline d'Irlande à bandes alternées blanches et roses, et, si elle n'eût eu des bas rouges, on eût pu la prendre pour une parisienne. Elle allait devant elle avec une vivacité libre et légère, et, à cette marche qui n'a encore rien porté de la vie, on devinait une jeune fille. Elle avait cette grâce fugitive de l'allure qui marque la plus délicate des transitions, l'adolescence, les deux crépuscules mêlés, le commencement d'une femme dans la fin d'un enfant. L'homme ne la remarquait pas.

Tout à coup, près d'un bouquet de chênes verts qui est à l'angle d'un courtil, au lieu dit les Basses-Maisons, elle se retourna, et ce mouvement fit que l’homme la regarda. Elle s’arrêta, parut le considérer un moment, puis se baissa, et l’homme crut voir qu’elle écrivait avec son doigt quelque chose sur la neige. Elle se redressa, se remit en marche, doubla le pas, se retourna encore, cette fois en riant, et disparut à gauche du chemin, dans le sentier bordé de haies qui mène au château de Lierre. L’homme, quand elle se retourna pour la seconde fois, reconnut Déruchette, une ravissante fille du pays.

Il n’éprouva aucun besoin de se hâter, et, quelques instants après, il se trouva près du bouquet de chênes à l’angle du courtil. Il ne songeait déjà plus à la passante disparue, et il est probable que si, en cette minute-là, quelque marsouin eût sauté dans la mer ou quelque rouge-gorge dans les buissons, cet homme eût passé son chemin, l’œil fixé sur le rouge-gorge ou le marsouin. Le hasard fit qu’il avait les paupières baissées, son regard tomba machinalement sur l’endroit où la jeune fille s’était arrêtée. Deux petits pieds s’y étaient imprimés, et à côté il lut ce mot tracé par elle dans la neige: *Gilliatt*.

Ce mot était son nom.

Il s’appelait Gilliatt.

Il resta longtemps immobile, regardant ce nom, ces petits pieds, cette neige, puis continua sa route, pensif.

II

LE BÛ DE LA RUE

Gilliatt habitait la paroisse de Saint-Sampson. Il n’y était pas aimé. Il y avait des raisons pour cela.

D’abord il avait pour logis une maison « visionnée”. Il arrive quelquefois, à Jersey ou à Guernesey, qu’à la campagne, à la ville même, passant dans quelque coin désert ou dans une rue pleine d’habitants, vous rencontrez une maison dont l’entrée est barricadée; le houx obstrue la porte; on ne sait quels hideux emplâtres de planches clouées bouchent les fenêtres du rez-de-chaussée; les fenêtres des étages supérieurs sont à la fois fermées et ouvertes, tous les châssis sont verrouillés, mais tous les carreaux sont cassés. S’il y a un beyle, une cour, l’herbe y pousse, le parapet d’enceinte s’écroule; s’il y a un jardin, il est ortie, ronce et ciguë, et l’on peut y épier les insectes rares. Les cheminées se crevassent, le toit s’effondre; ce qu’on voit du dedans des chambres est démantelé; le bois est pourri, la pierre est moisie. Il y a aux murs du papier qui se décolle. Vous pouvez y étudier les vieilles modes du papier, les griffons de l’empire, les draperies en croissant du directoire, les balustres et les cippes de Louis XVI. L’épaississement des toiles pleines de mouches indique la paix profonde des araignées. Quelquefois on aperçoit un pot cassé sur une planche. C’est là une maison « visionnée”. Le diable y vient la nuit.

La maison comme l’homme peut devenir cadavre. Il suffit qu’une superstition la tue. Alors elle est terrible. Ces maisons mortes ne sont point rares dans les îles de la Manche.

Les populations campagnardes et maritimes ne sont pas tranquilles à l’endroit du diable. Celles de la Manche, archipel anglais et littoral français, ont sur lui des notions très précises. Le diable a des envoyés par toute la terre. Il est certain que Belphégor est ambassadeur de l’enfer en France, Hutgin en Italie, Bélial en Turquie, Thamuz en Espagne, Martinet en Suisse, et Mammon en Angleterre. Satan est un empereur comme un autre. Satan César. Sa maison est très bien montée; Dagon est grand panetier; Succor Bénoth est chef des eunuques; Asmodée, banquier des jeux; Kobal, directeur du théâtre, et Verdelet, grand maître des cérémonies; Nybbas est bouffon. Wiérus, homme savant, bon strygologue et démonographe bien renseigné, appelle Nybbas « le grand parodiste”.

Les pêcheurs normands de la Manche ont bien des précautions à prendre quand ils sont en mer, à cause des illusions que le diable fait. On a longtemps cru que saint Maclou habitait le gros rocher carré Ortach, qui est au large entre Aurigny et les Casquets, et beaucoup de vieux matelots d’autrefois affirmaient l’y avoir très souvent vu de loin, assis et lisant dans un livre. Aussi les marins de passage faisaient-ils force génuflexions devant le rocher Ortach jusqu’au jour où la fable s’est dissipée et a fait place à la vérité. On a découvert et l’on sait aujourd’hui que ce qui habite le rocher Ortach, ce n’est pas un saint, mais un diable. Ce diable, un nommé Jochmus, avait eu la malice de se faire passer pendant plusieurs siècles pour saint Maclou. Au reste l’église elle-même tombe dans ces méprises. Les diables Raguhel, Oribel et Tobiel ont été saints jusqu’en 745 où le pape Zacharie, les ayant flairés, les mit dehors. Pour faire de ces expulsions, qui sont certes très utiles, il faut beaucoup se connaître en diables.

Les anciens du pays racontent, mais ces faits-là appartiennent au passé, que la population catholique de l’archipel normand a été autrefois, bien malgré elle, plus en communication encore avec le démon que la population huguenote. Pourquoi? Nous l’ignorons. Ce qui est certain, c’est que cette minorité fut jadis fort ennuyée par le diable. Il avait pris les catholiques en affection, et cherchait à les fréquenter, ce qui donnerait à croire que le diable est plutôt catholique que protestant. Une de ses plus insupportables familiarités, c’était de faire des visites nocturnes aux lits conjugaux catholiques, au moment où le mari était endormi tout à fait, et la femme à moitié. De là des méprises. Patouillet pensait que Voltaire était né de cette façon. Cela n’a rien d’invraisemblable. Ce cas du reste est parfaitement connu et décrit dans les formulaires d’exorcismes, sous la rubrique: *De erroribus nocturnis et de semine diabolorum*. Il a

particulièrement sévi à saint-Hélier vers la fin du siècle dernier, probablement en punition des crimes de la Révolution. Les conséquences des excès révolutionnaires sont incalculables. Quoi qu’il en soit, cette survenue possible du démon, la nuit, quand on n’y voit pas clair, quand on dort, embarrassait beaucoup de femmes orthodoxes. Donner naissance à un Voltaire n’a rien d’agréable. Une d’elles, inquiète, consulta son confesseur sur le moyen d’éclaircir à temps ce quiproquo. Le confesseur répondit: − Pour vous assurer si vous avez affaire au diable ou à votre mari, tâtez le front; si vous trouvez des cornes, vous serez sûre… − De quoi? demanda la femme.

La maison qu’habitait Gilliatt avait été visionnée et ne l’était plus. Elle n’en était que plus suspecte. Personne n’ignore que lorsqu’un sorcier s’installe dans un logis hanté, le diable juge le logis suffisamment tenu, et fait au sorcier la politesse de n’y plus venir, à moins d’être appelé, comme le médecin.

Cette maison se nommait le Bû de la rue. Elle était située à la pointe d’une langue de terre ou plutôt de rocher qui faisait un petit mouillage à part dans la crique de Houmet-Paradis. Il y a là une eau profonde. Cette maison était toute seule sur cette pointe presque hors de l’île, avec juste assez de terre pour un petit jardin. Les hautes marées noyaient quelquefois le jardin. Entre le port de Saint-Sampson et la crique de Houmet-Paradis, il y a la grosse colline que surmonte ce bloc de tours et de lierre appelé le château du Valle ou de l’Archange, en sorte que de Saint-Sampson on ne voyait pas le Bû de la Rue.

Rien n’est moins rare qu’un sorcier à Guernesey. Ils exercent leur profession dans certaines paroisses, et le dix-neuvième siècle n’y fait rien. Ils ont des pratiques véritablement criminelles. Ils font bouillir de l’or. Ils cueillent des herbes à minuit. Ils regardent de travers les bestiaux des gens. On les consulte; ils se font apporter dans des bouteilles de « l’eau des malades”, et on les entend dire à demi-voix: *L’eau paraît bien triste*. L’un d’eux un jour, en mars 1856, a constaté dans « l’eau” d’un malade sept diables. Ils sont redoutés et redoutables. Un d’eux a récemment ensorcelé un boulanger « ainsi que son four”. Un autre a la scélératesse de cacheter et sceller avec le plus grand soin des enveloppes « où il n’y a rien dedans”. Un autre va jusqu’à avoir dans sa maison sur une planche trois bouteilles étiquetées B. Ces faits monstrueux sont constatés. Quelques sorciers sont complaisants, et, pour deux ou trois guinées, prennent vos maladies. Alors ils se roulent sur leur lit en poussant des cris. Pendant qu’ils se tordent, vous dites: Tiens, je n’ai plus rien. D’autres vous guérissent de tous les maux en vous nouant un mouchoir autour du corps. Moyen si simple qu’on s’étonne que personne ne s’en soit encore avisé. Au siècle dernier la cour royale de Guernesey les mettait sur un tas de fagots, et les brûlait vifs. De nos jours elle les condamne à huit semaines de prison, quatre semaines au pain et à l’eau, et quatre semaines au secret, alternant. *Amant alterna catenæ.*

Le dernier brûlement de sorciers à Guernesey a eu lieu en 1747. La ville avait utilisé pour cela une de ses places, le carrefour du Bordage. Le carrefour du Bordage a vu brûler onze sorciers, de 1565 à 1700. En général ces coupables avouaient. On les aidait à l’aveu au moyen de la torture. Le carrefour du Bordage a rendu d’autres services encore à la société et à la religion. On y a brûlé les hérétiques. Sous Marie Tudor, on y brûla, entre autres huguenots, une mère et ses deux filles; cette mère s’appelait Perrotine Massy. Une des filles était grosse. Elle accoucha dans la braise du bûcher. La chronique dit: « Son ventre éclata.” Il sortit de ce ventre un enfant vivant; le nouveau-né roula hors de la fournaise; un nommé House le ramassa. Le bailli Hélier Gosselin, bon catholique, fit rejeter l’enfant dans le feu.

III

Pour ta femme, quand tu te marieras

Revenons à Gilliatt.

On contait dans le pays qu'une femme, qui avait avec elle un petit enfant, était venue vers la fin de la Révolution habiter Guernesey. Elle était anglaise, à moins qu'elle ne fût française. Elle avait un nom quelconque dont la prononciation guernesiaise et l'orthographe paysanne avaient fait Gilliatt. Elle vivait seule avec cet enfant qui était pour elle, selon les uns un neveu, selon les autres un fils, selon les autres un petit-fils, selon les autres rien du tout. Elle avait un peu d'argent, de quoi vivre pauvrement. Elle avait acheté une pièce de pré à la Sergentée, et une jaonnière à la Roque-Crespel, près de Rocquaine. La maison du Bû de la Rue était, à cette époque, visionnée. Depuis plus de trente ans, on ne l'habitait plus. Elle tombait en ruine. Le jardin, trop visité par la mer, ne pouvait rien produire. Outre les bruits nocturnes et les lueurs, cette maison avait cela de particulièrement effrayant que, si on y laissait le soir sur la cheminée une pelote de laine, des aiguilles et une pleine assiettée de soupe, on trouvait le lendemain matin la soupe mangée, l'assiette vide et une paire de mitaines tricotée. On offrait cette masure à vendre avec le démon qui était dedans pour quelques livres sterling. Cette femme l'acheta, évidemment tentée par le diable. Ou par le bon marché.

Elle fit plus que l'acheter, elle s'y logea, elle et son enfant; et, à partir de ce moment, la maison s'apaisa. *Cette maison a ce qu'elle veut,* dirent les gens du pays. Le visionnement cessa. On n'y entendit plus de cris au point du jour. Il n'y eut plus d'autre lumière que le suif allumé le soir par la bonne femme. Chandelle de sorcière vaut torche du diable. Cette explication satisfit le public.

Cette femme tirait parti des quelques vergées de terre qu'elle avait. Elle avait une bonne vache à beurre jaune. Elle récoltait des mouzettes blanches, des caboches et des pommes de terre Golden Drops. Elle vendait, tout comme une autre, « des panais par le tonneau, des oignons par le cent, et des fèves par le dénerel”. Elle n'allait pas au marché, mais faisait vendre sa récolte par Guilbert Falliot, aux Abreuveurs Saint-Sampson. Le registre de

Falliot constate qu’il vendit pour elle une fois jusqu’à douze boisseaux de *patates dites trois mois, des plus temprunes*.

La maison avait été chétivement réparée, assez pour y vivre. Il ne pleuvait dans les chambres que par les très gros temps. Elle se composait d’un rez-de-chaussée et d’un grenier. Le rez-de-chaussée était partagé en trois salles, deux où l’on couchait, une où l’on mangeait. On montait au grenier par une échelle. La femme faisait la cuisine et montrait à lire à l’enfant. Elle n’allait point aux églises; ce qui fit que, tout bien considéré, on la déclara française. N’aller « à aucune place”, c’est grave.

En somme, c’étaient des gens que rien ne prouvait.

Française, il est probable qu’elle l’était. Les volcans lancent des pierres et les révolutions des hommes. Des familles sont ainsi envoyées à de grandes distances, des destinées sont dépaysées, des groupes sont dispersés et s’émiettent; des gens tombent des nues, ceux-ci en Allemagne, ceux-là en Angleterre, ceux-là en Amérique. Ils étonnent les naturels du pays. D’où viennent ces inconnus? C’est ce vésuve qui fume là-bas qui les a expectorés. On donne des noms à ces aérolithes, à ces individus expulsés et perdus, à ces éliminés du sort; on les appelle émigrés, réfugiés, aventuriers. S’ils restent, on les tolère; s’ils s’en vont, on est content. Quelquefois ce sont des êtres absolument inoffensifs, étrangers, les femmes du moins, aux évènements qui les ont chassés, n’ayant ni haine, ni colère, projectiles sans le vouloir, très étonnés. Ils reprennent racine comme ils peuvent. Ils ne faisaient rien à personne et ne comprennent pas ce qui leur est arrivé. J’ai vu une pauvre touffe d’herbe lancée éperdument en l’air par une explosion de mine. La Révolution française, plus que toute autre explosion, a eu de ces jets lointains.

La femme qu’à Guernesey on appelait *la Gilliatt* était peut-être cette touffe d’herbe-là.

La femme vieillit, l’enfant grandit. Ils vivaient seuls, et évités. Ils se suffisaient. Louve et louveteau se pourlèchent. Ceci est encore une des formules que leur appliqua la bienveillance environnante. L’enfant devint un adolescent, l’adolescent devint un homme, et alors, les vieilles écorces de la vie devant toujours tomber, la mère mourut. Elle lui laissa le pré de la Sergentée, la jaonnière de la Roque-Crespel, la maison du Bû de la Rue, plus, dit l’inventaire officiel, « cent guinées d’or dans le pied d’une cauche”, c’est-à-dire dans le pied d’un bas. La maison était suffisamment meublée de deux coffres de chêne, de deux lits, de six chaises et d’une table, avec ce qu'il faut d'ustensiles. Sur une planche il y avait quelques livres, et, dans un coin, une malle pas du tout mystérieuse qui dut être ouverte pour l'inventaire. Cette malle était en cuir fauve à arabesques de clous de cuivre et d'étoiles d'étain, et contenait un trousseau de femme neuf et complet en belle toile de fil de Dunkerque, chemises et jupes, plus des robes de soie en pièce, avec un papier où on lisait ceci écrit de la main de la morte: *Pour ta femme, quand tu te marieras*.

Cette mort fut pour le survivant un accablement. Il était sauvage, il devint farouche. Le désert s'acheva autour de lui. Ce n'était que l'isolement, ce fut le vide. Tant qu'on est deux, la vie est possible. Seul, il semble qu'on ne pourra plus la traîner. On renonce à tirer. C'est la première forme du désespoir. Plus tard on comprend que le devoir est une série d'acceptations. On regarde la mort, on regarde la vie, et l'on consent. Mais c'est un consentement qui saigne.

Gilliatt étant jeune, sa plaie se cicatrisa. À cet âge, les chairs du cœur reprennent. Sa tristesse, effacée peu à peu, se mêla autour de lui à la nature, y devint une sorte de charme, l'attira vers les choses et loin des hommes, et amalgama de plus en plus cette âme à la solitude.

IV.

Impopularité

Gilliatt, nous l’avons dit, n’était pas aimé dans la paroisse. Rien de plus naturel que cette antipathie. Les motifs abondaient. D’abord, on vient de l’expliquer, la maison qu’il habitait. Ensuite, son origine. Qu’est-ce que c’était que cette femme? et pourquoi cet enfant? Les gens du pays n’aiment pas qu’il y ait des énigmes sur les étrangers. Ensuite, son vêtement qui était d’un ouvrier, tandis qu’il avait, quoique pas riche, de quoi vivre sans rien faire. Ensuite, son jardin, qu’il réussissait à cultiver et d’où il tirait des pommes de terre malgré les coups d’équinoxe. Ensuite, de gros livres qu’il avait sur une planche, et où il lisait.

D’autres raisons encore.

D’où vient qu’il vivait solitaire? Le Bû de la Rue était une sorte de lazaret; on tenait Gilliatt en quarantaine; c’est pourquoi il était tout simple qu’on s’étonnât de son isolement, et qu’on le rendît responsable de la solitude qu’on faisait autour de lui.

Il n’allait jamais à la chapelle. Il sortait souvent la nuit. Il parlait aux sorciers. Une fois on l’avait vu assis dans l’herbe d’un air étonné. Il hantait le dolmen de l’Ancresse et les pierres fées qui sont dans la campagne çà et là. On croyait être sûr de l’avoir vu saluer poliment la Roque qui Chante. Il achetait tous les oiseaux qu’on lui apportait et les mettait en liberté. Il était honnête aux personnes bourgeoises dans les rues de Saint-Sampson, mais faisait volontiers un détour pour n’y point passer. Il pêchait souvent, et revenait toujours avec du poisson. Il travaillait à son jardin le dimanche. Il avait un bag-pipe, acheté par lui à des soldats écossais de passage à Guernesey, et dont il jouait dans les rochers au bord de la mer, à la nuit tombante. Il faisait des gestes comme un semeur. Que voulez-vous qu’un pays devienne avec un homme comme cela?

Quant aux livres, qui venaient de la femme morte, et où il lisait, ils étaient inquiétants. Le révérend Jaquemin Hérode, recteur de Saint-Sampson, quand il était entré dans la maison pour l’enterrement de la femme, avait lu au dos de ces livres les titres que voici: *Dictionnaire de Rosier*, *Candide*, par Voltaire, *Avis au peuple sur sa santé*, par Tissot. Un gentilhomme français, émigré, retiré à Saint-Sampson, avait dit: *Ce doit être le Tissot qui a porté la tête de la princesse De Lamballe*.

Le révérend avait remarqué sur un de ces livres ce titre véritablement bourru et menaçant: *De Rhubarbaro*.

Disons-le pourtant, l'ouvrage étant, comme le titre l'indique, écrit en latin, il était douteux que Gilliatt, qui ne savait pas le latin, lût ce livre.

Mais ce sont précisément les livres qu'un homme ne lit pas qui l'accusent le plus. L'inquisition d'Espagne a jugé ce point et l'a mis hors de doute.

Du reste ce n'était autre chose que le traité du docteur Tilingius *sur la Rhubarbe*, publié en Allemagne en 1679.

On n'était pas sûr que Gilliatt ne fît des charmes, des philtres et des « bouilleries". Il avait des fioles.

Pourquoi allait-il se promener le soir, et quelquefois jusqu'à minuit, dans les falaises? évidemment pour causer avec les mauvaises gens qui sont la nuit au bord de la mer dans de la fumée.

Une fois il avait aidé la sorcière de Torteval à désembourber son chariot. Une vieille, nommée Moutonne Gahy.

À un recensement qui s'était fait dans l'île, interrogé sur sa profession, il avait répondu: — *Pêcheur, quand il y a du poisson à prendre.* — Mettez-vous à la place des gens, on n'aime pas ces réponses-là.

La pauvreté et la richesse sont de comparaison. Gilliatt avait des champs et une maison, et, comparé à ceux qui n'ont rien du tout, il n'était pas pauvre. Un jour, pour l'éprouver, et peut-être aussi pour lui faire une avance, car il y a des femmes qui épouseraient le diable riche, une fille dit à Gilliatt: Quand donc prendrez-vous femme? Il répondit: *Je prendrai femme quand la Roque qui Chante prendra homme*.

Cette Roque qui Chante est une grande pierre plantée droite dans un courtil proche monsieur Lemézurier de Fry. Cette pierre est fort à surveiller. On ne sait ce qu'elle fait là. On y entend chanter un coq qu'on ne voit pas, chose extrêmement désagréable. Ensuite il est avéré qu'elle a été mise dans ce courtil par les sarregousets, qui sont la même chose que les sins.

La nuit, quand il tonne, si l'on voit des hommes voler dans le rouge des nuées et dans le tremblement de l'air, ce sont les sarregousets. Une femme, qui demeure au Grand-Mielles, les connaît. Un soir qu'il y avait des sarregousets dans un carrefour, cette femme cria à un charretier qui ne savait quelle route prendre: *Demandez-leur votre chemin; c'est des gens* *bien faisants, c'est des gens bien civils à deviser au monde*. Il y a gros à parier que cette femme est une sorcière.

Le judicieux et savant roi Jacques Ier faisait bouillir toutes vives les femmes de cette espèce, goûtait le bouillon, au goût du bouillon, disait: *C'était une sorcière*, ou *Ce n'en était pas une*.

Il est à regretter que les rois d'aujourd'hui n'aient plus de ces talents-là, qui faisaient comprendre l'utilité de l'institution.

Gilliatt, non sans de sérieux motifs, vivait en odeur de sorcellerie. Dans un orage, à minuit, Gilliatt étant en mer seul dans une barque du côté de la Sommeilleuse, on l'entendit demander:

— Y a-t-il du rang pour passer?

Une voix cria du haut des roches:

— Voire! hardi!

À qui parlait-il, si ce n'est à quelqu'un qui lui répondait? Ceci nous semble une preuve.

Dans une autre soirée d'orage, si noire qu'on ne voyait rien, tout près de la Catiau-Roque, qui est une double rangée de roches où les sorciers, les chèvres et les faces vont danser le vendredi, on crut être certain de reconnaître la voix de Gilliatt mêlée à l'épouvantable conversation que voici:

— Comment se porte Vésin Brovard? (C'était un maçon qui était tombé d'un toit.)

— Il guarit.

— Ver dia! il a chu de plus haut que ce grand pau. C'est ravissant qu'il ne se soit rien rompu.

— Les gens eurent beau temps au varech la semaine passée.

— Plus qu'ogny.

— Voire! il n'y aura pas hardi de poisson au marché.

— Il vente trop dur.

— Ils ne sauraient mettre leurs rets bas.

— Comment va la Catherine?

— Elle est de charme.

«La Catherine" était évidemment une sarregousette.

Gilliatt, selon toute apparence, faisait œuvre de nuit. Du moins, personne n'en doutait.

On le voyait quelquefois, avec une cruche qu'il avait, verser de l'eau à terre. Or l'eau qu'on jette à terre trace la forme des diables.

Il existe sur la route de Saint-Sampson, vis-à-vis le martello numéro I, trois pierres arrangées en escalier. Elles ont porté sur leur plate-forme, vide aujourd'hui, une croix, à moins qu'elles n'aient porté un gibet. Ces pierres sont très malignes.

Des gens fort prud'hommes et des personnes absolument croyables affirmaient avoir vu, près de ces pierres, Gilliatt causer avec un crapaud. Or il n'y a pas de crapauds à Guernesey; Guernesey a toutes les couleuvres, et Jersey a tous les crapauds. Ce crapaud avait dû venir de Jersey à la nage pour parler à Gilliatt. La conversation était amicale.

Ces faits demeurèrent constatés; et la preuve, c'est que les trois pierres sont encore là. Les gens qui douteraient peuvent les aller voir; et même, à peu de distance, il y a une maison au coin de laquelle on lit cette enseigne: *Marchand en bétail mort et vivant, vieux cordages, fer, os et chiques; est prompt dans son paiement et dans son attention.*

Il faudrait être de mauvaise foi pour contester la présence de ces pierres et l'existence de cette maison. Tout cela nuisait à Gilliatt.

Les ignorants seuls ignorent que le plus grand danger des mers de la Manche, c'est le roi des Auxcriniers. Pas de personnage marin plus redoutable. Qui l'a vu fait naufrage entre une Saint-Michel et l'autre. Il est petit, étant nain, et il est sourd, étant roi. Il sait les noms de tous ceux qui sont morts dans la mer et l'endroit où ils sont. Il connaît à fond le cimetière océan. Une tête massive en bas et étroite en haut, un corps trapu, un ventre visqueux et difforme, des nodosités sur le crâne, de courtes jambes, de longs bras, pour pieds des nageoires, pour mains des griffes, un large visage vert, tel est ce roi. Ses griffes sont palmées et ses nageoires sont onglées. Qu'on imagine un poisson qui est un spectre, et qui a une figure d'homme. Pour en finir avec lui, il faudrait l'exorciser, ou le pêcher. En attendant, il est sinistre. Rien n'est moins rassurant que de l'apercevoir. On entrevoit, au-dessus des lames et des houles, derrière les épaisseurs de la brume, un linéament qui est un être; un front bas, un nez camard, des oreilles plates, une bouche démesurée où il manque des dents, un rictus glauque, des sourcils en chevrons, et de gros yeux gais. Il est rouge quand l'éclair est livide, et blafard quand l'éclair est pourpre. Il a une barbe ruisselante et rigide qui s'étale, coupée carrément, sur une membrane en forme de pèlerine, laquelle est ornée de quatorze coquilles, sept par devant et sept par derrière. Ces coquilles sont extraordinaires pour ceux qui se connaissent en coquilles. Le roi des Auxcriniers n'est visible que dans la mer violente. Il est le baladin lugubre de la tempête. On voit sa forme s’ébaucher dans le brouillard, dans la rafale, dans la pluie. Son nombril est hideux. Une carapace de squames lui cache les côtes, comme ferait un gilet. Il se dresse debout au haut de ces vagues roulées qui jaillissent sous la pression des souffles et se tordent comme les copeaux sortant du rabot du menuisier. Il se tient tout entier hors de l’écume, et, s’il y a à l’horizon des navires en détresse, blême dans l’ombre, la face éclairée de la lueur d’un vague sourire, l’air fou et terrible, il danse. C’est là une vilaine rencontre. À l’époque où Gilliatt était une des préoccupations de Saint-Sampson, les dernières personnes qui avaient vu le roi des Auxcriniers déclaraient qu’il n’avait plus à sa pèlerine que treize coquilles. Treize; il n’en était que plus dangereux. Mais qu’était devenue la quatorzième? L’avait-il donnée à quelqu’un? Et à qui l’avait-il donnée? Nul ne pouvait le dire, et l’on se bornait à conjecturer. Ce qui est certain, c’est que M. Lupin-Mabier, du lieu les Godaines, homme ayant de la surface, propriétaire taxé à quatre-vingts quartiers, était prêt à jurer sous serment qu’il avait vu une fois dans les mains de Gilliatt une coquille très singulière.

Il n’était point rare d’entendre de ces dialogues entre deux paysans:

— N’est-ce pas, mon voisin, que j’ai là un beau bœuf?

— Bouffi, mon voisin.

— Tiens, c’est vrai tout de même.

— Il est meilleur en suif qu’il n’est en viande.

— Ver dia!

— Êtes-vous certain que Gilliatt ne l’a point regardé?

Gilliatt s’arrêtait au bord des champs près des laboureurs et au bord des jardins près des jardiniers, et il lui arrivait de leur dire des paroles mystérieuses: — Quand le mors du diable fleurit, moissonnez le seigle d’hiver.

(Parenthèse: le mors du diable, c’est la scabieuse.)

— Le frêne se feuille, il ne gèlera plus.

— Solstice d’été, chardon en fleur.

— S’il ne pleut pas en juin, les blés prendront le blanc. Craignez la nielle.

— Le merisier fait ses grappes, méfiez-vous de la pleine lune.

— Si le temps, le sixième jour de la lune, se comporte comme le quatrième ou comme le cinquième jour, il se comportera de même, neuf fois sur douze dans le premier cas, et onze fois sur douze dans le second, pendant toute la lune.

— Ayez l'œil sur les voisins en procès avec vous. Prenez garde aux malices. Un cochon, à qui on fait boire du lait chaud, crève. Une vache, à qui on frotte les dents avec du poireau, ne mange plus.

— L'éperlan fraye, gare les fièvres.

— La grenouille se montre, semez les melons.

— L'hépatique fleurit, semez l'orge.

— Le tilleul fleurit, fauchez les prés.

— L'ypréau fleurit, ouvrez les bâches.

— Le tabac fleurit, fermez les serres.

Et, chose terrible, si l'on suivait ses conseils, on s'en trouvait bien.

Une nuit de juin qu'il joua du bug-pipe dans la dune, du côté de la Demie de Fontenelle, la pêche aux maquereaux manqua.

Un soir, à la marée basse, sur la grève en face de sa maison du Bû de la Rue, une charrette chargée de varech versa. Il eut probablement peur d'être traduit en justice, car il se donna beaucoup de peine pour aider à relever la charrette, et il la rechargea lui-même.

Une petite fille du voisinage ayant des poux, il était allé à Saint-Pierre-Port, était revenu avec un onguent, et en avait frotté l'enfant; et Gilliatt lui avait ôté ses poux, ce qui prouve que Gilliatt les lui avait donnés.

Tout le monde sait qu'il y a un charme pour donner des poux aux personnes.

Gilliatt passait pour regarder les puits, ce qui est dangereux quand le regard est mauvais; et le fait est qu'un jour, aux Arculons, près Saint-Pierre-Port, l'eau d'un puits devint malsaine. La bonne femme à qui était le puits dit à Gilliatt: Voyez donc cette eau. Et elle lui en montra un plein verre. Gilliatt avoua. — L'eau est épaisse, dit-il; c'est vrai. La bonne femme, qui se méfiait, lui dit: Guérissez-moi-la donc. Gilliatt lui fit des questions: — si elle avait une étable? — si l'étable avait un égout? — si le ruisseau de l'égout ne passait pas tout près du puits? — La bonne femme répondit oui. Gilliatt entra dans l'étable, travailla à l'égout, détourna le ruisseau, et l'eau du puits redevint bonne. On pensa dans le pays ce qu'on voulut. Un puits n'est pas mauvais, et ensuite bon, sans motif; on ne trouva point la maladie de ce puits naturelle, et il est difficile de ne pas croire en effet que Gilliatt avait jeté un sort à cette eau.

Une fois qu'il était allé à Jersey, on remarqua qu'il s'était logé à Saint-Clément, rue des Alleurs. Les alleurs, ce sont les revenants.

Dans les villages, on recueille des indices sur un homme; on rapproche ces indices; le total fait une réputation.

Il arriva que Gilliatt fut surpris saignant du nez. Ceci parut grave. Un patron de barque, fort voyageur, qui avait presque fait le tour du monde, affirma que chez les Tungouses tous les sorciers saignent du nez. Quand on voit un homme saigner du nez, on sait à quoi s'en tenir. Toutefois les gens raisonnables firent remarquer que ce qui caractérise les sorciers en Tungousie peut ne point les caractériser au même degré à Guernesey.

Aux environs d'une Saint-Michel, on le vit s'arrêter dans un pré des courtils des Huriaux, bordant la grande route des Videclins. Il siffla dans le pré, et un moment après il y vint un corbeau, et un moment après il y vint une pie. Le fait fut attesté par un homme notable, qui a depuis été douzenier dans la Douzaine autorisée à faire un nouveau livre de Perchage du fief le Roi.

Au Hamel, dans la vingtaine de l'Épine, il y avait des vieilles femmes qui disaient être sûres d'avoir entendu un matin, à la piperette du jour, des hirondelles appeler Gilliatt.

Ajoutez qu'il n'était pas bon.

Un jour, un pauvre homme battait un âne. L'âne n'avançait pas. Le pauvre homme lui donna quelques coups de sabot dans le ventre, et l'âne tomba. Gilliatt accourut pour relever l'âne, l'âne était mort. Gilliatt souffleta le pauvre homme.

Un autre jour, voyant un garçon descendre d'un arbre avec une couvée de petits épluque-pommiers nouveau-nés, presque sans plumes et tout nus, Gilliatt prit cette couvée à ce garçon, et poussa la méchanceté jusqu'à la reporter dans l'arbre.

Des passants lui en firent des reproches, il se borna à montrer le père et la mère épluque-pommiers qui criaient au-dessus de l'arbre et qui revenaient à leur couvée. Il avait un faible pour les oiseaux. C'est un signe auquel on reconnaît généralement les magiciens.

Les enfants ont pour joie de dénicher les nids de goëlands et de mauves dans les falaises. Ils en rapportent des quantités d'œufs bleus, jaunes et verts avec lesquels on fait des rosaces sur les devantures des cheminées. Comme les falaises sont à pic, quelquefois le pied leur glisse, ils tombent, et se tuent. Rien n'est joli comme les paravents décorés d'œufs d'oiseaux de mer.

Gilliatt ne savait qu’inventer pour faire le mal. Il grimpait, au péril de sa propre vie, dans les escarpements des roches marines, et y accrochait des bottes de foin avec de vieux chapeaux et toutes sortes d’épouvantails, afin d’empêcher les oiseaux d’y nicher, et, par conséquent, les enfants d’y aller.

C’est pourquoi Gilliatt était à peu près haï dans le pays. On le serait à moins.

V.

Autres côtés louches de Gilliatt

L’opinion n’était pas bien fixée sur le compte de Gilliatt.

Généralement on le croyait marcou, quelques-uns allaient jusqu’à le croire cambion. Le cambion est le fils qu’une femme a du diable.

Quand une femme a d’un homme sept enfants mâles consécutifs, le septième est marcou. Mais il ne faut pas qu’une fille gâte la série des garçons.

Le marcou a une fleur de lys naturelle empreinte sur une partie quelconque du corps, ce qui fait qu’il guérit les écrouelles aussi bien que les rois de France. Il y a des marcous en France un peu partout, particulièrement dans l’Orléanais. Chaque village du Gâtinais a son marcou. Il suffit, pour guérir les malades, que le marcou souffle sur leurs plaies ou leur fasse toucher sa fleur de lys. La chose réussit surtout dans la nuit du vendredi saint. Il y a une dizaine d’années, le marcou d’Ormes en Gâtinais, surnommé le Beau Marcou et consulté de toute la Beauce, était un tonnelier appelé Foulon, qui avait cheval et voiture. On dut, pour empêcher ses miracles, faire jouer la gendarmerie. Il avait la fleur de lys sous le sein gauche. D’autres marcous l’ont ailleurs.

Il y a des marcous à Jersey, à Aurigny et à Guernesey. Cela tient sans doute aux droits que la France a sur le duché de Normandie. Autrement, à quoi bon la fleur de lys?

Il y a aussi dans les îles de la Manche des scrofuleux; ce qui rend les marcous nécessaires.

Quelques personnes s’étant trouvées présentes un jour que Gilliatt se baignait dans la mer avaient cru lui voir la fleur de lys. Questionné là-dessus, il s’était, pour toute réponse, mis à rire. Car il riait comme les autres hommes, quelquefois. Depuis ce temps-là, on ne le voyait plus se baigner; il ne se baignait que dans des lieux périlleux et solitaires. Probablement la nuit, au clair de lune; chose, on en conviendra, suspecte.

Ceux qui s’obstinaient à le croire cambion, c’est-à-dire fils du diable, se trompaient évidemment. Ils auraient dû savoir qu’il n’y a guère de cambions qu’en Allemagne. Mais le Valle et Saint-Sampson étaient, il y a cinquante ans, des pays d’ignorance.

Croire, à Guernesey, quelqu’un fils du diable, il y a visiblement là de l’exagération.

Gilliatt, par cela même qu’il inquiétait, était consulté. Les paysans venaient, avec peur, lui parler de leurs maladies. Cette peur-là contient de la confiance; et, dans la campagne, plus le médecin est suspect, plus le remède est sûr. Gilliatt avait des médicaments à lui, qu’il tenait de la vieille femme morte; il en faisait part à qui les lui demandait, et ne voulait pas recevoir d’argent. Il guérissait les panaris avec des applications d’herbes; la liqueur d’une de ses fioles coupait la fièvre; le chimiste de Saint-Sampson, que nous appellerions pharmacien en France, pensait que c’était une décoction de quinquina. Les moins bienveillants convenaient volontiers que Gilliatt était assez bon diable pour les malades quand il s’agissait de ses remèdes ordinaires; mais, comme marcou, il ne voulait rien entendre; si un scrofuleux lui demandait à toucher sa fleur de lys, pour toute réponse il lui fermait sa porte au nez; faire des miracles était une chose à laquelle il se refusait obstinément, ce qui est ridicule à un sorcier. Ne soyez pas sorcier; mais, si vous l’êtes, faites votre métier.

Il y avait une ou deux exceptions à l’antipathie universelle. Sieur Landoys, du Clos-Landès, était clerc greffier de la paroisse de Saint-Pierre-Port, chargé des écritures et gardien du registre des naissances, mariages et décès. Ce greffier Landoys tirait vanité de descendre du trésorier de Bretagne Pierre Landais, pendu en 1485. Un jour sieur Landoys poussa son bain trop avant dans la mer, et faillit se noyer. Gilliatt se jeta à l’eau, faillit se noyer lui aussi, et sauva Landoys. À partir de ce jour, Landoys ne dit plus de mal de Gilliatt. À ceux qui s’en étonnaient, il répondait: *Pourquoi voulez-vous que je déteste un homme qui ne m’a rien fait, et qui m’a rendu service?* Le clerc greffier en vint même à prendre Gilliatt en une certaine amitié. Ce clerc greffier était un homme sans préjugés. Il ne croyait pas aux sorciers. Il riait de ceux qui ont peur des revenants. Quant à lui, il avait un bateau, il pêchait dans ses heures de loisir pour s’amuser, et il n’avait jamais rien vu d’extraordinaire, si ce n’est une fois au clair de lune une femme blanche qui sautait sur l’eau, et encore il n’en était pas bien sûr. Moutonne Gahy, la sorcière de Torteval, lui avait donné un petit sac qu’on s’attache sous la cravate et qui protège contre les esprits; il se moquait de ce sac, et ne savait ce qu’il contenait; pourtant il le portait, se sentant plus en sûreté quand il avait cette chose au cou.

Quelques personnes hardies se risquaient, à la suite du sieur Landoys, à constater en Gilliatt certaines circonstances atténuantes, quelques apparences de qualités, sa sobriété, son abstinence de gin et de tabac, et l’on en venait parfois jusqu’à faire de lui ce bel éloge: *Il ne boit, ne fume, ne chique, ni ne snuffe*.

Mais être sobre, ce n’est une qualité que lorsqu’on en a d’autres.

L’aversion publique était sur Gilliatt.

Quoi qu’il en fût, comme marcou, Gilliatt pouvait rendre des services. Un certain vendredi saint, à minuit, jour et heure usités pour ces sortes de cures, tous les scrofuleux de l’île, d’inspiration ou par rendez-vous pris entre eux, vinrent en foule au Bû de la Rue, à mains jointes, et avec des plaies pitoyables, demander à Gilliatt de les guérir. Il refusa. On reconnut là sa méchanceté.

VI

La panse

Tel était Gilliatt.

Les filles le trouvaient laid.

Il n’était pas laid. Il était beau peut-être. Il avait dans le profil quelque chose d’un barbare antique. Au repos, il ressemblait à un dace de la colonne trajane. Son oreille était petite, délicate, sans lambeau, et d’une admirable forme acoustique. Il avait entre les deux yeux cette fière ride verticale de l’homme hardi et persévérant. Les deux coins de sa bouche tombaient, ce qui est amer; son front était d’une courbe noble et sereine; sa prunelle franche regardait bien, quoique troublée par ce clignement que donne aux pêcheurs la réverbération des vagues. Son rire était puéril et charmant. Pas de plus pur ivoire que ses dents. Mais le hâle l’avait fait presque nègre. On ne se mêle pas impunément à l’océan, à la tempête et à la nuit; à trente ans, il en paraissait quarante-cinq. Il avait le sombre masque du vent et de la mer.

On l’avait surnommé Gilliatt le Malin.

Une fable de l’Inde dit: Un jour Brahmâ demanda à la Force: Qui est plus fort que toi? Elle répondit: l’Adresse. Un proverbe chinois dit: Que ne pourrait le lion, s’il était singe! Gilliatt n’était ni lion, ni singe; mais les choses qu’il faisait venaient à l’appui du proverbe chinois et de la fable indoue. De taille ordinaire et de force ordinaire, il trouvait moyen, tant sa dextérité était inventive et puissante, de soulever des fardeaux de géant et d’accomplir des prodiges d’athlète.

Il y avait en lui du gymnaste; il se servait indifféremment de sa main droite et de sa main gauche.

Il ne chassait pas, mais il pêchait. Il épargnait les oiseaux, non les poissons. Malheur aux muets! Il était nageur excellent.

La solitude fait des gens à talents ou des idiots. Gilliatt s’offrait sous ces deux aspects. Par moments on lui voyait « l’air étonné” dont nous avons parlé, et on l’eût pris pour une brute. Dans d’autres instants, il avait on ne sait quel regard profond. L’antique Chaldée a eu de ces hommes-là; à de certaines heures, l’opacité du pâtre devenait transparente et laissait voir le mage.

En somme, ce n’était qu’un pauvre homme sachant lire et écrire. Il est probable qu’il était sur la limite qui sépare le songeur du penseur. Le penseur veut, le songeur subit. La solitude s’ajoute aux simples, et les complique d’une certaine façon. Ils se pénètrent à leur insu d’horreur sacrée. L’ombre où était l’esprit de Gilliatt se composait, en quantité presque égale, de deux éléments obscurs tous deux, mais bien différents: en lui, l’ignorance, infirmité; hors de lui, le mystère, immensité.

À force de grimper dans les rochers, d’escalader les escarpements, d’aller et de venir dans l’archipel par tous les temps, de manœuvrer la première embarcation venue, de se risquer jour et nuit dans les passes les plus difficiles, il était devenu, sans en tirer parti du reste, et pour sa fantaisie et son plaisir, un homme de mer surprenant.

Il était pilote né. Le vrai pilote est le marin qui navigue sur le fond plus encore que sur la surface. La vague est un problème extérieur, continuellement compliqué par la configuration sous-marine des lieux où le navire fait route. Il semblait, à voir Gilliatt voguer sur les bas-fonds et à travers les récifs de l’archipel normand, qu’il eût sous la voûte du crâne une carte du fond de la mer. Il savait tout et bravait tout.

Il connaissait les balises mieux que les cormorans qui s’y perchent. Les différences imperceptibles qui distinguent l’une de l’autre les quatre balises poteaux du Creux, d’Alligande, des Trémies et de la Sardrette étaient parfaitement nettes et claires pour lui, même dans le brouillard. Il n’hésitait ni sur le pieu à pomme ovale d’Anfré, ni sur le triple fer de lance de la Rousse, ni sur la boule blanche de la Corbette, ni sur la boule noire de Longue-Pierre, et il n’était pas à craindre qu’il confondît la croix de Goubeau avec l’épée plantée en terre de la Platte, ni la balise marteau des Barbées avec la balise queue d’aronde du Moulinet.

Sa rare science de matelot éclata singulièrement un jour qu’il y eut à Guernesey une de ces sortes de joutes marines qu’on nomme régates. La question était celle-ci: être seul dans une embarcation à quatre voiles, la conduire de Saint-Sampson à l’île de Herm qui est à une lieue, et la ramener de Herm à Saint-Sampson. Manœuvrer seul un bateau à quatre voiles, il n’est pas de pêcheur qui ne fasse cela, et la difficulté ne semble pas grande, mais voici ce qui l’aggravait. Premièrement, l’embarcation elle-même, laquelle était une de ces larges et fortes chaloupes ventrues d’autrefois, à la mode de Rotterdam, que les marins du siècle dernier appelaient des *panses hollandaises*. On rencontre encore quelquefois en mer cet ancien gabarit de Hollande, joufflu et plat, et ayant à bâbord et à tribord deux ailes qui s’abattent, tantôt l’une, tantôt l’autre, selon le vent, et remplacent la quille. Deuxièmement, le retour de Herm; retour qui se compliquait d’un lourd lest de pierres. On allait à vide, mais on revenait chargé. Le prix de la joute était la chaloupe. Elle était d’avance donnée au vainqueur. Cette panse avait servi de bateau-pilote; le pilote qui l’avait montée et conduite pendant vingt ans était le plus robuste des marins de la Manche; à sa mort on n’avait trouvé personne pour gouverner la panse, et l’on s’était décidé à en faire le prix d’une régate. La panse, quoique non pontée, avait des qualités, et pouvait tenter un manœuvrier. Elle était mâtée en avant, ce qui augmentait la puissance de traction de la voilure. Autre avantage, le mât ne gênait point le chargement. C’était une coque solide; pesante, mais vaste, et tenant bien le large; une vraie barque commère. Il y eut empressement à se la disputer; la joute était rude, mais le prix était beau. Sept ou huit pêcheurs, les plus vigoureux de l’île, se présentèrent. Ils essayèrent tour à tour; pas un ne put aller jusqu’à Herm. Le dernier qui lutta était connu pour avoir franchi à la rame par un gros temps le redoutable étranglement de mer qui est entre Serk et Brecq-Hou. Ruisselant de sueur, il ramena la panse et dit: C’est impossible. Alors Gilliatt entra dans la barque, empoigna d’abord l’aviron, ensuite la grande écoute, et poussa au large. Puis, sans bitter l’écoute, ce qui eût été une imprudence, et sans la lâcher, ce qui le maintenait maître de la grande voile, laissant l’écoute rouler sur l’estrop au gré du vent, sans dériver, il saisit de la main gauche la barre. En trois quarts d’heure, il fut à Herm. Trois heures après, quoiqu’un fort vent du sud se fût élevé et eût pris la rade en travers, la panse, montée par Gilliatt, rentrait à Saint-Sampson avec le chargement de pierres. Il avait, par luxe et bravade, ajouté au chargement le petit canon de bronze de Herm, que les gens de l’île tiraient tous les ans le 5 novembre en réjouissance de la mort de Guy Fawkes.

Guy Fawkes, disons-le en passant, est mort il y a deux cent soixante ans; c’est là une longue joie.

Gilliatt, ainsi surchargé et surmené, quoiqu’il eût de trop le canon de Guy Fawkes dans sa barque et le vent du sud dans sa voile, ramena, on pourrait dire rapporta, la panse à Saint-Sampson.

Ce que voyant, mess Lethierry s’écria: Voilà un matelot hardi!

Et il tendit la main à Gilliatt.

Nous reparlerons de mess Lethierry.

La panse fut adjugée à Gilliatt.

Cette aventure ne nuisit pas à son surnom de Malin.

Quelques personnes déclarèrent que la chose n’avait rien d’étonnant, attendu que Gilliatt avait caché dans le bateau une branche de mélier sauvage. Mais cela ne put être prouvé.

À partir de ce jour, Gilliatt n’eut plus d’autre embarcation que la panse. C’est dans cette lourde barque qu’il allait à la pêche. Il l’amarrait dans le très bon petit mouillage qu’il avait pour lui tout seul sous le mur même de sa maison du Bû de la Rue. À la tombée de la nuit, il jetait ses filets sur son dos, traversait son jardin, enjambait le parapet de pierres sèches, dégringolait d’une roche à l’autre, et sautait dans la panse. De là au large.

Il pêchait beaucoup de poisson, mais on affirmait que la branche de mélier était toujours attachée à son bateau. Le mélier, c’est le néflier. Personne n’avait vu cette branche, mais tout le monde y croyait.

Le poisson qu’il avait de trop, il ne le vendait pas, il le donnait.

Les pauvres recevaient son poisson, mais lui en voulaient pourtant, à cause de cette branche de mélier. Cela ne se fait pas. On ne doit point tricher la mer.

Il était pêcheur, mais il n’était pas que cela. Il avait, d’instinct et pour se distraire, appris trois ou quatre métiers. Il était menuisier, ferron, charron, calfat, et même un peu mécanicien. Personne ne raccommodait une roue comme lui. Il fabriquait dans un genre à lui tous ses engins de pêche. Il avait dans un coin du Bû de la Rue une petite forge et une enclume, et, la panse n’ayant qu’une ancre, il lui en avait fait, lui-même et lui seul, une seconde. Cette ancre était excellente; l’organeau avait la force voulue, et Gilliatt, sans que personne le lui eût enseigné, avait trouvé la dimension exacte que doit avoir le jouail pour empêcher l’ancre de cabaner.

Il avait patiemment remplacé tous les clous du bordage de la panse par des gournables, ce qui rendait les trous de rouille impossibles.

De cette manière il avait beaucoup augmenté les bonnes qualités de mer de la panse. Il en profitait pour s’en aller de temps en temps passer un mois ou deux dans quelque îlot solitaire comme Chousey ou les Casquets. On disait: Tiens, Gilliatt n’est plus là. Cela ne faisait de peine à personne.

VII

À maison visionnée habitant visionnaire

Gilliatt était l’homme du songe. De là ses audaces, de là aussi ses timidités. Il avait ses idées à lui.

Peut-être y avait-il en Gilliatt de l’halluciné et de l’illuminé. L’hallucination hante tout aussi bien un paysan comme Martin qu’un roi comme Henri IV. L’Inconnu fait parfois à l’esprit de l’homme des surprises. Une brusque déchirure de l’ombre laisse tout à coup voir l’invisible, puis se referme. Ces visions sont quelquefois transfiguratrices; elles font d’un chamelier Mahomet et d’une chevrière Jeanne d’Arc. La solitude dégage une certaine quantité d’égarement sublime. C’est la fumée du buisson ardent. Il en résulte un mystérieux tremblement d’idées qui dilate le docteur en voyant et le poëte en prophète; il en résulte Horeb, le Cédron, Ombos, les ivresses du laurier de Castalie mâché, les révélations du mois Busion; il en résulte Péléïa à Dodone, Phémonoë à Delphes, Trophonius à Lébadée, Ézéchiel sur le Kébar, Jérôme dans la Thébaïde. Le plus souvent l’état visionnaire accable l’homme et le stupéfie. L’abrutissement sacré existe. Le fakir a pour fardeau sa vision comme le crétin son goître. Luther parlant aux diables dans le grenier de Wittemberg, Pascal masquant l’enfer avec le paravent de son cabinet, l’obi nègre dialoguant avec le dieu Bossum à face blanche, c’est le même phénomène, diversement porté par les cerveaux qu’il traverse, selon leur force et leur dimension. Luther et Pascal sont et restent grands; l’obi est imbécile.

Gilliatt n’était ni si haut, ni si bas. C’était un pensif. Rien de plus.

Il voyait la nature un peu étrangement.

De ce qu’il lui était arrivé plusieurs fois de trouver dans de l’eau de mer parfaitement limpide d’assez gros animaux inattendus, de formes diverses, de l’espèce méduse, qui, hors de l’eau, ressemblaient à du cristal mou, et qui, rejetés dans l’eau, s’y confondaient avec leur milieu, par l’identité de diaphanéité et de couleur, au point d’y disparaître, il concluait que, puisque des transparences vivantes habitaient l’eau, d’autres transparences, également vivantes, pouvaient bien habiter l’air. Les oiseaux ne sont pas les habitants de l’air; ils en sont les amphibies. Gilliatt ne croyait pas à l’air désert. Il disait: Puisque la mer est remplie, pourquoi l’atmosphère serait-elle vide? Des créatures couleur d’air s’effaceraient dans la lumière et échapperaient à notre regard; qui nous prouve qu’il n’y en a pas? L’analogie indique que l’air doit avoir ses poissons comme la mer a les siens; ces poissons de l’air seraient diaphanes, bienfait de la prévoyance créatrice pour nous comme pour eux; laissant passer le jour à travers leur forme et ne faisant point d’ombre et n’ayant pas de silhouette, ils resteraient ignorés de nous, et nous n’en pourrions rien saisir. Gilliatt imaginait que si l’on pouvait mettre la terre à sec d’atmosphère, et que si l’on pêchait l’air comme on pêche un étang, on y trouverait une foule d’êtres surprenants. Et, ajoutait-il dans sa rêverie, bien des choses s’expliqueraient.

La rêverie, qui est la pensée à l’état de nébuleuse, confine au sommeil, et s’en préoccupe comme de sa frontière. L’air habité par des transparences vivantes, ce serait le commencement de l’inconnu; mais au delà s’offre la vaste ouverture du possible. Là d’autres êtres, là d’autres faits. Aucun surnaturalisme; mais la continuation occulte de la nature infinie. Gilliatt, dans ce désœuvrement laborieux qui était son existence, était un bizarre observateur. Il allait jusqu’à observer le sommeil. Le sommeil est en contact avec le possible, que nous nommons aussi l’invraisemblable. Le monde nocturne est un monde. La nuit, en tant que nuit, est un univers. L’organisme matériel humain sur lequel pèse une colonne atmosphérique de quinze lieues de haut, est fatigué le soir, il tombe de lassitude, il se couche, il se repose; les yeux de chair se ferment; alors dans cette tête assoupie, moins inerte qu’on ne croit, d’autres yeux s’ouvrent; l’Inconnu apparaît. Les choses sombres du monde ignoré deviennent voisines de l’homme, soit qu’il y ait communication véritable, soit que les lointains de l’abîme aient un grossissement visionnaire; il semble que les vivants indistincts de l’espace viennent nous regarder et qu’ils aient une curiosité de nous, les vivants terrestres; une création fantôme monte ou descend vers nous et nous côtoie dans un crépuscule; devant notre contemplation spectrale, une vie autre que la nôtre s’agrège et se désagrège, composée de nous-mêmes et d’autre chose; et le dormeur, pas tout à fait voyant, pas tout à fait inconscient, entrevoit ces animalités étranges, ces végétations extraordinaires, ces lividités terribles ou souriantes, ces larves, ces masques, ces figures, ces hydres, ces confusions, ce clair de lune sans lune, ces obscures décompositions du prodige, ces croissances et ces décroissances dans une épaisseur trouble, ces flottaisons de formes dans les ténèbres, tout ce mystère que nous appelons le songe et qui n'est autre chose que l'approche d'une réalité invisible. Le rêve est l'aquarium de la nuit.

Ainsi songeait Gilliatt.

VIII

LA CHAISE GILD-HOLM-’UR

Ce serait vainement qu’on chercherait aujourd’hui, dans l’anse du Houmet, la maison de Gilliatt, son jardin, et la crique où il abritait la panse. Le Bû de la Rue n’existe plus. La petite presqu’île qui portait cette maison est tombée sous le pic des démolisseurs de falaises et a été chargée, charretée à charretée, sur les navires des brocanteurs de rochers et des marchands de granit. Elle est devenue quai, église et palais, dans la capitale. Toute cette crête d’écueils est depuis longtemps partie pour Londres.

Ces allongements de rochers dans la mer, avec leurs crevasses et leurs dentelures, sont de vraies petites chaînes de montagnes; on a, en les voyant, l’impression qu’aurait un géant regardant les Cordillères. L’idiome local les appelle Banques. Ces banques ont des figures diverses. Les unes ressemblent à une épine dorsale, chaque rocher est une vertèbre; les autres à une arête de poisson; les autres à un crocodile qui boit.

À l’extrémité de la banque du Bû de la Rue, il y avait une grande roche que les pêcheurs du Houmet appelaient la Corne de la Bête. Cette roche, sorte de Pyramide, ressemblait, quoique moins élevée, au pinacle de Jersey. À marée haute, le flot la séparait de la banque, et la Corne était isolée. À marée basse, on y arrivait par un isthme de roches praticables. La curiosité de ce rocher, c’était, du côté de la mer, une sorte de chaise naturelle creusée par la vague et polie par la pluie. Cette chaise était traître. On y était insensiblement amené par la beauté de la vue; on s’y arrêtait « pour l’amour du prospect”, comme on dit à Guernesey; quelque chose vous retenait; il y a un charme dans les grands horizons. Cette chaise s’offrait; elle faisait une sorte de niche dans la façade à pic du rocher; grimper à cette niche était facile, la mer qui l’avait taillée dans le roc avait étagé au-dessous et commodément disposé une sorte d’escalier de pierres plates; l’abîme a de ces prévenances, défiez-vous de ses politesses; la chaise tentait, on y montait, on s’y asseyait; là on était à l’aise; pour siège le granit usé et arrondi par l’écume, pour accoudoirs deux anfractuosités qui semblaient faites exprès, pour dossier toute la haute muraille verticale du rocher qu’on admirait au-dessus de sa tête sans penser à se dire qu’il serait impossible de l’escalader; rien de plus simple que de s’oublier dans ce fauteuil; on découvrait toute la mer, on voyait au loin les navires arriver ou s’en aller, on pouvait suivre des yeux une voile jusqu’à ce qu’elle s’enfonçât au delà des Casquets sous la rondeur de l’océan, on s’émerveillait, on regardait, on jouissait, on sentait la caresse de la brise et du flot; il existe à Cayenne un vespertilio, sachant ce qu’il fait, qui vous endort dans l’ombre avec un doux et ténébreux battement d’ailes; le vent est cette chauve-souris invisible; quand il n’est pas ravageur, il est endormeur. On contemplait la mer, on écoutait le vent, on se sentait gagner par l’assoupissement de l’extase. Quand les yeux sont remplis d’un excès de beauté et de lumière, c’est une volupté de les fermer. Tout à coup on se réveillait. Il était trop tard. La marée avait grossi peu à peu. L’eau enveloppait le rocher.

On était perdu.

Redoutable blocus que celui-ci: la mer montante.

La marée croît insensiblement d’abord, puis violemment. Arrivée aux rochers, la colère la prend, elle écume. Nager ne réussit pas toujours dans les brisants. D’excellents nageurs s’étaient noyés à la corne du Bû de la Rue.

En de certains lieux, à de certaines heures, regarder la mer est un poison. C’est comme, quelquefois, regarder une femme.

Les très anciens habitants de Guernesey appelaient jadis cette niche façonnée dans le roc par le flot la chaise Gild-Holm-’Ur, ou *kidormur* . Mot celte, dit-on, que ceux qui savent le celte ne comprennent pas et que ceux qui savent le français comprennent. *Qui-dort-meurt*. telle est la traduction paysanne.

On est libre de choisir entre cette traduction, *Qui-dort-meurt*, et la traduction donnée en 1819, je crois, dans l’armoricain , par M. Athénas. Selon cet honorable celtisant, Gild-Holm-’Ur signifierait *halte-de-troupes-d’oiseaux*.

Il existe à Aurigny une autre chaise de ce genre, qu’on nomme la Chaise-au-Moine, si bien confectionnée par le flot, et avec une saillie de roche ajustée si à propos, qu’on pourrait dire que la mer a la complaisance de vous mettre un tabouret sous les pieds.

Au plein de la mer, à la marée haute, on n’apercevait plus la chaise Gild-Holm-’Ur. L’eau la couvrait entièrement.

La chaise Gild-Holm-’Ur était la voisine du Bû de la Rue. Gilliatt la connaissait et s’y asseyait. Il venait souvent là. Méditait-il? Non. Nous venons de le dire, il songeait. Il ne se laissait pas surprendre par la marée.

LIVRE DEUXIEME

MESS LETHIERRY

I

Vie agitée et conscience tranquille

Mess Lethierry, l’homme notable de saint-Sampson, était un matelot terrible. Il avait beaucoup navigué. Il avait été mousse, voilier, gabier, timonier, contre-maître, maître d’équipage, pilote, patron. Il était maintenant armateur. Il n’y avait pas un autre homme comme lui pour savoir la mer. Il était intrépide aux sauvetages. Dans les gros temps il s’en allait le long de la grève, regardant à l’horizon. Qu’est-ce que c’est que ça là-bas? Il y a quelqu’un en peine. C’est un chasse-marée de Weymouth, c’est un coutre d’Aurigny, c’est une bisquine de Courseulle, c’est le yacht d’un lord, c’est un anglais, c’est un français, c’est un pauvre, c’est un riche, c’est le diable, n’importe, il sautait dans une barque, appelait deux ou trois vaillants hommes, s’en passait au besoin, faisait l’équipe à lui tout seul, détachait l’amarre, prenait la rame, poussait en haute mer, montait et descendait et remontait dans les creux du flot, plongeait dans l’ouragan, allait au danger. On le voyait ainsi de loin dans la rafale, debout sur l’embarcation, ruisselant de pluie, mêlé aux éclairs, avec la face d’un lion qui aurait une crinière d’écume. Il passait quelquefois ainsi toute sa journée dans le risque, dans la vague, dans la grêle, dans le vent, accostant les navires en perdition, sauvant les hommes, sauvant les chargements, cherchant dispute à la tempête. Le soir il rentrait chez lui et tricotait une paire de bas.

Il mena cette vie cinquante ans, de dix ans à soixante, tant qu’il fut jeune. À soixante ans il s’aperçut qu’il ne levait plus d’un seul bras l’enclume de la forge du varclin; cette enclume pesait trois cents livres; et tout à coup il fut fait prisonnier par les rhumatismes. Il lui fallut renoncer à la mer. Alors il passa de l’âge héroïque à l’âge patriarcal. Ce ne fut plus qu’un bonhomme.

Il était arrivé en même temps aux rhumatismes et à l’aisance. Ces deux produits du travail se tiennent volontiers compagnie. Au moment où l’on devient riche, on est paralysé. Cela couronne la vie.

On se dit: jouissons maintenant.

Dans les îles comme Guernesey, la population est composée d’hommes qui ont passé leur vie à faire le tour de leur champ et d’hommes qui ont passé leur vie à faire le tour du monde. Ce sont les deux sortes de laboureurs, ceux-ci de la terre, ceux-là de la mer. Mess Lethierry était des derniers. Pourtant il connaissait la terre. Il avait eu une forte vie de travailleur. Il avait voyagé sur le continent. Il avait été quelque temps charpentier de navire à Rochefort, puis à Cette. Nous venons de parler du tour du monde; il avait accompli son tour de France comme compagnon dans la charpenterie. Il avait travaillé aux appareils d’épuisement des salines de Franche-Comté. Cet honnête homme avait eu une vie d’aventurier. En France il avait appris à lire, à penser, à vouloir. Il avait fait de tout, et de tout ce qu’il avait fait il avait extrait la probité. Le fond de sa nature, c’était le matelot. L’eau lui appartenait. Il disait: les poissons sont chez moi. En somme toute son existence, à deux ou trois années près, avait été donnée à l’océan; jetée à l’eau, disait-il. Il avait navigué dans les grandes mers, dans l’Atlantique et dans le Pacifique, mais il préférait la Manche. Il s’écriait avec amour: *C’est celle-là qui est rude!* il y était né et voulait y mourir. Après avoir fait un ou deux tours du monde, sachant à quoi s’en tenir, il était revenu à Guernesey, et n’en avait plus bougé. Ses voyages désormais étaient Granville et Saint-Malo.

Mess Lethierry était guernesiais, c’est-à-dire normand, c’est-à-dire anglais, c’est-à-dire français. Il avait en lui cette patrie quadruple, immergée et comme noyée dans sa grande patrie l’océan. Toute sa vie et partout, il avait gardé ses mœurs de pêcheur normand.

Cela ne l’empêchait point d’ouvrir un bouquin dans l’occasion, de se plaire à un livre, de savoir des noms de philosophes et de poëtes, et de baragouiner un peu toutes les langues.

II

UN GOÛT QU'IL AVAIT

Gilliatt était un sauvage. Mess Lethierry en était un autre.

Ce sauvage avait ses élégances.

Il était difficile pour les mains des femmes. Dans sa jeunesse, presque enfant encore, étant entre matelot et mousse, il avait entendu le bailli De Suffren s'écrier: *Voilà une jolie fille, mais quelles grandes diables de mains rouges!* un mot d'amiral, en toute matière, commande. Au-dessus d'un oracle, il y a une consigne. L'exclamation du bailli De Suffren avait rendu Lethierry délicat, et exigeant en fait de petites mains blanches. Sa main à lui, large spatule couleur acajou, était massue pour la légèreté et tenaille pour la caresse, et cassait un pavé en tombant dessus, fermée.

Il ne s'était jamais marié. Il n'avait pas voulu ou pas trouvé. Cela tenait peut-être à ce que ce matelot prétendait à des mains de duchesse. On ne rencontre guère de ces mains-là dans les pêcheuses de Portbail.

On racontait pourtant qu'à Rochefort en Charente, il avait jadis fait la trouvaille d'une grisette réalisant son idéal. C'était une jolie fille ayant de jolies mains. Elle médisait et égratignait. Il ne fallait point s'attaquer à elle. Griffes au besoin, et d'une propreté exquise, ses ongles étaient sans reproche et sans peur. Ces charmants ongles avaient enchanté Lethierry, puis l'avaient inquiété; et, craignant de ne pas être un jour le maître de sa maîtresse, il s'était décidé à ne point mener par-devant monsieur le maire cette amourette.

Une autre fois, à Aurigny, une fille lui avait plu. Il songeait aux épousailles, quand un habitant lui dit: *Je vous fais mon compliment. Vous aurez là une bonne bouselière*. Il se fit expliquer l'éloge. À Aurigny, on a une mode. On prend de la bouse de vache et on la jette contre les murs. Il y a une manière de la jeter. Quand elle est sèche, elle tombe, et l'on se chauffe avec cela. On appelle ces bouses sèches des *coipiaux*. On n'épouse une fille que si elle est bonne bouselière. Ce talent mit Lethierry en fuite.

Du reste il avait, en matière d'amour, ou d'amourette, une bonne grosse philosophie paysanne, une sagesse de matelot toujours pris, jamais enchaîné, et il se vantait de s'être, dans sa jeunesse, aisément laissé vaincre par le « cotillon”. Ce qu’on nomme aujourd’hui une crinoline, on l’appelait alors un cotillon. Cela signifie plus et moins qu’une femme.

Ces rudes marins de l’archipel normand ont de l’esprit. Presque tous savent lire et lisent. On voit le dimanche de petits mousses de huit ans assis sur un rouleau de cordages un livre à la main. De tout temps ces marins normands ont été sardoniques, et ont, comme on dit aujourd’hui, fait des mots. Ce fut l’un d’eux, le hardi pilote Quéripel, qui jeta à Montgomery, réfugié à Jersey après son malencontreux coup de lance à Henri II, cette apostrophe: *Tête folle a cassé tête vide*. C’est un autre, Touzeau, patron à saint-Brelade, qui a fait ce calembour philosophique, attribué à tort à l’évêque Camus: *Après la mort les papes deviennent papillons et les sires deviennent cirons*.

III

LA VIEILLE LANGUE DE MER

Ces marins des Channel Islands sont de vrais vieux gaulois. Ces îles, qui aujourd'hui s'anglaisent rapidement, sont restées longtemps autochthones. Le paysan de Serk parle la langue de Louis XIV.

Il y a quarante ans, on retrouvait dans la bouche des matelots de Jersey et d'Aurigny l'idiome marin classique. On se fût cru en pleine marine du xviie siècle. Un archéologue spécialiste eût pu venir étudier là l'antique patois de manœuvre et de bataille rugi par Jean Bart dans ce porte-voix qui terrifiait l'amiral Hidde. Le vocabulaire maritime de nos pères, presque entièrement renouvelé aujourd'hui, était encore usité à Guernesey vers 1820. Un navire qui tient bien le vent était « bon boulinier"; un navire qui se range au vent presque de lui-même, malgré ses voiles d'avant et son gouvernail, était un « vaisseau ardent". Entrer en mouvement, c'était « prendre aire"; mettre à la cape, c'était « capeyer"; amarrer le bout d'une manœuvre courante, c'était « faire dormant"; prendre le vent dessus, c'était « faire chapelle"; tenir bon sur le câble, c'était « faire teste"; être en désordre à bord, c'était « être en pantenne"; avoir le vent dans les voiles, c'était « porter-plain". Rien de tout cela ne se dit plus. Aujourd'hui on dit: *louvoyer*, alors on disait: *leauvoyer*; on dit: *naviguer*, on disait: *naviger*; on dit: *virer vent devant*, on disait: *donner vent devant*; on dit: *aller de l'avant*, on disait: *tailler de l'avant*; on dit: *tirez d'accord,* on disait: *halez d'accord*; on dit: *dérapez,* on disait: *déplantez*; on dit: *embraquez*, on disait: *abraquez*; on dit: *taquets*, on disait: *bittons*; on dit: *burins,* on disait: *tappes*; on dit: *balancines*, on disait: *valancines*; on dit: *tribord,* on disait: *stribord*; on dit: *les hommes de quart à bâbord,* on disait: *les basbourdis*. Tourville écrivait à Hocquincourt: *nous avons singlé.* Au lieu de « la rafale" , *le raffal*; au lieu de « bossoir", *boussoir*; au lieu de « drosse", *drousse*; au lieu de « loffer", *faire une olofée*; au lieu de « élonger", *alonger*; au lieu de « forte brise", *survent*; au lieu de « jouail", *jas*; au lieu de « soute", *fosse*; telle était, au commencement de ce siècle, la langue de bord des îles de la Manche. En entendant parler un pilote jersiais, Ango eût été ému. Tandis que partout les voiles *faseyaient*, aux îles de la Manche elles *barbeyaient*. Une saute-de-vent était une « folle-vente". On n'employait plus que là les deux modes gothiques d'amarrage, la valture et la portugaise. On n’entendait plus que là les vieux commandements: *tour-et-choque! - bosse et bitte!* - un matelot de Granville disait déjà *le clan*, qu’un matelot de Saint-Aubin ou de saint-Sampson disait encore *le canal de pouliot*. Ce qui était *bout d’alonge* à Saint-Malo, était à Saint-Hélier *oreille d’âne*. Mess Lethierry, absolument comme le duc De Vivonne, appelait la courbure concave des ponts *la tonture* et le ciseau du calfat *la patarasse*. C’est avec ce bizarre idiome entre les dents que Duquesne battit Ruyter, que Duguay-Trouin battit Wasnaer, et que Tourville en 1681 embossa en plein jour la première galère qui bombarda Alger. Aujourd’hui, c’est une langue morte. L’argot de la mer est actuellement tout autre. Duperré ne comprendrait pas Suffren.

La langue des signaux ne s’est pas moins transformée; et il y a loin des quatre flammes, rouge, blanche, bleue et jaune de La Bourdonnais aux dix-huit pavillons d’aujourd’hui qui, arborés deux par deux, trois par trois, et quatre par quatre, offrent aux besoins de la communication lointaine soixante-dix mille combinaisons, ne restent jamais court, et, pour ainsi dire, prévoient l’imprévu.

IV

ON EST VULNÉRABLE DANS CE QU’ON AIME

Mess Lethierry avait le cœur sur la main; une large main et un grand cœur. Son défaut, c’était cette admirable qualité, la confiance. Il avait une façon à lui de prendre un engagement; c’était solennel; il disait: *J’en donne ma parole d’honneur au bon Dieu.* Cela dit, il allait jusqu’au bout. Il croyait au bon Dieu, pas au reste. Le peu qu’il allait aux églises était politesse. En mer, il était superstitieux.

Pourtant jamais un gros temps ne l’avait fait reculer; cela tenait à ce qu’il était peu accessible à la contradiction. Il ne la tolérait pas plus de l’océan que d’un autre. Il entendait être obéi; tant pis pour la mer si elle résistait; il fallait qu’elle en prît son parti. Mess Lethierry ne cédait point. Une vague qui se cabre, pas plus qu’un voisin qui dispute, ne réussissait à l’arrêter. Ce qu’il disait était dit, ce qu’il projetait était fait. Il ne se courbait ni devant une objection, ni devant une tempête. *Non*, pour lui, n’existait pas; ni dans la bouche d’un homme, ni dans le grondement d’un nuage. Il passait outre. Il ne permettait point qu’on le refusât. De là son entêtement dans la vie et son intrépidité sur l’océan.

Il assaisonnait volontiers lui-même sa soupe au poisson, sachant la dose de poivre et de sel et les herbes qu’il fallait, et se régalait autant de la faire que de la manger. Un être qu’un suroît transfigure et qu’une redingote abrutit, qui ressemble, les cheveux au vent, à Jean Bart, et, en chapeau rond, à Jocrisse, gauche à la ville, étrange et redoutable à la mer, un dos de portefaix, point de jurons, très rarement de la colère, un petit accent très doux qui devient tonnerre dans un porte-voix, un paysan qui a lu l’Encyclopédie, un guernesiais qui a vu la révolution, un ignorant très savant, aucune bigoterie, mais toutes sortes de visions, plus de foi à la dame blanche qu’à la sainte Vierge, la force de Polyphème, la volonté de Christophe Colomb, la logique de la girouette, quelque chose d’un taureau et quelque chose d’un enfant, un nez presque camard, des joues puissantes, une bouche qui a toutes ses dents, un froncement partout sur la figure, une face qui semble avoir été tripotée par la vague et sur laquelle la rose des vents a tourné pendant quarante ans, un air d’orage sur le front, une carnation de roche en pleine mer; et maintenant mettez dans ce visage dur un regard bon, vous aurez mess Lethierry.

Mess Lethierry avait deux amours: Durande et Déruchette.

LIVRE TROISIEME

DURANDE ET DERUCHETTE

I

BABIL ET FUMÉE

Le corps humain pourrait bien n’être qu’une apparence. Il cache notre réalité. Il s’épaissit sur notre lumière ou sur notre ombre. La réalité c’est l’âme. À parler absolument, notre visage est un masque. Le vrai homme, c’est ce qui est sous l’homme. Si l’on apercevait cet homme-là, tapi ou abrité derrière cette illusion qu’on nomme la chair, on aurait plus d’une surprise. L’erreur commune, c’est de prendre l’être extérieur pour l’être réel. Telle fille, par exemple, si on la voyait ce qu’elle est, apparaîtrait oiseau.

Un oiseau qui a la forme d’une fille, quoi de plus exquis! Figurez-vous que vous l’avez chez vous. Ce sera Déruchette. Le délicieux être! On serait tenté de lui dire: Bonjour, mademoiselle la bergeronnette. On ne voit pas les ailes, mais on entend le gazouillement. Par instants, elle chante. Par le babil, c’est au-dessous de l’homme; par le chant, c’est au-dessus. Il y a le mystère dans ce chant; une vierge est une enveloppe d’ange. Quand la femme se fait, l’ange s’en va; mais plus tard, il revient, apportant une petite âme à la mère. En attendant la vie, celle qui sera mère un jour est très longtemps un enfant, la petite fille persiste dans la jeune fille, et c’est une fauvette. On pense en la voyant: qu’elle est aimable de ne pas s’envoler! Le doux être familier prend ses aises dans la maison, de branche en branche, c’est-à-dire de chambre en chambre, entre, sort, s’approche, s’éloigne, lisse ses plumes ou peigne ses cheveux, fait toutes sortes de petits bruits délicats, murmure on ne sait quoi d’ineffable à vos oreilles. Il questionne, on lui répond; on l’interroge, il gazouille. On jase avec lui. Jaser, cela délasse de parler. Cet être a du ciel en lui. C’est une pensée bleue mêlée à votre pensée noire. Vous lui savez gré d’être si léger, si fuyant, si échappant, si peu saisissable, et d’avoir la bonté de ne pas être invisible, lui qui pourrait, ce semble, être impalpable. Ici-bas, le joli, c’est le nécessaire. Il y a sur la terre peu de fonctions plus importantes que celle-ci: être charmant. La forêt serait au désespoir sans le colibri. Dégager de la joie, rayonner du bonheur, avoir parmi les choses sombres une exsudation de lumière, être la dorure du destin, être l’harmonie, être la grâce, être la gentillesse, c’est vous rendre service. La beauté me fait du bien en étant belle. Telle créature a cette féerie d’être pour tout ce qui l’entoure un enchantement; quelquefois elle n’en sait rien elle-même, ce n’en est que plus souverain; sa présence éclaire, son approche réchauffe; elle passe, on est content, elle s’arrête, on est heureux; la regarder, c’est vivre; elle est de l’aurore ayant la figure humaine; elle ne fait pas autre chose que d’être là, cela suffit, elle édénise la maison, il lui sort par tous les pores un paradis; cette extase, elle la distribue à tous sans se donner d’autre peine que de respirer à côté d’eux. Avoir un sourire qui, on ne sait comment, diminue le poids de la chaîne énorme traînée en commun par tous les vivants, que voulez-vous que je vous dise, c’est divin. Ce sourire, Déruchette l’avait. Disons plus, Déruchette était ce sourire. Il y a quelque chose qui nous ressemble plus que notre visage, c’est notre physionomie; il y a quelque chose qui nous ressemble plus que notre physionomie, c’est notre sourire. Déruchette souriant, c’était Déruchette.

C’est un sang particulièrement attrayant que celui de Jersey et de Guernesey. Les femmes, les filles surtout, sont d’une beauté fleurie et candide. C’est la blancheur saxonne et la fraîcheur normande combinées. Des joues roses et des regards bleus. Il manque à ces regards l’étoile. L’éducation anglaise les amortit. Ces yeux limpides seront irrésistibles le jour où la profondeur parisienne y apparaîtra. Paris, heureusement, n’a pas encore fait son entrée dans les anglaises. Déruchette n’était pas une parisienne, mais n’était pas non plus une guernesiaise. Elle était née à Saint-Pierre-Port, mais mess Lethierry l’avait élevée. Il l’avait élevée pour être mignonne; elle l’était.

Déruchette avait le regard indolent, et agressif sans le savoir. Elle ne connaissait peut-être pas le sens du mot amour, et elle rendait volontiers les gens amoureux d’elle. Mais sans mauvaise intention. Elle ne songeait à aucun mariage. Le vieux gentilhomme émigré qui avait pris racine à Saint-Sampson disait: *Cette petite fait de la flirtation à poudre.*

Déruchette avait les plus jolies petites mains du monde et des pieds assortis aux mains, *quatre pattes de mouche*, disait mess Lethierry. Elle avait dans toute sa personne la bonté et la douceur, pour famille et pour richesse mess Lethierry, son oncle, pour travail de se laisser vivre, pour talent quelques chansons, pour science la beauté, pour esprit l’innocence, pour cœur l’ignorance; elle avait la gracieuse paresse créole, mêlée d’étourderie et de vivacité, la gaîté taquine de l’enfance avec une pente à la mélancolie, des toilettes un peu insulaires, élégantes, mais incorrectes, des chapeaux de fleurs toute l’année, le front naïf, le cou souple et tentant, les cheveux châtains, la peau blanche avec quelques taches de rousseur l’été, la bouche grande et saine, et sur cette bouche l’adorable et dangereuse clarté du sourire. C’était là Déruchette.

Quelquefois, le soir, après le soleil couché, au moment où la nuit se mêle à la mer, à l’heure où le crépuscule donne une sorte d’épouvante aux vagues, on voyait entrer dans le goulet de Saint-Sampson, sur le soulèvement sinistre des flots, on ne sait quelle masse informe, une silhouette monstrueuse qui sifflait et crachait, une chose horrible qui râlait comme une bête et qui fumait comme un volcan, une espèce d’hydre bavant dans l’écume et traînant un brouillard, et se ruant vers la ville avec un effrayant battement de nageoires et une gueule d’où sortait de la flamme. C’était Durande.

II

HISTOIRE ÉTERNELLE DE L'UTOPIE

C'était une prodigieuse nouveauté qu'un bateau à vapeur dans les eaux de la Manche en 182... toute la côte normande en fut longtemps effarée. Aujourd'hui dix ou douze steamers se croisant en sens inverse sur un horizon de mer ne font lever les yeux à personne; tout au plus occupent-ils un moment le connaisseur spécial qui distingue à la couleur de leur fumée que celui-ci brûle du charbon de Wales et celui-là du charbon de Newcastle. Ils passent, c'est bien. Wellcome, s'ils arrivent. Bon voyage, s'ils partent.

On était moins calme à l'endroit de ces inventions-là dans le premier quart de ce siècle, et ces mécaniques et leur fumée étaient particulièrement mal vues chez les insulaires de la Manche. Dans cet archipel puritain, où la reine d'Angleterre a été blâmée de violer la bible en accouchant par le chloroforme, le bateau à vapeur eut pour premier succès d'être baptisé le *Bateau-Diable* (Devil-Boat). à ces bons pêcheurs d'alors, jadis catholiques, désormais calvinistes, toujours bigots, cela sembla être de l'enfer qui flottait. Un prédicateur local traita cette question: *A-t-on le droit de faire travailler ensemble l'eau et le feu que Dieu a séparés?* Cette bête de feu et de fer ne ressemblait-elle pas à Léviathan? N'était-ce pas refaire, dans la mesure humaine, le chaos? Ce n'est pas la première fois que l'ascension du progrès est qualifiée retour au chaos. Idée folle, erreur grossière, absurdité*; tel* avait été le verdict de l'académie des sciences consultée, au commencement de ce siècle, sur le bateau à vapeur par Napoléon; les pêcheurs de Saint-Sampson sont excusables de n'être, en matière scientifique, qu'au niveau des géomètres de Paris, et, en matière religieuse, une petite île comme Guernesey n'est pas forcée d'avoir plus de lumières qu'un grand continent comme l'Amérique. En 1807, quand le premier bateau de Fulton, patronné par Livingstone, pourvu de la machine de Watt envoyée d'Angleterre, et monté, outre l'équipage, par deux français seulement, André Michaux et un autre, quand ce premier bateau à vapeur fit son premier voyage de New-York à Albany, le hasard fit que ce fut le 17 août. Sur ce, le méthodisme prit la parole, et dans toutes les chapelles les prédicateurs maudirent cette machine, déclarant que ce nombre *dix-sept* était le total des dix antennes et des sept têtes de la bête de l'Apocalypse. En

Amérique on invoquait contre le navire à vapeur la bête de l'Apocalypse et en Europe la bête de la Genèse. Là était toute la différence.

Les savants avaient rejeté le bateau à vapeur comme impossible; les prêtres à leur tour le rejetaient comme impie. La science avait condamné, la religion damnait. Fulton était une variété de Lucifer. Les gens simples des côtes et des campagnes adhéraient à la réprobation par le malaise que leur donnait cette nouveauté. En présence du bateau à vapeur, le point de vue religieux était ceci: — l'eau et le feu sont un divorce. Ce divorce est ordonné de Dieu. On ne doit pas désunir ce que Dieu a uni; on ne doit pas unir ce qu'il a désuni. — Le point de vue paysan était ceci: ça me fait peur.

Pour oser à cette époque lointaine une telle entreprise, un bateau à vapeur allant de Guernesey à Saint-Malo, il ne fallait rien moins que mess Lethierry. Lui seul pouvait la concevoir comme libre penseur, et la réaliser comme hardi marin. Son côté français eut l'idée, son côté anglais l'exécuta.

À quelle occasion? disons-le.

III

RANTAINE

Quarante ans environ avant l’époque où se passent les faits que nous racontons ici, il y avait dans la banlieue de Paris, près du mur de ronde, entre la fosse-aux-loups et la tombe-issoire, un logis suspect. C’était une masure isolée, coupe-gorge au besoin. Là demeurait avec sa femme et son enfant une espèce de bourgeois bandit, ancien clerc de procureur au Châtelet, devenu voleur tout net. Il figura plus tard en cour d’assises. Cette famille s’appelait les Rantaine. On voyait dans la masure sur une commode d’acajou deux tasses en porcelaine fleurie; on lisait en lettres dorées sur l’une: *souvenir d’amitié*, et sur l’autre: *don d’estime*. L’enfant était dans le bouge pêle-mêle avec le crime. Le père et la mère ayant été de la demi-bourgeoisie, l’enfant apprenait à lire; on l’élevait. La mère, pâle, presque en guenilles, donnait machinalement « de l’éducation” à son petit, le faisait épeler, et s’interrompait pour aider son mari à quelque guet-apens, ou pour se prostituer à un passant. Pendant ce temps-là, la croix de Jésus, ouverte à l’endroit où on l’avait quittée, restait sur la table, et l’enfant auprès, rêveur.

Le père et la mère, saisis dans quelque flagrant délit, disparurent dans la nuit pénale. L’enfant disparut aussi.

Lethierry dans ses courses rencontra un aventurier comme lui, le tira d’on ne sait quel mauvais pas, lui rendit service, lui en fut reconnaissant, le prit en gré, le ramassa, l’amena à Guernesey, le trouva intelligent au cabotage, et en fit son associé. C’était le petit Rantaine devenu grand.

Rantaine, comme Lethierry, avait une nuque robuste, une large et puissante marge à porter des fardeaux entre les deux épaules, et des reins d’Hercule Farnèse. Lethierry et lui, c’était la même allure et la même encolure; Rantaine était de plus haute taille. Qui les voyait de dos se promener côte à côte sur le port, disait: voilà les deux frères. De face, c’était autre chose. Tout ce qui était ouvert chez Lethierry était fermé chez Rantaine. Rantaine était circonspect. Rantaine était maître d’armes, jouait de l’harmonica, mouchait une chandelle d’une balle à vingt pas, avait un coup de poing magnifique, récitait des vers de la Henriade et devinait les songes. Il savait par cœur les tombeaux de saint-Denis, par Treneuil. Il disait avoir été lié avec le sultan de Calicut *que les portugais appellent le* *zamorin*. Si l’on eût pu feuilleter le petit agenda qu’il avait sur lui, on y eût trouvé, entre autres notes, des mentions du genre de celle-ci: « À Lyon, dans une des fissures du mur d’un des cachots de saint-Joseph, il y a une lime cachée”. Il parlait avec une sage lenteur. Il se disait fils d’un chevalier de Saint-Louis. Son linge était dépareillé et marqué à des lettres différentes. Personne n’était plus chatouilleux que lui sur le point d’honneur; il se battait et tuait. Il avait dans le regard quelque chose d’une mère d’actrice.

La force servant d’enveloppe à la ruse, c’était là Rantaine.

La beauté de son coup de poing, appliquée dans une foire sur une *cabeza de moro*, avait gagné jadis le cœur de Lethierry.

On ignorait pleinement à Guernesey ses aventures. Elles étaient bigarrées. Si les destinées ont un vestiaire, la destinée de Rantaine devait être vêtue en arlequin. Il avait vu le monde et fait la vie. C’était un circumnavigateur. Ses métiers étaient une gamme. Il avait été cuisinier à Madagascar, éleveur d’oiseaux à Sumatra, général à Honolulu, journaliste religieux aux îles Gallapagos, poëte à Oomrawuttee, franc-maçon à Haïti. Il avait prononcé en cette dernière qualité au Grand-Goâve une oraison funèbre dont les journaux locaux ont conservé ce fragment: “ ... Adieu donc, belle âme! Dans la voûte azurée des cieux où tu prends maintenant ton vol, tu rencontreras sans doute le bon abbé Léandre Crameau du Petit-Goâve. Dis-lui que, grâce à dix années d’efforts glorieux, tu as terminé l’église de l’Anse-à-Veau! Adieu, génie transcendant, maç… modèle!” Son masque de franc-maçon ne l’empêchait pas, comme on voit, de porter le faux nez catholique. Le premier lui conciliait les hommes de progrès et le second les hommes d’ordre. Il se déclarait blanc pur sang, il haïssait les noirs; pourtant il eût certainement admiré Soulouque. À Bordeaux, en 1815, il avait été verdet. À cette époque, la fumée de son royalisme lui sortait du front sous la forme d’un immense plumet blanc. Il avait passé sa vie à faire des éclipses, paraissant, disparaissant, reparaissant. C’était un coquin à feu tournant. Il savait du turc; au lieu de *guillotiné* il disait *néboïssé*. Il avait été esclave en Tripoli chez un thaleb, et il y avait appris le turc à coups de bâton; sa fonction avait été d’aller le soir aux portes des mosquées et d’y lire à haute voix devant les fidèles le koran écrit sur des planchettes de bois ou sur des omoplates de chameau. Il était probablement renégat.

Il était capable de tout, et de pire.

Il éclatait de rire et fronçait le sourcil en même temps. Il disait: *En politique, je n’estime que les gens inaccessibles aux influences*. Il disait: *Je* *suis pour les mœurs*. Il était plutôt gai et cordial qu’autre chose. La forme de sa bouche démentait le sens de ses paroles. Ses narines eussent pu passer pour des naseaux. Il avait au coin de l’œil un carrefour de rides où toutes sortes de pensées obscures se donnaient rendez-vous. Le secret de sa physionomie ne pouvait être déchiffré que là. Sa patte d’oie était une serre de vautour. Son crâne était bas au sommet et large aux tempes. Son oreille, difforme et encombrée de broussailles, semblait dire: ne parlez pas à la bête qui est dans cet antre.

Un beau jour, à Guernesey, on ne sut plus où était Rantaine.

L’associé de Lethierry avait « filé”, laissant vide la caisse de l’association.

Dans cette caisse il y avait de l’argent à Rantaine sans doute, mais il y avait aussi cinquante mille francs à Lethierry.

Lethierry, dans son métier de caboteur et de charpentier de navires, avait, en quarante ans d’industrie et de probité, gagné cent mille francs. Rantaine lui en emporta la moitié.

Lethierry, à moitié ruiné, ne fléchit pas et songea immédiatement à se relever. On ruine la fortune des gens de cœur, non leur courage. On commençait alors à parler du bateau à vapeur. L’idée vint à Lethierry d’essayer la machine Fulton, si contestée, et de relier par un bateau à feu l’archipel normand à la France. Il joua son vatout sur cette idée. Il y consacra son reste. Six mois après la fuite de Rantaine, on vit sortir du port stupéfait de Saint-Sampson un navire à fumée, faisant l’effet d’un incendie en mer, le premier steamer qui ait navigué dans la Manche.

Ce bateau, que la haine et le dédain de tous gratifièrent immédiatement du sobriquet « la galiote à Lethierry”, s’annonça comme devant faire le service régulier de Guernesey à Saint-Malo.

IV

SUITE DE L’HISTOIRE DE L’UTOPIE

La chose, on le comprend de reste, prit d’abord fort mal. Tous les propriétaires de coutres faisant le voyage de l’île guernesiaise à la côte française jetèrent les hauts cris. Ils dénoncèrent cet attentat à l’écriture sainte et à leur monopole. Quelques chapelles fulminèrent. Un révérend, nommé Elihu, qualifia le bateau à vapeur « un libertinage”. Le navire à voiles fut déclaré orthodoxe. On vit distinctement les cornes du diable sur la tête des bœufs que le bateau à vapeur apportait et débarquait. Cette protestation dura un temps raisonnable. Cependant peu à peu on finit par s’apercevoir que ces bœufs arrivaient moins fatigués, et se vendaient mieux, la viande étant meilleure; que les risques de mer étaient moindres pour les hommes aussi; que ce passage, moins coûteux, était plus sûr et plus court; qu’on partait à heure fixe et qu’on arrivait à heure fixe; que le poisson, voyageant plus vite, était plus frais, et qu’on pouvait désormais déverser sur les marchés français l’excédent des grandes pêches, si fréquentes à Guernesey; que le beurre des admirables vaches de Guernesey faisait plus rapidement le trajet dans le Devil-Boat que dans les sloops à voile, et ne perdait plus rien de sa qualité, de sorte que Dinan en demandait, et que Saint-Brieuc en demandait, et que Rennes en demandait; qu’enfin il y avait, grâce à ce qu’on appelait *la galiote à Lethierry*, sécurité de voyage, régularité de communication, va-et-vient facile et prompt, agrandissement de circulation, multiplication de débouchés, extension de commerce, et qu’en somme il fallait prendre son parti de ce Devil-Boat qui violait la bible et enrichissait l’île. Quelques esprits forts se hasardèrent à approuver dans une certaine mesure. Sieur Landoys, le greffier, accorda son estime à ce bateau. Du reste, ce fut impartialité de sa part, car il n’aimait pas Lethierry. D’abord Lethierry était mess et Landoys n’était que sieur. Ensuite, quoique greffier à Saint-Pierre-Port, Landoys était paroissien de Saint-Sampson; or ils n’étaient dans la paroisse que deux hommes, Lethierry et lui, n’ayant point de préjugés; c’était bien le moins que l’un détestât l’autre. Être du même bord, cela éloigne.

Sieur Landoys néanmoins eut l’honnêteté d’approuver le bateau à vapeur. D’autres se joignirent à sieur Landoys. Insensiblement, le fait monta; les faits sont une marée, et, avec le temps, avec le succès continu et croissant, avec l'évidence du service rendu, l'augmentation du bien-être de tous étant constatée, il vint un jour où, quelques sages exceptés, tout le monde admira « la galiote à Lethierry”.

On l'admirerait moins aujourd'hui. Ce steamer d'il y a quarante ans ferait sourire nos constructeurs actuels. Cette merveille était difforme; ce prodige était infirme.

De nos grands steamers transatlantiques d'à présent au bateau à roues et à feu que Denis Papin fit manœuvrer sur la fulde en 1707, il n'y a pas moins de distance que du vaisseau à trois ponts le *Montebello*, long de deux cents pieds, large de cinquante, ayant une grande vergue de cent quinze pieds, déplaçant un poids de trois mille tonneaux, portant onze cents hommes, cent vingt canons, dix mille boulets et cent soixante paquets de mitraille, vomissant à chaque bordée, quand il combat, trois mille trois cents livres de fer, et déployant au vent, quand il marche, cinq mille six cents mètres carrés de toile, au dromon danois du iie siècle, trouvé plein de haches de pierre, d'arcs et de massues, dans les boues marines de Wester-Satrup, et déposé à l'hôtel de ville de Flensbourg.

Cent ans juste d'intervalle, 1707-1807, séparent le premier bateau de Papin du premier bateau de Fulton. La « galiote à Lethierry” était, à coup sûr, un progrès sur ces deux ébauches, mais était une ébauche elle-même. Cela ne l'empêchait pas d'être un chef-d'œuvre. Tout embryon de la science offre ce double aspect: monstre comme fœtus; merveille comme germe.

V

LE BATEAU-DIABLE

La « galiote à Lethierry” n’était pas mâtée selon le point vélique, et ce n’était pas là son défaut, car c’est une des lois de la construction navale; d’ailleurs le navire ayant pour propulseur le feu, la voilure était l’accessoire. Ajoutons qu’un navire à roues est presque insensible à la voilure qu’on lui met. La galiote était trop courte, trop ronde, trop ramassée; elle avait trop de joue et trop de hanche; la hardiesse n’avait pas été jusqu’à la faire légère; la galiote avait quelques-uns des inconvénients et quelques-unes des qualités de la panse. Elle tanguait peu, mais roulait beaucoup. Les tambours étaient trop hauts. Elle avait trop de bau pour sa longueur. La machine, massive, l’encombrait, et, pour rendre le navire capable d’une forte cargaison, on avait dû hausser démesurément la muraille, ce qui donnait à la galiote à peu près le défaut des vaisseaux de soixante-quatorze, qui sont un gabarit bâtard, et qu’il faut raser pour les rendre battants et marins. Étant courte, elle eût dû virer vite, les temps employés à une évolution étant comme les longueurs des navires; mais sa pesanteur lui ôtait l’avantage que lui donnait sa brièveté. Son maître-couple était trop large, ce qui la ralentissait, la résistance de l’eau étant proportionnelle à la plus grande section immergée et au carré de la vitesse du navire. L’avant était vertical, ce qui ne serait pas une faute aujourd’hui, mais en ce temps-là l’usage invariable était de l’incliner de quarante-cinq degrés. Toutes les courbes de la coque étaient bien raccordées, mais pas assez longues pour l’obliquité et surtout pour le parallélisme avec le prisme d’eau déplacé, lequel ne doit jamais être refoulé que latéralement. Dans les gros temps, elle tirait trop d’eau, tantôt par l’avant, tantôt par l’arrière, ce qui indiquait un vice dans le centre de gravité. La charge n’étant pas où elle devait être, à cause du poids de la machine, le centre de gravité passait souvent à l’arrière du grand mât, et alors il fallait s’en tenir à la vapeur, et se défier de la grande voile, car l’effort de la grande voile dans ce cas-là faisait arriver le vaisseau au lieu de le soutenir au vent. La ressource était, quand on était au plus près du vent, de larguer en bande la grande écoute; le vent, de la sorte, était fixé sur l’avant par l’amure, et la grande voile ne faisait plus l’effet d’une voile de poupe. Cette manœuvre était difficile. Le gouvernail était l’antique gouvernail, non à roue comme aujourd’hui, mais à barre, tournant sur ses gonds scellés dans l’étambot et mû par une solive horizontale passant par-dessus la barre d’arcasse. Deux canots, espèces de youyous, étaient suspendus aux pistolets. Le navire avait quatre ancres, la grosse ancre, la seconde ancre qui est l’ancre travailleuse, *working-anchor*, et deux ancres d’affourche. Ces quatre ancres, mouillées avec des chaînes, étaient manœuvrées, selon les occasions, par le grand cabestan de poupe et le petit cabestan de proue. À cette époque, le guindoir à pompe n’avait pas encore remplacé l’effort intermittent de la barre d’anspect. N’ayant que deux ancres d’affourche, l’une à tribord, l’autre à bâbord, le navire ne pouvait affourcher en patte d’oie, ce qui le désarmait un peu devant certains vents. Pourtant il pouvait en ce cas s’aider de la seconde ancre. Les bouées étaient normales, et construites de manière à porter le poids de l’orin des ancres, tout en restant à flot. La chaloupe avait la dimension utile. C’était le véritable en-cas du bâtiment; elle était assez forte pour lever la maîtresse ancre. Une nouveauté de ce navire, c’est qu’il était en partie gréé avec des chaînes, ce qui du reste n’ôtait rien de leur mobilité aux manœuvres courantes et de leur tension aux manœuvres dormantes. La mâture, quoique secondaire, n’avait aucune incorrection; le capelage bien serré, bien dégagé, paraissait peu. Les membrures étaient solides, mais grossières, la vapeur n’exigeant point la même délicatesse de bois que la voile. Ce navire marchait avec une vitesse de deux lieues à l’heure. En panne il faisait bien son abatée. Telle qu’elle était, « la galiote à Lethierry” tenait bien la mer, mais elle manquait de pointe pour diviser le liquide, et l’on ne pouvait dire qu’elle eût de belles façons. On sentait que dans un danger, écueil ou trombe, elle serait peu maniable. Elle avait le craquement d’une chose informe. Elle faisait, en roulant sur la vague, un bruit de semelle neuve.

Ce navire était surtout un récipient, et, comme tout bâtiment plutôt armé en marchandise qu’en guerre, il était exclusivement disposé pour l’arrimage. Il admettait peu de passagers. Le transport du bétail rendait l’arrimage difficile et très particulier. On arrimait alors les bœufs dans la cale, ce qui était une complication. Aujourd’hui on les arrime sur l’avant-pont. Les tambours du Devil-Boat Lethierry étaient peints en blanc, la coque, jusqu’à la ligne de flottaison, en couleur de feu, et tout le reste du navire, selon la mode assez laide de ce siècle, en noir.

Vide, il calait sept pieds, et, chargé, quatorze.

Quant à la machine, elle était puissante. La force était d’un cheval pour trois tonneaux, ce qui est presque une force de remorqueur. Les roues étaient bien placées, un peu en avant du centre de gravité du navire. La machine avait une pression maximum de deux atmosphères. Elle usait beaucoup de charbon, quoiqu’elle fût à condensation et à détente. Elle n’avait pas de volant à cause de l’instabilité du point d’appui, et elle y remédiait, comme on le fait encore aujourd’hui, par un double appareil faisant alterner deux manivelles fixées aux extrémités de l’arbre de rotation et disposées de manière à ce que l’une fût toujours à son point fort quand l’autre était à son point mort. Toute la machine reposait sur une seule plaque de fonte; de sorte que, même dans un cas de grave avarie, aucun coup de mer ne lui ôtait l’équilibre et que la coque déformée ne pouvait déformer la machine. Pour rendre la machine plus solide encore, on avait placé la bielle principale près du cylindre, ce qui transportait du milieu à l’extrémité le centre d’oscillation du balancier. Depuis on a inventé les cylindres oscillants qui permettent de supprimer les bielles; mais, à cette époque, la bielle près du cylindre semblait le dernier mot de la machinerie. La chaudière était coupée de cloisons et pourvue de sa pompe de saumure. Les roues étaient très grandes, ce qui diminuait la perte de force, et la cheminée était très haute, ce qui augmentait le tirage du foyer; mais la grandeur des roues donnait prise au flot et la hauteur de la cheminée donnait prise au vent. Aubes de bois, crochets de fer, moyeux de fonte, telles étaient les roues, bien construites et, chose qui étonne, pouvant se démonter. Il y avait toujours trois aubes immergées. La vitesse du centre des aubes ne surpassait que d’un sixième la vitesse du navire; c’était là le défaut de ces roues. En outre, le manneton des manivelles était trop long, et le tiroir distribuait la vapeur dans le cylindre avec trop de frottement. Dans ces temps-là, cette machine semblait et était admirable.

Cette machine avait été forgée en France à l’usine de fer de Bercy. Mess Lethierry l’avait un peu imaginée; le mécanicien qui l’avait construite sur son épure était mort; de sorte que cette machine était unique, et impossible à remplacer. Le dessinateur restait, mais le constructeur manquait.

La machine avait coûté quarante mille francs.

Lethierry avait construit lui-même la galiote sous la grande cale couverte qui est à côté de la première tour entre Saint-Pierre-Port et Saint-Sampson. Il avait été à Brême acheter le bois. Il avait épuisé dans cette construction tout son savoir-faire de charpentier de marine, et l’on reconnaissait son talent au bordage dont les coutures étaient étroites et égales, et recouvertes de sarangousti, mastic de l’Inde meilleur que le brai. Le doublage était bien mailleté. Lethierry avait enduit la carène de gallegalle. Il avait, pour remédier à la rondeur de la coque, ajusté un boute-hors au beaupré, ce qui lui permettait d’ajouter à la civadière une fausse civadière. Le jour du lancement, il avait dit: me voilà à flot! La galiote réussit en effet, on l’a vu.

Par hasard ou exprès, elle avait été lancée un 14 juillet. Ce jour-là, Lethierry, debout sur le pont entre les deux tambours, regarda fixement la mer et lui cria: — C’est ton tour! Les parisiens ont pris la Bastille; maintenant nous te prenons, toi!

La galiote à Lethierry faisait une fois par semaine le voyage de Guernesey à Saint-Malo. Elle partait le mardi matin et revenait le vendredi soir, veille du marché qui est le samedi. Elle était d’un plus fort échantillon de bois que les plus grands sloops caboteurs de tout l’archipel, et, sa capacité étant en raison de sa dimension, un seul de ses voyages valait, pour l’apport et pour le rendement, quatre voyages d’un coutre ordinaire. De là de forts bénéfices. La réputation d’un navire dépend de son arrimage, et Lethierry était un admirable arrimeur. Quand il ne put plus travailler en mer lui-même, il dressa un matelot pour le remplacer comme arrimeur. Au bout de deux années, le bateau à vapeur

rapportait net sept cent cinquante livres sterling par an, c’est-à-dire dix-huit mille francs. La livre sterling de Guernesey vaut vingt-quatre francs, celle d’Angleterre vingt-cinq et celle de Jersey vingt-six. Ces chinoiseries sont moins chinoises qu’elles n’en ont l’air; les banques y trouvent leur compte.

VI

ENTRÉE DE LETHIERRY DANS LA GLOIRE

«La Galiote” prospérait. Mess Lethierry voyait s’approcher le moment où il deviendrait monsieur. à Guernesey on n’est pas de plain-pied monsieur. Entre l’homme et le monsieur il y a toute une échelle à gravir; d’abord, premier échelon, le nom tout sec, Pierre, je suppose; puis, deuxième échelon, vésin (voisin) Pierre; puis, troisième échelon, père Pierre; puis, quatrième échelon, sieur Pierre; puis, cinquième échelon, mess Pierre; puis, sommet, monsieur Pierre.

Cette échelle, qui sort de terre, se continue dans le bleu. Toute la hiérarchique Angleterre y entre et s’y étage. En voici les échelons, de plus en plus lumineux: au-dessus du monsieur *gentleman*, il y a l’esq. (écuyer), au-dessus de l’esq., le chevalier (*sir* viager), puis, en s’élevant toujours, le baronet (*sir* héréditaire), puis le lord, *laird* en écosse, puis le baron, puis le vicomte, puis le comte (*earl* en Angleterre, *jarl* en Norvège), puis le marquis, puis le duc, puis le pair d’Angleterre, puis le prince du sang royal, puis le roi. Cette échelle monte du peuple à la bourgeoisie, de la bourgeoisie au baronetage, du baronetage à la pairie, de la pairie à la royauté.

Grâce à son coup de tête réussi, grâce à la vapeur, grâce à sa machine, grâce au Bateau-Diable, mess Lethierry était devenu quelqu’un. Pour construire « la galiote”, il avait dû emprunter; il s’était endetté à Brême, il s’était endetté à Saint-Malo; mais chaque année il amortissait son passif.

Il avait de plus acheté à crédit, à l’entrée même du port de s Saint-Sampson, une jolie maison de pierre, toute neuve, entre mer et jardin, sur l’encoignure de laquelle on lisait ce nom: *les Bravées*. le logis les Bravées, dont la devanture faisait partie de la muraille même du port, était remarquable par une double rangée de fenêtres, au nord, du côté d’un enclos plein de fleurs, au sud, du côté de l’océan; de sorte que cette maison avait deux façades, l’une sur les tempêtes, l’autre sur les roses.

Ces façades semblaient faites pour les deux habitants, mess Lethierry et miss Déruchette.

La maison des Bravées était populaire à Saint-Sampson.

Car mess Lethierry avait fini par être populaire. Cette popularité lui venait un peu de sa bonté, de son dévouement et de son courage, un peu de la quantité d'hommes qu'il avait sauvés, beaucoup de son succès, et aussi de ce qu'il avait donné au port de Saint-Sampson le privilège des départs et des arrivées du bateau à vapeur. Voyant que décidément le Devil-Boat était une bonne affaire, Saint-Pierre, la capitale, l'avait réclamé pour son port, mais Lethierry avait tenu bon pour Saint-Sampson. C'était sa ville natale. — C'est là que j'ai été lancé à la mer, disait-il. — De là une vive popularité locale. Sa qualité de propriétaire payant taxe faisait de lui ce qu'on appelle à Guernesey *un habitant*. On l'avait nommé douzenier. Ce pauvre matelot avait franchi cinq échelons sur six de l'ordre social guernesiais; il était mess; il touchait au monsieur; et qui sait s'il n'arriverait pas même à franchir le monsieur? Qui sait si un jour on ne lirait pas dans l'almanach de Guernesey au chapitre *gentry and nobility* cette inscription inouïe et superbe: *Lethierry esq.*?

mais mess Lethierry dédaignait ou plutôt ignorait le côté par lequel les choses sont vanité. Il se sentait utile, c'était là sa joie. Être populaire le touchait moins qu'être nécessaire. Il n'avait, nous l'avons dit, que deux amours et, par conséquent, que deux ambitions, Durande et Déruchette.

Quoi qu'il en fût, il avait mis à la loterie de la mer, et il y avait gagné le quine.

Le quine, c'était la Durande naviguant.

VII

LE MÊME PARRAIN ET LA MÊME PATRONNE

Après avoir créé ce bateau à vapeur, Lethierry l’avait baptisé. Il l’avait nommé *Durande*. La Durande, — nous ne l’appellerons plus autrement. On nous permettra également, quel que soit l’usage typographique, de ne point souligner ce nom *Durande*, nous conformant en cela à la pensée de mess Lethierry pour qui la Durande était presque une personne.

Durande et Déruchette, c’est le même nom. Déruchette est le diminutif. Ce diminutif est fort usité dans l’ouest de la France.

Les saints dans les campagnes portent souvent leur nom avec tous ses diminutifs et tous ses augmentatifs. On croirait à plusieurs personnes là où il n’y en a qu’une. Ces identités de patrons et de patronnes sous des noms différents ne sont point chose rare. Lise, Lisette, Lisa, Élisa, Isabelle, Lisbeth, Betsy, cette multitude est Élisabeth. Il est probable que Mahout, Maclou, Malo et Magloire sont le même saint. Du reste, nous n’y tenons pas.

Sainte Durande est une sainte de l’Angoumois et de la Charente. Est-elle correcte? Ceci regarde les bollandistes. Correcte ou non, elle a des chapelles.

Lethierry étant à Rochefort, jeune matelot, avait fait connaissance avec cette sainte, probablement dans la personne de quelque jolie charentaise, peut-être de la grisette aux beaux ongles. Il lui en était resté assez de souvenir pour qu’il donnât ce nom aux deux choses qu’il aimait: Durande à la galiote, Déruchette à la fille.

Il était le père de l’une et l’oncle de l’autre.

Déruchette était la fille d’un frère qu’il avait eu. Elle n’avait plus ni père ni mère. Il l’avait adoptée. Il remplaçait le père, et la mère. Déruchette n’était pas seulement sa nièce. Elle était sa filleule. C’était lui qui l’avait tenue sur les fonts de baptême. C’était lui qui lui avait trouvé cette patronne, sainte Durande, et ce prénom Déruchette.

Déruchette, nous l’avons dit, était née à Saint-Pierre-Port. Elle était inscrite à sa date sur le registre de paroisse.

Tant que la nièce fut enfant et tant que l’oncle fut pauvre, personne ne prit garde à cette appellation, Déruchette; mais quand la petite fille devint une miss et quand le matelot devint un gentleman, Déruchette choqua. On s’en étonnait. On demandait à mess Lethierry: Pourquoi Déruchette? Il répondait: C’est un nom qui est comme ça. On essaya plusieurs fois de la débaptiser. Il ne s’y prêta point. Un jour une belle dame de la high life de Saint-Sampson, femme d’un forgeron riche ne travaillant plus, une sixty, comme on dit à Guernesey, dit à mess Lethierry: désormais j’appellerai votre fille *Nancy*. — Pourquoi pas Lons-Le-Saulnier? dit-il. La belle dame ne lâcha point prise, et lui dit le lendemain: Nous ne voulons décidément pas de Déruchette. J’ ai trouvé pour votre fille un joli nom, *Marianne*. — Joli nom en effet, repartit mess Lethierry, mais composé de deux vilaines bêtes, un mari et un âne. Il maintint Déruchette.

On se tromperait si l’on concluait du mot ci-dessus qu’il ne voulait point marier sa nièce. Il voulait la marier, certes, mais à sa façon. Il entendait qu’elle eût un mari dans son genre à lui, travaillant beaucoup, et qu’elle ne fît pas grand’chose. Il aimait les mains noires de l’homme et les mains blanches de la femme. Pour que Déruchette ne gâtât point ses jolies mains, il l’avait tournée vers la demoiselle. Il lui avait donné un maître de musique, un piano, une petite bibliothèque, et aussi un peu de fil et d’aiguilles dans une corbeille de travail. Elle était plutôt liseuse que couseuse, et plutôt musicienne que liseuse. Mess Lethierry la voulait ainsi. Le charme, c’était tout ce qu’il lui demandait. Il l’avait élevée plutôt à être fleur qu’à être femme. Quiconque a étudié les marins comprendra ceci. Ces rudesses aiment ces délicatesses. Pour que la nièce réalisât l’idéal de l’oncle, il fallait qu’elle fût riche. C’est bien ce qu’entendait mess Lethierry. Sa grosse machine de mer travaillait dans ce but. Il avait chargé Durande de doter Déruchette.

VIII

L’AIR « BONNY DUNDEE”

Déruchette habitait la plus jolie chambre des Bravées, à deux fenêtres, meublée en acajou ronceux, ornée d’un lit à rideaux quadrillés vert et blanc, et ayant vue sur le jardin et sur la haute colline où est le château du Valle. C’est de l’autre côté de cette colline qu’était le Bû de la Rue.

Déruchette avait dans cette chambre sa musique et son piano. Elle s’accompagnait de ce piano en chantant l’air qu’elle préférait, la mélancolique mélodie écossaise *Bonny Dundee*; tout le soir est dans cet air, toute l’aurore était dans sa voix; cela faisait un contraste doucement surprenant; on disait: miss Déruchette est à son piano; et les passants du bas de la colline s’arrêtaient quelquefois devant le mur du jardin des Bravées pour écouter ce chant si frais et cette chanson si triste.

Déruchette était de l’allégresse allant et venant dans la maison. Elle y faisait un printemps perpétuel. Elle était belle, mais plus jolie que belle, et plus gentille que jolie. Elle rappelait aux bons vieux pilotes amis de mess Lethierry cette princesse d’une chanson de soldats et de matelots qui était si belle « qu’elle passait pour telle dans le régiment”. Mess Lethierry disait: Elle a un câble de cheveux.

Dès l’enfance, elle avait été ravissante. On avait craint longtemps son nez; mais la petite, probablement déterminée à être jolie, avait tenu bon; la croissance ne lui avait fait aucun mauvais tour; son nez ne s’était ni trop allongé, ni trop raccourci; et, en devenant grande, elle était restée charmante.

Elle n’appelait jamais son oncle autrement que « mon père”.

Il lui tolérait quelques talents de jardinière, et même de ménagère. Elle arrosait elle-même ses plates-bandes de roses trémières, de molènes pourpres, de phlox vivaces et de benoîtes écarlates; elle cultivait le crépis rose et l’oxalide rose; elle tirait parti du climat de cette île de Guernesey, si hospitalière aux fleurs. Elle avait, comme tout le monde, des aloès en pleine terre, et, ce qui est plus difficile, elle faisait réussir la potentille du Népaul. Son petit potager était savamment ordonné; elle y faisait succéder les épinards aux radis et les pois aux épinards; elle savait semer des choux-fleurs de Hollande et des choux de Bruxelles qu’elle repiquait en juillet, des navets pour août, de la chicorée frisée pour septembre, des panais ronds pour l'automne, et de la raiponce pour l'hiver. Mess Lethierry la laissait faire, pourvu qu'elle ne maniât pas trop la bêche et le râteau et surtout qu'elle ne mît pas l'engrais elle-même. Il lui avait donné deux servantes, nommées l'une Grace et l'autre Douce, qui sont deux noms de Guernesey. Grace et Douce faisaient le service de la maison et du jardin, et elles avaient le droit d'avoir les mains rouges.

Quant à mess Lethierry, il avait pour chambre un petit réduit donnant sur le port, et attenant à la grande salle basse du rez-de-chaussée où était la porte d'entrée et où venaient aboutir les divers escaliers de la maison. Sa chambre était meublée de son branle, de son chronomètre et de sa pipe. Il y avait aussi une table et une chaise. Le plafond, à poutres, avait été blanchi au lait de chaux, ainsi que les quatre murs; à droite de la porte était cloué l'archipel de la Manche, belle carte marine portant cette mention: *W. Faden, 5, charing Cross. Geographer to His Majesty*; et à gauche d'autres clous étalaient sur la muraille un de ces gros mouchoirs de coton où sont figurés en couleur les pavillons et les signaux de toute la marine du globe, ayant aux quatre coins les étendards de France, de Russie, d'Espagne et des États-Unis d'Amérique, et au centre l'Union-Jack d'Angleterre.

Douce et Grace étaient deux créatures quelconques, du bon côté du mot. Douce n'était pas méchante et Grace n'était pas laide. Ces noms dangereux n'avaient point mal tourné. Douce, non mariée, avait un « galant”. Dans les îles de la Manche le mot est usité; la chose aussi. Ces deux filles avaient ce qu'on pourrait appeler le service créole, une sorte de lenteur propre à la domesticité normande dans l'archipel. Grace, coquette et jolie, considérait sans cesse l'horizon avec une inquiétude de chat. Cela tenait à ce qu'ayant, comme Douce, un galant, elle avait, de plus, disait-on, un mari matelot, dont elle craignait le retour. Mais cela ne nous regarde pas. La nuance entre Grace et Douce, c'est que, dans une maison moins austère et moins innocente, Douce fût restée la servante et Grace fût devenue la soubrette. Les talents possibles de Grace se perdaient avec une fille candide comme Déruchette. Du reste, les amours de Douce et de Grace étaient latents. Rien n'en revenait à mess Lethierry, et rien n'en rejaillissait sur Déruchette.

La salle basse du rez-de-chaussée, halle à cheminée entourée de bancs et de tables, avait, au siècle dernier, servi de lieu d'assemblée à un conventicule de réfugiés français protestants. Le mur de pierre nue avait pour tout luxe un cadre de bois noir où s'étalait une pancarte de parchemin ornée des prouesses de Bénigne Bossuet, évêque de Meaux. Quelques pauvres diocésains de cet aigle, persécutés par lui lors de la révocation de l’édit de Nantes, et abrités à Guernesey, avaient accroché ce cadre à ce mur pour porter témoignage. On y lisait, si l’on parvenait à déchiffrer une écriture lourde et une encre jaunie, les faits peu connus que voici: — Le 29 octobre 1685, démolition des temples de Morcerf et de Nanteuil, demandée au Roy par M. l’évêque de Meaux.” — « le 2 avril 1686, arrestation de Cochard père et fils pour religion, à la prière de M. l’évêque de Meaux. Relâchés; les Cochard ayant abjuré.” — « le 28 octobre 1699, M. l’évêque de Meaux envoie à M. De Pontchartrain un mémoire remontrant qu’il serait nécessaire de mettre les demoiselles de Chalandes et de Neuville, qui sont de la religion réformée, dans la maison des nouvelles-catholiques de Paris.” — « le 7 juillet 1703, est exécuté l’ordre demandé au Roy par M. l’évêque de Meaux de faire enfermer à l’hôpital le nommé Baudoin et sa femme, *mauvais catholiques* de Fublaines.”

Au fond de la salle, près de la porte de la chambre de mess Lethierry, un petit retranchement en planches qui avait été la chaire huguenote était devenu, grâce à un grillage avec chatière, « l’office” du bateau à vapeur, c’est-à-dire le bureau de la Durande, tenu par mess Lethierry en personne. Sur le vieux pupitre de chêne, un registre aux pages cotées Doit et Avoir remplaçait la bible.

IX

L'HOMME QUI AVAIT DEVINÉ RANTAINE

Tant que mess Lethierry avait pu naviguer, il avait conduit la Durande, et il n'avait pas eu d'autre pilote et d'autre capitaine que lui-même; mais il était venu une heure, nous l'avons dit, où mess Lethierry avait dû se faire remplacer. Il avait choisi pour cela sieur Clubin, de Torteval, homme silencieux. Sieur Clubin avait sur toute la côte un renom de probité sévère. C'était l'alter ego et le vicaire de mess Lethierry.

Sieur Clubin, quoiqu'il eût plutôt l'air d'un notaire que d'un matelot, était un marin capable et rare. Il avait tous les talents que veut le risque perpétuellement transformé. Il était arrimeur habile, gabier méticuleux, bosseman soigneux et connaisseur, timonier robuste, pilote savant, et hardi capitaine. Il était prudent, et il poussait quelquefois la prudence jusqu'à oser, ce qui est une grande qualité à la mer. Il avait la crainte du probable tempérée par l'instinct du possible. C'était un de ces marins qui affrontent le danger dans une proportion à eux connue et qui de toute aventure savent dégager le succès. Toute la certitude que la mer peut laisser à un homme, il l'avait. Sieur Clubin, en outre, était un nageur renommé; il était de cette race d'hommes rompus à la gymnastique de la vague, qui restent tant qu'on veut dans l'eau, qui, à Jersey, partent du Havre-des-Pas, doublent la Colette, font le tour de l'ermitage et du château Élisabeth, et reviennent au bout de deux heures à leur point de départ. Il était de Torteval, et il passait pour avoir souvent fait à la nage le trajet redouté des Hanois à la pointe de Plainmont.

Une des choses qui avaient le plus recommandé sieur Clubin à mess Lethierry, c'est que, connaissant ou pénétrant Rantaine, il avait signalé à mess Lethierry l'improbité de cet homme, et lui avait dit: — *Rantaine vous volera.* Ce qui s'était vérifié. Plus d'une fois, pour des objets, il est vrai, peu importants, mess Lethierry avait mis à l'épreuve l'honnêteté, poussée jusqu'au scrupule, de sieur Clubin, et il se reposait de ses affaires sur lui. Mess Lethierry disait: Toute conscience veut toute confiance.

X

LES RÉCITS DE LONG COURS

Mess Lethierry, mal à l’aise autrement, portait toujours ses habits de bord, et plutôt sa vareuse de matelot que sa vareuse de pilote. Cela faisait plisser le petit nez de Déruchette. Rien n’est joli comme les grimaces de la grâce en colère. Elle grondait et riait. — *Bon père,* s’écriait-elle, *pouah! Vous sentez le goudron.* et elle lui donnait une petite tape sur sa grosse épaule.

Ce bon vieux héros de la mer avait rapporté de ses voyages des récits surprenants. Il avait vu à Madagascar des plumes d’oiseau dont trois suffisaient à faire le toit d’une maison. Il avait vu dans l’Inde des tiges d’oseille hautes de neuf pieds. Il avait vu dans la Nouvelle-Hollande des troupeaux de dindons et d’oies menés et gardés par un chien de berger qui est un oiseau, et qu’on appelle l’agami. Il avait vu des cimetières d’éléphants. Il avait vu en Afrique des gorilles, espèces d’hommes-tigres, de sept pieds de haut. Il connaissait les mœurs de tous les singes, depuis le macaque sauvage qu’il appelait *macaco bravo* jusqu’au macaque hurleur qu’il appelait *macaco barbado*. Au Chili, il avait vu une guenon attendrir les chasseurs en leur montrant son petit. Il avait vu en Californie un tronc d’arbre creux tombé à terre dans l’intérieur duquel un homme à cheval pouvait faire cent cinquante pas. Il avait vu au Maroc les mozabites et les biskris se battre à coups de matraks et de barres de fer, les biskris pour avoir été traités de *kelb,* qui veut dire chiens, et les mozabites pour avoir été traités de *khamsi*, qui veut dire gens de la cinquième secte. Il avait vu en Chine couper en petits morceaux le pirate Chanh-Thong-Quan-Larh-Quoi, pour avoir assassiné le âp d’un village. À Thun-Daû-Môt, il avait vu un lion enlever une vieille femme en plein marché de la ville. Il avait assisté à l’arrivée du grand serpent venant de Canton à Saïgon pour célébrer dans la pagode de Cholen la fête de Quannam, déesse des navigateurs. Il avait contemplé chez les Moï le grand Quan-Sû. À Rio-Janeiro, il avait vu les dames brésiliennes se mettre le soir dans les cheveux de petites bulles de gaze contenant chacune une vagalumes, belle mouche à phosphore, ce qui les coiffe d’étoiles. Il avait combattu dans l’Uruguay les fourmilières et dans le Paraguay les araignées d’oiseaux, velues, grosses comme une tête d’enfant, couvrant de leurs pattes un diamètre d’un tiers d’aune, et attaquant l’homme, auquel elles lancent leurs poils qui s’enfoncent comme des flèches dans la chair et y soulèvent des pustules. Sur le fleuve Arinos, affluent du Tocantins, dans les forêts vierges au nord de Diamantina, il avait constaté l’effrayant peuple chauve-souris, les murcilagos, hommes qui naissent avec les cheveux blancs et les yeux rouges, habitent le sombre des bois, dorment le jour, s’éveillent la nuit, et pêchent et chassent dans les ténèbres, y voyant mieux quand il n’y a pas de lune. Près de Beyrouth, dans un campement d’une expédition dont il faisait partie, un pluviomètre ayant été volé dans une tente, un sorcier, habillé de deux ou trois bandelettes de cuir et ressemblant à un homme qui serait vêtu de ses bretelles, avait si furieusement agité une sonnette au bout d’une corne qu’une hyène était venue rapporter le pluviomètre. Cette hyène était la voleuse. Ces histoires vraies ressemblaient tant à des contes qu’elles amusaient Déruchette.

La poupée de la Durande était le lien entre le bateau et la fille. On nomme *poupée* dans les îles normandes la figure taillée dans la proue, statue de bois sculptée à peu près. De là, pour dire *naviguer*, cette locution locale, *être entre poupe et poupée*.

la poupée de la Durande était particulièrement chère à mess Lethierry. Il l’avait commandée au charpentier ressemblante à Déruchette. Elle ressemblait à coups de hache. C’était une bûche faisant effort pour être une jolie fille.

Ce bloc légèrement difforme faisait illusion à mess

Lethierry. Il le considérait avec une contemplation de croyant. Il était de bonne foi devant cette figure. Il y reconnaissait parfaitement Déruchette. C’est un peu comme cela que le dogme ressemble à la vérité, et l’idole à Dieu.

Mess Lethierry avait deux grandes joies par semaine; une joie le mardi et une joie le vendredi. Première joie, voir partir la Durande; deuxième joie, la voir revenir. Il s’accoudait à sa fenêtre, regardait son œuvre, et était heureux. Il y a quelque chose de cela dans la Genèse. *Et vidit quod esset bonum*.

Le vendredi, la présence de mess Lethierry à sa fenêtre valait un signal. Quand on voyait, à la croisée des Bravées, s’allumer sa pipe, on disait: Ah! Le bateau à vapeur est à l’horizon. Une fumée annonçait l’autre.

La Durande en rentrant au port nouait son câble sous les fenêtres de mess Lethierry à un gros anneau de fer scellé dans le soubassement des Bravées.

Ces nuits-là, Lethierry faisait un admirable somme dans son branle, sentant d’un côté Déruchette endormie et de l’autre Durande amarrée.

Le lieu d’amarrage de la Durande était voisin de la cloche du port. Il y avait là, devant la porte des Bravées, un petit bout de quai.

Ce quai, les Bravées, la maison, le jardin, les ruettes bordées de haies, la plupart même des habitations environnantes, n’existent plus aujourd’hui. L’exploitation du granit de Guernesey a fait vendre ces terrains. Tout cet emplacement est occupé, à l’heure où nous sommes, par des chantiers de casseurs de pierres.

XI

COUP D'ŒIL SUR LES MARIS ÉVENTUELS

Déruchette grandissait, et ne se mariait pas.

Mess Lethierry, en en faisant une fille aux mains blanches, l'avait rendue difficile. Ces éducations-là se retournent plus tard contre vous.

Du reste, il était, quant à lui, plus difficile encore. Le mari qu'il imaginait pour Déruchette était aussi un peu un mari pour Durande. Il eût voulu pourvoir d'un coup ses deux filles. Il eût voulu que le conducteur de l'une pût être aussi le pilote de l'autre. Qu'est-ce qu'un mari? C'est le capitaine d'une traversée. Pourquoi pas le même patron à la fille et au bateau? Un ménage obéit aux marées. Qui sait mener une barque sait mener une femme. Ce sont les deux sujettes de la lune et du vent. Sieur Clubin, n'ayant guère que quinze ans de moins que mess Lethierry, ne pouvait être pour Durande qu'un patron provisoire; il fallait un pilote jeune, un patron définitif, un vrai successeur du fondateur, de l'inventeur, du créateur. Le pilote définitif de Durande serait un peu le gendre de mess Lethierry. Pourquoi ne pas fondre les deux gendres dans un? Il caressait cette idée. Il voyait, lui aussi, apparaître dans ses songes un fiancé. Un puissant gabier basané et fauve, athlète de la mer, voilà son idéal. Ce n'était pas tout à fait celui de Déruchette. Elle faisait un rêve plus rose.

Quoi qu'il en fût, l'oncle et la nièce semblaient être d'accord pour ne point se hâter. Quand on avait vu Déruchette devenir une héritière probable, les partis s'étaient présentés en foule. Ces empressements-là ne sont pas toujours de bonne qualité. Mess Lethierry le sentait. Il grommelait: fille d'or, épouseur de cuivre. Et il éconduisait les prétendants. Il attendait. Elle de même.

Chose singulière, il tenait peu à l'aristocratie. De ce côté-là, mess Lethierry était un anglais invraisemblable. On croira difficilement qu'il avait été jusqu'à refuser pour Déruchette un Ganduel, de Jersey, et un Bugnet-Nicolin, de Serk. On n'a pas même craint d'affirmer, mais nous doutons que cela soit possible, qu'il n'avait point accepté une ouverture venant de l'aristocratie d'Aurigny, et qu'il avait décliné les propositions d'un membre de la famille Édou, laquelle évidemment descend d'Édouard le confesseur.

XII

EXCEPTION DANS LE CARACTÈRE DE LETHIERRY

Mess Lethierry avait un défaut; un gros. Il haïssait, non quelqu’un, mais quelque chose, le prêtre. Un jour, lisant, — car il lisait, — dans Voltaire, — car il lisait Voltaire, — ces mots: « les prêtres sont des chats”, il posa le livre, et on l’entendit grommeler à demi-voix: je me sens chien.

Il faut se souvenir que les prêtres, les luthériens et les calvinistes comme les catholiques, l’avaient, dans sa création du Devil-Boat local, vivement combattu et doucement persécuté. Être révolutionnaire en navigation, essayer d’ajuster un progrès à l’archipel normand, faire essuyer à la pauvre petite île de Guernesey les plâtres d’une invention nouvelle, c’était là, nous ne l’avons point dissimulé, une témérité damnable. Aussi l’avait-on un peu damné. Nous parlons ici, qu’on ne l’oublie pas, du clergé ancien, bien différent du clergé actuel, qui, dans presque toutes les églises locales, a une tendance libérale vers le progrès. On avait entravé Lethierry de cent manières; toute la quantité d’obstacles qu’il peut y avoir dans les prêches et dans les sermons lui avait été opposée. Détesté des hommes d’église, il les détestait. Leur haine était la circonstance atténuante de la sienne.

Mais, disons-le, son aversion des prêtres était idiosyncrasique. Il n’avait pas besoin pour les haïr, d’en être haï. Comme il le disait, il était le chien de ces chats. Il était contre eux par l’idée, et, ce qui est le plus irréductible, par l’instinct. Il sentait leurs griffes latentes, et il montrait les dents. Un peu à tort et à travers, convenons-en, et pas toujours à propos. Ne point distinguer est un tort. Il n’y a pas de bonne haine en bloc. Le vicaire savoyard n’eût point trouvé grâce devant lui. Il n’est pas sûr que, pour mess Lethierry, il y eût un bon prêtre. À force d’être philosophe, il perdait un peu de sagesse. L’intolérance des tolérants existe, de même que la rage des modérés. Mais Lethierry était si débonnaire qu’il ne pouvait être vraiment haineux. Il repoussait plutôt qu’il n’attaquait. Il tenait les gens d’église à distance. Ils lui avaient fait du mal, il se bornait à ne pas leur vouloir de bien. La nuance entre leur haine et la sienne, c’est que la leur était animosité, et que la sienne était antipathie.

Guernesey, toute petite île qu’elle est, a de la place pour deux religions. Elle contient de la religion catholique et de la religion protestante. Ajoutons qu’elle ne met point les deux religions dans la même église. Chaque culte a son temple ou sa chapelle à part. En Allemagne, à Heidelberg, par exemple, on n’y fait pas tant de façons; on coupe l’église en deux; une moitié à saint Pierre, une moitié à Calvin; entre deux, une cloison pour prévenir les gourmades; parts égales; les catholiques ont trois autels, les huguenots ont trois autels; comme ce sont les mêmes heures d’offices, la cloche unique sonne à la fois pour les deux services. Elle appelle en même temps à Dieu et au diable. Simplification.

Le flegme allemand s’accommode de ces voisinages. Mais à Guernesey chaque religion est chez elle. Il y a la paroisse orthodoxe et il y a la paroisse hérétique. On peut choisir. Ni l’une, ni l’autre; tel avait été le choix de mess Lethierry.

Ce matelot, cet ouvrier, ce philosophe, ce parvenu du travail, très simple en apparence, n’était pas du tout simple au fond. Il avait ses contradictions et ses opiniâtretés. Sur le prêtre, il était inébranlable. Il eût rendu des points à Montlosier.

Il se permettait des railleries très déplacées. Il avait des mots à lui, bizarres, mais ayant un sens. Aller à confesse, il appelait cela « peigner sa conscience”. Le peu de lettres qu’il avait, bien peu, une certaine lecture glanée çà et là, entre deux bourrasques, se compliquait de fautes d’orthographe. Il avait aussi des fautes de prononciation, pas toujours naïves. Quand la paix fut faite par Waterloo entre la France de Louis XVIII et l’Angleterre de Wellington, mess Lethierry dit: *Bourmont a été le traître d’union entre les deux camps*. Une fois il écrivit papauté, *pape ôté*. Nous ne pensons pas que ce fût exprès.

Cet antipapisme ne lui conciliait point les anglicans. Il n’était pas plus aimé des recteurs protestants que des curés catholiques. En présence des dogmes les plus graves, son irréligion éclatait presque sans retenue. Un hasard l’ayant conduit à un sermon sur l’enfer du révérend Jaquemin Hérode, sermon magnifique rempli d’un bout à l’autre de textes sacrés prouvant les peines éternelles, les supplices, les tourments, les damnations, les châtiments inexorables, les brûlements sans fin, les malédictions inextinguibles, les colères de la toute-puissance, les fureurs célestes, les vengeances divines, choses incontestables, on l’entendit, en sortant avec un des fidèles, dire doucement: — Voyez-vous, moi, j’ai une drôle d’idée. Je m’imagine que Dieu est bon.

Ce levain d’athéisme lui venait de son séjour en France.

Quoique guernesiais, et assez pur sang, on l’appelait dans l’île « le français”, à cause de son esprit *improper*. Lui-même ne s’en cachait point, il était imprégné d’idées subversives. Son acharnement de faire ce bateau à vapeur, ce Devil-Boat, l’avait bien prouvé. Il disait: *J’ai tété 89*. Ce n’est point là un bon lait.

Du reste, des contre-sens, il en faisait. Il est très difficile de rester entier dans les petits pays. En France, garder les apparences, en Angleterre, *être respectable*, la vie tranquille est à ce prix. Être respectable, cela implique une foule d’observances, depuis le dimanche bien sanctifié jusqu’à la cravate bien mise. « Ne pas se faire montrer au doigt”, voilà encore une loi terrible. Être montré au doigt, c’est le diminutif de l’anathème. Les petites villes, marais de commères, excellent dans cette malignité isolante, qui est la malédiction vue par le petit bout de la lorgnette. Les plus vaillants redoutent ce raca. On affronte la mitraille, on affronte l’ouragan, on recule devant Mme Pimbêche. Mess Lethierry était plutôt tenace que logique. Mais, sous cette pression, sa ténacité même fléchissait. Il mettait, autre locution pleine de concessions latentes, et parfois inavouables, « de l’eau dans son vin”. Il se tenait à l’écart des hommes du clergé, mais il ne leur fermait point résolûment sa porte. Aux occasions officielles et aux époques voulues des visites pastorales, il recevait d’une façon suffisante, soit le recteur luthérien, soit le chapelain papiste. Il lui arrivait, de loin en loin, d’accompagner à la paroisse anglicane Déruchette, laquelle elle-même, nous l’avons dit, n’y allait qu’aux quatre grandes fêtes de l’année.

Somme toute, ces compromis, qui lui coûtaient, l’irritaient, et, loin de l’incliner vers les gens d’église, augmentaient son escarpement intérieur. Il s’en dédommageait par plus de moquerie. Cet être sans amertume n’avait d’âcreté que de ce côté-là. Aucun moyen de l’amender là-dessus.

De fait et absolument, c’était son tempérament, et il fallait en prendre son parti.

Tout clergé lui déplaisait. Il avait l’irrévérence révolutionnaire. D’une forme à l’autre du culte il distinguait peu. Il ne rendait même pas justice à ce grand progrès: ne point croire à la présence réelle. Sa myopie en ces choses allait jusqu’à ne point voir la nuance entre un ministre et un abbé. Il confondait un révérend docteur avec un révérend père. Il disait: *Wesley ne vaut pas mieux que Loyola*. Quand il voyait passer un pasteur avec sa femme, il se détournait. *Prêtre marié!* disait-il, avec l’accent absurde que ces deux mots avaient en France à cette époque. Il contait qu’à son dernier voyage en Angleterre, il avait vu « l’évêchesse de Londres”. Ses révoltes sur ce genre d’unions allaient jusqu’à la colère. — Une robe n’épouse pas une robe! s’écriait-il. — Le sacerdoce lui faisait l’effet d’un sexe. Il eût volontiers dit: « Ni homme, ni femme; prêtre”. Il appliquait, avec mauvais goût, au clergé anglican et au clergé papiste, les mêmes épithètes dédaigneuses; il enveloppait les deux « soutanes” dans la même phraséologie; et il ne se donnait pas la peine de varier, à propos des prêtres, quels qu’ils fussent, catholiques ou luthériens, les métonymies soldatesques usitées dans ce temps-là. Il disait à Déruchette: *Marie-toi avec qui tu voudras, pourvu que ce ne soit pas avec un calotin*.

XIII

L'INSOUCIANCE FAIT PARTIE DE LA GRÂCE

Une fois une parole dite, mess Lethierry s'en souvenait; une fois une parole dite, Déruchette l'oubliait. Là était la nuance entre l'oncle et la nièce.

Déruchette, élevée comme on l'a vu, s'était accoutumée à peu de responsabilité. Il y a, insistons-y, plus d'un péril latent dans une éducation pas assez prise au sérieux. Vouloir faire son enfant heureux trop tôt, c'est peut-être une imprudence.

Déruchette croyait que, pourvu qu'elle fût contente, tout était bien. Elle sentait d'ailleurs son oncle joyeux de la voir joyeuse. Elle avait à peu près les idées de mess Lethierry. Sa religion se satisfaisait d'aller à la paroisse quatre fois par an. On l'a vue en toilette pour Noël. De la vie, elle ignorait tout. Elle avait tout ce qu'il faut pour être un jour folle d'amour. En attendant, elle était gaie.

Elle chantait au hasard, jasait au hasard, vivait devant elle, jetait un mot et passait, faisait une chose et fuyait, était charmante. Joignez à cela la liberté anglaise. En Angleterre les enfants vont seuls, les filles sont leurs maîtresses, l'adolescence a la bride sur le cou. Telles sont les mœurs. Plus tard ces filles libres font des femmes esclaves. Nous prenons ici ces deux mots en bonne part; libres dans la croissance, esclaves dans le devoir.

Déruchette s'éveillait chaque matin avec l'inconscience de ses actions de la veille. Vous l'eussiez bien embarrassée en lui demandant ce qu'elle avait fait la semaine passée. Ce qui ne l'empêchait pas d'avoir, à de certaines heures troubles, un malaise mystérieux, et de sentir on ne sait quel passage du sombre de la vie sur son épanouissement et sur sa joie. Ces azurs-là ont ces nuages-là. Mais ces nuages s'en allaient vite. Elle en sortait par un éclat de rire, ne sachant pourquoi elle avait été triste ni pourquoi elle était sereine. Elle jouait avec tout. Son espièglerie becquetait les passants. Elle faisait des malices aux garçons. Si elle eût rencontré le diable, elle n'en eût pas eu pitié, elle lui eût fait une niche. Elle était jolie, et en même temps si innocente, qu'elle en abusait. Elle donnait un sourire comme un jeune chat donne un coup de griffe. Tant pis pour l'égratigné. Elle n'y songeait plus. Hier n'existait pas pour elle; elle vivait dans la plénitude d'aujourd'hui.

Voilà ce que c’est que trop de bonheur. Chez Déruchette le souvenir s’évanouissait comme la neige fond.

LIVRE QUATRIEME

LE BUG-PIPE

I

PREMIÈRES ROUGEURS D’UNE AURORE OU D’UN INCENDIE

Gilliatt n’avait jamais parlé à Déruchette. Il la connaissait pour l’avoir vue de loin, comme on connaît l’étoile du matin.

À l’époque où Déruchette avait rencontré Gilliatt dans le chemin de Saint-Pierre-Port au Valle et lui avait fait la surprise d’écrire son nom sur la neige, elle avait seize ans. La veille précisément, mess Lethierry lui avait dit: Ne fais plus d’enfantillages. Te voilà grande fille.

Ce nom, *Gilliatt*, écrit par cette enfant, était tombé dans une profondeur inconnue.

Qu’était-ce que les femmes pour Gilliatt? Lui-même n’aurait pu le dire. Quand il en rencontrait une, il lui faisait peur, et il en avait peur. Il ne parlait à une femme qu’à la dernière extrémité. Il n’avait jamais été « le galant” d’aucune campagnarde. Quand il était seul dans un chemin et qu’il voyait une femme venir vers lui, il enjambait une clôture de courtil ou se fourrait dans une broussaille et s’en allait. Il évitait même les vieilles. Il avait vu dans sa vie une parisienne. Une parisienne de passage, étrange évènement pour Guernesey à cette époque lointaine. Et Gilliatt avait entendu cette parisienne raconter en ces termes ses malheurs: « Je suis très ennuyée, je viens de recevoir des gouttes de pluie sur mon chapeau, il est abricot, et c’est une couleur qui ne pardonne pas”. Ayant trouvé plus tard, entre les feuillets d’un livre, une ancienne gravure de modes représentant « une dame de la chaussée d’Antin” en grande toilette, il l’avait collée à son mur, en souvenir de cette apparition. Les soirs d’été, il se cachait derrière les rochers de la crique houmet-paradis pour voir les paysannes se baigner en chemise dans la mer. Un jour, à travers une haie, il avait regardé la sorcière de Torteval remettre sa jarretière. Il était probablement vierge.

Ce matin de Noël où il rencontra Déruchette et où elle écrivit son nom en riant, il rentra chez lui ne sachant plus pourquoi il était sorti. La nuit venue, il ne dormit pas. Il songea à mille choses; — qu’il ferait bien de cultiver des radis noirs dans son jardin; que l’exposition était bonne; — qu’il n’avait pas vu passer le bateau de Serk; était-il arrivé quelque chose à ce bateau? — qu’il avait vu des trique-madame en fleur, chose rare pour la saison. Il n’avait jamais su au juste ce que lui était la vieille femme qui était morte, il se dit que décidément elle devait être sa mère, et il pensa à elle avec un redoublement de tendresse. Il pensa au trousseau de femme qui était dans la malle de cuir. Il pensa que le révérend Jaquemin Hérode serait probablement un jour ou l’autre nommé doyen de Saint-Pierre-Port subrogé de l’évêque, et que le rectorat de Saint-Sampson deviendrait vacant. Il pensa que le lendemain de Noël on serait au vingt-septième jour de la lune, et que par conséquent la haute mer serait à trois heures vingt et une minutes, la demi-retirée à sept heures quinze, la basse mer à neuf heures trente-trois, et la demi-montée à douze heures trente-neuf. Il se rappela dans les moindres détails le costume du highlander qui lui avait vendu le bag-pipe, son bonnet orné d’un chardon, sa claymore, son habit serré aux pans courts et carrés, son jupon, le scilt or philaberg, orné de la bourse sporran et du smushing-mull, tabatière de corne, son épingle faite d’une pierre écossaise, ses deux ceintures, la sashwise et le belts, son épée, le swond, son coutelas, le dirck, et le skene dhu, couteau noir à poignée noire ornée de deux cairgorums, et les genoux nus de ce soldat, ses bas, ses guêtres quadrillées et ses souliers à boucles. Cet équipement devint un spectre, le poursuivit, lui donna la fièvre, et l’assoupit. Il se réveilla au grand jour, et sa première pensée fut Déruchette.

Le lendemain il dormit, mais il revit toute la nuit le soldat écossais. Il se dit à travers son sommeil que les chefs-plaids d’après Noël seraient tenus le 21 janvier. Il rêva aussi du vieux recteur Jaquemin Hérode. En se réveillant il songea à Déruchette, et il eut contre elle une violente colère; il regretta de ne plus être petit, parce qu’il irait jeter des pierres dans ses carreaux.

Puis il pensa que, s’il était petit, il aurait sa mère, et il se mit à pleurer.

Il forma le projet d’aller passer trois mois à Chousey ou aux Minquiers. Pourtant il ne partit pas.

Il ne remit plus les pieds dans la route de Saint-Pierre-Port au Valle.

Il se figurait que son nom, *Gilliatt*, était resté là gravé sur la terre et que tous les passants devaient le regarder.

II

ENTRÉE, PAS À PAS, DANS L'INCONNU

En revanche, il voyait tous les jours les Bravées. Il ne le faisait pas exprès, mais il allait de ce côté-là. Il se trouvait que son chemin était toujours de passer par le sentier qui longeait le mur du jardin de Déruchette.

Un matin, comme il était dans ce sentier, une femme du marché qui revenait des Bravées dit à une autre: *Miss Lethierry aime les seakales*.

Il fit dans son jardin du Bû de la Rue une fosse à seakales. Le seakale est un chou qui a le goût de l'asperge.

Le mur du jardin des Bravées était très bas; on pouvait l'enjamber. L'idée de l'enjamber lui eût paru épouvantable. Mais il n'était pas défendu d'entendre en passant, comme tout le monde, les voix des personnes qui parlaient dans les chambres ou dans le jardin. Il n'écoutait pas, mais il entendait. Une fois, il entendit les deux servantes, Douce et Grâce, se quereller. C'était un bruit de la maison. Cette querelle lui resta dans l'oreille comme une musique.

Une autre fois, il distingua une voix qui n'était pas comme celle des autres et qui lui sembla devoir être la voix de Déruchette. Il prit la fuite.

Les paroles que cette voix avait prononcées demeurèrent à jamais gravées dans sa pensée. Il se les redisait à chaque instant. Ces paroles étaient: *Vous plairait-il me bailler le genêt?*

Par degrés il s'enhardit. Il osa s'arrêter. Il arriva une fois que Déruchette, impossible à apercevoir du dehors, quoique sa fenêtre fût ouverte, était à son piano, et chantait. Elle chantait son air *Bonny Dundee.* Il devint très pâle, mais il poussa la fermeté jusqu'à écouter.

Le printemps arriva. Un jour, Gilliatt eut une vision; le ciel s'ouvrit. Gilliatt vit Déruchette arroser des laitues.

Bientôt, il fit plus que s'arrêter. Il observa ses habitudes, il remarqua ses heures, et il l'attendit.

Il avait bien soin de ne pas se montrer.

Peu à peu, en même temps que les massifs se

remplissaient de papillons et de roses, immobile et muet des heures entières, caché derrière ce mur, vu de personne, retenant son haleine, il s’habitua à voir Déruchette aller et venir dans le jardin. On s’accoutume au poison.

De la cachette où il était, il entendait souvent Déruchette causer avec mess Lethierry sous une épaisse tonnelle de charmille où il y avait un banc. Les paroles venaient distinctement jusqu’à lui.

Que de chemin il avait fait! Maintenant il en était venu à guetter et à prêter l’oreille. Hélas! Le cœur humain est un vieil espion.

Il y avait un autre banc, visible et tout proche, au bord d’une allée. Déruchette s’y asseyait quelquefois.

D’après les fleurs qu’il voyait Déruchette cueillir et respirer, il avait deviné ses goûts en fait de parfums. Le liseron était l’odeur qu’elle préférait, puis l’œillet, puis le chèvrefeuille, puis le jasmin. La rose n’était que la cinquième. Elle regardait le lys, mais elle ne le respirait pas.

D’après ce choix de parfums, Gilliatt la composait dans sa pensée. À chaque odeur il rattachait une perfection.

La seule idée d’adresser la parole à Déruchette lui faisait dresser les cheveux.

Une bonne vieille chineuse, que son industrie ambulante ramenait de temps en temps dans la ruette longeant l’enclos des Bravées, en vint à remarquer confusément les assiduités de Gilliatt pour cette muraille et sa dévotion à ce lieu désert. Rattacha-t-elle la présence de cet homme devant ce mur à la possibilité d’une femme derrière ce mur? Aperçut-elle ce vague fil invisible? Était-elle, en sa décrépitude mendiante, restée assez jeune pour se rappeler quelque chose des belles années, et savait-elle encore, dans son hiver et dans sa nuit, ce que c’est que l’aube? Nous l’ignorons, mais il paraît qu’une fois, en passant près de Gilliatt « faisant sa faction”, elle dirigea de son côté toute la quantité de sourire dont elle était encore capable, et grommela entre ses gencives: *ça chauffe.*

Gilliatt entendit ces mots, il en fut frappé, il murmura avec un point d’interrogation intérieur: — Ça chauffe? Que veut dire cette vieille? — Il répéta machinalement le mot toute la journée, mais il ne le comprit pas.

Un soir qu’il était à sa fenêtre du Bû de la Rue, cinq ou six jeunes filles de l’ancresse vinrent par partie de plaisir se baigner dans la crique de Houmet. Elles jouaient dans l’eau, très naïvement, à cent pas de lui. Il ferma sa fenêtre violemment. Il s’aperçut qu’une femme nue lui faisait horreur.

III

L’AIR « BONNY DUNDEE” TROUVE UN ÉCHO DANS LA COLLINE

Derrière l’enclos du jardin des Bravées, un angle de mur couvert de houx et de lierre, encombré d’orties, avec une mauve sauvage arborescente et un grand bouillon-blanc poussant dans les granits, ce fut dans ce recoin qu’il passa à peu près tout son été. Il était là, inexprimablement pensif. Les lézards, accoutumés à lui, se chauffaient dans les mêmes pierres au soleil. L’été fut lumineux et caressant. Gilliatt avait au-dessus de sa tête le va-et-vient des nuages. Il était assis sur une pierre dans l’herbe. Tout était plein de bruits d’oiseaux. Il se prenait le front à deux mains et se demandait: Mais enfin pourquoi a-t-elle écrit mon nom sur la neige? Le vent de mer jetait au loin de grands souffles. Par intervalles, dans la carrière lointaine de la Vaudue, la trompe des mineurs grondait brusquement, avertissant les passants de s’écarter et qu’une mine allait faire explosion. On ne voyait pas le port de Saint-Sampson, mais on voyait les pointes des mâts par-dessus les arbres. Les mouettes volaient, éparses. Gilliatt avait entendu sa mère dire que les femmes pouvaient être amoureuses des hommes, que cela arrivait quelquefois. Il se répondait: Voilà. Je comprends, Déruchette est amoureuse de moi. Il se sentait profondément triste. Il se disait: Mais elle aussi, elle pense à moi de son côté; c’est bien fait. Il songeait que Déruchette était riche, et que, lui, il était pauvre. Il pensait que le bateau à vapeur était une exécrable invention. Il ne pouvait jamais se rappeler quel quantième du mois on était. Il regardait vaguement les gros bourdons noirs à croupes jaunes et à ailes courtes qui s’enfoncent avec bruit dans les trous des murailles.

Un soir, Déruchette rentrait se coucher. Elle s’approcha de sa fenêtre pour la fermer. La nuit était obscure. Tout à coup Déruchette prêta l’oreille. Dans cette profondeur d’ombre il y avait une musique. Quelqu’un qui était probablement sur le versant de la colline, ou au pied des tours du château du Valle, ou peut-être plus loin encore, exécutait un air sur un instrument. Déruchette reconnut sa mélodie favorite *Bonny Dundee* jouée sur le bag-pipe. Elle n’y comprit rien.

Depuis ce moment, cette musique se renouvela de temps en temps à la même heure, particulièrement dans les nuits très noires.

Déruchette n’aimait pas beaucoup cela.

IV

Pour l’oncle et le tuteur, bonshommes taciturnes,
Les sérénades sont des tapages nocturnes.
(Vers d’une comédie inédite.)

Quatre années passèrent.

Déruchette approchait de ses vingt et un ans et n’était toujours pas mariée.

Quelqu’un a écrit quelque part: — Une idée fixe, c’est une vrille. Chaque année elle s’enfonce d’un tour. Si on veut nous l’extirper la première année, on nous tirera les cheveux; la deuxième année, on nous déchirera la peau; la troisième année, on nous brisera l’os; la quatrième année, on nous arrachera la cervelle.

Gilliatt en était à cette quatrième année-là.

Il n’avait pas encore dit une parole à Déruchette. Il songeait du côté de cette charmante fille. C’était tout.

Il était arrivé qu’une fois, se trouvant par hasard à Saint-Sampson, il avait vu Déruchette causant avec mess Lethierry devant la porte des Bravées qui s’ouvrait sur la chaussée du port. Gilliatt s’était risqué à approcher très près. Il croyait être sûr qu’au moment où il avait passé elle avait souri. Il n’y avait à cela rien d’impossible.

Déruchette entendait toujours de temps en temps le bag-pipe.

Ce bag-pipe, mess Lethierry aussi l’entendait. Il avait fini par remarquer cet acharnement de musique sous les fenêtres de Déruchette. Musique tendre, circonstance aggravante. Un galant nocturne n’était pas de son goût. Il voulait marier Déruchette le jour venu, quand elle voudrait et quand il voudrait, purement et simplement, sans roman et sans musique. Impatienté, il avait guetté, et il croyait bien avoir entrevu Gilliatt. Il s’était passé les ongles dans les favoris, signe de colère, et il avait grommelé: *Qu’a-t-il à piper, cet animal-là? Il aime Déruchette, c’est clair. Tu perds ton temps. Qui veut Déruchette doit s’adresser à moi, et pas en jouant de la flûte.*

Un évènement considérable, prévu depuis longtemps, s’accomplit. On annonça que le révérend Jaquemin Hérode était nommé subrogé de l’évêque de Winchester, doyen de l’île et recteur de Saint-Pierre-Port, et qu’il quitterait Saint-Sampson pour Saint-Pierre immédiatement après avoir installé son successeur.

Le nouveau recteur ne pouvait tarder à arriver. Ce prêtre était un gentleman d'origine normande, monsieur Joë Ebenezer Caudray, anglaisé Cawdry.

On avait sur le futur recteur des détails que la bienveillance et la malveillance commentaient en sens inverse. On le disait jeune et pauvre, mais sa jeunesse était tempérée par beaucoup de doctrine et sa pauvreté par beaucoup d' es]pérance. Dans la langue spéciale créée pour l'héritage et la richesse, la mort s'appelle espérance. Il était le neveu et l'héritier du vieux et opulent doyen de Saint-Asaph. Ce doyen mort, il serait riche. M Ebenezer Caudray avait des parentés distinguées; il avait presque droit à la qualité d'honorable. Quant à sa doctrine, on la jugeait diversement. Il était anglican, mais, selon l'expression de l'évêque Tillotson, très « libertin", c'est-à-dire très sévère. Il répudiait le pharisaïsme; il se ralliait plutôt au presbytère qu'à l'épiscopat. Il faisait le rêve de la primitive église, où Adam avait le droit de choisir Éve, et où Frumentanus, évêque d'Hiérapolis, enlevait une fille pour en faire sa femme en disant aux parents: *Elle le veut et je le veux, vous n'êtes plus son père et vous n'êtes plus sa mère, je suis l'ange d'Hiérapolis, et celle-ci est mon épouse. Le père, c'est Dieu.* S'il fallait en croire ce qu'on disait, M. Ebenezer Caudray subordonnait le texte: *Tes père et mère honoreras*, au texte, selon lui supérieur: *La femme est la chair de l'homme. La femme quittera son père et sa mère pour suivre son mari*. Du reste, cette tendance à circonscrire l'autorité paternelle, et à favoriser religieusement tous les modes de formation du lien conjugal, est propre à tout le protestantisme, particulièrement en Angleterre et singulièrement en Amérique.

V

LE SUCCÈS JUSTE EST TOUJOURS HAÏ

Voici quel était à ce moment-là le bilan de mess Lethierry. La Durande avait tenu tout ce qu’elle avait promis. Mess Lethierry avait payé ses dettes, réparé ses brèches, acquitté les créances de Brême, fait face aux échéances de Saint-Malo. Il avait exonéré sa maison des Bravées des hypothèques qui la grevaient; il avait racheté toutes les petites rentes locales inscrites sur cette maison. Il était possesseur d’un grand capital productif, la Durande. Le revenu net du navire était maintenant de mille livres sterling et allait croissant. À proprement parler, la Durande était toute sa fortune. Elle était aussi la fortune du pays. Le transport des bœufs étant un des plus gros bénéfices du navire, on avait dû, pour améliorer l’arrimage et faciliter l’entrée et la sortie des bestiaux, supprimer les portemanteaux et les deux canots. C’était peut-être une imprudence. La Durande n’avait plus qu’une embarcation, la chaloupe. La chaloupe, il est vrai, était excellente.

Il s’était écoulé dix ans depuis le vol Rantaine.

Cette prospérité de la Durande avait un côté faible, c’est qu’elle n’inspirait point confiance; on la croyait un hasard. La situation de mess Lethierry n’était acceptée que comme exception. Il passait pour avoir fait une folie heureuse. Quelqu’un qui l’avait imité à Cowes, dans l’île de Wight, n’avait pas réussi. L’essai avait ruiné ses actionnaires. Lethierry disait: C’est que la machine était mal construite. Mais on hochait la tête. Les nouveautés ont cela contre elles que tout le monde leur en veut; le moindre faux pas les compromet. Un des oracles commerciaux de l’archipel normand, le banquier Jauge, de Paris, consulté sur une spéculation de bateaux à vapeur, avait, dit-on, répondu en tournant le dos: *C’est une conversion* que vous me proposez là. Conversion de l’argent en fumée. *En revanche, les bateaux à voiles* trouvaient des commandites tant qu’ils en voulaient. Les capitaux s’obstinaient pour la toile contre la chaudière. À Guernesey, la Durande était un fait, mais la vapeur n’était pas un principe. Tel est l’acharnement de la négation en présence du progrès. On disait de Lethierry: *C’est bon, mais il ne* recommencerait pas. *Loin d’encourager, son* exemple faisait peur. Personne n’eût osé risquer une deuxième Durande.

VI

CHANCE QU’ONT EUE CES NAUFRAGÉS DE RENCONTRER CE SLOOP

L’équinoxe s’annonce de bonne heure dans la Manche. C’est une mer étroite qui gêne le vent et l’irrite. Dès le mois de février, il y a commencement de vents d’ouest, et toute la vague est secouée en tous sens. La navigation devient inquiète; les gens de la côte regardent le mât de signal; on se préoccupe des navires qui peuvent être en détresse. La mer apparaît comme un guet-apens; un clairon invisible sonne on ne sait quelle guerre; de grands coups d’haleine furieuse bouleversent l’horizon; il fait un vent terrible. L’ombre siffle et souffle. Dans la profondeur des nuées la face noire de la tempête enfle ses joues.

Le vent est un danger; le brouillard en est un autre.

Les brouillards ont été de tout temps craints des navigateurs. Dans certains brouillards sont en suspension des prismes microscopiques de glace auxquels Mariotte attribue les halos, les parhélies et les parasélènes. Les brouillards orageux sont composites; des vapeurs diverses, de pesanteur spécifique inégale, s’y combinent avec la vapeur d’eau, et se superposent dans un ordre qui divise la brume en zones et fait du brouillard une véritable formation; l’iode est en bas, le soufre au-dessus de l’iode, le brome au-dessus du soufre, le phosphore au-dessus du brome. Ceci, dans une certaine mesure, en faisant la part de la tension électrique et magnétique, explique plusieurs phénomènes, le feu Saint-Elme de Colomb et de Magellan, les étoiles volantes mêlées aux navires dont parle Sénèque, les deux flammes Castor et Pollux dont parle Plutarque, la légion romaine dont César crut voir les javelots prendre feu, la pique du château de Duino dans le Frioul que le soldat de garde faisait étinceler en la touchant du fer de sa lance, et peut-être même ces fulgurations d’en bas que les anciens appelaient « les éclairs terrestres de Saturne”. À l’équateur, une immense brume permanente semble nouée autour du globe, c’est le *cloud-ring,* l’anneau de nuages. Le cloud-ring a pour fonction de refroidir le tropique, de même que le Gulf-Stream a pour fonction de réchauffer le pôle. Sous le cloud-ring, le brouillard est fatal. Ce sont les latitudes des chevaux, *horse latitude*; les navigateurs des derniers siècles jetaient là les chevaux à la mer, en temps d’orage pour s’alléger, en temps de calme pour économiser la provision d’eau. Colomb disait: *Nube abaxo es muerte*. « le nuage bas est la mort.” Les Étrusques, qui sont pour la météorologie ce que les chaldéens sont pour l’astronomie, avaient deux pontificats, le pontificat du tonnerre et le pontificat de la nuée; les fulgurateurs observaient les éclairs et les aquilèges observaient le brouillard. Le collège des prêtres-augures de Tarquinies était consulté par les Tyriens, les Phéniciens, les Pélasges, et tous les navigateurs primitifs de l’antique Marinterne. Le mode de génération des tempêtes était dès lors entrevu; il est intimement lié au mode de génération des brouillards, et c’est, à proprement parler, le même phénomène. Il existe sur l’océan trois régions des brumes, une équatoriale, deux polaires; les marins leur donnent un seul nom: *le pot au noir*.

Dans tous les parages et surtout dans la Manche, les brouillards d’équinoxe sont dangereux. Ils font brusquement la nuit sur la mer. Un des périls du brouillard, même quand il n’est pas très épais, c’est d’empêcher de reconnaître le changement de fond par le changement de couleur de l’eau; il en résulte une dissimulation redoutable de l’approche des brisants et des bas-fonds. On est près d’un écueil sans que rien vous en avertisse. Souvent les brouillards ne laissent au navire en marche d’autre ressource que de mettre en panne ou de jeter l’ancre. Il y a autant de naufrages de brouillard que de vent.

Pourtant, après une bourrasque fort violente qui succéda à une de ces journées de brouillard, le sloop de poste *Cashmere* arriva parfaitement d’Angleterre. Il entra à Saint-Pierre-Port au premier rayon du jour sortant de la mer, au moment même où le château Cornet tirait son coup de canon au soleil. Le ciel s’était éclairci. Le sloop *Cashmere* était attendu comme devant amener le nouveau recteur de Saint-Sampson. Peu après l’arrivée du sloop, le bruit se répandit dans la ville qu’il avait été accosté la nuit en mer par une chaloupe contenant un équipage naufragé.

VII

CHANCE QU’A EUE CE FLÂNEUR D’ÊTRE APERÇU PAR CE PÊCHEUR

Cette nuit-là, Gilliatt, au moment où le vent avait molli, était allé pêcher, sans toutefois pousser la panse trop loin de la côte.

Comme il rentrait, à la marée montante, vers deux heures de l’après-midi, par un très beau soleil, en passant devant la corne de la bête pour gagner l’anse du Bû de la Rue, il lui sembla voir dans la projection de la chaise Gild-Holm-’Ur une ombre portée qui n’était pas celle du rocher. Il laissa arriver la panse de ce côté, et il reconnut qu’un homme était assis dans la chaise Gild-Holm-’Ur. La mer était déjà très haute, la roche était cernée par le flot, le retour n’était plus possible. Gilliatt fit à l’homme de grands gestes. L’homme resta immobile. Gilliatt approcha. L’homme était endormi.

Cet homme était vêtu de noir. — Cela a l’air d’un prêtre, pensa Gilliatt. Il approcha plus près encore, et vit un visage d’adolescent.

Ce visage lui était inconnu.

La roche heureusement était à pic, il y avait beaucoup de fond, Gilliatt effaça et parvint à élonger la muraille. La marée soulevait assez la barque pour que Gilliatt en se haussant debout sur le bord de la panse pût atteindre aux pieds de l’homme. Il se dressa sur le bordage et éleva les mains. S’il fût tombé en ce moment-là, il est douteux qu’il eût reparu sur l’eau. La lame battait. Entre la panse et le rocher l’écrasement était inévitable.

Il tira le pied de l’homme endormi.

— Hé, que faites-vous là?

L’homme se réveilla.

— Je regarde, dit-il.

Il se réveilla tout à fait et reprit:

— J’arrive dans le pays, je suis venu par ici en me promenant, j’ai passé la nuit en mer, j’ai trouvé la vue belle, j’étais fatigué, je me suis endormi.

— Dix minutes plus tard, vous étiez noyé, dit Gilliatt.

— Bah!

— Sautez dans ma barque.

Gilliatt maintint la barque du pied, se cramponna d’une main au rocher et tendit l’autre main à l’homme vêtu de noir, qui sauta lestement dans le bateau. C’était un très beau jeune homme.

Gilliatt prit l’aviron, et en deux minutes la panse arriva dans l’anse du Bû de la Rue.

Le jeune homme avait un chapeau rond et une cravate blanche. Sa longue redingote noire était boutonnée jusqu’à la cravate. Il avait des cheveux blonds en couronne, le visage féminin, l’œil pur, l’air grave.

Cependant la panse avait touché terre. Gilliatt passa le câble dans l’anneau d’amarre, puis se tourna, et vit la main très blanche du jeune homme qui lui présentait un souverain d’or.

Gilliatt écarta doucement cette main.

Il y eut un silence. Le jeune homme le rompit.

— Vous m’avez sauvé la vie.

— Peut-être, répondit Gilliatt.

L’amarre était nouée. Ils sortirent de la barque.

Le jeune homme reprit:

— Je vous dois la vie, monsieur.

— Qu’est-ce que ça fait?

Cette réponse de Gilliatt fut encore suivie d’un silence.

— Êtes-vous de cette paroisse? demanda le jeune homme.

— Non, répondit Gilliatt.

— De quelle paroisse êtes-vous?

Gilliatt leva la main droite, montra le ciel, et dit:

— De celle-ci.

Le jeune homme le salua et le quitta.

Au bout de quelques pas, le jeune homme s’arrêta, fouilla dans sa poche, en tira un livre, et revint vers Gilliatt en lui tendant le livre.

— Permettez-moi de vous offrir ceci.

Gilliatt prit le livre.

C’était une bible.

Un instant après, Gilliatt, accoudé sur son parapet, regardait le jeune homme tourner l’angle du sentier qui va à Saint-Sampson.

Peu à peu il baissa la tête, oublia ce nouveau venu, ne sut plus si la chaise Gild-Holm-’Ur existait, et tout disparut pour lui dans l’immersion sans fond de la rêverie. Gilliatt avait un abîme, Déruchette.

Une voix qui l’appelait le tira de cette ombre.

— Hé, Gilliatt!

Il reconnut la voix et leva les yeux.

— Qu'y a-t-il, sieur Landoys?

C'était en effet sieur Landoys qui passait sur la route à cent pas du Bû de la Rue dans son phiaton (phaéton) attelé de son petit cheval. Il s'était arrêté pour héler Gilliatt, mais il semblait affairé et pressé.

— Il y a du nouveau, Gilliatt.

— Où ça?

— Aux Bravées.

— Quoi donc?

— Je suis trop loin pour vous conter cela.

Gilliatt frissonna.

— Est-ce que miss Déruchette se marie?

— Non. Il s'en faut.

— Que voulez-vous dire?

— Allez aux Bravées. Vous le saurez.

Et sieur Landoys fouetta son cheval.

LIVRE CINQUIEME

LE REVOLVER

I. Les conversations de l’auberge Jean.

Sieur Clubin était l’homme qui attend une occasion. Il était petit et jaune avec la force d’un taureau. La mer n’avait pu réussir à le hâler. Sa chair semblait de cire. Il était de la couleur d’un cierge et il en avait la clarté discrète dans les yeux. Sa mémoire était quelque chose d’imperturbable et de particulier. Pour lui, voir un homme une fois, c’était l’avoir; comme on a une note dans un registre. Ce regard laconique empoignait. Sa prunelle prenait une épreuve d’un visage et la gardait; le visage avait beau vieillir, sieur Clubin le retrouvait. Impossible de dépister ce souvenir tenace. Sieur Clubin était bref, sobre, froid; jamais un geste. Son air de candeur gagnait tout d’abord. Beaucoup de gens le croyaient naïf; il avait au coin de l’oeil un pli d’une bêtise étonnante. Pas de meilleur marin que lui, nous l’avons dit; personne comme lui pour amurer une voile, pour baisser le point du vent, et pour maintenir avec l’écoute la voile orientée. Aucune réputation de religion et d’intégrité ne dépassait la sienne. Qui l’eût soupçonné eût été suspect. Il était lié d’amitié avec M Rébuchet, changeur à Saint-Malo, rue saint-Vincent, à côté de l’armurier, et M Rébuchet disait: je donnerais ma boutique à garder à Clubin. sieur Clubin était veuvier. Sa femme avait été l’honnête femme comme il était l’honnête homme. Elle était morte avec la renommée d’une vertu à tout rompre. Si le bailli lui eût conté fleurette, elle l’eût été dire au roi; et si le bon Dieu eût été amoureux d’elle, elle l’eût été dire au curé. Ce couple, sieur et dame Clubin, avait réalisé dans Torteval l’idéal de l’épithète anglaise, respectable. dame Clubin était le cygne; sieur Clubin était l’hermine. Il fût mort d’une tache. Il n’eût pu trouver une épingle sans en chercher le propriétaire.

Il eût tambouriné un paquet d’allumettes. Il était entré un jour dans un cabaret à Saint-Servan, et avait dit au cabaretier: j’ai déjeuné ici il y a trois ans, vous vous êtes trompé dans l’addition; et il avait remboursé au cabaretier soixante-cinq centimes. C’était une grande probité, avec un pincement de lèvres attentif. Il semblait en arrêt. Sur qui? Sur les coquins probablement. Tous les mardis il menait la durande de Guernesey à Saint-Malo. Il arrivait à Saint-Malo le mardi soir, séjournait deux jours pour faire son chargement, et repartait pour Guernesey le vendredi matin. Il y avait alors à Saint-Malo une petite hôtellerie sur le port qu'on appelait l'auberge Jean. La construction des quais actuels a démoli cette auberge. à cette époque la mer venait mouiller la porte saint-Vincent et la porte Dinan; Saint-Malo et Saint-Servan communiquaient à marée basse par des carrioles et des maringottes roulant et circulant entre les navires à sec, évitant les bouées, les ancres et les cordages, et risquant parfois de crever leur capote de cuir à une basse vergue ou à une barre de clin-foc. Entre deux marées, les cochers houspillaient leurs chevaux sur ce sable où, six heures après, le vent fouettait le flot. Sur cette même grève rôdaient jadis les vingt-quatre dogues portiers de Saint-Malo, qui mangèrent un officier de marine en 1770. Cet excès de zèle les a fait supprimer. Aujourd'hui l'on n'entend plus d'aboiements nocturnes entre le petit Talard et le grand Talard. Sieur Clubin descendait à l'auberge Jean. C'est là qu'était le bureau français de la durande. Les douaniers et les gardes-côtes venaient prendre leurs repas et boire à l'auberge Jean. Ils avaient leur table à part. Les douaniers de Binic se rencontraient là, utilement pour le service, avec les douaniers de Saint-Malo. Des patrons de navires y venaient aussi, mais mangeaient à une autre table. Sieur Clubin s'asseyait tantôt à l'une, tantôt à l'autre, plus volontiers pourtant à la table des douaniers qu'à celle des patrons. Il était bienvenu aux deux. Ces tables étaient bien servies. Il y avait des raffinements de boissons locales étrangères pour les marins dépaysés. Un matelot petit-maître de Bilbao y eût trouvé une helada. On y buvait du stout comme à Greenwich et de la gueuse brune comme à Anvers. Des capitaines au long cours et des armateurs faisaient quelquefois figure à la mense des patrons. On y échangeait les nouvelles: -où en sont les sucres? -cette douceur ne figure que pour de petits lots. Pourtant les bruts vont; trois mille sacs de Bombay et cinq cents boucauts de Sagua.

— vous verrez que la droite finira par renverser Villèle. -et l'indigo? -on n'a traité que sept surons Guatemala. -la nanine-Julie est montée en rade. Joli trois-mâts de Bretagne. -voilà encore les deux villes de la Plata en bisbille. -quand Montevideo engraisse, Buenos-Ayres maigrit. -il a fallu transborder le chargement du regina-coeli , condamné au Callao. -les cacaos marchent; les sacs caraques sont cotés deux cent trente-quatre et les sacs Trinidad soixante-treize. -il paraît qu'à la revue du champ de Mars on a crié: à bas les ministres! -les cuirs salés verts saladeros se vendent, les boeufs soixante francs et les vaches quarante-huit. -a-t-on passé le Balkan?

Que fait Diebitsch? -à San Francisco l’anisette en pomponelles manque. L’huile d’olive Plagniol est calme. Le fromage de Gruyère en tins, trente-deux francs le quintal. -eh bien, Léon Xii est-il mort? -etc. Ces choses-là se criaient et se commentaient bruyamment. à la table des douaniers et des gardes-côtes on parlait moins haut. Les faits de police des côtes et des ports veulent moins de sonorité et moins de clarté dans le dialogue. La table des patrons était présidée par un vieux capitaine au long cours, M Gertrais-Gaboureau. M Gertrais-Gaboureau n’était pas un homme, c’était un baromètre. Son habitude de la mer lui avait donné une surprenante infaillibilité de pronostic. Il décrétait le temps qu’il fera demain. Il auscultait le vent; il tâtait le pouls à la marée. Il disait au nuage: montre-moi ta langue. C’est-à-dire l’éclair. Il était le docteur de la vague, de la brise, de la rafale. L’océan était son malade; il avait fait le tour du monde comme on fait une clinique, examinant chaque climat dans sa bonne et mauvaise santé; il savait à fond la pathologie des saisons. On l’entendait énoncer des faits comme ceci: -le baromètre a descendu une fois, en 1796, à trois lignes au-dessous de tempête. -il était marin par amour. Il haïssait l’Angleterre de toute l’amitié qu’il avait pour la mer. Il avait étudié soigneusement la marine anglaise pour en connaître le côté faible. Il expliquait en quoi le sovereign de 1637 différait du royal william de 1670 et de la victory de 1735. Il comparait les accastillages. Il regrettait les tours sur le pont et les hunes en entonnoir du great harry de 1514, probablement au point de vue du boulet français, qui se logeait si bien dans ces surfaces. Les nations pour lui n’existaient que par leurs institutions maritimes; des synonymies bizarres lui étaient propres. Il désignait volontiers l’Angleterre par trinity house , l’écosse par northern commissionners , et l’Irlande par ballast board . Il abondait en renseignements; il était alphabet et almanach; il était étiage et tarif. Il savait par coeur le péage des phares, surtout des anglais; un penny par tonne en passant devant celui-ci, un farthing devant celui-là. Il vous disait: le phare de small’s rock, qui ne consommait que deux cents gallons d’huile, en brûle maintenant quinze cents gallons. un jour, à bord, dans une maladie grave qu’il fit, on le croyait mort, l’équipage entourait son branle, il interrompit les hoquets de l’agonie pour dire au maître charpentier: -il serait avantageux d’adapter dans l’épaisseur des chouquets une mortaise de chaque côté pour y recevoir un réa en fonte ayant son essieu en fer et pour servir à passer les guinderesses. -de tout cela résultait une figure magistrale. Il était rare que le sujet de conversation fût le même à la table des patrons et à la table des douaniers. Ce cas pourtant se présenta précisément dans les premiers jours de ce mois de février où nous ont amené les faits que nous racontons. Le trois-mâts tamaulipas , capitaine Zuela, venant du Chili et y retournant, appela l’attention des deux menses. à la mense des patrons on parla de son chargement, et à la mense des douaniers de ses allures. Le capitaine Zuela, de Copiapo, était un chilien un peu colombien, qui avait fait avec indépendance les guerres de l’indépendance, tenant tantôt pour Bolivar, tantôt pour Morillo, selon qu’il y trouvait son profit. Il s’était enrichi à rendre service à tout le monde. Pas d’homme plus bourbonien, plus bonapartiste, plus absolutiste, plus libéral, plus athée, et plus catholique. Il était de ce grand parti qu’on pourrait nommer le parti lucratif. Il faisait de temps en temps en France des apparitions commerciales; et, à en croire les ouï-dire, il donnait volontiers passage à son bord à des gens en fuite, banqueroutiers ou proscrits politiques, peu lui importait, payants. Son procédé d’embarquement était simple. Le fugitif attendait sur un point désert de la côte, et, au moment d’appareiller, Zuela détachait un canot qui l’allait prendre. Il avait ainsi, à son précédent voyage, fait évader un contumace du procès Berton, et cette fois il comptait, disait-on, emmener des hommes compromis dans l’affaire de la Bidassoa. La police, avertie, avait l’oeil sur lui. Ces temps étaient une époque de fuites. La restauration était une réaction; or les révolutions amènent des émigrations, et les restaurations entraînent des proscriptions. Pendant les sept ou huit premières années après la rentrée des bourbons, la panique fut partout, dans la finance, dans l’industrie, dans le commerce, qui sentaient la terre trembler et où abondaient les faillites. Il y avait un sauve-qui-peut dans la politique. Lavalette avait pris la fuite, Lefebvre-Desnouettes avait pris la fuite, Delon avait pris la fuite. Les tribunaux d’exception sévissaient, plus Trestaillon. On fuyait le pont de Saumur, l’esplanade de la Réole, le mur de l’observatoire de Paris, la tour de Taurias d’Avignon, silhouettes lugubrement debout dans l’histoire, qu’a marquées la réaction, et où l’on distingue encore aujourd’hui cette main sanglante. à Londres le procès Thistlewood ramifié en France, à Paris le procès Trogoff, ramifié en Belgique, en Suisse et en Italie, avaient multiplié les motifs d’inquiétude et de disparition, et augmenté cette profonde déroute souterraine qui faisait le vide jusque dans les plus hauts rangs de l’ordre social d’alors. Se mettre en sûreté, tel était le souci. être compromis, c’était être perdu. être accusé, c’était être exécuté. L’esprit des cours prévôtales avait survécu à l’institution. Les condamnations étaient de complaisance. On se sauvait au Texas, aux montagnes Rocheuses, au Pérou, au Mexique. Les hommes de la Loire, brigands alors, paladins aujourd’hui, avaient fondé le champ d’asile. Une chanson de Béranger disait: sauvages, nous sommes français; prenez pitié de notre gloire. s’expatrier était la ressource. Mais rien n’est moins simple que de fuir; ce monosyllabe contient des abîmes. Tout fait obstacle à qui s’esquive. Se dérober implique se déguiser. Des personnes considérables, et même illustres, étaient réduites à des expédients de malfaiteurs. Et encore elles y réussissaient mal. Elles y étaient invraisemblables. Leur habitude de coudées franches rendait difficile leur glissement à travers les mailles de l’évasion. Un filou en rupture de ban était devant l’oeil de la police plus correct qu’un général. S’imagine-t-on l’innocence contrainte à se grimer, la vertu contrefaisant sa voix, la gloire mettant un masque? Tel passant à l’air suspect était une renommée en quête d’un faux passe-port. Les allures louches de l’homme qui s’échappe ne prouvaient pas qu’on n’eût point devant les yeux un héros. Traits fugitifs et caractéristiques des temps, que l’histoire dite régulière néglige, et que le vrai peintre d’un siècle doit souligner. Derrière ces fuites d’honnêtes gens se faufilaient, moins surveillées et moins suspectes, les fuites des fripons. Un chenapan forcé de s’éclipser profitait du pêle-mêle, faisait nombre parmi les proscrits, et souvent, nous venons de le dire, grâce à plus d’art, semblait dans ce crépuscule plus honnête homme que l’honnête homme. Rien n’est gauche comme la probité reprise de justice. Elle n’y comprend rien et fait des maladresses. Un faussaire s’échappait plus aisément qu’un conventionnel. Chose bizarre à constater, on pourrait presque dire, particulièrement pour les malhonnêtes gens, que l’évasion menait à tout. La quantité de civilisation qu’un coquin apportait de Paris ou de Londres lui tenait lieu de dot dans les pays primitifs ou barbares, le recommandait, et en faisait un initiateur. Cette aventure n’avait rien d’impossible d’échapper ici au code pour arriver là-bas au sacerdoce. Il y avait de la fantasmagorie dans la disparition, et plus d’une évasion a eu des résultats de rêve. Une fugue de ce genre conduisait à l’inconnu et au chimérique. Tel banqueroutier sorti d’Europe par ce trou à la lune a reparu vingt ans après grand vizir au Mogol ou roi en Tasmanie.

Aider aux évasions, c’était une industrie et, vu la fréquence du fait, une industrie à gros profits. Cette spéculation complétait de certains commerces. Qui voulait se sauver en Angleterre s’adressait aux contrebandiers; qui voulait se sauver en Amérique s’adressait à des fraudeurs de long cours tels que Zuela.

II. Clubin aperçoit quelqu’un.

Zuela venait quelquefois manger à l’auberge Jean. Sieur Clubin le connaissait de vue. Du reste, sieur Clubin n’était pas fier; il ne dédaignait pas de connaître de vue les chenapans. Il allait même quelquefois jusqu’à les connaître de fait, leur donnant la main en pleine rue et leur disant bonjour. Il parlait anglais au smogler et baragouinait l’espagnol avec le contrebandista. Il avait là-dessus des sentences: -on peut tirer du bien de la connaissance du mal. -le garde-chasse cause utilement avec le braconnier. -le pilote doit sonder le pirate; le pirate étant un écueil. -je goûte à un coquin comme un médecin goûte à un poison. -c’était sans réplique. Tout le monde donnait raison au capitaine Clubin. On l’approuvait de ne point être un délicat ridicule. Qui donc eût osé en médire? Tout ce qu’il faisait était évidemment “ pour le bien du service “ . De lui tout était simple. Rien ne pouvait le compromettre. Le cristal voudrait se tacher qu’il ne pourrait. Cette confiance était la juste récompense d’une longue honnêteté, et c’est là l’excellence des réputations bien assises. Quoi que fît ou quoi que semblât faire Clubin, on y entendait malice dans le sens de la vertu; l’impeccabilité lui était acquise; -par-dessus le marché, il est très avisé, disait-on; -et de telle ou telle accointance qui dans un autre eût été suspecte, sa probité sortait avec un relief d’habileté. Ce renom d’habileté se combinait harmonieusement avec son renom de naïveté, sans contradiction ni trouble. Un naïf habile, cela existe. C’est une des variétés de l’honnête homme, et une des plus appréciées. Sieur Clubin était de ces hommes qui, rencontrés en conversation intime avec un escroc ou un bandit, sont acceptés ainsi, pénétrés, compris, respectés d’autant plus, et ont pour eux le clignement d’yeux satisfait de l’estime publique. Le tamaulipas avait complété son chargement. Il était en partance et allait prochainement appareiller. Un mardi soir la durande arriva à Saint-Malo comme il faisait encore grand jour. Sieur Clubin, debout sur la passerelle et surveillant la manoeuvre de l’approche du port, aperçut près du petit-bey, sur la plage de sable, entre deux rochers, dans un lieu très solitaire, deux hommes qui causaient.

Il les visa de sa lunette marine, et reconnut l’un des deux hommes. C’était le capitaine Zuela. Il paraît qu’il reconnut aussi l’autre. Cet autre était un personnage de haute taille, un peu grisonnant. Il portait le haut chapeau et le grave vêtement des amis. C’était probablement un quaker. Il baissait les yeux avec modestie. En arrivant à l'auberge Jean, sieur Clubin apprit que le tamaulipas comptait appareiller dans une dizaine de jours. On a su depuis qu'il avait pris encore quelques autres informations. à la nuit il entra chez l'armurier de la rue saint-Vincent et lui dit: -savez-vous ce que c'est qu'un revolver? -oui, répondit l'armurier, c'est américain. -c'est un pistolet qui recommence la conversation. -en effet, ça a la demande et la réponse. -et la réplique. -c'est juste, monsieur Clubin. Un canon tournant. -et cinq ou six balles. L'armurier entr'ouvrit le coin de sa lèvre et fit entendre ce bruit de langue qui, accompagné d'un hochement de tête, exprime l'admiration. -l'arme est bonne, Monsieur Clubin. Je crois qu'elle fera son chemin. -je voudrais un revolver à six canons. -je n'en ai pas. -comment ça, vous armurier? -je ne tiens pas encore l'article. Voyez-vous, c'est nouveau. ça débute. On ne fait encore en France que du pistolet. -diable! -ça n'est pas encore dans le commerce. -diable! -j'ai d'excellents pistolets. -je veux un revolver. -je conviens que c'est plus avantageux. Mais attendez donc, Monsieur Clubin... -quoi? -je crois savoir qu'il y en a un en ce moment à Saint-Malo, d'occasion. -un revolver? -oui. -à vendre? -oui. -où ça? -je crois savoir où. Je m'informerai. -quand pourrez-vous me rendre réponse? -d'occasion. Mais bon. -quand faut-il que je revienne? -si je vous procure un revolver, c'est qu'il sera bon. -quand me rendrez-vous réponse? -à votre prochain voyage. -ne dites pas que c'est pour moi, dit Clubin.

III. Clubin emporte et ne rapporte point.

Sieur Clubin fit le chargement de la durande, embarqua nombre de boeufs et quelques passagers, et quitta, comme à l'ordinaire, Saint-Malo pour Guernesey le vendredi matin. Ce même jour vendredi, quand le navire fut au large, ce qui permet au capitaine de s'absenter quelques instants du pont de commandement, Clubin entra dans sa cabine, s'y enferma, prit un sac-valise qu'il avait, mit des vêtements dans le compartiment élastique, du biscuit, quelques boîtes de conserves, quelques livres de cacao en bâton, un chronomètre et une lunette marine dans le compartiment solide, cadenassa le sac, et passa dans les oreillons une aussière toute préparée pour le hisser au besoin. Puis il descendit dans la cale, entra dans la fosse aux câbles, et on le vit remonter avec une de ces cordes à noeuds armées d'un crampon qui servent aux calfats sur mer et aux voleurs sur terre. Ces cordes facilitent les escalades. Arrivé à Guernesey, Clubin alla à Torteval. Il y passa trente-six heures. Il y emporta le sac-valise et la corde à noeuds, et ne les rapporta pas. à cette époque, les contrebandiers d'Espagne venaient jusqu'à Guernesey.

Ils y apportaient des cigares de la Havane et du vin de Xérès, que les anglais appellent sherry. Disons-le une fois pour toutes, le Guernesey dont il est question dans ce livre, c’est l’ancien Guernesey, qui n’existe plus et qu’il serait impossible de retrouver aujourd’hui, ailleurs que dans les campagnes. Là il est encore vivant, mais il est mort dans les villes. La remarque que nous faisons pour Guernesey doit être aussi faite pour Jersey. Saint-Hélier vaut Dieppe; Saint-Pierre-Port vaut Lorient. Grâce au progrès, grâce à l’admirable esprit d’initiative de ce vaillant petit peuple insulaire, tout s’est transformé depuis quarante ans dans l’archipel de la Manche. Où il y avait l’ombre, il y a la lumière. Cela dit, passons. En ces temps qui sont déjà, par l’éloignement, des temps historiques, la contrebande était très active dans la Manche. Les navires fraudeurs abondaient particulièrement sur la côte ouest de Guernesey. Les personnes renseignées à outrance, et qui savent dans les moindres détails ce qui se passait il y a tout à l’heure un demi-siècle, vont jusqu’à citer les noms de plusieurs de ces navires, presque tous asturiens et guipuscoans. Ce qui est hors de doute, c’est qu’il ne s’écoulait guère de semaine sans qu’il en vînt un ou deux, soit dans la baie des saints, soit à Plainmont. Cela avait presque les allures d’un service régulier. Une cave de la mer à Serk s’appelait et s’appelle encore les boutiques, parce que c’était dans cette grotte qu’on venait acheter aux fraudeurs leurs marchandises. Pour les besoins de ces commerces, il se parlait dans la Manche une espèce de langue contrebandière, oubliée aujourd’hui, et qui était à l’espagnol ce que le levantin est à l’italien. Sur beaucoup de points du littoral anglais et français, la contrebande était en cordiale entente secrète avec le négoce patent et patenté. Elle avait ses entrées chez plus d’un haut financier, par la porte dérobée, il est vrai; et elle fusait souterrainement dans la circulation commerciale et dans tout le système veineux de l’industrie. Négociant par devant, contrebandier par derrière; c’était l’histoire de beaucoup de fortunes. Séguin le disait de Bourgain; Bourgain le disait de Séguin. Nous ne nous faisons point garant de leurs paroles; peut-être se calomniaient-ils l’un et l’autre. Quoi qu’il en fût, la contrebande, traquée par la loi, était incontestablement fort bien apparentée dans la finance. Elle était en rapport avec “ le meilleur monde “ . Cette caverne, où Mandrin coudoyait jadis le comte de Charolais, était honnête au dehors, et avait une façade irréprochable sur la société; pignon sur rue. De là beaucoup de connivences, nécessairement masquées. Ces mystères voulaient une ombre impénétrable. Un contrebandier savait beaucoup de choses, et devait les taire; une foi inviolable et rigide était sa loi. La première qualité d’un fraudeur était la loyauté. Sans discrétion pas de contrebande. Il y avait le secret de la fraude comme il y a le secret de la confession. Ce secret était imperturbablement gardé. Le contrebandier jurait de tout taire, et tenait parole. On ne pouvait se fier à personne mieux qu’à un fraudeur. Le juge-alcade d’Oyarzun prit un jour un contrebandier des ports secs, et le fit mettre à la question pour le forcer à nommer son bailleur de fonds secret. Le contrebandier ne nomma point le bailleur de fonds. Ce bailleur de fonds était le juge-alcade. De ces deux complices, le juge et le contrebandier, l’un avait dû, pour obéir aux yeux de tous à la loi, ordonner la torture, à laquelle l’autre avait résisté, pour obéir à son serment. Les deux plus fameux contrebandiers hantant Plainmont à cette époque étaient Blasco et Blasquito. Ils étaient tocayos. C’est une parenté espagnole et catholique qui consiste à avoir le même patron dans le paradis, chose, on en conviendra, non moins digne de considération que d’avoir le même père sur la terre. Quand on était à peu près au fait du furtif itinéraire de la contrebande, parler à ces hommes, rien n’était plus facile et plus difficile. Il suffisait de n’avoir aucun préjugé nocturne, d’aller à Plainmont et d’affronter le mystérieux point d’interrogation qui se dresse là.

IV. Plainmont.

Plainmont, près Torteval, est un des trois angles de Guernesey. Il y a là, à l’extrémité du cap, une haute croupe de gazon qui domine la mer. Ce sommet est désert. Il est d’autant plus désert qu’on y voit une maison. Cette maison ajoute l’effroi à la solitude. Elle est, dit-on, visionnée. Hantée ou non, l’aspect en est étrange. Cette maison, bâtie en granit et élevée d’un étage, est au milieu de l’herbe. Elle n’a rien d’une ruine. Elle est parfaitement habitable. Les murs sont épais et le toit est solide. Pas une pierre ne manque aux murailles, pas une tuile au toit. Une cheminée de brique contrebute l’angle du toit. Cette maison tourne le dos à la mer. Sa façade du côté de l’océan n’est qu’une muraille. En examinant attentivement cette façade, on y distingue une fenêtre, murée. Les deux pignons offrent trois lucarnes, une à l’est, deux à l’ouest, murées toutes trois. La devanture qui fait face à la terre a seule une porte et des fenêtres. La porte est murée. Les deux fenêtres du rez-de-chaussée sont murées. Au premier étage, et c’est là ce qui frappe tout d’abord quand on approche, il y a deux fenêtres ouvertes; mais les fenêtres murées sont moins farouches que ces fenêtres ouvertes. Leur ouverture les fait noires en plein jour. Elles n’ont pas de vitres, pas même de châssis. Elles s’ouvrent sur l’ombre du dedans. On dirait les trous vides de deux yeux arrachés. Rien dans cette maison. On aperçoit par les croisées béantes le délabrement intérieur. Pas de lambris, nulle boiserie, la pierre nue. On croit voir un sépulcre à fenêtre permettant aux spectres de regarder dehors. Les pluies affouillent les fondations du côté de la mer. Quelques orties agitées par le vent caressent le bas des murs. à l’horizon, aucune habitation humaine. Cette maison est une chose vide où il y a le silence. Si l’on s’arrête pourtant et si l’on colle son oreille à la muraille, on y entend confusément par instants des battements d’ailes effarouchées. Au-dessus de la porte murée, sur la pierre qui fait l’architrave, sont gravées ces lettres: elm-pbilg, et cette date: 1780. La nuit, la lune lugubre entre là.

Toute la mer est autour de cette maison. Sa situation est magnifique, et par conséquent sinistre. La beauté du lieu devient une énigme. Pourquoi aucune famille humaine n’habite-t-elle ce logis? La place est belle, la maison est bonne. D’où vient cet abandon? Aux questions de la raison s’ajoutent les questions de la rêverie. Ce champ est cultivable, d’où vient qu’il est inculte? Pas de maître. La porte murée. Qu’a donc ce lieu? Pourquoi l’homme en fuite? Que se passe-t-il ici? S’il ne s’y passe rien, pourquoi n’y a-t-il personne? Quand tout est endormi, y a-t-il ici quelqu’un d’éveillé? La rafale ténébreuse, le vent, les oiseaux de proie, les bêtes cachées, les êtres ignorés, apparaissent à la pensée et se mêlent à cette maison. De quels passants est-elle l’hôtellerie? On se figure des ténèbres de grêle et de pluie s’engouffrant dans les fenêtres. De vagues ruissellements de tempêtes ont laissé leurs traces sur la muraille intérieure. Ces chambres murées et ouvertes sont visitées par l’ouragan. S’est-il commis un crime là? Il semble que, la nuit, cette maison livrée à l’ombre doit appeler au secours. Reste-t-elle muette? En sort-il des voix? à qui a-t-elle affaire dans cette solitude? Le mystère des heures noires est à l’aise ici. Cette maison est inquiétante à midi; qu’est-elle à minuit? En la regardant, on regarde un secret. On se demande, la rêverie ayant sa logique et le possible ayant sa pente, ce que devient cette maison entre le crépuscule du soir et le crépuscule du matin. L’immense dispersion de la vie extra-humaine a-t-elle sur ce sommet désert un noeud où elle s’arrête et qui la force à devenir visible et à descendre? L’épars vient-il y tourbillonner? L’impalpable s’y condense-t-il jusqu’à prendre forme? énigmes. L’horreur sacrée est dans ces pierres. Cette ombre qui est dans ces chambres défendues est plus que de l’ombre; c’est de l’inconnu. Après le soleil couché, les bateaux pêcheurs rentreront, les oiseaux se tairont, le chevrier qui est derrière le rocher s’en ira avec ses chèvres, les entre-deux des pierres livreront passage aux premiers glissements des reptiles rassurés, les étoiles commenceront à regarder, la bise soufflera, le plein de l’obscurité se fera, ces deux fenêtres seront là, béantes. Cela s’ouvre aux songes; et c’est par des apparitions, par des larves, par des faces de fantômes vaguement distinctes, par des masques dans des lueurs, par de mystérieux tumultes d’âmes et d’ombres, que la croyance populaire, à la fois stupide et profonde, traduit les sombres intimités de cette demeure avec la nuit. La maison est “ visionnée “; ce mot répond à tout. Les esprits crédules ont leur explication; mais les esprits positifs ont aussi la leur. Rien de plus simple, disent-ils, que cette maison. C’est un ancien poste d’observation, du temps des guerres de la révolution et de l’empire, et des contrebandes. Elle a été bâtie là pour cela. La guerre finie, le poste a été abandonné.

On n’a pas démoli la maison parce qu’elle peut redevenir utile. On a muré la porte et les fenêtres du rez-de-chaussée contre les stercoraires humains, et pour que personne n’y pût entrer; on a muré les fenêtres des trois côtés sur la mer, à cause du vent du sud et du vent d’ouest. Voilà tout. Les ignorants et les crédules insistent. D’abord, la maison n’a pas été bâtie à l’époque des guerres de la révolution. Elle porte la date-1780- antérieure à la révolution. Ensuite, elle n’a pas été bâtie pour être un poste; elle porte les lettres elm-pbilg, qui sont le double monogramme de deux familles, et qui indiquent, suivant l’usage, que la maison a été construite pour l’établissement d’un jeune ménage. Donc, elle a été habitée. Pourquoi ne l’est-elle plus? Si l’on a muré la porte et les croisées pour que personne ne pût pénétrer dans la maison, pourquoi a-t-on laissé deux fenêtres ouvertes? Il fallait tout murer, ou rien. Pourquoi pas de volets? Pourquoi pas de châssis? Pourquoi pas de vitres? Pourquoi murer les fenêtres d’un côté si on ne les mure pas de l’autre? On empêche la pluie d’entrer par le sud, mais on la laisse entrer par le nord. Les crédules ont tort, sans doute, mais à coup sûr les positifs n’ont pas raison. Le problème persiste. Ce qui est sûr, c’est que la maison passe pour avoir été plutôt utile que nuisible aux contrebandiers. Le grossissement de l’effroi ôte aux faits leur vraie proportion. Sans nul doute, bien des phénomènes nocturnes, parmi ceux dont s’est peu à peu composé le “ visionnement “ de la masure, pourraient s’expliquer par des présences obscures et furtives, par de courtes stations d’hommes tout de suite rembarqués, tantôt par les précautions, tantôt par les hardiesses de certains industriels suspects se cachant pour mal faire et se laissant entrevoir pour faire peur. à cette époque déjà lointaine, beaucoup d'audaces étaient possibles. La police, surtout dans les petits pays, n'était pas ce qu'elle est aujourd'hui. Ajoutons que, si cette masure était, comme on le dit, commode aux fraudeurs, leurs rendez-vous devaient avoir là jusqu'à un certain point leurs coudées franches, précisément parce que la maison était mal vue. être mal vue l'empêchait d'être dénoncée. Ce n'est guère aux douaniers et aux sergents qu'on s'adresse contre les spectres. Les superstitieux font des signes de croix et non des procès-verbaux. Ils voient ou croient voir, s'enfuient et se taisent. Il existe une connivence tacite, non voulue, mais réelle, entre ceux qui font peur et ceux qui ont peur. Les effrayés se sentent dans leur tort d'avoir été effrayés, ils s'imaginent avoir surpris un secret, ils craignent d'aggraver leur position, mystérieuse pour eux-mêmes, et de fâcher les apparitions. Ceci les rend discrets. Et, même en dehors de ce calcul, l'instinct des gens crédules est le silence; il y a du mutisme dans l'épouvante; les terrifiés parlent peu; il semble que l'horreur dise: chut! S'il faut ajouter foi aux légendes locales et aux récits des gens qu'on rencontre, la superstition autrefois a quelquefois été jusqu'à suspendre aux murs de cette maison de Plainmont, à des clous dont on voit encore çà et là la trace, des rats sans pattes, des chauves-souris sans ailes, des carcasses de bêtes mortes, des crapauds écrasés entre les pages d'une bible, des brins de lupin jaune, étranges ex-voto, accrochés là par d'imprudents passants nocturnes qui avaient cru voir quelque chose, et qui, par ces cadeaux, espéraient obtenir leur pardon, et conjurer la mauvaise humeur des stryges, des larves et des brucolaques. Il y a eu de tout temps des crédules aux abacas et aux sabbats, et même d'assez haut placés. César consultait Sagane, et Napoléon Mademoiselle Lenormand. Il est des consciences inquiètes jusqu'à tâcher d'obtenir des indulgences du diable. que Dieu fasse et que Satan ne défasse pas! c'était là une des prières de Charles-Quint. D'autres esprits sont plus timorés encore. Ils vont jusqu'à se persuader qu'on peut avoir des torts envers le mal. être irréprochable vis-à-vis du démon, c'est une de leurs préoccupations. De là des pratiques religieuses tournées vers l'immense malice obscure. C'est un bigotisme comme un autre. Les crimes contre le démon existent dans certaines imaginations malades; avoir violé la loi d'en bas tourmente de bizarres casuistes de l'ignorance; on a des scrupules du côté des ténèbres. Croire à l’efficacité de la dévotion aux mystères du Brocken et d’Armuyr, se figurer qu’on a péché contre l’enfer, avoir recours pour des infractions chimériques à des pénitences chimériques, avouer la vérité à l’esprit de mensonge, faire son meâ culpâ devant le père de la faute, se confesser en sens inverse, tout cela existe ou a existé; les procès de magie le prouvent à chaque page de leurs dossiers. Le songe humain va jusque-là. Quand l’homme se met à s’effarer, il ne s’arrête point. On rêve des fautes imaginaires, on rêve des purifications imaginaires, et l’on fait faire le nettoyage de sa conscience par l’ombre du balai des sorcières. Il faut se souvenir que ceci remonte à l’époque où les paysans guernesiais croyaient que le mystère de la crèche était, tous les ans, à jour fixe, répété par les boeufs et les ânes; époque où personne, dans la nuit de noël, n’eût osé pénétrer dans une étable, de peur d’y trouver les bêtes à genoux. Quoi qu’il en soit, si cette maison a des aventures, c’est son affaire; à part quelques hasards et quelques exceptions, nul n’y va voir, elle est laissée seule; il n’est du goût de personne de se risquer aux rencontres infernales. Grâce à la terreur qui la garde, et qui en éloigne quiconque pourrait observer et témoigner, il a été de tout temps facile de s’introduire la nuit dans cette maison, au moyen d’une échelle de corde, ou même tout simplement du premier échalier venu pris aux courtils voisins. Un en-cas de hardes et de vivres apporté là permettrait d’y attendre en toute sécurité l’éventualité et l’à-propos d’un embarquement furtif. La tradition raconte qu’il y a une quarantaine d’années, un fugitif, de la politique selon les uns, du commerce selon les autres, a séjourné quelque temps caché dans la maison visionnée de Plainmont, d’où il a réussi à s’embarquer sur un bateau pêcheur pour l’Angleterre. D’Angleterre on gagne aisément l’Amérique. Cette même tradition affirme que des provisions déposées dans cette masure y demeurent sans qu’on y touche; Lucifer, comme les contrebandiers, ayant intérêt à ce que celui qui les a mises là revienne. Du sommet où est cette maison, on aperçoit au sud-ouest, à un mille de la côte, l’écueil des hanois. Cet écueil est célèbre. Il a fait toutes les mauvaises actions que peut faire un rocher. C’était un des plus redoutables assassins de la mer. Il attendait en traître les navires dans la nuit. Il a élargi les cimetières de Torteval et de la Rocquaine. En 1862 on a placé sur cet écueil un phare. Aujourd’hui l’écueil des hanois éclaire la navigation qu’il fourvoyait; le guet-apens a un flambeau à la main. On cherche à l’horizon comme un protecteur et un guide ce rocher qu’on fuyait comme un malfaiteur. Les hanois rassurent ces vastes espaces nocturnes qu’ils effrayaient. C’est quelque chose comme le brigand devenu gendarme. Il y a trois hanois: le grand hanois, le petit hanois, et la mauve. C’est sur le petit hanois qu’est aujourd’hui le “ light red “ . Cet écueil fait partie d’un groupe de pointes, quelques-unes sous-marines, quelques-unes sortant de la mer. Il les domine. Il a, comme une forteresse, ses ouvrages avancés; du côté de la haute mer, un cordon de treize rochers; au nord, deux brisants, les hautes-fourquies, les aiguillons, et un banc de sable, l’hérouée; au sud, trois roches, le cat-rock, la percée et la roque herpin; plus deux boues, la south boue et la boue le mouet, et en outre, devant Plainmont, à fleur d’eau, le tas de pois d’aval. Qu’un nageur franchisse le détroit des hanois à Plainmont, cela est malaisé, non impossible. On se souvient que c’était une des prouesses de sieur Clubin. Le nageur qui connaît ces bas-fonds a deux stations où il peut se reposer, la roque ronde, et plus loin, en obliquant un peu à gauche, la roque rouge.

V. Les déniquoiseaux.

C’est à peu près vers cette journée le samedi, passée par sieur Clubin à Torteval, qu’il faut rapporter un fait singulier, peu ébruité d’abord dans le pays, et qui ne transpira que longtemps après. Car beaucoup de choses, nous venons de le remarquer, restent inconnues à cause même de l’effroi qu’elles ont fait à ceux qui en ont été témoins. Dans la nuit du samedi au dimanche, nous précisons la date et nous la croyons exacte, trois enfants escaladèrent l’escarpement de Plainmont. Ces enfants s’en retournaient au village. Ils venaient de la mer. C’était ce qu’on appelle dans la langue locale des déniquoiseaux . Lisez déniche-oiseaux. Partout où il y a des falaises et des trous de rochers au-dessus de la mer, les enfants dénicheurs d’oiseaux abondent. Nous en avons dit un mot déjà. On se souvient que Gilliatt s’en préoccupait, à cause des oiseaux et à cause des enfants. Les déniquoiseaux sont des espèces de gamins de l’océan, peu timides. La nuit était très obscure. D’épaisses superpositions de nuées cachaient le zénith. Trois heures du matin venaient de sonner au clocher de torteval, qui est rond et pointu et qui ressemble à un bonnet de magicien. Pourquoi ces enfants revenaient-ils si tard? Rien de plus simple. Ils étaient allés à la chasse aux nids de mauves, dans le tas de pois d’aval. La saison ayant été très douce, les amours des oiseaux commençaient de très bonne heure. Ces enfants, guettant les allures des mâles et des femelles autour des gîtes, et distraits par l’acharnement de cette poursuite, avaient oublié l’heure. Le flux les avait cernés; ils n’avaient pu regagner à temps la petite anse où ils avaient amarré leur canot, et ils avaient dû attendre sur une des pointes du tas de pois que la mer se retirât. De là leur rentrée nocturne. Ces rentrées-là sont attendues par la fiévreuse inquiétude des mères, laquelle, rassurée, dépense sa joie en colère, et, grossie dans les larmes, se dissipe en taloches. Aussi se hâtaient-ils, assez inquiets. Ils avaient cette manière de se hâter qui s'attarderait volontiers, et qui contient un secret désir de ne pas arriver. Ils avaient en perspective un embrassement compliqué de giffles. Un seul de ces enfants n'avait rien à craindre, c'était un orphelin. Ce garçon était français, sans père ni mère, et content en cette minute-là de n'avoir pas de mère. Personne ne s'intéressant à lui, il ne serait pas battu. Les deux autres étaient guernesiais, et de la paroisse même de Torteval. La haute croupe de roches escaladée, les trois déniquoiseaux parvinrent sur le plateau où est la maison visionnée. Ils commencèrent par avoir peur, ce qui est le devoir de tout passant, et surtout de tout enfant, à cette heure et dans ce lieu. Ils eurent bien envie de se sauver à toutes jambes, et bien envie de s'arrêter pour regarder. Ils s'arrêtèrent. Ils regardèrent la maison. Elle était toute noire, et formidable. C'était, au milieu du plateau désert, un bloc obscur, une excroissance symétrique et hideuse, une haute masse carrée à angles rectilignes, quelque chose de semblable à un énorme autel de ténèbres. La première pensée des enfants avait été de s'enfuir; la seconde fut de s'approcher. Ils n'avaient jamais vu cette maison-là à cette heure-là. La curiosité d'avoir peur existe. Ils avaient un petit français avec eux, ce qui fit qu'ils approchèrent. On sait que les français ne croient à rien. D'ailleurs, être plusieurs dans un danger, rassure; avoir peur à trois, encourage. Et puis, on est chasseur, on est enfant; à trois qu'on est, on n'a pas trente ans; on est en quête, on fouille, on épie les choses cachées; est-ce pour s'arrêter en chemin? On avance la tête dans ce trou-ci, comment ne point l'avancer dans ce trou-là? Qui est en chasse subit un entraînement; qui va à la découverte est dans un engrenage. Avoir tant regardé dans le nid des oiseaux, cela donne la démangeaison de regarder un peu dans le nid des spectres. Fureter dans l'enfer; pourquoi pas? De gibier en gibier, on arrive au démon. Après les moineaux, les farfadets. On va savoir à quoi s'en tenir sur toutes ces peurs que vos parents vous ont faites. être sur la piste des contes bleus, rien n'est plus glissant. En savoir aussi long que les bonnes femmes, cela tente. Tout ce pêle-mêle d'idées, à l'état de confusion et d'instinct dans la cervelle des déniquoiseaux guernesiais, eut pour résultante leur témérité. Ils marchèrent vers la maison. Du reste, le petit qui leur servait de point d’appui dans cette bravoure en était digne. C’était un garçon résolu, apprenti calfat, de ces enfants déjà hommes, couchant au chantier sur de la paille dans un hangar, gagnant sa vie, ayant une grosse voix, grimpant volontiers aux murs et aux arbres, sans préjugés vis-à-vis des pommes près desquelles il passait, ayant travaillé à des radoubs de vaisseaux de guerre, fils du hasard, enfant de raccroc, orphelin gai, né en France, et on ne savait où, deux raisons pour être hardi, ne regardant pas à donner un double à un pauvre, très méchant, très bon, blond jusqu’au roux, ayant parlé à des parisiens. Pour le moment, il gagnait un chelin par jour à calfater des barques de poissonniers, en réparation aux pêqueries. Quand l’envie lui en prenait, il se donnait des vacances, et allait dénicher des oiseaux. Tel était le petit français. La solitude du lieu avait on ne sait quoi de funèbre. On sentait là l’inviolabilité menaçante. C’était farouche. Ce plateau, silencieux et nu, dérobait à très courte distance dans le précipice sa courbe déclive et fuyante. La mer en bas se taisait. Il n’y avait point de vent. Les brins d’herbe ne bougeaient pas. Les petits déniquoiseaux avançaient à pas lents, l’enfant français en tête, en regardant la maison. L’un d’eux, plus tard, en racontant le fait, ou l’à peu près qui lui en était resté, ajoutait: “ elle ne disait rien. “ ils s’approchaient en retenant leur haleine, comme on approcherait d’une bête. Ils avaient gravi le roidillon qui est derrière la maison et qui aboutit du côté de la mer à un petit isthme de rochers peu praticable; ils étaient parvenus assez près de la masure; mais ils ne voyaient que la façade sud, qui est toute murée; ils n’avaient pas osé tourner à gauche, ce qui les eût exposés à voir l’autre façade où il y a deux fenêtres, ce qui est terrible. Cependant ils s’enhardirent, l’apprenti calfat leur ayant dit tout bas: -virons à bâbord. C’est ce côté-là qui est le beau. Il faut voir les deux fenêtres noires. Ils “ virèrent à bâbord “ et arrivèrent de l’autre côté de la maison. Les deux fenêtres étaient éclairées. Les enfants s’enfuirent. Quand ils furent loin, le petit français se retourna. -tiens, dit-il, il n’y a plus de lumière. En effet, il n’y avait plus de clarté aux fenêtres. La silhouette de la masure se dessinait, découpée comme à l’emporte-pièce, sur la lividité diffuse du ciel. La peur ne s’en alla point, mais la curiosité revint. Les déniquoiseaux se rapprochèrent. Brusquement, aux deux fenêtres à la fois, la lumière se refit. Les deux gars de Torteval reprirent leurs jambes à leur cou, et se sauvèrent. Le petit satan de français n’avança pas, mais ne recula pas. Il demeura immobile, faisant face à la maison, et la regardant.

La clarté s’éteignit, puis brilla de nouveau. Rien de plus horrible. Le reflet faisait une vague traînée de feu sur l’herbe mouillée par la buée de la nuit. à un certain moment, la lueur dessina sur le mur intérieur de la masure de grands profils noirs qui remuaient et des ombres de têtes énormes. Du reste, la masure étant sans plafonds ni cloisons et n’ayant plus que les quatre murs et le toit, une fenêtre ne peut pas être éclairée sans que l’autre le soit. Voyant que l’apprenti calfat restait, les deux autres déniquoiseaux revinrent, pas à pas, l’un après l’autre, tremblants, curieux. L’apprenti calfat leur dit tout bas: -il y a des revenants dans la maison. J’ai vu le nez d’un. -les deux petits de Torteval se blottirent derrière le français, et haussés sur la pointe du pied, par-dessus son épaule, abrités par lui, le prenant pour bouclier, l’opposant à la chose, rassurés de le sentir entre eux et la vision, ils regardèrent, eux aussi. La masure, de son côté, semblait les regarder. Elle avait, dans cette vaste obscurité muette, deux prunelles rouges. C’étaient les fenêtres. La lumière s’éclipsait, reparaissait, s’éclipsait encore, comme font ces lumières-là. Ces intermittences sinistres tiennent probablement au va-et-vient de l’enfer. Cela s’entr’ouvre, puis se referme. Le soupirail du sépulcre a des effets de lanterne sourde. Tout à coup une noirceur très opaque ayant la forme humaine se dressa sur l’une des fenêtres comme si elle venait du dehors, puis s’enfonça dans l’intérieur de la maison. Il sembla que quelqu’un venait d’entrer. Entrer par la croisée, c’est l’habitude des alleurs. La clarté fut un moment plus vive, puis s’éteignit et ne reparut plus. La maison redevint noire. Alors il en sortit des bruits. Ces bruits ressemblaient à des voix. C’est toujours comme cela. Quand on voit, on n’entend pas; quand on ne voit pas, on entend. La nuit sur la mer a une taciturnité particulière. Le silence de l’ombre est là plus profond qu’ailleurs. Lorsqu’il n’y a ni vent ni flot, dans cette remuante étendue où d’ordinaire on n’entend pas voler les aigles, on entendrait une mouche voler. Cette paix sépulcrale donnait un relief lugubre aux bruits qui sortaient de la masure. -voyons voir, dit le petit français. Et il fit un pas vers la maison. Les deux autres avaient une telle peur qu’ils se décidèrent à le suivre. Ils n’osaient plus s’enfuir tout seuls. Comme ils venaient de dépasser un assez gros tas de fagots qui, on ne sait pas pourquoi, les rassurait dans cette solitude, une chevêche s’envola d’un buisson. Cela fit un froissement de branches. Les chevêches ont une espèce de vol louche, d’une obliquité inquiétante. L’oiseau passa de travers près des enfants, en fixant sur eux la rondeur de ses yeux, clairs dans la nuit. Il y eut un certain tremblement dans le groupe derrière le petit français. Il apostropha la chevêche. -moineau, tu viens trop tard. Il n’est plus temps. Je veux voir. Et il avança. Le craquement de ses gros souliers cloutés sur les ajoncs n’empêchait pas d’entendre les bruits de la masure, qui s’élevaient et s’abaissaient, avec l’accentuation calme et la continuité d’un dialogue. Un moment après, il ajouta: -d’ailleurs il n’y a que les bêtes qui croient aux revenants. L’insolence dans le danger rallie les traînards et les pousse en avant. Les deux gars de Torteval se remirent en marche, emboîtant le pas à la suite de l’apprenti calfat. La maison visionnée leur faisait l’effet de grandir démesurément. Dans cette illusion d’optique de la peur il y avait de la réalité. La maison grandissait en effet, parce qu’ils en approchaient. Cependant les voix qui étaient dans la maison prenaient une saillie de plus en plus nette. Les enfants écoutaient. L’oreille aussi a ses grossissements. C’était autre chose qu’un murmure, plus qu’un chuchotement, moins qu’un brouhaha. Par instants une ou deux paroles clairement articulées se détachaient. Ces paroles, impossibles à comprendre, sonnaient bizarrement. Les enfants s’arrêtaient, écoutaient, puis recommençaient à avancer. -c’est la conversation des revenants, murmura l’apprenti calfat, mais je ne crois pas aux revenants. Les petits de Torteval étaient bien tentés de se replier derrière le tas de fagots; mais ils en étaient déjà loin, et leur ami le calfat continuait de marcher vers la masure. Ils tremblaient de rester avec lui, et ils n’osaient pas le quitter. Pas à pas, et perplexes, ils le suivaient. L’apprenti calfat se tourna vers eux et leur dit: -vous savez que ce n’est pas vrai. Il n’y en a pas. La maison devenait de plus en plus haute. Les voix devenaient de plus en plus distinctes. Ils approchaient. En approchant, on reconnaissait qu’il y avait dans la maison quelque chose comme de la lumière étouffée. C’était une lueur très vague, un de ces effets de lanterne sourde indiqués tout à l’heure, et qui abondent dans l’éclairage des sabbats.

Quand ils furent tout près, ils firent halte. Un des deux de Torteval hasarda cette observation: -ce n’est pas des revenants; c’est des dames blanches. -qu’est-ce que c’est que ça qui pend à une fenêtre? Demanda l’autre. -ça a l’air d’une corde. -c’est un serpent. -c’est de la corde de pendu, dit le français avec autorité. ça leur sert. Mais je n’y crois pas. Et, en trois bonds plutôt qu’en trois pas, il fut au pied du mur de la masure. Il y avait de la fièvre dans cette hardiesse. Les deux autres, frissonnants, l’imitèrent, et vinrent se coller près de lui, se serrant l’un contre son côté droit, l’autre contre son côté gauche. Les enfants appliquèrent leur oreille contre la muraille. On continuait de parler dans la maison. Voici ce que disaient les fantômes: -ainsi, c’est entendu? -entendu. -c’est dit? -dit. -un homme attendra ici, et pourra s’en aller en Angleterre avec Blasquito? -en payant. -en payant. -Blasquito prendra l’homme dans sa barque. -sans chercher à savoir de quel pays il est? -cela ne nous regarde pas. -sans lui demander son nom? -on ne demande pas le nom; on pèse la bourse.

— bien. L’homme attendra dans cette maison. -il faudra qu’il ait de quoi manger. -il en aura. -où? -dans ce sac que j’apporte. -très bien. -puis-je laisser ce sac ici? -les contrebandiers ne sont pas des voleurs. -et vous autres, quand partez-vous? -demain matin. Si votre homme était prêt, il pourrait venir avec nous. -il n’est pas prêt. -c’est son affaire. -combien de jours aura-t-il à attendre dans cette maison? -deux, trois, quatre jours. Moins ou plus. -est-il certain que Blasquito viendra? -certain. -ici? à Plainmont? -à Plainmont. -quelle semaine? -la semaine prochaine.

— quel jour? -vendredi, samedi, ou dimanche. -il ne peut manquer? -il est mon tocayo. -il vient par tous les temps? -par tous. Il n’a pas peur. Je suis Blasco, il est Blasquito. -ainsi, il ne peut manquer de venir à Guernesey? -je viens un mois; il vient l’autre mois. -je comprends. -à compter de samedi prochain, d’aujourd’hui en huit, il ne se passera pas cinq jours sans que Blasquito arrive. -mais si la mer était très dure? -egurraldia gaïztoa? -oui. -Blasquito ne viendra pas si vite, mais il viendra. -d’où viendra-t-il? -de Bilbao. -où ira-t-il? -à Portland. -c’est bien.

— ou à Torbay. -c’est mieux. -votre homme peut être tranquille. -Blasquito ne trahira pas? -les lâches sont les traîtres. Nous sommes des vaillants. La mer est l’église de l’hiver. La trahison est l’église de l’enfer. -personne n’entend ce que nous disons? -nous écouter et nous regarder est impossible. L’épouvante fait ici le désert. -je le sais. -qui oserait se hasarder à nous écouter? -c’est vrai. -d’ailleurs on écouterait qu’on ne comprendrait pas. Nous parlons une farouche langue à nous que personne ne connaît. Puisque vous la savez, c’est que vous êtes des nôtres. -je suis venu pour prendre des arrangements avec vous. -c’est bon. -maintenant je m’en vais. -soit. -dites-moi, si le passager veut que Blasquito le conduise ailleurs qu’à Portland ou à Torbay?

— Blasquito fera-t-il ce que l’homme voudra? -Blasquito fera ce que les onces voudront. -faut-il beaucoup de temps pour aller à Torbay? -qu’il ait des onces. -comme il plaît au vent. -huit heures? -moins ou plus. -Blasquito obéira-t-il à son passager? -si la mer obéit à Blasquito. -il sera bien payé. -l’or est l’or. Le vent est le vent. -c’est juste. -l’homme avec l’or fait ce qu’il peut. Dieu avec le vent fait ce qu’il veut. -l’homme qui compte partir avec Blasquito sera ici vendredi. -bien. -à quel moment arrive Blasquito? -à la nuit. On arrive la nuit. On part la nuit. Nous avons une femme qui s’appelle la mer, et une soeur qui s’appelle la nuit. La femme trompe quelquefois; la soeur jamais.

— tout est convenu. Adieu, hommes. -bonsoir. Un coup d’eau-de-vie? -merci. -c’est meilleur que du sirop. -j’ai votre parole. -mon nom est point-d’honneur. -adieu. -vous êtes gentilhomme et je suis chevalier. Il était clair que des diables seuls pouvaient parler ainsi. Les enfants n’en écoutèrent pas davantage, et cette fois prirent la fuite pour de bon, le petit français, enfin convaincu, courant plus vite que les autres. Le mardi qui suivit ce samedi, sieur Clubin était de retour à Saint-Malo, ramenant la durande. Le tamaulipas était toujours en rade. Sieur Clubin, entre deux bouffées de pipe, demanda à l’aubergiste de l’auberge Jean: -eh bien, quand donc part-il, ce tamaulipas? -après-demain jeudi, répondit l’aubergiste. Ce soir-là, Clubin soupa à la table des gardes-côtes, et, contre son habitude, sortit après son souper. Il résulta de cette sortie qu’il ne put tenir le bureau de la Durande, et qu’il manqua à peu près son chargement. Cela fut remarqué d’un homme si exact. Il paraît qu’il causa quelques instants avec son ami le changeur. Il rentra deux heures après que Noguette eut sonné le couvre-feu. La cloche brésilienne sonne à dix heures. Il était donc minuit.

VI. La jacressarde.

Il y a quarante ans, Saint-Malo possédait une ruelle dite la ruelle coutanchez. Cette ruelle n’existe plus, ayant été comprise dans les embellissements. C’était une double rangée de maisons de bois penchées les unes vers les autres, et laissant entre elles assez de place pour un ruisseau qu’on appelait la rue. On marchait les jambes écartées des deux côtés de l’eau, en heurtant de la tête ou du coude les maisons de droite et de gauche. Ces vieilles baraques du moyen-âge normand ont des profils presque humains. De masure à sorcière il n’y a pas loin. Leurs étages rentrants, leurs surplombs, leurs auvents circonflexes et leurs broussailles de ferrailles simulent des lèvres, des mentons, des nez et des sourcils. La lucarne est l’oeil, borgne. La joue, c’est la muraille, ridée et dartreuse. Elles se touchent du front comme si elles complotaient un mauvais coup. Tous ces mots de l’ancienne civilisation, coupe-gorge, coupe-trogne, coupe-gueule, se rattachent à cette architecture. Une des maisons de la ruelle coutanchez, la plus grande, la plus fameuse ou la plus famée, se nommait la jacressarde. La jacressarde était le logis de ceux qui ne logent pas. Il y a, dans toutes les villes, et particulièrement dans les ports de mer, au-dessous de la population, un résidu. Des gens sans aveu, à ce point que souvent la justice elle-même ne parvient pas à leur en arracher un, des écumeurs d’aventures, des chasseurs d’expédients, des chimistes de l’espèce escroc, remettant toujours la vie au creuset, toutes les formes du haillon et toutes les manières de le porter, les fruits secs de l’improbité, les existences en banqueroute, les consciences qui ont déposé leur bilan, ceux qui ont avorté dans l’escalade et le bris de clôture (car les grands faiseurs d’effractions planent et restent en haut), les ouvriers et les ouvrières du mal, les drôles et les drôlesses, les scrupules déchirés et les coudes percés, les coquins aboutis à l’indigence, les méchants mal récompensés, les vaincus du duel social, les affamés qui ont été les dévorants, les gagne-petit du crime, les gueux, dans la double et lamentable acception du mot; tel est le personnel. L’intelligence humaine est là; bestiale. C’est le tas d’ordure des âmes. Cela s’amasse dans un coin, où passe de temps en temps ce coup de balai qu’on nomme une descente de police. à Saint-Malo la jacressarde était ce coin. Ce qu’on trouve dans ces repaires, ce ne sont pas les forts criminels, les bandits, les escarpes, les grands produits de l’ignorance et de l’indigence. Si le meurtre y est représenté, c’est par quelque ivrogne brutal; le vol n’y dépasse point le filou. C’est plutôt le crachat de la société que son vomissement. Le truand, oui; le brigand, non. Pourtant il ne faudrait pas s’y fier. Ce dernier étage des bohèmes peut avoir des extrémités scélérates. Une fois, en jetant le filet sur l’épi-scié qui était pour Paris ce que la jacressarde était pour saint-Malo, la police prit Lacenaire. Ces gîtes admettent tout. La chute est un nivellement. Quelquefois l’honnêteté qui se dépouille tombe là. La vertu et la probité ont, cela s’est vu, des aventures. Il ne faut, d’emblée, ni estimer les louvres ni mépriser les bagnes. Le respect public, de même que la réprobation universelle, veulent être épluchés. On y a des surprises. Un ange dans le lupanar, une perle dans le fumier, cette sombre et éblouissante trouvaille est possible. La jacressarde était plutôt une cour qu’une maison, et plutôt un puits qu’une cour. Elle n’avait point d’étage sur la rue. Un haut mur percé d’une porte basse était sa façade. On levait le loquet, on poussait la porte, on était dans une cour. Au milieu de cette cour, on apercevait un trou rond, entouré d’une marge de pierre au niveau du sol. C’était un puits. La cour était petite, le puits était grand. Un pavage défoncé encadrait la margelle. La cour, carrée, était bâtie de trois côtés. Du côté de la rue, rien; mais en face de la porte, et à droite et à gauche, il y avait du logis. Si, après la nuit tombée, on entrait là, un peu à ses risques et périls, on entendait comme un bruit d'haleines mêlées, et, s'il y avait assez de lune ou d'étoiles pour donner forme aux linéaments obscurs qu'on avait sous les yeux, voici ce qu'on voyait. La cour. Le puits. Autour de la cour, vis-à-vis la porte, un hangar figurant une sorte de fer à cheval qui serait carré, galerie vermoulue, tout ouverte, à plafond de solives, soutenue par des piliers de pierre inégalement espacés; au centre, le puits; autour du puits, sur une litière de paille, et faisant comme un chapelet circulaire, des semelles droites, des dessous de bottes éculées, des orteils passant par des trous de souliers, et force talons nus, des pieds d'homme, des pieds de femme, des pieds d'enfant. Tous ces pieds dormaient. Au delà de ces pieds, l'oeil, en s'enfonçant dans la pénombre du hangar, distinguait des corps, des formes, des têtes assoupies, des allongements inertes, des guenilles des deux sexes, une promiscuité dans du fumier, on ne sait quel sinistre gisement humain. Cette chambre à coucher était à tout le monde. On y payait deux sous par semaine. Les pieds touchaient le puits. Dans les nuits d'orage, il pleuvait sur ces pieds; dans les nuits d'hiver, il neigeait sur ces corps. Qu'était-ce que ces êtres? Les inconnus. Ils venaient là le soir et s'en allaient le matin. L'ordre social se complique de ces larves. Quelques-uns se glissaient pour une nuit et ne payaient pas. La plupart n'avaient point mangé de la journée. Tous les vices, toutes les abjections, toutes les infections, toutes les détresses; le même sommeil d'accablement sur le même lit de boue. Les rêves de toutes ces âmes faisaient bon voisinage. Rendez-vous funèbre où remuaient et s'amalgamaient dans le même miasme les lassitudes, les défaillances, les ivresses cuvées, les marches et contre-marches d'une journée sans un morceau de pain et sans une bonne pensée, les lividités à paupières closes, des remords, des convoitises, des chevelures mêlées de balayures, des visages qui ont le regard de la mort, peut-être des baisers de bouches de ténèbres. Cette putridité humaine fermentait dans cette cuve. Ils étaient jetés dans ce gîte par la fatalité, par le voyage, par le navire arrivé la veille, par une sortie de prison, par la chance, par la nuit. Chaque jour la destinée vidait là sa hotte. Entrait qui voulait, dormait qui pouvait, parlait qui osait. Car c'était un lieu de chuchotement. On se hâtait de se mêler. On tâchait de s'oublier dans le sommeil, puisqu'on ne peut se perdre dans l'ombre. On prenait de la mort ce qu'on pouvait. Ils fermaient les yeux dans cette agonie pêle-mêle recommençant tous les soirs. D'où sortaient-ils? De la société, étant la misère; de la vague, étant l’écume. N’avait point de la paille qui voulait. Plus d’une nudité traînait sur le pavé; ils se couchaient éreintés; ils se levaient ankylosés. Le puits, sans parapet et sans couvercle, toujours béant, avait trente pieds de profondeur. La pluie y tombait, les immondices y suintaient, tous les ruissellements de la cour y filtraient. Le seau pour tirer l’eau était à côté. Qui avait soif, y buvait. Qui avait ennui, s’y noyait. Du sommeil dans le fumier on glissait à ce sommeil-là. En 1819, on en retira un enfant de quatorze ans. Pour ne point courir de danger dans cette maison, il fallait être “ de la chose “ . Les laïques étaient mal vus. Ces êtres se connaissaient-ils entre eux? Non. Ils se flairaient. Une femme était la maîtresse du logis, jeune, assez jolie, coiffée d’un bonnet à rubans, débarbouillée quelquefois avec l’eau du puits, ayant une jambe de bois. Dès l’aube, la cour se vidait; les habitués s’envolaient. Il y avait dans la cour un coq et des poules, grattant le fumier tout le jour. La cour était traversée par une poutre horizontale sur poteaux, figure d’un gibet pas trop dépaysée là. Souvent, le lendemain des soirées pluvieuses, on voyait sécher sur cette poutre une robe de soie mouillée et crottée, qui était à la femme jambe de bois. Au-dessus du hangar, et, comme lui, encadrant la cour, il y avait un étage, et au-dessus de l’étage un grenier. Un escalier de bois pourri trouant le plafond du hangar menait en haut; échelle branlante gravie bruyamment par la femme chancelante. Les locataires de passage, à la semaine ou à la nuit, habitaient la cour; les locataires à demeure habitaient la maison. Des fenêtres, pas un carreau; des chambranles, pas une porte; des cheminées, pas un foyer; c’était la maison. On passait d’une chambre dans l’autre indifféremment par un trou carré long, qui avait été la porte, ou par une baie triangulaire qui était l’entre-deux des solives de la cloison. Les plâtrages tombés couvraient le plancher. On ne savait comment tenait la maison. Le vent la remuait. On montait comme on pouvait sur le glissement des marches usées de l’escalier. Tout était à claire-voie. L’hiver entrait dans la masure comme l’eau dans une éponge. L’abondance des araignées rassurait contre l’écroulement immédiat. Aucun meuble. Deux ou trois paillasses dans des coins, ventre ouvert, montrant plus de cendre que de paille. çà et là une cruche et une terrine, servant à divers usages. Une odeur douce et hideuse. Des fenêtres on avait vue sur la cour. Cette vue ressemblait à un dessus de tombereau de boueux. Les choses, sans compter les hommes, qui pourrissaient là, qui s’y rouillaient, qui y moisissaient, étaient indescriptibles. Les débris fraternisaient; il en tombait des murailles, il en tombait des créatures. Les loques ensemençaient les décombres. Outre sa population flottante, cantonnée dans la cour, la jacressarde avait trois locataires, un charbonnier, un chiffonnier et un faiseur d’or. Le charbonnier et le chiffonnier occupaient deux des paillasses du premier; le faiseur d’or, chimiste, logeait au grenier, qu’on appelait, on ne sait pourquoi, le galetas. On ignorait dans quel coin couchait la femme. Le faiseur d’or était un peu poëte. Il habitait, dans le toit, sous les tuiles, une chambre où il y avait une lucarne étroite et une grande cheminée de pierre, gouffre à faire mugir le vent. La lucarne n’ayant pas de châssis, il avait cloué dessus un morceau de feuillard provenant d’une déchirure de navire. Cette tôle laissait passer peu de jour et beaucoup de froid. Le charbonnier payait d’un sac de charbon de temps en temps, le chiffonnier payait d’un setier de grain aux poules par semaine, le faiseur d’or ne payait pas. En attendant il brûlait la maison. Il avait arraché le peu qu’il y avait de boiserie, et à chaque instant il tirait du mur ou du toit une latte pour faire chauffer sa marmite à or. Sur la cloison, au-dessus du grabat du chiffonnier, on voyait deux colonnes de chiffres à la craie, tracées par le chiffonnier semaine à semaine, une colonne de 3 et une colonne de 5, selon que le setier de grain coûtait trois liards ou cinq centimes. La marmite à or du “ chimiste “ était une vieille bombe cassée, promue par lui chaudière, où il combinait des ingrédients. La transmutation l’absorbait. Quelquefois il en parlait dans la cour aux va-nu-pieds, qui en riaient. Il disait: ces gens-là sont pleins de préjugés. il était résolu à ne pas mourir sans jeter la pierre philosophale dans les vitres de la science. Son fourneau mangeait beaucoup de bois. La rampe de l’escalier y avait disparu. Toute la maison y passait, à petit feu. L’hôtesse lui disait: vous ne me laisserez que la coque. Il la désarmait en lui faisant des vers. Telle était la jacressarde. Un enfant, qui était peut-être un nain, âgé de douze ans ou de soixante ans, goîtreux, ayant un balai à la main, était le domestique. Les habitués entraient par la porte de la cour; le public entrait par la boutique. Qu’était-ce que la boutique? Le haut mur faisant façade sur la rue était percé, à droite de l’entrée de la cour, d’une baie en équerre à la fois porte et fenêtre, avec volet et châssis, le seul volet dans toute la maison qui eût des gonds et des verrous, le seul châssis qui eût des vitres. Derrière cette devanture, ouverte sur la rue, il y avait une petite chambre, compartiment pris sur le hangar-dortoir. On lisait sur la porte de la rue cette inscription charbonnée: ici on tient la curiosité. le mot était dès lors usité. Sur trois planches s’appliquant en étagère au vitrage, on apercevait quelques pots de faïence sans anse, un parasol chinois en baudruche à figures, crevé çà et là, impossible à ouvrir et à fermer, des tessons de fer ou de grès informes, des chapeaux d’homme et de femme effondrés, trois ou quatre coquilles d’ormers, quelques paquets de vieux boutons d’os et de cuivre, une tabatière avec portrait de Marie-Antoinette, et un volume dépareillé de l’algèbre de Boisbertrand. C’était la boutique. Cet assortiment était “ la curiosité “ . La boutique communiquait, par une arrière-porte, avec la cour où était le puits. Il y avait une table et un escabeau. La femme à la jambe de bois était la dame de comptoir.

VII. Acheteurs nocturnes et vendeur ténébreux.

Clubin avait été absent de l’auberge Jean le mardi toute la soirée; il le fut encore le mercredi soir. Ce soir-là, à la brune, deux hommes s’engagèrent dans la ruelle coutanchez; ils s’arrêtèrent devant la jacressarde. L’un d’eux cogna à la vitre. La porte de la boutique s’ouvrit. Ils entrèrent. La femme à la jambe de bois leur fit le sourire réservé aux bourgeois. Il y avait une chandelle sur la table. Ces hommes étaient deux bourgeois en effet. Celui des deux qui avait cogné dit: -bonjour, la femme. Je viens pour la chose. La femme jambe de bois fit un deuxième sourire et sortit par l’arrière-porte, qui donnait sur la cour au puits. Un moment après, l’arrière-porte se rouvrit, et un homme se présenta dans l’entre-bâillement. Cet homme avait une casquette et une blouse, et la saillie d’un objet sous sa blouse. Il avait des brins de paille dans les plis de sa blouse et le regard de quelqu’un qu’on vient de réveiller. Il avança. On se regarda. L’homme en blouse avait l’air ahuri et fin. Il dit: -c’est vous l’armurier? Celui qui avait cogné répondit: -oui. C’est vous le parisien?

— dit Peaurouge. Oui. -montrez. -voici. L’homme tira de dessous sa blouse un engin fort rare en Europe à cette époque, un revolver. Ce revolver était neuf et brillant. Les deux bourgeois l’examinèrent. Celui qui semblait connaître la maison et que l’homme en blouse avait qualifié “ l’armurier “ fit jouer le mécanisme. Il passa l’objet à l’autre, qui paraissait être moins de la ville et qui se tenait le dos tourné à la lumière. L’armurier reprit: -combien? L’homme en blouse répondit: -j’arrive d’Amérique avec. Il y a des gens qui apportent des singes, des perroquets, des bêtes, comme si les français étaient des sauvages. Moi j’apporte ça. C’est une invention utile. -combien? Repartit l’armurier. -c’est un pistolet qui fait le moulinet. -combien? -paf. Un premier coup. Paf. Un deuxième coup. Paf... une grêle, quoi! ça fait de la besogne. -combien? -il y a six canons. -eh bien, combien?

-six canons, c’est six louis. -voulez-vous cinq louis? -impossible. Un louis par balle. C’est le prix. -voulons-nous faire affaire? Soyons raisonnables. -j’ai dit le prix juste. Examinez-moi ça, monsieur l’arquebusier. -j’ai examiné. -le moulinet tourne comme Monsieur Talleyrand. On pourrait mettre ce moulinet-là dans le dictionnaire des girouettes. C’est un bijou. -je l’ai vu. -quant aux canons, c’est de forge espagnole. -je l’ai remarqué. -c’est rubané. Voici comment ça se confectionne, ces rubans-là. On vide dans la forge la hotte d’un chiffonnier en vieux fer. On prend tout plein de vieille ferraille, des vieux clous de maréchal, des fers à cheval cassés... -et de vieilles lames de faulx. -j’allais le dire, monsieur l’armurier. On vous fiche à tout ce bric-à-brac une bonne chaude suante, et ça vous fait une magnifique étoffe de fer...

— oui, mais qui peut avoir des crevasses, des éventures, des travers. -pardine. Mais on remédie aux travers par des petites queues d’aronde, de même qu’on évite le risque des doublures en battant ferme. On corroie son étoffe de fer au gros marteau, on lui flanque deux autres chaudes suantes; si le fer a été surchauffé, on le rétablit par des chaudes grasses, et à petits coups. Et puis on étire l’étoffe, et puis on la roule bien sur la chemise, et avec ce fer-là, fichtre! On vous fait ces canons-là. -vous êtes donc du métier? -je suis de tous les métiers. -les canons sont couleur d’eau. -c’est une beauté, monsieur l’armurier. ça s’obtient avec du beurre d’antimoine. -nous disons donc que nous allons vous payer cela cinq louis? -je me permets de faire observer à monsieur que j’ai eu l’honneur de dire six louis. L’armurier baissa la voix. -écoutez, parisien. Profitez de l’occasion. Défaites-vous de ça. ça ne vaut rien pour vous autres, une arme comme ça. ça fait remarquer un homme. -en effet, dit le parisien, c’est un peu voyant. C’est meilleur pour un bourgeois. -voulez-vous cinq louis? -non, six. Un par trou. -eh bien, six napoléons. -je veux six louis. -vous n’êtes donc pas bonapartiste? Vous préférez un louis à un napoléon! Parisien, dit Peaurouge, sourit. -napoléon vaut mieux, dit-il, mais louis vaut plus. -six napoléons. -six louis. C’est pour moi une différence de vingt-quatre francs. -pas d’affaire en ce cas. -soit. Je garde le bibelot. -gardez-le. -du rabais! Par exemple! Il ne me sera pas dit que je me serai défait comme ça d’une chose qui est une invention. -bonsoir, alors. -c’est un progrès sur le pistolet, que les indiens chesapeakes appellent nortay-u-hah. -cinq louis payés comptant, c’est de l’or.

— nortay-u-hah, cela veut dire fusil-court . Beaucoup de personnes ignorent cela. -voulez-vous cinq louis, et un petit écu de rabiot? -bourgeois, j’ai dit six. L’homme qui tournait le dos à la chandelle et qui n’avait pas encore parlé faisait pendant ce dialogue pivoter le mécanisme. Il s’approcha de l’oreille de l’armurier et lui chuchota: -l’objet est-il bon? -excellent. -je donne les six louis. Cinq minutes après, pendant que parisien dit Peaurouge serrait dans une fente secrète sous l’aisselle de sa blouse les six louis d’or qu’il venait de recevoir, l’armurier et l’acheteur emportant dans la poche de son pantalon le revolver sortaient de la ruelle coutanchez.

VIII. Carambolage de la bille rouge et de la bille noire.

Le lendemain, qui était le jeudi, à peu de distance de Saint-Malo, près de la pointe du décollé, à un endroit où la falaise est haute et où la mer est profonde, il se passa une chose tragique. Une langue de rochers en forme de fer de lance, qui se relie à la terre par un isthme étroit, se prolonge dans l’eau et s’y achève brusquement par un grand brisant à pic; rien n’est plus fréquent dans l’architecture de la mer. Pour arriver, en venant du rivage, au plateau de la roche à pic, on suit un plan incliné dont la montée est quelquefois assez âpre. C’est sur un plateau de ce genre qu’était debout vers quatre heures du soir un homme enveloppé dans une large cape d’ordonnance et probablement armé dessous, chose facile à reconnaître à de certains plis droits et anguleux de son manteau. Le sommet où se tenait cet homme était une plate-forme assez vaste, semée de gros cubes de roche pareils à des pavés démesurés, et laissant entre eux des passages étroits. Cette plate-forme, où croissait une petite herbe épaisse et courte, se terminait du côté de la mer par un espace libre, aboutissant à un escarpement vertical. L’escarpement, élevé d’une soixantaine de pieds au-dessus de la haute mer, semblait taillé au fil à plomb. Son angle de gauche pourtant se ruinait et offrait un de ces escaliers naturels propres aux falaises de granit, dont les marches peu commodes exigent quelquefois des enjambées de géants ou des sauts de clowns. Cette dégringolade de rochers descendait perpendiculairement jusqu’à la mer et s’y enfonçait. C’était à peu près un casse-cou. Cependant, à la rigueur, on pouvait par là s’aller embarquer sous la muraille même de la falaise. La brise soufflait. L’homme serré dans sa cape, ferme sur ses jarrets, la main gauche empoignant son coude droit, clignait un oeil et appuyait sur l’autre une longue-vue. Il semblait absorbé dans une attention sérieuse. Il s’était approché du bord de l’escarpement, et il se tenait là immobile, le regard imperturbablement attaché sur l’horizon. La marée était pleine. Le flot battait au-dessous de lui le bas de la falaise. Ce que cet homme observait, c’était un navire au large qui faisait en effet un jeu singulier.

Ce navire, qui venait de quitter depuis une heure à peine le port de Saint-Malo, s’était arrêté derrière les banquetiers. C’était un trois-mâts. Il n’avait pas jeté l’ancre, peut-être parce que le fond ne lui eût permis d’abattre que sur le bord du câble, et parce que le navire eût serré son ancre sous le taille-mer; il s’était borné à mettre en panne. L’homme, qui était un garde-côte, comme le faisait voir sa cape d’uniforme, épiait toutes les manoeuvres du trois-mâts et semblait en prendre note mentalement. Le navire avait mis en panne vent dessus vent dedans; ce qu’indiquaient le petit hunier coeffé et le vent laissé dans le grand hunier; il avait bordé l’artimon et orienté le perroquet de fougue au plus près, de façon à contrarier les voiles les unes par les autres, et à avoir peu d’arrivée et moins de dérive. Il ne se souciait point de se présenter beaucoup au vent, car il n’avait brassé le petit hunier que perpendiculairement à la quille. De cette façon, tombant en travers, il ne dérivait au plus que d’une demi-lieue à l’heure. Il faisait encore grand jour, surtout en pleine mer et sur le haut de la falaise. Le bas des côtes devenait obscur. Le garde-côte, tout à sa besogne et espionnant consciencieusement le large, n’avait pas songé à scruter le rocher à côté et au-dessous de lui. Il tournait le dos à l’espèce d’escalier peu praticable qui mettait en communication le plateau de la falaise et la mer. Il ne remarquait pas que quelque chose y remuait. Il y avait dans cet escalier, derrière une anfractuosité, quelqu’un, un homme, caché là, selon toute apparence, avant l’arrivée du garde-côte. De temps en temps, dans l’ombre, une tête sortait de dessous la roche, regardait en haut, et guettait le guetteur. Cette tête, coiffée d’un large chapeau américain, était celle de l’homme, du quaker, qui, une dizaine de jours auparavant, parlait, dans les pierres du petit-bey, au capitaine Zuela. Tout à coup l’attention du garde-côte parut redoubler. Il essuya rapidement du drap de sa manche le verre de sa longue-vue et la braqua avec énergie sur le trois-mâts. Un point noir venait de s’en détacher. Ce point noir, semblable à une fourmi sur la mer, était une embarcation. L’embarcation semblait vouloir gagner la terre. Quelques marins la montaient, ramant vigoureusement. Elle obliquait peu à peu et se dirigeait vers la pointe du décollé. Le guet du garde-côte était arrivé à son plus haut degré de fixité. Il ne perdait pas un mouvement de l’embarcation. Il s’était rapproché plus près encore de l’extrême bord de la falaise.

En ce moment un homme de haute stature, le quaker, surgit derrière le garde-côte au haut de l'escalier. Le guetteur ne le voyait pas. Cet homme s'arrêta un instant, les bras pendants et les poings crispés, et, avec l'oeil d'un chasseur qui vise, il regarda le dos du garde-côte. Quatre pas seulement le séparaient du garde-côte; il mit un pied en avant, puis s'arrêta; il fit un second pas, et s'arrêta encore; il ne faisait point d'autre mouvement que de marcher, tout le reste de son corps était statue; son pied s'appuyait sur l'herbe sans bruit; il fit le troisième pas, et s'arrêta; il touchait presque le garde-côte, toujours immobile avec sa longue-vue. L'homme ramena lentement ses deux mains fermées à la hauteur de ses clavicules, puis, brusquement, ses avant-bras s'abattirent, et ses deux poings, comme lâchés par une détente, frappèrent les deux épaules du garde-côte. Le choc fut sinistre. Le garde-côte n'eut pas le temps de jeter un cri. Il tomba la tête la première du haut de la falaise dans la mer. On vit ses deux semelles le temps d'un éclair. Ce fut une pierre dans l'eau. Tout se referma. Deux ou trois grands cercles se firent dans l'eau sombre. Il ne resta que la longue-vue échappée des mains du garde-côte et tombée à terre sur l'herbe. Le quaker se pencha sur le bord de l'escarpement, regarda les cercles s'effacer dans le flot, attendit quelques minutes, puis se redressa en chantant entre ses dents: monsieur d'la police est mort en perdant la vie. Il se pencha une seconde fois. Rien ne reparut. Seulement, à l'endroit où le garde-côte s'était englouti, il s'était formé à la surface de l'eau une sorte d'épaisseur brune qui s'élargissait sur le balancement de la lame. Il était probable que le garde-côte s'était brisé le crâne sur quelque roche sous-marine. Son sang remontait et faisait cette tache dans l'écume. Le quaker, tout en considérant cette flaque rougeâtre, reprit: un quart d'heure avant sa mort, il était encore... il n'acheva pas. Il entendit derrière lui une voix très douce qui disait: -vous voilà, Rantaine. Bonjour. Vous venez de tuer un homme. Il se retourna, et vit à une quinzaine de pas en arrière de lui, à l'issue d'un des entre-deux des rochers, un petit homme qui avait un revolver à la main. Il répondit: -comme vous voyez. Bonjour, sieur Clubin. Le petit homme eut un tressaillement. -vous me reconnaissez? -vous m'avez bien reconnu, repartit Rantaine. Cependant on entendait un bruit de rames sur la mer. C'était l'embarcation observée par le garde-côte, qui approchait. Sieur Clubin dit à demi-voix, comme se parlant à lui-même: -cela a été vite fait. -qu'y a-t-il pour votre service? Demanda Rantaine. -pas grand'chose. Voilà tout à l'heure dix ans que je ne vous ai vu. Vous avez dû faire de bonnes affaires. Comment vous portez-vous? -bien, dit Rantaine. Et vous? -très bien, répondit sieur Clubin. Rantaine fit un pas vers sieur Clubin. Un petit coup sec arriva à son oreille. C’était sieur Clubin qui armait le revolver. -Rantaine, nous sommes à quinze pas. C’est une bonne distance. Restez où vous êtes. -ah çà, fit Rantaine, qu’est-ce que vous me voulez? -moi, je viens causer avec vous. Rantaine ne bougea plus. Sieur Clubin reprit: -vous venez d’assassiner un garde-côte. Rantaine souleva le bord de son chapeau et répondit: -vous m’avez déjà fait l’honneur de me le dire. -en termes moins précis. J’avais dit: un homme; je dis maintenant: un garde-côte. Ce garde-côte portait le numéro si cent dix-neuf. Il était père de famille. Il laisse une femme et cinq enfants. -ça doit être, dit Rantaine. Il y eut un imperceptible temps d’arrêt. -ce sont des hommes de choix, ces gardes-côtes, fit Clubin, presque tous d’anciens marins. -j’ai remarqué, dit Rantaine, qu’en général on laisse une femme et cinq enfants. Sieur Clubin continua: -devinez combien m’a coûté ce revolver? -c’est une jolie pièce, répondit Rantaine. -combien l’estimez-vous?

— je l’estime beaucoup. -il m’a coûté cent quarante-quatre francs. -vous avez dû acheter ça, dit Rantaine, à la boutique d’armes de la rue coutanchez. Clubin reprit: -il n’a pas crié. La chute coupe la voix. -sieur Clubin, il y aura de la brise cette nuit. -je suis seul dans le secret. -logez-vous toujours à l’auberge Jean? Demanda Rantaine. -oui, on n’y est pas mal. -je me rappelle y avoir mangé de bonne choucroute. -vous devez être excessivement fort, Rantaine. Vous avez des épaules! Je ne voudrais pas recevoir une chiquenaude de vous. Moi, quand je suis venu au monde, j’avais l’air si chétif qu’on ne savait pas si on réussirait à m’élever. -on y a réussi, c’est heureux. -j’ai gardé mes habitudes, je loge toujours à cette vieille auberge Jean. -savez-vous, sieur Clubin, pourquoi je vous ai reconnu? C’est parce que vous m’avez reconnu. J’ai dit: il n’y a pour cela que Clubin. Et il avança d’un pas. -replacez-vous où vous étiez, Rantaine. Rantaine recula et fit cet aparté: -on devient un enfant devant ces machins-là. Sieur Clubin poursuivit: -situation. Nous avons à droite, du côté de Saint-énogat, à trois cents pas d’ici, un autre garde-côte, le numéro six cent dix-huit, qui est vivant, et à gauche, du côté de Saint-Lunaire, un poste de douane. Cela fait sept hommes armés qui peuvent être ici dans cinq minutes. Le rocher sera cerné. Le col sera gardé. Impossible de s’évader. Il y a un cadavre au pied de la falaise. Rantaine jeta un oeil oblique sur le revolver. -comme vous dites, Rantaine. C’est une jolie pièce. Peut-être n’est-il chargé qu’à poudre.

Mais qu’est-ce que cela fait? Il suffit d’un coup de feu pour faire accourir la force armée. J’en ai six à tirer. Le choc alternatif des rames devenait très distinct. Le canot n’était pas loin. Le grand homme regardait le petit homme, étrangement. Sieur Clubin parlait d’une voix de plus en plus tranquille et douce. -Rantaine, les hommes du canot qui va arriver, sachant ce que vous venez de faire ici tout à l’heure, prêteraient main-forte et aideraient à vous arrêter. Vous payez dix mille francs votre passage au capitaine Zuela. Par parenthèse, vous auriez eu meilleur marché avec les contrebandiers de Plainmont; mais ils ne vous auraient mené qu’en Angleterre, et d’ailleurs vous ne pouvez risquer d’aller à Guernesey où l’on a l’honneur de vous connaître. Je reviens à la situation. Si je fais feu, on vous arrête. Vous payez à Zuela votre fugue dix mille francs. Vous lui avez donné cinq mille francs d’avance. Zuela garderait les cinq mille francs, et s’en irait. Voilà. Rantaine, vous êtes bien affublé. Ce chapeau, ce drôle d’habit et ces guêtres vous changent. Vous avez oublié les lunettes. Vous avez bien fait de laisser pousser vos favoris. Rantaine fit un sourire assez semblable à un grincement. Clubin continua: -Rantaine, vous avez une culotte américaine à gousset double. Dans l’un il y a votre montre. Gardez-la. -merci, sieur Clubin. -dans l’autre il y a une petite boîte de fer battu qui ouvre et ferme à ressort. C’est une ancienne tabatière à matelot. Tirez-la de votre gousset et jetez-la-moi. -mais c’est un vol! -vous êtes libre de crier à la garde. Et Clubin regarda fixement Rantaine. -tenez, mess Clubin..., dit Rantaine faisant un pas, et tendant sa main ouverte. mess était une flatterie. -restez où vous êtes, Rantaine. -mess Clubin, arrangeons-nous. Je vous offre moitié. Clubin exécuta un croisement de bras d’où sortait le bout de son revolver. -Rantaine, pour qui me prenez-vous? Je suis un honnête homme. Et il ajouta après un silence: -il me faut tout. Rantaine grommela entre ses dents: -celui-ci est d’un fort gabarit. Cependant l’oeil de Clubin venait de s’allumer. Sa voix devint nette et coupante comme l’acier. Il s’écria: -je vois que vous vous méprenez. C’est vous qui vous appelez vol, moi je m’appelle restitution. Rantaine, écoutez. Il y a dix ans, vous avez quitté de nuit Guernesey en prenant dans la caisse d’une association cinquante mille francs qui étaient à vous, et en oubliant d’y laisser cinquante mille francs qui étaient à un autre. Ces cinquante mille francs volés par vous à votre associé, l’excellent et digne mess Lethierry, font aujourd’hui avec les intérêts composés pendant dix ans quatrevingt-un mille six cent soixante-six francs soixante-six centimes. Hier vous êtes entré chez un changeur. Je vais vous le nommer. Rébuchet, rue saint-Vincent. Vous lui avez compté soixante-seize mille francs en billets de banque français, contre lesquels il vous a donné trois bank-notes d'Angleterre de mille livres sterling chaque, plus l'appoint. Vous avez mis ces bank-notes dans la tabatière de fer, et la tabatière de fer dans votre gousset de droite. Ces trois mille livres sterling font soixante-quinze mille francs. Au nom de mess Lethierry, je m'en contenterai. Je pars demain pour Guernesey, et j'entends les lui porter. Rantaine, le trois-mâts qui est là en panne est le tamaulipas . Vous y avez fait embarquer cette nuit vos malles mêlées aux sacs et aux valises de l'équipage. Vous voulez quitter la France. Vous avez vos raisons. Vous allez à Arequipa. L'embarcation vient vous chercher. Vous l'attendez ici. Elle arrive. On l'entend qui nage. Il dépend de moi de vous laisser partir ou de vous faire rester. Assez de paroles. Jetez-moi la tabatière de fer. Rantaine ouvrit son gousset, en tira une petite boîte et la jeta à Clubin. C'était la tabatière de fer. Elle alla rouler aux pieds de Clubin. Clubin se pencha sans baisser la tête et ramassa la tabatière de la main gauche, tenant dirigés sur Rantaine ses deux yeux et les six canons du revolver. Puis il cria: -mon ami, tournez le dos. Rantaine tourna le dos. Sieur Clubin mit le revolver sous son aisselle, et fit jouer le ressort de la tabatière. La boîte s'ouvrit. Elle contenait quatre bank-notes, trois de mille livres et une de dix livres. Il replia les trois bank-notes de mille livres, les replaça dans la tabatière de fer, referma la boîte et la mit dans sa poche. Puis il prit à terre un caillou. Il enveloppa ce caillou du billet de dix livres, et dit: -retournez-vous. Rantaine se retourna. Sieur Clubin reprit: -je vous ai dit que je me contenterais des trois mille livres. Voilà dix livres que je vous rends. Et il jeta à Rantaine le billet lesté du caillou. Rantaine, d'un coup de pied, lança la bank-note et le caillou dans la mer. -comme il vous plaira, fit Clubin. Allons, vous devez être riche. Je suis tranquille.

Le bruit de rames, qui s'était continuellement rapproché pendant ce dialogue, cessa. Cela indiquait que l'embarcation était au pied de la falaise. -votre fiacre est en bas. Vous pouvez partir, Rantaine. Rantaine se dirigea vers l'escalier et s'y enfonça. Clubin vint avec précaution au bord de l'escarpement, et, avançant la tête, le regarda descendre. Le canot s'était arrêté près de la dernière marche de rochers, à l'endroit même où était tombé le garde-côte. Tout en regardant dégringoler Rantaine, Clubin grommela: -bon numéro six cent dix-neuf! Il se croyait seul. Rantaine croyait n'être que deux. Moi seul savais que nous étions trois. Il aperçut à ses pieds sur l’herbe la longue-vue qu’avait laissé tomber le garde-côte. Il la ramassa. Le bruit de rames recommença. Rantaine venait de sauter dans l’embarcation, et le canot prenait le large. Quand Rantaine fut dans le canot, après les premiers coups d’aviron, la falaise commençant à s’éloigner derrière lui, il se dressa brusquement debout, sa face devint monstrueuse, il montra le poing en bas, et cria: -ha! Le diable lui-même est une canaille! Quelques secondes après, Clubin, au haut de la falaise et braquant la longue-vue sur l’embarcation, entendait distinctement ces paroles articulées par une voix haute dans le bruit de la mer: -sieur Clubin, vous êtes un honnête homme; mais vous trouverez bon que j’écrive à Lethierry pour lui faire part de la chose, et voici dans le canot un matelot de Guernesey qui est de l’équipage du tamaulipas , qui s’appelle Ahier Tostevin, qui reviendra à Saint-Malo au prochain voyage de Zuela et qui témoignera que je vous ai remis pour mess Lethierry la somme de trois mille livres sterling. C’était la voix de Rantaine. Clubin était l’homme des choses bien faites. Immobile comme l’avait été le garde-côte, et à cette même place, l’oeil dans la longue-vue, il ne quitta pas un instant le canot du regard. Il le vit décroître dans les lames, disparaître et reparaître, approcher le navire en panne, et l’accoster, et il put reconnaître la haute taille de Rantaine sur le pont du tamaulipas . Quand le canot fut remonté à bord et replacé dans les pistolets, le tamaulipas fit servir. La brise montait de terre, il éventa toutes ses voiles, la lunette de Clubin demeura braquée sur cette silhouette de plus en plus simplifiée, et, une demi-heure après, le tamaulipas n’était plus qu’une corne noire s’amoindrissant à l’horizon sur le ciel blême du crépuscule.

IX. Renseignement utile aux personnes qui attendent, ou craignent, des lettres d’outre-mer.

Ce soir-là encore, sieur Clubin rentra tard. Une des causes de son retard, c’est qu’avant de rentrer il était allé jusqu’à la porte Dinan où il y avait des cabarets. Il avait acheté, dans un de ces cabarets où il n’était pas connu, une bouteille d’eau-de-vie qu’il avait mise dans la large poche de sa vareuse comme s’il voulait l’y cacher; puis, la durande devant partir le lendemain matin, il avait fait un tour à bord pour s’assurer que tout était en ordre. Quand sieur Clubin rentra à l’auberge Jean, il n’y avait plus dans la salle basse que le vieux capitaine au long cours, M Gertrais-Gaboureau, qui buvait sa chope et fumait sa pipe. M Gertrais-Gaboureau salua sieur Clubin entre une bouffée et une gorgée. -good bye, capitaine Clubin. -bonsoir, capitaine Gertrais. -eh bien, voilà le tamaulipas parti. -ah! Dit Clubin, je n’y ai pas fait attention. Le capitaine Gertrais-Gaboureau cracha et dit: -filé, Zuela. -quand ça donc? -ce soir. -où va-t-il? -au diable. -sans doute; mais où? -à Arequipa. -je n'en savais rien, dit Clubin. Il ajouta: -je vais me coucher. Il alluma sa chandelle, marcha vers la porte, et revint. -êtes-vous allé à Arequipa, capitaine Gertrais? -oui. Il y a des ans. -où relâche-t-on?

— un peu partout. Mais ce tamaulipas ne relâchera point. M Gertrais-Gaboureau vida sur le bord d'une assiette la cendre de sa pipe, et continua: -vous savez, le chasse-marée cheval-de-Troie et ce beau trois-mâts, le trentemouzin , qui sont allés à Cardiff. Je n'étais pas d'avis du départ à cause du temps. Ils sont revenus dans un bel état. Le chasse-marée était chargé de térébenthine, il a fait eau, et en faisant jouer les pompes il a pompé avec l'eau tout son chargement. Quant au trois-mâts, il a surtout souffert dans les hauts; la guibre, la poulaine, les minots, le jas de l'ancre à bâbord, tout ça cassé. Le bout-dehors du grand foc cassé au ras du chouque. Les haubans de focs et les sous-barbes, va-t'en voir s'ils viennent. Le mât de misaine n'a rien; il a eu cependant une sévère secousse. Tout le fer du beaupré a manqué, et, chose incroyable, le beaupré n'est que mâché, mais il est complètement dépouillé. Le masque du navire à bâbord est à jour trois bons pieds carrés. Voilà ce que c'est que de ne pas écouter le monde. Clubin avait posé sa chandelle sur la table et s'était mis à repiquer un rang d'épingles qu'il avait dans le collet de sa vareuse. Il reprit: -ne disiez-vous pas, capitaine Gertrais, que le tamaulipas ne relâchera point? -non. Il va droit au Chili. -en ce cas il ne pourra pas donner de ses nouvelles en route. -pardon, capitaine Clubin. D'abord il peut remettre des dépêches à tous les bâtiments qu'il rencontre faisant voile pour Europe. -c'est juste. -ensuite il a la boîte aux lettres de la mer. -qu'appelez-vous la boîte aux lettres de la mer? -vous ne connaissez pas ça, capitaine Clubin? -non. -quand on passe le détroit de Magellan. -eh bien? -partout de la neige, toujours gros temps, de vilains mauvais vents, une mer de quatre sous. -après? -quand vous avez doublé le cap Monmouth. -bien. Ensuite? -ensuite vous doublez le cap Valentin. -et ensuite? -ensuite vous doublez le cap Isidore. -et puis? -vous doublez la pointe Anna.

— bon. Mais qu'est-ce que vous appelez la boîte aux lettres de la mer? -nous y sommes. Montagnes à droite, montagnes à gauche. Des pingouins partout, des pétrels-tempêtes. Un endroit terrible. Ah! Mille saints, mille singes! Quel bataclan, et comme ça tape! La bourrasque n'a pas besoin qu'on aille à son secours. C'est là qu'on surveille la lisse de hourdi! C'est là qu’on diminue la toile! C’est là qu’on vous remplace la grande voile par le foc, et le foc par le tourmentin! Coups de vent sur coups de vent. Et puis quelquefois quatre, cinq, six jours de cape sèche. Souvent d’un jeu de voiles tout neuf il vous reste de la charpie. Quelle danse! Des rafales à vous faire sauter un trois-mâts comme une puce. J’ai vu sur un brick anglais, le true blue , un petit mousse occupé à la gibboom emporté à tous les cinq cent mille millions de tonnerres de Dieu, et la gibboom avec. On va en l’air comme des papillons, quoi. J’ai vu le contre-maître de la revenue , une jolie goëlette, arraché de dessus le fore-crostree, et tué roide. J’ai eu ma lisse cassée, et mon serre-gouttière en capilotade. On sort de là avec toutes ses voiles mangées. Des frégates de cinquante font eau comme des paniers. Et la mauvaise diablesse de côte! Rien de plus bourru. Des rochers déchiquetés comme par enfantillage. On approche du port-famine. Là, c’est pire que pire. Les plus rudes lames que j’aie vues de ma vie. Des parages d’enfer. Tout à coup on aperçoit ces deux mots écrits en rouge: post-office . -que voulez-vous dire, capitaine Gertrais? -je veux dire, capitaine Clubin, que tout de suite après qu’on a doublé la pointe Anna on voit sur un caillou de cent pieds de haut un grand bâton. C’est un poteau qui a une barrique au cou. Cette barrique, c’est la boîte aux lettres. Il a fallu que les anglais écrivent dessus: post-office . De quoi se mêlent-ils? C’est la poste de l’océan; elle n’appartient pas à cet honorable gentleman, le roi d’Angleterre. Cette boîte aux lettres est commune. Elle appartient à tous les pavillons. post-office! est-ce assez chinois! ça vous fait l’effet d’une tasse de thé que le diable vous offrirait tout à coup. Voici maintenant comme se fait le service. Tout bâtiment qui passe expédie au poteau un canot avec ses dépêches. Le navire qui vient de l’Atlantique envoie ses lettres pour l’Europe, et le navire qui vient du Pacifique envoie ses lettres pour l’Amérique. L’officier commandant votre canot met dans le baril votre paquet et y prend le paquet qu’il y trouve. Vous vous chargez de ces lettres-là; le navire qui viendra après vous se chargera des vôtres. Comme on navigue en sens contraire, le continent d’où vous venez, c’est celui où je vais. Je porte vos lettres, vous portez les miennes. Le baril est bitté au poteau avec une chaîne. Et il pleut! Et il neige! Et il grêle! Une fichue mer! Les satanicles volent de tous côtés. Le tamaulipas ira par là. Le baril a un bon couvercle à charnière, mais pas de serrure ni de cadenas. Vous voyez qu’on peut écrire à ses amis. Les lettres parviennent. -c’est très drôle, murmura Clubin rêveur. Le capitaine Gertrais-Gaboureau se retourna vers sa chope. -une supposition que ce garnement de Zuela m'écrit, ce gueux flanque son barbouillage dans la barrique à Magellan et dans quatre mois j'ai le griffonnage de ce gredin. -ah çà! Capitaine Clubin, est-ce que vous partez demain? Clubin, absorbé dans une sorte de somnambulisme, n'entendit pas. Le capitaine Gertrais répéta sa question. Clubin se réveilla. -sans doute, capitaine Gertrais. C'est mon jour. Il faut que je parte demain matin. -si c'était moi, je ne partirais pas. Capitaine Clubin, la peau des chiens sent le poil mouillé. Les oiseaux de mer viennent depuis deux nuits tourner autour de la lanterne du phare. Mauvais signe. J'ai un storm-glass qui fait des siennes. Nous sommes au deuxième octant de la lune; c'est le maximum d'humidité. J'ai vu tantôt des pimprenelles qui fermaient leurs feuilles et un champ de trèfles dont les tiges étaient toutes droites. Les vers de terre sortent, les mouches piquent, les abeilles ne s'éloignent pas de leur ruche, les moineaux se consultent. On entend le son des cloches de loin. J'ai entendu ce soir l'angélus de Saint-Lunaire. Et puis le soleil s'est couché sale. Il y aura demain un fort brouillard. Je ne vous conseille pas de partir. Je crains plus le brouillard que l'ouragan. C'est un sournois, le brouillard.

LIVRE SIXIEME

LE TIMONIER IVRE ET LE CAPITAINE SOBRE

I. la perle au fond du précipice.

Quelques minutes après son court colloque avec sieur Landoys, Gilliatt était à Saint-Sampson. Gilliatt était inquiet jusqu'à l'anxiété. Qu'était-il donc arrivé? Saint-Sampson avait une rumeur de ruche effarouchée. Tout le monde était sur les portes. Les femmes s'exclamaient. Il y avait des gens qui semblaient raconter quelque chose et qui gesticulaient; on faisait groupe autour d'eux. On entendait ce mot: quel malheur! Plusieurs visages souriaient. Gilliatt n'interrogea personne. Il n'était pas dans sa nature de faire des questions. D'ailleurs il était trop ému pour parler à des indifférents. Il se défiait des récits, il aimait mieux tout savoir d'un coup; il alla droit aux bravées. Son inquiétude était telle qu'il n'eut même pas peur d'entrer dans cette maison. D'ailleurs la porte de la salle basse sur le quai était toute grande ouverte. Il y avait sur le seuil un fourmillement d'hommes et de femmes. Tout le monde entrait, il entra. En entrant, il trouva contre le chambranle de la porte sieur Landoys qui lui dit à demi-voix: -vous savez sans doute à présent l'évènement? -non. -je n'ai pas voulu vous crier ça dans la route. On a l'air d'un oiseau de malheur. -qu'est-ce? -la durande est perdue.

Il y avait foule dans la salle. Les groupes parlaient bas, comme dans la chambre d'un malade. Les assistants, qui étaient les voisins, les passants, les curieux, les premiers venus, se tenaient entassés près de la porte avec une sorte de crainte, et laissaient vide le fond de la salle où l'on voyait, à côté de Déruchette en larmes, assise, mess Lethierry, debout. Il était adossé à la cloison du fond. Son bonnet de matelot tombait sur ses sourcils. Une mèche de cheveux gris pendait sur sa joue. Il ne disait rien. Ses bras n'avaient pas de mouvement, sa bouche semblait n'avoir plus de souffle. Il avait l'air d'une chose posée contre le mur. On sentait, en le voyant, l'homme au dedans duquel la vie vient de s'écrouler. Durande n'étant plus, Lethierry n'avait plus de raison d'être. Il avait une âme en mer, cette âme venait de sombrer. Que devenir maintenant? Se lever tous les matins, se coucher tous les soirs. Ne plus attendre durande, ne plus la voir partir, ne plus la voir revenir. Qu'est-ce qu'un reste d'existence sans but? Boire, manger, et puis? Cet homme avait couronné tous ses travaux par un chef-d’oeuvre, et tous ses dévouements par un progrès. Le progrès était aboli, le chef-d’oeuvre était mort. Vivre encore quelques années vides, à quoi bon? Rien à faire désormais. à cet âge on ne recommence pas; en outre, il était ruiné. Pauvre vieux bonhomme! Déruchette, pleurante près de lui sur une chaise, tenait dans ses deux mains un des poings de mess Lethierry. Les mains étaient jointes, le poing était crispé. La nuance des deux accablements était là. Dans les mains jointes quelque chose espère encore; dans le poing crispé, rien. Mess Lethierry lui abandonnait son bras et la laissait faire. Il était passif. Il n’avait plus que la quantité de vie qu’on peut avoir après le coup de foudre. Il y a de certaines arrivées au fond de l’abîme qui vous retirent du milieu des vivants. Les gens qui vont et viennent dans votre chambre sont confus et indistincts; ils vous coudoient sans parvenir jusqu’à vous. Vous leur êtes inabordable et ils vous sont inaccessibles. Le bonheur et le désespoir ne sont pas les mêmes milieux respirables; désespéré, on assiste à la vie des autres de très loin, on ignore presque leur présence; on perd le sentiment de sa propre existence; on a beau être en chair et en os, on ne se sent plus réel; on n’est plus pour soi-même qu’un songe. Mess Lethierry avait le regard de cette situation-là. Les groupes chuchotaient. On échangeait ce qu’on savait. Voici quelles étaient les nouvelles: la durande s’était perdue la veille sur le rocher Douvres, par le brouillard, une heure environ avant le coucher du soleil. à l’exception du capitaine qui n’avait pas voulu quitter son navire, les gens s’étaient sauvés dans la chaloupe. Une bourrasque de sud-ouest, survenue après le brouillard, avait failli les faire naufrager une seconde fois, et les avait poussés au large au delà de Guernesey. Dans la nuit ils avaient eu ce bon hasard de rencontrer le cashmere , qui les avait recueillis et amenés à Saint-Pierre-Port. Tout était de la faute du timonier Tangrouille, qui était en prison. Clubin avait été magnanime. Les pilotes, qui abondaient dans les groupes, prononçaient ce mot, l’écueil Douvres, d’une façon particulière. -mauvaise auberge, disait l’un d’eux. On remarquait sur la table une boussole et une liasse de registres et de carnets; c’étaient sans doute la boussole de la durande et les papiers de bord remis par Clubin à Imbrancam et à Tangrouille au moment du départ de la chaloupe; magnifique abnégation de cet homme sauvant jusqu’à des paperasses à l’instant où il se laisse mourir; petit détail plein de grandeur; oubli sublime de soi-même. On était unanime pour admirer Clubin, et, du reste, unanime aussi pour le croire, après tout, sauvé. Le coutre shealtiel était arrivé quelques heures après le cashmere; c’était ce coutre qui apportait les derniers renseignements. Il venait de passer vingt-quatre heures dans les mêmes eaux que la durande. Il y avait patienté pendant le brouillard et louvoyé pendant la tempête. Le patron du shealtiel était présent parmi les assistants. à l’instant où Gilliatt était entré, ce patron venait de faire son récit à mess Lethierry. Ce récit était un vrai rapport. Vers le matin, la bourrasque étant finie et le vent devenant maniable, le patron du shealtiel avait entendu des beuglements en pleine mer. Ce bruit de prairies au milieu des vagues l’avait surpris; il s’était dirigé de ce côté. Il avait aperçu la durande dans les rochers Douvres. L’accalmie était suffisante pour qu’il pût approcher. Il avait hélé l’épave. Le mugissement des boeufs qui se noyaient dans la cale avait seul répondu. Le patron du shealtiel était certain qu’il n’y avait personne à bord de la durande. L’épave était parfaitement tenable; et, si violente qu’eût été la bourrasque, Clubin eût pu y passer la nuit. Il n’était pas homme à lâcher prise aisément. Il n’y était point, donc il était sauvé. Plusieurs sloops et plusieurs lougres, de Granville et de Saint-Malo, se dégageant du brouillard, avaient dû, la veille au soir, ceci était hors de doute, côtoyer d’assez près l’écueil Douvres. Un d’eux avait évidemment recueilli le capitaine Clubin. Il faut se souvenir que la chaloupe de la durande était pleine en quittant le navire échoué, qu’elle allait courir beaucoup de risques, qu’un homme de plus était une surcharge et pouvait la faire sombrer, et que c’était là surtout ce qui avait dû déterminer Clubin à rester sur l’épave; mais qu’une fois son devoir rempli, un navire sauveteur se présentant, Clubin n’avait, à coup sûr, fait nulle difficulté d’en profiter. On est un héros, mais on n’est pas un niais. Un suicide eût été d’autant plus absurde, que Clubin était irréprochable. Le coupable c’était Tangrouille, et non Clubin. Tout ceci était concluant; le patron du shealtiel avait visiblement raison, et tout le monde s’attendait à voir Clubin reparaître d’un moment à l’autre. On préméditait de le porter en triomphe. Deux certitudes ressortaient du récit du patron, Clubin sauvé et la durande perdue. Quant à la durande, il fallait en prendre son parti, la catastrophe était irrémédiable. Le patron du shealtiel avait assisté à la dernière phase du naufrage. Le rocher fort aigu où la durande était en quelque sorte clouée avait tenu bon toute la nuit, et avait résisté au choc de la tempête comme s’il voulait garder l’épave pour lui; mais au matin, à l’instant où le shealtiel , constatant qu’il n’y avait personne à sauver, allait s’éloigner de la durande, il était survenu un de ces paquets de mer qui sont comme les derniers coups de colère des tempêtes. Ce flot avait furieusement soulevé la durande, l’avait arrachée du brisant, et, avec la vitesse et la rectitude d’une flèche lancée, l’avait jetée entre les deux roches Douvres. On avait entendu un craquement “ diabolique “ , disait le patron. La durande, portée par la lame à une certaine hauteur, s’était engagée dans l’entre-deux des roches jusqu’au maître-couple. Elle était de nouveau clouée, mais plus solidement que sur le brisant sous-marin. Elle allait rester là, déplorablement suspendue, livrée à tout le vent et à toute la mer. La durande, au dire de l’équipage du shealtiel , était déjà aux trois quarts fracassée. Elle eût évidemment coulé dans la nuit si l’écueil ne l’eût retenue et soutenue. Le patron du shealtiel avec sa lunette avait étudié l’épave. Il donnait avec la précision marine le détail du désastre; la hanche de tribord était défoncée, les mâts tronqués, la voilure déralinguée, les chaînes des haubans presque toutes coupées, la claire-voie du capot-de-chambre écrasée par la chute d’une vergue, les jambettes brisées au ras du plat bord depuis le travers du grand mât jusqu’au couronnement, le dôme de la cambuse effondré, les chantiers de la chaloupe culbutés, le rouffle démonté, l’arbre du gouvernail rompu, les drosses déclouées, les pavois rasés, les bittes emportées, le traversin détruit, la lisse enlevée, l’étambot cassé. C’était toute la dévastation frénétique de la tempête. Quant à la grue de chargement scellée au mât sur l’avant, plus rien, aucune nouvelle, nettoyage complet, partie à tous les diables, avec sa guinderesse, ses moufles, sa poulie de fer et ses chaînes. La durande était disloquée; l’eau allait maintenant se mettre à la déchiqueter. Dans quelques jours, il n’en resterait rien. Pourtant la machine, chose remarquable et qui prouvait son excellence, était à peine atteinte dans ce ravage. Le patron du shealtiel croyait pouvoir affirmer que “ la manivelle “ n’avait point d’avarie grave. Les mâts du navire avaient cédé, mais la cheminée de la machine avait résisté. Les gardes de fer de la passerelle de commandement étaient seulement tordues; les tambours avaient souffert, les cages étaient froissées, mais les roues ne paraissaient pas avoir une palette de moins. La machine était intacte. C’était la conviction du patron du shealtiel . Le chauffeur Imbrancam, qui était mêlé aux groupes, partageait cette conviction. Ce nègre, plus intelligent que beaucoup de blancs, était l’admirateur de la machine. Il levait les bras en ouvrant les dix doigts de ses mains noires et disait à Lethierry muet: mon maître, la mécanique est en vie. Le salut de Clubin semblant assuré, et la coque de la durande étant sacrifiée, la machine, dans les conversations des groupes, était la question. On s'y intéressait comme à une personne. On s'émerveillait de sa bonne conduite. -voilà une solide commère, disait un matelot français. -c'est de quoi bon! S'écriait un pêcheur guernesiais. -il faut qu'elle ait eu de la malice, reprenait le patron du shealtiel , pour se tirer de là avec deux ou trois écorchures. Peu à peu cette machine fut la préoccupation unique. Elle échauffa les opinions pour et contre. Elle avait des amis et des ennemis. Plus d'un, qui avait un bon vieux coutre à voiles, et qui espérait ressaisir la clientèle de la durande, n'était pas fâché de voir l'écueil Douvres faire justice de la nouvelle invention. Le chuchotement devint brouhaha. On discuta presque avec bruit. Pourtant c'était une rumeur toujours un peu discrète, et il se faisait par intervalles de subits abaissements de voix, sous la pression du silence sépulcral de Lethierry. Du colloque engagé sur tous les points, il résultait ceci: la machine était l'essentiel. Refaire le navire était possible, refaire la machine non. Cette machine était unique. Pour en fabriquer une pareille, l'argent manquerait, l'ouvrier manquerait encore plus. On rappelait que le constructeur de la machine était mort. Elle avait coûté quarante mille francs. Personne ne risquerait désormais sur une telle éventualité un tel capital; d'autant plus que voilà qui était jugé, les navires à vapeur se perdaient comme les autres; l'accident actuel de la durande coulait à fond tout son succès passé. Pourtant il était déplorable de penser qu'à l'heure qu'il était, cette mécanique était encore entière et en bon état, et qu'avant cinq ou six jours elle serait probablement mise en pièces comme le navire. Tant qu'elle existait, il n'y avait, pour ainsi dire, pas de naufrage. La perte seule de la machine serait irrémédiable. Sauver la machine, ce serait réparer le désastre. Sauver la machine, c'était facile à dire. Mais qui s'en chargerait? Est-ce que c'était possible? Faire et exécuter c'est deux, et la preuve, c'est qu'il est aisé de faire un rêve et difficile de l'exécuter. Or si jamais un rêve avait été impraticable et insensé, c'était celui-ci: sauver la machine échouée sur les Douvres. Envoyer travailler sur ces roches un navire et un équipage serait absurde; il n'y fallait pas songer. C'était la saison des coups de mer; à la première bourrasque les chaînes des ancres seraient sciées par les crêtes sous-marines des brisants, et le navire se fracasserait à l'écueil. Ce serait envoyer un deuxième naufrage au secours du premier. Dans l'espèce de trou du plateau supérieur où s'était abrité le naufragé légendaire mort de faim, il y avait à peine place pour un homme. Il faudrait donc que, pour sauver cette machine, un homme allât aux rochers

Douvres, et qu’il y allât seul, seul dans cette mer, seul dans ce désert, seul à cinq lieues de la côte, seul dans cette épouvante, seul des semaines entières, seul devant le prévu et l’imprévu, sans ravitaillement dans les angoisses du dénûment, sans secours dans les incidents de la détresse, sans autre trace humaine que celle de l’ancien naufragé expiré de misère là, sans autre compagnon que ce mort. Et comment s’y prendrait-il d’ailleurs pour sauver cette machine? Il faudrait qu’il fût non seulement matelot, mais forgeron. Et à travers quelles épreuves! L’homme qui tenterait cela serait plus qu’un héros. Ce serait un fou. Car dans de certaines entreprises disproportionnées où le surhumain semble nécessaire, la bravoure a au-dessus d’elle la démence. Et en effet, après tout, se dévouer pour de la ferraille, ne serait-ce pas extravagant? Non, personne n’irait aux rochers Douvres. On devait renoncer à la machine comme au reste. Le sauveteur qu’il fallait ne se présenterait point. Où trouver un tel homme? Ceci, dit un peu autrement, était le fond de tous les propos murmurés dans cette foule. Le patron du shealtiel , qui était un ancien pilote, résuma la pensée de tous par cette exclamation à voix haute: -non! C’est fini. L’homme qui ira là et qui rapportera la machine n’existe pas. -puisque je n’y vais pas, ajouta Imbrncam, c’est qu’on ne peut pas y aller. Le patron du shealtiel secoua sa main gauche avec cette brusquerie qui exprime la conviction de l’impossible, et reprit: -s’il existait... Déruchette tourna la tête. -je l’épouserais, dit-elle. Il y eut un silence. Un homme très pâle sortit du milieu des groupes et dit: -vous l’épouseriez, miss Déruchette? C’était Gilliatt. Cependant tous les yeux s’étaient levés. Mess Lethierry venait de se dresser tout droit. Il avait sous le sourcil une lumière étrange. Il prit du poing son bonnet de matelot et le jeta à terre, puis il regarda solennellement devant lui sans voir aucune des personnes présentes, et dit: -Déruchette l’épouserait. J’en donne ma parole d’honneur au bon Dieu.

II. beaucoup d’étonnement sur la côte ouest.

La nuit qui suivit ce jour-là devait être, à partir de dix heures du soir, une nuit de lune. Cependant, quelle que fût la bonne apparence de la nuit, du vent et de la mer, aucun pêcheur ne comptait sortir ni de la Hougue La Perre, ni du Bourdeaux, ni de Houmet Benet, ni du Platon, ni de Port Grat, ni de la baie Vason, ni de Perelle bay, ni de Pezeris, ni du Tielles, ni de la baie des Saints, ni de Petit Bô, ni d’aucun port ou portelet de Guernesey. Et cela était tout simple, le coq avait chanté à midi. Quand le coq chante à une heure extraordinaire, la pêche manque. Ce soir-là, pourtant, à la tombée de la nuit, un pêcheur qui rentrait à Omptolle eut une surprise. à la hauteur du Houmet Paradis, au delà des deux Brayes et des deux Grunes, ayant à gauche la balise des Plattes Fougères qui représente un entonnoir renversé, et à droite la balise de Saint-Sampson qui représente une figure d'homme, il crut apercevoir une troisième balise. Qu'était-ce que cette balise? Quand l'avait-on plantée sur ce point? Quel bas-fond indiquait-elle? La balise répondit tout de suite à ces interrogations; elle remuait; c'était un mât. L'étonnement du pêcheur ne décrut point. Une balise faisait question; un mât bien plus encore. Il n'y avait point de pêche possible. Quand tout le monde rentrait, quelqu'un sortait. Qui? Pourquoi? Dix minutes après, le mât, cheminant lentement, arriva à quelque distance du pêcheur d'Omptolle. Il ne put reconnaître la barque. Il entendit ramer. Il n'y avait que le bruit de deux avirons. C'était donc vraisemblablement un homme seul. Le vent était nord; cet homme évidemment nageait pour aller prendre le vent au delà de la pointe Fontenelle. Là, probablement, il mettrait à la voile. Il comptait donc doubler l'Ancresse et le mont Crevel. Qu'est-ce que cela voulait dire? Le mât passa, le pêcheur rentra. Cette même nuit, sur la côte ouest de Guernesey, des observateurs d'occasion, disséminés et isolés, firent, à des heures diverses et sur divers points, des remarques. Comme le pêcheur d'Omptolle venait d'amarrer sa barque, un charretier de varech, à un demi-mille plus loin, fouettant ses chevaux dans la route déserte des clôtures, près du cromlech, aux environs des martellos 6 et 7, vit en mer, assez loin à l'horizon, dans un endroit peu fréquenté parce qu'il faut le bien connaître, devers la Roque-Nord et la Sablonneuse, une voile qu'on hissait. Il y fit d'ailleurs peu d'attention, étant pour chariot et non pour bateau. Une demi-heure s'était peut-être écoulée depuis que le charretier avait aperçu cette voile, quand un plâtreur, revenant de son ouvrage de la ville et contournant la mare Pelée, se trouva tout à coup presque en face d'une barque très hardiment engagée parmi les roches du Quenon, de la Rousse De Mer et de la Grippe De Rousse. La nuit était noire, mais la mer était claire, effet qui se produit souvent, et l'on pouvait distinguer au large les allées et venues. Il n'y avait en mer que cette barque. Un peu plus bas, et un peu plus tard, un ramasseur de langoustes, disposant ses boutiques sur l'ensablement qui sépare le Port Soif du Port Enfer, ne comprit pas ce que faisait une barque glissant entre la Boue Corneille et la Moulrette. Il fallait être bon pilote et bien pressé d'arriver quelque part pour se risquer là. Comme huit heures sonnaient au Catel, le tavernier de Cobo Bay observa, avec quelque ébahissement, une voile au delà de la Boue Du Jardin et des Grunettes, très près de la Suzanne et des Grunes de l’ouest. Non loin de Cobo Bay, sur la pointe solitaire du Houmet de la baie Vason, deux amoureux étaient en train de se séparer et de se retenir; au moment où la fille disait au garçon: -si je m’en vas, ce n’est pas pour l’amour de ne pas être avec toi, c’est que j’ai mon fait à choser-, ils furent distraits de leur baiser d’adieu par une assez grosse barque qui passa très près d’eux et qui se dirigeait vers les Messellettes. Monsieur Le Peyre Des Norgiots, habitant le cotillon Pipet, était occupé vers neuf heures du soir à examiner un trou fait par des maraudeurs dans la haie de son courtil, la Jennerotte, et de son “ friquet planté à arbres “; tout en constatant le dommage, il ne put s’empêcher de remarquer une barque doublant témérairement le Crocq-Point à cette heure de nuit. Un lendemain de tempête, avec ce qui reste d’agitation à la mer, cet itinéraire était peu sûr. On était imprudent de le choisir, à moins de savoir par coeur les passes. à neuf heures et demie, à l’équerrier, un chalutier remportant son filet s’arrêta quelque temps pour considérer entre Colombelle et la Souffleresse quelque chose qui devait être un bateau. Ce bateau s’exposait beaucoup. Il y a là des coups de vent subits très dangereux. La roche Souffleresse est ainsi nommée parce qu’elle souffle brusquement sur les barques. à l’instant où la lune se levait, la marée étant pleine et la mer étant étale dans le petit détroit de Li-Hou, le gardien solitaire de l’île de Li-Hou fut très effrayé; il vit passer entre la lune et lui une longue forme noire. Cette forme noire, haute et étroite, ressemblait à un linceul debout qui marcherait. Elle glissait lentement au-dessus des espèces de murs que font les bancs de rochers. Le gardien de Li-Hou crut reconnaître la Dame Noire. La Dame Blanche habite le Tau De Pez D’Amont, la Dame Grise habite le Tau De Pez D’Aval, la Dame Rouge habite la Silleuse au nord du Banc-Marquis, et la Dame Noire habite le Grand-étacré, à l’ouest de Li-Houmet. La nuit, au clair de lune, ces dames sortent, et quelquefois se rencontrent. à la rigueur cette forme noire pouvait être une voile. Les longs barrages de rochers sur lesquels elle semblait marcher pouvaient en effet cacher la coque d’une barque voguant derrière eux, et laisser voir la voile seulement. Mais le gardien se demanda quelle barque oserait à cette heure se hasarder entre Li-Hou et la Pécheresse et les Angullières et Lérée-Point. Et dans quel but? Il lui parut plus probable que c’était la Dame Noire. Comme la lune venait de dépasser le clocher de Saint-Pierre Du Bois, le sergent du château rocquaine, en relevant la moitié de l’échelle pont-levis, distingua, à l’embouchure de la baie, plus loin que la Haute Canée, plus près que la Sambule, une barque à la voile qui semblait descendre du nord au sud. Il existe sur la côte sud de Guernesey, en arrière de Plainmont, au fond d’une baie toute de précipices et de murailles, coupée à pic dans le flot, un port singulier qu’un français, séjournant dans l’île depuis 1855, le même peut-être qui écrit ces lignes, a baptisé le port au quatrième étage , nom généralement adopté aujourd’hui. Ce port, qui s’appelait alors la Moie, est un plateau de roche, à demi naturel, à demi taillé, élevé d’une quarantaine de pieds au-dessus du niveau de l’eau, et communiquant avec les vagues par deux gros madriers parallèles en plan incliné. Les barques, hissées à force de bras par des chaînes et des poulies, montent de la mer et y redescendent le long de ces madriers qui sont comme deux rails. Pour les hommes il y a un escalier. Ce port était alors très fréquenté par les contrebandiers. étant peu praticable, il leur était commode. Vers onze heures, des fraudeurs, peut-être ceux-là mêmes sur lesquels avait compté Clubin, étaient avec leurs ballots au sommet de cette plate-forme de la Moie. Qui fraude guette; ils épiaient. Ils furent étonnés d’une voile qui déboucha brusquement au delà de la silhouette noire du cap Plainmont. Il faisait clair de lune. Ces contrebandiers surveillèrent cette voile, craignant que ce ne fût quelque garde-côte allant s’embusquer en observation derrière le grand hanois. Mais la voile dépassa les hanois, laissa derrière elle au nord-ouest la Boue Blondel, et s’enfonça au large dans l’estompe livide des brumes de l’horizon. -où diable peut aller cette barque? Se dirent les contrebandiers. Le même soir, un peu après le coucher du soleil, on avait entendu quelqu’un frapper à la porte de la masure du bû de la rue. C’était un jeune garçon vêtu de brun avec des bas jaunes, ce qui indiquait un petit clerc de la paroisse. Le bû de la rue était fermé, porte et volets. Une vieille pêcheuse de fruits de mer, rôdant dans la banque une lanterne à la main, avait hélé le garçon, et ces paroles s’étaient échangées devant le bû de la rue entre la pêcheuse et le petit clerc. -qu’est-ce que vous voulez, gars? -l’homme d’ici. -il n’y est point. -où est-il? -je ne sais point. -y sera-t-il demain? -je ne sais point. -est-ce qu’il est parti? -je ne sais point. -c’est que, voyez-vous, la femme, le nouveau recteur de la paroisse, le révérend Ebenezer Caudray, voudrait lui faire une visite. -je ne sais point. -le révérend m’envoie demander si l’homme du bû de la rue sera chez lui demain matin. -je ne sais point.

III. ne tentez pas la bible.

Dans les vingt-quatre heures qui suivirent, mess Lethierry ne dormit pas, ne mangea pas, ne but pas, baisa au front Déruchette, s’informa de Clubin dont on n’avait pas encore de nouvelles, signa une déclaration comme quoi il n’entendait former aucune plainte, et fit mettre Tangrouille en liberté. Il resta toute la journée du lendemain à demi appuyé à la table de l’office de la durande, ni debout, ni assis, répondant avec douceur quand on lui parlait. Du reste, la curiosité étant satisfaite, la solitude s’était faite aux bravées. Il y a beaucoup de désir d’observer dans l’empressement à s’apitoyer. La porte s’était refermée; on laissait Lethierry avec Déruchette. L’éclair qui avait passé dans les yeux de Lethierry s’était éteint; le regard lugubre du commencement de la catastrophe lui était revenu. Déruchette, inquiète, avait, sur le conseil de Grace et de Douce, mis, sans rien dire, à côté de lui sur la table une paire de bas qu’il était en train de tricoter quand la mauvaise nouvelle était arrivée. Il sourit amèrement et dit: -on me croit donc bête. Après un quart d’heure de silence, il ajouta: -c’est bon quand on est heureux ces manies-là. Déruchette avait fait disparaître la paire de bas, et avait profité de l’occasion pour faire disparaître aussi la boussole et les papiers de bord, que mess Lethierry regardait trop. Dans l’après-midi, un peu avant l’heure du thé, la porte s’ouvrit, et deux hommes entrèrent, vêtus de noir, l’un vieux, l’autre jeune. Le jeune, on l’a peut-être aperçu déjà dans le cours de ce récit. Ces hommes avaient tous deux l’air grave, mais d’une gravité différente; le vieillard avait ce qu’on pourrait nommer la gravité d’état; le jeune homme avait la gravité de nature. L’habit donne l’une, la pensée donne l’autre. C’étaient, le vêtement l’indiquait, deux hommes d’église, appartenant tous deux à la religion établie. Ce qui, dans le jeune homme, eût, au premier abord, frappé l’observateur, c’est que cette gravité, qui était profonde dans son regard, et qui résultait évidemment de son esprit, ne résultait pas de sa personne. La gravité admet la passion, et l’exalte en l’épurant, mais ce jeune homme était, avant tout, joli. étant prêtre, il avait au moins vingt-cinq ans; il en paraissait dix-huit. Il offrait cette harmonie, et aussi ce contraste, qu’en lui l’âme semblait faite pour la passion et le corps pour l’amour. Il était blond, rose, frais, très fin et très souple dans son costume sévère, avec des joues de jeune fille et des mains délicates; il avait l’allure vive et naturelle, quoique réprimée. Tout en lui était charme, élégance, et presque volupté. La beauté de son regard corrigeait cet excès de grâce. Son sourire sincère, qui montrait des dents d’enfant, était pensif et religieux. C’était la gentillesse d’un page et la dignité d’un évêque. Sous ses épais cheveux blonds, si dorés qu’ils paraissaient coquets, son crâne était élevé, candide et bien fait. Une ride légère à double inflexion entre les deux sourcils éveillait confusément l’idée de l’oiseau de la pensée planant, ailes déployées, au milieu de ce front. On sentait, en le voyant, un de ces êtres bienveillants, innocents et purs, qui progressent en sens inverse de l’humanité vulgaire, que l’illusion fait sages et que l’expérience fait enthousiastes. Sa jeunesse transparente laissait voir sa maturité intérieure. Comparé à l’ecclésiastique en cheveux gris qui l’accompagnait, au premier coup d’oeil il semblait le fils, au second coup d’oeil il semblait le père. Celui-ci n’était autre que le docteur Jaquemin Hérode. Le docteur Jaquemin Hérode appartenait à la haute église, laquelle est à peu près un papisme sans pape. L’anglicanisme était travaillé dès cette époque par les tendances qui se sont depuis affirmées et condensées dans le puséysme. Le docteur Jaquemin Hérode était de cette nuance anglicane qui est presque une variété romaine. Il était haut, correct, étroit et supérieur. Son rayon visuel intérieur sortait à peine au dehors. Il avait pour esprit la lettre. Du reste altier. Son personnage tenait de la place. Il avait moins l’air d’un révérend que d’un monsignor. Sa redingote était un peu coupée en soutane. Son vrai milieu eût été Rome. Il était prélat de chambre, né. Il semblait avoir été créé exprès pour orner un pape, et pour marcher derrière la chaise gestatoire, avec toute la cour pontificale, in abitto paonazzo . L’accident d’être né anglais, et une éducation théologique plus tournée vers l’ancien testament que vers le nouveau, lui avaient fait manquer cette grande destinée. Toutes ses splendeurs se résumaient en ceci, être recteur de Saint-Pierre-Port, doyen de l’île de Guernesey et subrogé de l’évêque de Winchester. C’était, sans nul doute, de la gloire. Cette gloire n’empêchait pas M Jaquemin Hérode d’être, à tout prendre, un assez bon homme. Comme théologien, il était bien situé dans l’estime des connaisseurs, et il faisait presque autorité à la cour des arches, cette sorbonne de l’Angleterre. Il avait la mine docte, un clignement d’yeux capable et exagéré, les narines velues, les dents visibles, la lèvre supérieure mince et la lèvre inférieure épaisse, plusieurs diplômes, une grosse prébende, des amis baronets, la confiance de l’évêque, et toujours une bible dans sa poche. Mess Lethierry était si complètement absorbé que tout ce que put produire l’entrée des deux prêtres fut un imperceptible froncement de sourcil. M Jaquemin Hérode s’avança, salua, rappela, en quelques mots sobrement hautains, sa promotion récente, et dit qu’il venait, selon l’usage, “ introduire “ près des notables, -et près de mess Lethierry en particulier, -son successeur dans la paroisse, le nouveau recteur de Saint-Sampson, le révérend Joë Ebenezer Caudray, désormais pasteur de mess Lethierry. Déruchette se leva. Le jeune prêtre, qui était le révérend Ebenezer, s’inclina. Mess Lethierry regarda M Ebenezer Caudray et grommela entre ses dents: mauvais matelot. Grace avança des chaises. Des deux révérends s’assirent près de la table. Le docteur Hérode entama un speech. Il lui était revenu qu’il était arrivé un évènement. La durande avait fait naufrage. Il venait, comme pasteur, apporter des consolations et des conseils. Ce naufrage était malheureux, mais heureux aussi. Sondons-nous; n’étions-nous pas enflés par la prospérité? Les eaux de la félicité sont dangereuses. Il ne faut pas prendre en mauvaise part les malheurs. Les voies du seigneur sont inconnues. Mess Lethierry était ruiné. Eh bien? être riche, c’est être en danger. On a de faux amis. La pauvreté les éloigne. On reste seul. solus eris. la durande rapportait, disait-on, mille livres sterling par an. C’est trop pour le sage. Fuyons les tentations, dédaignons l’or. Acceptons avec reconnaissance la ruine et l’abandon. L’isolement est plein de fruits. On y obtient les grâces du seigneur. C’est dans la solitude qu’Aia trouva les eaux chaudes, en conduisant les ânes de Sébéon son père. Ne nous révoltons pas contre les impénétrables décrets de la providence. Le saint homme Job, après sa misère, avait crû en richesse. Qui sait si la perte de la durande n’aurait pas des compensations, même temporelles? Ainsi, lui docteur Jaquemin Hérode, il avait engagé des capitaux dans une très belle opération en cours d’exécution à Sheffield; si mess Lethierry, avec les fonds qui pouvaient lui rester, voulait entrer dans cette affaire, il y referait sa fortune; c’était une grosse fourniture d’armes au czar en train de réprimer la Pologne. On y gagnerait trois cents pour cent. Le mot czar parut réveiller Lethierry. Il interrompit le docteur Hérode. -je ne veux pas du czar. Le révérend Hérode répondit: -mess Lethierry, les princes sont voulus de Dieu. Il est écrit: “ rendez à César ce qui est à César. “ le czar, c’est César. Lethierry, à demi retombé dans son rêve, murmura: -qui ça, César? Je ne connais pas. Le révérend Jaquemin Hérode reprit son exhortation. Il n’insistait pas sur Sheffield. Ne pas vouloir de César, c’est être républicain. Le révérend comprenait qu’on fût républicain. En ce cas, que mess Lethierry se tournât vers une république. Mess Lethierry pouvait rétablir sa fortune aux états-Unis mieux encore qu’en Angleterre. S’il voulait décupler ce qui lui restait, il n’avait qu’à prendre des actions dans la grande compagnie d’exploitation des plantations du Texas, laquelle employait plus de vingt mille nègres. -je ne veux pas de l’esclavage, dit Lethierry. -l’esclavage, répliqua le révérend Hérode, est d’institution sacrée. Il est écrit: “ si le maître a frappé son esclave, il ne lui sera rien fait, car c’est son argent. “ Grace et Douce, sur le seuil de la porte, recueillaient avec une sorte d’extase les paroles du révérend recteur. Le révérend continua. C’était, somme toute, nous venons de le dire, un bon homme; et, quels que pussent être ses dissentiments de caste ou de personne avec mess Lethierry, il venait très sincèrement lui apporter toute l’aide spirituelle, et même temporelle, dont lui, docteur Jaquemin Hérode, disposait. Si mess Lethierry était ruiné à ce point de ne pouvoir coopérer fructueusement à une spéculation quelconque, russe ou américaine, que n’entrait-il dans le gouvernement et dans les fonctions salariées? Ce sont de nobles places, et le révérend était prêt à y introduire mess Lethierry. L’office de député-vicomte était précisément vacant à Jersey. Mess Lethierry était aimé et estimé, et le révérend Hérode, doyen de Guernesey et subrogé de l’évêque, se faisait fort d’obtenir pour mess Lethierry l’emploi de député-vicomte de Jersey. Le député-vicomte est un officier considérable; il assiste, comme représentant de sa majesté, à la tenue des chefs-plaids, aux débats de la cohue, et aux exécutions des arrêts de justice. Lethierry fixa sa prunelle sur le docteur Hérode. -je n’aime pas la pendaison, dit-il. Le docteur Hérode, qui jusqu’alors avait prononcé tous les mots avec la même intonation, eut un accès de sévérité et une inflexion nouvelle. -mess Lethierry, la peine de mort est ordonnée divinement. Dieu a remis le glaive à l’homme. Il est écrit: “ oeil pour oeil, dent pour dent. “ le révérend Ebenezer rapprocha imperceptiblement sa chaise de la chaise du révérend Jaquemin, et lui dit, de façon à n’être entendu que de lui: -ce que dit cet homme lui est dicté. -par qui? Par quoi? Demanda du même ton le révérend Jaquemin Hérode. Ebenezer répondit très bas: -par sa conscience. Le révérend Hérode fouilla dans sa poche, en tira un gros in-dix-huit relié avec fermoirs, le posa sur la table, et dit à voix haute: -la conscience, la voici. Le livre était une bible. Puis le docteur Hérode s’adoucit. Son désir était d’être utile à mess Lethierry, qu’il considérait fort. Il avait, lui pasteur, droit et devoir de conseil; pourtant mess Lethierry était libre. Mess Lethierry, ressaisi par son absorption et par son accablement, n’écoutait plus. Déruchette, assise près de lui, et pensive de son côté, ne levait pas les yeux et mêlait à cette conversation peu animée la quantité de gêne qu’apporte une présence silencieuse. Un témoin qui ne dit rien est une espèce de poids indéfinissable. Au surplus, le docteur Hérode ne semblait pas le sentir. Lethierry ne répondant plus, le docteur Hérode se donna carrière. Le conseil vient de l'homme et l'inspiration vient de Dieu. Dans le conseil du prêtre il y a de l'inspiration. Il est bon d'accepter les conseils et dangereux de les rejeter. Sochoth fut saisi par onze diables pour avoir dédaigné les exhortations de Nathanaël. Tiburien fut frappé de la lèpre pour avoir mis hors de chez lui l'apôtre André. Barjésus, tout magicien qu'il était, devint aveugle pour avoir ri des paroles de saint Paul. Elxaï, et ses soeurs Marthe et Marthène, sont en enfer à l'heure qu'il est pour avoir méprisé les avertissements de Valencianus qui leur prouvait clair comme le jour que leur Jésus-Christ de trente-huit lieues de haut était un démon. Oolibama, qui s'appelle aussi Judith, obéissait aux conseils. Ruben et Pheniel écoutaient les avis d'en haut; leurs noms seuls suffisent pour l'indiquer; Ruben signifie fils de la vision , et Pheniel signifie la face de Dieu . Mess Lethierry frappa du poing sur la table. -parbleu! S'écria-t-il, c'est ma faute. -que voulez-vous dire? Demanda M Jaquemin Hérode. -je dis que c'est ma faute. -votre faute, quoi? -puisque je faisais revenir durande le vendredi. M Jaquemin Hérode murmura à l'oreille de M Ebenezer Caudray: -cet homme est superstitieux. Il reprit en élevant la voix, et du ton de l'enseignement: -mess Lethierry, il est puéril de croire au vendredi. Il ne faut pas ajouter foi aux fables. Le vendredi est un jour comme un autre. C'est très souvent une date heureuse. Melendez a fondé la ville de Saint-Augustin un vendredi; c'est un vendredi que Henri Vii a donné sa commission à John Cabot; les pèlerins du mayflower sont arrivés à Providence-Town un vendredi. Washington est né le vendredi 22 février 1732; Christoph Colomb a découvert l'Amérique le vendredi 12 octobre 1492. Cela dit, il se leva. Ebenezer, qu'il avait amené, se leva également. Grace et Douce, devinant que les révérends allaient prendre congé, ouvrirent la porte à deux battants. Mess Lethierry ne voyait rien et n'entendait rien. M Jaquemin Hérode dit en aparté à M Ebenezer Caudray: -il ne nous salue même pas. Ce n'est pas du chagrin, c'est de l'abrutissement. Il faut croire qu'il est fou. Cependant il prit sa petite bible sur la table et la tint entre ses deux mains allongées comme on tiendrait un oiseau qu'on craint de voir envoler. Cette attitude créa parmi les personnes présentes une certaine attente. Grace et Douce avancèrent la tête. Sa voix fit tout ce qu'elle put pour être majestueuse. -mess Lethierry, ne nous séparons pas sans lire une page du saint livre. Les situations de la vie sont éclairées par les livres; les profanes ont les sorts virgiliens, les croyants ont les avertissements bibliques. Le premier livre venu, ouvert au hasard, donne un conseil; la bible, ouverte au hasard, fait une révélation. Elle est surtout bonne pour les affligés. Ce qui se dégage immanquablement de la sainte écriture, c’est l’adoucissement à leur peine. En présence des affligés, il faut consulter le saint livre sans choisir l’endroit, et lire avec candeur le passage sur lequel on tombe. Ce que l’homme ne choisit pas, Dieu le choisit. Dieu sait ce qu’il nous faut. Son doigt invisible est sur le passage inattendu que nous lisons. Quelle que soit cette page, il en sort infailliblement de la lumière. N’en cherchons pas d’autre, et tenons-nous-en là. C’est la parole d’en haut. Notre destinée nous est dite mystérieusement dans le texte évoqué avec confiance et respect. écoutons, et obéissons. Mess Lethierry, vous êtes dans la douleur, ceci est le livre de consolation. Vous êtes dans la maladie, ceci est le livre de santé. Le révérend Jaquemin Hérode fit jouer le ressort du fermoir, glissa son ongle à l’aventure entre deux pages, posa sa main un instant sur le livre ouvert, et se recueillit, puis, abaissant les yeux avec autorité, il se mit à lire à haute voix. Ce qu’il lut, le voici: “ Isaac se promenait dans le chemin qui mène au puits appelé le puits de celui qui vit et qui voit. “ Rébecca, ayant aperçu Isaac, dit: qui est cet homme qui vient au devant de moi? “ alors Isaac la fit entrer dans sa tente, et la prit pour femme, et l’amour qu’il eut pour elle fut grand. “ Ebenezer et Déruchette se regardèrent.

LIVRE SEPTIEME

IMPRUDENCE DE FAIRE DES QUESTIONS A UN LIVRE

I. la perle au fond du précipice.

Quelques minutes après son court colloque avec sieur Landoys, Gilliatt était à Saint-Sampson. Gilliatt était inquiet jusqu'à l'anxiété. Qu'était-il donc arrivé? Saint-Sampson avait une rumeur de ruche effarouchée. Tout le monde était sur les portes. Les femmes s'exclamaient. Il y avait des gens qui semblaient raconter quelque chose et qui gesticulaient; on faisait groupe autour d'eux. On entendait ce mot: quel malheur! Plusieurs visages souriaient. Gilliatt n'interrogea personne. Il n'était pas dans sa nature de faire des questions. D'ailleurs il était trop ému pour parler à des indifférents. Il se défiait des récits, il aimait mieux tout savoir d'un coup; il alla droit aux bravées. Son inquiétude était telle qu'il n'eut même pas peur d'entrer dans cette maison. D'ailleurs la porte de la salle basse sur le quai était toute grande ouverte. Il y avait sur le seuil un fourmillement d'hommes et de femmes. Tout le monde entrait, il entra. En entrant, il trouva contre le chambranle de la porte sieur Landoys qui lui dit à demi-voix: -vous savez sans doute à présent l'évènement? -non. -je n'ai pas voulu vous crier ça dans la route. On a l'air d'un oiseau de malheur. -qu'est-ce? -la durande est perdue.

Il y avait foule dans la salle. Les groupes parlaient bas, comme dans la chambre d'un malade. Les assistants, qui étaient les voisins, les passants, les curieux, les premiers venus, se tenaient entassés près de la porte avec une sorte de crainte, et laissaient vide le fond de la salle où l'on voyait, à côté de Déruchette en larmes, assise, mess Lethierry, debout. Il était adossé à la cloison du fond. Son bonnet de matelot tombait sur ses sourcils. Une mèche de cheveux gris pendait sur sa joue. Il ne disait rien. Ses bras n'avaient pas de mouvement, sa bouche semblait n'avoir plus de souffle. Il avait l'air d'une chose posée contre le mur. On sentait, en le voyant, l'homme au dedans duquel la vie vient de s'écrouler. Durande n'étant plus, Lethierry n'avait plus de raison d'être. Il avait une âme en mer, cette âme venait de sombrer. Que devenir maintenant? Se lever tous les matins, se coucher tous les soirs. Ne plus attendre durande, ne plus la voir partir, ne plus la voir revenir. Qu'est-ce qu'un reste d'existence sans but? Boire, manger, et puis? Cet homme avait couronné tous ses travaux par un chef-d’oeuvre, et tous ses dévouements par un progrès. Le progrès était aboli, le chef-d’oeuvre était mort. Vivre encore quelques années vides, à quoi bon? Rien à faire désormais. à cet âge on ne recommence pas; en outre, il était ruiné. Pauvre vieux bonhomme! Déruchette, pleurante près de lui sur une chaise, tenait dans ses deux mains un des poings de mess Lethierry. Les mains étaient jointes, le poing était crispé. La nuance des deux accablements était là. Dans les mains jointes quelque chose espère encore; dans le poing crispé, rien. Mess Lethierry lui abandonnait son bras et la laissait faire. Il était passif. Il n’avait plus que la quantité de vie qu’on peut avoir après le coup de foudre. Il y a de certaines arrivées au fond de l’abîme qui vous retirent du milieu des vivants. Les gens qui vont et viennent dans votre chambre sont confus et indistincts; ils vous coudoient sans parvenir jusqu’à vous. Vous leur êtes inabordable et ils vous sont inaccessibles. Le bonheur et le désespoir ne sont pas les mêmes milieux respirables; désespéré, on assiste à la vie des autres de très loin, on ignore presque leur présence; on perd le sentiment de sa propre existence; on a beau être en chair et en os, on ne se sent plus réel; on n’est plus pour soi-même qu’un songe. Mess Lethierry avait le regard de cette situation-là. Les groupes chuchotaient. On échangeait ce qu’on savait. Voici quelles étaient les nouvelles: la durande s’était perdue la veille sur le rocher Douvres, par le brouillard, une heure environ avant le coucher du soleil. à l’exception du capitaine qui n’avait pas voulu quitter son navire, les gens s’étaient sauvés dans la chaloupe. Une bourrasque de sud-ouest, survenue après le brouillard, avait failli les faire naufrager une seconde fois, et les avait poussés au large au delà de Guernesey. Dans la nuit ils avaient eu ce bon hasard de rencontrer le cashmere , qui les avait recueillis et amenés à Saint-Pierre-Port. Tout était de la faute du timonier Tangrouille, qui était en prison. Clubin avait été magnanime. Les pilotes, qui abondaient dans les groupes, prononçaient ce mot, l’écueil Douvres, d’une façon particulière. -mauvaise auberge, disait l’un d’eux. On remarquait sur la table une boussole et une liasse de registres et de carnets; c’étaient sans doute la boussole de la durande et les papiers de bord remis par Clubin à Imbrancam et à Tangrouille au moment du départ de la chaloupe; magnifique abnégation de cet homme sauvant jusqu’à des paperasses à l’instant où il se laisse mourir; petit détail plein de grandeur; oubli sublime de soi-même. On était unanime pour admirer Clubin, et, du reste, unanime aussi pour le croire, après tout, sauvé. Le coutre shealtiel était arrivé quelques heures après le cashmere; c'était ce coutre qui apportait les derniers renseignements. Il venait de passer vingt-quatre heures dans les mêmes eaux que la durande. Il y avait patienté pendant le brouillard et louvoyé pendant la tempête. Le patron du shealtiel était présent parmi les assistants. à l'instant où Gilliatt était entré, ce patron venait de faire son récit à mess Lethierry. Ce récit était un vrai rapport. Vers le matin, la bourrasque étant finie et le vent devenant maniable, le patron du shealtiel avait entendu des beuglements en pleine mer. Ce bruit de prairies au milieu des vagues l'avait surpris; il s'était dirigé de ce côté. Il avait aperçu la durande dans les rochers Douvres. L'accalmie était suffisante pour qu'il pût approcher. Il avait hélé l'épave. Le mugissement des boeufs qui se noyaient dans la cale avait seul répondu. Le patron du shealtiel était certain qu'il n'y avait personne à bord de la durande. L'épave était parfaitement tenable; et, si violente qu'eût été la bourrasque, Clubin eût pu y passer la nuit. Il n'était pas homme à lâcher prise aisément. Il n'y était point, donc il était sauvé. Plusieurs sloops et plusieurs lougres, de Granville et de Saint-Malo, se dégageant du brouillard, avaient dû, la veille au soir, ceci était hors de doute, côtoyer d'assez près l'écueil Douvres. Un d'eux avait évidemment recueilli le capitaine Clubin. Il faut se souvenir que la chaloupe de la durande était pleine en quittant le navire échoué, qu'elle allait courir beaucoup de risques, qu'un homme de plus était une surcharge et pouvait la faire sombrer, et que c'était là surtout ce qui avait dû déterminer Clubin à rester sur l'épave; mais qu'une fois son devoir rempli, un navire sauveteur se présentant, Clubin n'avait, à coup sûr, fait nulle difficulté d'en profiter. On est un héros, mais on n'est pas un niais. Un suicide eût été d'autant plus absurde, que Clubin était irréprochable. Le coupable c'était Tangrouille, et non Clubin. Tout ceci était concluant; le patron du shealtiel avait visiblement raison, et tout le monde s'attendait à voir Clubin reparaître d'un moment à l'autre. On préméditait de le porter en triomphe. Deux certitudes ressortaient du récit du patron, Clubin sauvé et la durande perdue. Quant à la durande, il fallait en prendre son parti, la catastrophe était irrémédiable. Le patron du shealtiel avait assisté à la dernière phase du naufrage. Le rocher fort aigu où la durande était en quelque sorte clouée avait tenu bon toute la nuit, et avait résisté au choc de la tempête comme s'il voulait garder l'épave pour lui; mais au matin, à l'instant où le shealtiel , constatant qu'il n'y avait personne à sauver, allait s'éloigner de la durande, il était survenu un de ces paquets de mer qui sont comme les derniers coups de colère des tempêtes. Ce flot avait furieusement soulevé la durande, l’avait arrachée du brisant, et, avec la vitesse et la rectitude d’une flèche lancée, l’avait jetée entre les deux roches Douvres. On avait entendu un craquement “ diabolique “ , disait le patron. La durande, portée par la lame à une certaine hauteur, s’était engagée dans l’entre-deux des roches jusqu’au maître-couple. Elle était de nouveau clouée, mais plus solidement que sur le brisant sous-marin. Elle allait rester là, déplorablement suspendue, livrée à tout le vent et à toute la mer. La durande, au dire de l’équipage du shealtiel , était déjà aux trois quarts fracassée. Elle eût évidemment coulé dans la nuit si l’écueil ne l’eût retenue et soutenue. Le patron du shealtiel avec sa lunette avait étudié l’épave. Il donnait avec la précision marine le détail du désastre; la hanche de tribord était défoncée, les mâts tronqués, la voilure déralinguée, les chaînes des haubans presque toutes coupées, la claire-voie du capot-de-chambre écrasée par la chute d’une vergue, les jambettes brisées au ras du plat bord depuis le travers du grand mât jusqu’au couronnement, le dôme de la cambuse effondré, les chantiers de la chaloupe culbutés, le rouffle démonté, l’arbre du gouvernail rompu, les drosses déclouées, les pavois rasés, les bittes emportées, le traversin détruit, la lisse enlevée, l’étambot cassé. C’était toute la dévastation frénétique de la tempête. Quant à la grue de chargement scellée au mât sur l’avant, plus rien, aucune nouvelle, nettoyage complet, partie à tous les diables, avec sa guinderesse, ses moufles, sa poulie de fer et ses chaînes. La durande était disloquée; l’eau allait maintenant se mettre à la déchiqueter. Dans quelques jours, il n’en resterait rien. Pourtant la machine, chose remarquable et qui prouvait son excellence, était à peine atteinte dans ce ravage. Le patron du shealtiel croyait pouvoir affirmer que “ la manivelle “ n’avait point d’avarie grave. Les mâts du navire avaient cédé, mais la cheminée de la machine avait résisté. Les gardes de fer de la passerelle de commandement étaient seulement tordues; les tambours avaient souffert, les cages étaient froissées, mais les roues ne paraissaient pas avoir une palette de moins. La machine était intacte. C’était la conviction du patron du shealtiel . Le chauffeur Imbrancam, qui était mêlé aux groupes, partageait cette conviction. Ce nègre, plus intelligent que beaucoup de blancs, était l’admirateur de la machine. Il levait les bras en ouvrant les dix doigts de ses mains noires et disait à Lethierry muet: mon maître, la mécanique est en vie. Le salut de Clubin semblant assuré, et la coque de la durande étant sacrifiée, la machine, dans les conversations des groupes, était la question. On s’y intéressait comme à une personne. On s’émerveillait de sa bonne conduite. -voilà une solide commère, disait un matelot français. -c’est de quoi bon! S’écriait un pêcheur guernesiais. -il faut qu’elle ait eu de la malice, reprenait le patron du shealtiel , pour se tirer de là avec deux ou trois écorchures. Peu à peu cette machine fut la préoccupation unique. Elle échauffa les opinions pour et contre. Elle avait des amis et des ennemis. Plus d’un, qui avait un bon vieux coutre à voiles, et qui espérait ressaisir la clientèle de la durande, n’était pas fâché de voir l’écueil Douvres faire justice de la nouvelle invention. Le chuchotement devint brouhaha. On discuta presque avec bruit. Pourtant c’était une rumeur toujours un peu discrète, et il se faisait par intervalles de subits abaissements de voix, sous la pression du silence sépulcral de Lethierry. Du colloque engagé sur tous les points, il résultait ceci: la machine était l’essentiel. Refaire le navire était possible, refaire la machine non. Cette machine était unique. Pour en fabriquer une pareille, l’argent manquerait, l’ouvrier manquerait encore plus. On rappelait que le constructeur de la machine était mort. Elle avait coûté quarante mille francs. Personne ne risquerait désormais sur une telle éventualité un tel capital; d’autant plus que voilà qui était jugé, les navires à vapeur se perdaient comme les autres; l’accident actuel de la durande coulait à fond tout son succès passé. Pourtant il était déplorable de penser qu’à l’heure qu’il était, cette mécanique était encore entière et en bon état, et qu’avant cinq ou six jours elle serait probablement mise en pièces comme le navire. Tant qu’elle existait, il n’y avait, pour ainsi dire, pas de naufrage. La perte seule de la machine serait irrémédiable. Sauver la machine, ce serait réparer le désastre. Sauver la machine, c’était facile à dire. Mais qui s’en chargerait? Est-ce que c’était possible? Faire et exécuter c’est deux, et la preuve, c’est qu’il est aisé de faire un rêve et difficile de l’exécuter. Or si jamais un rêve avait été impraticable et insensé, c’était celui-ci: sauver la machine échouée sur les Douvres. Envoyer travailler sur ces roches un navire et un équipage serait absurde; il n’y fallait pas songer. C’était la saison des coups de mer; à la première bourrasque les chaînes des ancres seraient sciées par les crêtes sous-marines des brisants, et le navire se fracasserait à l’écueil. Ce serait envoyer un deuxième naufrage au secours du premier. Dans l’espèce de trou du plateau supérieur où s’était abrité le naufragé légendaire mort de faim, il y avait à peine place pour un homme. Il faudrait donc que, pour sauver cette machine, un homme allât aux rochers

Douvres, et qu’il y allât seul, seul dans cette mer, seul dans ce désert, seul à cinq lieues de la côte, seul dans cette épouvante, seul des semaines entières, seul devant le prévu et l’imprévu, sans ravitaillement dans les angoisses du dénûment, sans secours dans les incidents de la détresse, sans autre trace humaine que celle de l’ancien naufragé expiré de misère là, sans autre compagnon que ce mort. Et comment s’y prendrait-il d’ailleurs pour sauver cette machine? Il faudrait qu’il fût non seulement matelot, mais forgeron. Et à travers quelles épreuves! L’homme qui tenterait cela serait plus qu’un héros. Ce serait un fou. Car dans de certaines entreprises disproportionnées où le surhumain semble nécessaire, la bravoure a au-dessus d’elle la démence. Et en effet, après tout, se dévouer pour de la ferraille, ne serait-ce pas extravagant? Non, personne n’irait aux rochers Douvres. On devait renoncer à la machine comme au reste. Le sauveteur qu’il fallait ne se présenterait point. Où trouver un tel homme? Ceci, dit un peu autrement, était le fond de tous les propos murmurés dans cette foule. Le patron du shealtiel , qui était un ancien pilote, résuma la pensée de tous par cette exclamation à voix haute: -non! C’est fini. L’homme qui ira là et qui rapportera la machine n’existe pas. -puisque je n’y vais pas, ajouta Imbrncam, c’est qu’on ne peut pas y aller. Le patron du shealtiel secoua sa main gauche avec cette brusquerie qui exprime la conviction de l’impossible, et reprit: -s’il existait... Déruchette tourna la tête. -je l’épouserais, dit-elle. Il y eut un silence. Un homme très pâle sortit du milieu des groupes et dit: -vous l’épouseriez, miss Déruchette? C’était Gilliatt. Cependant tous les yeux s’étaient levés. Mess Lethierry venait de se dresser tout droit. Il avait sous le sourcil une lumière étrange. Il prit du poing son bonnet de matelot et le jeta à terre, puis il regarda solennellement devant lui sans voir aucune des personnes présentes, et dit: -Déruchette l’épouserait. J’en donne ma parole d’honneur au bon Dieu.

II. beaucoup d’étonnement sur la côte ouest.

La nuit qui suivit ce jour-là devait être, à partir de dix heures du soir, une nuit de lune. Cependant, quelle que fût la bonne apparence de la nuit, du vent et de la mer, aucun pêcheur ne comptait sortir ni de la Hougue La Perre, ni du Bourdeaux, ni de Houmet Benet, ni du Platon, ni de Port Grat, ni de la baie Vason, ni de Perelle bay, ni de Pezeris, ni du Tielles, ni de la baie des Saints, ni de Petit Bô, ni d’aucun port ou portelet de Guernesey. Et cela était tout simple, le coq avait chanté à midi. Quand le coq chante à une heure extraordinaire, la pêche manque. Ce soir-là, pourtant, à la tombée de la nuit, un pêcheur qui rentrait à Omptolle eut une surprise. à la hauteur du Houmet Paradis, au delà des deux Brayes et des deux Grunes, ayant à gauche la balise des Plattes Fougères qui représente un entonnoir renversé, et à droite la balise de Saint-Sampson qui représente une figure d'homme, il crut apercevoir une troisième balise. Qu'était-ce que cette balise? Quand l'avait-on plantée sur ce point? Quel bas-fond indiquait-elle? La balise répondit tout de suite à ces interrogations; elle remuait; c'était un mât. L'étonnement du pêcheur ne décrut point. Une balise faisait question; un mât bien plus encore. Il n'y avait point de pêche possible. Quand tout le monde rentrait, quelqu'un sortait. Qui? Pourquoi? Dix minutes après, le mât, cheminant lentement, arriva à quelque distance du pêcheur d'Omptolle. Il ne put reconnaître la barque. Il entendit ramer. Il n'y avait que le bruit de deux avirons. C'était donc vraisemblablement un homme seul. Le vent était nord; cet homme évidemment nageait pour aller prendre le vent au delà de la pointe Fontenelle. Là, probablement, il mettrait à la voile. Il comptait donc doubler l'Ancresse et le mont Crevel. Qu'est-ce que cela voulait dire? Le mât passa, le pêcheur rentra. Cette même nuit, sur la côte ouest de Guernesey, des observateurs d'occasion, disséminés et isolés, firent, à des heures diverses et sur divers points, des remarques. Comme le pêcheur d'Omptolle venait d'amarrer sa barque, un charretier de varech, à un demi-mille plus loin, fouettant ses chevaux dans la route déserte des clôtures, près du cromlech, aux environs des martellos 6 et 7, vit en mer, assez loin à l'horizon, dans un endroit peu fréquenté parce qu'il faut le bien connaître, devers la Roque-Nord et la Sablonneuse, une voile qu'on hissait. Il y fit d'ailleurs peu d'attention, étant pour chariot et non pour bateau. Une demi-heure s'était peut-être écoulée depuis que le charretier avait aperçu cette voile, quand un plâtreur, revenant de son ouvrage de la ville et contournant la mare Pelée, se trouva tout à coup presque en face d'une barque très hardiment engagée parmi les roches du Quenon, de la Rousse De Mer et de la Grippe De Rousse. La nuit était noire, mais la mer était claire, effet qui se produit souvent, et l'on pouvait distinguer au large les allées et venues. Il n'y avait en mer que cette barque. Un peu plus bas, et un peu plus tard, un ramasseur de langoustes, disposant ses boutiques sur l'ensablement qui sépare le Port Soif du Port Enfer, ne comprit pas ce que faisait une barque glissant entre la Boue Corneille et la Moulrette. Il fallait être bon pilote et bien pressé d'arriver quelque part pour se risquer là. Comme huit heures sonnaient au Catel, le tavernier de Cobo Bay observa, avec quelque ébahissement, une voile au delà de la Boue Du Jardin et des Grunettes, très près de la Suzanne et des Grunes de l'ouest. Non loin de Cobo Bay, sur la pointe solitaire du Houmet de la baie Vason, deux amoureux étaient en train de se séparer et de se retenir; au moment où la fille disait au garçon: -si je m'en vas, ce n'est pas pour l'amour de ne pas être avec toi, c'est que j'ai mon fait à choser-, ils furent distraits de leur baiser d'adieu par une assez grosse barque qui passa très près d'eux et qui se dirigeait vers les Messellettes. Monsieur Le Peyre Des Norgiots, habitant le cotillon Pipet, était occupé vers neuf heures du soir à examiner un trou fait par des maraudeurs dans la haie de son courtil, la Jennerotte, et de son " friquet planté à arbres "; tout en constatant le dommage, il ne put s'empêcher de remarquer une barque doublant témérairement le Crocq-Point à cette heure de nuit. Un lendemain de tempête, avec ce qui reste d'agitation à la mer, cet itinéraire était peu sûr. On était imprudent de le choisir, à moins de savoir par coeur les passes. à neuf heures et demie, à l'équerrier, un chalutier remportant son filet s'arrêta quelque temps pour considérer entre Colombelle et la Souffleresse quelque chose qui devait être un bateau. Ce bateau s'exposait beaucoup. Il y a là des coups de vent subits très dangereux. La roche Souffleresse est ainsi nommée parce qu'elle souffle brusquement sur les barques. à l'instant où la lune se levait, la marée étant pleine et la mer étant étale dans le petit détroit de Li-Hou, le gardien solitaire de l'île de Li-Hou fut très effrayé; il vit passer entre la lune et lui une longue forme noire. Cette forme noire, haute et étroite, ressemblait à un linceul debout qui marcherait. Elle glissait lentement au-dessus des espèces de murs que font les bancs de rochers. Le gardien de Li-Hou crut reconnaître la Dame Noire. La Dame Blanche habite le Tau De Pez D'Amont, la Dame Grise habite le Tau De Pez D'Aval, la Dame Rouge habite la Silleuse au nord du Banc-Marquis, et la Dame Noire habite le Grand-étacré, à l'ouest de Li-Houmet. La nuit, au clair de lune, ces dames sortent, et quelquefois se rencontrent. à la rigueur cette forme noire pouvait être une voile. Les longs barrages de rochers sur lesquels elle semblait marcher pouvaient en effet cacher la coque d'une barque voguant derrière eux, et laisser voir la voile seulement. Mais le gardien se demanda quelle barque oserait à cette heure se hasarder entre Li-Hou et la Pécheresse et les Angullières et Lérée-Point. Et dans quel but? Il lui parut plus probable que c'était la Dame Noire. Comme la lune venait de dépasser le clocher de Saint-Pierre Du Bois, le sergent du château rocquaine, en relevant la moitié de l’échelle pont-levis, distingua, à l’embouchure de la baie, plus loin que la Haute Canée, plus près que la Sambule, une barque à la voile qui semblait descendre du nord au sud. Il existe sur la côte sud de Guernesey, en arrière de Plainmont, au fond d’une baie toute de précipices et de murailles, coupée à pic dans le flot, un port singulier qu’un français, séjournant dans l’île depuis 1855, le même peut-être qui écrit ces lignes, a baptisé le port au quatrième étage , nom généralement adopté aujourd’hui. Ce port, qui s’appelait alors la Moie, est un plateau de roche, à demi naturel, à demi taillé, élevé d’une quarantaine de pieds au-dessus du niveau de l’eau, et communiquant avec les vagues par deux gros madriers parallèles en plan incliné. Les barques, hissées à force de bras par des chaînes et des poulies, montent de la mer et y redescendent le long de ces madriers qui sont comme deux rails. Pour les hommes il y a un escalier. Ce port était alors très fréquenté par les contrebandiers. étant peu praticable, il leur était commode. Vers onze heures, des fraudeurs, peut-être ceux-là mêmes sur lesquels avait compté Clubin, étaient avec leurs ballots au sommet de cette plate-forme de la Moie. Qui fraude guette; ils épiaient. Ils furent étonnés d’une voile qui déboucha brusquement au delà de la silhouette noire du cap Plainmont. Il faisait clair de lune. Ces contrebandiers surveillèrent cette voile, craignant que ce ne fût quelque garde-côte allant s’embusquer en observation derrière le grand hanois. Mais la voile dépassa les hanois, laissa derrière elle au nord-ouest la Boue Blondel, et s’enfonça au large dans l’estompe livide des brumes de l’horizon. -où diable peut aller cette barque? Se dirent les contrebandiers. Le même soir, un peu après le coucher du soleil, on avait entendu quelqu’un frapper à la porte de la masure du bû de la rue. C’était un jeune garçon vêtu de brun avec des bas jaunes, ce qui indiquait un petit clerc de la paroisse. Le bû de la rue était fermé, porte et volets. Une vieille pêcheuse de fruits de mer, rôdant dans la banque une lanterne à la main, avait hélé le garçon, et ces paroles s’étaient échangées devant le bû de la rue entre la pêcheuse et le petit clerc. -qu’est-ce que vous voulez, gars? -l’homme d’ici. -il n’y est point. -où est-il? -je ne sais point. -y sera-t-il demain? -je ne sais point. -est-ce qu’il est parti? -je ne sais point. -c’est que, voyez-vous, la femme, le nouveau recteur de la paroisse, le révérend Ebenezer Caudray, voudrait lui faire une visite. -je ne sais point. -le révérend m’envoie demander si l’homme du bû de la rue sera chez lui demain matin. -je ne sais point.

III. ne tentez pas la bible.

Dans les vingt-quatre heures qui suivirent, mess Lethierry ne dormit pas, ne mangea pas, ne but pas, baisa au front Déruchette, s’informa de Clubin dont on n’avait pas encore de nouvelles, signa une déclaration comme quoi il n’entendait former aucune plainte, et fit mettre Tangrouille en liberté. Il resta toute la journée du lendemain à demi appuyé à la table de l’office de la durande, ni debout, ni assis, répondant avec douceur quand on lui parlait. Du reste, la curiosité étant satisfaite, la solitude s’était faite aux bravées. Il y a beaucoup de désir d’observer dans l’empressement à s’apitoyer. La porte s’était refermée; on laissait Lethierry avec Déruchette. L’éclair qui avait passé dans les yeux de Lethierry s’était éteint; le regard lugubre du commencement de la catastrophe lui était revenu. Déruchette, inquiète, avait, sur le conseil de Grace et de Douce, mis, sans rien dire, à côté de lui sur la table une paire de bas qu’il était en train de tricoter quand la mauvaise nouvelle était arrivée. Il sourit amèrement et dit: -on me croit donc bête. Après un quart d’heure de silence, il ajouta: -c’est bon quand on est heureux ces manies-là. Déruchette avait fait disparaître la paire de bas, et avait profité de l’occasion pour faire disparaître aussi la boussole et les papiers de bord, que mess Lethierry regardait trop. Dans l’après-midi, un peu avant l’heure du thé, la porte s’ouvrit, et deux hommes entrèrent, vêtus de noir, l’un vieux, l’autre jeune. Le jeune, on l’a peut-être aperçu déjà dans le cours de ce récit. Ces hommes avaient tous deux l’air grave, mais d’une gravité différente; le vieillard avait ce qu’on pourrait nommer la gravité d’état; le jeune homme avait la gravité de nature. L’habit donne l’une, la pensée donne l’autre. C’étaient, le vêtement l’indiquait, deux hommes d’église, appartenant tous deux à la religion établie. Ce qui, dans le jeune homme, eût, au premier abord, frappé l’observateur, c’est que cette gravité, qui était profonde dans son regard, et qui résultait évidemment de son esprit, ne résultait pas de sa personne. La gravité admet la passion, et l’exalte en l’épurant, mais ce jeune homme était, avant tout, joli. étant prêtre, il avait au moins vingt-cinq ans; il en paraissait dix-huit. Il offrait cette harmonie, et aussi ce contraste, qu’en lui l’âme semblait faite pour la passion et le corps pour l’amour. Il était blond, rose, frais, très fin et très souple dans son costume sévère, avec des joues de jeune fille et des mains délicates; il avait l’allure vive et naturelle, quoique réprimée. Tout en lui était charme, élégance, et presque volupté. La beauté de son regard corrigeait cet excès de grâce. Son sourire sincère, qui montrait des dents d’enfant, était pensif et religieux. C’était la gentillesse d’un page et la dignité d’un évêque. Sous ses épais cheveux blonds, si dorés qu’ils paraissaient coquets, son crâne était élevé, candide et bien fait. Une ride légère à double inflexion entre les deux sourcils éveillait confusément l’idée de l’oiseau de la pensée planant, ailes déployées, au milieu de ce front. On sentait, en le voyant, un de ces êtres bienveillants, innocents et purs, qui progressent en sens inverse de l’humanité vulgaire, que l’illusion fait sages et que l’expérience fait enthousiastes. Sa jeunesse transparente laissait voir sa maturité intérieure. Comparé à l’ecclésiastique en cheveux gris qui l’accompagnait, au premier coup d’oeil il semblait le fils, au second coup d’oeil il semblait le père. Celui-ci n’était autre que le docteur Jaquemin Hérode. Le docteur Jaquemin Hérode appartenait à la haute église, laquelle est à peu près un papisme sans pape. L’anglicanisme était travaillé dès cette époque par les tendances qui se sont depuis affirmées et condensées dans le puséysme. Le docteur Jaquemin Hérode était de cette nuance anglicane qui est presque une variété romaine. Il était haut, correct, étroit et supérieur. Son rayon visuel intérieur sortait à peine au dehors. Il avait pour esprit la lettre. Du reste altier. Son personnage tenait de la place. Il avait moins l’air d’un révérend que d’un monsignor. Sa redingote était un peu coupée en soutane. Son vrai milieu eût été Rome. Il était prélat de chambre, né. Il semblait avoir été créé exprès pour orner un pape, et pour marcher derrière la chaise gestatoire, avec toute la cour pontificale, in abitto paonazzo . L’accident d’être né anglais, et une éducation théologique plus tournée vers l’ancien testament que vers le nouveau, lui avaient fait manquer cette grande destinée. Toutes ses splendeurs se résumaient en ceci, être recteur de Saint-Pierre-Port, doyen de l’île de Guernesey et subrogé de l’évêque de Winchester. C’était, sans nul doute, de la gloire. Cette gloire n’empêchait pas M Jaquemin Hérode d’être, à tout prendre, un assez bon homme. Comme théologien, il était bien situé dans l’estime des connaisseurs, et il faisait presque autorité à la cour des arches, cette sorbonne de l’Angleterre. Il avait la mine docte, un clignement d’yeux capable et exagéré, les narines velues, les dents visibles, la lèvre supérieure mince et la lèvre inférieure épaisse, plusieurs diplômes, une grosse prébende, des amis baronets, la confiance de l’évêque, et toujours une bible dans sa poche. Mess Lethierry était si complètement absorbé que tout ce que put produire l’entrée des deux prêtres fut un imperceptible froncement de sourcil. M Jaquemin Hérode s’avança, salua, rappela, en quelques mots sobrement hautains, sa promotion récente, et dit qu’il venait, selon l’usage, “ introduire “ près des notables, -et près de mess Lethierry en particulier, -son successeur dans la paroisse, le nouveau recteur de Saint-Sampson, le révérend Joë Ebenezer Caudray, désormais pasteur de mess Lethierry. Déruchette se leva. Le jeune prêtre, qui était le révérend Ebenezer, s’inclina. Mess Lethierry regarda M Ebenezer Caudray et grommela entre ses dents: mauvais matelot. Grace avança des chaises. Des deux révérends s’assirent près de la table. Le docteur Hérode entama un speech. Il lui était revenu qu’il était arrivé un évènement. La durande avait fait naufrage. Il venait, comme pasteur, apporter des consolations et des conseils. Ce naufrage était malheureux, mais heureux aussi. Sondons-nous; n’étions-nous pas enflés par la prospérité? Les eaux de la félicité sont dangereuses. Il ne faut pas prendre en mauvaise part les malheurs. Les voies du seigneur sont inconnues. Mess Lethierry était ruiné. Eh bien? être riche, c’est être en danger. On a de faux amis. La pauvreté les éloigne. On reste seul. solus eris. la durande rapportait, disait-on, mille livres sterling par an. C’est trop pour le sage. Fuyons les tentations, dédaignons l’or. Acceptons avec reconnaissance la ruine et l’abandon. L’isolement est plein de fruits. On y obtient les grâces du seigneur. C’est dans la solitude qu’Aia trouva les eaux chaudes, en conduisant les ânes de Sébéon son père. Ne nous révoltons pas contre les impénétrables décrets de la providence. Le saint homme Job, après sa misère, avait crû en richesse. Qui sait si la perte de la durande n’aurait pas des compensations, même temporelles? Ainsi, lui docteur Jaquemin Hérode, il avait engagé des capitaux dans une très belle opération en cours d’exécution à Sheffield; si mess Lethierry, avec les fonds qui pouvaient lui rester, voulait entrer dans cette affaire, il y referait sa fortune; c’était une grosse fourniture d’armes au czar en train de réprimer la Pologne. On y gagnerait trois cents pour cent. Le mot czar parut réveiller Lethierry. Il interrompit le docteur Hérode. -je ne veux pas du czar. Le révérend Hérode répondit: -mess Lethierry, les princes sont voulus de Dieu. Il est écrit: “ rendez à César ce qui est à César. “ le czar, c’est César. Lethierry, à demi retombé dans son rêve, murmura: -qui ça, César? Je ne connais pas. Le révérend Jaquemin Hérode reprit son exhortation. Il n’insistait pas sur Sheffield. Ne pas vouloir de César, c’est être républicain. Le révérend comprenait qu’on fût républicain. En ce cas, que mess Lethierry se tournât vers une république. Mess Lethierry pouvait rétablir sa fortune aux états-Unis mieux encore qu’en Angleterre. S’il voulait décupler ce qui lui restait, il n’avait qu’à prendre des actions dans la grande compagnie d’exploitation des plantations du Texas, laquelle employait plus de vingt mille nègres. -je ne veux pas de l’esclavage, dit Lethierry. -l’esclavage, répliqua le révérend Hérode, est d’institution sacrée. Il est écrit: “ si le maître a frappé son esclave, il ne lui sera rien fait, car c’est son argent. “ Grace et Douce, sur le seuil de la porte, recueillaient avec une sorte d’extase les paroles du révérend recteur. Le révérend continua. C’était, somme toute, nous venons de le dire, un bon homme; et, quels que pussent être ses dissentiments de caste ou de personne avec mess Lethierry, il venait très sincèrement lui apporter toute l’aide spirituelle, et même temporelle, dont lui, docteur Jaquemin Hérode, disposait. Si mess Lethierry était ruiné à ce point de ne pouvoir coopérer fructueusement à une spéculation quelconque, russe ou américaine, que n’entrait-il dans le gouvernement et dans les fonctions salariées? Ce sont de nobles places, et le révérend était prêt à y introduire mess Lethierry. L’office de député-vicomte était précisément vacant à Jersey. Mess Lethierry était aimé et estimé, et le révérend Hérode, doyen de Guernesey et subrogé de l’évêque, se faisait fort d’obtenir pour mess Lethierry l’emploi de député-vicomte de Jersey. Le député-vicomte est un officier considérable; il assiste, comme représentant de sa majesté, à la tenue des chefs-plaids, aux débats de la cohue, et aux exécutions des arrêts de justice. Lethierry fixa sa prunelle sur le docteur Hérode. -je n’aime pas la pendaison, dit-il. Le docteur Hérode, qui jusqu’alors avait prononcé tous les mots avec la même intonation, eut un accès de sévérité et une inflexion nouvelle. -mess Lethierry, la peine de mort est ordonnée divinement. Dieu a remis le glaive à l’homme. Il est écrit: “ oeil pour oeil, dent pour dent. “ le révérend Ebenezer rapprocha imperceptiblement sa chaise de la chaise du révérend Jaquemin, et lui dit, de façon à n’être entendu que de lui: -ce que dit cet homme lui est dicté. -par qui? Par quoi? Demanda du même ton le révérend Jaquemin Hérode. Ebenezer répondit très bas: -par sa conscience. Le révérend Hérode fouilla dans sa poche, en tira un gros in-dix-huit relié avec fermoirs, le posa sur la table, et dit à voix haute: -la conscience, la voici. Le livre était une bible. Puis le docteur Hérode s’adoucit. Son désir était d’être utile à mess Lethierry, qu’il considérait fort. Il avait, lui pasteur, droit et devoir de conseil; pourtant mess Lethierry était libre. Mess Lethierry, ressaisi par son absorption et par son accablement, n’écoutait plus. Déruchette, assise près de lui, et pensive de son côté, ne levait pas les yeux et mêlait à cette conversation peu animée la quantité de gêne qu’apporte une présence silencieuse. Un témoin qui ne dit rien est une espèce de poids indéfinissable. Au surplus, le docteur Hérode ne semblait pas le sentir. Lethierry ne répondant plus, le docteur Hérode se donna carrière. Le conseil vient de l'homme et l'inspiration vient de Dieu. Dans le conseil du prêtre il y a de l'inspiration. Il est bon d'accepter les conseils et dangereux de les rejeter. Sochoth fut saisi par onze diables pour avoir dédaigné les exhortations de Nathanaël. Tiburien fut frappé de la lèpre pour avoir mis hors de chez lui l'apôtre André. Barjésus, tout magicien qu'il était, devint aveugle pour avoir ri des paroles de saint Paul. Elxaï, et ses soeurs Marthe et Marthène, sont en enfer à l'heure qu'il est pour avoir méprisé les avertissements de Valencianus qui leur prouvait clair comme le jour que leur Jésus-Christ de trente-huit lieues de haut était un démon. Oolibama, qui s'appelle aussi Judith, obéissait aux conseils. Ruben et Pheniel écoutaient les avis d'en haut; leurs noms seuls suffisent pour l'indiquer; Ruben signifie fils de la vision , et Pheniel signifie la face de Dieu . Mess Lethierry frappa du poing sur la table. -parbleu! S'écria-t-il, c'est ma faute. -que voulez-vous dire? Demanda M Jaquemin Hérode. -je dis que c'est ma faute. -votre faute, quoi? -puisque je faisais revenir durande le vendredi. M Jaquemin Hérode murmura à l'oreille de M Ebenezer Caudray: -cet homme est superstitieux. Il reprit en élevant la voix, et du ton de l'enseignement: -mess Lethierry, il est puéril de croire au vendredi. Il ne faut pas ajouter foi aux fables. Le vendredi est un jour comme un autre. C'est très souvent une date heureuse. Melendez a fondé la ville de Saint-Augustin un vendredi; c'est un vendredi que Henri Vii a donné sa commission à John Cabot; les pèlerins du mayflower sont arrivés à Providence-Town un vendredi. Washington est né le vendredi 22 février 1732; Christoph Colomb a découvert l'Amérique le vendredi 12 octobre 1492. Cela dit, il se leva. Ebenezer, qu'il avait amené, se leva également. Grace et Douce, devinant que les révérends allaient prendre congé, ouvrirent la porte à deux battants. Mess Lethierry ne voyait rien et n'entendait rien. M Jaquemin Hérode dit en aparté à M Ebenezer Caudray: -il ne nous salue même pas. Ce n'est pas du chagrin, c'est de l'abrutissement. Il faut croire qu'il est fou. Cependant il prit sa petite bible sur la table et la tint entre ses deux mains allongées comme on tiendrait un oiseau qu'on craint de voir envoler. Cette attitude créa parmi les personnes présentes une certaine attente. Grace et Douce avancèrent la tête. Sa voix fit tout ce qu'elle put pour être majestueuse. -mess Lethierry, ne nous séparons pas sans lire une page du saint livre. Les situations de la vie sont éclairées par les livres; les profanes ont les sorts virgiliens, les croyants ont les avertissements bibliques. Le premier livre venu, ouvert au hasard, donne un conseil; la bible, ouverte au hasard, fait une révélation. Elle est surtout bonne pour les affligés. Ce qui se dégage immanquablement de la sainte écriture, c’est l’adoucissement à leur peine. En présence des affligés, il faut consulter le saint livre sans choisir l’endroit, et lire avec candeur le passage sur lequel on tombe. Ce que l’homme ne choisit pas, Dieu le choisit. Dieu sait ce qu’il nous faut. Son doigt invisible est sur le passage inattendu que nous lisons. Quelle que soit cette page, il en sort infailliblement de la lumière. N’en cherchons pas d’autre, et tenons-nous-en là. C’est la parole d’en haut. Notre destinée nous est dite mystérieusement dans le texte évoqué avec confiance et respect. écoutons, et obéissons. Mess Lethierry, vous êtes dans la douleur, ceci est le livre de consolation. Vous êtes dans la maladie, ceci est le livre de santé. Le révérend Jaquemin Hérode fit jouer le ressort du fermoir, glissa son ongle à l’aventure entre deux pages, posa sa main un instant sur le livre ouvert, et se recueillit, puis, abaissant les yeux avec autorité, il se mit à lire à haute voix. Ce qu’il lut, le voici: “ Isaac se promenait dans le chemin qui mène au puits appelé le puits de celui qui vit et qui voit. “ Rébecca, ayant aperçu Isaac, dit: qui est cet homme qui vient au devant de moi? “ alors Isaac la fit entrer dans sa tente, et la prit pour femme, et l’amour qu’il eut pour elle fut grand. “ Ebenezer et Déruchette se regardèrent.

DEUXIÈME PARTIE

GILLIATT LE MALIN

LIVRE PREMIER

L’ÉCUEIL

I. l’endroit où il est malaisé d’arriver et difficile de repartir.

La barque, aperçue sur plusieurs points de la côte de Guernesey dans la soirée précédente à des heures diverses, était, on l’a deviné, la panse. Gilliatt avait choisi le long de la côte le chenal à travers les rochers; c’était la route périlleuse, mais c’était le chemin direct. Prendre le plus court avait été son seul souci. Les naufrages n’attendent pas, la mer est une chose pressante, une heure de retard pouvait être irréparable. Il voulait arriver vite au secours de la machine en danger. Une des préoccupations de Gilliatt en quittant Guernesey parut être de ne point éveiller l’attention. Il partit de la façon dont on s’évade. Il eut un peu l’allure de se cacher. Il évita la côte est comme quelqu’un qui trouverait inutile de passer en vue de Saint-Sampson et de Saint-Pierre-Port; il glissa, on pourrait presque dire il se glissa, silencieusement le long de la côte opposée qui est relativement inhabitée. Dans les brisants, il dut ramer; mais Gilliatt maniait l’aviron selon la loi hydraulique: prendre l’eau sans choc et la rendre sans vitesse, et de cette manière il put nager dans l’obscurité avec le plus de force et le moins de bruit possible. On eût pu croire qu’il allait faire une mauvaise action. La vérité est que, se jetant tête baissée dans une entreprise fort ressemblante à l’impossible, et risquant sa vie avec toutes les chances à peu près contre lui, il craignait la concurrence. Comme le jour commençait à poindre, les yeux inconnus qui sont peut-être ouverts dans les espaces purent voir au milieu de la mer, sur un des points où il y a le plus de solitude et de menace, deux choses entre lesquelles l’intervalle décroissait, l’une se rapprochant de l’autre. L’une, presque imperceptible dans le large mouvement des lames, était une barque à la voile; dans cette barque il y avait un homme; c’était la panse portant Gilliatt. L’autre, immobile, colossale, noire, avait au-dessus des vagues une surprenante figure. Deux hauts piliers soutenaient hors des flots dans le vide une sorte de traverse horizontale qui était comme un pont entre leurs sommets. La traverse, si informe de loin qu’il était impossible de deviner ce que c’était, faisait corps avec les deux jambages. Cela ressemblait à une porte. à quoi bon une porte dans cette ouverture de toutes parts qui est la mer? On eût dit un dolmen titanique planté là, en plein océan, par une fantaisie magistrale, et bâti par des mains qui ont l’habitude de proportionner leurs constructions à l’abîme. Cette silhouette farouche se dressait sur le clair du ciel. La lueur du matin grandissait à l’est; la blancheur de l’horizon augmentait la noirceur de la mer. En face, de l’autre côté, la lune se couchait. Ces deux piliers, c’étaient les Douvres. L’espèce de masse emboîtée entre eux comme une architrave entre deux chambranles, c’était la durande. Cet écueil, tenant ainsi sa proie et la faisant voir, était terrible; les choses ont parfois vis-à-vis de l’homme une ostentation sombre et hostile. Il y avait du défi dans l’attitude de ces rochers. Cela semblait attendre. Rien d’altier et d’arrogant comme cet ensemble: le vaisseau vaincu, l’abîme maître. Les deux rochers, tout ruisselants encore de la tempête de la veille, semblaient des combattants en sueur. Le vent avait molli, la mer se plissait paisiblement, on devinait à fleur d’eau quelques brisants où les panaches d’écume retombaient avec grâce, il venait du large un murmure semblable à un bruit d’abeilles. Tout était de niveau, hors les deux Douvres, debout et droites comme deux colonnes noires. Elles étaient jusqu’à une certaine hauteur toutes velues de varech. Leurs hanches escarpées avaient des reflets d’armures. Elles semblaient prêtes à recommencer. On comprenait qu’elles étaient enracinées sous l’eau à des montagnes. Une sorte de toute-puissance tragique s’en dégageait. D’ordinaire la mer cache ses coups. Elle reste volontiers obscure. Cette ombre incommensurable garde tout pour elle. Il est très rare que le mystère renonce au secret. Certes, il y a du monstre dans la catastrophe, mais en quantité inconnue. La mer est patente et secrète; elle se dérobe, elle ne tient pas à divulguer ses actions. Elle fait un naufrage, et le recouvre; l’engloutissement est sa pudeur. La vague est hypocrite; elle tue, vole, recèle, ignore et sourit. Elle rugit, puis moutonne. Ici rien de pareil. Les Douvres, élevant au-dessus des flots la durande morte, avaient un air de triomphe. On eût dit deux bras monstrueux sortant du gouffre et montrant aux tempêtes ce cadavre de navire. C’était quelque chose comme l’assassin qui se vante. L’horreur sacrée de l’heure s’y ajoutait. Le point du jour a une grandeur mystérieuse qui se compose d’un reste de rêve et d’un commencement de pensée. à ce moment trouble, un peu de spectre flotte encore. L’espèce d’immense h majuscule, formée par les deux Douvres ayant la durande pour trait d’union, apparaissait à l’horizon dans on ne sait quelle majesté crépusculaire. Gilliatt était vêtu de ses habits de mer, chemise de laine, bas de laine, souliers cloutés, vareuse de tricot, pantalon à poches de grosse étoffe bourrue, et sur la tête une de ces coiffes de laine rouge usitées alors dans la marine, qu’on appelait au siècle dernier galériennes . Il reconnut l’écueil et avança. La durande était tout le contraire d’un navire coulé à fond; c’était un navire accroché en l’air. Pas de sauvetage plus étrange à entreprendre. Il faisait plein jour quand Gilliatt arriva dans les eaux de l’écueil. Il y avait, nous venons de le dire, peu de mer. L’eau avait seulement la quantité d’agitation que lui donne le resserrement entre les rochers. Toute manche, petite ou grande, clapote. L’intérieur d’un détroit écume toujours. Gilliatt n’aborda point les Douvres sans précaution. Il jeta la sonde plusieurs fois. Gilliatt avait un petit débarquement à faire. Habitué aux absences, il avait chez lui son en-cas de départ toujours prêt. C’était un sac de biscuit, un sac de farine de seigle, un panier de stock-fish et de boeuf fumé, un grand bidon d’eau douce, une caisse norvégienne à fleurs peintes contenant quelques grosses chemises de laine, son suroit et ses jambières goudronnées, et une peau de mouton qu’il jetait la nuit par-dessus sa vareuse. Il avait, en quittant le bû de la rue, mis tout cela en hâte dans la panse, plus un pain frais. Pressé de partir, il n’avait emporté d’autre engin de travail que son marteau de forgeron, sa hache et son hacherot, une scie, et une corde à noeuds armée de son grappin. Avec une échelle de cette sorte et la manière de s’en servir, les pentes revêches deviennent maniables, et un bon marin trouve des praticables dans les plus rudes escarpements. On peut voir, dans l’île de Serk, le parti que tirent d’une corde à noeuds les pêcheurs du havre Gosselin. Ses filets et ses lignes et tout son attirail de pêche étaient dans sa barque. Il les y avait mis par habitude, et machinalement, car il allait, s’il donnait suite à son entreprise, séjourner quelque temps dans un archipel de brisants, et les engins de pêche n’y ont que faire. Au moment où Gilliatt accosta l’écueil, la mer baissait, circonstance favorable. Les lames décroissantes laissaient à découvert, au pied de la petite Douvre, quelques assises plates ou peu inclinées, figurant assez bien des corbeaux à porter un plancher. Ces surfaces, tantôt étroites, tantôt larges, échelonnées avec des espacements inégaux le long du monolithe vertical, se prolongeaient en corniche mince jusque sous la durande, laquelle faisait ventre entre les deux rochers. Elle était serrée là comme dans un étau. Ces plates-formes étaient commodes pour débarquer et aviser. On pouvait décharger là, provisoirement, l’en-cas apporté dans la panse. Mais il fallait se hâter, elles n’étaient hors de l’eau que pour peu d’heures. à la mer montante, elles rentreraient sous l’écume. Ce fut devant ces roches, les unes planes, les autres déclives, que Gilliatt poussa et arrêta la panse. Une épaisseur mouillée et glissante de goëmon les couvrait, l’obliquité augmentait çà et là le glissement. Gilliatt se déchaussa, sauta pieds nus sur le goëmon, et amarra la panse à une pointe de rocher. Puis il s’avança le plus loin qu’il put sur l’étroite corniche de granit, parvint sous la durande, leva les yeux et la considéra. La durande était saisie, suspendue et comme ajustée dans les deux roches à vingt pieds environ au-dessus du flot. Il avait fallu pour la jeter là une furieuse violence de la mer. Ces coups forcenés n’ont rien qui étonne les gens de mer. Pour ne citer qu’un exemple, le 25 janvier 1840, dans le golfe de Stora, une tempête finissante fit, du choc de sa dernière lame, sauter un brick, tout d’une pièce, par-dessus la carcasse échouée de la corvette la Marne , et l’incrusta, beaupré en avant, entre deux falaises. Du reste il n’y avait dans les Douvres qu’une moitié de la durande. Le navire, arraché aux vagues, avait été en quelque sorte déraciné de l’eau par l’ouragan. Le tourbillon de vent l’avait tordu, le tourbillon de mer l’avait retenu, et le bâtiment, ainsi pris en sens inverse par les deux mains de la tempête, s’était cassé comme une latte. L’arrière, avec la machine et les roues, enlevé hors de l’écume et chassé par toute la furie du cyclone dans le défilé des Douvres, y était entré jusqu’au maître-bau, et était demeuré là. Le coup de vent avait été bien assené; pour enfoncer ce coin entre ces deux rochers, l’ouragan s’était fait massue. L’avant, emporté et roulé par la rafale, s’était disloqué sur les brisants. La cale défoncée avait vidé dans la mer les boeufs noyés. Un large morceau de la muraille de l’avant tenait encore à l’arrière et pendait aux porques du tambour de gauche par quelques attaches délabrées, faciles à briser d’un coup de hache. On voyait çà et là dans les anfractuosités lointaines de l’écueil des poutres, des planches, des haillons de voiles, des tronçons de chaînes, toutes sortes de débris, tranquilles sur les rochers. Gilliatt regardait avec attention la durande. La quille faisait plafond au-dessus de sa tête. L’horizon, où l’eau illimitée remuait à peine, était serein. Le soleil sortait superbement de cette vaste rondeur bleue. De temps en temps une goutte d’eau se détachait de l’épave et tombait dans la mer.

II. les perfections du désastre.

Les Douvres étaient différentes de forme comme de hauteur. Sur la petite Douvre, recourbée et aiguë, on voyait se ramifier, de la base à la cime, de longues veines d’une roche couleur brique, relativement tendre, qui cloisonnait de ses lames l’intérieur du granit. Aux affleurements de ces lames rougeâtres il y avait des cassures utiles à l’escalade. Une de ces cassures, située un peu au-dessus de l’épave, avait été si bien élargie et travaillée par les éclaboussures de la vague qu’elle était devenue une espèce de niche où l’on eût pu loger une statue. Le granit de la petite Douvre était arrondi à la surface et mousse comme de la pierre de touche, douceur qui ne lui ôtait rien de sa dureté. La petite Douvre se terminait en pointe comme une corne. La grande Douvre, polie, unie, lisse, perpendiculaire, et comme taillée sur épure, était d’un seul morceau et semblait faite d’ivoire noir. Pas un trou, pas un relief. L’escarpement était inhospitalier; un forçat n’eût pu s’en servir pour sa fuite ni un oiseau pour son nid. Au sommet il y avait, comme sur le rocher l’Homme, une plate-forme; seulement cette plate-forme était inaccessible. On pouvait monter sur la petite Douvre, mais non s’y maintenir; on pouvait séjourner sur la grande, mais non y monter. Gilliatt, le premier coup d’oeil jeté, revint à la panse, la déchargea sur la plus large des corniches à fleur d’eau, fit de tout ce chargement, fort succinct, une sorte de ballot qu’il noua dans un prélart, y ajusta une élingue avec sa boucle de hissement, poussa ce ballot dans un recoin de roche où le flot ne pouvait l’atteindre, puis des pieds et des mains, de saillie en saillie, étreignant la petite Douvre, se cramponnant aux moindres stries, il monta jusqu’à la durande échouée en l’air. Parvenu à la hauteur des tambours, il sauta sur le pont. Le dedans de l’épave était lugubre. La durande offrait toutes les traces d’une voie de fait épouvantable. C’était le viol effrayant de l’orage. La tempête se comporte comme une bande de pirates. Rien ne ressemble à un attentat comme un naufrage. La nuée, le tonnerre, la pluie, les souffles, les flots, les roches, ce tas de complices est horrible. On rêvait sur le pont désemparé quelque chose comme le trépignement furieux des esprits de la mer. Il y avait partout des marques de rage. Les torsions étranges de certaines ferrures indiquaient les saisissements forcenés du vent. L’entre-pont était comme le cabanon d’un fou où tout est cassé. Pas de bête comme la mer pour dépecer une proie. L’eau est pleine de griffes. Le vent mord, le flot dévore; la vague est une mâchoire. C’est à la fois de l’arrachement et de l’écrasement. L’océan a le même coup de patte que le lion. Le délabrement de la durande offrait ceci de particulier qu’il était détaillé et minutieux. C’était une sorte d’épluchement terrible. Beaucoup de choses semblaient faites exprès. On pouvait dire: quelle méchanceté! Les fractures des bordages étaient feuilletées avec art. Ce genre de ravage est propre au cyclone. Déchiqueter et amenuiser, tel est le caprice de ce dévastateur énorme. Le cyclone a des recherches de bourreau. Les désastres qu’il fait ont un air de supplices. On dirait qu’il a de la rancune; il raffine comme un sauvage. Il dissèque en exterminant. Il torture le naufrage, il se venge, il s’amuse; il y met de la petitesse. Les cyclones sont rares dans nos climats, et d’autant plus redoutables qu’ils sont inattendus. Un rocher rencontré peut faire pivoter un orage. Il est probable que la bourrasque avait fait spirale sur les Douvres, et s’était brusquement tournée en trombe au choc de l’écueil, ce qui expliquait le jet du navire à une telle hauteur dans ces roches. Quand le cyclone souffle, un vaisseau ne pèse pas plus au vent qu’une pierre à une fronde. La durande avait la plaie qu’aurait un homme coupé en deux; c’était un tronc ouvert laissant échapper un fouillis de débris semblable à des entrailles. Des cordages flottaient et frissonnaient; des chaînes se balançaient en grelottant; les fibres et les nerfs du navire étaient à nu, et pendaient. Ce qui n’était pas fracassé était désarticulé; des fragments du mailletage du doublage étaient pareils à des étrilles hérissées de clous; tout avait la forme de la ruine; une barre d’anspect n’était plus qu’un morceau de fer, une sonde n’était plus qu’un morceau de plomb, un cap-de-mouton n’était plus qu’un morceau de bois; une drisse n’était plus qu’un bout de chanvre, un touron n’était plus qu’un écheveau brouillé, une ralingue n’était plus qu’un fil dans un ourlet; partout l’inutilité lamentable de la démolition; rien qui ne fût décroché, décloué, lézardé, rongé, déjeté, sabordé, anéanti; aucune adhésion dans ce monceau hideux, partout la déchirure, la dislocation, et la rupture, et ce je ne sais quoi d’inconsistant et de liquide qui caractérise tous les pêle-mêle, depuis les mêlées d’hommes qu’on nomme batailles jusqu’aux mêlées d’éléments qu’on nomme chaos. Tout croulait, tout coulait, et un ruissellement de planches, de panneaux, de ferrailles, de câbles et de poutres s’était arrêté au bord de la grande fracture de la quille, d’où le moindre choc pouvait tout précipiter dans la mer. Ce qui restait de cette puissante carène si triomphante autrefois, tout cet arrière suspendu entre les deux Douvres et peut-être prêt à tomber, était crevassé çà et là et laissait voir par de larges trous l’intérieur sombre du navire. L’écume crachait d’en bas sur cette chose misérable.

III. saine, mais non sauve.

Gilliatt ne s’attendait pas à ne trouver qu’une moitié du bâtiment. Rien dans les indications, pourtant si précises, du patron du shealtiel , ne faisait pressentir cette coupure du navire par le milieu. C’était probablement à l’instant où s’était faite cette coupure sous les épaisseurs aveuglantes de l’écume qu’avait eu lieu ce “ craquement diabolique “ entendu par le patron du shealtiel . Ce patron s’était sans doute éloigné au moment du dernier coup de vent, et ce qu’il avait pris pour un paquet de mer était une trombe. Plus tard, en se rapprochant pour observer l’échouement, il n’avait pu voir que la partie antérieure de l’épave, le reste, c’est-à-dire la large cassure qui avait séparé l’avant de l’arrière, lui étant caché par l’étranglement de l’écueil. à cela près, le patron du shealtiel n’avait rien dit que d’exact. La coque était perdue, la machine était intacte. Ces hasards sont fréquents dans les naufrages comme dans les incendies. La logique du désastre nous échappe. Les mâts cassés étaient tombés, la cheminée n’était pas même ployée; la grande plaque de fer qui supportait la mécanique l’avait maintenue ensemble et tout d’une pièce. Les revêtements en planches des tambours étaient disjoints à peu près comme les lames d’une persienne; mais à travers leurs claires-voies on distinguait les deux roues en bon état. Quelques pales manquaient. Outre la machine, le grand cabestan de l’arrière avait résisté. Il avait sa chaîne, et, grâce à son robuste emboîtement dans un cadre de madriers, il pouvait rendre encore des services, pourvu toutefois que l’effort du tournevire ne fît pas fendre le plancher. Le tablier du pont fléchissait presque sur tous les points. Tout ce diaphragme était branlant. En revanche le tronçon de la coque engagé entre les Douvres tenait ferme, nous l’avons dit, et semblait solide. Cette conservation de la machine avait on ne sait quoi de dérisoire et ajoutait l’ironie à la catastrophe. La sombre malice de l’inconnu éclate quelquefois dans ces espèces de moqueries amères. La machine était sauvée, ce qui ne l’empêchait point d’être perdue. L’océan la gardait pour la démolir à loisir. Jeu de chat. Elle allait agoniser là et se défaire pièce à pièce. Elle allait servir de jouet aux sauvageries de l’écume. Elle allait décroître jour par jour, et fondre pour ainsi dire. Qu’y faire? Que ce lourd bloc de mécanismes et d’engrenages, à la fois massif et délicat, condamné à l’immobilité par sa pesanteur, livré dans cette solitude aux forces démolissantes, mis par l’écueil à la discrétion du vent et du flot, pût, sous la pression de ce milieu implacable, échapper à la destruction lente, il semblait qu’il y eût folie rien qu’à l’imaginer. La durande était prisonnière des Douvres. Comment la délivrer? Comment la tirer de là? L’évasion d’un homme est difficile; mais quel problème que celui-ci: l’évasion d’une machine!

IV. examen local préalable.

Gilliatt n’était entouré que d’urgences. Le plus pressé pourtant était de trouver d’abord un mouillage pour la panse, puis un gîte pour lui-même. La durande s’étant plus tassée à bâbord qu’à tribord, le tambour de droite était plus élevé que le tambour de gauche. Gilliatt monta sur le tambour de droite. De là il dominait la partie basse des brisants et, quoique le boyau des rochers, aligné à angles brisés derrière les Douvres, fît plusieurs coudes, Gilliatt put étudier le plan géométral de l’écueil. Ce fut par cette reconnaissance qu’il commença. Les Douvres, ainsi que nous l’avons indiqué déjà, étaient comme deux hauts pignons marquant l’entrée étroite d’une ruelle de petites falaises granitiques à devantures perpendiculaires. Il n’est point rare de trouver, dans les formations sous-marines primitives, de ces corridors singuliers qui semblent coupés à la hache. Ce défilé, fort tortueux, n’était jamais à sec, même dans les basses mers. Un courant très secoué le traversait toujours de part en part. La brusquerie des tournants était, selon le rumb de vent régnant, bonne ou mauvaise; tantôt elle déconcertait la houle et la faisait tomber; tantôt elle l’exaspérait. Ce dernier cas était le plus fréquent; l’obstacle met le flot en colère et le pousse aux excès; l’écume est l’exagération de la vague. Le vent d’orage, dans ces étranglements entre deux roches, subit la même compression et acquiert la même malignité. C’est la tempête à l’état de strangurie. L’immense souffle reste immense et se fait aigu. Il est massue et dard. Il perce en même temps qu’il écrase. Qu’on se figure l’ouragan devenu vent coulis. Les deux chaînes de rochers, laissant entre elles cette espèce de rue de la mer, s’étageaient plus bas que les Douvres en hauteurs graduellement décroissantes et s’enfonçaient ensemble dans le flot à une certaine distance. Il y avait là un autre goulet, moins élevé que le goulet des Douvres, mais plus étroit encore, et qui était l’entrée est du défilé. On devinait que le double prolongement des deux arêtes de roches continuait la rue sous l’eau jusqu’au rocher l’Homme placé comme une citadelle carrée à l’autre extrémité de l’écueil. Du reste, à mer basse, et c’était l’instant où Gilliatt observait, ces deux rangées de bas-fonds montraient leurs affleurements, quelques-uns à sec, tous visibles, et se coordonnant sans interruption. L’Homme bornait et arc-boutait au levant la masse entière de l’écueil contrebutée au couchant par les deux Douvres. Tout l’écueil, vu à vol d’oiseau, offrait un chapelet serpentant de brisants ayant à un bout les Douvres et à l’autre bout l’Homme. L’écueil Douvres, pris dans son ensemble, n’était autre chose que l’émergement de deux gigantesques lames de granit se touchant presque et sortant verticalement, comme une crête, des cimes qui sont au fond de l’océan. Il y a hors de l’abîme de ces exfoliations immenses. La rafale et la houle avaient déchiqueté cette crête en scie. On n’en voyait que le haut; c’était l’écueil. Ce que le flot cachait devait être énorme. La ruelle, où l’orage avait jeté la durande, était l’entre-deux de ces lames colossales. Cette ruelle, en zigzag comme l’éclair, avait à peu près sur tous les points la même largeur. L’océan l’avait ainsi faite. L’éternel tumulte dégage de ces régularités bizarres. Une géométrie sort de la vague. D’un bout à l’autre du défilé, les deux murailles de roche se faisaient face parallèlement à une distance que le maître-couple de la durande mesurait presque exactement. Entre les deux Douvres, l’évasement de la petite Douvre, recourbée et renversée, avait donné place aux tambours. Partout ailleurs les tambours eussent été broyés. La double façade intérieure de l’écueil était hideuse. Quand dans l’exploration du désert d’eau nommé océan on arrive aux choses inconnues de la mer, tout devient surprenant et difforme. Ce que Gilliatt, du haut de l’épave, pouvait apercevoir du défilé, faisait horreur. Il y a souvent dans les gorges granitiques de l’océan une étrange figuration permanente du naufrage. Le défilé des Douvres avait la sienne, effroyable. Les oxydes de la roche mettaient sur l’escarpement, çà et là, des rougeurs imitant des plaques de sang caillé. C’était quelque chose comme l’exsudation saignante d’un caveau de boucherie. Il y avait du charnier dans cet écueil. La rude pierre marine, diversement colorée, ici par la décomposition des amalgames métalliques mêlés à la roche, là par la moisissure, étalait par places des pourpres affreuses, des verdissements suspects, des éclaboussures vermeilles, éveillant une idée de meurtre et d’extermination. On croyait voir le mur pas essuyé d’une chambre d’assassinat. On eût dit que des écrasements d’hommes avaient laissé là leur trace; la roche à pic avait on ne sait quelle empreinte d’agonies accumulées. En de certains endroits ce carnage paraissait ruisseler encore, la muraille était mouillée, et il semblait impossible d’y appuyer le doigt sans le retirer sanglant. Une rouille de massacre apparaissait partout. Au pied du double escarpement parallèle, épars à fleur d’eau, ou sous la lame, ou à sec dans les affouillements, de monstrueux galets ronds, les uns écarlates, les autres noirs ou violets, avaient des ressemblances de viscères; on croyait voir des poumons frais, ou des foies pourrissant. On eût dit que des ventres de géants avaient été vidés là. De longs fils rouges, qu’on eût pu prendre pour des suintements funèbres, rayaient du haut en bas le granit. Ces aspects sont fréquents dans les cavernes de la mer.

V. un mot sur les collaborations secrètes des éléments.

Pour ceux qui, par les hasards des voyages, peuvent être condamnés à l’habitation temporaire d’un écueil dans l’océan, la forme de l’écueil n’est point chose indifférente. Il y a l’écueil pyramide, une cime unique hors de l’eau; il y a l’écueil cercle, quelque chose comme un rond de grosses pierres; il y a l’écueil corridor. L’écueil corridor est le plus inquiétant. Ce n’est pas seulement à cause de l’angoisse du flot entre ses parois et des tumultes de la vague resserrée, c’est aussi à cause des obscures propriétés météorologiques qui semblent se dégager du parallélisme de deux roches en pleine mer. Ces deux lames droites sont un véritable appareil voltaïque. Un écueil corridor est orienté. Cette orientation importe. Il en résulte une première action sur l’air et sur l’eau. L’écueil corridor agit sur le flot et sur le vent, mécaniquement, par sa forme, galvaniquement, par l’aimantation différente possible de ses plans verticaux, masses juxtaposées et contrariées l’une par l’autre. Cette nature d’écueils tire à elle toutes les forces furieuses éparses dans l’ouragan, et a sur la tourmente une singulière puissance de concentration. De là, dans les parages de ces brisants, une certaine accentuation de la tempête. Il faut savoir que le vent est composite. On croit le vent simple; il ne l’est point. Cette force n’est pas seulement dynamique, elle est chimique; elle n’est pas seulement chimique, elle est magnétique. Il y a en elle de l’inexplicable. Le vent est électrique autant qu’aérien. De certains vents coïncident avec les aurores boréales. Le vent du banc des aiguilles roule des vagues de cent pieds de haut, stupeur de Dumont D’Urville. - la corvette, dit-il, ne savait à qui entendre. -sous les rafales australes, de vraies tumeurs maladives boursouflent l’océan, et la mer devient si horrible que les sauvages s’enfuient dans les cavernes pour ne point la voir. Les rafales boréales sont autres; elles sont toutes mêlées d’épingles de glace, et ces bises irrespirables refoulent en arrière sur la neige les traîneaux des esquimaux. D’autres vents brûlent. C’est le simoun d’Afrique, qui est le typhon de Chine et le samiel de l’Inde. Simoun, typhon, samiel; on croit nommer des démons. Ils fondent le haut des montagnes; un orage a vitrifié le volcan de Tolucca. Ce vent chaud, tourbillon couleur d’encre se ruant sur les nuées écarlates, a fait dire aux védas: voici le dieu noir qui vient voler les vaches rouges . On sent dans tous ces faits la pression du mystère électrique. Le vent est plein de ce mystère. De même la mer. Elle aussi est compliquée; sous ses vagues d’eau, qu’on voit, elle a ses vagues de forces, qu’on ne voit pas. Elle se compose de tout. De tous les pêle-mêle, l’océan est le plus indivisible et le plus profond. Essayez de vous rendre compte de ce chaos, si énorme qu’il aboutit au niveau. Il est le récipient universel, réservoir pour les fécondations, creuset pour les transformations. Il amasse, puis disperse, il accumule, puis ensemence; il dévore, puis crée. Il reçoit tous les égouts de la terre, et il les thésaurise. Il est solide dans la banquise, liquide dans le flot, fluide dans la nuée, invisible dans le vent, impalpable dans l’effluve. Comme matière il est masse, et comme force il est abstraction. Il égalise et marie les phénomènes. Il se simplifie par l’infini dans la combinaison. C’est à force de mélange et de trouble qu’il arrive à la transparence. La diversité soluble se fond dans son unité. Il a tant d’éléments qu’il est l’identité. Une de ses gouttes, c’est tout lui. Parce qu’il est plein de tempêtes, il devient l’équilibre. Platon voyait danser les sphères; chose étrange à dire, mais réelle, dans la colossale évolution terrestre autour du soleil, l’océan, avec son flux et reflux, est le balancier du globe. Dans un phénomène de la mer, tous les phénomènes sont présents. La mer est aspirée par le tourbillon comme par un siphon; un orage est un corps de pompe; la foudre vient de l’eau comme de l’air; dans les navires on sent de sourdes secousses, puis une odeur de soufre sort du puits des chaînes. L’océan bout. le diable a mis la mer dans sa chaudière, disait Ruyter. En de certaines tempêtes qui caractérisent le remous des saisons et les entrées en équilibre des forces génésiaques, les navires battus de l’écume semblent exsuder une lueur, et des flammèches de phosphore courent sur les cordages, si mêlées à la manoeuvre que les matelots tendent la main et tâchent de prendre au vol ces oiseaux de feu. Après le tremblement de terre de Lisbonne, une haleine de fournaise poussa vers la ville une lame de soixante pieds de hauteur. L’oscillation océanique se lie à la trépidation terrestre. Ces énergies incommensurables rendent possibles tous les cataclysmes. à la fin de 1864, à cent lieues des côtes de Malabar, une des îles Maldives a sombré. Elle a coulé à fond comme un navire. Les pêcheurs partis le matin n’ont rien retrouvé le soir; à peine ont-ils pu distinguer vaguement leurs villages sous la mer, et cette fois ce sont les barques qui ont assisté au naufrage des maisons.

En Europe, où il semble que la nature se sente contrainte au respect de la civilisation, de tels évènements sont rares jusqu’à l’impossibilité présumable. Pourtant Jersey et Guernesey ont fait partie de la Gaule; et, au moment où nous écrivons ces lignes, un coup d’équinoxe vient de démolir sur la frontière d’Angleterre et d’écosse la falaise première des quatre, first of the fourth . Nulle part ces forces paniques n’apparaissent plus formidablement amalgamées que dans le surprenant détroit boréal nommé Lyse-Fiord. Le Lyse-Fiord est le plus redoutable des écueils-boyaux de l’océan. La démonstration est là complète. C’est la mer de Norvège, le voisinage du rude golfe Stavanger, le cinquante-neuvième degré de latitude. L’eau est lourde et noire, avec une fièvre d’orages intermittents. Dans cette eau, au milieu de cette solitude, il y a une grande rue sombre. Rue pour personne. Nul n’y passe; aucun navire ne s’y hasarde. Un corridor de dix lieues de long entre deux murailles de trois mille pieds de haut; voilà l’entrée qui s’offre. Ce détroit a des coudes et des angles comme toutes les rues de la mer, jamais droites, étant faites par la torsion du flot. Dans le Lyse-Fiord, presque toujours la lame est tranquille; le ciel est serein; lieu terrible. Où est le vent? Pas en haut. Où est le tonnerre? Pas dans le ciel. Le vent est sous la mer, la foudre est dans la roche. De temps en temps, il y a un tremblement d’eau. à de certains moments, sans qu’il y ait un nuage en l’air, vers le milieu de la hauteur de la falaise verticale, à mille ou quinze cents pieds au-dessus des vagues, plutôt du côté sud que du côté nord, brusquement le rocher tonne, un éclair en sort, cet éclair s’élance, puis se retire, comme ces jouets qui s’allongent et se replient dans la main des enfants; il a des contractions et des élargissements; il se darde à la falaise opposée, rentre dans le rocher, puis en ressort, recommence, multiplie ses têtes et ses langues, se hérisse de pointes, frappe où il peut, recommence encore, puis s’éteint sinistre. Les volées d’oiseaux s’enfuient. Rien de mystérieux comme cette artillerie sortant de l’invisible. Un rocher attaque l’autre. Les écueils s’entre-foudroient. Cette guerre ne regarde pas les hommes. Haine de deux murailles dans le gouffre. Dans le Lyse-Fiord le vent tourne en effluve, la roche fait fonction de nuage et le tonnerre a des sorties de volcan. Ce détroit étrange est une pile; il a pour éléments ses deux falaises.

VI. une écurie pour le cheval.

Gilliatt se connaissait assez en écueils pour prendre les Douvres fort au sérieux. Avant tout, nous venons de le dire, il s’agissait de mettre en sûreté la panse. La double arête de récifs qui se prolongeait en tranchée sinueuse derrière les Douvres faisait elle-même groupe çà et là avec d’autres roches, et l’on y devinait des culs-de-sac et des caves se dégorgeant dans la ruelle et se rattachant au défilé principal comme des branches à un tronc. La partie inférieure des brisants était tapissée de varech et la partie supérieure de lichen. Le niveau uniforme du varech sur toutes les roches marquait la ligne de flottaison de la marée pleine et de la mer étale. Les pointes que l’eau n’atteignait pas avaient cette argenture et cette dorure que donne aux granits marins le bariolage du lichen blanc et du lichen jaune. Une lèpre de coquillages conoïdes couvrait la roche à de certains endroits. Carie sèche du granit. Sur d’autres points, dans des angles rentrants où s’était accumulé un sable fin ondé à la surface plutôt par le vent que par le flot, il y avait des touffes de chardon bleu. Dans les redans peu battus de l’écume, on reconnaissait les petites tanières forées par l’oursin. Ce hérisson coquillage, qui marche, boule vivante, en roulant sur ses pointes, et dont la cuirasse se compose de plus de dix mille pièces artistement ajustées et soudées, l’oursin, dont la bouche s’appelle, on ne sait pourquoi, lanterne d’Aristote, creuse le granit avec ses cinq dents qui mordent la pierre, et se loge dans le trou. C’est en ces alvéoles que les chercheurs de fruits de mer le trouvent. Ils le coupent en quatre et le mangent cru, comme l’huître. Quelques-uns trempent leur pain dans cette chair molle. De là son nom, oeuf de mer . Les sommets lointains des bas-fonds, mis hors de l’eau par la marée descendante, aboutissaient sous l’escarpement même de l’Homme à une sorte de crique, murée presque de tous côtés par l’écueil. Il y avait là évidemment un mouillage possible. Gilliatt observa cette crique. Elle avait la forme d’un fer à cheval, et s’ouvrait d’un seul côté, au vent d’est, qui est le moins mauvais vent de ces parages. Le flot y était enfermé et presque dormant. Cette baie était tenable. Gilliatt d’ailleurs n’avait pas beaucoup de choix. Si Gilliatt voulait profiter de la marée basse, il importait qu’il se hâtât. Le temps, du reste, continuait d’être beau et doux. L’insolente mer était maintenant de bonne humeur. Gilliatt redescendit, se rechaussa, dénoua l’amarre, rentra dans sa barque et poussa en mer. Il côtoya à la rame le dehors de l’écueil. Arrivé près de l’Homme, il examina l’entrée de la crique. Une moire fixe dans la mobilité du flot, ride imperceptible à tout autre qu’un marin, dessinait la passe. Gilliatt étudia un instant cette courbe, linéament presque indistinct dans la lame, puis il prit un peu de large afin de virer à l’aise et de faire bon chenal, et vivement, d’un seul coup d’aviron, il entra dans la petite anse. Il sonda. Le mouillage était excellent en effet. La panse serait protégée là contre à peu près toutes les éventualités de la saison. Les plus redoutables récifs ont de ces recoins paisibles. Les ports qu’on trouve dans l’écueil ressemblent à l’hospitalité du bédouin; ils sont honnêtes et sûrs. Gilliatt rangea la panse le plus près qu’il put de l’Homme, toutefois hors de la distance de talonnement, et mouilla ses deux ancres. Cela fait, il croisa les bras et tint conseil avec lui-même. La panse était abritée; c'était un problème résolu; mais le deuxième se présentait. Où s'abriter lui-même maintenant? Deux gîtes s'offraient: la panse elle-même, avec son coin de cabine à peu près habitable, et le plateau de l'Homme, aisé à escalader. De l'un ou de l'autre de ces gîtes, on pourrait, à eau basse, et en sautant de roche en roche, gagner presque à pied sec l'entre-deux des Douvres où était la durande. Mais la marée basse ne dure qu'un moment, et tout le reste du temps on serait séparé, soit du gîte, soit de l'épave, par plus de deux cents brasses. Nager dans le flot d'un écueil est difficile; pour peu qu'il y ait de la mer, c'est impossible. Il fallait renoncer à la panse et à l'Homme. Aucune station possible dans les rochers voisins. Les sommets inférieurs s'effaçaient deux fois par jour sous la marée haute. Les sommets supérieurs étaient sans cesse atteints par des bonds d'écume. Lavage inhospitalier. Restait l'épave elle-même. Pouvait-on s'y loger? Gilliatt l'espéra.

VII. une chambre pour le voyageur.

Une demi-heure après, Gilliatt, de retour sur l'épave, montait et descendait du pont à l'entrepont et de l'entrepont à la cale, approfondissant l'examen sommaire de sa première visite. Il avait, à l'aide du cabestan, hissé sur le pont de la durande le ballot qu'il avait fait du chargement de la panse. Le cabestan s'était bien comporté. Les barres ne manquaient pas pour le virer. Gilliatt, dans ce tas de décombres, n'avait qu'à choisir. Il trouva dans les débris un ciseau à froid, tombé sans doute de la baille du charpentier, et dont il augmenta sa petite caisse d'outils. En outre, car dans le dénûment tout compte, il avait son couteau dans sa poche. Gilliatt travailla toute la journée à l'épave, déblayant, consolidant, simplifiant. Le soir venu, il reconnut ceci: toute l'épave était frissonnante au vent. Cette carcasse tremblait à chaque pas que Gilliatt faisait. Il n'y avait de stable et de ferme que la partie de la coque, emboîtée entre les rochers, qui contenait la machine. Là, les baux s'arc-boutaient puissamment au granit. S'installer dans la durande était imprudent. C'était une surcharge; et, loin de peser sur le navire, il importait de l'alléger. Appuyer sur l'épave était le contraire de ce qu'il fallait faire. Cette ruine voulait les plus grands ménagements. C'était comme un malade, qui expire. Il y aurait bien assez du vent pour la brutaliser. C'était déjà fâcheux d'être contraint d'y travailler. La quantité de travail que l'épave aurait nécessairement à porter la fatiguerait certainement, peut-être au delà de ses forces. En outre, si quelque accident de nuit survenait pendant le sommeil de Gilliatt, être dans l’épave, c’était sombrer avec elle. Nulle aide possible; tout était perdu. Pour secourir l’épave, il fallait être dehors. être hors d’elle et près d’elle; tel était le problème. La difficulté se compliquait. Où trouver un abri dans de telles conditions?

Gilliatt songea. Il ne restait plus que les deux Douvres. Elles semblaient peu logeables. On distinguait d’en bas sur le plateau supérieur de la grande Doure une espèce d’excroissance. Les roches debout à cime plate, comme la grande Douvre et l’Homme, sont des pics décapités. Ils abondent dans les montagnes et dans l’océan. Certains rochers, surtout parmi ceux qu’on rencontre au large, ont des entailles comme des arbres attaqués. Ils ont l’air d’avoir reçu un coup de cognée. Ils ont soumis en effet au vaste va-et-vient de l’ouragan, ce bûcheron de la mer. Il existe d’autres causes de cataclysme, plus profondes encore. De là sur tous ces vieux granits tant de blessures. Quelques-uns de ces colosses ont la tête coupée. Quelquefois cette tête, sans qu’on puisse s’expliquer comment, ne tombe pas, et demeure, mutilée, sur le sommet tronqué. Cette singularité n’est point très rare. La roque-au-diable, à Guernesey, et la table, dans la vallée d’Annweiler, offrent, dans les plus surprenantes conditions, cette bizarre énigme géologique. Il était probablement arrivé à la grande Douvre quelque chose de pareil. Si le renflement qu’on apercevait sur le plateau n’était pas une gibbosité naturelle de la pierre, c’était nécessairement quelque fragment restant du faîte ruiné. Peut-être y avait-il dans ce morceau de roche une excavation. Un trou où se fourrer; Gilliatt n’en demandait pas davantage. Mais comment atteindre au plateau? Comment gravir cette paroi verticale, dense et polie comme un caillou, à demi couverte d’une nappe de conferves visqueuses, et ayant l’aspect glissant d’une surface savonnée? Il y avait trente pieds au moins du pont de la durande à l’arête du plateau. Gilliatt tira de sa caisse d’outils la corde à noeuds, se l’agrafa à la ceinture par le grappin, et se mit à escalader la petite Douvre. à mesure qu’il montait, l’ascension était plus rude. Il avait négligé d’ôter ses souliers, ce qui augmentait le malaise de la montée. Il ne parvint pas sans peine à la pointe. Arrivé à cette pointe, il se dressa debout. Il n’y avait guère de place que pour ses deux pieds. En faire son logis était difficile. Un stylite se fût contenté de cela; Gilliatt, plus exigeant, voulait mieux. La petite Douvre se recourbait vers la grande, ce qui faisait que de loin elle semblait la saluer; et l’intervalle des deux Douvres, qui était d’une vingtaine de pieds en bas, n’était plus que de huit ou dix pieds en haut.

De la pointe où il avait gravi, Gilliatt vit plus distinctement l’ampoule rocheuse qui couvrait en partie la plate-forme de la grande Douvre. Cette plate-forme s’élevait à trois toises au moins au-dessus de sa tête. Un précipice l’en séparait. L’escarpement de la petite Douvre en surplomb se dérobait sous lui. Gilliatt détacha de sa ceinture la corde à noeuds, prit rapidement du regard les dimensions, et lança le grappin sur la plate-forme. Le grappin égratigna la roche, puis dérapa. La corde à noeuds, ayant le grappin à son extrémité, retomba sous les pieds de Gilliatt le long de la petite Douvre. Gilliatt recommença, lançant la corde plus avant, et visant la protubérance granitique où il apercevait des crevasses et des stries. Le jet fut si adroit et si net que le crampon se fixa. Gilliatt tira dessus. La roche cassa, et la corde à noeuds revint battre l’escarpement au-dessous de Gilliatt. Gilliatt lança le grappin une troisième fois. Le grappin ne retomba point. Gilliatt fit effort sur la corde. Elle résista. Le grappin était ancré. Il était arrêté dans quelque anfractuosité du plateau que Gilliatt ne pouvait voir. Il s’agissait de confier sa vie à ce support inconnu. Gilliatt n’hésita point. Tout pressait. Il fallait aller au plus court. D’ailleurs redescendre sur le pont de la durande pour aviser à quelque autre mesure était presque impossible. Le glissement était probable, et la chute à peu près certaine. On monte, on ne redescend pas. Gilliatt avait, comme tous les bons matelots, des mouvements de précision. Il ne perdait jamais de force. Il ne faisait que des efforts proportionnés. De là les prodiges de vigueur qu’il exécutait avec des muscles ordinaires; il avait les biceps du premier venu, mais un autre coeur. Il ajoutait à la force, qui est physique, l’énergie, qui est morale. La chose à faire était redoutable. Franchir, pendu à ce fil, l’intervalle des deux Douvres; telle était la question. On rencontre souvent, dans les actes de dévouement ou de devoir, de ces points d’interrogation qui semblent posés par la mort. Feras-tu cela? Dit l’ombre. Gilliatt exécuta une seconde traction d’essai sur le crampon; le crampon tint bon.

Gilliatt enveloppa sa main gauche de son mouchoir, étreignit la corde à noeuds du poing droit qu’il recouvrit de son poing gauche, puis tendant un pied en avant, et repoussant vivement de l’autre pied la roche afin que la vigueur de l’impulsion empêchât la rotation de la corde, il se précipita du haut de la petite Douvre sur l’escarpement de la grande. Le choc fut dur. Malgré la précaution prise par Gilliatt, la corde tourna, et ce fut son épaule qui frappa le rocher. Il y eut rebondissement. à leur tour ses poings heurtèrent la roche. Le mouchoir s’était dérangé. Ils furent écorchés; c’était beaucoup qu’ils ne fussent pas brisés. Gilliatt demeura un moment étourdi et suspendu. Il fut assez maître de son étourdissement pour ne point lâcher la corde. Un certain temps s’écoula en oscillations et en soubresauts avant qu’il pût saisir la corde avec ses pieds; il y parvint pourtant. Revenu à lui, et tenant la corde entre ses pieds comme dans ses mains, il regarda en bas. Il n’était pas inquiet sur la longueur de sa corde, qui lui avait plus d’une fois servi pour de plus grandes hauteurs. La corde, en effet, traînait sur le pont de la durande. Gilliatt, sûr de pouvoir redescendre, se mit à grimper. En quelques instants il atteignit le plateau. Jamais rien que d’ailé n’avait posé le pied là. Ce plateau était couvert de fientes d’oiseaux. C’était un trapèze irrégulier, cassure de ce colossal prisme granitique nommé la grande Douvre. Ce trapèze était creusé au centre comme une cuvette. Travail des pluies. Gilliatt, du reste, avait conjecturé juste. On voyait à l’angle méridional du trapèze une superposition de rochers, décombres probables de l’écroulement du sommet. Ces rochers, espèce de tas de pavés démesurés, laissaient à une bête fauve qui eût été fourvoyée sur cette cime de quoi se glisser entre eux. Ils s’équilibraient pêle-mêle; ils avaient les interstices d’un monceau de gravats. Il n’y avait là ni grotte, ni antre, mais des trous comme dans une éponge. Une de ces tanières pouvait admettre Gilliatt. Cette tanière avait un fond d’herbe et de mousse. Gilliatt serait là comme dans une gaine. L’alcôve, à l’entrée, avait deux pieds de haut. Elle allait se rétrécissant vers le fond. Il y a des cercueils de pierre qui ont cette forme. L’amas de rochers étant adossé au sud-ouest, la tanière était garantie des ondées, mais ouverte au vent du nord. Gilliatt trouva que c’était bon.

Les deux problèmes étaient résolus; la panse avait un port et il avait un logis. L’excellence de ce logis était d’être à portée de l’épave. Le grappin de la corde à noeuds, tombé entre deux quartiers de roche, s’y était solidement accroché. Gilliatt l’immobilisa en mettant dessus une grosse pierre. Puis il entra immédiatement en libre pratique avec la durande. Il était chez lui désormais. La grande Douvre était sa maison; la durande était son chantier. Aller et venir, monter et descendre, rien de plus simple. Il dégringola vivement de la corde à noeuds sur le pont. La journée était bonne, cela commençait bien, il était content, il s’aperçut qu’il avait faim. Il déficela son panier de provisions, ouvrit son couteau, coupa une tranche de boeuf fumé, mordit sa miche de pain bis, but un coup au bidon d’eau douce, et soupa admirablement. Bien faire et bien manger, ce sont là deux joies. L’estomac plein ressemble à une conscience satisfaite. Son souper fini, il y avait encore un peu de jour. Il en profita pour commencer l’allégement, très urgent, de l’épave. Il avait passé une partie de la journée à trier les décombres. Il mit de côté, dans le compartiment solide où était la machine, tout ce qui pouvait servir, bois, fer, cordage, toile. Il jeta à la mer l’inutile. Le chargement de la panse, hissé par le cabestan sur le pont, était, quelque sommaire qu’il fût, un encombrement. Gilliatt avisa l’espèce de niche creusée, à une hauteur que sa main pouvait atteindre, dans la muraille de la petite Douvre. On voit souvent dans les rochers de ces armoires naturelles, point fermées, il est vrai. Il pensa qu’il était possible de confier à cette niche un dépôt. Il mit au fond ses deux caisses, celle des outils et celle des vêtements, ses deux sacs, le seigle et le biscuit, et sur le devant, un peu trop près du bord peut-être, mais il n’avait pas d’autre place, le panier de provisions. Il avait eu le soin de retirer de la caisse aux vêtements sa peau de mouton, son suroit à capuchon et ses jambières goudronnées. Pour ôter prise au vent sur la corde à noeuds, il en attacha l’extrémité inférieure à une porque de la durande. La durande ayant beaucoup de rentrée, cette porque avait beaucoup de courbure, et tenait le bout de la corde aussi bien que l’eût fait une main fermée. Restait le haut de la corde. Assujettir le bas était bien, mais au sommet de l’escarpement, à l’endroit où la corde à noeuds rencontrait l’arête de la plate-forme, il était à craindre qu’elle ne fût peu à peu sciée par l’angle vif du rocher. Gilliatt fouilla le monceau de décombres en réserve, et y prit quelques loques de toile à voile et, dans un tronçon de vieux câbles, quelques longs brins de fil de caret, dont il bourra ses poches. Un marin eût deviné qu’il allait capitonner avec ces morceaux de toile et ces bouts de fil le pli de la corde à noeuds sur le coupant du rocher, de façon à le préserver de toute avarie; opération qui s’appelle fourrure. Sa provision de chiffons faite, il se passa les jambières aux jambes, endossa le suroit par-dessus sa vareuse, rabattit le capuchon sur sa galérienne, se noua au cou par les deux pattes la peau de mouton, et ainsi vêtu de cette panoplie complète, il empoigna la corde, robustement fixée désormais au flanc de la grande Douvre, et il monta à l’assaut de cette sombre tour de la mer. Gilliatt, en dépit de ses mains écorchées, arriva lestement au plateau. Les dernières pâleurs du couchant s’éteignaient. Il faisait nuit sur la mer. Le haut de la douvre gardait un peu de lueur. Gilliatt profita de ce reste de clarté pour fourrer la corde à noeuds. Il lui appliqua, au coude qu’elle faisait sur le rocher, un bandage de plusieurs épaisseurs de toile, fortement ficelé à chaque épaisseur. C’était quelque chose comme la garniture que se mettent aux genoux les actrices pour les agonies et les supplications du cinquième acte. La fourrure terminée, Gilliatt accroupi se redressa. Depuis quelques instants, pendant qu’il ajustait ces loques sur la corde à noeuds, il percevait confusément en l’air un frémissement singulier. Cela ressemblait, dans le silence du soir, au bruit que ferait le battement d’ailes d’une immense chauve-souris. Gilliatt leva les yeux. Un grand cercle noir tournait au-dessus de sa tête dans le ciel profond et blanc du crépuscule. On voit, dans les vieux tableaux, de ces cercles sur la tête des saints. Seulement ils sont d’or sur un fond sombre; celui-ci était ténébreux sur un fond clair. Rien de plus étrange. On eût dit l’auréole de nuit de la grande Douvre. Ce cercle s’approchait de Gilliatt et ensuite s’éloignait; se rétrécissant, puis s’élargissant. C’étaient des mouettes, des goëlands, des frégates, des cormorans, des mauves, une nuée d’oiseaux de mer, étonnés. Il est probable que la grande Douvre était leur auberge et qu’ils venaient se coucher. Gilliatt y avait pris une chambre. Ce locataire inattendu les inquiétait. Un homme là, c’est ce qu’ils n’avaient jamais vu. Ce vol effaré dura quelque temps. Ils paraissaient attendre que Gilliatt s’en allât. Gilliatt, vaguement pensif, les suivait du regard. Ce tourbillon volant finit par prendre son parti, le cercle tout à coup se défit en spirale, et ce nuage de cormorans alla s’abattre, à l’autre bout de l’écueil, sur l’Homme. Là, ils parurent se consulter et délibérer. Gilliatt, tout en s’allongeant dans son fourreau de granit, et tout en se mettant sous la joue une pierre pour oreiller, entendit longtemps les oiseaux parler l’un après l’autre, chacun à son tour de croassement. Puis ils se turent, et tout s’endormit, les oiseaux sur leur rocher, Gilliatt sur le sien.

VIII. importunaeque volucres.

Gilliatt dormit bien. Pourtant il eut froid, ce qui le réveilla de temps en temps. Il avait naturellement placé ses pieds au fond et sa tête au seuil. Il n’avait pas pris le soin d’ôter de son lit une multitude de cailloux assez tranchants qui n’amélioraient pas son sommeil. Par moments, il entr’ouvrait les yeux. Il entendait à de certains instants des détonations profondes. C’était la mer montante qui entrait dans les caves de l’écueil avec un bruit de coup de canon. Tout ce milieu où il était offrait l’extraordinaire de la vision; Gilliatt avait de la chimère autour de lui. Le demi-étonnement de la nuit s’y ajoutant, il se voyait plongé dans l’impossible. Il se disait: je rêve.

Puis il se rendormait, et, en rêve alors, il se retrouvait au bû de la rue, aux bravées, à Saint-Sampson; il entendait chanter Déruchette; il était dans le réel. Tant qu'il dormait, il croyait veiller et vivre; quand il se réveillait, il croyait dormir. En effet, il était désormais dans un songe. Vers le milieu de la nuit, une vaste rumeur s'était faite dans le ciel. Gilliatt en avait confusément conscience à travers son sommeil. Il est probable que la brise s'élevait. Une fois, qu'un frisson de froid le réveilla, il écarta les paupières un peu plus qu'il n'avait fait encore. Il y avait de larges nuées au zénith; la lune s'enfuyait et une grosse étoile courait après elle. Gilliatt avait l'esprit plein de la diffusion des songes, et ce grossissement du rêve compliquait les farouches paysages de la nuit. Au point du jour il était glacé et dormait profondément. La brusquerie de l'aurore le tira de ce sommeil, dangereux peut-être. Son alcôve faisait face au soleil levant. Gilliatt bâilla, s'étira, et se jeta hors de son trou. Il dormait si bien qu'il ne comprit pas d'abord. Peu à peu le sentiment de la réalité lui revint, et à tel point qu'il s'écria: déjeunons! Le temps était calme, le ciel était froid et serein, il n'y avait plus de nuages, le balayage de la nuit avait nettoyé l'horizon, le soleil se levait bien. C'était une seconde belle journée qui commençait. Gilliatt se sentit joyeux. Il quitta son suroit et ses jambières, les roula dans la peau de mouton, la laine en dedans, noua le rouleau d'un bout de funin, et le poussa au fond de la tanière, à l'abri d'une pluie éventuelle. Puis il fit son lit, c'est-à-dire retira les cailloux. Son lit fait, il se laissa glisser le long de la corde sur le pont de la durande, et courut à la niche où il avait déposé le panier de provisions. Le panier n'y était plus. Comme il était fort près du bord, le vent de la nuit l'avait emporté et jeté dans la mer. Ceci annonçait l'intention de se défendre. Il avait fallu au vent une certaine volonté et une certaine malice pour aller chercher là ce panier. C'était un commencement d'hostilités. Gilliatt le comprit. Il est très difficile, quand on vit dans la familiarité bourrue de la mer, de ne point regarder le vent comme quelqu'un et les rochers comme des personnages. Il ne restait plus à Gilliatt, avec le biscuit et la farine de seigle, que la ressource des coquillages dont s'était nourri le naufragé mort de faim sur le rocher l'Homme. Quant à la pêche, il n'y fallait point songer. Le poisson, ennemi des chocs, évite les brisants; les nasses et les chaluts perdent leur peine dans les récifs, et ces pointes ne sont bonnes qu'à déchirer les filets. Gilliatt déjeuna de quelques poux de roque, qu'il détacha fort malaisément du rocher. Il faillit y casser son couteau. Tandis qu'il faisait ce luncheon maigre, il entendit un bizarre tumulte sur la mer. Il regarda. C’était l’essaim de goëlands et de mouettes qui venait de se ruer sur une des roches basses, battant de l’aile, s’entre-culbutant, criant, appelant. Tous fourmillaient bruyamment sur le même point. Cette horde à bec et ongles pillait quelque chose. Ce quelque chose était le panier de Gilliatt. Le panier, lancé sur une pointe par le vent, s’y était crevé. Les oiseaux étaient accourus. Ils emportaient dans leurs becs toutes sortes de lambeaux déchiquetés. Gilliatt reconnut de loin son boeuf fumé et son stock-fish. Les oiseaux entraient en lutte à leur tour. Ils avaient, eux aussi, leurs représailles. Gilliatt leur avait pris leur logis; ils lui prenaient son souper.

IX. l’écueil, et la manière de s’en servir.

Une semaine se passa. Quoiqu’on fût dans une saison de pluie, il ne pleuvait pas, ce qui réjouissait fort Gilliatt. Du reste, ce qu’il entreprenait dépassait, en apparence du moins, la force humaine. Le succès était tellement invraisemblable que la tentative paraissait folle. Les opérations serrées de près manifestent leurs empêchements et leurs périls. Rien n’est tel que de commencer pour voir combien il sera malaisé de finir. Tout début résiste. Le premier pas qu’on fait est un révélateur inexorable. La difficulté qu’on touche pique comme une épine. Gilliatt eut tout de suite à compter avec l’obstacle. Pour tirer du naufrage, où elle était aux trois quarts enfoncée, la machine de la durande, pour tenter, avec quelque chance de réussite, un tel sauvetage en un tel lieu dans une telle saison, il semblait qu’il fallût être une troupe d’hommes, Gilliatt était seul; il fallait tout un outillage de charpenterie et de machinerie, Gilliatt avait une scie, une hache, un ciseau et un marteau; il fallait un bon atelier et un bon baraquement, Gilliatt n’avait pas de toit; il fallait des provisions et des vivres, Gilliatt n’avait pas de pain. Quelqu’un qui, pendant toute cette première semaine, eût vu Gilliatt travailler dans l’écueil, ne se fût pas rendu compte de ce qu’il voulait faire. Il semblait ne plus songer à la durande ni aux deux Douvres. Il n’était occupé que de ce qu’il y avait dans les brisants; il paraissait absorbé dans le sauvetage des petites épaves. Il profitait des marées basses pour dépouiller les récifs de tout ce que le naufrage leur avait partagé. Il allait de roche en roche ramassant ce que la mer y avait jeté, les haillons de voilure, les bouts de corde, les morceaux de fer, les éclats de panneaux, les bordages défoncés, les vergues cassées, là une poutre, là une chaîne, là une poulie. En même temps il étudiait toutes les anfractuosités de l’écueil. Aucune n’était habitable, au grand désappointement de Gilliatt qui avait froid la nuit dans l’entre-deux de pavés où il logeait sur le comble de la grande Douvre, et qui eût souhaité trouver une meilleure mansarde. Deux de ces anfractuosités étaient assez spacieuses; quoique le dallage de roche naturel en fût presque partout oblique et inégal, on pouvait s’y tenir debout et y marcher. La pluie et le vent y avaient leurs aises, mais les plus hautes marées ne les atteignaient point. Elles étaient voisines de la petite Douvre, et d’un abord possible à toute heure. Gilliatt décida que l’une serait un magasin, et l’autre une forge. Avec tous les rabans de têtière et tous les rabans de pointure qu’il put recueillir, il fit des ballots des menues épaves, liant les débris en faisceaux et les toiles en paquets. Il aiguilleta soigneusement le tout. à mesure que la marée en montant venait renflouer ces ballots, il les traînait à travers les récifs jusqu’à son magasin. Il avait trouvé dans un creux de roche une guinderesse au moyen de laquelle il pouvait haler même les grosses pièces de charpente. Il tira de la mer de la même façon les nombreux tronçons de chaînes, épars dans les brisants. Gilliatt était tenace et étonnant dans ce labeur. Il faisait tout ce qu’il voulait. Rien ne résiste à un acharnement de fourmi. à la fin de la semaine, Gilliatt avait dans ce hangar de granit tout l’informe bric-à-brac de la tempête mis en ordre. Il y avait le coin des écouets et le coin des écoutes; les boulines n’étaient point mêlées avec les drisses; les bigots étaient rangés selon la quantité de trous qu’ils avaient; les emboudinures, soigneusement détachées des organeaux des ancres brisées, étaient roulées en écheveaux; les moques, qui n’ont point de rouet, étaient séparées des moufles; les cabillots, les margouillets, les pataras, les gabarons, les joutereaux, les calebas, les galoches, les pantoires, les oreilles d’âne, les racages, les bosses, les boutehors, occupaient, pourvu qu’ils ne fussent pas complètement défigurés par l’avarie, des compartiments différents; toute la charpente, traversins, piliers, épontilles, chouquets, mantelets, jumelles, hiloires, était entassée à part; chaque fois que cela avait été possible, les planches des fragments de francbord embouffeté avaient été rentrées les unes dans les autres; il n’y avait nulle confusion des garcettes de ris avec les garcettes de tournevire, ni des araignées avec les touées, ni des poulies de galhauban avec les poulies de franc-funin, ni des morceaux de virure avec les morceaux de vibord; un recoin avait été réservé à une partie du trelingage de la durande, qui appuyait les haubans de hune et les gambes de hune. Chaque débris avait sa place. Tout le naufrage était là, classé et étiqueté. C’était quelque chose comme le chaos en magasin. Une voile d’étai, fixée par de grosses pierres, recouvrait, fort trouée il est vrai, ce que la pluie pouvait endommager. Si fracassé qu'eût été l'avant de la durande, Gilliatt était parvenu à sauver les deux bossoirs avec leurs trois roues de poulies. Il retrouva le beaupré, et il eut beaucoup de peine à en dérouler les liures; elles étaient fort adhérentes, ayant été, comme toujours, faites au cabestan, et par un temps sec. Gilliatt pourtant les détacha, ce gros funin pouvant lui être fort utile. Il avait également recueilli la petite ancre qui était demeurée accrochée dans un creux de bas-fond où la mer descendante la découvrait. Il trouva dans ce qui avait été la cabine de Tangrouille un morceau de craie, et le serra soigneusement. On peut avoir des marques à faire. Un seau de cuir à incendie et plusieurs bailles en assez bon état complétaient cet en-cas de travail. Tout ce qui restait du chargement de charbon de terre de la durande fut porté dans le magasin. En huit jours ce sauvetage des débris fut achevé; l'écueil fut nettoyé, et la durande fut allégée. Il ne resta plus sur l'épave que la machine. Le morceau de la muraille de l'avant qui adhérait à l'arrière ne fatiguait point la carcasse. Il y pendait sans tiraillement, étant soutenu par une saillie de roche. Il était d'ailleurs large et vaste, et lourd à traîner, et il eût encombré le magasin. Ce panneau de muraille avait l'aspect d'un radeau. Gilliatt le laissa où il était. Gilliatt, profondément pensif dans ce labeur, chercha en vain la " poupée " de la durande. C'était une des choses que le flot avait à jamais emportées. Gilliatt, pour la retrouver, eût donné ses deux bras, s'il n'en eût pas eu tant besoin. à l'entrée du magasin et en dehors, on voyait deux tas de rebut, le tas de fer, bon à reforger, et le tas de bois, bon à brûler. Gilliatt était à la besogne au point du jour. Hors des heures de sommeil, il ne prenait pas un moment de repos. Les cormorans, volant çà et là, le regardaient travailler.

X. la forge.

Le magasin fait, Gilliatt fit la forge. La deuxième anfractuosité choisie par Gilliatt offrait un réduit, espèce de boyau, assez profond. Il avait eu d'abord l'idée de s'y installer; mais la bise, se renouvelant sans cesse, était si continue et si opiniâtre dans ce couloir qu'il avait dû renoncer à habiter là. Ce soufflet lui donna l'idée d'une forge. Puisque cette caverne ne pouvait être sa chambre, elle serait son atelier. Se faire servir par l'obstacle est un grand pas vers le triomphe. Le vent était l'ennemi de Gilliatt; Gilliatt entreprit d'en faire son valet. Ce qu'on dit de certains hommes: -propre à tout, bon à rien, -on peut le dire des creux de rocher. Ce qu'ils offrent, ils ne le donnent point. Tel creux de rocher est une baignoire, mais qui laisse fuir l’eau par une fissure; tel autre est une chambre, mais sans plafond; tel autre est un lit de mousse, mais mouillée; tel autre est un fauteuil, mais de pierre. La forge que Gilliatt voulait établir était ébauchée par la nature; mais dompter cette ébauche jusqu’à la rendre maniable, et transformer cette caverne en laboratoire, rien n’était plus âpre et plus malaisé. Avec trois ou quatre larges roches évidées en entonnoir et aboutissant à une fêlure étroite, le hasard avait fait là une espèce de vaste soufflante informe, bien autrement puissante que ces anciens grands soufflets de forge de quatorze pieds de long, lesquels donnaient en bas, par chaque coup d’haleine, quatrevingt-dix-huit mille pouces d’air. C’était ici tout autre chose. Les proportions de l’ouragan ne se calculent pas. Cet excès de force était une gêne; il était difficile de régler ce souffle. La caverne avait deux inconvénients; l’air la traversait de part en part, l’eau aussi. Ce n’était point la lame marine, c’était un petit ruissellement perpétuel, plus semblable à un suintement qu’à un torrent. L’écume, sans cesse lancée par le ressac sur l’écueil, quelquefois à plus de cent pieds en l’air, avait fini par emplir d’eau de mer une cuve naturelle située dans les hautes roches qui dominaient l’excavation. Le trop-plein de ce réservoir faisait, un peu en arrière, dans l’escarpement, une mince chute d’eau, d’un pouce environ, tombant de quatre ou cinq toises. Un contingent de pluie s’y ajoutait. De temps en temps un nuage versait en passant une ondée dans ce réservoir inépuisable et toujours débordant. L’eau en était saumâtre, non potable, mais limpide, quoique salée. Cette chute s’égouttait gracieusement aux extrémités des conferves comme aux pointes d’une chevelure. Gilliatt songea à se servir de cette eau pour discipliner ce vent. Au moyen d’un entonnoir, de deux ou trois tuyaux en planches menuisés et ajustés à la hâte, dont un à robinet, et d’une baille très large disposée en réservoir inférieur, sans flasque et sans contrepoids, en complétant seulement l’engin par un étranguillon en haut et des trous aspirateurs en bas, Gilliatt, qui était, nous l’avons dit, un peu forgeron et un peu mécanicien, parvint à composer, pour remplacer le soufflet de forge qu’il n’avait pas, un appareil moins parfait que ce qu’on nomme aujourd’hui une cagniardelle, mais moins rudimentaire que ce qu’on appelait jadis dans les Pyrénées une trompe. Il avait de la farine de seigle, il en fit de la colle; il avait du funin blanc, il en fit de l’étoupe. Avec cette étoupe et cette colle et quelques coins de bois, il boucha toutes les fissures du rocher, ne laissant qu’un bec d’air, fait d’un petit tronçon d’espoulette qu’il trouva dans la durande et qui avait servi de boute-feu au pierrier de signal. Ce bec d’air était horizontalement dirigé sur une large dalle où Gilliatt mit le foyer de la forge. Un bouchon, fait d’un bout de touron, le fermait au besoin. Après quoi, Gilliatt empila du charbon et du bois dans ce foyer, battit le briquet sur le rocher même, fit tomber l’étincelle sur une poignée d’étoupe, et, avec l’étoupe allumée, alluma le bois et le charbon. Il essaya la soufflante. Elle fit admirablement. Gilliatt sentit une fierté de cyclope, maître de l’air, de l’eau et du feu. Maître de l’air; il avait donné au vent une espèce de poumon, créé dans le granit un appareil respiratoire, et changé la soufflante en soufflet. Maître de l’eau; de la petite cascade, il avait fait une trompe. Maître du feu; de ce rocher inondé, il avait fait jaillir la flamme. L’excavation étant presque partout à ciel ouvert, la fumée s’en allait librement, noircissant l’escarpement en surplomb. Ces rochers, qui semblaient à jamais faits pour l’écume, connurent la suie. Gilliatt prit pour enclume un gros galet roulé d’un grain très dense, offrant à peu près la forme et la dimension voulues. C’était là une base de frappement fort dangereuse, et pouvant éclater. Une des extrémités de ce bloc, arrondie et finissant en pointe, pouvait à la rigueur tenir lieu de bicorne conoïde, mais l’autre bicorne, la bicorne pyramidale, manquait. C’était l’antique enclume de pierre des troglodytes. La surface, polie par le flot, avait presque la fermeté de l’acier.

Gilliatt regretta de ne point avoir apporté son enclume. Comme il ignorait que la durande avait été coupée en deux par la tempête, il avait espéré trouver la baille du charpentier et tout son outillage ordinairement logé dans la cale à l’avant. Or, c’était précisément l’avant qui avait été emporté. Les deux excavations, conquises sur l’écueil par Gilliatt, étaient voisines. Le magasin et la forge communiquaient. Tous les soirs, sa journée finie, Gilliatt soupait d’un morceau de biscuit amolli dans l’eau, d’un oursin ou d’un poingclos, ou de quelques châtaignes de mer, la seule chasse possible dans ces rochers, et, grelottant comme la corde à noeuds, remontait se coucher dans son trou sur la grande Douvre. L’espèce d’abstraction où vivait Gilliatt s’augmentait de la matérialité même de ses occupations. La réalité à haute dose effare. Le labeur corporel avec ses détails sans nombre n’ôtait rien à la stupeur de se trouver là et de faire ce qu’il faisait. Ordinairement la lassitude matérielle est un fil qui tire à terre; mais la singularité même de la besogne entreprise par Gilliatt le maintenait dans une sorte de région idéale et crépusculaire. Il lui semblait par moments donner des coups de marteau dans les nuages. Dans d’autres instants, il lui semblait que ses outils étaient des armes. Il avait le sentiment singulier d’une attaque latente qu’il réprimait ou qu’il prévenait. Tresser du funin, tirer d’une voile un fil de caret, arc-bouter deux madriers, c’était façonner des machines de guerre. Les mille soins minutieux de ce sauvetage finissaient par ressembler à des précautions contre des agressions intelligentes, fort peu dissimulées et très transparentes. Gilliatt ne savait pas les mots qui rendent les idées, mais il percevait les idées. Il se sentait de moins en moins ouvrier et de plus en plus belluaire. Il était là comme dompteur. Il le comprenait presque. élargissement étrange pour son esprit. En outre, il avait autour de lui, à perte de vue, l’immense songe du travail perdu. Voir manoeuvrer dans l’insondable et dans l’illimité la diffusion des forces, rien n’est plus troublant. On cherche des buts. L’espace toujours en mouvement, l’eau infatigable, les nuages qu’on dirait affairés, le vaste effort obscur, toute cette convulsion est un problème. Qu’est-ce que ce tremblement perpétuel fait? Que construisent ces rafales? Que bâtissent ces secousses? Ces chocs, ces sanglots, ces hurlements, qu’est-ce qu’ils créent? à quoi est occupé ce tumulte? Le flux et le reflux de ces questions est éternel comme la marée. Gilliatt, lui, savait ce qu’il faisait; mais l’agitation de l’étendue l’obsédait confusément de son énigme. à son insu, mécaniquement, impérieusement, par pression et pénétration, sans autre résultat qu’un éblouissement inconscient et presque farouche, Gilliatt rêveur amalgamait à son propre travail le prodigieux travail inutile de la mer. Comment, en effet, ne pas subir et sonder, quand on est là, le mystère de l’effrayante onde laborieuse? Comment ne pas méditer, dans la mesure de ce qu’on a de méditation possible, la vacillation du flot, l’acharnement de l’écume, l’usure imperceptible du rocher, l’époumonement insensé des quatre vents? Quelle terreur pour la pensée, le recommencement perpétuel, l’océan puits, les nuées danaïdes, toute cette peine pour rien! Pour rien, non. Mais, ô inconnu, toi seul sais pourquoi.

XI. découverte.

Un écueil voisin de la côte est quelquefois visité par les hommes; un écueil en pleine mer, jamais. Qu’irait-on y chercher? Ce n’est pas une île. Point de ravitaillement à espérer, ni arbres à fruits, ni pâturages, ni bestiaux, ni sources d’eau potable. C’est une nudité dans une solitude. C’est une roche, avec des escarpements hors de l’eau et des pointes sous l’eau. Rien à trouver là, que le naufrage. Ces espèces d’écueils, que la vieille langue marine appelle les isolés, sont, nous l’avons dit, des lieux étranges. La mer y est seule. Elle fait ce qu’elle veut. Nulle apparition terrestre ne l’inquiète. L’homme épouvante la mer; elle se défie de lui; elle lui cache ce qu’elle est et ce qu’elle fait. Dans l’écueil, elle est rassurée; l’homme n’y viendra pas. Le monologue des flots ne sera point troublé. Elle travaille à l’écueil, répare ses avaries, aiguise ses pointes, le hérisse, le remet à neuf, le maintient en état. Elle entreprend le percement du rocher, désagrège la pierre tendre, dénude la pierre dure, ôte la chair, laisse l’ossement, fouille, dissèque, fore, troue, canalise, met les caecums en communication, emplit l’écueil de cellules, imite l’éponge en grand, creuse le dedans, sculpte le dehors. Elle se fait, dans cette montagne secrète qui est à elle, des antres, des sanctuaires, des palais; elle a on ne sait quelle végétation hideuse et splendide composée d’herbes flottantes qui mordent et de monstres qui prennent racine; elle enfouit sous l’ombre de l’eau cette magnificence affreuse. Dans l’écueil isolé, rien ne la surveille, ne l’espionne et ne la dérange; elle y développe à l’aise son côté mystérieux, inaccessible à l’homme. Elle y dépose ses sécrétions vivantes et horribles. Tout l’ignoré de la mer est là. Les promontoires, les caps, les finistères, les nases, les brisants, les récifs, sont, insistons-y, de vraies constructions. La formation géologique est peu de chose, comparée à la formation océanique. Les écueils, ces maisons de la vague, ces pyramides et ces syringes de l’écume, appartiennent à un art mystérieux que l’auteur de ce livre a nommé quelque part l’art de la nature, et ont une sorte de style énorme. Le fortuit y semble voulu. Ces constructions sont multiformes. Elles ont l’enchevêtrement du polypier, la sublimité de la cathédrale, l’extravagance de la pagode, l’amplitude du mont, la délicatesse du bijou, l’horreur du sépulcre. Elles ont des alvéoles comme un guêpier, des tanières comme une ménagerie, des tunnels comme une taupinière, des cachots comme une bastille, des embuscades comme un camp. Elles ont des portes, mais barricadées, des colonnes, mais tronquées, des tors, mais penchées, des ponts, mais rompus. Leurs compartiments sont inexorables; ceci n’est que pour les oiseaux; ceci n’est que pour les poissons. On ne passe pas. Leur figure architecturale se transforme, se déconcerte, affirme la statique, la nie, se brise, s’arrête court, commence en archivolte, finit en architrave; bloc sur bloc; Encelade est le maçon. Une dynamique extraordinaire étale là ses problèmes, résolus. D’effrayants pendentifs menacent, mais ne tombent pas. On ne sait comment tiennent ces bâtisses vertigineuses. Partout des surplombs, des porte-à-faux, des lacunes, des suspensions insensées; la loi de ce babélisme échappe; l’inconnu, immense architecte, ne calcule rien, et réussit tout; les rochers, bâtis pêle-mêle, composent un monument monstre; nulle logique, un vaste équilibre. C’est plus que de la solidité, c’est de l’éternité. En même temps, c’est le désordre. Le tumulte de la vague semble avoir passé dans le granit. Un écueil, c’est de la tempête pétrifiée. Rien de plus émouvant pour l’esprit que cette farouche architecture, toujours croulante, toujours debout. Tout s’y entr’aide et s’y contrarie. C’est un combat de lignes d’où résulte un édifice. On y reconnaît la collaboration de ces deux querelles, l’océan et l’ouragan. Cette architecture a ses chefs-d’oeuvre, terribles. L’écueil Douvres en était un. Celui-là, la mer l’avait construit et perfectionné avec un amour formidable. L’eau hargneuse le léchait. Il était hideux, traître, obscur, plein de caves. Il avait tout un système veineux de trous sous-marins se ramifiant dans des profondeurs insondables. Plusieurs des orifices de ce percement inextricable étaient à sec aux marées basses. On y pouvait entrer. à ses risques et périls. Gilliatt, pour les besoins de son sauvetage, dut explorer toutes ces grottes. Pas une qui ne fût effroyable. Partout, dans ces caves, se reproduisait, avec les dimensions exagérées de l’océan, cet aspect d’abattoir et de boucherie étrangement empreint dans l’entre-deux des Douvres. Qui n’a point vu, dans des excavations de ce genre, sur la muraille du granit éternel, ces affreuses fresques de la nature, ne peut s’en faire l’idée. Ces grottes féroces étaient sournoises; il ne fallait point s’y attarder. La marée haute les emplissait jusqu’au plafond. Les poux de roque et les fruits de mer y abondaient.

Elles étaient encombrées de galets roulés, amoncelés en tas au fond des voûtes. Beaucoup de ces galets pesaient plus d’une tonne. Ils étaient de toutes proportions et de toutes couleurs; la plupart paraissaient sanglants; quelques-uns, couverts de conferves poilues et gluantes, semblaient de grosses taupes vertes fouillant le rocher. Plusieurs de ces caves se terminaient brusquement en cul-de-four. D’autres, artères d’une circulation mystérieuse, se prolongeaient dans le rocher en fissures tortueuses et noires. C’étaient les rues du gouffre. Ces fissures se rétrécissant sans cesse, un homme n’y pouvait passer. Un brandon allumé y laissait voir des obscurités suintantes. Une fois, Gilliatt, furetant, s’aventura dans une de ces fissures. L’heure de la marée s’y prêtait. C’était une belle journée de calme et de soleil. Aucun incident de mer, pouvant compliquer le risque, n’était à redouter. Deux nécessités, nous venons de l’indiquer, poussaient Gilliatt à ces explorations: chercher, pour le sauvetage, des débris utiles, et trouver des crabes et des langoustes pour sa nourriture. Les coquillages commençaient à lui manquer dans les Douvres. La fissure était resserrée et le passage presque impossible. Gilliatt voyait de la clarté au delà. Il fit effort, s'effaça, se tordit de son mieux, et s'engagea le plus avant qu'il put. Il se trouvait, sans s'en douter, précisément dans l'intérieur du rocher sur la pointe duquel Clubin avait lancé la durande. Gilliatt était sous cette pointe. Le rocher, abrupt extérieurement, et inabordable, était évidé en dedans. Il avait des galeries, des puits et des chambres comme le tombeau d'un roi d'égypte. Cet affouillement était un des plus compliqués parmi ces dédales, travail de l'eau, sape de la mer infatigable. Les embranchements de ce souterrain sous mer communiquaient probablement avec l'eau immense du dehors par plus d'une issue, les unes béantes au niveau du flot, les autres, profonds entonnoirs invisibles. C'était tout près de là, mais Gilliatt l'ignorait, que Clubin s'était jeté à la mer. Gilliatt, dans cette lézarde à crocodiles, où les crocodiles, il est vrai, n'étaient pas à craindre, serpentait, rampait, se heurtait le front, se courbait, se redressait, perdait pied, retrouvait le sol, avançait péniblement. Peu à peu le boyau s'élargit, un demi-jour parut, et tout à coup Gilliatt fit son entrée dans une caverne extraordinaire.

XII. le dedans d'un édifice sous mer.

Ce demi-jour vint à propos. Un pas de plus, Gilliatt tombait dans une eau peut-être sans fond. Ces eaux de caves ont un tel refroidissement et une paralysie si subite, que souvent les plus forts nageurs y restent. Nul moyen d'ailleurs de remonter et de s'accrocher aux escarpements entre lesquels on est muré. Gilliatt s'arrêta court. La crevasse d'où il sortait aboutissait à une saillie étroite et visqueuse, espèce d'encorbellement dans la muraille à pic. Gilliatt s'adossa à la muraille et regarda. Il était dans une grande cave. Il avait au-dessus de lui quelque chose comme le dessous d'un crâne démesuré. Ce crâne avait l'air fraîchement disséqué. Les nervures ruisselantes des stries du rocher imitaient sur la voûte les embranchements des fibres et les sutures dentelées d'une boîte osseuse. Pour plafond, la pierre; pour plancher, l'eau; les lames de la marée, resserrées entre les quatre parois de la grotte, semblaient de larges dalles tremblantes. La grotte était fermée de toutes parts. Pas une lucarne, pas un soupirail; aucune brèche à la muraille, aucune fêlure à la voûte. Tout cela était éclairé d'en bas à travers l'eau. C'était on ne sait quel resplendissement ténébreux. Gilliatt, dont les pupilles s'étaient dilatées pendant le trajet obscur du corridor, distinguait tout dans ce crépuscule. Il connaissait, pour y être allé plus d’une fois, les caves de Plémont à Jersey, le Creux-Maillé à Guernesey, les Boutiques à Serk, ainsi nommées à cause des contrebandiers qui y déposaient leurs marchandises; aucun de ces merveilleux antres n’était comparable à la chambre souterraine et sous-marine où il venait de pénétrer. Gilliatt voyait en face de lui sous la vague une sorte d’arche noyée. Cette arche, ogive naturelle façonnée par le flot, était éclatante entre ses deux jambages profonds et noirs. C’est par ce porche submergé qu’entrait dans la caverne la clarté de la haute mer. Jour étrange donné par un engloutissement. Cette clarté s’évasait sous la lame comme un large éventail et se répercutait sur le rocher. Ses rayonnements rectilignes, découpés en longues bandes droites sur l’opacité du fond, s’éclaircissant ou s’assombrissant d’une anfractuosité à l’autre, imitaient des interpositions de lames de verre. Il y avait du jour dans cette cave, mais du jour inconnu. Il n’y avait plus dans cette clarté rien de notre lumière. On pouvait croire qu’on venait d’enjamber dans une autre planète. La lumière était une énigme; on eût dit la lueur glauque de la prunelle d’un sphinx. Cette cave figurait le dedans d’une tête de mort énorme et splendide; la voûte était le crâne, et l’arche était la bouche; les trous des yeux manquaient. Cette bouche, avalant et rendant le flux et le reflux, béante au plein midi extérieur, buvait de la lumière et vomissait de l’amertume. De certains êtres, intelligents et mauvais, ressemblent à cela. Le rayon du soleil, en traversant ce porche obstrué d’une épaisseur vitreuse d’eau de mer, devenait vert comme un rayon d’Aldébaran. L’eau, toute pleine de cette lumière mouillée, paraissait de l’émeraude en fusion. Une nuance d’aigue-marine d’une délicatesse inouïe teignait mollement toute la caverne. La voûte, avec ses lobes presque cérébraux et ses ramifications rampantes pareilles à des épanouissements de nerfs, avait un tendre reflet de chrysoprase. Les moires du flot, réverbérées au plafond, s’y décomposaient et s’y recomposaient sans fin, élargissant et rétrécissant leurs mailles d’or avec un mouvement de danse mystérieuse. Une impression spectrale s’en dégageait; l’esprit pouvait se demander quelle proie ou quelle attente faisait si joyeux ce magnifique filet de feu vivant. Aux reliefs de la voûte et aux aspérités du roc pendaient de longues et fines végétations baignant probablement leurs racines à travers le granit dans quelque nappe d’eau supérieure, et égrenant, l’une après l’autre, à leur extrémité, une goutte d’eau, une perle. Ces perles tombaient dans le gouffre avec un petit bruit doux. Le saisissement de cet ensemble était indicible. On ne pouvait rien imaginer de plus charmant ni rien rencontrer de plus lugubre. C’était on ne sait quel palais de la mort, contente.

XIII. ce qu’on y voit et ce qu’on y entrevoit.

De l’ombre qui éblouit; tel était ce lieu surprenant. La palpitation de la mer se faisait sentir dans cette cave. L’oscillation extérieure gonflait, puis déprimait la nappe d’eau intérieure avec la régularité d’une respiration. On croyait deviner une âme mystérieuse dans ce grand diaphragme vert s’élevant et s’abaissant en silence. L’eau était magiquement limpide, et Gilliatt y distinguait, à des profondeurs diverses, des stations immergées, surfaces de roches en saillie d’un vert de plus en plus foncé. Certains creux obscurs étaient probablement insondables. Des deux côtés du porche sous-marin, des ébauches de cintres surbaissés, pleins de ténèbres, indiquaient de petites caves latérales, bas côtés de la caverne centrale, accessibles peut-être à l’époque des très basses marées. Ces anfractuosités avaient des plafonds en plan incliné, à angles plus ou moins ouverts. De petites plages, larges de quelques pieds, mises à nu par les fouilles de la mer, s’enfonçaient et se perdaient sous ces obliquités. çà et là des herbes longues de plus d’une toise ondulaient sous l’eau avec un balancement de cheveux au vent. On entrevoyait des forêts de goëmons. Hors du flot et dans le flot, toute la muraille de la cave, du haut en bas, depuis la voûte jusqu’à son effacement dans l’invisible, était tapissée de ces prodigieuses floraisons de l’océan, si rarement aperçues par l’oeil humain, que les vieux navigateurs espagnols nommaient praderias del mar . Une mousse robuste, qui avait toutes les nuances de l’olive, cachait et amplifiait les exostoses du granit. De tous les surplombs jaillissaient les minces lanières gaufrées du varech dont les pêcheurs se font des baromètres. Le souffle obscur de la caverne agitait ces courroies luisantes. Sous ces végétations se dérobaient et se montraient en même temps les plus rares bijoux de l’écrin de l’océan, des éburnes, des strombes, des mitres, des casques, des pourpres, des buccins, des struthiolaires, des cérites turriculées. Les cloches des patelles, pareilles à des huttes microscopiques, adhéraient partout au rocher et se groupaient en villages, dans les rues desquels rôdaient les oscabrions, ces scarabées de la vague. Les galets ne pouvant que difficilement entrer dans cette grotte, les coquillages s’y réfugiaient.

Les coquillages sont des grands seigneurs, qui, tout brodés et tout passementés, évitent le rude et incivil contact de la populace des cailloux.

L’amoncellement étincelant des coquillages faisait sous la lame, à de certains endroits, d’ineffables irradiations à travers lesquelles on entrevoyait un fouillis d’azurs et de nacres, et des ors de toutes les nuances de l’eau. Sur la paroi de la cave, un peu au-dessus de la ligne de flottaison de la marée, une plante magnifique et singulière se rattachait comme une bordure à la tenture de varech, la continuait et l’achevait. Cette plante, fibreuse, touffue, inextricablement coudée et presque noire, offrait au regard de larges nappes brouillées et obscures, partout piquées d’innombrables petites fleurs couleur lapis-lazuli. Dans l’eau ces fleurs semblaient s’allumer, et l’on croyait voir des braises bleues. Hors de l’eau c’étaient des fleurs, sous l’eau c’étaient des saphirs; de sorte que la lame, en montant et en inondant le soubassement de la grotte revêtu de ces plantes, couvrait le rocher d’escarboucles. à chaque gonflement de la vague enflée comme un poumon, ces fleurs, baignées, resplendissaient; à chaque abaissement elles s’éteignaient; mélancolique ressemblance avec la destinée. C’était l’aspiration, qui est la vie; puis l’expiration, qui est la mort. Une des merveilles de cette caverne, c’était le roc. Ce roc, tantôt muraille, tantôt cintre, tantôt étrave ou pilastre, était par places brut et nu, puis, tout à côté, travaillé des plus délicates ciselures naturelles. On ne sait quoi, qui avait beaucoup d’esprit, se mêlait à la stupidité massive du granit. Quel artiste que l’abîme! Tel pan de mur, coupé carrément et couvert de rondes bosses ayant des attitudes, figurait un vague bas-relief; on pouvait, devant cette sculpture où il y avait du nuage, rêver de Prométhée ébauchant pour Michel-Ange. Il semblait qu’avec quelques coups de marteau le génie eût pu achever ce qu’avait commencé le géant. En d’autres endroits la roche était damasquinée comme un bouclier sarrasin ou niellée comme une vasque florentine. Elle avait des panneaux qui paraissaient de bronze de Corinthe, puis des arabesques comme une porte de mosquée, puis, comme une pierre runique, des empreintes d’ongle obscures et improbables. Des plantes à ramuscules torses et à vrilles, s’entrecroisant sur les dorures du lichen, la couvraient de filigranes. Cet antre se compliquait d’un alhambra. C’était la rencontre de la sauvagerie et de l’orfévrerie dans l’auguste et difforme architecture du hasard. Les magnifiques moisissures de la mer mettaient du velours sur les angles du granit. Les escarpements étaient festonnés de lianes grandiflores, adroites à ne point tomber, et qui semblaient intelligentes, tant elles ornaient bien. Des pariétaires à bouquets bizarres montraient leurs touffes à propos et avec goût. Toute la coquetterie possible à une caverne était là. La surprenante lumière édénique qui venait de dessous l'eau, à la fois pénombre marine et rayonnement paradisiaque, estompait tous les linéaments dans une sorte de diffusion visionnaire. Chaque vague était un prisme. Les contours des choses, sous ces ondoiements irisés, avaient le chromatisme des lentilles d'optique trop convexes; des spectres solaires flottaient sous l'eau. On croyait voir se tordre dans cette diaphanéité aurorale des tronçons d'arcs-en-ciel noyés. Ailleurs, en d'autres coins, il y avait dans l'eau un certain clair de lune. Toutes les splendeurs semblaient amalgamées là pour faire on ne sait quoi d'aveugle et de nocturne. Rien de plus troublant et de plus énigmatique que ce faste dans cette cave. Ce qui dominait, c'était l'enchantement. La végétation fantasque et la stratification informe s'accordaient et dégageaient une harmonie. Ce mariage de choses farouches était heureux. Les ramifications se cramponnaient en ayant l'air d'effleurer. La caresse du roc sauvage et de la fleur fauve était profonde. Des piliers massifs avaient pour chapiteaux et pour ligatures de frêles guirlandes toutes pénétrées de frémissement, on songeait à des doigts de fées chatouillant des pieds de béhémoths, et le rocher soutenait la plante et la plante étreignait le rocher avec une grâce monstrueuse. La résultante de ces difformités mystérieusement ajustées était on ne sait quelle beauté souveraine. Les oeuvres de la nature, non moins suprêmes que les oeuvres du génie, contiennent de l'absolu, et s'imposent. Leur inattendu se fait obéir impérieusement par l'esprit; on y sent une préméditation qui es en dehors de l'homme, et elles ne sont jamais plus saisissantes que lorsqu'elles font subitement sortir l'exquis du terrible. Cette grotte inconnue était, pour ainsi dire, et si une telle expression est admissible, sidéralisée. On y subissait ce que la stupeur a de plus imprévu. Ce qui emplissait cette crypte, c'était de la lumière d'apocalypse. On n'était pas bien sûr que cette chose fût. On avait devant les yeux une réalité empreinte d'impossible. On regardait cela, on y touchait, on y était; seulement il était difficile d'y croire. était-ce du jour qui venait par cette fenêtre sous la mer? était-ce de l'eau qui tremblait dans cette cuve obscure? Ces cintres et ces porches n'étaient-ils point de la nuée céleste imitant une caverne? Quelle pierre avait-on sous les pieds? Ce support n'allait-il point se désagréger et devenir fumée? Qu'était-ce que cette joaillerie de coquillages qu'on entrevoyait? à quelle distance était-on de la vie, de la terre, des hommes? Qu'était-ce que ce ravissement mêlé à ces ténèbres? émotion inouïe, presque sacrée, à laquelle s'ajoutait la douce inquiétude des herbes au fond de l'eau. à l'extrémité de la cave, qui était oblongue, sous une archivolte cyclopéenne d'une coupe singulièrement correcte, dans un creux presque indistinct, espèce d'antre dans l'antre et de tabernacle dans le sanctuaire, derrière une nappe de clarté verte interposée comme un voile de temple, on apercevait hors du flot une pierre à pans carrés ayant une ressemblance d'autel. L'eau entourait cette pierre de toutes parts. Il semblait qu'une déesse vînt d'en descendre. On ne pouvait s'empêcher de rêver sous cette crypte, sur cet autel, quelque nudité céleste éternellement pensive, et que l'entrée d'un homme faisait éclipser. Il était difficile de concevoir cette cellule auguste sans une vision dedans; l'apparition, évoquée par la rêverie, se recomposait d'elle-même; un ruissellement de lumière chaste sur des épaules à peine entrevues, un front baigné d'aube, un ovale de visage olympien, des rondeurs de seins mystérieux, des bras pudiques, une chevelure dénouée dans de l'aurore, des hanches ineffables modelées en pâleur dans une brume sacrée, des formes de nymphe, un regard de vierge, une Vénus sortant de la mer, une ève sortant du chaos; tel était le songe qu'il était impossible de ne pas faire. Il était invraisemblable qu'il n'y eût point là un fantôme. Une femme toute nue, ayant en elle un astre, était probablement sur cet autel tout à l'heure. Sur ce piédestal d'où émanait une indicible extase, on imaginait une blancheur, vivante et debout. L'esprit se représentait, au milieu de l'adoration muette de cette caverne, une Amphitrite, une Téthys, quelque Diane pouvant aimer, statue de l'idéal formée d'un rayonnement et regardant l'ombre avec douceur. C'était elle qui, en s'en allant, avait laissé dans la caverne cette clarté, espèce de parfum lumière sorti de ce corps étoile. L'éblouissement de ce fantôme n'était plus là; on n'apercevait pas cette figure, faite pour être vue seulement par l'invisible, mais on la sentait; on avait ce tremblement, qui est une volupté. La déesse était absente, mais la divinité était présente. La beauté de l'antre semblait faite pour cette présence. C'était à cause de cette déité, de cette fée des nacres, de cette reine des souffles, de cette grâce née des flots, c'était à cause d'elle, on se le figurait du moins, que le souterrain était religieusement muré, afin que rien ne pût jamais troubler, autour de ce divin fantôme, l'obscurité qui est un respect, et le silence qui est une majesté. Gilliatt, qui était une espèce de voyant de la nature, songeait, confusément ému. Tout à coup, à quelques pieds au-dessous de lui, dans la transparence charmante de cette eau, qui était comme de la pierrerie dissoute, il aperçut quelque chose d’inexprimable. Une espèce de long haillon se mouvait dans l’oscillation des lames. Ce haillon ne flottait pas, il voguait; il avait un but, il allait quelque part, il était rapide. Cette guenille avait la forme d’une marotte de bouffon avec des pointes; ces pointes, flasques, ondoyaient; elle semblait couverte d’une poussière impossible à mouiller. C’était plus qu’horrible, c’était sale. Il y avait de la chimère dans cette chose; c’était un être, à moins que ce ne fût une apparence. Elle semblait se diriger vers le côté obscur de la cave, et s’y enfonçait. Les épaisseurs d’eau devinrent sombres sur elle. Cette silhouette glissa et disparut, sinistre.

LIVRE DEUXIÈME

LE LABEUR

I

LES RESSOURCES DE CELUI À QUI TOUT MANQUE

Cette cave ne lâchait pas aisément les gens. L’entrée avait été peu commode, la sortie fut plus obstruée encore. Gilliat néanmoins s’en tira, mais il n’y retourna plus. Il n’y avait rien trouvé de ce qu’il cherchait, et il n’avait pas le temps d’être curieux.

Il mit immédiatement la forge en activité. Il manquait d’outils, il s’en fabriqua.

Il avait pour combustible l’épave, l’eau pour moteur, le vent pour souffleur, une pierre pour enclume, pour art son instinct, pour puissance sa volonté.

Gilliatt entra ardemment dans ce sombre travail.

Le temps paraissait y mettre de la complaisance. Il continuait d’être sec et aussi peu équinoxial que possible. Le mois de mars était venu, mais tranquillement. Les jours s’allongeaient. Le bleu du ciel, la vaste douceur des mouvements de l’étendue, la sérénité du plein midi, semblaient exclure toute mauvaise intention. La mer était gaie au soleil. Une caresse préalable assaisonne les trahisons. De ces caresses-là, la mer n’en est point avare. Quand on a affaire à cette femme, il faut se défier du sourire.

Il y avait peu de vent; la soufflante hydraulique n’en travaillait que mieux. L’excès de vent eût plutôt gêné qu’aidé.

Gilliatt avait une scie; il se fabriqua une lime; avec la scie il attaqua le bois; avec la lime il attaqua le métal; puis il s’ajouta les deux mains de fer du forgeron, une tenaille et une pince; la tenaille étreint, la pince manie; l’une agit comme le poignet, l’autre comme le doigt. L’outillage est un organisme. Peu à peu Gilliatt se donnait des auxiliaires, et construisait son armure. D’un morceau de feuillard il fit un auvent au foyer de sa forge.

Un de ses principaux soins fut le triage et la réparation des poulies. Il remit en état les caisses et les rouets des moufles. Il coupa l’exfoliation de toutes les solives brisées, et en refaçonna les extrémités; il avait, nous l’avons dit, pour les nécessités de sa charpenterie, quantité de membrures emmagasinées et appareillées selon les formes, les dimensions et les essences, le chêne d’un côté, le sapin de l’autre, les pièces courbes, comme les porques, séparées des pièces droites, comme les hiloires. C'était sa réserve de points d'appui et de leviers, dont il pouvait avoir grand besoin à un moment donné.

Quiconque médite un palan doit se pourvoir de poutres et de moufles; mais cela ne suffit pas, il faut de la corde. Gilliatt restaura les câbles et les grelins. Il étira les voiles déchirées, et réussit à en extraire d'excellent fil de caret dont il composa du filin; avec ce filin, il rabouta les cordages. Seulement ces sutures étaient sujettes à pourrir, il fallait se hâter d'employer ces cordes et ces câbles, Gilliatt n'avait pu faire que du funin blanc, il manquait de goudron.

Les cordages raccommodés, il raccommoda les chaînes.

Il put, grâce à la pointe latérale du galet enclume, laquelle tenait lieu de bicorne conique, forger des anneaux grossiers, mais solides. Avec ces anneaux il rattacha les uns aux autres les bouts de chaîne cassés, et fit des longueurs.

Forger seul et sans aide est plus que malaisé. Il en vint à bout pourtant. Il est vrai qu'il n'eut à façonner sur la forge que des pièces de peu de masse; il pouvait les manier d'une main avec la pince pendant qu'il les martelait de l'autre main.

Il coupa en tronçons les barres de fer rondes de la passerelle de commandement, forgea aux deux extrémités de chaque tronçon, d'un côté une pointe, de l'autre une large tête plate, et cela fit de grands clous d'environ un pied de long. Ces clous, très usités en pontonnerie, sont utiles aux fixations dans les rochers.

Pourquoi Gilliatt se donnait-il toute cette peine? On verra.

Il dut refaire plusieurs fois le tranchant de sa hache et les dents de sa scie. Il s'était, pour la scie, fabriqué un tiers-point.

Il se servait dans l'occasion du cabestan de la Durande. Le crochet de la chaîne cassa. Gilliatt en reforgea un autre.

À l'aide de sa pince et de sa tenaille, et en se servant de son ciseau comme d'un tournevis, il entreprit de démonter les deux roues du navire; il y parvint. On n'a pas oublié que ce démontage était exécutable; c'était une particularité de la construction de ces roues. Les tambours qui les avaient couvertes les emballèrent; avec les planches des tambours, Gilliatt charpenta et menuisa deux caisses, où il déposa, pièce à pièce, les deux roues soigneusement numérotées. Son morceau de craie lui fut précieux pour ce numérotage.

Il rangea ces deux caisses sur la partie la plus solide du pont de la Durande.

Ces préliminaires terminés, Gilliatt se trouva face à face avec la difficulté suprême. La question de la machine se posa.

Démonter les roues avait été possible; démonter la machine, non.

D’abord Gilliatt connaissait mal ce mécanisme. Il pouvait, en allant au hasard, lui faire quelque blessure irréparable. Ensuite, même pour essayer de le défaire morceau à morceau, s’il eût eu cette imprudence, il fallait d’autres outils que ceux qu’on peut fabriquer avec une caverne pour forge, un vent coulis pour soufflet, et un caillou pour

enclume. En tentant de démonter la machine, on risquait de la dépecer.

Ici on pouvait se croire tout à fait en présence de l’impraticable.

Il semblait que Gilliatt fut au pied de ce mur, l’impossible.

Que faire?

II

COMME QUOI SHAKESPEARE PEUT SE RENCONTRER AVEC ESCHYLE

Gilliatt avait son idée.

Depuis ce maçon charpentier de Salbris qui, au seizième siècle, dans le bas âge de la science, bien avant qu'Amontons eût trouvé la première loi du frottement, Lahire la seconde et Coulomb la troisième, sans conseil, sans guide, sans autre aide qu'un enfant, son fils, avec un outillage informe, résolut en bloc, dans la descente du « gros horloge" de l'église de la Charité-Sur-Loire, cinq ou six problèmes de statique et de dynamique mêlés ensemble ainsi que des roues dans un embarras de charrettes et faisant obstacle à la fois, depuis ce manœuvre extravagant et superbe qui trouva moyen, sans casser un fil de laiton et sans décliqueter un engrenage, de faire glisser tout d'une pièce, par une simplification prodigieuse, du second étage du clocher au premier étage, cette massive cage des heures, toute en fer et en cuivre, « grande comme la chambre du guetteur de nuit", avec son mouvement, ses cylindres, ses barillets, ses tambours, ses crochets et ses pesons, son orbe de canon et son orbe de chaussée, son balancier horizontal, ses ancres d'échappement, ses écheveaux de chaînes et de chaînettes, ses poids de pierre dont un pesait cinq cents livres, ses sonneries, ses carillons, ses jacquemarts; depuis cet homme qui fit ce miracle, et dont on ne sait plus le nom, jamais rien de pareil à ce que méditait Gilliatt n'avait été entrepris.

L'opération que rêvait Gilliatt était pire peut-être, c'est-à-dire plus belle encore.

Le poids, la délicatesse, l'enchevêtrement des difficultés, n'étaient pas moindres de la machine de la Durande que de l'horloge de La Charité-Sur-Loire.

Le charpentier gothique avait un aide, son fils; Gilliatt était seul.

Une population était là, venue de Meung-sur-Loire, de Nevers, et même d'Orléans, pouvant, au besoin, assister le maçon de Salbris, et l'encourageant de son brouhaha bienveillant; Gilliatt n'avait autour de lui d'autre rumeur que le vent et d'autre foule que les flots.

Rien n'égale la timidité de l'ignorance, si ce n'est sa témérité. Quand l'ignorance se met à oser, c'est qu'elle a en elle une boussole. Cette boussole, c’est l’intuition du vrai, plus claire parfois dans un esprit simple que dans un esprit compliqué.

Ignorer invite à essayer. L’ignorance est une rêverie, et la rêverie curieuse est une force. Savoir, déconcerte parfois et déconseille souvent. Gama, savant, eût reculé devant le cap des tempêtes. Si Christophe Colomb eût été bon cosmographe, il n’eût point découvert l’Amérique.

Le second qui monta sur le mont Blanc fut un savant, Saussure; le premier fut un pâtre, Balmat.

Ces cas, disons-le en passant, sont l’exception, et tout ceci n’ôte rien à la science, qui reste la règle. L’ignorant peut trouver, le savant seul invente.

La panse était toujours à l’ancre dans la crique de l’Homme, où la mer la laissait tranquille. Gilliatt, on s’en souvient, avait tout arrangé de façon à se maintenir en libre pratique avec sa barque. Il y alla, et en mesura soigneusement le bau à plusieurs endroits, particulièrement le maître-couple. Puis il revint à la Durande, et mesura le grand diamètre du parquet de la machine. Ce grand diamètre, sans les roues, bien entendu, était de deux pieds moindre que le maître-bau de la panse. Donc la machine pouvait entrer dans la barque.

Mais comment l’y faire entrer?

III

LE CHEF-D’ŒUVRE DE GILLIATT VIENT AU SECOURS DU CHEF-D’ŒUVRE DE LETHIERRY

À quelque temps de là, un pêcheur qui eût été assez fou pour flâner en cette saison dans ces parages eût été payé de sa hardiesse par la vision entre les Douvres de quelque chose de singulier.

Voici ce qu’il eût aperçu: quatre madriers robustes, espacés également, allant d’une Douvre à l’autre, et comme forcés entre les rochers, ce qui est la meilleure des solidités. Du côté de la petite Douvre leurs extrémités posaient et se contrebutaient sur les reliefs du roc; du côté de la grande Douvre, ces extrémités avaient dû être violemment enfoncées dans l’escarpement à coups de marteau par quelque puissant ouvrier debout sur la poutre même qu’il enfonçait. Ces madriers étaient un peu plus longs que l’ entre-deux n’était large; de là la ténacité de leur emboîtement; de là aussi leur ajustement en plan incliné. Ils touchaient la grande Douvre à angle aigu et la petite Douvre à angle obtus. Ils étaient faiblement déclives, mais inégalement, ce qui était un défaut. À ce défaut près, on les eût dit disposés pour recevoir le tablier d’un pont. À ces quatre madriers étaient attachés quatre palans garnis chacun de leur itague et de leur garant, et ayant cela de hardi et d’étrange que le moufle à deux rouets était à une extrémité du madrier et la poulie simple à l’extrémité opposée. Cet écart, trop grand pour n’être pas périlleux, était probablement exigé par les nécessités de l’opération à accomplir. Les moufles étaient forts et les poulies solides. à ces palans se rattachaient des câbles qui de loin paraissaient des fils, et, au-dessous de cet appareil aérien de moufles et de charpentes, la massive épave, la Durande, semblait suspendue à ces fils.

Suspendue, elle ne l’était pas encore. Perpendiculairement sous les madriers, huit ouvertures étaient pratiquées dans le pont, quatre à bâbord et quatre à tribord de la machine, et huit autres sous celles-là, dans la carène. Les câbles descendant verticalement des quatre moufles entraient dans le pont, puis sortaient de la carène par les ouvertures de tribord, passaient sous la quille et sous la machine, rentraient dans le navire par les ouvertures de bâbord, et, remontant, traversant de nouveau le pont, revenaient s’enrouler aux quatre poulies des madriers, où une sorte de palanguin les saisissait et en faisait un trousseau relié à un câble unique et pouvant être dirigé par un seul bras. Un crochet et une moque, par le trou de laquelle passait et se dévidait le câble unique, complétaient l’appareil et, au besoin, l’enrayaient. Cette combinaison contraignait les quatre palans à travailler ensemble, et, véritable frein des forces pendantes, gouvernail de dynamique sous la main du pilote de l’opération, maintenait la manœuvre en équilibre. L’ajustement très ingénieux de ce palanguin avait quelques-unes des qualités simplifiantes de la poulie Weston d’aujourd’hui, et de l’antique polyspaston de Vitruve. Gilliatt avait trouvé cela, bien qu’il ne connût ni Vitruve, qui n’existait plus, ni Weston, qui n’existait pas encore. La longueur des câbles variait selon l’inégale déclivité des madriers, et corrigeait un peu cette inégalité. Les cordes étaient dangereuses, le funin blanc pouvait casser, il eût mieux valu des chaînes, mais des chaînes eussent mal roulé sur les palans.

Tout cela, plein de fautes, mais fait par un seul homme, était surprenant.

Du reste, nous abrégeons l’explication. On comprendra que nous omettions beaucoup de détails qui rendraient la chose claire aux gens du métier et obscure aux autres.

Le haut de la cheminée de la machine passait entre les deux madriers du milieu.

Gilliatt, sans s’en douter, plagiaire inconscient de l’inconnu, avait refait, à trois siècles de distance, le mécanisme du charpentier de Salbris, mécanisme rudimentaire et incorrect, redoutable à qui oserait le manœuvrer.

Disons ici que les fautes même les plus grossières n’empêchent point un mécanisme de fonctionner tant bien que mal. Cela boite, mais cela marche. L’obélisque de la place de saint-Pierre de Rome a été dressé contre toutes les règles de la statique. Le carrosse du czar Pierre était construit de telle sorte qu’il semblait devoir verser à chaque pas; il roulait pourtant. Que de difformités dans la machine de Marly! Tout y était en porte-à-faux. Elle n’en donnait pas moins à boire à Louis XIV.

Quoi qu’il en fût, Gilliatt avait confiance. Il avait même empiété sur le succès au point de fixer dans le bord de la panse, le jour où il y était allé, deux paires d’anneaux de fer en regard, des deux côtés de la barque, aux mêmes espacements que les quatre anneaux de la Durande auxquels se rattachaient les quatre chaînes de la cheminée.

Gilliatt avait évidemment un plan très complet et très arrêté. Ayant contre lui toutes les chances, il voulait mettre toutes les précautions de son côté.

Il faisait des choses qui semblaient inutiles, signe d’une préméditation attentive.

Sa manière de procéder eût dérouté, nous avons déjà fait cette remarque, un observateur, même connaisseur.

Un témoin de ses travaux qui l’eût vu, par exemple, avec des efforts inouïs et au péril de se rompre le cou, enfoncer à coups de marteau huit ou dix des grands clous qu’il avait forgés, dans le soubassement des deux Douvres à l’entrée du défilé de l’écueil, eût compris difficilement le pourquoi de ces clous, et se fût probablement demandé à quoi bon toute cette peine.

S’il eût vu ensuite Gilliatt mesurer le morceau de la muraille de l’avant qui était, on s’en souvient, resté adhérent à l’épave, puis attacher un fort grelin au rebord supérieur de cette pièce, couper à coups de hache les charpentes disloquées qui la retenaient, la traîner hors du défilé, à l’aide de la marée descendante poussant le bas pendant que Gilliatt tirait le haut, enfin, rattacher à grand’peine avec le grelin cette pesante plaque de planches et de poutres, plus large que l’entrée même du défilé, aux clous enfoncés dans la base de la petite Douvre, l’observateur eût peut-être moins compris encore, et se fût dit que si Gilliatt voulait, pour l’aisance de ses manœuvres, dégager la ruelle des Douvres de cet encombrement, il n’avait qu’à le laisser tomber dans la marée qui l’eût emporté à vau-l’eau.

Gilliatt probablement avait ses raisons.

Gilliatt, pour fixer les clous dans le soubassement des Douvres, tirait parti de toutes les fentes du granit, les élargissait au besoin, et y enfonçait d’abord des coins de bois dans lesquels il enracinait ensuite les clous de fer. Il ébaucha la même préparation dans les deux roches qui se dressaient à l’autre extrémité du détroit de l’écueil, du côté de l’est; il en garnit de chevilles de bois toutes les lézardes, comme s’il voulait tenir ces lézardes prêtes à recevoir, elles aussi, des crampons; mais cela parut être un simple en-cas, car il n’y enfonça point de clous. On comprend que, par prudence dans sa pénurie, il ne pouvait dépenser ses matériaux qu’au fur et à mesure des besoins, et au moment où la nécessité se déclarait. C’était une complication ajoutée à tant d’autres difficultés.

Un premier travail achevé, un deuxième surgissait.

Gilliatt passait sans hésiter de l’un à l’autre et faisait résolument cette enjambée de géant.

IV

SUB RE

L’homme qui faisait ces choses était devenu effrayant.

Gilliatt, dans ce labeur multiple, dépensait toutes ses forces à la fois; il les renouvelait difficilement.

Privations d’un côté, lassitude de l’autre, il avait maigri. Ses cheveux et sa barbe avaient poussé. Il n’avait plus qu’une chemise qui ne fût pas en loques. Il était pieds nus, le vent ayant emporté un de ses souliers, et la mer l’autre. Les éclats de l’enclume rudimentaire, et fort dangereuse, dont il se servait, lui avaient fait aux mains et aux bras de petites plaies, éclaboussures du travail. Ces plaies, écorchures plutôt que blessures, étaient superficielles, mais irritées par l’air vif et par l’eau salée.

Il avait faim, il avait soif, il avait froid.

Son bidon d’eau douce était vide. Sa farine de seigle était employée ou mangée. Il n’avait plus qu’un peu de biscuit.

Il le cassait avec les dents, manquant d’eau pour le détremper.

Peu à peu et jour à jour ses forces décroissaient.

Ce rocher redoutable lui soutirait la vie.

Boire était une question; manger était une question; dormir était une question.

Il mangeait quand il parvenait à prendre un cloporte de mer ou un crabe; il buvait quand il voyait un oiseau de mer s’abattre sur une pointe de rocher. Il y grimpait et y trouvait un creux avec un peu d’eau douce. Il buvait après l’oiseau, quelquefois avec l’oiseau; car les mauves et les mouettes s’étaient accoutumées à lui, et ne s’envolaient pas à son approche. Gilliatt, même dans ses plus grandes faims, ne leur faisait point de mal. Il avait, on s’en souvient, la superstition des oiseaux. Les oiseaux, de leur côté, ses cheveux étant hérissés et horribles et sa barbe longue, n’en avaient plus peur; ce changement de figure les rassurait; ils ne le trouvaient plus un homme et le croyaient une bête.

Les oiseaux et Gilliatt étaient maintenant bons amis. Ces pauvres s’entr’aidaient. Tant que Gilliatt avait eu du seigle, il leur avait émietté de petits morceaux des galettes qu’il faisait; à cette heure, à leur tour, ils lui indiquaient les endroits où il y avait de l’eau.

Il mangeait les coquillages crus; les coquillages sont, dans une certaine mesure, désaltérants. Quant aux crabes, il les faisait cuire; n’ayant pas de marmite, il les rôtissait entre deux pierres rougies au feu, à la manière des gens sauvages des îles Féroë.

Cependant un peu d’équinoxe s’était déclaré; la pluie était venue; mais une pluie hostile. Point d’ondées, point d’averses, mais de longues aiguilles, fines, glacées, pénétrantes, aiguës, qui perçaient les vêtements de Gilliatt jusqu’à la peau et la peau jusqu’aux os. Cette pluie donnait peu à boire et mouillait beaucoup.

Avare d’assistance, prodigue de misère, telle était cette pluie, indigne du ciel. Gilliatt l’eut sur lui pendant plus d’une semaine tout le jour et toute la nuit. Cette pluie était une mauvaise action d’en haut.

La nuit, dans son trou de rocher, il ne dormait que par l’accablement du travail. Les grands cousins de mer venaient le piquer. Il se réveillait couvert de pustules.

Il avait la fièvre, ce qui le soutenait; la fièvre est un secours, qui tue. D’instinct, il mâchait du lichen ou suçait des feuilles de cochléaria sauvage, maigres pousses des fentes sèches de l’écueil. Du reste, il s’occupait peu de sa souffrance. Il n’avait pas le temps de se distraire de sa besogne à cause de lui, Gilliatt. La machine de la Durande se portait bien. Cela lui suffisait.

À chaque instant, pour les nécessités de son travail, il se jetait à la nage, puis reprenait pied. Il entrait dans l’eau et en sortait, comme on passe d’une chambre de son appartement dans l’autre.

Ses vêtements ne séchaient plus. Ils étaient pénétrés d’eau de pluie qui ne tarissait pas et d’eau de mer qui ne sèche jamais. Gilliatt vivait mouillé.

Vivre mouillé est une habitude qu’on prend. Les pauvres groupes irlandais, vieillards, mères, jeunes filles presque nues, enfants, qui passent l’hiver en plein air sous l’averse et la neige blottis les uns contre les autres aux angles des maisons dans les rues de Londres, vivent et meurent mouillés.

Être mouillé et avoir soif; Gilliatt endurait cette torture bizarre. Il mordait par moments la manche de sa vareuse.

Le feu qu’il faisait ne le réchauffait guère; le feu en plein air n’est qu’un demi-secours; on brûle d’un côté et l’on gèle de l’autre.

Gilliatt, en sueur, grelottait.

Tout résistait autour de Gilliatt dans une sorte de silence terrible. Il se sentait l’ennemi.

Les choses ont un sombre *Non possumus*.

Leur inertie est un avertissement lugubre.

Une immense mauvaise volonté entourait Gilliatt. Il avait des brûlures et des frissons. Le feu le mordait, l’eau le glaçait, la soif l’enfiévrait, le vent lui déchirait ses habits, la faim lui minait l’estomac. Il subissait l’oppression d’un ensemble épuisant. L’obstacle, tranquille, vaste, ayant l’irresponsabilité apparente du fait fatal, mais plein d’on ne sait quelle unanimité farouche, convergeait de toutes parts sur Gilliatt. Gilliatt le sentait appuyé inexorablement sur lui. Nul moyen de s’y soustraire. C’était presque quelqu’un. Gilliatt avait conscience d’un rejet sombre et d’une haine faisant effort pour le diminuer. Il ne tenait qu’à lui de fuir; mais, puisqu’il restait, il avait affaire à l’hostilité impénétrable. Ne pouvant le mettre dehors, on le mettait dessous. On? L’inconnu. Cela l’étreignait, le comprimait, lui ôtait la place, lui ôtait l’haleine. Il était meurtri par l’invisible. Chaque jour la vis mystérieuse se serrait d’un cran.

La situation de Gilliatt en ce milieu inquiétant ressemblait à un duel louche dans lequel il y a un traître.

La coalition des forces obscures l’environnait. Il sentait une résolution de se débarrasser de lui. C’est ainsi que le glacier chasse le bloc erratique.

Presque sans avoir l’air d’y toucher, cette coalition latente le mettait en haillons, en sang, aux abois, et, pour ainsi dire, hors de combat avant le combat. Il n’en travaillait pas moins, et sans relâche; mais, à mesure que l’ouvrage se faisait, l’ouvrier se défaisait. On eût dit que cette fauve nature, redoutant l’âme, prenait le parti d’exténuer l’homme. Gilliatt tenait tête, et attendait. L’abîme commençait par l’user. Que ferait l’abîme ensuite?

La double Douvre, ce dragon fait de granit et embusqué en pleine mer, avait admis Gilliatt. Elle l’avait laissé entrer et laissé faire. Cette acceptation ressemblait à l’hospitalité d’une gueule ouverte.

Le désert, l’étendue, l’espace où il y a pour l’homme tant de refus, l’inclémence muette des phénomènes suivant leurs cours, la grande loi générale implacable et passive, les flux et reflux, l’écueil, pléiade noire dont chaque pointe est une étoile à tourbillons, centre d’une irradiation de courants, on ne sait quel complot de l’indifférence des choses contre la témérité d’un être, l’hiver, les nuées, la mer assiégeante, enveloppaient Gilliatt, le cernaient lentement, se fermaient en quelque sorte sur lui, et le séparaient des vivants comme un cachot qui monterait autour d’un homme. Tout contre lui, rien pour lui; il était isolé, abandonné, affaibli, miné, oublié.

Gilliatt avait sa cambuse vide, son outillage ébréché ou défaillant, la soif et la faim le jour, le froid la nuit, des plaies et des loques, des guenilles sur des suppurations, des trous aux habits et à la chair, les mains déchirées, les pieds saignants, les membres maigres, le visage livide, une flamme dans les yeux.

Flamme superbe, la volonté visible. L'œil de l'homme est ainsi fait qu'on y aperçoit sa vertu. Notre prunelle dit quelle quantité d'homme il y a en nous. Nous nous affirmons par la lumière qui est sous notre sourcil. Les petites consciences clignent de l'œil, les grandes jettent des éclairs. Si rien ne brille sous la paupière, c'est que rien ne pense dans le cerveau, c'est que rien n'aime dans le cœur. Celui qui aime veut, et celui qui veut éclaire et éclate. La résolution met le feu au regard; feu admirable qui se compose de la combustion des pensées timides.

Les opiniâtres sont les sublimes. Qui n'est que brave n'a qu'un accès, qui n'est que vaillant n'a qu'un tempérament, qui n'est que courageux n'a qu'une vertu; l'obstiné dans le vrai a la grandeur. Presque tout le secret des grands cœurs est dans ce mot: *perseverando*. La persévérance est au courage ce que la roue est au levier; c'est le renouvellement perpétuel du point d'appui. Que le but soit sur la terre ou au ciel, aller au but, tout est là; dans le premier cas, on est Colomb, dans le second cas, on est Jésus. La croix est folle; de là sa gloire. Ne pas laisser discuter sa conscience ni désarmer sa volonté, c'est ainsi qu'on obtient la souffrance, et le triomphe. Dans l'ordre des faits moraux tomber n'exclut point planer. De la chute sort l'ascension. Les médiocres se laissent déconseiller par l'obstacle spécieux; les forts, non. Périr est leur peut-être, conquérir est leur certitude. Vous pouvez donner à Étienne toutes sortes de bonnes raisons pour qu'il ne se fasse pas lapider. Le dédain des objections raisonnables enfante cette sublime victoire vaincue qu'on nomme le martyre.

Tous les efforts de Gilliatt semblaient cramponnés à l'impossible, la réussite était chétive ou lente, et il fallait dépenser beaucoup pour obtenir peu; c'est là ce qui le faisait magnanime, c'est là ce qui le faisait pathétique.

Que, pour échafauder quatre poutres au-dessus d'un navire échoué, pour découper et isoler dans ce navire la partie sauvetable, pour ajuster à cette épave dans l'épave quatre palans avec leurs câbles, il eût fallu tant de préparatifs, tant de travaux, tant de tâtonnements, tant de nuits sur la dure, tant de jours dans la peine, c'était là la misère du travail solitaire. Fatalité dans la cause, nécessité dans l'effet. Cette misère, Gilliatt l'avait plus qu’acceptée; il l’avait voulue. Redoutant un concurrent, parce qu’un concurrent eût pu être un rival, il n’avait point cherché d’auxiliaire. L’écrasante entreprise, le risque, le danger, la besogne multipliée par elle-même, l’engloutissement possible du sauveteur par le sauvetage, la famine, la fièvre, le dénûment, la détresse, il avait tout pris pour lui seul. Il avait eu cet égoïsme.

Il était sous une sorte d’effrayante cloche pneumatique. La vitalité se retirait peu à peu de lui. Il s’en apercevait à peine.

L’épuisement des forces n’épuise pas la volonté. Croire n’est que la deuxième puissance; vouloir est la première. Les montagnes proverbiales que la foi transporte ne sont rien à côté de ce que fait la volonté. Tout le terrain que Gilliatt perdait en vigueur, il le regagnait en ténacité. L’amoindrissement de l’homme physique sous l’action refoulante de cette sauvage nature aboutissait au grandissement de l’homme moral.

Gilliatt ne sentait point la fatigue, ou, pour mieux dire, n’y consentait pas. Le consentement de l’âme refusé aux défaillances du corps est une force immense.

Gilliatt voyait les pas que faisait son travail, et ne voyait que cela. C’était le misérable sans le savoir. Son but, auquel il touchait presque, l’hallucinait. Il souffrait toutes ces souffrances sans qu’il lui vînt une autre pensée que celle-ci: en avant! Son œuvre lui montait à la tête. La volonté grise. On peut s’enivrer de son âme.

Cette ivrognerie-là s’appelle l’héroïsme.

Gilliatt était une espèce de Job de l’océan.

Mais un Job luttant, un Job combattant et faisant front aux fléaux, un Job conquérant, et, si de tels mots n’étaient pas trop grands pour un pauvre matelot pêcheur de crabes et de langoustes, un Job Prométhée.

V

SUB UMBRA

Parfois, la nuit, Gilliatt ouvrait les yeux et regardait l’ombre.

Il se sentait étrangement ému.

L’œil ouvert sur le noir. Situation lugubre; anxiété.

La pression de l’ombre existe.

Un indicible plafond de ténèbres; une haute obscurité sans plongeur possible; de la lumière mêlée à cette obscurité, on ne sait quelle lumière vaincue et sombre; de la clarté mise en poudre; est-ce une semence? Est-ce une cendre? Des millions de flambeaux, nul éclairage; une vaste ignition qui ne dit pas son secret, une diffusion de feu en poussière qui semble une volée d’étincelles arrêtée, le désordre du tourbillon et l’immobilité du sépulcre, le problème offrant une ouverture de précipice, l’énigme montrant et cachant sa face, l’infini masqué de noirceur, voilà la nuit. Cette superposition pèse à l’homme.

Cet amalgame de tous les mystères à la fois, du mystère cosmique comme du mystère fatal, accable la tête humaine.

La pression de l’ombre agit en sens inverse sur les différentes espèces d’âmes. L’homme devant la nuit se reconnaît incomplet. Il voit l’obscurité et sent l’infirmité. Le ciel noir, c’est l’homme aveugle. L’homme, face à face avec la nuit, s’abat, s’agenouille, se prosterne, se couche à plat ventre, rampe vers un trou, ou se cherche des ailes. Presque toujours il veut fuir cette présence informe de l’inconnu. Il se demande ce que c’est; il tremble, il se courbe, il ignore; parfois aussi il veut y aller.

Aller où?

Là.

Là? Qu’est-ce? Et qu’y a-t-il?

Cette curiosité est évidemment celle des choses défendues, car de ce côté tous les ponts autour de l’homme sont rompus. L’arche de l’infini manque. Mais le défendu attire, étant gouffre. Où le pied ne va pas, le regard peut atteindre, où le regard s’arrête, l’esprit peut continuer. Pas d’homme qui n’essaie, si faible, et si insuffisant qu’il soit. L’homme, selon sa nature, est en quête ou en arrêt devant la nuit. Pour les uns c’est un refoulement; pour les autres c’est une dilatation. Le spectacle est sombre. L’indéfinissable y est mêlé.

La nuit est-elle sereine? C’est un fond d’ombre. Est-elle orageuse? C’est un fond de fumée. L’illimité se refuse et s’offre à la fois, fermé à l’expérimentation, ouvert à la conjecture. D’innombrables piqûres de lumière rendent plus noire l’obscurité sans fond. Escarboucles, scintillations, astres, présences constatées dans l’ignoré; défis effrayants d’aller toucher à ces clartés. Ce sont des jalons de création dans l’absolu; ce sont des marques de distance là où il n’y a plus de distance; c’est on ne sait quel numérotage impossible, et réel pourtant, de l’étiage des profondeurs. Un point microscopique qui brille, puis un autre, puis un autre, puis un autre; c’est l’imperceptible, c’est l’énorme. Cette lumière est un foyer, ce foyer est une étoile, cette étoile est un soleil, ce soleil est un univers, cet univers n’est rien. Tout nombre est zéro devant l’infini.

Ces univers, qui ne sont rien, existent. En les constatant, on sent la différence qui sépare n’être rien de n’être pas.

L’inaccessible ajouté à l’inexplicable, tel est le ciel.

De cette contemplation se dégage un phénomène sublime: le grandissement de l’âme par la stupeur.

L’effroi sacré est propre à l’homme; la bête ignore cette crainte. L’intelligence trouve dans cette terreur auguste son éclipse et sa preuve.

L’ombre est une; de là l’horreur. En même temps elle est complexe; de là l’épouvante. Son unité fait masse sur notre esprit, et ôte l’envie de résister. Sa complexité fait qu’on regarde de tous côtés autour de soi; il semble qu’on ait à craindre de brusques arrivées. On se rend, et on se garde. On est en présence de tout, d’où la soumission, et de plusieurs, d’où la défiance. L’unité de l’ombre contient un multiple. Multiple mystérieux, visible dans la matière, sensible dans la pensée. Cela fait silence, raison de plus d’être au guet.

La nuit, — celui qui écrit ceci l’a dit ailleurs, — c’est l’état propre et normal de la création spéciale dont nous faisons partie. Le jour, bref dans la durée comme dans l’espace, n’est qu’une proximité d’étoile.

Le prodige nocturne universel ne s’accomplit pas sans frottements, et tous les frottements d’une telle machine sont des contusions à la vie. Les frottements de la machine, c’est là ce que nous nommons le mal.

Nous sentons dans cette obscurité le mal, démenti latent à l’ordre divin, blasphème implicite du fait rebelle à l’idéal. Le mal complique d’on ne sait quelle tératologie à mille têtes le vaste ensemble cosmique. Le mal est présent à tout pour protester. Il est ouragan, et il tourmente la marche d'un navire; il est chaos, et il entrave l'éclosion d'un monde. Le bien a l'unité, le mal a l'ubiquité. Le mal déconcerte la vie, qui est une logique. Il fait dévorer la mouche par l'oiseau et la planète par la comète. Le mal est une rature à la création.

L'obscurité nocturne est pleine d'un vertige. Qui l'approfondit s'y submerge et s'y débat. Pas de fatigue comparable à cet examen des ténèbres. C'est l'étude d'un effacement.

Aucun lieu définitif où poser l'esprit. Des points de départ sans point d'arrivée. L'entre-croisement des solutions contradictoires, tous les embranchements du doute s'offrant en même temps, la ramification des phénomènes s'exfoliant sans limite sous une poussée indéfinie, toutes les lois se versant l'une dans l'autre, une promiscuité insondable qui fait que la minéralisation végète, que la végétation vit, que la pensée pèse, que l'amour rayonne et que la gravitation aime; l'immense front d'attaque de toutes les questions se développant dans l'obscurité sans bornes; l'entrevu ébauchant l'ignoré; la simultanéité cosmique en pleine apparition, non pour le regard mais pour l'intelligence, dans le grand espace indistinct; l'invisible devenu vision. C'est l'ombre. L'homme est là-dessous.

Il ne connaît pas le détail, mais il porte, en quantité proportionnée à son esprit, le poids monstrueux de l'ensemble. Cette obsession poussait les pâtres chaldéens à l'astronomie. Des révélations involontaires sortent des pores de la création; une exsudation de science se fait en quelque sorte d'elle-même, et gagne l'ignorant. Tout solitaire, sous cette imprégnation mystérieuse, devient, souvent sans en avoir conscience, un philosophe naturel.

L'obscurité est indivisible. Elle est habitée. Habitée sans déplacement par l'absolu; habitée aussi avec déplacement. On s'y meut, chose inquiétante. Une formation sacrée y accomplit ses phases. Des préméditations, des puissances, des destinations voulues, y élaborent en commun une œuvre démesurée. Une vie terrible et horrible est là dedans. Il y a de vastes évolutions d'astres, la famille stellaire, la famille planétaire, le pollen zodiacal, le *quid divinum* des courants, des effluves, des polarisations et des attractions; il y a l'embrassement et l'antagonisme, un magnifique flux et reflux d'antithèse universelle, l'impondérable en liberté au milieu des centres; il y a la sève dans les globes, la lumière hors des globes, l’atome errant, le germe épars, des courbes de fécondation, des rencontres d’accouplement et de combat, des profusions inouïes, des distances qui ressemblent à des rêves, des circulations vertigineuses, des enfoncements de mondes dans l’incalculable, des prodiges s’entre-poursuivant dans les ténèbres, un mécanisme une fois pour toutes, des souffles de sphères en fuite, des roues qu’on sent tourner; le savant conjecture, l’ignorant consent et tremble; cela est et se dérobe; c’est inexpugnable; c’est hors de portée, c’est hors d’approche. On est convaincu jusqu’à l’oppression. On a sur soi on ne sait quelle évidence noire. On ne peut rien saisir. On est écrasé par l’impalpable.

Partout l’incompréhensible; nulle part l’inintelligible.

Et à tout cela ajoutez la question redoutable: cette immanence est-elle un Être?

On est sous l’ombre. On regarde. On écoute.

Cependant la sombre terre marche et roule; les fleurs ont conscience de ce mouvement énorme; la silène s’ouvre à onze heures du soir et l’hémérocalle à cinq heures du matin. Régularités saisissantes.

Dans d’autres profondeurs la goutte d’eau se fait monde, l’infusoire pullule, la fécondité géante sort de l’animalcule, l’imperceptible étale sa grandeur, le sens inverse de l’ immensité se manifeste; une diatomée en une heure produit treize cents millions de diatomées.

Quelle proposition de toutes les énigmes à la fois!

L’irréductible est là.

On est contraint à la foi. Croire de force, tel est le résultat. Mais avoir foi ne suffit pas pour être tranquille. La foi a on ne sait quel bizarre besoin de forme. De là les religions. Rien n’est accablant comme une croyance sans contour.

Quoi qu’on pense et quoi qu’on veuille, quelque résistance qu’on ait en soi, regarder l’ombre, ce n’est pas regarder, c’est contempler.

Que faire de ces phénomènes? Comment se mouvoir sous leur convergence? Décomposer cette pression est impossible. Quelle rêverie ajuster à tous ces aboutissants mystérieux? Que de révélations abstruses, simultanées, balbutiantes, s’obscurcissant par leur foule même, sortes de bégaiements du verbe! L’ombre est un silence; mais ce silence dit tout. Une résultante s’en dégage majestueusement, Dieu. Dieu, c’est la notion incompressible. Elle est dans l’homme. Les syllogismes, les querelles, les négations, les systèmes, les religions, passent dessus sans la diminuer. Cette notion, l’ombre tout entière l’affirme. Mais le trouble est sur tout le reste. Immanence formidable. L’inexprimable entente des forces se manifeste par le maintien de toute cette obscurité en équilibre. L’univers pend; rien ne tombe. Le déplacement incessant et démesuré s’opère sans accident et sans fracture. L’homme participe à ce mouvement de translation, et la quantité d’oscillation qu’il subit, il l’ appelle la destinée. Où commence la destinée? Où finit la nature? Quelle différence y a-t-il entre un évènement et une saison, entre un chagrin et une pluie, entre une vertu et une étoile? Une heure, n’est-ce pas une onde? Les engrenages en mouvement continuent, sans répondre à l’homme, leur révolution impassible. Le ciel étoilé est une vision de roues, de balanciers et de contre-poids. C’est la contemplation suprême, doublée de la suprême méditation. C’est toute la réalité, plus toute l’abstraction. Rien au delà. On se sent pris. On est à la discrétion de cette ombre. Pas d’évasion possible. On se voit dans l’engrenage, on est partie intégrante d’un tout ignoré, on sent l’inconnu qu’on a en soi fraterniser mystérieusement avec un inconnu qu’on a hors de soi. Ceci est l’annonce sublime de la mort. Quelle angoisse, et en même temps quel ravissement! Adhérer à l’infini, être amené par cette adhérence à s’attribuer à soi-même une immortalité nécessaire, qui sait? Une éternité possible, sentir dans le prodigieux flot de ce déluge de vie universelle l’opiniâtreté insubmersible du moi! Regarder les astres et dire: je suis une âme comme vous; Regarder l’obscurité et dire: je suis un abîme comme toi!

Ces énormités, c’est la nuit.

Tout cela, accru par la solitude, pesait sur Gilliatt.

Le comprenait-il? Non.

Le sentait-il? Oui.

Gilliatt était un grand esprit trouble et un grand cœur sauvage.

VI

GILLIATT FAIT PRENDRE POSITION À LA PANSE

Ce sauvetage de la machine, médité par Gilliatt, était, nous l’avons dit déjà, une véritable évasion, et l’on connaît les patiences de l’évasion. On en connaît aussi les industries. L’industrie va jusqu’au miracle; la patience va jusqu’à l’agonie. Tel prisonnier, Thomas, par exemple, au Mont-Saint-Michel, trouve moyen de mettre la moitié d’une muraille dans sa paillasse. Tel autre, à Tulle, en 1820, coupe du plomb sur la plate-forme promenoir de la prison, avec quel couteau? on ne peut le deviner, fait fondre ce plomb, avec quel feu? on l’ignore, coule ce plomb fondu, dans quel moule? on le sait, dans un moule de mie de pain; avec ce plomb et ce moule, fait une clef, et avec cette clef ouvre une serrure dont il n’avait jamais vu que le trou. Ces habiletés inouïes, Gilliatt les avait. Il eût monté et descendu la falaise de Boisrosé. Il était le Trenck d’une épave et le Latude d’une machine.

La mer, geôlière, le surveillait.

Du reste, disons-le, si ingrate et si mauvaise que fût la pluie, il en avait tiré parti. Il avait un peu refait sa provision d’eau douce; mais sa soif était inextinguible, et il vidait son bidon presque aussi rapidement qu’il l’emplissait.

Un jour, le dernier jour d’avril, je crois, ou le premier de mai, tout se trouva prêt.

Le parquet de la machine était comme encadré entre les huit câbles des palans, quatre d’un côté, quatre de l’autre. Les seize ouvertures par où passaient ces câbles étaient reliées sur le pont et sous la carène par des traits de scie. Le vaigrage avait été coupé avec la scie, la charpente avec la hache, la ferrure avec la lime, le doublage avec le ciseau. La partie de la quille à laquelle se superposait la machine était coupée carrément et prête à glisser avec la machine en la soutenant. Tout ce branle effrayant ne tenait plus qu’à une chaîne qui, elle-même, ne tenait plus qu’à un coup de lime. À ce point d’achèvement et si près de la fin, la hâte est prudence.

La marée était basse, c’était le bon moment.

Gilliatt était parvenu à démonter l’arbre des roues dont les extrémités pouvaient faire obstacle et arrêter le dérapement. Il avait réussi à amarrer verticalement cette lourde pièce dans la cage même de la machine.

Il était temps de finir. Gilliatt, nous venons de le dire, n’était point fatigué, ne voulant pas l’être, mais ses outils l’étaient. La forge devenait peu à peu impossible. La pierre enclume s’était fendue. La soufflante commençait à mal travailler. La petite chute hydraulique étant d’eau marine, des dépôts salins s’étaient formés dans les jointures de l’appareil, et en gênaient le jeu.

Gilliatt alla à la crique de l’Homme, passa la panse en revue, s’assura que tout y était en état, particulièrement les quatre anneaux plantés à bâbord et à tribord, puis leva l’ancre, et, ramant, revint avec la panse aux deux Douvres.

L’entre-deux des Douvres pouvait admettre la panse. Il y avait assez de fond et assez d’ouverture. Gilliatt avait reconnu dès le premier jour qu’on pouvait pousser la panse jusque sous la Durande.

La manœuvre pourtant était excessive, elle exigeait une précision de bijoutier, et cette insertion de la barque dans l’écueil était d’autant plus délicate que, pour ce que Gilliatt voulait faire, il était nécessaire d’entrer par la poupe, le gouvernail en avant. Il importait que le mât et le gréement de la panse restassent en deçà de l’épave, du côté du goulet.

Ces aggravations dans la manœuvre rendaient l’opération malaisée pour Gilliatt lui-même. Ce n’était plus, comme pour la crique de l’Homme, l’affaire d’un coup de barre; il fallait tout ensemble pousser, tirer, ramer et sonder. Gilliatt n’y employa pas moins d’un quart d’heure. Il y parvint pourtant.

En quinze ou vingt minutes, la panse fut ajustée sous la Durande. Elle y fut presque embossée. Gilliatt, au moyen de ses deux ancres, affourcha la panse. La plus grosse des deux se trouva placée de façon à travailler du plus fort vent à craindre, qui était le vent d’ouest. Puis, à l’aide d’un levier et du cabestan, Gilliatt descendit dans la panse les deux caisses contenant les roues démontées, dont les élingues étaient toutes prêtes. Ces deux caisses firent lest.

Débarrassé des deux caisses, Gilliatt rattacha au crochet de la chaîne du cabestan l’élingue du palanguin régulateur, destiné à enrayer les palans.

Pour ce que méditait Gilliatt, les défauts de la panse devenaient des qualités; elle n’était pas pontée, le chargement aurait plus de profondeur, et pourrait poser sur la cale; elle était mâtée à l’avant, trop à l’avant peut-être, le chargement aurait plus d’aisance, et, le mât se trouvant ainsi en dehors de l’épave, rien ne gênerait la sortie; elle n’était qu’un sabot, rien n’est stable et solide en mer comme un sabot.

Tout à coup Gilliatt s’aperçut que la mer montait. Il regarda d’où venait le vent.

VII

TOUT DE SUITE UN DANGER

Il y avait peu de brise, mais ce qui soufflait, soufflait de l’ouest. C’est une mauvaise habitude que le vent a volontiers dans l’équinoxe.

La marée montante, selon le vent qui souffle, se comporte diversement dans l’écueil Douvres. Suivant la rafale qui le pousse, le flot entre dans ce corridor soit par l’est, soit par l’ouest. Si la mer entre par l’est, elle est bonne et molle; si elle entre par l’ouest, elle est furieuse. Cela tient à ce que le vent d’est, venant de terre, a peu d’haleine, tandis que le vent d’ouest, qui traverse l’Atlantique, apporte tout le souffle de l’immensité. Même très peu de brise apparente, si elle vient de l’ouest, est inquiétante. Elle roule les larges lames de l’étendue illimitée, et pousse trop de vague à la fois dans l’étranglement.

Une eau qui s’engouffre est toujours affreuse. Il en est d’une eau comme d’une foule; une multitude est un liquide; quand la quantité pouvant entrer est moindre que la quantité voulant entrer, il y a écrasement pour la foule et convulsion pour l’eau. Tant que le vent du couchant règne, fût-ce la plus faible brise, les Douvres ont deux fois par jour cet assaut. La marée s’élève, le flux presse, la roche résiste, le goulet ne s’ouvre qu’avarement, le flot enfoncé de force bondit et rugit, et une houle forcenée bat les deux façades intérieures de la ruelle. De sorte que les Douvres, par le moindre vent d’ouest, offrent ce spectacle singulier: dehors, sur la mer, le calme; dans l’écueil, un orage. Ce tumulte local et circonscrit n’a rien d’une tempête; ce n’est qu’une émeute de vagues, mais terrible. Quant aux vents de nord et de sud, ils prennent l’écueil en travers et ne font que peu de ressac dans le boyau. L’entrée par l’est, détail qu’il faut rappeler, confine au rocher l’Homme, l’ouverture redoutable de l’ouest est à l’extrémité opposée, précisément entre les deux Douvres.

C’est à cette ouverture de l’ouest que se trouvait Gilliatt avec la Durande échouée et la panse embossée.

Une catastrophe semblait inévitable. Cette catastrophe imminente avait, en quantité faible, mais suffisante, le vent qu’il lui fallait.

Avant peu d’heures, le gonflement de la marée ascendante allait se ruer de haute lutte dans le détroit des Douvres. Les premières lames bruissaient déjà. Ce gonflement, mascaret de tout l’Atlantique, aurait derrière lui la totalité de la mer. Aucune bourrasque, aucune colère; mais une simple onde souveraine contenant en elle une force d’impulsion qui, partie de l’Amérique pour aboutir à l’Europe, a deux mille lieues de jet. Cette onde, barre gigantesque de l’océan, rencontrerait l’hiatus de l’écueil et, froncée aux deux Douvres, tours de l’entrée, piliers du détroit, enflée par le flux, enflée par l’empêchement, repoussée par le rocher, surmenée par la brise, ferait violence à l’écueil, pénétrerait avec toutes les torsions de l’obstacle subi et toutes les frénésies de la vague entravée, entre les deux murailles, y trouverait la panse et la Durande, et les briserait.

Contre cette éventualité, il fallait un bouclier. Gilliatt l’avait.

Il fallait empêcher la marée de pénétrer d’emblée, lui interdire de heurter tout en la laissant monter, lui barrer le passage sans lui refuser l’entrée, lui résister et lui céder, prévenir la compression du flot dans le goulet, qui était tout le danger, remplacer l’irruption par l’introduction, soutirer à la vague son emportement et sa brutalité, contraindre cette furie à la douceur. Il fallait substituer à l’obstacle qui irrite l’obstacle qui apaise.

Gilliatt, avec cette adresse qu’il avait, plus forte que la force, exécutant une manœuvre de chamois dans la montagne ou de sapajou dans la forêt, utilisant pour des enjambées oscillantes et vertigineuses la moindre pierre en saillie, sautant à l’eau, sortant de l’eau, nageant dans le remous, grimpant au rocher, une corde entre les dents, un marteau à la main, détacha le grelin qui maintenait suspendu et collé au soubassement de la petite Douvre le pan de muraille de l’avant de la Durande, façonna avec des bouts de haussière des espèces de gonds rattachant ce panneau aux gros clous plantés dans le granit, fit tourner sur ces gonds cette armature de planches pareille à une trappe d’écluse, l’offrit en flanc, comme on fait d’une joue de gouvernail, au flot qui en poussa et en appliqua une extrémité sur la grande Douvre pendant que les gonds de corde retenaient sur la petite Douvre l’autre extrémité, opéra sur la grande Douvre, au moyen des clous d’attente plantés d’avance, la même fixation que sur la petite, amarra solidement cette vaste plaque de bois au double pilier du goulet, croisa sur ce barrage une chaîne comme un baudrier sur une cuirasse, et en moins d’une heure cette clôture se dressa contre la marée, et la ruelle de l’écueil fut fermée comme par une porte.

Cette puissante applique, lourde masse de poutres et de planches, qui, à plat eût été un radeau, et, debout, était un mur, avait, le flot aidant, été maniée par Gilliatt avec une dextérité de saltimbanque. On pourrait presque dire que le tour était fait avant que la mer montante eût eu le temps de s’en apercevoir.

C’était un de ces cas où Jean Bart eût dit le fameux mot qu’il adressait au flot de la mer chaque fois qu’il esquivait un naufrage: *attrapé, l’anglais!* On sait que quand Jean Bart voulait insulter l’océan, il l’appelait *l’anglais*.

Le détroit barré, Gilliatt songea à la panse. Il dévida assez de câble sur les deux ancres pour qu’elle pût monter avec la marée. Opération analogue à ce que les anciens marins appelaient « mouiller avec des embossures”. Dans tout ceci, Gilliatt n’était pas pris au dépourvu; le cas était prévu; un homme du métier l’eût reconnu à deux poulies de guinderesse frappées en galoche à l’arrière de la panse, dans lesquelles passaient deux grelins dont les bouts étaient en ralingue aux organeaux des deux ancres.

Cependant le flux avait grossi; la demi-montée s’était faite; c’est à ce moment que les chocs des lames de la marée, même paisible, peuvent être rudes. Ce que Gilliatt avait combiné se réalisa. Le flot roulait violemment vers le barrage, le rencontrait, s’y enflait, et passait dessous. Au dehors, c’était la houle, au dedans l’infiltration. Gilliatt avait imaginé quelque chose comme les fourches caudines de la mer. La marée était vaincue.

VIII

PÉRIPÉTIE PLUTÔT QUE DÉNOÛMENT

Le moment redoutable était venu.

Il s’agissait maintenant de mettre la machine dans la barque.

Gilliatt fut pensif quelques instants, tenant le coude de son bras gauche dans sa main droite et son front dans sa main gauche.

Puis il monta sur l’épave dont une partie, la machine, devait se détacher, et dont l’autre partie, la carcasse, devait demeurer.

Il coupa les quatre élingues qui fixaient à tribord et à bâbord à la muraille de la Durande les quatre chaînes de la cheminée. Les élingues n’étant que de la corde, son couteau en vint à bout.

Les quatre chaînes, libres et sans attache, vinrent pendre le long de la cheminée.

De l’épave il monta dans l’appareil construit par lui, frappa du pied sur les poutres, inspecta les moufles, regarda les poulies, toucha les câbles, examina les rallonges, s’assura que le funin blanc n’était pas mouillé profondément, constata que rien ne manquait et que rien ne fléchissait, puis, sautant du haut des hiloires sur le pont, il prit position, près du cabestan, dans la partie de la Durande qui devait rester accrochée aux Douvres. C’était là son poste de travail.

Grave, ému seulement de l’émotion utile, il jeta un dernier coup d’œil sur les palans, puis saisit une lime et se mit à scier la chaîne qui tenait tout en suspens.

On entendait le grincement de la lime dans le grondement de la mer.

La chaîne du cabestan, rattachée au palanguin régulateur, était à la portée de Gilliatt, tout près de sa main.

Tout à coup il y eut un craquement. Le chaînon que mordait la lime, plus qu’à moitié entamé, venait de se rompre; tout l’appareil entrait en branle. Gilliatt n’eut que le temps de se jeter sur le palanguin.

La chaîne cassée fouetta le rocher, les huit câbles se tendirent, tout le bloc scié et coupé s’arracha de l’épave, le ventre de la Durande s’ouvrit, le plancher de fer de la machine pesant sur les câbles apparut sous la quille.

Si Gilliatt n'eût pas empoigné à temps le palanguin, c'était une chute. Mais sa main terrible était là; ce fut une descente.

Quand le frère de Jean Bart, Pieter Bart, ce puissant et sagace ivrogne, ce pauvre pêcheur de Dunkerque qui tutoyait le grand amiral de France, sauva la galère Langeron en perdition dans la baie d'Ambleteuse, quand, pour tirer cette lourde masse flottante du milieu des brisants de la baie furieuse, il lia la grande voile en rouleau avec des joncs marins, quand il voulut que ce fût ces roseaux qui, en se cassant d'eux-mêmes, donnassent au vent la voile à enfler, il se fia à la rupture des roseaux comme Gilliatt à la fracture de la chaîne, et ce fut la même hardiesse bizarre couronnée du même succès surprenant.

Le palanguin, saisi par Gilliatt, tint bon et opéra admirablement. Sa fonction, on s'en souvient, était l'amortissement des forces, ramenées de plusieurs à une seule, et réduites à un mouvement d'ensemble. Ce palanguin avait quelque rapport avec une patte de bouline; seulement, au lieu d'orienter une voile, il équilibrait un mécanisme.

Gilliatt, debout et le poing au cabestan, avait, pour ainsi dire, la main sur le pouls de l'appareil.

Ici l'invention de Gilliatt éclata.

Une remarquable coïncidence de forces se produisit.

Pendant que la machine de la Durande, détachée en bloc, descendait vers la panse, la panse montait vers la machine. L'épave et le bateau sauveteur, s'entr'aidant en sens inverse, allaient au-devant l'un de l'autre. Ils venaient se chercher et s'épargnaient la moitié du travail.

Le flux, se gonflant sans bruit entre les deux Douvres, soulevait l'embarcation et l'approchait de la Durande. La marée était plus que vaincue, elle était domestiquée. L'océan faisait partie du mécanisme.

Le flot montant haussait la panse sans choc, mollement, presque avec précaution et comme si elle eût été de porcelaine.

Gilliatt combinait et proportionnait les deux travaux, celui de l'eau et celui de l'appareil, et, immobile au cabestan, espèce de statue redoutable obéie par tous les mouvements à la fois, réglait la lenteur de la descente sur la lenteur de la montée.

Pas de secousse dans le flot, pas de saccade dans les palans. C'était une étrange collaboration de toutes les forces naturelles, soumises. D'un côté, la gravitation, apportant la machine; de l'autre, la marée, apportant la barque. L'attraction des astres, qui est le flux, et l'attraction du globe, qui est la pesanteur, semblaient s’entendre pour servir Gilliatt. Leur subordination n’avait pas d’hésitation ni de temps d’arrêt, et, sous la pression d’une âme, ces puissances passives devenaient des auxiliaires actifs. De minute en minute l’œuvre avançait; l’intervalle entre la panse et l’épave diminuait insensiblement. L’approche se faisait en silence et avec une sorte de terreur de l’homme qui était là. L’élément recevait un ordre et l’exécutait.

Presque au moment précis où le flux cessa de s’élever, les câbles cessèrent de se dévider. Subitement, mais sans commotion, les moufles s’arrêtèrent. La machine, comme posée par une main, avait pris assiette dans la panse. Elle y était droite, debout, immobile, solide. La plaque de soutènement s’appuyait de ses quatre angles et d’aplomb sur la cale.

C’était fait.

Gilliatt regarda, éperdu.

Le pauvre être n’était point gâté par la joie. Il eut le fléchissement d’un immense bonheur. Il sentit tous ses membres plier; et, devant son triomphe, lui qui n’avait pas eu un trouble jusqu’alors, il se mit à trembler.

Il considéra la panse sous l’épave, et la machine dans la panse. Il semblait n’y pas croire. On eût dit qu’il ne s’attendait pas à ce qu’il avait fait. Un prodige lui était sorti des mains, et il le regardait avec stupeur.

Cet effarement dura peu.

Gilliatt eut le mouvement d’un homme qui se réveille, se jeta sur la scie, coupa les huit câbles, puis, séparé maintenant de la panse, grâce au soulèvement du flux, d’une dizaine de pieds seulement, il y sauta, prit un rouleau de filin, fabriqua quatre élingues, les passa dans les anneaux préparés d’avance, et fixa, des deux côtés, au bord de la panse, les quatre chaînes de la cheminée encore attachées une heure auparavant au bord de la Durande.

La cheminée amarrée, Gilliatt dégagea le haut de la machine. Un morceau carré du tablier du pont de la Durande y adhérait. Gilliatt le décloua, et débarrassa la panse de cet encombrement de planches et de solives qu’il jeta sur le rocher. Allégement utile.

Du reste, la panse, comme on devait le prévoir, s’était maintenue fermement sous la surcharge de la machine. La panse ne s’était enfoncée que jusqu’à un bon étiage de flottaison. La machine de la Durande, quoique pesante, était moins lourde que le monceau de pierres et le canon rapportés jadis de Herm par la panse.

Tout était donc fini. Il n’y avait plus qu’à s’en aller.

IX

LE SUCCÈS REPRIS AUSSITÔT QUE DONNÉ

Tout n’était pas fini.

Rouvrir le goulet fermé par le morceau de muraille de la Durande, et pousser tout de suite la panse hors de l’écueil, rien n’était plus clairement indiqué. En mer, toutes les minutes sont urgentes. Peu de vent, à peine une ride au large; la soirée, très belle, promettait une belle nuit. La mer était étale, mais le reflux commençait à se faire sentir; le moment était excellent pour partir. On aurait la marée descendante pour sortir des Douvres et la marée remontante pour rentrer à Guernesey. On pourrait être à Saint-Sampson au point du jour.

Mais un obstacle inattendu se présenta. Il y avait eu une lacune dans la prévoyance de Gilliatt.

La machine était libre; la cheminée ne l’était pas.

La marée, en approchant la panse de l’épave suspendue en l’air, avait amoindri les périls de la descente et abrégé le sauvetage; mais cette diminution d’intervalle avait laissé le haut de la cheminée engagé dans l’espèce de cadre béant qu’offrait la coque ouverte de la Durande. La cheminée était prise là comme entre quatre murs.

Le service rendu par le flot se compliquait de cette sournoiserie. Il semblait que la mer, contrainte d’obéir, eût eu une arrière-pensée.

Il est vrai que ce que le flux avait fait, le reflux allait le défaire.

La cheminée, haute d’un peu plus de trois toises, s’enfonçait de huit pieds dans la Durande; le niveau de l’eau allait baisser de douze pieds; la cheminée, descendant avec la panse sur le flot décroissant, aurait quatre pieds d’aisance et pourrait se dégager.

Mais combien de temps fallait-il pour cette mise en liberté? Six heures.

Dans six heures il serait près de minuit. Quel moyen d’essayer la sortie à pareille heure, quel chenal suivre à travers tous ces brisants déjà si inextricables le jour, et comment se risquer en pleine nuit noire dans cette embuscade de bas-fonds?

Force était d’attendre au lendemain. Ces six heures perdues en faisaient perdre au moins douze.

Il ne fallait pas même songer à avancer le travail en rouvrant le goulet de l’écueil. Le barrage serait nécessaire à la prochaine marée.

Gilliatt dut se reposer.

Se croiser les bras, c’était la seule chose qu’il n’eût pas encore faite depuis qu’il était dans l’écueil Douvres.

Ce repos forcé l’irrita et l’indigna presque, comme s’il était de sa faute. Il se dit: Qu’est-ce que Déruchette penserait de moi, si elle me voyait là à rien faire?

Pourtant cette reprise de forces n’était peut-être pas inutile.

La panse étant maintenant à sa disposition, il arrêta qu’il y passerait la nuit.

Il alla chercher sa peau de mouton sur la grande Douvre, redescendit, soupa de quelques patelles et de deux ou trois châtaignes de mer, but, ayant grand soif, les dernières gorgées d’eau douce de son bidon presque vide, s’enveloppa de la peau dont la laine lui fit plaisir, se coucha comme un chien de garde près de la machine, rabattit sa galérienne sur ses yeux, et s’endormit.

Il dormit profondément. On a de ces sommeils après les choses faites.

X

LES AVERTISSEMENTS DE LA MER

Au milieu de la nuit, brusquement, et comme par la détente d’un ressort, il se réveilla.

Il ouvrit les yeux.

Les Douvres au-dessus de sa tête étaient éclairées ainsi que par la réverbération d’une grande braise blanche. Il y avait sur toute la façade noire de l’écueil comme le reflet d’un feu.

D’où venait ce feu?

De l’eau.

La mer était extraordinaire.

Il semblait que l’eau fût incendiée. Aussi loin que le regard pouvait s’étendre, dans l’écueil et hors de l’écueil, toute la mer flamboyait. Ce flamboiement n’était pas rouge; il n’avait rien de la grande flamme vivante des cratères et des fournaises. Aucun pétillement, aucune ardeur, aucune pourpre, aucun bruit. Des traînées bleuâtres imitaient sur la vague des plis de suaire. Une large lueur blême

frissonnait sur l’eau. Ce n’était pas l’incendie; c’en était le spectre.

C’était quelque chose comme l’embrasement livide d’un dedans de sépulcre par une flamme de rêve.

Qu’on se figure des ténèbres allumées.

La nuit, la vaste nuit trouble et diffuse, semblait être le combustible de ce feu glacé. C’était on ne sait quelle clarté faite d’aveuglement. L’ombre entrait comme élément dans cette lumière fantôme.

Les marins de la Manche connaissent tous ces indescriptibles phosphorescences, pleines d’avertissements pour le navigateur. Elles ne sont nulle part plus surprenantes que dans le grand V, près d’Isigny.

À cette lumière, les choses perdent leur réalité. Une pénétration spectrale les fait comme transparentes. Les roches ne sont plus que des linéaments. Les câbles des ancres paraissent des barres de fer chauffées à blanc. Les filets des pêcheurs semblent sous l’eau du feu tricoté. Une moitié de l’aviron est d’ébène, l’autre moitié, sous la lame, est d’argent. En retombant de la rame dans le flot, les gouttes d’eau étoilent la mer. Toute barque traîne derrière elle une comète. Les matelots mouillés et lumineux semblent des hommes qui brûlent. On plonge sa main dans le flot, on la retire gantée de flamme; cette flamme est morte, on ne la sent point. Votre bras est un tison allumé. Vous voyez les formes qui sont dans la mer rouler sous les vagues vau-le-feu. L'écume étincelle. Les poissons sont des langues de feu et des tronçons d'éclair serpentant dans une profondeur pâle.

Cette clarté avait passé à travers les paupières fermées de Gilliatt. C'est grâce à elle qu'il s'était réveillé.

Ce réveil vint à point.

Le reflux avait descendu; un nouveau flux revenait. La cheminée de la machine, dégagée pendant le sommeil de Gilliatt, allait être ressaisie par l'épave, béante au-dessus d'elle.

Elle y retournait lentement.

Il ne s'en fallait que d'un pied pour que la cheminée rentrât dans la Durande.

La remontée d'un pied, c'est pour le flux environ une demi-heure. Gilliatt, s'il voulait profiter de cette délivrance déjà remise en question, avait une demi-heure devant lui.

Il se dressa en sursaut.

Si urgente que fût la situation, il ne put faire autrement que de rester quelques minutes debout, considérant la phosphorescence, méditant.

Gilliatt savait à fond la mer. Malgré qu'elle en eût, et quoique souvent maltraité par elle, il était depuis longtemps son compagnon. Cet être mystérieux qu'on nomme l'océan ne pouvait rien avoir dans l'idée que Gilliatt ne le devinât. Gilliatt, à force d'observation, de rêverie et de solitude, était devenu presque un voyant du temps, ce qu'on appelle en anglais un *wheater wise*.

Gilliatt courut aux guinderesses et fila du câble; puis, n'étant plus retenu par l'affourche, il saisit le croc de la panse, et, s'appuyant aux roches, la poussa vers le goulet à quelques brasses au delà de la Durande, tout près du barrage. Il y avait *du rang,* comme disent les matelots de Guernesey. En moins de dix minutes, la panse fut retirée de dessous la carcasse échouée. Plus de crainte que la cheminée fût désormais reprise au piège. Le flux pouvait monter.

Pourtant Gilliatt n'avait point l'air d'un homme qui va partir.

Il considéra encore la phosphorescence, et leva les ancres; mais ce ne fut point pour déplanter, ce fut pour affourcher de nouveau la panse, et très solidement; près de la sortie, il est vrai.

Il n’avait employé jusque-là que les deux ancres de la panse, et il ne s’était pas encore servi de la petite ancre de la Durande, retrouvée, on s’en souvient, dans les brisants. Cette ancre avait été déposée par lui, toute prête aux urgences, dans un coin de la panse, avec un en-cas de haussières et de poulies de guinderesses, et son câble tout garni d’avance de bosses très cassantes, ce qui empêche la chasse. Gilliatt mouilla cette troisième ancre, en ayant soin de rattacher le câble à un grelin dont un bout était en ralingue à l’organeau de l’ancre, et dont l’autre bout se garnissait au guindoir de la panse. Il pratiqua de cette façon une sorte d’affourche en patte d’oie, bien plus forte que l’affourche à deux ancres. Ceci indiquait une vive préoccupation, et un redoublement de précautions. Un marin eût reconnu dans cette opération quelque chose de pareil au mouillage d’un temps forcé, quand on peut craindre un courant qui prendrait le navire par sous le vent.

La phosphorescence, que Gilliatt surveillait et sur laquelle il avait l’œil fixé, le menaçait peut-être, mais en même temps le servait. Sans elle il eût été prisonnier du sommeil et dupe de la nuit. Elle l’avait réveillé, et elle l’éclairait.

Elle faisait dans l’écueil un jour louche. Mais cette clarté, si inquiétante qu’elle parût à Gilliatt, avait eu cela d’utile qu’elle lui avait rendu le danger visible et la manœuvre possible. Désormais, quand Gilliatt voudrait mettre à la voile, la panse, emportant la machine, était libre.

Seulement, Gilliatt semblait de moins en moins songer au départ. La panse embossée, il alla chercher la plus forte chaîne qu’il eût dans son magasin, et, la rattachant aux clous plantés dans les deux Douvres, il fortifia en dedans avec cette chaîne le rempart de vaigres et de solives déjà protégé au dehors par l’autre chaîne croisée. Loin d’ouvrir l’issue, il achevait de la barrer.

La phosphorescence l’éclairait encore, mais décroissait. Il est vrai que le jour commençait à poindre.

Tout à coup Gilliatt prêta l’oreille.

XI

À BON ENTENDEUR, SALUT

Il lui sembla entendre, dans un lointain immense, quelque chose de faible et d'indistinct.

Les profondeurs ont, à de certaines heures, un grondement.

Il écouta une seconde fois. Le bruit lointain recommença. Gilliatt secoua la tête comme quelqu'un qui sait ce que c'est.

Quelques minutes après, il était à l'autre extrémité de la ruelle de l'écueil, à l'entrée vers l'est, libre jusque-là, et, à grands coups de marteau, il enfonçait de gros clous dans le granit des deux musoirs de ce goulet voisin du rocher l'Homme, comme il avait fait pour le goulet des Douvres.

Les crevasses de ces roches étaient toutes préparées et bien garnies de bois, presque tout cœur de chêne. L'écueil de ce côté étant très délabré, il y avait beaucoup de lézardes, et Gilliatt put y fixer plus de clous encore qu'au soubassement des deux Douvres.

À un moment donné, et comme si l'on eût soufflé dessus, la phosphorescence s'était éteinte; le crépuscule, d'instant en instant plus lumineux, la remplaçait.

Les clous plantés, Gilliatt traîna des poutres, puis des cordes, puis des chaînes, et, sans détourner les yeux de son travail, sans se distraire un instant, il se mit à construire en travers du goulet de l'Homme, avec des madriers fixés horizontalement et rattachés par des câbles, un de ces barrages à claire-voie que la science aujourd'hui a adoptés et qu'elle qualifie brise-lames.

Ceux qui ont vu, par exemple, à la Rocquaine à Guernesey, ou au Bourg-d'Ault en France, l'effet que font quelques pieux plantés dans le rocher, comprennent la puissance de ces ajustages si simples. Le brise-lames est la combinaison de ce qu'on nomme en France épi avec ce qu'on nomme en Angleterre dick. Les brise-lames sont les chevaux de frise des fortifications contre les tempêtes. On ne peut lutter contre la mer qu'en tirant parti de la divisibilité de cette force.

Cependant le soleil s'était levé, parfaitement pur. Le ciel était clair, la mer était calme.

Gilliatt pressait son travail. Il était calme lui aussi, mais dans sa hâte il y avait de l’anxiété.

Il allait, à grandes enjambées de roche en roche, du barrage au magasin et du magasin au barrage. Il revenait tirant éperdument, tantôt une porque, tantôt une hiloire. L’utilité de cet en-cas de charpentes se manifesta. Il était évident que Gilliatt était en face d’une éventualité prévue.

Une forte barre de fer lui servait de levier pour remuer les poutres.

Le travail s’exécutait si vite que c’était plutôt une croissance qu’une construction. Qui n’a pas vu à l’œuvre un pontonnier militaire ne peut se faire une idée de cette rapidité.

Le goulet de l’est était plus étroit encore que le goulet de l’ouest. Il n’avait que cinq ou six pieds d’entre-bâillement. Ce peu d’ouverture aidait Gilliatt. L’espace à fortifier et à fermer étant très restreint, l’armature serait plus solide et pourrait être plus simple. Ainsi des solives horizontales suffisaient; les pièces debout étaient inutiles.

Les premières traverses du brise-lames posées, Gilliatt monta dessus et écouta.

Le grondement devenait expressif.

Gilliatt continua sa construction. Il la contrebuta avec les deux bossoirs de la Durande reliés à l’enchevêtrement des solives par des drisses passées dans leurs trois roues de poulies. Il noua le tout avec des chaînes.

Cette construction n’était autre chose qu’une sorte de claie colossale, ayant des madriers pour baguettes et des chaînes pour osiers.

Cela semblait tressé autant que bâti.

Gilliatt multiplia les attaches, et ajouta des clous où il le fallait.

Ayant eu beaucoup de fer rond dans l’épave, il avait pu faire de ces clous une grosse provision.

Tout en travaillant, il broyait du biscuit entre ses dents. Il avait soif, mais ne pouvait boire, n’ayant plus d’eau douce. Il avait vidé le bidon la veille à son souper.

Il échafauda encore quatre ou cinq charpentes, puis monta de nouveau sur le barrage. Il écouta.

Le bruit à l’horizon avait cessé. Tout se taisait.

La mer était douce et superbe; elle méritait tous les madrigaux que lui adressent les bourgeois quand ils sont contents d’elle, — « un miroir”, — « un lac”, — « de l’huile”, — « une plaisanterie”, — « un mouton”. — Le bleu profond du ciel répondait au vert profond de l’océan. Ce saphir et cette émeraude pouvaient s'admirer l'un l'autre. Ils n'avaient aucun reproche à se faire. Pas un nuage en haut, pas une écume en bas. Dans toute cette splendeur montait magnifiquement le soleil d'avril. Il était impossible de voir un plus beau temps.

À l'extrême horizon une longue file noire d'oiseaux de passage rayait le ciel. Ils allaient vite. Ils se dirigeaient vers la terre. Il semblait qu'il y eût de la fuite dans leur vol.

Gilliatt se remit à exhausser le brise-lames.

Il l'éleva le plus haut qu'il put, aussi haut que le lui permit la courbure des rochers.

Vers midi, le soleil lui sembla plus chaud qu'il ne devait l'être. Midi est l'heure critique du jour; Gilliatt, debout sur la robuste claire-voie qu'il achevait de bâtir, se remit à considérer l'étendue.

La mer était plus que tranquille, elle était stagnante. On n'y voyait pas une voile. Le ciel était partout limpide; seulement de bleu il était devenu blanc. Ce blanc était singulier. Il y avait à l'ouest sur l'horizon une petite tache d'apparence malsaine. Cette tache restait immobile à la même place, mais grandissait. Près des brisants, le flot frissonnait très doucement.

Gilliatt avait bien fait de bâtir son brise-lames.

Une tempête approchait.

L'abîme se décidait à livrer bataille.

LIVRE TROISIEME

LA LUTTE

1 l’extrême touche l’extrême, et le contraire

annonce le contraire. Rien n’est menaçant comme l’équinoxe en retard. Il y a sur la mer un phénomène farouche qu’on pourrait appeler l’arrivée des vents du large. En toute saison, particulièrement à l’époque des syzygies, à l’instant où l’on doit le moins s’y attendre, la mer est prise soudain d’une tranquillité étrange. Ce prodigieux mouvement perpétuel s’apaise; il a de l’assoupissement; il entre en langueur; il semble qu’il va se donner relâche; on pourrait le croire fatigué. Tous les chiffons marins, depuis le guidon de pêche jusqu’aux enseignes de guerre, pendent le long des mâts. Les pavillons amiraux, royaux, impériaux, dorment. Tout à coup ces loques se mettent à remuer discrètement. C’est le moment, s’il y a des nuages, d’épier la formation des cirrus; si le soleil se couche, d’examiner la rougeur du soir; s’il fait nuit et s’il y a lune, d’étudier les halos. Dans cette minute-là, le capitaine ou le chef d’escadre qui a la chance de posséder un de ces verres-de-tempête dont l’inventeur est inconnu observe ce verre au microscope et prend ses précautions contre le vent du sud si la mixture a un aspect de sucre fondu, et contre le vent du nord si la mixture s’exfolie en cristallisations pareilles à des fourrés de fougères ou à des bois de sapins. Dans cette minute-là, après avoir consulté quelque gnomon mystérieux gravé par les romains, ou par les démons, sur une de ces énigmatiques pierres droites qu’on appelle en Bretagne menhir et en Irlande cruach, le pauvre pêcheur irlandais ou breton retire sa barque de la mer. p322

Cependant la sérénité du ciel et de l’océan persiste. Le matin se lève radieux et l’aurore sourit; ce qui remplissait d’horreur religieuse les vieux poëtes et les vieux devins, épouvantés qu’on pût croire à la fausseté du soleil. solem quis dicere falsum audeat? la sombre vision du possible latent est interceptée à l’homme par l’opacité fatale des choses. Le plus redoutable et le plus perfide des aspects, c’est le masque de l’abîme. On dit: anguille sous roche; on devrait dire: tempête sous calme. Quelques heures, quelques jours parfois, se passent ainsi. Les pilotes braquent leurs longues-vues çà et là. Le visage des vieux marins a un air de sévérité qui tient à la colère secrète de l’attente. Subitement on entend un grand murmure confus. Il y a une sorte de dialogue mystérieux dans l’air. On ne voit rien. L’étendue demeure impassible. Cependant le bruit s’accroît, grossit, s’élève. Le dialogue s’accentue. Il y a quelqu’un derrière l’horizon. Quelqu’un de terrible, le vent. Le vent, c’est-à-dire cette populace de titans que nous appelons les souffles. L’immense canaille de l’ombre. L’Inde les nommait les marouts, la Judée les kéroubims, la Grèce les aquilons. Ce sont les invisibles oiseaux fauves de l’infini. Ces borées accourent. p323

2 les vents du large.

D’où viennent-ils? De l’incommensurable. Il faut à leurs envergures le diamètre du gouffre. Leurs ailes démesurées ont besoin du recul indéfini des solitudes. L’Atlantique, le Pacifique, ces vastes ouvertures bleues, voilà ce qui leur convient. Ils les font sombres. Ils y volent en troupes. Le commandant Page a vu une fois sur la haute mer sept trombes à la fois. Ils sont là, farouches. Ils préméditent les désastres. Ils ont pour labeur l’enflure éphémère et éternelle du flot. Ce qu’ils peuvent est ignoré, ce qu’ils veulent est inconnu. Ils sont les sphinx de l’abîme, et Gama est leur Oedipe. Dans cette obscurité de l’étendue qui remue toujours, ils apparaissent, faces de nuées. Qui aperçoit leurs linéaments livides dans cette dispersion qui est l’horizon de la mer, se sent en présence de la force irréductible. On dirai que l’intelligence humaine les inquiète, et ils se hérissent contre elle. L’intelligence est invincible, mais l’élément est imprenable. Que faire contre l’ubiquité insaisissable? Le souffle se fait massue, puis redevient souffle. Les vents combattent par l’écrasement et se défendent par l’évanouissement. Qui les rencontre est aux expédients. Leur assaut, divers et plein de répercussions, déconcerte. Ils ont autant de fuite que d’attaque. Ils sont les impalpables tenaces. Comment en venir à bout? La proue du navire argo, sculptée dans un chêne de Dodone, à la fois proue et pilote, leur parlait. Ils brutalisaient cette proue déesse. Christophe Colomb, les voyant venir vers la pinta , montait sur le pont et leur adressait les premiers versets de l’évangile selon saint Jean. Surcouf les insultait. voici la clique, disait-il. Napier leur tirait des coups de canon. Ils ont la dictature du chaos. Ils ont le chaos. Qu’en font-ils? On ne sait quoi d’implacable. La fosse aux vents est plus monstrueuse que la fosse aux lions. Que de cadavres sous ces plis sans fond! Les vents poussent sans pitié la grande masse obscure et amère. On les entend toujours, eux ils n’écoutent rien. Ils commettent des choses qui ressemblent à des crimes. On ne sait sur qui ils jettent les arrachements blancs de l’écume. Que de férocité impie dans le naufrage! Quel affront à la providence! Ils ont l’air par moment de cracher sur Dieu. Ils sont les tyrans des lieux inconnus. luoghi spaventosi, murmuraient les marins de Venise. p324

Les espaces frémissants subissent leurs voies de fait. Ce qui se passe dans ces grands abandons est inexprimable. Quelqu’un d’équestre est mêlé à l’ombre. L’air fait un bruit de forêt. On n’aperçoit rien, et l’on entend des cavaleries. Il est midi, tout à coup il fait nuit; un tornado passe; il est minuit, tout à coup il fait jour; l’effluve polaire s’allume. Des tourbillons alternent en sens inverse, sorte de danse hideuse, trépignement des fléaux sur l’élément. Un nuage trop lourd se casse par le milieu, et tombe en morceaux dans la mer. D’autres nuages, pleins de pourpre, éclairent et grondent, puis s’obscurcissent lugubrement; le nuage vidé de foudre noircit, c’est un charbon éteint. Des sacs de pluie se crèvent en brume. Là une fournaise où il pleut; là une onde d’où se dégage un flamboiement. Les blancheurs de la mer sous l’averse éclairent des lointains surprenants; on voit se déformer des épaisseurs où errent des ressemblances. Des nombrils monstrueux creusent les nuées. Les vapeurs tournoient, les vagues pirouettent; les naïades ivres roulent; à perte de vue, la mer massive et molle se meut sans se déplacer; tout est livide; des cris désespérés sortent de cette pâleur. Au fond de l’obscurité inaccessible, de grandes gerbes d’ombre frissonnent. Par moments, il y a paroxysme. La rumeur devient tumulte, de même que la vague devient houle. L’horizon, superposition confuse de lames, oscillation sans fin, murmure en basse continue; des jets de fracas y éclatent bizarrement; on croit entendre éternuer des hydres. Des souffles froids surviennent, puis des souffles chauds. La trépidation de la mer annonce une épouvante qui s’attend à tout. Inquiétude. Angoisse. Terreur profonde des eaux. Subitement, l’ouragan, comme une bête, vient boire à l’océan; succion inouïe; l’eau monte vers la bouche invisible, une ventouse se forme, la tumeur enfle; c’est la trombe, le prester des anciens, stalactite en haut, stalagmite en bas, double cône inverse tournant, une pointe en équilibre sur l’autre, baiser de deux montagnes, une montagne d’écume qui s’élève, une montagne de nuée qui descend; effrayant coït de l’onde et de l’ombre. La trombe, comme la colonne de la bible, est ténébreuse le jour et lumineuse la nuit. Devant la trombe le tonnerre se tait. Il semble qu’il ait peur. Le vaste trouble des solitudes a une gamme; crescendo redoutable: le grain, la rafale, la bourrasque, l’orage, la tourmente, la tempête, la trombe; les sept cordes de la lyre des vents, les sept notes de l’abîme. Le ciel est une largeur, la mer est une rondeur; une haleine passe, il n’y a plus rien de tout cela, tout est furie et pêle-mêle. Tels sont ces lieux sévères. Les vents courent, volent, s’abattent, finissent, recommencent, planent, sifflent, mugissent, rient; frénétiques, lascifs, effrénés, prenant leurs aises sur la vague irascible. Ces hurleurs ont une harmonie. Ils font tout le ciel p325

sonore. Ils soufflent dans la nuée comme dans un cuivre, ils embouchent l’espace; et ils chantent dans l’infini, avec toutes les voix amalgamées des clairons, des buccins, des olifants, des bugles et des trompettes, une sorte de fanfare prométhéenne. Qui les entend écoute Pan. Ce qu’il y a d’effroyable, c’est qu’ils jouent. Ils ont une colossale joie composée d’ombre. Ils font dans les solitudes la battue des navires. Sans trêve, jour et nuit, en toute saison, au tropique comme au pôle, en sonnant dans leur trompe éperdue, ils mènent, à travers les enchevêtrements de la nuée et de la vague, la grande chasse noire des naufrages. Ils sont des maîtres de meutes. Ils s’amusent. Ils font aboyer après les roches les flots, ces chiens. Ils combinent les nuages, et les désagrègent. Ils pétrissent, comme avec des millions de mains, la souplesse de l’eau immense. L’eau est souple parce qu’elle est incompressible. Elle glisse sous l’effort. Chargée d’un côté, elle échappe de l’autre. C’est ainsi que l’eau se fait l’onde. La vague est sa liberté. p326

3 LA MER ET LE VENT.

Nous voyons les marées de l’eau; nous ne voyons pas les marées de l’air. L’atmosphère a, comme l’océan, son flux et reflux, plus gigantesque encore, et montant, tumeur énorme, vers la lune. L’unité engendrant la complication, c’est, nous venons de le dire, la loi des lois. Le mécanisme de l’atmosphère est simple. Une libration s’établit entre l’électricité atmosphérique et le magnétisme tellurique. Les tropiques sont des bouilleurs, les pôles sont des condensateurs; le resserrement égale la dilatation; un versement se fait d’en haut par l’équateur, et une restitution se fait d’en bas par les pôles. Ce va et vient, c’est le vent. Toute la nature est un échange. Deux cercles de vent, l’un polaire, l’autre équatorial, évoluent éternellement autour du globe. Sous ce double anneau tournant, la terre roule. Vision colossale. La rencontre à angle droit des deux cercles de vent heurte et casse l’atmosphère et y fait ces fractures que nous appelons les orages. De ces fractures sortent les tourbillons. Le premier obstacle que les tourbillons rencontrent leur imprime le mouvement giratoire. Une pierre au milieu de l’eau, comme le pic de Ténériffe, ou même comme l’écueil Douvres, suffit. Ils s’en vont en spirale à travers l’espace et traînent la mer dans leurs anneaux. Un cyclone tord un vaisseau à trois ponts comme une laveuse tord un linge. Qu'on se figure un gigantesque serpent d'air, haut d'une lieue et long de trois ou quatre cents lieues, tournoyant avec une vitesse horrible sur l'océan. Le vent maltraite la mer. La voie de fait va jusqu'à troubler ce vaste rhythme qu'on appelle la marée. Les flots bourrelés s'insurgent. De longs nuages, vessies électriques, se gonflent, et, à un renflement difforme, on devine dans leur flanc la foudre prisonnière comme la bête morte dans le ventre du boa. L'écume ruisselle à mille plis sur les reins de l'écueil comme p327

la robe de lin sur les hanches de Vénus Anadyomène. Le baromètre baisse, puis monte, puis tombe; même jeu sombre dans l'orage. On entend le sanglot de la création. La mer est la grande pleureuse. Elle est chargée de la plainte; l'océan se lamente pour tout ce qui souffre. Sous l'eau les effluves vont et viennent, avec une vitesse de soixante-dix mille lieues par seconde, du pôle boréal qui a un volcan, l'Hékla, au pôle austral qui en a deux, Erebus et Terror. Le liquide et le fluide combattent. Les solitudes sans défense subissent les chocs de ce tournoi sauvage. S'il n'y a personne, déluges; si l'homme est là, naufrages. Telle est l'immense aventure de l'ombre. Les vents coulent et croulent; ils coulent, c'est la vie; ils croulent, c'est le fléau. Sous l'anneau de vent de l'équateur, il y a un roulement de foudre continu. La rotation de la terre fait ronger leur rive gauche aux fleuves de l'hémisphère méridional. Précisons cette géométrie majestueuse. Il y a toujours polarité électrique dans les cercles des spirales de vent; un demi-cercle est positif et l'autre est négatif. L'électroscope le démontre. La ligne de translation qui suit le centre du cyclone sépare les deux électricités. Au centre la pesanteur diminue. Au centre du cyclone, calme absolu. Il y a équilibre. La tempête est en paix avec elle-même. Le plan de rotation du cyclone oblique à mesure qu'il monte vers les régions froides. Aux tropiques le cyclone est une tangente, aux pôles il est une sécante. Figurez-vous un disque, d'abord à plat, qui se redresse. à neuf cents milles de distance, un cyclone en marche inquiète le baromètre. L'atmosphère a un réseau veineux où ruissellent les vents. Parfois ce réseau s'engorge. Une tempête est une rupture d'anévrisme. Variable dans l'immuable, telle est, insistons-y, cette législation. Des combinaisons sans nombre s'y ajoutent, et finissent par faire de quatre ou cinq lois, si simples en apparence, une forêt. Tout fait est un logarithme; un terme ajouté le ramifie au point de le transformer. Les choses ont un aspect général où se dessinent et se groupent les grandes lignes de la création; l’insondable est dessous. La physique a une restriction mentale, qui est la chimie. Toutes les lois de la nature ont un sous-sol. De ce que la nature est une, on a conclu qu’elle était simple. Erreur. Partout, dans ce que la vieille science appelait des éléments, la science actuelle a reconnu des formations. L’eau de mer, par exemple, qui était p328

simple pour Pythagore, était composée l’an passé de vingt-cinq substances; cette année (1864) l’analyse en a ajouté deux, le bore et l’aluminium; ce qui fait vingt-sept. Les phénomènes s’entrecroisent. N’en voir qu’un, c’est ne rien voir. La richesse des fléaux est inépuisable. Ils ont la même loi d’accroissement que toutes les autres richesses, la circulation. L’un entre dans l’autre. La pénétration du phénomène dans le phénomène engendre le prodige. Le prodige, c’est le phénomène à l’état de chef-d’oeuvre. Le chef-d’oeuvre est parfois une catastrophe. Mais dans l’engrenage de la création, prodigieuse décomposition immédiatement recomposée, rien n’est sans but. Accouplement est le premier terme, enfantement est le second. L’ordre universel est un hyménée magnifique. Point de fécondation par le désordre. Le chaos est un célibat. Nous assistons sans cesse au mariage de nos premiers parents. Adam et ève sont éternels. Adam, c’est le globe, ève, c’est la mer. Quand la mer veut, elle est gaie. Aucune joie n’a l’apparence radieuse de la mer. L’océan est un épanouissement. Rien ne lui fait ombre, que le nuage, et cette ombre, d’un souffle il la chasse. à ne voir que la surface, l’océan c’est la liberté; c’est aussi l’égalité. Sur ce niveau tous les rayonnements sont à l’aise. L’hilarité grandiose du ciel clair s’y étale. La mer tranquille, c’est une fête. Pas d’appel de sirène qui soit plus doux et plus charmant. Pas de marin qui ne soit tenté de partir. Rien n’égale cette sérénité, et toute l’immensité n’est qu’une caresse, et le flot soupire, et le récif chante, et l’algue baise le rocher, et les gabiers, les mouettes et les pintails volent, et les molles prairies de mer ondulent de lame en lame, et sous les nids d’alcyons l’eau semble une nourrice, la vague semble une berceuse, pendant que le soleil couvre d’une éclatante épaisseur de lumière ces formidables hypocrisies du gouffre. Les apparences marines sont fugaces à tel point que, pour qui l’observe longtemps, l’aspect de la mer devient purement métaphysique; cette brutalité dégénère en abstraction. C’est une quantité qui se décompose et se recompose. Cette quantité est dilatable; l’infini y tient. Le calcul est, comme la mer, un ondoiement sans arrêt possible. La vague est vaine comme le chiffre. Elle a besoin, elle aussi, d’un coefficient inerte. Elle vaut par l’écueil comme le chiffre par le zéro. Les flots ont comme les chiffres une transparence qui laisse apercevoir sous eux des profondeurs. Ils se dérobent, s’effacent, se reconstruisent, n’existent point par eux-mêmes, attendent qu’on se serve d’eux, se multiplient à perte de vue dans l’obscurité, p329

sont toujours là. Rien, comme la vue de l’eau, ne donne la vision des nombres. Sur cette rêverie plane l’ouragan. On est réveillé de l’abstraction par la tempête. Mare portentosum. La grande eau solitaire, cette mobilité diffuse, cette nappe d’orages si calme en dessous, communique par des artères latentes avec ces volcans de fange qui jettent au dehors l’humus interne, nous révélant que le globe a, comme l’homme, sa peau qui est la terre, et sa muqueuse qui est la boue. Le globe est évidemment un être animé. Est-il vivant? Ceci est la question. Entre animé et vivant, il existe une nuance, la personnalité. Il y aurait là un moi énorme. Qui oserait l’affirmer? qui pourrait le nier? Quoi qu’il en soit, les eaux sont aux vents. Le flot subit le souffle. Il en résulte une variété inépuisable de faits apparents, contradictoires extérieurement, d’accord au fond, qu’ont peine à suivre dans leurs transformations sans nombre Hippocrate, Aristote, Avicenne, Albert le Grand, Galilée, Porta, Huyghens, Mariotte, Volta, Vallisneri, Spallanzani, Beccaria, Wheatstone, Lyell, Coulvier-Gravier, Maury, Peltier, Maxadorf, Schoenbeïn, Humboldt, et même l’ingénieux Mathieu de la Drôme, et même ces sagaces et savants écrivains, Margollé et Zurcher, les deux historiens du vent. Le souffle, ce caprice, cette volonté, flat ubi vult, semble se rire aujourd’hui des fils métalliques de Snow-Harris, de même que jadis il se riait des deux épées du roi Artaxerce et de la reine Paryzatis. Ces épées étaient l’embryon du paratonnerre. L’atmosphère, épaisse de quinze lieues, dilatable jusqu’à trente, a été pesée par Galilée, équilibrée avec le mercure par Toricelli, l’inventeur du baromètre, mesurée du haut de la tour Saint-Jacques par Pascal, décomposée par Lavoisier. On en est là. Qui sait où s’arrêtera la science? Qui sait si l’homme ne parviendra pas à forger la clef du vent? La science fait, pour prendre l’ouragan, un filet dont les mailles se multiplient; l’observatoire de Londres a les vingt-six cartes de l’amiral Fitz-Roy, l’observatoire de Paris dresse l’Atlas des Tempêtes. La science arrive à pressentir le temps, presque à le prédire, en prolongeant le plus loin possible sur l’océan, par la confrontation des faits et par le calcul, toutes les courbes d’égale pression barométrique. Les inflexions de ces courbes marquent les variations de l'atmosphère. p330

Une partie de l'énigme est devinée. Les autres données du problème sont à l'étude. Les vents, ces despotes, obéissent; cette troupe éparse et fantasque est commandée; cette folie a des lois. Lois si grandes que les énoncer seulement est terrible. La période lunaire de dix-neuf ans observés par Grand-Jean de Fouchy, la période solaire de quarante et un ans qui ramène le maximum des taches, le passage en foule des étoiles filantes dans les nuits climatériques du 10 août et du 12 novembre, toute cette mystérieuse législation régit la sombre rose des vents. L'aurore polaire est un signal qui fait lever l'ouragan. Un météore tombe dans le soleil, un orage éclate sur la terre; coïncidence inouïe, loi peut-être. Pressions prodigieuses. D'autres engrenages incommensurables sont entrevus. Du 10 octobre 1781 au 25 mars 1782, pendant que la cinquante-cinquième étoile d'Hercule s'éteignait, l'océan fut bouleversé d'orages. Schwabe affirme le fait solaire, Slough affirme le fait stellaire. Pourquoi non? une fourmi pèse sur le globe; une étoile peut bien peser sur le monde. Qui sait en quelle quantité nous dépendons des variations de l'étoile gamma d'Antinoüs, de l'étoile delta de Céphée et de l'étoile alpha du Dragon? Qui connaît les dimensions de l'influence cosmique? qui sait la longueur des effluves? ne sentons-nous pas, dans une certaine mesure, à des contre-coups dans notre propre organisme planétaire, toutes ces présences lointaines, mais énormes, Sirius, Mira Ceti, Argo arrivant par moments presque à l'intensité de Canopus, et les oscillations de l'Hydre d'Hévélius? Humboldt en était rêveur. Est-on sûr que le passage de seize mille bolides en une nuit ne soit pour rien, par exemple, dans un coup de vent tel que celui qui refoula la mer dans les terres vers Elliott's Key, au point de faire jeter l'ancre aux navires dans des forêts? à leur réveil, les matelots du Ledbury-Snow aperçurent leur ancre accrochée sous l'eau dans le haut des arbres. Il n'y a pas d'interruption dans la création; point d'arche brisée; point de lapsus; un fait et ses dépendances embrassent toute la nature; la chaîne est plus ou moins longue, mais ne se rompt jamais. Montez cette immense corde à noeuds, prenez un fait après l'autre, et vous arriverez du vibrion à la constellation. Le prodige immanent adhère à lui-même. Rien ne se dissipe. Il n'y a point d'effort perdu. L'inutile n'existe pas. L'univers a le nécessaire et n'a que le nécessaire. L'influence astrale se combine avec l'influence tellurique. Les phénomènes inhérents au rétrécissement du cercle de rotation de la terre ne se lient-ils point, par exemple, au vol furieux de certains vents polaires, et en p331

particulier à ces violents vents de Norvège qui, une fois, ont fait en un jour baisser le baromètre de vingt et un millimètres à Skudernoës et de trente et un millimètres à Christiansund? L'insondable a sa machine. Laplace dit: la mécanique céleste . Ses rouages sont pour nous invisibles, tant ils sont démesurés. Ses bras de levier vont de ce que nous nommons la réalité à ce que nous nommons l'abstraction. Il y a des prises de force jusque dans le point géométrique. Aucune mesure, aucun rêve, ne peut donner l'idée de cette propagation de vitalité par voisinages grandissants ou décroissants, poussée vertigineuse de l'indéfini dans l'infini. L'infiniment grand arrive à l'infiniment petit et l'infiniment petit à l'infiniment grand. Prenez une pincée de tripoli, un pouce cube; il y a dans ce pouce cube de poudre impalpable quarante et un milliards de squelettes. Quelle différence faites-vous entre cette cendre et cette autre poussière qu'on nomme la Voie lactée? Quelle est la plus prodigieuse des deux? Ici la bacillariée, là l'étoile. En haut comme en bas, petitesses; en bas comme en haut, énormités. La relation étant le mètre unique, le monde microscopique a des colosses. à côté de la monade crépusculaire, le kolpode à capuchon, c'est la baleine à côté du goujon. Entre l'univers microscopique et l'univers télescopique, il y a identité. Le gros bout de la lorgnette est toute la question. L'homme lui-même, ce géant d'intelligence et de volonté, est microscopique. Un milliard d'hommes, toute la population du globe, tiendrait dans un cercueil de mille pieds de haut, de mille pieds de large et de six mille pieds de long. La moindre des Alpes, évidée, et creusée, suffirait au sarcophage du genre humain. La vie, c'est la communication de proche en proche; filière, transmission, chaîne. Ce qu'on appelle la mort est un changement d'anneau. Aucune solution de continuité n'étant possible, la perpétuité du moi est la résultante du fait immanent. L'oubli d'avoir été serait une rupture de la chaîne. Nous voulons dire l'oubli définitif, car l'oubli momentané possible, et n'ôtant rien à la persistance du moi, est prouvé par le sommeil. Notre vie terrestre est probablement une sorte de sommeil. L'immortalité de l'âme n'est autre chose que l'adhérence universelle de la création régissant l'individu comme elle régit l'ensemble. Ce qu'est cette adhérence, ce qu'est cette immanence, impossible de se le figurer. C'est tout à la fois l'amalgame qui engendre la solidarité et le moi qui crée les directions. Tout s'explique par le mot Rayonner. Les p332 créatures entrecroisant leurs effluves, c’est la création. Nous sommes en même temps points d’arrivée et points de départ. Tout être est un centre du monde. Il y a un travail d’ensemble composé de tous les travaux d’isolement entraînés, à l’insu même des travailleurs, vers un but commun par la grande âme centrale unique. Pas plus que l’immanence de la création, le travail dans cette immanence n’est imaginable. Les possibilités de la puissance sont inconnues. L’homme même ne connaît pas la puissance de l’homme. Le travail humain est déjà une telle force transfigurante qu’on ne peut songer sans éblouissement au travail divin. Une femme pleure, le chimiste Smithson est là, il recueille une goutte de cette eau, et cette larme d’une femme devient une formule chimique, d’où sortira une branche de la science. Quentin Metzis ou Benvenuto Cellini manient pendant quelques heures un morceau de fer, ils lui laissent leur marque, et voilà ce fer plus précieux que l’or. Byron achète un schelling chez son papetier une bouteille d’encre qu’il revendra cent mille francs à son éditeur. Et nous nous bornons à l’énoncé du résultat matériel; le résultat moral est bien plus surprenant encore. Un certain travail, s’infiltrant à une masse de métal ou de pierre, à une toile, à une feuille de papier, lui fait subir une telle sublimation que de matière qu’elle était, elle devient idée. Du travail sort une dynamique métaphysique, réfractaire à toute formule, productrice de forces et de valeurs. La mise en oeuvre est une seconde création. La première création n’est que la mise en mouvement. Après la sève, l’intelligence. Figurez-vous un papyrus qui devient l’Iliade. Si les Prométhées d’en bas, surprenant et dérobant au créateur son secret, peuvent de telles choses, s’ils les réalisent, que ne réaliseront pas les providences d’en haut! que ne pourra point le Créateur lui-même? Quid domini facient, audent cum talia fures! Les données de l’activité universelle défient toute nomenclature. Nul moyen de les définir, nul moyen de les circonscrire. Les contraires s’épousent; les lointains sont des contacts. Ce qui vous semble divorce est mariage. La haine s’achève en amour. Sous le combat il y a le baiser. Tout est coefficient. Vous croyez être à un pôle, vous êtes à l’autre. Jamais l’union n’est plus étroite que là où l’écart semble le plus irrémédiable. La montagne ignore le mouvement, l’infusoire ignore le sommeil. Eh bien, c’est l’infusoire qui fait la montagne. Toute l’Australie est un corail, construit par un insecte. Partout l’inattendu. Les similitudes ne sont pas moins étranges que les contrastes. Il est extraordinaire que ceci soit pareil à cela. Un phénomène calque l’autre. Dieu se répète. Le Tout-Puissant est le plagiaire du Créateur; p333

et là où vous sentez le plus l’accablement du sublime, c’est en présence de ce plagiat. Nous avons indiqué ailleurs l’identité de forme entre le soleil et l’araignée. Ces répétitions sont le miracle de l’invention. On contemple effaré, on écoute éperdu. à des profondeurs inouïes, les voix de l’infini se font écho. Des ressemblances de facture, saisissables à des distances zodiacales, quoi de plus stupéfiant! Quelle démonstration de l’unité! La comète s’envole comme la libellule. Une nébuleuse est peut-être un univers dans le cocon. Le firmament et la goutte d’eau ont le même modelé; l’un et l’autre contiennent des mondes. La reptilité de la chenille ressemble à nos misères et à nos vices; il y a des ailes dedans. L’ouragan et la colère sortent du même moule. Ces rapprochements pourraient être multipliés indéfiniment. On ne doit jamais se lasser d’insister sur l’unité de loi, révélatrice de l’unité d’essence. Dans ces merveilles logarithmiques de la fécondité créatrice repuisant sans cesse le nouveau dans la même urne à la même source, certaines philosophies infirmes ont voulu voir de la stérilité. Peu s’en faut qu’elles n’aient accusé Dieu de sénilité. Tu rabâches, Jupiter. Le penseur sérieux est plus enthousiasmé et plus confondu encore peut-être par ces grands parallélismes que par les chocs fulgurants de l’imprévu. L’harmonie est une ligne majestueuse à perte de vue. Sa rectitude est un éblouissement. à de certains moments, on devine, on sent que la loi va s’affirmer sous une nouvelle forme; on voit venir Dieu. Saisissement suprême! on surprend presque son procédé. Un peu plus il semble qu’on créerait soi-même. C’est comme cela qu’il fait. On a le vertige de mettre la main sur l’outil divin. Ici, il travaille par antithèse, là par identité. Rien de plus sublime. Il n’y a qu’un patron. La loi animique a les mêmes gravitations que la loi sidérale; le matériel répercute le moral; l’équilibre fait la preuve de l’équité; l’homme est la planète du vrai. Dieu fait tout de la même manière. L’univers est sa synonymie. L’immuable est analogue à l’éphémère. Dieu varie son édifice, non sa géométrie; son effet, non sa règle. Le cercle de rotation du volvoce lui sert pour l’évolution du globe; il ne se donne pas la peine d’inventer une autre figure; puisque l’insecte en use, c’est assez bon pour toi, univers; et le calme de la toute-puissance se recopiant a on ne sait quoi qui terrifie. La création s’exfolie sur l’unité. L’épanouissement est autre, la racine est la même. L’aboutissement à l’effroi sacré est tout simple en présence de ces symétries du mystère. L’infiniment grand a pour contrepoids p334

l’infiniment petit; l’harmonie a pour contre-coup la convulsion; l’immobilité n’est autre chose que du tourbillon fixe; la Voie Lactée ressemble à un nuage; une bande de vapeurs ressemble à une chaîne de montagnes; un fleuve coule dans l’arbre, une ramification tord, détaille et multiplie le cours d’eau; la sève est un sang; la clarté est une onde; le mouvement est une combustion; vivre, c’est brûler; consommer est identique à consumer; l’activité est uniforme; toute la matière est maniée de la même façon; l’élément se fond dans l’atome; des superpositions dans l’unité, c’est là l’univers; nulle différence entre une poignée de cendre et une poignée de mondes; mêmes conditions d’être, presque même aspect, avec des nuances de durée; même refonte perpétuelle; même enclume en haut et en bas; le travail, ici haletant, là impassible, éclate de la même manière, dans le momentané comme dans l’inextinguible, et le songeur, muet de conviction et de surprise, regarde s’émietter le feu de la forge en étincelles et le feu de l’abîme en étoiles. Notre dépendance cosmique, constatée aujourd’hui, mais que la science myope cherche à circonscrire, se manifestera de plus en plus. Tel phénomène terrestre, encore obscur à cette heure, est un dérivé zodiacal. Les évolutions sidérales pèsent sur le déplacement de nos saisons. Il faut à l’aiguille aimantée six cent vingt ans pour qu’elle accomplisse son oscillation complète à l’ouest et à l’est du méridien. Ainsi l’oscillation actuelle, commencée en 1660, ne s’achèvera qu’en 2280. La loi des tempêtes est liée à cette oscillation. Dans cette révolution de six cent vingt ans, c’est tantôt le pôle asiatique, tantôt le pôle américain, qui est le plus froid. L’unité et l’adhérence s’affirment sous bien d’autres formes encore. Franklin a prouvé que les coups de vent du Nord-Est avaient leur source au Sud-Ouest. Au sud de l’équateur, les ouragans tournent dans le sens des aiguilles d’une montre, et, au nord de l’équateur, en sens inverse. Les explosions de feu grisou dans la terre coïncident avec les coups d’équinoxe sur la mer. Arcanes redoutables que la navigation doit étudier. On peut soupçonner de tout le phénomène. Il en est capable. L’hypothèse dénonce l’infini; c’est ce qui la fait grande. Derrière le fait apparent elle cherche le fait réel. Elle demande à la création sa pensée, puis son arrière-pensée. Les grands inventeurs scientifiques sont ceux qui tiennent la nature pour suspecte. Suspecte d’accroissement, d’extension, d’exfoliation obscure, de pousses profondes dans toutes les directions, de végétation indéfinie; suspecte de prolongements dans l'invisible. C'est vers ces prolongements que se dirige le tâtonnement sublime de l'hypothèse. Qui entrevoit ces prolongements dans l'invisible de la création est le mage; qui entrevoit ces prolongements dans l'invisible de la destinée est le prophète. p335

La nature est suspecte dans tous les sens. Son immensité autorise le soupçon. Ce qu'elle fait n'est pas ce qu'elle semble faire; ce qu'elle veut n'est pas ce qu'elle semble vouloir. Elle met sur l'invisible le masque du visible, de telle sorte que ce que nous ne voyons pas nous manque, et que ce que nous voyons nous trompe. De là les arguments que fournit à l'athéisme la nature, cette plénitude de Dieu. La nature n'a point de franchise. Elle se montre à l'homme à profil perdu. Elle est apparence; heureusement elle est aussi transparence. Chose étrange, on s'égare peut-être encore moins en la devinant qu'en la calculant. Aristote voit plus loin que Ptolémée. Le rêveur de Stagyre, en affirmant que le mouvement de succession des vents suit le mouvement apparent du soleil, avait presque mis le doigt sur la trouvaille de Galilée. Un mathématicien n'est un savant qu'à la condition d'être aussi un sage. La nature échappe au calcul. Le nombre est un fourmillement sinistre. La nature est l'innombrable. Une idée fait plus de besogne qu'une addition. Pourquoi? parce que l'idée montre le tout, et que l'addition ne peut faire le total. L'infini, splendide et un, féconde l'intelligence; les nombres, ces mille-pieds, la dissèquent et la dévorent. Le savant qui se jette dans la fosse aux chiffres ressemble au bramine qui se jette dans la fosse aux vermines. Le calcul obtient certes d'admirables résultats, à la condition de ne point se brouiller avec l'hypothèse. Le petit calcul dédaigne la conjecture; le grand calcul en tient compte. Le calcul ne peut que multiplier; l'hypothèse, parfois, crée. Le calcul a pour limite l'exact, l'hypothèse a pour limite l'absolu; champ bien autrement profond. Le chiffre se heurte à l'impossible; il rencontre le 8 renversé, l'infini; l'hypothèse ne se heurte qu'au mystère. Chercher la quadrature du cercle est absurde; chercher la pierre philosophale ne l'est pas. La vénérable nature, tenue pour sacrée, mais mise en état de suspicion perpétuelle, telle est la loi du magisme antique et de la science moderne, tel est le point de départ de l'esprit de découverte. Les astronomes et les chimistes sont les arracheurs de masques. Un jour, dans le Portique, on demandait: quelle déesse voudriez-vous voir nue? Platon répondit: Vénus. Socrate répondit: Isis. Isis, c'est la Vérité. Isis, c'est la Réalité. Dans l'absolu, le réel est identique à l'idéal. Il est Jéhovah, Satan, Isis, Vénus; il est Pan. Il est la Nature. La nature est toute en doubles-fonds. Elle est dédaléenne et mêle tous les réseaux de toutes les voies. Pour notre courte vue, ses directions apparentes contrarient ses tendances réelles. Les faits ont un courant intérieur différent du courant de la surface. Un seul être sait le secret de la nature; c'est celui-là même qui est le secret. Depuis qu'il y a sur la terre des vivants pensifs, la nature est épiée par des regards inquiets, quelquefois même par des regards p336

de travers. Transversa tuentibus. Elle est suspecte, aux yeux de l'ascète, d'orgie; aux yeux du savant, d'illusion; aux yeux du philosophe, de mal pour le bien. Pour l'un elle est libertine, pour l'autre menteuse, pour l'autre féroce. Elle n'est rien de tout cela. Seulement, elle a ce qui nous manque, le temps et l'espace. Rien ne la presse et rien ne la borne. Sa ligne n'est pas droite et nous échappe. Elle prend pour arriver à son but le détour de l'infini. Elle serpente dans un possible qui n'est pas le nôtre. N'ayant point notre limite, elle n'a point notre morale. Elle serait le monstre, si elle n'était la merveille. Pour elle, nous l'avons dit autre part, la fin justifie les moyens. L'absolu seul a ce droit. Probablement, qui est sans mesure peut être sans scrupule. De là les cataclysmes, ces coups d'état de l'irresponsable. De là aussi les bêtes fléaux. L'antique Python n'est pas une fable. L'hécatonchire existe dans l'infiniment petit. Pourquoi n'existerait-il pas dans l'infiniment grand? Bonnet de Genève, ce naturaliste ouvert de toute part à l'étude, croyait au Mille-bras proportionné à l'océan. Il avait recueilli sur ce fait cent trente-neuf observations qu'il tenait pour certaines. Les solitudes de l'eau sont inexplorées. Elles ont des caecums. à chacun des deux pôles seulement, il existe une surface inconnue de huit cent mille lieues carrées. Qu'y a-t-il là? La vie magnétique est centralisée aux pôles. Ce sont de prodigieux réservoirs d'êtres. Le Kraken, auquel Buffon croyait, est un Python polaire. Ces fourmillements de la vie jettent de temps en temps jusqu'à nous des spécimens redoutables. Cuvier a retrouvé le dragon. L'ornithorrhynque est un griffon. L'épiornis est l'oiseau Bock des Mille et une Nuits. Une des cabanes-palais des rois de Madagascar a un toit fait de trois plumes d'épiornis. Ces vastes plumes démontrent une envergure d'aigle colossal, et c'est à tort que la science moderne, volontiers amie de la petitesse, et de l'hypothèse diminuante, avait déclaré l'épiornis brévipenne. Un autre oiseau gigantesque, le moa, est également mis en évidence par les fossiles. Une patte dépasse la hauteur de l'homme (fémur: un pied six pouces anglais; tibia: trois pieds trois pouces; métatarse: un pied huit pouces; orteil: dix pouces). La zoologie est aussi illimitée que la cosmographie. L’hydre est prouvée en quantité suffisante par le requin sur mer et le crocodile sur terre. p337

D’autres épouvantes animales, plus étranges encore, font partie de la création. Nous en rencontrerons peut-être dans le courant de ce livre. Il y a dans la création un Inconnu. Cet Inconnu a ses raisons. Son pourquoi nous déborde. Il se dépense dans l’effroi comme dans la splendeur. Ses réussites dans le terrible font frémir. Le rêve de l’homme est un essai toujours dépassé par la création; il y a quelque chose de plus nocturne que le songe, c’est le fait. La réalité distance le cauchemar. Nos fantômes sont des avortements. La nature après nous, ou avant nous, les crée; plus complets. à Cayenne, au-dessus des hommes endormis, le vampire vole avec des ailes de chauve-souris. L’Ignoré, l’Invisible, le Possible; sondez ces trois gouffres. Ne chicanons pas l’illimité. Chicaner n’est pas circonscrire; nier n’est pas borner. En dépit de notre optimisme, il y a des créatures d’effroi. L’épouvante existe, en chair et en os. Elle est sous nous et sur nous. Même quand nous la touchons, même quand elle nous tient, elle garde son invraisemblance, et, à force d’horreur, elle semble hors de l’être. L’inattendu nous guette. Il nous apparaît, il nous saisit, il nous dévore, et c’est à peine s’il nous semble réel. La création est pleine de formations vertigineuses qui nous enveloppent et dont nous doutons. C’est trop de magnificence ou c’est trop de difformité. Ici exubérance d’harmonie, là excès de chaos. Dieu exagère. En bas comme en haut, il va trop loin. Les ondulations de la vitalité sont aussi illimitées et aussi indéfinies que les moires de l’eau. Elles s’emmaillent, se nouent, se dénouent, se renouent. Les zones de la réalité universelle se tordent, au-dessus et au-dessous de notre horizon, en spirale sans fin. La vie est le prodigieux serpent de l’infini. Ni tête, ni queue, ni commencement, ni achèvement, des anneaux sans nombre. Il y a des anneaux d’astres, et il y a des anneaux d’acarus. Tout se tient. Tout adhère. Comme nous l’avons dit ailleurs, deux babels en sens inverse, l’une plongeant, l’autre montant, c’est le monde. Ce qui serait surprenant, ce serait que nous le comprissions. Tout au plus arrivons-nous à le conjecturer. Laquelle de nos méthodes de mesurage pourrions-nous appliquer à ce tourbillonnement, qui est l’univers? En présence des profondeurs, rêver est notre seule puissance. Notre conception, vite essoufflée, ne peut suivre la création, cette immense haleine. Nos hypothèses, qui sont des effarements, considèrent avec stupeur les

arborescences inexprimables du possible, et les dilatations de la réalité dans toutes les directions. Dieu arrive à l'inconcevable aussi bien dans le mollusque de la mer que dans l'étoile du ciel. Son excès même nous conduit quelquefois à le nier. L'insondable logarithme de ses combinaisons nous éblouit ou nous révolte, mais, révoltés ou éblouis, nous accable. Sa présence
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infinie dans le moindre fait nous déconcerte. Elle éclate surtout dans les phénomènes extrêmes, dans les merveilles hideuses ou splendides qu'on pourrait appeler les faits de frontière. Ce sont en effet des commencements de régions. Ceci atteint, ceci constaté, ceci enregistré et subi, nous ne comprenons plus rien. L'imagination renonce à plonger et à planer; la science refuse de tâtonner. Au delà du monstre, il n'y a plus que le fantôme. Nous ne désirons pas en savoir davantage. C'est bon, assez, nous sommes saturés, nous avons notre chargement. Le cerveau, en fait de science, n'est qu'un contenant limité. Une connaissance trop profonde de la réalité dans un vivant paraîtrait aux autres vivants folie, la science complète aurait un air de démence, et l'infortuné qui parviendrait à se rencontrer face à face avec le Grand Inconnu sur le sommet des choses ne redescendrait du Sinaï que pour entrer à Bedlam. Ne jetons pas la sonde trop avant. Bornons-nous, au point de vue cosmique, à accepter ce qui est, compliqué de ce qui peut être. Le réel est l'asymptote du possible; le point de rencontre est à l'extrémité de l'infini. Dans la création, qui est notre enveloppe et qui est notre pénétration, rien, excepté l'absurde, excepté ce qui se suicide, ne peut être nié à priori. L'incompréhensible prend trop de place pour qu'il en reste à l'improbable. Puisqu'il y a la comète, il peut bien y avoir le python. Le bout de l'ombre ne peut pas plus être trouvé que le bout de la lumière. L'Inconnu travaille dans les deux sens. Le miasme a sa logique comme le rayon, et logique c'est vie. Le Pourquoi des désastres est au-dessus de notre entendement. à quoi bon cette catastrophe? Quelle est l'utilité de cet incendie, de cette inondation, de ce tremblement de terre, de ce naufrage, de cette peste, de cette éruption? Quelle est la fonction des fléaux? En dehors de l'homme, quelle raison a-t-On de faire ce qu'On fait? Sous quel angle l'ordonnateur mystérieux voit-il les causes et les effets? Les éléments, ces intermédiaires entre lui et nous, sont-ils lucides? Ils nous paraissent souvent forcenés, parfois insensés. Lavoisier disait: l'extravagance de l'air. Il y a dans les ténèbres des forces dont la manière d'agir nous déconcerte. Il semble que nous ayions, nous vivants, à compter, sinon avec des méchancetés invisibles, du moins avec on ne sait quels aveuglements inconnus chargés d'une partie de la conduite des choses. Ces forces obscures manient à tâtons le genre humain. Disons-le cependant, entre aveugle et obscur, il faut distinguer. L'impénétrabilité n'est point la cécité. Ces forces sont ténébreuses, cela ne prouve pas qu'elles soient inconscientes. Elles sont assez actives pour ne pas être p339

uniquement passives. Nous les appelons Forces, elles sont peut-être Puissances. Le Ubi Vult indique dans le souffle une intention. Que dit le vent? à qui parle-t-il? Quel est son interlocuteur? à quelle oreille murmure-t-il? près de terre il se tait quelquefois; dans les hautes lititudes, jamais. Il est la voix. Tous les autres bruits cessent ou s'interrompent, le sien persiste. La divagation du vent emplit l'air. C'est le grand murmure opiniâtre. Est-ce un monologue? Est-ce une réplique? Rien de plus monotone et de plus sublime. Ce radotage du gouffre était pris en mauvaise part jadis par beaucoup de philosophes. Les gymnosophes panthéistes, habitués à demander des comptes à la nature, s'en indignaient. Pourquoi ce sifflement, toujours le même? Pourquoi ce grincement, toujours le même? à quoi bon s'égosiller dans la nuée pour répéter sans cesse les mêmes choses? variez vos exclamations. Un philosophe cynique qui s'appuyait sur un bâton vendu après sa mort un talent, cinq mille francs d'aujourd'hui, Pérégrinus Protée, dans les grands vents, se promenait au bord de la mer en haussant les épaules. Il assistait à la rumeur des souffles comme à une plaidoirie d'avocats. Il paraissait reprocher aux aquilons de recommencer toujours leurs éternels grondements, de commenter la tempête dans les mêmes termes, d'ennuyer l'auditoire, et d'assourdir les gens, avant de les noyer, de toutes ces banalités cruelles. Il eut volontiers dit: le naufrage sans phrases. Le vent en soi n'est pas une force: il n'est qu'une rapidité; mais rapidité, c'est vigueur. Force telle après tout, que le brusque arrêt d'une vitesse se solde par la combustion instantanée. L'élan se résout en feu. L'élan produit la percussion. Par la rapidité le zéphir devient projectile. La vitesse écrase. Le bond, qui fait le tigre, fait aussi l'ouragan. En 1836, un vent parti de Londres à dix heures du matin était à dix heures du soir à Stettin. Un autre, le 27 février 1860, a roulé sur Paris en une demi-heure vingt-deux millions pesant de tonnes d'air. Un autre, sur ce même Paris, le 23 mai 1865, versa en trente minutes seize cent mille mètres cubes d'eau. Et, près des vents d'Afrique et d'Asie, les vents d'Europe ne sont rien. Quelques météorologistes affirment que le cyclone fait parfois, comme le boulet de canon, six cents lieues à l’heure. Il y a là, nous le pensons, exagération. Les coups de force de cette vitesse sont merveilleux. Un souffle passe, et arrache une caronade de trente du pont de la frégate Sané; un autre, à Jersey, en 1854, près Saint-Luc, jette un mur de vingt toises de long tout d’une pièce à plat, comme une feuille de papier sur la terre; un autre, en p340

1863, à Guernesey, près Saint-Martin, démembre un grand moulin, lui casse sa croix en pleine volée, et enfonce à cinquante pas de là ces deux grosses poutres avec leurs échelons droites comme deux plumes dans le sol; un autre, le 7 juin 1859, rase une rue de Granville, un autre abat vingt-quatre clochers d’églises aux environs de Saint-Pol-de-Léon. Un autre, en juin 1865, dans la Corrèze, en quinze minutes, écartèle la commune de Meilhard, fracasse deux cents toitures, et disperse en l’air un hameau tout entier, Sauviate, dont il ne reste plus une maison. Un autre dessèche une forêt; un autre va sous la vague casser les madrépores et en charrie des fragments gigantesques dans les vallées de l’île Bourbon; un autre réduit Kingstown de six cents maisons à quatorze masures. Les flottes n’ont pas plus beau jeu. D’une seule bouffée, le vent prend deux vaisseaux à Orellana, trois à Duquesne, quatre à Anson, quatre à Rodney, tout à Medina Sidonia. Sur ces prodiges de force du vent, la légende est d’accord avec la science, et naturellement va un peu plus loin. Les gens d’Islande se plaignaient un jour de la dureté de leur climat, l’Hékla n’étant pas une cheminée suffisante pour les chauffer. - Attachez à votre île une remorque, leur cria le vent du pôle, et je traînerai l’Islande où vous voudrez. Ces forces ont la possession jalouse des espaces. Le vent garde la mer avec une âpreté de propriétaire. Il défend contre l’envahissement humain autant les enfers qu’il cache que les paradis qu’il abrite, autant les volcans du pôle Sud, Erebus et Terror, contre Dumont d’Urville qu’Otaïti contre Cook. Le pionnier d’Europe s’obstine pourtant; il s’obstine pour toutes sortes de motifs; Marco-Polo, pour aborder le Grand-Cathay; Rubruquis, pour convertir le Grand-Khan; Diaz, pour trouver le Prêtre-Jean; Pigolano, pour être nommé maestrante de la chevalerie de Séville; Quirino Buscon, pour découvrir le couvent de Plusimanos dont le diable sonne les cloches sous le nom de Malabestia. D’autres ont le divin et sûr instinct de la civilisation, et c’est pour le progrès qu’ils affrontent le naufrage. écartez la gloire à faux poids, et prenez une balance: devant la civilisation, toutes les armées de Cyrus et de Sésostris, et les phalanges d’Alexandre, et les légions de César, pèsent moins que les cent soixante hommes qui suivent Gama et les cent dix-huit hommes qui accompagnent

Cook. Navigation, c’est éducation. La mer, c’est la forte école. La cohabitation avec ces phénomènes peu maniables produit une rude race d’hommes qu’il faut aimer, les marins. Il n’y a pas d’autres conquérants qu’eux. Le voyageur Ulysse fait plus de besogne que le batailleur Achille. La mer trempe l’homme; le soldat n’est que de fer, le marin est d’acier. Regardez-les sur le port, ces matelots, martyrs tranquilles, triomphateurs silencieux, mâles p341

figures ayant dans le regard cette religion qui sort du gouffre. Ajoutons ceci: la navigation est le contraire de la guerre. La navigation civilise le sauvagisme, la guerre sauvagise la civilisation. Ce que font les marins est avouable. Chose bizarre, l’homme admire les tueries plus que les découvertes. Il tient à avoir les deux côtés de la brute, férocité, plus bêtise. De là tant d’égorgements. De là les armées pour la guerre et la guerre pour les armées. Le jour où Van Diémen sera plus populaire que César, le jour où la boussole sera préférée au glaive, le jour où l’amour des marins remplacera l’amour des soldats, ce jour-là, la paix sera faite. L’humanité entrera en possession de ses deux biens, la totalité de la terre et la totalité de la vie. En attendant, la civilisation, chose honteuse, brutalise le matelot. En 1863, pour ne citer que cette année, la marine anglaise a reçu vingt-cinq mille cinq cent treize coups de fouet. Donnés par qui? par l’officier au matelot. Lequel des deux est dégradé? C’est par la mer que la terre se conquiert. Vaste labeur, sans cesse remis en question. Toute la mer couvre un sous-entendu périlleux. On en vient à bout pourtant. Peu à peu, pas à pas, lentement, scientifiquement. Depuis vingt ans seulement, par l’étude de la mer, grâce aux beaux travaux du puissant sondeur Maury, on a abrégé de dix jours la traversée de l’équateur, de quinze jours la traversée de la Chine, de cinquante jours la traversée de l’Australie. L’homme empiète; les espaces ont l’air de consentir. L’océan semble entrer en capitulation. La tempête recule, non sans se cabrer. Le déchaînement des vents est un barrage. Le premier poste des Aquilons est aux colonnes d’Hercule; on viole Calpé et Abyla; alors sur le revers de l’Afrique, devant le navire humain en marche, se dresse, immobile en travers de l’océan, debout, ayant une sorte de regard sous son double sourcil de nuées, le menaçant Cap Non. Défense de passer. L’homme passe. Les vents font des concessions; l’obstacle fluide se laisse refouler par Gilianez qui double la pointe Bojador, par Cadamosto qui découvre les Canaries, par Fernandez qui découvre le cap Vert, par Alvarez Cabral qui découvre les Açores, par Jacques Lemaire qui double le cap Horn où les Andes s’achèvent par des volcans, par Sébastien del Cano qui continue Magellan, par Clarke qui continue Cook, par cent autres. Les vents résistent à Dumont d’Urville, essayant de trouer “les vieilles glaces bleues”. Ils exécutent Lapeyrouse et Franklin. Ils sont plus faciles pour Anson, ce héros compliqué d’un pirate; ils lui ramènent le Centurion aux îles Ladrones, et c’est par leur permission qu’il peut rentrer dans Londres au milieu des tambours et des trompettes avec trente-deux chariots chargés de piastres espagnoles. p342

Ils avaient déjà eu de ces complaisances pour l’Angleterre, notamment du temps où Cartis-Mandua, reine de Brigantes, envoyait contre Rouen ses flottilles de pirogues. Par moments, on croit entrevoir leur dédain. Ils obéissent à l’homme pour ou contre la civilisation. Ils apportent avec la même impartialité Attila en Italie et Colomb en Amérique. Le vent semble le grand indifférent sinistre. En somme les ouragans plient, fléchissent, rompent, lâchent pied, cèdent, laissent faire l’homme, par instants cela semble une déroute, ils subissent la conquête, Drake trouve la Californie, Tasman l’Australie, les vents rétrogradent le plus loin qu’ils peuvent dans les solitudes, se réfugient dans l’inaccessible, s’exilent dans l’inconnu, on les oublie presque, où sont-ils? et subitement, les voici, rien n’est fait, d’un coup d’aile ils reprennent tout. Nous étions chez eux, ils sont chez nous. Ils veulent leur revanche. Ils viennent chercher l’homme, ils sont furieux. Ils lui déclarent la guerre sur vingt points à la fois, en Asie en même temps qu’en Europe. En un mois, presque en un jour, ils broient à Londres des maisons de cinq étages sous des cheminées d’usine, tours de brique renversées d’un souffle, ils noient en quelques minutes dans la Tamise, devant Bugsby Hole, soixante gabares chargées de charbon, ils suppriment à Chandernagor le quartier indien, ils mêlent à Calcutta la marine anglaise, la marine française, la marine américaine, dans la même extermination. Ils font une sortie. Ils quittent leurs profonds déserts. Ils se ruent sur la terre. Pourquoi? Pour faire le mal? Oui et non. L’élément est d’un côté fléau, et de l’autre bienfait. Et c’est le bienfait qui est son grand côté. De certaines calamités font douter de la providence. Il semble que l’effrayante nature dise: Ah! tu ne crois pas en Dieu. Eh bien, tu as raison. Un déluge, une peste, un tremblement de terre, c’est l’athéisme pris au mot. Heureusement le mal n’est qu’un envers; le bien est la face de la création. Une tempête est un acte de dictature de l’ombre rétablissant l’équilibre. Disons-le en passant, quand un homme, dans la région des faits sociaux, a la prétention d’en faire autant, cette parodie n’a qu’un défaut, il lui manque l’infini. Un tremblement de terre humain est un crime. L’homme, imitant l’autorité de Dieu, reste petit et devient horrible. Le singe est le commencement du démon. p343

La dictature implique l’infinitude et l’éternité. Les ouragans sont de prodigieuses locomotives traînant les pluies de la haute mer vers la terre. Ils apportent aux plantes l’acide carbonique, le nitre, l’ammoniaque. Ils apportent à la vaste fermentation universelle l’ozone, ce désinfectant dosé par l’infini. Sans eux la terre n’aurait ni fleuves, ni forêts, ni prairies, ni fruits, ni fleurs. Ils font l’air respirable, ils font la terre habitable, ils font l’homme possible. Ils sont chargés du balayage des miasmes. Ils sont chargés de la provision d’eau. Drainage merveilleux de l’atmosphère. Utilité des dévastateurs. ôtez l’eau et figurez-vous ce qui reste. Ces bandits sont des distillateurs. Chaque fois que vous voyez un nuage, vous voyez leur cornue et leur alambic. Le réservoir d’eau est salé, sans quoi il croupirait. De la goutte d’océan, les vents font la goutte de pluie. Eux de moins, l’univers terrestre se composerait de deux déserts, un désert liquide et un désert solide. Tout ce qui est hors de l’eau serait sécheresse. La terre serait pierre. Le globe serait le crâne nu d’une tête de mort énorme roulant dans le ciel. p344

4 explication du bruit écouté par Gilliatt.

La grande venue des vents vers la terre se fait aux équinoxes. à ces époques la balance du tropique et du pôle bascule, et la colossale marée atmosphérique verse son flux sur un hémisphère et son reflux sur l’autre. Il y a des constellations qui signifient ces phénomènes, la balance, le verseau. C’est l’heure des tempêtes. La mer attend, et garde le silence. Quelquefois le ciel a mauvaise mine. Il est blafard, une grande panne obscure l’obstrue. Les marins regardent avec anxiété l’air fâché de l’ombre. Mais c’est son air satisfait qu’ils redoutent le plus. Un ciel riant d’équinoxe, c’est l’orage faisant patte de velours. Par ces ciels-là, la tour des pleureuses d’Amsterdam s’emplissait de femmes examinant l’horizon. Quand la tempête vernale ou automnale tarde, c’est qu’elle fait un plus gros amas. Elle thésaurise pour le ravage. Méfiez-vous des arrérages. Ango disait: la mer est bonne payeuse . Quand l’attente est trop longue, la mer ne trahit son impatience que par plus de calme. Seulement la tension magnétique se manifeste par ce qu’on pourrait nommer l’inflammation de l’eau. Des lueurs sortent de la vague. Air électrique, eau phosphorique. Les matelots se sentent harassés. Cette minute est particulièrement périlleuse pour les ironclads; leur coque de fer peut produire de fausses indications du compas, et les perdre. Le steamer transatlantique l’yowa a péri ainsi. Pour ceux qui sont en familiarité avec la mer, son aspect, dans ces instants-là, est étrange; on dirait qu’elle désire et craint le cyclone. De certains hyménées, d’ailleurs fort voulus par la nature, sont accueillis de cette façon. La lionne en rut fuit devant le lion. La mer, elle aussi, est en chaleur. De là son tremblement. L’immense mariage va se faire. Ce mariage, comme les noces des anciens empereurs, se célèbre par des exterminations. C’est une fête avec assaisonnement de désastres. Cependant, de là-bas, du large, des latitudes inexpugnables, du livide horizon des solitudes, du fond de la liberté sans bornes, les vents arrivent. Faites attention, voilà le fait équinoxial. p345

Une tempête, cela se complote. La vieille mythologie entrevoyait ces personnalités indistinctes mêlées à la grande nature diffuse. éole se concerte avec Borée. L’entente de l’élément avec l’élément est nécessaire. Ils se distribuent la tâche. On a des impulsions à donner à la vague, au nuage, à l’effluve; la nuit est un auxiliaire, il importe de l’employer. On a des boussoles à dérouter, des fanaux à éteindre, des phares à masquer, des étoiles à cacher. Il faut que la mer coopère. Tout orage est précédé d’un murmure. Il y a derrière l’horizon chuchotement préalable des ouragans. C’est là ce que, dans l’obscurité, au loin, par-dessus le silence effrayé de la mer, on entend. Ce chuchotement redoutable, Gilliatt l’avait entendu. La phosphorescence avait été le premier avertissement; ce murmure, le second. Si le démon légion existe, c’est lui, à coup sûr, qui est le vent. Le vent est multiple, mais l’air est un. De là cette conséquence: tout orage est mixte. L’unité de l’air l’exige. Tout l’abîme est impliqué dans une tempête. L’océan entier est dans une bourrasque. La totalité de ses forces y entre en ligne et y prend part. Une vague, c’est le gouffre d’en bas; un souffle, c’est le gouffre d’en haut. Avoir affaire à une tourmente, c’est avoir affaire à toute la mer et à tout le ciel. Messier, l’homme de la marine, l’astronome pensif de la logette de Cluny, disait: le vent de partout est partout . Il ne croyait point aux vents emprisonnés, même dans les mers closes. Il n’y avait point pour lui de vents méditerranéens. Il disait les reconnaître au passage. Il affirmait que tel jour, à telle heure, le fohn du lac de Constance, l’antique favonius de Lucrèce, avait traversé l’horizon de Paris; tel autre jour le bora de l’Adriatique; tel autre jour le notus giratoire qu’on prétend enfermé dans le rond des Cyclades. Il en spécifiait les effluves. Il ne pensait pas que l’autan qui tourne entre Malte et Tunis et que l’autan qui tourne entre la Corse et les Baléares fussent dans l’impossibilité de s’échapper. Il n’admettait point qu’il y eût des vents ours dans des cages. Il disait: “ toute pluie vient du tropique et tout éclair vient du pôle. “ le vent en effet se sature d’électricité à l’intersection des colures, qui marque les extrémités de l’axe, et d’eau à l’équateur; et il nous apporte de la ligne le liquide et des pôles le fluide. Ubiquité, c’est le vent. Ceci ne veut pas dire, certes, que les zones venteuses n’existent pas. Rien n’est plus démontré que ces afflations à courants continus, et un jour la navigation aérienne, servie par les air-navires que nous nommons, par manie du grec, aéroscaphes, en utilisera les lignes principales. La canalisation de l’air par le vent est incontestable, il y a des fleuves de vent, des rivières de p346

vent et des ruisseaux de vent; seulement les embranchements de l’air se font à l’inverse des embranchements de l’eau; ce sont les ruisseaux qui sortent des rivières et les rivières qui sortent des fleuves, au lieu d’y tomber; de là, au lieu de la concentration, la dispersion. C’est cette dispersion qui fait la solidarité des vents et l’unité de l’atmosphère. Une molécule déplacée déplace l’autre. Tout le vent remue ensemble. à ces profondes causes d’amalgame, ajoutez le relief du globe, trouant l’atmosphère par toutes ses montagnes, faisant des noeuds et des torsions dans les courses du vent, et déterminant dans tous les sens des contre-courants. Irradiation illimitée. Le phénomène du vent, c’est l’oscillation de deux océans l’un sur l’autre; l’océan d’air, superposé à l’océan d’eau, s’appuie sur cette fuite et chancelle sur ce tremblement. L’indivisible ne se met pas dans des compartiments. Il n’y a pas de cloison entre un flot et l’autre. Les îles de la Manche sentent la poussée du cap de Bonne-Espérance. La navigation universelle tient tête à un monstre unique. Toute la mer est la même hydre. Les vagues couvrent la mer d’une sorte de peau de poisson. Océan, c’est ceto. Sur cette unité s’abat l’innombrable. p347

5 turba, turma.

pour le compas, il y a trente-deux vents, c’est-à-dire trente-deux directions; mais ces directions peuvent se subdiviser indéfiniment. Le vent, classé par directions, c’est l’incalculable; classé par espèces, c’est l’infini. Homère reculerait devant ce dénombrement. Le courant polaire heurte le courant tropical. Voilà le froid et le chaud combinés, l’équilibre commence par le choc, l’onde des vents en sort, enflée, éparse, et déchiquetée dans tous les sens en ruissellements farouches. La dispersion des souffles secoue aux quatre coins de l’horizon le prodigieux échevèlement de l’air. Tous les rumbs sont là: le vent du Gulf-Stream qui dégorge tant de brume sur Terre-Neuve, le vent du Pérou, région à ciel muet où jamais l’homme n’a entendu tonner, le vent de la Nouvelle-écosse où vole le grand auk, alca impennis, au bec rayé, les tourbillons de fer des mers de Chine, le vent de Mozambique qui malmène les pangaies et les jonques, le vent électrique du Japon dénoncé par le gong, le vent d’Afrique qui habite entre la montagne de la table et la montagne du diable et qui se déchaîne de là, le vent de l’équateur qui passe par-dessus les vents alizés et qui trace une parabole dont le sommet est toujours à l’ouest, le vent plutonien qui sort des cratères et qui est le redoutable souffle de la flamme, l’étrange vent propre au volcan Awu qui fait toujours surgir un nuage olivâtre au nord, la mousson de Java, contre laquelle sont construites ces casemates qu’on nomme maisons d’ouragan , la bise à embranchements que les anglais appellent bush , buisson, les grains arqués du détroit de Malacca observés par Horsburgh, le puissant vent du sud-ouest, nommé Pampero au Chili et Rebojo à Buenos-Ayres, qui emporte le condor en pleine mer et le sauve de la fosse où l’attend, sous une peau de boeuf fraîchement écorché, le sauvage couché sur le dos et bandant son grand arc avec ses pieds, le vent chimique qui, selon Lemery, fait dans la nuée des pierres de tonnerre, l’harmattan des cafres, le chasse-neige polaire, qui s’attelle aux banquises et traîne les glaces éternelles, le vent du golfe de Bengale qui va jusqu’à Nijni-Novgorod saccager le triangle de baraques de bois où se tient la foire d’Asie, le vent des Cordillères, agitateur des grandes vagues et des grandes forêts, le vent des archipels d’Australie où p348

les chasseurs de miel dénichent les ruches sauvages cachées sous les aisselles des branches de l’eucalyptus géant, le siroco, le mistral, le hurricane, les vents de sécheresse, les vents d’inondation, les diluviens, les torrides, ceux qui jettent dans les rues de Gênes la poussière des plaines du Brésil, ceux qui obéissent à la rotation diurne, ceux qui la contrarient et qui font dire à Herrera: malo viento torna contra el sol, ceux qui vont par couples, d’accord pour bouleverser, l’un défaisant ce que fait l’autre, et les vieux vents qui ont assailli Christophe Colomb sur la côte de Veraguas, et ceux qui pendant quarante jours, du 21 octobre au 28 novembre 1520, ont mis en question Magellan abordant le Pacifique, et ceux qui ont démâté l’armada et soufflé sur Philippe Ii. D’autres encore, et comment trouver la fin? Les vents porteurs de crapauds et de sauterelles qui poussent des nuées de bêtes par-dessus l’océan; ceux qui opèrent ce qu’on appelle “ la saute de vent “ et qui ont pour fonction d’achever les naufragés, ceux qui, d’un seul coup d’haleine, déplacent la cargaison dans le navire, et le contraignent à continuer sa route penché; les vents qui construisent les circumcumuli, les vents qui construisent les circumstrati; les lourds vents aveugles tuméfiés de pluie, les vents de la grêle, les vents de la fièvre, ceux dont l’approche met en ébullition les salses et les solfatares de Calabre, ceux qui font étinceler le poil des panthères d’Afrique rôdant dans les broussailles du cap de Fer, ceux qui viennent secouant hors de leur nuage, comme une langue de trigonocéphale, l’épouvantable éclair à fourche; ceux qui apportent des neiges noires. Telle est l’armée. L’écueil Douvres, au moment où Gilliatt construisait son brise-lames, en entendait le galop lointain. Nous venons de le dire, le vent, c’est tous les vents. Toute cette horde arrivait. D’un côté, cette légion. De l’autre, Gilliatt. p349

6 Gilliatt a l’option.

Les mystérieuses forces avaient bien choisi le moment. Le hasard, s’il existe, est habile. Tant que la panse avait été remisée dans la crique de l’Homme, tant que la machine avait été emboîtée dans l’épave, Gilliatt était inexpugnable. La panse était en sûreté, la machine était à l’abri; les Douvres, qui tenaient la machine, la condamnaient à une destruction lente, mais la protégeaient contre une surprise. Dans tous les cas, il restait à Gilliatt une ressource. La machine détruite ne détruisait pas Gilliatt. Il avait la panse pour se sauver. Mais attendre que la panse fût retirée du mouillage où elle était inaccessible, la laisser s’engager dans le défilé des Douvres, patienter jusqu’à ce qu’elle fût prise, elle aussi, par l’écueil, permettre à Gilliatt d’opérer le sauvetage, le glissement et le transbordement de la machine, ne point entraver ce merveilleux travail qui mettait tout dans la panse, consentir à cette réussite, là était le piège. Là se laissait entrevoir, sorte de linéament sinistre, la sombre ruse de l’abîme. à cette heure, la machine, la panse, Gilliatt, étaient réunis dans la ruelle de rochers. Ils ne faisaient qu’un. La panse broyée à l’écueil, la machine coulée à fond, Gilliatt noyé, c’était l’affaire d’un effort unique sur un seul point. Tout pouvait être fini à la fois, en même temps, et sans dispersion; tout pouvait être écrasé d’un coup. Pas de situation plus critique que celle de Gilliatt. Le sphinx possible, soupçonné par les rêveurs au fond de l’ombre, semblait lui poser un dilemme: reste, ou pars. Partir était insensé, rester était effrayant. p350

7 le combat.

Gilliatt monta sur la grande Douvre. De là il voyait toute la mer. L'ouest était surprenant. Il en sortait une muraille. Une grande muraille de nuée, barrant de part en part l'étendue, montait lentement de l'horizon vers le zénith. Cette muraille, rectiligne, verticale, sans une crevasse dans sa hauteur, sans une déchirure à son arête, paraissait bâtie à l'équerre et tirée au cordeau. C'était du nuage ressemblant à du granit. L'escarpement de ce nuage, tout à fait perpendiculaire à l'extrémité sud, fléchissait un peu vers le nord comme une tôle ployée, et offrait le vague glissement d'un plan incliné. Ce mur de brume s'élargissait, et croissait sans que son entablement cessât un instant d'être parallèle à la ligne d'horizon, presque indistincte dans l'obscurité tombante. Cette muraille de l'air montait tout d'une pièce en silence. Pas une ondulation, pas un plissement, pas une saillie qui se déformât ou se déplaçât. Cette immobilité en mouvement était lugubre. Le soleil, blême derrière on ne sait quelle transparence malsaine, éclairait ce linéament d'apocalypse. La nuée envahissait déjà près de la moitié de l'espace. On eût dit l'effrayant talus de l'abîme. C'était quelque chose comme le lever d'une montagne d'ombre entre la terre et le ciel. C'était en plein jour l'ascension de la nuit. Il y avait dans l'air une chaleur de poêle. Une buée d'étuve se dégageait de cet amoncellement mystérieux. Le ciel, qui de bleu était devenu blanc, était de blanc devenu gris. On eût dit une grande ardoise. La mer, dessous, terne et plombée, était une autre ardoise énorme. Pas un souffle, pas un flot, pas un bruit. à perte de vue, la mer déserte. Aucune voile d'aucun côté. Les oiseaux s'étaient cachés. On sentait de la trahison dans l'infini. Le grossissement de toute cette ombre s'amplifiait insensiblement. La montagne mouvante de vapeurs qui se dirigeait vers les Douvres était un de ces nuages qu'on pourrait appeler les nuages de combat. Nuages louches. à travers ces entassements obscurs, on ne sait quel strabisme vous regarde. Cette approche était terrible. p351

Gilliatt examina fixement la nuée et grommela entre ses dents: j'ai soif, tu vas me donner à boire. Il demeura quelques moments immobile, l'oeil attaché sur le nuage. On eût dit qu'il toisait la tempête. Sa galérienne était dans la poche de sa vareuse, il l'en tira et s'en coiffa. Il prit, dans le trou où il avait si longtemps couché, sa réserve de hardes; il chaussa les jambières et endossa le suroit, comme un chevalier qui revêt son armure au moment de l'action. On sait qu'il n'avait plus de souliers, mais ses pieds nus étaient endurcis aux rochers. Cette toilette de guerre faite, il considéra son brise-lames, empoigna vivement la corde à noeuds, descendit du plateau de la Douvre, prit pied sur les roches d'en bas, et courut à son magasin. Quelques instants après, il était au travail. Le vaste nuage muet put entendre ses coups de marteau. Que faisait Gilliatt? Avec ce qui lui restait de clous, de cordes et de poutres il construisait au goulet de l'est une seconde claire-voie à dix ou douze pieds en arrière de la première. Le silence était toujours profond. Les brins d'herbe dans les fentes de l'écueil ne bougeaient pas. Brusquement le soleil disparut. Gilliatt leva la tête. La nuée montante venait d'atteindre le soleil. Ce fut comme une extinction du jour, remplacé par une réverbération mêlée et pâle. La muraille de nuée avait changé d'aspect. Elle n'avait plus son unité. Elle s'était froncée horizontalement en touchant au zénith d'où elle surplombait sur le reste du ciel. Elle avait maintenant des étages. La formation de la tempête s'y dessinait comme dans une section de tranchée. On distinguait les couches de la pluie et les gisements de la grêle. Il n'y avait point d'éclair, mais une horrible lueur éparse; car l'idée d'horreur peut s'attacher à l'idée de lumière. On entendait la vague respiration de l'orage. Ce silence palpitait obscurément. Gilliatt, silencieux lui aussi, regardait se grouper au-dessus de sa tête tous ces blocs de brume et se composer la difformité des nuages. Sur l'horizon pesait et s'étendait une bande de brouillard couleur cendre, et au zénith une bande couleur plomb; des guenilles livides pendaient des nuages d'en haut sur les brouillards d'en bas. Tout le fond, qui était le mur de nuages, était blafard, laiteux, terreux, morne, indescriptible. Une mince nuée blanchâtre transversale, arrivée on ne sait d'où, coupait obliquement, du nord au sud, la haute muraille sombre. Une des extrémités de cette nuée traînait dans la mer. Au point où elle touchait la confusion des vagues, on apercevait dans l'obscurité un étouffement de vapeur rouge. Au-dessous de la longue nuée pâle, de petits nuages, très bas, tout noirs, volaient en sens inverse les uns des autres comme s'ils ne savaient que devenir. Le p352

puissant nuage du fond croissait de toutes parts à la fois, augmentait l'éclipse, et continuait son interposition lugubre. Il n'y avait plus, à l'est, derrière Gilliatt, qu'un porche de ciel clair qui allait se fermer. Sans qu'on eût l'impression d'aucun vent, une étrange diffusion de duvet grisâtre passa, éparpillée et émiettée, comme si quelque gigantesque oiseau venait d'être plumé derrière ce mur de ténèbres. Il s'était formé un plafond de noirceur compacte qui, à l'extrême horizon, touchait la mer et s'y mêlait dans de la nuit. On sentait quelque chose qui avance. C'était vaste et lourd, et farouche. L’obscurité s’épaississait. Tout à coup un immense tonnerre éclata. Gilliatt lui-même ressentit la secousse. Il y a du songe dans le tonnerre. Cette réalité brutale dans la région visionnaire a quelque chose de terrifiant. On croit entendre la chute d’un meuble dans la chambre des géants. Aucun flamboiement électrique n’accompagna le coup. Ce fut comme un tonnerre noir. Le silence se refit. Il y eut une sorte d’intervalle comme lorsqu’on prend position. Puis apparurent, l’un après l’autre et lentement, de grands éclairs informes. Ces éclairs étaient muets. Pas de grondement. à chaque éclair tout s’illuminait. Le mur de nuages était maintenant un antre. Il y avait des voûtes et des arches. On y distinguait des silhouettes. Des têtes monstrueuses s’ébauchaient; des cous semblaient se tendre; des éléphants portant leurs tours, entrevus, s’évanouissaient. Une colonne de brume, droite, ronde et noire, surmontée d’une vapeur blanche, simulait la cheminée d’un steamer colossal englouti, chauffant sous la vague et fumant. Des nappes de nuée ondulaient. On croyait voir des plis de drapeaux. Au centre, sous des épaisseurs vermeilles, s’enfonçait, immobile, un noyau de brouillard dense, inerte, impénétrable aux étincelles électriques, sorte de foetus hideux dans le ventre de la tempête. Gilliatt subitement sentit qu’un souffle l’échevelait. Trois ou quatre larges araignées de pluie s’écrasèrent autour de lui sur la roche. Puis il y eut un second coup de foudre. Le vent se leva. L’attente de l’ombre était au comble; le premier coup de tonnerre avait remué la mer, le deuxième fêla la muraille de nuée du haut en bas, un trou se fit, toute l’ondée en suspens versa de ce côté, la crevasse devint comme une bouche ouverte pleine de pluie, et le vomissement de la tempête commença. L’instant fut effroyable. Averse, ouragan, fulgurations, fulminations, vagues jusqu’aux nuages, écume, détonations, torsions frénétiques, cris, rauquements, sifflements, tout à la fois. Déchaînement de monstres. Le vent soufflait en foudre. La pluie ne tombait pas, elle croulait. Pour un pauvre homme, engagé, comme Gilliatt, avec une barque chargée, p353

dans un entre-deux de rochers en pleine mer, pas de crise plus menaçante. Le danger de la marée, dont Gilliatt avait triomphé, n’était rien près du danger de la tempête. Voici quelle était la situation: Gilliatt, autour de qui tout était précipice, démasquait, à la dernière minute et devant le péril suprême, une stratégie savante. Il avait pris son point d’appui chez l’ennemi même; il s’était associé l’écueil; le rocher Douvres, autrefois son adversaire, était maintenant son second dans cet immense duel. Gilliatt l’avait mis sous lui. De ce sépulcre, Gilliatt avait fait sa forteresse. Il s’était crénelé dans cette masure formidable de la mer. Il y était bloqué, mais muré. Il était, pour ainsi dire, adossé à l’écueil, face à face avec l’ouragan. Il avait barricadé le détroit, cette rue des vagues. C’était du reste la seule chose à faire. Il semble que l’océan, qui est un despote, puisse être, lui aussi, mis à la raison par des barricades. La panse pouvait être considérée comme en sûreté de trois côtés. étroitement resserrée entre les deux façades intérieures de l’écueil, affourchée en patte d’oie, elle était abritée au nord par la petite Douvre, au sud par la grande, escarpements sauvages, plus habitués à faire des naufrages qu’à en empêcher. à l’ouest elle était protégée par le tablier de poutres amarré et cloué aux rochers, barrage éprouvé qui avait vaincu le rude flux de la haute mer, véritable porte de citadelle ayant pour chambranles les colonnes mêmes de l’écueil, les deux Douvres. Rien à craindre de ce côté-là. C’est à l’est qu’était le danger. à l’est il n’y avait que le brise-lames. Un brise-lames est un appareil de pulvérisation. Il lui faut au moins deux claires-voies. Gilliatt n’avait eu le temps que d’en construire une. Il bâtissait la seconde sous la tempête même. Heureusement le vent arrivait du nord-ouest. La mer fait des maladresses. Ce vent, qui est l’ancien vent de galerne, avait peu d’effet sur les roches Douvres. Il assaillait l’écueil en travers, et ne poussait le flot ni sur l’un, ni sur l’autre des deux goulets du défilé, de sorte qu’au lieu d’entrer dans une rue il se heurtait à une muraille. L’orage avait mal attaqué. Mais les attaques du vent sont courbes, et il fallait s’attendre à quelque virement subit. Si ce virement se faisait à l’est avant que la deuxième claire-voie du brise-lames fût construite, le péril serait grand. L’envahissement de la ruelle de rochers par la tempête s’accomplirait, et tout était perdu. L’étourdissement de l’orage allait croissant. Toute la tempête est coup sur coup. C’est là sa force; c’est aussi là son défaut. à force d’être une rage, elle donne prise à l’intelligence, et l’homme se défend; mais sous quel p354

écrasement! Rien n’est plus monstrueux. Nul répit, pas d’interruption, pas de trêve, pas de reprise d’haleine. Il y a on ne sait quelle lâcheté dans cette prodigalité de l’inépuisable. On sent que c’est le poumon de l’infini qui souffle. Toute l’immensité en tumulte se ruait sur l’écueil Douvres. On entendait des voix sans nombre. Qui donc crie ainsi? L’antique épouvante panique était là. Par moments, cela avait l’air de parler, comme si quelqu’un faisait un commandement. Puis des clameurs, des clairons, des trépidations étranges, et ce grand hurlement majestueux que les marins nomment appel de l’océan . Les spirales indéfinies et fuyantes du vent sifflaient en tordant le flot; les vagues, devenues disques sous ces tournoiements, étaient lancées contre les brisants comme des palets gigantesques par des athlètes invisibles. L’énorme écume échevelait toutes les roches. Torrents en haut, baves en bas. Puis les mugissements redoublaient. Aucune rumeur humaine ou bestiale ne saurait donner l’idée des fracas mêlés à ces dislocations de la mer. La nuée canonnait, les grêlons mitraillaient, la houle escaladait. De certains points semblaient immobiles; sur d’autres le vent faisait vingt toises par seconde. La mer à perte de vue était blanche; dix lieues d’eau de savon emplissaient l’horizon. Des portes de feu s’ouvraient et se fermaient. Quelques nuages paraissaient brûlés par les autres, et sur des tas de nuées rouges qui ressemblaient à des braises, ils ressemblaient à des fumées. Des configurations flottantes se heurtaient et s’amalgamaient, se déformant les unes par les autres. Une eau incommensurable ruisselait. On entendait des feux de peloton dans le firmament. Il y avait au milieu du plafond d’ombre une espèce de vaste hotte renversée d’où tombaient pêle-mêle la trombe, la grêle, les nuées, les pourpres, les phosphores, la nuit, la lumière, les bruits, les foudres, tant ces penchements du gouffre sont formidables! Gilliatt semblait n’y pas faire attention. Il avait la tête baissée sur son travail. La deuxième claire-voie commençait à s’exhausser. à chaque coup de tonnerre il répondait par un coup de marteau. On entendait cette cadence dans ce chaos. Il était nu-tête. Une rafale lui avait emporté sa galérienne. Sa soif était ardente. Il avait probablement la fièvre. Des flaques de pluie s’étaient formées autour de lui dans des trous de rochers. De temps en temps il prenait de l’eau dans le creux de sa main et buvait. Puis, sans même examiner où en était l’orage, il se remettait à la besogne. Tout pouvait dépendre d’un instant. Il savait ce qui l’attendait s’il ne terminait pas à temps son brise-lames. à quoi bon perdre une minute à regarder s’approcher la face de la mort? Le bouleversement autour de lui était comme une chaudière qui bout. Il p355

y avait du fracas et du tapage. Par instants la foudre semblait descendre un escalier. Les percussions électriques revenaient sans cesse aux mêmes pointes de rocher, probablement veinées de diorite. Il y avait des grêlons gros comme le poing. Gilliatt était forcé de secouer les plis de sa vareuse. Jusqu’à ses poches étaient pleines de grêle. La tourmente était maintenant ouest, et battait le barrage des deux Douvres; mais Gilliatt avait confiance en ce barrage, et avec raison. Ce barrage, fait du grand morceau de l’avant de la durande, recevait sans dureté le choc du flot; l'élasticité est une résistance; les calculs de Stevenson établissent que, contre la vague, élastique elle-même, un assemblage de bois, d'une dimension voulue, rejointoyé et enchaîné d'une certaine façon, fait meilleur obstacle qu'un breack-water de maçonnerie. Le barrage des Douvres remplissait ces conditions; il était d'ailleurs si ingénieusement amarré que la lame, en frappant dessus, était comme le marteau qui enfonce le clou, et l'appuyait au rocher et le consolidait; pour le démolir, il eût fallu renverser les Douvres. La rafale, en effet, ne réussissait qu'à envoyer à la panse, par-dessus l'obstacle, quelques jets de bave. De ce côté, grâce au barrage, la tempête avortait en crachement. Gilliatt tournait le dos à cet effort-là. Il sentait tranquillement derrière lui cette rage inutile. Les flocons d'écume, volant de toutes parts, ressemblaient à de la laine. L'eau vaste et irritée noyait les rochers, montait dessus, entrait dedans, pénétrait dans le réseau des fissures intérieures, et ressortait des masses granitiques par des fentes étroites, espèces de bouches intarissables qui faisaient dans ce déluge de petites fontaines paisibles. çà et là des filets d'argent tombaient gracieusement de ces trous dans la mer. La claire-voie de renfort du barrage de l'est s'achevait. Encore quelques noeuds de corde et de chaîne et le moment approchait où cette clôture pourrait à son tour lutter. Subitement, une grande clarté se fit, la pluie discontinua, les nuées se désagrégèrent, le vent venait de sauter, une sorte de haute fenêtre crépusculaire s'ouvrit au zénith, et les éclairs s'éteignirent; on put croire à la fin. C'était le commencement. La saute de vent était du sud-ouest au nord-est. La tempête allait reprendre, avec une nouvelle troupe d'ouragans. Le nord allait donner, assaut violent. Les marins nomment cette reprise redoutée la rafale de la renverse . Le vent du sud a plus d'eau, le vent du nord a plus de foudre. L'agression maintenant, venant de l'est, allait s'adresser au point faible. Cette fois Gilliatt se dérangea de son travail. Il regarda. p356

Il se plaça debout sur une saillie de rocher en surplomb derrière la deuxième claire-voie presque terminée. Si la première claie du brise-lames était emportée, elle défoncerait la seconde, pas consolidée encore, et, sous cette démolition, elle écraserait Gilliatt. Gilliatt, à la place qu'il venait de choisir, serait broyé avant de voir la panse et la machine et toute son oeuvre s'abîmer dans cet engouffrement. Telle était l'éventualité. Gilliatt l'acceptait, et, terrible, la voulait. Dans ce naufrage de toutes ses espérances, mourir d'abord, c'est ce qu'il lui fallait; mourir le premier; car la machine lui faisait l’effet d’une personne. Il releva de sa main gauche ses cheveux collés sur ses yeux par la pluie, étreignit à pleine poignée son bon marteau, se pencha en arrière, menaçant lui-même, et attendit. Il n’attendit pas longtemps. Un éclat de foudre donna le signal, l’ouverture pâle du zénith se ferma, une bouffée d’averse se précipita, tout redevint obscur, et il n’y eut plus de flambeau que l’éclair. La sombre attaque arrivait. Une puissante houle, visible dans les coups sur coups de l’éclair, se leva à l’est au delà du rocher l’Homme. Elle ressemblait à un gros rouleau de verre. Elle était glauque et sans écume et barrait toute la mer. Elle avançait vers le brise-lames. En approchant, elle s’enflait, c’était on ne sait quel large cylindre de ténèbres roulant sur l’océan. Le tonnerre grondait sourdement. Cette houle atteignit le rocher l’Homme, s’y cassa en deux, et passa outre. Les deux tronçons rejoints ne firent plus qu’une montagne d’eau, et, de parallèle qu’elle était au brise-lames, elle y devint perpendiculaire. C’était une vague qui avait la forme d’une poutre. Ce bélier se jeta sur le brise-lames. Le choc fut rugissant. Tout s’effaça dans de l’écume. On ne peut se figurer, si on ne les a vues, ces avalanches de neige que la mer s’ajoute, et sous lesquelles elle engloutit des rochers de plus de cent pieds de haut, tels, par exemple, que le grand Anderlo à Guernesey et le Pinacle à Jersey. à sainte-Marie de Madagascar, elle saute par-dessus la pointe de Tintingue. Pendant quelques instants, le paquet de mer aveugla tout. Il n’y eut plus rien de visible qu’un entassement furieux, une bave démesurée, la blancheur du linceul tournoyant au vent du sépulcre, un amas de bruit et d’orage sous lequel l’extermination travaillait. L’écume se dissipa. Gilliatt était debout. Le barrage avait tenu bon. Pas une chaîne rompue, pas un clou déplanté. Le barrage avait montré sous l’épreuve les deux qualités du brise-lames; p357

il avait été souple comme une claie et solide comme un mur. La houle s’y était dissoute en pluie. Un ruissellement d’écume, glissant le long des zigzags du détroit, alla mourir sous la panse. L’homme qui avait fait cette muselière à l’océan ne se reposa pas. L’orage heureusement divagua pendant quelque temps. L’acharnement des vagues revint aux parties murées de l’écueil. Ce fut un répit. Gilliatt en profita pour compléter la claire-voie d’arrière. La journée s’acheva dans ce labeur. La tourmente continuait ses violences sur le flanc de l’écueil avec une solennité lugubre. L’urne d’eau et l’urne de feu qui sont dans les nuées se versaient sans se vider. Les ondulations hautes et basses du vent ressemblaient aux mouvements d’un dragon. Quand la nuit vint, elle y était déjà; on ne s’en aperçut pas. Du reste, ce n'était point l'obscurité complète. Les tempêtes, illuminées et aveuglées par l'éclair, ont des intermittences de visible et d'invisible. Tout est blanc, puis tout est noir. On assiste à la sortie des visions et à la rentrée des ténèbres. Une zone de phosphore, rouge de la rougeur boréale, flottait comme un haillon de flamme spectrale derrière les épaisseurs de nuages. Il en résultait un vaste blêmissement. Les largeurs de la pluie étaient lumineuses. Ces clartés aidaient Gilliatt et le dirigeaient. Une fois il se tourna et dit à l'éclair: tiens-moi la chandelle. Il put, à cette lueur, exhausser la claire-voie d'arrière plus haut encore que la claire-voie d'avant. Le brise-lames se trouva presque complet. Comme Gilliatt amarrait à l'étrave culminante un câble de renfort, la bise lui souffla en plein dans le visage. Ceci lui fit dresser la tête. Le vent rentrait dans le défilé. Le vent s'était brusquement replacé au nord-est. L'assaut du goulet de l'est recommençait. Gilliatt jeta les yeux au large. Le brise-lames allait être encore assailli. Un nouveau coup de mer venait. Cette lame fut rudement assenée; une deuxième la suivit, puis une autre et une autre encore, cinq ou six en tumulte, presque ensemble; enfin une dernière, épouvantable. Celle-ci, qui était comme un total de forces, avait on ne sait quelle figure d'une chose vivante. Il n'aurait pas été malaisé d'imaginer dans cette intumescence et dans cette transparence des aspects d'ouïes et de nageoires. Elle s'aplatit et se broya sur le brise-lames. Sa forme presque animale s'y déchira dans un rejaillissement. Ce fut, sur ce bloc de rochers et de charpentes, quelque chose comme le vaste écrasement d'une hydre. La houle en mourant dévastait. Le flot paraissait se cramponner et mordre. Un profond p358

tremblement remua l'écueil. Des grognements de bête s'y mêlaient. L'écume ressemblait à la salive d'un léviathan. L'écume retombée laissa voir un ravage. Cette dernière escalade avait fait de la besogne. Cette fois le brise-lames avait souffert. Une longue et lourde poutre, arrachée de la claire-voie d'avant, avait été lancée par-dessus le barrage d'arrière, sur la roche en surplomb choisie un moment par Gilliatt pour poste de combat. Par bonheur, il n'y était point remonté. Il eût été tué roide. Il y eut dans la chute de ce poteau une singularité, qui, en empêchant le madrier de rebondir, sauva Giliatt des ricochets et des contre-coups. Elle lui fut même utile encore, comme on va le voir, d'une autre façon. Entre la roche en saillie et l'escarpement intérieur du défilé, il y avait un intervalle, un grand hiatus assez semblable à l'entaille d'une hache ou à l'alvéole d'un coin.

Une des extrémités du madrier jeté en l’air par le flot s’était en tombant engagée dans cet hiatus. L’hiatus s’en était élargi. Une idée vint à Gillitt. Peser sur l’autre extrémité. Le madrier, pris par un bout dans la fente du rocher qu’il avait agrandie, en sortait droit comme un bras tendu. Cette espèce de bras s’allongeait parallèlement à la façade intérieure du défilé, et l’extrémité libre du madrier s’éloignait de ce point d’appui d’environ dix-huit ou vingt pouces. Bonne distance pour l’effort à faire. Gilliatt s’arc-bouta des pieds, des genoux et des poings à l’escarpement et s’adossa des deux épaules au levier énorme. La poutre était longue, ce qui augmentait la puissance de la pesée. La roche était déjà ébranlée. Pourtant Gilliatt dut s’y reprendre à quatre fois. Il lui ruisselait des cheveux autant de sueur que de pluie. Le quatrième effort fut frénétique. Il y eut un rauquement dans le rocher, l’hiatus prolongé en fissure s’ouvrit comme une mâchoire, et la lourde masse tomba dans l’étroit entre-deux du défilé avec un bruit terrible, réplique aux coups de foudre. Elle tomba droite, si cette expression est possible, c’est-à-dire sans se casser. Qu’on se figure un menhir précipité tout d’une pièce. La poutre-levier suivit le rocher, et Gilliatt, tout cédant à la fois sous lui, faillit lui-même tomber. Le fond était très comblé de galets en cet endroit et il y avait peu d’eau. Le monolithe, dans un clapotement d’écume qui éclaboussa Gilliatt, se coucha entre les deux grandes roches parallèles du défilé et fit une muraille transversale, sorte de trait d’union des deux escarpements. Ses deux bouts touchaient; il était un peu trop long, et son sommet qui était de roche p359

mousse s’écrasa en s’emboîtant. Il résulta de cette chute un cul-de-sac singulier, qu’on peut voir encore aujourd’hui. L’eau derrière cette barre de pierre est presque toujours tranquille. C’était là un rempart plus invincible encore que le panneau de l’avant de la durande ajusté entre les deux Douvres. Ce barrage intervint à propos. Les coups de mer avaient continué. La vague s’opiniâtre toujours sur l’obstacle. La première claire-voie entamée commençait à se désarticuler. Une maille défaite à un brise-lames est une grave avarie. L’élargissement du trou est inévitable, et nul moyen d’y remédier sur place. La houle emporterait le travailleur. Une décharge électrique, qui illumina l’écueil, dévoila à Gilliatt le dégât qui se faisait dans le brise-lames, les poutres déjetées, les bouts de corde et les bouts de chaîne commençant à jouer dans le vent, une déchirure au centre de l’appareil. La deuxième claire-voie était intacte. Le bloc de pierre, si puissamment jeté par Gilliatt dans l’entre-deux derrière le brise-lames, était la plus solide des barrières, mais avait un défaut; il était trop bas. Les coups de mer ne pouvaient le rompre, mais pouvaient le franchir. Il ne fallait point songer à l’exhausser. Des masses rocheuses seules pouvaient être utilement superposées à ce barrage de pierre; mais comment les détacher, comment les traîner, comment les soulever, comment les étager, comment les fixer? On ajoute des charpentes! On n’ajoute pas des rochers. Gilliatt n’était pas Encelade. Le peu d’élévation de ce petit isthme de granit préoccupait Gilliatt. Ce défaut ne tarda point à se faire sentir. Les rafales ne quittaient plus le brise-lames; elles faisaient plus que s’acharner, on eût dit qu’elles s’appliquaient. On entendait sur cette charpente cahotée une sorte de piétinement. Tout à coup un tronçon d’hiloire, détaché de cette dislocation, sauta au delà de la deuxième claire-voie, vola par-dessus la roche transversale, et alla s’abattre dans le défilé, où l’eau le saisit et l’emporta dans les sinuosités de la ruelle. Gilliatt l’y perdit de vue. Il est probable que ce morceau de poutre alla heurter la panse. Heureusement, dans l’intérieur de l’écueil, l’eau, enfermée de toutes parts, se ressentait à peine du bouleversement extérieur. Il y avait peu de flot, et le choc ne put être très rude. Gilliatt du reste n’avait pas le temps de s’occuper de cette avarie, s’il y avait avarie; tous les dangers se levaient à la fois, la tempête se concentrait sur le point vulnérable, l’imminence était devant lui. p360

L’obscurité fut un moment profonde, l’éclair s’interrompit, connivence sinistre; la nuée et la vague ne firent qu’un; il y eut un coup sourd. Ce coup fut suivi d’un fracas. Gilliatt avança la tête. La claire-voie, qui était le front du barrage, était défoncée. On voyait les pointes de poutres bondir dans la vague. La mer se servait du premier brise-lames pour battre en brèche le second. Gilliatt éprouva ce qu’éprouverait un général qui verrait son avant-garde ramenée. Le deuxième rang de poutres résista au choc. L’armature d’arrière était fortement liée et contrebutée. Mais la claire-voie rompue était pesante, elle était à la discrétion des flots qui la lançaient, puis la reprenaient, les ligatures qui lui restaient l’empêchaient de s’émietter et lui maintenaient tout son volume, et les qualités que Gilliatt lui avait données comme appareil de défense aboutissaient à en faire un excellent engin de destruction. De bouclier elle était devenue massue. En outre les cassures la hérissaient, des bouts de solives lui sortaient de partout, et elle était comme couverte de dents et d’éperons. Pas d’arme contondante plus redoutable et plus propre à être maniée par la tempête. Elle était le projectile et la mer était la catapulte. Les coups se succédaient avec une sorte de régularité tragique. Gilliatt, pensif derrière cette porte barricadée par lui, écoutait ces frappements de la mort voulant entrer. Il réfléchissait amèrement que, sans cette cheminée de la durande si fatalement retenue par l'épave, il serait en cet instant-là même, et depuis le matin, rentré à Guernesey, et au port, avec la panse en sûreté et la machine sauvée. La chose redoutée se réalisa. L'effraction eut lieu. Ce fut comme un râle. Toute la charpente du brise-lames à la fois, les deux armatures confondues et broyées ensemble, vint, dans une trombe de houle, se ruer sur le barrage de pierre comme un chaos sur une montagne, et s'y arrêta. Cela ne fut plus qu'un enchevêtrement, informe broussaille de poutres, pénétrable aux flots mais les pulvérisant encore. Ce rempart vaincu agonisait héroïquement. La mer l'avait fracassé, et il brisait la mer. Renversé, il demeurait, dans une certaine mesure, efficace. La roche formant barrage, obstacle sans recul possible, le retenait par le pied. Le défilé était, nous l'avons dit, très étroit sur ce point; la rafale victorieuse avait refoulé, mêlé et pilé tout le brise-lames en bloc dans cet étranglement; la violence même de la poussée, en tassant la masse et en enfonçant les fractures les unes dans les autres, avait fait de cette démolition un écrasement solide. C'était détruit et inébranlable. Quelques pièces de bois seulement s'arrachèrent. Le flot les p361

dispersa. Une passa en l'air très près de Gilliatt. Il en sentit le vent sur son front. Mais quelques lames, ces grosses lames qui dans les tourmentes reviennent avec une périodicité imperturbable, sautaient par-dessus la ruine du brise-lames. Elles retombaient dans le défilé, et, en dépit des coudes que faisait la ruelle, elles y soulevaient l'eau. Le flot du détroit commençait à remuer fâcheusement. Le baiser obscur des vagues aux rochers s'accentuait. Comment empêcher à présent cette agitation de se propager jusqu'à la panse? Il ne faudrait pas beaucoup de temps à ces rafales pour mettre toute l'eau intérieure en tempête, et, en quelques coups de mer, la panse serait éventrée, et la machine coulée. Gilliatt songeait, frémissant. Mais il ne se déconcertait point. Pas de déroute possible pour cette âme. L'ouragan maintenant avait trouvé le joint et s'engouffrait frénétiquement entre les deux murailles du détroit. Tout à coup retentit et se prolongea dans le défilé, à quelque distance en arrière de Gilliatt, un craquement, plus effrayant que tout ce que Gilliatt avait encore entendu. C'était du côté de la panse. Quelque chose de funeste se passait là. Gilliatt y courut. Du goulet de l'est, où il était, il ne pouvait voir la panse à cause des zigzags de la ruelle. Au dernier tournant il s'arrêta, et attendit un éclair. L'éclair arriva et lui montra la situation. Au coup de mer sur le goulet de l’est avait répondu un coup de vent sur le goulet de l’ouest. Un désastre s’y ébauchait. La panse n’avait point d’avarie visible; affourchée comme elle était, elle donnait peu de prise; mais la carcasse de la durande était en détresse. Cette ruine, dans une telle tempête, présentait de la surface. Elle était toute hors de l’eau, en l’air, offerte. Le trou que lui avait pratiqué Gilliatt pour en extraire la machine, achevait d’affaiblir la coque. La poutre de quille était coupée. Ce squelette avait la colonne vertébrale rompue. L’ouragan avait soufflé dessus. Il n’en avait point fallu davantage. Le tablier du pont s’était plié comme un livre qui s’ouvre. Le démembrement s’était fait. C’était ce craquement qui, à travers la tourmente, était parvenu aux oreilles de Gilliatt. p362

Ce qu’il vit en approchant paraissait presque irrémédiable. L’incision carrée opérée par lui était devenue une plaie. De cette coupure le vent avait fait une fracture. Cette brisure transversale séparait l’épave en deux. La partie postérieure, voisine de la panse, était demeurée solide dans son étau de rochers. La partie antérieure, celle qui faisait face à Gilliatt, pendait. Une fracture, tant qu’elle tient, est un gond. Cette masse oscillait sur ses cassures comme sur des charnières, et le vent la balançait avec un bruit redoutable. Heureusement la panse n’était plus dessous. Mais ce balancement ébranlait l’autre moitié de la coque encore incrustée et immobile entre les deux Douvres. De l’ébranlement à l’arrachement il n’y a pas loin. Sous l’opiniâtreté du vent, la partie disloquée pouvait subitement entraîner l’autre, qui touchait presque à la panse, et tout, la panse avec la machine, s’engloutirait sous cet effondrement. Gilliatt avait cela devant les yeux. C’était la catastrophe. Comment la détourner? Gilliatt était de ceux qui du danger même font jaillir le secours. Il se recueillit un moment. Gilliatt alla à son arsenal et prit sa hache. Le marteau avait bien travaillé, c’était le tour de la cognée. Puis Gilliatt monta sur l’épave. Il prit pied sur la partie du tablier qui n’avait pas fléchi, et, penché au-dessus du précipice de l’entre-deux des Douvres, il se mit à achever les poutres brisées et à couper ce qui restait d’attaches à la coque pendante. Consommer la séparation des deux tronçons de l’épave, délivrer la moitié restée solide, jeter au flot ce que le vent avait saisi, faire la part à la tempête, telle était l’opération. Elle était plus périlleuse que malaisée. La moitié pendante de la coque, tirée par le vent et par son poids, n’adhérait que par quelques points. L’ensemble de l’épave ressemblait à un diptyque dont un volet à demi décloué battrait l’autre. Cinq ou six pièces de la membrure seulement, pliées et éclatées, mais non rompues, tenaient encore. Leurs fractures criaient et s’élargissaient à chaque va-et-vient de la bise, et la hache n’avait pour ainsi dire qu’à aider le vent. Ce peu d’attaches, qui faisait la facilité de ce travail, en faisait aussi le danger. Tout pouvait crouler à la fois sous Gilliatt. L’orage atteignait son paroxysme. La tempête n’avait été que terrible, elle devint horrible. La convulsion de la mer gagna le ciel. La nuée jusque-là avait été souveraine, elle semblait exécuter ce qu’elle voulait, elle donnait l’impulsion, elle versait la folie aux vagues, tout en gardant on ne sait p363

quelle lucidité sinistre. En bas c’était de la démence, en haut c’était de la colère. Le ciel est le souffle, l’océan n’est que l’écume. De là l’autorité du vent. L’ouragan est génie. Cependant l’ivresse de sa propre horreur l’avait troublé. Il n’était plus que tourbillon. C’était l’aveuglement enfantant la nuit. Il y a dans les tourmentes un moment insensé; c’est pour le ciel une espèce de montée au cerveau. L’abîme ne sait plus ce qu’il fait. Il foudroie à tâtons. Rien de plus affreux. C’est l’heure hideuse. La trépidation de l’écueil était à son comble. Tout orage a une mystérieuse orientation; à cet instant-là, il la perd. C’est le mauvais endroit de la tempête. à cet instant-là, le vent, disait Thomas Fuller, est un fou furieux . C’est à cet instant-là que se fait dans les tempêtes cette dépense continue d’électricité que Piddington appelle la cascade d’éclairs . C’est à cet instant-là qu’au plus noir de la nuée apparaît, on ne sait pourquoi, pour espionner l’effarement universel, ce cercle de lueur bleue que les vieux marins espagnols nommaient l’oeil de tempête, el ojo de tempestad . Cet oeil lugubre était sur Gilliatt. Gilliatt de son côté regardait la nuée. Maintenant il levait la tête. Après chaque coup de cognée, il se dressait, hautain. Il était, ou il semblait être, trop perdu pour que l’orgueil ne lui vînt pas. Désespérait-il? Non. Devant le suprême accès de rage de l’océan, il était aussi prudent que hardi. Il ne p364

mettait le pied dans l’épave que sur les points solides. Il se risquait et se préservait. Lui aussi était à son paroxysme. Sa vigueur avait décuplé. Il était éperdu d’intrépidité. Ses coups de cognée sonnaient comme des défis. Il paraissait avoir gagné en lucidité ce que la tempête avait perdu. Conflit pathétique. D’un côté l’intarissable, de l’autre l’infatigable. C’était à qui ferait lâcher prise à l’autre. Les nuées terribles modelaient dans l’immensité des masques de gorgones, tout le dégagement d’intimidation possible se produisait, la pluie venait des vagues, l’écume venait des nuages, les fantômes du vent se courbaient, des faces de météores s’empourpraient et s’éclipsaient, et l’obscurité était monstrueuse après ces évanouissements; il n’y avait plus qu’un versement, arrivant de tous les côtés à la fois; tout était ébullition; l’ombre en masse débordait; les cumulus chargés de grêle, déchiquetés, couleur cendre, paraissaient pris d’une espèce de frénésie giratoire, il y avait en l’air un bruit de pois secs secoués dans un crible, les électricités inverses observées par Volta faisaient de nuage à nuage leur jeu fulminant, les prolongements de la foudre étaient épouvantables, les éclairs s’approchaient tout près de Gilliatt. Il semblait étonner l’abîme. Il allait et venait sur la durande branlante, faisant trembler le pont sous son pas, frappant, taillant, coupant, tranchant, la hache au poing, blême aux éclairs, échevelé, pieds nus, en haillons, la face couverte des crachats de la mer, grand dans ce cloaque de tonnerres. Contre le délire des forces, l’adresse seule peut lutter. L’adresse était le triomphe de Gilliatt. Il voulait une chute ensemble de tout le débris disloqué. Pour cela il affaiblissait les fractures charnières sans les rompre tout à fait, laissant quelques fibres qui soutenaient le reste. Subitement il s’arrêta, tenant la cognée haute. L’opération était à point. Le morceau entier se détacha. Cette moitié de la carcasse de l’épave coula entre les deux Douvres, au-dessous de Gilliatt debout sur l’autre moitié, penché et regardant. Elle plongea perpendiculairement dans l’eau, éclaboussa les rochers, et s’arrêta dans l’étranglement avant de toucher le fond. Il en resta assez hors de l’eau pour dominer le flot de plus de douze pieds; le tablier vertical faisait muraille entre les deux Douvres; comme la roche jetée en travers un peu plus haut dans le détroit, il laissait à peine filtrer un glissement d’écume à ses deux extrémités; et ce fut la cinquième barricade improvisée par Gilliatt contre la tempête dans cette rue de la mer. L’ouragan, aveugle, avait travaillé à cette barricade dernière. Il était heureux que le resserrement des parois eût empêché ce barrage d’aller jusqu’au fond. Cela lui laissait plus de hauteur; en outre l’eau pouvait passer sous l’obstacle, ce qui soutirait de la force aux lames. Ce qui p365

passe par-dessous ne saute point par-dessus. C’est là, en partie, le secret du brise-lames flottant. Désormais, quoi que fît la nuée, rien n’était à craindre pour la panse et la machine. L’eau ne pouvait plus bouger autour d’elles. Entre la clôture des Douvres qui les couvrait à l’ouest et le nouveau barrage qui les protégeait à l’est, aucun coup de mer ni de vent ne pouvait les atteindre. Gilliatt de la catastrophe avait tiré le salut. La nuée, en somme, l’avait aidé. Cette chose faite, il prit d’une flaque de pluie un peu d’eau dans le creux de sa main, but, et dit à la nuée: cruche! C’est une joie ironique pour l’intelligence combattante de constater la vaste stupidité des forces furieuses aboutissant à des services rendus, et Gilliatt sentait cet immémorial besoin d’insulter son ennemi, qui remonte aux héros d’Homère. Gilliatt descendit dans la panse et profita des éclairs pour l’examiner. Il était temps que le secours arrivât à la pauvre barque, elle avait été fort secouée dans l’heure précédente et elle commençait à s’arquer. Gilliatt, dans ce coup d’oeil sommaire, ne constata aucune avarie. Pourtant il était certain qu’elle avait enduré des chocs violents. Une fois l’eau calmée, la coque s’était redressée d’elle-même; les ancres s’étaient bien comportées; quant à la machine, ses quatre chaînes l’avaient admirablement maintenue. Comme Gilliatt achevait cette revue, une blancheur passa près de lui et s’enfonça dans l’ombre. C’était une mouette. Pas d’apparition meilleure dans les tourmentes. Quand les oiseaux arrivent, c’est que l’orage se retire. Autre signe excellent, le tonnerre redoublait. Les suprêmes violences de la tempête la désorganisent. Tous les marins le savent, la dernière épreuve est rude, mais courte. L’excès de foudre annonce la fin. La pluie s’arrêta subitement. Puis il n’y eut plus qu’un roulement bourru dans la nuée. L’orage cessa comme une planche qui tombe à terre. Il se cassa, pour ainsi dire. L’immense machine des nuages se défit. Une lézarde de ciel clair disjoignit les ténèbres. Gilliatt fut stupéfait, il était grand jour. La tempête avait duré près de vingt heures. Le vent qui avait apporté, remporta. Un écroulement d’obscurité diffuse encombra l’horizon. Les brumes rompues et fuyantes se massèrent pêle-mêle en tumulte, il y eut d’un bout à l’autre de la ligne des nuages un mouvement p366

de retraite, on entendit une longue rumeur décroissante, quelques dernières gouttes de pluie tombèrent, et toute cette ombre pleine de tonnerres s’en alla comme une cohue de chars terribles. Brusquement le ciel fut bleu. Gilliatt s’aperçut qu’il était las. Le sommeil s’abat sur la fatigue comme un oiseau de proie. Gilliatt se laissa fléchir et tomber dans la barque sans choisir la place, et s’endormit. Il resta ainsi quelques heures inerte et allongé, peu distinct des poutres et des solives parmi lesquelles il gisait. Quand il s’éveilla, il eut faim.

LIVRE QUATRIÈME

LES DOUBLES FONDS DE L’OBSTACLE

I

QUI A FAIM N'EST PAS LE SEUL

Quand il s'éveilla, il eut faim.

La mer s'apaisait. Mais il restait assez d'agitation au large pour que le départ immédiat fût impossible. La journée d'ailleurs était trop avancée. Avec le chargement que portait la panse, pour arriver à Guernesey avant minuit, il fallait partir le matin.

Quoique la faim le pressât, Gilliatt commença par se mettre nu, seul moyen de se réchauffer.

Ses vêtements étaient trempés par l'orage, mais l'eau de pluie avait lavé l'eau de mer, ce qui fait que maintenant ils pouvaient sécher.

Gilliatt ne garda que son pantalon, qu'il releva jusqu'aux jarrets.

Il étendit çà et là et fixa avec des galets sur les saillies de rocher autour de lui sa chemise, sa vareuse, son suroît, ses jambières et sa peau de mouton.

Puis il pensa à manger.

Gilliatt eut recours à son couteau qu'il avait grand soin d'aiguiser et de tenir toujours en état, et il détacha du granit quelques poux de roque, de la même espèce à peu près que les clovisses de la Méditerranée. On sait que cela se mange cru. Mais, après tant de labeurs si divers et si rudes, la pitance était maigre. Il n'avait plus de biscuit. Quant à l'eau, elle ne lui manquait plus. Il était mieux que désaltéré, il était inondé.

Il profita de ce que la mer baissait pour rôder dans les rochers à la recherche des langoustes. Il y avait assez de découverte pour espérer une bonne chasse.

Seulement il ne réfléchissait pas qu'il ne pouvait plus rien faire cuire. S'il eût pris le temps d'aller jusqu'à son magasin, il l'eût trouvé effondré sous la pluie. Son bois et son charbon étaient noyés, et de sa provision d'étoupe, qui lui tenait lieu d'amadou, il n'y avait pas un brin qui ne fût mouillé. Nul moyen d'allumer du feu. Du reste la soufflante était désorganisée; l'auvent du foyer de la forge était descellé; l'orage avait fait le sac du laboratoire. Avec ce qui restait d'outils échappés à l'avarie, Gilliatt, à la rigueur, pouvait encore travailler comme charpentier, non comme forgeron. Mais Gilliatt, pour l'instant, ne songeait pas à son atelier.

Tiré d'un autre côté par l'estomac, il s'était mis, sans plus de réflexion, à la poursuite de son repas. Il errait, non dans la gorge de l'écueil, mais en dehors, sur le revers des brisants. C'était de ce côté-là que la Durande, dix semaines auparavant, était venue se heurter aux récifs.

Pour la chasse que faisait Gilliatt, l'extérieur du défilé valait mieux que l'intérieur. Les crabes, à mer basse, ont l'habitude de prendre l'air. Ils se chauffent volontiers au soleil. Ces êtres difformes aiment midi. C'est une chose bizarre que leur sortie de l'eau en pleine lumière. Leur fourmillement indigne presque. Quand on les voit, avec leur gauche allure oblique, monter lourdement, de pli en pli, les étages inférieurs des rochers comme les marches d'un escalier, on est forcé de s'avouer que l'océan a de la vermine.

Depuis deux mois Gilliatt vivait de cette vermine.

Ce jour-là pourtant les poings-clos et les langoustes se dérobaient. La tempête avait refoulé ces solitaires dans leurs cachettes et ils n'étaient pas encore rassurés. Gilliatt tenait à la main son couteau ouvert, et arrachait de temps en temps un coquillage sous le varech. Il mangeait, tout en marchant. Il ne devait pas être loin de l'endroit où sieur Clubin s'était perdu.

Comme Gilliatt prenait le parti de se résigner aux oursins et aux châtaignes de mer, un clapotement se fit à ses pieds. Un gros crabe, effrayé de son approche, venait de sauter à l'eau. Le crabe ne s'enfonça point assez pour que Gilliatt le perdît de vue.

Gilliatt se mit à courir après le crabe sur le soubassement de l'écueil. Le crabe fuyait.

Subitement il n'y eut plus rien.

Le crabe venait de se fourrer dans quelque crevasse sous le rocher.

Gilliatt se cramponna du poing à des reliefs de roche et avança la tête pour voir sous les surplombs.

Il y avait là, en effet, une anfractuosité. Le crabe avait dû s'y réfugier.

C'était mieux qu'une crevasse. C'était une espèce de porche.

La mer entrait sous ce porche, mais n'y était pas profonde. On voyait le fond couvert de galets. Ces galets étaient glauques et revêtus de conferves, ce qui indiquait qu'ils n'étaient jamais à sec. Ils ressemblaient à des dessus de têtes d'enfants avec des cheveux verts.

Gilliatt prit son couteau dans ses dents, descendit des pieds et des mains du haut de l’escarpement et sauta dans cette eau. Il en eut presque jusqu’aux épaules.

Il s’engagea sous ce porche. Il se trouvait dans un couloir fruste avec une ébauche de voûte ogive sur sa tête. Les parois étaient polies et lisses. Il ne voyait plus le crabe. Il avait pied. Il avançait dans une décroissance de jour. Il commençait à ne plus rien distinguer.

Après une quinzaine de pas, la voûte cessa au-dessus de lui. Il était hors du couloir. Il y avait plus d’espace, et par conséquent plus de jour; ses pupilles d’ailleurs s’étaient dilatées; il voyait assez clair. Il eut une surprise.

Il venait de rentrer dans cette cave étrange visitée par lui le mois d’auparavant.

Seulement il y était rentré par la mer.

Cette arche qu’il avait vue noyée, c’est par là qu’il venait de passer. À de certaines marées basses, elle était praticable.

Ses yeux s’accoutumaient. Il voyait de mieux en mieux. Il était stupéfait. Il retrouvait cet extraordinaire palais de l’ombre, cette voûte, ces piliers, ces sangs ou ces pourpres, cette végétation à pierreries, et, au fond, cette crypte, presque sanctuaire, et cette pierre, presque autel.

Il se rendait peu compte de ces détails, mais il avait dans l’esprit l’ensemble, et il le revoyait.

Il revoyait en face de lui, à une certaine hauteur dans l’escarpement, la crevasse par laquelle il avait pénétré la première fois, et qui, du point où il était maintenant, semblait inaccessible.

Il revoyait près de l’arche ogive ces grottes basses et obscures, sortes de caveaux dans la cave, qu’il avait déjà observées de loin. À présent, il en était près. La plus voisine de lui était à sec et aisément abordable.

Plus près encore que cet enfoncement, il remarqua, au-dessus du niveau de l’eau, à portée de sa main, une fissure horizontale dans le granit. Le crabe était probablement là. Il y plongea le poing le plus avant qu’il put, et se mit à tâtonner dans ce trou de ténèbres.

Tout à coup il se sentit saisir le bras.

Ce qu’il éprouva en ce moment, c’est l’horreur indescriptible.

Quelque chose qui était mince, âpre, plat, glacé, gluant et vivant venait de se tordre dans l’ombre autour de son bras nu. Cela lui montait vers la poitrine. C’était la pression d’une courroie et la poussée d’une vrille. En moins d’une seconde, on ne sait quelle spirale lui avait envahi le poignet et le coude et touchait l’épaule. La pointe fouillait sous son aisselle.

Gilliatt se rejeta en arrière, mais put à peine remuer. Il était comme cloué. De sa main gauche restée libre il prit son couteau qu’il avait entre les dents, et de cette main, tenant le couteau, s’arc-bouta au rocher, avec un effort désespéré pour retirer son bras. Il ne réussit qu’à inquiéter un peu la ligature, qui se resserra. Elle était souple comme le cuir, solide comme l’acier, froide comme la nuit.

Une deuxième lanière, étroite et aiguë, sortit de la crevasse du roc. C’était comme une langue hors d’une gueule. Elle lécha épouvantablement le torse nu de Gilliatt, et tout à coup s’allongeant, démesurée et fine, elle s’appliqua sur sa peau et lui entoura tout le corps.

En même temps une souffrance inouïe, comparable à rien, soulevait les muscles crispés de Gilliatt. Il sentait dans sa peau des enfoncements ronds, horribles. Il lui semblait que d’innombrables lèvres, collées à sa chair, cherchaient à lui boire le sang.

Une troisième lanière ondoya hors du rocher, tâta Gilliatt, et lui fouetta les côtes comme une corde. Elle s’y fixa.

L’angoisse, à son paroxysme, est muette. Gilliatt ne jetait pas un cri. Il y avait assez de jour pour qu’il pût voir les repoussantes formes appliquées sur lui. Une quatrième ligature, celle-ci rapide comme une flèche, lui sauta autour du ventre et s’y enroula.

Impossible de couper ni d’arracher ces courroies visqueuses qui adhéraient étroitement au corps de Gilliatt et par quantité de points. Chacun de ces points était un foyer d’affreuse et bizarre douleur. C’était ce qu’on éprouverait si l’on se sentait avalé à la fois par une foule de bouches trop petites.

Un cinquième allongement jaillit du trou. Il se superposa aux autres et vint se replier sur le diaphragme de Gilliatt. La compression s’ajoutait à l’anxiété; Gilliatt pouvait à peine respirer.

Ces lanières, pointues à leur extrémité, allaient s’élargissant comme des lames d’épée vers la poignée. Toutes les cinq appartenaient évidemment au même centre. Elles marchaient et rampaient sur Gilliatt. Il sentait se déplacer ces pressions obscures qui lui semblaient être des bouches.

Brusquement une large viscosité ronde et plate sortit de dessous la crevasse. C’était le centre; les cinq lanières s’y rattachaient comme des rayons à un moyeu; on distinguait au côté opposé de ce disque immonde le commencement de trois autres tentacules, restés sous l’enfoncement du rocher.

Au milieu de cette viscosité il y avait deux yeux qui regardaient.

Ces yeux voyaient Gilliatt.

Gilliatt reconnut la pieuvre.

II

LE MONSTRE

Pour croire à la pieuvre, il faut l’avoir vue.

Comparées à la pieuvre, les vieilles hydres font sourire.

À de certains moments, on serait tenté de le penser, l’insaisissable qui flotte en nos songes rencontre dans le possible des aimants auxquels ses linéaments se prennent, et de ces obscures fixations du rêve il sort des êtres. L’inconnu dispose du prodige, et il s’en sert pour composer le monstre. Orphée, Homère et Hésiode n’ont pu faire que la Chimère; Dieu a fait la pieuvre.

Quand Dieu veut, il excelle dans l’exécrable.

Le pourquoi de cette volonté est l’effroi du penseur religieux.

Tous les idéals étant admis, si l’épouvante est un but, la pieuvre est un chef-d’œuvre.

La baleine a l’énormité, la pieuvre est petite; l’hippopotame a une cuirasse, la pieuvre est nue; la jararaca a un sifflement, la pieuvre est muette; le rhinocéros a une corne, la pieuvre n’a pas de corne; le scorpion a un dard, la pieuvre n’a pas de dard; le buthus a des pinces, la pieuvre n’a pas de pinces; l’alouate a une queue prenante, la pieuvre n’a pas de queue; le requin a des nageoires tranchantes, la pieuvre n’a pas de nageoires; le vespertilio-vampire a des ailes onglées, la pieuvre n’a pas d’ailes; le hérisson a des épines, la pieuvre n’a pas d’épines; l’espadon a un glaive, la pieuvre n’a pas de glaive; la torpille a une foudre, la pieuvre n’a pas d’effluve; le crapaud a un virus, la pieuvre n’a pas de virus; la vipère a un venin, la pieuvre n’a pas de venin; le lion a des griffes, la pieuvre n’a pas de griffes; le gypaète a un bec, la pieuvre n’a pas de bec; le crocodile a une gueule, la pieuvre n’a pas de dents.

La pieuvre n’a pas de masse musculaire, pas de cri menaçant, pas de cuirasse, pas de corne, pas de dard, pas de pince, pas de queue prenante ou contondante, pas d’ailerons tranchants, pas d’ailerons onglés, pas d’épines, pas d’épée, pas de décharge électrique, pas de virus, pas de venin, pas de griffes, pas de bec, pas de dents. La pieuvre est de toutes les bêtes la plus formidablement armée.

Qu’est-ce donc que la pieuvre? C’est la ventouse.

Dans les écueils de pleine mer, là où l’eau étale et cache toutes ses splendeurs, dans les creux de roches non visités, dans les caves inconnues où abondent les végétations, les crustacés et les coquillages, sous les profonds portails de l’océan, le nageur qui s’y hasarde, entraîné par la beauté du lieu, court le risque d’une rencontre. Si vous faites cette rencontre, ne soyez pas curieux, évadez-vous. On entre ébloui, on sort terrifié.

Voici ce que c’est que cette rencontre, toujours possible dans les roches du large.

Une forme grisâtre oscille dans l’eau; c’est gros comme le bras et long d’une demi-aune environ; c’est un chiffon; cette forme ressemble à un parapluie fermé qui n’aurait pas de manche. Cette loque avance vers vous peu à peu. Soudain, elle s’ouvre, huit rayons s’écartent brusquement autour d’une face qui a deux yeux; ces rayons vivent; il y a du flamboiement dans leur ondoiement; c’est une sorte de roue; déployée, elle a quatre ou cinq pieds de diamètre. épanouissement effroyable. Cela se jette sur vous.

L’hydre harponne l’homme.

Cette bête s’applique sur sa proie, la recouvre, et la noue de ses longues bandes. En dessous elle est jaunâtre, en dessus elle est terreuse; rien ne saurait rendre cette inexplicable nuance poussière; on dirait une bête faite de cendre qui habite l’eau. Elle est arachnide par la forme et caméléon par la coloration. Irritée, elle devient violette. Chose épouvantable, c’est mou.

Ses nœuds garrottent; son contact paralyse.

Elle a un aspect de scorbut et de gangrène; c’est de la maladie arrangée en monstruosité.

Elle est inarrachable. Elle adhère étroitement à sa proie. Comment? Par le vide. Les huit antennes, larges à l’origine, vont s’effilant et s’achèvent en aiguilles. Sous chacune d’elles s’allongent parallèlement deux rangées de pustules décroissantes, les grosses près de la tête, les petites à la pointe. Chaque rangée est de vingt-cinq; il y a cinquante pustules par antenne, et toute la bête en a quatre cents. Ces pustules sont des ventouses.

Ces ventouses sont des cartilages cylindriques, cornés, livides. Sur la grande espèce, elles vont diminuant du diamètre d’une pièce de cinq francs à la grosseur d’une lentille. Ces tronçons de tubes sortent de l’animal et y rentrent. Ils peuvent s’enfoncer dans la proie de plus d’un pouce.

Cet appareil de succion a toute la délicatesse d'un clavier. Il se dresse, puis se dérobe. Il obéit à la moindre intention de l'animal. Les sensibilités les plus exquises n'égalent pas la contractilité de ces ventouses, toujours proportionnée aux mouvements intérieurs de la bête et aux incidents extérieurs. Ce dragon est une sensitive.

Ce monstre est celui que les marins appellent poulpe, que la science appelle céphalopode, et que la légende appelle kraken. Les matelots anglais l'appellent *Devil-Fish*, le Poisson-Diable. Ils l'appellent aussi *Blood-Sucker*, Suceur de sang. Dans les îles de la Manche on le nomme la pieuvre.

Il est très rare à Guernesey, très petit à Jersey, très gros et assez fréquent à Serk.

Une estampe de l'édition de Buffon par Sonnini

représente un céphalopode étreignant une frégate. Denis Montfort pense qu'en effet le poulpe des hautes latitudes est de force à couler un navire. Bory Saint-Vincent le nie, mais constate que dans nos régions il attaque l'homme. Allez à Serk, on vous montrera près de Brecq-Hou le creux de rocher où une pieuvre, il y a quelques années, a saisi, retenu et noyé un pêcheur de homards. Péron et Lamarck se trompent quand ils doutent que le poulpe, n'ayant pas de nageoires, puisse nager. Celui qui écrit ces lignes a vu de ses yeux à Serk, dans la cave dite les boutiques, une pieuvre poursuivre à la nage un baigneur. Tuée, on la mesura, elle avait quatre pieds anglais d'envergure, et l'on put compter les quatre cents suçoirs. La bête agonisante les poussait hors d'elle convulsivement.

Selon Denis Montfort, un de ces observateurs que l'intuition à haute dose fait descendre ou monter jusqu'au magisme, le poulpe a presque des passions d'homme; le poulpe hait. En effet, dans l'absolu, être hideux, c'est haïr.

Le difforme se débat sous une nécessité d'élimination qui le rend hostile.

La pieuvre nageant reste, pour ainsi dire, dans le fourreau. Elle nage, tous ses plis serrés. Qu'on se représente une manche cousue avec un poing dedans. Ce poing, qui est la tête, pousse le liquide et avance d'un vague mouvement ondulatoire. Ses deux yeux, quoique gros, sont peu distincts, étant de la couleur de l'eau.

La pieuvre en chasse ou au guet se dérobe; elle se rapetisse, elle se condense; elle se réduit à sa plus simple expression. Elle se confond avec la pénombre. Elle a l'air d'un pli de la vague. Elle ressemble à tout, excepté à quelque chose de vivant.

La pieuvre, c’est l’hypocrite. On n’y fait pas attention; brusquement, elle s’ouvre.

Une viscosité qui a une volonté, quoi de plus effroyable! De la glu pétrie de haine.

C’est dans le plus bel azur de l’eau limpide que surgit cette hideuse étoile vorace de la mer. Elle n’a pas d’approche, ce qui est terrible. Presque toujours, quand on la voit, on est pris.

La nuit, pourtant, et particulièrement dans la saison du rut, elle est phosphorescente. Cette épouvante a ses amours. Elle attend l’hymen. Elle se fait belle, elle s’allume, elle s’illumine, et, du haut de quelque rocher, on peut l’apercevoir au-dessous de soi dans les profondes ténèbres épanouie en une irradiation blême, soleil spectre.

La pieuvre nage; elle marche aussi. Elle est un peu poisson, ce qui ne l’empêche pas d’être un peu reptile. Elle rampe sur le fond de la mer. En marche elle utilise ses huit pattes. Elle se traîne à la façon de la chenille arpenteuse.

Elle n’a pas d’os, elle n’a pas de sang, elle n’a pas de chair. Elle est flasque. Il n’y a rien dedans. C’est une peau. On peut retourner ses huit tentacules du dedans au dehors comme des doigts de gants.

Elle a un seul orifice, au centre de son rayonnement. Cet hiatus unique, est-ce l’anus? est-ce la bouche? C’est les deux.

La même ouverture fait les deux fonctions. L’entrée est l’issue. Toute la bête est froide.

Le carnasse de la Méditerranée est repoussant. C’est un contact odieux que cette gélatine animée qui enveloppe le nageur, où les mains s’enfoncent, où les ongles labourent, qu’on déchire sans la tuer, et qu’on arrache sans l’ôter, espèce d’être coulant et tenace qui vous passe entre les doigts; mais aucune stupeur n’égale la subite apparition de la pieuvre, Méduse servie par huit serpents.

Pas de saisissement pareil à l’étreinte du céphalopode.

C’est la machine pneumatique qui vous attaque. Vous avez affaire au vide ayant des pattes. Ni coups d’ongle, ni coups de dents; une scarification indicible. Une morsure est redoutable; moins qu’une succion. La griffe n’est rien près de la ventouse. La griffe, c’est la bête qui entre dans votre chair; la ventouse, c’est vous-même qui entrez dans la bête. Vos muscles s’enflent, vos fibres se tordent, votre peau éclate sous une pesée immonde, votre sang jaillit et se mêle affreusement à la lymphe du mollusque. La bête se superpose à vous par mille bouches infâmes; l’hydre s’incorpore à l’homme; l’homme s’amalgame à l’hydre. Vous ne faites qu’un. Ce rêve est sur vous. Le tigre ne peut que vous dévorer; le poulpe, horreur! Vous aspire. Il vous tire à lui et en lui, et, lié, englué, impuissant, vous vous sentez lentement vidé dans cet épouvantable sac, qui est un monstre.

Au delà du terrible, être mangé vivant, il y a l’inexprimable, être bu vivant.

Ces étranges animaux, la science les rejette d’abord, selon son habitude d’excessive prudence, même vis-à-vis des faits, puis elle se décide à les étudier; elle les dissèque, elle les classe, elle les catalogue, elle leur met une étiquette; elle s’en procure des exemplaires; elle les expose sous verre dans les musées; ils entrent dans la nomenclature; elle les qualifie mollusques, invertébrés, rayonnés; elle constate leurs voisinages: un peu au delà les calmars, un peu en deçà les sépiaires; elle trouve à ces hydres de l’eau salée un analogue dans l’eau douce, l’argyronecte; elle les divise en grande, moyenne et petite espèce; elle admet plus aisément la petite espèce que la grande, ce qui est d’ailleurs, dans toutes les régions, la tendance de la science, laquelle est plus volontiers microscopique que télescopique; elle regarde leur construction et les appelle céphalopodes, elle compte leurs antennes et les appelle octopèdes. Cela fait, elle les laisse là. Où la science les lâche, la philosophie les reprend.

La philosophie étudie à son tour ces êtres. Elle va moins loin et plus loin que la science. Elle ne les dissèque pas, elle les médite. Où le scalpel a travaillé, elle plonge l’hypothèse. Elle cherche la cause finale. Profond tourment du penseur. Ces créatures l’inquiètent presque sur le créateur. Elles sont les surprises hideuses. Elles sont les trouble-fête du contemplateur. Il les constate éperdu. Elles sont les formes voulues du mal. Que devenir devant ces blasphèmes de la création contre elle-même? À qui s’en prendre?

Le Possible est une matrice formidable. Le mystère se concrète en monstres. Des morceaux d’ombre sortent de ce bloc, l’immanence, se déchirent, se détachent, roulent, flottent, se condensent, font des emprunts à la noirceur ambiante, subissent des polarisations inconnues, prennent vie, se composent on ne sait quelle forme avec l’obscurité et on ne sait quelle âme avec le miasme, et s’en vont, larves, à travers la vitalité. C’est quelque chose comme les ténèbres faites bêtes. À quoi bon? à quoi cela sert-il? Rechute de la question éternelle.

Ces animaux sont fantômes autant que monstres. Ils sont prouvés et improbables. Être est leur fait, ne pas être serait leur droit. Ils sont les amphibies de la mort. Leur invraisemblance complique leur existence. Ils touchent la frontière humaine et peuplent la limite chimérique. Vous niez le vampire, la pieuvre apparaît. Leur fourmillement est une certitude qui déconcerte notre assurance. L'optimisme, qui est le vrai pourtant, perd presque contenance devant eux. Ils sont l'extrémité visible des cercles noirs. Ils marquent la transition de notre réalité à une autre. Ils semblent appartenir à ce commencement d'êtres terribles que le songeur entrevoit confusément par le soupirail de la nuit.

Ces prolongements de monstres, dans l'invisible d'abord, dans le possible ensuite, ont été soupçonnés, aperçus peut-être, par l'extase sévère et par l'œil fixe des mages et des philosophes. De là la conjecture d'un enfer. Le démon est le tigre de l'invisible. La bête fauve des âmes a été dénoncée au genre humain par deux visionnaires, l'un qui s'appelle Jean, l'autre qui s'appelle Dante.

Si en effet les cercles de l'ombre continuent indéfiniment, si après un anneau il y en a un autre, si cette aggravation persiste en progression illimitée, si cette chaîne, dont pour notre part nous sommes résolu à douter, existe, il est certain que la pieuvre à une extrémité prouve Satan à l'autre.

Il est certain que le méchant à un bout prouve à l'autre bout la méchanceté.

Toute bête mauvaise, comme toute intelligence perverse, est sphinx.

Sphinx terrible proposant l'énigme terrible. L'énigme du mal.

C'est cette perfection du mal qui a fait pencher parfois de grands esprits vers la croyance au dieu double, vers le redoutable bi-frons des manichéens.

Une soie chinoise, volée dans la dernière guerre au palais de l'empereur de la Chine, représente le requin qui mange le crocodile qui mange le serpent qui mange l'aigle qui mange l'hirondelle qui mange la chenille.

Toute la nature que nous avons sous les yeux est mangeante et mangée. Les proies s'entre-mordent.

Cependant des savants qui sont aussi des philosophes, et par conséquent bienveillants pour la création, trouvent ou croient trouver l'explication. Le but final frappe, entre autres, Bonnet de Genève, ce mystérieux esprit exact, qui fut opposé à Buffon, comme plus tard Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire l'a été à Cuvier. L'explication serait ceci: la mort partout exige l'ensevelissement partout. Les voraces sont des ensevelisseurs.

Tous les êtres rentrent les uns dans les autres. Pourriture, c’est nourriture. Nettoyage effrayant du globe. L’homme, carnassier, est, lui aussi, un enterreur. Notre vie est faite de mort. Telle est la loi terrifiante. Nous sommes sépulcres.

Dans notre monde crépusculaire, cette fatalité de l’ordre produit des monstres. Vous dites: à quoi bon? Le voilà.

Est-ce l’explication? Est-ce la réponse à la question? Mais alors pourquoi pas un autre ordre? La question renaît.

Vivons, soit.

Mais tâchons que la mort nous soit progrès. Aspirons aux mondes moins ténébreux.

Suivons la conscience qui nous y mène.

Car, ne l’oublions jamais, le mieux n’est trouvé que par le meilleur.

III

AUTRE FORME DU COMBAT DANS LE GOUFFRE

Tel était l’être auquel, depuis quelques instants, Gilliatt appartenait.

Ce monstre était l’habitant de cette grotte. Il était l’effrayant génie du lieu. Sorte de sombre démon de l’eau.

Toutes ces magnificences avaient pour centre l’horreur.

Le mois d’auparavant, le jour où pour la première fois Gilliatt avait pénétré dans la grotte, la noirceur ayant un contour, entrevue par lui dans les plissements de l’eau secrète, c’était cette pieuvre.

Elle était là chez elle.

Quand Gilliatt, entrant pour la seconde fois dans cette cave à la poursuite du crabe, avait aperçu la crevasse où il avait pensé que le crabe se réfugiait, la pieuvre était dans ce trou, au guet.

Se figure-t-on cette attente?

Pas un oiseau n’oserait couver, pas un œuf n’oserait éclore, pas une fleur n’oserait s’ouvrir, pas un sein n’oserait allaiter, pas un cœur n’oserait aimer, pas un esprit n’oserait s’envoler, si l’on songeait aux sinistres patiences embusquées dans l’abîme.

Gilliatt avait enfoncé son bras dans le trou; la pieuvre l’avait happé.

Elle le tenait.

Il était la mouche de cette araignée.

Gilliatt était dans l’eau jusqu’à la ceinture, les pieds crispés sur la rondeur des galets glissants, le bras droit étreint et assujetti par les enroulements plats des courroies de la pieuvre, et le torse disparaissant presque sous les replis et les croisements de ce bandage horrible.

Des huit bras de la pieuvre, trois adhéraient à la roche, cinq adhéraient à Gilliatt. De cette façon, cramponnée d’un côté au granit, de l’autre à l’homme, elle enchaînait Gilliatt au rocher. Gilliatt avait sur lui deux cent cinquante suçoirs. Complication d’angoisse et de dégoût. Être serré dans un poing démesuré dont les doigts élastiques, longs de près d’un mètre, sont intérieurement pleins de pustules vivantes qui vous fouillent la chair.

Nous l’avons dit, on ne s’arrache pas à la pieuvre. Si on l’essaie, on est plus sûrement lié. Elle ne fait que se resserrer davantage. Son effort croît en raison du vôtre. Plus de secousse produit plus de constriction.

Gilliatt n’avait qu’une ressource, son couteau.

Il n’avait de libre que la main gauche, mais on sait qu’il en usait puissamment. On aurait pu dire de lui qu’il avait deux mains droites.

Son couteau, ouvert, était dans cette main.

On ne coupe pas les antennes de la pieuvre; c’est un cuir impossible à trancher, il glisse sous la lame; d’ailleurs la superposition est telle qu’une entaille à ces lanières entamerait votre chair.

Le poulpe est formidable; pourtant il y a une manière de s’en servir. Les pêcheurs de Serk la connaissent; qui les a vus exécuter en mer de certains mouvements brusques, le sait. Les marsouins la connaissent aussi; ils ont une façon de mordre la sèche qui lui coupe la tête. De là tous ces calmars, toutes ces sèches et tous ces poulpes sans tête qu’on rencontre au large.

Le poulpe, en effet, n’est vulnérable qu’à la tête.

Gilliatt ne l’ignorait point.

Il n’avait jamais vu de pieuvre de cette dimension. Du premier coup, il se trouvait pris par la grande espèce. Un autre se fût troublé.

Pour la pieuvre comme pour le taureau il y a un moment qu’il faut saisir; c’est l’instant où le taureau baisse le cou, c’est l’instant où la pieuvre avance la tête; instant rapide. Qui manque ce joint est perdu.

Tout ce que nous venons de dire n’avait duré que quelques minutes. Gilliatt pourtant sentait croître la succion des deux cent cinquante ventouses.

La pieuvre est traître. Elle tâche de stupéfier d’abord sa proie. Elle saisit, puis attend le plus qu’elle peut.

Gilliatt tenait son couteau. Les succions augmentaient.

Il regardait la pieuvre, qui le regardait.

Tout à coup la bête détacha du rocher sa sixième antenne, et, la lançant sur Gilliatt, tâcha de lui saisir le bras gauche.

En même temps elle avança vivement la tête. Une seconde de plus, sa bouche anus s’appliquait sur la poitrine de Gilliatt. Gilliatt, saigné au flanc, et les deux bras garrottés, était mort.

Mais Gilliatt veillait. Guetté, il guettait.

Il évita l’antenne, et, au moment où la bête allait mordre sa poitrine, son poing armé s’abattit sur la bête.

Il y eut deux convulsions en sens inverse, celle de la pieuvre et celle de Gilliatt.

Ce fut comme la lutte de deux éclairs.

Gilliatt plongea la pointe de son couteau dans la viscosité plate, et, d’un mouvement giratoire pareil à la torsion d’un coup de fouet, faisant un cercle autour des deux yeux, il arracha la tête comme on arrache une dent.

Ce fut fini.

Toute la bête tomba.

Cela ressembla à un linge qui se détache. La pompe aspirante détruite, le vide se défit. Les quatre cents ventouses lâchèrent à la fois le rocher et l’homme. Ce haillon coula au fond de l’eau.

Gilliatt, haletant du combat, put apercevoir à ses pieds sur les galets deux tas gélatineux informes, la tête d’un côté, le reste de l’autre. Nous disons le reste, car on ne pourrait dire le corps.

Gilliatt toutefois, craignant quelque reprise convulsive de l’agonie, recula hors de la portée des tentacules.

Mais la bête était bien morte.

Gilliatt referma son couteau.

IV

RIEN NE SE CACHE ET RIEN NE SE PERD

Il était temps qu'il tuât la pieuvre. Il était presque étouffé; son bras droit et son torse étaient violets; plus de deux cents tumeurs s'y ébauchaient; le sang jaillissait de quelques-unes çà et là. Le remède à ces lésions, c'est l'eau salée. Gilliatt s'y plongea. En même temps il se frottait avec la paume de la main. Les gonflements s'effaçaient sous ces frictions.

En reculant et en s'enfonçant plus avant dans l'eau, il s'était, sans s'en apercevoir, rapproché de l'espèce de caveau, déjà remarqué par lui, près de la crevasse où il avait été harponné par la pieuvre.

Ce caveau se prolongeait obliquement, et à sec, sous les grandes parois de la cave. Les galets qui s'y étaient amassés en avaient exhaussé le fond au-dessus du niveau des marées ordinaires. Cette anfractuosité était un assez large cintre surbaissé; un homme y pouvait entrer en se courbant. La clarté verte de la grotte sous-marine y pénétrait, et l'éclairait faiblement.

Il arriva que, tout en frictionnant en hâte sa peau tuméfiée, Gilliatt leva machinalement les yeux.

Son regard s'enfonça dans ce caveau.

Il eut un tressaillement.

Il lui sembla voir au fond de ce trou dans l'ombre une sorte de face qui riait.

Gilliatt ignorait le mot hallucination, mais connaissait la chose. Les mystérieuses rencontres avec l'invraisemblable que, pour nous tirer d'affaire, nous appelons hallucinations, sont dans la nature. Illusions ou réalités, des visions passent. Qui se trouve là les voit. Gilliatt, nous l'avons dit, était un pensif. Il avait cette grandeur d'être parfois halluciné comme un prophète. On n'est pas impunément le songeur des lieux solitaires.

Il crut à un de ces mirages dont, homme nocturne qu'il était, il avait eu plus d'une fois la stupeur.

L'anfractuosité figurait assez exactement un four à chaux. C'était une niche basse en anse de panier, dont les voussures abruptes allaient se rétrécissant jusqu'à l'extrémité de la crypte où le cailloutis de galets et la voûte de roche se rejoignaient, et où finissait le cul-de-sac.

Il y entra, et, penchant le front, se dirigea vers ce qu'il y avait au fond.

Quelque chose riait en effet.

C’était une tête de mort.

Il n’y avait pas que la tête, il y avait le squelette.

Un squelette humain était couché dans ce caveau.

Le regard d’un homme hardi, en de pareilles rencontres, veut savoir à quoi s’en tenir.

Gilliatt jeta les yeux autour de lui.

Il était entouré d’une multitude de crabes.

Cette multitude ne remuait pas. C’était l’aspect que présenterait une fourmilière morte. Tous ces crabes étaient inertes. Ils étaient vides.

Leurs groupes, semés çà et là, faisaient sur le pavé de galets qui encombrait le caveau des constellations difformes.

Gilliat, l’œil fixé ailleurs, avait marché dessus sans s’en apercevoir.

À l’extrémité de la crypte où Gilliatt était parvenu, il y en avait une plus grande épaisseur. C’était un hérissement immobile d’antennes, de pattes et de mandibules. Des pinces ouvertes se tenaient toutes droites et ne se fermaient plus. Les boîtes osseuses ne bougeaient pas sous leur croûte d’épines; quelques-unes retournées montraient leur creux livide. Cet entassement ressemblait à une mêlée d’assiégeants et avait l’enchevêtrement d’une broussaille.

C’est sous ce monceau qu’était le squelette.

On apercevait sous ce pêle-mêle de tentacules et d’écailles le crâne avec ses stries, les vertèbres, les fémurs, les tibias, les longs doigts noueux avec les ongles. La cage des côtes était pleine de crabes. Un cœur quelconque avait battu là. Des moisissures marines tapissaient les trous des yeux. Des patelles avaient laissé leur bave dans les fosses nasales. Du reste il n’y avait dans ce recoin de rocher ni goëmons, ni herbes, ni un souffle d’air. Aucun mouvement. Les dents ricanaient.

Le côté inquiétant du rire, c’est l’imitation qu’en fait la tête de mort.

Ce merveilleux palais de l’abîme, brodé et incrusté de toutes les pierreries de la mer, finissait par se révéler et par dire son secret. C’était un repaire, la pieuvre y habitait; et c’était une tombe, un homme y gisait.

L’immobilité spectrale du squelette et des bêtes oscillait vaguement, à cause de la réverbération des eaux souterraines qui tremblait sur cette pétrification. Les crabes, fouillis effroyable, avaient l’air d’achever leur repas. Ces carapaces semblaient manger cette carcasse. Rien de plus étrange que cette vermine morte sur cette proie morte. Sombres continuations de la mort.

Gilliatt avait sous les yeux le garde-manger de la pieuvre.

Vision lugubre, et où se laissait prendre sur le fait l’horreur profonde des choses. Les crabes avaient mangé l’homme, la pieuvre avait mangé les crabes.

Il n’y avait près du cadavre aucun reste de vêtement. Il avait dû être saisi nu.

Gilliatt, attentif et examinant, se mit à ôter les crabes de dessus l’homme. Qu’était-ce que cet homme? Le cadavre était admirablement disséqué. On eût dit une préparation d’anatomie; toute la chair était éliminée; pas un muscle ne restait, pas un os ne manquait. Si Gilliatt eût été du métier, il eût pu le constater. Les périostes dénudés étaient blancs, polis, et comme fourbis. Sans quelques verdissements de conferves çà et là, c’eût été de l’ivoire. Les cloisons cartilagineuses étaient délicatement amenuisées et ménagées. La tombe fait de ces bijouteries sinistres.

Le cadavre était comme enterré sous les crabes morts; Gilliatt le déterrait.

Tout à coup il se pencha vivement.

Il venait d’apercevoir autour de la colonne vertébrale une espèce de lien.

C’était une ceinture de cuir qui avait évidemment été bouclée sur le ventre de l’homme de son vivant.

Le cuir était moisi. La boucle était rouillée.

Gilliatt tira à lui cette ceinture. Les vertèbres résistèrent, et il dut les rompre pour la prendre. La ceinture était intacte. Une croûte de coquillages commençait à s’y former.

Il la palpa et sentit un objet dur et de forme carrée dans l’intérieur. Il ne fallait pas songer à défaire la boucle. Il fendit le cuir avec son couteau.

La ceinture contenait une petite boîte de fer et quelques pièces d’or. Gilliatt compta vingt guinées.

La boîte de fer était une vieille tabatière de matelot, s’ouvrant à ressort. Elle était très rouillée et très fermée. Le ressort, complètement oxydé, n’avait plus de jeu.

Le couteau tira encore d’embarras Gilliatt. Une pesée de la pointe de la lame fit sauter le couvercle de la boîte.

La boîte s’ouvrit.

Il n’y avait dedans que du papier.

Une petite liasse de feuilles très minces, pliées en quatre, tapissait le fond de la boîte. Elles étaient humides, mais point altérées. La boîte, hermétiquement fermée, les avait préservées. Gilliatt les déplia.

C’étaient trois bank-notes de mille livres sterling chaque, faisant ensemble soixante-quinze mille francs.

Gilliatt les replia, les remit dans la boîte, profita d’un peu de place qui y restait pour y ajouter les vingt guinées, et referma la boîte le mieux qu’il put.

Il se mit à examiner la ceinture.

Le cuir, autrefois verni à l’extérieur, était brut à l’intérieur. Sur ce fond fauve quelques lettres étaient tracées en noir à l’encre grasse. Gilliatt déchiffra ces lettres et lut: *Sieur Clubin*.

V

DANS L’INTERVALLE QUI SÉPARE SIX POUCES

DE DEUX PIEDS

IL Y A DE QUOI LOGER LA MORT

Gilliatt remit la boîte dans la ceinture, et mit la ceinture dans la poche de son pantalon.

Il laissa le squelette aux crabes, avec la pieuvre morte à côté.

Pendant que Gilliatt était avec la pieuvre et avec le squelette, le flux remontant avait noyé le boyau d’entrée. Gilliatt ne put sortir qu’en plongeant sous l’arche. Il s’en tira sans peine; il connaissait l’issue, et il était maître dans ces gymnastiques de la mer.

On entrevoit le drame qui s’était passé là dix semaines auparavant. Un monstre avait saisi l’autre. La pieuvre avait pris Clubin.

Cela avait été, dans l’ombre inexorable, presque ce qu’on pourrait nommer la rencontre des hypocrisies. Il y avait eu, au fond de l’abîme, abordage entre ces deux existences faites d’attente et de ténèbres, et l’une, qui était la bête, avait exécuté l’autre, qui était l’âme. Sinistres justices.

Le crabe se nourrit de charogne, la pieuvre se nourrit de crabes. La pieuvre arrête au passage un animal nageant, une loutre, un chien, un homme si elle peut, boit le sang, et laisse au fond de l’eau le corps mort. Les crabes sont les scarabées nécrophores de la mer. La chair pourrissante les attire; ils viennent; ils mangent le cadavre, la pieuvre les mange. Les choses mortes disparaissent dans le crabe, le crabe disparaît dans la pieuvre. Nous avons déjà indiqué cette loi.

Clubin avait été l’appât de la pieuvre.

La pieuvre l’avait retenu et noyé; les crabes l’avaient dévoré. Un flot quelconque l’avait poussé dans la cave, au fond de l’anfractuosité où Gilliatt l’avait trouvé.

Gilliatt s’en revint, furetant dans les rochers, cherchant des oursins et des patelles, ne voulant plus de crabes. Il lui eût semblé manger de la chair humaine.

Du reste, il ne songeait plus qu’à souper le mieux possible avant de partir. Rien désormais ne l’arrêtait. Les grandes tempêtes sont toujours suivies d’un calme qui dure plusieurs jours quelquefois. Nul danger maintenant du côté de la mer. Gilliatt était résolu à partir le lendemain. Il importait de garder pendant la nuit, à cause de la marée, le barrage ajusté entre les Douvres; mais Gilliatt comptait défaire au point du jour ce barrage, pousser la panse hors des Douvres, et mettre à la voile pour Saint-Sampson. La brise de calme qui soufflait, et qui était sud-est, était précisément le vent qu'il lui fallait.

On entrait dans le premier quartier de la lune de mai; les jours étaient déjà longs.

Quand Gilliatt, sa tournée de rôdeur de rochers terminée et son estomac à peu près satisfait, revint à l'entre-deux des Douvres où était la panse, le soleil était couché, le crépuscule se doublait de ce demi-clair de lune qu'on pourrait appeler clair de croissant; le flux avait atteint son plein, et commençait à redescendre. La cheminée de la machine debout au-dessus de la panse avait été couverte par les écumes de la tempête d'une couche de sel que la lune blanchissait.

Ceci rappela à Gilliatt que la tourmente avait jeté dans la panse beaucoup d'eau de pluie et d'eau de mer, et que, s'il voulait partir le lendemain, il fallait vider la barque.

Il avait constaté, en quittant la panse pour aller à la chasse aux crabes, qu'il y avait environ six pouces d'eau dans la cale. Sa pelle d'épuisement suffirait pour jeter cette eau dehors.

Arrivé à la barque, Gilliatt eut un mouvement de terreur. Il y avait dans la panse près de deux pieds d'eau.

Incident redoutable, la panse faisait eau.

Elle s'était peu à peu emplie pendant l'absence de Gilliatt. Chargée comme elle l'était, vingt pouces d'eau étaient un surcroît périlleux. Un peu plus, elle coulait. Si Gilliatt fût revenu une heure plus tard, il n'eût probablement trouvé hors de l'eau que la cheminée et le mât.

Il n'y avait pas même à prendre une minute pour

délibérer. Il fallait chercher la voie d'eau, la boucher, puis vider la barque, ou du moins l'alléger. Les pompes de la Durande s'étaient perdues dans le naufrage; Gilliatt était réduit à la pelle d'épuisement de la panse.

Chercher la voie d'eau, avant tout. C'était le plus pressé.

Gilliatt se mit à l'œuvre tout de suite, sans même se donner le temps de se rhabiller, frémissant. Il ne sentait plus ni la faim, ni le froid.

La panse continuait de s'emplir. Heureusement il n'y avait point de vent. Le moindre clapotement l'eût coulée.

La lune se coucha.

Gilliatt, à tâtons, courbé, plus qu’à demi plongé dans l’eau, chercha longtemps. Il découvrit enfin l’avarie.

Pendant la bourrasque, au moment critique où la panse s’était arquée, la robuste barque avait talonné et heurté assez violemment le rocher. Un des reliefs de la petite Douvre avait fait, dans la coque, à tribord, une fracture.

Cette voie d’eau était fâcheusement, on pourrait presque dire perfidement, située près du point de rencontre de deux porques, ce qui, joint à l’ahurissement de la tourmente, avait empêché Gilliatt, dans sa revue obscure et rapide au plus fort de l’orage, d’apercevoir le dégât.

La fracture avait cela d’alarmant qu’elle était large, et cela de rassurant que, bien qu’immergée en ce moment par la crue intérieure de l’eau, elle était au-dessus de la flottaison.

À l’instant où la crevasse s’était faite, le flot était rudement secoué dans le détroit, et il n’y avait plus de niveau de flottaison, la lame avait pénétré par l’effraction dans la panse, la panse sous cette surcharge s’était enfoncée de quelques pouces, et, même après l’apaisement des vagues, le poids du liquide infiltré, faisant hausser la ligne de flottaison, avait maintenu la crevasse sous l’eau. De là, l’imminence du danger. La crue avait augmenté de six pouces à vingt. Mais si l’on parvenait à boucher la voie d’eau, on pourrait vider la panse; une fois la barque étanchée, elle remonterait à sa flottaison normale, la fracture sortirait de l’eau, et, à sec, la réparation serait aisée, ou du moins possible. Gilliatt, nous l’avons dit, avait encore son outillage de charpentier en assez bon état.

Mais que d’incertitudes avant d’en venir là! Que de périls! Que de chances mauvaises! Gilliatt entendait l’eau sourdre inexorablement. Une secousse, et tout sombrait. Quelle misère! Peut-être n’était-il plus temps.

Gilliatt s’accusa amèrement. Il aurait dû voir tout de suite l’avarie. Les six pouces d’eau dans la cale auraient dû l’avertir. Il avait été stupide d’attribuer ces six pouces d’eau à la pluie et à l’écume. Il se reprocha d’avoir dormi, d’avoir mangé; il se reprocha la fatigue, il se reprocha presque la tempête et la nuit. Tout était de sa faute.

Ces duretés qu’il se disait à lui-même se mêlaient au va-et-vient de son travail et ne l’empêchaient pas d’aviser.

La voie d’eau était trouvée, c’était le premier pas; l’étouper était le second. On ne pouvait davantage pour l’instant. On ne fait point de menuiserie sous l’eau.

Une circonstance favorable, c’est que l’effraction de la coque avait eu lieu dans l’espace compris entre les deux chaînes qui assujettissaient à tribord la cheminée de la machine. L’étoupage pouvait se rattacher à ces chaînes.

L’eau cependant gagnait. La crue maintenant dépassait deux pieds.

Gilliatt avait de l’eau plus haut que les genoux.

VI

DE PROFUNDIS AD ALTUM

Gilliatt avait à sa disposition, dans la réserve du gréement de la panse, un assez grand prélart goudronné pourvu de longues aiguillettes à ses quatre coins.

Il prit ce prélart, en amarra deux coins par les aiguillettes aux deux anneaux des chaînes de la cheminée du côté de la voie d’eau, et jeta le prélart par-dessus le bord. Le prélart tomba comme une nappe entre la petite Douvre et la barque, et s’immergea dans le flot. La poussée de l’eau voulant entrer dans la cale l’appliqua contre la coque sur le trou. Plus l’eau pressait, plus le prélart adhérait. Il était collé par le flot lui-même sur la fracture. La plaie de la barque était pansée.

Cette toile goudronnée s’interposait entre l’intérieur de la cale et les lames du dehors. Il n’entrait plus une goutte d’eau.

La voie d’eau était masquée, mais n’était pas étoupée.

C’était un répit.

Gilliatt prit la pelle d’épuisement et se mit à vider la panse. Il était grand temps de l’alléger. Ce travail le réchauffa un peu, mais sa fatigue était extrême. Il était forcé de s’avouer qu’il n’irait pas jusqu’au bout et qu’il ne parviendrait point à étancher la cale. Gilliatt avait à peine mangé, et il avait l’humiliation de se sentir exténué.

Il mesurait les progrès de son travail à la baisse du niveau de l’eau à ses genoux. Cette baisse était lente.

En outre la voie d’eau n’était qu’interrompue. Le mal était pallié, non réparé. Le prélart, poussé dans la fracture par le flot, commençait à faire tumeur dans la cale. Cela ressemblait à un poing sous cette toile, s’efforçant de la crever. La toile, solide et goudronnée, résistait; mais le gonflement et la tension augmentaient, il n’était pas certain que la toile ne céderait pas, et d’un moment à l’autre la tumeur pouvait se fendre. L’irruption de l’eau recommencerait.

En pareil cas, les équipages en détresse le savent, il n’y a pas d’autre ressource qu’un tampon. On prend les chiffons de toute espèce qu’on trouve sous sa main, tout ce que dans la langue spéciale on appelle *fourrures*, et l’on refoule le plus qu’on peut dans la crevasse la tumeur du prélart.

De ces « fourrures”, Gilliatt n’en avait point. Tout ce qu’il avait emmagasiné de lambeaux et d’étoupes avait été ou employé dans ses travaux, ou dispersé par la rafale.

À la rigueur, il eût pu en retrouver quelques restes en furetant dans les rochers. La panse était assez allégée pour qu’il pût s’absenter un quart d’heure; mais comment faire cette perquisition sans lumière? L’obscurité était complète. Il n’y avait plus de lune; rien que le sombre ciel étoilé. Gilliatt n’avait pas de filin sec pour faire une mèche, pas de suif pour faire une chandelle, pas de feu pour l’allumer, pas de lanterne pour l’abriter. Tout était confus et indistinct dans la barque et dans l’écueil. On entendait l’eau bruire autour de la coque blessée, on ne voyait même pas la crevasse; c’est avec les mains que Gilliatt constatait la tension croissante du prélart. Impossible de faire en cette obscurité une recherche utile des haillons de toile et de funin épars dans les brisants. Comment glaner ces loques sans y voir clair? Gilliatt considérait tristement la nuit. Toutes les étoiles, et pas une chandelle.

La masse liquide ayant diminué dans la barque, la pression extérieure augmentait. Le gonflement du prélart grossissait. Il ballonnait de plus en plus. C’était comme un abcès prêt à s’ouvrir. La situation, un moment améliorée, redevenait menaçante.

Un tampon était impérieusement nécessaire.

Gilliatt n’avait plus que ses vêtements.

Il les avait, on s’en souvient, mis à sécher sur les roches saillantes de la petite Douvre.

Il les alla ramasser et les déposa sur le rebord de la panse.

Il prit son suroît goudronné, et, s’agenouillant dans l’eau, il l’enfonça dans la crevasse, repoussant la tumeur du prélart au dehors, et par conséquent la vidant. Au suroît il ajouta la peau de mouton, à la peau de mouton la chemise de laine, à la chemise la vareuse. Tout y passa.

Il n’avait plus sur lui qu’un vêtement, il l’ôta, et avec son pantalon il grossit et affermit l’étoupage. Le tampon était fait, et ne semblait pas insuffisant.

Ce tampon débordait au dehors la crevasse, avec le prélart pour enveloppe. Le flot, voulant entrer, pressait l’obstacle, l’élargissait utilement sur la fracture, et le consolidait. C’était une sorte de compresse extérieure.

À l’intérieur, le centre seul du gonflement ayant été refoulé, il restait tout autour de la crevasse et du tampon un bourrelet circulaire du prélart d’autant plus adhérent que les inégalités mêmes de la fracture le retenaient. La voie d’eau était aveuglée.

Mais rien n’était plus précaire. Ces reliefs aigus de la fracture qui fixaient le prélart pouvaient le percer, et par ces trous l’eau rentrerait. Gilliatt, dans l’obscurité, ne s’en apercevrait même pas. Il était peu probable que ce tampon durât jusqu’au jour. L’anxiété de Gilliatt changeait de forme, mais il la sentait croître en même temps qu’il sentait ses forces s’éteindre.

Il s’était remis à vider la cale, mais ses bras, à bout d’efforts, pouvaient à peine soulever la pelle pleine d’eau. Il était nu, et frissonnait.

Gilliatt sentait l’approche sinistre de l’extrémité.

Une chance possible lui traversa l’esprit. Peut-être y avait-il une voile au large. Un pêcheur qui serait par aventure de passage dans les eaux des Douvres pourrait lui venir en aide. Le moment était arrivé où un collaborateur était absolument nécessaire. Un homme et une lanterne, et tout pouvait être sauvé. À deux, on viderait aisément la cale; dès que la barque serait étanche, n’ayant plus cette surcharge de liquide, elle remonterait, elle reprendrait son niveau de flottaison, la crevasse sortirait de l’eau, le radoub serait exécutable, on pourrait immédiatement remplacer le tampon par une pièce de bordage, et l’appareil provisoire posé sur la fracture par une réparation définitive. Sinon, il fallait attendre jusqu’au jour, attendre toute la nuit! Retard funeste qui pouvait être la perdition. Gilliatt avait la fièvre de l’urgence. Si par hasard quelque fanal de navire était en vue, Gilliatt pourrait, du haut de la grande Douvre, faire des signaux. Le temps était calme, il n’y avait pas de vent, il n’y avait pas de mer, un homme s’agitant sur le fond étoilé du ciel avait possibilité d’être remarqué. Un capitaine de navire, et même un patron de barque, n’est pas la nuit dans les eaux des Douvres sans braquer la longue-vue sur l’écueil; c’est de précaution.

Gilliatt espéra qu’on l’apercevrait.

Il escalada l’épave, empoigna la corde à nœuds, et monta sur la grande Douvre.

Pas une voile à l’horizon. Pas un fanal. L’eau à perte de vue était déserte.

nulle assistance possible et nulle résistance possible.

Gilliatt, chose qu’il n’avait point éprouvée jusqu’à ce moment, se sentit désarmé.

La fatalité obscure était maintenant sa maîtresse. Lui, avec sa barque, avec la machine de la Durande, avec toute sa peine, avec toute sa réussite, avec tout son courage, il appartenait au gouffre. Il n'avait plus de ressource de lutte; il devenait passif. Comment empêcher le flux de venir, l'eau de monter, la nuit de continuer? Ce tampon était son unique point d'appui. Gilliatt s'était épuisé et dépouillé à le composer et à le compléter; il ne pouvait plus ni le fortifier, ni l'affermir; le tampon était tel quel, il devait rester ainsi, et fatalement tout effort était fini. La mer avait à sa discrétion cet appareil hâtif appliqué sur la voie d'eau. Comment se comporterait cet obstacle inerte? C'était lui maintenant qui combattait, ce n'était plus Gilliatt. C'était ce chiffon, ce n'était plus cet esprit. Le gonflement d'un flot suffisait pour déboucher la fracture. Plus ou moins de pression; toute la question était là.

Tout allait se dénouer par une lutte machinale entre deux quantités mécaniques. Gilliatt ne pouvait désormais ni aider l'auxiliaire, ni arrêter l'ennemi. Il n'était plus que le spectateur de sa vie ou de sa mort. Ce Gilliatt, qui avait été une providence, était, à la minute suprême, remplacé par une résistance inconsciente.

Aucune des épreuves et des épouvantes que Gilliatt avait traversées n'approchait de celle-ci.

En arrivant dans l'écueil Douvres, il s'était vu entouré et comme saisi par la solitude. Cette solitude faisait plus que l'environner, elle l'enveloppait. Mille menaces à la fois lui avaient montré le poing. Le vent était là, prêt à souffler; la mer était là, prête à rugir. Impossible de bâillonner cette bouche, le vent; impossible d'édenter cette gueule, la mer. Et pourtant il avait lutté; homme, il avait combattu corps à corps l'océan; il s'était colleté avec la tempête.

Il avait tenu tête à d'autres anxiétés et à d'autres nécessités encore. Il avait eu affaire à toutes les détresses. Il lui avait fallu sans outils faire des travaux, sans aide remuer des fardeaux, sans science résoudre des problèmes, sans provisions boire et manger, sans lit et sans toit dormir.

Sur cet écueil, chevalet tragique, il avait été tour à tour mis à la question par les diverses fatalités tortionnaires de la nature, mère quand bon lui semble, bourreau quand il lui plaît.

Il avait vaincu l'isolement, vaincu la faim, vaincu la soif, vaincu le froid, vaincu la fièvre, vaincu le travail, vaincu le sommeil. Il avait rencontré pour lui barrer le passage les obstacles coalisés. Après le dénûment, l'élément;

après la marée, la tourmente; après la tempête, la pieuvre; après le monstre, le spectre.

Lugubre ironie finale. Dans cet écueil d’où Gilliatt avait compté sortir triomphant, Clubin mort venait de le regarder en riant.

Le ricanement du spectre avait raison. Gilliatt se voyait perdu. Gilliatt se voyait aussi mort que Clubin.

L’hiver, la famine, la fatigue, l’épave à dépecer, la machine à transborder, les coups d’équinoxe, le vent, le tonnerre, la pieuvre, tout cela n’était rien près de la voie d’eau. On pouvait avoir, et Gilliatt avait eu, contre le froid le feu, contre la faim les coquillages du rocher, contre la soif la pluie, contre les difficultés du sauvetage l’industrie et l’énergie, contre la marée et l’orage le brise-lames, contre la pieuvre le couteau. Contre la voie d’eau, rien.

L’ouragan lui laissait cet adieu sinistre. Dernière reprise, estocade traître, attaque sournoise du vaincu au vainqueur. La tempête en fuite lançait cette flèche derrière elle. La déroute se retournait et frappait. C’était le coup de Jarnac de l’abîme.

On combat la tempête; mais comment combattre un suintement?

Si le tampon cédait, si la voie d’eau se rouvrait, rien ne pouvait faire que la panse ne sombrât point. C’était la ligature de l’artère qui se dénoue. Et une fois la panse au fond de l’eau, avec cette surcharge, la machine, nul moyen de l’en tirer. Ce magnanime effort de deux mois titaniques aboutissait à un anéantissement. Recommencer était impossible. Gilliatt n’avait plus ni forge, ni matériaux. Peut-être, au point du jour, allait-il voir toute son œuvre s’enfoncer lentement et irrémédiablement dans le gouffre.

Chose effrayante, sentir sous soi la force sombre.

Le gouffre le tirait à lui.

Sa barque engloutie, il n’aurait plus qu’à mourir de faim et de froid, comme l’autre, le naufragé du rocher l’Homme.

Pendant deux longs mois, les consciences et les providences qui sont dans l’invisible avaient assisté à ceci: d’un côté les étendues, les vagues, les vents, les éclairs, les météores, de l’autre un homme; d’un côté la mer, de l’autre une âme; d’un côté l’infini, de l’autre un atome.

Et il y avait eu bataille.

Et voilà que peut-être ce prodige avortait.

Ainsi aboutissait à l’impuissance cet héroïsme inouï; ainsi s’achevait par le désespoir ce formidable combat accepté, cette lutte de rien contre tout, cette Iliade à un.

Gilliatt éperdu regardait l’espace.

Il n’avait même plus un vêtement. Il était nu devant l’immensité.

Alors, dans l’accablement de toute cette énormité inconnue, ne sachant plus ce qu’on lui voulait, se confrontant avec l’ombre, en présence de cette obscurité irréductible, dans la rumeur des eaux, des lames, des flots, des houles, des écumes, des rafales, sous les nuées, sous les souffles, sous la vaste force éparse, sous ce mystérieux firmament des ailes, des astres et des tombes, sous l’intention possible mêlée à ces choses démesurées, ayant autour de lui et au-dessous de lui l’océan, et au-dessus de lui les constellations, sous l’insondable, il s’affaissa, il renonça, il se coucha tout de son long le dos sur la roche, la face aux étoiles, vaincu, et, joignant les mains devant la profondeur terrible, il cria dans l’infini: Grâce!

Terrassé par l’immensité, il la pria.

Il était là, seul dans cette nuit sur ce rocher au milieu de cette mer, tombé d’épuisement, ressemblant à un foudroyé, nu comme le gladiateur dans le cirque, seulement au lieu de cirque ayant l’abîme, au lieu de bêtes féroces les ténèbres, au lieu des yeux du peuple le regard de l’inconnu, au lieu des vestales les étoiles, au lieu de César, Dieu.

Il lui sembla qu’il se sentait se dissoudre dans le froid, dans la fatigue, dans l’impuissance, dans la prière, dans l’ombre, et ses yeux se fermèrent.

VII

IL Y A UNE OREILLE DANS L'INCONNU

Quelques heures s'écoulèrent.

Le soleil se leva, éblouissant.

Son premier rayon éclaira sur le plateau de la grande Douvre une forme immobile. C'était Gilliatt.

Il était toujours étendu sur le rocher.

Cette nudité glacée et roidie n'avait plus un frisson. Les paupières closes étaient blêmes. Il eût été difficile de dire si ce n'était pas un cadavre.

Le soleil paraissait le regarder.

Si cet homme nu n'était pas mort, il en était si près qu'il suffisait du moindre vent froid pour l'achever.

Le vent se mit à souffler, tiède et vivifiant; la printanière haleine de mai.

Cependant le soleil montait dans le profond ciel bleu; son rayon moins horizontal s'empourpra. Sa lumière devint chaleur. Elle enveloppa Gilliatt.

Gilliatt ne bougeait pas. S'il respirait, c'était de cette respiration prête à s'éteindre qui ternirait à peine un miroir.

Le soleil continua son ascension, de moins en moins oblique sur Gilliatt. Le vent, qui n'avait été d'abord que tiède, était maintenant chaud.

Ce corps rigide et nu demeurait toujours sans mouvement; pourtant la peau semblait moins livide.

Le soleil, approchant du zénith, tomba à plomb sur le plateau de la Douvre. Une prodigalité de lumière se versa du haut du ciel; la vaste réverbération de la mer sereine s'y joignit; le rocher commença à tiédir, et réchauffa l'homme.

Un soupir souleva la poitrine de Gilliatt.

Il vivait.

Le soleil continua ses caresses, presque ardentes. Le vent, qui était déjà le vent de midi et le vent d'été, s'approcha de Gilliatt comme une bouche, soufflant mollement.

Gilliatt remua.

L'apaisement de la mer était inexprimable. Elle avait un murmure de nourrice près de son enfant. Les vagues paraissaient bercer l'écueil.

Les oiseaux de mer, qui connaissaient Gilliatt, volaient au-dessus de lui, inquiets. Ce n’était plus leur ancienne inquiétude sauvage. C’était on ne sait quoi de tendre et de fraternel. Ils poussaient de petits cris. Ils avaient l’air de l’appeler. Une mouette, qui l’aimait sans doute, eut la familiarité de venir tout près de lui. Elle se mit à lui parler. Il ne semblait pas entendre. Elle sauta sur son épaule et lui becqueta les lèvres doucement.

Gilliatt ouvrit les yeux.

Les oiseaux, contents et farouches, s’envolèrent.

Gilliatt se dressa debout, s’étira comme le lion réveillé, courut au bord de la plate-forme, et regarda sous lui dans l’entre-deux des Douvres.

La panse était là, intacte. Le tampon s’était maintenu, la mer probablement l’avait peu rudoyé.

Tout était sauvé.

Gilliatt n’était plus las. Ses forces étaient réparées. Cet évanouissement avait été un sommeil.

Il vida la panse, mit la cale à sec et l’avarie hors de la flottaison, se rhabilla, but, mangea, fut joyeux.

La voie d’eau, examinée au jour, demandait plus de travail que Gilliatt n’aurait cru. C’était une assez grave avarie. Gilliatt n’eut pas trop de toute la journée pour la réparer.

Le lendemain, à l’aube, après avoir défait le barrage et rouvert l’issue du défilé, vêtu de ces haillons qui avaient eu raison de la voie d’eau, ayant sur lui la ceinture de Clubin et les soixante-quinze mille francs, debout dans la panse radoubée à côté de la machine sauvée, par un bon vent, par une mer admirable, Gilliatt sortit de l’écueil Douvres.

Il mit le cap sur Guernesey.

Au moment où il s’éloigna de l’écueil, quelqu’un qui eût été là l’eût entendu chanter à demi-voix l’air Bonny Dundee.

TROISIÈME PARTIE

DÉRUCHETTE

LIVRE PREMIER

NUIT ET LUNE

I

LA CLOCHE DU PORT

Le Saint-Sampson d’aujourd’hui est presque une ville; le Saint-Sampson d’il y a quarante ans était presque un village.

Le printemps venu et les veillées d’hiver finies, on y faisait les soirées courtes, on se mettait au lit dès la nuit tombée. Saint-Sampson était une ancienne paroisse de couvre-feu ayant conservé l’habitude de souffler de bonne heure sa chandelle. On s’y couchait et on s’y levait avec le jour. Ces vieux villages normands sont volontiers poulaillers.

Disons en outre que Saint-Sampson, à part quelques riches familles bourgeoises, est une population de carriers et de charpentiers. Le port est un port de radoub. Tout le jour on extrait des pierres ou l’on façonne des madriers; ici le pic, là le marteau. Maniement perpétuel du bois de chêne et du granit. Le soir on tombe de fatigue et l’on dort comme des plombs. Les rudes travaux font les durs sommeils.

Un soir du commencement de mai, après avoir, pendant quelques instants, regardé le croissant de la lune dans les arbres et écouté le pas de Déruchette se promenant seule, au frais de la nuit, dans le jardin des Bravées, mess Lethierry était rentré dans sa chambre située sur le port et s’était couché. Douce et Grâce étaient au lit. Excepté Déruchette, tout dormait dans la maison. Tout dormait aussi dans Saint-Sampson. Portes et volets étaient partout fermés. Aucune allée et venue dans les rues. Quelques rares lumières, pareilles à des clignements d’yeux qui vont s’éteindre, rougissaient çà et là des lucarnes sur les toits, annonce du coucher des domestiques. Il y avait un certain temps déjà que neuf heures avaient sonné au vieux clocher roman couvert de lierre qui partage avec l’église de Saint-Brelade de Jersey la bizarrerie d’avoir pour date quatre uns: 1111; ce qui signifie *onze cent onze*.

La popularité de mess Lethierry à Saint-Sampson tenait à son succès. Le succès ôté, le vide s’était fait. Il faut croire que le guignon se gagne et que les gens point heureux ont la peste, tant est rapide leur mise en quarantaine. Les jolis fils de famille évitaient Déruchette. L’isolement autour des Bravées était maintenant tel qu’on n’y avait pas même su le petit grand évènement local qui avait ce jour-là mis tout Saint-Sampson en rumeur. Le recteur de la paroisse, le révérend Joë Ebenezer Caudray, était riche. Son oncle, le magnifique doyen de Saint-Asaph, venait de mourir à Londres. La nouvelle en avait été apportée par le sloop de poste *Cashmere* arrivé d'Angleterre le matin même, et dont on apercevait le mât dans la rade de Saint-Pierre-Port. Le *Cashmere* devait repartir pour Southampton le lendemain à midi, et, disait-on, emmener le révérend recteur, rappelé en Angleterre à bref délai pour l'ouverture officielle du testament, sans compter les autres urgences d'une grande succession à recueillir. Toute la journée, Saint-Sampson avait confusément dialogué. Le Cashmere, le révérend Ebenezer, son oncle mort, sa richesse, son départ, ses promotions possibles dans l'avenir, avaient fait le fond du bourdonnement. Une seule maison, point informée, était restée silencieuse, les Bravées.

Mess Lethierry s'était jeté sur son branle, tout habillé.

Depuis la catastrophe de la Durande, se jeter sur son branle, c'était sa ressource. S'étendre sur son grabat, c'est à quoi tout prisonnier a recours, et mess Lethierry était le prisonnier du chagrin. Il se couchait; c'était une trêve, une reprise d'haleine, une suspension d'idées. Dormait-il? Non. Veillait-il? Non. À proprement parler, depuis deux mois et demi, — il y avait deux mois et demi de cela, — mess Lethierry était comme en somnambulisme. Il ne s'était pas encore ressaisi lui-même. Il était dans cet état mixte et diffus que connaissent ceux qui ont subi les grands accablements. Ses réflexions n'étaient pas de la pensée, son sommeil n'était pas du repos. Le jour il n'était pas un homme éveillé, la nuit il n'était pas un homme endormi. Il était debout, puis il était couché, voilà tout. Quand il était dans son branle, l'oubli lui venait un peu, il appelait cela dormir, les chimères flottaient sur lui et en lui, le nuage nocturne, plein de faces confuses, traversait son cerveau; l'empereur Napoléon lui dictait ses mémoires, il y avait plusieurs Déruchettes, des oiseaux bizarres étaient dans des arbres, les rues de Lons-le-Saulnier devenaient des serpents. Le cauchemar était le répit du désespoir. Il passait ses nuits à rêver, et ses jours à songer.

Il restait quelquefois toute une après-midi, immobile à la fenêtre de sa chambre qui donnait, on s'en souvient, sur le port, la tête basse, les coudes sur la pierre, les oreilles dans ses poings, le dos tourné au monde entier, l'œil fixé sur le vieil anneau de fer scellé dans le mur de sa maison à quelques pieds de sa fenêtre, où jadis on amarrait la Durande. Il regardait la rouille qui venait à cet anneau.

Mess Lethierry était réduit à la fonction machinale de vivre.

Les plus vaillants hommes, privés de leur idée réalisable, en arrivent là. C'est l'effet des existences vidées. La vie est le voyage, l'idée est l'itinéraire. Plus d'itinéraire, on s'arrête. Le but est perdu, la force est morte. Le sort a un obscur pouvoir discrétionnaire. Il peut toucher de sa verge même notre être moral. Le désespoir, c'est presque la destitution de l'âme. Les très grands esprits seuls résistent. Et encore.

Mess Lethierry méditait continuellement, si l'absorption peut s'appeler méditation, au fond d'une sorte de précipice trouble. Il lui échappait des paroles navrées comme celle-ci: — Il ne me reste plus qu'à demander là-haut mon billet de sortie.

Notons une contradiction dans cette nature, complexe comme la mer dont Lethierry était, pour ainsi dire, le produit; mess Lethierry ne priait point.

Être impuissant, c'est une force. En présence de nos deux grandes cécités, la destinée et la nature, c'est dans son impuissance que l'homme a trouvé le point d'appui, la prière.

L'homme se fait secourir par l'effroi; il demande aide à sa crainte; l'anxiété, c'est un conseil d'agenouillement.

La prière, énorme force propre à l'âme et de même espèce que le mystère. La prière s'adresse à la magnanimité des ténèbres; la prière regarde le mystère avec les yeux mêmes de l'ombre, et, devant la fixité puissante de ce regard suppliant, on sent un désarmement possible de l'inconnu.

Cette possibilité entrevue est déjà une consolation.

Mais Lethierry ne priait pas.

Du temps qu'il était heureux, Dieu existait pour lui, on pourrait dire en chair et en os; Lethierry lui parlait, lui engageait sa parole, lui donnait presque de temps en temps une poignée de main. Mais dans le malheur de Lethierry, phénomène du reste assez fréquent, Dieu s'était éclipsé. Cela arrive quand on s'est fait un bon Dieu qui est un bonhomme.

Il n'y avait pour Lethierry, dans l'état d'âme où il était, qu'une vision nette, le sourire de Déruchette. Hors de ce sourire, tout était noir.

Depuis quelque temps, sans doute à cause de la perte de la Durande, dont elle ressentait le contre-coup, ce charmant sourire de Déruchette était plus rare. Elle paraissait préoccupée. Ses gentillesses d’oiseau et d’enfant s’étaient éteintes. On ne la voyait plus, le matin, au coup de canon du point du jour, faire une révérence et dire au soleil levant: « *bum!… jour*. donnez-vous la peine d’entrer.” Elle avait par moments l’air très sérieux, chose triste dans ce doux être. Elle faisait effort cependant pour rire à mess Lethierry, et pour le distraire, mais sa gaîté se ternissait de jour en jour et se couvrait de poussière, comme l’aile d’un papillon qui a une épingle à travers le corps. Ajoutons que, soit par chagrin du chagrin de son oncle, car il y a des douleurs de reflet, soit pour d’autres raisons, elle semblait maintenant incliner beaucoup vers la religion. Du temps de l’ancien recteur M. Jaquemin Hérode, elle n’allait guère, on le sait, que quatre fois l’an à l’église. Elle y était à présent fort assidue. Elle ne manquait aucun office, ni du dimanche, ni du jeudi. Les âmes pieuses de la paroisse voyaient avec satisfaction cet amendement. Car c’est un grand bonheur qu’une jeune fille, qui court tant de dangers du côté des hommes, se tourne vers Dieu.

Cela fait du moins que les pauvres parents ont l’esprit en repos du côté des amourettes. Le soir, toutes les fois que le temps le permettait, elle se promenait une heure ou deux dans le jardin des Bravées. Elle était là, presque aussi pensive que mess Lethierry, et toujours seule. Déruchette se couchait la dernière. Ce qui n’empêchait point Douce et Grâce d’avoir toujours un peu l’œil sur elle, par cet instinct de guet qui se mêle à la domesticité; espionner désennuie de servir.

Quant à mess Lethierry, dans l’état voilé où était son esprit, ces petites altérations dans les habitudes de Déruchette lui échappaient. D’ailleurs, il n’était pas né duègne. Il ne remarquait même pas l’exactitude de Déruchette aux offices de la paroisse. Tenace dans son préjugé contre les choses et les gens du clergé, il eût vu sans plaisir ces fréquentations d’église.

Ce n’est pas que sa situation morale à lui-même ne fût en train de se modifier. Le chagrin est nuage et change de forme.

Les âmes robustes, nous venons de le dire, sont parfois, par de certains coups de malheur, destituées presque, non tout à fait. Les caractères virils, tels que Lethierry, réagissent dans un temps donné. Le désespoir a des degrés remontants. De l’accablement on monte à l’abattement, de l’abattement à l’affliction, de l’affliction à la mélancolie. La mélancolie est un crépuscule. La souffrance s’y fond dans une sombre joie.

La mélancolie, c’est le bonheur d’être triste.

Ces atténuations élégiaques n’étaient point faites pour Lethierry; ni la nature de son tempérament, ni le genre de son malheur, ne comportaient ces nuances. Seulement, au moment où nous venons de le retrouver, la rêverie de son premier désespoir tendait, depuis une semaine environ, à se dissiper; sans être moins triste, Lethierry était moins inerte; il était toujours sombre, mais il n’était plus morne; il lui revenait une certaine perception des faits et des évènements; et il commençait à éprouver quelque chose de ce phénomène qu’on pourrait appeler la rentrée dans la réalité.

Ainsi, le jour, dans sa salle basse, il n’écoutait pas les paroles des gens, mais il les entendait. Grâce vint un matin toute triomphante dire à Déruchette que mess Lethierry avait défait la bande d’un journal.

Cette demi-acceptation de la réalité est, en soi, un bon symptôme. C’est la convalescence. Les grands malheurs sont un étourdissement. On en sort par là. Mais cette amélioration fait d’abord l’effet d’une aggravation. L’état de rêve antérieur émoussait la douleur; on voyait trouble, on sentait peu; à présent la vue est nette, on n’échappe à rien, on saigne de tout. La plaie s’avive. La douleur s’accentue de tous les détails qu’on aperçoit. On revoit tout dans le souvenir. Tout retrouver, c’est tout regretter. Il y a dans ce retour au réel toutes sortes d’arrière-goûts amers. On est mieux, et pire. C’est ce qu’éprouvait Lethierry. Il souffrait plus distinctement.

Ce qui avait ramené mess Lethierry au sentiment de la réalité, c’était une secousse.

Disons cette secousse.

Une après-midi, vers le 15 ou le 20 avril, on avait entendu à la porte de la salle basse des Bravées les deux coups qui annoncent le facteur. Douce avait ouvert. C’était une lettre en effet.

Cette lettre venait de la mer. Elle était adressée à mess Lethierry. Elle était timbrée *Lisboa*.

Douce avait porté la lettre à mess Lethierry qui était enfermé dans sa chambre. Il avait pris cette lettre, l’avait machinalement posée sur sa table, et ne l’avait pas regardée.

Cette lettre resta une bonne semaine sur la table sans être décachetée.

Il arriva pourtant qu’un matin Douce dit à mess Lethierry:

— Monsieur, faut-il ôter la poussière qu’il y a sur votre lettre?

Lethierry parut se réveiller.

— C’est juste, dit-il.

Et il ouvrit la lettre.

Il lut ceci:

«En mer, ce 10 mars.

«Mess Lethierry, de Saint-Sampson,

«Vous recevrez de mes nouvelles avec plaisir.

«Je suis sur le *Tamaulipas*, en route pour Pasrevenir. Il y a dans l'équipage un matelot Ahier-Tostevin, de Guernesey, qui reviendra, lui, et qui aura des choses à raconter. Je profite de la rencontre du navire *Hernan Cortez* allant à Lisbonne pour vous faire passer cette lettre.

«Soyez étonné. Je suis honnête homme.

«Aussi honnête homme que sieur Clubin.

«Je dois croire que vous savez la chose qui est arrivée; pourtant il n'est peut-être pas de trop que je vous l'apprenne.

«La voici:

«Je vous ai rendu vos capitaux.

«Je vous avais emprunté, un peu incorrectement, cinquante mille francs. Avant de quitter Saint-Malo, j'ai remis pour vous à votre homme de confiance, sieur Clubin, trois bank-notes de mille livres chaque, ce qui fait soixante-quinze mille francs. Vous trouverez sans doute ce remboursement suffisant.

«Sieur Clubin a pris vos intérêts et reçu votre argent avec énergie. Il m'a paru très zélé; c'est pourquoi je vous avertis.

«Votre autre homme de confiance,

Rantaine.

«*Post-scriptum.* — Sieur Clubin avait un revolver, ce qui fait que je n'ai pas de reçu.”

Touchez une torpille, touchez une bouteille de Leyde chargée, vous ressentirez ce qu'éprouva mess Lethierry en lisant cette lettre.

Sous cette enveloppe, dans cette feuille de papier pliée en quatre à laquelle il avait au premier moment fait si peu attention, il y avait une commotion.

Il reconnut cette écriture, il reconnut cette signature. Quant au fait, tout d'abord il n'y comprit rien.

Commotion telle qu'elle lui remit, pour ainsi dire, l'esprit sur pied.

Le phénomène des soixante-quinze mille francs confiés par Rantaine à Clubin, étant une énigme, était le côté utile de la secousse, en ce qu'il forçait le cerveau de Lethierry à travailler. Faire une conjecture, c'est pour la pensée une occupation saine. Le raisonnement est éveillé, la logique est appelée.

Depuis quelque temps l'opinion publique de Guernesey était occupée à rejuger Clubin, cet honnête homme pendant tant d'années si unanimement admis dans la circulation de l'estime. On s'interrogeait, on se prenait à douter, il y avait des paris pour et contre. Des lumières singulières s'étaient produites. Clubin commençait à s'éclairer, c'est-à-dire qu'il devenait noir.

Une information judiciaire avait eu lieu à Saint-Malo pour savoir ce qu'était devenu le garde-côte 619. La perspicacité légale avait fait fausse route, ce qui lui arrive souvent. Elle était partie de cette supposition que le garde-côte avait dû être embauché par Zuela et embarqué sur le *Tamaulipas* pour le Chili. Cette hypothèse ingénieuse avait entraîné force aberrations. La myopie de la justice n'avait pas même aperçu Rantaine. Mais, chemin faisant, les magistrats instructeurs avaient levé d'autres pistes. L'obscure affaire s'était compliquée. Clubin avait fait son entrée dans l'énigme. Il s'était établi une coïncidence, un rapport peut-être, entre le départ du *Tamaulipas* et la perte de la Durande. Au cabaret de la porte Dinan où Clubin croyait n'être pas connu, on l'avait reconnu; le cabaretier avait parlé; Clubin avait acheté une bouteille d'eau-de-vie. Pour qui? L'armurier de la rue saint-Vincent avait parlé; Clubin avait acheté un revolver. Contre qui? L'aubergiste de l'auberge Jean avait parlé; Clubin avait eu des absences inexplicables. Le capitaine Gertrais-Gaboureau avait parlé; Clubin avait voulu partir, quoique averti, et sachant qu'il allait chercher le brouillard. L'équipage de la Durande avait parlé. Au fait, le chargement était manqué et l'arrimage était mal fait, négligence aisée à comprendre, si le capitaine veut perdre le navire. Le passager guernesiais avait parlé; Clubin avait cru naufrager sur les Hanois. Les gens de Torteval avaient parlé; Clubin y était venu quelques jours avant la perte de la Durande, et avait dirigé sa promenade vers Plainmont voisin des Hanois. Il portait un sac-valise. « Il était parti avec, et revenu sans.” Les déniquoiseaux avaient parlé; leur histoire avait paru pouvoir se rattacher à la disparition de Clubin, à la seule condition d'y remplacer les revenants par des contrebandiers. Enfin la maison visionnée de Plainmont elle-même avait parlé; des gens décidés à se renseigner l'avaient escaladée, et avaient trouvé dedans, quoi? Précisément le sac-valise de Clubin. La Douzaine de Torteval avait saisi le sac, et l'avait fait ouvrir. Il contenait des provisions de bouche, une longue-vue, un chronomètre, des vêtements d'homme et du linge marqué aux initiales de Clubin. Tout cela, dans les propos de Saint-Malo et de Guernesey, se construisait, et finissait par faire un à peu près de baraterie. On rapprochait des linéaments confus; on constatait un dédain singulier des avis, une acceptation des chances de brouillard, une négligence suspecte dans l'arrimage, une bouteille d'eau-de-vie, un timonier ivre, une substitution du capitaine au timonier, un coup de barre au moins bien maladroit. L'héroïsme de demeurer sur l'épave devenait coquinerie. Clubin du reste s'était trompé d'écueil. L'intention de baraterie admise, on comprenait le choix des Hanois, la côte aisément gagnée à la nage, un séjour dans la maison visionnée en attendant l'occasion de fuir. Le sac-valise, cet en-cas, achevait la démonstration. Par quel lien cette aventure se rattachait-elle à l'autre aventure, celle du garde-côte, on ne le saisissait point. On devinait une corrélation; rien de plus. On entrevoyait, du côté de cet homme, le garde-marine numéro 619, tout un drame tragique. Clubin peut-être n'y jouait pas, mais on l'apercevait dans la coulisse.

Tout ne s'expliquait point par la baraterie. Il y avait un revolver sans emploi. Ce revolver était probablement de l'autre affaire.

Le flair du peuple est fin et juste. L'instinct public excelle dans ces restaurations de la vérité faites de pièces et de morceaux. Seulement, dans ces faits d'où se dégageait une baraterie vraisemblable, il y avait de sérieuses incertitudes.

Tout se tenait, tout concordait; mais la base manquait.

On ne perd pas un navire pour le plaisir de le perdre. On ne court point tous ces risques de brouillard, d'écueil, de nage, de refuge et de fuite, sans un intérêt. Quel avait pu être l'intérêt de Cubin?

On voyait son acte, on ne voyait pas son motif.

De là un doute dans beaucoup d'esprits. Où il n'y a point de motif, il semble qu'il n'y ait plus d'acte.

La lacune était grave.

Cette lacune, la lettre de Rantaine venait la combler.

Cette lettre donnait le motif de Clubin. Soixante-quinze mille francs à voler.

Rantaine était le dieu dans la machine. Il descendait du nuage une chandelle à la main.

Sa lettre était le coup de clarté final.

Elle expliquait tout, et surabondamment elle annonçait un témoignage, Ahier-Tostevin.

Chose décisive, elle donnait l’emploi du revolver. Rantaine était incontestablement tout à fait informé. Sa lettre faisait toucher tout du doigt.

Aucune atténuation possible à la scélératesse de Clubin. Il avait prémédité le naufrage; et la preuve, c’était l’en-cas apporté dans la maison visionnée. Et, en le supposant innocent, en admettant le naufrage fortuit, n’eût-il pas dû, au dernier moment, décidé à son sacrifice sur l’épave, remettre les soixante-quinze mille francs pour mess Lethierry aux hommes qui se sauvaient dans la chaloupe? L’évidence éclatait. Maintenant qu’était devenu Clubin? Il avait probablement été victime de sa méprise. Il avait sans doute péri dans l’écueil Douvres. Cet échafaudage de conjectures, très conformes, on le voit, à la réalité, occupa pendant plusieurs jours l’esprit de mess Lethierry. La lettre de Rantaine lui rendit ce service de le forcer à penser. Il eut un premier ébranlement de surprise, puis il fit cet effort de se mettre à réfléchir. Il fit l’autre effort plus difficile encore de s’informer. Il dut accepter et même chercher des conversations. Au bout de huit jours, il était redevenu, jusqu’à un certain point, pratique; son esprit avait repris de l’adhérence, et était presque guéri. Il était sorti de l’état trouble.

La lettre de Rantaine, en admettant que mess Lethierry eût pu jamais entretenir quelque espoir de remboursement de ce côté-là, fit évanouir sa dernière chance.

Elle ajouta à la catastrophe de la Durande ce nouveau naufrage de soixante-quinze mille francs. Elle le remit en possession de cet argent juste assez pour lui en faire sentir la perte. Cette lettre lui montra le fond de sa ruine.

De là une souffrance nouvelle, et très aiguë, que nous avons indiquée tout à l’heure. Il commença, chose qu’il n’avait point faite depuis deux mois, à se préoccuper de sa maison, de ce qu’elle allait devenir, de ce qu’il faudrait réformer. Petit ennui à mille pointes, presque pire que le désespoir. Subir son malheur par le menu, disputer pied à pied au fait accompli le terrain qu’il vient vous prendre, c’est odieux. Le bloc du malheur s’accepte, non sa poussière. L’ensemble accablait, le détail torture. Tout à l’heure la catastrophe vous foudroyait, maintenant elle vous chicane.

C’est l’humiliation aggravant l’écrasement. C’est une deuxième annulation s’ajoutant à la première, et laide. On descend d’un degré dans le néant. Après le linceul, c'est le haillon.

Songer à décroître. Il n'est pas de pensée plus triste.

Être ruiné, cela semble simple. Coup violent; brutalité du sort; c'est la catastrophe une fois pour toutes. Soit. On l'accepte. Tout est fini. On est ruiné. C'est bon, on est mort. Point. On est vivant. Dès le lendemain, on s'en aperçoit. À quoi? À des piqûres d'épingle. Tel passant ne vous salue plus, les factures des marchands pleuvent, voilà un de vos ennemis qui rit. Peut-être rit-il du dernier calembour d'Arnal, mais c'est égal, ce calembour ne lui semble si charmant que parce que vous êtes ruiné. Vous lisez votre amoindrissement même dans les regards indifférents; les gens qui dînaient chez vous trouvent que c'était trop de trois plats à votre table; vos défauts sautent aux yeux de tout le monde; les ingratitudes, n'attendant plus rien, s'affichent; tous les imbéciles ont prévu ce qui vous arrive; les méchants vous déchirent, les pires vous plaignent. Et puis cent détails mesquins. La nausée succède aux larmes. Vous buviez du vin, vous boirez du cidre. Deux servantes! C'est déjà trop d'une. Il faudra congédier celle-ci et surcharger celle-là. Il y a trop de fleurs dans le jardin; on plantera des pommes de terre. On donnait ses fruits à ses amis, on les fera vendre au marché. Quant aux pauvres, il n'y faut plus songer; n'est-on pas un pauvre soi-même? Les toilettes, question poignante. Retrancher un ruban à une femme, quel supplice! À qui vous donne la beauté, refuser la parure! Avoir l'air d'un avare! Elle va peut-être vous dire: — Quoi, vous avez ôté les fleurs de mon jardin, et voilà que vous les ôtez de mon chapeau! — Hélas! La condamner aux robes fanées! La table de famille est silencieuse. Vous vous figurez qu'autour de vous on vous en veut. Les visages aimés sont soucieux. Voilà ce que c'est que décroître. Il faut remourir tous les jours. Tomber, ce n'est rien, c'est la fournaise. Décroître, c'est le petit feu.

L'écroulement, c'est Waterloo; la diminution, c'est Sainte-Hélène. Le sort, incarné en Wellington, a encore quelque dignité; mais quand il se fait Hudson Lowe, quelle vilenie! Le destin devient un pleutre. On voit l'homme de Campo-Formio querellant pour une paire de bas de soie. Rapetissement de Napoléon qui rapetisse l'Angleterre.

Ces deux phases, Waterloo et Sainte-Hélène, réduites aux proportions bourgeoises, tout homme ruiné les traverse.

Le soir que nous avons dit, et qui était un des premiers soirs de mai, Lethierry, laissant Déruchette errer au clair de lune dans le jardin, s'était couché plus triste que jamais. Tous ces détails chétifs et déplaisants, complications des fortunes perdues, toutes ces préoccupations du troisième ordre, qui commencent par être insipides et qui finissent par être lugubres, roulaient dans son esprit. Maussade encombrement de misères. Mess Lethierry sentait sa chute irrémédiable. Qu’allait-on faire? Qu’allait-on devenir? Quels sacrifices faudrait-il imposer à Déruchette? Qui renvoyer, de Douce ou de Grâce? Vendrait-on les Bravées? N’en serait-on pas réduit à quitter l’île? N’être rien là où l’on a été tout, déchéance insupportable en effet.

Et dire que c’était fini! Se rappeler ces traversées liant la France à l’Archipel, ces mardis du départ, ces vendredis du retour, la foule sur le quai, ces grands chargements, cette industrie, cette prospérité, cette navigation directe et fière, cette machine où l’homme met sa volonté, cette chaudière toute-puissante, cette fumée, cette réalité! Le navire à vapeur, c’est la boussole complétée; la boussole indique le droit chemin, la vapeur le suit. L’une propose, l’autre exécute. Où était-elle, sa Durande, cette magnifique et souveraine Durande, cette maîtresse de la mer, cette reine qui le faisait roi! Avoir été dans son pays l’homme idée, l’homme succès, l’homme révolution! Y renoncer! Abdiquer! N’être plus! Faire rire! être un sac où il y a eu quelque chose! être le passé quand on a été l’avenir! Aboutir à la pitié hautaine des idiots! Voir triompher la routine, l’entêtement, l’ornière, l’égoïsme, l’ignorance! Voir recommencer bêtement les va-et-vient des coutres gothiques cahotés sur le flot! Voir la vieillerie rajeunir! Avoir perdu toute sa vie! Avoir été lumière et subir l’éclipse! Ah! Comme c’était beau sur les vagues cette cheminée altière, ce prodigieux cylindre, ce pilier au chapiteau de fumée, cette colonne plus grande que la colonne Vendôme, car sur l’une il n’y a qu’un homme et sur l’autre il y a le progrès! L’océan était dessous. C’était la certitude en pleine mer. On avait vu cela dans cette petite île, dans ce petit port, dans ce petit Saint-Sampson! Oui, on l’avait vu! Quoi! On l’a vu, et on ne le reverra plus!

Toute cette obsession du regret torturait Lethierry. Il y a des sanglots de la pensée. Jamais peut-être il n’avait plus amèrement senti sa perte. Un certain engourdissement suit ces accès aigus. Sous cet appesantissement de tristesse, il s’assoupit.

Il resta environ deux heures les paupières fermées, dormant un peu, songeant beaucoup, fiévreux. Ces torpeurs-là couvrent un obscur travail du cerveau, très fatigant. Vers le milieu de la nuit, vers minuit, un peu avant, ou un peu après, il secoua cet assoupissement. Il se réveilla, il ouvrit les yeux, sa fenêtre faisait face à son hamac, il vit une chose extraordinaire.

Une forme était devant sa fenêtre. Une forme inouïe. La cheminée d'un bateau à vapeur.

Mess Lethierry se dressa tout d'une pièce sur son séant. Le hamac oscilla comme au branle d'une tempête. Lethierry regarda. Il y avait dans la fenêtre une vision. Le port plein de clair de lune s'encadrait dans les vitres, et sur cette clarté, tout près de la maison, se découpait, droite, ronde et noire, une silhouette superbe.

Un tuyau de machine était là.

Lethierry se précipita à bas du hamac, courut à la fenêtre, leva le châssis, se pencha dehors, et la reconnut.

La cheminée de la Durande était devant lui.

Elle était à l'ancienne place.

Ses quatre chaînes la maintenaient amarrée au bordage d'un bateau dans lequel, au-dessous d'elle, on distinguait une masse qui avait un contour compliqué.

Lethierry recula, tourna le dos à la fenêtre, et retomba assis sur le hamac.

Il se retourna, et revit la vision.

Un moment après, le temps d'un éclair, il était sur le quai, une lanterne à la main.

Au vieil anneau d'amarrage de la Durande était attachée une barque portant un peu à l'arrière un bloc massif d'où sortait la cheminée droite devant la fenêtre des Bravées. L'avant de la barque se prolongeait, en dehors du coin du mur de la maison, à fleur de quai.

Il n'y avait personne dans la barque.

Cette barque avait une forme à elle et dont tout Guernesey eût donné le signalement. C'était la panse.

Lethierry sauta dedans. Il courut à la masse qu'il voyait au delà du mât. C'était la machine. Elle était là, entière, complète, intacte, carrément assise sur son plancher de fonte; la chaudière avait toutes ses cloisons; l'arbre des roues était dressé et amarré près de la chaudière; la pompe de saumure était à sa place. Rien ne manquait.

Lethierry examina la machine.

La lanterne et la lune s'entr'aidaient pour l'éclairer.

Il passa tout le mécanisme en revue.

Il vit les deux caisses qui étaient à côté. Il regarda l'arbre des roues.

Il alla à la cabine. Elle était vide.

Il revint à la machine et la toucha. Il avança sa tête dans la chaudière. Il se mit à genoux pour voir dedans.

Il posa dans le fourneau sa lanterne dont la lueur illumina toute la mécanique et produisit presque le trompe-l’œil d’une machine allumée.

Puis il éclata de rire, et, se redressant, l’œil fixé sur la machine, les bras tendus vers la cheminée, il cria: Au secours!

La cloche du port était sur le quai à quelques pas, il y courut, empoigna la chaîne et se mit à secouer la cloche impétueusement.

II

ENCORE LA CLOCHE DU PORT

Gilliatt en effet, après une traversée sans incident, mais un peu lente à cause de la pesanteur du chargement de la panse, était arrivé à Saint-Sampson à la nuit close, plus près de dix heures que de neuf.

Gilliatt avait calculé l’heure. La demi-remontée s’était faite. Il y avait de la lune et de l’eau; on pouvait entrer dans le port.

Le petit havre était endormi. Quelques navires y étaient mouillés, cargues sur vergues, hunes capelées, et sans fanaux. On apercevait au fond quelques barques au radoub, à sec dans le carénage. Grosses coques démâtées et sabordées, dressant au-dessus de leur bordage troué de claires-voies les pointes courbes de leur membrure dénudée, assez semblables à des scarabées morts couchés sur le dos, pattes en l’air.

Gilliatt, sitôt le goulet franchi, avait examiné le port et le quai. Il n’y avait de lumière nulle part, pas plus aux Bravées qu’ailleurs. Il n’y avait point de passants, excepté peut-être quelqu’un, un homme, qui venait d’entrer au presbytère ou d’en sortir. Et encore n’était-on pas sûr que ce fût une personne, la nuit estompant tout ce qu’elle dessine et le clair de lune ne faisant jamais rien que d’indécis. La distance s’ajoutait à l’obscurité. Le presbytère d’alors était situé de l’autre côté du port, sur un emplacement où est construite aujourd’hui une cale ouverte.

Gilliatt avait silencieusement accosté les Bravées, et avait amarré la panse à l’anneau de la Durande sous la fenêtre de mess Lethierry.

Puis il avait sauté par-dessus le bordage et pris terre.

Gilliatt, laissant derrière lui la panse à quai, tourna la maison, longea une ruette, puis une autre, ne regarda même pas l’embranchement de sentier qui menait au Bû de la Rue, et au bout de quelques minutes, s’arrêta dans ce recoin de muraille où il y avait une mauve sauvage à fleurs roses en juin, du houx, du lierre et des orties. C’est de là que, caché sous les ronces, assis sur une pierre, bien des fois, dans les jours d’été, et pendant de longues heures et pendant des mois entiers, il avait contemplé, par-dessus le mur bas au point de tenter l’enjambée, le jardin des Bravées, et, à travers les branches d’arbres, deux fenêtres d’une chambre de la maison. Il retrouva sa pierre, sa ronce, toujours le mur aussi bas, toujours l’angle aussi obscur, et, comme une bête rentrée au trou, glissant plutôt que marchant, il se blottit. Une fois assis, il ne fit plus un mouvement. Il regarda. Il revoyait le jardin, les allées, les massifs, les carrés de fleurs, la maison, les deux fenêtres de la chambre. La lune lui montrait ce rêve. Il est affreux qu'on soit forcé de respirer. Il faisait ce qu'il pouvait pour s'en empêcher.

Il lui semblait voir un paradis fantôme. Il avait peur que tout cela ne s'envolât. Il était presque impossible que ces choses fussent réellement sous ses yeux; et si elles y étaient, ce ne pouvait être qu'avec l'imminence d'évanouissement qu'ont toujours les choses divines. Un souffle, et tout se dissiperait. Gilliatt avait ce tremblement.

Tout près, en face de lui, dans le jardin, au bord d'une allée, il y avait un banc de bois peint en vert. On se souvient de ce banc.

Gilliatt regardait les deux fenêtres. Il pensait à un sommeil possible de quelqu'un dans cette chambre. Derrière ce mur, on dormait. Il eût voulu ne pas être où il était. Il eût mieux aimé mourir que de s'en aller. Il pensait à une haleine soulevant une poitrine. Elle, ce mirage, cette blancheur dans une nuée, cette obsession flottante de son esprit, elle était là! Il pensait à l'inaccessible qui était endormi, et si près, et comme à la portée de son extase; il pensait à la femme impossible assoupie, et visitée, elle aussi, par les chimères; à la créature souhaitée, lointaine, insaisissable, fermant les yeux, le front dans la main; au mystère du sommeil de l'être idéal, aux songes que peut faire un songe. Il n'osait penser au delà et il pensait pourtant; il se risquait dans les manques de respect de la rêverie, la quantité de forme féminine que peut avoir un ange le troublait, l'heure nocturne enhardit aux regards furtifs les yeux timides, il s'en voulait d'aller si avant, il craignait de profaner en réfléchissant; malgré lui, forcé, contraint, frémissant, il regardait dans l'invisible. Il subissait le frisson, et presque la souffrance, de se figurer un jupon sur une chaise, une mante jetée sur le tapis, une ceinture débouclée, un fichu. Il imaginait un corset, un lacet traînant à terre, des bas, des jarretières. Il avait l'âme dans les étoiles.

Les étoiles sont faites aussi bien pour le cœur humain d'un pauvre comme Gilliatt que pour le cœur humain d'un millionnaire. À un certain degré de passion, tout homme est sujet aux profonds éblouissements. Si c'est une nature âpre et primitive, raison de plus. Être sauvage, cela s'ajoute au rêve.

Le ravissement est une plénitude qui déborde comme une autre. Voir ces fenêtres, c'était presque trop pour Gilliatt.

Tout à coup, il la vit elle-même.

Des branchages d’un fourré déjà épaissi par le printemps, sortit, avec une ineffable lenteur spectrale et céleste, une figure, une robe, un visage divin, presque une clarté sous la lune.

Gilliatt se sentit défaillir, c’était Déruchette.

Déruchette approcha. Elle s’arrêta. Elle fit quelques pas pour s’éloigner, s’arrêta encore, puis revint s’asseoir sur le banc de bois. La lune était dans les arbres, quelques nuées erraient parmi les étoiles pâles, la mer parlait aux choses de l’ombre à demi-voix, la ville dormait, une brume montait de l’horizon, cette mélancolie était profonde. Déruchette inclinait le front, avec cet œil pensif qui regarde attentivement rien; elle était assise de profil, elle était presque nu-tête, ayant un bonnet dénoué qui laissait voir sur sa nuque délicate la naissance des cheveux, elle roulait machinalement un ruban de ce bonnet autour d’un de ses doigts, la pénombre modelait ses mains de statue, sa robe était d’une de ces nuances que la nuit fait blanches, les arbres remuaient comme s’ils étaient pénétrables à l’enchantement qui se dégageait d’elle, on voyait le bout d’un de ses pieds; il y avait dans ses cils baissés cette vague contraction qui annonce une larme rentrée ou une pensée refoulée, ses bras avaient l’indécision ravissante de ne point trouver où s’accouder, quelque chose qui flotte un peu se mêlait à toute sa posture, c’était plutôt une lueur qu’une lumière et une grâce qu’une déesse, les plis du bas de sa jupe étaient exquis, son adorable visage méditait virginalement. Elle était si près que c’était terrible. Gilliatt l’entendait respirer.

Il y avait dans des profondeurs un rossignol qui chantait. Les passages du vent dans les branches mettaient en mouvement l’ineffable silence nocturne. Déruchette, jolie et sacrée, apparaissait dans ce crépuscule comme la résultante de ces rayons et de ces parfums; ce charme immense et épars aboutissait mystérieusement à elle, et s’y condensait, et elle en était l’épanouissement. Elle semblait l’âme fleur de toute cette ombre.

Toute cette ombre, flottante en Déruchette, pesait sur Gilliatt. Il était éperdu. Ce qu’il éprouvait échappe aux paroles; l’émotion est toujours neuve et le mot a toujours servi; de là l’impossibilité d’exprimer l’émotion. L’accablement du ravissement existe. Voir Déruchette, la voir elle-même, voir sa robe, voir son bonnet, voir son ruban qu’elle tourne autour de son doigt, est-ce qu’on peut se figurer une telle chose? Être près d’elle, est-ce que c’est possible? L’entendre respirer, elle respire donc! Alors les astres respirent. Gilliatt frissonnait. Il était le plus misérable et le plus enivré des hommes. Il ne savait que faire. Ce délire de la voir l’anéantissait. Quoi! C’était elle qui était là, et c’était lui qui était ici! Ses idées, éblouies et fixes, s’arrêtaient sur cette créature comme sur une escarboucle. Il regardait cette nuque et ces cheveux. Il ne se disait même pas que tout cela maintenant était à lui, qu’avant peu, demain peut-être, ce bonnet il aurait le droit de le défaire, ce ruban il aurait le droit de le dénouer. Songer jusque-là, il n’eût pas même conçu un moment cet excès d’audace. Toucher avec la pensée, c’est presque toucher avec la main. L’amour était pour Gilliatt comme le miel pour l’ours, le rêve exquis et délicat. Il pensait confusément. Il ne savait ce qu’il avait. Le rossignol chantait. Il se sentait expirer.

Se lever, franchir le mur, s’approcher, dire c’est moi, parler à Déruchette, cette idée ne lui venait pas. Si elle lui fût venue, il se fût enfui. Si quelque chose de semblable à une pensée parvenait à poindre dans son esprit, c’était ceci, que Déruchette était là, qu’il n’y avait besoin de rien de plus, et que l’éternité commençait.

Un bruit les tira tous les deux, elle de sa rêverie, lui de son extase.

Quelqu’un marchait dans le jardin. On ne voyait pas qui, à cause des arbres. C’était un pas d’homme.

Déruchette leva les yeux.

Les pas s’approchèrent, puis cessèrent. La personne qui marchait venait de s’arrêter. Elle devait être tout près. Le sentier où était le banc se perdait entre deux massifs. C’est là qu’était cette personne, dans cet entre-deux, à quelques pas du banc.

Le hasard avait disposé les épaisseurs des branches de telle sorte que Déruchette la voyait, mais que Gilliatt ne la voyait pas.

La lune projetait sur la terre, hors du massif jusqu’au banc, une ombre.

Gilliatt voyait cette ombre.

Il regarda Déruchette.

Elle était toute pâle. Sa bouche entr’ouverte ébauchait un cri de surprise. Elle s’était soulevée à demi sur le banc et elle y était retombée; il y avait dans son attitude un mélange de fuite et de fascination. Son étonnement était un enchantement plein de crainte. Elle avait sur les lèvres presque le rayonnement du sourire et une lueur de larmes dans les yeux. Elle était comme transfigurée par une présence. Il ne semblait pas que l’être qu’elle voyait fût de la terre. La réverbération d’un ange était dans son regard.

L’être qui n’était pour Gilliatt qu’une ombre parla. Une voix sortit du massif, plus douce qu’une voix de femme, une voix d’homme pourtant.

Gilliatt entendit ces paroles:

— Mademoiselle, je vous vois tous les dimanches et tous les jeudis; on m’a dit qu’autrefois vous ne veniez pas si souvent. C’est une remarque qu’on a faite, je vous demande pardon. Je ne vous ai jamais parlé, c’était mon devoir; aujourd’hui je vous parle, c’est mon devoir. Je dois d’abord m’adresser à vous. Le *Cashmere* part demain, c’est ce qui fait que je suis venu. Vous vous promenez tous les soirs dans votre jardin. Ce serait mal à moi de connaître vos habitudes si je n’avais pas la pensée que j’ai. Mademoiselle, vous êtes pauvre; depuis ce matin je suis riche. Voulez-vous de moi pour votre mari?

Déruchette joignit ses deux mains comme une suppliante, et regarda celui qui lui parlait, muette, l’œil fixe, tremblante de la tête aux pieds.

La voix reprit:

— Je vous aime. Dieu n’a pas fait le cœur de l’homme pour qu’il se taise. Puisque Dieu promet l’éternité, c’est qu’il veut qu’on soit deux. Il y a pour moi sur la terre une femme, c’est vous. Je pense à vous comme à une prière. Ma foi est en Dieu et mon espérance est en vous. Les ailes que j’ai, c’est vous qui les portez. Vous êtes ma vie, et déjà mon ciel.

— Monsieur, dit Déruchette, il n’y a personne pour répondre dans la maison.

La voix s’éleva de nouveau:

— J’ai fait ce doux songe. Dieu ne défend pas les songes. Vous me faites l’effet d’une gloire. Je vous aime passionnément, mademoiselle. La sainte innocence, c’est vous. Je sais que c’est l’heure où l’on est couché, mais je n’avais pas le choix d’un autre moment. Vous rappelez-vous ce passage de la bible qu’on nous a lu? Genèse, chapitre vingt-cinq. J’y ai toujours songé depuis. Je l’ai relu souvent. Le révérend Hérode me disait: Il vous faut une femme riche. Je lui ai répondu: Non, il me faut une femme pauvre. Mademoiselle, je vous parle sans approcher, je me reculerai même si vous ne voulez pas que mon ombre touche vos pieds. C’est vous qui êtes la souveraine; vous viendrez à moi si vous voulez. J’aime et j’attends. Vous êtes la forme vivante de la bénédiction.

— Monsieur, balbutia Déruchette, je ne savais pas qu’on me remarquait le dimanche et le jeudi.

La voix continua:

— On ne peut rien contre les choses angéliques. Toute la loi est amour. Le mariage, c’est Chanaan. Vous êtes la beauté promise. Ô pleine de grâce, je vous salue.

Déruchette répondit:

— Je ne croyais pas faire plus de mal que les autres personnes qui étaient exactes.

La voix poursuivit:

— Dieu a mis ses intentions dans les fleurs, dans l'aurore, dans le printemps, et il veut qu'on aime. Vous êtes belle dans cette obscurité sacrée de la nuit. Ce jardin a été cultivé par vous et dans ses parfums il y a quelque chose de votre haleine. Mademoiselle, les rencontres des âmes ne dépendent pas d'elles. Ce n'est pas de notre faute. Vous assistiez, rien de plus; j'étais là, rien de plus. Je n'ai rien fait que de sentir que je vous aimais. Quelquefois mes yeux se sont levés sur vous. J'ai eu tort, mais comment faire? C'est en vous regardant que tout est venu. On ne peut s'empêcher. Il y a des volontés mystérieuses qui sont au-dessus de nous. Le premier des temples, c'est le cœur. Avoir votre âme dans ma maison, c'est à ce paradis terrestre que j'aspire, y consentez-vous? Tant que j'ai été pauvre, je n'ai rien dit. Je sais votre âge. Vous avez vingt et un ans, j'en ai vingt-six. Je pars demain; si vous me refusez, je ne reviendrai pas. Soyez mon engagée, voulez-vous? Mes yeux ont déjà, plus d'une fois, malgré moi, fait aux vôtres cette question. Je vous aime, répondez-moi. Je parlerai à votre oncle dès qu'il pourra me recevoir, mais je me tourne d'abord vers vous. C'est à Rebecca qu'on demande Rebecca. À moins que vous ne m'aimiez pas.

Déruchette pencha le front, et murmura:

— Oh! Je l'adore

Cela fut dit si bas que Gilliatt seul entendit.

Elle resta le front baissé comme si le visage dans l'ombre mettait dans l'ombre la pensée.

Il y eut une pause. Les feuilles d'arbres ne remuaient pas. C'était ce moment sévère et paisible où le sommeil des choses s'ajoute au sommeil des êtres, et où la nuit semble écouter le battement de cœur de la nature. Dans ce recueillement s'élevait, comme une harmonie qui complète un silence, le bruit immense de la mer.

La voix reprit:

— Mademoiselle.

Déruchette tressaillit.

La voix continua:

— Hélas! J'attends.

— Qu’attendez-vous?

— Votre réponse.

— Dieu l’a entendue, dit Déruchette.

Alors la voix devint presque sonore, et en même temps plus douce que jamais. Ces paroles sortirent du massif, comme d’un buisson ardent:

— Tu es ma fiancée. Lève-toi, et viens. Que le bleu profond où sont les astres assiste à cette acceptation de mon âme par ton âme, et que notre premier baiser se mêle au firmament!

Déruchette se leva, et demeura un instant immobile, le regard fixé devant elle, sans doute sur un autre regard. Puis, à pas lents, la tête droite, les bras pendants et les doigts des mains écartés comme lorsqu’on marche sur un support inconnu, elle se dirigea vers le massif et y disparut.

Un moment après, au lieu d’une ombre sur le sable il y en avait deux, elles se confondaient, et Gilliatt voyait à ses pieds l’embrassement de ces deux ombres.

Le temps coule de nous comme d’un sablier, et nous n’avons pas le sentiment de cette fuite, surtout dans de certains instants suprêmes. Ce couple d’un côté, qui ignorait ce témoin et ne le voyait pas, de l’autre ce témoin qui ne voyait pas ce couple, mais qui le savait là, combien de minutes demeurèrent-ils ainsi, dans cette suspension mystérieuse? Il serait impossible de le dire. Tout à coup, un bruit lointain éclata, une voix cria: Au secours! Et la cloche du port sonna. Ce tumulte, il est probable que le bonheur, ivre et céleste, ne l’entendit pas.

La cloche continua de sonner. Quelqu’un qui eût cherché Gilliatt dans l’angle du mur ne l’y eût plus trouvé.

LIVRE DEUXIÈME

LA RECONNAISSANCE EN PLEIN DESPOTISME

I

JOIE ENTREMÊLÉE D’ANGOISSE

Mess Lethierry agitait la cloche avec emportement. Brusquement il s’arrêta. Un homme venait de tourner l’angle du quai. C’était Gilliatt.

Mess Lethierry courut à lui, ou pour mieux dire se jeta sur lui, lui prit la main dans ses poings, et le regarda un moment dans les deux yeux en silence; un de ces silences qui sont de l’explosion ne sachant par où sortir.

Puis avec violence, le secouant et le tirant, et le serrant dans ses bras, il fit entrer Gilliatt dans la salle basse des Bravées, en repoussa du talon la porte qui demeura entr’ouverte, s’assit, ou tomba, sur une chaise à côté d’une grande table éclairée par la lune dont le reflet blanchissait vaguement le visage de Gilliatt, et, d’une voix où il y avait des éclats de rire et des sanglots mêlés, il cria:

— Ah! Mon fils! L’homme au bag pipe! Gilliatt! Je savais bien que c’était toi! La panse, parbleu! Conte-moi ça. Tu y es donc allé! On t’aurait brûlé il y a cent ans. C’est de la magie. Il ne manque pas une vis. J’ai déjà tout regardé, tout reconnu, tout manié. Je devine que les roues sont dans les deux caisses. Te voilà donc enfin! Je viens de te chercher dans ta cabine. J’ai sonné la cloche. Je te cherchais. Je me disais: Où est-il que je le mange! Il faut convenir qu’il se passe des choses extraordinaires. Cet animal-là revient de l’écueil Douvres. Il me rapporte ma vie. Tonnerre! Tu es un ange. Oui, oui, oui, c’est ma machine. Personne n’y croira. On le verra, on dira: ce n’est pas vrai. Tout y est, quoi! Tout y est! Il ne manque pas un serpentin. Il ne manque pas un apitage. Le tube de prise d’eau n’a pas bougé. C’est incroyable qu’il n’y ait pas eu d’avarie. Il n’y a qu’un peu d’huile à mettre. Mais comment as-tu fait? Et dire que Durande va remarcher! L’arbre des roues est démonté comme par un bijoutier. Donne-moi ta parole d’honneur que je ne suis pas fou.

Il se dressa debout, respira, et poursuivit:

— Jure-moi ça. Quelle révolution! Je me pince, je sens bien que je ne rêve pas. Tu es mon enfant, tu es mon garçon, tu es le bon Dieu. Ah! Mon fils! Avoir été me chercher ma gueuse de machine! En pleine mer! Dans ce guet-apens d’écueil! J’ai vu des choses très farces dans ma vie. Je n’ai rien vu de tel. J’ai vu les parisiens qui sont des satans. Je t’en fiche qu’ils feraient ça. C'est pis que la Bastille. J'ai vu les gauchos labourer dans les pampas, ils ont pour charrue une branche d'arbre qui a un coude et pour herse un fagot d'épines tiré avec une corde de cuir, ils récoltent avec ça des grains de blé gros comme des noisettes. C'est de la gnognotte à côté de toi. Tu as fait là un miracle, un pour de vrai. Ah! Le gredin! Saute-moi donc au cou. Et on te devra tout le bonheur du pays. Vont-ils bougonner dans Saint-Sampson! Je vais m'occuper tout de suite de refaire le bachot. C'est étonnant, la bielle n'a rien de cassé. Messieurs, il est allé aux Douvres. Je dis les Douvres. Il est allé tout seul. Les Douvres! Un caillou qu'il n'y a rien de pire. Tu sais, t'a-t-on dit? C'est prouvé, ça a été fait exprès, Clubin a coulé Durande pour me filouter de l'argent qu'il avait à m'apporter. Il a soûlé Tangrouille. C'est long, je te raconterai un autre jour la piraterie. Moi, affreuse brute, j'avais confiance dans Clubin. Il s'y est pincé le scélérat, car il n'a pas dû en sortir. Il y a un Dieu, canaille! Vois-tu, Gilliatt, tout de suite, dare, dare, les fers au feu, nous allons rebâtir Durande. Nous lui donnerons vingt pieds de plus. On fait maintenant les bateaux plus longs. J'achèterai du bois à Dantzick et à Brême. À présent que j'ai la machine, on me fera crédit. La confiance reviendra.

Mess Lethierry s'arrêta, leva les yeux avec ce regard qui voit le ciel à travers le plafond, et dit entre ses dents: Il y en a un.

Puis il posa le médium de sa main droite entre ses deux sourcils, l'ongle appuyé sur la naissance du nez, ce qui indique le passage d'un projet dans le cerveau, et il reprit:

— C'est égal, pour tout recommencer sur une grande échelle, un peu d'argent comptant eût bien fait mon affaire. Ah! Si j'avais mes trois bank-notes, les soixante-quinze mille francs que ce brigand de Rantaine m'a rendus et que ce brigand de Clubin m'a volés!

Gilliatt, en silence, chercha dans sa poche quelque chose qu'il posa devant lui. C'était la ceinture de cuir qu'il avait rapportée. Il ouvrit et étala sur la table cette ceinture dans l'intérieur de laquelle la lune laissait déchiffrer le mot *Clubin*; il tira du gousset de la ceinture une boîte, et de la boîte trois morceaux de papier pliés qu'il déplia et qu'il tendit à mess Lethierry.

Mess Lethierry examina les trois morceaux de papier. Il faisait assez clair pour que le chiffre 1000 et le mot *thousand* y fussent parfaitement visibles. Mess Lethierry prit les trois billets, les posa sur la table l'un à côté de l’autre, les regarda, regarda Gilliatt, resta un moment interdit, puis ce fut comme une éruption après une explosion.

— Ça aussi! Tu es prodigieux. Mes bank-notes! Tous les trois! Mille chaque! Mes soixante-quinze mille francs! Tu es donc allé jusqu’en enfer. C’est la ceinture à Clubin. Pardieu! Je lis dedans son ordure de nom. Gilliatt rapporte la machine, plus l’argent! Voilà de quoi mettre dans les journaux. J’achèterai du bois première qualité. Je devine, tu auras retrouvé la carcasse. Clubin pourri dans quelque coin. Nous prendrons le sapin à Dantzick et le chêne à Brême, nous ferons un bon bordé, nous mettrons le chêne en dedans et le sapin en dehors. Autrefois on fabriquait les navires moins bien et ils duraient davantage; c’est que le bois était plus assaisonné, parce qu’on ne construisait pas tant. Nous ferons peut-être la coque en orme. L’orme est bon pour les parties noyées; être tantôt sec, tantôt trempé, ça le pourrit; l’orme veut être toujours mouillé, il se nourrit d’eau. Quelle belle Durande nous allons conditionner! On ne me fera pas la loi. Je n’aurai plus besoin de crédit. J’ai les sous. A-t-on jamais vu ce Gilliatt! J’étais par terre, aplati, mort. Il me remet debout sur mes quatre fers! Et moi qui ne pensais pas du tout à lui! Ça m’était sorti de l’esprit. Tout me revient, à présent. Pauvre garçon! Ah! Par exemple, tu sais, tu épouses Déruchette.

Gilliatt s’adossa au mur, comme quelqu’un qui chancelle, et très bas, mais très distinctement, il dit:

— Non.

Mess Lethierry eut un soubresaut.

— Comment, non!

Gilliatt répondit:

— Je ne l’aime pas.

Mess Lethierry alla à la fenêtre, l’ouvrit, la referma, revint à la table, prit les trois bank-notes, les plia, posa la boîte de fer dessus, se gratta les cheveux, saisit la ceinture de Clubin, la jeta violemment contre la muraille, et dit:

— Il y a quelque chose.

Il enfonça ses deux poings dans ses deux poches, et reprit:

— Tu n’aimes pas Déruchette! C’est donc pour moi que tu jouais du bag pipe?

Gilliatt, toujours adossé au mur, pâlissait comme un homme qui tout à l’heure ne respirera plus. À mesure qu’il devenait pâle, mess Lethierry devenait rouge.

— En voilà un imbécile! Il n’aime pas Déruchette! Eh bien, arrange-toi pour l’aimer, car elle n’épousera que toi. Quelle diable d’anecdote viens-tu me conter là! Si tu crois que je te crois! Est-ce que tu es malade? C’est bon, envoie chercher le médecin, mais ne dis pas d’extravagances. Pas possible que tu aies déjà eu le temps de vous quereller et de te fâcher avec elle. Il est vrai que les amoureux, c’est si bête! Voyons, as-tu des raisons? Si tu as des raisons, dis-les. On n’est pas une oie sans avoir des raisons. Après ça, j’ai du coton dans les oreilles, j’ai peut-être mal entendu, répète ce que tu as dit.

Gilliatt répliqua:

— J’ai dit non.

— Tu as dit non. Il y tient, la brute! Tu as quelque chose, c’est sûr! Tu as dit non! Voilà une stupidité qui dépasse les limites du monde connu. On flanque des douches aux personnes pour bien moins que ça. Ah! Tu n’aimes pas Déruchette! Alors c’est pour l’amour du bonhomme que tu as fait tout ce que tu as fait! C’est pour les beaux yeux du papa que tu es allé aux Douvres, que tu as eu froid, que tu as eu chaud, que tu as crevé de faim et de soif, que tu as mangé de la vermine de rocher, que tu as eu le brouillard, la pluie et le vent pour chambre à coucher, et que tu as exécuté la chose de me rapporter ma machine, comme on rapporte à une jolie femme son serin qui s’est échappé! Et la tempête d’il y a trois jours! Si tu t’imagines que je ne me rends pas compte. Tu en as eu du tirage! C’est en faisant la bouche en cœur du côté de ma vieille caboche que tu as taillé, coupé, tourné, viré, traîné, limé, scié, charpenté, inventé, écrabouillé, et fait plus de miracles à toi tout seul que tous les saints du paradis. Ah! Idiot! Tu m’as pourtant assez ennuyé avec ton bag pipe. On appelle ça biniou en Bretagne. Toujours le même air, l’animal! Ah! Tu n’aimes pas Déruchette! Je ne sais pas ce que tu as. Je me rappelle bien tout à présent, j’étais là dans le coin, Déruchette a dit: Je l’épouserai. Et elle t’épousera! Ah! Tu ne l’aimes pas! Réflexions faites, je ne comprends rien. Ou tu es fou, ou je le suis. Et le voilà qui ne dit plus un mot. Ça n’est pas permis de faire tout ce que tu as fait, et de dire à la fin: Je n’aime pas Déruchette. On ne rend pas service aux gens pour les mettre en colère. Eh bien, si tu ne l’épouses pas, elle coiffera sainte Catherine. D’abord, j’ai besoin de toi, moi. Tu seras le pilote de Durande. Si tu t’imagines que je vais te laisser aller comme ça! Ta, ta, ta, nenni mon cœur, je ne te lâche point. Je te tiens. Je ne t’écoute seulement pas. Où y a-t-il un matelot comme toi! Tu es mon homme. Mais parle donc!

Cependant la cloche avait réveillé la maison et les environs. Douce et Grâce s’étaient levées et venaient d’entrer dans la salle basse, l’air stupéfait, sans dire mot. Grâce avait à la main une chandelle. Un groupe de voisins, bourgeois, marins et paysans, sortis en hâte, était dehors sur le quai, considérant avec pétrification et stupeur la cheminée de la Durande dans la panse. Quelques-uns, entendant la voix de mess Lethierry dans la salle basse, commençaient à s’y glisser silencieusement par la porte entre-bâillée. Entre deux faces de commères, passait la tête de sieur Landoys qui avait ce hasard d’être toujours là où il aurait regretté de ne pas être.

Les grandes joies ne demandent pas mieux que d’avoir un public. Le point d’appui un peu épars qu’offre toujours une foule leur plaît; elles repartent de là. Mess Lethierry s’aperçut tout à coup qu’il y avait des gens autour de lui. Il accepta d’emblée l’auditoire.

— Ah! Vous voilà, vous autres. C’est bien heureux. Vous savez la nouvelle. Cet homme a été là et il a rapporté ça. Bonjour, sieur Landoys. Tout à l’heure quand je me suis réveillé, j’ai vu le tuyau. C’était sous ma fenêtre. Il ne manque pas un clou à la chose. On fait des gravures de Napoléon; moi, j’aime mieux ça que la bataille d’Austerlitz. Vous sortez de votre lit, bonnes gens. La Durande vous vient en dormant. Pendant que vous mettez vos bonnets de coton et que vous soufflez vos chandelles, il y a des gens qui sont des héros. On est un tas de lâches et de fainéants, on chauffe ses rhumatismes, heureusement cela n’empêche pas qu’il y ait des enragés. Ces enragés vont où il faut aller et font ce qu’il faut faire. L’homme du Bû de la Rue arrive du rocher Douvres. Il a repêché la Durande au fond de la mer, il a repêché l’argent dans la poche de Clubin, un trou encore plus profond. Mais comment as-tu fait? Tout le diantre était contre toi, le vent et la marée, la marée et le vent. C’est vrai que tu es sorcier. Ceux qui disent ça ne sont déjà pas si bêtes. La Durande est revenue! Les tempêtes ont beau avoir de la méchanceté, ça la leur coupe rasibus. Mes amis, je vous annonce qu’il n’y a plus de naufrages. J’ai visité la mécanique. Elle est comme neuve, entière, quoi! Les tiroirs à vapeur jouent comme sur des roulettes. On dirait un objet d’hier matin. Vous savez que l’eau qui sort est conduite hors du bateau par un tube placé dans un autre tube par où passe l’eau qui entre, pour utiliser la chaleur; eh bien, les deux tubes, ça y est. Toute la machine! Les roues aussi! Ah! Tu l’épouseras!

— Qui? La machine? demanda sieur Landoys.

— Non, la fille. Oui, la machine. Les deux. Il sera deux fois mon gendre. Il sera le capitaine. Good bye, capitaine Gilliatt. Il va y en avoir une, de Durande! On va en faire des affaires, et de la circulation, et du commerce, et des chargements de bœufs et de moutons! Je ne donnerais pas Saint-Sampson pour Londres. Et voici l'auteur. Je vous dis que c'est une aventure. On lira ça samedi dans la gazette au père Mauger. Gilliatt le Malin est un malin. Qu'est-ce que c'est que ces louis d'or là?

Mess Lethierry venait de remarquer, par l'hiatus du couvercle, qu'il y avait de l'or dans la boîte posée sur les bank-notes. Il la prit, l'ouvrit, la vida dans la paume de sa main, et mit la poignée de guinées sur la table.

— Pour les pauvres. Sieur Landoys, donnez ces pounds de ma part au connétable de Saint-Sampson. Vous savez, la lettre de Rantaine? Je vous l'ai montrée; eh bien, j'ai les bank-notes. Voilà de quoi acheter du chêne et du sapin et faire de la menuiserie. Regardez plutôt. Vous rappelez-vous le temps d'il y a trois jours? Quel massacre de vent et de pluie! Le ciel tirait le canon. Gilliatt a reçu ça dans les Douvres. ça ne l'a pas empêché de décrocher l'épave comme je décroche ma montre. Grâce à lui, je redeviens quelqu'un. La galiote au père Lethierry va reprendre son service, messieurs, mesdames. Une coquille de noix avec deux roues et un tuyau de pipe, j'ai toujours été toqué de cette invention-là. Je me suis toujours dit: j'en ferai une! Ça date de loin; c'est une idée qui m'est venue à Paris dans le café qui fait le coin de la rue Christine et de la rue Dauphine en lisant un journal qui en parlait. Savez-vous bien que Gilliatt ne serait pas gêné pour mettre la machine de Marly dans son gousset et pour se promener avec? C'est du fer battu, cet homme-là, de l'acier trempé, du diamant, un marin bon jeu bon argent, un forgeron, un gaillard extraordinaire, plus étonnant que le prince de Hohenlohe. J'appelle ça un homme qui a de l'esprit. Nous sommes tous des pas grand'chose. Les loups de mer, c'est vous, c'est moi, c'est nous; mais le lion de mer, le voici. Hurrah, Gilliatt! Je ne sais pas ce qu'il a fait, mais certainement il a été un diable, et comment veut-on que je ne lui donne pas Déruchette!

Depuis quelques instants Déruchette était dans la salle. Elle n'avait pas dit un mot, elle n'avait pas fait de bruit. Elle avait eu une entrée d'ombre. Elle s'était assise, presque inaperçue, sur une chaise en arrière de mess Lethierry debout, loquace, orageux, joyeux, abondant en gestes et parlant haut. Un peu après elle, une autre apparition muette s'était faite. Un homme vêtu de noir, en cravate blanche, ayant son chapeau à la main, s'était arrêté dans l’ entre-bâillement de la porte. Il y avait maintenant plusieurs chandelles dans le groupe lentement grossi. Ces lumières éclairaient de côté l’homme vêtu de noir; son profil d’une blancheur jeune et charmante se dessinait sur le fond obscur avec une pureté de médaille; il appuyait son coude à l’angle d’un panneau de la porte, et il tenait son front dans sa main gauche, attitude, à son insu, gracieuse, qui faisait valoir la grandeur du front par la petitesse de la main. Il y avait un pli d’angoisse au coin de ses lèvres contractées. Il examinait et écoutait avec une attention profonde. Les assistants, ayant reconnu le révérend Ebenezer Caudray, recteur de la paroisse, s’étaient écartés pour le laisser passer, mais il était resté sur le seuil. Il y avait de l’hésitation dans sa posture et de la décision dans son regard. Ce regard par moments se rencontrait avec celui de Déruchette. Quant à Gilliatt, soit par hasard, soit exprès, il était dans l’ombre, et on ne le voyait que très confusément.

Mess Lethierry d’abord n’aperçut pas M. Ebenezer, mais il aperçut Déruchette. Il alla à elle, et l’embrassa avec tout l’emportement que peut avoir un baiser au front. En même temps il étendait le bras vers le coin sombre où était Gilliatt.

— Déruchette, dit-il, te revoilà riche, et voilà ton mari.

Déruchette leva la tête avec égarement et regarda dans cette obscurité.

Mess Lethierry reprit:

— On fera la noce tout de suite, demain si ça se peut, on aura les dispenses, d’ailleurs ici les formalités ne sont pas lourdes, le doyen fait ce qu’il veut, on est marié avant qu’on ait le temps de crier gare, ce n’est pas comme en France, où il faut des bans, des publications, des délais, tout le bataclan, et tu pourras te vanter d’être la femme d’un brave homme, et il n’y a pas à dire, c’est que c’est un marin, je l’ai pensé dès le premier jour quand je l’ai vu revenir de Herm avec le petit canon. À présent il revient des Douvres, avec sa fortune, et la mienne, et la fortune du pays; c’est un homme dont on parlera un jour comme il n’est pas possible; tu as dit: je l’épouserai, tu l’épouseras; et vous aurez des enfants, et je serai grand-père, et tu auras cette chance d’être la lady d’un gaillard sérieux, qui travaille, qui est utile, qui est surprenant, qui en vaut cent, qui sauve les inventions des autres, qui est une providence, et au moins, toi, tu n’auras pas, comme presque toutes les chipies riches de ce pays-ci, épousé un soldat ou un prêtre, c’est-à-dire l’homme qui tue ou l’homme qui ment. Mais qu’est-ce que tu fais dans ton coin, Gilliatt? On ne te voit pas. Douce! Grâce! Tout le monde, de la lumière. Illuminez-moi mon gendre à giorno. Je vous fiance, mes enfants, et voilà ton mari, et voilà mon gendre, c’est Gilliatt du Bû de la Rue, le bon garçon, le grand matelot, et je n’aurai pas d’autre gendre, et tu n’auras pas d’autre mari, j’en redonne ma parole d’honneur au bon Dieu. Ah! C’est vous, monsieur le curé, vous me marierez ces jeunes gens-là.

L’œil de mess Lethierry venait de tomber sur le révérend Ebenezer.

Douce et Grâce avaient obéi. Deux chandelles posées sur la table éclairaient Gilliatt de la tête aux pieds.

— Qu’il est beau! cria Lethierry.

Gilliatt était hideux.

Il était tel qu’il était sorti, le matin même, de l’écueil Douvres, en haillons, les coudes percés, la barbe longue, les cheveux hérissés, les yeux brûlés et rouges, la face écorchée, les poings saignants; il avait les pieds nus. Quelques-unes des pustules de la pieuvre étaient encore visibles sur ses bras velus.

Lethierry le contemplait.

— C’est mon vrai gendre. Comme il s’est battu avec la mer! Il est tout en loques! Quelles épaules! Quelles pattes! Que tu es beau!

Grace courut à Déruchette et lui soutint la tête. Déruchette venait de s’évanouir.

II

LA MALLE DE CUIR

Dès l'aube Saint-Sampson était sur pied et Saint-Pierre-Port commençait à arriver. La résurrection de la Durande faisait dans l'île un bruit comparable à celui qu'a fait dans le midi de la France la Salette. Il y avait foule sur le quai pour regarder la cheminée sortant de la panse. On eût bien voulu voir et toucher un peu la machine; mais Lethierry, après avoir fait de nouveau, et au jour, l'inspection triomphante de la mécanique, avait posté dans la panse deux matelots chargés d'empêcher l'approche. La cheminée, au surplus, suffisait à la contemplation. La foule s'émerveillait. On ne parlait que de Gilliatt. On commentait et on accentuait son surnom de Malin; l'admiration s'achevait volontiers par cette phrase: « Ce n'est toujours pas agréable d'avoir dans l'île des gens capables de faire des choses comme ça.”

on voyait du dehors mess Lethierry assis à sa table devant sa fenêtre et écrivant, un œil sur son papier, l'autre sur la machine. Il était tellement absorbé qu'il ne s'était interrompu qu'une fois pour « crier” Douce et pour lui demander des nouvelles de Déruchette. Douce avait répondu: — Mademoiselle s'est levée, et est sortie. — Mess Lethierry avait dit: — Elle fait bien de prendre l'air. Elle s'est trouvée un peu mal cette nuit à cause de la chaleur. Il y avait beaucoup de monde dans la salle. Et puis la surprise, la joie, avec cela que les fenêtres étaient fermées. Elle va avoir un fier mari! — Et il avait recommencé à écrire. Il avait déjà paraphé et scellé deux lettres adressées aux plus notables maîtres de chantiers de Brême. Il achevait de cacheter la troisième.

Le bruit d'une roue sur le quai lui fit dresser le cou. Il se pencha à sa fenêtre et vit déboucher du sentier par où l'on allait au Bû de la Rue un boy poussant une brouette. Ce boy se dirigeait du côté de Saint-Pierre-Port. Il y avait dans la brouette une malle de cuir jaune damasquinée de clous de cuivre et d'étain.

Mess Lethierry apostropha le boy.

— Où vas-tu, garçon?

Le boy s'arrêta, et répondit:

— Au *Cashmere*.

— Quoi faire?

— Porter cette malle.

— Eh bien, tu porteras aussi ces trois lettres.

Mess Lethierry ouvrit le tiroir de sa table, y prit un bout de ficelle, noua ensemble sous un nœud en croix les trois lettres qu’il venait d’écrire, et jeta le paquet au boy qui le reçut au vol dans ses deux mains.

— Tu diras au capitaine du *Cashmere* que c’est moi qui écris, et qu’il ait soin. C’est pour l’Allemagne. Brême via London.

— Je ne parlerai pas au capitaine, mess Lethierry.

— Pourquoi?

— Le *Cashmere* n’est pas à quai.

— Ah!

— Il est en rade.

— C’est juste. À cause de la mer.

— Je ne pourrai parler qu’au patron de l’embarcation.

— Tu lui recommanderas mes lettres.

— Oui, mess Lethierry.

— À quelle heure part le *Cashmere*?

— À douze heures.

— À midi, aujourd’hui, la marée monte. Il a la marée contre.

— mais il a le vent pour.

— Boy, dit mess Lethierry, braquant son index sur la cheminée de la machine, vois-tu ça? ça se moque du vent et de la marée.

Le boy mit les lettres dans sa poche, ressaisit le brancard de la brouette, et reprit sa course vers la ville. Mess Lethierry appela: Douce! Grâce!

Grace entre-bâilla la porte.

— Mess, qu’y a-t-il?

— Entre, et attends.

Mess Lethierry prit une feuille de papier et se mit à écrire. Si Grâce, debout derrière lui, eût été curieuse et eût avancé la tête pendant qu’il écrivait, elle aurait pu lire, par-dessus son épaule, ceci:

«J’écris à Brême pour du bois. J’ai rendez-vous toute la journée avec des charpentiers pour l’estimat. La reconstruction marchera vite. Toi, de ton côté, va chez le doyen pour avoir les dispenses. Je désire que le mariage se fasse le plus tôt possible, tout de suite serait le mieux. Je m’occupe de Durande, occupe-toi de Déruchette.”

Il data, et signa: Lethierry.

Il ne prit point la peine de cacheter le billet, le plia simplement en quatre et le tendit à Grâce.

— Porte cela à Gilliatt.

— Au Bû de la Rue?

— Au Bû de la Rue.

LIVRE TROISIÈME

DÉPART DU « CASHMERE

I

LE HAVELET TOUT PROCHE DE L’ÉGLISE

Saint-Sampson ne peut avoir foule sans que Saint-Pierre-Port soit désert. Une chose curieuse sur un point donné est une pompe aspirante. Les nouvelles courent vite dans les petits pays; aller voir la cheminée de la Durande sous les fenêtres de mess Lethierry était depuis le lever du soleil la grande affaire de Guernesey. Tout autre évènement s’était effacé devant celui-là. Éclipse de la mort du doyen de Saint-Asaph; il n’était plus question du révérend Ebenezer Caudray, ni de sa soudaine richesse, ni de son départ par le *Cashmere*. La machine de la durande rapportée des Douvres, tel était l’ordre du jour. On n’y croyait pas. Le naufrage avait paru extraordinaire, mais le sauvetage semblait impossible. C’était à qui s’en assurerait par ses yeux. Toute autre préoccupation était suspendue. De longues files de bourgeois en famille, depuis le vésin jusqu’au mess, des hommes, des femmes, des gentlemen, des mères avec enfants et des enfants avec poupées, se dirigeaient par toutes les routes vers « la chose à voir” aux Bravées et tournaient le dos à Saint-Pierre-Port. Beaucoup de boutiques dans Saint-Pierre-Port étaient fermées; dans Commercial-Arcade, stagnation absolue de vente et de négoce; toute l’attention était à la Durande; pas un marchand n’avait « étrenné”; excepté un bijoutier, lequel s’émerveillait d’avoir vendu un anneau d’or pour mariage « à une espèce d’homme paraissant fort pressé qui lui avait demandé la demeure de monsieur le doyen”. Les boutiques restées ouvertes étaient des lieux de causerie où l’on commentait bruyamment le miraculeux sauvetage. Pas un promeneur à l’Hyvreuse, qu’on nomme aujourd’hui, sans savoir pourquoi, Cambridge-Park; personne dans High-Street, qui s’appelait alors la Grand’Rue, ni dans Smith-Street, qui s’appelait alors la rue des Forges; personne dans Hauteville; l’esplanade elle-même était dépeuplée. On eût dit un dimanche. Une altesse royale en visite passant la revue de la milice à l’Ancresse n’eût pas mieux vidé la ville. Tout ce dérangement à propos d’un rien du tout comme ce Gilliatt faisait hausser les épaules aux hommes graves et aux personnes correctes.

L’église de Saint-Pierre-Port, triple pignon juxtaposé avec transept et flèche, est au bord de l’eau au fond du port, presque sur le débarcadère même. Elle donne la bienvenue à ceux qui arrivent et l’adieu à ceux qui s’en vont. Cette église est la majuscule de la longue ligne que fait la façade de la ville sur l’océan.

Elle est en même temps paroisse du district de Saint-Pierre-Port et doyenné de toute l’île. Elle a pour desservant le subrogé de l’évêque, clergyman à pleins pouvoirs.

Le havre de Saint-Pierre-Port, très beau et très large port aujourd’hui, était à cette époque, et il y a dix ans encore, moins considérable que le havre de Saint-Sampson. C’étaient deux grosses murailles cyclopéennes courbes partant du rivage à tribord et à bâbord, et se rejoignant presque à leur extrémité, où il y avait un petit phare blanc. Sous ce phare un étroit goulet, ayant encore le double anneau de la chaîne qui le fermait au moyen âge, donnait passage aux navires. Qu’on se figure une pince de homard entr’ouverte, c’était le havre de Saint-Pierre-Port. Cette tenaille prenait sur l’abîme un peu de mer qu’elle forçait à se tenir tranquille. Mais par les vents d’est, il y avait du flot à l’entre-bâillement, le port clapotait, et il était plus sage de ne point entrer. C’est ce qu’avait fait ce jour-là le *Cashmere*. Il avait mouillé en rade.

Les navires, quand il y avait du vent d’est, prenaient volontiers ce parti qui, en outre, leur économisait les frais de port. Dans ce cas, les bateliers commissionnés de la ville, brave tribu de marins que le nouveau port a destituée, venaient prendre dans leurs barques, soit à l’embarcadère, soit aux stations de la plage, les voyageurs, et les transportaient, eux et leurs bagages, souvent par de très grosses mers et toujours sans accident, aux navires en partance. Le vent d’est est un vent de côté, très bon pour la traversée d’Angleterre; on roule, mais on ne tangue pas.

Quand le bâtiment en partance était dans le port, tout le monde s’embarquait dans le port; quand il était en rade, on avait le choix de s’embarquer sur un des points de la côte voisins du mouillage. On trouvait dans toutes les criques des bateliers « à volonté”.

Le Havelet était une de ces criques. Ce petit havre, Havelet, était tout près de la ville, mais si solitaire qu’il en semblait très loin. Il devait cette solitude à l’encaissement des hautes falaises du fort George qui dominent cette anse discrète. On arrivait au Havelet par plusieurs sentiers. Le plus direct longeait le bord de l’eau; il avait l’avantage de mener à la ville et à l’église en cinq minutes, et l’inconvénient d’être couvert par la lame deux fois par jour. Les autres sentiers, plus ou moins abrupts, s’enfonçaient dans les anfractuosités des escarpements. Le Havelet, même en plein jour, était dans une pénombre. Des blocs en porte-à-faux pendaient de toutes parts. Un hérissement de ronces et de broussailles s’épaississait et faisait une sorte de douce nuit sur ce désordre de roches et de vagues; rien de plus paisible que cette crique en temps calme, rien de plus tumultueux dans les grosses eaux. Il y avait là des pointes de branches perpétuellement mouillées par l’écume. Au printemps c’était plein de fleurs, de nids, de parfums, d’oiseaux, de papillons et d’abeilles. Grâce aux travaux récents, ces sauvageries n’existent plus aujourd’hui; de belles lignes droites les ont remplacées; il y a des maçonneries, des quais et des jardinets; le terrassement a sévi; le goût a fait justice des bizarreries de la montagne et de l’incorrection des rochers.

II

LES DÉSESPOIRS EN PRÉSENCE

Il était un peu moins de dix heures du matin; le quart avant, comme on dit à Guernesey.

L’affluence, selon toute apparence, grossissait à Saint-Sampson. La population, enfiévrée de curiosité, versant toute au nord de l’île, le Havelet, qui est au sud, était plus désert que jamais.

Pourtant on y voyait un bateau, et un batelier. Dans le bateau il y avait un sac de nuit. Le batelier semblait attendre.

On apercevait en rade le *Cashmere* à l’ancre, qui, ne devant partir qu’à midi, ne faisait encore aucune manœuvre d’appareillage.

Un passant qui, de quelqu’un des sentiers-escaliers de la falaise, eût prêté l’oreille, eût entendu un murmure de paroles dans le Havelet, et, s’il se fût penché par-dessus les surplombs, il eût vu, à quelque distance du bateau, dans un recoin de roches et de branches où ne pouvait pénétrer le regard du batelier, deux personnes, un homme et une femme, Ebenezer et Déruchette.

Ces réduits obscurs du bord de la mer, qui tentent les baigneuses, ne sont pas toujours aussi solitaires qu’on le croit. On y est quelquefois observé et écouté. Ceux qui s’y réfugient et qui s’y abritent peuvent être aisément suivis à travers les épaisseurs des végétations, et grâce à la multiplicité et à l’enchevêtrement des sentiers. Les granits et les arbres, qui cachent l’aparté, peuvent cacher aussi un témoin.

Déruchette et Ebenezer étaient debout en face l’un de l’autre, le regard dans le regard; ils se tenaient les mains. Déruchette parlait. Ebenezer se taisait. Une larme amassée et arrêtée entre ses cils hésitait, et ne tombait pas.

La désolation et la passion étaient empreintes sur le front religieux d’Ebenezer. Une résignation poignante s’y ajoutait, résignation hostile à la foi, quoique venant d’elle. Sur ce visage, simplement angélique jusqu’alors, il y avait un commencement d’expression fatale. Celui qui n’avait encore médité que le dogme se mettait à méditer le sort, méditation malsaine au prêtre. La foi s’y décompose. Plier sous de l’inconnu, rien n’est plus troublant. L’homme est le patient des évènements. La vie est une perpétuelle arrivée; nous la subissons. Nous ne savons jamais de quel côté viendra la brusque descente du hasard. Les catastrophes et les félicités entrent, puis sortent, comme des personnages inattendus. Elles ont leur loi, leur orbite, leur gravitation, en dehors de l'homme. La vertu n'amène pas le bonheur, le crime n'amène pas le malheur; la conscience a une logique, le sort en a une autre; nulle coïncidence. Rien ne peut être prévu. Nous vivons pêle-mêle et coup sur coup. La conscience est la ligne droite, la vie est le tourbillon. Ce tourbillon jette inopinément sur la tête de l'homme des chaos noirs et des ciels bleus. Le sort n'a point l'art des transitions. Quelquefois la roue tourne si vite que l'homme distingue à peine l'intervalle d'une péripétie à l'autre et le lien d'hier à aujourd'hui. Ebenezer était un croyant mélangé de raisonnement et un prêtre compliqué de passion. Les religions célibataires savent ce qu'elles font. Rien ne défait le prêtre comme d'aimer une femme. Toutes sortes de nuages assombrissaient Ebenezer.

Il contemplait Déruchette, trop.

Ces deux êtres s'idolâtraient.

Il y avait dans la prunelle d'Ebenezer la muette adoration du désespoir.

Déruchette disait:

— Vous ne partirez pas. Je n'en ai pas la force. Voyez-vous, j'ai cru que je pourrais vous dire adieu, je ne peux pas. On n'est pas forcé de pouvoir. Pourquoi êtes-vous venu hier? Il ne fallait pas venir si vous vouliez vous en aller. Je ne vous ai jamais parlé. Je vous aimais, mais je ne le savais pas. Seulement, le premier jour, quand monsieur Hérode a lu l'histoire de Rebecca et que vos yeux ont rencontré les miens, je me suis senti les joues en feu, et j'ai pensé: Oh! Comme Rebecca a dû devenir rouge! C'est égal, avant-hier, on m'aurait dit: Vous aimez le recteur, j'aurais ri. C'est ce qu'il y a eu de terrible dans cet amour-là. Ç'a été comme une trahison. Je n'y ai pas pris garde. J'allais à l'église, je vous voyais, je croyais que tout le monde était comme moi. Je ne vous fais pas de reproche, vous n'avez rien fait pour que je vous aime, vous ne vous êtes pas donné de peine, vous me regardiez, ce n'est pas de votre faute si vous regardez les personnes, et cela a fait que je vous ai adoré. Je ne m'en doutais pas. Quand vous preniez le livre, c'était de la lumière; quand les autres le prenaient, ce n'était qu'un livre. Vous leviez quelquefois les yeux sur moi. Vous parliez des archanges, c'était vous l'archange. Ce que vous disiez, je le pensais tout de suite. Avant vous, je ne sais pas si je croyais en Dieu. Depuis vous, j'étais devenue une femme qui fait sa prière. Je disais à Douce: Habille-moi bien vite que je ne manque pas l’office. Et je courais à l’église. Ainsi, être amoureuse d’un homme, c’est cela. Je ne le savais pas. Je me disais: Comme je deviens dévote! C’est vous qui m’avez appris que je n’allais pas à l’église pour le bon Dieu. J’y allais pour vous, c’est vrai. Vous êtes beau, vous parlez bien, quand vous éleviez les bras au ciel, il me semblait que vous teniez mon cœur dans vos deux mains blanches. J’étais folle, je l’ignorais. Voulez-vous que je vous dise votre faute, c’est d’être entré hier dans le jardin, c’est de m’avoir parlé. Si vous ne m’aviez rien dit, je n’aurais rien su. Vous seriez parti, j’aurais peut-être été triste, mais à présent je mourrai. À présent que je sais que vous m’aimez, à présent que je sais que je vous aime, il n’est plus possible que vous vous en alliez. À quoi pensez-vous? Vous n’avez pas l’air de m’écouter.

Ebenezer répondit:

— Vous avez entendu ce qui s’est dit hier.

— Hélas!

— Que puis-je à cela?

Ils se turent un moment. Ebenezer reprit:

— Il n’y a plus pour moi qu’une chose à faire. Partir.

— Et moi, mourir. Oh! Je voudrais qu’il n’y eût pas de mer et qu’il n’y eût plus que le ciel. Il me semble que cela arrangerait tout, notre départ serait le même. Il ne fallait pas me parler, vous. Pourquoi m’avez-vous parlé? Alors ne vous en allez pas. Qu’est-ce que je vais devenir? Je vous dis que je mourrai. Vous serez bien avancé quand je serai dans le cimetière. Oh! J’ai le cœur brisé. Je suis bien malheureuse. Mon oncle n’est pas méchant pourtant.

C’était la première fois de sa vie que Déruchette disait, en parlant de mess Lethierry, *mon oncle*. Jusque-là elle avait toujours dit *mon père*.

Ebenezer recula d’un pas et fit un signe au batelier. On entendit le bruit du croc dans les galets et le pas de l’homme sur le bord de sa barque.

— Non, non! cria Déruchette.

Ebenezer se rapprocha d’elle.

— Il le faut, Déruchette.

— Non, jamais! Pour une machine! Est-ce que c’est possible? Avez-vous vu cet homme horrible hier? Vous ne pouvez pas m’abandonner. Vous avez de l’esprit, vous trouverez un moyen. Il ne se peut pas que vous m’ayez dit de venir vous trouver ici ce matin, avec l’idée que vous partiriez. Je ne vous ai rien fait. Vous n’avez pas à vous plaindre de moi. C’est par ce vaisseau-là que vous voulez vous en aller? Je ne veux pas. Vous ne me quitterez pas. On n’ouvre pas le ciel pour le refermer. Je vous dis que vous resterez. D’ailleurs il n’est pas encore l’heure. Oh! Je t’aime.

Et, se pressant contre lui, elle lui croisa ses dix doigts derrière le cou, comme pour faire de ses bras enlacés un lien à Ebenezer et de ses mains jointes une prière à Dieu.

Il dénoua cette étreinte délicate qui résista tant qu’elle put.

Déruchette tomba assise sur une saillie de roche couverte de lierre, relevant d’un geste machinal la manche de sa robe jusqu’au coude, montrant son charmant bras nu, avec une clarté noyée et blême dans ses yeux fixes. La barque approchait. Ebenezer lui prit la tête dans ses deux mains; cette vierge avait l’air d’une veuve et ce jeune homme avait l’air d’un aïeul. Il lui touchait les cheveux avec une sorte de précaution religieuse; il attacha son regard sur elle pendant quelques instants, puis il déposa sur son front un de ces baisers sous lesquels il semble que devrait éclore une étoile, et, d’un accent où tremblait la suprême angoisse et où l’on sentait l’arrachement de l’âme, il lui dit ce mot, le mot des profondeurs: Adieu!

Déruchette éclata en sanglots.

En ce moment ils entendirent une voix lente et grave qui disait:

— Pourquoi ne vous mariez-vous pas?

Ebenezer tourna la tête. Déruchette leva les yeux.

Gilliatt était devant eux.

Il venait d’entrer par un sentier latéral.

Gilliatt n’était plus le même homme que la veille. Il avait peigné ses cheveux, il avait fait sa barbe, il avait mis des souliers, il avait une chemise blanche de marin à grand col rabattu, il était vêtu de ses habits de matelot les plus neufs. On voyait une bague d’or à son petit doigt. Il semblait profondément calme. Son hâle était livide.

Du bronze qui souffre, tel était ce visage.

Ils le regardèrent, stupéfaits. Quoique méconnaissable, Déruchette le reconnut. Quant aux paroles qu’il venait de dire, elles étaient si loin de ce qu’ils pensaient en ce moment-là, qu’elles avaient glissé sur leur esprit.

Gilliatt reprit:

— Quel besoin avez-vous de vous dire adieu? Mariez-vous. Vous partirez ensemble.

Déruchette tressaillit. Elle eut un tremblement de la tête aux pieds.

Gilliatt continua:

— Miss Déruchette a ses vingt et un ans. Elle ne dépend que d’elle. Son oncle n’est que son oncle. Vous vous aimez…

Déruchette interrompit doucement:

— Comment se fait-il que vous soyez ici?

— Mariez-vous, poursuivit Gilliatt.

Déruchette commençait à percevoir ce que cet homme lui disait. Elle bégaya:

— Mon pauvre oncle… — Il refuserait si le mariage était à faire, dit Gilliatt, il consentira quand le mariage sera fait. D’ailleurs vous allez partir. Quand vous reviendrez, il pardonnera.

Gilliatt ajouta avec une nuance amère: — Et puis, il ne pense déjà plus qu’à rebâtir son bateau. Cela l’occupera pendant votre absence. Il a la Durande pour le consoler.

— Je ne voudrais pas, balbutia Déruchette, dans une stupeur où l’on sentait de la joie, laisser derrière moi des chagrins.

— Ils ne dureront pas longtemps, dit Gilliatt.

Ebenezer et Déruchette avaient eu comme un éblouissement. Ils se remettaient maintenant. Dans leur trouble décroissant, le sens des paroles de Gilliatt leur apparaissait. Un nuage y restait mêlé, mais leur affaire à eux n’était pas de résister. On se laisse faire à qui sauve. Les objections à la rentrée dans l’Éden sont molles. Il y avait dans l’attitude de Déruchette, imperceptiblement appuyée sur Ebenezer, quelque chose qui faisait cause commune avec ce que disait Gilliatt. Quant à l’énigme de la présence de cet homme et de ses paroles qui, dans l’esprit de Déruchette en particulier, produisaient plusieurs sortes d’étonnements, c’étaient des questions à côté. Cet homme leur disait: Mariez-vous. Ceci était clair. S’il y avait une responsabilité, il la prenait. Déruchette sentait confusément que, pour des raisons diverses, il en avait le droit. Ce qu’il disait de mess Lethierry était vrai. Ebenezer pensif murmura: Un oncle n’est pas un père.

Il subissait la corruption d’une péripétie heureuse et soudaine. Les scrupules probables du prêtre fondaient et se dissolvaient dans ce pauvre cœur amoureux.

La voix de Gilliatt devint brève et dure et l’on y sentait comme des pulsations de fièvre:

— Tout de suite. Le *Cashmere* part dans deux heures. Vous avez le temps, mais vous n’avez que le temps. Venez.

Ebenezer le considérait attentivement.

Tout à coup il s’écria:

— Je vous reconnais. C’est vous qui m’avez sauvé la vie.

Gilliatt répondit:

— Je ne crois pas.

— Là-bas, à la pointe des banques.

— Je ne connais pas cet endroit-là.

— C’est le jour même que j’arrivais.

— Ne perdons pas de temps, dit Gilliatt.

— Et, je ne me trompe pas, vous êtes l’homme d’hier soir.

— Peut-être.

— Comment vous appelez-vous?

Gilliatt haussa la voix:

— batelier, attendez-nous. Nous allons revenir. Miss, vous m’avez demandé comment il se faisait que j’étais ici, c’est bien simple, je marchais derrière vous. Vous avez vingt et un ans. Dans ce pays-ci, quand les personnes sont majeures et dépendent d’elles-mêmes, on se marie en un quart d’heure. Prenons le sentier du bord de l’eau. Il est praticable, la mer ne montera qu’à midi. Mais tout de suite. Venez avec moi.

Déruchette et Ebenezer semblaient se consulter du regard. Ils étaient debout l’un près de l’autre, sans bouger; ils étaient comme ivres. Il y a de ces hésitations étranges au bord de cet abîme, le bonheur. Ils comprenaient sans comprendre.

— Il s’appelle Gilliatt, dit Déruchette bas à Ebenezer.

Gilliatt reprit avec une sorte d’autorité:

— Qu’attendez-vous? Je vous dis de me suivre.

— Où? demanda Ebenezer.

— Là.

Et Gilliatt montra du doigt le clocher de l’église.

Ils le suivirent.

Gilliatt allait devant. Son pas était ferme. Eux ils chancelaient.

À mesure qu’ils avançaient vers le clocher, on voyait poindre sur ces purs et beaux visages d’Ebenezer et de Déruchette quelque chose qui serait bientôt le sourire. L’approche de l’église les éclairait. Dans l’œil creux de Gilliatt, il y avait de la nuit.

On eût dit un spectre menant deux âmes au paradis.

Ebenezer et Déruchette ne se rendaient pas bien compte de ce qui allait arriver. L'intervention de cet homme était la branche où se raccroche le noyé. Ils suivaient Gilliatt avec la docilité du désespoir pour le premier venu. Qui se sent mourir n'est pas difficile sur l'acceptation des incidents. Déruchette, plus ignorante, était plus confiante. Ebenezer songeait. Déruchette était majeure. Les formalités du mariage anglais sont très simples, surtout dans les pays autochthones où les recteurs de paroisse ont un pouvoir presque discrétionnaire; mais le doyen néanmoins consentirait-il à célébrer le mariage sans même s'informer si l'oncle consentait? Il y avait là une question. Pourtant, on pouvait essayer. Dans tous les cas, c'était un sursis.

Mais qu'était-ce que cet homme? Et si c'était lui en effet que la veille mess Lethierry avait déclaré son gendre, comment s'expliquer ce qu'il faisait là? Lui, l'obstacle, il se changeait en providence. Ebenezer s'y perdait, mais il donnait à ce qui se passait le consentement tacite et rapide de l'homme qui se sent sauvé.

Le sentier était inégal, parfois mouillé et difficile. Ebenezer, absorbé, ne faisait pas attention aux flaques d'eau et aux blocs de galets. De temps en temps, Gilliatt se retournait et disait à Ebenezer: — Prenez garde à ces pierres, donnez-lui la main.

III

LA PRÉVOYANCE DE L’ABNÉGATION

Dix heures et demie sonnaient comme ils entraient dans l’église.

À cause de l’heure, et aussi à cause de la solitude de la ville ce jour-là, l’église était vide.

Au fond pourtant, près de la table qui, dans les églises réformées, remplace l’autel, il y avait trois personnes; c’étaient le doyen et son évangéliste; plus le registraire. Le doyen, qui était le révérend Jaquemin Hérode, était assis; l’évangéliste et le registraire étaient debout.

Le Livre ouvert, était sur la table.

À côté, sur une crédence, s’étalait un autre livre, le registre de paroisse, ouvert également, et sur lequel un œil attentif eût pu remarquer une page fraîchement écrite et dont l’encre n’était pas encore séchée. Une plume et une écritoire étaient à côté du registre.

En voyant entrer le révérend Ebenezer Caudray, le révérend Jaquemin Hérode se leva.

— Je vous attends, dit-il. Tout est prêt.

Le doyen, en effet, était en robe d’officiant.

Ebenezer regarda Gilliatt.

Le révérend doyen ajouta:

— Je suis à vos ordres, mon collègue.

Et il salua.

Ce salut ne s’égara ni à droite ni à gauche. Il était évident, à la direction du rayon visuel du doyen, que pour lui Ebenezer seul existait. Ebenezer était clergyman et gentleman. Le doyen ne comprenait dans sa salutation ni Déruchette qui était à côté, ni Gilliatt qui était en arrière. Il y avait dans son regard une parenthèse où le seul Ebenezer était admis. Le maintien de ces nuances fait partie du bon ordre et consolide les sociétés.

Le doyen reprit avec une aménité gracieusement altière:

— Mon collègue, je vous fais mon double compliment. Votre oncle est mort et vous prenez femme; vous voilà riche par l’un et heureux par l’autre. Du reste, maintenant, grâce à ce bateau à vapeur qu’on va rétablir, miss Lethierry aussi est riche, ce que j’approuve. Miss Lethierry est née sur cette paroisse, j’ai vérifié la date de sa naissance sur le registre. Miss Lethierry est majeure, et s’appartient. D’ailleurs son oncle, qui est toute sa famille, consent. Vous voulez vous marier tout de suite à cause de votre départ, je le comprends; mais, ce mariage étant d’un recteur de paroisse, j’aurais souhaité un peu de solennité. J’abrégerai pour vous être agréable. L’essentiel peut tenir dans le sommaire. L’acte est déjà tout dressé sur le registre que voici, et il n’y a que les noms à remplir. Aux termes de la loi et coutume, le mariage peut être célébré immédiatement après l’inscription. La déclaration voulue pour la licence a été dûment faite. Je prends sur moi une petite irrégularité, car la demande de licence eût dû être préalablement enregistrée sept jours d’avance; mais je me rends à la nécessité et à l’urgence de votre départ. Soit. Je vais vous marier. Mon évangéliste sera le témoin de l’époux; quant au témoin de l’épouse…

le doyen se tourna vers Gilliatt.

Gilliatt fit un signe de tête.

— Cela suffit, dit le doyen.

Ebenezer restait immobile. Déruchette était l’extase, pétrifiée.

Le doyen continua:

— Maintenant, toutefois, il y a un obstacle.

Déruchette fit un mouvement.

Le doyen poursuivit:

— L’envoyé, ici présent, de mess Lethierry, lequel envoyé a demandé pour vous la licence et a signé la déclaration sur le registre, — Et du pouce de sa main gauche le doyen désigna Gilliatt, ce qui l’exemptait d’articuler ce nom quelconque, — l’envoyé de mess Lethierry m’a dit ce matin que mess Lethierry, trop occupé pour venir en personne, désirait que le mariage se fît incontinent. Ce désir, exprimé verbalement, n’est point assez. Je ne saurais, à cause des dispenses à accorder et de l’irrégularité que je prends sur moi, passer outre si vite sans m’informer près de mess Lethierry, à moins qu’on ne me montre sa signature. Quelle que soit ma bonne volonté, je ne puis me contenter d’une parole qu’on vient me redire. Il me faudrait quelque chose d’écrit.

— Qu’à cela ne tienne, dit Gilliatt.

Et il présenta au révérend doyen un papier.

Le doyen se saisit du papier, le parcourut d’un coup d’œil, sembla passer quelques lignes, sans doute inutiles, et lut tout haut:

— « … Va chez le doyen pour avoir les dispenses. Je désire que le mariage se fasse le plus tôt possible. Tout de suite serait le mieux.”

Il posa le papier sur la table, et poursuivit:

— Signé Lethierry. La chose serait plus respectueusement adressée à moi. Mais puisqu’il s’agit d’un collègue, je n’en demande pas davantage.

Ebenezer regarda de nouveau Gilliatt. Il y a des ententes d’âmes. Ebenezer sentait là une fraude; et il n’eut pas la force, il n’eut peut-être pas même l’idée, de la dénoncer. Soit obéissance à un héroïsme latent qu’il entrevoyait, soit étourdissement de la conscience par le coup de foudre du bonheur, il demeura sans paroles.

Le doyen prit la plume et remplit, aidé du registraire, les blancs de la page écrite sur le registre, puis il se redressa, et, du geste, invita Ebenezer et Déruchette à s’approcher de la table.

La cérémonie commença.

Ce fut un moment étrange.

Ebenezer et Déruchette étaient l’un près de l’autre devant le ministre. Quiconque a fait un songe où il s’est marié a éprouvé ce qu’ils éprouvaient.

Gilliatt était à quelque distance dans l’obscurité des piliers.

Déruchette le matin en se levant, désespérée, pensant au cercueil et au suaire, s’était vêtue de blanc. Cette idée de deuil fut à propos pour la noce. La robe blanche fait tout de suite une fiancée. La tombe aussi est une fiançaille.

Un rayonnement se dégageait de Déruchette. Jamais elle n’avait été ce qu’elle était en cet instant-là. Déruchette avait ce défaut d’être peut-être trop jolie et pas assez belle. Sa beauté péchait, si c’est là pécher, par excès de grâce. Déruchette au repos, c’est-à-dire en dehors de la passion et de la douleur, était, nous avons indiqué ce détail, surtout gentille. La transfiguration de la fille charmante, c’est la vierge idéale. Déruchette, grandie par l’amour et par la souffrance, avait eu, qu’on nous passe le mot, cet avancement. Elle avait la même candeur avec plus de dignité, la même fraîcheur avec plus de parfum. C’était quelque chose comme une pâquerette qui deviendrait un lys.

La moiteur des pleurs taries était sur ses joues. Il y avait peut-être encore une larme dans le coin du sourire. Les larmes séchées, vaguement visibles, sont une sombre et douce parure au bonheur.

Le doyen, debout près de la table, posa un doigt sur la bible ouverte et demanda à haute voix:

— Y a-t-il opposition?

Personne ne répondit.

— Amen, dit le doyen.

Ebenezer et Déruchette avancèrent d’un pas vers le révérend Jaquemin Hérode.

Le doyen dit:

— Joë Ebenezer Caudray, veux-tu avoir cette femme pour ton épouse?

Ebenezer répondit:

— Je le veux.

Le doyen reprit:

— Durande Déruchette Lethierry, veux-tu avoir cet homme pour ton mari?

Déruchette, dans l’agonie de l’âme sous trop de joie comme de la lampe sous trop d’huile, murmura plutôt qu’elle ne prononça: — Je le veux.

Alors, suivant le beau rite du mariage anglican, le doyen regarda autour de lui et fit dans l’ombre de l’église cette demande solennelle:

— Qui est-ce qui donne cette femme à cet homme?

— Moi, dit Gilliatt.

Il y eut un silence. Ebenezer et Déruchette sentirent on ne sait quelle vague oppression à travers leur ravissement.

Le doyen mit la main droite de Déruchette dans la main droite d’Ebenezer, et Ebenezer dit à Déruchette:

— Déruchette, je te prends pour ma femme, soit que tu sois meilleure ou pire, plus riche ou plus pauvre, en maladie ou en santé, pour t’aimer jusqu’à la mort, et je te donne ma foi. Le doyen mit la main droite d’Ebenezer dans la main droite de Déruchette, et Déruchette dit à Ebenezer:

— Ebenezer, je te prends pour mon mari, soit que tu sois meilleur ou pire, plus riche ou plus pauvre, en maladie ou en santé, pour t’aimer et t’obéir jusqu’à la mort, et je te donne ma foi.

Le doyen reprit:

— Où est l’anneau?

Ceci était l’imprévu. Ebenezer, pris au dépourvu, n’avait pas d’anneau.

Gilliatt ôta la bague d’or qu’il avait au petit doigt, et la présenta au doyen. C’était probablement l’anneau « de mariage” acheté le matin au bijoutier de Commercial-Arcade.

Le doyen posa l’anneau sur le livre, puis le remit à Ebenezer.

Ebenezer prit la petite main gauche, toute tremblante, de Déruchette, passa l’anneau au quatrième doigt, et dit:

— Je t’épouse avec cet anneau.

— Au nom du Père, du Fils et du Saint-Esprit, dit le doyen.

— Que cela soit ainsi, dit l’évangéliste.

Le doyen éleva la voix:

— Vous êtes époux.

— Que cela soit, dit l’évangéliste.

Le doyen reprit:

— Prions.

Ebenezer et Déruchette se retournèrent vers la table et se mirent à genoux.

Gilliatt, resté debout, baissa la tête.

Eux s’agenouillaient devant Dieu, lui se courbait sous la destinée.

IV

«POUR TA FEMME, QUAND TU TE MARIERAS”

À leur sortie de l’église, ils virent le *Cashmere* qui commençait à appareiller.

— Vous êtes à temps, dit Gilliatt.

Ils reprirent le sentier du Havelet.

Ils allaient devant, Gilliatt maintenant marchait derrière.

C’étaient deux somnambules. Ils n’avaient pour ainsi dire que changé d’égarement. Ils ne savaient ni où ils étaient, ni ce qu’ils faisaient; ils se hâtaient machinalement, ils ne se souvenaient plus de l’existence de rien, ils se sentaient l’un à l’autre, ils ne pouvaient lier deux idées. On ne pense pas plus dans l’extase qu’on ne nage dans le torrent. Du milieu des ténèbres, ils étaient tombés brusquement dans un Niagara de joie. On pourrait dire qu’ils subissaient l’emparadisement. Ils ne se parlaient point, se disant trop de choses avec l’âme. Déruchette serrait contre elle le bras d’Ebenezer.

Le pas de Gilliatt derrière eux leur faisait par moments songer qu’il était là. Ils étaient profondément émus, mais sans dire mot; l’excès d’émotion se résout en stupeur. La leur était délicieuse, mais accablante. Ils étaient mariés. Ils ajournaient, on se reverrait, ce que Gilliatt faisait était bien, voilà tout. Le fond de ces deux cœurs le remerciait ardemment et vaguement. Déruchette se disait qu’elle avait là quelque chose à débrouiller, plus tard. En attendant, ils acceptaient. Ils se sentaient à la discrétion de cet homme décisif et subit, qui, d’autorité, faisait leur bonheur. Lui adresser des questions, causer avec lui, était impossible. Trop d’impressions se précipitaient sur eux à la fois. Leur engloutissement est pardonnable.

Les faits sont parfois une grêle. Ils vous criblent. Cela assourdit. La brusquerie des incidents tombant dans des existences habituellement calmes rend très vite les évènements inintelligibles à ceux qui en souffrent ou qui en profitent. On n’est pas au fait de sa propre aventure. On est écrasé sans deviner; on est couronné sans comprendre. Déruchette, en particulier, depuis quelques heures, avait reçu toutes les commotions; d’abord l’éblouissement, Ebenezer dans le jardin; puis le cauchemar, ce monstre déclaré son mari; puis la désolation, l’ange ouvrant ses ailes et prêt à partir; maintenant c’était la joie, une joie inouïe, avec un fond indéchiffrable; le monstre lui donnant l'ange, à elle Déruchette; le mariage sortant de l'agonie; ce Gilliatt, la catastrophe d'hier, le salut d'aujourd'hui. Elle ne se rendait compte de rien. Il était évident que depuis le matin Gilliatt n'avait eu d'autre occupation que de les marier; il avait tout fait; il avait répondu pour mess Lethierry, vu le doyen, demandé la licence, signé la déclaration voulue; voilà comment le mariage avait pu s'accomplir. Mais Déruchette ne le comprenait pas; d'ailleurs lors même qu'elle eût compris comment, elle n'eût pas compris pourquoi.

Fermer les yeux, rendre grâces mentalement, oublier la terre et la vie, se laisser emporter au ciel par ce bon démon, il n'y avait que cela à faire. Un éclaircissement était trop long, un remercîment était trop peu. Elle se taisait dans ce doux abrutissement du bonheur.

Un peu de pensée leur restait, assez pour se conduire. Sous l'eau il y a des parties de l'éponge qui demeurent blanches. Ils avaient juste la quantité de lucidité qu'il fallait pour distinguer la mer de la terre et le *Cashmere* de tout autre navire.

En quelques minutes, ils furent au Havelet.

Ebenezer entra le premier dans le bateau. Au moment où Déruchette allait le suivre, elle eut la sensation de sa manche doucement retenue. C'était Gilliatt qui avait posé un doigt sur un pli de sa robe.

— Madame, dit-il, vous ne vous attendiez pas à partir. J'ai pensé que vous auriez peut-être besoin de robes et de linge. Vous trouverez à bord du *Cashmere* un coffre qui contient des objets pour femme. Ce coffre me vient de ma mère. Il était destiné à la femme que j'épouserais. Permettez-moi de vous l'offrir.

Déruchette se réveilla à demi de son rêve. Elle se tourna vers Gilliatt. Gilliatt, d'une voix basse et qu'on entendait à peine, continua:

— Maintenant, ce n'est pas pour vous retarder, mais voyez-vous, madame, je crois qu'il faut que je vous explique. Le jour qu'il y a eu ce malheur, vous étiez assise dans la salle basse, vous avez dit une parole. Vous ne vous souvenez pas, c'est tout simple. On n'est pas forcé de se souvenir de tous les mots qu'on dit. Mess Lethierry avait beaucoup de chagrin. Il est certain que c'était un bon bateau, et qui rendait des services. Le malheur de la mer était arrivé; il y avait de l'émotion dans le pays. Ce sont là des choses, naturellement, qu'on a oubliées. Il n'y a pas eu que ce navire-là perdu dans les rochers. On ne peut pas penser toujours à un accident. Seulement ce que je voulais vous dire, c'est que, comme on disait personne n’ira, j’y suis allé. Ils disaient c’est impossible; ce n’était pas cela qui était impossible. Je vous remercie de m’écouter un petit instant. Vous comprenez, madame, si je suis allé là, ce n’était pas pour vous offenser. D’ailleurs la chose date de très loin. Je sais que vous êtes pressée. Si on avait le temps, si on parlait, on se souviendrait, mais cela ne sert à rien. La chose remonte à un jour où il y avait de la neige. Et puis une fois que je passais, j’ai cru que vous aviez souri. C’est comme ça que ça s’explique. Quant à hier, je n’avais pas eu le temps de rentrer chez moi, je sortais du travail, j’étais tout déchiré, je vous ai fait peur, vous vous êtes trouvée mal, j’ai eu tort, on n’arrive pas ainsi chez les personnes, je vous prie de ne pas m’en vouloir. C’est à peu près tout ce que je voulais dire. Vous allez partir. Vous aurez beau temps. Le vent est à l’est. Adieu, madame. Vous trouvez juste que je vous parle un peu, n’est-ce pas? Ceci est une dernière minute.

— Je pense à ce coffre, répondit Déruchette. Mais pourquoi ne pas le garder pour votre femme, quand vous vous marierez?

— Madame, dit Gilliatt, je ne me marierai probablement pas.

— Ce sera dommage, car vous êtes bon. Merci.

Et Déruchette sourit. Gilliatt lui rendit ce sourire.

Puis il aida Déruchette à entrer dans le canot.

Moins d’un quart d’heure après, le bateau où étaient Ebenezer et Déruchette abordait en rade le *Cashmere.*

V

LA GRANDE TOMBE

Gilliatt suivit le bord de l’eau, passa rapidement dans Saint-Pierre-Port, puis se remit à marcher vers Saint-Sampson le long de la mer, se dérobant aux rencontres, évitant les routes, pleines de passants par sa faute.

Dès longtemps, on le sait, il avait une manière à lui de traverser dans tous les sens le pays sans être vu de personne. Il connaissait des sentiers, il s’était fait des itinéraires isolés et serpentants; il avait l’habitude farouche de l’être qui ne se sent pas aimé; il restait lointain. Tout enfant, voyant peu d’accueil dans les visages des hommes, il avait pris ce pli, qui depuis était devenu son instinct, de se tenir à l’écart.

Il dépassa l’Esplanade, puis la Salerie. De temps en temps, il se retournait et regardait, en arrière de lui, dans la rade, le *Cashmere*, qui venait de mettre à la voile. Il y avait peu de vent, Gilliatt allait plus vite que le *Cashmere*. Gilliatt marchait dans les roches extrêmes du bord de l’eau, la tête baissée. Le flux commençait à monter.

À un certain moment il s’arrêta, et, tournant le dos à la mer, il considéra pendant quelques minutes, au delà des rochers cachant la route du Valle, un bouquet de chênes. C’étaient les chênes du lieu dit les Basses-Maisons. Là, autrefois, sous ces arbres, le doigt de Déruchette avait écrit son nom, *Gilliatt*, sur la neige. Il y avait longtemps que cette neige était fondue.

Il poursuivit son chemin.

La journée était charmante plus qu’aucune qu’il y eût encore eu cette année-là. Cette matinée avait on ne sait quoi de nuptial. C’était un de ces jours printaniers où mai se dépense tout entier; la création semble n’avoir d’autre but que de se donner une fête et de faire son bonheur. Sous toutes les rumeurs, de la forêt comme du village, de la vague comme de l’atmosphère, il y avait un roucoulement. Les premiers papillons se posaient sur les premières roses. Tout était neuf dans la nature, les herbes, les mousses, les feuilles, les parfums, les rayons. Il semblait que le soleil n’eût jamais servi. Les cailloux étaient lavés de frais. La profonde chanson des arbres était chantée par des oiseaux nés d’hier. Il est probable que leur coquille d’œuf cassée par leur petit bec était encore dans le nid. Des essais d’ailes bruissaient dans le tremblement des branches. Ils chantaient leur premier chant, ils volaient leur premier vol. C’était un doux parlage de tous à la fois, huppes, mésanges, piquebois, chardonnerets, bouvreuils, moines et misses. Les lilas, les muguets, les daphnés, les glycines, faisaient dans les fourrés un bariolage exquis. Une très jolie lentille d’eau qu’il y a à Guernesey couvrait les mares d’une nappe d’émeraude. Les bergeronnettes et les épluque-pommiers qui font de si gracieux petits nids s’y baignaient. Par toutes les claires-voies de la végétation on apercevait le bleu du ciel. Quelques nuées lascives s’entre-poursuivaient dans l’azur avec des ondoiements de nymphes. On croyait sentir passer des baisers que s’envoyaient des bouches invisibles. Pas un vieux mur qui n’eût, comme un marié, son bouquet de giroflées. Les prunelliers étaient en fleur, les cytises étaient en fleur; on voyait ces monceaux blancs qui luisaient et ces monceaux jaunes qui étincelaient à travers les entre-croisements des rameaux. Le printemps jetait tout son argent et tout son or dans l’immense panier percé des bois. Les pousses nouvelles étaient toutes fraîches vertes. On entendait en l’air des cris de bienvenue. L’été hospitalier ouvrait sa porte aux oiseaux lointains. C’était l’instant de l’arrivée des hirondelles. Les thyrses des ajoncs bordaient les talus des chemins creux, en attendant les thyrses des aubépines. Le beau et le joli faisaient bon voisinage; le superbe se complétait par le gracieux; le grand ne gênait pas le petit; aucune note du concert ne se perdait; les magnificences microscopiques étaient à leur plan dans la vaste beauté universelle, on distinguait tout comme dans une eau limpide. Partout une divine plénitude et un gonflement mystérieux faisaient deviner l’effort panique et sacré de la sève en travail. Qui brillait, brillait plus; qui aimait, aimait mieux. Il y avait de l’hymne dans la fleur et du rayonnement dans le bruit. La grande harmonie diffuse s’épanouissait. Ce qui commence à poindre provoquait ce qui commence à sourdre. Un trouble, qui venait d’en bas, et qui venait aussi d’en haut, remuait vaguement les cœurs, corruptibles à l’influence éparse et souterraine des germes. La fleur promettait obscurément le fruit, toute vierge songeait, la reproduction des êtres, préméditée par l’immense âme de l’ombre, s’ébauchait dans l’irradiation des choses. On se fiançait partout. On s’épousait sans fin. La vie, qui est la femelle, s’accouplait avec l’infini, qui est le mâle. Il faisait beau, il faisait clair, il faisait chaud; à travers les haies, dans les enclos, on voyait rire les enfants. Quelques-uns jouaient aux mérelles. Les pommiers, les pêchers, les cerisiers, les poiriers, couvraient les vergers de leurs grosses touffes pâles ou vermeilles. Dans l’herbe, primevères, pervenches, achillées, marguerites, amaryllis, jacinthes, et les violettes, et les véroniques. Les bourraches bleues, les iris jaunes, pullulaient, avec ces belles petites étoiles roses qui fleurissent toujours en troupe et qu'on appelle pour cela « les compagnons". Des bêtes toutes dorées couraient entre les pierres. Les joubarbes en floraison empourpraient les toits de chaume. Les travailleuses des ruches étaient dehors. L'abeille était à la besogne. L'étendue était pleine du murmure des mers et du bourdonnement des mouches. La nature, perméable au printemps, était moite de volupté.

Quand Gilliatt arriva à Saint-Sampson, il n'y avait pas encore d'eau au fond du port, et il put le traverser à pied sec, inaperçu derrière les coques de navires au radoub. Un cordon de pierres plates espacées qu'il y a là aide à ce passage.

Gilliatt ne fut pas remarqué. La foule était à l'autre bout du port, près du goulet, aux Bravées. Là son nom était dans toutes les bouches. On parlait tant de lui qu'on ne fit pas attention à lui. Gilliatt passa, caché en quelque sorte par le bruit qu'il faisait.

Il vit de loin la panse à la place où il l'avait amarrée, la cheminée de la machine entre ses quatre chaînes, un mouvement de charpentiers à l'ouvrage, des silhouettes confuses d'allants et de venants, et il entendit la voix tonnante et joyeuse de mess Lethierry donnant des ordres.

Il s'enfonça dans les ruettes.

Il n'y avait personne derrière les Bravées, toute la curiosité étant sur le devant. Gilliatt prit le sentier longeant le mur bas du jardin. Il s'arrêta dans l'angle où était la mauve sauvage; il revit la pierre où il s'était assis; il revit le banc de bois où s'était assise Déruchette. Il regarda la terre de l'allée où il avait vu s'embrasser deux ombres, qui avaient disparu.

Il se remit en marche. Il gravit la colline du château du Valle, puis la redescendit, et se dirigea vers le Bû de la Rue.

Le Houmet-Paradis était solitaire.

Sa maison était telle qu'il l'avait laissée le matin après s'être habillé pour aller à Saint-Pierre-Port.

Une fenêtre était ouverte. Par cette fenêtre on voyait le bag-pipe accroché à un clou de la muraille.

On apercevait sur la table la petite bible donnée en remercîment à Gilliatt par un inconnu qui était Ebenezer.

La clef était à la porte. Gilliatt approcha, posa la main sur cette clef, ferma la porte à double tour, mit la clef dans sa poche, et s’éloigna.

Il s’éloigna, non du côté de la terre, mais du côté de la mer.

Il traversa diagonalement son jardin, par le plus court, sans précaution pour les plates-bandes, en ayant soin toutefois de ne pas écraser les seakales, qu’il avait plantés parce que c’était un goût de Déruchette.

Il franchit le parapet et descendit dans les brisants.

Il se mit à suivre, allant toujours devant lui, la longue et étroite ligne de récifs qui liait le Bû de la Rue à ce gros obélisque de granit debout au milieu de la mer qu’on appelait la Corne de la Bête. C’est là qu’était la chaise Gild-Holm-’Ur.

Il enjambait d’un récif à l’autre comme un géant sur des cimes. Faire ces enjambées sur une crête de brisants, cela ressemble à marcher sur l’arête d’un toit.

Une pêcheuse à la trouble qui rôdait pieds nus dans les flaques d’eau à quelque distance, et qui regagnait le rivage, lui cria: Prenez garde. La mer arrive.

Il continua d’avancer.

Parvenu à ce grand rocher de la pointe, la Corne, qui faisait pinacle sur la mer, il s’arrêta. La terre finissait là. C’était l’extrémité du petit promontoire.

Il regarda.

Au large, quelques barques, à l’ancre, pêchaient. On voyait de temps en temps sur ces bateaux des ruissellements d’argent au soleil qui étaient la sortie de l’eau des filets. Le *Cashmere* n’était pas encore à la hauteur de Saint-Sampson; il avait déployé son grand hunier. Il était entre Herm et Jethou.

Gilliatt tourna le rocher. Il parvint sous la chaise Gild-Holm-’Ur, au pied de cette espèce d’escalier abrupt que, moins de trois mois auparavant, il avait aidé Ebenezer à descendre. Il le monta.

La plupart des degrés étaient déjà sous l’eau. Deux ou trois seulement étaient encore à sec. Il les escalada.

Ces degrés menaient à la chaise Gild-Holm-’Ur. Il arriva à la chaise, la considéra un moment, appuya sa main sur ses yeux et la fit lentement glisser d’un sourcil à l’autre, geste par lequel il semble qu’on essuie le passé, puis il s’assit dans ce creux de roche, avec l’escarpement derrière son dos et l’océan sous ses pieds.

Le *Cashmere* en ce moment-là élongeait la grosse tour ronde immergée, gardée par un sergent et un canon, qui marque dans la rade le mi-chemin entre Herm et Saint-Pierre-Port.

Au-dessus de la tête de Gilliatt, dans les fentes, quelques fleurs de rocher frissonnaient. L'eau était bleue à perte de vue. Le vent étant d'est, il y avait peu de ressac autour de Serk, dont on ne voit de Guernesey que la côte occidentale. On apercevait au loin la France comme une brume et la longue bande jaune des sables de Carteret. Par instants, un papillon blanc passait. Les papillons ont le goût de se promener sur la mer.

La brise était très faible. Tout ce bleu, en bas comme en haut, était immobile. Aucun tremblement n'agitait ces espèces de serpents d'un azur plus clair ou plus foncé qui marquent à la surface de la mer les torsions latentes des bas-fonds.

Le *Cashmere*, peu poussé du vent, avait, pour saisir la brise, hissé ses bonnettes de hune. Il s'était couvert de toile. Mais, le vent étant de travers, l'effet des bonnettes le forçait à serrer de très près la côte de Guernesey. Il avait franchi la balise de Saint-Sampson. Il atteignait la colline du château du Valle. Le moment arrivait où il allait doubler la pointe du Bû de la Rue.

Gilliatt le regardait venir.

L'air et la vague étaient comme assoupis. La marée se faisait, non par lame, mais par gonflement. Le niveau de l'eau se haussait sans palpitation. La rumeur du large, éteinte, ressemblait à un souffle d'enfant.

On entendait dans la direction du havre de Saint-Sampson de petits coups sourds, qui étaient des coups de marteau. C'étaient probablement les charpentiers dressant les palans et le fardier pour retirer de la panse la machine. Ces bruits parvenaient à peine à Gilliatt, à cause de la masse de granit à laquelle il était adossé.

Le *Cashmere* approchait avec une lenteur de fantôme.

Gilliatt attendait.

Tout à coup un clapotement et une sensation de froid le firent regarder en bas. Le flot lui touchait les pieds.

Il baissa les yeux, puis les releva.

Le *Cashmere* était tout près.

L'escarpement où les pluies avaient creusé la chaise Gild-Holm-'Ur était si vertical, et il y avait là tant d'eau, que les navires pouvaient sans danger, par les temps calmes, faire chenal à quelques encâblures du rocher.

Le *Cashmere* arriva. Il surgit, il se dressa. Il semblait croître sur l'eau. Ce fut comme le grandissement d'une ombre. Le gréement se détacha en noir sur le ciel dans le magnifique balancement de la mer. Les longues voiles, un moment superposées au soleil, devinrent presque roses et eurent une transparence ineffable. Les flots avaient un murmure indistinct. Aucun bruit ne troublait le glissement majestueux de cette silhouette. On voyait sur le pont comme si on y eût été.

Le *Cashmere* rasa presque la roche.

Le timonier était à la barre, un mousse grimpait aux haubans, quelques passagers, accoudés au bordage, considéraient la sérénité du temps, le capitaine fumait.

Mais ce n'était rien de tout cela que voyait Gilliatt.

Il y avait sur le pont un coin plein de soleil. C'était là ce qu'il regardait. Dans ce soleil étaient Ebenezer et Déruchette. Ils étaient assis dans cette lumière, lui près d'elle. Ils se blottissaient gracieusement côte à côte, comme deux oiseaux se chauffant à un rayon de midi, sur un de ces bancs couverts d'un petit plafond goudronné que les navires bien aménagés offrent aux voyageurs et sur lesquels on lit, quand c'est un bâtiment anglais: *For ladies only*. La tête de Déruchette était sur l'épaule d'Ebenezer, le bras d'Ebenezer était derrière la taille de Déruchette; ils se tenaient les mains, les doigts entre-croisés dans les doigts. Les nuances d'un ange à l'autre étaient saisissables sur ces deux exquises figures faites d'innocence. L'une était plus virginale, l'autre était plus sidérale. Leur chaste embrassement était expressif. Tout l'hyménée était là, toute la pudeur aussi. Ce banc était déjà une alcôve et presque un nid. En même temps, c'était une gloire; la douce gloire de l'amour en fuite dans un nuage.

Le silence était céleste.

L'œil d'Ebenezer rendait grâce et contemplait; les lèvres de Déruchette remuaient; et dans ce charmant silence, comme le vent portait du côté de terre, à l'instant rapide où le sloop glissa à quelques toises de la chaise Gild-Holm-'Ur, Gilliatt entendit la voix tendre et délicate de Déruchette qui disait:

— Vois donc. Il semblerait qu'il y a un homme dans le rocher.

Cette apparition passa.

Le *Cashmere* laissa la pointe du Bû de la Rue derrière lui et s'enfonça dans le plissement profond des vagues. En moins d'un quart d'heure, sa mâture et ses voiles ne firent plus sur la mer qu'une sorte d'obélisque blanc décroissant à l'horizon. Gilliatt avait de l'eau jusqu'aux genoux.

Il regardait le sloop s'éloigner.

La brise fraîchit au large. Il put voir le *Cashmere* hisser ses bonnettes basses et ses focs pour profiter de cette

augmentation de vent. Le *Cashmere* était déjà hors des eaux de Guernesey. Gilliatt ne le quittait pas des yeux.

Le flot lui arrivait à la ceinture.

La marée s'élevait. Le temps passait.

Les mauves et les cormorans volaient autour de lui, inquiets. On eût dit qu'ils cherchaient à l'avertir. Peut-être y avait-il dans ces volées d'oiseaux quelque mouette venue des Douvres, qui le reconnaissait.

Une heure s'écoula.

Le vent du large ne se faisait pas sentir dans la rade, mais la diminution du *Cashmere* était rapide. Le sloop était, selon toute apparence, en pleine vitesse. Il atteignait déjà presque la hauteur des Casquets.

Il n'y avait pas d'écume autour du rocher Gild-Holm-'Ur. Aucune lame ne battait le granit. L'eau s'enflait paisiblement. Elle atteignait presque les épaules de Gilliatt.

Une autre heure s'écoula.

Le *Cashmere* était au delà des eaux d'Aurigny. Le rocher Ortach le cacha un moment. Il entra dans l'occultation de cette roche, puis en ressortit, comme d'une éclipse. Le sloop fuyait au nord. Il gagna la haute mer. Il n'était plus qu'un point ayant, à cause du soleil, la scintillation d'une lumière.

Les oiseaux jetaient de petits cris à Gilliatt.

On ne voyait plus que sa tête.

La mer montait avec une douceur sinistre. Gilliatt, immobile, regardait le *Cashmere* s'évanouir.

Le flux était presque à son plein. Le soir approchait. Derrière Gilliatt, dans la rade, quelques bateaux de pêche rentraient.

L'œil de Gilliatt, attaché au loin sur le sloop, restait fixe.

Cet œil fixe ne ressemblait à rien de ce qu'on peut voir sur la terre. Dans cette prunelle tragique et calme il y avait de l'inexprimable. Ce regard contenait toute la quantité d'apaisement que laisse le rêve non réalisé; c'était l'acceptation lugubre d'un autre accomplissement. Une fuite d'étoile doit être suivie par des regards pareils. De moment en moment, l'obscurité céleste se faisait sous ce sourcil dont le rayon visuel demeurait fixé à un point de l’espace. En même temps que l’eau infinie autour du rocher Gild-Holm-’Ur, l’immense tranquillité de l’ombre montait dans l’œil profond de Gilliatt.

Le *Cashmere,* devenu imperceptible, était maintenant une tache mêlée à la brume. Il fallait pour le distinguer savoir où il était.

Peu à peu, cette tache, qui n’était plus une forme, pâlit.

Puis elle s’amoindrit.

Puis elle se dissipa.

À l’instant où le navire s’effaça à l’horizon, la tête disparut sous l’eau. Il n’y eut plus rien que la mer.

THE MAN WHO LAUGHS

Anonymous translation, 1901

First published in 1869, this novel was written over a period of fifteen months, while Hugo was living in exile due to the political content of his previous novels and poetry. Hugo's working title for this book was *On the King's Command*, but a friend suggested the present one closer to the time of publication.

This Romance novel is set in 17th century England, where the relationships between the bourgeoisie and aristocracy are complicated by continual distancing from the lower classes. Hugo's protagonist, Gwynplaine transgresses societal spheres by being reinstated from the lower class into the aristocracy, enabling Hugo to criticise the class system mercilessly in his narrative.

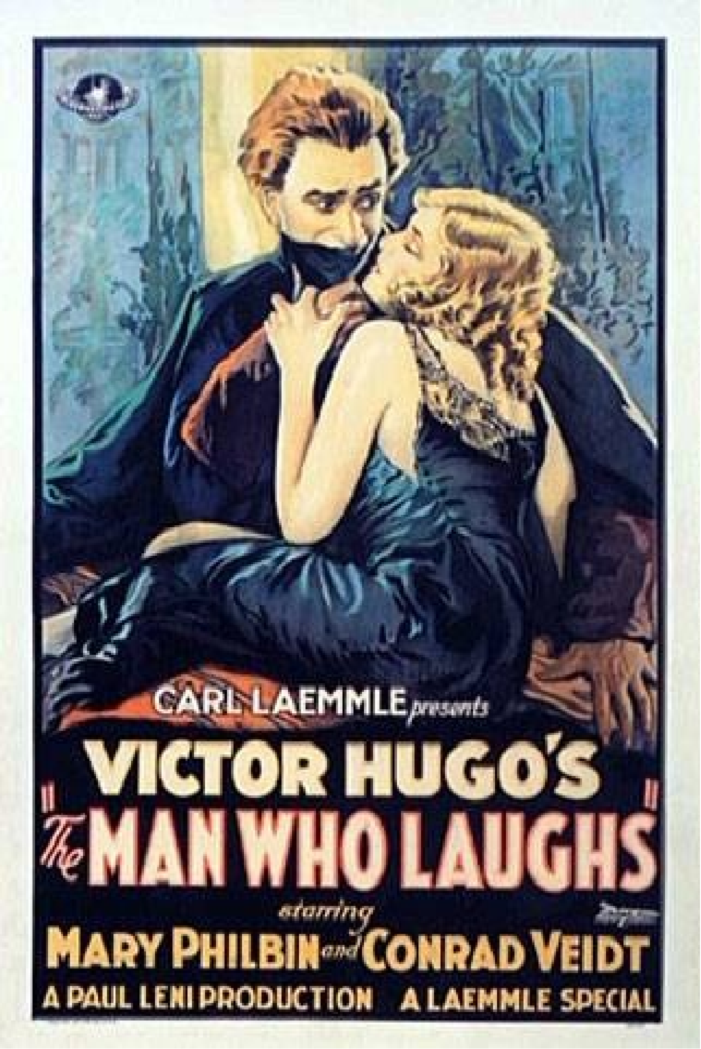
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"The MAN WHO LAUGHS"
starring
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The 1928 American silent film based on the novel

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The original French text of this novel can be accessed via this link.

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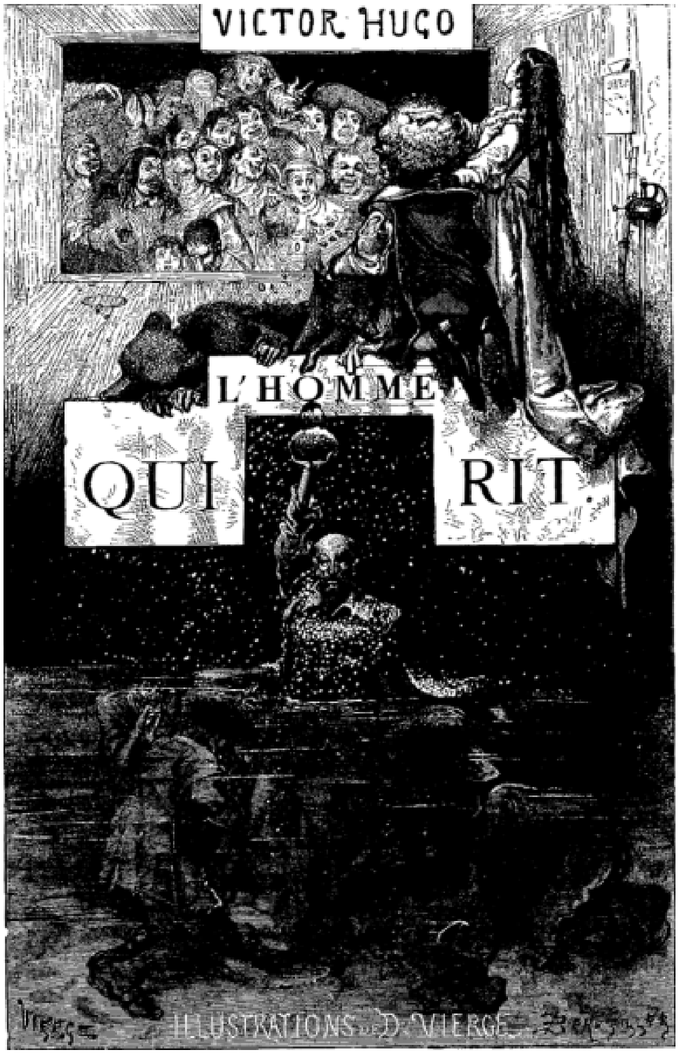
VICTOR HUGO
L'HOMME
QUI
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ILLUSTRATIONS DE D. VIERGE

Frontispiece of the first edition, 1876

PRELIMINARY CHAPTER.

URSUS.

I.

Ursus and Homo were fast friends. Ursus was a man, Homo a wolf. Their dispositions tallied. It was the man who had christened the wolf: probably he had also chosen his own name. Having found *Ursus* fit for himself, he had found *Homo* fit for the beast. Man and wolf turned their partnership to account at fairs, at village fêtes, at the corners of streets where passers-by throng, and out of the need which people seem to feel everywhere to listen to idle gossip and to buy quack medicine. The wolf, gentle and courteously subordinate, diverted the crowd. It is a pleasant thing to behold the tameness of animals. Our greatest delight is to see all the varieties of domestication parade before us. This it is which collects so many folks on the road of royal processions.

Ursus and Homo went about from cross-road to cross-road, from the High Street of Aberystwith to the High Street of Jedburgh, from country-side to country-side, from shire to shire, from town to town. One market exhausted, they went on to another. Ursus lived in a small van upon wheels, which Homo was civilized enough to draw by day and guard by night. On bad roads, up hills, and where there were too many ruts, or there was too much mud, the man buckled the trace round his neck and pulled fraternally, side by side with the wolf. They had thus grown old together. They encamped at haphazard on a common, in the glade of a wood, on the waste patch of grass where roads intersect, at the outskirts of villages, at the gates of towns, in market-places, in public walks, on the borders of parks, before the entrances of churches. When the cart drew up on a fair green, when the gossips ran up open-mouthed and the curious made a circle round the pair, Ursus harangued and Homo approved. Homo, with a bowl in his mouth, politely made a collection among the audience. They gained their livelihood. The wolf was lettered, likewise the man. The wolf had been trained by the man, or had trained himself unassisted, to divers wolfish arts, which swelled the receipts. “Above all things, do not degenerate into a man,” his friend would say to him.

Never did the wolf bite: the man did now and then. At least, to bite was the intent of Ursus. He was a misanthrope, and to italicize his misanthropy he had made himself a juggler. To live, also; for the stomach has to be consulted. Moreover, this juggler-misanthrope, whether to add to the complexity of his being or to perfect it, was a doctor. To be a doctor is little: Ursus was a ventriloquist. You heard him speak without his moving his lips. He counterfeited, so as to deceive you, any one’s accent or pronunciation. He imitated voices so exactly that you believed you heard the people themselves. All alone he simulated the murmur of a crowd, and this gave him a right to the title of Engastrimythos, which he took. He reproduced all sorts of cries of birds, as of the thrush, the wren, the pipit lark, otherwise called the gray cheeper, and the ring ousel, all travellers like himself: so that at times when the fancy struck him, he made you aware either of a public thoroughfare filled with the uproar of men, or of a meadow loud with the voices of beasts — at one time stormy as a multitude, at another fresh and serene as the dawn. Such gifts, although rare, exist. In the last century a man called Touzel, who imitated the mingled utterances of men and animals, and who counterfeited all the cries of beasts, was attached to the person of Buffon — to serve as a menagerie.

Ursus was sagacious, contradictory, odd, and inclined to the singular expositions which we term fables. He had the appearance of believing in them, and this impudence was a part of his humour. He read people’s hands, opened books at random and drew conclusions, told fortunes, taught that it is perilous to meet a black mare, still more perilous, as you start for a journey, to hear yourself accosted by one who knows not whither you are going; and he called himself a dealer in superstitions. He used to say: “There is one difference between me and the Archbishop of Canterbury: I avow what I am.” Hence it was that the archbishop, justly indignant, had him one day before him; but Ursus cleverly disarmed his grace by reciting a sermon he had composed upon Christmas Day, which the delighted archbishop learnt by heart, and delivered from the pulpit as his own. In consideration thereof the archbishop pardoned Ursus.

As a doctor, Ursus wrought cures by some means or other. He made use of aromatics; he was versed in simples; he made the most of the immense power which lies in a heap of neglected plants, such as the hazel, the catkin, the white alder, the white bryony, the mealy-tree, the traveller’s joy, the buckthorn. He treated phthisis with the sundew; at opportune moments he would use the leaves of the spurge, which plucked at the bottom are a purgative and plucked at the top, an emetic. He cured sore throat by means of the vegetable excrescence called Jew’s ear. He knew the rush which cures the ox and the mint which cures the horse. He was well acquainted with the beauties and virtues of the herb mandragora, which, as every one knows, is of both sexes. He had many recipes. He cured burns with the salamander wool, of which, according to Pliny, Nero had a napkin. Ursus possessed a retort and a flask; he effected transmutations; he sold panaceas. It was said of him that he had once been for a short time in Bedlam; they had done him the honour to take him for a madman, but had set him free on discovering that he was only a poet. This story was probably not true; we have all to submit to some such legend about us.

The fact is, Ursus was a bit of a savant, a man of taste, and an old Latin poet. He was learned in two forms; he Hippocratized and he Pindarized. He could have vied in bombast with Rapin and Vida. He could have composed Jesuit tragedies in a style not less triumphant than that of Father Bouhours. It followed from his familiarity with the venerable rhythms and metres of the ancients, that he had peculiar figures of speech, and a whole family of classical metaphors. He would say of a mother followed by her two daughters, *There is a dactyl;* of a father preceded by his two sons, *There is an anapæst;* and of a little child walking between its grandmother and grandfather, *There is an amphimacer*. So much knowledge could only end in starvation. The school of Salerno says, “Eat little and often.” Ursus ate little and seldom, thus obeying one half the precept and disobeying the other; but this was the fault of the public, who did not always flock to him, and who did not often buy.

Ursus was wont to say: “The expectoration of a sentence is a relief. The wolf is comforted by its howl, the sheep by its wool, the forest by its finch, woman by her love, and the philosopher by his epiphonema.” Ursus at a pinch composed comedies, which, in recital, he all but acted; this helped to sell the drugs. Among other works, he had composed an heroic pastoral in honour of Sir Hugh Middleton, who in 1608 brought a river to London. The river was lying peacefully in Hertfordshire, twenty miles from London: the knight came and took possession of it. He brought a brigade of six hundred men, armed with shovels and pickaxes; set to breaking up the ground, scooping it out in one place, raising it in another — now thirty feet high, now twenty feet deep; made wooden aqueducts high in air; and at different points constructed eight hundred bridges of stone, bricks, and timber. One fine morning the river entered London, which was short of water. Ursus transformed all these vulgar details into a fine Eclogue between the Thames and the New River, in which the former invited the latter to come to him, and offered her his bed, saying, “I am too old to please women, but I am rich enough to pay them” — an ingenious and gallant conceit to indicate how Sir Hugh Middleton had completed the work at his own expense.

Ursus was great in soliloquy. Of a disposition at once unsociable and talkative, desiring to see no one, yet wishing to converse with some one, he got out of the difficulty by talking to himself. Any one who has lived a solitary life knows how deeply seated monologue is in one’s nature. Speech imprisoned frets to find a vent. To harangue space is an outlet. To speak out aloud when alone is as it were to have a dialogue with the divinity which is within. It was, as is well known, a custom of Socrates; he declaimed to himself. Luther did the same. Ursus took after those great men. He had the hermaphrodite faculty of being his own audience. He questioned himself, answered himself, praised himself, blamed himself. You heard him in the street soliloquizing in his van. The passers-by, who have their own way of appreciating clever people, used to say: He is an idiot. As we have just observed, he abused himself at times; but there were times also when he rendered himself justice. One day, in one of these allocutions addressed to himself, he was heard to cry out, “I have studied vegetation in all its mysteries — in the stalk, in the bud, in the sepal, in the stamen, in the carpel, in the ovule, in the spore, in the theca, and in the apothecium. I have thoroughly sifted chromatics, osmosy, and chymosy — that is to say, the formation of colours, of smell, and of taste.” There was something fatuous, doubtless, in this certificate which Ursus gave to Ursus; but let those who have not thoroughly sifted chromatics, osmosy, and chymosy cast the first stone at him.

Fortunately Ursus had never gone into the Low Countries; there they would certainly have weighed him, to ascertain whether he was of the normal weight, above or below which a man is a sorcerer. In Holland this weight was sagely fixed by law. Nothing was simpler or more ingenious. It was a clear test. They put you in a scale, and the evidence was conclusive if you broke the equilibrium. Too heavy, you were hanged; too light, you were burned. To this day the scales in which sorcerers were weighed may be seen at Oudewater, but they are now used for weighing cheeses; how religion has degenerated! Ursus would certainly have had a crow to pluck with those scales. In his travels he kept away from Holland, and he did well. Indeed, we believe that he used never to leave the United Kingdom.

However this may have been, he was very poor and morose, and having made the acquaintance of Homo in a wood, a taste for a wandering life had come over him. He had taken the wolf into partnership, and with him had gone forth on the highways, living in the open air the great life of chance. He had a great deal of industry and of reserve, and great skill in everything connected with healing operations, restoring the sick to health, and in working wonders peculiar to himself. He was considered a clever mountebank and a good doctor. As may be imagined, he passed for a wizard as well — not much indeed; only a little, for it was unwholesome in those days to be considered a friend of the devil. To tell the truth, Ursus, by his passion for pharmacy and his love of plants, laid himself open to suspicion, seeing that he often went to gather herbs in rough thickets where grew Lucifer’s salads, and where, as has been proved by the Counsellor De l’Ancre, there is a risk of meeting in the evening mist a man who comes out of the earth, “blind of the right eye, barefooted, without a cloak, and a sword by his side.” But for the matter of that, Ursus, although eccentric in manner and disposition, was too good a fellow to invoke or disperse hail, to make faces appear, to kill a man with the torment of excessive dancing, to suggest dreams fair or foul and full of terror, and to cause the birth of cocks with four wings. He had no such mischievous tricks. He was incapable of certain abominations, such as, for instance, speaking German, Hebrew, or Greek, without having learned them, which is a sign of unpardonable wickedness, or of a natural infirmity proceeding from a morbid humour. If Ursus spoke Latin, it was because he knew it. He would never have allowed himself to speak Syriac, which he did not know. Besides, it is asserted that Syriac is the language spoken in the midnight meetings at which uncanny people worship the devil. In medicine he justly preferred Galen to Cardan; Cardan, although a learned man, being but an earthworm to Galen.

To sum up, Ursus was not one of those persons who live in fear of the police. His van was long enough and wide enough to allow of his lying down in it on a box containing his not very sumptuous apparel. He owned a lantern, several wigs, and some utensils suspended from nails, among which were musical instruments. He possessed, besides, a bearskin with which he covered himself on his days of grand performance. He called this putting on full dress. He used to say, “I have two skins; this is the real one,” pointing to the bearskin.

The little house on wheels belonged to himself and to the wolf. Besides his house, his retort, and his wolf, he had a flute and a violoncello on which he played prettily. He concocted his own elixirs. His wits yielded him enough to sup on sometimes. In the top of his van was a hole, through which passed the pipe of a cast-iron stove; so close to his box as to scorch the wood of it. The stove had two compartments; in one of them Ursus cooked his chemicals, and in the other his potatoes. At night the wolf slept under the van, amicably secured by a chain. Homo’s hair was black, that of Ursus, gray; Ursus was fifty, unless, indeed, he was sixty. He accepted his destiny, to such an extent that, as we have just seen, he ate potatoes, the trash on which at that time they fed pigs and convicts. He ate them indignant, but resigned. He was not tall — he was long. He was bent and melancholy. The bowed frame of an old man is the settlement in the architecture of life. Nature had formed him for sadness. He found it difficult to smile, and he had never been able to weep, so that he was deprived of the consolation of tears as well as of the palliative of joy. An old man is a thinking ruin; and such a ruin was Ursus. He had the loquacity of a charlatan, the leanness of a prophet, the irascibility of a charged mine: such was Ursus. In his youth he had been a philosopher in the house of a lord.

This was 180 years ago, when men were more like wolves than they are now.

Not so very much though.

II.

Homo was no ordinary wolf. From his appetite for medlars and potatoes he might have been taken for a prairie wolf; from his dark hide, for a lycaon; and from his howl prolonged into a bark, for a dog of Chili. But no one has as yet observed the eyeball of a dog of Chili sufficiently to enable us to determine whether he be not a fox, and Homo was a real wolf. He was five feet long, which is a fine length for a wolf, even in Lithuania; he was very strong; he looked at you askance, which was not his fault; he had a soft tongue, with which he occasionally licked Ursus; he had a narrow brush of short bristles on his backbone, and he was lean with the wholesome leanness of a forest life. Before he knew Ursus and had a carriage to draw, he thought nothing of doing his fifty miles a night. Ursus meeting him in a thicket near a stream of running water, had conceived a high opinion of him from seeing the skill and sagacity with which he fished out crayfish, and welcomed him as an honest and genuine Koupara wolf of the kind called crab-eater.

As a beast of burden, Ursus preferred Homo to a donkey. He would have felt repugnance to having his hut drawn by an ass; he thought too highly of the ass for that. Moreover he had observed that the ass, a four-legged thinker little understood by men, has a habit of cocking his ears uneasily when philosophers talk nonsense. In life the ass is a third person between our thoughts and ourselves, and acts as a restraint. As a friend, Ursus preferred Homo to a dog, considering that the love of a wolf is more rare.

Hence it was that Homo sufficed for Ursus. Homo was for Ursus more than a companion, he was an analogue. Ursus used to pat the wolf’s empty ribs, saying: “I have found the second volume of myself!” Again he said, “When I am dead, any one wishing to know me need only study Homo. I shall leave a true copy behind me.”

The English law, not very lenient to beasts of the forest, might have picked a quarrel with the wolf, and have put him to trouble for his assurance in going freely about the towns: but Homo took advantage of the immunity granted by a statute of Edward IV. to servants: “Every servant in attendance on his master is free to come and go.” Besides, a certain relaxation of the law had resulted with regard to wolves, in consequence of its being the fashion of the ladies of the Court, under the later Stuarts, to have, instead of dogs, little wolves, called adives, about the size of cats, which were brought from Asia at great cost.

Ursus had communicated to Homo a portion of his talents: such as to stand upright, to restrain his rage into sulkiness, to growl instead of howling, etc.; and on his part, the wolf had taught the man what *he* knew — to do without a roof, without bread and fire, to prefer hunger in the woods to slavery in a palace.

The van, hut, and vehicle in one, which traversed so many different roads, without, however, leaving Great Britain, had four wheels, with shafts for the wolf and a splinter-bar for the man. The splinter-bar came into use when the roads were bad. The van was strong, although it was built of light boards like a dove-cot. In front there was a glass door with a little balcony used for orations, which had something of the character of the platform tempered by an air of the pulpit. At the back there was a door with a practicable panel. By lowering the three steps which turned on a hinge below the door, access was gained to the hut, which at night was securely fastened with bolt and lock. Rain and snow had fallen plentifully on it; it had been painted, but of what colour it was difficult to say, change of season being to vans what changes of reign are to courtiers. In front, outside, was a board, a kind of frontispiece, on which the following inscription might once have been deciphered; it was in black letters on a white ground, but by degrees the characters had become confused and blurred: —

“By friction gold loses every year a fourteen hundredth part of its bulk. This is what is called the Wear. Hence it follows that on fourteen hundred millions of gold in circulation throughout the world, one million is lost annually. This million dissolves into dust, flies away, floats about, is reduced to atoms, charges, drugs, weighs down consciences, amalgamates with the souls of the rich whom it renders proud, and with those of the poor whom it renders brutish.”

The inscription, rubbed and blotted by the rain and by the kindness of nature, was fortunately illegible, for it is possible that its philosophy concerning the inhalation of gold, at the same time both enigmatical and lucid, might not have been to the taste of the sheriffs, the provost-marshals, and other big-wigs of the law. English legislation did not trifle in those days. It did not take much to make a man a felon. The magistrates were ferocious by tradition, and cruelty was a matter of routine. The judges of assize increased and multiplied. Jeffreys had become a breed.

III.

In the interior of the van there were two other inscriptions. Above the box, on a whitewashed plank, a hand had written in ink as follows: —

“THE ONLY THINGS NECESSARY TO KNOW.

“The Baron, peer of England, wears a cap with six pearls. The coronet begins with the rank of Viscount. The Viscount wears a coronet of which the pearls are without number. The Earl a coronet with the pearls upon points, mingled with strawberry leaves placed low between. The Marquis, one with pearls and leaves on the same level. The Duke, one with strawberry leaves alone — no pearls. The Royal Duke, a circlet of crosses and fleurs de lys. The Prince of Wales, crown like that of the King, but unclosed.

“The Duke is a most high and most puissant prince, the Marquis and Earl most noble and puissant lord, the Viscount noble and puissant lord, the Baron a trusty lord. The Duke is his Grace; the other Peers their Lordships. *Most honourable* is higher than *right honourable*.

“Lords who are peers are lords in their own right. Lords who are not peers are lords by courtesy: — there are no real lords, excepting such as are peers.

“The House of Lords is a chamber and a court, *Concilium et Curia*, legislature and court of justice. The Commons, who are the people, when ordered to the bar of the Lords, humbly present themselves bareheaded before the peers, who remain covered. The Commons send up their bills by forty members, who present the bill with three low bows. The Lords send their bills to the Commons by a mere clerk. In case of disagreement, the two Houses confer in the Painted Chamber, the Peers seated and covered, the Commons standing and bareheaded.

“Peers go to parliament in their coaches in file; the Commons do not. Some peers go to Westminster in open four-wheeled chariots. The use of these and of coaches emblazoned with coats of arms and coronets is allowed only to peers, and forms a portion of their dignity.

“Barons have the same rank as bishops. To be a baron peer of England, it is necessary to be in possession of a tenure from the king *per Baroniam integram*, by full barony. The full barony consists of thirteen knights’ fees and one third part, each knight’s fee being of the value of £20 sterling, which makes in all 400 marks. The head of a barony (*Caput baroniæ*) is a castle disposed by inheritance, as England herself, that is to say, descending to daughters if there be no sons, and in that case going to the eldest daughter, *cæteris filiabus aliundè satisfactis*.

“Barons have the degree of lord: in Saxon, *laford; dominus* in high Latin; *Lordus* in low Latin. The eldest and younger sons of viscounts and barons are the first esquires in the kingdom. The eldest sons of peers take precedence of knights of the garter. The younger sons do not. The eldest son of a viscount comes after all barons, and precedes all baronets. Every daughter of a peer is a *Lady*. Other English girls are plain *Mistress*.

“All judges rank below peers. The serjeant wears a lambskin tippet; the judge one of patchwork, *de minuto vario*, made up of a variety of little white furs, always excepting ermine. Ermine is reserved for peers and the king.

“A lord never takes an oath, either to the crown or the law. His word suffices; he says, Upon my honour.

“By a law of Edward the Sixth, peers have the privilege of committing manslaughter. A peer who kills a man without premeditation is not prosecuted.

“The persons of peers are inviolable.

“A peer cannot be held in durance, save in the Tower of London.

“A writ of supplicavit cannot be granted against a peer.

“A peer sent for by the king has the right to kill one or two deer in the royal park.

“A peer holds in his castle a baron’s court of justice.

“It is unworthy of a peer to walk the street in a cloak, followed by two footmen. He should only show himself attended by a great train of gentlemen of his household.

“A peer can be amerced only by his peers, and never to any greater amount than five pounds, excepting in the case of a duke, who can be amerced ten.

“A peer may retain six aliens born, any other Englishman but four.

“A peer can have wine custom-free; an earl eight tuns.

“A peer is alone exempt from presenting himself before the sheriff of the circuit.

“A peer cannot be assessed towards the militia.

“When it pleases a peer he raises a regiment and gives it to the king; thus have done their graces the Dukes of Athol, Hamilton, and Northumberland.

“A peer can hold only of a peer.

“In a civil cause he can demand the adjournment of the case, if there be not at least one knight on the jury.

“A peer nominates his own chaplains. A baron appoints three chaplains; a viscount four; an earl and a marquis five; a duke six.

“A peer cannot be put to the rack, even for high treason. A peer cannot be branded on the hand. A peer is a clerk, though he knows not how to read. In law he knows.

“A duke has a right to a canopy, or cloth of state, in all places where the king is not present; a viscount may have one in his house; a baron has a cover of assay, which may be held under his cup while he drinks. A baroness has the right to have her train borne by a man in the presence of a viscountess.

“Eighty-six tables, with five hundred dishes, are served every day in the royal palace at each meal.

“If a plebeian strike a lord, his hand is cut off.

“A lord is very nearly a king.

“The king is very nearly a god.

“The earth is a lordship.

“The English address God as my lord!”

Opposite this writing was written a second one, in the same fashion, which ran thus: —

“SATISFACTION WHICH MUST SUFFICE THOSE WHO HAVE NOTHING.

“Henry Auverquerque, Earl of Grantham, who sits in the House of Lords between the Earl of Jersey and the Earl of Greenwich, has a hundred thousand a year. To his lordship belongs the palace of Grantham Terrace, built all of marble and famous for what is called the labyrinth of passages — a curiosity which contains the scarlet corridor in marble of Sarancolin, the brown corridor in lumachel of Astracan, the white corridor in marble of Lani, the black corridor in marble of Alabanda, the gray corridor in marble of Staremma, the yellow corridor in marble of Hesse, the green corridor in marble of the Tyrol, the red corridor, half cherry-spotted marble of Bohemia, half lumachel of Cordova, the blue corridor in turquin of Genoa, the violet in granite of Catalonia, the mourning-hued corridor veined black and white in slate of Murviedro, the pink corridor in cipolin of the Alps, the pearl corridor in lumachel of Nonetta, and the corridor of all colours, called the courtiers’ corridor, in motley.

“Richard Lowther, Viscount Lonsdale, owns Lowther in Westmorland, which has a magnificent approach, and a flight of entrance steps which seem to invite the ingress of kings.

“Richard, Earl of Scarborough, Viscount and Baron Lumley of Lumley Castle, Viscount Lumley of Waterford in Ireland, and Lord Lieutenant and Vice-Admiral of the county of Northumberland and of Durham, both city and county, owns the double castleward of old and new Sandbeck, where you admire a superb railing, in the form of a semicircle, surrounding the basin of a matchless fountain. He has, besides, his castle of Lumley.

“Robert Darcy, Earl of Holderness, has his domain of Holderness, with baronial towers, and large gardens laid out in French fashion, where he drives in his coach-and-six, preceded by two outriders, as becomes a peer of England.

“Charles Beauclerc, Duke of St. Albans, Earl of Burford, Baron Hedington, Grand Falconer of England, has an abode at Windsor, regal even by the side of the king’s.

“Charles Bodville Robartes, Baron Robartes of Truro, Viscount Bodmin and Earl of Radnor, owns Wimpole in Cambridgeshire, which is as three palaces in one, having three façades, one bowed and two triangular. The approach is by an avenue of trees four deep.

“The most noble and most puissant Lord Philip, Baron Herbert of Cardiff, Earl of Montgomery and of Pembroke, Ross of Kendall, Parr, Fitzhugh, Marmion, St. Quentin, and Herbert of Shurland, Warden of the Stannaries in the counties of Cornwall and Devon, hereditary visitor of Jesus College, possesses the wonderful gardens at Wilton, where there are two sheaf-like fountains, finer than those of his most Christian Majesty King Louis XIV. at Versailles.

“Charles Somerset, Duke of Somerset, owns Somerset House on the Thames, which is equal to the Villa Pamphili at Rome. On the chimney-piece are seen two porcelain vases of the dynasty of the Yuens, which are worth half a million in French money.

“In Yorkshire, Arthur, Lord Ingram, Viscount Irwin, has Temple Newsain, which is entered under a triumphal arch and which has large wide roofs resembling Moorish terraces.

“Robert, Lord Ferrers of Chartly, Bourchier, and Lonvaine, has Staunton Harold in Leicestershire, of which the park is geometrically planned in the shape of a temple with a façade, and in front of the piece of water is the great church with the square belfry, which belongs to his lordship.

“In the county of Northampton, Charles Spencer, Earl of Sunderland, member of his Majesty’s Privy Council, possesses Althorp, at the entrance of which is a railing with four columns surmounted by groups in marble.

“Laurence Hyde, Earl of Rochester, has, in Surrey, New Park, rendered magnificent by its sculptured pinnacles, its circular lawn belted by trees, and its woodland, at the extremity of which is a little mountain, artistically rounded, and surmounted by a large oak, which can be seen from afar.

“Philip Stanhope, Earl of Chesterfield, possesses Bretby Hall in Derbyshire, with a splendid clock tower, falconries, warrens, and very fine sheets of water, long, square, and oval, one of which is shaped like a mirror, and has two jets, which throw the water to a great height.

“Charles Cornwallis, Baron Cornwallis of Eye, owns Broome Hall, a palace of the fourteenth century.

“The most noble Algernon Capel, Viscount Maiden, Earl of Essex, has Cashiobury in Hertfordshire, a seat which has the shape of a capital H, and which rejoices sportsmen with its abundance of game.

“Charles, Lord Ossulston, owns Darnley in Middlesex, approached by Italian gardens.

“James Cecil, Earl of Salisbury, has, seven leagues from London, Hatfield House, with its four lordly pavilions, its belfry in the centre, and its grand courtyard of black and white slabs, like that of St. Germain. This palace, which has a frontage 272 feet in length, was built in the reign of James I. by the Lord High Treasurer of England, the great-grandfather of the present earl. To be seen there is the bed of one of the Countesses of Salisbury: it is of inestimable value and made entirely of Brazilian wood, which is a panacea against the bites of serpents, and which is called *milhombres* — that is to say, a thousand men. On this bed is inscribed, *Honi soit qui mal y pense*.

“Edward Rich, Earl of Warwick and Holland, is owner of Warwick Castle, where whole oaks are burnt in the fireplaces.

“In the parish of Sevenoaks, Charles Sackville, Baron Buckhurst, Baron Cranfield, Earl of Dorset and Middlesex, is owner of Knowle, which is as large as a town and is composed of three palaces standing parallel one behind the other, like ranks of infantry. There are six covered flights of steps on the principal frontage, and a gate under a keep with four towers.

“Thomas Thynne, Baron Thynne of Warminster, and Viscount Weymouth, possesses Longleat, in which there are as many chimneys, cupolas, pinnacles, pepper-boxes pavilions, and turrets as at Chambord, in France, which belongs to the king.

“Henry Howard, Earl of Suffolk, owns, twelve leagues from London, the palace of Audley End in Essex, which in grandeur and dignity scarcely yields the palm to the Escorial of the King of Spain.

“In Bedfordshire, Wrest House and Park, which is a whole district, enclosed by ditches, walls, woodlands, rivers, and hills, belongs to Henry, Marquis of Kent.

"Hampton Court, in Herefordshire, with its strong embattled keep, and its gardens bounded by a piece of water which divides them from the forest, belongs to Thomas, Lord Coningsby.

"Grimsthorp, in Lincolnshire, with its long façade intersected by turrets in pale, its park, its fish-ponds, its pheasantries, its sheepfolds, its lawns, its grounds planted with rows of trees, its groves, its walks, its shrubberies, its flower-beds and borders, formed in square and lozenge-shape, and resembling great carpets; its racecourses, and the majestic sweep for carriages to turn in at the entrance of the house — belongs to Robert, Earl Lindsey, hereditary lord of the forest of Waltham.

"Up Park, in Sussex, a square house, with two symmetrical belfried pavilions on each side of the great courtyard, belongs to the Right Honourable Forde, Baron Grey of Werke, Viscount Glendale and Earl of Tankerville.

"Newnham Paddox, in Warwickshire, which has two quadrangular fish-ponds and a gabled archway with a large window of four panes, belongs to the Earl of Denbigh, who is also Count von Rheinfelden, in Germany.

"Wytham Abbey, in Berkshire, with its French garden in which there are four curiously trimmed arbours, and its great embattled towers, supported by two bastions, belongs to Montague, Earl of Abingdon, who also owns Rycote, of which he is Baron, and the principal door of which bears the device *Virtus ariete fortior*.

"William Cavendish, Duke of Devonshire, has six dwelling-places, of which Chatsworth (two storied, and of the finest order of Grecian architecture) is one.

"The Viscount of Kinalmeaky, who is Earl of Cork, in Ireland, is owner of Burlington House, Piccadilly, with its extensive gardens, reaching to the fields outside London; he is also owner of Chiswick, where there are nine magnificent lodges; he also owns Londesborough, which is a new house by the side of an old palace.

"The Duke of Beaufort owns Chelsea, which contains two Gothic buildings, and a Florentine one; he has also Badminton, in Gloucestershire, a residence from which a number of avenues branch out like rays from a star. The most noble and puissant Prince Henry, Duke of Beaufort, is also Marquis and Earl of Worcester, Earl of Glamorgan, Viscount Grosmont, and

Baron Herbert of Chepstow, Ragland, and Gower, Baron Beaufort of Caldecott Castle, and Baron de Bottetourt.

“John Holies, Duke of Newcastle, and Marquis of Clare, owns Bolsover, with its majestic square keeps; his also is Haughton, in Nottinghamshire, where a round pyramid, made to imitate the Tower of Babel, stands in the centre of a basin of water.

“William, Earl of Craven, Viscount Uffington, and Baron Craven of Hamstead Marshall, owns Combe Abbey in Warwickshire, where is to be seen the finest water-jet in England; and in Berkshire two baronies, Hamstead Marshall, on the façade of which are five Gothic lanterns sunk in the wall, and Ashdown Park, which is a country seat situate at the point of intersection of cross-roads in a forest.

“Linnæus, Lord Clancharlie, Baron Clancharlie and Hunkerville, Marquis of Corleone in Sicily, derives his title from the castle of Clancharlie, built in 912 by Edward the Elder, as a defence against the Danes. Besides Hunkerville House, in London, which is a palace, he has Corleone Lodge at Windsor, which is another, and eight castlewards, one at Burton-on-Trent, with a royalty on the carriage of plaster of Paris; then Grumdaith Humble, Moricambe, Trewardraith, Hell-Kerters (where there is a miraculous well), Phillinmore, with its turf bogs, Reculver, near the ancient city Vagniac, Vinecaunton, on the Moel-eulle Mountain; besides nineteen boroughs and villages with reeves, and the whole of Penneth chase, all of which bring his lordship £40,000 a year.

“The 172 peers enjoying their dignities under James II. possess among them altogether a revenue of £1,272,000 sterling a year, which is the eleventh part of the revenue of England.”

In the margin, opposite the last name (that of Linnæus, Lord Clancharlie), there was a note in the handwriting of Ursus: *Rebel; in exile; houses, lands, and chattels sequestrated. It is well.*

IV.

Ursus admired Homo. One admires one’s like. It is a law. To be always raging inwardly and grumbling outwardly was the normal condition of Ursus. He was the malcontent of creation. By nature he was a man ever in opposition. He took the world unkindly; he gave his satisfecit to no one and to nothing. The bee did not atone, by its honey-making, for its sting; a full-blown rose did not absolve the sun for yellow fever and black vomit. It is probable that in secret Ursus criticized Providence a good deal. “Evidently,” he would say, “the devil works by a spring, and the wrong that God does is having let go the trigger.” He approved of none but princes, and he had his own peculiar way of expressing his approbation. One day, when James II. made a gift to the Virgin in a Catholic chapel in Ireland of a massive gold lamp, Ursus, passing that way with Homo, who was more indifferent to such things, broke out in admiration before the crowd, and exclaimed, “It is certain that the blessed Virgin wants a lamp much more than these barefooted children there require shoes.”

Such proofs of his loyalty, and such evidences of his respect for established powers, probably contributed in no small degree to make the magistrates tolerate his vagabond life and his low alliance with a wolf. Sometimes of an evening, through the weakness of friendship, he allowed Homo to stretch his limbs and wander at liberty about the caravan. The wolf was incapable of an abuse of confidence, and behaved in society, that is to say among men, with the discretion of a poodle. All the same, if bad-tempered officials had to be dealt with, difficulties might have arisen; so Ursus kept the honest wolf chained up as much as possible.

From a political point of view, his writing about gold, not very intelligible in itself, and now become undecipherable, was but a smear, and gave no handle to the enemy. Even after the time of James II., and under the “respectable” reign of William and Mary, his caravan might have been seen peacefully going its rounds of the little English country towns. He travelled freely from one end of Great Britain to the other, selling his philtres and phials, and sustaining, with the assistance of his wolf, his quack mummeries; and he passed with ease through the meshes of the nets which the police at that period had spread all over England in order to sift wandering gangs, and especially to stop the progress of the Comprachicos.

This was right enough. Ursus belonged to no gang. Ursus lived with Ursus, a *tête-à-tête*, into which the wolf gently thrust his nose. If Ursus could have had his way, he would have been a Caribbee; that being impossible, he preferred to be alone. The solitary man is a modified savage, accepted by civilization. He who wanders most is most alone; hence his continual change of place. To remain anywhere long suffocated him with the sense of being tamed. He passed his life in passing on his way. The sight of towns increased his taste for brambles, thickets, thorns, and holes in the rock. His home was the forest. He did not feel himself much out of his element in the murmur of crowded streets, which is like enough to the bluster of trees. The crowd to some extent satisfies our taste for the desert. What he disliked in his van was its having a door and windows, and thus resembling a house. He would have realized his ideal, had he been able to put a cave on four wheels and travel in a den.

He did not smile, as we have already said, but he used to laugh; sometimes, indeed frequently, a bitter laugh. There is consent in a smile, while a laugh is often a refusal.

His great business was to hate the human race. He was implacable in that hate. Having made it clear that human life is a dreadful thing; having observed the superposition of evils, kings on the people, war on kings, the plague on war, famine on the plague, folly on everything; having proved a certain measure of chastisement in the mere fact of existence; having recognized that, death is a deliverance — when they brought him a sick man he cured him; he had cordials and beverages to prolong the lives of the old. He put lame cripples on their legs again, and hurled this sarcasm at them, “There, you are on your paws once more; may you walk long in this valley of tears!” When he saw a poor man dying of hunger, he gave him all the pence he had about him, growling out, “Live on, you wretch! eat! last a long time! It is not I who would shorten your penal servitude.” After which, he would rub his hands and say, “I do men all the harm I can.”

Through the little window at the back, passers-by could read on the ceiling of the van these words, written within, but visible from without, inscribed with charcoal, in big letters, —

URSUS, PHILOSOPHER.

ANOTHER PRELIMINARY CHAPTER.

THE COMPRACHICOS.

I.

Who now knows the word Comprachicos, and who knows its meaning?

The Comprachicos, or Comprapequeños, were a hideous and nondescript association of wanderers, famous in the 17th century, forgotten in the 18th, unheard of in the 19th. The Comprachicos are like the “succession powder,” an ancient social characteristic detail. They are part of old human ugliness. To the great eye of history, which sees everything collectively, the Comprachicos belong to the colossal fact of slavery. Joseph sold by his brethren is a chapter in their story. The Comprachicos have left their traces in the penal laws of Spain and England. You find here and there in the dark confusion of English laws the impress of this horrible truth, like the footprint of a savage in a forest.

Comprachicos, the same as Comprapequeños, is a compound Spanish word signifying Child-buyers.

The Comprachicos traded in children. They bought and sold them. They did not steal them. The kidnapping of children is another branch of industry. And what did they make of these children?

Monsters.

Why monsters?

To laugh at.

The populace must needs laugh, and kings too. The mountebank is wanted in the streets, the jester at the Louvre. The one is called a Clown, the other a Fool.

The efforts of man to procure himself pleasure are at times worthy of the attention of the philosopher.

What are we sketching in these few preliminary pages? A chapter in the most terrible of books; a book which might be entitled — *The farming of the unhappy by the happy*.

II.

A child destined to be a plaything for men — such a thing has existed; such a thing exists even now. In simple and savage times such a thing constituted an especial trade. The 17th century, called the great century, was of those times. It was a century very Byzantine in tone. It combined corrupt simplicity with delicate ferocity — a curious variety of civilization. A tiger with a simper. Madame de Sevigné minces on the subject of the fagot and the wheel. That century traded a good deal in children. Flattering historians have concealed the sore, but have divulged the remedy, Vincent de Paul.

In order that a human toy should succeed, he must be taken early. The dwarf must be fashioned when young. We play with childhood. But a well-formed child is not very amusing; a hunchback is better fun.

Hence grew an art. There were trainers who took a man and made him an abortion; they took a face and made a muzzle; they stunted growth; they kneaded the features. The artificial production of teratological cases had its rules. It was quite a science — what one can imagine as the antithesis of orthopedy. Where God had put a look, their art put a squint; where God had made harmony, they made discord; where God had made the perfect picture, they re-established the sketch; and, in the eyes of connoisseurs, it was the sketch which was perfect. They debased animals as well; they invented piebald horses. Turenne rode a piebald horse. In our own days do they not dye dogs blue and green? Nature is our canvas. Man has always wished to add something to God’s work. Man retouches creation, sometimes for better, sometimes for worse. The Court buffoon was nothing but an attempt to lead back man to the monkey. It was a progress the wrong way. A masterpiece in retrogression. At the same time they tried to make a man of the monkey. Barbara, Duchess of Cleveland and Countess of Southampton, had a marmoset for a page. Frances Sutton, Baroness Dudley, eighth peeress in the bench of barons, had tea served by a baboon clad in cold brocade, which her ladyship called My Black. Catherine Sedley, Countess of Dorchester, used to go and take her seat in Parliament in a coach with armorial bearings, behind which stood, their muzzles stuck up in the air, three Cape monkeys in grand livery. A Duchess of Medina-Celi, whose toilet Cardinal Pole witnessed, had her stockings put on by an orang-outang. These monkeys raised in the scale were a counterpoise to men brutalized and bestialized. This promiscuousness of man and beast, desired by the great, was especially prominent in the case of the dwarf and the dog. The dwarf never quitted the dog, which was always bigger than himself.

The dog was the pair of the dwarf; it was as if they were coupled with a collar. This juxtaposition is authenticated by a mass of domestic records — notably by the portrait of Jeffrey Hudson, dwarf of Henrietta of France, daughter of Henri IV., and wife of Charles I.

To degrade man tends to deform him. The suppression of his state was completed by disfigurement. Certain vivisectors of that period succeeded marvellously well in effacing from the human face the divine effigy. Doctor Conquest, member of the Amen Street College, and judicial visitor of the chemists' shops of London, wrote a book in Latin on this pseudo-surgery, the processes of which he describes. If we are to believe Justus of Carrickfergus, the inventor of this branch of surgery was a monk named Avonmore — an Irish word signifying Great River.

The dwarf of the Elector Palatine, Perkeo, whose effigy — or ghost — springs from a magical box in the cave of Heidelberg, was a remarkable specimen of this science, very varied in its applications. It fashioned beings the law of whose existence was hideously simple: it permitted them to suffer, and commanded them to amuse.

III.

The manufacture of monsters was practised on a large scale, and comprised various branches.

The Sultan required them, so did the Pope; the one to guard his women, the other to say his prayers. These were of a peculiar kind, incapable of reproduction. Scarcely human beings, they were useful to voluptuousness and to religion. The seraglio and the Sistine Chapel utilized the same species of monsters; fierce in the former case, mild in the latter.

They knew how to produce things in those days which are not produced now; they had talents which we lack, and it is not without reason that some good folk cry out that the decline has come. We no longer know how to sculpture living human flesh; this is consequent on the loss of the art of torture. Men were once virtuosi in that respect, but are so no longer; the art has become so simplified that it will soon disappear altogether. In cutting the limbs of living men, in opening their bellies and in dragging out their entrails, phenomena were grasped on the moment and discoveries made. We are obliged to renounce these experiments now, and are thus deprived of the progress which surgery made by aid of the executioner.

The vivisection of former days was not limited to the manufacture of phenomena for the market-place, of buffoons for the palace (a species of augmentative of the courtier), and eunuchs for sultans and popes. It abounded in varieties. One of its triumphs was the manufacture of cocks for the king of England.

It was the custom, in the palace of the kings of England, to have a sort of watchman, who crowed like a cock. This watcher, awake while all others slept, ranged the palace, and raised from hour to hour the cry of the farmyard, repeating it as often as was necessary, and thus supplying a clock. This man, promoted to be cock, had in childhood undergone the operation of the pharynx, which was part of the art described by Dr. Conquest. Under Charles II. the salivation inseparable to the operation having disgusted the Duchess of Portsmouth, the appointment was indeed preserved, so that the splendour of the crown should not be tarnished, but they got an unmutilated man to represent the cock. A retired officer was generally selected for this honourable employment. Under James II. the functionary was named William Sampson, Cock, and received for his crow £9, 2s. 6d. annually.

The memoirs of Catherine II. inform us that at St. Petersburg, scarcely a hundred years since, whenever the czar or czarina was displeased with a Russian prince, he was forced to squat down in the great antechamber of the palace, and to remain in that posture a certain number of days, mewing like a cat, or clucking like a sitting hen, and pecking his food from the floor.

These fashions have passed away; but not so much, perhaps, as one might imagine. Nowadays, courtiers slightly modify their intonation in clucking to please their masters. More than one picks up from the ground — we will not say from the mud — what he eats.

It is very fortunate that kings cannot err. Hence their contradictions never perplex us. In approving always, one is sure to be always right — which is pleasant. Louis XIV. would not have liked to see at Versailles either an officer acting the cock, or a prince acting the turkey. That which raised the royal and imperial dignity in England and Russia would have seemed to Louis the Great incompatible with the crown of St. Louis. We know what his displeasure was when Madame Henriette forgot herself so far as to see a hen in a dream — which was, indeed, a grave breach of good manners in a lady of the court. When one is of the court, one should not dream of the courtyard. Bossuet, it may be remembered, was nearly as scandalized as Louis XIV.

IV.

The commerce in children in the 17th century, as we have explained, was connected with a trade. The Comprachicos engaged in the commerce, and carried on the trade. They bought children, worked a little on the raw material, and resold them afterwards.

The venders were of all kinds: from the wretched father, getting rid of his family, to the master, utilizing his stud of slaves. The sale of men was a simple matter. In our own time we have had fighting to maintain this right. Remember that it is less than a century ago since the Elector of Hesse sold his subjects to the King of England, who required men to be killed in America. Kings went to the Elector of Hesse as we go to the butcher to buy meat. The Elector had food for powder in stock, and hung up his subjects in his shop. Come buy; it is for sale. In England, under Jeffreys, after the tragical episode of Monmouth, there were many lords and gentlemen beheaded and quartered. Those who were executed left wives and daughters, widows and orphans, whom James II. gave to the queen, his wife. The queen sold these ladies to William Penn. Very likely the king had so much per cent. on the transaction. The extraordinary thing is, not that James II. should have sold the women, but that William Penn should have bought them. Penn's purchase is excused, or explained, by the fact that having a desert to sow with men, he needed women as farming implements.

Her Gracious Majesty made a good business out of these ladies. The young sold dear. We may imagine, with the uneasy feeling which a complicated scandal arouses, that probably some old duchesses were thrown in cheap.

The Comprachicos were also called the Cheylas, a Hindu word, which conveys the image of harrying a nest.

For a long time the Comprachicos only partially concealed themselves. There is sometimes in the social order a favouring shadow thrown over iniquitous trades, in which they thrive. In our own day we have seen an association of the kind in Spain, under the direction of the ruffian Ramon Selles, last from 1834 to 1866, and hold three provinces under terror for thirty years — Valencia, Alicante, and Murcia.

Under the Stuarts, the Comprachicos were by no means in bad odour at court. On occasions they were used for reasons of state. For James II. they were almost an *instrumentum regni*. It was a time when families, which were refractory or in the way, were dismembered; when a descent was cut short; when heirs were suddenly suppressed. At times one branch was defrauded to the profit of another. The Comprachicos had a genius for disfiguration which recommended them to state policy. To disfigure is better than to kill. There was, indeed, the Iron Mask, but that was a mighty measure. Europe could not be peopled with iron masks, while deformed tumblers ran about the streets without creating any surprise. Besides, the iron mask is removable; not so the mask of flesh. You are masked for ever by your own flesh — what can be more ingenious? The Comprachicos worked on man as the Chinese work on trees. They had their secrets, as we have said; they had tricks which are now lost arts. A sort of fantastic stunted thing left their hands; it was ridiculous and wonderful. They would touch up a little being with such skill that its father could not have known it. *Et que méconnaîtrait l'oeil même de son père*, as Racine says in bad French. Sometimes they left the spine straight and remade the face. They unmarked a child as one might unmark a pocket-handkerchief. Products, destined for tumblers, had their joints dislocated in a masterly manner — you would have said they had been boned. Thus gymnasts were made.

Not only did the Comprachicos take away his face from the child, they also took away his memory. At least they took away all they could of it; the child had no consciousness of the mutilation to which he had been subjected. This frightful surgery left its traces on his countenance, but not on his mind. The most he could recall was that one day he had been seized by men, that next he had fallen asleep, and then that he had been cured. Cured of what? He did not know. Of burnings by sulphur and incisions by the iron he remembered nothing. The Comprachicos deadened the little patient by means of a stupefying powder which was thought to be magical, and suppressed all pain. This powder has been known from time immemorial in China, and is still employed there in the present day. The Chinese have been beforehand with us in all our inventions — printing, artillery, aerostation, chloroform. Only the discovery which in Europe at once takes life and birth, and becomes a prodigy and a wonder, remains a chrysalis in China, and is preserved in a deathlike state. China is a museum of embryos.

Since we are in China, let us remain there a moment to note a peculiarity. In China, from time immemorial, they have possessed a certain refinement of industry and art. It is the art of moulding a living man. They take a child, two or three years old, put him in a porcelain vase, more or less grotesque, which is made without top or bottom, to allow egress for the head and feet. During the day the vase is set upright, and at night is laid down to allow the child to sleep. Thus the child thickens without growing taller, filling up with his compressed flesh and distorted bones the reliefs in the vase. This development in a bottle continues many years. After a certain time it becomes irreparable. When they consider that this is accomplished, and the monster made, they break the vase. The child comes out — and, behold, there is a man in the shape of a mug!

This is convenient: by ordering your dwarf betimes you are able to have it of any shape you wish.

V.

James II. tolerated the Comprachicos for the good reason that he made use of them; at least it happened that he did so more than once. We do not always disdain to use what we despise. This low trade, an excellent expedient sometimes for the higher one which is called state policy, was willingly left in a miserable state, but was not persecuted. There was no surveillance, but a certain amount of attention. Thus much might be useful — the law closed one eye, the king opened the other.

Sometimes the king went so far as to avow his complicity. These are audacities of monarchical terrorism. The disfigured one was marked with the fleur-de-lis; they took from him the mark of God; they put on him the mark of the king. Jacob Astley, knight and baronet, lord of Melton Constable, in the county of Norfolk, had in his family a child who had been sold, and upon whose forehead the dealer had imprinted a fleur-de-lis with a hot iron. In certain cases in which it was held desirable to register for some reason the royal origin of the new position made for the child, they used such means. England has always done us the honour to utilize, for her personal service, the fleur-de-lis.

The Comprachicos, allowing for the shade which divides a trade from a fanaticism, were analogous to the Stranglers of India. They lived among themselves in gangs, and to facilitate their progress, affected somewhat of the merry-andrew. They encamped here and there, but they were grave and religious, bearing no affinity to other nomads, and incapable of theft. The people for a long time wrongly confounded them with the Moors of Spain and the Moors of China. The Moors of Spain were coiners, the Moors of China were thieves. There was nothing of the sort about the Comprachicos; they were honest folk. Whatever you may think of them, they were sometimes sincerely scrupulous. They pushed open a door, entered, bargained for a child, paid, and departed. All was done with propriety.

They were of all countries. Under the name of Comprachicos fraternized English, French, Castilians, Germans, Italians. A unity of idea, a unity of superstition, the pursuit of the same calling, make such fusions. In this fraternity of vagabonds, those of the Mediterranean seaboard represented the East, those of the Atlantic seaboard the West. Many Basques conversed with many Irishmen. The Basque and the Irishman understand each other — they speak the old Punic jargon; add to this the intimate relations of Catholic Ireland with Catholic Spain — relations such that they terminated by bringing to the gallows in London one almost King of Ireland, the Celtic Lord de Brany; from which resulted the conquest of the county of Leitrim.

The Comprachicos were rather a fellowship than a tribe; rather a residuum than a fellowship. It was all the riffraff of the universe, having for their trade a crime. It was a sort of harlequin people, all composed of rags. To recruit a man was to sew on a tatter.

To wander was the Comprachicos' law of existence — to appear and disappear. What is barely tolerated cannot take root. Even in the kingdoms where their business supplied the courts, and, on occasions, served as an auxiliary to the royal power, they were now and then suddenly ill-treated. Kings made use of their art, and sent the artists to the galleys. These inconsistencies belong to the ebb and flow of royal caprice. "For such is our pleasure."

A rolling stone and a roving trade gather no moss. The Comprachicos were poor. They might have said what the lean and ragged witch observed, when she saw them setting fire to the stake, "Le jeu n'en vaut pas la chandelle." It is possible, nay probable (their chiefs remaining unknown), that the wholesale contractors in the trade were rich. After the lapse of two centuries, it would be difficult to throw any light on this point.

It was, as we have said, a fellowship. It had its laws, its oaths, its formulæ — it had almost its cabala. Any one nowadays wishing to know all about the Comprachicos need only go into Biscaya or Galicia; there were many Basques among them, and it is in those mountains that one hears their history. To this day the Comprachicos are spoken of at Oyarzun, at Urbistondo, at Leso, at Astigarraga. *Aguardate niño, que voy a llamar al Comprachicos* — Take care, child, or I'll call the Comprachicos — is the cry with which mothers frighten their children in that country.

The Comprachicos, like the Zigeuner and the Gipsies, had appointed places for periodical meetings. From time to time their leaders conferred together. In the seventeenth century they had four principal points of rendezvous: one in Spain — the pass of Pancorbo; one in Germany — the glade called the Wicked Woman, near Diekirsch, where there are two enigmatic bas-reliefs, representing a woman with a head and a man without one; one in France — the hill where was the colossal statue of Massue-la-Promesse in the old sacred wood of Borvo Tomona, near Bourbonne les Bains; one in England — behind the garden wall of William Challoner, Squire of Gisborough in Cleveland, Yorkshire, behind the square tower and the great wing which is entered by an arched door.

VI.

The laws against vagabonds have always been very rigorous in England. England, in her Gothic legislation, seemed to be inspired with this principle, *Homo errans fera errante pejor*. One of the special statutes classifies the man without a home as "more dangerous than the asp, dragon, lynx, or basilisk" (*atrocior aspide, dracone, lynce, et basilico*). For a long time England troubled herself as much concerning the gipsies, of whom she wished to be rid as about the wolves of which she had been cleared. In that the Englishman differed from the Irishman, who prayed to the saints for the health of the wolf, and called him "my godfather."

English law, nevertheless, in the same way as (we have just seen) it tolerated the wolf, tamed, domesticated, and become in some sort a dog, tolerated the regular vagabond, become in some sort a subject. It did not trouble itself about either the mountebank or the travelling barber, or the quack doctor, or the peddler, or the open-air scholar, as long as they had a trade to live by. Further than this, and with these exceptions, the description of freedom which exists in the wanderer terrified the law. A tramp was a possible public enemy. That modern thing, the lounger, was then unknown; that ancient thing, the vagrant, was alone understood. A suspicious appearance, that indescribable something which all understand and none can define, was sufficient reason that society should take a man by the collar. “Where do you live? How do you get your living?” And if he could not answer, harsh penalties awaited him. Iron and fire were in the code: the law practised the cauterization of vagrancy.

Hence, throughout English territory, a veritable “loi des suspects” was applicable to vagrants (who, it must be owned, readily became malefactors), and particularly to gipsies, whose expulsion has erroneously been compared to the expulsion of the Jews and the Moors from Spain, and the Protestants from France. As for us, we do not confound a battue with a persecution.

The Comprachicos, we insist, had nothing in common with the gipsies. The gipsies were a nation; the Comprachicos were a compound of all nations — the lees of a horrible vessel full of filthy waters. The Comprachicos had not, like the gipsies, an idiom of their own; their jargon was a promiscuous collection of idioms: all languages were mixed together in their language; they spoke a medley. Like the gipsies, they had come to be a people winding through the peoples; but their common tie was association, not race. At all epochs in history one finds in the vast liquid mass which constitutes humanity some of these streams of venomous men exuding poison around them. The gipsies were a tribe; the Comprachicos a freemasonry — a masonry having not a noble aim, but a hideous handicraft. Finally, their religions differ — the gipsies were Pagans, the Comprachicos were Christians, and more than that, good Christians, as became an association which, although a mixture of all nations, owed its birth to Spain, a devout land.

They were more than Christians, they were Catholics; they were more than Catholics, they were Romans, and so touchy in their faith, and so pure, that they refused to associate with the Hungarian nomads of the comitate of Pesth, commanded and led by an old man, having for sceptre a wand with a silver ball, surmounted by the double-headed Austrian eagle. It is true that these Hungarians were schismatics, to the extent of celebrating the Assumption on the 29th August, which is an abomination.

In England, so long as the Stuarts reigned, the confederation of the Comprachicos was (for motives of which we have already given you a glimpse) to a certain extent protected. James II., a devout man, who persecuted the Jews and trampled out the gipsies, was a good prince to the Comprachicos. We have seen why. The Comprachicos were buyers of the human wares in which he was dealer. They excelled in disappearances.

Disappearances are occasionally necessary for the good of the state. An inconvenient heir of tender age whom they took and handled lost his shape. This facilitated confiscation; the tranfer of titles to favourites was simplified. The Comprachicos were, moreover, very discreet and very taciturn. They bound themselves to silence, and kept their word, which is necessary in affairs of state. There was scarcely an example of their having betrayed the secrets of the king. This was, it is true, for their interest; and if the king had lost confidence in them, they would have been in great danger. They were thus of use in a political point of view. Moreover these artists furnished singers for the Holy Father. The Comprachicos were useful for the *Miserere* of Allegri. They were particularly devoted to Mary. All this pleased the papistry of the Stuarts. James II. could not be hostile to holy men who pushed their devotion to the Virgin to the extent of manufacturing eunuchs. In 1688 there was a change of dynasty in England: Orange supplanted Stuart. William III. replaced James II.

James II. went away to die in exile, miracles were performed on his tomb, and his relics cured the Bishop of Autun of fistula — a worthy recompense of the Christian virtues of the prince.

William, having neither the same ideas nor the same practices as James, was severe to the Comprachicos. He did his best to crush out the vermin.

A statute of the early part of William and Mary’s reign hit the association of child-buyers hard. It was as the blow of a club to the Comprachicos, who were from that time pulverized. By the terms of this statute those of the fellowship taken and duly convicted were to be branded with a red-hot iron, imprinting R. on the shoulder, signifying rogue; on the left hand T, signifying thief; and on the right hand M, signifying man-slayer. The chiefs, “supposed to be rich, although beggars in appearance,” were to be punished in the *collistrigium* — that is, the pillory — and branded on the forehead with a P, besides having their goods confiscated, and the trees in their woods rooted up. Those who did not inform against the Comprachicos were to be punished by confiscation and imprisonment for life, as for the crime of misprision. As for the women found among these men, they were to suffer the cucking-stool — this is a tumbrel, the name of which is composed of the French word *coquine,* and the German *stuhl*. English law being endowed with a strange longevity, this punishment still exists in English legislation for quarrelsome women. The cucking-stool is suspended over a river or a pond, the woman seated on it. The chair is allowed to drop into the water, and then pulled out. This dipping of the woman is repeated three times, “to cool her anger,” says the commentator, Chamberlayne.

PART I.

BOOK THE FIRST.

NIGHT NOT SO BLACK AS MAN.

CHAPTER I.

PORTLAND BILL.

An obstinate north wind blew without ceasing over the mainland of Europe, and yet more roughly over England, during all the month of December, 1689, and all the month of January, 1690. Hence the disastrous cold weather, which caused that winter to be noted as “memorable to the poor,” on the margin of the old Bible in the Presbyterian chapel of the Nonjurors in London. Thanks to the lasting qualities of the old monarchical parchment employed in official registers, long lists of poor persons, found dead of famine and cold, are still legible in many local repositories, particularly in the archives of the Liberty of the Clink, in the borough of Southwark, of Pie Powder Court (which signifies Dusty Feet Court), and in those of Whitechapel Court, held in the village of Stepney by the bailiff of the Lord of the Manor. The Thames was frozen over — a thing which does not happen once in a century, as the ice forms on it with difficulty owing to the action of the sea. Coaches rolled over the frozen river, and a fair was held with booths, bear-baiting, and bull-baiting. An ox was roasted whole on the ice. This thick ice lasted two months. The hard year 1690 surpassed in severity even the famous winters at the beginning of the seventeenth century, so minutely observed by Dr. Gideon Delane — the same who was, in his quality of apothecary to King James, honoured by the city of London with a bust and a pedestal.

One evening, towards the close of one of the most bitter days of the month of January, 1690, something unusual was going on in one of the numerous inhospitable bights of the bay of Portland, which caused the sea-gulls and wild geese to scream and circle round its mouth, not daring to re-enter.

In this creek, the most dangerous of all which line the bay during the continuance of certain winds, and consequently the most lonely — convenient, by reason of its very danger, for ships in hiding — a little vessel, almost touching the cliff, so deep was the water, was moored to a point of rock. We are wrong in saying, The night falls; we should say the night rises, for it is from the earth that obscurity comes. It was already night at the bottom of the cliff; it was still day at top. Any one approaching the vessel's moorings would have recognized a Biscayan hooker.

The sun, concealed all day by the mist, had just set. There was beginning to be felt that deep and sombrous melancholy which might be called anxiety for the absent sun. With no wind from the sea, the water of the creek was calm.

This was, especially in winter, a lucky exception. Almost all the Portland creeks have sand-bars; and in heavy weather the sea becomes very rough, and, to pass in safety, much skill and practice are necessary. These little ports (ports more in appearance than fact) are of small advantage. They are hazardous to enter, fearful to leave. On this evening, for a wonder, there was no danger.

The Biscay hooker is of an ancient model, now fallen into disuse. This kind of hooker, which has done service even in the navy, was stoutly built in its hull — a boat in size, a ship in strength. It figured in the Armada. Sometimes the war-hooker attained to a high tonnage; thus the Great Griffin, bearing a captain's flag, and commanded by Lopez de Medina, measured six hundred and fifty good tons, and carried forty guns. But the merchant and contraband hookers were very feeble specimens. Sea-folk held them at their true value, and esteemed the model a very sorry one, The rigging of the hooker was made of hemp, sometimes with wire inside, which was probably intended as a means, however unscientific, of obtaining indications, in the case of magnetic tension. The lightness of this rigging did not exclude the use of heavy tackle, the cabrias of the Spanish galleon, and the cameli of the Roman triremes. The helm was very long, which gives the advantage of a long arm of leverage, but the disadvantage of a small arc of effort. Two wheels in two pulleys at the end of the rudder corrected this defect, and compensated, to some extent, for the loss of strength. The compass was well housed in a case perfectly square, and well balanced by its two copper frames placed horizontally, one in the other, on little bolts, as in Cardan's lamps. There was science and cunning in the construction of the hooker, but it was ignorant science and barbarous cunning. The hooker was primitive, just like the praam and the canoe; was kindred to the praam in stability, and to the canoe in swiftness; and, like all vessels born of the instinct of the pirate and fisherman, it had remarkable sea qualities: it was equally well suited to landlocked and to open waters. Its system of sails, complicated in stays, and very peculiar, allowed of its navigating trimly in the close bays of Asturias (which are little more than enclosed basins, as Pasages, for instance), and also freely out at sea. It could sail round a lake, and sail round the world — a strange craft with two objects, good for a pond and good for a storm. The hooker is among vessels what the wagtail is among birds — one of the smallest and one of the boldest. The wagtail perching on a reed scarcely bends it, and, flying away, crosses the ocean.

These Biscay hookers, even to the poorest, were gilt and painted. Tattooing is part of the genius of those charming people, savages to some degree. The sublime colouring of their mountains, variegated by snows and meadows, reveals to them the rugged spell which ornament possesses in itself. They are poverty-stricken and magnificent; they put coats-of-arms on their cottages; they have huge asses, which they bedizen with bells, and huge oxen, on which they put head-dresses of feathers. Their coaches, which you can hear grinding the wheels two leagues off, are illuminated, carved, and hung with ribbons. A cobbler has a bas-relief on his door: it is only St. Crispin and an old shoe, but it is in stone. They trim their leathern jackets with lace. They do not mend their rags, but they embroider them. Vivacity profound and superb! The Basques are, like the Greeks, children of the sun; while the Valencian drapes himself, bare and sad, in his russet woollen rug, with a hole to pass his head through, the natives of Galicia and Biscay have the delight of fine linen shirts, bleached in the dew. Their thresholds and their windows teem with faces fair and fresh, laughing under garlands of maize; a joyous and proud serenity shines out in their ingenious arts, in their trades, in their customs, in the dress of their maidens, in their songs. The mountain, that colossal ruin, is all aglow in Biscay: the sun's rays go in and out of every break. The wild Jaïzquivel is full of idylls. Biscay is Pyrenean grace as Savoy is Alpine grace. The dangerous bays — the neighbours of St. Sebastian, Leso, and Fontarabia — with storms, with clouds, with spray flying over the capes, with the rages of the waves and the winds, with terror, with uproar, mingle boat-women crowned with roses. He who has seen the Basque country wishes to see it again. It is the blessed land. Two harvests a year; villages resonant and gay; a stately poverty; all Sunday the sound of guitars, dancing, castanets, love-making; houses clean and bright; storks in the belfries.

Let us return to Portland — that rugged mountain in the sea.

The peninsula of Portland, looked at geometrically, presents the appearance of a bird's head, of which the bill is turned towards the ocean, the back of the head towards Weymouth; the isthmus is its neck.

Portland, greatly to the sacrifice of its wildness, exists now but for trade. The coasts of Portland were discovered by quarrymen and plasterers towards the middle of the seventeenth century. Since that period what is called Roman cement has been made of the Portland stone — a useful industry, enriching the district, and disfiguring the bay. Two hundred years ago these coasts were eaten away as a cliff; to-day, as a quarry. The pick bites meanly, the wave grandly; hence a diminution of beauty. To the magnificent ravages of the ocean have succeeded the measured strokes of men. These measured strokes have worked away the creek where the Biscay hooker was moored. To find any vestige of the little anchorage, now destroyed, the eastern side of the peninsula should be searched, towards the point beyond Folly Pier and Dirdle Pier, beyond Wakeham even, between the place called Church Hope and the place called Southwell.

The creek, walled in on all sides by precipices higher than its width, was minute by minute becoming more overshadowed by evening. The misty gloom, usual at twilight, became thicker; it was like a growth of darkness at the bottom of a well. The opening of the creek seaward, a narrow passage, traced on the almost night-black interior a pallid rift where the waves were moving. You must have been quite close to perceive the hooker moored to the rocks, and, as it were, hidden by the great cloaks of shadow. A plank thrown from on board on to a low and level projection of the cliff, the only point on which a landing could be made, placed the vessel in communication with the land. Dark figures were crossing and recrossing each other on this tottering gangway, and in the shadow some people were embarking.

It was less cold in the creek than out at sea, thanks to the screen of rock rising over the north of the basin, which did not, however, prevent the people from shivering. They were hurrying. The effect of the twilight defined the forms as though they had been punched out with a tool. Certain indentations in their clothes were visible, and showed that they belonged to the class called in England the ragged.

The twisting of the pathway could be distinguished vaguely in the relief of the cliff. A girl who lets her stay-lace hang down trailing over the back of an armchair, describes, without being conscious of it, most of the paths of cliffs and mountains. The pathway of this creek, full of knots and angles, almost perpendicular, and better adapted for goats than men, terminated on the platform where the plank was placed. The pathways of cliffs ordinarily imply a not very inviting declivity; they offer themselves less as a road than as a fall; they sink rather than incline. This one — probably some ramification of a road on the plain above — was disagreeable to look at, so vertical was it. From underneath you saw it gain by zigzag the higher layer of the cliff where it passed out through deep passages on to the high plateau by a cutting in the rock; and the passengers for whom the vessel was waiting in the creek must have come by this path.

Excepting the movement of embarkation which was being made in the creek, a movement visibly scared and uneasy, all around was solitude; no step, no noise, no breath was heard. At the other side of the roads, at the entrance of Ringstead Bay, you could just perceive a flotilla of shark-fishing boats, which were evidently out of their reckoning. These polar boats had been driven from Danish into English waters by the whims of the sea. Northerly winds play these tricks on fishermen. They had just taken refuge in the anchorage of Portland — a sign of bad weather expected and danger out at sea. They were engaged in casting anchor: the chief boat, placed in front after the old manner of Norwegian flotillas, all her rigging standing out in black, above the white level of the sea; and in front might be perceived the hook-iron, loaded with all kinds of hooks and harpoons, destined for the Greenland shark, the dogfish, and the spinous shark, as well as the nets to pick up the sunfish.

Except a few other craft, all swept into the same corner, the eye met nothing living on the vast horizon of Portland — not a house, not a ship. The coast in those days was not inhabited, and the roads, at that season, were not safe.

Whatever may have been the appearance of the weather, the beings who were going to sail away in the Biscayan urca pressed on the hour of departure all the same. They formed a busy and confused group, in rapid movement on the shore. To distinguish one from another was difficult; impossible to tell whether they were old or young. The indistinctness of evening intermixed and blurred them; the mask of shadow was over their faces. They were sketches in the night. There were eight of them, and there were seemingly among them one or two women, hard to recognize under the rags and tatters in which the group was attired — clothes which were no longer man’s or woman’s. Rags have no sex.

A smaller shadow, flitting to and fro among the larger ones, indicated either a dwarf or a child.

It was a child.

CHAPTER II.

LEFT ALONE.

This is what an observer close at hand might have noted.

All wore long cloaks, torn and patched, but covering them, and at need concealing them up to the eyes; useful alike against the north wind and curiosity. They moved with ease under these cloaks. The greater number wore a handkerchief rolled round the head — a sort of rudiment which marks the commencement of the turban in Spain. This headdress was nothing unusual in England. At that time the South was in fashion in the North; perhaps this was connected with the fact that the North was beating the South. It conquered and admired. After the defeat of the Armada, Castilian was considered in the halls of Elizabeth to be elegant court talk. To speak English in the palace of the Queen of England was held almost an impropriety. Partially to adopt the manners of those upon whom we impose our laws is the habit of the conquering barbarian towards conquered civilization. The Tartar contemplates and imitates the Chinese. It was thus Castilian fashions penetrated into England; in return, English interests crept into Spain.

One of the men in the group embarking appeared to be a chief. He had sandals on his feet, and was bedizened with gold lace tatters and a tinsel waistcoat, shining under his cloak like the belly of a fish. Another pulled down over his face a huge piece of felt, cut like a sombrero; this felt had no hole for a pipe, thus indicating the wearer to be a man of letters.

On the principle that a man’s vest is a child’s cloak, the child was wrapped over his rags in a sailor’s jacket, which descended to his knees.

By his height you would have guessed him to be a boy of ten or eleven; his feet were bare.

The crew of the hooker was composed of a captain and two sailors.

The hooker had apparently come from Spain, and was about to return thither. She was beyond a doubt engaged in a stealthy service from one coast to the other.

The persons embarking in her whispered among themselves.

The whispering interchanged by these creatures was of composite sound — now a word of Spanish, then of German, then of French, then of Gaelic, at times of Basque. It was either a patois or a slang. They appeared to be of all nations, and yet of the same band.

The motley group appeared to be a company of comrades, perhaps a gang of accomplices.

The crew was probably of their brotherhood. Community of object was visible in the embarkation.

Had there been a little more light, and if you could have looked at them attentively, you might have perceived on these people rosaries and scapulars half hidden under their rags; one of the semi-women mingling in the group had a rosary almost equal for the size of its beads to that of a dervish, and easy to recognize for an Irish one made at Llanymthefry, which is also called Llanandriffy.

You might also have observed, had it not been so dark, a figure of Our Lady and Child carved and gilt on the bow of the hooker. It was probably that of the Basque Notre Dame, a sort of Panagia of the old Cantabri. Under this image, which occupied the position of a figurehead, was a lantern, which at this moment was not lighted — an excess of caution which implied an extreme desire of concealment. This lantern was evidently for two purposes. When alight it burned before the Virgin, and at the same time illumined the sea — a beacon doing duty as a taper.

Under the bowsprit the cutwater, long, curved, and sharp, came out in front like the horn of a crescent. At the top of the cutwater, and at the feet of the Virgin, a kneeling angel, with folded wings, leaned her back against the stem, and looked through a spyglass at the horizon. The angel was gilded like Our Lady. In the cutwater were holes and openings to let the waves pass through, which afforded an opportunity for gilding and arabesques.

Under the figure of the Virgin was written, in gilt capitals, the word *Matutina* — the name of the vessel, not to be read just now on account of the darkness.

Amid the confusion of departure there were thrown down in disorder, at the foot of the cliff, the goods which the voyagers were to take with them, and which, by means of a plank serving as a bridge across, were being passed rapidly from the shore to the boat. Bags of biscuit, a cask of stock fish, a case of portable soup, three barrels — one of fresh water, one of malt, one of tar — four or five bottles of ale, an old portmanteau buckled up by straps, trunks, boxes, a ball of tow for torches and signals — such was the lading. These ragged people had valises, which seemed to indicate a roving life. Wandering rascals are obliged to own something; at times they would prefer to fly away like birds, but they cannot do so without abandoning the means of earning a livelihood. They of necessity possess boxes of tools and instruments of labour, whatever their errant trade may be. Those of whom we speak were dragging their baggage with them, often an encumbrance.

It could not have been easy to bring these movables to the bottom of the cliff. This, however, revealed the intention of a definite departure.

No time was lost; there was one continued passing to and fro from the shore to the vessel, and from the vessel to the shore; each one took his share of the work — one carried a bag, another a chest. Those amidst the promiscuous company who were possibly or probably women worked like the rest. They overloaded the child.

It was doubtful if the child’s father or mother were in the group; no sign of life was vouchsafed him. They made him work, nothing more. He appeared not a child in a family, but a slave in a tribe. He waited on every one, and no one spoke to him.

However, he made haste, and, like the others of this mysterious troop, he seemed to have but one thought — to embark as quickly as possible. Did he know why? probably not: he hurried mechanically because he saw the others hurry.

The hooker was decked. The stowing of the lading in the hold was quickly finished, and the moment to put off arrived. The last case had been carried over the gangway, and nothing was left to embark but the men. The two objects among the group who seemed women were already on board; six, the child among them, were still on the low platform of the cliff. A movement of departure was made in the vessel: the captain seized the helm, a sailor took up an axe to cut the hawser — to cut is an evidence of haste; when there is time it is unknotted.

“Andamos,” said, in a low voice, he who appeared chief of the six, and who had the spangles on his tatters. The child rushed towards the plank in order to be the first to pass. As he placed his foot on it, two of the men hurried by, at the risk of throwing him into the water, got in before him, and passed on; the fourth drove him back with his fist and followed the third; the fifth, who was the chief, bounded into rather than entered the vessel, and, as he jumped in, kicked back the plank, which fell into the sea, a stroke of the hatchet cut the moorings, the helm was put up, the vessel left the shore, and the child remained on land.

CHAPTER III.

ALONE.

The child remained motionless on the rock, with his eyes fixed — no calling out, no appeal. Though this was unexpected by him, he spoke not a word. The same silence reigned in the vessel. No cry from the child to the men — no farewell from the men to the child. There was on both sides a mute acceptance of the widening distance between them. It was like a separation of ghosts on the banks of the Styx. The child, as if nailed to the rock, which the high tide was beginning to bathe, watched the departing bark. It seemed as if he realized his position. What did he realize? Darkness.

A moment later the hooker gained the neck of the crook and entered it. Against the clear sky the masthead was visible, rising above the split blocks between which the strait wound as between two walls. The truck wandered to the summit of the rocks, and appeared to run into them. Then it was seen no more — all was over — the bark had gained the sea.

The child watched its disappearance — he was astounded but dreamy. His stupefaction was complicated by a sense of the dark reality of existence. It seemed as if there were experience in this dawning being. Did he, perchance, already exercise judgment? Experience coming too early constructs, sometimes, in the obscure depths of a child’s mind, some dangerous balance — we know not what — in which the poor little soul weighs God.

Feeling himself innocent, he yielded. There was no complaint — the irreproachable does not reproach.

His rough expulsion drew from him no sign; he suffered a sort of internal stiffening. The child did not bow under this sudden blow of fate, which seemed to put an end to his existence ere it had well begun; he received the thunderstroke standing.

It would have been evident to any one who could have seen his astonishment unmixed with dejection, that in the group which abandoned him there was nothing which loved him, nothing which he loved.

Brooding, he forgot the cold. Suddenly the wave wetted his feet — the tide was flowing; a gust passed through his hair — the north wind was rising. He shivered. There came over him, from head to foot, the shudder of awakening.

He cast his eyes about him.

He was alone.

Up to this day there had never existed for him any other men than those who were now in the hooker. Those men had just stolen away.

Let us add what seems a strange thing to state. Those men, the only ones he knew, were unknown to him.

He could not have said who they were. His childhood had been passed among them, without his having the consciousness of being of them. He was in juxtaposition to them, nothing more.

He had just been — forgotten — by them.

He had no money about him, no shoes to his feet, scarcely a garment to his body, not even a piece of bread in his pocket.

It was winter — it was night. It would be necessary to walk several leagues before a human habitation could be reached.

He did not know where he was.

He knew nothing, unless it was that those who had come with him to the brink of the sea had gone away without him.

He felt himself put outside the pale of life.

He felt that man failed him.

He was ten years old.

The child was in a desert, between depths where he saw the night rising and depths where he heard the waves murmur.

He stretched his little thin arms and yawned.

Then suddenly, as one who makes up his mind, bold, and throwing off his numbness — with the agility of a squirrel, or perhaps of an acrobat — he turned his back on the creek, and set himself to climb up the cliff. He escaladed the path, left it, returned to it, quick and venturous. He was hurrying landward, just as though he had a destination marked out; nevertheless he was going nowhere.

He hastened without an object — a fugitive before Fate.

To climb is the function of a man; to clamber is that of an animal — he did both. As the slopes of Portland face southward, there was scarcely any snow on the path; the intensity of cold had, however, frozen that snow into dust very troublesome to the walker. The child freed himself of it. His man’s jacket, which was too big for him, complicated matters, and got in his way. Now and then on an overhanging crag or in a declivity he came upon a little ice, which caused him to slip down. Then, after hanging some moments over the precipice, he would catch hold of a dry branch or projecting stone. Once he came on a vein of slate, which suddenly gave way under him, letting him down with it. Crumbling slate is treacherous. For some seconds the child slid like a tile on a roof; he rolled to the extreme edge of the decline; a tuft of grass which he clutched at the right moment saved him. He was as mute in sight of the abyss as he had been in sight of the men; he gathered himself up and re-ascended silently. The slope was steep; so he had to tack in ascending. The precipice grew in the darkness; the vertical rock had no ending. It receded before the child in the distance of its height. As the child ascended, so seemed the summit to ascend. While he clambered he looked up at the dark entablature placed like a barrier between heaven and him. At last he reached the top.

He jumped on the level ground, or rather landed, for he rose from the precipice.

Scarcely was he on the cliff when he began to shiver. He felt in his face that bite of the night, the north wind. The bitter north-wester was blowing; he tightened his rough sailor’s jacket about his chest.

It was a good coat, called in ship language a sou-’wester, because that sort of stuff allows little of the south-westerly rain to penetrate.

The child, having gained the tableland, stopped, placed his feet firmly on the frozen ground, and looked about him.

Behind him was the sea; in front the land; above, the sky — but a sky without stars; an opaque mist masked the zenith.

On reaching the summit of the rocky wall he found himself turned towards the land, and looked at it attentively. It lay before him as far as the sky-line, flat, frozen, and covered with snow. Some tufts of heather shivered in the wind. No roads were visible — nothing, not even a shepherd’s cot. Here and there pale spiral vortices might be seen, which were whirls of fine snow, snatched from the ground by the wind and blown away. Successive undulations of ground, become suddenly misty, rolled themselves into the horizon. The great dull plains were lost under the white fog. Deep silence. It spread like infinity, and was hush as the tomb.

The child turned again towards the sea.

The sea, like the land, was white — the one with snow, the other with foam. There is nothing so melancholy as the light produced by this double whiteness.

Certain lights of night are very clearly cut in their hardness; the sea was like steel, the cliff like ebony. From the height where the child was the bay of Portland appeared almost like a geographical map, pale, in a semicircle of hills. There was something dreamlike in that nocturnal landscape — a wan disc belted by a dark crescent. The moon sometimes has a similar appearance. From cape to cape, along the whole coast, not a single spark indicating a hearth with a fire, not a lighted window, not an inhabited house, was to be seen. As in heaven, so on earth — no light. Not a lamp below, not a star above. Here and there came sudden risings in the great expanse of waters in the gulf, as the wind disarranged and wrinkled the vast sheet. The hooker was still visible in the bay as she fled.

It was a black triangle gliding over the livid waters.

Far away the waste of waters stirred confusedly in the ominous clear-obscure of immensity. The *Matutina* was making quick way. She seemed to grow smaller every minute. Nothing appears so rapid as the flight of a vessel melting into the distance of ocean.

Suddenly she lit the lantern at her prow. Probably the darkness falling round her made those on board uneasy, and the pilot thought it necessary to throw light on the waves. This luminous point, a spark seen from afar, clung like a corpse light to the high and long black form. You would have said it was a shroud raised up and moving in the middle of the sea, under which some one wandered with a star in his hand.

A storm threatened in the air; the child took no account of it, but a sailor would have trembled. It was that moment of preliminary anxiety when it seems as though the elements are changing into persons, and one is about to witness the mysterious transfiguration of the wind into the wind-god. The sea becomes Ocean: its power reveals itself as Will: that which one takes for a thing is a soul. It will become visible; hence the terror. The soul of man fears to be thus confronted with the soul of nature.

Chaos was about to appear. The wind rolling back the fog, and making a stage of the clouds behind, set the scene for that fearful drama of wave and winter which is called a Snowstorm. Vessels putting back hove in sight. For some minutes past the roads had no longer been deserted. Every instant troubled barks hastening towards an anchorage appeared from behind the capes; some were doubling Portland Bill, the others St. Alban’s Head. From afar ships were running in. It was a race for refuge. Southwards the darkness thickened, and clouds, full of night, bordered on the sea. The weight of the tempest hanging overhead made a dreary lull on the waves. It certainly was no time to sail. Yet the hooker had sailed.

She had made the south of the cape. She was already out of the gulf, and in the open sea. Suddenly there came a gust of wind. The *Matutina*, which was still clearly in sight, made all sail, as if resolved to profit by the hurricane. It was the nor’-wester, a wind sullen and angry. Its weight was felt instantly. The hooker, caught broadside on, staggered, but recovering held her course to sea. This indicated a flight rather than a voyage, less fear of sea than of land, and greater heed of pursuit from man than from wind.

The hooker, passing through every degree of diminution, sank into the horizon. The little star which she carried into shadow paled. More and more the hooker became amalgamated with the night, then disappeared.

This time for good and all.

At least the child seemed to understand it so: he ceased to look at the sea. His eyes turned back upon the plains, the wastes, the hills, towards the space where it might not be impossible to meet something living.

Into this unknown he set out.

CHAPTER IV.

QUESTIONS.

What kind of band was it which had left the child behind in its flight?

Were those fugitives Comprachicos?

We have already seen the account of the measures taken by William III. and passed by Parliament against the malefactors, male and female, called Comprachicos, otherwise Comprapequeños, otherwise Cheylas.

There are laws which disperse. The law acting against the Comprachicos determined, not only the Comprachicos, but vagabonds of all sorts, on a general flight.

It was the devil take the hindmost. The greater number of the Comprachicos returned to Spain — many of them, as we have said, being Basques.

The law for the protection of children had at first this strange result: it caused many children to be abandoned.

The immediate effect of the penal statute was to produce a crowd of children, found or rather lost. Nothing is easier to understand. Every wandering gang containing a child was liable to suspicion. The mere fact of the child's presence was in itself a denunciation.

"They are very likely Comprachicos." Such was the first idea of the sheriff, of the bailiff, of the constable. Hence arrest and inquiry. People simply unfortunate, reduced to wander and to beg, were seized with a terror of being taken for Comprachicos although they were nothing of the kind. But the weak have grave misgivings of possible errors in justice. Besides, these vagabond families are very easily scared. The accusation against the Comprachicos was that they traded in other people's children. But the promiscuousness caused by poverty and indigence is such that at times it might have been difficult for a father and mother to prove a child their own.

How came you by this child? how were they to prove that they held it from God? The child became a peril — they got rid of it. To fly unencumbered was easier; the parents resolved to lose it — now in a wood, now on a strand, now down a well.

Children were found drowned in cisterns.

Let us add that, in imitation of England, all Europe henceforth hunted down the Comprachicos. The impulse of pursuit was given. There is nothing like belling the cat. From this time forward the desire to seize them made rivalry and emulation among the police of all countries, and the alguazil was not less keenly watchful than the constable.

One could still read, twenty-three years ago, on a stone of the gate of Otero, an untranslatable inscription — the words of the code outraging propriety. In it, however, the shade of difference which existed between the buyers and the stealers of children is very strongly marked. Here is part of the inscription in somewhat rough Castillan, *Aqui quedan las orejas de los Comprachicos, y las bolsas de los robaniños, mientras que se van ellos al trabajo de mar*. You see the confiscation of ears, etc., did not prevent the owners going to the galleys. Whence followed a general rout among all vagabonds. They started frightened; they arrived trembling. On every shore in Europe their furtive advent was watched. Impossible for such a band to embark with a child, since to disembark with one was dangerous.

To lose the child was much simpler of accomplishment.

And this child, of whom we have caught a glimpse in the shadow of the solitudes of Portland, by whom had he been cast away?

To all appearance by Comprachicos.

CHAPTER V.

THE TREE OF HUMAN INVENTION.

It might be about seven o’clock in the evening. The wind was now diminishing — a sign, however, of a violent recurrence impending. The child was on the table-land at the extreme south point of Portland.

Portland is a peninsula; but the child did not know what a peninsula is, and was ignorant even of the name of Portland. He knew but one thing, which is, that one can walk until one drops down. An idea is a guide; he had no idea. They had brought him there and left him there. *They* and *there* — these two enigmas represented his doom. *They* were humankind. *There* was the universe. For him in all creation there was absolutely no other basis to rest on but the little piece of ground where he placed his heel, ground hard and cold to his naked feet. In the great twilight world, open on all sides, what was there for the child? Nothing.

He walked towards this Nothing. Around him was the vastness of human desertion.

He crossed the first plateau diagonally, then a second, then a third. At the extremity of each plateau the child came upon a break in the ground. The slope was sometimes steep, but always short; the high, bare plains of Portland resemble great flagstones overlapping each other. The south side seems to enter under the protruding slab, the north side rises over the next one; these made ascents, which the child stepped over nimbly. From time to time he stopped, and seemed to hold counsel with himself. The night was becoming very dark. His radius of sight was contracting. He now only saw a few steps before him.

All of a sudden he stopped, listened for an instant, and with an almost imperceptible nod of satisfaction turned quickly and directed his steps towards an eminence of moderate height, which he dimly perceived on his right, at the point of the plain nearest the cliff. There was on the eminence a shape which in the mist looked like a tree. The child had just heard a noise in this direction, which was the noise neither of the wind nor of the sea, nor was it the cry of animals. He thought that some one was there, and in a few strides he was at the foot of the hillock.

In truth, some one was there.

That which had been indistinct on the top of the eminence was now visible. It was something like a great arm thrust straight out of the ground; at the upper extremity of the arm a sort of forefinger, supported from beneath, by the thumb, pointed out horizontally; the arm, the thumb, and the forefinger drew a square against the sky. At the point of juncture of this peculiar finger and this peculiar thumb there was a line, from which hung something black and shapeless. The line moving in the wind sounded like a chain. This was the noise the child had heard. Seen closely the line was that which the noise indicated, a chain — a single chain cable.

By that mysterious law of amalgamation which throughout nature causes appearances to exaggerate realities, the place, the hour, the mist, the mournful sea, the cloudy turmoils on the distant horizon, added to the effect of this figure, and made it seem enormous.

The mass linked to the chain presented the appearance of a scabbard. It was swaddled like a child and long like a man. There was a round thing at its summit, about which the end of the chain was rolled. The scabbard was riven asunder at the lower end, and shreds of flesh hung out between the rents.

A feeble breeze stirred the chain, and that which hung to it swayed gently. The passive mass obeyed the vague motions of space. It was an object to inspire indescribable dread. Horror, which disproportions everything, blurred its dimensions while retaining its shape. It was a condensation of darkness, which had a defined form. Night was above and within the spectre; it was a prey of ghastly exaggeration. Twilight and moonrise, stars setting behind the cliff, floating things in space, the clouds, winds from all quarters, had ended by penetrating into the composition of this visible nothing. The species of log hanging in the wind partook of the impersonality diffused far over sea and sky, and the darkness completed this phase of the *thing* which had once been a man.

It was that which is no longer.

To be naught but a remainder! Such a thing is beyond the power of language to express. To exist no more, yet to persist; to be in the abyss, yet out of it; to reappear above death as if indissoluble — there is a certain amount of impossibility mixed with such reality. Thence comes the inexpressible. This being — was it a being? This black witness was a remainder, and an awful remainder — a remainder of what? Of nature first, and then of society. Naught, and yet total.

The lawless inclemency of the weather held it at its will; the deep oblivion of solitude environed it; it was given up to unknown chances; it was without defence against the darkness, which did with it what it willed. It was for ever the patient; it submitted; the hurricane (that ghastly conflict of winds) was upon it.

The spectre was given over to pillage. It underwent the horrible outrage of rotting in the open air; it was an outlaw of the tomb. There was no peace for it even in annihilation: in the summer it fell away into dust, in the winter into mud. Death should be veiled, the grave should have its reserve. Here was neither veil nor reserve, but cynically avowed putrefaction. It is effrontery in death to display its work; it offends all the calmness of shadow when it does its task outside its laboratory, the grave.

This dead thing had been stripped. To strip one already stripped — relentless act! His marrow was no longer in his bones; his entrails were no longer in his body; his voice no longer in his throat. A corpse is a pocket which death turns inside out and empties. If he ever had a Me, where was the Me? There still, perchance, and this was fearful to think of. Something wandering about something in chains — can one imagine a more mournful lineament in the darkness?

Realities exist here below which serve as issues to the unknown, which seem to facilitate the egress of speculation, and at which hypothesis snatches. Conjecture has its *compelle intrare*. In passing by certain places and before certain objects one cannot help stopping — a prey to dreams into the realms of which the mind enters. In the invisible there are dark portals ajar. No one could have met this dead man without meditating.

In the vastness of dispersion he was wearing silently away. He had had blood which had been drunk, skin which had been eaten, flesh which had been stolen. Nothing had passed him by without taking somewhat from him. December had borrowed cold of him; midnight, horror; the iron, rust; the plague, miasma; the flowers, perfume. His slow disintegration was a toll paid to all — a toll of the corpse to the storm, to the rain, to the dew, to the reptiles, to the birds. All the dark hands of night had rifled the dead.

He was, indeed, an inexpressibly strange tenant, a tenant of the darkness. He was on a plain and on a hill, and *he was not*. He was palpable, yet vanished. He was a shadow accruing to the night. After the disappearance of day into the vast of silent obscurity, he became in lugubrious accord with all around him. By his mere presence he increased the gloom of the tempest and the calm of stars. The unutterable which is in the desert was condensed in him. Waif of an unknown fate, he commingled with all the wild secrets of the night. There was in his mystery a vague reverberation of all enigmas.

About him life seemed sinking to its lowest depths. Certainty and confidence appeared to diminish in his environs. The shiver of the brushwood and the grass, a desolate melancholy, an anxiety in which a conscience seemed to lurk, appropriated with tragic force the whole landscape to that black figure suspended by the chain. The presence of a spectre in the horizon is an aggravation of solitude.

He was a Sign. Having unappeasable winds around him, he was implacable. Perpetual shuddering made him terrible. Fearful to say, he seemed to be a centre in space, with something immense leaning on him. Who can tell? Perhaps that equity, half seen and set at defiance, which transcends human justice. There was in his unburied continuance the vengeance of men and his own vengeance. He was a testimony in the twilight and the waste. He was in himself a disquieting substance, since we tremble before the substance which is the ruined habitation of the soul. For dead matter to trouble us, it must once have been tenanted by spirit. He denounced the law of earth to the law of Heaven. Placed there by man, he there awaited God. Above him floated, blended with all the vague distortions of the cloud and the wave, boundless dreams of shadow.

Who could tell what sinister mysteries lurked behind this phantom? The illimitable, circumscribed by naught, nor tree, nor roof, nor passer-by, was around the dead man. When the unchangeable broods over us — when Heaven, the abyss, the life, grave, and eternity appear patent — then it is we feel that all is inaccessible, all is forbidden, all is sealed. When infinity opens to us, terrible indeed is the closing of the gate behind.

CHAPTER VI.

STRUGGLE BETWEEN DEATH AND LIFE.

The child was before this thing, dumb, wondering, and with eyes fixed. To a man it would have been a gibbet; to the child it was an apparition.

Where a man would have seen a corpse the child saw a spectre.

Besides, he did not understand.

The attractions of the obscure are manifold. There was one on the summit of that hill. The child took a step, then another; he ascended, wishing all the while to descend; and approached, wishing all the while to retreat.

Bold, yet trembling, he went close up to survey the spectre.

When he got close under the gibbet, he looked up and examined it.

The spectre was tarred; here and there it shone. The child distinguished the face. It was coated over with pitch; and this mask, which appeared viscous and sticky, varied its aspect with the night shadows. The child saw the mouth, which was a hole; the nose, which was a hole; the eyes, which were holes. The body was wrapped, and apparently corded up, in coarse canvas, soaked in naphtha. The canvas was mouldy and torn. A knee protruded through it. A rent disclosed the ribs — partly corpse, partly skeleton. The face was the colour of earth; slugs, wandering over it, had traced across it vague ribbons of silver. The canvas, glued to the bones, showed in reliefs like the robe of a statue. The skull, cracked and fractured, gaped like a rotten fruit. The teeth were still human, for they retained a laugh. The remains of a cry seemed to murmur in the open mouth. There were a few hairs of beard on the cheek. The inclined head had an air of attention.

Some repairs had recently been done; the face had been tarred afresh, as well as the ribs and the knee which protruded from the canvas. The feet hung out below.

Just underneath, in the grass, were two shoes, which snow and rain had rendered shapeless. These shoes had fallen from the dead man.

The barefooted child looked at the shoes.

The wind, which had become more and more restless, was now and then interrupted by those pauses which foretell the approach of a storm. For the last few minutes it had altogether ceased to blow. The corpse no longer stirred; the chain was as motionless as a plumb line.

Like all newcomers into life, and taking into account the peculiar influences of his fate, the child no doubt felt within him that awakening of ideas characteristic of early years, which endeavours to open the brain, and which resembles the pecking of the young bird in the egg. But all that there was in his little consciousness just then was resolved into stupor. Excess of sensation has the effect of too much oil, and ends by putting out thought. A man would have put himself questions; the child put himself none — he only looked.

The tar gave the face a wet appearance; drops of pitch, congealed in what had once been the eyes, produced the effect of tears. However, thanks to the pitch, the ravage of death, if not annulled, was visibly slackened and reduced to the least possible decay. That which was before the child was a thing of which care was taken: the man was evidently precious. They had not cared to keep him alive, but they cared to keep him dead.

The gibbet was old, worm-eaten, although strong, and had been in use many years.

It was an immemorial custom in England to tar smugglers. They were hanged on the seaboard, coated over with pitch and left swinging. Examples must be made in public, and tarred examples last longest. The tar was mercy: by renewing it they were spared making too many fresh examples. They placed gibbets from point to point along the coast, as nowadays they do beacons. The hanged man did duty as a lantern. After his fashion, he guided his comrades, the smugglers. The smugglers from far out at sea perceived the gibbets. There is one, first warning; another, second warning. It did not stop smuggling; but public order is made up of such things. The fashion lasted in England up to the beginning of this century. In 1822 three men were still to be seen hanging in front of Dover Castle. But, for that matter, the preserving process was employed not only with smugglers. England turned robbers, incendiaries, and murderers to the same account. Jack Painter, who set fire to the government storehouses at Portsmouth, was hanged and tarred in 1776. L’Abbé Coyer, who describes him as Jean le Peintre, saw him again in 1777. Jack Painter was hanging above the ruin he had made, and was re-tarred from time to time. His corpse lasted — I had almost said lived — nearly fourteen years. It was still doing good service in 1788; in 1790, however, they were obliged to replace it by another. The

Egyptians used to value the mummy of the king; a plebeian mummy can also, it appears, be of service.

The wind, having great power on the hill, had swept it of all its snow. Herbage reappeared on it, interspersed here and there with a few thistles; the hill was covered by that close short grass which grows by the sea, and causes the tops of cliffs to resemble green cloth. Under the gibbet, on the very spot over which hung the feet of the executed criminal, was a long and thick tuft, uncommon on such poor soil. Corpses, crumbling there for centuries past, accounted for the beauty of the grass. Earth feeds on man.

A dreary fascination held the child; he remained there open-mouthed. He only dropped his head a moment when a nettle, which felt like an insect, stung his leg; then he looked up again — he looked above him at the face which looked down on him. It appeared to regard him the more steadfastly because it had no eyes. It was a comprehensive glance, having an indescribable fixedness in which there were both light and darkness, and which emanated from the skull and teeth, as well as the empty arches of the brow. The whole head of a dead man seems to have vision, and this is awful. No eyeball, yet we feel that we are looked at. A horror of worms.

Little by little the child himself was becoming an object of terror. He no longer moved. Torpor was coming over him. He did not perceive that he was losing consciousness — he was becoming benumbed and lifeless. Winter was silently delivering him over to night. There is something of the traitor in winter. The child was all but a statue. The coldness of stone was penetrating his bones; darkness, that reptile, was crawling over him. The drowsiness resulting from snow creeps over a man like a dim tide. The child was being slowly invaded by a stagnation resembling that of the corpse. He was falling asleep.

On the hand of sleep is the finger of death. The child felt himself seized by that hand. He was on the point of falling under the gibbet. He no longer knew whether he was standing upright.

The end always impending, no transition between to be and not to be, the return into the crucible, the slip possible every minute — such is the precipice which is Creation.

Another instant, the child and the dead, life in sketch and life in ruin, would be confounded in the same obliteration.

The spectre appeared to understand, and not to wish it. Of a sudden it stirred. One would have said it was warning the child. It was the wind beginning to blow again. Nothing stranger than this dead man in movement.

The corpse at the end of the chain, pushed by the invisible gust, took an oblique attitude; rose to the left, then fell back, reascended to the right, and fell and rose with slow and mournful precision. A weird game of see-saw. It seemed as though one saw in the darkness the pendulum of the clock of Eternity.

This continued for some time. The child felt himself waking up at the sight of the dead; through his increasing numbness he experienced a distinct sense of fear.

The chain at every oscillation made a grinding sound, with hideous regularity. It appeared to take breath, and then to resume. This grinding was like the cry of a grasshopper.

An approaching squall is heralded by sudden gusts of wind. All at once the breeze increased into a gale. The corpse emphasized its dismal oscillations. It no longer swung, it tossed; the chain, which had been grinding, now shrieked. It appeared that its shriek was heard. If it was an appeal, it was obeyed. From the depths of the horizon came the sound of a rushing noise.

It was the noise of wings.

An incident occurred, a stormy incident, peculiar to graveyards and solitudes. It was the arrival of a flight of ravens. Black flying specks pricked the clouds, pierced through the mist, increased in size, came near, amalgamated, thickened, hastening towards the hill, uttering cries. It was like the approach of a Legion. The winged vermin of the darkness alighted on the gibbet; the child, scared, drew back.

Swarms obey words of command: the birds crowded on the gibbet; not one was on the corpse. They were talking among themselves. The croaking was frightful. The howl, the whistle and the roar, are signs of life; the croak is a satisfied acceptance of putrefaction. In it you can fancy you hear the tomb breaking silence. The croak is night-like in itself.

The child was frozen even more by terror than by cold.

Then the ravens held silence. One of them perched on the skeleton. This was a signal: they all precipitated themselves upon it. There was a cloud of wings, then all their feathers closed up, and the hanged man disappeared under a swarm of black blisters struggling in the obscurity. Just then the corpse moved. Was it the corpse? Was it the wind? It made a frightful bound. The hurricane, which was increasing, came to its aid. The phantom fell into convulsions.

The squall, already blowing with full lungs, laid hold of it, and moved it about in all directions.

It became horrible; it began to struggle. An awful puppet, with a gibbet chain for a string. Some humorist of night must have seized the string and been playing with the mummy. It turned and leapt as if it would fain dislocate itself; the birds, frightened, flew off. It was like an explosion of all those unclean creatures. Then they returned, and a struggle began.

The dead man seemed possessed with hideous vitality. The winds raised him as though they meant to carry him away. He seemed struggling and making efforts to escape, but his iron collar held him back. The birds adapted themselves to all his movements, retreating, then striking again, scared but desperate. On one side a strange flight was attempted, on the other the pursuit of a chained man. The corpse, impelled by every spasm of the wind, had shocks, starts, fits of rage: it went, it came, it rose, it fell, driving back the scattered swarm. The dead man was a club, the swarms were dust. The fierce, assailing flock would not leave their hold, and grew stubborn; the man, as if maddened by the cluster of beaks, redoubled his blind chastisement of space. It was like the blows of a stone held in a sling. At times the corpse was covered by talons and wings; then it was free. There were disappearances of the horde, then sudden furious returns — a frightful torment continuing after life was past. The birds seemed frenzied. The air-holes of hell must surely give passage to such swarms. Thrusting of claws, thrusting of beaks, croakings, rendings of shreds no longer flesh, creakings of the gibbet, shudderings of the skeleton, jingling of the chain, the voices of the storm and tumult — what conflict more fearful? A hobgoblin warring with devils! A combat with a spectre!

At times the storm redoubling its violence, the hanged man revolved on his own pivot, turning every way at once towards the swarm, as if he wished to run after the birds; his teeth seemed to try and bite them. The wind was for him, the chain against him. It was as if black deities were mixing themselves up in the fray. The hurricane was in the battle. As the dead man turned himself about, the flock of birds wound round him spirally. It was a whirl in a whirlwind. A great roar was heard from below. It was the sea.

The child saw this nightmare. Suddenly he trembled in all his limbs; a shiver thrilled his frame; he staggered, tottered, nearly fell, recovered himself, pressed both hands to his forehead, as if he felt his forehead a support; then, haggard, his hair streaming in the wind, descending the hill with long strides, his eyes closed, himself almost a phantom, he took flight, leaving behind that torment in the night.

CHAPTER VII.

THE NORTH POINT OF PORTLAND.

He ran until he was breathless, at random, desperate, over the plain into the snow, into space. His flight warmed him. He needed it. Without the run and the fright he had died.

When his breath failed him he stopped, but he dared not look back. He fancied that the birds would pursue him, that the dead man had undone his chain and was perhaps hurrying behind him, and no doubt the gibbet itself was descending the hill, running after the dead man; he feared to see these things if he turned his head.

When he had somewhat recovered his breath he resumed his flight.

To account for facts does not belong to childhood. He received impressions which were magnified by terror, but he did not link them together in his mind, nor form any conclusion on them. He was going on, no matter how or where; he ran in agony and difficulty as one in a dream. During the three hours or so since he had been deserted, his onward progress, still vague, had changed its purpose. At first it was a search; now it was a flight. He no longer felt hunger nor cold — he felt fear. One instinct had given place to another. To escape was now his whole thought — to escape from what? From everything. On all sides life seemed to enclose him like a horrible wall. If he could have fled from all things, he would have done so. But children know nothing of that breaking from prison which is called suicide. He was running. He ran on for an indefinite time; but fear dies with lack of breath.

All at once, as if seized by a sudden accession of energy and intelligence, he stopped. One would have said he was ashamed of running away. He drew himself up, stamped his foot, and, with head erect, looked round. There was no longer hill, nor gibbet, nor flights of crows. The fog had resumed possession of the horizon. The child pursued his way: he now no longer ran but walked. To say that meeting with a corpse had made a man of him would be to limit the manifold and confused impression which possessed him. There was in his impression much more and much less. The gibbet, a mighty trouble in the rudiment of comprehension, nascent in his mind, still seemed to him an apparition; but a trouble overcome is strength gained, and he felt himself stronger. Had he been of an age to probe self, he would have detected within him a thousand other germs of meditation; but the reflection of children is shapeless, and the utmost they feel is the bitter aftertaste of that which, obscure to them, the man later on calls indignation. Let us add that a child has the faculty of quickly accepting the conclusion of a sensation; the distant fading boundaries which amplify painful subjects escape him. A child is protected by the limit of feebleness against emotions which are too complex. He sees the fact, and little else beside. The difficulty of being satisfied by half-ideas does not exist for him. It is not until later that experience comes, with its brief, to conduct the lawsuit of life. *Then* he confronts groups of facts which have crossed his path; the understanding, cultivated and enlarged, draws comparisons; the memories of youth reappear under the passions, like the traces of a palimpsest under the erasure; these memories form the bases of logic, and that which was a vision in the child's brain becomes a syllogism in the man's. Experience is, however, various, and turns to good or evil according to natural disposition. With the good it ripens, with the bad it rots.

The child had run quite a quarter of a league, and walked another quarter, when suddenly he felt the craving of hunger. A thought which altogether eclipsed the hideous apparition on the hill occurred to him forcibly — that he must eat. Happily there is in man a brute which serves to lead him back to reality.

But what to eat, where to eat, how to eat?

He felt his pockets mechanically, well knowing that they were empty. Then he quickened his steps, without knowing whither he was going. He hastened towards a possible shelter. This faith in an inn is one of the convictions enrooted by God in man. To believe in a shelter is to believe in God.

However, in that plain of snow there was nothing like a roof. The child went on, and the waste continued bare as far as eye could see. There had never been a human habitation on the tableland. It was at the foot of the cliff, in holes in the rocks, that, lacking wood to build themselves huts, had dwelt long ago the aboriginal inhabitants, who had slings for arms, dried cow-dung for firing, for a god the idol Heil standing in a glade at Dorchester, and for trade the fishing of that false gray coral which the Gauls called *plin*, and the Greeks *isidis plocamos*.

The child found his way as best he could. Destiny is made up of cross-roads. An option of path is dangerous. This little being had an early choice of doubtful chances.

He continued to advance, but although the muscles of his thighs seemed to be of steel, he began to tire. There were no tracks in the plain; or if there were any, the snow had obliterated them. Instinctively he inclined eastwards. Sharp stones had wounded his heels. Had it been daylight pink stains made by his blood might have been seen in the footprints he left in the snow.

He recognized nothing. He was crossing the plain of Portland from south to north, and it is probable that the band with which he had come, to avoid meeting any one, had crossed it from east to west; they had most likely sailed in some fisherman's or smuggler's boat, from a point on the coast of Uggescombe, such as St. Catherine's Cape or Swancry, to Portland to find the hooker which awaited them; and they must have landed in one of the creeks of Weston, and re-embarked in one of those of Easton. That direction was intersected by the one the child was now following. It was impossible for him to recognize the road.

On the plain of Portland there are, here and there, raised strips of land, abruptly ended by the shore and cut perpendicular to the sea. The wandering child reached one of these culminating points and stopped on it, hoping that a larger space might reveal further indications. He tried to see around him. Before him, in place of a horizon, was a vast livid opacity. He looked at this attentively, and under the fixedness of his glance it became less indistinct. At the base of a distant fold of land towards the east, in the depths of that opaque lividity (a moving and wan sort of precipice, which resembled a cliff of the night), crept and floated some vague black rents, some dim shreds of vapour. The pale opacity was fog, the black shreds were smoke. Where there is smoke there are men. The child turned his steps in that direction.

He saw some distance off a descent, and at the foot of the descent, among shapeless conformations of rock, blurred by the mist, what seemed to be either a sandbank or a tongue of land, joining probably to the plains of the horizon the tableland he had just crossed. It was evident he must pass that way.

He had, in fact, arrived at the Isthmus of Portland, a diluvian alluvium which is called Chess Hill.

He began to descend the side of the plateau.

The descent was difficult and rough. It was (with less of ruggedness, however) the reverse of the ascent he had made on leaving the creek. Every ascent is balanced by a decline. After having clambered up he crawled down.

He leapt from one rock to another at the risk of a sprain, at the risk of falling into the vague depths below. To save himself when he slipped on the rock or on the ice, he caught hold of handfuls of weeds and furze, thick with thorns, and their points ran into his fingers. At times he came on an easier declivity, taking breath as he descended; then came on the precipice again, and each step necessitated an expedient. In descending precipices, every movement solves a problem. One must be skilful under pain of death. These problems the child solved with an instinct which would have made him the admiration of apes and mountebanks. The descent was steep and long. Nevertheless he was coming to the end of it.

Little by little it was drawing nearer the moment when he should land on the Isthmus, of which from time to time he caught a glimpse. At intervals, while he bounded or dropped from rock to rock, he pricked up his ears, his head erect, like a listening deer. He was hearkening to a diffused and faint uproar, far away to the left, like the deep note of a clarion. It was a commotion of winds, preceding that fearful north blast which is heard rushing from the pole, like an inroad of trumpets. At the same time the child felt now and then on his brow, on his eyes, on his cheeks, something which was like the palms of cold hands being placed on his face. These were large frozen flakes, sown at first softly in space, then eddying, and heralding a snowstorm. The child was covered with them. The snowstorm, which for the last hour had been on the sea, was beginning to gain the land. It was slowly invading the plains. It was entering obliquely, by the north-west, the tableland of Portland.

BOOK THE SECOND.

THE HOOKER AT SEA.

CHAPTER I.

SUPERHUMAN LAWS.

The snowstorm is one of the mysteries of the ocean. It is the most obscure of things meteorological — obscure in every sense of the word. It is a mixture of fog and storm; and even in our days we cannot well account for the phenomenon. Hence many disasters.

We try to explain all things by the action of wind and wave; yet in the air there is a force which is not the wind, and in the waters a force which is not the wave. That force, both in the air and in the water, is effluvium. Air and water are two nearly identical liquid masses, entering into the composition of each other by condensation and dilatation, so that to breathe is to drink. Effluvium alone is fluid. The wind and the wave are only impulses; effluvium is a current. The wind is visible in clouds, the wave is visible in foam; effluvium is invisible. From time to time, however, it says, “I am here.” Its “I am here” is a clap of thunder.

The snowstorm offers a problem analogous to the dry fog. If the solution of the *callina* of the Spaniards and the *quobar* of the Ethiopians be possible, assuredly that solution will be achieved by attentive observation of magnetic effluvium.

Without effluvium a crowd of circumstances would remain enigmatic. Strictly speaking, the changes in the velocity of the wind, varying from 3 feet per second to 220 feet, would supply a reason for the variations of the waves rising from 3 inches in a calm sea to 36 feet in a raging one. Strictly speaking, the horizontal direction of the winds, even in a squall, enables us to understand how it is that a wave 30 feet high can be 1,500 feet long. But why are the waves of the Pacific four times higher near America than near Asia; that is to say, higher in the East than in the West? Why is the contrary true of the Atlantic? Why, under the Equator, are they highest in the middle of the sea? Wherefore these deviations in the swell of the ocean? This is what magnetic effluvium, combined with terrestrial rotation and sidereal attraction, can alone explain.

Is not this mysterious complication needed to explain an oscillation of the wind veering, for instance, by the west from south-east to north-east, then suddenly returning in the same great curve from north-east to south-east, so as to make in thirty-six hours a prodigious circuit of 560 degrees? Such was the preface to the snowstorm of March 17, 1867.

The storm-waves of Australia reach a height of 80 feet; this fact is connected with the vicinity of the Pole. Storms in those latitudes result less from disorder of the winds than from submarine electrical discharges. In the year 1866 the transatlantic cable was disturbed at regular intervals in its working for two hours in the twenty-four — from noon to two o'clock — by a sort of intermittent fever. Certain compositions and decompositions of forces produce phenomena, and impose themselves on the calculations of the seaman under pain of shipwreck. The day that navigation, now a routine, shall become a mathematic; the day we shall, for instance, seek to know why it is that in our regions hot winds come sometimes from the north, and cold winds from the south; the day we shall understand that diminutions of temperature are proportionate to oceanic depths; the day we realize that the globe is a vast loadstone polarized in immensity, with two axes — an axis of rotation and an axis of effluvium — intersecting each other at the centre of the earth, and that the magnetic poles turn round the geographical poles; when those who risk life will choose to risk it scientifically; when men shall navigate assured from studied uncertainty; when the captain shall be a meteorologist; when the pilot shall be a chemist; then will many catastrophes be avoided. The sea is magnetic as much as aquatic: an ocean of unknown forces floats in the ocean of the waves, or, one might say, on the surface. Only to behold in the sea a mass of water is not to see it at all: the sea is an ebb and flow of fluid, as much as a flux and reflux of liquid. It is, perhaps, complicated by attractions even more than by hurricanes; molecular adhesion, manifested among other phenomena by capillary attraction, although microscopic, takes in ocean its place in the grandeur of immensity; and the wave of effluvium sometimes aids, sometimes counteracts, the wave of the air and the wave of the waters. He who is ignorant of electric law is ignorant of hydraulic law; for the one intermixes with the other. It is true there is no study more difficult nor more obscure; it verges on empiricism, just as astronomy verges on astrology; and yet without this study there is no navigation. Having said this much we will pass on.

One of the most dangerous components of the sea is the snowstorm. The snowstorm is above all things magnetic. The pole produces it as it produces the aurora borealis. It is in the fog of the one as in the light of the other; and in the flake of snow as in the streak of flame effluvium is visible.

Storms are the nervous attacks and delirious frenzies of the sea. The sea has its ailments. Tempests may be compared to maladies. Some are mortal, others not; some may be escaped, others not. The snowstorm is supposed to be generally mortal. Jarabija, one of the pilots of Magellan, termed it “a cloud issuing from the devil’s sore side.”

The old Spanish navigators called this kind of squall *la nevada,* when it came with snow; *la helada,* when it came with hail. According to them, bats fell from the sky, with the snow.

Snowstorms are characteristic of polar latitudes; nevertheless, at times they glide — one might almost say tumble — into our climates; so much ruin is mingled with the chances of the air.

The *Matutina,* as we have seen, plunged resolutely into the great hazard of the night, a hazard increased by the impending storm. She had encountered its menace with a sort of tragic audacity; nevertheless, it must be remembered that she had received due warning.

CHAPTER II.

OUR FIRST ROUGH SKETCHES FILLED IN.

While the hooker was in the gulf of Portland, there was but little sea on; the ocean, if gloomy, was almost still, and the sky was yet clear. The wind took little effect on the vessel; the hooker hugged the cliff as closely as possible; it served as a screen to her.

There were ten on board the little Biscayan felucca — three men in crew, and seven passengers, of whom two were women. In the light of the open sea (which broadens twilight into day) all the figures on board were clearly visible. Besides they were not hiding now — they were all at ease; each one reassumed his freedom of manner, spoke in his own note, showed his face; departure was to them a deliverance.

The motley nature of the group shone out. The women were of no age. A wandering life produces premature old age, and indigence is made up of wrinkles. One of them was a Basque of the Dry-ports. The other, with the large rosary, was an Irishwoman. They wore that air of indifference common to the wretched. They had squatted down close to each other when they got on board, on chests at the foot of the mast. They talked to each other. Irish and Basque are, as we have said, kindred languages. The Basque woman's hair was scented with onions and basil. The skipper of the hooker was a Basque of Guipuzcoa. One sailor was a Basque of the northern slope of the Pyrenees, the other was of the southern slope — that is to say, they were of the same nation, although the first was French and the latter Spanish. The Basques recognize no official country. *Mi madre se llama Montaña*, my mother is called the mountain, as Zalareus, the muleteer, used to say. Of the five men who were with the two women, one was a Frenchman of Languedoc, one a Frenchman of Provence, one a Genoese; one, an old man, he who wore the sombrero without a hole for a pipe, appeared to be a German. The fifth, the chief, was a Basque of the Landes from Biscarrosse. It was he who, just as the child was going on board the hooker, had, with a kick of his heel, cast the plank into the sea. This man, robust, agile, sudden in movement, covered, as may be remembered, with trimmings, slashings, and glistening tinsel, could not keep in his place; he stooped down, rose up, and continually passed to and fro from one end of the vessel to the other, as if debating uneasily on what had been done and what was going to happen.

This chief of the band, the captain and the two men of the crew, all four Basques, spoke sometimes Basque, sometimes Spanish, sometimes French — these three languages being common on both slopes of the Pyrenees. But generally speaking, excepting the women, all talked something like French, which was the foundation of their slang. The French language about this period began to be chosen by the peoples as something intermediate between the excess of consonants in the north and the excess of vowels in the south. In Europe, French was the language of commerce, and also of felony. It will be remembered that Gibby, a London thief, understood Cartouche.

The hooker, a fine sailer, was making quick way; still, ten persons, besides their baggage, were a heavy cargo for one of such light draught.

The fact of the vessel's aiding the escape of a band did not necessarily imply that the crew were accomplices. It was sufficient that the captain of the vessel was a Vascongado, and that the chief of the band was another. Among that race mutual assistance is a duty which admits of no exception. A Basque, as we have said, is neither Spanish nor French; he is Basque, and always and everywhere he must succour a Basque. Such is Pyrenean fraternity.

All the time the hooker was in the gulf, the sky, although threatening, did not frown enough to cause the fugitives any uneasiness. They were flying, they were escaping, they were brutally gay. One laughed, another sang; the laugh was dry but free, the song was low but careless.

The Languedocian cried, "*Caoucagno!*" "*Cocagne*" expresses the highest pitch of satisfaction in Narbonne. He was a longshore sailor, a native of the waterside village of Gruissan, on the southern side of the Clappe, a bargeman rather than a mariner, but accustomed to work the reaches of the inlet of Bages, and to draw the drag-net full of fish over the salt sands of St. Lucie. He was of the race who wear a red cap, make complicated signs of the cross after the Spanish fashion, drink wine out of goat-skins, eat scraped ham, kneel down to blaspheme, and implore their patron saint with threats— "Great saint, grant me what I ask, or I'll throw a stone at thy head, *ou té feg un pic*." He might be, at need, a useful addition to the crew.

The Provençal in the caboose was blowing up a turf fire under an iron pot, and making broth. The broth was a kind of puchero, in which fish took the place of meat, and into which the Provençal threw chick peas, little bits of bacon cut in squares, and pods of red pimento — concessions made by the eaters of *bouillabaisse* to the eaters of *olla podrida*. One of the bags of provisions was beside him unpacked. He had lighted over his head an iron lantern, glazed with talc, which swung on a hook from the ceiling. By its side, on another hook, swung the weather-cock halcyon. There was a popular belief in those days that a dead halcyon, hung by the beak, always turned its breast to the quarter whence the wind was blowing. While he made the broth, the Provençal put the neck of a gourd into his mouth, and now and then swallowed a draught of aguardiente. It was one of those gourds covered with wicker, broad and flat, with handles, which used to be hung to the side by a strap, and which were then called hip-gourds. Between each gulp he mumbled one of those country songs of which the subject is nothing at all: a hollow road, a hedge; you see in the meadow, through a gap in the bushes, the shadow of a horse and cart, elongated in the sunset, and from time to time, above the hedge, the end of a fork loaded with hay appears and disappears — you want no more to make a song.

A departure, according to the bent of one’s mind, is a relief or a depression. All seemed lighter in spirits excepting the old man of the band, the man with the hat that had no pipe.

This old man, who looked more German than anything else, although he had one of those unfathomable faces in which nationality is lost, was bald, and so grave that his baldness might have been a tonsure. Every time he passed before the Virgin on the prow, he raised his felt hat, so that you could see the swollen and senile veins of his skull. A sort of full gown, torn and threadbare, of brown Dorchester serge, but half hid his closely fitting coat, tight, compact, and hooked up to the neck like a cassock. His hands inclined to cross each other, and had the mechanical junction of habitual prayer. He had what might be called a wan countenance; for the countenance is above all things a reflection, and it is an error to believe that idea is colourless. That countenance was evidently the surface of a strange inner state, the result of a composition of contradictions, some tending to drift away in good, others in evil, and to an observer it was the revelation of one who was less and more than human — capable of falling below the scale of the tiger, or of rising above that of man. Such chaotic souls exist.

There was something inscrutable in that face. Its secret reached the abstract. You felt that the man had known the foretaste of evil which is the calculation, and the after-taste which is the zero. In his impassibility, which was perhaps only on the surface, were imprinted two petrifactions — the petrifaction of the heart proper to the hangman, and the petrifaction of the mind proper to the mandarin. One might have said (for the monstrous has its mode of being complete) that all things were possible to him, even emotion. In every savant there is something of the corpse, and this man was a savant. Only to see him you caught science imprinted in the gestures of his body and in the folds of his dress. His was a fossil face, the serious cast of which was counteracted by that wrinkled mobility of the polyglot which verges on grimace. But a severe man withal; nothing of the hypocrite, nothing of the cynic. A tragic dreamer. He was one of those whom crime leaves pensive; he had the brow of an incendiary tempered by the eyes of an archbishop. His sparse gray locks turned to white over his temples. The Christian was evident in him, complicated with the fatalism of the Turk. Chalkstones deformed his fingers, dissected by leanness. The stiffness of his tall frame was grotesque. He had his sea-legs, he walked slowly about the deck, not looking at any one, with an air decided and sinister. His eyeballs were vaguely filled with the fixed light of a soul studious of the darkness and afflicted by reapparitions of conscience.

From time to time the chief of the band, abrupt and alert, and making sudden turns about the vessel, came to him and whispered in his ear. The old man answered by a nod. It might have been the lightning consulting the night.

CHAPTER III.

TROUBLED MEN ON THE TROUBLED SEA.

Two men on board the craft were absorbed in thought — the old man, and the skipper of the hooker, who must not be mistaken for the chief of the band. The captain was occupied by the sea, the old man by the sky. The former did not lift his eyes from the waters; the latter kept watch on the firmament. The skipper's anxiety was the state of the sea; the old man seemed to suspect the heavens. He scanned the stars through every break in the clouds.

It was the time when day still lingers, but some few stars begin faintly to pierce the twilight. The horizon was singular. The mist upon it varied. Haze predominated on land, clouds at sea.

The skipper, noting the rising billows, hauled all taut before he got outside Portland Bay. He would not delay so doing until he should pass the headland. He examined the rigging closely, and satisfied himself that the lower shrouds were well set up, and supported firmly the futtock-shrouds — precautions of a man who means to carry on with a press of sail, at all risks.

The hooker was not trimmed, being two feet by the head. This was her weak point.

The captain passed every minute from the binnacle to the standard compass, taking the bearings of objects on shore. The *Matutina* had at first a soldier's wind which was not unfavourable, though she could not lie within five points of her course. The captain took the helm as often as possible, trusting no one but himself to prevent her from dropping to leeward, the effect of the rudder being influenced by the steerage-way.

The difference between the true and apparent course being relative to the way on the vessel, the hooker seemed to lie closer to the wind than she did in reality. The breeze was not a-beam, nor was the hooker close-hauled; but one cannot ascertain the true course made, except when the wind is abaft. When you perceive long streaks of clouds meeting in a point on the horizon, you may be sure that the wind is in that quarter; but this evening the wind was variable; the needle fluctuated; the captain distrusted the erratic movements of the vessel. He steered carefully but resolutely, luffed her up, watched her coming to, prevented her from yawing, and from running into the wind's eye: noted the leeway, the little jerks of the helm: was observant of every roll and pitch of the vessel, of the difference in her speed, and of the variable gusts of wind. For fear of accidents, he was constantly on the lookout for squalls from off the land he was hugging, and above all he was cautious to keep her full; the direction of the breeze indicated by the compass being uncertain from the small size of the instrument. The captain's eyes, frequently lowered, remarked every change in the waves.

Once nevertheless he raised them towards the sky, and tried to make out the three stars of Orion's belt. These stars are called the three magi, and an old proverb of the ancient Spanish pilots declares that, "He who sees the three magi is not far from the Saviour."

This glance of the captain's tallied with an aside growled out, at the other end of the vessel, by the old man, "We don't even see the pointers, nor the star Antares, red as he is. Not one is distinct."

No care troubled the other fugitives.

Still, when the first hilarity they felt in their escape had passed away, they could not help remembering that they were at sea in the month of January, and that the wind was frozen. It was impossible to establish themselves in the cabin. It was much too narrow and too much encumbered by bales and baggage. The baggage belonged to the passengers, the bales to the crew, for the hooker was no pleasure boat, and was engaged in smuggling. The passengers were obliged to settle themselves on deck, a condition to which these wanderers easily resigned themselves. Open-air habits make it simple for vagabonds to arrange themselves for the night. The open air (*la belle étoile*) is their friend, and the cold helps them to sleep — sometimes to die.

This night, as we have seen, there was no *belle étoile*.

The Languedocian and the Genoese, while waiting for supper, rolled themselves up near the women, at the foot of the mast, in some tarpaulin which the sailors had thrown them.

The old man remained at the bow motionless, and apparently insensible to the cold.

The captain of the hooker, from the helm where he was standing, uttered a sort of guttural call somewhat like the cry of the American bird called the exclaimer; at his call the chief of the brand drew near, and the captain addressed him thus, —

"Etcheco Jaüna." These two words, which mean "tiller of the mountain," form with the old Cantabri a solemn preface to any subject which should command attention.

Then the captain pointed the old man out to the chief, and the dialogue continued in Spanish; it was not, indeed, a very correct dialect, being that of the mountains. Here are the questions and answers.

"Etcheco jaüna, que es este hombre?"

"Un hombre."

"Que lenguas habla?"

"Todas."

"Que cosas sabe?"

"Todas."

"Quai païs?"

"Ningun, y todos."

"Qual dios?"

"Dios."

"Como le llamas?"

"El tonto."

"Como dices que le llamas?"

"El sabio."

"En vuestre tropa que esta?"

"Esta lo que esta."

"El gefe?"

"No."

"Pues que esta?"

"La alma."

The chief and the captain parted, each reverting to his own meditation, and a little while afterwards the *Matutina* left the gulf.

Now came the great rolling of the open sea. The ocean in the spaces between the foam was slimy in appearance. The waves, seen through the twilight in indistinct outline, somewhat resembled plashes of gall. Here and there a wave floating flat showed cracks and stars, like a pane of glass broken by stones; in the centre of these stars, in a revolving orifice, trembled a phosphorescence, like that feline reflection, of vanished light which shines in the eyeballs of owls.

Proudly, like a bold swimmer, the *Matutina* crossed the dangerous Shambles shoal. This bank, a hidden obstruction at the entrance of Portland roads, is not a barrier; it is an amphitheatre — a circus of sand under the sea, its benches cut out by the circling of the waves — an arena, round and symmetrical, as high as a Jungfrau, only drowned — a coliseum of the ocean, seen by the diver in the vision-like transparency which engulfs him, — such is the Shambles shoal. There hydras fight, leviathans meet. There, says the legend, at the bottom of the gigantic shaft, are the wrecks of ships, seized and sunk by the huge spider Kraken, also called the fish-mountain. Such things lie in the fearful shadow of the sea.

These spectral realities, unknown to man, are manifested at the surface by a slight shiver.

In this nineteenth century, the Shambles bank is in ruins; the breakwater recently constructed has overthrown and mutilated, by the force of its surf, that high submarine architecture, just as the jetty, built at the Croisic in 1760, changed, by a quarter of an hour, the course of the tides. And yet the tide is eternal. But eternity obeys man more than man imagines.

CHAPTER IV.

A CLOUD DIFFERENT FROM THE OTHERS ENTERS ON THE SCENE.

The old man whom the chief of the band had named first the Madman, then the Sage, now never left the forecastle. Since they crossed the Shambles shoal, his attention had been divided between the heavens and the waters. He looked down, he looked upwards, and above all watched the north-east.

The skipper gave the helm to a sailor, stepped over the after hatchway, crossed the gangway, and went on to the forecastle. He approached the old man, but not in front. He stood a little behind, with elbows resting on his hips, with outstretched hands, the head on one side, with open eyes and arched eyebrows, and a smile in the corners of his mouth — an attitude of curiosity hesitating between mockery and respect.

The old man, either that it was his habit to talk to himself, or that hearing some one behind incited him to speech, began to soliloquize while he looked into space.

“The meridian, from which the right ascension is calculated, is marked in this century by four stars — the Polar, Cassiopeia’s Chair, Andromeda’s Head, and the star Algenib, which is in Pegasus. But there is not one visible.”

These words followed each other mechanically, confused, and scarcely articulated, as if he did not care to pronounce them. They floated out of his mouth and dispersed. Soliloquy is the smoke exhaled by the inmost fires of the soul.

The skipper broke in, “My lord!”

The old man, perhaps rather deaf as well as very thoughtful, went on, —

“Too few stars, and too much wind. The breeze continually changes its direction and blows inshore; thence it rises perpendicularly. This results from the land being warmer than the water. Its atmosphere is lighter. The cold and dense wind of the sea rushes in to replace it. From this cause, in the upper regions the wind blows towards the land from every quarter. It would be advisable to make long tacks between the true and apparent parallel. When the latitude by observation differs from the latitude by dead reckoning by not more than three minutes in thirty miles, or by four minutes in sixty miles, you are in the true course.”

The skipper bowed, but the old man saw him not. The latter, who wore what resembled an Oxford or Gottingen university gown, did not relax his haughty and rigid attitude. He observed the waters as a critic of waves and of men. He studied the billows, but almost as if he was about to demand his turn to speak amidst their turmoil, and teach them something. There was in him both pedagogue and soothsayer. He seemed an oracle of the deep.

He continued his soliloquy, which was perhaps intended to be heard.

“We might strive if we had a wheel instead of a helm. With a speed of twelve miles an hour, a force of twenty pounds exerted on the wheel produces three hundred thousand pounds’ effect on the course. And more too. For in some cases, with a double block and runner, they can get two more revolutions.”

The skipper bowed a second time, and said, “My lord!”

The old man’s eye rested on him; he had turned his head without moving his body.

“Call me Doctor.”

“Master Doctor, I am the skipper.”

“Just so,” said the doctor.

The doctor, as henceforward we shall call him, appeared willing to converse.

“Skipper, have you an English sextant?”

“No.”

“Without an English sextant you cannot take an altitude at all.”

“The Basques,” replied the captain, “took altitudes before there were any English.”

“Be careful you are not taken aback.”

“I keep her away when necessary.”

“Have you tried how many knots she is running?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“Just now.”

“How?”

“By the log.”

“Did you take the trouble to look at the triangle?”

“Yes.”

“Did the sand run through the glass in exactly thirty seconds?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure that the sand has not worn the hole between the globes?”

“Yes.”

“Have you proved the sand-glass by the oscillations of a bullet?”

“Suspended by a rope yarn drawn out from the top of a coil of soaked hemp? Undoubtedly.”

“Have you waxed the yarn lest it should stretch?”

“Yes.”

“Have you tested the log?”

“I tested the sand-glass by the bullet, and checked the log by a round shot.”

“Of what size was the shot?”

“One foot in diameter.”

“Heavy enough?”

“It is an old round shot of our war hooker, La Casse de Par-Grand.”

“Which was in the Armada?”

“Yes.”

“And which carried six hundred soldiers, fifty sailors, and twenty-five guns?”

“Shipwreck knows it.”

“How did you compute the resistance of the water to the shot?”

“By means of a German scale.”

“Have you taken into account the resistance of the rope supporting the shot to the waves?”

“Yes.”

“What was the result?”

“The resistance of the water was 170 pounds.”

“That’s to say she is running four French leagues an hour.”

“And three Dutch leagues.”

“But that is the difference merely of the vessel’s way and the rate at which the sea is running?”

“Undoubtedly.”

“Whither are you steering?”

“For a creek I know, between Loyola and St. Sebastian.”

“Make the latitude of the harbour’s mouth as soon as possible.”

“Yes, as near as I can.”

"Beware of gusts and currents. The first cause the second."

"Traidores."

"No abuse. The sea understands. Insult nothing. Rest satisfied with watching."

"I have watched, and I do watch. Just now the tide is running against the wind; by-and-by, when it turns, we shall be all right."

"Have you a chart?"

"No; not for this channel."

"Then you sail by rule of thumb?"

"Not at all. I have a compass."

"The compass is one eye, the chart the other."

"A man with one eye can see."

"How do you compute the difference between the true and apparent course?"

"I've got my standard compass, and I make a guess."

"To guess is all very well. To know for certain is better."

"Christopher guessed."

"When there is a fog and the needle revolves treacherously, you can never tell on which side you should look out for squalls, and the end of it is that you know neither the true nor apparent day's work. An ass with his chart is better off than a wizard with his oracle."

"There is no fog in the breeze yet, and I see no cause for alarm."

"Ships are like flies in the spider's web of the sea."

"Just now both winds and waves are tolerably favourable."

"Black specks quivering on the billows — such are men on the ocean."

"I dare say there will be nothing wrong to-night."

"You may get into such a mess that you will find it hard to get out of it."

"All goes well at present."

The doctor's eyes were fixed on the north-east. The skipper continued, —

"Let us once reach the Gulf of Gascony, and I answer for our safety. Ah! I should say I am at home there. I know it well, my Gulf of Gascony. It is a little basin, often very boisterous; but there, I know every sounding in it and the nature of the bottom — mud opposite San Cipriano, shells opposite Cizarque, sand off Cape Peñas, little pebbles off Boncaut de Mimizan, and I know the colour of every pebble."

The skipper broke off; the doctor was no longer listening.

The doctor gazed at the north-east. Over that icy face passed an extraordinary expression. All the agony of terror possible to a mask of stone was depicted there. From his mouth escaped this word, “Good!”

His eyeballs, which had all at once become quite round like an owl’s, were dilated with stupor on discovering a speck on the horizon. He added, —

“It is well. As for me, I am resigned.”

The skipper looked at him. The doctor went on talking to himself, or to some one in the deep, —

“I say, Yes.”

Then he was silent, opened his eyes wider and wider with renewed attention on that which he was watching, and said, —

“It is coming from afar, but not the less surely will it come.”

The arc of the horizon which occupied the visual rays and thoughts of the doctor, being opposite to the west, was illuminated by the transcendent reflection of twilight, as if it were day. This arc, limited in extent, and surrounded by streaks of grayish vapour, was uniformly blue, but of a leaden rather than cerulean blue. The doctor, having completely returned to the contemplation of the sea, pointed to this atmospheric arc, and said, —

“Skipper, do you see?”

“What?”

“That.”

“What?”

“Out there.”

“A blue spot? Yes.”

“What is it?”

“A niche in heaven.”

“For those who go to heaven; for those who go elsewhere it is another affair.” And he emphasized these enigmatical words with an appalling expression which was unseen in the darkness.

A silence ensued. The skipper, remembering the two names given by the chief to this man, asked himself the question, —

“Is he a madman, or is he a sage?”

The stiff and bony finger of the doctor remained immovably pointing, like a sign-post, to the misty blue spot in the sky.

The skipper looked at this spot.

“In truth,” he growled out, “it is not sky but clouds.”

"A blue cloud is worse than a black cloud," said the doctor; "and," he added, "it's a snow-cloud."

"La nube de la nieve," said the skipper, as if trying to understand the word better by translating it.

"Do you know what a snow-cloud is?" asked the doctor.

"No."

"You'll know by-and-by."

The skipper again turned his attention to the horizon.

Continuing to observe the cloud, he muttered between his teeth, —

"One month of squalls, another of wet; January with its gales, February with its rains — that's all the winter we Asturians get. Our rain even is warm. We've no snow but on the mountains. Ay, ay; look out for the avalanche. The avalanche is no respecter of persons. The avalanche is a brute."

"And the waterspout is a monster," said the doctor, adding, after a pause, "Here it comes." He continued, "Several winds are getting up together — a strong wind from the west, and a gentle wind from the east."

"That last is a deceitful one," said the skipper.

The blue cloud was growing larger.

"If the snow," said the doctor, "is appalling when it slips down the mountain, think what it is when it falls from the Pole!"

His eye was glassy. The cloud seemed to spread over his face and simultaneously over the horizon. He continued, in musing tones, —

"Every minute the fatal hour draws nearer. The will of Heaven is about to be manifested."

The skipper asked himself again this question,— "Is he a madman?"

"Skipper," began the doctor, without taking his eyes off the cloud, "have you often crossed the Channel?"

"This is the first time."

The doctor, who was absorbed by the blue cloud, and who, as a sponge can take up but a definite quantity of water, had but a definite measure of anxiety, displayed no more emotion at this answer of the skipper than was expressed by a slight shrug of his shoulders.

"How is that?"

"Master Doctor, my usual cruise is to Ireland. I sail from Fontarabia to Black Harbour or to the Achill Islands. I go sometimes to Braich-y-Pwll, a point on the Welsh coast. But I always steer outside the Scilly Islands. I do not know this sea at all."

"That's serious. Woe to him who is inexperienced on the ocean! One ought to be familiar with the Channel — the Channel is the Sphinx. Look out for shoals."

"We are in twenty-five fathoms here."

"We ought to get into fifty-five fathoms to the west, and avoid even twenty fathoms to the east."

"We'll sound as we get on."

"The Channel is not an ordinary sea. The water rises fifty feet with the spring tides, and twenty-five with neap tides. Here we are in slack water. I thought you looked scared."

"We'll sound to-night."

"To sound you must heave to, and that you cannot do."

"Why not?"

"On account of the wind."

"We'll try."

"The squall is close on us."

"We'll sound, Master Doctor."

"You could not even bring to."

"Trust in God."

"Take care what you say. Pronounce not lightly the awful name."

"I will sound, I tell you."

"Be sensible; you will have a gale of wind presently."

"I say that I will try for soundings."

"The resistance of the water will prevent the lead from sinking, and the line will break. Ah! so this is your first time in these waters?"

"The first time."

"Very well; in that case listen, skipper."

The tone of the word "listen" was so commanding that the skipper made an obeisance.

"Master Doctor, I am all attention."

"Port your helm, and haul up on the starboard tack."

"What do you mean?"

"Steer your course to the west."

"Caramba!"

"Steer your course to the west."

"Impossible."

"As you will. What I tell you is for the others' sake. As for myself, I am indifferent."

"But, Master Doctor, steer west?"

"Yes, skipper."

"The wind will be dead ahead."

"Yes, skipper."

"She'll pitch like the devil."

"Moderate your language. Yes, skipper."

"The vessel would be in irons."

"Yes, skipper."

"That means very likely the mast will go."

"Possibly."

"Do you wish me to steer west?"

"Yes."

"I cannot."

"In that case settle your reckoning with the sea."

"The wind ought to change."

"It will not change all night."

"Why not?"

"Because it is a wind twelve hundred leagues in length."

"Make headway against such a wind! Impossible."

"To the west, I tell you."

"I'll try, but in spite of everything she will fall off."

"That's the danger."

"The wind sets us to the east."

"Don't go to the east."

"Why not?"

"Skipper, do you know what is for us the word of death?"

"No."

"Death is the east."

"I'll steer west."

This time the doctor, having turned right round, looked the skipper full in the face, and with his eyes resting on him, as though to implant the idea in his head, pronounced slowly, syllable by syllable, these words, —

“If to-night out at sea we hear the sound of a bell, the ship is lost.”

The skipper pondered in amaze.

“What do you mean?”

The doctor did not answer. His countenance, expressive for a moment, was now reserved. His eyes became vacuous. He did not appear to hear the skipper’s wondering question. He was now attending to his own monologue. His lips let fall, as if mechanically, in a low murmuring tone, these words, —

“The time has come for sullied souls to purify themselves.”

The skipper made that expressive grimace which raises the chin towards the nose.

“He is more madman than sage,” he growled, and moved off.

Nevertheless he steered west.

But the wind and the sea were rising.

CHAPTER V.

HARDQUANONNE.

The mist was deformed by all sorts of inequalities, bulging out at once on every point of the horizon, as if invisible mouths were busy puffing out the bags of wind. The formation of the clouds was becoming ominous. In the west, as in the east, the sky's depths were now invaded by the blue cloud: it advanced in the teeth of the wind. These contradictions are part of the wind's vagaries.

The sea, which a moment before wore scales, now wore a skin — such is the nature of that dragon. It was no longer a crocodile: it was a boa. The skin, lead-coloured and dirty, looked thick, and was crossed by heavy wrinkles. Here and there, on its surface, bubbles of surge, like pustules, gathered and then burst. The foam was like a leprosy. It was at this moment that the hooker, still seen from afar by the child, lighted her signal.

A quarter of an hour elapsed.

The skipper looked for the doctor: he was no longer on deck. Directly the skipper had left him, the doctor had stooped his somewhat ungainly form under the hood, and had entered the cabin; there he had sat down near the stove, on a block. He had taken a shagreen ink-bottle and a cordwain pocket-book from his pocket; he had extracted from his pocket-book a parchment folded four times, old, stained, and yellow; he had opened the sheet, taken a pen out of his ink-case, placed the pocket-book flat on his knee, and the parchment on the pocket-book; and by the rays of the lantern, which was lighting the cook, he set to writing on the back of the parchment. The roll of the waves inconvenienced him. He wrote thus for some time.

As he wrote, the doctor remarked the gourd of aguardiente, which the Provençal tasted every time he added a grain of pimento to the puchero, as if he were consulting it in reference to the seasoning. The doctor noticed the gourd, not because it was a bottle of brandy, but because of a name which was plaited in the wickerwork with red rushes on a background of white. There was light enough in the cabin to permit of his reading the name.

The doctor paused, and spelled it in a low voice, —

"Hardquanonne."

Then he addressed the cook.

“I had not observed that gourd before; did it belong to Hardquanonne?”

“Yes,” the cook answered; “to our poor comrade, Hardquanonne.”

The doctor went on, —

“To Hardquanonne, the Fleming of Flanders?”

“Yes.”

“Who is in prison?”

“Yes.”

“In the dungeon at Chatham?”

“It is his gourd,” replied the cook; “and he was my friend. I keep it in remembrance of him. When shall we see him again? It is the bottle he used to wear slung over his hip.”

The doctor took up his pen again, and continued laboriously tracing somewhat straggling lines on the parchment. He was evidently anxious that his handwriting should be very legible; and at length, notwithstanding the tremulousness of the vessel and the tremulousness of age, he finished what he wanted to write.

It was time, for suddenly a sea struck the craft, a mighty rush of waters besieged the hooker, and they felt her break into that fearful dance in which ships lead off with the tempest.

The doctor arose and approached the stove, meeting the ship’s motion with his knees dexterously bent, dried as best he could, at the stove where the pot was boiling, the lines he had written, refolded the parchment in the pocket-book, and replaced the pocket-book and the inkhorn in his pocket.

The stove was not the least ingenious piece of interior economy in the hooker. It was judiciously isolated. Meanwhile the pot heaved — the Provençal was watching it.

“Fish broth,” said he.

“For the fishes,” replied the doctor. Then he went on deck again.

CHAPTER VI.

THEY THINK THAT HELP IS AT HAND.

Through his growing preoccupation the doctor in some sort reviewed the situation; and any one near to him might have heard these words drop from his lips, —

“Too much rolling, and not enough pitching.”

Then recalled to himself by the dark workings of his mind, he sank again into thought, as a miner into his shaft. His meditation in nowise interfered with his watch on the sea. The contemplation of the sea is in itself a reverie.

The dark punishment of the waters, eternally tortured, was commencing. A lamentation arose from the whole main. Preparations, confused and melancholy, were forming in space. The doctor observed all before him, and lost no detail. There was, however, no sign of scrutiny in his face. One does not scrutinize hell.

A vast commotion, yet half latent, but visible through the turmoils in space, increased and irritated, more and more, the winds, the vapours, the waves. Nothing is so logical and nothing appears so absurd as the ocean. Self-dispersion is the essence of its sovereignty, and is one of the elements of its redundance. The sea is ever for and against. It knots that it may unravel itself; one of its slopes attacks, the other relieves. No apparition is so wonderful as the waves. Who can paint the alternating hollows and promontories, the valleys, the melting bosoms, the sketches? How render the thickets of foam, blendings of mountains and dreams? The indescribable is everywhere there — in the rending, in the frowning, in the anxiety, in the perpetual contradiction, in the chiaroscuro, in the pendants of the cloud, in the keys of the ever-open vault, in the disaggregation without rupture, in the funereal tumult caused by all that madness!

The wind had just set due north. Its violence was so favourable and so useful in driving them away from England that the captain of the *Matutina* had made up his mind to set all sail. The hooker slipped through the foam as at a gallop, the wind right aft, bounding from wave to wave in a gay frenzy. The fugitives were delighted, and laughed; they clapped their hands, applauded the surf, the sea, the wind, the sails, the swift progress, the flight, all unmindful of the future. The doctor appeared not to see them, and dreamt on.

Every vestige of day had faded away. This was the moment when the child, watching from the distant cliff, lost sight of the hooker. Up to then his glance had remained fixed, and, as it were, leaning on the vessel. What part had that look in fate? When the hooker was lost to sight in the distance, and when the child could no longer see aught, the child went north and the ship went south.

All were plunged in darkness.

CHAPTER VII.

SUPERHUMAN HORRORS.

On their part it was with wild jubilee and delight that those on board the hooker saw the hostile land recede and lessen behind them. By degrees the dark ring of ocean rose higher, dwarfing in twilight Portland, Purbeck, Tineham, Kimmeridge, the Matravers, the long streaks of dim cliffs, and the coast dotted with lighthouses.

England disappeared. The fugitives had now nothing round them but the sea.

All at once night grew awful.

There was no longer extent nor space; the sky became blackness, and closed in round the vessel. The snow began to fall slowly; a few flakes appeared. They might have been ghosts. Nothing else was visible in the course of the wind. They felt as if yielded up. A snare lurked in every possibility.

It is in this cavernous darkness that in our climate the Polar waterspout makes its appearance.

A great muddy cloud, like to the belly of a hydra, hung over ocean, and in places its lividity adhered to the waves. Some of these adherences resembled pouches with holes, pumping the sea, disgorging vapour, and refilling themselves with water. Here and there these suctions drew up cones of foam on the sea.

The boreal storm hurled itself on the hooker. The hooker rushed to meet it. The squall and the vessel met as though to insult each other.

In the first mad shock not a sail was clewed up, not a jib lowered, not a reef taken in, so much is flight a delirium. The mast creaked and bent back as if in fear.

Cyclones, in our northern hemisphere, circle from left to right, in the same direction as the hands of a watch, with a velocity which is sometimes as much as sixty miles an hour. Although she was entirely at the mercy of that whirling power, the hooker behaved as if she were out in moderate weather, without any further precaution than keeping her head on to the rollers, with the wind broad on the bow so as to avoid being pooped or caught broadside on. This semi-prudence would have availed her nothing in case of the wind's shifting and taking her aback.

A deep rumbling was brewing up in the distance. The roar of the abyss, nothing can be compared to it. It is the great brutish howl of the universe. What we call matter, that unsearchable organism, that amalgamation of incommensurable energies, in which can occasionally be detected an almost imperceptible degree of intention which makes us shudder, that blind, benighted cosmos, that enigmatical Pan, has a cry, a strange cry, prolonged, obstinate, and continuous, which is less than speech and more than thunder. That cry is the hurricane. Other voices, songs, melodies, clamours, tones, proceed from nests, from broods, from pairings, from nuptials, from homes. This one, a trumpet, comes out of the Naught, which is All. Other voices express the soul of the universe; this one expresses the monster. It is the howl of the formless. It is the inarticulate finding utterance in the indefinite. A thing it is full of pathos and terror. Those clamours converse above and beyond man. They rise, fall, undulate, determine waves of sound, form all sorts of wild surprises for the mind, now burst close to the ear with the importunity of a peal of trumpets, now assail us with the rumbling hoarseness of distance. Giddy uproar which resembles a language, and which, in fact, is a language. It is the effort which the world makes to speak. It is the lisping of the wonderful. In this wail is manifested vaguely all that the vast dark palpitation endures, suffers, accepts, rejects. For the most part it talks nonsense; it is like an access of chronic sickness, and rather an epilepsy diffused than a force employed; we fancy that we are witnessing the descent of supreme evil into the infinite. At moments we seem to discern a reclamation of the elements, some vain effort of chaos to reassert itself over creation. At times it is a complaint. The void bewails and justifies itself. It is as the pleading of the world's cause. We can fancy that the universe is engaged in a lawsuit; we listen — we try to grasp the reasons given, the redoubtable for and against. Such a moaning of the shadows has the tenacity of a syllogism. Here is a vast trouble for thought. Here is the *raison d'être* of mythologies and polytheisms. To the terror of those great murmurs are added superhuman outlines melting away as they appear — Eumenides which are almost distinct, throats of Furies shaped in the clouds, Plutonian chimeras almost defined. No horrors equal those sobs, those laughs, those tricks of tumult, those inscrutable questions and answers, those appeals to unknown aid. Man knows not what to become in the presence of that awful incantation. He bows under the enigma of those Draconian intonations. What latent meaning have they? What do they signify? What do they threaten? What do they implore? It would seem as though all bonds were loosened. Vociferations from precipice to precipice, from air to water, from the wind to the wave, from the rain to the rock, from the zenith to the nadir, from the stars to the foam — the abyss unmuzzled — such is that tumult, complicated by some mysterious strife with evil consciences.

The loquacity of night is not less lugubrious than its silence. One feels in it the anger of the unknown.

Night is a presence. Presence of what?

For that matter we must distinguish between night and the shadows. In the night there is the absolute; in the darkness the multiple. Grammar, logic as it is, admits of no singular for the shadows. The night is one, the shadows are many.

This mist of nocturnal mystery is the scattered, the fugitive, the crumbling, the fatal; one feels earth no longer, one feels the other reality.

In the shadow, infinite and indefinite, lives something or some one; but that which lives there forms part of our death. After our earthly passage, when that shadow shall be light for us, the life which is beyond our life shall seize us. Meanwhile it appears to touch and try us. Obscurity is a pressure. Night is, as it were, a hand placed on our soul. At certain hideous and solemn hours we feel that which is beyond the wall of the tomb encroaching on us.

Never does this proximity of the unknown seem more imminent than in storms at sea. The horrible combines with the fantastic. The possible interrupter of human actions, the old Cloud compeller, has it in his power to mould, in whatsoever shape he chooses, the inconsistent element, the limitless incoherence, the force diffused and undecided of aim. That mystery the tempest every instant accepts and executes some unknown changes of will, apparent or real.

Poets have, in all ages, called this the caprice of the waves. But there is no such thing as caprice. The disconcerting enigmas which in nature we call caprice, and in human life chance, are splinters of a law revealed to us in glimpses.

CHAPTER VIII.

NIX ET NOX.

The characteristic of the snowstorm is its blackness. Nature's habitual aspect during a storm, the earth or sea black and the sky pale, is reversed; the sky is black, the ocean white, foam below, darkness above; a horizon walled in with smoke; a zenith roofed with crape. The tempest resembles a cathedral hung with mourning, but no light in that cathedral: no phantom lights on the crests of the waves, no spark, no phosphorescence, naught but a huge shadow. The polar cyclone differs from the tropical cyclone, inasmuch as the one sets fire to every light, and the other extinguishes them all. The world is suddenly converted into the arched vault of a cave. Out of the night falls a dust of pale spots, which hesitate between sky and sea. These spots, which are flakes of snow, slip, wander, and flow. It is like the tears of a winding-sheet putting themselves into lifelike motion. A mad wind mingles with this dissemination. Blackness crumbling into whiteness, the furious into the obscure, all the tumult of which the sepulchre is capable, a whirlwind under a catafalque — such is the snowstorm. Underneath trembles the ocean, forming and re-forming over portentous unknown depths.

In the polar wind, which is electrical, the flakes turn suddenly into hailstones, and the air becomes filled with projectiles; the water crackles, shot with grape.

No thunderstrokes: the lightning of boreal storms is silent. What is sometimes said of the cat, "it swears," may be applied to this lightning. It is a menace proceeding from a mouth half open and strangely inexorable. The snowstorm is a storm blind and dumb; when it has passed, the ships also are often blind and the sailors dumb.

To escape from such an abyss is difficult.

It would be wrong, however, to believe shipwreck to be absolutely inevitable. The Danish fishermen of Disco and the Balesin; the seekers of black whales; Hearn steering towards Behring Strait, to discover the mouth of Coppermine River; Hudson, Mackenzie, Vancouver, Ross, Dumont D'Urville, all underwent at the Pole itself the wildest hurricanes, and escaped out of them.

It was into this description of tempest that the hooker had entered, triumphant and in full sail — frenzy against frenzy. When Montgomery, escaping from Rouen, threw his galley, with all the force of its oars, against the chain barring the Seine at La Bouille, he showed similar effrontery.

The *Matutina* sailed on fast; she bent so much under her sails that at moments she made a fearful angle with the sea of fifteen degrees; but her good bellied keel adhered to the water as if glued to it. The keel resisted the grasp of the hurricane. The lantern at the prow cast its light ahead.

The cloud, full of winds, dragging its tumour over the deep, cramped and eat more and more into the sea round the hooker. Not a gull, not a sea-mew, nothing but snow. The expanse of the field of waves was becoming contracted and terrible; only three or four gigantic ones were visible.

Now and then a tremendous flash of lightning of a red copper colour broke out behind the obscure superposition of the horizon and the zenith; that sudden release of vermilion flame revealed the horror of the clouds; that abrupt conflagration of the depths, to which for an instant the first tiers of clouds and the distant boundaries of the celestial chaos seemed to adhere, placed the abyss in perspective. On this ground of fire the snow-flakes showed black — they might have been compared to dark butterflies flying about in a furnace — then all was extinguished.

The first explosion over, the squall, still pursuing the hooker, began to roar in thorough bass. This phase of grumbling is a perilous diminution of uproar. Nothing is so terrifying as this monologue of the storm. This gloomy recitative appears to serve as a moment of rest to the mysterious combating forces, and indicates a species of patrol kept in the unknown.

The hooker held wildly on her course. Her two mainsails especially were doing fearful work. The sky and sea were as of ink with jets of foam running higher than the mast. Every instant masses of water swept the deck like a deluge, and at each roll of the vessel the hawse-holes, now to starboard, now to larboard, became as so many open mouths vomiting back the foam into the sea. The women had taken refuge in the cabin, but the men remained on deck; the blinding snow eddied round, the spitting surge mingled with it. All was fury.

At that moment the chief of the band, standing abaft on the stern frames, holding on with one hand to the shrouds, and with the other taking off the kerchief he wore round his head and waving it in the light of the lantern, gay and arrogant, with pride in his face, and his hair in wild disorder, intoxicated by all the darkness, cried out, —

“We are free!”

“Free, free, free,” echoed the fugitives, and the band, seizing hold of the rigging, rose up on deck.

“Hurrah!” shouted the chief.

And the band shouted in the storm, —

“Hurrah!”

Just as this clamour was dying away in the tempest, a loud solemn voice rose from the other end of the vessel, saying, —

“Silence!”

All turned their heads. The darkness was thick, and the doctor was leaning against the mast so that he seemed part of it, and they could not see him.

The voice spoke again, —

“Listen!”

All were silent.

Then did they distinctly hear through the darkness the toll of a bell.

CHAPTER IX.

THE CHARGE CONFIDED TO A RAGING SEA.

The skipper, at the helm, burst out laughing, —

“A bell! that’s good. We are on the larboard tack. What does the bell prove? Why, that we have land to starboard.”

The firm and measured voice of the doctor replied, —

“You have not land to starboard.”

“But we have,” shouted the skipper.

“No!”

“But that bell tolls from the land.”

“That bell,” said the doctor, “tolls from the sea.”

A shudder passed over these daring men. The haggard faces of the two women appeared above the companion like two hobgoblins conjured up. The doctor took a step forward, separating his tall form from the mast. From the depth of the night’s darkness came the toll of the bell.

The doctor resumed, —

“There is in the midst of the sea, halfway between Portland and the Channel Islands, a buoy, placed there as a caution; that buoy is moored by chains to the shoal, and floats on the top of the water. On the buoy is fixed an iron trestle, and across the trestle a bell is hung. In bad weather heavy seas toss the buoy, and the bell rings. That is the bell you hear.”

The doctor paused to allow an extra violent gust of wind to pass over, waited until the sound of the bell reasserted itself, and then went on, —

“To hear that bell in a storm, when the nor’-wester is blowing, is to be lost. Wherefore? For this reason: if you hear the bell, it is because the wind brings it to you. But the wind is nor’-westerly, and the breakers of Aurigny lie east. You hear the bell only because you are between the buoy and the breakers. It is on those breakers the wind is driving you. You are on the wrong side of the buoy. If you were on the right side, you would be out at sea on a safe course, and you would not hear the bell. The wind would not convey the sound to you. You would pass close to the buoy without knowing it. We are out of our course. That bell is shipwreck sounding the tocsin. Now, look out!”

As the doctor spoke, the bell, soothed by a lull of the storm, rang slowly stroke by stroke, and its intermitting toll seemed to testify to the truth of the old man’s words. It was as the knell of the abyss.

All listened breathless, now to the voice, now to the bell.

CHAPTER X.

THE COLOSSAL SAVAGE, THE STORM.

In the meantime the skipper had caught up his speaking-trumpet.

“Strike every sail, my lads; let go the sheets, man the down-hauls, lower ties and brails. Let us steer to the west, let us regain the high sea; head for the buoy, steer for the bell — there’s an offing down there. We’ve yet a chance.”

“Try,” said the doctor.

Let us remark here, by the way, that this ringing buoy, a kind of bell tower on the deep, was removed in 1802. There are yet alive very old mariners who remember hearing it. It forewarned, but rather too late.

The orders of the skipper were obeyed. The Languedocian made a third sailor. All bore a hand. Not satisfied with brailing up, they furled the sails, lashed the earrings, secured the clew-lines, bunt-lines, and leech-lines, and clapped preventer-shrouds on the block straps, which thus might serve as back-stays. They fished the mast. They battened down the ports and bulls’-eyes, which is a method of walling up a ship. These evolutions, though executed in a lubberly fashion, were, nevertheless, thoroughly effective. The hooker was stripped to bare poles. But in proportion as the vessel, stowing every stitch of canvas, became more helpless, the havoc of both winds and waves increased. The seas ran mountains high. The hurricane, like an executioner hastening to his victim, began to dismember the craft. There came, in the twinkling of an eye, a dreadful crash: the top-sails were blown from the bolt-ropes, the chess-trees were hewn asunder, the deck was swept clear, the shrouds were carried away, the mast went by the board, all the lumber of the wreck was flying in shivers. The main shrouds gave out although they were turned in, and stoppered to four fathoms.

The magnetic currents common to snowstorms hastened the destruction of the rigging. It broke as much from the effect of effluvium as the violence of the wind. Most of the chain gear, fouled in the blocks, ceased to work. Forward the bows, aft the quarters, quivered under the terrific shocks. One wave washed overboard the compass and its binnacle. A second carried away the boat, which, like a box slung under a carriage, had been, in accordance with the quaint Asturian custom, lashed to the bowsprit. A third breaker wrenched off the spritsail yard. A fourth swept away the figurehead and signal light. The rudder only was left.

To replace the ship's bow lantern they set fire to, and suspended at the stem, a large block of wood covered with oakum and tar.

The mast, broken in two, all bristling with quivering splinters, ropes, blocks, and yards, cumbered the deck. In falling it had stove in a plank of the starboard gunwale. The skipper, still firm at the helm, shouted, —

"While we can steer we have yet a chance. The lower planks hold good. Axes, axes! Overboard with the mast! Clear the decks!"

Both crew and passengers worked with the excitement of despair. A few strokes of the hatchets, and it was done. They pushed the mast over the side. The deck was cleared.

"Now," continued the skipper, "take a rope's end and lash me to the helm." To the tiller they bound him.

While they were fastening him he laughed, and shouted, —

"Blow, old hurdy-gurdy, bellow. I've seen your equal off Cape Machichaco."

And when secured he clutched the helm with that strange hilarity which danger awakens.

"All goes well, my lads. Long live our Lady of Buglose! Let us steer west."

An enormous wave came down abeam, and fell on the vessel's quarter. There is always in storms a tiger-like wave, a billow fierce and decisive, which, attaining a certain height, creeps horizontally over the surface of the waters for a time, then rises, roars, rages, and falling on the distressed vessel tears it limb from limb.

A cloud of foam covered the entire poop of the *Matutina*.

There was heard above the confusion of darkness and waters a crash.

When the spray cleared off, when the stern again rose in view, the skipper and the helm had disappeared. Both had been swept away.

The helm and the man they had but just secured to it had passed with the wave into the hissing turmoil of the hurricane.

The chief of the band, gazing intently into the darkness, shouted, —

"*Te burlas de nosotros?*"

To this defiant exclamation there followed another cry, —

"Let go the anchor. Save the skipper."

They rushed to the capstan and let go the anchor.

Hookers carry but one. In this case the anchor reached the bottom, but only to be lost. The bottom was of the hardest rock. The billows were raging with resistless force. The cable snapped like a thread.

The anchor lay at the bottom of the sea. At the cutwater there remained but the cable end protruding from the hawse-hole.

From this moment the hooker became a wreck. The *Matutina* was irrevocably disabled. The vessel, just before in full sail, and almost formidable in her speed, was now helpless. All her evolutions were uncertain and executed at random. She yielded passively and like a log to the capricious fury of the waves. That in a few minutes there should be in place of an eagle a useless cripple, such a transformation is to be witnessed only at sea.

The howling of the wind became more and more frightful. A hurricane has terrible lungs; it makes unceasingly mournful additions to darkness, which cannot be intensified. The bell on the sea rang despairingly, as if tolled by a weird hand.

The *Matutina* drifted like a cork at the mercy of the waves. She sailed no longer — she merely floated. Every moment she seemed about to turn over on her back, like a dead fish. The good condition and perfectly water-tight state of the hull alone saved her from this disaster. Below the water-line not a plank had started. There was not a cranny, chink, nor crack; and she had not made a single drop of water in the hold. This was lucky, as the pump, being out of order, was useless.

The hooker pitched and roared frightfully in the seething billows. The vessel had throes as of sickness, and seemed to be trying to belch forth the unhappy crew.

Helpless they clung to the standing rigging, to the transoms, to the shank painters, to the gaskets, to the broken planks, the protruding nails of which tore their hands, to the warped riders, and to all the rugged projections of the stumps of the masts. From time to time they listened. The toll of the bell came over the waters fainter and fainter; one would have thought that it also was in distress. Its ringing was no more than an intermittent rattle. Then this rattle died away. Where were they? At what distance from the buoy? The sound of the bell had frightened them; its silence terrified them. The north-wester drove them forward in perhaps a fatal course. They felt themselves wafted on by maddened and ever-recurring gusts of wind. The wreck sped forward in the darkness. There is nothing more fearful than being hurried forward blindfold. They felt the abyss before them, over them, under them. It was no longer a run, it was a rush.

Suddenly, through the appalling density of the snowstorm, there loomed a red light.

“A lighthouse!” cried the crew.

CHAPTER XI.

THE CASKETS.

It was indeed the Caskets light.

A lighthouse of the nineteenth century is a high cylinder of masonry, surmounted by scientifically constructed machinery for throwing light. The Caskets lighthouse in particular is a triple white tower, bearing three light-rooms. These three chambers revolve on clockwork wheels, with such precision that the man on watch who sees them from sea can invariably take ten steps during their irradiation, and twenty-five during their eclipse. Everything is based on the focal plan, and on the rotation of the octagon drum, formed of eight wide simple lenses in range, having above and below it two series of dioptric rings; an algebraic gear, secured from the effects of the beating of winds and waves by glass a millimetre thick, yet sometimes broken by the sea-eagles, which dash themselves like great moths against these gigantic lanterns. The building which encloses and sustains this mechanism, and in which it is set, is also mathematically constructed. Everything about it is plain, exact, bare, precise, correct. A lighthouse is a mathematical figure.

In the seventeenth century a lighthouse was a sort of plume of the land on the seashore. The architecture of a lighthouse tower was magnificent and extravagant. It was covered with balconies, balusters, lodges, alcoves, weathercocks. Nothing but masks, statues, foliage, volutes, reliefs, figures large and small, medallions with inscriptions. *Pax in bello*, said the Eddystone lighthouse. We may as well observe, by the way, that this declaration of peace did not always disarm the ocean. Winstanley repeated it on a lighthouse which he constructed at his own expense, on a wild spot near Plymouth. The tower being finished, he shut himself up in it to have it tried by the tempest. The storm came, and carried off the lighthouse and Winstanley in it. Such excessive adornment gave too great a hold to the hurricane, as generals too brilliantly equipped in battle draw the enemy’s fire. Besides whimsical designs in stone, they were loaded with whimsical designs in iron, copper, and wood. The ironwork was in relief, the woodwork stood out. On the sides of the lighthouse there jutted out, clinging to the walls among the arabesques, engines of every description, useful and useless, windlasses, tackles, pulleys, counterpoises, ladders, cranes, grapnels. On the pinnacle around the light delicately-wrought ironwork held great iron chandeliers, in which were placed pieces of rope steeped in resin; wicks which burned doggedly, and which no wind extinguished; and from top to bottom the tower was covered by a complication of sea-standards, banderoles, banners, flags, pennons, colours which rose from stage to stage, from story to story, a medley of all hues, all shapes, all heraldic devices, all signals, all confusion, up to the light chamber, making, in the storm, a gay riot of tatters about the blaze. That insolent light on the brink of the abyss showed like a defiance, and inspired shipwrecked men with a spirit of daring. But the Caskets light was not after this fashion.

It was, at that period, merely an old barbarous lighthouse, such as Henry I. had built it after the loss of the *White Ship* — a flaming pile of wood under an iron trellis, a brazier behind a railing, a head of hair flaming in the wind.

The only improvement made in this lighthouse since the twelfth century was a pair of forge-bellows worked by an indented pendulum and a stone weight, which had been added to the light chamber in 1610.

The fate of the sea-birds who chanced to fly against these old lighthouses was more tragic than those of our days. The birds dashed against them, attracted by the light, and fell into the brazier, where they could be seen struggling like black spirits in a hell, and at times they would fall back again between the railings upon the rock, red hot, smoking, lame, blind, like half-burnt flies out of a lamp.

To a full-rigged ship in good trim, answering readily to the pilot’s handling, the Caskets light is useful; it cries, “Look out;” it warns her of the shoal. To a disabled ship it is simply terrible. The hull, paralyzed and inert, without resistance, without defence against the impulse of the storm or the mad heaving of the waves, a fish without fins, a bird without wings, can but go where the wind wills. The lighthouse shows the end — points out the spot where it is doomed to disappear — throws light upon the burial. It is the torch of the sepulchre.

To light up the inexorable chasm, to warn against the inevitable, what more tragic mockery!

CHAPTER XII.

FACE TO FACE WITH THE ROCK.

The wretched people in distress on board the *Matutina* understood at once the mysterious derision which mocked their shipwreck. The appearance of the lighthouse raised their spirits at first, then overwhelmed them. Nothing could be done, nothing attempted. What has been said of kings, we may say of the waves — we are their people, we are their prey. All that they rave must be borne. The nor'-wester was driving the hooker on the Caskets. They were nearing them; no evasion was possible. They drifted rapidly towards the reef; they felt that they were getting into shallow waters; the lead, if they could have thrown it to any purpose, would not have shown more than three or four fathoms. The shipwrecked people heard the dull sound of the waves being sucked within the submarine caves of the steep rock. They made out, under the lighthouse, like a dark cutting between two plates of granite, the narrow passage of the ugly wild-looking little harbour, supposed to be full of the skeletons of men and carcasses of ships. It looked like the mouth of a cavern, rather than the entrance of a port. They could hear the crackling of the pile on high within the iron grating. A ghastly purple illuminated the storm; the collision of the rain and hail disturbed the mist. The black cloud and the red flame fought, serpent against serpent; live ashes, reft by the wind, flew from the fire, and the sudden assaults of the sparks seemed to drive the snowflakes before them. The breakers, blurred at first in outline, now stood out in bold relief, a medley of rocks with peaks, crests, and vertebræ. The angles were formed by strongly marked red lines, and the inclined planes in blood-like streams of light. As they neared it, the outline of the reefs increased and rose — sinister.

One of the women, the Irishwoman, told her beads wildly.

In place of the skipper, who was the pilot, remained the chief, who was the captain. The Basques all know the mountain and the sea. They are bold on the precipice, and inventive in catastrophes.

They neared the cliff. They were about to strike. Suddenly they were so close to the great north rock of the Caskets that it shut out the lighthouse from them. They saw nothing but the rock and the red light behind it. The huge rock looming in the mist was like a gigantic black woman with a hood of fire.

That ill-famed rock is called the Biblet. It faces the north side the reef, which on the south is faced by another ridge, L’Etacq-aux-giulmets. The chief looked at the Biblet, and shouted, —

“A man with a will to take a rope to the rock! Who can swim?”

No answer.

No one on board knew how to swim, not even the sailors — an ignorance not uncommon among seafaring people.

A beam nearly free of its lashings was swinging loose. The chief clasped it with both hands, crying, “Help me.”

They unlashed the beam. They had now at their disposal the very thing they wanted. From the defensive, they assumed the offensive.

It was a longish beam of heart of oak, sound and strong, useful either as a support or as an engine of attack — a lever for a burden, a ram against a tower.

“Ready!” shouted the chief.

All six, getting foothold on the stump of the mast, threw their weight on the spar projecting over the side, straight as a lance towards a projection of the cliff.

It was a dangerous manoeuvre. To strike at a mountain is audacity indeed. The six men might well have been thrown into the water by the shock.

There is variety in struggles with storms. After the hurricane, the shoal; after the wind, the rock. First the intangible, then the immovable, to be encountered.

Some minutes passed, such minutes as whiten men’s hair.

The rock and the vessel were about to come in collision. The rock, like a culprit, awaited the blow.

A resistless wave rushed in; it ended the respite. It caught the vessel underneath, raised it, and swayed it for an instant as the sling swings its projectile.

“Steady!” cried the chief; “it is only a rock, and we are men.”

The beam was couched, the six men were one with it, its sharp bolts tore their arm-pits, but they did not feel them.

The wave dashed the hooker against the rock.

Then came the shock.

It came under the shapeless cloud of foam which always hides such catastrophes.

When this cloud fell back into the sea, when the waves rolled back from the rock, the six men were tossing about the deck, but the *Matutina* was floating alongside the rock — clear of it. The beam had stood and turned the vessel; the sea was running so fast that in a few seconds she had left the Caskets behind.

Such things sometimes occur. It was a straight stroke of the bowsprit that saved Wood of Largo at the mouth of the Tay. In the wild neighbourhood of Cape Winterton, and under the command of Captain Hamilton, it was the appliance of such a lever against the dangerous rock, Branodu-um, that saved the *Royal Mary* from shipwreck, although she was but a Scotch built frigate. The force of the waves can be so abruptly discomposed that changes of direction can be easily managed, or at least are possible even in the most violent collisions. There is a brute in the tempest. The hurricane is a bull, and can be turned.

The whole secret of avoiding shipwreck is to try and pass from the secant to the tangent.

Such was the service rendered by the beam to the vessel. It had done the work of an oar, had taken the place of a rudder. But the manoeuvre once performed could not be repeated. The beam was overboard; the shock of the collision had wrenched it out of the men's hands, and it was lost in the waves. To loosen another beam would have been to dislocate the hull.

The hurricane carried off the *Matutina*. Presently the Caskets showed as a harmless encumbrance on the horizon. Nothing looks more out of countenance than a reef of rocks under such circumstances. There are in nature, in its obscure aspects, in which the visible blends with the invisible, certain motionless, surly profiles, which seem to express that a prey has escaped.

Thus glowered the Caskest while the *Matutina* fled.

The lighthouse paled in distance, faded, and disappeared.

There was something mournful in its extinction. Layers of mist sank down upon the now uncertain light. Its rays died in the waste of waters; the flame floated, struggled, sank, and lost its form. It might have been a drowning creature. The brasier dwindled to the snuff of a candle; then nothing; more but a weak, uncertain flutter. Around it spread a circle of extravasated glimmer; it was like the quenching of: light in the pit of night.

The bell which had threatened was dumb. The lighthouse which had threatened had melted away. And yet it was more awful now that they had ceased to threaten. One was a voice, the other a torch. There was something human about them.

They were gone, and nought remained but the abyss.

CHAPTER XIII.

FACE TO FACE WITH NIGHT.

Again was the hooker running with the shadow into immeasurable darkness.

The *Matutina*, escaped from the Caskets, sank and rose from billow to billow. A respite, but in chaos.

Spun round by the wind, tossed by all the thousand motions of the wave, she reflected every mad oscillation of the sea. She scarcely pitched at all — a terrible symptom of a ship's distress. Wrecks merely roll. Pitching is a convulsion of the strife. The helm alone can turn a vessel to the wind.

In storms, and more especially in the meteors of snow, sea and night end by melting into amalgamation, resolving into nothing but a smoke. Mists, whirlwinds, gales, motion in all directions, no basis, no shelter, no stop. Constant recommencement, one gulf succeeding another. No horizon visible; intense blackness for background. Through all these the hooker drifted.

To have got free of the Caskets, to have eluded the rock, was a victory for the shipwrecked men; but it was a victory which left them in stupor. They had raised no cheer: at sea such an imprudence is not repeated twice. To throw down a challenge where they could not cast the lead, would have been too serious a jest.

The repulse of the rock was an impossibility achieved. They were petrified by it. By degrees, however, they began to hope again. Such are the insubmergable mirages of the soul! There is no distress so complete but that even in the most critical moments the inexplicable sunrise of hope is seen in its depths. These poor wretches were ready to acknowledge to themselves that they were saved. It was on their lips.

But suddenly something terrible appeared to them in the darkness.

On the port bow arose, standing stark, cut out on the background of mist, a tall, opaque mass, vertical, right-angled, a tower of the abyss. They watched it open-mouthed.

The storm was driving them towards it.

They knew not what it was. It was the Ortach rock.

CHAPTER XIV.

ORTACH.

The reef reappeared. After the Caskets comes Ortach. The storm is no artist; brutal and all-powerful, it never varies its appliances. The darkness is inexhaustible. Its snares and perfidies never come to an end. As for man, he soon comes to the bottom of his resources. Man expends his strength, the abyss never.

The shipwrecked men turned towards the chief, their hope. He could only shrug his shoulders. Dismal contempt of helplessness.

A pavement in the midst of the ocean — such is the Ortach rock. The Ortach, all of a piece, rises up in a straight line to eighty feet above the angry beating of the waves. Waves and ships break against it. An immovable cube, it plunges its rectilinear planes apeak into the numberless serpentine curves of the sea.

At night it stands an enormous block resting on the folds of a huge black sheet. In time of storm it awaits the stroke of the axe, which is the thunder-clap.

But there is never a thunder-clap during the snowstorm. True, the ship has the bandage round her eyes; darkness is knotted about her; she is like one prepared to be led to the scaffold. As for the thunderbolt, which makes quick ending, it is not to be hoped for.

The *Matutina*, nothing better than a log upon the waters, drifted towards this rock as she had drifted towards the other. The poor wretches on board, who had for a moment believed themselves saved, relapsed into their agony. The destruction they had left behind faced them again. The reef reappeared from the bottom of the sea. Nothing had been gained.

The Caskets are a figuring iron with a thousand compartments. The Ortach is a wall. To be wrecked on the Caskets is to be cut into ribbons; to strike on the Ortach is to be crushed into powder.

Nevertheless, there was one chance.

On a straight frontage such as that of the Ortach neither the wave nor the cannon ball can ricochet. The operation is simple: first the flux, then the reflux; a wave advances, a billow returns.

In such cases the question of life and death is balanced thus: if the wave carries the vessel on the rock, she breaks on it and is lost; if the billow retires before the ship has touched, she is carried back, she is saved.

It was a moment of great anxiety; those on board saw through the gloom the great decisive wave bearing down on them. How far was it going to drag them? If the wave broke upon the ship, they were carried on the rock and dashed to pieces. If it passed under the ship....

The wave *did* pass under.

They breathed again.

But what of the recoil? What would the surf do with them? The surf carried them back. A few minutes later the *Matutina* was free of the breakers. The Ortach faded from their view, as the Caskets had done. It was their second victory. For the second time the hooker had verged on destruction, and had drawn back in time.

CHAPTER XV.

PORTENTOSUM MARE.

Meanwhile a thickening mist had descended on the drifting wretches. They were ignorant of their whereabouts, they could scarcely see a cable's length around. Despite a furious storm of hail which forced them to bend down their heads, the women had obstinately refused to go below again. No one, however hopeless, but wishes, if shipwreck be inevitable, to meet it in the open air. When so near death, a ceiling above one's head seems like the first outline of a coffin.

They were now in a short and chopping sea. A turgid sea indicates its constraint. Even in a fog the entrance into a strait may be known by the boiling-like appearance of the waves. And thus it was, for they were unconsciously coasting Aurigny. Between the west of Ortach and the Caskets and the east of Aurigny the sea is hemmed in and cramped, and the uneasy position determines locally the condition of storms. The sea suffers like others, and when it suffers it is irritable. That channel is a thing to fear.

The *Matutina* was in it.

Imagine under the sea a tortoise shell as big as Hyde Park or the Champs Elysées, of which every striature is a shallow, and every embossment a reef. Such is the western approach of Aurigny. The sea covers and conceals this ship-wrecking apparatus. On this conglomeration of submarine breakers the cloven waves leap and foam — in calm weather, a chopping sea; in storms, a chaos.

The shipwrecked men observed this new complication without endeavouring to explain it to themselves. Suddenly they understood it. A pale vista broadened in the zenith; a wan tinge overspread the sea; the livid light revealed on the port side a long shoal stretching eastward, towards which the power of the rushing wind was driving the vessel. The shoal was Aurigny.

What was that shoal? They shuddered. They would have shuddered even more had a voice answered them — Aurigny.

No isle so well defended against man's approach as Aurigny. Below and above water it is protected by a savage guard, of which Ortach is the outpost. To the west, Burhou, Sauteriaux, Anfroque, Niangle, Fond du

Croc, Les Jumelles, La Grosse, La Clanque, Les Eguillons, Le Vrac, La Fosse-Malière; to the east, Sauquet, Hommeau Floreau, La Brinebetais, La Queslingue, Croquelihou, La Fourche, Le Saut, Noire Pute, Coupie, Orbue. These are hydra-monsters of the species reef.

One of these reefs is called Le But, the goal, as if to imply that every voyage ends there.

This obstruction of rocks, simplified by night and sea, appeared to the shipwrecked men in the shape of a single dark band, a sort of black blot on the horizon.

Shipwreck is the ideal of helplessness; to be near land, and unable to reach it; to float, yet not to be able to do so in any desired direction; to rest the foot on what seems firm and is fragile; to be full of life, when o'ershadowed by death; to be the prisoner of space; to be walled in between sky and ocean; to have the infinite overhead like a dungeon; to be encompassed by the eluding elements of wind and waves; and to be seized, bound, paralyzed — such a load of misfortune stupefies and crushes us. We imagine that in it we catch a glimpse of the sneer of the opponent who is beyond our reach. That which holds you fast is that which releases the birds and sets the fishes free. It appears nothing, and is everything. We are dependent on the air which is ruffled by our mouths; we are dependent on the water which we catch in the hollow of our hands. Draw a glassful from the storm, and it is but a cup of bitterness — a mouthful is nausea, a waveful is extermination. The grain of sand in the desert, the foam-flake on the sea, are fearful symptoms. Omnipotence takes no care to hide its atom, it changes weakness into strength, fills naught with all; and it is with the infinitely little that the infinitely great crushes you. It is with its drops the ocean dissolves you. You feel you are a plaything.

A plaything — ghastly epithet!

The *Matutina* was a little above Aurigny, which was not an unfavourable position; but she was drifting towards its northern point, which was fatal. As a bent bow discharges its arrow, the nor'-wester was shooting the vessel towards the northern cape. Off that point, a little beyond the harbour of Corbelets, is that which the seamen of the Norman archipelago call a "*singe*."

The "*singe*," or race, is a furious kind of current. A wreath of funnels in the shallows produces in the waves a wreath of whirlpools. You escape one to fall into another. A ship caught hold of by the race, winds round and round until some sharp rock cleaves her hull; then the shattered vessel stops, her stern rises from the waves, the stem completes the revolution in the abyss, the stern sinks in, and all is sucked down. A circle of foam broadens and floats, and nothing more is seen on the surface of the waves but a few bubbles here and there rising from the smothered breathings below.

The three most dangerous races in the whole Channel are one close to the well-known Girdler Sands, one at Jersey between the Pignonnet and the Point of Noirmont, and the race of Aurigny.

Had a local pilot been on board the *Matutina*, he could have warned them of their fresh peril. In place of a pilot, they had their instinct. In situations of extreme danger men are endowed with second sight. High contortions of foam were flying along the coast in the frenzied raid of the wind. It was the spitting of the race. Many a bark has been swamped in that snare. Without knowing what awaited them, they approached the spot with horror.

How to double that cape? There were no means of doing it.

Just as they had seen, first the Caskets, then Ortach, rise before them, they now saw the point of Aurigny, all of steep rock. It was like a number of giants, rising up one after another — a series of frightful duels.

Charybdis and Scylla are but two; the Caskets, Ortach, and Aurigny are three.

The phenomenon of the horizon being invaded by the rocks was thus repeated with the grand monotony of the abyss. The battles of the ocean have the same sublime tautology as the combats of Homer.

Each wave, as they neared it, added twenty cubits to the cape, awfully magnified by the mist; the fast decreasing distance seemed more inevitable — they were touching the skirts of the race! The first fold which seized them would drag them in — another wave surmounted, and all would be over.

Suddenly the hooker was driven back, as by the blow of a Titan’s fist. The wave reared up under the vessel and fell back, throwing the waif back in its mane of foam. The *Matutina*, thus impelled, drifted away from Aurigny.

She was again on the open sea.

Whence had come the succour? From the wind. The breath of the storm had changed its direction.

The wave had played with them; now it was the wind's turn. They had saved themselves from the Caskets. Off Ortach it was the wave which had been their friend. Now it was the wind. The wind had suddenly veered from north to south. The sou'-wester had succeeded the nor'-wester.

The current is the wind in the waters; the wind is the current in the air. These two forces had just counteracted each other, and it had been the wind's will to snatch its prey from the current.

The sudden fantasies of ocean are uncertain. They are, perhaps, an embodiment of the perpetual, when at their mercy man must neither hope nor despair. They do and they undo. The ocean amuses itself. Every shade of wild, untamed ferocity is phased in the vastness of that cunning sea, which Jean Bart used to call the "great brute." To its claws and their gashings succeed soft intervals of velvet paws. Sometimes the storm hurries on a wreck, at others it works out the problem with care; it might almost be said that it caresses it. The sea can afford to take its time, as men in their agonies find out.

We must own that occasionally these lulls of the torture announce deliverance. Such cases are rare. However this may be, men in extreme peril are quick to believe in rescue; the slightest pause in the storm's threats is sufficient; they tell themselves that they are out of danger. After believing themselves buried, they declare their resurrection; they feverishly embrace what they do not yet possess; it is clear that the bad luck has turned; they declare themselves satisfied; they are saved; they cry quits with God. They should not be in so great a hurry to give receipts to the Unknown.

The sou'-wester set in with a whirlwind. Shipwrecked men have never any but rough helpers. The *Matutina* was dragged rapidly out to sea by the remnant of her rigging — like a dead woman trailed by the hair. It was like the enfranchisement granted by Tiberius, at the price of violation.

The wind treated with brutality those whom it saved; it rendered service with fury; it was help without pity.

The wreck was breaking up under the severity of its deliverers.

Hailstones, big and hard enough to charge a blunderbuss, smote the vessel; at every rotation of the waves these hailstones rolled about the deck like marbles. The hooker, whose deck was almost flush with the water, was being beaten out of shape by the rolling masses of water and its sheets of spray. On board it each man was for himself.

They clung on as best they could. As each sea swept over them, it was with a sense of surprise they saw that all were still there. Several had their faces torn by splinters.

Happily despair has stout hands. In terror a child's hand has the grasp of a giant. Agony makes a vice of a woman's fingers. A girl in her fright can almost bury her rose-coloured fingers in a piece of iron. With hooked fingers they hung on somehow, as the waves dashed on and passed off them; but every wave brought them the fear of being swept away.

Suddenly they were relieved.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE PROBLEM SUDDENLY WORKS IN SILENCE.

The hurricane had just stopped short. There was no longer in the air sou'-wester or nor'-wester. The fierce clarions of space were mute. The whole of the waterspout had poured from the sky without any warning of diminution, as if it had slided perpendicularly into a gulf beneath. None knew what had become of it; flakes replaced the hailstones, the snow began to fall slowly. No more swell: the sea flattened down.

Such sudden cessations are peculiar to snowstorms. The electric effluvium exhausted, all becomes still, even the wave, which in ordinary storms often remains agitated for a long time. In snowstorms it is not so. No prolonged anger in the deep. Like a tired-out worker it becomes drowsy directly, thus almost giving the lie to the laws of statics, but not astonishing old seamen, who know that the sea is full of unforeseen surprises.

The same phenomenon takes place, although very rarely, in ordinary storms. Thus, in our time, on the occasion of the memorable hurricane of July 27th, 1867, at Jersey the wind, after fourteen hours' fury, suddenly relapsed into a dead calm.

In a few minutes the hooker was floating in sleeping waters.

At the same time (for the last phase of these storms resembles the first) they could distinguish nothing; all that had been made visible in the convulsions of the meteoric cloud was again dark. Pale outlines were fused in vague mist, and the gloom of infinite space closed about the vessel. The wall of night — that circular occlusion, that interior of a cylinder the diameter of which was lessening minute by minute — enveloped the *Matutina*, and, with the sinister deliberation of an encroaching iceberg, was drawing in dangerously. In the zenith nothing — a lid of fog closing down. It was as if the hooker were at the bottom of the well of the abyss.

In that well the sea was a puddle of liquid lead. No stir in the waters — ominous immobility! The ocean is never less tamed than when it is still as a pool.

All was silence, stillness, blindness.

Perchance the silence of inanimate objects is taciturnity.

The last ripples glided along the hull. The deck was horizontal, with an insensible slope to the sides. Some broken planks were shifting about irresolutely. The block on which they had lighted the tow steeped in tar, in place of the signal light which had been swept away, swung no longer at the prow, and no longer let fall burning drops into the sea. What little breeze remained in the clouds was noiseless. The snow fell thickly, softly, with scarce a slant. No foam of breakers could be heard. The peace of shadows was over all.

This repose succeeding all the past exasperations and paroxysms was, for the poor creatures so long tossed about, an unspeakable comfort. It was as though the punishment of the rack had ceased. They caught a glimpse about them and above them of something which seemed like a consent, that they should be saved. They regained confidence. All that had been fury was now tranquillity. It appeared to them a pledge of peace. Their wretched hearts dilated. They were able to let go the end of rope or beam to which they had clung, to rise, hold themselves up, stand, walk, move about. They felt inexpressibly calmed. There are in the depths of darkness such phases of paradise, preparations for other things. It was clear that they were delivered out of the storm, out of the foam, out of the wind, out of the uproar. Henceforth all the chances were in their favour. In three or four hours it would be sunrise. They would be seen by some passing ship; they would be rescued. The worst was over; they were re-entering life. The important feat was to have been able to keep afloat until the cessation of the tempest. They said to themselves, “It is all over this time.”

Suddenly they found that all was indeed over.

One of the sailors, the northern Basque, Galdeazun by name, went down into the hold to look for a rope, then came above again and said, —

“The hold is full.”

“Of what?” asked the chief.

“Of water,” answered the sailor.

The chief cried out, —

“What does that mean?”

“It means,” replied Galdeazun, “that in half an hour we shall founder.”

CHAPTER XVII.

THE LAST RESOURCE.

There was a hole in the keel. A leak had been sprung. When it happened no one could have said. Was it when they touched the Caskets? Was it off Ortach? Was it when they were whirled about the shallows west of Aurigny? It was most probable that they had touched some rock there. They had struck against some hidden buttress which they had not felt in the midst of the convulsive fury of the wind which was tossing them. In tetanus who would feel a prick?

The other sailor, the southern Basque, whose name was Ave Maria, went down into the hold, too, came on deck again, and said, —

“There are two varas of water in the hold.”

About six feet.

Ave Maria added, “In less than forty minutes we shall sink.”

Where was the leak? They couldn’t find it. It was hidden by the water which was filling up the hold. The vessel had a hole in her hull somewhere under the water-line, quite forward in the keel. Impossible to find it — impossible to check it. They had a wound which they could not stanch. The water, however, was not rising very fast.

The chief called out,

“We must work the pump.”

Galdeazun replied, “We have no pump left.”

“Then,” said the chief, “we must make for land.”

“Where is the land?”

“I don’t know.”

“Nor I.”

“But it must be somewhere.”

“True enough.”

“Let some one steer for it.”

“We have no pilot.”

“Stand to the tiller yourself.”

“We have lost the tiller.”

“Let’s rig one out of the first beam we can lay hands on. Nails — a hammer — quick — some tools.”

"The carpenter's box is overboard, we have no tools."

"We'll steer all the same, no matter where."

"The rudder is lost."

"Where is the boat? We'll get in and row."

"The boat is lost."

"We'll row the wreck."

"We have lost the oars."

"We'll sail."

"We have lost the sails and the mast."

"We'll rig one up with a pole and a tarpaulin for sail Let's get clear of this and trust in the wind."

"There is no wind."

The wind, indeed, had left them, the storm had fled; and its departure, which they had believed to mean safety, meant, in fact, destruction. Had the sou'-wester continued it might have driven them wildly on some shore — might have beaten the leak in speed — might, perhaps, have carried them to some propitious sandbank, and cast them on it before the hooker foundered. The swiftness of the storm, bearing them away, might have enabled them to reach land; but no more wind, no more hope. They were going to die because the hurricane was over.

The end was near!

Wind, hail, the hurricane, the whirlwind — these are wild combatants that may be overcome; the storm can be taken in the weak point of its armour; there are resources against the violence which continually lays itself open, is off its guard, and often hits wide. But nothing is to be done against a calm; it offers nothing to the grasp of which you can lay hold.

The winds are a charge of Cossacks: stand your ground and they disperse. Calms are the pincers of the executioner.

The water, deliberate and sure, irrepressible and heavy, rose in the hold, and as it rose the vessel sank — it was happening slowly.

Those on board the wreck of the *Matutina* felt that most hopeless of catastrophes — an inert catastrophe undermining them. The still and sinister certainty of their fate petrified them. No stir in the air, no movement on the sea. The motionless is the inexorable. Absorption was sucking them down silently. Through the depths of the dumb waters — without anger, without passion, not willing, not knowing, not caring — the fatal centre of the globe was attracting them downwards. Horror in repose amalgamating them with itself. It was no longer the wide open mouth of the sea, the double jaw of the wind and the wave, vicious in its threat, the grin of the waterspout, the foaming appetite of the breakers — it was as if the wretched beings had under them the black yawn of the infinite.

They felt themselves sinking into Death's peaceful depths. The height between the vessel and the water was lessening — that was all. They could calculate her disappearance to the moment. It was the exact reverse of submersion by the rising tide. The water was not rising towards them; they were sinking towards it. They were digging their own grave. Their own weight was their sexton.

They were being executed, not by the law of man, but by the law of things.

The snow was falling, and as the wreck was now motionless, this white lint made a cloth over the deck and covered the vessel as with a winding-sheet.

The hold was becoming fuller and deeper — no means of getting at the leak. They struck a light and fixed three or four torches in holes as best they could. Galdeazun brought some old leathern buckets, and they tried to bale the hold out, standing in a row to pass them from hand to hand; but the buckets were past use, the leather of some was unstitched, there were holes in the bottoms of the others, and the buckets emptied themselves on the way. The difference in quantity between the water which was making its way in and that which they returned to the sea was ludicrous — for a ton that entered a glassful was baled out; they did not improve their condition. It was like the expenditure of a miser, trying to exhaust a million, halfpenny by halfpenny.

The chief said, "Let us lighten the wreck."

During the storm they had lashed together the few chests which were on deck. These remained tied to the stump of the mast. They undid the lashings and rolled the chests overboard through a breach in the gunwale. One of these trunks belonged to the Basque woman, who could not repress a sigh.

"Oh, my new cloak lined with scarlet! Oh, my poor stockings of birchen-bark lace! Oh, my silver ear-rings to wear at mass on May Day!"

The deck cleared, there remained the cabin to be seen to. It was greatly encumbered; in it were, as may be remembered, the luggage belonging to the passengers, and the bales belonging to the sailors. They took the luggage, and threw it over the gunwale. They carried up the bales and cast them into the sea.

Thus they emptied the cabin. The lantern, the cap, the barrels, the sacks, the bales, and the water-butts, the pot of soup, all went over into the waves.

They unscrewed the nuts of the iron stove, long since extinguished: they pulled it out, hoisted it on deck, dragged it to the side, and threw it out of the vessel.

They cast overboard everything they could pull out of the deck — chains, shrouds, and torn rigging.

From time to time the chief took a torch, and throwing its light on the figures painted on the prow to show the draught of water, looked to see how deep the wreck had settled down.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE HIGHEST RESOURCE.

The wreck being lightened, was sinking more slowly, but none the less surely.

The hopelessness of their situation was without resource — without mitigation; they had exhausted their last expedient.

“Is there anything else we can throw overboard?”

The doctor, whom every one had forgotten, rose from the companion, and said,

“Yes.”

“What?” asked the chief.

The doctor answered, “Our Crime.”

They shuddered, and all cried out, —

“Amen.”

The doctor standing up, pale, raised his hand to heaven, saying, —

“Kneel down.”

They wavered — to waver is the preface to kneeling down.

The doctor went on, —

“Let us throw our crimes into the sea, they weigh us down; it is they that are sinking the ship. Let us think no more of safety — let us think of salvation. Our last crime, above all, the crime which we committed, or rather completed, just now — O wretched beings who are listening to me — it is that which is overwhelming us. For those who leave intended murder behind them, it is an impious insolence to tempt the abyss. He who sins against a child, sins against God. True, we were obliged to put to sea, but it was certain perdition. The storm, warned by the shadow of our crime, came on. It is well. Regret nothing, however. There, not far off in the darkness, are the sands of Vauville and Cape la Hogue. It is France. There was but one possible shelter for us, which was Spain. France is no less dangerous to us than England. Our deliverance from the sea would have led but to the gibbet. Hanged or drowned — we had no alternative. God has chosen for us; let us give Him thanks. He has vouchsafed us the grave which cleanses. Brethren, the inevitable hand is in it. Remember that it was we who just now did our best to send on high that child, and that at this very moment, now as I speak, there is perhaps, above our heads, a soul accusing us before a Judge whose eye is on us. Let us make the best use of this last respite; let us make an effort, if we still may, to repair, as far as we are able, the evil that we have wrought. If the child survives us, let us come to his aid; if he is dead, let us seek his forgiveness. Let us cast our crime from us. Let us ease our consciences of its weight. Let us strive that our souls be not swallowed up before God, for that is the awful shipwreck. Bodies go to the fishes, souls to the devils. Have pity on yourselves. Kneel down, I tell you. Repentance is the bark which never sinks. You have lost your compass! You are wrong! You still have prayer."

The wolves became lambs — such transformations occur in last agonies; tigers lick the crucifix; when the dark portal opens ajar, belief is difficult, unbelief impossible. However imperfect may be the different sketches of religion essayed by man, even when his belief is shapeless, even when the outline of the dogma is not in harmony with the lineaments of the eternity he foresees, there comes in his last hour a trembling of the soul. There is something which will begin when life is over; this thought impresses the last pang.

A man's dying agony is the expiration of a term. In that fatal second he feels weighing on him a diffused responsibility. That which has been complicates that which is to be. The past returns and enters into the future. What is known becomes as much an abyss as the unknown. And the two chasms, the one which is full by his faults, the other of his anticipations, mingle their reverberations. It is this confusion of the two gulfs which terrifies the dying man.

They had spent their last grain of hope on the direction of life; hence they turned in the other. Their only remaining chance was in its dark shadow. They understood it. It came on them as a lugubrious flash, followed by the relapse of horror. That which is intelligible to the dying man is as what is perceived in the lightning. Everything, then nothing; you see, then all is blindness. After death the eye will reopen, and that which was a flash will become a sun.

They cried out to the doctor, —

"Thou, thou, there is no one but thee. We will obey thee, what must we do? Speak."

The doctor answered, —

“The question is how to pass over the unknown precipice and reach the other bank of life, which is beyond the tomb. Being the one who knows the most, my danger is greater than yours. You do well to leave the choice of the bridge to him whose burden is the heaviest.”

He added, —

“Knowledge is a weight added to conscience.”

He continued, —

“How much time have we still?”

Galdeazun looked at the water-mark, and answered, —

“A little more than a quarter of an hour.”

“Good,” said the doctor.

The low hood of the companion on which he leant his elbows made a sort of table; the doctor took from his pocket his inkhorn and pen, and his pocket-book out of which he drew a parchment, the same one on the back of which he had written, a few hours before, some twenty cramped and crooked lines.

“A light,” he said.

The snow, falling like the spray of a cataract, had extinguished the torches one after another; there was but one left. Ave Maria took it out of the place where it had been stuck, and holding it in his hand, came and stood by the doctor’s side.

The doctor replaced his pocket-book in his pocket, put down the pen and inkhorn on the hood of the companion, unfolded the parchment, and said, —

“Listen.”

Then in the midst of the sea, on the failing bridge (a sort of shuddering flooring of the tomb), the doctor began a solemn reading, to which all the shadows seemed to listen. The doomed men bowed their heads around him. The flaming of the torch intensified their pallor. What the doctor read was written in English. Now and then, when one of those woebegone looks seemed to ask an explanation, the doctor would stop, to repeat — whether in French, or Spanish, Basque, or Italian — the passage he had just read. Stifled sobs and hollow beatings of the breast were heard. The wreck was sinking more and more.

The reading over, the doctor placed the parchment flat on the companion, seized his pen, and on a clear margin which he had carefully left at the bottom of what he had written, he signed himself, GERNARDUS GEESTEMUNDE: Doctor.

Then, turning towards the others, he said, —

“Come, and sign.”

The Basque woman approached, took the pen, and signed herself, ASUNCION.

She handed the pen to the Irish woman, who, not knowing how to write, made a cross.

The doctor, by the side of this cross, wrote, BARBARA FERMOY, *of Tyrrif Island, in the Hebrides*.

Then he handed the pen to the chief of the band.

The chief signed, GAIZDORRA: *Captal*.

The Genoese signed himself under the chief’s name. GIANGIRATE.

The Languedocian signed, JACQUES QUARTOURZE: *alias, the Narbonnais*.

The Provençal signed, LUC-PIERRE CAPGAROUPE, *of the Galleys of Mahon*.

Under these signatures the doctor added a note: —

“Of the crew of three men, the skipper having been washed overboard by a sea, but two remain, and they have signed.”

The two sailors affixed their names underneath the note. The northern Basque signed himself, GALDEAZUN.

The southern Basque signed, AVE MARIA: *Robber*.

Then the doctor said, —

“Capgaroupe.”

“Here,” said the Provençal.

“Have you Hardquanonne’s flask?”

“Yes.”

“Give it me.”

Capgaroupe drank off the last mouthful of brandy, and handed the flask to the doctor.

The water was rising in the hold; the wreck was sinking deeper and deeper into the sea. The sloping edges of the ship were covered by a thin gnawing wave, which was rising. All were crowded on the centre of the deck.

The doctor dried the ink on the signatures by the heat of the torch, and folding the parchment into a narrower compass than the diameter of the neck, put it into the flask. He called for the cork.

“I don’t know where it is,” said Capgaroupe.

“Here is a piece of rope,” said Jacques Quartourze.

The doctor corked the flask with a bit of rope, and asked for some tar. Galdeazun went forward, extinguished the signal light with a piece of tow, took the vessel in which it was contained from the stern, and brought it, half full of burning tar, to the doctor.

The flask holding the parchment which they had all signed was corked and tarred over.

“It is done,” said the doctor.

And from out all their mouths, vaguely stammered in every language, came the dismal utterances of the catacombs.

“Ainsi soit-il!”

“Mea culpa!”

“Asi sea!”

“Aro raï!”

“Amen!”

It was as though the sombre voices of Babel were scattered through the shadows as Heaven uttered its awful refusal to hear them.

The doctor turned away from his companions in crime and distress, and took a few steps towards the gunwale. Reaching the side, he looked into space, and said, in a deep voice, —

“Bist du bei mir?”

Perchance he was addressing some phantom.

The wreck was sinking.

Behind the doctor all the others were in a dream. Prayer mastered them by main force. They did not bow, they were bent. There was something involuntary in their condition; they wavered as a sail flaps when the breeze fails. And the haggard group took by degrees, with clasping of hands and prostration of foreheads, attitudes various, yet of humiliation. Some strange reflection of the deep seemed to soften their villainous features.

The doctor returned towards them. Whatever had been his past, the old man was great in the presence of the catastrophe.

The deep reserve of nature which enveloped him preoccupied without disconcerting him. He was not one to be taken unawares. Over him was the calm of a silent horror: on his countenance the majesty of God’s will comprehended.

This old and thoughtful outlaw unconsciously assumed the air of a pontiff.

He said, —

“Attend to me.”

He contemplated for a moment the waste of water, and added, —

“Now we are going to die.”

Then he took the torch from the hands of Ave Maria, and waved it.

A spark broke from it and flew into the night.

Then the doctor cast the torch into the sea.

The torch was extinguished: all light disappeared. Nothing left but the huge, unfathomable shadow. It was like the filling up of the grave.

In the darkness the doctor was heard saying, —

“Let us pray.”

All knelt down.

It was no longer on the snow, but in the water, that they knelt.

They had but a few minutes more.

The doctor alone remained standing.

The flakes of snow falling on him had sprinkled him with white tears, and made him visible on the background of darkness. He might have been the speaking statue of the shadow.

The doctor made the sign of the cross and raised his voice, while beneath his feet he felt that almost imperceptible oscillation which prefaces the moment in which a wreck is about to founder. He said, —

“Pater noster qui es in coelis.”

The Provençal repeated in French, —

“Notre Père qui êtes aux cieux.”

The Irishwoman repeated in Gaelic, understood by the Basque woman, —

“Ar nathair ata ar neamh.”

The doctor continued, —

“Sanctificetur nomen tuum.”

“Que votre nom soit sanctifié,” said the Provençal.

“Naomhthar hainm,” said the Irishwoman.

“Adveniat regnum tuum,” continued the doctor.

“Que votre règne arrive,” said the Provençal.

“Tigeadh do rioghachd,” said the Irishwoman.

As they knelt, the waters had risen to their shoulders. The doctor went on, —

“Fiat voluntas tua.”

“Que votre volonté soit faite,” stammered the Provençal.

And the Irishwoman and Basque woman cried, —

“Deuntar do thoil ar an Hhalàmb.”

“Sicut in coelo, sicut in terra,” said the doctor.

No voice answered him.

He looked down. All their heads were under water. They had let themselves be drowned on their knees.

The doctor took in his right hand the flask which he had placed on the companion, and raised it above his head.

The wreck was going down. As he sank, the doctor murmured the rest of the prayer.

For an instant his shoulders were above water, then his head, then nothing remained but his arm holding up the flask, as if he were showing it to the Infinite.

His arm disappeared; there was no greater fold on the deep sea than there would have been on a tun of oil. The snow continued falling.

One thing floated, and was carried by the waves into the darkness. It was the tarred flask, kept afloat by its osier cover.

BOOK THE THIRD.

THE CHILD IN THE SHADOW.

CHAPTER I.

CHESIL.

The storm was no less severe on land than on sea. The same wild enfranchisement of the elements had taken place around the abandoned child. The weak and innocent become their sport in the expenditure of the unreasoning rage of their blind forces. Shadows discern not, and things inanimate have not the clemency they are supposed to possess.

On the land there was but little wind. There was an inexplicable dumbness in the cold. There was no hail. The thickness of the falling snow was fearful.

Hailstones strike, harass, bruise, stun, crush. Snowflakes do worse: soft and inexorable, the snowflake does its work in silence; touch it, and it melts. It is pure, even as the hypocrite is candid. It is by white particles slowly heaped upon each other that the flake becomes an avalanche and the knave a criminal.

The child continued to advance into the mist. The fog presents but a soft obstacle; hence its danger. It yields, and yet persists. Mist, like snow, is full of treachery. The child, strange wrestler at war with all these risks, had succeeded in reaching the bottom of the descent, and had gained Chesil. Without knowing it he was on an isthmus, with the ocean on each side; so that he could not lose his way in the fog, in the snow, or in the darkness, without falling into the deep waters of the gulf on the right hand, or into the raging billows of the high sea on the left. He was travelling on, in ignorance, between these two abysses.

The Isthmus of Portland was at this period singularly sharp and rugged. Nothing remains at this date of its past configuration. Since the idea of manufacturing Portland stone into Roman cement was first seized, the whole rock has been subjected to an alteration which has completely changed its original appearance. Calcareous lias, slate, and trap are still to be found there, rising from layers of conglomerate, like teeth from a gum; but the pickaxe has broken up and levelled those bristling, rugged peaks which were once the fearful perches of the ossifrage. The summits exist no longer where the labbes and the skua gulls used to flock together, soaring, like the envious, to sully high places. In vain might you seek the tall monolith called Godolphin, an old British word, signifying “white eagle.” In summer you may still gather on those surfaces, pierced and perforated like a sponge, rosemary, pennyroyal, wild hyssop, and sea-fennel which when infused makes a good cordial, and that herb full of knots, which grows in the sand and from which they make matting; but you no longer find gray amber, or black tin, or that triple species of slate — one sort green, one blue, and the third the colour of sage-leaves. The foxes, the badgers, the otters, and the martens have taken themselves off; on the cliffs of Portland, as well as at the extremity of Cornwall, where there were at one time chamois, none remain. They still fish in some inlets for plaice and pilchards; but the scared salmon no longer ascend the Wey, between Michaelmas and Christmas, to spawn. No more are seen there, as during the reign of Elizabeth, those old unknown birds as large as hawks, who could cut an apple in two, but ate only the pips. You never meet those crows with yellow beaks, called Cornish choughs in English, *pyrrocorax* in Latin, who, in their mischief, would drop burning twigs on thatched roofs. Nor that magic bird, the fulmar, a wanderer from the Scottish archipelago, dropping from his bill an oil which the islanders used to burn in their lamps. Nor do you ever find in the evening, in the plash of the ebbing tide, that ancient, legendary neitse, with the feet of a hog and the bleat of a calf. The tide no longer throws up the whiskered seal, with its curled ears and sharp jaws, dragging itself along on its nailless paws. On that Portland — nowadays so changed as scarcely to be recognized — the absence of forests precluded nightingales; but now the falcon, the swan, and the wild goose have fled. The sheep of Portland, nowadays, are fat and have fine wool; the few scattered ewes, which nibbled the salt grass there two centuries ago, were small and tough and coarse in the fleece, as became Celtic flocks brought there by garlic-eating shepherds, who lived to a hundred, and who, at the distance of half a mile, could pierce a cuirass with their yard-long arrows. Uncultivated land makes coarse wool. The Chesil of to-day resembles in no particular the Chesil of the past, so much has it been disturbed by man and by those furious winds which gnaw the very stones.

At present this tongue of land bears a railway, terminating in a pretty square of houses, called Chesilton, and there is a Portland station. Railway carriages roll where seals used to crawl.

The Isthmus of Portland two hundred years ago was a back of sand, with a vertebral spine of rock.

The child's danger changed its form. What he had had to fear in the descent was falling to the bottom of the precipice; in the isthmus, it was falling into the holes. After dealing with the precipice, he must deal with the pitfalls. Everything on the sea-shore is a trap — the rock is slippery, the strand is quicksand. Resting-places are but snares. It is walking on ice which may suddenly crack and yawn with a fissure, through which you disappear. The ocean has false stages below, like a well-arranged theatre.

The long backbone of granite, from which fall away both slopes of the isthmus, is awkward of access. It is difficult to find there what, in scene-shifters' language, are termed *practicables*. Man has no hospitality to hope for from the ocean; from the rock no more than from the wave. The sea is provident for the bird and the fish alone. Isthmuses are especially naked and rugged; the wave, which wears and mines them on either side, reduces them to the simplest form. Everywhere there were sharp relief ridges, cuttings, frightful fragments of torn stone, yawning with many points, like the jaws of a shark; breaknecks of wet moss, rapid slopes of rock ending in the sea. Whosoever undertakes to pass over an isthmus meets at every step misshapen blocks, as large as houses, in the forms of shin-bones, shoulder-blades, and thigh-bones, the hideous anatomy of dismembered rocks. It is not without reason that these *striæ* of the sea-shore are called *côtes*.

The wayfarer must get out as he best can from the confusion of these ruins. It is like journeying over the bones of an enormous skeleton.

Put a child to this labour of Hercules.

Broad daylight might have aided him. It was night. A guide was necessary. He was alone. All the vigour of manhood would not have been too much. He had but the feeble strength of a child. In default of a guide, a footpath might have aided him; there was none.

By instinct he avoided the sharp ridge of the rocks, and kept to the strand as much as possible. It was there that he met with the pitfalls. They were multiplied before him under three forms: the pitfall of water, the pitfall of snow, and the pitfall of sand. This last is the most dangerous of all, because the most illusory. To know the peril we face is alarming; to be ignorant of it is terrible. The child was fighting against unknown dangers. He was groping his way through something which might, perhaps, be the grave.

He did not hesitate. He went round the rocks, avoided the crevices, guessed at the pitfalls, obeyed the twistings and turnings caused by such obstacles, yet he went on. Though unable to advance in a straight line, he walked with a firm step. When necessary, he drew back with energy. He knew how to tear himself in time from the horrid bird-lime of the quicksands. He shook the snow from about him. He entered the water more than once up to the knees. Directly that he left it, his wet knees were frozen by the intense cold of the night. He walked rapidly in his stiffened garments; yet he took care to keep his sailor's coat dry and warm on his chest. He was still tormented by hunger.

The chances of the abyss are illimitable. Everything is possible in it, even salvation. The issue may be found, though it be invisible. How the child, wrapped in a smothering winding-sheet of snow, lost on a narrow elevation between two jaws of an abyss, managed to cross the isthmus is what he could not himself have explained. He had slipped, climbed, rolled, searched, walked, persevered, that is all. Such is the secret of all triumphs. At the end of somewhat less than half an hour he felt that the ground was rising. He had reached the other shore. Leaving Chesil, he had gained terra firma.

The bridge which now unites Sandford Castle with Smallmouth Sands did not then exist. It is probable that in his intelligent groping he had reascended as far as Wyke Regis, where there was then a tongue of sand, a natural road crossing East Fleet.

He was saved from the isthmus; but he found himself again face to face with the tempest, with the cold, with the night.

Before him once more lay the plain, shapeless in the density of impenetrable shadow. He examined the ground, seeking a footpath. Suddenly he bent down. He had discovered, in the snow, something which seemed to him a track.

It was indeed a track — the print of a foot. The print was cut out clearly in the whiteness of the snow, which rendered it distinctly visible. He examined it. It was a naked foot; too small for that of a man, too large for that of a child.

It was probably the foot of a woman. Beyond that mark was another, then another, then another. The footprints followed each other at the distance of a step, and struck across the plain to the right. They were still fresh, and slightly covered with little snow. A woman had just passed that way.

This woman was walking in the direction in which the child had seen the smoke. With his eyes fixed on the footprints, he set himself to follow them.

CHAPTER II.

THE EFFECT OF SNOW.

He journeyed some time along this course. Unfortunately the footprints were becoming less and less distinct. Dense and fearful was the falling of the snow. It was the time when the hooker was so distressed by the snow-storm at sea.

The child, in distress like the vessel, but after another fashion, had, in the inextricable intersection of shadows which rose up before him, no resource but the footsteps in the snow, and he held to it as the thread of a labyrinth.

Suddenly, whether the snow had filled them up or for some other reason, the footsteps ceased. All became even, level, smooth, without a stain, without a detail. There was now nothing but a white cloth drawn over the earth and a black one over the sky. It seemed as if the foot-passenger had flown away. The child, in despair, bent down and searched; but in vain.

As he arose he had a sensation of hearing some indistinct sound, but he could not be sure of it. It resembled a voice, a breath, a shadow. It was more human than animal; more sepulchral than living. It was a sound, but the sound of a dream.

He looked, but saw nothing.

Solitude, wide, naked and livid, was before him. He listened. That which he had thought he heard had faded away. Perhaps it had been but fancy. He still listened. All was silent.

There was illusion in the mist.

He went on his way again. He walked forward at random, with nothing henceforth to guide him.

As he moved away the noise began again. This time he could doubt it no longer. It was a groan, almost a sob.

He turned. He searched the darkness of space with his eyes. He saw nothing. The sound arose once more. If limbo could cry out, it would cry in such a tone.

Nothing so penetrating, so piercing, so feeble as the voice — for it was a voice. It arose from a soul. There was palpitation in the murmur. Nevertheless, it seemed uttered almost unconsciously. It was an appeal of suffering, not knowing that it suffered or that it appealed.

The cry — perhaps a first breath, perhaps a last sigh — was equally distant from the rattle which closes life and the wail with which it commences. It breathed, it was stifled, it wept, a gloomy supplication from the depths of night. The child fixed his attention everywhere, far, near, on high, below. There was no one. There was nothing. He listened. The voice arose again. He perceived it distinctly. The sound somewhat resembled the bleating of a lamb.

Then he was frightened, and thought of flight.

The groan again. This was the fourth time. It was strangely miserable and plaintive. One felt that after that last effort, more mechanical than voluntary, the cry would probably be extinguished. It was an expiring exclamation, instinctively appealing to the amount of aid held in suspense in space. It was some muttering of agony, addressed to a possible Providence.

The child approached in the direction from whence the sound came.

Still he saw nothing.

He advanced again, watchfully.

The complaint continued. Inarticulate and confused as it was, it had become clear — almost vibrating. The child was near the voice; but where was it?

He was close to a complaint. The trembling of a cry passed by his side into space. A human moan floated away into the darkness. This was what he had met. Such at least was his impression, dim as the dense mist in which he was lost.

Whilst he hesitated between an instinct which urged him to fly and an instinct which commanded him to remain, he perceived in the snow at his feet, a few steps before him, a sort of undulation of the dimensions of a human body — a little eminence, low, long, and narrow, like the mould over a grave — a sepulchre in a white churchyard.

At the same time the voice cried out. It was from beneath the undulation that it proceeded. The child bent down, crouching before the undulation, and with both his hands began to clear it away.

Beneath the snow which he removed a form grew under his hands; and suddenly in the hollow he had made there appeared a pale face.

The cry had not proceeded from that face. Its eyes were shut, and the mouth open but full of snow.

It remained motionless; it stirred not under the hands of the child. The child, whose fingers were numbed with frost, shuddered when he touched its coldness. It was that of a woman. Her dishevelled hair was mingled with the snow. The woman was dead.

Again the child set himself to sweep away the snow. The neck of the dead woman appeared; then her shoulders, clothed in rags. Suddenly he felt something move feebly under his touch. It was something small that was buried, and which stirred. The child swiftly cleared away the snow, discovering a wretched little body — thin, wan with cold, still alive, lying naked on the dead woman’s naked breast.

It was a little girl.

It had been swaddled up, but in rags so scanty that in its struggles it had freed itself from its tatters. Under it its attenuated limbs, and above it its breath, had somewhat melted the snow. A nurse would have said that it was five or six months old, but perhaps it might be a year, for growth, in poverty, suffers heart-breaking reductions which sometimes even produce rachitis. When its face was exposed to the air it gave a cry, the continuation of its sobs of distress. For the mother not to have heard that sob, proved her irrevocably dead.

The child took the infant in his arms. The stiffened body of the mother was a fearful sight; a spectral light proceeded from her face. The mouth, apart and without breath, seemed to form in the indistinct language of shadows her answer to the questions put to the dead by the invisible. The ghastly reflection of the icy plains was on that countenance. There was the youthful forehead under the brown hair, the almost indignant knitting of the eyebrows, the pinched nostrils, the closed eyelids, the lashes glued together by the rime, and from the corners of the eyes to the corners of the mouth a deep channel of tears. The snow lighted up the corpse. Winter and the tomb are not adverse. The corpse is the icicle of man. The nakedness of her breasts was pathetic. They had fulfilled their purpose. On them was a sublime blight of the life infused into one being by another from whom life has fled, and maternal majesty was there instead of virginal purity. At the point of one of the nipples was a white pearl. It was a drop of milk frozen.

Let us explain at once. On the plains over which the deserted boy was passing in his turn a beggar woman, nursing her infant and searching for a refuge, had lost her way a few hours before. Benumbed with cold she had sunk under the tempest, and could not rise again. The falling snow had covered her. So long as she was able she had clasped her little girl to her bosom, and thus died.

The infant had tried to suck the marble breast. Blind trust, inspired by nature, for it seems that it is possible for a woman to suckle her child even after her last sigh.

But the lips of the infant had been unable to find the breast, where the drop of milk, stolen by death, had frozen, whilst under the snow the child, more accustomed to the cradle than the tomb, had wailed.

The deserted child had heard the cry of the dying child.

He disinterred it.

He took it in his arms.

When she felt herself in his arms she ceased crying. The faces of the two children touched each other, and the purple lips of the infant sought the cheek of the boy, as it had been a breast. The little girl had nearly reached the moment when the congealed blood stops the action of the heart. Her mother had touched her with the chill of her own death — a corpse communicates death; its numbness is infectious. Her feet, hands, arms, knees, seemed paralyzed by cold. The boy felt the terrible chill. He had on him a garment dry and warm — his pilot jacket. He placed the infant on the breast of the corpse, took off his jacket, wrapped the infant in it, took it up again in his arms, and now, almost naked, under the blast of the north wind which covered him with eddies of snow-flakes, carrying the infant, he pursued his journey.

The little one having succeeded in finding the boy’s cheek, again applied her lips to it, and, soothed by the warmth, she slept. First kiss of those two souls in the darkness.

The mother lay there, her back to the snow, her face to the night; but perhaps at the moment when the little boy stripped himself to clothe the little girl, the mother saw him from the depths of infinity.

CHAPTER III.

A BURDEN MAKES A ROUGH ROAD ROUGHER.

It was little more than four hours since the hooker had sailed from the creek of Portland, leaving the boy on the shore. During the long hours since he had been deserted, and had been journeying onwards, he had met but three persons of that human society into which he was, perchance, about to enter — a man, the man on the hill; a woman, the woman in the snow; and the little girl whom he was carrying in his arms.

He was exhausted by fatigue and hunger, yet advanced more resolutely than ever, with less strength and an added burden. He was now almost naked. The few rags which remained to him, hardened by the frost, were sharp as glass, and cut his skin. He became colder, but the infant was warmer. That which he lost was not thrown away, but was gained by her. He found out that the poor infant enjoyed the comfort which was to her the renewal of life. He continued to advance.

From time to time, still holding her securely, he bent down, and taking a handful of snow he rubbed his feet with it, to prevent their being frost-bitten. At other times, his throat feeling as if it were on fire, he put a little snow in his mouth and sucked it; this for a moment assuaged his thirst, but changed it into fever — a relief which was an aggravation.

The storm had become shapeless from its violence. Deluges of snow are possible. This was one. The paroxysm scourged the shore at the same time that it uptore the depths of ocean. This was, perhaps, the moment when the distracted hooker was going to pieces in the battle of the breakers.

He travelled under this north wind, still towards the east, over wide surfaces of snow. He knew not how the hours had passed. For a long time he had ceased to see the smoke. Such indications are soon effaced in the night; besides, it was past the hour when fires are put out. Or he had, perhaps, made a mistake, and it was possible that neither town nor village existed in the direction in which he was travelling. Doubting, he yet persevered.

Two or three times the little infant cried. Then he adopted in his gait a rocking movement, and the child was soothed and silenced. She ended by falling into a sound sleep. Shivering himself, he felt her warm. He frequently tightened the folds of the jacket round the babe’s neck, so that the frost should not get in through any opening, and that no melted snow should drop between the garment and the child.

The plain was unequal. In the declivities into which it sloped the snow, driven by the wind into the dips of the ground, was so deep, in comparison with a child so small, that it almost engulfed him, and he had to struggle through it half buried. He walked on, working away the snow with his knees.

Having cleared the ravine, he reached the high lands swept by the winds, where the snow lay thin. Then he found the surface a sheet of ice. The little girl’s lukewarm breath, playing on his face, warmed it for a moment, then lingered, and froze in his hair, stiffening it into icicles.

He felt the approach of another danger. He could not afford to fall. He knew that if he did so he should never rise again. He was overcome by fatigue, and the weight of the darkness would, as with the dead woman, have held him to the ground, and the ice glued him alive to the earth.

He had tripped upon the slopes of precipices, and had recovered himself; he had stumbled into holes, and had got out again. Thenceforward the slightest fall would be death; a false step opened for him a tomb. He must not slip. He had not strength to rise even to his knees. Now everything was slippery; everywhere there was rime and frozen snow. The little creature whom he carried made his progress fearfully difficult. She was not only a burden, which his weariness and exhaustion made excessive, but was also an embarrassment. She occupied both his arms, and to him who walks over ice both arms are a natural and necessary balancing power.

He was obliged to do without this balance.

He did without it and advanced, bending under his burden, not knowing what would become of him.

This little infant was the drop causing the cup of distress to overflow.

He advanced, reeling at every step, as if on a spring board, and accomplishing, without spectators, miracles of equilibrium. Let us repeat that he was, perhaps, followed on this path of pain by eyes unsleeping in the distances of the shadows — the eyes of the mother and the eyes of God. He staggered, slipped, recovered himself, took care of the infant, and, gathering the jacket about her, he covered up her head; staggered again, advanced, slipped, then drew himself up. The cowardly wind drove against him. Apparently, he made much more way than was necessary. He was, to all appearance, on the plains where Bincleaves Farm was afterwards established, between what are now called Spring Gardens and the Parsonage House. Homesteads and cottages occupy the place of waste lands. Sometimes less than a century separates a steppe from a city.

Suddenly, a lull having occurred in the icy blast which was blinding him, he perceived, at a short distance in front of him, a cluster of gables and of chimneys shown in relief by the snow. The reverse of a silhouette — a city painted in white on a black horizon, something like what we call nowadays a negative proof. Roofs — dwellings — shelter! He had arrived somewhere at last. He felt the ineffable encouragement of hope. The watch of a ship which has wandered from her course feels some such emotion when he cries, “Land ho!”

He hurried his steps.

At length, then, he was near mankind. He would soon be amidst living creatures. There was no longer anything to fear. There glowed within him that sudden warmth — security; that out of which he was emerging was over; thenceforward there would no longer be night, nor winter, nor tempest. It seemed to him that he had left all evil chances behind him. The infant was no longer a burden. He almost ran.

His eyes were fixed on the roofs. There was life there. He never took his eyes off them. A dead man might gaze thus on what might appear through the half-opened lid of his sepulchre. There were the chimneys of which he had seen the smoke.

No smoke arose from them now. He was not long before he reached the houses. He came to the outskirts of a town — an open street. At that period bars to streets were falling into disuse.

The street began by two houses. In those two houses neither candle nor lamp was to be seen; nor in the whole street; nor in the whole town, so far as eye could reach. The house to the right was a roof rather than a house; nothing could be more mean. The walls were of mud, the roof was of straw, and there was more thatch than wall. A large nettle, springing from the bottom of the wall, reached the roof. The hovel had but one door, which was like that of a dog-kennel; and a window, which was but a hole. All was shut up. At the side an inhabited pig-sty told that the house was also inhabited.

The house on the left was large, high, built entirely of stone, with a slated roof. It was also closed. It was the rich man’s home, opposite to that of the pauper.

The boy did not hesitate. He approached the great mansion. The double folding-door of massive oak, studded with large nails, was of the kind that leads one to expect that behind it there is a stout armoury of bolts and locks. An iron knocker was attached to it. He raised the knocker with some difficulty, for his benumbed hands were stumps rather than hands. He knocked once.

No answer.

He struck again, and two knocks.

No movement was heard in the house.

He knocked a third time.

There was no sound. He saw that they were all asleep, and did not care to get up.

Then he turned to the hovel. He picked up a pebble from the snow, and knocked against the low door.

There was no answer.

He raised himself on tiptoe, and knocked with his pebble against the pane too softly to break the glass, but loud enough to be heard.

No voice was heard; no step moved; no candle was lighted.

He saw that there, as well, they did not care to awake.

The house of stone and the thatched hovel were equally deaf to the wretched.

The boy decided on pushing on further, and penetrating the strait of houses which stretched away in front of him, so dark that it seemed more like a gulf between two cliffs than the entrance to a town.

CHAPTER IV.

ANOTHER FORM OF DESERT.

It was Weymouth which he had just entered. Weymouth then was not the respectable and fine Weymouth of to-day.

Ancient Weymouth did not present, like the present one, an irreproachable rectangular quay, with an inn and a statue in honour of George III. This resulted from the fact that George III. had not yet been born. For the same reason they had not yet designed on the slope of the green hill towards the east, fashioned flat on the soil by cutting away the turf and leaving the bare chalk to the view, the white horse, an acre long, bearing the king upon his back, and always turning, in honour of George III., his tail to the city. These honours, however, were deserved. George III., having lost in his old age the intellect he had never possessed in his youth, was not responsible for the calamities of his reign. He was an innocent. Why not erect statues to him?

Weymouth, a hundred and eighty years ago, was about as symmetrical as a game of spillikins in confusion. In legends it is said that Astaroth travelled over the world, carrying on her back a wallet which contained everything, even good women in their houses. A pell-mell of sheds thrown from her devil’s bag would give an idea of that irregular Weymouth — the good women in the sheds included. The Music Hall remains as a specimen of those buildings. A confusion of wooden dens, carved and eaten by worms (which carve in another fashion) — shapeless, overhanging buildings, some with pillars, leaning one against the other for support against the sea wind, and leaving between them awkward spaces of narrow and winding channels, lanes, and passages, often flooded by the equinoctial tides; a heap of old grandmother houses, crowded round a grandfather church — such was Weymouth; a sort of old Norman village thrown up on the coast of England.

The traveller who entered the tavern, now replaced by the hotel, instead of paying royally his twenty-five francs for a fried sole and a bottle of wine, had to suffer the humiliation of eating a pennyworth of soup made of fish — which soup, by-the-bye, was very good. Wretched fare!

The deserted child, carrying the foundling, passed through the first street, then the second, then the third. He raised his eyes, seeking in the higher stories and in the roofs a lighted window-pane; but all were closed and dark. At intervals he knocked at the doors. No one answered. Nothing makes the heart so like a stone as being warm between sheets. The noise and the shaking had at length awakened the infant. He knew this because he felt her suck his cheek. She did not cry, believing him her mother.

He was about to turn and wander long, perhaps, in the intersections of the Scrambridge lanes, where there were then more cultivated plots than dwellings, more thorn hedges than houses; but fortunately he struck into a passage which exists to this day near Trinity schools. This passage led him to a water-brink, where there was a roughly built quay with a parapet, and to the right he made out a bridge. It was the bridge over the Wey, connecting Weymouth with Melcombe Regis, and under the arches of which the Backwater joins the harbour.

Weymouth, a hamlet, was then the suburb of Melcombe Regis, a city and port. Now Melcombe Regis is a parish of Weymouth. The village has absorbed the city. It was the bridge which did the work. Bridges are strange vehicles of suction, which inhale the population, and sometimes swell one river-bank at the expense of its opposite neighbour.

The boy went to the bridge, which at that period was a covered timber structure. He crossed it. Thanks to its roofing, there was no snow on the planks. His bare feet had a moment’s comfort as they crossed them. Having passed over the bridge, he was in Melcombe Regis. There were fewer wooden houses than stone ones there. He was no longer in the village; he was in the city.

The bridge opened on a rather fine street called St. Thomas’s Street. He entered it. Here and there were high carved gables and shop-fronts. He set to knocking at the doors again: he had no strength left to call or shout.

At Melcombe Regis, as at Weymouth, no one was stirring. The doors were all carefully double-locked, The windows were covered by their shutters, as the eyes by their lids. Every precaution had been taken to avoid being roused by disagreeable surprises. The little wanderer was suffering the indefinable depression made by a sleeping town. Its silence, as of a paralyzed ants’ nest, makes the head swim. All its lethargies mingle their nightmares, its slumbers are a crowd, and from its human bodies lying prone there arises a vapour of dreams. Sleep has gloomy associates beyond this life: the decomposed thoughts of the sleepers float above them in a mist which is both of death and of life, and combine with the possible, which has also, perhaps, the power of thought, as it floats in space. Hence arise entanglements. Dreams, those clouds, interpose their folds and their transparencies over that star, the mind. Above those closed eyelids, where vision has taken the place of sight, a sepulchral disintegration of outlines and appearances dilates itself into impalpability. Mysterious, diffused existences amalgamate themselves with life on that border of death, which sleep is. Those larvæ and souls mingle in the air. Even he who sleeps not feels a medium press upon him full of sinister life. The surrounding chimera, in which he suspects a reality, impedes him. The waking man, wending his way amidst the sleep phantoms of others, unconsciously pushes back passing shadows, has, or imagines that he has, a vague fear of adverse contact with the invisible, and feels at every moment the obscure pressure of a hostile encounter which immediately dissolves. There is something of the effect of a forest in the nocturnal diffusion of dreams.

This is what is called being afraid without reason.

What a man feels a child feels still more.

The uneasiness of nocturnal fear, increased by the spectral houses, increased the weight of the sad burden under which he was struggling.

He entered Conycar Lane, and perceived at the end of that passage the Backwater, which he took for the ocean. He no longer knew in what direction the sea lay. He retraced his steps, struck to the left by Maiden Street, and returned as far as St. Alban’s Row.

There, by chance and without selection, he knocked violently at any house that he happened to pass. His blows, on which he was expending his last energies, were jerky and without aim; now ceasing altogether for a time, now renewed as if in irritation. It was the violence of his fever striking against the doors.

One voice answered.

That of Time.

Three o’clock tolled slowly behind him from the old belfry of St. Nicholas.

Then all sank into silence again.

That no inhabitant should have opened a lattice may appear surprising. Nevertheless that silence is in a great measure to be explained. We must remember that in January 1790 they were just over a somewhat severe outbreak of the plague in London, and that the fear of receiving sick vagabonds caused a diminution of hospitality everywhere. People would not even open their windows for fear of inhaling the poison.

The child felt the coldness of men more terribly than the coldness of night. The coldness of men is intentional. He felt a tightening on his sinking heart which he had not known on the open plains. Now he had entered into the midst of life, and remained alone. This was the summit of misery. The pitiless desert he had understood; the unrelenting town was too much to bear.

The hour, the strokes of which he had just counted, had been another blow. Nothing is so freezing in certain situations as the voice of the hour. It is a declaration of indifference. It is Eternity saying, “What does it matter to me?”

He stopped, and it is not certain that, in that miserable minute, he did not ask himself whether it would not be easier to lie down there and die. However, the little infant leaned her head against his shoulder, and fell asleep again.

This blind confidence set him onwards again. He whom all supports were failing felt that he was himself a basis of support. Irresistible summons of duty!

Neither such ideas nor such a situation belonged to his age. It is probable that he did not understand them. It was a matter of instinct. He did what he chanced to do.

He set out again in the direction of Johnstone Row. But now he no longer walked; he dragged himself along. He left St. Mary’s Street to the left, made zigzags through lanes, and at the end of a winding passage found himself in a rather wide open space. It was a piece of waste land not built upon — probably the spot where Chesterfield Place now stands. The houses ended there. He perceived the sea to the right, and scarcely anything more of the town to his left.

What was to become of him? Here was the country again. To the east great inclined planes of snow marked out the wide slopes of Radipole. Should he continue this journey? Should he advance and re-enter the solitudes? Should he return and re-enter the streets? What was he to do between those two silences — the mute plain and the deaf city? Which of the two refusals should he choose?

There is the anchor of mercy. There is also the look of piteousness. It was that look which the poor little despairing wanderer threw around him.

All at once he heard a menace.

CHAPTER V.

MISANTHROPY PLAYS ITS PRANKS.

A strange and alarming grinding of teeth reached him through the darkness. It was enough to drive one back: he advanced. To those to whom silence has become dreadful a howl is comforting.

That fierce growl reassured him; that threat was a promise. There was there a being alive and awake, though it might be a wild beast. He advanced in the direction whence came the snarl.

He turned the corner of a wall, and, behind in the vast sepulchral light made by the reflection of snow and sea, he saw a thing placed as if for shelter. It was a cart, unless it was a hovel. It had wheels — it was a carriage. It had a roof — it was a dwelling. From the roof arose a funnel, and out of the funnel smoke. This smoke was red, and seemed to imply a good fire in the interior. Behind, projecting hinges indicated a door, and in the centre of this door a square opening showed a light inside the caravan. He approached.

Whatever had growled perceived his approach, and became furious. It was no longer a growl which he had to meet; it was a roar. He heard a sharp sound, as of a chain violently pulled to its full length, and suddenly, under the door, between the hind wheels, two rows of sharp white teeth appeared. At the same time as the mouth between the wheels a head was put through the window.

“Peace there!” said the head.

The mouth was silent.

The head began again, —

“Is any one there?”

The child answered, —

“Yes.”

“Who?”

“I.”

“You? Who are you? whence do you come?”

“I am weary,” said the child.

“What o’clock is it?”

“I am cold.”

“What are you doing there?”

“I am hungry.”

The head replied, —

“Every one cannot be as happy as a lord. Go away.”

The head was withdrawn and the window closed.

The child bowed his forehead, drew the sleeping infant closer in his arms, and collected his strength to resume his journey. He had taken a few steps, and was hurrying away.

However, at the same time that the window closed the door had opened; a step had been let down; the voice which had spoken to the child cried out angrily from the inside of the van, —

“Well! why do you not enter?”

The child turned back.

“Come in,” resumed the voice. “Who has sent me a fellow like this, who is hungry and cold, and who does not come in?”

The child, at once repulsed and invited, remained motionless.

The voice continued, —

“You are told to come in, you young rascal.”

He made up his mind, and placed one foot on the lowest step.

There was a great growl under the van. He drew back. The gaping jaws appeared.

“Peace!” cried the voice of the man.

The jaws retreated, the growling ceased.

“Come up!” continued the man.

The child with difficulty climbed up the three steps. He was impeded by the infant, so benumbed, rolled up and enveloped in the jacket that nothing could be distinguished of her, and she was but a little shapeless mass.

He passed over the three steps; and having reached the threshold, stopped.

No candle was burning in the caravan, probably from the economy of want. The hut was lighted only by a red tinge, arising from the opening at the top of the stove, in which sparkled a peat fire. On the stove were smoking a porringer and a saucepan, containing to all appearance something to eat. The savoury odour was perceptible. The hut was furnished with a chest, a stool, and an unlighted lantern which hung from the ceiling. Besides, to the partition were attached some boards on brackets and some hooks, from which hung a variety of things. On the boards and nails were rows of glasses, coppers, an alembic, a vessel rather like those used for graining wax, which are called granulators, and a confusion of strange objects of which the child understood nothing, and which were utensils for cooking and chemistry. The caravan was oblong in shape, the stove being in front. It was not even a little room; it was scarcely a big box. There was more light outside from the snow than inside from the stove. Everything in the caravan was indistinct and misty. Nevertheless, a reflection of the fire on the ceiling enabled the spectator to read in large letters, —

URSUS, PHILOSOPHER.

The child, in fact, was entering the house of Homo and Ursus. The one he had just heard growling, the other speaking.

The child having reached the threshold, perceived near the stove a man, tall, smooth, thin and old, dressed in gray, whose head, as he stood, reached the roof. The man could not have raised himself on tiptoe. The caravan was just his size.

"Come in!" said the man, who was Ursus.

The child entered.

"Put down your bundle."

The child placed his burden carefully on the top of the chest, for fear of awakening and terrifying it.

The man continued, —

"How gently you put it down! You could not be more careful were it a case of relics. Is it that you are afraid of tearing a hole in your rags? Worthless vagabond! in the streets at this hour! Who are you? Answer! But no. I forbid you to answer. There! You are cold. Warm yourself as quick as you can," and he shoved him by the shoulders in front of the fire.

"How wet you are! You're frozen through! A nice state to come into a house! Come, take off those rags, you villain!" and as with one hand, and with feverish haste, he dragged off the boy's rags which tore into shreds, with the other he took down from a nail a man's shirt, and one of those knitted jackets which are up to this day called kiss-me-quicks.

"Here are clothes."

He chose out of a heap a woollen rag, and chafed before the fire the limbs of the exhausted and bewildered child, who at that moment, warm and naked, felt as if he were seeing and touching heaven. The limbs having been rubbed, he next wiped the boy's feet.

"Come, you limb; you have nothing frost-bitten! I was a fool to fancy you had something frozen, hind legs or fore paws. You will not lose the use of them this time. Dress yourself!"

The child put on the shirt, and the man slipped the knitted jacket over it.

"Now...."

The man kicked the stool forward and made the little boy sit down, again shoving him by the shoulders; then he pointed with his finger to the porringer which was smoking upon the stove. What the child saw in the porringer was again heaven to him — namely, a potato and a bit of bacon.

"You are hungry; eat!"

The man took from the shelf a crust of hard bread and an iron fork, and handed them to the child.

The boy hesitated.

"Perhaps you expect me to lay the cloth," said the man, and he placed the porringer on the child's lap.

"Gobble that up."

Hunger overcame astonishment. The child began to eat. The poor boy devoured rather than ate. The glad sound of the crunching of bread filed the hut. The man grumbled, —

"Not so quick, you horrid glutton! Isn't he a greedy scoundrel? When such scum are hungry, they eat in a revolting fashion. You should see a lord sup. In my time I have seen dukes eat. They don't eat; that's noble. They drink, however. Come, you pig, stuff yourself!"

The absence of ears, which is the concomitant of a hungry stomach, caused the child to take little heed of these violent epithets, tempered as they were by charity of action involving a contradiction resulting in his benefit. For the moment he was absorbed by two exigencies and by two ecstasies — food and warmth.

Ursus continued his imprecations, muttering to himself, —

"I have seen King James supping *in propriâ personâ* in the Banqueting House, where are to be admired the paintings of the famous Rubens. His Majesty touched nothing. This beggar here browses: browses, a word derived from brute. What put it into my head to come to this Weymouth seven times devoted to the infernal deities? I have sold nothing since morning I have harangued the snow. I have played the flute to the hurricane. I have not pocketed a farthing; and now, to-night, beggars drop in. Horrid place! There is battle, struggle, competition between the fools in the street and myself. They try to give me nothing but farthings. I try to give them nothing but drugs. Well, to-day I've made nothing. Not an idiot on the highway, not a penny in the till. Eat away, hell-born boy! Tear and crunch! We have fallen on times when nothing can equal the cynicism of spongers. Fatten at my expense, parasite! This wretched boy is more than hungry; he is mad. It is not appetite, it is ferocity. He is carried away by a rabid virus. Perhaps he has the plague. Have you the plague, you thief? Suppose he were to give it to Homo! No, never! Let the populace die, but not my wolf. But by-the-bye I am hungry myself. I declare that this is all very disagreeable. I have worked far into the night. There are seasons in a man's life when he is hard pressed. I was to-night, by hunger. I was alone. I made a fire. I had but one potato, one crust of bread, a mouthful of bacon, and a drop of milk, and I put it to warm. I said to myself, 'Good.' I think I am going to eat, and bang! this crocodile falls upon me at the very moment. He installs himself clean between my food and myself. Behold, how my larder is devastated! Eat, pike, eat! You shark! how many teeth have you in your jaws? Guzzle, wolf-cub; no, I withdraw that word. I respect wolves. Swallow up my food, boa. I have worked all day, and far into the night, on an empty stomach; my throat is sore, my pancreas in distress, my entrails torn; and my reward is to see another eat. 'Tis all one, though! We will divide. He shall have the bread, the potato, and the bacon; but I will have the milk."

Just then a wail, touching and prolonged, arose in the hut. The man listened.

"You cry, sycophant! Why do you cry?"

The boy turned towards him. It was evident that it was not he who cried. He had his mouth full.

The cry continued.

The man went to the chest.

"So it is your bundle that wails! Vale of Jehoshaphat! Behold a vociferating parcel! What the devil has your bundle got to croak about?"

He unrolled the jacket. An infant's head appeared, the mouth open and crying.

"Well, who goes there?" said the man. "Here is another of them. When is this to end? Who is there? To arms! Corporal, call out the guard! Another bang! What have you brought me, thief! Don't you see it is thirsty? Come! the little one must have a drink. So now I shall not have even the milk!"

He took down from the things lying in disorder on the shelf a bandage of linen, a sponge and a phial, muttering savagely, “What an infernal place!”

Then he looked at the little infant. “’Tis a girl! one can tell that by her scream, and she is drenched as well.” He dragged away, as he had done from the boy, the tatters in which she was knotted up rather than dressed, and swathed her in a rag, which, though of coarse linen, was clean and dry. This rough and sudden dressing made the infant angry.

“She mews relentlessly,” said he.

He bit off a long piece of sponge, tore from the roll a square piece of linen, drew from it a bit of thread, took the saucepan containing the milk from the stove, filled the phial with milk, drove down the sponge halfway into its neck, covered the sponge with linen, tied this cork in with the thread, applied his cheeks to the phial to be sure that it was not too hot, and seized under his left arm the bewildered bundle which was still crying. “Come! take your supper, creature! Let me suckle you,” and he put the neck of the bottle to its mouth.

The little infant drank greedily.

He held the phial at the necessary incline, grumbling, “They are all the same, the cowards! When they have all they want they are silent.”

The child had drunk so ravenously, and had seized so eagerly this breast offered by a cross-grained providence, that she was taken with a fit of coughing.

“You are going to choke!” growled Ursus. “A fine gobbler this one, too!”

He drew away the sponge which she was sucking, allowed the cough to subside, and then replaced the phial to her lips, saying, “Suck, you little wretch!”

In the meantime the boy had laid down his fork. Seeing the infant drink had made him forget to eat. The moment before, while he ate, the expression in his face was satisfaction; now it was gratitude. He watched the infant’s renewal of life; the completion of the resurrection begun by himself filled his eyes with an ineffable brilliancy. Ursus went on muttering angry words between his teeth. The little boy now and then lifted towards Ursus his eyes moist with the unspeakable emotion which the poor little being felt, but was unable to express. Ursus addressed him furiously.

“Well, will you eat?”

“And you?” said the child, trembling all over, and with tears in his eyes. “You will have nothing!”

“Will you be kind enough to eat it all up, you cub? There is not too much for you, since there was not enough for me.”

The child took up his fork, but did not eat.

“Eat,” shouted Ursus. “What has it got to do with me? Who speaks of me? Wretched little barefooted clerk of Penniless Parish, I tell you, eat it all up! You are here to eat, drink, and sleep — eat, or I will kick you out, both of you.”

The boy, under this menace, began to eat again. He had not much trouble in finishing what was left in the porringer. Ursus muttered, “This building is badly joined. The cold comes in by the window pane.” A pane had indeed been broken in front, either by a jolt of the caravan or by a stone thrown by some mischievous boy. Ursus had placed a star of paper over the fracture, which had become unpasted. The blast entered there.

He was half seated on the chest. The infant in his arms, and at the same time on his lap, was sucking rapturously at the bottle, in the happy somnolency of cherubim before their Creator, and infants at their mothers’ breast.

“She is drunk,” said Ursus; and he continued, “After this, preach sermons on temperance!”

The wind tore from the pane the plaster of paper, which flew across the hut; but this was nothing to the children, who were entering life anew. Whilst the little girl drank, and the little boy ate, Ursus grumbled, —

“Drunkenness begins in the infant in swaddling clothes. What useful trouble Bishop Tillotson gives himself, thundering against excessive drinking. What an odious draught of wind! And then my stove is old. It allows puffs of smoke to escape enough to give you trichiasis. One has the inconvenience of cold, and the inconvenience of fire. One cannot see clearly. That being over there abuses my hospitality. Well, I have not been able to distinguish the animal’s face yet. Comfort is wanting here. By Jove! I am a great admirer of exquisite banquets in well closed rooms. I have missed my vocation. I was born to be a sensualist. The greatest of stoics was Philoxenus, who wished to possess the neck of a crane, so as to be longer in tasting the pleasures of the table. Receipts to-day, naught. Nothing sold all day. Inhabitants, servants, and tradesmen, here is the doctor, here are the drugs. You are losing your time, old friend. Pack up your physic. Every one is well down here. It’s a cursed town, where every one is well! The skies alone have diarrhoea — what snow! Anaxagoras taught that the snow was black; and he was right, cold being blackness. Ice is night. What a hurricane! I can fancy the delight of those at sea. The hurricane is the passage of demons. It is the row of the tempest fiends galloping and rolling head over heels above our bone-boxes. In the cloud this one has a tail, that one has horns, another a flame for a tongue, another claws to its wings, another a lord chancellor's paunch, another an academician's pate. You may observe a form in every sound. To every fresh wind a fresh demon. The ear hears, the eye sees, the crash is a face. Zounds! There are folks at sea — that is certain. My friends, get through the storm as best you can. I have enough to do to get through life. Come now, do I keep an inn, or do I not? Why should I trade with these travellers? The universal distress sends its spatterings even as far as my poverty. Into my cabin fall hideous drops of the far-spreading mud of mankind. I am given up to the voracity of travellers. I am a prey — the prey of those dying of hunger. Winter, night, a pasteboard hut, an unfortunate friend below and without, the storm, a potato, a fire as big as my fist, parasites, the wind penetrating through every cranny, not a halfpenny, and bundles which set to howling. I open them and find beggars inside. Is this fair? Besides, the laws are violated. Ah! vagabond with your vagabond child! Mischievous pick-pocket, evil-minded abortion, so you walk the streets after curfew? If our good king only knew it, would he not have you thrown into the bottom of a ditch, just to teach you better? My gentleman walks out at night with my lady, and with the glass at fifteen degrees of frost, bare-headed and bare-footed. Understand that such things are forbidden. There are rules and regulations, you lawless wretches. Vagabonds are punished, honest folks who have houses are guarded and protected. Kings are the fathers of their people. I have my own house. You would have been whipped in the public street had you chanced to have been met, and quite right, too. There must be order in an established city. For my own part, I did wrong not to denounce you to the constable. But I am such a fool! I understand what is right and do what is wrong. O the ruffian! to come here in such a state! I did not see the snow upon them when they came in; it had melted, and here's my whole house swamped. I have an inundation in my home. I shall have to burn an incredible amount of coals to dry up this lake — coals at twelve farthings the miners' standard! How am I going to manage to fit three into this caravan? Now it is over; I enter the nursery; I am going to have in my house the weaning of the future beggardom of England. I shall have for employment, office, and function, to fashion the miscarried fortunes of that colossal prostitute, Misery, to bring to perfection future gallows' birds, and to give young thieves the forms of philosophy. The tongue of the wolf is the warning of God. And to think that if I had not been eaten up by creatures of this kind for the last thirty years, I should be rich; Homo would be fat; I should have a medicine-chest full of rarities; as many surgical instruments as Doctor Linacre, surgeon to King Henry VIII.; divers animals of all kinds; Egyptian mummies, and similar curiosities; I should be a member of the College of Physicians, and have the right of using the library, built in 1652 by the celebrated Hervey, and of studying in the lantern of that dome, whence you can see the whole of London. I could continue my observations of solar obfuscation, and prove that a caligenous vapour arises from the planet. Such was the opinion of John Kepler, who was born the year before the Massacre of St. Bartholomew, and who was mathematician to the emperor. The sun is a chimney which sometimes smokes; so does my stove. My stove is no better than the sun. Yes, I should have made my fortune; my part would have been a different one — I should not be the insignificant fellow I am. I should not degrade science in the highways, for the crowd is not worthy of the doctrine, the crowd being nothing better than a confused mixture of all sorts of ages, sexes, humours, and conditions, that wise men of all periods have not hesitated to despise, and whose extravagance and passion the most moderate men in their justice detest. Oh, I am weary of existence! After all, one does not live long! The human life is soon done with. But no — it is long. At intervals, that we should not become too discouraged, that we may have the stupidity to consent to bear our being, and not profit by the magnificent opportunities to hang ourselves which cords and nails afford, nature puts on an air of taking a little care of man — not to-night, though. The rogue causes the wheat to spring up, ripens the grape, gives her song to the nightingale. From time to time a ray of morning or a glass of gin, and that is what we call happiness! It is a narrow border of good round a huge winding-sheet of evil. We have a destiny of which the devil has woven the stuff and God has sewn the hem. In the meantime, you have eaten my supper, you thief!"

In the meantime the infant whom he was holding all the time in his arms very tenderly whilst he was vituperating, shut its eyes languidly; a sign of repletion. Ursus examined the phial, and grumbled, —

"She has drunk it all up, the impudent creature!"

He arose, and sustaining the infant with his left arm, with his right he raised the lid of the chest and drew from beneath it a bear-skin — the one he called, as will be remembered, his real skin. Whilst he was doing this he heard the other child eating, and looked at him sideways.

“It will be something to do if, henceforth, I have to feed that growing glutton. It will be a worm gnawing at the vitals of my industry.”

He spread out, still with one arm, the bear-skin on the chest, working his elbow and managing his movements so as not to disturb the sleep into which the infant was just sinking.

Then he laid her down on the fur, on the side next the fire. Having done so, he placed the phial on the stove, and exclaimed, —

“I’m thirsty, if you like!”

He looked into the pot. There were a few good mouthfuls of milk left in it; he raised it to his lips. Just as he was about to drink, his eye fell on the little girl. He replaced the pot on the stove, took the phial, uncorked it, poured into it all the milk that remained, which was just sufficient to fill it, replaced the sponge and the linen rag over it, and tied it round the neck of the bottle.

“All the same, I’m hungry and thirsty,” he observed.

And he added, —

“When one cannot eat bread, one must drink water.”

Behind the stove there was a jug with the spout off. He took it and handed it to the boy.

“Will you drink?”

The child drank, and then went on eating.

Ursus seized the pitcher again, and conveyed it to his mouth. The temperature of the water which it contained had been unequally modified by the proximity of the stove.

He swallowed some mouthfuls and made a grimace.

“Water! pretending to be pure, thou resemblest false friends. Thou art warm at the top and cold at bottom.”

In the meantime the boy had finished his supper. The porringer was more than empty; it was cleaned out. He picked up and ate pensively a few crumbs caught in the folds of the knitted jacket on his lap.

Ursus turned towards him.

“That is not all. Now, a word with you. The mouth is not made only for eating; it is made for speaking. Now that you are warmed and stuffed, you beast, take care of yourself. You are going to answer my questions. Whence do you come?”

The child replied, —

“I do not know.”

“How do you mean? you don’t know?”

“I was abandoned this evening on the sea-shore.”

“You little scamp! what’s your name? He is so good for nothing that his relations desert him.”

“I have no relations.”

“Give in a little to my tastes, and observe that I do not like those who sing to a tune of fibs. Thou must have relatives since you have a sister.”

“It is not my sister.”

“It is not your sister?”

“No.”

“Who is it then?”

“It is a baby that I found.”

“Found?”

“Yes.”

“What! did you pick her up?”

“Yes.”

“Where? If you lie I will exterminate you.”

“On the breast of a woman who was dead in the snow.”

“When?”

“An hour ago.”

“Where?”

“A league from here.”

The arched brow of Ursus knitted and took that pointed shape which characterizes emotion on the brow of a philosopher.

“Dead! Lucky for her! We must leave her in the snow. She is well off there. In which direction?”

“In the direction of the sea.”

“Did you cross the bridge?”

“Yes.”

Ursus opened the window at the back and examined the view.

The weather had not improved. The snow was falling thickly and mournfully.

He shut the window.

He went to the broken glass; he filled the hole with a rag; he heaped the stove with peat; he spread out as far as he could the bear-skin on the chest; took a large book which he had in a corner, placed it under the skin for a pillow, and laid the head of the sleeping infant on it.

Then he turned to the boy.

"Lie down there."

The boy obeyed, and stretched himself at full length by the side of the infant.

Ursus rolled the bear-skin over the two children, and tucked it under their feet.

He took down from a shelf, and tied round his waist, a linen belt with a large pocket containing, no doubt, a case of instruments and bottles of restoratives.

Then he took the lantern from where it hung to the ceiling and lighted it. It was a dark lantern. When lighted it still left the children in shadow.

Ursus half opened the door, and said, —

"I am going out; do not be afraid. I shall return. Go to sleep."

Then letting down the steps, he called Homo. He was answered by a loving growl.

Ursus, holding the lantern in his hand, descended. The steps were replaced, the door was reclosed. The children remained alone.

From without, a voice, the voice of Ursus, said, —

"You, boy, who have just eaten up my supper, are you already asleep?"

"No," replied the child.

"Well, if she cries, give her the rest of the milk."

The clinking of a chain being undone was heard, and the sound of a man's footsteps, mingled with that of the pads of an animal, died off in the distance. A few minutes after, both children slept profoundly.

The little boy and girl, lying naked side by side, were joined through the silent hours, in the seraphic promiscuousness of the shadows; such dreams as were possible to their age floated from one to the other; beneath their closed eyelids there shone, perhaps, a starlight; if the word marriage were not inappropriate to the situation, they were husband and wife after the fashion of the angels. Such innocence in such darkness, such purity in such an embrace; such foretastes of heaven are possible only to childhood, and no immensity approaches the greatness of little children. Of all gulfs this is the deepest. The fearful perpetuity of the dead chained beyond life, the mighty animosity of the ocean to a wreck, the whiteness of the snow over buried bodies, do not equal in pathos two children’s mouths meeting divinely in sleep, and the meeting of which is not even a kiss. A betrothal perchance, perchance a catastrophe. The unknown weighs down upon their juxtaposition. It charms, it terrifies; who knows which? It stays the pulse. Innocence is higher than virtue. Innocence is holy ignorance. They slept. They were in peace. They were warm. The nakedness of their bodies, embraced each in each, amalgamated with the virginity of their souls. They were there as in the nest of the abyss.

CHAPTER VI.

THE AWAKING.

The beginning of day is sinister. A sad pale light penetrated the hut. It was the frozen dawn. That wan light which throws into relief the mournful reality of objects which are blurred into spectral forms by the night, did not awake the children, so soundly were they sleeping. The caravan was warm. Their breathings alternated like two peaceful waves. There was no longer a hurricane without. The light of dawn was slowly taking possession of the horizon. The constellations were being extinguished, like candles blown out one after the other. Only a few large stars resisted. The deep-toned song of the Infinite was coming from the sea.

The fire in the stove was not quite out. The twilight broke, little by little, into daylight. The boy slept less heavily than the girl. At length, a ray brighter than the others broke through the pane, and he opened his eyes. The sleep of childhood ends in forgetfulness. He lay in a state of semi-stupor, without knowing where he was or what was near him, without making an effort to remember, gazing at the ceiling, and setting himself an aimless task as he gazed dreamily at the letters of the inscription— “Ursus, Philosopher” — which, being unable to read, he examined without the power of deciphering.

The sound of the key turning in the lock caused him to turn his head.

The door turned on its hinges, the steps were let down. Ursus was returning. He ascended the steps, his extinguished lantern in his hand. At the same time the pattering of four paws fell upon the steps. It was Homo, following Ursus, who had also returned to his home.

The boy awoke with somewhat of a start. The wolf, having probably an appetite, gave him a morning yawn, showing two rows of very white teeth. He stopped when he had got halfway up the steps, and placed both forepaws within the caravan, leaning on the threshold, like a preacher with his elbows on the edge of the pulpit. He sniffed the chest from afar, not being in the habit of finding it occupied as it then was. His wolfine form, framed by the doorway, was designed in black against the light of morning. He made up his mind, and entered. The boy, seeing the wolf in the caravan, got out of the bear-skin, and, standing up, placed himself in front of the little infant, who was sleeping more soundly than ever.

Ursus had just hung the lantern up on a nail in the ceiling. Silently, and with mechanical deliberation, he unbuckled the belt in which was his case, and replaced it on the shelf. He looked at nothing, and seemed to see nothing. His eyes were glassy. Something was moving him deeply in his mind. His thoughts at length found breath, as usual, in a rapid outflow of words. He exclaimed, —

“Happy, doubtless! Dead! stone dead!”

He bent down, and put a shovelful of turf mould into the stove; and as he poked the peat he growled out, —

“I had a deal of trouble to find her. The mischief of the unknown had buried her under two feet of snow. Had it not been for Homo, who sees as clearly with his nose as Christopher Columbus did with his mind, I should be still there, scratching at the avalanche, and playing hide and seek with Death. Diogenes took his lantern and sought for a man; I took my lantern and sought for a woman. He found a sarcasm, and I found mourning. How cold she was! I touched her hand — a stone! What silence in her eyes! How can any one be such a fool as to die and leave a child behind? It will not be convenient to pack three into this box. A pretty family I have now! A boy and a girl!”

Whilst Ursus was speaking, Homo sidled up close to the stove. The hand of the sleeping infant was hanging down between the stove and the chest. The wolf set to licking it. He licked it so softly that he did not awake the little infant.

Ursus turned round.

“Well done, Homo. I shall be father, and you shall be uncle.”

Then he betook himself again to arranging the fire with philosophical care, without interrupting his aside.

“Adoption! It is settled; Homo is willing.”

He drew himself up.

“I should like to know who is responsible for that woman’s death? Is it man? or....”

He raised his eyes, but looked beyond the ceiling, and his lips murmured, —

“Is it Thou?”

Then his brow dropped, as if under a burden, and he continued, —

“The night took the trouble to kill the woman.”

Raising his eyes, they met those of the boy, just awakened, who was listening. Ursus addressed him abruptly, —

“What are you laughing about?”

The boy answered, —

“I am not laughing.”

Ursus felt a kind of shock, looked at him fixedly for a few minutes, and said, —

“Then you are frightful.”

The interior of the caravan, on the previous night, had been so dark that Ursus had not yet seen the boy’s face. The broad daylight revealed it. He placed the palms of his hands on the two shoulders of the boy, and, examining his countenance more and more piercingly, exclaimed, —

“Do not laugh any more!”

“I am not laughing,” said the child.

Ursus was seized with a shudder from head to foot.

“You do laugh, I tell you.”

Then seizing the child with a grasp which would have been one of fury had it not been one of pity, he asked him: roughly, —

“Who did that to you?”

The child replied, —

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“How long have you had that laugh?”

“I have always been thus,” said the child.

Ursus turned towards the chest, saying in a low voice, —

“I thought that work was out of date.”

He took from the top of it, very softly, so as not to awaken the infant, the book which he had placed there for a pillow.

“Let us see Conquest,” he murmured.

It was a bundle of paper in folio, bound in soft parchment. He turned the pages with his thumb, stopped at a certain one, opened the book wide on the stove, and read, —

“‘*De Denasatis,*’ it is here.”

And he continued, —

“*Bucca fissa usque ad aures, genezivis denudatis, nasoque murdridato, masca eris, et ridebis semper*.”

“There it is for certain.”

Then he replaced the book on one of the shelves, growling.

“It might not be wholesome to inquire too deeply into a case of the kind. We will remain on the surface. Laugh away, my boy!”

Just then the little girl awoke. Her good-day was a cry.

“Come, nurse, give her the breast,” said Ursus.

The infant sat up. Ursus taking the phial from the stove gave it to her to suck.

Then the sun arose. He was level with the horizon. His red rays gleamed through the glass, and struck against the face of the infant, which was turned towards him. Her eyeballs, fixed on the sun, reflected his purple orbit like two mirrors. The eyeballs were immovable, the eyelids also.

“See!” said Ursus. “She is blind.”

PART II.

BOOK THE FIRST.

THE EVERLASTING PRESENCE OF THE PAST: MAN REFLECTS MAN.

CHAPTER I.

LORD CLANCHARLIE.

I.

There was, in those days, an old tradition.

That tradition was Lord Linnæus Clancharlie.

Linnæus Baron Clancharlie, a contemporary of Cromwell, was one of the peers of England — few in number, be it said — who accepted the republic. The reason of his acceptance of it might, indeed, for want of a better, be found in the fact that for the time being the republic was triumphant. It was a matter of course that Lord Clancharlie should adhere to the republic, as long as the republic had the upper hand; but after the close of the revolution and the fall of the parliamentary government, Lord Clancharlie had persisted in his fidelity to it. It would have been easy for the noble patrician to re-enter the reconstituted upper house, repentance being ever well received on restorations, and Charles II. being a kind prince enough to those who returned to their allegiance to him; but Lord Clancharlie had failed to understand what was due to events. While the nation overwhelmed with acclamation the king come to retake possession of England, while unanimity was recording its verdict, while the people were bowing their salutation to the monarchy, while the dynasty was rising anew amidst a glorious and triumphant recantation, at the moment when the past was becoming the future, and the future becoming the past, that nobleman remained refractory. He turned his head away from all that joy, and voluntarily exiled himself. While he could have been a peer, he preferred being an outlaw. Years had thus passed away. He had grown old in his fidelity to the dead republic, and was therefore crowned with the ridicule which is the natural reward of such folly.

He had retired into Switzerland, and dwelt in a sort of lofty ruin on the banks of the Lake of Geneva. He had chosen his dwelling in the most rugged nook of the lake, between Chillon, where is the dungeon of Bonnivard, and Vevay, where is Ludlow’s tomb. The rugged Alps, filled with twilight, winds, and clouds, were around him; and he lived there, hidden in the great shadows that fall from the mountains. He was rarely met by any passer-by. The man was out of his country, almost out of his century. At that time, to those who understood and were posted in the affairs of the period, no resistance to established things was justifiable. England was happy; a restoration is as the reconciliation of husband and wife, prince and nation return to each other, no state can be more graceful or more pleasant. Great Britain beamed with joy; to have a king at all was a good deal — but furthermore, the king was a charming one. Charles II. was amiable — a man of pleasure, yet able to govern; and great, if not after the fashion of Louis XIV. He was essentially a gentleman. Charles II. was admired by his subjects. He had made war in Hanover for reasons best known to himself; at least, no one else knew them. He had sold Dunkirk to France, a manoeuvre of state policy. The Whig peers, concerning whom Chamberlain says, "The cursed republic infected with its stinking breath several of the high nobility," had had the good sense to bow to the inevitable, to conform to the times, and to resume their seats in the House of Lords. To do so, it sufficed that they should take the oath of allegiance to the king. When these facts were considered — the glorious reign, the excellent king, august princes given back by divine mercy to the people's love; when it was remembered that persons of such consideration as Monk, and, later on, Jeffreys, had rallied round the throne; that they had been properly rewarded for their loyalty and zeal by the most splendid appointments and the most lucrative offices; that Lord Clancharlie could not be ignorant of this, and that it only depended on himself to be seated by their side, glorious in his honours; that England had, thanks to her king, risen again to the summit of prosperity; that London was all banquets and carousals; that everybody was rich and enthusiastic, that the court was gallant, gay, and magnificent; — if by chance, far from these splendours, in some melancholy, indescribable half-light, like nightfall, that old man, clad in the same garb as the common people, was observed pale, absent-minded, bent towards the grave, standing on the shore of the lake, scarce heeding the storm and the winter, walking as though at random, his eye fixed, his white hair tossed by the wind of the shadow, silent, pensive, solitary, who could forbear to smile?

It was the sketch of a madman.

Thinking of Lord Clancharlie, of what he might have been and what he was, a smile was indulgent; some laughed out aloud, others could not restrain their anger. It is easy to understand that men of sense were much shocked by the insolence implied by his isolation.

One extenuating circumstance: Lord Clancharlie had never had any brains. Every one agreed on that point.

II.

It is disagreeable to see one's fellows practise obstinacy. Imitations of Regulus are not popular, and public opinion holds them in some derision. Stubborn people are like reproaches, and we have a right to laugh at them.

Besides, to sum up, are these perversities, these rugged notches, virtues? Is there not in these excessive advertisements of self-abnegation and of honour a good deal of ostentation? It is all parade more than anything else. Why such exaggeration of solitude and exile? to carry nothing to extremes is the wise man's maxim. Be in opposition if you choose, blame if you will, but decently, and crying out all the while "Long live the King." The true virtue is common sense — what falls ought to fall, what succeeds ought to succeed. Providence acts advisedly, it crowns him who deserves the crown; do you pretend to know better than Providence? When matters are settled — when one rule has replaced another — when success is the scale in which truth and falsehood are weighed, in one side the catastrophe, in the other the triumph; then doubt is no longer possible, the honest man rallies to the winning side, and although it may happen to serve his fortune and his family, he does not allow himself to be influenced by that consideration, but thinking only of the public weal, holds out his hand heartily to the conqueror.

What would become of the state if no one consented to serve it? Would not everything come to a standstill? To keep his place is the duty of a good citizen. Learn to sacrifice your secret preferences. Appointments must be filled, and some one must necessarily sacrifice himself. To be faithful to public functions is true fidelity. The retirement of public officials would paralyse the state. What! banish yourself! — how weak! As an example? — what vanity! As a defiance? — what audacity! What do you set yourself up to be, I wonder? Learn that we are just as good as you. If we chose we too could be intractable and untameable and do worse things than you; but we prefer to be sensible people. Because I am a Trimalcion, you think that I could not be a Cato! What nonsense!

III.

Never was a situation more clearly defined or more decisive than that of 1660. Never had a course of conduct been more plainly indicated to a well-ordered mind. England was out of Cromwell’s grasp. Under the republic many irregularities had been committed. British preponderance had been created. With the aid of the Thirty Years’ War, Germany had been overcome; with the aid of the Fronde, France had been humiliated; with the aid of the Duke of Braganza, the power of Spain had been lessened. Cromwell had tamed Mazarin; in signing treaties the Protector of England wrote his name above that of the King of France. The United Provinces had been put under a fine of eight millions; Algiers and Tunis had been attacked; Jamaica conquered; Lisbon humbled; French rivalry encouraged in Barcelona, and Masaniello in Naples; Portugal had been made fast to England; the seas had been swept of Barbary pirates from Gibraltar to Crete; maritime domination had been founded under two forms, Victory and Commerce. On the 10th of August, 1653, the man of thirty-three victories, the old admiral who called himself the sailors’ grandfather, Martin Happertz van Tromp, who had beaten the Spanish, had been destroyed by the English fleet. The Atlantic had been cleared of the Spanish navy, the Pacific of the Dutch, the Mediterranean of the Venetian, and by the patent of navigation, England had taken possession of the sea-coast of the world. By the ocean she commanded the world; at sea the Dutch flag humbly saluted the British flag. France, in the person of the Ambassador Mancini, bent the knee to Oliver Cromwell; and Cromwell played with Calais and Dunkirk as with two shuttlecocks on a battledore. The Continent had been taught to tremble, peace had been dictated, war declared, the British Ensign raised on every pinnacle. By itself the Protector’s regiment of Ironsides weighed in the fears of Europe against an army. Cromwell used to say, “*I wish the Republic of England to be respected, as was respected the Republic of Rome.*” No longer were delusions held sacred; speech was free, the press was free. In the public street men said what they listed; they printed what they pleased without control or censorship. The equilibrium of thrones had been destroyed. The whole order of European monarchy, in which the Stuarts formed a link, had been overturned. But at last England had emerged from this odious order of things, and had won its pardon.

The indulgent Charles II. had granted the declaration of Breda. He had conceded to England oblivion of the period in which the son of the

Huntingdon brewer placed his foot on the neck of Louis XIV. England said its mea culpa, and breathed again. The cup of joy was, as we have just said, full; gibbets for the regicides adding to the universal delight. A restoration is a smile; but a few gibbets are not out of place, and satisfaction is due to the conscience of the public. To be good subjects was thenceforth the people's sole ambition. The spirit of lawlessness had been expelled. Royalty was reconstituted. Men had recovered from the follies of politics. They mocked at revolution, they jeered at the republic, and as to those times when such strange words as *Right, Liberty, Progress*, had been in the mouth — why, they laughed at such bombast! Admirable was the return to common sense. England had been in a dream. What joy to be quit of such errors! Was ever anything so mad? Where should we be if every one had his rights? Fancy every one's having a hand in the government? Can you imagine a city ruled by its citizens? Why, the citizens are the team, and the team cannot be driver. To put to the vote is to throw to the winds. Would you have states driven like clouds? Disorder cannot build up order. With chaos for an architect, the edifice would be a Babel. And, besides, what tyranny is this pretended liberty! As for me, I wish to enjoy myself; not to govern. It is a bore to have to vote; I want to dance. A prince is a providence, and takes care of us all. Truly the king is generous to take so much trouble for our sakes. Besides, he is to the manner born. He knows what it is. It's his business. Peace, War, Legislation, Finance — what have the people to do with such things? Of course the people have to pay; of course the people have to serve; but that should suffice them. They have a place in policy; from them come two essential things, the army and the budget. To be liable to contribute, and to be liable to serve; is not that enough? What more should they want? They are the military and the financial arm. A magnificent *rôle*. The king reigns for them, and they must reward him accordingly. Taxation and the civil list are the salaries paid by the peoples and earned by the prince. The people give their blood and their money, in return for which they are led. To wish to lead themselves! what an absurd idea! They require a guide; being ignorant, they are blind. Has not the blind man his dog? Only the people have a lion, the king, who consents to act the dog. How kind of him! But why are the people ignorant? because it is good for them. Ignorance is the guardian of Virtue. Where there is no perspective there is no ambition. The ignorant man is in useful darkness, which, suppressing sight, suppresses covetousness: whence innocence. He who reads, thinks; who thinks, reasons. But not to reason is duty; and happiness as well. These truths are incontestable; society is based on them.

Thus had sound social doctrines been re-established in England; thus had the nation been reinstated. At the same time a correct taste in literature was reviving. Shakespeare was despised, Dryden admired. “*Dryden is the greatest poet of England, and of the century*,” said Atterbury, the translator of “Achitophel.” It was about the time when M. Huet, Bishop of Avranches, wrote to Saumaise, who had done the author of “Paradise Lost” the honour to refute and abuse him, “*How can you trouble yourself about so mean a thing as that Milton?*” Everything was falling into its proper place: Dryden above, Shakespeare below; Charles II. on the throne, Cromwell on the gibbet. England was raising herself out of the shame and the excesses of the past. It is a great happiness for nations to be led back by monarchy to good order in the state and good taste in letters.

That such benefits should be misunderstood is difficult to believe. To turn the cold shoulder to Charles II., to reward with ingratitude the magnanimity which he displayed in ascending the throne — was not such conduct abominable? Lord Linnæus Clancharlie had inflicted this vexation upon honest men. To sulk at his country’s happiness, alack, what aberration!

We know that in 1650 Parliament had drawn up this form of declaration: “*I promise to remain faithful to the republic, without king, sovereign, or lord*.” Under pretext of having taken this monstrous oath, Lord Clancharlie was living out of the kingdom, and, in the face of the general joy, thought that he had the right to be sad. He had a morose esteem for that which was no more, and was absurdly attached to things which had been.

To excuse him was impossible. The kindest-hearted abandoned him; his friends had long done him the honour to believe that he had entered the republican ranks only to observe the more closely the flaws in the republican armour, and to smite it the more surely, when the day should come, for the sacred cause of the king. These lurkings in ambush for the convenient hour to strike the enemy a death-blow in the back are attributes to loyalty. Such a line of conduct had been expected of Lord Clancharlie, so strong was the wish to judge him favourably; but, in the face of his strange persistence in republicanism, people were obliged to lower their estimate. Evidently Lord Clancharlie was confirmed in his convictions — that is to say, an idiot!

The explanation given by the indulgent, wavered between puerile stubbornness and senile obstinacy.

The severe and the just went further; they blighted the name of the renegade. Folly has its rights, but it has also its limits. A man may be a brute, but he has no right to be a rebel. And, after all, what was this Lord Clancharlie? A deserter. He had fled his camp, the aristocracy, for that of the enemy, the people. This faithful man was a traitor. It is true that he was a traitor to the stronger, and faithful to the weaker; it is true that the camp repudiated by him was the conquering camp, and the camp adopted by him, the conquered; it is true that by his treason he lost everything — his political privileges and his domestic hearth, his title and his country. He gained nothing but ridicule, he attained no benefit but exile. But what does all this prove? — that he was a fool. Granted.

Plainly a dupe and traitor in one. Let a man be as great a fool as he likes, so that he does not set a bad example. Fools need only be civil, and in consideration thereof they may aim at being the basis of monarchies. The narrowness of Clancharlie's mind was incomprehensible. His eyes were still dazzled by the phantasmagoria of the revolution. He had allowed himself to be taken in by the republic — yes; and cast out. He was an affront to his country. The attitude he assumed was downright felony. Absence was an insult. He held aloof from the public joy as from the plague. In his voluntary banishment he found some indescribable refuge from the national rejoicing. He treated loyalty as a contagion; over the widespread gladness at the revival of the monarchy, denounced by him as a lazaretto, he was the black flag. What! could he look thus askance at order reconstituted, a nation exalted, and a religion restored? Over such serenity why cast his shadow? Take umbrage at England's contentment! Must he be the one blot in the clear blue sky! Be as a threat! Protest against a nation's will! refuse his Yes to the universal consent! It would be disgusting, if it were not the part of a fool. Clancharlie could not have taken into account the fact that it did not matter if one had taken the wrong turn with Cromwell, as long as one found one's way back into the right path with Monk.

Take Monk's case. He commands the republican army. Charles II., having been informed of his honesty, writes to him. Monk, who combines virtue with tact, dissimulates at first, then suddenly at the head of his troops dissolves the rebel parliament, and re-establishes the king on the throne. Monk is created Duke of Albemarle, has the honour of having saved society, becomes very rich, sheds a glory over his own time, is created Knight of the Garter, and has the prospect of being buried in Westminster Abbey. Such glory is the reward of British fidelity!

Lord Clancharlie could never rise to a sense of duty thus carried out. He had the infatuation and obstinacy of an exile. He contented himself with hollow phrases. He was tongue-tied by pride. The words conscience and dignity are but words, after all. One must penetrate to the depths. These depths Lord Clancharlie had not reached. His "eye was single," and before committing an act he wished to observe it so closely as to be able to judge it by more senses than one. Hence arose absurd disgust to the facts examined. No man can be a statesman who gives way to such overstrained delicacy. Excess of conscientiousness degenerates into infirmity. Scruple is one-handed when a sceptre is to be seized, and a eunuch when fortune is to be wedded. Distrust scruples; they drag you too far. Unreasonable fidelity is like a ladder leading into a cavern — one step down, another, then another, and there you are in the dark. The clever reascend; fools remain in it. Conscience must not be allowed to practise such austerity. If it be, it will fall until, from transition to transition, it at length reaches the deep gloom of political prudery. Then one is lost. Thus it was with Lord Clancharlie.

Principles terminate in a precipice.

He was walking, his hands behind him, along the shores of the Lake of Geneva. A fine way of getting on!

In London they sometimes spoke of the exile. He was accused before the tribunal of public opinion. They pleaded for and against him. The cause having been heard, he was acquitted on the ground of stupidity.

Many zealous friends of the former republic had given their adherence to the Stuarts. For this they deserve praise. They naturally calumniated him a little. The obstinate are repulsive to the compliant. Men of sense, in favour and good places at Court, weary of his disagreeable attitude, took pleasure in saying, "*If he has not rallied to the throne, it is because he has not been sufficiently paid,*" *etc*. "*He wanted the chancellorship which the king has given to Hyde*." One of his old friends went so far as to whisper, "*He told me so himself.*" Remote as was the solitude of Linnæus Clancharlie, something of this talk would reach him through the outlaws he met, such as old regicides like Andrew Broughton, who lived at Lausanne. Clancharlie confined himself to an imperceptible shrug of the shoulders, a sign of profound deterioration. On one occasion he added to the shrug these few words, murmured in a low voice, “I pity those who believe such things.”

IV.

Charles II., good man! despised him. The happiness of England under Charles II. was more than happiness, it was enchantment. A restoration is like an old oil painting, blackened by time, and revarnished. All the past reappeared, good old manners returned, beautiful women reigned and governed. Evelyn notices it. We read in his journal, “Luxury, profaneness, contempt of God. I saw the king on Sunday evening with his courtesans, Portsmouth, Cleveland, Mazarin, and two or three others, all nearly naked, in the gaming-room.” We feel that there is ill-nature in this description, for Evelyn was a grumbling Puritan, tainted with republican reveries. He did not appreciate the profitable example given by kings in those grand Babylonian gaieties, which, after all, maintain luxury. He did not understand the utility of vice. Here is a maxim: Do not extirpate vice, if you want to have charming women; if you do you are like idiots who destroy the chrysalis whilst they delight in the butterfly.

Charles II., as we have said, scarcely remembered that a rebel called Clancharlie existed; but James II. was more heedful. Charles II. governed gently, it was his way; we may add, that he did not govern the worse on that account. A sailor sometimes makes on a rope intended to baffle the wind, a slack knot which he leaves to the wind to tighten. Such is the stupidity of the storm and of the people.

The slack knot very soon becomes a tight one. So did the government of Charles II.

Under James II. the throttling began; a necessary throttling of what remained of the revolution. James II. had a laudable ambition to be an efficient king. The reign of Charles II. was, in his opinion, but a sketch of restoration. James wished for a still more complete return to order. He had, in 1660, deplored that they had confined themselves to the hanging of ten regicides. He was a more genuine reconstructor of authority. He infused vigour into serious principles. He installed true justice, which is superior to sentimental declamations, and attends, above all things, to the interests of society. In his protecting severities we recognize the father of the state. He entrusted the hand of justice to Jeffreys, and its sword to Kirke. That useful

Colonel, one day, hung and rehung the same man, a republican, asking him each time, “Will you renounce the republic?” The villain, having each time said “No,” was dispatched. “*I hanged him four times*,” said Kirke, with satisfaction. The renewal of executions is a great sign of power in the executive authority. Lady Lisle, who, though she had sent her son to fight against Monmouth, had concealed two rebels in her house, was executed; another rebel, having been honourable enough to declare that an Anabaptist female had given him shelter, was pardoned, and the woman was burned alive. Kirke, on another occasion, gave a town to understand that he knew its principles to be republican, by hanging nineteen burgesses. These reprisals were certainly legitimate, for it must be remembered that, under Cromwell, they cut off the noses and ears of the stone saints in the churches. James II., who had had the sense to choose Jeffreys and Kirke, was a prince imbued with true religion; he practised mortification in the ugliness of his mistresses; he listened to le Père la Colombière, a preacher almost as unctuous as le Père Cheminais, but with more fire, who had the glory of being, during the first part of his life, the counsellor of James II., and, during the latter, the inspirer of Mary Alcock. It was, thanks to this strong religious nourishment, that, later on, James II. was enabled to bear exile with dignity, and to exhibit, in his retirement at Saint Germain, the spectacle of a king rising superior to adversity, calmly touching for king’s evil, and conversing with Jesuits.

It will be readily understood that such a king would trouble himself to a certain extent about such a rebel as Lord Linnæus Clancharlie. Hereditary peerages have a certain hold on the future, and it was evident that if any precautions were necessary with regard to that lord, James II. was not the man to hesitate.

CHAPTER II.

LORD DAVID DIRRY-MOIR.

I.

Lord Linnæus Clancharlie had not always been old and proscribed; he had had his phase of youth and passion. We know from Harrison and Pride that Cromwell, when young, loved women and pleasure, a taste which, at times (another reading of the text “Woman”), betrays a seditious man. Distrust the loosely-clasped girdle. *Male proecinctam juvenem cavete*. Lord Clancharlie, like Cromwell, had had his wild hours and his irregularities. He was known to have had a natural child, a son. This son was born in England in the last days of the republic, just as his father was going into exile. Hence he had never seen his father. This bastard of Lord Clancharlie had grown up as page at the court of Charles II. He was styled Lord David Dirry-Moir: he was a lord by courtesy, his mother being a woman of quality. The mother, while Lord Clancharlie was becoming an owl in Switzerland, made up her mind, being a beauty, to give over sulking, and was forgiven that Goth, her first lover, by one undeniably polished and at the same time a royalist, for it was the king himself.

She had been but a short time the mistress of Charles II., sufficiently long however to have made his Majesty — who was delighted to have won so pretty a woman from the republic — bestow on the little Lord David, the son of his conquest, the office of keeper of the stick, which made that bastard officer, boarded at the king’s expense, by a natural revulsion of feeling, an ardent adherent of the Stuarts. Lord David was for some time one of the hundred and seventy wearing the great sword, while afterwards, entering the corps of pensioners, he became one of the forty who bear the gilded halberd. He had, besides being one of the noble company instituted by Henry VIII. as a bodyguard, the privilege of laying the dishes on the king’s table. Thus it was that whilst his father was growing gray in exile, Lord David prospered under Charles II.

After which he prospered under James II.

The king is dead. Long live the king! It is the *non deficit alter, aureus*.

It was on the accession of the Duke of York that he obtained permission to call himself Lord David Dirry-Moir, from an estate which his mother, who had just died, had left him, in that great forest of Scotland, where is found the krag, a bird which scoops out a nest with its beak in the trunk of the oak.

II.

James II. was a king, and affected to be a general. He loved to surround himself with young officers. He showed himself frequently in public on horseback, in a helmet and cuirass, with a huge projecting wig hanging below the helmet and over the cuirass — a sort of equestrian statue of imbecile war. He took a fancy to the graceful mien of the young Lord David. He liked the royalist for being the son of a republican. The repudiation of a father does not damage the foundation of a court fortune. The king made Lord David gentleman of the bedchamber, at a salary of a thousand a year.

It was a fine promotion. A gentleman of the bedchamber sleeps near the king every night, on a bed which is made up for him. There are twelve gentlemen who relieve each other.

Lord David, whilst he held that post, was also head of the king’s granary, giving out corn for the horses and receiving a salary of £260. Under him were the five coachmen of the king, the five postilions of the king, the five grooms of the king, the twelve footmen of the king, and the four chair-bearers of the king. He had the management of the race-chorses which the king kept at Newmarket, and which cost his Majesty £600 a year. He worked his will on the king’s wardrobe, from which the Knights of the Garter are furnished with their robes of ceremony. He was saluted to the ground by the usher of the Black Rod, who belongs to the king. That usher, under James II., was the knight of Duppa. Mr. Baker, who was clerk of the crown, and Mr. Brown, who was clerk of the Parliament, kotowed to Lord David. The court of England, which is magnificent, is a model of hospitality. Lord David presided, as one of the twelve, at banquets and receptions. He had the glory of standing behind the king on offertory days, when the king give to the church the golden *byzantium;* on collar-days, when the king wears the collar of his order; on communion days, when no one takes the sacrament excepting the king and the princes. It was he who, on Holy Thursday, introduced into his Majesty’s presence the twelve poor men to whom the king gives as many silver pence as the years of his age, and as many shillings as the years of his reign. The duty devolved on him when the king was ill, to call to the assistance of his Majesty the two grooms of the almonry, who are priests, and to prevent the approach of doctors without permission from the council of state. Besides, he was lieutenant-colonel of the Scotch regiment of Guards, the one which plays the Scottish march. As such, he made several campaigns, and with glory, for he was a gallant soldier. He was a brave lord, well-made, handsome, generous, and majestic in look and in manner. His person was like his quality. He was tall in stature as well as high in birth.

At one time he stood a chance of being made groom of the stole, which would have given him the privilege of putting the king’s shirt on his Majesty: but to hold that office it was necessary to be either prince or peer. Now, to create a peer is a serious thing; it is to create a peerage, and that makes many people jealous. It is a favour; a favour which gives the king one friend and a hundred enemies, without taking into account that the one friend becomes ungrateful. James II., from policy, was indisposed to create peerages, but he transferred them freely. The transfer of a peerage produces no sensation. It is simply the continuation of a name. The order is little affected by it.

The goodwill of royalty had no objection to raise Lord David Dirry-Moir to the Upper House so long as it could do so by means of a substituted peerage. Nothing would have pleased his majesty better than to transform Lord David Dirry-Moir, lord by courtesy, into a lord by right.

III.

The opportunity occurred.

One day it was announced that several things had happened to the old exile, Lord Clancharlie, the most important of which was that he was dead. Death does just this much good to folks: it causes a little talk about them. People related what they knew, or what they thought they knew, of the last years of Lord Linnæus. What they said was probably legend and conjecture. If these random tales were to be credited, Lord Clancharlie must have had his republicanism intensified towards the end of his life, to the extent of marrying (strange obstinacy of the exile!) Ann Bradshaw, the daughter of a regicide; they were precise about the name. She had also died, it was said, but in giving birth to a boy. If these details should prove to be correct, his child would of course be the legitimate and rightful heir of Lord Clancharlie. These reports, however, were extremely vague in form, and were rumours rather than facts. Circumstances which happened in Switzerland, in those days, were as remote from the England of that period as those which take place in China from the England of to-day. Lord Clancharlie must have been fifty-nine at the time of his marriage, they said, and sixty at the birth of his son, and must have died shortly after, leaving his infant orphaned both of father and mother. This was possible, perhaps, but improbable. They added that the child was beautiful as the day, — just as we read in all the fairy tales. King James put an end to these rumours, evidently without foundation, by declaring, one fine morning, Lord David Dirry-Moir sole and positive heir *in default of legitimate issue,* and by his royal pleasure, of Lord Linnæus Clancharlie, his natural father, *the absence of all other issue and descent being established*, patents of which grant were registered in the House of Lords. By these patents the king instituted Lord David Dirry-Moir in the titles, rights, and prerogatives of the late Lord Linnæus Clancharlie, on the sole condition that Lord David should wed, when she attained a marriageable age, a girl who was, at that time, a mere infant a few months old, and whom the king had, in her cradle, created a duchess, no one knew exactly why; or, rather, every one knew why. This little infant was called the Duchess Josiana.

The English fashion then ran on Spanish names. One of Charles II.'s bastards was called Carlos, Earl of Plymouth. It is likely that Josiana was a contraction for Josefa-y-Ana. Josiana, however, may have been a name — the feminine of Josias. One of Henry VIII.'s gentlemen was called Josias du Passage.

It was to this little duchess that the king granted the peerage of Clancharlie. She was a peeress till there should be a peer; the peer should be her husband. The peerage was founded on a double castleward, the barony of Clancharlie and the barony of Hunkerville; besides, the barons of Clancharlie were, in recompense of an ancient feat of arms, and by royal licence, Marquises of Corleone, in Sicily.

Peers of England cannot bear foreign titles; there are, nevertheless, exceptions; thus — Henry Arundel, Baron Arundel of Wardour, was, as well as Lord Clifford, a Count of the Holy Roman Empire, of which Lord

Cowper is a prince. The Duke of Hamilton is Duke of Chatelherault, in France; Basil Fielding, Earl of Denbigh, is Count of Hapsburg, of Lauffenberg, and of Rheinfelden, in Germany. The Duke of Marlborough was Prince of Mindelheim, in Suabia, just as the Duke of Wellington was Prince of Waterloo, in Belgium. The same Lord Wellington was a Spanish Duke of Ciudad Rodrigo, and Portuguese Count of Vimiera.

There were in England, and there are still, lands both noble and common. The lands of the Lords of Clancharlie were all noble. These lands, burghs, bailiwicks, fiefs, rents, freeholds, and domains, adherent to the peerage of Clancharlie-Hunkerville, belonged provisionally to Lady Josiana, and the king declared that, once married to Josiana, Lord David Dirry-Moir should be Baron Clancharlie.

Besides the Clancharlie inheritance, Lady Josiana had her own fortune. She possessed great wealth, much of which was derived from the gifts of *Madame sans queue* to the Duke of York. *Madame sans queue* is short for Madame. Henrietta of England, Duchess of Orleans, the lady of highest rank in France after the queen, was thus called.

IV.

Having prospered under Charles and James, Lord David prospered under William. His Jacobite feeling did not reach to the extent of following James into exile. While he continued to love his legitimate king, he had the good sense to serve the usurper; he was, moreover, although sometimes disposed to rebel against discipline, an excellent officer. He passed from the land to the sea forces, and distinguished himself in the White Squadron. He rose in it to be what was then called captain of a light frigate. Altogether he made a very fine fellow, carrying to a great extent the elegancies of vice: a bit of a poet, like every one else; a good servant of the state, a good servant to the prince; assiduous at feasts, at galas, at ladies’ receptions, at ceremonies, and in battle; servile in a gentlemanlike way; very haughty; with eyesight dull or keen, according to the object examined; inclined to integrity; obsequious or arrogant, as occasion required; frank and sincere on first acquaintance, with the power of assuming the mask afterwards; very observant of the smiles and frowns of the royal humour; careless before a sword’s point; always ready to risk his life on a sign from his Majesty with heroism and complacency, capable of any insult but of no impoliteness; a man of courtesy and etiquette, proud of kneeling at great regal ceremonies; of a gay valour; a courtier on the surface, a paladin below; quite young at forty-five. Lord David sang French songs, an elegant gaiety which had delighted Charles II. He loved eloquence and fine language. He greatly admired those celebrated discourses which are called the funeral orations of Bossuet.

From his mother he had inherited almost enough to live on, about £10,000 a year. He managed to get on with it — by running into debt. In magnificence, extravagance, and novelty he was without a rival. Directly he was copied he changed his fashion. On horseback he wore loose boots of cow-hide, which turned over, with spurs. He had hats like nobody else's, unheard-of lace, and bands of which he alone had the pattern.

CHAPTER III.

THE DUCHESS JOSIANA.

Towards 1705, although Lady Josiana was twenty-three and Lord David forty-four, the wedding had not yet taken place, and that for the best reasons in the world. Did they hate each other? Far from it; but what cannot escape from you inspires you with no haste to obtain it. Josiana wanted to remain free, David to remain young. To have no tie until as late as possible appeared to him to be a prolongation of youth. Middle-aged young men abounded in those rakish times. They grew gray as young fops. The wig was an accomplice: later on, powder became the auxiliary. At fifty-five Lord Charles Gerrard, Baron Gerrard, one of the Gerrards of Bromley, filled London with his successes. The young and pretty Duchess of Buckingham, Countess of Coventry, made a fool of herself for love of the handsome Thomas Bellasys, Viscount Falconberg, who was sixty-seven. People quoted the famous verses of Corneille, the septuagenarian, to a girl of twenty— "*Marquise, si mon visage*." Women, too, had their successes in the autumn of life. Witness Ninon and Marion. Such were the models of the day.

Josiana and David carried on a flirtation of a particular shade. They did not love, they pleased, each other. To be at each other's side sufficed them. Why hasten the conclusion? The novels of those days carried lovers and engaged couples to that kind of stage which was the most becoming. Besides, Josiana, while she knew herself to be a bastard, felt herself a princess, and carried her authority over him with a high tone in all their arrangements. She had a fancy for Lord David. Lord David was handsome, but that was over and above the bargain. She considered him to be fashionable.

To be fashionable is everything. Caliban, fashionable and magnificent, would distance Ariel, poor. Lord David was handsome, so much the better. The danger in being handsome is being insipid; and that he was not. He betted, boxed, ran into debt. Josiana thought great things of his horses, his dogs, his losses at play, his mistresses. Lord David, on his side, bowed down before the fascinations of the Duchess Josiana — a maiden without spot or scruple, haughty, inaccessible, and audacious. He addressed sonnets to her, which Josiana sometimes read. In these sonnets he declared that to possess Josiana would be to rise to the stars, which did not prevent his always putting the ascent off to the following year. He waited in the antechamber outside Josiana's heart; and this suited the convenience of both. At court all admired the good taste of this delay. Lady Josiana said, "It is a bore that I should be obliged to marry Lord David; I, who would desire nothing better than to be in love with him!"

Josiana was "the flesh." Nothing could be more resplendent. She was very tall — too tall. Her hair was of that tinge which might be called red gold. She was plump, fresh, strong, and rosy, with immense boldness and wit. She had eyes which were too intelligible. She had neither lovers nor chastity. She walled herself round with pride. Men! oh, fie! a god only would be worthy of her, or a monster. If virtue consists in the protection of an inaccessible position, Josiana possessed all possible virtue, but without any innocence. She disdained intrigues; but she would not have been displeased had she been supposed to have engaged in some, provided that the objects were uncommon, and proportioned to the merits of one so highly placed. She thought little of her reputation, but much of her glory. To appear yielding, and to be unapproachable, is perfection. Josiana felt herself majestic and material. Hers was a cumbrous beauty. She usurped rather than charmed. She trod upon hearts. She was earthly. She would have been as much astonished at being proved to have a soul in her bosom as wings on her back. She discoursed on Locke; she was polite; she was suspected of knowing Arabic.

To be "the flesh" and to be woman are two different things. Where a woman is vulnerable, on the side of pity, for instance, which so readily turns to love, Josiana was not. Not that she was unfeeling. The ancient comparison of flesh to marble is absolutely false. The beauty of flesh consists in not being marble: its beauty is to palpitate, to tremble, to blush, to bleed, to have firmness without hardness, to be white without being cold, to have its sensations and its infirmities; its beauty is to be life, and marble is death.

Flesh, when it attains a certain degree of beauty, has almost a claim to the right of nudity; it conceals itself in its own dazzling charms as in a veil. He who might have looked upon Josiana nude would have perceived her outlines only through a surrounding glory. She would have shown herself without hesitation to a satyr or a eunuch. She had the self-possession of a goddess. To have made her nudity a torment, ever eluding a pursuing Tantalus, would have been an amusement to her.

The king had made her a duchess, and Jupiter a Nereid — a double irradiation of which the strange, brightness of this creature was composed. In admiring her you felt yourself becoming a pagan and a lackey. Her origin had been bastardy and the ocean. She appeared to have emerged from the foam. From the stream had risen the first jet of her destiny; but the spring was royal. In her there was something of the wave, of chance, of the patrician, and of the tempest. She was well read and accomplished. Never had a passion approached her, yet she had sounded them all. She had a disgust for realizations, and at the same time a taste for them. If she had stabbed herself, it would, like Lucretia, not have been until afterwards. She was a virgin stained with every defilement in its visionary stage. She was a possible Astarte in a real Diana. She was, in the insolence of high birth, tempting and inaccessible. Nevertheless, she might find it amusing to plan a fall for herself. She dwelt in a halo of glory, half wishing to descend from it, and perhaps feeling curious to know what a fall was like. She was a little too heavy for her cloud. To err is a diversion. Princely unconstraint has the privilege of experiment, and what is frailty in a plebeian is only frolic in a duchess. Josiana was in everything — in birth, in beauty, in irony, in brilliancy — almost a queen. She had felt a moment's enthusiasm for Louis de Bouffles, who used to break horseshoes between his fingers. She regretted that Hercules was dead. She lived in some undefined expectation of a voluptuous and supreme ideal.

Morally, Josiana brought to one's mind the line —

"Un beau torse de femme en hydre se termine."

Hers was a noble neck, a splendid bosom, heaving harmoniously over a royal heart, a glance full of life and light, a countenance pure and haughty, and who knows? below the surface was there not, in a semi-transparent and misty depth, an undulating, supernatural prolongation, perchance deformed and dragon-like — a proud virtue ending in vice in the depth of dreams.

II.

With all that she was a prude.

It was the fashion.

Remember Elizabeth.

Elizabeth was of a type that prevailed in England for three centuries — the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth. Elizabeth was more than English — she was Anglican. Hence the deep respect of the Episcopalian Church for that queen — respect resented by the Church of Rome, which counterbalanced it with a dash of excommunication. In the mouth of Sixtus V., when anathematizing Elizabeth, malediction turned to madrigal. “*Un gran cervello di principessa*,” he says. Mary Stuart, less concerned with the church and more with the woman part of the question, had little respect for her sister Elizabeth, and wrote to her as queen to queen and coquette to prude: “Your disinclination to marriage arises from your not wishing to lose the liberty of being made love to.” Mary Stuart played with the fan, Elizabeth with the axe. An uneven match. They were rivals, besides, in literature. Mary Stuart composed French verses; Elizabeth translated Horace. The ugly Elizabeth decreed herself beautiful; liked quatrains and acrostics; had the keys of towns presented to her by cupids; bit her lips after the Italian fashion, rolled her eyes after the Spanish; had in her wardrobe three thousand dresses and costumes, of which several were for the character of Minerva and Amphitrite; esteemed the Irish for the width of their shoulders; covered her farthingale with braids and spangles; loved roses; cursed, swore, and stamped; struck her maids of honour with her clenched fists; used to send Dudley to the devil; beat Burleigh, the Chancellor, who would cry — poor old fool! spat on Matthew; collared Hatton; boxed the ears of Essex; showed her legs to Bassompierre; and was a virgin.

What she did for Bassompierre the Queen of Sheba had done for Solomon; consequently she was right, Holy Writ having created the precedent. That which is biblical may well be Anglican. Biblical precedent goes so far as to speak of a child who was called Ebnehaquem or Melilechet — that is to say, the Wise Man’s son.

Why object to such manners? Cynicism is at least as good as hypocrisy.

Nowadays England, whose Loyola is named Wesley, casts down her eyes a little at the remembrance of that past age. She is vexed at the memory, yet proud of it.

These fine ladies, moreover, knew Latin. From the 16th century this had been accounted a feminine accomplishment. Lady Jane Grey had carried fashion to the point of knowing Hebrew. The Duchess Josiana Latinized. Then (another fine thing) she was secretly a Catholic; after the manner of her uncle, Charles II., rather than her father, James II. James II. had lost his crown for his Catholicism, and Josiana did not care to risk her peerage. Thus it was that while a Catholic amongst her intimate friends and the refined of both sexes, she was outwardly a Protestant for the benefit of the riffraff.

This is the pleasant view to take of religion. You enjoy all the good things belonging to the official Episcopalian church, and later on you die, like Grotius, in the odour of Catholicity, having the glory of a mass being said for you by le Père Petau.

Although plump and healthy, Josiana was, we repeat, a perfect prude.

At times her sleepy and voluptuous way of dragging out the end of her phrases was like the creeping of a tiger's paws in the jungle.

The advantage of prudes is that they disorganize the human race. They deprive it of the honour of their adherence. Beyond all, keep the human species at a distance. This is a point of the greatest importance.

When one has not got Olympus, one must take the Hôtel de Rambouillet. Juno resolves herself into Araminta. A pretension to divinity not admitted creates affectation. In default of thunderclaps there is impertinence. The temple shrivels into the boudoir. Not having the power to be a goddess, she is an idol.

There is besides, in prudery, a certain pedantry which is pleasing to women. The coquette and the pedant are neighbours. Their kinship is visible in the fop. The subtile is derived from the sensual. Gluttony affects delicacy, a grimace of disgust conceals cupidity. And then woman feels her weak point guarded by all that casuistry of gallantry which takes the place of scruples in prudes. It is a line of circumvallation with a ditch. Every prude puts on an air of repugnance. It is a protection. She will consent, but she disdains — for the present.

Josiana had an uneasy conscience. She felt such a leaning towards immodesty that she was a prude. The recoils of pride in the direction opposed to our vices lead us to those of a contrary nature. It was the excessive effort to be chaste which made her a prude. To be too much on the defensive points to a secret desire for attack; the shy woman is not strait-laced. She shut herself up in the arrogance of the exceptional circumstances of her rank, meditating, perhaps, all the while, some sudden lapse from it.

It was the dawn of the eighteenth century. England was a sketch of what France was during the regency. Walpole and Dubois are not unlike. Marlborough was fighting against his former king, James II., to whom it was said he had sold his sister, Miss Churchill. Bolingbroke was in his meridian, and Richelieu in his dawn. Gallantry found its convenience in a certain medley of ranks. Men were equalized by the same vices as they were later on, perhaps, by the same ideas. Degradation of rank, an aristocratic prelude, began what the revolution was to complete. It was not very far off the time when Jelyotte was seen publicly sitting, in broad daylight, on the bed of the Marquise d'Epinay. It is true (for manners re-echo each other) that in the sixteenth century Smeton's nightcap had been found under Anne Boleyn's pillow.

If the word woman signifies fault, as I forget what Council decided, never was woman so womanlike as then. Never, covering her frailty by her charms, and her weakness by her omnipotence, has she claimed absolution more imperiously. In making the forbidden the permitted fruit, Eve fell; in making the permitted the forbidden fruit, she triumphs. That is the climax. In the eighteenth century the wife bolts out her husband. She shuts herself up in Eden with Satan. Adam is left outside.

III.

All Josiana's instincts impelled her to yield herself gallantly rather than to give herself legally. To surrender on the score of gallantry implies learning, recalls Menalcas and Amaryllis, and is almost a literary act. Mademoiselle de Scudéry, putting aside the attraction of ugliness for ugliness' sake, had no other motive for yielding to Pélisson.

The maiden a sovereign, the wife a subject, such was the old English notion. Josiana was deferring the hour of this subjection as long as she could. She must eventually marry Lord David, since such was the royal pleasure. It was a necessity, doubtless; but what a pity! Josiana appreciated Lord David, and showed him off. There was between them a tacit agreement neither to conclude nor to break off the engagement. They eluded each other. This method of making love, one step in advance and two back, is expressed in the dances of the period, the minuet and the gavotte.

It is unbecoming to be married — fades one’s ribbons and makes one look old. An espousal is a dreary absorption of brilliancy. A woman handed over to you by a notary, how commonplace! The brutality of marriage creates definite situations; suppresses the will; kills choice; has a syntax, like grammar; replaces inspiration by orthography; makes a dictation of love; disperses all life’s mysteries; diminishes the rights both of sovereign and subject; by a turn of the scale destroys the charming equilibrium of the sexes, the one robust in bodily strength, the other all-powerful in feminine weakness — strength on one side, beauty on the other; makes one a master and the other a servant, while without marriage one is a slave, the other a queen.

To make Love prosaically decent, how gross! to deprive it of all impropriety, how dull!

Lord David was ripening. Forty; ’tis a marked period. He did not perceive this, and in truth he looked no more than thirty. He considered it more amusing to desire Josiana than to possess her. He possessed others. He had mistresses. On the other hand, Josiana had dreams.

The Duchess Josiana had a peculiarity, less rare than it is supposed. One of her eyes was blue and the other black. Her pupils were made for love and hate, for happiness and misery. Night and day were mingled in her look.

Her ambition was this — to show herself capable of impossibilities. One day she said to Swift, “You people fancy that you know what scorn is.” “You people” meant the human race.

She was a skin-deep Papist. Her Catholicism did not exceed the amount necessary for fashion. She would have been a Puseyite in the present day. She wore great dresses of velvet, satin, or moire, some composed of fifteen or sixteen yards of material, with embroideries of gold and silver; and round her waist many knots of pearls, alternating with other precious stones. She was extravagant in gold lace. Sometimes she wore an embroidered cloth jacket like a bachelor. She rode on a man’s saddle, notwithstanding the invention of side-saddles, introduced into England in the fourteenth century by Anne, wife of Richard II. She washed her face, arms, shoulders, and neck, in sugar-candy, diluted in white of egg, after the fashion of Castile. There came over her face, after any one had spoken wittily in her presence, a reflective smile of singular grace. She was free from malice, and rather good-natured than otherwise.

CHAPTER IV.

THE LEADER OF FASHION.

Josiana was bored. The fact is so natural as to be scarcely worth mentioning.

Lord David held the position of judge in the gay life of London. He was looked up to by the nobility and gentry. Let us register a glory of Lord David's. He was daring enough to wear his own hair. The reaction against the wig was beginning. Just as in 1824 Eugene Deveria was the first to allow his beard to grow, so in 1702 Prince Devereux was the first to risk wearing his own hair in public disguised by artful curling. For to risk one's hair was almost to risk one's head. The indignation was universal. Nevertheless Prince Devereux was Viscount Hereford, and a peer of England. He was insulted, and the deed was well worth the insult. In the hottest part of the row Lord David suddenly appeared without his wig and in his own hair. Such conduct shakes the foundations of society. Lord David was insulted even more than Viscount Hereford. He held his ground. Prince Devereux was the first, Lord David Dirry-Moir the second. It is sometimes more difficult to be second than first. It requires less genius, but more courage. The first, intoxicated by the novelty, may ignore the danger; the second sees the abyss, and rushes into it. Lord David flung himself into the abyss of no longer wearing a wig. Later on these lords found imitators. Following these two revolutionists, men found sufficient audacity to wear their own hair, and powder was introduced as an extenuating circumstance.

In order to establish, before we pass on, an important period of history, we should remark that the first blow in the war of wigs was really struck by a Queen, Christina of Sweden, who wore man's clothes, and had appeared in 1680, in her hair of golden brown, powdered, and brushed up from her head. She had, besides, says Misson, a slight beard. The Pope, on his part, by a bull of March 1694, had somewhat let down the wig, by taking it from the heads of bishops and priests, and in ordering churchmen to let their hair grow.

Lord David, then, did not wear a wig, and did wear cowhide boots. Such great things made him a mark for public admiration. There was not a club of which he was not the leader, not a boxing match in which he was not desired as referee. The referee is the arbitrator.

He had drawn up the rules of several clubs in high life. He founded several resorts of fashionable society, of which one, the Lady Guinea, was still in existence in Pall Mall in 1772. The Lady Guinea was a club in which all the youth of the peerage congregated. They gamed there. The lowest stake allowed was a rouleau of fifty guineas, and there was never less than 20,000 guineas on the table. By the side of each player was a little stand on which to place his cup of tea, and a gilt bowl in which to put the rouleaux of guineas. The players, like servants when cleaning knives, wore leather sleeves to save their lace, breastplates of leather to protect their ruffles, shades on their brows to shelter their eyes from the great glare of the lamps, and, to keep their curls in order, broad-brimmed hats covered with flowers. They were masked to conceal their excitement, especially when playing the game of *quinze*. All, moreover, had their coats turned the wrong way, for luck. Lord David was a member of the Beefsteak Club, the Surly Club, and of the Splitfarthing Club, of the Cross Club, the Scratchpenny Club, of the Sealed Knot, a Royalist Club, and of the Martinus Scribblerus, founded by Swift, to take the place of the Rota, founded by Milton.

Though handsome, he belonged to the Ugly Club. This club was dedicated to deformity. The members agreed to fight, not about a beautiful woman, but about an ugly man. The hall of the club was adorned by hideous portraits — Thersites, Triboulet, Duns, Hudibras, Scarron; over the chimney was Æsop, between two men, each blind of an eye, Cocles and Camoëns (Cocles being blind of the left, Camoëns of the right eye), so arranged that the two profiles without eyes were turned to each other. The day that the beautiful Mrs. Visart caught the small pox the Ugly Club toasted her. This club was still in existence in the beginning of the nineteenth century, and Mirabeau was elected an honorary member.

Since the restoration of Charles II. revolutionary clubs had been abolished. The tavern in the little street by Moorfields, where the Calf’s Head Club was held, had been pulled down; it was so called because on the 30th of January, the day on which the blood of Charles I. flowed on the scaffold, the members had drunk red wine out of the skull of a calf to the health of Cromwell. To the republican clubs had succeeded monarchical clubs. In them people amused themselves with decency.

There was the Hell-fire Club, where they played at being impious. It was a joust of sacrilege. Hell was at auction there to the highest bidder in blasphemy.

There was the Butting Club, so called from its members butting folks with their heads. They found some street porter with a wide chest and a stupid countenance. They offered him, and compelled him, if necessary, to accept a pot of porter, in return for which he was to allow them to butt him with their heads four times in the chest, and on this they betted. One day a man, a great brute of a Welshman named Gogangerdd, expired at the third butt. This looked serious. An inquest was held, and the jury returned the following verdict: “Died of an inflation of the heart, caused by excessive drinking.” Gogangerdd had certainly drunk the contents of the pot of porter.

There was the Fun Club. *Fun* is like *cant*, like *humour*, a word which is untranslatable. Fun is to farce what pepper is to salt. To get into a house and break a valuable mirror, slash the family portraits, poison the dog, put the cat in the aviary, is called “cutting a bit of fun.” To give bad news which is untrue, whereby people put on mourning by mistake, is fun. It was fun to cut a square hole in the Holbein at Hampton Court. Fun would have been proud to have broken the arm of the Venus of Milo. Under James II. a young millionaire lord who had during the night set fire to a thatched cottage — a feat which made all London burst with laughter — was proclaimed the King of Fun. The poor devils in the cottage were saved in their night clothes. The members of the Fun Club, all of the highest aristocracy, used to run about London during the hours when the citizens were asleep, pulling the hinges from the shutters, cutting off the pipes of pumps, filling up cisterns, digging up cultivated plots of ground, putting out lamps, sawing through the beams which supported houses, breaking the window panes, especially in the poor quarters of the town. It was the rich who acted thus towards the poor. For this reason no complaint was possible. That was the best of the joke. Those manners have not altogether disappeared. In many places in England and in English possessions — at Guernsey, for instance — your house is now and then somewhat damaged during the night, or a fence is broken, or the knocker twisted off your door. If it were poor people who did these things, they would be sent to jail; but they are done by pleasant young gentlemen.

The most fashionable of the clubs was presided over by an emperor, who wore a crescent on his forehead, and was called the Grand Mohawk. The Mohawk surpassed the Fun. Do evil for evil’s sake was the programme. The Mohawk Club had one great object — to injure. To fulfil this duty all means were held good. In becoming a Mohawk the members took an oath to be hurtful. To injure at any price, no matter when, no matter whom, no matter where, was a matter of duty. Every member of the Mohawk Club was bound to possess an accomplishment. One was “a dancing master;” that is to say he made the rustics frisk about by pricking the calves of their legs with the point of his sword. Others knew how to make a man sweat; that is to say, a circle of gentlemen with drawn rapiers would surround a poor wretch, so that it was impossible for him not to turn his back upon some one. The gentleman behind him chastised him for this by a prick of his sword, which made him spring round; another prick in the back warned the fellow that one of noble blood was behind him, and so on, each one wounding him in his turn. When the man, closed round by the circle of swords and covered with blood, had turned and danced about enough, they ordered their servants to beat him with sticks, to change the course of his ideas. Others “hit the lion” — that is, they gaily stopped a passenger, broke his nose with a blow of the fist, and then shoved both thumbs into his eyes. If his eyes were gouged out, he was paid for them.

Such were, towards the beginning of the eighteenth century, the pastimes of the rich idlers of London. The idlers of Paris had theirs. M. de Charolais was firing his gun at a citizen standing on his own threshold. In all times youth has had its amusements.

Lord David Dirry-Moir brought into all these institutions his magnificent and liberal spirit. Just like any one else, he would gaily set fire to a cot of woodwork and thatch, and just scorch those within; but he would rebuild their houses in stone. He insulted two ladies. One was unmarried — he gave her a portion; the other was married — he had her husband appointed chaplain.

Cockfighting owed him some praiseworthy improvements. It was marvellous to see Lord David dress a cock for the pit. Cocks lay hold of each other by the feathers, as men by the hair. Lord David, therefore, made his cock as bald as possible. With a pair of scissors he cut off all the feathers from the tail and from the head to the shoulders, and all those on the neck. So much less for the enemy’s beak, he used to say. Then he extended the cock’s wings, and cut each feather, one after another, to a point, and thus the wings were furnished with darts. So much for the enemy’s eyes, he would say. Then he scraped its claws with a penknife, sharpened its nails, fitted it with spurs of sharp steel, spat on its head, spat on its neck, anointed it with spittle, as they used to rub oil over athletes; then set it down in the pit, a redoubtable champion, exclaiming, “That’s how to make a cock an eagle, and a bird of the poultry yard a bird of the mountain.”

Lord David attended prize-fights, and was their living law. On occasions of great performances it was he who had the stakes driven in and ropes stretched, and who fixed the number of feet for the ring. When he was a second, he followed his man step by step, a bottle in one hand, a sponge in the other, crying out to him to *hit hard*, suggesting stratagems, advising him as he fought, wiping away the blood, raising him when overthrown, placing him on his knee, putting the mouth of the bottle between his teeth, and from his own mouth, filled with water, blowing a fine rain into his eyes and ears — a thing which reanimates even a dying man. If he was referee, he saw that there was no foul play, prevented any one, whosoever he might be, from assisting the combatants, excepting the seconds, declare the man beaten who did not fairly face his opponent, watched that the time between the rounds did not exceed half a minute, prevented butting, and declared whoever resorted to it beaten, and forbade a man’s being hit when down. All this science, however, did not render him a pedant, nor destroy his ease of manner in society.

When he was referee, rough, pimple-faced, unshorn friends of either combatant never dared to come to the aid of their failing man, nor, in order to upset the chances of the betting, jumped over the barrier, entered the ring, broke the ropes, pulled down the stakes, and violently interposed in the battle. Lord David was one of the few referees whom they dared not thrash.

No one could train like him. The pugilist whose trainer he consented to become was sure to win. Lord David would choose a Hercules — massive as a rock, tall as a tower — and make him his child. The problem was to turn that human rock from a defensive to an offensive state. In this he excelled. Having once adopted the Cyclops, he never left him. He became his nurse; he measured out his wine, weighed his meat, and counted his hours of sleep. It was he who invented the athlete’s admirable rules, afterwards reproduced by Morley. In the mornings, a raw egg and a glass of sherry; at twelve, some slices of a leg of mutton, almost raw, with tea; at four, toast and tea; in the evening, pale ale and toast; after which he undressed his man, rubbed him, and put him to bed. In the street he never allowed him to leave his sight, keeping him out of every danger — runaway horses, the wheels of carriages, drunken soldiers, pretty girls. He watched over his virtue. This maternal solicitude continually brought some new perfection into the pupil's education. He taught him the blow with the fist which breaks the teeth, and the twist of the thumb which gouges out the eye. What could be more touching?

Thus he was preparing himself for public life to which he was to be called later on. It is no easy matter to become an accomplished gentleman.

Lord David Dirry-Moir was passionately fond of open-air exhibitions, of shows, of circuses with wild beasts, of the caravans of mountebanks, of clowns, tumblers, merrymen, open-air farces, and the wonders of a fair. The true noble is he who smacks of the people. Therefore it was that Lord David frequented the taverns and low haunts of London and the Cinque Ports. In order to be able at need, and without compromising his rank in the white squadron, to be cheek-by-jowl with a topman or a calker, he used to wear a sailor's jacket when he went into the slums. For such disguise his not wearing a wig was convenient; for even under Louis XIV. the people kept to their hair like the lion to his mane. This gave him great freedom of action. The low people whom Lord David used to meet in the stews, and with whom he mixed, held him in high esteem, without ever dreaming that he was a lord. They called him Tom-Jim-Jack. Under this name he was famous and very popular amongst the dregs of the people. He played the blackguard in a masterly style: when necessary, he used his fists. This phase of his fashionable life was highly appreciated by Lady Josiana.

CHAPTER V.

QUEEN ANNE.

I.

Above this couple there was Anne, Queen of England. An ordinary woman was Queen Anne. She was gay, kindly, august — to a certain extent. No quality of hers attained to virtue, none to vice. Her stoutness was bloated, her fun heavy, her good-nature stupid. She was stubborn and weak. As a wife she was faithless and faithful, having favourites to whom she gave up her heart, and a husband for whom she kept her bed. As a Christian she was a heretic and a bigot. She had one beauty — the well-developed neck of a Niobe. The rest of her person was indifferently formed. She was a clumsy coquette and a chaste one. Her skin was white and fine; she displayed a great deal of it. It was she who introduced the fashion of necklaces of large pearls clasped round the throat. She had a narrow forehead, sensual lips, fleshy cheeks, large eyes, short sight. Her short sight extended to her mind. Beyond a burst of merriment now and then, almost as ponderous as her anger, she lived in a sort of taciturn grumble and a grumbling silence. Words escaped from her which had to be guessed at. She was a mixture of a good woman and a mischievous devil. She liked surprises, which is extremely woman-like. Anne was a pattern — just sketched roughly — of the universal Eve. To that sketch had fallen that chance, the throne. She drank. Her husband was a Dane, thoroughbred. A Tory, she governed by the Whigs — like a woman, like a mad woman. She had fits of rage. She was violent, a brawler. Nobody more awkward than Anne in directing affairs of state. She allowed events to fall about as they might chance. Her whole policy was cracked. She excelled in bringing about great catastrophes from little causes. When a whim of authority took hold of her, she called it giving a stir with the poker. She would say with an air of profound thought, “No peer may keep his hat on before the king except De Courcy, Baron Kingsale, an Irish peer;” or, “It would be an injustice were my husband not to be Lord High Admiral, since my father was.” And she made George of Denmark High Admiral of England and of all her Majesty’s plantations. She was perpetually perspiring bad humour; she did not explain her thought, she exuded it. There was something of the Sphinx in this goose.

She rather liked fun, teasing, and practical jokes. Could she have made Apollo a hunchback, it would have delighted her. But she would have left him a god. Good-natured, her ideal was to allow none to despair, and to worry all. She had often a rough word in her mouth; a little more, and she would have sworn like Elizabeth. From time to time she would take from a man's pocket, which she wore in her skirt, a little round box, of chased silver, on which was her portrait, in profile, between the two letters Q.A.; she would open this box, and take from it, on her finger, a little pomade, with which she reddened her lips, and, having coloured her mouth, would laugh. She was greedily fond of the flat Zealand gingerbread cakes. She was proud of being fat.

More of a Puritan than anything else, she would, nevertheless, have liked to devote herself to stage plays. She had an absurd academy of music, copied after that of France. In 1700 a Frenchman, named Foretroche, wanted to build a royal circus at Paris, at a cost of 400,000 francs, which scheme was opposed by D'Argenson. This Forteroche passed into England, and proposed to Queen Anne, who was immediately charmed by the idea, to build in London a theatre with machinery, with a fourth under-stage finer than that of the King of France. Like Louis XIV., she liked to be driven at a gallop. Her teams and relays would sometimes do the distance between London and Windsor in less than an hour and a quarter.

II.

In Anne's time no meeting was allowed without the permission of two justices of the peace. The assembly of twelve persons, were it only to eat oysters and drink porter, was a felony. Under her reign, otherwise relatively mild, pressing for the fleet was carried on with extreme violence — a gloomy evidence that the Englishman is a subject rather than a citizen. For centuries England suffered under that process of tyranny which gave the lie to all the old charters of freedom, and out of which France especially gathered a cause of triumph and indignation. What in some degree diminishes the triumph is, that while sailors were pressed in England, soldiers were pressed in France. In every great town of France, any able-bodied man, going through the streets on his business, was liable to be shoved by the crimps into a house called the oven. There he was shut up with others in the same plight; those fit for service were picked out, and the recruiters sold them to the officers. In 1695 there were thirty of these ovens in Paris.

The laws against Ireland, emanating from Queen Anne, were atrocious. Anne was born in 1664, two years before the great fire of London, on which the astrologers (there were some left, and Louis XIV. was born with the assistance of an astrologer, and swaddled in a horoscope) predicted that, being the elder sister of fire, she would be queen. And so she was, thanks to astrology and the revolution of 1688. She had the humiliation of having only Gilbert, Archbishop of Canterbury, for godfather. To be godchild of the Pope was no longer possible in England. A mere primate is but a poor sort of godfather. Anne had to put up with one, however. It was her own fault. Why was she a Protestant?

Denmark had paid for her virginity (*virginitas empta*, as the old charters expressed it) by a dowry of £6,250 a year, secured on the bailiwick of Wardinburg and the island of Fehmarn. Anne followed, without conviction, and by routine, the traditions of William. The English under that royalty born of a revolution possessed as much liberty as they could lay hands on between the Tower of London, into which they put orators, and the pillory, into which they put writers. Anne spoke a little Danish in her private chats with her husband, and a little French in her private chats with Bolingbroke. Wretched gibberish; but the height of English fashion, especially at court, was to talk French. There was never a *bon mot* but in French. Anne paid a deal of attention to her coins, especially to copper coins, which are the low and popular ones; she wanted to cut a great figure on them. Six farthings were struck during her reign. On the back of the first three she had merely a throne struck, on the back of the fourth she ordered a triumphal chariot, and on the back of the sixth a goddess holding a sword in one hand and an olive branch in the other, with the scroll, *Bello et pace*. Her father, James II., was candid and cruel; she was brutal.

At the same time she was mild at bottom. A contradiction which only appears such. A fit of anger metamorphosed her. Heat sugar and it will boil.

Anne was popular. England liked feminine rulers. Why? France excludes them. There is a reason at once. Perhaps there is no other. With English historians Elizabeth embodies grandeur, Anne good-nature. As they will. Be it so. But there is nothing delicate in the reigns of these women. The lines are heavy. It is gross grandeur and gross good-nature. As to their immaculate virtue, England is tenacious of it, and we are not going to oppose the idea. Elizabeth was a virgin tempered by Essex; Anne, a wife complicated by Bolingbroke.

III.

One idiotic habit of the people is to attribute to the king what they do themselves. They fight. Whose the glory? The king's. They pay. Whose the generosity? The king's. Then the people love him for being so rich. The king receives a crown from the poor, and returns them a farthing. How generous he is! The colossus which is the pedestal contemplates the pigmy which is the statue. How great is this myrmidon! he is on my back. A dwarf has an excellent way of being taller than a giant: it is to perch himself on his shoulders. But that the giant should allow it, there is the wonder; and that he should admire the height of the dwarf, there is the folly. Simplicity of mankind! The equestrian statue, reserved for kings alone, is an excellent figure of royalty: the horse is the people. Only that the horse becomes transfigured by degrees. It begins in an ass; it ends in a lion. Then it throws its rider, and you have 1642 in England and 1789 in France; and sometimes it devours him, and you have in England 1649, and in France 1793. That the lion should relapse into the donkey is astonishing; but it is so. This was occurring in England. It had resumed the pack-saddle, idolatry of the crown. Queen Anne, as we have just observed, was popular. What was she doing to be so? Nothing. Nothing! — that is all that is asked of the sovereign of England. He receives for that nothing £1,250,000 a year. In 1705, England which had had but thirteen men of war under Elizabeth, and thirty-six under James I., counted a hundred and fifty in her fleet. The English had three armies, 5,000 men in Catalonia; 10,000 in Portugal; 50,000 in Flanders; and besides, was paying £1,666,666 a year to monarchical and diplomatic Europe, a sort of prostitute the English people has always had in keeping. Parliament having voted a patriotic loan of thirty-four million francs of annuities, there had been a crush at the Exchequer to subscribe it. England was sending a squadron to the East Indies, and a squadron to the West of Spain under Admiral Leake, without mentioning the reserve of four hundred sail, under Admiral Sir Cloudesley Shovel. England had lately annexed Scotland. It was the interval between Hochstadt and Ramillies, and the first of these victories was foretelling the second. England, in its cast of the net at Hochstadt, had made prisoners of twenty-seven battalions and four regiments of dragoons, and deprived France of one hundred leagues of country — France drawing back dismayed from the Danube to the Rhine. England was stretching her hand out towards Sardinia and the Balearic Islands. She was bringing into her ports in triumph ten Spanish line-of-battle ships, and many a galleon laden with gold. Hudson Bay and Straits were already half given over by Louis XIV. It was felt that he was about to give up his hold over Acadia, St. Christopher, and Newfoundland, and that he would be but too happy if England would only tolerate the King of France fishing for cod at Cape Breton. England was about to impose upon him the shame of demolishing himself the fortifications of Dunkirk. Meanwhile, she had taken Gibraltar, and was taking Barcelona. What great things accomplished! How was it possible to refuse Anne admiration for taking the trouble of living at the period?

From a certain point of view, the reign of Anne appears a reflection of the reign of Louis XIV. Anne, for a moment even with that king in the race which is called history, bears to him the vague resemblance of a reflection. Like him, she plays at a great reign; she has her monuments, her arts, her victories, her captains, her men of letters, her privy purse to pension celebrities, her gallery of chefs-d’oeuvre, side by side with those of his Majesty. Her court, too, was a cortège, with the features of a triumph, an order and a march. It was a miniature copy of all the great men of Versailles, not giants themselves. In it there is enough to deceive the eye; add God save the Queen, which might have been taken from Lulli, and the ensemble becomes an illusion. Not a personage is missing. Christopher Wren is a very passable Mansard; Somers is as good as Lamoignon; Anne has a Racine in Dryden, a Boileau in Pope, a Colbert in Godolphin, a Louvois in Pembroke, and a Turenne in Marlborough. Heighten the wigs and lower the foreheads. The whole is solemn and pompous, and the Windsor of the time has a faded resemblance to Marly. Still the whole was effeminate, and Anne’s Père Tellier was called Sarah Jennings. However, there is an outline of incipient irony, which fifty years later was to turn to philosophy, in the literature of the age, and the Protestant Tartuffe is unmasked by Swift just in the same way as the Catholic Tartuffe is denounced by Molière. Although the England of the period quarrels and fights France, she imitates her and draws enlightenment from her; and the light on the façade of England is French light. It is a pity that Anne's reign lasted but twelve years, or the English would not hesitate to call it the century of Anne, as we say the century of Louis XIV. Anne appeared in 1702, as Louis XIV. declined. It is one of the curiosities of history, that the rise of that pale planet coincides with the setting of the planet of purple, and that at the moment in which France had the king Sun, England should have had the queen Moon.

A detail to be noted. Louis XIV., although they made war with him, was greatly admired in England. "He is the kind of king they want in France," said the English. The love of the English for their own liberty is mingled with a certain acceptance of servitude for others. That favourable regard of the chains which bind their neighbours sometimes attains to enthusiasm for the despot next door.

To sum up, Anne rendered her people *hureux*, as the French translator of Beeverell's book repeats three times, with graceful reiteration at the sixth and ninth page of his dedication and the third of his preface.

IV.

Queen Anne bore a little grudge to the Duchess Josiana, for two reasons. Firstly, because she thought the Duchess Josiana handsome. Secondly, because she thought the Duchess Josiana's betrothed handsome. Two reasons for jealousy are sufficient for a woman. One is sufficient for a queen. Let us add that she bore her a grudge for being her sister. Anne did not like women to be pretty. She considered it against good morals. As for herself, she was ugly. Not from choice, however. A part of her religion she derived from that ugliness. Josiana, beautiful and philosophical, was a cause of vexation to the queen. To an ugly queen, a pretty duchess is not an agreeable sister.

There was another grievance, Josiana's "improper" birth. Anne was the daughter of Anne Hyde, a simple gentlewoman, legitimately, but vexatiously, married by James II. when Duke of York. Anne, having this inferior blood in her veins, felt herself but half royal, and Josiana, having come into the world quite irregularly, drew closer attention to the incorrectness, less great, but really existing, in the birth of the queen. The daughter of *mésalliance* looked without love upon the daughter of bastardy, so near her. It was an unpleasant resemblance. Josiana had a right to say to

Anne, “My mother was at least as good as yours.” At court no one said so, but they evidently thought it. This was a bore for her royal Majesty. Why this Josiana? What had put it into her head to be born? What good was a Josiana? Certain relationships are detrimental. Nevertheless, Anne smiled on Josiana. Perhaps she might even have liked her, had she not been her sister.

CHAPTER VI.

BARKILPHEDRO.

It is useful to know what people do, and a certain surveillance is wise. Josiana had Lord David watched by a little creature of hers, in whom she reposed confidence, and whose name was Barkilphedro.

Lord David had Josiana discreetly observed by a creature of his, of whom he was sure, and whose name was Barkilphedro.

Queen Anne, on her part, kept herself secretly informed of the actions and conduct of the Duchess Josiana, her bastard sister, and of Lord David, her future brother-in-law by the left hand, by a creature of hers, on whom she counted fully, and whose name was Barkilphedro.

This Barkilphedro had his fingers on that keyboard — Josiana, Lord David, a queen. A man between two women. What modulations possible! What amalgamation of souls!

Barkilphedro had not always held the magnificent position of whispering into three ears.

He was an old servant of the Duke of York. He had tried to be a churchman but had failed. The Duke of York, an English and a Roman prince, compounded of royal Popery and legal Anglicanism, had his Catholic house and his Protestant house, and might have pushed Barkilphedro in one or the other hierarchy; but he did not judge him to be Catholic enough to make him almoner, or Protestant enough to make him chaplain. So that between two religions, Barkilphedro found himself with his soul on the ground.

Not a bad posture, either, for certain reptile souls.

Certain ways are impracticable, except by crawling flat on the belly.

An obscure but fattening servitude had long made up Barkilphedro’s whole existence. Service is something; but he wanted power besides. He was, perhaps, about to reach it when James II. fell. He had to begin all over again. Nothing to do under William III., a sullen prince, and exercising in his mode of reigning a prudery which he believed to be probity. Barkilphedro, when his protector, James II., was dethroned, did not lapse all at once into rags. There is a something which survives deposed princes, and which feeds and sustains their parasites. The remains of the exhaustible sap causes leaves to live on for two or three days on the branches of the uprooted tree; then, all at once, the leaf yellows and dries up: and thus it is with the courtier.

Thanks to that embalming which is called legitimacy, the prince himself, although fallen and cast away, lasts and keeps preserved; it is not so with the courtier, much more dead than the king. The king, beyond there, is a mummy; the courtier, here, is a phantom. To be the shadow of a shadow is leanness indeed. Hence Barkilphedro became famished. Then he took up the character of a man of letters.

But he was thrust back even from the kitchens. Sometimes he knew not where to sleep. “Who will give me shelter?” he would ask. He struggled on. All that is interesting in patience in distress he possessed. He had, besides, the talent of the termite — knowing how to bore a hole from the bottom to the top. By dint of making use of the name of James II., of old memories, of fables of fidelity, of touching stories, he pierced as far as the Duchess Josiana’s heart.

Josiana took a liking to this man of poverty and wit, an interesting combination. She presented him to Lord Dirry-Moir, gave him a shelter in the servants’ hall among her domestics, retained him in her household, was kind to him, and sometimes even spoke to him. Barkilphedro felt neither hunger nor cold again. Josiana addressed him in the second person; it was the fashion for great ladies to do so to men of letters, who allowed it. The Marquise de Mailly received Roy, whom she had never seen before, in bed, and said to him, “C’est toi qui as fait l’Année galante! Bonjour.” Later on, the men of letters returned the custom. The day came when Fabre d’Eglantine said to the Duchesse de Rohan, “N’est-tu pas la Chabot?”

For Barkilphedro to be “thee’d” and “thou’d” was a success; he was overjoyed by it. He had aspired to this contemptuous familiarity. “Lady Josiana thees-and-thous me,” he would say to himself. And he would rub his hands. He profited by this theeing-and-thouing to make further way. He became a sort of constant attendant in Josiana’s private rooms; in no way troublesome; unperceived; the duchess would almost have changed her shift before him. All this, however, was precarious. Barkilphedro was aiming at a position. A duchess was half-way; an underground passage which did not lead to the queen was having bored for nothing.

One day Barkilphedro said to Josiana, —

“Would your Grace like to make my fortune?”.

"What dost thou want?"

"An appointment."

"An appointment? for thee!"

"Yes, madam."

"What an idea! *thou* to ask for an appointment! thou, who art good for nothing."

"That's just the reason."

Josiana burst out laughing.

"Among the offices to which thou art unsuited, which dost thou desire?"

"That of cork drawer of the bottles of the ocean."

Josiana's laugh redoubled.

"What meanest thou? Thou art fooling."

"No, madam."

"To amuse myself, I shall answer you seriously," said the duchess. "What dost thou wish to be? Repeat it."

"Uncorker of the bottles of the ocean."

"Everything is possible at court. Is there an appointment of that kind?"

"Yes, madam."

"This is news to me. Go on."

"There is such an appointment."

"Swear it on the soul which thou dost not possess."

"I swear it."

"I do not believe thee."

"Thank you, madam."

"Then thou wishest? Begin again."

"To uncork the bottles of the ocean."

"That is a situation which can give little trouble. It is like grooming a bronze horse."

"Very nearly."

"Nothing to do. Well 'tis a situation to suit thee. Thou art good for that much."

"You see I am good for something."

"Come! thou art talking nonsense. Is there such an appointment?"

Barkilphedro assumed an attitude of deferential gravity. "Madam, you had an august father, James II., the king, and you have an illustrious brother-in-law, George of Denmark, Duke of Cumberland; your father was, and your brother is, Lord High Admiral of England—"

“Is what thou tellest me fresh news? I know all that as well as thou.”

“But here is what your Grace does not know. In the sea there are three kinds of things: those at the bottom, *lagan;* those which float, *flotsam;* those which the sea throws up on the shore, *jetsam*.”

“And then?”

“These three things — *lagan*, *flotsam*, and *jetsam* — belong to the Lord High Admiral.”

“And then?”

“Your Grace understands.”

“No.”

“All that is in the sea, all that sinks, all that floats, all that is cast ashore — all belongs to the Admiral of England.”

“Everything! Really? And then?”

“Except the sturgeon, which belongs to the king.”

“I should have thought,” said Josiana, “all that would have belonged to Neptune.”

“Neptune is a fool. He has given up everything. He has allowed the English to take everything.”

“Finish what thou wert saying.”

“‘Prizes of the sea’ is the name given to such *treasure trove*.”

“Be it so.”

“It is boundless: there is always something floating, something being cast up. It is the contribution of the sea — the tax which the ocean pays to England.”

“With all my heart. But pray conclude.”

“Your Grace understands that in this way the ocean creates a department.”

“Where?”

“At the Admiralty.”

“What department?”

“The Sea Prize Department.”

“Well?”

“The department is subdivided into three offices — Lagan, Flotsam, and Jetsam — and in each there is an officer.”

“And then?”

“A ship at sea writes to give notice on any subject to those on land — that it is sailing in such a latitude; that it has met a sea monster; that it is in sight of shore; that it is in distress; that it is about to founder; that it is lost, etc. The captain takes a bottle, puts into it a bit of paper on which he has written the information, corks up the flask, and casts it into the sea. If the bottle goes to the bottom, it is in the department of the lagan officer; if it floats, it is in the department of the flotsam officer; if it be thrown upon shore, it concerns the jetsam officer.”

“And wouldst thou like to be the jetsam officer?”

“Precisely so.”

“And that is what thou callest uncorking the bottles of the ocean?”

“Since there is such an appointment.”

“Why dost thou wish for the last-named place in preference to both the others?”

“Because it is vacant just now.”

“In what does the appointment consist?”

“Madam, in 1598 a tarred bottle, picked up by a man, conger-fishing on the strand of Epidium Promontorium, was brought to Queen Elizabeth; and a parchment drawn out of it gave information to England that Holland had taken, without saying anything about it, an unknown country, Nova Zembla; that the capture had taken place in June, 1596; that in that country people were eaten by bears; and that the manner of passing the winter was described on a paper enclosed in a musket-case hanging in the chimney of the wooden house built in the island, and left by the Dutchmen, who were all dead: and that the chimney was built of a barrel with the end knocked out, sunk into the roof.”

“I don’t understand much of thy rigmarole.”

“Be it so. Elizabeth understood. A country the more for Holland was a country the less for England. The bottle which had given the information was held to be of importance; and thenceforward an order was issued that anybody who should find a sealed bottle on the sea-shore should take it to the Lord High Admiral of England, under pain of the gallows. The admiral entrusts the opening of such bottles to an officer, who presents the contents to the queen, if there be reason for so doing.”

“Are many such bottles brought to the Admiralty?”

“But few. But it’s all the same. The appointment exists. There is for the office a room and lodgings at the Admiralty.”

“And for that way of doing nothing, how is one paid?”

“One hundred guineas a year.”

“And thou wouldst trouble me for that much?”

“It is enough to live upon.”

“Like a beggar.”

“As it becomes one of my sort.”

“One hundred guineas! It’s a bagatelle.”

“What keeps you for a minute, keeps us for a year. That’s the advantage of the poor.”

“Thou shalt have the place.”

A week afterwards, thanks to Josiana’s exertions, thanks to the influence of Lord David Dirry-Moir, Barkilphedro — safe thenceforward, drawn out of his precarious existence, lodged, and boarded, with a salary of a hundred guineas — was installed at the Admiralty.

CHAPTER VII.

BARKILPHEDRO GNAWS HIS WAY.

There is one thing the most pressing of all: to be ungrateful.

Barkilphedro was not wanting therein.

Having received so many benefits from Josiana, he had naturally but one thought — to revenge himself on her. When we add that Josiana was beautiful, great, young, rich, powerful, illustrious, while Barkilphedro was ugly, little, old, poor, dependent, obscure, he must necessarily revenge himself for all this as well.

When a man is made out of night, how is he to forgive so many beams of light?

Barkilphedro was an Irishman who had denied Ireland — a bad species.

Barkilphedro had but one thing in his favour — that he had a very big belly. A big belly passes for a sign of kind-heartedness. But his belly was but an addition to Barkilphedro's hypocrisy; for the man was full of malice.

What was Barkilphedro's age? None. The age necessary for his project of the moment. He was old in his wrinkles and gray hairs, young in the activity of his mind. He was active and ponderous; a sort of hippopotamus-monkey. A royalist, certainly; a republican — who knows? a Catholic, perhaps; a Protestant, without doubt. For Stuart, probably; for Brunswick, evidently. To be For is a power only on the condition of being at the same time Against. Barkilphedro practised this wisdom.

The appointment of drawer of the bottles of the ocean was not as absurd as Barkilphedro had appeared to make out. The complaints, which would in these times be termed declamations, of Garcia Fernandez in his "Chart-Book of the Sea," against the robbery of jetsam, called right of wreck, and against the pillage of wreck by the inhabitants of the coast, had created a sensation in England, and had obtained for the shipwrecked this reform — that their goods, chattels, and property, instead of being stolen by the country-people, were confiscated by the Lord High Admiral. All the *débris* of the sea cast upon the English shore — merchandise, broken hulls of ships, bales, chests, etc. — belonged to the Lord High Admiral; but — and here was revealed the importance of the place asked for by Barkilphedro — the floating receptacles containing messages and declarations awakened particularly the attention of the Admiralty. Shipwrecks are one of England's gravest cares. Navigation being her life, shipwreck is her anxiety. England is kept in perpetual care by the sea. The little glass bottle thrown to the waves by the doomed ship, contains final intelligence, precious from every point of view. Intelligence concerning the ship, intelligence concerning the crew, intelligence concerning the place, the time, the manner of loss, intelligence concerning the winds which have broken up the vessel, intelligence concerning the currents which bore the floating flask ashore. The situation filled by Barkilphedro has been abolished more than a century, but it had its real utility. The last holder was William Hussey, of Doddington, in Lincolnshire. The man who held it was a sort of guardian of the things of the sea. All the closed and sealed-up vessels, bottles, flasks, jars, thrown upon the English coast by the tide were brought to him. He alone had the right to open them; he was first in the secrets of their contents; he put them in order, and ticketed them with his signature. The expression "*loger un papier au greffe*," still used in the Channel Islands, is thence derived. However, one precaution was certainly taken. Not one of these bottles could be unsealed except in the presence of two jurors of the Admiralty sworn to secrecy, who signed, conjointly with the holder of the jetsam office, the official report of the opening. But these jurors being held to secrecy, there resulted for Barkilphedro a certain discretionary latitude; it depended upon him, to a certain extent, to suppress a fact or bring it to light.

These fragile floating messages were far from being what Barkilphedro had told Josiana, rare and insignificant. Some times they reached land with little delay; at others, after many years. That depended on the winds and the currents. The fashion of casting bottles on the surface of the sea has somewhat passed away, like that of vowing offerings, but in those religious times, those who were about to die were glad thus to send their last thought to God and to men, and at times these messages from the sea were plentiful at the Admiralty. A parchment preserved in the hall at Audlyene (ancient spelling), with notes by the Earl of Suffolk, Grand Treasurer of England under James I., bears witness that in the one year, 1615, fifty-two flasks, bladders, and tarred vessels, containing mention of sinking ships, were brought and registered in the records of the Lord High Admiral.

Court appointments are the drop of oil in the widow's cruse, they ever increase. Thus it is that the porter has become chancellor, and the groom, constable. The special officer charged with the appointment desired and obtained by Barkilphedro was invariably a confidential man. Elizabeth had wished that it should be so. At court, to speak of confidence is to speak of intrigue, and to speak of intrigue is to speak of advancement. This functionary had come to be a personage of some consideration. He was a clerk, and ranked directly after the two grooms of the almonry. He had the right of entrance into the palace, but we must add, what was called the humble entrance — *humilis introïtus* — and even into the bed-chamber. For it was the custom that he should inform the monarch, on occasions of sufficient importance, of the objects found, which were often very curious: the wills of men in despair, farewells cast to fatherland, revelations of falsified logs, bills of lading, and crimes committed at sea, legacies to the crown, etc., that he should maintain his records in communication with the court, and should account, from time to time, to the king or queen, concerning the opening of these ill-omened bottles. It was the black cabinet of the ocean.

Elizabeth, who was always glad of an opportunity of speaking Latin, used to ask Tonfield, of Coley in Berkshire, jetsam officer of her day, when he brought her one of these papers cast up by the sea, “Quid mihi scribit Neptunus?” (What does Neptune write me?)

The way had been eaten, the insect had succeeded. Barkilphedro approached the queen.

This was all he wanted.

To make his fortune?

No.

To unmake that of others?

A greater happiness.

To hurt is to enjoy.

To have within one the desire of injuring, vague but implacable, and never to lose sight of it, is not given to all.

Barkilphedro possessed that fixity of intention.

As the bulldog holds on with his jaws, so did his thought.

To feel himself inexorable gave him a depth of gloomy satisfaction. As long as he had a prey under his teeth, or in his soul, a certainty of evil-doing, he wanted nothing.

He was happy, shivering in the cold which his neighbour was suffering. To be malignant is an opulence. Such a man is believed to be poor, and, in truth, is so; but he has all his riches in malice, and prefers having them so.

Everything is in what contents one. To do a bad turn, which is the same as a good turn, is better than money. Bad for him who endures, good for him who does it. Catesby, the colleague of Guy Fawkes, in the Popish powder plot, said: “To see Parliament blown upside down, I wouldn’t miss it for a million sterling.”

What was Barkilphedro? That meanest and most terrible of things — an envious man.

Envy is a thing ever easily placed at court.

Courts abound in impertinent people, in idlers, in rich loungers hungering for gossip, in those who seek for needles in trusses of hay, in triflers, in banterers bantered, in witty ninnies, who cannot do without converse with an envious man.

What a refreshing thing is the evil spoken to you of others.

Envy is good stuff to make a spy. There is a profound analogy between that natural passion, envy, and that social function, espionage. The spy hunts on others’ account, like the dog. The envious man hunts on his own, like the cat.

A fierce Myself, such is the envious man.

He had other qualities. Barkilphedro was discreet, secret, concrete. He kept in everything and racked himself with his hate. Enormous baseness implies enormous vanity. He was liked by those whom he amused, and hated by all others; but he felt that he was disdained by those who hated him, and despised by those who liked him. He restrained himself. All his gall simmered noiselessly in his hostile resignation. He was indignant, as if rogues had the right to be so. He was the furies’ silent prey. To swallow everything was his talent. There were deaf wraths within him, frenzies of interior rage, black and brooding flames unseen; he was a *smoke-consuming* man of passion. The surface was smiling. He was kind, prompt, easy, amiable, obliging. Never mind to whom, never mind where, he bowed. For a breath of wind he inclined to the earth. What a source of fortune to have a reed for a spine! Such concealed and venomous beings are not so rare as is believed. We live surrounded by ill-omened crawling things. Wherefore the malevolent? A keen question! The dreamer constantly proposes it to himself, and the thinker never resolves it. Hence the sad eye of the philosophers ever fixed upon that mountain of darkness which is destiny, and from the top of which the colossal spectre of evil casts handfuls of serpents over the earth.

Barkilphedro’s body was obese and his face lean. A fat bust and a bony countenance. His nails were channelled and short, his fingers knotted, his thumbs flat, his hair coarse, his temples wide apart, and his forehead a murderer’s, broad and low. The littleness of his eye was hidden under his bushy eyebrows. His nose, long, sharp, and flabby, nearly met his mouth. Barkilphedro, properly attired, as an emperor, would have somewhat resembled Domitian. His face of muddy yellow might have been modelled in slimy paste — his immovable cheeks were like putty; he had all kinds of ugly refractory wrinkles; the angle of his jaw was massive, his chin heavy, his ear underbred. In repose, and seen in profile, his upper lip was raised at an acute angle, showing two teeth. Those teeth seemed to look at you. The teeth can look, just as the eye can bite.

Patience, temperance, continence, reserve, self-control, amenity, deference, gentleness, politeness, sobriety, chastity, completed and finished Barkilphedro. He culumniated those virtues by their possession.

In a short time Barkilphedro took a foothold at court.

CHAPTER VIII.

INFERI.

There are two ways of making a footing at court. In the clouds, and you are august; in the mud, and you are powerful.

In the first case, you belong to Olympus.

In the second case, you belong to the private closet.

He who belongs to Olympus has but the thunderbolt, he who is of the private closet has the police.

The private closet contains all the instruments of government, and sometimes, for it is a traitor, its chastisement. Heliogabalus goes there to die. Then it is called the latrines.

Generally it is less tragic. It is there that Alberoni admires Vendôme. Royal personages willingly make it their place of audience. It takes the place of the throne. Louis XIV. receives the Duchess of Burgundy there. Philip V. is shoulder to shoulder there with the queen. The priest penetrates into it. The private closet is sometimes a branch of the confessional. Therefore it is that at court there are underground fortunes — not always the least. If, under Louis XI., you would be great, be Pierre de Rohan, Marshal of France; if you would be influential, be Olivier le Daim, the barber; if you would, under Mary de Medicis, be glorious, be Sillery, the Chancellor; if you would be a person of consideration, be La Hannon, the maid; if you would, under Louis XV., be illustrious, be Choiseul, the minister; if you would be formidable, be Lebel, the valet. Given, Louis XIV., Bontemps, who makes his bed, is more powerful than Louvois, who raises his armies, and Turenne, who gains his victories. From Richelieu, take Père Joseph, and you have Richelieu nearly empty. There is the mystery the less. His Eminence in scarlet is magnificent; his Eminence in gray is terrible. What power in being a worm! All the Narvaez amalgamated with all the O’Donnells do less work than one Sõr Patrocinio.

Of course the condition of this power is littleness. If you would remain powerful, remain petty. Be Nothingness. The serpent in repose, twisted into a circle, is a figure at the same time of the infinite and of naught.

One of these viper-like fortunes had fallen to Barkilphedro.

He had crawled where he wanted.

Flat beasts can get in everywhere. Louis XIV. had bugs in his bed and Jesuits in his policy.

The incompatibility is nil.

In this world everything is a clock. To gravitate is to oscillate. One pole is attracted to the other. Francis I. is attracted by Triboulet; Louis XIV. is attracted by Lebel. There exists a deep affinity between extreme elevation and extreme debasement.

It is abasement which directs. Nothing is easier of comprehension. It is he who is below who pulls the strings. No position more convenient. He is the eye, and has the ear. He is the eye of the government; he has the ear of the king. To have the eye of the king is to draw and shut, at one’s whim, the bolt of the royal conscience, and to throw into that conscience whatever one wishes. The mind of the king is his cupboard; if he be a rag-picker, it is his basket. The ears of kings belong not to kings, and therefore it is that, on the whole, the poor devils are not altogether responsible for their actions. He who does not possess his own thought does not possess his own deed. A king obeys — what? Any evil spirit buzzing from outside in his ear; a noisome fly of the abyss.

This buzzing commands. A reign is a dictation.

The loud voice is the sovereign; the low voice, sovereignty. Those who know how to distinguish, in a reign, this low voice, and to hear what it whispers to the loud, are the real historians.

CHAPTER IX.

HATE IS AS STRONG AS LOVE.

Queen Anne had several of these low voices about her. Barkilphedro was one.

Besides the queen, he secretly worked, influenced, and plotted upon Lady Josiana and Lord David. As we have said, he whispered in three ears, one more than Dangeau. Dangeau whispered in but two, in the days when, thrusting himself between Louis XIV., in love with Henrietta, his sister-in-law, and Henrietta, in love with Louis XIV., her brother-in-law, he being Louis's secretary, without the knowledge of Henrietta, and Henrietta's without the knowledge of Louis, he wrote the questions and answers of both the love-making marionettes.

Barkilphedro was so cheerful, so accepting, so incapable of taking up the defence of anybody, possessing so little devotion at bottom, so ugly, so mischievous, that it was quite natural that a regal personage should come to be unable to do without him. Once Anne had tasted Barkilphedro she would have no other flatterer. He flattered her as they flattered Louis the Great, by stinging her neighbours. "The king being ignorant," says Madame de Montchevreuil, "one is obliged to mock at the savants."

To poison the sting, from time to time, is the acme of art. Nero loves to see Locusta at work.

Royal palaces are very easily entered; these madrepores have a way in soon guessed at, contrived, examined, and scooped out at need by the gnawing thing which is called the courtier. A pretext to enter is sufficient. Barkilphedro, having found this pretext, his position with the queen soon became the same as that with the Duchess Josiana — that of an indispensable domestic animal. A witticism risked one day by him immediately led to his perfect understanding of the queen and how to estimate exactly her kindness of heart. The queen was greatly attached to her Lord Steward, William Cavendish, Duke of Devonshire, who was a great fool. This lord, who had obtained every Oxford degree and did not know how to spell, one fine morning committed the folly of dying. To die is a very imprudent thing at court, for there is then no further restraint in speaking of you. The queen, in the presence of Barkilphedro, lamented the event, finally exclaiming, with a sigh, —

“It is a pity that so many virtues should have been borne and served by so poor an intellect.”

“Dieu veuille avoir son âne!” whispered Barkilphedro, in a low voice, and in French.

The queen smiled. Barkilphedro noted the smile. His conclusion was that biting pleased. Free licence had been given to his spite. From that day he thrust his curiosity everywhere, and his malignity with it. He was given his way, so much was he feared. He who can make the king laugh makes the others tremble. He was a powerful buffoon. Every day he worked his way forward — underground. Barkilphedro became a necessity. Many great people honoured him with their confidence, to the extent of charging him, when they required him, with their disgraceful commissions.

There are wheels within wheels at court. Barkilphedro became the motive power. Have you remarked, in certain mechanisms, the smallness of the motive wheel?

Josiana, in particular, who, as we have explained, made use of Barkilphedro’s talents as a spy, reposed such confidence in him that she had not hesitated to entrust him with one of the master-keys of her apartments, by means of which he was able to enter them at any hour. This excessive licence of insight into private life was in fashion in the seventeenth century. It was called “giving the key.” Josiana had given two of these confidential keys — Lord David had one, Barkilphedro the other. However, to enter straight into a bedchamber was, in the old code of manners, a thing not in the least out of the way. Thence resulted incidents. La Ferté, suddenly drawing back the bed curtains of Mademoiselle Lafont, found inside Sainson, the black musketeer, etc., etc.

Barkilphedro excelled in making the cunning discoveries which place the great in the power of the little. His walk in the dark was winding, soft, clever. Like every perfect spy, he was composed of the inclemency of the executioner and the patience of a micograph. He was a born courtier. Every courtier is a noctambulist. The courtier prowls in the night, which is called power. He carries a dark lantern in his hand. He lights up the spot he wishes, and remains in darkness himself. What he seeks with his lantern is not a man, it is a fool. What he finds is the king.

Kings do not like to see those about them pretend to greatness. Irony aimed at any one except themselves has a charm for them. The talent of Barkilphedro consisted in a perpetual dwarfing of the peers and princes to the advantage of her Majesty's stature, thus increased in proportion. The master-key held by Barkilphedro was made with two sets of wards, one at each end, so as to open the inner apartments in both Josiana's favourite residences — Hunkerville House in London, Corleone Lodge at Windsor. These two houses were part of the Clancharlie inheritance. Hunkerville House was close to Oldgate. Oldgate was a gate of London, which was entered by the Harwich road, and on which was displayed a statue of Charles II., with a painted angel on his head, and beneath his feet a carved lion and unicorn. From Hunkerville House, in an easterly wind, you heard the peals of St. Marylebone. Corleone Lodge was a Florentine palace of brick and stone, with a marble colonnade, built on pilework, at Windsor, at the head of the wooden bridge, and having one of the finest courts in England.

In the latter palace, near Windsor Castle, Josiana was within the queen's reach. Nevertheless, Josiana liked it.

Scarcely anything in appearance, everything in the root, such was the influence of Barkilphedro over the queen. There is nothing more difficult than to drag up these bad grasses of the court — they take a deep root, and offer no hold above the surface. To root out a Roquelaure, a Triboulet, or a Brummel, is almost impossible.

From day to day, and more and more, did the queen take Barkilphedro into her good graces. Sarah Jennings is famous; Barkilphedro is unknown. His existence remains ignored. The name of Barkilphedro has not reached as far as history. All the moles are not caught by the mole-trapper.

Barkilphedro, once a candidate for orders, had studied a little of everything. Skimming all things leaves naught for result. One may be victim of the *omnis res scibilis*. Having the vessel of the Danaïdes in one's head is the misfortune of a whole race of learned men, who may be termed the sterile. What Barkilphedro had put into his brain had left it empty.

The mind, like nature, abhors vacuum. Into emptiness nature puts love; the mind often puts hate. Hate occupies.

Hate for hate's sake exists. Art for art's sake exists in nature more than is believed. A man hates — he must do something. Gratuitous hate — formidable word! It means hate which is itself its own payment. The bear lives by licking his claws. Not indefinitely, of course. The claws must be revictualled — something must be put under them.

Hate indistinct is sweet, and suffices for a time; but one must end by having an object. An animosity diffused over creation is exhausting, like every solitary pleasure. Hate without an object is like a shooting-match without a target. What lends interest to the game is a heart to be pierced. One cannot hate solely for honour; some seasoning is necessary — a man, a woman, somebody, to destroy. This service of making the game interesting; of offering an end; of throwing passion into hate by fixing it on an object; of of amusing the hunter by the sight of his living prey; giving the watcher the hope of the smoking and boiling blood about to flow; of amusing the bird-catcher by the credulity of the uselessly-winged lark; of being a victim, unknowingly reared for murder by a master-mind — all this exquisite and horrible service, of which the person rendering it is unconscious, Josiana rendered Barkilphedro.

Thought is a projectile. Barkilphedro had, from the first day, begun to aim at Josiana the evil intentions which were in his mind. An intention and a carbine are alike. Barkilphedro aimed at Josiana, directing against the duchess all his secret malice. That astonishes you! What has the bird done at which you fire? You want to eat it, you say. And so it was with Barkilphedro.

Josiana could not be struck in the heart — the spot where the enigma lies is hard to wound; but she could be struck in the head — that is, in her pride. It was there that she thought herself strong, and that she was weak.

Barkilphedro had found it out. If Josiana had been able to see clearly through the night of Barkilphedro, if she had been able to distinguish what lay in ambush behind his smile, that proud woman, so highly situated, would have trembled. Fortunately for the tranquillity of her sleep, she was in complete ignorance of what was in the man.

The unexpected spreads, one knows not whence. The profound depths of life are dangerous. There is no small hate. Hate is always enormous. It preserves its stature in the smallest being, and remains a monster. An elephant hated by a worm is in danger.

Even before he struck, Barkilphedro felt, with joy, the foretaste of the evil action which he was about to commit. He did not as yet know what he was going to do to Josiana; but he had made up his mind to do something. To have come to this decision was a great step taken. To crush Josiana utterly would have been too great a triumph. He did not hope for so much; but to humiliate her, lessen her, bring her grief, redden her proud eyes with tears of rage — what a success! He counted on it. Tenacious, diligent, faithful to the torment of his neighbour, not to be torn from his purpose, nature had not formed him for nothing. He well understood how to find the flaw in Josiana's golden armour, and how to make the blood of that Olympian flow.

What benefit, we ask again, would accrue to him in so doing? An immense benefit — doing evil to one who had done good to him. What is an envious man? An ungrateful one. He hates the light which lights and warms him. Zoilus hated that benefit to man, Homer. To inflict on Josiana what would nowadays be called vivisection — to place her, all convulsed, on his anatomical table; to dissect her alive, at his leisure, in some surgery; to cut her up, as an amateur, while she should scream — this dream delighted Barkilphedro!

To arrive at this result it was necessary to suffer somewhat himself; he did so willingly. We may pinch ourselves with our own pincers. The knife as it shuts cuts our fingers. What does it matter? That he should partake of Josiana's torture was a matter of little moment. The executioner handling the red-hot iron, when about to brand a prisoner, takes no heed of a little burn. Because another suffers much, he suffers nothing. To see the victim's writhings takes all pain from the inflicter.

Do harm, whatever happens.

To plan evil for others is mingled with an acceptance of some hazy responsibility. We risk ourselves in the danger which we impel towards another, because the chain of events sometimes, of course, brings unexpected accidents. This does not stop the man who is truly malicious. He feels as much joy as the patient suffers agony. He is tickled by the laceration of the victim. The malicious man blooms in hideous joy. Pain reflects itself on him in a sense of welfare. The Duke of Alva used to warm his hands at the stake. The pile was torture, the reflection of it pleasure. That such transpositions should be possible makes one shudder. Our dark side is unfathomable. *Supplice exquis* (exquisite torture) — the expression is in Bodin — has perhaps this terrible triple sense: search for the torture; suffering of the tortured; delight of the torturer.

Ambition, appetite — all such words signify some one sacrificed to some one satiated. It is sad that hope should be wicked. Is it that the outpourings of our wishes flow naturally to the direction to which we most incline — that of evil? One of the hardest labours of the just man is to expunge from his soul a malevolence which it is difficult to efface. Almost all our desires, when examined, contain what we dare not avow.

In the completely wicked man this exists in hideous perfection. So much the worse for others, signifies so much the better for himself. The shadows of the caverns of man’s mind.

Josiana, in a plenitude of security the fruit of ignorant pride, had a contempt for all danger. The feminine faculty of disdain is extraordinary. Josiana’s disdain, unreasoning, involuntary, and confident. Barkilphedro was to her so contemptible that she would have been astonished had any one remarked to her that such a creature existed. She went, and came, and laughed before this man who was looking at her with evil eyes. Thoughtful, he bided his time.

In proportion as he waited, his determination to cast a despair into this woman’s life augmented. Inexorable high tide of malice.

In the meantime he gave himself excellent reasons for his determination. It must not be thought that scoundrels are deficient in self-esteem. They enter into details with themselves in their lofty monologues, and they take matters with a high hand. How? This Josiana had bestowed charity on him! She had thrown some crumbs of her enormous wealth to him, as to a beggar. She had nailed and riveted him to an office which was unworthy him. Yes; that he, Barkilphedro, almost a clergyman, of varied and profound talent, a learned man, with the material in him for a bishop, should have for employ the registration of nasty patience-trying shards, that he should have to pass his life in the garret of a register-office, gravely uncorking stupid bottles, incrusted with all the nastiness of the sea, deciphering musty parchments, like filthy conjuring-books, dirty wills, and other illegible stuff of the kind, was the fault of this Josiana. Worst of all, this creature “thee’d” and “thou’d” him! And he should not revenge himself — he should not punish such conduct! Well, in that case there would no longer be justice on earth!

CHAPTER X.

THE FLAME WHICH WOULD BE SEEN IF MAN WERE TRANSPARENT.

What! this woman, this extravagant thing, this libidinous dreamer, a virgin until the opportunity occurred, this bit of flesh as yet unfreed, this bold creature under a princess's coronet; this Diana by pride, as yet untaken by the first comer, just because chance had so willed it; this bastard of a low-lived king who had not the intellect to keep his place; this duchess by a lucky hit, who, being a fine lady, played the goddess, and who, had she been poor, would have been a prostitute; this lady, more or less, this robber of a proscribed man's goods, this overbearing strumpet, because one day he, Barkilphedro, had not money enough to buy his dinner, and to get a lodging — she had had the impudence to seat him in her house at the corner of a table, and to put him up in some hole in her intolerable palace. Where? never mind where. Perhaps in the barn, perhaps in the cellar; what does it matter? A little better than her valets, a little worse than her horses. She had abused his distress — his, Barkilphedro's — in hastening to do him treacherous good; a thing which the rich do in order to humiliate the poor, and to tie them, like curs led by a string. Besides, what did the service she rendered him cost her? A service is worth what it costs. She had spare rooms in her house. She came to Barkilphedro's aid! A great thing, indeed. Had she eaten a spoonful the less of turtle soup for it? had she deprived herself of anything in the hateful overflowing of her superfluous luxuries? No. She had added to it a vanity, a luxury, a good action like a ring on her finger, the relief of a man of wit, the patronization of a clergyman. She could give herself airs: say, "I lavish kindness; I fill the mouths of men of letters; I am his benefactress. How lucky the wretch was to find me out! What a patroness of the arts I am!" All for having set up a truckle bed in a wretched garret in the roof. As for the place in the Admiralty, Barkilphedro owed it to Josiana; by Jove, a pretty appointment! Josiana had made Barkilphedro what he was. She had created him. Be it so. Yes, created nothing — less than nothing. For in his absurd situation he felt borne down, tongue-tied, disfigured. What did he owe Josiana? The thanks due from a hunchback to the mother who bore him deformed. Behold your privileged ones, your folks overwhelmed with fortune, your parvenus, your favourites of that horrid stepmother Fortune! And that man of talent, Barkilphedro, was obliged to stand on staircases, to bow to footmen, to climb to the top of the house at night, to be courteous, assiduous, pleasant, respectful, and to have ever on his muzzle a respectful grimace! Was not it enough to make him gnash his teeth with rage! And all the while she was putting pearls round her neck, and making amorous poses to her fool, Lord David Dirry-Moir; the hussy!

Never let any one do you a service. They will abuse the advantage it gives them. Never allow yourself to be taken in the act of inanition. They would relieve you. Because he was starving, this woman had found it a sufficient pretext to give him bread. From that moment he was her servant; a craving of the stomach, and there is a chain for life! To be obliged is to be sold. The happy, the powerful, make use of the moment you stretch out your hand to place a penny in it, and at the crisis of your weakness make you a slave, and a slave of the worst kind, the slave of an act of charity — a slave forced to love the enslaver. What infamy! what want of delicacy! what an assault on your self-respect! Then all is over. You are sentenced for life to consider this man good, that woman beautiful; to remain in the back rows; to approve, to applaud, to admire, to worship, to prostrate yourself, to blister your knees by long genuflections, to sugar your words when you are gnawing your lips with anger, when you are biting down your cries of fury, and when you have within you more savage turbulence and more bitter foam than the ocean!

It is thus that the rich make prisoners of the poor.

This slime of a good action performed towards you bedaubs and bespatters you with mud for ever.

An alms is irremediable. Gratitude is paralysis. A benefit is a sticky and repugnant adherence which deprives you of free movement. Those odious, opulent, and spoiled creatures whose pity has thus injured you are well aware of this. It is done — you are their creature. They have bought you — and how? By a bone taken from their dog and cast to you. They have flung that bone at your head. You have been stoned as much as benefited. It is all one. Have you gnawed the bone — yes or no? You have had your place in the dog-kennel as well. Then be thankful — be ever thankful. Adore your masters. Kneel on indefinitely. A benefit implies an understood inferiority accepted by you. It means that you feel them to be gods and yourself a poor devil. Your diminution augments them. Your bent form makes theirs more upright. In the tones of their voices there is an impertinent inflexion. Their family matters — their marriages, their baptisms, their child-bearings, their progeny — all concern you. A wolf cub is born to them. Well, you have to compose a sonnet. You are a poet because you are low. Isn’t it enough to make the stars fall! A little more, and they would make you wear their old shoes.

“Who have you got there, my dear? How ugly he is! Who is that man?”

“I do not know. A sort of scholar, whom I feed.”

Thus converse these idiots, without even lowering their voice. You hear, and remain mechanically amiable. If you are ill, your masters will send for the doctor — not their own. Occasionally they may even inquire after you. Being of a different species from you, and at an inaccessible height above you, they are affable. Their height makes them easy. They know that equality is impossible. By force of disdain they are polite. At table they give you a little nod. Sometimes they absolutely know how your name is spelt! They only show that they are your protectors by walking unconsciously over all the delicacy and susceptibility you possess. They treat you with good-nature. Is all this to be borne?

No doubt he was eager to punish Josiana. He must teach her with whom she had to deal!

O my rich gentry, because you cannot eat up everything, because opulence produces indigestion seeing that your stomachs are no bigger than ours, because it is, after all, better to distribute the remainder than to throw it away, you exalt a morsel flung to the poor into an act of magnificence. Oh, you give us bread, you give us shelter, you give us clothes, you give us employment, and you push audacity, folly, cruelty, stupidity, and absurdity to the pitch of believing that we are grateful! The bread is the bread of servitude, the shelter is a footman’s bedroom, the clothes are a livery, the employment is ridiculous, paid for, it is true, but brutalizing.

Oh, you believe in the right to humiliate us with lodging and nourishment, and you imagine that we are your debtors, and you count on our gratitude! Very well; we will eat up your substance, we will devour you alive and gnaw your heart-strings with our teeth.

This Josiana! Was it not absurd? What merit had she? She had accomplished the wonderful work of coming into the world as a testimony of the folly of her father and the shame of her mother. She had done us the favour to exist, and for her kindness in becoming a public scandal they paid her millions; she had estates and castles, warrens, parks, lakes, forests, and I know not what besides, and with all that she was making a fool of herself, and verses were addressed to her! And Barkilphedro, who had studied and laboured and taken pains, and stuffed his eyes and his brain with great books, who had grown mouldy in old works and in science, who was full of wit, who could command armies, who could, if he would, write tragedies like Otway and Dryden, who was made to be an emperor — Barkilphedro had been reduced to permit this nobody to prevent him from dying of hunger. Could the usurpation of the rich, the hateful elect of chance, go further? They put on the semblance of being generous to us, of protecting us, and of smiling on us, and we would drink their blood and lick our lips after it! That this low woman of the court should have the odious power of being a benefactress, and that a man so superior should be condemned to pick up such bribes falling from such a hand, what a frightful iniquity! And what social system is this which has for its base disproportion and injustice? Would it not be best to take it by the four corners, and to throw pell-mell to the ceiling the damask tablecloth, and the festival, and the orgies, and the tippling and drunkenness, and the guests, and those with their elbows on the table, and those with their paws under it, and the insolent who give and the idiots who accept, and to spit it all back again in the face of Providence, and fling all the earth to the heavens? In the meantime let us stick our claws into Josiana.

Thus dreamed Barkilphedro. Such were the ragings of his soul. It is the habit of the envious man to absolve himself, amalgamating with his personal grievance the public wrongs.

All the wild forms of hateful passions went and came in the intellect of this ferocious being. At the corners of old maps of the world of the fifteenth century are great vague spaces without shape or name, on which are written these three words, *Hic sunt leones*. Such a dark corner is there also in man. Passions grow and growl somewhere within us, and we may say of an obscure portion of our souls, “There are lions here.”

Is this scaffolding of wild reasoning absolutely absurd? does it lack a certain justice? We must confess it does not.

It is fearful to think that judgment within us is not justice. Judgment is the relative, justice is the absolute. Think of the difference between a judge and a just man.

Wicked men lead conscience astray with authority. There are gymnastics of untruth. A sophist is a forger, and this forger sometimes brutalizes good sense.

A certain logic, very supple, very implacable, and very agile, is at the service of evil, and excels in stabbing truth in the dark. These are blows struck by the devil at Providence.

The worst of it was that Barkilphedro had a presentiment. He was undertaking a heavy task, and he was afraid that after all the evil achieved might not be proportionate to the work.

To be corrosive as he was, to have within himself a will of steel, a hate of diamond, a burning curiosity for the catastrophe, and to burn nothing, to decapitate nothing, to exterminate nothing; to be what he was, a force of devastation, a voracious animosity, a devourer of the happiness of others, to have been created (for there is a creator, whether God or devil), to have been created Barkilphedro all over, and to inflict perhaps after all but a fillip of the finger — could this be possible? could it be that Barkilphedro should miss his aim? To be a lever powerful enough to heave great masses of rock, and when sprung to the utmost power to succeed only in giving an affected woman a bump in the forehead — to be a catapult dealing ruin on a pole-kitten! To accomplish the task of Sisyphus, to crush an ant; to sweat all over with hate, and for nothing at all. Would not this be humiliating, when he felt himself a mechanism of hostility capable of reducing the world to powder! To put into movement all the wheels within wheels, to work in the darkness all the mechanism of a Marly machine, and to succeed perhaps in pinching the end of a little rosy finger! He was to turn over and over blocks of marble, perchance with the result of ruffling a little the smooth surface of the court! Providence has a way of thus expending forces grandly. The movement of a mountain often only displaces a molehill.

Besides this, when the court is the dangerous arena, nothing is more dangerous than to aim at your enemy and miss him. In the first place, it unmasks you and irritates him; but besides and above all, it displeases the master. Kings do not like the unskilful. Let us have no contusions, no ugly gashes. Kill anybody, but give no one a bloody nose. He who kills is clever, he who wounds awkward. Kings do not like to see their servants lamed. They are displeased if you chip a porcelain jar on their chimney-piece or a courtier in their cortège. The court must be kept neat. Break and replace; that does not matter. Besides, all this agrees perfectly with the taste of princes for scandal. Speak evil, do none; or if you do, let it be in grand style.

Stab, do not scratch, unless the pin be poisoned. This would be an extenuating circumstance, and was, we may remember, the case with Barkilphedro.

Every malicious pigmy is a phial in which is enclosed the dragon of Solomon. The phial is microscopic, the dragon immense. A formidable condensation, awaiting the gigantic hour of dilation! Ennui consoled by the premeditation of explosion! The prisoner is larger than the prison. A latent giant! how wonderful! A minnow in which is contained a hydra. To be this fearful magical box, to contain within him a leviathan, is to the dwarf both a torture and a delight.

Nor would anything have caused Barkilphedro to let go his hold. He awaited his time. Was it to come? What mattered that? He watched for it. Self-love is mixed up in the malice of the very wicked man. To make holes and gaps in a court fortune higher than your own, to undermine it at all risks and perils, while encased and concealed yourself, is, we repeat, exceedingly interesting. The player at such a game becomes eager, even to passion. He throws himself into the work as if he were composing an epic. To be very mean, and to attack that which is great, is in itself a brilliant action. It is a fine thing to be a flea on a lion.

The noble beast feels the bite, and expends his mighty anger against the atom. An encounter with a tiger would weary him less; see how the actors exchange their parts. The lion, humiliated, feels the sting of the insect; and the flea can say, “I have in my veins the blood of a lion.”

However, these reflections but half appeased the cravings of Barkilphedro’s pride. Consolations, palliations at most. To vex is one thing; to torment would be infinitely better. Barkilphedro had a thought which returned to him without ceasing: his success might not go beyond just irritating the epidermis of Josiana. What could he hope for more — he so obscure against her so radiant? A scratch is worth but little to him who longs to see the crimson blood of his flayed victim, and to hear her cries as she lies before him more than naked, without even that garment the skin! With such a craving, how sad to be powerless!

Alas, there is nothing perfect!

However, he resigned himself. Not being able to do better, he only dreamed half his dream. To play a treacherous trick is an object after all.

What a man is he who revenges himself for a benefit received! Barkilphedro was a giant among such men. Usually, ingratitude is forgetfulness. With this man, patented in wickedness, it was fury. The vulgar ingrate is full of ashes; what was within Barkilphedro? A furnace — furnace walled round by hate, silence, and rancour, awaiting Josiana for fuel. Never had a man abhorred a woman to such a point without reason. How terrible! She was his dream, his preoccupation, his ennui, his rage.

Perhaps he was a little in love with her.

CHAPTER XI.

BARKILPHEDRO IN AMBUSCADE.

To find the vulnerable spot in Josiana, and to strike her there, was, for all the causes we have just mentioned, the imperturbable determination of Barkilphedro. The wish is sufficient; the power is required. How was he to set about it? There was the question.

Vulgar vagabonds set the scene of any wickedness they intend to commit with care. They do not feel themselves strong enough to seize the opportunity as it passes, to take possession of it by fair means or foul, and to constrain it to serve them. Deep scoundrels disdain preliminary combinations. They start from their villainies alone, merely arming themselves all round, prepared to avail themselves of various chances which may occur, and then, like Barkilphedro, await the opportunity. They know that a ready-made scheme runs the risk of fitting ill into the event which may present itself. It is not thus that a man makes himself master of possibilities and guides them as one pleases. You can come to no previous arrangement with destiny. To-morrow will not obey you. There is a certain want of discipline in chance.

Therefore they watch for it, and summon it suddenly, authoritatively, on the spot. No plan, no sketch, no rough model; no ready-made shoe ill-fitting the unexpected. They plunge headlong into the dark. To turn to immediate and rapid profit any circumstance that can aid him is the quality which distinguishes the able scoundrel, and elevates the villain into the demon. To strike suddenly at fortune, *that* is true genius.

The true scoundrel strikes you from a sling with the first stone he can pick up. Clever malefactors count on the unexpected, that senseless accomplice of so many crimes. They grasp the incident and leap on it; there is no better *Ars Poetica* for this species of talent. Meanwhile be sure with whom you have to deal. Survey the ground.

With Barkilphedro the ground was Queen Anne. Barkilphedro approached the queen, and so close that sometimes he fancied he heard the monologues of her Majesty. Sometimes he was present unheeded at conversations between the sisters. Neither did they forbid his sliding in a word. He profited by this to lessen himself — a way of inspiring confidence. Thus one day in the garden at Hampton Court, being behind the duchess, who was behind the queen, he heard Anne, following the fashion, awkwardly enunciating sentiments.

“Animals are happy,” said the queen. “They run no risk of going to hell.”

“They are there already,” replied Josiana.

This answer, which bluntly substituted philosophy for religion, displeased the queen. If, perchance, there was depth in the observation, Anne felt shocked.

“My dear,” said she to Josiana, “we talk of hell like a couple of fools. Ask Barkilphedro all about it. He ought to know such things.”

“As a devil?” said Josiana.

“As a beast,” replied Barkilphedro, with a bow.

“Madam,” said the queen to Josiana, “he is cleverer than we.”

For a man like Barkilphedro to approach the queen was to obtain a hold on her. He could say, “I hold her.” Now, he wanted a means of taking advantage of his power for his own benefit. He had his foothold in the court. To be settled there was a fine thing. No chance could now escape him. More than once he had made the queen smile maliciously. This was having a licence to shoot. But was there any preserved game? Did this licence to shoot permit him to break the wing or the leg of one like the sister of her Majesty? The first point to make clear was, did the queen love her sister? One false step would lose all. Barkilphedro watched.

Before he plays the player looks at the cards. What trumps has he? Barkilphedro began by examining the age of the two women. Josiana, twenty-three; Anne, forty-one. So far so good. He held trumps. The moment that a woman ceases to count by springs, and begins to count by winters, she becomes cross. A dull rancour possesses her against the time of which she carries the proofs. Fresh-blown beauties, perfumes for others, are to such a one but thorns. Of the roses she feels but the prick. It seems as if all the freshness is stolen from her, and that beauty decreases in her because it increases in others.

To profit by this secret ill-humour, to dive into the wrinkle on the face of this woman of forty, who was a queen, seemed a good game for Barkilphedro.

Envy excels in exciting jealousy, as a rat draws the crocodile from its hole.

Barkilphedro fixed his wise gaze on Anne. He saw into the queen as one sees into a stagnant pool. The marsh has its transparency. In dirty water we see vices, in muddy water we see stupidity; Anne was muddy water.

Embryos of sentiments and larvæ of ideas moved in her thick brain. They were not distinct; they had scarcely any outline. But they were realities, however shapeless. The queen thought this; the queen desired that. To decide what was the difficulty. The confused transformations which work in stagnant water are difficult to study. The queen, habitually obscure, sometimes made sudden and stupid revelations. It was on these that it was necessary to seize. He must take advantage of them on the moment. How did the queen feel towards the Duchess Josiana? Did she wish her good or evil?

Here was the problem. Barkilphedro set himself to solve it. This problem solved, he might go further.

Divers chances served Barkilphedro — his tenacity at the watch above all.

Anne was, on her husband’s side, slightly related to the new Queen of Prussia, wife of the king with the hundred chamberlains. She had her portrait painted on enamel, after the process of Turquet of Mayerne. This Queen of Prussia had also a younger illegitimate sister, the Baroness Drika.

One day, in the presence of Barkilphedro, Anne asked the Russian ambassador some question about this Drika.

“They say she is rich?”

“Very rich.”

“She has palaces?”

“More magnificent than those of her sister, the queen.”

“Whom will she marry?”

“A great lord, the Count Gormo.”

“Pretty?”

“Charming.”

“Is she young?”

“Very young.”

“As beautiful as the queen?”

The ambassador lowered his voice, and replied, —

“More beautiful.”

“That is insolent,” murmured Barkilphedro.

The queen was silent; then she exclaimed, —

“Those bastards!”

Barkilphedro noticed the plural.

Another time, when the queen was leaving the chapel, Barkilphedro kept pretty close to her Majesty, behind the two grooms of the almonry. Lord David Dirry-Moir, crossing the ranks of women, made a sensation by his handsome appearance. As he passed there was an explosion of feminine exclamations.

“How elegant! How gallant! What a noble air! How handsome!”

“How disagreeable!” grumbled the queen.

Barkilphedro overheard this; it decided him.

He could hurt the duchess without displeasing the queen. The first problem was solved; but now the second presented itself.

What could he do to harm the duchess? What means did his wretched appointment offer to attain so difficult an object?

Evidently none.

CHAPTER XII.

SCOTLAND, IRELAND, AND ENGLAND.

Let us note a circumstance. Josiana had *le tour*.

This is easy to understand when we reflect that she was, although illegitimate, the queen's sister — that is to say, a princely personage.

To have *le tour* — what does it mean?

Viscount St. John, otherwise Bolingbroke, wrote as follows to Thomas Lennard, Earl of Sussex: —

"Two things mark the great — in England, they have *le tour;* in France, *le pour*."

When the King of France travelled, the courier of the court stopped at the halting-place in the evening, and assigned lodgings to his Majesty's suite.

Amongst the gentlemen some had an immense privilege. "They have *le pour*" says the *Journal Historique* for the year 1694, page 6; "which means that the courier who marks the billets puts '*pour*' before their names — as, '*Pour* M. le Prince de Soubise;' instead of which, when he marks the lodging of one who is not royal, he does not put *pour*, but simply the name — as, 'Le Duc de Gesvres, le Duc de Mazarin.'" This *pour* on a door indicated a prince or a favourite. A favourite is worse than a prince. The king granted *le pour*, like a blue ribbon or a peerage.

Avoir le tour in England was less glorious but more real. It was a sign of intimate communication with the sovereign. Whoever might be, by birth or favour, in a position to receive direct communications from majesty, had in the wall of their bedchamber a shaft in which was adjusted a bell. The bell sounded, the shaft opened, a royal missive appeared on a gold plate or on a cushion of velvet, and the shaft closed. This was intimate and solemn, the mysterious in the familiar. The shaft was used for no other purpose. The sound of the bell announced a royal message. No one saw who brought it. It was of course merely the page of the king or the queen. Leicester *avait le tour* under Elizabeth; Buckingham under James I. Josiana had it under Anne, though not much in favour. Never was a privilege more envied.

This privilege entailed additional servility. The recipient was more of a servant. At court that which elevates, degrades. *Avoir le tour* was said in

French; this circumstance of English etiquette having, probably, been borrowed from some old French folly.

Lady Josiana, a virgin peeress as Elizabeth had been a virgin queen, led — sometimes in the City, and sometimes in the country, according to the season — an almost princely life, and kept nearly a court, at which Lord David was courtier, with many others.

Not being married, Lord David and Lady Josiana could show themselves together in public without exciting ridicule, and they did so frequently. They often went to plays and racecourses in the same carriage, and sat together in the same box. They were chilled by the impending marriage, which was not only permitted to them, but imposed upon them; but they felt an attraction for each other's society. The privacy permitted to the engaged has a frontier easily passed. From this they abstained; that which is easy is in bad taste.

The best pugilistic encounters then took place at Lambeth, a parish in which the Lord Archbishop of Canterbury has a palace though the air there is unhealthy, and a rich library open at certain hours to decent people.

One evening in winter there was in a meadow there, the gates of which were locked, a fight, at which Josiana, escorted by Lord David, was present. She had asked, —

"Are women admitted?"

And David had responded, —

"*Sunt fœminae magnates!*"

Liberal translation, "Not shopkeepers." Literal translation, "Great ladies exist. A duchess goes everywhere!"

This is why Lady Josiana saw a boxing match.

Lady Josiana made only this concession to propriety — she dressed as a man, a very common custom at that period. Women seldom travelled otherwise. Out of every six persons who travelled by the coach from Windsor, it was rare that there were not one or two amongst them who were women in male attire; a certain sign of high birth.

Lord David, being in company with a woman, could not take any part in the match himself, and merely assisted as one of the audience.

Lady Josiana betrayed her quality in one way; she had an opera-glass, then used by gentlemen only.

This encounter in the noble science was presided over by Lord Germaine, great-grandfather, or grand-uncle, of that Lord Germaine who, towards the end of the eighteenth century, was colonel, ran away in a battle, was afterwards made Minister of War, and only escaped from the bolts of the enemy, to fall by a worse fate, shot through and through by the sarcasm of Sheridan.

Many gentlemen were betting. Harry Bellew, of Carleton, who had claims to the extinct peerage of Bella-aqua, with Henry, Lord Hyde, member of Parliament for the borough of Dunhivid, which is also called Launceston; the Honourable Peregrine Bertie, member for the borough of Truro, with Sir Thomas Colpepper, member for Maidstone; the Laird of Lamyrbau, which is on the borders of Lothian, with Samuel Trefusis, of the borough of Penryn; Sir Bartholomew Gracedieu, of the borough of Saint Ives, with the Honourable Charles Bodville, who was called Lord Robartes, and who was Custos Rotulorum of the county of Cornwall; besides many others.

Of the two combatants, one was an Irishman, named after his native mountain in Tipperary, Phelem-ghe-Madone, and the other a Scot, named Helmsgail.

They represented the national pride of each country. Ireland and Scotland were about to set to; Erin was going to fisticuff Gajothel. So that the bets amounted to over forty thousand guineas, besides the stakes.

The two champions were naked, excepting short breeches buckled over the hips, and spiked boots laced as high as the ankles.

Helmsgail, the Scot, was a youth scarcely nineteen, but he had already had his forehead sewn up, for which reason they laid 2 1/3 to 1 on him. The month before he had broken the ribs and gouged out the eyes of a pugilist named Sixmileswater. This explained the enthusiasm he created. He had won his backers twelve thousand pounds. Besides having his forehead sewn up Helmsgail’s jaw had been broken. He was neatly made and active. He was about the height of a small woman, upright, thick-set, and of a stature low and threatening. And nothing had been lost of the advantages given him by nature; not a muscle which was not trained to its object, pugilism. His firm chest was compact, and brown and shining like brass. He smiled, and three teeth which he had lost added to his smile.

His adversary was tall and overgrown — that is to say, weak.

He was a man of forty years of age, six feet high, with the chest of a hippopotamus, and a mild expression of face. The blow of his fist would break in the deck of a vessel, but he did not know how to use it.

The Irishman, Phelem-ghe-Madone, was all surface, and seemed to have entered the ring to receive rather than to give blows. Only it was felt that he would take a deal of punishment. Like underdone beef, tough to chew, and impossible to swallow. He was what was termed, in local slang, raw meat. He squinted. He seemed resigned.

The two men had passed the preceding night in the same bed, and had slept together. They had each drunk port wine from the same glass, to the three-inch mark.

Each had his group of seconds — men of savage expression, threatening the umpires when it suited their side. Amongst Helmsgail's supporters was to be seen John Gromane, celebrated for having carried an ox on his back; and one called John Bray, who had once carried on his back ten bushels of flour, at fifteen pecks to the bushel, besides the miller himself, and had walked over two hundred paces under the weight. On the side of Phelem-ghe-Madone, Lord Hyde had brought from Launceston a certain Kilter, who lived at Green Castle, and could throw a stone weighing twenty pounds to a greater height than the highest tower of the castle.

These three men, Kilter, Bray, and Gromane, were Cornishmen by birth, and did honour to their county.

The other seconds were brutal fellows, with broad backs, bowed legs, knotted fists, dull faces; ragged, fearing nothing, nearly all jail-birds.

Many of them understood admirably how to make the police drunk. Each profession should have its peculiar talents.

The field chosen was farther off than the bear garden, where they formerly baited bears, bulls, and dogs; it was beyond the line of the farthest houses, by the side of the ruins of the Priory of Saint Mary Overy, dismantled by Henry VIII. The wind was northerly, and biting; a small rain fell, which was instantly frozen into ice. Some gentlemen present were evidently fathers of families, recognized as such by their putting up their umbrellas.

On the side of Phelem-ghe-Madone was Colonel Moncreif, as umpire; and Kilter, as second, to support him on his knee.

On the side of Helmsgail, the Honourable Pughe Beaumaris was umpire, with Lord Desertum, from Kilcarry, as bottle-holder, to support him on his knee.

The two combatants stood for a few seconds motionless in the ring, whilst the watches were being compared. They then approached each other and shook hands.

Phelem-ghe-Madone said to Helmsgail, —

“I should prefer going home.”

Helmsgail answered, handsomely, —

“The gentlemen must not be disappointed, on any account.”

Naked as they were, they felt the cold. Phelem-ghe-Madone shook. His teeth chattered.

Dr. Eleanor Sharpe, nephew of the Archbishop of York, cried out to them, —

“Set to, boys; it will warm you.”

Those friendly words thawed them.

They set to.

But neither one nor the other was angry. There were three ineffectual rounds. The Rev. Doctor Gumdraith, one of the forty Fellows of All Souls’ College, cried, —

“Spirit them up with gin.”

But the two umpires and the two seconds adhered to the rule. Yet it was exceedingly cold.

First blood was claimed.

They were again set face to face.

They looked at each other, approached, stretched their arms, touched each other’s fists, and then drew back.

All at once, Helmsgail, the little man, sprang forward. The real fight had begun.

Phelem-ghe-Madone was struck in the face, between the Ryes. His whole face streamed with blood. The crowd cried, —

“Helmsgail has tapped his claret!”

There was applause. Phelem-ghe-Madone, turning his arms like the sails of a windmill, struck out at random.

The Honourable Peregrine Bertie said, “Blinded;” but he was not blind yet.

Then Helmsgail heard on all sides these encouraging words, —

“Bung up his peepers!”

On the whole, the two champions were really well matched; and, notwithstanding the unfavourable weather, it was seen that the fight would be a success.

The great giant, Phelem-ghe-Madone, had to bear the inconveniences of his advantages; he moved heavily. His arms were massive as clubs; but his chest was a mass. His little opponent ran, struck, sprang, gnashed his teeth; redoubling vigour by quickness, from knowledge of the science.

On the one side was the primitive blow of the fist — savage, uncultivated, in a state of ignorance; on the other side, the civilized blow of the fist. Helmsgail fought as much with his nerves as with his muscles, and with as much intention as force. Phelem-ghe-Madone was a kind of sluggish mauler — somewhat mauled himself, to begin with. It was art against nature. It was cultivated ferocity against barbarism.

It was clear that the barbarian would be beaten, but not very quickly. Hence the interest.

A little man against a big one, and the chances are in favour of the little one. The cat has the best of it with a dog. Goliaths are always vanquished by Davids.

A hail of exclamations followed the combatants.

“Bravo, Helmsgail! Good! Well done, Highlander! Now, Phelem!”

And the friends of Helmsgail repeated their benevolent exhortation, —

“Bung up his peepers!”

Helmsgail did better. Rapidly bending down and back again, with the undulation of a serpent, he struck Phelem-ghe-Madone in the sternum. The Colossus staggered.

“Foul blow!” cried Viscount Barnard.

Phelem-ghe-Madone sank down on the knee of his second, saying, —

“I am beginning to get warm.”

Lord Desertum consulted the umpires, and said, —

“Five minutes before time is called.”

Phelem-ghe-Madone was becoming weaker. Kilter wiped the blood from his face and the sweat from his body with a flannel, and placed the neck of a bottle to his mouth. They had come to the eleventh round. Phelem, besides the scar on his forehead, had his breast disfigured by blows, his belly swollen, and the fore part of the head scarified. Helmsgail was untouched.

A kind of tumult arose amongst the gentlemen.

Lord Barnard repeated, “Foul blow.”

“Bets void!” said the Laird of Lamyrbau.

“I claim my stake!” replied Sir Thomas Colpepper.

And the honourable member for the borough of Saint Ives, Sir Bartholomew Gracedieu, added, “Give me back my five hundred guineas, and I will go. Stop the fight.”

Phelem arose, staggering like a drunken man, and said, —

“Let us go on fighting, on one condition — that I also shall have the right to give one foul blow.”

They cried “Agreed!” from all parts of the ring. Helmsgail shrugged his shoulders. Five minutes elapsed, and they set to again.

The fighting, which was agony to Phelem, was play to Helmsgail. Such are the triumphs of science.

The little man found means of putting the big one into chancery — that is to say, Helmsgail suddenly took under his left arm, which was bent like a steel crescent, the huge head of Phelem-ghe-Madone, and held it there under his armpits, the neck bent and twisted, whilst Helmsgail’s right fist fell again and again like a hammer on a nail, only from below and striking upwards, thus smashing his opponent’s face at his ease. When Phelem, released at length, lifted his head, he had no longer a face.

That which had been a nose, eyes, and a mouth now looked only like a black sponge, soaked in blood. He spat, and on the ground lay four of his teeth.

Then he fell. Kilter received him on his knee.

Helmsgail was hardly touched: he had some insignificant bruises and a scratch on his collar bone.

No one was cold now. They laid sixteen and a quarter to one on Helmsgail.

Harry Carleton cried out, —

“It is all over with Phelem-ghe-Madone. I will lay my peerage of Bella-aqua, and my title of Lord Bellew, against the Archbishop of Canterbury’s old wig, on Helmsgail.”

“Give me your muzzle,” said Kilter to Phelem-ghe-Madone. And stuffing the bloody flannel into the bottle, he washed him all over with gin. The mouth reappeared, and he opened one eyelid. His temples seemed fractured.

“One round more, my friend,” said Kilter; and he added, “for the honour of the low town.”

The Welsh and the Irish understand each other, still Phelem made no sign of having any power of understanding left.

Phelem arose, supported by Kilter. It was the twenty-fifth round. From the way in which this Cyclops, for he had but one eye, placed himself in position, it was evident that this was the last round, for no one doubted his defeat. He placed his guard below his chin, with the awkwardness of a failing man.

Helmsgail, with a skin hardly sweating, cried out, —

"I'll back myself, a thousand to one."

Helmsgail, raising his arm, struck out; and, what was strange, both fell. A ghastly chuckle was heard. It was Phelem-ghe-Madone's expression of delight. While receiving the terrible blow given him by Helmsgail on the skull, he had given him a foul blow on the navel.

Helmsgail, lying on his back, rattled in his throat.

The spectators looked at him as he lay on the ground, and said, "Paid back!" All clapped their hands, even those who had lost. Phelem-ghe-Madone had given foul blow for foul blow, and had only asserted his right.

They carried Helmsgail off on a hand-barrow. The opinion was that he would not recover.

Lord Robartes exclaimed, "I win twelve hundred guineas."

Phelem-ghe-Madone was evidently maimed for life.

As she left, Josiana took the arm of Lord David, an act which was tolerated amongst people "engaged." She said to him, —

"It is very fine, but—"

"But what?"

"I thought it would have driven away my spleen. It has not."

Lord David stopped, looked at Josiana, shut his mouth, and inflated his cheeks, whilst he nodded his head, which signified attention, and said to the duchess, —

"For spleen there is but one remedy."

"What is it?"

"Gwynplaine."

The duchess asked, —

"And who is Gwynplaine?"

BOOK THE SECOND.

GWYNPLAINE AND DEA.

CHAPTER I.

WHEREIN WE SEE THE FACE OF HIM OF WHOM WE HAVE HITHERTO SEEN ONLY THE ACTS.

Nature had been prodigal of her kindness to Gwynplaine. She had bestowed on him a mouth opening to his ears, ears folding over to his eyes, a shapeless nose to support the spectacles of the grimace maker, and a face that no one could look upon without laughing.

We have just said that nature had loaded Gwynplaine with her gifts. But was it nature? Had she not been assisted?

Two slits for eyes, a hiatus for a mouth, a snub protuberance with two holes for nostrils, a flattened face, all having for the result an appearance of laughter; it is certain that nature never produces such perfection single-handed.

But is laughter a synonym of joy?

If, in the presence of this mountebank — for he was one — the first impression of gaiety wore off, and the man were observed with attention, traces of art were to be recognized. Such a face could never have been created by chance; it must have resulted from intention. Such perfect completeness is not in nature. Man can do nothing to create beauty, but everything to produce ugliness. A Hottentot profile cannot be changed into a Roman outline, but out of a Grecian nose you may make a Calmuck’s. It only requires to obliterate the root of the nose and to flatten the nostrils. The dog Latin of the Middle Ages had a reason for its creation of the verb *denasare*. Had Gwynplaine when a child been so worthy of attention that his face had been subjected to transmutation? Why not? Needed there a greater motive than the speculation of his future exhibition? According to all appearance, industrious manipulators of children had worked upon his face. It seemed evident that a mysterious and probably occult science, which was to surgery what alchemy was to chemistry, had chiselled his flesh, evidently at a very tender age, and manufactured his countenance with premeditation. That science, clever with the knife, skilled in obtusions and ligatures, had enlarged the mouth, cut away the lips, laid bare the gums, distended the ears, cut the cartilages, displaced the eyelids and the cheeks, enlarged the zygomatic muscle, pressed the scars and cicatrices to a level, turned back the skin over the lesions whilst the face was thus stretched, from all which resulted that powerful and profound piece of sculpture, the mask, Gwynplaine.

Man is not born thus.

However it may have been, the manipulation of Gwynplaine had succeeded admirably. Gwynplaine was a gift of Providence to dispel the sadness of man.

Of what providence? Is there a providence of demons as well as of God? We put the question without answering it.

Gwynplaine was a mountebank. He showed himself on the platform. No such effect had ever before been produced. Hypochondriacs were cured by the sight of him alone. He was avoided by folks in mourning, because they were compelled to laugh when they saw him, without regard to their decent gravity. One day the executioner came, and Gwynplaine made him laugh. Every one who saw Gwynplaine held his sides; he spoke, and they rolled on the ground. He was removed from sadness as is pole from pole. Spleen at the one; Gwynplaine at the other.

Thus he rose rapidly in the fair ground and at the cross roads to the very satisfactory renown of a horrible man.

It was Gwynplaine’s laugh which created the laughter of others, yet he did not laugh himself. His face laughed; his thoughts did not. The extraordinary face which chance or a special and weird industry had fashioned for him, laughed alone. Gwynplaine had nothing to do with it. The outside did not depend on the interior. The laugh which he had not placed, himself, on his brow, on his eyelids, on his mouth, he could not remove. It had been stamped for ever on his face. It was automatic, and the more irresistible because it seemed petrified. No one could escape from this rictus. Two convulsions of the face are infectious; laughing and yawning. By virtue of the mysterious operation to which Gwynplaine had probably been subjected in his infancy, every part of his face contributed to that rictus; his whole physiognomy led to that result, as a wheel centres in the nave. All his emotions, whatever they might have been, augmented his strange face of joy, or to speak more correctly, aggravated it. Any astonishment which might seize him, any suffering which he might feel, any anger which might take possession of him, any pity which might move him, would only increase this hilarity of his muscles. If he wept, he laughed; and whatever Gwynplaine was, whatever he wished to be, whatever he thought, the moment that he raised his head, the crowd, if crowd there was, had before them one impersonation: an overwhelming burst of laughter.

It was like a head of Medusa, but Medusa hilarious. All feeling or thought in the mind of the spectator was suddenly put to flight by the unexpected apparition, and laughter was inevitable. Antique art formerly placed on the outsides of the Greek theatre a joyous brazen face, called comedy. It laughed and occasioned laughter, but remained pensive. All parody which borders on folly, all irony which borders on wisdom, were condensed and amalgamated in that face. The burden of care, of disillusion, anxiety, and grief were expressed in its impassive countenance, and resulted in a lugubrious sum of mirth. One corner of the mouth was raised, in mockery of the human race; the other side, in blasphemy of the gods. Men confronted that model of the ideal sarcasm and exemplification of the irony which each one possesses within him; and the crowd, continually renewed round its fixed laugh, died away with delight before its sepulchral immobility of mirth.

One might almost have said that Gwynplaine was that dark, dead mask of ancient comedy adjusted to the body of a living man. That infernal head of implacable hilarity he supported on his neck. What a weight for the shoulders of a man — an everlasting laugh!

An everlasting laugh!

Let us understand each other; we will explain. The Manichæans believed the absolute occasionally gives way, and that God Himself sometimes abdicates for a time. So also of the will. We do not admit that it can ever be utterly powerless. The whole of existence resembles a letter modified in the postscript. For Gwynplaine the postscript was this: by the force of his will, and by concentrating all his attention, and on condition that no emotion should come to distract and turn away the fixedness of his effort, he could manage to suspend the everlasting rictus of his face, and to throw over it a kind of tragic veil, and then the spectator laughed no longer; he shuddered.

This exertion Gwynplaine scarcely ever made. It was a terrible effort, and an insupportable tension. Moreover, it happened that on the slightest distraction, or the slightest emotion, the laugh, driven back for a moment, returned like a tide with an impulse which was irresistible in proportion to the force of the adverse emotion.

With this exception, Gwynplaine’s laugh was everlasting.

On seeing Gwynplaine, all laughed. When they had laughed they turned away their heads. Women especially shrank from him with horror. The man was frightful. The joyous convulsion of laughter was as a tribute paid; they submitted to it gladly, but almost mechanically. Besides, when once the novelty of the laugh had passed over, Gwynplaine was intolerable for a woman to see, and impossible to contemplate. But he was tall, well made, and agile, and no way deformed, excepting in his face.

This led to the presumption that Gwynplaine was rather a creation of art than a work of nature. Gwynplaine, beautiful in figure, had probably been beautiful in face. At his birth he had no doubt resembled other infants. They had left the body intact, and retouched only the face.

Gwynplaine had been made to order — at least, that was probable. They had left him his teeth; teeth are necessary to a laugh. The death's head retains them. The operation performed on him must have been frightful. That he had no remembrance of it was no proof that it had not taken place. Surgical sculpture of the kind could never have succeeded except on a very young child, and consequently on one having little consciousness of what happened to him, and who might easily take a wound for a sickness. Besides, we must remember that they had in those times means of putting patients to sleep, and of suppressing all suffering; only then it was called magic, while now it is called anæsthesia.

Besides this face, those who had brought him up had given him the resources of a gymnast and an athlete. His articulations usefully displaced and fashioned to bending the wrong way, had received the education of a clown, and could, like the hinges of a door, move backwards and forwards. In appropriating him to the profession of mountebank nothing had been neglected. His hair had been dyed with ochre once for all; a secret which has been rediscovered at the present day. Pretty women use it, and that which was formerly considered ugly is now considered an embellishment. Gwynplaine had yellow hair. His hair having probably been dyed with some corrosive preparation, had left it woolly and rough to the touch. Its yellow bristles, rather a mane than a head of hair, covered and concealed a lofty brow, evidently made to contain thought. The operation, whatever it had been, which had deprived his features of harmony, and put all their flesh into disorder, had had no effect on the bony structure of his head. The facial angle was powerful and surprisingly grand. Behind his laugh there was a soul, dreaming, as all our souls dream.

However, his laugh was to Gwynplaine quite a talent. He could do nothing with it, so he turned it to account. By means of it he gained his living.

Gwynplaine, as you have doubtless already guessed, was the child abandoned one winter evening on the coast of Portland, and received into a poor caravan at Weymouth.

CHAPTER II.

DEA.

That boy was at this time a man. Fifteen years had elapsed. It was in 1705. Gwynplaine was in his twenty-fifth year.

Ursus had kept the two children with him. They were a group of wanderers. Ursus and Homo had aged. Ursus had become quite bald. The wolf was growing gray. The age of wolves is not ascertained like that of dogs. According to Molière, there are wolves which live to eighty, amongst others the little koupara, and the rank wolf, the *Canis nubilus* of Say.

The little girl found on the dead woman was now a tall creature of sixteen, with brown hair, slight, fragile, almost trembling from delicacy, and almost inspiring fear lest she should break; admirably beautiful, her eyes full of light, yet blind. That fatal winter night which threw down the beggar woman and her infant in the snow had struck a double blow. It had killed the mother and blinded the child. Gutta serena had for ever paralysed the eyes of the girl, now become woman in her turn. On her face, through which the light of day never passed, the depressed corners of the mouth indicated the bitterness of the privation. Her eyes, large and clear, had a strange quality: extinguished for ever to her, to others they were brilliant. They were mysterious torches lighting only the outside. They gave light but possessed it not. These sightless eyes were resplendent. A captive of shadow, she lighted up the dull place she inhabited. From the depth of her incurable darkness, from behind the black wall called blindness, she flung her rays. She saw not the sun without, but her soul was perceptible from within.

In her dead look there was a celestial earnestness. She was the night, and from the irremediable darkness with which she was amalgamated she came out a star.

Ursus, with his mania for Latin names, had christened her Dea. He had taken his wolf into consultation. He had said to him, “You represent man, I represent the beasts. We are of the lower world; this little one shall represent the world on high. Such feebleness is all-powerful. In this manner the universe shall be complete in our hut in its three orders — human, animal, and Divine.” The wolf made no objection. Therefore the foundling was called Dea.

As to Gwynplaine, Ursus had not had the trouble of inventing a name for him. The morning of the day on which he had realized the disfigurement of the little boy and the blindness of the infant he had asked him, “Boy, what is your name?” and the boy had answered, “They call me Gwynplaine.” “Be Gwynplaine, then,” said Ursus.

Dea assisted Gwynplaine in his performances. If human misery could be summed up, it might have been summed up in Gwynplaine and Dea. Each seemed born in a compartment of the sepulchre; Gwynplaine in the horrible, Dea in the darkness. Their existences were shadowed by two different kinds of darkness, taken from the two formidable sides of night. Dea had that shadow in her, Gwynplaine had it on him. There was a phantom in Dea, a spectre in Gwynplaine. Dea was sunk in the mournful, Gwynplaine in something worse. There was for Gwynplaine, who could see, a heartrending possibility that existed not for Dea, who was blind; he could compare himself with other men. Now, in a situation such as that of Gwynplaine, admitting that he should seek to examine it, to compare himself with others was to understand himself no more. To have, like Dea, empty sight from which the world is absent, is a supreme distress, yet less than to be an enigma to oneself; to feel that something is wanting here as well, and that something, oneself; to see the universe and not to see oneself. Dea had a veil over her, the night; Gwynplaine a mask, his face. Inexpressible fact, it was by his own flesh that Gwynplaine was masked! What his visage had been, he knew not. His face had vanished. They had affixed to him a false self. He had for a face, a disappearance. His head lived, his face was dead. He never remembered to have seen it. Mankind was for Gwynplaine, as for Dea, an exterior fact. It was far-off. She was alone, he was alone. The isolation of Dea was funereal, she saw nothing; that of Gwynplaine sinister, he saw all things. For Dea creation never passed the bounds of touch and hearing; reality was bounded, limited, short, immediately lost. Nothing was infinite to her but darkness. For Gwynplaine to live was to have the crowd for ever before him and outside him. Dea was the proscribed from light, Gwynplaine the banned of life. They were beyond the pale of hope, and had reached the depth of possible calamity; they had sunk into it, both of them. An observer who had watched them would have felt his reverie melt into immeasurable pity. What must they not have suffered! The decree of misfortune weighed visibly on these human creatures, and never had fate encompassed two beings who had done nothing to deserve it, and more clearly turned destiny into torture, and life into hell.

They were in a Paradise.

They were in love.

Gwynplaine adored Dea. Dea idolized Gwynplaine.

“How beautiful you are!” she would say to him.

CHAPTER III.

“OCULOS NON HABET, ET VIDET.”

Only one woman on earth saw Gwynplaine. It was the blind girl. She had learned what Gwynplaine had done for her, from Ursus, to whom he had related his rough journey from Portland to Weymouth, and the many sufferings which he had endured when deserted by the gang. She knew that when an infant dying upon her dead mother, suckling a corpse, a being scarcely bigger than herself had taken her up; that this being, exiled, and, as it were, buried under the refusal of the universe to aid him, had heard her cry; that all the world being deaf to him, he had not been deaf to her; that the child, alone, weak, cast off, without resting-place here below, dragging himself over the waste, exhausted by fatigue, crushed, had accepted from the hands of night a burden, another child: that he, who had nothing to expect in that obscure distribution which we call fate, had charged himself with a destiny; that naked, in anguish and distress, he had made himself a Providence; that when Heaven had closed he had opened his heart; that, himself lost, he had saved; that having neither roof-tree nor shelter, he had been an asylum; that he had made himself mother and nurse; that he who was alone in the world had responded to desertion by adoption; that lost in the darkness he had given an example; that, as if not already sufficiently burdened, he had added to his load another’s misery; that in this world, which seemed to contain nothing for him, he had found a duty; that where every one else would have hesitated, he had advanced; that where every one else would have drawn back, he consented; that he had put his hand into the jaws of the grave and drawn out her — Dea. That, himself half naked, he had given her his rags, because she was cold; that famished, he had thought of giving her food and drink; that for one little creature, another little creature had combated death; that he had fought it under every form; under the form of winter and snow, under the form of solitude, under the form of terror, under the form of cold, hunger, and thirst, under the form of whirlwind, and that for her, Dea, this Titan of ten had given battle to the immensity of night. She knew that as a child he had done this, and that now as a man, he was strength to her weakness, riches to her poverty, healing to her sickness, and sight to her blindness. Through the mist of the unknown by which she felt herself encompassed, she distinguished clearly his devotion, his abnegation, his courage. Heroism in immaterial regions has an outline; she distinguished this sublime outline. In the inexpressible abstraction in which thought lives unlighted by the sun, Dea perceived this mysterious lineament of virtue. In the surrounding of dark things put in motion, which was the only impression made on her by reality; in the uneasy stagnation of a creature, always passive, yet always on the watch for possible evil; in the sensation of being ever defenceless, which is the life of the blind — she felt Gwynplaine above her; Gwynplaine never cold, never absent, never obscured; Gwynplaine sympathetic, helpful, and sweet-tempered. Dea quivered with certainty and gratitude, her anxiety changed into ecstasy, and with her shadowy eyes she contemplated on the zenith from the depth of her abyss the rich light of his goodness. In the ideal, kindness is the sun; and Gwynplaine dazzled Dea.

To the crowd, which has too many heads to have a thought, and too many eyes to have a sight — to the crowd who, superficial themselves, judge only of the surface, Gwynplaine was a clown, a merry-andrew, a mountebank, a creature grotesque, a little more and a little less than a beast. The crowd knew only the face.

For Dea, Gwynplaine was the saviour, who had gathered her into his arms in the tomb, and borne her out of it; the consoler, who made life tolerable; the liberator, whose hand, holding her own, guided her through that labyrinth called blindness. Gwynplaine was her brother, friend, guide, support; the personification of heavenly power; the husband, winged and resplendent. Where the multitude saw the monster, Dea recognized the archangel. It was that Dea, blind, perceived his soul.

CHAPTER IV.

WELL-MATCHED LOVERS.

Ursus being a philosopher understood. He approved of the fascination of Dea. He said, The blind see the invisible. He said, Conscience is vision. Then, looking at Gwynplaine, he murmured, Semi-monster, but demi-god.

Gwynplaine, on the other hand, was madly in love with Dea.

There is the invisible eye, the spirit, and the visible eye, the pupil. He saw her with the visible eye. Dea was dazzled by the ideal; Gwynplaine, by the real. Gwynplaine was not ugly; he was frightful. He saw his contrast before him: in proportion as he was terrible, Dea was sweet. He was horror; she was grace. Dea was his dream. She seemed a vision scarcely embodied. There was in her whole person, in her Grecian form, in her fine and supple figure, swaying like a reed; in her shoulders, on which might have been invisible wings; in the modest curves which indicated her sex, to the soul rather than to the senses; in her fairness, which amounted almost to transparency; in the august and reserved serenity of her look, divinely shut out from earth; in the sacred innocence of her smile — she was almost an angel, and yet just a woman.

Gwynplaine, we have said, compared himself and compared Dea.

His existence, such as it was, was the result of a double and unheard-of choice. It was the point of intersection of two rays — one from below and one from above — a black and a white ray. To the same crumb, perhaps pecked at at once by the beaks of evil and good, one gave the bite, the other the kiss. Gwynplaine was this crumb — an atom, wounded and caressed. Gwynplaine was the product of fatality combined with Providence. Misfortune had placed its finger on him; happiness as well. Two extreme destinies composed his strange lot. He had on him an anathema and a benediction. He was the elect, cursed. Who was he? He knew not. When he looked at himself, he saw one he knew not; but this unknown was a monster. Gwynplaine lived as it were beheaded, with a face which did not belong to him. This face was frightful, so frightful that it was absurd. It caused as much fear as laughter. It was a hell-concocted absurdity. It was the shipwreck of a human face into the mask of an animal. Never had been seen so total an eclipse of humanity in a human face; never parody more complete; never had apparition more frightful grinned in nightmare; never had everything repulsive to woman been more hideously amalgamated in a man. The unfortunate heart, masked and calumniated by the face, seemed for ever condemned to solitude under it, as under a tombstone.

Yet no! Where unknown malice had done its worst, invisible goodness had lent its aid. In the poor fallen one, suddenly raised up, by the side of the repulsive, it had placed the attractive; on the barren shoal it had set the loadstone; it had caused a soul to fly with swift wings towards the deserted one; it had sent the dove to console the creature whom the thunderbolt had overwhelmed, and had made beauty adore deformity. For this to be possible it was necessary that beauty should not see the disfigurement. For this good fortune, misfortune was required. Providence had made Dea blind.

Gwynplaine vaguely felt himself the object of a redemption. Why had he been persecuted? He knew not. Why redeemed? He knew not. All he knew was that a halo had encircled his brand. When Gwynplaine had been old enough to understand, Ursus had read and explained to him the text of Doctor Conquest *de Denasatis*, and in another folio, Hugo Plagon, the passage, *Naves habensmutilas;* but Ursus had prudently abstained from “hypotheses,” and had been reserved in his opinion of what it might mean. Suppositions were possible. The probability of violence inflicted on Gwynplaine when an infant was hinted at, but for Gwynplaine the result was the only evidence. His destiny was to live under a stigma. Why this stigma? There was no answer.

Silence and solitude were around Gwynplaine. All was uncertain in the conjectures which could be fitted to the tragical reality; excepting the terrible fact, nothing was certain. In his discouragement Dea intervened a sort of celestial interposition between him and despair. He perceived, melted and inspirited by the sweetness of the beautiful girl who turned to him, that, horrible as he was, a beautified wonder affected his monstrous visage. Having been fashioned to create dread, he was the object of a miraculous exception, that it was admired and adored in the ideal by the light; and, monster that he was, he felt himself the contemplation of a star.

Gwynplaine and Dea were united, and these two suffering hearts adored each other. One nest and two birds — that was their story. They had begun to feel a universal law — to please, to seek, and to find each other.

Thus hatred had made a mistake. The persecutors of Gwynplaine, whoever they might have been — the deadly enigma, from wherever it came — had missed their aim. They had intended to drive him to desperation; they had succeeded in driving him into enchantment. They had affianced him beforehand to a healing wound. They had predestined him for consolation by an infliction. The pincers of the executioner had softly changed into the delicately-moulded hand of a girl. Gwynplaine was horrible — artificially horrible — made horrible by the hand of man. They had hoped to exile him for ever: first, from his family, if his family existed, and then from humanity. When an infant, they had made him a ruin; of this ruin Nature had repossessed herself, as she does of all ruins. This solitude Nature had consoled, as she consoles all solitudes. Nature comes to the succour of the deserted; where all is lacking, she gives back her whole self. She flourishes and grows green amid ruins; she has ivy for the stones and love for man.

Profound generosity of the shadows!

CHAPTER V.

THE BLUE SKY THROUGH THE BLACK CLOUD.

Thus lived these unfortunate creatures together — Dea, relying; Gwynplaine, accepted. These orphans were all in all to each other, the feeble and the deformed. The widowed were betrothed. An inexpressible thanksgiving arose out of their distress. They were grateful. To whom? To the obscure immensity. Be grateful in your own hearts. That suffices. Thanksgiving has wings, and flies to its right destination. Your prayer knows its way better than you can.

How many men have believed that they prayed to Jupiter, when they prayed to Jehovah! How many believers in amulets are listened to by the Almighty! How many atheists there are who know not that, in the simple fact of being good and sad, they pray to God!

Gwynplaine and Dea were grateful. Deformity is expulsion. Blindness is a precipice. The expelled one had been adopted; the precipice was habitable.

Gwynplaine had seen a brilliant light descending on him, in an arrangement of destiny which seemed to put, in the perspective of a dream, a white cloud of beauty having the form of a woman, a radiant vision in which there was a heart; and the phantom, almost a cloud and yet a woman, clasped him; and the apparition embraced him; and the heart desired him. Gwynplaine was no longer deformed. He was beloved. The rose demanded the caterpillar in marriage, feeling that within the caterpillar there was a divine butterfly. Gwynplaine the rejected was chosen. To have one’s desire is everything. Gwynplaine had his, Dea hers.

The abjection of the disfigured man was exalted and dilated into intoxication, into delight, into belief; and a hand was stretched out towards the melancholy hesitation of the blind girl, to guide her in her darkness.

It was the penetration of two misfortunes into the ideal which absorbed them. The rejected found a refuge in each other. Two blanks, combining, filled each other up. They held together by what they lacked: in that in which one was poor, the other was rich. The misfortune of the one made the treasure of the other. Had Dea not been blind, would she have chosen Gwynplaine? Had Gwynplaine not been disfigured, would he have preferred Dea? She would probably have rejected the deformed, as he would have passed by the infirm. What happiness for Dea that Gwynplaine was hideous! What good fortune for Gwynplaine that Dea was blind! Apart from their providential matching, they were impossible to each other. A mighty want of each other was at the bottom of their loves, Gwynplaine saved Dea. Dea saved Gwynplaine. Apposition of misery produced adherence. It was the embrace of those swallowed in the abyss; none closer, none more hopeless, none more exquisite.

Gwynplaine had a thought— “What should I be without her?” Dea had a thought— “What should I be without him?” The exile of each made a country for both. The two incurable fatalities, the stigmata of Gwynplaine and the blindness of Dea, joined them together in contentment. They sufficed to each other. They imagined nothing beyond each other. To speak to one another was a delight, to approach was beatitude; by force of reciprocal intuition they became united in the same reverie, and thought the same thoughts. In Gwynplaine’s tread Dea believed that she heard the step of one deified. They tightened their mutual grasp in a sort of sidereal *chiaroscuro*, full of perfumes, of gleams, of music, of the luminous architecture of dreams. They belonged to each other; they knew themselves to be for ever united in the same joy and the same ecstasy; and nothing could be stranger than this construction of an Eden by two of the damned.

They were inexpressibly happy. In their hell they had created heaven. Such was thy power, O Love! Dea heard Gwynplaine’s laugh; Gwynplaine saw Dea’s smile. Thus ideal felicity was found, the perfect joy of life was realized, the mysterious problem of happiness was solved; and by whom? By two outcasts.

For Gwynplaine, Dea was splendour. For Dea, Gwynplaine was presence. Presence is that profound mystery which renders the invisible world divine, and from which results that other mystery — confidence. In religions this is the only thing which is irreducible; but this irreducible thing suffices. The great motive power is not seen; it is felt.

Gwynplaine was the religion of Dea. Sometimes, lost in her sense of love towards him, she knelt, like a beautiful priestess before a gnome in a pagoda, made happy by her adoration.

Imagine to yourself an abyss, and in its centre an oasis of light, and in this oasis two creatures shut out of life, dazzling each other. No purity could be compared to their loves. Dea was ignorant what a kiss might be, though perhaps she desired it; because blindness, especially in a woman, has its dreams, and though trembling at the approaches of the unknown, does not fear them all. As to Gwynplaine, his sensitive youth made him pensive. The more delirious he felt, the more timid he became. He might have dared anything with this companion of his early youth, with this creature as innocent of fault as of the light, with this blind girl who saw but one thing — that she adored him! But he would have thought it a theft to take what she might have given; so he resigned himself with a melancholy satisfaction to love angelically, and the conviction of his deformity resolved itself into a proud purity.

These happy creatures dwelt in the ideal. They were spouses in it at distances as opposite as the spheres. They exchanged in its firmament the deep effluvium which is in infinity attraction, and on earth the sexes. Their kisses were the kisses of souls.

They had always lived a common life. They knew themselves only in each other's society. The infancy of Dea had coincided with the youth of Gwynplaine. They had grown up side by side. For a long time they had slept in the same bed, for the hut was not a large bedchamber. They lay on the chest, Ursus on the floor; that was the arrangement. One fine day, whilst Dea was still very little, Gwynplaine felt himself grown up, and it was in the youth that shame arose. He said to Ursus, "I will also sleep on the floor." And at night he stretched himself, with the old man, on the bear skin. Then Dea wept. She cried for her bed-fellow; but Gwynplaine, become restless because he had begun to love, decided to remain where he was. From that time he always slept by the side of Ursus on the planks. In the summer, when the nights were fine, he slept outside with Homo.

When thirteen, Dea had not yet become resigned to the arrangement. Often in the evening she said, "Gwynplaine, come close to me; that will put me to sleep." A man lying by her side was a necessity to her innocent slumbers.

Nudity is to see that one is naked. She ignored nudity. It was the ingenuousness of Arcadia or Otaheite. Dea untaught made Gwynplaine wild. Sometimes it happened that Dea, when almost reaching youth, combed her long hair as she sat on her bed — her chemise unfastened and falling off revealed indications of a feminine outline, and a vague commencement of Eve — and would call Gwynplaine. Gwynplaine blushed, lowered his eyes, and knew not what to do in presence of this innocent creature. Stammering, he turned his head, feared, and fled. The Daphnis of darkness took flight before the Chloe of shadow.

Such was the idyll blooming in a tragedy.

Ursus said to them,— “Old brutes, adore each other!”

CHAPTER VI.

URSUS AS TUTOR, AND URSUS AS GUARDIAN.

Ursus added, —

“Some of these days I will play them a nasty trick. I will marry them.”

Ursus taught Gwynplaine the theory of love. He said to him, —

“Do you know how the Almighty lights the fire called love? He places the woman underneath, the devil between, and the man at the top. A match — that is to say, a look — and behold, it is all on fire.”

“A look is unnecessary,” answered Gwynplaine, thinking of Dea.

And Ursus replied, —

“Booby! Do souls require mortal eyes to see each other?”

Ursus was a good fellow at times. Gwynplaine, sometimes madly in love with Dea, became melancholy, and made use of the presence of Ursus as a guard on himself. One day Ursus said to him, —

“Bah! do not put yourself out. When in love, the cock shows himself.”

“But the eagle conceals himself,” replied Gwynplaine.

At other times Ursus would say to himself, apart, —

“It is wise to put spokes in the wheels of the Cytherean car. They love each other too much. This may have its disadvantages. Let us avoid a fire. Let us moderate these hearts.”

Then Ursus had recourse to warnings of this nature, speaking to Gwynplaine when Dea slept, and to Dea when Gwynplaine’s back was turned: —

“Dea, you must not be so fond of Gwynplaine. To live in the life of another is perilous. Egoism is a good root of happiness. Men escape from women. And then Gwynplaine might end by becoming infatuated with you. His success is so great! You have no idea how great his success is!”

“Gwynplaine, disproportions are no good. So much ugliness on one side and so much beauty on another ought to compel reflection. Temper your ardour, my boy. Do not become too enthusiastic about Dea. Do you seriously consider that you are made for her? Just think of your deformity and her perfection! See the distance between her and yourself. She has everything, this Dea. What a white skin! What hair! Lips like strawberries! And her foot! her hand! Those shoulders, with their exquisite curve! Her expression is sublime. She walks diffusing light; and in speaking, the grave tone of her voice is charming. But for all this, to think that she is a woman! She would not be such a fool as to be an angel. She is absolute beauty. Repeat all this to yourself, to calm your ardour."

These speeches redoubled the love of Gwynplaine and Dea, and Ursus was astonished at his want of success, just as one who should say, "It is singular that with all the oil I throw on fire I cannot extinguish it."

Did he, then, desire to extinguish their love, or to cool it even?

Certainly not. He would have been well punished had he succeeded. At the bottom of his heart this love, which was flame for them and warmth for him, was his delight.

But it is natural to grate a little against that which charms us; men call it wisdom.

Ursus had been, in his relations with Gwynplaine and Dea, almost a father and a mother. Grumbling all the while, he had brought them up; grumbling all the while, he had nourished them. His adoption of them had made the hut roll more heavily, and he had been oftener compelled to harness himself by Homo's side to help to draw it.

We may observe, however, that after the first few years, when Gwynplaine was nearly grown up, and Ursus had grown quite old, Gwynplaine had taken his turn, and drawn Ursus.

Ursus, seeing that Gwynplaine was becoming a man, had cast the horoscope of his deformity. "*It has made your fortune!*" he had told him.

This family of an old man and two children, with a wolf, had become, as they wandered, a group more and more intimately united. There errant life had not hindered education. "To wander is to grow," Ursus said. Gwynplaine was evidently made to exhibit at fairs. Ursus had cultivated in him feats of dexterity, and had encrusted him as much as possible with all he himself possessed of science and wisdom.

Ursus, contemplating the perplexing mask of Gwynplaine's face, often growled, —

"He has begun well." It was for this reason that he had perfected him with every ornament of philosophy and wisdom.

He repeated constantly to Gwynplaine, —

"Be a philosopher. To be wise is to be invulnerable. You see what I am, I have never shed a tears. This is the result of my wisdom. Do you think that occasion for tears has been wanting, had I felt disposed to weep?"

Ursus, in one of his monologues in the hearing of the wolf, said, —

“I have taught Gwynplaine everything, Latin included. I have taught Dea nothing, music included.”

He had taught them both to sing. He had himself a pretty talent for playing on the oaten reed, a little flute of that period. He played on it agreeably, as also on the *chiffonie*, a sort of beggar’s hurdy-gurdy, mentioned in the Chronicle of Bertrand Duguesclin as the “truant instrument,” which started the symphony. These instruments attracted the crowd. Ursus would show them the chiffonie, and say, “It is called organistrum in Latin.”

He had taught Dea and Gwynplaine to sing, according to the method of Orpheus and of Egide Binchois. Frequently he interrupted the lessons with cries of enthusiasm, such as “Orpheus, musician of Greece! Binchois, musician of Picardy!”

These branches of careful culture did not occupy the children so as to prevent their adoring each other. They had mingled their hearts together as they grew up, as two saplings planted near mingle their branches as they become trees.

“No matter,” said Ursus. “I will marry them.”

Then he grumbled to himself, —

“They are quite tiresome with their love.”

The past — their little past, at least — had no existence for Dea and Gwynplaine. They knew only what Ursus had told them of it. They called Ursus father. The only remembrance which Gwynplaine had of his infancy was as of a passage of demons over his cradle. He had an impression of having been trodden in the darkness under deformed feet. Was this intentional or not? He was ignorant on this point. That which he remembered clearly and to the slightest detail were his tragical adventures when deserted at Portland. The finding of Dea made that dismal night a radiant date for him.

The memory of Dea, even more than that of Gwynplaine, was lost in clouds. In so young a child all remembrance melts away. She recollected her mother as something cold. Had she ever seen the sun? Perhaps so. She made efforts to pierce into the blank which was her past life.

“The sun! — what was it?”

She had some vague memory of a thing luminous and warm, of which Gwynplaine had taken the place.

They spoke to each other in low tones. It is certain that cooing is the most important thing in the world. Dea often said to Gwynplaine, —

“Light means that you are speaking.”

Once, no longer containing himself, as he saw through a muslin sleeve the arm of Dea, Gwynplaine brushed its transparency with his lips — ideal kiss of a deformed mouth! Dea felt a deep delight; she blushed like a rose. This kiss from a monster made Aurora gleam on that beautiful brow full of night. However, Gwynplaine sighed with a kind of terror, and as the neckerchief of Dea gaped, he could not refrain from looking at the whiteness visible through that glimpse of Paradise.

Dea pulled up her sleeve, and stretching towards Gwynplaine her naked arm, said, —

“Again!”

Gwynplaine fled.

The next day the game was renewed, with variations.

It was a heavenly subsidence into that sweet abyss called love.

At such things heaven smiles philosophically.

CHAPTER VII.

BLINDNESS GIVES LESSONS IN CLAIRVOYANCE.

At times Gwynplaine reproached himself. He made his happiness a case of conscience. He fancied that to allow a woman who could not see him to love him was to deceive her.

What would she have said could she have suddenly obtained her sight? How she would have felt repulsed by what had previously attracted her! How she would have recoiled from her frightful loadstone! What a cry! What covering of her face! What a flight! A bitter scruple harassed him. He told himself that such a monster as he had no right to love. He was a hydra idolized by a star. It was his duty to enlighten the blind star.

One day he said to Dea, —

“You know that I am very ugly.”

“I know that you are sublime,” she answered.

He resumed, —

“When you hear all the world laugh, they laugh at me because I am horrible.”

“I love you,” said Dea.

After a silence, she added, —

“I was in death; you brought me to life. When you are here, heaven is by my side. Give me your hand, that I may touch heaven.”

Their hands met and grasped each other. They spoke no more, but were silent in the plenitude of love.

Ursus, who was crabbed, had overheard this. The next day, when the three were together, he said, —

“For that matter, Dea is ugly also.”

The word produced no effect. Dea and Gwynplaine were not listening. Absorbed in each other, they rarely heeded such exclamations of Ursus. Their depth was a dead loss.

This time, however, the precaution of Ursus, “Dea is also ugly,” indicated in this learned man a certain knowledge of women. It is certain that Gwynplaine, in his loyalty, had been guilty of an imprudence. To have said, *I am ugly*, to any other blind girl than Dea might have been dangerous. To be blind, and in love, is to be twofold blind. In such a situation dreams are dreamt. Illusion is the food of dreams. Take illusion from love, and you take from it its aliment. It is compounded of every enthusiasm, of both physical and moral admiration.

Moreover, you should never tell a woman a word difficult to understand. She will dream about it, and she often dreams falsely. An enigma in a reverie spoils it. The shock caused by the fall of a careless word displaces that against which it strikes. At times it happens, without our knowing why, that because we have received the obscure blow of a chance word the heart empties itself insensibly of love. He who loves perceives a decline in his happiness. Nothing is to be feared more than this slow exudation from the fissure in the vase.

Happily, Dea was not formed of such clay. The stuff of which other women are made had not been used in her construction. She had a rare nature. The frame, but not the heart, was fragile. A divine perseverance in love was in the heart of her being.

The whole disturbance which the word used by Gwynplaine had produced in her ended in her saying one day, —

“To be ugly — what is it? It is to do wrong. Gwynplaine only does good. He is handsome.”

Then, under the form of interrogation so familiar to children and to the blind, she resumed, —

“To see — what is it that you call seeing? For my own part, I cannot see; I know. It seems that *to see* means to hide.”

“What do you mean?” said Gwynplaine.

Dea answered, —

“To see is a thing which conceals the true.”

“No,” said Gwynplaine.

“But yes,” replied Dea, “since you say you are ugly.”

She reflected a moment, and then said, “Story-teller!”

Gwynplaine felt the joy of having confessed and of not being believed. Both his conscience and his love were consoled.

Thus they had reached, Dea sixteen, Gwynplaine nearly twenty-five. They were not, as it would now be expressed, “more advanced” than the first day. Less even; for it may be remembered that on their wedding night she was nine months and he ten years old. A sort of holy childhood had continued in their love. Thus it sometimes happens that the belated nightingale prolongs her nocturnal song till dawn.

Their caresses went no further than pressing hands, or lips brushing a naked arm. Soft, half-articulate whispers sufficed them.

Twenty-four and sixteen! So it happened that Ursus, who did not lose sight of the ill turn he intended to do them, said, —

“One of these days you must choose a religion.”

“Wherefore?” inquired Gwynplaine.

“That you may marry.”

“That is already done,” said Dea.

Dea did not understand that they could be more man and wife than they were already.

At bottom, this chimerical and virginal content, this innocent union of souls, this celibacy taken for marriage, was not displeasing to Ursus.

Besides, were they not already married? If the indissoluble existed anywhere, was it not in their union? Gwynplaine and Dea! They were creatures worthy of the love they mutually felt, flung by misfortune into each other’s arms. And as if they were not enough in this first link, love had survened on misfortune, and had attached them, united and bound them together. What power could ever break that iron chain, bound with knots of flowers? They were indeed bound together.

Dea had beauty, Gwynplaine had sight. Each brought a dowry. They were more than coupled — they were paired: separated solely by the sacred interposition of innocence.

Though dream as Gwynplaine would, however, and absorb all meaner passions as he could in the contemplation of Dea and before the tribunal of conscience, he was a man. Fatal laws are not to be eluded. He underwent, like everything else in nature, the obscure fermentations willed by the Creator. At times, therefore, he looked at the women who were in the crowd, but he immediately felt that the look was a sin, and hastened to retire, repentant, into his own soul.

Let us add that he met with no encouragement. On the face of every woman who looked upon him he saw aversion antipathy, repugnance, and rejection. It was clear that no other than Dea was possible for him. This aided his repentance.

CHAPTER VIII.

NOT ONLY HAPPINESS, BUT PROSPERITY.

What true things are told in stories! The burnt scar of the invisible fiend who has touched you is remorse for a wicked thought. In Gwynplaine evil thoughts never ripened, and he had therefore no remorse. Sometimes he felt regret.

Vague mists of conscience.

What was this?

Nothing.

Their happiness was complete — so complete that they were no longer even poor.

From 1680 to 1704 a great change had taken place.

It happened sometimes, in the year 1704, that as night fell on some little village on the coast, a great, heavy van, drawn by a pair of stout horses, made its entry. It was like the shell of a vessel reversed — the keel for a roof, the deck for a floor, placed on four wheels. The wheels were all of the same size, and high as wagon wheels. Wheels, pole, and van were all painted green, with a rhythmical gradation of shades, which ranged from bottle green for the wheels to apple green for the roofing. This green colour had succeeded in drawing attention to the carriage, which was known in all the fair grounds as The Green Box. The Green Box had but two windows, one at each extremity, and at the back a door with steps to let down. On the roof, from a tube painted green like the rest, smoke arose. This moving house was always varnished and washed afresh. In front, on a ledge fastened to the van, with the window for a door, behind the horses and by the side of an old man who held the reins and directed the team, two gipsy women, dressed as goddesses, sounded their trumpets. The astonishment with which the villagers regarded this machine was overwhelming.

This was the old establishment of Ursus, its proportions augmented by success, and improved from a wretched booth into a theatre. A kind of animal, between dog and wolf, was chained under the van. This was Homo. The old coachman who drove the horses was the philosopher himself.

Whence came this improvement from the miserable hut to the Olympic caravan?

From this — Gwynplaine had become famous.

It was with a correct scent of what would succeed amongst men that Ursus had said to Gwynplaine, —

“They made your fortune.”

Ursus, it may be remembered, had made Gwynplaine his pupil. Unknown people had worked upon his face; he, on the other hand, had worked on his mind, and behind this well-executed mask he had placed all that he could of thought. So soon as the growth of the child had rendered him fitted for it, he had brought him out on the stage — that is, he had produced him in front of the van.

The effect of his appearance had been surprising. The passers-by were immediately struck with wonder. Never had anything been seen to be compared to this extraordinary mimic of laughter. They were ignorant how the miracle of infectious hilarity had been obtained. Some believed it to be natural, others declared it to be artificial, and as conjecture was added to reality, everywhere, at every cross-road on the journey, in all the grounds of fairs and fêtes, the crowd ran after Gwynplaine. Thanks to this great attraction, there had come into the poor purse of the wandering group, first a rain of farthings, then of heavy pennies, and finally of shillings. The curiosity of one place exhausted, they passed on to another. Rolling does not enrich a stone but it enriches a caravan; and year by year, from city to city, with the increased growth of Gwynplaine’s person and of his ugliness, the fortune predicted by Ursus had come.

“What a good turn they did you there, my boy!” said Ursus.

This “fortune” had allowed Ursus, who was the administrator of Gwynplaine’s success, to have the chariot of his dreams constructed — that is to say, a caravan large enough to carry a theatre, and to sow science and art in the highways. Moreover, Ursus had been able to add to the group composed of himself, Homo, Gwynplaine, and Dea, two horses and two women, who were the goddesses of the troupe, as we have just said, and its servants. A mythological frontispiece was, in those days, of service to a caravan of mountebanks.

“We are a wandering temple,” said Ursus.

These two gipsies, picked up by the philosopher from amongst the vagabondage of cities and suburbs, were ugly and young, and were called, by order of Ursus, the one Phoebe, and the other Venus.

For these read Fibi and Vinos, that we may conform to English pronunciation.

Phoebe cooked; Venus scrubbed the temple.

Moreover, on days of performance they dressed Dea.

Mountebanks have their public life as well as princes, and on these occasions Dea was arrayed, like Fibi and Vinos, in a Florentine petticoat of flowered stuff, and a woman's jacket without sleeves, leaving the arms bare. Ursus and Gwynplaine wore men's jackets, and, like sailors on board a man-of-war, great loose trousers. Gwynplaine had, besides, for his work and for his feats of strength, round his neck and over his shoulders, an esclavine of leather. He took charge of the horses. Ursus and Homo took charge of each other.

Dea, being used to the Green Box, came and went in the interior of the wheeled house, with almost as much ease and certainty as those who saw.

The eye which could penetrate within this structure and its internal arrangements might have perceived in a corner, fastened to the planks, and immovable on its four wheels, the old hut of Ursus, placed on half-pay, allowed to rust, and from thenceforth dispensed the labour of rolling as Ursus was relieved from the labour of drawing it.

This hut, in a corner at the back, to the right of the door, served as bedchamber and dressing-room to Ursus and Gwynplaine. It now contained two beds. In the opposite corner was the kitchen.

The arrangement of a vessel was not more precise and concise than that of the interior of the Green Box. Everything within it was in its place — arranged, foreseen, and intended.

The caravan was divided into three compartments, partitioned from each other. These communicated by open spaces without doors. A piece of stuff fell over them, and answered the purpose of concealment. The compartment behind belonged to the men, the compartment in front to the women; the compartment in the middle, separating the two sexes, was the stage. The instruments of the orchestra and the properties were kept in the kitchen. A loft under the arch of the roof contained the scenes, and on opening a trap-door lamps appeared, producing wonders of light.

Ursus was the poet of these magical representations; he wrote the pieces. He had a diversity of talents; he was clever at sleight of hand. Besides the voices he imitated, he produced all sorts of unexpected things — shocks of light and darkness; spontaneous formations of figures or words, as he willed, on the partition; vanishing figures in chiaroscuro; strange things, amidst which he seemed to meditate, unmindful of the crowd who marvelled at him.

One day Gwynplaine said to him, —

“Father, you look like a sorcerer!”

And Ursus replied, —

“Then I look, perhaps, like what I am.”

The Green Box, built on a clear model of Ursus’s, contained this refinement of ingenuity — that between the fore and hind wheels the central panel of the left side turned on hinges by the aid of chains and pulleys, and could be let down at will like a drawbridge. As it dropped it set at liberty three legs on hinges, which supported the panel when let down, and which placed themselves straight on the ground like the legs of a table, and supported it above the earth like a platform. This exposed the stage, which was thus enlarged by the platform in front.

This opening looked for all the world like a “mouth of hell,” in the words of the itinerant Puritan preachers, who turned away from it with horror. It was, perhaps, for some such pious invention that Solon kicked out Thespis.

For all that Thespis has lasted much longer than is generally believed. The travelling theatre is still in existence. It was on those stages on wheels that, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, they performed in England the ballets and dances of Amner and Pilkington; in France, the pastorals of Gilbert Colin; in Flanders, at the annual fairs, the double choruses of Clement, called Non Papa; in Germany, the “Adam and Eve” of Theiles; and, in Italy, the Venetian exhibitions of Animuccia and of Cafossis, the “Silvæ” of Gesualdo, the “Prince of Venosa,” the “Satyr” of Laura Guidiccioni, the “Despair of Philene,” the “Death of Ugolina,” by Vincent Galileo, father of the astronomer, which Vincent Galileo sang his own music, and accompanied himself on his *viol de gamba;* as well as all the first attempts of the Italian opera which, from 1580, substituted free inspiration for the madrigal style.

The chariot, of the colour of hope, which carried Ursus, Gwynplaine, and their fortunes, and in front of which Fibi and Vinos trumpeted like figures of Fame, played its part of this grand Bohemian and literary brotherhood. Thespis would no more have disowned Ursus than Congrio would have disowned Gwynplaine.

Arrived at open spaces in towns or villages, Ursus, in the intervals between the too-tooing of Fibi and Vinos, gave instructive revelations as to the trumpetings.

“This symphony is Gregorian,” he would exclaim. “Citizens and townsmen, the Gregorian form of worship, this great progress, is opposed in Italy to the Ambrosial ritual, and in Spain to the Mozarabic ceremonial, and has achieved its triumph over them with difficulty.”

After which the Green Box drew up in some place chosen by Ursus, and evening having fallen, and the panel stage having been let down, the theatre opened, and the performance began.

The scene of the Green Box represented a landscape painted by Ursus; and as he did not know how to paint, it represented a cavern just as well as a landscape. The curtain, which we call drop nowadays, was a checked silk, with squares of contrasted colours.

The public stood without, in the street, in the fair, forming a semicircle round the stage, exposed to the sun and the showers; an arrangement which made rain less desirable for theatres in those days than now. When they could, they acted in an inn yard, on which occasions the windows of the different stories made rows of boxes for the spectators. The theatre was thus more enclosed, and the audience a more paying one. Ursus was in everything — in the piece, in the company, in the kitchen, in the orchestra. Vinos beat the drum, and handled the sticks with great dexterity. Fibi played on the *morache*, a kind of guitar. The wolf had been promoted to be a utility gentleman, and played, as occasion required, his little parts. Often when they appeared side by side on the stage — Ursus in his tightly-laced bear’s skin, Homo with his wolf’s skin fitting still better — no one could tell which was the beast. This flattered Ursus.

CHAPTER IX.

ABSURDITIES WHICH FOLKS WITHOUT TASTE CALL POETRY.

The pieces written by Ursus were interludes — a kind of composition out of fashion nowadays. One of these pieces, which has not come down to us, was entitled “Ursus Rursus.” It is probable that he played the principal part himself. A pretended exit, followed by a reappearance, was apparently its praiseworthy and sober subject. The titles of the interludes of Ursus were sometimes Latin, as we have seen, and the poetry frequently Spanish. The Spanish verses written by Ursus were rhymed, as was nearly all the Castilian poetry of that period. This did not puzzle the people. Spanish was then a familiar language; and the English sailors spoke Castilian even as the Roman sailors spoke Carthaginian (see Plautus). Moreover, at a theatrical representation, as at mass, Latin, or any other language unknown to the audience, is by no means a subject of care with them. They get out of the dilemma by adapting to the sounds familiar words. Our old Gallic France was particularly prone to this manner of being devout. At church, under cover of an *Immolatus*, the faithful chanted, “I will make merry;” and under a *Sanctus*, “Kiss me, sweet.”

The Council of Trent was required to put an end to these familiarities.

Ursus had composed expressly for Gwynplaine an interlude, with which he was well pleased. It was his best work. He had thrown his whole soul into it. To give the sum of all one’s talents in the production is the greatest triumph that any one can achieve. The toad which produces a toad achieves a grand success. You doubt it? Try, then, to do as much.

Ursus had carefully polished this interlude. This bear’s cub was entitled “Chaos Vanquished.” Here it was: — A night scene. When the curtain drew up, the crowd, massed around the Green Box, saw nothing but blackness. In this blackness three confused forms moved in the reptile state — wolf, a bear, and a man. The wolf acted the wolf; Ursus, the bear; Gwynplaine, the man. The wolf and the bear represented the ferocious forces of Nature — unreasoning hunger and savage ignorance. Both rushed on Gwynplaine. It was chaos combating man. No face could be distinguished. Gwynplaine fought infolded, in a winding-sheet, and his face was covered by his thickly-falling locks. All else was shadow. The bear growled, the wolf gnashed his teeth, the man cried out. The man was down; the beasts overwhelmed him. He cried for aid and succour; he hurled to the unknown an agonized appeal. He gave a death-rattle. To witness this agony of the prostrate man, now scarcely distinguishable from the brutes, was appalling. The crowd looked on breathless; in one minute more the wild beasts would triumph, and chaos reabsorb man. A struggle — cries — howlings; then, all at once, silence.

A song in the shadows. A breath had passed, and they heard a voice. Mysterious music floated, accompanying this chant of the invisible; and suddenly, none knowing whence or how, a white apparition arose. This apparition was a light; this light was a woman; this woman was a spirit. Dea — calm, fair, beautiful, formidable in her serenity and sweetness — appeared in the centre of a luminous mist. A profile of brightness in a dawn! She was a voice — a voice light, deep, indescribable. She sang in the new-born light — she, invisible, made visible. They thought that they heard the hymn of an angel or the song of a bird. At this apparition the man, starting up in his ecstasy, struck the beasts with his fists, and overthrew them.

Then the vision, gliding along in a manner difficult to understand, and therefore the more admired, sang these words in Spanish sufficiently pure for the English sailors who were present: —

“Ora! llora!
De palabra
Nace razon.
De luz el son.”

Then looking down, as if she saw a gulf beneath, she went on, —

“Noche, quita te de alli!
El alba canta hallali.”

As she sang, the man raised himself by degrees; instead of lying he was now kneeling, his hands elevated towards the vision, his knees resting on the beasts, which lay motionless, and as if thunder-stricken.

She continued, turning towards him, —

“Es menester a cielos ir,
Y tu que llorabas reir.”

And approaching him with the majesty of a star, she added, —

“Gebra barzon;

Deja, monstruo,
A tu negro
Caparazon."

And she put hot hand on his brow. Then another voice arose, deeper, and consequently still sweeter — a voice broken and enwrapt with a gravity both tender and wild. It was the human chant responding to the chant of the stars. Gwynplaine, still in obscurity, his head under Dea's hand, and kneeling on the vanquished bear and wolf, sang, —

"O ven! ama!
Eres alma,
Soy corazon."

And suddenly from the shadow a ray of light fell full upon Gwynplaine. Then, through the darkness, was the monster full exposed.

To describe the commotion of the crowd is impossible.

A sun of laughter rising, such was the effect. Laughter springs from unexpected causes, and nothing could be more unexpected than this termination. Never was sensation comparable to that produced by the ray of light striking on that mask, at once ludicrous and terrible. They laughed all around his laugh. Everywhere — above, below, behind, before, at the uttermost distance; men, women, old gray-heads, rosy-faced children; the good, the wicked, the gay, the sad, everybody. And even in the streets, the passers-by who could see nothing, hearing the laughter, laughed also. The laughter ended in clapping of hands and stamping of feet. The curtain dropped: Gwynplaine was recalled with frenzy. Hence an immense success. Have you seen "Chaos Vanquished?" Gwynplaine was run after. The listless came to laugh, the melancholy came to laugh, evil consciences came to laugh — a laugh so irresistible that it seemed almost an epidemic. But there is a pestilence from which men do not fly, and that is the contagion of joy. The success, it must be admitted, did not rise higher than the populace. A great crowd means a crowd of nobodies. "Chaos Vanquished" could be seen for a penny. Fashionable people never go where the price of admission is a penny.

Ursus thought a good deal of his work, which he had brooded over for a long time. "It is in the style of one Shakespeare," he said modestly.

The juxtaposition of Dea added to the indescribable effect produced by Gwynplaine. Her white face by the side of the gnome represented what might have been called divine astonishment. The audience regarded Dea with a sort of mysterious anxiety. She had in her aspect the dignity of a virgin and of a priestess, not knowing man and knowing God. They saw that she was blind, and felt that she could see. She seemed to stand on the threshold of the supernatural. The light that beamed on her seemed half earthly and half heavenly. She had come to work on earth, and to work as heaven works, in the radiance of morning. Finding a hydra, she formed a soul. She seemed like a creative power, satisfied but astonished at the result of her creation; and the audience fancied that they could see in the divine surprise of that face desire of the cause and wonder at the result. They felt that she loved this monster. Did she know that he was one? Yes; since she touched him. No; since she accepted him. This depth of night and this glory of day united, formed in the mind of the spectator a chiaroscuro in which appeared endless perspectives. How much divinity exists in the germ, in what manner the penetration of the soul into matter is accomplished, how the solar ray is an umbilical cord, how the disfigured is transfigured, how the deformed becomes heavenly — all these glimpses of mysteries added an almost cosmical emotion to the convulsive hilarity produced by Gwynplaine. Without going too deep — for spectators do not like the fatigue of seeking below the surface — something more was understood than was perceived. And this strange spectacle had the transparency of an avatar.

As to Dea, what she felt cannot be expressed by human words. She knew that she was in the midst of a crowd, and knew not what a crowd was. She heard a murmur, that was all. For her the crowd was but a breath. Generations are passing breaths. Man respires, aspires, and expires. In that crowd Dea felt herself alone, and shuddering as one hanging over a precipice. Suddenly, in this trouble of innocence in distress, prompt to accuse the unknown, in her dread of a possible fall, Dea, serene notwithstanding, and superior to the vague agonies of peril, but inwardly shuddering at her isolation, found confidence and support. She had seized her thread of safety in the universe of shadows; she put her hand on the powerful head of Gwynplaine.

Joy unspeakable! she placed her rosy fingers on his forest of crisp hair. Wool when touched gives an impression of softness. Dea touched a lamb which she knew to be a lion. Her whole heart poured out an ineffable love. She felt out of danger — she had found her saviour. The public believed that they saw the contrary. To the spectators the being loved was

Gwynplaine, and the saviour was Dea. What matters? thought Ursus, to whom the heart of Dea was visible. And Dea, reassured, consoled and delighted, adored the angel whilst the people contemplated the monster, and endured, fascinated herself as well, though in the opposite sense, that dread Promethean laugh.

True love is never weary. Being all soul it cannot cool. A brazier comes to be full of cinders; not so a star. Her exquisite impressions were renewed every evening for Dea, and she was ready to weep with tenderness whilst the audience was in convulsions of laughter. Those around her were but joyful; she was happy.

The sensation of gaiety due to the sudden shock caused by the rictus of Gwynplaine was evidently not intended by Ursus. He would have preferred more smiles and less laughter, and more of a literary triumph. But success consoles. He reconciled himself every evening to his excessive triumph, as he counted how many shillings the piles of farthings made, and how many pounds the piles of shillings; and besides, he said, after all, when the laugh had passed, “Chaos Vanquished” would be found in the depths of their minds, and something of it would remain there.

Perhaps he was not altogether wrong: the foundations of a work settle down in the mind of the public. The truth is, that the populace, attentive to the wolf, the bear, to the man, then to the music, to the howlings governed by harmony, to the night dissipated by dawn, to the chant releasing the light, accepted with a confused, dull sympathy, and with a certain emotional respect, the dramatic poem of “Chaos Vanquished,” the victory of spirit over matter, ending with the joy of man.

Such were the vulgar pleasures of the people.

They sufficed them. The people had not the means of going to the noble matches of the gentry, and could not, like lords and gentlemen, bet a thousand guineas on Helmsgail against Phelem-ghe-madone.

CHAPTER X.

AN OUTSIDER’S VIEW OF MEN AND THINGS.

Man has a notion of revenging himself on that which pleases him. Hence the contempt felt for the comedian.

This being charms me, diverts, distracts, teaches, enchants, consoles me; flings me into an ideal world, is agreeable and useful to me. What evil can I do him in return? Humiliate him. Disdain is a blow from afar. Let us strike the blow. He pleases me, therefore he is vile. He serves me, therefore I hate him. Where can I find a stone to throw at him? Priest, give me yours. Philosopher, give me yours. Bossuet, excommunicate him. Rousseau, insult him. Orator, spit the pebbles from your mouth at him. Bear, fling your stone. Let us cast stones at the tree, hit the fruit and eat it. “Bravo!” and “Down with him!” To repeat poetry is to be infected with the plague. Wretched playactor, we will put him in the pillory for his success. Let him follow up his triumph with our hisses. Let him collect a crowd and create a solitude. Thus it is that the wealthy, termed the higher classes, have invented for the actor that form of isolation, applause.

The crowd is less brutal. They neither hated nor despised Gwynplaine. Only the meanest calker of the meanest crew of the meanest merchantman, anchored in the meanest English seaport, considered himself immeasurably superior to this amuser of the “scum,” and believed that a calker is as superior to an actor as a lord is to a calker.

Gwynplaine was, therefore, like all comedians, applauded and kept at a distance. Truly, all success in this world is a crime, and must be expiated. He who obtains the medal has to take its reverse side as well.

For Gwynplaine there was no reverse. In this sense, both sides of his medal pleased him. He was satisfied with the applause, and content with the isolation. In applause he was rich, in isolation happy.

To be rich in his low estate means to be no longer wretchedly poor — to have neither holes in his clothes, nor cold at his hearth, nor emptiness in his stomach. It is to eat when hungry and drink when thirsty. It is to have everything necessary, including a penny for a beggar. This indigent wealth, enough for liberty, was possessed by Gwynplaine. So far as his soul was concerned, he was opulent. He had love. What more could he want? Nothing.

You may think that had the offer been made to him to remove his deformity he would have grasped at it. Yet he would have refused it emphatically. What! to throw off his mask and have his former face restored; to be the creature he had perchance been created, handsome and charming? No, he would never have consented to it. For what would he have to support Dea? What would have become of that poor child, the sweet blind girl who loved him? Without his rictus, which made him a clown without parallel, he would have been a mountebank, like any other; a common athlete, a picker up of pence from the chinks in the pavement, and Dea would perhaps not have had bread every day. It was with deep and tender pride that he felt himself the protector of the helpless and heavenly creature. Night, solitude, nakedness, weakness, ignorance, hunger, and thirst — seven yawning jaws of misery — were raised around her, and he was the St. George fighting the dragon. He triumphed over poverty. How? By his deformity. By his deformity he was useful, helpful, victorious, great. He had but to show himself, and money poured in. He was a master of crowds, the sovereign of the mob. He could do everything for Dea. Her wants he foresaw; her desires, her tastes, her fancies, in the limited sphere in which wishes are possible to the blind, he fulfilled. Gwynplaine and Dea were, as we have already shown, Providence to each other. He felt himself raised on her wings; she felt herself carried in his arms. To protect the being who loves you, to give what she requires to her who shines on you as your star, can anything be sweeter? Gwynplaine possessed this supreme happiness, and he owed it to his deformity. His deformity had raised him above all. By it he had gained the means of life for himself and others; by it he had gained independence, liberty, celebrity, internal satisfaction and pride. In his deformity he was inaccessible. The Fates could do nothing beyond this blow in which they had spent their whole force, and which he had turned into a triumph. This lowest depth of misfortune had become the summit of Elysium. Gwynplaine was imprisoned in his deformity, but with Dea. And this was, as we have already said, to live in a dungeon of paradise. A wall stood between them and the living world. So much the better. This wall protected as well as enclosed them. What could affect Dea, what could affect Gwynplaine, with such a fortress around them? To take from him his success was impossible. They would have had to deprive him of his face.

Take from him his love. Impossible. Dea could not see him. The blindness of Dea was divinely incurable. What harm did his deformity do Gwynplaine? None. What advantage did it give him? Every advantage. He was beloved, notwithstanding its horror, and perhaps for that very cause. Infirmity and deformity had by instinct been drawn towards and coupled with each other. To be beloved, is not that everything? Gwynplaine thought of his disfigurement only with gratitude. He was blessed in the stigma. With joy he felt that it was irremediable and eternal. What a blessing that it was so! While there were highways and fairgrounds, and journeys to take, the people below and the sky above, they would be sure to live, Dea would want nothing, and they should have love. Gwynplaine would not have changed faces with Apollo. To be a monster was his form of happiness.

Thus, as we said before, destiny had given him all, even to overflowing. He who had been rejected had been preferred.

He was so happy that he felt compassion for the men around him. He pitied the rest of the world. It was, besides, his instinct to look about him, because no one is always consistent, and a man's nature is not always theoretic; he was delighted to live within an enclosure, but from time to time he lifted his head above the wall. Then he retreated again with more joy into his loneliness with Dea, having drawn his comparisons. What did he see around him?

What were those living creatures of which his wandering life showed him so many specimens, changed every day? Always new crowds, always the same multitude, ever new faces, ever the same miseries. A jumble of ruins. Every evening every phase of social misfortune came and encircled his happiness.

The Green Box was popular.

Low prices attract the low classes. Those who came were the weak, the poor, the little. They rushed to Gwynplaine as they rushed to gin. They came to buy a pennyworth of forgetfulness. From the height of his platform Gwynplaine passed those wretched people in review. His spirit was enwrapt in the contemplation of every succeeding apparition of widespread misery. The physiognomy of man is modelled by conscience, and by the tenor of life, and is the result of a crowd of mysterious excavations. There was never a suffering, not an anger, not a shame, not a despair, of which Gwynplaine did not see the wrinkle. The mouths of those children had not eaten. That man was a father, that woman a mother, and behind them their families might be guessed to be on the road to ruin. There was a face already marked by vice, on the threshold of crime, and the reasons were plain — ignorance and indigence. Another showed the stamp of original goodness, obliterated by social pressure, and turned to hate. On the face of an old woman he saw starvation; on that of a girl, prostitution. The same fact, and although the girl had the resource of her youth, all the sadder for that! In the crowd were arms without tools; the workers asked only for work, but the work was wanting. Sometimes a soldier came and seated himself by the workmen, sometimes a wounded pensioner; and Gwynplaine saw the spectre of war. Here Gwynplaine read want of work; there man-farming, slavery. On certain brows he saw an indescribable ebbing back towards animalism, and that slow return of man to beast, produced on those below by the dull pressure of the happiness of those above. There was a break in the gloom for Gwynplaine. He and Dea had a loophole of happiness; the rest was damnation. Gwynplaine felt above him the thoughtless trampling of the powerful, the rich, the magnificent, the great, the elect of chance. Below he saw the pale faces of the disinherited. He saw himself and Dea, with their little happiness, so great to themselves, between two worlds. That which was above went and came, free, joyous, dancing, trampling under foot; above him the world which treads, below the world which is trodden upon. It is a fatal fact, and one indicating a profound social evil, that light should crush the shadow! Gwynplaine thoroughly grasped this dark evil. What! a destiny so reptile? Shall a man drag himself thus along with such adherence to dust and corruption, with such vicious tastes, such an abdication of right, or such abjectness that one feels inclined to crush him under foot? Of what butterfly is, then, this earthly life the grub?

What! in the crowd which hungers and which denies everywhere, and before all, the questions of crime and shame (the inflexibility of the law producing laxity of conscience), is there no child that grows but to be stunted, no virgin but matures for sin, no rose that blooms but for the slime of the snail?

His eyes at times sought everywhere, with the curiosity of emotion, to probe the depths of that darkness, in which there died away so many useless efforts, and in which there struggled so much weariness: families devoured by society, morals tortured by the laws, wounds gangrened by penalties, poverty gnawed by taxes, wrecked intelligence swallowed up by ignorance, rafts in distress alive with the famished, feuds, dearth, death-rattles, cries, disappearances. He felt the vague oppression of a keen, universal suffering. He saw the vision of the foaming wave of misery dashing over the crowd of humanity. He was safe in port himself, as he watched the wreck around him. Sometimes he laid his disfigured head in his hands and dreamed.

What folly to be happy! How one dreams! Ideas were born within him. Absurd notions crossed his brain.

Because formerly he had succoured an infant, he felt a ridiculous desire to succour the whole world. The mists of reverie sometimes obscured his individuality, and he lost his ideas of proportion so far as to ask himself the question, “What can be done for the poor?” Sometimes he was so absorbed in his subject as to express it aloud. Then Ursus shrugged his shoulders and looked at him fixedly. Gwynplaine continued his reverie.

“Oh; were I powerful, would I not aid the wretched? But what am I? An atom. What can I do? Nothing.”

He was mistaken. He was able to do a great deal for the wretched. He could make them laugh; and, as we have said, to make people laugh is to make them forget. What a benefactor on earth is he who can bestow forgetfulness!

CHAPTER XI.

GWYNPLAINE THINKS JUSTICE, AND URSUS TALKS TRUTH.

A philosopher is a spy. Ursus, a watcher of dreams, studied his pupil.

Our monologues leave on our brows a faint reflection, distinguishable to the eye of a physiognomist. Hence what occurred to Gwynplaine did not escape Ursus. One day, as Gwynplaine was meditating, Ursus pulled him by his jacket, and exclaimed, —

“You strike me as being an observer! You fool! Take care; it is no business of yours. You have one thing to do — to love Dea. You have two causes of happiness — the first is, that the crowd sees your muzzle; the second is, that Dea does not. You have no right to the happiness you possess, for no woman who saw your mouth would consent to your kiss; and that mouth which has made your fortune, and that face which has given you riches, are not your own. You were not born with that countenance. It was borrowed from the grimace which is at the bottom of the infinite. You have stolen your mask from the devil. You are hideous; be satisfied with having drawn that prize in the lottery. There are in this world (and a very good thing too) the happy by right and the happy by luck. You are happy by luck. You are in a cave wherein a star is enclosed. The poor star belongs to you. Do not seek to leave the cave, and guard your star, O spider! You have in your web the carbuncle, Venus. Do me the favour to be satisfied. I see your dreams are troubled. It is idiotic of you. Listen; I am going to speak to you in the language of true poetry. Let Dea eat beefsteaks and mutton chops, and in six months she will be as strong as a Turk; marry her immediately, give her a child, two children, three children, a long string of children. That is what I call philosophy. Moreover, it is happiness, which is no folly. To have children is a glimpse of heaven. Have brats — wipe them, blow their noses, dirt them, wash them, and put them to bed. Let them swarm about you. If they laugh, it is well; if they howl, it is better — to cry is to live. Watch them suck at six months, crawl at a year, walk at two, grow tall at fifteen, fall in love at twenty. He who has these joys has everything For myself, I lacked the advantage; and that is the reason why I am a brute. God, a composer of beautiful poems and the first of men of letters, said to his fellow-workman, Moses, ‘Increase and multiply.’ Such is the text.

Multiply, you beast! As to the world, it is as it is; you cannot make nor mar it. Do not trouble yourself about it. Pay no attention to what goes on outside. Leave the horizon alone. A comedian is made to be looked at, not to look. Do you know what there is outside? The happy by right. You, I repeat, are the happy by chance. You are the pickpocket of the happiness of which they are the proprietors. They are the legitimate possessors; you are the intruder. You live in concubinage with luck. What do you want that you have not already? Shibboleth help me! This fellow is a rascal. To multiply himself by Dea would be pleasant, all the same. Such happiness is like a swindle. Those above who possess happiness by privilege do not like folks below them to have so much enjoyment. If they ask you what right you have to be happy, you will not know what to answer. You have no patent, and they have. Jupiter, Allah, Vishnu, Sabaoth, it does not matter who, has given them the passport to happiness. Fear them. Do not meddle with them, lest they should meddle with you. Wretch! do you know what the man is who is happy by right? He is a terrible being. He is a lord. A lord! He must have intrigued pretty well in the devil's unknown country before he was born, to enter life by the door he did. How difficult it must have been to him to be born! It is the only trouble he has given himself; but, just heavens, what a one! — to obtain from destiny, the blind blockhead, to mark him in his cradle a master of men. To bribe the box-keeper to give him the best place at the show. Read the memoranda in the old hut, which I have placed on half-pay. Read that breviary of my wisdom, and you will see what it is to be a lord. A lord is one who has all and is all. A lord is one who exists above his own nature. A lord is one who has when young the rights of an old man; when old, the success in intrigue of a young one; if vicious, the homage of respectable people; if a coward, the command of brave men; if a do-nothing, the fruits of labour; if ignorant, the diploma of Cambridge or Oxford; if a fool, the admiration of poets; if ugly, the smiles of women; if a Thersites, the helm of Achilles; if a hare, the skin of a lion. Do not misunderstand my words. I do not say that a lord must necessarily be ignorant, a coward, ugly, stupid, or old. I only mean that he may be all those things without any detriment to himself. On the contrary. Lords are princes. The King of England is only a lord, the first peer of the peerage; that is all, but it is much. Kings were formerly called lords — the Lord of Denmark, the Lord of Ireland, the Lord of the Isles. The Lord of Norway was first called king three hundred years ago. Lucius, the most ancient king in

England, was spoken to by Saint Telesphonis as my Lord Lucius. The lords are peers — that is to say, equals — of whom? Of the king. I do not commit the mistake of confounding the lords with parliament. The assembly of the people which the Saxons before the Conquest called *wittenagemote*, the Normans, after the Conquest, entitled *parliamentum*. By degrees the people were turned out. The king's letters clause convoking the Commons, addressed formerly *ad concilium impendendum*, are now addressed *ad consentiendum*. To say yes is their liberty. The peers can say no; and the proof is that they have said it. The peers can cut off the king's head. The people cannot. The stroke of the hatchet which decapitated Charles I. is an encroachment, not on the king, but on the peers, and it was well to place on the gibbet the carcass of Cromwell. The lords have power. Why? Because they have riches. Who has turned over the leaves of the Doomsday Book? It is the proof that the lords possess England. It is the registry of the estates of subjects, compiled under William the Conqueror; and it is in the charge of the Chancellor of the Exchequer. To copy anything in it you have to pay twopence a line. It is a proud book. Do you know that I was domestic doctor to a lord, who was called Marmaduke, and who had thirty-six thousand a year? Think of that, you hideous idiot! Do you know that, with rabbits only from the warrens of Earl Lindsay, they could feed all the riffraff of the Cinque Ports? And the good order kept! Every poacher is hung. For two long furry ears sticking out of a game bag I saw the father of six children hanging on the gibbet. Such is the peerage. The rabbit of a great lord is of more importance than God's image in a man.

“Lords exist, you trespasser, do you see? and we must think it good that they do; and even if we do not, what harm will it do them? The people object, indeed! Why? Plautus himself would never have attained the comicality of such an idea. A philosopher would be jesting if he advised the poor devil of the masses to cry out against the size and weight of the lords. Just as well might the gnat dispute with the foot of an elephant. One day I saw a hippopotamus tread upon a molehill; he crushed it utterly. He was innocent. The great soft-headed fool of a mastodon did not even know of the existence of moles. My son, the moles that are trodden on are the human race. To crush is a law. And do you think that the mole himself crushes nothing? Why, it is the mastodon of the fleshworm, who is the mastodon of the globeworm. But let us cease arguing. My boy, there are coaches in the world; my lord is inside, the people under the wheels; the philosopher gets out of the way. Stand aside, and let them pass. As to myself, I love lords, and shun them. I lived with one; the beauty of my recollections suffices me. I remember his country house, like a glory in a cloud. My dreams are all retrospective. Nothing could be more admirable than Marmaduke Lodge in grandeur, beautiful symmetry, rich avenues, and the ornaments and surroundings of the edifice. The houses, country seats, and palaces of the lords present a selection of all that is greatest and most magnificent in this flourishing kingdom. I love our lords. I thank them for being opulent, powerful, and prosperous. I myself am clothed in shadow, and I look with interest upon the shred of heavenly blue which is called a lord. You enter Marmaduke Lodge by an exceedingly spacious courtyard, which forms an oblong square, divided into eight spaces, each surrounded by a balustrade; on each side is a wide approach, and a superb hexagonal fountain plays in the midst; this fountain is formed of two basins, which are surmounted by a dome of exquisite openwork, elevated on six columns. It was there that I knew a learned Frenchman, Monsieur l'Abbé du Cros, who belonged to the Jacobin monastery in the Rue Saint Jacques. Half the library of Erpenius is at Marmaduke Lodge, the other half being at the theological gallery at Cambridge. I used to read the books, seated under the ornamented portal. These things are only shown to a select number of curious travellers. Do you know, you ridiculous boy, that William North, who is Lord Grey of Rolleston, and sits fourteenth on the bench of Barons, has more forest trees on his mountains than you have hairs on your horrible noddle? Do you know that Lord Norreys of Rycote, who is Earl of Abingdon, has a square keep a hundred feet high, having this device — *Virtus ariete fortior;* which you would think meant that virtue is stronger than a ram, but which really means, you idiot, that courage is stronger than a battering-machine. Yes, I honour, accept, respect, and revere our lords. It is the lords who, with her royal Majesty, work to procure and preserve the advantages of the nation. Their consummate wisdom shines in intricate junctures. Their precedence over others I wish they had not; but they have it. What is called principality in Germany, grandeeship in Spain, is called peerage in England and France. There being a fair show of reason for considering the world a wretched place enough, heaven felt where the burden was most galling, and to prove that it knew how to make happy people, created lords for the satisfaction of philosophers. This acts as a set-off, and gets heaven out of the scrape, affording it a decent escape from a false position. The great are great. A peer, speaking of himself, says *we*. A peer is a plural. The king qualifies the peer *consanguinei nostri*. The peers have made a multitude of wise laws; amongst others, one which condemns to death any one who cuts down a three-year-old poplar tree. Their supremacy is such that they have a language of their own. In heraldic style, black, which is called sable for gentry, is called saturne for princes, and diamond for peers. Diamond dust, a night thick with stars, such is the night of the happy! Even amongst themselves these high and mighty lords have their own distinctions. A baron cannot wash with a viscount without his permission. These are indeed excellent things, and safeguards to the nation. What a fine thing it is for the people to have twenty-five dukes, five marquises, seventy-six earls, nine viscounts, and sixty-one barons, making altogether a hundred and seventy-six peers, of which some are your grace, and some my lord! What matter a few rags here and there, withal: everybody cannot be dressed in gold. Let the rags be. Cannot you see the purple? One balances the other. A thing must be built of something. Yes, of course, there are the poor — what of them! They line the happiness of the wealthy. Devil take it! our lords are our glory! The pack of hounds belonging to Charles, Baron Mohun, costs him as much as the hospital for lepers in Moorgate, and for Christ's Hospital, founded for children, in 1553, by Edward VI. Thomas Osborne, Duke of Leeds, spends yearly on his liveries five thousand golden guineas. The Spanish grandees have a guardian appointed by law to prevent their ruining themselves. That is cowardly. Our lords are extravagant and magnificent. I esteem them for it. Let us not abuse them like envious folks. I feel happy when a beautiful vision passes. I have not the light, but I have the reflection. A reflection thrown on my ulcer, you will say. Go to the devil! I am a Job, delighted in the contemplation of Trimalcion. Oh, that beautiful and radiant planet up there! But the moonlight is something. To suppress the lords was an idea which Orestes, mad as he was, would not have dared to entertain. To say that the lords are mischievous or useless is as much as to say that the state should be revolutionized, and that men are not made to live like cattle, browsing the grass and bitten by the dog. The field is shorn by the sheep, the sheep by the shepherd. It is all one to me. I am a philosopher, and I care about life as much as a fly. Life is but a lodging. When I think that Henry Bowes Howard, Earl of Berkshire, has in his stable twenty-four state carriages, of which one is mounted in silver and another in gold — good heavens! I know that every one has not got twenty-four state carriages; but there is no need to complain for all that. Because you were cold one night, what was that to him? It concerns you only. Others besides you suffer cold and hunger. Don’t you know that without that cold, Dea would not have been blind, and if Dea were not blind she would not love you? Think of that, you fool! And, besides, if all the people who are lost were to complain, there would be a pretty tumult! Silence is the rule. I have no doubt that heaven imposes silence on the damned, otherwise heaven itself would be punished by their everlasting cry. The happiness of Olympus is bought by the silence of Cocytus. Then, people, be silent! I do better myself; I approve and admire. Just now I was enumerating the lords, and I ought to add to the list two archbishops and twenty-four bishops. Truly, I am quite affected when I think of it! I remember to have seen at the tithe-gathering of the Rev. Dean of Raphoe, who combined the peerage with the church, a great tithe of beautiful wheat taken from the peasants in the neighbourhood, and which the dean had not been at the trouble of growing. This left him time to say his prayers. Do you know that Lord Marmaduke, my master, was Lord Grand Treasurer of Ireland, and High Seneschal of the sovereignty of Knaresborough in the county of York? Do you know that the Lord High Chamberlain, which is an office hereditary in the family of the Dukes of Ancaster, dresses the king for his coronation, and receives for his trouble forty yards of crimson velvet, besides the bed on which the king has slept; and that the Usher of the Black Rod is his deputy? I should like to see you deny this, that the senior viscount of England is Robert Brent, created a viscount by Henry V. The lords’ titles imply sovereignty over land, except that of Earl Rivers, who takes his title from his family name. How admirable is the right which they have to tax others, and to levy, for instance, four shillings in the pound sterling income-tax, which has just been continued for another year! And all the time taxes on distilled spirits, on the excise of wine and beer, on tonnage and poundage, on cider, on perry, on mum, malt, and prepared barley, on coals, and on a hundred things besides. Let us venerate things as they are. The clergy themselves depend on the lords. The Bishop of Man is subject to the Earl of Derby. The lords have wild beasts of their own, which they place in their armorial bearings. God not having made enough, they have invented others. They have created the heraldic wild boar, who is as much above the wild boar as the wild boar is above the domestic pig and the lord is above the priest. They have created the griffin, which is an eagle to lions, and a lion to eagles, terrifying lions by his wings, and eagles by his mane. They have the guivre, the unicorn, the serpent, the salamander, the tarask, the dree, the dragon, and the hippogriff. All these things, terrible to us, are to them but an ornament and an embellishment. They have a menagerie which they call the blazon, in which unknown beasts roar. The prodigies of the forest are nothing compared to the inventions of their pride. Their vanity is full of phantoms which move as in a sublime night, armed with helm and cuirass, spurs on their heels and the sceptres in their hands, saying in a grave voice, ‘We are the ancestors!’ The canker-worms eat the roots, and panoplies eat the people. Why not? Are we to change the laws? The peerage is part of the order of society. Do you know that there is a duke in Scotland who can ride ninety miles without leaving his own estate? Do you know that the Archbishop of Canterbury has a revenue of £40,000 a year? Do you know that her Majesty has £700,000 sterling from the civil list, besides castles, forests, domains, fiefs, tenancies, freeholds, prebendaries, tithes, rent, confiscations, and fines, which bring in over a million sterling? Those who are not satisfied are hard to please.”

“Yes,” murmured Gwynplaine sadly, “the paradise of the rich is made out of the hell of the poor.”

CHAPTER XII.

URSUS THE POET DRAGS ON URSUS THE PHILOSOPHER.

Then Dea entered. He looked at her, and saw nothing but her. This is love; one may be carried away for a moment by the importunity of some other idea, but the beloved one enters, and all that does not appertain to her presence immediately fades away, without her dreaming that perhaps she is effacing in us a world.

Let us mention a circumstance. In “Chaos Vanquished,” the word *monstruo*, addressed to Gwynplaine, displeased Dea. Sometimes, with the smattering of Spanish which every one knew at the period, she took it into her head to replace it by *quiero*, which signifies, “I wish it.” Ursus tolerated, although not without an expression of impatience, this alteration in his text. He might have said to Dea, as in our day Moessard said to Vissot, *Tu manques de respect au repertoire*.

“The Laughing Man.”

Such was the form of Gwynplaine’s fame. His name, Gwynplaine, little known at any time, had disappeared under his nickname, as his face had disappeared under its grin.

His popularity was like his visage — a mask.

His name, however, was to be read on a large placard in front of the Green Box, which offered the crowd the following narrative composed by Ursus: —

“Here is to be seen Gwynplaine, deserted at the age of ten, on the night of the 29th of January, 1690, by the villainous Comprachicos, on the coast of Portland. The little boy has grown up, and is called now, THE LAUGHING MAN.”

The existence of these mountebanks was as an existence of lepers in a leper-house, and of the blessed in one of the Pleiades. There was every day a sudden transition from the noisy exhibition outside, into the most complete seclusion. Every evening they made their exit from this world. They were like the dead, vanishing on condition of being reborn next day. A comedian is a revolving light, appearing one moment, disappearing the next, and existing for the public but as a phantom or a light, as his life circles round. To exhibition succeeded isolation. When the performance was finished, whilst the audience were dispersing, and their murmur of satisfaction was dying away in the streets, the Green Box shut up its platform, as a fortress does its drawbridge, and all communication with mankind was cut off. On one side, the universe; on the other, the caravan; and this caravan contained liberty, clear consciences, courage, devotion, innocence, happiness, love — all the constellations.

Blindness having sight and deformity beloved sat side by side, hand pressing hand, brow touching brow, and whispered to each other, intoxicated with love.

The compartment in the middle served two purposes — for the public it was a stage, for the actors a dining-room.

Ursus, ever delighting in comparisons, profited by the diversity of its uses to liken the central compartment in the Green Box to the arradach in an Abyssinian hut.

Ursus counted the receipts, then they supped. In love all is ideal. In love, eating and drinking together affords opportunities for many sweet promiscuous touches, by which a mouthful becomes a kiss. They drank ale or wine from the same glass, as they might drink dew out of the same lily. Two souls in love are as full of grace as two birds. Gwynplaine waited on Dea, cut her bread, poured out her drink, approached her too close.

“Hum!” cried Ursus, and he turned away, his scolding melting into a smile.

The wolf supped under the table, heedless of everything which did actually not concern his bone.

Fibi and Vinos shared the repast, but gave little trouble. These vagabonds, half wild and as uncouth as ever, spoke in the gipsy language to each other.

At length Dea re-entered the women’s apartment with Fibi and Vinos. Ursus chained up Homo under the Green Box; Gwynplaine looked after the horses, the lover becoming a groom, like a hero of Homer’s or a paladin of Charlemagne’s. At midnight, all were asleep, except the wolf, who, alive to his responsibility, now and then opened an eye. The next morning they met again. They breakfasted together, generally on ham and tea. Tea was introduced into England in 1678. Then Dea, after the Spanish fashion, took a siesta, acting on the advice of Ursus, who considered her delicate, and slept some hours, while Gwynplaine and Ursus did all the little jobs of work, without and within, which their wandering life made necessary.

Gwynplaine rarely wandered away from the Green Box, except on unfrequented roads and in solitary places. In cities he went out only at night, disguised in a large, slouched hat, so as not to exhibit his face in the street.

His face was to be seen uncovered only on the stage.

The Green Box had frequented cities but little. Gwynplaine at twenty-four had never seen towns larger than the Cinque Ports. His renown, however, was increasing. It began to rise above the populace, and to percolate through higher ground. Amongst those who were fond of, and ran after, strange foreign curiosities and prodigies, it was known that there was somewhere in existence, leading a wandering life, now here, now there, an extraordinary monster. They talked about him, they sought him, they asked where he was. The laughing man was becoming decidedly famous. A certain lustre was reflected on “Chaos Vanquished.”

So much so, that, one day, Ursus, being ambitious, said, —

“We must go to London.”

BOOK THE THIRD.

THE BEGINNING OF THE FISSURE.

CHAPTER I.

THE TADCASTER INN.

At that period London had but one bridge — London Bridge, with houses built upon it. This bridge united London to Southwark, a suburb which was paved with flint pebbles taken from the Thames, divided into small streets and alleys, like the City, with a great number of buildings, houses, dwellings, and wooden huts jammed together, a pell-mell mixture of combustible matter, amidst which fire might take its pleasure, as 1666 had proved. Southwark was then pronounced Soudric, it is now pronounced Sousouorc, or near it; indeed, an excellent way of pronouncing English names is not to pronounce them. Thus, for Southampton, say Stpntn.

It was the time when “Chatham” was pronounced *je t’aime*.

The Southwark of those days resembles the Southwark of to-day about as much as Vaugirard resembles Marseilles. It was a village — it is a city. Nevertheless, a considerable trade was carried on there. The long old Cyclopean wall by the Thames was studded with rings, to which were anchored the river barges.

This wall was called the Effroc Wall, or Effroc Stone. York, in Saxon times, was called Effroc. The legend related that a Duke of Effroc had been drowned at the foot of the wall. Certainly the water there was deep enough to drown a duke. At low water it was six good fathoms. The excellence of this little anchorage attracted sea vessels, and the old Dutch tub, called the *Vograat*, came to anchor at the Effroc Stone. The *Vograat* made the crossing from London to Rotterdam, and from Rotterdam to London, punctually once a week. Other barges started twice a day, either for Deptford, Greenwich, or Gravesend, going down with one tide and returning with the next. The voyage to Gravesend, though twenty miles, was performed in six hours.

The *Vograat* was of a model now no longer to be seen, except in naval museums. It was almost a junk. At that time, while France copied Greece, Holland copied China. The *Vograat*, a heavy hull with two masts, was partitioned perpendicularly, so as to be water-tight, having a narrow hold in the middle, and two decks, one fore and the other aft. The decks were flush as in the iron turret-vessels of the present day, the advantage of which is that in foul weather, the force of the wave is diminished, and the inconvenience of which is that the crew is exposed to the action of the sea, owing to there being no bulwarks. There was nothing to save any one on board from falling over. Hence the frequent falls overboard and the losses of men, which have caused the model to fall into disuse. The *Vograat* went to Holland direct, and did not even call at Gravesend.

An old ridge of stones, rock as much as masonry, ran along the bottom of the Effroc Stone, and being passable at all tides, was used as a passage on board the ships moored to the wall. This wall was, at intervals, furnished with steps. It marked the southern point of Southwark. An embankment at the top allowed the passers-by to rest their elbows on the Effroc Stone, as on the parapet of a quay. Thence they could look down on the Thames; on the other side of the water London dwindled away into fields.

Up the river from the Effroc Stone, at the bend of the Thames which is nearly opposite St. James's Palace, behind Lambeth House, not far from the walk then called Foxhall (Vauxhall, probably), there was, between a pottery in which they made porcelain, and a glass-blower's, where they made ornamental bottles, one of those large unenclosed spaces covered with grass, called formerly in France *cultures* and *mails*, and in England bowling-greens. Of bowling-green, a green on which to roll a ball, the French have made *boulingrin*. Folks have this green inside their houses nowadays, only it is put on the table, is a cloth instead of turf, and is called billiards.

It is difficult to see why, having boulevard (boule-vert), which is the same word as bowling-green, the French should have adopted *boulingrin*. It is surprising that a person so grave as the Dictionary should indulge in useless luxuries.

The bowling-green of Southwark was called Tarrinzeau Field, because it had belonged to the Barons Hastings, who are also Barons Tarrinzeau and Mauchline. From the Lords Hastings the Tarrinzeau Field passed to the Lords Tadcaster, who had made a speculation of it, just as, at a later date, a Duke of Orleans made a speculation of the Palais Royal. Tarrinzeau Field afterwards became waste ground and parochial property.

Tarrinzeau Field was a kind of permanent fair ground covered with jugglers, athletes, mountebanks, and music on platforms; and always full of "fools going to look at the devil," as Archbishop Sharp said. To look at the devil means to go to the play.

Several inns, which harboured the public and sent them to these outlandish exhibitions, were established in this place, which kept holiday all the year round, and thereby prospered. These inns were simply stalls, inhabited only during the day. In the evening the tavern-keeper put into his pocket the key of the tavern and went away.

One only of these inns was a house, the only dwelling in the whole bowling-green, the caravans of the fair ground having the power of disappearing at any moment, considering the absence of any ties in the vagabond life of all mountebanks.

Mountebanks have no roots to their lives.

This inn, called the Tadcaster, after the former owners of the ground, was an inn rather than a tavern, an hotel rather than an inn, and had a carriage entrance and a large yard.

The carriage entrance, opening from the court on the field, was the legitimate door of the Tadcaster Inn, which had, beside it, a small bastard door, by which people entered. To call it bastard is to mean preferred. This lower door was the only one used, It opened into the tavern, properly so called, which was a large taproom, full of tobacco smoke, furnished with tables, and low in the ceiling. Over it was a window on the first floor, to the iron bars of which was fastened and hung the sign of the inn. The principal door was barred and bolted, and always remained closed.

It was thus necessary to cross the tavern to enter the courtyard.

At the Tadcaster Inn there was a landlord and a boy. The landlord was called Master Nicless, the boy Govicum. Master Nicless — Nicholas, doubtless, which the English habit of contraction had made Nicless, was a miserly widower, and one who respected and feared the laws. As to his appearance, he had bushy eyebrows and hairy hands. The boy, aged fourteen, who poured out drink, and answered to the name of Govicum, wore a merry face and an apron. His hair was cropped close, a sign of servitude.

He slept on the ground floor, in a nook in which they formerly kept a dog. This nook had for window a bull’s-eye looking on the bowling-green.

CHAPTER II.

OPEN-AIR ELOQUENCE.

One very cold and windy evening, on which there was every reason why folks should hasten on their way along the street, a man, who was walking in Tarrinzeau Field close under the walls of the tavern, stopped suddenly. It was during the last months of winter between 1704 and 1705. This man, whose dress indicated a sailor, was of good mien and fine figure, things imperative to courtiers, and not forbidden to common folk.

Why did he stop? To listen. What to? To a voice apparently speaking in the court on the other side of the wall, a voice a little weakened by age, but so powerful notwithstanding that it reached the passer-by in the street. At the same time might be heard in the enclosure, from which the voice came, the hubbub of a crowd.

This voice said, —

“Men and women of London, here I am! I cordially wish you joy of being English. You are a great people. I say more: you are a great populace. Your fisticuffs are even better than your sword thrusts. You have an appetite. You are the nation which eats other nations — a magnificent function! This suction of the world makes England preeminent. As politicians and philosophers, in the management of colonies, populations, and industry, and in the desire to do others any harm which may turn to your own good, you stand alone. The hour will come when two boards will be put up on earth — inscribed on one side, Men; on the other, Englishmen. I mention this to your glory, I, who am neither English nor human, having the honour to be a bear. Still more — I am a doctor. That follows. Gentlemen, I teach. What? Two kinds of things — things which I know, and things which I do not. I sell my drugs and I sell my ideas. Approach and listen. Science invites you. Open your ear; if it is small, it will hold but little truth; if large, a great deal of folly will find its way in. Now, then, attention! I teach the Pseudoxia Epidemica. I have a comrade who will make you laugh, but I can make you think. We live in the same box, laughter being of quite as old a family as thought. When people asked Democritus, ‘How do you know?’ he answered, ‘I laugh.’ And if I am asked, ‘Why do you laugh?’ I shall answer, ‘I know.’ However, I am not laughing. I am the rectifier of popular errors. I take upon myself the task of cleaning your intellects. They require it. Heaven permits people to deceive themselves, and to be deceived. It is useless to be absurdly modest. I frankly avow that I believe in Providence, even where it is wrong. Only when I see filth — errors are filth — I sweep them away. How am I sure of what I know? That concerns only myself. Every one catches wisdom as he can. Lactantius asked questions of, and received answers from, a bronze head of Virgil. Sylvester II. conversed with birds. Did the birds speak? Did the Pope twitter? That is a question. The dead child of the Rabbi Elcazer talked to Saint Augustine. Between ourselves, I doubt all these facts except the last. The dead child might perhaps talk, because under its tongue it had a gold plate, on which were engraved divers constellations. Thus he deceived people. The fact explains itself. You see my moderation. I separate the true from the false. See! here are other errors in which, no doubt, you partake, poor ignorant folks that you are, and from which I wish to free you. Dioscorides believed that there was a god in the henbane; Chrysippus in the cynopaste; Josephus in the root bauras; Homer in the plant moly. They were all wrong. The spirits in herbs are not gods but devils. I have tested this fact. It is not true that the serpent which tempted Eve had a human face, as Cadmus relates. Garcias de Horto, Cadamosto, and John Hugo, Archbishop of Treves, deny that it is sufficient to saw down a tree to catch an elephant. I incline to their opinion. Citizens, the efforts of Lucifer are the cause of all false impressions. Under the reign of such a prince it is natural that meteors of error and of perdition should arise. My friends, Claudius Pulcher did not die because the fowls refused to come out of the fowl house. The fact is, that Lucifer, having foreseen the death of Claudius Pulcher, took care to prevent the birds feeding. That Beelzebub gave the Emperor Vespasian the virtue of curing the lame and giving sight to the blind, by his touch, was an act praiseworthy in itself, but of which the motive was culpable. Gentlemen, distrust those false doctors, who sell the root of the bryony and the white snake, and who make washes with honey and the blood of a cock. See clearly through that which is false. It is not quite true that Orion was the result of a natural function of Jupiter. The truth is that it was Mercury who produced this star in that way. It is not true that Adam had a navel. When St. George killed the dragon he had not the daughter of a saint standing by his side. St. Jerome had not a clock on the chimney-piece of his study; first, because living in a cave, he had no study; secondly, because he had no chimney-piece; thirdly, because clocks were not yet invented. Let us put these things right. Put them right. O gentlefolks, who listen to me, if any one tells you that a lizard will be born in your head if you smell the herb valerian; that the rotting carcase of the ox changes into bees, and that of the horse into hornets; that a man weighs more when dead than when alive; that the blood of the he-goat dissolves emeralds; that a caterpillar, a fly, and a spider, seen on the same tree, announces famine, war, and pestilence; that the falling sickness is to be cured by a worm found in the head of a buck — do not believe him. These things are errors. But now listen to truths. The skin of a sea-calf is a safeguard against thunder. The toad feeds upon earth, which causes a stone to come into his head. The rose of Jericho blooms on Christmas Eve. Serpents cannot endure the shadow of the ash tree. The elephant has no joints, and sleeps resting upright against a tree. Make a toad sit upon a cock’s egg, and he will hatch a scorpion which will become a salamander. A blind person will recover sight by putting one hand on the left side of the altar and the other on his eyes. Virginity does not hinder maternity. Honest people, lay these truths to heart. Above all, you can believe in Providence in either of two ways, either as thirst believes in the orange, or as the ass believes in the whip. Now I am going to introduce you to my family.”

Here a violent gust of wind shook the window-frames and shutters of the inn, which stood detached. It was like a prolonged murmur of the sky. The orator paused a moment, and then resumed.

“An interruption; very good. Speak, north wind. Gentlemen, I am not angry. The wind is loquacious, like all solitary creatures. There is no one to keep him company up there, so he jabbers. I resume the thread of my discourse. Here you see associated artists. We are four — *a lupo principium*. I begin by my friend, who is a wolf. He does not conceal it. See him! He is educated, grave, and sagacious. Providence, perhaps, entertained for a moment the idea of making him a doctor of the university; but for that one must be rather stupid, and that he is not. I may add that he has no prejudices, and is not aristocratic. He chats sometimes with bitches; he who, by right, should consort only with she-wolves. His heirs, if he have any, will no doubt gracefully combine the yap of their mother with the howl of their father. Because he does howl. He howls in sympathy with men. He barks as well, in condescension to civilization — a magnanimous concession. Homo is a dog made perfect. Let us venerate the dog. The dog — curious animal!

sweats with its tongue and smiles with its tail. Gentlemen, Homo equals in wisdom, and surpasses in cordiality, the hairless wolf of Mexico, the wonderful xoloïtzeniski. I may add that he is humble. He has the modesty of a wolf who is useful to men. He is helpful and charitable, and says nothing about it. His left paw knows not the good which his right paw does. These are his merits. Of the other, my second friend, I have but one word to say. He is a monster. You will admire him. He was formerly abandoned by pirates on the shores of the wild ocean. This third one is blind. Is she an exception? No, we are all blind. The miser is blind; he sees gold, and he does not see riches. The prodigal is blind; he sees the beginning, and does not see the end. The coquette is blind; she does not see her wrinkles. The learned man is blind; he does not see his own ignorance. The honest man is blind; he does not see the thief. The thief is blind; he does not see God. God is blind; the day that he created the world He did not see the devil manage to creep into it. I myself am blind; I speak, and do not see that you are deaf. This blind girl who accompanies us is a mysterious priestess. Vesta has confided to her her torch. She has in her character depths as soft as a division in the wool of a sheep. I believe her to be a king’s daughter, though I do not assert it as a fact. A laudable distrust is the attribute of wisdom. For my own part, I reason and I doctor, I think and I heal. *Chirurgus sum*. I cure fevers, miasmas, and plagues. Almost all our melancholy and sufferings are issues, which if carefully treated relieve us quietly from other evils which might be worse. All the same I do not recommend you to have an anthrax, otherwise called carbuncle. It is a stupid malady, and serves no good end. One dies of it — that is all. I am neither uncultivated nor rustic. I honour eloquence and poetry, and live in an innocent union with these goddesses. I conclude by a piece of advice. Ladies and gentlemen, on the sunny side of your dispositions, cultivate virtue, modesty, honesty, probity, justice, and love. Each one here below may thus have his little pot of flowers on his window-sill. My lords and gentlemen, I have spoken. The play is about to begin.”

The man who was apparently a sailor, and who had been listening outside, entered the lower room of the inn, crossed it, paid the necessary entrance money, reached the courtyard which was full of people, saw at the bottom of it a caravan on wheels, wide open, and on the platform an old man dressed in a bearskin, a young man looking like a mask, a blind girl, and a wolf.

“Gracious heaven!” he cried, “what delightful people!”

CHAPTER III.

WHERE THE PASSER-BY REAPPEARS.

The Green Box, as we have just seen, had arrived in London. It was established at Southwark. Ursus had been tempted by the bowling-green, which had one great recommendation, that it was always fair-day there, even in winter.

The dome of St. Paul’s was a delight to Ursus.

London, take it all in all, has some good in it. It was a brave thing to dedicate a cathedral to St. Paul. The real cathedral saint is St. Peter. St. Paul is suspected of imagination, and in matters ecclesiastical imagination means heresy. St. Paul is a saint only with extenuating circumstances. He entered heaven only by the artists’ door.

A cathedral is a sign. St. Peter is the sign of Rome, the city of the dogma; St. Paul that of London, the city of schism.

Ursus, whose philosophy had arms so long that it embraced everything, was a man who appreciated these shades of difference, and his attraction towards London arose, perhaps, from a certain taste of his for St. Paul.

The yard of the Tadcaster Inn had taken the fancy of Ursus. It might have been ordered for the Green Box. It was a theatre ready-made. It was square, with three sides built round, and a wall forming the fourth. Against this wall was placed the Green Box, which they were able to draw into the yard, owing to the height of the gate. A large wooden balcony, roofed over, and supported on posts, on which the rooms of the first story opened, ran round the three fronts of the interior façade of the house, making two right angles. The windows of the ground floor made boxes, the pavement of the court the pit, and the balcony the gallery. The Green Box, reared against the wall, was thus in front of a theatre. It was very like the Globe, where they played “Othello,” “King Lear,” and “The Tempest.”

In a corner behind the Green Box was a stable.

Ursus had made his arrangements with the tavern keeper, Master Nicless, who, owing to his respect for the law, would not admit the wolf without charging him extra.

The placard, “Gwynplaine, the Laughing Man,” taken from its nail in the Green Box, was hung up close to the sign of the inn. The sitting-room of the tavern had, as we have seen, an inside door which opened into the court. By the side of the door was constructed off-hand, by means of an empty barrel, a box for the money-taker, who was sometimes Fibi and sometimes Vinos. This was managed much as at present. Pay and pass in. Under the placard announcing the Laughing Man was a piece of wood, painted white, hung on two nails, on which was written in charcoal in large letters the title of Ursus's grand piece, "Chaos Vanquished."

In the centre of the balcony, precisely opposite the Green Box, and in a compartment having for entrance a window reaching to the ground, there had been partitioned off a space "for the nobility." It was large enough to hold, in two rows, ten spectators.

"We are in London," said Ursus. "We must be prepared for the gentry."

He had furnished this box with the best chairs in the inn, and had placed in the centre a grand arm-chair of yellow Utrecht velvet, with a cherry-coloured pattern, in case some alderman's wife should come.

They began their performances. The crowd immediately flocked to them, but the compartment for the nobility remained empty. With that exception their success became so great that no mountebank memory could recall its parallel. All Southwark ran in crowds to admire the Laughing Man.

The merry-andrews and mountebanks of Tarrinzeau Field were aghast at Gwynplaine. The effect he caused was as that of a sparrow-hawk flapping his wings in a cage of goldfinches, and feeding in their seed-trough. Gwynplaine ate up their public.

Besides the small fry, the swallowers of swords and the grimace makers, real performances took place on the green. There was a circus of women, ringing from morning till night with a magnificent peal of all sorts of instruments — psalteries, drums, rebecks, micamons, timbrels, reeds, dulcimers, gongs, chevrettes, bagpipes, German horns, English eschaqueils, pipes, flutes, and flageolets.

In a large round tent were some tumblers, who could not have equalled our present climbers of the Pyrenees — Dulma, Bordenave, and Meylonga — who from the peak of Pierrefitte descend to the plateau of Limaçon, an almost perpendicular height. There was a travelling menagerie, where was to be seen a performing tiger, who, lashed by the keeper, snapped at the whip and tried to swallow the lash. Even this comedian of jaws and claws was eclipsed in success.

Curiosity, applause, receipts, crowds, the Laughing Man monopolized everything. It happened in the twinkling of an eye. Nothing was thought of but the Green Box.

"'Chaos Vanquished' is 'Chaos Victor,'" said Ursus, appropriating half Gwynplaine's success, and taking the wind out of his sails, as they say at sea. That success was prodigious. Still it remained local. Fame does not cross the sea easily. It took a hundred and thirty years for the name of Shakespeare to penetrate from England into France. The sea is a wall; and if Voltaire — a thing which he very much regretted when it was too late — had not thrown a bridge over to Shakespeare, Shakespeare might still be in England, on the other side of the wall, a captive in insular glory.

The glory of Gwynplaine had not passed London Bridge. It was not great enough yet to re-echo throughout the city. At least not at first. But Southwark ought to have sufficed to satisfy the ambition of a clown. Ursus said, —

"The money bag grows palpably bigger."

They played "Ursus Rursus" and "Chaos Vanquished."

Between the acts Ursus exhibited his power as an engastrimist, and executed marvels of ventriloquism. He imitated every cry which occurred in the audience — a song, a cry, enough to startle, so exact the imitation, the singer or the crier himself; and now and then he copied the hubbub of the public, and whistled as if there were a crowd of people within him. These were remarkable talents. Besides this he harangued like Cicero, as we have just seen, sold his drugs, attended sickness, and even healed the sick.

Southwark was enthralled.

Ursus was satisfied with the applause of Southwark, but by no means astonished.

"They are the ancient Trinobantes," he said.

Then he added, "I must not mistake them, for delicacy of taste, for the Atrobates, who people Berkshire, or the Belgians, who inhabited Somersetshire, nor for the Parisians, who founded York."

At every performance the yard of the inn, transformed into a pit, was filled with a ragged and enthusiastic audience. It was composed of watermen, chairmen, coachmen, and bargemen, and sailors, just ashore, spending their wages in feasting and women. In it there were felons, ruffians, and blackguards, who were soldiers condemned for some crime against discipline to wear their red coats, which were lined with black, inside out, and from thence the name of blackguard, which the French turn into *blagueurs*. All these flowed from the street into the theatre, and poured back from the theatre into the tap. The emptying of tankards did not decrease their success.

Amidst what it is usual to call the scum, there was one taller than the rest, bigger, stronger, less poverty-stricken, broader in the shoulders; dressed like the common people, but not ragged.

Admiring and applauding everything to the skies, clearing his way with his fists, wearing a disordered periwig, swearing, shouting, joking, never dirty, and, at need, ready to blacken an eye or pay for a bottle.

This frequenter was the passer-by whose cheer of enthusiasm has been recorded.

This connoisseur was suddenly fascinated, and had adopted the Laughing Man. He did not come every evening, but when he came he led the public — applause grew into acclamation — success rose not to the roof, for there was none, but to the clouds, for there were plenty of them. Which clouds (seeing that there was no roof) sometimes wept over the masterpiece of Ursus.

His enthusiasm caused Ursus to remark this man, and Gwynplaine to observe him.

They had a great friend in this unknown visitor.

Ursus and Gwynplaine wanted to know him; at least, to know who he was.

One evening Ursus was in the side scene, which was the kitchen-door of the Green Box, seeing Master Nicless standing by him, showed him this man in the crowd, and asked him, —

“Do you know that man?”

“Of course I do.”

“Who is he?”

“A sailor.”

“What is his name?” said Gwynplaine, interrupting.

“Tom-Jim-Jack,” replied the inn-keeper.

Then as he redescended the steps at the back of the Green Box, to enter the inn, Master Nicless let fall this profound reflection, so deep as to be unintelligible, —

“What a pity that he should not be a lord. He would make a famous scoundrel.”

Otherwise, although established in the tavern, the group in the Green Box had in no way altered their manner of living, and held to their isolated habits. Except a few words exchanged now and then with the tavern-keeper, they held no communication with any of those who were living, either permanently or temporarily, in the inn; and continued to keep to themselves.

Since they had been at Southwark, Gwynplaine had made it his habit, after the performance and the supper of both family and horses — when Ursus and Dea had gone to bed in their respective compartments — to breathe a little the fresh air of the bowling-green, between eleven o’clock and midnight.

A certain vagrancy in our spirits impels us to take walks at night, and to saunter under the stars. There is a mysterious expectation in youth. Therefore it is that we are prone to wander out in the night, without an object.

At that hour there was no one in the fair-ground, except, perhaps, some reeling drunkard, making staggering shadows in dark corners. The empty taverns were shut up, and the lower room in the Tadcaster Inn was dark, except where, in some corner, a solitary candle lighted a last reveller. An indistinct glow gleamed through the window-shutters of the half-closed tavern, as Gwynplaine, pensive, content, and dreaming, happy in a haze of divine joy, passed backwards and forwards in front of the half-open door.

Of what was he thinking? Of Dea — of nothing — of everything — of the depths.

He never wandered far from the Green Box, being held, as by a thread, to Dea. A few steps away from it was far enough for him.

Then he returned, found the whole Green Box asleep, and went to bed himself.

CHAPTER IV.

CONTRARIES FRATERNIZE IN HATE.

Success is hateful, especially to those whom it overthrows. It is rare that the eaten adore the eaters.

The Laughing Man had decidedly made a hit. The mountebanks around were indignant. A theatrical success is a syphon — it pumps in the crowd and creates emptiness all round. The shop opposite is done for. The increased receipts of the Green Box caused a corresponding decrease in the receipts of the surrounding shows. Those entertainments, popular up to that time, suddenly collapsed. It was like a low-water mark, showing inversely, but in perfect concordance, the rise here, the fall there. Theatres experience the effect of tides: they rise in one only on condition of falling in another. The swarming foreigners who exhibited their talents and their trumpetings on the neighbouring platforms, seeing themselves ruined by the Laughing Man, were despairing, yet dazzled. All the grimacers, all the clowns, all the merry-andrews envied Gwynplaine. How happy he must be with the snout of a wild beast! The buffoon mothers and dancers on the tight-rope, with pretty children, looked at them in anger, and pointing out Gwynplaine, would say, “What a pity you have not a face like that!” Some beat their babes savagely for being pretty. More than one, had she known the secret, would have fashioned her son’s face in the Gwynplaine style. The head of an angel, which brings no money in, is not as good as that of a lucrative devil. One day the mother of a little child who was a marvel of beauty, and who acted a cupid, exclaimed, —

“Our children are failures! They only succeeded with Gwynplaine.” And shaking her fist at her son, she added, “If I only knew your father, wouldn’t he catch it!”

Gwynplaine was the goose with the golden eggs! What a marvellous phenomenon! There was an uproar through all the caravans. The mountebanks, enthusiastic and exasperated, looked at Gwynplaine and gnashed their teeth. Admiring anger is called envy. Then it howls! They tried to disturb “Chaos Vanquished;” made a cabal, hissed, scolded, shouted! This was an excuse for Ursus to make out-of-door harangues to the populace, and for his friend Tom-Jim-Jack to use his fists to re-establish order. His pugilistic marks of friendship brought him still more under the notice and regard of Ursus and Gwynplaine. At a distance, however, for the group in the Green Box sufficed to themselves, and held aloof from the rest of the world, and because Tom-Jim-Jack, this leader of the mob, seemed a sort of supreme bully, without a tie, without a friend; a smasher of windows, a manager of men, now here, now gone, hail-fellow-well-met with every one, companion of none.

This raging envy against Gwynplaine did not give in for a few friendly hits from Tom-Jim-Jack. The outcries having miscarried, the mountebanks of Tarrinzeau Field fell back on a petition. They addressed to the authorities. This is the usual course. Against an unpleasant success we first try to stir up the crowd and then we petition the magistrate.

With the merry-andrews the reverends allied themselves. The Laughing Man had inflicted a blow on the preachers. There were empty places not only in the caravans, but in the churches. The congregations in the churches of the five parishes in Southwark had dwindled away. People left before the sermon to go to Gwynplaine. “Chaos Vanquished,” the Green Box, the Laughing Man, all the abominations of Baal, eclipsed the eloquence of the pulpit. The voice crying in the desert, *vox clamantis in deserto*, is discontented, and is prone to call for the aid of the authorities. The clergy of the five parishes complained to the Bishop of London, who complained to her Majesty.

The complaint of the merry-andrews was based on religion. They declared it to be insulted. They described Gwynplaine as a sorcerer, and Ursus as an atheist. The reverend gentlemen invoked social order. Setting orthodoxy aside they took action on the fact that Acts of Parliament were violated. It was clever. Because it was the period of Mr. Locke, who had died but six months previously — 28th October, 1704 — and when scepticism, which Bolingbroke had imbibed from Voltaire, was taking root. Later on Wesley came and restored the Bible, as Loyola restored the papacy.

Thus the Green Box was battered on both sides; by the merry-andrews, in the name of the Pentateuch, and by chaplains in the name of the police. In the name of Heaven and of the inspectors of nuisances. The Green Box was denounced by the priests as an obstruction, and by the jugglers as sacrilegious.

Had they any pretext? Was there any excuse? Yes. What was the crime? This: there was the wolf. A dog was allowable; a wolf forbidden. In England the wolf is an outlaw. England admits the dog which barks, but not the dog which howls — a shade of difference between the yard and the woods.

The rectors and vicars of the five parishes of Southwark called attention in their petitions to numerous parliamentary and royal statutes putting the wolf beyond the protection of the law. They moved for something like the imprisonment of Gwynplaine and the execution of the wolf, or at any rate for their banishment. The question was one of public importance, the danger to persons passing, etc. And on this point, they appealed to the Faculty. They cited the opinion of the Eighty physicians of London, a learned body which dates from Henry VIII., which has a seal like that of the State, which can raise sick people to the dignity of being amenable to their jurisdiction, which has the right to imprison those who infringe its law and contravene its ordinances, and which, amongst other useful regulations for the health of the citizens, put beyond doubt this fact acquired by science; that if a wolf sees a man first, the man becomes hoarse for life. Besides, he may be bitten.

Homo, then, was a pretext.

Ursus heard of these designs through the inn-keeper. He was uneasy. He was afraid of two claws — the police and the justices. To be afraid of the magistracy, it is sufficient to be afraid, there is no need to be guilty. Ursus had no desire for contact with sheriffs, provosts, bailiffs, and coroners. His eagerness to make their acquaintance amounted to nil. His curiosity to see the magistrates was about as great as the hare's to see the greyhound.

He began to regret that he had come to London. "'Better' is the enemy of 'good,'" murmured he apart. "I thought the proverb was ill-considered. I was wrong. Stupid truths are true truths."

Against the coalition of powers — merry-andrews taking in hand the cause of religion, and chaplains, indignant in the name of medicine — the poor Green Box, suspected of sorcery in Gwynplaine and of hydrophobia in Homo, had only one thing in its favour (but a thing of great power in England), municipal inactivity. It is to the local authorities letting things take their own course that Englishmen owe their liberty. Liberty in England behaves very much as the sea around England. It is a tide. Little by little manners surmount the law. A cruel system of legislation drowned under the wave of custom; a savage code of laws still visible through the transparency of universal liberty: such is England.

The Laughing Man, “Chaos Vanquished,” and Homo might have mountebanks, preachers, bishops, the House of Commons, the House of Lords, her Majesty, London, and the whole of England against them, and remain undisturbed so long as Southwark permitted.

The Green Box was the favourite amusement of the suburb, and the local authorities seemed disinclined to interfere. In England, indifference is protection. So long as the sheriff of the county of Surrey, to the jurisdiction of which Southwark belongs, did not move in the matter, Ursus breathed freely, and Homo could sleep on his wolf’s ears.

So long as the hatred which it excited did not occasion acts of violence, it increased success. The Green Box was none the worse for it, for the time. On the contrary, hints were scattered that it contained something mysterious. Hence the Laughing Man became more and more popular. The public follow with gusto the scent of anything contraband. To be suspected is a recommendation. The people adopt by instinct that at which the finger is pointed. The thing which is denounced is like the savour of forbidden fruit; we rush to eat it. Besides, applause which irritates some one, especially if that some one is in authority, is sweet. To perform, whilst passing a pleasant evening, both an act of kindness to the oppressed and of opposition to the oppressor is agreeable. You are protecting at the same time that you are being amused. So the theatrical caravans on the bowling-green continued to howl and to cabal against the Laughing Man. Nothing could be better calculated to enhance his success. The shouts of one’s enemies are useful and give point and vitality to one’s triumph. A friend wearies sooner in praise than an enemy in abuse. To abuse does not hurt. Enemies are ignorant of this fact. They cannot help insulting us, and this constitutes their use. They cannot hold their tongues, and thus keep the public awake.

The crowds which flocked to “Chaos Vanquished” increased daily.

Ursus kept what Master Nicless had said of intriguers and complaints in high places to himself, and did not tell Gwynplaine, lest it should trouble the ease of his acting by creating anxiety. If evil was to come, he would be sure to know it soon enough.

CHAPTER V.

THE WAPENTAKE.

Once, however, he thought it his duty to derogate from this prudence, for prudence' sake, thinking that it might be well to make Gwynplaine uneasy. It is true that this idea arose from a circumstance much graver, in the opinion of Ursus, than the cabals of the fair or of the church.

Gwynplaine, as he picked up a farthing which had fallen when counting the receipts, had, in the presence of the innkeeper, drawn a contrast between the farthing, representing the misery of the people, and the die, representing, under the figure of Anne, the parasitical magnificence of the throne — an ill-sounding speech. This observation was repeated by Master Nicless, and had such a run that it reached to Ursus through Fibi and Vinos. It put Ursus into a fever. Seditious words, lèse Majesté. He took Gwynplaine severely to task. "Watch over your abominable jaws. There is a rule for the great — to do nothing; and a rule for the small — to say nothing. The poor man has but one friend, silence. He should only pronounce one syllable: 'Yes.' To confess and to consent is all the right he has. 'Yes,' to the judge; 'yes,' to the king. Great people, if it pleases them to do so, beat us. I have received blows from them. It is their prerogative; and they lose nothing of their greatness by breaking our bones. The ossifrage is a species of eagle. Let us venerate the sceptre, which is the first of staves. Respect is prudence, and mediocrity is safety. To insult the king is to put oneself in the same danger as a girl rashly paring the nails of a lion. They tell me that you have been prattling about the farthing, which is the same thing as the liard, and that you have found fault with the august medallion, for which they sell us at market the eighth part of a salt herring. Take care; let us be serious. Consider the existence of pains and penalties. Suck in these legislative truths. You are in a country in which the man who cuts down a tree three years old is quietly taken off to the gallows. As to swearers, their feet are put into the stocks. The drunkard is shut up in a barrel with the bottom out, so that he can walk, with a hole in the top, through which his head is passed, and with two in the bung for his hands, so that he cannot lie down. He who strikes another one in Westminster Hall is imprisoned for life and has his goods confiscated. Whoever strikes any one in the king’s palace has his hand struck off. A fillip on the nose chances to bleed, and, behold! you are maimed for life. He who is convicted of heresy in the bishop’s court is burnt alive. It was for no great matter that Cuthbert Simpson was quartered on a turnstile. Three years since, in 1702, which is not long ago, you see, they placed in the pillory a scoundrel, called Daniel Defoe, who had had the audacity to print the names of the Members of Parliament who had spoken on the previous evening. He who commits high treason is disembowelled alive, and they tear out his heart and buffet his cheeks with it. Impress on yourself notions of right and justice. Never allow yourself to speak a word, and at the first cause of anxiety, run for it. Such is the bravery which I counsel and which I practise. In the way of temerity, imitate the birds; in the way of talking, imitate the fishes. England has one admirable point in her favour, that her legislation is very mild.”

His admonition over, Ursus remained uneasy for some time. Gwynplaine not at all. The intrepidity of youth arises from want of experience. However, it seemed that Gwynplaine had good reason for his easy mind, for the weeks flowed on peacefully, and no bad consequences seemed to have resulted from his observations about the queen.

Ursus, we know, lacked apathy, and, like a roebuck on the watch, kept a lookout in every direction. One day, a short time after his sermon to Gwynplaine, as he was looking out from the window in the wall which commanded the field, he became suddenly pale.

“Gwynplaine?”

“What?”

“Look.”

“Where?”

“In the field.”

“Well.”

“Do you see that passer-by?”

“The man in black?”

“Yes.”

“Who has a kind of mace in his hand?”

“Yes.”

“Well?”

“Well, Gwynplaine, that man is a wapentake.”

“What is a wapentake?”

“He is the bailiff of the hundred.”

“What is the bailiff of the hundred?”

“He is the *proepositus hundredi*.”

“And what is the *proepositus hundredi?*”

“He is a terrible officer.”

“What has he got in his hand?”

“The iron weapon.”

“What is the iron weapon?”

“A thing made of iron.”

“What does he do with that?”

“First of all, he swears upon it. It is for that reason that he is called the wapentake.”

“And then?”

“Then he touches you with it.”

“With what?”

“With the iron weapon.”

“The wapentake touches you with the iron weapon?”

“Yes.”

“What does that mean?”

“That means, follow me.”

“And must you follow?”

“Yes.”

“Whither?”

“How should I know?”

“But he tells you where he is going to take you?”

“No.”

“How is that?”

“He says nothing, and you say nothing.”

“But—”

“He touches you with the iron weapon. All is over then. You must go.”

“But where?”

“After him.”

“But where?”

“Wherever he likes, Gwynplaine.”

“And if you resist?”

“You are hanged.”

Ursus looked out of the window again, and drawing a long breath, said, —

“Thank God! He has passed. He was not coming here.”

Ursus was perhaps unreasonably alarmed about the indiscreet remark, and the consequences likely to result from the unconsidered words of Gwynplaine.

Master Nicless, who had heard them, had no interest in compromising the poor inhabitants of the Green Box. He was amassing, at the same time as the Laughing Man, a nice little fortune. “Chaos Vanquished” had succeeded in two ways. While it made art triumph on the stage, it made drunkenness prosper in the tavern.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MOUSE EXAMINED BY THE CATS.

Ursus was soon afterwards startled by another alarming circumstance. This time it was he himself who was concerned. He was summoned to Bishopsgate before a commission composed of three disagreeable countenances. They belonged to three doctors, called overseers. One was a Doctor of Theology, delegated by the Dean of Westminster; another, a Doctor of Medicine, delegated by the College of Surgeons; the third, a Doctor in History and Civil Law, delegated by Gresham College. These three experts *in omni re scibili* had the censorship of everything said in public throughout the bounds of the hundred and thirty parishes of London, the seventy-three of Middlesex, and, by extension, the five of Southwark.

Such theological jurisdictions still subsist in England, and do good service. In December, 1868, by sentence of the Court of Arches, confirmed by the decision of the Privy Council, the Reverend Mackonochie was censured, besides being condemned in costs, for having placed lighted candles on a table. The liturgy allows no jokes.

Ursus, then, one fine day received from the delegated doctors an order to appear before them, which was, luckily, given into his own hands, and which he was therefore enabled to keep secret. Without saying a word, he obeyed the citation, shuddering at the thought that he might be considered culpable to the extent of having the appearance of being suspected of a certain amount of rashness. He who had so recommended silence to others had here a rough lesson. *Garrule, sana te ipsum*.

The three doctors, delegated and appointed overseers, sat at Bishopsgate, at the end of a room on the ground floor, in three armchairs covered with black leather, with three busts of Minos, Æacus, and Rhadamanthus, in the wall above their heads, a table before them, and at their feet a form for the accused.

Ursus, introduced by a tipstaff, of placid but severe expression, entered, perceived the doctors, and immediately in his own mind, gave to each of them the name of the judge of the infernal regions represented by the bust placed above his head. Minos, the president, the representative of theology, made him a sign to sit down on the form.

Ursus made a proper bow — that is to say, bowed to the ground; and knowing that bears are charmed by honey, and doctors by Latin, he said, keeping his body still bent respectfully, —

“*Tres faciunt capitulum!*”

Then, with head inclined (for modesty disarms) he sat down on the form.

Each of the three doctors had before him a bundle of papers, of which he was turning the leaves.

Minos began.

“You speak in public?”

“Yes,” replied Ursus.

“By what right?”

“I am a philosopher.”

“That gives no right.”

“I am also a mountebank,” said Ursus.

“That is a different thing.”

Ursus breathed again, but with humility.

Minos resumed, —

“As a mountebank, you may speak; as a philosopher, you must keep silence.”

“I will try,” said Ursus.

Then he thought to himself.

“I may speak, but I must be silent. How complicated.”

He was much alarmed.

The same overseer continued, —

“You say things which do not sound right. You insult religion. You deny the most evident truths. You propagate revolting errors. For instance, you have said that the fact of virginity excludes the possibility of maternity.”

Ursus lifted his eyes meekly, “I did not say that. I said that the fact of maternity excludes the possibility of virginity.”

Minos was thoughtful, and mumbled, “True, that is the contrary.”

It was really the same thing. But Ursus had parried the first blow.

Minos, meditating on the answer just given by Ursus, sank into the depths of his own imbecility, and kept silent.

The overseer of history, or, as Ursus called him, Rhadamanthus, covered the retreat of Minos by this interpolation, “Accused! your audacity and your errors are of two sorts. You have denied that the battle of Pharsalia would have been lost because Brutus and Cassius had met a negro.”

"I said," murmured Ursus "that there was something in the fact that Cæsar was the better captain."

The man of history passed, without transition, to mythology.

"You have excused the infamous acts of Actæon."

"I think," said Ursus, insinuatingly, "that a man is not dishonoured by having seen a naked woman."

"Then you are wrong," said the judge severely. Rhadamanthus returned to history.

"Apropos of the accidents which happened to the cavalry of Mithridates, you have contested the virtues of herbs and plants. You have denied that a herb like the securiduca, could make the shoes of horses fall off."

"Pardon me," replied Ursus. "I said that the power existed only in the herb sferra cavallo. I never denied the virtue of any herb," and he added, in a low voice, "nor of any woman."

By this extraneous addition to his answer Ursus proved to himself that, anxious as he was, he was not disheartened. Ursus was a compound of terror and presence of mind.

"To continue," resumed Rhadamanthus; "you have declared that it was folly in Scipio, when he wished to open the gates of Carthage, to use as a key the herb æthiopis, because the herb æthiopis has not the property of breaking locks."

"I merely said that he would have done better to have used the herb lunaria."

"That is a matter of opinion," murmured Rhadamanthus, touched in his turn. And the man of history was silent.

The theologian, Minos, having returned to consciousness, questioned Ursus anew. He had had time to consult his notes.

"You have classed orpiment amongst the products of arsenic, and you have said that it is a poison. The Bible denies this."

"The Bible denies, but arsenic affirms it," sighed Ursus.

The man whom Ursus called Æacus, and who was the envy of medicine, had not yet spoken, but now looking down on Ursus, with proudly half-closed eyes, he said, —

"The answer is not without some show of reason."

Ursus thanked him with his most cringing smile. Minos frowned frightfully. "I resume," said Minos. "You have said that it is false that the basilisk is the king of serpents, under the name of cockatrice."

“Very reverend sir,” said Ursus, “so little did I desire to insult the basilisk that I have given out as certain that it has a man’s head.”

“Be it so,” replied Minos severely; “but you added that Poerius had seen one with the head of a falcon. Can you prove it?”

“Not easily,” said Ursus.

Here he had lost a little ground.

Minos, seizing the advantage, pushed it.

“You have said that a converted Jew has not a nice smell.”

“Yes. But I added that a Christian who becomes a Jew has a nasty one.”

Minos lost his eyes over the accusing documents.

“You have affirmed and propagated things which are impossible. You have said that Elien had seen an elephant write sentences.”

“Nay, very reverend gentleman! I simply said that Oppian had heard a hippopotamus discuss a philosophical problem.”

“You have declared that it is not true that a dish made of beech-wood will become covered of itself with all the viands that one can desire.”

“I said, that if it has this virtue, it must be that you received it from the devil.”

“That I received it!”

“No, most reverend sir. I, nobody, everybody!”

Aside, Ursus thought, “I don’t know what I am saying.”

But his outward confusion, though extreme, was not distinctly visible. Ursus struggled with it.

“All this,” Minos began again, “implies a certain belief in the devil.”

Ursus held his own.

“Very reverend sir, I am not an unbeliever with regard to the devil. Belief in the devil is the reverse side of faith in God. The one proves the other. He who does not believe a little in the devil, does not believe much in God. He who believes in the sun must believe in the shadow. The devil is the night of God. What is night? The proof of day.”

Ursus here extemporized a fathomless combination of philosophy and religion. Minos remained pensive, and relapsed into silence.

Ursus breathed afresh.

A sharp onslaught now took place. Æacus, the medical delegate, who had disdainfully protected Ursus against the theologian, now turned suddenly from auxiliary into assailant. He placed his closed fist on his bundle of papers, which was large and heavy. Ursus received this apostrophe full in the breast, —

"It is proved that crystal is sublimated ice, and that the diamond is sublimated crystal. It is averred that ice becomes crystal in a thousand years, and crystal diamond in a thousand ages. You have denied this."

"Nay," replied Ursus, with sadness, "I only said that in a thousand years ice had time to melt, and that a thousand ages were difficult to count."

The examination went on; questions and answers clashed like swords.

"You have denied that plants can talk."

"Not at all. But to do so they must grow under a gibbet."

"Do you own that the mandragora cries?"

"No; but it sings."

"You have denied that the fourth finger of the left hand has a cordial virtue."

"I only said that to sneeze to the left was a bad sign."

"You have spoken rashly and disrespectfully of the phoenix."

"Learned judge, I merely said that when he wrote that the brain of the phoenix was a delicate morsel, but that it produced headache, Plutarch was a little out of his reckoning, inasmuch as the phoenix never existed."

"A detestable speech! The cinnamalker which makes its nest with sticks of cinnamon, the rhintacus that Parysatis used in the manufacture of his poisons, the manucodiatas which is the bird of paradise, and the semenda, which has a threefold beak, have been mistaken for the phoenix; but the phoenix has existed."

"I do not deny it."

"You are a stupid ass."

"I desire to be thought no better."

"You have confessed that the elder tree cures the quinsy, but you added that it was not because it has in its root a fairy excrescence."

"I said it was because Judas hung himself on an elder tree."

"A plausible opinion," growled the theologian, glad to strike his little blow at Æacus.

Arrogance repulsed soon turns to anger. Æacus was enraged.

"Wandering mountebank! you wander as much in mind as with your feet. Your tendencies are out of the way and suspicious. You approach the bounds of sorcery. You have dealings with unknown animals. You speak to the populace of things that exist but for you alone, and the nature of which is unknown, such as the hoemorrhoüs."

"The hoemorrhoüs is a viper which was seen by Tremellius."

This repartee produced a certain disorder in the irritated science of Doctor Æacus.

Ursus added, "The existence of the hoemorrhoüs is quite as true as that of the odoriferous hyena, and of the civet described by Castellus."

Æacus got out of the difficulty by charging home.

"Here are your own words, and very diabolical words they are. Listen."

With his eyes on his notes, Æacus read, —

"Two plants, the thalagssigle and the aglaphotis, are luminous in the evening, flowers by day, stars by night;" and looking steadily at Ursus, "What have you to say to that?"

Ursus answered, —

"Every plant is a lamp. Its perfume is its light." Æacus turned over other pages.

"You have denied that the vesicles of the otter are equivalent to castoreum."

"I merely said that perhaps it may be necessary to receive the teaching of Ætius on this point with some reserve."

Æacus became furious.

"You practise medicine?"

"I practise medicine," sighed Ursus timidly.

"On living things?"

"Rather than on dead ones," said Ursus.

Ursus defended himself stoutly, but dully; an admirable mixture, in which meekness predominated. He spoke with such gentleness that Doctor Æacus felt that he must insult him.

"What are you murmuring there?" said he rudely.

Ursus was amazed, and restricted himself to saying, —

"Murmurings are for the young, and moans for the aged. Alas, I moan!"

Æacus replied, —

"Be assured of this — if you attend a sick person, and he dies, you will be punished by death."

Ursus hazarded a question.

"And if he gets well?"

"In that case," said the doctor, softening his voice, "you will be punished by death."

"There is little difference," said Ursus.

The doctor replied, —

"If death ensues, we punish gross ignorance; if recovery, we punish presumption. The gibbet in either case."

"I was ignorant of the circumstance," murmured Ursus. "I thank you for teaching me. One does not know all the beauties of the law."

"Take care of yourself."

"Religiously," said Ursus.

"We know what you are about."

"As for me," thought Ursus, "that is more than I always know myself."

"We could send you to prison."

"I see that perfectly, gentlemen."

"You cannot deny your infractions nor your encroachments."

"My philosophy asks pardon."

"Great audacity has been attributed to you."

"That is quite a mistake."

"It is said that you have cured the sick."

"I am the victim of calumny."

The three pairs of eyebrows which were so horribly fixed on Ursus contracted. The three wise faces drew near to each other, and whispered. Ursus had the vision of a vague fool's cap sketched out above those three empowered heads. The low and requisite whispering of the trio was of some minutes' duration, during which time Ursus felt all the ice and all the scorch of agony. At length Minos, who was president, turned to him and said angrily, —

"Go away!"

Ursus felt something like Jonas when he was leaving the belly of the whale.

Minos continued, —

"You are discharged."

Ursus said to himself, —

"They won't catch me at this again. Good-bye, medicine!"

And he added in his innermost heart, —

"From henceforth I will carefully allow them to die."

Bent double, he bowed everywhere; to the doctors, to the busts, the tables, the walls, and retiring backwards through the door, disappeared almost as a shadow melting into air.

He left the hall slowly, like an innocent man, and rushed from the street rapidly, like a guilty one. The officers of justice are so singular and obscure in their ways that even when acquitted one flies from them.

As he fled he mumbled, —

“I am well out of it. I am the savant untamed; they the savants civilized. Doctors cavil at the learned. False science is the excrement of the true, and is employed to the destruction of philosophers. Philosophers, as they produce sophists, produce their own scourge. Of the dung of the thrush is born the mistletoe, with which is made birdlime, with which the thrush is captured. *Turdus sibi malum cacat*.”

We do not represent Ursus as a refined man. He was imprudent enough to use words which expressed his thoughts. He had no more taste than Voltaire.

When Ursus returned to the Green Box, he told Master Nicless that he had been delayed by following a pretty woman, and let not a word escape him concerning his adventure.

Except in the evening when he said in a low voice to Homo, —

“See here, I have vanquished the three heads of Cerberus.”

CHAPTER VII.

WHY SHOULD A GOLD PIECE LOWER ITSELF BY MIXING WITH A HEAP OF PENNIES?

An event happened.

The Tadcaster Inn became more and more a furnace of joy and laughter. Never was there more resonant gaiety. The landlord and his boy were become insufficient to draw the ale, stout, and porter. In the evening in the lower room, with its windows all aglow, there was not a vacant table. They sang, they shouted; the great old hearth, vaulted like an oven, with its iron bars piled with coals, shone out brightly. It was like a house of fire and noise.

In the yard — that is to say, in the theatre — the crowd was greater still.

Crowds as great as the suburb of Southwark could supply so thronged the performances of “Chaos Vanquished” that directly the curtain was raised — that is to say, the platform of the Green Box was lowered — every place was filled. The windows were alive with spectators, the balcony was crammed. Not a single paving-stone in the paved yard was to be seen. It seemed paved with faces.

Only the compartment for the nobility remained empty.

There was thus a space in the centre of the balcony, a black hole, called in metaphorical slang, an oven. No one there. Crowds everywhere except in that one spot.

One evening it was occupied.

It was on a Saturday, a day on which the English make all haste to amuse themselves before the *ennui* of Sunday. The hall was full.

We say *hall*. Shakespeare for a long time had to use the yard of an inn for a theatre, and he called it *hall*.

Just as the curtain rose on the prologue of “Chaos Vanquished,” with Ursus, Homo, and Gwynplaine on the stage, Ursus, from habit, cast a look at the audience, and felt a sensation.

The compartment for the nobility was occupied. A lady was sitting alone in the middle of the box, on the Utrecht velvet arm-chair. She was alone, and she filled the box. Certain beings seem to give out light. This lady, like Dea, had a light in herself, but a light of a different character.

Dea was pale, this lady was pink. Dea was the twilight, this lady, Aurora. Dea was beautiful, this lady was superb. Dea was innocence, candour, fairness, alabaster — this woman was of the purple, and one felt that she did not fear the blush. Her irradiation overflowed the box, she sat in the midst of it, immovable, in the spreading majesty of an idol.

Amidst the sordid crowd she shone out grandly, as with the radiance of a carbuncle. She inundated it with so much light that she drowned it in shadow, and all the mean faces in it underwent eclipse. Her splendour blotted out all else.

Every eye was turned towards her.

Tom-Jim-Jack was in the crowd. He was lost like the rest in the nimbus of this dazzling creature.

The lady at first absorbed the whole attention of the public, who had crowded to the performance, thus somewhat diminishing the opening effects of “Chaos Vanquished.”

Whatever might be the air of dreamland about her, for those who were near she was a woman; perchance too much a woman.

She was tall and amply formed, and showed as much as possible of her magnificent person. She wore heavy earrings of pearls, with which were mixed those whimsical jewels called “keys of England.” Her upper dress was of Indian muslin, embroidered all over with gold — a great luxury, because those muslin dresses then cost six hundred crowns. A large diamond brooch closed her chemise, the which she wore so as to display her shoulders and bosom, in the immodest fashion of the time; the chemisette was made of that lawn of which Anne of Austria had sheets so fine that they could be passed through a ring. She wore what seemed like a cuirass of rubies — some uncut, but polished, and precious stones were sewn all over the body of her dress. Then, her eyebrows were blackened with Indian ink; and her arms, elbows, shoulders, chin, and nostrils, with the top of her eyelids, the lobes of her ears, the palms of her hands, the tips of her fingers, were tinted with a glowing and provoking touch of colour. Above all, she wore an expression of implacable determination to be beautiful. This reached the point of ferocity. She was like a panther, with the power of turning cat at will, and caressing. One of her eyes was blue, the other black.

Gwynplaine, as well as Ursus, contemplated her.

The Green Box somewhat resembled a phantasmagoria in its representations. “Chaos Vanquished” was rather a dream than a piece; it generally produced on the audience the effect of a vision. Now, this effect was reflected on the actors. The house took the performers by surprise, and they were thunderstruck in their turn. It was a rebound of fascination.

The woman watched them, and they watched her.

At the distance at which they were placed, and in that luminous mist which is the half-light of a theatre, details were lost and it was like a hallucination. Of course it was a woman, but was it not a chimera as well? The penetration of her light into their obscurity stupefied them. It was like the appearance of an unknown planet. It came from a world of the happy. Her irradiation amplified her figure. The lady was covered with nocturnal glitterings, like a milky way. Her precious stones were stars. The diamond brooch was perhaps a pleiad. The splendid beauty of her bosom seemed supernatural. They felt, as they looked upon the star-like creature, the momentary but thrilling approach of the regions of felicity. It was out of the heights of a Paradise that she leant towards their mean-looking Green Box, and revealed to the gaze of its wretched audience her expression of inexorable serenity. As she satisfied her unbounded curiosity, she fed at the same time the curiosity of the public.

It was the Zenith permitting the Abyss to look at it.

Ursus, Gwynplaine, Vinos, Fibi, the crowd, every one had succumbed to her dazzling beauty, except Dea, ignorant in her darkness.

An apparition was indeed before them; but none of the ideas usually evoked by the word were realized in the lady’s appearance.

There was nothing about her diaphanous, nothing undecided, nothing floating, no mist. She was an apparition; rose-coloured and fresh, and full of health. Yet, under the optical condition in which Ursus and Gwynplaine were placed, she looked like a vision. There are fleshy phantoms, called vampires. Such a queen as she, though a spirit to the crowd, consumes twelve hundred thousand a year, to keep her health.

Behind the lady, in the shadow, her page was to be perceived, *el mozo*, a little child-like man, fair and pretty, with a serious face. A very young and very grave servant was the fashion at that period. This page was dressed from top to toe in scarlet velvet, and had on his skull-cap, which was embroidered with gold, a bunch of curled feathers. This was the sign of a high class of service, and indicated attendance on a very great lady.

The lackey is part of the lord, and it was impossible not to remark, in the shadow of his mistress, the train-bearing page. Memory often takes notes unconsciously; and, without Gwynplaine’s suspecting it, the round cheeks, the serious mien, the embroidered and plumed cap of the lady’s page left some trace on his mind. The page, however, did nothing to call attention to himself. To do so is to be wanting in respect. He held himself aloof and passive at the back of the box, retiring as far as the closed door permitted.

Notwithstanding the presence of her train-bearer, the lady was not the less alone in the compartment, since a valet counts for nothing.

However powerful a diversion had been produced by this person, who produced the effect of a personage, the *dénouement* of “Chaos Vanquished” was more powerful still. The impression which it made was, as usual, irresistible. Perhaps, even, there occurred in the hall, on account of the radiant spectator (for sometimes the spectator is part of the spectacle), an increase of electricity. The contagion of Gwynplaine’s laugh was more triumphant than ever. The whole audience fell into an indescribable epilepsy of hilarity, through which could be distinguished the sonorous and magisterial ha! ha! of Tom-Jim-Jack.

Only the unknown lady looked at the performance with the immobility of a statue, and with her eyes, like those of a phantom, she laughed not. A spectre, but sun-born.

The performance over, the platform drawn up, and the family reassembled in the Green Box, Ursus opened and emptied on the supper-table the bag of receipts. From a heap of pennies there slid suddenly forth a Spanish gold onza. “Hers!” cried Ursus.

The onza amidst the pence covered with verdigris was a type of the lady amidst the crowd.

“She has paid an onza for her seat,” cried Ursus with enthusiasm.

Just then, the hotel-keeper entered the Green Box, and, passing his arm out of the window at the back of it, opened the loophole in the wall of which we have already spoken, which gave a view over the field, and which was level with the window; then he made a silent sign to Ursus to look out. A carriage, swarming with plumed footmen carrying torches and magnificently appointed, was driving off at a fast trot.

Ursus took the piece of gold between his forefinger and thumb respectfully, and, showing it to Master Nicless, said, —

“She is a goddess.”

Then his eyes falling on the carriage which was about to turn the corner of the field, and on the imperial of which the footmen’s torches lighted up a golden coronet, with eight strawberry leaves, he exclaimed, —

“She is more. She is a duchess.”

The carriage disappeared: The rumbling of its wheels died away in the distance.

Ursus remained some moments in an ecstasy, holding the gold piece between his finger and thumb, as in a monstrance, elevating it as the priest elevates the host.

Then he placed it on the table, and, as he contemplated it, began to talk of “Madam.”

The innkeeper replied, —

“She was a duchess.” Yes. They knew her title. But her name? Of that they were ignorant. Master Nicless had been close to the carriage, and seen the coat of arms and the footmen covered with lace. The coachman had a wig on which might have belonged to a Lord Chancellor. The carriage was of that rare design called, in Spain, *cochetumbon*, a splendid build, with a top like a tomb, which makes a magnificent support for a coronet. The page was a man in miniature, so small that he could sit on the step of the carriage outside the door. The duty of those pretty creatures was to bear the trains of their mistresses. They also bore their messages. And did you remark the plumed cap of the page? How grand it was! You pay a fine if you wear those plumes without the right of doing so. Master Nicless had seen the lady, too, quite close. A kind of queen. Such wealth gives beauty. The skin is whiter, the eye more proud, the gait more noble, and grace more insolent. Nothing can equal the elegant impertinence of hands which never work. Master Nicless told the story of all the magnificence, of the white skin with the blue veins, the neck, the shoulders, the arms, the touch of paint everywhere, the pearl earrings, the head-dress powdered with gold; the profusion of stones, the rubies, the diamonds.

“Less brilliant than her eyes,” murmured Ursus.

Gwynplaine said nothing.

Dea listened.

“And do you know,” said the tavern-keeper, “the most wonderful thing of all?”

“What?” said Ursus.

“I saw her get into her carriage.”

“What then?”

“She did not get in alone.”

“Nonsense!”

“Some one got in with her.”

“Who?”

“Guess.”

“The king,” said Ursus.

“In the first place,” said Master Nicless, “there is no king at present. We are not living under a king. Guess who got into the carriage with the duchess.”

“Jupiter,” said Ursus.

The hotel-keeper replied, —

“Tom-Jim-Jack!”

Gwynplaine, who had not said a word, broke silence.

“Tom-Jim-Jack!” he cried.

There was a pause of astonishment, during which the low voice of Dea was heard to say, —

“Cannot this woman be prevented coming.”

CHAPTER VIII.

SYMPTOMS OF POISONING.

The “apparition” did not return. It did not reappear in the theatre, but it reappeared to the memory of Gwynplaine. Gwynplaine was, to a certain degree, troubled. It seemed to him that for the first time in his life he had seen a woman.

He made that first stumble, a strange dream. We should beware of the nature of the reveries that fasten on us. Reverie has in it the mystery and subtlety of an odour. It is to thought what perfume is to the tuberose. It is at times the exudation of a venomous idea, and it penetrates like a vapour. You may poison yourself with reveries, as with flowers. An intoxicating suicide, exquisite and malignant. The suicide of the soul is evil thought. In it is the poison. Reverie attracts, cajoles, lures, entwines, and then makes you its accomplice. It makes you bear your half in the trickeries which it plays on conscience. It charms; then it corrupts you. We may say of reverie as of play, one begins by being a dupe, and ends by being a cheat.

Gwynplaine dreamed.

He had never before seen Woman. He had seen the shadow in the women of the populace, and he had seen the soul in Dea.

He had just seen the reality.

A warm and living skin, under which one felt the circulation of passionate blood; an outline with the precision of marble and the undulation of the wave; a high and impassive mien, mingling refusal with attraction, and summing itself up in its own glory; hair of the colour of the reflection from a furnace; a gallantry of adornment producing in herself and in others a tremor of voluptuousness, the half-revealed nudity betraying a disdainful desire to be coveted at a distance by the crowd; an ineradicable coquetry; the charm of impenetrability, temptation seasoned by the glimpse of perdition, a promise to the senses and a menace to the mind; a double anxiety, the one desire, the other fear. He had just seen these things. He had just seen Woman.

He had seen more and less than a woman; he had seen a female.

And at the same time an Olympian. The female of a god.

The mystery of sex had just been revealed to him.

And where? On inaccessible heights — at an infinite distance.

O mocking destiny! The soul, that celestial essence, he possessed; he held it in his hand. It was Dea. Sex, that terrestrial embodiment, he perceived in the heights of heaven. It was that woman.

A duchess!

“More than a goddess,” Ursus had said.

What a precipice! Even dreams dissolved before such a perpendicular height to escalade.

Was he going to commit the folly of dreaming about the unknown beauty?

He debated with himself.

He recalled all that Ursus had said of high stations which are almost royal. The philosopher’s disquisitions, which had hitherto seemed so useless, now became landmarks for his thoughts. A very thin layer of forgetfulness often lies over our memory, through which at times we catch a glimpse of all beneath it. His fancy ran on that august world, the peerage, to which the lady belonged, and which was so inexorably placed above the inferior world, the common people, of which he was one.

And was he even one of the people? Was not he, the mountebank, below the lowest of the low? For the first time since he had arrived at the age of reflection, he felt his heart vaguely contracted by a sense of his baseness, and of that which we nowadays call abasement. The paintings and the catalogues of Ursus, his lyrical inventories, his dithyrambics of castles, parks, fountains, and colonnades, his catalogues of riches and of power, revived in the memory of Gwynplaine in the relief of reality mingled with mist. He was possessed with the image of this zenith. That a man should be a lord! — it seemed chimerical. It was so, however. Incredible thing! There were lords! But were they of flesh and blood, like ourselves? It seemed doubtful. He felt that he lay at the bottom of all darkness, encompassed by a wall, while he could just perceive in the far distance above his head, through the mouth of the pit, a dazzling confusion of azure, of figures, and of rays, which was Olympus. In the midst of this glory the duchess shone out resplendent.

He felt for this woman a strange, inexpressible longing, combined with a conviction of the impossibility of attainment. This poignant contradiction returned to his mind again and again, notwithstanding every effort. He saw near to him, even within his reach, in close and tangible reality, the soul;

and in the unattainable — in the depths of the ideal — the flesh. None of these thoughts attained to certain shape. They were as a vapour within him, changing every instant its form, and floating away. But the darkness which the vapour caused was intense.

He did not form even in his dreams any hope of reaching the heights where the duchess dwelt. Luckily for him.

The vibration of such ladders of fancy, if ever we put our foot upon them, may render our brains dizzy for ever. Intending to scale Olympus, we reach Bedlam; any distinct feeling of actual desire would have terrified him. He entertained none of that nature.

Besides, was he likely ever to see the lady again? Most probably not. To fall in love with a passing light on the horizon, madness cannot reach to that pitch. To make loving eyes at a star even, is not incomprehensible. It is seen again, it reappears, it is fixed in the sky. But can any one be enamoured of a flash of lightning?

Dreams flowed and ebbed within him. The majestic and gallant idol at the back of the box had cast a light over his diffused ideas, then faded away. He thought, yet thought not of it; turned to other things — returned to it. It rocked about in his brain — nothing more. It broke his sleep for several nights. Sleeplessness is as full of dreams as sleep.

It is almost impossible to express in their exact limits the abstract evolutions of the brain. The inconvenience of words is that they are more marked in form than ideas. All ideas have indistinct boundary lines, words have not. A certain diffused phase of the soul ever escapes words. Expression has its frontiers, thought has none.

The depths of our secret souls are so vast that Gwynplaine’s dreams scarcely touched Dea. Dea reigned sacred in the centre of his soul; nothing could approach her.

Still (for such contradictions make up the soul of man) there was a conflict within him. Was he conscious of it? Scarcely.

In his heart of hearts he felt a collision of desires. We all have our weak points. Its nature would have been clear to Ursus; but to Gwynplaine it was not.

Two instincts — one the ideal, the other sexual — were struggling within him. Such contests occur between the angels of light and darkness on the edge of the abyss.

At length the angel of darkness was overthrown. One day Gwynplaine suddenly thought no more of the unknown woman.

The struggle between two principles — the duel between his earthly and his heavenly nature — had taken place within his soul, and at such a depth that he had understood it but dimly. One thing was certain, that he had never for one moment ceased to adore Dea.

He had been attacked by a violent disorder, his blood had been fevered; but it was over. Dea alone remained.

Gwynplaine would have been much astonished had any one told him that Dea had ever been, even for a moment, in danger; and in a week or two the phantom which had threatened the hearts of both their souls faded away.

Within Gwynplaine nothing remained but the heart, which was the hearth, and the love, which was its fire.

Besides, we have just said that "the duchess" did not return.

Ursus thought it all very natural. "The lady with the gold piece" is a phenomenon. She enters, pays, and vanishes. It would be too much joy were she to return.

As to Dea, she made no allusion to the woman who had come and passed away. She listened, perhaps, and was sufficiently enlightened by the sighs of Ursus, and now and then by some significant exclamation, such as, —

"*One does not get ounces of gold every day!*"

She spoke no more of the "woman." This showed deep instinct. The soul takes obscure precautions, in the secrets of which it is not always admitted itself. To keep silence about any one seems to keep them afar off. One fears that questions may call them back. We put silence between us, as if we were shutting a door.

So the incident fell into oblivion.

Was it ever anything? Had it ever occurred? Could it be said that a shadow had floated between Gwynplaine and Dea? Dea did not know of it, nor Gwynplaine either. No; nothing had occurred. The duchess herself was blurred in the distant perspective like an illusion. It had been but a momentary dream passing over Gwynplaine, out of which he had awakened.

When it fades away, a reverie, like a mist, leaves no trace behind; and when the cloud has passed on, love shines out as brightly in the heart as the sun in the sky.

CHAPTER IX.

ABYSSUS ABYSSUM VOCAT.

Another face, disappeared — Tom-Jim-Jack's. Suddenly he ceased to frequent the Tadcaster Inn.

Persons so situated as to be able to observe other phases of fashionable life in London, might have seen that about this time the *Weekly Gazette*, between two extracts from parish registers, announced the departure of Lord David Dirry-Moir, by order of her Majesty, to take command of his frigate in the white squadron then cruising off the coast of Holland.

Ursus, perceiving that Tom-Jim-Jack did not return, was troubled by his absence. He had not seen Tom-Jim-Jack since the day on which he had driven off in the same carriage with the lady of the gold piece. It was, indeed, an enigma who this Tom-Jim-Jack could be, who carried off duchesses under his arm. What an interesting investigation! What questions to propound! What things to be said. Therefore Ursus said not a word.

Ursus, who had had experience, knew the smart caused by rash curiosity. Curiosity ought always to be proportioned to the curious. By listening, we risk our ear; by watching, we risk our eye. Prudent people neither hear nor see. Tom-Jim-Jack had got into a princely carriage. The tavern-keeper had seen him. It appeared so extraordinary that the sailor should sit by the lady that it made Ursus circumspect. The caprices of those in high life ought to be sacred to the lower orders. The reptiles called the poor had best squat in their holes when they see anything out of the way. Quiescence is a power. Shut your eyes, if you have not the luck to be blind; stop up your ears, if you have not the good fortune to be deaf; paralyze your tongue, if you have not the perfection of being mute. The great do what they like, the little what they can. Let the unknown pass unnoticed. Do not importune mythology. Do not interrogate appearances. Have a profound respect for idols. Do not let us direct our gossiping towards the lessenings or increasings which take place in superior regions, of the motives of which we are ignorant. Such things are mostly optical delusions to us inferior creatures. Metamorphoses are the business of the gods: the transformations and the contingent disorders of great persons who float above us are clouds impossible to comprehend and perilous to study. Too much attention irritates the

Olympians engaged in their gyrations of amusement or fancy; and a thunderbolt may teach you that the bull you are too curiously examining is Jupiter. Do not lift the folds of the stone-coloured mantles of those terrible powers. Indifference is intelligence. Do not stir, and you will be safe. Feign death, and they will not kill you. Therein lies the wisdom of the insect. Ursus practised it.

The tavern-keeper, who was puzzled as well, questioned Ursus one day.

“Do you observe that Tom-Jim-Jack never comes here now!”

“Indeed!” said Ursus. “I have not remarked it.”

Master Nicless made an observation in an undertone, no doubt touching the intimacy between the ducal carriage and Tom-Jim-Jack — a remark which, as it might have been irreverent and dangerous, Ursus took care not to hear.

Still Ursus was too much of an artist not to regret Tom-Jim-Jack. He felt some disappointment. He told his feeling to Homo, of whose discretion alone he felt certain. He whispered into the ear of the wolf, “Since Tom-Jim-Jack ceased to come, I feel a blank as a man, and a chill as a poet.” This pouring out of his heart to a friend relieved Ursus.

His lips were sealed before Gwynplaine, who, however, made no allusion to Tom-Jim-Jack. The fact was that Tom-Jim-Jack’s presence or absence mattered not to Gwynplaine, absorbed as he was in Dea.

Forgetfulness fell more and more on Gwynplaine. As for Dea, she had not even suspected the existence of a vague trouble. At the same time, no more cabals or complaints against the Laughing Man were spoken of. Hate seemed to have let go its hold. All was tranquil in and around the Green Box. No more opposition from strollers, merry-andrews, nor priests; no more grumbling outside. Their success was unclouded. Destiny allows of such sudden serenity. The brilliant happiness of Gwynplaine and Dea was for the present absolutely cloudless. Little by little it had risen to a degree which admitted of no increase. There is one word which expresses the situation — apogee. Happiness, like the sea, has its high tide. The worst thing for the perfectly happy is that it recedes.

There are two ways of being inaccessible: being too high and being too low. At least as much, perhaps, as the first is the second to be desired. More surely than the eagle escapes the arrow, the animalcule escapes being crushed. This security of insignificance, if it had ever existed on earth, was enjoyed by Gwynplaine and Dea, and never before had it been so complete.

They lived on, daily more and more ecstatically wrapt in each other. The heart saturates itself with love as with a divine salt that preserves it, and from this arises the incorruptible constancy of those who have loved each other from the dawn of their lives, and the affection which keeps its freshness in old age. There is such a thing as the embalmment of the heart. It is of Daphnis and Chloë that Philemon and Baucis are made. The old age of which we speak, evening resembling morning, was evidently reserved for Gwynplaine and Dea. In the meantime they were young.

Ursus looked on this love as a doctor examines his case. He had what was in those days termed a hippocratical expression of face. He fixed his sagacious eyes on Dea, fragile and pale, and growled out, "It is lucky that she is happy." At other times he said, "She is lucky for her health's sake." He shook his head, and at times read attentively a portion treating of heart-disease in Aviccunas, translated by Vossiscus Fortunatus, Louvain, 1650, an old worm-eaten book of his.

Dea, when fatigued, suffered from perspirations and drowsiness, and took a daily *siesta*, as we have already seen. One day, while she was lying asleep on the bearskin, Gwynplaine was out, and Ursus bent down softly and applied his ear to Dea's heart. He seemed to listen for a few minutes, and then stood up, murmuring, "She must not have any shock. It would find out the weak place."

The crowd continued to flock to the performance of "Chaos Vanquished." The success of the Laughing Man seemed inexhaustible. Every one rushed to see him; no longer from Southwark only, but even from other parts of London. The general public began to mingle with the usual audience, which no longer consisted of sailors and drivers only; in the opinion of Master Nicless, who was well acquainted with crowds, there were in the crowd gentlemen and baronets disguised as common people. Disguise is one of the pleasures of pride, and was much in fashion at that period. This mixing of the aristocratic element with the mob was a good sign, and showed that their popularity was extending to London. The fame of Gwynplaine has decidedly penetrated into the great world. Such was the fact. Nothing was talked of but the Laughing Man. He was talked about even at the Mohawk Club, frequented by noblemen.

In the Green Box they had no idea of all this. They were content to be happy. It was intoxication to Dea to feel, as she did every evening, the crisp and tawny head of Gwynplaine. In love there is nothing like habit. The whole of life is concentrated in it. The reappearance of the stars is the custom of the universe. Creation is nothing but a mistress, and the sun is a lover. Light is a dazzling caryatid supporting the world. Each day, for a sublime minute, the earth, covered by night, rests on the rising sun. Dea, blind, felt a like return of warmth and hope within her when she placed her hand on the head of Gwynplaine.

To adore each other in the shadows, to love in the plenitude of silence; who could not become reconciled to such an eternity?

One evening Gwynplaine, feeling within him that overflow of felicity which, like the intoxication of perfumes, causes a sort of delicious faintness, was strolling, as he usually did after the performance, in the meadow some hundred paces from the Green Box. Sometimes in those high tides of feeling in our souls we feel that we would fain pour out the sensations of the overflowing heart. The night was dark but clear. The stars were shining. The whole fair-ground was deserted. Sleep and forgetfulness reigned in the caravans which were scattered over Tarrinzeau Field.

One light alone was unextinguished. It was the lamp of the Tadcaster Inn, the door of which was left ajar to admit Gwynplaine on his return.

Midnight had just struck in the five parishes of Southwark, with the breaks and differences of tone of their various bells. Gwynplaine was dreaming of Dea. Of whom else should he dream? But that evening, feeling singularly troubled, and full of a charm which was at the same time a pang, he thought of Dea as a man thinks of a woman. He reproached himself for this. It seemed to be failing in respect to her. The husband’s attack was forming dimly within him. Sweet and imperious impatience! He was crossing the invisible frontier, on this side of which is the virgin, on the other, the wife. He questioned himself anxiously. A blush, as it were, overspread his mind. The Gwynplaine of long ago had been transformed, by degrees, unconsciously in a mysterious growth. His old modesty was becoming misty and uneasy. We have an ear of light, into which speaks the spirit; and an ear of darkness, into which speaks the instinct. Into the latter strange voices were making their proposals. However pure-minded may be the youth who dreams of love, a certain grossness of the flesh eventually comes between his dream and him. Intentions lose their transparency. The unavowed desire implanted by nature enters into his conscience. Gwynplaine felt an indescribable yearning of the flesh, which abounds in all temptation, and Dea was scarcely flesh. In this fever, which he knew to be unhealthy, he transfigured Dea into a more material aspect, and tried to exaggerate her seraphic form into feminine loveliness. It is thou, O woman, that we require.

Love comes not to permit too much of paradise. It requires the fevered skin, the troubled life, the unbound hair, the kiss electrical and irreparable, the clasp of desire. The sidereal is embarrassing, the ethereal is heavy. Too much of the heavenly in love is like too much fuel on a fire: the flame suffers from it. Gwynplaine fell into an exquisite nightmare; Dea to be clasped in his arms — Dea clasped in them! He heard nature in his heart crying out for a woman. Like a Pygmalion in a dream modelling a Galathea out of the azure, in the depths of his soul he worked at the chaste contour of Dea — a contour with too much of heaven, too little of Eden. For Eden is Eve, and Eve was a female, a carnal mother, a terrestrial nurse; the sacred womb of generations; the breast of unfailing milk; the rocker of the cradle of the newborn world, and wings are incompatible with the bosom of woman. Virginity is but the hope of maternity. Still, in Gwynplaine’s dreams, Dea, until now, had been enthroned above flesh. Now, however, he made wild efforts in thought to draw her downwards by that thread, sex, which ties every girl to earth. Not one of those birds is free. Dea, like all the rest, was within this law; and Gwynplaine, though he scarcely acknowledged it, felt a vague desire that she should submit to it. This desire possessed him in spite of himself, and with an ever-recurring relapse. He pictured Dea as woman. He came to the point of regarding her under a hitherto unheard-of form; as a creature no longer of ecstasy only, but of voluptuousness; as Dea, with her head resting on the pillow. He was ashamed of this visionary desecration. It was like an attempt at profanation. He resisted its assault. He turned from it, but it returned again. He felt as if he were committing a criminal assault. To him Dea was encompassed by a cloud. Cleaving that cloud, he shuddered, as though he were raising her chemise. It was in April. The spine has its dreams. He rambled at random with the uncertain step caused by solitude. To have no one by is a provocative to wander. Whither flew his thoughts? He would not have dared to own it to himself. To heaven? No. To a bed. You were looking down upon him, O ye stars.

Why talk of a man in love? Rather say a man possessed. To be possessed by the devil, is the exception; to be possessed by a woman, the rule. Every man has to bear this alienation of himself. What a sorceress is a pretty woman! The true name of love is captivity.

Man is made prisoner by the soul of a woman; by her flesh as well, and sometimes even more by the flesh than by the soul. The soul is the true love, the flesh, the mistress.

We slander the devil. It was not he who tempted Eve. It was Eve who tempted him. The woman began. Lucifer was passing by quietly. He perceived the woman, and became Satan.

The flesh is the cover of the unknown. It is provocative (which is strange) by its modesty. Nothing could be more distracting. It is full of shame, the hussey!

It was the terrible love of the surface which was then agitating Gwynplaine, and holding him in its power. Fearful the moment in which man covets the nakedness of woman! What dark things lurk beneath the fairness of Venus!

Something within him was calling Dea aloud, Dea the maiden, Dea the other half of a man, Dea flesh and blood, Dea with uncovered bosom. That cry was almost driving away the angel. Mysterious crisis through which all love must pass and in which the Ideal is in danger! Therein is the predestination of Creation. Moment of heavenly corruption! Gwynplaine's love of Dea was becoming nuptial. Virgin love is but a transition. The moment was come. Gwynplaine coveted the woman.

He coveted a woman!

Precipice of which one sees but the first gentle slope!

The indistinct summons of nature is inexorable. The whole of woman — what an abyss!

Luckily, there was no woman for Gwynplaine but Dea — the only one he desired, the only one who could desire him.

Gwynplaine felt that vague and mighty shudder which is the vital claim of infinity. Besides there was the aggravation of the spring. He was breathing the nameless odours of the starry darkness. He walked forward in a wild feeling of delight. The wandering perfumes of the rising sap, the heady irradiations which float in shadow, the distant opening of nocturnal flowers, the complicity of little hidden nests, the murmurs of waters and of leaves, soft sighs rising from all things, the freshness, the warmth, and the mysterious awakening of April and May, is the vast diffusion of sex murmuring, in whispers, their proposals of voluptuousness, till the soul stammers in answer to the giddy provocation. The ideal no longer knows what it is saying.

Any one observing Gwynplaine walk would have said, “See! — a drunken man!”

He almost staggered under the weight of his own heart, of spring, and of the night.

The solitude in the bowling-green was so peaceful that at times he spoke aloud. The consciousness that there is no listener induces speech.

He walked with slow steps, his head bent down, his hands behind him, the left hand in the right, the fingers open.

Suddenly he felt something slipped between his fingers.

He turned round quickly.

In his hand was a paper, and in front of him a man.

It was the man who, coming behind him with the stealth of a cat, had placed the paper in his fingers.

The paper was a letter.

The man, as he appeared pretty clearly in the starlight, was small, chubby-cheeked, young, sedate, and dressed in a scarlet livery, exposed from top to toe through the opening of a long gray cloak, then called a capenoche, a Spanish word contracted; in French it was *cape-de-nuit*. His head was covered by a crimson cap, like the skull-cap of a cardinal, on which servitude was indicated by a strip of lace. On this cap was a plume of tisserin feathers. He stood motionless before Gwynplaine, like a dark outline in a dream.

Gwynplaine recognized the duchess’s page.

Before Gwynplaine could utter an exclamation of surprise, he heard the thin voice of the page, at once childlike and feminine in its tone, saying to him, —

“At this hour to-morrow, be at the corner of London Bridge. I will be there to conduct you—”

“Whither?” demanded Gwynplaine.

“Where you are expected.”

Gwynplaine dropped his eyes on the letter, which he was holding mechanically in his hand.

When he looked up the page was no longer with him.

He perceived a vague form lessening rapidly in the distance. It was the little valet. He turned the corner of the street, and solitude reigned again.

Gwynplaine saw the page vanish, then looked at the letter. There are moments in our lives when what happens seems not to happen. Stupor keeps us for a moment at a distance from the fact.

Gwynplaine raised the letter to his eyes, as if to read it, but soon perceived that he could not do so for two reasons — first, because he had not broken the seal; and, secondly, because it was too dark.

It was some minutes before he remembered that there was a lamp at the inn. He took a few steps sideways, as if he knew not whither he was going.

A somnambulist, to whom a phantom had given a letter, might walk as he did.

At last he made up his mind. He ran rather than walked towards the inn, stood in the light which broke through the half-open door, and by it again examined the closed letter. There was no design on the seal, and on the envelope was written, “*To Gwynplaine*.” He broke the seal, tore the envelope, unfolded the letter, put it directly under the light, and read as follows: —

“You are hideous; I am beautiful. You are a player; I am a duchess. I am the highest; you are the lowest. I desire you! I love you! Come!”

BOOK THE FOURTH.

THE CELL OF TORTURE.

CHAPTER I.

THE TEMPTATION OF ST. GWYNPLAINE.

One jet of flame hardly makes a prick in the darkness; another sets fire to a volcano.

Some sparks are gigantic.

Gwynplaine read the letter, then he read it over again. Yes, the words were there, “I love you!”

Terrors chased each other through his mind.

The first was, that he believed himself to be mad.

He was mad; that was certain: He had just seen what had no existence. The twilight spectres were making game of him, poor wretch! The little man in scarlet was the will-o’-the-wisp of a dream. Sometimes, at night, nothings condensed into flame come and laugh at us. Having had his laugh out, the visionary being had disappeared, and left Gwynplaine behind him, mad.

Such are the freaks of darkness.

The second terror was, to find out that he was in his right senses.

A vision? Certainly not. How could that be? Had he not a letter in his hand? Did he not see an envelope, a seal, paper, and writing? Did he not know from whom that came? It was all clear enough. Some one took a pen and ink, and wrote. Some one lighted a taper, and sealed it with wax. Was not his name written on the letter— “*To Gwynplaine?*” The paper was scented. All was clear.

Gwynplaine knew the little man. The dwarf was a page. The gleam was a livery. The page had given him a rendezvous for the same hour on the morrow, at the corner of London Bridge.

Was London Bridge an illusion?

No, no. All was clear. There was no delirium. All was reality. Gwynplaine was perfectly clear in his intellect. It was not a phantasmagoria, suddenly dissolving above his head, and fading into nothingness. It was something which had really happened to him. No, Gwynplaine was not mad, nor was he dreaming. Again he read the letter.

Well, yes! But then?

That then was terror-striking.

There was a woman who desired him! If so, let no one ever again pronounce the word incredible! A woman desire him! A woman who had seen his face! A woman who was not blind! And who was this woman? An ugly one? No; a beauty. A gipsy? No; a duchess!

What was it all about, and what could it all mean? What peril in such a triumph! And how was he to help plunging into it headlong?

What! that woman! The siren, the apparition, the lady in the visionary box, the light in the darkness! It was she! Yes; it was she!

The crackling of the fire burst out in every part of his frame. It was the strange, unknown lady, she who had previously so troubled his thoughts; and his first tumultuous feelings about this woman returned, heated by the evil fire. Forgetfulness is nothing but a palimpsest: an incident happens unexpectedly, and all that was effaced revives in the blanks of wondering memory.

Gwynplaine thought that he had dismissed that image from his remembrance, and he found that it was still there; and she had put her mark in his brain, unconsciously guilty of a dream. Without his suspecting it, the lines of the engraving had been bitten deep by reverie. And now a certain amount of evil had been done, and this train of thought, thenceforth, perhaps, irreparable, he took up again eagerly. What! she desired him! What! the princess descend from her throne, the idol from its shrine, the statue from its pedestal, the phantom from its cloud! What! from the depths of the impossible had this chimera come! This deity of the sky! This irradiation! This nereid all glistening with jewels! This proud and unattainable beauty, from the height of her radiant throne, was bending down to Gwynplaine! What! had she drawn up her chariot of the dawn, with its yoke of turtle-doves and dragons, before Gwynplaine, and said to him, “Come!” What! this terrible glory of being the object of such abasement from the empyrean, for Gwynplaine! This woman, if he could give that name to a form so starlike and majestic, this woman proposed herself, gave herself, delivered herself up to him! Wonder of wonders! A goddess prostituting herself for him! The arms of a courtesan opening in a cloud to clasp him to the bosom of a goddess, and that without degradation! Such majestic creatures cannot be sullied. The gods bathe themselves pure in light; and this goddess who came to him knew what she was doing. She was not ignorant of the incarnate hideousness of Gwynplaine. She had seen the mask which was his face; and that mask had not caused her to draw back. Gwynplaine was loved notwithstanding it!

Here was a thing surpassing all the extravagance of dreams. He was loved in consequence of his mask. Far from repulsing the goddess, the mask attracted her. Gwynplaine was not only loved; he was desired. He was more than accepted; he was chosen. He, chosen!

What! there, where this woman dwelt, in the regal region of irresponsible splendour, and in the power of full, free will; where there were princes, and she could take a prince; nobles, and she could take a noble; where there were men handsome, charming, magnificent, and she could take an Adonis: whom did she take? Gnafron! She could choose from the midst of meteors and thunders, the mighty six-winged seraphim, and she chose the larva crawling in the slime. On one side were highnesses and peers, all grandeur, all opulence, all glory; on the other, a mountebank. The mountebank carried it! What kind of scales could there be in the heart of this woman? By what measure did she weigh her love? She took off her ducal coronet, and flung it on the platform of a clown! She took from her brow the Olympian aureola, and placed it on the bristly head of a gnome! The world had turned topsy-turvy. The insects swarmed on high, the stars were scattered below, whilst the wonder-stricken Gwynplaine, overwhelmed by a falling ruin of light, and lying in the dust, was enshrined in a glory. One all-powerful, revolting against beauty and splendour, gave herself to the damned of night; preferred Gwynplaine to Antinoüs; excited by curiosity, she entered the shadows, and descending within them, and from this abdication of goddess-ship was rising, crowned and prodigious, the royalty of the wretched. “You are hideous. I love you.” These words touched Gwynplaine in the ugly spot of pride. Pride is the heel in which all heroes are vulnerable. Gwynplaine was flattered in his vanity as a monster. He was loved for his deformity. He, too, was the exception, as much and perhaps more than the Jupiters and the Apollos. He felt superhuman, and so much a monster as to be a god. Fearful bewilderment!

Now, who was this woman? What did he know about her? Everything and nothing. She was a duchess, that he knew; he knew, also, that she was beautiful and rich; that she had liveries, lackeys, pages, and footmen running with torches by the side of her coroneted carriage. He knew that she was in love with him; at least she said so. Of everything else he was ignorant. He knew her title, but not her name. He knew her thought; he knew not her life. Was she married, widow, maiden? Was she free? Of what family was she? Were there snares, traps, dangers about her? Of the gallantry existing on the idle heights of society; the caves on those summits, in which savage charmers dream amid the scattered skeletons of the loves which they have already preyed on; of the extent of tragic cynicism to which the experiments of a woman may attain who believes herself to be beyond the reach of man — of things such as these Gwynplaine had no idea. Nor had he even in his mind materials out of which to build up a conjecture, information concerning such things being very scanty in the social depths in which he lived. Still he detected a shadow; he felt that a mist hung over all this brightness. Did he understand it? No. Could he guess at it? Still less. What was there behind that letter? One pair of folding doors opening before him, another closing on him, and causing him a vague anxiety. On the one side an avowal; on the other an enigma — avowal and enigma, which, like two mouths, one tempting, the other threatening, pronounce the same word, Dare!

Never had perfidious chance taken its measures better, nor timed more fitly the moment of temptation. Gwynplaine, stirred by spring, and by the sap rising in all things, was prompt to dream the dream of the flesh. The old man who is not to be stamped out, and over whom none of us can triumph, was awaking in that backward youth, still a boy at twenty-four.

It was just then, at the most stormy moment of the crisis, that the offer was made him, and the naked bosom of the Sphinx appeared before his dazzled eyes. Youth is an inclined plane. Gwynplaine was stooping, and something pushed him forward. What? the season, and the night. Who? the woman.

Were there no month of April, man would be a great deal more virtuous. The budding plants are a set of accomplices! Love is the thief, Spring the receiver.

Gwynplaine was shaken.

There is a kind of smoke of evil, preceding sin, in which the conscience cannot breathe. The obscure nausea of hell comes over virtue in temptation. The yawning abyss discharges an exhalation which warns the strong and turns the weak giddy. Gwynplaine was suffering its mysterious attack.

Dilemmas, transient and at the same time stubborn, were floating before him. Sin, presenting itself obstinately again and again to his mind, was taking form. The morrow, midnight? London Bridge, the page? Should he go? “Yes,” cried the flesh; “No,” cried the soul.

Nevertheless, we must remark that, strange as it may appear at first sight, he never once put himself the question, “Should he go?” quite distinctly. Reprehensible actions are like over-strong brandies — you cannot swallow them at a draught. You put down your glass; you will see to it presently; there is a strange taste even about that first drop. One thing is certain: he felt something behind him pushing him, forward towards the unknown. And he trembled. He could catch a glimpse of a crumbling precipice, and he drew back, stricken by the terror encircling him. He closed his eyes. He tried hard to deny to himself that the adventure had ever occurred, and to persuade himself into doubting his reason. This was evidently his best plan; the wisest thing he could do was to believe himself mad.

Fatal fever! Every man, surprised by the unexpected, has at times felt the throb of such tragic pulsations. The observer ever listens with anxiety to the echoes resounding from the dull strokes of the battering-ram of destiny striking against a conscience.

Alas! Gwynplaine put himself questions. Where duty is clear, to put oneself questions is to suffer defeat.

There are invasions which the mind may have to suffer. There are the Vandals of the soul — evil thoughts coming to devastate our virtue. A thousand contrary ideas rushed into Gwynplaine’s brain, now following each other singly, now crowding together. Then silence reigned again, and he would lean his head on his hands, in a kind of mournful attention, as of one who contemplates a landscape by night.

Suddenly he felt that he was no longer thinking. His reverie had reached that point of utter darkness in which all things disappear.

He remembered, too, that he had not entered the inn. It might be about two o’clock in the morning.

He placed the letter which the page had brought him in his side-pocket; but perceiving that it was next his heart, he drew it out again, crumpled it up, and placed it in a pocket of his hose. He then directed his steps towards the inn, which he entered stealthily, and without awaking little Govicum, who, while waiting up for him, had fallen asleep on the table, with his arms for a pillow. He closed the door, lighted a candle at the lamp, fastened the bolt, turned the key in the lock, taking, mechanically, all the precautions usual to a man returning home late, ascended the staircase of the Green

Box, slipped into the old hovel which he used as a bedroom, looked at Ursus who was asleep, blew out his candle, and did not go to bed.

Thus an hour passed away. Weary, at length, and fancying that bed and sleep were one, he laid his head upon the pillow without undressing, making darkness the concession of closing his eyes. But the storm of emotions which assailed him had not waned for an instant. Sleeplessness is a cruelty which night inflicts on man. Gwynplaine suffered greatly. For the first time in his life, he was not pleased with himself. Ache of heart mingled with gratified vanity. What was he to do? Day broke at last; he heard Ursus get up, but did not raise his eyelids. No truce for him, however. The letter was ever in his mind. Every word of it came back to him in a kind of chaos. In certain violent storms within the soul thought becomes a liquid. It is convulsed, it heaves, and something rises from it, like the dull roaring of the waves. Flood and flow, sudden shocks and whirls, the hesitation of the wave before the rock; hail and rain clouds with the light shining through their breaks; the petty flights of useless foam; wild swell broken in an instant; great efforts lost; wreck appearing all around; darkness and universal dispersion — as these things are of the sea, so are they of man. Gwynplaine was a prey to such a storm.

At the acme of his agony, his eyes still closed, he heard an exquisite voice saying, “Are you asleep, Gwynplaine?” He opened his eyes with a start, and sat up. Dea was standing in the half-open doorway. Her ineffable smile was in her eyes and on her lips. She was standing there, charming in the unconscious serenity of her radiance. Then came, as it were, a sacred moment. Gwynplaine watched her, startled, dazzled, awakened. Awakened from what? — from sleep? no, from sleeplessness. It was she, it was Dea; and suddenly he felt in the depths of his being the indescribable wane of the storm and the sublime descent of good over evil; the miracle of the look from on high was accomplished; the blind girl, the sweet light-bearer, with no effort beyond her mere presence, dissipated all the darkness within him; the curtain of cloud was dispersed from the soul as if drawn by an invisible hand, and a sky of azure, as though by celestial enchantment, again spread over Gwynplaine’s conscience. In a moment he became by the virtue of that angel, the great and good Gwynplaine, the innocent man. Such mysterious confrontations occur to the soul as they do to creation. Both were silent — she, who was the light; he, who was the abyss; she, who was divine; he, who was appeased; and over Gwynplaine’s stormy heart Dea shone with the indescribable effect of a star shining on the sea.

CHAPTER II.

FROM GAY TO GRAVE.

How simple is a miracle! It was breakfast hour in the Green Box, and Dea had merely come to see why Gwynplaine had not joined their little breakfast table.

“It is you!” exclaimed Gwynplaine; and he had said everything. There was no other horizon, no vision for him now but the heavens where Dea was. His mind was appeased — appeased in such a manner as he alone can understand who has seen the smile spread swiftly over the sea when the hurricane had passed away. Over nothing does the calm come so quickly as over the whirlpool. This results from its power of absorption. And so it is with the human heart. Not always, however.

Dea had but to show herself, and all the light that was in Gwynplaine left him and went to her, and behind the dazzled Gwynplaine there was but a flight of phantoms. What a peacemaker is adoration! A few minutes afterwards they were sitting opposite each other, Ursus between them, Homo at their feet. The teapot, hung over a little lamp, was on the table. Fibi and Vinos were outside, waiting.

They breakfasted as they supped, in the centre compartment. From the position in which the narrow table was placed, Dea’s back was turned towards the aperture in the partition which was opposite the entrance door of the Green Box. Their knees were touching. Gwynplaine was pouring out tea for Dea. Dea blew gracefully on her cup. Suddenly she sneezed. Just at that moment a thin smoke rose above the flame of the lamp, and something like a piece of paper fell into ashes. It was the smoke which had caused Dea to sneeze.

“What was that?” she asked.

“Nothing,” replied Gwynplaine.

And he smiled. He had just burnt the duchess’s letter.

The conscience of the man who loves is the guardian angel of the woman whom he loves.

Unburdened of the letter, his relief was wondrous, and Gwynplaine felt his integrity as the eagle feels its wings.

It seemed to him as if his temptation had evaporated with the smoke, and as if the duchess had crumbled into ashes with the paper.

Taking up their cups at random, and drinking one after the other from the same one, they talked. A babble of lovers, a chattering of sparrows! Child’s talk, worthy of Mother Goose or of Homer! With two loving hearts, go no further for poetry; with two kisses for dialogue, go no further for music.

“Do you know something?”

“No.”

“Gwynplaine, I dreamt that we were animals, and had wings.”

“Wings; that means birds,” murmured Gwynplaine.

“Fools! it means angels,” growled Ursus.

And their talk went on.

“If you did not exist, Gwynplaine?”

“What then?”

“It could only be because there was no God.”

“The tea is too hot; you will burn yourself, Dea.”

“Blow on my cup.”

“How beautiful you are this morning!”

“Do you know that I have a great many things to say to you?”

“Say them.”

“I love you.”

“I adore you.”

And Ursus said aside, “By heaven, they are polite!”

Exquisite to lovers are their moments of silence! In them they gather, as it were, masses of love, which afterwards explode into sweet fragments.

“Do you know! In the evening, when we are playing our parts, at the moment when my hand touches your forehead — oh, what a noble head is yours, Gwynplaine! — at the moment when I feel your hair under my fingers, I shiver; a heavenly joy comes over me, and I say to myself, In all this world of darkness which encompasses me, in this universe of solitude, in this great obscurity of ruin in which I am, in this quaking fear of myself and of everything, I have one prop; and he is there. It is he — it is you.”

“Oh! you love me,” said Gwynplaine. “I, too, have but you on earth. You are all in all to me. Dea, what would you have me do? What do you desire? What do you want?”

Dea answered, —

“I do not know. I am happy.”

“Oh,” replied Gwynplaine, “we are happy.”

Ursus raised his voice severely, —

“Oh, you are happy, are you? That’s a crime. I have warned you already. You are happy! Then take care you aren’t seen. Take up as little room as you can. Happiness ought to stuff itself into a hole. Make yourselves still less than you are, if that can be. God measures the greatness of happiness by the littleness of the happy. The happy should conceal themselves like malefactors. Oh, only shine out like the wretched glowworms that you are, and you’ll be trodden on; and quite right too! What do you mean by all that love-making nonsense? I’m no duenna, whose business it is to watch lovers billing and cooing. I’m tired of it all, I tell you; and you may both go to the devil.”

And feeling that his harsh tones were melting into tenderness, he drowned his emotion in a loud grumble.

“Father,” said Dea, “how roughly you scold!”

“It’s because I don’t like to see people too happy.”

Here Homo re-echoed Ursus. His growl was heard from beneath the lovers’ feet.

Ursus stooped down, and placed his hand on Homo’s head.

“That’s right; you’re in bad humour, too. You growl. The bristles are all on end on your wolf’s pate. You don’t like all this love-making. That’s because you are wise. Hold your tongue, all the same. You have had your say and given your opinion; be it so. Now be silent.”

The wolf growled again. Ursus looked under the table at him.

“Be still, Homo! Come, don’t dwell on it, you philosopher!”

But the wolf sat up, and looked towards the door, showing his teeth.

“What’s wrong with you now?” said Ursus. And he caught hold of Homo by the skin of the neck.

Heedless of the wolf’s growls, and wholly wrapped up in her own thoughts and in the sound of Gwynplaine’s voice, which left its after-taste within her, Dea was silent, and absorbed by that kind of esctasy peculiar to the blind, which seems at times to give them a song to listen to in their souls, and to make up to them for the light which they lack by some strain of ideal music. Blindness is a cavern, to which reaches the deep harmony of the Eternal.

While Ursus, addressing Homo, was looking down, Gwynplaine had raised his eyes. He was about to drink a cup of tea, but did not drink it. He placed it on the table with the slow movement of a spring drawn back; his fingers remained open, his eyes fixed. He scarcely breathed.

A man was standing in the doorway, behind Dea. He was clad in black, with a hood. He wore a wig down to his eyebrows, and held in his hand an iron staff with a crown at each end. His staff was short and massive. He was like Medusa thrusting her head between two branches in Paradise.

Ursus, who had heard some one enter and raised his head without loosing his hold of Homo, recognized the terrible personage. He shook from head to foot, and whispered to Gwynplaine, —

“It’s the wapentake.”

Gwynplaine recollected. An exclamation of surprise was about to escape him, but he restrained it. The iron staff, with the crown at each end, was called the iron weapon. It was from this iron weapon, upon which the city officers of justice took the oath when they entered on their duties, that the old wapentakes of the English police derived their qualification.

Behind the man in the wig, the frightened landlord could just be perceived in the shadow.

Without saying a word, a personification of the Muta Themis of the old charters, the man stretched his right arm over the radiant Dea, and touched Gwynplaine on the shoulder with the iron staff, at the same time pointing with his left thumb to the door of the Green Box behind him. These gestures, all the more imperious for their silence, meant, “Follow me.”

Pro signo exeundi, sursum trahe, says the old Norman record.

He who was touched by the iron weapon had no right but the right of obedience. To that mute order there was no reply. The harsh penalties of the English law threatened the refractory. Gwynplaine felt a shock under the rigid touch of the law; then he sat as though petrified.

If, instead of having been merely grazed on the shoulder, he had been struck a violent blow on the head with the iron staff, he could not have been more stunned. He knew that the police-officer summoned him to follow; but why? *That* he could not understand.

On his part Ursus, too, was thrown into the most painful agitation, but he saw through matters pretty distinctly. His thoughts ran on the jugglers and preachers, his competitors, on informations laid against the Green Box, on that delinquent the wolf, on his own affair with the three Bishopsgate commissioners, and who knows? — perhaps — but that would be too fearful — Gwynplaine’s unbecoming and factious speeches touching the royal authority.

He trembled violently.

Dea was smiling.

Neither Gwynplaine nor Ursus pronounced a word. They had both the same thought — not to frighten Dea. It may have struck the wolf as well, for he ceased growling. True, Ursus did not loose him.

Homo, however, was a prudent wolf when occasion required. Who is there who has not remarked a kind of intelligent anxiety in animals? It may be that to the extent to which a wolf can understand mankind he felt that he was an outlaw.

Gwynplaine rose.

Resistance was impracticable, as Gwynplaine knew. He remembered Ursus’s words, and there was no question possible. He remained standing in front of the wapentake. The latter raised the iron staff from Gwynplaine’s shoulder, and drawing it back, held it out straight in an attitude of command — a constable’s attitude which was well understood in those days by the whole people, and which expressed the following order: “Let this man, and no other, follow me. The rest remain where they are. Silence!”

No curious followers were allowed. In all times the police have had a taste for arrests of the kind. This description of seizure was termed sequestration of the person.

The wapentake turned round in one motion, like a piece of mechanism revolving on its own pivot, and with grave and magisterial step proceeded towards the door of the Green Box.

Gwynplaine looked at Ursus. The latter went through a pantomime composed as follows: he shrugged his shoulders, placed both elbows close to his hips, with his hands out, and knitted his brows into chevrons — all which signifies, “We must submit to the unknown.”

Gwynplaine looked at Dea. She was in her dream. She was still smiling. He put the ends of his fingers to his lips, and sent her an unutterable kiss.

Ursus, relieved of some portion of his terror now that the wapentake’s back was turned, seized the moment to whisper in Gwynplaine’s ear, —

“On your life, do not speak until you are questioned.”

Gwynplaine, with the same care to make no noise as he would have taken in a sickroom, took his hat and cloak from the hook on the partition, wrapped himself up to the eyes in the cloak, and pushed his hat over his forehead. Not having been to bed, he had his working clothes still on, and his leather esclavin round his neck. Once more he looked at Dea. Having reached the door, the wapentake raised his staff and began to descend the steps; then Gwynplaine set out as if the man was dragging him by an invisible chain. Ursus watched Gwynplaine leave the Green Box. At that moment the wolf gave a low growl; but Ursus silenced him, and whispered, “He is coming back.”

In the yard, Master Nicless was stemming, with servile and imperious gestures, the cries of terror raised by Vinos and Fibi, as in great distress they watched Gwynplaine led away, and the mourning-coloured garb and the iron staff of the wapentake.

The two girls were like petrifactions: they were in the attitude of stalactites. Govicum, stunned, was looking open-mouthed out of a window.

The wapentake preceded Gwynplaine by a few steps, never turning round or looking at him, in that icy ease which is given by the knowledge that one is the law.

In death-like silence they both crossed the yard, went through the dark taproom, and reached the street. A few passers-by had collected about the inn door, and the justice of the quorum was there at the head of a squad of police. The idlers, stupefied, and without breathing a word, opened out and stood aside, with English discipline, at the sight of the constable’s staff. The wapentake moved off in the direction of the narrow street then called the Little Strand, running by the Thames; and Gwynplaine, with the justice of the quorum’s men in ranks on each side, like a double hedge, pale, without a motion except that of his steps, wrapped in his cloak as in a shroud, was leaving the inn farther and farther behind him as he followed the silent man, like a statue following a spectre.

CHAPTER III.

LEX, REX, FEX.

Unexplained arrest, which would greatly astonish an Englishman nowadays, was then a very usual proceeding of the police. Recourse was had to it, notwithstanding the Habeas Corpus Act, up to George II.'s time, especially in such delicate cases as were provided for by *lettres de cachet* in France; and one of the accusations against which Walpole had to defend himself was that he had caused or allowed Neuhoff to be arrested in that manner. The accusation was probably without foundation, for Neuhoff, King of Corsica, was put in prison by his creditors.

These silent captures of the person, very usual with the Holy Væhme in Germany, were admitted by German custom, which rules one half of the old English laws, and recommended in certain cases by Norman custom, which rules the other half. Justinian's chief of the palace police was called "*silentiarius imperialis*." The English magistrates who practised the captures in question relied upon numerous Norman texts: — *Canes latrant, sergentes silent. Sergenter agere, id est tacere*. They quoted Lundulphus Sagax, paragraph 16: *Facit imperator silentium*. They quoted the charter of King Philip in 1307: *Multos tenebimus bastonerios qui, obmutescentes, sergentare valeant*. They quoted the statutes of Henry I. of England, cap. 53: *Surge signo jussus. Taciturnior esto. Hoc est esse in captione regis*. They took advantage especially of the following description, held to form part of the ancient feudal franchises of England:— "Sous les viscomtes sont les serjans de l'espée, lesquels doivent justicier vertueusement à l'espée tous ceux qui suient malveses compagnies, gens diffamez d'aucuns crimes, et gens fuites et forbannis.... et les doivent si vigoureusement et discrètement appréhender, que la bonne gent qui sont paisibles soient gardez paisiblement et que les malfeteurs soient espoantés." To be thus arrested was to be seized "à le glaive de l'espée." (*Vetus Consuetudo Normanniæ*, MS. part I, sect. I, ch. 11.) The jurisconsults referred besides "*in Charta Ludovici Hutum pro Normannis*, chapter *Servientes spathæ*." *Servientes spathæ*, in the gradual approach of base Latin to our idioms, became *sergentes spadæ*.

These silent arrests were the contrary of the *Clameur de Haro*, and gave warning that it was advisable to hold one's tongue until such time as light should be thrown upon certain matters still in the dark. They signified questions reserved, and showed in the operation of the police a certain amount of *raison d'état*.

The legal term "private" was applied to arrests of this description. It was thus that Edward III., according to some chroniclers, caused Mortimer to be seized in the bed of his mother, Isabella of France. This, again, we may take leave to doubt; for Mortimer sustained a siege in his town before being captured.

Warwick, the king-maker, delighted in practising this mode of "attaching people." Cromwell made use of it, especially in Connaught; and it was with this precaution of silence that Trailie Arcklo, a relation of the Earl of Ormond, was arrested at Kilmacaugh.

These captures of the body by the mere motion of justice represented rather the *mandat de comparution* than the warrant of arrest. Sometimes they were but processes of inquiry, and even argued, by the silence imposed upon all, a certain consideration for the person seized. For the mass of the people, little versed as they were in the estimate of such shades of difference, they had peculiar terrors.

It must not be forgotten that in 1705, and even much later, England was far from being what she is to-day. The general features of its constitution were confused and at times very oppressive. Daniel Defoe, who had himself had a taste of the pillory, characterizes the social order of England, somewhere in his writings, as the "iron hands of the law." There was not only the law; there was its arbitrary administration. We have but to recall Steele, ejected from Parliament; Locke, driven from his chair; Hobbes and Gibbon, compelled to flight; Charles Churchill, Hume, and Priestley, persecuted; John Wilkes sent to the Tower. The task would be a long one, were we to count over the victims of the statute against seditious libel. The Inquisition had, to some extent, spread its arrangements throughout Europe, and its police practice was taken as a guide. A monstrous attempt against all rights was possible in England. We have only to recall the *Gazetier Cuirassé*. In the midst of the eighteenth century, Louis XV. had writers, whose works displeased him, arrested in Piccadilly. It is true that George II. laid his hands on the Pretender in France, right in the middle of the hall at the opera. Those were two long arms — that of the King of France reaching

London; that of the King of England, Paris! Such was the liberty of the period.

CHAPTER IV.

URSUS SPIES THE POLICE.

As we have already said, according to the very severe laws of the police of those days, the summons to follow the wapentake, addressed to an individual, implied to all other persons present the command not to stir.

Some curious idlers, however, were stubborn, and followed from afar off the *cortège* which had taken Gwynplaine into custody.

Ursus was of them. He had been as nearly petrified as any one has a right to be. But Ursus, so often assailed by the surprises incident to a wandering life, and by the malice of chance, was, like a ship-of-war, prepared for action, and could call to the post of danger the whole crew — that is to say, the aid of all his intelligence.

He flung off his stupor and began to think. He strove not to give way to emotion, but to stand face to face with circumstances.

To look fortune in the face is the duty of every one not an idiot; to seek not to understand, but to act.

Presently he asked himself, What could he do?

Gwynplaine being taken, Ursus was placed between two terrors — a fear for Gwynplaine, which instigated him to follow; and a fear for himself, which urged him to remain where he was.

Ursus had the intrepidity of a fly and the impassibility of a sensitive plant. His agitation was not to be described. However, he took his resolution heroically, and decided to brave the law, and to follow the wapentake, so anxious was he concerning the fate of Gwynplaine.

His terror must have been great to prompt so much courage.

To what valiant acts will not fear drive a hare!

The chamois in despair jumps a precipice. To be terrified into imprudence is one of the forms of fear.

Gwynplaine had been carried off rather than arrested. The operation of the police had been executed so rapidly that the Fair field, generally little frequented at that hour of the morning, had scarcely taken cognizance of the circumstance.

Scarcely any one in the caravans had any idea that the wapentake had come to take Gwynplaine. Hence the smallness of the crowd.

Gwynplaine, thanks to his cloak and his hat, which nearly concealed his face, could not be recognized by the passers-by.

Before he went out to follow Gwynplaine, Ursus took a precaution. He spoke to Master Nicless, to the boy Govicum, and to Fibi and Vinos, and insisted on their keeping absolute silence before Dea, who was ignorant of everything. That they should not utter a syllable that could make her suspect what had occurred; that they should make her understand that the cares of the management of the Green Box necessitated the absence of Gwynplaine and Ursus; that, besides, it would soon be the time of her daily siesta, and that before she awoke he and Gwynplaine would have returned; that all that had taken place had arisen from a mistake; that it would be very easy for Gwynplaine and himself to clear themselves before the magistrate and police; that a touch of the finger would put the matter straight, after which they should both return; above all, that no one should say a word on the subject to Dea. Having given these directions he departed.

Ursus was able to follow Gwynplaine without being remarked. Though he kept at the greatest possible distance, he so managed as not to lose sight of him. Boldness in ambuscade is the bravery of the timid.

After all, notwithstanding the solemnity of the attendant circumstances, Gwynplaine might have been summoned before the magistrate for some unimportant infraction of the law.

Ursus assured himself that the question would be decided at once.

The solution of the mystery would be made under his very eyes by the direction taken by the *cortège* which took Gwynplaine from Tarrinzeau Field when it reached the entrance of the lanes of the Little Strand.

If it turned to the left, it would conduct Gwynplaine to the justice hall in Southwark. In that case there would be little to fear, some trifling municipal offence, an admonition from the magistrate, two or three shillings to pay, and Gwynplaine would be set at liberty, and the representation of “Chaos Vanquished” would take place in the evening as usual. In that case no one would know that anything unusual had happened.

If the *cortège* turned to the right, matters would be serious.

There were frightful places in that direction.

When the wapentake, leading the file of soldiers between whom Gwynplaine walked, arrived at the small streets, Ursus watched them breathlessly. There are moments in which a man’s whole being passes into his eyes.

Which way were they going to turn?

They turned to the right.

Ursus, staggering with terror, leant against a wall that he might not fall.

There is no hypocrisy so great as the words which we say to ourselves, "*I wish to know the worst!*" At heart we do not wish it at all. We have a dreadful fear of knowing it. Agony is mingled with a dim effort not to see the end. We do not own it to ourselves, but we would draw back if we dared; and when we have advanced, we reproach ourselves for having done so.

Thus did Ursus. He shuddered as he thought, —

"Here are things going wrong. I should have found it out soon enough. What business had I to follow Gwynplaine?"

Having made this reflection, man being but self-contradiction, he increased his pace, and, mastering his anxiety, hastened to get nearer the *cortège*, so as not to break, in the maze of small streets, the thread between Gwynplaine and himself.

The *cortège* of police could not move quickly, on account of its solemnity.

The wapentake led it.

The justice of the quorum closed it.

This order compelled a certain deliberation of movement.

All the majesty possible in an official shone in the justice of the quorum. His costume held a middle place between the splendid robe of a doctor of music of Oxford and the sober black habiliments of a doctor of divinity of Cambridge. He wore the dress of a gentleman under a long *godebert*, which is a mantle trimmed with the fur of the Norwegian hare. He was half Gothic and half modern, wearing a wig like Lamoignon, and sleeves like Tristan l'Hermite. His great round eye watched Gwynplaine with the fixedness of an owl's.

He walked with a cadence. Never did honest man look fiercer.

Ursus, for a moment thrown out of his way in the tangled skein of streets, overtook, close to Saint Mary Overy, the *cortège*, which had fortunately been retarded in the churchyard by a fight between children and dogs — a common incident in the streets in those days. "*Dogs and boys,*" say the old registers of police, placing the dogs before the boys.

A man being taken before a magistrate by the police was, after all, an everyday affair, and each one having his own business to attend to, the few who had followed soon dispersed. There remained but Ursus on the track of Gwynplaine.

They passed before two chapels opposite to each other, belonging the one to the Recreative Religionists, the other to the Hallelujah League — sects which flourished then, and which exist to the present day.

Then the *cortège* wound from street to street, making a zigzag, choosing by preference lanes not yet built on, roads where the grass grew, and deserted alleys.

At length it stopped.

It was in a little lane with no houses except two or three hovels. This narrow alley was composed of two walls — one on the left, low; the other on the right, high. The high wall was black, and built in the Saxon style with narrow holes, scorpions, and large square gratings over narrow loopholes. There was no window on it, but here and there slits, old embrasures of *pierriers* and archegayes. At the foot of this high wall was seen, like the hole at the bottom of a rat-trap, a little wicket gate, very elliptical in its arch.

This small door, encased in a full, heavy girding of stone, had a grated peephole, a heavy knocker, a large lock, hinges thick and knotted, a bristling of nails, an armour of plates, and hinges, so that altogether it was more of iron than of wood.

There was no one in the lane — no shops, no passengers; but in it there was heard a continual noise, as if the lane ran parallel to a torrent. There was a tumult of voices and of carriages. It seemed as if on the other side of the black edifice there must be a great street, doubtless the principal street of Southwark, one end of which ran into the Canterbury road, and the other on to London Bridge.

All the length of the lane, except the *cortège* which surrounded Gwynplaine, a watcher would have seen no other human face than the pale profile of Ursus, hazarding a hall advance from the shadow of the corner of the wall — looking, yet fearing to see. He had posted himself behind the wall at a turn of the lane.

The constables grouped themselves before the wicket. Gwynplaine was in the centre, the wapentake and his baton of iron being now behind him.

The justice of the quorum raised the knocker, and struck the door three times. The loophole opened.

The justice of the quorum said, —

“By order of her Majesty.”

The heavy door of oak and iron turned on its hinges, making a chilly opening, like the mouth of a cavern. A hideous depth yawned in the shadow.

Ursus saw Gwynplaine disappear within it.

CHAPTER V.

A FEARFUL PLACE.

The wapentake entered behind Gwynplaine.

Then the justice of the quorum.

Then the constables.

The wicket was closed.

The heavy door swung to, closing hermetically on the stone sills, without any one seeing who had opened or shut it. It seemed as if the bolts re-entered their sockets of their own act. Some of these mechanisms, the inventions of ancient intimidation, still exist in old prisons — doors of which you saw no doorkeeper. With them the entrance to a prison becomes like the entrance to a tomb.

This wicket was the lower door of Southwark Jail.

There was nothing in the harsh and worm-eaten aspect of this prison to soften its appropriate air of rigour.

Originally a pagan temple, built by the Catieuchlans for the Mogons, ancient English gods, it became a palace for Ethelwolf and a fortress for Edward the Confessor; then it was elevated to the dignity of a prison, in 1199, by John Lackland. Such was Southwark Jail. This jail, at first intersected by a street, like Chenonceaux by a river, had been for a century or two a gate — that is to say, the gate of the suburb; the passage had then been walled up. There remain in England some prisons of this nature. In London, Newgate; at Canterbury, Westgate; at Edinburgh, Canongate. In France the Bastile was originally a gate.

Almost all the jails of England present the same appearance — a high wall without and a hive of cells within. Nothing could be more funereal than the appearance of those prisons, where spiders and justice spread their webs, and where John Howard, that ray of light, had not yet penetrated. Like the old Gehenna of Brussels, they might well have been designated Treurenberg — *the house of tears*.

Men felt before such buildings, at once so savage and inhospitable, the same distress that the ancient navigators suffered before the hell of slaves mentioned by Plautus, islands of creaking chains, *ferricrepiditæ insulæ*, when they passed near enough to hear the clank of the fetters.

Southwark Jail, an old place of exorcisms and torture, was originally used solely for the imprisonment of sorcerers, as was proved by two verses engraved on a defaced stone at the foot of the wicket, —

Sunt arreptitii, vexati dæmone multo
Est energumenus, quem dæmon possidet unus.

Lines which draw a subtle delicate distinction between the demoniac and man possessed by a devil.

At the bottom of this inscription, nailed flat against the wall, was a stone ladder, which had been originally of wood, but which had been changed into stone by being buried in earth of petrifying quality at a place called Apsley Gowis, near Woburn Abbey.

The prison of Southwark, now demolished, opened on two streets, between which, as a gate, it formerly served as means of communication. It had two doors. In the large street a door, apparently used by the authorities; and in the lane the door of punishment, used by the rest of the living and by the dead also, because when a prisoner in the jail died it was by that issue that his corpse was carried out. A liberation not to be despised. Death is release into infinity.

It was by the gate of punishment that Gwynplaine had been taken into prison. The lane, as we have said, was nothing but a little passage, paved with flints, confined between two opposite walls. There is one of the same kind at Brussels called *Rue d’une Personne*. The walls were unequal in height. The high one was the prison; the low one, the cemetery — the enclosure for the mortuary remains of the jail — was not higher than the ordinary stature of a man. In it was a gate almost opposite the prison wicket. The dead had only to cross the street; the cemetery was but twenty paces from the jail. On the high wall was affixed a gallows; on the low one was sculptured a Death’s head. Neither of these walls made its opposite neighbour more cheerful.

CHAPTER VI.

THE KIND OF MAGISTRACY UNDER THE WIGS OF FORMER DAYS.

Any one observing at that moment the other side of the prison — its façade — would have perceived the high street of Southwark, and might have remarked, stationed before the monumental and official entrance to the jail, a travelling carriage, recognized as such by its imperial. A few idlers surrounded the carriage. On it was a coat of arms, and a personage had been seen to descend from it and enter the prison. “Probably a magistrate,” conjectured the crowd. Many of the English magistrates were noble, and almost all had the right of bearing arms. In France blazon and robe were almost contradictory terms. The Duke Saint-Simon says, in speaking of magistrates, “people of that class.” In England a gentleman was not despised for being a judge.

There are travelling magistrates in England; they are called judges of circuit, and nothing was easier than to recognize the carriage as the vehicle of a judge on circuit. That which was less comprehensible was, that the supposed magistrate got down, not from the carriage itself, but from the box, a place which is not habitually occupied by the owner. Another unusual thing. People travelled at that period in England in two ways — by coach, at the rate of a shilling for five miles; and by post, paying three half-pence per mile, and twopence to the postillion after each stage. A private carriage, whose owner desired to travel by relays, paid as many shillings per horse per mile as the horseman paid pence. The carriage drawn up before the jail in Southwark had four horses and two postillions, which displayed princely state. Finally, that which excited and disconcerted conjectures to the utmost was the circumstance that the carriage was sedulously shut up. The blinds of the windows were closed up. The glasses in front were darkened by blinds; every opening by which the eye might have penetrated was masked. From without, nothing within could be seen, and most likely from within, nothing could be seen outside. However, it did not seem probable that there was any one in the carriage.

Southwark being in Surrey, the prison was within the jurisdiction of the sheriff of the county.

Such distinct jurisdictions were very frequent in England. Thus, for example, the Tower of London was not supposed to be situated in any county; that is to say, that legally it was considered to be in air. The Tower recognized no authority of jurisdiction except in its own constable, who was qualified as *custos turris*. The Tower had its jurisdiction, its church, its court of justice, and its government apart. The authority of its *custos*, or constable, extended, beyond London, over twenty-one hamlets. As in Great Britain legal singularities engraft one upon another the office of the master gunner of England was derived from the Tower of London. Other legal customs seem still more whimsical. Thus, the English Court of Admiralty consults and applies the laws of Rhodes and of Oleron, a French island which was once English.

The sheriff of a county was a person of high consideration. He was always an esquire, and sometimes a knight. He was called *spectabilis* in the old deeds, "a man to be looked at" — kind of intermediate title between *illustris* and *clarissimus;* less than the first, more than the second. Long ago the sheriffs of the counties were chosen by the people; but Edward II., and after him Henry VI., having claimed their nomination for the crown, the office of sheriff became a royal emanation.

They all received their commissions from majesty, except the sheriff of Westmoreland, whose office was hereditary, and the sheriffs of London and Middlesex, who were elected by the livery in the common hall. Sheriffs of Wales and Chester possessed certain fiscal prerogatives. These appointments are all still in existence in England, but, subjected little by little to the friction of manners and ideas, they have lost their old aspects. It was the duty of the sheriff of the county to escort and protect the judges on circuit. As we have two arms, he had two officers; his right arm the under-sheriff, his left arm the justice of the quorum. The justice of the quorum, assisted by the bailiff of the hundred, termed the wapentake, apprehended, examined, and, under the responsibility of the sheriff, imprisoned, for trial by the judges of circuit, thieves, murderers, rebels, vagabonds, and all sorts of felons.

The shade of difference between the under-sheriff and the justice of the quorum, in their hierarchical service towards the sheriff, was that the under-sheriff accompanied and the justice of the quorum assisted.

The sheriff held two courts — one fixed and central, the county court; and a movable court, the sheriff's turn. He thus represented both unity and ubiquity. He might as judge be aided and informed on legal questions by the serjeant of the coif, called *sergens coifæ*, who is a serjeant-at-law, and who wears under his black skull-cap a fillet of white Cambray lawn.

The sheriff delivered the jails. When he arrived at a town in his province, he had the right of summary trial of the prisoners, of which he might cause either their release or the execution. This was called a jail delivery. The sheriff presented bills of indictment to the twenty-four members of the grand jury. If they approved, they wrote above, *billa vera;* if the contrary, they wrote *ignoramus*. In the latter case the accusation was annulled, and the sheriff had the privilege of tearing up the bill. If during the deliberation a juror died, this legally acquitted the prisoner and made him innocent, and the sheriff, who had the privilege of arresting the accused, had also that of setting him at liberty.

That which made the sheriff singularly feared and respected was that he had the charge of executing all the orders of her Majesty — a fearful latitude. An arbitrary power lodges in such commissions.

The officers termed vergers, the coroners making part of the sheriff’s *cortège*, and the clerks of the market as escort, with gentlemen on horseback and their servants in livery, made a handsome suite. The sheriff, says Chamberlayne, is the “life of justice, of law, and of the country.”

In England an insensible demolition constantly pulverizes and dissevers laws and customs. You must understand in our day that neither the sheriff, the wapentake, nor the justice of the quorum could exercise their functions as they did then. There was in the England of the past a certain confusion of powers, whose ill-defined attributes resulted in their overstepping their real bounds at times — a thing which would be impossible in the present day. The usurpation of power by police and justices has ceased. We believe that even the word “wapentake” has changed its meaning. It implied a magisterial function; now it signifies a territorial division: it specified the centurion; it now specifies the hundred (*centum*).

Moreover, in those days the sheriff of the county combined with something more and something less, and condensed in his own authority, which was at once royal and municipal, the two magistrates formerly called in France the civil lieutenant of Paris and the lieutenant of police. The civil lieutenant of Paris, Monsieur, is pretty well described in an old police note: “The civil lieutenant has no dislike to domestic quarrels, because he always has the pickings” (22nd July 1704). As to the lieutenant of police, he was a redoubtable person, multiple and vague. The best personification of him was René d’Argenson, who, as was said by Saint-Simon, displayed in his face the three judges of hell united.

The three judges of hell sat, as has already been seen, at Bishopsgate, London.

CHAPTER VII.

SHUDDERING.

When Gwynplaine heard the wicket shut, creaking in all its bolts, he trembled. It seemed to him that the door which had just closed was the communication between light and darkness — opening on one side on the living, human crowd, and on the other on a dead world; and now that everything illumined by the sun was behind him, that he had stepped over the boundary of life and was standing without it, his heart contracted. What were they going to do with him? What did it all mean? Where was he?

He saw nothing around him; he found himself in perfect darkness. The shutting of the door had momentarily blinded him. The window in the door had been closed as well. No loophole, no lamp. Such were the precautions of old times. It was forbidden to light the entrance to the jails, so that the newcomers should take no observations.

Gwynplaine extended his arms, and touched the wall on the right side and on the left. He was in a passage. Little by little a cavernous daylight exuding, no one knows whence, and which floats about dark places, and to which the dilatation of the pupil adjusts itself slowly, enabled him to distinguish a feature here and there, and the corridor was vaguely sketched out before him.

Gwynplaine, who had never had a glimpse of penal severities, save in the exaggerations of Ursus, felt as though seized by a sort of vague gigantic hand. To be caught in the mysterious toils of the law is frightful. He who is brave in all other dangers is disconcerted in the presence of justice. Why? Is it that the justice of man works in twilight, and the judge gropes his way? Gwynplaine remembered what Ursus had told him of the necessity for silence. He wished to see Dea again; he felt some discretionary instinct, which urged him not to irritate. Sometimes to wish to be enlightened is to make matters worse; on the other hand, however, the weight of the adventure was so overwhelming that he gave way at length, and could not restrain a question.

“Gentlemen,” said he, “whither are you taking me?”

They made no answer.

It was the law of silent capture, and the Norman text is formal: *A silentiariis ostio, præpositis introducti sunt*.

This silence froze Gwynplaine. Up to that moment he had believed himself to be firm: he was self-sufficing. To be self-sufficing is to be powerful. He had lived isolated from the world, and imagined that being alone he was unassailable; and now all at once he felt himself under the pressure of a hideous collective force. How was he to combat that horrible anonyma, the law? He felt faint under the perplexity; a fear of an unknown character had found a fissure in his armour; besides, he had not slept, he had not eaten, he had scarcely moistened his lips with a cup of tea. The whole night had been passed in a kind of delirium, and the fever was still on him. He was thirsty; perhaps hungry. The craving of the stomach disorders everything. Since the previous evening all kinds of incidents had assailed him. The emotions which had tormented had sustained him. Without the storm a sail would be a rag. But his was the excessive feebleness of the rag, which the wind inflates till it tears it. He felt himself sinking. Was he about to fall without consciousness on the pavement? To faint is the resource of a woman, and the humiliation of a man. He hardened himself, but he trembled. He felt as one losing his footing.

CHAPTER VIII.

LAMENTATION.

They began to move forward.

They advanced through the passage.

There was no preliminary registry, no place of record. The prisons in those times were not overburdened with documents. They were content to close round you without knowing why. To be a prison, and to hold prisoners, sufficed.

The procession was obliged to lengthen itself out, taking the form of the corridor. They walked almost in single file; first the wapentake, then Gwynplaine, then the justice of the quorum, then the constables, advancing in a group, and blocking up the passage behind Gwynplaine as with a bung. The passage narrowed. Now Gwynplaine touched the walls with both his elbows. In the roof, which was made of flints, dashed with cement, was a succession of granite arches jutting out, and still more contracting the passage. He had to stoop to pass under them. No speed was possible in that corridor. Any one trying to escape through it would have been compelled to move slowly. The passage twisted. All entrails are tortuous; those of a prison as well as those of a man. Here and there, sometimes to the right and sometimes to the left, spaces in the wall, square and closed by large iron gratings, gave glimpses of flights of stairs, some descending and some ascending.

They reached a closed door; it opened. They passed through, and it closed again. Then they came to a second door, which admitted them; then to a third, which also turned on its hinges. These doors seemed to open and shut of themselves. No one was to be seen. While the corridor contracted, the roof grew lower, until at length it was impossible to stand upright. Moisture exuded from the wall. Drops of water fell from the vault. The slabs that paved the corridor were clammy as an intestine. The diffused pallor that served as light became more and more a pall. Air was deficient, and, what was singularly ominous, the passage was a descent.

Close observation was necessary to perceive that there was such a descent. In darkness a gentle declivity is portentous. Nothing is more fearful than the vague evils to which we are led by imperceptible degrees.

It is awful to descend into unknown depths.

How long had they proceeded thus? Gwynplaine could not tell.

Moments passed under such crushing agony seem immeasurably prolonged.

Suddenly they halted.

The darkness was intense.

The corridor widened somewhat. Gwynplaine heard close to him a noise of which only a Chinese gong could give an idea; something like a blow struck against the diaphragm of the abyss. It was the wapentake striking his wand against a sheet of iron.

That sheet of iron was a door.

Not a door on hinges, but a door which was raised and let down.

Something like a portcullis.

There was a sound of creaking in a groove, and Gwynplaine was suddenly face to face with a bit of square light. The sheet of metal had just been raised into a slit in the vault, like the door of a mouse-trap.

An opening had appeared.

The light was not daylight, but glimmer; but on the dilated eyeballs of Gwynplaine the pale and sudden ray struck like a flash of lightning.

It was some time before he could see anything. To see with dazzled eyes is as difficult as to see in darkness.

At length, by degrees, the pupil of his eye became proportioned to the light, just as it had been proportioned to the darkness, and he was able to distinguish objects. The light, which at first had seemed too bright, settled into its proper hue and became livid. He cast a glance into the yawning space before him, and what he saw was terrible.

At his feet were about twenty steps, steep, narrow, worn, almost perpendicular, without balustrade on either side, a sort of stone ridge cut out from the side of a wall into stairs, entering and leading into a very deep cell. They reached to the bottom.

The cell was round, roofed by an ogee vault with a low arch, from the fault of level in the top stone of the frieze, a displacement common to cells under heavy edifices.

The kind of hole acting as a door, which the sheet of iron had just revealed, and on which the stairs abutted, was formed in the vault, so that the eye looked down from it as into a well.

The cell was large, and if it was the bottom of a well, it must have been a cyclopean one. The idea that the old word “*cul-de-basse-fosse*” awakens in the mind can only be applied to it if it were a lair of wild beasts.

The cell was neither flagged nor paved. The bottom was of that cold, moist earth peculiar to deep places.

In the midst of the cell, four low and disproportioned columns sustained a porch heavily ogival, of which the four mouldings united in the interior of the porch, something like the inside of a mitre. This porch, similar to the pinnacles under which sarcophagi were formerly placed, rose nearly to the top of the vault, and made a sort of central chamber in the cavern, if that could be called a chamber which had only pillars in place of walls.

From the key of the arch hung a brass lamp, round and barred like the window of a prison. This lamp threw around it — on the pillars, on the vault, on the circular wall which was seen dimly behind the pillars — a wan light, cut by bars of shadow.

This was the light which had at first dazzled Gwynplaine; now it threw out only a confused redness.

There was no other light in the cell — neither window, nor door, nor loophole.

Between the four pillars, exactly below the lamp, in the spot where there was most light, a pale and terrible form lay on the ground.

It was lying on its back; a head was visible, of which the eyes were shut; a body, of which the chest was a shapeless mass; four limbs belonging to the body, in the position of the cross of Saint Andrew, were drawn towards the four pillars by four chains fastened to each foot and each hand.

These chains were fastened to an iron ring at the base of each column. The form was held immovable, in the horrible position of being quartered, and had the icy look of a livid corpse.

It was naked. It was a man.

Gwynplaine, as if petrified, stood at the top of the stairs, looking down. Suddenly he heard a rattle in the throat.

The corpse was alive.

Close to the spectre, in one of the ogives of the door, on each side of a great seat, which stood on a large flat stone, stood two men swathed in long black cloaks; and on the seat an old man was sitting, dressed in a red robe — wan, motionless, and ominous, holding a bunch of roses in his hand.

The bunch of roses would have enlightened any one less ignorant that Gwynplaine. The right of judging with a nosegay in his hand implied the holder to be a magistrate, at once royal and municipal. The Lord Mayor of London still keeps up the custom. To assist the deliberations of the judges was the function of the earliest roses of the season.

The old man seated on the bench was the sheriff of the county of Surrey.

His was the majestic rigidity of a Roman dignitary.

The bench was the only seat in the cell.

By the side of it was a table covered with papers and books, on which lay the long, white wand of the sheriff. The men standing by the side of the sheriff were two doctors, one of medicine, the other of law; the latter recognizable by the Serjeant's coif over his wig. Both wore black robes — one of the shape worn by judges, the other by doctors.

Men of these kinds wear mourning for the deaths of which they are the cause.

Behind the sheriff, at the edge of the flat stone under the seat, was crouched — with a writing-table near to him, a bundle of papers on his knees, and a sheet of parchment on the bundle — a secretary, in a round wig, with a pen in his hand, in the attitude of a man ready to write.

This secretary was of the class called keeper of the bag, as was shown by a bag at his feet.

These bags, in former times employed in law processes, were termed bags of justice.

With folded arms, leaning against a pillar, was a man entirely dressed in leather, the hangman's assistant.

These men seemed as if they had been fixed by enchantment in their funereal postures round the chained man. None of them spoke or moved.

There brooded over all a fearful calm.

What Gwynplaine saw was a torture chamber. There were many such in England.

The crypt of Beauchamp Tower long served this purpose, as did also the cell in the Lollards' prison. A place of this nature is still to be seen in London, called "the Vaults of Lady Place." In this last-mentioned chamber there is a grate for the purpose of heating the irons.

All the prisons of King John's time (and Southwark Jail was one) had their chambers of torture.

The scene which is about to follow was in those days a frequent one in England, and might even, by criminal process, be carried out to-day, since the same laws are still unrepealed. England offers the curious sight of a barbarous code living on the best terms with liberty. We confess that they make an excellent family party.

Some distrust, however, might not be undesirable. In the case of a crisis, a return to the penal code would not be impossible. English legislation is a tamed tiger with a velvet paw, but the claws are still there. Cut the claws of the law, and you will do well. Law almost ignores right. On one side is penalty, on the other humanity. Philosophers protest; but it will take some time yet before the justice of man is assimilated to the justice of God.

Respect for the law: that is the English phrase. In England they venerate so many laws, that they never repeal any. They save themselves from the consequences of their veneration by never putting them into execution. An old law falls into disuse like an old woman, and they never think of killing either one or the other. They cease to make use of them; that is all. Both are at liberty to consider themselves still young and beautiful. They may fancy that they are as they were. This politeness is called respect.

Norman custom is very wrinkled. That does not prevent many an English judge casting sheep's eyes at her. They stick amorously to an antiquated atrocity, so long as it is Norman. What can be more savage than the gibbet? In 1867 a man was sentenced to be cut into four quarters and offered to a woman — the Queen.

Still, torture was never practised in England. History asserts this as a fact. The assurance of history is wonderful.

Matthew of Westminster mentions that the "Saxon law, very clement and kind," did not punish criminals by death; and adds that "it limited itself to cutting off the nose and scooping out the eyes." That was all!

Gwynplaine, scared and haggard, stood at the top of the steps, trembling in every limb. He shuddered from head to foot. He tried to remember what crime he had committed. To the silence of the wapentake had succeeded the vision of torture to be endured. It was a step, indeed, forward; but a tragic one. He saw the dark enigma of the law under the power of which he felt himself increasing in obscurity.

The human form lying on the earth rattled in its throat again.

Gwynplaine felt some one touching him gently on his shoulder.

It was the wapentake.

Gwynplaine knew that meant that he was to descend.

He obeyed.

He descended the stairs step by step. They were very narrow, each eight or nine inches in height. There was no hand-rail. The descent required caution. Two steps behind Gwynplaine followed the wapentake, holding up his iron weapon; and at the same interval behind the wapentake, the justice of the quorum.

As he descended the steps, Gwynplaine felt an indescribable extinction of hope. There was death in each step. In each one that he descended there died a ray of the light within him. Growing paler and paler, he reached the bottom of the stairs.

The larva lying chained to the four pillars still rattled in its throat.

A voice in the shadow said, —

“Approach!”

It was the sheriff addressing Gwynplaine.

Gwynplaine took a step forward.

“Closer,” said the sheriff.

The justice of the quorum murmured in the ear of Gwynplaine, so gravely that there was solemnity in the whisper, “You are before the sheriff of the county of Surrey.”

Gwynplaine advanced towards the victim extended in the centre of the cell. The wapentake and the justice of the quorum remained where they were, allowing Gwynplaine to advance alone.

When Gwynplaine reached the spot under the porch, close to that miserable thing which he had hitherto perceived only from a distance, but which was a living man, his fear rose to terror. The man who was chained there was quite naked, except for that rag so hideously modest, which might be called the vineleaf of punishment, the *succingulum* of the Romans, and the *christipannus* of the Goths, of which the old Gallic jargon made *cripagne*. Christ wore but that shred on the cross.

The terror-stricken sufferer whom Gwynplaine now saw seemed a man of about fifty or sixty years of age. He was bald. Grizzly hairs of beard bristled on his chin. His eyes were closed, his mouth open. Every tooth was to be seen. His thin and bony face was like a death’s-head. His arms and legs were fastened by chains to the four stone pillars in the shape of the letter X. He had on his breast and belly a plate of iron, and on this iron five or six large stones were laid. His rattle was at times a sigh, at times a roar.

The sheriff, still holding his bunch of roses, took from the table with the hand which was free his white wand, and standing up said, “Obedience to her Majesty.”

Then he replaced the wand upon the table.

Then in words long-drawn as a knell, without a gesture, and immovable as the sufferer, the sheriff, raising his voice, said, —

“Man, who liest here bound in chains, listen for the last time to the voice of justice; you have been taken from your dungeon and brought to this jail. Legally summoned in the usual forms, *formaliis verbis pressus;* not regarding to lectures and communications which have been made, and which will now be repeated, to you; inspired by a bad and perverse spirit of tenacity, you have preserved silence, and refused to answer the judge. This is a detestable licence, which constitutes, among deeds punishable by cashlit, the crime and misdemeanour of overseness.”

The serjeant of the coif on the right of the sheriff interrupted him, and said, with an indifference indescribably lugubrious in its effect, “*Overhernessa*. Laws of Alfred and of Godrun, chapter the sixth.”

The sheriff resumed.

“The law is respected by all except by scoundrels who infest the woods where the hinds bear young.”

Like one clock striking after another, the serjeant said, —

“*Qui faciunt vastum in foresta ubi damoe solent founinare*.”

“He who refuses to answer the magistrate,” said the sheriff, “is suspected of every vice. He is reputed capable of every evil.”

The serjeant interposed.

“*Prodigus, devorator, profusus, salax, ruffianus, ebriosus, luxuriosus, simulator, consumptor patrimonii, elluo, ambro, et gluto*.”

“Every vice,” said the sheriff, “means every crime. He who confesses nothing, confesses everything. He who holds his peace before the questions of the judge is in fact a liar and a parricide.”

“*Mendax et parricida*,” said the serjeant.

The sheriff said, —

“Man, it is not permitted to absent oneself by silence. To pretend contumaciousness is a wound given to the law. It is like Diomede wounding a goddess. Taciturnity before a judge is a form of rebellion. Treason to justice is high treason. Nothing is more hateful or rash. He who resists interrogation steals truth. The law has provided for this. For such cases, the English have always enjoyed the right of the foss, the fork, and chains."

"*Anglica Charta*, year 1088," said the serjeant. Then with the same mechanical gravity he added, "*Ferrum, et fossam, et furcas cum aliis libertatibus*."

The sheriff continued, —

"Man! Forasmuch as you have not chosen to break silence, though of sound mind and having full knowledge in respect of the subject concerning which justice demands an answer, and forasmuch as you are diabolically refractory, you have necessarily been put to torture, and you have been, by the terms of the criminal statutes, tried by the '*Peine forte et dure*.' This is what has been done to you, for the law requires that I should fully inform you. You have been brought to this dungeon. You have been stripped of your clothes. You have been laid on your back naked on the ground, your limbs have been stretched and tied to the four pillars of the law; a sheet of iron has been placed on your chest, and as many stones as you can bear have been heaped on your belly, 'and more,' says the law."

"*Plusque,*" affirmed the serjeant.

The sheriff continued, —

"In this situation, and before prolonging the torture, a second summons to answer and to speak has been made you by me, sheriff of the county of Surrey, and you have satanically kept silent, though under torture, chains, shackles, fetters, and irons."

"*Attachiamenta legalia,*" said the serjeant.

"On your refusal and contumacy," said the sheriff, "it being right that the obstinacy of the law should equal the obstinacy of the criminal, the proof has been continued according to the edicts and texts. The first day you were given nothing to eat or drink."

"*Hoc est superjejunare,*" said the serjeant.

There was silence, the awful hiss of the man's breathing was heard from under the heap of stones.

The serjeant-at-law completed his quotation.

"*Adde augmentum abstinentiæ ciborum diminutione. Consuetudo brittanica*, art. 504."

The two men, the sheriff and the serjeant, alternated. Nothing could be more dreary than their imperturbable monotony. The mournful voice responded to the ominous voice; it might be said that the priest and the deacon of punishment were celebrating the savage mass of the law.

The sheriff resumed, —

“On the first day you were given nothing to eat or drink. On the second day you were given food, but nothing to drink. Between your teeth were thrust three mouthfuls of barley bread. On the third day they gave you to drink, but nothing to eat. They poured into your mouth at three different times, and in three different glasses, a pint of water taken from the common sewer of the prison. The fourth day is come. It is to-day. Now, if you do not answer, you will be left here till you die. Justice wills it.”

The Serjeant, ready with his reply, appeared.

“*Mors rei homagium est bonæ legi*.”

“And while you feel yourself dying miserably,” resumed the sheriff, “no one will attend to you, even when the blood rushes from your throat, your chin, and your armpits, and every pore, from the mouth to the loins.”

“*A throtabolla,*” said the Serjeant, “*et pabu et subhircis et a grugno usque ad crupponum*.”

The sheriff continued, —

“Man, attend to me, because the consequences concern you. If you renounce your execrable silence, and if you confess, you will only be hanged, and you will have a right to the meldefeoh, which is a sum of money.”

“*Damnum confitens,*” said the Serjeant, “*habeat le meldefeoh. Leges Inæ*, chapter the twentieth.”

“Which sum,” insisted the sheriff, “shall be paid in doitkins, suskins, and galihalpens, the only case in which this money is to pass, according to the terms of the statute of abolition, in the third of Henry V., and you will have the right and enjoyment of *scortum ante mortem,* and then be hanged on the gibbet. Such are the advantages of confession. Does it please you to answer to justice?”

The sheriff ceased and waited.

The prisoner lay motionless.

The sheriff resumed, —

“Man, silence is a refuge in which there is more risk than safety. The obstinate man is damnable and vicious. He who is silent before justice is a felon to the crown. Do not persist in this unfilial disobedience. Think of her

Majesty. Do not oppose our gracious queen. When I speak to you, answer her; be a loyal subject."

The patient rattled in the throat.

The sheriff continued, —

"So, after the seventy-two hours of the proof, here we are at the fourth day. Man, this is the decisive day. The fourth day has been fixed by the law for the confrontation."

"*Quarta die, frontem ad frontem adduce*," growled the Serjeant.

"The wisdom of the law," continued the sheriff, "has chosen this last hour to hold what our ancestors called 'judgment by mortal cold,' seeing that it is the moment when men are believed on their yes or their no."

The serjeant on the right confirmed his words.

"*Judicium pro frodmortell, quod homines credendi sint per suum ya et per suum no*. Charter of King Adelstan, volume the first, page one hundred and sixty-three."

There was a moment's pause; then the sheriff bent his stern face towards the prisoner.

"Man, who art lying there on the ground—"

He paused.

"Man," he cried, "do you hear me?"

The man did not move.

"In the name of the law," said the sheriff, "open your eyes."

The man's lids remained closed.

The sheriff turned to the doctor, who was standing on his left.

"Doctor, give your diagnostic."

"*Probe, da diagnosticum*," said the serjeant.

The doctor came down with magisterial stiffness, approached the man, leant over him, put his ear close to the mouth of the sufferer, felt the pulse at the wrist, the armpit, and the thigh, then rose again.

"Well?" said the sheriff.

"He can still hear," said the doctor.

"Can he see?" inquired the sheriff.

The doctor answered, "He can see."

On a sign from the sheriff, the justice of the quorum and the wapentake advanced. The wapentake placed himself near the head of the patient. The justice of the quorum stood behind Gwynplaine.

The doctor retired a step behind the pillars.

Then the sheriff, raising the bunch of roses as a priest about to sprinkle holy water, called to the prisoner in a loud voice, and became awful.

"O wretched man, speak! The law supplicates before she exterminates you. You, who feign to be mute, remember how mute is the tomb. You, who appear deaf, remember that damnation is more deaf. Think of the death which is worse than your present state. Repent! You are about to be left alone in this cell. Listen! you who are my likeness; for I am a man! Listen, my brother, because I am a Christian! Listen, my son, because I am an old man! Look at me; for I am the master of your sufferings, and I am about to become terrible. The terrors of the law make up the majesty of the judge. Believe that I myself tremble before myself. My own power alarms me. Do not drive me to extremities. I am filled by the holy malice of chastisement. Feel, then, wretched man, the salutary and honest fear of justice, and obey me. The hour of confrontation is come, and you must answer. Do not harden yourself in resistance. Do not that which will be irrevocable. Think that your end belongs to me. Half man, half corpse, listen! At least, let it not be your determination to expire here, exhausted for hours, days, and weeks, by frightful agonies of hunger and foulness, under the weight of those stones, alone in this cell, deserted, forgotten, annihilated, left as food for the rats and the weasels, gnawed by creatures of darkness while the world comes and goes, buys and sells, whilst carriages roll in the streets above your head. Unless you would continue to draw painful breath without remission in the depths of this despair — grinding your teeth, weeping, blaspheming — without a doctor to appease the anguish of your wounds, without a priest to offer a divine draught of water to your soul. Oh! if only that you may not feel the frightful froth of the sepulchre ooze slowly from your lips, I adjure and conjure you to hear me. I call you to your own aid. Have pity on yourself. Do what is asked of you. Give way to justice. Open your eyes, and see if you recognize this man!"

The prisoner neither turned his head nor lifted his eyelids.

The sheriff cast a glance first at the justice of the quorum and then at the wapentake.

The justice of the quorum, taking Gwynplaine's hat and mantle, put his hands on his shoulders and placed him in the light by the side of the chained man. The face of Gwynplaine stood out clearly from the surrounding shadow in its strange relief.

At the same time, the wapentake bent down, took the man’s temples between his hands, turned the inert head towards Gwynplaine, and with his thumbs and his first fingers lifted the closed eyelids.

The prisoner saw Gwynplaine. Then, raising his head voluntarily, and opening his eyes wide, he looked at him.

He quivered as much as a man can quiver with a mountain on his breast, and then cried out, —

“’Tis he! Yes; ’tis he!”

And he burst into a horrible laugh.

“’Tis he!” he repeated.

Then his head fell back on the ground, and he closed his eyes again.

“Registrar, take that down,” said the justice.

Gwynplaine, though terrified, had, up to that moment, preserved a calm exterior. The cry of the prisoner, “’Tis he!” overwhelmed him completely. The words, “Registrar, take that down!” froze him. It seemed to him that a scoundrel had dragged him to his fate without his being able to guess why, and that the man’s unintelligible confession was closing round him like the clasp of an iron collar. He fancied himself side by side with him in the posts of the same pillory. Gwynplaine lost his footing in his terror, and protested. He began to stammer incoherent words in the deep distress of an innocent man, and quivering, terrified, lost, uttered the first random outcries that rose to his mind, and words of agony like aimless projectiles.

“It is not true. It was not me. I do not know the man. He cannot know me, since I do not know him. I have my part to play this evening. What do you want of me? I demand my liberty. Nor is that all. Why have I been brought into this dungeon? Are there laws no longer? You may as well say at once that there are no laws. My Lord Judge, I repeat that it is not I. I am innocent of all that can be said. I know I am. I wish to go away. This is not justice. There is nothing between this man and me. You can find out. My life is not hidden up. They came and took me away like a thief. Why did they come like that? How could I know the man? I am a travelling mountebank, who plays farces at fairs and markets. I am the Laughing Man. Plenty of people have been to see me. We are staying in Tarrinzeau Field. I have been earning an honest livelihood these fifteen years. I am five-and-twenty. I lodge at the Tadcaster Inn. I am called Gwynplaine. My lord, let me out. You should not take advantage of the low estate of the unfortunate.

Have compassion on a man who has done no harm, who is without protection and without defence. You have before you a poor mountebank."

"I have before me," said the sheriff, "Lord Fermain Clancharlie, Baron Clancharlie and Hunkerville, Marquis of Corleone in Sicily, and a peer of England."

Rising, and offering his chair to Gwynplaine, the sheriff added, —

"My lord, will your lordship deign to seat yourself?"

BOOK THE FIFTH.

THE SEA AND FATE ARE MOVED BY THE SAME BREATH.

CHAPTER I.

THE DURABILITY OF FRAGILE THINGS.

Destiny sometimes proffers us a glass of madness to drink. A hand is thrust out of the mist, and suddenly hands us the mysterious cup in which is contained the latent intoxication.

Gwynplaine did not understand.

He looked behind him to see who it was who had been addressed.

A sound may be too sharp to be perceptible to the ear; an emotion too acute conveys no meaning to the mind. There is a limit to comprehension as well as to hearing.

The wapentake and the justice of the quorum approached Gwynplaine and took him by the arms. He felt himself placed in the chair which the sheriff had just vacated. He let it be done, without seeking an explanation.

When Gwynplaine was seated, the justice of the quorum and the wapentake retired a few steps, and stood upright and motionless, behind the seat.

Then the sheriff placed his bunch of roses on the stone table, put on spectacles which the secretary gave him, drew from the bundles of papers which covered the table a sheet of parchment, yellow, green, torn, and jagged in places, which seemed to have been folded in very small folds, and of which one side was covered with writing; standing under the light of the lamp, he held the sheet close to his eyes, and in his most solemn tone read as follows: —

"In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

"This present day, the twenty-ninth of January, one thousand six hundred and ninetieth year of our Lord.

"Has been wickedly deserted on the desert coast of Portland, with the intention of allowing him to perish of hunger, of cold, and of solitude, a child ten years old.

"That child was sold at the age of two years, by order of his most gracious Majesty, King James the Second.

"That child is Lord Fermain Clancharlie, the only legitimate son of Lord Linnæus Clancharlie, Baron Clancharlie and Hunkerville, Marquis of Corleone in Sicily, a peer of England, and of Ann Bradshaw, his wife, both deceased. That child is the inheritor of the estates and titles of his father. For this reason he was sold, mutilated, disfigured, and put out of the way by desire of his most gracious Majesty.

“That child was brought up, and trained to be a mountebank at markets and fairs.

“He was sold at the age of two, after the death of the peer, his father, and ten pounds sterling were given to the king as his purchase-money, as well as for divers concessions, tolerations, and immunities.

“Lord Fermain Clancharlie, at the age of two years, was bought by me, the undersigned, who write these lines, and mutilated and disfigured by a Fleming of Flanders, called Hardquanonne, who alone is acquainted with the secrets and modes of treatment of Doctor Conquest.

“The child was destined by us to be a laughing mask (*masca ridens*).

“With this intention Hardquanonne performed on him the operation, *Bucca fissa usque ad aures*, which stamps an everlasting laugh upon the face.

“The child, by means known only to Hardquanonne, was put to sleep and made insensible during its performance, knowing nothing of the operation which he underwent.

“He does not know that he is Lord Clancharlie.

“He answers to the name of Gwynplaine.

“This fact is the result of his youth, and the slight powers of memory he could have had when he was bought and sold, being then barely two years old.

“Hardquanonne is the only person who knows how to perform the operation *Bucca fissa*, and the said child is the only living subject upon which it has been essayed.

“The operation is so unique and singular that though after long years this child should have come to be an old man instead of a child, and his black locks should have turned white, he would be immediately recognized by Hardquanonne.

“At the time that I am writing this, Hardquanonne, who has perfect knowledge of all the facts, and participated as principal therein, is detained in the prisons of his highness the Prince of Orange, commonly called King William III. Hardquanonne was apprehended and seized as being one of the band of Comprachicos or Cheylas. He is imprisoned in the dungeon of Chatham.

“It was in Switzerland, near the Lake of Geneva, between Lausanne and Vevey, in the very house in which his father and mother died, that the child was, in obedience with the orders of the king, sold and given up by the last servant of the deceased Lord Linnæus, which servant died soon after his master, so that this secret and delicate matter is now unknown to any one on earth, excepting Hardquanonne, who is in the dungeon of Chatham, and ourselves, now about to perish.

“We, the undersigned, brought up and kept, for eight years, for professional purposes, the little lord bought by us of the king.

“To-day, flying from England to avoid Hardquanonne’s ill-fortune, our fear of the penal indictments, prohibitions, and fulminations of Parliament has induced us to desert, at night-fall, on the coast of Portland, the said child Gwynplaine, who is Lord Fermain Clancharlie.

“Now, we have sworn secrecy to the king, but not to God.

“To-night, at sea, overtaken by a violent tempest by the will of Providence, full of despair and distress, kneeling before Him who could save our lives, and may, perhaps, be willing to save our souls, having nothing more to hope from men, but everything to fear from God, having for only anchor and resource repentance of our bad actions, resigned to death, and content if Divine justice be satisfied, humble, penitent, and beating our breasts, we make this declaration, and confide and deliver it to the furious ocean to use as it best may according to the will of God. And may the Holy Virgin aid us, Amen. And we attach our signatures.”

The sheriff interrupted, saying,— “Here are the signatures. All in different handwritings.”

And he resumed, —

“Doctor Gernardus Geestemunde. — Asuncion. — A cross, and at the side of it, Barbara Fermoy, from Tyrryf Isle, in the Hebrides; Gaizdorra, Captain; Giangirate; Jacques Quartourze, alias le Narbonnais; Luc-Pierre Capgaroupe, from the galleys of Mahon.”

The sheriff, after a pause, resumed, a “note written in the same hand as the text and the first signature,” and he read, —

“Of the three men comprising the crew, the skipper having been swept off by a wave, there remain but two, and we have signed, Galdeazun; Ave Maria, Thief.”

The sheriff, interspersing his reading with his own observations, continued, “At the bottom of the sheet is written, —

"'At sea, on board of the *Matutina*, Biscay hooker, from the Gulf de Pasages.' This sheet," added the sheriff, "is a legal document, bearing the mark of King James the Second. On the margin of the declaration, and in the same handwriting there is this note, 'The present declaration is written by us on the back of the royal order, which was given us as our receipt when we bought the child. Turn the leaf and the order will be seen.'"

The sheriff turned the parchment, and raised it in his right hand, to expose it to the light.

A blank page was seen, if the word blank can be applied to a thing so mouldy, and in the middle of the page three words were written, two Latin words, *Jussu regis*, and a signature, *Jeffreys*.

"*Jussu regis*, *Jeffreys*," said the sheriff, passing from a grave voice to a clear one.

Gwynplaine was as a man on whose head a tile falls from the palace of dreams.

He began to speak, like one who speaks unconsciously.

"Gernardus, yes, the doctor. An old, sad-looking man. I was afraid of him. Gaizdorra, Captain, that means chief. There were women, Asuncion, and the other. And then the Provençal. His name was Capgaroupe. He used to drink out of a flat bottle on which there was a name written in red."

"Behold it," said the sheriff.

He placed on the table something which the secretary had just taken out of the bag. It was a gourd, with handles like ears, covered with wicker. This bottle had evidently seen service, and had sojourned in the water. Shells and seaweed adhered to it. It was encrusted and damascened over with the rust of ocean. There was a ring of tar round its neck, showing that it had been hermetically sealed. Now it was unsealed and open. They had, however, replaced in the flask a sort of bung made of tarred oakum, which had been used to cork it.

"It was in this bottle," said the sheriff, "that the men about to perish placed the declaration which I have just read. This message addressed to justice has been faithfully delivered by the sea."

The sheriff increased the majesty of his tones, and continued, —

"In the same way that Harrow Hill produces excellent wheat, which is turned into fine flour for the royal table, so the sea renders every service in its power to England, and when a nobleman is lost finds and restores him."

Then he resumed, —

“On this flask, as you say, there is a name written in red.”

He raised his voice, turning to the motionless prisoner, —

“Your name, malefactor, is here. Such are the hidden channels by which truth, swallowed up in the gulf of human actions, floats to the surface.”

The sheriff took the gourd, and turned to the light one of its sides, which had, no doubt, been cleaned for the ends of justice. Between the interstices of wicker was a narrow line of red reed, blackened here and there by the action of water and of time.

The reed, notwithstanding some breakages, traced distinctly in the wicker-work these twelve letters — Hardquanonne.

Then the sheriff, resuming that monotonous tone of voice which resembles nothing else, and which may be termed a judicial accent, turned towards the sufferer.

“Hardquanonne! when by us, the sheriff, this bottle, on which is your name, was for the first time shown, exhibited, and presented to you, you at once, and willingly, recognized it as having belonged to you. Then, the parchment being read to you which was contained, folded and enclosed within it, you would say no more; and in the hope, doubtless, that the lost child would never be recovered, and that you would escape punishment, you refuse to answer. As the result of your refusal, you have had applied to you the *peine forte et dure;* and the second reading of the said parchment, on which is written the declaration and confession of your accomplices, was made to you, but in vain.

“This is the fourth day, and that which is legally set apart for the confrontation, and he who was deserted on the twenty-ninth of January, one thousand six hundred and ninety, having been brought into your presence, your devilish hope has vanished, you have broken silence, and recognized your victim.”

The prisoner opened his eyes, lifted his head, and, with a voice strangely resonant of agony, but which had still an indescribable calm mingled with its hoarseness, pronounced in excruciating accents, from under the mass of stones, words to pronounce each of which he had to lift that which was like the slab of a tomb placed upon him. He spoke, —

“I swore to keep the secret. I have kept it as long as I could. Men of dark lives are faithful, and hell has its honour. Now silence is useless. So be it! For this reason I speak. Well — yes; ’tis he! We did it between us — the king and I: the king, by his will; I, by my art!”

And looking at Gwynplaine, —

“Now laugh for ever!”

And he himself began to laugh.

This second laugh, wilder yet than the first, might have been taken for a sob.

The laughed ceased, and the man lay back. His eyelids closed.

The sheriff, who had allowed the prisoner to speak, resumed, —

“All which is placed on record.”

He gave the secretary time to write, and then said, —

“Hardquanonne, by the terms of the law, after confrontation followed by identification, after the third reading of the declarations of your accomplices, since confirmed by your recognition and confession, and after your renewed avowal, you are about to be relieved from these irons, and placed at the good pleasure of her Majesty to be hung as *plagiary*.”

“*Plagiary*,” said the serjeant of the coif. “That is to say, a buyer and seller of children. Law of the Visigoths, seventh book, third

“‘*Qui pueros vendis, plagiarius est tibi nomen*.’”

The sheriff placed the parchment on the table, laid down his spectacles, took up the nosegay, and said, —

“End of *la peine forte et dure*. Hardquanonne, thank her Majesty.”

By a sign the justice of the quorum set in motion the man dressed in leather.

This man, who was the executioner’s assistant, “groom of the gibbet,” the old charters call him, went to the prisoner, took off the stones, one by one, from his chest, and lifted the plate of iron up, exposing the wretch’s crushed sides. Then he freed his wrists and ankle-bones from the four chains that fastened him to the pillars.

The prisoner, released alike from stones and chains, lay flat on the ground, his eyes closed, his arms and legs apart, like a crucified man taken down from a cross.

“Hardquanonne,” said the sheriff, “arise!”

The prisoner did not move.

The groom of the gibbet took up a hand and let it go; the hand fell back. The other hand, being raised, fell back likewise.

The groom of the gibbet seized one foot and then the other, and the heels fell back on the ground.

The fingers remained inert, and the toes motionless. The naked feet of an extended corpse seem, as it were, to bristle.

The doctor approached, and drawing from the pocket of his robe a little mirror of steel, put it to the open mouth of Hardquanonne. Then with his fingers he opened the eyelids. They did not close again; the glassy eyeballs remained fixed.

The doctor rose up and said, —

"He is dead."

And he added, —

"He laughed; that killed him."

"'Tis of little consequence," said the sheriff. "After confession, life or death is a mere formality."

Then pointing to Hardquanonne by a gesture with the nosegay of roses, the sheriff gave the order to the wapentake, —

"A corpse to be carried away to-night."

The wapentake acquiesced by a nod.

And the sheriff added, —

"The cemetery of the jail is opposite."

The wapentake nodded again.

The sheriff, holding in his left hand the nosegay and in his right the white wand, placed himself opposite Gwynplaine, who was still seated, and made him a low bow; then assuming another solemn attitude, he turned his head over his shoulder, and looking Gwynplaine in the face, said, —

"To you here present, we Philip Denzill Parsons, knight, sheriff of the county of Surrey, assisted by Aubrey Dominick, Esq., our clerk and registrar, and by our usual officers, duly provided by the direct and special commands of her Majesty, in virtue of our commission, and the rights and duties of our charge, and with authority from the Lord Chancellor of England, the affidavits having been drawn up and recorded, regard being had to the documents communicated by the Admiralty, after verification of attestations and signatures, after declarations read and heard, after confrontation made, all the statements and legal information having been completed, exhausted, and brought to a good and just issue — we signify and declare to you, in order that right may be done, that you are Fermain Clancharlie, Baron Clancharlie and Hunkerville, Marquis de Corleone in Sicily, and a peer of England; and God keep your lordship!"

And he bowed to him.

The serjeant on the right, the doctor, the justice of the quorum, the wapentake, the secretary, all the attendants except the executioner, repeated his salutation still more respectfully, and bowed to the ground before Gwynplaine.

“Ah,” said Gwynplaine, “awake me!”

And he stood up, pale as death.

“I come to awake you indeed,” said a voice which had not yet been heard.

A man came out from behind the pillars. As no one had entered the cell since the sheet of iron had given passage to the *cortège* of police, it was clear that this man had been there in the shadow before Gwynplaine had entered, that he had a regular right of attendance, and had been present by appointment and mission. The man was fat and pursy, and wore a court wig and a travelling cloak.

He was rather old than young, and very precise.

He saluted Gwynplaine with ease and respect — with the ease of a gentleman-in-waiting, and without the awkwardness of a judge.

“Yes,” he said; “I have come to awaken you. For twenty-five years you have slept. You have been dreaming. It is time to awake. You believe yourself to be Gwynplaine; you are Clancharlie. You believe yourself to be one of the people; you belong to the peerage. You believe yourself to be of the lowest rank; you are of the highest. You believe yourself a player; you are a senator. You believe yourself poor; you are wealthy. You believe yourself to be of no account; you are important. Awake, my lord!”

Gwynplaine, in a low voice, in which a tremor of fear was to be distinguished, murmured, —

“What does it all mean?”

“It means, my lord,” said the fat man, “that I am called Barkilphedro; that I am an officer of the Admiralty; that this waif, the flask of Hardquanonne, was found on the beach, and was brought to be unsealed by me, according to the duty and prerogative of my office; that I opened it in the presence of two sworn jurors of the Jetsam Office, both members of Parliament, William Brathwait, for the city of Bath, and Thomas Jervois, for Southampton; that the two jurors deciphered and attested the contents of the flask, and signed the necessary affidavit conjointly with me; that I made my report to her Majesty, and by order of the queen all necessary and legal formalities were carried out with the discretion necessary in a matter so delicate; that the last form, the confrontation, has just been carried out; that you have £40,000 a year; that you are a peer of the United Kingdom of Great Britain, a legislator and a judge, a supreme judge, a sovereign legislator, dressed in purple and ermine, equal to princes, like unto emperors; that you have on your brow the coronet of a peer, and that you are about to wed a duchess, the daughter of a king.”

Under this transfiguration, overwhelming him like a series of thunderbolts, Gwynplaine fainted.

CHAPTER II.

THE WAIF KNOWS ITS OWN COURSE.

All this had occurred owing to the circumstance of a soldier having found a bottle on the beach. We will relate the facts. In all facts there are wheels within wheels.

One day one of the four gunners composing the garrison of Castle Calshor picked up on the sand at low water a flask covered with wicker, which had been cast up by the tide. This flask, covered with mould, was corked by a tarred bung. The soldier carried the waif to the colonel of the castle, and the colonel sent it to the High Admiral of England. The Admiral meant the Admiralty; with waifs, the Admiralty meant Barkilphedro.

Barkilphedro, having uncorked and emptied the bottle, carried it to the queen. The queen immediately took the matter into consideration.

Two weighty counsellors were instructed and consulted — namely, the Lord Chancellor, who is by law the guardian of the king's conscience; and the Lord Marshal, who is referee in Heraldry and in the pedigrees of the nobility. Thomas Howard, Duke of Norfolk, a Catholic peer, who is hereditary Earl Marshal of England, had sent word by his deputy Earl Marshal, Henry Howard, Earl Bindon, that he would agree with the Lord Chancellor. The Lord Chancellor was William Cowper. We must not confound this chancellor with his namesake and contemporary William Cowper, the anatomist and commentator on Bidloo, who published a treatise on muscles, in England, at the very time that Etienne Abeille published a history of bones, in France. A surgeon is a very different thing from a lord. Lord William Cowper is celebrated for having, with reference to the affair of Talbot Yelverton, Viscount Longueville, propounded this opinion: That in the English constitution the restoration of a peer is more important than the restoration of a king. The flask found at Calshor had awakened his interest in the highest degree. The author of a maxim delights in opportunities to which it may be applied. Here was a case of the restoration of a peer. Search was made. Gwynplaine, by the inscription over his door, was soon found. Neither was Hardquanonne dead. A prison rots a man, but preserves him — if to keep is to preserve. People placed in Bastiles were rarely removed. There is little more change in the dungeon than in the tomb. Hardquanonne was still in prison at Chatham. They had only to put their hands on him. He was transferred from Chatham to London. In the meantime information was sought in Switzerland. The facts were found to be correct. They obtained from the local archives at Vevey, at Lausanne, the certificate of Lord Linnæus's marriage in exile, the certificate of his child's birth, the certificate of the decease of the father and mother; and they had duplicates, duly authenticated, made to answer all necessary requirements.

All this was done with the most rigid secrecy, with what is called royal promptitude, and with that mole-like silence recommended and practised by Bacon, and later on made law by Blackstone, for affairs connected with the Chancellorship and the state, and in matters termed parliamentary. The *jussu regis* and the signature *Jeffreys* were authenticated. To those who have studied pathologically the cases of caprice called "our good will and pleasure," this *jussu regis* is very simple. Why should James II., whose credit required the concealment of such acts, have allowed that to be written which endangered their success? The answer is, cynicism — haughty indifference. Oh! you believe that effrontery is confined to abandoned women? The *raison d'état* is equally abandoned. *Et se cupit ante videri*. To commit a crime and emblazon it, there is the sum total of history. The king tattooes himself like the convict. Often when it would be to a man's greatest advantage to escape from the hands of the police or the records of history, he would seem to regret the escape so great is the love of notoriety. Look at my arm! Observe the design! *I* am Lacenaire! See, a temple of love and a burning heart pierced through with an arrow! *Jussu regis*. It is I, James the Second. A man commits a bad action, and places his mark upon it. To fill up the measure of crime by effrontery, to denounce himself, to cling to his misdeeds, is the insolent bravado of the criminal. Christina seized Monaldeschi, had him confessed and assassinated, and said, —

"I am the Queen of Sweden, in the palace of the King of France."

There is the tyrant who conceals himself, like Tiberius; and the tyrant who displays himself, like Philip II. One has the attributes of the scorpion, the other those rather of the leopard. James II. was of this latter variety. He had, we know, a gay and open countenance, differing so far from Philip. Philip was sullen, James jovial. Both were equally ferocious. James II. was an easy-minded tiger; like Philip II., his crimes lay light upon his conscience. He was a monster by the grace of God. Therefore he had nothing to dissimulate nor to extenuate, and his assassinations were by divine right. He, too, would not have minded leaving behind him those archives of Simancas, with all his misdeeds dated, classified, labelled, and put in order, each in its compartment, like poisons in the cabinet of a chemist. To set the sign-manual to crimes is right royal.

Every deed done is a draft drawn on the great invisible paymaster. A bill had just come due with the ominous endorsement, *Jussu regis*.

Queen Anne, in one particular unfeminine, seeing that she could keep a secret, demanded a confidential report of so grave a matter from the Lord Chancellor — one of the kind specified as “report to the royal ear.” Reports of this kind have been common in all monarchies. At Vienna there was “a counsellor of the ear” — an aulic dignitary. It was an ancient Carlovingian office — the *auricularius* of the old palatine deeds. He who whispers to the emperor.

William, Baron Cowper, Chancellor of England, whom the queen believed in because he was short-sighted like herself, or even more so, had committed to writing a memorandum commencing thus: “Two birds were subject to Solomon — a lapwing, the hudbud, who could speak all languages; and an eagle, the simourganka, who covered with the shadow of his wings a caravan of twenty thousand men. Thus, under another form, Providence,” etc. The Lord Chancellor proved the fact that the heir to a peerage had been carried off, mutilated, and then restored. He did not blame James II., who was, after all, the queen’s father. He even went so far as to justify him. First, there are ancient monarchical maxims. *E senioratu eripimus. In roturagio cadat*. Secondly, there is a royal right of mutilation. Chamberlayne asserts the fact. *Corpora et bona nostrorum subjectorum nostra sunt*, said James I., of glorious and learned memory. The eyes of dukes of the blood royal have been plucked out for the good of the kingdom. Certain princes, too near to the throne, have been conveniently stifled between mattresses, the cause of death being given out as apoplexy. Now to stifle is worse than to mutilate. The King of Tunis tore out the eyes of his father, Muley Assem, and his ambassadors have not been the less favourably received by the emperor. Hence the king may order the suppression of a limb like the suppression of a state, etc. It is legal. But one law does not destroy another. “If a drowned man is cast up by the water, and is not dead, it is an act of God readjusting one of the king. If the heir be found, let the coronet be given back to him. Thus was it done for Lord Alla, King of Northumberland, who was also a mountebank. Thus should be done to Gwynplaine, who is also a king, seeing that he is a peer. The lowness of the occupation which he has been obliged to follow, under constraint of superior power, does not tarnish the blazon: as in the case of Abdolmumen, who was a king, although he had been a gardener; that of Joseph, who was a saint, although he had been a carpenter; that of Apollo, who was a god, although he had been a shepherd."

In short, the learned chancellor concluded by advising the reinstatement, in all his estates and dignities, of Lord Fermain Clancharlie, miscalled Gwynplaine, on the sole condition that he should be confronted with the criminal Hardquanonne, and identified by the same. And on this point the chancellor, as constitutional keeper of the royal conscience, based the royal decision. The Lord Chancellor added in a postscript that if Hardquanonne refused to answer he should be subjected to the *peine forte et dure*, until the period called the *frodmortell*, according to the statute of King Athelstane, which orders the confrontation to take place on the fourth day. In this there is a certain inconvenience, for if the prisoner dies on the second or third day the confrontation becomes difficult; still the law must be obeyed. The inconvenience of the law makes part and parcel of it. In the mind of the Lord Chancellor, however, the recognition of Gwynplaine by Hardquanonne was indubitable.

Anne, having been made aware of the deformity of Gwynplaine, and not wishing to wrong her sister, on whom had been bestowed the estates of Clancharlie, graciously decided that the Duchess Josiana should be espoused by the new lord — that is to say, by Gwynplaine.

The reinstatement of Lord Fermain Clancharlie was, moreover, a very simple affair, the heir being legitimate, and in the direct line.

In cases of doubtful descent, and of peerages in abeyance claimed by collaterals, the House of Lords must be consulted. This (to go no further back) was done in 1782, in the case of the barony of Sydney, claimed by Elizabeth Perry; in 1798, in that of the barony of Beaumont, claimed by Thomas Stapleton; in 1803, in that of the barony of Stapleton; in 1803, in that of the barony of Chandos, claimed by the Reverend Tymewell Brydges; in 1813, in that of the earldom of Banbury, claimed by General Knollys, etc., etc. But the present was no similar case. Here there was no pretence for litigation; the legitimacy was undoubted, the right clear and certain. There was no point to submit to the House, and the Queen, assisted by the Lord Chancellor, had power to recognize and admit the new peer.

Barkilphedro managed everything.

The affair, thanks to him, was kept so close, the secret was so hermetically sealed, that neither Josiana nor Lord David caught sight of the fearful abyss which was being dug under them. It was easy to deceive Josiana, entrenched as she was behind a rampart of pride. She was self-isolated. As to Lord David, they sent him to sea, off the coast of Flanders. He was going to lose his peerage, and had no suspicion of it. One circumstance is noteworthy.

It happened that at six leagues from the anchorage of the naval station commanded by Lord David, a captain called Halyburton broke through the French fleet. The Earl of Pembroke, President of the Council, proposed that this Captain Halyburton should be made vice-admiral. Anne struck out Halyburton's name, and put Lord David Dirry-Moir's in its place, that he might, when no longer a peer, have the satisfaction of being a vice-admiral.

Anne was well pleased. A hideous husband for her sister, and a fine step for Lord David. Mischief and kindness combined.

Her Majesty was going to enjoy a comedy. Besides, she argued to herself that she was repairing an abuse of power committed by her august father. She was reinstating a member of the peerage. She was acting like a great queen; she was protecting innocence according to the will of God that Providence in its holy and impenetrable ways, etc., etc. It is very sweet to do a just action which is disagreeable to those whom we do not like.

To know that the future husband of her sister was deformed, sufficed the queen. In what manner Gwynplaine was deformed, and by what kind of ugliness, Barkilphedro had not communicated to the queen, and Anne had not deigned to inquire. She was proudly and royally disdainful. Besides, what could it matter? The House of Lords could not but be grateful. The Lord Chancellor, its oracle, had approved. To restore a peer is to restore the peerage. Royalty on this occasion had shown itself a good and scrupulous guardian of the privileges of the peerage. Whatever might be the face of the new lord, a face cannot be urged in objection to a right. Anne said all this to herself, or something like it, and went straight to her object, an object at once grand, womanlike, and regal — namely, to give herself a pleasure.

The queen was then at Windsor — a circumstance which placed a certain distance between the intrigues of the court and the public. Only such persons as were absolutely necessary to the plan were in the secret of what was taking place. As to Barkilphedro, he was joyful — a circumstance which gave a lugubrious expression to his face. If there be one thing in the world which can be more hideous than another, ’tis joy.

He had had the delight of being the first to taste the contents of Hardquanonne’s flask. He seemed but little surprised, for astonishment is the attribute of a little mind. Besides, was it not all due to him, who had waited so long on duty at the gate of chance? Knowing how to wait, he had fairly won his reward.

This *nil admirari* was an expression of face. At heart we may admit that he was very much astonished. Any one who could have lifted the mask with which he covered his inmost heart even before God would have discovered this: that at the very time Barkilphedro had begun to feel finally convinced that it would be impossible — even to him, the intimate and most infinitesimal enemy of Josiana — to find a vulnerable point in her lofty life. Hence an access of savage animosity lurked in his mind. He had reached the paroxysm which is called discouragement. He was all the more furious, because despairing. To gnaw one’s chain — how tragic and appropriate the expression! A villain gnawing at his own powerlessness!

Barkilphedro was perhaps just on the point of renouncing not his desire to do evil to Josiana, but his hope of doing it; not the rage, but the effort. But how degrading to be thus baffled! To keep hate thenceforth in a case, like a dagger in a museum! How bitter the humiliation!

All at once to a certain goal — Chance, immense and universal, loves to bring such coincidences about — the flask of Hardquanonne came, driven from wave to wave, into Barkilphedro’s hands. There is in the unknown an indescribable fealty which seems to be at the beck and call of evil. Barkilphedro, assisted by two chance witnesses, disinterested jurors of the Admiralty, uncorked the flask, found the parchment, unfolded, read it. What words could express his devilish delight!

It is strange to think that the sea, the wind, space, the ebb and flow of the tide, storms, calms, breezes, should have given themselves so much trouble to bestow happiness on a scoundrel. That co-operation had continued for fifteen years. Mysterious efforts! During fifteen years the ocean had never for an instant ceased from its labours. The waves transmitted from one to another the floating bottle. The shelving rocks had shunned the brittle glass; no crack had yawned in the flask; no friction had displaced the cork; the sea-weeds had not rotted the osier; the shells had not eaten out the word "Hardquanonne;" the water had not penetrated into the waif; the mould had not rotted the parchment; the wet had hot effaced the writing. What trouble the abyss must have taken! Thus that which Gernardus had flung into darkness, darkness had handed back to Barkilphedro. The message sent to God had reached the devil. Space had committed an abuse of confidence, and a lurking sarcasm which mingles with events had so arranged that it had complicated the loyal triumph of the lost child's becoming Lord Clancharlie with a venomous victory: in doing a good action, it had mischievously placed justice at the service of iniquity. To save the victim of James II. was to give a prey to Barkilphedro. To reinstate Gwynplaine was to crush Josiana. Barkilphedro had succeeded, and it was for this that for so many years the waves, the surge, the squalls had buffeted, shaken, thrown, pushed, tormented, and respected this bubble of glass, which bore within it so many commingled fates. It was for this that there had been a cordial co-operation between the winds, the tides, and the tempests — a vast agitation of all prodigies for the pleasure of a scoundrel; the infinite co-operating with an earthworm! Destiny is subject to such grim caprices.

Barkilphedro was struck by a flash of Titanic pride. He said to himself that it had all been done to fulfil his intentions. He felt that he was the object and the instrument.

But he was wrong. Let us clear the character of chance.

Such was not the real meaning of the remarkable circumstance of which the hatred of Barkilphedro was to profit. Ocean had made itself father and mother to an orphan, had sent the hurricane against his executioners, had wrecked the vessel which had repulsed the child, had swallowed up the clasped hands of the storm-beaten sailors, refusing their supplications and accepting only their repentance; the tempest received a deposit from the hands of death. The strong vessel containing the crime was replaced by the fragile phial containing the reparation. The sea changed its character, and, like a panther turning nurse, began to rock the cradle, not of the child, but of his destiny, whilst he grew up ignorant of all that the depths of ocean were doing for him.

The waves to which this flask had been flung watching over that past which contained a future; the whirlwind breathing kindly on it; the currents directing the frail waif across the fathomless wastes of water; the caution exercised by seaweed, the swells, the rocks; the vast froth of the abyss, taking under its protection an innocent child; the wave imperturbable as a conscience; chaos re-establishing order; the worldwide shadows ending in radiance; darkness employed to bring to light the star of truth; the exile consoled in his tomb; the heir given back to his inheritance; the crime of the king repaired; divine premeditation obeyed; the little, the weak, the deserted child with infinity for a guardian — all this Barkilphedro might have seen in the event on which he triumphed. This is what he did not see. He did not believe that it had all been done for Gwynplaine. He fancied that it had been effected for Barkilphedro, and that he was well worth the trouble. Thus it is ever with Satan.

Moreover, ere we feel astonished that a waif so fragile should have floated for fifteen years undamaged, we should seek to understand the tender care of the ocean. Fifteen years is nothing. On the 4th of October 1867, on the coast of Morbihan, between the Isle de Croix, the extremity of the peninsula de Gavres, and the Rocher des Errants, the fishermen of Port Louis found a Roman amphora of the fourth century, covered with arabesques by the incrustations of the sea. That amphora had been floating fifteen hundred years.

Whatever appearance of indifference Barkilphedro tried to exhibit, his wonder had equalled his joy. Everything he could desire was there to his hand. All seemed ready made. The fragments of the event which was to satisfy his hate were spread out within his reach. He had nothing to do but to pick them up and fit them together — a repair which it was an amusement to execute. He was the artificer.

Gwynplaine! He knew the name. *Masca ridens*. Like every one else, he had been to see the Laughing Man. He had read the sign nailed up against the Tadcaster Inn as one reads a play-bill that attracts a crowd. He had noted it. He remembered it directly in its most minute details; and, in any case, it was easy to compare them with the original. That notice, in the electrical summons which arose in his memory, appeared in the depths of his mind, and placed itself by the side of the parchment signed by the shipwrecked crew, like an answer following a question, like the solution following an enigma; and the lines— “Here is to be seen Gwynplaine, deserted at the age of ten, on the 29th of January, 1690, on the coast at Portland” — suddenly appeared to his eyes in the splendour of an apocalypse. His vision was the light of *Mene, Tekel, Upharsin*, outside a booth. Here was the destruction of the edifice which made the existence of Josiana. A sudden earthquake. The lost child was found. There was a Lord Clancharlie; David Dirry-Moir was nobody. Peerage, riches, power, rank — all these things left Lord David and entered Gwynplaine. All the castles, parks, forests, town houses, palaces, domains, Josiana included, belonged to Gwynplaine. And what a climax for Josiana! What had she now before her? Illustrious and haughty, a player; beautiful, a monster. Who could have hoped for this? The truth was that the joy of Barkilphedro had become enthusiastic. The most hateful combinations are surpassed by the infernal munificence of the unforeseen. When reality likes, it works masterpieces. Barkilphedro found that all his dreams had been nonsense; reality were better.

The change he was about to work would not have seemed less desirable had it been detrimental to him. Insects exist which are so savagely disinterested that they sting, knowing that to sting is to die. Barkilphedro was like such vermin.

But this time he had not the merit of being disinterested. Lord David Dirry-Moir owed him nothing, and Lord Fermain Clancharlie was about to owe him everything. From being a *protégé* Barkilphedro was about to become a protector. Protector of whom? Of a peer of England. He was going to have a lord of his own, and a lord who would be his creature. Barkilphedro counted on giving him his first impressions. His peer would be the morganatic brother-in-law of the queen. His ugliness would please the queen in the same proportion as it displeased Josiana. Advancing by such favour, and assuming grave and modest airs, Barkilphedro might become a somebody. He had always been destined for the church. He had a vague longing to be a bishop.

Meanwhile he was happy.

Oh, what a great success! and what a deal of useful work had chance accomplished for him! His vengeance — for he called it his vengeance — had been softly brought to him by the waves. He had not lain in ambush in vain.

He was the rock, Josiana was the waif. Josiana was about to be dashed against Barkilphedro, to his intense villainous ecstasy.

He was clever in the art of suggestion, which consists in making in the minds of others a little incision into which you put an idea of your own. Holding himself aloof, and without appearing to mix himself up in the matter, it was he who arranged that Josiana should go to the Green Box and see Gwynplaine. It could do no harm. The appearance of the mountebank, in his low estate, would be a good ingredient in the combination; later on it would season it.

He had quietly prepared everything beforehand. What he most desired was something unspeakably abrupt. The work on which he was engaged could only be expressed in these strange words — the construction of a thunderbolt.

All preliminaries being complete, he had watched till all the necessary legal formalities had been accomplished. The secret had not oozed out, silence being an element of law.

The confrontation of Hardquanonne with Gwynplaine had taken place. Barkilphedro had been present. We have seen the result.

The same day a post-chaise belonging to the royal household was suddenly sent by her Majesty to fetch Lady Josiana from London to Windsor, where the queen was at the time residing.

Josiana, for reasons of her own, would have been very glad to disobey, or at least to delay obedience, and put off her departure till next day; but court life does not permit of these objections. She was obliged to set out at once, and to leave her residence in London, Hunkerville House, for her residence at Windsor, Corleone Lodge.

The Duchess Josiana left London at the very moment that the wapentake appeared at the Tadcaster Inn to arrest Gwynplaine and take him to the torture cell of Southwark.

When she arrived at Windsor, the Usher of the Black Rod, who guards the door of the presence chamber, informed her that her Majesty was in audience with the Lord Chancellor, and could not receive her until the next day; that, consequently, she was to remain at Corleone Lodge, at the orders of her Majesty; and that she should receive the queen’s commands direct, when her Majesty awoke the next morning. Josiana entered her house feeling very spiteful, supped in a bad humour, had the spleen, dismissed every one except her page, then dismissed him, and went to bed while it was yet daylight.

When she arrived she had learned that Lord David Dirry-Moir was expected at Windsor the next day, owing to his having, whilst at sea, received orders to return immediately and receive her Majesty’s commands.

CHAPTER III.

AN AWAKENING.

“No man could pass suddenly from Siberia into Senegal without losing consciousness.” — HUMBOLDT.

The swoon of a man, even of one the most firm and energetic, under the sudden shock of an unexpected stroke of good fortune, is nothing wonderful. A man is knocked down by the unforeseen blow, like an ox by the poleaxe. Francis d’Albescola, he who tore from the Turkish ports their iron chains, remained a whole day without consciousness when they made him pope. Now the stride from a cardinal to a pope is less than that from a mountebank to a peer of England.

No shock is so violent as a loss of equilibrium.

When Gwynplaine came to himself and opened his eyes it was night. He was in an armchair, in the midst of a large chamber lined throughout with purple velvet, over walls, ceiling, and floor. The carpet was velvet. Standing near him, with uncovered head, was the fat man in the travelling cloak, who had emerged from behind the pillar in the cell at Southwark. Gwynplaine was alone in the chamber with him. From the chair, by extending his arms, he could reach two tables, each bearing a branch of six lighted wax candles. On one of these tables there were papers and a casket, on the other refreshments; a cold fowl, wine, and brandy, served on a silver-gilt salver.

Through the panes of a high window, reaching from the ceiling to the floor, a semicircle of pillars was to be seen, in the clear April night, encircling a courtyard with three gates, one very wide, and the other two low. The carriage gate, of great size, was in the middle; on the right, that for equestrians, smaller; on the left, that for foot passengers, still less. These gates were formed of iron railings, with glittering points. A tall piece of sculpture surmounted the central one. The columns were probably in white marble, as well as the pavement of the court, thus producing an effect like snow; and framed in its sheet of flat flags was a mosaic, the pattern of which was vaguely marked in the shadow. This mosaic, when seen by daylight, would no doubt have disclosed to the sight, with much emblazonry and many colours, a gigantic coat-of-arms, in the Florentine fashion. Zigzags of balustrades rose and fell, indicating stairs of terraces.

Over the court frowned an immense pile of architecture, now shadowy and vague in the starlight. Intervals of sky, full of stars, marked out clearly the outline of the palace. An enormous roof could be seen, with the gable ends vaulted; garret windows, roofed over like visors; chimneys like towers; and entablatures covered with motionless gods and goddesses.

Beyond the colonnade there played in the shadow one of those fairy fountains in which, as the water falls from basin to basin, it combines the beauty of rain with that of the cascade, and as if scattering the contents of a jewel box, flings to the wind its diamonds and its pearls as though to divert the statues around. Long rows of windows ranged away, separated by panoplies, in relievo, and by busts on small pedestals. On the pinnacles, trophies and morions with plumes cut in stone alternated with statues of heathen deities.

In the chamber where Gwynplaine was, on the side opposite the window, was a fireplace as high as the ceiling, and on another, under a dais, one of those old spacious feudal beds which were reached by a ladder, and where you might sleep lying across; the joint-stool of the bed was at its side; a row of armchairs by the walls, and a row of ordinary chairs, in front of them, completed the furniture. The ceiling was domed. A great wood fire in the French fashion blazed in the fireplace; by the richness of the flames, variegated of rose colour and green, a judge of such things would have seen that the wood was ash — a great luxury. The room was so large that the branches of candles failed to light it up. Here and there curtains over doors, falling and swaying, indicated communications with other rooms. The style of the room was altogether that of the reign of James I. — a style square and massive, antiquated and magnificent. Like the carpet and the lining of the chamber, the dais, the baldaquin, the bed, the stool, the curtains, the mantelpiece, the coverings of the table, the sofas, the chairs, were all of purple velvet.

There was no gilding, except on the ceiling. Laid on it, at equal distance from the four angles, was a huge round shield of embossed metal, on which sparkled, in dazzling relief, various coats of arms. Amongst the devices, on two blazons, side by side, were to be distinguished the cap of a baron and the coronet of a marquis. Were they of brass or of silver-gilt? You could not tell. They seemed to be of gold. And in the centre of this lordly ceiling, like a gloomy and magnificent sky, the gleaming escutcheon was as the dark splendour of a sun shining in the night.

The savage, in whom is embodied the free man, is nearly as restless in a palace as in a prison. This magnificent chamber was depressing. So much splendour produces fear. Who could be the inhabitant of this stately palace? To what colossus did all this grandeur appertain? Of what lion is this the lair? Gwynplaine, as yet but half awake, was heavy at heart.

“Where am I?” he said.

The man who was standing before him answered,— “You are in your own house, my lord.”

CHAPTER IV.

FASCINATION.

It takes time to rise to the surface. And Gwynplaine had been thrown into an abyss of stupefaction.

We do not gain our footing at once in unknown depths.

There are routs of ideas, as there are routs of armies. The rally is not immediate.

We feel as it were scattered — as though some strange evaporation of self were taking place.

God is the arm, chance is the sling, man is the pebble. How are you to resist, once flung?

Gwynplaine, if we may coin the expression, ricocheted from one surprise to another. After the love letter of the duchess came the revelation in the Southwark dungeon.

In destiny, when wonders begin, prepare yourself for blow upon blow. The gloomy portals once open, prodigies pour in. A breach once made in the wall, and events rush upon us pell-mell. The marvellous never comes singly.

The marvellous is an obscurity. The shadow of this obscurity was over Gwynplaine. What was happening to him seemed unintelligible. He saw everything through the mist which a deep commotion leaves in the mind, like the dust caused by a falling ruin. The shock had been from top to bottom. Nothing was clear to him. However, light always returns by degrees. The dust settles. Moment by moment the density of astonishment decreases. Gwynplaine was like a man with his eyes open and fixed in a dream, as if trying to see what may be within it. He dispersed the mist. Then he reshaped it. He had intermittances of wandering. He underwent that oscillation of the mind in the unforeseen which alternately pushes us in the direction in which we understand, and then throws us back in that which is incomprehensible. Who has not at some time felt this pendulum in his brain?

By degrees his thoughts dilated in the darkness of the event, as the pupil of his eye had done in the underground shadows at Southwark. The difficulty was to succeed in putting a certain space between accumulated sensations. Before that combustion of hazy ideas called comprehension can take place, air must be admitted between the emotions. There air was wanting. The event, so to speak, could not be breathed.

In entering that terrible cell at Southwark, Gwynplaine had expected the iron collar of a felon; they had placed on his head the coronet of a peer. How could this be? There had not been space of time enough between what Gwynplaine had feared and what had really occurred; it had succeeded too quickly — his terror changing into other feelings too abruptly for comprehension. The contrasts were too tightly packed one against the other. Gwynplaine made an effort to withdraw his mind from the vice.

He was silent. This is the instinct of great stupefaction, which is more on the defensive than it is thought to be. Who says nothing is prepared for everything. A word of yours allowed to drop may be seized in some unknown system of wheels, and your utter destruction be compassed in its complex machinery.

The poor and weak live in terror of being crushed. The crowd ever expect to be trodden down. Gwynplaine had long been one of the crowd.

A singular state of human uneasiness can be expressed by the words: Let us see what will happen. Gwynplaine was in this state. You feel that you have not gained your equilibrium when an unexpected situation surges up under your feet. You watch for something which must produce a result. You are vaguely attentive. We will see what happens. What? You do not know. Whom? You watch.

The man with the paunch repeated, “You are in your own house, my lord.”

Gwynplaine felt himself. In surprises, we first look to make sure that things exist; then we feel ourselves, to make sure that we exist ourselves. It was certainly to him that the words were spoken; but he himself was somebody else. He no longer had his jacket on, or his esclavine of leather. He had a waistcoat of cloth of silver; and a satin coat, which he touched and found to be embroidered. He felt a heavy purse in his waistcoat pocket. A pair of velvet trunk hose covered his clown’s tights. He wore shoes with high red heels. As they had brought him to this palace, so had they changed his dress.

The man resumed, —

“Will your lordship deign to remember this: I am called Barkilphedro; I am clerk to the Admiralty. It was I who opened Hardquanonne’s flask and drew your destiny out of it. Thus, in the ‘Arabian Nights’ a fisherman releases a giant from a bottle.”

Gwynplaine fixed his eyes on the smiling face of the speaker.

Barkilphedro continued: —

“Besides this palace, my lord, Hunkerville House, which is larger, is yours. You own Clancharlie Castle, from which you take your title, and which was a fortress in the time of Edward the Elder. You have nineteen bailiwicks belonging to you, with their villages and their inhabitants. This puts under your banner, as a landlord and a nobleman, about eighty thousand vassals and tenants. At Clancharlie you are a judge — judge of all, both of goods and of persons — and you hold your baron’s court. The king has no right which you have not, except the privilege of coining money. The king, designated by the Norman law as chief signor, has justice, court, and coin. Coin is money. So that you, excepting in this last, are as much a king in your lordship as he is in his kingdom. You have the right, as a baron, to a gibbet with four pillars in England; and, as a marquis, to a scaffold with seven posts in Sicily: that of the mere lord having two pillars; that of a lord of the manor, three; and that of a duke, eight. You are styled prince in the ancient charters of Northumberland. You are related to the Viscounts Valentia in Ireland, whose name is Power; and to the Earls of Umfraville in Scotland, whose name is Angus. You are chief of a clan, like Campbell, Ardmannach, and Macallummore. You have eight barons’ courts — Reculver, Baston, Hell-Kerters, Homble, Moricambe, Grundraith, Trenwardraith, and others. You have a right over the turf-cutting of Pillinmore, and over the alabaster quarries near Trent. Moreover, you own all the country of Penneth Chase; and you have a mountain with an ancient town on it. The town is called Vinecaunton; the mountain is called Moilenlli. All which gives you an income of forty thousand pounds a year. That is to say, forty times the five-and-twenty thousand francs with which a Frenchman is satisfied.”

Whilst Barkilphedro spoke, Gwynplaine, in a crescendo of stupor, remembered the past. Memory is a gulf that a word can move to its lowest depths. Gwynplaine knew all the words pronounced by Barkilphedro. They were written in the last lines of the two scrolls which lined the van in which his childhood had been passed, and, from so often letting his eyes wander over them mechanically, he knew them by heart. On reaching, a forsaken orphan, the travelling caravan at Weymouth, he had found the inventory of the inheritance which awaited him; and in the morning, when the poor little boy awoke, the first thing spelt by his careless and unconscious eyes was his own title and its possessions. It was a strange detail added to all his other surprises, that, during fifteen years, rolling from highway to highway, the clown of a travelling theatre, earning his bread day by day, picking up farthings, and living on crumbs, he should have travelled with the inventory of his fortune placarded over his misery.

Barkilphedro touched the casket on the table with his forefinger.

“My lord, this casket contains two thousand guineas which her gracious Majesty the Queen has sent you for your present wants.”

Gwynplaine made a movement.

“That shall be for my Father Ursus,” he said.

“So be it, my lord,” said Barkilphedro. “Ursus, at the Tadcaster Inn. The Serjeant of the Coif, who accompanied us hither, and is about to return immediately, will carry them to him. Perhaps I may go to London myself. In that case I will take charge of it.”

“I shall take them to him myself,” said Gwynplaine.

Barkilphedro’s smile disappeared, and he said,— “Impossible!”

There is an impressive inflection of voice which, as it were, underlines the words. Barkilphedro’s tone was thus emphasized; he paused, so as to put a full stop after the word he had just uttered. Then he continued, with the peculiar and respectful tone of a servant who feels that he is master, —

“My lord, you are twenty-three miles from London, at Corleone Lodge, your court residence, contiguous to the Royal Castle of Windsor. You are here unknown to any one. You were brought here in a close carriage, which was awaiting you at the gate of the jail at Southwark. The servants who introduced you into this palace are ignorant who you are; but they know me, and that is sufficient. You may possibly have been brought to these apartments by means of a private key which is in my possession. There are people in the house asleep, and it is not an hour to awaken them. Hence we have time for an explanation, which, nevertheless, will be short. I have been commissioned by her Majesty—”

As he spoke, Barkilphedro began to turn over the leaves of some bundles of papers which were lying near the casket.

“My lord, here is your patent of peerage. Here is that of your Sicilian marquisate. These are the parchments and title-deeds of your eight baronies, with the seals of eleven kings, from Baldret, King of Kent, to James the

Sixth of Scotland, and first of England and Scotland united. Here are your letters of precedence. Here are your rent-rolls, and titles and descriptions of your fiefs, freeholds, dependencies, lands, and domains. That which you see above your head in the emblazonment on the ceiling are your two coronets: the circlet with pearls for the baron, and the circlet with strawberry leaves for the marquis.

"Here, in the wardrobe, is your peer's robe of red velvet, bordered with ermine. To-day, only a few hours since, the Lord Chancellor and the Deputy Earl Marshal of England, informed of the result of your confrontation with the Comprachico Hardquanonne, have taken her Majesty's commands. Her Majesty has signed them, according to her royal will, which is the same as the law. All formalities have been complied with. To-morrow, and no later than to-morrow, you will take your seat in the House of Lords, where they have for some days been deliberating on a bill, presented by the crown, having for its object the augmentation, by a hundred thousand pounds sterling yearly, of the annual allowance to the Duke of Cumberland, husband of the queen. You will be able to take part in the debate."

Barkilphedro paused, breathed slowly, and resumed.

"However, nothing is yet settled. A man cannot be made a peer of England without his own consent. All can be annulled and disappear, unless you acquiesce. An event nipped in the bud ere it ripens often occurs in state policy. My lord, up to this time silence has been preserved on what has occurred. The House of Lords will not be informed of the facts until to-morrow. Secrecy has been kept about the whole matter for reasons of state, which are of such importance that the influential persons who alone are at this moment cognizant of your existence, and of your rights, will forget them immediately should reasons of state command their being forgotten. That which is in darkness may remain in darkness. It is easy to wipe you out; the more so as you have a brother, the natural son of your father and of a woman who afterwards, during the exile of your father, became mistress to King Charles II., which accounts for your brother's high position at court; for it is to this brother, bastard though he be, that your peerage would revert. Do you wish this? I cannot think so. Well, all depends on you. The queen must be obeyed. You will not quit the house till to-morrow in a royal carriage, and to go to the House of Lords. My lord, will you be a peer of England; yes or no? The queen has designs for you. She destines you for an alliance almost royal. Lord Fermain Clancharlie, this is the decisive moment. Destiny never opens one door without shutting another. After a certain step in advance, to step back is impossible. Whoso enters into transfiguration, leaves behind him evanescence. My lord, Gwynplaine is dead. Do you understand?”

Gwynplaine trembled from head to foot.

Then he recovered himself.

“Yes,” he said.

Barkilphedro, smiling, bowed, placed the casket under his cloak, and left the room.

CHAPTER V.

WE THINK WE REMEMBER; WE FORGET.

Whence arise those strange, visible changes which occur in the soul of man?

Gwynplaine had been at the same moment raised to a summit and cast into an abyss.

His head swam with double giddiness — the giddiness of ascent and descent. A fatal combination.

He felt himself ascend, and felt not his fall.

It is appalling to see a new horizon.

A perspective affords suggestions, — not always good ones.

He had before him the fairy glade, a snare perhaps, seen through opening clouds, and showing the blue depths of sky; so deep, that they are obscure.

He was on the mountain, whence he could see all the kingdoms of the earth. A mountain all the more terrible that it is a visionary one. Those who are on its apex are in a dream.

Palaces, castles, power, opulence, all human happiness extending as far as eye could reach; a map of enjoyments spread out to the horizon; a sort of radiant geography of which he was the centre. A perilous mirage!

Imagine what must have been the haze of such a vision, not led up to, not attained to as by the gradual steps of a ladder, but reached without transition and without previous warning.

A man going to sleep in a mole’s burrow, and awaking on the top of the Strasbourg steeple; such was the state of Gwynplaine.

Giddiness is a dangerous kind of glare, particularly that which bears you at once towards the day and towards the night, forming two whirlwinds, one opposed to the other.

He saw too much, and not enough.

He saw all, and nothing.

His state was what the author of this book has somewhere expressed as the blind man dazzled.

Gwynplaine, left by himself, began to walk with long strides. A bubbling precedes an explosion.

Notwithstanding his agitation, in this impossibility of keeping still, he meditated. His mind liquefied as it boiled. He began to recall things to his memory. It is surprising how we find that we have heard so clearly that to which we scarcely listened. The declaration of the shipwrecked men, read by the sheriff in the Southwark cell, came back to him clearly and intelligibly. He recalled every word, he saw under it his whole infancy.

Suddenly he stopped, his hands clasped behind his back, looking up to the ceilings — the sky — no matter what — whatever was above him.

“Quits!” he cried.

He felt like one whose head rises out of the water. It seemed to him that he saw everything — the past, the future, the present — in the accession of a sudden flash of light.

“Oh!” he cried, for there are cries in the depths of thought. “Oh! it was so, was it! I was a lord. All is discovered. They stole, betrayed, destroyed, abandoned, disinherited, murdered me! The corpse of my destiny floated fifteen years on the sea; all at once it touched the earth, and it started up, erect and living. I am reborn. I am born. I felt under my rags that the breast there palpitating was not that of a wretch; and when I looked on crowds of men, I felt that they were the flocks, and that I was not the dog, but the shepherd! Shepherds of the people, leaders of men, guides and masters, such were my fathers; and what they were I am! I am a gentleman, and I have a sword; I am a baron, and I have a casque; I am a marquis, and I have a plume; I am a peer, and I have a coronet. Lo! they deprived me of all this. I dwelt in light, they flung me into darkness. Those who proscribed the father, sold the son. When my father was dead, they took from beneath his head the stone of exile which he had placed for his pillow, and, tying it to my neck, they flung me into a sewer. Oh! those scoundrels who tortured my infancy! Yes, they rise and move in the depths of my memory. Yes; I see them again. I was that morsel of flesh pecked to pieces on a tomb by a flight of crows. I bled and cried under all those horrible shadows. Lo! it was there that they precipitated me, under the crush of those who come and go, under the trampling feet of men, under the undermost of the human race, lower than the serf, baser than the serving man, lower than the felon, lower than the slave, at the spot where Chaos becomes a sewer, in which I was engulfed. It is from thence that I come; it is from this that I rise; it is from this that I am risen. And here I am now. Quits!”

He sat down, he rose, clasped his head with his hands, began to pace the room again, and his tempestuous monologue continued within him.

"Where am I? — on the summit? Where is it that I have just alighted? — on the highest peak? This pinnacle, this grandeur, this dome of the world, this great power, is my home. This temple is in air. I am one of the gods. I live in inaccessible heights. This supremacy, which I looked up to from below, and from whence emanated such rays of glory that I shut my eyes; this ineffaceable peerage; this impregnable fortress of the fortunate, I enter. I am in it. I am of it. Ah, what a decisive turn of the wheel! I was below, I am on high — on high for ever! Behold me a lord! I shall have a scarlet robe. I shall have an earl's coronet on my head. I shall assist at the coronation of kings. They will take the oath from my hands. I shall judge princes and ministers. I shall exist. From the depths into which I was thrown, I have rebounded to the zenith. I have palaces in town and country: houses, gardens, chases, forests, carriages, millions. I will give fêtes. I will make laws. I shall have the choice of joys and pleasures. And the vagabond Gwynplaine, who had not the right to gather a flower in the grass, may pluck the stars from heaven!"

Melancholy overshadowing of a soul's brightness! Thus it was that in Gwynplaine, who had been a hero, and perhaps had not ceased to be one, moral greatness gave way to material splendour. A lamentable transition! Virtue broken down by a troop of passing demons. A surprise made on the weak side of man's fortress. All the inferior circumstances called by men superior, ambition, the purblind desires of instinct, passions, covetousness, driven far from Gwynplaine by the wholesome restraints of misfortune, took tumultuous possession of his generous heart. And from what had this arisen? From the discovery of a parchment in a waif drifted by the sea. Conscience may be violated by a chance attack.

Gwynplaine drank in great draughts of pride, and it dulled his soul. Such is the poison of that fatal wine.

Giddiness invaded him. He more than consented to its approach. He welcomed it. This was the effect of previous and long-continued thirst. Are we an accomplice of the cup which deprives us of reason? He had always vaguely desired this. His eyes had always turned towards the great. To watch is to wish. The eaglet is not born in the eyrie for nothing.

Now, however, at moments, it seemed to him the simplest thing in the world that he should be a lord. A few hours only had passed, and yet the past of yesterday seemed so far off! Gwynplaine had fallen into the ambuscade of Better, who is the enemy of Good.

Unhappy is he of whom we say, how lucky he is! Adversity is more easily resisted than prosperity. We rise more perfect from ill fortune than from good. There is a Charybdis in poverty, and a Scylla in riches. Those who remain erect under the thunderbolt are prostrated by the flash. Thou who standest without shrinking on the verge of a precipice, fear lest thou be carried up on the innumerable wings of mists and dreams. The ascent which elevates will dwarf thee. An apotheosis has a sinister power of degradation.

It is not easy to understand what is good luck. Chance is nothing but a disguise. Nothing deceives so much as the face of fortune. Is she Providence? Is she Fatality?

A brightness may not be a brightness, because light is truth, and a gleam may be a deceit. You believe that it lights you; but no, it sets you on fire.

At night, a candle made of mean tallow becomes a star if placed in an opening in the darkness. The moth flies to it.

In what measure is the moth responsible?

The sight of the candle fascinates the moth as the eye of the serpent fascinates the bird.

Is it possible that the bird and the moth should resist the attraction? Is it possible that the leaf should resist the wind? Is it possible that the stone should refuse obedience to the laws of gravitation?

These are material questions, which are moral questions as well.

After he had received the letter of the duchess, Gwynplaine had recovered himself. The deep love in his nature had resisted it. But the storm having wearied itself on one side of the horizon, burst out on the other; for in destiny, as in nature, there are successive convulsions. The first shock loosens, the second uproots.

Alas! how do the oaks fall?

Thus he who, when a child of ten, stood alone on the shore of Portland, ready to give battle, who had looked steadfastly at all the combatants whom he had to encounter, the blast which bore away the vessel in which he had expected to embark, the gulf which had swallowed up the plank, the yawning abyss, of which the menace was its retrocession, the earth which refused him a shelter, the sky which refused him a star, solitude without pity, obscurity without notice, ocean, sky, all the violence of one infinite space, and all the mysterious enigmas of another; he who had neither trembled nor fainted before the mighty hostility of the unknown; he who, still so young, had held his own with night, as Hercules of old had held his own with death; he who in the unequal struggle had thrown down this defiance, that he, a child, adopted a child, that he encumbered himself with a load, when tired and exhausted, thus rendering himself an easier prey to the attacks on his weakness, and, as it were, himself unmuzzling the shadowy monsters in ambush around him; he who, a precocious warrior, had immediately, and from his first steps out of the cradle, struggled breast to breast with destiny; he, whose disproportion with strife had not discouraged from striving; he who, perceiving in everything around him a frightful occultation of the human race, had accepted that eclipse, and proudly continued his journey; he who had known how to endure cold, thirst, hunger, valiantly; he who, a pigmy in stature, had been a colossus in soul: this Gwynplaine, who had conquered the great terror of the abyss under its double form, Tempest and Misery, staggered under a breath — Vanity.

Thus, when she has exhausted distress, nakedness, storms, catastrophes, agonies on an unflinching man, Fatality begins to smile, and her victim, suddenly intoxicated, staggers.

The smile of Fatality! Can anything more terrible be imagined? It is the last resource of the pitiless trier of souls in his proof of man. The tiger, lurking in destiny, caresses man with a velvet paw. Sinister preparation, hideous gentleness in the monster!

Every self-observer has detected within himself mental weakness coincident with aggrandisement. A sudden growth disturbs the system, and produces fever.

In Gwynplaine’s brain was the giddy whirlwind of a crowd of new circumstances; all the light and shade of a metamorphosis; inexpressibly strange confrontations; the shock of the past against the future. Two Gwynplaines, himself doubled; behind, an infant in rags crawling through night — wandering, shivering, hungry, provoking laughter; in front, a brilliant nobleman — luxurious, proud, dazzling all London. He was casting off one form, and amalgamating himself with the other. He was casting the mountebank, and becoming the peer. Change of skin is sometimes change of soul. Now and then the past seemed like a dream. It was complex; bad and good. He thought of his father. It was a poignant anguish never to have known his father. He tried to picture him to himself. He thought of his brother, of whom he had just heard. Then he had a family! He, Gwynplaine! He lost himself in fantastic dreams. He saw visions of magnificence; unknown forms of solemn grandeur moved in mist before him. He heard flourishes of trumpets.

“And then,” he said, “I shall be eloquent.”

He pictured to himself a splendid entrance into the House of Lords. He should arrive full to the brim with new facts and ideas. What could he not tell them? What subjects he had accumulated! What an advantage to be in the midst of them, a man who had seen, touched, undergone, and suffered; who could cry aloud to them, “I have been near to everything, from which you are so far removed.” He would hurl reality in the face of those patricians, crammed with illusions. They should tremble, for it would be the truth. They would applaud, for it would be grand. He would arise amongst those powerful men, more powerful than they. “I shall appear as a torch-bearer, to show them truth; and as a sword-bearer, to show them justice!” What a triumph!

And, building up these fantasies in his mind, clear and confused at the same time, he had attacks of delirium, — sinking on the first seat he came to; sometimes drowsy, sometimes starting up. He came and went, looked at the ceiling, examined the coronets, studied vaguely the hieroglyphics of the emblazonment, felt the velvet of the walls, moved the chairs, turned over the parchments, read the names, spelt out the titles, Buxton, Homble, Grundraith, Hunkerville, Clancharlie; compared the wax, the impression, felt the twist of silk appended to the royal privy seal, approached the window, listened to the splash of the fountain, contemplated the statues, counted, with the patience of a somnambulist, the columns of marble, and said, —

“It is real.”

Then he touched his satin clothes, and asked himself, —

“Is it I? Yes.”

He was torn by an inward tempest.

In this whirlwind, did he feel faintness and fatigue? Did he drink, eat, sleep? If he did so, he was unconscious of the fact. In certain violent situations instinct satisfies itself, according to its requirements, unconsciously. Besides, his thoughts were less thoughts than mists. At the moment that the black flame of an irruption disgorges itself from depths full of boiling lava, has the crater any consciousness of the flocks which crop the grass at the foot of the mountain?

The hours passed.

The dawn appeared and brought the day. A bright ray penetrated the chamber, and at the same instant broke on the soul of Gwynplaine.

And Dea! said the light.

BOOK THE SIXTH.

URSUS UNDER DIFFERENT ASPECTS.

CHAPTER I.

WHAT THE MISANTHROPE SAID.

After Ursus had seen Gwynplaine thrust within the gates of Southwark Jail, he remained, haggard, in the corner from which he was watching. For a long time his ears were haunted by the grinding of the bolts and bars, which was like a howl of joy that one wretch more should be enclosed within them.

He waited. What for? He watched. What for? Such inexorable doors, once shut, do not re-open so soon. They are tongue-tied by their stagnation in darkness, and move with difficulty, especially when they have to give up a prisoner. Entrance is permitted. Exit is quite a different matter. Ursus knew this. But waiting is a thing which we have not the power to give up at our own will. We wait in our own despite. What we do disengages an acquired force, which maintains its action when its object has ceased, which keeps possession of us and holds us, and obliges us for some time longer to continue that which has already lost its motive. Hence the useless watch, the inert position that we have all held at times, the loss of time which every thoughtful man gives mechanically to that which has disappeared. None escapes this law. We become stubborn in a sort of vague fury. We know not why we are in the place, but we remain there. That which we have begun actively we continue passively, with an exhausting tenacity from which we emerge overwhelmed. Ursus, though differing from other men, was, as any other might have been, nailed to his post by that species of conscious reverie into which we are plunged by events all important to us, and in which we are impotent. He scrutinized by turns those two black walls, now the high one, then the low; sometimes the door near which the ladder to the gibbet stood, then that surmounted by a death’s head. It was as if he were caught in a vice, composed of a prison and a cemetery. This shunned and unpopular street was so deserted that he was unobserved.

At length he left the arch under which he had taken shelter, a kind of chance sentry-box, in which he had acted the watchman, and departed with slow steps. The day was declining, for his guard had been long. From time to time he turned his head and looked at the fearful wicket through which Gwynplaine had disappeared. His eyes were glassy and dull. He reached the end of the alley, entered another, then another, retracing almost unconsciously the road which he had taken some hours before. At intervals he turned, as if he could still see the door of the prison, though he was no longer in the street in which the jail was situated. Step by step he was approaching Tarrinzeau Field. The lanes in the neighbourhood of the fair-ground were deserted pathways between enclosed gardens. He walked along, his head bent down, by the hedges and ditches. All at once he halted, and drawing himself up, exclaimed, “So much the better!”

At the same time he struck his fist twice on his head and twice on his thigh, thus proving himself to be a sensible fellow, who saw things in their right light; and then he began to growl inwardly, yet now and then raising his voice.

“It is all right! Oh, the scoundrel! the thief! the vagabond! the worthless fellow! the seditious scamp! It is his speeches about the government that have sent him there. He is a rebel. I was harbouring a rebel. I am free of him, and lucky for me; he was compromising us. Thrust into prison! Oh, so much the better! What excellent laws! Ungrateful boy! I who brought him up! To give oneself so much trouble for this! Why should he want to speak and to reason? He mixed himself up in politics. The ass! As he handled pennies he babbled about the taxes, about the poor, about the people, about what was no business of his. He permitted himself to make reflections on pennies. He commented wickedly and maliciously on the copper money of the kingdom. He insulted the farthings of her Majesty. A farthing! Why, ’tis the same as the queen. A sacred effigy! Devil take it! a sacred effigy! Have we a queen — yes or no? Then respect her verdigris! Everything depends on the government; one ought to know that. I have experience, I have. I know something. They may say to me, ‘But you give up politics, then?’ Politics, my friends! I care as much for them as for the rough hide of an ass. I received, one day, a blow from a baronet’s cane. I said to myself, That is enough: I understand politics. The people have but a farthing, they give it; the queen takes it, the people thank her. Nothing can be more natural. It is for the peers to arrange the rest; their lordships, the lords spiritual and temporal. Oh! so Gwynplaine is locked up! So he is in prison. That is just as it should be. It is equitable, excellent, well-merited, and legitimate. It is his own fault. To criticize is forbidden. Are you a lord, you idiot? The constable has seized him, the justice of the quorum has carried him off, the sheriff has him in custody. At this moment he is probably being examined by a serjeant of the coif. They pluck out your crimes, those clever fellows! Imprisoned, my wag! So much the worse for him, so much the better for me! Faith, I am satisfied. I own frankly that fortune favours me. Of what folly was I guilty when I picked up that little boy and girl! We were so quiet before, Homo and I! What had they to do in my caravan, the little blackguards? Didn't I brood over them when they were young! Didn't I draw them along with my harness! Pretty foundlings, indeed; he as ugly as sin, and she blind of both eyes! Where was the use of depriving myself of everything for their sakes? The beggars grow up, forsooth, and make love to each other. The flirtations of the deformed! It was to that we had come. The toad and the mole; quite an idyl! That was what went on in my household. All which was sure to end by going before the justice. The toad talked politics! But now I am free of him. When the wapentake came I was at first a fool; one always doubts one's own good luck. I believed that I did not see what I did see; that it was impossible, that it was a nightmare, that a day-dream was playing me a trick. But no! Nothing could be truer. It is all clear. Gwynplaine is really in prison. It is a stroke of Providence. Praise be to it! He was the monster who, with the row he made, drew attention to my establishment and denounced my poor wolf. Be off, Gwynplaine; and, see, I am rid of both! Two birds killed with one stone. Because Dea will die, now that she can no longer see Gwynplaine. For she sees him, the idiot! She will have no object in life. She will say, 'What am I to do in the world?' Good-bye! To the devil with both of them. I always hated the creatures! Die, Dea! Oh, I am quite comfortable!"

CHAPTER II.

WHAT HE DID.

He returned to the Tadcaster Inn,

It struck half-past six. It was a little before twilight.

Master Nicless stood on his doorstep.

He had not succeeded, since the morning, in extinguishing the terror which still showed on his scared face.

He perceived Ursus from afar.

“Well!” he cried.

“Well! what?”

“Is Gwynplaine coming back? It is full time. The public will soon be coming. Shall we have the performance of ‘The Laughing Man’ this evening?”

“I am the laughing man,” said Ursus.

And he looked at the tavern-keeper with a loud chuckle.

Then he went up to the first floor, opened the window next to the sign of the inn, leant over towards the placard about Gwynplaine, the laughing man, and the bill of “Chaos Vanquished;” unnailed the one, tore down the other, put both under his arm, and descended.

Master Nicless followed him with his eyes.

“Why do you unhook that?”

Ursus burst into a second fit of laughter.

“Why do you laugh?” said the tavern-keeper.

“I am re-entering private life.”

Master Nicless understood, and gave an order to his lieutenant, the boy Govicum, to announce to every one who should come that there would be no performance that evening. He took from the door the box made out of a cask, where they received the entrance money, and rolled it into a corner of the lower sitting-room.

A moment after, Ursus entered the Green Box.

He put the two signs away in a corner, and entered what he called the woman’s wing.

Dea was asleep.

She was on her bed, dressed as usual, excepting that the body of her gown was loosened, as when she was taking her siesta.

Near her Vinos and Fibi were sitting — one on a stool, the other on the ground — musing. Notwithstanding the lateness of the hour, they had not dressed themselves in their goddesses' gauze, which was a sign of deep discouragement. They had remained in their drugget petticoats and their dress of coarse cloth.

Ursus looked at Dea.

"She is rehearsing for a longer sleep," murmured he.

Then, addressing Fibi and Vinos, —

"You both know all. The music is over. You may put your trumpets into the drawer. You did well not to equip yourselves as deities. You look ugly enough as you are, but you were quite right. Keep on your petticoats. No performance to-night, nor to-morrow, nor the day after to-morrow. No Gwynplaine. Gwynplaine is clean gone."

Then he looked at Dea again.

"What a blow to her this will be! It will be like blowing out a candle."

He inflated his cheeks.

"Puff! nothing more."

Then, with a little dry laugh, —

"Losing Gwynplaine, she loses all. It would be just as if I were to lose Homo. It will be worse. She will feel more lonely than any one else could. The blind wade through more sorrow than we do."

He looked out of the window at the end of the room.

"How the days lengthen! It is not dark at seven o'clock. Nevertheless we will light up."

He struck the steel and lighted the lamp which hung from the ceiling of the Green Box.

Then he leaned over Dea.

"She will catch cold; you have unlaced her bodice too low. There is a proverb, —

"'Though April skies be bright,
Keep all your wrappers tight.'"

Seeing a pin shining on the floor, he picked it up and pinned up her sleeve. Then he paced the Green Box, gesticulating.

"I am in full possession of my faculties. I am lucid, quite lucid. I consider this occurrence quite proper, and I approve of what has happened.

When she awakes I will explain everything to her clearly. The catastrophe will not be long in coming. No more Gwynplaine. Good-night, Dea. How well all has been arranged! Gwynplaine in prison, Dea in the cemetery, they will be *vis-à-vis!* A dance of death! Two destinies going off the stage at once. Pack up the dresses. Fasten the valise. For valise, read coffin. It was just what was best for them both. Dea without eyes, Gwynplaine without a face. On high the Almighty will restore sight to Dea and beauty to Gwynplaine. Death puts things to rights. All will be well. Fibi, Vinos, hang up your tambourines on the nail. Your talents for noise will go to rust, my beauties; no more playing, no more trumpeting 'Chaos Vanquished' is vanquished. 'The Laughing Man' is done for. 'Taratantara' is dead. Dea sleeps on. She does well. If I were she I would never awake. Oh! she will soon fall asleep again. A skylark like her takes very little killing. This comes of meddling with politics. What a lesson! Governments are right. Gwynplaine to the sheriff. Dea to the grave-digger. Parallel cases! Instructive symmetry! I hope the tavern-keeper has barred the door. We are going to die to-night quietly at home, between ourselves — not I, nor Homo, but Dea. As for me, I shall continue to roll on in the caravan. I belong to the meanderings of vagabond life. I shall dismiss these two women. I shall not keep even one of them. I have a tendency to become an old scoundrel. A maidservant in the house of a libertine is like a loaf of bread on the shelf. I decline the temptation. It is not becoming at my age. *Turpe senilis amor*. I will follow my way alone with Homo. How astonished Homo will be! Where is Gwynplaine? Where is Dea? Old comrade, here we are once more alone together. Plague take it! I'm delighted. Their bucolics were an encumbrance. Oh! that scamp Gwynplaine, who is never coming back. He has left us stuck here. I say 'All right.' And now 'tis Dea's turn. That won't be long. I like things to be done with. I would not snap my fingers to stop her dying — her dying, I tell you! See, she awakes!"

Dea opened her eyelids; many blind persons shut them when they sleep. Her sweet unwitting face wore all its usual radiance.

"She smiles," whispered Ursus, "and I laugh. That is as it should be."

Dea called, —

"Fibi! Vinos! It must be the time for the performance. I think I have been asleep a long time. Come and dress me."

Neither Fibi nor Vinos moved.

Meanwhile the ineffable blind look of Dea's eyes met those of Ursus. He started.

"Well!" he cried; "what are you about? Vinos! Fibi! Do you not hear your mistress? Are you deaf? Quick! the play is going to begin."

The two women looked at Ursus in stupefaction.

Ursus shouted, —

"Do you not hear the audience coming in? — Fibi, dress Dea. — Vinos, take your tambourine."

Fibi was obedient; Vinos, passive. Together, they personified submission. Their master, Ursus, had always been to them an enigma. Never to be understood is a reason for being always obeyed. They simply thought he had gone mad, and did as they were told. Fibi took down the costume, and Vinos the tambourine.

Fibi began to dress Dea. Ursus let down the door-curtain of the women's room, and from behind the curtain continued, —

"Look there, Gwynplaine! the court is already more than half full of people. They are in heaps in the passages. What a crowd! And you say that Fibi and Vinos look as if they did not see them. How stupid the gipsies are! What fools they are in Egypt! Don't lift the curtain from the door. Be decent. Dea is dressing."

He paused, and suddenly they heard an exclamation, —

"How beautiful Dea is!"

It was the voice of Gwynplaine.

Fibi and Vinos started, and turned round. It was the voice of Gwynplaine, but in the mouth of Ursus.

Ursus, by a sign which he made through the door ajar, forbade the expression of any astonishment.

Then, again taking the voice of Gwynplaine, —

"Angel!"

Then he replied in his own voice, —

"Dea an angel! You are a fool, Gwynplaine. No mammifer can fly except the bats."

And he added, —

"Look here, Gwynplaine! Let Homo loose; that will be more to the purpose."

And he descended the ladder of the Green Box very quickly, with the agile spring of Gwynplaine, imitating his step so that Dea could hear it.

In the court he addressed the boy, whom the occurrences of the day had made idle and inquisitive.

“Spread out both your hands,” said he, in a loud voice.

And he poured a handful of pence into them.

Govicum was grateful for his munificence.

Ursus whispered in his ear, —

“Boy, go into the yard; jump, dance, knock, bawl, whistle, coo, neigh, applaud, stamp your feet, burst out laughing, break something.”

Master Nicless, saddened and humiliated at seeing the folks who had come to see “The Laughing Man” turned back and crowding towards other caravans, had shut the door of the inn. He had even given up the idea of selling any beer or spirits that evening, that he might have to answer no awkward questions; and, quite overcome by the sudden close of the performance, was looking, with his candle in his hand, into the court from the balcony above.

Ursus, taking the precaution of putting his voice between parentheses fashioned by adjusting the palms of his hands to his mouth, cried out to him, —

“Sir! do as your boy is doing — yelp, bark, howl.”

He re-ascended the steps of the Green Box, and said to the wolf, —

“*Talk* as much as you can.”

Then, raising his voice, —

“What a crowd there is! We shall have a crammed performance.”

In the meantime Vinos played the tambourine. Ursus went on, —

“Dea is dressed. Now we can begin. I am sorry they have admitted so many spectators. How thickly packed they are! — Look, Gwynplaine, what a mad mob it is! I will bet that to-day we shall take more money than we have ever done yet. — Come, gipsies, play up, both of you. Come here. — Fibi, take your clarion. Good. — Vinos, drum on your tambourine. Fling it up and catch it again. — Fibi, put yourself into the attitude of Fame. — Young ladies, you have too much on. Take off those jackets. Replace stuff by gauze. The public like to see the female form exposed. Let the moralists thunder. A little indecency. Devil take it! what of that? Look voluptuous, and rush into wild melodies. Snort, blow, whistle, flourish, play the tambourine. — What a number of people, my poor Gwynplaine!”

He interrupted himself.

“Gwynplaine, help me. Let down the platform.” He spread out his pocket-handkerchief. “But first let me roar in my rag,” and he blew his nose violently as a ventriloquist ought. Having returned his handkerchief to his pocket, he drew the pegs out of the pulleys, which creaked as usual as the platform was let down.

“Gwynplaine, do not draw the curtain until the performance begins. We are not alone. — You two come on in front. Music, ladies! turn, turn, turn. — A pretty audience we have! the dregs of the people. Good heavens!”

The two gipsies, stupidly obedient, placed themselves in their usual corners of the platform. Then Ursus became wonderful. It was no longer a man, but a crowd. Obliged to make abundance out of emptiness, he called to aid his prodigious powers of ventriloquism. The whole orchestra of human and animal voices which was within him he called into tumult at once.

He was legion. Any one with his eyes closed would have imagined that he was in a public place on some day of rejoicing, or in some sudden popular riot. A whirlwind of clamour proceeded from Ursus: he sang, he shouted, he talked, he coughed, he spat, he sneezed, took snuff, talked and responded, put questions and gave answers, all at once. The half-uttered syllables ran one into another. In the court, untenanted by a single spectator, were heard men, women, and children. It was a clear confusion of tumult. Strange laughter wound, vapour-like, through the noise, the chirping of birds, the swearing of cats, the wailings of children at the breast. The indistinct tones of drunken men were to be heard, and the growls of dogs under the feet of people who stamped on them. The cries came from far and near, from top to bottom, from the upper boxes to the pit. The whole was an uproar, the detail was a cry. Ursus clapped his hands, stamped his feet, threw his voice to the end of the court, and then made it come from underground. It was both stormy and familiar. It passed from a murmur to a noise, from a noise to a tumult, from a tumult to a tempest. He was himself, any, every one else. Alone, and polyglot. As there are optical illusions, there are also auricular illusions. That which Proteus did to sight Ursus did to hearing. Nothing could be more marvellous than his facsimile of multitude. From time to time he opened the door of the women’s apartment and looked at Dea. Dea was listening. On his part the boy exerted himself to the utmost. Vinos and Fibi trumpeted conscientiously, and took turns with the tambourine. Master Nicless, the only spectator, quietly made himself the same explanation as they did — that Ursus was gone mad; which was, for that matter, but another sad item added to his misery. The good tavern-keeper growled out, “What insanity!” And he was serious as a man might well be who has the fear of the law before him.

Govicum, delighted at being able to help in making a noise, exerted himself almost as much as Ursus. It amused him, and, moreover, it earned him pence.

Homo was pensive.

In the midst of the tumult Ursus now and then uttered such words as these:— “Just as usual, Gwynplaine. There is a cabal against us. Our rivals are undermining our success. Tumult is the seasoning of triumph. Besides, there are too many people. They are uncomfortable. The angles of their neighbours’ elbows do not dispose them to good-nature. I hope the benches will not give way. We shall be the victims of an incensed population. Oh, if our friend Tom-Jim-Jack were only here! but he never comes now. Look at those heads rising one above the other. Those who are forced to stand don’t look very well pleased, though the great Galen pronounced it to be strengthening. We will shorten the entertainment; as only ‘Chaos Vanquished’ was announced in the playbill, we will not play ‘Ursus Rursus.’ There will be something gained in that. What an uproar! O blind turbulence of the masses. They will do us some damage. However, they can’t go on like this. We should not be able to play. No one can catch a word of the piece. I am going to address them. Gwynplaine, draw the curtain a little aside. — Gentlemen.” Here Ursus addressed himself with a shrill and feeble voice, —

“Down with that old fool!”

Then he answered in his own voice, —

“It seems that the mob insult me. Cicero is right: *plebs fex urbis*. Never mind; we will admonish the mob, though I shall have a great deal of trouble to make myself heard. I will speak, notwithstanding. Man, do your duty. Gwynplaine, look at that scold grinding her teeth down there.”

Ursus made a pause, in which he placed a gnashing of his teeth. Homo, provoked, added a second, and Govicum a third.

Ursus went on, —

“The women are worse than the men. The moment is unpropitious, but it doesn’t matter! Let us try the power of a speech; an eloquent speech is never out of place. Listen, Gwynplaine, to my attractive exordium. Ladies and gentlemen, I am a bear. I take off my head to address you. I humbly appeal to you for silence.” Ursus, lending a cry to the crowd, said, “Grumphll!”

Then he continued, —

“I respect my audience. Grumphll is an epiphonema as good as any other welcome. You growlers. That you are all of the dregs of the people, I do not doubt. That in no way diminishes my esteem for you. A well-considered esteem. I have a profound respect for the bullies who honour me with their custom. There are deformed folks amongst you. They give me no offence. The lame and the humpbacked are works of nature. The camel is gibbous. The bison’s back is humped. The badger’s left legs are shorter than the right, That fact is decided by Aristotle, in his treatise on the walking of animals. There are those amongst you who have but two shirts — one on his back, and the other at the pawnbroker’s. I know that to be true. Albuquerque pawned his moustache, and St. Denis his glory. The Jews advanced money on the glory. Great examples. To have debts is to have something. I revere your beggardom.”

Ursus cut short his speech, interrupting it in a deep bass voice by the shout, —

“Triple ass!”

And he answered in his politest accent, —

“I admit it. I am a learned man. I do my best to apologize for it. I scientifically despise science. Ignorance is a reality on which we feed; science is a reality on which we starve. In general one is obliged to choose between two things — to be learned and grow thin, or to browse and be an ass. O gentlemen, browse! Science is not worth a mouthful of anything nice. I had rather eat a sirloin of beef than know what they call the psoas muscle. I have but one merit — a dry eye. Such as you see me, I have never wept. It must be owned that I have never been satisfied — never satisfied — not even with myself. I despise myself; but I submit this to the members of the opposition here present — if Ursus is only a learned man, Gwynplaine is an artist.”

He groaned again, —

“Grumphll!”

And resumed, —

“Grumphll again! it is an objection. All the same, I pass it over. Near Gwynplaine, gentlemen and ladies, is another artist, a valued and distinguished personage who accompanies us — his lordship Homo, formerly a wild dog, now a civilized wolf, and a faithful subject of her Majesty’s. Homo is a mine of deep and superior talent. Be attentive and watch. You are going to set Homo play as well as Gwynplaine, and you must do honour to art. That is an attribute of great nations. Are you men of the woods? I admit the fact. In that case, *sylvæ sunt consule digna*. Two artists are well worth one consul. All right! Some one has flung a cabbage stalk at me, but did not hit me. That will not stop my speaking; on the contrary, a danger evaded makes folks garrulous. *Garrula pericula*, says Juvenal. My hearers! there are amongst you drunken men and drunken women. Very well. The men are unwholesome. The women are hideous. You have all sorts of excellent reasons for stowing yourselves away here on the benches of the pothouse — want of work, idleness, the spare time between two robberies, porter, ale, stout, malt, brandy, gin, and the attraction of one sex for the other. What could be better? A wit prone to irony would find this a fair field. But I abstain. ’Tis luxury; so be it, but even an orgy should be kept within bounds. You are gay, but noisy. You imitate successfully the cries of beasts; but what would you say if, when you were making love to a lady, I passed my time in barking at you? It would disturb you, and so it disturbs us. I order you to hold your tongues. Art is as respectable as debauch. I speak to you civilly.”

He apostrophized himself, —

“May the fever strangle you, with your eyebrows like the beard of rye.”

And he replied, —

“Honourable gentlemen, let the rye alone. It is impious to insult the vegetables, by likening them either to human creatures or animals. Besides, the fever does not strangle. ’Tis a false metaphor. For pity’s sake, keep silence. Allow me to tell you that you are slightly wanting in the repose which characterizes the true English gentleman. I see that some amongst you, who have shoes out of which their toes are peeping, take advantage of the circumstance to rest their feet on the shoulders of those who are in front of them, causing the ladies to remark that the soles of shoes divide always at the part at which is the head of the metatarsal bones. Show more of your hands and less of your feet. I perceive scamps who plunge their ingenious fists into the pockets of their foolish neighbours. Dear pickpockets, have a little modesty. Fight those next to you if you like; do not plunder them. You will vex them less by blackening an eye, than by lightening their purses of a penny. Break their noses if you like. The shopkeeper thinks more of his money than of his beauty. Barring this, accept my sympathies, for I am not pedantic enough to blame thieves. Evil exists. Every one endures it, every one inflicts it. No one is exempt from the vermin of his sins. That's what I keep saying. Have we not all our itch? I myself have made mistakes. *Plaudite, cives*."

Ursus uttered a long groan, which he overpowered by these concluding words, —

"My lords and gentlemen, I see that my address has unluckily displeased you. I take leave of your hisses for a moment. I shall put on my head, and the performance is going to begin."

He dropt his oratorical tone, and resumed his usual voice.

"Close the curtains. Let me breathe. I have spoken like honey. I have spoken well. My words were like velvet; but they were useless. I called them my lords and gentlemen. What do you think of all this scum, Gwynplaine? How well may we estimate the ills which England has suffered for the last forty years through the ill-temper of these irritable and malicious spirits! The ancient Britons were warlike; these are melancholy and learned. They glory in despising the laws and contemning royal authority. I have done all that human eloquence can do. I have been prodigal of metonymics, as gracious as the blooming cheek of youth. Were they softened by them? I doubt it. What can affect a people who eat so extraordinarily, who stupefy themselves by tobacco so completely that their literary men often write their works with a pipe in their mouths? Never mind. Let us begin the play."

The rings of the curtain were heard being drawn over the rod. The tambourines of the gipsies were still. Ursus took down his instrument, executed his prelude, and said in a low tone: "Alas, Gwynplaine, how mysterious it is!" then he flung himself down with the wolf.

When he had taken down his instrument, he had also taken from the nail a rough wig which he had, and which he had thrown on the stage in a corner within his reach. The performance of "Chaos Vanquished" took place as usual, minus only the effect of the blue light and the brilliancy of the fairies. The wolf played his best. At the proper moment Dea made her appearance, and, in her voice so tremulous and heavenly, invoked Gwynplaine. She extended her arms, feeling for that head.

Ursus rushed at the wig, ruffled it, put it on, advanced softly, and holding his breath, his head bristled thus under the hand of Dea.

Then calling all his art to his aid, and copying Gwynplaine’s voice, he sang with ineffable love the response of the monster to the call of the spirit. The imitation was so perfect that again the gipsies looked for Gwynplaine, frightened at hearing without seeing him.

Govicum, filled with astonishment, stamped, applauded, clapped his hands, producing an Olympian tumult, and himself laughed as if he had been a chorus of gods. This boy, it must be confessed, developed a rare talent for acting an audience.

Fibi and Vinos, being automatons of which Ursus pulled the strings, rattled their instruments, composed of copper and ass’s skin — the usual sign of the performance being over and of the departure of the people.

Ursus arose, covered with perspiration. He said, in a low voice, to Homo, “You see it was necessary to gain time. I think we have succeeded. I have not acquitted myself badly — I, who have as much reason as any one to go distracted. Gwynplaine may perhaps return to-morrow. It is useless to kill Dea directly. I can explain matters to you.”

He took off his wig and wiped his forehead.

“I am a ventriloquist of genius,” murmured he. “What talent I displayed! I have equalled Brabant, the engastrimist of Francis I. of France. Dea is convinced that Gwynplaine is here.”

“Ursus,” said Dea, “where is Gwynplaine?”

Ursus started and turned round. Dea was still standing at the back of the stage, alone under the lamp which hung from the ceiling. She was pale, with the pallor of a ghost.

She added, with an ineffable expression of despair, —

“I know. He has left us. He is gone. I always knew that he had wings.”

And raising her sightless eyes on high, she added, —

“When shall I follow?”

CHAPTER III.

COMPLICATIONS.

Ursus was stunned.

He had not sustained the illusion.

Was it the fault of ventriloquism? Certainly not. He had succeeded in deceiving Fibi and Vinos, who had eyes, although he had not deceived Dea, who was blind. It was because Fibi and Vinos saw with their eyes, while Dea saw with her heart. He could not utter a word. He thought to himself, *Bos in lingûa*. The troubled man has an ox on his tongue.

In his complex emotions, humiliation was the first which dawned on him. Ursus, driven out of his last resource, pondered.

“I lavish my onomatopies in vain.” Then, like every dreamer, he reviled himself. “What a frightful failure! I wore myself out in a pure loss of imitative harmony. But what is to be done next?”

He looked at Dea. She was silent, and grew paler every moment, as she stood perfectly motionless. Her sightless eyes remained fixed in depths of thought.

Fortunately, something happened. Ursus saw Master Nicless in the yard, with a candle in his hand, beckoning to him.

Master Nicless had not assisted at the end of the phantom comedy played by Ursus. Some one had happened to knock at the door of the inn. Master Nicless had gone to open it. There had been two knocks, and twice Master Nicless had disappeared. Ursus, absorbed by his hundred-voiced monologue, had not observed his absence.

On the mute call of Master Nicless, Ursus descended.

He approached the tavern-keeper. Ursus put his finger on his lips. Master Nicless put his finger on his lips.

The two looked at each other thus.

Each seemed to say to the other, “We will talk, but we will hold our tongues.”

The tavern-keeper silently opened the door of the lower room of the tavern. Master Nicless entered. Ursus entered. There was no one there except these two. On the side looking on the street both doors and window-shutters were closed.

The tavern-keeper pushed the door behind him, and shut it in the face of the inquisitive Govicum.

Master Nicless placed the candle on the table.

A low whispering dialogue began.

“Master Ursus?”

“Master Nicless?”

“I understand at last.”

“Nonsense!”

“You wished the poor blind girl to think that all going on as usual.”

“There is no law against my being a ventriloquist.”

“You are a clever fellow.”

“No.”

“It is wonderful how you manage all that you wish to do.”

“I tell you it is not.”

“Now, I have something to tell you.”

“Is it about politics?”

“I don’t know.”

“Because in that case I could not listen to you.”

“Look here: whilst you were playing actors and audience by yourself, some one knocked at the door of the tavern.”

“Some one knocked at the door?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t like that.”

“Nor I, either.”

“And then?”

“And then I opened it.”

“Who was it that knocked?”

“Some one who spoke to me.”

“What did he say?”

“I listened to him.”

“What did you answer?”

“Nothing. I came back to see you play.”

“And — ?”

“Some one knocked a second time.”

“Who? the same person?”

“No, another.”

“Some one else to speak to you?”

“Some one who said nothing.”

“I like that better.”

“I do not.”

“Explain yourself, Master Nicless.”

“Guess who called the first time.”

“I have no leisure to be an Oedipus.”

“It was the proprietor of the circus.”

“Over the way?”

“Over the way.”

“Whence comes all that fearful noise. Well?”

“Well, Master Ursus, he makes you a proposal.”

“A proposal?”

“A proposal.”

“Why?”

“Because—”

“You have an advantage over me, Master Nicless. Just now you solved my enigma, and now I cannot understand yours.”

“The proprietor of the circus commissioned me to tell you that he had seen the *cortège* of police pass this morning, and that he, the proprietor of the circus, wishing to prove that he is your friend, offers to buy of you, for fifty pounds, ready money, your caravan, the Green Box, your two horses, your trumpets, with the women that blow them, your play, with the blind girl who sings in it, your wolf, and yourself.”

Ursus smiled a haughty smile.

“Innkeeper, tell the proprietor of the circus that Gwynplaine is coming back.”

The innkeeper took something from a chair in the darkness, and turning towards Ursus with both arms raised, dangled from one hand a cloak, and from the other a leather esclavine, a felt hat, and a jacket.

And Master Nicless said, “The man who knocked the second time was connected with the police; he came in and left without saying a word, and brought these things.”

Ursus recognized the esclavine, the jacket, the hat, and the cloak of Gwynplaine.

CHAPTER IV.

MOENIBUS SURDIS CAMPANA MUTA.

Ursus smoothed the felt of the hat, touched the cloth of the cloak, the serge of the coat, the leather of the esclavine, and no longer able to doubt whose garments they were, with a gesture at once brief and imperative, and without saying a word, pointed to the door of the inn.

Master Nicless opened it.

Ursus rushed out of the tavern.

Master Nicless looked after him, and saw Ursus run, as fast as his old legs would allow, in the direction taken that morning by the wapentake who carried off Gwynplaine.

A quarter of an hour afterwards, Ursus, out of breath, reached the little street in which stood the back wicket of the Southwark jail, which he had already watched so many hours. This alley was lonely enough at all hours; but if dreary during the day, it was portentous in the night. No one ventured through it after a certain hour. It seemed as though people feared that the walls should close in, and that if the prison or the cemetery took a fancy to embrace, they should be crushed in their clasp. Such are the effects of darkness. The pollard willows of the Ruelle Vauvert in Paris were thus ill-famed. It was said that during the night the stumps of those trees changed into great hands, and caught hold of the passers-by.

By instinct the Southwark folks shunned, as we have already mentioned, this alley between a prison and a churchyard. Formerly it had been barricaded during the night by an iron chain. Very uselessly; because the strongest chain which guarded the street was the terror it inspired.

Ursus entered it resolutely.

What intention possessed him? None.

He came into the alley to seek intelligence.

Was he going to knock at the gate of the jail? Certainly not. Such an expedient, at once fearful and vain, had no place in his brain. To attempt to introduce himself to demand an explanation. What folly! Prisons do not open to those who wish to enter, any more than to those who desire to get out. Their hinges never turn except by law. Ursus knew this. Why, then, had he come there? To see. To see what? Nothing. Who can tell? Even to be opposite the gate through which Gwynplaine had disappeared was something.

Sometimes the blackest and most rugged of walls whispers, and some light escapes through a cranny. A vague glimmering is now and then to be perceived through solid and sombre piles of building. Even to examine the envelope of a fact may be to some purpose. The instinct of us all is to leave between the fact which interests us and ourselves but the thinnest possible cover. Therefore it was that Ursus returned to the alley in which the lower entrance to the prison was situated.

Just as he entered it he heard one stroke of the clock, then a second.

“Hold,” thought he; “can it be midnight already?”

Mechanically he set himself to count.

“Three, four, five.”

He mused.

“At what long intervals this clock strikes! how slowly! Six; seven!”

Then he remarked, —

“What a melancholy sound! Eight, nine! Ah! nothing can be more natural; it’s dull work for a clock to live in a prison. Ten! Besides, there is the cemetery. This clock sounds the hour to the living, and eternity to the dead. Eleven! Alas! to strike the hour to him who is not free is also to chronicle an eternity. Twelve!”

He paused.

“Yes, it is midnight.”

The clock struck a thirteenth stroke.

Ursus shuddered.

“Thirteen!”

Then followed a fourteenth; then a fifteenth.

“What can this mean?”

The strokes continued at long intervals. Ursus listened.

“It is not the striking of a clock; it is the bell Muta. No wonder I said, ‘How long it takes to strike midnight!’ This clock does not strike; it tolls. What fearful thing is about to take place?”

Formerly all prisons and all monasteries had a bell called Muta, reserved for melancholy occasions. La Muta (the mute) was a bell which struck very low, as if doing its best not to be heard.

Ursus had reached the corner which he had found so convenient for his watch, and whence he had been able, during a great part of the day, to keep his eye on the prison.

The strokes followed each other at lugubrious intervals.

A knell makes an ugly punctuation in space. It breaks the preoccupation of the mind into funereal paragraphs. A knell, like a man’s death-rattle, notifies an agony. If in the houses about the neighbourhood where a knell is tolled there are reveries straying in doubt, its sound cuts them into rigid fragments. A vague reverie is a sort of refuge. Some indefinable diffuseness in anguish allows now and then a ray of hope to pierce through it. A knell is precise and desolating. It concentrates this diffusion of thought, and precipitates the vapours in which anxiety seeks to remain in suspense. A knell speaks to each one in the sense of his own grief or of his own fear. Tragic bell! it concerns you. It is a warning to you.

There is nothing so dreary as a monologue on which its cadence falls. The even returns of sound seem to show a purpose.

What is it that this hammer, the bell, forges on the anvil of thought?

Ursus counted, vaguely and without motive, the tolling of the knell. Feeling that his thoughts were sliding from him, he made an effort not to let them slip into conjecture. Conjecture is an inclined plane, on which we slip too far to be to our own advantage. Still, what was the meaning of the bell?

He looked through the darkness in the direction in which he knew the gate of the prison to be.

Suddenly, in that very spot which looked like a dark hole, a redness showed. The redness grew larger, and became a light.

There was no uncertainty about it. It soon took a form and angles. The gate of the jail had just turned on its hinges. The glow painted the arch and the jambs of the door. It was a yawning rather than an opening. A prison does not open; it yawns — perhaps from ennui. Through the gate passed a man with a torch in his hand.

The bell rang on. Ursus felt his attention fascinated by two objects. He watched — his ear the knell, his eye the torch. Behind the first man the gate, which had been ajar, enlarged the opening suddenly, and allowed egress to two other men; then to a fourth. This fourth was the wapentake, clearly visible in the light of the torch. In his grasp was his iron staff.

Following the wapentake, there filed and opened out below the gateway in order, two by two, with the rigidity of a series of walking posts, ranks of silent men.

This nocturnal procession stepped through the wicket in file, like a procession of penitents, without any solution of continuity, with a funereal care to make no noise — gravely, almost gently. A serpent issues from its hole with similar precautions.

The torch threw out their profiles and attitudes into relief. Fierce looks, sullen attitudes.

Ursus recognized the faces of the police who had that morning carried off Gwynplaine.

There was no doubt about it. They were the same. They were reappearing.

Of course, Gwynplaine would also reappear. They had led him to that place; they would bring him back.

It was all quite clear.

Ursus strained his eyes to the utmost. Would they set Gwynplaine at liberty?

The files of police flowed from the low arch very slowly, and, as it were, drop by drop. The toll of the bell was uninterrupted, and seemed to mark their steps. On leaving the prison, the procession turned their backs on Ursus, went to the right, into the bend of the street opposite to that in which he was posted.

A second torch shone under the gateway, announcing the end of the procession.

Ursus was now about to see what they were bringing with them. The prisoner — the man.

Ursus was soon, he thought, to see Gwynplaine.

That which they carried appeared.

It was a bier.

Four men carried a bier, covered with black cloth.

Behind them came a man, with a shovel on his shoulder.

A third lighted torch, held by a man reading a book, probably the chaplain, closed the procession.

The bier followed the ranks of the police, who had turned to the right.

Just at that moment the head of the procession stopped.

Ursus heard the grating of a key.

Opposite the prison, in the low wall which ran along the other side of the street, another opening was illuminated by a torch passing beneath it.

This gate, over which a death's-head was placed, was that of the cemetery.

The wapentake passed through it, then the men, then the second torch. The procession decreased therein, like a reptile entering his retreat.

The files of police penetrated into that other darkness which was beyond the gate; then the bier; then the man with the spade; then the chaplain with his torch and his book, and the gate closed.

There was nothing left but a haze of light above the wall.

A muttering was heard; then some dull sounds. Doubtless the chaplain and the gravedigger — the one throwing on the coffin some verses of Scripture, the other some clods of earth.

The muttering ceased; the heavy sounds ceased. A movement was made. The torches shone. The wapentake reappeared, holding high his weapon, under the reopened gate of the cemetery; then the chaplain with his book, and the gravedigger with his spade. The *cortège* reappeared without the coffin.

The files of men crossed over in the same order, with the same taciturnity, and in the opposite direction. The gate of the cemetery closed. That of the prison opened. Its sepulchral architecture stood out against the light. The obscurity of the passage became vaguely visible. The solid and deep night of the jail was revealed to sight; then the whole vision disappeared in the depths of shadow.

The knell ceased. All was locked in silence. A sinister incarceration of shadows.

A vanished vision; nothing more.

A passage of spectres, which had disappeared.

The logical arrangement of surmises builds up something which at least resembles evidence. To the arrest of Gwynplaine, to the secret mode of his capture, to the return of his garments by the police officer, to the death bell of the prison to which he had been conducted, was now added, or rather adjusted — portentous circumstance — a coffin carried to the grave.

"He is dead!" cried Ursus.

He sank down upon a stone.

"Dead! They have killed him! Gwynplaine! My child! My son!"

And he burst into passionate sobs.

CHAPTER V.

STATE POLICY DEALS WITH LITTLE MATTERS AS WELL AS WITH GREAT.

Ursus, alas! had boasted that he had never wept. His reservoir of tears was full. Such plentitude as is accumulated drop on drop, sorrow on sorrow, through a long existence, is not to be poured out in a moment. Ursus wept alone.

The first tear is a letting out of waters. He wept for Gwynplaine, for Dea, for himself, Ursus, for Homo. He wept like a child. He wept like an old man. He wept for everything at which he had ever laughed. He paid off arrears. Man is never nonsuited when he pleads his right to tears.

The corpse they had just buried was Hardquanonne's; but Ursus could not know that.

The hours crept on.

Day began to break. The pale clothing of the morning was spread out, dimly creased with shadow, over the bowling-green. The dawn lighted up the front of the Tadcaster Inn. Master Nicless had not gone to bed, because sometimes the same occurrence produces sleeplessness in many.

Troubles radiate in every direction. Throw a stone in the water, and count the splashes.

Master Nicless felt himself impeached. It is very disagreeable that such things should happen in one's house. Master Nicless, uneasy, and foreseeing misfortunes, meditated. He regretted having received such people into his house. Had he but known that they would end by getting him into mischief! But the question was how to get rid of them? He had given Ursus a lease. What a blessing if he could free himself from it! How should he set to work to drive them out?

Suddenly the door of the inn resounded with one of those tumultuous knocks which in England announces "Somebody." The gamut of knocking corresponds with the ladder of hierarchy.

It was not quite the knock of a lord; but it was the knock of a justice.

The trembling innkeeper half opened his window. There was, indeed, the magistrate. Master Nicless perceived at the door a body of police, from the head of which two men detached themselves, one of whom was the justice of the quorum.

Master Nicless had seen the justice of the quorum that morning, and recognized him.

He did not know the other, who was a fat gentleman, with a waxen-coloured face, a fashionable wig, and a travelling cloak. Nicless was much afraid of the first of these persons, the justice of the quorum. Had he been of the court, he would have feared the other most, because it was Barkilphedro.

One of the subordinates knocked at the door again violently.

The innkeeper, with great drops of perspiration on his brow, from anxiety, opened it.

The justice of the quorum, in the tone of a man who is employed in matters of police, and who is well acquainted with various shades of vagrancy, raised his voice, and asked, severely, for

"Master Ursus!"

The host, cap in hand, replied, —

"Your honour; he lives here."

"I know it," said the justice.

"No doubt, your honour."

"Tell him to come down."

"Your honour, he is not here."

"Where is he?"

"I do not know."

"How is that?"

"He has not come in."

"Then he must have gone out very early?"

"No; but he went out very late."

"What vagabonds!" replied the justice.

"Your honour," said Master Nicless, softly, "here he comes."

Ursus, indeed, had just come in sight, round a turn of the wall. He was returning to the inn. He had passed nearly the whole night between the jail, where at midday he had seen Gwynplaine, and the cemetery, where at midnight he had heard the grave filled up. He was pallid with two pallors — that of sorrow and of twilight.

Dawn, which is light in a chrysalis state, leaves even those forms which are in movement in the uncertainty of night. Ursus, wan and indistinct, walked slowly, like a man in a dream. In the wild distraction produced by agony of mind, he had left the inn with his head bare. He had not even found out that he had no hat on. His spare, gray locks fluttered in the wind. His open eyes appeared sightless. Often when awake we are asleep, and as often when asleep we are awake.

Ursus looked like a lunatic.

“Master Ursus,” cried the innkeeper, “come; their honours desire to speak to you.”

Master Nicless, in his endeavour to soften matters down, let slip, although he would gladly have omitted, this plural, “their honours” — respectful to the group, but mortifying, perhaps, to the chief, confounded therein, to some degree, with his subordinates.

Ursus started like a man falling off a bed, on which he was sound asleep.

“What is the matter?” said he.

He saw the police, and at the head of the police the justice. A fresh and rude shock.

But a short time ago, the wapentake, now the justice of the quorum. He seemed to have been cast from one to the other, as ships by some reefs of which we have read in old stories.

The justice of the quorum made him a sign to enter the tavern. Ursus obeyed.

Govicum, who had just got up, and who was sweeping the room, stopped his work, got into a corner behind the tables, put down his broom, and held his breath. He plunged his fingers into his hair, and scratched his head, a symptom which indicated attention to what was about to occur.

The justice of the quorum sat down on a form, before a table. Barkilphedro took a chair. Ursus and Master Nicless remained standing. The police officers, left outside, grouped themselves in front of the closed door.

The justice of the quorum fixed his eye, full of the law, upon Ursus. He said, —

“You have a wolf.”

Ursus answered, —

“Not exactly.”

“You have a wolf,” continued the justice, emphasizing “wolf” with a decided accent.

Ursus answered, —

“You see—”

And he was silent.

“A misdemeanour!” replied the justice.

Ursus hazarded an excuse, —

“He is my servant.”

The justice placed his hand flat on the table, with his fingers spread out, which is a very fine gesture of authority.

“Merry-andrew! to-morrow, by this hour, you and your wolf must have left England. If not, the wolf will be seized, carried to the register office, and killed.”

Ursus thought, “More murder!” but he breathed not a syllable, and was satisfied with trembling in every limb.

“You hear?” said the justice.

Ursus nodded.

The justice persisted, —

“Killed.”

There was silence.

“Strangled, or drowned.”

The justice of the quorum watched Ursus.

“And yourself in prison.”

Ursus murmured, —

“Your worship!”

“Be off before to-morrow morning; if not, such is the order.”

“Your worship!”

“What?”

“Must we leave England, he and I?”

“Yes.”

“To-day?”

“To-day.”

“What is to be done?”

Master Nicless was happy. The magistrate, whom he had feared, had come to his aid. The police had acted as auxiliary to him, Nicless. They had delivered him from “such people.” The means he had sought were brought to him. Ursus, whom he wanted to get rid of, was being driven away by the police, a superior authority. Nothing to object to. He was delighted. He interrupted, —

“Your honour, that man—”

He pointed to Ursus with his finger.

“That man wants to know how he is to leave England to-day. Nothing can be easier. There are night and day at anchor on the Thames, both on this and on the other side of London Bridge, vessels that sail to the Continent. They go from England to Denmark, to Holland, to Spain; not to France, on account of the war, but everywhere else. To-night several ships will sail, about one o’clock in the morning, which is the hour of high tide, and, amongst others, the *Vograat* of Rotterdam.”

The justice of the quorum made a movement of his shoulder towards Ursus.

“Be it so. Leave by the first ship — by the *Vograat*.”

“Your worship,” said Ursus.

“Well?”

“Your worship, if I had, as formerly, only my little box on wheels, it might be done. A boat would contain that; but—”

“But what?”

“But now I have got the Green Box, which is a great caravan drawn by two horses, and however wide the ship might be, we could not get it into her.”

“What is that to me?” said the justice. “The wolf will be killed.”

Ursus shuddered, as if he were grasped by a hand of ice.

“Monsters!” he thought. “Murdering people is their way of settling matters.”

The innkeeper smiled, and addressed Ursus.

“Master Ursus, you can sell the Green Box.”

Ursus looked at Nicless.

“Master Ursus, you have the offer.”

“From whom?”

“An offer for the caravan, an offer for the two horses, an offer for the two gipsy women, an offer—”

“From whom?” repeated Ursus.

“From the proprietor of the neighbouring circus.”

Ursus remembered it.

“It is true.”

Master Nicless turned to the justice of the quorum.

“Your honour, the bargain can be completed to-day. The proprietor of the circus close by wishes to buy the caravan and the horses.”

“The proprietor of the circus is right,” said the justice, “because he will soon require them. A caravan and horses will be useful to him. He, too, will depart to-day. The reverend gentlemen of the parish of Southwark have complained of the indecent riot in Tarrinzeau field. The sheriff has taken his measures. To-night there will not be a single juggler’s booth in the place. There must be an end of all these scandals. The honourable gentleman who deigns to be here present—”

The justice of the quorum interrupted his speech to salute Barkilphedro, who returned the bow.

“The honourable gentleman who deigns to be present has just arrived from Windsor. He brings orders. Her Majesty has said, ‘It must be swept away.’”

Ursus, during his long meditation all night, had not failed to put himself some questions. After all, he had only seen a bier. Could he be sure that it contained Gwynplaine? Other people might have died besides Gwynplaine. A coffin does not announce the name of the corpse, as it passes by. A funeral had followed the arrest of Gwynplaine. That proved nothing. *Post hoc, non propter hoc, etc*. Ursus had begun to doubt.

Hope burns and glimmers over misery like naphtha over water. Its hovering flame ever floats over human sorrow. Ursus had come to this conclusion, “It is probable that it was Gwynplaine whom they buried, but it is not certain. Who knows? Perhaps Gwynplaine is still alive.”

Ursus bowed to the justice.

“Honourable judge, I will go away, we will go away, all will go away, by the *Vograat* of Rotterdam, to-day. I will sell the Green Box, the horses, the trumpets, the gipsies. But I have a comrade, whom I cannot leave behind — Gwynplaine.”

“Gwynplaine is dead,” said a voice.

Ursus felt a cold sensation, such as is produced by a reptile crawling over the skin. It was Barkilphedro who had just spoken.

The last gleam was extinguished. No more doubt now. Gwynplaine was dead. A person in authority must know. This one looked ill-favoured enough to do so.

Ursus bowed to him.

Master Nicless was a good-hearted man enough, but a dreadful coward. Once terrified, he became a brute. The greatest cruelty is that inspired by fear.

He growled out, —

“This simplifies matters.”

And he indulged, standing behind Ursus, in rubbing his hands, a peculiarity of the selfish, signifying, “I am well out of it,” and suggestive of Pontius Pilate washing his hands.

Ursus, overwhelmed, bent down his head.

The sentence on Gwynplaine had been executed — death. His sentence was pronounced — exile. Nothing remained but to obey. He felt as in a dream.

Some one touched his arm. It was the other person, who was with the justice of the quorum. Ursus shuddered.

The voice which had said, “Gwynplaine is dead,” whispered in his ear, —

“Here are ten guineas, sent you by one who wishes you well.”

And Barkilphedro placed a little purse on a table before Ursus. We must not forget the casket that Barkilphedro had taken with him.

Ten guineas out of two thousand! It was all that Barkilphedro could make up his mind to part with. In all conscience it was enough. If he had given more, he would have lost. He had taken the trouble of finding out a lord; and having sunk the shaft, it was but fair that the first proceeds of the mine should belong to him. Those who see meanness in the act are right, but they would be wrong to feel astonished. Barkilphedro loved money, especially money which was stolen. An envious man is an avaricious one. Barkilphedro was not without his faults. The commission of crimes does not preclude the possession of vices. Tigers have their lice.

Besides, he belonged to the school of Bacon.

Barkilphedro turned towards the justice of the quorum, and said to him, —

“Sir, be so good as to conclude this matter. I am in haste. A carriage and horses belonging to her Majesty await me. I must go full gallop to Windsor, for I must be there within two hours’ time. I have intelligence to give, and orders to take.”

The justice of the quorum arose.

He went to the door, which was only latched, opened it, and, looking silently towards the police, beckoned to them authoritatively. They entered with that silence which heralds severity of action.

Master Nicless, satisfied with the rapid *dénouement* which cut short his difficulties, charmed to be out of the entangled skein, was afraid, when he saw the muster of officers, that they were going to apprehend Ursus in his house. Two arrests, one after the other, made in his house — first that of Gwynplaine, then that of Ursus — might be injurious to the inn. Customers dislike police raids.

Here then was a time for a respectful appeal, suppliant and generous. Master Nicless turned toward the justice of the quorum a smiling face, in which confidence was tempered by respect.

“Your honour, I venture to observe to your honour that these honourable gentlemen, the police officers, might be dispensed with, now that the wolf is about to be carried away from England, and that this man, Ursus, makes no resistance; and since your honour’s orders are being punctually carried out, your honour will consider that the respectable business of the police, so necessary to the good of the kingdom, does great harm to an establishment, and that my house is innocent. The merry-andrews of the Green Box having been swept away, as her Majesty says, there is no longer any criminal here, as I do not suppose that the blind girl and the two women are criminals; therefore, I implore your honour to deign to shorten your august visit, and to dismiss these worthy gentlemen who have just entered, because there is nothing for them to do in my house; and, if your honour will permit me to prove the justice of my speech under the form of a humble question, I will prove the inutility of these revered gentlemen’s presence by asking your honour, if the man, Ursus, obeys orders and departs, who there can be to arrest here?”

“Yourself,” said the justice.

A man does not argue with a sword which runs him through and through. Master Nicless subsided — he cared not on what, on a table, on a form, on anything that happened to be there — prostrate.

The justice raised his voice, so that if there were people outside, they might hear.

“Master Nicless Plumptree, keeper of this tavern, this is the last point to be settled. This mountebank and the wolf are vagabonds. They are driven away. But the person most in fault is yourself. It is in your house, and with your consent, that the law has been violated; and you, a man licensed, invested with a public responsibility, have established the scandal here.

Master Nicless, your licence is taken away; you must pay the penalty, and go to prison."

The policemen surrounded the innkeeper.

The justice continued, pointing out Govicum, —

"Arrest that boy as an accomplice." The hand of an officer fell upon the collar of Govicum, who looked at him inquisitively. The boy was not much alarmed, scarcely understanding the occurrence; having already observed many things out of the way, he wondered if this were the end of the comedy.

The justice of the quorum forced his hat down on his head, crossed his hands on his stomach, which is the height of majesty, and added, —

"It is decided, Master Nicless; you are to be taken to prison, and put into jail, you and the boy; and this house, the Tadcaster Inn, is to remain shut up, condemned and closed. For the sake of example. Upon which, you will follow us."

BOOK THE SEVENTH.

THE TITANESS.

CHAPTER I.

THE AWAKENING.

And Dea!

It seemed to Gwynplaine, as he watched the break of day at Corleone Lodge, while the things we have related were occurring at the Tadcaster Inn, that the call came from without; but it came from within.

Who has not heard the deep clamours of the soul?

Moreover, the morning was dawning.

Aurora is a voice.

Of what use is the sun if not to reawaken that dark sleeper — the conscience?

Light and virtue are akin.

Whether the god be called Christ or Love, there is at times an hour when he is forgotten, even by the best. All of us, even the saints, require a voice to remind us; and the dawn speaks to us, like a sublime monitor. Conscience calls out before duty, as the cock crows before the dawn of day.

That chaos, the human heart, hears the *fiat lux!*

Gwynplaine — we will continue thus to call him (Clancharlie is a lord, Gwynplaine is a man) — Gwynplaine felt as if brought back to life. It was time that the artery was bound up.

For a while his virtue had spread its wings and flown away.

“And Dea!” he said.

Then he felt through his veins a generous transfusion. Something healthy and tumultuous rushed upon him. The violent irruption of good thoughts is like the return home of a man who has not his key, and who forces his own look honestly. It is an escalade, but an escalade of good. It is a burglary, but a burglary of evil.

“Dea! Dea! Dea!” repeated he.

He strove to assure himself of his heart’s strength. And he put the question with a loud voice— “Where are you?”

He almost wondered that no one answered him.

Then again, gazing on the walls and the ceiling, with wandering thoughts, through which reason returned.

“Where are you? Where am I?”

And in the chamber which was his cage he began to walk again, to and fro, like a wild beast in captivity.

“Where am I? At Windsor. And you? In Southwark. Alas! this is the first time that there has been distance between us. Who has dug this gulf? I here, thou there. Oh, it cannot be; it shall not be! What is this that they have done to me?”

He stopped.

“Who talked to me of the queen? What do I know of such things? *I* changed! Why? Because I am a lord. Do you know what has happened, Dea? You are a lady. What has come to pass is astounding. My business now is to get back into my right road. Who is it who led me astray? There is a man who spoke to me mysteriously. I remember the words which he addressed to me. ‘My lord, when one door opens another is shut. That which you have left behind is no longer yours.’ In other words, you are a coward. That man, the miserable wretch! said that to me before I was well awake. He took advantage of my first moment of astonishment. I was as it were a prey to him. Where is he, that I may insult him? He spoke to me with the evil smile of a demon. But see — I am myself again. That is well. They deceive themselves if they think that they can do what they like with Lord Clancharlie, a peer of England. Yes, with a peeress, who is Dea! Conditions! Shall I accept them? The queen! What is the queen to me? I never saw her. I am not a lord to be made a slave. I enter my position unfettered. Did they think they had unchained me for nothing? They have unmuzzled me. That is all. Dea! Ursus! we are together. That which you were, I was; that which I am, you are. Come. No. I will go to you directly — directly. I have already waited too long. What can they think, not seeing me return! That money. When I think I sent them that money! It was myself that they wanted. I remember the man said that I could not leave this place. We shall see that. Come! a carriage, a carriage! put to the horses. I am going to look for them. Where are the servants? I ought to have servants here, since I am a lord. I am master here. This is my house. I will twist off the bolts, I will break the locks, I will kick down the doors, I will run my sword through the body of any one who bars my passage. I should like to see who shall stop me. I have a wife, and she is Dea. I have a father, who is Ursus. My house is a palace, and I give it to Ursus. My name is a diadem, and I give it to Dea. Quick, directly, Dea, I am coming; yes, you may be sure that I shall soon stride across the intervening space!”

And raising the first piece of tapestry he came to, he rushed from the chamber impetuously.

He found himself in a corridor.

He went straight forward.

A second corridor opened out before him.

All the doors were open.

He walked on at random, from chamber to chamber, from passage to passage, seeking an exit.

CHAPTER II.

THE RESEMBLANCE OF A PALACE TO A WOOD.

In palaces after the Italian fashion, and Corleone Lodge was one, there were very few doors, but abundance of tapestry screens and curtained doorways. In every palace of that date there was a wonderful labyrinth of chambers and corridors, where luxury ran riot; gilding, marble, carved wainscoting, Eastern silks; nooks and corners, some secret and dark as night, others light and pleasant as the day. There were attics, richly and brightly furnished; burnished recesses shining with Dutch tiles and Portuguese azulejos. The tops of the high windows were converted into small rooms and glass attics, forming pretty habitable lanterns. The thickness of the walls was such that there were rooms within them. Here and there were closets, nominally wardrobes. They were called “The Little Rooms.” It was within them that evil deeds were hatched.

When a Duke of Guise had to be killed, the pretty Présidente of Sylvecane abducted, or the cries of little girls brought thither by Lebel smothered, such places were convenient for the purpose. They were labyrinthine chambers, impracticable to a stranger; scenes of abductions; unknown depths, receptacles of mysterious disappearances. In those elegant caverns princes and lords stored their plunder. In such a place the Count de Charolais hid Madame Courchamp, the wife of the Clerk of the Privy Council; Monsieur de Monthulé, the daughter of Haudry, the farmer of La Croix Saint Lenfroy; the Prince de Conti, the two beautiful baker women of L’Ile Adam; the Duke of Buckingham, poor Pennywell, etc. The deeds done there were such as were designated by the Roman law as committed *vi, clam, et precario* — by force, in secret, and for a short time. Once in, an occupant remained there till the master of the house decreed his or her release. They were gilded oubliettes, savouring both of the cloister and the harem. Their staircases twisted, turned, ascended, and descended. A zigzag of rooms, one running into another, led back to the starting-point. A gallery terminated in an oratory. A confessional was grafted on to an alcove. Perhaps the architects of “the little rooms,” building for royalty and aristocracy, took as models the ramifications of coral beds, and the openings in a sponge. The branches became a labyrinth. Pictures turning on false panels were exits and entrances. They were full of stage contrivances, and no wonder — considering the dramas that were played there! The floors of these hives reached from the cellars to the attics. Quaint madrepore inlaying every palace, from Versailles downwards, like cells of pygmies in dwelling-places of Titans. Passages, niches, alcoves, and secret recesses. All sorts of holes and corners, in which was stored away the meanness of the great.

These winding and narrow passages recalled games, blindfolded eyes, hands feeling in the dark, suppressed laughter, blind man's buff, hide and seek, while, at the same time, they suggested memories of the Atrides, of the Plantagenets, of the Médicis, the brutal knights of Eltz, of Rizzio, of Monaldeschi; of naked swords, pursuing the fugitive flying from room to room.

The ancients, too, had mysterious retreats of the same kind, in which luxury was adapted to enormities. The pattern has been preserved underground in some sepulchres in Egypt, notably in the tomb of King Psammetichus, discovered by Passalacqua. The ancient poets have recorded the horrors of these suspicious buildings. *Error circumflexus, locus implicitus gyris*.

Gwynplaine was in the “little rooms” of Corleone Lodge. He was burning to be off, to get outside, to see Dea again. The maze of passages and alcoves, with secret and bewildering doors, checked and retarded his progress. He strove to run; he was obliged to wander. He thought that he had but one door to thrust open, while he had a skein of doors to unravel. To one room succeeded another. Then a crossway, with rooms on every side.

Not a living creature was to be seen. He listened. Not a sound.

At times he thought that he must be returning towards his starting-point; then, that he saw some one approaching. It was no one. It was only the reflection of himself in a mirror, dressed as a nobleman. *That* he? Impossible! Then he recognized himself, but not at once.

He explored every passage that he came to.

He examined the quaint arrangements of the rambling building, and their yet quainter fittings. Here, a cabinet, painted and carved in a sentimental but vicious style; there, an equivocal-looking chapel, studded with enamels and mother-of-pearl, with miniatures on ivory wrought out in relief, like those on old-fashioned snuff-boxes; there, one of those pretty Florentine retreats, adapted to the hypochondriasis of women, and even then called *boudoirs*. Everywhere — on the ceilings, on the walls, and on the very floors — were representations, in velvet or in metal, of birds, of trees; of luxuriant vegetation, picked out in reliefs of lacework; tables covered with jet carvings, representing warriors, queens, and tritons armed with the scaly terminations of a hydra. Cut crystals combining prismatic effects with those of reflection. Mirrors repeated the light of precious stones, and sparkles glittered in the darkest corners. It was impossible to guess whether those many-sided, shining surfaces, where emerald green mingled with the golden hues of the rising sun where floated a glimmer of ever-varying colours, like those on a pigeon's neck, were miniature mirrors or enormous beryls. Everywhere was magnificence, at once refined and stupendous; if it was not the most diminutive of palaces, it was the most gigantic of jewel-cases. A house for Mab or a jewel for Geo.

Gwynplaine sought an exit. He could not find one. Impossible to make out his way. There is nothing so confusing as wealth seen for the first time. Moreover, this was a labyrinth. At each step he was stopped by some magnificent object which appeared to retard his exit, and to be unwilling to let him pass. He was encompassed by a net of wonders. He felt himself bound and held back.

What a horrible palace! he thought. Restless, he wandered through the maze, asking himself what it all meant — whether he was in prison; chafing, thirsting for the fresh air. He repeated Dea! Dea! as if that word was the thread of the labyrinth, and must be held unbroken, to guide him out of it. Now and then he shouted, “Ho! Any one there?” No one answered. The rooms never came to an end. All was deserted, silent, splendid, sinister. It realized the fables of enchanted castles. Hidden pipes of hot air maintained a summer temperature in the building. It was as if some magician had caught up the month of June and imprisoned it in a labyrinth. There were pleasant odours now and then, and he crossed currents of perfume, as though passing by invisible flowers. It was warm. Carpets everywhere. One might have walked about there, unclothed.

Gwynplaine looked out of the windows. The view from each one was different. From one he beheld gardens, sparkling with the freshness of a spring morning; from another a plot decked with statues; from a third, a patio in the Spanish style, a little square, flagged, mouldy, and cold. At times he saw a river — it was the Thames; sometimes a great tower — it was Windsor.

It was still so early that there were no signs of life without.

He stood still and listened.

“Oh! I will get out of this place,” said he. “I will return to Dea! They shall not keep me here by force. Woe to him who bars my exit! What is that great tower yonder? If there was a giant, a hell-hound, a minotaur, to keep the gate of this enchanted palace, I would annihilate him. If an army, I would exterminate it. Dea! Dea!”

Suddenly he heard a gentle noise, very faint. It was like dropping water. He was in a dark narrow passage, closed, some few paces further on, by a curtain. He advanced to the curtain, pushed it aside, entered. He leaped before he looked.

CHAPTER III.

EVE.

An octagon room, with a vaulted ceiling, without windows but lighted by a skylight; walls, ceiling, and floors faced with peach-coloured marble; a black marble canopy, like a pall, with twisted columns in the solid but pleasing Elizabethan style, overshadowing a vase-like bath of the same black marble — this was what he saw before him. In the centre of the bath arose a slender jet of tepid and perfumed water, which, softly and slowly, was filling the tank. The bath was black to augment fairness into brilliancy.

It was the water which he had heard. A waste-pipe, placed at a certain height in the bath, prevented it from overflowing. Vapour was rising from the water, but not sufficient to cause it to hang in drops on the marble. The slender jet of water was like a supple wand of steel, bending at the slightest current of air. There was no furniture, except a chair-bed with pillows, long enough for a woman to lie on at full length, and yet have room for a dog at her feet. The French, indeed, borrow their word *canapé* from *can-al-pié*. This sofa was of Spanish manufacture. In it silver took the place of woodwork. The cushions and coverings were of rich white silk.

On the other side of the bath, by the wall, was a lofty dressing-table of solid silver, furnished with every requisite for the table, having in its centre, and in imitation of a window, eight small Venetian mirrors, set in a silver frame. In a panel on the wall was a square opening, like a little window, which was closed by a door of solid silver. This door was fitted with hinges, like a shutter. On the shutter there glistened a chased and gilt royal crown. Over it, and affixed to the wall, was a bell, silver gilt, if not of pure gold.

Opposite the entrance of the chamber, in which Gwynplaine stood as if transfixed, there was an opening in the marble wall, extending to the ceiling, and closed by a high and broad curtain of silver tissue. This curtain, of fairy-like tenuity, was transparent, and did not interrupt the view. Through the centre of this web, where one might expect a spider, Gwynplaine saw a more formidable object — a woman. Her dress was a long chemise — so long that it floated over her feet, like the dresses of angels in holy pictures; but so fine that it seemed liquid.

The silver tissue, transparent as glass and fastened only at the ceiling, could be lifted aside. It separated the marble chamber, which was a bathroom, from the adjoining apartment, which was a bedchamber. This tiny dormitory was as a grotto of mirrors. Venetian glasses, close together, mounted with gold mouldings, reflected on every side the bed in the centre of the room. On the bed, which, like the toilet-table, was of silver, lay the woman; she was asleep.

The crumpled clothes bore evidence of troubled sleep. The beauty of the folds was proof of the quality of the material.

It was a period when a queen, thinking that she should be damned, pictured hell to herself as a bed with coarse sheets.

A dressing-gown, of curious silk, was thrown over the foot of the couch. It was apparently Chinese; for a great golden lizard was partly visible in between the folds.

Beyond the couch, and probably masking a door, was a large mirror, on which were painted peacocks and swans.

Shadow seemed to lose its nature in this apartment, and glistened. The spaces between the mirrors and the gold work were lined with that sparkling material called at Venice thread of glass — that is, spun glass.

At the head of the couch stood a reading desk, on a movable pivot, with candles, and a book lying open, bearing this title, in large red letters, “Alcoranus Mahumedis.”

Gwynplaine saw none of these details. He had eyes only for the woman. He was at once stupefied and filled with tumultuous emotions, states apparently incompatible, yet sometimes co-existent. He recognized her. Her eyes were closed, but her face was turned towards him. It was the duchess — she, the mysterious being in whom all the splendours of the unknown were united; she who had occasioned him so many unavowable dreams; she who had written him so strange a letter! The only woman in the world of whom he could say, “She has seen me, and she desires me!”

He had dismissed the dreams from his mind; he had burnt the letter. He had, as far as lay in his power, banished the remembrance of her from his thoughts and dreams. He no longer thought of her. He had forgotten her....

Again he saw her, and saw her terrible in power. His breath came in short catches. He felt as if he were in a storm-driven cloud. He looked. This woman before him! Was it possible? At the theatre a duchess; here a nereid, a nymph, a fairy. Always an apparition. He tried to fly, but felt the futility of the attempt. His eyes were riveted on the vision, as though he were bound. Was she a woman? Was she a maiden? Both. Messalina was perhaps present, though invisible, and smiled, while Diana kept watch.

Over all her beauty was the radiance of inaccessibility. No purity could compare with her chaste and haughty form. Certain snows, which have never been touched, give an idea of it — such as the sacred whiteness of the Jungfrau. Immodesty was merged in splendour. She felt the security of an Olympian, who knew that she was daughter of the depths, and might say to the ocean, “Father!” And she exposed herself, unattainable and proud, to everything that should pass — to looks, to desires, to ravings, to dreams; as proud in her languor, on her boudoir couch, as Venus in the immensity of the sea-foam.

She had slept all night, and was prolonging her sleep into the daylight; her boldness, begun in shadow, continued in light.

Gwynplaine shuddered. He admired her with an unhealthy and absorbing admiration, which ended in fear. Misfortunes never come singly. Gwynplaine thought he had drained to the dregs the cup of his ill-luck. Now it was refilled. Who was it who was hurling all those unremitting thunderbolts on his devoted head, and who had now thrown against him, as he stood trembling there, a sleeping goddess? What! was the dangerous and desirable object of his dream lurking all the while behind these successive glimpses of heaven? Did these favours of the mysterious tempter tend to inspire him with vague aspirations and confused ideas, and overwhelm him with an intoxicating series of realities proceeding from apparent impossibilities? Wherefore did all the shadows conspire against him, a wretched man; and what would become of him, with all those evil smiles of fortune beaming on him? Was his temptation prearranged? This woman, how and why was she there? No explanation! Why him? Why her? Was he made a peer of England expressly for this duchess? Who had brought them together? Who was the dupe? Who the victim? Whose simplicity was being abused? Was it God who was being deceived? All these undefined thoughts passed confusedly, like a flight of dark shadows, through his brain. That magical and malevolent abode, that strange and prison-like palace, was it also in the plot? Gwynplaine suffered a partial unconsciousness. Suppressed emotions threatened to strangle him. He was weighed down by an overwhelming force. His will became powerless. How could he resist? He was incoherent and entranced. This time he felt he was becoming irremediably insane. His dark, headlong fall over the precipice of stupefaction continued.

But the woman slept on.

What aggravated the storm within him was, that he saw not the princess, not the duchess, not the lady, but the woman.

Gwynplaine, losing all self-command, trembled. What could he do against such a temptation? Here were no skilful effects of dress, no silken folds, no complex and coquettish adornments, no affected exaggeration of concealment or of exhibition, no cloud. It was fearful simplicity — a sort of mysterious summons — the shameless audacity of Eden. The whole of the dark side of human nature was there. Eve worse than Satan; the human and the superhuman commingled. A perplexing ecstasy, winding up in a brutal triumph of instinct over duty. The sovereign contour of beauty is imperious. When it leaves the ideal and condescends to be real, its proximity is fatal to man.

Now and then the duchess moved softly on the bed, with the vague movement of a cloud in the heavens, changing as a vapour changes its form. Absurd as it may appear, though he saw her present in the flesh before him, yet she seemed a chimera; and, palpable as she was, she seemed to him afar off. Scared and livid, he gazed on. He listened for her breathing, and fancied he heard only a phantom's respiration. He was attracted, though against his will. How arm himself against her — or against himself? He had been prepared for everything except this danger. A savage doorkeeper, a raging monster of a jailer — such were his expected antagonists. He looked for Cerberus; he saw Hebe. A sleeping woman! What an opponent! He closed his eyes. Too bright a dawn blinds the eyes. But through his closed eyelids there penetrated at once the woman's form — not so distinct, but beautiful as ever.

Fly! Easier said than done. He had already tried and failed. He was rooted to the ground, as if in a dream. When we try to draw back, temptation clogs our feet and glues them to the earth. We can still advance, but to retire is impossible. The invisible arms of sin rise from below and drag us down.

There is a commonplace idea, accepted by every one, that feelings become blunted by experience. Nothing can be more untrue. You might as well say that by dropping nitric acid slowly on a sore it would heal and become sound, and that torture dulled the sufferings of Damiens. The truth is, that each fresh application intensifies the pain.

From one surprise after another, Gwynplaine had become desperate. That cup, his reason, under this new stupor, was overflowing. He felt within him a terrible awakening. Compass he no longer possessed. One idea only was before him — the woman. An indescribable happiness appeared, which threatened to overwhelm him. He could no longer decide for himself. There was an irresistible current and a reef. The reef was not a rock, but a siren — a magnet at the bottom of the abyss. He wished to tear himself away from this magnet; but how was he to carry out his wish? He had ceased to feel any basis of support. Who can foresee the fluctuations of the human mind! A man may be wrecked, as is a ship. Conscience is an anchor. It is a terrible thing, but, like the anchor, conscience may be carried away.

He had not even the chance of being repulsed on account of his terrible disfigurement. The woman had written to say that she loved him.

In every crisis there is a moment when the scale hesitates before kicking the beam. When we lean to the worst side of our nature, instead of strengthening our better qualities, the moral force which has been preserving the balance gives way, and down we go. Had this critical moment in Gwynplaine’s life arrived?

How could he escape?

So it is she — the duchess, the woman! There she was in that lonely room — asleep, far from succour, helpless, alone, at his mercy; yet he was in her power! The duchess! We have, perchance, observed a star in the distant firmament. We have admired it. It is so far off. What can there be to make us shudder in a fixed star? Well, one day — one night, rather — it moves. We perceive a trembling gleam around it. The star which we imagined to be immovable is in motion. It is no longer a star, but a comet — the incendiary giant of the skies. The luminary moves on, grows bigger, shakes off a shower of sparks and fire, and becomes enormous. It advances towards us. Oh, horror, it is coming our way! The comet recognizes us, marks us for its own, and will not be turned aside. Irresistible attack of the heavens! What is it which is bearing down on us? An excess of light, which blinds us; an excess of life, which kills us. That proposal which the heavens make we refuse; that unfathomable love we reject. We close our eyes; we hide; we tear ourselves away; we imagine the danger is past. We open our eyes: the formidable star is still before us; but, no longer a star, it has become a world — a world unknown, a world of lava and ashes; the devastating prodigy of space. It fills the sky, allowing no compeers. The carbuncle of the firmament’s depths, a diamond in the distance, when drawn close to us becomes a furnace. You are caught in its flames. And the first sensation of burning is that of a heavenly warmth.

CHAPTER IV.

SATAN.

Suddenly the sleeper awoke. She sat up with a sudden and gracious dignity of movement, her fair silken tresses falling in soft disorder. Then stretching herself, she yawned like a tigress in the rising sun.

Perhaps Gwynplaine breathed heavily, as we do when we endeavour to restrain our respiration.

“Is any one there?” said she.

She yawned as she spoke, and her very yawn was graceful. Gwynplaine listened to the unfamiliar voice — the voice of a charmer, its accents exquisitely haughty, its caressing intonation softening its native arrogance. Then rising on her knees — there is an antique statue kneeling thus in the midst of a thousand transparent folds — she drew the dressing-gown towards her, and springing from the couch stood upright. In the twinkling of an eye the silken robe was around her. The trailing sleeve concealed her hands; only the tips of her toes, with little pink nails like those of an infant, were left visible. Having drawn from underneath the dressing-gown a mass of hair which had been imprisoned by it, she crossed behind the couch to the end of the room, and placed her ear to the painted mirror, which was, apparently, a door. Tapping the glass with her finger, she called, “Is any one there? Lord David? Are you come already? What time is it then? Is that you, Barkilphedro?” She turned from the glass. “No! it was not there. Is there any one in the bathroom? Will you answer? Of course not. No one could come that way.”

Going to the silver lace curtain, she raised it with her foot, thrust it aside with her shoulder, and entered the marble room. An agonized numbness fell upon Gwynplaine. No possibility of concealment. It was too late to fly. Moreover, he was no longer equal to the exertion. He wished that the earth might open and swallow him up. Anything to hide him.

She saw him. She stared, immensely astonished, but without the slightest nervousness. Then, in a tone of mingled pleasure and contempt, she said, “Why, it is Gwynplaine!” Suddenly with a rapid spring, for this cat was a panther, she flung herself on his neck.

Suddenly, pushing him back, and holding him by both shoulders with her small claw-like hands, she stood up face to face with him, and began to gaze at him with a strange expression.

It was a fatal glance she gave him with her Aldebaran-like eyes — a glance at once equivocal and starlike. Gwynplaine watched the blue eye and the black eye, distracted by the double ray of heaven and of hell that shone in the orbs thus fixed on him. The man and the woman threw a malign dazzling reflection one on the other. Both were fascinated — he by her beauty, she by his deformity. Both were in a measure awe-stricken. Pressed down, as by an overwhelming weight, he was speechless.

“Oh!” she cried. “How clever you are! You are come. You found out that I was obliged to leave London. You followed me. That was right. Your being here proves you to be a wonder.”

The simultaneous return of self-possession acts like a flash of lightning. Gwynplaine, indistinctly warned by a vague, rude, but honest misgiving, drew back, but the pink nails clung to his shoulders and restrained him. Some inexorable power proclaimed its sway over him. He himself, a wild beast, was caged in a wild beast’s den. She continued, “Anne, the fool — you know whom I mean — the queen — ordered me to Windsor without giving any reason. When I arrived she was closeted with her idiot of a Chancellor. But how did you contrive to obtain access to me? That’s what I call being a man. Obstacles, indeed! there are no such things. You come at a call. You found things out. My name, the Duchess Josiana, you knew, I fancy. Who was it brought you in? No doubt it was the page. Oh, he is clever! I will give him a hundred guineas. Which way did you get in? Tell me! No, don’t tell me; I don’t want to know. Explanations diminish interest. I prefer the marvellous, and you are hideous enough to be wonderful. You have fallen from the highest heavens, or you have risen from the depths of hell through the devil’s trap-door. Nothing can be more natural. The ceiling opened or the floor yawned. A descent in a cloud, or an ascent in a mass of fire and brimstone, that is how you have travelled. You have a right to enter like the gods. Agreed; you are my lover.”

Gwynplaine was scared, and listened, his mind growing more irresolute every moment. Now all was certain. Impossible to have any further doubt. That letter! the woman confirmed its meaning. Gwynplaine the lover and the beloved of a duchess! Mighty pride, with its thousand baleful heads, stirred his wretched heart. Vanity, that powerful agent within us, works us measureless evil.

The duchess went on, “Since you are here, it is so decreed. I ask nothing more. There is some one on high, or in hell, who brings us together. The betrothal of Styx and Aurora! Unbridled ceremonies beyond all laws! The very day I first saw you I said, ‘It is he!’ I recognize him. He is the monster of my dreams. He shall be mine. We should give destiny a helping hand. Therefore I wrote to you. One question, Gwynplaine: do you believe in predestination? For my part, I have believed in it since I read, in Cicero, Scipio’s dream. Ah! I did not observe it. Dressed like a gentleman! You in fine clothes! Why not? You are a mountebank. All the more reason. A juggler is as good as a lord. Moreover, what are lords? Clowns. You have a noble figure; you are magnificently made. It is wonderful that you should be here. When did you arrive? How long have you been here? Did you see me naked? I am beautiful, am I not? I was going to take my bath. Oh, how I love you! You read my letter! Did you read it yourself? Did any one read it to you? Can you read? Probably you are ignorant. I ask questions, but don’t answer them. I don’t like the sound of your voice. It is soft. An extraordinary thing like you should snarl, and not speak. You sing harmoniously. I hate it. It is the only thing about you that I do not like. All the rest is terrible — is grand. In India you would be a god. Were you born with that frightful laugh on your face? No! No doubt it is a penal brand. I do hope you have committed some crime. Come to my arms.”

She sank on the couch, and made him sit beside her. They found themselves close together unconsciously. What she said passed over Gwynplaine like a mighty storm. He hardly understood the meaning of her whirlwind of words. Her eyes were full of admiration. She spoke tumultuously, frantically, with a voice broken and tender. Her words were music, but their music was to Gwynplaine as a hurricane. Again she fixed her gaze upon him and continued, —

“I feel degraded in your presence, and oh, what happiness that is! How insipid it is to be a grandee! I am noble; what can be more tiresome? Disgrace is a comfort. I am so satiated with respect that I long for contempt. We are all a little erratic, from Venus, Cleopatra, Mesdames de Chevreuse and de Longueville, down to myself. I will make a display of you, I declare. Here’s a love affair which will be a blow to my family, the Stuarts. Ah! I breathe again. I have discovered a secret. I am clear of royalty. To be free from its trammels is indeed deliverance. To break down, defy, make and destroy at will, that is true enjoyment. Listen, I love you."

She paused; then with a frightful smile went on, "I love you, not only because you are deformed, but because you are low. I love monsters, and I love mountebanks. A lover despised, mocked, grotesque, hideous, exposed to laughter on that pillory called a theatre, has for me an extraordinary attraction. It is tasting the fruit of hell. An infamous lover, how exquisite! To taste the apple, not of Paradise, but of hell — such is my temptation. It is for that I hunger and thirst. I am that Eve, the Eve of the depths. Probably you are, unknown to yourself, a devil. I am in love with a nightmare. You are a moving puppet, of which the strings are pulled by a spectre. You are the incarnation of infernal mirth. You are the master I require. I wanted a lover such as those of Medea and Canidia. I felt sure that some night would bring me such a one. You are all that I want. I am talking of a heap of things of which you probably know nothing. Gwynplaine, hitherto I have remained untouched; I give myself to you, pure as a burning ember. You evidently do not believe me; but if you only knew how little I care!"

Her words flowed like a volcanic eruption. Pierce Mount Etna, and you may obtain some idea of that jet of fiery eloquence.

Gwynplaine stammered, "Madame—"

She placed her hand on his mouth. "Silence," she said. "I am studying you. I am unbridled desire, immaculate. I am a vestal bacchante. No man has known me, and I might be the virgin pythoness at Delphos, and have under my naked foot the bronze tripod, where the priests lean their elbows on the skin of the python, whispering questions to the invisible god. My heart is of stone, but it is like those mysterious pebbles which the sea washes to the foot of the rock called Huntly Nabb, at the mouth of the Tees, and which if broken are found to contain a serpent. That serpent is my love — a love which is all-powerful, for it has brought you to me. An impossible distance was between us. I was in Sirius, and you were in Allioth. You have crossed the immeasurable space, and here you are. 'Tis well. Be silent. Take me."

She ceased; he trembled. Then she went on, smiling, "You see, Gwynplaine, to dream is to create; to desire is to summon. To build up the chimera is to provoke the reality. The all-powerful and terrible mystery will not be defied. It produces result. You are here. Do I dare to lose caste? Yes. Do I dare to be your mistress — your concubine — your slave — your chattel? Joyfully. Gwynplaine, I am woman. Woman is clay longing to become mire. I want to despise myself. That lends a zest to pride. The alloy of greatness is baseness. They combine in perfection. Despise me, you who are despised. Nothing can be better. Degradation on degradation. What joy! I pluck the double blossom of ignominy. Trample me under foot. You will only love me the more. I am sure of it. Do you understand why I idolize you? Because I despise you. You are so immeasurably below me that I place you on an altar. Bring the highest and lowest depths together, and you have Chaos, and I delight in Chaos — Chaos, the beginning and end of everything. What is Chaos? A huge blot. Out of that blot God made light, and out of that sink the world. You don't know how perverse I can be. Knead a star in mud, and you will have my likeness."

She went on, —

"A wolf to all beside; a faithful dog to you. How astonished they will all be! The astonishment of fools is amusing. I understand myself. Am I a goddess? Amphitrite gave herself to the Cyclops. *Fluctivoma Amphitrite*. Am I a fairy? Urgele gave herself to Bugryx, a winged man, with eight webbed hands. Am I a princess? Marie Stuart had Rizzio. Three beauties, three monsters. I am greater than they, for you are lower than they. Gwynplaine, we were made for one another. The monster that you are outwardly, I am within. Thence my love for you. A caprice? Just so. What is a hurricane but a caprice? Our stars have a certain affinity. Together we are things of night — you in your face, I in my mind. As your countenance is defaced, so is my mind. You, in your turn, create me. You come, and my real soul shows itself. I did not know it. It is astonishing. Your coming has evoked the hydra in me, who am a goddess. You reveal my real nature. See how I resemble you. Look at me as if I were a mirror. Your face is my mind. I did not know I was so terrible. I am also, then, a monster. O Gwynplaine, you do amuse me!"

She laughed, a strange and childlike laugh; and, putting her mouth close to his ear, whispered, —

"Do you want to see a mad woman? look at me."

She poured her searching look into Gwynplaine. A look is a philtre. Her loosened robe provoked a thousand dangerous feelings. Blind, animal ecstasy was invading his mind — ecstasy combined with agony. Whilst she spoke, though he felt her words like burning coals, his blood froze within his veins. He had not strength to utter a word.

She stopped, and looked at him.

“O monster!” she cried. She grew wild.

Suddenly she seized his hands.

“Gwynplaine, I am the throne; you are the footstool. Let us join on the same level. Oh, how happy I am in my fall! I wish all the world could know how abject I am become. It would bow down all the lower. The more man abhors, the more does he cringe. It is human nature. Hostile, but reptile; dragon, but worm. Oh, I am as depraved as are the gods! They can never say that I am not a king’s bastard. I act like a queen. Who was Rodope but a queen loving Pteh, a man with a crocodile’s head? She raised the third pyramid in his honour. Penthesilea loved the centaur, who, being now a star, is named Sagittarius. And what do you say about Anne of Austria? Mazarin was ugly enough! Now, you are not only ugly; you are deformed. Ugliness is mean, deformity is grand. Ugliness is the devil’s grin behind beauty; deformity is the reverse of sublimity. It is the back view. Olympus has two aspects. One, by day, shows Apollo; the other, by night, shows Polyphemus. You — you are a Titan. You would be Behemoth in the forests, Leviathan in the deep, and Typhon in the sewer. You surpass everything. There is the trace of lightning in your deformity; your face has been battered by the thunderbolt. The jagged contortion of forked lightning has imprinted its mark on your face. It struck you and passed on. A mighty and mysterious wrath has, in a fit of passion, cemented your spirit in a terrible and superhuman form. Hell is a penal furnace, where the iron called Fatality is raised to a white heat. You have been branded with it. To love you is to understand grandeur. I enjoy that triumph. To be in love with Apollo — a fine effort, forsooth! Glory is to be measured by the astonishment it creates. I love you. I have dreamt of you night after night. This is my palace. You shall see my gardens. There are fresh springs under the shrubs; arbours for lovers; and beautiful groups of marble statuary by Bernini. Flowers! there are too many — during the spring the place is on fire with roses. Did I tell you that the queen is my sister? Do what you like with me. I am made for Jupiter to kiss my feet, and for Satan to spit in my face. Are you of any religion? I am a Papist. My father, James II., died in France, surrounded by Jesuits. I have never felt before as I feel now that I am near you. Oh, how I should like to pass the evening with you, in the midst of music, both reclining on the same cushion, under a purple awning, in a gilded gondola on the soft expanse of ocean! Insult me, beat me, kick me, cuff me, treat me like a brute! I adore you.”

Caresses can roar. If you doubt it, observe the lion’s. The woman was horrible, and yet full of grace. The effect was tragic. First he felt the claw, then the velvet of the paw. A feline attack, made up of advances and retreats. There was death as well as sport in this game of come and go. She idolized him, but arrogantly. The result was contagious frenzy. Fatal language, at once inexpressible, violent, and sweet. The insulter did not insult; the adorer outraged the object of adoration. She, who buffeted, deified him. Her tones imparted to her violent yet amorous words an indescribable Promethean grandeur. According to Æschylus, in the orgies in honour of the great goddess the women were smitten by this evil frenzy when they pursued the satyrs under the stars. Such paroxysms raged in the mysterious dances in the grove of Dodona. This woman was as if transfigured — if, indeed, we can term that transfiguration which is the antithesis of heaven.

Her hair quivered like a mane; her robe opened and closed. The sunshine of the blue eye mingled with the fire of the black one. She was unearthly.

Gwynplaine, giving way, felt himself vanquished by the deep subtilty of this attack.

“I love you!” she cried. And she bit him with a kiss.

Homeric clouds were, perhaps, about to be required to encompass Gwynplaine and Josiana, as they did Jupiter and Juno. For Gwynplaine to be loved by a woman who could see and who saw him, to feel on his deformed mouth the pressure of divine lips, was exquisite and maddening. Before this woman, full of enigmas, all else faded away in his mind. The remembrance of Dea struggled in the shadows with weak cries. There is an antique bas-relief representing the Sphinx devouring a Cupid. The wings of the sweet celestial are bleeding between the fierce, grinning fangs.

Did Gwynplaine love this woman? Has man, like the globe, two poles? Are we, on our inflexible axis, a moving sphere, a star when seen from afar, mud when seen more closely, in which night alternates with day? Has the heart two aspects — one on which its love is poured forth in light; the other in darkness? Here a woman of light, there a woman of the sewer. Angels are necessary. Is it possible that demons are also essential? Has the soul the wings of the bat? Does twilight fall fatally for all? Is sin an integral and inevitable part of our destiny? Must we accept evil as part and portion of our whole? Do we inherit sin as a debt? What awful subjects for thought!

Yet a voice tells us that weakness is a crime. Gwynplaine's feelings are not to be described. The flesh, life, terror, lust, an overwhelming intoxication of spirit, and all the shame possible to pride. Was he about to succumb?

She repeated, "I love you!" and flung her frenzied arms around him. Gwynplaine panted.

Suddenly close at hand there rang, clear and distinct, a little bell. It was the little bell inside the wall. The duchess, turning her head, said, —

"What does she want of me?"

Quickly, with the noise of a spring door, the silver panel, with the golden crown chased on it, opened. A compartment of a shaft, lined with royal blue velvet, appeared, and on a golden salver a letter. The letter, broad and weighty, was placed so as to exhibit the seal, which was a large impression in red wax. The bell continued to tinkle. The open panel almost touched the couch where the duchess and Gwynplaine were sitting.

Leaning over, but still keeping her arm round his neck, she took the letter from the plate, and touched the panel. The compartment closed in, and the bell ceased ringing.

The duchess broke the seal, and, opening the envelope, drew out two documents contained therein, and flung it on the floor at Gwynplaine's feet. The impression of the broken seal was still decipherable, and Gwynplaine could distinguish a royal crown over the initial A. The torn envelope lay open before him, so that he could read, "To Her Grace the Duchess Josiana." The envelope had contained both vellum and parchment. The former was a small, the latter a large document. On the parchment was a large Chancery seal in green wax, called Lords' sealing-wax.

The face of the duchess, whose bosom was palpitating, and whose eyes were swimming with passion, became overspread with a slight expression of dissatisfaction.

"Ah!" she said. "What does she send me? A lot of papers! What a spoil-sport that woman is!"

Pushing aside the parchment, she opened the vellum.

"It is her handwriting. It is my sister's hand. It is quite provoking. Gwynplaine, I asked you if you could read. Can you?"

Gwynplaine nodded assent.

She stretched herself at full length on the couch, carefully drew her feet and arms under her robe, with a whimsical affectation of modesty, and, giving Gwynplaine the vellum, watched him with an impassioned look.

“Well, you are mine. Begin your duties, my beloved. Read me what the queen writes.”

Gwynplaine took the vellum, unfolded it, and, in a voice tremulous with many emotions, began to read: —

“MADAM, — We are graciously pleased to send to you herewith, sealed and signed by our trusty and well-beloved William Cowper, Lord High Chancellor of England, a copy of a report showing forth the very important fact that the legitimate son of Linnæus Lord Clancharlie has just been discovered and recognized, bearing the name of Gwynplaine, in the lowest rank of a wandering and vagabond life, among strollers and mountebanks. His false position dates from his earliest days. In accordance with the laws of the country, and in virtue of his hereditary rights, Lord Fermain Clancharlie, son of Lord Linnæus, will be this day admitted, and installed in his position in the House of Lords. Therefore, having regard to your welfare, and wishing to preserve for your use the property and estates of Lord Clancharlie of Hunkerville, we substitute him in the place of Lord David Dirry-Moir, and recommend him to your good graces. We have caused Lord Fermain to be conducted to Corleone Lodge. We will and command, as sister and as Queen, that the said Fermain Lord Clancharlie, hitherto called Gwynplaine, shall be your husband, and that you shall marry him. Such is our royal pleasure.”

While Gwynplaine, in tremulous tones which varied at almost every word, was reading the document, the duchess, half risen from the couch, listened with fixed attention. When Gwynplaine finished, she snatched the letter from his hands.

“Anne R,” she murmured in a tone of abstraction. Then picking up from the floor the parchment she had thrown down, she ran her eye over it. It was the confession of the shipwrecked crew of the *Matutina*, embodied in a report signed by the sheriff of Southwark and by the lord chancellor.

Having perused the report, she read the queen’s letter over again. Then she said, “Be it so.” And calmly pointing with her finger to the door of the gallery through which he had entered, she added, “Begone.”

Gwynplaine was petrified, and remained immovable. She repeated, in icy tones, “Since you are my husband, begone.” Gwynplaine, speechless, and with eyes downcast like a criminal, remained motionless. She added, “You have no right to be here; it is my lover’s place.” Gwynplaine was like a man transfixed. “Very well,” said she; “I must go myself. So you are my husband. Nothing can be better. I hate you.” She rose, and with an indescribably haughty gesture of adieu left the room. The curtain in the doorway of the gallery fell behind her.

CHAPTER V.

THEY RECOGNIZE, BUT DO NOT KNOW, EACH OTHER.

Gwynplaine was alone — alone, and in the presence of the tepid bath and the deserted couch. The confusion in his mind had reached its culminating point. His thoughts no longer resembled thoughts. They overflowed and ran riot; it was the anguish of a creature wrestling with perplexity. He felt as if he were awaking from a horrid nightmare. The entrance into unknown spheres is no simple matter.

From the time he had received the duchess's letter, brought by the page, a series of surprising adventures had befallen Gwynplaine, each one less intelligible than the other. Up to this time, though in a dream, he had seen things clearly. Now he could only grope his way. He no longer thought, nor even dreamed. He collapsed. He sank down upon the couch which the duchess had vacated.

Suddenly he heard a sound of footsteps, and those of a man. The noise came from the opposite side of the gallery to that by which the duchess had departed. The man approached, and his footsteps, though deadened by the carpet, were clear and distinct. Gwynplaine, in spite of his abstraction, listened.

Suddenly, beyond the silver web of curtain which the duchess had left partly open, a door, evidently concealed by the painted glass, opened wide, and there came floating into the room the refrain of an old French song, carolled at the top of a manly and joyous voice, —

“Trois petits gorets sur leur fumier
Juraient comme de porteurs de chaise,”

and a man entered. He wore a sword by his side, a magnificent naval uniform, covered with gold lace, and held in his hand a plumed hat with loops and cockade. Gwynplaine sprang up erect as if moved by springs. He recognized the man, and was, in turn, recognized by him. From their astonished lips came, simultaneously, this double exclamation: —

“Gwynplaine!”

“Tom-Jim-Jack!”

The man with the plumed hat advanced towards Gwynplaine, who stood with folded arms.

"What are you doing here, Gwynplaine?"

"And you, Tom-Jim-Jack, what are you doing here?"

"Oh! I understand. Josiana! a caprice. A mountebank and a monster! The double attraction is too powerful to be resisted. You disguised yourself in order to get here, Gwynplaine?"

"And you, too, Tom-Jim-Jack?"

"Gwynplaine, what does this gentleman's dress mean?"

"Tom-Jim-Jack, what does that officer's uniform mean?"

"Gwynplaine, I answer no questions."

"Neither do I, Tom-Jim-Jack."

"Gwynplaine, my name is not Tom-Jim-Jack."

"Tom-Jim-Jack, my name is not Gwynplaine."

"Gwynplaine, I am here in my own house."

"I am here in my own house, Tom-Jim-Jack."

"I will not have you echo my words. You are ironical; but I've got a cane. An end to your jokes, you wretched fool."

Gwynplaine became ashy pale. "You are a fool yourself, and you shall give me satisfaction for this insult."

"In your booth as much as you like, with fisticuffs."

"Here, and with swords?"

"My friend Gwynplaine, the sword is a weapon for gentlemen. With it I can only fight my equals. At fisticuffs we are equal, but not so with swords. At the Tadcaster Inn Tom-Jim-Jack could box with Gwynplaine; at Windsor the case is altered. Understand this: I am a rear-admiral."

"And I am a peer of England."

The man whom Gwynplaine recognized as Tom-Jim-Jack burst out laughing. "Why not a king? Indeed, you are right. An actor plays every part. You'll tell me next that you are Theseus, Duke of Athens."

"I am a peer of England, and we are going to fight."

"Gwynplaine, this becomes tiresome. Don't play with one who can order you to be flogged. I am Lord David Dirry-Moir."

"And I am Lord Clancharlie."

Again Lord David burst out laughing.

"Well said! Gwynplaine is Lord Clancharlie. That is indeed the name the man must bear who is to win Josiana. Listen. I forgive you; and do you know the reason? It's because we are both lovers of the same woman."

The curtain in the door was lifted, and a voice exclaimed, “You are the two husbands, my lords.”

They turned.

“Barkilphedro!” cried Lord David.

It was indeed he; he bowed low to the two lords, with a smile on his face. Some few paces behind him was a gentleman with a stern and dignified countenance, who carried in his hand a black wand. This gentleman advanced, and, bowing three times to Gwynplaine, said, “I am the Usher of the Black Rod. I come to fetch your lordship, in obedience to her Majesty’s commands.”

BOOK THE EIGHTH.

THE CAPITOL AND THINGS AROUND IT.

CHAPTER I.

ANALYSIS OF MAJESTIC MATTERS.

Irresistible Fate ever carrying him forward, which had now for so many hours showered its surprises on Gwynplaine, and which had transported him to Windsor, transferred him again to London. Visionary realities succeeded each other without a moment's intermission. He could not escape from their influence. Freed from one he met another. He had scarcely time to breathe. Any one who has seen a juggler throwing and catching balls can judge the nature of fate. Those rising and falling projectiles are like men tossed in the hands of Destiny — projectiles and playthings.

On the evening of the same day, Gwynplaine was an actor in an extraordinary scene. He was seated on a bench covered with fleurs-de-lis; over his silken clothes he wore a robe of scarlet velvet, lined with white silk, with a cape of ermine, and on his shoulders two bands of ermine embroidered with gold. Around him were men of all ages, young and old, seated like him on benches covered with fleurs-de-lis, and dressed like him in ermine and purple. In front of him other men were kneeling, clothed in black silk gowns. Some of them were writing; opposite, and a short distance from him, he observed steps, a raised platform, a dais, a large escutcheon glittering between a lion and a unicorn, and at the top of the steps, on the platform under the dais, resting against the escutcheon, was a gilded chair with a crown over it. This was a throne — the throne of Great Britain.

Gwynplaine, himself a peer of England, was in the House of Lords. How Gwynplaine's introduction to the House of Lords came about, we will now explain. Throughout the day, from morning to night, from Windsor to London, from Corleone Lodge to Westminster Hall, he had step by step mounted higher in the social grade. At each step he grew giddier. He had been conveyed from Windsor in a royal carriage with a peer's escort. There is not much difference between a guard of honour and a prisoner's. On that day, travellers on the London and Windsor road saw a galloping cavalcade of gentlemen pensioners of her Majesty's household escorting two carriages drawn at a rapid pace. In the first carriage sat the Usher of the Black Rod, his wand in his hand. In the second was to be seen a large hat with white plumes, throwing into shadow and hiding the face underneath it. Who was it who was thus being hurried on — a prince, a prisoner? It was Gwynplaine.

It looked as if they were conducting some one to the Tower, unless, indeed, they were escorting him to the House of Lords. The queen had done things well. As it was for her future brother-in-law, she had provided an escort from her own household. The officer of the Usher of the Black Rod rode on horseback at the head of the cavalcade. The Usher of the Black Rod carried, on a cushion placed on a seat of the carriage, a black portfolio stamped with the royal crown. At Brentford, the last relay before London, the carriages and escort halted. A four-horse carriage of tortoise-shell, with two postilions, a coachman in a wig, and four footmen, was in waiting. The wheels, steps, springs, pole, and all the fittings of this carriage were gilt. The horses' harness was of silver. This state coach was of an ancient and extraordinary shape, and would have been distinguished by its grandeur among the fifty-one celebrated carriages of which Roubo has left us drawings.

The Usher of the Black Rod and his officer alighted. The latter, having lifted the cushion, on which rested the royal portfolio, from the seat in the postchaise, carried it on outstretched hands, and stood behind the Usher. He first opened the door of the empty carriage, then the door of that occupied by Gwynplaine, and, with downcast eyes, respectfully invited him to descend. Gwynplaine left the chaise, and took his seat in the carriage. The Usher carrying the rod, and the officer supporting the cushion, followed, and took their places on the low front seat provided for pages in old state coaches. The inside of the carriage was lined with white satin trimmed with Binche silk, with tufts and tassels of silver. The roof was painted with armorial bearings. The postilions of the chaises they were leaving were dressed in the royal livery. The attendants of the carriage they now entered wore a different but very magnificent livery.

Gwynplaine, in spite of his bewildered state, in which he felt quite overcome, remarked the gorgeously-attired footmen, and asked the Usher of the Black Rod, —

"Whose livery is that?"

He answered, —

"Yours, my lord."

The House of Lords was to sit that evening. *Curia erat serena*, run the old records. In England parliamentary work is by preference undertaken at night. It once happened that Sheridan began a speech at midnight and finished it at sunrise.

The two postchaises returned to Windsor. Gwynplaine’s carriage set out for London. This ornamented four-horse carriage proceeded at a walk from Brentford to London, as befitted the dignity of the coachman. Gwynplaine’s servitude to ceremony was beginning in the shape of his solemn-looking coachman. The delay was, moreover, apparently prearranged; and we shall see presently its probable motive.

Night was falling, though it was not quite dark, when the carriage stopped at the King’s Gate, a large sunken door between two turrets connecting Whitehall with Westminster. The escort of gentlemen pensioners formed a circle around the carriage. A footman jumped down from behind it and opened the door. The Usher of the Black Rod, followed by the officer carrying the cushion, got out of the carriage, and addressed Gwynplaine.

“My lord, be pleased to alight. I beg your lordship to keep your hat on.”

Gwynplaine wore under his travelling cloak the suit of black silk, which he had not changed since the previous evening. He had no sword. He left his cloak in the carriage. Under the arched way of the King’s Gate there was a small side door raised some few steps above the road. In ceremonial processions the greatest personage never walks first.

The Usher of the Black Rod, followed by his officer, walked first; Gwynplaine followed. They ascended the steps, and entered by the side door. Presently they were in a wide, circular room, with a pillar in the centre, the lower part of a turret. The room, being on the ground floor, was lighted by narrow windows in the pointed arches, which served but to make darkness visible. Twilight often lends solemnity to a scene. Obscurity is in itself majestic.

In this room, thirteen men, disposed in ranks, were standing — three in the front row, six in the second row, and four behind. In the front row one wore a crimson velvet gown; the other two, gowns of the same colour, but of satin. All three had the arms of England embroidered on their shoulders. The second rank wore tunics of white silk, each one having a different coat of arms emblazoned in front. The last row were clad in black silk, and were thus distinguished. The first wore a blue cape. The second had a scarlet St. George embroidered in front. The third, two embroidered crimson crosses, in front and behind. The fourth had a collar of black sable fur. All were uncovered, wore wigs, and carried swords. Their faces were scarcely visible in the dim light, neither could they see Gwynplaine's face.

The Usher of the Black Rod, raising his wand, said, —

"My Lord Fermain Clancharlie, Baron Clancharlie and Hunkerville, I, the Usher of the Black Rod, first officer of the presence chamber, hand your lordship over to Garter King-at-Arms."

The person clothed in velvet, quitting his place in the ranks, bowed to the ground before Gwynplaine, and said, —

"My Lord Fermain Clancharlie, I am Garter, Principal King-at-Arms of England. I am the officer appointed and installed by his grace the Duke of Norfolk, hereditary Earl Marshal. I have sworn obedience to the king, peers, and knights of the garter. The day of my installation, when the Earl Marshal of England anointed me by pouring a goblet of wine on my head, I solemnly promised to be attentive to the nobility; to avoid bad company; to excuse, rather than accuse, gentlefolks; and to assist widows and virgins. It is I who have the charge of arranging the funeral ceremonies of peers, and the supervision of their armorial bearings. I place myself at the orders of your lordship."

The first of those wearing satin tunics, having bowed deeply, said, —

"My lord, I am Clarenceaux, Second King-at-Arms of England. I am the officer who arranges the obsequies of nobles below the rank of peers. I am at your lordship's disposal."

The other wearer of the satin tunic bowed and spoke thus, —

"My lord, I am Norroy, Third King-at-Arms of England. Command me."

The second row, erect and without bowing, advanced a pace. The right-hand man said, —

"My lord, we are the six Dukes-at-Arms of England. I am York."

Then each of the heralds, or Dukes-at-Arms, speaking in turn, proclaimed his title.

"I am Lancaster."

"I am Richmond."

"I am Chester."

"I am Somerset."

"I am Windsor."

The coats of arms embroidered on their breasts were those of the counties and towns from which they took their names.

The third rank, dressed in black, remained silent. Garter King-at-Arms, pointing them out to Gwynplaine, said, —

“My lord, these are the four Pursuivants-at-Arms. Blue Mantle.”

The man with the blue cape bowed.

“Rouge Dragon.”

He with the St. George inclined his head.

“Rouge Croix.”

He with the scarlet crosses saluted.

“Portcullis.”

He with the sable fur collar made his obeisance.

On a sign from the King-at-Arms, the first of the pursuivants, Blue Mantle, stepped forward and received from the officer of the Usher the cushion of silver cloth and crown-emblazoned portfolio. And the King-at-Arms said to the Usher of the Black Rod, —

“Proceed; I leave in your hands the introduction of his lordship!”

The observance of these customs, and also of others which will now be described, were the old ceremonies in use prior to the time of Henry VIII., and which Anne for some time attempted to revive. There is nothing like it in existence now. Nevertheless, the House of Lords thinks that it is unchangeable; and, if Conservatism exists anywhere, it is there.

It changes, nevertheless. *E pur si muove*. For instance, what has become of the may-pole, which the citizens of London erected on the 1st of May, when the peers went down to the House? The last one was erected in 1713. Since then the may-pole has disappeared. Disuse.

Outwardly, unchangeable; inwardly, mutable. Take, for example, the title of Albemarle. It sounds eternal. Yet it has been through six different families — Odo, Mandeville, Bethune, Plantagenet, Beauchamp, Monck. Under the title of Leicester five different names have been merged — Beaumont, Breose, Dudley, Sydney, Coke. Under Lincoln, six; under Pembroke, seven. The families change, under unchanging titles. A superficial historian believes in immutability. In reality it does not exist. Man can never be more than a wave; humanity is the ocean.

Aristocracy is proud of what women consider a reproach — age! Yet both cherish the same illusion, that they do not change. It is probable the House of Lords will not recognize itself in the foregoing description, nor yet in that which follows, thus resembling the once pretty woman, who objects to having any wrinkles. The mirror is ever a scapegoat, yet its truths cannot be contested. To portray exactly, constitutes the duty of a historian. The King-at-Arms, turning to Gwynplaine, said, —

“Be pleased to follow me, my lord.” And added, “You will be saluted. Your lordship, in returning the salute, will be pleased merely to raise the brim of your hat.”

They moved off, in procession, towards a door at the far side of the room. The Usher of the Black Rod walked in front; then Blue Mantle, carrying the cushion; then the King-at-Arms; and after him came Gwynplaine, wearing his hat. The rest, kings-at-arms, heralds, and pursuivants, remained in the circular room. Gwynplaine, preceded by the Usher of the Black Rod, and escorted by the King-at-Arms, passed from room to room, in a direction which it would now be impossible to trace, the old Houses of Parliament having been pulled down. Amongst others, he crossed that Gothic state chamber in which took place the last meeting of James II. and Monmouth, and whose walls witnessed the useless debasement of the cowardly nephew at the feet of his vindictive uncle. On the walls of this chamber hung, in chronological order, nine fell-length portraits of former peers, with their dates — Lord Nansladron, 1305; Lord Baliol, 1306; Lord Benestede, 1314; Lord Cantilupe, 1356; Lord Montbegon, 1357; Lord Tibotot, 1373; Lord Zouch of Codnor, 1615; Lord Bella-Aqua, with no date; Lord Harren and Surrey, Count of Blois, also without date.

It being now dark, lamps were burning at intervals in the galleries. Brass chandeliers, with wax candles, illuminated the rooms, lighting them like the side aisles of a church. None but officials were present. In one room, which the procession crossed, stood, with heads respectfully lowered, the four clerks of the signet, and the Clerk of the Council. In another room stood the distinguished Knight Banneret, Philip Sydenham of Brympton in Somersetshire. The Knight Banneret is a title conferred in time of war, under the unfurled royal standard. In another room was the senior baronet of England, Sir Edmund Bacon of Suffolk, heir of Sir Nicholas Bacon, styled, *Primus baronetorum Anglicæ*. Behind Sir Edmund was an armour-bearer with an arquebus, and an esquire carrying the arms of Ulster, the baronets being the hereditary defenders of the province of Ulster in Ireland. In another room was the Chancellor of the Exchequer, with his four accountants, and the two deputies of the Lord Chamberlain, *appointed to cleave the tallies*.

At the entrance of a corridor covered with matting, which was the communication between the Lower and the Upper House, Gwynplaine was saluted by Sir Thomas Mansell of Margam, Comptroller of the Queen's Household and Member for Glamorgan; and at the exit from the corridor by a deputation of one for every two of the Barons of the Cinque Ports, four on the right and four on the left, the Cinque Ports being eight in number. William Hastings did obeisance for Hastings; Matthew Aylmor, for Dover; Josias Burchett, for Sandwich; Sir Philip Boteler, for Hythe; John Brewer, for New Rumney; Edward Southwell, for the town of Rye; James Hayes, for Winchelsea; George Nailor, for Seaford. As Gwynplaine was about to return the salute, the King-at-Arms reminded him in a low voice of the etiquette, "Only the brim of your hat, my lord." Gwynplaine did as directed. He now entered the so-called Painted Chamber, in which there was no painting, except a few of saints, and amongst them St. Edward, in the high arches of the long and deep-pointed windows, which were divided by what formed the ceiling of Westminster Hall and the floor of the Painted Chamber. On the far side of the wooden barrier which divided the room from end to end, stood the three Secretaries of State, men of mark. The functions of the first of these officials comprised the supervision of all affairs relating to the south of England, Ireland, the Colonies, France, Switzerland, Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Turkey. The second had charge of the north of England, and watched affairs in the Low Countries, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Poland, and Russia. The third, a Scot, had charge of Scotland. The two first-mentioned were English, one of them being the Honourable Robert Harley, Member for the borough of New Radnor. A Scotch member, Mungo Graham, Esquire, a relation of the Duke of Montrose, was present. All bowed, without speaking, to Gwynplaine, who returned the salute by touching his hat. The barrier-keeper lifted the wooden arm which, pivoting on a hinge, formed the entrance to the far side of the Painted Chamber, where stood the long table, covered with green cloth, reserved for peers. A branch of lighted candles stood on the table. Gwynplaine, preceded by the Usher of the Black Rod, Garter King-at-Arms, and Blue Mantle, penetrated into this privileged compartment. The barrier-keeper closed the opening immediately Gwynplaine had passed. The King-at-Arms, having entered the precincts of the privileged compartment, halted. The Painted Chamber was a spacious apartment. At the farther end, upright, beneath the royal escutcheon which was placed between the two windows, stood two old men, in red velvet robes, with two rows of ermine trimmed with gold lace on their shoulders, and wearing wigs, and hats with white plumes. Through the openings of their robes might be detected silk garments and sword hilts. Motionless behind them stood a man dressed in black silk, holding on high a great mace of gold surmounted by a crowned lion. It was the Mace-bearer of the Peers of England. The lion is their crest. *Et les Lions ce sont les Barons et li Per*, runs the manuscript chronicle of Bertrand Duguesclin.

The King-at-Arms pointed out the two persons in velvet, and whispered to Gwynplaine, —

"My lord, these are your equals. Be pleased to return their salute exactly as they make it. These two peers are barons, and have been named by the Lord Chancellor as your sponsors. They are very old, and almost blind. They will, themselves, introduce you to the House of Lords. The first is Charles Mildmay, Lord Fitzwalter, sixth on the roll of barons; the second is Augustus Arundel, Lord Arundel of Trerice, thirty-eighth on the roll of barons." The King-at-Arms having advanced a step towards the two old men, proclaimed "Fermain Clancharlie, Baron Clancharlie, Baron Hunkerville, Marquis of Corleone in Sicily, greets your lordships!" The two peers raised their hats to the full extent of the arm, and then replaced them. Gwynplaine did the same. The Usher of the Black Rod stepped forward, followed by Blue Mantle and Garter King at-Arms. The Mace-bearer took up his post in front of Gwynplaine, the two peers at his side, Lord Fitzwalter on the right, and Lord Arundel of Trerice on the left. Lord Arundel, the elder of the two, was very feeble. He died the following year, bequeathing to his grandson John, a minor, the title which became extinct in 1768. The procession, leaving the Painted Chamber, entered a gallery in which were rows of pilasters, and between the spaces were sentinels, alternately pike-men of England and halberdiers of Scotland. The Scotch halberdiers were magnificent kilted soldiers, worthy to encounter later on at Fontenoy the French cavalry, and the royal cuirassiers, whom their colonel thus addressed: "*Messieurs les maitres, assurez vos chapeaux. Nous allons avoir l'honneur de charger.*" The captain of these soldiers saluted Gwynplaine, and the peers, his sponsors, with their swords. The men saluted with their pikes and halberds.

At the end of the gallery shone a large door, so magnificent that its two folds seemed to be masses of gold. On each side of the door there stood, upright and motionless, men who were called doorkeepers. Just before you came to this door, the gallery widened out into a circular space. In this space was an armchair with an immense back, and on it, judging by his wig and from the amplitude of his robes, was a distinguished person. It was William Cowper, Lord Chancellor of England. To be able to cap a royal infirmity with a similar one has its advantages. William Cowper was short-sighted. Anne had also defective sight, but in a lesser degree. The near-sightedness of William Cowper found favour in the eyes of the short-sighted queen, and induced her to appoint him Lord Chancellor, and Keeper of the Royal Conscience. William Cowper's upper lip was thin, and his lower one thick — a sign of semi-good-nature.

This circular space was lighted by a lamp hung from the ceiling. The Lord Chancellor was sitting gravely in his large armchair; at his right was the Clerk of the Crown, and at his left the Clerk of the Parliaments.

Each of the clerks had before him an open register and an inkhorn.

Behind the Lord Chancellor was his mace-bearer, holding the mace with the crown on the top, besides the train-bearer and purse-bearer, in large wigs.

All these officers are still in existence. On a little stand, near the woolsack, was a sword, with a gold hilt and sheath, and belt of crimson velvet.

Behind the Clerk of the Crown was an officer holding in his hands the coronation robe.

Behind the Clerk of the Parliaments another officer held a second robe, which was that of a peer.

The robes, both of scarlet velvet, lined with white silk, and having bands of ermine trimmed with gold lace over the shoulders, were similar, except that the ermine band was wider on the coronation robe.

The third officer, who was the librarian, carried on a square of Flanders leather the red book, a little volume, bound in red morocco, containing a list of the peers and commons, besides a few blank leaves and a pencil, which it was the custom to present to each new member on his entering the House.

Gwynplaine, between the two peers, his sponsors, brought up the procession, which stopped before the woolsack.

The two peers, who introduced him, uncovered their heads, and Gwynplaine did likewise.

The King-at-Arms received from the hands of Blue Mantle the cushion of silver cloth, knelt down, and presented the black portfolio on the cushion to the Lord Chancellor.

The Lord Chancellor took the black portfolio, and handed it to the Clerk of the Parliament.

The Clerk received it ceremoniously, and then sat down.

The Clerk of the Parliament opened the portfolio, and arose.

The portfolio contained the two usual messages — the royal patent addressed to the House of Lords, and the writ of summons.

The Clerk read aloud these two messages, with respectful deliberation, standing.

The writ of summons, addressed to Fermain Lord Clancharlie, concluded with the accustomed formalities, —

“We strictly enjoin you, on the faith and allegiance that you owe, to come and take your place in person among the prelates and peers sitting in our Parliament at Westminster, for the purpose of giving your advice, in all honour and conscience, on the business of the kingdom and of the church.”

The reading of the messages being concluded, the Lord Chancellor raised his voice, —

“The message of the Crown has been read. Lord Clancharlie, does your lordship renounce transubstantiation, adoration of saints, and the mass?”

Gwynplaine bowed.

“The test has been administered,” said the Lord Chancellor.

And the Clerk of the Parliament resumed, —

“His lordship has taken the test.”

The Lord Chancellor added, —

“My Lord Clancharlie, you can take your seat.”

“So be it,” said the two sponsors.

The King-at-Arms rose, took the sword from the stand, and buckled it round Gwynplaine’s waist.

“Ce faict,” says the old Norman charter, “le pair prend son espée, et monte aux hauts siéges, et assiste a l’audience.”

Gwynplaine heard a voice behind him which said, —

“I array your lordship in a peer’s robe.”

At the same time, the officer who spoke to him, who was holding the robe, placed it on him, and tied the black strings of the ermine cape round his neck.

Gwynplaine, the scarlet robe on his shoulders, and the golden sword by his side, was attired like the peers on his right and left.

The librarian presented to him the red book, and put it in the pocket of his waistcoat.

The King-at-Arms murmured in his ear, —

“My lord, on entering, will bow to the royal chair.”

The royal chair is the throne.

Meanwhile the two clerks were writing, each at his table — one on the register of the Crown, the other on the register of the House.

Then both — the Clerk of the Crown preceding the other — brought their books to the Lord Chancellor, who signed them. Having signed the two registers, the Lord Chancellor rose.

“Fermain Lord Clancharlie, Baron Clancharlie, Baron Hunkerville, Marquis of Corleone in Sicily, be you welcome among your peers, the lords spiritual and temporal of Great Britain.”

Gwynplaine’s sponsors touched his shoulder.

He turned round.

The folds of the great gilded door at the end of the gallery opened.

It was the door of the House of Lords.

Thirty-six hours only had elapsed since Gwynplaine, surrounded by a different procession, had entered the iron door of Southwark Jail.

What shadowy chimeras had passed, with terrible rapidity through his brain — chimeras which were hard facts; rapidity, which was a capture by assault!

CHAPTER II.

IMPARTIALITY.

The creation of an equality with the king, called Peerage, was, in barbarous epochs, a useful fiction. This rudimentary political expedient produced in France and England different results. In France, the peer was a mock king; in England, a real prince — less grand than in France, but more genuine: we might say less, but worse.

Peerage was born in France; the date is uncertain — under Charlemagne, says the legend; under Robert le Sage, says history, and history is not more to be relied on than legend. Favin writes: “The King of France wished to attach to himself the great of his kingdom, by the magnificent title of peers, as if they were his equals.”

Peerage soon thrust forth branches, and from France passed over to England.

The English peerage has been a great fact, and almost a mighty institution. It had for precedent the Saxon wittenagemote. The Danish thane and the Norman vavassour commingled in the baron. Baron is the same as vir, which is translated into Spanish by *varon,* and which signifies, *par excellence,* “Man.” As early as 1075, the barons made themselves felt by the king — and by what a king! By William the Conqueror. In 1086 they laid the foundation of feudality, and its basis was the “Doomsday Book.” Under John Lackland came conflict. The French peerage took the high hand with Great Britain, and demanded that the king of England should appear at their bar. Great was the indignation of the English barons. At the coronation of Philip Augustus, the King of England, as Duke of Normandy, carried the first square banner, and the Duke of Guyenne the second. Against this king, a vassal of the foreigner, the War of the Barons burst forth. The barons imposed on the weak-minded King John Magna Charta, from which sprang the House of Lords. The pope took part with the king, and excommunicated the lords. The date was 1215, and the pope was Innocent III., who wrote the “Veni, Sancte Spiritus,” and who sent to John Lackland the four cardinal virtues in the shape of four gold rings. The Lords persisted. The duel continued through many generations. Pembroke struggled. 1248 was the year of “the provisions of Oxford.” Twenty-four barons limited the king’s powers, discussed him, and called a knight from each county to take part in the widened breach. Here was the dawn of the Commons. Later on, the Lords added two citizens from each city, and two burgesses from each borough. It arose from this, that up to the time of Elizabeth the peers were judges of the validity of elections to the House of Commons. From their jurisdiction sprang the proverb that the members returned ought to be without the three P's — *sine Prece, sine Pretio, sine Poculo*. This did not obviate rotten boroughs. In 1293, the Court of Peers in France had still the King of England under their jurisdiction; and Philippe le Bel cited Edward I. to appear before him. Edward I. was the king who ordered his son to boil him down after death, and to carry his bones to the wars. Under the follies of their kings the Lords felt the necessity of fortifying Parliament. They divided it into two chambers, the upper and the lower. The Lords arrogantly kept the supremacy. "If it happens that any member of the Commons should be so bold as to speak to the prejudice of the House of Lords, he is called to the bar of the House to be reprimanded, and, occasionally, to be sent to the Tower." There is the same distinction in voting. In the House of Lords they vote one by one, beginning with the junior, called the puisne baron. Each peer answers "*Content*," or "*Non-content*." In the Commons they vote together, by "Aye," or "No," in a crowd. The Commons accuse, the peers judge. The peers, in their disdain of figures, delegated to the Commons, who were to profit by it, the superintendence of the Exchequer — thus named, according to some, after the table-cover, which was like a chess-board; and according to others, from the drawers of the old safe, where was kept, behind an iron grating, the treasure of the kings of England. The "Year-Book" dates from the end of the thirteenth century. In the War of the Roses the weight of the Lords was thrown, now on the side of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, now on the side of Edmund, Duke of York. Wat Tyler, the Lollards, Warwick the King-maker, all that anarchy from which freedom is to spring, had for foundation, avowed or secret, the English feudal system. The Lords were usefully jealous of the Crown; for to be jealous is to be watchful. They circumscribed the royal initiative, diminished the category of cases of high treason, raised up pretended Richards against Henry IV., appointed themselves arbitrators, judged the question of the three crowns between the Duke of York and Margaret of Anjou, and at need levied armies, and fought their battles of Shrewsbury, Tewkesbury, and St. Albans, sometimes winning, sometimes losing. Before this, in the thirteenth century, they had gained the battle of Lewes, and had driven from the kingdom the four brothers of the king, bastards of Queen Isabella by the Count de la Marche; all four usurers, who extorted money from Christians by means of the Jews; half princes, half sharpers — a thing common enough in more recent times, but not held in good odour in those days. Up to the fifteenth century the Norman Duke peeped out in the King of England, and the acts of Parliament were written in French. From the reign of Henry VII., by the will of the Lords, these were written in English. England, British under Uther Pendragon; Roman under Cæsar; Saxon under the Heptarchy; Danish under Harold; Norman after William; then became, thanks to the Lords, English. After that she became Anglican. To have one's religion at home is a great power. A foreign pope drags down the national life. A Mecca is an octopus, and devours it. In 1534, London bowed out Rome. The peerage adopted the reformed religion, and the Lords accepted Luther. Here we have the answer to the excommunication of 1215. It was agreeable to Henry VIII.; but, in other respects, the Lords were a trouble to him. As a bulldog to a bear, so was the House of Lords to Henry VIII. When Wolsey robbed the nation of Whitehall, and when Henry robbed Wolsey of it, who complained? Four lords — Darcie, of Chichester; Saint John of Bletsho; and (two Norman names) Mountjoie and Mounteagle. The king usurped. The peerage encroached. There is something in hereditary power which is incorruptible. Hence the insubordination of the Lords. Even in Elizabeth's reign the barons were restless. From this resulted the tortures at Durham. Elizabeth was as a farthingale over an executioner's block. Elizabeth assembled Parliament as seldom as possible, and reduced the House of Lords to sixty-five members, amongst whom there was but one marquis (Winchester), and not a single duke. In France the kings felt the same jealousy and carried out the same elimination. Under Henry III. there were no more than eight dukedoms in the peerage, and it was to the great vexation of the king that the Baron de Mantes, the Baron de Courcy, the Baron de Coulommiers, the Baron de Chateauneuf-en-Thimerais, the Baron de la Fère-en-Lardenois, the Baron de Mortagne, and some others besides, maintained themselves as barons — peers of France. In England the crown saw the peerage diminish with pleasure. Under Anne, to quote but one example, the peerages become extinct since the twelfth century amounted to five hundred and sixty-five. The War of the Roses had begun the extermination of dukes, which the axe of Mary Tudor completed. This was, indeed, the decapitation of the nobility. To prune away the dukes was to cut off its head. Good policy, perhaps; but it is better to corrupt than to decapitate. James I. was of this opinion. He restored dukedoms. He made a duke of his favourite Villiers, who had made him a pig; a transformation from the duke feudal to the duke courtier. This sowing was to bring forth a rank harvest: Charles II. was to make two of his mistresses duchesses — Barbara of Southampton, and Louise de la Querouel of Portsmouth. Under Anne there were to be twenty-five dukes, of whom three were to be foreigners, Cumberland, Cambridge, and Schomberg. Did this court policy, invented by James I., succeed? No. The House of Peers was irritated by the effort to shackle it by intrigue. It was irritated against James I., it was irritated against Charles I., who, we may observe, may have had something to do with the death of his father, just as Marie de Medicis may have had something to do with the death of her husband. There was a rupture between Charles I. and the peerage. The lords who, under James I., had tried at their bar extortion, in the person of Bacon, under Charles I. tried treason, in the person of Stratford. They had condemned Bacon; they condemned Stratford. One had lost his honour, the other lost his life. Charles I. was first beheaded in the person of Stratford. The Lords lent their aid to the Commons. The king convokes Parliament to Oxford; the revolution convokes it to London. Forty-four peers side with the King, twenty-two with the Republic. From this combination of the people with the Lords arose the Bill of Rights — a sketch of the French *Droits de l'homme*, a vague shadow flung back from the depths of futurity by the revolution of France on the revolution of England.

Such were the services of the peerage. Involuntary ones, we admit, and dearly purchased, because the said peerage is a huge parasite. But considerable services, nevertheless.

The despotic work of Louis XI., of Richelieu, and of Louis XIV., the creation of a sultan, levelling taken for true equality, the bastinado given by the sceptre, the common abasement of the people, all these Turkish tricks in France the peers prevented in England. The aristocracy was a wall, banking up the king on one side, sheltering the people on the other. They redeemed their arrogance towards the people by their insolence towards the king. Simon, Earl of Leicester, said to Henry III., "*King, thou hast lied!*" The Lords curbed the crown, and grated against their kings in the tenderest point, that of venery. Every lord, passing through a royal park, had the right to kill a deer: in the house of the king the peer was at home; in the Tower of London the scale of allowance for the king was no more than that for a peer — namely, twelve pounds sterling per week. This was the House of Lords' doing.

Yet more. We owe to it the deposition of kings. The Lords ousted John Lackland, degraded Edward II., deposed Richard II., broke the power of Henry VI., and made Cromwell a possibility. What a Louis XIV. there was in Charles I.! Thanks to Cromwell, it remained latent. By-the-bye, we may here observe that Cromwell himself, though no historian seems to have noticed the fact, aspired to the peerage. This was why he married Elizabeth Bouchier, descendant and heiress of a Cromwell, Lord Bouchier, whose peerage became extinct in 1471, and of a Bouchier, Lord Robesart, another peerage extinct in 1429. Carried on with the formidable increase of important events, he found the suppression of a king a shorter way to power than the recovery of a peerage. A ceremonial of the Lords, at times ominous, could reach even to the king. Two men-at-arms from the Tower, with their axes on their shoulders, between whom an accused peer stood at the bar of the house, might have been there in like attendance on the king as on any other nobleman. For five centuries the House of Lords acted on a system, and carried it out with determination. They had their days of idleness and weakness, as, for instance, that strange time when they allowed themselves to be seduced by the vessels loaded with cheeses, hams, and Greek wines sent them by Julius II. The English aristocracy was restless, haughty, ungovernable, watchful, and patriotically mistrustful. It was that aristocracy which, at the end of the seventeenth century, by act the tenth of the year 1694, deprived the borough of Stockbridge, in Hampshire, of the right of sending members to Parliament, and forced the Commons to declare null the election for that borough, stained by papistical fraud. It imposed the test on James, Duke of York, and, on his refusal to take it, excluded him from the throne. He reigned, notwithstanding; but the Lords wound up by calling him to account and banishing him. That aristocracy has had, in its long duration, some instinct of progress. It has always given out a certain quantity of appreciable light, except now towards its end, which is at hand. Under James II. it maintained in the Lower House the proportion of three hundred and forty-six burgesses against ninety-two knights. The sixteen barons, by courtesy, of the Cinque Ports were more than counterbalanced by the fifty citizens of the twenty-five cities. Though corrupt and egotistic, that aristocracy was, in some instances, singularly impartial. It is harshly judged. History keeps all its compliments for the Commons. The justice of this is doubtful. We consider the part played by the Lords a very great one. Oligarchy is the independence of a barbarous state, but it is an independence. Take Poland, for instance, nominally a kingdom, really a republic. The peers of England held the throne in suspicion and guardianship. Time after time they have made their power more felt than that of the Commons. They gave check to the king. Thus, in that remarkable year, 1694, the Triennial Parliament Bill, rejected by the Commons, in consequence of the objections of William III., was passed by the Lords. William III., in his irritation, deprived the Earl of Bath of the governorship of Pendennis Castle, and Viscount Mordaunt of all his offices. The House of Lords was the republic of Venice in the heart of the royalty of England. To reduce the king to a doge was its object; and in proportion as it decreased the power of the crown it increased that of the people. Royalty knew this, and hated the peerage. Each endeavoured to lessen the other. What was thus lost by each was proportionate profit to the people. Those two blind powers, monarchy and oligarchy, could not see that they were working for the benefit of a third, which was democracy. What a delight it was to the crown, in the last century, to be able to hang a peer, Lord Ferrers!

However, they hung him with a silken rope. How polite!

“They would not have hung a peer of France,” the Duke of Richelieu haughtily remarked. Granted. They would have beheaded him. Still more polite!

Montmorency Tancarville signed himself *peer of France and England;* thus throwing the English peerage into the second rank. The peers of France were higher and less powerful, holding to rank more than to authority, and to precedence more than to domination. There was between them and the Lords that shade of difference which separates vanity from pride. With the peers of France, to take precedence of foreign princes, of Spanish grandees, of Venetian patricians; to see seated on the lower benches the Marshals of France, the Constable and the Admiral of France, were he even Comte de Toulouse and son of Louis XIV.; to draw a distinction between duchies in the male and female line; to maintain the proper distance between a simple *comté,* like Armagnac or Albret, and a *comté pairie,* like Evreux; to wear by right, at five-and-twenty, the blue ribbon of the Golden Fleece; to counterbalance the Duke de la Tremoille, the most ancient peer of the court, with the Duke Uzès, the most ancient peer of the Parliament; to claim as many pages and horses to their carriages as an elector; to be called *monseigneur* by the first President; to discuss whether the Duke de Maine dates his peerage as the Comte d'Eu, from 1458; to cross the grand chamber diagonally, or by the side — such things were grave matters. Grave matters with the Lords were the Navigation Act, the Test Act, the enrolment of Europe in the service of England, the command of the sea, the expulsion of the Stuarts, war with France. On one side, etiquette above all; on the other, empire above all. The peers of England had the substance, the peers of France the shadow.

To conclude, the House of Lords was a starting-point; towards civilization this is an immense thing. It had the honour to found a nation. It was the first incarnation of the unity of the people: English resistance, that obscure but all-powerful force, was born in the House of Lords. The barons, by a series of acts of violence against royalty, have paved the way for its eventual downfall. The House of Lords at the present day is somewhat sad and astonished at what it has unwillingly and unintentionally done, all the more that it is irrevocable.

What are concessions? Restitutions; — and nations know it.

"I grant," says the king.

"I get back my own," says the people.

The House of Lords believed that it was creating the privileges of the peerage, and it has produced the rights of the citizen. That vulture, aristocracy, has hatched the eagle's egg of liberty.

And now the egg is broken, the eagle is soaring, the vulture dying.

Aristocracy is at its last gasp; England is growing up.

Still, let us be just towards the aristocracy. It entered the scale against royalty, and was its counterpoise. It was an obstacle to despotism. It was a barrier. Let us thank and bury it.

CHAPTER III.

THE OLD HALL.

Near Westminster Abbey was an old Norman palace which was burnt in the time of Henry VIII. Its wings were spared. In one of them Edward VI. placed the House of Lords, in the other the House of Commons. Neither the two wings nor the two chambers are now in existence. The whole has been rebuilt.

We have already said, and we must repeat, that there is no resemblance between the House of Lords of the present day and that of the past. In demolishing the ancient palace they somewhat demolished its ancient usages. The strokes of the pickaxe on the monument produce their counter-strokes on customs and charters. An old stone cannot fall without dragging down with it an old law. Place in a round room a parliament which has been hitherto held in a square room, and it will no longer be the same thing. A change in the shape of the shell changes the shape of the fish inside.

If you wish to preserve an old thing, human or divine, a code or a dogma, a nobility or a priesthood, never repair anything about it thoroughly, even its outside cover. Patch it up, nothing more. For instance, Jesuitism is a piece added to Catholicism. Treat edifices as you would treat institutions. Shadows should dwell in ruins. Worn-out powers are uneasy in chambers freshly decorated. Ruined palaces accord best with institutions in rags. To attempt to describe the House of Lords of other days would be to attempt to describe the unknown. History is night. In history there is no second tier. That which is no longer on the stage immediately fades into obscurity. The scene is shifted, and all is at once forgotten. The past has a synonym, the unknown.

The peers of England sat as a court of justice in Westminster Hall, and as the higher legislative chamber in a chamber specially reserved for the purpose, called *The House of Lords*.

Besides the house of peers of England, which did not assemble as a court unless convoked by the crown, two great English tribunals, inferior to the house of peers, but superior to all other jurisdiction, sat in Westminster Hall. At the end of that hall they occupied adjoining compartments. The first was the Court of King’s Bench, in which the king was supposed to preside; the second, the Court of Chancery, in which the Chancellor presided. The one was a court of justice, the other a court of mercy. It was the Chancellor who counselled the king to pardon; only rarely, though.

These two courts, which are still in existence, interpreted legislation, and reconstructed it somewhat, for the art of the judge is to carve the code into jurisprudence; a task from which equity results as it best may. Legislation was worked up and applied in the severity of the great hall of Westminster, the rafters of which were of chestnut wood, over which spiders could not spread their webs. There are enough of them in all conscience in the laws.

To sit as a court and to sit as a chamber are two distinct things. This double function constitutes supreme power. The Long Parliament, which began in November 1640, felt the revolutionary necessity for this two-edged sword. So it declared that, as House of Lords, it possessed judicial as well as legislative power.

This double power has been, from time immemorial, vested in the House of Peers. We have just mentioned that as judges they occupied Westminster Hall; as legislators, they had another chamber. This other chamber, properly called the House of Lords, was oblong and narrow. All the light in it came from four windows in deep embrasures, which received their light through the roof, and a bull’s-eye, composed of six panes with curtains, over the throne. At night there was no other light than twelve half candelabra, fastened to the wall. The chamber of Venice was darker still. A certain obscurity is pleasing to those owls of supreme power.

A high ceiling adorned with many-faced relievos and gilded cornices, circled over the chamber where the Lords assembled. The Commons had but a flat ceiling. There is a meaning in all monarchical buildings. At one end of the long chamber of the Lords was the door; at the other, opposite to it, the throne. A few paces from the door, the bar, a transverse barrier, and a sort of frontier, marked the spot where the people ended and the peerage began. To the right of the throne was a fireplace with emblazoned pinnacles, and two bas-reliefs of marble, representing, one, the victory of Cuthwolf over the Britons, in 572; the other, the geometrical plan of the borough of Dunstable, which had four streets, parallel to the four quarters of the world. The throne was approached by three steps. It was called the royal chair. On the two walls, opposite each other, were displayed in successive pictures, on a huge piece of tapestry given to the Lords by Elizabeth, the adventures of the Armada, from the time of its leaving Spain until it was wrecked on the coasts of Great Britain. The great hulls of the ships were embroidered with threads of gold and silver, which had become blackened by time. Against this tapestry, cut at intervals by the candelabra fastened in the wall, were placed, to the right of the throne, three rows of benches for the bishops, and to the left three rows of benches for the dukes, marquises, and earls, in tiers, and separated by gangways. On the three benches of the first section sat the dukes; on those of the second, the marquises; on those of the third, the earls. The viscounts' bench was placed across, opposite the throne, and behind, between the viscounts and the bar, were two benches for the barons.

On the highest bench to the right of the throne sat the two archbishops of Canterbury and York; on the middle bench three bishops, London, Durham, and Winchester, and the other bishops on the lowest bench. There is between the Archbishop of Canterbury and the other bishops this considerable difference, that he is bishop "by divine providence," whilst the others are only so "by divine permission." On the right of the throne was a chair for the Prince of Wales, and on the left, folding chairs for the royal dukes, and behind the latter, a raised seat for minor peers, who had not the privilege of voting. Plenty of fleurs-de-lis everywhere, and the great escutcheon of England over the four walls, above the peers, as well as above the king.

The sons of peers and the heirs to peerages assisted at the debates, standing behind the throne, between the daïs and the wall. A large square space was left vacant between the tiers of benches placed along three sides of the chamber and the throne. In this space, which was covered with the state carpet, interwoven with the arms of Great Britain, were four woolsacks — one in front of the throne, on which sat the Lord Chancellor, between the mace and the seal; one in front of the bishops, on which sat the judges, counsellors of state, who had the right to vote, but not to speak; one in front of the dukes, marquises, and earls, on which sat the Secretaries of State; and one in front of the viscounts and barons, on which sat the Clerk of the Crown and the Clerk of the Parliament, and on which the two under-clerks wrote, kneeling.

In the middle of the space was a large covered table, heaped with bundles of papers, registers, and summonses, with magnificent inkstands of chased silver, and with high candlesticks at the four corners.

The peers took their seats in chronological order, each according to the date of the creation of his peerage. They ranked according to their titles, and within their grade of nobility according to seniority. At the bar stood the Usher of the Black Rod, his wand in his hand. Inside the door was the Deputy-Usher; and outside, the Crier of the Black Rod, whose duty it was to open the sittings of the Courts of Justice with the cry, “Oyez!” in French, uttered thrice, with a solemn accent upon the first syllable. Near the Crier stood the Serjeant Mace-Bearer of the Chancellor.

In royal ceremonies the temporal peers wore coronets on their heads, and the spiritual peers, mitres. The archbishops wore mitres, with a ducal coronet; and the bishops, who rank after viscounts, mitres, with a baron’s cap.

It is to be remarked, as a coincidence at once strange and instructive, that this square formed by the throne, the bishops, and the barons, with kneeling magistrates within it, was in form similar to the ancient parliament in France under the two first dynasties. The aspect of authority was the same in France as in England. Hincmar, in his treatise, “De Ordinatione Sacri Palatii,” described in 853 the sittings of the House of Lords at Westminster in the eighteenth century. Strange, indeed! a description given nine hundred years before the existence of the thing described.

But what is history? An echo of the past in the future; a reflex from the future on the past.

The assembly of Parliament was obligatory only once in every seven years.

The Lords deliberated in secret, with closed doors. The debates of the Commons were public. Publicity entails diminution of dignity.

The number of the Lords was unlimited. To create Lords was the menace of royalty; a means of government.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century the House of Lords already contained a very large number of members. It has increased still further since that period. To dilute the aristocracy is politic. Elizabeth most probably erred in condensing the peerage into sixty-five lords. The less numerous, the more intense is a peerage. In assemblies, the more numerous the members, the fewer the heads. James II. understood this when he increased the Upper House to a hundred and eighty-eight lords; a hundred and eighty-six if we subtract from the peerages the two duchies of royal favourites, Portsmouth and Cleveland. Under Anne the total number of the lords, including bishops, was two hundred and seven. Not counting the Duke of Cumberland, husband of the queen, there were twenty-five dukes, of whom the premier, Norfolk, did not take his seat, being a Catholic; and of whom the junior, Cambridge, the Elector of Hanover, did, although a foreigner. Winchester, termed first and sole marquis of England, as Astorga was termed sole Marquis of Spain, was absent, being a Jacobite; so that there were only five marquises, of whom the premier was Lindsay, and the junior Lothian; seventy-nine earls, of whom Derby was premier and Islay junior; nine viscounts, of whom Hereford was premier and Lonsdale junior; and sixty-two barons, of whom Abergavenny was premier and Hervey junior. Lord Hervey, the junior baron, was what was called the “Puisné of the House.” Derby, of whom Oxford, Shrewsbury, and Kent took precedence, and who was therefore but the fourth under James II., became (under Anne) premier earl. Two chancellors’ names had disappeared from the list of barons — Verulam, under which designation history finds us Bacon; and Wem, under which it finds us Jeffreys. Bacon and Jeffreys! both names overshadowed, though by different crimes. In 1705, the twenty-six bishops were reduced to twenty-five, the see of Chester being vacant. Amongst the bishops some were peers of high rank, such as William Talbot, Bishop of Oxford, who was head of the Protestant branch of that family. Others were eminent Doctors, like John Sharp, Archbishop of York, formerly Dean of Norwich; the poet, Thomas Spratt, Bishop of Rochester, an apoplectic old man; and that Bishop of Lincoln, who was to die Archbishop of Canterbury, Wake, the adversary of Bossuet. On important occasions, and when a message from the Crown to the House was expected, the whole of this august assembly — in robes, in wigs, in mitres, or plumes — formed out, and displayed their rows of heads, in tiers, along the walls of the House, where the storm was vaguely to be seen exterminating the Armada — almost as much as to say, “The storm is at the orders of England.”

CHAPTER IV.

THE OLD CHAMBER.

The whole ceremony of the investiture of Gwynplaine, from his entry under the King’s Gate to his taking the test under the nave window, was enacted in a sort of twilight.

Lord William Cowper had not permitted that he, as Lord Chancellor of England, should receive too many details of circumstances connected with the disfigurement of the young Lord Fermain Clancharlie, considering it below his dignity to know that a peer was not handsome; and feeling that his dignity would suffer if an inferior should venture to intrude on him information of such a nature. We know that a common fellow will take pleasure in saying, “That prince is humpbacked;” therefore, it is abusive to say that a lord is deformed. To the few words dropped on the subject by the queen the Lord Chancellor had contented himself with replying, “The face of a peer is in his peerage!”

Ultimately, however, the affidavits he had read and certified enlightened him. Hence the precautions which he took. The face of the new lord, on his entrance into the House, might cause some sensation. This it was necessary to prevent; and the Lord Chancellor took his measures for the purpose. It is a fixed idea, and a rule of conduct in grave personages, to allow as little disturbance as possible. Dislike of incident is a part of their gravity. He felt the necessity of so ordering matters that the admission of Gwynplaine should take place without any hitch, and like that of any other successor to the peerage.

It was for this reason that the Lord Chancellor directed that the reception of Lord Fermain Clancharlie should take place at the evening sitting. The Chancellor being the doorkeeper— “*Quodammodo ostiarus,*” says the Norman charter; “*Januarum cancellorumque,*” says Tertullian — he can officiate outside the room on the threshold; and Lord William Cowper had used his right by carrying out under the nave the formalities of the investiture of Lord Fermain Clancharlie. Moreover, he had brought forward the hour for the ceremonies; so that the new peer actually made his entrance into the House before the House had assembled.

For the investiture of a peer on the threshold, and not in the chamber itself, there were precedents. The first hereditary baron, John de Beauchamp, of Holt Castle, created by patent by Richard II., in 1387, Baron Kidderminster, was thus installed. In renewing this precedent the Lord Chancellor was creating for himself a future cause for embarrassment, of which he felt the inconvenience less than two years afterwards on the entrance of Viscount Newhaven into the House of Lords.

Short-sighted as we have already stated him to be, Lord William Cowper scarcely perceived the deformity of Gwynplaine; while the two sponsors, being old and nearly blind, did not perceive it at all.

The Lord Chancellor had chosen them for that very reason.

More than this, the Lord Chancellor, having only seen the presence and stature of Gwynplaine, thought him a fine-looking man. When the door-keeper opened the folding doors to Gwynplaine there were but few peers in the house; and these few were nearly all old men. In assemblies the old members are the most punctual, just as towards women they are the most assiduous.

On the dukes’ benches there were but two, one white-headed, the other gray — Thomas Osborne, Duke of Leeds, and Schomberg, son of that Schomberg, German by birth, French by his marshal’s bâton, and English by his peerage, who was banished by the edict of Nantes, and who, having fought against England as a Frenchman, fought against France as an Englishman. On the benches of the lords spiritual there sat only the Archbishopof Canterbury, Primate of England, above; and below, Dr. Simon Patrick, Bishop of Ely, in conversation with Evelyn Pierrepoint, Marquis of Dorchester, who was explaining to him the difference between a gabion considered singly and when used in the parapet of a field work, and between palisades and fraises; the former being a row of posts driven info the ground in front of the tents, for the purpose of protecting the camp; the latter sharp-pointed stakes set up under the wall of a fortress, to prevent the escalade of the besiegers and the desertion of the besieged; and the marquis was explaining further the method of placing fraises in the ditches of redoubts, half of each stake being buried and half exposed. Thomas Thynne, Viscount Weymouth, having approached the light of a chandelier, was examining a plan of his architect’s for laying out his gardens at Longleat, in Wiltshire, in the Italian style — as a lawn, broken up into plots, with squares of turf alternating with squares of red and yellow sand, of river shells, and of fine coal dust. On the viscounts' benches was a group of old peers, Essex, Ossulstone, Peregrine, Osborne, William Zulestein, Earl of Rochford, and amongst them, a few more youthful ones, of the faction which did not wear wigs, gathered round Prince Devereux, Viscount Hereford, and discussing the question whether an infusion of apalaca holly was tea. "Very nearly," said Osborne. "Quite," said Essex. This discussion was attentively listened to by Paulet St. John, a cousin of Bolingbroke, of whom Voltaire was, later on, in some degree the pupil; for Voltaire's education, commenced by Père Porée, was finished by Bolingbroke. On the marquises' benches, Thomas de Grey, Marquis of Kent, Lord Chamberlain to the Queen, was informing Robert Bertie, Marquis of Lindsay, Lord Chamberlain of England, that the first prize in the great English lottery of 1694 had been won by two French refugees, Monsieur Le Coq, formerly councillor in the parliament of Paris, and Monsieur Ravenel, a gentleman of Brittany. The Earl of Wemyss was reading a book, entitled "Pratique Curieuse des Oracles des Sybilles." John Campbell, Earl of Greenwich, famous for his long chin, his gaiety, and his eighty-seven years, was writing to his mistress. Lord Chandos was trimming his nails.

The sitting which was about to take place, being a royal one, where the crown was to be represented by commissioners, two assistant door-keepers were placing in front of the throne a bench covered with purple velvet. On the second woolsack sat the Master of the Rolls, *sacrorum scriniorum magister*, who had then for his residence the house formerly belonging to the converted Jews. Two under-clerks were kneeling, and turning over the leaves of the registers which lay on the fourth woolsack. In the meantime the Lord Chancellor took his place on the first woolsack. The members of the chamber took theirs, some sitting, others standing; when the Archbishop of Canterbury rose and read the prayer, and the sitting of the house began.

Gwynplaine had already been there for some time without attracting any notice. The second bench of barons, on which was his place, was close to the bar, so that he had had to take but a few steps to reach it. The two peers, his sponsors, sat, one on his right, the other on his left, thus almost concealing the presence of the new-comer.

No one having been furnished with any previous information, the Clerk of the Parliament had read in a low voice, and as it were, mumbled through the different documents concerning the new peer, and the Lord Chancellor had proclaimed his admission in the midst of what is called, in the reports, “general inattention.” Every one was talking. There buzzed through the House that cheerful hum of voices during which assemblies pass things which will not bear the light, and at which they wonder when they find out what they have done, too late.

Gwynplaine was seated in silence, with his head uncovered, between the two old peers, Lord Fitzwalter and Lord Arundel. On entering, according to the instructions of the King-at-Arms — afterwards renewed by his sponsors — he had bowed to the throne.

Thus all was over. He was a peer. That pinnacle, under the glory of which he had, all his life, seen his master, Ursus, bow himself down in fear — that prodigious pinnacle was under his feet. He was in that place, so dark and yet so dazzling in England. Old peak of the feudal mountain, looked up to for six centuries by Europe and by history! Terrible nimbus of a world of shadow! He had entered into the brightness of its glory, and his entrance was irrevocable.

He was there in his own sphere, seated on his throne, like the king on his. He was there and nothing in the future could obliterate the fact. The royal crown, which he saw under the daïs, was brother to his coronet. He was a peer of that throne. In the face of majesty he was peerage; less, but like. Yesterday, what was he? A player. To-day, what was he? A prince.

Yesterday, nothing; to-day, everything.

It was a sudden confrontation of misery and power, meeting face to face, and resolving themselves at once into the two halves of a conscience. Two spectres, Adversity and Prosperity, were taking possession of the same soul, and each drawing that soul towards itself.

Oh, pathetic division of an intellect, of a will, of a brain, between two brothers who are enemies! the Phantom of Poverty and the Phantom of Wealth! Abel and Cain in the same man!

CHAPTER V.

ARISTOCRATIC GOSSIP.

By degrees the seats of the House filled as the Lords arrived. The question was the vote for augmenting, by a hundred thousand pounds sterling, the annual income of George of Denmark, Duke of Cumberland, the queen's husband. Besides this, it was announced that several bills assented to by her Majesty were to be brought back to the House by the Commissioners of the Crown empowered and charged to sanction them. This raised the sitting to a royal one. The peers all wore their robes over their usual court or ordinary dress. These robes, similar to that which had been thrown over Gwynplaine, were alike for all, excepting that the dukes had five bands of ermine, trimmed with gold; marquises, four; earls and viscounts, three; and barons, two. Most of the lords entered in groups. They had met in the corridors, and were continuing the conversations there begun. A few came in alone. The costumes of all were solemn; but neither their attitudes nor their words corresponded with them. On entering, each one bowed to the throne.

The peers flowed in. The series of great names marched past with scant ceremonial, the public not being present. Leicester entered, and shook Lichfield's hand; then came Charles Mordaunt, Earl of Peterborough and Monmouth, the friend of Locke, under whose advice he had proposed the recoinage of money; then Charles Campbell, Earl of Loudoun, listening to Fulke Greville, Lord Brooke; then Dorme, Earl of Carnarvon; then Robert Sutton, Baron Lexington, son of that Lexington who recommended Charles II. to banish Gregorio Leti, the historiographer, who was so ill-advised as to try to become a historian; then Thomas Bellasys, Viscount Falconberg, a handsome old man; and the three cousins, Howard, Earl of Bindon, Bowes Howard, Earl of Berkshire, and Stafford Howard, Earl of Stafford — all together; then John Lovelace, Baron Lovelace, which peerage became extinct in 1736, so that Richardson was enabled to introduce Lovelace in his book, and to create a type under the name. All these personages — celebrated each in his own way, either in politics or in war, and of whom many were an honour to England — were laughing and talking.

It was history, as it were, seen in undress.

In less than half an hour the House was nearly full. This was to be expected, as the sitting was a royal one. What was more unusual was the eagerness of the conversations. The House, so sleepy not long before, now hummed like a hive of bees.

The arrival of the peers who had come in late had wakened them up. These lords had brought news. It was strange that the peers who had been there at the opening of the sitting knew nothing of what had occurred, while those who had not been there knew all about it. Several lords had come from Windsor.

For some hours past the adventures of Gwynplaine had been the subject of conversation. A secret is a net; let one mesh drop, and the whole goes to pieces. In the morning, in consequence of the incidents related above, the whole story of a peer found on the stage, and of a mountebank become a lord, had burst forth at Windsor in Royal places. The princes had talked about it, and then the lackeys. From the Court the news soon reached the town. Events have a weight, and the mathematical rule of velocity, increasing in proportion to the squares of the distance, applies to them. They fall upon the public, and work themselves through it with the most astounding rapidity. At seven o’clock no one in London had caught wind of the story; by eight Gwynplaine was the talk of the town. Only the lords who had been so punctual that they were present before the assembling of the House were ignorant of the circumstances, not having been in the town when the matter was talked of by every one, and having been in the House, where nothing had been perceived. Seated quietly on their benches, they were addressed by the eager newcomers.

“Well!” said Francis Brown, Viscount Montacute, to the Marquis of Dorchester.

“What?”

“Is it possible?”

“What?”

“The Laughing Man!”

“Who is the Laughing Man?”

“Don’t you know the Laughing Man?”

“No.”

“He is a clown, a fellow performing at fairs. He has an extraordinary face, which people gave a penny to look at. A mountebank.”

“Well, what then?”

“You have just installed him as a peer of England.”

“You are the laughing man, my Lord Montacute!”

“I am not laughing, my Lord Dorchester.”

Lord Montacute made a sign to the Clerk of the Parliament, who rose from his woolsack, and confirmed to their lordships the fact of the admission of the new peer. Besides, he detailed the circumstances.

“How wonderful!” said Lord Dorchester. “I was talking to the Bishop of Ely all the while.”

The young Earl of Annesley addressed old Lord Eure, who had but two years more to live, as he died in 1707.

“My Lord Eure.”

“My Lord Annesley.”

“Did you know Lord Linnæus Clancharlie?”

“A man of bygone days. Yes I did.”

“He died in Switzerland?”

“Yes; we were relations.”

“He was a republican under Cromwell, and remained a republican under Charles II.?”

“A republican? Not at all! He was sulking. He had a personal quarrel with the king. I know from good authority that Lord Clancharlie would have returned to his allegiance, if they had given him the office of Chancellor, which Lord Hyde held.”

“You astonish me, Lord Eure. I had heard that Lord Clancharlie was an honest politician.”

“An honest politician! does such a thing exist? Young man, there is no such thing.”

“And Cato?”

“Oh, you believe in Cato, do you?”

“And Aristides?”

“They did well to exile him.”

“And Thomas More?”

“They did well to cut off his head.”

“And in your opinion Lord Clancharlie was a man as you describe. As for a man remaining in exile, why, it is simply ridiculous.”

“He died there.”

“An ambitious man disappointed?”

"You ask if I knew him? I should think so indeed. I was his dearest friend."

"Do you know, Lord Eure, that he married when in Switzerland?"

"I am pretty sure of it."

"And that he had a lawful heir by that marriage?"

"Yes; who is dead."

"Who is living."

"Living?"

"Living."

"Impossible!"

"It is a fact — proved, authenticated, confirmed, registered."

"Then that son will inherit the Clancharlie peerage?"

"He is not going to inherit it."

"Why?"

"Because he has inherited it. It is done."

"Done?"

"Turn your head, Lord Eure; he is sitting behind you, on the barons' benches."

Lord Eure turned, but Gwynplaine's face was concealed under his forest of hair.

"So," said the old man, who could see nothing but his hair, "he has already adopted the new fashion. He does not wear a wig."

Grantham accosted Colepepper.

"Some one is finely sold."

"Who is that?"

"David Dirry-Moir."

"How is that?"

"He is no longer a peer."

"How can that be?"

And Henry Auverquerque, Earl of Grantham, told John Baron Colepepper the whole anecdote — how the waif-flask had been carried to the Admiralty, about the parchment of the Comprachicos, the *jussu regis*, countersigned *Jeffreys*, and the confrontation in the torture-cell at Southwark, the proof of all the facts acknowledged by the Lord Chancellor and by the Queen; the taking the test under the nave, and finally the admission of Lord Fermain Clancharlie at the commencement of the sitting. Both the lords endeavoured to distinguish his face as he sat between Lord

Fitzwalter and Lord Arundel, but with no better success than Lord Eure and Lord Annesley.

Gwynplaine, either by chance or by the arrangement of his sponsors, forewarned by the Lord Chancellor, was so placed in shadow as to escape their curiosity.

“Who is it? Where is he?”

Such was the exclamation of all the new-comers, but no one succeeded in making him out distinctly. Some, who had seen Gwynplaine in the Green Box, were exceedingly curious, but lost their labour: as it sometimes happens that a young lady is entrenched within a troop of dowagers, Gwynplaine was, as it were, enveloped in several layers of lords, old, infirm, and indifferent. Good livers, with the gout, are marvellously indifferent to stories about their neighbours.

There passed from hand to hand copies of a letter three lines in length, written, it was said, by the Duchess Josiana to the queen, her sister, in answer to the injunction made by her Majesty, that she should espouse the new peer, the lawful heir of the Clancharlies, Lord Fermain. This letter was couched in the following terms: —

“MADAM, — The arrangement will suit me just as well. I can have Lord David for my lover. — (Signed) JOSIANA.”

This note, whether a true copy or a forgery, was received by all with the greatest enthusiasm. A young lord, Charles Okehampton, Baron Mohun, who belonged to the wigless faction, read and re-read it with delight. Lewis de Duras, Earl of Faversham, an Englishman with a Frenchman’s wit, looked at Mohun and smiled.

“That is a woman I should like to marry!” exclaimed Lord Mohun.

The lords around them overheard the following dialogue between Duras and Mohun: —

“Marry the Duchess Josiana, Lord Mohun!”

“Why not?”

“Plague take it.”

“She would make one very happy.”

“She would make many very happy.”

“But is it not always a question of many?”

“Lord Mohun, you are right. With regard to women, we have always the leavings of others. Has any one ever had a beginning?”

“Adam, perhaps.”

"Not he."

"Then Satan."

"My dear lord," concluded Lewis de Duras, "Adam only lent his name. Poor dupe! He endorsed the human race. Man was begotten on the woman by the devil."

Hugh Cholmondeley, Earl of Cholmondeley, strong in points of law, was asked from the bishops' benches by Nathaniel Crew, who was doubly a peer, being a temporal peer, as Baron Crew, and a spiritual peer, as Bishop of Durham.

"Is it possible?" said Crew.

"Is it regular?" said Cholmondeley.

"The investiture of this peer was made outside the House," replied the bishop; "but it is stated that there are precedents for it."

"Yes. Lord Beauchamp, under Richard II.; Lord Chenay, under Elizabeth: and Lord Broghill, under Cromwell."

"Cromwell goes for nothing."

"What do you think of it all?"

"Many different things."

"My Lord Cholmondeley, what will be the rank of this young Lord Clancharlie in the House?"

"My Lord Bishop, the interruption of the Republic having displaced ancient rights of precedence, Clancharlie now ranks in the peerage between Barnard and Somers, so that should each be called upon to speak in turn, Lord Clancharlie would be the eighth in rotation."

"Really! he — a mountebank from a public show!"

"The act, *per se*, does not astonish me, my Lord Bishop. We meet with such things. Still more wonderful circumstances occur. Was not the War of the Roses predicted by the sudden drying up of the river Ouse, in Bedfordshire, on January 1st, 1399. Now, if a river dries up, a peer may, quite as naturally, fall into a servile condition. Ulysses, King of Ithaca, played all kinds of different parts. Fermain Clancharlie remained a lord under his player's garb. Sordid garments touch not the soul's nobility. But taking the test and the investiture outside the sitting, though strictly legal, might give rise to objections. I am of opinion that it will be necessary to look into the matter, to see if there be any ground to question the Lord Chancellor in Privy Council later on. We shall see in a week or two what is best to be done."

And the Bishop added, —

“All the same. It is an adventure such as has not occurred since Earl Gesbodus’s time.”

Gwynplaine, the Laughing Man; the Tadcaster Inn; the Green Box; “Chaos Vanquished;” Switzerland; Chillon; the Comprachicos; exile; mutilation; the Republic; Jeffreys; James II.; the *jussu regis;* the bottle opened at the Admiralty; the father, Lord Linnæus; the legitimate son, Lord Fermain; the bastard son, Lord David; the probable lawsuits; the Duchess Josiana; the Lord Chancellor; the Queen; — all these subjects of conversation ran from bench to bench.

Whispering is like a train of gunpowder.

They seized on every incident. All the details of the occurrence caused an immense murmur through the House. Gwynplaine, wandering in the depths of his reverie, heard the buzzing, without knowing that he was the cause of it. He was strangely attentive to the depths, not to the surface. Excess of attention becomes isolation.

The buzz of conversation in the House impedes its usual business no more than the dust raised by a troop impedes its march. The judges — who in the Upper House were mere assistants, without the privilege of speaking, except when questioned — had taken their places on the second woolsack; and the three Secretaries of State theirs on the third.

The heirs to peerages flowed into their compartment, at once without and within the House, at the back of the throne.

The peers in their minority were on their own benches. In 1705 the number of these little lords amounted to no less than a dozen — Huntingdon, Lincoln, Dorset, Warwick, Bath, Barlington, Derwentwater — destined to a tragical death — Longueville, Lonsdale, Dudley, Ward, and Carteret: a troop of brats made up of eight earls, two viscounts, and two barons.

In the centre, on the three stages of benches, each lord had taken his seat. Almost all the bishops were there. The dukes mustered strong, beginning with Charles Seymour, Duke of Somerset; and ending with George Augustus, Elector of Hanover, and Duke of Cambridge, junior in date of creation, and consequently junior in rank. All were in order, according to right of precedence: Cavendish, Duke of Devonshire, whose grandfather had sheltered Hobbes, at Hardwicke, when he was ninety-two; Lennox, Duke of Richmond; the three Fitzroys, the Duke of Southampton, the Duke of Grafton, and the Duke of Northumberland; Butler, Duke of Ormond; Somerset, Duke of Beaufort; Beauclerk, Duke of St. Albans; Paulet, Duke of Bolton; Osborne, Duke of Leeds; Wrottesley Russell, Duke of Bedford, whose motto and device was *Che sarà sarà*, which expresses a determination to take things as they come; Sheffield, Duke of Buckingham; Manners, Duke of Rutland; and others. Neither Howard, Duke of Norfolk, nor Talbot, Duke of Shrewsbury, was present, being Catholics; nor Churchill, Duke of Marlborough, the French Malbrouck, who was at that time fighting the French and beating them. There were no Scotch dukes then — Queensberry, Montrose, and Roxburgh not being admitted till 1707.

CHAPTER VI.

THE HIGH AND THE LOW.

All at once a bright light broke upon the House. Four doorkeepers brought and placed on each side of the throne four high candelabra filled with wax-lights. The throne, thus illuminated, shone in a kind of purple light. It was empty but august. The presence of the queen herself could not have added much majesty to it.

The Usher of the Black Rod entered with his wand and announced, —

“The Lords Commissioners of her Majesty.”

The hum of conversation immediately subsided.

A clerk, in a wig and gown, appeared at the great door, holding a cushion worked with *fleurs de lis,* on which lay parchment documents. These documents were bills. From each hung the *bille*, or *bulle*, by a silken string, from which laws are called bills in England and bulls at Rome. Behind the clerk walked three men in peers’ robes, and wearing plumed hats.

These were the Royal Commissioners. The first was the Lord High Treasurer of England, Godolphin; the second, the Lord President of the Council, Pembroke; the third, the Lord of the Privy Seal, Newcastle.

They walked one by one, according to precedence, not of their rank, but of their commission — Godolphin first, Newcastle last, although a duke.

They reached the bench in front of the throne, to which they bowed, took off and replaced their hats, and sat down on the bench.

The Lord Chancellor turned towards the Usher of the Black Rod, and said, —

“Order the Commons to the bar of the House.”

The Usher of the Black Rod retired.

The clerk, who was one of the clerks of the House of Lords, placed on the table, between the four woolsacks, the cushion on which lay the bills.

Then there came an interruption, which continued for some minutes.

Two doorkeepers placed before the bar a stool with three steps.

This stool was covered with crimson velvet, on which *fleurs de lis* were designed in gilt nails.

The great door, which had been closed, was reopened; and a voice announced, —

"The faithful Commons of England."

It was the Usher of the Black Rod announcing the other half of Parliament.

The lords put on their hats.

The members of the House of Commons entered, preceded by their Speaker, all with uncovered heads.

They stopped at the bar. They were in their ordinary garb; for the most part dressed in black, and wearing swords. The Speaker, the Right Honourable John Smith, an esquire, member for the borough of Andover, got up on the stool which was at the centre of the bar. The Speaker of the Commons wore a robe of black satin, with large hanging sleeves, embroidered before and behind with brandenburgs of gold, and a wig smaller than that of the Lord Chancellor. He was majestic, but inferior.

The Commons, both Speaker and members, stood waiting with uncovered heads, before the peers, who were seated, with their hats on.

Amongst the members of Commons might have been remarked the Chief Justice of Chester, Joseph Jekyll; the Queen's three Serjeants-at-Law — Hooper, Powys, and Parker; James Montagu, Solicitor-General; and the Attorney-General, Simon Harcourt. With the exception of a few baronets and knights, and nine lords by courtesy — Hartington, Windsor, Woodstock, Mordaunt, Granby, Scudamore, Fitzharding, Hyde, and Berkeley — sons of peers and heirs to peerages — all were of the people, a sort of gloomy and silent crowd.

When the noise made by the trampling of feet had ceased, the Crier of the Black Rod, standing by the door, exclaimed: —

"Oyez!"

The Clerk of the Crown arose. He took, unfolded, and read the first of the documents on the cushion. It was a message from the Queen, naming three commissioners to represent her in Parliament, with power to sanction the bills.

"To wit—"

Here the Clerk raised his voice.

"Sidney Earl Godolphin."

The Clerk bowed to Lord Godolphin. Lord Godolphin raised his hat.

The Clerk continued, —

"Thomas Herbert, Earl of Pembroke and Montgomery."

The Clerk bowed to Lord Pembroke. Lord Pembroke touched his hat.

The Clerk resumed, —

“John Holles, Duke of Newcastle.”

The Duke of Newcastle nodded.

The Clerk of the Crown resumed his seat.

The Clerk of the Parliaments arose. His under-clerk, who had been on his knees behind him, got up also. Both turned their faces to the throne, and their backs to the Commons.

There were five bills on the cushion. These five bills, voted by the Commons and agreed to by the Lords, awaited the royal sanction.

The Clerk of the Parliaments read the first bill.

It was a bill passed by the Commons, charging the country with the costs of the improvements made by the Queen to her residence at Hampton Court, amounting to a million sterling.

The reading over, the Clerk bowed low to the throne. The under-clerk bowed lower still; then, half turning his head towards the Commons, he said, —

“The Queen accepts your bounty — *et ainsi le veut*.”

The Clerk read the second bill.

It was a law condemning to imprisonment and fine whosoever withdrew himself from the service of the trainbands. The trainbands were a militia, recruited from the middle and lower classes, serving gratis, which in Elizabeth’s reign furnished, on the approach of the Armada, one hundred and eighty-five thousand foot-soldiers and forty thousand horse.

The two clerks made a fresh bow to the throne, after which the under-clerk, again half turning his face to the Commons, said, —

“*La Reine le veut*.”

The third bill was for increasing the tithes and prebends of the Bishopric of Lichfield and Coventry, which was one of the richest in England; for making an increased yearly allowance to the cathedral, for augmenting the number of its canons, and for increasing its deaneries and benefices, “to the benefit of our holy religion,” as the preamble set forth. The fourth bill added to the budget fresh taxes — one on marbled paper; one on hackney coaches, fixed at the number of eight hundred in London, and taxed at a sum equal to fifty-two francs yearly each; one on barristers, attorneys, and solicitors, at forty-eight francs a year a head; one on tanned skins, notwithstanding, said the preamble, the complaints of the workers in leather; one on soap, notwithstanding the petitions of the City of Exeter and of the whole of Devonshire, where great quantities of cloth and serge were manufactured; one on wine at four shillings; one on flour; one on barley and hops; and one renewing for four years "the necessities of the State," said the preamble, "requiring to be attended to before the remonstrances of commerce" — tonnage-dues, varying from six francs per ton, for ships coming from the westward, to eighteen francs on those coming from the eastward. Finally, the bill, declaring the sums already levied for the current year insufficient, concluded by decreeing a poll-tax on each subject throughout the kingdom of four shillings per head, adding that a double tax would be levied on every one who did not take the fresh oath to Government. The fifth bill forbade the admission into the hospital of any sick person who on entering did not deposit a pound sterling to pay for his funeral, in case of death. These last three bills, like the first two, were one after the other sanctioned and made law by a bow to the throne, and the four words pronounced by the under-clerk, "*la Reine le veut*," spoken over his shoulder to the Commons. Then the under-clerk knelt down again before the fourth woolsack, and the Lord Chancellor said, —

"*Soit fait comme il est désiré*."

This terminated the royal sitting. The Speaker, bent double before the Chancellor, descended from the stool, backwards, lifting up his robe behind him; the members of the House of Commons bowed to the ground, and as the Upper House resumed the business of the day, heedless of all these marks of respect, the Commons departed.

CHAPTER VII.

STORMS OF MEN ARE WORSE THAN STORMS OF OCEANS.

The doors were closed again, the Usher of the Black Rod re-entered; the Lords Commissioners left the bench of State, took their places at the top of the dukes’ benches, by right of their commission, and the Lord Chancellor addressed the House: —

“My Lords, the House having deliberated for several days on the Bill which proposes to augment by £100,000 sterling the annual provision for his Royal Highness the Prince, her Majesty’s Consort, and the debate having been exhausted and closed, the House will proceed to vote; the votes will be taken according to custom, beginning with the puisne Baron. Each Lord, on his name being called, will rise and answer *content*, or *non-content*, and will be at liberty to explain the motives of his vote, if he thinks fit to do so. — Clerk, take the vote.”

The Clerk of the House, standing up, opened a large folio, and spread it open on a gilded desk. This book was the list of the Peerage.

The puisne of the House of Lords at that time was John Hervey, created Baron and Peer in 1703, from whom is descended the Marquis of Bristol.

The clerk called, —

“My Lord John, Baron Hervey.”

An old man in a fair wig rose, and said, “Content.”

Then he sat down.

The Clerk registered his vote.

The Clerk continued, —

“My Lord Francis Seymour, Baron Conway, of Killultagh.”

“Content,” murmured, half rising, an elegant young man, with a face like a page, who little thought that he was to be ancestor to the Marquises of Hertford.

“My Lord John Leveson, Baron Gower,” continued the Clerk.

This Baron, from whom were to spring the Dukes of Sutherland, rose, and, as he reseated himself, said “Content.”

The Clerk went on.

“My Lord Heneage Finch, Baron Guernsey.”

The ancestor of the Earls of Aylesford, neither older nor less elegant than the ancestor of the Marquises of Hertford, justified his device, *Aperto vivere voto*, by the proud tone in which he exclaimed, “Content.”

Whilst he was resuming his seat, the Clerk called the fifth Baron, —

“My Lord John, Baron Granville.”

Rising and resuming his seat quickly, “Content,” exclaimed Lord Granville, of Potheridge, whose peerage was to become extinct in 1709.

The Clerk passed to the sixth.

“My Lord Charles Montague, Baron Halifax.”

“Content,” said Lord Halifax, the bearer of a title which had become extinct in the Saville family, and was destined to become extinct again in that of Montague. Montague is distinct from Montagu and Montacute. And Lord Halifax added, “Prince George has an allowance as Her Majesty’s Consort; he has another as Prince of Denmark; another as Duke of Cumberland; another as Lord High Admiral of England and Ireland; but he has not one as Commander-in-Chief. This is an injustice and a wrong which must be set right, in the interest of the English people.”

Then Lord Halifax passed a eulogium on the Christian religion, abused popery, and voted the subsidy.

Lord Halifax sat down, and the Clerk resumed, —

“My Lord Christopher, Baron Barnard.”

Lord Barnard, from whom were to descend the Dukes of Cleveland, rose to answer to his name.

“Content.”

He took some time in reseating himself, for he wore a lace band which was worth showing. For all that, Lord Barnard was a worthy gentleman and a brave officer.

While Lord Barnard was resuming his seat, the Clerk, who read by routine, hesitated for an instant; he readjusted his spectacles, and leaned over the register with renewed attention; then, lifting up his head, he said, —

“My Lord Fermain Clancharlie, Baron Clancharlie and Hunkerville.”

Gwynplaine arose.

“Non-content,” said he.

Every face was turned towards him. Gwynplaine remained standing. The branches of candles, placed on each side of the throne, lighted up his features, and marked them against the darkness of the august chamber in the relief with which a mask might show against a background of smoke.

Gwynplaine had made that effort over himself which, it may be remembered, was possible to him in extremity. By a concentration of will equal to that which would be needed to cow a tiger, he had succeeded in obliterating for a moment the fatal grin upon his face. For an instant he no longer laughed. This effort could not last long. Rebellion against that which is our law or our fatality must be short-lived; at times the waters of the sea resist the power of gravitation, swell into a waterspout and become a mountain, but only on the condition of falling back again.

Such a struggle was Gwynplaine's. For an instant, which he felt to be a solemn one, by a prodigious intensity of will, but for not much longer than a flash of lightning lasts, he had thrown over his brow the dark veil of his soul — he held in suspense his incurable laugh. From that face upon which it had been carved he had withdrawn the joy. Now it was nothing but terrible.

"Who is this man?" exclaimed all.

That forest of hair, those dark hollows under the brows, the deep gaze of eyes which they could not see, that head, on the wild outlines of which light and darkness mingled weirdly, were a wonder indeed. It was beyond all understanding; much as they had heard of him, the sight of Gwynplaine was a terror. Even those who expected much found their expectations surpassed. It was as though on the mountain reserved for the gods, during the banquet on a serene evening, the whole of the all-powerful body being gathered together, the face of Prometheus, mangled by the vulture's beak, should have suddenly appeared before them, like a blood-coloured moon on the horizon. Olympus looking on Caucasus! What a vision! Old and young, open-mouthed with surprise, fixed their eyes upon Gwynplaine.

An old man, respected by the whole House, who had seen many men and many things, and who was intended for a dukedom — Thomas, Earl of Wharton — rose in terror.

"What does all this mean?" he cried. "Who has brought this man into the House? Let him be put out."

And addressing Gwynplaine haughtily, —

"Who are you? Whence do you come?"

Gwynplaine answered, —

"Out of the depths."

And folding his arms, he looked at the lords.

“Who am I? I am wretchedness. My lords, I have a word to say to you.”

A shudder ran through the House. Then all was silence. Gwynplaine continued, —

“My lords, you are highly placed. It is well. We must believe that God has His reasons that it should be so. You have power, opulence, pleasure, the sun ever shining in your zenith; authority unbounded, enjoyment without a sting, and a total forgetfulness of others. So be it. But there is something below you — above you, it may be. My lords, I bring you news — news of the existence of mankind.”

Assemblies are like children. A strange occurrence is as a Jack-in-the-Box to them. It frightens them; but they like it. It is as if a spring were touched and a devil jumps up. Mirabeau, who was also deformed, was a case in point in France.

Gwynplaine felt within himself, at that moment, a strange elevation. In addressing a body of men, one’s foot seems to rest on them; to rest, as it were, on a pinnacle of souls — on human hearts, that quiver under one’s heel. Gwynplaine was no longer the man who had been, only the night before, almost mean. The fumes of the sudden elevation which had disturbed him had cleared off and become transparent, and in the state in which Gwynplaine had been seduced by a vanity he now saw but a duty. That which had at first lessened now elevated him. He was illuminated by one of those great flashes which emanate from duty.

All round Gwynplaine arose cries of “Hear, hear!”

Meanwhile, rigid and superhuman, he succeeded in maintaining on his features that severe and sad contraction under which the laugh was fretting like a wild horse struggling to escape.

He resumed, —

“I am he who cometh out of the depths. My lords, you are great and rich. There lies your danger. You profit by the night; but beware! The dawn is all-powerful. You cannot prevail over it. It is coming. Nay! it is come. Within it is the day-spring of irresistible light. And who shall hinder that sling from hurling the sun into the sky? The sun I speak of is Right. You are Privilege. Tremble! The real master of the house is about to knock at the door. What is the father of Privilege? Chance. What is his son? Abuse. Neither Chance nor Abuse are abiding. For both a dark morrow is at hand. I am come to warn you. I am come to impeach your happiness. It is fashioned out of the misery of your neighbour. You have everything, and that everything is composed of the nothing of others. My lords, I am an advocate without hope, pleading a cause that is lost; but that cause God will gain on appeal. As for me, I am but a voice. Mankind is a mouth, of which I am the cry. You shall hear me! I am about to open before you, peers of England, the great assize of the people; of that sovereign who is the subject; of that criminal who is the judge. I am weighed down under the load of all that I have to say. Where am I to begin? I know not. I have gathered together, in the vast diffusion of suffering, my innumerable and scattered pleas. What am I to do with them now? They overwhelm me, and I must cast them to you in a confused mass. Did I foresee this? No. You are astonished. So am I. Yesterday I was a mountebank; to-day I am a peer. Deep play. Of whom? Of the Unknown. Let us all tremble. My lords, all the blue sky is for you. Of this immense universe you see but the sunshine. Believe me, it has its shadows. Amongst you I am called Lord Fermain Clancharlie; but my true name is one of poverty — Gwynplaine. I am a wretched thing carved out of the stuff of which the great are made, for such was the pleasure of a king. That is my history. Many amongst you knew my father. I knew him not. His connection with you was his feudal descent; his outlawry is the bond between him and me. What God willed was well. I was cast into the abyss. For what end? To search its depths. I am a diver, and I have brought back the pearl, truth. I speak, because I know. You shall hear me, my lords. I have seen, I have felt! Suffering is not a mere word, ye happy ones! Poverty I grew up in; winter has frozen me; hunger I have tasted; contempt I have suffered; pestilence I have undergone; shame I have drunk of. And I will vomit all these up before you, and this ejection of all misery shall sully your feet and flame about them. I hesitated before I allowed myself to be brought to the place where I now stand, because I have duties to others elsewhere, and my heart is not here. What passed within me has nothing to do with you. When the man whom you call Usher of the Black Rod came to seek me by order of the woman whom you call the Queen, the idea struck me for a moment that I would refuse to come. But it seemed to me that the hidden hand of God pressed me to the spot, and I obeyed. I felt that I must come amongst you. Why? Because of my rags of yesterday. It is to raise my voice among those who have eaten their fill that God mixed me up with the famished. Oh, have pity! Of this fatal world to which you believe yourselves to belong you know nothing. Placed so high, you are out of it. But I will tell you what it is. I have had experience enough. I come from beneath the pressure of your feet. I can tell you your weight. Oh, you who are masters, do you know what you are? do you see what you are doing? No. Oh, it is dreadful! One night, one night of storm, a little deserted child, an orphan alone in the immeasurable creation, I made my entrance into that darkness which you call society. The first thing that I saw was the law, under the form of a gibbet; the second was riches, your riches, under the form of a woman dead of cold and hunger; the third, the future, under the form of a child left to die; the fourth, goodness, truth, and justice, under the figure of a vagabond, whose sole friend and companion was a wolf."

Just then Gwynplaine, stricken by a sudden emotion, felt the sobs rising in his throat, causing him, most unfortunately, to burst into an uncontrollable fit of laughter.

The contagion was immediate. A cloud had hung over the assembly. It might have broken into terror; it broke into delight. Mad merriment seized the whole House. Nothing pleases the great chambers of sovereign man so much as buffoonery. It is their revenge upon their graver moments.

The laughter of kings is like the laughter of the gods. There is always a cruel point in it. The lords set to play. Sneers gave sting to their laughter. They clapped their hands around the speaker, and insulted him. A volley of merry exclamations assailed him like bright but wounding hailstones.

"Bravo, Gwynplaine!"— "Bravo, Laughing Man!"— "Bravo, Snout of the Green Box!"— "Mask of Tarrinzeau Field!"— "You are going to give us a performance."— "That's right; talk away!"— "There's a funny fellow!"— "How the beast does laugh, to be sure!"— "Good-day, pantaloon!"— "How d'ye do, my lord clown!"— "Go on with your speech!"— "That fellow a peer of England?"— "Go on!"— "No, no!"— "Yes, yes!"

The Lord Chancellor was much disturbed.

A deaf peer, James Butler, Duke of Ormond, placing his hand to his ear like an ear trumpet, asked Charles Beauclerk, Duke of St. Albans, —

"How has he voted?"

"Non-content."

"By heavens!" said Ormond, "I can understand it, with such a face as his."

Do you think that you can ever recapture a crowd once it has escaped your grasp? And all assemblies are crowds alike. No, eloquence is a bit; and if the bit breaks, the audience runs away, and rushes on till it has thrown the orator. Hearers naturally dislike the speaker, which is a fact not as clearly understood as it ought to be. Instinctively he pulls the reins, but that is a useless expedient. However, all orators try it, as Gwynplaine did.

He looked for a moment at those men who were laughing at him. Then he cried, —

“So, you insult misery! Silence, Peers of England! Judges, listen to my pleading! Oh, I conjure you, have pity. Pity for whom? Pity for yourselves. Who is in danger? Yourselves! Do you not see that you are in a balance, and that there is in one scale your power, and in the other your responsibility? It is God who is weighing you. Oh, do not laugh. Think. The trembling of your consciences is the oscillation of the balance in which God is weighing your actions. You are not wicked; you are like other men, neither better nor worse. You believe yourselves to be gods; but be ill to-morrow, and see your divinity shivering in fever! We are worth one as much as the other. I address myself to honest men; there are such here. I address myself to lofty intellects; there are such here. I address myself to generous souls; there are such here. You are fathers, sons, and brothers; therefore you are often touched. He amongst you who has this morning watched the awaking of his little child is a good man. Hearts are all alike. Humanity is nothing but a heart. Between those who oppress and those who are oppressed there is but a difference of place. Your feet tread on the heads of men. The fault is not yours; it is that of the social Babel. The building is faulty, and out of the perpendicular. One floor bears down the other. Listen, and I will tell you what to do. Oh! as you are powerful, be brotherly; as you are great, be tender. If you only knew what I have seen! Alas, what gloom is there beneath! The people are in a dungeon. How many are condemned who are innocent! No daylight, no air, no virtue! They are without hope, and yet — there is the danger — they expect something. Realize all this misery. There are beings who live in death. There are little girls who at twelve begin by prostitution, and who end in old age at twenty. As to the severities of the criminal code, they are fearful. I speak somewhat at random, and do not pick my words. I say everything that comes into my head. No later than yesterday I who stand here saw a man lying in chains, naked, with stones piled on his chest, expire in torture. Do you know of these things? No. If you knew what goes on, you would not dare to be happy. Who of you have been to Newcastle-upon-Tyne? There, in the mines, are men who chew coals to fill their stomachs and deceive hunger. Look here! in Lancashire, Ribblechester has sunk, by poverty, from a town to a village. I do not see that Prince George of Denmark requires a hundred thousand pounds extra. I should prefer receiving a poor sick man into the hospital, without compelling him to pay his funeral expenses in advance. In Carnarvon, and at Strathmore, as well as at Strathbickan, the exhaustion of the poor is horrible. At Stratford they cannot drain the marsh for want of money. The manufactories are shut up all over Lancashire. There is forced idleness everywhere. Do you know that the herring fishers at Harlech eat grass when the fishery fails? Do you know that at Burton-Lazars there are still lepers confined, on whom they fire if they leave their tan houses! At Ailesbury, a town of which one of you is lord, destitution is chronic. At Penkridge, in Coventry, where you have just endowed a cathedral and enriched a bishop, there are no beds in the cabins, and they dig holes in the earth in which to put the little children to lie, so that instead of beginning life in the cradle, they begin it in the grave. I have seen these things! My lords, do you know who pays the taxes you vote? The dying! Alas! you deceive yourselves. You are going the wrong road. You augment the poverty of the poor to increase the riches of the rich. You should do the reverse. What! take from the worker to give to the idle, take from the tattered to give to the well-clad; take from the beggar to give to the prince! Oh yes! I have old republican blood in my veins. I have a horror of these things. How I execrate kings! And how shameless are the women! I have been told a sad story. How I hate Charles II.! A woman whom my father loved gave herself to that king whilst my father was dying in exile. The prostitute! Charles II., James II.! After a scamp, a scoundrel. What is there in a king? A man, feeble and contemptible, subject to wants and infirmities. Of what good is a king? You cultivate that parasite royalty; you make a serpent of that worm, a dragon of that insect. O pity the poor! You increase the weight of the taxes for the profit of the throne. Look to the laws which you decree. Take heed of the suffering swarms which you crush. Cast your eyes down. Look at what is at your feet. O ye great, there are the little. Have pity! yes, have pity on yourselves; for the people is in its agony, and when the lower part of the trunk dies, the higher parts die too. Death spares no limb. When night comes no one can keep his corner of daylight. Are you selfish? then save others. The destruction of the vessel cannot be a matter of indifference to any passenger. There can be no wreck for some that is not wreck for all. O believe it, the abyss yawns for all!”

The laughter increased, and became irresistible. For that matter, such extravagance as there was in his words was sufficient to amuse any assembly. To be comic without and tragic within, what suffering can be more humiliating? what pain deeper? Gwynplaine felt it. His words were an appeal in one direction, his face in the other. What a terrible position was his!

Suddenly his voice rang out in strident bursts.

“How gay these men are! Be it so. Here is irony face to face with agony; a sneer mocking the death-rattle. They are all-powerful. Perhaps so; be it so. We shall see. Behold! I am one of them; but I am also one of you, O ye poor! A king sold me. A poor man sheltered me. Who mutilated me? A prince. Who healed and nourished me? A pauper. I am Lord Clancharlie; but I am still Gwynplaine. I take my place amongst the great; but I belong to the mean. I am amongst those who rejoice; but I am with those who suffer. Oh, this system of society is false! Some day will come that which is true. Then there will be no more lords, and there shall be free and living men. There will be no more masters; there will be fathers. Such is the future. No more prostration; no more baseness; no more ignorance; no more human beasts of burden; no more courtiers; no more toadies; no more kings; but Light! In the meantime, see me here. I have a right, and I will use it. Is it a right? No, if I use it for myself; yes, if I use it for all. I will speak to you, my lords, being one of you. O my brothers below, I will tell them of your nakedness. I will rise up with a bundle of the people’s rags in my hand. I will shake off over the masters the misery of the slaves; and these favoured and arrogant ones shall no longer be able to escape the remembrance of the wretched, nor the princes the itch of the poor; and so much the worse, if it be the bite of vermin; and so much the better, if it awake the lions from their slumber.”

Here Gwynplaine turned towards the kneeling under-clerks, who were writing on the fourth woolsack.

“Who are those fellows kneeling down? — What are you doing? Get up; you are men.”

These words, suddenly addressed to inferiors whom a lord ought not even to perceive, increased the merriment to the utmost.

They had cried, “Bravo!” Now they shouted, “Hurrah!” From clapping their hands they proceeded to stamping their feet. One might have been back in the Green Box, only that there the laughter applauded Gwynplaine; here it exterminated him. The effort of ridicule is to kill. Men’s laughter sometimes exerts all its power to murder.

The laughter proceeded to action. Sneering words rained down upon him. Humour is the folly of assemblies. Their ingenious and foolish ridicule shuns facts instead of studying them, and condemns questions instead of solving them. Any extraordinary occurrence is a point of interrogation; to laugh at it is like laughing at an enigma. But the Sphynx, which never laughs, is behind it.

Contradictory shouts arose, —

“Enough! enough!” “Encore! encore!”

William Farmer, Baron Leimpster, flung at Gwynplaine the insult cast by Ryc Quiney at Shakespeare, —

“Histrio, mima!”

Lord Vaughan, a sententious man, twenty-ninth on the barons’ bench, exclaimed, —

“We must be back in the days when animals had the gift of speech. In the midst of human tongues the jaw of a beast has spoken.”

“Listen to Balaam’s ass,” added Lord Yarmouth.

Lord Yarmouth presented that appearance of sagacity produced by a round nose and a crooked mouth.

“The rebel Linnæus is chastised in his tomb. The son is the punishment of the father,” said John Hough, Bishop of Lichfield and Coventry, whose prebendary Gwynplaine’s attack had glanced.

“He lies!” said Lord Cholmondeley, the legislator so well read up in the law. “That which he calls torture is only the *peine forte et dure*, and a very good thing, too. Torture is not practised in England.”

Thomas Wentworth, Baron Raby, addressed the Chancellor.

“My Lord Chancellor, adjourn the House.”

“No, no. Let him go on. He is amusing. Hurrah! hip! hip! hip!”

Thus shouted the young lords, their fun amounting to fury. Four of them especially were in the full exasperation of hilarity and hate. These were Laurence Hyde, Earl of Rochester; Thomas Tufton, Earl of Thanet; Viscount Hatton; and the Duke of Montagu.

“To your tricks, Gwynplaine!” cried Rochester.

“Put him out, put him out!” shouted Thanet.

Viscount Hatton drew from his pocket a penny, which he flung to Gwynplaine.

And John Campbell, Earl of Greenwich; Savage, Earl Rivers; Thompson, Baron Haversham; Warrington, Escrick Rolleston, Rockingham, Carteret, Langdale, Barcester, Maynard, Hunsdon, Cäernarvon, Cavendish, Burlington, Robert Darcy, Earl of Holderness, Other Windsor, Earl of Plymouth, applauded.

There was a tumult as of pandemonium or of pantheon, in which the words of Gwynplaine were lost.

Amidst it all, there was heard but one word of Gwynplaine’s: “Beware!”

Ralph, Duke of Montagu, recently down from Oxford, and still a beardless youth, descended from the bench of dukes, where he sat the nineteenth in order, and placed himself in front of Gwynplaine, with his arms folded. In a sword there is a spot which cuts sharpest, and in a voice an accent which insults most keenly. Montagu spoke with that accent, and sneering with his face close to that of Gwynplaine, shouted,— “What are you talking about?”

“I am prophesying,” said Gwynplaine.

The laughter exploded anew; and below this laughter, anger growled its continued bass. One of the minors, Lionel Cranfield Sackville, Earl of Dorset and Middlesex, stood upon his seat, not smiling, but grave as became a future legislator, and, without saying a word, looked at Gwynplaine with his fresh twelve-year old face, and shrugged his shoulders. Whereat the Bishop of St. Asaph’s whispered in the ear of the Bishop of St. David’s, who was sitting beside him, as he pointed to Gwynplaine, “There is the fool;” then pointing to the child, “there is the sage.”

A chaos of complaint rose from amidst the confusion of exclamations:—

“Gorgon’s face!”— “What does it all mean?”— “An insult to the House!”— “The fellow ought to be put out!”— “What a madman!”— “Shame! shame!”— “Adjourn the House!”— “No; let him finish his speech!”— “Talk away, you buffoon!”

Lord Lewis of Duras, with his arms akimbo, shouted, —

“Ah! it does one good to laugh. My spleen is cured. I propose a vote of thanks in these terms: ‘The House of Lords returns thanks to the Green

Box.’”

Gwynplaine, it may be remembered, had dreamt of a different welcome.

A man who, climbing up a steep and crumbling acclivity of sand above a giddy precipice, has felt it giving way under his hands, his nails, his elbows, his knees, his feet; who — losing instead of gaining on his treacherous way, a prey to every terror of the danger, slipping back instead of ascending, increasing the certainty of his fall by his very efforts to gain the summit, and losing ground in every struggle for safety — has felt the abyss approaching nearer and nearer, until the certainty of his coming fall into the yawning jaws open to receive him, has frozen the marrow of his bones; — that man has experienced the sensations of Gwynplaine.

He felt the ground he had ascended crumbling under him, and his audience was the precipice.

There is always some one to say the word which sums all up.

Lord Scarsdale translated the impression of the assembly in one exclamation, —

“What is the monster doing here?”

Gwynplaine stood up, dismayed and indignant, in a sort of final convulsion. He looked at them all fixedly.

“What am I doing here? I have come to be a terror to you! I am a monster, do you say? No! I am the people! I am an exception? No! I am the rule; you are the exception! You are the chimera; I am the reality! I am the frightful man who laughs! Who laughs at what? At you, at himself, at everything! What is his laugh? Your crime and his torment! That crime he flings at your head! That punishment he spits in your face! I laugh, and that means I weep!”

He paused. There was less noise. The laughter continued, but it was more subdued. He may have fancied that he had regained a certain amount of attention. He breathed again, and resumed, —

“This laugh which is on my face a king placed there. This laugh expresses the desolation of mankind. This laugh means hate, enforced silence, rage, despair. This laugh is the production of torture. This laugh is a forced laugh. If Satan were marked with this laugh, it would convict God. But the Eternal is not like them that perish. Being absolute, he is just; and God hates the acts of kings. Oh! you take me for an exception; but I am a symbol. Oh, all-powerful men, fools that you are! open your eyes. I am the incarnation of All. I represent humanity, such as its masters have made it.

Mankind is mutilated. That which has been done to me has been done to it. In it have been deformed right, justice, truth, reason, intelligence, as eyes, nostrils, and ears have been deformed in me; its heart has been made a sink of passion and pain, like mine, and, like mine, its features have been hidden in a mask of joy. Where God had placed his finger, the king set his sign-manual. Monstrous superposition! Bishops, peers, and princes, the people is a sea of suffering, smiling on the surface. My lords, I tell you that the people are as I am. To-day you oppress them; to-day you hoot at me. But the future is the ominous thaw, in which that which was as stone shall become wave. The appearance of solidity melts into liquid. A crack in the ice, and all is over. There will come an hour when convulsion shall break down your oppression; when an angry roar will reply to your jeers. Nay, that hour did come! Thou wert of it, O my father! That hour of God did come, and was called the Republic! It was destroyed, but it will return. Meanwhile, remember that the line of kings armed with the sword was broken by Cromwell, armed with the axe. Tremble! Incorruptible solutions are at hand: the talons which were cut are growing again; the tongues which were torn out are floating away, they are turning to tongues of fire, and, scattered by the breath of darkness, are shouting through infinity; those who hunger are showing their idle teeth; false heavens, built over real hells, are tottering. The people are suffering — they are suffering; and that which is on high totters, and that which is below yawns. Darkness demands its change to light; the damned discuss the elect. Behold! it is the coming of the people, the ascent of mankind, the beginning of the end, the red dawn of the catastrophe! Yes, all these things are in this laugh of mine, at which you laugh to-day! London is one perpetual fête. Be it so. From one end to the other, England rings with acclamation. Well! but listen. All that you see is I. You have your fêtes — they are my laugh; you have your public rejoicings — they are my laugh; you have your weddings, consecrations, and coronations — they are my laugh. The births of your princes are my laugh. But above you is the thunderbolt — it is my laugh."

How could they stand such nonsense? The laughter burst out afresh; and now it was overwhelming. Of all the lava which that crater, the human mouth, ejects, the most corrosive is joy. To inflict evil gaily is a contagion which no crowd can resist. All executions do not take place on the scaffold; and men, from the moment they are in a body, whether in mobs or in senates, have always a ready executioner amongst them, called sarcasm.

There is no torture to be compared to that of the wretch condemned to execution by ridicule. This was Gwynplaine’s fate. He was stoned with their jokes, and riddled by the scoffs shot at him. He stood there a mark for all. They sprang up; they cried, “Encore;” they shook with laughter; they stamped their feet; they pulled each other’s bands. The majesty of the place, the purple of the robes, the chaste ermine, the dignity of the wigs, had no effect. The lords laughed, the bishops laughed, the judges laughed, the old men’s benches derided, the children’s benches were in convulsions. The Archbishop of Canterbury nudged the Archbishop of York; Henry Compton, Bishop of London, brother of Lord Northampton, held his sides; the Lord Chancellor bent down his head, probably to conceal his inclination to laugh; and, at the bar, that statue of respect, the Usher of the Black Rod, was laughing also.

Gwynplaine, become pallid, had folded his arms; and, surrounded by all those faces, young and old, in which had burst forth this grand Homeric jubilee; in that whirlwind of clapping hands, of stamping feet, and of hurrahs; in that mad buffoonery, of which he was the centre; in that splendid overflow of hilarity; in the midst of that unmeasured gaiety, he felt that the sepulchre was within him. All was over. He could no longer master the face which betrayed nor the audience which insulted him.

That eternal and fatal law by which the grotesque is linked with the sublime — by which the laugh re-echoes the groan, parody rides behind despair, and seeming is opposed to being — had never found more terrible expression. Never had a light more sinister illumined the depths of human darkness.

Gwynplaine was assisting at the final destruction of his destiny by a burst of laughter. The irremediable was in this. Having fallen, we can raise ourselves up; but, being pulverized, never. And the insult of their sovereign mockery had reduced him to dust. From thenceforth nothing was possible. Everything is in accordance with the scene. That which was triumph in the Green Box was disgrace and catastrophe in the House of Lords. What was applause there, was insult here. He felt something like the reverse side of his mask. On one side of that mask he had the sympathy of the people, who welcomed Gwynplaine; on the other, the contempt of the great, rejecting Lord Fermain Clancharlie. On one side, attraction; on the other, repulsion; both leading him towards the shadows. He felt himself, as it were, struck from behind. Fate strikes treacherous blows. Everything will be explained hereafter, but, in the meantime, destiny is a snare, and man sinks into its pitfalls. He had expected to rise, and was welcomed by laughter. Such apotheoses have lugubrious terminations. There is a dreary expression — to be sobered; tragical wisdom born of drunkenness! In the midst of that tempest of gaiety commingled with ferocity, Gwynplaine fell into a reverie.

An assembly in mad merriment drifts as chance directs, and loses its compass when it gives itself to laughter. None knew whither they were tending, or what they were doing. The House was obliged to rise, adjourned by the Lord Chancellor, "owing to extraordinary circumstances," to the next day. The peers broke up. They bowed to the royal throne and departed. Echoes of prolonged laughter were heard losing themselves in the corridors.

Assemblies, besides their official doors, have — under tapestry, under projections, and under arches — all sorts of hidden doors, by which the members escape like water through the cracks in a vase. In a short time the chamber was deserted. This takes place quickly and almost imperceptibly, and those places, so lately full of voices, are suddenly given back to silence.

Reverie carries one far; and one comes by long dreaming to reach, as it were, another planet.

Gwynplaine suddenly awoke from such a dream. He was alone. The chamber was empty. He had not even observed that the House had been adjourned. All the peers had departed, even his sponsors. There only remained here and there some of the lower officers of the House, waiting for his lordship to depart before they put the covers on and extinguished the lights.

Mechanically he placed his hat on his head, and, leaving his place, directed his steps to the great door opening into the gallery. As he was passing through the opening in the bar, a doorkeeper relieved him of his peer's robes. This he scarcely felt. In another instant he was in the gallery.

The officials who remained observed with astonishment that the peer had gone out without bowing to the throne!

CHAPTER VIII.

HE WOULD BE A GOOD BROTHER, WERE HE NOT A GOOD SON.

There was no one in the gallery.

Gwynplaine crossed the circular space, from whence they had removed the arm-chair and the tables, and where there now remained no trace of his investiture. Candelabra and lustres, placed at certain intervals, marked the way out. Thanks to this string of light, he retraced without difficulty, through the suite of saloons and galleries, the way which he had followed on his arrival with the King-at-Arms and the Usher of the Black Rod. He saw no one, except here and there some old lord with tardy steps, plodding along heavily in front of him.

Suddenly, in the silence of those great deserted rooms, bursts of indistinct exclamations reached him, a sort of nocturnal clatter unusual in such a place. He directed his steps to the place whence this noise proceeded, and found himself in a spacious hall, dimly lighted, which was one of the exits from the House of Lords. He saw a great glass door open, a flight of steps, footmen and links, a square outside, and a few coaches waiting at the bottom of the steps.

This was the spot from which the noise which he had heard had proceeded.

Within the door, and under the hall lamp, was a noisy group in a storm of gestures and of voices.

Gwynplaine approached in the gloom.

They were quarrelling. On one side there were ten or twelve young lords, who wanted to go out; on the other, a man, with his hat on, like themselves, upright and with a haughty brow, who barred their passage.

Who was this man? Tom-Jim-Jack.

Some of these lords were still in their robes, others had thrown them off, and were in their usual attire. Tom-Jim-Jack wore a hat with plumes — not white, like the peers; but green tipped with orange. He was embroidered and laced from head to foot, had flowing bows of ribbon and lace round his wrists and neck, and was feverishly fingering with his left hand the hilt of the sword which hung from his waistbelt, and on the billets and scabbard of which were embroidered an admiral’s anchors.

It was he who was speaking and addressing the young lords; and Gwynplaine overheard the following: —

“I have told you you are cowards. You wish me to withdraw my words. Be it so. You are not cowards; you are idiots. You all combined against one man. That was not cowardice. All right. Then it was stupidity. He spoke to you, and you did not understand him. Here, the old are hard of hearing, the young devoid of intelligence. I am one of your own order to quite sufficient extent to tell you the truth. This new-comer is strange, and he has uttered a heap of nonsense, I admit; but amidst all that nonsense there were some things which were true. His speech was confused, undigested, ill-delivered. Be it so. He repeated, ‘You know, you know,’ too often; but a man who was but yesterday a clown at a fair cannot be expected to speak like Aristotle or like Doctor Gilbert Burnet, Bishop of Salisbury. The vermin, the lions, the address to the under-clerks — all that was in bad taste. Zounds! who says it wasn’t? It was a senseless and fragmentary and topsy-turvy harangue; but here and there came out facts which were true. It is no small thing to speak even as he did, seeing it is not his trade. I should like to see you do it. Yes, you! What he said about the lepers at Burton Lazars is an undeniable fact. Besides, he is not the first man who has talked nonsense. In fine, my lords, I do not like to see many set upon one. Such is my humour; and I ask your lordships’ permission to take offence. You have displeased me; I am angry. I am grateful to God for having drawn up from the depth of his low existence this peer of England, and for having given back his inheritance to the heir; and, without heeding whether it will or will not affect my own affairs, I consider it a beautiful sight to see an insect transformed into an eagle, and Gwynplaine into Lord Clancharlie. My lords, I forbid you holding any opinion but mine. I regret that Lord Lewis Duras should not be here. I should like to insult him. My lords, it is Fermain Clancharlie who has been the peer, and you who have been the mountebanks. As to his laugh, it is not his fault. You have laughed at that laugh; men should not laugh at misfortune. If you think that people cannot laugh at you as well, you are very much mistaken. You are ugly. You are badly dressed. My Lord Haversham, I saw your mistress the other day; she is hideous — a duchess, but a monkey. Gentlemen who laugh, I repeat that I should like to hear you try to say four words running! Many men jabber; very few speak. You imagine you know something, because you have kept idle terms at Oxford or Cambridge, and because, before being peers of England on the benches of Westminster, you have been asses on the benches at Gonville and Caius. Here I am; and I choose to stare you in the face. You have just been impudent to this new peer. A monster, certainly; but a monster given up to beasts. I had rather be that man than you. I was present at the sitting, in my place as a possible heir to a peerage. I heard all. I have not the right to speak; but I have the right to be a gentleman. Your jeering airs annoyed me. When I am angry I would go up to Mount Pendlehill, and pick the cloudberry which brings the thunderbolt down on the gatherer. That is the reason why I have waited for you at the door. We must have a few words, for we have arrangements to make. Did it strike you that you failed a little in respect towards myself? My lords, I entertain a firm determination to kill a few of you. All you who are here — Thomas Tufton, Earl of Thanet; Savage, Earl Rivers; Charles Spencer, Earl of Sunderland; Laurence Hyde, Earl of Rochester; you Barons, Gray of Rolleston, Cary Hunsdon, Escrick, Rockingham, little Carteret; Robert Darcy, Earl of Holderness; William, Viscount Hutton; and Ralph, Duke of Montagu; and any who choose — I, David Dirry-Moir, an officer of the fleet, summon, call, and command you to provide yourselves, in all haste, with seconds and umpires, and I will meet you face to face and hand to hand, to-night, at once, to-morrow, by day or night, by sunlight or by candlelight, where, when, or how you please, so long as there is two sword-lengths’ space; and you will do well to look to the flints of your pistols and the edges of your rapiers, for it is my firm intention to cause vacancies in your peerages. — Ogle Cavendish, take your measures, and think of your motto, *Cavendo tutus*. — Marmaduke Langdale, you will do well, like your ancestor, Grindold, to order a coffin to be brought with you. — George Booth, Earl of Warrington, you will never again see the County Palatine of Chester, or your labyrinth like that of Crete, or the high towers of Dunham Massy! — As to Lord Vaughan, he is young enough to talk impertinently, and too old to answer for it. I shall demand satisfaction for his words of his nephew Richard Vaughan, Member of Parliament for the Borough of Merioneth. — As for you, John Campbell, Earl of Greenwich, I will kill you as Achon killed Matas; but with a fair cut, and not from behind, it being my custom to present my heart and not my back to the point of the sword. — I have spoken my mind, my lords. And so use witchcraft if you like. Consult the fortune-tellers. Grease your skins with ointments and drugs to make them invulnerable; hang round your necks charms of the devil or the Virgin. I will fight you blest or curst, and I will not have you searched to see if you are wearing any wizard’s tokens. On foot or on horseback, on the highroad if you wish it, in Piccadilly, or at Charing Cross; and they shall take up the pavement for our meeting, as they unpaved the court of the Louvre for the duel between Guise and Bassompierre. All of you! Do you hear? I mean to fight you all. — Dorme, Earl of Caernarvon, I will make you swallow my sword up to the hilt, as Marolles did to Lisle Mariveaux, and then we shall see, my lord, whether you will laugh or not. — You, Burlington, who look like a girl of seventeen — you shall choose between the lawn of your house in Middlesex, and your beautiful garden at Londesborough in Yorkshire, to be buried in. — I beg to inform your lordships that it does not suit me to allow your insolence in my presence. I will chastise you, my lords. I take it ill that you should have ridiculed Lord Fermain Clancharlie. He is worth more than you. As Clancharlie, he has nobility, which you have; as Gwynplaine, he has intellect, which you have not. I make his cause my cause, insult to him insult to me, and your ridicule my wrath. We shall see who will come out of this affair alive, because I challenge you to the death. Do you understand? With any arm, in any fashion, and you shall choose the death that pleases you best; and since you are clowns as well as gentlemen, I proportion my defiance to your qualities, and I give you your choice of any way in which a man can be killed, from the sword of the prince to the fist of the blackguard.”

To this furious onslaught of words the whole group of young noblemen answered by a smile. “Agreed,” they said.

“I choose pistols,” said Burlington.

“I,” said Escrick, “the ancient combat of the lists, with the mace and the dagger.”

“I,” said Holderness, “the duel with two knives, long and short, stripped to the waist, and breast to breast.”

“Lord David,” said the Earl of Thanet, “you are a Scot. I choose the claymore.”

“I the sword,” said Rockingham.

“I,” said Duke Ralph, “prefer the fists; ’tis noblest.”

Gwynplaine came out from the shadow. He directed his steps towards him whom he had hitherto called Tom-Jim-Jack, but in whom now, however, he began to perceive something more. “I thank you,” said he, “but this is my business.”

Every head turned towards him.

Gwynplaine advanced. He felt himself impelled towards the man whom he heard called Lord David — his defender, and perhaps something nearer. Lord David drew back.

“Oh!” said he. “It is you, is it? This is well-timed. I have a word for you as well. Just now you spoke of a woman who, after having loved Lord Linnæus Clancharlie, loved Charles II.”

“It is true.”

“Sir, you insulted my mother.”

“Your mother!” cried Gwynplaine. “In that case, as I guessed, we are—”

“Brothers,” answered Lord David, and he struck Gwynplaine. “We are brothers,” said he; “so we can fight. One can only fight one’s equal; who is one’s equal if not one’s brother? I will send you my seconds; to-morrow we will cut each other’s throats.”

BOOK THE NINTH.

IN RUINS.

CHAPTER I.

IT IS THROUGH EXCESS OF GREATNESS THAT MAN REACHES EXCESS OF MISERY.

As midnight tolled from St. Paul’s, a man who had just crossed London Bridge struck into the lanes of Southwark. There were no lamps lighted, it being at that time the custom in London, as in Paris, to extinguish the public lamps at eleven o’clock — that is, to put them out just as they became necessary. The streets were dark and deserted. When the lamps are out men stay in. He whom we speak of advanced with hurried strides. He was strangely dressed for walking at such an hour. He wore a coat of embroidered silk, a sword by his side, a hat with white plumes, and no cloak. The watchmen, as they saw him pass, said, “It is a lord walking for a wager,” and they moved out of his way with the respect due to a lord and to a better.

The man was Gwynplaine. He was making his escape. Where was he? He did not know. We have said that the soul has its cyclones — fearful whirlwinds, in which heaven, the sea, day, night, life, death, are all mingled in unintelligible horror. It can no longer breathe Truth; it is crushed by things in which it does not believe. Nothingness becomes hurricane. The firmament pales. Infinity is empty. The mind of the sufferer wanders away. He feels himself dying. He craves for a star. What did Gwynplaine feel? a thirst — a thirst to see Dea.

He felt but that. To reach the Green Box again, and the Tadcaster Inn, with its sounds and light — full of the cordial laughter of the people; to find Ursus and Homo, to see Dea again, to re-enter life. Disillusion, like a bow, shoots its arrow, man, towards the True. Gwynplaine hastened on. He approached Tarrinzeau Field. He walked no longer now; he ran. His eyes pierced the darkness before him. His glance preceded him, eagerly seeking the harbour on the horizon. What a moment for him when he should see the lighted windows of Tadcaster Inn!

He reached the bowling-green. He turned the corner of the wall, and saw before him, at the other end of the field, some distance off, the inn — the only house, it may be remembered, in the field where the fair was held.

He looked. There was no light; nothing but a black mass.

He shuddered. Then he said to himself that it was late; that the tavern was shut up; that it was very natural; that every one was asleep; that he had only to awaken Nicless or Govicum; that he must go up to the inn and knock at the door. He did so, running no longer now, but rushing.

He reached the inn, breathless. It is when, storm-beaten and struggling in the invisible convulsions of the soul until he knows not whether he is in life or in death, that all the delicacy of a man's affection for his loved ones, being yet unimpaired, proves a heart true. When all else is swallowed up, tenderness still floats unshattered. Not to awaken Dea too suddenly was Gwynplaine's first thought. He approached the inn with as little noise as possible. He recognized the nook, the old dog kennel, where Govicum used to sleep. In it, contiguous to the lower room, was a window opening on to the field. Gwynplaine tapped softly at the pane. It would be enough to awaken Govicum, he thought.

There was no sound in Govicum's room.

"At his age," said Gwynplaine, "a boy sleeps soundly."

With the back of his hand he knocked against the window gently. Nothing stirred.

He knocked louder twice. Still nothing stirred. Then, feeling somewhat uneasy, he went to the door of the inn and knocked. No one answered. He reflected, and began to feel a cold shudder come over him.

"Master Nicless is old, children sleep soundly, and old men heavily. Courage! louder!"

He had tapped, he had knocked, he had kicked the door; now he flung himself against it.

This recalled to him a distant memory of Weymouth, when, a little child, he had carried Dea, an infant, in his arms.

He battered the door again violently, like a lord, which, alas! he was.

The house remained silent. He felt that he was losing his head. He no longer thought of caution. He shouted, —

"Nicless! Govicum!"

At the same time he looked up at the windows, to see if any candle was lighted. But the inn was blank. Not a voice, not a sound, not a glimmer of light. He went to the gate and knocked at it, kicked against it, and shook it, crying out wildly, —

"Ursus! Homo!"

The wolf did not bark.

A cold sweat stood in drops upon his brow. He cast his eyes around. The night was dark; but there were stars enough to render the fair-green visible. He saw — a melancholy sight to him — that everything on it had vanished.

There was not a single caravan. The circus was gone. Not a tent, not a booth, not a cart, remained. The strollers, with their thousand noisy cries, who had swarmed there, had given place to a black and sullen void.

All were gone.

The madness of anxiety took possession of him. What did this mean? What had happened? Was no one left? Could it be that life had crumbled away behind him? What had happened to them all? Good heavens! Then he rushed like a tempest against the house. He struck the small door, the gate, the windows, the window-shutters, the walls, with fists and feet, furious with terror and agony of mind.

He called Nicless, Govicum, Fibi, Vinos, Ursus, Homo. He tried every shout and every sound against this wall. At times he waited and listened; but the house remained mute and dead. Then, exasperated, he began again with blows, shouts, and repeated knockings, re-echoed all around. It might have been thunder trying to awake the grave.

There is a certain stage of fright in which a man becomes terrible. He who fears everything fears nothing. He would strike the Sphynx. He defies the Unknown.

Gwynplaine renewed the noise in every possible form — stopping, resuming, unwearying in the shouts and appeals by which he assailed the tragic silence. He called a thousand times on the names of those who should have been there. He shrieked out every name except that of Dea — a precaution of which he could not have explained the reason himself, but which instinct inspired even in his distraction.

Having exhausted calls and cries, nothing was left but to break in.

“I must enter the house,” he said to himself; “but how?”

He broke a pane of glass in Govicum’s room by thrusting his hand through it, tearing the flesh; he drew the bolt of the sash and opened the window. Perceiving that his sword was in the way, he tore it off angrily, scabbard, blade, and belt, and flung it on the pavement. Then he raised himself by the inequalities in the wall, and though the window was narrow, he was able to pass through it. He entered the inn. Govicum’s bed, dimly visible in its nook, was there; but Govicum was not in it. If Govicum was not in his bed, it was evident that Nicless could not be in his.

The whole house was dark. He felt in that shadowy interior the mysterious immobility of emptiness, and that vague fear which signifies—“There is no one here.”

Gwynplaine, convulsed with anxiety, crossed the lower room, knocking against the tables, upsetting the earthenware, throwing down the benches, sweeping against the jugs, and, striding over the furniture, reached the door leading into the court, and broke it open with one blow from his knee, which sprung the lock. The door turned on its hinges. He looked into the court. The Green Box was no longer there.

CHAPTER II.

THE DREGS.

Gwynplaine left the house, and began to explore Tarrinzeau Field in every direction. He went to every place where, the day before, the tents and caravans had stood. He knocked at the stalls, though he knew well that they were uninhabited. He struck everything that looked like a door or a window. Not a voice arose from the darkness. Something like death had been there.

The ant-hill had been razed. Some measures of police had apparently been carried out. There had been what, in our days, would be called a *razzia*. Tarrinzeau Field was worse than a desert; it had been scoured, and every corner of it scratched up, as it were, by pitiless claws. The pocket of the unfortunate fair-green had been turned inside out, and completely emptied.

Gwynplaine, after having searched every yard of ground, left the green, struck into the crooked streets abutting on the site called East Point, and directed his steps towards the Thames. He had threaded his way through a network of lanes, bounded only by walls and hedges, when he felt the fresh breeze from the water, heard the dull lapping of the river, and suddenly saw a parapet in front of him. It was the parapet of the Effroc stone.

This parapet bounded a block of the quay, which was very short and very narrow. Under it the high wall, the Effroc stone, buried itself perpendicularly in the dark water below.

Gwynplaine stopped at the parapet, and, leaning his elbows on it, laid his head in his hands and set to thinking, with the water beneath him.

Did he look at the water? No. At what then? At the shadow; not the shadow without, but within him. In the melancholy night-bound landscape, which he scarcely marked, in the outer depths, which his eyes did not pierce, were the blurred sketches of masts and spars. Below the Effroc stone there was nothing on the river; but the quay sloped insensibly downwards till, some distance off, it met a pier, at which several vessels were lying, some of which had just arrived, others which were on the point of departure. These vessels communicated with the shore by little jetties, constructed for the purpose, some of stone, some of wood, or by movable gangways. All of them, whether moored to the jetties or at anchor, were wrapped in silence. There was neither voice nor movement on board, it being a good habit of sailors to sleep when they can, and awake only when wanted. If any of them were to sail during the night at high tide, the crews were not yet awake. The hulls, like large black bubbles, and the rigging, like threads mingled with ladders, were barely visible. All was livid and confused. Here and there a red cresset pierced the haze.

Gwynplaine saw nothing of all this. What he was musing on was destiny.

He was in a dream — a vision — giddy in presence of an inexorable reality.

He fancied that he heard behind him something like an earthquake. It was the laughter of the Lords.

From that laughter he had just emerged. He had come out of it, having received a blow, and from whom?

From his own brother!

Flying from the laughter, carrying with him the blow, seeking refuge, a wounded bird, in his nest, rushing from hate and seeking love, what had he found?

Darkness.

No one.

Everything gone.

He compared that darkness to the dream he had indulged in.

What a crumbling away!

Gwynplaine had just reached that sinister bound — the void. The Green Box gone was his universe vanished.

His soul had been closed up.

He reflected.

What could have happened? Where were they? They had evidently been carried away. Destiny had given him, Gwynplaine, a blow, which was greatness; its reaction had struck them another, which was annihilation. It was clear that he would never see them again. Precautions had been taken against that. They had scoured the fair-green, beginning by Nicless and Govicum, so that he should gain no clue through them. Inexorable dispersion! That fearful social system, at the same time that it had pulverized him in the House of Lords, had crushed them in their little cabin. They were lost; Dea was lost — lost to him for ever. Powers of heaven! where was she? And he had not been there to defend her!

To have to make guesses as to the absent whom we love is to put oneself to the torture. He inflicted this torture on himself. At every thought that he fathomed, at every supposition which he made, he felt within him a moan of agony.

Through a succession of bitter reflections he remembered a man who was evidently fatal to him, and who had called himself Barkilphedro. That man had inscribed on his brain a dark sentence which reappeared now; he had written it in such terrible ink that every letter had turned to fire; and Gwynplaine saw flaming at the bottom of his thought the enigmatical words, the meaning of which was at length solved: “Destiny never opens one door without closing another.”

All was over. The final shadows had gathered about him. In every man’s fate there may be an end of the world for himself alone. It is called despair. The soul is full of falling stars.

This, then, was what he had come to.

A vapour had passed. He had been mingled with it. It had lain heavily on his eyes; it had disordered his brain. He had been outwardly blinded, intoxicated within. This had lasted the time of a passing vapour. Then everything melted away, the vapour and his life. Awaking from the dream, he found himself alone.

All vanished, all gone, all lost — night — nothingness. Such was his horizon.

He was alone.

Alone has a synonym, which is Dead. Despair is an accountant. It sets itself to find its total; it adds up everything, even to the farthings. It reproaches Heaven with its thunderbolts and its pinpricks. It seeks to find what it has to expect from fate. It argues, weighs, and calculates, outwardly cool, while the burning lava is still flowing on within.

Gwynplaine examined himself, and examined his fate.

The backward glance of thought; terrible recapitulation!

When at the top of a mountain, we look down the precipice; when at the bottom, we look up at heaven. And we say, “I was there.”

Gwynplaine was at the very bottom of misfortune. How sudden, too, had been his fall!

Such is the hideous swiftness of misfortune, although it is so heavy that we might fancy it slow. But no! It would likewise appear that snow, from its coldness, ought to be the paralysis of winter, and, from its whiteness, the immobility of the winding-sheet. Yet this is contradicted by the avalanche.

The avalanche is snow become a furnace. It remains frozen, but it devours. The avalanche had enveloped Gwynplaine. He had been torn like a rag, uprooted like a tree, precipitated like a stone. He recalled all the circumstances of his fall. He put himself questions, and returned answers. Grief is an examination. There is no judge so searching as conscience conducting its own trial.

What amount of remorse was there in his despair? This he wished to find out, and dissected his conscience. Excruciating vivisection!

His absence had caused a catastrophe. Had this absence depended on him? In all that had happened, had he been a free agent? No! He had felt himself captive. What was that which had arrested and detained him — a prison? No. A chain? No. What then? Sticky slime! He had sunk into the slough of greatness.

To whom has it not happened to be free in appearance, yet to feel that his wings are hampered?

There had been something like a snare spread for him. What is at first temptation ends by captivity.

Nevertheless — and his conscience pressed him on this point — had he merely submitted to what had been offered him? No; he had accepted it.

Violence and surprise had been used with him in a certain measure, it was true; but he, in a certain measure, had given in. To have allowed himself to be carried off was not his fault; but to have allowed himself to be inebriated was his weakness. There had been a moment — a decisive moment — when the question was proposed. This Barkilphedro had placed a dilemma before Gwynplaine, and had given him clear power to decide his fate by a word. Gwynplaine might have said, “No.” He had said, “Yes.”

From that “Yes,” uttered in a moment of dizziness, everything had sprung. Gwynplaine realized this now in the bitter aftertaste of that consent.

Nevertheless — for he debated with himself — was it then so great a wrong to take possession of his right, of his patrimony, of his heritage, of his house; and, as a patrician, of the rank of his ancestors; as an orphan, of the name of his father? What had he accepted? A restitution. Made by whom? By Providence.

Then his mind revolted. Senseless acceptance! What a bargain had he struck! what a foolish exchange! He had trafficked with Providence at a loss. How now! For an income of £80,000 a year; for seven or eight titles; for ten or twelve palaces; for houses in town, and castles in the country; for a hundred lackeys; for packs of hounds, and carriages, and armorial bearings; to be a judge and legislator; for a coronet and purple robes, like a king; to be a baron and a marquis; to be a peer of England, he had given the hut of Ursus and the smile of Dea. For shipwreck and destruction in the surging immensity of greatness, he had bartered happiness. For the ocean he had given the pearl. O madman! O fool! O dupe!

Yet nevertheless — and here the objection reappeared on firmer ground — in this fever of high fortune which had seized him all had not been unwholesome. Perhaps there would have been selfishness in renunciation; perhaps he had done his duty in the acceptance. Suddenly transformed into a lord, what ought he to have done? The complication of events produces perplexity of mind. This had happened to him. Duty gave contrary orders. Duty on all sides at once, duty multiple and contradictory — this was the bewilderment which he had suffered. It was this that had paralyzed him, especially when he had not refused to take the journey from Corleone Lodge to the House of Lords. What we call rising in life is leaving the safe for the dangerous path. Which is, thenceforth, the straight line? Towards whom is our first duty? Is it towards those nearest to ourselves, or is it towards mankind generally? Do we not cease to belong to our own circumscribed circle, and become part of the great family of all? As we ascend we feel an increased pressure on our virtue. The higher we rise, the greater is the strain. The increase of right is an increase of duty. We come to many cross-ways, phantom roads perchance, and we imagine that we see the finger of conscience pointing each one of them out to us. Which shall we take? Change our direction, remain where we are, advance, go back? What are we to do? That there should be cross-roads in conscience is strange enough; but responsibility may be a labyrinth. And when a man contains an idea, when he is the incarnation of a fact — when he is a symbolical man, at the same time that he is a man of flesh and blood — is not the responsibility still more oppressive? Thence the care-laden docility and the dumb anxiety of Gwynplaine; thence his obedience when summoned to take his seat. A pensive man is often a passive man. He had heard what he fancied was the command of duty itself. Was not that entrance into a place where oppression could be discussed and resisted the realization of one of his deepest aspirations? When he had been called upon to speak — he the fearful human scantling, he the living specimen of the despotic whims under which, for six thousand years, mankind has groaned in agony — had he the right to refuse? Had he the right to withdraw his head from under the tongue of fire descending from on high to rest upon him?

In the obscure and giddy debate of conscience, what had he said to himself? This: “The people are a silence. I will be the mighty advocate of that silence; I will speak for the dumb; I will speak of the little to the great — of the weak to the powerful. This is the purpose of my fate. God wills what He wills, and does it. It was a wonder that Hardquanonne’s flask, in which was the metamorphosis of Gwynplaine into Lord Clancharlie, should have floated for fifteen years on the ocean, on the billows, in the surf, through the storms, and that all the raging of the sea did it no harm. But I can see the reason. There are destinies with secret springs. I have the key of mine, and know its enigma. I am predestined; I have a mission. I will be the poor man’s lord; I will speak for the speechless with despair; I will translate inarticulate remonstrance; I will translate the mutterings, the groans, the murmurs, the voices of the crowd, their ill-spoken complaints, their unintelligible words, and those animal-like cries which ignorance and suffering put into men’s mouths. The clamour of men is as inarticulate as the howling of the wind. They cry out, but they are understood; so that cries become equivalent to silence, and silence with them means throwing down their arms. This forced disarmament calls for help. I will be their help; I will be the Denunciation; I will be the Word of the people. Thanks to me, they shall be understood. I will be the bleeding mouth from which the gag has been torn. I will tell everything. This will be great indeed.”

Yes; it is fine to speak for the dumb, but to speak to the deaf is sad. And that was his second part in the drama.

Alas! he had failed irremediably. The elevation in which he had believed, the high fortune, had melted away like a mirage. And what a fall! To be drowned in a surge of laughter!

He had believed himself strong — he who, during so many years, had floated with observant mind on the wide sea of suffering; he who had brought back out of the great shadow so touching a cry. He had been flung against that huge rock the frivolity of the fortunate. He believed himself an avenger; he was but a clown. He thought that he wielded the thunderbolt; he did but tickle. In place of emotion, he met with mockery. He sobbed; they burst into gaiety, and under that gaiety he had sunk fatally submerged.

And what had they laughed at? At his laugh. So that trace of a hateful act, of which he must keep the mark for ever — mutilation carved in everlasting gaiety; the stigmata of laughter, image of the sham contentment of nations under their oppressors; that mask of joy produced by torture; that abyss of grimace which he carried on his features; the scar which signified *Jussu regis*, the attestation of a crime committed by the king towards him, and the symbol of crime committed by royalty towards the people; — that it was which had triumphed over him; that it was which had overwhelmed him; so that the accusation against the executioner turned into sentence upon the victim. What a prodigious denial of justice! Royalty, having had satisfaction of his father, had had satisfaction of him! The evil that had been done had served as pretext and as motive for the evil which remained to be done. Against whom were the lords angered? Against the torturer? No; against the tortured. Here is the throne; there, the people. Here, James II.; there, Gwynplaine. That confrontation, indeed, brought to light an outrage and a crime. What was the outrage? Complaint. What was the crime? Suffering. Let misery hide itself in silence, otherwise it becomes treason. And those men who had dragged Gwynplaine on the hurdle of sarcasm, were they wicked? No; but they, too, had their fatality — they were happy. They were executioners, ignorant of the fact. They were good-humoured; they saw no use in Gwynplaine. He opened himself to them. He tore out his heart to show them, and they cried, “Go on with your play!” But, sharpest sting! he had laughed himself. The frightful chain which tied down his soul hindered his thoughts from rising to his face. His disfigurement reached even his senses; and, while his conscience was indignant, his face gave it the lie, and jested. Then all was over. He was the laughing man, the caryatid of the weeping world. He was an agony petrified in hilarity, carrying the weight of a universe of calamity, and walled up for ever with the gaiety, the ridicule, and the amusement of others; of all the oppressed, of whom he was the incarnation, he partook the hateful fate, to be a desolation not believed in; they jeered at his distress; to them he was but an extraordinary buffoon lifted out of some frightful condensation of misery, escaped from his prison, changed to a deity, risen from the dregs of the people to the foot of the throne, mingling with the stars, and who, having once amused the damned, now amused the elect. All that was in him of generosity, of enthusiasm, of eloquence, of heart, of soul, of fury, of anger, of love, of inexpressible grief, ended in — a burst of laughter! And he proved, as he had told the lords, that this was not the exception; but that it was the normal, ordinary, universal, unlimited, sovereign fact, so amalgamated with the routine of life that they took no account of it. The hungry pauper laughs, the beggar laughs, the felon laughs, the prostitute laughs, the orphan laughs to gain his bread; the slave laughs, the soldier laughs, the people laugh. Society is so constituted that every perdition, every indigence, every catastrophe, every fever, every ulcer, every agony, is resolved on the surface of the abyss into one frightful grin of joy. Now he was that universal grin, and that grin was himself. The law of heaven, the unknown power which governs, had willed that a spectre visible and palpable, a spectre of flesh and bone, should be the synopsis of the monstrous parody which we call the world; and he was that spectre, immutable fate!

He had cried, “Pity for those who suffer.” In vain! He had striven to awake pity; he had awakened horror. Such is the law of apparitions.

But while he was a spectre, he was also a man; here was the heartrending complication. A spectre without, a man within. A man more than any other, perhaps, since his double fate was the synopsis of all humanity. And he felt that humanity was at once present in him and absent from him. There was in his existence something insurmountable. What was he? A disinherited heir? No; for he was a lord. Was he a lord? No; for he was a rebel. He was the light-bearer; a terrible spoil-sport. He was not Satan, certainly; but he was Lucifer. His entrance, with his torch in his hand, was sinister.

Sinister for whom? for the sinister. Terrible to whom? to the terrible. Therefore they rejected him. Enter their order? be accepted by them? Never. The obstacle which he carried in his face was frightful; but the obstacle which he carried in his ideas was still more insurmountable. His speech was to them more deformed than his face. He had no possible thought in common with the world of the great and powerful, in which he had by a freak of fate been born, and from which another freak of fate had driven him out. There was between men and his face a mask, and between society and his mind a wall. In mixing, from infancy, a wandering mountebank, with that vast and tough substance which is called the crowd, in saturating himself with the attraction of the multitude, and impregnating himself with the great soul of mankind, he had lost, in the common sense of the whole of mankind, the particular sense of the reigning classes. On their heights he was impossible. He had reached them wet with water from the well of Truth; the odour of the abyss was on him. He was repugnant to those princes perfumed with lies. To those who live on fiction, truth is disgusting; and he who thirsts for flattery vomits the real, when he has happened to drink it by mistake. That which Gwynplaine brought was not fit for their table. For what was it? Reason, wisdom, justice; and they rejected them with disgust.

There were bishops there. He brought God into their presence. Who was this intruder?

The two poles repel each other. They can never amalgamate, for transition is wanting. Hence the result — a cry of anger — when they were brought together in terrible juxtaposition: all misery concentrated in a man, face to face with all pride concentrated in a caste.

To accuse is useless. To state is sufficient. Gwynplaine, meditating on the limits of his destiny, proved the total uselessness of his effort. He proved the deafness of high places. The privileged have no hearing on the side next the disinherited. Is it their fault? Alas! no. It is their law. Forgive them! To be moved would be to abdicate. Of lords and princes expect nothing. He who is satisfied is inexorable. For those that have their fill the hungry do not exist. The happy ignore and isolate themselves. On the threshold of their paradise, as on the threshold of hell, must be written, “Leave all hope behind.”

Gwynplaine had met with the reception of a spectre entering the dwelling of the gods.

Here all that was within him rose in rebellion. No, he was no spectre; he was a man. He told them, he shouted to them, that he was Man.

He was not a phantom. He was palpitating flesh. He had a brain, and he thought; he had a heart, and he loved; he had a soul, and he hoped. Indeed, to have hoped overmuch was his whole crime.

Alas! he had exaggerated hope into believing in that thing at once so brilliant and so dark which is called Society. He who was without had re-entered it. It had at once, and at first sight, made him its three offers, and given him its three gifts — marriage, family, and caste. Marriage? He had seen prostitution on the threshold. Family? His brother had struck him, and was awaiting him the next day, sword in hand. Caste? It had burst into laughter in his face, at him the patrician, at him the wretch. It had rejected, almost before it had admitted him. So that his first three steps into the dense shadow of society had opened three gulfs beneath him.

And it was by a treacherous transfiguration that his disaster had begun; and catastrophe had approached him with the aspect of apotheosis!

Ascend had signified Descend!

His fate was the reverse of Job’s. It was through prosperity that adversity had reached him.

O tragical enigma of life! Behold what pitfalls! A child, he had wrestled against the night, and had been stronger than it; a man, he had wrestled against destiny, and had overcome it. Out of disfigurement he had created success; and out of misery, happiness. Of his exile he had made an asylum. A vagabond, he had wrestled against space; and, like the birds of the air, he had found his crumb of bread. Wild and solitary, he had wrestled against the crowd, and had made it his friend. An athlete, he had wrestled against that lion, the people; and he had tamed it. Indigent, he had wrestled against distress, he had faced the dull necessity of living, and from amalgamating with misery every joy of his heart, he had at length made riches out of poverty. He had believed himself the conqueror of life. Of a sudden he was attacked by fresh forces, reaching him from unknown depths; this time, with menaces no longer, but with smiles and caresses. Love, serpent-like and sensual, had appeared to him, who was filled with angelic love. The flesh had tempted him, who had lived on the ideal. He had heard words of voluptuousness like cries of rage; he had felt the clasp of a woman’s arms, like the convolutions of a snake; to the illumination of truth had succeeded the fascination of falsehood; for it is not the flesh that is real, but the soul. The flesh is ashes, the soul is flame. For the little circle allied to him by the relationship of poverty and toil, which was his true and natural family, had been substituted the social family — his family in blood, but of tainted blood; and even before he had entered it, he found himself face to face with an intended fractricide. Alas! he had allowed himself to be thrown back into that society of which Brantôme, whom he had not read, wrote: “*The son has a right to challenge his father!*” A fatal fortune had cried to him, “Thou art not of the crowd; thou art of the chosen!” and had opened the ceiling above his head, like a trap in the sky, and had shot him up, through this opening, causing him to appear, wild, and unexpected, in the midst of princes and masters. Then suddenly he saw around him, instead of the people who applauded him, the lords who cursed him. Mournful metamorphosis!

Ignominious ennobling! Rude spoliation of all that had been his happiness! Pillage of his life by derision! Gwynplaine, Clancharlie, the lord, the mountebank, torn out of his old lot, out of his new lot, by the beaks of those eagles!

What availed it that he had commenced life by immediate victory over obstacle? Of what good had been his early triumphs? Alas! the fall must come, ere destiny be complete.

So, half against his will, half of it — because after he had done with the wapentake he had to do with Barkilphedro, and he had given a certain amount of consent to his abductions — he had left the real for the chimerical; the true for the false; Dea for Josiana; love for pride; liberty for power; labour proud and poor for opulence full of unknown responsibilities; the shade in which is God for the lurid flames in which the devils dwell; Paradise for Olympus!

He had tasted the golden fruit. He was now spitting out the ashes to which it turned.

Lamentable result! Defeat, failure, fall into ruin, insolent expulsion of all his hopes, frustrated by ridicule. Immeasurable disillusion! And what was there for him in the future? If he looked forward to the morrow, what did he see? A drawn sword, the point of which was against his breast, and the hilt in the hand of his brother. He could see nothing but the hideous flash of that sword. Josiana and the House of Lords made up the background in a monstrous chiaroscuro full of tragic shadows.

And that brother seemed so brave and chivalrous! Alas! he had hardly seen the Tom-Jim-Jack who had defended Gwynplaine, the Lord David who had defended Lord Clancharlie; but he had had time to receive a blow from him and to love him.

He was crushed.

He felt it impossible to proceed further. Everything had crumbled about him. Besides, what was the good of it? All weariness dwells in the depths of despair.

The trial had been made. It could not be renewed.

Gwynplaine was like a gamester who has played all his trumps away, one after the other. He had allowed himself to be drawn to a fearful gambling-table, without thinking what he was about; for, so subtle is the poison of illusion, he had staked Dea against Josiana, and had gained a monster; he had staked Ursus against a family, and had gained an insult; he had played his mountebank platform against his seat in the Lords; for the applause which was his he had gained insult. His last card had fallen on that fatal green cloth, the deserted bowling-green. Gwynplaine had lost. Nothing remained but to pay. Pay up, wretched man!

The thunder-stricken lie still. Gwynplaine remained motionless. Anybody perceiving him from afar, in the shadow, stiff, and without movement, might have fancied that he saw an upright stone.

Hell, the serpent, and reverie are tortuous. Gwynplaine was descending the sepulchral spirals of the deepest thought.

He reflected on that world of which he had just caught a glimpse with the icy contemplation of a last look. Marriage, but no love; family, but no brotherly affection; riches, but no conscience; beauty, but no modesty; justice, but no equity; order, but no equilibrium; authority, but no right; power, but no intelligence; splendour, but no light. Inexorable balance-sheet! He went throughout the supreme vision in which his mind had been plunged. He examined successively destiny, situation, society, and himself. What was destiny? A snare. Situation? Despair. Society? Hatred. And himself? A defeated man. In the depths of his soul he cried. Society is the stepmother, Nature is the mother. Society is the world of the body, Nature is the world of the soul. The one tends to the coffin, to the deal box in the grave, to the earth-worms, and ends there. The other tends to expanded wings, to transformation into the morning light, to ascent into the firmament, and there revives into new life.

By degrees a paroxysm came over him, like a sweeping surge. At the close of events there is always a last flash, in which all stands revealed once more.

He who judges meets the accused face to face. Gwynplaine reviewed all that society and all that nature had done for him. How kind had nature been to him! How she, who is the soul, had succoured him! All had been taken from him, even his features. The soul had given him all back — all, even his features; because there was on earth a heavenly blind girl made expressly for him, who saw not his ugliness, and who saw his beauty.

And it was from this that he had allowed himself to be separated — from that adorable girl, from his own adopted one, from her tenderness, from her divine blind gaze, the only gaze on earth that saw him, that he had strayed! Dea was his sister, because he felt between them the grand fraternity of above — the mystery which contains the whole of heaven. Dea, when he was a little child, was his virgin; because every child has his virgin, and at the commencement of life a marriage of souls is always consummated in the plenitude of innocence. Dea was his wife, for theirs was the same nest on the highest branch of the deep-rooted tree of Hymen. Dea was still more — she was his light, for without her all was void, and nothingness; and for him her head was crowned with rays. What would become of him without Dea? What could he do with all that was himself? Nothing in him could live without her. How, then, could he have lost sight of her for a moment? O unfortunate man! He allowed distance to intervene between himself and his star and, by the unknown and terrible laws of gravitation in such things, distance is immediate loss.

Where was she, the star? Dea! Dea! Dea! Dea! Alas! he had lost her light. Take away the star, and what is the sky? A black mass. But why, then, had all this befallen him? Oh, what happiness had been his! For him God had remade Eden. Too close was the resemblance, alas! even to allowing the serpent to enter; but this time it was the man who had been tempted. He had been drawn without, and then, by a frightful snare, had fallen into a chaos of murky laughter, which was hell. O grief! O grief! How frightful seemed all that had fascinated him! That Josiana, fearful creature! — half beast, half goddess! Gwynplaine was now on the reverse side of his elevation, and he saw the other aspect of that which had dazzled him. It was baleful. His peerage was deformed, his coronet was hideous; his purple robe, a funeral garment; those palaces, infected; those trophies, those statues, those armorial bearings, sinister; the unwholesome and treacherous air poisoned those who breathed it, and turned them mad. How brilliant the rags of the mountebank, Gwynplaine, appeared to him now! Alas! where was the Green Box, poverty, joy, the sweet wandering life — wandering together, like the swallows? They never left each other then; he saw her every minute, morning, evening. At table their knees, their elbows, touched; they drank from the same cup; the sun shone through the pane, but it was only the sun, and Dea was Love. At night they slept not far from each other; and the dream of Dea came and hovered over Gwynplaine, and the dream of Gwynplaine spread itself mysteriously above the head of Dea. When they awoke they could be never quite sure that they had not exchanged kisses in the azure mists of dreams. Dea was all innocence; Ursus, all wisdom. They wandered from town to town; and they had for provision and for stimulant the frank, loving gaiety of the people. They were angel vagabonds, with enough of humanity to walk the earth and not enough of wings to fly away; and now all had disappeared! Where was it gone? Was it possible that it was all effaced? What wind from the tomb had swept over them? All was eclipsed! All was lost! Alas! power, irresistible and deaf to appeal, which weighs down the poor, flings its shadow over all, and is capable of anything. What had been done to them? And he had not been there to protect them, to fling himself in front of them, to defend them, as a lord, with his title, his peerage, and his sword; as a mountebank, with his fists and his nails!

And here arose a bitter reflection, perhaps the most bitter of all. Well, no; he could not have defended them. It was he himself who had destroyed them; it was to save him, Lord Clancharlie, from them; it was to isolate his dignity from contact with them, that the infamous omnipotence of society had crushed them. The best way in which he could protect them would be to disappear, and then the cause of their persecution would cease. He out of the way, they would be allowed to remain in peace. Into what icy channel was his thought beginning to run! Oh! why had he allowed himself to be separated from Dea? Was not his first duty towards her? To serve and to defend the people? But Dea was the people. Dea was an orphan. She was blind; she represented humanity. Oh! what had they done to them? Cruel smart of regret! His absence had left the field free for the catastrophe. He would have shared their fate; either they would have been taken and carried away with him, or he would have been swallowed up with them. And, now, what would become of him without them? Gwynplaine without Dea! Was it possible? Without Dea was to be without everything. It was all over now. The beloved group was for ever buried in irreparable disappearance. All was spent. Besides, condemned and damned as Gwynplaine was, what was the good of further struggle? He had nothing more to expect either of men or of heaven. Dea! Dea! Where is Dea? Lost! What? lost? He who has lost his soul can regain it but through one outlet — death.

Gwynplaine, tragically distraught, placed his hand firmly on the parapet, as on a solution, and looked at the river.

It was his third night without sleep. Fever had come over him. His thoughts, which he believed to be clear, were blurred. He felt an imperative need of sleep. He remained for a few instants leaning over the water. Its darkness offered him a bed of boundless tranquillity in the infinity of shadow. Sinister temptation!

He took off his coat, which he folded and placed on the parapet; then he unbuttoned his waistcoat. As he was about to take it off, his hand struck against something in the pocket. It was the red book which had been given him by the librarian of the House of Lords: he drew it from the pocket, examined it in the vague light of the night, and found a pencil in it, with which he wrote on the first blank that he found these two lines, —

“I depart. Let my brother David take my place, and may he be happy!”

Then he signed, “Fermain Clancharlie, peer of England.”

He took off his waistcoat and placed it upon the coat; then his hat, which he placed upon the waistcoat. In the hat he laid the red book open at the page on which he had written. Seeing a stone lying on the ground, he picked it up and placed it in the hat. Having done all this, he looked up into the deep shadow above him. Then his head sank slowly, as if drawn by an invisible thread towards the abyss.

There was a hole in the masonry near the base of the parapet; he placed his foot in it, so that his knee stood higher than the top, and scarcely an effort was necessary to spring over it. He clasped his hands behind his back and leaned over. “So be it,” said he.

And he fixed his eyes on the deep waters. Just then he felt a tongue licking his hands.

He shuddered, and turned round.

Homo was behind him.

CONCLUSION.

THE NIGHT AND THE SEA.

CHAPTER I.

A WATCH-DOG MAY BE A GUARDIAN ANGEL.

Gwynplaine uttered a cry.

“Is that you, wolf?”

Homo wagged his tail. His eyes sparkled in the darkness. He was looking earnestly at Gwynplaine.

Then he began to lick his hands again. For a moment Gwynplaine was like a drunken man, so great is the shock of Hope’s mighty return.

Homo! What an apparition! During the last forty-eight hours he had exhausted what might be termed every variety of the thunder-bolt. But one was left to strike him — the thunderbolt of joy. And it had just fallen upon him. Certainty, or at least the light which leads to it, regained; the sudden intervention of some mysterious clemency possessed, perhaps, by destiny; life saying, “Behold me!” in the darkest recess of the grave; the very moment in which all expectation has ceased bringing back health and deliverance; a place of safety discovered at the most critical instant in the midst of crumbling ruins — Homo was all this to Gwynplaine. The wolf appeared to him in a halo of light.

Meanwhile, Homo had turned round. He advanced a few steps, and then looked back to see if Gwynplaine was following him.

Gwynplaine was doing so. Homo wagged his tail, and went on.

The road taken by the wolf was the slope of the quay of the Effroc-stone. This slope shelved down to the Thames; and Gwynplaine, guided by Homo, descended it.

Homo turned his head now and then, to make sure that Gwynplaine was behind him.

In some situations of supreme importance nothing approaches so near an omniscient intelligence as the simple instinct of a faithful animal. An animal is a lucid somnambulist.

There are cases in which the dog feels that he should follow his master; others, in which he should precede him. Then the animal takes the direction of sense. His imperturbable scent is a confused power of vision in what is twilight to us. He feels a vague obligation to become a guide. Does he know that there is a dangerous pass, and that he can help his master to surmount it? Probably not. Perhaps he does. In any case, some one knows it for him. As we have already said, it often happens in life that some mighty help which we have held to have come from below has, in reality, come from above. Who knows all the mysterious forms assumed by God?

What was this animal? Providence.

Having reached the river, the wolf led down the narrow tongue of land which bordered the Thames.

Without noise or bark he pushed forward on his silent way. Homo always followed his instinct and did his duty, but with the pensive reserve of an outlaw.

Some fifty paces more, and he stopped. A wooden platform appeared on the right. At the bottom of this platform, which was a kind of wharf on piles, a black mass could be made out, which was a tolerably large vessel. On the deck of the vessel, near the prow, was a glimmer, like the last flicker of a night-light.

The wolf, having finally assured himself that Gwynplaine was there, bounded on to the wharf. It was a long platform, floored and tarred, supported by a network of joists, and under which flowed the river. Homo and Gwynplaine shortly reached the brink.

The ship moored to the wharf was a Dutch vessel, of the Japanese build, with two decks, fore and aft, and between them an open hold, reached by an upright ladder, in which the cargo was laden. There was thus a forecastle and an afterdeck, as in our old river boats, and a space between them ballasted by the freight. The paper boats made by children are of a somewhat similar shape. Under the decks were the cabins, the doors of which opened into the hold and were lighted by glazed portholes. In stowing the cargo a passage was left between the packages of which it consisted. These vessels had a mast on each deck. The foremast was called Paul, the mainmast Peter — the ship being sailed by these two masts, as the Church was guided by her two apostles. A gangway was thrown, like a Chinese bridge, from one deck to the other, over the centre of the hold. In bad weather, both flaps of the gangway were lowered, on the right and left, on hinges, thus making a roof over the hold; so that the ship, in heavy seas, was hermetically closed. These sloops, being of very massive construction, had a beam for a tiller, the strength of the rudder being necessarily proportioned to the height of the vessel. Three men, the skipper and two sailors, with a cabin-boy, sufficed to navigate these ponderous sea-going machines. The decks, fore and aft, were, as we have already said, without bulwarks. The great lumbering hull of this particular vessel was painted black, and on it, visible even in the night, stood out, in white letters, the words, *Vograat, Rotterdam*.

About that time many events had occurred at sea, and amongst others, the defeat of the Baron de Pointi's eight ships off Cape Carnero, which had driven the whole French fleet into refuge at Gibraltar; so that the Channel was swept of every man-of-war, and merchant vessels were able to sail backwards and forwards between London and Rotterdam, without a convoy.

The vessel on which was to be read the word *Vograat*, and which Gwynplaine was now close to, lay with her main-deck almost level with the wharf. But one step to descend, and Homo in a bound, and Gwynplaine in a stride, were on board.

The deck was clear, and no stir was perceptible. The passengers, if, as was likely, there were any, were already on board, the vessel being ready to sail, and the cargo stowed, as was apparent from the state of the hold, which was full of bales and cases. But they were, doubtless, lying asleep in the cabins below, as the passage was to take place during the night. In such cases the passengers do not appear on deck till they awake the following morning. As for the crew, they were probably having their supper in the men's cabin, whilst awaiting the hour fixed for sailing, which was now rapidly approaching. Hence the silence on the two decks connected by the gangway.

The wolf had almost run across the wharf; once on board, he slackened his pace into a discreet walk. He still wagged his tail — no longer joyfully, however, but with the sad and feeble wag of a dog troubled in his mind. Still preceding Gwynplaine, he passed along the after-deck, and across the gangway.

Gwynplaine, having reached the gangway, perceived a light in front of him. It was the same that he had seen from the shore. There was a lantern on the deck, close to the foremast, by the gleam of which was sketched in black, on the dim background of the night, what Gwynplaine recognized to be Ursus's old four-wheeled van.

This poor wooden tenement, cart and hut combined, in which his childhood had rolled along, was fastened to the bottom of the mast by thick ropes, of which the knots were visible at the wheels. Having been so long out of service, it had become dreadfully rickety; it leant over feebly on one side; it had become quite paralytic from disuse; and, moreover, it was suffering from that incurable malady — old age. Mouldy and out of shape, it tottered in decay. The materials of which it was built were all rotten. The iron was rusty, the leather torn, the wood-work worm-eaten. There were lines of cracks across the window in front, through which shone a ray from the lantern. The wheels were warped. The lining, the floor, and the axletrees seemed worn out with fatigue. Altogether, it presented an indescribable appearance of beggary and prostration. The shafts, stuck up, looked like two arms raised to heaven. The whole thing was in a state of dislocation. Beneath it was hanging Homo’s chain.

Does it not seem that the law and the will of nature would have dictated Gwynplaine’s headlong rush to throw himself upon life, happiness, love regained? So they would, except in some case of deep terror such as his. But he who comes forth, shattered in nerve and uncertain of his way, from a series of catastrophes, each one like a fresh betrayal, is prudent even in his joy; hesitates, lest he should bear the fatality of which he has been the victim to those whom he loves; feels that some evil contagion may still hang about him, and advances towards happiness with wary steps. The gates of Paradise reopen; but before he enters he examines his ground.

Gwynplaine, staggering under the weight of his emotion, looked around him, while the wolf went and lay down silently by his chain.

CHAPTER II.

BARKILPHEDRO, HAVING AIMED AT THE EAGLE, BRINGS DOWN THE DOVE.

The step of the little van was down — the door ajar — there was no one inside. The faint light which broke through the pane in front sketched the interior of the caravan vaguely in melancholy chiaroscuro. The inscriptions of Ursus, gloryifying the grandeur of Lords, showed distinctly on the worn-out boards, which were both the wall without and the wainscot within. On a nail, near the door, Gwynplaine saw his esclavine and his cape hung up, as they hang up the clothes of a corpse in a dead-house. Just then he had neither waistcoat nor coat on.

Behind the van something was laid out on the deck at the foot of the mast, which was lighted by the lantern. It was a mattress, of which he could make out one corner. On this mattress some one was probably lying, for he could see a shadow move.

Some one was speaking. Concealed by the van, Gwynplaine listened. It was Ursus's voice. That voice, so harsh in its upper, so tender in its lower, pitch; that voice, which had so often upbraided Gwynplaine, and which had taught him so well, had lost the life and clearness of its tone. It was vague and low, and melted into a sigh at the end of every sentence. It bore but a confused resemblance to his natural and firm voice of old. It was the voice of one in whom happiness is dead. A voice may become a ghost.

He seemed to be engaged in monologue rather than in conversation. We are already aware, however, that soliloquy was a habit with him. It was for that reason that he passed for a madman.

Gwynplaine held his breath, so as not to lose a word of what Ursus said, and this was what he heard.

“This is a very dangerous kind of craft, because there are no bulwarks to it. If we were to slip, there is nothing to prevent our going overboard. If we have bad weather, we shall have to take her below, and that will be dreadful. An awkward step, a fright, and we shall have a rupture of the aneurism. I have seen instances of it. O my God! what is to become of us? Is she asleep? Yes. She is asleep. Is she in a swoon? No. Her pulse is pretty strong. She is only asleep. Sleep is a reprieve. It is the happy blindness. What can I do to prevent people walking about here? Gentlemen, if there be anybody on deck, I beg of you to make no noise. Do not come near us, if you do not mind. You know a person in delicate health requires a little attention. She is feverish, you see. She is very young. ’Tis a little creature who is rather feverish. I put this mattress down here so that she may have a little air. I explain all this so that you should be careful. She fell down exhausted on the mattress as if she had fainted. But she is asleep. I do hope that no one will awake her. I address myself to the ladies, if there are any present. A young girl, it is pitiful! We are only poor mountebanks, but I beg a little kindness, and if there is anything to pay for not making a noise, I will pay it. I thank you, ladies and gentlemen. Is there any one there? No? I don’t think there is. My talk is mere loss of breath. So much the better. Gentlemen, I thank you, if you are there; and I thank you still more if you are not. Her forehead is all in perspiration. Come, let us take our places in the galleys again. Put on the chain. Misery is come back. We are sinking again. A hand, the fearful hand which we cannot see, but the weight of which we feel ever upon us, has suddenly struck us back towards the dark point of our destiny. Be it so. We will bear up. Only I will not have her ill. I must seem a fool to talk aloud like this, when I am alone; but she must feel she has some one near her when she awakes. What shall I do if somebody awakes her suddenly! No noise, in the name of Heaven! A sudden shock which would awake her suddenly would be of no use. It will be a pity if anybody comes by. I believe that every one on board is asleep. Thanks be to Providence for that mercy. Well, and Homo? Where is he, I wonder? In all this confusion I forgot to tie him up. I do not know what I am doing. It is more than an hour since I have seen him. I suppose he has been to look for his supper somewhere ashore. I hope nothing has happened to him. Homo! Homo!”

Homo struck his tail softly on the planks of the deck.

“You are there. Oh! you are there! Thank God for that. If Homo had been lost, it would have been too much to bear. She has moved her arm. Perhaps she is going to awake. Quiet, Homo! The tide is turning. We shall sail directly. I think it will be a fine night. There is no wind: the flag droops. We shall have a good passage. I do not know what moon it is, but there is scarcely a stir in the clouds. There will be no swell. It will be a fine night. Her cheek is pale; it is only weakness! No, it is flushed; it is only the fever. Stay! It is rosy. She is well! I can no longer see clearly. My poor Homo, I no longer see distinctly. So we must begin life afresh. We must set to work again. There are only we two left, you see. We will work for her, both of us! She is our child, Ah! the vessel moves! We are off! Good-bye, London! Good evening! good-night! To the devil with horrible London!"

He was right. He heard the dull sound of the unmooring as the vessel fell away from the wharf. Abaft on the poop a man, the skipper, no doubt, just come from below, was standing. He had slipped the hawser and was working the tiller. Looking only to the rudder, as befitted the combined phlegm of a Dutchman and a sailor, listening to nothing but the wind and the water, bending against the resistance of the tiller, as he worked it to port or starboard, he looked in the gloom of the after-deck like a phantom bearing a beam upon its shoulder. He was alone there. So long as they were in the river the other sailors were not required. In a few minutes the vessel was in the centre of the current, with which she drifted without rolling or pitching. The Thames, little disturbed by the ebb, was calm. Carried onwards by the tide, the vessel made rapid way. Behind her the black scenery of London was fading in the mist.

Ursus went on talking.

"Never mind, I will give her digitalis. I am afraid that delirium will supervene. She perspires in the palms of her hands. What sin can we have committed in the sight of God? How quickly has all this misery come upon us! Hideous rapidity of evil! A stone falls. It has claws. It is the hawk swooping on the lark. It is destiny. There you lie, my sweet child! One comes to London. One says: What a fine city! What fine buildings! Southwark is a magnificent suburb. One settles there. But now they are horrid places. What would you have me do there? I am going to leave. This is the 30th of April. I always distrusted the month of April. There are but two lucky days in April, the 5th and the 27th; and four unlucky ones — the 10th, the 20th, the 29th, and the 30th. This has been placed beyond doubt by the calculations of Cardan. I wish this day were over. Departure is a comfort. At dawn we shall be at Gravesend, and to-morrow evening at Rotterdam. Zounds! I will begin life again in the van. We will draw it, won't we, Homo?"

A light tapping announced the wolf's consent.

Ursus continued, —

"If one could only get out of a grief as one gets out of a city! Homo, we must yet be happy. Alas! there must always be the one who is no more. A shadow remains on those who survive. You know whom I mean, Homo. We were four, and now we are but three. Life is but a long loss of those whom we love. They leave behind them a train of sorrows. Destiny amazes us by a prolixity of unbearable suffering; who then can wonder that the old are garrulous? It is despair that makes the dotard, old fellow! Homo, the wind continues favourable. We can no longer see the dome of St. Paul's. We shall pass Greenwich presently. That will be six good miles over. Oh! I turn my back for ever on those odious capitals, full of priests, of magistrates, and of people. I prefer looking at the leaves rustling in the woods. Her forehead is still in perspiration. I don't like those great violet veins in her arm. There is fever in them. Oh! all this is killing me. Sleep, my child. Yes; she sleeps."

Here a voice spoke: an ineffable voice, which seemed from afar, and appeared to come at once from the heights and the depths — a voice divinely fearful, the voice of Dea.

All that Gwynplaine had hitherto felt seemed nothing. His angel spoke. It seemed as though he heard words spoken from another world in a heaven-like trance.

The voice said, —

"He did well to go. This world was not worthy of him. Only I must go with him. Father! I am not ill; I heard you speak just now. I am very well, quite well. I was asleep. Father, I am going to be happy."

"My child," said Ursus in a voice of anguish, "what do you mean by that?"

The answer was, —

"Father, do not be unhappy."

There was a pause, as if to take breath, and then these few words, pronounced slowly, reached Gwynplaine.

"Gwynplaine is no longer here. It is now that I am blind. I knew not what night was. Night is absence."

The voice stopped once more, and then continued, —

"I always feared that he would fly away. I felt that he belonged to heaven. He has taken flight suddenly. It was natural that it should end thus. The soul flies away like a bird. But the nest of the soul is in the height, where dwells the Great Loadstone, who draws all towards Him. I know where to find Gwynplaine. I have no doubt about the way. Father, it is yonder. Later on, you will rejoin us, and Homo, too."

Homo, hearing his name pronounced, wagged his tail softly against the deck.

“Father!” resumed the voice, “you understand that once Gwynplaine is no longer here, all is over. Even if I would remain, I could not, because one must breathe. We must not ask for that which is impossible. I was with Gwynplaine. It was quite natural, I lived. Now Gwynplaine is no more, I die. The two things are alike: either he must come or I must go. Since he cannot come back, I am going to him. It is good to die. It is not at all difficult. Father, that which is extinguished here shall be rekindled elsewhere. It is a heartache to live in this world. It cannot be that we shall always be unhappy. When we go to what you call the stars, we shall marry, we shall never part again, and we shall love, love, love; and that is what is God.”

“There, there, do not agitate yourself,” said Ursus.

The voice continued, —

“Well, for instance; last year. In the spring of last year we were together, and we were happy. How different it is now! I forget what little village we were in, but there were trees, and I heard the linnets singing. We came to London; all was changed. This is no reproach, mind. When one comes to a fresh place, how is one to know anything about it? Father, do you remember that one day there was a woman in the great box; you said: ‘It is a duchess.’ I felt sad. I think it might have been better had we kept to the little towns. Gwynplaine has done right, withal. Now my turn has come. Besides, you have told me yourself, that when I was very little, my mother died, and that I was lying on the ground with the snow falling upon me, and that he, who was also very little then, and alone, like myself, picked me up, and that it was thus that I came to be alive; so you cannot wonder that now I should feel it absolutely necessary to go and search the grave to see if Gwynplaine be in it. Because the only thing which exists in life is the heart; and after life, the soul. You take notice of what I say, father, do you not? What is moving? It seems as if we are in something that is moving, yet I do not hear the sound of the wheels.”

After a pause the voice added, —

“I cannot exactly make out the difference between yesterday and to-day. I do not complain. I do not know what has occurred, but something must have happened.”

These words, uttered with deep and inconsolable sweetness, and with a sigh which Gwynplaine heard, wound up thus, —

“I must go, unless he should return.”

Ursus muttered gloomily: “I do not believe in ghosts.”

He went on, —

“This is a ship. You ask why the house moves; it is because we are on board a vessel. Be calm; you must not talk so much. Daughter, if you have any love for me, do not agitate yourself, it will make you feverish. I am so old, I could not bear it if you were to have an illness. Spare me! do not be ill!”

Again the voice spoke, —

“What is the use of searching the earth, when we can only find in heaven?”

Ursus replied, with a half attempt at authority, —

“Be calm. There are times when you have no sense at all. I order you to rest. After all, you cannot be expected to know what it is to rupture a blood-vessel. I should be easy if you were easy. My child, do something for me as well. If he picked you up, I took you in. You will make me ill. That is wrong. You must calm yourself, and go to sleep. All will come right. I give you my word of honour, all will come right. Besides, it is very fine weather. The night might have been made on purpose. To-morrow we shall be at Rotterdam, which is a city in Holland, at the mouth of the Meuse.”

“Father,” said the voice, “look here; when two beings have always been together from infancy, their state should not be disturbed, or death must come, and it cannot be otherwise. I love you all the same, but I feel that I am no longer altogether with you, although I am as yet not altogether with him.”

“Come! try to sleep,” repeated Ursus.

The voice answered, —

“I shall have sleep enough soon.”

Ursus replied, in trembling tones, —

“I tell you that we are going to Holland, to Rotterdam, which is a city.”

“Father,” continued the voice, “I am not ill; if you are anxious about that, you may rest easy. I have no fever. I am rather hot; it is nothing more.”

Ursus stammered out, —

“At the mouth of the Meuse—”

“I am quite well, father; but look here! I feel that I am going to die!”

“Do nothing so foolish,” said Ursus. And he added, “Above all, God forbid she should have a shock!”

There was a silence. Suddenly Ursus cried out, —

“What are you doing? Why are you getting up? Lie down again, I implore of you.”

Gwynplaine shivered, and stretched out his head.

CHAPTER III.

PARADISE REGAINED BELOW.

He saw Dea. She had just raised herself up on the mattress. She had on a long white dress, carefully closed, and showing only the delicate form of her neck. The sleeves covered her arms; the folds, her feet. The branch-like tracery of blue veins, hot and swollen with fever, were visible on her hands. She was shivering and rocking, rather than reeling, to and fro, like a reed. The lantern threw up its glancing light on her beautiful face. Her loosened hair floated over her shoulders. No tears fell on her cheeks. In her eyes there was fire, and darkness. She was pale, with that paleness which is like the transparency of a divine life in an earthly face. Her fragile and exquisite form was, as it were, blended and interfused with the folds of her robe. She wavered like the flicker of a flame, while, at the same time, she was dwindling into shadow. Her eyes, opened wide, were resplendent. She was as one just freed from the sepulchre; a soul standing in the dawn.

Ursus, whose back only was visible to Gwynplaine, raised his arms in terror. “O my child! O heavens! she is delirious. Delirium is what I feared worst of all. She must have no shock, for that might kill her; yet nothing but a shock can prevent her going mad. Dead or mad! what a situation. O God! what can I do? My child, lie down again.”

Meanwhile, Dea spoke. Her voice was almost indistinct, as if a cloud already interposed between her and earth.

“Father, you are wrong. I am not in the least delirious. I hear all you say to me, distinctly. You tell me that there is a great crowd of people, that they are waiting, and that I must play to-night. I am quite willing. You see that I have my reason; but I do not know what to do, since I am dead, and Gwynplaine is dead. I am coming all the same. I am ready to play. Here I am; but Gwynplaine is no longer here.”

“Come, my child,” said Ursus, “do as I bid you. Lie down again.”

“He is no longer here, no longer here. Oh! how dark it is!”

“Dark!” muttered Ursus. “This is the first time she has ever uttered that word!”

Gwynplaine, with as little noise as he could help making as he crept, mounted the step of the caravan, entered it, took from the nail the cape and the esclavine, put the esclavine round his neck, and redescended from the van, still concealed by the projection of the cabin, the rigging, and the mast.

Dea continued murmuring. She moved her lips, and by degrees the murmur became a melody. In broken pauses, and with the interrupted cadences of delirium, her voice broke into the mysterious appeal she had so often addressed to Gwynplaine in *Chaos Vanquished*. She sang, and her voice was low and uncertain as the murmur of the bee, —

“Noche, quita te de allí.
El alba canta....”

She stopped. “No, it is not true. I am not dead. What was I saying? Alas! I am alive. I am alive. He is dead. I am below. He is above. He is gone. I remain. I shall hear his voice no more, nor his footstep. God, who had given us a little Paradise on earth, has taken it away. Gwynplaine, it is over. I shall never feel you near me again. Never! And his voice! I shall never hear his voice again. And she sang: —

“Es menester a cielos ir —
Deja, quiero,
A tu negro
Caparazon.”

“We must go to heaven.
Take off, I entreat thee,
Thy black cloak.”

She stretched out her hand, as if she sought something in space on which she might rest.

Gwynplaine, rising by the side of Ursus, who had suddenly become as though petrified, knelt down before her.

“Never,” said Dea, “never shall I hear him again.”

She began, wandering, to sing again: —

“Deja, quiero,
A tu negro
Caparazon.”

Then she heard a voice — even the beloved voice — answering: —

“O ven! ama!
Eres alma,
Soy corazon.”

“O come and love
Thou art the soul,

I am the heart."

And at the same instant Dea felt under her hand the head of Gwynplaine. She uttered an indescribable cry.

"Gwynplaine!"

A light, as of a star, shone over her pale face, and she tottered. Gwynplaine received her in his arms.

"Alive!" cried Ursus.

Dea repeated "Gwynplaine;" and with her head bowed against Gwynplaine's cheek, she whispered faintly, —

"You have come down to me again. I thank you, Gwynplaine."

And seated on his knee, she lifted up her head. Wrapt in his embrace, she turned her sweet face towards him, and fixed on him those eyes so full of light and shadow, as though she could see him.

"It is you," she said.

Gwynplaine covered her sobs with kisses. There are words which are at once words, cries, and sobs, in which all ecstasy and all grief are mingled and burst forth together. They have no meaning, and yet tell all.

"Yes, it is! It is I, Gwynplaine, of whom you are the soul. Do you hear me? I, of whom you are the child, the wife, the star, the breath of life; I, to whom you are eternity. It is I. I am here. I hold you in my arms. I am alive. I am yours. Oh, when I think that in a moment all would have been over — one minute more, but for Homo! I will tell you everything. How near is despair to joy! Dea, we live! Dea, forgive me. Yes — yours for ever. You are right. Touch my forehead. Make sure that it is I. If you only knew — but nothing can separate us now. I rise out of hell, and ascend into heaven. Am I not with you? You said that I descended. Not so; I reascend. Once more with you! For ever! I tell you for ever! Together! We are together! Who would have believed it? We have found each other again. All our troubles are past. Before us now there is nothing but enchantment. We will renew our happy life, and we will shut the door so fast that misfortune shall never enter again. I will tell you all. You will be astonished. The vessel has sailed. No one can prevent that now. We are on our voyage, and at liberty. We are going to Holland. We will marry. I have no fear about gaining a livelihood. What can hinder it? There is nothing to fear. I adore you!"

"Not so quick!" stammered Ursus.

Dea, trembling, and with the rapture of an angelic touch, passed her hand over Gwynplaine's profile. He overheard her say to herself, "It is thus that gods are made."

Then she touched his clothes.

"The esclavine," she said, "the cape. Nothing changed; all as it was before."

Ursus, stupefied, delighted, smiling, drowned in tears, looked at them, and addressed an aside to himself.

"I don't understand it in the least. I am a stupid idiot — I, who saw him carried to the grave! I cry and I laugh. That is all I know. I am as great a fool as if I were in love myself. But that is just what I am. I am in love with them both. Old fool! Too much emotion — too much emotion. It is what I was afraid of. No; it is that I wished for. Gwynplaine, be careful of her. Yes, let them kiss; it is no affair of mine. I am but a spectator. What I feel is droll. I am the parasite of their happiness, and I am nourished by it."

Whilst Ursus was talking to himself, Gwynplaine exclaimed, —

"Dea, you are too beautiful! I don't know where my wits were gone these last few days. Truly, there is but you on earth. I see you again, but as yet I can hardly believe it. In this ship! But tell me, how did it all happen? To what a state have they reduced you! But where is the Green Box? They have robbed you. They have driven you away. It is infamous. Oh, I will avenge you — I will avenge you, Dea! They shall answer for it. I am a peer of England."

Ursus, as if stricken by a planet full in his breast, drew back, and looked at Gwynplaine attentively.

"It is clear that he is not dead; but can he have gone mad?" and he listened to him doubtfully.

Gwynplaine resumed.

"Be easy, Dea; I will carry my complaint to the House of Lords."

Ursus looked at him again, and struck his forehead with the tip of his forefinger. Then making up his mind, —

"It is all one to me," he said. "It will be all right, all the same. Be as mad as you like, my Gwynplaine. It is one of the rights of man. As for me, I am happy. But how came all this about?"

The vessel continued to sail smoothly and fast. The night grew darker and darker. The mists, which came inland from the ocean, were invading the zenith, from which no wind blew them away. Only a few large stars were visible, and they disappeared one after another, so that soon there were none at all, and the whole sky was dark, infinite, and soft. The river broadened until the banks on each side were nothing but two thin brown lines mingling with the gloom. Out of all this shadow rose a profound peace. Gwynplaine, half seated, held Dea in his embrace. They spoke, they cried, they babbled, they murmured in a mad dialogue of joy! How are we to paint thee, O joy!

“My life!”

“My heaven!”

“My love!”

“My whole happiness!”

“Gwynplaine!”

“Dea, I am drunk. Let me kiss your feet.”

“Is it you, then, for certain?”

“I have so much to say to you now that I do not know where to begin.”

“One kiss!”

“O my wife!”

“Gwynplaine, do not tell me that I am beautiful. It is you who are handsome.”

“I have found you again. I hold you to my heart. This is true. You are mine. I do not dream. Is it possible? Yes, it is. I recover possession of life. If you only knew! I have met with all sorts of adventures. Dea!”

“Gwynplaine, I love you!”

And Ursus murmured, —

“Mine is the joy of a grandfather.”

Homo, having come from under the van, was going from one to the other discreetly, exacting no attention, licking them left and right — now Ursus’s thick shoes, now Gwynplaine’s cape, now Dea’s dress, now the mattress. This was his way of giving his blessing.

They had passed Chatham and the mouth of the Medway. They were approaching the sea. The shadowy serenity of the atmosphere was such that the passage down the Thames was being made without trouble: no manoeuvre was needful, nor was any sailor called on deck. At the other end of the vessel the skipper, still alone, was steering. There was only this man aft. At the bow the lantern lighted up the happy group of beings who, from the depths of misery, had suddenly been raised to happiness by a meeting so unhoped for.

CHAPTER IV.

NAY; ON HIGH!

Suddenly Dea, disengaging herself from Gwynplaine's embrace, arose. She pressed both her hands against her heart, as if to still its throbbings.

"What is wrong with me?" said she. "There is something the matter. Joy is suffocating. No, it is nothing! That is lucky. Your reappearance, O my Gwynplaine, has given me a blow — a blow of happiness. All this heaven of joy which you have put into my heart has intoxicated me. You being absent, I felt myself dying. The true life which was leaving me you have brought back. I felt as if something was being torn away within me. It is the shadows that have been torn away, and I feel life dawn in my brain — a glowing life, a life of fever and delight. This life which you have just given me is wonderful. It is so heavenly that it makes me suffer somewhat. It seems as though my soul is enlarged, and can scarcely be contained in my body. This life of seraphim, this plenitude, flows into my brain and penetrates it. I feel like a beating of wings within my breast. I feel strangely, but happy. Gwynplaine, you have been my resurrection."

She flushed, became pale, then flushed again, and fell.

"Alas!" said Ursus, "you have killed her."

Gwynplaine stretched his arms towards Dea. Extremity of anguish coming upon extremity of ecstasy, what a shock! He would himself have fallen, had he not had to support her.

"Dea!" he cried, shuddering, "what is the matter?"

"Nothing," said she— "I love you!"

She lay in his arms, lifeless, like a piece of linen; her hands were hanging down helplessly.

Gwynplaine and Ursus placed Dea on the mattress. She said, feebly, —

"I cannot breathe lying down."

They lifted her up.

Ursus said, —

"Fetch a pillow."

She replied, —

"What for? I have Gwynplaine!"

She laid her head on Gwynplaine’s shoulder, who was sitting behind, and supporting her, his eyes wild with grief.

“Oh,” said she, “how happy I am!”

Ursus took her wrist, and counted the pulsation of the artery. He did not shake his head. He said nothing, nor expressed his thought except by the rapid movement of his eyelids, which were opening and closing convulsively, as if to prevent a flood of tears from bursting out.

“What is the matter?” asked Gwynplaine.

Ursus placed his ear against Dea’s left side.

Gwynplaine repeated his question eagerly, fearful of the answer.

Ursus looked at Gwynplaine, then at Dea. He was livid. He said, —

“We ought to be parallel with Canterbury. The distance from here to Gravesend cannot be very great. We shall have fine weather all night. We need fear no attack at sea, because the fleets are all on the coast of Spain. We shall have a good passage.”

Dea, bent, and growing paler and paler, clutched her robe convulsively. She heaved a sigh of inexpressible sadness, and murmured, —

“I know what this is. I am dying!”

Gwynplaine rose in terror. Ursus held Dea.

“Die! You die! No; it shall not be! You cannot die! Die now! Die at once! It is impossible! God is not ferociously cruel — to give you and to take you back in the same moment. No; such a thing cannot be. It would make one doubt in Him. Then, indeed, would everything be a snare — the earth, the sky, the cradles of infants, the human heart, love, the stars. God would be a traitor and man a dupe. There would be nothing in which to believe. It would be an insult to the creation. Everything would be an abyss. You know not what you say, Dea. You shall live! I command you to live! You must obey me! I am your husband and your master; I forbid you to leave me! O heavens! O wretched Man! No, it cannot be — I to remain in the world after you! Why, it is as monstrous as that there should be no sun! Dea! Dea! recover! It is but a moment of passing pain. One feels a shudder at times, and thinks no more about it. It is absolutely necessary that you should get well and cease to suffer. *You* die! What have I done to you? The very thought of it drives me mad. We belong to each other, and we love each other. You have no reason for going! It would be unjust! Have I committed crimes? Besides, you have forgiven me. Oh, you would not make me desperate — have me become a villain, a madman, drive me to perdition? Dea, I entreat you! I conjure you! I supplicate you! Do not die!”

And clenching his hands in his hair, agonized with fear, stifled with tears, he threw himself at her feet.

“My Gwynplaine,” said Dea, “it is no fault of mine.”

There then rose to her lips a red froth, which Ursus wiped away with the fold of her robe, before Gwynplaine, who was prostrate at her feet, could see it.

Gwynplaine took her feet in his hands, and implored her in all kinds of confused words.

“I tell you, I will not have it! *You* die? I have no strength left to bear it. Die? Yes; but both of us together — not otherwise. *You* die, my Dea? I will never consent to it! My divinity, my love! Do you understand that I am with you? I swear that you shall live! Oh, but you cannot have thought what would become of me after you were gone. If you had an idea of the necessity which you are to me, you would see that it is absolutely impossible! Dea! you see I have but you! The most extraordinary things have happened to me. You will hardly believe that I have just explored the whole of life in a few hours! I have found out one thing — that there is nothing in it! You exist! if you did not, the universe would have no meaning. Stay with me! Have pity on me! Since you love me, live on! If I have just found you again, it is to keep you. Wait a little longer; you cannot leave me like this, now that we have been together but a few minutes! Do not be impatient! O Heaven, how I suffer! You are not angry with me, are you? You know that I could not help going when the wapentake came for me. You will breathe more easily presently, you will see. Dea, all has been put right. We are going to be happy. Do not drive me to despair, Dea! I have done nothing to you.”

These words were not spoken, but sobbed out. They rose from his breast — now in a lament which might have attracted the dove, now in a roar which might have made lions recoil.

Dea answered him in a voice growing weaker and weaker, and pausing at nearly every word.

“Alas! it is of no use, my beloved. I see that you are doing all you can. An hour ago I wanted to die; now I do not. Gwynplaine — my adored Gwynplaine — how happy we have been! God placed you in my life, and He takes me out of yours. You see, I am going. You will remember the

Green Box, won’t you, and poor blind little Dea? You will remember my song? Do not forget the sound of my voice, and the way in which I said, ‘I love you!’ I will come back and tell it to you again, in the night while you are asleep. Yes, we found each other again; but it was too much joy. It was to end at once. It is decreed that I am to go first. I love my father, Ursus, and my brother, Homo, very dearly. You are all so good. There is no air here. Open the window. My Gwynplaine, I did not tell you, but I was jealous of a woman who came one day. You do not even know of whom I speak. Is it not so? Cover my arms; I am rather cold. And Fibi and Vinos, where are they? One comes to love everybody. One feels a friendship for all those who have been mixed up in one’s happiness. We have a kindly feeling towards them for having been present in our joys. Why has it all passed away? I have not clearly understood what has happened during the last two days. Now I am dying. Leave me in my dress. When I put it on I foresaw that it would be my shroud. I wish to keep it on. Gwynplaine’s kisses are upon it. Oh, what would I not have given to have lived on! What a happy life we led in our poor caravan! How we sang! How I listened to the applause! What joy it was never to be separated from each other! It seemed to me that I was living in a cloud with you; I knew one day from another, although I was blind. I knew that it was morning, because I heard Gwynplaine; I felt that it was night, because I dreamed of Gwynplaine. I felt that I was wrapped up in something which was his soul. We adored each other so sweetly. It is all fading away; and there will be no more songs. Alas that I cannot live on! You will think of me, my beloved!”

Her voice was growing fainter. The ominous waning, which was death, was stealing away her breath. She folded her thumbs within her fingers — a sign that her last moments were approaching. It seemed as though the first uncertain words of an angel just created were blended with the last failing accents of the dying girl.

She murmured, —

“You will think of me, won’t you? It would be very sad to be dead, and to be remembered by no one. I have been wayward at times; I beg pardon of you all. I am sure that, if God had so willed it, we might yet have been happy, my Gwynplaine; for we take up but very little room, and we might have earned our bread together in another land. But God has willed it otherwise. I cannot make out in the least why I am dying. I never complained of being blind, so that I cannot have offended any one. I should never have asked for anything, but always to be blind as I was, by your side. Oh, how sad it is to have to part!”

Her words were more and more inarticulate, evaporating into each other, as if they were being blown away. She had become almost inaudible.

“Gwynplaine,” she resumed, “you will think of me, won’t you? I shall crave it when I am dead.”

And she added, —

“Oh, keep me with you!”

Then, after a pause, she said, —

“Come to me as soon as you can. I shall be very unhappy without you, even in heaven. Do not leave me long alone, my sweet Gwynplaine! My paradise was here; above there is only heaven! Oh! I cannot breathe! My beloved! My beloved! My beloved!”

“Mercy!” cried Gwynplaine.

“Farewell!” murmured Dea.

And he pressed his mouth to her beautiful icy hands. For a moment it seemed as if she had ceased to breathe. Then she raised herself on her elbows, and an intense splendour flashed across her eyes, and through an ineffable smile her voice rang out clearly.

“Light!” she cried. “I see!”

And she expired. She fell back rigid and motionless on the mattress.

“Dead!” said Ursus.

And the poor old man, as if crushed by his despair, bowed his bald head and buried his swollen face in the folds of the gown which covered Dea’s feet. He lay there in a swoon.

Then Gwynplaine became awful. He arose, lifted his eyes, and gazed into the vast gloom above him. Seen by none on earth, but looked down upon, perhaps, as he stood in the darkness, by some invisible presence, he stretched his hands on high, and said, —

“I come!”

And he strode across the deck, towards the side of the vessel, as if beckoned by a vision.

A few paces off was the abyss. He walked slowly, never casting down his eyes. A smile came upon his face, such as Dea’s had just worn. He advanced straight before him, as if watching something. In his eyes was a light like the reflection of a soul perceived from afar off. He cried out, “Yes!” At every step he was approaching nearer to the side of the vessel.

His gait was rigid, his arms were lifted up, his head was thrown back, his eyeballs were fixed. His movement was ghost-like. He advanced without haste and without hesitation, with fatal precision, as though there were before him no yawning gulf and open grave. He murmured, “Be easy. I follow you. I understand the sign that you are making me.” His eyes were fixed upon a certain spot in the sky, where the shadow was deepest. The smile was still upon his face. The sky was perfectly black; there was no star visible in it, and yet he evidently saw one. He crossed the deck. A few stiff and ominous steps, and he had reached the very edge.

“I come,” said he; “Dea, behold, I come!”

One step more; there was no bulwark; the void was before him; he strode into it. He fell. The night was thick and dull, the water deep. It swallowed him up. He disappeared calmly and silently. None saw nor heard him. The ship sailed on, and the river flowed.

Shortly afterwards the ship reached the sea.

When Ursus returned to consciousness, he found that Gwynplaine was no longer with him, and he saw Homo by the edge of the deck baying in the shadow and looking down upon the water.

THE END

THE MAN WHO LAUGHS

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PREMIÈRE PARTIE

LA MER ET LA NUIT

DEUX CHAPITRES PRÉLIMINAIRES

I — URSUS

I

Ursus et Homo étaient liés d'une amitié étroite. Ursus était un homme, Homo était un loup, Leurs humeurs s'étaient convenues.

C'était l'homme qui avait baptisé le loup. Probablement il s'était aussi choisi lui-même son nom; ayant trouvé *Ursus* bon pour lui, il avait trouvé *Homo* bon pour la bête, L'association de cet homme et de ce loup profitait aux foires, aux fêtes de paroisse, aux coins de rues où les passants s'attroupent, et au besoin qu'éprouve partout le peuple d'écouter des sornettes et d'acheter de l'orviétan. Ce loup, docile et gracieusement subalterne, était agréable à la foule. Voir des apprivoisements est une chose qui plaît. Notre suprême contentement est de regarder défiler toutes les variétés de la domestication. C'est ce qui fait qu'il y a tant de gens sur le passage des cortèges royaux,

Ursus et Homo allaient de carrefour en carrefour, des places publiques d'Aberystwith aux places publiques de Yeddburg, de pays en pays, de comté en comté, de ville en ville. Un marché épuisé, ils passaient à l'autre. Ursus habitait une cahute roulante qu'Homo, suffisamment civilisé, traînait le jour et gardait la nuit. Dans les routes difficiles, dans les montées, quand il y avait trop d'ornière et trop de boue, l'homme se bouclait la bricole au cou et tirait fraternellement, côte à côte avec le loup. Ils avaient ainsi vieilli ensemble. Ils campaient l'aventure dans une friche, dans une clairière, dans la patte d'oie d'un entre-croisement de routes, à l'entrée des hameaux, aux portes des bourgs, dans les halles, dans les mails publics, sur la lisière des parcs, sur les parvis d'églises, Quand la carriole s'arrêtait dans quelque champ de foire, quand les commères accouraient béantes, quand les curieux faisaient cercle, Ursus pérorait, Homo approuvait. Homo, une sébile dans sa gueule, faisait poliment la quête dans l'assistance. Ils gagnaient leur vie. Le loup était lettré, l'homme aussi. Le loup avait été dressé par l'homme, ou s'était dressé tout seul, diverses gentillesses de loup qui contribuaient à la recette. — Surtout ne dégénère pas en homme, lui disait son ami.

Le loup ne mordait jamais, l’homme quelquefois. Du moins, mordre était la prétention d’Ursus. Ursus était un misanthrope, et, pour souligner sa misanthropie, il s’était fait bateleur. Pour vivre aussi, car l’estomac impose ses conditions. De plus ce bateleur misanthrope, soit pour se compliquer, soit pour se compléter, était médecin. Médecin c’est peu, Ursus était ventriloque. On le voyait parler sans que sa bouche remuât. Il copiait, à s’y méprendre, l’accent et la prononciation du premier venu; il imitait les voix à croire entendre les personnes. A lui tout seul, il faisait le murmure d’une foule, ce qui lui donnait droit au titre d’*engastrimythe*. Il le prenait. Il reproduisait toutes sortes de cris d’oiseaux, la grive, le grasset, l’alouette pépi, qu’on nomme aussi la béguinette, le merle à plastron blanc, tous voyageurs comme lui; de façon que, par instants, il vous faisait entendre, à son gré, ou une place publique couverte de rumeurs humaines, ou une prairie pleine de voix bestiales; tantôt orageux comme une multitude, tantôt puéril et serein comme l’aube. — Du reste, ces talents-là, quoique rares, existent. Au siècle dernier, un nommé Touzel, qui imitait les cohues mêlées d’hommes et d’animaux et qui copiait tous les cris de bêtes, était attaché à la personne de Buffon en qualité de ménagerie. — Ursus était sagace, invraisemblable, et curieux, et enclin aux explications singulières, que nous appelons fables.

Il avait l’air d’y croire. Cette effronterie faisait partie de sa malice. Il regardait dans la main des quidams, ouvrait des livres au hasard et concluait, prédisait les sorts, enseignait qu’il est dangereux de rencontrer une jument noire et plus dangereux encore de s’entendre, au moment où l’on part pour un voyage, appeler par quelqu’un qui ne sait pas où vous allez, et il s’intitulait «marchand de superstition». Il disait: «Il y a entre l’archevêque de Cantorbéry et moi une différence; moi, j’avoue.» Si bien que l’archevêque, justement indigné, le fit un jour venir; mais Ursus, adroit, désarma sa grâce en lui récitant un sermon de lui Ursus sur le saint jour de Christmas que l’archevêque, charmé, apprit par coeur, débita en chaire et publia, comme de lui archevêque. Moyennant quoi, il pardonna.

Ursus, médecin, guérissait, parce que ou quoique. Il pratiquait les aromates. Il était versé dans les simples. Il tirait parti de la profonde puissance qui est dans un tas de plantes dédaignées, la coudre moissine, la bourdaine blanche, le hardeau, la mancienne, la bourg-épine, la viorne, le nerprun. Il traitait la phthisie par la ros solis; il usait à propos des feuilles du tithymale qui, arrachées par le bas, sont un purgatif, et, arrachées par le haut, sont un vomitif; il vous ôtait un mal de gorge au moyen de l’excroissance végétale dite *oreille de juif*; il savait quel est le jonc qui guérit le boeuf, et quelle est la menthe qui guérit le cheval; il était au fait des beautés et des bontés de l’herbe mandragore qui, personne ne l’ignore, est homme et femme. Il avait des recettes. Il guérissait les brûlures avec de la laine de salamandre, de laquelle Néron, au dire de Pline, avait une serviette. Ursus possédait une cornue et un matras; il faisait de la transmutation; il vendait des panacées.

On contait de lui qu’il avait été jadis un peu enfermé à Bedlam; on lui avait fait l’honneur de le prendre pour un insensé, mais on l’avait relâché, s’apercevant qu’il n’était qu’un poëte.

Cette histoire n’était probablement pas vraie; nous avons tous de ces légendes que nous subissons.

La réalité est qu’Ursus était savantasse, homme de goût, et vieux poëte latin. Il était docte sous les deux espèces, il hippocralisait et il pindarisait. Il eût concouru en phébus avec Rapin et Vida. Il eût composé d’une façon non moins triomphante que le Père Bouhours des tragédies jésuites. Il résultait de sa familiarité avec les vénérables rhythmes et mètres des anciens qu’il avait des images à lui, et toute une famille de métaphores classiques. Il disait d’une mère précédée de ses deux filles: *c’est un dactyle*, d’un père suivi de ses deux fils: *c’est un anapeste*, et d’un petit enfant marchant entre son grand-père et sa grand’mère: *c’est un amphimacre*. Tant de science ne pouvait aboutir qu’à la famine. L’école de Salerne dit: «Mangez peu et souvent». Ursus mangeait peu et rarement; obéissant ainsi à une moitié du précepte et désobéissant à l’autre; mais c’était la faute du public, qui n’affluait pas toujours et n’achetait pas fréquemment. Ursus disait: «L’expectoration d’une sentence soulage. Le loup est consolé par le hurlement, le mouton par la laine, la forêt par la fauvette, la femme par l’amour, et le philosophe par l’épiphonème.» Ursus, au besoin, fabriquait des comédies qu’il jouait à peu près; cela aide à vendre les drogues.

Il avait, entre autres oeuvres, composé une bergerade héroïque en l’honneur du chevalier Hugh Middleton qui, en 1608, apporta Londres une rivière. Cette rivière était tranquille dans le comté de Hartford, à soixante milles de Londres; le chevalier Middleton vint et la prit; il amena une brigade de six cents hommes armés de pelles et de pioches, se mit à remuer la terre, la creusant ici, l’élevant là, parfois vingt pieds haut, parfois trente pieds profond, fit des aqueducs de bois en l’air, et ça et là huit cents ponts, de pierre, de brique, de madriers, et un beau matin, la rivière entra dans Londres, qui manquait d’eau.

Ursus transforma tous ces détails vulgaires en une belle bucolique entre le fleuve Tamis et la rivière Serpentine; le fleuve invitait la rivière à venir chez lui, et lui offrait son lit, et lui disait: «Je suis trop vieux pour plaire aux femmes, mais je suis assez riche pour les payer.» — Tour ingénieux et galant pour exprimer que sir Hugh Middleton avait fait tous les travaux à ses frais

Ursus était remarquable dans le soliloque. D’une complexion farouche et bavarde, ayant le désir de ne voir personne et le besoin de parler à quelqu’un, il se tirait d’affaire en se parlant à lui-même. Quiconque a vécu solitaire sait à quel point le monologue est dans la nature. La parole intérieure démange.

Haranguer l’espace est un exutoire. Parler tout haut et tout seul, cela fait l’effet d’un dialogue avec le dieu qu’on a en soi. C’était, on ne l’ignore point, l’habitude de Socrate. Il se pérorait. Luther aussi. Ursus tenait de ces grands hommes.

Il avait cette faculté hermaphrodite d’être son propre auditoire.

Il s’interrogeait et se répondait; il se glorifiait et s’insultait. On l’entendait de la rue monologuer dans sa cahute.

Les passants, qui ont leur manière à eux d’apprécier les gens d’esprit, disaient: c’est un idiot. Il s’injuriait parfois, nous venons de le dire, mais il y avait aussi des heures où il se rendait justice. Un jour, dans une de ces allocutions qu’il s’adressait à lui-même, on l’entendit crier: — J’ai étudié le végétal dans tous ses mystères, dans la tige, dans le bourgeon, dans la sépale, dans le pétale, dans l’étamine, dans la carpelle, dans l’ovule, dans la thèque, dans la sporange, et dans l’apothécion. J’ai approfondi la chromatie, l’osmosie, et la chymosie, c’est-à-dire la formation de la couleur, de l’odeur et de la saveur. — Il y avait sans doute, dans ce certificat qu’Ursus délivrait à Ursus, quelque fatuité, mais que ceux qui n’ont point approfondi la chromatie, l’osmosie et la chymosie, lui jettent la première pierre.

Heureusement Ursus n’était jamais allé dans les Pays-Bas. On l’y eût certainement voulu peser pour savoir s’il avait le poids normal au delà ou en deçà duquel un homme est sorcier. Ce poids en Hollande était sagement fixé par la loi. Rien n’était plus simple et plus ingénieux. C’était une vérification. On vous mettait dans un plateau, et l’évidence éclatait si vous rompiez l’équilibre; trop lourd, vous étiez pendu; trop léger, vous étiez brûlé, On peut voir encore aujourd’hui, à Oudewater, la balance peser les sorciers, mais elle sert maintenant à peser les fromages, tant la religion a dégénéré! Ursus eût eu certainement maille à partir avec cette balance. Dans ses voyages, il s’abstint de la Hollande, et fit bien. Du reste, nous croyons qu’il ne sortait point de la Grande-Bretagne.

Quoi qu’il en fût, étant très pauvre et très âpre, et ayant fait dans un bois la connaissance d’Homo, le goût de la vie errante lui était venu. Il avait pris ce loup en commandite, et il s’en était allé avec lui par les chemins, vivant, à l’air libre, de la grande vie du hasard. Il avait beaucoup d’industrie et d’arrière-pensée et un grand art en toute chose pour guérir, opérer, tirer les gens de maladie, et accomplir des particularités surprenantes; il était considéré comme bon saltimbanque et bon médecin; il passait aussi, on le comprend, pour magicien; un peu, pas trop; car il était malsain à celle époque d’être cru ami du diable. A vrai dire, Ursus, par passion de pharmacie et amour des plantes, s’exposait, vu qu’il allait souvent cueillir des herbes dans les fourrés bourrus où sont les salades de Lucifer, et où l’on risque, comme l’a constaté le conseiller De l’Ancre, de rencontrer dans la brouée du soir un homme qui sort de terre, «borgne de l’oeil droit, sans manteau, l’épée au côté, pieds nus et deschaux». Ursus du reste, quoique d’allure et de tempérament bizarres, était trop galant homme pour attirer ou chasser la grêle, faire paraître des faces, tuer un homme du tourment de trop danser, suggérer des songes clairs ou trisles et pleins d’effroi, et faire naître des coqs à quatre ailes; il n’avait pas de ces méchancetés-là. Il était incapable de certaines abominations. Comme, par exemple, de parler allemand, hébreu ou grec, sans l’avoir appris, ce qui est le signe d’une scélératesse exécrable, ou d’une maladie naturelle procédant de quelque humeur mélancolique. Si Ursus parlait latin, c’est qu’il le savait. Il ne se serait point permis de parler syriaque, attendu qu’il ne le savait pas; en outre, il est avéré que le syriaque est la langue des sabbats. En médecine, il préférait correctement Gallien à Cardan, Cardan, tout savant homme qu’il est, n’étant qu’un ver de terre au respect de Gallien.

En somme, Ursus n’était point un personnage inquiété par la police. Sa cahute était assez longue et assez large pour qu’il pût s’y coucher sur un coffre où étaient ses hardes, peu somptueuses. Il était propriétaire d’une lanterne, de plusieurs perruques, et de quelques ustensiles accrochés à des clous, parmi lesquels des instruments de musique. Il possédait en outre une peau d’ours dont il se couvrait les jours de grande performance; il appelait cela se mettre en costume. Il disait: *J’ai deux peaux; voici la vraie*. Et il montrait la peau d’ours. La cahute à roues était à lui et au loup. Outre sa cahute, sa cornue et son loup, il avait une flûte et une viole de gambe, et il en jouait agréablement. Il fabriquait lui-même ses élixirs.

Il tirait de ses talents de quoi souper quelquefois. Il y avait au plafond de sa cahute un trou par où passait le tuyau d’un poêle de fonte contigu à son coffre, assez pour roussir le bois.

Ce poêle avait deux compartiments; Ursus dans l’un faisait cuire de l’alchimie, et dans l’autre des pommes de terre. La nuit, le loup dormait sous la cahute, amicalement enchaîné. Homo avait le poil noir, et Ursus le poil gris; Ursus avait cinquante ans, moins qu’il n’en eût soixante. Son acceptation de la destinée humaine était telle, qu’il mangeait, on vient de le voir, des pommes de terre, immondice dont on nourrissait alors les pourceaux et les forçats. Il mangeait cela, indigné et résigné.

Il n’était pas grand, il était long. Il était ployé et mélancolique. La taille courbée du vieillard, c’est le tassement de la vie. La nature l’avait fait pour être triste. Il lui était difficile de sourire, et il lui avait toujours ét impossible de pleurer. Il lui manquait cette consolation, les larmes, et ce palliatif, la joie. Un vieux homme est une ruine pensante; Ursus était cette ruine-là. Une loquacité de charlatan, une maigreur de prophète, une irascibilité de mine chargée, tel était Ursus. Dans sa jeunesse il avait ét philosophe chez un lord.

Cela se passait il y a cent quatrevingts ans, du temps que les hommes étaient un peu plus des loups qu’ils ne sont aujourd’hui.

Pas beaucoup plus.

II

Homo n’était pas le premier loup venu. A son appétit de nèfles et de pommes, on l’eût pris pour un loup de prairie, à son pelage foncé, on l’eût pris pour un lycaon, et à son hurlement atténu en aboiement, on l’eût pris pour un culpeu; mais on n’a point encore assez observé la pupille du culpeu pour être sûr que ce n’est point un renard, et Homo était un vrai loup. Sa longueur était de cinq pieds, ce qui est une belle longueur de loup, même en Lithuanie; il était très fort; il avait le regard oblique, ce qui n’était pas sa faute; il avait la langue douce, et il en léchait parfois Ursus; il avait une étroite brosse de poils courts sur l’épine dorsale, et il était maigre d’une bonne maigreur de forêt. Avant de connaître Ursus et d’avoir une carriole à traîner, il faisait allègrement ses quarante lieues dans une nuit. Ursus, le rencontrant dans un hallier, près d'un ruisseau d'eau vive, l'avait pris en estime en le voyant pêcher des écrevisses avec sagesse et prudence, et avait salué en lui un honnête et authentique loup Koupara, du genre dit chien crabier.

Ursus préférait Homo, comme bête de somme, à un âne. Faire tirer sa cahute à un âne lui eût répugné; il faisait trop cas de l'âne pour cela. En outre, il avait remarqué que l'âne, songeur quatre pattes peu compris des hommes, a parfois un dressement d'oreilles inquiétant quand les philosophes disent des sottises.

Dans la vie, entre notre pensée et nous, un âne est un tiers; c'est gênant. Comme ami, Ursus préférait Homo à un chien, estimant que le loup vient de plus loin vers l'amitié.

C'est pourquoi Homo suffisait à Ursus. Homo était pour Ursus plus qu'un compagnon, c'était un analogue. Ursus lui tapait ses flancs creux en disant: *J'ai trouvé mon tome second.*

Il disait encore: Quand je serai mort, qui voudra me connaître n'aura qu'à étudier Homo. Je le laisserai après moi pour copie conforme.

La loi anglaise, peu tendre aux bêtes des bois, eût pu chercher querelle à ce loup et le chicaner sur sa hardiesse d'aller familièrement dans les villes; mais Homo profitait de l'immunit accordée par un statut d'Edouard IV aux «domestiques». — *Pourra tout domestique suivant son maître aller et venir librement.* — En outre, un certain relâchement à l'endroit des loups était résult de la mode des femmes de la cour, sous les derniers Stuarts, d'avoir, en guise de chiens, de petits loups-corsacs, dits adives, gros comme des chats, qu'elles faisaient venir d'Asie grands frais.

Ursus avait communiqué à Homo une partie de ses talents, se tenir debout, délayer sa colère en mauvaise humeur, bougonner au lieu de hurler, etc.; et de son côté le loup avait enseigné à l'homme ce qu'il savait, se passer de toit, se passer de pain, se passer de feu, préférer la faim dans un bois à l'esclavage dans un palais.

La cahute, sorte de cabane-voiture qui suivait l'itinéraire le plus varié, sans sortir pourtant d'Angleterre et d'Écosse, avait quatre roues, plus un brancard pour le loup, et un palonnier pour l'homme. Ce palonnier était l'en-cas des mauvais chemins. Elle était solide bien que bâtie en planches légères comme un colombage. Elle avait à l'avant une porte vitrée avec un petit balcon servant aux harangues, tribune mitigée de chaire, et l'arrière une porte pleine trouée d'un vasistas. L'abattement d'un marche-pied de trois degrés tournant sur charnière et dress derrière la porte à vasistas donnait entrée dans la cahute, bien fermée la nuit de verrous et de serrures. Il avait beaucoup plu et beaucoup neigé dessus. Elle avait été peinte, mais on ne savait plus trop de quelle couleur, les changements de saison étant pour les carrioles comme les changements de règne pour les courtisans, A l'avant, au dehors, sur une espèce de frontispice en volige, on avait pu jadis déchiffrer cette inscription, en caractères noirs sur fond blanc, lesquels s'étaient peu à peu mêlés et confondus.

«L'or perd annuellement par le frottement un quatorze centième de son volume; c'est ce qu'on nomme le *frai*; d'où il suit que, sur quatorze cent millions d'or circulant par toute la terre, il se perd tous les ans un million. Ce million d'or s'en va en poussière, s'envole, flotte, est atome, devient respirable, charge, dose, leste et appesantit les consciences, et s'amalgame avec l'âme des riches qu'il rend superbes et avec l'âme des pauvres qu'il rend farouches.

Cette inscription, effacée et biffée par la pluie et par la bont de la providence, était heureusement illisible, car il est probable qu'à la fois énigmatique et transparente, cette philosophie de l'or respiré n'eût pas été du goût des shériffs, prévôts, marshalls, et autres porte-perruques de la loi. La législation anglaise ne badinait pas dans ce temps-là. On était aisément félon. Les magistrats se montraient féroces par tradition, et la cruauté était de routine. Les juges d'inquisition pullulaient. Jeffrys avait fait des petits.

III

Dans l'intérieur de la cahute il y avait deux autres inscriptions. Au-dessus du coffre, sur la paroi de planches lavée à l'eau de chaux, on lisait ceci, écrit à l'encre et à la main:

«SEULES CHOSES QU'IL IMPORTE DE SAVOIR.

«Le baron pair d'Angleterre porte un tortil à six perles.

«La couronne commence au vicomte.

«Le vicomte porte une couronne de perles sans nombre, le comte une couronne de perles sur pointes entremêlées de feuilles de fraisier plus basses; le marquis, perles et feuilles d'égale hauteur; le duc, fleurons sans perles; le duc royal, un cercle de croix et de fleurs de lys; le prince de Galles, une couronne pareille à celle du roi, mais non fermée.

«Le duc est *très haut et très puissant prince*; le marquis et le comte, *très noble et puissant seigneur*; le vicomte, *noble et puissant seigneur*; *le baron, véritablement seigneur.*

«Le duc est *grâce*; les autres pairs sont *seigneurie*.

«Les lords sont inviolables.

«Les pairs sont chambre et cour, *concilium et curia*, législature et justice.

«Most honourable» est plus que «right honourable.

«Les lords pairs sont qualifiés «lords de droit»; les lords non pairs sont «lords de courtoisie»; il n'y a de lords que ceux qui sont pairs.

«Le lord ne prête jamais serment, ni au roi, ni en justice. Sa parole suffit. Il dit: *sur mon honneur*.

«Les communes, qui sont le peuple, mandées à la barre des lords, s'y présentent humblement, tête nue, devant les pairs couverts.

«Les communes envoient aux lords les bills par quarante membres qui présentent le bill avec trois révérences profondes.

«Les lords envoient aux communes les bills par un simple clerc.

«En cas de conflit, les deux chambres confèrent dans la chambre peinte, les pairs assis et couverts, les communes debout et nu-tête.

«D'après une loi d'Edouard VI, les lords ont le privilège d'homicide simple. Un lord qui tue un homme simplement n'est pas poursuivi.

«Les barons ont le même rang que les évêques.

«Pour être baron pair, il faut relever du roi *per baroniam integram*, par baronie entière.

«La baronie entière se compose de treize fiefs nobles et un quart, chaque fief noble étant de vingt livres sterling, ce qui monte à quatre cents marcs.

«Le chef de baronie, *caput baroniae*, est un château héréditairement régi comme l'Angleterre elle-même; c'est-à-dire ne pouvant être dévolu aux filles qu'à défaut d'enfants mâles, et en ce cas allant à la fille aînée, *coeteris filiabus aliunde satisfactis*.

Ce qui revient à dire: on pourvoit les autres filles comme on peut. (*Note d'Ursus*. En marge du mur.)

«Les barons ont la qualité de *lord*, du saxon *laford*, du grand latin *dominus* et du bas latin *lordus*.

«Les fils aînés et puînés des vicomtes et barons sont les premiers écuyers du royaume.

«Les fils aînés des pairs ont le pas sur les chevaliers de la Jarretière; les fils puînés, point.

«Le fils aîné d’un vicomte marche après tous les barons et avant tous les baronnets.

«Toute fille de lord est *lady*. Les autres filles anglaises sont *miss*.

«Tous les juges sont inférieurs aux pairs. Le sergent a un capuchon de peau d’agneau; le juge a un capuchon de menu vair, *de minuto vario*, quantité de petites fourrures blanches de toutes sortes, hors l’hermine. L’hermine est réservée aux pairs et au roi.

«On ne peut accorder de *supplicavit* contre un lord.

«Un lord ne peut être contraint par corps. Hors le cas de Tour de Londres.

«Un lord appelé chez le roi a droit de tuer un daim ou deux dans le parc royal.

«Le lord tient dans son château cour de baron.

«Il est indigne d’un lord d’aller dans les rues avec un manteau suivi de deux laquais. Il ne peut se montrer qu’avec un grand train de gentilshommes domestiques.

«Les pairs se rendent au parlement en carrosses à la file; les communes, point. Quelques pairs vont à Westminster en chaises renversées à quatre roues. La forme de ces chaises et de ces carrosses armoriés et couronnés n’est permise qu’aux lords et fait partie de leur dignité.

«Un lord ne peut être condamné à l’amende que par les lords, et jamais à plus de cinq schellings, excepté le duc, qui peut être condamné à dix.

«Un lord peut avoir chez lui six étrangers. Tout autre anglais n’en peut avoir que quatre.

«Un lord peut avoir huit tonneaux de vin sans payer de droits.

«Le lord est seul exempt de se présenter devant le shériff de circuit.

«Le lord ne peut être taxé pour la milice.

«Quand il plaît à un lord, il lève un régiment et le donne au roi; ainsi font leurs grâces le duc d’Athol, le duc de Hamilton, et le duc de Northumberland.

«Le lord ne relève que des lords.

«Dans les procès d’intérêt civil, il peut demander son renvoi de la cause, s’il n’y a pas au moins un chevalier parmi les juges.

«Le lord nomme ses chapelains.

«Un baron nomme trois chapelains; un vicomte, quatre; un comte et un marquis, cinq; un duc, six.

«Le lord ne peut être mis à la question, même pour haute trahison.

«Le lord ne peut être marqué à la main.

«Le lord est clerc, même ne sachant pas lire. Il sait de droit.

«Un duc se fait accompagner par un dais partout où le roi n’est pas; un vicomte a un dais dans sa maison; un baron a un couvercle d’essai et se le fait tenir sous la coupe pendant qu’il boit; une baronne a le droit de se faire porter la queue par un homme en présence d’une vicomtesse.

«Quatrevingt-six lords, ou fils aînés de lords, président aux quatrevingt-six tables, de cinq cents couverts chacune, qui sont servies chaque jour à sa majesté dans son palais aux frais du pays environnant la résidence royale.

«Un roturier qui frappe un lord a le poing coupé.

«Le lord est à peu près roi.

«Le roi est à peu près Dieu.

«La terre est une lordship.

«Les anglais disent à Dieu *milord*.

Vis-à-vis cette inscription, on en lisait une deuxième, écrite de la même façon, et que voici:

«SATISFACTIONS QUI DOIVENT SUFFIRE A CEUX QUI N’ONT RIEN.

«Henri Auverquerque, comte de Grantham, qui siège à la chambre des lords entre le comte de Jersey et le comte de Greenwich, a cent mille livres sterling de rente. C’est à sa seigneurie qu’appartient le palais Grantham-Terrace, bâti tout en marbre, et célèbre par ce qu’on appelle le labyrinthe des corridors, qui est une curiosité où il y a le corridor incarnat en marbre de Sarancolin, le corridor brun en lumachelle d’Astracan, le corridor blanc en marbre de Lani, le corridor noir en marbre d’Alabanda, le corridor gris en marbre de Staremma, le corridor jaune en marbre de Hesse, le corridor vert en marbre du Tyrol, le corridor rouge mi-parti griotte de Bohême et lumachelle de Gordoue, le corridor bleu en turquin de Gênes, le corridor violet en granit de Catalogne, le corridor deuil, veiné blanc et noir, en schiste de Murviedro, le corridor rose en cipolin des Alpes, le corridor perle en lumachelle de Nonette, et le corridor de toutes couleurs, dit corridor courtisan, en brèche arlequine.

«Richard Lowther, vicomte Lonsdale, a Lowther, dans le Weslmoreland, qui est d’un abord fastueux et dont le perron semble inviter les rois à entrer.

«Richard, comte de Scarborough, vicomte et baron Lumley, vicomte de Waierford en Irlande, lord-lieutenant et vice-amiral du comt de

Northumberland, et de Durham, ville et comté, a la double châtellenie de Stansted, l’antique et la moderne, où l’on admire une superbe grille en demi-cercle entourant un bassin avec jet d’eau incomparable. Il a de plus son château de Lumley.

«Robert Darcy, comte de Holderness, a son domaine de Holderness, avec tours de baron, et des jardins infinis à la française où il se promène en carrosse à six chevaux précédé de deux piqueurs, comme il convient à un pair d’Angleterre.

«Charles Beauclerk, duc de Saint-Albans, comte de Burford, baron Heddington, grand fauconnier d’Angleterre, a une maison Windsor, royale à côté de celle du roi.

«Charles Bodville, lord Robarles, baron Truro, vicomte Bodmyn, a Wimple en Cambridge, qui fait trois palais avec trois frontons, un arqué et deux triangulaires. L’arrivée est à quadruple rang d’arbres.

«Le très noble et très puissant lord Philippe Herbert, vicomte de Caërdif, comte de Monlgomeri, comte de Pembroke, seigneur pair et rosse de Candall, Marmion, Saint-Quentin et Churland, gardien de l’étanerie dans les comtés de Cornouailles et de Devon, visiteur héréditaire du collège de Jésus, a le merveilleux jardin de Willton où il y a deux bassins à gerbe plus beaux que le Versailles du roi très chrétien Louis quatorzième.

«Charles Seymour, duc de Somerset, a Somerset-House sur la Tamise, qui égale la villa Pamphili de Rome. On remarque sur la grande cheminée deux vases de porcelaine de la dynastie des Yuen, lesquels valent un demi-million de France.

«En Yorkshire, Arthur, lord Ingram, vicomte Irwin, a Temple-Newsham où l’on entre par un arc de triomphe, et dont les larges toits plats ressemblent aux terrasses morisques.

«Robert, lord Ferrers de Chartley, Bourchieret Lovaine, a, dans le Leicestershire, Staunton-Harold dont le parc en plan géométral a la forme d’un temple avec fronton; et, devant la pièce d’eau, la grande église à clocher carré est à sa seigneurie.

«Dans le comté de Northampton, Charles Spencer, comte de Sunderland, un du conseil privé de sa majesté, possède Althrop o l’on entre par une grille à quatre piliers surmontés de groupes de marbre.

«Laurence Hyde, comte de Rochester, a, en Surrey, New-Parke, magnifique par son acrotère sculpté, son gazon circulaire entour d’arbres, et ses forêts à l’extrémité desquelles il y a une petite montagne artistement arrondie et surmontée d’un grand chêne qu’on voit de loin.

«Philippe Slanhope, comte de Chesterfield, possède Bredby, en Derbyshire, qui a un pavillon d’horloge superbe, des fauconniers, des garennes et de très belles eaux longues, carrées et ovales, dont une en forme de miroir, avec deux jaillissements qui vont très haut.

«Lord Cornwallis, baron de Eye, a Brome-Hall qui est un palais du quatorzième siècle.

«Le très noble Algernon Capel, vicomte Malden, comte d’Essex, a Cashiobury en Hersfordshire, château qui a la forme d’un grand H et où il y a des chasses fort giboyeuses.

«Charles, lord Ossulstone, a Dawly en Middlesex où l’on arrive par des jardins italiens.

«James Cecill, comte de Salisbury, à sept lieues de Londres, a Hartfield-House, avec ses quatre pavillons seigneuriaux, son beffroi au centre et sa cour d’honneur, dallée de blanc et de noir comme celle de Saint-Germain. Ce palais, qui a deux cent soixante-douze pieds en front, a été bâti sous Jacques Ier par le grand trésorier d’Angleterre, qui est le bisaïeul du comte régnant. On y voit le lit d’une comtesse de Salisbury, d’un prix inestimable, entièrement fait d’un bois du Brésil qui est une panacée contre la morsure des serpents, et qu’on appelle *milhombres*, ce qui veut dire *mille hommes*. Sur ce lit est écrit en lettres d’or: *Honni soit qui mal y pense.*

«Edward Rich, comte de Warwick et Holland, a Warwick-Castle, o l’on brûle des chênes entiers dans les cheminées.

«Dans la paroisse de Seven-Oaks, Charles Sackville, baron Buekhurst, vicomte Cranfeild, comte de Dorset et Middlesex, a Knowle, qui est grand comme une ville, et qui se compose de trois palais, parallèles l’un derrière l’autre comme des lignes d’infanterie, avec dix pignons à escalier sur la façade principale, et une porte sous donjon à quatre tours.

«Thomas Thynne, vicomte Weymouth, baron Varminster, possède Long-Leate, qui a presque autant de cheminées, de lanternes, de gloriettes, de poivrières, de pavillons et de tourelles que Chambord en France, lequel est au roi.

«Henry Howard, comte de Suffolk, a, à douze lieues de Londres, le palais d’Audlyene en Middlesex, qui le cède à peine en grandeur et majesté à l’Escurial du roi d’Espagne.

«En Bedforshire, Wrest-House-and-Park, qui est tout un pays enclos de fossés et de murailles, avec bois, rivières et collines, est à Henri, marquis de Kent.

«Hampton-Court, en Hereford, avec son puissant donjon crénelé, et son jardin barré d’une pièce d’eau qui le sépare de la forêt, est à Thomas, lord Coningsby.

«Grimsthorf, en Lincolnshire, avec sa longue façade coupée de hautes tourelles en pal, ses parcs, ses étangs, ses faisanderies, ses bergeries, ses boulingrins, ses quinconces, ses mails, ses futaies, ses parterres brodés, quadrillés et losangés de fleurs, qui ressemblent à de grands tapis, ses prairies de course, et la majesté du cercle où les carrosses tournent avant d’entrer au château, appartient à Robert, comte Lindsay, lord héréditaire de la forêt de Walham.

«Up Parke, en Sussex, château carré avec deux pavillons symétriques à beffroi des deux côtés de la cour d’honneur, est au très honorable Ford, lord Grey, vicomte Glendale et comte de Tankarville,

«Newnham Padox, en Warwickshire, qui a deux viviers quadrangulaires, et un pignon avec vitrail à quatre pans, est au comte de Denbigh, qui est comte de Rheinfelden en Allemagne.

«Wythame, dans le comté de Berk, avec son jardin français où il y a quatre tonnelles taillées, et sa grande tour crénelée accostée de deux hautes nefs de guerre, est à lord Montagne, comte d’Abiegdon, qui a aussi Rycott, dont il est baron, et dont la porte principale fait lire la devise: *Virtus ariete fortior*.

«William Cavendish, duc de Devonshîre, a six châteaux, dont Chaltsworth qui est à deux élages du plus bel ordre grec, et en outre sa grâce a son hôtel de Londres où il y a un lion qui tourne le dos au palais du roi.

«Le vicomte Kinalmeaky, qui est comte de Cork en Irlande, a Burlington-house en Picadily, avec de vastes jardins qui vont jusqu’aux champs hors de Londres; il a aussi Chiswick où il y a neuf corps de logis magnifiques; il a aussi Londesburgh qui est un hôtel neuf à côté d’un vieux palais,

«Le duc de Beaufort a Chelsea qui contient deux châteaux gothiques et un château florentin; il a aussi Badmington en Glocester, qui est une résidence d’où rayonnent une foule d’avenues comme d’une étoile. Très noble et puissant prince Henri, duc de Beaufort, est en même temps marquis et comte de Worcester, baron Raglan, baron Power, et baron Herbert de Chepstow.

«John Holles, duc de Newcastle et marquis de Clare, a Bolsover dont le donjon carré est majestueux, plus Haughton en Nottingham où il y a au centre d'un bassin une pyramide ronde imitant la tour de Babel,

«William, lord Craven, baron Graven de Hampsteard, a, en Warwickshire, une résidence, Comb-Abbey, où l'on voit le plus beau jet d'eau de l'Angleterre, et, en Berkshire, deux baronnies, Hampstead Marshall dont la façade offre cinq lanternes gothiques engagées, et Asdowne Park qui est un château au point d'intersection d'une croix de routes dans une forêt.

«Lord Linnoeus Clancharlie, baron Clancharlie et Hunkerville, marquis de Corleone en Sicile, a sa pairie assise sur le château de Clancharlie, bâti en 914 par Edouard le Vieux contre les Danois, plus Hunkerville-house à Londres, qui est un palais, plus, à Windsor, Corleone-lodge, qui en est un autre, et huit châtellenies, une à Bruxton, sur le Trerit, avec un droit sur les carrières d'albâtre, puis Gumdraith, Homble, Moricambe, Trenwardraith, Hell-Kerters, où il y a un puits merveilleux, Pillinmore et ses marais à tourbe, Reculver près de l'ancienne ville Vagniacoe, Vinecaunton sur la montagne Moil-enlli; plus dix-neuf bourgs et villages avec baillis, et tout le pays de Pensneth-chase, ce qui ensemble rapporte à sa seigneurie quarante mille livres sterling de rente.

«Les cent soixante-douze pairs régnant sous Jacques II possèdent entre eux en bloc un revenu de douze cent soixante-douze mille livres sterling par an, qui est la onzième partie du revenu de l'Angleterre,

En marge du dernier nom, lord Linnoeus Clancharlie, on lisait cette note de la main d'Ursus:

— *Rebelle; en exil; biens, châteaux et domaines sous le séquestre. C'est bien fait.* —

IV

Ursus admirait Homo. On admire près de soi. C'est une loi.

Être toujours sourdement furieux, c'était la situation intérieure d'Ursus, et gronder était sa situation extérieure. Ursus était le mécontent de la création. Il était dans la nature celui qui fait de l'opposition. Il prenait l'univers en mauvaise part. Il ne donnait de satisfecit à qui que ce soit, ni à quoi que ce soit. Faire le miel n’absolvait pas l’abeille de piquer; une rosé épanouie n’absolvait pas le soleil de la fièvre jaune et du vomito negro. Il est probable que dans l’intimité Ursus faisait beaucoup de critiques à Dieu. Il disait: — Évidemment, le diable est à ressort, et le tort de Dieu, c’est d’avoir lâché la détente. — Il n’approuvait guère que les princes, et il avait sa manière à lui de les applaudir. Un jour que Jacques II donna en don à la Vierge d’une chapelle catholique irlandaise une lampe d’or massif, Ursus, qui passait par là, avec Homo, plus indifférent, éclata en admiration devant tout le peuple, et s’écria: — Il est certain que la sainte Vierge a bien plus besoin d’une lampe d’or que les petits enfants que voilà pieds nus n’ont besoin de souliers.

De telles preuves de sa «loyauté» et l’évidence de son respect pour les puissances établies ne contribuèrent probablement pas peu à faire tolérer par les magistrats son existence vagabonde et sa mésalliance avec un loup. Il laissait quelquefois le soir, par faiblesse amicale, Homo se détirer un peu les membres et errer en liberté autour de la cahute; le loup était incapable d’un abus de confiance, et se comportait «en société», c’est-à-dire parmi les hommes, avec la discrétion d’un caniche; pourtant, si l’on eût eu affaire à des alcades de mauvaise humeur, cela pouvait avoir des inconvénients; aussi Ursus maintenait-il, le plus possible, l’honnête loup enchaîné. Au point de vue politique, son écriteau sur l’or, devenu indéchiffrable et d’ailleurs peu intelligible, n’était autre chose qu’un barbouillage de façade et ne le dénonçait point.

Même après Jacques II, et sous le règne «respectable» de Guillaume et Marie, les petites villes des comtés d’Angleterre pouvaient voir rôder paisiblement sa carriole. Il voyageait librement, d’un bout de la Grande-Bretagne à l’autre, débitant ses philtres et ses fioles, faisant, de moitié avec son loup, ses mômeries de médecin de carrefour, et il passait avec aisance travers les mailles du filet de police tendu à cette époque par toute l’Angleterre pour éplucher les bandes nomades, et particulièrement pour arrêter au passage les «comprachicos».

Du reste, c’était juste. Ursus n’était d’aucune bande. Ursus vivait avec Ursus; tête-à-tête de lui-même avec lui-même dans lequel un loup fourrait gentiment son museau. L’ambition d’Ursus eût été d’être caraïbe; ne le pouvant, il était celui qui est seul. Le solitaire est un diminutif du sauvage, accepté par la civilisation. On est d’autant plus seul qu’on est errant. De l son déplacement perpétuel. Rester quelque part lui semblait de l'apprivoisement. Il passait sa vie à passer son chemin. La vue des villes redoublait en lui le goût des broussailles, des halliers, des épines, et des trous dans les rochers. Son chez-lui était la forêt. Il ne se sentait pas très dépaysé dans le murmure des places publiques assez pareil au brouhaha des arbres. La foule satisfait dans une certaine mesure le goût qu'on a du désert. Ce qui lui déplaisait dans cette cahute, c'est qu'elle avait une porte et des fenêtres et qu'elle ressemblait à une maison. Il eût atteint son idéal s'il eût pu mettre une caverne sur quatre roues, et voyager dans un antre.

Il ne souriait pas, nous l'avons dit, mais il riait; parfois, fréquemment même, d'un rire amer. Il y a du consentement dans le sourire, tandis que le rire est souvent un refus.

Sa grande affaire était de haïr le genre humain. Il était implacable dans cette haine. Ayant tiré à clair ceci que la vie humaine est une chose affreuse, ayant remarqué la superposition des fléaux, les rois sur le peuple, la guerre sur les rois, la peste sur la guerre, la famine sur la peste, la bêtise sur le tout, ayant constaté une certaine quantité de châtiment dans le seul fait d'exister, ayant reconnu que la mort est une délivrance, quand on lui amenait un malade, il le guérissait. Il avait des cordiaux et des breuvages pour prolonger la vie des vieillards. Il remettait les culs-de-jatte sur leurs pieds, et leur jetait ce sarcasme; — Te voilà sur tes pattes. Puisses-tu marcher longtemps dans la vallée de larmes! Quand il voyait un pauvre mourant de faim, il lui donnait tous les liards qu'il avait sur lui en grommelant:

— Vis, misérable! mange! dure longtemps! ce n'est pas moi qui abrégerai ton bagne. — Après quoi, il se frottait les mains, et disait: — Je fais aux hommes tout le mal que je peux.

Les passants pouvaient, par le trou de la lucarne de l'arrière, lire au plafond de la cahute cette enseigne, écrite l'intérieur, mais visible du dehors, et charbonnée en grosses lettres: URSUS, PHILOSOPHE.

II

LES COMPRACHICOS

I

Qui connait à cette heure le mot *comprachicos?* et qui en sait le sens?

Les comprachicos, ou comprapequeños, étaient une hideuse et étrange affiliation nomade, fameuse au dix-septième siècle, oubliée au dix-huitième, ignorée aujourd’hui. Les comprachicos sont, comme «la poudre de succession», un ancien détail social caractéristique. Ils font partie de la vieille laideur humaine.

Pour le grand regard de l’histoire, qui voit les ensembles, les comprachicos se rattachent à l’immense fait Esclavage. Joseph vendu par ses frères est un chapitre de leur légende. Les comprachicos ont laissé trace dans les législations pénales d’Espagne et d’Angleterre. On trouve çà et là dans la confusion obscure des lois anglaises la pression de ce fait monstrueux, comme on trouve l’empreinte du pied d’un sauvage dans une forêt.

Comprachicos, de même que comprapequenos, est un mot espagnol composé qui signifie «les *achète-petits*».

Les comprachicos faisaient le commerce des enfants.

Ils en achetaient et ils en vendaient.

Ils n’en dérobaient point. Le vol des enfants est une autre industrie.

Et que faisaient-ils de ces enfants?

Des monstres.

Pourquoi des monstres?

Pour rire.

Le peuple a besoin de rire; les rois aussi. Il faut aux carrefours le baladin; il faut aux louvres le bouffon. L’un s’appelle Turlupin, l’autre Triboulet.

Les efforts de l’homme pour se procurer de la joie sont parfois dignes de l’attention du philosophe,

Qu’ébauchons-nous dans ces quelques pages préliminaires? un chapitre du plus terrible des livres, du livre qu’on pourrait intituler: l’*Exploitation des malheureux par les heureux.*

II

Un enfant destiné à être un joujou pour les hommes, cela a existé. (Cela existe encore aujourd’hui.) Aux époques naïves et féroces, cela constitue une industrie spéciale. Le dix-septième siècle, dit grand siècle, fut une de ces époques. C’est un siècle très byzantin; il eut la naïveté corrompue et la férocit délicate, variété curieuse de civilisation. Un tigre faisant la petite bouche, Mme de Sévigné minaude à propos du bûcher et de la roue. Ce siècle exploita beaucoup les enfants; les historiens, flatteurs de ce siècle, ont caché la plaie, mais ils ont laiss voir le remède, Vincent de Paul.

Pour que l’homme-hochet réussisse, il faut le prendre de bonne heure. Le nain doit être commencé petit. On jouait de l’enfance. Mais un enfant droit, ce n’est pas bien amusant. Un bossu, c’est plus gai.

De là un art. Il y avait des éleveurs. On prenait un homme et l’on faisait un avorton; on prenait un visage et l’on faisait un mufle. On tassait la croissance; on pétrissait la physionomie.

Cette production artificielle de cas tératologiques avait ses règles. C’était toute une science. Qu’on s’imagine une orthopédie en sens inverse. Là où Dieu a mis le regard, cet art mettait le strabisme. Là où Dieu a mis l’harmonie, on mettait la difformité. Là où Dieu a mis la perfection, on rétablissait l’ébauche. Et, aux yeux des connaisseurs, c’était l’ébauche qui était parfaite. Il y avait également des reprises en sous-oeuvre pour les animaux; on inventait les chevaux pies; Turenne montait un cheval pie. De nos jours, ne peint-on pas les chiens en bleu et en vert? La nature est notre canevas. L’homme a toujours voulu ajouter quelque chose à Dieu, L’homme retouche la création, parfois en bien, parfois en mal. Le bouffon de cour n’était pas autre chose qu’un essai de ramener l’homme au singe. Progrès en arrière. Chef-d’oeuvre à reculons. En même temps, on tâchait de faire le singe homme. Barbe, duchesse de Cleveland et comtesse de Southampton, avait pour page un sapajou. Chez Françoise Sutton, baronne Dudley, huitième pairesse du banc des barons, le thé était servi par un babouin vêtu de brocart d’or que lady Dudley appelait «mon nègre». Catherine Sidley, comtesse de Dorchester, allait prendre séance au parlement dans un carrosse armorié derrière lequel se tenaient debout, museaux au vent, trois papions en grande livrée. Une duchesse de Medina-Coeli, dont le cardinal Polus vit le lever, se faisait mettre ses bas par un orang-outang. Ces singes montés en grade faisaient contrepoids aux hommes brutalisés et bestialisés. Cette promiscuité, voulue par les grands, de l’homme et de la bête, était

particulièrement soulignée par le nain et le chien. Le nain ne quittait jamais le chien, toujours plus grand que lui.
Le chien était le bini du nain. C'était comme deux colliers accouplés. Cette juxtaposition est constatée par une foule de monuments domestiques, notamment par le portrait de Jeffrey Hudson, nain de Henriette de France, fille de Henri IV, femme de Charles Ier.

Dégrader l'homme mène à le déformer. On complétait la suppression d'état par la défiguration. Certains vivisecteurs de ces temps-là réussissaient très bien à effacer de la face humaine l'effigie divine. Le docteur Conquest, membre du collège d'Amen-Street et visiteur juré des boutiques de chimistes de Londres, a écrit un livre en latin sur cette chirurgie à rebours dont il donne les procédés. A en croire Justus de Carrick-Fergus, l'inventeur de cette chirurgie est un moine nomm Aven-More, mot irlandais qui signifie *Grande Rivière.*

Le nain de l'électeur palatin, Perkeo, dont la poupée — ou le spectre — sort d'une boîte à surprises dans la cave de Heidelberg, était un remarquable spécimen de cette science très variée dans ses applications.

Cela faisait des êtres dont la loi d'existence était monstrueusement simple: permission de souffrir, ordre d'amuser.

III

Cette fabrication de monstres se pratiquait sur une grande échelle et comprenait divers genres.

Il en fallait au sultan; il en fallait au pape. A l'un pour garder ses femmes; à l'autre pour faire ses prières. C'était un genre à part ne pouvant se reproduire lui-même. Ces à peu près humains étaient utiles à la volupté et à la religion. Le sérail et la chapelle Sixtine consommaient la même espèce de monstres, ici féroces, là suaves.

On savait produire dans ces temps-là des choses qu'on ne produit plus maintenant, on avait des talents qui nous manquent, et ce n'est pas sans raison que les bons esprits crient à la décadence.
On ne sait plus sculpter en pleine chair humaine; cela tient à ce que l'art des supplices se perd; on était virtuose en ce genre, on ne l'est plus; on a simplifié cet art au point qu'il va bientôt peut-être disparaître tout à fait. En coupant les membres à des hommes vivants, en leur ouvrant le ventre, en leur arrachant les viscères, on prenait sur le fait les phénomènes, on avait

des trouvailles; il faut y renoncer, et nous sommes privés des progrès que le bourreau faisait faire à la chirurgie.

Cette vivisection d'autrefois ne se bornait pas à confectionner pour la place publique des phénomènes, pour les palais des bouffons, espèces d'augmentatifs du courtisan, et pour les sultans et papes des eunuques, Elle abondait en variantes. Un de ces triomphes, c'était de faire un coq pour le roi d'Angleterre.

Il était d'usage que, dans le palais du roi d'Angleterre, il y eût une sorte d'homme nocturne, chantant comme le coq. Ce veilleur, debout pendant qu'on dormait, rôdait dans le palais, et poussait d'heure en heure ce cri de basse-cour, répété autant de fois qu'il le fallait pour suppléer à une cloche. Cet homme, promu coq, avait subi pour cela en son enfance une opération dans le pharynx, laquelle fait partie de l'art décrit par le docteur Conquest. Sous Charles II, une salivation inhérente l'opération ayant dégoûté la duchesse de Portsmouth, on conserva la fonction, afin de ne point amoindrir l'éclat de la couronne, mais on fit pousser le cri du coq par un homme non mutilé. On choisissait d'ordinaire pour cet emploi honorable un ancien officier. Sous Jacques II, ce fonctionnaire se nommait William Sampson Coq, et recevait annuellement pour son chant neuf livres deux schellings six sous.

Voir le docteur Chamberlayne, *État présent de l'Angleterre*, 1688, 1re partie, chap. XIII, p. 179.

Il y a cent ans à peine, à Pétersbourg, les mémoires de Catherine II le racontent, quand le czar ou la czarine étaient mécontents d'un prince russe, on faisait accroupir le prince dans la grande antichambre du palais, et il restait dans cette posture un nombre de jours déterminé, miaulant, par ordre, comme un chat, ou gloussant comme une poule qui couve, et becquetant à terre sa nourriture.

Ces modes sont passées; moins qu'on ne croit pourtant.
Aujourd'hui, les courtisans gloussant pour plaire modifient un peu l'intonation. Plus d'un ramasse à terre, nous ne disons pas dans la boue, ce qu'il mange.

Il est très heureux que les rois ne puissent pas se tromper. De cette façon leurs contradictions n'embarrassent jamais. En approuvant sans cesse, on est sûr d'avoir toujours raison, ce qui est agréable. Louis XIV n'eût aimé voir à Versailles ni un officier faisant le coq, ni un prince faisant le dindon. Ce qui rehaussait la dignité royale et impériale en Angleterre et en Russie eût semblé à Louis le Grand incompatible avec la couronne de saint Louis. On sait son mécontentement quand Madame Henriette une nuit s'oublia jusqu'à voir en songe une poule, grave inconvenance en effet dans une personne de la cour. Quand on est de la grande, on ne doit point rêver de la basse.

Bossuet, on s'en souvient, partagea le scandale de Louis XIV.

IV

Le commerce des enfants au dix-septième siècle se complétait, nous venons de l'expliquer, par une industrie. Les comprachicos faisaient ce commerce et exerçaient cette industrie, Ils achetaient des enfants, travaillaient un peu cette matière première, et la revendaient ensuite.

Les vendeurs étaient de toute sorte, depuis le père misérable se débarrassant de sa famille jusqu'au maître utilisant son haras d'esclaves. Vendre des hommes n'avait rien que de simple. De nos jours on s'est battu pour maintenir ce droit. On se rappelle, il y a de cela moins d'un siècle, l'électeur de Hesse vendant ses sujets au roi d'Angleterre qui avait besoin d'hommes à faire tuer en Amérique. On allait chez l'électeur de Hesse comme chez le boucher, acheter de la viande. L'électeur de Hesse tenait de la chair à canon. Ce prince accrochait ses sujets dans sa boutique. Marchandez, c'est à vendre. En Angleterre, sous Jeffrys, après la tragique aventure de Monmouth, il y eut force seigneurs et gentilshommes décapités et écartelés; ces suppliciés laissèrent des épouses et des filles, veuves et orphelines que Jacques II donna à la reine sa femme. La reine vendit ces ladies à Guillaume Penn. Il est probable que ce roi avait une remise et tant pour cent, Ce qui étonne, ce n'est pas que Jacques II ait vendu ces femmes, c'est que Guillaume Penn les ait achetées.

L'emplette de Penn s'excuse, ou s'explique, par ceci que Penn, ayant un désert à ensemencer d'hommes, avait besoin de femmes.

Les femmes faisaient partie de son outillage.

Ces ladies furent une bonne affaire pour sa gracieuse majesté la reine. Les jeunes se vendirent cher. On songe, avec le malaise d'un sentiment de scandale compliqué, que Penn eut probablement de vieilles duchesses à très bon marché.

Les comprachicos se nommaient aussi “les cheylas”, mot indou qui signifie *dénicheurs d’enfants*.

Longtemps les comprachicos ne se cachèrent qu’à demi. Il y a parfois dans l’ordre social une pénombre complaisante aux industries scélérates; elles s’y conservent. Nous avons vu de nos jours en Espagne une affiliation de ce genre, dirigée par le trabucaire Ramon Selles, durer de 1834 à 1866, et tenir trente ans sous la terreur trois provinces, Valence, Alicante, et Murcie.

Sous les Stuarts, les comprachicos n’étaient point mal en cour.

Au besoin, la raison d’état se servait d’eux. Ils furent pour Jacques II presque un *instrumentum regni*. C’était l’époque o l’on tronquait les familles encombrantes et réfractaires, où l’on coupait court aux filiations, où l’on supprimait brusquement les héritiers. Parfois on frustrait une branche au profit de l’autre. Les comprachicos avaient un talent, défigurer, qui les recommandait à la politique. Défigurer vaut mieux que tuer. Il y avait bien le masque de fer, mais c’est un gros moyen. On ne peut peupler l’Europe de masques de fer, tandis que les bateleurs difformes courent les rues sans invraisemblance; et puis le masque de fer est arrachable, le masque de chair ne l’est pas.

Vous masquer à jamais avec votre propre visage, rien n’est plus ingénieux. Les comprachicos travaillaient l’homme comme les chinois travaillent l’arbre. Ils avaient des secrets, nous l’avons dit. Ils avaient des trucs. Art perdu. Un certain rabougrissement bizarre sortait de leurs mains. C’était ridicule et profond. Ils touchaient à un petit être avec tant d’esprit que le père ne l’eût pas reconnu. Quelquefois ils laissaient la colonne dorsale droite, mais ils refaisaient la face. Ils démarquaient un enfant comme on démarque un mouchoir.

Les produits destinés aux bateleurs avaient les articulations disloquées d’une façon savante. On les eût dit désossés. Cela faisait des gymnastes.

Non seulement les comprachicos ôtaient à l’enfant son visage, mais ils lui ôtaient sa mémoire. Du moins ils lui en ôtaient ce qu’ils pouvaient. L’enfant n’avait point conscience de la mutilation qu’il avait subie. Cette épouvantable chirurgie laissait trace sur sa face, non dans son esprit. Il pouvait se souvenir tout au plus qu’un jour il avait été saisi par des hommes, puis qu’il s’était endormi, et qu’ensuite on l’avait guéri. Guéri de quoi? il l’ignorait. Des brûlures par le soufre et des incisions par le fer, il ne se rappelait rien. Les comprachicos, pendant l’opération, assoupissaient le petit patient au moyen d'une poudre stupéfiante qui passait pour magique et qui supprimait la douleur. Cette poudre a été de tout temps connue en Chine, et y est encore employée à l'heure qu'il est, La Chine a eu avant nous toutes nos inventions, l'imprimerie, l'artillerie, l'aérostation, le chloroforme.

Seulement la découverte qui en Europe prend tout de suite vie et croissance, et devient prodige et merveille, reste embryon en Chine et s'y conserve morte. La Chine est un bocal de foetus.

Puisque nous sommes en Chine, restons-y un moment encore pour un détail. En Chine, de tout temps, on a vu la recherche d'art et d'industrie que voici: c'est le moulage de l'homme vivant. On prend un enfant de deux ou trois ans, on le met dans un vase de porcelaine plus ou moins bizarre, sans couvercle et sans fond, pour que la tête et les pieds passent. Le jour on tient ce vase debout, la nuit on le couche pour que l'enfant puisse dormir. L'enfant grossit ainsi sans grandir, emplissant de sa chair comprimée et de ses os tordus les bossages du vase. Cette croissance en bouteille dure plusieurs années. A un moment donné, elle est irrémédiable. Quand on juge que cela a pris et que le monstre est fait, on casse le vase, l'enfant en sort, et l'on a un homme ayant la forme d'un pot.

C'est commode; on peut d'avance se commander son nain de la forme qu'on veut.

V

Jacques II toléra les comprachicos. Par une bonne raison, c'est qu'il s'en servait. Cela du moins lui arriva plus d'une fois.

On ne dédaigne pas toujours ce qu'on méprise. Cette industrie d'en bas, expédient excellent parfois pour l'industrie d'en haut qu'on nomme la politique, était volontairement laissée misérable, mais point persécutée. Aucune surveillance, mais une certaine attention. Cela peut être utile. La loi fermait un oeil, le roi ouvrait l'autre.

Quelquefois le roi allait jusqu'à avouer sa complicité. Ce sont là les audaces du terrorisme monarchique. Le défiguré était fleurdelysé; on lui ôtait la marque de Dieu, on lui mettait la marque du roi. Jacob Astley, chevalier et baronnet, seigneur de Melton, constable dans le comté de Norfolk, eut dans sa famille un enfant vendu, sur le front duquel le commissaire vendeur avait imprimé au fer chaud une fleur de lys. Dans de certains cas, si l'on tenait à constater, pour des raisons quelconques, l’origine royale de la situation nouvelle faite à l’enfant, on employait ce moyen. L’Angleterre nous a toujours fait l’honneur d’utiliser, pour ses usages personnels, la fleur de lys.

Les comprachicos, avec la nuance qui sépare une industrie d’un fanatisme, étaient analogues aux étrangleurs de l’Inde; ils vivaient entre eux, en bandes, un peu baladins, mais par prétexte. La circulation leur était ainsi plus facile. Ils campaient ça et là, mais graves, religieux et n’ayant avec les autres nomades aucune ressemblance, incapables de vol. Le peuple les a longtemps confondus à tort avec les morîsques d’Espagne et les morisques de Chine. Les morisques d’Espagne étaient faux monnayeurs, les morisques de Chine étaient filous. Rien de pareil chez les comprachicos. C’étaient d’honnêtes gens. Qu’on en pense ce qu’on voudra, ils étaient parfois sincèrement scrupuleux. Ils poussaient une porte, entraient, marchandaient un enfant, payaient et l’emportaient. Cela se faisait correctement.

Ils étaient de tous les pays. Sous ce nom, *comprachicos*, fraternisaient des anglais, des français, des castillans, des allemands, des italiens. Une même pensée, une même superstition, l’exploitation en commun d’un même métier, font de ces fusions.

Dans cette fraternité de bandits, des levantins représentaient l’orient, des ponantais représentaient l’occident. Force basques y dialoguaient avec force irlandais, le basque et l’irlandais se comprennent, ils parlent le vieux jargon punique; ajoutez à cela les relations intimes de l’Irlande catholique avec la catholique Espagne. Relations telles qu’elles ont fini par faire pendre Londres presque un roi d’Irlande, le lord gallois de Brany, ce qui a produit le comté de Letrim.

Les comprachicos étaient plutôt une association qu’une peuplade, plutôt un résidu qu’une association. C’était toute la gueuserie de l’univers ayant pour industrie un crime. C’était une sorte de peuple arlequin composé de tous les haillons. Affilier un homme, c’était coudre une loque.

Errer était la loi d’existence des comprachicos. Apparaître, puis disparaître. Qui n’est que toléré ne prend pas racine.

Même dans les royaumes où leur industrie était pourvoyeuse des cours, et, au besoin, auxiliaire du pouvoir royal, ils étaient parfois tout à coup rudoyés. Les rois utilisaient leur art et mettaient les artistes aux galères. Ces inconséquences sont dans le va-et-vient du caprice royal. Car tel est notre plaisir.

Pierre qui roule et industrie qui rôdent n'amassent pas de mousse. Les comprachicos étaient pauvres. Ils auraient pu dire ce que disait cette sorcière maigre et en guenilles voyant s'allumer la torche du bûcher: Le jeu n'en vaut pas la chandelle. — Peut-être, probablement même, leurs chefs, restés inconnus, les entrepreneurs en grand du commerce des enfants, étaient riches. Ce point, après deux siècles, serait malais éclaircir.

C'était, nous l'avons dit, une affiliation. Elle avait ses lois, son serment, ses formules. Elle avait presque sa cabale. Qui voudrait en savoir long aujourd'hui sur les comprachicos n'aurait qu'à aller en Biscaye et en Galice. Comme il y avait beaucoup de basques parmi eux, c'est dans ces montagnes-là qu'est leur légende. On parle encore à l'heure qu'il est des comprachicos Oyarzun, à Urbistondo, à Leso, à Astigarraga. *Aguarda te, nino, que voy u llamar al comprachicos*! est dans ce pays-là le cri d'intimidation des mères aux enfants.

Prends garde, je vais appeler le comprachicos.

Les comprachicos, comme les tchiganes et les gypsies, se donnaient des rendez-vous; de temps en temps, les chefs échangeaient des colloques. Ils avaient, au dix-septième siècle, quatre principaux points de rencontre. Un en Espagne, le défil de Pancorbo; un en Allemagne, la clairière dite la Mauvaise Femme, près Diekirch, où il y a deux bas-reliefs énigmatiques représentant une femme qui a une tête et un homme qui n'en a pas; un en France, le tertre où était la colossale statue Massue-la-Promesse, dans l'ancien bois sacré Borvo-Tomona, près de Bourbonne-Ies-Bains; un en Angleterre, derrière le mur du jardin de William Chaloner, écuyer de Gisbrough en Cleveland dans York, entre la tour carrée et le grand pignon percé d'une porte ogive.

VI

Les lois contre les vagabonds ont toujours été très rigoureuses en Angleterre. L'Angleterre, dans sa législation gothique, semblait s'inspirer de ce principe: *Homo errans fera errante pejor*. Un de ses statuts spéciaux qualifie l'homme sans asile "plus dangereux que l'aspic, le dragon, le lynx et le basilic"
(*atrocior aspide, dracone, lynce et basilico*). L'Angleterre a longtemps eu le même souci des gypsies, dont elle voulait se débarrasser, que des loups, dont elle s'était nettoyée.

En cela l’anglais diffère de l’irlandais qui prie les saints pour la santé du loup et l’appelle «mon parrain».

La loi anglaise pourtant, de même qu’elle tolérait, on vient de le voir, le loup apprivoisé et domestiqué, devenu en quelque sorte un chien, tolérait le vagabond à état, devenu un sujet. On n’inquiétait ni le saltimbanque, ni le barbier ambulant, ni le physicien, ni le colporteur, ni le savant en plein vent, attendu qu’ils ont un métier pour vivre. Hors de là, et à ces exceptions près, l’espèce d’homme libre qu’il y a dans l’homme errant faisait peur à la loi. Un passant était un ennemi public possible. Cette chose moderne, flâner, était ignorée; on ne connaissait que cette chose antique, rôder. La «mauvaise mine», ce je ne sais quoi que tout le monde comprend et que personne ne peut définir, suffisait pour que la société prît un homme au collet. Où demeures-tu? Que fais-tu? Et s’il ne pouvait répondre, de dures pénalités l’attendaient. Le fer et le feu étaient dans le code. La loi pratiquait la cautérisation du vagabondage.

De là, sur tout le territoire anglais, une vraie «loi des suspects» appliquée aux rôdeurs, volontiers malfaiteurs, disons-le, et particulièrement aux gypsies, dont l’expulsion a été à tort comparée à l’expulsion des juifs et des maures d’Espagne, et des protestants de France. Quant à nous, nous ne confondons point une battue avec une persécution.

Les comprachicos, insistons-y, n’avaient rien de commun avec les gypsies. Les gypsies étaient une nation; les comprachicos étaient un composé de toutes les nations; un résidu, nous l’avons dit; cuvette horrible d’eaux immondes. Les comprachîcos n’avaient point, comme les gypsies, un idiome à eux; leur jargon était une promiscuité d’idiomes; toutes les langues mêlées étaient leur langue; ils parlaient un tohu-bohu. Ils avaient fini par être, ainsi que les gypsies, un peuple serpentant parmi les peuples; mais leur lien commun était l’affiliation, non la race. A toutes les époques de l’histoire, on peut constater, dans cette vaste masse liquide qui est l’humanité, de ces ruisseaux d’hommes vénéneux coulant à part, avec quelque empoisonnement autour d’eux. Les gypsies étaient une famille; les comprachicos étaient une franc-maçonnerie; maçonnerie ayant, non un but auguste, mais une industrie hideuse. Dernière différence, la religion. Les gypsies étaient païens, les comprachicos étaient chrétiens; et même bons chrétiens; comme il sied à une affiliation qui, bien que mélangée de tous les peuples, avait pris naissance en Espagne, lieu dévôt.

Ils étaient plus que chrétiens, ils étaient catholiques; ils étaient plus que catholiques, ils étaient romains; et si ombrageux dans leur foi et si purs, qu'ils refusèrent de s'associer avec les nomades hongrois du comitat de Pesth, commandés et conduits par un vieillard ayant pour sceptre un bâton à pomme d'argent que surmonte l'aigle d'Autriche à deux têtes. Il est vrai que ces hongrois étaient schismatiques au point de célébrer l'Assomption le 27 août, ce qui est abominable.

En Angleterre, tant que régnèrent les Stuarts, l'affiliation des comprachicos fut, nous en avons laissé entrevoir les motifs, peu près protégée. Jacques II, homme fervent, qui persécutait les juifs et traquait les gypsies, fut bon prince pour les comprachicos. On a vu pourquoi. Les comprachicos étaient acheteurs de la denrée humaine dont le roi était marchand. Ils excellaient dans les disparitions. Le bien de l'État veut de temps en temps des disparitions. Un héritier gênant, en bas âge, qu'ils prenaient et qu'ils maniaient, perdait sa forme. Ceci facilitait les confiscations. Les transferts de seigneuries aux favoris en étaient simplifiés. Les comprachicos étaient de plus très discrets et très taciturnes, s'engageaient au silence, et tenaient parole, ce qui est nécessaire pour les choses d'État.

Il n'y avait presque pas d'exemple qu'ils eussent trahi les secrets du roi. C'était, il est vrai, leur intérêt. Et si le roi eût perdu confiance, ils eussent été fort en danger, Ils étaient donc de ressource au point de vue de la politique. En outre, ces artistes fournissaient des chanteurs au saint-père. Les comprachicos étaient utiles au miserere d'Allegri. Ils étaient particulièrement dévôts à Marie. Tout ceci plaisait au papisme des Stuarts. Jacques II ne pouvait être hostile à des hommes religieux qui poussaient la dévotion à la vierge jusqu' fabriquer des eunuques. En 1688 il y eut un changement de dynastie en Angleterre. Orange supplanta Stuart. Guillaume III remplaça Jacques II.

Jacques II alla mourir en exil où il se fit des miracles sur son tombeau, et où ses reliques guérirent l'évêque d'Autun de la fistule, digne récompense des vertus chrétiennes de ce prince.

Guillaume, n'ayant point les mêmes idées ni les mêmes pratiques que Jacques, fut sévère aux comprachicos. Il mit beaucoup de bonne volonté à l'écrasement de cette vermine.

Un statut des premiers temps de Guillaume et Marie frappa rudement l'affiliation des acheteurs d'enfants. Ce fut un coup de massue sur les comprachicos, désormais pulvérisés. Aux termes de ce statut, les hommes de cette affiliation, pris et dûment convaincus, devaient être marqués sur l’épaule d’un fer chaud imprimant un R, qui signifie *rogue*, c’est-à-dire gueux; sur la main gauche d’un T, signifiant *thief*, c’est-à-dire voleur; et sur la main droite d’un M, signifiant *man slay*, c’est-à-dire meurtrier. Les chefs, «présumés riches, quoique d’aspect mendiant», seraient punis du *collistrigium*, qui est le pilori, et marqués au front d’un P, plus leurs biens confisqués et les arbres de leurs bois déracinés. Ceux qui ne dénonceraient point les comprachicos seraient «châtiés de confiscation et de prison perpétuelle», comme pour le crime de misprision. Quant aux femmes trouvées parmi ces hommes, elles subiraient le *cucking stool*, qui est un trébuchet dont l’appellation, composée du mot français *coquine* et du mot allemand *stuhl*, signifie «chaise de p.....». La loi anglaise étant douée d’une longévité bizarre, cette punition existe encore dans la législation d’Angleterre pour «les femmes querelleuses». On suspend le cucking stool au-dessus d’une rivière ou d’un étang, on asseoit la femme dedans, et on laisse tomber la chaise dans l’eau, puis on la retire, et on recommence trois fois ce plongeon de la femme, «pour rafraîchir sa colère», dit le commentateur Chamberlayne.

LIVRE PREMIER

LA NUIT MOINS NOIRE QUE L’HOMME

I

LA POINTE SUD DE PORTLAND

Une bise opiniâtre du nord souffla sans discontinuer sur le continent européen, et plus rudement encore sur l’Angleterre, pendant tout le mois de décembre 1689 et tout le mois de janvier 1690. De là le froid calamiteux qui a fait noter cet hiver comme «mémorable aux pauvres» sur les marges de la vieille bible de la chapelle presbytérienne des Non Jurors de Londres. Grâce à la solidité utile de l’antique parchemin monarchique employé aux registres officiels, de longues listes d’indigents trouvés morts de famine et de nudité sont encore lisibles aujourd’hui dans beaucoup de répertoires locaux, particulièrement dans les pouillés de la Clink liberty Court du bourg de Southwark, de la Pie powder Court, ce qui veut dire Cour des pieds poudreux, de la White Chapel Court, tenue au village de Starney par le bailly du seigneur. La Tamise prit, ce qui n’arrive pas une fois par siècle, la glace s’y formant difficilement à cause de la secousse de la mer. Les chariots roulèrent sur la rivière gelée; il y eut sur la Tamise foire avec tentes, et combats d’ours et de taureaux; on y rôtit un boeuf entier sur la glace. Cette épaisseur de glace dura deux mois. La pénible année 1690 dépassa en rigueur même les hivers célèbres du commencement du dix-septième siècle, si minutieusement observés par le docteur Gédéon Delaun, lequel a été honoré par la ville de Londres d’un buste avec piédouche en qualité d’apothicaire du roi Jacques Ier.

Un soir, vers la fin d’une des plus glaciales journées de ce mois de janvier 1690, il se passait dans une des nombreuses anses inhospitalières du golfe de Portland quelque chose d’inusité qui faisait crier et tournoyer à l’entrée de cette anse les mouettes et les oies de mer, n’osant rentrer.

Dans cette crique, la plus périlleuse de toutes les anses du golfe quand règnent de certains vents et par conséquent la plus solitaire, commode, à cause de son danger même, aux navires qui se cachent, un petit bâtiment, accostant presque la falaise, grâce à l’eau profonde, était amarré à une pointe de roche. On a tort de dire la nuit tombe; on devrait dire la nuit monte; car c’est de terre que vient l’obscurité. Il faisait déjà nuit au bas de la falaise; il faisait encore jour en haut. Qui se fût approché du bâtiment amarré, eût reconnu une ourque biscayenne.

Le soleil, caché toute la journée par les brumes, venait de se coucher. On commençait à sentir cette angoisse profonde et noire qu'on pourrait nommer l'anxiété du soleil absent.

Le vent ne venant pas de la mer, l'eau de la crique était calme.

C'était, en hiver surtout, une exception heureuse. Ces criques de Portland sont presque toujours des havres de barre. La mer dans les gros temps s'y émeut considérablement, et il faut beaucoup d'adresse et de routine pour passer là en sûreté. Ces petits ports, plutôt apparents que réels, font un mauvais service. Il est redoutable d'y entrer et terrible d'en sortir.

Ce soir-là, par extraordinaire, nul péril.

L'ourque de Biscaye est un ancien gabarit tombé en désuétude.

Cette ourque qui a rendu des services, même à la marine militaire, était une coque robuste, barque par la dimension, navire par la solidité. Elle figurait dans l'Armada; l'ourque de guerre atteignait, il est vrai, de forts tonnages; ainsi la capitainesse *Grand Griffon*, montée par Lope de Médina, jaugeait six cent cinquante tonneaux et portait quarante canons; mais l'ourque marchande et contrebandière était d'un très faible échantillon. Les gens de mer estimaient et considéraient ce gabarit chétif. Les cordages de l'ourque étaient formés de tourons de chanvre, quelques-uns avec âme en fil de fer, ce qui indique une intention probable, quoique peu scientifique, d'obtenir des indications dans les cas de tension magnétique; la délicatesse de ce gréement n'excluait point les gros câbles de fatigue, les cabrias des galères espagnoles et les cameli des trirèmes romaines. La barre était très longue, ce qui a l'avantage d'un grand bras de levier, mais l'inconvénient d'un petit arc d'effort; deux rouets dans deux clans au bout de la barre corrigeaient ce défaut et réparaient un peu cette perte de force. La boussole était bien logée dans un habitacle parfaitement carré, et bien balancée par ses deux cadres de cuivre placés l'un dans l'autre horizontalement sur de petits boulons comme dans les lampes de Cardan. Il y avait de la science et de la subtilité dans la construction de l'ourque, mais c'était de la science ignorante et de la subtilité barbare.

L'ourque était primitive comme la prame et la pirogue, participait de la prame par la stabilité et de la pirogue par la vitesse, et avait, comme toutes les embarcations nées de l'instinct pirate et pêcheur, de remarquables qualités de mer.

Elle était propre aux eaux fermées et aux eaux ouvertes; son jeu de voiles, compliqué d'étais et très particulier, lui permettait de naviguer petitement dans les baies closes des Asturies, qui sont presque des bassins, comme Pasage par exemple, et largement en pleine mer; elle pouvait faire le tour d'un lac et le tour du monde; singulières nefs à deux fins, bonnes pour l'étang, et bonnes pour la tempête. L'ourque était parmi les navires ce qu'est le hochequeue parmi les oiseaux, un des plus petits et un des plus hardis; le hochequeue, perché, fait à peine plier un roseau, et, envolé, traverse l'océan.

Les ourques de Biscaye, même les plus pauvres, étaient dorées et peintes. Ce tatouage est dans le génie de ces peuples charmants, un peu sauvages. Le sublime bariolage de leurs montagnes, quadrillées de neiges et de prairies, leur révèle le prestige âpre de l'ornement quand même. Ils sont indigents et magnifiques; ils mettent des armoiries à leurs chaumières; ils ont de grands ânes qu'ils chamarrent de grelots, et de grands boeufs qu'ils coiffent de plumes; leurs chariots, dont on entend à deux lieues grincer les roues, sont enluminés, ciselés, et enrubannés. Un savetier a un bas-relief sur sa porte; c'est saint Crépin et une savate, mais c'est en pierre. Ils galonnent leur veste de cuir; ils ne recousent pas le haillon, mais ils le brodent. Gaîté profonde et superbe. Les basques sont, comme les grecs, des fils du soleil. Tandis que le valencien se drape nu et triste dans sa couverture de laine rousse trouée pour le passage de la tête, les gens de Galice et de Biscaye ont la joie des belles chemises de toiles blanchies à la rosée. Leurs seuils et leurs fenêtres regorgent de faces blondes et fraîches, riant sous les guirlandes de maïs. Une sérénité joviale et fière éclate dans leurs arts naïfs, dans leurs industries, dans leurs coutumes, dans la toilette des filles, dans les chansons. La montagne, cette masure colossale, est en Biscaye toute lumineuse; les rayons entrent et sortent par toutes ses brèches. Le farouche Jaïzquivel est plein d'idylles. La Biscaye est la grâce pyrénéenne comme la Savoie est la grâce alpestre. Les redoutables baies qui avoisinent Saint-Sébastien, Leso et Fontarabie, mêlent aux tourmentes, aux nuées, aux écumes par-dessus les caps, aux rages de la vague et du vent, l'horreur, au fracas, des batelières couronnées de roses. Qui a vu le pays basque veut le revoir. C'est la terre bénie. Deux récoltes par an, des villages gais et sonores, une pauvret altière, tout le dimanche un bruit de guitares, danses, castagnettes, amours, des maisons propres et claires, les cigognes dans les clochers.

Revenons à Portland, âpre montagne de la mer.

La presqu’île de Portland, vue en plan géométral, offre l’aspect d’une tête d’oiseau dont le bec est tourné vers l’océan et l’occiput vers Weymouth; l’isthme est le cou.

Portland, au grand dommage de sa sauvagerie, existe aujourd’hui pour l’industrie. Les côtes de Portland ont été découvertes par les carriers et les plâtriers vers le milieu du dix-huitième siècle. Depuis cette époque, avec la roche de Portland, on fait du ciment dit romain, exploitation utile qui enrichit le pays et défigure la baie. Il y a deux cents ans, ces côtes étaient ruinées comme une falaise, aujourd’hui elles sont ruinées comme une carrière; la pioche mord petitement, et le flot grandement; de là une diminution de beauté. Au gaspillage magnifique de l’océan a succédé la coupe réglée de l’homme. Cette coupe réglée a supprimé la crique où était amarrée l’ourque biscayenne. Pour retrouver quelque vestige de ce petit mouillage démoli, il faudrait chercher sur la côte orientale de la presqu’île, vers la pointe, au delà de Folly-Pier et de Dirdle-Pier, au delà même de Wakeham, entre le lieu dit Church-Hop et le lieu dit Southwell.

La crique, murée de tous les côtés par des escarpements plus hauts qu’elle n’était large, était de minute en minute plus envahie par le soir; la brume trouble, propre au crépuscule, s’y épaississait; c’était comme une crue d’obscurité au fond d’un puits; la sortie de la crique sur la mer, couloir étroit, dessinait dans cet intérieur presque nocturne, où le flot remuait, une fissure blanchâtre. Il fallait être tout près pour apercevoir l’ourque amarrée aux rochers et comme cachée dans leur grand manteau d’ombre. Une planche jetée du bord à une saillie basse et plate de la falaise, unique point où l’on pût prendre pied, mettait la barque en communication avec la terre; des formes noires marchaient et se croisaient sur ce pont branlant, et dans ces ténèbres des gens s’embarquaient.

Il faisait moins froid dans la crique qu’en mer, grâce à l’écran de roche dressé au nord de ce bassin; diminution qui n’empêchait pas ces gens de grelotter. Ils se hâtaient.

Les effets de crépuscule découpent les formes à l’emporte-pièce; de certaines dentelures à leurs habits étaient visibles, et montraient que ces gens appartenaient à la classe nommée en Angleterre *the ragged*, c’est-à-dire les déguenillés.

On distinguait vaguement dans les reliefs de la falaise la torsion d’un sentier. Une fille qui laisse pendre et traîner son lacet sur un dossier de fauteuil dessine, sans s’en douter, à peu près tous les sentiers de falaises et de montagnes. Le sentier de cette crique, plein de noeuds et de coudes, presque à pic, et meilleur pour les chèvres que pour les hommes, aboutissait à la plate-forme où était la planche. Les sentiers de falaise sont habituellement d’une déclivité peu tentante; ils s’offrent moins comme une route que comme une chute; ils croulent plutôt qu’ils ne descendent. Celui-ci, ramification vraisemblable de quelque chemin dans la plaine, était désagréable à regarder, tant il était vertical. On le voyait d’en bas gagner en zigzag les assises hautes de la falaise d’où il débouchait à travers des effondrements sur le plateau supérieur par une entaille au rocher. C’est par ce sentier qu’avaient dû venir les passagers que cette barque attendait dans cette crique.

Autour du mouvement d’embarquement qui se faisait dans la crique, mouvement visiblement effaré et inquiet, tout était solitaire.
On n’entendait ni un pas, ni un bruit, ni un souffle. A peine apercevait-on, de l’autre côté de la rade, à l’entrée de la baie de Ringstead, une flottille, évidemment fourvoyée, de bateaux pêcher le requin. Ces bateaux polaires avaient été chassés des eaux danoises dans les eaux anglaises par les bizarreries de la mer. Les bises boréales jouent de ces tours aux pêcheurs. Ceux-ci venaient de se réfugier au mouillage de Portland, signe de mauvais temps présumable et de péril au large. Ils étaient occupés à jeter l’ancre, La maîtresse barque, placée en vedette selon l’ancien usage des flottilles norvégiennes, dessinait en noir tout son gréement sur la blancheur plate de la mer, et l’on voyait à l’avant la fourche de pêche portant toutes les variétés de crocs et de harpons destinés au seymnus glacialis, au squalus acanthias et au squalus spinax niger, et le filet à prendre la grande selache. A ces quelques embarcations près, toutes balayées dans le même coin, l’oeil, en ce vaste horizon de Portland, ne rencontrait rien de vivant. Pas une maison, pas un navire. La côte, à cette époque, n’était pas habitée, et la rade, en cette saison, n’était pas habitable.

Quel que fût l’aspect du temps, les êtres qu’allait emmener l’ourque biscayenne n’en pressaient pas moins le départ. Ils faisaient au bord de la mer une sorte de groupe affairé et confus, aux allures rapides. Les distinguer l’un de l’autre était difficile. Impossible de voir s’ils étaient vieux ou jeunes. Le soir indistinct les mêlait et les estompait.
L’ombre, ce masque, était sur leur visage. C’étaient des silhouettes dans de la nuit. Ils étaient huit, il y avait probablement parmi eux une ou deux

femmes, malaisées reconnaître sous les déchirures et les loques dont tout le groupe était affublé, accoutrements qui n'étaient plus ni des vêtements de femmes, ni des vêtements d'hommes. Les haillons n'ont pas de sexe.

Une ombre plus petite, allant et venant parmi les grandes, indiquait un nain ou un enfant.

C'était un enfant.

II

ISOLEMENT

En observant de près, voici ce qu'on eût pu noter.

Tous portaient de longues capes, percées et rapiécées, mais drapées, et au besoin les cachant jusqu'aux yeux, bonnes contre la bise et la curiosité.

Sous ces capes, ils se mouvaient agilement. La plupart étaient coiffés d'un mouchoir roulé autour de la tête, sorte de rudiment par lequel le turban commence en Espagne. Cette coiffure n'avait rien d'insolite en Angleterre.

Le midi à cette époque était à la mode dans le nord. Peut-être cela tenait-il à ce que le nord battait le midi. Il en triomphait, et l'admirait. Après la défaite de l'armada, le castillan fut chez Élisabeth un élégant baragouin de cour. Parler anglais chez la reine d'Angleterre était presque «shocking». Subir un peu les moeurs de ceux à qui l'on fait la loi, c'est l'habitude du vainqueur barbare vis-à-vis le vaincu raffiné; le tartare contemple et imite le chinois. C'est pourquoi les modes castillanes pénétraient en Angleterre; en revanche, les intérêts anglais s'infiltraient en Espagne.

Un des hommes du groupe qui s'embarquait avait un air de chef.

Il était chaussé d'alpargates, et attifé de guenilles passementées et dorées, et d'un gilet de paillon, luisant, sous sa cape, comme un ventre de poisson. Un autre rabattait sur son visage un vaste feutre taillé en sombrero. Ce feutre n'avait pas de trou pour la pipe, ce qui indiquait un homme lettré.

L'enfant, par-dessus ses loques, était affublé, selon le principe qu'une veste d'homme est un manteau d'enfant, d'une souquenille de gabier qui lui descendait jusqu'aux genoux.

Sa taille laissait deviner un garçon de dix à onze ans. Il était pieds nus.

L'équipage de l'ourque se composait d'un patron et de deux matelots.

L'ourque, vraisemblablement, venait d'Espagne, et y retournait.

Elle faisait, sans nul doute, d'une côte à l'autre, un service furtif.

Les personnes qu'elle était en train d'embarquer, chuchotaient entre elles.

Le chuchotement que ces êtres échangeaient était composite.

Tantôt un mot castillan, tantôt un mot allemand, tantôt un mot français;

parfois du gallois, parfois du basque. C’était un patois, à moins que ce ne fût un argot.

Ils paraissaient être de toutes les nations et de la même bande.

L’équipage était probablement des leurs. Il y avait de la connivence dans cet embarquement.

Cette troupe bariolée semblait être une compagnie de camarades, peut-être un tas de complices.

S’il y eût eu un peu plus de jour, et si l’on eût regardé un peu curieusement, on eût aperçu sur ces gens des chapelets et des scapulaires dissimulés à demi sous les guenilles. Un des à peu près de femme mêlés au groupe avait un rosaire presque pareil pour la grosseur des grains à un rosaire de derviche, et facile reconnaître pour un rosaire irlandais de Llanymthefry, qu’on appelle aussi Llanandiffry.

On eût également pu remarquer, s’il y avait eu moins d’obscurité, une Nuestra-Señora, avec le niño, sculptée et dorée à l’avant de l’ourque. C’était probablement la Notre-Dame basque, sorte de panagia des vieux cantabres. Sous cette figure, tenant lieu de poupée de proue, il y avait une cage à feu, point allumée en ce moment, excès de précaution qui indiquait un extrême souci de se cacher. Cette cage à feu était évidemment à deux fins; quand on l’allumait, elle brûlait pour la vierge et éclairait la mer, fanal faisant fonction de cierge.

Le taille-mer, long, courbe et aigu sous le beaupré, sortait de l’avant comme une corne de croissant. A la naissance du taille-mer, aux pieds de la vierge, était agenouillé un ange adossé à l’étrave, ailes ployées, et regardant l’horizon avec une lunette. — L’ange était doré comme la Notre-Dame.

Il y avait dans le taille-mer des jours et des claires-voies pour laisser passer les lames, occasion de dorures et d’arabesques.

Sous la Notre-Dame, était écrit en majuscules dorées le mot *Matutina*, nom du navire, illisible en ce moment à cause de l’obscurité.

Au pied de la falaise était déposé, en désordre dans le pêle-mêle du départ, le chargement que ces voyageurs emportaient et qui, grâce à la planche servant de pont, passait rapidement du rivage dans la barque. Des sacs de biscuits, une caque de *stock-fish*, une boîte de portative soup, trois barils, un d’eau douce, un de malt, un de goudron, quatre ou cinq bouteilles d’ale, un vieux portemanteau bouclé dans des courroies, des malles, des coffres, une balle d’étoupes pour torches et signaux, tel était ce chargement. Ces déguenillés avaient des valises, ce qui semblait indiquer une existence nomade; les gueux ambulants sont forcés de posséder quelque chose; ils voudraient bien parfois s’envoler comme des oiseaux, mais ils ne peuvent à moins d’abandonner leur gagne-pain. Ils ont nécessairement des caisses d’outils et des instruments de travail, quelle que soit leur profession errante. Ceux-ci traînaient ce bagage, embarras dans plus d’une occasion.

Il n’avait pas dû être aisé d’apporter ce déménagement au bas de cette falaise. Ceci du reste révélait une intention de départ définitif.

On ne perdait pas le temps; c’était un passage continuel du rivage à la barque et de la barque au rivage; chacun prenait sa part de la besogne; l’un portait un sac, l’autre un coffre. Les femmes possibles ou probables dans cette promiscuit travaillaient comme les autres. On surchargeait l’enfant.

Si cet enfant avait dans ce groupe son père et sa mère, cela est douteux. Aucun signe de vie ne lui était donné. On le faisait travailler, rien de plus. Il paraissait, non un enfant dans une famille, mais un esclave dans une tribu. Il servait tout le monde, et personne ne lui parlait.

Du reste, il se dépêchait, et, comme toute cette troupe obscure dont il faisait partie, il semblait n’avoir qu’une pensée, s’embarquer bien vite. Savait-il pourquoi? probablement non.

Il se hâtait machinalement. Parce qu’il voyait les autres se hâter.

L’ourque était pontée. L’arrimage du chargement dans la cale fut promptement exécuté, le moment de prendre le large arriva. La dernière caisse avait été portée sur le pont, il n’y avait plus embarquer que les hommes. Les deux de cette troupe qui semblaient les femmes étaient déjà à bord; six, dont l’enfant, étaient encore sur la plate-forme basse de la falaise. Le mouvement de départ se fit dans le navire, le patron saisit la barre, un matelot prit une hache pour trancher le câble d’amarre.

Trancher, signe de hâte; quand on a le temps, on dénoue.

Andamos, dit à demi-voix celui des six qui paraissait le chef, et qui avait des paillettes sur ses guenilles. L’enfant se précipita vers la planche pour passer le premier. Comme il y mettait le pied, deux des hommes se ruant, au risque de le jeter à l’eau, entrèrent avant lui, un troisième l’écarta du coude et passa, le quatrième le repoussa du poing et suivit le troisième, le cinquième, qui était le chef, bondit plutôt qu’il n’entra dans la barque, et, en y sautant, poussa du talon la planche qui tomba à la mer, un coup de hache coupa l’amarre, la barre du gouvernail vira, le navire quitta le rivage, et l’enfant resta à terre.

III

SOLITUDE

L’enfant demeura immobile sur le rocher, l’oeil fixe. Il n’appela point. Il ne réclama point. C’était inattendu pourtant; il ne dit pas une parole. Il y avait dans le navire le même silence. Pas un cri de l’enfant vers ces hommes, pas un adieu de ces hommes à l’enfant. Il y avait des deux parts une acceptation muette de l’intervalle grandissant. C’était comme une séparation de mânes au bord d’un styx. L’enfant, comme clou sur la roche que la marée haute commençait à baigner, regarda la barque s’éloigner. On eût dit qu’il comprenait. Quoi? que comprenait-il? l’ombre.

Un moment après, l’ourque atteignit le détroit de sortie de la crique et s’y engagea. On aperçut la pointe du mât sur le ciel clair au-dessus des blocs fendus entre lesquels serpentait le détroit comme entre deux murailles. Cette pointe erra au haut des roches, et sembla s’y enfoncer. On ne la vit plus. C’était fini. La barque avait pris la mer.

L’enfant regarda cet évanouissement.

Il était étonné, mais rêveur.

Sa stupéfaction se compliquait d’une sombre constatation de la vie. Il semblait qu’il y eût de l’expérience dans cet être commençant. Peut-être jugeait-il déjà. L’épreuve, arrivée trop tôt, construit parfois au fond de la réflexion obscure des enfants on ne sait quelle balance redoutable où ces pauvres petites âmes pèsent Dieu.

Se sentant innocent, il consentait. Pas une plainte.

L’irréprochable ne reproche pas.

Cette brusque élimination qu’on faisait de lui ne lui arracha pas même un geste. Il eut une sorte de refroidissement intérieur.

Sous cette subite voie de fait du sort qui semblait mettre le dénoûment de son existence presque avant le début, l’enfant ne fléchit pas. Il reçut ce coup de foudre, debout.

Il était évident, pour qui eût vu son étonnement sans accablement, que, dans ce groupe qui l’abandonnait, rien ne l’aimait, et il n’aimait rien.

Pensif, il oubliait le froid. Tout à coup l’eau lui mouilla les pieds; la marée montait; une haleine lui passa dans les cheveux; la bise s’élevait. Il frissonna. Il eut de la tête aux pieds ce tremblement qui est le réveil.

Il jeta les yeux autour de lui.

Il était seul.

Il n'y avait pas eu pour lui jusqu'à ce jour sur la terre d'autres hommes que ceux qui étaient en ce moment dans l'ourque.

Ces hommes venaient de se dérober.

Ajoutons, chose étrange à énoncer, que ces hommes, les seuls qu'il connût, lui étaient inconnus.

Il n'eût pu dire qui étaient ces hommes.

Son enfance s'était passée parmi eux, sans qu'il eût la conscience d'être des leurs. Il leur était juxtaposé; rien de plus.

Il venait d'être oublié par eux.

Il n'avait pas d'argent sur lui, pas de souliers aux pieds, peine un vêtement sur le corps, pas même un morceau de pain dans sa poche.

C'était l'hiver. C'était le soir. Il fallait marcher plusieurs lieues avant d'atteindre une habitation humaine.

Il ignorait où il était.

Il ne savait rien, sinon que ceux qui étaient venus avec lui au bord de cette mer s'en étaient allés sans lui.

Il se sentit mis hors de la vie.

Il sentait l'homme manquer sous lui.

Il avait dix ans.

L'enfant était dans un désert, entre des profondeurs où il voyait monter la nuit et des profondeurs où il entendait gronder les vagues.

Il étira ses petits bras maigres et bâilla.

Puis, brusquement, comme quelqu'un qui prend son parti, hardi, et se dégourdissant, et avec une agilité d'écureuil, — de clown peut-être, — il tourna le dos à la crique et se mit à monter le long de la falaise. Il escalada le sentier, le quitta, et revint, alerte et se risquant. Il se hâtait maintenant vers la terre. On eût dit qu'il avait un itinéraire. Il n'allait nulle part pourtant.

Il se hâtait sans but, espèce de fugitif devant la destinée.

Gravir est de l'homme, grimper est de la bête; il gravissait et grimpait.

Les escarpements de Portland étant tournés au sud, il n'y avait presque pas de neige dans le sentier. L'intensité du froid avait d'ailleurs fait de cette neige une poussière, assez incommode au marcheur. L'enfant s'en tirait. Sa veste d'homme, trop large, était une complication, et le gênait. De temps en temps, il rencontrait sur un surplomb ou dans une déclivité un peu de glace qui le faisait tomber. Il se raccrochait à une branche sèche ou à une saillie de pierre, après avoir pendu quelques instants sur le précipice. Une fois il eut affaire une veine de brèche qui s'écroula brusquement sous lui, l'entraînant dans sa démolition. Ces effondrements de la brèche sont perfides. L'enfant eut durant quelques secondes le glissement d'une tuile sur un toit; il dégringola jusqu' l'extrême bord de la chute; une touffe d'herbe empoignée à propos le sauva. Il ne cria pas plus devant l'abîme qu'il n'avait cri devant les hommes; il s'affermit et remonta silencieux. L'escarpement était haut. Il eut ainsi quelques péripéties. Le précipice s'aggravait de l'obscurité. Cette roche verticale n'avait pas de fin.

Elle reculait devant l'enfant dans la profondeur d'en haut. A mesure que l'enfant montait, le sommet semblait monter. Tout en grimpant, il considérait cet entablement noir, posé comme un barrage entre le ciel et lui. Enfin il arriva.

Il sauta sur le plateau. On pourrait presque dire: il prit terre, car il sortait du précipice.

A peine fut-il hors de l'escarpement qu'il grelotta. Il sentit son visage la bise, cette morsure de la nuit. L'aigre vent du nord-ouest souffla. Il serra contre sa poitrine sa serpillière de matelot.

C'était un bon vêtement. Cela s'appelle, en langage du bord, un *suroit*, parce que cette sorte de vareuse-là est peu pénétrable aux pluies du sud-ouest.

L'enfant, parvenu sur le plateau, s'arrêta, posa fermement ses deux pieds nus sur le sol gelé, et regarda.

Derrière lui la mer, devant lui la terre, au-dessus de sa tête le ciel.

Mais un ciel sans astres. Une bruine opaque masquait le zénith.

En arrivant au haut du mur de rocher, il se trouvait tourné du côté de la terre, il la considéra. Elle était devant lui à perte de vue, plate, glacée, couverte de neige. Quelques touffes de bruyère frissonnaient. On ne voyait pas de routes. Rien. Pas même une cabane de berger. On apercevait çà et là des tournoiements de spirales blêmes qui étaient des tourbillons de neige fine arrachés de terre par le vent, et s'envolant. Une succession d'ondulations de terrain, devenue tout de suite brumeuse, se plissait dans l'horizon. Les grandes plaines ternes se perdaient sous le brouillard blanc. Silence profond. Cela s'élargissait comme l'infini et se taisait comme la tombe.

L’enfant se retourna vers la mer.

La mer comme la terre était blanche; l’une de neige, l’autre d’écume. Rien de mélancolique comme le jour que faisait cette double blancheur. Certains éclairages de la nuit ont des duretés très nettes; la mer était de l’acier, les falaises étaient de l’ébène. De la hauteur où était l’enfant, la baie de Portland apparaissait presque en carte géographique, blafarde dans son demi-cercle de collines; il y avait du rêve dans ce paysage nocturne; une rondeur pâle engagée dans un croissant obscur, la lune offre quelquefois cet aspect. D’un cap à l’autre, dans toute cette côte, on n’apercevait pas un seul scintillement indiquant un foyer allumé, une fenêtre éclairée, une maison vivante. Absence de lumière sur la terre comme au ciel; pas une lampe en bas, pas un astre en haut. Les larges aplanissements des flots dans le golfe avaient çà et là des soulèvements subits.

Le vent dérangeait et fronçait cette nappe. L’ourque était encore visible dans la baie, fuyant.

C’était un triangle noir qui glissait sur cette lividité.

Au loin, confusément, les étendues d’eau remuaient dans le clair-obscur sinistre de l’immensité,

La *Matutina* filait vite. Elle décroissait de minute en minute.

Rien de rapide comme la fonte d’un navire dans les lointains de la mer.

A un certain moment, elle alluma son fanal de proue; il est probable que l’obscurité se faisait inquiétante autour d’elle, et que le pilote sentait le besoin d’éclairer la vague. Ce point lumineux, scintillation aperçue de loin, adhérait lugubrement sa haute et longue forme noire. On eût dit un linceul debout et en marche au milieu de la mer, sous lequel rôderait quelqu’un qui aurait à la main une étoile.

Il y avait dans l’air une imminence d’orage. L’enfant ne s’en rendait pas compte, mais un marin eût tremblé. C’était cette minute d’anxiété préalable où il semble que les éléments vont devenir des personnes, et qu’on va assister à la transfiguration mystérieuse du vent en aquilon. La mer va être océan, les forces vont se révéler volontés, ce qu’on prend pour une chose est une âme. On va le voir. De là l’horreur. L’âme de l’homme redoute cette confrontation avec l’âme de la nature.

Un chaos allait faire son entrée. Le vent, froissant le brouillard, et échafaudant les nuées derrière, posait le décor de ce drame terrible de la vague et de l’hiver qu’on appelle une tempête de neige.

Le symptôme des navires rentrants se manifestait. Depuis quelques moments la rade n’était plus déserte. A chaque instant surgissaient de derrière les caps des barques inquiètes se hâtant vers le mouillage. Les unes doublaient le Portland Bill, les autres le Saint-Albans Head. Du plus extrême lointain, des voiles venaient. C’était à qui se réfugierait. Au sud, l’obscurité s’épaississait et les nuages pleins de nuit se rapprochaient de la mer. La pesanteur de la tempête en surplomb et pendante apaisait lugubrement le flot. Ce n’était point le moment de partir. L’ourque était partie cependant.

Elle avait mis le cap au sud. Elle était déjà hors du golfe et en haute mer. Tout à coup la bise souffla en rafale; la *Matutina*, qu’on distinguait encore très nettement, se couvrit de toile, comme résolue à profiter de l’ouragan. C’était le noroit, qu’on nommait jadis vent de galerne, bise sournoise et colère. Le noroit eut tout de suite sur l’ourque un commencement d’acharnement. L’ourque, prise de côté, pencha, mais n’hésita pas, et continua sa course vers le large. Ceci indiquait une fuite plutôt qu’un voyage, moins de crainte de la mer que de la terre, et plus de souci de la poursuite des hommes que de la poursuite des vents.

L’ourque, passant par tous les degrés de l’amoindrissement, s’enfonça dans l’horizon; la petite étoile qu’elle traînait dans l’ombre pâlit; l’ourque, de plus en plus amalgamée à la nuit, disparut.

Cette fois, c’était pour jamais.

Du moins l’enfant parut le comprendre, il cessa de regarder la mer. Ses yeux se reportèrent sur les plaines, les landes, les collines, vers les espaces où il n’était pas impossible peut-être de faire une rencontre vivante. Il se mit en marche dans cet inconnu.

IV

QUESTIONS

Qu’était-ce que cette espèce de bande en fuite laissant derrière elle cet enfant?

Ces évadés étaient-ils des comprachicos?

On a vu plus haut le détail des mesures prises par Guillaume III, et votées en parlement, contre les malfaiteurs, hommes et femmes, dits comprachicos, dits comprapequeños, dits cheylas.

Il y a des législations dispersantes. Ce statut tombant sur les comprachicos détermina une fuite générale, non seulement des comprachicos, mais des vagabonds de toute sorte. Ce fut à qui se déroberait et s’embarquerait. La plupart des comprachicos retournèrent en Espagne. Beaucoup, nous l’avons dit, étaient basques.

Cette loi protectrice de l’enfance eut un premier résultat bizarre; un subit délaissement d’enfants.

Ce statut pénal produisit immédiatement une foule d’enfants trouvés, c’est-à-dire perdus. Rien de plus aisé à comprendre.

Toute troupe nomade contenant un enfant était suspecte; le seul fait de la présence de l’enfant la dénonçait. — Ce sont probablement des comprachicos. — Telle était la première idée du shériff, du prévôt, du constable. De là des arrestations et des recherches. Des gens simplement misérables, réduits à rôder et mendier, étaient pris de la terreur de passer pour comprachicos, bien que ne l’étant pas; mais les faibles sont peu rassurés sur les erreurs possibles de la justice. D’ailleurs les familles vagabondes sont habituellement effarées. Ce qu’on reprochait aux comprachicos, c’était l’exploitation des enfants d’autrui. Mais les promiscuités de la détresse et de l’indigence sont telles qu’il eût été parfois malaisé à un père et à une mère de constater que leur enfant était leur enfant. D’où tenez-vous cet enfant? Comment prouver qu’on le tient de Dieu? L’enfant devenait un danger; on s’en défaisait. Fuir seuls sera plus facile. Le père et la mère se décidaient à le perdre, tantôt dans un bois, tantôt sur une grève, tantôt dans un puits.

On trouva dans les citernes des enfants noyés.

Ajoutons que les comprachicos étaient, à l’imitation de l’Angleterre, traqués désormais par toute l’Europe. Le branle de les poursuivre était donné. Rien n’est tel qu’un grelot attaché.

Il y avait désormais émulation de toutes les polices pour les saisir, et l’alguazil n’était pas moins au guet que le constable.

On pouvait lire encore, il y a vingt-trois ans, sur une pierre de la porte d’Otero, une inscription intraduisible — le code dans les mots brave l’honnêteté — où est du reste marquée par une forte différence pénale la nuance entre les marchands d’enfants et les voleurs d’enfants. Voici l’inscription, en castillan un peu sauvage: *Aqui quedan las orejas de los comprachicos, y las bolsas de los robaniños, mientras que se van ellos al trabajo de mar*. On le voit, les oreilles, etc., confisquées n’empêchaient point les galères. De là un sauve-qui-peut parmi les vagabonds.

Ils partaient effrayés, ils arrivaient tremblants. Sur tout le littoral d’Europe, on surveillait les arrivages furtifs. Pour une bande, s’embarquer avec un enfant était impossible, car débarquer avec un enfant était périlleux.

Perdre l’enfant, c’était plutôt fait.

Par qui l’enfant qu’on vient d’entrevoir dans la pénombre des solitudes de Portland était-il rejeté?

Selon toute apparence, par des comprachicos.

V

L’ARBRE D’INVENTION HUMAINE

Il pouvait être environ sept heures du soir. Le vent maintenant diminuait, signe de recrudescence prochaine. L’enfant se trouvait sur l’extrême plateau sud de la pointe de Portland.

Portland est une presqu’île. Mais l’enfant ignorait ce que c’est qu’une presqu’île et ne savait pas même ce mot, Portland. Il ne savait qu’une chose, c’est qu’on peut marcher jusqu’à ce qu’on tombe. Une notion est un guide; il n’avait pas de notion. On l’avait amené là et laissé là. *On* et *là*, ces deux énigmes, représentaient toute sa destinée; *on* était le genre humain; *là* était l’univers. Il n’avait ici-bas absolument pas d’autre point d’appui que la petite quantité de terre où il posait le talon, terre dure et froide à la nudité de ses pieds. Dans ce grand monde crépusculaire ouvert de toutes parts, qu’y avait-il pour cet enfant? Rien.

Il marchait vers ce Rien.

L’immense abandon des hommes était autour de lui.

Il traversa diagonalement le premier plateau, puis un second, puis un troisième. A l’extrémité de chaque plateau, l’enfant trouvait une cassure de terrain; la pente était quelquefois abrupte, mais toujours courte. Les hautes plaines nues de la pointe de Portland ressemblent à de grandes dalles à demi engagées les unes sous les autres; le côté sud semble entrer sous la plaine précédente, et le côté nord se relève sur la suivante.

Cela fait des ressauts que l’enfant franchissait agilement. De temps en temps il suspendait sa marche et semblait tenir conseil avec lui-même. La nuit devenait très obscure, son rayon visuel se raccourcissait, il ne voyait plus qu’à quelques pas.

Tout à coup il s’arrêta, écouta un instant, fit un imperceptible hochement de tête satisfait, tourna vivement, et se dirigea vers une éminence de hauteur médiocre qu’il apercevait confusément sa droite, au point de la plaine le plus rapproché de la falaise.

Il y avait sur cette éminence une configuration qui semblait dans la brume un arbre. L’enfant venait d’entendre de ce côté un bruit, qui n’était ni le bruit du vent, ni le bruit de la mer.

Ce n’était pas non plus un cri d’animaux. Il pensa qu’il y avait là quelqu’un.

En quelques enjambées il fut au bas du monticule.

Il y avait quelqu’un en effet.

Ce qui était indistinct au sommet de l’éminence était maintenant visible.

C’était quelque chose comme un grand bras sortant de terre tout droit. A l’extrémité supérieure de ce bras, une sorte d’index, soutenu en dessous par le pouce, s’allongeait horizontalement.

Ce bras, ce pouce et cet index dessinaient sur le ciel une équerre. Au point de jonction de cette espèce d’index et de cette espèce de pouce il y avait un fil auquel pendait on ne sait quoi de noir et d’informe. Ce fil, remué par le vent, faisait le bruit d’une chaîne.

C’était ce bruit que l’enfant avait entendu.

Le fil était, vu de près, ce que son bruit annonçait, une chaîne.

Chaîne marine aux anneaux à demi pleins.

Par cette mystérieuse loi d’amalgame qui dans la nature entière superpose les apparences aux réalités, le lieu, l’heure, la brume, la mer tragique, les lointains tumultes visionnaires de l’horizon, s’ajoutaient à cette silhouette, et la faisaient énorme.

La masse liée à la chaîne offrait la ressemblance d’une gaine.

Elle était emmaillottée comme un enfant et longue comme un homme.

Il y avait en haut une rondeur autour de laquelle l’extrémité de la chaîne s’enroulait. La gaine se déchiquetait à sa partie inférieure. Des décharnements sortaient de ces déchirures.

Une brise faible agitait la chaîne, et ce qui pendait à la chaîne vacillait doucement. Cette masse passive obéissait aux mouvements diffus des étendues; elle avait on ne sait quoi de panique; l’horreur qui disproportionne les objets lui ôtait presque la dimension en lui laissant le contour; c’était une condensation de noirceur ayant un aspect; il y avait de la nuit dessus et de la nuit dedans; cela était en proie au grandissement sépulcral; les crépuscules, les levers de lune, les descentes de constellations derrière les falaises, les flottaisons de l’espace, les nuages, toute la rose des vents, avaient fini par entrer dans la composition de ce néant visible; cette espèce de bloc quelconque suspendu dans le vent participait de l’impersonnalité éparse au loin sur la mer et dans le ciel, et les ténèbres achevaient cette chose qui avait été un homme.

C’était ce qui n’est plus.

Être un reste, ceci échappe à la langue humaine. Ne plus exister, et persister, être dans le gouffre et dehors, reparaître au-dessus de la mort, comme insubmersible, il y a une certaine quantité d'impossible mêlée à de telles réalités. De l l'indicible. Cet être, — était-ce un être? — ce témoin noir, était un reste, et un reste terrible. Reste de quoi? De la nature d'abord, de la société ensuite. Zéro et total.

L'inclémence absolue l'avait à sa discrétion. Les profonds oublis de la solitude l'environnaient. Il était livré aux aventures de l'ignoré. Il était sans défense contre l'obscurité, qui en faisait ce qu'elle voulait. Il était à jamais le patient.

Il subissait. Les ouragans étaient sur lui. Lugubre fonction des souffles.

Ce spectre était là au pillage. Il endurait cette voie de fait horrible, la pourriture en plein vent. Il était hors la loi du cercueil. Il avait l'anéantissement sans la paix. Il tombait en cendre l'été et en boue l'hiver. La mort doit avoir un voile, la tombe doit avoir une pudeur. Ici ni pudeur ni voile. La putréfaction cynique et en aveu. Il y a de l'effronterie à la mort à montrer son ouvrage. Elle fait insulte à toutes les sérénités de l'ombre quand elle travaille hors de son laboratoire, le tombeau.

Cet être expiré était dépouillé. Dépouiller une dépouille, inexorable achèvement. Sa moelle n'était plus dans ses os, ses entrailles n'étaient plus dans son ventre, sa voix n'était plus dans son gosier. Un cadavre est une poche que la mort retourne et vide. S'il avait eu un moi, où ce moi était-il? Là encore peut-être, et c'était poignant à penser. Quelque chose d'errant autour de quelque chose d'enchaîné. Peut-on se figurer dans l'obscurité un linéament plus funèbre?

Il existe des réalités ici-bas qui sont comme des issues sur l'inconnu, par où la sortie de la pensée semble possible, et o l'hypothèse se précipite. La conjecture a son *compelle intrare.* Si l'on passe en certains lieux et devant certains objets, on ne peut faire autrement que de s'arrêter en proie aux songes, et de laisser son esprit s'avancer là dedans. Il y a dans l'invisible d'obscures portes entre-bâillées. Nul n'eût pu rencontrer ce trépassé sans méditer.

La vaste dispersion l'usait silencieusement. Il avait eu du sang qu'on avait bu, de la peau qu'on avait mangée, de la chair qu'on avait volée. Rien n'avait passé sans lui prendre quelque chose.

Décembre lui avait emprunté du froid, minuit de l'épouvante, le fer de la rouille, la peste des miasmes, la fleur des parfums.

Sa lente désagrégation était un péage. Péage du cadavre à la rafale, à la pluie, à la rosée, aux reptiles, aux oiseaux.

Toutes les sombres mains de la nuit avaient fouillé ce mort.

C’était on ne sait quel étrange habitant, l’habitant de la nuit.

Il était dans une plaine et sur une colline, et il n’y était pas.

Il était palpable et évanoui. Il était de l’ombre complétant les ténèbres.

Après la disparition du jour, dans la vaste obscurit silencieuse, il devenait lugubrement d’accord avec tout. Il augmentait, rien que parce qu’il était là, le deuil de la tempête et le calme des astres. L’inexprimable, qui est dans le désert, se condensait en lui. Épave d’un destin inconnu, il s’ajoutait toutes les farouches réticences de la nuit. Il y avait dans son mystère une vague réverbération de toutes les énigmes.

On sentait autour de lui comme une décroissance de vie allant jusqu’aux profondeurs. Il y avait dans les étendues environnantes une diminution de certitude et de confiance. Le frisson des broussailles et des herbes, une mélancolie désolée, une anxiété où il semblait qu’il y eût de la conscience, appropriaient tragiquement tout le paysage à cette figure noire suspendue à cette chaîne. La présence d’un spectre dans un horizon est une aggravation à la solitude.

Il était simulacre. Ayant sur lui les souffles qui ne s’apaisent pas, il était l’implacable. Le tremblement éternel le faisait terrible. Il semblait, dans les espaces, un centre, ce qui est effrayant à dire, et quelque chose d’immense s’appuyait sur lui.

Qui sait? Peut-être l’équité entrevue et bravée qui est au del de notre justice. Il y avait, dans sa durée hors de la tombe, de la vengeance des hommes et de sa vengeance à lui. Il faisait, dans ce crépuscule et dans ce désert, une attestation. Il était la preuve de la matière inquiétante, parce que la matière devant laquelle on tremble est de la ruine d’âme. Pour que la matière morte nous trouble, il faut que l’esprit y ait vécu. Il dénonçait la loi d’en bas à la loi d’en haut. Mis là par l’homme, il attendait Dieu. Au-dessus de lui flottaient, avec toutes les torsions indistinctes de la nuée et de la vague, les énormes rêveries de l’ombre.

Derrière cette vision, il y avait on ne sait quelle occlusion sinistre. L’illimité, borné par rien, ni par un arbre, ni par un toit, ni par un passant, était autour de ce mort. Quand l’immanence surplombant sur nous, ciel, gouffre, vie, tombeau, éternité, apparaît patente, c’est alors que nous sentons tout inaccessible, tout défendu, tout muré. Quand l’infini s’ouvre, pas de fermeture plus formidable.

VI

BATAILLE ENTRE LA MORT ET LA NUIT

L'enfant était devant cette chose, muet, étonné, les yeux fixes.

Pour un homme c'eût été un gibet, pour l'enfant c'était une apparition.

Où l'homme eût vu le cadavre, l'enfant voyait le fantôme.

Et puis il ne comprenait point.

Les attractions d'abîme sont de toute sorte; il y en avait une au haut de cette colline. L'enfant fit un pas, puis deux. Il monta, tout en ayant envie de descendre, et approcha, tout en ayant envie de reculer.

Il vint tout près, hardi et frémissant, faire une reconnaissance du fantôme.

Parvenu sous le gibet, il leva la tête et examina.

Le fantôme était goudronné. Il luisait çà et là. L'enfant distinguait la face. Elle était enduite de bitume, et ce masque qui semblait visqueux et gluant se modelait dans les reflets de la nuit. L'enfant voyait la bouche qui était un trou, le nez qui était un trou, et les yeux qui étaient des trous. Le corps était enveloppé et comme ficelé dans une grosse toile imbibée de naphte. La toile s'était moisie et rompue. Un genou passait travers. Une crevasse laissait voir les côtes. Quelques parties étaient cadavre, d'autres squelette. Le visage était couleur de terre; des limaces, qui avaient erré dessus, y avaient laissé de vagues rubans d'argent. La toile, collée aux os, offrait des reliefs comme une robe de statue. Le crâne, fêlé et fendu, avait l'hiatus d'un fruit pourri. Les dents étaient demeurées humaines, elles avaient conservé le rire. Un reste de cri semblait bruire dans la bouche ouverte. Il y avait quelques poils de barbe sur les joues. La tête, penchée, avait un air d'attention.

On avait fait récemment des réparations. Le visage était goudronné de frais, ainsi que le genou qui sortait de la toile, et les côtes. En bas les pieds passaient.

Juste dessous, dans l'herbe, on voyait deux souliers, devenus informes dans la neige et sous les pluies. Ces souliers étaient tombés de ce mort.

L'enfant, pieds nus, regarda ces souliers.

Le vent, de plus en plus inquiétant, avait de ces interruptions qui font partie des apprêts d'une tempête; il avait tout à fait cessé depuis quelques instants. Le cadavre ne bougeait plus. La chaîne avait l’immobilité du fil à plomb.

Comme tous les nouveaux venus dans la vie, et en tenant compte de la pression spéciale de sa destinée, l’enfant avait sans nul doute en lui cet éveil d’idées propre aux jeunes années, qui tâche d’ouvrir le cerveau et qui ressemble aux coups de bec de l’oiseau dans l’oeuf; mais tout ce qu’il y avait dans sa petite conscience en ce moment se résolvait en stupeur. L’excès de sensation, c’est l’effet du trop d’huile, arrive à l’étouffement de la pensée. Un homme se fût fait des questions, l’enfant ne s’en faisait pas; il regardait.

Le goudron donnait à cette face un aspect mouillé. Des gouttes de bitume figées dans ce qui avait été les yeux ressemblaient des larmes. Du reste, grâce à ce bitume, le dégât de la mort était visiblement ralenti, sinon annulé, et réduit au moins de délabrement possible. Ce que l’enfant avait devant lui était une chose dont on avait soin. Cet homme était évidemment précieux. On n’avait pas tenu à le garder vivant, mais on tenait à le conserver mort.

Le gibet était vieux, vermoulu, quoique solide, et servait depuis de longues années.

C’était un usage immémorial en Angleterre de goudronner les contrebandiers. On les pendait au bord de la mer, on les enduisait de bitume, et on les laissait accrochés; les exemples veulent le plein air, et les exemples goudronnés se conservent mieux. Ce goudron était de l’humanité. On pouvait de cette manière renouveler les pendus moins souvent. On mettait des potences de distance en distance sur la côte comme de nos jours des réverbères. Le pendu tenait lieu de lanterne. Il éclairait, à sa façon, ses camarades les contrebandiers. Les contrebandiers, de loin, en mer, apercevaient les gibets. En voilà un, premier avertissement; puis un autre, deuxième avertissement. Cela n’empêchait point la contrebande; mais l’ordre se compose de ces choses-là. Cette mode a duré en Angleterre jusqu’au commencement de ce siècle. En 1822, on voyait encore devant le château de Douvres trois pendus vernis.

Du reste, le procédé conservateur ne se bornait point aux contrebandiers. L’Angleterre tirait le même parti des voleurs, des incendiaires et des assassins. John Painter, qui mit le feu aux magasins maritimes de Portsmouth, fut pendu et goudronné en 1776.

L’abbé Coyer, qui l’appelle Jean le Peintre, le revit en 1777.

John Painter était accroché et enchaîné au-dessus de la ruine qu’il avait faite, et rebadigeonné de temps en temps. Ce cadavre dura, on pourrait presque dire vécut, près de quatorze ans. Il faisait encore un bon service en 1788. En 1790, pourtant, on dut le remplacer. Les égyptiens faisaient cas de la momie du roi; la momie de peuple, à ce qu'il paraît, peut être utile aussi.

Le vent, ayant beaucoup de prise sur le monticule, en avait enlevé toute la neige. L'herbe y reparaissait, avec quelques chardons ça et là. La colline était couverte de ce gazon marin dru et ras qui fait ressembler le haut des falaises à du drap vert. Sous la potence, au point même au-dessus duquel pendaient les pieds du supplicié, il y avait une touffe haute et épaisse, surprenante sur ce sol maigre. Les cadavres émiettés là depuis des siècles expliquaient cette beauté de l'herbe. La terre se nourrit de l'homme.

Une fascination lugubre tenait l'enfant. Il demeurait là, béant.

Il ne baissa le front qu'un moment pour une ortie qui lui piquait les jambes, et qui lui fit la sensation d'une bête. Puis il se redressa. Il regardait au-dessus de lui cette face qui le regardait. Elle le regardait d'autant plus qu'elle n'avait pas d'yeux. C'était du regard répandu, une fixité indicible où il y avait de la lueur et des ténèbres, et qui sortait du crâne et des dents aussi bien que des arcades sourcilières vides. Toute la tête du mort regarde, et c'est terrifiant. Pas de prunelles, et l'on se sent vu. Horreur des larves.

Peu à peu l'enfant devenait lui-même terrible. Il ne bougeait plus. La torpeur le gagnait. Il ne s'apercevait pas qu'il perdait conscience. Il s'engourdissait et s'ankylosait. L'hiver le livrait silencieusement à la nuit; il y a du traître dans l'hiver. L'enfant était presque statue. La pierre du froid entrait dans ses os; l'ombre, ce reptile, se glissait en lui.

L'assoupissement qui sort de la neige monte dans l'homme comme une marée obscure; l'enfant était lentement envahi par une immobilité ressemblant à celle du cadavre. Il allait s'endormir.

Dans la main du sommeil il y a le doigt de la mort. L'enfant se sentait saisi par cette main. Il était au moment de tomber sous le gibet. Il ne savait déjà plus s'il était debout.

La fin, toujours imminente, aucune transition entre être et ne plus être, la rentrée au creuset, le glissement possible à toute minute, c'est ce précipice-là qui est la création.

Encore un instant, et l'enfant et le trépassé, la vie en ébauche et la vie en ruine, allaient se confondre dans le même effacement.

Le spectre eut l'air de le comprendre et de ne pas le vouloir.

Tout à coup il se mit à remuer. On eût dit qu'il avertissait l'enfant. C'était une reprise de vent qui soufflait.

Rien d’étrange comme ce mort en mouvement.

Le cadavre au bout de la chaîne, poussé par le souffle invisible, prenait une attitude oblique, montait à gauche, puis retombait, remontait à droite, et retombait et remontait avec la lente et funèbre précision d’un battant. Va-et-vient farouche. On eût cru voir dans les ténèbres le balancier de l’horloge de l’éternité.

Cela dura quelque temps ainsi. L’enfant devant cette agitation du mort sentait un réveil, et, à travers son refroidissement, avait assez nettement peur. La chaîne, à chaque oscillation, grinçait avec une régularité hideuse. Elle avait l’air de reprendre haleine, puis recommençait. Ce grincement imitait un chant de cigale.

Les approches d’une bourrasque produisent de subites enflures du vent. Brusquement la brise devint bise. L’oscillation du cadavre s’accentua lugubrement. Ce ne fut plus du balancement, ce fut de la secousse. La chaîne, qui grinçait, cria.

Il sembla que ce cri était entendu. Si c’était un appel, il fut obéi. Du fond de l’horizon, un grand bruit accourut.

C’était un bruit d’ailes.

Un incident survenait, l’orageux incident des cimetières et des solitudes, l’arrivée d’une troupe de corbeaux.

Des taches noires volantes piquèrent le nuage, percèrent la brume, grossirent, approchèrent, s’amalgamèrent, s’épaissirent, se hâtant vers la colline, poussant des cris. C’était comme la venue d’une légion. Cette vermine ailée des ténèbres s’abattit sur le gibet.

L’enfant, effaré, recula.

Les essaims obéissent à des commandements. Les corbeaux s’étaient groupés sur la potence. Pas un n’était sur le cadavre.

Ils se parlaient entre eux. Le croassement est affreux. Hurler, siffler, rugir, c’est de la vie; le croassement est une acceptation satisfaite de la putréfaction. On croit entendre le bruit que fait le silence du sépulcre en se brisant. Le croassement est une voix dans laquelle il y a de la nuit.

L’enfant était glacé.

Plus encore par l’épouvante que par le froid.

Les corbeaux se turent. Un d’eux sauta sur le squelette. Ce fut un signal. Tous se précipitèrent, il y eut une nuée d’ailes, puis toutes les plumes se refermèrent, et le pendu disparut sous un fourmillement d'ampoules noires remuant dans l'obscurité. En ce moment, le mort se secoua.

Était-ce lui? Était-ce le vent? Il eut un bond effroyable.

L'ouragan, qui s'élevait, lui venait en aide. Le fantôme entra en convulsion. C'était la rafale, déjà soufflant à pleins poumons, qui s'emparait de lui, et qui l'agitait dans tous les sens. Il devint horrible. Il se mit à se démener. Pantin épouvantable, ayant pour ficelle la chaîne d'un gibet. Quelque parodiste de l'ombre avait saisi son fil et jouait de cette momie. Elle tourna et sauta comme prête à se disloquer. Les oiseaux, effrayés, s'envolèrent. Ce fut comme un rejaillissement de toutes ces bêtes infâmes. Puis ils revinrent. Alors une lutte commença.

Le mort sembla pris d'une vie monstrueuse. Les souffles le soulevaient comme s'ils allaient l'emporter; on eût dit qu'il se débattait et qu'il faisait effort pour s'évader; son carcan le retenait. Les oiseaux répercutaient tous ses mouvements, reculant, puis se ruant, effarouchés et acharnés. D'un côté, une étrange fuite essayée; de l'autre, la poursuite d'un enchaîné.

Le mort, poussé par tous les spasmes de la bise, avait des soubresauts, des chocs, des accès de colère, allait, venait, montait, tombait, refoulant l'essaim éparpillé. Le mort était massue, l'essaim était poussière. La féroce volée assaillante ne lâchait pas prise et s'opiniâtrait. Le mort, comme saisi de folie sous cette meute de becs, multipliait dans le vide ses frappements aveugles semblables aux coups d'une pierre liée à une fronde. Par moments il avait sur lui toutes les griffes et toutes les ailes, puis rien; c'étaient des évanouissements de la horde, tout de suite suivis de retours furieux. Effrayant supplice continuant après la vie. Les oiseaux semblaient frénétiques. Les soupiraux de l'enfer doivent donner passage des essaims pareils. Coups d'ongle, coups de bec, croassements, arrachements de lambeaux qui n'étaient plus de la chair, craquements de la potence, froissements du squelette, cliquetis des ferrailles, cris de la rafale, tumulte, pas de lutte plus lugubre. Une lémure contre des démons. Sorte de combat spectre.

Parfois, la bise redoublant, le pendu pivotait sur lui-même, faisait face à l'essaim de tous les côtés à la fois, paraissait vouloir courir après les oiseaux, et l'on eût dit que ses dents tâchaient de mordre. Il avait le vent pour lui et la chaîne contre lui, comme si les dieux noirs s'en mêlaient. L'ouragan était de la bataille. Le mort se tordait, la troupe d'oiseaux roulait sur lui en spirale. C'était un tournoiement dans un tourbillon.

On entendait en bas un grondement immense, qui était la mer.

L’enfant voyait ce rêve. Subitement il se mit à trembler de tous ses membres, un frisson ruissela le long de son corps, il chancela, tressaillit, faillit tomber, se retourna, pressa son front de ses deux mains, comme si le front était un point d’appui, et, hagard, les cheveux au vent, descendant la colline grands pas, les yeux fermés, presque fantôme lui-même, il prit la fuite, laissant derrière lui ce tourment dans la nuit.

VII

LA POINTE NORD DE PORTLAND

Il courut jusqu'à essoufflement, au hasard, éperdu, dans la neige, dans la plaine, dans l'espace. Cette fuite le réchauffa.

Il en avait besoin. Sans cette course et sans cette épouvante, il était mort.

Quand l'haleine lui manqua, il s'arrêta. Mais il n'osa point regarder en arrière. Il lui semblait que les oiseaux devaient le poursuivre, que le mort devait avoir dénoué sa chaîne et était probablement en marche du même côté que lui, et que sans doute le gibet lui-même descendait la colline, courant après le mort. Il avait peur de voir cela, s'il se retournait.

Lorsqu'il eut repris un peu haleine, il se remit à fuir.

Se rendre compte des faits n'est point de l'enfance. Il percevait des impressions à travers le grossissement de l'effroi, mais sans les lier dans son esprit et sans conclure. Il allait n'importe où ni comment; il courait avec l'angoisse et la difficulté du songe. Depuis près de trois heures qu'il était abandonné, sa marche en avant, tout en restant vague, avait changé de but; auparavant il était en quête, à présent il était en fuite. Il n'avait plus faim, ni froid; il avait peur. Un instinct avait remplacé l'autre. Échapper était maintenant toute sa pensée. Échapper à quoi? à tout. La vie lui apparaissait de toutes parts autour de lui comme une muraille horrible. S'il eût pu s'évader des choses, il l'eût fait.

Mais les enfants ne connaissent point ce bris de prison qu'on nomme le suicide.

Il courait.

Il courut ainsi un temps indéterminé. Mais l'haleine s'épuise, la peur s'épuise aussi.

Tout à coup, comme saisi d'un soudain accès d'énergie et d'intelligence, il s'arrêta, on eût dit qu'il avait honte de se sauver; il se roidit, frappa du pied, dressa résolument la tête, et se retourna.

Il n'y avait plus ni colline, ni gibet, ni vol de corbeaux.

Le brouillard avait repris possession de l'horizon.

L'enfant poursuivit son chemin.

Maintenant il ne courait plus, il marchait. Dire que cette rencontre d'un mort l'avait fait un homme, ce serait limiter l'impression multiple et confuse qu'il subissait. Il y avait dans cette impression beaucoup plus et beaucoup moins. Ce gibet, fort trouble dans ce rudiment de compréhension qui était sa pensée, restait pour lui une apparition. Seulement, une terreur domptée étant un affermissement, il se sentit plus fort. S'il eût été d'âge à se sonder, il eût trouvé en lui mille autres commencements de méditation, mais la réflexion des enfants est informe, et tout au plus sentent-ils l'arrière-goût amer de cette chose obscure pour eux que l'homme plus tard appelle l'indignation.

Ajoutons que l'enfant a ce don d'accepter très vite la fin d'une sensation. Les contours lointains et fuyants, qui font l'amplitude des choses douloureuses, lui échappent. L'enfant est défendu par sa limite, qui est la faiblesse, contre les émotions trop complexes. Il voit le fait, et peu de chose à côté. La difficulté de se contenter des idées partielles n'existe pas pour l'enfant. Le procès de la vie ne s'instruit que plus tard, quand l'expérience arrive avec son dossier. Alors il y a confrontation des groupes de faits rencontrés, l'intelligence renseignée et grandie compare, les souvenirs du jeune âge reparaissent sous les passions comme le palimpseste sous les ratures, ces souvenirs sont des points d'appui pour la logique, et ce qui était vision dans le cerveau de l'enfant devient syllogisme dans le cerveau de l'homme. Du reste l'expérience est diverse, et tourne bien ou mal selon les natures. Les bons mûrissent. Les mauvais pourrissent.

L'enfant avait bien couru un quart de lieue, et marché un autre quart de lieue. Tout à coup il sentit que son estomac le tiraillait. Une pensée, qui tout de suite éclipsa la hideuse apparition de la colline, lui vint violemment: manger. Il y a dans l'homme une bête, heureusement; elle le ramène à la réalité.

Mais quoi manger? mais où manger? mais comment manger?

Il tâta ses poches. Machinalement, car il savait bien qu'elles étaient vides.

Puis il hâta le pas. Sans savoir où il allait, il hâta le pas vers le logis possible.

Cette foi à l'auberge fait partie des racines de la providence dans l'homme.

Croire à un gîte, c'est croire en Dieu.

Du reste, dans cette plaine de neige, rien qui ressemblât à un toit.

L’enfant marchait, la lande continuait, nue à perte de vue.

Il n’y avait jamais eu sur ce plateau d’habitation humaine.

C’est au bas de la falaise, dans des trous de roche, que logeaient jadis, faute de bois pour bâtir des cabanes, les anciens habitants primitifs, qui avaient pour arme une fronde, pour chauffage la fiente de boeuf séchée, pour religion l’idole Heil debout dans une clairière à Dorchester, et pour industrie la pêche de ce faux corail gris que les gallois appelaient *plin* et les grecs *isidis plocamos*.

L’enfant s’orientait du mieux qu’il pouvait. Toute la destinée est un carrefour, le choix des directions est redoutable, ce petit être avait de bonne heure l’option entre les chances obscures. Il avançait cependant; mais, quoique ses jarrets semblassent d’acier, il commençait à se fatiguer. Pas de sentiers dans cette plaine; s’il y en avait, la neige les avait effacés. D’instinct, il continuait à dévier vers l’est. Des pierres tranchantes lui avaient écorché les talons. S’il eût fait jour, on eût pu voir, dans les traces qu’il laissait sur la neige, des taches roses qui étaient son sang.

Il ne reconnaissait rien. Il traversait le plateau de Portland du sud au nord, et il est probable que la bande avec laquelle il était venu, évitant les rencontres, l’avait traversé de l’ouest l’est. Elle était vraisemblablement partie, dans quelque barque de pêcheur ou de contrebandier, d’un point quelconque de la côte d’Uggescombe, tel que Sainte-Catherine Chap, ou Swancry, pour aller à Portland retrouver l’ourque qui l’attendait, et elle avait dû débarquer dans une des anses de Weston pour aller se rembarquer dans une des criques d’Eston. Cette direction-l était coupée en croix par celle que suivait maintenant l’enfant.

Il était impossible qu’il reconnût son chemin.

Le plateau de Portland a çà et là de hautes ampoules ruinées brusquement par la côte et coupées à pic sur la mer. L’enfant errant arriva sur un de ces points culminants, et s’y arrêta, espérant trouver plus d’indications dans plus d’espace, cherchant à voir. Il avait devant lui, pour tout horizon, une vaste opacité livide. Il l’examina avec attention, et, sous la fixit de son regard, elle devint moins indistincte. Au fond d’un lointain pli de terrain, vers l’est, au bas de cette lividit opaque, sorte d’escarpement mouvant et blême qui ressemblait une falaise de la nuit, rampaient et flottaient de vagues lambeaux noirs, espèces d’arrachements diffus. Cette opacit blafarde, c’était du brouillard; ces lambeaux noirs, c’étaient des fumées. Où il y a des fumées, il y a des hommes. L'enfant se dirigea de ce côté.

Il entrevoyait à quelque distance une descente, et au pied de la descente, parmi des configurations informes de rochers que la brume estompait, une apparence de banc de sable ou de langue de terre reliant probablement aux plaines de l'horizon le plateau qu'il venait de traverser. Il fallait évidemment passer par là.

Il était arrivé en effet à l'isthme de Portland, alluvion diluvienne qu'on appelle Chess-Hill.

Il s'engagea sur le versant du plateau.

La pente était difficile et rude. C'était, avec moins d'âpret pourtant, le revers de l'ascension qu'il avait faite pour sortir de la crique. Toute montée se solde par une descente. Après avoir grimpé, il dégringolait.

Il sautait d'un rocher à l'autre, au risque d'une entorse, au risque d'un écroulement dans la profondeur indistincte. Pour se retenir dans les glissements de la roche et de la glace, il prenait à poignées les longues lanières des landes et des ajoncs pleins d'épines, et toutes ces pointes lui entraient dans les doigts. Par instants, il trouvait un peu de rampe douce, et descendait en reprenant haleine, puis l'escarpement se refaisait, et pour chaque pas il fallait un expédient. Dans les descentes de précipice, chaque mouvement est la solution d'un problème. Il faut être adroit sous peine de mort. Ces problèmes, l'enfant les résolvait avec un instinct dont un singe eût pris note et une science qu'un saltimbanque eût admirée. La descente était abrupte et longue, Il en venait à bout néanmoins.

Peu à peu, il approchait de l'instant où il prendrait terre sur l'isthme entrevu.

Par intervalles, tout en bondissant ou en dévalant de rocher en rocher, il prêtait l'oreille, avec un dressement de daim attentif. Il écoutait au loin, à sa gauche, un bruit vaste et faible, pareil à un profond chant de clairon. Il y avait dans l'air en effet un remuement de souffles précédant cet effrayant vent boréal, qu'on entend venir du pôle comme une arrivée de trompettes. En même temps, l'enfant sentait par moments sur son front, sur ses yeux, sur ses joues, quelque chose qui ressemblait à des paumes de mains froides se posant sur son visage.

C'étaient de larges flocons glacés, ensemencés d'abord mollement dans l'espace, puis tourbillonnant, et annonçant l'orage de neige. L'enfant en était couvert. L'orage de neige qui, depuis plus d'une heure déjà, était sur la mer, commençait à gagner la terre. Il envahissait lentement les plaines. Il entrait obliquement par le nord-ouest dans le plateau de Portland.

LIVRE DEUXIÈME

L’OURQUE EN MER

I

LES LOIS QUI SONT HORS DE L’HOMME

La tempête de neige est une des choses inconnues de la mer.

C’est le plus obscur des météores; obscur dans tous les sens du mot. C’est un mélange de brouillard et de tourmente, et de nos jours on ne se rend pas bien compte encore de ce phénomène. De là beaucoup de désastres.

On veut tout expliquer par le vent et par le flot. Or dans l’air il y a une force qui n’est pas le vent, et dans l’eau il y a une force qui n’est pas le flot. Cette force, la même dans l’air et dans l’eau, c’est l’effluve. L’air et l’eau sont deux masses liquides, à peu près identiques, et rentrant l’une dans l’autre par la condensation et la dilatation, tellement que respirer c’est boire; l’effluve seul est fluide. Le vent et le flot ne sont que des poussées; l’effluve est un courant. Le vent est visible par les nuées, le flot est visible par l’écume; l’effluve est invisible. De temps en temps pourtant il dit: je suis là. Son *Je suis là*, c’est un coup de tonnerre.

La tempête de neige offre un problème analogue au brouillard sec.

Si l’éclaircissement de la callina des espagnols et du quobar des éthiopiens est possible, à coup sûr, cet éclaircissement se fera par l’observation attentive de l’effluve magnétique.

Sans l’effluve, une foule de faits demeurent énigmatiques. A la rigueur, les changements de vitesse du vent, se modifiant dans la tempête de trois pieds par seconde à deux cent vingt pieds, motiveraient les variantes de la vague allant de trois pouces, mer calme, à trente-six pieds, mer furieuse; à la rigueur, l’horizontalité des souffles, même en bourrasque, fait comprendre comment une lame de trente pieds de haut peut avoir quinze cents pieds de long; mais pourquoi les vagues du Pacifique sont-elles quatre fois plus hautes près de l’Amérique que près de l’Asie, c’est-à-dire plus hautes à l’ouest qu’à l’est; pourquoi est-ce le contraire dans l’Atlantique; pourquoi, sous l’équateur, est-ce le milieu de la mer qui est le plus haut; d’où viennent ces déplacements de la tumeur de l’océan? c’est ce que l’effluve magnétique, combiné avec la rotation terrestre et l’attraction sidérale, peut seul expliquer.

Ne faut-il pas cette complication mystérieuse pour rendre raison d’une oscillation du vent allant, par exemple, par l’ouest, du sud-est au nord-est, puis revenant brusquement, par le même grand tour, du nord-est au sud-est, de façon à faire en trente-six heures un prodigieux circuit de cinq cent soixante degrés, ce qui fut le prodrome de la tempête de neige du 19 mars 1867?

Les vagues de tempête de l’Australie atteignent jusqu’à quatre vingts pieds de hauteur; cela tient au voisinage du pôle. La tourmente en ces latitudes résulte moins du bouleversement des souffles que de la continuité des décharges électriques sous-marines; en l’année 1866, le câble transatlantique a ét régulièrement troublé dans sa fonction deux heures sur vingt-quatre, de midi à deux heures, par une sorte de fièvre intermittente. De certaines compositions et décompositions de forces produisent les phénomènes, et s’imposent aux calculs du marin à peine de naufrage. Le jour où la navigation, qui est une routine, deviendra une mathémathique, le jour où l’on cherchera savoir, par exemple, pourquoi, dans nos régions, les vents chauds viennent parfois du nord et les vents froids du midi, le jour o l’on comprendra que les décroissances de température sont proportionnées aux profondeurs océaniques, le jour où l’on aura présent à l’esprit que le globe est un gros aimant polarisé dans l’immensité, avec deux axes, un axe de rotation et un axe d’effluves, s’entrecoupant au centre de la terre, et que les pôles magnétiques tournent autour des pôles géographiques; quand ceux qui risquent leur vie voudront la risquer scientifiquement, quand on naviguera sur de l’instabilité étudiée, quand le capitaine sera un météorologue, quand le pilote sera un chimiste, alors bien des catastrophes seront évitées. La mer est magnétique autant qu’aquatique; un océan de forces flotte, inconnu, dans l’océan des flots; à vau-l’eau, pourrait-on dire. Ne voir dans la mer qu’une masse d’eau, c’est ne pas voir la mer; la mer est un va-et-vient de fluide autant qu’un flux et reflux de liquide; les attractions la compliquent plus encore peut-être que les ouragans; l’adhésion moléculaire, manifestée, entre autres phénomènes, par l’attraction capillaire, microscopique pour nous, participe, dans l’océan, de la grandeur des étendues; et l’onde des effluves, tantôt aide, tantôt contrarie l’onde des airs et l’onde des eaux. Qui ignore la loi électrique ignore la loi hydraulique; car l’une pénètre l’autre. Pas d’étude plus ardue, il est vrai, ni plus obscure; elle touche à l’empirisme comme l’astronomie touche à l’astrologie. Sans cette étude pourtant, pas de navigation.

Cela dit, passons.

Un des composés les plus redoutables de la mer, c’est la tourmente de neige. La tourmente de neige est surtout magnétique. Le pôle la produit comme il produit l’aurore boréale; il est dans ce brouillard comme il est dans cette lueur; et, dans le flocon de neige comme dans la strie de flamme, l’effluve est visible.

Les tourmentes sont les crises de nerfs et les accès de délire de la mer. La mer a ses migraines. On peut assimiler les tempêtes aux maladies. Les unes sont mortelles, d’autres ne le sont point; on se tire de celle-ci et non de celle-là. La bourrasque de neige passe pour être habituellement mortelle. Jarabija, un des pilotes de Magellan, la qualifiait «une nuée sortie du mauvais côté du diable».

Una nube salida del malo lado del diabolo.

Surcouf disait: *Il y a du trousse-galant dans cette tempête-là.*

Les anciens navigateurs espagnols appelaient cette sorte de bourrasque *la nevada* au moment des flocons, et l*a helada* au moment des grêlons. Selon eux il tombait du ciel des chauves-souris avec la neige.

Les tempêtes de neige sont propres aux latitudes polaires.
Pourtant, parfois elles glissent, on pourrait presque dire elles croulent, jusqu’à nos climats, tant la ruine est mêlée aux aventures de l’air.

La *Matutina*, on l’a vu, s’était, en quittant Portland, résolument engagée dans ce grand hasard nocturne qu’une approche d’orage aggravait. Elle était entrée dans toute cette menace avec une sorte d’audace tragique. Cependant, insistons-y, l’avertissement ne lui avait point manqué.

II

LES SILHOUETTES DU COMMENCEMENT FIXÉES

Tant que l’ourque fut dans le golfe de Portland, il y eut peu de mer; la lame était presque étale. Quel que fût le brun de l’océan, il faisait encore clair dans le ciel. La brise mordait peu sur le bâtiment. L’ourque longeait le plus possible la falaise qui lui était un bon paravent.

On était dix sur la petite felouque biscayenne, trois hommes d’équipage, et sept passagers, dont deux femmes. A la lumière de la pleine mer, car dans le crépuscule le large refait le jour, toutes les figures étaient maintenant visibles et nettes. On ne se cachait plus d’ailleurs, on ne se gênait plus, chacun reprenait sa liberté d’allures, jetait son cri, montrait son visage, le départ étant une délivrance.

La bigarrure du groupe éclatait. Les femmes étaient sans âge; la vie errante fait des vieillesses précoces, et l’indigence est une ride. L’une était une basquaise des ports-secs; l’autre, la femme au gros rosaire, était une irlandaise. Elles avaient l’air indifférent des misérables. Elles s’étaient en entrant accroupies l’une près de l’autre sur des coffres au pied du mât. Elles causaient; l’irlandais et le basque, nous l’avons dit, sont deux langues parentes. La basquaise avait les cheveux parfumés d’oignon et de basilic. Le patron de l’ourque était basque guipuzcoan; un matelot était basque du versant nord des Pyrénées, l’autre était basque du versant sud, c’est-à-dire de la même nation, quoique le premier fût français et le second espagnol. Les basques ne reconnaissent point la patrie officielle. *Mi madre se llama montaña,* «ma mère s’appelle la montagne», disait l’arriero Zalareus. Des cinq hommes accompagnant les deux femmes, un était français languedocien, un était français provençal, un était génois, un, vieux, celui qui avait le sombrero sans trou à pipe, paraissait allemand, le cinquième, le chef, était un basque landais de Biscarosse. C’était lui qui, au moment où l’enfant allait entrer dans l’ourque, avait d’un coup de talon jeté la passerelle à la mer. Cet homme, robuste, subit, rapide, couvert, on s’en souvient, de passementeries, de pasquilles et de clinquants qui faisaient ses guenilles flamboyantes, ne pouvait tenir en place, se penchait, se dressait, allait et venait sans cesse d'un bout du navire l'autre, comme inquiet entre ce qu'il venait de faire et ce qui allait arriver.

Ce chef de la troupe et le patron de l'ourque, et les deux hommes d'équipage, basques tous quatre, parlaient tantôt basque, tantôt espagnol, tantôt français, ces trois langues étant répandues sur les deux revers des Pyrénées. Du reste, hormis les femmes, tous parlaient à peu près le français, qui était le fond de l'argot de la bande. La langue française, dès cette époque, commençait être choisie par les peuples comme intermédiaire entre l'excès de consonnes du nord et l'excès de voyelles du midi. En Europe le commerce parlait français; le vol, aussi. On se souvient que Gibby, voleur de Londres, comprenait Cartouche.

L'ourque, fine voilière, marchait bon train; pourtant dix personnes, plus les bagages, c'était beaucoup de charge pour un si faible gabarit.

Ce sauvetage d'une bande par ce navire n'impliquait pas nécessairement l'affiliation de l'équipage du navire à la bande.
Il suffisait que le patron du navire fût un *vascongado*, et que le chef de la bande en fût un autre. S'entr'aider est, dans cette race, un devoir, qui n'admet pas d'exception. Un basque, nous venons de le dire, n'est ni espagnol, ni français, il est basque; et, toujours et partout, il doit sauver un basque. Telle est la fraternité pyrénéenne.

Tout le temps que l'ourque fut dans le golfe, le ciel, bien que de mauvaise mine, ne parut point assez gâté pour préoccuper les fugitifs. On se sauvait, on s'échappait, on était brutalement gai. L'un riait, l'autre chantait. Ce rire était sec, mais libre; ce chant était bas, mais insouciant.

Le languedocien criait: *caougagno*! «Cocagne!» est le comble de la satisfaction narbonnaise. C'était un demi-matelot, un naturel du village aquatique de Gruissan sur le versant sud de la Clappe, marinier plutôt que marin, mais habitué à manoeuvrer les périssoires de l'étang de Bages et à tirer sur les sables salés de Sainte-Lucie la traîne pleine de poisson. Il était de cette race qui se coiffe du bonnet rouge, fait des signes de croix compliqués à l'espagnole, boit du vin de peau de bouc, tette l'outre, racle le jambon, s'agenouille pour blasphémer, et implore son saint patron avec menaces: Grand saint, accorde-moi ce que je te demande, ou je te jette une pierre à la tête, «ou t feg' un pic».

Il pouvait, au besoin, s'ajouter utilement à l'équipage. Le provençal, dans la cambuse, attisait sous une marmite de fer un feu de tourbe, et faisait la soupe.

Cette soupe était une espèce de puchero où le poisson remplaçait la viande et où le provençal jetait des pois chiches, de petits morceaux de lard coupés carrément, et des gousses de piment rouge, concessions du mangeur de bouillabaisse aux mangeurs d'olla podrida. Un des sacs de provisions, déballé, était à côt de lui. Il avait allumé, au-dessus de sa tête, une lanterne de fer à vitres de talc, oscillant à un crochet du plafond de la cambuse. A côté, à un autre crochet, se balançait l'alcyon girouette. C'était alors une croyance populaire qu'un alcyon mort, suspendu par le bec, présente toujours la poitrine au côt d'où vient le vent.

Tout en faisant la soupe, le provençal se mettait par instants dans la bouche le goulot d'une gourde et avalait un coup d'aguardiente. C'était une de ces gourdes revêtues d'osier, larges et plates, à oreillons, qu'on se pendait au côté par une courroie, et qu'on appelait alors «gourdes de hanche». Entre chaque gorgée, il mâchonnait un couplet d'une de ces chansons campagnardes dont le sujet est rien du tout; un chemin creux, une haie; on voit dans la prairie par une crevasse du buisson l'ombre allongée d'une charrette et d'un cheval au soleil couchant, et de temps en temps au-dessus de la haie paraît et disparaît l'extrémité de la fourche chargée de foin. Il n'en faut pas plus pour une chanson.

Un départ, selon ce qu'on a dans le coeur ou dans l'esprit, est un soulagement ou un accablement. Tous semblaient allégés, un excepté, qui était le vieux de la troupe, l'homme au chapeau sans pipe.

Ce vieux, qui paraissait plutôt allemand qu'autre chose, bien qu'il eût une de ces figures à fond perdu où la nationalit s'efface, était chauve, et si grave que sa calvitie semblait une tonsure. Chaque fois qu'il passait devant la sainte vierge de la proue, il soulevait son feutre, et l'on pouvait apercevoir les veines gonflées et séniles de son crâne. Une façon de grande robe usée et déchiquetée, en serge brune de Dorchester, dont il s'enveloppait, ne cachait qu'à demi son justaucorps serré, étroit, et agrafé jusqu'au collet comme une soutane. Ses deux mains tendaient à l'entrecroisement et avaient la jonction machinale de la prière habituelle. Il avait ce qu'on pourrait nommer la physionomie blême; car la physionomie est surtout un reflet, et c'est une erreur de croire que l'idée n'a pas de couleur. Cette physionomie était évidemment la surface d'un étrange état intérieur, la résultante d'un composé de contradictions allant se perdre les unes dans le bien, les autres dans le mal, et, pour l'observateur, la révélation d'un à peu près humain pouvant tomber au-dessous du tigre ou grandir au-dessus de l’homme. Ces chaos de l’âme existent. Il y avait de l’illisible sur cette figure. Le secret y allait jusqu’ l’abstrait. On comprenait que cet homme avait connu l’avant-goût du mal, qui est le calcul, et l’arrière-goût, qui est le zéro.

Dans son impassibilité, peut-être seulement apparente, étaient empreintes les deux pétrifications, la pétrification du coeur, propre au bourreau, et la pétrification de l’esprit, propre au mandarin. On pouvait affirmer, car le monstrueux a sa manière d’être complet, que tout lui était possible, même s’émouvoir.

Tout savant est un peu cadavre; cet homme était un savant. Rien qu’à le voir, on devinait cette science empreinte dans les gestes de sa personne et dans les plis de sa robe. C’était une face fossile dont le sérieux était contrarié par cette mobilité ridée du polyglotte qui va jusqu’à la grimace. Du reste, sévère. Rien d’hypocrite, mais rien de cynique. Un songeur tragique. C’était l’homme que le crime a laissé pensif. Il avait le sourcil d’un trabucaire modifié par le regard d’un archevêque. Ses rares cheveux gris étaient blancs sur les tempes. On sentait en lui le chrétien, compliqué de fatalisme turc. Des nooeds de goutte déformaient ses doigts disséqués par la maigreur; sa haute taille roide était ridicule; il avait le pied marin. Il marchait lentement sur le pont sans regarder personne, d’un air convaincu et sinistre. Ses prunelles étaient vaguement pleines de la lueur fixe d’une âme attentive aux ténèbres et sujette à des réapparitions de conscience.

De temps en temps le chef de la bande, brusque et alerte, et faisant de rapides zigzags dans le navire, venait lui parler l’oreille. Le vieillard répondait d’un signe de tête. On eût dit l’éclair consultant la nuit.

III

LES HOMMES INQUIETS SUR LA MER INQUIÈTE

Deux hommes sur le navire étaient absorbés, ce vieillard et le patron de l’ourque, qu’il ne faut pas confondre avec le chef de la bande; le patron était absorbé par la mer, le vieillard par le ciel. L’un ne quittait pas des yeux la vague, l’autre attachait sa surveillance aux nuages. La conduite de l’eau était le souci du patron; le vieillard semblait suspecter le zénith. Il guettait les astres par toutes les ouvertures de la nuée.

C’était ce moment où il fait encore jour, et où quelques étoiles commencent à piquer faiblement le clair du soir.

L’horizon était singulier. La brume y était diverse.

Il y avait plus de brouillard sur la terre, et plus de nuage sur la mer.

Avant même d’être sorti de Portland-Bay, le patron, préoccupé du flot, eut tout de suite une grande minutie de manoeuvres. Il n’attendit pas qu’on eût décapé. Il passa en revue le trelingage, et s’assura que la bridure des bas haubans était en bon état et appuyait bien les gambes de hune, précaution d’un homme qui compte faire des témérités de vitesse.

L’ourque, c’était là son défaut, enfonçait d’une demi-vare par l’avant plus que par l’arrière.

Le patron passait à chaque instant du compas de route au compas de variation, visant par les deux pinnules aux objets de la côte, afin de reconnaître l’aire de vent à laquelle ils répondaient.

Ce fut d’abord une brise de bouline qui se déclara; il n’en parut pas contrarié, bien qu’elle s’éloignât de cinq pointes du vent de la route. Il tenait lui-même la barre le plus possible, paraissant ne se fier qu’à lui pour ne perdre aucune force, l’effet du gouvernail s’entretenant par la rapidité du sillage.

La différence entre le vrai rumb et le rumb apparent étant d’autant plus grande que le vaisseau a plus de vitesse, l’ourque semblait gagner vers l’origine du vent plus qu’elle ne faisait réellement. L’ourque n’avait pas vent largue et n’allait pas au plus près, mais on ne connaît directement le vrai rumb que lorsqu’on va vent arrière. Si l’on aperçoit dans les nuées de longues bandes qui aboutissent au même point de l’horizon, ce point est l’origine du vent; mais ce soir-là il y avait plusieurs vents, et l’aire du rumb était trouble; aussi le patron se méfiait des illusions du navire.

Il gouvernait à la fois timidement et hardiment, brassait au vent, veillait aux écarts subits, prenait garde au lans, ne laissait pas arriver le bâtiment, observait la dérive, notait les petits chocs de la barre, avait l’oeil à toutes les circonstances du mouvement, aux inégalités de vitesse du sillage, aux folles ventes, se tenait constamment, de peur d’aventure, à quelque quart de vent de la côte qu’il longeait, et surtout maintenait l’angle de la girouette avec la quille plus ouvert que l’angle de la voilure, le rumb de vent indiqué par la boussole étant toujours douteux, à cause de la petitesse du compas de route. Sa prunelle, imperturbablement baissée, examinait toutes les formes que prenait l’eau.

Une fois pourtant il leva les yeux vers l’espace et tâcha d’apercevoir les trois étoiles qui sont dans le baudrier d’Orion; ces étoiles se nomment les trois Mages, et un vieux proverbe des anciens pilotes espagnols dit: *Qui voit les trois mages n’est pas loin du sauveur*.

Ce coup d’oeil du patron au ciel coïncida avec cet apart grommelé à l’autre bout du navire par le vieillard:

— Nous ne voyons pas même la Claire des Gardes, ni l’astre Antarès, tout rouge qu’il est. Pas une étoile n’est distincte.

Aucun souci parmi les autres fugitifs.

Toutefois, quand la première hilarité de l’évasion fut passée, il fallut bien s’apercevoir qu’on était en mer au mois de janvier, et que la bise était glacée. Impossible de se loger dans la cabine, beaucoup trop étroite et d’ailleurs encombrée de bagages et de ballots. Les bagages appartenaient aux passagers, et les ballots à l’équipage, car l’ourque n’était point un navire de plaisance et faisait la contrebande. Les passagers durent s’établir sur le pont; résignation facile à ces nomades. Les habitudes du plein air rendent aisés aux vagabonds les arrangements de nuit; la belle étoile est de leurs amies; et le froid les aide à dormir, à mourir quelquefois,

Celle nuit-là, du reste, on vient de le voir, la belle étoile était absente.

Le languedocien et le génois, en attendant le souper, se pelotonnèrent près des femmes, au pied du mât, sous des prélarts que les matelots leur jetèrent.

Le vieux chauve resta debout à l’avant, immobile et comme insensible au froid.

Le patron de l’ourque, de la barre où il était, fit une sorte d’appel guttural assez semblable à l’interjection de l’oiseau qu’on appelle en Amérique l’Exclamateur; à ce cri, le chef de la bande approcha, et le patron lui adressa cette apostrophe: *Etcheco jaüna*! Ces deux mots basques, qui signifient «laboureur de la montagne», sont, chez ces antiques cantabres, une entrée en matière solennelle et commandent l’attention.

Puis le palron montra du doigt au chef le vieillard, et le dialogue continua en espagnol, peu correct, du reste, étant de l’espagnol montagnard. Voici les demandes et les réponses:

— Etchceo jaüna, que es este hombre?

— Un hombre.

— Que lenguas habla?

— Todas.

— Que cosas sabe?

— Todas.

— Qual païs!

— Ningun, y todos.

— Qual Dios?

— Dios.

— Como le llamas?

— El Tonto.

— Como dices que le llamas?

— El Sabio.

— En vuestre tropa, que esta?

— Esta lo que esta.

— El gefe?

— No.

— Pues, que esta?

— La alma.

— Laboureur de la montagne, quel est cet homme? — Un homme. — Quelles langues parle-t-il? — Toutes. — Quelles choses sait-il? — Toutes. — Quel est son pays? — Aucun et tous. — Quel est son Dieu? — Dieu. — Comment le nommes-tu?

— Le Fou. — Comment dis-tu que tu le nommes? — Le Sage.

— Dans votre troupe, qu’est-ce qu’il est? — Il est ce qu’il est. — Le chef? — Non. — Alors, quel est-il? — L’âme.

Le chef et le patron se séparèrent, chacun retournant à sa pensée, et peu après la *Matutina* sortit du golfe.

Les grands balancements du large commencèrent.

La mer, dans les écartements de l’écume, était d’apparence visqueuse; les vagues, vues dans la clarté crépusculaire à profil perdu, avaient des aspects de flasques de fiel. Ça et là une lame, flottant à plat, offrait des fêlures et des étoiles, comme une vitre où l’on a jeté des pierres. Au centre de ces étoiles, dans un trou tournoyant, tremblait une phosphorescence, assez semblable à cette réverbération féline de la lumière disparue qui est dans la prunelle des chouettes.

La *Matutina* traversa fièrement et en vaillante nageuse le redoutable frémissement du banc Chambours. Le banc Chambours, obstacle latent à la sortie de la rade de Portland, n’est point un barrage, c’est un amphithéâtre. Un cirque de sable sous l’eau, des gradins sculptés par les cercles de l’onde, une arène ronde et symétrique, haute comme une Yungfrau, mais noyée, un colisée de l’océan entrevu par le plongeur dans la transparence visionnaire de l’engloutissement, c’est là le banc Chambours.

Les hydres s’y combattent, les léviathans s’y rencontrent; il y a là, disent les légendes, au fond du gigantesque entonnoir, des cadavres de navires saisis et coulés par l’immense araignée Kraken, qu’on appelle aussi le poisson-montagne. Telle est l’effrayante ombre de la mer.

Ces réalités spectrales ignorées de l’homme se manifestent à la surface par un peu de frisson.

Au dix-neuvième siècle, le banc Chambours est en ruine. Le brise-lames récemment construit a bouleversé et tronqué à force de ressacs cette haute architecture sous-marine, de même que la jetée bâtie au Croisie en 1760 y a changé d’un quart d’heure l’établissement des marées. La marée pourtant, c’est éternel; mais l’éternité obéit à l’homme plus qu’on ne croit.

IV

ENTRÉE EN SCÈNE D’UN NUAGE DIFFÉRENT DES AUTRES

Le vieux homme que le chef de la troupe avait qualifié d’abord le Fou, puis le Sage, ne quittait plus l’avant. Depuis le passage du banc Chambours, son attention se partageait entre le ciel et l’océan. Il baissait les yeux, puis les relevait; ce qu’il scrutait surtout, c’était le nord-est,

Le patron confia la barre à un matelot, enjamba le panneau de la fosse aux câbles, traversa le passavent et vint au gaillard de proue.

Il aborda le vieillard, mais non de face. Il se tint un peu en arrière, les coudes serrés aux hanches, les mains écartées, la tête penchée sur l’épaule, l’oeil ouvert, le sourcil haut, un coin des lèvres souriant, ce qui est l’attitude de la curiosité, quand elle flotte entre l’ironie et le respect.

Le vieillard, soit qu’il eût l’habitude de parler quelquefois seul, soit que sentir quelqu’un derrière lui l’excitât à parler, se mit à monologuer, en considérant l’étendue.

— Le méridien d’où l’on compte l’ascension droite est marqué dans ce siècle par quatre étoiles, la Polaire, la chaise de Cassiopée, la tête d’Andromède, et l’étoile Algénib, qui est dans Pégase.

Mais aucune n’est visible.

Ces paroles se succédaient automatiquement, confuses, à peu près dites, et en quelque façon sans qu’il se mêlât de les prononcer.

Elles flottaient hors de sa bouche et se dissipaient. Le monologue est la fumée des feux intérieurs de l’esprit.

Le patron interrompit:

— Seigneur...

Le vieillard, peut-être un peu sourd en même temps que très pensif, continua:

— Pas assez d’étoiles, et trop de vent. Le vent quitte toujours sa route pour se jeter sur la côte. Il s’y jette à pic. Cela tient à ce que la terre est plus chaude que la mer. L’air en est plus léger. Le vent froid et lourd de la mer se précipite sur la terre pour le remplacer. C’est pourquoi dans le grand ciel le vent souffle vers la terre de tous les côtés. Il importerait de faire des bordées allongées entre le parallèle estimé et le parallèle présumé. Quand la latitude observée ne diffère pas de la latitude présumée de plus de trois minutes sur dix lieues, et de quatre sur vingt, on est en bonne route.

Le patron salua, mais le vieillard ne le vit point. Cet homme, qui portait presque une simarre d'universitaire d'Oxford ou de Goettingue, ne bougeait pas de sa posture hautaine et revêche.

Il observait la mer en connaisseur des flots et des hommes. Il étudiait les vagues, mais presque comme s'il allait demander dans leur tumulte son tour de parole, et leur enseigner quelque chose.

Il y avait en lui du magister et de l'augure. Il avait l'air du pédant de l'abîme.

Il poursuivit son soliloque, peut-être fait, après tout, pour être écouté.

— On pourrait lutter, si l'on avait une roue au lieu d'une barre.

Par une vitesse de quatre lieues à l'heure, trente livres d'effort sur la roue peuvent produire trois cent mille livres d'effet sur la direction. Et plus encore, car il y a des cas o l'on fait faire à la trousse deux tours de plus.

Le patron salua une deuxième fois, et dit:

— Seigneur...

L'oeil du vieillard se fixa sur lui. La tête tourna sans que le corps remuât.

— Appelle-moi docteur.

— Seigneur docteur, c'est moi qui suis le patron.

— Soit, répondit le «docteur».

Le docteur — nous le nommerons ainsi dorénavant — parut consentir au dialogue:

— Patron, as-tu un octant anglais?

— Non.

— Sans octant anglais, tu ne peux prendre hauteur ni par derrière, ni par devant.

— Les basques, répliqua le patron, prenaient hauteur avant qu'il y eût des anglais,

— Méfie-toi de l'olofée.

— Je mollis quand il le faut.

— As-tu mesuré la vitesse du navire?

— Oui.

— Quand?

— Tout à l'heure.

— Par quel moyen?

— Au moyen du loch.

— As-tu eu soin d’avoir l’oeil sur le bois du loch?

— Oui.

— Le sablier fait-il juste ses trente secondes?

— Oui.

— Es-tu sûr que le sable n’a point usé le trou entre les deux empoulettes?

— Oui.

— As-tu fait la contre-épreuve du sablier par la vibration d’une balle de mousquet suspendue...

— A un fil plat tiré de dessus le chanvre roui? Sans doute.

— As-tu ciré le fil de peur qu’il ne s’allonge?

— Oui.

— As-tu fait la contre-épreuve du loch?

— J’ai fait la contre-épreuve du sablier par la balle de mousquet et la contre-épreuve du loch par le boulet de canon.

— Quel diamètre a ton boulet?

— Un pied.

— Bonne lourdeur.

— C’est un ancien boulet de notre vieille ourque de guerre, *la Casse de Par-grand*.

— Qui était de l’armada?

— Oui.

— Et qui portait six cents soldats, cinquante matelots et vingt-cinq canons?

— Le naufrage le sait.

— Comment as-tu pesé le choc de l’eau contre le boulet?

— Au moyen d’un peson d’Allemagne.

— As-tu tenu compte de l’impulsion du flot contre la corde portant le boulet?

— Oui.

— Quel est le résultat?

— Le choc de l’eau a été de cent soixante-dix livres.

— C’est-à-dire que le navire fait à l’heure quatre lieues de France.

— Et trois de Hollande.

— Mais c’est seulement le surplus de la vitesse du sillage sur la vitesse de la mer.

— Sans doute.

— Où te diriges-tu?

— A une anse que je connais entre Loyola et Saint-Sébastien.

— Mets-toi vite sur le parallèle du lieu de l’arrivée.

— Oui. Le moins d’écart possible.

— Méfie-toi des vents et des courants. Les premiers excitent les seconds.

— Traidores .

Traitres.

— Pas de mots injurieux. La mer entend. N’insulte rien.
Contente-toi d’observer,

— J’ai observé et j’observe. La marée est en ce moment contre le vent; mais tout à l’heure, quand elle courra avec le vent, nous aurons du bon.

— As-tu un routier?

— Non. Pas pour cette mer.

— Alors tu navigues à tâtons?

— Point. J’ai la boussole.

— La boussole est un oeil, le routier est l’autre.

— Un borgne voit.

— Comment mesures-tu l’angle que fait la route du navire avec la quille?

— J’ai mon compas de variation, et puis je devine.

— Deviner, c’est bien; savoir c’est mieux.

— Christophe devinait.

Colomb.

— Quand il y a de la brouille et quand la rose tourne vilainement, on ne sait plus par quel bout du harnais prendre le vent, et l’on finit par n’avoir plus ni point estimé, ni point corrigé. Un âne avec son routier vaut mieux qu’un devin avec son oracle.

— Il n’y a pas encore de brouille dans la bise, et je ne vois pas de motif d’alarme.

— Les navires sont des mouches dans la toile d’araignée de la mer.

— Présentement, tout est en assez bon état dans la vague et dans le vent.

— Un tremblement de points noirs sur le flot, voilà les hommes sur l’océan.

— Je n’augure rien de mauvais pour cette nuit.

— Il peut arriver une telle bouteille à l’encre que tu aies de la peine à te tirer d’intrigue.

— Jusqu’à présent tout va bien.

L’oeil du docteur se fixa sur le nord-est.

Le patron continua:

— Gagnons seulement le golfe de Gascogne, et je réponds de tout. Ah! par exemple, j’y suis chez moi. Je le tiens, mon golfe de Gascogne. C’est une cuvette souvent bien en colère, mais là je connais toutes les hauteurs d’eau et toutes les qualités de fond; vase devant San Cipriano, coquilles devant Cizarque, sable au cap Penas, petits cailloux au Boucaut de Mimizan, et je sais la couleur de tous les cailloux.

Le patron s’interrompit; le docteur ne l’écoutait plus.

Le docteur considérait le nord-est. Il se passait sur ce visage glacial quelque chose d’extraordinaire.

Toute la quantité d’effroi possible à un masque de pierre y était peinte. Sa bouche laissa échapper ce mot:

— A la bonne heure!

Sa prunelle, devenue tout à fait de hibou et toute ronde, s’était dilatée de stupeur en examinant un point de l’espace.

Il ajouta:

— C’est juste. Quant à moi, je consens.

Le patron le regardait.

Le docteur reprit, se parlant à lui-même ou parlant à quelqu’un dans l’abîme:

— Je dis oui.

Il se tut, ouvrit de plus en plus son oeil avec un redoublement d’attention sur ce qu’il voyait, et reprit:

— Cela vient de loin, mais cela sait ce que cela fait.

Le segment de l’espace où plongeaient le rayon visuel et la pensée du docteur, étant opposé au couchant, était éclairé par la vaste réverbération crépusculaire presque comme par le jour. Ce segment, fort circonscrit et entouré de lambeaux de vapeur grisâtre, était tout simplement bleu, mais d’un bleu plus voisin du plomb que de l’azur.

Le docteur, tout à fait retourné du côté de la mer et sans regarder le patron désormais, désigna de l’index ce segment aérien, et dit:

— Patron, vois-tu?

— Quoi?

— Cela.

— Quoi?

— Là-bas.

— Du bleu. Oui.

— Qu’est-ce?

— Un coin du ciel.

— Pour ceux qui vont au ciel, dit le docteur. Pour ceux qui vont ailleurs, c’est autre chose.

Et il souligna ces paroles d’énigme d’un effrayant regard perdu dans l’ombre.

Il y eut un silence.

Le patron, songeant à la double qualification donnée par le chef à cet homme, se posa en lui-même cette question: Est-ce un fou?
Est-ce un sage?

L’index osseux et rigide du docteur était demeuré dressé comme en arrêt vers le coin bleu trouble de l’horizon.

Le patron examina ce bleu,

— En effet, grommela-t-il, ce n’est pas du ciel, c’est du nuage.

— Nuage bleu pire que nuage noir, dit le docteur. Et il ajouta:

— C’est le nuage de la neige.

— *La nube de la nieve*, fit le patron comme s’il cherchait mieux comprendre en se traduisant le mot.

— Sais-tu ce que c’est que le nuage de la neige? demanda le docteur.

— Non.

— Tu le sauras tout à l’heure.

Le patron se remit à considérer l’horizon.

Tout en observant le nuage, le patron parlait entre ses dents.

— Un mois de bourrasque, un mois de pluie, janvier qui tousse et février qui pleure, voilà tout notre hiver à nous autres asturiens. Notre pluie est chaude. Nous n’avons de neige que dans la montagne. Par exemple, gare à l’avalanche! l’avalanche ne connaît rien; l’avalanche, c’est la bête.

— Et la trombe, c’est le monstre, dit le docteur,

Le docteur, après une pause, ajouta;

— La voilà qui vient.

Il reprit:

— Plusieurs vents se mettent au travail à la fois. Un gros vent, de l’ouest, et un vent très lent, de l’est.

— Celui-là est un hypocrite, dit le patron.

La nuée bleue grandissait.

— Si la neige, continua le docteur, est redoutable quand elle descend de la montagne, juge de ce qu'elle est quand elle croule du pôle.

Son oeil était vitreux. Le nuage semblait croître sur son visage en même temps qu'à l'horizon.

Il reprit avec un accent de rêverie:

— Toutes les minutes amènent l'heure. La volonté d'en haut s'entr'ouvre.

Le patron de nouveau se posa intérieurement ce point d'interrogation: Est-ce un fou?

— Patron, repartit le docteur, la prunelle toujours attachée sur le nuage, as-tu beaucoup navigué dans la Manche?

Le patron répondit:

— C'est aujourd'hui la première fois.

Le docteur, que le nuage bleu absorbait, et qui, de même que l'éponge n'a qu'une capacité d'eau, n'avait qu'une capacit d'anxiété, ne fut pas, à cette réponse du patron, ému au del d'un très léger dressement d'épaule.

— Comment cela?

— Seigneur docteur, je ne fais habituellement que le voyage d'Irlande. Je vais de Fontarabie à Black-Harbour ou à l'île Akill, qui est deux îles. Je vais parfois à Brachipult, qui est une pointe du pays de Galles. Mais je gouverne toujours par del les îles Scilly. Je ne connais pas cette mer-ci.

— C'est grave. Malheur à qui épelle l'océan! La Manche est une mer qu'il faut lire couramment. La Manche, c'est le sphinx.
Méfie-toi du fond.

— Nous sommes ici dans vingt-cinq brasses.

— Il faut arriver aux cinquante-cinq brasses qui sont au couchant et éviter les vingt qui sont au levant.

— En route, nous sonderons.

— La Manche n'est pas une mer comme une autre. La marée y monte de cinquante pieds dans les malines et de vingt-cinq dans les mortes eaux. Ici, le reflux n'est pas l'èbe, et l'èbe n'est pas le jusant. Ah! tu m'avais l'air décontenancé en effet.

— Cette nuit, nous sonderons.

— Pour sonder, il faut s'arrêter, et tu ne pourras.

— Pourquoi?

— Parce que le vent.

— Nous essaierons.

— La bourrasque est une épée aux reins.

— Nous sonderons, seigneur docteur.

— Tu ne pourras pas seulement mettre côté à travers.

— Foi en Dieu.

— Prudence dans les paroles. Ne prononce pas légèrement le nom irritable.

— Je sonderai, vous dis-je.

— Sois modeste. Tout à l'heure tu vas être souffleté par le vent.

— Je veux dire que je tâcherai de sonder.

— Le choc de l'eau empêchera le plomb de descendre et la ligne cassera. Ah! tu viens dans ces parages pour la première fois!

— Pour la première fois.

— Eh bien, en ce cas, écoute, patron.

L'accent de ce mot, *écoute*, était si impératif que le patron salua.

— Seigneur docteur, j'écoute.

— Amure à bâbord et borde à tribord.

— Que voulez-vous dire?

— Mets le cap à l'ouest.

— Caramba!

— Mets le cap à l'ouest.

— Pas possible,

— Comme tu voudras. Ce que je t'en dis, c'est pour les autres. Moi, j'accepte.

— Mais, seigneur docteur, le cap à l'ouest...

— Oui, patron.

— C'est le vent debout!

— Oui. patron.

— C'est un tangage diabolique!

— Choisis d'autres mots. Oui, patron.

— C'est le navire sur le chevalet!

— Oui, patron.

— C'est peut-être le mât rompu!

— Peut-être.

— Vous voulez que je gouverne à l'ouest!

— Oui.

— Je ne puis.

— En ce cas, fais ta dispute avec la mer comme tu voudras.

— Il faudrait que le vent changeât.

— Il ne changera pas de toute la nuit.

— Pourquoi?

— Ceci est un souffle long de douze cents lieues.

— Aller contre ce vent-là! impossible.

— Le cap à l’ouest, te dis-je!

— J’essaierai. Mais malgré tout nous dévierons.

— C’est le danger.

— La brise nous chasse à l’est.

— Ne va pas à l’est.

— Pourquoi?

— Patron, sais-tu quel est aujourd’hui pour nous le nom de la mort?

— Non.

— La mort s’appelle l’est.

— Je gouvernerai à l’ouest.

Le docteur cette fois regarda le patron, et le regarda avec ce regard qui appuie comme pour enfoncer une pensée dans un cerveau.

Il s’était tourné tout entier vers le patron et il prononça ces paroles lentement, syllabe à syllabe:

— Si cette nuit, quand nous serons au milieu de la mer, nous entendons le son d’une cloche, le navire est perdu.

Le patron le considéra, stupéfait.

— Que voulez-vous dire?

Le docteur ne répondit pas. Son regard, un instant sorti, était maintenant rentré. Son oeil était redevenu intérieur. Il ne sembla point percevoir la question étonnée du patron. Il n’était plus attentif qu’à ce qu’il écoutait en lui-même. Ses lèvres articulèrent, comme machinalement, ces quelques mots bas comme un murmure:

— Le moment est venu pour les âmes noires de se laver.

Le patron fit cette moue expressive qui rapproche du nez tout le bas du visage.

— C’est plutôt le fou que le sage, grommela-t-il.

Et il s’éloigna.

Cependant il mit le cap à l’ouest.

Mais le vent et la mer grossissaient.

V

HARDQUANONNE

Toutes sortes d’intumescences déformaient la bruine et se gonflaient à la fois sur tous les points de l’horizon, comme si des bouches qu’on ne voyait pas étaient occupées à enfler les outres de la tempête. Le modelé des nuages devenait inquiétant.

La nuée bleue tenait tout le fond du ciel. Il y en avait maintenant autant à l’ouest qu’à l’est. Elle avançait contre la brise. Ces contradictions font partie du vent.

La mer qui, le moment d’auparavant, avait des écailles, avait maintenant une peau. Tel est ce dragon. Ce n’était plus le crocodile, c’était le boa. Cette peau, plombée et sale, semblait épaisse et se ridait lourdement. A la surface, des bouillons de houle, isolés, pareils à des pustules, s’arrondissaient, puis crevaient. L’écume ressemblait à une lèpre.

C’est à cet instant-là que l’ourque, encore aperçue de loin par l’enfant abandonné, alluma son fanal.

Un quart d’heure s’écoula.

Le patron chercha des yeux le docteur; il n’était plus sur le pont.

Sitôt que le patron l’avait quitté, le docteur avait courbé sous le capot de chambre sa stature peu commode, et était entré dans la cabine. Là il s’était assis près du fourneau, sur un chouquet; il avait tiré de sa poche un encrier de chagrin et un portefeuille de cordouan; il avait extrait du portefeuille un parchemin plié en quatre, vieux, taché et jaune; il avait dépli cette feuille, pris une plume dans l’étui de son encrier, pos plat le portefeuille sur son genou et le parchemin sur le portefeuille, et, sur le verso de ce parchemin, au rayonnement de la lanterne qui éclairait le cuisinier, il s’était mis à écrire.

Les secousses du flot le gênaient. Le docteur écrivit longuement.

Tout en écrivant, le docteur remarqua la gourde d’aguardiente que le provençal dégustait chaque fois qu’il ajoutait un piment au puchero, comme s’il la consultait sur l’assaisonnement.

Le docteur remarqua cette gourde, non parce que c’était une bouteille d’eau-de-vie, mais à cause d’un nom qui était tress dans l’osier, en jonc rouge au milieu du jonc blanc. Il faisait assez clair dans la cabine pour qu'on pût lire ce nom.

Le docteur, s'interrompant, l'épela à demi-voix,

— Hardquanonne,

Puis il s'adressa au cuisinier.

— Je n'avais pas encore fait attention à cette gourde. Est-ce qu'elle a appartenu à Hardquanonne?

— A notre pauvre camarade Hardquanonne? fit le cuisinier. Oui.

Le docteur poursuivit:

— A Hardquanonne, le flamand de Flandre?

— Oui.

— Qui est en prison?

— Oui.

— Dans le donjon de Chatham?

— C'est sa gourde, répondit le cuisinier, et c'était mon ami. Je la garde en souvenir de lui Quand le reverrons-nous? Oui, c'est sa gourde de hanche.

Le docteur reprit sa plume et se remit à tracer péniblement des lignes un peu tortueuses sur le parchemin. Il avait évidemment le souci que cela fût très lisible. Malgré le tremblement du bâtiment et le tremblement de l'âge, il vint à bout de ce qu'il voulait écrire.

Il était temps, car subitement il y eut un coup de mer,

Une arrivée impétueuse de flots assaillit l'ourque, et l'on sentit poindre cette danse effrayante par laquelle les navires accueillent la tempête.

Le docteur se leva, s'approcha du fourneau, tout en opposant de savantes flexions de genou aux brusqueries de la houle, sécha, comme il put, au feu de la marmite les lignes qu'il venait d'écrire, replia le parchemin dans le portefeuille, et remit le portefeuille et l'écritoire dans sa poche.

Le fourneau n'était pas la pièce la moins ingénieuse de l'aménagement intérieur de l'ourque; il était dans un bon isolement. Pourtant la marmite oscillait. Le provençal la surveillait.

— Soupe aux poissons, dit-il.

— Pour les poissons, répondit le docteur.

Puis il retourna sur le pont.

VI

ILS SE CROIENT AIDÉS

A travers sa préoccupation croissante, le docteur passa une sorte de revue de la situation, et quelqu'un qui eût été près de lui eût pu entendre ceci sortir de ses lèvres:

— Trop de roulis et pas assez de tangage.

Et le docteur, rappelé par le travail obscur de son esprit, redescendit dans sa pensée comme un mineur dans son puits.

Celte méditation n'excluait nullement l'observation de la mer.

La mer observée est une rêverie.

Le sombre supplice des eaux, éternellement tourmentées, allait commencer. Une lamentation sortait de toute cette onde. Des apprêts, confusément lugubres, se faisaient dans l'immensité. Le docteur considérait ce qu'il avait sous les yeux et ne perdait aucun détail. Du reste il n'y avait dans son regard aucune contemplation. On ne contemple pas l'enfer.

Une vaste commotion, encore à demi latente, mais transparente déjà dans le trouble des étendues, accentuait et aggravait de plus en plus le vent, les vapeurs, les houles. Rien n'est logique et rien ne semble absurde comme l'océan. Cette dispersion de soi-même est inhérente à sa souveraineté, et est un des éléments de son ampleur. Le flot est sans cesse pour ou contre. Il ne se noue que pour se dénouer. Un de ses versants attaque, un autre délivre. Pas de vision comme les vagues.

Comment peindre ces creux et ces reliefs alternants, réels peine, ces vallées, ces hamacs, ces évanouissements de poitrails, ces ébauches? Comment exprimer ces halliers de l'écume, mélangés de montagne et de songe? L'indescriptible est là, partout, dans la déchirure, dans le froncement, dans l'inquiétude, dans le démenti personnel, dans le clair-obscur, dans les pendentifs de la nuée, dans les clefs de voûtes toujours défaites, dans la désagrégation sans lacune et sans rupture, et dans le fracas funèbre que fait toute cette démence.

La brise venait de se déclarer plein nord. Elle était tellement favorable dans sa violence, et si utile à l'éloignement de l'Angleterre, que le patron de la *Matutina* s'était décid couvrir la barque de toile. L'ourque s'évadait dans l’écume, comme au galop, toutes voiles hors, vent arrière, bondissant de vague en vague, avec rage et gaîté. Les fugitifs, ravis, riaient. Ils battaient des mains, applaudissant la houle, le flot, les souffles, les voiles, la vitesse, la fuite, l’avenir ignoré. Le docteur semblait ne pas les voir, et songeait.

Tout vestige de jour s’était éclipsé.

Cette minute-là était celle où l’enfant attentif sur les falaises lointaines perdit l’ourque de vue. Jusqu’à ce momoment son regard était resté fixé et comme appuyé sur le navire. Quelle part ce regard eut-il dans la destinée? Dans cet instant où la distance effaça l’ourque et où l’enfant ne vit plus rien, l’enfant s’en alla au nord pendant que le navire s’en allait au sud.

Tous s’enfonçant dans la nuit.

VII

HORREUR SACRÉE

De leur côté, mais avec épanouissement et allégresse, ceux que l’ourque emportait regardaient derrière eux reculer et décroître la terre hostile. Peu à peu la rondeur obscure de l’océan montait amincissant dans le crépuscule Portland, Purbeck, Tineham, Kimmeridge, les deux Matravers, les longues bandes de la falaise brumeuse, et la côte ponctuée de phares.

L’Angleterre s’effaça. Les fuyards n’eurent plus autour d’eux que la mer.

Toul à coup la nuit fut terrible.

Il n’y eut plus d’étendue ni d’espace; le ciel s’était fait noirceur, et il se referma sur le navire. La lente descente de la neige commença. Quelques flocons apparurent. On eût dit des âmes. Rien ne fut plus visible dans le champ de course du vent.

On se sentit livré. Tout le possible était là, piégé.

C’est par cette obscurité de caverne que débute dans nos climats la trombe polaire.

Un grand nuage trouble, pareil au dessous d’une hydre, pesait sur l’océan, et par endroits ce ventre livide adhérait aux vagues. Quelques-unes de ces adhérences ressemblaient à des poches crevées, pompant la mer, se vidant de vapeur et s’emplissant d’eau. Ces succions soulevaient ça et là sur le flot des cônes d’écume.

La tourmente boréale se précipita sur l’ourque, l’ourque se rua dedans. La rafale et le navire vinrent au-devant l’un de l’autre comme pour une insulte.

Dans ce premier abordage forcené, pas une voile ne fut carguée, pas un foc ne fut amené, pas un ris ne fut pris, tant l’évasion est un délire. Le mât craquait et se ployait en arrière, comme effrayé.

Les cyclones, dans notre hémisphère nord, tournent de gauche droite, dans le même sens que les aiguilles d’une montre, avec un mouvement de translation qui atteint quelquefois soixante milles par heure. Quoiqu’elle fût en plein à la merci de celte violente poussée giratoire, l’ourque se comportait comme si elle eût ét dans le demi-cercle maniable, sans autre précaution que de se tenir debout à la lame, et de présenter le cap au vent antérieur en recevant le vent actuel à tribord afin d'éviter les coups d'arrière et de travers. Cette demi-prudence n'eût servi de rien en cas d'une saute de vent de bout en bout.

Une profonde rumeur soufflait dans la région inaccessible.

Le rugissement de l'abîme, rien n'est comparable a cela. C'est l'immense voix bestiale du monde. Ce que nous appelons la matière, cet organisme insondable, cet amalgame d'énergies incommensurables où parfois on distingue une quantit imperceptible d'intention qui fait frissonner, ce cosmos aveugle et nocturne, ce Pan incompréhensible, a un cri, cri étrange, prolongé, obstiné, continu, qui est moins que la parole et plus que le tonnerre. Ce cri, c'est l'ouragan. Les autres voix, chants, mélodies, clameurs, verbes, sortent des nids, des couvées, des accouplements, des hyménées, des demeures; celle-ci, trombe, sort de ce Rien qui est Tout. Les autres voix expriment l'âme de l'univers; celle-ci en exprime le monstre. C'est l'informe, hurlant. C'est l'inarticulé parlé par l'indéfini.

Chose pathétique et terrifiante. Ces rumeurs dialoguent au-dessus et au delà de l'homme. Elles s'élèvent, s'abaissent, ondulent, déterminent des flots de bruit, font toutes sortes de surprises farouches à l'esprit, tantôt éclatent tout près de notre oreille avec une importunité de fanfare, tantôt ont l'enrouement rauque du lointain; brouhaha vertigineux qui ressemble à un langage, et qui est un langage en effet; c'est l'effort que fait le monde pour parler, c'est le bégaiement du prodige. Dans ce vagissement se manifeste confusément tout ce qu'endure, subit, souffre, accepte et rejette l'énorme palpitation ténébreuse. Le plus souvent, cela déraisonne, cela semble un accès de maladie chronique, et c'est plutôt de l'épilepsie répandue que de la force employée; on croit assister à une chute du haut mal dans l'infini. Par moments, on entrevoit une revendication de l'élément, on ne sait quelle velléité de reprise du chaos sur la création. Par moments, c'est une plainte, l'espace se lamente et se justifie, c'est quelque chose comme la cause du monde plaidée; on croit deviner que l'univers est un procès; on écoute, on tâche de saisir les raisons données, le pour et contre redoutable; tel gémissement de l'ombre a la ténacité d'un syllogisme. Vaste trouble pour la pensée. La raison d'être des mythologies et des polythéismes est là. A l'effroi de ces grands murmures s'ajoutent des profils surhumains sitôt évanouis qu'aperçus, des euménides à peu près distinctes, des gorges de furies dessinées dans les nuages, des chimères plutoniennes presque affirmées. Aucune horreur n’égale ces sanglots, ces rires, ces souplesses du fracas, ces demandes et ces réponses indéchiffrables, ces appels à des auxiliaires inconnus. L’homme ne sait que devenir en présence de cette incantation épouvantable. Il plie sous l’énigme de ces intonations draconiennes. Quel sous-entendu y a-t-il? Que signifient-elles? qui menacent-elles? qui supplient-elles? Il y a là comme un déchaînement. Vociférations de précipice précipice, de l’air à l’eau, du vent au flot, de la pluie au rocher, du zénith au nadir, des astres aux écumes, la muselière du gouffre défaite, tel est ce tumulte, compliqué d’on ne sait quel démêlé mystérieux avec les mauvaises consciences,

La loquacité de la nuit n’est pas moins lugubre que son silence.
On y sent la colère de l’ignoré.

La nuit est une présence. Présence de qui?

Du reste, entre la nuit et les ténèbres, il faut distinguer, Dans la nuit il y a l’absolu; il y a le multiple dans les ténèbres.
La grammaire, cette logique, n’admet pas de singulier pour les ténèbres. La nuit est une, les ténèbres sont plusieurs.

Cette brume du mystère nocturne, c’est l’épars, le fugace, le croulant, le funeste. On ne sent plus la terre, on sent l’autre réalité.

Dans l’ombre infinie et indéfinie, il y a quelque chose, ou quelqu’un, de vivant; mais ce qui est vivant là fait partie de notre mort. Après notre passage terrestre, quand cette ombre sera pour nous de la lumière, la vie qui est au delà de notre vie nous saisira. En attendant, il semble qu’elle nous tâte.
L’obscurité est une pression. La nuit est une sorte de mainmise sur notre âme. A de certaines heures hideuses et solennelles nous sentons ce qui est derrière le mur du tombeau empiéter sur nous.

Jamais cette proximité de l’inconnu n’est plus palpable que dans les tempêtes de mer. L’horrible s’y accroît du fantasque.
L’interrupteur possible des aclions humaines, l’antique Assemble-nuages, a là à sa disposition, pour pétrir l’événement comme bon lui semble, l’élément inconsistant, l’incohérence illimitée, la force diffuse sans parti pris. Ce mystère, la tempête, accepte et exécute, à chaque instant, on ne sait quels changements de volonté, apparents ou réels.

Les poètes ont de tout temps appelé cela le caprice des flots.

Mais le caprice n’existe pas.

Les choses déconcertantes que nous nommons, dans la nature, caprice, et, dans la destinée, hasard, sont des tronçons de loi entrevus.

VIII

NIX ET NOX

Ce qui caractérise la tempête de neige, c’est qu’elle est noire.
L’aspect habituel de la nature dans l’orage, terre ou mer obscure, ciel blême, est renversé; le ciel est noir, l’océan est blanc. En bas écume, en haut ténèbres. Un horizon muré de fumée, un zénith plafonné de crêpe. La tempête ressemble l’intérieur d’une cathédrale tendue de deuil. Mais aucun luminaire dans cette cathédrale. Pas de feux Saint-Elme aux pointes des vagues; pas de flammèches, pas de phosphores; rien qu’une immense ombre. Le cyclone polaire diffère du cyclone tropical en ceci que l’un allume toutes les lumières et que l’autre les éteint toutes. Le monde devient subitement une voûte de cave. De cette nuit tombe une poussière de taches pâles qui hésitent entre ce ciel et cette mer. Ces taches, qui sont les flocons de neige, glissent, errent et flottent. C’est quelque chose comme les larmes d’un suaire qui se mettraient à vivre et entreraient en mouvement. A cet ensemencement se mêle une bise forcenée. Une noirceur émiettée en blancheurs, le furieux dans l’obscur, tout le tumulte dont est capable le sépulcre, un ouragan sous un catafalque, telle est la tempête de neige.

Dessous tremble l’océan recouvrant de formidables approfondissements inconnus.

Dans le vent polaire, qui est électrique, les flocons se font tout de suite grêlons, et l’air s’emplit de projectiles. L’eau pétille, mitraillée.

Pas de coups de tonnerre. L’éclair des tourmentes boréales est silencieux. Ce qu’on dit quelquefois du chat, «il jure», on peut le dire de cet éclair-là. C’est une menace de gueule entr’ouverte, étrangement inexorable. La tempête de neige, c’est la tempête aveugle et muette. Quand elle a passé, souvent les navires aussi sont aveugles, et les matelots muets.

Sortir d’un tel gouffre est malaisé.

On se tromperait pourtant de croire le naufrage absolument inévitable. Les pêcheurs danois de Disco et du Balesin, les chercheurs de baleines noires, Hearn allant vers le détroit de Behring reconnaître l’embouchure de la Rivière de la mine de cuivre, Hudson, Mackensie, Vancouver, Ross, Dumont d’Urville, ont subi, au pôle même, les plus inclémentes bourrasques de neige, et s’en sont échappés,

C’est dans cette espèce de tempête-là que l’ourque était entrée pleines voiles et avec triomphe. Frénésie contre frénésie.

Quand Montgomery, s’évadant de Rouen, précipita à toutes rames sa galère sur la chaîne barrant la Seine à la Bouille, il eut la même effronterie.

La *Matutina* courait. Son penchement sous voiles faisait par instants avec la mer un affreux angle de quinze degrés, mais sa bonne quille ventrue adhérait au flot comme à de la glu. La quille résistait à l’arrachement de l’ouragan. La cage à feu éclairait l’avant. Le nuage plein de souffles traînant sa tumeur sur l’océan, rétrécissait et rongeait de plus en plus la mer autour de l’ourque. Pas une mouette. Pas une hirondelle de falaise. Rien que la neige. Le champ des vagues était petit et épouvantable. On n’en voyait que trois ou quatre, démesurées.

De temps en temps un vaste éclair, couleur de cuivre rouge, apparaissait derrière les superpositions obscures de l’horizon et du zénith. Cet élargissement vermeil montrait l’horreur des nuées. Le brusque embrasement des profondeurs, sur lequel, pendant une seconde, se détachaient les premiers plans des nuages et les fuites lointaines du chaos céleste, mettait l’abîme en perspective. Sur ce fond de feu les flocons de neige devenaient noirs, et l’on eût dit des papillons sombres volant dans une fournaise. Puis tout s’éteignait.

La première explosion passée, la bourrasque, chassant toujours l’ourque, se mit à rugir en basse continue. C’est la phase de grondement, redoutable diminution de fracas. Rien d’inquiétant comme ce monologue de la tempête. Ce récitatif morne ressemble un temps d’arrêt que prendraient les mystérieuses forces combattantes, et indique une sorte de guet dans l’inconnu.

L’ourque continuait éperdument sa course. Ses deux voiles majeures surtout faisaient une fonction effrayante. Le ciel et la mer étaient d’encre, avec des jets de bave sautant plus haut que le mât. A chaque instant, des paquets d’eau traversaient le pont comme un déluge, et à toutes les inflexions du roulis, les écubiers, tantôt de tribord, tantôt de bâbord, devenaient autant de bouches ouvertes revomissant l’écume à la mer. Les femmes s’étaient réfugiées dans la cabine, mais les hommes demeuraient sur le pont. La neige aveuglante tourbillonnait. Les crachats de la houle s’y ajoutaient. Tout était furieux.

En ce moment, le chef de la bande, debout à l’arrière sur la barre d’arcasse, d’une main s’accrochant aux haubans, de l’autre arrachant sa pagne de tête qu’il secouait aux lueurs de la cage feu, arrogant, content, la face altière, les cheveux farouches, ivre de toute cette ombre, cria:

— Nous sommes libres!

— Libres! libres! libres! répétèrent les évadés.

Et toute la bande, saisissant des poings les agrès, se dressa sur le pont.

— Hurrah! cria le chef,

Et la bande hurla dans la tempête:

— Hurrah!

A l’instant où cette clameur s’éteignait parmi les rafales, une voix grave et haute s’éleva à l’autre extrémité du navire, et dit: — Silence!

Toutes les têtes se retournèrent.

Ils venaient de reconnaître la voix du docteur. L’obscurit était épaisse; le docteur était adossé au mât avec lequel sa maigreur se confondait, on ne le voyait pas.

La voix reprit:

— Écoutez!

Tous se turent.

Alors on entendit distinctement dans les ténèbres le tintement d’une cloche.

IX

SOIN CONFIÉ A LA MER FURIEUSE

Le patron de la barque, qui tenait la barre, éclata de rire. — Une cloche! C’est bon. Nous chassons à bâbord. Que prouve cette cloche? Que nous avons la terre à dextribord.

La voix ferme et lente du docteur répondit:

— Vous n’avez pas la terre à tribord.

— Mais si! cria le patron.

— Non.

— Mais cette cloche vient de la terre.

— Cette cloche, dit le docteur, vient de la mer.

Il y eut un frisson parmi ces hommes hardis. Les faces hagardes des deux femmes apparurent dans le carré du capot de cabine comme deux larves évoquées. Le docteur fit un pas, et sa longue forme noire se détacha du mât. On entendait la cloche tinter au fond de la nuit.

Le docteur reprit:

— Il y a, au milieu de la mer, à moitié chemin entre Portland et l’archipel de la Manche, une bouée, qui est là pour avertir.

Cette bouée est amarrée avec des chaînes aux bas-fonds et flotte à fleur d’eau. Sur cette bouée est fixé un tréteau de fer, et la traverse de ce tréteau est suspendue une cloche. Dans le gros temps, la mer, secouée, secoue la bouée, et la cloche sonne.

Cette cloche, vous l’entendez.

Le docteur laissa passer un redoublement de la bise, attendit que le son de la cloche eût repris le dessus, et poursuivit:

— Entendre celte cloche dans la tempête, quand le noroit souffle, c’est être perdu. Pourquoi? le voici. Si vous entendez le bruit de cette cloche, c’est que le vent vous l’apporte. Or le vent vient de l’ouest et les brisants d’Aurigny sont à l’est.

Vous ne pouvez entendre la cloche que parce que vous êtes entre la bouée et les brisants. C’est sur ces brisants que le vent vous pousse. Vous êtes du mauvais côté de la bouée. Si vous étiez du bon, vous seriez au large, en haute mer, en route sûre, et vous n’entendriez pas la cloche. Le vent n’en porterait pas le bruit vers vous. Vous passeriez, près de la bouée sans savoir qu’elle est là. Nous avons dévié. Cette cloche, c’est le naufrage qui sonne le tocsin. Maintenant, avisez!

La cloche, pendant que le docteur parlait, apaisée par une baisse de brise, sonnait lentement, un coup après l’autre, et ce tintement intermittent semblait prendre acte des paroles du vieillard. On eût dit le glas de l’abîme.

Tous écoutaient, haletants, tantôt cette voix, tantôt cette cloche.

X

LA GRANDE SAUVAGE. C’EST LA TEMPÊTE

Cependant le patron avait saisi son porte-voix.

— *Cargate todo, hombres*! Débordez les écoutes, halez les cale-bas, affalez les itaques et les cagues des basses voiles!
mordons à l’ouest! reprenons de la mer! le cap sur la bouée!
le cap sur la cloche! il y a du large là-bas. Tout n’est pas désespéré.

— Essayez, dit le docteur.

Disons ici, en passant, que cette bouée à sonnerie, sorte de clocher de la mer, a été supprimée en 1802. De très vieux navigateurs se souviennent encore de l’avoir entendue. Elle avertissait, mais un peu tard.

L’ordre du patron fut obéi. Le languedocien fit un troisième matelot. Tous aidèrent. On fit mieux que carguer, on ferla; on sangla tous les rabans, on noua les cargue-points, les cargue-fonds et les cargue-boulines; on mit des pataras sur les estropes qui purent ainsi servir de haubans de travers; on jumela le mât; on cloua les mantelets de sabord, ce qui est une façon de murer le navire. La manoeuvre, quoique exécutée en pantenne, n’en fut pas moins correcte. L’ourque fut ramenée à la simplification de détresse. Mais à mesure que le bâtiment, serrant tout, s’amoindrissait, le bouleversement de l’air et de l’eau croissait sur lui. La hauteur des houles atteignait presque la dimension polaire.

L’ouragan, comme un bourreau pressé, se mit à écarteler le navire. Ce fut, en un clin d’oeil, un arrachement effroyable, les huniers déralingués, le bordage rasé, les dogues d’amures déboîtés, les haubans saccagés, le mât brisé, tout le fracas du désastre volant en éclats. Les gros cables cédèrent, bien qu’ils eussent quatre brasses d’étalingure.

La tension magnétique propre aux orages de neige aidait à la rupture des cordages. Ils cassaient autant sous l’effluve que sous le vent. Diverses chaînes sorties de leurs poulies ne manoeuvraient plus. A l’avant, les joues, et à l’arrière, les hanches, ployaient sous des pressions à outrance. Une lame emporta la boussole avec l’habitacle. Une autre lame emporta le canot, amarré en porte-manteau au beaupré, selon la bizarre coutume asturienne.

Une autre lame emporta la vergue civadière.
Une autre lame emporta la Notre-Dame de proue et la cage à feu.

Il ne restait que le gouvernail.

On suppléa au fanal manquant au moyen d'une grosse grenade brûlot pleine d'étoupe flambante et de goudron allumé, qu'on suspendit à l'étrave.

Le mât, cassé en deux, tout hérissé de haillons frissonnants, de cordes, de moufles et de vergues, encombrait le pont. En tombant, il avait brisé un pan de la muraille de tribord.

Le patron, toujours à la barre, cria:

— Tant que nous pouvons gouverner, rien n'est perdu. Les oeuvres vives tiennent bon. Des haches! des haches! Le mât à la mer!
dégagez le pont.

Équipage et passagers avaient la fièvre des batailles suprêmes.
Ce fut l'affaire de quelques coups de cognée. On poussa le mât par-dessus le bord. Le pont fut débarrassé.

— Maintenant, reprit le patron, prenez une drisse et amarrez-moi à la barre.

On le lia au timon.

Pendant qu'on l'attachait, il riait. Il cria à la mer:

— Beugle, la vieille! beugle! j'en ai vu de pires au cap Machichaco.

Et quand il fut garrotté, il empoigna le timon à deux poings avec cette joie étrange que donne le danger.

— Tout est bien, camarades! Vive Notre-Dame de Buglose!
Gouvernons à l'ouest!

Une lame de travers, colossale, vint, et s'abattit sur l'arrière.
Il y a toujours dans les tempêtes une sorte de vague tigre, flot féroce et définitif, qui arrive à point nommé, rampe quelque temps comme à plat ventre sur la mer, puis bondit, rugit, grince, fond sur le navire en détresse, et le démembre. Un engloutissement d'écume couvrit toute la poupe de la *Matutina*, on entendit dans cette mêlée d'eau et de nuit une dislocation.
Quand l'écume se dissipa, quand l'arrière reparut, il n'y avait plus ni patron, ni gouvernail.

Tout avait été arraché.

La barre et l'homme qu'on venait d'y lier s'en étaient allés avec la vague dans le pêle-mêle hennissant de la tempête.

Le chef de la bande regarda fixement l'ombre et cria:

— *Te burlas de nosotros*?

Te moques-tu de nous?

A ce cri de révolte succéda un autre cri:

— Jetons l'ancre! sauvons le patron.

On courut au cabestan. On mouilla l'ancre. Les ourques n'en avaient qu'une. Ceci n'aboutit qu'à la perdre. Le fond était de roc vif, la houle forcenée. Le câble cassa comme un cheveu.

L'ancre demeura au fond de la mer.

Du taille-mer il ne restait que l'ange regardant dans sa lunette.

A dater de ce moment, l'ourque ne fut plus qu'une épave. La *Matutina* était irrémédiablement désemparée. Ce navire, tout l'heure ailé, et presque terrible dans sa course, était maintenant impotent. Pas une manoeuvre qui ne fût tronqué et désarticulée. Il obéissait, ankylosé et passif, aux furies bizarres de la flottaison. Qu'en quelques minutes, à la place d'un aigle, il y ait un cul-de-jatte, cela ne se voit qu'à la mer.

Le soufflement de l'espace était de plus en plus monstrueux. La tempête est un poumon épouvantable. Elle ajoute sans cesse de lugubres aggravations à ce qui n'a point de nuances, le noir. La cloche du milieu de la mer sonnait désespérément, comme secouée par une main farouche.

La *Matutina* s'en allait au hasard des vagues; un bouchon de liège a de ces ondulations; elle ne voguait plus, elle surnageait; elle semblait à chaque instant prête à se retourner le ventre à fleur d'eau comme un poisson mort. Ce qui la sauvait de cette perdition, c'était la bonne conservation de la coque, parfaitement étanche. Aucune vaigre n'avait cédé sous la flottaison. Il n'y avait ni fissure, ni crevasse, et pas une goutte d'eau n'entrait dans la cale. Heureusement, car une avarie avait atteint la pompe et l'avait mise hors de service.

L'ourque dansait hideusement dans l'angoisse des flots. Le pont avait les convulsions d'un diaphragme qui cherche à vomir. On eût dit qu'il faisait effort pour rejeter les naufragés. Eux, inertes, se cramponnaient aux manoeuvres dormantes, au bordage, au traversin, au serre-bosse, aux garcettes, aux cassures du franc-bord embouffeté dont les clous leur déchiraient les mains, aux porques déjetées, à tous les reliefs misérables du délabrement. De temps en temps ils prêtaient l'oreille. Le bruit de la cloche allait s'affaiblissant. On eût dit qu'elle aussi agonisait. Son tintement n'était plus qu'un râle intermittent. Puis ce râle s'éteignit. Où étaient-ils donc? et à quelle distance étaient-ils de la bouée? Le bruit de la cloche les avait effrayés, son silence les terrifia. Le noroit leur faisait faire un chemin peut-être irréparable. Ils se sentaient emportés par une frénétique reprise d’haleine. L’épave courait dans le noir. Une vitesse aveuglée, rien n’est plus affreux.

Ils sentaient du précipice devant eux, sous eux, sur eux. Ce n’était plus une course, c’était une chute.

Brusquement, dans l’énorme tumulte du brouillard de neige, une rougeur apparut.

— Un phare! crièrent les naufragés.

XI

LES CASQUETS

C’était en effet les Light-House des Casquets.

Un phare au dix-neuvième siècle est un haut cylindre conoïde de maçonnerie surmonté d’une machine à éclairage toute scientifique.

Le phare des Casquets en particulier est aujourd’hui une triple tour blanche portant trois châteaux de lumière. Ces trois maisons à feu évoluent et pivotent sur des rouages d’horlogerie avec une telle précision que l’homme de quart qui les observe du large fait invariablement dix pas sur le pont du navire pendant l’irradiation, et vingt-cinq pendant l’éclipse. Tout est calcul dans le plan focal et dans la rotation du tambour octogone form de huit larges lentilles simples à échelons, et ayant au-dessus et au-dessous ses deux séries d’anneaux dioptriques; engrenage algébrique garanti des coups de vent et des coups de mer par des vitres épaisses, parfois cassées pourtant par les aigles de mer qui se jettent dessus, grands phalènes de ces lanternes géantes.

La bâtisse qui enferme, soutient et sertit ce mécanisme est, comme lui, mathématique. Tout y est sobre, exact, nu, précis, correct; un phare est un chiffre.

Au dix-septième siècle un phare était une sorte de panache de la terre au bord de la mer. L’architecture d’une tour de phare était magnifique et extravagante. On y prodiguait les balcons, les balustres, les tourelles, les logettes, les gloriettes, les girouettes. Ce n’étaient que mascarons, statues, rinceaux, volutes, rondes bosses, figures et figurines, cartouches avec inscriptions. *Pax in bello,* disait le phare d’Eddystone, Observons-le en passant, cette déclaration de paix ne désarmait pas toujours l’océan. Winstanley la répéta sur un phare qu’il construisit à ses frais dans un lieu farouche, devant Plymoulh.

La tour du phare achevée, il se mit dedans et la fit essayer par la tempête.

La tempête vint et emporta le phare et Winstanley.

Du reste ces bâtisses excessives donnaient de toutes parts prise à la bourrasque, comme ces généraux trop chamarrés qui dans la bataille attirent les coups. Outre les fantaisies de pierre, il y avait les fantaisies de fer, de cuivre, de bois; les serrureries faisaient relief, les charpentes faisaient saillie.

Partout, sur le profil du phare, débordaient, scellés au mur parmi les arabesques, des engins de toute espèce, utiles et inutiles, treuils, palans, poulies, contre-poids, échelles, grues de chargement, grappins de sauvetage. Sur le faîte, autour du foyer, de délicates serrureries ouvragées portaient de gros chandeliers de fer où l’on plantait des tronçons de câble noyés de résine, mèches brûlant opiniâtrement et qu’aucun vent n’éteignait. Et, du haut en bas, la tour était compliquée d’étendards de nier, de banderoles, de bannières, de drapeaux, de pennons, de pavillons, qui montaient de hampe en hampe, d’étage en étage, amalgamant toutes les couleurs, toutes les formes, tous les blasons, tous les signaux, toutes les turbulences, jusqu’à la cage à rayons du phare, et faisaient dans la tempête une joyeuse émeute de guenilles autour de ce flamboiement. Cette effronterie de lumière au bord du gouffre ressemblait à un défi et mettait en verve d’audace les naufragés. Mais le phare des Casquets n’était point de cette mode.

C’était à cette époque un simple vieux phare barbare, tel que Henri Ier l’avait fait construire après la perdition de la *Blanche-Nef,* un bûcher flambant sous un treillis de fer au haut d’un rocher, une braise derrière une grille, et une chevelure de flamme dans le vent.

Le seul perfectionnement qu’avait eu ce phare depuis le douzième siècle, c’était un soufflet de forge mis en mouvement par une crémaillère à poids de pierre qu’on avait ajustée à la cage à feu en 1610.

A ces antiques phares-là, l’aventure des oiseaux de mer était plus tragique qu’aux phares actuels. Les oiseaux y accouraient, attirés par la clarté, s’y précipitaient et tombaient dans le brasier où on les voyait sauter, espèces d’esprits noirs agonisant dans cet enfer; et parfois ils retombaient hors de la cage rouge sur le rocher, fumants, boiteux, aveugles, comme hors d’une flamme de lampe des mouches à demi brûlées.

A un navire en manoeuvre, pourvu de toutes ses ressources de gréement, et maniable au pilote, le phare des Casquets est utile.

Il crie: gare! Il avertit de l’ecueil. A un navire désemparé il n’est que terrible. La coque, paralysée et inerte, sans résistance contre le plissement insensé de l’eau, sans défense contre la pression du vent, poisson sans nageoires, oiseau sans ailes, ne peut qu’aller où le souffle la pousse. Le phare lui montre l’endroit suprême, signale le lieu de disparition, fait le jour sur l’ensevelissement. Il est la chandelle du sépulcre.

Éclairer l’ouverture inexorable, avertir de l’inévitable, pas de plus tragique ironie.

XII

CORPS A CORPS AVEC L’ÉCUEIL

Cette mystérieuse dérision ajoutée au naufrage, les misérables en détresse sur la *Matutina* la comprirent tout de suite.

L’apparition du phare les releva d’abord, puis les accabla. Rien à faire, rien à tenter. Ce qui a été dit des rois peut se dire des flots. On est leur peuple; on est leur proie. Tout ce qu’ils délirent, on le subit. Le noroit drossait l’ourque sur les Casquets. On y allait. Pas de refus possible. On dérivait rapidement vers le récif. On sentait monter le fond; la sonde, si on eût pu mouiller utilement une sonde, n’eût pas donné plus de trois ou quatre brasses. Les naufragés écoulaient les sourds engouffrements de la vague dans les hiatus sous-marins du profond rocher. Ils distinguaient au-dessous du phare, comme une tranche obscure, entre deux lames de granit, la passe étroite de l’affreux petit havre sauvage qu’on devinait plein de squelettes d’hommes et de carcasses de navires. C’était une bouche d’antre, plutôt qu’une entrée de port. Ils entendaient le pétillement du haut bûcher dans sa cage de fer, une pourpre hagarde illuminait la tempête, la rencontre de la flamme et de la grêle troublait la brume, la nuée noire et la fumée rouge combattaient, serpent contre serpent, un arrachement de braises volait au vent, et les flocons de neige semblaient prendre la fuite devant cette brusque attaque d’étincelles. Les brisants, estompés d’abord, se dessinaient maintenant nettement, fouillis de roches, avec des pics, des crêtes et des vertèbres. Les angles se modelaient par de vives lignes vermeilles, et les plans inclinés par de sanglants glissements de clarté, A mesure qu’on avançait, le relief de l’écueil croissait et montait, sinistre.

Une des femmes, l’irlandaise, dévidait éperdument son rosaire.

A défaut du patron, qui était le pilote, restait le chef, qui était le capitaine. Les basques savent tous la montagne et la mer. Ils sont hardis aux précipices et inventifs dans les catastrophes.

On arrivait, on allait toucher. On fut tout à coup si près de la grande roche du nord des Casquets, que subitement elle éclipsa le phare. On ne vit plus qu’elle, et de la lueur derrière. Cette roche debout dans la brume ressemblait à une grande femme noire avec une coiffe de feu.

Cette roche mal famée se nomme le Biblet. Elle contrebute au septentrion l'écueil qu'un autre récif, l'Étacq-aux-Guilmets, contrebute au midi.

Le chef regarda le Biblet, et cria:

— Un homme de bonne volonté pour porter un grelin au brisant! Y a-t-il ici quelqu'un qui sache nager?

Pas de réponse.

Personne à bord ne savait nager, pas même les matelots; ignorance du reste fréquente chez les gens de mer.

Une hiloire à peu près détachée de ses liaisons oscillait dans le bordage. Le chef l'étreignit de ses deux poings, et dit:

— Aidez-moi.

On détacha l'hiloire. On l'eut à sa disposition pour en faire ce qu'on voudrait. De défensive elle devint offensive.

C'était une assez longue poutre, en coeur de chêne, saine et robuste, pouvant servir d'engin d'attaque et de point d'appui; levier contre un fardeau, bélier contre une tour.

— En garde! cria le chef.

Ils se mirent six, arc-boutés au tronçon du mât, tenant l'hiloire horizontale hors du bord et droite comme une lance devant la hanche de l'écueil.

La manoeuvre était périlleuse. Donner une poussée à une montagne, c'est une audace. Les six hommes pouvaient être jetés à l'eau du contre-coup.

Ce sont là les diversités de la lutte des tempêtes. Après la rafale, l'écueil; après le vent, le granit. On a affaire tantôt à l'insaisissable, tantôt à l'inébranlable.

Il y eut une de ces minutes pendant lesquelles les cheveux blanchissent.

L'écueil et le navire, on allait s'aborder.

Un rocher est un patient. Le récif attendait.

Une houle accourut, désordonnée. Elle mit fin à l'attente. Elle prit le navire en dessous, le souleva et le balança un moment, comme la fronde balance le projectile.

— Fermes! cria le chef. Ce n'est qu'un rocher, nous sommes des hommes.

La poutre était en arrêt. Les six hommes ne faisaient qu'un avec elle. Les chevilles pointues de l'hiloire leur labouraient les aisselles, mais ils ne les sentaient point.

La houle jeta l'ourque contre le roc.

Le choc eut lieu.

Il eut lieu sous l'informe nuage d'écume qui cache toujours ces péripéties.

Quand ce nuage tomba à la mer, quant l'écart se refit entre la vague et le rocher, les six hommes roulaient sur le pont; mais la *Matutina* fuyait le long du brisant. La poutre avait tenu bon et déterminé une déviation. En quelques secondes, le glissement de la lame étant effréné, les Casquets furent derrière l'ourque.

La *Matutina*, pour l'instant, était hors de péril immédiat.

Cela arrive. C'est un coup droit de beaupré dans la falaise qui sauva Wood de Largo à l'embouchure du Tay. Dans les rudes parages du cap Winterton, et sous le commandement du capitaine Hamilton, c'est par une manoeuvre de levier pareille contre le redoutable rocher Brannodu-um que sut échapper au naufrage la *Royale-Marie*, bien que ce ne fût qu'une frégate de la façon d'Ecosse. La vague est une force si soudainement décomposée que les diversions y sont faciles, possibles du moins, même dans les chocs les plus violents. Dans la tempête il y a de la brute; l'ouragan c'est le taureau, et l'on peut lui donner le change.

Tâcher de passer de la sécante à la tangente, tout le secret d'éviter le naufrage est là.

C'est ce service que l'hiloire avait rendu au navire. Elle avait fait office d'aviron; elle avait tenu lieu de gouvernail. Mais cette manoeuvre libératrice était une fois faite; on ne pouvait la recommencer. La poutre était à la mer. La dureté du choc l'avait fait sauter hors des mains des hommes par-dessus le bord, et elle s'était perdue dans le flot. Desceller une autre charpente, c'était disloquer la membrure.

L'ouragan remporta la *Matutina*. Tout de suite les Casquets semblèrent à l'horizon un encombrement inutile. Rien n'a l'air décontenancé comme un écueil en pareille occasion. Il y a dans la nature, du côté de l'inconnu, là où le visible est compliqu d'invisible, de hargneux profils immobiles que semble indigner une proie lâchée.

Tels furent les Casquets pendant que la *Matutina* s'enfuyait.

Le phare, reculant, pâlit, blêmit, puis s'effaça.

Cette extinction fut morne. Les épaisseurs de brume se superposèrent sur ce flamboiement devenu diffus, Le rayonnement se délaya dans l'immensité mouillée. La flamme flotta, lutta, s’enfonça, perdit forme. On eût dit une noyée. Le brasier devint lumignon, ce ne fut plus qu’un tremblement blafard et vague. Tout autour s’élargissait un cercle de lueur extravasée. C’était comme un écrasement de lumière au fond de la nuit.

La cloche, qui était une menace, s’était tue; le phare, qui était une menace, s’était évanoui. Pourtant, quand ces deux menaces eurent disparu, ce fut plus terrible. L’une était une voix, l’autre était un flambeau. Elles avaient quelque chose d’humain.

Elles de moins, resta l’abîme.

XIII

FACE A FACE AVEC LA NUIT

L’ourque se retrouva à vau-l’ombre dans l’obscurit incommensurable.
La *Matutina*, échappée aux Casquets, dévalait de houle en houle.
Répit, mais dans le chaos. Poussée en travers par le vent, maniée par les mille tractions de la vague, elle répercutait toutes les oscillations folles du flot. Elle n’avait presque plus de tangage, signe redoutable de l’agonie d’un navire. Les épaves n’ont que du roulis. Le tangage est la convulsion de la lutte. Le gouvernail seul peut prendre le vent debout.

Dans la tempête, et surtout dans le météore de neige, la mer et la nuit finissent par se fondre et s’amalgamer, et par ne plus faire qu’une fumée. Brume, tourbillon, souffle, glissement dans tous les sens, aucun point d’appui, aucun lieu de repère, aucun temps d’arrêt, un perpétuel recommencement, une trouée après l’autre, nul horizon visible, profond recul noir, l’ourque voguait là-dedans,

Se dégager des Casquets, éluder l’écueil, cela avait été pour les naufragés une victoire. Mais surtout une stupeur. Ils n’avaient point poussé de hurrahs; en mer, on ne fait pas deux fois de ces imprudences-là. Jeter la provocation là où on ne jetterait pas la sonde, c’est grave.

L’écueil repoussé, c’était de l’impossible accompli. Ils en étaient pétrifiés. Peu à peu pourtant, ils se remettaient espérer. Telles sont les insubmersibles mirages de l’âme. Pas de détresse qui, même à l’instant le plus critique, ne voie blanchir dans ses profondeurs l’inexprimable lever de l’espérance. Ces malheureux ne demandaient pas mieux que de s’avouer qu’ils étaient sauvés. Ils avaient en eux ce bégaiement.

Mais un grandissement formidable se fit tout à coup dans la nuit.
A bâbord surgit, se dessina et se découpa sur le fond de brume une haute masse opaque, verticale, à angles droits, une tour carrée de l’abîme.

Ils regardèrent, béants.

La rafale les poussait vers cela.

Ils ignoraient ce que c’était. C’était le rocher Ortach.

XIV

ORTACH

L’écueil recommençait. Après les Casquets, Ortach. La tempête n’est point une artiste, elle est brutale et toute-puissante, et ne varie pas ses moyens.

L’obscurité n’est pas épuisable. Elle n’est jamais à bout de pièges et de perfidies. L’homme, lui, est vite à l’extrémité de ses ressources. L’homme se dépense, le gouffre non.

Les naufragés se tournèrent vers le chef, leur espoir. Il ne put que hausser les épaules; morne dédain de l’impuissance.

Un pavé au milieu de l’océan, c’est le rocher Ortach. L’écueil Orlach, tout d’une pièce, au-dessus du choc contrarié des houles, monte droit à quatrevingts pieds de haut. Les vagues et les navires s’y brisent. Cube immuable, il plonge à pic ses flancs rectilignes dans les innombrables courbes serpentantes de la mer.

La nuit il figure un billot énorme posé sur les plis d’un grand drap noir. Dans la tempête, il attend le coup de hache, qui est le coup de tonnerre.

Mais jamais de coup de tonnerre dans la trombe de neige. Le navire, il est vrai, a le bandeau sur les yeux; toutes les ténèbres sont nouées sur lui. Il est prêt comme un supplicié.

Quant à la foudre, qui est une fin prompte, il ne faut point l’espérer.

La *Matutina,* n’étant plus qu’un échouement flottant, s’en alla vers ce rocher-ci comme elle était allée vers l’autre. Les infortunés, qui s’étaient un moment crus sauvés, rentrèrent dans l’angoisse. Le naufrage, qu’ils avaient laissé derrière eux, reparaissait devant eux. L’écueil ressortait du fond de la mer.

Il n’y avait rien de fait.

Les Casquets sont un gaufrier à mille compartiments, l’Ortach est une muraille. Naufrager aux Casquets, c’est être déchiqueté; naufrager à l’Ortach, c’est être broyé.

Il y avait une chance pourtant.

Sur les fronts droits, et l’Ortach est un front droit, la vague, pas plus que le boulet, n’a de ricochets. Elle est réduite au jeu simple. C’est le flux, puis le reflux. Elle arrive lame et revient houle.

Dans des cas pareils, la question de vie et de mort se pose ainsi: si la lame conduit le bâtiment jusqu’au rocher, elle l’y brise, il est perdu; si la houle revient avant que le bâtiment ait touché, elle le remmène, il est sauvé.

Anxiété poignante. Les naufragés apercevaient dans la pénombre le grand flot suprême venant à eux. Jusqu’où allait-il les traîner? Si le flot brisait au navire, ils étaient roulés au roc et fracassés. S’il passait sous le navire...

Le flot passa sous le navire.

Ils respirèrent.

Mais quel retour allait-il avoir? Qu’est-ce que le ressac ferait d’eux?

Le ressac les remporta.

Quelques minutes après, la *Matutina* était hors des eaux de l’écueil. L’Ortach s’effaçait comme les Casquets s’étaient effacés.

C’était la deuxième victoire. Pour la seconde fois l’ourque était arrivée au bord du naufrage, et avait reculé à temps.

XV

PORTENTOSUM MARE

Cependant un épaississcment de brume s’était abattu sur ces malheureux en dérive. Ils ignoraient où ils étaient. Ils voyaient à peine à quelques encâblures autour de l’ourque.

Malgré une véritable lapidation de grêlons qui les forçait tous baisser la tête, les femmes s’étaient obstinées à ne point redescendre dans la cabine. Pas de désespéré qui ne veuille naufrager à ciel ouvert. Si près de la mort, il semble qu’un plafond au-dessus de soi est un commencement de cercueil,

La vague, de plus en plus gonflée, devenait courte. La turgescence du flot indique un étranglement; dans le brouillard, de certains bourrelets de l’eau signalent un détroit. En effet, à leur insu, ils côtoyaient Aurigny. Entre Ortach et les Casquets au couchant et Aurigny au levant, la mer est resserrée et gênée, et l’état de malaise pour la mer détermine localement l’état de tempête. La mer souffre comme autre chose; et là o elle souffre, elle s’irrite. Cette passe est redoutée.

La *Matutina* était dans cette passe.

Qu’on s’imagine sous l’eau une écaille de tortue grande comme Hyde-Park ou les Champs-Elysées, et dont chaque strie est un bas-fond et dont chaque bossage est un récif. Telle est l’approche ouest d’Aurigny. La mer recouvre et cache cet appareil de naufrage. Sur cette carapace de brisants sous-marins, la vague déchiquetée saute et écume. Dans le calme, clapotement; dans l’orage, chaos.

Cette complication nouvelle, les naufragés la remarquaient sans se l’expliquer. Subitement ils la comprirent. Une pâle éclaircie se fit au zénith, un peu de blêmissement se dispersa sur la mer, cette lividité démasqua à bâbord un long barrage en travers à l’est, et vers lequel se ruait, chassant le navire devant elle, la poussée du vent. Ce barrage était Aurigny.

Qu’était-ce que ce barrage? Ils tremblèrent. Ils eussent bien plus tremblé encore si une voix leur eût répondu: Aurigny,

Pas d’île défendue contre la venue de l’homme comme Aurigny.

Elle a sous l’eau et hors de l’eau une garde féroce dont Ortach est la sentinelle. A l’ouest, Burhou, Sauteriaux, Anfroque, Niangle, Fond-du-

Croc, les Jumelles, la Grosse, la Clanque, les Éguillons, le Vrac, la Fosse-Malière; à l'est, Sauquet, Hommeau, Floreau, la Brinebelais, la Queslingue, Croquelihou, la Fourche, le Saut, Noire Pute, Coupie, Orbue, Qu'est-ce que tous ces monstres? des hydres? Oui, de l'espèce écueil.

Un de ces récifs s'appelle le But, comme pour indiquer que tout voyage finit là.

Cet encombrement d'écueils, simplifié par l'eau et la nuit, apparaissait aux naufragés sous la forme d'une simple bande obscure, sorte de rature noire sur l'horizon.

Le naufrage, c'est l'idéal de l'impuissance. Être près de la terre et ne pouvoir l'atteindre, flotter et ne pouvoir voguer, avoir le pied sur quelque chose qui paraît solide et qui est fragile, être plein de vie et plein de mort en même temps, être prisonnier des étendues, être muré entre le ciel et l'océan, avoir sur soi l'infini comme un cachot, avoir autour de soi l'immense évasion des souffles et des ondes, et être saisi, garrotté, paralysé, cet accablement stupéfie et indigne. On croit y entrevoir le ricanement du combattant inaccessible. Ce qui vous tient, c'est cela même qui lâche les oiseaux et met en liberté les poissons. Cela ne semble rien et c'est tout. On dépend de cet air qu'on trouble avec sa bouche, on dépend de cette eau qu'on prend dans le creux de sa main. Puisez de cette tempête plein un verre, ce n'est plus qu'un peu d'amertume.
Gorgée, c'est une nausée; houle, c'est l'extermination. Le grain de sable dans le désert, le flocon d'écume dans l'océan, sont des manifestations vertigineuses; la toute-puissance ne prend pas la peine de cacher son atome, elle fait la faiblesse force, elle emplit de son tout le néant, et c'est avec l'infiniment petit que l'infiniment grand vous écrase. C'est avec des gouttes que l'océan vous broie. On se sent jouet.

Jouet, quel mot terrible!

La *Matutina* était un peu au-dessus d'Aurigny, ce qui était favorable; mais dérivait vers la pointe nord, ce qui était fatal.
La bise nord-ouest, comme un arc tendu décoche une flèche, lançait le navire vers le cap septentrional. Il existe à cette pointe, un peu en deçà du havre des Corbelets, ce que les marins de l'archipel normand appellent «un singe». Le singe — *swinge* — est un courant de l'espèce furieuse. Un chapelet d'entonnoirs dans les bas-fonds produit dans les vagues un chapelet de tourbillons. Quand l'un vous lâche, l'autre vous reprend. Un navire, happé par le singe, roule ainsi de spirale en spirale jusqu'à ce qu'une

roche aiguë ouvre la coque. Alors le bâtiment crevé s’arrête, l’arrière sort des vagues, l’avant plonge, le gouffre achève son tour de roue, l’arrière s’enfonce, et tout se referme. Une flaque d’écume s’élargit et flotte, et l’on ne voit plus à la surface de la lame que quelques bulles ça et là, venues des respirations étouffées sous l’eau.

Dans toute la Manche, les trois singes les plus dangereux sont le singe qui avoisine le fameux banc de sable Girdler Sands, le singe qui est à Jersey entre le Pignonnet et la pointe de Noirmont, et le singe d’Aurigny.

Un pilote local, qui eût été à bord de la *Mututina*, eût averti les naufragés de ce nouveau péril. A défaut de pilote, ils avaient l’instinct; dans les situations extrêmes, il y a une seconde vue. De hautes torsions d’écume s’envolaient le long de la côte, dans le pillage frénétique du vent. C’était le crachement du singe. Nombre de barques ont chaviré dans celte embûche. Sans savoir ce qu’il y avait là, ils approchaient avec horreur.

Comment doubler ce cap? Nul moyen,

De même qu’ils avaient vu surgir les Casquets, puis surgir Ortach, à présent ils voyaient se dresser la pointe d’Aurigny, toute de haute roche. C’était comme des géants l’un après l’autre. Série de duels effrayants,

Charybde et Scylla ne sont que deux; les Casquets, Ortach et Aurigny sont trois.

Le même phénomène d’envahissement de l’horizon par l’écueil se reproduisait avec la monotonie grandiose du gouffre. Les batailles de l’océan ont, comme les combats d’Homère, ce rabâchage sublime.

Chaque lame, à mesure qu’ils approchaient, ajoutait vingt coudées au cap affreusement amplifié dans la brume. La décroissance d’intervalle semblait de plus en plus irrémédiable. Ils touchaient à la lisière du singe. Le premier pli qui les saisirait les entraînerait. Encore un flot franchi, tout était fini.

Soudain l’ourque fut repoussée en arrière comme par le coup de poing d’un titan. La houle se cabra sous le navire et se renversa, rejetant l’épave dans sa crinière d’écume. La *Matutina*, sous cette impulsion, s’écarta d’Aurigny.

Elle se retrouva au large.

D’où arrivait ce secours? Du vent.

Le souffle de l’orage venait de se déplacer.

Le flot avait joué d’eux, maintenant c’était le tour du vent, Ils s’étaient dégagés eux-mêmes des Casquets; mais devant Ortach la houle avait fait la péripétie; devant Aurigny, ce fut la bise, Il y avait eu subitement une saute du septentrion au midi.

Le suroit avait succédé au noroit.

Le courant, c’est le vent dans l’eau; le vent, c’est le courant dans l’air; ces deux forces venaient de se contrarier, et le vent avait eu le caprice de retirer sa proie au courant.

Les brusqueries de l’océan sont obscures. Elles sont le perpétuel peut-être. Quand on est à leur merci, on ne peut ni espérer, ni désespérer. Elles font, puis défont. L’océan s’amuse. Toutes les nuances de la férocité fauve sont dans cette vaste et sournoise mer, que Jean Bart appelait «la grosse bête».

C’est le coup de griffe avec les intervalles voulus de patte de velours. Quelquefois la tempête bâcle le naufrage; quelquefois elle le travaille avec soin; on pourrait presque dire elle le caresse. La mer a le temps. Les agonisants s’en aperçoivent.

Parfois, disons-le, ces ralentissements dans le supplice annoncent la délivrance. Ces cas sont rares. Quoi qu’il en soit, les agonisants croient vite au salut, le moindre apaisement dans les menaces de l’orage leur suffit, ils s’affirment eux-mêmes qu’ils sont hors de péril, après s’être crus ensevelis ils prennent acte de leur résurrection, ils acceptent fiévreusement ce qu’ils ne possèdent pas encore, tout ce que la mauvaise chance contenait est épuisé, c’est évident, ils se déclarent satisfaits, ils sont sauvés, ils tiennent Dieu quitte.

Il ne faut point trop se hâter de donner de ces reçus l’Inconnu,

Le suroit débuta en tourbillon, Les naufragés n’ont jamais que des auxiliaires bourrus. La *Matutina* fut impétueusement traînée au large par ce qui lui restait d’agrès comme une morte par les cheveux. Cela ressembla à ces délivrances accordées par Tibère, à prix de viol. Le vent brutalisait ceux qu’il sauvait.

Il leur rendait service avec fureur. Ce fut du secours sans pitié.

L’épave, dans ce rudoiement libérateur, acheva de se disloquer.

Des grêlons, gros et durs à charger un tromblon, criblaient le bâtiment. A tous les renversements du flot, ces grêlons roulaient sur le pont comme des billes. L’ourque, presque entre deux eaux, perdait toute forme sous les retombées de vagues et sous les effondrements d’écumes. Chacun dans le navire songeait à soi.

Se cramponnait qui pouvait. Après chaque paquet de mer, on avait la surprise de se retrouver tous. Plusieurs avaient le visage déchiré par des éclats de bois.

Heureusement le désespoir a les poings solides. Une main d’enfant dans l’effroi a une étreinte de géant. L’angoisse fait un étau avec des doigts de femme. Une jeune fille qui a peur enfoncerait ses ongles roses dans du fer. Ils s’accrochaient, se tenaient, se retenaient. Mais toutes les vagues leur apportaient l’épouvante du balaiement.

Soudainement ils furent soulagés.

XVI

DOUCEUR SUBITE DE L’ÉNIGME

L’ouragan venait de s’arrêter court.

Il n’y eut plus dans l’air ni suroit, ni noroit. Les clairons forcenés de l’espace se turent. La trombe sortit du ciel, sans diminution préalable, sans transition, et comme si elle-même avait glissé à pic dans un gouffre. On ne sut plus où elle était. Les flocons remplacèrent les grêlons. La neige recommença à tomber lentement.

Plus de flot. La mer s’aplatit.

Ces soudaines cessations sont propres aux bourrasques de neige.
L’effluve électrique épuisé, tout se tranquillise, même la vague, qui, dans
les tourmentes ordinaires, conserve souvent une longue agitation. Ici point.
Aucun prolongement de colère dans le flot. Comme un travailleur après une
fatigue, le flot s’assoupit immédiatement, ce qui dément presque les lois de
la statique, mais n’étonne point les vieux pilotes, car ils savent que tout
l’inattendu est dans la mer.

Ce phénomène a lieu même, mais très rarement, dans les tempêtes ordinaires. Ainsi, de nos jours, lors du mémorable ouragan du 27 juillet 1867, à Jersey, le vent, après quatorze heures de furie, tomba tout de suite au calme plat.

Au bout de quelques minutes, l’ourque n’avait plus autour d’elle qu’une eau endormie.

En même temps, car la dernière phase ressemble à la première, on ne distingua plus rien. Tout ce qui était devenu visible dans les convulsions des nuages météoriques redevînt trouble, les silhouettes blêmes se fondirent en délaiement diffus, et le sombre de l’infini se rapprocha de toutes parts du navire. Ce mur de nuit, cette occlusion circulaire, ce dedans de cylindre dont le diamètre décroissait de minute en minute, enveloppait la *Matutina*, et, avec la lenteur sinistre d’une banquise qui se ferme, se rapetissait formidablement. Au zénith, rien, un couvercle de brume, une clôture. L’ourque était comme au fond du puits de l’abîme.

Dans ce puits, une flaque de plomb liquide, c’était la mer.

L’eau ne bougeait plus. Immobilité morne. L’océan n’est jamais plus farouche qu’étang.

Tout était silence, apaisement, aveuglement.

Le silence des choses est peut-être de la taciturnité.

Les derniers clapotements glissaient le long du bordage. Le pont était horizontal avec des déclivités insensibles. Quelques dislocations remuaient faiblement. La coque de grenade, qui tenait lieu de fanal, et où brillaient des étoupes dans du goudron, ne se balançait plus au beaupré et ne jetait plus de gouttes enflammées dans la mer. Ce qui restait de souffle dans les nuées n’avait plus de bruit. La neige tombait épaisse, molle, à peine oblique. On n’entendait l’écume d’aucun brisant.

Paix de ténèbres.

Ce repos, après ces exaspérations et ces paroxysmes, fut pour les malheureux si longtemps ballottés un indicible bien-être. Il leur sembla qu’ils cessaient d’être mis à la question. Ils entrevoyaient autour d’eux et au-dessus d’eux un consentement les sauver. Ils reprirent confiance. Tout ce qui avait ét furie était maintenant tranquillité. Cela leur parut une paix signée. Leurs poitrines misérables se dilatèrent. Ils pouvaient lâcher le bout de corde ou de planche qu’ils tenaient, se lever, se redresser, se tenir debout, marcher, se mouvoir. Ils se sentaient inexprimablement calmés. Il y a, dans la profondeur obscure, de ces effets de paradis, préparation à autre chose. Il était clair qu’ils étaient bien décidément hors de la rafale, hors de l’écume, hors des souffles, hors des rages, délivrés.

On avait désormais toutes les chances pour soi. Dans trois ou quatre heures le jour se lèverait, on serait aperçu par quelque navire passant, on serait recueilli. Le plus fort était fait.

On rentrait dans la vie. L’important, c’était d’avoir pu se soutenir sur l’eau jusqu’à la cessation de la tempête. Ils se disaient: Cette fois, c’est fini.

Tout à coup ils s’aperçurent que c’était fini en effet.

Un des matelots, le basque du nord, nommé Galdeazun, descendit, pour chercher du câble, dans la cale, puis remonta, et dit:

— La cale est pleine.

— De quoi? demanda le chef.

— D’eau, répondit le matelot.

Le chef cria:

— Qu’est-ce que cela veut dire?

— Cela veut dire, reprit Galdeazun, que dans une demi-heure nous allons sombrer.

XVII

LA RESSOURCE DERNIÈRE

Il y avait une crevasse dans la quille. Une voie d'eau s'était faite. A quel moment? Personne n'eût pu le dire. Était-ce en accostant les Casquets? Était-ce devant Ortach? Était-ce dans le clapotement des bas-fonds de l'ouest d'Aurigny? Le plus probable, c'est qu'ils avaient touché le Singe. Ils avaient reçu un obscur coup de boutoir. Ils ne s'en étaient point aperçus au milieu de la survente convulsive qui les secouait. Dans le tétanos on ne sent pas une piqûre.

L'autre matelot, le basque du sud, qui s'appelait Ave-Maria, fit à son tour la descente de la cale, revint, et dit;

— L'eau dans la quille est haute de deux vares.

Environ six pieds.

Ave-Maria ajouta:

— Avant quarante minutes, nous coulons,

Où était cette voie d'eau? on ne la voyait pas. Elle était noyée. Le volume d'eau qui emplissait la cale cachait cette fissure. Le navire avait un trou au ventre, quelque part, sous la flottaison, fort avant sous la carène. Impossible de l'apercevoir. Impossible de le boucher. On avait une plaie et l'on ne pouvait la panser. L'eau, du reste, n'entrait pas très vite.

Le chef cria:

— Il faut pomper.

Galdeazun répondit:

— Nous n'avons plus de pompe.

— Alors, repartit le chef, gagnons la terre.

— Où, la terre?

— Je ne sais.

— Ni moi.

— Mais elle est quelque part.

— Oui.

— Que quelqu'un nous y mène, reprit le chef.

— Nous n'avons pas de pilote, dit Galdeazun.

— Prends la barre, toi.

— Nous n’avons plus de barre.

— Bâclons-en une avec la première poutre venue. Des clous. Un marteau. Vite des outils!

— La baille de charpenterie est à l’eau. Nous n’avons plus d’outils.

— Gouvernons tout de même, n’importe où!

— Nous n’avons plus de gouvernail.

— Où est le canot? Jetons nous-y. Ramons!

— Nous n’avons plus de canot,

— Ramons sur l’épave.

— Nous n’avons plus d’avirons.

— A la voile alors!

— Nous n’avons plus de voile, et plus de mât.

— Faisons un mât avec une hiloire, faisons une voile avec un prélart. Tirons-nous de là. Confions-nous au vent!

— Il n’y a plus de vent.

Le vent en effet les avait quittés. La tempête s’en était allée, et ce départ, qu’ils avaient pris pour leur salut, était leur perte. Le suroit en persistant les eût frénétiquement poussés quelque rivage, eût gagné de vitesse la voie d’eau, les eût portés peut-être à un bon banc de sable propice, et les eût échoués avant qu’ils eussent sombré. Le rapide emportement de l’orage eût pu leur faire prendre terre. Point de vent, plus d’espoir. Ils mourraient de l’absence d’ouragan.

La situation suprême apparaissait.

Le vent, la grêle, la bourrasque, le tourbillon, sont des combattants désordonnés qu’on peut vaincre. La tempête peut être prise au défaut de l’armure. On a des ressources contre la violence qui se découvre sans cesse, se meut à faux, et frappe souvent à côté. Mais rien à faire contre le calme. Pas un relief qu’on puisse saisir.

Les vents sont une attaque de cosaques; tenez bon, cela se disperse. Le calme, c’est la tenaille du bourreau.

L’eau, sans hâte, mais sans interruption, irrésistible et lourde, montait dans la cale, et, à mesure qu’elle montait, le navire descendait. Cela était très lent.

Les naufragés de la *Matutina* sentaient peu à peu s’entr’ouvrir sous eux la plus désespérée des catastrophes, la catastrophe inerte. La certitude tranquille et sinistre du fait inconscient les tenait. L’air n’oscillait pas, la mer ne bougeait pas.

L’immobile, c’est l’inexorable. L’engloutissemenl les résorbait en silence. A travers l’épaisseur de l’eau muette, sans colère, sans passion, sans le vouloir, sans le savoir, sans y prendre intérêt, le fatal centre du globe les attirait. L’horreur, au repos, se les amalgamait. Ce n’était plus la gueule béante du flot, la double mâchoire du coup de vent et du coup de mer, méchamment menaçante, le rictus de la trombe, l’appétit écumant de la houle; c’était sous ces misérables on ne sait quel bâillement noir de l’infini. Ils se sentaient entrer dans une profondeur paisible qui était la mort. La quantité de bord que le navire avait hors du flot s’amincissait, voilà tout. On pouvait calculer à quelle minute elle s’effacerait. C’était tout le contraire de la submersion par la marée montante. L’eau ne montait pas vers eux, ils descendaient vers elle. Le creusement de leur tombe venait d’eux-mêmes. Leur poids était le fossoyeur.

Ils étaient exécutés, non par la loi des hommes, mais par la loi des choses.

La neige tombait, et, comme l’épave ne remuait plus, cette charpie blanche faisait sur le pont une nappe et couvrait le navire d’un suaire,

La cale allait s’alourdissant. Nul moyen de franchir la voie d’eau. Ils n’avaient pas même une pelle d’épuisement, qui d’ailleurs eût été illusoire et d’un emploi impraticable, l’ourque étant pontée. On s’éclaira; on alluma trois ou quatre torches qu’on planta dans des trous et comme on put. Galdeazun apporta quelques vieux seaux de cuir; ils entreprirent d’étancher la cale et firent la chaîne; mais les seaux étaient hors de service, le cuir des uns était décousu, le fond des autres était crevé, et les seaux se vidaient en chemin. L’inégalité était dérisoire entre ce qu’on recevait et ce qu’on rendait. Une tonne d’eau entrait, un verre d’eau sortait. On n’eut pas d’autre réussite. C’était une dépense d’avare essayant d’épuiser sou sou un million.

Le chef dit:

— Allégeons l’épave!

Pendant la tempête on avait amarré les quelques coffres qui étaient sur le pont. Ils étaient restés liés au tronçon du mât.

On défit les amarres, et on roula les coffres à l’eau par une des brèches du bordage. Une de ces valises appartenait à la femme basquaise qui ne put retenir ce soupir:

— Oh! ma cape neuve doublée d’écarlate! oh! mes pauvres bas en dentelle d’écorce de bouleau! Oh! mes pendeloques d’argent pour aller à la messe du mois de Marie!

Le pont déblayé, restait la cabine. Elle était fort encombrée. Elle contenait, on s’en souvient, des bagages qui étaient aux passagers et des ballots qui étaient aux matelots.

On prit les bagages, et on se débarrassa de tout ce chargement par la brèche du bordage.

On retira les ballots, et on les poussa à l’océan.

On acheva de vider la cabine. La lanterne, le chouquet, les barils, les sacs, les bailles et les charniers, la marmite avec la soupe, tout alla aux flots.

On dévissa les écrous du fourneau de fer éteint depuis longtemps, on le descella, on le hissa sur le pont, on le traîna jusqu’à la brèche, et on le précipita hors du navire.

On envoya à l’eau tout ce qu’on put arracher du vaigrage, des porques, des haubans et du gréement fracassé.

De temps en temps le chef prenait une torche, la promenait sur les chiffres d’étiage peints à l’avant du navire, et regardait o en était le naufrage.

XVIII

LA RESSOURCE SUPRÊME

L’épave, allégée, s’enfonçait un peu moins, mais s’enfonçait toujours.

Le désespoir de la situation n’avait plus ni ressource, ni palliatif. On avait épuisé le dernier expédient.

— Y a-t-il encore quelque chose à jeter à la mer? cria le chef.

Le docteur, auquel personne ne songeait plus, sortit d’un angle du capot de cabine, et dit:

— Oui.

— Quoi? demanda le chef.

Le docteur répondit:

— Notre crime.

Il y eut un frémissement, et tous crièrent:

— Amen.

Le docteur, debout et blême, leva un doigt vers le ciel, et dit:

— A genoux.

Ils chancelaient, ce qui est le commencement de l’agenouillement.

Le docteur reprit:

— Jetons à la mer nos crimes. Ils pèsent sur nous. C’est là ce qui enfonce le navire. Ne songeons plus au sauvetage, songeons au salut. Notre dernier crime surtout, celui que nous avons commis, ou, pour mieux dire, complété tout à l’heure, misérables qui m’écoutez, il nous accable. C’est une insolence impie de tenter l’abîme quand on a l’intention d’un meurtre derrière soi.

Ce qui est fait contre un enfant est fait contre Dieu. Il fallait s’embarquer, je le sais, mais c’était la perdition certaine. La tempête, avertie par l’ombre que notre action a faite, est venue. C’est bien. Du reste, ne regrettez rien. Nous avons là, pas loin de nous, dans cette obscurité, les sables de Vauville et le cap de la Hougue. C’est la France. Il n’y avait qu’un abri possible, l’Espagne. La France ne nous est pas moins dangereuse que l’Angleterre. Notre délivrance de la mer eût abouti au gibet. Ou pendus, ou noyés, nous n’avions pas d’autre option. Dieu a choisi pour nous. Rendons-lui grâce. Il nous accorde la tombe qui lave. Mes frères, l’inévitable était là. Songez que

c’est nous qui tout à l’heure avons fait notre possible pour envoyer là-haut quelqu’un, cet enfant, et qu’en ce moment-ci même, à l’instant où je parle, il y a peut-être au-dessus de nos têtes une âme qui nous accuse devant un juge qui nous regarde. Mettons à profit le sursis suprême.
Efforçons-nous, si cela se peut encore, de réparer, dans tout ce qui dépend de nous, le mal que nous avons fait. Si l’enfant nous survit, venons-lui en aide. S’il meurt, tâchons qu’il nous pardonne. Otons de dessus nous notre forfait. Déchargeons de ce poids nos consciences. Tâchons que nos âmes ne soient pas englouties devant Dieu, car c’est le naufrage terrible. Les corps vont aux poissons, les âmes aux démons. Ayez pitié de vous. A genoux, vous dis-je. Le repentir, c’est la barque qui ne se submerge pas. Vous n’avez plus de boussole? Erreur. Vous avez la prière.

Ces loups devinrent moutons. Ces transformations se voient dans l’angoisse. Il arrive que les tigres lèchent le crucifix. Quand la porte sombre s’entrebâille, croire est difficile, ne pas croire est impossible. Si imparfaites que soient les diverses ébauches de religion essayées par l’homme, même quand la croyance est informe, même quand le contour du dogme ne s’adapte point aux linéaments de l’éternité entrevue, il y a, à la minute suprême, un tressaillement d’âme. Quelque chose commence après la vie. Cette pression est sur l’agonie.

L’agonie est une échéance. A cette seconde fatale, on sent sur soi la responsabilité diffuse. Ce qui a été complique ce qui sera. Le passé revient et rentre dans l’avenir. Le connu devient abîme aussi bien que l’inconnu, et ces deux précipices, l’un où l’on a ses fautes, l’autre où l’on a son attente, mêlent leur réverbération. C’est cette confusion des deux gouffres qui épouvante le mourant.

Ils avaient fait leur dernière dépense d’espérance du côté de la vie. C’est pourquoi ils se tournèrent de l’autre côté. Il ne leur restait plus de chance que dans cette ombre. Ils le comprirent. Ce fut un éblouissement lugubre, tout de suite suivi d’une rechute d’horreur. Ce que l’on comprend dans l’agonie ressemble à ce qu’on aperçoit dans l’éclair. Tout, puis rien.
On voit, et l’on ne voit plus. Après la mort, l’oeil se rouvrira, et ce qui a été un éclair deviendra un soleil.

Ils crièrent au docteur:

— Toi! toi! il n’y a plus que toi. Nous t’obéirons. Que faut-il faire? parle.

Le docteur répondit:

— Il s’agit de passer par-dessus le précipice inconnu et d’atteindre l’autre bord de la vie, qui est au delà du tombeau.
Étant celui qui sait le plus de choses, je suis le plus en péril de vous tous. Vous faites bien de laisser le choix du pont celui qui porte le fardeau le plus lourd.

Il ajouta:

— La science pèse sur la conscience.

Puis il reprit;

— Combien de temps nous reste-t-il encore?

Galdeazun regarda à l’étiage et répondît:

— Un peu plus d’un quart d’heure.

— Bien dit le docteur.

Le toit bas du capot, où il s’accoudait, faisait une espèce de table. Le docteur prit dans sa poche son écritoire et sa plume, et son portefeuille d’où il tira un parchemin, le même sur le revers duquel il avait écrit, quelques heures auparavant, une vingtaine de lignes tortueuses et serrées.

— De la lumière, dit-il.

La neige, tombant comme une écume de cataracte, avait éteint les torches l’une après l’autre. Il n’en restait plus qu’une.
Ave-Maria la déplanta, et vint se placer debout, tenant cette torche, à côté du docteur.

Le docteur remit son portefeuille dans sa poche, posa sur le capot la plume et l’encrier, déplia le parchemin, et dit:

— Ecoutez.

Alors, au milieu de la mer, sur ce ponton décroissant, sorte de plancher tremblant du tombeau, commença, gravement faite par le docteur, une lecture que toute l’ombre semblait écouter. Tous ces condamnés baissaient la tête autour de lui. Le flamboiement de la torche accentuait leurs pâleurs.
Ce que lisait le docteur était écrit en anglais. Par intervalles, quand un de ces regards lamentables paraissait désirer un éclaircissement, le docteur s’interrompait et répétait, soit en français, soit en espagnol, soit en basque, soit en italien, le passage qu’il venait de lire.
On entendait des sanglots étouffés et des coups sourds frappés sur les poitrines. L’épave continuait de s’enfoncer.

La lecture achevée, le docteur posa le parchemin à plat sur le capot, saisit la plume, et, sur une marge blanche ménagée au bas de ce qu’il avait écrit, il signa:

DOCTOR GERNARDUS GEESTEMUNDE.

Puis, se tournant vers les autres, il dit:

— Venez, et signez.

La basquaise approcha, prit la plume, et signa ASUNCION. Elle passa la plume à l’irlandaise qui, ne sachant pas écrire, fit une croix.

Le docteur, à côté de cette croix, écrivit:

— BARBARA FERMOY, *de l’île Tyrryf, dans les Ébudes*.

Puis il tendit la plume au chef de la bande.

Le chef signa GAÏZDORRA, *captal*.

Le génois, au-dessous du chef, signa GIANGIRATE.

Le languedocien signa JACQUES QUATOURZE, dit le NARBONNAIS.

Le provençal signa LUC-PIERRE CAPGAROUPE, *du bagne de Mahon.*

Sous ces signatures, le docteur écrivit cette note:

— De trois hommes d’équipage, le patron ayant été enlevé par un coup de mer, il ne reste que deux, et on signé.

Les deux matelots mirent leurs noms au-dessous de cette note. Le basque du nord signa GALDEAZUN. Le basque du sud signa AVE-MARIA, *voleur*.

Puis le docleur dit:

— Capgaroupe.

— Présent, dit le provençal.

— Tu as la gourde de Hardquanonne?

— Oui.

— Donne-la moi.

Capgaroupe but la dernière gorgée d’eau-de-vie et tendit la gourde au docteur.

La crue intérieure du flot s’aggravait. L’épave entrait de plus en plus dans la mer.

Les bords du pont en plan incliné étaient couverts d’une mince lame rongeante, qui grandissait.

Tous s’étaient groupés sur la tonture du navire.

Le docteur sécha l’encre des signatures au feu de la torche, plia le parchemin à plis plus étroits que le diamètre du goulot, et l’introduisit dans la gourde. Il cria:

— Le bouchon.

— Je ne sais où il est, dit Capgaroupe.

— Voici un bout de funin, dit Jacques Quatourze.

Le docteur boucha la gourde avec ce funin, et dît:

— Du goudron.

Galdeazun alla de l’avant, appuya un étouffoir d’étoupe sur la grenade à brûlot qui s’éteignait, la décrocha de l’étrave et l’apporta au docteur, à demi pleine de goudron bouillant.

Le docteur plongea le goulot de la gourde dans le goudron, et l’en retira. La gourde, qui contenait le parchemin signé de tous, était bouchée et goudronnée.

— C’est fait, dit le docteur.

Et de toutes ces bouches sortit, vaguement bégayé en toutes langues, le brouhaha lugubre dos catacombes.

— Ainsi soit-il!

— Mea culpa!

— Asi sea!

Ainsi-soit il!

— Aro raï!

A la bonne heure (patois roman).

— Amen!

On eût cru entendre se disperser dans les ténèbres, devant l’effrayant refus céleste de les entendre, les sombres voix de Babel.

Le docteur tourna le dos à ses compagnons de crime et de détresse, et fit quelques pas vers le bordage. Arrivé au bord de l’épave, il regarda dans l’infini, et dit avec un accent profond:

— Bist du bei mir?

— Es-tu près de moi?

Il parlait probablement à quelque spectre.

L’épave s’enfonçait.

Derrière le docteur tous songeaient. La prière est une force majeure. Ils ne se courbaient pas, ils ployaient. Il y avait de l’involontaire dans leur contrition. Ils fléchissaient comme se flétrit une voile à qui la brise manque, et ce groupe hagard prenait peu à peu, par la jonction des mains et par rabattement des fronts, l’attitude, diverse, mais accablée, de la confiance désespérée en Dieu. On ne sait quel reflet vénérable, venu de l’abîme, s’ébauchait sur ces faces scélérates.

Le docteur revint vers eux.

Quel que fût son passé, ce vieillard était grand en présence du dénoûment. La vaste réticence environnante le préoccupait sans le déconcerter. C'était l'homme qui n'est pas pris au dépourvu.
Il y avait sur lui de l'horreur tranquille. La majesté de Dieu compris était sur son visage.

Ce bandit vieilli et pensif avait, sans s'en douter, la posture pontificale.

Il dit:

— Faites attention.

Il considéra un moment l'étendue et ajouta:

— Maintenant nous allons mourir.

Puis il prit la torche des mains d'Ave-Maria, et la secoua.

Une flamme s'en détacha, et s'envola dans la nuit.

Et le docteur jeta la torche à la mer.

La torche s'éteignit. Toute clarté s'évanouit. Il n'y eut plus que l'immense ombre inconnue. Ce fut quelque chose comme la tombe se fermant.

Dans cette éclipse on entendit le docteur qui disait:

— Prions.

Tous se mirent à genoux.

Ce n'était déjà plus dans la neige, c'était dans l'eau qu'ils s'agenouillaient.

Ils n'avaient plus que quelques minutes.

Le docteur seul était resté debout. Les flocons de neige, en s'arrêtant sur lui, l'étoilaient de larmes blanches, et le faisaient visible sur ce fond d'obscurité. On eût dit la statue parlante des ténèbres.

Le docteur fit un signe de croix, et éleva la voix pendant que sous ses pieds commençait cette oscillation presque indistincte qui annonce l'instant où une épave va plonger. Il dit:

— Pater noster qui es in coelis.

Le provençal répéta en français:

— Notre père qui êtes aux cieux.

L'irlandaise reprit en langue galloise, comprise de la femme basque:

— Ar nathair ala ar neamh.

Le docteur continua:

— Sanctificetur nomen tuum.

— Que votre nom soit sanctifié, dit le provençal.

— Naomhthar hainm, dit l'irlandaise.

— Adveniat regnum tuum, poursuivit le docteur.

— Que votre règne arrive, dit le provençal.

— Tigeadh do rioghachd, dit l’irlandaise.

Les agenouillés avaient de l’eau jusqu’aux épaules. Le docteur reprit:

— Fiat voluntas tua.

— Que votre volonté soit faite, balbutia le provençal.

Et l’irlandaise et la basquaise jetèrent ce cri:

— Deuntar do thoil ar an Hhalàmb!

— Sicut in coelo, et in terra, dit le docteur.

Aucune voix ne lui répondit.

Il baissa les yeux. Toutes les têtes étaient sous l’eau. Pas un ne s’était levé. Ils s’étaient laissé noyer à genoux.

Le docteur prit dans sa main droite la gourde qu’il avait déposée sur le capot, et l’éleva au-dessus de sa tête.

L’épave coulait.

Tout en enfonçant, le docteur murmurait le reste de la prière.

Son buste fut hors de l’eau un moment, puis sa tête, puis il n’y eut plus que son bras tenant la gourde, comme s’il la montrait l’infini.

Ce bras disparu. La profonde mer n’eut pas plus de pli qu’une tonne d’huile. La neige continuait de tomber.

Quelque chose surnagea, et s’en alla sur le flot dans l’ombre.

C’était la gourde goudronnée que son enveloppe d’osier soutenait.

LIVRE TROISIÈME

L’ENFANT DANS L’OMBRE

I

LE CHESS-HILL

La tempête n'était pas moins intense sur terre que sur mer.

Le même déchaînement farouche s'était fait autour de l'enfant abandonné. Le faible et l'innocent deviennent ce qu'ils peuvent dans la dépense de colère inconsciente que font les forces aveugles; l'ombre ne discerne pas; et les choses n'ont point les clémences qu'on leur suppose.

Il y avait sur terre très peu de vent; le froid avait on ne sait quoi d'immobile. Aucun grêlon. L'épaisseur de la neige tombante était épouvantable.

Les grêlons frappent, harcèlent, meurtrissent, assourdissent, écrasent; les flocons sont pires. Le flocon inexorable et doux fait son oeuvre en silence. Si on le louche, il fond. Il est pur comme l'hypocrite est candide. C'est par des blancheurs lentement superposées que le flocon arrive à l'avalanche et le fourbe au crime.

L'enfant avait continué d'avancer dans le brouillard. Le brouillard est un obstacle mou; de là des périls; il cède et persiste; le brouillard, comme la neige, est plein de trahison.

L'enfant, étrange lutteur au milieu de tous ces risques, avait réussi à atteindre le bas de la descente, et s'était engagé dans le Chess-Hill. Il était, sans le savoir, sur un isthme, ayant des deux côtés l'océan, et ne pouvant faire fausse route, dans cette brume, dans cette neige et dans cette nuit, sans tomber, droite dans l'eau profonde du golfe, à gauche dans la vague violente de la haute mer. Il marchait, ignorant, entre deux abîmes.

L'isthme de Portland était à cette époque singulièrement âpre et rude. Il n'a plus rien aujourd'hui de sa configuration d'alors.

Depuis qu'on a eu l'idée d'exploiter la pierre de Portland en ciment romain, toute la roche a subi un remaniement qui a supprimé l'aspect primitif. On y trouve encore le calcaire lias, le schiste, et le trapp sortant des bancs de conglomérat comme la dent de la gencive; mais la pioche a tronqué et nivelé tous ces pilons hérissés et scabreux où venaient se percher hideusement les ossifrages. Il n'y a plus de cimes où puissent se donner rendez-vous les labbes et les stercoraires qui, comme les envieux, aiment à souiller les sommets. On chercherait en vain le haut monolithe nommé Godolphin, vieux mot gallois qui signifie *aigle blanche*. On cueille encore, l'été, dans ces terrains forés et troués comme l'éponge, du romarin, du pouliot, de l'hysope sauvage, du fenouil de mer qui, infusé, donne un bon cordial, et cette herbe pleine de noeuds qui sort du sable et dont on fait de la natte; mais on n'y ramasse plus ni ambre gris, ni étain noir, ni cette triple espèce d'ardoise, l'une verte, l'autre bleue, l'autre couleur de feuilles de sauge. Les renards, les blaireaux, les loutres, les martres, s'en sont allés; il y avait dans ces escarpements de Portland, comme à la pointe de Cornouailles, des chamois; il n'y en a plus. On pêche encore, dans de certains creux, des plies et des pilchards, mais les saumons, effarouchés, ne remontent plus la Wey entre la Saint-Michel et la Noël pour y pondre leurs oeufs. On ne voit plus là, comme au temps d'Elisabeth, de ces vieux oiseaux inconnus, gros comme des éperviers, qui coupaient une pomme en deux et n'en mangeaient que le pépin. On n'y voit plus de ces corneilles à bec jaune, *cornish chough* en anglais, *pyrrocarax* en latin, qui avaient la malice de jeter sur les toits de chaume des sarments allumés. On n'y voit plus l'oiseau sorcier fulmar, émigré de l'archipel d'Ecosse, et jetant par le bec une huile que les insulaires brûlaient dans leurs lampes. On n'y rencontre plus le soir, dans les ruissellements du jusant, l'antique neitse légendaire aux pieds de porc et au cri de veau. La marée n'échoue plus sur ces sables l'otarie moustachue, aux oreilles enroulées, aux mâchelières pointues, se traînant sur ses pattes sans ongles. Dans ce Portland aujourd'hui méconnaissable, il n'y a jamais eu de rossignols, à cause du manque de forêts, mais les faucons, les cygnes et les oies de mer se sont envolés. Les moutons de Portland d'à présent ont la chair grasse et la laine fine; les rares brebis qui paissaient il y a deux siècles cette herbe salée étaient petites et coriaces et avaient la toison bourrue, comme il sied à des troupeaux celtes menés jadis par des bergers mangeurs d'ail qui vivaient cent ans et qui, à un demi-mille de distance, perçaient des cuirasses avec leur flèche d'une aune de long. Terre inculte fait laine rude. Le Chess-Hill d'aujourd'hui ne ressemble en rien au Chess-Hill d'autrefois, tant il a été bouleversé par l'homme, et par ces furieux vents des Sorlingues qui rongent jusqu'aux pierres.

Aujourd'hui cette langue de terre porte un railway qui aboutit un joli échiquier de maisons neuves, Chesilton, et il y a une «Portland-Station». Les wagons roulent où rampaient les phoques.

L’isthme de Portland, il y a deux cents ans, était un dos d’âne de sable avec une épine vertébrale de rocher.

Le danger, pour l’enfant, changea de forme. Ce que l’enfant avait à craindre dans la descente, c’était de rouler au bas de l’escarpement; dans l’isthme, ce fut de tomber dans des trous.

Après avoir eu affaire au précipice, il eut affaire à la fondrière. Tout est chausse-trape au bord de la mer. La roche est glissante, la grève est mouvante. Les points d’appui sont des embûches. On est comme quelqu’un qui met le pied sur des vitres. Tout peut brusquement se fêler sous vous. Fêlure par o l’on disparaît. L’océan a des troisièmes dessous comme un théâtre bien machiné.

Les longues arêtes de granit auxquelles s’adosse le double versant d’un isthme sont d’un abord malaisé. On y trouve difficilement ce qu’on appelle en langage de mise en scène des praticables. L’homme n’a aucune hospitalité à attendre de l’océan, pas plus du rocher que de la vague; l’oiseau et le poisson seuls sont prévus par la mer. Les isthmes particulièrement sont dénudés et hérissés. Le flot qui les use et les mine des deux côtés les réduit à leur plus simple expression. Partout des reliefs coupants, des crêtes, des scies, d’affreux haillons de pierre déchirée, des entre-bâillements dentelés comme la mâchoire multicuspide d’un requin, des casse-cous de mousse mouillée, de rapides coulées de roches aboutissant à l’écume. Qui entreprend de franchir un isthme rencontre à chaque pas des blocs difformes, gros comme des maisons, figurant des tibias, des omoplates, des fémurs, anatomie hideuse des rocs écorchés. Ce n’est pas pour rien que ces stries des bords de la mer se nomment côtes. Le piéton se tire comme il peut de ce pêle-mêle de débris. Cheminer à travers l’ossature d’une énorme carcasse, tel est à peu près ce labeur.

Mettez un enfant dans ce travail d’Hercule.

Le grand jour eût été utile, il faisait nuit; un guide eût ét nécessaire, il était seul. Toute la vigueur d’un homme n’eût pas été de trop, il n’avait que la faible force d’un enfant. A défaut de guide, un sentier l’eût aidé. Il n’y avait point de sentier.

D’instinct, il évitait le chaîneau aigu des rochers et suivait la plage le plus qu’il pouvait. C’est là qu’il rencontrait les fondrières. Les fondrières se multipliaient devant lui sous trois formes, la fondrière d’eau, la fondrière de neige, la fondrière de sable. La dernière est la plus redoutable. C’est l’enlisement.

Savoir ce que l'on affronte est alarmant, mais l'ignorer est terrible. L'enfant combattait le danger inconnu. Il était tâtons dans quelque chose qui était peut-être la tombe.

Nulle hésitation. Il tournait les rochers, évitait les crevasses, devinait les pièges, subissait les méandres de l'obstacle, mais avançait. Ne pouvant aller droit, il marchait ferme.

Il reculait au besoin avec énergie. Il savait s'arracher à temps de la glu hideuse des sables mouvants. Il secouait la neige de dessus lui. Il entra plus d'une fois dans l'eau jusqu'aux genoux. Dès qu'il sortait de l'eau, ses guenilles mouillées étaient tout de suite gelées par le froid profond de la nuit. Il marchait rapide dans ses vêlements roidis. Pourtant il avait eu l'industrie de conserver sèche et chaude sur sa poitrine sa vareuse de matelot. Il avait toujours bien faim.

Les aventures de l'abîme ne sont limitées en aucun sens; tout y est possible, même le salut. L'issue est invisible, mais trouvable. Comment l'enfant, enveloppé d'une étouffante spirale de neige, perdu sur cette levée étroite entre les deux gueules du gouffre, n'y voyant pas, parvint-il à traverser l'isthme, c'est ce que lui-même n'aurait pu dire. Il avait glissé, grimpé, roulé, cherché, marché, persévéré, voilà tout. Secret de tous les triomphes. Au bout d'un peu moins d'une heure, il sentit que le sol remontait, il arrivait à l'autre bord, il sortait du Chess-Hill, il était sur la terre ferme.

Le pont qui relie aujourd'hui Sandford-Cas à Smallmouth-Sand n'existait pas à cette époque. Il est probable que, dans son tâtonnement intelligent, il avait remonté jusque vis-à-vis Wyke Regis, où il y avait alors une langue de sable, vraie chaussée naturelle, traversant l'East Fleet.

Il était sauvé de l'isthme, mais il se retrouvait face à face avec la tempête, avec l'hiver, avec la nuit.

Devant lui se développait de nouveau la sombre perte de vue des plaines.

Il regarda à terre, cherchant un sentier.

Tout à coup il se baissa.

Il venait d'apercevoir dans la neige quelque chose qui lui semblait une trace.

C'était une trace en effet, la marque d'un pied. La blancheur de la neige découpait nettement l'empreinte et la faisait très visible. Il la considéra. C'était un pied nu, plus petit qu'un pied d'homme, plus grand qu'un pied d'enfant.

Probablement le pied d’une femme.

Au delà de cette empreinte, il y en avait une autre, puis une autre; les empreintes se succédaient, à la distance d’un pas, et s’enfonçaient dans la plaine vers la droite. Elles étaient encore fraîches et couvertes de peu de neige. Une femme venait de passer là.

Celle femme avait marché et s’en était allée dans la direction même où l’enfant avait vu des fumées.

L’enfant, l’oeil fixé sur les empreintes, se mit à suivre ce pas.

II

EFFET DE NEIGE

Il chemina un certain temps sur cette piste. Par malheur les traces étaient de moins en moins nettes. La neige tombait dense et affreuse. C’était le moment où l’ourque agonisait sous cette même neige dans la haute mer.

L’enfant, en détresse comme le navire, mais autrement, n’ayant, dans l’ínextricable entre-croisement d’obscurités qui se dressaient devant lui, d’autre ressource que ce pied marqué dans la neige, s’attachait à ce pas comme au fil du dédale.

Subitement, soit que la neige eût fini par les niveler, soit pour toute autre cause, les empreintes s’effacèrent. Tout redevint plan, uni, ras, sans une tache, sans un détail. Il n’y eut plus qu’un drap blanc sur la terre et un drap noir sur le ciel.

C’était comme si la passante s’était envolée.

L’enfant aux abois se pencha et chercha. En vain.

Comme il se relevait, il eut la sensation de quelque chose d’indistinct qu’il entendait, mais qu’il n’était pas sûr d’entendre. Cela ressemblait à une voix, à une haleine, à de l’ombre. C’était plutôt humain que bestial, et plutôt sépulcral que vivant. C’était du bruit, mais du rêve.

Il regarda et ne vit rien.

La large solitude nue et livide était devant lui.

Il écouta. Ce qu’il avait cru entendre s’était dissipé.

Peut-être n’avail-il rien entendu. Il écouta encore. Tout faisait silence.

Il y avait de l’illusion dans toute cette brume. Il se remit en marche.

En marche au hasard, n’ayant plus désormais ce pas pour le guider.

Il s’éloignait à peine que le bruit recommença. Cette fois il ne pouvait douter. C’était un gémissement, presque un sanglot.

Il se retourna. il promena ses yeux dans l’espace nocturne. Il ne vit rien.

Le bruit s’éleva de nouveau.

Si les limbes peuvent crier, c’est ainsi qu’elles crient.

Rien de pénétrant, de poignant et de faible comme cette voix.

Car c’était une voix. Cela venait d’une âme. Il y avait de la palpitation dans ce murmure. Pourtant cela semblait presque inconscient. C’était quelque chose comme une souffrance qui appelle, mais sans savoir qu'elle est une souffrance et qu'elle fait un appel. Ce cri, premier souffle peut-être, peut-être dernier soupir, était à égale distance du râle qui clôt la vie et du vagissement qui l'ouvre. Cela respirait, cela étouffait, cela pleurait. Sombre supplication dans l'invisible.

L'enfant fixa son attention partout, loin, près, au fond, en haut, en bas. Il n'y avait personne. Il n'y avait rien.

Il prêta l'oreille. La voix se fit entendre encore. Il la perçût distinctement. Celte voix avait un peu du bêlement d'un agneau.

Alors il eut peur et songea à fuir.

Le gémissement reprit. C'était la quatrième fois. Il était étrangement misérable et plaintif. On sentait qu'après ce suprême effort, plutôt machinal que voulu, ce cri allait probablement s'éteindre. C'était une réclamation expirante, instinctivement faite à la quantité de secours qui est en suspens dans l'étendue; c'était on ne sait quel bégaiement d'agonie adressé à une providence possible. L'enfant s'avança du côt d'où venait la voix.

Il ne voyait toujours rien.

Il avança encore, épiant.

La plainte continuait. D'inarticulée et confuse qu'elle était, elle était devenue claire et presque vibrante. L'enfant était tout près de la voix. Mais où était-elle?

Il était près d'une plainte. Le tremblement d'une plainte dans l'espace passait à coté de lui. Un gémissement humain flottant dans l'invisible, voilà ce qu'il venait de rencontrer. Telle était du moins son impression, trouble comme le profond brouillard où il était perdu.

Comme il hésitait entre un instinct qui le poussait à fuir et un instinct qui lui disait de rester, il aperçut dans la neige, ses pieds, à quelques pas devant lui, une sorte d'ondulation de la dimension d'un corps humain, une petite éminence basse, longue et étroite, pareille au renflement d'une fosse, une ressemblance de sépulture dans un cimetière qui serait blanc.

En même temps, la voix cria.

C'est de là-dessous qu'elle sortait.

L'enfant se baissa, s'accroupit devant l'ondulation, et de ses deux mains en commença le déblaiement.

Il vit se modeler, sous la neige qu'il écartait, une forme, et tout à coup, sous ses mains, dans le creux qu'il avait fait, apparut une face pâle, Ce n’était point cette face qui criait. Elle avait les yeux fermés et la bouche ouverte, mais pleine de neige.

Elle était immobile. Elle ne bougea pas sous la main de l’enfant.

L’enfant, qui avait l’onglée aux doigts, tressaillit en touchant le froid de ce visage. C’était la tëte d’une femme.

Les cheveux épars étaient, mêlés à la neige. Cette femme était morte.

L’enfant, se remit à écarter la neige. Le cou de la morte se dégagea, puis le haut, du torse, dont on voyait la chair sous des haillons.

Soudainement il sentit sous son tâtonnement un mouvement faible.

C’était quelque chose de petit qui était enseveli, et qui remuait. L’enfant ôta vivement la neige, et découvrit un misérable corps d’avorton, chétif, blême de froid, encore vivant, nu sur le sein nu de la morte.

C’était une petite fille.

Elle était emmaillottée, mais de pas assez de guenilles, et, en se débattant, elle était sortie de ses loques. Sous elle ses pauvres membres maigres, et son haleine au-dessus d’elle, avaient un peu fait fondre la neige. Une nourrice lui eût donné cinq ou six mois, mais elle avait un an peut-être, car la croissance dans la misère subit de navrantes réductions qui vont parfois jusqu’au rachitisme. Quand son visage fut à l’air, elle poussa un cri, continuation de son sanglot de détresse. Pour que la mère n’eût pas entendu ce sanglot, il fallait qu’elle fût bien profondément morte.

L’enfant prit la petite dans ses bras.

La mère roidie était sinistre. Une irradiation spectrale sortait de cette figure. La bouche béante et sans souffle semblait commencer dans la langue indistincte de l’ombre la réponse aux questions faites aux morts dans l’invisible. La réverbération blafarde des plaines glacées était sur ce visage. On voyait le front, jeune sous les cheveux bruns, le froncement presque indigné des sourcils, les narines serrées, les paupières closes, les cils collés par le givre, et, du coin des yeux au coin des lèvres, le pli profond des pleurs. La neige éclairait la morte.

L’hiver et le tombeau ne se nuisent pas. Le cadavre est le glaçon de l’homme. La nudité des seins était pathétique. Ils avaient servi; ils avaient la sublime flétrissure de la vie donnée par l’être à qui la vie manque, et la majesté maternelle y remplaçait la pureté virginale. A la pointe d’une des mamelles il y avait une perle blanche. C’était une goutte de lait, gelée.

Disons-le tout de suite, dans ces plaines où le garçon perdu passait à son tour, une mendiante allaitant son nourrisson, et cherchant elle aussi un gîte, s’était, il y avait peu d’heures, égarée. Transie, elle était tombée sous la tempête, et n’avait pu se relever. L’avalanche l’avait couverte. Elle avait, le plus qu’elle avait pu, serré sa fille contre elle, et elle avait expiré.

La petite fille avait essayé de téter ce marbre.

Sombre confiance voulue par la nature, car il semble que le dernier allaitement soit possible à une mère, même après le dernier soupir.

Mais la bouche de l’enfant n’avait pu trouver le sein, où la goutte de lait, volée par la mort, s’était glacée, et, sous la neige, le nourrisson, plus accoutumé au berceau qu’à la tombe, avait crié.

Le petit abandonné avait entendu la petite agonisante.

Il l’avait déterrée.

Il l’avait prise dans ses bras.

Quand la petite se sentit dans des bras, elle cessa de crier.

Les deux visages des deux enfants se touchèrent, et les lèvres violettes du nourrisson se rapprochèrent de la joue du garçon comme d’une mamelle.

La petite fille était presque au moment où le sang coagulé va arrêter le coeur. Sa mère lui avait déjà donné quelque chose de sa mort; le cadavre se communique, c’est un refroidissement qui se gagne. La petite avait les pieds, les mains, les bras, les genoux, comme paralysés par la glace. Le garçon sentit ce froid terrible.

Il avait sur lui un vêtement sec et chaud, sa vareuse. Il posa le nourrisson sur la poitrine de la morte, ôta sa vareuse, en enveloppa la petite fille, ressaisit l’enfant, et, presque nu maintenant sous les bouffées de neige que soufflait la bise, emportant la petite dans ses bras, il se remit en route.

La petite ayant réussi à retrouver la joue du garçon, y appuya sa bouche, et, réchauffée, s’endormit. Premicr baiser de ces deux âmes dans les ténèbres.

La mère demeura gisante, le dos sur la neige, la face vers la nuit. Mais au moment où le petit garçon se dépouilla pour vêtir la petite fille, peut-être, du fond de l’infini où elle était, la mère le vit-elle.

III

TOUTE VOIE DOULOUREUSE SE COMPLIQUE D’UN FARDEAU

Il y avail un peu plus de quatre heures que l’ourque s’était éloignée de la crique de Portland, laissant sur le rivage ce garçon. Depuis ces longues heures qu’il était abandonné, et qu’il marchait devant lui, il n’avait encore fait, dans celle société humaine où peut-être il allait entrer, que trois rencontres, un homme, une femme et un enfant. Un homme, cet homme sur la colline; une femme, cette femme dans la neige; un enfant, cette petite fille qu’il avait dans les bras.

Il était exténué de faligue et de faim. Il avançait plus résolument que jamais, avec de la force de moins et un fardeau de plus.

Il était maintenant à peu près sans vêtements. Le peu de haillons qui lui restaient, durcis par le givre, étaient coupants comme du verre et lui écorchaient la peau. Il se refroidissait, mais l’autre enfant se réchauffait. Ce qu’il perdait n’était pas perdu, elle le regagnait. Il constatait cette chaleur qui était pour la pauvre petite une reprise de vie. Il continuait d’avancer.

De temps en temps, tout en la soutenant bien, il se baissait et d’une main prenait de la neige à poignée, et en frottait ses pieds, pour les empêcher de geler.

Dans d’autres moments, ayant la gorge en feu, il se mettait dans la bouche un peu de cette neige et la suçait, ce qui trompait une minute sa soif, mais la changeait en fièvre. Soulagement qui était une aggravation.

La tourmemte était devenue informe à force de violence; les déluges de neige sont possibles; c’en était un. Ce paroxysme maltraitait le littoral en même temps qu’il bouleversait l’océan.

C’était probablement l’instant où l’ourque éperdue se disloquait dans la bataille des écueils.

Il traversa sous cette bise, marchant toujours vers l’est, de larges surfaces de neige. Il ne savait quelle heure il était.

Depuis longtemps il ne voyait plus de fumées. Ces indications dans la nuit sont vite effacées; d’ailleurs, il était plus que l’heure où les feux sont éteints; enfin peut-être s’était-il trompé, et il était possible qu’il n’y eût point de ville ni de village du côté où il allait.

Dans le doute, il persévérait.

Deux ou trois fois la petite cria. Alors il imprimait à son allure un mouvement de bercement; elle s'apaisait et se taisait.

Elle finit par se bien endormir, et d'un bon sommeil. Il la sentait chaude, tout en grelottant.

Il resserrait fréquemment les plis de la vareuse autour du cou de la petite, afin que le givre ne s'introduisît pas par quelque ouverture et qu'il n'y eût aucune fuite de neige fondue entre le vêtement et l'enfant.

La plaine avait des ondulations. Aux déclivités où elle s'abaissait, la neige, amassée par le vent dans les plis de terrain, était si haute pour lui petit qu'il y enfonçait presque tout entier, et il fallait marcher à demi enterré. Il marchait, poussant la neige des genoux.

Le ravin franchi, il parvenait à des plateaux balayés par la bise où la neige était mince. Là il trouvait le verglas.

L'haleine tiède de la petite fille effleurait sa joue, le réchauffait un moment, et s'arrêtait et se gelait dans ses cheveux, où elle faisait un glaçon.

Il se rendait compte d'une complication redoutable, il ne pouvait plus tomber. Il sentait qu'il ne se relèverait pas. Il était brisé de fatigue, et le plomb de l'ombre l'eût, comme la femme expirée, appliqué sur le sol, et la glace l'eût soudé vivant à la terre. Il avait dévalé sur des pentes de précipices, et s'en était tiré; il avait trébuché dans des trous, et en était sorti; désormais une simple chute, c'était la mort. Un faux pas ouvrait la tombe. Il ne fallait pas glisser. Il n'aurait plus la force méme de se remettre sur ses genoux.

Or le glissement était partout autour de lui; tout était givre et neige durcie.

La petite qu'il portait lui faisait la marche affreusement difficile; non seulement c'était un poids, excessif pour sa lassitude et son épuisement, mais c'était un embarras. Elle lui occupait les deux bras, et, à qui chemine sur le verglas, les deux bras sont un balancier naturel et nécessaire.

Il fallait se passer de ce balancier.

Il s'en passait, et marchait, ne sachant que devenir sous son fardeau.

Cette petite était la goutte qui faisait déborder le vase de détresse.

Il avançait, oscillant à chaque pas, comme sur un tremplin, et accomplissant, pour aucun regard, des miracles d'équilibre.

Peut-être pourtant, redisons-le, était-il suivi en cette voie douloureuse par des yeux ouverts dans les lointains de l'ombre, l'oeil de la mère et l'oeil de Dieu.

Il chancelait, chavirait, se raffermissait, avait soin de l'enfant, lui remettait du vêtement sur elle, lui couvrait la tête, chavirait encore, avançait toujours, glissait, puis se redressait. Le vent avait la lâcheté de le pousser.

Il faisait vraisemblablement beaucoup plus de chemin qu'il ne fallait. Il était selon toute apparence dans ces plaines o s'est établie plus tard la Bincleaves Farm, entre ce qu'on nomme maintenant Spring Gardens et Personage House. Métairies et cottages à présent, friches alors. Souvent moins d'un siècle sépare un steppe d'une ville.

Subitement, une interruption s'étant faite dans la bourrasque glaciale qui l'aveuglait, il aperçut à peu de distance devant lui un groupe de pignons et de cheminées mis en relief par la neige, le contraire d'une silhouette, une ville dessinée en blanc sur l'horizon noir, quelque chose comme ce qu'on appellerait aujourd'hui une épreuve négative.

Des toits, des demeures, un gîte! Il était donc quelque part!

Il sentit l'ineffable encouragement de l'espérance. La vigie d'un navire égaré criant terre! a de ces émotions. Il pressa le pas.

Il touchait donc enfin à des hommes. Il allait donc arriver des vivants. Plus rien à craindre. Il avait en lui cette chaleur subite, la sécurité. Ce dont il sortait était fini. Il n'y aurait plus de nuit désormais, ni d'hiver, ni de tempête. Il lui semblait que tout ce qu'il y a de possible dans le mal était maintenant derrière lui. La petite n'était plus un poids. Il courait presque.

Son oeil était fixé sur ces toits. La vie était là. Il ne les quittait pas du regard. Un mort regarderait ainsi ce qui lui apparaîtrait par l'entre-bâillement d'un couvercle de tombe.

C'étaient les cheminées dont il avait vu les fumées. Aucune fumée n'en sortait.

Il eut vite fait d'atteindre les habitations. Il parvint à un faubourg de ville qui était une rue ouverte. A celle époque le barrage des rues la nuit tombait en désuétude.

La rue commençait par deux maisons. Dans ces deux maisons on n'apercevait aucune chandelle ni aucune lampe, non plus que dans toute la rue, ni dans toute la ville, aussi loin que la vue pouvait s'étendre.

La maison de droite étaie plutôt un toit qu'une maison; rien de plus chétif; la muraille était de torchis et le toit de paille; il y avait plus de chaume que de mur. Une grande ortie née au pied du mur touchait au bord du toit. Cette masure n’avait qu’une porte qui semblait une chatière et qu’une fenêtre qui était une lucarne. Le tout fermé. A côté une soue à porcs habitée indiquait que la chaumière était habitée aussi.

La maison de gauche était large, haute, toute en pierre, avec toit d’ardoises. Fermée aussi. C’était Chez le Riche vis-à-vis de Chez le Pauvre.

Le garçon n’hésita pas.

Il alla à la grande maison.

La porte à deux battants, massif damier de chêne à gros clous, était de celles derrière lesquelles on devine une robuste armature de barres et de serrures; un marteau de fer y pendait.

Il souleva le marteau, avec quelque peine, car ses mains engourdies étaient plutôt des moignons que des mains. il frappa un coup.

On ne répondit pas.

Il frappa une seconde fois, et deux coups.

Aucun mouvement ne se fit dans la maison.

Il frappa une troisième fois. Rien.

Il comprit qu’on dormait, ou qu’on ne se souciait pas de se lever.

Alors il se tourna vers la maison pauvre. Il prit à terre, dans la neige, un galet et heurta à la porte basse.

On ne répondit pas.

Il se haussa sur la pointe des pieds, et cogna de son caillou la lucarne, assez doucement pour ne point casser la vitre, assez fort pour être entendu.

Aucune voix ne s’éleva, aucun pas ne remua, aucune chandelle ne s’alluma.

Il pensa que là aussi on ne voulait point se réveiller.

Il y avait dans l’hôtel de pierre et dans le logis de chaume la même surdité aux misérables.

Le garçon se décida à pousser plus loin, et pénétra dans le détroit de maisons qui se prolongeait devant lui, si obscur qu’on eût plutôt dit l’écart de deux falaises que l’entrée d’une ville.

IV

AUTRE FORME DU DÉSERT

C’est dans le Weymouth qu’il venait d’entrer.

Le Weymouth d’alors n’était pas l’honorable et superbe Weymouth d’aujourd’hui. Cet ancien Weymouth n’avait pas, connue le Weymouth actuel, un irréprochable quai rectiligne avec une statue et une auberge en l’honneur de Georges III. Cela tenait à ce que Georges III n’était pas né. Par la même raison, on n’avait point encore, au penchant de la verte colline de l’est, dessiné, à plat sur le sol, au moyen du gazon scalpé et de la craie mise à nu, ce cheval blanc, d’un arpent de long, le *White Horse*, portant un roi sur son dos, et tournant, toujours en l’honneur de Georges III, sa queue vers la ville. Ces honneurs, du reste, sont mérités; Georges III, ayant perdu dans sa vieillesse l’esprit qu’il n’avait jamais eu dans sa jeunesse, n’est point responsable des calamités de son règne. C’était un innocent. Pourquoi pas des statues?

Le Weymouth d’il y a cent quatrevingts ans était à peu près aussi symétrique qu’un jeu d’onchets brouillé. L’Astaroth des légendes se promenait quelquefois sur la terre portant derrière son dos une besace dans laquelle il y avait de tout, même des bonnes femmes dans leurs maisons. Un pêle-mêle de baraques tombé de ce sac du diable donnerait l’idée de ce Weymouth incorrect. Plus, dans les baraques, les bonnes femmes. Il reste comme spécimen de ces logis la maison des Musiciens. Une confusion de tanières de bois sculptées, et vermoulues, ce qui est une autre sculpture, d’informes bâtisses branlantes à surplombs, quelques-unes piliers, s’appuyant les unes sur les autres pour ne pas tomber au vent de mer, et laissant entre elles les espacements exigus d’une voirie tortue et maladroite, ruelles et carrefours souvent inondés par les marées d’équinoxe, un amoncellement de vieilles maisons grand-mères groupées autour d’une église aïeule, c’était là Weymouth. Weymouth était une sorte d’antique village normand échoué sur la côte d’Angleterre.

Le voyageur, s’il entrait à la taverne remplacée aujourd’hui par l’hôtel, au lieu de payer royalement une sole frite et une bouteille de vin vingt-cinq francs, avait l’humiliation de manger pour deux sous une soupe au poisson, fort bonne d’ailleurs.

C’était misérable.

L’enfant perdu portant l’enfant trouvé suivit la première rue, puis la seconde, puis une troisième. Il levait les yeux cherchant aux étages et sur les toits une vitre éclairée, mais tout était clos et éteint. Par intervalles, il cognait aux portes. Personne ne répondait. Rien ne fait le coeur de pierre comme d’être chaudement entre deux draps. Ce bruit et ces secousses avaient fini par réveiller la petite. Il s’en apercevait parce qu’il se sentait téter la joue. Elle ne criait pas, croyant à une mère.

Il risquait de tourner et de rôder longtemps peut-être dans les intersections des ruelles de Scrambridge où il y avait alors plus de sculptures que de maisons, et plus de haies d’épines que de logis, mais il s’engagea à propos dans un couloir qui existe encore aujourd’hui près de Trinity Schools. Ce couloir le mena sur une plage qui était un rudiment de quai avec parapet, et à sa droite il distingua un pont.

Ce pont était le pont de la Wey qui relie Weymouth Melcomb-Regis, et sous les arches duquel le Harbour communique avec la Back Water.

Weymouth, hameau, était alors le faubourg de Melcomb-Regis, cit et port; aujourd’hui Melcomb-Regis est une paroisse de Weymouth.

Le village a absorbé la ville. C’est par ce pont que s’est fait ce travail. Les ponts sont de singuliers appareils de succion qui aspirent la population et font quelquefois grossir un quartier riverain aux dépens de son vis-à-vis.

Le garçon alla à ce pont, qui à cette époque était une passerelle de charpente couverte. Il traversa cette passerelle.

Grâce au toit du pont, il n’y avait pas de neige sur le tablier.

Ses pieds nus eurent un moment de bien-être en marchant sur ces planches sèches.

Le pont franchi, il se trouva dans Melcomb-Regis.

Il y avait là moins de maisons de bois que de maisons de pierre.

Ce n’était plus le bourg, c’était la cité. Le pont débouchait sur une assez belle rue qui était Saint-Thomas street. Il y entra. La rue offrait de hauts pignons taillés, et ça et là des devantures de boutiques. Il se remit à frapper aux portes. Il ne lui restait pas assez de force pour appeler et crier.

A Melcomb-Regis comme à Weymouth, personne ne bougeait. Un bon double tour avait été donné aux serrures. Les fenêtres étaient recouvertes de leurs volets comme les yeux de leurs paupières.

Toutes les précautions étaient prises contre le réveil, soubresaut désagréable.

Le petit errant subissait la pression indéfinissable de la ville endormie. Ces silences de fourmilière paralysée dégagent du vertige. Toutes ces léthargies mêlent leurs cauchemars, ces sommeils sont une foule, et il sort de ces corps humains gisants une fumée de songes. Le sommeil a de sombres voisinages hors de la vie; la pensée décomposée des endormis flotte au-dessus d’eux, vapeur vivante et morte, et se combine avec le possible qui pense probablement aussi dans l’espace. De là des enchevêtrements. Le rêve, ce nuage, superpose ses épaisseurs et ses transparences cette étoile, l’esprit. Au-dessus de ces paupières fermées où la vision a remplacé la vue, une désagrégation sépulcrale de silhouettes et d’aspects se dilate dans l’impalpable. Une dispersion d’existences mystérieuses s’amalgame à notre vie par ce bord de la mort qui est le sommeil. Ces entrelacements de larves et d’âmes sont dans l’air. Celui même qui ne dort pas sent peser sur lui ce milieu plein d’une vie sinistre. La chimère ambiante, réalité devinée, le gêne. L’homme éveillé qui chemine à travers les fantômes du sommeil des autres refoule confusément des formes passantes, a, ou croit avoir, la vague horreur des contacts hostiles de l’invisible, et sent à chaque instant la poussée obscure d’une rencontre inexprimable qui s’évanouit. Il y a des effets de forêt dans cette marche au milieu de la diffusion nocturne des songes.

C’est ce qu’on appelle avoir peur sans savoir pourquoi.

Ce qu’un homme éprouve, un enfant l’éprouve plus encore.

Ce malaise de l’effroi nocturne, amplifié par ces maisons spectres, s’ajoutait à tout cet ensemble lugubre sous lequel il luttait.

Il entra dans Conyear Lane, et aperçut au bout de cette ruelle la Bach Water qu’il prit pour l’Océan; il ne savait plus de quel coté était la mer; il revint sur ses pas, tourna à gauche par Maiden street, et rétrograda jusqu’à Saint-Albans row.

Là, au hasard, et sans choisir, et aux premières maisons venues, il heurta violemment. Ces coups, où il épuisait sa dernière énergie, étaient désordonnés et saccadés, avec des intermittences et des reprises presque irritées. C’était le battement de sa fièvre frappant aux portes.

Une voix répondit.

Celle de l’heure.

Trois heures du matin sonnèrent lentement derrière lui au vieux clocher de Saint-Nicolas.

Puis tout retomha dans le silence.

Que pas un habitant n'eût même entr'ouvert une lucarne, cela peut sembler surprenant. Pourtant dans une certaine mesure ce silence s'explique. Il faut dire qu'en janvier 1690 on était au lendemain d'une assez forte peste qu'il y avait eu à Londres, et que la crainte de recevoir des vagabonds malades produisait partout une certaine diminution d'hospitalité. On n'entre-baillait pas même sa fenêtre de peur de respirer leur miasme.

L'enfant sentit le froid des hommes plus terrible que le froid de la nuit. C'est un froid qui veut. Il eut ce serrement du coeur découragé qu'il n'avait pas eu dans les solitudes. Maintenant il était rentré dans la vie de tous, et il restait seul. Comble d'angoisse. Le désert impitoyable, il l'avait compris; mais la ville inexorable, c'était trop.

L'heure, dont il venait de compter les coups, avait été un accablement de plus. Rien de glaçant en de certains cas comme l'heure qui sonne. C'est une déclaration d'indifférence. C'est l'éternité disant: que m'importe!

Il s'arrêta. Et il n'est pas certain qu'en celle minute lamentable, il ne se soit pas demandé s'il ne serait pas plus simple de se coucher là et de mourir. Cependant la petite fille posa la tête sur son épaule, et se rendormit. Cette confiance obscure le remit en marche.

Lui qui n'avait autour de lui que de l'écroulement, il sentit qu'il était point d'appui. Profonde sommation du devoir.

Ni ces idées ni cette situation n'étaient de son âge. Il est probable qu'il ne les comprenait pas. Il agissait d'instinct.
Il faisait ce qu'il faisait.

Il marcha dans la direction de Johnstone row.

Mais il ne marchait plus, il se traînait.

Il laissa à sa gauche Sainte-Mary street, fit des zigzags dans les ruelles, et, au débouché d'un boyau sinueux entre deux masures, se trouva dans un assez large espace libre. C'était un terrain vague, point bâti, probablement l'endroit où est aujourd'hui Chesterfield place. Les maisons finissaient là. Il apercevait à sa droite la mer, et presque plus rien de la ville sa gauche.

Que devenir? La campagne recommençait. A l'est, de grands plans inclinés de neige marquaient les larges versants de Radipole.
Allait-il continuer ce voyage? allait-il avancer et rentrer dans les solitudes?

allait-il reculer et rentrer dans les rues? que faire entre ces deux silences, la plaine muette et la ville sourde? lequel choisir de ces refus?

Il y a l’ancre de miséricorde, il y a aussi le regard de miséricorde. C’est ce regard que le pauvre petit désespéré jeta autour de lui.

Tout à coup il entendit une menace.

V

LA MISANTHROPIE FAIT DES SIENNES

On ne sait quel grincement étrange et alarmant vint dans cette ombre jusqu'à lui.

C'était de quoi reculer. Il avança.

A ceux que le silence consterne, un rugissement plaît.

Ce rictus féroce le rassura. Cette menace était une promesse.

Il y avait là un être vivant et éveillé, fût-ce une bête fauve.

Il marcha du côté d'où venait le grincement.

Il tourna un angle de mur, et, derrière, à la réverbération de la neige et de la mer, sorte de vaste éclairage sépulcral, il vit une chose qui était là comme abritée. C'était une charrette, moins que ce ne fût une cabane. Il y avait des roues, c'était une voiture; et il y avait un toit, c'était une demeure. Du toit sortait un tuyau, et du tuyau une fumée. Cette fumée était vermeille, ce qui semblait annoncer un assez bon feu a l'intérieur. A l'arrière, des gonds en saillie indiquaient une porte, et au centre de cette porte une ouverture carrée laissait voir de la lueur dans la cahute. Il approcha.

Ce qui avait grincé le sentit venir. Quand il fut près de la cahute, la menace devint furieuse. Ce n'était plus à un grondement qu'il avait affaire, mais à un hurlement. Il entendit un bruit sec, comme d'une chaîne violemment tendue, et brusquement, au-dessous de la porle, dans l'écartement des roues de derrière, deux rangées de dents aiguës et blanches apparurent.

En même temps qu'une gueule entre les roues, une tête passa par la lucarne.

— Paix là! dit la tête.

La gueule se tut.

La tête reprit:

— Est-ce qu'il y a quelqu'un?

L'enfant répondit:

— Oui.

— Qui?

— Moi.

— Toi? qui çà, d’où viens-tu?

— Je suis las, dit l’enfant.

— Quelle heure est-il?

— J’ai froid.

— Que fais-tu là?

— J’ai faim.

La tête répliqua:

— Tout le monde ne peut pas être heureux comme un lord. Va-t-en.

La tête rentra, et le vasistas se ferma.

L’enfant courha le front, resserra entre ses bras la petite endormie et rassembla sa force pour se remettre en route. Il fit quelques pas et commença à s’éloigner.

Cependant, en même temps que la lucarne s’était fermée, la porte s’était ouverte. Un marche-pied s’était abaissé. La voix qui venait de parler à l’enfant cria du fond de la cahute avec colère:

— Eh bien, pourquoi n’entres-tu pas?

L’enfant se retourna.

— Entre donc, reprit la voix. Qui est-ce qui m’a donné un garnement comme cela, qui a faim et qui a froid, et qui n’entre pas?

L’enfant, à la fois repoussé et attiré, demeurait immobile.

La voix repartit:

— On te dit d’entrer, drôle!

Il se décida, et mit un pied sur le premier échelon de l’escalier.

Mais on gronda sous la voilure.

Il recula. La gueule ouverte reparut.

— Paix! cria la voix de l’homme.

La gueule rentra. Le grondement cessa.

— Monte, reprit l’homme.

L’enfant gravit péniblement les trois marches. Il était gêné par l’autre enfant, tellement engourdie, enveloppée et roulée dans le suroît qu’on ne distinguait rien d’elle, et que ce n’était qu’une petite masse informe.

Il franchit les trois marches, et, parvenu au seuil, s’arrêta.

Aucune chandelle ne brûlait dans la cahute, par économie de misère probablement. La baraque n’était éclairée que d’une rougeur faite par le soupirail d’un poêle de fonte où pétillait un feu de tourbe. Sur le poêle fumaient une écuelle et un pot contenant selon toute apparence quelque chose à manger. On en sentait la bonne odeur. Cette habitation était meublée d’un coffre, d’un escabeau, et d’une lanterne, point allumée, accrochée au plafond. Plus, aux cloisons, quelques planches sur tasseaux, et un décroche-moi-çà, où pendaient des choses mêlées.

Sur les planches et aux clous s’étageaint des verreries, des cuivres, un alambic, un récipient assez semblable à ces vases grener la cire qu’on appelle grelous, et une confusion d’objets bizarres auxquels l’enfant n’eût pu rien comprendre, et qui était une batterie de cuisine de chimiste. La cahute avait une forme oblongue, le poêle à l’aval. Ce n’était pas même une petite chambre, c’était à peine une grande boîte. Le dehors était plus éclairé par la neige que cet intérieur par le poêle. Tout dans la baraque était indistinct et trouble. Pourtant un reflet du feu sur le plafond permettait d’y lire cette inscription en gros caractères: URSUS, PHILOSOPHE.

L’enfant, en effet, faisait son entrée chez Homo et chez Ursus.

On vient d’entendre gronder l’un et parler l’antre.

L’enfant, arrivé au seuil, aperçut près du poêle un homme long, glabre, maigre et vieux, vêtu en grisaille, qui était debout et dont le crâne chauve touchait le toit. Cet homme n’eût pu se hausser sur les pieds. La cahute était juste.

— Entre, dit l’homme, qui était Ursus.

L’enfant entra.

— Pose-là ton paquet.

L’enfant posa sur le coffre son fardeau, avec précaution, de crainte de l’effrayer et de le réveiller.

L’homme reprit:

— Comme tu mets ça là doucement! Ce ne serait pas pire quand ce serait une châsse. Est-ce que tu as peur de faire une fêlure tes guenilles? Ah! l’abominable vaurien! dans les rues à cette heure-ci! Qui es-tu? Réponds. Mais non, je te défends de répondre. Allons au plus pressé; tu as froid, chauffe-toi.

Et il le poussa par les deux épaules devant le poêle.

— Es-tu assez mouillé! Es-tu assez glacé! S’il est permis d’entrer ainsi dans les maisons! Allons, ôte-moi toutes ces pourritures, malfaiteur!

Et, d’une main, avec une brusquerie fébrile, il lui arracha ses haillons qui se déchirèrent en charpie, tandis que, de l’autre main, il décrochait d’un clou une chemise d’homme et une de ces jaquettes de tricot qu’on appelle encore aujourd’hui kiss-my-quick.

— Tiens, voilà des nippes.

Il choisit dans le tas un chiffon de laine et en frotta devant le feu les membres de l’enfant ébloui et défaillant, et qui, en cette minute de nudité chaude, crut voir et toucher le ciel. Les membres frottés, l’homme essuya les pieds.

— Allons, carcasse, tu n’as rien de gelé. J’étais assez hôte pour avoir peur qu’il n’eût quelque chose de gelé, les pattes de derrière ou de devant! Il ne sera pas perclus pour cette fois.
Rhabille-toi.

L’enfant endossa la chemise, et l’homme lui passa, pardessus, la jaquette de tricot.

— A présent...

L’homme avança du pied l’escabeau, y fit asseoir, toujours par une poussée aux épaules, le petit garçon, et lui montra de l’index l’écuelle qui fumait sur le poêle. Ce que l’enfant entrevoyait dans celte écuette, c’était encore le ciel, c’est-à-dire une pomme de terre et du lard.

— Tu as faim, mange.

L’homme prit sur une planche une croûte de pain dur et une fourchette de fer, et les présenta à l’enfant. L’enfant hésita.

— Faut-il que je mette le couvert? dit l’homme.

Et il posa l’écuelle sur les genoux de l’enfant.

— Mords dans tout ça!

La faim l’emporta sur l’ahurissement. L’enfant se mit à manger.
Le pauvre être dévorait plutôt qu’il ne mangeait. Le bruit joyeux du pain croqué remplissait la cahute. L’homme bougonnait.

— Pas si vite, horrible goinfre! Est-il gourmand, ce gredin-là!
Ces canailles qui ont faim mangent d’une façon révoltante. On n’a qu’à voir souper un lord. J’ai vu dans ma vie des ducs manger. Ils ne mangent pas; c’est ça qui est noble. Ils boivent, par exemple. Allons, marcassin, empiffre-toi!

L’absence d’oreilles qui caractérise le ventre affamé faisait l’enfant peu sensible à celte violence d’épithètes, tempérée d’ailleurs par la charité des actions, contresens à son profit.
Pour l’instant, il était absorbé par ces deux urgences, et par ces deux extases, se réchauffer, manger.

Ursus poursuivait entre cuir et chair son imprécation en sourdine:

— J’ai vu le roi Jacques souper en personne dans le Banqueting House où l’on admire des peintures du fameux Rubens; sa majest ne touchait à rien. Ce gueux-ci broute! Brouter, mot qui dérive de brute. Quelle idée ai-je eue de venir dans ce Weymouth, sept fois voué aux dieux infernaux! Je n'ai depuis ce matin rien vendu, j'ai parlé à la neige, j'ai joué de la flûte à l'ouragan, je n'ai pas empoché un farthing, et le soir il m'arrive des pauvres! Hideuse contrée! Il y a bataille, lutte et concours entre les passants imbéciles et moi. Ils tâchent de ne me donner que des liards, je tâche de ne leur donner que des drogues. Eh bien, aujourd'hui, rien! pas un idiot dans le carrefour, pas un penny dans la caisse! Mange, boy de l'enfer! tords et croque!

nous sommes dans un temps où rien n'égale le cynisme des pique-assiettes. Engraisse a mes dépens, parasite. Il est mieux qu'affamé, il est enragé, cet être-là. Ce n'est pas de l'appétit, c'est de la férocité. Il est surmené par un virus rabique. Qui sait? il a peut-être la peste. As-tu la peste, brigand? S'il allait la donner à Homo! Ah mais, non! crevez, populace, mais je ne veux pas que mon loup meure. Ah ça, j'ai faim moi aussi. Je déclare que ceci est un incident désagréable.

J'ai travaillé aujourd'hui très avant dans la nuit. Il y a des fois dans la vie qu'on est pressé. Je l'étais ce soir de manger.

Je suis tout seul, je fais du feu, je n'ai qu'une pomme de terre, une croûte de pain, une bouchée de lard et une goutte de lait, je mets ça à chauffer, je me dis: bon! je m'imagine que je vais me repaître. Patatras! il faut que ce crocodile me tombe dans ce moment-là. Il s'installe carrément entre ma nourriture et moi.

Voilà mon réfectoire dévasté. Mange, brochet, mange, requin, combien as-tu de rangs de dents dans la gargamelle? bâfre, louveteau. Non, je retire le mol, respect aux loups. Engloutis ma pâture, boa! J'ai travaillé aujourd'hui, l'estomac vide, le gosier plaintif, le pancréas en détresse, les entrailles délabrées, très avant dans la nuit; ma récompense est de voir manger un autre. C'est égal, part à deux. Il aura le pain, la pomme de terre et le lard, mais j'aurai le lait.

En ce moment un cri lamentable et prolongé s'éleva dans la cahute. L'homme dressa l'oreille.

— Tu cries maintenant, sycophante! Pourquoi cries-tu?

Le garçon se retourna. Il était évident qu'il ne criait pas. Il avait la bouche pleine.

Le cri ne s'interrompait pas.

L'homme alla au coffre.

— C’est donc le paquet qui gueule! Vallée de Josaphat! Voilà le paquet qui vocifère! Qu’est-ce qu’il a à croasser, ton paquet?

Il déroula le suroit. Une têe d’enfant en sortit, la bouche ouverte et criant.

— Eh bien, qui va là? dit l’homme. Qu’est-ce que c’est? Il y en a un autre. Ça ne va donc pas finir? Qui vive? aux armes!
Caporal, hors la garde! Deuxième patatras! Qu’est-ce que tu m’apportes là, bandit? Tu vois bien qu’elle a soif. Allons, il faut qu’elle boive, celle-ci. Bon! je n’aurai pas même le lait à présent.

Il prit dans un fouillis sur une planche un rouleau de linge bandage, une éponge et une fiole, en murmurant avec frénésie:

— Damné pays!

Puis il considéra la petite.

— C’est une fille. Ça se reconnaît au glapissement. Elle est trempée, elle aussi.

Il arracha, comme il avait fait pour le garçon, les haillons dont elle était plutôt nouée que vêtue, et il l’entortilla d’un lambeau indigent, mais propre et sec, de grosse toile. Ce rhabillement rapide et brusque exaspéra la petite fille.

— Elle miaule inexorablement, dit-il.

Il coupa avec ses dents un morceau allongé de l’éponge, déchira du rouleau un carré de linge, en étira un brin de fil, prit sur le poêle le pot où il y avait du lait, remplit de ce lait la fiole, introduisit à demi l’éponge dans le goulot, couvrit l’éponge avec le linge, ficela ce bouchon avec le fil, appliqua contre sa joue la fiole, pour s’assurer qu’elle n’était pas trop chaude, et saisit sous son bras gauche le maillot éperdu qui continuait de crier.

— Allons, soupe, créature! prends-moi le téton.

Et il lui mit dans la bouche le goulot de la fiole.

La petite but avidement.

Il soutint la fiole à l’inclinaison voulut en grommelant:

— Ils sont tous les mêmes, les lâches! Quand ils ont ce qu’ils veulent, ils se taisent.

La petite avait bu si énergiquement et avait saisi avec tant d’emportement ce bout de sein offert par cette providence bourrue, qu’elle fut prise d’une quinte de toux.

— Tu vas t’étrangler, gronda Ursus. Une fière goulue aussi que celle-là!

Il lui retira l’éponge qu’elle suçait, laissa la quinte s’apaiser, et lui replaça la fiole entre les lèvres, en disant:

— Tette, coureuse!

Cependant le garçon avail posé sa fourchette. Voir la petite boire lui faisait oublier de manger. Le moment d’auparavant, quand il mangeait, ce qu’il avait dans le regard, c’était de la satisfaction, maintenant c’était de la reconnaissance. Il regardait la petite revivre. Cet achèvement de la résurrection commencée par lui emplissait sa prunelle d’une réverbération ineffable. Ursus continuait entre ses gencives son mâchonnement de paroles courroucées. Le petit garçon par instant levait sur Ursus ses yeux humides de l’émotion indéfinissable qu’éprouvait, sans pouvoir l’exprimer, le pauvre être rudoyé et attendri.

Ursus l’apostropha furieusement.

— Eh bien, mange donc!

— Et vous? dit l’enfant tout tremblant, et une larme dans la prunelle. Vous n’aurez rien?

— Veux-tu bien manger tout, engeance! Il n’y en a pas trop pour toi puisqu’il n’y en avait pas assez pour moi. L’enfant reprit sa fourchette, mais ne mangea point.

— Mange, vociféra Ursus. Est-ce qu’il s’agit de moi? Qui est-ce qui te parle de moi? Mauvais petit clerc pieds nus de la paroisse de Sans-le-Sou, je te dis de manger tout. Tu es ici pour manger, boire et dormir. Mange, sinon je te jette à la porte, toi et ta drôlesse.

Le garçon, sur cette menace, se remit à manger. Il n’avait pas grand’chose à faire pour expédier ce qui restait dans l’écuelle.

Ursus murmura:

— Ça joint mal, cet édifice, il vient du froid par les vitres.

Une vitre en effet avait été cassée à l’avant, par quelque cahot de la carriole, ou par quelque pierre de polisson. Ursus avait appliqué sur cette avarie une étoile de papier qui s’était décollée. La bise entrait par là.

Il s’était à demi assis sur le coffre. La petite, à la fois dans ses bras et sur ses genoux, suçait voluptueusement la bouteille avec cette somnolence béate des chérubins devant Dieu et des enfants devant la mamelle.

— Elle est soule, dit Ursus.

Et il reprit:

— Faites donc des sermons sur la tempérance!

Le vent arracha de la vitre l’emplâtre de papier qui vola travers la cahute; mais ce n’était pas de quoi troubler les deux enfants occupés à renaître.

Pendant que la petite buvait et que le petit mangeait, Ursus maugréait.

— L’ivrognerie commence au maillot. Donnez-vous donc la peine d’être l’évêque Tillotson et de tonner contre les excès de la boisson. Odieux vent coulis! Avec cela que mon poêle est vieux.

Il laisse échapper des bouffées de fumée à vous donner la trichiasis. On a l’inconvénient du froid et l’inconvénient du feu. On ne voit pas clair. L’être que voici abuse de mon hospitalité. Eh bien, je n’ai pas encore pu distinguer le visage de ce mufle. Le confortable fait défaut céans. Par Jupiter, j’estime fortement les festins exquis dans les chambres bien closes. J’ai manqué ma vocation, j’étais né pour être sensuel.

Le plus grand des sages est Philoxénès qui souhaita d’avoir un cou de grue pour goûter plus longuement les plaisirs de la table.

Zéro de recette aujourd’hui! Rien vendu de la journée!

Calamité. Habitants, laquais, et bourgeois, voilà le médecin, voilà la médecine. Tu perds ta peine, mon vieux. Remballe ta pharmacie. Tout le monde se porte bien ici. En voilà une ville maudite où personne n’est malade! Le ciel seul a la diarrhée.

Quelle neige! Anaxagoras enseignait que la neige est noire. Il avait raison, froideur étant noirceur. La glace, c’est la nuit.

Quelle bourrasque! Je me représente l’agrément de ceux qui sont en mer. L’ouragan, c’est le passage des satans, c’est le hourvari des brucolaques galopant et roulant, tête bêche, au-dessus de nos boîtes osseuses. Dans la nuée, celui-ci a une queue, celui-là a des cornes, celui-là a une flamme pour langue, cet autre a des griffes aux ailes, cet autre a une bedaine de lord-chancelier, cet autre a une caboche d’académicien, on distingue une forme dans chaque bruit. A vent nouveau, démon différent; l’oreille écoule, l’oeil voit, le fracas est une figure. Parbleu, il y a des gens en mer, c’est évident. Mes amis, tirez-vous de la tempête, j’ai assez à faire de me tirer de la vie. Ah ça, est-ce que je tiens auberge, moi? Pourquoi est-ce que j’ai des arrivages de voyageurs? La détresse universelle a des éclaboussures jusque dans ma pauvreté. Il me tombe dans ma cabane des gouttes hideuses de la grande boue humaine. Je suis livré à la voracité des passants. Je suis une proie. La proie des meurt-de-faim. L’hiver, la nuit, une cahute de carton, un malheureux ami dessous, et dehors la tempête, une pomme de terre, du feu gros comme le poing, des parasites, le vent pénétrant par toutes les fentes, pas le sou, et des paquets qui se mettent à aboyer. On les ouvre, on trouve dedans des gueuses. Si c'est là un sort! J'ajoute que les lois sont violées. Ah! vagabond avec ta vagabonde, malicieux pick-pocket, avorton mal intentionné, ah! tu circules dans les rues passé le couvre-feu! Si notre bon roi le savait, c'est lui qui te ferait joliment flanquer dans un cul de basse-fosse pour t'apprendre!

Monsieur se promène la nuit avec Mademoiselle! Par quinze degrés de froid, nu-tête, nu-pieds! sache que c'est défendu. Il y a des règlements et ordonnances, factieux! les vagabonds sont punis, les honnêtes gens qui ont des maisons à eux sont gardés et protégés, les rois sont les pères du peuple. Je suis domicilié, moi! Tu aurais été fouetté en place publique, si l'on t'avait rencontré, et c'eût été bien fait. Il faut de l'ordre dans un état policé. Moi j'ai eu tort de ne pas te dénoncer au constable. Mais je suis comme cela, je comprends le bien, et je fais le mal. Ah! le ruffian! m'arriver dans cet état-là! Je ne me suis pas aperçu de leur neige en entrant, ça a fondu. Et voilà toute ma maison mouillée. J'ai l'inondation chez moi. Il faudra brûler un charbon impossible pour sécher ce lac. Du charbon à douze farthings le dénerel! Comment allons-nous faire pour tenir trois dans cette baraque? Maintenant c'est fini, j'entre dans la nursery, je vais avoir chez moi en sevrage l'avenir de la gueuserie d'Angleterre. J'aurai pour emploi, office et fonction de dégrossir les foetus mal accouchés de la grande coquine Misère, de perfectionner la laideur des gibiers de potence en bas âge, et de donner aux jeunes filous des formes de philosophe! La langue de l'ours est l'ébauchoir de Dieu. Et dire que, si je n'avais pas été depuis trente ans grugé par des espèces de cette sorte, je serais riche, Homo serait gras, j'aurais un cabinet de médecine plein de raretés, des instruments de chirurgie autant que le docteur Linacre, chirurgien du roi Henri VIII, divers animaux de tous genres, des momies d'Egypte, et autres choses semblables! Je serais du collège des Docteurs, et j'aurais le droit d'user de la bibliothèque bâtie en 1652 par le célèbre Harvey, et d'aller travailler dans la lanterne du dôme d'où l'on découvre toute la ville de Londres! Je pourrais continuer mes calculs sur l'offuscation solaire, et prouver qu'une vapeur caligineuse sort de l'astre. C'est l'opinion de Jean Kepler, qui naquit un an avant la Saint-Barthélemy, et qui fut mathématicien de l'empereur. Le soleil est une cheminée qui fume quelquefois. Mon poêle aussi. Mon poêle ne vaut pas mieux que le soleil. Oui, j'eusse fait fortune, mon personnage serait autre, je ne serais pas trivial, je n'avilirais point la science dans les carrefours. Car le peuple n’est pas digne de la doctrine, le peuple n’étant qu’une multitude d’insensés, qu’un mélange confus de toutes sortes d’âges, de sexes, d’humeurs et de conditions, que les sages de tous les temps n’ont point hésit mépriser, et dont les plus modérés, dans leur justice, détestent l’extravagance et la fureur. Ah! je suis ennuyé de ce qui existe. Après cela on ne vit pas longtemps. C’est vite fait, la vie humaine. Hé bien non, c’est long. Par intervalles, pour que nous ne nous découragions pas, pour que nous ayons la stupidit de consentir à être, et pour que nous ne profitions pas des magnifiques occasions de nous pendre que nous offrent toutes les cordes et tous les clous, la nature a l’air de prendre un peu soin de l’homme. Pas cette nuit pourtant. Elle fait pousser le blé, elle fail mûrir le raisin, elle fail chanter le rossignol, celle sournoise de nature. De temps en temps un rayon d’aurore, ou un verre de gin, c’est là ce qu’on appelle le bonheur. Une mince bordure de bien autour de l’immense suaire du mal. Nous avons une destinée dont le diable a fait l’étoffe et dont Dieu a fait l’ourlet. En attendant, tu m’as mangé mon souper, voleur!

Cependant le nourrisson, qu’il tenait toujours entre ses bras, et très doucement tout en faisant rage, refermait vaguement les yeux, signe de plénitude. Ursus examina la fiole, et grogna:

— Elle a tout bu, l’effrontée!

Il se dressa et, soutenant la petite du bras gauche, de la main droite il souleva le couvercle du coffre, et tira de l’intérieur une peau d’ours, ce qu’il appelait, on s’en souvient, sa «vraie peau».

Tout en exécutant ce travail, il entendait l’autre enfant manger, et il le regardait de travers.

— Ce sera une besogne s’il faut désormais que je nourrisse ce glouton en croissance! Ce sera un ver solitaire que j’aurai dans le ventre de mon industrie.

Il étala, toujours d’un seul bras, et de son mieux, la peau d’ours sur le coffre, avec des efforts de coude et des ménagements de mouvements pour ne point secouer le commencement de sommeil de la petite fille. Puis il la déposa sur la fourrure, du côté le plus proche du feu.

Cela fait, il mit la fiole vide sur le poêle, et s’écria:

— C’est moi qui ai soif!

Il regarda dans le pot; il y restait quelques bonnes gorgées de lait; il approcha le pot de ses lèvres. Au moment où il allait boire, son oeil tomba sur la petite fille. Il remit le pot sur le poêle, prit la fiole, la déboucha, y vida ce qui restait de lait, juste assez pour l’emplir, replaça l’éponge, et reficela le linge sur l’éponge autour du goulot.

— J’ai tout de même faim et soif, reprit-il.

Et il ajouta:

— Quand on ne peut pas manger du pain, on boit de l’eau. On entrevoyait derrière le poêle une cruche égueulée. Il la prit et la présenta au garçon:

— Veux-tu boire?

L’enfant but, et se remit à manger.

Ursus ressaisit la cruche et la porta à sa bouche. La température de l’eau qu’elle contenait avait été inégalement modifiée par le voisinage du poêle. Il avala quelques gorgées, et fit une grimace.

— Eau prétendue pure, tu ressembles aux faux amis. Tu es tiède en dessus et froide en dessous.

Cependant le garçon avait fini de souper. L’écuelle était mieux que vidée, elle était nettoyée. Il ramassait et mangeait, pensif, quelques miettes de pain éparses dans les plis du tricot, sur ses genoux.

Ursus se tourna vers lui.

— Ce n’est pas tout ça. Maintenant, à nous deux. La bouche n’est pas faite que pour manger, elle est faite pour parler. A présent que tu es réchauffé et gavé, animal, prends garde à toi, tu vas répondre à mes questions. D’où viens-tu?

L’enfant répondit:

— Je ne sais pas.

— Comment, tu ne sais pas?

— J’ai été abandonné ce soir au bord de la mer.

— Ah! le chenapan! Comment t’appelles-tu? Il est si mauvais sujet qu’il en vient à être abandonné par ses parents.

— Je n’ai pas de parents.

— Rends-toi un peu compte de mes goûts, el fais attention que je n’aime point qu’on me chante des chansons qui sont des contes.
Tu as des parents, puisque tu as ta soeur.

— Ce n’est pas ma soeur.

— Ce n’est pas ta soeur?

— Non.

— Qu’est-cc que c’est alors?

— C’est une petite que j’ai trouvée.

— Trouvée!

— Oui.

— Comment! tu as ramassé ça?

— Oui.

— Où? si tu mens, je t’extermine.

— Sur une femme qui était morte dans la neige.

— Quand?

— Il y a une heure.

— Où?

— A une lieue d’ici.

Les arcades frontales d’Ursus se plissèrent et prirent cette forme aiguë qui caractérise l’émotion des sourcils d’un philosophe.

— Morte! en voilà une qui est heureuse! Il faut l’y laisser, dans sa neige. Elle y est bien. De quel côté?

— Du côté de la mer.

— As-tu passé le pont?

— Oui.

Ursus ouvrit la lucarne de l’arrière et examina le dehors. Le temps ne s’était pas amélioré. La neige tombait épaisse et lugubre.

Il referma le vasistas.

Il alla à la vitre cassée, il boucha le trou avec un chiffon, il remit de la tourbe dans le poêle, il déploya le plus largement qu’il put la peau d’ours sur le coffre, prit un gros livre qu’il avait dans un coin et le mit sous le chevet pour servir d’oreiller, et plaça sur ce traversin la tête de la petite endormie.

Il se tourna vers le garçon.

— Couche-toi là.

L’enfant obéit et s’étendit de tout son long avec la petite.

Ursus roula la peau d’ours autour des deux enfants, et la borda sous leurs pieds.

Il atteignit sur une planche, et se noua autour du corps une ceinture de toile à grosse poche contenant probablement une trousse de chirurgien et des flacons d’élixirs.

Puis il décrocha du plafond la lanterne, et l’alluma. C’était une lanterne sourde. En s’allumant, elle laissa les enfants dans l’obscurité.

Ursus entre-bailla la porte et dit:

— Je sors. N’ayez pas peur. Je vais revenir. Dormez.

Et, abaissant le marchepied, il cria:

— Homo!

Un grondement tendre lui répondit. Ursus, la lanterne à la main, descendit, le marchepied remonta, la porte se referma. Les enfants demeurèrent seuls. Du dehors, une voix, qui était la voix d’Ursus, demanda:

— Boy qui viens de me manger mon souper! — dis donc, tu ne dors pas encore?

— Non, répondit le garçon.

— Eh bien! si elle beugle, tu lui donneras le reste du lait.

On entendit un cliquetis de chaîne défaite, et le bruit d’un pas d’homme, compliqué d’un pas de bête, qui s’éloignait.

Quelques instants après, les deux enfants dormaient profondément.

C’était on ne sait quel ineffable mélange d’haleines; plus que la chasteté, l’ignorance; une nuit de noces avant le sexe. Le petit garçon et la petite fille, nus et côte à côte, eurent pendant ces heures silencieuses la promiscuité séraphique de l’ombre; la quantité de songe possible à cet âge flottait de l’un à l’autre; il y avait probablement sous leurs paupières fermées de la lumière d’étoile; si le mot mariage n’est pas ici disproportionné, ils étaient mari et femme de la façon dont on est ange. De telles innocences dans de telles ténèbres, une telle pureté dans un tel embrassement, ces anticipations sur le ciel ne sont possibles qu’à l’enfance, et aucune immensit n’approche de cette grandeur des petits. De tous les gouffres celui-ci est le plus profond. La perpétuité formidable d’un mort enchaîné hors de la vie, l’énorme acharnement de l’océan sur un naufrage, la vaste blancheur de la neige recouvrant des formes ensevelies, n’égalent pas en pathétique deux bouches d’enfants qui se touchent divinement dans le sommeil, et dont la rencontre n’est pas même un baiser. Fiançailles peut-être; peut-être catastrophe. L’ignoré pèse sur cette juxtaposition. Cela est charmant; qui sait si ce n’est pas effrayant? on se sent le coeur serré. L’innocence est plus suprême que la vertu.

L’innocence est faite d’obscurité sacrée. Ils dormaient. Ils étaient paisibles. Ils avaient chaud. La nudité des corps entrelacés amalgamait la virginité des âmes. Ils étaient l comme dans le nid de l’abîme.

VI

LE RÉVEIL

Le jour commence par être sinistre. Une blancheur triste entra dans la cahute. C'était l'aube glaciale. Ce blêmissement, qui ébauche en réalité funèbre le relief des choses frappées d'apparence spectrale par la nuit, n'éveilla pas les enfants, étroitement endormis. La cahute était chaude. On entendait leurs deux respirations alternant comme deux ondes tranquilles.

Il n'y avait plus d'ouragan dehors. Le clair du crépuscule prenait lentement possession de l'horizon. Les constellations s'éteignaient comme des chandelles soufflées l'une après l'autre.

Il n'y avait plus que la résistance de quelques grosses étoiles.

Le profond chant de l'infini sortait de la mer.

Le poêle n'était pas tout à fait éteint. Le petit jour devenait peu à peu le grand jour. Le garçon dormait moins que la fille.

Il y avait en lui du veilleur et du gardien. A un rayon plus vif que les autres qui traversa la vitre, il ouvrit les yeux; le sommeil de l'enfance s'achève en oubli; il demeura dans un demi-assoupissement, sans savoir où il était, ni ce qu'il avait près de lui, sans faire effort pour se souvenir, regardant au plafond, et se composant un vague travail de rêverie avec les lettres de l'inscription *Ursus, philosophe*, qu'il examinait sans les déchiffrer, car il ne savait pas lire.

Un bruit de serrure fouillée par une clef lui fit dresser le cou.

La porte tourna, le marchepied bascula. Ursus revenait. Il monta les trois degrés, sa lanterne éteinte à la main.

En même temps un piétinement de quatre pattes escalada lestement le marchepied. C'était Homo, suivant Ursus, et, lui aussi, rentrant chez lui.

Le garçon réveillé eut un certain sursaut.

Le loup, probablement en appétit, avait un rictus matinal qui montrait toutes ses dents, très blanches.

Il s'arrêta à demi-montée et posa ses deux pattes de devant dans la cahute, les deux coudes sur le seuil comme un prêcheur au bord de la chaire. Il flaira à distance le coffre qu'il n'était pas accoutumé à voir habité de cette façon. Son buste de loup, encadré par la porte, se dessinait en noir sur la clarté du matin. Il se décida, et fit son entrée.

Le garçon, en voyant le loup dans la cahute, sortit de la peau d'ours, se leva et se plaça debout devant la petite, plus endormie que jamais.

Ursus venait de raccrocher la lanterne au clou du plafond. Il déboucla silencieusement et avec une lenteur machinale sa ceinture où était sa trousse, et la remit sur une planche. Il ne regardait rien et semblait ne rien voir. Sa prunelle était vitreuse. Quelque chose de profond remuait dans son esprit. Sa pensée enfin se fit jour, comme d'ordinaire, par une vive sortie de paroles. Il s'écria:

— Décidément heureuse! Morte, bien morte. Il s'accroupit, et remit une pelletée de scories dans le poêle, et, tout en fourgonnant la tourbe, il grommela:

— J'ai eu de la peine à la trouver. La malice inconnue l'avail fourrée sous deux pieds de neige. Sans Homo, qui voit aussi clair avec son nez que Christophe Colomb avec son esprit, je serais encore là à patauger dans l'avalanche et à jouer cache-cache avec la mort. Diogène prenait sa lanterne et cherchait un homme, j'ai pris ma lanterne et j'ai cherché une femme; il a trouvé le sarcasme, j'ai trouvé le deuil. Comme elle était froide! J'ai touché la main, une pierre. Quel silence dans les yeux! Comment peut-on être assez bête pour mourir en laissant un enfant derrière soi! Ça ne va pas être commode présent de tenir trois dans celle boîte-ci. Quelle tuile! Voil que j'ai de la famille à présent! Fille et garçon.

Tandis qu'Ursus parlait, Homo s'était glissé près du poêle. La main de la petite endormie pendait entre le poêle et le coffre.

Le loup se mit à lécher cette main.

Il la léchait si doucement que la petite ne s'éveilla pas.

Ursus se retourna.

— Bien, Homo. Je serai le père et tu seras l'oncle. Puis il reprit sa besogne de philosophe d'arranger le feu, sans interrompre son *aparte*.

— Adoption. C'est dit. D'ailleurs Homo veut bien.

Il se redressa.

— Je voudrais savoir qui est responsable de cette morte. Sont-ce les hommes? ou...

Son oeil regarda en l'air, mais au delà du plafond, et sa bouche murmura:

— Est-ce toi?

Puis son front s'abaissa comme sous un poids, et il reprit:

— La nuit a pris la peine de tuer cette femme.

Son regard, en se relevant, rencontra le visage du garçon réveillé qui l'écoutait, Ursus l'interpella brusquement:

— Qu'as-tu à rire?

Le garçon répondit:

— Je ne ris pas.

Ursus eut une sorte de secousse, l'examina fixement et en silence pendant quelques instants, et dit:

— Alors tu es terrible.

L'intérieur de la cahute dans la nuit était si peu éclair qu'Ursus n'avait pas encore vu la face du garçon. Le grand jour la lui montrait.

Il posa les deux paumes de ses mains sur les deux épaules de l'enfant, considéra encore avec une attention de plus en plus poignante son visage, et lui cria:

— Ne ris donc plus!

— Je ne ris pas, dit l'enfant.

Ursus eut un tremblement de la tête aux pieds.

— Tu ris, te dis-je.

Puis secouant l'enfant avec une étreinte qui était de la fureur si elle n'était de la pitié, il lui demanda violemment:

— Qui est-ce qui t'a fait cela?

L'enfant répondit:

— Je ne sais ce que vous voulez dire.

Ursus reprit:

— Depuis quand as-tu ce rire?

— J'ai toujours été ainsi, dit l'enfant.

Ursus se tourna vers le coffre en disant à demi-voix:

— Je croyais que ce travail-là ne se faisait plus.

Il prit au chevet, très doucement pour ne pas la réveiller, le livre qu'il avait mis comme oreiller sous la tète de la petite.

— Voyons Conquest, murmura-t-il.

C'était une liasse in-folio, reliée en parchemin mou. Il la feuilleta du pouce, s'arrêta à une page, ouvrit le livre tout grand sur le poêle, et lut:

— ... *De Denasatis*. — C'est ici.

Et il continua:

— *Bucca fissa usque ad aures, genzivis denudatis, nasoque murdridato, masca eris, et ridebis semper*.

— C’est bien cela.

Et il replaça le livre sur une des planches en grommelant:

— Aventure dont l’approfondissement serait malsain. Restons à la surface. Ris, mon garçon.

La petite fille se réveilla. Son bonjour fut un cri.

— Allons, nourrice, donne le sein, dit Ursus.

La petite s’était dressée sur son séant. Ursus prit sur le poêle la fiole, et la lui donna à sucer.

En ce moment le soleil se levait. Il était à fleur de l’horizon.
Son rayon rouge entrait par la vitre et frappait de face le visage de la petite fille tourné vers lui. Les prunelles de l’enfant fixées sur le soleil réfléchissaient comme deux miroirs cette rondeur pourpre. Les prunelles restaient immobiles, les paupières aussi.

— Tiens, dit Ursus, elle est aveugle.

DEUXIEME PARTIE

PAR ORDRE DU ROI

LIVRE PREMIER

ÉTERNELLE PRÉSENCE DU PASS

LES HOMMES REFLÈTENT L’HOMME

I

LORD CLANCHARLIE

I

Il y avait dans ces temps-là un vieux souvenir.

Ce souvenir était lord Linnaeus Clancharlie.

Le baron Linnaeus Clancharlie, contemporain de Cromwell, était un des pairs d’Angleterre, peu nombreux, hâtons-nous de le dire, qui avaient accepté la république. Cette acceptation pouvait avoir sa raison d’être, et s’explique à la rigueur, puisque la république avait momentanément triomphé. Il était tout simple que lord Clancharlie demeurât du parti de la république, tant que la république avait eu le dessus. Mais, après la clôture de la révolution et la chute du gouvernement parlementaire, lord Clancharlie avait persisté. Il était aisé au noble patricien de rentrer dans la chambre haute reconstituée, les repentirs étant toujours bien reçus des restaurations, et Charles II étant bon prince à ceux qui revenaient à lui; mais lord Clancharlie n’avait pas compris ce qu’on doit aux événements. Pendant que la nation couvrait d’acclamations le roi, reprenant possession de l’Angleterre, pendant que l’unanimité prononçait son verdict, pendant que s’accomplissait la salutation du peuple à la monarchie, pendant que la dynastie se relevait au milieu d’une palinodie glorieuse et triomphale, à l’instant où le pass devenait l’avenir et où l’avenir devenait le passé, ce lord était resté réfractaire. Il avait détourné la tête de toute cette allégresse; il s’était volontairement exilé; pouvant être pair, il avait mieux aimé être proscrit; et les années s’étaient écoulées ainsi; il avait vieilli dans cette fidélité à la république morte. Aussi était-il couvert du ridicule qui s’attache naturellement à cette sorte d’enfantillage.

Il s’était retiré en Suisse. Il habitait une espèce de haute masure au bord du lac de Genève. Il s’était choisi cette demeure dans le plus âpre recoin du lac, entre Chillon où est le cachot de Bonnivard, et Vevoy où est le tombeau de Ludlow. Les Alpes sévères, pleines de crépuscules, de souffles et de nuées, l’enveloppaient; et il vivait là, perdu dans ces grandes ténèbres qui tombent des montagnes. Il était rare qu’un passant le rencontrât. Cet homme était hors de son pays, presque hors de son siècle. En ce moment, pour ceux qui étaient au courant et qui connaissaient les affaires du temps, aucune résistance aux conjonctures n'était justifiable. L'Angleterre était heureuse; une restauration est une réconciliation d'époux; prince et nation ont cessé de faire lit à part; rien de plus gracieux et de plus riant; la Grande-Bretagne rayonnait; avoir un roi, c'est beaucoup, mais de plus on avait un charmant roi; Charles II était aimable, homme de plaisir et de gouvernement, et grand à la suite de Louis XIV; c'était un gentleman et un gentilhomme; Charles II était admiré de ses sujets; il avait fait la guerre de Hanovre, sachant certainement pourquoi, mais le sachant tout seul; il avait vendu Dunkerque à la France, opération de haute politique; les pairs démocrates, desquels Chamberlayne a dit: «La maudite république infecta avec son haleine puante plusieurs de la haute noblesse», avaient eu le bon sens de se rendre à l'évidence, d'être de leur époque, et de reprendre leur siège à la noble chambre; il leur avait suffi pour cela de prêter au roi le serment d'allégeance. Quand on songeait à toutes ces réalités, ce beau règne, à cet excellent roi, à ces augustes princes rendus par la miséricorde divine à l'amour des peuples; quand on se disait que des personnages considérables, tels que Monk, et plus lard Jeffreys, s'étaient ralliés au trône, qu'ils avaient ét justement récompensés de leur loyauté et de leur zèle par les plus magnifiques charges et par les fonctions les plus lucratives, que lord Clancharlie ne pouvait l'ignorer, qu'il n'eut tenu qu'a lui d'être glorieusement assis à côté d'eux dans les honneurs, que l'Angleterre était remontée, grâce à son roi, au sommet de la prospérité, que Londres n'était que fêtes et carrousels, que tout le monde était opulent et enthousiasmé, que la cour était galante, gaie et superbe; si, par hasard, loin de ces splendeurs, dans on ne sait quel demi-jour lugubre ressemblant à la tombée de la nuit, on apercevait ce vieillard vêtu des mêmes habits que le peuple, pâle, distrait, courbé, probablement du côté de la tombe, debout au bord du lac, à peine attentif à la tempête et à l'hiver, marchant comme au hasard, l'oeil fixe, ses cheveux blancs secoués par le vent de l'ombre, silencieux, solitaire, pensif, il était difficile de ne pas sourire.

Sorte de silhouette d'un fou.

En songeant à lord Clancharlie, à ce qu'il aurait pu être et à ce qu'il était, sourire était de l'indulgence. Quelques-uns riaient tout haut. D'autres s'indignaient.

On comprend que les hommes sérieux fussent choqués par une telle insolence d’isolement.

Circonstance atténuante: lord Clancharlie n’avait jamais eu d’esprit. Tout le monde en tombait d’accord.

II

Il est désagréable de voir les gens pratiquer l’obstination. On n’aime pas ces façons de Régulus, et dans l’opinion publique quelque ironie en résulte.

Ces opiniâtretés ressemblent à des reproches, et l’on a raison d’en rire.

Et puis, en somme, ces entêtements, ces escarpements, sont-ce des vertus? N’y a-t-il pas dans ces affiches excessives d’abnégation et d’honneur beaucoup d’ostentation? C’est plutôt parade qu’autre chose. Pourquoi ces exagérations de solitude et d’exil?

Ne rien outrer est la maxime du sage. Faites de l’opposition, soit; blâmez si vous voulez, mais décemment, et tout en criant vive le roi! La vraie vertu, c’est d’être raisonnable. Ce qui tombe a dû tomber, ce qui réussit a dû réussir. La providence a ses motifs; elle couronne qui le mérite. Avez-vous la prétention de vous y connaître mieux qu’elle? Quand les circonstances ont prononcé, quand un régime a remplacé l’autre, quand la défalcation du vrai et du faux s’est faite par le succès, ici la catastrophe, là le triomphe, aucun doute n’est plus possible, l’honnête homme se rallie à ce qui a prévalu, et, quoique cela soit utile à sa fortune et à sa famille, sans se laisser influencer par cette considération, et ne songeant qu’à la chose publique, il prête main-forte au vainqueur.

Que deviendrait l’état si personne ne consentait à servir? Tout s’arrêterait donc? Garder sa place est d’un bon citoyen. Sachez sacrifier vos préférences secrètes. Les emplois veulent être tenus. Il faut bien que quelqu’un se dévoue, Être fidèle aux fonctions publiques est une fidélité. La retraite des fonctionnaires serait la paralysie de l’état. Vous vous bannissez, c’est pitoyable. Est-ce un exemple? quelle vanité!

Est-ce un défi? quelle audace! Quel personnage vous croyez-vous donc? Apprenez que nous vous valons. Nous ne désertons pas, nous. Si nous voulions, nous aussi, nous serions intraitables et indomptables, et nous ferions de pires choses que vous. Mais nous aimons mieux être des gens intelligents. Parce que je suis Trimalcion, vous ne me croyez, pas capable d’être Caton! Allons donc!

III

Jamais situation ne fut plus nette et plus décisive que celle de 1660. Jamais la conduite à tenir n’avait été plus clairement indiquée à un bon esprit.

L’Angleterre était hors de Cromwell. Sous la république beaucoup de faits irréguliers s’étaient produits. On avait crée la suprématie britannique; on avait, avec l’aide de la guerre de Trente ans, dominé l’Allemagne, avec l’aide de la Fronde, abaiss la France, avec l’aide du duc de Bragance, amoindri l’Espagne.

Cromwell avait domestiqué Mazarin; dans les traités, le protecteur d’Angleterre signait au-dessus du roi de France; on avait mis les Provinces-Unies à l’amende de huit millions, molesté Alger et Tunis, conquis la Jamaïque, humilié Lisbonne, suscité dans Barcelone la rivalité française, et dans Naples Masaniello; on avait amarré le Portugal à l’Angleterre; on avait fait, de Gibraltar à Candie, un balayage des barbaresques; on avait fondé la domination maritime sous ces deux formes, la victoire el le commerce; le 10 août 1653, l’homme des trente-trois batailles gagnées, le vieil amiral qui se qualifiait *Grand-père des matelots,* ce Martin Happertz Tromp, qui avait, battu la flotte espagnole, avait été détruit par la flotte anglaise; on avait retiré l’Atlantique à la marine espagnole, le Pacifique à la marine hollandaise, la Méditerranée à la marine vénitienne, et, par l’acte de navigation, on avait pris possession du littoral universel; par l’océan on tenait le monde; le pavillon hollandais saluait humblement en mer le pavillon britannique; la France, dans la personne de l’ambassadeur Mancini, faisait des génuflexions à Olivier Cromwell; ce Cromwell jouait de Calais et de Dunkerque comme de deux volants sur une raquette; on avait fait trembler le continent, dicté la paix, décrété la guerre, mis sur tous les faîtes le drapeau anglais; le seul régiment des côtes-de-fer du protecteur pesait dans la terreur de l’Europe autant qu’une armée; Cromwell disait: *Je veux qu’on respecte la république anglaise comme on a respecté la république romaine*; il n’y avait plus rien de sacré; la parole était libre, la presse était libre; on disait en pleine rue ce qu’on voulait; on imprimait sans contrôle ni censure ce qu’on voulait; l’équilibre des trônes avait été rompu; tout l’ordre monarchique européen, dont les Stuarts faisaient partie, avait été bouleversé... Enfin, on était sorti de cet odieux régime, et l’Angleterre avait son pardon.

Charles II, indulgent, avait donné la Déclaration de Bréda. Il avait octroyé à l'Angleterre l'oubli de cette époque où le fils d'un brasseur de Huntingdon mettait le pied sur la tête de Louis XIV. L'Angleterre faisait son mea culpa, et respirait.

L'épanouissement des coeurs, nous venons de le dire, était complet; les gibets des régicides s'ajoutant à la joie universelle. Une restauration est un sourire; mais un peu de potence ne messied pas, et il faut satisfaire la conscience publique. L'esprit d'indiscipline s'était dissipé, la loyauté se reconstituait. Être de bons sujets était désormais l'ambition unique. On était revenu des folies de là politique; on bafouait la révolution, on raillait la république et ces temps singuliers où l'on avait toujours de grands mots à la bouche, *Droit, Liberté, Progrès*; on riait de ces emphases. Le retour au bon sens était admirable; l'Angleterre avait rêvé. Quel bonheur d'être hors de ces égarements! Y a-t-il rien de plus insensé?

Où en serait-on si le premier venu avait des droits? Se figure-t-on tout le monde gouvernant? S'imagine-t-on la cit menée par les citoyens? Les citoyens sont un attelage, et l'attelage n'est pas le cocher. Mettre aux voix, c'est jeter aux vents. Voulez-vous faire flotter les états comme les nuées? Le désordre ne construit pas l'ordre. Si le chaos est l'architecte, l'édifice sera Babel. Et puis quelle tyrannie que cette prétendue liberté! Je veux m'amuser, moi, et non gouverner.

Voter m'ennuie; je veux danser. Quelle providence qu'un prince qui se charge de tout! Certes ce roi est généreux de se donner pour nous cette peine! Et puis, il est élevé là dedans, il sait ce que c'est. C'est son affaire. La paix, la guerre, la législation, les finances, est-ce que cela regarde les peuples?

Sans doute il faut que le peuple paie, sans doute il faut que le peuple serve, mais cela doit lui suffire. Une part lui est faite dans la politique; c'est de lui que sortent les deux forces de l'état, l'armée et le budget. Etre contribuable, et être soldat, est-ce que ce n'est pas assez? Qu'a-t-il besoin d'autre chose? il est le bras militaire, il est le bras financier. Rôle magnifique. On règne pour lui. Il faut bien qu'il rétribue ce service. Impôt et liste civile sont des salaires acquittés par les peuples et gagnés par les princes. Le peuple donne son sang et son argent, moyennant quoi on le mène. Vouloir se conduire lui-même, quelle idée bizarre! un guide lui est nécessaire.

Étant ignorant, le peuple est aveugle. Est-ce que l'aveugle n'a pas un chien?

Seulement, pour le peuple, c’est un lion, le roi, qui consent à être le chien. Que de bonté! Mais pourquoi le peuple est-il ignorant? Parce qu’il faut qu’il le soit.

L’ignorance est gardienne de la vertu. Où il n’y a pas de perspectives, il n’y a pas d’ambitions; l’ignorant est dans une nuit utile, qui, supprimant le regard, supprime les convoitises.

De là l’innocence. Qui lit pense, qui pense raisonne. Ne pas raisonner, c’est le devoir; c’est aussi le bonheur. Ces vérités sont incontestables. La société est assise dessus.

Ainsi s’étaient rétablies les saines doctrines sociales en Angleterre. Ainsi la nation s’était réhabilitée. En même temps on revenait à la belle littérature. On dédaignait Shakespeare et l’on admirait Dryden. *Dryden est le plus grand poète de l’Angleterre et du siècle*, disait Atterbury le traducteur d’*Achitophel*, C’était l’époque où M. Huet, évêque d’Avranches, écrivait à Saumaise qui avait fait à l’auteur du *Paradis perdu* l’honneur de le réfuter et de l’injurier: — *Comment pouvez-vous vous occuper de si peu de chose que ce Milton?* Tout renaissait, tout reprenait sa place. Dryden en haut, Shakespeare en bas, Charles II sur le trône, Cromwell au gibet. L’Angleterre se relevait des hontes et des extravagances du passé. C’est un grand bonheur pour les nations d’être ramenées par la monarchie au bon ordre dans l’état et au bon goût dans les lettres.

Que de tels bienfaits pussent être méconnus, cela est difficile croire. Tourner le dos à Charles II, récompenser par de l’ingratitude la magnanimité qu’il avait eue de remonter sur le trône, n’était-ce pas abominable? Lord Linnaeus Clancharlie avait fait aux honnêtes gens ce chagrin. Bouder le bonheur de sa patrie, quelle aberration!

On sait qu’en 1650 le parlement avait décrété cette rédaction: — *Je promets de demeurer fidèle à la république, sans roi, sans souverain, sans seigneur*. — Sous prétexte qu’il avait prêté ce serment monstrueux, lord Clancharlie vivait hors du royaume, et, en présence de la félicité générale, se croyait le droit d’être triste. Il avait la sombre estime de ce qui n’était plus; attache bizarre à des choses évanouies.

L’excuser était impossible; les plus bienveillants l’abandonnaient. Ses amis lui avaient fait longtemps l’honneur de croire qu’il n’était entré dans les rangs républicains que pour voir de plus près les défauts de la cuirasse de la république, et pour la frapper plus sûrement, le jour venu, au profit de la cause sacrée du roi. Ces attentes de l’heure utile pour tuer l’ennemi par derrière font partie de la loyauté. On avait espéré cela de lord Chancharlie, tant on avait de pente le juger favorablement. Mais, en présence de son étrange persistance républicaine, il avait bien fallu renoncer à celle bonne opinion. Évidemment lord Clancharlie était convaincu, c'est-à-dire idiot.

L'explication des indulgents flottait entre obstination puérile et opiniâtreté sénile.

Les sévères, les justes, allaient plus loin. Ils flétrissaient ce relaps. L'imbécillité a des droits, mais elle a des limites. On peut être une brute, on ne doit pas être un rebelle. Et puis, qu'était-ce après tout que lord Clancharlie? un transfuge. Il avait quitté son camp, l'aristocratie, pour aller au camp opposé, le peuple. Ce fidèle était un traître. Il est vrai qu'il était «traître» au plus fort et fidèle au plus faible; il est vrai que le camp répudié par lui était le camp vainqueur, et que le camp adopté par lui était le camp vaincu; il est vrai qu'à cette «trahison» il perdait tout, son privilège politique et son foyer domestique, sa pairie et sa patrie; il ne gagnait que le ridicule; il n'avait de bénéfice que l'exil. Mais qu'est-ce que cela prouve? qu'il était un niais. Accordé.

Traître et dupe en même temps, cela se voit.

Qu'on soit niais tant qu'on voudra, à la condition de ne pas donner le mauvais exemple. On ne demande aux niais que d'être honnêtes, moyennant quoi ils peuvent prétendre à être les bases des monarchies. La brièveté d'esprit de ce Clancharlie était inimaginable. Il était resté dans l'éblouissement de la fantasmagorie révolutionnaire. Il s'était laissé mettre dedans par la république, et dehors. Il faisait affront à son pays. Pure félonie que son attitude! Être absent, c'est être injurieux. Il semblait se tenir à l'écart du bonhcur public comme d'une peste. Dans son bannissement volontaire, il y avait on ne sait quel refuge contre la satisfaction nationale. Il traitait la royauté comme une contagion. Sur la vaste allégresse monarchique, dénoncée par lui comme lazaret, il était le drapeau noir. Quoi! au-dessus de l'ordre reconstitué, de la nation relevée, de la religion restaurée, faire cete figure sinistre! sur cete sérénité jeter cette ombre! prendre en mauvaise part l'Angleterre contente! être le point obscur dans ce grand ciel bleu! ressembler à une menace! protester contre le voeu de la nation! refuser son oui au consentement universel! Ce serait odieux si ce n'était pas bouffon. Ce Clancharlie ne s'était pas rendu compte qu'on peut s'égarer avec Cromwell, mais qu'il faut revenir avec Monk. Voyez Monk. Il commande l'armée de la république; Charles II en exil, instruit de sa probité, lui écrit; Monk, qui concilie la vertu avec les démarches rusées, dissimule d'abord, puis tout à coup, à la tête des troupes, casse le parlement factieux, et rétablit le roi, et Monk est créé duc d'Albemarle, a l'honneur d'avoir sauvé la société, devient très riche, illustre à jamais son époque, et est fait chevalier de la Jarretière avec la perspective d'un enterrement à Westminster.

Telle est la gloire d'un anglais fidèle. Lord Clancharlie n'avait pu s'élever jusqu'à l'intelligence du devoir ainsi pratiqué. Il avait l'infatuation et l'immobilité de l'exil. Il se satisfaisait avec des phrases creuses. Cet homme était ankylosé par l'orgueil. Les mots conscience, dignité, etc., sont des mots après tout. Il faut voir le fond.

Ce fond, Clancharlie ne l'avait pas vu. C'était une conscience myope, voulant, avant defaire une action, la regarder d'assez prèspour en sentir l'odeur. De là des dégoûts absurdes. On n'est pas homme d'état avec ces délicatesses. L'excès de conscience dégénère en infirmité. Le scrupule est manchot devant le sceptre à saisir et eunuque devant la fortune a épouser. Méfiez-vous des scrupules. Ils mènent loin. La fidélit déraisonnable se descend comme un escalier de cave. Une marche, puis une marche, puis une marche encore, et l'on se trouve dans le noir. Les habiles remontent, les naïfs restent. Il ne faut pas laisser légèrement sa conscience s'engager dans le farouche.

De transition en transition on arrive aux nuances foncées de la pudeur politique. Alors on est perdu. C'était l'aventure de lord Clancharlie.

Les principes finissent par être un gouffre.

Il se promenait, les mains derrière le dos, le long du lac de Genève; la belle avance!

On parlait quelquefois à Londres de cet absent. C'était, devant l'opinion publique, à peu près un accusé. On plaidait le pour et le contre. La cause entendue, le bénéfice de la stupidité lui était acquis.

Beaucoup d'anciens zélés de l'ex-république avaient fait adhésion aux Stuarts. Ce dont on doit les louer. Naturellement ils le calomniaient un peu. Les entêtés sont importuns aux complaisants. Des gens d'esprit, bien vus et bien situés en cour, et ennuyés de son attitude désagréable, disaient volontiers: — *S'il ne s'est pas rallié, c'est qu'on ne l'a pas payé assez cher,* etc. — *Il voulait la place de chancelier que le roi a donnée à lord Hyde,* etc. — Un de ses «anciens amis» allait même jusqu'à chuchoter: — *Il me l'a dit à moi-même.*

Quelquefois, tout solitaire qu'était Linnaeus Clancharlie, par des proscrits qu'il rencontrait, par de vieux régicides tels que Andrew Broughton, lequel habitait Lausanne, il lui revenait quelque chose de ces propos. Clancharlie se bornait à un imperceptible haussement d'épaules, signe de profond abrutissement.

Une fois il compléta ce haussement d'épaules par ces quelques mots murmurés à demi-voix: *Je plains ceux qui croient cela*.

IV

Charles II, bon homme, le dédaigna. Le bonheur de l'Angleterre sous Charles Il était plus que du bonheur, c'était de l'enchantement. Une restauration, c'est un ancien tableau pouss au noir qu'on revernit; tout le passé reparaît. Les bonnes vieilles moeurs faisaient leur rentrée, les jolies femmes régnaient et gouvernaient. Evelyn en a pris note; on lit dans son journal: «Luxure, profanation, mépris de Dieu. J'ai vu un dimanche soir le roi avec ses filles de joie, la Portsmouth, la Cleveland, la Mazarin, et deux ou trois autres; toutes à peu près nues dans la galerie du jeu.» On sent percer quelque humeur dans cette peinture; mais Evelyn était un puritain grognon, entaché de rêverie républicaine. Il n'appréciait pas le profitable exemple que donnent les rois par ces grandes gaîtés babyloniennes qui, en définitive, alimentent le luxe. Il ne comprenait pas l'utilit des vices. Règle: N'extirpez point les vices, si vous voulez avoir des femmes charmantes. Autrement vous ressembleriez aux imbéciles qui détruisent les chenilles tout en raffolant des papillons.

Charles II, nous venons de le dire, s'aperçut à peine qu'il existait un réfractaire appelé Clancharlie, mais Jacques II fut plus attentif. Charles II gouvernait mollement, c'était sa manière; disons qu'il n'en gouvernait pas plus mal. Un marin quelquefois fait à un cordage destiné à maîtriser le vent un noeud lâche qu'il laisse serrer par le vent. Telle est la bêtise de l'ouragan, et du peuple.

Ce noeud large, devenu très vite noeud étroit, ce fut le gouvernement de Charles II.

Sous Jacques II, l'étranglement commença. Étranglement nécessaire de ce qui restait de la révolution. Jacques II eut l'ambition louable d'être un roi efficace. Le règne de Charles II n'était à ses yeux qu'une ébauche de restauration; Jacques II voulut un retour à l'ordre plus complet encore. Il avait, en 1660, déploré qu'on se fût borné à une pendaison de dix régicides. Il fut un plus réel reconstructeur de l'autorité. Il donna vigueur aux principes sérieux; il fit régner cette justice qui est la véritable, qui se met au-dessus des déclamations sentimentales, et qui se préoccupe avant tout des intérêts de la société. A ces sévérités protectrices, on reconnaît le père de l'état. Il confia la main de justice à Jeffreys, et l'épée Kirke. Kirke multipliait les exemples. Ce colonel utile fit un jour pendre et dépendre trois fois de suite le même homme, un républicain, lui demandant à chaque fois: — Abjures-tu la république? Le scélérat ayant toujours dit non, fut achevé. — *Je l'ai pendu quatre fois,* dit Kirke satisfait. Les supplices recommencés sont un grand signe de force dans le pouvoir. Lady Lyle, qui pourtant avait envoyé son fils en guerre contre Monmouth, mais qui avait caché chez elle deux rebelles, fut mise à mort. Un autre rebelle, ayant eu l'honnêteté de déclarer qu'une femme anabaptiste lui avait donné asile, eût sa grâce, et la femme fut brûlée vive. Kirke, un autre jour, fit comprendre une ville qu'il la savait républicaine en pendant dix-neuf bourgeois. Représailles bien légitimes, certes, quand on songe que sous Cromwell on coupait le nez et les oreilles aux saints de pierre dans les églises. Jacques II, qui avait su choisir Jeffreys et Kirke, était un prince imbu de vraie religion, il se mortifiait par la laideur de ses maîtresses, il écoutait le père la Colombière, ce prédicateur qui était presque aussi onctueux que le père Cheminais, mais avec plus de feu, et qui eut la gloire d'être dans la première moitié de sa vie le conseiller de Jacques II, et dans la seconde l'inspirateur de Marie Alacoque.

C'est grâce à cette forte nourriture religieuse que plus tard Jacques II put supporter dignement l'exil et donner dans sa retraite de Saint-Germain le spectacle d'un roi supérieur l'adversité, touchant avec calme les écrouelles, et conversant avec des jésuites.

On comprend qu'un tel roi dut, dans une certaine mesure, se préoccuper d'un rebelle comme lord Linnaeus Clancharlie. Les pairies héréditairement transmissibles contenant une certaine quantité d'avenir, il était évident que, s'il y avait quelque précaution à prendre du côté de ce lord, Jacques II n'hésiterait pas.

II

LORD DAVID DIRRY-MOIR

Lord Linnaeus Clancharlie n’avait pas toujours été vieux et proscrit. Il avait eu sa phase de jeunesse et de passion. On sait, par Harrison et Pride, que Cromwell jeune avait aimé les femmes et le plaisir, ce qui, parfois (autre aspect de la question femme), annonce un séditieux. Défiez-vous de la ceinture mal attachée. *Male praecinctum juvenem cavete.*

Lord Clancharlie avait eu, comme Cromwell, ses incorrections et ses irrégularités. On lui connaissait un enfant naturel, un fils. Ce fils, venu au monde à l’instant où la république finissait, était né en Angleterre pendant que son père partait pour l’exil. C’est pourquoi il n’avait jamais vu ce père qu’il avait. Ce bâtard de lord Clancharlie avait grandi page à la cour de Charles II. On l’appelait lord David Dirry-Moir; il était lord de courtoisie, sa mère étant femme de qualité. Cette mère, pendant que lord Clancharlie devenait hibou en Suisse, prit le parti, étant belle, de bouder moins, et se fit pardonner ce premier amant sauvage par un deuxième, celui-là incontestablement apprivoisé, et même royaliste, car c’était le roi. Elle fut un peu la maîtresse de Charles II, assez pour que sa majesté, charmée d’avoir repris cette jolie femme à la république, donnât au petit lord David, fils de sa conquête, une commission de garde de la branche. Ce qui fit ce bâtard officier, avec bouche en cour, et par contre-coup stuartiste ardent. Lord David fut quelque temps, comme garde de la branche, un des cent soixante-dix portant la grosse épée; puis il entra dans la bande des pensionnaires, et fut un des quarante qui portent la pertuisane dorée. Il eut en outre, étant de cette troupe noble instituée par Henri VIII pour garder son corps, le privilège de poser les plats sur la table du roi. Ce fut ainsi que, tandis que son père blanchissait en exil, lord David prospéra sous Charles II.

Après quoi il prospéra sous Jacques II.

Le roi est mort, vive le roi, c’est le *non deficit alter, aureus*.

Ce fut à cet avénement du duc d’York qu’il obtint la permission de s’appeler lord David Dirry-Moir, d’une seigneurie que sa mère, qui venait

de mourir, lui avait léguée dans cette grande forêt d’Ecosse où l’on trouve l’oiseau Krag, lequel creuse son nid avec son bec dans le tronc des chênes
.

II

Jacques II était un roi, et avait la prétention d’être un général. Il aimait à s’entourer de jeunes officiers. Il se montrait volontiers en public à cheval avec un casque et une cuirasse, et une vaste perruque débordante sortant de dessous le casque par-dessus la cuirasse; espèce de statue équestre de la guerre imbécile. Il prit en amitié la bonne grâce du jeune lord David. Il sut gré à ce royaliste d’être fils d’un républicain; un père renié ne nuit point à une fortune de cour qui commence.

Le roi fit lord David gentilhomme de la chambre du lit, à mille livres de gages.

C’était un bel avancement. Un gentilhomme du lit couche toutes les nuits près du roi sur un lit qu’on dresse. On est douze gentilshommes, et l’on se relaie.

Lord David, dans ce poste, fut le chef de l’avenier du roi, celui qui donne l’avoine aux chevaux et qui a deux cent soixante livres de gages. Il eut sous lui les cinq cochers du roi, les cinq postillons du roi, les cinq palefreniers du roi, les douze valets de pied du roi, et les quatre porteurs de chaise du roi. Il eut le gouvernement des six chevaux de course que le roi entretient Haymarket et qui coûtent six cents livres par an à sa majesté.

Il fit la pluie et le beau temps dans la garde-robe du roi, laquelle fournit les habits de cérémonie aux chevaliers de la Jarretière. Il fut salué jusqu’à terre par l’huissier de la verge noire, qui est au roi. Cet huissier, sous Jacques II, était le chevalier Duppa. Lord David eut les respects de M.
Baker, qui était clerc de la couronne, et de M. Brown, qui était clerc du parlement. La cour d’Angleterre, magnifique, est un patron d’hospitalité. Lord David présida, comme l’un des douze, aux tables et réceptions. Il eut la gloire d’être debout derrière le roi les jours d’offrande, quand le roi donne l’église le besant d’or, *byzantium*, les jours de collier, quand le roi porte le collier de son ordre, et les jours de communion, quand personne ne communie, hors le roi et les princes. Ce fut lui qui, le jeudi saint, introduisit près de sa majesté les douze pauvres auxquels le roi donne autant de sous d’argent qu’il a d’années de vie et autant de shellings qu’il a d’années de règne.

Il eut la fonction, quand le roi était malade, d'appeler, pour assister sa majesté, les deux grooms de l'aumônerie qui sont prêtres, et d'empêcher les médecins d'approcher sans permission du conseil d'état. De plus, il fut lieutenant-colonel du régiment écossais de la garde royale, lequel bat la marche d'Ecosse.

En cette qualité il fit plusieurs campagnes, et très glorieusement, car il était vaillant homme de guerre. C'était un seigneur brave, bien fait, beau, généreux, fort grand de mine et de manières. Sa personne ressemblait à sa qualité. Il était de haute taille comme de haute naissance.

Il fut presque un moment en passe d'être nommé groom of the stole, ce qui lui eût donné le privilège de passer la chemise au roi; mais il faut pour cela être prince ou pair.

Créer un pair, c'est beaucoup. C'est créer une pairie, cela fait des jaloux. C'est une faveur; une faveur fait au roi un ami et cent ennemis, sans compter que l'ami devient ingrat. Jacques II, par politique, créait difficilement des pairies, mais les transférait volontiers. Une pairie transférée ne produit pas d'émoi. C'est simplement un nom qui continue. La lordship en est peu troublée.

La bonne volonté royale ne répugnait point à introduire lord David Dirry-Moir dans la chambre haute, pourvu que ce fut par la porte d'une pairie substituée. Sa majesté ne demandait pas mieux que d'avoir une occasion de faire David Dirry-Moir, de lord de courtoisie, lord de droit.

III

Cette occasion se présenta.

Un jour on apprit qu'il était arrivé au vieil absent, lord Linnaeus Clancharlie, diverses choses dont la principale était qu'il était trépassé. La mort a cela de bon pour les gens, qu'elle fait un peu parler d'eux. On raconta ce qu'on savait, ou ce qu'on croyait savoir, des dernières années de lord Linnaeus.

Conjectures et légendes probablement. A en croire ces récits, sans doute très hasardés, vers la fin de sa vie, lord Clancharlie aurait eu une recrudescence républicaine telle, qu'il en était venu, affirmait-on, jusqu'à épouser, étrange entêtement de l'exil, la fille d'un régicide, Ann Bradshaw, — on précisait le nom, — laquelle était morte aussi, mais, disait-on, en mettant au monde un enfant, un garçon, qui, si tous ces détails étaient exacts, se trouverait être le fils légitime et l'héritier légal de lord

Clancharlie. Ces dires, fort vagues, ressemblaient plutôt à des bruits qu'à des faits. Ce qui se passait en Suisse était pour l'Angleterre d'alors aussi lointain que ce qui se passe en Chine pour l'Angleterre d'aujourd'hui. Lord Clancharlie aurait eu cinquante-neuf ans au moment de son mariage, et soixante à la naissance de son fils, et serait mort fort peu de temps après, laissant derrière lui cet enfant, orphelin de père et de mère. Possibilités, sans doute, mais invraisemblances. On ajoutait que cet enfant était «beau comme le jour», ce qui se lit dans tous les contes de fées. Le roi Jacques mit fin à ces rumeurs, évidemment sans fondement aucun, en déclarant un beau matin lord David Dirry-Moir unique et définitif héritier, *défaut d'enfant légitime*, et par le bon plaisir royal, de lord Linnæus Clancharlie, son père naturel, *l'absence de toute autre filiation et descendance étant constatée;* de quoi les patentes furent enregistrées en chambre des lords. Par ces patentes, le roi substituait lord David Dirry-Moir aux titres, droits et prérogatives dudit défunt lord Linnæus Glancharlie, à la seule condition que lord David épouserait, quand elle serait nubile, une fille, en ce moment-là tout enfant et âgée de quelques mois seulement, que le roi avait au berceau faite duchesse, on ne savait trop pourquoi. Lisez, si vous voulez, on savait trop pourquoi. On appelait cette petite la duchesse Josiane.

La mode anglaise était alors aux noms espagnols. Un des bâtards de Charles II s'appelait Carlos, comte de Plymouth. Il est probable que *Josiane* était la contraction de Josefa y Ana.

Cependant peut-être y avait-il Josiane comme il y avait Josias.

Un des gentilshommes de Henri III se nommait Josias du Passage.

C'est à cette petite duchesse que le roi donnait la pairie de Clancharlie. Elle était pairesse en attendant qu'il y eût un pair. Le pair serait son mari. Cette pairie reposait sur une double châtellenie, la baronnie de Clancharlie et la baronnie de Hunkerville; en outre les lords Clancharlie étaient, en récompense d'un ancien fait d'armes et par permission royale, marquis de Corleone en Sicile. Les pairs d'Angleterre ne peuvent porter de titres étrangers; il y a pourtant des exceptions; ainsi Henry Arundel, baron Arundel de Wardour, était, ainsi que lord Clifford, comte du Saint-Empire, dont lord Cowper est prince; le duc de Hamilton est en France duc de Chatellerault; Basil Feilding, comte de Denbigh, est en Allemagne comte de Hapsbourg, de Lauffenbourg et de Rheinfelden. Le duc de Malborough était prince de Mindelheim en Souabe, de même que le duc de Wellington était prince de Waterloo en Belgique. Le même lord Wellington était duc espagnol de Ciudad-Rodrigo, et comte portugais de Vimeira.

Il y avait en Angleterre, et il y a encore, des terres nobles et des terres roturières. Les terres des lords Clancharlie étaient toutes nobles. Ces terres, châteaux, bourgs, bailliages, fiefs, rentes, alleux et domaines adhérents à la pairie Clancharlie-Hunkerville appartenaient provisoirement à lady Josiane, et le roi déclarait qu'une fois Josiane épousée, lord David Dirry-Moir serait baron Clancharlie.

Outre l'héritage Clancharlie, lady Josiane avait sa fortune personnelle. Elle possédait de grands biens, dont plusieurs venaient des dons de Madame sans queue au duc d'York. *Madame sans queue,* cela veut dire Madame tout court. On appelait ainsi Henriette d'Angleterre, duchesse d'Orléans, la première femme de France après la reine.

IV

Après avoir prospéré sous Charles et Jacques, lord David prospéra sous Guillaume. Son jacobisme n'alla point jusqu'à suivre Jacques II en exil. Tout en continuant d'aimer son roi légitime, il eut le bon sens de servir l'usurpateur. Il était, du reste, quoique avec quelque indiscipline, excellent officier; il passa de l'armée de terre dans l'armée de mer, et se distingua dans l'escadre blanche. Il y devint ce qu'on appelait alors «capitaine de frégate légère». Cela finit par faire un très galant homme, poussant fort loin l'élégance des vices, un peu poète comme tout le monde, bon serviteur de l'état, bon domestique du prince, assidu aux fêtes, aux galas, aux petits levers, aux cérémonies, aux batailles, servile comme il faut, très hautain, ayant la vue basse ou perçante selon l'objet regarder, probe volontiers, obséquieux et arrogant à propos, d'un premier mouvement franc et sincère, quitte à se remasquer ensuite, très observateur de la bonne et mauvaise humeur royale, insouciant devant une pointe d'épée, toujours prêt à risquer sa vie sur un signe de sa majesté avec héroïsme et platitude, capable de toutes les incartades et d'aucune impolitesse, homme de courtoisie et d'étiquette, fier d'être à genoux dans les grandes occasions monarchiques, d'une vaillance gaie, courtisan en dessus, paladin en dessous, tout jeune à quarante-cinq ans.

Lord David chantait des chansons françaises, gaîté élégante qui avait plu à Charles II.

Il aimait l’éloquence et le beau langage. Il admirait fort ces boniments célèbres qu’on appelle les Oraisons funèbres de Bossuet.

Du côté de sa mère, il avait à peu près de quoi vivre, environ dix mille livres sterling de revenu, c’est-à-dire deux cent cinquante mille francs de rente. Il s’en tirait en faisant des dettes. En magnificence, extravagance et nouveauté, il était incomparable. Dès qu’on le copiait, il changeait sa mode. A cheval, il portait des bottes aisées de vache retournée, avec éperons. Il avait des chapeaux que personne n’avait, des dentelles inouïes, et des rabats à lui tout seul.

III

LA DUCHESSE JOSIANE

I

Vers 1705, bien que lady Josiane eût vingt-trois ans et lord David quarante-quatre, le mariage n'avait pas encore eu lieu, et cela par les meilleures raisons du monde. Se haïssaient-ils?

loin de là. Mais ce qui ne peut vous échapper n'inspire aucune hâte. Josiane voulait rester libre; David voulait rester jeune.

N'avoir de lien que le plus tard possible, cela lui semblait un prolongement du bel âge. Les jeunes hommes retardataires abondaient dans ces époques galantes; on grisonnait dameret; la perruque était complice, plus tard la poudre fut auxiliaire. A cinquante-cinq ans, lord Charles Gerrard, baron Gerrard des Gerrards de Bromley, remplissait Londres de ses bonnes fortunes.

La jolie et jeune duchesse de Buckingham, comtesse de Coventry, faisait des folies d'amour pour les soixante-sept ans du beau Thomas Bellasyse, vicomte Falcomberg. On citait les vers fameux de Corneille septuagénaire à une femme de vingt ans: *Marquise, si mon visage*. Les femmes aussi avaient des succès d'automne, témoin Ninon et Marion. Tels étaient les modèles.

Josiane et David étaient en coquetterie avec une nuance particulière. Ils ne s'aimaient pas, ils se plaisaient. Se côtoyer leur suffisait. Pourquoi se dépêcher d'en finir? Les romans d'alors poussaient les amoureux et les fiancés à ce genre de stage qui était du plus bel air. Josiane, en outre, se sachant bâtarde, se sentait princesse, et le prenait de haut avec les arrangements quelconques. Elle avait du goût pour lord David. Lord David était beau, mais c'était pardessus le marché.

Elle le trouvait élégant.

Être élégant, c'est tout. Caliban élégant et magnifique distance Ariel pauvre. Lord David était beau, tant mieux; l'écueil d'être beau, c'est d'être fade; il ne l'était pas. Il pariait, boxait, s'endettait. Josiane faisait grand cas de ses chevaux, de ses chiens, de ses perles au jeu, de ses maîtresses. Lord David de son côté subissait la fascination de la duchesse Josiane, fille sans tache et sans scrupule, altière, inaccessible et hardie. Il lui adressait des sonnets que Josiane lisait quelquefois. Dans ces sonnets, il affirmait que posséder Josiane, ce serait monter jusqu'aux astres, ce qui ne l'empêchait pas de toujours remettre cette ascension à l'an prochain. Il faisait antichambre à la porte du coeur de Josiane, et cela leur convenait à tous les deux. A la cour on admirait le suprême bon goût de cet ajournement. Lady Josiane disait: C'est ennuyeux que je sois forcée d'épouser lord David, moi qui ne demanderais pas mieux que d'être amoureuse de lui!

Josiane, c'était la chair. Rien de plus magnifique. Elle était très grande, trop grande. Ses cheveux étaient de cette nuance qu'on pourrait nommer le blond pourpre. Elle était grasse, fraîche, robuste, vermeille, avec énormément d'audace et d'esprit. Elle avait les yeux trop intelligibles. D'amant, point; de chasteté, pas davantage. Elle se murait dans l'orgueil. Les hommes, fi donc! un dieu tout au plus était digne d'elle; ou un monstre. Si la vertu consiste dans l'escarpement, Josiane était toute la vertu possible, sans aucune innocence. Elle n'avait pas d'aventures, par dédain; mais on ne l'eût point fâchée de lui en supposer, pourvu qu'elles fussent étranges et proportionnées à une personne faite comme elle. Elle tenait peu à sa réputation et beaucoup à sa gloire. Sembler facile et être impossible, voilà le chef-d'oeuvre. Josiane se sentait majesté et matière. C'était une beauté encombrante.

Elle empiétait plus qu'elle ne charmait. Elle marchait sur les coeurs. Elle était terrestre. On l'eut aussi étonnée de lui montrer une âme dans sa poitrine que de lui faire voir des ailes sur son dos. Elle dissertait sur Locke. Elle avait de la politesse. On la soupçonnait de savoir l'arabe.

Être la chair et être la femme, c'est deux. Où la femme est vulnérable, au côté pitié, par exemple, qui devient si aisément amour, Josiane ne l'était pas. Non qu'elle fût insensible.

L'antique comparaison de la chair avec le marbre est absolument fausse. La beauté de la chair, c'est de n'être point marbre; c'est de palpiter, c'est de trembler, c'est de rougir, c'est de saigner; c'est d'avoir la fermeté sans avoir la dureté; c'est d'être blanche sans être froide; c'est d'avoir ses tressaillements et ses infirmités; c'est d'être la vie, et le marbre est la mort. La chair, à un certain degré de beauté, a presque le droit de nudité; elle se couvre d'éblouissement comme d'un voile; qui eût vu Josiane nue n'aurait aperçu ce modelé qu' travers une dilatation lumineuse. Elle se fût montrée volontiers à un satyre, ou à un eunuque. Elle avait l'aplomb mythologique.

Faire de sa nudité un supplice, éluder un Tantale, l’eût amusée.

Le roi l’avait faite duchesse, et Jupiter néréide. Double irradiation dont se composait la clarté étrange de cette créature, A l’admirer on se sentait devenir païen et laquais.

Son origine, c’était la bâtardise et l’océan. Elle semblait sortir d’une écume. A vau-l’eau avait été le premier jet de sa destinée, mais dans le grand milieu royal. Elle avait en elle de la vague, du hasard, de la seigneurie, et de la tempête. Elle était lettrée et savante. Jamais une passion ne l’avait approchée, et elle les avait sondées toutes. Elle avait le dégoût des réalisations, et le goût aussi. Si elle se fût poignardée, ce n’eût été, comme Lucrèce, qu’après. Toutes les corruptions, à l’état visionnaire, étaient dans cette vierge.

C’était une Astarté possible dans une Diane réelle. Elle était, par insolence de haute naissance, provocante et inabordable.

Pourtant elle pouvait trouver divertissant de s’arranger elle-même une chute. Elle habitait une gloire dans un nimbe avec la velléité d’en descendre, et peut-être avec la curiosité d’en tomber. Elle était un peu lourde pour son nuage. Faillir plaît.

Le sans-gêne princier donne un privilège d’essai, et une personne ducale s’amuse où une bourgeoise se perdrait. Josiane était en tout, par la naissance, par la beauté, par l’ironie, par la lumière, à peu près reine. Elle avait eu un moment d’enthousiasme pour Louis de Boufflers qui cassait un fer cheval entre ses doigts. Elle regrettait qu’Hercule fût mort.

Elle vivait dans on ne sait quelle attente d’un idéal lascif et suprême.

Au moral, Josiane faisait penser au vers de l’épître aux Pisons: *Desinit in piscem*.

Un beau torse de femme en hydre se termine.

C’était une noble poitrine, un sein splendide harmonieusement soulevé par un coeur royal, un vivant et clair regard, une figure pure et hautaine, et, qui sait? ayant sous l’eau, dans la transparence entrevue et trouble, un prolongement ondoyant, surnaturel, peut-être draconien et difforme. Vertu superbe achevée en vices dans la profondeur des rêves.

II

Avec cela, précieuse.

C’était la mode.

Qu’on se rappelle Élisabeth.

Elisabeth est un type qui, en Angleterre, a dominé trois siècles, le seizième, le dix-septième et le dix-huitième. Élisabeth est plus qu'une anglaise, c'est une anglicane. De là le respect profond de l'église épiscopale pour cette reine; respect ressenti par l'église catholique, qui la mélangeait d'un peu d'excommunication. Dans la bouche de Sixte-Quint anathématisant Elisabeth, la malédiction tourne au madrigal. *Un gran cervello di principessa*, dit-il. Marie Stuart, moins occupée de la question église et plus occupée de la question femme, était peu respectueuse pour sa soeur Élisabeth et lui écrivait de reine reine et de coquette à prude: «Votre esloignement du mariage provient de ce que vous ne voulez perdre liberté de vous faire faire l'amour.» Marie Stuart jouait de l'éventail et Elisabeth de la hache. Partie inégale. Du reste toutes deux rivalisaient en littérature. Marie Stuart faisait des vers français; Élisabeth traduisait Horace. Elisabeth, laide, se décrétait belle, aimait les quatrains et les acrostiches, se faisait présenter les clefs des villes par des cupidons, pinçait la lèvre à l'italienne et roulait la prunelle à l'espagnole, avait dans sa garde-robe trois mille habits et toilettes, dont plusieurs costumes de Minerve et d'Amphitrite, estimait les irlandais pour la largeur de leurs épaules, couvrait son vertugadin de paillons et de passequilles, adorait les roses, jurait, sacrait, trépignait, cognait du poing ses filles d'honneur, envoyait au diable Dudley, battait le chancelier Burleigh, qui pleurait, la vieille bête, crachait sur Mathew, colletait Hatton, souffletait Essex, montrait sa cuisse Bassompierre, était vierge.

Ce qu'elle avait fait pour Bassompierre, la reine de Saba l'avait fait pour Salomon. Donc, c'était correct, l'écriture sainte ayant créé le précédent. Ce qui est biblique peut être anglican.

Le précédent biblique va même jusqu'à faire un enfant qui s'appelle Ebnehaquem ou Melilechet, c'est-à-dire *le Fils du Sage*.

Regina Saba coram rege crura denudavit. Schicklardus In Prooemio Tarich. Jersici F. 65.

Pourquoi pas ces moeurs? Cynisme vaut bien hypocrisie.

Aujourd'hui l'Angleterre, qui a un Loyola appelé Wesley, baisse un peu les yeux devant ce passé. Elle en est contrariée, mais fière.

Dans ces moeurs-là, le goût du difforme existait, particulièrement chez les femmes, et singulièrement chez les belles. A quoi bon être belle, si l'on n'a pas un magot? Que sert d'être reine, si l'on n'est pas tutoyée par un

poussah?
Marie Stuart avait eu des «bontés» pour un cron, Rizzio.
Marie-Thérèse d'Espagne avait été «un peu familière» avec un nègre. D'où *l'abbesse noire*. Dans les alcôves du grand siècle la bosse était bien portée; témoin le maréchal de Luxembourg.

Et avant Luxembourg, Condé, «ce petit homme tant joli».

Les belles elles-mêmes pouvaient, sans inconvénient, être contrefaites. C'était accepté. Anne de Boleyn avait un sein plus gros que l'autre, six doigts à une main, et une surdent. La Vallière était bancale. Cela n'empêcha pas Henri VIII d'être insensé et Louis XIV d'être éperdu.

Au moral, mêmes déviations. Presque pas de femme dans les hauts rangs qui ne fût un cas tératologique. Agnès contenait Mélusine.
On était femme le jour et goule la nuit. On allait en grève baiser sur le pieu de fer des têtes fraîches coupées. Marguerite de Valois, une aïeule des précieuses, avait porté à sa ceinture sous cadenas, dans des boîtes de fer-blanc cousues à son corps de jupe, tous les coeurs de ses amants morts.
Henri IV s'était caché sous ce vertugadin-là.

Au dix-huitième siècle la duchesse de Berry, fille du régent, résuma toutes ces créatures dans un type obscène et royal.

En outre les belles dames savaient le latin. C'était, depuis le seizième siècle, une grâce féminine. Jane Grey avait pouss l'élégance jusqu'à savoir l'hébreu.

La duchesse Josiane latinisait. De plus, autre belle manière, elle était catholique. En secret, disons-le, et plutôt comme son oncle Charles II que comme son père Jacques II. Jacques, à son catholicisme, avait perdu sa royauté, et Josiane ne voulait point risquer sa pairie. C'est pourquoi, catholique dans l'intimité et entre raffinés et raffinées, elle était protestante extérieure.
Pour la canaille.

Cette façon d'entendre la religion est agréable; on jouit de tous les biens attachés à l'église officielle épiscopale, et plus tard on meurt, comme Grotius, en odeur de catholicisme, et l'on a la gloire que le père Petau dise une messe pour vous.

Quoique grasse et bien portante, Josiane était, insistons-y, une précieuse parfaite.

Par moments, sa façon dormante et voluptueuse de traîner la fin des phrases imitait les allongements de pattes d'une tigresse marchant dans les jongles.

L’utilité d’être précieuse, c’est que cela déclasse le genre humain. On ne lui fait plus l’honneur d’en être.

Avant tout, mettre l’espèce humaine à distance, voilà ce qui importe.

Quand on n’a pas l’olympe, on prend l’hôtel de Rambouillet.

Junon se résout en Araminte. Une prétention de divinité non admise crée la mijaurée. A défaut de coups de tonnerre, on a l’impertinence. Le temple se ratatine en boudoir. Ne pouvant être déesse, on est idole.

Il y a en outre dans le précieux une certaine pédanterie qui plaît aux femmes.

La coquette et le pédant sont deux voisins. Leur adhérence est visible dans le fat.

Le subtil dérive du sensuel. La gourmandise affecte la délicatesse. Une grimace dégoûtée sied à la convoitise,

Et puis le côté faible de la femme se sent gardé par toute cette casuistique de la galanterie qui tient lieu de scrupules aux précieuses. C’est une circonvallation avec fossé. Toute précieuse a un air de répugnance. Cela protège.

On consentira, mais on méprise. En attendant.

Josiane avait un for intérieur inquiétant. Elle se sentait une telle pente à l’impudeur qu’elle était bégueule. Les reculs de fierté en sens inverse de nos vices nous mènent aux vices contraires. L’excès d’effort pour être chaste la faisait prude.

Être trop sur la défensive, cela indique un secret désir d’attaque. Qui est farouche n’est pas sévère.

Elle s’enfermait dans l’exception arrogante de son rang et de sa naissance, tout en préméditant peut-être, nous l’avons dit, quelque brusque sortie.

On était à l’aurore du dix-huitième siècle. L’Angleterre ébauchait ce qui a été en France la régence. Walpole et Dubois se tiennent. Marlborough se battait contre son ex-roi Jacques II auquel il avait, disait-on, vendu sa soeur Churchill. On voyait briller Bolingbroke et poindre Richelieu. La galanterie trouvait commode une certaine mêlée des rangs; le plain-pied se faisait par les vices. Il devait se faire plus tard par les idées.

L’encanaillement, prélude aristocratique, commençait ce que la révolution devait achever. On n’était pas très loin de Jélyotte publiquement assis en plein jour sur le lit de la marquise d’Épinay. Il est vrai, car les moeurs se font écho, que le seizième siècle avait vu le bonnet de nuit de Smeton sur l’oreiller d’Anne de Boleyn.

Si femme signifie faute, comme je ne sais plus quel concile l’a affirmé, jamais la femme n’a plus été femme qu’en ces temps-là.

Jamais, couvrant sa fragilité de son charme, et sa faiblesse de sa toute-puissance, elle ne s’est plus impérieusement fait absoudre. Faire du fruit défendu le fruit permis, c’est la chute d’Eve; mais faire du fruit permis le fruit défendu, c’est son triomphe. Elle finit par là. Au dix-huitième siècle, la femme tire le verrou sur le mari. Elle s’enferme dans l’éden avec Satan. Adam est dehors.

III

Tous les instincts de Josiane inclinaient plutôt à se donner galamment qu’à se donner légalement. Se donner par galanterie implique de la littérature, rappelle Ménalque et Amaryllis, et est presque une action docte.

Mademoiselle de Scudéry, l’attrait de la laideur pour la laideur mis à part, n’avait pas eu d’autre motif pour céder à Pélisson.

La fille souveraine et la femme sujette, telles sont les vieilles coutumes anglaises. Josiane différait le plus qu’elle pouvait l’heure de cette sujétion. Qu’il fallût en venir au mariage avec lord David, puisque le bon plaisir royal l’exigeait, c’était une nécessité sans doute, mais quel dommage! Josiane agréait et éconduisait lord David. Il y avait entre eux accord tacite pour ne point conclure et pour ne point rompre. Ils s’éludaient.

Cette façon de s’aimer, avec un pas en avant et deux pas en arrière, est exprimée par les danses du temps, le menuet et la gavotte. Être des gens mariés, cela ne va pas à l’air du visage, cela fane les rubans qu’on porte, cela vieillit. L’épousaille, solution désolante de clarté. La livraison d’une femme par un notaire, quelle platitude! La brutalité du mariage crée des situations définitives, supprime la volonté, tue le choix, a une syntaxe comme la grammaire, remplace l’inspiration par l’orthographe, fait de l’amour une dictée, met en déroute le mystérieux de la vie, inflige la transparence aux fonctions périodiques et fatales, ôte du nuage l’aspect en chemise de la femme, donne des droits diminuants pour qui les exerce comme pour qui les subit, dérange par un penchement de balance tout d’un côté le charmant équilibre du sexe robuste et du sexe puissant, de la force et de la beauté, et fait ici un maître et là une servante, tandis que, hors du mariage, il y a un esclave et une reine. Prosaïser le lit jusqu’à le rendre décent, conçoit-on rien de plus grossier? Qu'il n'y ait plus de mal du tout s'aimer, est-ce assez bête!

Lord David mûrissait. Quarante ans, c'est une heure qui sonne.

Il ne s'en apercevait pas. Et de fait il avait toujours l'air de ses trente ans. Il trouvait plus amusant de désirer Josiane que de la posséder. Il en possédait d'autres; il avait des femmes.

Josiane, de son côté, avait des songes.

Les songes étaient pires.

La duchesse Josiane avait cette particularité, moins rare du reste qu'on ne croit, qu'un de ses yeux était bleu et l'autre noir. Ses prunelles étaient faites d'amour et de haine, de bonheur et de malheur. Le jour et la nuit étaient mêlés dans son regard.

Son ambition était ceci: se montrer capable de l'impossible.

Un jour elle avait dit à Swift:

— Vous vous figurez, vous autres, que votre mépris existe.

Vous autres, c'était le genre humain.

Elle était papiste à fleur de peau. Son catholicisme ne dépassait point la quantité nécessaire pour l'élégance. Ce serait du puséysme aujourd'hui. Elle portait de grosses robes de velours, ou de satin, ou de moire, quelques-unes amples de quinze et seize aunes, et des entoilages d'or et d'argent, et autour de sa ceinture force noeuds de perles alternés avec des noeuds de pierreries. Elle abusait des galons. Elle mettait parfois une veste de drap passementé comme un bachelier. Elle allait cheval sur une selle d'homme, en dépit de l'invention des selles de femme introduite en Angleterre au quatorzième siècle par Anne, femme de Richard II. Elle se lavait le visage, les bras, les épaules et la gorge avec du sucre candi délayé dans du blanc d'oeuf, à la mode castillane. Elle avait, après qu'on avait spirituellement parlé auprès d'elle, un rire de réflexion d'une grâce singulière.

Du reste, aucune méchanceté. Elle était plutôt bonne.

IV

MAGISTER ELEGANTIARUM

Josiane s’ennuyait, cela va sans dire.

Lord David Dirry-Moir avait une situalion magistrale dans la vie joyeuse de Londres. Nobility et gentry le vénéraient.

Enregistrons une gloire de lord David, il osait porter ses cheveux. La réaction contre la perruque commençait. De même qu’en 1821 Eugène Devéria osa le premier laisser pousser sa barbe, en 1702 Price Devereux osa le premier hasarder en public, sous la dissimulation d’une frisure savante, sa chevelure naturelle. Risquer sa chevelure, c’était presque risquer sa tête. L’indignation fut universelle; pourtant Price Devereux était vicomte Hereford, et pair d’Angleterre. Il fut insulté, et le fait est que la chose en valait la peine. Au plus fort de la huée, lord David parut tout à coup, lui aussi, avec ses cheveux et sans perruque. Ces choses-là annoncent la fin des sociétés.

Lord David fut honni plus encore que le vicomte Hereford. Il tint bon. Price Devereux avait été le premier, David Dirry-Moir fut le second. Il est quelquefois plus difficile d’être le second que le premier. Il faut moins de génie, mais plus de courage. Le premier, enivré par l’innovation, a pu ignorer le danger; le second voit l’abîme, et s’y précipite. Cet abîme, ne plus porter perruque, David Dirry-Moir s’y jeta. Plus tard on les imita, on eut, après ces deux révolutionnaires, l’audace de se coiffer de ses cheveux, et la poudre vint, comme circonstance atténuante.

Pour fixer en passant cet important point d’histoire, disons que la vraie priorité dans la guerre à la perruque appartiendrait une reine, Christine de Suède, laquelle mettait des habits d’homme, et s’était montrée dès 1680 avec ses cheveux châtains naturels, poudrés et hérissés sans coiffure en tête naissante.

Elle avait en outre «quelques poils de barbe», dit Misson.

Le pape, de son côté, par sa bulle de mars 1691, avait un peu déconsidéré la perruque en l’ôtant de la tête des évêques et des prêtres, et en ordonnant aux gens d’église de laisser pousser leurs cheveux.

Lord David donc ne portait pas perruque et mettait des bottes de peau de vache.

Ces grandes choses le désignaient à l’admiration publique. Pas un club dont il ne fut le leader; pas une boxe où on ne le souhaitât pour referee. Le referee, c’est l’arbitre.

Il avait rédigé les chartes de plusieurs cercles de la high life; il avait fait des fondations d’élégance dont une, *Lady Guinea*, existait encore à Pall Mall en 1772. *Lady Guinea* était un cercle où foisonnait toute la jeune lordship. On y jouait. Le moindre enjeu était un rouleau de cinquante guinées, et il n’y avait jamais moins de vingt mille guinées sur la table. Près de chaque joueur se dressait un guéridon pour poser la tasse de th et la sébile de bois doré où l’on met les rouleaux de guinées.

Les joueurs avaient, comme les valets quand ils fourbissent les couteaux, des manches de cuir, lesquelles protégeaient leurs dentelles, des plastrons de cuir qui garantissaient leurs fraises, et sur la tête, pour abriter leurs yeux, à cause de la grande lumière des lampes, et maintenir en ordre leur frisure, de larges chapeaux de paille couverts de fleurs. Ils étaient masqués, pour qu’on ne vît pas leur émotion, surtout au jeu de quinze, Tous avaient sur le dos leurs habits à l’envers, afin d’attirer la chance.

Lord David élait du Beefsteak Club, du Surly Club, et du Split-farthing Club, du Club des Bourrus et du Club des Gratte-Sous, du Noeud Scellé, Sealed Knot, club des royalistes, et du Martinus Scribblerus, fondé par Swift, en remplacement de la Rota, fondée par Milton.

Quoique beau, il était du Club des Laids. Ce club était dédi la difformité. On y prenait l’engagement de se battre, non pour une belle femme, mais pour un homme laid. La salle du club avait pour ornement des portraits hideux, Thersite, Triboulet, Duns, Hudibras, Scarron; sur la cheminée était Ésope entre deux borgnes, Coclès et Camoëns; Coclès étant borgne de l’oeil gauche et Camoëns de l’oeil droit, chacun était sculpté de son côt borgne; et ces deux profils sans yeux se faisaient vis-à-vis. Le jour où la belle madame Visart eut la petite vérole, le Club des Laids lui porta un toast. Ce club florissait encore au commencement du dix-neuvième siècle; il avait envoyé un diplôme de membre honoraire à Mirabeau.

Depuis la restauration de Charles II, les clubs révolutionnaires étaient abolis. On avait démoli, dans la petite rue avoisinant Moorfields, la taverne où se tenait le Calf’s Head Club, club de la Tête de Veau, ainsi nommé parce que le 30 janvier 1649, jour où coula sur l’échafaud le sang de

Charles Ier, on y avait bu dans un crâne de veau du vin rouge à la santé de Cromwell.

Aux clubs républicains avaient succédé les clubs monarchiques.

On s'y amusait décemment.

Il y avait le She romps Club. On prenait dans la rue une femme, une passante, une bourgeoise, aussi peu vieille et aussi peu laide que possible; on la poussait dans le club, de force, et on la faisait marcher sur les mains, les pieds en l'air, le visage voilé par ses jupes retombantes. Si elle y mettait de la mauvaise grâce, on cinglait un peu de la cravache ce qui n'était plus voilé. C'était sa faute. Les écuyers de ce genre de manège s'appelaient «les sauteurs». Il y avait le Club des Éclairs de chaleur, métaphoriquement Merry-dances. On y faisait danser par des nègres et des blanches les danses des picantes et des timtirimbas du Pérou, notamment la Mozamala, «mauvaise fille», danse qui a pour triomphe la danseuse s'asseyant sur un tas de son auquel en se relevant elle laisse une empreinte callipyge.
On s'y donnait pour spectacle un vers de Lucrèce,

Tunc Venus in sylvis jungebat corpora amantum.

Il y avait le Hellfire Club, «Club des Flammes», où l'on jouait être impie. C'était la joute des sacrilèges. L'enfer y était l'enchère du plus gros blasphème.

Il y avait le Club des Coups de Tête, ainsi nommé parce qu'on y donnait des coups de tête aux gens. On avisait quelque portefaix à large poitrail et à l'air imbécile. On lui offrait, et au besoin on le contraignait d'accepter, un pot de porter pour se laisser donner quatre coups de tête dans la poitrine. Et là-dessus on pariait. Une fois, un homme, une grosse brute de gallois nommé Gogangerdd, expira au troisième coup de tête. Ceci parut grave. Il y eut enquête, et le jury d'indictement rendit ce verdict: «Mort d'un gonflement de coeur causé par excès de boisson». Gogangerdd avait en effet bu le pot de porter.

Il y avait le Fun Club. *Fun* est, comme *cant*, comme *humour*, un mot spécial intraduisible. Le fun est à la farce ce que le piment est au sel. Pénétrer dans une maison, y briser une glace de prix, y balafrer les portraits de famille, empoisonner le chien, mettre un chat dans la volière, cela s'appelle «tailler une pièce de fun.» Donner une fausse mauvaise nouvelle qui fait prendre aux personnes le deuil à tort, c'est du fun. C'est le fun qui a fait un trou carré dans un Holbein à Hampton-Court. Le fun serait fier si c'était lui qui avait cassé les bras à la Vénus de Milo. Sous Jacques II, un jeune lord millionnaire qui avait mis le feu la nuit à une chaumière fit rire Londres aux éclats et fut proclamé roi du fun. Les pauvres diables de la chaumière s'étaient sauvés en chemise. Les membres du Fun Club, tous de la plus haute aristocratie, couraient Londres à l'heure où les bourgeois dorment, arrachaient les gonds des volets, coupaient les tuyaux des pompes, défonçaient les citernes, décrochaient les enseignes, saccageaient les cultures, éteignaient les réverbères, sciaient les poutres d'étai des maisons, cassaient les carreaux des fenêtres, surtout dans les quartiers indigents. C'étaient les riches qui faisaient cela aux misérables. C'est pourquoi nulle plainte possible. D'ailleurs c'était de la comédie. Ces moeurs n'ont pas tout à fait disparu.

Sur divers points de l'Angleterre ou des possessions anglaises, Guernesey par exemple, de temps en temps on vous dévaste un peu votre maison la nuit, on vous brise une clôture, ou vous arrache le marteau de votre porte, etc. Si c'étaient des pauvres, on les enverrait au bagne; mais ce sont d'aimables jeunes gens.

Le plus distingué des clubs était présidé par un empereur qui portait un croissant sur le front et qui s'appelait «le grand Mohock». Le mohock dépassait le fun. Faire le mal pour le mal, tel était le programme. Le Mohock Club avait ce but grandiose, nuire. Pour remplir cette fonction, tous les moyens étaient bons. En devenant mohock, on prêtait serment d'être nuisible.

Nuire à tout prix, n'importe quand, à n'importe qui, et n'importe comment, était le devoir. Tout membre du Mohock Club devait avoir un talent. L'un était «maître de danse», c'est-à-dire faisait gambader les manants en leur lardant les mollets de son épée. D'autres savaient «faire suer», c'est-à-dire improviser autour d'un bélître quelconque une ronde de six ou huit gentilshommes la rapière à la main; étant entouré de toutes parts, il était impossible que le bélître ne tournât pas le dos quelqu'un; le gentilhomme à qui l'homme montrait le dos l'en châtiait par un coup de pointe qui le faisait pirouetter, un nouveau coup de pointe aux reins avertissait le quidam que quelqu'un de noble était derrière lui, et ainsi de suite, chacun piquant à son tour; quand l'homme, enfermé dans ce cercle d'épées, et tout ensanglanté, avait assez tourné et dansé, on le faisait bâtonner par des laquais pour changer le cours de ses idées. D'autres «tapaient le lion», c'est-à-dire arrêtaient en riant un passant, lui écrasaient le nez d'un coup de poing, et lui enfonçaient leurs deux pouces dans les deux yeux. Si les yeux étaient crevés, on les lui payait.

C’étaient là, au commencement du dix-huitième siècle, les passe-temps des opulents oisifs de Londres. Les oisifs de Paris en avaient d’autres. M. de Charolais lâchait son coup de fusil un bourgeois sur le seuil de sa porte. De tout temps la jeunesse s’est amusée.

Lord David Dirry-Moir apportait dans ces diverses institutions de plaisir son esprit magnifique et libéral. Tout comme un autre, il brûlait gaîment une cabane de chaume et de bois, et roussissait un peu ceux qui étaient dedans, mais il leur rebâtissait leur maison en pierre. Il lui arriva de faire danser sur les mains deux femmes dans le She romps Club. L’une était fille, il la dota; l’autre était mariée, il fit nommer son mari chapelain.

Les combats de coq lui durent de louables perfectionnements. C’était merveille de voir lord David habiller un coq pour le combat. Les coqs se prennent aux plumes comme les hommes aux cheveux. Aussi lord David faisait-il son coq le plus chauve possible. Il lui coupait avec des ciseaux toutes les plumes de la queue et, de la tête aux épaules, toutes les plumes du cou. — Autant de moins pour le bec de l’ennemi, disait-il. Puis il étendait les ailes de son coq, et taillait en pointe chaque plume l’une après l’autre, et cela faisait les ailes garnies de dards. — Voilà pour les yeux de l’ennemi, disait-il. Ensuite, il lui grattait les pattes avec un canif, lui aiguisait les ongles, lui emboîtait dans le maître ergot un éperon d’acier aigu et tranchant, lui crachait sur la tête, lui crachait sur le cou, l’oignait de salive comme on frottait d’huile les athlètes, et le lâchait, terrible, en s’écriant: — Voilà comment d’un coq on fait un aigle, et comment la bête de basse-cour devient une bête de la montagne!

Lord David assistait aux boxes, et il en était la règle vivante. Dans les grandes performances, c’était lui qui faisait planter les pieux et tendre les cordes, et qui fixait le nombre de toises qu’aurait le carré de combat. S’il était second, il suivait pied à pied son boxeur, une bouteille dans une main, une éponge dans l’autre, lui criait: *Strike fair*, lui suggérait les ruses, le conseillait combattant, l’essuyait sanglant, le ramassait renversé, le prenait sur ses genoux, lui mettait le goulot entre les dents, et de sa propre bouche pleine d’eau lui soufllait une pluie fine dans les yeux et dans les oreilles, ce qui ranime le mourant. S’il était arbitre, il présidait à la loyauté des coups, interdisait à qui que ce fût, hors les seconds, d’assister les combattants, déclarait vaincu le champion qui ne se plaçait pas bien en face de l’adversaire, veillait à ce que le temps des ronds ne dépassât pas une demi-minute, faisait obstacle au butting, donnait tort à qui cognait avec la tête, empêchait de frapper l’homme tombé à terre. Toute cette science ne le faisait point pédant et n’ôtait rien à son aisance dans le monde.

Frappe ferme.

Ce n’est pas quand il était referee d’une boxe que les partenaires hâlés, bourgeonnés et velus de celui-ci ou de celui-là, se fussent permis, pour venir en aide à leurs boxeurs faiblissants et pour culbuter la balance des paris, d’enjamber la palissade, d’entrer dans l’enceinte, de casser les cordes, d’arracher les pieux, et d’intervenir violemment dans le combat.

Lord David était du petit nombre des arbitres qu’on n’ose rosser.

Personne n’entraînait comme lui. Le boxeur dont il consentait être le «trainer» était sûr de vaincre. Lord David choisissait un Hercule, massif comme une roche, haut comme une tour, et en faisait son enfant. Faire passer de l’état défensif à l’état offensif cet écueil humain, tel était le problème. Il y excellait. Une fois le cyclope adopté, il ne le quittait plus.

Il devenait nourrice. Il lui mesurait le vin, il lui pesait la viande, il lui comptait le sommeil. Ce fut lui qui inventa cet admirable régime d’athlète, renouvelé depuis par Moreley: le matin un oeuf cru et un verre de sherry, à midi gigot saignant et thé, à quatre heures pain grillé et thé, le soir pale ale et pain grillé. Après quoi il déshabillait l’homme, le massait et le couchait. Dans la rue il ne le perdait pas de vue, écartant de lui tous les dangers, les chevaux échappés, les roues de voitures, les soldats ivres, les jolies filles. Il veillait sur sa vertu. Cette sollicitude maternelle apportait sans cesse quelque nouveau perfectionnement à l’éducation du pupille. Il lui enseignait le coup de poing qui casse les dents et le coup de pouce qui fait jaillir l’oeil. Rien de plus touchant.

Il se préparait de la sorte à la vie politique, à laquelle il devait plus tard être appelé. Ce n’est pas une petite affaire que de devenir un gentilhomme accompli.

Lord David Dirry-Moir aimait passionnément les exhibitions de carrefours, les tréteaux à parade, les circus à bêtes curieuses, les baraques de saltimbanques, les clowns, les tartailles, les pasquins, les farces en plein vent et les prodiges de la foire.

Le vrai seigneur est celui qui goûte de l’homme du peuple; c’est pourquoi lord David hantait les tavernes et les cours des miracles de Londres et des

Cinq-Ports. Afin de pouvoir au besoin, sans compromettre son rang dans l'escadre blanche, se colleter avec un gabier ou un calfat, il mettait, quand il allait dans ces bas-fonds, une jaquette de matelot. Pour ces transformations, ne pas porter perruque lui était commode, car, même sous Louis XIV, le peuple a gardé ses cheveux, comme le lion sa crinière. De cette façon, il était libre. Les petites gens, que lord David rencontrait dans ces cohues et auxquelles il se mêlait, le tenaient en haute estime, et ne savaient pas qu'il fût lord. On l'appelait Tom-Jim-Jack. Sous ce nom il était populaire, et fort illustre dans cette crapule. Il s'encanaillait en maître. Dans l'occasion, il faisait le coup de poing. Ce côté de sa vie élégante était connu et fort appréci de Lady Josiane.

V

LA REINE ANNE

I

Au-dessus de ce couple, il y avait Anne, reine d'Angleterre.

La première femme venue, c'était la reine Anne. Elle était gaie, bienveillante, auguste, à peu près. Aucune de ses qualités n'atteignait à la vertu, aucune de ses imperfections n'atteignait au mal. Son embonpoint était bouffi, sa malice était épaisse, sa bonté était bête. Elle était tenace et molle. Epouse, elle était infidèle et fidèle, ayant des favoris auxquels elle livrait son coeur, et un consort auquel elle gardait son lit.

Chrétienne, elle était hérétique et bigote. Elle avait une beauté, le cou robuste d'une Niobé. Le reste de sa personne était mal réussi. Elle était gauchement coquette, et honnêtement. Sa peau était blanche et fine, elle la montrait beaucoup. C'est d'elle que venait la mode du collier de grosses perles serré au cou. Elle avait le front étroit, les lèvres sensuelles, les joues charnues, l'oeil gros, la vue basse. Sa myopie s'étendait à son esprit. A part ça et là un éclat de jovialité, presque aussi pesante que sa colère, elle vivait dans une sorte de gronderie taciturne et de silence grognon. Il lui échappait des mots qu'il fallait deviner. C'était un mélange de la bonne femme et de la méchante diablesse. Elle aimait l'inattendu, ce qui est profondément féminin. Anne était un échantillon à peine dégrossi de l'Eve universelle. A cette ébauche était échu ce hasard, le trône. Elle buvait. Son mari était un danois, de race.

Tory, elle gouvernait par les whighs. En femme, en folle. Elle avait des rages. Elle était casseuse. Pas de personne plus maladroite pour manier les choses de l'état. Elle laissait tomber à terre les événements. Toute sa politique était fêlée.

Elle excellait à faire de grosses catastrophes avec de petites causes. Quand une fantaisie d'autorité lui prenait, elle appelait cela: *donner le coup de poker*.

Elle disait avec un air de profonde rêverie des paroles telles que celles-ci: «Aucun pair ne peut être couvert devant le roi, excepté Courcy, baron Kinsale, pair d'Irlande.» Elle disait: «Ce serait une injustice que mon mari ne fût pas lord-amiral, puisque mon père l'a été.» — Et elle faisait George de Danemark haut-amiral d'Angleterre, «and of all Her Majesty's Plantations».

Elle était perpétuellement en transpiration de mauvaise humeur; elle n'exprimait pas sa pensée, elle l'exsudait. Il y avait du sphinx dans cette oie.

Elle ne haïssait point le fun, la farce taquine et hostile. Si elle eût pu faire Apollon bossu, c'eût été sa joie. Mais elle l'eût laissé dieu. Bonne, elle avait pour idéal de ne désespérer personne, et d'ennuyer tout le monde. Elle avait souvent le mot cru, et, un peu plus, elle eût juré, comme Elisabeth. De temps en temps, elle prenait dans une poche d'homme qu'elle avait à sa jupe une petite boîte ronde d'argent repoussé, sur laquelle était son portrait de profil, entre les deux lettres Q. A., ouvrait cette boîte, et en tirait avec le bout de son doigt un peu de pommade dont elle se rougissait les lèvres. Alors, ayant arrang sa bouche, elle riait. Elle était très friande des pains d'épice plats de Zélande. Elle était fière d'être grasse.

Queen Ann.

Puritaine plutôt qu'autre chose, elle eût pourtant volontiers donné dans les spectacles. Elle eut une velléité d'académie de musique, copiée sur celle de France. En 1700, un français nomm Fortcroche voulut construire à Paris un «Cirque Royal» coûtant quatre cent mille livres, à quoi d'Argenson s'opposa; ce Fortcroche passa en Angleterre, et proposa à la reine Anne, qui en fut un moment séduite, l'idée de bâtir à Londres un théâtre machines, plus beau que celui du roi de France, et ayant *un quatrième dessous*. Comme Louis XIV, elle aimait que son carrosse galopât. Ses attelages et ses relais faisaient quelquefois en moins de cinq quarts d'heure le trajet de Windsor à Londres.

II

Du temps d'Anne, pas de réunion sans l'autorisation de deux juges de paix. Douze personnes assemblées, fut-ce pour manger des huîtres et boire du porter, étaient en félonie.

Sous ce règne, pourtant relativement débonnaire, la presse pour la flotte se fit avec une extrême violence; sombre preuve que l'anglais est plutôt sujet que citoyen. Depuis des siècles le roi d'Angleterre avait là un procédé de tyran qui démentait toutes les vieilles chartes de franchise, et dont la France en particulier triomphait et s'indignait. Ce qui diminue un peu ce triomphe, c’est que, en regard de la presse des matelots en Angleterre, il y avait en France la presse des soldats. Dans toutes les grandes villes de France, tout homme valide allant par les rues à ses affaires était exposé à être poussé par les racoleurs dans une maison appelée *four*. Là on l’enfermait pêle-mele avec d’autres, on triait ceux qui étaient propres au service, et les recruteurs vendaient ces passants aux officiers.

En 1695, il y avait à Paris trente fours.

Les lois contre l’Irlande, émanées de la reine Anne, furent atroces.

Anne était née en 1664, deux ans avant l’incendie de Londres, sur quoi les astrologues — (il y en avait encore, témoin Louis XIV, qui naquit assisté d’un astrologue et emmaillotté dans un horoscope) — avaient prédit qu’étant «la soeur aînée du feu», elle serait reine. Elle le fut, grâce à l’astrologie, et à la révolution de 1688. Elle était humiliée de n’avoir pour parrain que Gilbert, archevêque de Cantorbéry. Être filleule du pape n’était plus possible en Angleterre. Un simple primat est un parrain médiocre. Anne dut s’en contenter. C’était sa faute.

Pourquoi était-elle protestante?

Le Danemark avait payé sa virginité, *virginitas empta*, comme disent les vieilles chartes, d’un douaire de six mille deux cent cinquante livres sterling de rente, pris sur le bailliage de Wardinbourg et sur l’île de Fehmarn.

Anne suivait, par conviction et par routine, les traditions de Guillaume. Les anglais, sous cette royauté née d’une révolution, avaient tout ce qui peut tenir de liberté entre la Tour de Londres où l’on mettait l’orateur et le pilori où l’on mettait l’écrivain. Anne parlait un peu danois, pour ses aparté avec son mari, et un peu français, pour ses aparté avec Bolingbroke. Pur baragouin; mais c’était, à la cour surtout, la grande mode anglaise de parler français. Il n’y avait de bon mot qu’en français. Anne se préoccupait des monnaies, surtout des monnaies de cuivre, qui sont les basses et les populaires; elle voulait y faire grande figure. Six farlhings furent frappés sous son règne. Au revers des trois premiers, elle fit mettre simplement un trône; au revers du quatrième, elle voulut un char de triomphe, et au revers du sixième une déesse tenant d’une main l’épée et de l’autre l’olivier avec l’exergue *Bello et Pace*.

Fille de Jacques II, qui était ingénu et féroce, elle était brutale.

Et en même temps au fond elle était douce. Contradiction qui n’est qu’apparente. Une colère la métamorphosait. Chauffez le sucre, il bouillonnera.

Anne était populaire. L’Angleterre aime les femmes régnantes.
Pourquoi? la France les exclut. C’est déjà une raison.
Peut-être même n’y en a-t-il point d’autres. Pour les historiens anglais, Elisabeth, c’est la grandeur, Anne, c’est la bonté.
Comme on voudra. Soit. Mais rien de délicat dans ces règnes féminins. Les lignes sont lourdes. C’est de la grosse grandeur et de la grosse bonté. Quant à leur vertu immaculée, l’Angleterre y tient, nous ne nous y opposons point. Elisabeth est une vierge tempérée par Essex, et Anne est une épouse compliquée de Bolingbroke.

III

Une habitude idiote qu’ont les peuples, c’est d’attribuer au roi ce qu’ils font. Ils se battent. A qui la gloire? au roi. Ils paient. Qui est magnifique? le roi. Et le peuple l’aime d’être si riche. Le roi reçoit des pauvres un écu et rend aux pauvres un liard. Qu’il est généreux! Le colosse piédestal contemple le pygmée fardeau. Que Myrmidon est grand! il est sur mon dos. Un nain a un excellent moyen d’être plus haut qu’un géant, c’est de se jucher sur ses épaules. Mais que le géant laisse faire, c’est là le singulier; et qu’il admire la grandeur du nain, c’est là le bête. Naïveté humaine.

La statue équestre, réservée aux rois seuls, figure très bien la royauté; le cheval, c’est le peuple. Seulement ce cheval se transfigure lentement. Au commencement c’est un âne, à la fin c’est un lion. Alors il jette par terre son cavalier, et l’on a 1642 en Angleterre et 1789 en France, et quelquefois il le dévore, et l’on a en Angleterre 1649 et en France 1793.

Que le lion puisse redevenir baudet, cela étonne, mais cela est.
Cela se voyait en Angleterre. On avait repris le bât de l’idolâtrie royaliste. La Queen Ann, nous venons de le dire, était populaire. Que faisait elle pour cela? rien. Rien, c’est là tout ce qu’on demande au roi d’Angleterre. Il reçoit pour ce rien-là une trentaine de millions par an. En 1705, l’Angleterre, qui n’avait que treize vaisseaux de guerre sous Elisabeth et trente-six sous Jacques Ier, en comptait cent cinquante. Les anglais avaient trois armées, cinq mille hommes en Catalogne, dix mille en Portugal, cinquante mille en Flandre, et en outre ils payaient quarante millions par an à l’Europe monarchique et diplomatique, sorte de fille publique que le peuple anglais a toujours entretenue. Le parlement ayant volé un emprunt patriotique de

trente-quatre millions de rentes viagères, il y avait eu presse à l'échiquier pour y souscrire. L'Angleterre envoyait une escadre aux Indes orientales, et une escadre sur les côtes d'Espagne avec l'amiral Leake, sans compter un en-cas de quatre cents voiles sous l'amiral Showell. L'Angleterre venait de s'amalgamer l'Ecosse. On était entre Hochstett et Ramillies, et l'une de ces victoires faisait entrevoir l'autre.

L'Angleterre, dans ce coup de filet de Hochstett, avait fait prisonniers vingt-sept bataillons et quatre régiments de dragons, et ôté cent lieues de pays à la France, reculant éperdue du Danube au Rhin. L'Angleterre étendait la main vers la Sardaigne et les Baléares. Elle ramenait triomphalement dans ses ports dix vaisseaux de ligne espagnols et force galions chargés d'or. La baie et le détroit d'Hudson étaient déjà à demi lâchés par Louis XIV; on sentait qu'il allait lâcher aussi l'Acadie, Saint-Christophe et Terre-Neuve, et qu'il serait trop heureux si l'Angleterre tolérait au cap Breton le roi de France, pêchant la morue. L'Angleterre allait lui imposer cette honte de démolir lui-même les fortifications de Dunkerque. En attendant elle avait pris Gibraltar et elle prenait Barcelone. Que de grandes choses accomplies! Comment ne pas admirer la reine Anne qui se donnait la peine de vivre pendant ce temps-là?

A un certain point de vue, le règne d'Anne semble une réverbération du règne de Louis XIV. Anne, un moment parallèle ce roi dans cette rencontre qu'on appelle l'histoire, a avec lui une vague ressemblance de reflet. Comme lui elle joue au grand règne; elle a ses monuments, ses arts, ses victoires, ses capitaines, ses gens de lettres, sa cassette pensionnant les renommées, sa galerie de chefs-d'oeuvre latérale à sa majesté.

Sa cour, à elle aussi, fait cortège et a un aspect triomphal, un ordre et une marche. C'est une réduction en petit de tous les grands hommes de Versailles, déjà pas très grands. Le trompe-l'oeil y est; qu'on y ajoute le *God save the queen*, qui eût pu dès lors être pris à Lulli, et l'ensemble fait illusion.

Pas un personnage ne manque. Christophe Wren est un Mansard fort passable; Somers vaut Lamoignon. Anne a un Racine qui est Dryden, un Boileau qui est Pope, un Colbert qui est Godolphin, un Louvois qui est Pembroke, et un Turenne qui est Marlborough.

Grandissez les perruques pourtant, et diminuez les fronts. Le tout est solennel et pompeux, et Windsor, à cet instant-là, aurait presque un faux air de Marly. Pourtant tout est féminin, et le père Tellier d'Anne s'appelle

Sarah Jennings. Du reste, un commencement d'ironie, qui cinquante ans plus tard sera la philosophie, s'ébauche dans la littérature, et le Tartuffe protestant est démasqué par Swift, de même que le Tartuffe catholique a été dénoncé par Molière. Bien qu'à cette époque l'Angleterre querelle et batte la France, elle l'imite et elle s'en éclaire; et ce qui est sur la façade de l'Angleterre, c'est de la lumière française. C'est dommage que le règne d'Anne n'ait duré que douze ans, sans quoi les anglais ne se feraient pas beaucoup prier pour dire le siècle d'Anne, comme nous disons le siècle de Louis XIV. Anne apparaît en 1702, quand Louis XIV décline. C'est une des curiosités de l'histoire que le lever de cet astre pâle coïncide avec le coucher de l'astre de pourpre, et qu'à l'instant où la France avait le roi Soleil, l'Angleterre ait eu la reine Lune.

Détail qu'il faut noter. Louis XIV, bien qu'on fût en guerre avec lui, était fort admiré en Angleterre. *C'est le roi qu'il faut à la France*, disaient les anglais. L'amour des anglais pour leur liberté se complique d'une certaine acceptation de la servitude d'autrui. Cette bienveillance pour les chaînes qui attachent le voisin va quelquefois jusqu'à l'enthousiasme pour le despote d'à côté.

En somme, Anne a rendu son peuple *hureux*, comme le dit à trois reprises et avec une gracieuse insistance, pages 6 et 9 de sa dédicace, et page 3 de sa préface, le traducteur français du livre de Beeverell.

IV

La reine Anne en voulait un peu à la duchesse Josiane, pour deux raisons.

Premièrement, parce qu'elle trouvait la duchesse Josiane jolie.

Deuxièmement, parce qu'elle trouvait joli le fiancé de la duchesse Josiane.

Deux raisons pour être jalouse suffisent à une femme; une seule suffit à une reine.

Ajoutons ceci. Elle lui en voulait d'être sa soeur.

Anne n'aimait pas que les femmes fussent jolies. Elle trouvait cela contraire aux moeurs.

Quant à elle, elle était laide.

Non par choix pourtant.

Une partie de sa religion venait de cette laideur.

Josiane, belle et philosophe, importunait la reine.

Pour une reine laide, une jolie duchesse n’est pas une soeur agréable.

Il y avait un autre grief, la naissance *improper* de Josiane.

Anne était fille d’Anne Hyde, simple lady, légitimement, mais fâcheusement épousée par Jacques II, lorsqu’il était duc d’York. Anne, ayant de ce sang inférieur dans les veines, ne se sentait qu’à demi royale, et Josiane, venue au monde tout à fait irrégulièrement, soulignait l’incorrection, moindre, mais réelle, de la naissance de la reine. La fille de la mésalliance voyait sans plaisir, pas très loin d’elle, la fille de la bâtardise. Il y avait là une ressemblance désobligeante. Josiane avait le droit de dire à Anne: ma mère vaut bien la vôtre. A la cour on ne le disait pas, mais évidemment on le pensait. C’était ennuyeux pour la majesté royale. Pourquoi cette Josiane? Quelle idée avait-elle eue de naître? A quoi bon une Josiane? De certaines parentés sont diminuantes.

Pourtant Anne faisait bon visage à Josiane.

Peut-être l’eût-elle aimée, si elle n’eût été sa soeur.

VI

BARKILPHEDRO

Il est utile de connaître les actions des personnes, et quelque surveillance est sage.

Josiane faisait un peu espionner lord David par un homme à elle, en qui elle avait confiance, et qui se nommait Barkilphedro.

Lord David faisait discrètement observer Josiane par un homme lui, dont il était sûr, et qui se nommait Barkilphedro.

La reine Anne, de son côté, se faisait secrètement tenir au courant des faits et gestes de la duchesse Josiane, sa soeur bâtarde, et de lord David, son futur beau-frère de la main gauche, par un homme à elle, sur qui elle comptait pleinement, et qui se nommait Barkilphedro.

Ce Barkilphedro avait sous la main ce clavier: Josiane, lord David, la reine. Un homme entre deux femmes. Que de modulations possibles! Quel amalgame d’âmes!

Barkilphedro n’avait pas toujours eu cette situation magnifique de parler bas à trois oreilles.

C’était un ancien domestique du duc d’York. Il avait tâch d’être homme d’église, mais avait échoué. Le duc d’York, prince anglais et romain, composé de papisme royal et d’anglicanisme légal, avait sa maison catholique et sa maison protestante, et eût pu pousser Barkilphedro dans l’une ou l’aulre hiérarchie, mais il ne le jugea point assez catholique pour le faire aumônier, et pas assez protestant pour le faire chapelain. De sorte que Barkilphedro se trouva entre deux religions l’âme par terre.

Ce n’est point une posture mauvaise pour de certaines âmes reptiles.

De certains chemins ne sont faisables qu’à plat ventre. Une domesticité obscure, mais nourrissante, fut longtemps toute l’existence de Barkilphedro. La domesticité, c’est quelque chose, mais il voulait de plus la puissance. Il allait peut-être y arriver quand Jacques II tomba. Tout était à recommencer. Rien à faire sous Guillaume III, maussade, et ayant dans sa façon de régner une pruderie qu’il croyait de la probité.

Barkilphedro, son protecteur Jacques détrôné, ne fut pas tout de suite en guenilles. Un je ne sais quoi qui survit aux princes déchus alimente et soutient quelque temps leurs parasites. Le reste de sève épuisable fait vivre deux ou trois jours au bout des branches les feuilles de l’arbre déraciné; puis tout à coup la feuille jaunit et sêche, et le courtisan aussi.

Grâce à cet embaumement qu’on nomme légitimité, le prince, lui, quoique tombé et jeté au loin, persiste et se conserve; il n’en est pas de même du courtisan, bien plus mort que le roi. Le roi là-bas est momie, le courtisan ici est fantôme. Être l’ombre d’une ombre, c’est là une maigreur extrême. Donc Barkilphedro devint famélique. Alors il prit la qualité d’homme de lettres.

Mais on le repoussait même des cuisines. Quelquefois il ne savait où coucher. — Qui me tirera de la belle étoile? disait-il.

Et il luttait. Tout ce que la patience dans la détresse a d’intéressant, il l’avait. Il avait de plus le talent du termite, savoir faire une trouée de bas en haut. En s’aidant du nom de Jacques II, des souvenirs, de la fidélité, de l’attendrissement, etc., il perça jusqu’à la duchesse Josiane.

Josiane prit en gré cet homme qui avait de la misère et de l’esprit, deux choses qui émeuvent. Elle le présenta à lord Dirry-Moir, lui donna gîte dans ses communs, le tint pour de sa maison, fut bonne pour lui, et quelquefois même lui parla.

Barkilphedro n’eut plus ni faim, ni froid. Josiane le tutoyait.

C’était la mode des grandes dames de tutoyer les gens de lettres, qui se laissaient faire. La marquise de Mailly recevait, couchée, Roy qu’elle n’avait jamais vu, et lui disail: *C’est toi qui as fait l’Année galante? Bonjour*. Plus tard, les gens de lettres rendirent le tutoiement. Un jour vint où Fabre d’Églantine dit à la duchesse de Rohan:

— *N’es-tu pas la Chabot?*

Pour Barkilphedro, être tutoyé, c’était un succès. Il en fut ravi. Il avait ambitionné cette familiarilé de haut en bas.

— Lady Josiane me tutoie! se disait-il. Et il se frottait les mains.

Il profita de ce tutoiement pour gagner du terrain. Il devint une sorte de familier des petits appartements de Josiane, point gênant, inaperçu; la duchesse eût presque changé de chemise devant lui. Tout cela pourtant était précaire, Barkilphedro visait à une situation. Une duchesse, c’est à moitié chemin.

Une galerie souterraine qui n’arrivait pas jusqu’à la reine, c’était de l’ouvrage manqué.

Un jour Barkilphedro dit à Josiane:

— Votre grâce voudrait-elle faire mon bonheur?

— Qu’est-ce que tu veux? demanda Josiane.

— Un emploi.

— Un emploi! à toi!

— Oui, madame.

— Quelle idée as-tu de demander un emploi? tu n’es bon à rien.

— C’est pour cela.

Josiane se mit à rire.

— Dans les fonctions auxquelles tu n’es pas propre, laquelle désires-tu?

— Celle de déboucheur de bouteilles de l’océan.

Le rire de Josiane redoubla.

— Qu’est-ce que cela? Tu te moques.

— Non, madame.

— Je vais m’amuser à te répondre sérieusement, dit la duchesse. Qu’est-ce que tu veux être? Répète.

— Déboucheur de bouteilles de l’océan.

— Tout est possible à la cour. Est-ce qu’il y a un emploi comme cela?

— Oui, madame.

— Apprends-moi des choses nouvelles. Continue.

— C’est un emploi qui est.

— Jure-le moi sur l’âme que tu n’as pas.

— Je le jure.

— Je ne te crois point.

— Merci, madame.

— Donc tu voudrais?... Recommence.

— Décacheter les bouteilles de la mer.

— Voilà une fonction qui ne doit pas donner grande fatigue. C’est comme peigner le cheval de bronze.

— A peu près.

— Ne rien faire. C’est en effet la place qu’il te faut. Tu es bon à cela.

— Vous voyez que je suis propre à quelque chose.

— Ah çà! tu bouffonnes. La place existe-t-elle? Barkilphedro prit l’attitude de la gravité déférente.

— Madame, vous avez un père auguste, Jacques II, roi, et un beau-frère illustre, Georges de Danemark, duc de Cumberland. Votre père a été et votre beau-frère est lord-amiral d’Angleterre.

— Sont-ce là les nouveautés que tu viens m'apprendre? Je sais cela aussi bien que toi.

— Mais voici ce que votre grâce ne sait pas. Il y a dans la mer trois sortes de choses: celles qui sont au fond de l'eau, *Lagon*; celles qui flottent sur l'eau, *Flotson*; et celles que l'eau rejette sur la terre, *Jetson*.

— Après?

— Ces trois choses-là, Lagon, Flotson, Jetson, appartiennent au lord haut-amiral.

— Après?

— Votre grâce comprend?

— Non.

— Tout ce qui est dans la mer, ce qui s'engloutit, ce qui surnage et ce qui s'échoue, tout appartient à l'amiral d'Angleterre?

— Tout. Soit. Ensuite?

— Excepté l'esturgeon, qui appartient au roi.

— J'aurais cru, dit Josiane, que tout cela appartenait à Neptune.

— Neptune est un imbécile. Il a tout lâché. Il a laissé tout prendre aux anglais.

— Conclus.

— Les prises de mer; c'est le nom qu'on donne à ces trouvailles-là.

— Soit.

— C'est inépuisable. Il y a toujours quelque chose qui flotte, quelque chose qui aborde. C'est la contribution de la mer. La mer paie impôt à l'Angleterre.

— Je veux bien. Mais conclus.

— Votre grâce comprend que de cette façon l'océan crée un bureau.

— Où ça?

— A l'amirauté.

— Quel bureau?

— Le bureau des prises de mer.

— Eh bien?

— Le bureau se subdivise en trois offices, Lagon, Flotson, Jetson; et pour chaque office il y a un officier.

— Et puis?

— Un navire en pleine mer veut donner un avis quelconque à la terre, qu'il navigue en telle latitude, qu'il rencontre un monstre marin, qu'il est en vue d'une côte, qu'il est en détresse, qu'il va sombrer, qu'il est perdu, et coetera, le patron prend une bouteille, met dedans un morceau de papier où il a écrit la chose, cachette le goulot, et jette la bouteille à la mer. Si la bouteille va au fond, cela regarde l'officier Lagon; si elle flotte, cela regarde l'officier Flotson; si elle est portée à terre par les vagues, cela regarde l'officier Jetson.

— Et tu voudrais être l'officier Jetson?

— Précisément.

— Et c'est ce que tu appelles être déboucheur de bouteilles de l'océan?

— Puisque la place existe.

— Pourquoi désires-tu cette dernière place plutôt que les deux autres?

— Parce qu'elle est vacante en ce moment.

— En quoi consiste l'emploi?

— Madame, en 1598, une bouteille goudronnée trouvée par un pêcheur de congre dans les sables d'échouage d'Epidium Promontorium fut portée à la reine Elisabeth, et un parchemin qu'on tira de cette bouteille fit savoir à l'Angleterre que la Hollande avait pris sans rien dire un pays inconnu, la nouvelle Zemble, *Nova Zemla*, que cette prise avait eu lieu en juin 1596, que dans ce pays-là on était mangé par les ours, et que la manière d'y passer l'hiver était indiquée sur un papier enferm dans un étui de mousquet suspendu dans la cheminée de la maison de bois bâtie dans l'île et laissée par les hollandais qui étaient tous morts, et que cette cheminée était faite d'un tonneau défoncé, emboîté dans le toit.

— Je comprends peu ton amphigouri.

— Soit. Élisabeth comprit. Un pays de plus pour la Hollande, c'était un pays de moins pour l'Angleterre. La bouteille qui avait donné l'avis fut tenue pour chose importante. Et à partir de ce jour, ordre fut intimé à quiconque trouverait une bouteille cachetée au bord de la mer de la porter à l'amiral d'Angleterre, sous peine de potence. L'amiral commet pour ouvrir ces bouteilles-là un officier, lequel informe du contenu sa majesté, s'il y a lieu.

— Arrive-t-il souvent de ces bouteilles à l'amirauté?

— Rarement. Mais c'est égal. La place existe. Il y a pour la fonction chambre et logis à l'amirauté.

— Et cette manière de ne rien faire, combien la paie-t-on?

— Cent guinées par an.

— Tu me déranges pour cela?

— C'est de quoi vivre.

— Gueusement.

— Comme il sied à ceux de ma sorte.

— Cent guinées, c’est une fumée.

— Ce qui vous fait vivre une minute nous fait vivre un an, nous autres. C’est l’avantage qu’ont les pauvres.

— Tu auras la place.

Huit jours après, grâce à la bonne volonté de Josiane, grâce au crédit de lord David Dirry-Moir, Barkilphedro, sauvé désormais, tiré du provisoire, posant maintenant le pied sur un terrain solide, logé, défrayé, renté de cent guinées, était install l’amirauté.

VII

BARKILPHEDRO PERCE

Il y a d'abord une chose pressée; c'est d'être ingrat.

Barkilphedro n'y manqua point.

Ayant reçu tant de bienfaits de Josiane, naturellement il n'eut qu'une pensée, s'en venger.

Ajoutons que Josiane était belle, grande, jeune, riche, puissante, illustre, et que Barkilphedro était laid, petit, vieux, pauvre, protégé, obscur. Il fallait bien aussi qu'il se vengeât de cela.

Quand on n'est fait que de nuit, comment pardonner tant de rayons?

Barkilphedro était un irlandais qui avait renié l'Irlande; mauvaise espèce.

Barkilphedro n'avait qu'une chose en sa faveur; c'est qu'il avait un très gros ventre.

Un gros ventre passe pour signe de bonté. Mais ce ventre s'ajoutait à l'hypocrisie de Barkilphedro. Car cet homme était très méchant.

Quel âge avait Barkilphedro? aucun. L'âge nécessaire à son projet du moment. Il était vieux par les rides et les cheveux gris, et jeune par l'agilité d'esprit. Il était leste et lourd; sorte d'hippopotame singe. Royaliste, certes; républicain, qui sait? catholique, peut-être; protestant, sans doute. Pour Stuart, probablement; pour Brunswick, évidemment, Être Pour n'est une force qu'à la condition d'être en même temps Contre, Barkilphedro pratiquait cette sagesse.

La place de «déboucheur de bouteilles de l'océan» n'était pas aussi risible qu'avait semblé le dire Barkilphedro. Les réclamations, qu'aujourd'hui on qualifierait déclamations, de Garcie-Ferrandez dans son *Routier de la mer* contre la spoliation des échouages, dite *droit de bris,* et contre le pillage des épaves par les gens des côtes, avaient fait sensation en Angleterre et avaient amené pour les naufragés ce progrès que leurs biens, effets et propriétés, au lieu d'être volés par les paysans, étaient confisqués par le lord-amiral.

Tous les débris de mer jetés à la rive anglaise, marchandises, carcasses de navires, ballots, caisses, etc., appartenaient au lord-amiral; mais, et ici se révélait l'importance de la place sollicitée par Barkilphedro, les récipients flottants contenant des messages et des informations éveillaient particulièrement l’attention de l’amirauté. Les naufrages sont une des graves préoccupations de l’Angleterre. La navigation étant sa vie, le naufrage est son souci. L’Angleterre a la perpétuelle inquiétude de la mer. La petite fiole de verre que jette aux vagues un navire en perdition contient un renseignement suprême, précieux tous les points de vue. Renseignement sur le bâtiment, renseignement sur l’équipage, renseignement sur le lieu, l’époque et le mode du naufrage, renseignement sur les vents qui ont bris le vaisseau, renseignement sur les courants qui ont porté la fiole flottante à la côte. La fonction que Barkilphedro occupait a été supprimée il y a plus d’un siècle, mais elle avait une véritable utilité. Le dernier titulaire fut William Hussey, de Doddington en Lincoln. L’homme qui tenait cet office était une sorte de rapporteur des choses de la mer. Tous les vases fermés et cachetés, bouteilles, fioles, jarres, etc., jetés au littoral anglais par le flux, lui étaient remis; il avait seul droit de les ouvrir; il était le premier dans le secret de leur contenu; il les classait et les étiquetait dans son greffe; l’expression *loger un panier au greffe*, encore usitée dans les îles de la Manche, vient de là. A la vérité, une précaution avait ét prise. Aucun de ces récipients ne pouvait être décacheté et débouché qu’en présence de deux jurés de l’amirauté assermentés au secret, lesquels signaient, conjointement avec le titulaire de l’office Jeston, le procès-verbal d’ouverture. Mais ces jurés étant tenus au silence, il en résultait, pour Barkilphedro, une certaine latitude discrétionnaire; il dépendait de lui, jusqu’ un certain point, de supprimer un fait, ou de le mettre en lumière.

Ces fragiles épaves étaient loin d’être, comme Barkilphedro l’avait dit à Josiane, rares et insignifiantes. Tantôt elles atteignaient la terre assez vite; tantôt après des années. Cela dépendait des vents et des courants. Cette mode des bouteilles jetées à vau-l’eau a un peu passé comme celle des ex-voto; mais, dans ces temps religieux, ceux qui allaient mourir envoyaient volontiers de cette façon leur dernière pensée à Dieu et aux hommes, et parfois ces missives de la mer abondaient l’amirauté. Un parchemin conservé au château d’Audlyene (vieille orthographe), et annoté par le comte de Suffolk, grand trésorier d’Angleterre sous Jacques Ier, constate qu’en la seule année 1615, cinquante-deux gourdes, ampoules, et fibules goudronnées, contenant des mentions de bâtiments en perdition, furent apportées et enregistrées au greffe du lord-amiral.

Les emplois de cour sont la goutte d’huile, ils vont toujours s’élargissant. C’est ainsi que le portier est devenu le chancelier et que le palefrenier est devenu le connétable.

L’officier spécial chargé de la fonction souhaitée et obtenue par Barkelphedro était habituellement un homme de confiance.

Elisabeth l’avait voulu ainsi. A la cour, qui dit confiance dit intrigue, et qui dit intrigue dit croissance. Ce fonctionnaire avait fini par être un peu un personnage. Il était clerc, et prenait rang immédiatement après les deux grooms de l’aumônerie.

Il avait ses entrées au palais, pourtant, disons-le, ce qu’on appelait «l’entrée humble» *humilis introïtus*, et jusque dans la chambre de lit. Car l’usage était qu’il informât la personne royale, quand l’occasion en valait la peine, de ses trouvailles, souvent très curieuses, testaments de désespérés, adieux jetés la patrie, révélations de barateries et de crimes de mer, legs la couronne, etc., qu’il maintînt son greffe en communication avec la cour, et qu’il rendît de temps en temps compte à sa majesté de ce décachetage de bouteilles sinistres. C’était le cabinet noir de l’océan.

Elisabeth, qui parlait volontiers latin, demandait à Tamfeld de Coley en Berkshire, l’officier Jetson de son temps, lorsqu’il lui apportait quelqu’une de ces paperasses sorties de la mer: *Quid mihi scribit Neptunus?* Qu’est-ce que Neptune m’écrit?

La percée était faite. Le termite avait réussi. Barkilphedro approchait la reine.

C’était tout ce qu’il voulait.

Pour faire sa fortune?

Non.

Pour défaire celle des autres.

Bonheur plus grand.

Nuire, c’est jouir.

Avoir en soi un désir de nuire, vague mais implacable, et ne le jamais perdre de vue, ceci n’est pas donné à tout le monde.

Barkilphedro avait cette fixîté.

L’adhérence de gueule qu’a le boule-dogue, sa pensée l’avait.

Se sentir inexorable lui donnait un fond de satisfaction sombre.

Pourvu qu’il eût une proie sous la dent, ou dans l’âme une certitude de mal faire, rien ne lui manquait.

Il grelottait content, dans l'espoir du froid d'autrui. Être méchant, c'est une opulence. Tel homme qu'on croit pauvre, et qui l'est en effet, a toute sa richesse en malice, et la préfère ainsi. Tout est dans le contentement qu'on a. Faire un mauvais tour, qui est la même chose qu'un bon tour, c'est plus que de l'argent. Mauvais pour qui l'endure, bon pour qui le fait.
Katesby, le collaborateur de Guy Fawkes dans le complot papiste des poudres, disait: *Voir sauter le parlement les quatre fers en l'air, je ne donnerais pas cela pour un million sterling.*

Qu'était-ce que Barkilphedro? Ce qu'il y a de plus petit et ce qu'il y a de plus terrible. Un envieux.

L'envie est une chose dont on a toujours le placement à la cour.

La cour abonde en impertinents, en désoeuvrés, en riches fainéants affamés de commérages, en chercheurs d'aiguilles dans les bottes de foin, en faiseurs de misères, en moqueurs moqués, en niais spirituels, qui ont besoin de la conversation d'un envieux.

Quelle chose rafraîchissante que le mal qu'on vous dit des autres!

L'envie est une bonne étoffe à faire un espion.

Il y a une profonde analogie entre cette passion naturelle, l'envie, et cette fonction sociale, l'espionnage. L'espion chasse pour le compte d'autrui, comme le chien; l'envieux chasse pour son propre compte, comme le chat.

Un moi féroce, c'est là tout l'envieux.

Autres qualités, Barkilphedro était discret, secret, concret. Il gardait tout, et se creusait de sa haine. Une énorme bassesse implique une énorme vanité. Il était aimé de ceux qu'il amusait, et haï des autres; mais il se sentait dédaigné par ceux qui le haïssaient, et méprisé par ceux qui l'aimaient. Il se contenait.
Tous ses froissements bouillonnaient sans bruit dans sa résignation hostile. Il était indigné, comme si les coquins avaient ce droit-là. Il était silencieusement en proie aux furies. Tout avaler, c'était son talent. Il avait de sourds courroux intérieurs, des frénésies de rage souterraine, des flammes couvées et noires, dont on ne s'apercevait pas; c'était un colérique fumivore. La surface souriait. Il était obligeant, empressé, facile, aimable, complaisant. N'importe qui, et n'importe où, il saluait. Pour un souffle de vent, il s'inclinait jusqu'à terre. Avoir un roseau dans la colonne vertébrale, quelle source de fortune!

Ces êtres cachés et vénéneux ne sont pas si rares qu'on le croit.
Nous vivons entourés de glissements sinistres. Pourquoi les malfaisants?

Question poignante. Le rêveur se la pose sans cesse, et le penseur ne la résout jamais. De là l’oeil triste des pbilosopbes toujours fixé sur cette montagne de ténèbres qui est la destinée, et du haut de laquelle le colossal spectre du mal laisse tomber des poignées de serpents sur la terre.

Barkilphedro avait le corps obèse et le visage maigre. Torse gras et face osseuse. Il avait les ongles cannelés et courts, les doigts noueux, les pouces plats, les cheveux gros, beaucoup de distance d’une tempe à l’autre, et un front de meurtrier, large et bas. L’oeil bridé cachait la petitesse de son regard sous une broussaille de sourcils. Le nez long, pointu, bossu et mou, s’appliquait presque sur la bouche. Barkilphedro, convenablement vêtu en empereur, eût un peu ressemblé à Domitien.

Sa face d’un jaune rance était comme modelée dans une pâte visqueuse; ses joues immobiles semblaient de mastic; il avait toutes sortes de vilaines rides réfractaires, l’angle de la mâchoire massif, le menton lourd, l’oreille canaille. Au repos, de profil, sa lèvre supérieure relevée en angle aigu laissait voir deux dents. Ces dents avaient l’air de vous regarder. Les dents regardent, de même que l’oeil mord.

Patience, tempérance, continence, réserve, retenue, aménité, déférence, douceur, politesse, sobriété, chasteté, complétaient et achevaient Barkilphedro. Il calomniait ces vertus en les ayant.

En peu de temps Barkilphedro prit pied à la cour.

VIII

INFERI

On peut, à la cour, prendre pied de deux façons: dans les nuées, on est auguste; dans la boue, on est puissant.

Dans le premier cas, on est de l'olympe. Dans le second cas, on est de la garde-robe.

Qui est de l'olympe n'a que la foudre; qui est de la garde-robe a la police.

La garde-robe contient tous les instruments de règne, et parfois, car elle est traître, le châtiment. Héliogabale y vient mourir.

Alors elle s'appelle les latrines.

D'habitude elle est moins tragique. C'est là qu'Albéroni admire Vendôme. La garde-robe est volontiers le lieu d'audience des personnes royales. Elle fait fonction de trône. Louis XIV y reçoit la duchesse de Bourgogne; Philippe V y est coude à coude avec la reine. Le prêtre y pénètre. La garde-robe est parfois une succursale du confessionnal.

C'est pourquoi il y a à la cour les fortunes du dessous. Ce ne sont pas les moindres.

Si vous voulez, sous Louis XI, être grand, soyez Pierre de Rohan, maréchal de France; si vous voulez, être influent, soyez Olivier le Daim, barbier, Si vous voulez, sous Marie de Médicis, être glorieux, soyez Sillery, chancelier; si vous voulez être considérable, soyez la Hannon, femme de chambre. Si vous voulez, sous Louis XV, être illustre, soyez Choiseul, ministre; si vous voulez être redoutable, soyez Lebel, valet. Étant donné Louis XIV, Bontemps qui lui fait son lit est plus puissant que Louvois qui lui fait ses armées et que Turenne qui lui fait ses victoires. De Richelieu ôtez le père Joseph, voilà Richelieu presque vide. Il a de moins le mystère. L'éminence rouge est superbe, l'éminence grise est terrible. Être un ver, quelle force! Tous les Narvaez amalgamés avec tous les O'Donnell font moins de besogne qu'une soeur Patrocinio.

Par exemple, la condition de cette puissance, c'est la petitesse.

Si vous voulez rester fort, restez chétif. Soyez le néant. Le serpent au repos, couché en rond, figure à la fois l'infini et zéro.

Une de ces fortunes vipérines était échue à Barkilphedro.

Il s'était glissé où il voulait.

Les bêtes plates entrent partout. Louis XIV avait des punaises dans son lit et des jésuites dans sa politique.

D'incompatibilité, point.

En ce monde tout est pendule. Graviter, c'est osciller. Un pôle vaut l'autre. François Ier veut Triboulet; Louis XV veut Lebel.

Il existe une affinité profonde entre cette extrême hauteur et cet extrême abaissement.

C'est l'abaissement qui dirige. Rien de plus aisé à comprendre.

Qui est dessous tient les fils.

Pas de position plus commode.

On est l'oeil, et on a l'oreille.

On est l'oeil du gouvernement.

On a l'oreille du roi.

Avoir l'oreille du roi, c'est tirer et pousser à sa fantaisie le verrou de la conscience royale, et fourrer dans cette conscience ce qu'on veut. L'esprit du roi, c'est votre armoire. Si vous êtes chiffonnier, c'est votre hotte. L'oreille des rois n'est pas aux rois; c'est ce qui fait qu'en somme ces pauvres diables sont peu responsables. Qui ne possède pas sa pensée, ne possède pas son action. Un roi, cela obéit.

A quoi?

A une mauvaise âme quelconque qui du dehors lui bourdonne dans l'oreille. Mouche sombre de l'abîme.

Ce bourdonnement commande. Un règne est une dictée.

La voix haute, c'est le souverain; la voix basse, c'est la souveraineté.

Ceux qui dans un règne savent distinguer cette voix basse et entendre ce qu'elle souffle à la voix haute, sont les vrais historiens.

IX

HAÏR EST AUSSI FORT QU’AIMER

La reine Anne avait autour d’elle plusieurs de ces voix basses.

Barkilphedro en était une.

Outre la reine, il travaillait, influençait et pratiquait sourdement lady Josiane et lord David. Nous l’avons dit, il parlait bas à trois oreilles. Une oreille de plus que Dangeau.

Dangeau ne parlait bas qu’à deux, du temps où, passant sa tête entre Louis XIV épris d’Henriette sa belle-soeur, et Henriette éprise de Louis XIV son beau-frère, secrétaire de Louis à l’insu d’Henriette et d’Henriette à l’insu de Louis, situé au beau milieu de l’amour des deux marionnettes, il faisait les demandes et les réponses.

Barkilphedro était si riant, si acceptant, si incapable de prendre la défense de qui que ce soit, si peu dévoué au fond, si laid, si méchant, qu’il était tout simple qu’une personne royale en vînt à ne pouvoir se passer de lui. Quand Anne eut gouté de Barkilphedro, elle ne voulut pas d’autre flatteur. Il la flattait comme on flattait Louis le Grand, par la piqûre autrui. — Le roi étant ignorant, dit madame de Montchevreuil, on est obligé de bafouer les savants.

Empoisonner de temps en temps la piqûre, c’est le comble de l’art. Néron aime à voir travailler Locuste.

Les palais royaux sont très pénétrables; ces madrépores ont une voirie intérieure vite devinée, pratiquée, fouillée, et au besoin évidée, par ce rongeur qu’on nomme le courtisan. Un prétexte pour entrer suffit. Barkilphedro ayant ce prétexte, sa charge, fut en très peu de temps chez la reine ce qu’il était chez la duchesse Josiane, l’animal domestique indispensable. Un mot qu’il hasarda un jour le mit tout de suite au fait de la reine; il sut à quoi s’en tenir sur la bonté de sa majesté. La reine aimait beaucoup son lord stewart, William Cavendish, duc de Devonshire, qui était très imbécile. Ce lord, qui avait tous les grades d’Oxford et ne savait pas l’orthographe, fit un beau matin la bêtise de mourir. Mourir, c’est fort imprudent à la cour, car personne ne se gêne plus pour parler de vous. La reine, Barkilphedro présent, se lamenta, et finit par s’écrier en soupirant: —

C’est dommage que tant de vertus fussent portées et servies par une si pauvre intelligence!

— Dieu veuille avoir son âne! murmura Barkilpbedro, à demi-voix et en français.

La reine sourit. Barkilphedro enregistra ce sourire.

Il en conclut: Mordre plaît.

Congé était donné à sa malice.

A partir de ce jour, il fourra sa curiosité partout, sa malignit aussi. On le laissait faire, tant on le craignait. Qui fait rire le roi fait trembler le reste.

C’était un puissant drôle.

Il faisait chaque jour des pas en avant, sous terre. On avait besoin de Barkilphedro. Plusieurs grands l’honoraient de leur confiance au point de le charger dans l’occasion d’une commission honteuse.

La cour est un engrenage. Barkilphedro y devint moteur.

Avez-vous remarqué dans certains mécanismes la petitesse de la roue motrice?

Josiane, en particulier, qui utilisait, nous l’avons indiqué, le talent d’espion de Barkilphedro, avait en lui une telle confiance, qu’elle n’avait pas hésité à lui remettre une des clefs secrètes de son appartement, au moyen de laquelle il pouvait entrer chez elle à toute heure. Cette excessive livraison de sa vie intime était une mode au dix-septième siècle.

Cela s’appelait: donner la clef. Josiane avait donné deux de ces clefs de confiance; lord David avait l’une, Barkilphedro avait l’autre.

Du reste, pénétrer d’emblée jusqu’aux chambres à coucher était dans les vieilles moeurs une chose nullement surprenante. De l des incidents. La Ferté, tirant brusquement les rideaux du lit de mademoiselle Lafont, y trouvait Sainson, mousquetaire noir, etc., etc.

Barkilphedro excellait à faire de ces découvertes sournoises qui subordonnent et soumettent les grands aux petits. Sa marche dans l’ombre était tortueuse, douce et savante. Comme tout espion parfait, il était composé d’une inclémence de bourreau et d’une patience de micrographe.

Il était courtisan né. Tout courtisan est un noctambule. Le courtisan rôde dans cette nuit qu’on appelle la toute-puisssance. Il a une lanterne sourde à la main.

Il éclaire le point qu’il veut, et reste ténébreux. Ce qu’il cherche avec cette lanterne, ce n’est pas un homme; c’est une bête. Ce qu’il trouve, c’est le roi.

Les rois n'aiment pas qu'on prétende être grand autour d'eux.
L'ironie à qui n'est pas eux les charme. Le talent de Barkilphedro consistait en un rapetissement perpétuel des lords et des princes, au profit de la majesté royale, grandie d'autant.

La clef intime qu'avait Barkilphedro était faite, ayant deux jeux, un à chaque extrémité, de façon à pouvoir ouvrir les petits appartements dans les deux résidences favorites de Josiane, Hunkerville-house à Londres, Corleone-lodge à Windsor. Ces deux hôtels faisaient partie de l'héritage Clancharlie.

Hunkerville-house confinait à Oldgate. Oldgate à Londres était une porte par où l'on venait de Harwick, et où l'on voyait une statue de Charles II ayant sur sa tête un ange peint, et sous ses pieds un lion et une licorne sculptés. De Hunkerville-house, par le vent d'est, on entendait le carillon de Sainte-Marylebone.

Corleone-lodge était un palais florentin en brique et en pierre avec colonnade de marbre, bâti sur pilotis à Windsor, au bout du pont de bois, et ayant une des plus superbes cours d'honneur de l'Angleterre.

Dans ce dernier palais, contigu au château de Windsor, Josiane était à portée de la reine. Josiane s'y plaisait néanmoins.

Presque rien au dehors, toute en racines, telle était l'influence de Barkilphedro sur la reine. Rien de plus difficile à arracher que ces mauvaises herbes de cour; elles s'enfoncent très avant et n'offrent aucune prise extérieure. Sarcler Roquelaure, Triboulet ou Brummel, est presque impossible.

De jour en jour, et de plus en plus, la reine Anne prenait en gr Barkilphedro.

Sarah Jennings est célèbre; Barkilphedro est inconnu; sa faveur resta obscure. Ce nom, Barkilphedro, n'est pas arrivé jusqu' l'histoire. Toutes les taupes ne sont pas prises par le taupier.

Barkilphedro, ancien candidat clergyman, avait un peu étudi tout; tout effleuré donne pour résultat rien. On peut être victime de l'*omnis res scibilis*. Avoir sous le crâne le tonneau des Danaïdes, c'est le malheur de toute une race de savants qu'on peut appeler les stériles. Ce que Barkilphedro avait mis dans son cerveau l'avait laissé vide.

L'esprit, comme la nature, a horreur du vide. Dans le vide, la nature met l'amour; l'esprit, souvent, y met la haine. La haine occupe.

Là haine pour la haine existe. L’art pour l’art est dans la nature, plus qu’on ne croit.

On hait. Il faut bien faire quelque chose.

La haine gratuite, mot formidable. Cela veut dire la haine qui est à elle-même son propre paiement.

L’ours vit de se lécher la griffe.

Indéfiniment, non. Cette griffe, il faut la ravitailler. Il faut mettre quelque chose dessous.

Haïr indistinctement est doux et suffit quelque temps; mais il faut finir par avoir un objet. Une animosité diffuse sur la création épuise, comme toute jouissance solitaire. La haine sans objet ressemble au tir sans cible. Ce qui intéresse le jeu, c’est un coeur à percer.

On ne peut pas haïr uniquement pour l’honneur. Il faut un assaisonnement, un homme, une femme, quelqu’un à détruire.

Ce service d’intéresser le jeu, d’offrir un but, de passionner la haine en la fixant, d’amuser le chasseur par la vue de la proie vivante, de faire espérer au guetteur le bouillonnement tiède et fumant du sang qui va couler, d’épanouir l’oiseleur par la crédulité inutilement ailée de l’alouette, d’être une bête couvée à son insu pour le meurtre par un esprit, ce service exquis et horrible dont n’a pas conscience celui qui le rend, Josiane le rendit à Barkilphedro.

La pensée est un projectile. Barkilphedro, dès le premier jour, s’était mis à viser Josiane avec les mauvaises intentions qu’il avait dans l’esprit. Une intention et une escopette, cela se ressemble. Barkilphedro se tenait en arrêt, dirigeant contre la duchesse toute sa méchanceté secrète. Cela vous étonne? Que vous a fait l’oiseau à qui vous tirez un coup de fusil? C’est pour le manger, dites-vous. Barkilphedro aussi.

Josiane ne pouvait guère être frappée au coeur, l’endroit où est une énigme est difficilement vulnérable mais elle pouvait être atteinte à la tête, c’est-à-dire à l’orgueil.

C’est par là qu’elle se croyait forte et qu’elle était faible.

Barkilphedro s’en était rendu compte.

Si Josiane avait pu voir clair dans la nuit de Barkilphedro, si elle avait pu distinguer ce qui était embusqué derrière ce sourire, cette fière personne, si haut située, eût probablement tremblé. Heureusement pour la tranquillité de ses sommeils, elle ignorait absolument ce qu’il y avait dans cet homme.

L’inattendu fuse on ne sait d’où. Les profonds dessous de la vie sont redoutables. Il n’y a point de haine petite. La haine est toujours énorme. Elle conserve sa stature dans le plus petit être, et reste monstre. Une haine est toute la haine. Un éléphant que hait une fourmi est en danger.

Même avant d’avoir frappé, Barkilphedro sentait avec joie un commencement de saveur de l’action mauvaise qu’il voulait commettre. Il ne savait encore ce qu’il ferait contre Josiane.

Mais il était décidé à faire quelque chose. C’était déj beaucoup qu’un tel parti pris.

Anéantir Josiane, c’eût été trop de succès. Il ne l’espérait point. Mais l’humilier, l’amoindrir, la désoler, rougir de larmes de rage ces yeux superbes, voilà une réussite. Il y comptait. Tenace, appliqué, fidèle au tourment d’autrui, inarrachable, la nature ne l’avait pas fait ainsi pour rien. Il entendait bien trouver le défaut de l’armure d’or de Josiane, et faire ruisseler le sang de celte olympienne. Quel bénéfice, insistons-y, y avait-il là pour lui? Un bénéfice énorme. Faire du mal à qui nous a fait du bien.

Qu’est-ce qu’un envieux? C’est un ingrat. Il déteste la lumière qui l’éclaire et le réchauffe. Zoile hait ce bienfait, Homère.

Faire subir à Josiane ce qu’on appellerait aujourd’hui une vivisection, l’avoir, toute convulsive, sur sa table d’anatomie, la disséquer, vivante, à loisir dans une chirurgie quelconque, la déchiqueter en amateur pendant qu’elle hurlerait, ce rêve charmait Barkilphedro.

Pour arriver à ce résultat, il eût fallu souffrir un peu, qu’il l’eût trouvé bon. On peut se pincer à sa tenaille. Le couteau en se reployant vous coupe les doigts; qu’importe! Être un peu pris dans la torture de Josiane lui eût été égal. Le bourreau, manieur de fer rouge, a sa part de brûlure, et n’y prend pas garde. Parce que l’autre souffre davantage, on ne sent rien.

Voir le supplicié se tordre vous ôte votre douleur.

Fais ce qui nuit, advienne que pourra.

La construction du mal d’autrui se complique d’une acceptation de responsabilité obscure. On se risque soi-même dans le danger qu’on fait courir à un autre, tant les enchaînements de tout peuvent amener d’écroulements inattendus. Ceci n’arrête point le vrai méchant. Il ressent en joie ce que le patient éprouve en angoisse. Il a le chatouillement de ce déchirement; l’homme mauvais ne s’épanouit qu’affreusement. Le supplice se réverbère sur lui en bien-être. Le duc d’Albe se chauffait les mains aux bûchers. Foyer, douleur; reflet, plaisir. Que de telles transpositions soient possibles, cela fait frissonner. Notre côté ténèbres est insondable. *Supplice exquis*, l'expression est dans Bodin, ayant peut-être ce triple sens terrible: recherche du tourment, souffrance du tourmenté, volupté du tourmenteur. Ambition, appétit, tous ces mots signifient quelqu'un sacrifié à quelqu'un satisfait. Chose triste, que l'espérance puisse être perverse. En vouloir à une créature, c'est lui vouloir du mal. Pourquoi pas du bien? Serait-ce que le principal versant de notre volonté serait du côté du mal? Un des plus rudes labeurs du juste, c'est de s'extraire continuellement de l'âme une malveillance difficilement épuisable. Presque toutes nos convoitises, examinées, contiennent de l'inavouable. Pour le méchant complet, et cette perfection hideuse existe, Tant pis pour les autres signifie Tant mieux pour moi. Ombre de l'homme. Cavernes.

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Josiane avait cette plénitude de sécurité que donne l'orgueil ignorant, fait du mépris de tout. La faculté féminine de dédaigner est extraordinaire. Un dédain inconscient, involontaire et confiant, c'était là Josiane. Barkilphedro était pour elle à peu près une chose. On l'eût bien étonnée, si on lui eût dit que Barkilphedro, cela existait.

Elle allait, venait et riait, devant cet homme qui la contemplait obliquement.

Lui, pensif, il épiait une occasion.

A mesure qu'il attendait, sa détermination de jeter dans la vie de celte femme un désespoir quelconque, augmentait.

Affût inexorable.

D'ailleurs il se donnait à lui-même d'excellentes raisons. Il ne faut pas croire que les coquins ne s'estiment pas. Ils se rendent des comptes dans des monologues altiers, et ils le prennent de très haut. Comment! cette Josiane lui avait fait l'aumône! Elle avait émietté sur lui, comme sur un mendiant, quelques liards de sa colossale richesse! Elle l'avait rivé et cloué à une fonclion inepte! Si, lui Barkilphedro, presque homme d'église, capacité variée et profonde, personnage docte, ayant l'étoffe d'un révérend, il avait pour emploi d'enregistrer des tessons bons à racler les pustules de Job, s'il passait sa vie dans un galetas de greffe à déboucher gravement de stupides bouteilles incrustées de toutes les saletés de la mer, et déchiffrer des parchemins moisis, des pourritures de grimoires, des ordures de testaments, on ne sait quelles balivernes illisibles, c’était la faute de cette Josiane! Comment! cette créature le tutoyait!

Et il ne se vengerait pas!

Et il ne punirait pas cette espèce!

Ah ça mais! il n’y aurait donc plus de justice ici-bas!

X

FLAMBOIEMENTS QU’ON VERRAIT SI L’HOMME ÉTAIT TRANSPARENT

Quoi! cette femme, cette extravagante, cette songeuse lubrique, vierge jusqu’à l’occasion, ce morceau de chair n’ayant pas encore fait sa livraison, cette effronterie à couronne princière, cette Diane par orgueil, pas encore prise par le premier venu, soit, peut-être, on le dit, j’y consens, faute d’un hasard, cete bâtarde d’une canaille de roi qui n’avait pas eu l’esprit de rester en place, cette duchesse de raccroc, qui, grande dame, jouait à la déesse, et qui, pauvre, eût été fille publique, cette lady à peu près, cette voleuse des biens d’un proscrit, cette hautaine gueuse, parce qu’un jour, lui Barkilphedro, n’avait pas de quoi dîner, et qu’il était sans asile, avait eu l’impudence de l’asseoir chez elle à un bout de table, et de le nicher dans un trou quelconque de son insupportable palais, ou ça? n’importe où, peut-être au grenier, peut-être à la cave, qu’est-ce que cela fait? un peu mieux que les valets, un peu plus mal que les chevaux! Elle avait abusé de sa détresse, à lui, Barkilphedro, pour se dépêcher de lui rendre traîtreusement service, ce que font les riches afin d’humilier les pauvres, et de se les attacher comme des bassets qu’on mène en laisse! Qu’est-ce que ce service lui coûtait d’ailleurs? Un service vaut ce qu’il coûte. Elle avait des chambres de trop dans sa maison. Venir en aide à Barkilphedro! le bel effort qu’elle avait fait là!

avait-elle mangé une cuillerée de soupe à la tortue de moins?

s’élait-elle privée de quelque chose dans le débordement haïssable de son superflu? Non. Elle avait ajouté à ce superflu une vanité, un objet de luxe, une bonne action en bague au doigt, un homme d’esprit secouru, un clergyman patronné! Elle pouvait prendre des airs, dire: je prodigue les bienfaits, je donne la becquée à des gens de lettres, faire sa protectrice! Est-il heureux de m’avoir trouvée, ce misérable! Quelle amie des arts je suis! Le tout pour avoir dressé un lit de sangle dans un méchant bouge sous les combles! Quant à la place à l’amirauté, Barkilphedro la tenait de Josiane, parbleu! jolie fonction!

Josiane avait fait Barkilphedro ce qu’il était. Elle l’avait créé, soit. Oui, créé rien. Moins que rien. Car il se sentait, dans cette charge ridicule, ployé, ankylosé et contrefait. Que devait-il à Josiane? La reconnaissance du bossu pour sa mère qui l’a fait difforme. Voilà ces privilégiés, ces gens comblés, ces parvenus, ces préférés de la hideuse marâtre fortune! Et l’homme à talents, et Barkilphedro, était forcé de se ranger dans les escaliers, de saluer des laquais, de grimper le soir un tas d’étages, et d’être courtois, empressé, gracieux, déférent, agréable, et d’avoir toujours sur le museau une grimace respectueuse! S’il n’y a pas de quoi grincer de rage! Et pendant ce temps-la elle se mettait des perles au cou, et elle prenait des poses d’amoureuse avec son imbécile de lord David Dirry-Moir, la drôlesse!

Ne vous laissez jamais rendre service. On en abusera. Ne vous laissez pas prendre en délit d’inanition, On vous soulagerait.

Parce qu’il était sans pain, cette femme avait trouvé le prétexte suffisant pour lui donner à manger! Désormais il était son domestique! Une défaillance d’estomac, et vous voilà à la chaîne pour la vie! Être obligé, c’est être exploité. Les heureux, les puissants, profitent du moment où vous tendez la main pour vous mettre un sou dedans, et de la minute où vous êtes lâche pour vous faire esclave, et esclave de la pire espèce, esclave d’une charité, esclave forcé d’aimer! quelle infamie! quelle indélicatesse, quelle surprise à notre fierté! Et c’est fini, vous voilà condamné, à perpétuité, à trouver bon cet homme, trouver belle cette femme, à rester au second plan du subalterne, à approuver, à applaudir, à admirer, à encenser, à vous prosterner, à mettre à vos rotules le calus de l’agenouillement, à sucrer vos paroles, quand vous êtes rongé de colère, quand vous mâchez des cris de fureur, et quand vous avez, en vous plus de soulèvement sauvage et plus d’écume amère que l’océan.

C’est ainsi que les riches font prisonnier le pauvre.

Cette glu de la bonne action commise sur vous vous barbouille et vous embourbe pour toujours.

Une aumône est irrémédiable. Reconnaissance, c’est paralysie.

Le bienfait a une adhérence visqueuse et répugnante qui vous ôte vos libres mouvements. Les odieux êtres opulents et gavés dont la pitié a sévi sur vous le savent. C’est dit. Vous êtes leur chose. Ils vous ont acheté. Combien? un os, qu’ils ont retir à leur chien pour vous l’offrir. Ils vous ont lancé cet os à la tête. Vous avez été lapidé autant que secouru. C’est égal.

Avez-vous rongé l’os, oui ou non? Vous avez eu aussi votre part de la niche. Donc remerciez. Remerciez à jamais. Adorez, vos maîtres. Génuflexion indéfinie. Le bienfait implique un sous-entendu d’infériorité acceptée par vous. Ils exigent que vous vous sentiez pauvre diable et que vous les sentiez dieux.

Votre diminution les augmente. Votre courbure les redresse. Il y a dans leur son de voix une douce pointe impertinente. Leurs événements de famille, mariages, baptêmes, la femelle pleine, les petits qu'on met bas, cela vous regarde. Il leur naît un louveteau, bien, vous composerez un sonnet. Vous êtes poëte pour être plat. Si ce n'est pas à faire crouler les astres! Un peu plus, ils vous feraient user leurs vieux souliers!

— Qu'est-ce que vous avez donc là chez vous, ma chère? qu'il est laid! qu'est-ce que c'est que cet homme? — Je ne sais pas, c'est un grimaud que je nourris. — Ainsi dialoguent ces dindes. Sans même baisser la voix. Vous entendez, et vous restez mécaniquement aimable. Du reste, si vous êtes malade, vos maîtres vous envoient le médecin. Pas le leur. Dans l'occasion, ils s'informent. N'étant pas de la même espèce que vous, et l'inaccessible étant de leur côté, ils sont affables. Leur escarpement les fait abordables. Ils savent que le plain-pied est impossible. A force de dédain, ils sont polis. A table, ils vous font un petit signe de tête. Quelquefois ils savent l'orthographe de votre nom. Ils ne vous font pas sentir qu'ils sont vos protecteurs autrement qu'en marchant naïvement sur tout ce que vous avez de susceptible et de délicat. Ils vous traitent avec bonté!

Est-ce assez abominable?

Certes, il était urgent de châtier la Josiane. Il fallait lui apprendre à qui elle avait eu affaire! Ah! messieurs les riches, parce que vous ne pouvez pas tout consommer, parce que l'opulence aboutirait à l'indigestion, vu la petitesse de vos estomacs égaux aux nôtres, après tout, parce qu'il vaut mieux distribuer les restes que les perdre, vous érigez, cette pâtée jetée aux pauvres en magnificence! Ah! vous nous donnez du pain, vous nous donnez, un asile, vous nous donnez, des vêtements, vous nous donnez un emploi, et vous poussez l'audace, la folie, la cruauté, l'ineptie et l'absurdité jusqu'à croire que nous sommes vos obligés! Ce pain, c'est un pain de servitude, cet asile, c'est une chambre de valet, ces vêtements, c'est une livrée, cet emploi, c'est une dérision, payée, soit, mais abrutissante! Ah! vous vous croyez le droit de nous flétrir avec du logement et de la nourriture, vous vous imaginez, que nous vous sommes redevables, et vous comptez sur de la reconnaissance! Eh bien! nous vous mangerons le ventre! Eh bien! nous vous détripaillerons, belle madame, et nous vous dévorerons toute en vie, et nous vous couperons les attaches du coeur avec nos dents!

Cette Josiane! n’était-ce pas monstrueux? quel mérite avait-elle? Elle avait fait ce chef-d’oeuvre de venir au monde en témoignage de la bêtise de son père et de la honte de sa mère, elle nous faisait la grâce d’exister, et cette complaisance qu’elle avait d’être un scandale public, on la lui payait des millions, elle avait des terres et des châteaux, des garennes, des chasses, des lacs, des forêts, est-ce que je sais, moi? et avec cela elle faisait sa sotte! et on lui adressait des vers!

et lui, Barkilphedro, qui avait étudié et travaillé, qui s’était donné de la peine, qui s’était fourré de gros livres dans les yeux et dans la cervelle, qui avait pourri dans les bouquins et dans la science, qui avait énormément d’esprit, qui commanderait très bien des armées, qui écrirait des tragédies comme Otway et Dryden, s’il voulait, lui qui était fait pour être empereur, il avait été réduit à permettre à cette rien du tout de l’empêcher de crever de faim! L’usurpation de ces riches, exécrables élus du hasard, peut-elle aller plus loin! Faire semblant d’être généreux avec nous, et nous protéger, et nous sourire à nous qui boirions leur sang et qui nous lècherions les lèvres ensuite!

Que la basse femme de cour ait l’odieuse puissance d’être bienfaitrice, et que l’homme supérieur puisse être condamn ramasser de telles bribes tombant d’une telle main, quelle plus épouvantable iniquité! Et quelle sociélé que celle qui a à ce point pour base la disproportion et l’injustice! Ne serait-ce pas le cas de tout prendre par les quatre coins, et d’envoyer pêle-mêle au plafond la nappe et le festin et l’orgie, et l’ivresse et l’ivrognerie, et les convives, et ceux qui sont deux coudes sur la table, et ceux qui sont à quatre pattes dessous, et les insolents qui donnent et les idiots qui acceptent, et de recracher tout au nez de Dieu, et de jeter au ciel toute la terre! En attendant, enfonçons nos griffes dans Josiane.

Ainsi songeait Barkilphedro. C’étaient là les rugissements qu’il avait dans l’âme. C’est l’habitude de l’envieux de s’absoudre en amalgamant à son grief personnel le mal public. Toutes les formes farouches des passions haineuses allaient et venaient dans cette intelligence féroce. A l’angle des vieilles mappemondes du quinzième siècle, on trouve un large espace vague sans forme et sans nom où sont écrits ces trois mots: *Hic sunt leones.* Ce coin sombre est aussi dans l’homme. Les passions rôdent et grondent quelque part en nous, et l’on peut dire aussi d’un côt obscur de notre âme: Il y a ici des lions.

Cet échafaudage de raisonnements fauves était-il absolument absurde? cela manquait-il d'un certain jugement? Il faut bien le dire, non.

Il est effrayant de penser que cette chose qu'on a en soi, le jugement, n'est pas la justice. Le jugement, c'est le relatif.
La justice, c'est l'absolu. Réfléchissez à la différence entre un juge et un juste.

Les méchants malmènent la conscience avec autorité. Il y a une gymnastique du faux. Un sophiste est un faussaire, et dans l'occasion ce faussaire brutalise le bon sens. Une certaine logique très souple, très implacable et très agile est au service du mal et excelle à meurtrir la vérité dans les ténèbres. Coups de poing sinistres de Satan à Dieu.

Tel sophiste, admiré des niais, n'a pas d'autre gloire que d'avoir fait des «bleus» à la conscience humaine.

L'affligeant, c'est que Barkilphedro pressentait un avortemcnt.
Il entreprenait un vaste travail, et en somme, il le craignait du moins, pour peu de ravage. Être un homme corrosif, avoir en soi une volonté d'acier, une haine de diamant, une curiosité ardente de la catastrophe, et ne rien brûler, ne rien décapiter, ne rien exterminer! Être ce qu'il était, une force de dévastation, une animosité vorace, un rongeur du bonheur d'autrui, avoir ét créé — (car il y a un créateur, le diable ou Dieu, n'importe qui!) avoir été créé de toutes pièces Barkilphedro pour ne réaliser peut-être qu'une chiquenaude; est-ce possible! Barkilphedro manquerait son coup! Être un ressort à lancer des quartiers de rocher, et lâcher toute sa détente pour faire à une mijaurée une bosse au front! une catapulte faisant le dégât d'une pichenette!
accomplir une besogne de Sisyphe pour un résultat de fourmi!
suer toute la haine pour à peu près rien! Est-ce assez humiliant quand on est un mécanisme d'hostilité à broyer le monde! Mettre en mouvement tous ses engrenages, faire dans l'ombre un fracas de machine de Marly, pour réussir peut-être à pincer le bout d'un petit doigt rose! Il allait tourner et retourner des blocs pour arriver, qui sait? à rider un peu la surface plate de la cour!
Dieu a cette manie de dépenser grandement les forces. Un remuement de montagne aboutit au déplacement d'une taupinière.

En outre, la cour étant donnée, terrain bizarre, rien n'est plus dangereux que de viser son ennemi, et de le manquer. D'abord cela vous démasque à votre ennemi, et cela l'irrite; ensuite, et surtout, cela déplaît au maître. Les rois goûtent peu les maladroits. Pas de contusions; pas de gourmades laides.

Égorgez, tout le monde, ne faites saigner du nez à personne. Qui tue est habile, qui blesse est inepte. Les rois n'aiment pas qu'on écloppe leurs domestiques. Ils vous en veulent si vous fêlez une porcelaine sur leur cheminée ou un courtisan dans leur cortège. La cour doit rester propre. Cassez, et remplacez; c'est bien.

Ceci se concilie du reste parfaitement avec le goût des médisances qu'ont les princes. Dites du mal, n'en faites point.
Ou, si vous en faites, que ce soit en grand.

Poignardez, mais n'égratignez pas. A moins que l'épingle ne soit empoisonnée. Circonstance atténuante. C'était, rappelons-le, le cas de Barkilphedro.

Tout pygmée haineux est la fiole où est enfermé le dragon de Salomon. Fiole microscopique, dragon démesuré. Condensation formidable attendant l'heure gigantesque de la dilatation. Ennui consolé par la préméditation de l'explosion. Le contenu est plus grand que le contenant. Un géant latent, quelle chose étrange!
un acarus dans lequel il y a une hydre! Être cette affreuse boîte à surprise, avoir en soi Léviathan, c'est pour le nain une torture et une volupté.

Aussi rien n'eût fait lâcher prise à Barkilphedro. Il attendait son heure. Viendrait-elle? Qu'importe? il l'attendait. Quand on est très mauvais, l'amour-propre s'en mêle. Faire des trous et des sapes à une fortune de cour, plus haute que nous, la miner à ses risques et périls, tout souterrain et tout caché qu'on est, insistons-y, c'est intéressant. On se passionne à un tel jeu. On s'éprend de cela comme d'un poëme épique qu'on ferait. Être très petit et s'attaquer à quelqu'un de très grand est une action d'éclat. C'est beau d'être la puce d'un lion.

L'altière bête se sent piquée et dépense son énorme colère contre l'atome. Un tigre rencontré l'ennuierait moins. Et voilà les rôles changés. Le lion humilié a dans sa chair le dard de l'insecte, et la puce peut dire: j'ai en moi du sang de lion.

Pourtant, ce n'étaient là pour l'orgueil de Barkilphedro que de demi-apaisements. Consolations. Palliatifs. Taquiner est une chose, torturer vaudrait mieux. Barkilphedro, pensée désagréable qui lui revenait sans cesse, n'aurait vraisemblablement pas d'autre succès que d'entamer chétivement l'épiderme de Josiane.
Que pouvait-il espérer de plus, lui si infime contre elle si radieuse? Une égratignure, que c'est peu, à qui voudrait toute la pourpre de l'écorchure

vive, et les rugissements de la femme plus que nue, n'ayant même plus cette chemise, la peau! avec de telles envies, que c'est fâcheux d'être impuissant! Hélas! rien n'est parfait.

En somme il se résignait. Ne pouvant mieux, il ne rêvait que la moitié de son rêve. Faire une farce noire, c'est là un but après tout.

Celui qui se venge d'un bienfait, quel homme! Barkilphedro était ce colosse. Ordinairement l'ingratitude est de l'oubli; chez ce privilégié du mal, elle était de la fureur. L'ingrat vulgaire est rempli de cendre. De quoi était plein Barkilphedro? d'une fournaise. Fournaise murée de haine, de colère, de silence, de rancune, attendant pour combustible Josiane. Jamais un homme n'avait à ce point abhorré une femme sans raison. Quelle chose terrible! Elle était son insomnie, sa préoccupation, son ennui, sa rage.

Peut-être en était-il un peu amoureux.

XI

BARKILPHEDRO EN EMBUSCADE

Trouver l’endroit sensible de Josiane et la frapper là; telle était, pour toutes les causes que nous venons de dire, la volont imperturbable de Barkilphedro.

Vouloir ne suffit pas; il faut pouvoir.

Comment s’y prendre?

Là était la question.

Les chenapans vulgaires font soigneusement le scenario de la coquinerie qu’ils veulent commettre. Ils ne se sentent pas assez forts pour saisir l’incident au passage, pour en prendre possession de gré ou de force, et pour le contraindre à les servir. De là des combinaisons préliminaires que les méchants profonds dédaignent. Les méchants profonds ont pour tout *a priori* leur méchanceté; ils se bornent à s’armer de toutes pièces, préparent plusieurs en-cas variés, et, comme Barkilphedro, épient tout bonnement l’occasion. Ils savent qu’un plan façonné d’avance court risque de mal s’emboîter dans l’événement qui se présentera. On ne se rend pas comme cela maître du possible et l’on n’en fait point ce qu’on veut. On n’a point de pourparler préalable avec la destinée. Demain ne nous obéit pas. Le hasard a une certaine indiscipline.

Aussi le guettent-ils pour lui demander sans préambule, d’autorité, et sur-le-champ, sa collaboration. Pas de plan, pas d’épure, pas de maquette, pas de soulier tout fait chaussant mal l’inattendu. Ils plongent à pic dans la noirceur. La mise profit immédiate et rapide du fait quelconque qui peut aider, c’est là l’habileté qui distingue le méchant efficace, et qui élève le coquin à la dignité de démon. Brusquer le sort, c’est le génie.

Le vrai scélérat vous frappe comme une fronde, avec le premier caillou venu.

Les malfaiteurs capables comptent sur l’imprévu, cet auxiliaire stupéfait de tant de crimes.

Empoigner l’incident, sauter dessus; il n’y a pas d’autre Art poétique pour ce genre de talent.

Et, en attendant, savoir à qui l’on a affaire. Sonder le terrain.

Pour Barkilphedro, le terrain était la reine Anne.

Barkilphedro approchait la reine.

De si près que, parfois, il s'imaginait entendre les monologues de sa majesté.

Quelquefois, il assistait, point compté, aux conversations des deux soeurs. On ne lui défendait pas le glissement d'un mot. Il en profitait pour s'amoindrir. Façon d'inspirer confiance.

C'est ainsi qu'un jour, à Hampton-Court, dans le jardin, étant derrière la duchesse, qui était derrière la reine, il entendit Anne, se conformant lourdement à la mode, émettre des sentences.

— Les bêtes sont heureuses, disait la reine, elles ne risquent pas d'aller en enfer.

— Elles y sont, répondit Josiane.

Cette réponse, qui substituait brusquement la philosophie à la religion, déplut. Si par hasard c'était profond, Anne se sentait choquée.

— Ma chère, dit-elle à Josiane, nous parlons de l'enfer comme deux sottes. Demandons à Barkilphedro ce qu'il en est. Il doit savoir ces choses-là.

— Comme diable? demanda Josiane.

— Comme bête, répondit Barkilphedro.

Et il salua.

— Madame, dit la reine à Josiane, il a plus d'esprit que nous.

Pour un homme comme Barkilphedro, approcher la reine, c'était la tenir. Il pouvait dire: Je l'ai. Maintenant il lui fallait la manière de s'en servir.

Il avait pied en cour. Être posté, c'est superbe. Aucune chance ne pouvait lui échapper. Plus d'une fois il avait fait sourire méchamment la reine. C'était avoir un permis de chasse.

Mais n'y avait-il aucun gibier réservé? Ce permis de chasse allait-il jusqu'à casser l'aile ou la patte à quelqu'un comme la propre soeur de sa majesté?

Premier point à éclaircir. La reine aimait-elle sa soeur?

Un faux pas peut tout perdre. Barkilphedro observait.

Avant d'entamer la partie, le joueur regarde ses cartes. Quels atouts a-t-il? Barkilphedro commença par examiner l'âge des deux femmes: Josiane, vingt-trois ans; Anne, quarante et un ans.

C'était bien. Il avait du jeu.

Le moment où la femme cesse de compter par printemps et commence à compter par hivers, est irritant. Sourde rancune contre le temps, qu'on a en soi. Les jeunes belles épanouies, parfums pour les autres, sont pour vous épines, et de toutes ces roses vous sentez la piqûre. Il semble que toute cette fraîcheur vous est prise, et que la beauté ne décroît en vous que parée qu'elle croît chez les autres.

Exploiter cette mauvaise humeur secrète, creuser la ride d'une femme de quarante ans qui est reine, cela était indiqu Barkilphedro.

L'envie excelle à exciter la jalousie comme le rat à faire sortir le crocodile.

Barkilphedro attachait sur Anne son regard magistral.

Il voyait dans la reine comme on voit dans une stagnation. Le marécage a sa transparence. Dans une eau sale on voit des vices; dans une eau trouble on voit des inepties. Anne n'était qu'une eau trouble.

Des embryons de sentiments et des larves d'idées se mouvaient dans cette cervelle épaisse.

C'était peu distinct. Cela avait à peine des contours.

C'étaient des réalités pourtant, mais informes. La reine pensait ceci. La reine désirait cela. Préciser quoi était difficile.

Les transformations confuses qui s'opèrent dans l'eau croupissante sont malaisées à étudier.

La reine, habituellement obscure, avait par instants des échappées bêtes et brusques. C'était là ce qu'il fallait saisir.

Il fallait la prendre sur le fait.

Qu'est-ce que la reine Anne, dans son for intérieur, voulait à la duchesse Josiane? Du bien, ou du mal?

Problème. Barkilphedro se le posa.

Ce problème résolu, on pourrait aller plus loin.

Divers hasards servirent Barkilphedro. Et surtout sa ténacité au guet.

Anne était, du côté de son mari, un peu parente de la nouvelle reine de Prusse, femme du roi aux cent chambellans, de laquelle elle avait un portrait peint sur émail d'après le procédé de Turquet de Mayerne. Cette reine de Prusse avait, elle aussi, une soeur cadette illégitime, la baronne Drika.

Un jour, Barkilphedro présent, Anne fit à l'ambassadeur de Prusse des questions sur cette Drika.

— On la dit riche?

— Très riche, répondit l'ambassadeur.

— Elle a des palais?

— Plus magnifiques que ceux de la reine sa soeur.

— Qui doit-elle épouser?

— Un très grand seigneur, le comte Gormo.

— Joli?

— Charmant.

— Elle est jeune?

— Toute jeune.

— Aussi belle que la reine.

L’ambassadeur baissa la voix et répondit:

— Plus belle.

— Ce qui est insolent, murmura Barkilphedro.

La reine eut un silence, puis s’écria:

— Ces bâtardes!

Barkilphedro nota ce pluriel.

Une autre fois, à une sortie de chapelle où Barkilphedro se tenait assez près déjà reine derrière les deux grooms de l’aumônerie, lord David Dirry-Moir, traversant des rangées de femmes, fit sensation par sa bonne mine. Sur son passage éclatait un brouhaha d’exclamations féminines: — Qu’il est élégant! — Qu’il est galant! — Qu’il a grand air! — Qu’il est beau!

— Comme c’est désagréable! grommela la reine.

Barkilphedro entendit.

Il était fixé.

On pouvait nuire à la duchesse sans déplaire à la reine.

Le premier problème était résolu.

Maintenant le deuxième se présentait.

Comment faire pour nuire à la duchesse?

Quelle ressource pouvait, pour un but si ardu, lui offrir son misérable emploi?

Aucune, évidemment.

XII

ÉCOSSE, IRLANDE ET ANGLETERRE

Indiquons un détail: Josiane «avait le tour».

On le comprendra en réfléchissant qu'elle était, quoique du petit côté, soeur de la reine, c'est-à-dire personne princière.

Avoir le tour. Qu'est cela?

Le vicomte de Saint-John — prononcez Bolingbroke — écrivait Thomas Lennard, comte de Sussex: «Deux choses font qu'on est grand. En Angleterre avoir le tour; en France avoir le pour.

Le pour, en France, c'était ceci: quand le roi était en voyage, le fourrier de la cour, le soir venu, au débotté à l'étape, assignait leur logement aux personnes suivant sa majesté. Parmi ces seigneurs, quelques-uns avaient un privilège immense: «Ils ont le *pour*, dit le Journal historique de l'année 1694, page 6, c'est-à-dire que le fourrier qui marque les logis met *Pour* avant leur nom, comme: *Pour M. le prince de Soubise*, au lieu que, quand il marque le logis d'une personne qui n'est point prince, il ne met point de *Pour*, mais simplement son nom, par exemple: *Le duc de Gesvres, le duc de Mazarin*, etc.» Ce *Pour* sur une porte indiquait un prince ou un favori. Favori, c'est pire que prince. Le roi accordait le *pour* comme le cordon bleu ou la pairie.

«Avoir le tour» en Angleterre était moins vaniteux, mais plus réel. C'était un signe de véritable approche de la personne régnante. Quiconque était, par naissance ou faveur, en posture de recevoir des communications directes de sa majesté, avait dans le mur de sa chambre de lit un tour où était ajusté un timbre.

Le timbre sonnait, le tour s'ouvrait, une missive royale apparaissait sur une assiette d'or ou sur un coussin de velours, puis le tour se refermait. C'était intime et solennel. Le mystérieux dans le familier. Le tour ne servait à aucun autre usage. Sa sonnerie annonçait un message royal. On ne voyait pas qui l'apportait. C'était du reste tout simplement un page de la reine ou du roi. Leicester avait le tour sous Elisabeth, et Buckingham sous Jacques Ier. Josiane l'avait sous Anne, quoique peu favorite. Qui avait le tour était comme quelqu'un qui serait en relation directe avec la petite poste du ciel, et chez qui Dieu enverrait de temps en temps son facteur porter une lettre. Pas d’exception plus enviée. Ce privilège entraînait plus de servilité. On en était un peu plus valet. A la cour, ce qui élève abaisse. «Avoir le tour», cela se disait en français; ce détail d’étiquette anglaise étant probablement une ancienne platitude française.

Lady Josiane, vierge pairesse comme Elisabeth avait été vierge reine, menait, tantôt à la ville, tantôt à la campagne, selon la saison, une existence quasi princière, et tenait à peu près une cour dont lord David était courtisan, avec plusieurs. N’étant pas encore mariés, lord David et lady Josiane pouvaient sans ridicule se montrer ensemble en public, ce qu’ils faisaient volontiers. Ils allaient souvent aux spectacles et aux courses dans le même carrosse et dans la même tribune. Le mariage, qui leur était permis et même imposé, les refroidissait; mais en somme leur attrait était de se voir. Les privautés permises aux «engaged» ont une frontière aisée à franchir. Ils s’en abstenaient, ce qui est facile étant de mauvais goût.

Les plus belles boxes d’alors avaient lieu à Lambeth, paroisse o le lord archevêque de Cantorbéry a un palais, quoique l’air y soit malsain, et une riche bibliothèque ouverte à de certaines heures aux honnêtes gens. Une fois, c’était en hiver, il y eut là, dans une prairie fermée à clef, un assaut de deux hommes auquel assista Josiane, menée par David. Elle avait demandé: Est-ce que les femmes sont admises? et David avait répondu: *Sunt faeminae magnates*. Traduction libre: *Pas les bourgeoises*. Traduction littérale: *Les grandes dames existent*. Une duchesse entre partout. C’est pourquoi lady Josiane vit la boxe.

Lady Josiane fit seulement la concession de se vêtir en cavalier, chose fort usitée alors. Les femmes ne voyageaient guère autrement. Sur six personnes que contenait le coach de Windsor, il était rare qu’il n’y eût point une ou deux femmes habillées en hommes. C’était signe de gentry.

Lord David, étant en compagnie d’une femme, ne pouvait figurer dans le match, et devait rester simple assistant.

Lady Josiane ne trahissait sa qualité que par ceci, qu’elle regardait à travers une lorgnette, ce qui était acte de gentilhomme.

La «noble rencontre» était présidée par lord Germaine, arrière-grand-père ou grand-oncle de ce lord Germaine qui, vers la fin du dix-huitième siècle, fut colonel, lâcha pied dans une bataille, puis fut ministre de la guerre, et n’échappa aux biscayens de l’ennemi que pour tomber sous les sarcasmes de Sheridan, mitraille pire. Force gentilshommes pariaient; Harry

Belew de Carleton, ayant des prétentions à la pairie éteinte de Bella-Aqua, contre Henry, lord Hyde, membre du parlement pour le bourg de Dunhivid, qu'on appelle aussi Launceston; l'honorable Peregrine Bertie, membre pour le bourg de Truro, contre sir Thomas Colepeper, membre pour Maidstone; le laird de Lamyrbau, qui est de la marche de Lothian, contre Samuel Trefusis, du bourg de Penryn; sir Bartholomew Gracedieu, du bourg Saint-Yves, contre le très honorable Charles Bodville, qui s'appelle lord Robartes, et qui est Custos Rotulorum du comté de Cornouailles. D'autres encore.

Les deux boxeurs étaient un irlandais de Tipperary nommé du nom de sa montagne natale Phelem-ghe-madone, et un écossais appel Helmsgail. Cela mettait deux orgueils nationaux en présence.

Irlande et Ecosse allaient se cogner; Erin allait donner des coups de poing à Gajothel. Aussi les paris dépassaient quarante mille guinées, sans compter les jeux fermes.

Les deux champions étaient nus avec une culotte très courte bouclée aux hanches, et des brodequins à semelles cloutées, lacés aux chevilles.

Helmsgail, l'écossais, était un petit d'à peine dix-neuf ans, mais il avait déjà le front recousu; c'est pourquoi on tenait pour lui deux et un tiers. Le mois précédent il avait enfonc une côte et crevé les deux yeux au boxeur Sixmileswater; ce qui expliquait l'enthousiasme. Il y avait eu pour ses parieurs gain de douze mille livres sterling. Outre son front recousu, Helmsgail avait la mâchoire ébréchée. Il était leste et alerte.

Il était haut comme une femme petite, ramassé, trapu, d'une stature basse et menaçante, et rien n'avait été perdu de la pâte dont il avait été fait; pas un muscle qui n'allât au but, le pugilat. Il y avait de la concision dans son torse ferme, luisant et brun comme l'airain. Il souriait, et trois dents qu'il avait de moins s'ajoutaient à son sourire.

Son adversaire était vaste et large, c'est-à-dire faible.

C'était un homme de quarante ans. Il avait six pieds de haut, un poitrail d'hippopotame, et l'air doux. Son coup de poing fendait le pont d'un navire, mais il ne savait pas le donner.

L'irlandais Phelem-ghe-madone était surtout une surface et semblait être dans les boxes plutôt pour recevoir que pour rendre. Seulement on sentait qu'il durerait longtemps. Espèce de rostbeef pas assez cuit, difficile à mordre et impossible manger. Il était ce qu'on appelle, en argot local, de la viande crue, *raw flesh*. Il louchait. Il semblait résigné.

Ces deux hommes avaient passé la nuit précédente côte à côte dans le même lit, et dormi ensemble. Ils avaient bu dans le même verre chacun trois doigts de vin de Porto.

Ils avaient l’un et l’autre leur groupe de souteneurs, gens de rude mine, menaçant au besoin les arbitres. Dans le groupe pour Helmsgail, on remarquait John Gromane, fameux pour porter un boeuf sur son dos, et un nommé John Bray qui un jour avait pris sur ses épaules dix boisseaux de farine à quinze gallons par boisseau, plus le meunier, et avait marché avec cette charge plus de deux cents pas plus loin. Du côté de Phelem-ghe-madone, lord Hyde avait amené de Launceston un certain Kilter, lequel demeurait au Château-Vert, et lançait par-dessus son épaule une pierre de vingt livres plus haut que la plus haute tour du château. Ces trois hommes, Kilter, Bray et Gromane, étaient de Cornouailles, ce qui honore le comté.

D’autres souteneurs étaient des garnements brutes, au râble solide, aux jambes arquées, aux grosses pattes noueuses, à la face inepte, en haillons, et ne craignant rien, étant presque tous repris de justice.

Beaucoup s’entendaient admirablement à griser les gens de police.
Chaque profession doit avoir ses talents.

Le pré choisi était plus loin que le Jardin des Ours, où l’on faisait autrefois battre les ours, les taureaux et les dogues, au delà des dernières bâtisses en construction, à côté de la masure du prieuré de Sainte-Marie Over Ry, ruiné par Henri VIII. Vent du nord et givre était le temps; une pluie fine tombait, vite figée en verglas. On reconnaissait dans les gentlemen présents ceux qui étaient pères de famille, parce qu’ils avaient ouvert leurs parapluies.

Du côté de Phelem-ghe-madone, colonel Moncreif, arbitre, et Kilter, pour tenir le genou.

Du côté de Helmsgail, l’honorable Pughe Beaumaris, arbitre, et lord Desertum, qui est de Kilcarry, pour tenir le genou.

Les deux boxeurs furent quelques instants immobiles dans l’enceinte pendant qu’on réglait les montres. Puis ils marchèrent l’un à l’autre et se donnèrent la main.

Phelem-ghe-madone dit à Helmsgail: — J’aimerais m’en aller chez moi.

Helmsgail répondit avec honnêteté: — Il faut que la gentry se soit dérangée pour quelque chose.

Nus comme ils étaient, ils avaient froid. Phelem-ghe-madone tremblait. Ses mâchoires claquaient.

Docteur Eleanor Sharp, neveu de l’archevêque d’York, leur cria: Tapez-vous, mes drôles. Ça vous réchauffera.

Cette parole d’aménité les dégela.

Ils s’attaquèrent.

Mais ni l’un ni l’autre n’étaient en colère. On compta trois reprises molles. Révérend Docteur Gumdraith, un des quarante associés d’All Souls Colleges, cria: Qu’on leur entonne du gin!

Collège de Toutes-les-Ames

Mais les deux referees et les deux parrains, juges tous quatre, maintinrent la règle. Il faisait pourtant bien froid.

On entendit le cri: *first blood!* Le premier sang était réclamé.

On les replaça bien en face l’un de l’autre.

Ils se regardèrent, s’approchèrent, allongèrent les bras, se touchèrent les poings, puis reculèrent. Tout à coup, Helmsgail, le petit homme, bondit.

Le vrai combat commença.

Phelem-ghe-madone fut frappé en plein front entre les deux sourcils.

Tout son visage ruissela de sang. La foule cria: *Helmsgail a fait couler le bordeaux!* On applaudit.

Phelem-ghe-madone, tournant ses bras comme un moulin ses ailes, se mit à démener ses deux poings au hasard.

Hemlsgail has tapped his claret.

L’honorable Peregrine Berti dit: — Aveuglé. Mais pas encore aveugle.

Alors Helmsgail entendit de toutes parts éclater cet encouragement: — *Bung his peepers!*

Crève-lui les quinquets.

En somme, les deux champions étaient vraiment bien choisis, et, quoique le temps fut peu favorable, on comprit que le match réussirait. Le quasi-géant Phelem-ghe-madone avait les inconvénients de ses avantages; il se mouvait pesamment. Ses bras étaient massue, mais son corps était masse. Le petit courait, frappait, sautait, grinçait, doublait la vigueur par la vitesse, savait les ruses. D’un côté le coup de poing primitif, sauvage, inculte, à l’état d’ignorance; de l’autre le coup de poing de la civilisation, Helmsgail combattait autant avec ses nerfs qu’avec ses muscles et avec sa méchanceté qu’avec sa force; Phelem-ghe-madone était une espèce d’assommeur inerte, un peu assommé au préalable. C’était l’art contre la nature. C’était le féroce contre le barbare.

Il était clair que le barbare serait battu. Mais pas très vite.
De là l'intérêt.

Un petit contre un grand. La chance est pour le petit. Un chat a raison d'un dogue. Les Goliath sont toujours vaincus par les David.

Une grêle d'apostrophes tombait sur les combattants: — *Bravo, Helmsgail! good! well done, highlander! — Now, Phelem!*

Bravo, Helmsgail! bon! c'est bien, montagnard! A ton tour Phelem!

Et, les amis de Helmsgail lui répétaient avec bienveillance l'exhortation: — Crève-lui les quinquets!

Helmsgail fit mieux, brusquement baissé et redressé avec une ondulation de reptile, il frappa Phelem-ghe-madone au sternum.

Le colosse chancela.

— Mauvais coup! cria le vicomte Barnard,

Phelem-ghe-madone s'affaissa sur le genou de Kilter en disant: — Je commence à me réchauffer.

Lord Desertum consulta les referees, et dit: — Il y aura cinq minutes de rond.

Suspension.

Phelem-ghe-madone défaillait. Kilter lui essuya le sang des yeux et la sueur du corps avec une flanelle et lui mit un goulot dans la bouche. On était à la onzième passe. Phelem-ghe-madone, outre sa plaie au front, avait les pectoraux déformés de coups, le ventre tuméfié et le sinciput meurtri. Helmsgail n'avait rien.

Un certain tumulte éclatait parmi les gentlemen.

Lord Barnard répétait: — Mauvais coup.

— Pari nul, dit le laird de Lamyrbau.

— Je réclame mon enjeu, reprit sir Thomas Colepeper.

Et l'honorable membre pour le bourg Sainl-Yves, sir Bartholomew Gracedieu, ajouta:

— Qu'on me rende mes cinq cents guinées, je m'en vais.

— Cessez le match, cria l'assistance.

Mais Phelem-ghe-madone se leva presque aussi branlant qu'un homme ivre, et dit:

— Continuons le match, à une condition. J'aurai aussi, moi, le droit de donner un mauvais coup.

On cria de toutes parts: — Accordé.

Helmsgail haussa les épaules.

Les cinq minutes passées, la reprise se fit.

Le combat, qui était une agonie pour Phelem-ghe-madone, était un jeu pour Helmsgail.

Ce que c’est que la science! le petit homme trouva moyen de mettre le grand en chancery, c’est-à-dire que tout à coup Helmsgail prit sous son bras gauche courbé comme un croissant d’acier la grosse tête de Phelem-ghe-madone, et le tint là sous son aisselle, cou ployé et nuque basse, pendant que de son poing droit, tombant et retombant comme un marteau sur un clou, mais de bas en haut et en dessous, il lui écrasait à l’aise la face. Quand Phelem-ghe-madone, enfin lâché, releva la tête, il n’avait plus de visage.

Ce qui avait été un nez, des yeux et une bouche, n’était plus qu’une apparence d’épongé noire trempée dans le sang. Il cracha.

On vit à terre quatre dents.

Puis il tomba. Kilter le reçut sur son genou.

Helmsgail était à peine touché. Il avait quelques bleus insignifiants et une égratignure à une clavicule.

Personne n’avait plus froid. On faisait seize et un quart pour Helmsgail contre Phelem-ghe-madone.

Harry de Carleton cria:

— Il n’y a plus de Phelem-ghe-madone. Je parie pour Helmsgail ma pairie de Bella-Aqua et mon titre de lord Bellew contre une vieille perruque de l’archevêque de Cantorbery.

— Donne ton mufle, dit Kilter à Phelem-ghe-madone, et, fourrant sa flanelle sanglante dans la bouteille, il le débarbouilla avec du gin. On revit la bouche, et Phelem-ghe-madone ouvrit une paupière. Les tempes semblaient fêlées.

— Encore une reprise, ami, dit Kilter. Et il ajouta: — Pour l’honneur de la basse ville.

Les gallois et les irlandais s’entendent; pourtant Phelem-ghe-madone, ne fit aucun signe pouvant indiquer qu’il avait encore quelque chose dans l’esprit.

Phelem-ghe-madone se releva, Kilter le soutenant. C’était la vingt-cinquième reprise. A la manière dont ce cyclope, car il n’avait plus qu’un oeil, se remit en posture, on comprit que c’était la fin et personne ne douta qu’il ne fût perdu. Il posa sa garde au-dessus du menton, gaucherie de moribond. Helmsgail, à peine en sueur, cria: Je parie pour moi. Mille contre un.

Helmsgail, levant le bras, frappa, et, ce fut étrange, tous deux tombèrent. On entendit un grognement gai.

C'était Phelem-ghe-madone qui était content.

Il avait profité du coup terrible qu'Helmsgail lui avait donn sur le crâne pour lui en donner un, mauvais, au nombril.

Helmsgail, gisant, râlait.

L'assistance regarda Helmsgail à terre et dit: — Remboursé.

Tout le monde battit des mains, même les perdants.

Phelem-ghe-madone avait rendu mauvais coup pour mauvais coup, et agi dans son droit.

On emporta Helmsgail sur une civière. L'opinion était qu'il n'en reviendrait point. Lord Robartes s'écria: Je gagne douze cents guinées. Phelem-ghe-madone était évidemment estropié pour la vie.

En sortant, Josiane prit le bras de lord David, ce qui est tolér entre «engaged». Elle lui dit:

— C'est très beau. Mais...

— Mais quoi?

— J'aurais cru que cela m'ôterait mon ennui. Eh bien, non.

Lord David s'arrêta, regarda Josiane, ferma la bouche et enfla les joues en secouant la tête, ce qui signifie: attention! et dit à la duchesse:

— Pour l'ennui il n'y a qu'un remède.

— Lequel?

— Gwynplaine.

La duchesse demanda:

— Qu'est-ce que c'est que Gwynplaine?

LIVE DEUXIÈME

GWINPLAINE ET DEA

I

OU L’ON VOIT LE VISAGE DE CELUI DONT ON N’A ENCORE VU QUE LES ACTIONS

La nature avait été prodigue de ses bienfaits envers Gwynplaine.
Elle lui avait donné une bouche s’ouvrant jusqu’aux oreilles, des oreilles se repliant jusque sur les yeux, un nez informe fait pour l’oscillation des lunettes de grimacier, et un visage qu’on ne pouvait regarder sans rire. Nous venons de le dire, la nature avait comblé Gwynplaine de ses dons. Mais était-ce la nature?

Ne l’avait-on pas aidée?

Deux yeux pareils à des jours de souffrance, un hiatus pour bouche, une protubérance camuse avec deux trous qui étaient les narines, pour face un écrasement, et tout cela ayant pour résultante le rire, il est certain que la nature ne produit pas toute seule de tels chefs-d’oeuvre.

Seulement, le rire est-il synonyme de la joie?

Si, en présence de ce bateleur, — car c’était un bateleur, — on laissait se dissiper la première impression de gaîté, et si l’on observait cet homme avec attention, on y reconnaissait la trace de l’art. Un pareil visage n’est pas fortuit, mais voulu. Être à ce point complet n’est pas dans la nature. L’homme ne peut rien sur sa beauté, mais peut tout sur sa laideur. D’un profil hottentot vous ne ferez pas un profil romain, mais d’un nez grec vous pouvez faire un nez kalmouck. Il suffit d’oblitérer la racine du nez et d’épater les narines. Le bas latin du moyen âge n’a pas créé pour rien le verbe *denasare*. Gwynplaine enfant avait-il été assez digne d’attention pour qu’on s’occupât de lui au point de modifier son visage? Pourquoi pas? ne fut-ce que dans un but d’exhibition et de spéculation. Selon toute apparence, d’industrieux manieurs d’enfants avaient travaill cette figure. Il semblait évident qu’une science mystérieuse, probablement occulte, qui était à la chirurgie ce que l’alchimie est à la chimie, avait ciselé cette chair, à coup sûr dans le très bas âge, et créé, avec préméditation, ce visage. Cette science, habile aux sections, aux obtusions et aux ligatures, avait fendu la bouche, débridé les lèvres, dénudé les gencives, distendu les oreilles, décloisonné les cartilages, désordonné les sourcils et les joues, élargi le muscle zygomatique, estompé les coutures et les cicatrices, ramené la peau sur les lésions, tout en maintenant la face à l'état béant, et de cette sculpture puissante et profonde était sorti ce masque, Gwynplaine.

On ne naît pas ainsi.

Quoi qu'il en fût, Guynplaine était admirablement réussi.

Gwynplaine était un don fait par la providence à la tristesse des hommes. Par quelle providence? Y a-t-il une providence Démon comme il y a une providence Dieu? Nous posons la question sans la résoudre.

Gwynplaine était saltimbanque. Il se faisait voir en public.

Pas d'effet comparable au sien. Il guérissait les hypocondries rien qu'en se montrant. Il était à éviter pour des gens en deuil, confus et forcés, s'ils l'apercevaient, de rire indécemment. Un jour le bourreau vint, et Gwynplaine le fit rire. On voyait Gwynplaine, on se tenait les côtes; il parlait, on se roulait à terre. Il était le pôle opposé du chagrin.

Spleen était à un bout, et Gwynplaine à l'autre.

Aussi était-il parvenu rapidement, dans les champs de foire et dans les carrefours, à une fort satisfaisante renommée d'homme horrible.

C'est en riant que Guynplaine faisait rire. Et pourtant il ne riait pas. Sa face riait, sa pensée non. L'espèce de visage inouï que le hasard ou une industrie bizarrement spéciale lui avait façonné, riait tout seul. Gwynplaine ne s'en mêlait pas.

Le dehors ne dépendait pas du dedans. Ce rire qu'il n'avait point mis sur son front, sur ses joues, sur ses sourcils, sur sa bouche, il ne pouvait l'en ôter. On lui avait à jamais appliqu le rire sur le visage. C'était un rire automatique, et d'autant plus irrésistible qu'il était pétrifié. Personne ne se dérobait à ce rictus. Deux convulsions de la bouche sont communicatives, le rire et le bâillement. Par la vertu de la mystérieuse opération probablement subie par Gwynplaine enfant, toutes les parties de son visage contribuaient à ce rictus, toute sa physionomie y aboutissait, comme une roue se concentre sur le moyeu; toutes ses émotions, quelles qu'elles fussent, augmentaient cette étrange figure de joie, disons mieux, l'aggravaient. Un étonnement qu'il aurait eu, une souffrance qu'il aurait ressentie, une colère qui lui serait survenue, une pitié qu'il aurait éprouvée, n'eussent fait qu'accroître cette hilarité des muscles; s'il eût pleuré, il eût ri; et, quoi que fit Gwynplaine, quoi qu'il voulût, quoi qu'il pensât, dès qu'il levait la tête, la foule, si la foule était là, avait devant les yeux cette apparition, l'éclat de rire foudroyant.

Qu’on se figure une tête de Méduse gaie.

Tout ce qu’on avait dans l’esprit était mis en déroute par cet inattendu, et il fallait rire.

L’art antique appliquait jadis au fronton des théâtres de la Grèce une face d’airain joyeuse. Cette face s’appelait la Comédie. Ce bronze semblait rire et faisait rire, et était pensif. Toute la parodie, qui aboutit à la démence, toute l’ironie, qui aboutit à la sagesse, se condensaient et s’amalgamaient sur cette figure; la somme des soucis, des désillusions, des dégoûts et des chagrins se faisait sur ce front impassible, et donnait ce total lugubre, la gaîté; un coin de la bouche était relevé, du côté du genre humain, par la moquerie, et l’autre coin, du côté des dieux, par le blasphème; les hommes venaient confronter à ce modèle du sarcasme idéal l’exemplaire d’ironie que chacun a en soi; et la foule, sans cesse renouvelée autour de ce rire fixe, se pâmait d’aise devant l’immobilit sépulcrale du ricanement. Ce sombre masque mort de la comédie antique ajusté à un homme vivant, on pourrait presque dire que c’était là Gwynplaine. Cette tête infernale de l’hilarit implacable, il l’avait sur le cou. Quel fardeau pour les épaules d’un homme, le rire éternel!

Rire éternel. Entendons-nous, et expliquons-nous. A en croire les manichéens, l’absolu plie par moments, et Dieu lui-même a des intermittences. Entendons-nous aussi sur la volonté. Qu’elle puisse jamais être tout à fait impuissante, nous ne l’admettons pas. Toute existence ressemble à une lettre, que modifie le post-scriptum. Pour Gwynplaine, le post-scriptum était ceci: force de volonté, en y concentrant toute son attention, et à la condition qu’aucune émotion ne vînt le distraire et détendre la fixité de son effort, il pouvait parvenir à suspendre l’éternel rictus de sa face et à y jeter une sorte de voile tragique, et alors on ne riait plus devant lui, on frissonnait.

Cet effort, Gwyynplaine, disons-le, ne le faisait presque jamais, car c’était une fatigue douloureuse et une tension insupportable.
Il suffisait d’ailleurs de la moindre distraction et de la moindre émotion pour que, chassé un moment, ce rire, irrésistible comme un reflux, reparût sur sa face, et il était d’autant plus intense que l’émotion, quelle qu’elle fût, était plus forte.

A cette restriction près, le rire de Gwynplaine était éternel.

On voyait Gwynplaine, on riait. Quand on avait ri, on détournait la tête. Les femmes surtout avaient horreur. Cet homme était effroyable. La convulsion bouffonne était comme un tribut payé; on la subissait joyeusement, mais presque mécaniquement. Après quoi, une fois le rire refroidi, Gwynplaine, pour une femme, était insupportable à voir et impossible à regarder.

Il était du reste grand, bien fait, agile, nullement difforme, si ce n’est de visage. Ceci était une indication de plus parmi les présomptions qui laissaient entrevoir dans Gwynplaine plutôt une création de l’art qu’une oeuvre de la nature. Gwynplaine, beau de corps, avait probablement été beau de figure. En naissant, il avait dû être un enfant comme un autre. On avait conservé le corps intact et seulement retouché la face. Gwynplaine avait ét fait exprès.

C’était là du moins la vraisemblance.

On lui avait laissé les dents. Les dents sont nécessaires au rire. La tête de mort les garde.

L’opération faite sur lui avait dû être affreuse. Il ne s’en souvenait pas, ce qui ne prouvait point qu’il ne l’eût pas subie.

Cette sculpture chirurgicale n’avait pu réussir que sur un enfant tout petit, et par conséquent ayant peu conscience de ce qui lui arrivait, et pouvant aisément prendre une plaie pour une maladie.

En outre, dès ce temps-là, on se le rappelle, les moyens d’endormir le patient et de supprimer la souffrance étaient connus. Seulement, à cette époque, on les appelait magie.

Aujourd’hui on les appelle anesthésie.

Outre ce visage, ceux qui l’avaient élevé lui avaient donné des ressources de gymnaste et d’athlète; ses articulations, utilement disloquées, et propres à des flexions en sens inverse, avaient reçu une éducation de clown et pouvaient, comme des gonds de porte, se mouvoir dans tous les sens. Dans son appropriation au métier de saltimbanque rien n’avait été négligé.

Ses cheveux avaient été teints couleur d’ocre une fois pour toutes; secret qu’on a retrouvé de nos jours. Les jolies femmes en usent; ce qui enlaidissait autrefois est aujourd’hui jugé bon pour embellir. Gwynplaine avait les cheveux jaunes. Cette peinture des cheveux, apparemment corrosive, les avait laissés laineux et bourrus au toucher. Ce hérissement fauve, plutôt crinière que chevelure, couvrait et cachait un profond crâne fait pour contenir de la pensée, L’opération quelconque, qui avait ôt l’harmonie au visage et mis toute cette chair en désordre, n’avait pas eu prise sur la boîte osseuse. L'angle facial de Gwynplaine était puissant et surprenant. Derrière ce rire il y avait une âme, faisant, comme nous tous, un songe.

Du reste, ce rire était pour Gwynplaine tout un talent. Il n'y pouvait rien, et il en tirait parti. Au moyen de ce rire, il gagnait sa vie.

Gwynplaine — on l'a sans doute déjà reconnu — était cet enfant abandonné un soir d'hiver sur la côte de Portland, et recueilli dans une pauvre cahute roulante à Weymouth.

II

DEA

L’enfant était à cette heure un homme. Quinze ans s’étaient écoulés. On était en 1705. Gwynplaine touchait à ses vingt-cinq ans.

Ursus avait gardé avec lui les deux enfants. Cela avait fait un groupe nomade.

Ursus et Homo avaient vieilli. Ursus était devenu tout à fait chauve. Le loup grisonnait. L’âge des loups n’est pas fix comme l’âge des chiens. Selon Molin, il y a des loups qui vivent quatrevingts ans, entre autres le petit koupara, *caviae vorus*, et le loup odorant, *canis nubilus* de Say.

La petite fille trouvée sur la femme morte était maintenant une grande créature de seize ans, pâle avec des cheveux bruns, mince, frêle, presque tremblante à force de délicatesse et donnant la peur de la briser, admirablement belle, les yeux pleins de lumière, aveugle.

La fatale nuit d’hiver, qui avait renversé la mendiante et son enfant dans la neige, avait fait coup double. Elle avait tué la mère et aveuglé la fille.

La goutte sereine avait à jamais paralysé les prunelles de cette fille, devenue femme à son tour. Sur son visage, à travers lequel le jour ne passait point, les coins des lèvres tristement abaissés exprimaient ce désappointement amer. Ses yeux, grands et clairs, avaient cela d’étrange qu’éteints pour elle, pour les autres ils brillaient. Mystérieux flambeaux allumés n’éclairant que le dehors. Elle donnait de la lumière, elle qui n’en avait pas. Ces yeux disparus resplendissaient. Cette captive des ténèbres blanchissait le milieu sombre où elle était. Du fond de son obscurité incurable, de derrière ce mur noir qu’on nomme la cécité, elle jetait un rayonnement. Elle ne voyait pas hors d’elle le soleil et l’on voyait en elle son âme.

Son regard mort avait on ne sait quelle fixité céleste.

Elle était la nuit, et de cette ombre irrémédiable amalgamée elle-même, elle sortait astre.

Ursus, maniaque de noms latins, l’avait baptisée Dea. Il avait un peu consulté son loup; il lui avait dit: Tu représentes l’homme, je représente la bête; nous sommes le monde d’en bas; cette petite représentera le monde d’en haut. Tant de faiblesse, c’est la toute-puissance. De cette façon l’univers complet, humanité, bestialité, divinité, sera dans notre cahute. — Le loup n’avait pas fait d’objection.

Et c’est ainsi que l’enfant trouvé s’appelait Dea.

Quant à Gwynplaine, Ursus n’avait pas eu la peine de lui inventer un nom. Le matin même du jour où il avait constaté le défigurement du petit garçon et la cécité de la petite fille, il avait demandé: — Boy, comment t’appelles-tu?

Et le garçon avait répondu: — On m’appelle Gwynplaine.

— Va pour Gwynplaine, avait dit Ursus.

Dea assistait Gwynplaine dans ses exercices.

Si la misère humaine pouvait être résumée, elle l’eût été par Gwynplaine et Dea. Ils semblaient être nés chacun dans un compartiment du sépulcre; Gwynplaine dans l’horrible, Dea dans le noir. Leurs existences étaient faites avec des ténèbres d’espèce différente, prises dans les deux côtés formidables de la vie.

Ces ténèbres, Dea les avait en elle et Gwynplaine les avait sur lui. Il y avait du fantôme dans Dea et du spectre dans Gwynplaine. Dea était dans le lugubre, et Gwynplaine dans le pire. Il y avait pour Gwynplaine voyant, une possibilit poignante qui n’existait pas pour Dea aveugle, se comparer aux autres hommes. Or, dans une situation comme celle de Gwynplaine, en admettant qu’il cherchât à s’en rendre compte, se comparer, c’était ne plus se comprendre. Avoir, comme Dea, un regard vide d’où le monde est absent, c’est une suprême détresse, moindre pourtant que celle-ci: être sa propre énigme; sentir aussi quelque chose d’absent qui est soi-même; voir l’univers et ne pas se voir. Dea avait un voile, la nuit, et Gwynplaine avait un masque, sa face. Chose inexprimable, c’était avec sa propre chair que Gwynplaine était masqué. Quel était son visage, il l’ignorait. Sa figure était dans l’évanouissement. On avait mis sur lui un faux lui-même. Il avait pour face une disparition.

Sa tête vivait et son visage était mort. Il ne se souvenait pas de l’avoir vu.

Le genre humain, pour Dea comme pour Gwynplaine, était un fait extérieur; ils en étaient loin; elle était seule, il était seul; l’isolement de Dea était funèbre, elle ne voyait rien; l’isolement de Gwynplaine était sinistre, il voyait tout.

Pour Dea, la création ne dépassait point l’ouïe et le toucher; le réel était borné, limité, court, tout de suite perdu; elle n’avait pas d’autre infini que l’ombre. Pour Gwynplaine, vivre, c’était avoir à jamais la foule devant soi et hors de soi. Dea était la proscrite de la lumière; Gwynplaine était le banni de la vie. Certes, c’étaient là deux désespérés. Le fond de la calamité possible était touché. Ils y étaient, lui comme elle.

Un observateur qui les eût vus eût senti sa rêverie s’achever en une incommensurable pitié. Que ne devaient-ils pas souffrir? Un décret de malheur pesait visiblement sur ces deux créatures humaines, et jamais la fatalité, autour de deux êtres qui n’avaient rien fait, n’avait mieux arrangé la destinée en torture et la vie en enfer.

Ils étaient dans un paradis.

Ils s’aimaient.

Gwynplaine adorait Dea. Dea idolâtrait Gwynplaine.

— Tu es si beau! lui disait-elle.

III

«OCULOS NON HABET ET VIDET

Une seule femme sur la terre voyait Gwynplaiae. C’était cette aveugle.

Ce que Gwynplaine avait été pour elle, elle le savait par Ursus, à qui Gwynplaine avait raconté sa rude marche de Portland Weymouth, et les agonies mêlées à son abandon, Elle savait que, toute petite, expirante sur sa mère expirée, tétant un cadavre, un être, un peu moins petit qu’elle, l’avait ramassée; que cet être, éliminé et comme enseveli sous le sombre refus universel, avait entendu son cri; que, tous étant sourds pour lui, il n’avait pas été sourd pour elle; que cet enfant, isolé, faible, rejeté, sans point d’appui ici-bas, se traînant dans le désert, épuisé de fatigue, brisé, avait accepté des mains de la nuit ce fardeau, un autre enfant; que lui, qui n’avait point de part attendre dans cette distribution obscure qu’on appelle le sort, il s’était chargé d’une destinée; que, dénûment, angoisse et détresse, il s’était fait providence; que, le ciel se fermant, il avait ouvert son coeur; que, perdu, il avait sauvé; que, n’ayant pas de toit ni d’abri, il avait été asile; qu’il s’était fait mère et nourrice; que, lui qui était seul au monde, il avait répondu au délaissement par une adoption; que, dans les ténèbres, il avait donné cet exemple; que, ne se trouvant pas assez accablé, il avait bien voulu de la misère d’un autre par surcroît; que sur cette terre où il semblait qu’il n’y eût rien pour lui, il avait découvert le devoir; que là où tous eussent hésité, il avait avancé; que là où tous eussent reculé, il avait consenti; qu’il avait mis sa main dans l’ouverture du sépulcre et qu’il l’en avait retirée, elle, Dea; que, demi-nu, il lui avail donné son bâillon, parce qu’elle avait froid; qu’affamé, il avait songé à la faire boire et manger; que pour cette petite, ce petit avait combattu la mort; qu’il l’avait combattue sous toutes les formes, sous la forme hiver et neige, sous la forme solitude, sous la forme terreur, sous la forme froid, faim et soif, sous la forme ouragan; que pour elle, Dea, ce titan de dix ans avait livré bataille à l’immensité nocturne. Elle savait qu’il avait fait cela, enfant, et que maintenant, homme, il était sa force elle débile, sa richesse à elle indigente, sa guérison à elle malade, son regard à elle aveugle. A travers les épaisseurs inconnues par qui elle se sentait tenue à distance, elle distinguait nettement ce dévouement, cette abnégalion, ce courage. L’héroïsme, dans la région immatérielle, a un contour.

Elle saisissait ce contour sublime; dans l’inexprimable abstraction où vit une pensée que n’éclaire pas le soleil, elle percevait ce mystérieux linéament de la vertu. Dans cet entourage de choses obscures mises en mouvement qui était la seule impression que lui fît la réalité, dans cette stagnation inquiète de la créature passive toujours au guet du péril possible, dans cette sensation d’être là sans défense qui est toute la vie de l’aveugle, elle constatait au-dessus d’elle Gwynplaine, Guynplaine jamais refroidi, jamais absent, jamais éclipsé, Gwynplaine attendri, secourable et doux; Dea tressaillait de certitude et de reconnaissance, son anxiét rassurée aboutissait à l’extase, et de ses yeux pleins de ténèbres elle contemplait au zénith de son abîme cette bonté, lumière profonde.

Dans l’idéal, la bonté, c’est le soleil; et Gwynplaine éblouissait Dea.

Pour la foule, qui a trop de têtes pour avoir une pensée et trop d’yeux pour avoir un regard, pour la foule qui, surface elle-même, s’arrête aux surfaces, Gwynplaine était un clown, un bateleur, un saltimbanque, un grotesque, un peu plus et un peu moins qu’une bête. La foule ne connaissait que le visage.

Pour Dea, Gwynplaine était le sauveur qui l’avait ramassée dans la tombe et emportée dehors, le consolateur qui lui faisait la vie possible, le libérateur dont elle sentait la main dans la sienne en ce labyrinthe qui est la cécité; Gwynplaine était le frère, l’ami, le guide, le soutien, le semblable d’en haut, l’époux ailé et rayonnant, et là où la multitude voyait le monstre, elle voyait l’archange.

C’est que Dea, aveugle, apercevait l’âme.

IV

LES AMOUREUX ASSORTIS

Ursus, philosophe, comprenait. Il approuvait la fascination de Dea.

— L'aveugle voit l'invisible.

Il disait:

— La conscience est vision.

Il regardait Gwynplaine, et il grommelait:

— Demi-monstre, mais demi-dieu.

Gwynplaine, de son côté, était enivré de Dea. Il y a l'oeil invisible, l'esprit, et l'oeil visible, la prunelle. Lui, c'est avec l'oeil visible qu'il la voyait. Dea avait l'éblouissement idéal, Gwynplaine avait l'éblouissement réel. Gwynplaine n'était pas laid, il était effrayant; il avait devant lui son contraste.

Autant il était terrible, autant Dea était suave. Il était l'horreur, elle était la grâce. Il y avait du rêve en Dea. Elle semblait un songe ayant un peu pris corps. Il y avait dans toute sa personne, dans sa structure éolienne, dans sa fine et souple taille inquiète comme le roseau, dans ses épaules peut-être invisiblement ailées, dans les rondeurs discrètes de son contour indiquant le sexe, mais à l'âme plutôt qu'aux sens, dans sa blancheur qui était presque de la transparence, dans l'auguste occlusion sereine de son regard divinement fermé à la terre, dans l'innocence sacrée de son sourire, un voisinage exquis de l'ange, et elle était tout juste assez femme.

Gwynplaine, nous l'avons dit, se comparait, et il comparait Dea.

Son existence, telle qu'elle était, était le résultat d'un double choix inouï. C'était le point d'intersection des deux rayons d'en bas et d'en haut, du rayon noir et du rayon blanc. La même miette peut être becquetée à la fois par les deux becs du mal et du bien, l'un donnant la morsure, l'autre le baiser. Gwynplaine était cette miette, atome meurtri et caressé. Gwynplaine était le produit d'une fatalité, compliquée d'une providence. Le malheur avait mis le doigt sur lui, le bonheur aussi. Deux destinées extrêmes composaient son sort étrange. Il y avait sur lui un anathème et une bénédiction. Il était le maudit élu. Qui était-il? Il ne le savait. Quand il se regardait, il voyait un inconnu. Mais cet inconnu était monstrueux.

Gwynplaine vivait dans une sorte de décapitation, ayant un visage qui n'était pas lui. Ce visage était épouvantable, si épouvantable qu'il amusait. Il faisait tant peur qu'il faisait rire. Il était infernalement bouffon. C'était le naufrage de la figure humaine dans un mascaron bestial. Jamais on n'avait vu plus totale éclipse de l'homme sur le visage humain, jamais parodie n'avait été plus complète, jamais ébauche plus affreuse n'avait rican dans un cauchemar, jamais tout ce qui peut repousser une femme n'avait été plus hideusement amalgamé dans un homme; l'infortun coeur, masqué et calomnié par cette face, semblait à jamais condamné à la solitude sous ce visage comme sous un couvercle de tombe. Eh bien, non! où s'était épuisée la méchanceté inconnue, la bonté invisible à son tour se dépensait. Dans ce pauvre déchu, tout à coup relevé, à côté de tout ce qui repousse elle mettait ce qui attire, dans l'écueil elle mettait l'aimant, elle faisait accourir à tire d'aile vers cet abandonné une âme, elle chargeait la colombe de consoler le foudroyé, et elle faisait adorer la difformité par la beaulé.

Pour que cela fût possible, il fallait que la belle ne vît pas le défiguré. Pour ce bonheur, il fallait ce malheur. La providence avait fait Dea aveugle.

Gwynplaine se sentait vaguement l'objet d'une rédemption. Pourquoi la persécution? il l'ignorait. Pourquoi le rachat? il l'ignorait. Une auréole était venue se poser sur sa flétrissure; c'est tout ce qu'il savait. Ursus, quand Gwynplaine avait été en âge de comprendre, lui avait lu et expliqué le texte du docteur Conquest *de Denasatis*, et, dans un autre in-folio, *Hugo Plagon*, le passage *nares habens mutilas*; mais Ursus s'était prudemment abstenu «d'hypothèses», et s'était bien gardé de conclure quoi que ce soit. Des suppositions étaient possibles, la probabilité d'une voie de fait sur l'enfance de Gwynplaine était entrevue; mais pour Gwynplaine il n'y avait qu'une évidence, le résultat. Sa destinée était de vivre sous un stigmate. Pourquoi ce stigmate? pas de réponse. Silence et solitude autour de Gwynplainwe. Tout était fuyant dans les conjectures qu'on pouvait ajuster à cette réalité tragique, et, excepté le fait terrible, rien n'était certain. Dans cet accablement, Dea intervenait; sorte d'interposition céleste entre Gwynplaine et le désespoir. Il percevait, ému et comme réchauffé, la douceur de cette fille exquise tournée vers son horreur; l'étonnement paradisiaque attendrissait sa face draconienne; fait pour l'effroi, il avait cette exception prodigieuse d'être admiré et adoré dans l'idéal par la lumière, et, monstre, il sentait sur lui la contemplation d'une étoile.

Versio Gallica Will, Tyrii, bb. II, cap. xxiii.

Gwynplaine et Dea, c’était un couple, et ces deux coeurs pathétiques s’adoraient. Un nid, et deux oiseaux; c’était l leur histoire. Ils avaient fait leur rentrée dans la loi universelle qui est de se plaire, de se chercher et de se trouver. De sorte que la haine s’était trompée. Les persécuteurs de Gwynplaine, quels qu’ils fussent, l’énigmatique acharnement, de quelque part qu’il vînt, avaient manqué leur but.

On avait voulu faire un désespéré, on avait fait un enchanté. On l’avait d’avance fiancé à une plaie guérissante. On l’avait prédestiné à être consolé par une affliction. La tenaille de bourreau s’était doucement faite main de femme. Gwynplaine était horrible, artificiellement horrible, horrible de la main des hommes; on avait espéré l’isoler à jamais, de la famille d’abord, s’il avait une famille, de l’humanité ensuite; enfant, on avait fait de lui une ruine, mais cette ruine, la nature l’avait reprise comme elle reprend toutes les ruines; cette solitude, la nature l’avait consolée comme elle console toutes les solitudes; la nature vient au secours de tous les abandons; là où tout manque, elle se redonne tout entière; elle refleurit et reverdit sur tous les écroulements; elle a le lierre pour les pierres et l’amour pour les hommes. Générosité profonde de l’ombre.

V

LE BLEU DANS LE NOIR

Ainsi vivaient l’un par l’autre ces infortunés, Déa appuyée, Gwynplaine accepté.

Cette orpheline avait cet orphelin. Cette infirme avait ce difforme.

Ces veuvages s’épousaient.

Une ineffable action de grâces se dégageait de ces deux détresses. Elles remerciaient.

Qui?

L’immensité obscure.

Remercier devant soi, c’est assez. L’action de grâces a des ailes et va où elle doit aller. Votre prière en sait plus long que vous.

Que d’hommes ont cru prier Jupiter et ont prié Jéhovah! Que de croyants aux amulettes sont écoutés par l’infini! Combien d’athées ne s’aperçoivent pas que, par le seul fait d’être bons et tristes, ils prient Dieu!

Gwynplaine et Dea étaient reconnaissants.

La difformité, c’est l’expulsion. La cécité, c’est le précipice.

L’expulsion était adoptée; le précipice était habitable.

Gwynplaine voyait descendre vers lui en pleine lumière, dans un arrangement de destinée qui ressemblait à la mise en perspective d’un songe, une blanche nuée de beauté ayant la forme d’une femme, une vision radieuse dans laquelle il y avait un coeur, et cette apparition, presque nuage et pourtant femme, l’étreignait, et cette vision l’embrassait, et ce coeur voulait bien de lui; Gwynplaine n’était plus difforme, étant aimé; une rose demandait la chenille en mariage, sentant dans cette chenille le papillon divin; Gwynplaine, le rejeté, était choisi.

Avoir son nécessaire, tout est là. Gwynplaine avait le sien.

Dea avait le sien.

L’abjection du défiguré, allégée et comme sublimée, se dilatait en ivresse, en ravissement, en croyance; et une main venait au-devant de la sombre hésitation de l’aveugle dans la nuit.

C’était la pénétration de deux détresses dans l’idéal, celle-ci absorbant celle-là. Deux exclusions s’admettaient. Deux lacunes se combinaient pour se compléter. Ils se tenaient par ce qui leur manquait. Par où l’un était pauvre, l’autre était riche.

Le malheur de l’un faisait le trésor de l’autre. Si Dea n’eût pas été aveugle, eût-elle choisi Gwynplaine? Si Gwynplaine n’eût pas été défiguré, eût-il préféré Dea? Elle probablement n’eût pas plus voulu du difforme que lui de l’infirme. Quel bonheur pour Dea que Gwynplaine fût hideux! Quelle chance pour Gwynplaine que Dea fût aveugle! En dehors de leur appareillement providentiel, ils étaient impossibles. Un prodigieux besoin l’un de l’autre était au fond de leur amour. Gwynplaine sauvait Dea.

Dea sauvait Gwynplaine. Rencontre de misères produisant l’adhérence. Embrassement d’engloutis dans le gouffre. Rien de plus étroit, rien de plus désespéré, rien de plus exquis.

Gwynplaine avait une pensée:

— Que serais-je sans elle?

Dea avait une pensée:

— Que serais-je sans lui?

Ces deux exils aboutissaient à une patrie; ces deux fatalités incurables, le stigmate de Gwynplaine, la cécité de Dea, opéraient leur jonction dans le contentement. Ils se suffisaient, ils n’imaginaient rien au delà d’eux-mêmes; se parler était un délice, s’approcher était une béatitude; à force d’intuition réciproque, ils en étaient venus à l’unité de rêverie; ils pensaient à deux la même pensée. Quand Gwynplaine marchait, Dea croyait entendre un pas d’apothéose, Ils se serraient l’un contre l’autre dans une sorte de clair-obscur sidéral plein de parfums, de lueurs, de musiques, d’architectures lumineuses, de songes; ils s’appartenaient; ils se savaient ensemble à jamais dans la même joie et dans la même extase; et rien n’était étrange comme cette construction d’un éden par deux damnés.

Ils étaient inexprimablement heureux.

Avec leur enfer ils avaient fait du ciel; telle est votre puissance, amour!

Dea entendait rire Gwynplaine. Et Gwynplaine voyait Dea sourire.

Ainsi la félicité idéale était trouvée, la joie parfaite de la vie était réalisée, le mystérieux problème du bonheur était résolu. Et par qui? par deux misérables.

Pour Gwynplaine Dea était la splendeur. Pour Dea Gwynplaine était la présence.

La présence, profond mystère qui divinise l’invisible et d’o résulte cet autre mystère, la confiance. Il n’y a dans les religions que cela d’irréductible. Mais cet irréductible suffit.

On ne voit pas l’immense être nécessaire; on le sent.

Gwynplaine était la religion de Dea.

Parfois, éperdue d’amour, elle se mettait à genoux devant lui, sorte de belle prêtresse adorant un gnome de pagode, épanoui.

Figurez-vous l’abîme, et au milieu de l’abîme une oasis de clarté, et dans cette oasis ces deux êtres hors de la vie, s’éblouissant.

Pas de pureté comparable à ces amours. Dea ignorait ce que c’était qu’un baiser, bien que peut-être elle le désirât; car la cécité, surtout d’une femme, a ses rêves, et, quoique tremblante devant les approches de l’inconnu, ne les hait pas toutes. Quant à Gwynplaine, la jeunesse frissonnante le rendait pensif; plus il se sentait ivre, plus il était timide; il eût pu tout oser avec cette compagne de son premier âge, avec cette ignorante de la faute comme de la lumière, avec cette aveugle qui voyait une chose, c’est qu’elle l’adorait. Mais il eût cru voler ce qu’elle lui eût donné; il se résignait avec une mélancolie satisfaite aimer angéliquement, et le sentiment de sa difformité se résolvait en une pudeur auguste.

Ces heureux habitaient l’idéal. Ils y étaient époux à distance comme les sphères. Ils échangeaient dans le bleu l’effluve profond qui dans l’infini est l’attraction et sur la terre le sexe. Ils se donnaient des baisers d’âme.

Ils avaient toujours eu la vie commune. Ils ne se connaissaient pas autrement qu’ensemble. L’enfance de Dea avait coïncidé avec l’adolescence de Gwynplaine. Ils avaient grandi côte à côte.

Ils avaient longtemps dormi dans le même lit, la cahute n’étant point une vaste chambre à coucher. Eux sur le coffre, Ursus sur le plancher; voilà quel était l’arrangement. Puis un beau jour, Dea étant encore petite, Gwynplaine s’était vu grand, et c’est du côté de l’homme qu’avait commencé la honte. Il avait dit Ursus: Je veux dormir à terre, moi aussi. Et, le soir venu, il s’était étendu près du vieillard, sur la peau d’ours. Alors Dea avait pleuré. Elle avait réclamé son camarade de lit. Mais Gwynplaine, devenu inquiet, car il commençait à aimer, avait tenu bon. A partir de ce moment, il s’était mis à coucher sur le plancher avec Ursus. L’été, dans les belles nuits, il couchait dehors, avec Homo. Dea avait treize ans qu’elle n’était pas encore résignée. Souvent le soir elle disait; Gwynplaine, viens près de moi; cela me fera dormir. Un homme à côté d’elle était un besoin du sommeil de l’innocente. La nudité, c’est de se voir nu; aussi ignorait-elle la nudité. Ingénuité d’Arcadie ou d’Otaïti. Dea sauvage faisait Gwynplaine farouche. Il arrivait parfois à Dea, étant déjà presque jeune fille, de se peigner ses longs cheveux, assise sur son lit, sa chemise défaite et à demi tombante, laissant voir la statue féminine ébauchée et un vague commencement d'Eve, et d'appeler Gwynplaine. Gwynplaine rougissait, baissait les yeux, ne savait que devenir devant cette chair naïve, balbutiait, détournait la tête, avait peur, et s'en allait, et ce Daphnis des ténèbres prenait la fuite devant cette Chloë de l'ombre.

Telle était cette idylle éclose dans une tragédie.

Ursus leur disait:

— Vieilles brutes, adorez-vous.

VI

URSUS INSTITUTEUR, ET URSUS TUTEUR

Ursus ajoutait:

— Je leur ferai un de ces jours un mauvais tour. Je les marierai.

Ursus faisait à Gwynplaine la théorie de l’amour. Il lui disait:

— L’amour, sais-tu comment le bon Dieu allume ce feu-là? Il met la femme en bas, le diable entre deux; l’homme sur le diable.

Une allumette, c’est-à-dire un regard, et voilà que tout flambe.

— Un regard n’est pas nécessaire, répondait Guynplaine, songeant à Dea.

Et Ursus répliquait:

— Dadais! est-ce que les âmes, pour se regarder, ont besoin des yeux?

Parfois Ursus était bon diable. Gwynplaine, par moments, éperdu de Dea jusqu’à en devenir sombre, se garait d’Ursus comme d’un témoin. Un jour Ursus lui dit:

— Bah! ne te gêne pas. En amour le coq se montre.

— Mais l’aigle se cache, répondit Gwynplaine. Dans d’autres instants, Ursus se disait en aparté:

— Il est sage de mettre des bâtons dans les roues du char de Cythérée. Ils s’aiment trop. Cela peut avoir des inconvénients.

Obvions à l’incendie. Modérons ces coeurs.

Et Ursus avait recours à des avertissements de ce genre, parlant à Gwynplaine quand Dea dormait, et à Dea quand Gwynplaine avait le dos tourné:

— Dea, il ne faut pas trop t’attacher à Gwynplaine. Vivre dans un autre est périlleux. L’égoïsme est une bonne racine du bonheur. Les hommes, ça échappe aux femmes. Et puis, Gwynplaine peut finir par s’infatuer. Il a tant de succès! tu ne le figures pas le succès qu’il a!

— Gwynplaine, les disproportions ne valent rien. Trop de laideur d’un côté, trop de beauté de l’autre, cela doit donner réfléchir. Tempère ton ardeur, mon boy. Ne t’enthousiasme pas trop de Dea. Te crois-tu sérieusement fait pour elle? Mais considère donc ta difformité et sa perfection. Vois la distance entre elle et toi. Elle a tout, cette Dea! quelle peau blanche, quels cheveux, des lèvres qui sont des fraises, et son pied!

quant à sa main! Ses épaules sont d'une courbe exquise, le visage est sublime, elle marche, il sort d'elle de la lumière, et ce parler grave avec ce son de voix charmant! et avec tout cela songer que c'est une femme! elle n'est pas si sotte que d'être un ange. C'est la beauté absolue. Dis-toi tout cela pour te calmer.

De là des redoublements d'amour entre Dea et Gwynplaine, et Ursus s'étonnait de son insuccès, un peu comme quelqu'un qui dirait:

— C'est singulier, j'ai beau jeter de l'huile sur le feu, je ne parviens pas à l'éteindre.

Les éteindre, moins même, les refroidir, le voulait-il? non certes. Il eût été bien attrapé s'il avait réussi. Au fond, cet amour, flamme pour eux, chaleur pour lui, le ravissait. Mais il faut bien taquiner un peu ce qui nous charme. Cette taquinerie-là, c'est ce que les hommes appellent la sagesse,

Ursus avait été pour Gwynplaine et Dea à peu près père et mère. Tout en murmurant, il les avait élevés; tout en grondant, il les avait nourris. Cette adoption ayant fait la cahute roulante plus lourde, il avait du s'atteler plus fréquemment avec Homo pour la traîner.

Disons que, les premières années passées, quand Gywnplaine fut presque grand et Ursus tout à fait vieux, c'avait été le tour de Gwynplaine de traîner Ursus.

Ursus, en voyant grandir Gwynplaine, avait tiré l'horoscope de sa difformité. — *On a fait ta fortune*, lui avait-il dit.

Cette famille d'un vieillard, de deux enfants et d'un loup, avait formé, tout en rôdant, un groupe de plus en plus étroit.

La vie errante n'avait pas empêché l'éducation. Errer, c'est croître, disait Ursus. Gwynplaine étant évidemment fait pour être «montré dans les foires», Ursus avait cultivé en lui le saltimbanque, et dans ce saltimbanque il avait incrusté de son mieux la science et la sagesse. Ursus, en arrêt devant le masque ahurissant de Gwynplaine, grommelait: Il a été bien commencé. C'est pourquoi il l'avait complété par tous les ornements de la philosophie et du savoir.

Il répétait souvent à Gwynplaine: — Sois un philosophe. Être sage, c'est être invulnérable. Tel que tu me vois, je n'ai jamais pleuré. Force de ma sagesse. Crois-tu que, si j'avais voulu pleurer, j'aurais manqué d'occasion?

Ursus, dans ses monologues écoutés par le loup, disait: — J'ai enseigné à Gwynplaine Tout, y compris le latin, et à Dea Rien, y compris la musique. — Il leur avait appris à tous deux à chanter.

Il avait lui-même un joli talent sur la muse de blé, une petite flûte de ce temps-là. Il en jouait agréablement, ainsi que de la chiffonie, sorte de vielle de mendiant, que la chronique de Bertrand Duguesclin qualifie «instrument truand», et qui est le point de départ de la symphonie. Ces musiques attiraient le monde. Ursus montrait à la foule sa chiffonie et disait: — En latin *organistrum*.

Il avait enseigné à Dea et à Gwynplaine le chant selon la méthode d'Orphée et d'Égide Binchois. Il lui était arrivé plus d'une fois de couper les leçons de ce cri d'enthousiasme: — Orphée, musicien de la Grèce! Binchois, musicien de la Picardie!

Ces complications d'éducation soignée n'avaient pas occupé les deux enfants au point de les empêcher de s'adorer. Ils avaient grandi en mêlant leurs coeurs, comme deux arbrisseaux plantés près, en devenant arbres, mêlent leurs branches.

— C'est égal, murmurait Ursus, je les marierai.

Et il bougonnait en aparté:

— Il m'ennuient avec leur amour,

Le passé, le peu qu'ils en avaient du moins, n'existait point pour Guynplaine et Dea. Ils en savaient ce qu'Ursus leur en avait dit. Ils appelaient Ursus «Père».

Gwynplaine n'avait souvenir de son enfance que comme d'un passage de démons sur son berceau. Il en avait une impression comme d'avoir été trépigné dans l'obscurité sous des pieds difformes.

Était-ce exprès, ou sans le vouloir? il l'ignorait. Ce qu'il se rappelait nettement, et dans les moindres détails, c'était la tragique aventure de son abandon. La trouvaille de Dea faisait pour lui de cette nuit lugubre une date radieuse.

La mémoire de Dea était, plus encore que celle de Gwynplaine, dans la nuée. Si petite, tout s'était dissipé. Elle se rappelait sa mère comme une chose froide. Avait-elle vu le soleil? Peut-être. Elle faisait effort pour replonger son esprit dans cet évanouissement qui était derrière elle. Le soleil? qu'était-ce? Elle se souvenait d'on ne sait quoi de lumineux et de chaud que Gwynplaine avait remplacé.

Ils se disaient des choses à voix basse. Il est certain que roucouler est ce qu'il y a de plus important sur la terre. Dea disait à Gwynplaine: La lumière, c'est quand tu parles.

Une fois, n’y tenant plus, Gwynplaine, apercevant à travers une manche de mousseline le bras de Dea, effleura de ses lèvres cette transparence. Bouche difforme, baiser idéal. Dea sentit un ravissement profond. Elle devint toute rose. Ce baiser d’un monstre fit l’aurore sur ce beau front plein de nuit. Cependant Gwynplaine soupirait avec une sorte de terreur, et, comme la gorgère de Dea s’entre-bâillait, il ne pouvait s’empêcher de regarder des blancheurs visibles par cette ouverture de paradis.

Dea releva sa manche et tendit à Gwynplaine son bras nu en disant: Encore! Gwynplaine se tira d’affaire par l’évasion.

Le lendemain ce jeu recommençait, avec des variantes. Glissement céleste dans ce doux abîme qui est l’amour.

Ce sont là des choses auxquelles le bon Dieu, en sa qualité de vieux philosophe, sourit.

VII

LA CÉCITÉ DONNE DES LEÇONS DE CLAIRVOYANCE

Parfois Gwynplaine s’adressait des reproches. Il se faisait de son bonheur un cas de conscience. Il s’imaginait que se laisser aimer par cette femme qui ne pouvait le voir, c’était la tromper.
Que dirait-elle si ses yeux s’ouvraient tout à coup? comme ce qui l’attire la repousserait! comme elle reculerait devant son effroyable amant! quel-cri! quelles mains voilant son visage!
quelle fuite! Un pénible scrupule le harcelait. Il se disait que, monstre, il n’avait pas droit à l’amour. Hydre idolâtrée par l’astre, il était de son devoir d’éclairer cette étoile aveugle.

Une fois il dit à Dea:

— Tu sais que je suis très laid.

— Je sais que tu es sublime, répondit-elle.

Il reprit:

— Quand tu entends tout le monde rire, c’est de moi qu’on rit, parce que je suis horrible.

— Je t’aime, lui dit Dea.

Après un silence, elle ajouta:

— J’étais dans la mort; tu m’as remise dans la vie. Toi là, c’est le ciel à côté de moi. Donne-moi ta main, que je touche Dieu!

Leurs mains se cherchèrent et s’étreignirent, et ils ne dirent plus une parole, rendus silencieux par la plénitude de s’aimer.

Ursus, bourru, avait entendu. Le lendemain, comme ils étaient tous trois ensemble, il dit:

— D’ailleurs Dea est laide aussi.

Le mot manqua son effet. Dea et Gwynplaine n’écoutaient pas. Absorbés l’un dans l’autre, ils percevaient rarement les épiphonèmes d’Ursus. Ursus était profond en pure perte.

Cette fois pourtant la précaution d’Ursus «Dea est laide aussi indiquait chez cet homme docte une certaine science de la femme.
Il est certain que Gwynplaine avait fait, loyalement, une imprudence. Dit à une toute autre femme et à une toute autre aveugle que Dea, le mot: Je suis

laid eût pu être dangereux.

Être aveugle et amoureux, c'est être deux fois aveugle. Dans cette situation-là on fait des songes; l'illusion est le pain du songe; ôter l'illusion à l'amour, c'est lui ôter l'aliment. Tous les enthousiasmes entrent utilement dans sa formation; aussi bien l'admiration physique que l'admiration morale. D'ailleurs, il ne faut jamais dire à une femme de mot difficile à comprendre. Elle rêve là-dessus. Et souvent elle rêve mal. Une énigme dans une rêverie fait du dégât. La percussion d'un mot qu'on a laiss tomber désagrège ce qui adhérait. Il arrive parfois que, sans qu'on sache comment, parce qu'il a reçu le choc obscur d'une parole en l'air, un coeur se vide insensiblement. L'être qui aime s'aperçoit d'une baisse dans son bonheur. Rien n'est redoutable comme cette exsudation lente de vase fêlé.

Heureusement Dea n'était point de cette argile. La pâte à faire toutes les femmes n'avait point servi pour elle. C'était une nature rare que Dea. Le corps était fragile, le coeur non. Ce qui était le fond de son être, c'était une divine persévérance d'amour.

Tout le creusement que produisit en elle le mot de Gwynplaine aboutit à lui faire dire un jour cette parole:

— Être laid, qu'est-ce que cela? c'est faire du mal. Gwynplaine ne fait que du bien. Il est beau.

Puis, toujours sous cette forme d'interrogation familière aux enfants et aux aveugles, elle reprit:

— Voir? qu'appelez-vous voir, vous autres! moi, je ne vois pas, je sais. Il paraît que voir, cela cache.

— Que veux-tu dire? demanda Gwynplaine.

Dea répondit:

— Voir est une chose qui cache le vrai.

— Non, dit Gwynplaine.

— Mais si! répliqua Dea, puisque tu dis que tu es laid!

Elle songea un moment, et ajouta:

— Menteur!

Et Gwynplaine avait cette joie d'avoir avoué et de n'être pas cru. Sa conscience était en repos, son amour aussi.

Ils étaient arrivés ainsi, elle à seize ans, lui à près de vingt-cinq.

Ils n'étaient pas, comme on dirait aujourd'hui, «plus avancés que le premier jour. Moins; puisque, l'on s'en souvient, ils avaient eu leur nuit de noces, elle âgée de neuf mois, lui de dix ans. Une sorte de sainte enfance continuait dans leur amour; c’est ainsi qu’il arrive parfois que le rossignol attard prolonge son chant de nuit jusque dans l’aurore.

Leurs caresses n’allaient guère au delà des mains pressées, et parfois du bras nu effleuré. Une volupté doucement bégayante leur suffisait.

Vingt-quatre ans, seize ans. Cela fit qu’un matin, Ursus, ne perdant pas de vue son «mauvais tour», leur dit:

— Un de ces jours vous choisirez une religion.

— Pourquoi faire? demanda Gwynplaine.

— Pour vous marier.

— Mais c’est fait, répondit Dea.

Dea ne comprenait point qu’on pût être mari et femme plus qu’ils ne l’étaient.

Au fond, ce contentement chimérique et virginal, ce naïf assouvissement de l’âme par l’âme, ce célibat pris pour mariage, ne déplaisait point à Ursus. Ce qu’il en disait, c’était parce qu’il faut bien parler. Mais le médecin qu’il y avait en lui trouvait Dea, sinon trop jeune, du moins trop délicate et trop frêle pour ce qu’il appelait «l’hyménée en chair et en os».

Cela viendrait toujours assez tôt.

D’ailleurs, mariés, ne l’étaient-ils point? Si l’indissoluble existait quelque part, n’était-ce pas dans cette cohésion, Gwynplaine et Dea? Chose admirable, ils étaient adorablement jetés dans les bras l’un de l’autre par le malheur. Et comme si ce n’était pas assez de ce premier lien, sur le malheur était venu se rattacher, s’enrouler et se serrer l’amour. Quelle force peut jamais rompre la chaîne de fer consolidée par le noeud de fleurs?

Certes, les inséparables étaient là.

Dea avait la beauté; Gwynplaine avait la lumière. Chacun apportait sa dot; et ils faisaient plus que le couple, ils faisaient la paire; séparés seulement par l’innocence, interposition sacrée.

Cependant Gwynplaine avait beau rêver et s’absorber le plus qu’il pouvait dans la contemplation de Dea et dans le for intérieur de son amour, il était homme. Les lois fatales ne s’éludent point.

Il subissait, comme toute l’immense nature, les fermentations obscures voulues par le créateur. Cela parfois, quand il paraissait en public, lui faisait regarder les femmes qui étaient dans la foule; mais il détournait tout de suite ce regard en contravention, et il se hâtait de rentrer, repentant, dans son âme.

Ajoutons que l’encouragement manquait. Sur le visage de toutes les femmes qu’il regardait il voyait l’aversion, l’antipathie, la répugnance, le rejet. Il était clair qu’aucune autre que Dea n’était possible pour lui. Cela l’aidait à se repentir.

VIII

NON SEULEMENT LE BONHEUR, MAIS LA PROSPÉRIT

Que de choses vraies dans les contes! La brûlure du diable invisible qui vous touche, c’est le remords d’une mauvaise pensée.

Chez Gwynplaine, la mauvaise pensée ne parvenait point à éclore, et il n’y avait jamais de remords. Mais il y avait parfois regret.

Vagues brumes de la conscience.

Qu’était-ce? Rien.

Leur bonheur était complet. Tellement complet qu’ils n’étaient même plus pauvres.

De 1689 à 1704 une transfiguration avait eu lieu.

Il arrivait parfois, en cette année 1704, qu’à la nuit tombante, dans telle ou telle petite ville du littoral, un vaste et lourd fourgon, traîné par deux chevaux robustes, faisait son entrée.

Cela ressemblait à une coque de navire qu’on aurait renversée, la quille pour toit, le pont pour plancher, et mise sur quatre roues. Les roues étaient égales toutes quatre et hautes comme des roues de fardier. Roues, timon et fourgon, tout était badigeonné en vert, avec une gradation rhythmique de nuances qui allait du vert bouteille pour les roues au vert pomme pour la toiture. Cette couleur verte avait fini par faire remarquer cette voiture, et elle était connue dans les champs de foire; on l’appelait la Green-Box, ce qui veut dire la Boîte-Verte. Cette Green-Box n’avait que deux fenêtres, une à chaque extrémité, et l’arrière une porte avec marchepied. Sur le toit, d’un tuyau peint en vert comme le reste, sortait une fumée. Cette maison en marche était toujours vernie à neuf et lavée de frais. A l’avant, sur un strapontin adhérent au fourgon, et ayant pour porte la fenêtre, au-dessus de la croupe des chevaux, à côté d’un vieillard qui tenait les guides et dirigeait l’attelage, deux femmes bréhaignes, c’est-à-dire bohémiennes, vêtues en déesses, sonnaient de la trompette. L’ébahissement des bourgeois contemplait et commentait cette machine, fièrement cahotante.

C’était l’ancien établissement d’Ursus, amplifié par le succès, et de tréteau promu théâtre.

Une espèce d’être entre chien et loup était enchaîné sous le fourgon. C’était Homo.

Le vieux cocher qui menait les hackneys était la personne même du philosophe.

D’où venait cette croissance de la cahute misérable en berlingot olympique?

De ceci: Gwynplaine était célèbre.

C’était avec un flair vrai de ce qui est la réussite parmi les hommes qu’Ursus avait dit à Gwynplaine: On a fait ta fortune.

Ursus, on s’en souvient, avait fait de Gwynplaine son élève. Des inconnus avaient travaillé le visage. Il avait, lui, travaill l’intelligence, et derrière ce masque si bien réussi il avait mis le plus qu’il avait pu de pensée. Dès que l’enfant grandi lui en avait paru digne, il l’avait produit sur la scène, c’est-à-dire sur le devant de la cahute. L’effet de cette apparition avait été extraordinaire. Tout de suite les passants avaient admiré. Jamais on n’avait rien vu de comparable à ce surprenant mime du rire. On ignorait comment ce miracle d’hilarité communîcable était obtenu, les uns le croyaient naturel, les autres le déclaraient artificiel, et, les conjectures s’ajoutant à la réalité, partout, dans les carrefours, dans les marchés, dans toutes les stations de foire et de fête, la foule se ruait vers Gwynplaine. Grâce à cette «great attraction», il y avait eu dans la pauvre escarcelle du groupe nomade pluie de liards d’abord, ensuite de gros sous, et enfin de shellings. Un lieu de curiosité épuisé, on passait à l’autre. Rouler n’enrichit pas une pierre, mais enrichit une cahute; et d’année en année, de ville en ville, avec l’accroissement de la taille et de la laideur de Gwynplaine, la fortune prédite par Ursus était venue.

— Quel service on t’a rendu là, mon garçon! disait Ursus.

Cette «fortune» avait permis à Ursus, administrateur du succès de Gwynplaine, de faire construire la charrette de ses rêves, c’est-à-dire un fourgon assez vaste pour porter un théâtre et semer la science et l’art dans les carrefours. De plus, Ursus avait pu ajouter au groupe composé de lui, d’Homo, de Gwynplaine et de Dea, deux chevaux et deux femmes, lesquelles étaient dans la troupe déesses, nous venons de le dire, et servantes. Un frontispice mythologique était utile alors à une baraque de bateleurs. — Nous sommes un temple errant, disait Ursus.

Ces deux bréhaignes, ramassées par le philosophe dans le pêle-mêle nomade des bourgs et faubourgs, étaient laides et jeunes, et s’appelaient, par la volonté d'Ursus, l'une Phoebé et l'autre Vénus. Lisez: *Fibi* et *Vinos*. Attendu qu'il est convenable de se conformer à la prononciation anglaise.

Phoebé faisait la cuisine et Vénus scrobait le temple.

De plus, les jours de performance, elles habillaient Dea.

En dehors de ce qui est, pour les bateleurs comme pour les princes, «la vie publique», Dea était comme Fibi et Vinos, vêtue d'une jupe florentine en toile fleurie et d'un capingot de femme qui, n'ayant pas de manches, laissait les bras libres. Ursus et Gwynplaine portaient des capingots d'hommes, et, comme les matelots de guerre, de grandes chausses à la marine. Gwynplaine avait en outre, pour les travaux et les exercices de force, autour du cou et sur les épaules une esclavine de cuir. Il soignait les chevaux. Ursus et Homo avaient soin l'un de l'autre.

Dea, à force d'être habituée à la Green-Box, allait et venait dans l'intérieur de la maison roulante presque avec aisance, et comme si elle y voyait.

L'oeil qui eût pu pénétrer dans la structure intime et dans l'arrangement de cet édifice ambulant eût aperçu dans un angle, amarrée aux parois et immobile sur ses quatre roues, l'antique cahute d'Ursus mise à la retraite, ayant permission de se rouiller, et désormais dispensée de rouler comme Homo de traîner.

Celte cahute, rencognée à l'arrière à droite de la porte, servait de chambre et de vestiaire à Ursus et à Gwynplaine. Elle contenait maintenant deux lits. Dans le coin vis-à-vis était la cuisine.

Un aménagement de navire n'est pas plus concis et plus précis que ne l'était l'appropriation intérieure de la Green-Box. Tout y était casé, rangé, prévu, voulu.

Le berlingot était coupé en trois compartiments cloisonnés. Les compartiments communiquaient par des baies libres et sans porte.
Une pièce d'étoffe tombante les fermait à peu près. Le compartiment d'arrière était le logis des hommes, le compartiment d'avant était le logis des femmes, le compartiment du milieu, séparant les deux sexes, était le théâtre. Les effets d'orchestre et de machines étaient dans la cuisine. Une soupente sous la voussure du toit contenait les décors, et en ouvrant une trappe à cette soupente on démasquait des lampes qui produisaient des magies d'éclairage.

Ursus était le poëte de ces magies. C'était lui qui faisait les pièces.

Il avait des talents divers, il faisait des tours de passe-passe très particuliers. Outre les voix qu'il faisait entendre, il produisait toules sortes de choses inattendues, des chocs de lumière et d'obscurité, des formations spontanées de chiffres ou de mots à volonté sur une cloison, des clairs-obscurs mêlés d'évanouissements de figures, force bizarreries parmi lesquelles, inattentif à la foule qui s'émerveillait, il semblait méditer.

Un jour, Gwynplaine lui avait dit:

— Père, vous avez l'air d'un sorcier.

Et Ursus avait répondu:

— Cela tient peut-être à ce que je le suis.

La Green-Box, fabriquée sur la savante épure d'Ursus, offrait ce raffinement ingénieux qu'entre les deux roues de devant et de derrière, le panneau central de la façade de gauche tournait sur charnière à l'aide d'un jeu de chaînes et de poulies, et s'abattait à volonté comme un pont-levis. En s'abattant il mettait en liberté trois supports fléaux à gonds qui, gardant la verticale pendant que le panneau s'abaissait, venaient se poser droits sur le sol comme les pieds d'une table, et soutenaient au-dessus du pavé, ainsi qu'une estrade, le panneau devenu plateau. En même temps le théâtre apparaissait, augmenté du plateau qui en faisait l'avant-scène. Celle ouverture ressemblait absolument à une bouche de l'enfer, au dire des prêcheurs puritains en plein vent qui s'en détournaient avec horreur. Il est probable que c'est pour une invention impie de ce genre que Solon donna des coups de bâton à Thespis.

Thespis du reste a duré plus longtemps qu'on ne croit. La charrette-théâtre existe encore. C'est sur des théâtres roulants de ce genre qu'au seizième et au dix-septième siècle on a joué en Angleterre les ballets et ballades d'Amner et de Pilkington, en France les pastorales de Gilbert Colin, en Flandre, aux kermesses, les doubles-choeurs de Clément, dit Non Papa, en Allemagne l'Adam et Eve de Theiles, et en Italie les parades vénitiennes d'Animuccia et de Ca-Fossis, les sylves de Gesualdo, prince de Venouse, *le Satyre* de Laura Guidiccioni, *le Désespoir de Philène, la Mort d'Ugolin* de Vincent Galilée, père de l'astronome, lequel Vincent Galilée chantait lui-même sa musique en s'accompagnant de la viole de gambe, et tous ces premiers essais d'opéra italien qui, dès 1580, ont substitu l'inspiration libre au genre madrigalesque.

Le chariot couleur d'espérance qui portait Ursus, Gwynplaine et leur fortune, et en tête duquel Fibi et Vinos trompettaient comme deux renommées, faisait partie de tout ce grand ensemble bohémien et littéraire. Thespis n'eût pas plus désavoué Ursus que Congrio n'eût désavoué Gwynplaine.

A l'arrivée, sur les places des villages et des villes, dans les intervalles de la fanfare de Fibi et de Vinos, Ursus commentait les trompettes par des révélations instructives.

— Cette symphonie est grégorienne, s'écriait-il. Citoyens bourgeois, le sacramentaire grégorien, ce grand progrès, s'est heurté en Italie contre le rit ambrosien, et en Espagne contre le rit mozarabique, et n'en a triomphé que difficilement.

Après quoi, la Green-Box s'arrêtait dans un lieu quelconque du choix d'Ursus, et, le soir venu, le panneau avant-scène s'abaissait, le théâtre s'ouvrait, et la performance commençait.

Le théâtre de la Green-Box représentait un paysage peint par Ursus qui ne savait pas peindre, ce qui fait qu'au besoin le paysage pouvait représenter un souterrain.

Le rideau, ce que nous appelons la toile, était une triveline de soie à carreaux contrastés.

Le public était dehors, dans la rue, sur la place, arrondi en demi-cercle devant le spectacle, sous le soleil, sous les averses, disposition qui faisait la pluie moins désirable pour les théâtres de ce temps-là que pour les théâtres d'à présent.

Quand on le pouvait, on donnait les représentations dans une cour d'auberge, ce qui faisait qu'on avait autant de rangs de loges que d'étages de fenêtres. De cette manière, le théâtre étant plus clos, le public était plus payant.

Ursus était de tout, de la pièce, de la troupe, de la cuisine, de l'orchestre. Vinos battait du carcaveau, dont elle maniait merveille les baguettes, et Fibi pinçait de la morache, qui est une sorte de guiterne. Le loup avait été promu utilité. Il faisait décidément partie de «la compagnie», et jouait dans l'occasion des bouts de rôle. Souvent, quand ils paraissaient côte à côte sur le théâtre, Ursus et Homo, Ursus dans sa peau d'ours bien lacée, Homo dans sa peau de loup mieux ajustée encore, on ne savait lequel des deux était la bête; ce qui flattait Ursus.

IX

EXTRAVAGANCES QUE LES GENS SANS GOUT APPELLENT POÉSIE

Les pièces d’Ursus étaient des interludes, genre un peu passé de mode aujourd’hui. Une de ces pièces, qui n’est pas venue jusqu’ nous, était intitulée *Ursus Rursus.* Il est probable qu’il y jouait le principal rôle. Une fausse sortie suivie d’une rentrée, c’était vraisemblablement le sujet, sobre et louable.

Le titre des interludes d’Ursus était quelquefois en latin, comme on le voit, et la poésie quelquefois en espagnol. Les vers espagnols d’Ursus étaient rimés comme presque tous les sonnets castillans de ce temps-là. Cela ne gênait point le peuple.

L’espagnol était alors une langue courante, et les marins anglais parlaient castillan de même que les soldats romains parlaient carthaginois. Voyez Plaute. D’ailleurs, au spectacle comme à la messe, la langue latine ou autre que l’auditoire ne comprenait pas, n’embarrassait personne. On s’en tirait en l’accompagnant gaîment de paroles connues. Notre vieille France gauloise particulièrement avait cette manière-là d’être dévote. A l’église, sur un *Immolatus* les fidèles chantaient *Liesse prendrai*, et sur un *Sanctus*, *Baise-moi, ma mie*. Il fallut le concile de Trente pour mettre fin à ces familiarités.

Ursus avait fait spécialement pour Gwynplaine un interlude, dont il était content. C’était son oeuvre capitale. Il s’y était mis tout entier. Donner sa somme dans son produit, c’est le triomphe de quiconque crée. La crapaude qui fait un crapaud fait un chef-d’oeuvre. Vous doutez? Essayez d’en faire autant.

Ursus avait heaucoup léché cet interlude. Cet ourson était intitulé: *Chaos vaincu.*

Voici ce que c’était:

Un effet de nuit. Au moment où la triveline s’écartait, la foule massée devant la Green-Box ne voyait que du noir. Dans ce noir se mouvaient, à l’état reptile, trois formes confuses, un loup, un ours et un homme. Le loup était le loup, Ursus était l’ours, Gwynplaine était l’homme. Le loup et l’ours représentaient les forces féroces de la nature, les faims inconscientes, l'obscurit sauvage, et tous deux se ruaient sur Gwynplaine, et c'était le chaos combattant l'homme. On ne distinguait la figure d'aucun. Gwynplaine se débatait couvert d'un linceul, et son visage était caché par ses épais cheveux tombants. D'ailleurs tout était ténèbres. L'ours grondait, le loup grinçait, l'homme criait.

L'homme avait le dessous, les deux bêtes l'accablaient; il demandait aide et secours, il jetait dans l'inconnu un profond appel. Il râlait. On assistait à cette agonie de l'homme ébauche, encore à peine distinct des brutes; c'était lugubre, la foule regardait haletante; une minute de plus, les fauves triomphaient, et le chaos allait résorber l'homme. Lutte, cris, hurlements, et tout à coup silence. Un chant dans l'ombre. Un souffle avait passé, on entendait une voix. Des musiques mystérieuses flottaient, accompagnant ce chant de l'invisible, et subitement, sans qu'on sut d'où ni comment, une blancheur surgissait. Cette blancheur était une lumière, cette lumière était une femme, cette femme était l'esprit. Dea, calme, candide, belle, formidable de sérénité et de douceur, apparaissait au centre d'un nimbe. Silhouette de clarté dans de l'aurore. La voix, c'était elle. Voix légère, profonde, ineffable. D'invisible faite visible, dans cette aube elle chantait. On croyait entendre une chanson d'ange ou un hymne d'oiseau. A cette apparition, l'homme, dressé dans un sursaut d'éblouissement, abattait ses deux poings sur les deux brutes terrassées.

Alors la vision, portée sur un glissement difficile à comprendre et d'autant plus admiré, chantait ces vers, d'une puret espagnole suffisante pour les matelots anglais qui écoutaient:

Ora! Hora!
De palabra Nace razon, Da luze el son.

Prie! pleure! Du verbe naît la raison. Le chant crée la lumière.

Puis elle baissait les yeux au-dessous d'elle comme si elle eût vu un gouffre, et reprenait:

Noche quitta te de alli El alba canta hallali.

Nuit! va-t'en! L'aube chante hallali!

A mesure qu'elle chantait, l'homme se levait de plus en plus, et, de gisant, il était maintenant agenouillé, les mains levées vers la vision, ses deux genoux posés sur les deux bêtes immobiles et comme foudroyées. Elle continuait, tournée vers lui:

Es menester a cielos ir, Y tu que llorabas reir.

Il faut aller au ciel, — et rire, toi qui pleurais.

Et s'approchant, avec une majesté d'astre, elle ajoutait:

Gebra barzon!
Dexa, monstro, A tu negro Caparazon.

Brise le joug! — quitte, monstre, — ta noire — carapace.

Et elle lui posait la main sur le front.

Alors une autre voix s'élevait, plus profonde et par conséquent plus douce encore, voix navrée et ravie, d'une gravité tendre et farouche, et c'était le chant humain répondant au chant sidéral.

Gwynplaine, toujours agenouillé dans l'obscurité sur l'ours et le loup vaincus, la tète sous la main de Dea, chantait:

O ven! ama!
Eres alma, Soy corazon.

Oh! viens! aime! — tu es âme, — je suis coeur.

Et brusquement, dans cette ombre, un jet de lumière frappait Gwynplaine en pleine face,

On voyait dans ces ténèbres le monstre épanoui.

Dire la commotion de la foule est impossible. Un soleil de rire surgissant, tel était l'effet. Le rire naît de l'inattendu, et rien de plus inattendu que ce dénoûment. Pas de saisissement comparable à ce soufflet de lumière sur ce masque bouffon et terrible. On riait autour de ce rire; partout, en haut, en bas, sur le devant, au fond, les hommes, les femmes, les vieilles faces chauves, les roses figures d'enfants, les bons, les méchants, les gens gais, les gens tristes, tout le monde; et même dans la rue, les passants, ceux qui ne voyaient pas, en entendant rire, riaient. Et ce rire s'achevait en battements de mains et en trépignements. La triveline refermée, on rappelait Gwynplaine avec frénésie. De là un succès énorme. Avez-vous vu *Chaos vaincu?* On courait à Gwynplaine. Les insouciances venaient rire, les mélancolies venaient rire, les mauvaises consciences venaient rire. Rire si irrésistible que par moments il pouvait sembler maladif. Mais s'il y a une peste que l'homme ne fuit pas, c'est la contagion de la joie. Le succès au surplus ne dépassait point la populace. Grosse foule, c'est petit peuple.

On voyait *Chaos vaincu* pour un penny. Le beau monde ne va pas où l'on va pour un sou.

Ursus ne haïssait point cette oeuvre, longtemps couvée par lui.

— C’est dans le genre d’un nommé Shakespeare, disait-il avec modestie.

La juxtaposition de Dea ajoutait à l’inexprimable effet de Gwynplaine. Cette blanche figure à côté de ce gnome représentait ce qu’on pourrait appeler l’étonnement divin. Le peuple regardait Dea avec une sorte d’anxiété mystérieuse. Elle avait ce je ne sais quoi de suprême de la vierge et de la prêtresse, qui ignore l’homme et connaît Dieu. On voyait qu’elle était aveugle et l’on sentait qu’elle était voyante. Elle semblait debout sur le seuil du surnaturel. Elle paraissait être à moiti dans notre lumière et à moitié dans l’autre clarté. Elle venait travailler sur la terre, et travailler de la façon dont travaille le ciel, avec de l’aurore. Elle trouvait une hydre et faisait une âme. Elle avait l’air de la puissance créatrice, satisfaite et stupéfaite de sa création; on croyait voir sur son visage adorablement effaré la volonté de la cause et la surprise du résultat. On sentait qu’elle aimait son monstre. Le savait-elle monstre? Oui, puisqu’elle le touchait. Non, puisqu’elle l’acceptait. Toute cette nuit et tout ce jour mêlés se résolvaient dans l’esprit du spectateur en un clair-obscur o apparaissaient des perspectives infinies. Comment la divinit adhère à l’ébauche, de quelle façon s’accomplit la pénétration de l’âme dans la matière, comment le rayon solaire est un cordon ombilical, comment le défiguré se transfigure, comment l’informe devient paradisiaque, tous ces mystères entrevus compliquaient d’une émotion presque cosmique la convulsion d’hilarité soulevée par Gwynplaine. Sans aller au fond, car le spectateur n’aime point la fatigue de l’approfondissement, on comprenait quelque chose au delà de ce qu’on apercevait, et ce spectacle étrange avait une transparence d’avatar.

Quant à Dea, ce qu’elle éprouvait échappe à la parole humaine.

Elle se sentait au milieu d’une foule, et ne savait ce que c’était qu’une foule.

Elle entendait une rumeur, et c’est tout.

Pour elle une foule était un souffle; et au fond ce n’est que cela. Les générations sont des baleines qui passent. L’bomme respire, aspire et expire. Dans cette foule, Dea se sentait seule, et avait le frisson d’une suspension au-dessus d’un précipice. Tout à coup, dans ce trouble de l’innocent en détresse prêt à accuser l’inconnu, dans ce mécontentement de la chute possible, Dea, sereine pourtant, et supérieure à la vague angoisse du péril, mais intérieurement frémissante de son isolement, retrouvait sa certitude et son support; elle ressaisissait son fil de sauvetage dans l’univers des ténèbres, elle posait sa main sur la puissante tête de Gwynplaine. Joie inouïe! elle appuyait ses doigts roses sur cette forêt de cheveux crépus. La laine touchée éveille une idée de douceur.

Dea touchait un mouton qu’elle savait être un lion. Tout son coeur se fondait en un ineffable amour. Elle se sentait hors de danger, elle trouvait le sauveur. Le public croyait voir le contraire. Pour les spectateurs, l’être sauvé, c’était Gwynplaine, et l’être sauveur, c’était Dea. Qu’importe! pensait Ursus, pour qui le coeur de Dea était visible. Et Dea, rassurée, consolée, ravie, adorait l’ange, pendant que le peuple contemplait le monstre, et subissait, fasciné lui aussi, mais en sens inverse, cet immense rire prométhéen.

L’amour vrai ne se blase point. Étant tout âme, il ne peut s’attiédir. Une braise se couvre de cendre, une étoile non. Ces impressions exquises se renouvelaient tous les soirs pour Dea, et elle était prête à pleurer de tendresse pendant qu’on se tordait de rire. Autour d’elle, on n’était que joyeux; elle, elle était heureuse.

Du reste l’effet de gaîté, dû au rictus imprévu et stupéfiant de Gwynplaine, n’était évidemment pas voulu par Ursus. Il eût préféré plus de sourire et moins de rire, et une admiration plus littéraire. Mais triomphe console. Il se réconciliait tous les soirs avec son succès excessif, en comptant combien les piles de farthings faisaient de shellings, et combien les piles de shellings faisaient de pounds. Et puis il se disait qu’après tout, ce rire passé, *Chaos vaincu* se retrouvait au fond des esprits et qu’il leur en restait quelque chose. Il ne se trompait peut-être point tout à fait; le tassement d’une oeuvre se fait dans le public. La vérité est que cette populace, attentive à ce loup, à cet ours, à cet homme, puis à cette musique, à ces hurlements domptés par l’harmonie, à cette nuit dissipée par l’aube, à ce chant dégageant la lumière, acceptait avec une sympathie confuse et profonde, et même avec un certain respect attendri, ce drame-poëme de *Chaos vaincu*, cette victoire de l’esprit sur la matière, aboutissant à la joie de l’homme.

Tels étaient les plaisirs grossiers du peuple.

Ils lui suffisaient. Le peuple n’avait pas le moyen d’aller aux «nobles matches» de la gentry, et ne pouvait, comme les seigneurs et gentilshommes, parier mille guinées pour Helmsgail contre Phelem-ghe-madone.

X

COUP D'OEIL DE CELUI QUI EST HORS DE TOUT SUR LES CHOSES ET SUR LES HOMMES

L'homme a une pensée, se venger du plaisir qu'on lui fait. De l le mépris pour le comédien.

Cet être me charme, me divertit, m'enseigne, m'enchante, me console, me verse l'idéal, m'est agréable et utile, quel mal puis-je lui rendre? L'humiliation. Le dédain, c'est le soufflet à distance. Souffletons-le. Il me plaît, donc il est vil. Il me sert, donc je le hais. Où y a-t-il une pierre que je la lui jette? Prêtre, donne la tienne. Philosophe, donne la tienne. Bossuet, excommunie-le. Rousseau, insulte-le. Orateur, crache-lui les cailloux de ta bouche. Ours, lance-lui ton pavé. Lapidons l'arbre, meurtrissons le fruit, et mangeons-le. Bravo! et A bas! Dire les vers des poëtes, c'est être pestiféré. Histrion, va! mettons-le au carcan dans son succès. Achevons-lui son triomphe en huée. Qu'il amasse la foule et qu'il crée la solitude. Et c'est ainsi que les classes riches, dites hautes classes, ont inventé pour le comédien cette forme d'isolement, l'applaudissement.

La populace est moins féroce. Elle ne haïssait point Gwynplaine. Elle ne le méprisait pas non plus. Seulement le dernier calfat du dernier équipage de la dernière caraque amarrée dans le dernier des ports d'Angleterre se considérait comme incommensurablement supérieur à cet amuseur de «la canaille», et estimait qu'un calfat est autant audessus d'un saltimbanque qu'un lord est au-dessus d'un calfat.

Gwynplaine était donc, comme tous les comédiens, applaudi et isolé. Du reste, ici-bas tout succès est crime, et s'expie. Qui a la médaille a le revers.

Pour Gwynplaine il n'y avait point de revers. En ce sens que les deux côtés de son succès lui agréaient. Il était satisfait de l'applaudissement, et content de l'isolement. Par l'applaudissement, il était riche; par l'isolement, il était heureux.

Être riche, dans ces bas-fonds, c'est n'être plus misérable. C'est n'avoir plus de trous à ses vêtements, plus de froid dans son âtre, plus de vide dans son estomac. C'est manger à son appétit et boire à sa soif.

C’est avoir tout le nécessaire, y compris un sou a donner a un pauvre. Cette richesse indigente, suffisante à la liberté, Gwynplaine l’avait.

Du côté de l’âme, il était opulent. Il avait l’amour. Que pouvait-il désirer?

Il ne désirait rien.

La difformité de moins, il semble que ce pouvait être là une offre à lui faire. Comme il l’eût repoussée! Quitter ce masque et reprendre son visage, redevenir ce qu’il avait été peut-être, beau et charmant, certes, il n’eût pas voulu! Et avec quoi eût-il nourri Dea? que fût devenue la pauvre et douce aveugle qui l’aimait? Sans ce rictus qui faisait de lui un clown unique, il ne serait plus qu’un saltimbanque comme un autre, le premier équilibriste venu, un ramasseur de liards entre les fentes des pavés, et Dea n’aurait peut-être pas du pain tous les jours! Il se sentait avec un profond orgueil de tendresse le protecteur de cette infirme céleste. Nuit, Solitude, Dénûment, Impuissance, Ignorance, Faim et Soif, les sept gueules béantes de la misère se dressaient autour d’elle, et il était le saint Georges combattant ce dragon. Et il triomphait de la misère. Comment? par sa difformité. Par sa difformité, il était utile, secourable, victorieux, grand. Il n’avait qu’à se montrer, et l’argent venait. Il était le maître des foules; il se constatait le souverain des populaces. Il pouvait tout pour Dea. Ses besoins, il y pourvoyait; ses désirs, ses envies, ses fantaisies, dans la sphère limitée des souhaits possibles à un aveugle, il les contentait. Gwynplaine et Dea étaient, nous l’avons montré déjà, la providence l’un de l’autre. Il se sentait enlevé sur ses ailes, elle se sentait portée dans ses bras. Protéger qui vous aime, donner le nécessaire à qui vous donne les étoiles, il n’est rien de plus doux. Gwynplaine avait cette félicité suprême. Et il la devait à sa difformité. Cette difformité le faisait supérieur à tout. Par elle il gagnait sa vie, et la vie des autres; par elle il avait l’indépendance, la liberté, la célébrité, la satisfaction intime, la fierté. Dans cette difformité il était inaccessible. Les fatalités ne pouvaient rien contre lui au delà de ce coup où elles s’étaient épuisées, et qui lui avait tourné en triomphe. Ce fond du malheur était devenu un sommet élyséen. Gwynplaine était emprisonné dans sa difformité, mais avec Dea. C’était, nous l’avons dit, être au cachot dans le paradis. Il y avait entre eux et le monde des vivants une muraille. Tant mieux. Cette muraille les parquait, mais les défendait. Que pouvait-on contre Dea, que pouvait-on contre Gwynplaine, avec une telle fermeture de la vie autour d’eux? Lui ôter le succès? impossible. Il eût fallu lui ôter sa face. Lui ôter l’amour?

impossible. Dea ne le voyait point.

L’aveuglement de Dea était divinement incurable. Quel inconvénient avait pour Gwynplaine sa difformité? Aucun. Quel avantage avait-elle? Tous. Il était aimé malgré cette horreur, et peut-être à cause d’elle. Infirmité et difformité s’étaient, d’instinct, rapprochées et accouplées. Être aimé, est-ce que ce n’est pas tout? Gwynplaine ne songeait à sa défiguration qu’avec reconnaissance. Il était béni dans ce stigmate. Il le sentait avec joie imperdable et éternel, Quelle chance que ce bienfait fût irrémédiable! Tant qu’il y aurait des carrefours, des champs de foire, des routes où aller devant soi, du peuple en bas, du ciel en haut, on serait sûr de vivre, Dea ne manquerait de rien, on aurait l’amour! Gwynplaine n’eût pas changé de visage avec Apollon. Être monstre était pour lui la forme du bonheur.

Aussi disions-nous en commençant que la destinée l’avait comblé.

Ce réprouvé était un préféré.

Il était si heureux qu’il en venait à plaindre les hommes autour de lui. Il avait de la pitié de reste. C’était d’ailleurs son instinct de regarder un peu dehors, car aucun homme n’est tout d’une pièce et une nature n’est pas une abstraction; il était ravi d’être muré, mais de temps en temps il levait la tête par-dessus le mur. Il n’en rentrait qu’avec plus de joie dans son isolement près de Dea, après avoir comparé.

Que voyait-il autour de lui? Qu’était-ce que ces vivants dont son existence nomade lui montrait tous les échantillons, chaque jour remplacés par d’autres? Toujours de nouvelles foules, et toujours la même multitude. Toujours de nouveaux visages et toujours les mêmes infortunes. Une promiscuité de ruines.

Chaque soir toutes les fatalités sociales venaient faire cercle autour de sa félicité.

La Green-Box était populaire.

Le bas prix appelle la basse classe. Ce qui venait à lui c’étaient les faibles, les pauvres, les petits. On allait Gwynplaine comme on va au gin. On venait acheter pour deux sous d’oubli. Du haut de son tréteau, Gwynplaine passait en revue le sombre peuple. Son esprit s’emplissait de toutes ces apparitions successives de l’immense misère. La physionomie humaine est faite par la conscience et par la vie, et est la résultante d’une foule de creusements mystérieux. Pas une souffrance, pas une colère, pas une ignominie, pas un désespoir, dont Gwynplaine ne vît la ride. Ces bouches d’enfants n’avaient pas mangé. Cet homme était un père, cette

femme était une mère, et derrière eux on devinait des familles en perdition. Tel visage sortait du vice et entrait au crime; et l’on comprenait le pourquoi: ignorance et indigence. Tel autre offrait une empreinte de bont première raturée par l’accablement social et devenue haine. Sur ce front de vieille femme on voyait la famine; sur ce front de jeune fille on voyait la prostitution. Le même fait, offrant chez la jeune la ressource, et plus lugubre là. Dans cette cohue il y avait des bras, mais pas d’outils; ces travailleurs ne demandaient pas mieux, mais le travail manquait. Parfois près de l’ouvrier un soldat venait s’asseoir, quelquefois un invalide, et Gwynplaine apercevait ce spectre, la guerre. Ici Gwynplaine lisait chômage, là exploitation, là servitude. Sur certains fronts il constatait on ne sait quel refoulement vers l’animalité, et ce lent retour de l’homme à la bête produit en bas par la pression des pesanteurs obcures du bonheur d’en haut.
Dans ces ténèbres, il y avait pour Gwynplaine un soupirail. Ils avaient, lui et Dea, du bonheur par un jour de souffrance. Tout le reste était damnation. Gwynplaine sentait au-dessus de lui le piétinement inconscient des puissants, des opulents, des magnifiques, des grands, des élus du hasard; au-dessous, il distinguait le tas de faces pâles des déshérités; il se voyait, lui et Dea, avec leur tout petit bonheur, si immense, entre deux mondes; en haut le monde allant et venant, libre, joyeux, dansant, foulant aux pieds; en haut, le monde qui marche; en bas, le monde sur qui l’on marche. Chose fatale, et qui indique un profond mal social, la lumière écrase l’ombre! Gwynplaine constatait ce deuil. Quoi! une destinée si reptile! L’homme se traînant ainsi! une telle adhérence à la poussière et à la fange, un tel dégoût, une telle abdication, et une telle abjection, qu’on a envie de mettre le pied dessus! de quel papillon cette vie terrestre est-elle donc la chenille? Quoi!
dans cette foule qui a faim et qui ignore, partout, devant tous, le point d’interrogation du crime ou de la honte!
l’inflexibilité des lois produisant l’amollissement des consciences! pas un enfant qui ne croisse pour le rapetissement!
pas une vierge qui ne grandisse pour l’offre! pas une rose qui ne naisse pour la bave! Ses yeux parfois, curieux d’une curiosité émue, cherchaient à voir jusqu’au fond de cette obscurité où agonisaient tant d’efforts inutiles et où luttaient tant de lassitudes, familles dévorées par la société, moeurs torturées par les lois, plaies faites gangrènes par la pénalité, indigences rongées par l’impôt, intelligences à vau-l’eau dans un engloutissement d’ignorance, radeaux en détresse couverts d’affamés, guerres, disettes, râles,

cris, disparitions; et il sentait le vague saisissement de cette poignante angoisse universelle. Il avait la vision de toute cette écume du malheur sur le sombre pêle-mêle humain. Lui, il était au port, et il regardait autour de lui ce naufrage. Par moment, il prenait dans ses mains sa tête défigurée, et songeait.

Quelle folie que d'être heureux! comme on rêve! il lui venait des idées. L'absurde lui traversait le cerveau. Parce qu'il avait autrefois secouru un enfant, il sentait des velléités de secourir le monde. Des nuages de rêverie lui obscurcissaient parfois sa propre réalité; il perdait le sentiment de la proportion jusqu'à se dire: Que pourrait-on faire pour ce pauvre peuple? Quelquefois son absorption était telle qu'il le disait tout haut. Alors Ursus haussait les épaules et le regardait fixement. Et Gwynplaine continuait de rêver: — Oh! si j'étais puissant, comme je viendrais en aide aux malheureux! Mais que suis-je? un atome. Que puis-je? rien.

Il se trompait. Il pouvait beaucoup pour les malheureux. Il les faisait rire.

Et, nous l'avons dit, faire rire, c'est faire oublier. Quel bienfaiteur sur la terre, qu'un distributeur d'oubli!

XI

GWYNPLAINE EST DANS LE JUSTE, URSUS EST DANS LE VRAI

Un philosophe est un espion. Ursus, guetteur de rêves, étudiait son élève. Nos monologues ont sur notre front une vague réverbération distincte au regard du physionomiste. C’est pourquoi ce qui se passait en Gwynplaine n’échappait point Ursus. Un jour que Gwynplaine méditait, Ursus, le tirant par son capingot, s’écria:

— Tu me fais l’effet d’un observateur, imbécile! Prends-y garde, cela ne te regarde pas. Tu as une chose à faire, aimer Dea. Tu es heureux de deux bonheurs: le premier, c’est que la foule voit ton museau, le second, c’est que Dea ne le voit pas. Ce bonheur que tu as, tu n’y as pas droit Nulle femme, voyant ta bouche, n’acceptera ton baiser. Et cette bouche qui fait ta fortune, cette face qui fait ta richesse, ça n’est pas à toi. Tu n’étais pas né avec ce visage-là. Tu l’as pris à la grimace qui est au fond de l’infini. Tu as volé son masque au diable. Tu es hideux, contente-toi de ce quine. Il y a dans ce monde, qui est une chose très bien faite, les heureux de droit et les heureux de raccroc. Tu es un heureux de raccroc. Tu es dans une cave où se trouve prise une étoile. La pauvre étoile est à toi. N’essaie pas de sortir de ta cave, et garde ton astre, araignée! Tu as dans la toile l’escarboucle Vénus. Fais-moi le plaisir d’être satisfait. Je te vois rêvasser, c’est idiot. Écoute, je vais te parler le langage de la vraie poésie: que Dea mange des tranches de boeuf et des côtelelles de mouton, dans six mois elle sera forte comme une turque; épouse-la tout net, et fais-lui un enfant, deux enfants, trois enfants, une ribambelle d’enfants.

Voilà ce que j’appelle philosopher. De plus, on est heureux, ce qui n’est pas bête. Avoir des petits, c’est là le bleu. Aie des mioches, torche-les, mouche-les, couche-les, barbouille-les et débarbouille-les, que tout cela grouille autour de toi; s’ils rient, c’est bien; s’ils gueulent, c’est mieux; crier, c’est vivre; regarde-les téter à six mois, ramper à un an, marcher deux ans, grandir à quinze ans, aimer à vingt ans. Qui a ces joies, a tout. Moi, j’ai manqué cela, c’est ce qui fait que je suis une brûte. Le bon Dieu, un faiseur de beaux poêmes, et qui est le premier des hommes de lettres, a dicté à son collaborateur Moïse: *Multipliez*! Tel est le texte. Multiplie, animal.

Quant au monde, il est ce qu’il est; il n’a pas besoin de toi pour aller mal.

N’en prends pas souci. Ne t’occupe pas de ce qui est dehors. Laisse l’horizon tranquille. Un comédien est fait pour être regardé, non pour regarder. Sais-tu ce qu’il y a dehors? les heureux de droit. Toi, je te le répète, tu es l’heureux du hasard. Tu es le filou du bonheur dont ils sont les propriétaires. Ils sont les légitimes, tu es l’intrus, tu vis en concubinage avec la chance. Que veux-tu de plus que ce que tu as? Que Schiboleth me soit en aide! ce polisson est un maroufle. Se multiplier par Dea, c’est pourtant agréable. Une telle félicité ressemble à une escroquerie. Ceux qui ont le bonheur ici-bas par privilège de là-haut n’aiment pas qu’on se permette d’avoir tant de joie audessous d’eux. S’ils te demandaient: de quel droit es-tu heureux? tu ne saurais que répondre. Tu n’as pas de patente, eux ils en ont une. Jupiter, Allah, Vishnou, Sabaoth, n’importe, leur a donné le visa pour être heureux. Crains-les. Ne te mêle pas d’eux afin qu’ils ne se mêlent pas de toi. Sais-tu ce que c’est, misérable, que l’heureux de droit? C’est un être terrible, c’est le lord. Ah!
le lord, en voilà un qui a dû intriguer dans l’inconnu du diable avant d’être au monde, pour entrer dans la vie par cette porte-là! Comme il a dû lui être difficile de naître! Il ne s’est donné que cette peine-là, mais, juste ciel! c’en est une!
obtenir du destin, ce butor aveugle, qu’il vous fasse d’emblée au berceau maître des hommes! corrompre ce buraliste pour qu’il vous donne la meilleure place au spectacle! Lis le memento qui est dans la cahute que j’ai mise à la retraite, lis ce bréviaire de ma sagesse, et tu verras ce que c’est que le lord. Un lord, c’est celui qui a tout et qui est tout. Un lord est celui qui existe au-dessus de sa propre nature; un lord est celui qui a, jeune, les droits du vieillard, vieux, les bonnes fortunes du jeune homme, vicieux, le respect des gens de bien, poltron, le commandement des gens de coeur, fainéant, le fruit du travail, ignorant, le diplôme de Cambridge et d’Oxford, bête, l’admiration des poëtes, laid, le sourire des femmes, Thersite, le casque d’Achille, lièvre, la peau du lion. N’abuse pas de mes paroles, je ne dis pas qu’un lord soit nécessairement ignorant, poltron, laid, bête et vieux; je dis seulement qu’il peut être tout cela sans que cela lui fasse du tort. Au contraire. Les lords sont les princes. Le roi d’Angleterre n’est qu’un lord, le premier seigneur de la seigneurie; c’est tout, c’est beaucoup. Les rois jadis s’appelaient lords; le lord de Danemark, le lord d’Irlande, le lord des Iles. Le lord de Norvège ne s’est appelé roi que depuis trois cents ans. Lucius, le plus ancien roi d’Angleterre, était qualifié par saint Télesphore *milord*

Lucius. Les lords sont pairs, c’est-à-dire égaux. De qui? du roi. Je ne fais pas la faute de confondre les lords avec le parlement. L’assemblée du peuple, que les saxons, avant la conquête, intitulaient *wittenagemot*, les normands, après la conquête, l’ont intitulée *parliamentum*. Peu à peu on a mis le peuple à la porte. Les lettres closes du roi convoquant les communes portaient jadis *ad consilium impendendum*, elles portent aujourd’hui *ad consentiendum*. Les communes ont le droit de consentement. Dire oui est leur liberté. Les pairs peuvent dire non. Et la preuve, c’est qu’ils l’ont dit. Les pairs peuvent couper la tête au roi, le peuple point. Le coup de hache à Charles Ier est un empiétement, non sur le roi, mais sur les pairs, et l’on a bien fait de mettre aux fourches la carcasse de Cromwell. Les lords ont la puissance, pourquoi? parce qu’ils ont la richesse. Qui est-ce qui a feuilleté le Doomsday-book? C’est la preuve que les lords possèdent l’Angleterre, c’est le registre des biens des sujets dressé sous Guillaume le Conquérant, et il est sous la garde du chancelier de l’échiquier. Pour y copier quelque chose, on paie quatre sous par ligne. C’est un fier livre. Sais-tu que j’ai été docteur domestique chez un lord qui s’appelait Marmaduke et qui avait neuf cent mille francs de France de rente par an?

Tire-toi de là, affreux crétin. Sais-tu que rien qu’avec les lapins des garennes du comte Lindsey on nourrirait toute la canaille des Cinq-ports? Aussi frottez-vous-y. On y met bon ordre. Tout braconnier est pendu. Pour deux longues oreilles poilues qui passaient hors de sa gibecière, j’ai vu accrocher la potence un père de six enfants. Telle est la seigneurie. Le lapin d’un lord est plus que l’homme du bon Dieu. Les seigneurs sont, entends-tu, maraud? et nous devons le trouver bon. Et puis si nous le trouvons mauvais, qu’est-ce que cela leur fait?

Le peuple faisant des objections! Plante lui-même n’approcherait pas de ce comique. Un philosophe serait plaisant s’il conseillait à cette pauvre diablesse de multitude de se récrier contre la largeur et la lourdeur des lords. Autant faire discuter par la chenille la patte de l’éléphant. J’ai vu un jour un hippopotame marcher sur une taupinière; il écrasait tout; il était innocent. Il ne savait même pas qu’il y eût des taupes, ce gros bonasse de mastodonte. Mon cher, des taupes qu’on écrase, c’est le genre humain. L’écrasement est une loi. Et crois-tu que la taupe elle-même n’écrase rien? Elle est le mastodonte du ciron, qui est le mastodonte du volvoce. Mais ne raisonnons pas.

Mon garçon, les carrosses existent. Le lord est dedans, le peuple est sous la roue, le sage se range. Mets-toi de côté, et laisse passer. Quant à moi, j'aime les lords, et je les évite.

J'ai vécu chez un. Cela suffit à la beauté de mes souvenirs. Je me rappelle son château, comme une gloire dans un nuage. Moi, mes rêves sont en arrière. Rien de plus admirable que Marmaduke-Lodge pour la grandeur, la belle symétrie, les riches revenus, les ornements et les accompagnements de l'édifice. Du reste, les maisons, hôtels et palais des lords offrent un recueil de ce qu'il y a de plus grand et magnifique dans ce florissant royaume. J'aime nos seigneurs. Je les remercie d'être opulents, puissants et prospères. Moi qui suis vêtu de ténèbres, je vois avec intérêt et plaisir cet échantillon de l'azur céleste qu'on appelle un lord. On entrait à Marmaduke-Lodge par une cour extrêmement spacieuse, qui faisait un carré long partagé en huit carreaux, fermés de balustrades, laissant de tous côtés un large chemin ouvert, avec une superbe fontaine hexagone au milieu, deux bassins, couverte d'un dôme d'un ouvrage exquis à jour, qui était suspendu sur six colonnes. C'est là que j'ai connu un docte français, M. l'abbé du Cros, qui était de la maison des Jacobins de la rue Saint-Jacques. Il y avait à Marmaduke-Lodge une moitié de la bibliothèque d'Erpenius, dont l'autre moitié est à l'auditoire de théologie de Cambridge. J'y lisais des livres, assis sous le portail qui est enjolivé. Ces choses-là ne sont ordinairement vues que par un petit nombre de voyageurs curieux.

Sais-tu, ridicule boy, que monseigneur William North, qui est lord Gray de Rolleston, et qui siège le quartorzième au banc des barons, a plus d'arbres de haute futaie dans sa montagne que tu n'as de cheveux sur ton horrible caboche? Sais-tu que lord Norreys de Rycott, qui est la même chose que le comte d'Abingdon, a un donjon carré de deux cents pieds de haut portant cette devise *Virtus ariete fortior*, ce qui a l'air de vouloir dire *la vertu est plus forte qu'un bélier*, mais ce qui veut dire, imbécile! *le courage est plus fort qu'une machine de guerre?* Oui, j'honore, accepte, respecte et révère nos seigneurs. Ce sont les lords qui, avec la majesté royale, travaillent procurer et à conserver les avantages de la nation. Leur sagesse consommée éclate dans les conjonctures épineuses. La préséance sur tous, je voudrais bien voir qu'ils ne l'eussent pas. Ils l'ont. Ce qui s'appelle en Allemagne principauté et en Espagne grandesse, s'appelle pairie en Angleterre et en France. Comme on était en droit de trouver ce monde assex, misérable, Dieu a senti ou le bât le blessait, il a voulu prouver qu'il savait faire des gens heureux, et il a créé les lords pour donner satisfaction aux philosophes.

Cette création-là corrige l’autre, et tire d’affaire le bon Dieu. C’est pour lui une sortie décente d’une fausse position. Les grands sont grands. Un pair en parlant de lui-même dit *nos*. Un pair est un pluriel. Le roi qualifie les pairs *consanguinei nostri*. Les pairs ont fait une foule de lois sages, entre autres celle qui condamne à mort l’homme qui coupe un peuplier de trois ans. Leur suprématie est telle qu’ils ont une langue à eux. En style héraldique, le noir, qui s’appelle *sable* pour le peuple des nobles, s’appelle *saturne* pour les princes et *diamant* pour les pairs. Poudre de diamant, nuit étoilée, c’est le noir des heureux. Et, même entre eux, ils ont des nuances, ces hauts seigneurs. Un baron ne peut laver avec un vicomte sans sa permission. Ce sont là des choses excellentes, et qui conservent les nations. Que c’est beau pour un peuple d’avoir vingt-cinq ducs, cinq marquis, soixante-seize comtes, neuf vicomtes et soixante et un barons, qui font cent soixante-seize pairs, qui les uns sont grâce et les autres seigneurie! Après cela, quand il y aurait quelques haillons par-ci par-là! Tout ne peut pas être en or. Haillons, soit; est-ce que ne voilà pas de la pourpre? L’un achète l’autre. Il faut bien que quelque chose soit construit avec quelque chose.

Eh bien, oui, il y a des indigents, la belle affaire! Ils étoffent le bonheur des opulents. Morbleu! nos lords sont notre gloire. La meute de Charles Mohun, baron Mohun, coûte à elle seule autant que l’hôpital des lépreux de Mooregate, et que l’hôpital de Christ, fondé pour les enfants en 1553 par Édouard VI. Thomas Osborne, duc de Leeds, dépense par an, rien que pour ses livrées, cinq mille guinées d’or. Les grands d’Espagne ont un gardien nommé par le roi qui les empêche de se ruiner. C’est pleutre. Nos lords, à nous, sont extravagants et magnifiques.

J’estime cela. Ne déblatérons pas comme des envieux. Je sais gré à une belle vision qui passe. Je n’ai pas la lumière, mais j’ai le reflet. Reflet sur mon ulcère, diras-tu. Va-t’en au diable. Je suis un Job heureux de contempler Trimalcion. Oh!

la belle planète radieuse là-haut! c’est quelque chose que d’avoir ce clair de lune. Supprimer les lords, c’est une opinion qu’Oreste n’oserait soutenir, tout insensé qu’il était. Dire que les lords sont nuisibles ou inutiles, cela revient à dire qu’il faut ébranler les états, et que les hommes ne sont pas faits pour vivre comme les troupeaux, broutant l’herbe et mordus par le chien. Le pré est tondu par le mouton, le mouton est tondu par le berger. Quoi de plus juste? A tondeur, tondeur et demi.

Moi, tout m’est égal; je suis un philosophe, et je tiens à la vie comme une mouche. La vie n’est qu’un pied à terre. Quand je pense que Henry Bowes Howard, comte de Berkshire, a dans ses écuries vingt-quatre carrosses de gala, dont un à harnais d’argent et un autre à harnais d’or! Mon Dieu, je sais bien que tout le monde n’a pas vingt-quatre carrosses de gala, mais il ne faut point déclamer. Parce que tu as eu froid une nuit, ne voilà-t-il pas! Il n’y a pas que toi. D’autres aussi ont froid et faim. Sais-tu que sans ce froid Dea ne serait pas aveugle, et que si Dea n’était pas aveugle, elle ne t’aimerait pas!

raisonne, buse! Et puis, si tous les gens qui sont épars se plaignaient, ce serait un beau vacarme. Silence, voilà la règle.

Je suis convaincu que le bon Dieu ordonne aux damnés de se taire, sans quoi ce serait Dieu qui serait damné, d’entendre un cri éternel. Le bonheur de l’Olympe est au prix du silence du Cocyte. Donc, peuple, tais-toi. Je fais mieux, moi, j’approuve et j’admire. Tout à l’heure, j’énumérais les lords, mais il faut y ajouter deux archevêques et vingt-quatre évêques! En vérité, je suis attendri quand j’y songe. Je me rappelle avoir vu, chez le dîmeur du révérend doyen de Raphoë, lequel doyen fait partie de la seigneurie et de l’église, une vaste meule du plus beau bl prise aux paysans d’alentour et que le doyen n’avait pas eu la peine de faire pousser. Cela lui laissait le temps de prier Dieu. Sais-tu que lord Marmaduke mon maître était lord grand trésorier d’Irlande, et haut sénéchal de la souveraineté de Knaresburg dans le comté d’York! Sais-tu que le lord haut chambellan, qui est un office héréditaire dans la famille des ducs d’Ancaster, habille le roi le jour du couronnement, et reçoit pour sa peine quarante aunes de velours cramoisi, plus le lit où le roi a dormi; et que l’huissier de la verge noire est son député! Je voudrais bien te voir faire résistance à ceci, que le plus ancien vicomte d’Angleterre est le sire Robert Brent, créé vicomte par Henri V. Tous les titres des lords indiquent une souveraineté sur une terre, le comte Rivers excepté, qui a pour titre son nom de famille. Comme c’est admirable ce droit qu’ils ont de taxer les autres, et de prélever, par exemple, comme en ce moment-ci, quatre shellings par livre sterling de rente, ce qu’on vient de continuer pour un an, et tous ces beaux impôts sur les esprits distillés, sur les accises du vin et de la bière, sur le tonnage et le pondage, sur le cidre, le poiré, le mum, le malt et l’orge préparé, et sur le charbon de terre et cent autres semblables! Vénérons ce qui est. Le clergé lui-même relève des lords. L’évêque de Man est le sujet du comte de Derby. Les lords ont des bêtes féroces à eux qu’ils mettent dans leurs armoiries. Comme Dieu n’en a

pas fait assez, ils en inventent. Ils ont crée le sanglier héraldique qui est autant au-dessus du sanglier que le sanglier est au-dessus du porc, et que le seigneur est au-dessus du prêtre. Ils ont créé le griffon, qui est aigle aux lions et lion aux aigles, et qui fait peur aux lions par ses ailes et aux aigles par sa crinière. Ils ont la guivre, la licorne, la serpente, la salamandre, la tarasque, la drée, le dragon, l'hippogriffe. Tout cela, terreur pour nous, leur est ornement et parure. Ils ont une ménagerie qui s'appelle le blason, et où rugissent les monstres inconnus.
Pas de forêt comparable pour l'inattendu des prodiges à leur orgueil. Leur vanité est pleine de fantômes qui s'y promènent comme dans une nuit sublime, armés, casqués, cuirassés, éperonnés, le bâton d'empire à la main, et disant d'une voix grave: Nous sommes les aïeux! Les scarabées mangent les racines, et les panoplies mangent le peuple. Pourquoi pas? Allons-nous changer les lois? La seigneurie fait partie de l'ordre. Sais-tu qu'il y a un duc en Écosse qui galope trente lieues sans sortir de chez lui? Sais-lu que le lord archevêque de Canterbury a un million de France de revenu? Sais-tu que sa majesté a par an sept cent mille livres sterling de liste civile, sans compter les châteaux, forêts, domaines, fiefs, tenances, alleux, prébendes, dîmes et redevances, confiscations et amendes, qui dépassent un million sterling? Ceux qui ne sont pas contents sont difficiles.

— Oui, murmura Gwynplaine pensif, c'est de l'enfer des pauvres qu'est fait le paradis des riches.

XII

URSUS LE POËTE ENTRAINE URSUS LE PHILOSOPHE

Puis Dea entra; il la regarda, et ne vit plus qu'elle. L'amour est ainsi; on peut être envahi un moment par une obsession de pensées quelconques; la femme qu'on aime arrive, et fait brusquement évanouir tout ce qui n'est pas sa présence, sans se douter qu'elle efface peut-être en nous un monde.

Disons ici un détail. Dans *Chaos vaincu*, un mot, *monstre*, adressé à Gwynplaine, déplaisait à Dea. Quelquefois, avec le peu d'espagnol que tout le monde savait dans ce temps-là, elle faisait le petit coup de tête de le remplacer par *quiero*, qui signifie *je le veux*, Ursus tolérait, non sans quelque impatience, ces altérations du texte. Il eût volontiers dit Dea, comme de nos jours Moëssard à Vissot: *Tu manques de respect au répertoire*.

«L'Homme qui rit». Telle était la forme qu'avait prise la célébrité de Gwynplaine. Son nom, Gwynplaine, à peu près ignoré, avait disparu sous ce sobriquet, de même que sa face sous le rire. Sa popularité était comme son visage un masque.

Son nom pourtant se lisait sur un large écriteau placard l'avant de la Green-Box, lequel offrait à la foule cette rédaction due à Ursus:

«Ici l'on voit Gwynplaine, abandonné à l'âge de dix ans, la nuit du 29 janvier 1690, par les scélérats comprachicos, au bord de la mer à Portland, de petit devenu grand, et aujourd'hui appel

«L'HOMME QUI RIT.

L'existence de ces saltimbanques était une existence de lépreux dans une ladrerie et de bienheureux dans une atlanlide. C'était chaque jour un brusque passage de l'exhibition foraine la plus bruyante à l'abstraction la plus complète. Tous les soirs ils faisaient leur sortie de ce monde. C'étaient comme des morts qui s'en allaient, quitte à renaître le lendemain. Le comédien est un phare à éclipses, apparition, puis disparition, et il n'existe guère pour le public que comme fantôme et lueur dans cette vie feux tournants.

Au carrefour succédait la claustration. Sitôt le spectacle fini, pendant que l'auditoire se désagrégeait et que le brouhaha de satisfaction de la foule se dissipait dans la dispersion des rues, la Green-Box redressait son panneau comme une forteresse son pont-levis, et la communication avec le genre humain était coupée. D’un côté l’univers et de l’autre cette baraque; et dans cette baraque il y avait la liberté, la bonne conscience, le courage, le dévouement, l’innocence, le bonheur, l’amour, toutes les constellations.

La cécité voyante et la difformité aimée s’asseyaient côte côte, la main pressant la main, le front touchant le front, et, ivres, se parlaient tout bas.

Le compartiment du milieu était à deux fins; pour le public théâtre, pour les acteurs salle à manger.

Ursus, toujours satisfait de placer une comparaison, profitait de celle diversité de destination pour assimiler le compartiment central de la Green-Box à l’arradash d’une hutte abyssinienne.

Ursus comptait la recette, puis l’on soupait. Pour l’amour tout est de l’idéal, et boire et manger ensemble quand on aime, cela admet toutes sortes de douces promiscuités furtives qui font qu’une bouchée devient un baiser. On boit l’ale ou le vin au même verre, comme on boirait la rosée au même lys. Deux âmes, dans l’agape, ont la même grâce que deux oiseaux. Gwynplaine servait Dea, lui coupait les morceaux, lui versait à boire, s’approchait trop près.

— Hum! disait Ursus, et il détournait son grondement achev malgré lui en sourire.

Le loup, sous la table, soupait, inattentif à ce qui n’était point son os.

Vinos et Fibi partageaient le repas, mais gênaient peu. Ces deux vagabondes, à demi sauvages et restées effarées, parlaient bréhaigne entre elles.

Ensuite Dea rentrait au gynécée avec Fibi et Vinos. Ursus allait mettre Homo à la chaîne sous la Green-Box, et Gwynplaine s’occupait des chevaux, et d’amant devenait palefrenier, comme s’il eût été un héros d’Homère ou un paladin de Charlemagne. A minuit, tout dormait, le loup excepté, qui de temps en temps, pénétré de sa responsabilité, ouvrait un oeil.

Le lendemain, au réveil, on se retrouvait; on déjeunait ensemble, habituellement de jambon et de thé; le thé, en Angleterre, date de 1678. Puis Dea, à la mode espagnole, et par le conseil d’Ursus qui la trouvait délicate, dormait quelques heures, pendant que Gwynplaine et Ursus faisaient tous les petits travaux du dehors et du dedans qu’exigé la vie nomade.

Il était rare que Gwynplaine rôdât hors de la Green-Box, except dans les routes désertes et les lieux solitaires. Dans les villes, il ne sortait qu'à la nuit, caché par un large chapeau rabattu, afin de ne point user son visage dans la rue.

On ne le voyait à face découverte que sur le théâtre.

Du reste la Green-Box avait peu fréquenté les villes; Gwynplaine, à vingt-quatre ans, n'avait guère vu de plus grandes cités que les Cinq-ports. Sa renommée cependant croissait. Elle commençait à déborder la populace, et elle montait plus haut.

Parmi les amateurs de bizarreries foraines et les coureurs de curiosités et de prodiges, on savait qu'il existait quelque part, à l'état de vie errante, tantôt ici, tantôt là, un masque extraordinaire. On en parlait, on le cherchait, on se demandait: Où est-ce? L'Homme qui Rit devenait décidément fameux. Un certain lustre, en rejaillissait sur *Chaos vaincu.*

Tellement qu'un jour Ursus, ambitieux, dit

— Il faut aller à Londres.

LIVRE TROISIÈME

COMMENCEMENT DE LA FÊLURE

I

L’INN TADCASTER

Londres n’avait à cette époque qu’un pont, le Pont de Londres, avec des maisons dessus. Ce pont reliait à Londres Southwark, faubourg pavé et caillouté avec des galets de la Tamise, tout en ruettes et ruelles, ayant des lieux fort serrés et, comme la cité, quantité de bâtisses, logis et cahutes de bois, pêle-mêle combustible où l’incendie a ses aises. 1666 l’avait prouvé.

Southwark alors se prononçait *Soudric*; aujourd’hui on prononce *Sousouorc*, à peu près. Du reste, une excellente manière de prononcer les noms anglais, c’est de ne pas les prononcer du tout. Ainsi, Southampton, dites *Stpntn*.

C’était le temps où *Chatam* se prononçait *Je t’aime*.

Le Southwark de ce temps-là ressemble au Southwark d’aujourd’hui comme Vaugirard ressemble à Marseille. C’était un bourg; c’est une ville. Pourtant il s’y faisait un grand mouvement de navigation. Dans un long vieux mur cyclopéen sur la Tamise étaient scellés des anneaux où s’amarraient les coches de rivière. Ce mur s’appelait le mur d’Effroc ou Effroc-Stone.

York, quand elle était saxonne, s’appelait Effroc. La légende contait qu’un duc d’Effroc s’était noyé au pied de ce mur. L’eau en effet y était assez profonde pour un duc. A mer basse il y avait encore six bonnes brasses. L’excellence de ce petit mouillage attirait les navires de mer, et la vieille panse de Hollande, dite la Vograat, venait s’amarrer à l’Effroc-Stone. La Vograat faisait directement une fois par semaine la traversée de Londres à Rotterdam et de Rotterdam à Londres. D’autres coches partaient deux fois par jour, soit pour Deptfort, soit pour Greenwich, soit pour Gravesend, descendant par une marée et remontant par l’autre. Le trajet jusqu’à Gravesend, quoique de vingt milles, se faisait en six heures.

La Vograat était d’un modèle qu’on ne voit plus aujourd’hui que dans les musées de marine. Cette panse était un peu une jonque.

En ce temps-là, pendant que la France copiait la Grèce, la Hollande copiait la Chine. La Vograat, lourde coque à deux mâts, était cloisonnée étanche perpendiculairement, avec une chambre très creuse au milieu du bâtiment et deux tillacs, l’un l’avant, l’autre à l’arrière, pontés ras, comme les vaisseaux de fer à tourelle d’aujourd’hui, ce qui avait l’avantage de diminuer la prise du flot sur le navire dans les gros temps, et l’inconvénient d’exposer l’équipage aux coups de mer, à cause de l’absence de parapet. Rien n’arrêtait au bord celui qui allait tomber. De là de fréquentes chutes et des pertes d’hommes qui ont fait abandonner ce gabarit. La pause *Vograat* allait droit en Hollande et ne faisait même pas escale à Gravesend.

Une antique corniche de pierre, roche autant que maçonnerie, longeait le bas de l’Effroc-Stone, et, praticable à toute mer, facilitait l’abord des bateaux amarrés au mur. Le mur était de distance en distance coupé d’escaliers. Il marquait la pointe sud de Southwark. Un remblai permettait aux passants de s’accouder au haut de l’Effroc-Stone comme au parapet d’un quai.

De là on voyait la Tamise. De l’autre côté de l’eau, Londres cessait. Il n’y avait plus que des champs.

En amont de l’Effroc-Stone, au coude de la Tamise, presque vis-à-vis le palais de Saint-James, derrière Lambeth-House, non loin de la promenade appelée alors Foxhall (*vaux-hall* probablement), il y avait, entre une poterie où l’on faisait de la porcelaine et une verrerie où l’on faisait des bouteilles peintes, un de ces vastes terrains vagues où l’herbe pousse, appelés autrefois en France cultures et mails, et en Angleterre bowling-greens. De bowling-green, tapis vert à rouler une boule, nous avons fait boulingrin. On a aujourd’hui ce pré-là dans sa maison; seulement on le met sur une table, il est en drap au lieu d’être en gazon, et on l’appelle billard.

Du reste, on ne voit pas pourquoi, ayant *boulevard* (boule-vert), qui est le même mot que *bowling-green*, nous nous sommes donné *boulingrin*. Il est surprenant qu’un personnage grave comme le dictionnaire ait de ces luxes inutiles.

Le bowling-green de Southwark s’appelait Tarrinzeau-field, pour avoir appartenu jadis aux barons Hastings, qui sont barons Tarrinzeau and Mauchline. Des lords Hastings, le Tarrinzeau-field avait passé aux lords Tadcaster, lesquels l’avaient exploité en lieu public, ainsi que plus tard un duc d’Orléans a exploité le Palais-Royal. Puis le Tarrinzeau-field était devenu vaine pâture et propriété paroissiale.

Le Tarrinzeau-field était une sorte de champ de foire permanent, encombré d’escamoteurs, d’équilibristes, de bateleurs, et de musiques sur des tréteaux, et toujours plein d’imbéciles qui «viennent regarder le diable», comme disait l’archevêque Sharp.

Regarder le diable, c’est aller au spectacle.

Plusieurs inns, qui prenaient et envoyaient du public à ces théâtres forains, s’ouvraient sur cette place fériée toute l’année et y prospéraient. Ces inns étaient de simples échoppes, habitées seulement le jour. Le soir le tavernier mettait dans sa poche la clef de la taverne, et s’en allait. Un seul de ces inns était une maison. Il n’y avait pas d’autre logis dans tout le bowling-green, les baraques du champ de foire pouvant toujours disparaître d’un moment à l’autre, vu l’absence d’attache et le vagabondage de tous ces saltimbanques. Les bateleurs ont une vie déracinée.

Cet inn, appelé l’inn Tadcaster, du nom des anciens seigneurs, plutôt auberge que taverne, et plutôt hôtellerie qu’auberge, avait une porte cochère et une assez grande cour.

La porte cochère, ouvrant de la cour sur la place, était la porte légitime de l’auberge Tadcaster, et avait à côté d’elle une porte bâtarde par où l’on entrait. Qui dit bâtarde dit préférée.

Cette porte basse était la seule par où l’on passât. Elle donnait dans le cabaret proprement dit, qui était un large galetas enfumé, garni de tables et bas de plafond. Elle était surmontée d’une fenêtre au premier étage, aux ferrures de laquelle était ajustée et pendue l’enseigne de l’inn. La grande porte, barrée et verrouillée à demeure, restait fermée.

Il fallait traverser le cabaret pour entrer dans la cour.

Il y avait dans l’inn Tadcaster un maître et un boy. Le maître s’appelait maître Nicless. Le boy s’appelait Govicum. Maître Nicless, — Nicolas sans doute, qui devient par la prononciation anglaise Nicless, — était un veuf avare et tremblant et ayant le respect des lois. Du reste, poilu aux sourcils et sur les mains.

Quant au garçon de quatorze ans qui versait à boire et répondait au nom de Govicum, c’était une grosse tête joyeuse avec un tablier. Il était tondu ras, signe de servitude.

Il couchait au rez-de-chaussée, dans un réduit où l’on avait jadis mis un chien. Ce réduit avait pour fenêtre une lucarne ouvrant sur le bowling-green.

II

ÉLOQUENCE EN PLEIN VENT

Un soir qu’il faisait grand vent, et assez froid, et qu’on avait toutes les raisons du monde de se hâter dans la rue, un homme qui cheminait dans le Tarrinzeau-field, sous le mur de l’auberge Tadcaster, s’arrêta brusquement. On était dans les derniers mois de l’hiver de 1704 à 1705. Cet homme, dont les vêtements indiquaient un matelot, était de bonne mine et de belle taille, ce qui est prescrit aux gens de cour et n’est pas défendu aux gens du peuple. Pourquoi s’était-il arrêté? Pour écouter.

Qu’écoutait-il? Une voix qui parlait probablement dans une cour, de l’autre côté du mur, voix un peu sénile, mais pourtant si haute, qu’elle venait jusqu’aux passants dans la rue. En même temps, on entendait, dans l’enclos où la voix pérorait, un bruit de foule. Cette voix disait:

— Hommes et femmes de Londres, me voici. Je vous félicite cordialement d’être anglais. Vous êtes un grand peuple. Je dis plus, vous êtes une grande populace. Vos coups de poing sont encore plus beaux que vos coups d’épée. Vous avez de l’appétit.

Vous êtes la nation qui mange les autres. Fonction magnifique.

Cette succion du monde classe à part l’Angleterre. Comme politique et philosophie, et maniement des colonies, populations, et industries, et comme volonté de faire aux autres du mal qui est pour soi du bien, vous êtes particuliers et surprenants. Le moment approche où il y aura sur la terre deux écriteaux; sur l’un on lira: *Côté des hommes;* sur l’autre on lira: *Côté des anglais.* Je constate ceci à votre gloire, moi qui ne suis ni anglais, ni homme, ayant l’honneur d’être un docteur. Cela va ensemble. Gentlemen, j’enseigne. Quoi? Deux espèces de choses, celles que je sais et celles que j’ignore. Je vends des drogues et je donne des idées. Approchez, et écoutez. La science vous y convie. Ouvrez votre oreille. Si elle est petite, elle tiendra peu de vérité; si elle est grande, beaucoup de stupidité y entrera. Donc, attention. J’enseigne la Pseudodoxia Epidemica.

J’ai un camarade qui fait rire, moi je fais penser. Nous habitons la même boîte, le rire étant d’aussi bonne famille que le savoir. Quand on demandait à Démocrite: Comment savez-vous?

il répondait: Je ris. Et moi, si l'on me demande: Pourquoi riez-vous? je répondrai: Je sais. Du reste, je ne ris pas. Je suis le rectificateur des erreurs populaires. J'entreprends le nettoyage de vos intelligences. Elles sont malpropres. Dieu permet que le peuple se trompe et soit trompé. Il ne faut pas avoir de pudeurs bêtes; j'avoue franchement que je crois en Dieu, même quand il a tort. Seulement, quand je vois des ordures, — les erreurs sont des ordures, — je les balaie. Comment sais-je ce que je sais? Cela ne regarde que moi. Chacun prend la science comme il peut. Lactance faisait des questions à une tête de Virgile en bronze qui lui répondait; Sylvestre II dialoguait avec les oiseaux; les oiseaux parlaient-ils? le pape gazouillait-il? Questions. L'enfant mort du rabbin Éléazar causait avec saint Augustin. Entre nous, je doute de tous ces faits, excepté du dernier. L'enfant mort parlait, soit; mais il avait sous la langue une lame d'or, où étaient gravées diverses constellations.

Donc il trichait. Le fait s'explique. Vous voyez ma modération.

Je sépare le vrai du faux. Tenez, voici d'autres erreurs que vous partagez sans doute, pauvres gens du peuple, et dont je désire vous dégager. Dioscoride croyait qu'il y avait un dieu dans la jusquiame, Chrysippe dans le cynopaste, Josèphe dans la racine bauras, Homère dans la plante moly. Tous se trompaient.

Ce qui est dans ces herbes, ce n'est pas un dieu, c'est un démon.

Je l'ai vérifié. Il n'est pas vrai que le serpent qui tenta Ève eût, comme Cadmus, une face humaine. Garcias de Horto, Cadamosto et Jean Hugo, archevêque de Trèves, nient qu'il suffise de scier un arbre pour prendre un éléphant. J'incline à leur avis.

Citoyens, les efforts de Lucifer sont la cause des fausses opinions. Sous le règne d'un tel prince, il doit paraître des météores d'erreur et de perdition. Peuple, Claudius Pulcher ne mourut pas parce que les poulets refusèrent de sortir du poulailler; la vérité est que Lucifer ayant prévu la mort de Claudius Pulcher prit soin d'empêcher ces animaux de manger. Que Belzébuth ait donné à l'empereur Vespasien la vertu de redresser les boiteux et de rendre la vue aux aveugles en les touchant, c'était une action louable en soi, mais dont le motif était coupable. Gentlemen, défiez-vous des faux savants qui exploitent la racine de brioine et la couleuvrée blanche, et qui font des collyres avec du miel et du sang de coq. Sachez voir clair dans les mensonges. Il n'est point exact qu'Orion soit né d'un besoin naturel de Jupiter; la vérité est que ce fut Mercure qui produisit cet astre de cette façon. Il n'est pas vrai qu'Adam eût un nombril. Quand saint Georges a tué un dragon, il n'avait pas près de lui la fille d'un saint. Saint Jérôme dans son cabinet n'avait pas sur sa cheminée une pendule; premièrement, parce qu'étant dans une grotte, il n'avait pas de cabinet; deuxièmement, parce qu'il n'avait pas de cheminée; troisièmement, parce que les pendules n'existaient pas. Rectifions.

Rectifions. O gentils qui m'écoutez, si l'on vous dit que quiconque flaire l'herbe valériane, il lui naît un lézard dans le cerveau, que dans sa putréfaction le boeuf se change en abeilles et le cheval en frelons, que l'homme pèse plus mort que vivant, que le sang de bouc dissout l'émeraude, qu'une chenille, une mouche et une araignée aperçues sur le même arbre annoncent la famine, la guerre et la peste, qu'on guérit le mal caduc au moyen d'un ver qu'on trouve dans la tête du chevreuil, n'en croyez rien, ce sont des erreurs. Mais voici des vérités: la peau de veau marin garantit du tonnerre; le crapaud se nourrit de terre, ce qui lui fait venir une pierre dans la tête; la rose de Jéricho fleurit la veille de Noël; les serpents ne peuvent supporter l'ombre du frêne; l'éléphant n'a pas de jointures et est forcé de dormir debout contre un arbre; faites couver par un crapaud un oeuf de coq, vous aurez un scorpion qui vous fera une salamandre; un aveugle recouvre la vue en mettant une main sur le côté gauche de l'autel et l'autre main sur ses yeux; la virginité n'exclut pas la maternité. Braves gens, nourrissez-vous de ces évidences.

Sur ce, vous pouvez croire en Dieu de deux façons, ou comme la soif croit à l'orange, ou comme l'âne croit au fouet. Maintenant je vais vous présenter mon personnel.

Ici un coup de vent assez violent secoua les chambranles, et les volets de l'inn, qui était une maison isolée. Cela fit une espèce de long murmure céleste. L'orateur attendit un moment, puis reprit le dessus.

— Interruption. Soit. Parle, aquilon. Gentlemen, je ne me fâche pas. Le vent est loquace, comme tous les solitaires.

Personne ne lui tient compagnie là-haut. Alors il bavarde. Je reprends mon fil. Vous contemplez ici des artistes associés.

Nous sommes quatre. *A lupo principium.* Je commence par mon ami qui est un loup. Il ne s'en cache pas. Voyez-le. Il est instruit, grave et sagace. La providence a probablement eu un moment l'idée d'en faire un docteur d'université; mais il faut pour cela être un peu bête, et il ne l'est pas. J'ajoute qu'il est sans préjugés et point aristocrate. Il cause dans l'occasion avec une chienne, lui qui aurait droit à une louve. Ses dauphins, s'il en a eu, mêlent probablement avec grâce le jappement de leur mère au hurlement de leur père. Car il hurle.

Il faut hurler avec les hommes. Il aboie aussi, par condescendance pour la civilisation. Adoucissement magnanime.

Homo est un chien perfectionné. Vénérons le chien. Le chien, — quelle drôle de bête! — a sa sueur sur sa langue et son sourire dans sa queue. Gentlemen, Homo égale en sagesse et surpasse en cordialité le loup sans poil du Mexique, l'admirable xoloitzeniski. J'ajoute qu'il est humble. Il a la modestie d'un loup utile aux humains. Il est secourable et charitable, silencieusement. Sa patte gauche ignore la bonne action qu'a faite sa patte droite. Tels sont ses mérites. De cet autre, mon deuxième ami, je ne dis qu'un mot; c'est un monstre. Vous l'admirerez. Il fut jadis abandonné par des pirates sur les bords du sauvage océan. Celle-ci est une aveugle. Est-ce une exception? Non. Nous sommes tous des aveugles. L'avare est un aveugle; il voit l'or et ne voit pas la richesse. Le prodigue est un aveugle; il voit le commencement et ne voit pas la fin.

La coquette est une aveugle; elle ne voit pas ses rides. Le savant est un aveugle; il ne voit pas son ignorance. L'honnête homme est un aveugle; il ne voit pas le coquin. Le coquin est un aveugle; il ne voit pas Dieu. Dieu est un aveugle; le jour où il a créé le monde, il n'a pas vu que le diable se fourrait dedans.

Moi je suis un aveugle; je parle, et je ne vois pas que vous êtes des sourds. Cette aveugle-ci, qui nous accompagne, est une prêtresse mystérieuse. Vesta lui eût confié son tison. Elle a dans le caractère des obscurités douces comme les hiatus qui s'ouvrent dans la laine d'un mouton. Je la crois fille de roi, sans l'affirmer. Une louable défiance est l'attribut du sage.

Quant à moi, je ratiocine et je médicamente. Je pense et je panse. *Chirurgus sum*. Je guéris les fièvres, miasmes et pestes. Presque toutes nos phlegmasies et souffrances sont des exutoires, et, bien soignées, nous débarrassent gentiment d'autres maux qui seraient pires. Nonobstant, je ne vous conseille pas d'avoir un anthrax, autrement dit carbuncle. C'est une maladie bête qui ne sert à rien. On en meurt, mais c'est tout. Je ne suis pas inculte ni rustique. J'honore l'éloquence et la poésie, et je vis avec ces déesses dans une intimit innocente. Et je termine par un avis. Gentlemen et gentlewomen, en vous, du côté d'où vient la lumière, cultivez la vertu, la modestie, la probité, la justice et l'amour. Chacun ici-bas peut, comme cela,

avoir son petit pot de fleurs sur sa fenêtre.
Milords et messieurs, j’ai dit. Le spectacle va commencer.

L’homme, matelot probable, qui écoutait du dehors, entra dans la salle basse de l’inn, la traversa, paya quelque monnaie qu’on lui demanda, pénétra dans une cour pleine de public, aperçut au fond de la cour une baraque à roues, toute grande ouverte, et vit sur ce tréteau un homme vieux vêtu d’une peau d’ours, un homme jeune qui avait l’air d’un masque, une fille aveugle, et un loup.

— Vivedieu! s’écria-t-il, voilà d’admirables gens.

III

OU LE PASSANT REPARAIT

La Green-Box, on vient de la reconnaître, était arrivée Londres. Elle s'était établie à Southwark. Ursus avait ét attiré par le bowling-green, lequel avait cela d'excellent, que la foire n'y chômait jamais; pas même en hiver.

Voir le dôme de Saint-Paul avait été agréable à Ursus.

Londres, à tout prendre, est une ville qui a du bon. Avoir dédi une cathédrale à saint Paul, c'est de la bravoure. Le vrai saint cathédral est saint Pierre. Saint Paul est suspect d'imagination, et, en matière ecclésiastique, imagination signifie hérésie. Saint Paul n'est saint qu'avec des circonstances atténuantes. Il n'est entré au ciel que par la porte des artistes.

Une cathédrale est une enseigne. Saint Pierre indique Rome, la ville du dogme; saint Paul signale Londres, la ville du schisme.

Ursus, dont la philosophie avait de si grands bras qu'elle contenait tout, était homme à apprécier ces nuances, et son attrait pour Londres venait peut-être d'un certain goût pour saint Paul.

La grande cour de l'inn Tadcaster avait fixé le choix d'Ursus.

La Green-Box semblait prévue par cette cour; c'était un théâtre tout construit. Cette cour était carrée, et bâtie de trois côtés, avec un mur faisant vis-à-vis aux étages, et auquel on adossa la Green-Box, introduite grâce aux vastes dimensions de la porte cochère. Un grand balcon de bois, couvert d'un auvent et porté sur poteaux, lequel desservait les chambres du premier étage, s'appliquait sur les trois pans de la façade intérieure de cette cour, avec deux retours en équerre. Les fenêtres du rez-de-chaussée firent les baignoires, le pavé de la cour fit le parterre, et le balcon fit le balcon. La Green-Box, rangée contre le mur, avait devant elle cette salle de spectacle. Cela ressemblait beaucoup au Globe, où furent joués *Othello*, le *Roi Lear* et la *Tempête*.

Dans un recoin, en arrière de la Green-Box, il y avait une écurie.

Ursus avait pris ses arrangements avec le tavernier, maître Nicless, qui, vu le respect des lois, n'admit le loup qu'en payant plus cher. L'écriteau «GWYNPLAINE — L'HOMME QUI RIT», décroché de la Green-Box, avait été accroché près de l'enseigne de l'inn. La salle-cabaret avait, on le sait, une porte intérieure qui donnait sur la cour. A côté de cette porte fut improvisée, au moyen d'un tonneau éventré, une logette pour «la buraliste», qui était tantôt Fibi, tantôt Vinos. C'était à peu près comme aujourd'hui. Qui entre paie. Sous l'écriteau L'HOMME QUI RIT fut pendue à deux clous une planche peinte en blanc, portant, charbonné en grosses lettres, le titre de la grande pièce d'Ursus, *Chaos vaincu.*

Au centre du balcon, précisément en face de la Green-Box, un compartiment, qui avait pour entrée principale une porte-fenêtre, avait été réservé entre deux cloisons «pour la noblesse».

Il était assez large pour contenir, sur deux rangs, dix spectateurs.

— Nous sommes à Londres, avait dit Ursus. Il faut s'attendre de la gentry.

Il avait fait meubler cette «loge» des meilleures chaises de l'inn, et placer au centre un grand fauteuil de velours d'Utrecht bouton d'or à dessins cerise pour le cas où quelque femme d'alderman viendrait.

Les représentations avaient commencé.

Tout de suite, la foule vint.

Mais le compartiment pour la noblesse resta vide.

A cela près, le succès fut tel que de mémoire de saltimbanque on n'en avait pas vu de pareil. Tout Southwark accourut en cohue admirer l'Homme qui Rit.

Les baladins et bateleurs de Tarrinzeau-field furent effarés de Gwynplaine. Un épervier s'abattant dans une cage de chardonnerets et leur becquetant leur mangeoire, tel fut l'effet.

Gwynplaine leur dévora leur public.

Outre le menu peuple des avaleurs de sabres et des grimaciers, il y avait sur le bowling-green de vrais spectacles. Il y avait un circus à femmes retentissant du matin au soir d'une sonnerie magnifique de toutes sortes d'instruments, psaltérions, tambours, rubèbes, micamons, timbres, chalumelles, dulcaynes, gingues, chevrettes, cornemuses, cornets d'Allemagne, eschaqueils d'Angleterre, pipes, fistules, flajos et flageolets. Il y avait sous une large tente ronde des sauteurs que n'eussent point égalés nos coureurs actuels des Pyrénées, Dulma, Bordenave et Meylonga, lesquels du pic de Pierrefitte descendent au plateau du Limaçon, ce qui est presque tomber. Il y avait une ménagerie ambulante où l'on voyait un tigre bouffe, qui, fouaillé par un belluaire, tâchait de lui happer son fouet et d'en avaler la mèche. Ce comique à gueules et à griffes fut lui-même éclipsé.

Curiosité, applaudissements, recettes, foule, l'Homme qui Rit prit tout. En un clin d'oeil ce fut fait. Il n'y eut plus que la Green-Box.

— Chaos vaincu est Chaos vainqueur, disait Ursus, se mettant de moitié dans le succès de Gwynplaine, et tirant la nappe à lui, comme on dit en langue cabotine.

Le succès de Gwynplaine fut prodigieux. Pourtant il resta local.
Passer l'eau est difficile pour une renommée. Le nom de Shakespeare a mis cent trente ans à venir d'Angleterre en France; l'eau est une muraille, et si Voltaire, ce qu'il a bien regrett plus tard, n'avait pas fait à Shakespeare la courte échelle, Shakespeare, à l'heure qu'il est, serait peut-être encore de l'autre côté du mur, en Angleterre, captif d'une gloire insulaire.

La gloire de Gwynplaine ne passa point le pont de Londres. Elle ne prit point les dimensions d'un écho de grande ville. Du moins dans les premiers temps. Mais Southwark peut suffire l'ambition d'un clown. Ursus disait: — La sacoche des recettes, comme une fille qui a fait une faute, grossit à vue d'oeil.

On jouait *Ursus Rursus*, puis *Chaos vaincu*.

Dans les entr'actes, Ursus justifiait sa qualité d'engastrimythe et faisait de la ventriloquie transcendante; il imitait toute voix qui s'offrait dans l'assistance, un chant, un cri, à ébahir par la ressemblance le chanteur ou le crieur lui-même, et parfois il copiait le brouhaha du public, et il soufflait comme s'il eût été à lui seul un tas de gens. Talents remarquables.

En outre, il haranguait, on vient de le voir, comme Cicéron, vendait des drogues, soignait les maladies et même guérissait les malades.

Southwark était captivé.

Ursus était satisfait des applaudissements de Southwark, mais il n'en était point étonné.

— Ce sont les anciens trinobantes, disait-il.

Et il ajoutait:

— Que je ne confonds point, pour la délicatesse du goût, avec les atrobates qui ont peuplé Berks, les belges qui ont habité le Somerset, et les parisiens qui ont fondé York.

A chaque représentation, la cour de l'inn, transformée en parterre, s'emplissait d'un auditoire déguenillé et enthousiaste.
C'étaient des bateliers, des porte-chaises, des charpentiers de bord, des cochers de coches de rivière, des matelots frais débarqués dépensant leur solde en ripailles et en filles. Il y avait des estafiers, des ruffians, et des

gardes noirs, qui sont des soldats condamnés pour quelque faute disciplinaire à porter leur habit rouge retourné du côté de la doublure noire, et nommés pour cela blackquards, d'où nous avons fait *blagueurs*. Tout cela affluait de la rue dans le théâtre et refluait du théâtre dans la salle à boire. Les chopes bues ne nuisaient pas au succès.

Parmi ces gens qu'on est convenu d'appeler «la lie», il y en avait un plus haut que les autres, plus grand, plus fort, moins pauvre, plus carré d'épaules, vêtu comme le commun du peuple, mais pas déchiré, admirateur à tout rompre, se faisant place coups de poing, ayant une perruque à la diable, jurant, criant, gouaillant, point malpropre, et au besoin pochant un oeil et payant bouteille.

Cet habitué était le passant dont on a entendu tout à l'heure le cri d'enthousiasme.

Ce connaisseur immédiatement fasciné avait tout de suite adopt l'Homme qui Rit. Il ne venait pas à toutes les représentations. Mais quand il venait, il était le «traîner» du public; les applaudissements se changeaient en acclamations; le succès allait, non aux frises, il n'y en avait pas, mais aux nues, il y en avait. Mais ces nues, vu l'absence de plafond, pleuvaient quelquefois sur le chef-d'oeuvre d'Ursus.

Si bien qu'Ursus remarqua cet homme et que Gwynplaine le regarda.

C'était un fier ami inconnu qu'on avait là!

Ursus et Gwynplaine voulurent le connaître, ou du moins savoir qui c'était.

Ursus un soir, de la coulisse, qui était la porte de la cuisine de la Green-Box, ayant par hasard maître Nicless l'hôtelier près de lui, lui montra l'homme mêlé à la foule, et lui demanda:

— Connaissez-vous cet homme?

— Sans doute.

— Qu'est-ce?

— Un matelot.

— Comment s'appelle-t-il? dit Gwynplaine, intervenant.

— Tom-Jim-Jack, répondit l'hôtelier.

Puis, tout en redescendant l'escalier marchepied de l'arrière de la Green-Box pour rentrer dans l'inn, maître Nicless laissa tomber cette réflexion, profonde à perte de vue:

— Quel dommage qu'il ne soit pas lord! ce serait une fameuse canaille.

Du reste, quoique installé dans une hôtellerie, le groupe de la Green-Box n'avait rien modifié de ses moeurs, et maintenait son isolement. A cela près de quelques mots échangés ça et là avec le tavernier, ils ne se mêlaient point aux habitants, permanents ou passagers, de l'auberge, et ils continuaient de vivre entre eux.

Depuis qu'on était à Southwark, Gwynplaine avait pris l'habitude, après le spectacle, après le souper des gens et des chevaux, d'aller, pendant qu'Ursus et Dea se couchaient chacun de son côté, respirer un peu le grand air dans le bowling-green entre onze heures et minuit. Un certain vague qu'on a dans l'esprit pousse aux promenades nocturnes et aux flâneries étoilées; la jeunesse est une attente mystérieuse; c'est pourquoi on marche volontiers la nuit, sans but. A cette heure-là, il n'y avait plus personne dans le champ de foire, tout au plus quelques titubations d'ivrognes faisant des silhouettes chancelantes dans les coins obscurs; les tavernes vides se fermaient, la salle basse de l'auberge Tadcaster s'éteignait, ayant à peine dans quelque angle une dernière chandelle éclairant un dernier buveur, une lueur indistincte sortait entre les chambranles de l'inn entr'ouvert, et Gwynplaine, pensif, content, songeant, heureux d'un divin bonheur trouble, allait et venait devant cette porte entre-bâillée. A quoi pensait-il? à Dea, à rien, à tout, aux profondeurs. Il s'écartait peu de l'auberge, retenu, comme par un fil, près de Dea. Faire quelques pas dehors lui suffisait.

Puis il rentrait, trouvait toute la Green-Box endormie, et s'endormait.

IV

LES CONTRAIRES FRATERNISENT DANS LA HAINE

Le succès n'est pas aimé, surtout par ceux dont il est la chute.

Il est rare que les mangés adorent les mangeurs. L'Homme qui Rit, décidément, faisait événement. Les bateleurs d'alentour étaient indignés. Un succès de théâtre est un siphon, pompe la foule, et fait le vide autour de lui. La boutique en face est éperdue. A la hausse des recettes de la Green-Box avait tout de suite correspondu, nous l'avons dit, une baisse dans les recettes environnantes. Brusquement, les spectacles, jusqu'alors fêtés, chômèrent. Ce fut comme un étiage se marquant en sens inverse, mais avec une concordance parfaite, la crue ici, la diminution là. Tous les théâtres connaissent ces effets de marée; elle n'est haute chez celui-ci qu'à la condition d'être basse chez celui-là. La fourmilière foraine, qui exhibait ses talents et ses fanfares sur les tréteaux circonvoisins, se voyant ruinée par l'Homme qui Rit, entra en désespoir, mais fut éblouie. Tous les grimes, tous les clowns, tous les bateleurs enviaient Gwynplaine.

En voilà un qui est heureux d'avoir un mufle de bête féroce! Des mères baladines et danseuses de cordes, qui avaient de jolis enfants, les regardaient avec colère en montrant Gwynplaine et en disant: Quel dommage que tu n'aies pas une figure comme cela!

Quelques-unes battaient leurs petits de fureur de les trouver beaux. Plus d'une, si elle eût su le secret, eût arrangé son fils «à la Gwynplaine». Une tête d'ange qui ne rapporte rien ne vaut pas une face de diable lucrative. On entendit un jour la mère d'un petit qui était un chérubin de gentillesse et qui jouait les cupidons, s'écrier: — On nous a manqué nos enfants. Il n'y a que ce Gwynplaine de réussi. Et, montrant le poing à son fils, elle ajouta: — Si je connaissais ton père, je lui ferais une scène!

Gwynplaine était une poule aux oeufs d'or. Quel merveilleux phénomène! Ce n'était qu'un cri dans toutes les baraques. Les saltimbanques, enthousiasmés et exaspérés, contemplaient Gwynplaine en grinçant des dents. La rage admire, cela s'appelle l'envie. Alors elle hurle. Ils essayèrent de troubler *Chaos vaincu,* firent cabale, sifflèrent, grognèrent, huèrent. Cela fut pour Ursus un motif de harangues hortensiennes à la populace, et pour l'ami Tom-Jim-Jack une occasion de donner quelques-uns de ces coups de poing qui rétablissent l'ordre. Les coups de poing de Tom-Jim-Jack achevèrent de le faire remarquer par Gwynplaine et estimer par Ursus. De loin, du reste; car le groupe de la Green-Box se suffisait à lui-même et se tenait à distance de tout, et quant à Tom-Jim-Jack, ce leader de la canaille faisait l'effet d'une sorte d'estafier suprême, sans liaison, sans intimité, casseur de vitres, meneur d'hommes, paraissant, disparaissant, camarade de tout le monde et compagnon de personne.

Ce déchaînement d'envie contre Gwynplaine ne se tint pas pour battu, pour quelques giffles de Tom-Jim-Jack. Les huées ayant avorté, les saltimbanques du Tarrinzeau-field rédigèrent une supplique. Ils s'adressèrent à l'autorité. C'est la marche ordinaire. Contre un succès qui nous gêne, on ameute la foule, puis on implore le magistrat.

Aux bateleurs se joignirent les révérends. L'Homme qui Rit avait porté coup aux prêches. Le vide ne s'était pas fait seulement dans les baraques, mais dans les églises. Les chapelles des cinq paroisses de Southwark n'avaient plus d'auditoire. On délaissait le sermon pour aller à Gwynplaine. *Chaos vaincu,* la Green-Box, l'Homme qui Rit, toutes ces abominations de Baal l'emportaient sur l'éloquence de la chaire. La voix qui harangue dans le désert, *vox clamantis in deserto,* n'est pas contente, et adjure volontiers le gouvernement. Les pasteurs des cinq paroisses se plaignirent à l'évêque de Londres, lequel se plaignit à sa majesté.

La plainte des bateleurs se fondait sur la religion. Ils la déclaraient outragée. Ils signalaient Gwynplaine comme sorcier et Ursus comme impie.

Les révérends, eux, invoquaient l'ordre social. Ils prenaient fait et cause pour les actes du parlement violés, laissant l'orthodoxie de côté. C'était plus malin. Car on était l'époque de M. Locke, mort depuis six mois à peine, le 28 octobre 1704, et le scepticisme, que Bolingbroke allait insuffler à Voltaire, commençait. Wesley devait plus tard venir restaurer la bible comme Loyola a restauré le papisme.

De cette façon, la Green-Box était battue en brèche des deux côtés, par les bateleurs au nom du pentateuque, par les chapelains au nom des règlements de police. D'une part le ciel, d'autre part la voirie, les révérends tenant pour la voirie, et les saltimbanques pour le ciel. La Green-Box était dénoncée par les prêtres comme encombrante, et par les baladins comme sacrilège.

Y avait-il prétexte? donnait-elle prise? Oui. Quel était son crime? Ceci: elle avait un loup. Un loup en Angleterre est un proscrit. Le dogue, soit; le loup, point. L'Angleterre admet le chien qui aboie et non le chien qui hurle; nuance entre la basse-cour et la forêt. Les recteurs et vicaires des cinq paroisses de Southwark rappelaient dans leurs requêtes les nombreux statuts royaux et parlementaires mettant le loup hors la loi. Ils concluaient à quelque chose comme l'incarcération de Gwynplaine et la mise en fourrière du loup, ou tout au moins l'expulsion. Question d'intérêt public, de risque pour les passants, etc. Et là-dessus, ils faisaient appel à la Faculté.
Ils citaient le verdict du collège des Quatrevingts médecins de Londres, corps docte qui date de Henri VIII, qui a un sceau comme l'état, qui élève les malades à la dignité de justiciables, qui a le droit d'emprisonner ceux qui enfreignent ses lois et contreviennent à ses ordonnances, et qui, entre autres constatations utiles à la santé des citoyens, a mis hors de doute ce fait acquis à la science: — Si un loup voit un homme le premier, l'homme est enroué pour la vie. — De plus, on peut être mordu.

Donc Homo était le prétexte.

Ursus, par l'hôtelier, avait vent de ces menées. Il était inquiet. Il craignait ces deux griffes, police et justice. Pour avoir peur de la magistrature, il suffit d'avoir peur; il n'est pas nécessaire d'être coupable. Ursus souhaitait peu le contact des shériffs, prévôts, baillis et coroners. Son empressement de contempler de près ces visages officiels était nul. Il avait de voir des magistrats la même curiosité que le lièvre de voir des chiens d'arrêt.

Il commençait à regretter d'être venu à Londres.

— Le mieux est ennemi du bien, murmurait-il en aparté. Je croyais ce proverbe déconsidéré, j'ai eu tort. Les vérités bêtes sont les vérités vraies.

Contre tant de puissances coalisées, saltimbanques prenant en main la cause de la religion, chapelains s'indignant au nom de la médecine, la pauvre Green-Box, suspecte de sorcellerie en Gwynplaine et d'hydrophobie en Homo, n'avait pour elle qu'une chose, mais qui est une grande force en Angleterre, l'inertie municipale. C'est du laisser-faire local qu'est sortie la liberté anglaise. La liberté en Angleterre se comporte comme la mer autour de l'Angleterre. C'est une marée. Peu à peu les moeurs montent sur les lois. Une épouvantable législation engloutie, l'usage dessus, un code féroce encore visible sous la transparence de l'immense liberté, c'est là l'Angleterre.

L’Homme qui Rit, *Chaos vaincu,* Homo, pouvaient avoir contre eux les bateleurs, les prédicants, les évêques, la chambre des communes, la chambre des lords, sa majesté, et Londres, et toute l’Angleterre, et rester tranquilles tant que Southwark serait pour eux. La Green-Box était l’amusement préféré du faubourg, et l’autorité locale semblait indifférente. En Angleterre, indifférence, c’est protection. Tant que le shériff du comté de Surrey, à qui ressortit Southwark, ne bougerait pas, Ursus respirait, et Homo pouvait dormir sur ses deux oreilles de loup.

A la condition de ne point aboutir au coup de pouce, ces haines servaient le succès. La Green-Box pour l’instant ne s’en portait pas plus mal. Au contraire. Il transpirait dans le public qu’il y avait des intrigues. L’Homme qui Rit en devenait plus populaire. La foule a le flair des choses dénoncées, et les prend en bonne part. Être suspect recommande. Le peuple adopte d’instinct ce que l’index menace. La chose dénoncée, c’est un commencement de fruit défendu; on se hâte d’y mordre. Et puis un applaudissement qui taquine quelqu’un, surtout quand ce quelqu’un est l’autorité, c’est doux. Faire, en passant une soirée agréable, acte d’adhésion à l’opprimé et d’opposition l’oppresseur, cela plaît. On protège en même temps qu’on s’amuse. Ajoutons que les baraques théâtrales du bowling-green continuaient de huer et de cabaler contre l’Homme qui Rit. Rien de meilleur pour le succès. Les ennemis font un bruit efficace qui aiguise et avive le triomphe. Un ami est plus vite las de louer qu’un ennemi d’injurier. Injurier n’est pas nuire. Voil ce que les ennemis ignorent. Ils ne peuvent pas ne point insulter, et c’est là leur utilité. Ils ont une impossibilité de se taire qui entretient l’éveil public. La foule grossissait *Chaos vaincu.*

Ursus gardait pour lui ce que lui disait maître Nicless des intrigues et des plaintes en haut lieu, et n’en parlait pas Gwynplaine, pour ne point troubler la sérénité des représentations par des préoccupations. S’il arrivait malheur, on le saurait toujours assez tôt.

V

LE WAPENTAKE

Une fois pourtant il crut devoir déroger à cette prudence, par prudence même, et il jugea utile de tâcher d’inquiéter Gwynplaine. Il est vrai qu’il s’agissait d’une chose beaucoup plus grave encore, dans la pensée d’Ursus, que les cabales de foire et d’église. Gwynplaine, en ramassant un farthing tomb terre dans un moment où l’on comptait la recette, s’était mis l’examiner, et, en présence de l’hôtelier, avait tiré du contraste entre le farthing, représentant la misère du peuple, et l’empreinte représentant, sous la figure d’Anne, la magnificence parasite du trône, un propos mal sonnant. Ce propos, répété par maître Nicless, avait fait tant de chemin qu’il était revenu Ursus par Fibi et Vinos. Ursus en eut la fièvre. Paroles séditieuses. Lèse-majesté. Il admonesta rudement Gwynplaine.

— Veille sur ton abominable gueule. Il y a une règle pour les grands, ne rien faire; et une règle pour les petits, ne rien dire. Le pauvre n’a qu’un ami, le silence. Il ne doit prononcer qu’un monosyllabe: oui. Avouer et consentir, c’est tout son droit. Oui, au juge. Oui, au roi. Les grands, si bon leur semble, nous donnent des coups de bâton, j’en ai reçu, c’est leur prérogative, et ils ne perdent nullement de leur grandeur en nous rompant les os. L’ossifrage est une espèce d’aigle. Vénérons le sceptre qui est le premier des bâtons. Respect, c’est prudence, et platitude, c’est égoïsme. Qui outrage son roi se met en même danger qu’une fille coupant témérairement la jube à un lion. On m’informe que tu as jasé sur le compte du farthing, qui est la même chose que le liard, et que tu as médit de cette médaille auguste moyennant laquelle on nous octroie au marché le demi-quart d’un hareng salé. Prends garde. Deviens sérieux.

Apprends qu’il existe des punitions. Imprègne-toi des vérités législatives. Tu es dans un pays où celui qui scie un petit arbre de trois ans est paisiblement mené au gibet. Les jureurs, on leur met les pieds aux ceps. L’ivrogne est enfermé dans une barrique défoncée par en bas pour qu’il marche, avec un trou en haut du tonneau par où passe sa tête et deux trous dans la bonde par où passent ses mains, de sorte qu’il ne peut se coucher. Qui frappe quelqu’un dans la salle de Westminster est en prison pour sa vie, et ses biens confisqués. Qui frappe quelqu’un dans le palais du roi a la main droite tranchée. Une chiquenaude sur un nez qui saigne, et te voilà manchot. Le convaincu d'hérésie en cour d'évêque est brûlé vif. C'est pour pas grand'chose que Cuthbert Simpson a été écartelé au tourniquet. Voilà trois ans, en 1702, ce n'est pas loin, comme tu vois, on a tourné au pilori un scélérat appelé Daniel de Foë, lequel avait eu l'audace d'imprimer les noms des membres des communes qui avaient parlé la veille au parlement. Celui qui est félon à sa majesté, on l'éventre vivant et on lui arrache le coeur dont on lui soufflette les deux joues. Inculque-toi ces notions de droit et de justice. Ne jamais se permettre un mot, et, à la plus petite inquiétude, prendre sa volée; telle est la bravoure que je pratique et que je conseille. En fait de témérité, imite les oiseaux, et en fait de bavardage, imite les poissons. Du reste, l'Angleterre a cela d'admirable que sa législation est fort douce.

Son admonition faite, Ursus fut inquiet quelque temps; Gwynplaine point. L'intrépidité de la jeunesse se compose de défaut d'expérience. Toutefois il sembla que Gwynplaine avait eu raison d'être tranquille, car les semaines s'écoulèrent pacifiquement, et il ne parut pas que le propos sur la reine eût des suites.

Ursus, on le sait, manquait d'apathie, et, comme le chevreuil au guet, était en éveil de tous les côtés.

Un jour, peu de temps après sa semonce à Gwynplaine, en regardant par la lucarne du mur qui avait vue sur le dehors, Ursus devint pâle.

— Gwynplaine?

— Quoi?

— Regarde.

— Où?

— Dans la place.

— Et puis?

— Vois-tu ce passant?

— Cet homme en noir?

— Oui.

— Qui a une espèce de masse au poing?

— Oui.

— Eh bien?

— Eh bien, Gwynplaine, cet homme est le wapentake.

— Qu'est-ce que c'est que le wapentake?

— C’est le bailli de la centaine.

— Qu’est-ce que c’est que le bailli de la centaine?

— C’est le *praepositus hundredi*.

— Qu’est-ce que c’est que le *praepositus hundredi*?

— C’est un officier terrible.

— Qu’est-ce qu’il a à la main?

— C’est l’iron-weapon.

— Qu’est-ce que l’iron-weapon?

— C’est une chose en fer.

— Qu’est-ce qu’il fait de ça?

— D’abord il jure dessus. Et c’est pour cela qu’on l’appelle le wapentake.

— Ensuite?

— Ensuite il vous touche avec.

— Avec quoi?

— Avec l’iron-weapon.

— Le wapentake vous touche avec l’iron-weapon?

— Oui.

— Qu’est-ce que cela veut dire?

— Cela veut dire: suivez-moi.

— Et il faut le suivre?

— Oui.

— Où?

— Est-ce que je sais, moi?

— Mais il vous dit où il vous mène?

— Non.

— Mais on peut bien le lui demander?

— Non.

— Comment?

— Il ne vous dit rien, et vous ne lui dites rien.

— Mais...

— Il vous touche de l’iron-weapon, tout est dit. Vous devez marcher.

— Mais où?

— Derrière lui.

— Mais où?

— Où bon lui semble, Gwynplaine.

— Et si l’on résiste?

— On est pendu.

Ursus remit la tête à la lucarne, respira largement, et dit:

— Dieu merci, le voilà passé! ce n’est pas chez nous qu’il vient.

Ursus s’effrayait probablement plus que de raison des indiscrétions et des rapports possibles au sujet des paroles inconsidérées de Gwynplaine.

Maître Nicless, qui les avait entendues, n’avait aucun intérêt compromettre les pauvres gens de la Green-Box. Il tirait latéralement de l’Homme qui Rit une bonne petite fortune. *Chaos vaincu* avait deux réussites; en même temps qu’il faisait triompher l’art dans la Green-Box, il faisait prospérer l’ivrognerie dans la taverne.

VI

LA SOURIS INTERROGÉE PAR LES CHATS

Ursus eut encore une autre alerte, assez terrible. Cette fois, c’était lui qui était en question. Il fut mandé à Bishopsgate devant une commission composée de trois visages désagréables.

Ces trois visages étaient trois docteurs, qualifiés préposés; l’un était un docteur en théologie, délégué du doyen de Westminster, l’autre était un docteur en médecine, délégué du collège des Quatrevingts, l’autre était un docteur en histoire et droit civil, délégué du collège de Gresham. Ces trois experts *in onmi re scibili* avaient la police des paroles prononcées en public dans tout le territoire des cent trente paroisses de Londres, des soixante-treize de Middlesex, et, par extension, des cinq de Southwark. Ces juridictions théologales subsistent encore en Angleterre, et sévissent utilement. Le 23 décembre 1868, par sentence de la cour des Arches, confirmée par arrêt des lords du conseil privé, le révérend Mackonochie a été condamné au blâme, plus aux dépens, pour avoir allumé des chandelles sur une table. La liturgie ne plaisante pas.

Ursus donc un beau jour reçut des docteurs délégués un ordre de comparution qui, heureusement, lui fut remis en mains propres et qu’il put tenir secret. Il se rendit, sans mot dire, à la sommation, frémissant à la pensée qu’il pouvait être considér comme donnant prise jusqu’au point d’avoir l’air de pouvoir être soupçonné d’être peut-être, dans une certaine mesure, téméraire.

Lui qui recommandait tant le silence aux autres, il avait là une rude leçon. *Garrule, sana te ipsum.*

Les trois docteurs préposés et délégués siégeaient à Bishopsgate au fond d’une salle de rez-de-chaussée, sur trois chaises à bras en cuir noir, avec les trois bustes de Minos, d’Éaque et de Rhadamante au-dessus de leur tête dans la muraille, une table devant eux, et à leurs pieds une sellette.

Ursus, introduit par un estafier paisible et sévère, entra, les aperçut, et, sur-le-champ, dans sa pensée, donna à chacun d’eux le nom d’un juge d’enfer que le personnage avait au-dessus de sa tête.

Minos, le premier des trois, le préposé à la théologie, lui fit signe de s'asseoir sur la sellette.

Ursus salua correctement, c'est-à-dire jusqu'à terre, et, sachant qu'on enchante les ours avec du miel et les docteurs avec du latin, dit, en restant à demi courbé par respect:

— *Tres faciunt capitulum*.

Et tête basse, la modestie désarme, il vint s'asseoir sur le tabouret.

Chacun des trois docteurs avait devant lui sur la table un dossier de notes qu'il feuilletait.

Minos commença:

— Vous parlez en public.

— Oui, répondit Ursus.

— De quel droit?

— Je suis philosophe.

— Ce n'est pas là un droit.

— Je suis aussi saltimbanque, fit Ursus.

— C'est différent.

Ursus respira, mais humblement. Minos reprit:

— Comme saltimbanque, vous pouvez parler, mais comme philosophe, vous devez vous taire.

— Je tâcherai, dit Ursus.

Et il songea en lui-même: — Je puis parler, mais je dois me taire. Complication.

Il était fort effrayé.

Le préposé à Dieu continua:

— Vous dites des choses mal sonnantes. Vous outragez la religion. Vous niez les vérités les plus évidentes. Vous propagez de révoltantes erreurs. Par exemple, vous avez dit que la virginité excluait la maternité.

Ursus leva doucement les yeux.

— Je n'ai pas dit cela. J'ai dit que la maternité excluait la virginité.

Minos fut pensif et grommela:

— Au fait, c'est le contraire.

C'était la même chose. Mais Ursus avait paré le premier coup.

Minos, méditant la réponse d'Ursus, s'enfonça dans la profondeur de son imbécillité, ce qui fit un silence.

Le préposé à l'histoire, celui qui pour Ursus était Rhadamante, masqua la déroute de Minos par cette interpellation:

— Inculpé, vos hardiesses et vos erreurs sont de toutes sortes. Vous avez nié que la bataille de Pharsale eût été perdue parce que Brutus et Cassius avaient rencontré un nègre.

— J’ai dit, murmura Ursus, que cela tenait aussi à ce que César était un meilleur capitaine.

L’homme de l’histoire passa sans transition à la mythologie.

— Vous avez excusé les infamies d’Actéon.

— Je pense, insinua Ursus, qu’un homme n’est pas déshonoré pour avoir vu une femme nue.

— Et vous avez tort, dit le juge sévèrement. Rhadamante rentra dans l’histoire.

— A propos des accidents arrivés à la cavalerie de Mithridate, vous avez contesté les vertus des herbes et des plantes. Vous avez nié qu’une herbe, comme la securiduca, pût faire tomber les fers des chevaux.

— Pardon, répondit Ursus. J’ai dit que cela n’était possible qu’à l’herbe sferra-cavallo. Je ne nie la vertu d’aucune herbe.

Et il ajouta à demi-voix:

— Ni d’aucune femme.

Par ce hors-d’oeuvre ajouté à sa réponse, Ursus se prouvait lui-même que, si inquiet qu’il fût, il n’était pas désarçonné. Ursus était composé de terreur et de présence d’esprit.

— J’insiste, reprit Rhadamante. Vous avez déclaré que ce fut une simplicité à Scipion, quand il voulut ouvrir les portes de Carthage, de prendre pour clef l’herbe Aethiopis, parce que l’herbe Aethiopis n’a pas la propriété de rompre les serrures.

— J’ai simplement dit qu’il eût mieux fait de se servir de l’herbe Lunaria.

— C’est une opinion, murmura Rhadamante touché à son tour.

Et l’homme de l’histoire se tut.

L’homme de la théologie, Minos, revenu à lui, questionna de nouveau Ursus. Il avait eu le temps de consulter le cahier de notes.

— Vous avez classé l’orpiment parmi les produits arsenicaux, et vous avez dit qu’on pouvait empoisonner avec de l’orpiment. La bible le nie.

— La bible le nie, soupira Ursus, mais l’arsenic l’affirme.

Le personnage en qui Ursus voyait Éaque, qui était le prépos la médecine et qui n’avait pas encore parlé, intervint, et, les yeux superbement fermés à demi, appuya Ursus de très haut. Il dit:

— La réponse n’est pas inepte.

Ursus remercia de son sourire le plus avili.

Minos fit une moue affreuse.

— Je continue, reprit Minos. Répondez. Vous avez dit qu’il était faux que le basilic soit roi des serpents sous le nom de Cocatrix.

— Très révérend, dit Ursus, j’ai si peu voulu nuire au basilic que j’ai dit qu’il était certain qu’il avait une tête d’homme.

— Soit, répliqua sévèrement Minos, mais vous avez ajouté que Poerius en avait vu un qui avait une tête de faucon.
Pourriez-vous le prouver?

— Difficilement, dit Ursus.

Ici il perdit un peu de terrain.

Minos, ressaisissant l’avantage, poussa.

— Vous avez dit qu’un juif qui se fait chrétien ne sent pas bon.

— Mais j’ai ajouté qu’un chrétien qui se fait juif sent mauvais.

Minos jeta un regard sur le dossier dénonciateur.

— Vous affirmez et propagez des choses invraisemblables. Vous avez dit qu’Elien avait vu un éléphant écrire des sentences.

— Non pas, très révérend. J’ai simplement dit qu’Oppien avait entendu un hippopotame discuter un problème philosophique.

— Vous avez déclaré qu’il n’est pas vrai qu’un plat de bois de hêtre se couvre de lui-même de tous les mets qu’on peut désirer.

— J’ai dit que, pour qu’il eût cette vertu, il faut qu’il vous ait été donné par le diable.

— Donné à moi!

— Non, à moi, révérend! — Non! à personne! à tout le monde!

Et, à part, Ursus songea: Je ne sais plus ce que je dis. Mais son trouble extérieur, bien qu’extrême, n’était pas trop visible.
Ursus luttait.

— Tout ceci, repartit Minos, implique une certaine foi au diable.

Ursus tint bon.

— Très révérend, je ne suis pas impie au diable. La foi au diable est l’envers de la foi en Dieu. L’une prouve l’autre.
Qui ne croit pas un peu au diable ne croit pas beaucoup en Dieu.
Qui croit au soleil doit croire à l’ombre. Le diable est la nuit de Dieu.
Qu’est-ce que la nuit? la preuve du jour.

Ursus improvisait ici une insondable combinaison de philosophie et de religion. Minos redevint pensif et refit un plongeon dans le silence.

Ursus respira de nouveau.

Une brusque attaque eut lieu. Éaque, le délégué de la médecine, qui venait de protéger dédaigneusement Ursus contre le prépos la théologie, se fit subitement d'auxiliaire assaillant. Il posa son poing fermé sur son dossier, qui était épais et chargé.

Ursus reçut de lui en plein torse cette apostrophe:

— Il est prouvé que le cristal est de la glace sublimée et que le diamant est du cristal sublimé; il est avéré que la glace devient cristal en mille ans, et que le cristal devient diamant en mille siècles. Vous l'avez nié.

— Point, répliqua Ursus avec mélancolie. J'ai seulement dit qu'en mille ans la glace avait le temps de fondre, et que mille siècles, c'était malaisé à compter.

L'interrogatoire continua, les demandes et les réponses faisant comme un cliquetis d'épées.

— Vous avez nié que les plantes pussent parler.

— Nullement. Mais il faut pour cela qu'elles soient sous un gibet.

— Avouez-vous que la mandragore crie?

— Non, mais elle chante.

— Vous avez nié que le quatrième doigt de la main gauche eût une vertu cordiale.

— J'ai seulement dit qu'éternuer à gauche était un signe malheureux.

— Vous avez témérairement et injurieusement parlé du phénix.

— Docte juge, j'ai simplement dit que, lorsqu'il a écrit que le cerveau du phénix était un morceau délicat, mais qui causait des maux de tête, Plutarque s'était fort avancé, attendu que le phénix n'a jamais existé.

— Parole détestable. Le cinnamalque qui fait son nid avec des bâtons de cannelle, le rhintace que Parysatis employait à ses empoisonnements, le manucodiate qui est l'oiseau de paradis, et la semenda dont le bec a trois tuyaux, ont passé à tort pour le phénix; mais le phénix a existé.

— Je ne m'y oppose pas.

— Vous êtes une bourrique.

— Je ne demande pas mieux.

— Vous avez confessé que le sureau guérissait l'esquinancie, mais vous avez ajouté que ce n'était pas parce qu'il avait dans sa racine une excroissance fée.

— J’ai dit que c’était parce que Judas s’était pendu à un sureau.

— Opinion plausible, grommela le théologien Minos, satisfait de rendre son coup d’épingle au médecin Êaque.

L’arrogance froissée est tout de suite colère. Eaque s’acharna.

— Homme nomade, vous errez par l’esprit autant que par les pieds. Vous avez des tendances suspectes et surprenantes. Vous côtoyez la sorcellerie. Vous êtes en relation avec des animaux inconnus. Vous parlez aux populaces d’objets qui n’existent que pour vous seul, et qui sont d’une nature ignorée, tels que l’hoemorrhoüs.

— L’hoemorrhoüs est une vipère qu’a vue Tremellius.

Cette riposte produisit un certain désarroi dans la science irritée du docteur Éaque.

Ursus ajouta:

— L’hoemorrhoüs est tout aussi réel que l’hyène odoriférante et que la civette décrite par Castellus.

Éaque s’en tira par une charge à fond.

— Voici des paroles textuelles de vous, et très diaboliques. Écoutez.

L’oeil sur le dossier, Éaque lut:

— «Deux plantes, la thalagssigle et l’aglaphotis sont lumineuses le soir. Fleurs le jour, étoiles la nuit.

Et regardant fixement Ursus:

— Qu’avez-vous à dire?

Ursus répondit:

— Toute plante est lampe. Le parfum est de la lumière.

Éaque feuilleta d’autres pages.

— Vous avez nié que les vésicules de loutre fussent équivalentes au castoreum.

— Je me suis borné à dire qu’il fallait peut-être se défier d’Aétius sur ce point.

Éaque devint farouche.

— Vous exercez la médecine?

— Je m’exerce à la médecine, soupira timidement Ursus.

— Sur les vivants?

— Plutôt que sur les morts, fit Ursus.

Ursus ripostait avec solidité, mais avec platitude; mélange admirable où la suavité dominait. Il parlait avec tant de douceur que le docteur Éaque sentit le besoin de l’insulter.

— Que nous roucoulez-vous là? dit-il rudement.

Ursus fut ébahi et se borna à répondre:

— Le roucoulement est pour les jeunes et le gémissement pour les vieux. Hélas! je gémis.

Éaque répliqua:

— Soyez averti de ceci: si un malade est soigné par vous, et s’il meurt, vous serez puni de mort.

Ursus hasarda une question.

— Et s’il guérit?

— En ce cas-là, répondit le docteur, adoucissant sa voix, vous serez puni de mort.

— C’est peu varié, dit Ursus.

Le docteur reprit:

— S’il y a mort, on punit l’ânerie. S’il y a guérison, on punit l’outrecuidance. La potence dans les deux cas.

— J’ignorais ce détail, murmura Ursus. Je vous remercie de me renseigner. On ne connaît pas toutes les beautés de la législation.

— Prenez garde à vous.

— Religieusement, dit Ursus.

— Nous savons ce que vous faites.

— Moi, pensa Ursus, je ne le sais pas toujours.

— Nous pouvons vous envoyer en prison.

— Je l’entrevois, messeigneurs.

— Vous ne pouvez nier vos contraventions et vos empiétements.

— Ma philosophie demande pardon.

— On vous attribue des audaces.

— On a énormément tort.

— On dit que vous guérissez les malades?

— Je suis victime des calomnies.

La triple paire de sourcils horrifiques braquée sur Ursus se fronça; les trois savantes faces se rapprochèrent et chuchotèrent. Ursus eut la vision d’un vague bonnet d’âne s’esquissant au-dessus de ces trois têtes autorisées; le bougonnement intime et compétent de cette trinité dura quelques minutes, pendant lesquelles Ursus sentit toutes les glaces et toutes les braises de l’angoisse; enfin Minos, qui était le praeses, se tourna vers lui et lui dit d’un air furieux:

— Allez-vous-en.

Ursus eut un peu la sensation de Jonas sortant du ventre de la baleine.

Minos continua:

— On vous relaxe!

Ursus se dit:

— Si l'on m'y reprend! — Bonsoir la médecine!

Et il ajouta dans son for intérieur:

— Désormais je laisserai soigneusement crever les gens.

Ployé en deux, il salua tout, les docteurs, les bustes, la table et les murs, et se dirigea vers la porte à reculons, disparaissant presque comme de l'ombre qui se dissipe.

Il sortit de la salle lentement, comme un innocent, et de la rue rapidement, comme un coupable. Les gens de justice sont d'une approche si singulière et si obscure, que, même absous, on s'évade.

Tout en s'enfuyant, il grommelait:

— Je l'ai échappé belle. Je suis le savant sauvage, eux sont les savants domestiques. Les docteurs tracassent les doctes. La fausse science est l'excrément de la vraie; et on l'emploie à la perte des philosophes. Les philosophes, en produisant les sophistes, produisent leur propre malheur. De la fiente de la grive naît le gui, avec lequel on fait la glu, avec laquelle on prend la grive. *Turdus sibi malum cacat.*

Nous ne donnons pas Ursus pour un délicat. Il avait l'effronterie de se servir des mots qui rendaient sa pensée. Il n'avait pas plus de goût que Voltaire.

Ursus rentra à la Green-Box, raconta à maître Nicless qu'il s'était attardé à suivre une jolie femme, et ne souffla mot de son aventure.

— Seulement le soir il dit tout bas à Homo:

— Sache ceci. J'ai vaincu les trois têtes de Cerbère.

VII

QUELLES RAISONS PEUT AVOIR UN QUADRUPLE POUR VENIR S'ENCANAILLER PARMI LES GROS SOUS?

Une diversion survint.

L'inn Tadcaster était de plus en plus une fournaise de joie et de rire. Pas de plus gai tumulte. L'hôtelier et son boy ne suffisaient pas à verser l'ale, le stout et le porter. Le soir, la salle basse, toutes vitres éclairées, n'avait pas une table vide. On chantait, on criait; le grand vieil âtre en cul de four, grillé de fer et gorgé de houille, flambait. C'était comme une maison de feu et de bruit.

Dans la cour, c'est-à-dire dans le théâtre, plus de foule encore.

Tout le public de faubourg que pouvait donner Southwark abondait à tel point aux représentations de *Chaos vaincu* que, sitôt le rideau levé, c'est-à-dire sitôt le panneau de la Green-Box abaissé, il était impossible de trouver une place. Les fenêtres regorgeaient de spectateurs; le balcon était envahi. On ne voyait plus un seul des pavés de la cour, tous remplacés par des visages.

Seulement le compartiment pour la noblesse restait toujours vide.

Cela faisait, à cet endroit, qui était le centre du balcon, un trou noir, ce qu'on appelle, en métaphore d'argot «un four».

Personne. Foule partout, excepté là.

Un soir, il y eut quelqu'un.

C'était un samedi, jour où les anglais se dépêchent de s'amuser, ayant à s'ennuyer le dimanche. La salle était comble.

Nous disons *salle*. Shakespeare aussi n'a eu longtemps pour théâtre qu'une cour d'hôtellerie, et il l'appelait salle.

Hall.

Au moment où la triveline s'écarta sur le prologue de *Chaos vaincu*, Ursus, Homo et Gwynplaine étant en scène, Ursus jeta, comme d'habitude, un coup d'oeil sur l'assistance, et eut une commotion.

Le compartiment «pour la noblesse» était occupé.

Une femme était assise, seule, au milieu de la loge, sur le fauteuil de velours d'Utrecht.

Elle était seule, et elle emplissait la loge.

De certains êtres ont de la clarté. Cette femme, comme Dea, avait sa lueur à elle, mais autre. Dea était pâle, cette femme était vermeille. Dea était l'aube, cette femme était l'aurore.

Dea était belle, cette femme était superbe. Dea était l'innocence, la candeur, la blancheur, l'albâtre; cette femme était la pourpre, et l'on sentait qu'elle ne craignait pas la rougeur. Son irradiation débordait la loge, et elle siégeait au centre, immobile, dans on ne sait quelle plénitude d'idole.

Au milieu de cette foule sordide, elle avait le rayonnement supérieur de l'escarboucle, elle inondait ce peuple de tant de lumière qu'elle le noyait d'ombre, et toutes ces faces obscures subissaient son éclipse. Sa splendeur était l'effacement de tout.

Tous les yeux la regardaient.

Tom-Jim-Jack était mêlé à la cohue. Il disparaissait comme les autres dans le nimbe de cette personne éclatante.

Cette femme absorba d'abord l'attention du public, fit concurrence au spectacle, et nuisit un peu aux premiers effets de *Chaos vaincu*.

Quel que fût son air de rêve, pour ceux qui étaient près d'elle, elle était réelle. C'était bien une femme. C'était peut-être même trop une femme. Elle était grande et forte, et se montrait magnifiquement le plus nue qu'elle pouvait. Elle portait de volumineux pendants d'oreilles en perles où étaient mêlés ces bijoux bizarres dits *clefs d'Angleterre*. Sa robe de dessus était de mousseline de Siam brodée en or passé, grand luxe, car telle de ces robes de mousseline valait alors six cents écus.

Une large agrafe de diamants fermait sa chemise qu'on voyait fleur de gorge, mode lascive du temps, et qui était de cette toile de Frise dont Anne d'Autriche avait des draps si fins qu'ils passaient à travers une bague. Cette femme avait comme une cuirasse de rubis, quelques-uns cabochons, et des pierreries cousues partout à son corps de jupe. De plus, les deux sourcils noircis à l'encre de Chine, et les bras, les coudes, les épaules, le menton, le dessous des narines, le dessus des paupières, le lambeau des oreilles, la paume des mains, le bout des doigts, touchés avec le fard et ayant on ne sait quelle pointe rouge et provocante. Et sur tout cela une implacable volonté d'être belle. Elle l'était au point d'être farouche. C'était la panthère, pouvant être chatte, et caresser. Un de ses yeux était bleu, l'autre était noir.

Gwynplaine, comme Ursus, considérait cette femme.

La Green-Box était un peu un spectacle fantasmagorique, *Chaos vaincu* était plutôt un songe qu'une pièce, ils étaient habitués à faire sur le public un effet de vision; cette fois l'effet de vision revenait sur eux, la salle renvoyait au théâtre la surprise, et c'était leur tour d'être effarés. Ils avaient le ricochet de la fascination.

Cette femme les regardait, et ils la regardaient.

Pour eux, à la distance où ils étaient, et dans la brume lumineuse que fait la pénombre théâtrale, les détails s'effaçaient; et c'était comme une hallucination. C'était une femme sans doute, mais n'était-ce pas aussi une chimère? Cette entrée d'une lumière dans leur obscurité les stupéfiait. C'était comme l'arrivée d'une planète inconnue. Cela venait du monde des heureux. L'irradiation amplifiait cette figure. Cette femme avait sur elle des scintillations nocturnes, comme une voie lactée. Ces pierreries semblaient des étoiles. Cette agrafe de diamants était peut-être une pléiade. Le modelé splendide de son sein semblait surnaturel. On sentait, en voyant cette créature astrale, l'approche momentanée et glaciale des régions de félicité. C'était des profondeurs d'un paradis que se penchait sur la chétive Green-Box et sur son misérable public cette face de sérénité inexorable. Curiosité suprême qui se satisfaisait, et qui, en même temps, donnait pâture à la curiosité populaire.

En haut permettait à En bas de le regarder.

Ursus, Gwynplaine, Vinos, Fibi, la foule, tous, avaient la secousse de cet éblouissemcnt, excepté Dea, ignorante dans sa nuit.

Il y avait, dans cette présence, de l'apparition, mais aucune des idées qu'éveillé ordinairement ce mot n'était réalisée par cette figure; elle n'avait rien de diaphane, rien d'indécis, rien de flottant; aucune vapeur; c'était une apparition rose et fraîche, bien portante. Et pourtant, dans les conditions d'optique o étaient placés Ursus et Gwynplaine, c'était visionnaire. Les fantômes gras, qu'on nomme les vampires, existent. Telle belle reine qui, elle aussi, est pour la foule une vision, et qui mange trente millions par an au peuple des pauvres, a cette santé-là.

Derrière cette femme, dans la pénombre, on apercevait son mousse, *el mozo*, un petit homme enfantin, blanc et joli, à l'air sérieux. Un groom très jeune et très grave était la mode de ce temps-là. Ce mousse était vêtu, chaussé et coiffé de velours couleur feu, et avait sur sa calotte galonnée d'or un bouquet de plumes de tisserin, ce qui est le signe d'une haute domesticité, et indique qu'on est le valet d'une très grande dame.

Le laquais fait partie du seigneur, et il était impossible de ne pas remarquer dans l'ombre de cette femme ce page porte-queue.
La mémoire prend des notes souvent à notre insu; et, sans que Gwynplaine s'en doutât, les joues rondes, la mine sérieuse, la calotte galonnée et le bouquet de plumes du mousse de la dame laissèrent une trace quelconque dans son esprit. Ce groom du reste ne faisait rien pour se faire regarder; attirer l'attention, c'est manquer de respect; il se tenait debout et passif au fond de la loge, et reculé aussi loin que le permettait la porte fermée.

Quoique son muchacho porte-queue fût là, cette femme n'en était pas moins seule dans le compartiment, attendu qu'un valet ne compte pas.

Si puissante que fût la diversion produite par cette personne qui faisait l'effet d'un personnage, le dénoûment de *Chaos vaincu* fut plus puissant encore. L'impression fut, comme toujours, irrésistible. Peut-être même y eut-il dans la salle, à cause de la radieuse spectatrice, car quelquefois le spectateur s'ajoute au spectacle, un surcroît d'électricité. La contagion du rire de Gwynplaine fut plus triomphante que jamais. Toute l'assistance se pâma dans une indescriptible épilepsie d'hilarité, où l'on distinguait le rictus sonore et magistral de Tom-Jim-Jack.

Seule, la femme inconnue qui regardait ce spectacle dans une immobilité de statue et avec des yeux de fantôme, ne rit pas.

Spectre, mais solaire.

La représentation finie, le panneau relevé, l'intimité refaite dans la Green-Box, Ursus ouvrit et vida sur la table du souper le sac de la recette. C'était une cohue de gros sous parmi laquelle ruissela subitement une once d'or d'Espagne.

— Elle! s'écria Ursus.

Cette once d'or au milieu de ces sous vert-de-grisés, c'était en effet cette femme au milieu de ce peuple.

— Elle a payé sa place un quadruple! reprit Ursus enthousiasmé.

En ce moment l'hôtelier entra dans la Green-Box, passa son bras par la fenêtre de l'arrière, ouvrit dans le mur auquel la Green-Box s'adossait un vasistas dont nous avons parlé, qui permettait de voir dans la place, et qui était à la hauteur de cette fenêtre, puis fit silencieusement signe à Ursus de regarder dehors. Un carrosse empanaché de laquais à plumes portant des torches, et magnifiquement attelé, s'éloignait au grand trot.

Ursus prit respectueusement le quadruple entre son pouce et son index, le montra à maître Nicless et dit:

— C’est une déesse.

Puis ses yeux tombèrent sur le carrosse prêt à tourner le coin de la place, et sur l’impériale duquel les torches des valets éclairaient une couronne d’or à huit fleurons.

Et il s’écria:

— C’est plus. C’est une duchesse.

Le carrosse disparut. Le bruit du roulement s’éteignit.

Ursus demeura quelques instants extatique, faisant entre ses deux doigts, devenus ostensoir, l’élévation du quadruple comme on ferait l’élévation de l’hostie.

Puis il le posa sur la table, et, tout en le contemplant, se mit à parler de «la madame». L’hôtelier lui donnait la réplique.

C’était une duchesse. Oui. On savait le titre. Mais le nom?

on l’ignorait. Maître Nicless avait vu de près le carrosse, tout armorié, et les laquais, tout galonnés. Le cocher avait une perruque à croire voir un lord chancelier. Le carrosse était de cette forme rare nommée en Espagne *coche-tumbonu*, variét splendide qui a un couvercle de tombe, ce qui est un support magnifique pour une couronne. Le mousse était un échantillon d’homme si mignon qu’il pouvait se tenir assis sur l’étrier du carrosse en dehors de la portière. On emploie ces jolis êtres-l à porter les queues des dames; ils portent aussi leurs messages.

Et avait-on remarqué le bouquet de plumes de tisserin de ce mousse? Voilà qui est grand. On paie l’amende si l’on porte ces plumes-là sans droit.

Maître Nicless avait aussi regardé la dame de près. Une espèce de reine.

Tant de richesse donne de la beauté. La peau est plus blanche, l’oeil est plus fier, la démarche est plus noble, la grâce est plus insolente. Rien n’égale l’élégance impertinente de ces mains qui ne travaillent pas. Maître Nicless racontait cette magnificence de la chair blanche avec des veines bleues, ce cou, ces épaules, ces bras, ce fard partout, ces pendeloques de perles, cette coiffure poudrée d’or, ces profusions de pierreries, ces rubis, ces diamants.

— Moins brillants que les yeux, murmura Ursus.

Gwynplaine se taisait.

Dea écoutait.

— Et savez-vous, dit le tavernicr, le plus étonnant?

— Quoi? demanda Ursus.

— C’est que je l’ai vue monter en carrosse.

— Après?

— Elle n’y est pas montée seule.

— Bah!

— Quelqu’un est monté avec elle.

— Qui?

— Devinez.

— Le roi? dit Ursus.

— D’abord, fit maître Nicless, il n’y a pas de roi pour le moment. Nous ne sommes pas sous un roi. Devinez qui est mont dans le carrosse de cette duchesse.

— Jupiter, dit Ursus.

L’hôtelier répondit:

— Tom-Jim-Jack.

Gwynplaine, qui n’avait pas articulé un mot, rompit le silence.

— Tom-Jim-Jack! s’écria-t-il.

Il y eut une pause d’étonnement pendant laquelle on put entendre Dea dire à voix basse:

— Est-ce qu’on ne pourrait pas empêcher cette femme-là de venir?

VIII

SYMPTOMES D’EMPOISONNEMENT

«L’apparition» ne revint pas.

Elle ne revint pas dans la salle, mais elle revint dans l’esprit de Gwynplaine.

Gwynplaine fut, dans une certaine mesure, troublé.

Il lui sembla que, pour la première fois de sa vie, il venait de voir une femme.

Il fit tout de suite cette demi-chute de songer étrangement. Il faut prendre garde à la rêverie qui s’impose. La rêverie a le mystère et la subtilité d’une odeur. Elle est à la pensée ce que le parfum est à la tubéreuse. Elle est parfois la dilatation d’une idée vénéneuse, et elle a la pénétration d’une fumée. On peut s’empoisonner avec des rêveries comme avec des fleurs. Suicide enivrant, exquis et sinistre.

Le suicide de l’âme, c’est de penser mal. C’est l l’empoisonnement. La rêverie attire, enjôle, leurre, enlace, puis fait de vous son complice. Elle vous met de moitié dans les tricheries qu’elle fait à la conscience. Elle vous charme. Puis vous corrompt. On peut dire de la rêverie ce qu’on dit du jeu. On commence par être dupe, on finit par être fripon.

Gwynplaine songea.

Il n’avait jamais vu la Femme.

Il en avait vu l’ombre dans toutes les femmes du peuple, et il en avait vu l’âme dans Dea.

Il venait d’en voir la réalité.

Une peau tiède et vivante, sous laquelle on sentait couler un sang passionné, des contours ayant la précision du marbre et l’ondulation de la vague, un visage hautain et impassible, mêlant le refus à l’attrait, et se résumant en un resplendissement, des cheveux colorés comme d’un reflet d’incendie, une galanterie de parure ayant et donnant le frisson des voluptés, la nudit ébauchée trahissant le souhait dédaigneux d’être possédée distance par la foule, une coquetterie inexpugnable, l’impénétrable ayant du charme, la tentation assaisonnée de perdition entrevue, une promesse aux sens et une menace l’esprit, double anxiété, l’une qui est le désir, l’autre qui est la crainte. Il venait de voir cela. Il venait de voir une femme.

Il venait de voir plus et moins qu’une femme, une femelle.

Et en même temps une olympienne.

Une femelle de dieu.

Ce mystère, le sexe, venait de lui apparaître.

Et où? dans l’inaccessible.

A une distance infinie.

Destinée ironique, l’âme, cette chose céleste, il la tenait, il l’avait dans sa main, c’était Dea; le sexe, cette chose terrestre, il l’apercevait au plus profond du ciel, c’était cette femme.

Une duchesse.

Plus qu’une déesse, avait dit Ursus.

Quel escarpement!

Le rêve lui-même reculerait devant une telle escalade.

Allait-il faire la folie de songer à cette inconnue? Il se débattait.

Il se rappelait tout ce qu’Ursus lui avait dit de ces hautes existences quasi royales; les divagations du philosophe, qui lui avaient semblé inutiles, devenaient pour lui des jalons de méditation; nous n’avons souvent dans la mémoire qu’une couche d’oubli très mince, laquelle, dans l’occasion, laisse tout à coup voir ce qui est dessous; il se représentait ce monde auguste, la seigneurie, dont était cette femme, inexorablement superposé au monde infime, le peuple, dont il était. Et même était-il du peuple? N’était-il pas, lui bateleur, au-dessous de ce qui est au-dessous? Pour la première fois, depuis qu’il avait l’âge de réflexion, il eut vaguement le coeur serré de sa bassesse, que nous appellerions aujourd’hui abaissement. Les peintures et les énumérations d’Ursus, ses inventaires lyriques, ses dithyrambes de châteaux, de parcs, de jets d’eau et de colonnades, ses étalages de la richesse et de la puissance, revivaient dans la pensée de Gwynplaine avec le relief d’une réalité mêlée aux nuées. Il avait l’obsession de ce zénith. Qu’un homme pût être un lord, cela lui semblait chimérique. Cela était pourtant. Chose incroyable! il y avait des lords! mais étaient-ils de chair et d’os, comme nous? C’était douteux. Il se sentait, lui, au fond de l’ombre, avec de la muraille tout autour lui, et il apercevait dans un lointain suprême, au-dessus de sa tête, comme par l’ouverture d’un puits au fond duquel il serait, cet éblouissant pêle-mêle d’azur, de figures et de rayons qui est l’olympe. Au milieu de cette gloire resplendissait la duchesse.

Il sentait de cette femme on ne sait quel besoin bizarre compliqué d’impossible.

Et ce contre-sens poignant se retournait sans cesse malgré lui dans son esprit: voir auprès de lui, à sa portée, dans la réalit étroite et tangible, l'âme, et dans l'insaisissable, au fond de l'idéal, la chair.

Aucune de ces pensées ne lui arrivait à l'état de précision.
C'était du brouillard qu'il avait en lui. Cela changeait chaque instant de contour et flottait. Mais c'était un profond obscurcissement.

Du reste, l'idée qu'il y eût là quoi que ce soit d'abordable n'effleura pas un instant son esprit. Il n'ébaucha, pas même en songe, aucune ascension vers la duchesse. Heureusement.

Le tremblement de ces échelles-là, une fois qu'on a mis le pied dessus, peut vous rester à jamais dans le cerveau; on croit monter à l'olympe, et l'on arrive à Bedlam. Une convoitise distincte, qui eût pris forme en lui, l'eût terrifié. Il n'éprouva rien de pareil.

D'ailleurs reverrait-il jamais cette femme? probablement non.
S'éprendre d'une lueur qui passe à l'horizon, la démence ne va point jusque-là. Faire les yeux doux à une étoile, à la rigueur, cela se comprend, on la revoit, elle reparaît, elle est fixe.
Mais est-ce qu'on peut être amoureux d'un éclair?

Il avait un va-et-vient de rêves. L'idole au fond de la loge, majestueuse et galante, s'estompait lumineusement dans la diffusion de ses idées, puis s'effaçait. Il y pensait, n'y pensait pas, s'occupait d'autre chose, y retournait. Il subissait un bercement, rien de plus.

Cela l'empêcha de dormir plusieurs nuits. L'insomnie est aussi pleine de songes que le sommeil.

Il est presque impossible d'exprimer dans leurs limites exactes les évolutions abstruses qui se font dans le cerveau.
L'inconvénient des mots, c'est d'avoir plus de contour que les idées. Toutes les idées se mêlent par les bords; les mots, non.
Un certain côté diffus de l'âme leur échappe toujours.
L'expression a des frontières, la pensée n'en a pas.

Notre sombre immensité intérieure est telle que ce qui se passait en Gwynplaine touchait à peine, dans sa pensée, à Dea. Dea était au centre de son esprit, sacrée. Rien ne pouvait approcher d'elle.

Et pourtant, ces contradictions sont toute l'âme humaine, il y avait en lui un conflit. En avait-il conscience? tout au plus.

Il sentait dans son for intérieur, à l'endroit des fêlures possibles, nous avons tous cet endroit-là, un choc de velléités.

Pour Ursus, c’eût été clair; pour Gwynplaine, c’était indistinct.

Deux instincts, l’un l’idéal, l’autre le sexe, combattaient en lui. Il y a de ces luttes entre l’ange blanc et l’ange noir sur le pont de l’abîme.

Enfin l’ange noir fut précipité.

Un jour, tout à coup, Gwynplaine ne pensa plus à la femme inconnue.

Le combat entre les deux principes, le duel entre son côt terrestre et son côté céleste, s’était passé au plus obscur de lui-même, et à de telles profondeurs qu’il ne s’en était que très confusément aperçu.

Ce qui est certain, c’est qu’il n’avait pas cessé une minute d’adorer Dea.

Il y avait eu en lui, et très avant, un désordre, son sang avait eu une fièvre, mais c’était fini. Dea seule demeurait.

On eût même bien étonné Gwynplaine si on lui eut dit que Dea avait pu être un moment en danger.

En une semaine ou deux le fantôme qui avait semblé menacer ces âmes s’effaça.

Il n’y eut plus dans Gwynplaine que le coeur, foyer, et l’amour, flamme.

Du reste, nous l’avons dit, «la duchesse» n’était pas revenue.

Ce qu’Ursus trouva tout simple. «La dame au quadruple» est un phénomène. Cela entre, paie, et s’évanouit. Ce serait trop beau si cela revenait.

Quant à Dea, elle ne fit même pas allusion à cette femme qui avait passé. Elle écoutait probablement, et était suffisamment renseignée par des soupirs d’Ursus, et, ça et là, par quelque exclamation significative comme: *on n’a pas des onces d’or tous les jours!* Elle ne parla plus de «la femme». C’est là un instinct profond. L’âme prend de ces précautions obscures, dans le secret desquelles elle n’est pas toujours elle-même. Se taire sur quelqu’un, il semble que c’est l’éloigner. En s’informant, on craint d’appeler. Ou met du silence de son côté comme on fermerait une porte.

L’incident s’oublia.

Était-ce même quelque chose? Cela avait-il existé? Pouvait-on dire qu’une ombre eût flotté entre Gwynplaine et Dea? Dea ne le savait pas, et Gwynplaine ne le savait plus. Non. Il n’y avait rien eu. La duchesse elle-même s’estompa dans la perspective lointaine comme une illusion. Ce ne fut rien qu’une minute de songe traversée par Gwynplaine, et dont il était hors. Une dissipation de rêverie, comme une dissipation de brume, ne laisse point trace, et, le nuage passé, l’amour n’est pas plus diminu dans le coeur que le soleil dans le ciel.

IX

ABYSSUS ABYSSUM VOCAT

Une autre figure disparue, ce fut Tom-Jim-Jack. Brusquement il cessa de venir dans l’inn Tadcaster.

Les personnes situées de façon à voir les deux versants de la vie élégante des grands seigneurs de Londres purent noter peut-être qu’à la même époque la Gazette de la Semaine, entre deux extraits de registres de paroisses, annonça le «départ de lord David Dirry-Moir, sur l’ordre de sa majesté d’aller reprendre, dans l’escadre blanche en croisière sur les côtes de Hollande, le commandement de sa frégate».

Ursus s’aperçut que Tom-Jim-Jack ne venait plus; il en fut très préoccupé. Tom-Jim-Jack n’avait point reparu depuis le jour o il était parti dans le même carrosse que la dame au quadruple.

C’était, certes, une énigme que ce Tom-Jim-Jack qui enlevait des duchesses à bras tendu! Quel approfondissement intéressant faire! que de questions à poser! que de choses à dire! C’est pourquoi Ursus ne dit pas un mot.

Ursus, qui avait vécu, savait quelles cuissons donnent les curiosités téméraires. La curiosité doit toujours être proportionnée au curieux. A écouter, on risque l’oreille; guetter, on risque l’oeil. Ne rien entendre et ne rien voir est prudent. Tom-Jim-Jack était monté dans ce carrosse princier, l’hôtelier avait été témoin de cette ascension. Ce matelot s’asseyant à côté de cette lady avait un aspect de prodige qui rendait Ursus circonspect. Les caprices de la vie d’en haut doivent être sacrés pour les personnes basses. Tous ces reptiles qu’on appelle les pauvres n’ont rien de mieux à faire que de se tapir dans leur trou quand ils aperçoivent quelque chose d’extraordinaire. Se tenir coi est une force. Fermez vos yeux, si vous n’avez pas le bonheur d’être aveugle; bouchez vos oreilles, si vous n’avez pas la chance d’être sourd; paralysez votre langue, si vous n’avez pas la perfection d’être muet. Les grands sont ce qu’ils veulent, les petits sont ce qu’ils peuvent, laissons passer l’inconnu. N’importunons point la mythologie; n’ennuyons point les apparences; ayons un profond respect pour les simulacres. Ne dirigeons pas nos commérages vers les rapetissements ou les grossissements qui s’opèrent dans les régions supérieures pour des motifs que nous ignorons. Ce sont la plupart du temps, pour nous chétifs, des illusions d’optique.

Les métamorphoses sont l’affaire des dieux; les transformations et les désagrégations des grands personnages éventuels qui flottent au-dessus de nous, sont des nuages impossibles comprendre et périlleux à étudier. Trop d’attention impatiente les olympiens dans leurs évolutions d’amusement et de fantaisie, et un coup de tonnerre pourrait bien vous apprendre que ce taureau trop curieusement examiné par vous est Jupiter.

N’entre-bâillons pas les plis du manteau couleur de muraille des puissants terribles. Indifférence, c’est intelligence. Ne bougez point, cela est salubre. Faites le mort, on ne vous tuera pas. Telle est la sagesse de l’insecte. Ursus la pratiquait.

L’hôtelier, intrigué de son côté, interpella un jour Ursus.

— Savez-vous qu’on ne voit plus Tom-Jim-Jack?

— Tiens, dit Ursus, je ne l’avais pas remarqué.

Maître Nicless fit à demi-voix une réflexion, sans doute sur la promiscuité du carrosse ducal avec Tom-Jim-Jack, observation probablement irrévérente et dangereuse, qu’Ursus eut soin de ne pas écouter.

Ursus néanmoins était trop artiste pour ne point regretter Tom-Jim-Jack. Il eut un certain désappointement. Il ne fit part de son impression qu’à Homo, seul confident de la discrétion duquel il fût sûr. Il dit tout bas à l’oreille du loup:

— Depuis que Tom-Jim-Jack ne vient plus, je sens un vide comme homme et un froid comme poète.

Cet épanchement dans le coeur d’un ami soulagea Ursus.

Il resta muré vis-à-vis de Gwynplaine qui, de son côté, ne fit aucune allusion à Tom-Jim-Jack.

Au fait, Tom-Jim-Jack de plus ou de moins importait peu Gwynplaine, absorbé en Dea.

L’oubli s’était fait de plus en plus dans Gwynplaine. Dea, elle, ne se doutait même pas qu’un vague ébranlement eût eu lieu. En même temps, on n’entendait plus parler de cabales et de plaintes contre l’Homme qui Rit. Les haines semblaient avoir lâché prise.

Tout s’était apaisé dans la Green-Box et autour de la Green-Box.

Plus de cabotinage, ni des cabotins, ni des prêtres. Plus de grondement extérieur. On avait le succès sans la menace. La destinée a de ces sérénités subites. La splendide félicité de Gwynplaine et de Dea était, pour l’instant, absolument sans ombre. Elle était peu à peu montée jusqu’à ce point où rien ne peut plus croître. Il y a un mot qui exprime ces situations-là, l’apogée. Le bonheur, comme la mer, arrive à faire son plein.

Ce qui est inquiétant pour les parfaitement heureux, c’est que la mer redescend.

Il y a deux façons d’être inaccessible, c’est d’être très haut et d’être très bas. Au moins autant peut-être que la première, la deuxième est souhaitable. Plus sûrement que l’aigle n’échappe la flèche, l’infusoire échappe à l’écrasement. Cette sécurité de la petitesse, nous l’avons dit déjà, si quelqu’un l’avait sur la terre, c’étaient ces deux êtres, Gwynplaine et Dea; mais jamais elle n’avait été si complète. Ils vivaient de plus en plus l’un par l’autre, l’un en l’autre, extatiquement. Le coeur se sature d’amour comme d’un sel divin qui le conserve; de l l’incorruptible adhérence de ceux qui se sont aimés dès l’aube de la vie, et la fraîcheur des vieilles amours prolongées. Il existe un embaumement d’amour. C’est de Daphnis et Chloé que sont faits Philémon et Baucis. Cette vieillesse-là, ressemblance du soir avec l’aurore, était évidemment réservée à Gwynplaine et à Dea. En attendant, ils étaient jeunes.

Ursus regardait cet amour comme un médecin fait sa clinique. Du reste il avait ce qu’on appelait en ce temps-là «le regard hippocratique». Il attachait sur Dea, frêle et pâle, sa prunelle sagace, et il gromme-lait: — C’est bien heureux qu’elle soit heureuse! — D’autres fois il disait: — Elle est heureuse pour sa santé.

Il hochait la tête, et parfois lisait attentivement Avicenne, traduit par Vopiscus Fortunatus, Louvain, 1650, un bouquin qu’il avait, à l’endroit des «troubles cardiaques».

Dea, aisément fatiguée, avait des sueurs et des assoupissements, et faisait, on s’en souvient, sa sieste dans le jour. Une fois qu’elle était ainsi endormie, étendue sur la peau d’ours, et que Gwynplaine n’était pas là, Ursus se pencha doucement et appliqua son oreille contre la poitrine de Dea, du côté du coeur. Il sembla écouter quelques instants, et en se redressant il murmura: — Il ne lui faudrait pas une secousse. La fêlure grandirait bien vite.

La foule continuait d’affluer aux représentations de *Chaos vaincu*. Le succès de l’Homme qui Rit paraissait inépuisable.

Tout accourait; ce n’était plus seulement Southwark, c’était déj un peu

Londres. Le public commençait même à se mélanger; ce n'étaient plus de purs matelots et cochers; dans l'opinion de maître Nicless, connaisseur en canaille, il y avait maintenant dans cette populace des gentilshommes et des baronnets, déguisés en gens du peuple. Le déguisement est un des bonheurs de l'orgueil, et c'était la grande mode d'alors. Cette aristocratie mêlée à la mob était bon signe et indiquait une extension de succès gagnant Londres. La gloire de Gwynplaine avait décidément fait son entrée dans le grand public. Et le fait était réel. Il n'était plus question dans Londres que de l'Homme qui Rit. On en parlait jusque chez le Mohock-Club, hanté des lords.

Dans la Green-Box on ne s'en doutait pas; on se contentait d'être heureux. L'enivrement de Dea, c'était de toucher tous les soirs le front crépu et fauve de Gwynplaine. En amour, rien n'est tel qu'une habitude. Toute la vie s'y concentre. La réapparition de l'astre est une habitude de l'univers. La création n'est pas autre chose qu'une amoureuse, et le soleil est un amant.

La lumière est une cariatide éblouissante qui porte le monde.
Tous les jours, pendant une minute sublime, la terre couverte de nuit s'appuie sur le soleil levant. Dea, aveugle, sentait la même rentrée de chaleur et d'espérance en elle dans le moment o elle posait sa main sur la tête de Gwynplaine.

Être deux ténébreux qui s'adorent, s'aimer dans la plénitude du silence, on s'accommoderait de l'éternité passée ainsi.

Un soir, Gwynplaine, ayant en lui cette surcharge de félicit qui, pareille à l'ivresse des parfums, cause une sorte de divin malaise, rôdait, comme il faisait d'ordinaire après le spectacle terminé, dans le pré, à quelque cent pas de la Green-Box. On a de ces heures de dilatation où l'on dégorge le trop-plein de son coeur. La nuit était noire et transparente; il faisait clair d'étoiles. Tout le champ de foire était désert, et il n'y avait que du sommeil et de l'oubli dans les baraques éparses autour du Tarrinzeau-field.

Une seule lumière n'était pas éteinte; c'était la lanterne de l'inn Tadcaster, entr'ouvert et attendant la rentrée de Gwynplaine.

Minuit venait de sonner aux cinq paroisses de Southwark avec les intermittences et les différences de voix d'un clocher à l'autre.

Gwynplaine songeait à Dea. A quoi eût-il songé? Mais ce soir-là, singulièrement confus, plein d'un charme où il y avait de l'angoisse, il songeait à Dea comme un homme songe à une femme. Il se le reprochait.

C’était une diminution. La sourde attaque de l’époux commençait en lui. Douce et impérieuse impatience. Il franchissait la frontière invisible; en deçà il y a la vierge, au delà il y a la femme. Il se questionnait avec anxiété; il avait ce qu’on pourrait nommer la rougeur intérieure.

Le Gwynplaine des premières années s’était peu à peu transform dans l’inconscience d’une croissance mystérieuse. L’ancien adolescent pudique se sentait devenir trouble et inquiétant.

Nous avons l’oreille de lumière où parle l’esprit, et l’oreille d’obscurité où parle l’instinct. Dans cette oreille amplifiante des voix inconnues lui faisaient des offres. Si pur que soit le jeune homme qui rêve d’amour, un certain épaississement de chair finit toujours par s’interposer entre son rêve et lui. Les intentions perdent leur transparence. L’inavouable voulu par la nature fait son entrée dans la conscience. Gwynplaine éprouvait on ne sait quel appétit de cette matière où sont toutes les tentations, et qui manquait presque à Dea. Dans sa fièvre, qui lui semblait malsaine, il transfigurait Dea, du côté périlleux peut-être, et il tâchait d’exagérer cette forme séraphique jusqu’à la forme féminine. C’est de toi, femme, que nous avons besoin.

Trop de paradis, l’amour en arrive à ne pas vouloir cela. Il lui faut la peau fiévreuse, la vie émue, le baiser électrique et irréparable, les cheveux dénoués, l’étreinte ayant un but. Le sidéral gêne. L’éthéré pèse. L’excès de ciel dans l’amour, c’est l’excès de combustible dans le feu; la flamme en souffre.

Dea saisissable et saisie, la vertigineuse approche qui mêle en deux êtres l’inconnu de la création, Gwynplaine, éperdu, avait ce cauchemar exquis. Une femme! Il entendait en lui ce profond cri de la nature. Comme un Pygmalion du rêve modelant une Galatée de l’azur, il faisait témérairement, au fond de son âme, des retouches à ce contour chaste de Dea; contour trop céleste et pas assez édénique; car l’éden, c’est Ève; et Ève était une femelle, une mère charnelle, une nourrice terrestre, le ventre sacré des générations, la mamelle du lait inépuisable, la berceuse du monde nouveau-né; et le sein exclut les ailes. La virginité n’est que l’espérance de la maternité. Pourtant, dans les mirages de Gwynplaine, Dea jusqu’alors avait été au-dessus de la chair. En ce moment, égaré, il essayait dans sa pensée de l’y faire redescendre, et il tirait ce fil, le sexe, qui tient toute jeune fille liée à la terre. Pas un seul de ces oiseaux n’est lâché.

Dea, pas plus qu’une autre, n’était hors la loi, et Gwynplaine, tout en ne l’avouant qu’à demi, avait une vague volonté qu’elle s’y soumît. Il avait cette volonté malgré lui, et dans une rechute continuelle. Il se figurait Dea humaine. Il en était concevoir une idée inouïe: Dea, créature, non plus seulement d’extase, mais de volupté; Dea la tête sur l’oreiller. Il avait honte de cet empiétement visionnaire; c’était comme un effort de profanation; il résistait à cette obsession; il s’en détournait, puis il y revenait; il lui semblait commettre un attentat à la pudeur. Dea était pour lui un nuage. Frémissant, il écartait ce nuage comme il eût soulevé une chemise. On était en avril.

La colonne vertébrale a ses rêveries.

Il faisait des pas au hasard avec cette oscillation distraite qu’on a dans la solitude. N’avoir personne autour de soi, cela aide à divaguer. Où allait sa pensée? il n’eût osé se le dire lui-même. Dans le ciel? Non. Dans un lit. Vous le regardiez, astres.

Pourquoi dit-on un amoureux? On devrait dire un possédé. Être possédé du diable, c’est l’exception; être possédé de la femme, c’est la règle. Tout homme subit cette aliénation de soi-même.

Quelle sorcière qu’une jolie femme! Le vrai nom de l’amour, c’est captivité.

On est fait prisonnier par l’âme d’une femme. Par sa chair aussi. Quelquefois plus encore par la chair que par l’âme.

L’âme est l’amante; la chair est la maîtresse.

On calomnie le démon. Ce n’est pas lui qui a tenté Eve. C’est Ève qui l’a tenté. La femme a commencé.

Lucifer passait tranquille. Il a aperçu la femme. Il est devenu Satan.

La chair, c’est le dessus de l’inconnu. Elle provoque, chose étrange, par la pudeur. Rien de plus troublant. Elle a honte, cette effrontée.

En cet instant-là, ce qui agitait Gwynplaine et ce qui le tenait, c’était cet effrayant amour de surface. Moment redoutable que celui où l’on veut la nudité. Un glissement dans la faute est possible. Que de ténèbres dans cette blancheur de Vénus!

Quelque chose en Gwynplaine appelait à grands cris Dea, Dea fille, Dea moitié d’un homme, Dea chair et flamme, Dea gorge nue.

Il chassait presque l’ange. Crise mystérieuse que tout amour traverse, et où l’idéal est en danger. Ceci est la préméditation de la création.

Moment de corruption céleste.

L’amour de Gwynplaine pour Dea devenait nuptial. L’amour virginal n’est qu’une transition. Le moment était arrivé. Il fallait à Gwynplaine cette femme.

Il lui fallait une femme.

Pente dont on ne voit que le premier plan.

L’appel indistinct de la nature est inexorable.

Toute la femme, quel gouffre!

Heureusement, pour Gwynplaine, il n’y avait d’autre femme que Dea. La seule dont il voulût. La seule qui pût vouloir de lui.

Gwynplaine avait ce grand frisson vague qui est la réclamation vitale de l’infini.

Ajoutez l’aggravation du printemps. Il aspirait les effluves sans nom de l’obscurité sidérale. Il allait devant lui, délicieusement hagard. Les parfums errants de la sève en travail, les irradiations capiteuses qui flottent dans l’ombre, l’ouverture lointaine des fleurs nocturnes, la complicité des petits nids cachés, les bruissements d’eaux et de feuilles, les soupirs sortant des choses, la fraîcheur, la tiédeur, tout ce mystérieux éveil d’avril et de mai, c’est l’immense sexe épars proposant à voix basse la volupté, provocation vertigineuse qui fait bégayer l’âme. L’idéal ne sait plus ce qu’il dit.

Qui eût vu marcher Gwynplaine eût pensé: Tiens! un ivrogne!

Il chancelait presque en effet sous le poids de son coeur, du printemps et de la nuit.

La solitude dans le bowling-green était si paisible que, par instants, il parlait haut.

Se sentir pas écouté fait qu’on parle.

Il se promenait à pas lents, la tête baissée, les mains derrière le dos, la gauche dans la droite, les doigts ouverts.

Tout à coup il sentit comme le glissement de quelque chose dans l’entre-bâillement inerte de ses doigts.

Il se retourna vivement.

Il avait dans la main un papier et devant lui un homme.

C’était cet homme venu jusqu’à lui par derrière avec la précaution d’un chat, qui lui avait mis ce papier entre les doigts.

Le papier était une lettre.

L’homme, suffisamment éclairé par la pénombre stellaire, était petit, joufflu, jeune, grave, et vêtu d’une livrée couleur feu, visible du haut en bas par la fente verticale d’un long surtout gris qu’on appelait alors capenoche, mot espagnol contracté qui veut dire cape de nuit. Il était coiffé d’une gorra cramoisie, pareille à une calotte de cardinal où la domesticité serait accentuée par un galon. Sur cette calotte on apercevait un bouquet de plumes de tisserin.

Il était immobile devant Gwynplaine. On eût dit une silhouette de rêve.

Gwynplaine reconnut le mousse de la duchesse.

Avant que Gwynplaine eût pu jeter un cri de surprise, il entendit la voix grêle, à la fois enfantine et féminine, du mousse qui lui disait:

— Trouvez-vous demain à pareille heure à l’entrée du pont de Londres. J’y serai. Je vous conduirai.

— Où? demanda Gwynplaine.

— Où vous êtes attendu.

Gwynplaine abaissa ses yeux sur la lettre qu’il tenait machinalement dans sa main.

Quand il les releva, le mousse n’était plus là.

On distinguait dans la profondeur du champ de foire une vague forme obscure qui décroissait rapidement. C’était le petit laquais qui s’en allait. Il tourna un coin de rue, et il n’y eut plus personne.

Gwynplaine regarda le mousse disparaître, puis il regarda la lettre. Il est des moments dans la vie où ce qui vous arrive ne vous arrive pas; la stupeur vous maintient quelque temps à une certaine distance du fait. Gwynplaine approcha la lettre de ses yeux comme quelqu’un qui veut lire; alors, il s’aperçut qu’il ne pouvait la lire pour deux raisons: premièrement, parce qu’il ne l’avait pas décachetée; deuxièmement, parce qu’il faisait nuit.
Il fut plusieurs minutes avant de se rendre compte qu’il y avait une lanterne dans l’inn. Il fit quelques pas, mais de côté, et comme s’il ne savait où aller. Un somnambule à qui un fantôme a remis une lettre marche de la sorte.

Enfin il se décida, courut plutôt qu’il n’avança vers l’inn, se plaça dans le rayon de la porte entr’ouverte, et considéra encore une fois, à cette clarté, la lettre fermée. On ne voyait aucune empreinte sur le cachet, et sur l’enveloppe il y avait: A *Gwynplaine*. Il brisa le cachet, déchira l’enveloppe, déplia la lettre, la mit en plein sous la lumière, et voici ce qu’il lut:

«Tu es horrible, et je suis belle. Tu es histrion, et je suis duchesse. Je suis la première, et tu es le dernier. Je veux de toi. Je t’aime. Viens.

LIVRE QUATRIÈME

LA CAVE PÉNALE

I

LA TENTATION DE SAINT GWYNPLAINE

Tel jet de flamme fait à peine une piqûre aux ténèbres; tel autre met le feu à un volcan.

Il y a des étincelles énormes.

Gwynplaine lut la lettre, puis la relut. Il y avait bien ce mot: Je t'aime!

Les épouvantes se succédèrent dans son esprit.

La première, ce fut de se croire fou.

Il était fou. C'était certain. Ce qu'il venait de voir n'existait pas. Les simulacres crépusculaires jouaient de lui, misérable. Le petit homme écarlate était une lueur de vision.

Quelquefois, la nuit, rien condensé en une flamme vient rire de vous. Après s'être moqué, l'être illusoire avait disparu, laissant derrière lui Gwynplaine fou. L'ombre fait de ces choses-là.

La seconde épouvante, ce fut de constater qu'il avait toute sa raison.

Une vision? mais non. Eh bien! et cette lettre? Est-ce qu'il n'avait pas une lettre entre les mains? Est-ce que ne voilà pas une enveloppe, un cachet, du papier, une écriture? Est-ce qu'il ne sait pas de qui cela vient? Rien d'obscur dans cette aventure. On a pris une plume et de l'encre, et l'on a écrit.

On a allumé une bougie, et l'on a cacheté avec de la cire.

Est-ce que son nom n'est pas écrit sur la lettre? *A Gwynplaine*. Le papier sent bon. Tout est clair. Le petit homme, Gwynplaine le connaît. Ce nain est un groom. Cette lueur est une livrée. Ce groom a donné rendez-vous à Gwynplaine pour le lendemain à la même heure, à l'entrée du pont de Londres.

Est-ce que le pont de Londres est une illusion? Non, non, tout cela se tient. Il n'y a là dedans aucun délire. Tout est réalité. Gwynplaine est parfaitement lucide. Ce n'est pas une fantasmagorie tout de suite décomposée au-dessus de sa tête, et dissipée en évanouissement; c'est une chose qui lui arrive. Non, Gwynplaine n'est pas fou. Gwynplaine ne rêve pas. Et il relisait la lettre.

Eh bien, oui. Mais alors?

Alors c’est formidable.

Il y a une femme qui veut de lui.

Une femme veut de lui! En ce cas que personne ne prononce plus jamais ce mot: incroyable. Une femme veut de lui! une femme qui a vu son visage! une femme qui n’est pas aveugle! Et qui est cette femme? Une laide? non. Une belle. Une bohémienne? non.
Une duchesse.

Qu’y avait-il là dedans, et qu’est-ce que cela voulait dire?
Quel péril qu’un tel triomphe! mais comment ne pas s’y jeter tête perdue?

Quoi! cette femme! la sirène, l’apparition, la lady, la spectatrice de la loge visionnaire, la ténébreuse éclatante! Car c’était elle. C’était bien elle.

Le pétillement de l’incendie commençant éclatait en lui de toutes parts. C’était cette étrange inconnue! la même qui l’avait tant troublé! Et ses premières pensées tumultueuses sur cette femme reparaissaient, comme chauffées à tout ce feu sombre. L’oubli n’est autre chose qu’un palimpseste. Qu’un accident survienne, et tous les effacements revivent dans les interlignes de la mémoire étonnée. Gwynplaine croyait avoir retiré cette figure de son esprit, et il l’y retrouvait, et elle y était empreinte, et elle avait fait son creux dans ce cerveau inconscient, coupable d’un songe. A son insu, la profonde gravure de la rêverie avait mordu très avant. Maintenant un certain mal était fait. Et toute cette rêverie, désormais peut-être irréparable, il la reprenait avec emportement.

Quoi! on voulait de lui! Quoi! la princesse descendait de son trône, l’idole de son autel, la statue de son piédestal, le fantôme de sa nuée! Quoi! du fond de l’impossible, la chimère arrivait! Quoi! cette déité du plafond, quoi! cette irradiation, quoi! cette néréide toute mouillée de pierreries, quoi! cette beauté inabordable et suprême, du haut de son escarpement de rayons, elle se penchait vers Gwynplaine! Quoi!
son char d’aurore, attelé à la fois de tourterelles et de dragons, elle l’arrêtait au-dessus de Gwynplaine, et elle disait à Gwynplaine: Viens! Quoi! lui, Gwynplaine, il avait cette gloire terrifiante d’être l’objet d’un tel abaissement de l’empyrée! Cette femme, si l’on peut donner ce nom à une forme sidérale et souveraine, cette femme se proposait, se donnait, se livrait! Vertige! L’olympe se prostituait! à qui? à lui, Gwynplaine! Des bras de courtisane s’ouvraient dans un nimbe pour le serrer contre un sein de déesse! Et cela sans souillure.
Ces majestés-là ne noircissent pas. La lumière lave les dieux.

Et cette déesse qui venait à lui savait ce qu'elle faisait. Elle n'était pas ignorante de l'horreur incarnée en Gwynplaine. Elle avait vu ce masque qui était le visage de Gwynplaine! et ce masque ne la faisait pas reculer. Gwynplaine était aimé quoique!

Chose qui dépassait tous les songes, il était aimé parce que!

Loin de faire reculer la déesse, ce masque l'attirait!

Gwynplaine était plus qu'aimé, il était désiré. Il était mieux qu'accepté, il était choisi. Lui, choisi!

Quoi! là où était cette femme, dans ce royal milieu du resplendissement irresponsable et de la puissance en plein libre arbitre, il y avait des princes, elle pouvait prendre un prince; il y avait des lords, elle pouvait prendre un lord; il y avait des hommes beaux, charmants, superbes, elle pouvait prendre Adonis. Et qui prenait-elle? Gnafron! Elle pouvait choisir au milieu des météores et des foudres l'immense séraphin à six ailes, et elle choisissait la larve rampant dans la vase. D'un côté, les altesses et les seigneuries, toute la grandeur, toute l'opulence, toute la gloire; de l'autre, un saltimbanque. Le saltimbanque l'emportait! Quelle balance y avait-il donc dans le coeur de cette femme? à quel poids pesait-elle son amour? Cette femme ôtait de son front le chapeau ducal et le jetait sur le tréteau du clown! Cette femme ôtait de sa tête l'auréole olympienne et la posait sur le crâne hérissé du gnome! On ne sait quel renversement du monde, le fourmillement d'insectes en haut, les constellations en bas, engloutissait Gwynplaine éperdu sous un écroulement de lumière, et lui faisait un nimbe dans le cloaque. Une toute-puissante, en révolte contre la beauté et la splendeur, se donnait au damné de la nuit, préférait Gwynplaine Antinous, entrait en accès de curiosité devant les ténèbres, et y descendait, et, de cette abdication de la déesse, sortait, couronnée et prodigieuse, la royauté du misérable. «Tu es horrible. Je t'aime.» Ces mots atteignaient Gwynplaine l'endroit hideux de l'orgueil. L'orgueil, c'est là le talon o tous les héros sont vulnérables. Gwynplaine était flatté dans sa vanité de monstre. C'était comme être difforme qu'il était aimé.

Lui aussi, autant et plus peut-être que les Jupiters et les Apollons, il était l'exception. Il se sentait surhumain, et tellement monstre qu'il était dieu. Éblouissement épouvantable.

Maintenant, qu'était-ce que cette femme? que savait-il d'elle?

Tout et rien. C'était une duchesse, il le savait; il savait qu'elle était belle, qu'elle était riche, qu'elle avait des livrées, des laquais, des pages, et des coureurs à flambeaux autour de son carrosse à couronne. Il savait qu'elle était amoureuse de lui, ou du moins qu'elle le lui disait. Le reste, il l'ignorait. Il savait son titre, et ne savait pas son nom.

Il savait sa pensée, et ne savait pas sa vie. Était-elle mariée, veuve, fille? était-elle libre? était-elle sujette à des devoirs quelconques? A quelle famille appartenait-elle? Y avait-il autour d'elle des pièges, des embûches, des écueils? Ce qu'est la galanterie dans les hautes régions oisives, qu'il y ait sur ces sommets des antres où rêvent des charmeuses féroces ayant pêle-mêle autour d'elles des ossements d'amour déjà dévorés, quels essais tragiquement cyniques peut aboutir l'ennui d'une femme qui se croit au-dessus de l'homme, Gwynplaine ne soupçonnait rien de cela; il n'avait pas même dans l'esprit de quoi échafauder une conjecture, on est mal renseigné dans le sous-sol social où il vivait; pourtant il voyait de l'ombre. Il se rendait compte que toute cette clarté était obscure.

Comprenait-il? Non. Devinait-il? Encore moins. Qu'y avait-il derrière cette lettre? Une ouverture à deux battants, et en même temps une fermeture inquiétante. D'un côté l'aveu. De l'autre l'énigme.

L'aveu et l'énigme, ces deux bouches, l'une provocante, l'autre menaçante, prononcent la même parole: Ose!

Jamais la perfidie du hasard n'avait mieux pris ses mesures, et n'avait fait arriver plus à point une tentation. Gwynplaine, remué par le printemps et par la montée de la sève universelle, était en train de faire le rêve de la chair. Le vieil homme insubmersible dont aucun de nous ne triomphe, s'éveillait en cet éphèbe attardé, resté adolescent à vingt-quatre ans. C'est à ce moment-là, c'est à la minute la plus trouble de cette crise, que l'offre lui était faite, et que se dressait devant lui, éblouissante, la gorge nue du sphinx. La jeunesse est un plan incliné. Gwynplaine penchait, on le poussait. Qui? la saison.

Qui? la nuit. Qui? cette femme. S'il n'y avait pas le mois d'avril, on serait bien plus vertueux. Les buissons en fleur, tas de complices! l'amour est le voleur, le printemps est le recéleur.

Gwynplaine était bouleversé.

Il y a une certaine fumée du mal qui précède la faute, et qui n'est pas respirable à la conscience. L'honnêteté tentée a la nausée obscure de l'enfer. Ce qui s'entr'ouvre dégage une exhalaison qui avertit les forts et étourdit les faibles.

Gwynplaine avait ce mystérieux malaise.

Des dilemmes, à la fois fugaces et opiniâtres, flottaient devant lui. La faute, obstinée à s'offrir, prenait forme. Le lendemain, minuit, le pont de Londres, le page! irait-il? Oui!
criait la chair. Non! criait l'âme.

Pourtant, disons-le, si singulier que cela semble au premier abord, cette question: — Irait-il? — il ne se l'adressa pas une seule fois distinctement. Les actions reprochables ont des endroits réservés. Comme les eaux-de-vie trop fortes, on ne les boit pas tout d'un trait. On pose le verre, on verra plus tard, la première goutte est déjà bien étrange.

Ce qui est sûr, c'est qu'il se sentait poussé par derrière vers l'inconnu.

Et il frémissait. Et il entrevoyait un bord d'écroulement. Et il se rejetait en arrière, ressaisi de tous côtés par l'effroi.
Il fermait les yeux. Il faisait effort pour se nier à lui-même cette aventure, et pour se remettre à douter de sa raison.
Évidemment c'était le mieux. Ce qu'il avait de plus sage faire, c'était de se croire fou.

Fièvre fatale. Tout homme surpris par l'imprévu a eu dans sa vie de ces pulsations tragiques. L'observateur écoute toujours avec anxiété le retentissement des sombres coups de bélier du destin contre une conscience.

Hélas! Gwynplaine s'interrogeait. Là où le devoir est net, se poser des questions, c'est déjà la défaite.

Du reste, détail à noter, l'effronterie de l'aventure qui peut-être eût choqué un homme corrompu, ne lui apparaissait point. Ce que c'est que le cynisme, il l'ignorait. L'idée de prostitution, indiquée plus haut, ne l'approchait pas. Il n'était pas de force à la concevoir. Il était trop pur pour admettre les hypothèses compliquées. De cette femme, il ne voyait que la grandeur. Hélas! il était flatté. Sa vanité ne constatait que sa victoire. Qu'il fût l'objet d'une impudeur plutôt que d'un amour, il lui eût fallu, pour conjecturer cela, beaucoup plus d'esprit que n'en a l'innocence. Près de: *Je t'aime*, il n'apercevait pas ce correctif effrayant: *Je veux de toi.*

Le côté bestial de la déesse lui échappait.

L'esprit peut subir des invasions. L'âme a ses vandales, les mauvaises pensées, qui viennent dévaster notre vertu. Mille idées en sens inverse se précipitaient sur Gwynplaine l'une après l'autre, quelquefois toutes ensemble. Puis il se faisait en lui des silences. Alors il prenait sa tête entre ses mains, dans une sorte d'attention lugubre, pareille à la contemplation d'un paysage de la nuit.

Tout à coup il s’aperçut d’une chose, c’est qu’il ne pensait plus. Sa rêverie était arrivée à ce moment noir où tout disparaît.

Il remarqua aussi qu’il n’était pas rentré. Il pouvait être deux heures du matin.

Il mit la lettre apportée par le page dans sa poche de côté, mais s’apercevant qu’elle était sur son coeur, il l’ôta de là, et la fourra toute froissée dans le premier gousset venu de son haut-de-chausses, puis il se dirigea vers l’hôtellerie, y pénétra silencieusement, ne réveilla pas le petit Govicum qui l’attendait tombé de sommeil sur une table avec ses deux bras pour oreiller, referma la porte, alluma une chandelle à la lanterne de l’auberge, tira les verrous, donna un tour de clef à la serrure, prit machinalement les précautions d’un homme qui rentre tard, remonta l’escalier de la Green-Box, se glissa dans l’ancienne cahute qui lui servait de chambre, regarda Ursus qui dormait, souffla sa chandelle, et ne se coucha pas.

Une heure passa ainsi. Enfin, las, se figurant que le lit c’est le sommeil, il posa sa tête sur son oreiller, sans se déshabiller, et il fit à l’obscurité la concession de fermer les yeux; mais l’orage d’émotions qui l’assaillait n’avait pas discontinué un instant. L’insomnie est un sévice de la nuit sur l’homme. Gwynplaine souffrait beaucoup. Pour la première fois de sa vie, il n’était pas content de lui. Intime douleur mêlée sa vanité satisfaite. Que faire? Le jour vint. Il entendit Ursus se lever, et n’ouvrit pas les paupières. Aucune trêve cependant. Il songeait à cette lettre. Tous les mots lui revenaient dans une sorte de chaos. Sous de certains souffles violents du dedans de l’âme, la pensée est un liquide. Elle entre en convulsions, elle se soulève, et il en sort quelque chose de semblable au rugissement sourd de la vague. Flux, reflux, secousses, tournoiements, hésitations du flot devant l’écueil, grêles et pluies, nuages avec des trouées où sont des lueurs, arrachements misérables d’une écume inutile, folles ascensions tout de suite écroulées, immenses efforts perdus, apparition du naufrage de toutes parts, ombre et dispersion, tout cela, qui est dans l’abîme, est dans l’homme. Gwynplaine était en proie à cette tourmente.

Au plus fort de cette angoisse, les paupières toujours fermées, il entendit une voix exquise qui disait: — Est-ce que tu dors, Gwynplaine? — Il ouvrit les yeux en sursaut et se leva sur son séant, la porte de la cahute vestiaire était entr’ouverte, Dea apparaissait dans l’entre-bâillement. Elle avait dans les yeux et sur les lèvres son ineffable sourire. Elle se dressait charmante,

dans la sérénité inconsciente de son rayonnement. Il y eut une sorte de minute sacrée. Gwynplaine la contempla, tressaillant, ébloui, réveillé; réveillé de quoi? du sommeil?
non, de l’insomnie. C’était elle, c’était Dea; et tout à coup il sentit au plus profond de son être l’indéfinissable évanouissement de la tempête et la sublime descente du bien sur le mal; le prodige du regard d’en haut s’opéra, la douce aveugle lumineuse, sans autre effort que sa présence, dissipa toute l’ombre en lui, le rideau de nuage s’écarta de cet esprit comme tiré par une main invisible, et Gwynplaine, enchantement céleste, eut dans la conscience une rentrée d’azur. Il redevint subitement, par la vertu de cet ange, le grand et bon Gwynplaine innocent. L’âme, comme la création, a de ces confrontations mystérieuses; tous deux se taisaient, elle la clarté, lui le gouffre, elle divine, lui apaisé; et audessus du coeur orageux de Gwynplaine, Dea resplendissait avec on ne sait quel inexprimable effet d’étoile de la mer.

II

DU PLAISANT AU SÉVÈRE

Comme c'est simple un miracle! C'était dans la Green-Box l'heure du déjeuner, et Dea venait tout bonnement savoir pourquoi Gwynplaine n'arrivait pas à leur petite table du matin.

— Toi! cria Gwynplaine, et tout fut dit. Il n'eut plus d'autre horizon et d'autre vision que ce ciel où était Dea.

Qui n'a pas vu, après l'ouragan, le sourire immédiat de la mer, ne peut se rendre compte de ces apaisements-là. Rien ne se calme plus vite que les gouffres. Cela tient à leur facilit d'engloutissement. Ainsi est le coeur humain. Pas toujours, pourtant.

Dea n'avait qu'à se montrer, toute la lumière qui était en Gwynplaine sortait et allait à elle, et il n'y avait plus derrière Gwynplaine ébloui qu'une fuite de fantômes. Quelle pacificatrice que l'adoration!

Quelques instants après, tous deux étaient assis l'un devant l'autre, Ursus entre eux, Homo à leurs pieds. La théière, sous laquelle flambait une petite lampe, était sur la table. Fibi et Vinos étaient dehors et vaquaient au service.

Le déjeuner, comme le souper, se faisait dans le compartiment du centre. De la façon dont la table très étroite était placée, Dea tournait le dos à la baie de la cloison qui répondait à la porte d'entrée de la Green-Box.

Leurs genoux se touchaient. Gwynplaine versait le thé à Dea.

Dea soufflait gracieusement sur sa tasse. Tout à coup, elle éternua. Il y avait en ce moment-là, audessus de la flamme de la lampe, une fumée qui se dissipait, et quelque chose comme du papier qui tombait en cendre. Cette fumée avait fait éternuer Dea.

— Qu'est cela? demanda-t-elle.

— Rien, répondit Gwynplaine.

Et il se mit à sourire.

Il venait de brûler la lettre de la duchesse.

L'ange gardien de la femme aimée, c'est la conscience de l'homme qui aime.

Cette lettre de moins sur lui le soulagea étrangement, et Gwynplaine sentit son honnêteté comme l'aigle sent ses ailes.

Il lui sembla qu'avec cette fumée la tentation s'en allait, et qu'en même temps que ce papier, la duchesse tombait en cendre.

Tout en mêlant leurs tasses, buvant l'un après l'autre dans la même, ils parlaient. Babil d'amoureux, caquetage de moineaux.

Enfantillages dignes de la Mère l'Oie et d'Homère. Deux coeurs qui s'aiment, n'allez pas chercher plus loin la poésie; et deux baisers qui dialoguent, n'allez pas chercher plus loin la musique.

— Sais-tu une chose?

— Non.

— Gwynplaine, j'ai rêvé que nous étions des bêtes, et que nous avions des ailes.

— Ailes, cela veut dire oiseaux, murmura Gwynplaine.

— Bêtes, cela veut dire anges, grommela Ursus.

La causerie continuait.

— Si tu n'existais pas, Gwynplaine...

— Eh bien?

— C'est qu'il n'y aurait pas de bon Dieu.

— Le thé est trop chaud. Tu vas te brûler, Dea.

— Souffle sur ma tasse.

— Que tu es belle ce matin!

— Figure-toi qu'il y a toutes sortes de choses que je veux te dire.

— Dis.

— Je t'aime!

— Je t'adore!

Et Ursus faisait cet aparté:

— Par le ciel, voilà d'honnêtes gens.

Quand on s'aime, ce qui est exquis, ce sont les silences. Il se fait comme des amas d'amour, qui éclatent ensuite doucement.

Il y eut une pause après laquelle Dea s'écria:

— Si tu savais! le soir, quand nous jouons la pièce, à l'instant où ma main touche ton front... — Oh! tu as une noble tête, Gwynplaine! — ... à l'instant où je sens tes cheveux sous mes doigts, c'est un frisson, j'ai une joie du ciel, je me dis: Dans tout ce monde de noirceur qui m'enveloppe, dans cet univers de solitude, dans cet immense écroulement obscur où je suis, dans cet effrayant tremblement de moi et de tout, j'ai un point d'appui, le voilà. C'est lui. — C'est toi.

— Oh! tu m'aimes, dit Gwynplaine. Moi aussi je n'ai que toi sur la terre. Tu es tout pour moi. Dea, que veux-tu que je fasse? Désires-tu quelque chose? que te faut-il?

Dea répondit:

— Je ne sais pas. Je suis heureuse.

— Oh! reprit Gwynplaine, nous sommes heureux!

Ursus éleva la voix sévèrement:

— Ah! vous êtes heureux. C'est une contravention. Je vous ai déjà avertis. Ah! vous êtes heureux! Alors, tâchez qu'on ne vous voie pas. Tenez le moins de place possible. Ça doit se fourrer dans des trous, le bonheur. Faites-vous encore plus petits que vous n'êtes, si vous pouvez. Dieu mesure la grandeur du bonheur à la petitesse des heureux. Les gens contents doivent se cacher comme des malfaiteurs. Ah! vous rayonnez, méchants vers luisants que vous êtes, morbleu, on vous marchera dessus, et l'on fera bien. Qu'est-ce que c'est que toutes ces mamours-là? Je ne suis pas une duègne, moi, dont l'état est de regarder les amoureux se becqueter. Vous me fatiguez, à la fin! Allez au diable!

Et sentant que son accent revêche mollissait jusqu' l'attendrissement, il noya cette émotion dans un fort souffle de bougonnement.

— Père, dit Dea, comme vous faites votre grosse voix!

— C'est que je n'aime pas qu'on soit trop heureux, répondit Ursus.

Ici Homo fit écho à Ursus. On entendit un grondement sous les pieds des amoureux.

Ursus se pencha et mit la main sur le crâne d'Homo.

— C'est cela, toi aussi, tu es de mauvaise humeur. Tu grognes. Tu hérisses ta mèche sur ta caboche de loup. Tu n'aimes pas les amourettes. C'est que tu es sage. C'est égal, tais-toi. Tu as parlé, tu as dit ton avis, soit; maintenant silence.

Le loup gronda de nouveau.

Ursus le regarda sous la table.

— Paix donc, Homo! Allons, n'insiste pas, philosophe!

Mais le loup se dressa et montra les dents du côté de la porte.

— Qu'est-ce que tu as donc? dit Ursus.

Et il empoigna Homo par la peau du cou.

Dea, inattentive aux grincements du loup, toute à sa pensée, et savourant en elle-même le son de voix de Gwynplaine, se taisait, dans cette sorte d'extase propre aux aveugles, qui semble parfois leur donner intérieurement un chant à écouter et leur remplacer par on ne sait quelle musique idéale la lumière qui leur manque.

La cécité est un souterrain d'où l'on entend la profonde harmonie éternelle.

Pendant qu'Ursus, apostrophant Homo, baissait le front, Gwynplaine avait levé les yeux.

Il allait boire une tasse de thé, et ne la but pas; il la posa sur la table avec la lenteur d'un ressort qui se détend, ses doigts restèrent ouverts, et il demeura immobile, l'oeil fixe, ne respirant plus.

Un homme était debout derrière Dea, dans l'encadrement de la porte.

Cet homme était vêtu de noir avec une cape de justice. Il avait une perruque jusqu'aux sourcils, et il tenait à la main un bâton de fer sculpté en couronne aux deux bouts.

Ce bâton était court et massif.

Qu'on se figure Méduse passant sa tête entre deux branches du paradis.

Ursus, qui avait senti la commotion d'un nouveau venu et qui avait dressé la tête sans lâcher Homo, reconnut ce personnage redoutable.

Il eut un tremblement de la tête aux pieds.

Il dit bas à l'oreille de Gwynplaine:

— C'est le wapentake.

Gwynplaine se souvint.

Une parole de surprise allait lui échapper. Il la retint.

Le bâton de fer terminé en couronne aux deux extrémités était l'iron-weapon.

C'était de l'iron-weapon, sur lequel les officiers de justice urbaine prêtaient serment en entrant en charge, que les anciens wapentakes de la police anglaise tiraient leur qualification.

Au delà de l'homme à la perruque, dans la pénombre, on entrevoyait l'hôtelier consterné.

L'homme, sans dire une parole, et personnifiant cette *muta Themis* des vieilles chartes, abaissa son bras droit par-dessus Dea rayonnante, et toucha du bâton de fer l'épaule de Gwynplaine, pendant que, du pouce de sa main gauche, il montrait derrière lui la porte de la Green-Box. Ce double geste, d'autant plus impérieux qu'il était silencieux, voulait dire: Suivez-moi.

Pro signo exeundi, sursum trahe, dit le cartulaire normand.

L'individu sur lequel venait se poser l'iron-weapon n'avait d'autre droit que le droit d'obéir. Nulle réplique à cet ordre muet. Les rudes pénalités anglaises menaçaient le réfractaire.

Sous ce rigide attouchement de la loi, Gwynplaine eut une secousse, puis fut comme pétrifié.

Au lieu d'être simplement effleuré du bâton de fer sur l'épaule, il en eût été violemment frappé sur la tête, qu'il n'eût pas ét plus étourdi. Il se voyait sommé de suivre l'officier de police.

Mais pourquoi? Il ne comprenait pas.

Ursus, jeté lui aussi de son côté dans un trouble poignant, entrevoyait quelque chose d'assez distinct. Il songeait aux bateleurs et aux prédicateurs, ses concurrents, à la Green-Box dénoncée, au loup, ce délinquant, à son propre démêlé avec les trois inquisitions de Bishops'gate; et qui sait? peut-être, mais ceci était effrayant, aux bavardages malséants et factieux de Gwynplaine touchant l'autorité royale. Il tremblait profondément.

Dea souriait.

Ni Gwynplaine, ni Ursus ne prononcèrent une parole. Tous deux eurent la même pensée: ne pas inquiéter Dea. Le loup l'eut peut-être aussi, car il cessa de gronder. Il est vrai qu'Ursus ne le lâchait point.

D'ailleurs Homo, dans l'occasion, avait ses prudences. Qui n'a remarqué certaines anxiétés intelligentes des animaux?

Peut-être, dans la mesure de ce qu'un loup peut comprendre des hommes, se sentait-il proscrit.

Gwynplaine se leva.

Aucune résistance n'était possible, Gwynplaine le savait, il se rappelait les paroles d'Ursus, et aucune question n'était faisable.

Il demeura debout devant le wapentake.

Le wapentake lui retira le weapon de dessus l'épaule, et ramena lui le bâton de fer qu'il tint droit dans la posture du commandement, attitude de police comprise alors de tout le peuple, et qui intimait l'ordre que voici:

— Que cet homme me suive, et personne autre. Restez tous où vous êtes. Silence.

Pas de curieux. La police a, de tout temps, eu le goût de ces clôtures-là.

Ce genre de saisie était qualifié «séquestre de la personne».

Le wapentake, d'un seul mouvement, et comme une pièce mécanique qui pivote sur elle-même, tourna le dos et se dirigea d'un pas magistral et grave vers l'issue de la Green-Box.

Gwynplaine regarda Ursus.

Ursus eut cette pantomime composée d'un haussement d'épaules, des deux coudes aux hanches avec les mains écartées, et des sourcils froncés en chevrons, laquelle signifie: soumission à l’inconnu.

Gwynplaine regarda Dea. Elle songeait. Elle continuait de sourire.

Il posa l’extrémité de ses doigts sur ses lèvres, et lui envoya un inexprimable baiser.

Ursus, soulagé d’une certaine quantité de terreur par le dos tourné du wapentake, saisit ce moment pour glisser dans l’oreille de Gwynplaine ce murmure:

— Sur ta vie, ne parle pas avant qu’on t’interroge!

Gwynplaine, avec ce soin de ne pas faire de bruit qu’on a dans la chambre d’un malade, décrocha de la cloison son chapeau et son manteau, s’enveloppa du manteau jusqu’aux yeux, et se rabattit le chapeau sur le front; ne s’étant pas couché, il avait encore ses vêtements de travail et au cou son esclavine de cuir; il regarda encore une fois Dea; le wapentake, arrivé à la porte extérieure de la Green-Box, éleva son bâton et commença à descendre le petit escalier de sortie; alors Gwynplaine se mit en marche comme si cet homme le tirait avec une chaîne invisible; Ursus regarda Gwynplaine sortir de la Green-Box; le loup, à ce moment-là, ébaucha un grondement plaintif, mais Ursus le tint en respect, et lui dit tout bas: Il va revenir.

Dans la cour, maître Nicless, d’un geste servile et impérieux, refoulait les cris d’effarement dans les bouches de Vinos et de Fibi qui considéraient avec détresse Gwynplaine emmené, et les vêtements couleur deuil et le bâton de fer du wapentake.

Deux pétrifications, c’étaient ces deux filles. Elles avaient des attitudes de stalactites.

Govicum, abasourdi, écarquillait sa face dans une fenêtre entre baillée.

Le wapentake précédait Gwynplaine de quelques pas sans se retourner et sans le regarder, avec cette tranquillité glaciale que donne la certitude d’être la loi.

Tous deux, dans un silence de sépulcre, franchirent la cour, traversèrent la salle obscure du cabaret et débouchèrent sur la place. Il y avait là quelques passants groupés devant la porte de l’auberge, et le justicier-quorum à la tête d’une escouade de police. Ces curieux, stupéfaits, et sans souffler mot, s’écartèrent et se rangèrent avec la discipline anglaise devant le bâton du constable; le wapentake prit la direction des petites rues, dites alors Little Strand, qui longeaient la Tamise; et Gwynplaine, ayant à sa droite et à sa gauche les gens du justicier-quorum alignés en double haie, pâle, sans un geste, sans autre mouvement que les pas qu’il faisait, couvert de son manteau ainsi que d’un suaire, s’éloigna lentement de l’inn, marchant muet derrière l’homme taciturne, comme une statue qui suit un spectre.

III

LEX, REX, FEX

L’arrestation sans explication, qui étonnerait fort un anglais d’aujourd’hui, était un procédé de police fort usité alors dans la Grande-Bretagne. On y eut recours, particulièrement pour les choses délicates auxquelles pourvoyaient en France les lettres de cachet, et en dépit de l’*habeas corpus*, jusque sous Georges II, et une des accusations dont Walpole eut à se défendre, ce fut d’avoir fait ou laissé arrêter Neuhoff de cette façon.

L’accusation était probablement peu fondée, car Neuhoff, roi de Corse, fut incarcéré par ses créanciers.

Les prises de corps silencieuses, dont la Sainte-Voehme en Allemagne avait fort usé, étaient admises par la coutume germanique qui régit une moitié des vieilles lois anglaises, et recommandées, en certain cas, par la coutume normande qui régit l’autre moitié. Le maître de police du palais de Justinien s’appelait «le silentiaire impérial», *silentiarius imperialis*.

Les magistrats anglais qui pratiquaient cette sorte de prise de corps, s’appuyaient sur de nombreux textes normands: — *Canes latrant, sergentes silent*. — *Sergenter agere, ici est tacere*. — Ils citaient Lundulphus Sagax, paragraphe 16: — *Facit imperator silentium.* — Ils citaient la charte du roi Philippe, de 1307: — *Multos tenebimus bastonerios qui, obmutescentes, sergentare valeant.* — Ils citaient les statuts de Henri Ier d’Angleterre, chapitre LIII: — *Surge signa jussus. Taciturnior esto. Hoc est esse in captione regis*. — Ils se prévalaient spécialement de cette prescription considérée comme faisant partie des antiques franchises féodales de l’Angleterre: — «Sous les viscomtes sont les serjans de l’espée, lesquels doivent justicier vertueusement à l’espée tous ceux qui suient malveses compagnies, gens diffamez d’aucuns crimes, et gens fuitis et forbannis..... et les doivent si vigoureusement et si discrètement appréhender, que la bonne gent qui sont paisibles soient gardez paisiblement, et que les malfeteurs soient espoantés.» Être arrêté de la sorte, c’était être saisi «ô le glaive de l’espée» (*Vetus Consuetudo Normanniae,* MS. I. part.

Sect. I, cap. II). Les jurisconsultes invoquaient en outre, *in Charta Ludovici Hutini pro normannis,* le chapitre *servientes spathae*. Les *servientes* *spathae,* dans l’approche graduelle de la basse latinité jusqu’à nos idiomes, sont devenus *sergentes spadae*

Les arrestations silencieuses étaient le contraire de la clameur de haro, et indiquaient qu’il convenait de se taire jusqu’à ce que de certaines obscurités fussent éclaircies.

Elles signifiaient: Questions réservées.

Elles indiquaient, dans l’opération de police, une certaine quantité de raison d’état.

Le terme de droit *private,* qui veut dire *à huis clos,* s’appliquait à ce genre d’arrestations.

C’est de cette manière qu’Edouard III avait, selon quelques annalistes, fait saisir Mortimer dans le lit de sa mère Isabelle de France. Ici encore on peut douter, car Mortimer soutint un siège dans sa ville avant d’être pris.

Warwick, le Faiseur de rois, pratiquait volontiers ce mode «d’attraire les gens».

Cromwell l’employait, surtout dans le Connaugh; et ce fut avec cette précaution du silence que Trailie-Arcklo, parent du comte d’Ormond, fut arrêté dans Kilmacaugh.

Ces prises de corps par le simple geste de justice représentaient plutôt le mandat de comparution que le mandat d’arrêt.

Elles n’étaient parfois qu’un procédé d’information, et impliquaient même, par le silence imposé à tous, un certain ménagement pour la personne saisie.

Pour le peuple, peu au fait de ces nuances, elles étaient particulièrement terrifiantes.

L’Angleterre, qu’on ne l’oublie pas, n’était pas en 1705, ni même beaucoup plus tard, ce qu’elle est de nos jours. L’ensemble était très confus et parfois très oppressif; Daniel de Foë, qui avait tâté du pilori, caractérise quelque part l’ordre social anglais par ces mots: «les mains de fer de la loi». Il n’y avait pas seulement la loi, il y avait l’arbitraire. Qu’on se rappelle Steele chassé du parlement, Locke chassé de sa chaire; Hobbes et Gibbon, forcés de fuir; Charles Curchill, Hume, Priestley persécutés; John Wilkes mis à la Tour. Qu’on énumère, le compte sera long, les victimes du statut *seditious libel*.

L’inquisition avait un peu fusé par toute l’Europe; ses pratiques de police faisaient école. Un attentat monstrueux à tous les droits était possible en

Angleterre; qu’on se souvienne du *Gazetier cuirassé*. En plein dix-huitième siècle, Louis XV faisait enlever dans Piccadilly les écrivains qui lui déplaisaient. Il est vrai que Georges III empoignait en France le prétendant au beau milieu de la salle de l’Opéra. C’étaient deux bras très longs; celui du roi de France allait jusque dans Londres, et celui du roi d’Angleterre jusque dans Paris. Telles étaient les libertés.

Ajoutons qu’on exécutait volontiers les gens dans l’intérieur des prisons; escamotage mêlé au supplice; expédient hideux, auquel l’Angleterre revient en ce moment; donnant ainsi au monde le singulier spectacle d’un grand peuple qui, voulant améliorer, choisit le pire, et qui, ayant devant lui, d’un côté le passé, de l’autre le progrès, se trompe de visage, et prend la nuit pour le jour.

IV

URSUS ESPIONNE LA POLICE

Ainsi que nous l’avons dit, selon les très rigides lois de la police d’alors, la sommation de suivre le wapentake, adressée un individu, impliquait pour toute autre personne présente le commandement de ne point bouger.

Quelques curieux pourtant s’obstinèrent, et accompagnèrent de loin le cortège qui emmenait Gwynplaine.

Ursus fut du nombre.

Ursus avait été pétrifié autant qu’on a le droit de l’être. Mais Ursus, tant de fois assailli par les surprises de la vie errante et par les méchancetés de l’inattendu, avait, comme un navire de guerre, son branle-bas de combat qui appelle au poste de bataille tout l’équipage, c’est-à-dire toute l’intelligence.

Il se dépêcha de n’être plus pétrifié, et se mit à réfléchir. Il ne s’agit pas d’être ému, il s’agit de faire face.

Faire face à l’incident, c’est le devoir de quiconque n’est pas imbécile.

Ne pas chercher à comprendre, mais agir. Tout de suite. Ursus s’interrogea.

Qu’y avait-il à faire?

Gwynplaine parti, Ursus se trouvait placé entre deux craintes: la crainte pour Gwynplaine, qui lui disait de suivre; la crainte pour lui-même, qui lui disait de rester.

Ursus avait l’intrépidité d’une mouche et l’impassibilité d’une sensitive. Son tremblement fut indescriptible. Pourtant il prit héroiquement son parti, et se décida à braver la loi et à suivre le wapentake, tant il était inquiet de ce qui pouvait arriver a Gwynplaine.

Il fallait qu’il eût bien peur pour avoir tant de courage.

A quels actes de vaillance l’épouvante peut pousser un lièvre!

Le chamois éperdu saute les précipices. Être effrayé jusqu’ l’imprudence, c’est une des formes de l’effroi.

Gwynplaine avait été enlevé plutôt qu’arrêté. L’opération de police s’était exécutée si rapidement que le champ de foire, d’ailleurs peu fréquenté à cette heure matinale, avait ét peine ému. Presque personne ne se doutait dans les baraques du Tarrinzeau-field que le wapentake était venu chercher l’Homme qui Rit. De là le peu de foule.

Gwynplaine, grâce à son manteau et à son feutre, qui se rejoignaient presque sur son visage, ne pouvait être reconnu des passants.

Avant de sortir à la suite de Gwynplaine, Ursus eut une précaution. Il prit à part maître Nicless, le boy Govicum, Fibi et Vinos, et leur prescrivit le plus absolu silence vis-à-vis de Dea, ignorante de tout; qu’on eût soin de ne pas souffler un mot qui pût lui faire soupçonner ce qui s’était passé; qu’on lui expliquât par les soins de ménage de la Green-Box l’absence de Gwynplaine et d’Ursus; que d’ailleurs c’était bientôt l’heure de son sommeil au milieu du jour, et qu’avant que Dea fût éveillée, il serait de retour, lui Ursus, avec Gwynplaine, tout cela n’étant qu’un malentendu, un mistake, comme on dit en Angleterre; qu’il leur serait bien facile à Gwynplaine et à lui d’éclairer les magistrats et la police; qu’ils feraient toucher du doigt la méprise, et que tout à l’heure ils allaient revenir tous deux.

Surtout que personne ne dît rien à Dea. Ces recommandations faites, il partit.

Ursus put, sans être remarqué, suivre Gwynplaine. Quoiqu’il se tînt à la plus grande distance possible, il s’arrangea de façon ne pas le perdre de vue. La hardiesse dans le guet, c’est la bravoure des timides.

Après tout, et si solennel que fût l’appareil, Gwynplaine n’était peut-être que cité à comparaître devant le magistrat de simple police pour quelque infraction sans gravité.

Ursus se disait que cette question allait être tout de suite résolue.

L’éclaircissement se ferait, sous ses yeux mêmes, par la direction que prendrait l’escouade emmenant Gwynplaine au moment où, parvenue aux limites du Tarrinzeau-field, elle atteindrait l’entrée des ruelles du Little Strand.

Si elle tournait à gauche, c’était qu’elle conduisait Gwynplaine à la maison de ville de Southwark. Peu de chose à craindre alors; quelque méchant délit municipal, une admonition du magistrat, deux ou trois shellings d’amende, puis Gwynplaine serait lâché, et la représentation de *Chaos vaincu* aurait lieu le soir même comme à l’ordinaire. Personne ne se serait aperçu de rien.

Si l’escouade tournait à droite, c’était sérieux.

Il y avait de ce côté là des lieux sévères.

A l’instant où le wapentake, menant les deux files d’argousins entre lesquelles marchait Gwynplaine, arriva aux petites rues, Ursus, haletant, regarda. Il existe des moments où tout l’homme passe dans les yeux.

De quel côté allait-on tourner?

On tourna à droite.

Ursus, chancelant d’effroi, s’appuya contre un mur pour ne point tomber.

Rien d’hypocrite comme ce mot qu’on se dit à soi-même: *Je veux savoir à quoi m’en tenir*. Au fond, on ne le veut pas du tout.

On a une peur profonde. L’angoisse se complique d’un effort obscur pour ne point conclure. On ne se l’avoue pas, mais on reculerait volontiers, et quand on a avancé, on se le reproche.

C’est ce que fit Ursus. Il pensa avec frisson: — Voilà qui tourne mal. J’aurais toujours su cela assez tôt. Qu’est-ce que je fais là à suivre Gwynplaine?

Cette réflexion faite, comme l’homme n’est que contradiction, il doubla le pas, et maîtrisant son anxiété, il se hâta, afin de se rapprocher de l’escouade et de ne pas laisser se rompre dans le dédale des rues de Southwark le fil entre Gwynplaine et lui Ursus.

Le cortège de police ne pouvait aller vite, à cause de sa solennité.

Le wapentake l’ouvrait.

Le justicier-quorum le fermait.

Cet ordre impliquait une certaine lenteur.

Toute la majesté possible au recors éclatait dans le justicier-quorum. Son costume tenait le milieu entre le splendide accoutrement du docteur en musique d’Oxford et l’ajustement sobre et noir du docteur en divinité de Cambridge.

Il avait des habits de gentilhomme sous un long godebert qui est une mante fourrée de dos de lièvre de Norvège. Il était mi-parti gothique et moderne, ayant une perruque comme Lamoignon et des manches mahoîtres comme Tristan l’Hermite. Son gros oeil rond couvait Gwynplaine avec une fixité de hibou. Il marchait en cadence. Impossible de voir un bonhomme plus farouche.

Ursus, un moment dérouté dans l’écheveau brouillé des ruelles, parvint à rejoindre près de Sainte-Marie Over-Ry le cortège qui, heureusement, avait été retardé dans le préau de l’église par une batterie d’enfants et de chiens, incident habituel des rues de Londres, *dogs and boys*, disent les vieux registres de police, lesquels font passer les chiens avant les enfants.

Un homme conduit au magistrat par les gens de police étant, après tout, un événement fort vulgaire, et chacun ayant ses affaires, les curieux s'étaient dispersés. Il n'était resté, sur la piste de Gwynplaine, qu'Ursus.

On passa devant les deux chapelles, qui se faisaient face, des Recreative Religionists et de la Ligue Halleluiah, deux sectes d'alors qui subsistent encore aujourd'hui.

Puis le cortège serpenta de ruelle en ruelle, choisissant de préférence les roads non encore bâtis, les rows où poussait l'herbe et les lànes déserts, et fit force zigzags.

Enfin il s'arrêta.

On était dans une ruette exiguë. Pas de maisons, si ce n'est l'entrée deux ou trois masures. Cette ruette était composée de deux murs, l'un à gauche, bas; l'autre à droite, haut. La muraille haute était noire et maçonnée à la saxonne, avec des créneaux, des scorpions et des carrés de grosses grilles sur des soupiraux étroits. Aucune fenêtre; ça et là seulement des fentes, qui étaient d'anciennes embrasures de pierriers et d'archegayes. On voyait, au pied de ce grand mur, comme le trou au bas de la ratière, un tout petit guichet, très surbaissé.

Ce guichet, emboîté dans un lourd plein cintre de pierre, avait un judas grillé, un marteau massif, une large serrure, des gonds noueux et robustes, un enchevêtrement de clous, une cuirasse de plaques et de peintures, et était fait de fer plus que de bois.

Personne dans la ruette. Pas de boutiques, pas de passants.

Mais on entendait tout près un bruit continu comme si la ruette eût été parallèle à un torrent. C'était un vacarme de voix et de voitures. Il était probable qu'il y avait de l'autre côté de l'édifice noir une grande rue, sans doute la rue principale de Southwark, laquelle se reliait d'un bout à la route de Cantorbéry et de l'autre bout au pont de Londres.

Dans toute la longueur de la ruette un guetteur, en dehors du cortége enveloppant Gwynplaine, n'eût vu d'autre face humaine que le blême profil d'Ursus, risqué et à demi avancé dans la pénombre d'un coin de mur, regardant et ayant peur de voir. Il s'était posté dans le repli que faisait un zigzag de la rue.

L'escouade se groupa devant le guichet.

Gwynplaine était au centre, mais avait maintenant derrière lui le wapentake et son bâton de fer.

Le justicier-quorum leva le marteau et frappa trois coups.

Le judas s’ouvrit.

Le justicier-quorum dit:

— De par sa majesté.

La pesante porte de chêne et de fer tourna sur ses gonds, et une ouverture livide et froide s’offrit, pareille à une bouche d’antre. Une voûte hideuse se prolongeait dans l’ombre.

Ursus vit Gwynplaine disparaître là-dessous.

V

MAUVAIS LIEU

Le wapentake entra après Gwynplaine.

Puis le justicier-quorum.

Puis toute l’escouade.

Le guichet se referma.

La pesante porte revint s’appliquer hermétiquement sur ses chambranles de pierre sans qu’on vît qui l’avait ouverte ni qui la refermait. Il semblait que les verrous rentrassent d’eux-mêmes dans leurs alvéoles. Quelques-uns de ces mécanismes inventés par l’antique intimidation existent encore dans les très vieilles maisons de force. Porte dont on ne voyait pas le portier. Cela faisait ressembler le seuil de la prison au seuil de la tombe.

Ce guichet était la porte basse de la geôle de Southwark.

Rien dans cet édifice vermoulu et revêche ne démentait la mine discourtoise propre à une prison.

Un temple paien, construit par les vieux cattieuchlans pour les Mogons qui sont d’anciens dieux anglais, devenu palais pour Ethelulfe et forteresse pour saint Edouard, puis élevé à la dignité de prison en 1199 par Jean sans Terre, c’était là la geôle de Southwark. Cette geôle, d’abord traversée par une rue, comme Chenonceaux l’est par une rivière, avait été pendant un siècle ou deux une *gate*, c’est-à-dire une porte de faubourg; puis on avait muré le passage. Il reste en Angleterre quelques prisons de ce genre; ainsi, à Londres, Newgate; à Cantorbéry, Westgate; à Edimbourg, Canongate. En France la Bastille a d’abord été une porte.

Presque toutes les geôles d’Angleterre offraient le même aspect, grand mur au dehors, au dedans une ruche de cachots. Rien de funèbre comme ces gothiques prisons où l’araignée et la justice tendaient leurs toiles, et où John Howard, ce rayon, n’avait pas encore pénétré. Toutes, comme l’antique géhenne de Bruxelles, eussent pu être appelées Treurenberg, *maison des pleurs*.

On éprouvait, en présence de ces constructions inclémentes et sauvages, la même angoisse que ressentaient les navigateurs antiques devant les enfers d’esclaves dont parle Plaute, îles ferricrépitantes, *ferricrepiditae insulae,* lorsqu’ils passaient assez près pour entendre le bruit des chaînes.

La geôle de Southwark, ancien lieu d’exorcismes et de tourments, avait d abord eu pour spécialité les sorciers, ainsi que l’indiquaient ces deux vers gravés sur une pierre fruste au-dessus du guichet:

Sunt arreptitii vexati doemone multo.
Est energumenus quem doemon possidet unus.

Dans le démoniaque un enfer se démène. Avec un simple diable, on n’est qu’énergumène.

Vers qui fixent la nuance délicate entre le démoniaque et l’énergumène.

Au-dessus de cette inscription était clouée à plat contre le mur, signe de haute justice, une échelle de pierre, laquelle avait ét de bois jadis, mais changée en pierre par l’enfouissement dans la terre pétrifiante du lieu nommé Aspley-Gowis, près l’abbaye de Woburn.

La prison de Southwark, aujourd’hui démolie, donnait sur deux rues, auxquelles, comme *gate*, elle avait autrefois servi de communication, et avait deux portes; sur la grande rue, la porte d’apparat, destinée aux autorités, et, sur la ruette, la porte de souffrance, destinée au reste des vivants. Et aux trépassés aussi; car lorsqu’il mourait un prisonnier dans la geôle, c’était par là que le cadavre sortait. Une libération comme une autre.

La mort, c’est l’élargissement dans l’infini.

C’est par l’entrée de souffrance que Gwynplaine venait d’être introduit dans la prison.

La ruette, nous l’avons dit, n’était autre chose qu’un petit chemin caillouté, serré entre deux murs se faisant face. Il y a en ce genre à Bruxelles le passage dit: *Rue d’une personne*.

Les deux murs étaient inégaux; le haut mur était la prison, le mur bas était le cimetière. Ce mur bas, clôture du pourrissoir mortuaire de la geôle, ne dépassait guère la stature d’un homme.

Il était percé d’une porte, vis-à-vis le guichet de la geôle.

Les morts n’avaient que la peine de traverser la rue. Il suffisait de longer le mur une vingtaine de pas pour entrer au cimetière. Sur la muraille haute était appliquée une échelle patibulaire, en face sur la muraille basse était sculptée une tête de mort. L’un de ces murs n’égayait pas l’autre.

VI

QUELLES MAGISTRATURES IL Y AVAIT SOUS LES PERRUQUES D’AUTREFOIS

Quelqu’un qui, en ce moment-là, eût regardé de l’autre côté de la prison, du côté de la façade, eût aperçu la grande rue de Southwark, et eût pu remarquer, en station devant la porte monumentale et officielle de la geôle, une voiture de voyage, reconnaissable à sa «loge de carrosse» qu’on appellerait aujourd’hui cabriolet. Un cercle de curieux entourait cette voiture. Elle était armoriée, et l’on en avait vu descendre un personnage qui était entré dans la prison; probablement un magistrat, conjecturait la foule; les magistrats en Angleterre étant souvent nobles et ayant presque toujours «droit d’écuage».

En France, blason et robe s’excluaient presque; le duc de Saint-Simon dit en parlant des magistrats: «Les gens de cet état.» En Angleterre un gentilhomme n’était point déshonoré parce qu’il était juge.

Le magistrat ambulant existe en Angleterre; il s’appelle *juge de circuit*, et rien n’était plus simple que de voir dans ce carrosse le véhicule d’un magistrat en tournée. Ce qui était moins simple, c’est que le personnage supposé magistrat était descendu, non de la voiture même, mais de la loge de devant, place qui n’est pas habituellement celle du maître. Autre particularité: on voyageait à cette époque, en Angleterre, de deux façons, par «le carrosse de diligence» à raison d’un shelling tous les cinq milles, et en poste à franc étrier moyennant trois sous par mille et quatre sous au postillon après chaque poste; une voiture de maître, qui se passait la fantaisie de voyager par relais, payait par cheval et par mille autant de shellings que le cavalier courant la poste payait de sous; or la voiture arrêtée devant la geôle de Southwark était attelée de quatre chevaux et avait deux postillons, luxe de prince. Enfin, ce qui achevait d’exciter et de déconcerter les conjectures, cette voiture était minutieusement fermée. Les panneaux pleins étaient levés. Les vitres étaient bouchées avec des volets; toutes les ouvertures par où l’oeil eût pu pénétrer étaient masquées; du dehors on ne pouvait rien voir dedans, et il est probable que du dedans on ne pouvait rien voir dehors. Du reste, il ne semblait pas qu’il y eût quelqu’un dans cette voiture.

Southwark étant dans le Surrey, c’est au shériff du comté de Surrey que ressortissait la prison de Southwark. Ces juridictions distinctes étaient très fréquentes en Angleterre.

Ainsi, par exemple, la Tour de Londres n’était supposée située dans aucun comté; c’est-à-dire que, légalement, elle était en quelque sorte en l’air. La Tour ne reconnaissait d’autre autorité juridique que son constable, qualifié *custos turris*.

La Tour avait sa juridiction, son église, sa cour de justice et son gouvernement à part. L’autorité du *custos*, ou constable, s’étendait hors de Londres sur vingt et un *hamlets*, traduisez: *hameaux*. Comme en Grande-Bretagne les singularités légales se greffent les unes sur les autres, l’office de maître canonnier d’Angleterre relevait de la Tour de Londres.

D’autres habitudes légales semblent plus bizarres encore. Ainsi la cour de l’amirauté anglaise consulte et applique les lois de Rhodes et d’Oleron (île française qui a été anglaise).

Le shériff d’une province était très considérable. Il était toujours écuyer, et quelquefois chevalier. Il était qualifi *spectabilis* dans les vieilles chartes; «homme à regarder».

Titre intermédiaire entre *illustris* et *clarissimus*, moins que le premier, plus que le second. Les shériffs des comtés étaient jadis choisis par le peuple; mais Edouard II, et après lui Henri VI, ayant repris cette nomination pour la couronne, les shériffs étaient devenus une émanation royale. Tous recevaient leur commission de sa majesté, excepté le shériff du Westmoreland qui était héréditaire, et les shériffs de Londres et de Midlesex qui étaient élus par la livery dans le Commonhall. Les shériffs de Galles et de Chester possédaient de certaines prérogatives fiscales. Toutes ces charges subsistent encore en Angleterre, mais, usées peu à peu au frottement des moeurs et des idées, elles n’ont plus la même physionomie qu’autrefois. Le shériff du comté avait la fonction d’escorter et de protéger les «juges itinérants». Comme on a deux bras, il avait deux officiers, son bras droit, le sous-shériff, et son bras gauche, le justicier-quorum. Le justicier-quorum, assisté du bailli de la centaine, qualifié wapentake, appréhendait, interrogeait, et, sous la responsabilité du shériff, emprisonnait, pour être jugés par les juges de circuit, les voleurs, meurtriers, séditieux, vagabonds, et tous gens de félonie. La nuance entre le sous-shériff et le justicier-quorum, dans leur service hiérarchique vis-à-vis du shériff, c’est que le sous-shériff accompagnait, et que le justicier-quorum assistait. Le shériff tenait deux cours, une cour sédentaire et centrale, la County-court, et une cour voyageante, la Shériff-turn. Il représentait ainsi l’unité et l’ubiquité. Il pouvait comme juge se faire aider et renseigner, dans les questions litigieuses, par un sergent de la coiffe, dit *sergens coifae,* qui est un sergent en droit et qui porte, sous la calotte noire, une coiffe de toile blanche de Cambrai. Le shériff désencombrait les maisons de justice; quand il arrivait dans une ville de sa province, il avait le droit d’expédier sommairement les prisonniers, ce qui aboutissait soit à leur renvoi, soit à leur pendaison, et ce qui s’appelait «délivrer la geôle», *goal delivery*. Le shériff présentait le bill de mise en cause aux vingt-quatre jurés d’accusation; s’ils l’approuvaient, ils écrivaient dessus: *billa vera*; s’ils le désapprouvaient, ils écrivaient: *ignoramus*; alors l’accusation était annulée et le shériff avait le privilège de déchirer le bill. Si, pendant la délibération, un jur mourait, ce qui, de droit, acquittait l’accusé et le faisait innocent, le shériff, qui avait eu le privilège d’arrêter l’accusé, avait le privilège de le mettre en liberté. Ce qui faisait singulièrement estimer et craindre le shériff, c’est qu’il avait pour charge d’exécuter *tous les ordres de sa majesté*; latitude redoutable. L’arbitraire se loge dans ces rédactions-là. Les officiers qualifiés verdeors, et les coroners faisaient cortège au shériff, et les clercs du marché lui prêtaient main-forte, et il avait une très belle suite de gens cheval et de livrées. Le shériff, dit Chamberlayne, est «la vie de la Justice, de la Loi et de la Comté».

En Angleterre, une démolition insensible pulvérise et désagrège perpétuellement les lois et les coutumes. De nos jours, insistons-y, ni le shériff, ni le wapentake, ni le justicier-quorum, ne pratiqueraient leurs charges comme ils les pratiquaient en ce temps-là. Il y avait dans l’ancienne Angleterre une certaine confusion de pouvoirs, et les attributions mal définies se résolvaient en empiétements, qui seraient impossibles aujourd’hui. La promiscuité de la police et de la justice a cessé. Les noms sont restés, les fonctions se sont modifiées. Nous croyons même que le mot *wapentake* a changé de sens. Il signifiait une magistrature, maintenant il signifie une division territoriale; il spécifiait le centenier, il spécifie le canton (*centum*).

Du reste, à cette époque, le shériff de comté combinait, avec quelque chose de plus et quelque chose de moins, et condensait dans son autorité, à la fois royale et municipale, les deux magistrats qu’on appelait jadis en

France Lieutenant civil de Paris et Lieutenant de police. Le lieutenant civil de Paris est assez bien qualifié par cette vieille note de police: «M. le lieutenant civil ne hait pas les querelles domestiques, parce que le pillage est toujours pour lui.» (22 juillet 1704.) Quant au lieutenant de police, personnage inquiétant, multiple et vague, il se résume en l'un de ses meilleurs types, René d'Argenson, qui, au dire de Saint-Simon, avait sur son visage les trois juges d'enfer mêlés.

Ces trois juges d'enfer étaient, on l'a vu, à la Bishopsgate de Londres.

VII

FRÉMISSEMENT

Quand Gwynplaine entendit le guichet, grinçant de tous ses verrous, se refermer, il tressaillit. Il lui sembla que cette porte, qui venait de se clore, était la porte de communication de la lumière avec les ténèbres, donnant d'un côté sur le fourmillement terrestre, et de l'autre sur le monde mort, et que maintenant toutes les choses qu'éclaire le soleil étaient derrière lui, qu'il avait franchi la frontière de ce qui est la vie, et qu'il était dehors. Ce fut un profond serrement de coeur. Qu'allait-on faire de lui? Qu'est-ce que tout cela voulait dire?

Où était-il?

Il ne voyait rien autour de lui; il se trouvait dans du noir. La porte en se fermant l'avait fait momentanément aveugle. Le vasistas était fermé comme la porte. Pas de soupirail, pas de lanterne. C'était une précaution des vieux temps. Il était défendu d'éclairer l'abord intérieur des geôles, afin que les nouveaux venus ne pussent faire aucune remarque.

Gwynplaine étendit les mains et toucha le mur à sa droite et à sa gauche; il était dans un couloir. Peu à peu, ce jour de cave qui suinte on ne sait d'où et qui flotte dans les lieux obscurs, et auquel s'ajuste la dilatation des pupilles, lui fit distinguer çà et là un linéament, et le couloir s'ébaucha vaguement devant lui.

Gwynplaine, qui n'avait jamais entrevu les sévérités pénales qu' travers les grossissements d'Ursus, se sentait saisi par une sorte de main énorme et obscure. Être manié par l'inconnu de la loi, c'est effrayant. On est brave en présence de tout, et l'on se déconcerte en présence de la justice. Pourquoi? c'est que la justice de l'homme n'est que crépusculaire, et que le juge s'y meut à tâtons. Gwynplaine se rappelait ce qu'Ursus lui avait dit de la nécessité du silence; il voulait revoir Dea; il y avait dans sa situation on ne sait quoi de discrétionnaire qu'il ne voulait pas irriter. Parfois vouloir éclaircir, c'est empirer.

Pourtant, d'un autre côté, la pesée de cette aventure était si forte qu'il finit par y céder, et qu'il ne put retenir une question.

— Messieurs, demanda-t-il, où me conduisez-vous?

On ne lui répondit pas.

C’était la loi des prises de corps silencieuses, et le texte normand est formel: *A silentiariis ostio proepositis introducti sunt.*

Ce silence glaça Gwynplaine. Jusque-là il s’était cru fort; il se suffisait; se suffire, c’est être puissant. Il avait vécu isolé, s’imaginant qu’être isolé, c’est être inexpugnable. Et voilà que tout à coup il se sentait sous la pression de la hideuse force collective. De quelle façon se débattre avec cet anonyme horrible, la loi? Il défaillait sous l’énigme. Une peur d’une espèce inconnue avait trouvé le défaut de son armure. Et puis il n’avait pas dormi, il n’avait pas mangé; à peine avait-il trempé ses lèvres dans une tasse de thé. Il avait eu toute la nuit une sorte de délire, et il lui restait de la fièvre. Il avait soif, il avait faim peut-être. L’estomac mécontent dérange tout. Depuis la veille, il était assailli d’incidents. Les émotions qui le tourmentaient le soutenaient; sans l’ouragan, la voile serait chiffon. Mais cette faiblesse profonde du haillon que le vent gonfle jusqu’à ce qu’il le déchire, il la sentait en lui. Il sentait venir l’affaissement. Allait-il tomber sans connaissance sur le pavé? Se trouver mal, c’est la ressource de la femme et l’humiliation de l’homme. Il se roidissait, mais il tremblait.

Il avait la sensation de quelqu’un qui perd pied.

VIII

GÉMISSEMENT

On se mit en marche.

On avança dans le couloir.

Aucun greffe préalable. Aucun bureau avec registres. Les prisons de ce temps-là n’étaient point paperassières. Elles se contentaient de se fermer sur vous, souvent sans savoir pourquoi.

Être une prison, et avoir des prisonniers, cela leur suffisait.

Le cortège avait dû s’allonger et prendre la forme du corridor.

On marchait presque un à un; d’abord le wapentake, ensuite Gwynplaine, ensuite le justicier-quorum; puis les gens de police, avançant en bloc et bouchant le corridor derrière Gwynplaine comme un tampon. Le couloir se resserrait; maintenant Gwynplaine touchait le mur de ses deux coudes; la voûte en caillou noyé de ciment avait d’intervalle en intervalle des voussures de granit en saillie faisant étranglement; il fallait baisser le front pour passer; pas de course possible dans ce corridor; la fuite eût ét forcée de marcher lentement; ce boyau faisait des détours; toutes les entrailles sont tortueuses, celles d’une prison comme celles d’un homme; çà et là, tantôt à droite, tantôt à gauche, des coupures dans le mur, carrées et closes de grosses grilles, laissaient apercevoir des escaliers, ceux-ci montant, ceux-l plongeant. On arriva à une porte fermée, elle s’ouvrit, on passa, elle se referma. Puis on rencontra une deuxième porte, qui livra passage, puis une troisième, qui tourna de même sur ses gonds. Ces portes s’ouvraient et se refermaient comme toutes seules. On ne voyait personne. En même temps que le couloir se rétrécissait, la voûte s’abaissait, et l’on en était à ne plus pouvoir marcher que la tête courbée. Le mur suintait; il tombait de la voûte des gouttes d’eau; le dallage qui pavait le corridor avait la viscosité d’un intestin. L’espèce de pâleur diffuse qui tenait lieu de clarté devenait de plus en plus opaque; l’air manquait. Ce qu’il y avait de singulièrement lugubre, c’est que cela descendait.

Il fallait y faire attention pour s’apercevoir qu’on descendait.

Dans les ténèbres, une pente douce, c’est sinistre. Rien n’est redoutable comme les choses obscures auxquelles on arrive par des pentes insensibles.

Descendre, c’est l’entrée dans l’ignoré terrible.

Combien de temps marcha-t-on ainsi? Gwynplaine n’eût pu le dire.

Passées à ce laminoir, l’angoisse, les minutes s’allongent démesurément.

Subitement on fit halte.

L’obscurité était épaisse.

Il y avait un certain élargissement du corridor.

Gwynplaine entendit tout près de lui un bruit dont le gong chinois pourrait seul donner une idée; quelque chose comme un coup frappé sur le diaphragme de l’abîme.

C’était le wapentake qui venait de heurter de son bâton une lame de fer.

Cette lame était une porte.

Non une porte qui tourne, mais une porte qui se lève et s’abat.
A peu près comme une herse.

Il y eut un froissement strident dans une rainure, et Gwynplaine eut subitement devant les yeux un morceau de jour carré.

C’était la lame qui venait de se hisser dans une fente de la voûte de la façon dont se lève le panneau d’une souricière.

Une ouverture s’était faite.

Ce jour n’était pas du jour; c’était de la lueur. Mais, pour la prunelle très dilatée de Gwynplaine, cette clarté pâle et brusque fut d’abord comme le choc d’un éclair.

Il fut quelque temps avant de rien voir. Discerner dans l’éblouissement est aussi difficile que dans la nuit.

Puis, par degrés, sa pupille se proportionna à la lumière comme elle s’était proportionnée à l’obscurité; il finit par distinguer; la clarté, qui lui avait d’abord paru trop vive, s’apaisa dans sa prunelle et se refit livide; il hasarda son regard dans l’ouverture béante devant lui, et ce qu’il aperçut était effroyable.

A ses pieds, une vingtaine de marches, hautes, étroites, frustes, presque à pic, sans rampe à droite ni à gauche, sorte de crête de pierre pareille à un pan de mur biseauté en escalier, entraient et s’enfonçaient dans une cave très creuse. Elles allaient jusqu’en bas.

Cette cave était ronde, à voûte ogive en arc rampant, à cause du défaut de niveau des impostes, dislocation propre à tous les souterrains sur lesquels se sont tassés de très lourds édifices.

L’espèce de coupure tenant lieu de porte que la lame de fer venait de démasquer et à laquelle aboutissait l’escalier était entaillée dans la voûte, de sorte que de cette hauteur l’oeil plongeait dans la cave comme dans un puits.

La cave était vaste, et, si c’était le fond d’un puits, c’était le fond d’un puits cyclopéen. L’idée qu’éveillé l’ancien mot «cul de basse-fosse» ne pouvait s’appliquer à cette cave qu’à la condition de se figurer une fosse à lions ou à tigres.

La cave n’était pas dallée ni pavée. Elle avait pour sol la terre mouillée et froide des lieux profonds.

Au milieu de la cave, quatre colonnes basses et difformes soutenaient un porche lourdement ogival dont les quatre nervures en se rejoignant à l’intérieur du porche dessinaient à peu près le dedans d’une mitre. Ce porche, pareil aux pinacles sous lesquels jadis on mettait des sarcophages, montait jusqu’à la voûte et faisait dans la cave une sorte de chambre centrale, si l’on peut appeler du nom de chambre un compartiment ouvert de tous les côtés, ayant, au lieu de quatre murs, quatre piliers.

A la clef de voûte du porche pendait une lanterne de cuivre, ronde et grillée comme une fenêtre de prison. Cette lanterne jetait autour d’elle, sur les piliers, sur les voûtes et sur le mur circulaire entrevu vaguement en arrière des piliers, une clarté blafarde, coupée de barres d’ombre.

C’était cette clarté qui avait d’abord ébloui Gwynplaine.
Maintenant ce n’était plus pour lui qu’une rougeur presque confuse.

Pas d’autre jour dans cette cave. Ni fenêtre, ni porte, ni soupirail.

Entre les quatre piliers, précisément au-dessous de la lanterne, à l’endroit où il y avait le plus de lumière, était appliquée plat sur le sol une silhouette blanche et terrible.

C’était couché sur le clos. On voyait une tête dont les yeux étaient fermés, un corps dont le torse disparaissait sous on ne sait quel monceau informe, quatre membres se rattachant au torse en croix de saint André et tirés vers les quatre piliers par quatre chaînes liées aux pieds et aux mains. Ces chaînes aboutissaient à un anneau de fer au bas de chaque colonne. Cette forme, immobilisée dans l’atroce posture de l’écartèlememt, avait la lividité glacée du cadavre. C’était nu; c’était un homme.

Gwynplaine, pétrifié, debout au haut de l’escalier, regardait.

Tout à coup il entendit un râle.

Ce cadavre était vivant.

Tout près de ce spectre, dans une des ogives du porche, des deux côtés d’un grand fauteuil à bras exhaussé par une large pierre plate, se tenaient droits deux hommes vêtus de longs suaires noirs, et dans le fauteuil un vieillard enveloppé d'une robe rouge était assis, blême, immobile, sinistre, un bouquet de roses à la main.

Ce bouquet de roses eût renseigné un moins ignorant que Gwynplaine. Le droit de juger en tenant une touffe de fleurs caractérisait le magistrat à la fois royal et municipal. Le lord-maire de Londres juge encore ainsi. Aider les juges juger, c'était la fonction des premières roses de la saison.

Le vieillard assis dans le fauteuil était le shériff du comté de Surrey.

Il avait la rigidité majestueuse d'un romain revêtu de l'augustat.

Le fauteuil était le seul siège qu'il y eût das la cave.

A côté du fauteuil, on voyait une table couverte de papiers et de livres et sur laquelle était posée la longue baguette blanche du shériff.

Les hommes debout à gauche et à droite du shériff étaient deux docteurs, l'un en médecine, l'autre en lois; celui-ci reconnaissable à sa coiffe de sergent en droit sur sa perruque.

Tous deux avaient la robe noire, l'un de juge, l'autre de médecin. Ces deux sortes d'hommes portent le deuil des morts qu'ils font.

Derrière le shériff, au rebord de la marche que faisait la pierre plate, se tenait accroupi avec une écritoire près de lui sur la dalle, un dossier de carton sur ses genoux, et une feuille de parchemin sur le dossier, un greffier en perruque ronde, la plume à la main, dans l'attitude d'un homme prêt à écrire.

Ce greffier était de l'espèce dite *greffier garde-sacs*; ce qu'indiquait une sacoche qui était devant lui à ses pieds. Ces sacoches, jadis employées dans les procès, étaient qualifiées «sacs de justice».

A l'un des piliers était adossé, croisant les bras, un homme tout vêtu de cuir. C'était un valet de bourreau.

Ces hommes semblaient enchantés dans leur posture funèbre autour de l'homme enchaîné. Pas un ne remuait ni ne parlait.

Il y avait sur tout cela un calme monstrueux.

Ce que Gwynplaine voyait là, c'était une cave pénale. Ces caves abondaient en Angleterre. La crypte de la Beauchamp Tower a longtemps servi à cet usage, de même que le souterrain de la Lollard's Prison. Il y avait, et l'on peut voir encore Londres, en ce genre, le lieu bas dit «les vault de Lady Place».

Dans cette dernière chambre, il y a une cheminée en-cas pour la chauffe des fers.

Toutes les prisons du temps du King-John, et la geôle de Southwark en était une, avaient leur cave pénale.

Ce qui va suivre se pratiquait alors fréquemment en Angleterre, et pourrait, à la rigueur, en procédure criminelle, s’y exécuter même aujourd’hui; car toutes ces lois-là existent toujours.
L’Angleterre offre ce curieux spectacle d’un code barbare vivant en bonne intelligence avec la liberté. Le ménage, disons-le, est excellent.

Quelque défiance pourtant ne serait pas hors de propos. Si une crise survenait, un réveil pénal n’est pas impossible. La législation anglaise est un tigre apprivoisé. Elle fait patte de velours, mais elle a toujours ses griffes.

Couper les ongles aux lois, cela est sage.

La loi ignore presque le droit. Il y a d’un côté la pénalité, de l’autre l’humanité. Les philosophes protestent; mais il se passera du temps encore avant que la justice des hommes ait fait sa jonction avec la justice.

Respect de la loi; c’est le mot anglais. En Angleterre on vénère tant les lois qu’on ne les abroge jamais. On se tire de cette vénération en ne les exécutant point. Une vieille loi tombe en désuétude comme une vieille femme; mais on ne tue pas plus l’une de ces vieilles que l’autre. On cesse de les pratiquer, voil tout. Libre à elles de se croire toujours belles et jeunes. On les laisse rêver qu’elles existent. Cette politesse s’appelle respect.

La coutume normande est bien ridée; cela n’empêche pas plus d’un juge anglais de lui faire encore les yeux doux. On conserve amoureusement une antiquaille atroce, si elle est normande. Quoi de plus féroce que la potence? En 1867 on a condamné un homme à être coupé en quatre quartiers qui seraient offerts à une femme, la reine.

Le fénian Burke, mai 1867.

Du reste, la torture n’a jamais existé en Angleterre. C’est l’histoire qui le dit. L’aplomb de l’histoire est beau.

Mathieu de Westminster prend acte de ce que «la loi saxonne, fort clémente et débonnaire», ne punissait pas de mort les criminels, et il ajoute: «On se bornait à leur couper le nez, à leur crever les yeux, et à leur arracher les parties qui distinguent le sexe.» Seulement!

Gwynplaine, hagard au haut de l’escalier, commençait à trembler de tous ses membres. Il avait toutes sortes de frissons. Il cherchait à se rappeler quel crime il pouvait avoir commis. Au silence du wapentake venait de succéder la vision d’un supplice.

C’était un pas de fait, mais un pas tragique. Il voyait s’obscurcir de plus en plus la sombre énigme légale sous laquelle il se sentait pris.

La forme humaine couchée à terre râla une deuxième fois.

Gwynplaine eut l’impression qu’on lui poussait doucement l’épaule.

Cela venait du wapentake.

Gwynplaine comprit qu’il fallait descendre.

Il obéit.

Il s’enfonça de marche en marche dans l’escalier. Les degrés avaient un plat-bord très mince, et huit ou neuf pouces de haut.

Avec cela pas de rampe. On ne pouvait descendre qu’avec précaution.

Derrière Gwynplaine descendait, le suivant à la distance de deux degrés, le wapentake, tenant droit l’iron-weapon, et derrière le wapentake descendait, à la même distance, le justicier-quorum.

Gwynplaine en descendant ces marches sentait on ne sait quel engloutissement de l’espérance. C’était une sorte de mort pas pas. Chaque degré franchi éteignait en lui de la lumière. Il arriva, de plus en plus pâlissant, au bas de l’escalier.

L’espèce de larve terrassée et enchaînée aux quatre piliers continuait de râler.

Une voix dans la pénombre dit:

— Approchez.

C’était le shériff qui s’adressait à Gwynplaine.

Gwynplaine fit un pas.

— Plus près, dit la voix.

Gwynplaine fit encore un pas.

— Tout près, reprit le shériff.

Le justicier-quorum murmura à l’oreille de Gwynplaine, si gravement que ce chuchotement était solennel:

— Vous êtes devant le shériff du comté de Surrey.

Gwynplaine avança jusqu’au supplicié qu’il voyait étendu au centre de la cave. Le wapentake et le justicier-quorum restèrent où ils étaient et laissèrent Gwynplaine avancer seul.

Quand Gwynplaine, parvenu jusque sous le porche, vit de près cette chose misérable qu’il n’avait encore aperçue qu’à distance, et qui était un homme vivant, son effroi devint épouvante.

L’homme lié sur le sol était absolument nu, à cela près de ce haillon hideusement pudique qu’on pourrait nommer la feuille de vigne du supplice, et qui était le *succingulum* des romains et le *christipannus* des gothiques, duquel notre vieux jargon gaulois a fait le *cripagne*. Jésus, nu sur la croix, n’avait que ce lambeau.

L’effrayant patient que considérait Gwynplaine semblait un homme de cinquante à soixante ans. Il était chauve. Des poils blancs de barbe lui hérissaient le menton. Il fermait les yeux et ouvrait la bouche. On voyait toutes ses dents. Sa face maigre et osseuse était voisine de la tête de mort. Ses bras et ses jambes, assujettis par les chaînes aux quatre poteaux de pierre, faisaient un X. Il avait sur la poitrine et le ventre une plaque de fer, et sur cette plaque étaient posées en tas cinq ou six grosses pierres. Son râle était tantôt un souffle, tantôt un rugissement.

Le shériff, sans quitter son bouquet de roses, prit sur la table, de la main qu’il avait libre, sa verge blanche et la dressa en disant:

— Obédience à sa majesté.

Puis il reposa la verge sur la table.

Ensuite, avec la lenteur d’un glas, sans un geste, aussi immobile que le patient, le shériff éleva la voix.

Il dit:

— Homme qui êtes ici lié de chaînes, écoutez pour la dernière fois la voix de justice. Vous avez été extrait de votre cachot et amené dans cette geôle. Dûment interpellé et dans les formes voulues, *formaliis verbis pressus*, sans égard aux lectures et communications qui vous ont été faites et qui vous vont être renouvelées, inspiré par un esprit de ténacité mauvaise et perverse, vous vous êtes enfermé dans le silence, et vous avez refusé de répondre au juge. Ce qui est un libertinage détestable, et ce qui constitue, parmi les faits punissables du cashlit, le crime et délit d’oversenesse.

Le sergent de la coiffe debout à droite du shériff interrompit et dit avec une indifférence qui avait on ne sait quoi de funèbre:

— *Overhernessa*, Lois d’Alfred et de Godrun. Chapitre six.

Le shériff reprit:

— La loi est vénérée de tous, excepté des larrons qui infestent les bois où les biches font leurs petits.

Comme une cloche après une cloche, le sergent dit:

— *Qui faciunt vastum in foresta ubi damae solent founinare.*

— Celui qui refuse de répondre au magistrat, dit le shériff, est suspect de tous les vices. Il est réputé capable de tout le mal.

Le sergent intervint:

— *Prodigus, devorator, profusus, salax, ruffianus, ebriosus, luxuriosus, simulator, consumptor patrimonii, elluo, ambro, et gluto.*

— Tous les vices, dit le shériff, supposent tous les crimes. Qui n’avoue rien confesse tout. Celui qui se tait devant les questions du juge est de fait menteur et parricide.

— *Mendax et parricida,* fit le sergent.

Le shériff dit:

— Homme, il n’est point permis de se faire absent par le silence.

Le faux contumace fait une plaie à la loi. Il ressemble Diomède blessant une déesse. La taciturnité devant la justice est une forme de la rébellion. Lèse-justice, c’est lèse-majesté.

Rien de plus haïssable et de plus téméraire. Qui se soustrait l’interrogatoire vole la vérité. La loi y a pourvu. Pour des cas semblables, les anglais ont de tout temps joui du droit de fosse, de fourche et de chaînes.

— *Anglica charta*, année 1088, dit le sergent.

Et, toujours avec la même gravité mécanique, le sergent ajouta:

— *Ferrum, et fossam, et furcas, cum aliis libertalibus.*

Le shériff continua:

— C’est pourquoi, homme, puisque vous n’avez pas voulu vous départir du silence, bien que sain d’esprit et parfaitement informé de ce que vous demande la justice, puisque vous êtes diaboliquement réfractaire, vous avez dû être géhenné, et vous avez été, aux termes des statuts criminels, mis à l’épreuve du tourment dit «la peine forte et dure». Voici ce qui vous a ét fait. La loi exige que je vous en informe authentiquement. Vous avez été amené dans cette basse-fosse, vous avez été dépouillé de vos vêtements, vous avez été couché tout nu à terre sur le dos, vos quatre membres ont été tendus et liés aux quatre colonnes de la loi, une planche de fer vous a été appliquée au ventre, et l’on vous a mis sur le corps autant de pierres que vous en pouvez porter. «Et davantage», dit la loi.

— *Plusque*, affirma le sergent.

Le shériff poursuivit:

— En cette situation, et avant de prolonger l’épreuve, il vous a été fait, par moi shériff du comté de Surrey, sommation itérative de répondre et de parler, et vous avez sataniquement persévér dans le silence, bien qu’étant au pouvoir des gênes, chaînes, ceps, entraves et ferrements.

— *Attachiamenta legalia,* dit le sergent.

— Sur votre refus et endurcissement, dit le shériff, étant équitable que l’obstination de la loi soit égale à l’obstination du criminel, l’épreuve a continué, telle que la commandent les édits et textes. Le premier jour on ne vous a donné ni à boire ni à manger.

— *Hoc est superjejunare*, dit le sergent.

Il y eut un silence. On entendait l’affreuse respiration sifflante de l’homme sous le tas de pierres.

Le sergent en droit compléta son interruption:

— *Adde augmentum abstinentiae ciborum diminutione. Consuetudo brttannica*, article cinq cent quatre.

Ces deux hommes, le shériff et le sergent, alternaient; rien de plus sombre que cette monotonie imperturbable; la voix lugubre répondait à la voix sinistre; on eût dit le prêtre et le diacre du supplice, célébrant la messe féroce de la loi.

Le shériff recommença:

— Le premier jour on ne vous a donné ni à boire ni à manger. Le deuxième jour on vous a donné à manger et pas à boire; on vous a mis entre les dents trois bouchées de pain d’orge. Le troisième jour on vous a donné à boire et pas à manger. On vous a vers dans la bouche, en trois fois et en trois verres, une pinte d’eau prise au ruisseau d’égout de la prison. Le quatrième jour est venu. C’est aujourd’hui. Maintenant, si vous continuez à ne pas répondre, vous serez laissé là jusqu’à ce que vous mouriez.
Ainsi le veut justice.

Le sergent, toujours à sa réplique, approuva:

— *Mors rei homagium est bonae legi.*

— Et tandis que vous vous sentirez trépasser lamentablement, repartit le shériff, nul ne vous assistera, quand même le sang vous sortirait de la gorge, de la barbe et des aisselles, et de toutes les ouvertures du corps depuis la bouche jusqu’aux reins.

— *A throtebolla*, dit le sergent, *et pabus et subhircis, et a grugno usque ad crupponum*.

Le shériff continua:

— Homme, faites attention. Car les suites vous regardent. Si vous renoncez à votre silence exécrable, et si vous avouez, vous ne serez que pendu, et vous aurez droit au meldefeoh qui est une somme d’argent.

— *Damnum confitens*, dit le sergent, *habeat le meldefeoh*.
Leges Inae, chapitre vingt.

— Laquelle somme, insista le shériff, vous sera payée en doitkins, suskins et galihalpens, seul cas où cette monnaie puisse être employée, aux termes du statut d'abolition, au troisième de Henri cinquième, et aurez le droit et jouissance de *scortum ante mortem,* et serez ensuite étranglé au gibet. Tels sont les avantages de l'aveu. Vous plaît-il répondre à justice?

Le shériff se tut et attendit. Le patient demeura sans mouvement.

Le shériff reprit:

— Homme, le silence est un refuge où il y a plus de risque que de salut. L'opiniâtreté est damnable et scélérate. Qui se tait devant justice est félon à la couronne. Ne persistez point dans cette désobéissance non filiale. Songez à sa majesté. Ne résistez point à notre gracieuse reine. Quand je vous parle, répondez-lui. Soyez loyal sujet.

Le patient râla.

Le shériff repartit:

— Donc, après les soixante-douze premières heures de l'épreuve, nous voici au quatrième jour. Homme, c'est le jour décisif.

C'est au quatrième jour que la loi fixe la confrontation.

— *Quarta die, frontem ad frontem adduce,* grommela le sergent.

— La sagesse de la loi, reprit le shériff, a choisi cette heure extrême, afin d'avoir ce que nos ancêtres appelaient «le jugement par le froid mortel», attendu que c'est le moment où les hommes sont crus sur leur oui et sur leur non.

Le sergent en droit reprit:

— *Judicium pro frodmortell, quod homines credensi sint per suum ya et per suum na*. Charte du roi Adelstan. Tome premier, page cent soixante-treize.

Il y eut un instant d'attente, puis le shériff inclina vers le patient sa face sévère.

— Homme qui êtes là couché à terre...

Et il fit une pause.

— Homme, cria-t-il, m'entendez-vous?

L'homme ne bougea pas.

— Au nom de la loi, dit le shériff, ouvrez les yeux.

Les paupières de l'homme restèrent closes.

Le shériff se tourna vers le médecin debout à sa gauche.

— Docteur, donnez votre diagnostic.

— *Probe, da diagnosticum*, dit le sergent.

Le médecin descendit de la dalle avec la raideur magistrale, s’approcha de l’homme, se pencha, mit son oreille près de la bouche du patient, lui tâta le pouls au poignet, à l’aisselle et à la cuisse, et se redressa.

— Eh bien? dit le shériff.

— Il entend encore, dit le médecin.

— Voit-il? demanda le shériff.

Le médecin répondit:

— Il peut voir.

Sur un signe du shériff, le justicier-quorum et le wapentake s’avancèrent. Le wapentake se plaça près de la tête du patient; le justicier-quorum s’arrêta derrière Gwynplaine.

Le médecin recula d’un pas entre les piliers.

Alors le shériff, élevant le bouquet de roses comme un prêtre son goupillon, interpella le patient d’une voix haute, et devint formidable:

— O misérable, parle! la loi te supplie avant de t’exterminer. Tu veux sembler muet, songe à la tombe qui est muette; tu veux paraître sourd, songe à la damnation qui est sourde. Pense à la mort qui est pire que toi. Réfléchis, tu vas être abandonné dans ce cachot. Écoute, mon semblable, car je suis un homme! Écoute, mon frère, car je suis un chrétien! Écoute, mon fils, car je suis un vieillard! Prends garde à moi, car je suis le maître de ta souffrance, et je vais tout à l’heure être horrible. L’horreur de la loi fait la majesté du juge. Songe que moi-même je tremble devant moi. Mon propre pouvoir me consterne. Ne me pousse pas à bout. Je me sens plein de la sainte méchanceté du châtiment. Aie donc, ô infortuné, la salutaire et honnête crainte de la justice, et obéis-moi. L’heure de la confrontation est venue et tu dois répondre. Ne t’obstine point dans la résistance. N’entre pas dans l’irrévocable. Pense que l’achèvement est mon droit. Cadavre commencé, écoute! A moins qu’il ne te plaise expirer ici pendant des heures, des jours et des semaines, et agoniser longtemps d’une épouvantable agonie affamée et fécale, sous le poids de ces pierres, seul dans ce souterrain, délaissé, oublié, aboli, donné à manger aux rats et aux belettes, mordu par les bêtes des ténèbres, tandis qu’on ira et viendra, et qu’on achètera et qu’on vendra, et que les voitures rouleront dans la rue au-dessus de ta tête; à moins qu’il ne te convienne de râler sans rémission au fond de ce désespoir, grinçant, pleurant, blasphémant, sans un médecin pour apaiser tes plaies, sans un prêtre pour offrir le verre d’eau divin à ton âme; oh! à moins que tu ne veuilles sentir lentement éclore à tes lèvres l’écume affreuse du sépulcre, oh! je t'adjure et te conjure, entends-moi! je t'appelle à ton propre secours, aie pitié de toi-même, fais ce qui t'est demandé, cède la justice, obéis, tourne la tête, ouvre les yeux, et dis si tu reconnais cet homme!

Le patient ne tourna pas la tête et n'ouvrit pas les yeux.

Le shériff jeta un coup d'oeil tour à tour au justicier-quorum et au wapentake.

Le justicier-quorum ôta à Gwynplaine son chapeau et son manteau, le prit par les épaules et lui fit faire face à la lumière du côté de l'homme enchaîné. Le visage de Gwynplaine se détacha dans toute cette ombre, avec son relief étrange, pleinement éclairé.

En même temps le wapentake se courba, saisit par les tempes entre ses deux mains la tête du patient, tourna cette tête inerte vers Gwynplaine, et de ses deux pouces et de ses deux index écarta les paupières fermées. Les yeux farouches de l'homme apparurent.

Le patient vit Gwynplaine.

Alors, soulevant lui-même sa tête et ouvrant ses paupières toutes grandes, il le regarda.

Il tressaillit autant qu'on peut tressaillir quand on a une montagne sur la poitrine, et il cria:

— C'est lui! oui! c'est lui!

Et, terrible, il éclata de rire.

— C'est lui! répéta-t-il.

Puis il laissa retomber sa tête sur le sol, et il referma les yeux.

— Greffier, écrivez, dit le shériff.

Gwynplaine, quoique terrifié, avait fait jusqu'à ce moment-l peu près bonne contenance. Le cri du patient: *C'est lui!* le bouleversa. Ce: *Greffier, écrivez,* la glaça. Il lui sembla comprendre qu'un scélérat l'entraînait dans sa destinée, sans que lui, Gwynplaine, pût deviner pourquoi, et que l'inintelligible aveu de cet homme se fermait sur lui comme la charnière d'un carcan. Il se figura cet homme et lui attachés au même pilori deux poteaux jumeaux. Gwynplaine perdit pied dans cette épouvante, et se débattit. Il se mit à balbutier des bégaiements incohérents, avec le trouble profond de l'innocence, et, frémissant, effaré, éperdu, il jeta au hasard les premiers cris qui lui vinrent et toutes ces paroles de l'angoisse qui ont l'air de projectiles insensés.

— Ce n’est pas vrai. Ce n’est pas moi. Je ne connais pas cet homme. Il ne peut pas me connaître, puisque je ne le connais pas. J’ai ma représentation de ce soir qui m’attend. Qu’est-ce qu’on me veut? Je demande ma liberté. Ce n’est pas tout ça.

Pourquoi m’a-t-on amené dans cette cave? Alors il n’y a plus de lois. Dites tout de suite qu’il n’y a plus de lois. Monsieur le juge, je répète que ce n’est pas moi. Je suis innocent de tout ce qu’on peut dire. Je le sais bien, moi. Je veux m’en aller.

Cela n’est pas juste. Il n’y a rien entre cet homme et moi. On peut s’informer. Ma vie n’est pas une chose cachée. On est venu me prendre comme un voleur. Pourquoi est-on venu comme cela?

Cet homme-là, est-ce que je sais ce que c’est? Je suis un garçon ambulant qui joue des farces dans les foires et les marchés. Je suis l’Homme qui Rit. Il y a assez de monde qui sont venus me voir. Nous sommes dans le Tarrinzeau-field. Voilà quinze ans que je fais mon état honnêtement. J’ai vingt-cinq ans. Je loge à l’inn Tadcaster. Je m’appelle Gwynplaine. Faites-moi la grâce de me faire mettre hors d’ici, monsieur le juge. Il ne faut pas abuser de la petitesse des malheureux. Ayez compassion d’un homme qui n’a rien fait, et qui est sans protection et sans défense. Vous avez devant vous un pauvre saltimbanque.

— J’ai devant moi, dit le shériff, lord Fermain Clancharlie, baron Clancharlie et Hunkerville, marquis de Corleone en Sicile, pair d’Angleterre.

Et se levant, et montrant son fauteuil à Gwynplaine, le shériff ajouta:

— Milord, que votre seigneurie daigne s’asseoir.

LIVRE CINQUIÈME

LA MER ET LE SORT REMUENT SOUS LE MÊME SOUFFLE

I

SOLIDITÉ DES CHOSES FRAGILES

La destinée nous tend parfois un verre de folie à boire. Une main sort du nuage et nous offre brusquement la coupe sombre o est l’ivresse inconnue.

Gwynplaine ne comprit pas.

Il regarda derrière lui pour voir à qui l’on parlait,

Le son trop aigu n’est plus perceptible à l’oreille; l’émotion trop aiguë n’est plus perceptible à l’intelligence. Il y a une limite pour comprendre comme pour entendre.

Le wapentake et le justicier-quorum s’approchèrent de Gwynplaine et le prirent sous le bras, et il sentit qu’on l’asseyait dans le fauteuil d’où le shériff s’était levé.

Il se laissa faire, sans s’expliquer comment cela se pouvait.

Quand Gwynplaine fut assis, le justicier-quorum et le wapentake reculèrent de quelques pas et se tinrent droits et immobiles en arrière du fauteuil.

Alors le shériff posa son bouquet de roses sur la dalle, mit des lunettes que lui présenta le greffier, tira de dessous les dossiers qui encombraient la table une feuille de parchemin tachée, jaunie, verdie, rongée et cassée par places, qui semblait avoir été pliée à plis très étroits, et dont un côté était couvert d’écriture, et, debout sous la lumière de la lanterne, rapprochant de ses yeux cette feuille, de sa voix la plus solennelle, il lut ceci:

«Au nom du Père, du Fils et du Saint-Esprit,

«Ce jourd’hui vingt-neuvième de janvier mil six cent quatrevingt-dix de Notre Seigneur,

«A été méchamment abandonné, sur la côte déserte de Portland, dans l’intention de l’y laisser périr de faim, de froid et de solitude, un enfant âgé de dix ans.

«Cet enfant a été vendu à l’âge de deux ans par ordre de sa très gracieuse majesté le roi Jacques deuxième.

«Cet enfant est lord Fermain Clancharlie, fils légitime unique de lord Linnaeus Clancharlie, baron Clancharlie et Hunkerville, marquis de

Corleone en Italie, pair du royaume d’Angleterre, défunt, et d’Ann Bradshaw, son épouse, défunte.

«Cet enfant est héritier des biens et titres de son père. C’est pourquoi il a été vendu, mutilé, défiguré et disparu par la volonté de sa très gracieuse majesté.

«Cet enfant a été élevé et dressé pour être bateleur dans les marchés et foires.

«Il a été vendu à l’âge de deux ans après la mort du seigneur son père, et dix livres sterling ont été données au roi pour l’achat de cet enfant, ainsi que pour diverses concessions, tolérances et immunités.

«Lord Fermain Clancharlie, âgé de deux ans, a été acheté par moi soussigné qui écris ces lignes, et mutilé et défiguré par un flamand de Flandre nommé Hardquanonne, lequel est seul en possession des secrets et procédés du docteur Conquest.

«L’enfant était destiné par nous à être un masque de rire.

Masca ridens.

«A cette intention, Hardquanonne lui a pratiqué l’opération *Bucca fissa usque ad aures*, qui met sur la face un rire éternel.

«L’enfant, par un moyen connu de Hardquanonne seul, ayant ét endormi et fait insensible pendant ce travail, ignore l’opération qu’il a subie.

«Il ignore qu’il est lord Clancharlie.

«Il répond au nom de *Gwynplaine*.

«Cela tient à la bassesse de l’âge et à la petitesse de mémoire qu’il avait quand il a été vendu et acheté, étant à peine âgé de deux ans.

«Hardquanonne est le seul qui sache faire l’opération *Bucca fissa*, et cet enfant est le seul vivant à qui elle ait ét faite.

«Cette opération est unique et singulière à ce point que, même après de longues années, cet enfant, fût-il un vieillard au lieu d’être un enfant, et ses cheveux noirs fussent-ils devenus des cheveux blancs, serait immédiatement reconnu par Hardquanonne.

«A l’heure où nous écrivons ceci, Hardquanonne, lequel sait pertinemment tous ces faits et y a participé comme auteur principal, est détenu dans les prisons de son altesse le prince d’Orange, vulgairement appelé le roi Guillaume III. Hardquanonne a été appréhendé et saisi comme étant de ceux dits les Comprachicos ou Cheylas. Il est enfermé dans le donjon de Chatham.

«C’est en Suisse, près du lac de Genève, entre Lausanne et Vevey, dans la maison même où son père et sa mère étaient morts, que l’enfant nous a été, conformément aux commandements du roi, vendu et livré par le dernier domestique du feu lord Linnaeus, lequel domestique a trépassé peu après comme ses maîtres, de sorte que cette affaire délicate et secrète n’est plus connue à cette heure de personne ici-bas, si ce n’est de Hardquanonne, qui est au cachot dans Chatham, et de nous, qui allons mourir.

«Nous soussignés, avons élevé et gardé huit ans, pour en tirer parti dans notre industrie, le petit seigneur acheté par nous au roi.

«Ce jour d’huy, fuyant l’Angleterre pour ne point partager le mauvais sort de Hardquanonne, nous avons, par timidité et crainte, à cause des inhibitions et fulminations pénales édictées en parlement, abandonné, à la nuit tombante, sur la côte de Portland, ledit enfant Gwynplaine, qui est lord Fermain Clancharlie.

«Or, avons juré le secret au roi, mais pas à Dieu.

«Cette nuit, en mer, assaillis d’une sévère tempête par la volonté de la providence, en plein désespoir et détresse, agenouillés devant celui qui peut sauver nos vies et qui voudra peut-être sauver nos âmes, n’ayant plus rien à attendre des hommes et tout à craindre de Dieu, ayant pour ancre et ressource le repentir de nos actions mauvaises, résignés à mourir, et contents si la justice d’en haut se satisfait, humbles et pénitents et nous frappant la poitrine, faisons cette déclaration et la confions et remettons à la mer furieuse pour qu’elle en use selon le bien à l’obéissance de Dieu. Et que la Très Sainte Vierge nous soit en aide. Ainsi soit-il. Et avons signé.

Le shériff, s’interrompant, dit:

— Voici les signatures. Toutes d’écritures diverses.

Et il se remit à lire:

— «Doctor Gernardus Geestemunde. — Asuncion. — Une croix, et côté: Barbara Fermoy, de l’île Tyrryf, dans les Ebudes. — Gaïzdorra, captal. — Giangirate. — Jacques Quatourze, dit le Narbonnais. — Luc-Pierre Capgaroupe, du bagne de Mahon.

Le shériff, s’arrêtant encore, dit:

— Note écrite de la même main que le texte et que la première signature.

Et il lut:

— «De trois hommes d’équipage, le patron ayant été enlevé par un coup de mer, il ne reste que deux. Et ont signé. — Galdeazun. — Ave-Maria, voleur.

Le shériff, mêlant la lecture et les interruptions, continua:

— Au bas de la feuille est écrit: «En mer, à bord de la *Matutina,* ourque de Biscaye, du golfe de Pasages.

— Cette feuille, ajouta le shériff, est un parchemin de chancellerie qui porte le filigrane du roi Jacques deuxième. En marge de la déclaration, et de la même écriture, il y a cette note:

— «La présente déclaration est écrite par nous au verso de l’ordre royal qui nous a été remis pour notre décharge d’avoir acheté l’enfant. Qu’on retourne la feuille, on verra l’ordre.

Le shériff retourna le parchemin, et l’éleva dans sa main droite en l’exposant à la lumière. On vit une page blanche, si le mot page blanche peut s’appliquer à une telle moisissure, et au milieu de la page trois mots écrits: deux mots latins, *jussu regis*, et une signature, *Jeffreys*.

— *Jussu regis. Jeffreys,* dit le shériff, passant de la voix grave à la voix haute.

Un homme à qui il vient de tomber sur la tête une tuile du palais des rêves, c’était là Gwynplaine.

Il se mit à parler comme on parle dans l’inconscience:

— Gernardus, oui, le docteur. Un homme vieux et triste. J’en avais peur. Gaizdorra, captal, cela veut dire le chef. Il y avait des femmes, Asuncion, et l’autre. Et puis le provençal.
C’était Capgaroupe. Il buvait dans une bouteille plate sur laquelle il y avait un nom écrit en rouge.

— La voici, dit le shériff.

Et il posa sur la table une chose que le greffier venait de tirer du sac de justice.

C’était une gourde à oreillons, revêtue d’osier. Cette bouteille avait visiblement eu des aventures. Elle avait dû séjourner dans l’eau. Des coquillages et des conferves y adhéraient. Elle était incrustée et damasquinée de toutes les rouilles de l’océan.
Le goulot avait un collet de goudron indiquant qu’elle avait ét hermétiquement bouchée. Elle était décachetée et ouverte. On avait toutefois replacé dans le goulot une sorte de tampon de funin goudronné qui avait été le bouchon.

— C’est dans cette bouteille, dit le shériff, qu’avait été enfermée, par les gens qui allaient mourir, la déclaration dont il vient d’être donné lecture. Ce message adressé à la justice lui a été fidèlement remis par la mer.

Le shériff augmenta la majesté de son intonation, et continua:

— De même que la montagne Harrow est excellente au blé et fournit la fine fleur de farine dont on cuit le pain pour la table royale, de même la mer rend à l’Angleterre tous les services qu’elle peut, et, quand un lord se perd, elle le retrouve et le rapporte.

Puis il reprit:

— Sur cette gourde il y a en effet un nom écrit en rouge.

Et haussant la voix, il se tourna vers le patient immobile:

— Votre nom à vous, malfaiteur qui êtes ici. Car telles sont les voies obscures par où la vérité, engloutie dans le gouffre des actions humaines, arrive du fond à la surface.

Le shériff prit la gourde et présenta à la lumière un des côtés de l’épave qui avait été nettoyé, probablement pour les besoins de la justice. On y voyait serpenter dans les entrelacements de l’osier un mince ruban de jonc rouge, devenu noir par endroits, travail de l’eau et du temps. Ce jonc, malgré quelques cassures, traçait distinctement dans l’osier ces douze lettres: Hardquanonne.

Alors le shériff, reprenant ce son de voix particulier qui ne ressemble à rien et qu’on pourrait qualifier l’accent de justice, se tourna vers le patient:

— Hardquanonne! quand, par nous, shériff, cette gourde, sur laquelle est votre nom, vous a été, pour la première fois, montrée, exhibée et présentée, vous l’avez tout d’abord et de bonne grâce reconnue comme vous ayant appartenu; puis, lecture vous ayant été faite, en sa teneur, du parchemin qui y était ployé et enfermé, vous n’avez pas voulu en dire davantage, et, dans l’espoir sans doute que l’enfant perdu ne serait pas retrouvé et que vous échapperiez au châtiment, vous avez refus de répondre. A la suite duquel refus, vous avez été appliqu la peine forte et dure, et deuxième lecture dudit parchemin, o est consignée la déclaration et confession de vos complices, vous a été donnée. Inutilement. Aujourd’hui, qui est le jour quatrième et le jour légalement voulu de la confrontation, ayant été mis en présence de celui qui a été abandonné à Portland le vingt-neuf janvier mil six cent quatrevingt-dix, l’espérance diabolique s’est évanouie en vous, et vous avez rompu le silence et reconnu votre victime...

Le patient ouvrit les yeux, dressa la tète, et d’une voix où il y avait la sonorité étrange de l’agonie, avec on ne sait quel calme mêlé à son râle, prononçant tragiquement sous cet amas de pierres des mots pour chacun desquels il lui fallait soulever l'espèce de couvercle de tombe posé sur lui, il se mit à parler:

— J'ai juré le secret, et je l'ai gardé le plus que j'ai pu. Les hommes sombres sont les hommes fidèles, et il existe une honnêteté dans l'enfer. Aujourd'hui le silence est devenu inutile. Soit. C'est pourquoi je parle. Eh bien, oui. C'est lui. Nous l'avons fait à nous deux le roi; le roi par sa volonté, moi par mon art.

Et, regardant Gwynplaine, il ajouta:

— Maintenant ris à jamais.

Et lui-même il se mit à rire.

Ce second rire, plus farouche encore que le premier, aurait pu être pris pour un sanglot.

Le rire cessa, et l'homme se recoucha. Ses paupières se refermèrent.

Le shériff, qui avait laissé la parole au supplicié, poursuivit:

— De tout quoi il est pris acte.

Il donna au greffier le temps d'écrire, puis il dit:

— Hardquanonne, aux termes de la loi, après confrontation suivie d'effet, après troisième lecture de la déclaration de vos complices, désormais confirmée par votre reconnaissance et confession, après votre aveu itératif, vous allez être dégagé de ces entraves, et remis au bon plaisir de sa majesté pour être pendu comme plagiaire.

— Plagiaire, fit le sergent de la coiffe. C'est-à-dire acheteur et vendeur d'enfants. Loi visigothe, livre sept, titre trois, paragraphe *Usurpaverit*; et Loi salique, titre quarante et un, paragraphe deux; et Loi des Frisons, titre vingt et un, *De Plagio*. Et Alexandre Nequam dit:

Qui pueros vendis, plagiarius est tibi nomen.

Toi qui vends des enfants, ton nom est plagiaire.

Le shériff posa le parchemin sur la table, ôta ses lunettes, ressaisit le bouquet, et dit:

— Fin de la peine forte et dure. Hardquanonne, remerciez sa majesté.

D'un signe, le justicier-quorum mit en mouvement l'homme habill de cuir.

Cet homme, qui était un valet de bourreau, «groom du gibet», disent les vieilles chartes, alla au patient,

lui ôta l'une après l'autre les pierres qu'il avait sur le ventre, enleva la plaque de fer qui laissa voir les côtes déformées du misérable, puis lui défît des poignets et des chevilles les quatre carcans qui le liaient aux piliers.

Le patient, déchargé des pierres et délivré des chaînes, resta plat sur la terre, les yeux fermés, les bras et les jambes écartés, comme un crucifié décloué.

— Hardquanonne, dit le shériff, levez-vous.

Le patient ne remua point.

Le groom du gibet lui prit une main et la lâcha; la main retomba. L'autre main, soulevée, retomba de même. Le valet de bourreau saisit un pied, puis l'autre, les talons revinrent frapper le sol. Les doigts restèrent inertes et les orteils immobiles. Les pieds nus d'un corps gisant ont on ne sait quoi de hérissé.

Le médecin s'approcha, tira d'une poche de sa robe un petit miroir d'acier et le mit devant la bouche béante de Hardquanonne; puis du doigt il lui ouvrit les paupières. Elle ne s'abaissèrent point. Les prunelles vitreuses demeurèrent fixes.

Le médecin se redressa et dit:

— Il est mort.

Et il ajouta:

— Il a ri, cela l'a tué.

— Peu importe, dit le shériff. Après l'aveu, vivre ou mourir n'est plus qu'une formalité.

Puis, désignant Hardquanonne d'un geste de son bouquet de roses, le shériff jeta cet ordre au wapentake:

— Carcasse à emporter d'ici cette nuit.

Le wapentake adhéra d'un hochement de tête.

Et le shériff ajouta:

— Le cimetière de la prison est en face.

Le wapentake fit un nouveau signe d'adhésion.

Le greffier écrivait.

Le shériff, ayant dans sa main gauche le bouquet, prit dans l'autre main sa baguette blanche, se plaça droit devant Gwynplaine toujours assis, lui fit une révérence profonde, puis, autre attitude de solennité, renversa sa tête en arrière, et, regardant Gwynplaine en face, lui dit:

— A vous qui êtes ici présent, nous Philippe Deuzill Parsons, chevalier, shériff du comté de Surrey, assisté d'Aubrie Docminique, écuyer, notre clerc et greffier, et de nos officiers ordinaires, dûment pourvu de commandements directs et spéciaux de sa majesté, en vertu de notre commission, et des droits et devoirs de notre charge, et avec le congé du lord chancelier d’Angleterre, procès-verbaux dressés et actes pris, vu les pièces communiquées par l’amirauté, après vérification des attestations et signatures, après déclarations lues et ouïes, après confrontation faite, toutes les constatations et informations légales étant complétées, épuisées, et menées à bonne et juste fin, nous vous signifions et déclarons, afin qu’il en advienne ce que de droit, que vous êtes Fermain Clancharlie, baron Clancharlie et Hunkerville, marquis de Corleone en Sicile, pair d’Angleterre, et que Dieu garde votre seigneurie.

Et il salua.

Le sergent en droit, le docteur, le justicier-quorum, le wapentake, le greffier, tous les assistants, excepté le bourreau, répétèrent ce salut plus profondément encore, et s’inclinèrent jusqu’à terre devant Gwynplaine.

— Ah çà, cria Gwynplaine, réveillez-moi!

Et il se dressa debout, tout pâle.

— Je viens vous réveiller en effet, dit une voix qu’on n’avait pas encore entendue.

Un homme sortit de derrière un des piliers. Comme personne n’avait pénétré dans la cave depuis que la lame de fer avait livré passage à l’arrivée du cortège de police, il était visible que cet homme était dans cette ombre avant l’entrée de Gwynplaine, qu’il avait un rôle régulier d’observation, et qu’il avait mission et fonction de se tenir là. Cet homme était gros et replet, en perruque de cour et en manteau de voyage, plutôt vieux que jeune, et très correct.

Il salua Gwynplaine avec respect et aisance, avec l’élégance d’un gentleman domestique, et sans gaucherie de magistrat.

— Oui, dit-il, je viens vous réveiller. Depuis vingt-cinq ans, vous dormez. Vous faites un songe, et il faut en sortir. Vous vous croyez Gwynplaine, vous êtes Clancharlie. Vous vous croyez du peuple, vous êtes de la seigneurie. Vous vous croyez au dernier rang, vous êtes au premier. Vous vous croyez histrion, vous êtes sénateur. Vous vous croyez pauvre, vous êtes opulent.
Vous vous croyez petit, vous êtes grand. Réveillez-vous, milord!

Gwynplaine, d’une voix très basse, et où il y avait une certaine terreur, murmura:

— Qu’est-ce que tout cela veut dire?

— Cela veut dire, milord, répondit le gros homme, que je m’appelle Barkilphedro, que’ je suis officier de l’amirauté, que cette épave, la gourde de Hardquanonne, a été trouvée au bord de la mer, qu'elle m'a été apportée pour être décachetée par moi, comme c'est la sujétion et la prérogative de ma charge, que je l'ai ouverte en présence des deux jurés assermentés de l'office Jetson, lesquels sont tous deux membres du parlement, William Blathwaith, pour la ville de Bath, et Thomas Jervoise pour Southampton, que les deux jurés ont décrit et certifié le contenu de la gourde, et signé le procès-verbal d'ouverture, conjointement avec moi, que j'ai fait mon rapport à sa majesté, que, par l'ordre de la reine, toutes les formalités légales nécessaires ont été remplies avec la discrétion que commande une si délicate matière, et que la dernière, la confrontation, vient d'avoir lieu; cela veut dire que vous avez un million de rentes; cela veut dire que vous êtes lord du Royaume-Uni de la Grande-Bretagne, législateur et juge, juge suprême, législateur souverain, vêtu de la pourpre et de l'hermine, égal aux princes, semblable aux empereurs, que vous avez sur la tête la couronne de pair, et que vous allez épouser une duchesse, fille d'un roi.

Sous cette transfiguration croulant sur lui à coups de tonnerre, Gwynplaine s'évanouit.

II

CE QUI ERRE NE SE TROMPE PAS

Toute cette aventure était venue d'un soldat qui avait trouvé une bouteille au bord de la mer.

Racontons le fait.

A tout fait se rattache un engrenage.

Un jour un des quatre canonniers composant la garnison du château de Calshor avait ramassé dans le sable à marée basse une gourde d'osier jetée là par le flux. Cette gourde, toute moisie, était bouchée d'un bouchon goudronné. Le soldat avait porté l'épave au colonel du château, et le colonel l'avait transmise à l'amiral d'Angleterre. L'amiral, c'était l'amirauté; pour les épaves, l'amirauté, c'était Barkilphedro. Barkilphedro avait ouvert et débouché la gourde, et l'avait portée à la reine. La reine avait immédiatement avisé. Deux conseillers considérables avaient ét informés et consultés, le lord-chancelier, qui est, de par la loi, «gardien de la conscience du roi d'Angleterre», et le lord-maréchal, qui est «juge des armes et de la descente de la noblesse». Thomas Howard, duc de Norfolk, pair catholique, qui était héréditairement haut-maréchal d'Angleterre, avait fait dire par son député-comte-maréchal Henri Howard, comte de Bindon, qu'il serait de l'avis du lord-chancelier. Quant au lord-chancelier, c'était William Cowper. Il ne faut point confondre ce chancelier avec son homonyme et son contemporain William Cowper, l'anatomiste commentateur de Bidloo, qui publia en Angleterre le *Traité des muscles* presque au moment o Étienne Abeille publiait en France l'*Histoire des os;* un chirurgien est distinct d'un lord. Lord William Cowper était célèbre pour avoir, à propos de l'affaire de Talbot Yelverton, vicomte Longueville, émis cette sentence: «qu'au respect de la constitution d'Angleterre, la restauration d'un pair importait plus que la restauration d'un roi». La gourde trouvée à Calshor avait éveillé au plus haut point son attention. L'auteur d'une maxime aime les occasions de l'appliquer. C'était un cas de restauration d'un pair. Des recherches avaient été faites.

Gwynplaine, ayant écriteau sur rue, était facile à trouver.

Hardquanonne aussi. Il n'était pas mort. La prison pourrit l'homme, mais le conserve, si garder c'est conserver. Les gens confiés aux bastilles y étaient rarement dérangés. On ne changeait guère plus de cachot qu’on ne change de cercueil.

Hardquanonne était encore dans le donjon de Chatham. On n’eut qu’à mettre la main dessus. On le transféra de Chatham Londres. En même temps on s’informait en Suisse. Les faits furent reconnus exacts. On leva, dans les greffes locaux, Vevey, à Lausanne, l’acte de mariage de lord Linnaeus en exil, l’acte de naissance de l’enfant, les actes de décès du père et de la mère, et l’on en eut «pour servir ce que de besoin» de doubles expéditions, dûment certifiées. Tout cela s’exécuta dans le plus sévère secret, avec ce qu’on appelait alors *la promptitude royale*, et avec le «silence de taupe» recommandé et pratiqué par Bacon, et plus tard érigé en loi par Blackstone, pour les affaires de chancellerie et d’état, et pour les choses qualifiées sénatoriales.

Le *jussu regis* et la signature *Jeffreys* furent vérifiés.

Pour qui a étudié pathologiquement les cas de caprice dits «bon plaisir», ce *jussu regis* est tout simple. Pourquoi Jacques II, qui, ce semble, eût dû cacher de tels actes, en laissait-il, au risque même de compromettre la réussite, des traces écrites?

Cynisme. Indifférence hautaine. Ah! vous croyez qu’il n’y a que les filles d’impudiques! la raison d’état l’est aussi. *Et se cupit ante videri.* Commettre un crime et s’en blasonner, c’est là toute l’histoire. Le roi se tatoue, comme le forçat.

On a intérêt à échapper au gendarme et à l’histoire, on en serait bien fâché, on tient à être connu et reconnu. Voyez mon bras, remarquez ce dessin, un temple de l’amour et un coeur enflamm percé d’une flèche, c’est moi qui suis Lacenaire. *Jussu regis.* C’est moi qui suis Jacques II. On accomplit une mauvaise action, on met sa marque dessus. Se compléter par l’effronterie, se dénoncer soi-même, faire imperdable son méfait, c’est la bravade insolente du malfaiteur. Christine saisit Monaldeschi, le fait confesser et assassiner, et dit: *Je suis reine de Suède chez le roi de France.* Il y a le tyran qui se cache, comme Tibère, et le tyran qui se vante, comme Philippe II. L’un est plus scorpion, l’autre est plus léopard. Jacques II était de cette dernière variété. Il avait, on le sait, le visage ouvert et gai, différent en cela de Philippe II. Philippe était lugubre, Jacques était jovial. On est tout de même féroce. Jacques II était le tigre bonasse. Il avait, comme Philippe II, la tranquillité de ses forfaits. Il était monstre par la grâce de Dieu. Donc il n’avait rien à dissimuler et à atténuer, et ses assassinats étaient de droit divin. Il eût volontiers, lui aussi, laissé derrière lui ses archives de Simancas avec tous ses attentats numérotés, datés, classés, étiquetés et mis en ordre, chacun dans son compartiment, comme les poisons dans l’officine d’un pharmacien. Signer ses crimes, c’est royal.

Toute action commise est une traite tirée sur le grand payeur ignoré. Celle-ci venait d’arriver à échéance avec l’endos sinistre *Jussu regis.*

La reine Anne, point femme d’un côté, en ce qu’elle excellait garder un secret, avait demandé, sur cette grave affaire, au lord-chancelier un rapport confidentiel du genre qualifi «rapport à l’oreille royale». Les rapports de cette sorte ont toujours été usités dans les monarchies. A Vienne, il y avait le *conseiller de l’oreille,* personnage aulique. C’était une ancienne dignité carlovingienne, l’*auricularius* des vieilles chartes palatines. Celui qui parle bas à l’empereur.

William, baron Cowper, chancelier d’Angleterre, que la reine croyait, parce qu’il était myope comme elle et plus qu’elle, avait rédigé un mémoire commençant ainsi: «Deux oiseaux étaient aux ordres de Salomon, une huppe, la hudbud, qui parlait toutes les langues, et un aigle, le simourganka, qui couvrait d’ombre avec ses ailes une caravane de vingt mille hommes. De même, sous une autre forme, la providence», etc. Le lord-chancelier constatait le fait d’un héritier de pairie enlevé et mutilé, puis retrouvé. Il ne blâmait point Jacques II, père de la reine après tout. Il donnait même des raisons. Premièrement, il y a les anciennes maximes monarchiques. *E* senioratu eripimus. In roturagio cadat. Deuxièmement, le droit royal de mutilation existe. Chamberlayne l’a constaté. Corpora et bona nostrorum subjectorum nostra *sunt,* a dit Jacques Ier, de glorieuse et docte mémoire. Il a été crevé les yeux à des ducs de sang royal pour le bien du royaume. Certains princes, trop voisins du trône, ont été utilement étouffés entre deux matelas, ce qui a passé pour apoplexie. Or, étouffer, c’est plus que mutiler. Le roi de Tunis a arraché les yeux à son père, Muley-Assem, et ses ambassadeurs n’en ont pas moins été reçus par l’empereur. Donc le roi peut ordonner une suppression de membre comme une suppression d’état, etc., c’est légal, etc. Mais une légalité ne détruit pas l’autre. «Si le noyé revient sur l’eau et n’est pas mort, c’est Dieu qui retouche l’action du roi. Si l’héritier se retrouve, que la couronne lui soit rendue. Ainsi il fut fait pour lord Alla, roi de Northumbre, qui lui aussi avait ét bateleur. Ainsi il doit être fait pour Gwynplaine, qui lui aussi est roi, c’est-à-dire lord. La bassesse du métier, traversée et subie par force majeure, ne ternit point le blason; témoin Abdolonyme; qui était roi et qui fut jardinier; témoin Joseph, qui était saint et qui fut menuisier; témoin Apollon, qui était dieu et qui fut berger.» Bref, le savant chancelier concluait la réintégration en tous ses biens et dignités de Fermain, lord Clancharlie, faussement appelé Gwynplaine, «à la seule condition qu'il fût confronté avec le malfaiteur Hardquanonne, et reconnu par ledit». Et sur ce, le chancelier, garde constitutionnel de la conscience royale, rassurait cette conscience.

«La vie et les membres des sujets dépendent du roi.
(Chamberlayne, 2e partie, chap. iv, p. 76.)

Le lord-chancelier rappelait, en post-scriptum, que, au cas o Hardquanonne refuserait de répondre, il devait être appliqu «la peine forte et dure», auquel cas, pour atteindre la période dite de *frodmortell* voulue par la charte du roi Adelstan, la confrontation devait avoir lieu le quatrième jour; ce qui a bien un peu l'inconvénient que, si le patient murte le second ou le troisième jour, la confrontation devient difficile; mais la loi doit être exécutée. L'inconvénient de la loi fait partie de la loi.

Du reste, dans l'esprit du lord-chancelier, la reconnaissance de Gwynplaine par Hardquanonne ne faisait aucun doute.

Anne, suffisamment informée de la difformité de Gwynplaine, ne voulant point faire tort à sa soeur, à laquelle avaient ét substitués les biens des Clancharlie, décida avec bonheur que la duchesse Josiane serait épousée par le nouveau lord, c'est-à-dire par Gwynplaine.

La réintégration de lord Fermain Clancharlie était du reste un cas très simple, l'héritier étant légitime et direct. Pour les filiations douteuses ou pour les pairies «in abeyance revendiquées par des collatéraux, la chambre des lords doit être consultée. Ainsi, sans remonter plus haut, elle le fut en 1782 pour la baronnie de Sidney, réclamée par Élisabeth Perry; en 1798, pour la baronnie de Beaumont, réclamée par Thomas Stapleton; en 1803, pour la baronnie de Chandos, réclamée par le révérend Tymewell Brydges; en 1813, pour la pairie-comté de Banbury, réclamée par le lieutenant général Knollys, etc.; mais ici rien de pareil. Aucun litige; une légitimité évidente; un droit clair et certain; il n'y avait point lieu à saisir la chambre, et la reine, assistée du lord-chancelier, suffisait pour reconnaître et admettre le nouveau lord.

Barkilphedro mena tout.

L’affaire, grâce à lui, resta tellement souterraine, le secret fut si hermétiquement gardé, que ni Josiane, ni lord David n’eurent vent du prodigieux fait qui se creusait sous eux.

Josiane, très altière, avait un escarpement qui la rendait aisée à bloquer. Elle s’isolait d’elle-même. Quant à lord David, on l’envoya en mer, sur les côtes de Flandre. Il allait perdre la lordship et ne s’en doutait pas. Notons ici un détail. Il advint qu’à dix lieues du mouillage de la station navale commandée par lord David, un capitaine nommé Halyburton força la flotte française. Le comte de Pembroke, président du conseil, porta sur une proposition de promotion de contre-amiraux ce capitaine Halyburton. Anne raya Halyburton et mit lord David Dirry-Moir à sa place, afin que lord David eût au moins, lorsqu’il apprendrait qu’il n’était plus pair, la consolation d’être contre-amiral.

Anne se sentit contente. Un mari horrible à sa soeur, un beau grade à lord David. Malice et bonté.

Sa majesté allait se donner la comédie. En outre, elle se disait qu’elle réparait un abus de pouvoir de son auguste père, qu’elle restituait un membre à la pairie, qu’elle agissait en grande reine, qu’elle protégeait l’innocence selon la volonté de Dieu, que la providence dans ses saintes et impénétrables voies, etc.

C’est bien doux de faire une action juste, qui est désagréable quelqu’un qu’on n’aime pas.

Du reste, savoir que le futur mari de sa soeur était difforme avait suffi à la reine. De quelle façon ce Gwynplaine était-il difforme, quel genre de laideur était-ce? Barkilphedro n’avait pas tenu à en informer la reine, et Anne n’avait pas daigné s’en enquérir. Profond dédain royal. Qu’importait d’ailleurs? La chambre des lords ne pouvait qu’être reconnaissante. Le lord-chancelier, l’oracle, avait parlé. Restaurer un pair, c’est restaurer toute la pairie. La royauté, en cette occasion, se montrait bonne et respectueuse gardienne du privilège de la pairie. Quel que fût le visage du nouveau lord, un visage n’est pas une objection contre un droit. Anne se dit plus ou moins tout cela, et alla simplement à son but, à ce grand but féminin et royal, se satisfaire.

La reine était alors à Windsor, ce qui mettait une certaine distance entre les intrigues de cour et le public.

Les personnes seules d’absolue nécessité furent dans le secret de ce qui allait se passer.

Quant à Barkilphedro, il fut joyeux, ce qui ajouta à son visage une expression lugubre.

La chose en ce monde qui peut le plus être hideuse, c'est la joie.

Il eut cette volupté de déguster le premier la gourde de Hardquanonne. Il eut l'air peu surpris, l'étonnement étant d'un petit esprit. D'ailleurs, n'est-ce pas? cela lui était bien dû, à lui qui depuis si longtemps faisait faction à la porte du hasard. Puisqu'il attendait, il fallait bien que quelque chose arrivât.

Ce *nil mirari* faisait partie de sa contenance. Au fond, disons-le, il avait été émerveillé. Quelqu'un qui eût pu lui ôter le masque qu'il mettait sur sa conscience devant Dieu même, eût trouvé ceci: Précisément, en cet instant-là, Barkilphedro commençait à être convaincu qu'il lui serait décidément impossible, à lui ennemi intime et infime, de faire une fracture à cette haute existence de la duchesse Josiane. De là un accès frénétique d'animosité latente. Il était parvenu à ce paroxysme qu'on appelle le découragement. D'autant plus furieux qu'il désespérait. Ronger son frein, expression tragique et vraie! un méchant rongeant l'impuissance. Barkilphedro était peut-être au moment de renoncer, non à vouloir du mal à Josiane, mais à lui en faire; non à la rage, mais à la morsure. Pourtant, quelle chute, lâcher prise! garder désormais sa haine dans le fourreau, comme un poignard de musée! Rude humiliation.

Tout à coup, à point nommé, — l'immense aventure universelle se plaît à ces coïncidences, — la gourde de Hardquanonne vient, de vague en vague, se placer entre ses mains. Il y a dans l'inconnu on ne sait quoi d'apprivoisé qui semble être aux ordres du mal.

Barkilphedro, assisté des deux témoins quelconques, jurés indifférents de l'amirauté, débouche la gourde, trouve le parchemin, le déploie, lit... — Qu'on se représente cet épanouissement monstrueux!

Il est étrange de penser que la mer, le vent, les espaces, les flux et les reflux, les orages, les calmes, les souffles, peuvent se donner beaucoup de peine pour arriver à faire le bonheur d'un méchant. Cette complicité avait duré quinze ans. Oeuvre mystérieuse. Pendant ces quinze années, l'océan n'avait pas ét une minute sans y travailler. Les flots s'étaient transmis de l'un à l'autre la bouteille surnageante, les écueils avaient esquivé le choc du verre, aucune fêlure n'avait lézardé la gourde, aucun frottement n'avait usé le bouchon, les algues n'avaient point pourri l'osier, les coquillages n'avaient point rongé le mot *Hardquanonne*, l'eau n'avait pas pénétré dans l'épave, la moisissure n'avait pas dissous le parchemin, l'humidité n'avait

pas effacé l’écriture, que de soins l’abîme avait dû se donner! Et de cette façon, ce que Gernardus avait jeté à l’ombre, l’ombre l’avait remis à Barkilphedro, et le message envoyé à Dieu était parvenu au démon. Il y avait eu abus de confiance dans l’immensité, et l’ironie obscure mêlée aux choses s’était arrangée de telle sorte qu’elle avait compliqué ce triomphe loyal, l’enfant perdu Gwynplaine redevenant lord Clancharlie, d’une victoire venimeuse, qu’elle avait fait méchamment une bonne action, et qu’elle avait mis la justice au service de l’iniquité. Retirer sa victime à Jacques II, c’était donner une proie à Barkilphedro. Relever Gwynplaine, c’était livrer Josiane. Barkilphedro réussissait; et c’était pour cela que pendant tant d’années les vagues, les lames, les rafales, avaient ballotté, secoué, poussé, jeté, tourmenté et respect cette bulle de verre où il y avait tant d’existences mêlées!
c’était pour cela qu’il y avait eu entente cordiale entre les vents, les marées et les tempêtes! La vaste agitation du prodige complaisante pour un misérable! l’infini collaborateur d’un ver de terre! la destinée a de ces volontés sombres.

Barkilphedro eut un éclair d’orgueil titanique. Il se dit que tout cela avait été exécuté à son intention. Il se sentit centre et but.

Il se trompait. Réhabilitons le hasard. Ce n’était point là le vrai sens du fait remarquable dont profitait la haine de Barkilphedro. L’océan se faisant père et mère d’un orphelin, envoyant la tourmente à ses bourreaux, brisant la barque qui a repoussé l’enfant, engloutissant les mains jointes des naufragés, refusant toutes leurs supplications et n’acceptant d’eux que leur repentir, la tempête recevant un dépôt des mains de la mort, le robuste navire où était le forfait remplacé par la fiole fragile où est la réparation, la mer changeant de rôle, comme une panthère qui se ferait nourrice, et se mettant à bercer, non l’enfant, mais sa destinée, pendant qu’il grandit ignorant de tout ce que le gouffre fait pour lui, les vagues, à qui a ét jetée la gourde, veillant sur ce passé dans lequel il y a un avenir, l’ouragan soufflant dessus avec bonté, les courants dirigeant la frêle épave à travers l’insondable itinéraire de l’eau, les ménagements des algues, des houles, des rochers, toute la vaste écume de l’abîme prenant sous sa protection un innocent, l’onde imperturbable comme une conscience, le chaos rétablissant l’ordre, le monde des ténèbres aboutissant à une clarté, toute l’ombre employée à cette sortie d’astre, la vérité; le proscrit consolé dans sa tombe, l’héritier rendu à l’héritage, le crime du roi cassé, la préméditation divine obéie, le petit, le faible, l’abandonné, ayant l’infini pour tuteur; voilà ce que Barkilphedro eût pu voir dans l’événement dont il triomphait; voilà ce qu’il ne vit pas. Il ne se dit point que tout avait ét fait pour Gwynplaine; il se dit que tout avait été fait pour Barkilphedro; et qu’il en valait la peine. Tels sont les satans.

Du reste, pour s’étonner qu’une épave fragile ait pu nager quinze ans sans être avariée, il faudrait peu connaître la profonde douceur de l’océan. Quinze ans, ce n’est rien. Le 4 octobre 1867, dans le Morbihan, entre l’île de Groix, la pointe de la presqu’île de Gavres et le rocher des Errants, des pêcheurs de Port-Louis ont trouvé une amphore romaine du quatrième siècle, couverte d’arabesques par les incrustations de la mer. Cette amphore avait flotté quinze cents ans.

Quelque apparence flegmatique que voulût garder Barkilphedro, sa stupéfaction avait égalé sa joie.

Tout s’offrait; tout était comme préparé. Les tronçons de l’aventure qui allait satisfaire sa haine étaient d’avance épars à sa portée. Il n’y avait qu’à les rapprocher et à faire les soudures. Ajustage amusant à exécuter. Ciselure.

Gwynplaine! il connaissait ce nom. *Masca ridens!* Comme tout le monde, il avait été voir l’Homme qui Rit. Il avait lu l’enseigne-écriteau accrochée à l’inn Tadcaster ainsi qu’on lit une affiche de spectacle qui attire la foule; il l’avait remarquée; il se la rappela sur-le-champ dans les moindres détails, quitte d’ailleurs à vérifier ensuite; cette affiche, dans l’évocation électrique qui se fit en lui, reparut devant son oeil profond et vint se placer à côté du parchemin des naufragés, comme la réponse à côté de la question, comme le mot à côté de l’énigme, et ces lignes: «Ici l’on voit Gwynplaine abandonn l’âge de dix ans, la nuit du 29 janvier 1690, au bord de la mer, à Portland», prirent brusquement sous son regard un resplendissement d’apocalyse. Il eut cette vision, le flamboiement de *Mane Thecel Pharès* sur un boniment de la foire.

C’en était fait de tout cet échafaudage qui était l’existence de Josiane. Écroulement subit. L’enfant perdu était retrouvé. Il y avait un lord Clancharlie. David Dirry-Moir était vidé. La pairie, la richesse, la puissance, le rang, tout cela sortait de lord David et entrait dans Gwynplaine. Tout, châteaux, chasses, forêts, hôtels, palais, domaines, y compris Josiane, était Gwynplaine. Et Josiane, quelle solution! Qui maintenant avait-elle devant elle? Illustre et hautaine, un histrion; belle et précieuse, un monstre. Eût-on jamais espéré cela? La vérit est que Barkilphedro était dans l'enthousiasme. Toutes les combinaisons les plus haineuses peuvent être dépassées par la munificence infernale de l'imprévu. Quand la réalité veut, elle fait des chefs-d'oeuvre. Barkilphedro trouvait bêtes tous ses rêves. Il avait mieux.

Le changement qui allait se faire par lui se fût-il fait contre lui, il ne l'eût pas moins voulu. Il existe de féroces insectes désintéressés qui piquent sachant qu'ils mourront de la piqûre.

Barkilphedro était cette vermine-là.

Mais cette fois, il n'avait pas le mérite du désintéressement.

Lord David Dirry-Moir ne lui devait rien, et lord Fermain Clancharlie allait lui devoir tout. De protégé, Barkilphedro allait devenir protecteur. Et protecteur de qui? d'un pair d'Angleterre. Il aurait un lord à lui! un lord qui serait sa créature! Le premier pli, Barkilphedro comptait bien le lui donner. Et ce lord serait le beau-frère morganatique de la reine! Étant si laid, il plairait à la reine de toute la quantité dont il déplairait à Josiane. Poussé par cette faveur, et en mettant des habits graves et modestes, Barkilphedro pouvait devenir un personnage. Il s'était toujours destiné à l'église.

Il avait une vague envie d'être évêque.

En attendant, il était heureux.

Quel beau succès! et comme toute cette quantité de besogne du hasard était bien faite! Sa vengeance, car il appelait cela sa vengeance, lui était mollement apportée par le flot. Il n'avait pas été vainement embusqué.

L'écueil, c'était lui. L'épave, c'était Josiane. Josiane venait s'échouer sur Barkilphedro! Profonde extase scélérate.

Il était habile à cet art qu'on appelle la suggestion, et qui consiste à faire dans l'esprit des autres une petite incision o l'on met une idée à soi; tout en se tenant à l'écart, et sans avoir l'air de s'en mêler, il s'arrangea de façon à ce que Josiane allât à la baraque Green-Box et vît Gwynplaine. Cela ne pouvait pas nuire. Le saltimbanque vu en sa bassesse, bon ingrédient dans la combinaison. Plus tard, cela assaisonnerait.

Il avait silencieusement tout apprêté d'avance. Ce qu'il voulait, c'était on ne sait quoi de soudain. Le travail qu'il avait exécuté ne pourrait être exprimé que par ces mots étranges: construire un coup de foudre.

Les préliminaires achevés, il avait veillé à ce que toutes les formalités voulues fussent accomplies dans les formes légales.

Le secret n'en avait point souffert, le silence faisant partie de la loi.

La confrontation de Hardquanonne avec Gwynplaine avait eu lieu; Barkilphedro y avait assisté. On vient d’en voir le résultat.

Le même jour, un carrosse de poste de la reine vint brusquement, de la part de sa majesté, chercher lady Josiane à Londres pour la conduire à Windsor où Anne en ce moment passait la saison.

Josiane, pour quelque chose qu’elle avait dans l’esprit, eût bien souhaité désobéir, ou du moins retarder d’un jour son obéissance et remettre ce départ au lendemain, mais la vie de cour ne comporte point ces résistances-là. Elle dut se mettre immédiatement en route, et abandonner sa résidence de Londres, Hunkerville-house, pour sa résidence de Windsor, Corleone-lodge.

La duchesse Josiane avait quitté Londres au moment même où le wapentake se présentait à l’inn Tadcaster pour enlever Gwynplaine et le mener à la cave pénale de Southwark.

Quand elle arriva à Windsor, l’huissier de la verge noire, qui garde la porte de la chambre de présence, l’informa que sa majesté était enfermée avec le lord chancelier, et ne pourrait la recevoir que le lendemain; qu’elle eût en conséquence à se tenir, à Corleone-lodge, à la disposition de sa majesté, et que sa majesté lui enverrait directement ses ordres le lendemain matin son réveil. Josiane rentra chez elle fort dépitée, soupa de mauvaise humeur, eut la migraine, congédia tout le monde, son mousse excepté, puis le congédia lui-même, et se coucha qu’il faisait encore jour.

En arrivant elle avait appris que, ce même lendemain, lord David Dirry-Moir, ayant reçu en mer l’ordre de venir immédiatement prendre les ordres de la reine, était attendu à Windsor.

III

AUCUN HOMME NE PASSERAIT BRUSQUEMENT DE LA SIBÉRIE AU SÉNÉGAL SANS PERDRE CONNAISSANCE. (Humboldt.)

L'évanouissement d'un homme, même le plus ferme et le plus énergique, sous un brusque coup de massue de la fortune, n'a rien qui doive surprendre. Un homme s'assomme par l'imprévu comme un boeuf par le merlin. François d'Albescola, le même qui arrachait aux ports turcs leur chaîne de fer, demeura, quand on le fit pape, un jour entier sans connaissance. Or, du cardinal au pape l'enjambée est moindre que du saltimbanque au pair d'Angleterre.

Rien de violent comme les ruptures d'équilibre.

Quand Gwynplaine revint à lui et rouvrit les yeux, il était nuit.

Gwynplaine était dans un fauteuil au milieu d'une vaste chambre toute tendue de velours pourpre, murs, plafond et plancher. On marchait sur du velours. Près de lui se tenait debout, tête nue, l'homme au gros ventre et au manteau de voyage qui était sorti de derrière un pilier dans la cave de Southwark. Gwynplaine était seul dans cette chambre avec cet homme. De son fauteuil, en étendant le bras, il pouvait toucher deux tables, portant chacune une girandole de six chandelles de cire allumées. Sur l'une de ces tables, il y avait des papiers et une cassette; sur l'autre un en-cas, volaille froide, vin, brandy, servi sur un plateau de vermeil.

Par le vitrage d'une longue fenêtre allant du plancher au plafond, un clair ciel nocturne d'avril faisait entrevoir au dehors un demi-cercle de colonnes autour d'une cour d'honneur fermée d'un portail à trois portes, une fort large et deux basses; la porte cochère, très grande, au milieu; à droite, la porte chevalière, moindre; à gauche, la porte piétonne, petite.

Ces portes étaient fermées de grilles dont les pointes brillaient; une haute sculpture couronnait la porte centrale.

Les colonnes étaient probablement en marbre blanc, ainsi que le pavage de la cour, qui faisait un effet de neige et qui encadrait de sa nappe de lames plates une mosaïque confusément distincte dans l'ombre; cette mosaïque, sans doute, vue le jour, eût offert au regard, avec tous ses émaux et toutes ses couleurs, un gigantesque blason, selon la mode florentine. Des zigzags de balustres montaient et descendaient, indiquant des escaliers de terrasses. Au-dessus de la cour se dressait une immense architecture brumeuse et vague à cause de la nuit. Des intervalles de ciel, pleins d'étoiles, découpaient une silhouette de palais.

On apercevait un toit démesuré, des pignons à volutes, des mansardes à visières comme des casques, des cheminées pareilles des tours, et des entablements couverts de dieux et de déesses immobiles. A travers la colonnade jaillissait dans la pénombre une de ces fontaines de féerie, doucement bruyantes, qui se versent de vasque en vasque, mêlent la pluie à la cascade, ressemblent à une dispersion d'écrin, et font au vent une folle distribution de leurs diamants et de leurs perles comme pour désennuyer les statues qui les entourent. De longues rangées de fenêtres se profilaient, séparées par des panoplies en ronde bosse, et par des bustes sur des piédouches. Sur les acrotères, des trophées et des morions à panaches de pierre alternaient avec les dieux.

Dans la chambre où était Gwynplaine, au fond, en face de la fenêtre, on voyait d'un côté une cheminée aussi haute que la muraille, et de l'autre, sous un dais, un de ces spacieux lits féodaux où l'on monte avec une échelle et où l'on peut se coucher en travers. L'escabeau du lit était à côté. Un rang de fauteuils au bas des murs et un rang de chaises en avant des fauteuils complétaient l'ameublement. Le plafond était de forme tumbon; un grand feu de bois à la française flambait dans la cheminée; à la richesse des flammes et à leurs stries roses et vertes, un connaisseur eût constaté que ce feu était de bois de frêne, très grand luxe; la chambre était si grande que les deux girandoles la laissaient obscure. Çà et là, des portières, baissées et flottantes, indiquaient des communications avec d'autres chambres. Cet ensemble avait l'aspect carré et massif du temps de Jacques Ier, mode vieillie et superbe. Comme le tapis et la tenture de la chambre, le dais, le baldaquin, le lit, l'escabeau, les rideaux, la cheminée, les housses des tables, les fauteuils, les chaises, tout était velours cramoisi. Pas d'or, si ce n'est au plafond. Là, à égale distance des quatre angles, luisait, appliqué à plat, un énorme bouclier rond de métal repoussé, où étincelait un éblouissant relief d'armoiries; dans ces armoiries, sur deux blasons accostés, on distinguait un tortil de baron et une couronne de marquis; était-ce du cuivre doré? était-ce du vermeil? on ne savait. Cela semblait de l'or. Et au centre de ce plafond seigneurial, magnifique ciel obscur, ce flamboyant écusson avait le sombre resplendissement d'un soleil dans de la nuit.

Un homme sauvage dans lequel est amalgamé un homme libre est peu près aussi inquiet dans un palais que dans une prison. Ce lieu superbe était troublant. Toute magnificence dégage de l'effroi. Quel pouvait être l'habitant de cette demeure auguste?
A quel colosse toute cette grandeur appartenait-elle? De quel lion ce palais était-il l'antre? Gwynplaine, encore mal éveillé, avait le coeur serré.

— Où est-ce que je suis? dit-il.

L'homme qui était debout devant lui, répondit:

— Vous êtes dans votre maison, milord.

IV

FASCINATION

II faut du temps pour revenir à la surface.

Gwynplaine avait été jeté au fond de la stupéfaction.

On ne prend pas tout de suite pied dans l’inconnu.

Il y a des déroutes d’idées comme il y a des déroutes d’armées; le ralliement ne se fait point immédiatement.

On se sent en quelque sorte épars. On assiste à une bizarre dissipation de soi-même.

Dieu est le bras, le hasard est la fronde, l’homme est le caillou. Résistez donc, une fois lancé.

Gwynplaine, qu’on nous passe le mot, ricochait d’un étonnement sur l’autre. Après la lettre d’amour de la duchesse, la révélation de la cave de Southwark.

Dans une destinée, quand l’inattendu commence, préparez-vous ceci: coup sur coup. Cette farouche porte une fois ouverte, les surprises s’y précipitent. La brèche faite à votre mur, le pêle-mêle des événement s’y engouffre. L’extraordinaire ne vient pas pour une fois.

L’extraordinaire, c’est une obscurité. Cette obscurité était sur Gwynplaine. Ce qui lui arrivait lui semblait inintelligible. Il percevait tout à travers ce brouillard qu’une commotion profonde laisse dans l’intelligence comme la poussière d’un écroulement.

La secousse avait été de fond en comble. Rien de net ne s’offrait à lui. Pourtant la transparence se rétablit toujours peu à peu. La poussière tombe. D’instant en instant, la densit de l’étonnement décroît. Gwynplaine était comme quelqu’un qui aurait l’oeil ouvert et fixe dans un songe, et qui tâcherait de voir ce qu’il y a dedans. Il décomposait ce nuage, puis le recomposait. Il avait des intermittences d’égarement. Il subissait cette oscillation de l’esprit dans l’imprévu, laquelle, tour à tour, vous pousse du côté où l’on comprend, puis vous ramène du côté où l’on ne comprend plus. A qui n’est-il pas arrivé d’avoir ce balancier dans le cerveau?

Par degré la dilatation se faisait en sa pensée dans les ténèbres de l’incident comme elle s’était faite en sa pupille dans les ténèbres du souterrain de Southwark. Le difficile, c'était de parvenir à mettre un certain espacement entre tant de sensations accumulées. Pour que cette combustion des idées troubles, dite compréhension, puisse s'opérer, il faut de l'air entre les émotions. Ici l'air manquait. L'événement, pour ainsi dire, n'était pas respirable. En entrant dans la terrifiante cave de Southwark, Gwynplaine s'était attendu au carcan du forçat; on lui avait mis sur la tête la couronne de pair. Comment était-ce possible? Il n'y avait point assez de place entre ce que Gwynplaine avait redouté et ce qui lui arrivait, cela s'était succédé trop vite, son effroi se changeait en autre chose trop brusquement pour que ce fût clair. Les deux contrastes étaient trop serrés l'un contre l'autre. Gwynplaine faisait effort pour retirer son esprit de cet étau.

Il se taisait. C'est l'instinct des grandes stupeurs qui sont sur la défensive plus qu'on ne croit. Qui ne dit rien fait face à tout. Un mot qui vous échappe, saisi par l'engrenage inconnu, peut vous tirer tout entier sous on ne sait quelles roues.

L'écrasement, c'est la peur des petits. La foule craint toujours qu'on ne lui mette le pied dessus. Or Gwynplaine avait été de la foule bien longtemps.

Un état singulier de l'inquiétude humaine se traduit par ce mot: voir venir. Gwynplaine était dans cet état. On ne se sent pas encore en équilibre avec une situation qui surgit. On surveille quelque chose qui doit avoir une suite. On est vaguement attentif. On voit venir. Quoi? on ne sait. Qui? on regarde.

L'homme au gros ventre répéta:

— Vous êtes dans votre maison, milord.

Gwynplaine se tâta. Dans les surprises, on regarde, pour s'assurer que les choses existent, puis on se tâte, pour s'assurer qu'on existe soi-même.

C'était bien à lui qu'on parlait; mais lui-même était autre. Il n'avait plus son capingot et son esclavine de cuir. Il avait un gilet de drap d'argent, et un habit de satin qu'en le touchant il sentait brodé; il sentait une grosse bourse pleine dans la poche du gilet. Un large haut-de-chausses de velours recouvrait son étroite culotte collante de clown; il avait des souliers à hauts talons rouges.

De même qu'on l'avait transporté dans ce palais, on lui avait changé ses vêtements.

L'homme reprit:

— Que votre seigneurie daigne se souvenir de ceci: C’est moi qui me nomme Barkilphedro. Je suis clerc de l’amirauté. C’est moi qui ai ouvert la gourde de Hardquanonne et qui en ai fait sortir votre destinée. Ainsi, dans les contes arabes, un pêcheur fait sortir d’une bouteille un géant.

Gwynplaine fixa ses yeux sur le visage souriant qui lui parlait.

Barkilphedro continua:

— Outre ce palais, milord. vous avez Hunkerville-house, qui est plus grand. Vous avez Clancharlie-castle, où est assise votre pairie, et qui est une forteresse du temps d’Édouard le Vieux.

Vous avez dix-neuf baillis à vous, avec leurs villages et leurs paysans. Ce qui met sous votre bannière de lord et de nobleman environ quatrevingt mille vassaux et fiscalins. A Clancharlie, vous êtes juge, juge de tout, des biens et des personnes, et vous tenez votre cour de baron. Le roi n’a de plus que vous que le droit de frapper monnaie. Le roi, que la loi normande qualifie chief-signor, a justice, cour et coin. Coin, c’est monnaie. A cela près, vous êtes roi dans votre seigneurie comme lui dans son royaume. Vous avez droit, comme baron, à un gibet de quatre piliers en Angleterre, et, comme marquis, à une potence de sept poteaux en Sicile; la justice du simple seigneur ayant deux piliers, celle du châtelain trois, et celle du duc huit. Vous êtes qualifié prince dans les anciennes chartres de Northumbre. Vous êtes allié aux vicomtes Valentia en Irlande, qui sont Power, et aux comtes d’Umfraville en Écosse, qui sont Angus. Vous êtes chef de clan comme Campbell, Ardmannach, et Mac-Callummore. Vous avez huit châtellenies, Reculver, Buxton, Hell-Kerters, Homble, Moricambe, Gumdraith, Trenwardraith et d’autres. Vous avez un droit sur les tourbières de Pillinmore et sur les carrières d’albâtre de Trent; de plus vous avez tout le pays de Penneth-chase, et vous avez une montagne avec une ancienne ville qui est dessus. La ville s’appelle Vinecaunton; la montagne s’appelle Moil-enlli. Tout cela vous fait un revenu de quarante mille livres sterling, c’est-à-dire quarante fois les vingt-cinq mille francs de rente dont se contente un français.

Pendant que Barkilphedro parlait, Gwynplaine, dans un crescendo de stupeur, se souvenait. Le souvenir est un engloutissement qu’un mot peut remuer jusqu’au fond. Tous ces noms prononcés par Barkilphedro, Gwynplaine les connaissait. Ils étaient inscrits aux dernières lignes de ces deux placards qui tapissaient la cahute où s’était écoulée son enfance, et, à force d’y avoir laissé machinalement errer ses yeux, il les savait par coeur.

En arrivant, orphelin abandonné, dans la baraque roulante de Weymouth, il y avait trouvé son héritage inventorié qui l'attendait, et le matin, quand le pauvre petit s'éveillait, la première chose qu'épelait son regard insouciant et distrait, c'était sa seigneurie et sa pairie. Détail étrange qui s'ajoutait à toutes ses surprises, pendant quinze ans, rôdant de carrefour en carrefour, clown d'un tréteau nomade, gagnant son pain au jour le jour, ramassant des liards et vivant de miettes, il avait voyagé avec sa fortune affichée sur sa misère.

Barkilphedro toucha de l'index la cassette qui était sur la table:

— Milord, cette cassette contient deux mille guinées que sa gracieuse majesté la reine vous envoie pour vos premiers besoins.

Gwynplaine fit un mouvement.

— Ce sera pour mon père Ursus, dit-il.

— Soit, milord, fit Barkilphedro. Ursus, à l'inn Tadcaster. Le sergent de la coiffe, qui nous a accompagnés jusqu'ici et qui va repartir tout à l'heure, les lui portera. Peut-être irai-je Londres. En ce cas, ce serait moi. Je m'en charge.

— Je les lui porterai moi-même, repartit Gwynplaine.

Barkilphedro cessa de sourire, et dit:

— Impossible.

Il y a une inflexion de voix qui souligne. Barkilphedro eut cet accent. Il s'arrêta comme pour mettre un point après le mot qu'il venait de dire. Puis il continua, avec ce ton respectueux et particulier du valet qui se sent le maître:

— Milord, vous êtes ici à vingt-trois milles de Londres, Corleone-lodge, dans votre résidence de cour, contiguë au château royal de Windsor. Vous y êtes sans que personne le sache. Vous y avez été transporté dans une voiture fermée qui vous attendait à la porte de la geôle de Southwark. Les gens qui vous ont introduit dans ce palais ignorent qui vous êtes, mais me connaissent, et cela suffit. Vous avez pu être amené jusqu'à cet appartement, au moyen d'une clef secrète que j'ai. Il y a dans la maison des personnes endormies, et ce n'est pas l'heure de réveiller les gens. C'est pourquoi nous avons le temps d'une explication, qui sera courte d'ailleurs. Je vais vous la faire.

J'ai commission de sa majesté.

Barkilphedro se mit à feuilleter tout en parlant une liasse de dossiers qui était près de la cassette.

— Milord, voici votre patente de pair. Voici le brevet de votre marquisat sicilien. Voici les parchemins et diplômes de vos huit baronnies avec les sceaux de onze rois, depuis Baldret, roi de Kent, jusqu’à Jacques VI et Ier, roi d’Angleterre et d’Écosse.

Voici vos lettres de préséance. Voici vos baux à rentes, et les titres et descriptions de vos fiefs, alleux, mouvances, pays et domaines. Ce que vous avez au-dessus de votre tête dans ce blason qui est au plafond, ce sont vos deux couronnes, le tortil à perles de baron et le cercle à fleurons de marquis. Ici, côté, dans votre vestiaire, est votre robe de pair de velours rouge à bandes d’hermine. Aujourd’hui même, il y a quelques heures, le lord-chancelier, et le député-comte-maréchal d’Angleterre, informés du résultat de votre confrontation avec le comprachicos Hardquanonne, ont pris les ordres de sa majesté. Sa majesté a signé selon son bon plaisir qui est la même chose que la loi. Toutes les formalités sont remplies. Demain, pas plus tard que demain, vous serez admis à la chambre des lords; on y délibère depuis quelques jours sur un bill présenté par la couronne ayant pour objet d’augmenter de cent mille livres sterling, qui sont deux millions cinq cent mille livres de France, la dotation annuelle du duc de Cumberland, mari de la reine; vous pourrez prendre part à la discussion.

Barkilphedro s’interrompit, respira lentement, et reprit:

— Pourtant rien n’est fait encore. On n’est pas pair d’Angleterre malgré soi. Tout peut s’annuler et disparaître, moins que vous ne compreniez. Un événement qui se dissipe avant d’éclore, cela se voit dans la politique. Milord, le silence cette heure est encore sur vous. La chambre des lords ne sera mise au fait que demain. Le secret de toute votre affaire a ét gardé, par raison d’état, laquelle est d’une conséquence tellement considérable que les personnes graves, seules informées en ce moment de votre existence et de vos droits, les oublieront immédiatement, si la raison d’état leur commande de les oublier.

Ce qui est dans la nuit peut rester dans la nuit. Il est aisé de vous effacer. Cela est d’autant plus facile que vous avez un frère, fils naturel de votre père et d’une femme qui depuis, pendant l’exil de votre père, a été la maîtresse du roi Charles II, ce qui fait que votre frère est bien en cour; or c’est à ce frère, tout bâtard qu’il est, que reviendrait votre pairie.

Voulez-vous cela? je ne le suppose pas. Eh bien, tout dépend de vous. Il faut obéir à la reine. Vous ne quitterez cette résidence que demain, dans une voiture de sa majesté, et pour aller à la chambre des lords. Milord, voulez-vous être pair d'Angleterre, oui ou non? La reine a des vues sur vous. Elle vous destine à une alliance quasi royale. Lord Fermain Clancharlie, ceci est l'instant décisif. Le destin n'ouvre point une porte sans en fermer une autre. Après de certains pas en avant, un pas en arrière n'est plus possible. Qui entre dans la transfiguration a derrière lui un évanouissement. Milord, Gwynplaine est mort. Comprenez-vous?

Gwynplaine eut un tremblement de la tête aux pieds, puis il se remit.

— Oui, dit-il.

Barkilphedro sourit, salua, prit la cassette sous son manteau, et sortit.

V

ON CROIT SE SOUVENIR, ON OUBLIE

Qu’est-ce que ces étranges changements à vue qui se font dans l’âme humaine?

Gwynplaine avait été en même temps enlevé sur un sommet et précipité dans un abîme.

Il avait le vertige.

Le vertige double.

Le vertige de l’ascension et le vertige de la chute.

Mélange fatal.

Il s’était senti monter et ne s’était pas senti tomber.

Voir un nouvel horizon, c’est redoutable.

Une perspective, cela donne des conseils. Pas toujours bons.

Il avait eu devant lui la trouée féerique, piège peut-être, d’un nuage qui se déchire et qui montre le bleu profond.

Si profond qu’il est obscur.

Il était sur la montagne d’où l’on voit les royaumes de la terre.

Montagne d’autant plus terrible qu’elle n’existe pas. Ceux qui sont sur cette cime sont dans un rêve.

La tentation y est gouffre, et si puissante, que l’enfer sur ce sommet espère corrompre le paradis, et que le diable y apporte Dieu.

Fasciner l’éternité, quelle étrange espérance!

Là où Satan tente Jésus, comment un homme lutterait-il?

Des palais, des châteaux, la puissance, l’opulence, toutes les félicités humaines à perte de vue autour de soi, une mappemonde des jouissances étalées à l’horizon, une sorte de géographie radieuse dont on est le centre; mirage périlleux.

Et qu’on se figure le trouble d’une telle vision pas amenée, sans échelons préalables franchis, sans précaution, sans transition.

Un homme qui s’est endormi dans un trou de taupe et qui se réveille sur la pointe du clocher de Strasbourg; c’était l Gwynplaine.

Le vertige est une espèce de lucidité formidable. Surtout celui qui, vous emportant à la fois vers le jour et vers la nuit, se compose de deux tournoiements en sens inverse.

On voit trop, et pas assez.

On voit tout, et rien.

On est ce que l'auteur de ce livre a appelé quelque part «l'aveugle ébloui».

Gwynplaine, resté seul, se mit à marcher à grands pas. Un bouillonnement précède l'explosion.

A travers cette agitation, dans cette impossibilité de se tenir en place, il méditait. Ce bouillonnement était une liquidation.

Il faisait l'appel de ses souvenirs. Chose surprenante qu'on ait toujours si bien écouté ce qu'on croit à peine avoir entendu! la déclaration des naufragés lue par le shériff dans la cave de Southwark lui revenait parfaitement nette et intelligible; il s'en rappelait chaque mot; il revoyait dessous toute son enfance.

Brusquement il s'arrêta, les mains derrière le dos, regardant le plafond, le ciel, n'importe, ce qui est en haut.

— Revanche! dit-il.

Il fut comme celui qui met sa tête hors de l'eau. Il lui sembla qu'il voyait tout, le passé, l'avenir, le présent, dans le saisissement d'une clarté subite.

Ah! cria-t-il, — car il y a des cris au fond de la pensée, — ah!
c'était donc cela! j'étais lord. Tout se découvre. Ah! l'on m'a volé, trahi, perdu, déshérité, abandonné, assassiné! le cadavre de ma destinée a flotté quinze ans sur la mer, et tout coup il a touché la terre, et il s'est dressé debout et vivant!

Je renais. Je nais! Je sentais bien sous mes haillons palpiter autre chose qu'un misérable, et, quand je me tournais du côté des hommes, je sentais bien qu'ils étaient le troupeau, et que je n'étais pas le chien, mais le berger! Pasteurs des peuples, conducteurs d'hommes, guides et maîtres, c'est là ce qu'étaient mes pères; et ce qu'ils étaient, je le suis! Je suis gentilhomme, et j'ai une épée; je suis baron, et j'ai un casque; je suis marquis, et j'ai un panache; je suis pair, et j'ai une couronne. Ah! l'on m'avait pris tout cela! J'étais l'habitant de la lumière, et l'on m'avait fait l'habitant des ténèbres. Ceux qui avaient proscrit le père ont vendu l'enfant. Quand mon père a été mort, ils lui ont retiré de dessous la tête la pierre de l'exil qu'il avait pour oreiller, et ils me l'ont mise au cou, et ils m'ont jeté dans l'égout. Oh! ces bandits qui ont tortur mon enfance, oui, ils remuent et se dressent au plus profond de ma mémoire, oui, je les revois. J'ai été le morceau de chair becqueté sur une tombe par une troupe de corbeaux. J'ai saign et crié sous toutes ces silhouettes horribles. Ah! c'est donc là qu'on m'avait précipité, sous l'écrasement de ceux qui vont et viennent, sous le trépignement de tous, au-dessous du dernier dessous du genre humain, plus bas que le serf, plus bas que le valet, plus bas que le goujat, plus bas que l'esclave, l'endroit où le chaos devient le cloaque, au fond de la disparition! Et c'est de là que je sors! c'est de là que je remonte! c'est de là que je ressuscite! Et me voilà. Revanche!

Il s'assit, se releva, prit sa tête dans ses mains, se remit marcher, et ce monologue d'une tempête continua en lui:

— Où suis-je? sur le sommet! Où est-ce que je viens m'abattre? sur la cime! Ce faîte, la grandeur, ce dôme du monde, la toute-puissance, c'est ma maison. Ce temple en l'air, j'en suis un des dieux! l'inaccessible, j'y loge. Cette hauteur que je regardais d'en bas, et d'où il tombait tant de rayons que j'en fermais les yeux, cette seigneurie inexpugnable, cette forteresse imprenable des heureux, j'y entre. J'y suis. J'en suis. Ah! tour de roue définitif! j'étais en bas, je suis en haut. En haut, à jamais! me voilà lord, j'aurai un manteau d'écarlate, j'aurai des fleurons sur la tête, j'assisterai au couronnement des rois, ils prêteront serment entre mes mains, je jugerai les ministres et les princes, j'existerai. Des profondeurs où l'on m'avait jeté, je rejaillis jusqu'au zénith. J'ai des palais de ville et de campagne, des hôtels, des jardins, des chasses, des forêts, des carrosses, des millions, je donnerai des fêtes, je ferai des lois, j'aurai le choix des bonheurs et des joies, et le vagabond Gwynplaine, qui n'avait pas le droit de prendre une fleur dans l'herbe, pourra cueillir des astres dans le ciel!

Funèbre rentrée de l'ombre dans une âme. Ainsi s'opérait, en ce Gwynplaine qui avait été un héros, et qui, disons-le, n'avait peut-être pas cessé de l'être, le remplacement de la grandeur morale par la grandeur matérielle. Transition lugubre. Effraction d'une vertu par une troupe de démons qui passe. Surprise faite au côté faible de l'homme. Toutes les choses inférieures qu'on appelle supérieures, les ambitions, les volontés louches de l'instinct, les passions, les convoitises, chassées loin de Gwynplaine par l'assainissement du malheur, reprenaient tumultueusement possession de ce généreux coeur. Et à quoi cela avait-il tenu? à la trouvaille d'un parchemin dans une épave charriée par la mer. Le viol d'une conscience par un hasard, cela se voit.

Gwynplaine buvait à pleine gorgée l’orgueil, ce qui lui faisait l’âme obscure. Tel est ce vin tragique.

Cet étourdissement l’envahissait; il faisait plus qu’y consentir, il le savourait. Effet d’une longue soif. Est-on complice de la coupe où l’on perd sa raison? Il avait toujours vaguement désir cela. Il regardait sans cesse du côté des grands; regarder, c’est souhaiter. L’aiglon ne naît pas impunément dans l’aire.

Être lord. Maintenant, à de certains moments, il trouvait cela tout simple.

Peu d’heures s’étaient écoulées, comme le passé d’hier était déj loin!

Gwynplaine avait rencontré l’embuscade du mieux, ennemi du bien.

Malheur à celui dont on dit: A-t-il du bonheur!

On résiste à l’adversité mieux qu’à la prospérité. On se tire de la mauvaise fortune plus entier que de la bonne. Charybde est la misère, mais Scylla est la richesse. Ceux qui se dressaient sous la foudre sont terrassés par l’éblouissement. Toi qui ne t’étonnais pas du précipice, crains d’être emporté sur les légions d’ailes de la nuée et du songe. L’ascension t’élèvera et t’amoindrira. L’apothéose a une sinistre puissance d’abattre.

Se connaître en bonheur, ce n’est pas facile. Le hasard n’est autre chose qu’un déguisement. Rien ne trompe comme ce visage-là. Est-il la Providence? Est-il la Fatalité?

Une clarté peut ne pas être une clarté. Car la lumière est vérité, et une lueur peut être une perfidie. Vous croyez qu’elle éclaire, non, elle incendie.

Il fait nuit; une main pose une chandelle, vil suif devenu étoile, au bord d’une ouverture dans les ténèbres. Le phalène y va.

Dans quelle mesure est-il responsable?

Le regard du feu fascine le phalène de même que le regard du serpent fascine l’oiseau.

Que le phalène et l’oiseau n’aillent point là, cela leur est-il possible? Est-il possible à la feuille de refuser obéissance au vent? Est-il possible à la pierre de refuser obéissance à la gravitation?

Questions matérielles, qui sont aussi des questions morales.

Après la lettre de la duchesse, Gwynplaine s’était redressé. Il y avait en lui de profondes attaches qui avaient résisté. Mais les bourrasques, après avoir épuisé le vent d’un côté de l’horizon, recommencent de l’autre, et la destinée, comme la nature, a ses acharnements. Le premier coup ébranle, le second déracine.

Hélas! comment tombent les chênes?

Ainsi, celui qui, enfant de dix ans, seul sur la falaise de Portland, prêt à livrer bataille, regardait fixement les combattants à qui il allait avoir affaire, la rafale qui emportait le navire où il comptait s'embarquer, le gouffre qui lui dérobait cette planche de salut, le vide béant dont la menace est de reculer, la terre qui lui refusait un abri, le zénith qui lui refusait une étoile, la solitude sans pitié, l'obscurité sans regard, l'océan, le ciel, toutes les violences dans un infini et toutes les énigmes dans l'autre; celui qui n'avait pas tremblé ni défailli devant l'énormité hostile de l'inconnu; celui qui, tout petit, avait tenu tête à la nuit comme l'ancien Hercule avait tenu tête à la mort, celui qui, dans ce conflit démesuré, avait fait ce défi de mettre toutes les chances contre lui en adoptant un enfant, lui enfant, et en s'embarrassant d'un fardeau, lui fatigué et fragile, rendant ainsi plus faciles les morsures à sa faiblesse, et ôtant lui-même les muselières aux monstres de l'ombre embusqués autour de lui; celui qui, belluaire avant l'âge, avait, tout de suite, dès ses premiers pas hors du berceau, pris corps à corps la destinée; celui que sa disproportion avec la lutte n'avait pas empêché de lutter; celui qui, voyant tout à coup se faire autour de lui une occultation effrayante du genre humain, avait accepté cette éclipse et continué superbement sa marche; celui qui avait su avoir froid, avoir soif, avoir faim, vaillamment; celui qui, pygmée par la stature, avait été colosse par l'âme; ce Gwynplaine qui avait vaincu l'immense vent de l'abîme sous sa double forme, tempête et misère, chancelait sous ce souffle, une vanité!

Ainsi, quand elle a épuisé les détresses, les dénûments, les orages, les rugissements, les catastrophes, les agonies, sur un homme resté debout, la Fatalité se met à sourire, et l'homme, brusquement devenu ivre, trébuche.

Le sourire de la Fatalité. S'imagine-t-on rien de plus terrible? C'est la dernière ressource de l'impitoyable essayeur d'âmes qui éprouve les hommes. Le tigre qui est dans le destin fait parfois patte de velours. Préparation redoutable. Douceur hideuse du monstre.

La coïncidence d'un affaiblissement avec un agrandissement, tout homme a pu l'observer en soi. Une croissance soudaine disloque et donne la fièvre.

Gwynplaine avait dans le cerveau le tourbillonnement vertigineux d'une foule de nouveautés, tout le clair-obscur de la métamorphose, on ne sait quelles confrontations étranges, le choc du passé contre l'avenir, deux Gwynplaines, lui-même double; en arrière, un enfant en guenilles, sorti de la nuit, rôdant, grelottant, affamé, faisant rire, en avant, un seigneur éclatant, fastueux, superbe, éblouissant Londres. Il se dépouillait de l'un et s'amalgamait à l'autre. Il sortait du saltimbanque et entrait dans le lord. Changements de peau qui sont parfois des changements d'âme. Par instants cela ressemblait trop au songe.

C'était complexe, mauvais et bon. Il pensait à son père. Chose poignante, un père qui est un inconnu. Il essayait de se le figurer. Il pensait à ce frère dont on venait de lui parler.

Ainsi, une famille! Quoi! une famille, à lui Gwynplaine! Il se perdait dans des échafaudages fantastiques. Il avait des apparitions de magnificences; des solennités inconnues s'en allaient en nuage devant lui; il entendait des fanfares.

— Et puis, disait-il, je serai éloquent.

Et il se représentait une entrée splendide à la chambre des lords. Il arrivait gonflé de choses nouvelles. Que n'avait-il pas à dire? Quelle provision il avait faite! Quel avantage d'être, au milieu d'eux, l'homme qui a vu, touché, subi, souffert, et de pouvoir leur crier: J'ai été près de tout ce dont vous êtes loin! A ces patriciens repus d'illusions, il leur jettera la réalité à la face, et ils trembleront, car il sera vrai, et ils applaudiront, car il sera grand. Il surgira parmi ces tout-puissants, plus puissant qu'eux; il leur apparaîtra comme le porte-flambeau, car il leur montrera la vérité, et comme le porte-glaive, car il leur montrera la justice. Quel triomphe!

Et tout en faisant ces constructions dans son esprit, lucide et trouble à la fois, il avait des mouvements de délire, des accablements dans le premier fauteuil venu, des sortes d'assoupissements, des sursauts. Il allait, venait, regardait le plafond, examinait les couronnes, étudiait vaguement les hiéroglyphes du blason, palpait le velours du mur, remuait les chaises, retournait les parchemins, lisait les noms, épelait les titres, Buxton, Homble, Gumdraith, Hunkerville, Clancharlie, comparait les cires et les cachets, tâtait les tresses de soie des sceaux royaux, s'approchait de la fenêtre, écoutait le jaillissement de la fontaine, constatait les statues, comptait avec une patience de somnambule les colonnes de marbre, et disait: Cela est.

Et il touchait son habit de satin, et il s'interrogeait:

— Est-ce que c'est moi? Oui.

Il était en pleine tempête intérieure.

Dans cette tourmente, sentit-il sa défaillance et sa fatigue?

But-il, mangea-t-il, dormit-il? S'il le fit, ce fut sans le savoir. Dans de certaines situations violentes, les instincts se satisfont comme bon leur semble sans que la pensée s’en mêle.

D’ailleurs sa pensée était moins une pensée qu’une fumée. Au moment où le flamboiement noir de l’éruption se dégorge à travers son puits plein de tourbillons, le cratère a-t-il conscience des troupeaux qui paissent l’herbe au pied de sa montagne?

Les heures passèrent.

L’aube parut et fit le jour. Un rayon blanc pénétra dans la chambre et en même temps entra dans l’esprit de Gwynplaine.

— Et Dea! lui dit la clarté.

LIVRE SIXIÈME

ASPECTS VARIÉS D’URSUS

I

CE QUE DIT LE MISANTHROPE

Après qu’Ursus eut vu Gwynplaine s’enfoncer sous la porte de la geôle de Southwark, il demeura, hagard, dans le recoin où il s’était mis en observation. Il eut longtemps dans l’oreille ce grincement de serrures et de verrous qui semble le hurlement de joie de la prison dévorant un misérable. Il attendit. Quoi? Il épia. Quoi? Ces inexorables portes, une fois fermées, ne se rouvrent pas tout de suite; elles sont ankylosées par leur stagnation dans les ténèbres et elles ont les mouvements difficiles, surtout lorsqu’il s’agit de délivrer; entrer, soit; sortir, c’est différent. Ursus le savait. Mais attendre est une chose qu’on n’est pas libre de cesser à volonté; on attend malgr soi; les actions que nous faisons dégagent une force acquise qui persiste même lorsqu’il n’y a plus d’objet, qui nous possède et nous tient, et qui nous oblige pendant quelque temps à continuer ce qui est désormais sans but. Le guet inutile, posture inepte que nous avons tous eue dans l’occasion, perte de temps que fait machinalement tout homme attentif à une chose disparue. Personne n’échappe à ces fixités-là. On s’obstine avec une sorte d’acharnement distrait. On ne sait pourquoi l’on reste à cet endroit où l’on est, mais on y reste. Ce qu’on a commenc activement, on le continue passivement. Ténacité épuisante d’o l’on sort accablé. Ursus, différent des autres hommes, fut pourtant, comme le premier venu, cloué sur place par cette rêverie mêlée de surveillance où nous plonge un événement qui peut tout sur nous et sur lequel nous ne pouvons rien. Il considérait tour à tour les deux murailles noires, tantôt la basse, tantôt la haute, tantôt la porte où il y avait une échelle de potence, tantôt la porte où il y avait une tête de mort; il était comme pris dans cet étau composé d’une prison et d’un cimetière. Cette rue évitée et impopulaire avait si peu de passants qu’on ne remarquait point Ursus.

Enfin il sortit de l’encoignure quelconque qui l’abritait, espèce de guérite de hasard où il était en vedette, et il s’en alla pas lents. Le jour baissait, tant sa faction avait été longue.

De temps en temps il tournait le cou et regardait l’affreux guichet bas où était entré Gwynplaine. Il avait l’oeil vitreux et stupide. Il arriva au bout de la ruelle, prit une autre rue, puis une autre, retrouvant vaguement l’itinéraire par où il avait passé quelques heures auparavant. Par intervalles il se retournait, comme s’il pouvait encore voir la porte de la prison, quoiqu’il ne fût plus dans la rue où était la geôle. Peu à peu il se rapprochait du Tarrinzeau-field. Les lanes qui avoisinaient le champ de foire étaient des sentiers déserts entre des clôtures de jardins. Il marchait courbé le long des haies et des fossés. Tout à coup il fit halte, et se redressa, et il cria: — Tant mieux!

En même temps il se donna deux coups de poing sur la tête, puis deux coups de poing sur les cuisses, ce qui indique l’homme qui juge les choses comme il faut les juger.

Et il se mit à grommeler entre cuir et chair, par moments avec des éclats de voix:

— C’est bien fait! Ah! le gueux! le brigand! le chenapan! le vaurien! le séditieux! Ce sont ses propos sur le gouvernement qui l’ont mené là. C’est un rebelle. J’avais chez moi un rebelle. J’en suis délivré. J’ai de la chance. Il nous compromettait. Fourré au bagne! Ah! tant mieux! Excellence des lois. Ah! l’ingrat! moi qui l’avais élevé! Donnez-vous donc de la peine! Quel besoin avait-il de parler et de raisonner? Il s’est mêlé des questions d’état! Je vous demande un peu! En maniant des sous, il a déblatéré sur l’impôt, sur les pauvres, sur le peuple, sur ce qui ne le regardait pas! il s’est permis des réflexions sur les pence! il a commenté méchamment et malicieusement le cuivre de la monnaie du royaume! il a insult les liards de sa majesté! un farthing, c’est la même chose que la reine! l’effigie sacrée, morbleu, l’effigie sacrée. A-t-on une reine, oui ou non? respect à son vert-de-gris. Tout se tient dans le gouvernement. Il faut connaître cela. J’ai vécu, moi. Je sais les choses. On me dira: Mais vous renoncez donc la politique? La politique, mes amis, je m’en soucie autant que du poil bourru d’un âne. J’ai reçu un jour un coup de canne d’un baronnet. Je me suis dit: Cela suffit, je comprends la politique. Le peuple n’a qu’un liard, il le donne, la reine le prend, le peuple remercie. Rien de plus simple. Le reste regarde les lords. Leurs seigneuries les lords spirituels et temporels. Ah! Gwynplaine est sous clef! Ah! il est aux galères! c’est juste. C’est équitable, excellent, mérité et légitime. C’est sa faute. Bavarder est défendu. Es-tu un lord, imbécile? Le wapentake l’a saisi, le justicier-quorum l’a emmené, le shériff le tient. Il doit être en ce moment-ci épluché par quelque sergent de la coiffe. Comme ça vous plume les crimes, ces habiles gens-là! Coffré, mon drôle! Tant pis pour lui, tant mieux pour moi! Je suis, ma foi, bien content.

J’avoue ingénument que j’ai de la chance. Quelle extravagance j’avais faite de ramasser ce petit et cette petite! Nous étions si tranquilles auparavant, Homo et moi! Qu’est-ce qu’ils venaient faire dans ma baraque, ces gredins-là? Les ai-je assez couvés quand ils étaient mioches! les ai-je assez traînés avec ma bricole! joli sauvetage! lui sinistrement laid, elle borgne des deux yeux! Privez-vous donc de tout! Ai-je assez tété pour eux les mamelles de la famine! Ça grandit, ça fait l’amour! Des flirtations d’infirmes, c’est là que nous en étions. Le crapaud et la taupe, idylle. J’avais ça dans mon intimité. Tout cela devait finir par la justice. Le crapaud a parlé politique, c’est bon. M’en voilà délivré. Quand le wapentake est venu, j’ai d’abord été bête, on doute toujours du bonheur, j’ai cru que je ne voyais pas ce que je voyais, que c’était impossible, que c’était uu cauchemar, que c’était une farce que me faisait le rêve. Mais non, il n’y a rien de plus réel. C’est plastique.

Gwynplaine est bellement en prison. C’est un coup de la providence. Merci, bonne madame. C’est ce monstre qui, avec le tapage qu’il faisait, a attiré l’attention sur mon établissement, et a dénoncé mon pauvre loup! Parti, le Gwynplaine! Et me voil débarrassé des deux. D’un caillou deux bosses. Car Dea en mourra. Quand elle ne verra plus Gwynplaine — elle le voit, l’idiote! — elle n’aura plus de raison d’être, elle se dira: Qu’est-ce que je fais en ce monde? Et elle partira, elle aussi.

Bon voyage. Au diable tous les deux. Je les ai toujours détestés, ces êtres! Crève, Dea. Ah! que je suis content!

II

CE QU'IL FAIT

Il rejoignit l'inn Tadcaster.

Six heures et demie sonnaient, la demie passé six, comme disent les anglais. C'était un peu avant le crépuscule.

Maître Nicless était sur le pas de sa porte. Sa face consternée n'avait point réussi depuis le matin à se détendre, et l'effarement y était resté figé.

Du plus loin qu'il aperçut Ursus:

— Eh bien? cria-t-il.

— Eh bien quoi?

— Gwynplaine va-t-il revenir? Il serait grand temps. Le public ne tardera pas à arriver. Aurons-nous ce soir la représentation de l'Homme qui Rit?

— L'Homme qui Rit, c'est moi, dit Ursus.

Et il regarda le tavernier avec un ricanement éclatant.

Puis il monta droit au premier, ouvrit la fenêtre voisine de l'enseigne de l'inn, se pencha, allongea le poing, fit une pesée sur l'écriteau de Gwynplaine — l'Homme qui Rit, et sur le panneau affiche de Chaos vaincu, décloua l'un, arracha l'autre, mit ces deux planches sous son bras, et redescendit. Maître Nicless le suivait des yeux.

— Pourquoi décrochez-vous ça?

Ursus partit d'un second éclat de rire.

— Pourquoi riez-vous? reprit l'hôtelier.

— Je rentre dans la vie privée.

Maître Nicless comprit, et donna ordre à son lieutenant, le boy Govicum, d'annoncer à quiconque se présenterait qu'il n'y aurait pas de représentation le soir. Il ôta de la porte la futaille-niche où se faisait la recette, et la rencogna dans un angle de la salle basse.

Un moment après, Ursus montait dans la Green-Box.

Il posa dans un coin les deux écriteaux, et pénétra dans ce qu'il appelait «le pavillon des femmes».

Dea dormait.

Elle était sur son lit, tout habillée et son corps de jupe défait, comme dans les siestes.

Près d'elle, Vinos et Fibi, assises, l'une sur un escabeau, l'autre à terre, songeaient.

Malgré l'heure avancée, elles n'avaient point revêtu leur tricot de déesses, signe de profond découragement. Elles étaient restées empaquetées dans leur guimpe de bure et dans leur robe de grosse toile.

Ursus considéra Dea.

— Elle s'essaie à un plus long sommeil, murmura-t-il.

Il apostropha Fibi et Vinos.

— Vous savez, vous autres. C'est fini la musique. Vous pouvez mettre vos trompettes dans votre tiroir. Vous avez bien fait de ne pas vous harnacher en déités. Vous êtes bien laides comme ceci, mais vous avez bien fait. Gardez vos cotillons de torchon.
Pas de représentation ce soir. Ni demain, ni après-demain, ni après après-demain. Plus de Gwynplaine. Pas plus de Gwynplaine que sur ma patte.

Et il se remit à regarder Dea.

— Quel coup ça va lui donner! Ce sera comme une chandelle qu'on souffle.

Il enfla ses joues.

— Fouhh! — Plus rien.

Il eut un petit rire sec.

— Gwynplaine de moins, c'est tout de moins. Ce sera comme si je perdais Homo. Ce sera pire. Elle sera plus seule qu'une autre.
Les aveugles, ça patauge dans plus de tristesse que nous.

Il alla a la lucarne du fond.

— Comme les jours allongent! on y voit encore à sept heures.
Pourtant allumons le suif.

Il battit le briquet et alluma la lanterne du plafond de la Green-Box.

Il se pencha sur Dea.

— Elle va s'enrhumer. Les femmes, vous lui avez trop délacé son capingot. Il y a le proverbe français:

On est en avril, N'ôte pas un fil.

Il vit briller à terre une épingle, la ramassa et la piqua sur sa manche.
Puis il arpenta la Green-Box en gesticulant.

— Je suis en pleine possession de mes facultés. Je suis lucide, archilucide. Je trouve cet événement très correct, et j'approuve ce qui se

passe. Quand elle va se réveiller, je lui dirai tout net l'incident. La catastrophe ne se fera pas attendre. Plus de Gwynplaine. Bonsoir, Dea. Comme tout ça est bien arrangé!
Gwynplaine dans la prison. Dea au cimetière. Ils vont se faire vis-à-vis. Danse macabre. Deux destinées qui rentrent dans la coulisse. Serrons les costumes. Bouclons la valise. Valise, lisez cercueil. C'était manqué, ces deux créatures-là. Dea sans yeux, Gwynplaine sans visage. Là-haut le bon Dieu rendra la clarté à Dea et la beauté à Gwynplaine. La mort est une mise en ordre. Tout est bien. Fibi, Vinos, accrochez vos tambourins au clou. Vos talents pour le vacarme vont se rouiller, mes belles.
On ne jouera plus, on ne trompettera plus. Chaos vaincu est vaincu. L'Homme qui Rit est flambé. Taratantara est mort.
Cette Dea dort toujours. Elle fait aussi bien. A sa place, je ne me réveillerais pas. Bah! elle sera vite rendormie. C'est tout de suite mort, une mauviette comme ça. Voilà ce que c'est que de s'occuper de politique. Quelle leçon! Et comme les gouvernements ont raison! Gwynplaine au shériff. Dea au fossoyeur. C'est parallèle. Symétrie instructive. J'espère bien que le tavernier a barricadé la porte. Nous allons mourir ce soir entre nous, en famille. Pas moi, ni Homo. Mais Dea.
Moi, je continuerai de faire rouler le berlingot. J'appartiens aux méandres de la vie vagabonde. Je congédierai les deux filles. Je n'en garderai pas même une. J'ai de la tendance être un vieux débauché. Une servante chez un libertin, c'est du pain sur la planche. Je ne veux pas de tentation. Ce n'est plus de mon âge. *Turpe senilis amor.* Je poursuivrai ma route tout seul avec Homo. C'est Homo qui va être étonné! Où est Gwynplaine? où est Dea? Mon vieux camarade, nous revoil ensemble. Par la peste, je suis ravi. Ça m'encombrait, leurs bucoliques. Ah! ce garnement de Gwynplaine qui ne revient même pas! Il nous plante là. C'est bon. Maintenant c'est le tour de Dea. Ce ne sera pas long. J'aime les choses finies. Je ne donnerais pas une chiquenaude sur le bout du nez du diable pour l'empêcher de crever. Crève, entends-tu! Ah! elle se réveille!

Dea ouvrit les paupières; car beaucoup d'aveugles ferment les yeux pour dormir. Son doux visage ignorant avait tout son rayonnement.

— Elle sourit, murmura Ursus, et moi je ris. Ça va bien.

Dea appela.

— Fibi! Vinos! Il doit être l'heure de la représentation. Je crois avoir dormi longtemps. Venez m'habiller.

Ni Fibi, ni Vinos ne bougèrent.

Cependant cet ineffable regard d’aveugle qu’avait Dea venait de rencontrer la prunelle d’Ursus. Il tressaillit.

— Eh bien! cria-t-il, qu’est-ce que vous faites donc? Vinos, Fibi, vous n’entendez pas votre maîtresse? Est-ce que vous êtes sourdes? Vite! la représentation va commencer.

Les deux femmes regardèrent Ursus, stupéfaites.

Ursus vociféra.

— Vous ne voyez pas le public qui entre. Fibi, habille Dea.
Vinos, tambourine.

Obéissance, c’était Fibi. Passive, c’était Vinos. A elles deux elles personnifiaient la soumission. Leur maître Ursus avait toujours été pour elle une énigme. N’être jamais compris est une raison pour être toujours obéi. Elles pensèrent simplement qu’il devenait fou, et exécutèrent l’ordre. Fibi décrocha le costume et Vinos le tambour.

Fibi commença à habiller Dea. Ursus baissa la portière du gynécée et, de derrière le rideau, continua:

— Regarde donc, Gwynplaine! la cour est déjà plus qu’à moiti remplie de multitude. On se bouscule dans les vomitoires.
Quelle foule! que dis-tu de Fibi et de Vinos qui n’avaient pas l’air de s’en apercevoir? que ces femmes bréhaignes sont stupides! qu’on est bête en Egypte! Ne soulève pas la portière.
Sois pudique, Dea s’habille.

Il fit une pause, et tout à coup on entendit cette exclamation:

— Que Dea est belle!

C’était la voix de Gwynplaine. Fibi et Vinos eurent une secousse et se retournèrent. C’était la voix de Gwynplaine, mais dans la bouche d’Ursus.

Ursus, d’un signe, par l’entre-bâillement de la portière, leur fit défense de s’étonner.

Il reprit avec la voix de Gwynplaine:

— Ange!

Puis il répliqua avec la voix d’Ursus:

— Dea, un ange! tu es fou, Gwynplaine. Il n’y a de mammifère volant que la chauve-souris.

Et il ajouta:

— Tiens, Gwynplaine, va détacher Homo. Ce sera plus raisonnable.

Et il descendit l’escalier d’arrière de la Green-Box, très vite, à la façon leste de Gwynplaine. Tapage imitatif que Dea put entendre.

Il avisa dans la cour le boy que toute cette aventure faisait oisif et curieux.

— Tends tes deux mains, lui dit-il tout bas. Et il lui vida dedans une poignée de sous. Govicum fut attendri de cette munificence. Ursus lui chuchota à l’oreille:

— Boy, installe-toi dans la cour, saute, danse, cogne, gueule, braille, siffle, roucoule, hennis, applaudis, trépigne, éclate de rire, casse quelque chose.

Maître Nicless, humilié et dépité de voir les gens venus pour l’Homme qui Rit rebrousser chemin et refluer vers les autres baraques du champ de foire, avait fermé la porte de l’inn; il avait même renoncé à donner à boire ce soir-là, afin d’éviter l’ennui des questions; et, dans le désoeuvrement de la représentation manquée, chandelle au poing, il regardait dans la cour du haut du balcon. Ursus, avec la précaution de mettre sa voix entre parenthèses dans les paumes de ses deux mains ajustées à sa bouche, lui cria:

— Gentleman, faites comme votre boy, glapissez, jappez, hurlez.

Il remonta dans la Green-Box et dit au loup:

— Parle le plus que tu pourras.

Et, haussant la voix:

— Il y a trop de foule. Je crois que nous allons avoir une représentation cahotée.

Cependant Vinos tapait du tambour.

Ursus poursuivit:

— Dea est habillée. On va pouvoir commencer. Je regrette qu’on ait laissé entrer tant de public. Comme ils sont tassés! Mais vois donc, Gwynplaine! y en a-t-il de la tourbe effrénée! je gage que nous ferons notre plus grosse recette aujourd’hui.

Allons, drôlesses, toutes deux à la musique! Arrive ici, Fibi, saisis ton clairon. Bon, Vinos, rosse ton tambour. Flanque-lui une raclée. Fibi, prends une pose de Renommée. Mesdemoiselles, je ne vous trouve pas assez nues comme cela. Otez-moi ces jaquettes. Remplacez la toile par la gaze. Le public aime les formes de la femme. Laissons tonner les moralistes. Un peu d’indécence, morbleu. Soyons voluptueuses. Et ruez-vous dans des mélodies éperdues. Ronflez, cornez, crépitez, fanfarez, tambourinez! Que de monde, mon pauvre Gwynplaine!

Il s'interrompit:

— Gwynplaine, aide-moi. Baissons le panneau.

Cependant il déploya son mouchoir.

— Mais d'abord laisse-moi mugir dans mon haillon.

Et il se moucha énergiquement, ce que doit toujours faire un engastrimythe.

Son mouchoir remis dans sa poche, il retira les clavettes du jeu de poulies qui fit son grincement ordinaire. Le panneau s'abaissa.

— Gwynplaine, il est inutile d'écarter la triveline. Gardons le rideau jusqu'à ce que la représentation commence. Nous ne serions pas chez nous. Vous, venez sur l'avant-scène toutes deux. Musique, mesdemoiselles! Poum! Poum! Poum! La chambrée est bien composée. C'est la lie du peuple. Que de populace, mon Dieu!

Les deux brehaignes, abruties d'obéissance, s'installèrent avec leurs instruments à leur place habituelle aux deux angles du panneau abaisse.

Alors Ursus devint extraordinaire. Ce ne fut plus un homme, ce fut une foule. Force de faire la plénitude avec le vide, il appela à son secours une ventriloquie prodigieuse. Tout l'orchestre de voix humaines et bestiales qu'il avait en lui entra en branle à la fois. Il se fit légion. Quelqu'un qui eût fermé les yeux eût cru être dans une place publique un jour de fête ou un jour d'émeute. Le tourbillon de bégaiements et de clameurs qui sortait d'Ursus chantait, clabaudait, causait, toussait, crachait, éternuait, prenait du tabac, dialoguait, faisait les demandes et les réponses, tout cela à la fois. Les syllabes ébauchées rentraient les unes dans les autres. Dans cette cour où il n'y avait rien, on entendait des hommes, des femmes, des enfants. C'était la confusion claire du brouhaha. A travers ce fracas, serpentaient, comme dans une fumée, des cacophonies étranges, des gloussements d'oiseaux, des jurements de chats, des vagissements d'enfants qui tettent. On distinguait l'enrouement des ivrognes. Le mécontentement des dogues sous les pieds des gens bougonnait. Les voix venaient de loin et de près, d'en haut et d'en bas, du premier plan et du dernier. L'ensemble était une rumeur, le détail était un cri. Ursus cognait du poing, frappait du pied, jetait sa voix tout au fond de la cour, puis la faisait venir de dessous terre. C'était orageux et familier. Il passait du murmure au bruit, du bruit au tumulte, du tumulte à l'ouragan. Il était lui et tous. Soliloque et polyglotte. De même qu'il y a le trompe-l'oeil, il y a le trompe-l'oreille. Ce que Protée faisait pour le regard, Ursus le faisait pour l'ouïe. Rien de merveilleux comme ce fac-similé de la multitude. De temps en temps il écartait la portière du gynécée et regardait Dea. Dea écoutait.

De son côté dans la cour le boy faisait rage.

Vinos et Fibi s'essoufflaient consciencieusement dans les trompettes et se démenaient sur les tambourins. Maître Nicless, spectateur unique, se donnait, comme elles, l'explication tranquille qu'Ursus était fou, ce qui du reste n'était qu'un détail grisâtre ajouté à sa mélancolie. Le brave hôtelier grommelait: Quel désordres! Il était sérieux comme quelqu'un qui se souvient qu'il y a des lois.

Govicum, ravi d'être utile à du désordre, se démenait presque autant qu'Ursus. Cela l'amusait. De plus, il gagnait ses sous.

Homo était pensif.

A son vacarme, Ursus mêlait des paroles.

— C'est comme à l'ordinaire, Gwynplaine, il y a de la cabale.
Nos concurrents sapent nos succès. La huée, assaisonnement du triomphe. Et puis les gens sont trop nombreux. Ils sont mal leur aise. L'angle des coudes du voisin ne dispose pas à la bienveillance. Pourvu qu'ils ne cassent pas les banquettes!
Nous allons être en proie à une population insensée. Ah! si notre ami Tom-Jim-Jack était là! mais il ne vient plus. Vois donc toutes ces têtes les unes sur les autres. Ceux qui sont debout n'ont pas l'air content, quoique se tenir debout soit, selon Galien, un mouvement, que ce grand homme appelle «le mouvement tonique». Nous abrégerons le spectacle. Comme il n'y a que *Chaos vaincu* d'affiché, nous ne jouerons pas *Ursus rursus*. C'est toujours ça de gagné. Quel hourvari! O turbulence aveugle des masses! Ils nous feront quelque dégât!
Ça ne peut pourtant pas continuer comme ça. Nous ne pourrions pas jouer. On ne saisirait pas un mot de la pièce. Je vais les haranguer. Gwynplaine, écarte un peu la triveline. Citoyens...

Ici Ursus se cria à lui-même d'une voix fébrile et pointue:

— A bas le vieux!

Et il reprit, de sa voix à lui:

— Je crois que le peuple m'insulte. Cicéron a raison: *plebs, fex urbis*. N'importe, admonestons la mob. J'aurai beaucoup de peine à me faire entendre. Je parlerai pourtant. Homme, fais ton devoir. Gwynplaine, vois donc cette mégère qui grince là-bas.

Ursus fit une pause où il plaça un grincement. Homo, provoqué, en ajouta un second, et Govicum un troisième.

Ursus poursuivit.

— Les femmes sont pires que les hommes. Moment peu propice.
C’est égal, essayons le pouvoir d’un discours. Il est toujours l’heure d’être disert. — Écoute ça, Gwynplaine, exorde insinuant. — Citoyennes et citoyens, c’est moi qui suis l’ours.
J’ôte ma tête pour vous parler. Je réclame humblement le silence.

Ursus prêta à la foule ce cri:

— Grumphll!

Et continua:

— Je vénère mon auditoire. Grumphll est un épiphonème comme un autre. Salut, population grouillante. Que vous soyez tous de la canaille, je n’en fais nul doute. Cela n’ôte rien à mon estime.
Estime réfléchie. J’ai le plus profond respect pour messieurs les sacripants qui m’honorent de leur pratique. Il y a parmi vous des êtres difformes, je ne m’en offense point. Messieurs les boiteux et messieurs les bossus sont dans la nature. Le chameau est gibbeux; le bison est enflé du dos; le blaireau a les jambes plus courtes à gauche qu’à droite; le fait est détermin par Aristote dans son traité du marcher des animaux. Ceux d’entre vous qui ont deux chemises en ont une sur le torse et l’autre chez l’usurier. Je sais que cela se fait. Albuquerque mettait en gage sa moustache et saint Denis son auréole. Les juifs prêtaient, même sur l’auréole. Grands exemples. Avoir des dettes, c’est avoir quelque chose. Je révère en vous des gueux.

Ursus se coupa par cette interruption en basse profonde:

— Triple baudet!

Et il répondit de son accent le plus poli:

— D’accord. Je suis un savant. Je m’en excuse comme je peux.
Je méprise scientifiquement la science. L’ignorance est une réalité dont on se nourrit; la science est une réalité dont on jeûne. En général on est forcé d’opter: être un savant, et maigrir; brouter, et être un âne. O citoyens, broutez! La science ne vaut pas une bouchée de quelque chose de bon.
J’aime mieux manger de l’aloyau que de savoir qu’il s’appelle le muscle psoas. Je n’ai, moi, qu’un mérite. C’est l’oeil sec. Tel que vous me voyez, je n’ai jamais pleuré. Il faut dire que je n’ai jamais été content. Jamais content.

Pas même de moi. Je me dédaigne. Mais, je soumets ceci aux membres de l'opposition ici présents, si Ursus n'est qu'un savant, Gwynplaine est un artiste.

Il renifla de nouveau:

— Grumphll!

Et il reprit:

— Encore Grumphll! c'est une objection. Néanmoins je passe outre. Et Gwynplaine, ô messieurs, mesdames! a près de lui un autre artiste, c'est ce personnage distingué et velu qui nous accompagne, le seigneur Homo, ancien chien sauvage, aujourd'hui loup civilisé, et fidèle sujet de sa majesté. Homo est un mime d'un talent fondu et supérieur. Soyez attentifs et recueillis.

Vous allez tout à l'heure voir jouer Homo, ainsi que Gwynplaine, et il faut honorer l'art. Cela sied aux grandes nations.

Êtes-vous des hommes des bois? J'y souscris. En ce cas, *sylvae sint consule dignae*. Deux artistes valent bien un consul. Bon.

Ils viennent de me jeter un trognon de chou. Mais je n'ai pas été touché. Cela ne m'empêchera pas de parler. Au contraire.

Le danger esquivé est bavard. *Garrula pericula,* dit Juvénal.

Peuple, il y a parmi vous des ivrognes, il y a aussi des ivrognesses. C'est très bien. Les hommes sont infects, les femmes sont hideuses. Vous avez toutes sortes d'excellentes raisons pour vous entasser ici sur ces bancs de cabaret, le désoeuvrement, la paresse, l'intervalle entre deux vols, le porter, l'ale, le stout, le malt, le brandy, le gin, et l'attrait d'un sexe pour l'autre sexe. A merveille. Un esprit tourné au badinage aurait ici un beau champ. Mais je m'abstiens. Luxure, soit. Pourtant il faut que l'orgie ait de la tenue. Vous êtes gais, mais bruyants. Vous imitez avec distinction les cris des bêtes; mais que diriez-vous si, quand vous parlez d'amour avec une lady dans un bouge, je passais mon temps à aboyer après vous?

Cela vous gênerait. Eh bien, cela nous gêne. Je vous autorise vous taire. L'art est aussi respectable que la débauche. Je vous parle un langage honnête.

Il s'apostropha:

— Que la fièvre t'étrangle avec tes sourcils en épis de seigle!

Et il répliqua:

— Honorables messieurs, laissons les épis de seigle tranquilles.

C'est une impiété de faire violence aux végétables pour leur trouver une ressemblance humaine ou animale. En outre, la fièvre n'étrangle pas. Fausse métaphore. De grâce, faites silence!

souffrez qu'on vous le dise, vous manquez un peu de cette majest qui caractérise le vrai gentilhomme anglais! Je constate que, parmi vous, ceux qui ont des souliers à travers lesquels passent leurs orteils en profitent pour poser leurs pieds sur les épaules des spectateurs qui sont devant eux, ce qui expose les dames faire la remarque que les semelles se crèvent toujours au point où est la tête des os métatarsiens. Montrez un peu moins vos pieds, et montrez un peu plus vos mains. J'aperçois d'ici des fripons qui plongent leurs griffes ingénieuses dans les goussets de leurs voisins imbéciles. Chers pick-pockets, de la pudeur!

Boxez le prochain, si vous voulez, ne le dévalisez pas. Vous fâcherez moins les gens en leur pochant un oeil qu'en leur chipant un sou. Endommagez les nez, soit. Le bourgeois tient son argent plus qu'à sa beauté. Du reste, agréez mes sympathies.

Je n'ai point le pédantisme de blâmer les filous. Le mal existe.

Chacun l'endure, et chacun le fait. Nul n'est exempt de la vermine de ses péchés. Je ne parle que de celle-là.

N'avons-nous pas tous nos démangeaisons? Dieu se gratte l'endroit du diable. Moi-même j'ai fait des fautes. *Plaudite, cives.*

Ursus exécuta un long groan qu'il domina par ces paroles finales:

— Milords et messieurs, je vois que mon discours a eu le bonheur de vous déplaire. Je prends congé de vos huées pour un moment.

Maintenant je vais remettre ma tête, et la représentation va commencer.

Il quitta l'accent oratoire pour le ton intime.

— Referme la triveline. Respirons. J'ai été mielleux. J'ai bien parlé. Je les ai appelés milords et messieurs. Langage velouté, mais inutile. Que dis-tu de toute cette crapule, Gwynplaine? Comme on se rend bien compte des maux que l'Angleterre a soufferts depuis quarante ans par l'emportement de ces esprits aigres et malicieux! Les anciens anglais étaient belliqueux, ceux-ci sont mélancoliques et illuminés, et ils se font gloire de mépriser les lois et de méconnaître l'autorit royale. J'ai fait tout ce que peut faire l'éloquence humaine.

Je leur ai prodigué des métonymies gracieuses comme la joue en fleur d'un adolescent. Sont-ils adoucis? J'en doute.

Qu'attendre d'un peuple qui mange si extraordinairement, et qui se bourre de tabac, au point qu'en ce pays les gens de lettres eux-mêmes composent souvent leurs ouvrages avec une pipe à la bouche! C'est égal, jouons la pièce.

On entendit glisser sur leur tringle les anneaux de la triveline.

Le tambourinage des bréhaignes cessa. Ursus décrocha sa chiffonie, exécuta son prélude, dit à demi-voix: Hein!

Gwynplaine, comme c'est mystérieux! puis se bouscula avec le loup.

Cependant, en même temps que la chiffonie, il avait ôté du clou une perruque très bourrue qu'il avait, et il l'avait jetée sur le plancher dans un coin à sa portée.

La représentation de *Chaos vaincu* eut lieu presque comme l'ordinaire, moins les effets de lumière bleue et les féeries d'éclairage. Le loup jouait de bonne foi. Au moment voulu, Dea fit son apparition et de sa voix tremblante et divine évoqua Gwynplaine. Elle étendit le bras, cherchant cette tête...

Ursus se rua sur la perruque, l'ébouriffa, s'en coiffa, et avança doucement, en retenant son souffle, sa tête ainsi hérissée sous la main de Dea.

Puis, appelant à lui tout son art et copiant la voix de Gwynplaine, il chanta avec un ineffable amour la réponse du monstre à l'appel de l'esprit.

L'imitation fut si parfaite que, cette fois encore, les deux bréhaignes cherchèrent des yeux Gwynplaine, effrayées de l'entendre sans le voir.

Govicum, émerveillé, trépigna, applaudit, battit des mains, produisit un vacarme olympien, et rit à lui tout seul comme une troupe de dieux. Ce boy, disonsle, déploya un rare talent de spectateur.

Fibi et Vinos, automates dont Ursus poussait les ressorts, firent le tohu-bohu habituel d'instruments, cuivre et peau d'âne mêlés, qui marquait la fin de la représentation et accompagnait le départ du public.

Ursus se releva en sueur.

Il dit tout bas à Homo: — Tu comprends qu'il s'agissait de gagner du temps. Je crois que nous avons réussi. Je ne m'en suis point mal tiré, moi qui avais pourtant le droit d'être assez éperdu.

Gwynplaine peut encore revenir d'ici à demain. Il était inutile de tuer tout de suite Dea. Je t'explique la chose, à toi.

Il ôta la perruque et s'essuya le front.

— Je suis un ventriloque de génie, murmura-t-il. Quel talent j'ai eu! J'ai égalé Brabant, l'engastrimythe du roi de France François Ier. Dea est convaincue que Gwynplaine est ici.

— Ursus, dit Dea, où est Gwynplaine?

Ursus se retourna, en sursaut.

Dea était restée au fond du théâtre, debout sous la lanterne du plafond. Elle était pâle, d’une pâleur d’ombre.

Elle reprit avec un ineffable sourire désespéré:

— Je sais. Il nous a quittés. Il est parti. Je savais bien qu’il avait des ailes.

Et, levant vers l’infini ses yeux blancs, elle ajouta:

— A quand moi?

III

COMPLICATIONS

Ursus demeura interdit.

Il n’avait pas fait illusion.

Était-ce la faute de sa ventriloquie? Non certes. Il avait réussi à tromper Fibi et Vinos, qui avaient des yeux, et non tromper Dea, qui était aveugle. C’est que les prunelles seules de Fibi et de Vinos étaient lucides, tandis que, chez Dea, c’était le coeur qui voyait.

Il ne put répondre un mot. Et il pensa à part lui: *Bos in lingua*. L’homme interdit a un boeuf sur la langue.

Dans les émotions complexes, l’humiliation est le premier sentiment qui se fasse jour. Ursus songea:

— J’ai gaspillé mes onomatopées.

Et, comme tout rêveur acculé au pied du mur de l’expédient, il s’injuria:

— Chute à plat. J’ai épuisé en pure perte l’harmonie imitative. Mais qu’allons-nous devenir maintenant?

Il regarda Dea. Elle se taisait, de plus en plus pâlissante, sans faire un mouvement. Son oeil perdu restait fixé dans les profondeurs.

Un incident vint à propos.

Ursus aperçut dans la cour maître Nicless, sa chandelle en main, qui lui faisait signe.

Maître Nicless n’avait point assisté à la fin de l’espèce de comédie fantôme jouée par Ursus. Cela tenait à ce qu’on avait frappé à la porte de l’inn. Maître Nicless était allé ouvrir. Deux fois on avait frappé, ce qui avait fait deux éclipses de maître Nicless. Ursus, absorbé par son monologue à cent voix, ne s’en était point aperçu.

Sur l’appel muet de maître Nicless, Ursus descendit.

Il s’approcha de l’hôtelier.

Ursus mit un doigt sur sa bouche.

Maître Nicless mit un doigt sur sa bouche.

Tous deux se regardèrent ainsi.

Chacun d’eux semblait dire à l’autre: Causons, mais taisons-nous.

Le tavernier, silencieusement, ouvrit la porte de la salle basse de l’inn. Maître Nicless entra, Ursus entra. Il n’y avait personne qu’eux deux. La devanture sur la rue, porte et volets, était close.

Le tavernier poussa derrière lui la porte de la cour, qui se ferma au nez de Govicum curieux.

Maître Nicless posa la chandelle sur une table.

Le dialogue s’engagea. A demi-voix, comme un chuchotement.

— Maître Ursus...

— Maître Nicless?

— J’ai fini par comprendre.

— Bah!

— Vous avez voulu faire croire à la pauvre aveugle que tout était ici comme à l’ordinaire.

— Aucune loi ne défend d’être ventriloque.

— Vous avez du talent.

— Non.

— C’est prodigieux à quel point vous faites ce que vous voulez faire.

— Je vous dis que non.

— Maintenant j’ai à vous parler.

— Est-ce de la politique?

— Je n’en sais rien.

— C’est que je n’écouterais pas.

— Voici. Pendant que vous faisiez la pièce et le public à vous tout seul, on a frappé à la porte de la taverne.

— On a frappé à la porte?

— Oui.

— Je n’aime pas ça.

— Moi non plus.

— Et puis?

— Et puis j’ai ouvert.

— Qui est-ce qui frappait?

— Quelqu’un qui m’a parlé.

— Qu’est-ce qu’il a dit?

— Je l’ai écouté.

— Qu’est-ce que vous avez répondu?

— Rien. Je suis revenu vous voir jouer.

— Et?...

— Et l’on a frappé une seconde fois.

— Qui? le même?

— Non. Un autre.

— Quelqu’un encore qui vous a parlé?

— Quelqu’un qui ne m’a rien dit.

— Je le préfère.

— Moi pas.

— Expliquez-vous, maître Nicless.

— Devinez qui avait parlé la première fois.

— Je n’ai pas le temps d’être Oedipe.

— C’était le maître du circus.

— D’à côté?

— D’à côté.

— Où il y a toute cette musique enragée?

— Enragée.

— Eh bien?

— Eh bien, maître Ursus, il vous fait des offres.

— Des offres?

— Des offres.

— Pourquoi?

— Parce que.

— Vous avez sur moi un avantage, maître Nicless, c’est que vous, tout à l’heure, vous avez compris mon énigme, et que moi, maintenant, je ne comprends pas la vôtre.

— Le maître du circus m’a chargé de vous dire qu’il avait vu ce matin passer le cortège de police, et que lui, le maître du circus, voulant vous prouver qu’il est votre ami, il vous offrait de vous acheter, moyennant cinquante livres sterling payées comptant, votre berlingot, la Green-Box, vos deux chevaux, vos trompettes avec les femmes qui y soufflent, votre pièce avec l’aveugle qui chante dedans, votre loup, et vous avec.

Ursus eut un hautain sourire.

— Maître de l’inn Tadcaster, vous direz au maître du circus que Gwynplaine va revenir.

Le tavernier prit sur une chaise quelque chose qui était dans l’obscurité, et se retourna vers Ursus, les deux bras levés, laissant pendre de l’une de ses mains un manteau et de l’autre une esclavine de cuir, un chapeau de feutre et un capingot.

Et maître Nicless dit:

— L’homme qui a frappé la seconde fois, et qui était un homme de police, et qui est entré et sorti sans prononcer une parole, a apporté ceci.

Ursus reconnut l’esclavine, le capingot, le chapeau et le manteau de Gwynplaine.

IV

MOENIBUS SURDIS CAMPANA MUTA

Ursus palpa le feutre du chapeau, le drap du manteau, la serge du capingot, le cuir de l’esclavine, ne put douter de cette défroque, et d’un geste bref et impératif, sans dire un mot, désigna à maître Nicless la porte de l’inn.

Maître Nicless ouvrit.

Ursus se précipita hors de la taverne.

Maître Nicless le suivit des yeux, et vit Ursus courir, autant que le lui permettaient ses vieilles jambes, dans la direction prise le matin par le wapentake emmenant Gwynplaine. Un quart d’heure après, Ursus essoufflé arrivait dans la petite rue o était l’arrière-guichet de la geôle de Southwark et où il avait passé déjà tant d’heures d’observation.

Cette ruelle n’avait pas besoin de minuit pour être déserte.

Mais, triste le jour, elle était inquiétante la nuit. Personne ne s’y hasardait passé une certaine heure. Il semblait qu’on craignît que les deux murs ne se rapprochassent, et qu’on eût peur, s’il prenait fantaisie à la prison et au cimetière de s’embrasser, d’être écrasé par l’embrassement. Effets nocturnes.

Les saules tronqués de la ruelle Vauvert à Paris étaient de la sorte mal famés. On prétendait que la nuit ces moignons d’arbres se changeaient en grosses mains et empoignaient les passants.

D’instinct le peuple de Southwark évitait, nous l’avons dit, cette rue entre prison et cimetière. Jadis elle avait été barrée la nuit d’une chaîne de fer. Très inutile; car la meilleure chaîne pour fermer cette rue, c’était la peur qu’elle faisait.

Ursus y entra résolument.

Quelle idée avait-il? Aucune.

Il venait dans cette rue aux informations. Allait-il frapper la porte de la geôle? Non certes. Cet expédient effroyable et vain ne germait pas dans son cerveau. Tenter de s’introduire l pour demander un renseignement? Quelle folie! Les prisons n’ouvrent pas plus à qui veut entrer qu’à qui veut sortir. Leurs gonds ne tournent que sur la loi. Ursus le savait. Que venait-il donc faire dans cette rue? Voir. Voir quoi? Rien.

On ne sait pas. Le possible. Se retrouver en face de la porte où Gwynplaine avait disparu, c’était déjà quelque chose.

Quelquefois le mur le plus noir et le plus bourru parle, et d’entre les pierres une lueur sort. Une vague transsudation de clarté se dégage parfois d’un entassement fermé et sombre.

Examiner l’enveloppe d’un fait, c’est être utilement aux écoutes.

Nous avons tous cet instinct de ne laisser, entre le fait qui nous intéresse et nous, que le moins d’épaisseur possible. C’est pourquoi Ursus était retourné dans la ruelle où était l’entrée basse de la maison de force.

Au moment où il s’engagea dans la ruelle, il entendit un coup de cloche, puis un second.

— Tiens, pensa-t-il, serait-ce déjà minuit?

Machinalement, il se mit à compter:

— Trois, quatre, cinq.

Il songea:

— Comme les coups de cette cloche sont espacés! quelle lenteur! — Six. Sept.

Et il fit cette remarque:

— Quel son lamentable! — Huit, neuf. — Ah! rien de plus simple. Être dans une prison, cela attriste une horloge. — Dix. — Et puis, le cimetière est là. Cette cloche sonne l’heure aux vivants et l’éternité aux morts. — Onze. — Hélas! sonner une heure à qui n’est pas libre, c’est aussi sonner une éternité! — Douze.

Il s’arrêta.

— Oui, c’est minuit.

La cloche sonna un treizième coup.

Ursus tressaillit.

— Treize!

Il y eut un quatorzième coup. Puis un quinzième.

— Qu’est-ce que cela veut dire?

Les coups continuèrent à longs intervalles. Ursus écoutait.

— Ce n’est pas une cloche d’horloge. C’est la cloche Muta. Aussi je disais: Comme minuit sonne longtemps! cette cloche ne sonne pas, elle tinte. Que se passe-t-il de sinistre?

Toute prison autrefois, comme tout monastère, avait sa cloche dite muta, réservée aux occasions mélancoliques. La muta, «la muette», était une cloche tintant très bas, qui avait l’air de faire son possible pour n’être pas entendue.

Ursus avait regagné l’encoignure commode au guet, d’où il avait pu, pendant une grande partie de la journée, épier la prison.

Les tintements se suivaient, à une lugubre distance l’un de l’autre.

Un glas fait dans l’espace une vilaine ponctuation. Il marque dans les préoccupations de tout le monde des alinéas funèbres.

Un glas de cloche ressemble à un râle d’homme. Annonce d’agonie.

Si, dans les maisons, ça et là, aux environs de cette cloche en branle, il y a des rêveries éparses et en attente, ce glas les coupe en tronçons rigides. La rêverie indécise est une sorte de refuge; on ne sait quoi de diffus dans l’angoisse permet quelque espérance de percer; le glas, désolant, précise. Cette diffusion, il la supprime, et, dans ce trouble, où l’inquiétude tâche de rester en suspens, il détermine des précipités. Un glas parle à chacun dans le sens de son chagrin ou de son effroi. Une cloche tragique, cela vous regarde. Avertissement. Rien de sombre comme un monologue sur lequel tombe cette cadence. Les retours égaux indiquent une intention. Qu’est-ce que ce marteau, la cloche, forge sur cette enclume, la pensée?

Ursus, confusément, comptait, bien que cela n’eût aucun but, les tintements du glas. Se sentant sur un glissement, il faisait effort pour ne point ébaucher de conjectures. Les conjectures sont un plan incliné où l’on va inutilement trop loin.

Néanmoins, que signifiait cette cloche?

Il regardait l’obscurité à l’endroit où il savait qu’était la porte de la prison.

Tout à coup, à cet endroit même qui faisait une sorte de trou noir, il y eut une rougeur. Cette rougeur grandit et devint une clarté.

Cette rougeur n’avait rien de vague. Elle eut tout de suite une forme et des angles. La porte de la geôle venait de tourner sur ses gonds. Cette rougeur en dessinait le cintre et les chambranles.

C’était plutôt un entre-bâillement qu’une ouverture. Une prison, cela ne s’ouvre pas, cela bâille. D’ennui peut-être.

La porte du guichet donna passage à un homme qui avait une torche à la main.

La cloche ne discontinuait pas. Ursus se sentit saisi par deux attentes; il se mit en arrêt, l’oreille au glas, l’oeil à la torche.

Après cet homme, la porte, qui n’était qu’entrebâillée, s’élargit tout à fait, et donna issue à deux autres hommes, puis à un quatrième. Ce quatrième était le wapentake, visible à la lumière de la torche. Il avait au poing son bâton de fer.

A la suite du wapentake, défilèrent, débouchant de dessous le guichet, en ordre, deux par deux, avec la rigidité d’une série de poteaux qui marcheraient, des hommes silencieux.

Ce cortége nocturne franchissait la porte basse couple par couple, comme les bini d’une procession de pénitents, sans solution de continuité, avec un soin lugubre de ne faire aucun bruit, gravement, presque doucement. Un serpent qui sort d’un trou a cette précaution.

La torche faisait saillir les profils et les attitudes. Profils farouches, attitudes mornes.

Ursus reconnut tous les visages de police qui, le matin, avaient emmené Gwynplaine.

Nul doute. C’étaient les mêmes. Ils reparaissaient.

Évidemment Gwynplaine aussi allait reparaître.

Ils l’avaient amené là; ils le ramenaient.

C’était clair.

La prunelle d’Ursus redoubla de fixité. Mettrait-on Gwynplaine en liberté?

La double file des gens de police s’écoulait de la voûte basse très lentement, et comme goutte à goutte. La cloche, qui ne s’interrompait point, semblait leur marquer le pas. En sortant de la prison, le cortège, montrant le dos à Ursus, tournait droite dans le tronçon de la rue opposé à celui où il était posté.

Une deuxième torche brilla sous le guichet.

Ceci annonçait la fin du cortège.

Ursus allait voir ce qu’ils emmenaient. Le prisonnier. L’homme.

Ursus allait voir Gwynplaine.

Ce qu’ils emmenaient apparut.

C’était une bière.

Quatre hommes portaient une bière couverte d’un drap noir.

Derrière eux venait un homme ayant une pelle sur l’épaule.

Une troisième torche allumée, tenue par un personnage lisant dans un livre, qui devait être un chapelain, fermait le cortège.

La bière prit la file à la suite des gens de police qui avaient tourné à droite.

En même temps la tête du cortège s’arrêta.

Ursus entendit le grincement d’une clef.

Vis-à-vis la prison, dans le mur bas qui longeait l’autre côté de la rue, une deuxième ouverture de porte s’éclaira par une torche qui passa dessous.

Cette porte, sur laquelle on distinguait une tête de mort, était la porte du cimetière.

Le wapentake s’engagea dans cette ouverture, puis les hommes, puis la deuxième torche après la première; le cortège y décrut comme le reptile rentrant; la file entière des gens de police pénétra dans cette autre obscurité qui était au delà de cette porte, puis la bière, puis l’homme à la pelle, puis le chapelain avec sa torche et son livre, et la porte se referma.

Il n’y eut plus rien qu’une lueur au-dessus d’un mur.

On entendit un chuchotement, puis des coups sourds.

C’étaient sans doute le chapelain et le fossoyeur qui jetaient sur le cercueil, l’un, des versets de prière, l’autre, des pelletées de terre.

Le chuchotement cessa, les coups sourds cessèrent.

Un mouvement se fit, les torches brillèrent, le wapentake repassa, tenant haut le weapon, sous la porte rouverte du cimetière, le chapelain revint avec son livre, le fossoyeur avec sa pelle, le cortège reparut, sans le cercueil, la double file d’hommes refit le même trajet entre les deux portes avec la même taciturnité et en sens inverse, la porte du cimetière se referma, la porte de la prison se rouvrit, la voûte sépulcrale du guichet se découpa en lueur, l’obscurité du corridor devint vaguement visible, l’épaisse et profonde nuit de la geôle s’offrit au regard, et toute cette vision rentra dans toute cette ombre.

Le glas s’éteignit. Le silence vint tout clore, sinistre serrure des ténèbres.

De l’apparition évanouie, ce ne fut plus que cela.

Un passage de spectres qui se dissipe.

Des rapprochements qui coïncident logiquement finissent par construire quelque chose qui ressemble à l’évidence. A Gwynplaine arrêté, au mode silencieux de son arrestation, à ses vêtements rapportés par l’homme de police, à ce glas de la prison où il avait été conduit, venait s’ajouter, disons mieux, s’ajuster cette chose tragique, un cercueil porté en terre.

— Il est mort! cria Ursus.

Il tomba assis sur une borne.

— Mort! Ils l’ont tué! Gwynplaine! mon enfant! mon fils!

Et il éclata en sanglots.

V

LA RAISON D'ÉTAT TRAVAILLE EN PETIT COMME EN GRAND

Ursus, il s'en vantait, hélas! n'avait jamais pleuré. Le réservoir des pleurs était plein. Une telle plénitude, où s'est accumulée goutte à goutte, douleur à douleur, toute une longue existence, ne se vide pas en un instant. Ursus sanglota longtemps.

La première larme est une ponction. Il pleura sur Gwynplaine, sur Dea, sur lui Ursus, sur Homo. Il pleura comme un enfant. Il pleura comme un vieillard. Il pleura de tout ce dont il avait ri. Il acquitta l'arriéré. Le droit de l'homme aux larmes ne se périme pas.

Du reste, le mort qu'on venait de mettre en terre, c'était Hardquanonne; mais Ursus n'était pas forcé de le savoir.

Plusieurs heures s'écoulèrent.

Le jour commença à poindre; la pâle nappe du matin s'étala, vaguement plissée d'ombre, sur le bowling-green. L'aube vint blanchir la façade de l'inn Tadcaster. Maître Nicless ne s'était pas couché; car parfois le même fait produit plusieurs insomnies.

Les catastrophes rayonnent en tout sens. Jetez une pierre dans l'eau, et comptez les éclaboussures

Maître Nicless se sentait atteint. C'est fort désagréable, des aventures chez vous. Maître Nicless, peu rassuré et entrevoyant des complications, méditait. Il regrettait d'avoir reçu chez lui «ces gens-là». — S'il avait su! — Ils finiront par lui attirer quelque mauvaise affaire. Comment les mettre dehors maintenant? — Il avait bail avec Ursus. — Quel bonheur s'il en était débarrassé! — Comment s'y prendre pour les chasser?

Brusquement il y eut à la porte de l'inn un de ces frappements tumultueux qui, en Angleterre, annoncent «quelqu'un». La gamme du frappement correspond à l'échelle de la hiérarchie.

Ce n'était point tout à fait le frappement d'un lord, mais c'était le frappement d'un magistrat.

Le tavernier, fort tremblant, entre-bâilla son vasistas.

Il y avait magistrat en effet. Maître Nicless aperçut à sa porte, dans le petit jour, un groupe de police, en tête duquel se détachaient deux hommes, dont l’un était le justicier-quorum.

Maître Nicless avait vu le matin le justicier-quorum, et il le connaissait.

Il ne connaissait pas l’autre homme.

C’était un gentleman gras, au visage couleur cire, en perruque mondaine et en cape de voyage.

Maître Nicless avait grand’peur du premier de ces personnages, le justicier-quorum. Si maître Nicless eût été de la cour, il eût eu plus peur encore du second, car c’était Barkilphedro.

Un des hommes du groupe cogna une seconde fois la porte, violemment.

Le tavernier, avec une grosse sueur d’anxiété au front, ouvrit.

Le justicier-quorum, du ton d’un homme qui a charge de police et qui est très au fait du personnel des vagabonds, éleva la voix et demanda sévèrement:

— Maître Ursus?

L’hôtelier, bonnet bas, répondit:

— Votre honneur, c’est ici.

— Je le sais, dit le justicier.

— Sans doute, votre honneur,

— Qu’il vienne.

— Votre honneur, il n’est pas là,

— Où est-il?

— Je l’ignore.

— Comment?

— Il n’est pas rentré.

— Il est donc sorti de bien bonne heure?

— Non. Mais il est sorti bien tard.

— Ces vagabonds! reprit le justicier.

— Votre honneur, dit doucement maître Nicless. le voilà.

Ursus, en effet, venait de paraître à un détour de mur. Il arrivait à l’inn. Il avait passé presque toute la nuit entre la geôle où, à midi, il avait vu entrer Gwynplaine, et le cimetière où, à minuit, il avait entendu combler une fosse. Il était pâle de deux pâleurs, de sa tristesse et du crépuscule.

Le petit jour, qui est de la lueur à l’état de larve, laisse les formes, même celles qui se meuvent, mêlées à la diffusion de la nuit. Ursus, blême et vague, marchant lentement, ressemblait une figure de songe.

Dans cette distraction farouche que donne l’angoisse, il s’en était allé de l’inn tête nue. Il ne s’était pas même aperçu qu’il n’avait point de chapeau.

Ses quelques cheveux gris remuaient au vent. Ses yeux ouverts ne paraissaient pas regarder. Souvent, éveillé on est endormi, de même qu’il arrive qu’endormi on est éveillé. Ursus avait un air fou.

— Maître Ursus, cria le tavernier, venez. Leurs honneurs désirent vous parler.

Maître Nicless, occupé uniquement d’amadouer l’incident, lâcha, et en même temps eût voulu retenir ce pluriel, «leurs honneurs», respectueux pour le groupe, mais blessant peut-être pour le chef, confondu de la sorte avec ses subordonnés.

Ursus eut le sursaut d’un homme précipité à bas d’un lit où il dormirait profondément.

— Qu’est-ce? dit-il.

Et il aperçut la police, et en tête de la police le magistrat.

Nouvelle et rude secousse.

Tout à l’heure le wapentake, maintenant le justicier-quorum.

L’un semblait le jeter à l’autre. Il y a de vieilles histoires d’écueils comme cela.

Le justicier-quorum lui fit signe d’entrer dans la taverne.

Ursus obéit.

Govicum, qui venait de se lever et qui balayait la salle, s’arrêta, se rencogna derrière les tables, mit son balai au repos, et retint son souffle. Il plongea son poing dans ses cheveux et se gratta vaguement, ce qui indique l’attention aux événements.

Le justicier-quorum s’assit sur un banc, devant une table; Barkilphedro prit une chaise. Ursus et maître Nicless demeurèrent debout. Les gens de police, laissés dehors, se massèrent devant la porte refermée.

Le justicier-quorum fixa sa prunelle légale sur Ursus, et dit:

— Vous avez un loup.

Ursus répondit:

— Pas tout à fait.

— Vous avez un loup, reprit le justicier, en soulignant «loup d’un accent décisif.

Ursus répondit:

— C’est que...

Et il se tut.

— Délit, repartit le justicier.

Ursus hasarda cette plaidoirie:

— C’est mon domestique.

Le justicier posa sa main à plat sur la table les cinq doigts écartés, ce qui est un très beau geste d’autorité.

— Baladin, demain, à pareille heure, vous et votre loup; vous aurez quitté l’Angleterre. Sinon, le loup sera saisi, mené au greffe, et tué.

Ursus pensa: — Continuation des assassinats. — Mais il ne souffla mot et se contenta de trembler de tous ses membres.

— Vous entendez? reprit le justicier.

Ursus adhéra d’un hochement de tête.

Le justicier insista.

— Tué.

Il y eut un silence.

— Étranglé, ou noyé.

Le justicier-quorum regarda Ursus.

— Et vous en prison.

Ursus murmura:

— Mon juge...

— Soyez parti avant demain matin. Sinon, tel est l’ordre.

— Mon juge...

— Quoi?

— Il faut que nous quittions l’Angleterre, lui et moi?

— Oui.

— Aujourd’hui?

— Aujourd’hui.

— Comment faire?

Maître Nicless était heureux. Ce magistrat, qu’il avait redouté, venait à son aide. La police se faisait l’auxiliaire de lui, Nicless. Elle le délivrait de ces «gens-là». Le moyen qu’il cherchait, elle le lui apportait. Cet Ursus qu’il voulait congédier, la police le chassait. Force majeure. Rien objecter. Il était ravi. Il intervint:

— Votre honneur, cet homme...

Il désignait Ursus du doigt.

— ... Cet homme demande comment faire pour quitter l’Angleterre aujourd’hui? Rien de plus simple. Il y a, tous les jours et toutes les nuits, aux amarrages de la Tamise, de ce côté-ci du pont de Londres comme de l’autre côté, des bateaux qui partent pour les pays. On va d’Angleterre en Danemark, en Hollande, en Espagne, pas en France, à cause de la guerre, mais partout.

Cette nuit, plusieurs navires partiront, vers une heure du matin, qui est l’heure de la marée. Entre autres, la panse *Vograat* de Rotterdam.

Le justicier-quorum fit un mouvement d’épaule du côté d’Ursus:

— Soit. Partez par le premier bateau venu. Par la *Vograat*.

— Mon juge... fit Ursus.

— Eh bien?

— Mon juge, si je n’avais, comme autrefois, que ma petite baraque à roues, cela se pourrait. Elle tiendrait sur un bateau.

Mais...

— Mais quoi?

— Mais c’est que j’ai la Green-Box, qui est une grande machine avec deux chevaux, et, si large que soit un navire, jamais cela n’entrera.

— Qu’est-ce que cela me fait? dit le justicier. On tuera le loup.

Ursus, frémissant, se sentait manié comme par une main de glace. — Les monstres! pensa-t-il. Tuer les gens! c’est leur expédient.

Le tavernier sourit, et s’adressa à Ursus.

— Maître Ursus, vous pouvez vendre la Green-Box.

Ursus regarda Nicless.

— Maître Ursus, vous avez offre.

— De qui?

— Offre pour la voiture. Offre pour les deux chevaux. Offre pour les deux femmes bréhaignes. Offre...

— De qui? répéta Ursus.

— Du maître du circus voisin.

— C’est juste.

Ursus se souvint.

Maître Nicless se tourna vers le justicier-quorum.

— Votre honneur, le marché peut être conclu aujourd’hui même. Le maître du circus d’à côté désire acheter la grande voiture et les deux chevaux.

— Le maître de ce circus a raison, dit le justicier, car il va en avoir besoin. Une voiture et des chevaux, cela lui sera utile.

Lui aussi partira aujourd’hui. Les révérends des paroisses de Southwark se sont plaints des vacarmes obscènes du Tarrinzeau-field. Le shériff a pris des mesures. Ce soir, il n’y aura plus une seule baraque de bateleur sur cette place. Fin des scandales. L’honorable gentleman qui daigne être ici présent...

Le justicier-quorum s’interrompit par un salut à Barkilphedro, que Barkilphedro lui rendit.

— ... L’honorable gentleman qui daigne être ici présent est arrivé cette nuit de Windsor. Il apporte des ordres. Sa majest a dit: II faut nettoyer cela.

Ursus, dans sa longue méditation de toute la nuit, n’avait pas été sans se poser quelques questions. Après tout, il n’avait vu qu’une bière. Était-il bien sûr que Gwynplaine fut dedans? Il pouvait y avoir sur la terre d’autres morts que Gwynplaine. Un cercueil qui passe n’est pas un trépassé qui se nomme. A la suite de l’arrestation de Gwynplaine, il y avait eu un enterrement. Cela ne prouvait rien. *Post hoc, nonpropter hoc,* — etc. — Ursus en était revenu à douter. L’espérance brûle et luit sur l’angoisse comme le naphte sur l’eau. Cette flamme surnageante flotte éternellement sur la douleur humaine. Ursus avait fini par se dire: Il est probable que c’est Gwynplaine qu’on a enterré, mais ce n’est pas certain. Qui sait? Gwynplaine est peut-être encore vivant.

Ursus s’inclina devant le justicier.

— Honorable juge, je partirai. Nous partirons. On partira. Par la *Vograat*. Pour Rotterdam. J’obéis. Je vendrai la Green-Box, les chevaux, les trompettes, les femmes d’Egypte.

Mais il y a quelqu’un qui est avec moi, un camarade, et que je ne puis laisser derrière moi. Gwynplaine...

— Gwynplaine est mort, dit une voix.

Ursus eut l’impression du froid d’un reptile sur sa peau.

C’était Barkilphedro qui venait de parler.

La dernière lueur s’évanouissait. Plus de doute. Gwynplaine était mort.

Ce personnage devait le savoir. Il était assez sinistre pour cela.

Ursus salua.

Maître Nicless était très bon homme en dehors de la lâcheté.

Mais, effrayé, il était atroce. La suprême férocité, c’est la peur.

Il grommela:

— Simplification.

Et il eut, derrière Ursus, ce frottement de mains, particulier aux égoïstes, qui signifie: M’en voila quitte! et qui semble fait au-dessus de la cuvette de Ponce-Pilate.

Ursus accablé baissait la tête. La sentence de Gwynplaine était exécutée, la mort; et, quant à lui, son arrêt lui était signifié, l’exil. Il n’y avait plus qu’à obéir. Il songeait.

Il sentit qu’on lui touchait le coude. C’était l’autre personnage, l’acolyte du justicier-quorum. Ursus tressaillit.

La voix qui avait dit: *Gwynplaine est mort*, lui chuchota l’oreille:

— Voici dix livres sterling que vous envoie quelqu’un qui vous veut du bien.

Et Barkilphedro posa une petite bourse sur une table devant Ursus.

On se rappelle la cassette que Barkilphedro avait emportée.

Dix guinées sur deux mille, c’était tout ce que pouvait faire Barkilphedro. En conscience, c’était assez. S’il eût donn davantage, il y eût perdu. Il avait pris la peine de faire la trouvaille d’un lord, il en commençait l’exploitation, il était juste que le premier rendement de la mine lui appartînt. Ceux qui verraient là une petitesse seraient dans leur droit, mais auraient tort de s’étonner. Barkilphedro aimait l’argent, surtout volé. Un envieux contient un avare. Barkilphedro n’était pas sans défauts. Commettre des crimes, cela n’empêche pas d’avoir des vices. Les tigres ont des poux.

D’ailleurs, c’était l’école de Bacon.

Barkilphedro se tourna vers le justicier-quorum, et lui dit:

— Monsieur, veuillez terminer. Je suis très pressé. Une chaise attelée des propres relais de sa majesté m’attend. Il faut que je reparte ventre à terre pour Windsor, et que j’y sois avant deux heures d’ici. J’ai des comptes à rendre et des ordres prendre.

Le justicier-quorum se leva.

Il alla à la porte qui n’était fermée qu’au pêne, l’ouvrit, regarda, sans dire un mot, les gens de police, et il lui jaillit de l’index un éclair d’autorité. Tout le groupe entra avec ce silence où l’on entrevoit l’approche de quelque chose de sévère.

Maître Nicless, satisfait du dénoûment rapide qui coupait court aux complications, charmé d’être hors de cet écheveau brouillé, craignit, en voyant ce déploiement d’exempts, qu’on n’appréhendât Ursus chez lui. Deux arrestations coup sur coup dans sa maison, celle de Gwynplaine, puis celle d’Ursus, cela pouvait nuire à la taverne, les buveurs n’aimant point les dérangements de police.

C’était le cas d’une intervention convenablement suppliante et généreuse.

Maître Nicless tourna vers le justicier-quorum sa face souriante où la confiance était tempérée par le respect:

— Votre honneur, je fais observer à votre honneur que ces honorables messieurs les sergents ne sont point indispensables du moment que le loup coupable va être emmené hors d'Angleterre, et que ce nommé Ursus ne fait point de résistance, et que les ordres de votre honneur sont ponctuellement suivis. Votre honneur considérera que les actions respectables de la police, si nécessaires au bien du royaume, font du tort à un établissement, et que ma maison est innocente. Les saltimbanques de la Green-Box étant nettoyés, comme dit sa majesté la reine, je ne vois plus personne ici de criminel, car je ne suppose pas que la fille aveugle et les deux bréhaignes soient délinquantes, et j'implorerais votre honneur de daigner abréger son auguste visite et de congédier ces dignes messieurs qui viennent d'entrer, car ils n'ont rien à faire en ma maison, et si votre honneur me permettait de prouver la justesse de mon dire sous la forme d'une humble question, je rendrais évidente l'inutilité de la présence de ces vénérables messieurs en demandant à votre honneur: Puisque le nommé Ursus s'exécute et part, qui peuvent-ils avoir à arrêter ici?

— Vous, dit le justicier.

On ne discute pas avec un coup d'épée qui vous perce de part en part. Maître Nicless s'affaissa sur n'importe quoi, sur une table, sur un banc, sur ce qui se trouva là, altéré.

Le justicier haussa la voix tellement que, s'il y avait des gens sur la place, ils pouvaient l'entendre.

— Maître Nicless Plumptre, tavernier de cette taverne, ceci est le dernier point à régler. Ce baladin et ce loup sont des vagabonds. Ils sont chassés. Mais le plus coupable, c'est vous.

C'est chez vous, et de votre consentement, que la loi a ét violée, et vous, homme patenté, investi d'une responsabilit publique, vous avez installé le scandale dans votre maison.

Maître Nicless, votre licence vous est retirée, vous payerez l'amende, et vous irez en prison.

Les gens de police entourèrent le tavernier.

Le justicier continua, désignant Govicum:

— Ce garçon, votre complice, est saisi.

Le poignet d'un exempt s'abattit sur le collet de Govicum, qui considéra l'exempt avec curiosité. Le boy, pas très effrayé, comprenait peu, avait déjà vu plus d’une chose singulière, et se demandait si c’était la suite de la comédie.

Le justicier-quorum enfonça son chapeau sur son chef, croisa ses deux mains sur son ventre, ce qui est le comble de la majesté, et ajouta:

— C’est dit, maître Nicless, vous serez attrait en prison, et mis en geôle. Vous et ce boy. Et cette maison, l’inn Tadcaster, demeurera fermée, condamnée et close. Pour l’exemple. Sur ce, vous allez nous suivre.

LIVRE SEPTIEME

LA TITANE

I

RÉVEIL

— Et Dea!

Il sembla à Gwynplaine, regardant poindre le jour Corleone-lodge pendant ces aventures de l'inn Tadcaster, que ce cri venait du dehors; ce cri était en lui.

Qui n'a entendu les profondes clameurs de l'âme?

D'ailleurs le jour se levait.

L'aurore est une voix.

A quoi servirait le soleil si ce n'est à réveiller la sombre endormie, la conscience?

La lumière et la vertu sont de même espèce.

Que le dieu s'appelle Christ ou qu'il s'appelle Amour, il y a toujours une heure où il est oublié, même par le meilleur; nous avons tous, même les saints, besoin d'une voix qui nous fasse souvenir, et l'aube fait parler en nous l'avertisseur sublime.

La conscience crie devant le devoir comme le coq chante devant le jour.

Le coeur humain, ce chaos, entend le *Fiat lux.*

Gwynplaine — nous continuerons à le nommer ainsi; Clancharlie est un lord, Gwynplaine est un homme; — Gwynplaine fut comme ressuscité.

Il était temps que l'artère fût liée.

Il y avait en lui une fuite d'honnêteté.

— Et Dea! dit-il.

Et il sentit dans ses veines comme une transfusion généreuse.

Quelque chose de salubre et de tumultueux se précipitait en lui.

L'irruption violente des bonnes pensées, c'est un retour au logis de quelqu'un qui n'a pas sa clef, et qui force honnêtement son propre mur. Il y a escalade, mais du bien. Il y a effraction, mais du mal.

— Dea! Dea! Dea! répéta-t-il.

Il s'affirmait à lui-même son propre coeur.

Et il fit cette question à haute voix:

— Où es-tu?

Presque étonné qu'on ne lui répondit pas. Il reprit, regardant le plafond et les murs, avec un égarement où la raison revenait:

— Où es-tu? où suis-je?

Et dans cette chambre, dans cette cage, il recommença sa marche de bête farouche enfermée.

— Où suis-je? à Windsor. Et toi? à Southwark. Ah! mon Dieu! voilà la première fois qu'il y a une distance entre nous. Qui donc a creusé cela? moi ici, toi là! Oh! cela n'est pas. Cela ne sera pas. Qu'est-ce donc qu'on m'a fait?

Il s'arrêta.

— Qui donc m'a parlé de la reine? est-ce que je connais cela? Changé! moi changé! pourquoi? parce que je suis lord. Sais-tu ce qui se passe, Dea? tu es lady. C'est étonnant les choses qui arrivent. Ah ça! il s'agit de retrouver mon chemin. Est-ce qu'on m'aurait perdu? Il y a un homme qui m'a parlé avec un air obscur. Je me rappelle les paroles qu'il m'a adressées: — Milord, une porte qui s'ouvre ferme une autre porte. Ce qui est derrière vous n'est plus. — Autrement dit: Vous êtes un lâche! Cet homme-là, le misérable! il me disait cela pendant que je n'étais pas encore réveillé. Il abusait de mon premier moment étonné.
J'étais comme une proie qu'il avait. Où est-il, que je l'insulte! Il me parlait avec le sombre sourire du rêve. Ah!
voici que je redeviens moi! C'est bon. On se trompe si l'on croit qu'on fera de lord Clancharlie ce qu'on voudra! Pair d'Angleterre, oui, avec une pairesse, qui est Dea. Des conditions! est-ce que j'en accepte? La reine? que m'importe la reine! je ne l'ai jamais vue. Je ne suis pas lord pour être esclave. J'entre libre dans la puissance. Est-ce qu'on se figure m'avoir déchaîné pour rien? On m'a démuselé, voilà tout.
Dea! Ursus! nous sommes ensemble. Ce que vous étiez, je l'étais. Ce que je suis, vous l'êtes. Venez! Non. J'y vais!
Tout de suite. Tout de suite! J'ai déjà trop attendu. Que doivent-ils penser de ne pas me voir revenir? Cet argent! quand je pense que je leur ai envoyé de l'argent! C'était moi qu'il fallait. Je me rappelle, cet homme, il m'a dit que je ne pouvais pas sortir d'ici. Nous allons voir. Allons, une voiture! une voiture! qu'on attelle. Je veux aller les chercher. Où sont les valets? Il doit y avoir des valets, puisqu'il y a un seigneur. Je suis le maître ici. C'est ma maison. Et j'en tordrai les verrous, et j'en briserai les serrures, et j'en enfoncerai les portes à coups de pied. Quelqu'un qui me barre le passage, je lui passe mon épée au travers du corps, car j'ai une épée maintenant. Je voudrais bien voir qu'on me résistât. J'ai une femme, qui est Dea. J'ai un

père, qui est Ursus. Ma maison est un palais et je le donne à Ursus. Mon nom est un diadème et je le donne à Dea. Vite! Tout de suite! Dea, me voici! Ah!
j'aurai vite enjambé l'intervalle, va!

Et, levant la première portière venue, il sortit de la chambre impétueusement.

Il se trouva dans un corridor.

Il alla devant lui.

Un deuxième corridor se présenta.

Toutes les portes étaient ouvertes.

Il se mit à marcher au hasard, de chambre en chambre, de couloir en couloir, cherchant la sortie.

II

RESSEMBLANCE D’UN PALAIS AVEC UN BOIS

Dans les palais à l’italienne, Corleone-lodge était de cette sorte, il y avait très peu de portes. Tout était rideau, portière, tapisserie.

Pas de palais à cette époque qui n’eût, à l’intérieur, un singulier fouillis de chambres et de corridors où abondait le faste; dorures, marbres, boiseries ciselées, soies d’orient; avec des recoins pleins de précaution et d’obscurité, d’autres pleins de lumière. C’étaient des galetas riches et gais, des réduits vernis, luisants, revêtus de faïences de Hollande ou d’azulejos de Portugal, des embrasures de hautes fenêtres coupées en soupentes, et des cabinets tout en vitres, jolies lanternes logeables. Les épaisseurs de mur, évidées, étaient habitables.

Ça et là, des bonbonnières, qui étaient des garde-robes. Cela s’appelait «les petits appartements». C’est là qu’on commettait les crimes.

Si l’on avait à tuer le duc de Guise ou à fourvoyer la jolie présidente de Sylvecane, ou, plus tard, à étouffer les cris des petites qu’amenait Lebel, c’était commode. Logis compliqué, inintelligible à un nouveau venu. Lieu des rapts; fond ignoré o aboutissaient les disparitions. Dans ces élégantes cavernes les princes et les seigneurs déposaient leur butin; le comte de Charolais y cachait madame Courchamp, la femme du maître des requêtes; M. de Monthulé y cachait la fille de Haudry, le fermier de la Croix Saint-Lenfroy; le prince de Conti y cachait les deux belles boulangères de l’Ile-Adam; le duc de Buckingham y cachait la pauvre Pennywell, etc. Les choses qui s’accomplissaient là étaient de celles qui se font, comme dit la loi romaine, *vi, clam et precario,* par force, en secret, et pour peu de temps. Qui était là y restait selon le bon plaisir du maître. C’étaient des oubliettes, dorées. Cela tenait du cloître et du sérail. Des escaliers tournaient, montaient, descendaient. Une spirale de chambres s’emboîtant vous ramenait à votre point de départ. Une galerie s’achevait en oratoire. Un confessionnal se greffait sur une alcôve. Les ramifications des coraux et les percées des éponges avaient probablement servi de modèles aux architectes des «petits appartements» royaux et seigneuriaux. Les embranchements étaient inextricables. Des portraits pivotant sur des ouvertures offraient des entrées et des sorties. C'était machiné. Il le fallait bien; il s'y jouait des drames. Les étages de cette ruche allaient des caves aux mansardes. Madrépore bizarre incrusté dans tous les palais, commencer par Versailles, et qui était comme l'habitation des pygmées dans la demeure des titans. Couloirs, reposoirs, nids, alvéoles, cachettes. Toutes sortes de trous où se fourraient les petitesses des grands.

Ces lieux, serpentants et murés, éveillaient des idées de jeux, d'yeux bandés, de mains à tâtons, de rires contenus, colin-maillard, cache-cache; et en même temps faisaient songer aux Atrides, aux Plantagenets, aux Médicis, aux sauvages chevaliers d'Elz, à Rizzio, à Monaldeschi, aux épées poursuivant un fuyard de chambre en chambre.

L'antiquité avait, elle aussi, de mystérieux logis de ce genre, où le luxe était approprié aux horreurs. L'échantillon en a ét conservé sous terre dans certains sépulcres d'Egypte, par exemple dans la crypte du roi Psamméticus, découverte par Passalacqua.

On trouve dans les vieux poètes l'effroi de ces constructions suspectes.

Error circumflexus, locus implicitus gyris.

Gwynplaine était dans les petits appartements de Corleone-lodge.

Il avait la fièvre de partir, d'être dehors, de revoir Dea. Cet enchevêtrement de corridors et de cellules, de portes dérobées, de portes imprévues, l'arrêtait et le ralentissait. Il eût voulu y courir, il était forcé d'y errer. Il croyait n'avoir qu'une porte à pousser, il avait un écheveau à débrouiller.

Après une chambre, une autre. Puis des carrefours de salons.

Il ne rencontrait rien de vivant. Il écoutait. Aucun mouvement.

Il lui semblait parfois revenir sur ses pas.

Par moments il croyait voir quelqu'un venir à lui. Ce n'était personne. C'était lui, dans une glace, en habit de seigneur.

C'était lui, invraisemblable. Il se reconnaissait, mais pas tout de suite.

Il allait, prenant tous les passages qui s'offraient.

Il s'engageait dans des méandres d'architecture intime; là un cabinet coquettement peint et sculpté, un peu obscène et très discret; là une chapelle équivoque tout écaillée de nacres et d'émaux, avec des ivoires faits pour être vus à la loupe, comme des dessus de tabatières; là un de ces précieux retraits florentins accommodés pour les hypocondries féminines, et qu'on appelait dès lors *boudoirs*. Partout, sur les plafonds, sur les murs, sur les planchers même, il y avait des figurations veloutées ou métalliques d’oiseaux et d’arbres, des végétations extravagantes enroulées de perles, des bossages de passementerie, des nappes de jais, des guerriers, des reines, des tritonnes cuirassées d’un ventre d’hydre. Les biseaux des cristaux taillés ajoutaient des effets de prismes à des effets de reflets. Les verroteries jouaient les pierreries. On voyait étinceler des encoignures sombres. On ne savait si toutes ces facettes lumineuses, où des verres d’émeraudes s’amalgamaient à des ors de soleil levant et où flottaient des nuées gorge de pigeon, étaient des miroirs microscopiques ou des aigues-marines démesurées.

Magnificence à la fois délicate et énorme. C’était le plus mignon des palais, à moins que ce ne fût le plus colossal des écrins. Une maison pour Mab ou un bijou pour Géo. Gwynplaine cherchait l’issue.

Il ne la trouvait pas. Impossible de s’orienter. Rien de capiteux comme l’opulence quand on la voit pour la première fois.

Mais en outre c’était un labyrinthe. A chaque pas, une magnificence lui faisait obstacle. Cela semblait résister à ce qu’il s’en allât. Cela avait l’air de ne pas vouloir le lâcher.

Il était comme dans une glu de merveilles. Il se sentait saisi et retenu.

— Quel horrible palais! pensait-il.

Il rôdait dans ce dédale, inquiet, se demandant ce que cela voulait dire, s’il était en prison, s’irritant, aspirant à l’air libre. Il répétait: Dea! Dea! comme on tient le fil qu’il ne faut pas laisser rompre et qui vous fera sortir.

Par moments il appelait.

— Hé! quelqu’un!

Rien ne répondait.

Ces chambres n’en finissaient pas. C’était désert, silencieux, splendide, sinistre.

On se figure ainsi les châteaux enchantés.

Des bouches de chaleur cachées entretenaient dans ces corridors et dans ces cabinets une température d’été. Le mois de juin semblait avoir été pris par quelque magicien et enfermé dans ce labyrinthe. Par moments cela sentait bon. On traversait des bouffées de parfums comme s’il y avait là des fleurs invisibles.

On avait chaud. Partout des tapis. On eût pu se promener nu.

Gwynplaine regardait par les fenêtres. L’aspect changeait. Il voyait tantôt des jardins, remplis des fraîcheurs du printemps et du matin, tantôt de nouvelles façades avec d’autres statues, tantôt des patios à l’espagnole, qui sont de petites cours quadrangulaires entre de grands bâtiments, dallées, moisies et froides; parfois une rivière qui était la Tamise, parfois une grosse tour qui était Windsor.

Dehors, de si grand matin, il n’y avait point de passants.

Il s’arrêtait. Il écoutait.

— Oh! je m’en irai, disait-il. Je rejoindrai Dea. On ne me gardera pas de force. Malheur à qui voudrait m’empêcher de sortir! Qu’est-ce que c’est que cette grande tour-là? S’il y a un géant, un dogue d’enfer, une tarasque, pour barrer la porte dans ce palais ensorcelé, je l’exterminerai. Une armée, je la dévorerais. Dea! Dea!

Tout à coup il entendit un petit bruit, très faible. Cela ressemblait à de l’eau qui coule.

Il était dans une galerie étroite, obscure, fermée à quelques pas devant lui par un rideau fendu.

Il alla à ce rideau, l’écarta, entra.

Il pénétra dans de l’inattendu.

III

EVE

Une salle octogone, voûtée en anse de panier, sans fenêtres, éclairée d'un jour d'en haut, toute revêtue, mur, pavage et voûte, de marbre fleur de pêcher; au milieu de la salle un baldaquin pinacle en marbre drap mortuaire, à colonnes torses, dans le style pesant et charmant d'Elisabeth, couvrant d'ombre une vasque-baignoire du même marbre noir; au milieu de la vasque un fin jaillissement d'eau odorante et tiède remplissant doucement et lentement la cuve; c'est là ce qu'il avait devant les yeux.

Bain noir fait pour changer la blancheur en resplendissement.

C'était cette eau qu'il avait entendue. Une fuite ménagée dans la baignoire à un certain niveau ne la laissait pas déborder. La vasque fumait, mais si peu qu'il y avait à peine quelque buée sur le marbre. Le grêle jet d'eau était pareil à une souple verge d'acier fléchissante au moindre souffle.

Aucun meuble. Si ce n'est, près de la baignoire, une de ces chaises-lits à coussins assez longues pour qu'une femme, qui y est étendue, puisse avoir à ses pieds son chien, ou son amant; d'où *can-al-pie*, dont nous avons fait canapé.

C'était une chaise longue d'Espagne, vu que le bas était en argent. Les coussins et le capiton étaient de soie glacée blanc.

De l'autre côté de la baignoire, se dressait, adossée au mur, une haute étagère de toilette en argent massif avec tous ses ustensiles, ayant à son milieu huit petites glaces de Venise ajustées daans un châssis d'argent et figurant une fenêtre.

Dans le pan coupé de muraille le plus voisin du canapé, était entaillée une baie carrée qui ressemblait à une lucarne et qui était bouchée d'un panneau fait d'une lame d'argent rouge. Ce panneau avait des gonds comme un volet. Sur l'argent rouge brillait, niellée et dorée, une couronne royale. Au-dessus du panneau était suspendu et scellé au mur un timbre qui était en vermeil, à moins qu'il ne fût en or.

Vis-à-vis l'entrée de cette salle, en-face de Gwynplaine qui s'était arrêté court, le pan coupé de marbre manquait. Il était remplacé par une ouverture de même dimension, allant jusqu'à la voûte et fermée d'une large et haute toile d'argent.

Cette toile, d'une ténuité féerique, était transparente. On voyait au travers.

Au centre de la toile, à l'endroit où est d'ordinaire l'araignée, Gwynplaine aperçut une chose formidable, une femme nue.

Nue à la lettre, non. Cette femme était vêtue. Et vêtue de la tête aux pieds. Le vêtement était une chemise, très longue, comme les robes d'anges dans les tableaux de sainteté, mais si fine qu'elle semblait mouillée. De là un à peu près de femme nue, plus traître et plus périlleux que la nudité franche.

L'histoire a enregistré des processions de princesses et de grandes dames entre deux files de moines, où, sous prétexte de pieds nus et d'humilité, la duchesse de Montpensier se montrait ainsi à tout Paris dans une chemise de dentelle. Correctif: un cierge à la main.

La toile d'argent, diaphane comme une vitre, était un rideau.

Elle n'était fixée que du haut, et pouvait se soulever. Elle séparait la salle de marbre, qui était une salle de bain, d'une chambre, qui était une chambre à coucher. Cette chambre, très petite, était une espèce de grotte de miroirs. Partout des glaces de Venise, contiguës, ajustées polyédriquement, reliées par des baguettes dorées, réfléchissaient le lit qui était au centre. Sur ce lit, d'argent comme la toilette et le canapé, était couchée la femme. Elle dormait.

Elle dormait la tête renversée, un de ses pieds refoulant ses couvertures, comme la succube au-dessus de laquelle le rêve bat des ailes.

Son oreiller de guipure était tombé à terre sur le tapis.

Entre sa nudité et le regard il y avait deux obstacles, sa chemise et le rideau de gaze d'argent, deux transparences. La chambre, plutôt alcôve que chambre, était éclairée avec une sorte de retenue par le reflet de la salle de bain. La femme peut-être n'avait pas de pudeur, mais la lumière en avait.

Le lit n'avait ni colonnes, ni dais, ni ciel, de sorte que la femme, quand elle ouvrait les yeux, pouvait se voir mille fois nue dans les miroirs au-dessus de sa tête.

Les draps avaient le désordre d'un sommeil agité. La beauté des plis indiquait la finesse de la toile. C'était l'époque où une reine, songeant qu'elle serait damnée, se figurait l'enfer ainsi: un lit avec de gros draps.

Du reste, cette mode du sommeil nu venait d’Italie, et remontait aux romains. *Sub clara nuda lucerna*, dit Horace.

Une robe de chambre en soie singulière, de Chine sans doute, car dans les plis on entrevoyait un grand lézard d’or, était jetée sur le pied du lit.

Au delà du lit, au fond de l’alcôve, il y avait probablement une porte, masquée et marquée par une assez grande glace sur laquelle étaient peints des paons et des cygnes. Dans cette chambre faite d’ombre tout reluisait. Les espacements entre les cristaux et les dorures étaient enduits de cette matière étincelante qu’on appelait à Venise «fiel de verre».

Au chevet du lit était fixé un pupitre en argent à tasseaux tournants et à flambeaux fixes sur lequel on pouvait voir un livre ouvert portant au haut des pages ce titre en grosses lettres rouges: *Alcoramus Mahumedis*.

Gwynplaine ne percevait aucun de ces détails. La femme, voilà ce qu’il voyait.

Il était à la fois pétrifié et bouleversé; ce qui s’exclut, mais ce qui existe.

Cette femme, il la reconnaissait.

Elle avait les yeux fermés et le visage tourné vers lui.

C’était la duchesse.

Elle, cet être mystérieux en qui se mélangeaient tous les resplendissements de l’inconnu, celle qui lui avait fait faire tant de songes inavouables, celle qui lui avait écrit une si étrange lettre! La seule femme au monde dont il pût dire: Elle m’a vu, et elle veut de moi! Il avait chassé les songes, il avait brûlé la lettre. Il l’avait reléguée, elle; le plus loin qu’il avait pu hors de sa rêverie et de sa mémoire; il n’y pensait plus; il l’avait oubliée...

Il la revoyait!

Il la revoyait terrible.

La femme nue, c’est la femme armée.

Il ne respirait plus. Il se sentait soulevé comme dans un nimbe, et poussé. Il regardait. Cette femme devant lui! Était-ce possible?

Au théâtre, duchesse. Ici, néréide, naïade, fée. Toujours apparition.

Il essaya de fuir et sentit que cela ne se pouvait pas. Ses regards étaient devenus deux chaînes, et l’attachaient à cette vision.

Était-ce une fille? Était-ce une vierge? Les deux. Messaline, présente peut-être dans l’invisible, devait sourire, et Diane devait veiller. Il y avait sur cette beauté la clarté de l’inaccessible. Pas de pureté comparable à cette forme chaste et altière. Certaines neiges qui n’ont jamais été touchées sont reconnaissables. Les blancheurs sacrées de la Yungfrau, cette femme les avait. Ce qui se dégageait de ce front inconscient, de cette vermeille chevelure éparse, de ces cils abaissés, de ces veines bleues vaguement visibles, de ces rondeurs sculpturales des seins, des hanches et des genoux modelant les affleurements roses de la chemise, c'était la divinité d'un sommeil auguste.

Cette impudeur se dissolvait en rayonnement. Cette créature était nue avec autant de calme que si elle avait droit au cynisme divin, elle avait la sécurité d'une olympienne qui se fait fille du gouffre, et qui peut dire à l'océan: Père! et elle s'offrait, inabordable et superbe, à tout ce qui passe, aux regards, aux désirs, aux démences, aux songes, aussi fièrement assoupie sur ce lit de boudoir que Vénus dans l'immensité de l'écume.

Elle s'était endormie la nuit et prolongeait son sommeil au grand jour; confiance commencée dans les ténèbres et continuée dans la lumière.

Gwynplaine frémissait. Il admirait.

Admiration malsaine, et qui intéresse trop.

Il avait peur.

La boîte à surprises du sort ne s'épuise point. Gwynplaine avait cru être au bout. Il recommençait. Qu'était-ce que tous ces éclairs, s'abattant sur sa tête sans relâche, et enfin, foudroiement suprême, lui jetant, à lui, homme frissonnant, une déesse endormie? Qu'était-ce que toutes ces ouvertures de ciel successives d'où finissait par sortir, désirable et redoutable, son rêve? Qu'était-ce que ces complaisances du tentateur inconnu lui apportant, l'une après l'autre, ses aspirations vagues, ses velléités confuses, jusqu'à ses mauvaises pensées devenues chair vivante, et l'accablant sous une enivrante série de réalités tirées de l'impossible? Y avait-il conspiration de toute l'ombre contre lui, misérable, et qu'allait-il devenir avec tous ces sourires de la fortune sinistre autour de lui? Qu'était-ce que ce vertige arrangé exprès? Cette femme! là! pourquoi?
comment? Nulle explication. Pourquoi lui? Pourquoi elle?
Était-il fait pair d'Angleterre exprès pour cette duchesse? Qui les amenait ainsi l'un à l'autre? qui était dupe? qui était victime? De qui abusait-on la bonne foi? était-ce Dieu qu'on trompait? Toutes ces choses, il ne les précisait pas, il les entrevoyait à travers une suite de nuages noirs dans son cerveau.

Ce logis magique et malveillant, cet étrange palais, tenace comme une prison, était-il du complot? Gwynplaine subissait une sorte de résorption.

Des forces obscures le garrottaient mystérieusement. Une gravitation l’enchaînait. Sa volonté, soutirée, s’en allait de lui. A quoi se retenir? Il était hagard et charmé. Cette fois, il se sentait irrémédiablement insensé. La sombre chute à pic dans le précipice d’éblouissement continuait.

La femme dormait.

Pour lui, l’état de trouble s’aggravant, ce n’était même plus la lady, la duchesse, la dame; c’était la femme.

Les déviations sont dans l’homme à l’état latent. Les vices ont dans notre organisme un tracé invisible tout préparé. Même innocents, et en apparence purs, nous avons cela en nous. Être sans tache, ce n’est pas être sans défaut. L’amour est une loi.

La volupté est un piège. Il y a l’ivresse, et il y a l’ivrognerie. L’ivresse, c’est de vouloir une femme; l’ivrognerie, c’est de vouloir la femme.

Gwynplaine, hors de lui, tremblait.

Que faire contre cette rencontre? Pas de flots d’étoffes, pas d’ampleurs soyeuses, pas de toilette prolixe et coquette, pas d’exagération galante cachant et montrant, pas de nuage. La nudité dans sa concision redoutable. Sorte de sommation mystérieuse, effrontément édénique. Tout le côté ténébreux de l’homme mis en demeure. Ève pire que Satan. L’humain et le surhumain amalgamés. Extase inquiétante, aboutissant au triomphe brutal de l’instinct sur le devoir. Le contour souverain de la beauté est impérieux. Quand il sort de l’idéal et quand il daigne être réel, c’est pour l’homme une proximité funeste.

Par instants la duchesse se déplaçait mollement sur le lit, et avait les vagues mouvements d’une vapeur dans l’azur, changeant d’attitude comme la nuée change de forme. Elle ondulait, composant et décomposant des courbes charmantes. Toutes les souplesses de l’eau, la femme les a. Comme l’eau, la duchesse avait on ne sait quoi d’insaisissable. Chose bizarre à dire, elle était là, chair visible, et elle restait chimérique.

Palpable, elle semblait lointaine. Gwynplaine, effaré et pâle, contemplait. Il écoutait ce sein palpiter et croyait entendre une respiration de fantôme. Il était attiré, il se débattait.

Que faire contre elle? que faire contre lui?

Il s’était attendu à tout, excepté à cela. Un gardien féroce en travers de la porte, quelque furieux monstre geôlier à combattre, voilà sur quoi il avait compté. Il avait prévu Cerbère; il trouvait Hébé.

Une femme nue. Une femme endormie.

Quel sombre combat!

Il fermait les paupières. Trop d’aurore dans l’oeil est une souffrance. Mais, à travers ses paupières fermées, tout de suite il la revoyait. Plus ténébreuse, aussi belle.

Prendre la fuite, ce n’est pas facile. Il avait essayé, et n’avait pu. Il était enraciné comme on est dans le rêve. Quand nous voulons rétrograder, la tentation cloue nos pieds au pavé.

Avancer reste possible, reculer non. Les invisibles bras de la faute sortent de terre et nous tirent dans le glissement.

Une banalité acceptée de tout le monde, c’est que l’émotion s’émousse. Rien n’est plus faux. C’est comme si l’on disait que, sous de l’acide nitrique tombant goutte à goutte, une plaie s’apaise et s’endort, et que l’écartèlement blase Damiens.

La vérité est qu’à chaque redoublement, la sensation est plus aiguë.

D’étonnement en étonnement, Gwynplaine était arrivé au paroxysme.

Ce vase, sa raison, sous cette stupeur nouvelle, débordait. Il sentait en lui un éveil effrayant.

De boussole, il n’en avait plus. Une seule certitude était devant lui, cette femme. On ne sait quel irrémédiable bonheur s’entr’ouvrait, ressemblant à un naufrage. Plus de direction possible. Un courant irrésistible, et l’écueil. L’écueil, ce n’est pas le rocher, c’est la sirène. Un aimant est au fond de l’abîme. S’arracher à cette attraction, Gwynplaine le voulait, mais comment faire? Il ne sentait plus de point d’attache. La fluctuation humaine est infinie. Un homme peut être désempar comme un navire. L’ancre, c’est la conscience. Chose lugubre, la conscience peut casser.

Il n’avait même pas cette ressource: — Je suis défiguré et terrible. Elle me repoussera. — Cette femme lui avait écrit qu’elle l’aimait.

Il y a dans les crises un instant de porte-à-faux. Quand nous débordons sur le mal plus que nous ne nous appuyons sur le bien, cette quantité de nous-même qui est en suspens sur la faute finit par l’emporter et nous précipite. Ce moment triste était-il venu pour Gwynplaine?

Comment échapper?

Ainsi c’était elle! la duchesse! cette femme! Il l’avait devant lui, dans cette chambre, dans ce lieu désert, endormie, livrée, seule. Elle était à sa discrétion, et il était en son pouvoir!

La duchesse!

On a aperçu une étoile au fond des espaces. On l’a admirée.

Elle est si loin! que craindre d’une étoile fixe? Un jour, — une nuit, — on la voit se déplacer. On distingue un frisson de lueur autour d’elle. Cet astre, qu’on croyait impassible, remue. Ce n’est pas l’étoile, c’est la comète. C’est l’immense incendiaire du ciel. L’astre marche, grandit, secoue une chevelure de pourpre, devient énorme. C’est de votre côté qu’il se dirige. O terreur, il vient à vous! La comète vous connaît, la comète vous désire, la comète vous veut. Épouvantable approche céleste. Ce qui arrive sur vous, c’est le trop de lumière, qui est l’aveuglement; c’est l’excès de vie, qui est la mort. Cette avance que vous fait le zénith, vous la refusez. Cette offre d’amour du gouffre, vous la rejetez. Vous mettez votre main sur vos paupières, vous vous cachez, vous vous dérobez, vous vous croyez sauvé. Vous rouvrez les yeux... — L’étoile redoutable est là. Elle n’est plus étoile, elle est monde. Monde ignoré.

Monde de lave et de braise. Dévorant prodige des profondeurs.

Elle emplit le ciel. Il n’y a plus qu’elle. L’escarboucle du fond de l’infini, diamant de loin, de près est fournaise. Vous êtes dans sa flamme.

Et vous sentez commencer votre combustion par une chaleur de paradis.

IV

SATAN

Tout à coup la dormeuse se réveilla. Elle se dressa sur son séant avec une majesté brusque et harmonieuse; ses cheveux de blonde soie floche se répandirent avec un doux tumulte sur ses reins; sa chemise tombante laissa voir son épaule très bas; elle toucha de sa main délicate son orteil rose, et regarda quelques instants son pied nu, digne d'être adoré par Périclés et copi par Phidias; puis elle s'étira et bâilla comme une tigresse au soleil levant.

Il est probable que Gwynplaine respirait, comme lorsqu'on retient son souffle, avec effort.

— Est-ce qu'il y a là quelqu'un? dit-elle.

Elle dit cela tout en bâillant, et c'était plein de grâce.

Gwynplaine entendit cette voix qu'il ne connaissait pas. Voix de charmeuse; accent délicieusement hautain; l'intonation de la caresse tempérant l'habitude du commandement.

En même temps, se dressant sur ses genoux, il y a une statue antique ainsi agenouillée dans mille plis transparents, elle tira à elle la robe de chambre et se jeta à bas du lit, nue et debout, le temps de voir passer une flèche, et tout de suite enveloppée.

En un clin d'oeil la robe de soie la couvrit. Les manches, très longues, lui cachaient les mains. On ne voyait plus que le bout des doigts de ses pieds, blancs avec de petits ongles, comme des pieds d'enfant.

Elle s'ôta du dos un flot de cheveux qu'elle rejeta sur sa robe, puis elle courut derrière le lit, au fond de l'alcôve, et appliqua son oreille au miroir peint qui vraisemblablement recouvrait une porte.

Elle frappa contre la glace avec le petit coude que fait l'index replié.

— Y a-t-il quelqu'un? Lord David! est-ce que ce serait déj vous? Quelle heure est-il donc? Est-ce toi, Barkilphedro?

Elle se retourna.

— Mais non. Ce n'est pas de ce côté-ci. Est-ce qu'il y a quelqu'un dans la chambre de bain? Mais répondez donc! Au fait, non, personne ne peut venir par là.

Elle alla au rideau de toile d’argent, l’ouvrit du bout de son pied, l’écarta d’un mouvement d’épaule, et entra dans la chambre de marbre.

Gwynplaine sentit comme un froid d’agonie. Nul abri. Il était trop tard pour fuir. D’ailleurs il n’en avait pas la force. Il eût voulu que le pavé se fendît, et tomber sous terre. Aucun moyen de ne pas être vu.

Elle le vit.

Elle le regarda, prodigieusement étonnée, mais sans aucun tressaillement, avec une nuance de bonheur et de mépris:

— Tiens, dit-elle, Gwynplaine!

Puis, subitement, d’un bond violent, car cette chatte était une panthère, elle se jeta à son cou.

Elle lui pressa la tête entre ses bras nus dont les manches, dans cet emportement, s’étaient relevées.

Et tout à coup le repoussant, abattant sur les deux épaules de Gwynplaine ses petites mains comme des serres, elle debout devant lui, lui debout devant elle, elle se mit à le regarder étrangement.

Elle regarda, fatale, avec ses yeux d’Aldébaran, rayon visuel mixte, ayant on ne sait quoi de louche et de sidéral. Gwynplaine contemplait cette prunelle bleue et cette prunelle noire, éperdu sous la double fixité de ce regard de ciel et de ce regard d’enfer. Cette femme et cet homme se renvoyaient l’éblouissement sinistre. Ils se fascinaient l’un l’autre, lui par la difformité, elle par la beauté, tous deux par l’horreur.

Il se taisait, comme sous un poids impossible à soulever. Elle s’écria:

— Tu as de l’esprit. Tu es venu. Tu as su que j’avais ét forcée de partir de Londres. Tu m’as suivie. Tu as bien fait.
Tu es extraordinaire d’être ici.

Une prise de possession réciproque, cela jette une sorte d’éclair. Gwynplaine, confusément averti par une vague crainte sauvage et honnête, recula, mais les ongles roses crispés sur son épaule le tenaient. Quelque chose d’inexorable s’ébauchait. Il était dans l’antre de la femme fauve, homme fauve lui-même.

Elle reprit:

— Anne, cette sotte, — tu sais? la reine, — elle m’a fait venir Windsor sans savoir pourquoi. Quand je suis arrivée, elle était enfermée avec son idiot de chancelier. Mais comment as-tu fait pour pénétrer jusqu’à moi?
Voilà ce que j’appelle être un homme.
Des obstacles. Il n’y en a pas. On est appelé, on accourt. Tu t’es renseigné?

Mon nom, la duchesse Josiane, je pense que tu le savais. Qui est-ce qui t'a introduit? C'est le mousse sans doute. Il est intelligent. Je lui donnerai cent guinées.

Comment t'y es-tu pris? dis-moi cela. Non, ne me le dis pas.

Je ne veux pas le savoir. Expliquer rapetisse. Je t'aime mieux surprenant. Tu es assez monstrueux pour être merveilleux. Tu tombes de l'empyrée, voilà, ou tu montes du troisième dessous, travers la trappe de l'Érèbe. Rien de plus simple, le plafond s'est écarté ou le plancher s'est ouvert. Une descente par les nuées ou une ascension dans un flamboiement de soufre, c'est ainsi que tu arrives. Tu mérites d'entrer comme les dieux.

C'est dit, tu es mon amant.

Gwynplaine, égaré, écoutait, sentant de plus en plus sa pensée osciller. C'était fini. Et impossible de douter. La lettre de la nuit, cette femme la confirmait. Lui, Gwynplaine, amant d'une duchesse, amant aimé! l'immense orgueil aux mille têtes sombres remua dans ce coeur infortuné.

La vanité, force énorme en nous, contre nous.

La duchesse continua:

— Puisque tu es là, c'est que c'est voulu. Je n'en demande pas davantage. Il y a quelqu'un en haut, ou en bas, qui nous jette l'un à l'autre. Fiançailles du Styx et de l'Aurore. Fiançailles effrénées hors de toutes les lois! Le jour où je t'ai vu, j'ai dit: — C'est lui. Je le reconnais. C'est le monstre de mes rêves.

Il sera à moi. — Il faut aider le destin. C'est pourquoi je t'ai écrit. Une question, Gwynplaine? crois-tu à la prédestination?

J'y crois, moi, depuis que j'ai lu le Songe de Scipion dans Cicéron. Tiens, je ne remarquais pas. Un habit de gentilhomme.

Tu t'es habillé en seigneur. Pourquoi pas? Tu es saltimbanque.

Raison de plus. Un bateleur vaut un lord. D'ailleurs, qu'est-ce que les lords? des clowns. Tu as une noble taille, tu es très bien fait. C'est inouï que tu sois ici! Quand es-tu arrivé?

Depuis combien de temps es-tu là? Est-ce que tu m'as vue nue?

je suis belle, n'est-ce pas? J'allais prendre mon bain. Oh! je t'aime. Tu as lu ma lettre! L'as-tu lue toi-même? Te l'a-t-on lue? Sais-tu lire? Tu dois être ignorant. Je te fais des questions, mais n'y réponds pas. Je n'aime pas ton son de voix.

Il est doux. Un être incomparable comme toi ne devrait pas parler, mais grincer. Tu chantes, c'est harmonieux. Je hais cela. C'est la seule chose en toi qui me déplaise. Tout le reste est formidable, tout le reste est superbe. Dans l'Inde, tu serais dieu. Est-ce que tu es né avec ce rire épouvantable sur la face? Non, n'est-ce pas? C'est sans doute une mutilation pénale. J'espère bien que tu as commis quelque crime. Viens dans mes bras.

Elle se laissa tomber sur le canapé et le fit tomber près d'elle.

Ils se trouvèrent l'un près de l'autre sans savoir comment. Ce qu'elle disait passait sur Gwynplaine comme un grand vent. Il percevait à peine le sens de ce tourbillon de mots forcenés.

Elle avait l'admiration dans les yeux. Elle parlait en tumulte, frénétiquement, d'une voix éperdue et tendre. Sa parole était une musique, mais Gwynplaine entendait cette musique comme une tempête.

Elle appuya de nouveau sur lui son regard fixe.

— Je me sens dégradée près de toi, quel bonheur! Être altesse, comme c'est fade! Je suis auguste, rien de plus fatigant.

Déchoir repose. Je suis si saturée de respect que j'ai besoin de mépris. Nous sommes toutes un peu des extravagantes, à commencer par Vénus, Cléopâtre, mesdames de Chevreuse et de Longueville, et à finir par moi. Je t'afficherai, je le déclare. Voilà une amourette qui fera une contusion à la royale famille Stuart dont je suis. Ah! je respire! J'ai trouvé l'issue. Je suis hors de là majesté. Être déclassée, c'est être délivrée. Tout rompre, tout braver, tout faire, tout défaire, c'est vivre. Écoute, je t'aime.

Elle s'interrompit, et eut un effrayant sourire.

— Je t'aime non seulement parce que tu es difforme, mais parce que tu es vil. J'aime le monstre, et j'aime l'histrion. Un amant humilié, bafoué, grotesque, hideux, exposé aux rires sur ce pilori qu'on appelle un théâtre, cela a une saveur extraordinaire. C'est mordre au fruit de l'abîme. Un amant infamant, c'est exquis. Avoir sous la dent la pomme, non du paradis, mais de l'enfer, voilà ce qui me tente, j'ai cette faim et cette soif, et je suis cette Ève-là. L'Ève du gouffre. Tu es probablement, sans le savoir, un démon. Je me suis gardée à un masque du songe. Tu es un pantin dont un spectre tient les fils.

Tu es la vision du grand rire infernal. Tu es le maître que j'attendais. Il me fallait un amour comme en ont les Médées et les Canidies. J'étais sûre qu'il m'arriverait une de ces immenses aventures de la nuit. Tu es ce que je voulais. Je te dis là un tas de choses que tu ne dois pas comprendre. Gwynplaine, personne ne m'a possédée, je me donne à toi pure comme la braise ardente. Tu ne me crois évidemment pas, mais si tu savais comme cela m’est égal!

Ses paroles avaient le pêle-mêle de l’éruption. Une piqûre au flanc de l’Etna donnerait l’idée de ce jet de flamme.

Gwynplaine balbutia:

— Madame...

Elle lui mit la main sur la bouche.

— Silence! je te contemple. Gwynplaine, je suis l’immaculée effrénée. Je suis la vestale bacchante. Aucun homme ne m’a connue, et je pourrais être Pythie à Delphes, et avoir sous mon talon nu le trépied de bronze où les prêtres, accoudés sur la peau de Python, chuchotent des questions au dieu invisible. Mon coeur est de pierre, mais il ressemble à ces cailloux mystérieux que la mer roule au pied du rocher Huntly Nabb, à l’embouchure de la Thees, et dans lesquels, si on les casse, on trouve un serpent. Ce serpent, c’est mon amour. Amour tout-puissant, car il t’a fait venir. La distance impossible était entre nous.
J’étais dans Sirius et tu étais dans Allioth. Tu as fait la traversée démesurée, et te voilà. C’est bien. Tais-toi.
Prends-moi.

Elle s’arrêta. Il frissonnait. Elle se remit à sourire.

— Vois-tu, Gwynplaine, rêver, c’est créer. Un souhait est un appel. Construire une chimère, c’est provoquer la réalité.
L’ombre toute-puissante et terrible ne se laisse pas défier.
Elle nous satisfait. Te voilà. Oserai-je me perdre? oui.
Oserai-je être ta maîtresse, ta concubine, ton esclave, ta chose?
avec joie. Gwynplaine, je suis la femme. La femme, c’est de l’argile qui désire être fange. J’ai besoin de me mépriser.
Cela assaisonne l’orgueil. L’alliage de la grandeur, c’est la bassesse. Rien ne se combine mieux. Méprise-moi, toi qu’o méprise. L’avilissement sous l’avilissement, quelle volupté! la fleur double de l’ignominie! je la cueille. Foule-moi aux pieds. Tu ne m’en aimeras que mieux. Je le sais, moi. Sais-tu pourquoi je t’idolâtre? parce que je te dédaigne. Tu es si au-dessous de moi que je te mets sur un autel. Mêler le haut et le bas, c’est le chaos, et le chaos me plaît. Tout commence et finit par le chaos. Qu’est-ce que le chaos? une immense souillure. Et avec cette souillure, Dieu a fait la lumière, et avec cet égout, Dieu a fait le monde. Tu ne sais pas à quel point je suis perverse. Pétris un astre dans de la boue, ce sera moi.

Ainsi parlait cette femme formidable, montrant nu, par sa robe défaite, son torse de vierge.

Elle poursuivit:

— Louve pour tous, chienne pour toi. Comme on va s'étonner!
l'étonnement des imbéciles est doux. Moi, je me comprends.
Suis-je une déesse? Amphitrite s'est donnée au Cyclope.
Fluctivoma Amphitrite. Suis-je une fée? Urgèle s'est livrée Bugryx,
l'androptère aux huit mains palmées. Suis-je une princesse? Marie Stuart a
eu Rizzio. Trois belles, trois monstres. Je suis plus grande qu'elles, car tu es
pire qu'eux.
Gwynplaine, nous sommes faits l'un pour l'autre. Le monstre que tu es
dehors, je le suis dedans. De là mon amour. Caprice, soit. Qu'est-ce que
l'ouragan? un caprice. Il y a entre nous une affinité sidérale; l'un et l'autre
nous sommes de la nuit, toi par la face, moi par l'intelligence. A ton tour tu
me crées.
Tu arrives, voilà mon âme dehors. Je ne la connaissais pas.
Elle est surprenante. Ton approche fait sortir l'hydre de moi, déesse. Tu me
révèles ma vraie nature. Tu me fais faire la découverte de moi-même. Vois
comme je te ressemble. Regarde dans moi comme dans un miroir. Ton
visage, c'est mon âme. Je ne savais pas être à ce point terrible. Moi aussi je
suis donc un monstre! O Gwynplaine, tu me désennuies.

Elle eut un étrange rire d'enfant, s'approcha de son oreille et lui dit tout bas:

— Veux-tu voir une femme folle? c'est moi.

Son regard entrait dans Gwynplaine. Un regard est un philtre.
Sa robe avait des dérangements redoutables. L'extase aveugle et bestiale
envahissait Gwynplaine. Extase où il y avait de l'agonie.

Pendant que cette femme parlait, il sentait comme des éclaboussures de feu. Il sentait sourdre l'irréparable. Il n'avait pas la force de dire un mot. Elle s'interrompait, elle le considérait: O monstre! murmurait-elle. Elle était farouche.

Brusquement, elle lui saisit les mains.

— Gwynplaine, je suis le trône, tu es le tréteau. Mettons-nous de plain-pied. Ah! je suis heureuse, me voilà tombée. Je voudrais que tout le monde pût savoir à quel point je suis abjecte. Ou s'en prosternerait davantage, car plus on abhorre, plus on rampe. Ainsi est fait le genre humain. Hostile, mais reptile. Dragon, mais ver. Oh! je suis dépravée comme les dieux. On ne peut toujours pas m’ôter cela d’être la bâtarde d’un roi. J’agis en reine. Qu’était-ce que Rhodope? Une reine qui aima Phtèh, l’homme à la tête de crocodile. Elle a bâti en son honneur la troisième pyramide. Penthésilée a aimé le centaure, qui s’appelle le Sagittaire, et qui est une constellation. Et que dis-tu d’Anne d’Autriche? Mazarin était-il assez laid! Tu n’es pas laid, toi, tu es difforme. Le laid est petit, le difforme est grand. Le laid, c’est la grimace du diable derrière le beau. Le difforme est l’envers du sublime.

C’est l’autre côté. L’Olympe a deux versants; l’un, dans la clarté, donne Apollon; l’autre, dans la nuit, donne Polyphème.

Toi, tu es Titan. Tu serais Béhémoth dans la forêt, Léviathan dans l’océan, Typhon dans le cloaque. Tu es suprême. Il y a de la foudre dans ta difformité. Ton visage a été dérangé par un coup de tonnerre. Ce qui est sur ta face, c’est la torsion courroucée du grand poing de flamme. Il t’a pétri et il a passé.

La vaste colère obscure a, dans un accès de rage, englué ton âme sous cette effroyable figure surhumaine. L’enfer est un réchaud pénal où chauffe ce fer rouge qu’on appelle la Fatalité; tu es marqué de ce fer-là. T’aimer, c’est comprendre le grand. J’ai ce triomphe. Être amoureuse d’Apollon, le bel effort! La gloire se mesure à l’étonnement. Je t’aime. J’ai rêvé de toi des nuits, des nuits, des nuits! C’est ici un palais à moi. Tu verras mes jardins. Il y a des sources sous les feuilles, des grottes où l’on peut s’embrasser, et de très beaux groupes de marbre qui sont du cavalier Bernin. Et des fleurs! Il y en a trop. Au printemps, c’est un incendie de roses. T’ai-je dit que la reine était ma soeur? Fais de moi ce que tu voudras. Je suis faite pour que Jupiter baise mes pieds et pour que Satan me crache au visage. As-tu une religion? Moi je suis papiste. Mon père Jacques II est mort en France avec un tas de jésuites autour de lui. Jamais je n’ai ressenti ce que j’éprouve auprès de toi. Oh! je voudrais être le soir avec toi, pendant qu’on ferait de la musique, tous deux adossés au même coussin, sous le tendelet de pourpre d’une galère d’or, au milieu des douceurs infinies de la mer. Insulte-moi. Bats-moi. Paye-moi. Traite-moi comme une créature. Je t’adore. Les caresses peuvent rugir. En doutez-vous? entrez chez les lions. L’horreur était dans cette femme et se combinait avec la grâce. Rien de plus tragique. On sentait la griffe, on sentait le velours. C’était l’attaque féline, mêlée de retraite. Il y avait du jeu et du meurtre dans ce va-et-vient. Elle idolâtrait, insolemment. Le résultat, c’était la démence communiquée. Fatal langage, inexprimablement violent et doux. Ce qui insultait n’insultait pas. Ce qui adorait outrageait. Ce qui souffletait déifiait. Son accent imprimait à ses paroles furieuses et amoureuses on ne sait quelle grandeur prométhéenne. Les fêtes de la Grande Déesse, chantées par Eschyle, donnaient aux femmes cherchant les satyres sous les étoiles cette sombre rage épique. Ces paroxysmes compliquaient les danses obscures sous les branches de Dodone. Cette femme était comme transfigurée, s'il est possible qu'on se transfigure du côté opposé au ciel. Ses cheveux avaient des frissons de crinière; sa robe se refermait, puis se rouvrait; rien de charmant comme ce sein plein de cris sauvages, les rayons de son oeil bleu se mêlaient aux flamboiements de son oeil noir, elle était surnaturelle. Gwynplaine, défaillant, se sentait vaincu par la pénétration profonde d'une telle approche.

— Je t'aime! cria-t-elle.

Et elle le mordit d'un baiser.

Homère a des nuages qui peut-être allaient devenir nécessaires sur Gwynplaine et Josiane comme sur Jupiter et Junon. Pour Gwynplaine, être aimé par une femme qui avait un regard et qui le voyait, avoir sur sa bouche informe une pression de lèvres divines, c'était exquis et fulgurant. Il sentait devant cette femme pleine d'énigmes tout s'évanouir en lui. Le souvenir de Dea se débattait dans cette ombre avec de petits cris. Il y a un bas-relief antique qui représente le sphinx mangeant un amour; les ailes du doux être céleste saignent entre ces dents féroces et souriantes.

Est-ce que Gwynplaine aimait cette femme? Est-ce que l'homme a, comme le globe, deux pôles? Sommes-nous, sur notre axe inflexible, la sphère tournante, astre de loin, boue de près, o alternent le jour et la nuit? Le coeur a-t-il deux côtés, l'un qui aime dans la lumière, l'autre qui aime dans les ténèbres?

Ici la femme rayon; là la femme cloaque. L'ange est nécessaire.

Est-ce qu'il serait possible que le démon, lui aussi, fût un besoin? Y a-t-il pour l'âme l'aile de chauve-souris? l'heure crépusculaire sonne-t-elle fatalement pour tous? la faute fait-elle partie intégrante de notre destinée non refusable? le mal, dans notre nature, est-il à prendre en bloc, avec le reste?

est-ce que la faute est une dette à payer? Frémissements profonds.

Et une voix pourtant nous dit que c'est un crime d'être faible.

Ce que Gwynplaine éprouvait était indicible, la chair, la vie, l'effroi, la volupté, une ivresse accablée, et toute la quantit de honte qu'il y a dans l'orgueil. Est-ce qu'il allait tomber?

Elle répéta: — Je t'aime!

Et, frénétique, elle l'étreignit contre sa poitrine.

Gwynplaine haletait.

Tout à coup, tout près d'eux, une petite sonnerie ferme et claire vibra. C'était le timbre scellé dans le mur qui tintait. La duchesse tourna la tête, et dit:

— Qu'est-ce qu'elle me veut?

Et brusquement, avec le bruit d'une trappe à ressort, le panneau d'argent incrusté d'une couronne royale s'ouvrit.

L'intérieur d'un tour, tapissé de velours bleu prince, apparut avec une lettre sur une assiette d'or.

Cette lettre était volumineuse et carrée et posée de façon montrer le cachet, qui était une grande empreinte sur de la cire vermeille. Le timbre continuait de sonner.

Le panneau ouvert touchait presque au canapé où tous deux étaient assis. La duchesse, penchée et se retenant d'un bras au cou de Gwynplaine, étendit l'autre bras, prit la lettre sur l'assiette, et repoussa le panneau. Le tour se referma et le timbre se tut.

La duchesse cassa la cire entre ses doigts, défit l'enveloppe, en tira deux plis qu'elle contenait, et jeta l'enveloppe à terre aux pieds de Gwynplaine.

Le sceau de cire brisé restait déchiffrable, et Gwynplaine put y distinguer une couronne royale et au-dessous la lettre A.

L'enveloppe déchirée étalait ses deux côtés, de sorte qu'on pouvait en même temps lire la suscription: A sa grâce la duchesse Josiane.

Les deux plis qu'avait contenus l'enveloppe étaient un parchemin et un vélin. Le parchemin était grand, le vélin était petit.

Sur le parchemin était empreint un large sceau de chancellerie, en cette cire verte dite cire de seigneurie. La duchesse, toute palpitante et les yeux noyés d'extase, fit une imperceptible moue d'ennui.

— Ah! dit-elle, qu'est-ce qu'elle m'envoie là? Une paperasse!

Quel trouble-fête que cette femme!

Et, laissant de côté le parchemin, elle entr'ouvrit le vélin.

— C'est de son écriture. C'est de l'écriture de ma soeur. Cela me fatigue. Gwynplaine, je t'ai demandé si tu savais lire.

Sais-tu lire?

Gwynplaine fit de la tête signe que oui.

Elle s’étendit sur le canapé, presque comme une femme couchée, cacha soigneusement ses pieds sous sa robe et ses bras sous ses manches, avec une pudeur bizarre, tout en laissant voir son sein, et, couvrant Gwynplaine d’un regard passionné, elle lui tendit le vélin.

— Eh bien, Gwynplaine, tu es à moi. Commence ton service. Mon bien-aimé, lis-moi ce que m’écrit la reine.

Gwynplaine prit le vélin, il défit le pli, et, d’une voix où il y avait toutes sortes de tremblements, il lut:

«Madame,

«Nous vous envoyons gracieusement la copie ci-jointe d’un procès-verbal, certifié et signé par notre serviteur William Cowper, lord chancelier de ce royaume d’Angleterre, et duquel il résulte cette particularité considérable que le fils légitime de lord Linnaeus Clancharlie vient d’être constaté et retrouvé, sous le nom de Gwynplaine, dans la bassesse d’une existence ambulante et vagabonde et parmi des saltimbanques et bateleurs. Cette suppression d’état remonte à son plus bas âge. En conséquence des lois du royaume, et en vertu de son droit héréditaire, lord Fermain Clancharlie, fils de lord Linnaeus, sera, ce jourd’hui même, admis et réintégré dans la chambre des lords. C’est pourquoi, voulant vous bien traiter et vous conserver la transmission des biens et domaines des lords Clancharlie Hunkerville, nous le substituons dans vos bonnes grâces à lord David Dirry-Moir. Nous avons fait amener lord Fermain dans votre résidence de Corleone-lodge; nous commandons et voulons, comme reine et soeur, que notre dit lord Fermain Clancharlie, nomm jusqu’à ce jour Gwynplaine, soit votre mari, et vous l’épouserez, et c’est notre plaisir royal.

Pendant que Gwynplaine lisait, avec des intonations qui chancelaient presque à chaque mot, la duchesse, soulevée du coussin du canapé, écoutait, l’oeil fixe. Comme Gwynplaine achevait, elle lui arracha la lettre.

— ANNE, REINE, dit-elle, lisant la signature, avec une intonation de rêverie.

Puis elle ramassa à terre le parchemin qu’elle avait jeté, et y promena son regard. C’était la déclaration des naufragés de la *Matutina,* copiée sur un procès-verbal signé du shériff de Southwark et du lord-chancelier.

Le procès-verbal lu, elle relut le message de la reine. Puis elle dit:

— Soit.

Et, calme, montrant du doigt à Gwynplaine la portière de la galerie par où il était entré:

— Sortez, dit-elle.

Gwynplaine, pétrifié, demeura immobile.

Elle reprit, glaciale:

— Puisque vous êtes mon mari, sortez.

Gwynplaine, sans parole, les yeux baissés comme un coupable, ne bougeait pas. Elle ajouta:

— Vous n'avez pas le droit d'être ici. C'est la place de mon amant.

Gwynplaine était comme cloué.

— Bien, dit-elle. Ce sera moi, je m'en vais. Ah! vous êtes mon mari! Rien de mieux. Je vous hais.

Et se levant, jetant à on ne sait qui dans l'espace un hautain geste d'adieu, elle sortit.

La portière de la galerie se referma sur elle.

V

ON SE RECONNAIT, MAIS ON NE SE CONNAIT PAS

Gwynplaine demeura seul.

Seul en présence de cette baignoire tiède et de ce lit défait.

La pulvérisation des idées était en lui à son comble. Ce qu'il pensait ne ressemblait pas à de la pensée. C'était une diffusion, une dispersion, l'angoisse d'être dans l'incompréhensible. Il avait en lui quelque chose comme le sauve-qui-peut d'un rêve.

L'entrée dans les mondes inconnus n'est pas une chose simple.

A partir de la lettre de la duchesse, apportée par le mousse, une série d'heures surprenantes avait commencé pour Gwynplaine, de moins en moins intelligibles. Jusqu'à cet instant il était dans le songe, mais il y voyait clair. Maintenant il y tâtonnait.

Il ne pensait pas. Il ne songeait même plus. Il subissait.

Il restait assis sur le canapé, à l'endroit où la duchesse l'avait laissé.

Tout à coup il y eut dans cette ombre un bruit de pas. C'était un pas d'homme. Ce pas venait du côté opposé à la galerie par o était sortie la duchesse. Il approchait, et on l'entendait sourdement, mais nettement. Gwynplaine, quelle que fût son absorption, prêta l'oreille.

Subitement, au delà du rideau de toile d'argent que la duchesse avait laissé entr'ouvert, derrière le lit, la porte qu'il était aisé de soupçonner sous la glace peinte s'ouvrit toute grande, et une voix mâle et joyeuse, chantant à pleine gorge, jeta dans la chambre aux miroirs ce refrain d'une vieille chanson française:

Trois petits gorets sur leur fumier Juraient comme des porteurs de chaise.

Un homme entra.

Cet homme avait l'épée au côté et à la main un chapeau à plumes avec ganse et cocarde, et était vêtu d'un magnifique habit de mer, galonné.

Gwynplaine se dressa, comme si un ressort le mettait debout.

Il reconnut cet homme et cet homme le reconnut.

De leurs deux bouches stupéfaites s'échappa en même temps ce double cri:

— Gwynplaine!

— Tom-Jim-Jack!

L’homme au chapeau à plumes marcha sur Gwynplaine, qui croisa les bras.

— Comment es-tu ici, Gwynplaine?

— Et toi, Tom-Jim-Jack, comment y viens-tu?

— Ah! je comprends. Josiane! un caprice. Un saltimbanque qui est un monstre, c’est trop beau pour qu’on y résiste. Tu t’es déguisé pour venir ici, Gwynplaine.

— Et toi aussi, Tom-Jim-Jack.

— Gwynplaine, que signifie cet habit de seigneur?

— Tom-Jim-Jack, que signifie cet habit d’officier?

— Gwynplaine, je ne réponds pas aux questions.

— Ni moi, Tom-Jim-Jack.

— Gwynplaine, je ne m’appelle pas Tom-Jim-Jack.

— Tom-Jim-Jack, je ne m’appelle pas Gwynplaine.

— Gwynplaine, je suis ici chez moi.

— Je suis ici chez moi, Tom-Jim-Jack.

— Je te défends de me faire écho. Tu as l’ironie, mais j’ai ma canne. Trêve à tes parodies, misérable drôle.

Gwynplaine devint pâle.

— Drôle toi-même! et tu me rendras raison de cette insulte.

— Dans ta baraque, tant que tu voudras. A coups de poing.

— Ici, et à coups d’épée.

— L’ami Gwynplaine, l’épée est affaire de gentilshommes. Je ne me bats qu’avec mes pareils. Nous sommes égaux devant le poing, inégaux devant l’épée. A l’inn Tadcaster, Tom-Jim-Jack peut boxer Gwynplaine. A Windsor, c’est différent. Apprends ceci: je suis contre-amiral.

— Et moi, je suis pair d’Angleterre.

L’homme en qui Gwynplaine voyait Tom-Jim-Jack éclata de rire.

— Pourquoi pas roi? Au fait, tu as raison. Un histrion est tous ses rôles. Dis-moi que tu es Theseus, duc d’Athènes.

— Je suis pair d’Angleterre, et nous nous battrons.

— Gwynplaine, ceci devient long. Ne joue pas avec quelqu’un qui peut te faire fouetter. Je m’appelle lord David Dirry-Moir.

— Et moi, je m’appelle lord Clancharlie.

Lord David eut un second éclat de rire.

— Bien trouvé. Gwynplaine est lord Clancharlie. C’est en effet le nom qu’il faut avoir pour posséder Josiane. Écoute, je te pardonne. Et sais-tu pourquoi? C’est que nous sommes les deux amants.

La portière de la galerie s’écarta, et une voix dit:

— Vous êtes les deux maris, messeigneurs.

Tous deux se retournèrent.

— Barkilphedro! s’écria lord David.

C’était Barkilphedro, en effet.

Il saluait profondément les deux lords avec un sourire.

Derrière lui, à quelques pas, on apercevait un gentilhomme au visage respectueux et sévère qui avait une baguette noire à la main.

Ce gentilhomme s’avança, fit trois révérences à Gwynplaine, et lui dit:

— Milord, je suis l’huissier de la verge noire. Je viens chercher votre seigneurie, conformément aux ordres de sa majesté.

LIVRE HUITIEME

LE CAPITOLE ET SON VOISINAGE

I

DISSECTION DES CHOSES MAJESTUEUSES

La redoutable ascension qui, depuis tant d’heures déjà, variait ses éblouissements sur Gwynplaine, et qui l’avait emport Windsor, le remporta à Londres.

Les réalités visionnaires se succédèrent devant lui, sans solution de continuité.

Nul moyen de s’y soustraire. Quand une le quittait, l’autre le reprenait.

Il n’avait pas le temps de respirer.

Qui a vu un jongleur a vu le sort. Ces projectiles tombant, montant et retombant, ce sont les hommes dans la main du destin.

Projectiles et jouets.

Le soir de ce même jour, Gwynplaine était dans un lieu extraordinaire.

Il était assis sur un banc fleurdelysé. Il avait par-dessus ses habits de soie une robe de velours écarlate doublée de taffetas blanc avec rochet d’hermine, et aux épaules deux bandes d’hermine bordées d’or.

Il avait autour de lui des hommes de tout âge, jeunes et vieux, assis comme lui sur les fleurs de lys et comme lui vêtus d’hermine et de pourpre.

Devant lui, il apercevait d’autres hommes, à genoux. Ces hommes avaient des robes de soie noire. Quelques-uns de ces hommes agenouillés écrivaient.

En face de lui, à quelque distance, il apercevait des marches, une estrade, un dais, un large écusspn étincelant entre un lion et une licorne, et, sous ce dais, sur cette estrade, au haut de ces marches, adossé à cet écusson, un fauteuil doré et couronné.

C’était un trône.

Le trône de la Grande Bretagne.

Gwynplaine était, pair lui-même, dans la chambre des pairs d’Angleterre.

De quelle façon avait eu lieu cette introduction de Gwynplaine la chambre des lords? Disons-le.

Toute la journée, depuis le matin jusqu’au soir, depuis Windsor jusqu’à Londres, depuis Corleone-lodge jusqu’à Westminster-hall, avait été une montée d'échelon en échelon. A chaque échelon nouvel étourdissement.

Il avait été emmené de Windsor dans les voitures de la reine, avec l'escorte due à un pair. La garde qui honore ressemble beaucoup à la garde qui garde.

Ce jour-là, les riverains de la route de Windsor à Londres virent galoper une cavalcade de gentilshommes pensionnaires de sa majesté accompagnant deux chaises menées grand train en poste royale. Dans la première était assis l'huissier de la verge noire, sa baguette à la main. Dans la seconde on distinguait un large chapeau à plumes blanches couvrant d'ombre un visage qu'on ne voyait pas. Qui est-ce qui passait là? était-ce un prince? était-ce un prisonnier?

C'était Gwynplaine.

Cela avait l'air de quelqu'un qu'on mène à la tour de Londres, moins que ce ne fût quelqu'un qu'on menât à la chambre des pairs.

La reine avait bien fait les choses. Comme il s'agissait du futur mari de sa soeur, elle avait donné une escorte de son propre service.

L'officier de l'huissier de la verge noire était à cheval en tête du cortège.

L'huissier de la verge noire avait dans sa chaise, sur un strapontin, un coussin de drap d'argent. Sur ce coussin était posé un portefeuille noir timbré d'une couronne royale.

A Brentford, dernier relais avant Londres, les deux chaises et l'escorte firent halte.

Un carrosse d'écaillé attelé de quatre chevaux attendait, avec quatre laquais derrière, deux postillons devant, et un cocher en perruque. Roues, marchepieds, soupentes, timon, tout le train de ce carrosse était doré. Les chevaux étaient harnachés d'argent.

Ce coche de gala était d'un dessin allier et surprenant, et eût magnifiquement figuré parmi les cinquante et un carrosses célèbres, dont Roubo nous a laissé les portraits.

L'huissier de la verge noire mit pied à terre, ainsi que son officier.

L'officier de l'huissier retira du strapontin de la chaise de poste le coussin de drap d'argent sur lequel était le portefeuille à couronne, le prit sur ses deux mains, et se tint debout derrière l'huissier.

L'huissier de la verge noire ouvrit la portière du carrosse, qui était vide, puis la portière de la chaise où était Gwynplaine, et, baissant les yeux, invita respectueusement Gwynplaine prendre place dans le carrosse.

Gwynplaine descendit de la chaise et monta dans le carrosse.

L’huissier portant la verge et l’officier portant le coussin y entrèrent après lui, et y occupèrent la banquette basse destinée aux pages dans les anciens coches de cérémonie.

Le carrosse était tendu à l’intérieur de satin blanc garni d’entoilage de Binche avec crêtes et glands d’argent. Le plafond était armorié.

Les postillons des deux chaises qu’on venait de quitter étaient vêtus du hoqueton royal. Le cocher, les postillons et les laquais du carrosse où l’on entrait avaient une autre livrée, très magnifique.

Gwynplaine, à travers le somnambulisme où il était comme anéanti, remarqua cette fastueuse valetaille et demanda à l’huissier de la verge noire:

— Quelle est cette livrée?

L’huissier de la verge noire répondit:

— La vôtre, milord.

Ce jour-là, la chambre des lords devait siéger le soir. *Curia erat serena*, disent les vieux procès-verbaux. En Angleterre, la vie parlementaire est volontiers une vie nocturne. On sait qu’il arriva une fois à Sheridan de commencer à minuit un discours et de le terminer au lever du soleil.

Les deux chaises de poste retournèrent à vide à Windsor; le carrosse où était Gwynplaine se dirigea vers Londres.

Le carrosse d’écaillé à quatre chevaux alla au pas de Brentford Londres. La dignité de la perruque du cocher l’exigeait.

Sous la figure de ce cocher solennel, le cérémonial prenait possession de Gwynplaine.

Ces retards, du reste, étaient, selon toute apparence, calculés.

On en verra plus loin le motif probable.

Il n’était pas encore nuit, mais il s’en fallait de peu, quand le carrosse d’écaillé s’arrêta devant la King’s Gate, lourde porte surbaissée entre deux tourelles qui communiquait de White-Hall Westminster.

La cavalcade des gentilshommes pensionnaires fit groupe autour du carrosse.

Un des valets de pied de l’arrière sauta sur le pavé, et ouvrit la portière.

L’huissier de la verge noire, suivi de son officier portant le coussin, sortit du carrosse, et dit à Gwynplaine:

— Milord, daignez descendre. Que votre seigneurie garde son chapeau sur sa tête.

Gwynplaine était vêtu, sous son manteau de voyage, de l’habit de soie qu’il n’avait pas quitté depuis la veille. Il n’avait pas d’épée.

Il laissa son manteau dans le carrosse.

Sous la voûte carrossière de la King’s Gate, il y avait une porte latérale petite et exhaussée de quelques degrés.

Dans les choses d’apparat, le respect est de précéder.

L’huissier de la verge noire, ayant derrière lui son officier, marchait devant.

Gwynplaine suivait.

Ils montèrent le degré, et entrèrent sous la porte latérale.

Quelques instants après, ils étaient dans une chambre ronde et large avec pilier au centre, un bas de tourelle, salle de rez-de-chaussée, éclairée d’ogives étroites comme des lancettes d’abside, et qui devait être obscure même en plein midi. Peu de lumière fait parfois partie de la solennité. L’obscur est majestueux.

Dans cette chambre treize hommes se tenaient debout. Trois en avant, six au deuxième rang, quatre en arrière.

Des trois premiers un avait une cotte de velours incarnat, et les deux autres des cottes vermeilles aussi, mais de satin. Tous trois avaient les armes d’Angleterre brodées sur l’épaule.

Les six du second rang étaient vêtus de vestes dalmatiques en moire blanche, chacun avec un blason différent sur la poitrine.

Les quatre derniers, tous en moire noire, étaient distincts les uns des autres, le premier par une cape bleue, le deuxième par un saint Georges écarlate sur l’estomac, le troisième par deux croix cramoisies brodées sur sa poitrine et sur son dos, le quatrième par un collet de fourrure noire appelée peau de sabelline. Tous étaient en perruque, nu-tête, et avaient l’épée au côté.

On distinguait à peine leurs visages dans la pénombre. Eux ne pouvaient voir la figure de Gwynplaine.

L’huissier de la verge noire éleva sa baguette et dit:

— Milord Fermain Clancharlie, baron Clancharlie et Hunkerville, moi huissier de la verge noire, premier officier de la chambre de présence, je remets votre seigneurie à Jarretière, roi d’armes d’Angleterre.

Le personnage à cotte de velours, laissant les autres derrière lui, salua Gwynplaine jusqu’à terre et dit:

— Milord Fermain Clancharlie, je suis Jarretière, premier roi d’armes d’Angleterre. Je suis l’officier créé et couronné par sa grâce le duc de Norfolk, comte-maréchal héréditaire. J’ai jur obéissance au roi, aux pairs et aux chevaliers de la Jarretière.

Le jour de mon couronnement, où le comte-maréchal d’Angleterre m’a versé un gobelet de vin sur la tête, j’ai solennellement promis d’être officieux à la noblesse, d’éviter la compagnie des personnes de mauvaise réputation, d’excuser plutôt que de blâmer les gens de qualité, et d’assister les veuves et les vierges.

C’est moi qui ai charge de régler les cérémonies de l’enterrement des pairs et qui ai le soin et la garde de leurs armoiries. Je me mets aux ordres de votre seigneurie.

Le premier des deux autres en cottes de satin fit une révérence, et dit:

— Milord, je suis Clarence, deuxième roi d’armes d’Angleterre.

Je suis l’officier qui règle l’enterrement des nobles au-dessous des pairs. Je me mets aux ordres de votre seigneurie.

L’autre homme à cotte de satin salua, et dit:

— Milord, je suis Norroy, troisième roi d’armes d’Angleterre. Je me mets aux ordres de votre seigneurie.

Les six du second rang, immobiles et sans saluer, firent un pas.

Le premier à la droite de Gwynplaine, dit:

— Milord, nous sommes les six ducs d’armes d’Angleterre. Je suis York.

Puis chacun des hérauts ou ducs d’armes prit la parole à son tour, et se nomma.

— Je suis Lancastre.

— Je suis Richmond.

— Je suis Chester.

— Je suis Somerset.

— Je suis Windsor,

Les blasons qu’ils avaient sur la poitrine étaient ceux des comtés et des villes dont ils portaient les noms.

Les quatre qui étaient habillés de noir, derrière les hérauts, gardaient le silence.

Le roi d’armes Jarretière les montra du doigt à Gwynplaine et dit:

— Milord, voici les quatre poursuivants d’armes. — Manteau-Bleu.

L’homme à la cape bleue salua de la tête.

— Dragon-Rouge.

L’homme au saint Georges salua.

— Rouge-Croix.

L’homme aux croix écarlates salua.

— Porte-coulisse.

L’homme à la fourrure de sabelline salua.

Sur un signe du roi d’armes, le premier des poursuivants, Manteau-Bleu, s’avança, et prit des mains de l’officier de l’huissier le coussin de drap d’argent et le portefeuille couronne.

Et le roi d’armes dit à l’huissier de la verge noire:

— Ainsi soit. Je donne à votre honneur réception de sa seigneurie.

Ces pratiques d’étiquette et d’autres qui vont suivre étaient le vieux cérémonial antérieur à Henri VIII, qu’Anne essaya, pendant un temps, de faire revivre. Rien de tout cela ne se fait plus aujourd’hui. Pourtant la chambre des lords se croit immuable; et si l’immémorial existe quelque part, c’est là.

Elle change toutefois. *E pur si muove.*

Qu’est devenu, par exemple, le *may pole*, ce mât de mai que la ville de Londres plantait sur le passage des pairs allant au parlement? Le dernier qui ait fait figure a été arboré en 1713.

Depuis, le «may pole» a disparu. Désuétude.

L’apparence, c’est l’immobilité; la réalité, c’est le changement.

Ainsi prenez ce titre, Albemarle. Il semble éternel. Sous ce titre ont passé six familles, Odo, Mandeville, Béthune, Plantagenet, Beauchamp, Monk. Sous ce titre, Leicester, se sont succédé cinq noms différents, Beaumont, Brewose, Dudley, Sidney, Coke. Sous Lincoln, six. Sous Pembroke, sept, etc. Les familles changent sous les titres qui ne bougent pas.

L’historien superficiel croit à l’immuabilité. Au fond, nulle durée. L’homme ne peut être que flot. L’onde, c’est l’humanité.

Les aristocraties ont pour orgueil ce que les femmes ont pour humiliation, vieillir; mais femmes et aristocraties ont la même illusion, se conserver.

Il est probable que la chambre des lords ne se reconnaîtra point dans ce qu’on vient de lire et dans ce qu’on va lire, un peu comme la jolie femme d’autrefois qui ne veut pas avoir de rides.

Le miroir est un vieil accusé; il en prend son parti.

Faire ressemblant, c’est là tout le devoir de l’historien.

Le roi d’armes s’adressa à Gwynplaine.

— Veuillez me suivre, milord.

Il ajouta:

— On vous saluera. Votre seigneurie soulèvera seulement le bord de son chapeau.

Et l’on se dirigea en cortège vers une porte qui était au fond de la salle ronde.

L’huissier de la verge noire ouvrait la marche.

Puis Manteau-Bleu, portant le coussin; puis le roi d’armes; derrière le roi d’armes était Gwynplaine, le chapeau sur la tête.

Les autres rois d’armes, hérauts, poursuivants, restèrent dans la salle ronde.

Gwynplaine, précédé de l’huissier de la verge noire et sous la conduite du roi d’armes, suivit de salle en salle un itinéraire qu’il serait impossible de retrouver aujourd’hui, le vieux logis du parlement d’Angleterre ayant été démoli,

Il traversa entre autres cette gothique chambre d’état où avait eu lieu la rencontre suprême de Jacques II et de Monmouth, et qui avait vu l’agenouillement inutile du neveu lâche devant l’oncle féroce. Autour de cette chambre étaient rangés sur le mur, par ordre de dates, avec leurs noms et leurs blasons, neuf portraits en pied d’anciens pairs: lord Nansladron, 1305. Lord Baliol, 1306. Lord Benestede, 1314. Lord Cantilupe, 1356. Lord Montbegon, 1357. Lord Tibotot, 1372. Lord Zouch of Codnor, 1615. Lord Bella-Aqua, sans date. Lord Harren and Surrey, comte de Blois, sans date.

La nuit étant venue, il y avait des lampes de distance en distance dans les galeries. Des lustres de cuivre à chandelles de cire étaient allumés dans les salles, éclairées à peu près comme des bas côtés d’église.

On n’y rencontrait que les personnes nécessaires.

Dans une chambre que le cortège traversa se tenaient debout, la tête respectueusement inclinée, les quatre clercs du signet, et le clerc des papiers d’état.

Dans une autre était l’honorable Philip Sydenham, chevalier banneret, seigneur de Brympton en Somerset. Le chevalier banneret est le chevalier fait en guerre par le roi sous la bannière royale déployée.

Dans une autre était le plus ancien baronnet d’Angleterre, sir Edmund Bacon de Suffolk, héritier de sir Nicholas, et qualifi *primus baronetorum Angliae*. Sir Edmund avait derrière lui son arcifer portant son arquebuse et son écuyer portant les armes d’Ulster, les baronnets étant les défenseurs nés du comt d’Ulster en Irlande.

Dans une autre était le chancelier de l’échiquier, accompagné de ses quatre maîtres des comptes et des deux députés du lord-chambellan chargés de fendre les tailles. Plus le maître des monnaies, ayant dans sa main ouverte une livre sterling, faite, comme c’est l’usage pour les pounds, au moulinet. Ces huit personnages firent la révérence au nouveau lord.

A l’entrée du corridor tapissé d’une natte qui était la communication de la chambre basse à la chambre haute, Gwynplaine fut salué par sir Thomas Mansell de Margam, contrôleur de la maison de la reine et membre du parlement pour Glamorgan; et, la sortie, par une députation «d’un sur deux» des barons des Cinq-Ports, rangés à sa droite et à sa gauche, quatre par quatre, les Cinq-Ports étant huit. William Ashburnham le salua pour Hastings, Matthew Aylmor pour Douvres, Josias Burchett pour Sandwich, sir Philip Boteler pour Hyeth, John Brewer pour New Rumney, Edward Southwell pour la ville de Rye, James Hayes pour la ville de Winchelsea, et Georges Nailor pour la ville de Seaford.

Le roi d’armes, comme Gwynplaine allait rendre le salut, lui rappela à voix basse le cérémonial.

— Seulement le bord du chapeau, milord.

Gwynplaine fît comme il lui était indiqué.

Il arriva à la chambre peinte, où il n’y avait pas de peinture, si ce n’est quelques figures de saints, entre autres saint Edouard, sous les voussures des longues fenêtres ogives coupées en deux par le plancher, desquelles Westminster-Hall avait le bas, et la chambre peinte le haut.

En deçà de la barrière de bois qui traversait de part en part la chambre peinte, se tenaient les trois secrétaires d’état, hommes considérables. Le premier de ces officiers avait dans ses attributions le sud de l’Angleterre, l’Irlande et les colonies, plus la France, la Suisse, l’Italie, l’Espagne, le Portugal et la Turquie. Le deuxième dirigeait le nord de l’Angleterre, avec surveillance sur les Pays-Bas, l’Allemagne, le Danemark, la Suède, la Pologne et la Moscovie. Le troisième, écossais, avait l’Écosse. Les deux premiers étaient anglais. L’un d’eux était l’honorable Robert Harley, membre du parlement pour la ville de New-Radnor. Un député d’Ecosse, Mungo Graham, esquire, parent du duc de Montrose, était présent. Tous saluèrent Gwynplaine en silence.

Gwynplaine toucha le bord de son chapeau.

Le garde-barrière leva le bras de bois sur charnière qui donnait entrée sur l’arrière de la chambre peinte où était la longue table verte drapée, réservée aux seuls lords.

Il y avait sur la table un candélabre allumé.

Gwynplaine, précédé de l’huissier de la verge noire, de Manteau-Bleu et de Jarretière, pénétra dans ce compartiment privilégié.

Le garde-barrière referma l’entrée derrière Gwynplaine.

Le roi d’armes, sitôt la barrière franchie, s’arrêta.

La chambre peinte était spacieuse.

On apercevait au fond, debout au-dessous de l’écusson royal qui était entre les deux fenêtres, deux vieillards vêtus de robes de velours rouge avec deux bandes d’hermine ourlées de galons d’or sur l’épaule et des chapeaux à plumes blanches sur leurs perruques. Par la fente des robes on voyait leur habit de soie et la poignée de leur épée.

Derrière eux était immobile un homme habillé en moire noire, portant haute une grande masse d’or surmontée d’un lion couronné.

C’était le massier des pairs d’Angleterre.

Le lion est leur insigne: *Et les lions ce sont les Barons et li Per*, dit la chronique manuscrite de Bertrand Duguesclin.

Le roi d’armes montra à Gwynplaine les deux personnages en robes de velours, et lui dit à l’oreille:

— Milord, ceux-ci sont vos égaux. Vous rendrez le salut exactement comme il vous sera fait. Ces deux seigneuries ici présentes sont deux barons et vos parrains désignés par le lord-chancelier. Ils sont très vieux, et presque aveugles. Ce sont eux qui vous vont introduire dans la chambre des lords. Le premier est Charles Mildmay, lord Fitzwalter, sixième seigneur du banc des barons, le second est Augustus Arundel, lord ArundeL de Trerice, trente-huitième seigneur du banc des barons.

Le roi d’armes, faisant un pas vers les deux vieillards, éleva la voix:

— Fermain Clancharlie, baron Clancharlie, baron Hunkerville, marquis de Corleone en Sicile, salue vos seigneuries.

Les deux lords soulevèrent leurs chapeaux au-dessus de leur tête de toute la longueur du bras, puis se recoiffèrent.

Gwynplaine leur rendit le salut de la même manière.

L’huissier de la verge noire avança, puis Manteau-Bleu, puis Jarretière.

Le massier vint se placer devant Gwynplaine, et les deux lords ses côtés, lord Fitzwalter à sa droite et lord Arundel de Trerice à sa gauche. Lord Arundel était fort cassé, et le plus vieux des deux. Il mourut l’année d’après, léguant à son petit-fils John, mineur, sa pairie qui, du reste, devait s'éteindre en 1768.

Ce cortège sortit de la chambre peinte et s'engagea dans une galerie à pilastres où alternaient en sentinelle, de pilastre en pilastre, des pertuisaniers d'Angleterre et des hallebardiers d'Ecosse.

Les hallebardiers écossais étaient cette magnifique troupe aux jambes nues digne de faire face, plus tard, à Fontenoy, à la cavalerie française et à ces cuirassiers du roi auxquels leur colonel disait: *Messieurs les maîtres, assurez vos chapeaux, nous allons avoir l'honneur de charger*.

Le capitaine des pertuisaniers et le capitaine des hallebardiers firent à Gwynplaine et aux deux lords parrains le salut de l'épée. Les soldats saluèrent, les uns de la pertuisane, les autres de la hallebarde.

Au fond de la galerie resplendissait une grande porte, si magnifique que les deux battants semblaient deux lames d'or.

Des deux côtés de la porte deux hommes étaient immobiles. A leur livrée on pouvait reconnaître les *door-keepers*, «garde-portes».

Un peu avant d'arriver à cette porte, la galerie s'élargissait et il y avait un rond-point vitré.

Dans ce rond-point était assis sur un fauteuil à dossier démesur un personnage auguste par l'énormité de sa robe et de sa perruque. C'était William Cowper, lord-chancelier d'Angleterre.

C'est une qualité d'être infirme plus que le roi. William Cowper était myope, Anne l'était aussi, mais moins. Cette vue basse de William Cowper plut à la myopie de sa majesté et le fit choisir par la reine pour chancelier et garde de la conscience royale.

William Cowper avait la lèvre supérieure mince et la lèvre inférieure épaisse, signe de demi-bonté.

Le rond-point vitré était éclairé d'une lampe au plafond.

Le lord-chancelier, grave dans son haut fauteuil, avait à sa droite une table où était assis le clerc de la couronne, et à sa gauche une table où était assis le clerc du parlement.

Chacun des deux clercs avait devant soi un registre ouvert et une écritoire.

Derrière le fauteuil du lord-chancelier se tenait son massier, portant la masse à couronne. Plus le porte-queue et le porte-bourse, en grande perruque. Toutes ces charges existent encore.

Sur une crédence près du fauteuil il y avait une épée à poignée d'or, avec fourreau et ceinturon de velours feu.

Derrière le clerc de la couronne était debout un officier soutenant tout ouverte de ses deux mains une robe, qui était la robe de couronnement.

Derrière le clerc du parlement un autre officier tenait déployée une autre robe, qui était la robe de parlement.

Ces robes, toutes deux de velours cramoisi doublé de taffetas blanc avec deux bandes d'hermine galonnées d'or à l'épaule, étaient pareilles, à cela près que la robe de couronnement avait un plus large rochet d'hermine.

Un troisième officier qui était le «librarian» portait sur un carreau de cuir de Flandre le *red-book*, petit livre relié en maroquin rouge, contenant la liste des pairs et des communes, plus des pages blanches et un crayon qu'il était d'usage de remettre à chaque nouveau membre entrant au parlement.

La marche en procession que fermait Gwynplaine entre les deux pairs ses parrains s'arrêta devant le fauteuil du lord-chancelier.

Les deux lords parrains ôtèrent leurs chapeaux. Gwynplaine fit comme eux.

Le roi d'armes reçut des mains de Manteau-Bleu le coussin de drap d'argent, se mit à genoux, et présenta le portefeuille noir sur le coussin au lord-chancelier.

Le lord-chancelier prit le portefeuille et le tendit au clerc du parlement. Le clerc vint le recevoir avec cérémonie, puis alla se rasseoir.

Le clerc du parlement ouvrit le portefeuille, et se leva.

Le portefeuille contenait les deux messages usités, la patente royale adressée à la chambre des lords, et la sommation de siéger adressée au nouveau pair.

Writ of summons.

Le clerc, debout, lut tout haut les deux messages avec une lenteur respectueuse.

La sommation de siéger intimée à lord Fermain Clancharlie se terminait par les formules accoutumées: «...Nous vous enjoignons étroitement, sous la foi et l'allégeance que vous nous devez, de venir prendre en personne votre place parmi les prélats et les pairs siégeant en notre parlement à Westminster, afin de donner votre avis, en tout honneur et conscience, sur les affaires du royaume et de l'église.

Strictly enjoin you.

La lecture des messages terminée, le lord-chancelier éleva la voix.

— Acte est donné à la couronne. Lord Fermain Clancharlie, votre seigneurie renonce à la transsubstantiation, à l’adoration des saints et à la messe?

Gwynplaine s’inclina.

— Acte est donné, dit le lord-chancelier.

Et le clerc du parlement repartit:

— Sa seigneurie a pris le test.

Le lord-chancelier ajouta:

— Milord Fermain Clancharlie, vous pouvez siéger.

— Ainsi soit, dirent les deux parrains,

Le roi d’armes se releva, prit l’épée sur la crédence et en boucla le ceinturon autour de la taille de Gwynplaine.

«Ce faict, disent les vieilles chartes normandes, le pair prend son espée et monte aux hauts siéges et assiste à l’audience.

Gwynplaine entendit derrière lui quelqu’un qui lui disait:

— Je revêts votre seigneurie de la robe de parlement.

Et en même temps l’officier qui lui parlait et qui portait cette robe la lui passa et lui noua au cou le ruban noir du rochet d’hermine.

Gwynplaine maintenant, la robe de pourpre sur le dos et l’épée d’or au côté, était semblable aux deux lords qu’il avait à sa droite et à sa gauche.

Le librarian lui présenta le red-book et le lui mit, dans la poche de sa veste.

Le roi d’armes lui murmura à l’oreille:

— Milord, en entrant, vous saluerez la chaise royale.

La chaise royale, c’est le trône.

Cependant les deux clercs écrivaient, chacun à sa table, l’un sur le registre de la couronne, l’autre sur le registre du parlement.

Tous deux, l’un après l’autre, le clerc de la couronne le premier, apportèrent leur livre au lord-chancelier, qui signa.

Après avoir signé sur les deux registres, le lord chancelier se leva:

— Lord Fermain Clancharlie, baron Clancharlie, baron Hunkerville, marquis de Corleone en Italie, soyez le bienvenu parmi vos pairs, les lords spirituels et temporels de la Grande-Bretagne.

Les deux parrains de Gwynplaine lui touchèrent l’épaule. Il se tourna.

Et la grande porte dorée du fond de la galerie s’ouvrit à deux battants.

C’était la porte de la chambre des pairs d’Angleterre.

Il ne s’était pas écoulé trente-six heures depuis que Gwynplaine, entouré d’un autre cortège, avait vu s’ouvrir devant lui la porte de fer de la geôle de Southwark.

Rapidité terrible de tous ces nuages sur sa tête; nuages qui étaient des événements; rapidité qui était une prise d’assaut.

II

IMPARTIALIT

La création d’une égalité avec le roi, dite pairie, fut aux époques barbares une fiction utile. En France et en Angleterre, cet expédient politique rudimentaire produisit des résultats différents. En France, le pair fut un faux roi; en Angleterre, ce fut un vrai prince. Moins grand qu’en France, mais plus réel.

On pourrait dire: moindre, mais pire.

La pairie est née en France. L’époque est incertaine; sous Charlemague, selon la légende; sous Robert le Sage, selon l’histoire. L’histoire n’est pas plus sûre de ce qu’elle dit que la légende. Favin écrit: «le Roy de France voulut attirer à lui les grands de son état par ce titre magnifique de Pairs, comme s’ils lui étaient égaux.

La pairie se bifurqua très vite et de France passa en Angleterre.

La pairie anglaise a été un grand fait, et presque une grande chose. Elle a eu pour précédent le wittenagemot saxon. Le thane danois et le vavasseur normand se fondirent dans le baron. Baron est le même mot que *vir*; qui se traduit en espagnol par *varon*, et qui signifie, par excellence, homme. Dès 1075 les barons se font sentir au roi. Et à quel roi! à Guillaume le Conquérant. En 1086 ils donnent une base à la féodalité, cette base est le Doomsday-book. «Livre du Jugement dernier.» Sous Jean sans Terre, conflit; la seigneurie française le prend de haut avec la Grande-Bretagne, et la pairie de France mande à sa barre le roi d’Angleterre. Indignation des barons anglais. Au sacre de Philippe-Auguste, le roi d’Angleterre portait, comme duc de Normandie, la première bannière carrée et le duc de Guyenne la seconde. Contre ce roi vassal de l’étranger, «la guerre des seigneurs» éclate. Les barons imposent au misérable roi Jean la Grande Charte d’où sort la chambre des lords. Le pape prend fait et cause pour le roi, et excommunie les lords. La date, c’est 1215, et le pape, c’est Innocent III qui écrivait le *Veni sancte Spiritus* et qui envoyait à Jean sans Terre les quatre vertus cardinales sous la forme de quatre anneaux d’or. Les lords persistent. Long duel, qui durera plusieurs générations.

Pembroke lutte. 1248 est l’année des «Provisions d’Oxford».

Vingt-quatre barons limitent le roi, le discutent, et appellent, pour prendre part à la querelle élargie, un chevalier par comté.

Aube des communes. Plus tard, les lords s’adjoignirent deux citoyens par chaque cité et deux bourgeois par chaque bourg.

C’est ce qui fait que, jusqu’à Elisabeth, les pairs furent juges de la validité des élections des communes. De leur juridiction naquit l’adage: «Les députés doivent être nommés sans les trois P; *sine Prece, sine Pretio, sine Poculo*. Ce qui n’empêcha pas les bourgs-pourris. En 1293, la cour des pairs de France avait encore le roi d’Angleterre pour justiciable, et Philippe le Bel citait devant lui Edouard Ier. Edouard Ier était ce roi qui ordonnait à son fils de le faire bouillir après sa mort et d’emporter ses os en guerre. Sous les folies royales les lords sentent le besoin de fortifier le parlement; ils le divisent en deux chambres. Chambre haute et chambre basse. Les lords gardent arrogamment la suprématie. «S’il arrive qu’un des communes soit si hardy que de parler désavantageusement de la chambre des lords, on l’appelle au barreau (à la barre) pour recevoir correction et quelquefois on l’envoie à la Tour.

Même distinction dans le vote. Dans la chambre des lords on vote un à un, en commençant par le dernier baron qu’on nomme «le puîné». Chaque pair appelé répond *content* ou *non content*.

Dans les communes on vote tous ensemble, par Oui ou Non, en troupeau. Les communes accusent, les pairs jugent. Les pairs, par dédain des chiffres, délèguent aux communes, qui en tireront parti, la surveillance de l’échiquier, ainsi nommé, selon les uns, du tapis de la table qui représentait un *échiquier*, et, selon les autres, des tiroirs de la vieille armoire où. était, derrière une grille de fer, le trésor des rois d’Angleterre. De la fin du treizième siècle date le Registre annuel, «Year-book».

Dans la guerre des deux roses, on sent le poids des lords, tantôt du côté de John de Gaunt, duc de Lancastre, tantôt du côt d’Edmund, duc d’York. Wat-Tyler, les Lollards, Warwick, le faiseur de rois, toute cette anarchie-mère d’où sortira l’affranchissement, a pour point d’appui, avoué ou secret, la féodalité anglaise. Les lords jalousent utilement le trône; jalouser, c’est surveiller; ils circonscrivent l’initiative royale, restreignent les cas de haute trahison, suscitent de faux Richards contre Henri IV, se font arbitres, jugent la question des trois couronnes entre le duc d’York et Marguerite d’Anjou, et, au besoin, lèvent des armées et ont leurs batailles, Shrewsbury, Tewkesbury, Saint-Alban, tantôt perdues, tantôt gagnées. Déjà, au treizième siècle, ils avaient eu la victoire de Lewes, et ils avaient chassé du royaume les quatre frères du roi, bâtards d'Isabelle et du comte de la Marche, usuriers tous quatre, et exploitant les chrétiens par les juifs; d'un côt princes, de l'autre escrocs, chose qu'on a revue plus tard, mais qui était peu estimée dans ce temps-là. Jusqu'au quinzième siècle, le duc normand reste visible dans le roi d'Angleterre, et les actes du parlement se font en français. A partir de Henri VII, par la volonté des lords, ils se font en anglais.

L'Angleterre, bretonne sous Uther Pendragon, romaine sous César, saxonne sous l'heptarchie, danoise sous Harold, normande après Guillaume, devient, grâce aux lords, anglaise. Puis elle devient anglicane. Avoir sa religion chez soi, c'est une grande force.

Un pape extérieur soutire la vie nationale. Une mecque est une pieuvre. En 1534, Londres congédie Rome, la pairie adopte la réforme et les lords acceptent Luther. Réplique l'excommunication de 1215. Ceci convenait à Henri VIII, mais d'autres égards les lords le gênaient. Un bouledogue devant un ours, c'est la chambre des lords devant Henri VIII. Quand Wolsey vole White-Hall à la nation, et quand Henri VIII vole White-Hall à Wolsey, qui gronde? quatre lords, Darcie de Chichester, Saint-John de Bletso, et (deux noms normands) Mountjoye et Mounteagle. Le roi usurpe. La pairie empiète. L'hérédit contient de l'incorruptibilité; de là l'insubordination des lords. Devant Elisabeth même, les barons remuent. Il en résulte les supplices de Durham. Cette jupe tyrannique est teinte de sang. Un vertugadin sous lequel il y a un billot, c'est l Elisabeth. Elisabeth assemble le parlement le moins qu'elle peut, et réduit la chambre des lords à soixante-cinq membres, dont un seul marquis, Westminster, et pas un duc. Du reste, les rois en France avaient la même jalousie et opéraient la même élimination. Sous Henri III, il n'y avait plus que huit duchés-pairies, et c'était au grand déplaisir du roi que le baron de Mantes, le baron de Coucy, le baron de Coulommiers, le baron de Châteauneuf en Timerais, le baron de la Fère en Tardenois, le baron de Mortagne, et quelques autres encore, se maintenaient barons pairs de France. En Angleterre, la couronne laissait volontiers les pairies s'amortir; sous Anne, pour ne citer qu'un exemple, les extinctions depuis le douzième siècle avaient fini par faire un total de cinq cent soixante-cinq pairies abolies.

La guerre des roses avait commencé l'extirpation des ducs, que Marie Tudor, à coups de hache, avait achevée. C'était décapiter la noblesse.

Couper le duc, c’est couper la tête. Bonne politique sans doute, mais corrompre vaut mieux que couper.

C’est ce que sentit Jacques Ier. Il restaura la duché. Il fit duc son favori Villiers, qui l’avait fait porc.

Transformation du duc féodal en duc courtisan. Cela pullulera.

Charles II fera duchesses deux de ses maîtresses, Barbe de Southampton et Louise de Quérouel. Sous Anne, il y aura vingt-cinq ducs, dont trois étrangers, Cumberland, Cambridge et Schonberg. Ces procédés de cour, inventés par Jacques Ier, réussissent-ils? Non. La chambre des lords se sent maniée par l’intrigue et s’irrite. Elle s’irrite contre Jacques Ier, elle s’irrite contre Charles Ier, lequel, soit dit en passant, a peut-être un peu tué son père comme Marie de Médicis a peut-être un peu tué son mari. Rupture entre Charles Ier et la pairie.

Les lords, qui, sous Jacques Ier, avaient mandé à leur barre la concussion dans la personne de Bacon, font, sous Charles Ier, le procès à la trahison dans la personne de Stafford. Ils avaient condamné Bacon, ils condamnent Stafford. L’un avait perdu l’honneur, l’autre perd la vie. Charles Ier est décapité une première fois en Stafford. Les lords prêtent main-forte aux communes. Le roi convoque le parlement à Oxford, la révolution le convoque à Londres; quarante-trois pairs vont avec le roi, vingt-deux avec la république. De cette acceptation du peuple par les lords sort le *bill des droits*, ébauche de nos droits de l’homme, vague ombre projetée du fond de l’avenir par la révolution de France sur la révolution d’Angleterre.

Chamberlayne, État présent de l’Angleterre. Tome II, 2me partie, ch. iv, p. 64. 1688.

Villiers appelait Jacques Ier *Votre Cochonnerie*.

Tels sont les services. Involontaires, soit. Et payés cher, car cette pairie est un parasite énorme. Mais considérables.

L’oeuvre despotique de Louis XI, de Richelieu et de Louis XIV, la construction d’un sultan, l’aplatissement pris pour l’égalité, la bastonnade donnée par le sceptre, les multitudes nivelées par l’abaissement, ce travail turc fait en France, les lords l’ont empêché en Angleterre. Ils ont fait de l’aristocratie un mur, endiguant le roi d’un côté, abritant le peuple de l’autre. Ils rachètent leur arrogance envers le peuple par de l’insolence envers le roi. Simon, comte de Leicester, disait à Henri III: *Roi, tu as menti*. Les lords imposent à la couronne des servitudes; ils froissent le roi à l’endroit sensible, à la vénerie. Tout lord, passant dans un parc royal, a le droit d’y tuer un daim. Chez le roi, le lord est chez lui. Le roi prévu la tour de Londres, avec son tarif, pas plus qu’un pair, douze livres sterling par semaine, on doit cela à la chambre des lords.

Plus encore. Le roi découronné, on le lui doit. Les lords ont destitué Jean sans Terre, dégradé Edouard II, déposé Richard II, brisé Henri VI, et ont rendu Cromwell possible. Quel Louis XIV il y avait dans Charles Ier! Grâce à Cromwell, il est rest latent. Du reste, disons-le en passant, Cromwell lui-même, aucun historien n’a pris garde à ce fait, prétendait à la pairie; c’est ce qui lui fait épouser Elisabeth Bourchier, descendante et héritière d’un Cromwell, lord Bourchier, dont la pairie s’était éteinte en 1471, et d’un Bourchier, lord Robesart, autre pairie éteinte en 1429. Partageant la croissance redoutable des événements, il trouva plus court de dominer par le roi supprim que par la pairie réclamée. Le cérémonial des lords, parfois sinistre, atteignait le roi. Les deux porte-glaives de la Tour, debout, la hache sur l’épaule, à droite et à gauche du pair accusé comparaissant à la barre, étaient aussi bien pour le roi que pour tout autre lord. Pendant cinq siècles l’antique chambre des lords a eu un plan, et l’a suivi avec fixité. On compte ses jours de distraction et de faiblesse, comme par exemple ce moment étrange où elle se laissa séduire par la galéasse chargée de fromages, de jambons et de vins grecs que lui envoya Jules II.

L’aristocratie anglaise était inquiète, hautaine, irréductible, attentive, patriotiquement défiante. C’est elle qui, à la fin du dix-septième siècle, par l’acte dixième de l’an 1694, était au bourg de Stockbridge, en Southampton, le droit de députer au parlement, et forçait les communes à casser l’élection de ce bourg, entachée de fraude papiste. Elle avait imposé le test Jacques, duc d’York, et sur son refus l’avait exclu du trône. Il régna cependant, mais les lords finirent par le ressaisir et par le chasser. Cette aristocratie a eu dans sa longue durée quelque instinct de progrès. Une certaine quantité de lumière appréciable s’en est toujours dégagée, excepté vers la fin, qui est maintenant. Sous Jacques II, elle maintenait dans la chambre basse la proportion de trois cent quarante-six bourgeois contre quatrevingt douze chevaliers; les seize barons de courtoisie des Cinq-Ports étant plus que contre-balancés par les cinquante citoyens des vingt-cinq cités. Tout en étant très corruptrice et très égoïste, cette aristocratie avait, en certains cas, une singulière impartialité. On la juge durement. Les bons traitements de l’histoire sont pour les communes; c’est débattre. Nous croyons le rôle des lords très grand.

L’oligarchie, c’est de l’indépendance à l’état barbare, mais c’est de l’indépendance. Voyez la Pologne, royaume nominal, république réelle. Les pairs d’Angleterre tenaient le trône en suspicion et en tutelle. Dans mainte occasion, mieux que les communes, les lords savaient déplaire. Ils faisaient échec au roi. Ainsi, en 1694, année remarquable, les parlements triennaux, rejetés par les communes parce que Guillaume III n’en voulait pas, avaient été votés par les pairs. Guillaume III, irrité, ôta le château de Pendennis au comte de Bath, et toutes ses charges au vicomte Mordaunt. La chambre des lords, c’était la république de Venise au coeur de la royauté d’Angleterre. Réduire le roi au doge, tel était son but, et elle a fait croître la nation de tout ce dont elle a fait décroître le roi.

La royauté le comprenait et haïssait la pairie. Des deux côtés on cherchait à s’amoindrir. Ces diminutions profitaient au peuple en augmentation. Les deux puissances aveugles, monarchie et oligarchie, ne s’apercevaient pas qu’elles travaillaient pour un tiers, la démocratie. Quelle joie ce fut pour la cour, au siècle dernier, de pouvoir pendre un pair, lord Ferrers!

Du reste, on le pendit avec une corde de soie. Politesse.

On n’eût pas pendu un pair de France. Remarque altière que fit le duc de Richelieu. D’accord. On l’eût décapité. Politesse plus grande. Montmorency-Tancarville signait: Pair de France et d’Angleterre, rejetant ainsi la pairie anglaise au second rang.

Les pairs de France étaient plus hauts et moins puissants, tenant au rang plus qu’à l’autorité, et à la préséance plus qu’à la domination. Il y avait entre eux et les lords la nuance qui sépare la vanité de l’orgueil. Pour les pairs de France, avoir le pas sur les princes étrangers, précéder les grands d’Espagne, primer les patrices de Venise, faire asseoir sur les bas sièges du parlement les maréchaux de France, le connétable et l’amiral de France, fût-il comte de Toulouse et fils de Louis XIV, distinguer entre les duchés mâles et les duchés femelles, maintenir l’intervalle entre une comté simple comme Armagnac ou Albret et une comté-pairie comme Évreux, porter de droit, dans certains cas, le cordon bleu ou la toison d’or à vingt-cinq ans, contrebalancer le duc de la Trémoille, le plus ancien pair chez le roi, par le duc d’Uzès, le plus ancien pair en parlement, prétendre à autant de pages et de chevaux au carrosse qu’un électeur, se faire dire *monseigneur* par le premier président, discuter si le duc du Maine a rang de pair, comme comte d’Eu, dès 1458, traverser la grande chambre diagonalement ou par les côtés;

c’était la grosse affaire. La grosse affaire pour les lords, c’était l’acte de navigation, le test, l’enrôlement de l’Europe au service de l’Angleterre, la domination des mers, l’expulsion des Stuarts, la guerre à la France. Ici, avant tout l’étiquette; là, avant tout l’empire. Les pairs d’Angleterre avaient la proie, les pairs de France avaient l’ombre. En somme, la chambre des lords d’Angleterre a été un point de départ; en civilisation, c’est immense. Elle a eu l’honneur de commencer une nation.

Elle a été la première incarnation de l’unité d’un peuple. La résistance anglaise, cette obscure force toute-puissante, est née dans la chambre des lords. Les barons, par une série de voies de fait sur le prince, ont ébauché le détrônement définitif. La chambre des lords aujourd’hui est un peu étonnée et triste de ce qu’elle a fait sans le vouloir et sans le savoir. D’autant plus que c’est irrévocable. Que sont les concessions? des restitutions. Et les nations ne l’ignorent point. J’octroie, dit le roi. Je récupère, dit le peuple. La chambre des lords a cru créer le privilège des pairs, elle a produit le droit des citoyens. L’aristocratie, ce vautour, a couvé cet oeuf d’aigle, la liberté.

Aujourd’hui l’oeuf est cassé, l’aigle plane, le vautour meurt.

L’aristocratie agonise, l’Angleterre grandit.

Mais soyons justes envers l’aristocratie. Elle a fait équilibre à la royauté; elle a été contre-poids. Elle a fait obstacle au despotisme; elle a été barrière.

Remercions-la, et enterrons-la.

III

LA VIEILLE SALLE

Près de l’abbaye de Westminster il y avait un antique palais normand qui fut brûlé sous Henri VIII. Il en resta deux ailes.

Edouard VI mit dans l’une la chambre des lords, et dans l’autre la chambre des communes.

Ni les deux ailes, ni les deux salles n’existent maintenant; on a rebâti tout cela.

Nous l’avons dit et il faut y insister, nulle ressemblance entre la chambre des lords d’aujourd’hui et la chambre des lords de jadis. On a démoli l’ancien palais, ce qui a un peu démoli les anciens usages. Les coups de pioche dans les monuments ont leurs contre-coups dans les coutumes et les chartes. Une vieille pierre ne tombe pas sans entraîner une vieille loi. Installez dans une salle ronde le sénat d’une salle carrée, il sera autre.

Le coquillage changé déforme le mollusque.

Si vous voulez conserver une vieille chose, humaine ou divine, code ou dogme, patriciat ou sacerdoce, n’en refaites rien à neuf, pas même l’enveloppe. Mettez des pièces, tout au plus. Par exemple, le jésuitisme est une pièce mise au catholicisme.

Traitez les édifices comme vous traitez les institutions.

Les ombres doivent habiter les ruines. Les puissances décrépites sont mal à l’aise dans les logis fraîchement décorés. Aux institutions haillons il faut les palais masures.

Montrer l’intérieur de la chambre des lords d’autrefois, c’est montrer de l’inconnu. L’histoire, c’est la nuit. En histoire, il n’y a pas de second plan. La décroissance et l’obscurit s’emparent immédiatement de tout ce qui n’est plus sur le devant du théâtre. Décor enlevé, effacement, oubli. Le Passé a un synonyme, l’Ignoré.

Les pairs d’Angleterre siégeaient, comme cour de justice, dans la grande salle de Westminster, et, comme haute chambre législative, dans une salle spéciale nommée «maison des lords», *house of th lords*.

Outre la cour des pairs d’Angleterre, qui ne s’assemble que convoquée par la couronne, les deux grands tribunaux anglais, inférieurs à la cour des pairs, mais supérieurs à toute autre juridiction, siégeaient dans la grande salle de Westminster. Au haut bout de cette salle, ils habitaient deux compartiments qui se touchaient. Le premier tribunal était la cour du banc du roi, que le roi était censé présider; le deuxième était la cour de chancellerie, que le chancelier présidait. L'un était cour de justice, l'autre était cour de miséricorde. C'était le chancelier qui conseillait au roi les grâces; rarement. Ces deux cours, qui existent encore, interprétaient la législation et la refaisaient un peu; l'art du juge est de menuiser le code en jurisprudence. Industrie d'où l'équité se tire comme elle peut.

La législation se fabriquait et s'appliquait en ce lieu sévère, la grande salle de Westminster. Cette salle avait une voûte de châtaignier où ne pouvaient se mettre les toiles d'araignée; c'est bien assez qu'elles se mettent dans les lois.

Siéger comme cour et siéger comme chambre, c'est deux. Cette dualité constitue le pouvoir suprême. Le long parlement, qui commença le 3 novembre 1640, sentit le besoin révolutionnaire de ce double glaive. Aussi se déclara-t-il, comme une chambre des pairs, pouvoir judiciaire en même temps que pouvoir législatif.

Ce double pouvoir était immémorial dans la chambre des lords.

Nous venons de le dire, juges, les lords occupaient Westminster-Hall; législateurs, ils avaient une autre salle.

Cette autre salle, proprement dite chambre des lords, était oblongue et étroite. Elle avait pour tout éclairage quatre fenêtres profondément entaillées dans le comble et recevant le jour par le toit, plus, au-dessus du dais royal, un oeil-de-boeuf à six vitres, avec rideaux; le soir, pas d'autre lumière que douze demi-candélabres appliqués sur la muraille. La salle du sénat de Venise était moins éclairée encore. Une certaine ombre plaît à ces hiboux de la toute-puissance.

Sur la salle ou s'assemblaient les lords s'arrondissait avec des plans polyédriques une haute voûte à caissons dorés. Les communes n'avaient qu'un plafond plat; tout a un sens dans les constructions monarchiques. A une extrémité de la longue salle des lords était la porte; à l'autre, en face, le trône. A quelques pas de la porte, la barre, coupure transversale, sorte de frontière, marquant l'endroit où finit le peuple et o commence la seigneurie. A droite du trône, une cheminée, blasonnée au pinacle, offrait deux bas-reliefs de marbre, figurant, l'un la victoire de Cuthwolph sur les bretons en 572, l'autre le plan géométral du bourg de Dunstable, lequel n'a que quatre rues, parallèles aux quatre parties du monde. Trois marches exhaussaient le trône. Le trône était dit «chaise royale». Sur les deux murs se faisant vis-à-vis se déployait, en tableaux successifs, une vaste tapisserie donnée aux lords par Élisabeth et représentant toute l'aventure de l'armada depuis son départ d'Espagne jusqu'à son naufrage devant l'Angleterre. Les hauts accastillages des navires étaient tissus en fils d'or et d'argent, qui, avec le temps, avaient noirci. A cette tapisserie, coupée de distance en distance par les candélabres-appliques, étaient adossés à droite du trône trois rangs de bancs pour les évêques, à gauche trois rangs de bancs pour les ducs, les marquis et les comtes, sur gradins et séparés par desmontoirs. Sur les trois bancs de la première section s'asseyaient les ducs; sur les trois bancs de la deuxième, les marquis; sur les trois bancs de la troisième, les comtes. Le banc des vicomtes, en équerre, faisait face au trône, et derrière, entre les vicomtes et la barre, il y avait deux bancs pour les barons. Sur le haut banc, à droite du trône, étaient les deux archevêques, Canterbury et York; sur le banc intermédiaire, trois évêques, Londres, Durham et Winchester; les autres évêques sur le banc d'en bas. Il y a entre l'archevêque de Canterbury et les autres évêques cette différence considérable qu'il est, lui, évêque *par la divine providence*, tandis que les autres ne le sont que *par la divine permission*. A droite du trône, on voyait une chaise pour le prince de Galles, et à gauche des pliants pour les ducs royaux, et en arrière de ces pliants un gradin pour les jeunes pairs mineurs, n'ayant point encore séance à la chambre. Force fleurs de lys partout; et le vaste écusson d'Angleterre sur les quatre murs, au-dessus des pairs comme au-dessus du roi. Les fils de pairs et les héritiers de pairie assistaient aux délibérations, debout derrière le trône entre le dais et le mur. Le trône au fond, et, des trois côtés de la salle, les trois rangs des bancs des pairs laissaient libre un large espace carré. Dans ce carré, que recouvrait le tapis d'état, armorié d'Angleterre, il y avait quatre sacs de laine, un devant le trône où siégeait le chancelier entre la masse et le sceau, un devant les évêques où siégeaient les juges conseillers d'état, ayant séance et non voix, un devant les ducs, marquis et comtes, où siégeaient les secrétaires d'état, un devant les vicomtes et barons, où étaient assis le clerc de la couronne et le clerc du parlement, et sur lequel écrivaient les deux sous-clercs, à genoux. Au centre du carré, on voyait une large table drapée chargée de dossiers, de registres, de sommiers, avec de massifs encriers d'orfèvrerie et de hauts flambeaux aux quatre angles. Les pairs prenaient séance en ordre chronologique, chacun suivant la date de la création de sa pairie. Ils avaient rang selon le titre, et, dans le titre, selon l'ancienneté. A la barre se tenait l'huissier de la verge noire, debout, sa baguette à la main. En dedans de la porte, l'officier de l'huissier, et en dehors le crieur de la verge noire, ayant pour fonction d'ouvrir les séances de justice par le cri: *Oyez*! en français, poussé trois fois en appuyant solennellement sur la première syllabe. Près du crieur, le sergent porte-masse du chancelier.

Dans les cérémonies royales, les pairs temporels avaient la couronne en tête, et les pairs spirituels la mitre.

Les archevêques portaient la mitre à couronne ducale, et les évêques, qui ont rang après les vicomtes, la mitre à tortil de baron.

Remarque étrange et qui est un enseignement, ce carré formé par le trône, les évêques et les barons, et dans lequel sont des magistrats à genoux, c'était l'ancien parlement de France sous les deux premières races. Même aspect de l'autorité en France et en Angleterre, Hincmar, dans le *de ordinatione sacri palatii*, décrit en 853 la chambre des lords en séance à Westminster au dix-huitième siècle. Sorte de bizarre procès-verbal fait neuf cents ans d'avance.

Qu'est l'histoire? Un écho du passé dans l'avenir. Un reflet de l'avenir sur le passé.

L'assemblée du parlement n'était obligatoire que tous les sept ans.

Les lords délibéraient en secret, portes fermées. Les séances des communes étaient publiques. La popularité semblait diminution.

Le nombre des lords était illimité. Nommer des lords, c'était la menace de la royauté. Moyen de gouvernement.

Au commencement du dix-huitième siècle, la chambre des lords offrait déjà un très fort chiffre. Elle a grossi encore depuis.

Délayer l'aristocratie est une politique. Elisabeth fit peut-être une faute en condensant la pairie dans soixante-cinq lords. La seigneurie moins nombreuse est plus intense. Dans les assemblées, plus il y a de membres, moins il y a de têtes.

Jacques II l'avait senti en portant la chambre haute cent-quatrevingt-huit lords; cent-quatrevingt-six, si l'on défalque de ces pairies les deux duchesses de l'alcôve royale, Portsmouth et Cleveland. Sous Anne, le total des lords, y compris les évêques, était de deux cent sept.

Sans compter le duc de Cumberland, mari de la reine, il y avait vingt-cinq ducs dont le premier, Norfolk, ne siégeait point, étant catholique, et dont le dernier, Cambridge, prince électoral de Hanovre, siégeait, quoique étranger. Winchester, qualifi premier et seul marquis d'Angleterre, comme Astorga seul marquis d'Espagne, étant absent, vu qu'il était jacobite, il y avait cinq marquis, dont le premier était Lindsey et le dernier Lothian; soixante-dix-neuf comtes, dont le premier était Derby et le dernier Islay; neuf vicomtes, dont le premier était Hereford et le dernier Lonsdale; et soixante-deux barons, dont le premier était Abergaveny et le dernier Hervey. Lord Hervey, étant le dernier baron, était ce qu'on appelait «le puîné» de la chambre.

Derby, qui, étant primé par Oxford, Shrewsbury et Kent, n'était que le quatrième sous Jacques II, était devenu sous Anne le premier des comtes. Deux noms de chanceliers avaient disparu de la liste des barons, Verulam, sous lequel l'histoire retrouve Bacon, et Wem, sous lequel l'histoire retrouve Jeffreys. Bacon, Jeffreys, noms diversement sombres. En 1705, les vingt-six évêques n'étaient que vingt-cinq, le siège de Chester étant vacant. Parmi les évêques, quelques-uns étaient de très grands seigneurs; ainsi William Talbot évêque d'Oxford, chef de la branche protestante de sa maison. D'autres étaient des docteurs éminents, comme John Sharp, archevêque d'York, ancien doyen de Norwick, le poëte Thomas Spratt, évêque de Rochester, bonhomme apoplectique, et cet évêque de Lincoln, qui devait mourir archevêque de Canterbury, Wake, l'adversaire de Bossuet.

Dans les occasions importantes, et lorsqu'il y avait lieu de recevoir une communication de la couronne à la chambre haute, toute cette multitude auguste, en robes, en perruques, avec coiffes de prélature ou chapeaux à plumes, alignait et étageait ses rangées de têtes dans la salle de la pairie, le long des murs où l'on voyait vaguement la tempête exterminer l'armada. Sous-entendu: Tempête aux ordres de l'Angleterre.

IV

LA VIEILLE CHAMBRE

Toute la cérémonie de l'investiture de Gwynplaine, depuis l'entrée sous le King's Gate jusqu'à la prise du test dans le rond-point vitré, s'était passée dans une sorte de pénombre.

Lord William Cowper n'avait point permis qu'on lui donnât, à lui, chancelier d'Angleterre, des détails trop circonstanciés sur la défiguration du jeune lord Fermain Clancharlie, trouvant au-dessous de sa dignité de savoir qu'un pair n'était pas beau, et se sentant amoindri par la hardiesse qu'aurait un inférieur de lui apporter des renseignements de cette nature. Il est certain qu'un homme du peuple dit avec plaisir: ce prince est bossu. Donc, être difforme, pour un lord, c'est offensant. Aux quelques mots que lui en avait dits la reine, le lord chancelier s'était borné à répondre: *Un seigneur a pour visage la seigneurie*.

Sommairement, et sur les procès-verbaux qu'il avait dû vérifier et certifier, il avait compris. De là des précautions.

Le visage du nouveau lord pouvait, à son entrée dans la chambre, faire une sensation quelconque. Il importait d'obvier à cela.

Le lord-chancelier avait pris ses mesures. Le moins d'événement possible, c'est l'idée fixe et la règle de conduite des personnages sérieux. La haine des incidents fait partie de la gravité. Il importait de faire en sorte que l'admission de Gwynplaine passât sans encombre, comme celle de tout autre héritier de pairie.

C'est pourquoi le lord-chancelier avait fixé la réception de lord Fermain Clancharlie à une séance du soir. Le chancelier étant portier, *quodammodo ostiarius*, disent les chartes normandes, *januarum cancellorumque potestas*, dit Tertullien, il peut officier en dehors de la chambre sur le seuil, et lord William Cowper avait usé de son droit en accomplissant dans le rond-point vitré les formalités d'investiture de lord Fermain Clancharlie.

De plus, il avait avancé l'heure pour que le nouveau pair fit son entrée dans la chambre avant même que la séance fût commencée.

Quant à l'investiture d'un pair sur le seuil, et en dehors de la chambre même, il y avait des précédents. Le premier baron héréditaire créé par patente, John de Beauchamp, de Holtcastle, fait par Richard II, en 1387, baron de Kidderminster, fut reçu de cette façon.

Du reste, en renouvelant ce précédent, le lord-chancelier se créait à lui-même un embarras dont il vit l’inconvénient moins de deux ans après, lors de l’entrée du vicomte Newhaven à la chambre des lords.

Myope, comme nous l’avons dit, lord William Cowper s’était aperçu à peine de la difformité de Gwynplaine; les deux lords parrains, pas du tout. C’étaient deux vieillards presque aveugles.

Le lord-chancelier les avait choisis exprès.

Il y a mieux, le lord-chancelier, n’ayant vu que la stature et la prestance de Gwynplaine, lui avait trouvé «fort bonne mine».

Au moment où les door-keepers avaient ouvert devant Gwynplaine la grande porte à deux battants, il y avait à peine quelques lords dans la salle. Ces lords étaient presque tous vieux. Les vieux, dans les assemblées, sont les exacts, de même que, près des femmes, ils sont les assidus. On ne voyait au banc des ducs que deux ducs, l’un tout blanc, l’autre gris, Thomas Osborne, duc de Leeds, et Schonberg, fils de ce Schonberg, allemand par la naissance, français par le bâton de maréchal, et anglais par la pairie, qui, chassé par l’édit de Nantes, après avoir fait la guerre à l’Angleterre comme français, fit la guerre à la France comme anglais. Au banc des lords spirituels, il n’y avait que l’archevêque de Canterbury, primat d’Angleterre, tout en haut, et en bas le docteur Simon Patrick, évêque d’Ély, causant avec Evelyn Pierrepont, marquis de Dorchester, qui lui expliquait la différence entre un gabion et une courtine, et entre les palissades et les fraises, les palissades étant une rangée de poteaux devant les tentes, destinée à protéger le campement, et les fraises étant une collerette de pieux pointus sous le parapet d’une forteresse empêchant l’escalade des assiégeants et la désertion des assiégés, et le marquis enseignait à l’évêque de quelle façon on fraise une redoute, en mettant les pieux moiti dans la terre et moitié dehors. Thomas Thynne, vicomte Weymouth, s’était approché d’un candélabre et examinait un plan de son architecte pour faire à son jardin de Long Leate, en Wiltshire, une pelouse dite «gazon coupé», moyennant des carreaux de sable jaune, de sable rouge, de coquilles de rivière et de fine poudre de charbon de terre. Au banc des vicomtes il y avait un pêle-mêle de vieux lords, Essex, Ossulstone, Peregrine, Osborn, William Zulestein, comte de Rochfort, parmi lesquels quelques jeunes, de la faction qui ne portait pas perruque, entourant Price Devereux, vicomte Hereford, et discutant la question de savoir si une infusion de houx des apalaches est du thé. — A peu près, disait Osborn. — Tout à fait, disait Essex. Ce qui était attentivement écouté par Pawlets de Saint-John, cousin du Bolingbroke dont Voltaire plus tard a été un peu l'élève, car Voltaire, commencé par le père Porée, a été achevé par Bolingbroke. Au banc des marquis, Thomas de Grey, marquis de Kent, lord chambellan de la reine, affirmait à Robert Bertie, marquis de Lindsey, lord chambellan d'Angleterre, que c'était par deux français réfugiés, monsieur Lecoq, autrefois conseiller au parlement de Paris, et monsieur Ravenel, gentilhomme breton, qu'avait été gagné le gros lot de la grande loterie anglaise en 1614. Le comte de Wymes lisait un livre intitulé: *Pratique curieuse des oracles des sibylles*. John Campbell, comte de Greenwich, fameux par son long menton, sa gaîté et ses quatrevingt-sept ans, écrivait à sa maîtresse. Lord Chandos se faisait les ongles. La séance qui allait suivre devant être une séance royale où la couronne serait représentée par commissaires, deux assistants door-keepers disposaient en avant du trône un banc de velours couleur feu. Sur le deuxième sac de laine était assis le maître des rôles, *sacrorum scriniorum magister*, lequel avait alors pour logis l'ancienne maison des juifs convertis. Sur le quatrième sac, les deux sous-clercs à genoux feuilletaient des registres.

Cependant le lord-chancelier prenait place sur le premier sac de laine, les officiers de la chambre s'installaient, les uns assis, les autres debout, l'archevêque de Canterbury se levait et disait la prière, et la séance commençait. Gwynplaine était déjà entr depuis quelque temps, sans qu'on eût pris garde à lui; le deuxième banc des barons, où était sa place, étant contigu à la barre, il n'avait eu que quelques pas à faire. Les deux lords ses parrains s'étaient assis à sa droite et à sa gauche, ce qui avait à peu près masqué la présence du nouveau venu. Personne n'étant averti, le clerc du parlement avait lu à demi-voix et, pour ainsi dire, chuchoté les diverses pièces concernant le nouveau lord, et le lord-chancelier avait proclamé son admission au milieu de ce qu'on appelle dans les comptes rendus «l'inattention générale». Chacun causait. Il y avait dans la chambre ce brouhaha pendant lequel les assemblées font toutes sortes de choses crépusculaires, qui quelquefois les étonnent plus tard.

Gwynplaine s'était assis, silencieusement, tête nue, entre les deux vieux pairs, lord Fitz Walter et lord Arundel.

Ajoutons que Barkilphedro, renseigné à fond comme un espion qu'il était, et déterminé à réussir dans sa machination, avait dans ses dires officiels, en présence du lord-chancelier, atténué dans une certaine mesure la difformité de lord Fermain Clancharlie, en insistant sur ce détail que Gwynplaine pouvait à volont supprimer l'effet de rire et ramener au sérieux sa face défigurée. Barkilphedro avait probablement même exagéré cette faculté. D'ailleurs, au point de vue aristocratique, qu'est-ce que cela faisait? Lord William Cowper n'était-il pas le légiste auteur de la maxime: En Angleterre, la restauration d'un pair importe plus que la restauration d'un roi? Sans doute la beaut et la dignité devraient être inséparables, il est fâcheux qu'un lord soit contrefait, et c'est là un outrage du hasard; mais, insistons-y, en quoi cela diminue-t-il le droit? Le lord-chancelier prenait des précautions et avait raison d'en prendre, mais, en somme, avec ou sans précautions, qui donc pouvait empêcher un pair d'entrer à la chambre des pairs? La seigneurie et la royauté ne sont-elles pas supérieures à la difformité et à l'infirmité? Un cri de bête fauve n'avait-il pas été héréditaire comme la pairie elle-même dans l'antique famille, éteinte en 1347, des Cumin, comtes de Buchan, au point que c'était au cri de tigre qu'on reconnaissait le pair d'Ecosse?
Ses hideuses taches de sang au visage empêchèrent-elles César Borgia d'être duc de Valentinois? La cécité empêcha-t-elle Jean de Luxembourg d'être roi de Bohême? La gibbosité empêcha-t-elle Richard III d'être roi d'Angleterre? A bien voir le fond des choses, l'infirmité et la laideur acceptées avec une hautaine indifférence, loin de contredire la grandeur, l'affîrment et la prouvent. La seigneurie a une telle majesté que la difformité ne la trouble point. Ceci est l'autre aspect de la question, et n'est pas le moindre. Comme on le voit, rien ne pouvait faire obstacle à l'admission de Gwynplaine, et les précautions prudentes du lord-chancelier, utiles au point de vue inférieur de la tactique, étaient de luxe au point de vue supérieur du principe aristocratique.

En entrant, selon la recommandation que lui avait faite le roi d'armes et que les deux lords parrains lui avaient renouvelée, il avait salué «la chaise royale».

Donc c'était fini. Il était lord.

Cette hauteur, sous le rayonnement de laquelle, toute sa vie, il avait vu son maître Ursus se courber avec épouvante, ce sommet prodigieux, il l'avait sous ses pieds.

Il était dans le lieu éclatant et sombre de l'Angleterre.

Vieille cime du mont féodal regardée depuis six siècles par l'Europe et l'histoire. Auréole effrayante d'un monde de ténèbres.

Son entrée dans cette auréole avait eu lieu. Entrée irrévocable.

Il était là chez lui.

Chez lui sur son siège comme le roi sur le sien.

Il y était, et rien désormais ne pouvait faire qu'il n'y fût pas.

Cette couronne royale qu'il voyait sous ce dais était soeur de sa couronne à lui. Il était le pair de ce trône.

En face de la majesté, il était la seigneurie. Moindre, mais semblable.

Hier, qu'était-il? histrion. Aujourd'hui, qu'était-il? prince.

Hier, rien. Aujourd'hui, tout.

Confrontation brusque de la misère et de la puissance, s'abordant face à face au fond d'un esprit dans une destinée et devenant tout à coup les deux moitiés d'une conscience.

Deux spectres, l'adversité et la prospérité, prenant possession de la même âme, et chacun la tirant à soi. Partage pathétique d'une intelligence, d'une volonté, d'un cerveau, entre ces deux frères ennemis, le fantôme pauvre et le fantôme riche. Abel et Caïn dans le même homme.

V

CAUSERIES ALTIÈRES

Peu à peu les bancs de la chambre se garnirent. Les lords commencèrent à arriver. L’ordre du jour était le vote du bill augmentant de cent mille livres sterling la dotation annuelle de Georges de Danemark, duc de Cumberland, mari de la reine. En outre, il était annoncé que divers bills consentis par sa majest allaient être apportés à la chambre par des commissaires de la couronne ayant pouvoir et charge de les sanctionner, ce qui érigeait la séance en séance royale. Les pairs avaient tous leur robe de parlement par-dessus leur habit de cour ou de ville.

Cette robe, semblable à celle dont était revêtu Gwynplaine, était la même pour tous, sinon que les ducs avaient cinq bandes d’hermine avec bordure d’or, les marquis quatre, les comtes et les vicomtes trois, et les barons deux.

Les lords entraient par groupes. On s’était rencontré dans les couloirs, on continuait les dialogues commencés. Quelques-uns venaient seuls. Les costumes étaient solennels, les attitudes point; ni les paroles.

Tous, en entrant, saluaient le trône.

Les pairs affluaient. Ce défilé de noms majestueux se faisait peu près sans cérémonial, le public étant absent. Leicester entrait et serrait la main de Lichfield; puis Charles Mordaunt, comte de Peterborough et de Monmouth, l’ami de Locke, sur l’initiative duquel il avait proposé la refonte des monnaies; puis Charles Campbell, comte de Loudoun, prêtant l’oreille Fulke Greville, lord Brooke; puis Dorme, comte de Caërnarvon; puis Robert Sutton, baron Lexington, fils du Lexington qui avait conseillé à Charles II de chasser Gregorio Leti, historiographe assez mal avisé pour vouloir être historien; puis Thomas Bellasyse, vicomte Falconberg, ce beau vieux; et ensemble les trois cousins Howard, Howard, comte de Bindon, Bower-Howard, comte de Berkshire, et Stafford-Howard, comte de Stafford; puis John Lovelace, baron Lovelace, dont la pairie éteinte en 1736 permit à Richardson d’introduire Lovelace dans son livre et de créer sous ce nom un type. Tous ces personnages diversement célèbres dans la politique ou la guerre, et dont plusieurs honorent l’Angleterre, riaient et causaient. C’était comme l’histoire vue en négligé.

En moins d’une demi-heure, la chambre se trouva presque au complet. C’était tout simple, la séance étant royale. Ce qui était moins simple, c’était la vivacité des conversations. La chambre, si assoupie tout à l’heure, était maintenant en rumeur comme une ruche inquiétée. Ce qui l’avait réveillée, c’était l’arrivée des lords en retard. Ils apportaient du nouveau.
Chose bizarre, les pairs qui, à l’ouverture de la séance, étaient dans la chambre, ne savaient point ce qui s’y était passé, et ceux qui n’y étaient pas le savaient.

Plusieurs lords arrivaient de Windsor.

Depuis quelques heures, l’aventure de Gwynplaine s’était ébruitée. Le secret est un filet; qu’une maille se rompe, tout se déchire. Dès le matin, par suite des incidents racontés plus haut, toute cette histoire d’une pairie retrouvée sur un tréteau et d’un bateleur reconnu lord, avait fait éclat à Windsor, dans les privés royaux. Les princes en avaient parlé, puis les laquais. De la cour l’événement avait gagné la ville. Les événements ont une pesanteur, et la loi du carré des vitesses leur est applicable. Ils tombent dans le public et s’y enfoncent avec une rapidité inouïe. A sept heures, on n’avait pas Londres vent de cette histoire. A huit heures, Gwynplaine était le bruit de la ville. Seuls, les quelques lords exacts qui avaient devancé l’ouverture de la séance ignoraient la chose, n’étant point dans la ville où l’on racontait tout et étant dans la chambre où ils ne s’étaient aperçus de rien. Sur ce, tranquilles sur leurs bancs, ils étaient apostrophés par les arrivants, tout émus.

— Eh bien? disait Francis Brown, vicomte Mountacute, au marquis de Dorchester.

— Quoi?

— Est-ce que c’est possible?

— Quoi?

— L’Homme qui Rit!

— Qu’est-ce que c’est que l’Homme qui Rit?

— Vous ne connaissez pas l’Homme qui Rit?

— Non.

— C’est un clown. Un boy de la foire. Un visage impossible qu’on allait voir pour deux sous. Un saltimbanque.

— Après?

— Vous venez de le recevoir pair d’Angleterre.

— L’homme qui rit, c’est vous, milord Mountacute.

— Je ne ris pas, milord Dorchester.

Et le vicomte Mountacute faisait un signe au clerc du parlement, qui se levait de son sac de laine et confirmait à leurs seigneuries le fait de l'admission du nouveau pair. Plus les détails.

— Tiens, tiens, tiens, disait lord Dorchester, je causais avec l'évêque d'Ély.

Le jeune comte d'Annesley abordait le vieux lord Eure, lequel n'avait plus que deux ans à vivre, car il devait mourir en 1707.

— Milord Eure?

— Milord Annesley?

— Avez-vous connu lord Linnaeus Clancharlie?

— Un homme d'autrefois. Oui.

— Qui est mort en Suisse?

— Oui. Nous étions parents.

— Qui avait été républicain sous Cromwell, et qui était rest républicain sous Charles II?

— Républicain? pas du tout. Il boudait. C'était une querelle personnelle entre le roi et lui. Je tiens de source certaine que lord Clancharlie se serait rallié si on lui avait donné la place de chancelier qu'a eue lord Hyde.

— Vous m'étonnez, milord Eure. On m'avait dit que ce lord Clancharlie était un honnête homme.

— Un honnête homme! Est-ce que cela existe? Jeune homme, il n'y a pas d'honnête homme.

— Mais Caton?

— Vous croyez à Caton, vous.

— Mais Aristide?

— On a bien fait de l'exiler.

— Mais Thomas Morus?

— On a bien fait de lui couper le cou.

— Et à votre avis, lord Clancharlie?...

— Était de cette espèce. D'ailleurs un homme qui reste en exil, c'est ridicule.

— Il y est mort.

— Un ambitieux déçu. Oh! si je l'ai connu! je crois bien. J'étais son meilleur ami.

— Savez-vous, milord Eure, qu'il s'était marié en Suisse?

— Je le sais à peu près.

— Et qu’il a eu de ce mariage un fils légitime?

— Oui. Qui est mort.

— Qui est vivant.

— Vivant?

— Vivant.

— Pas possible.

— Réel. Prouvé. Constaté. Homologué. Enregistré.

— Mais alors ce fils va hériter de la pairie de Clancharlie?

— Il ne va pas en hériter.

— Pourquoi?

— Parce qu’il en a hérité. C’est fait.

— C’est fait?

— Tournez la tête, milord Eure. Il est assis derrière vous au banc des barons.

Lord Eure se retournait; mais le visage de Gwynplaine se dérobait sous sa forêt de cheveux.

— Tiens! disait le vieillard, ne voyant que ses cheveux, il a déjà adopté la nouvelle mode. Il ne porte pas perruque.

Grantham abordait Colepepper.

— En voilà un qui est attrapé!

— Qui ça?

— David Dirry-Moir.

— Pourquoi ça?

— Il n’est plus pair.

— Comment ça?

Et Henry Auverquerque, comte de Grantham, racontait à John, baron Colepepper, toute «l’anecdote», la bouteille épave portée l’amirauté, le parchemin des comprachicos, le *jussu régis* contre-signé *Jeffreys*. la confrontation dans la cave pénale de Southwark, l’acceptation de tous ces faits par le lord-chancelier et par la reine, la prise du test dans le rond-point vitré, et enfin l’admission de lord Fermain Clancharlie au commencement de la séance, et tous deux faisaient effort pour distinguer entre lord Fitz Walter et lord Arundel la figure, dont on parlait tant, du nouveau lord, mais sans y mieux réussir que lord Eure et lord Annesley.

Gwynplaine, du reste, soit hasard, soit arrangement de ses parrains avertis par le lord-chancelier, était placé dans assez d’ombre pour échapper à la curiosité.

— Où ça? où est-il?

C'était le cri de tous en arrivant, mais aucun ne parvenait à le bien voir. Quelques-uns, qui avaient vu Gwynplaine à la Green-Box, étaient passionnément curieux, mais perdaient leur peine. Comme il arrive quelquefois qu'on embastille prudemment une jeune fille dans un groupe de douairières, Gwynplaine était comme enveloppé par plusieurs épaisseurs de vieux lords infirmes et indifférents. Des bons hommes qui ont la goutte sont peu sensibles aux histoires d'autrui.

On se passait de main en main des copies de la lettre en trois lignes que la duchesse Josiane avait, affirmait-on, écrite à la reine sa soeur, en réponse à l'injonction que lui avait faite sa majesté d'épouser le nouveau pair, l'héritier légitime des Clancharlie, lord Fermain. Cette lettre était ainsi conçue:

«Madame,

«J'aime autant cela. Je pourrai avoir lord David pour amant.

Signé *Josiane*. Ce billet, vrai ou faux, avait un succès d'enthousiasme.

Un jeune lord, Charles d'Okehampton, baron Mohun, dans la faction qui ne portait pas perruque, le lisait et le relisait avec bonheur. Lewis de Duras, comte de Feversham, anglais qui avait de l'esprit français, regardait Mohun et souriait.

— Eh bien, s'écriait lord Mohun, voilà la femme que je voudrais épouser!

Et les voisins des deux lords entendaient ce dialogue entre Duras et Mohun:

— Épouser la duchesse Josiane, lord Mohun!

— Pourquoi pas?

— Peste!

— On serait heureux!

— On serait plusieurs.

— Est-ce qu'on n'est pas toujours plusieurs?

— Lord Mohun, vous avez raison. En fait de femmes, nous avons tous les restes les uns des autres. Qui est-ce qui a eu un commencement?

— Adam, peut-être.

— Pas même.

— Au fait, Satan!

— Mon cher, concluait Lewis de Duras, Adam n'est qu'un prête-nom. Pauvre dupe. Il a endossé le genre humain. L'homme a été fait la femme par le diable.

Hugo Cholmley, comte de Cholmley, fort légiste, était interrog du banc des évêques par Nathanaël Crew, lequel était deux fois pair, pair temporel, étant baron Crew, et pair spirituel, étant évêque de Durham.

— Est-ce possible? disait Crew.

— Est-ce régulier? disait Cholmley.

— L’investiture de ce nouveau venu s’est faite hors de la chambre, reprenait l’évêque, mais on affirme qu’il y a des précédents.

— Oui. Lord Beauchamp sous Richard II. Lord Chenay sous Élisabeth.

— Et lord Broghill sous Cromwell.

— Cromwell ne compte pas.

— Que pensez-vous de tout cela?

— Des choses diverses.

— Milord, comte de Cholmley, quel sera le rang de ce jeune Fermain Clancharlie dans la chambre?

— Milord évêque, l’interruption républicaine ayant déplacé les anciens rangs, Clancharlie est aujourd’hui situé dans la pairie entre Barnard et Somers, ce qui fait que, dans un cas de tour d’opinions, lord Fermain Clancharlie parlerait le huitième.

— En vérité! un bateleur de place publique!

— L’incident en soi ne m’étonne point, milord évêque. Ces choses-là arrivent. Il en arrive de plus surprenantes. Est-ce que la guerre des deux roses n’a pas été annoncée par l’assèchement subit de la rivière Ouse en Bedford le 1er janvier 1399? Or, si une rivière peut tomber en sécheresse, un seigneur peut tomber dans une condition servile. Ulysse, roi d’Ithaque, fit toutes sortes de métiers. Fermain Clancharlie est resté lord sous son enveloppe d’histrion. La bassesse de l’habit ne touche point la noblesse du sang. Mais la prise du test et l’investiture hors séance, quoique légale à la rigueur, peut soulever des objections. Je suis d’avis qu’il faudra s’entendre sur la question de savoir s’il y aurait lieu plus tard questionner en conversation d’état le lord-chancelier. On verra dans quelques semaines ce qu’il y aura à faire.

Et l’évêque ajoutait:

— C’est égal. C’est une aventure comme on n’en a pas vu depuis le comte Gesbodus.

Gwynplaine, l’Homme qui Rit, l’inn Tadcaster, la Green-Box, *Chaos vaincu*, la Suisse, Chillon, les comprachicos, l’exil, la mutilation, la

république, Jeffreys, Jacques II, le *jussu regis*, la bouteille ouverte à l'amirauté, le père, lord Linnaeus, le fils légitime, lord Fermain, le fils bâtard, lord David, les conflits probables, la duchesse Josiane, le lord-chancelier, la reine, tout cela courait de banc en banc.
Une traînée de poudre, c'est le chuchotement. On s'en ressassait les détails. Toute cette aventure était l'immense murmure de la chambre. Gwynplaine, vaguement, au fond du puits de rêverie o il était, entendait ce bourdonnement sans savoir que c'était pour lui.

Cependant il était étrangement attentif, mais attentif aux profondeurs, non à la surface. L'excès d'attention se tourne en isolement.

Une rumeur daus une chambre n'empêche point la séance d'aller son train, pas plus qu'une poussière sur une troupe ne l'empêche de marcher. Les juges, qui ne sont à la chambre haute que de simples assistants ne pouvant parler qu'interrogés, avaient pris place sur le deuxième sac de laine, et les trois secrétaires d'état sur le troisième. Les héritiers de pairie affluaient dans leur compartiment à la fois dehors et dedans, qui était en arrière du trône. Les pairs mineurs étaient sur leur gradin spécial. En 1705, ces petits lords n'étaient pas moins de douze: Huntingdon, Lincoln, Dorset, Warwick, Bath, Burlington, Derwentwater, destiné à une mort tragique, Longueville, Lonsdale, Dudley and Ward, et Carteret, ce qui faisait une marmaille de huit comtes, de deux vicomtes et de deux barons.

Dans l'enceinte, sur les trois étages de bancs, chaque lord avait regagné son siège. Presque tous les évêques étaient là. Les ducs étaient nombreux, à commencer par Charles Seymour, duc de Somerset, et à finir par Georges Augustus, prince électoral de Hanovre, duc de Cambridge, le dernier en date et par conséquent le dernier en rang. Tous étaient en ordre, selon les préséances; Cavendish, duc de Devonshire, dont le grand-père avait abrit Hardwick les quatrevingt-douze ans de Hobbes; Lennox, duc de Richmond; les trois Fitz-Roy, le duc de Southampton, le duc de Grafton et le duc de-Northumberland; Butler, duc d'Ormond; Somerset, duc de Beaufort; Beauclerk, duc de Saint-Albans; Pawlett, duc de Bolton; Osborne, duc de Leeds; Wriothesley Russell, duc de Bedford, ayant pour cri d'armes et pour devise: *Che sara sara*, c'est-à-dire l'acceptation des événements; Sheffîeld, duc de Buckingham; Manners, duc de Rutland, et les autres. Ni Howard, duc de Norfolk, ni Talbot, duc de Shrewsbury, ne siégeaient, étant catholiques; ni Churchill, duc de Marlborough, — notre Malbrouck, — qui était en guerre et battait la France en ce moment-là. Il n'y avait point alors de duc écossais, Queensberry, Montrose et Roxburghe n’ayant été admis qu’en 1707.

VI

LA HAUTE ET LA BASSE

Tout à coup, il y eut dans la chambre une vive clarté. Quatre door-keepers apportèrent et placèrent des deux côtés du trône quatre hautes torchères-candélabres chargées de bougies. Le trône, ainsi éclairé, apparut dans une sorte de pourpre lumineuse. Vide, mais auguste. La reine dedans n'y eût pas ajouté grand'chose.

L'huissier de la verge noire entra, la baguette levée, et dit:

— Leurs seigneuries les commissaires de sa majesté.

Toutes les rumeurs tombèrent.

Un clerc en perruque et en simarre parut à la grande porte tenant un coussin fleurdelysé sur lequel on voyait des parchemins. Ces parchemins étaient des bills. A chacun pendait à une tresse de soie la bille ou bulle, d'or quelquefois, qui fait qu'on appelle les lois *bills* en Angleterre et *bulles* à Rome.

A la suite du clerc marchaient trois hommes en robes de pairs, le chapeau à plumes sur la tête.

Ces hommes étaient les commissaires royaux. Le premier était le lord haut-trésorier d'Angleterre, Godolphin, le second était le lord-président du conseil, Pembroke, le troisième était le lord du sceau privé, Newcastle.

Ils marchaient l'un derrière l'autre, selon la préséance, non de leur titre, mais de leur charge, Godolphin en tête, Newcastle le dernier, quoique duc.

Ils vinrent au banc devant le trône, firent la révérence à la chaise royale, ôtèrent et remirent leurs chapeaux, et s'assirent sur le banc.

Le lord-chancelier regarda l'huissier de la verge noire, et dit: — Mandez à la barre les communes.

L'huissier de la verge noire sortit.

Le clerc, qui était un clerc de la chambre des lords, posa sur la table, dans le carré des sacs de laine, le coussin où étaient les bills.

Il y eut une interruption qui dura quelques minutes. Deux door-keepers posèrent devant la barre un escabeau de trois degrés. Cet escabeau était de velours incarnat sur lequel des clous dorées dessinaient des fleurs de lys.

La grande porte, qui s'était refermée, se rouvrit, et une voix cria:

— Les fidèles communes d’Angleterre.

C’était l’huissier de la verge noire qui annonçait l’autre moiti du parlement.

Les lords mirent leurs chapeaux.

Les membres des communes entrèrent, précédés du speaker, tous tête nue.

Ils s’arrêtèrent à la barre. Ils étaient en habit de ville, la plupart en noir, avec l’épée.

Le speaker, très honorable John Smyth, écuyer, membre pour le bourg d’Andover, monta sur l’escabeau qui était au milieu de la barre. L’orateur des communes avait une longue simarre de satin noir à larges manches et à fentes galonnées de brandebourgs d’or par derrière et par devant, et moins de perruque que le lord-chancelier. Il était majestueux, mais inférieur.

Tous ceux des communes, orateur et membres, demeurèrent en attente, debout et nu-tête, devant les pairs assis et couverts.

On remarquait dans les communes le chef-justice de Chester, Joseph Jekyll, plus trois sergents en loi de sa majesté, Hooper, Powys et Parker, et James Montagu, solliciteur général, et l’attorney général, Simon Harcourt. A part quelques baronnets et chevaliers, et neuf lords de courtoisie, Hartington, Windsor, Woodstock, Mordaunt, Gramby, Scudamore, Fitz-Harding, Hyde, et Burkeley, fils de pairs et héritiers de pairies, tout le reste était du peuple. Sorte de sombre foule silencieuse.

Quand le bruit de pas de toute cette entrée eut cessé, le crieur de la verge noire, à la porte, dit:

— Oyez!

Le clerc de la couronne se leva. Il prit, déploya et lut le premier des parchemins posés sur le coussin. C’était un message de la reine nommant, pour la représenter en son parlement, avec pouvoir de sanctionner les bills, trois commissaires, savoir:

Ici le clerc haussa la voix.

— Sydney, comte de Godolphin.

Le clerc salua lord Godolphin. Lord Godolphin souleva son chapeau. Le clerc continua:

— ... Thomas Herbert, comte de Pembroke et de Montgomery.

Le clerc salua lord Pembroke. Lord Pembroke toucha son chapeau.

Le clerc reprit:

— ... John Hollis, duc de Newcastle.

Le clerc salua lord Newcastle. Lord Newcastle fit un signe de tête.

Le clerc de la couronne se rassit. Le clerc du parlement se leva. Son sous-clerc, qui était à genoux, se leva en arrière de lui. Tous deux faisant face au trône, et tournant le dos aux communes.

Il y avait sur le coussin cinq bills. Ces cinq bills, votés par les communes et consentis par les lords, attendaient la sanction royale.

Le clerc du parlement lut le premier bill.

C'était un acte des communes, qui mettait à la charge de l'état les embellissements faits par la reine à sa résidence de Hampton-Court, se montant à un million sterling.

Lecture faite, le clerc salua profondément le trône. Le sous-clerc répéta le salut plus profondément encore, puis tournant à demi la tête vers les communes, dit:

— La reine accepte vos bénévolences et ainsi le veut.

Le clerc lut le deuxième bill.

C'était une loi condamnant à la prison et à l'amende quiconque se soustrairait au service des trainbands. Les trainbands (troupe qu'on traîne où l'on veut) sont cette milice bourgeoise qui sert gratis et qui, sous Elisabeth, à l'approche de l'armada, avait donné cent quatrevingt-cinq mille fantassins et quarante mille cavaliers.

Les deux clercs firent à la chaise royale une nouvelle révérence; après quoi le sous-clerc, de profil, dit à la chambre des communes:

— La reine le veut.

Le troisième bill accroissait les dîmes et prébendes de l'évêch de Lichfield et de Coventry, qui est une des plus riches prélatures d'Angleterre, faisait une rente à la cathédrale, augmentait le nombre des chanoines et grossissait le doyenné et les bénéfices, «afin de pourvoir, disait le préambule, aux nécessités de notre sainte religion». Le quatrième bill ajoutait au budget de nouveaux impôts, un sur le papier marbré, un sur les carrosses de louage fixés au nombre de huit cents dans Londres et taxés cinquante-deux livres par an chaque, un sur les avocats, procureurs et solliciteurs, de quarante-huit livres par tête par an, un sur les peaux tannées, «nonobstant, disait le préambule, les doléances des artisans en cuir», un sur le savon, «nonobstant les réclamations de la ville d'Exeter et du Devonshire où l'on fabrique quantité de serge et de drap», un sur le vin, de quatre schellings par barrique, un sur la farine, un sur l'orge et le houblon, et renouvellement pour quatre ans, les besoins de l'état, *disait le préambule,* devant passer avant les remontrances du commerce, l’impôt du tonnage, variant de six livres tournois par tonneau pour les vaisseaux venant d’occident à dix-huit cents livres pour ceux venant d’orient Enfin le bill, déclarant insuffisante la capitation ordinaire déjà levée pour l’année courante, s’achevait par une surtaxe générale sur tout le royaume de quatre schellings ou quarante-huit sous tournois par tête de sujet, avec mention que ceux qui refuseraient de prêter les nouveaux serments au gouvernement paieraient le double de la taxe. Le cinquième bill faisait défense d’admettre à l’hôpital aucun malade s’il ne déposait en entrant une livre sterling pour payer, en cas de mort, son enterrement. Les trois derniers bills, comme les deux premiers, furent, l’un après l’autre, sanctionnés et faits lois par une salutation au trône et par les quatre mots du sous-clerc «la reine le veut» dits, par-dessus l’épaule, aux communes.

Puis le sous-clerc se remit à genoux devant le quatrième sac de laine, et le lord-chancelier dit:

— Soit fait comme il est désiré.

Ceci terminait la séance royale.

Le speaker, courbé en deux devant le chancelier, descendit reculons de l’escabeau, en rangeant sa robe derrière lui; ceux des communes s’inclinèrent jusqu’à terre, et, pendant que la chambre haute reprenait, sans faire attention à toutes ces révérences, son ordre du jour interrompu, la chambre basse s’en alla.

VII

LES TEMPÊTES D’HOMMES PIRES QUE LES TEMPETES D’OCÉANS

Les portes se refermèrent; l’huissier de la verge noire rentra; les lords commissaires quittèrent le banc d’état et vinrent s’asseoir en tête du banc des ducs, aux places de leurs charges, et le lord-chancelier prit la parole:

— Milords, la délibération de la chambre étant depuis plusieurs jours sur le bill qui propose d’augmenter de cent mille livres sterling la provision annuelle de son altesse royale le prince mari de sa majesté, le débat ayant été épuisé et clos, il va être procédé au vote. Le vote sera pris, selon l’usage, à partir du puîné du banc des barons. Chaque lord, à l’appel de son nom, se lèvera et répondra *content* ou *non content,* et sera libre d’exposer ses motifs de vote, s’il le juge à propos. Clerc, appelez le vote.

Le clerc du parlement, debout, ouvrit un large in-folio exhauss sur un pupitre doré, qui était le Livre de la Pairie.

Le puîné de la chambre à cette époque était lord John Hervey, créé baron et pair en 1703, duquel sont issus les marquis de Bristol.

Le clerc appela:

— Milord John, baron Hervey.

Un vieillard en perruque blonde se leva et dit:

— Content.

Puis se rassit.

Le sous-clerc enregistra le vote.

Le clerc continua:

— Milord Francis Seymour, baron Conway de Kiltultagh.

— Content, murmura en se soulevant à demi un élégant jeune homme à figure de page, qui ne se doutait point qu’il était le grand-père des marquis d’Hertford.

— Milord John Leveson, baron Gower, reprit le clerc.

Ce baron, d’où devaient sortir les ducs de Sutherland, se leva et dit en se rasseyant:

— Content.

Le clerc poursuivit:

— Milord Heneage Finch, baron Guernesey.

L’aïeul des comtes d’Aylesford, non moins jeune et non moins élégant que l’ancêtre des marquis d’Hertford, justifia sa devise *Aperto vivere voto* par la hauteur de son consentement.

— Content, cria-t-il.

Pendant qu’il se rasseyait, le clerc appelait le cinquième baron:

— Milord John, baron Granville.

— Content, répondit, tout de suite levé et rassis, lord Granville de Potheridge, dont la pairie sans avenir devait s’éteindre en 1709.

Le clerc passa au sixième.

— Milord Charles Mountague, baron Halifax.

— Content, dit lord Halifax, porteur d’un titre sous lequel s’était éteint le nom de Saville et devait s’éteindre le nom de Mountague. Mountague est distinct de Montagu et de Mountacute.

Et lord Halifax ajouta:

— Le prince Georges a une dotation comme mari de sa majesté; il en a une autre comme prince de Danemark, une autre comme duc de Cumberland, et une autre comme lord haut-amiral d’Angleterre et d’Irlande, mais il n’en a point comme généralissime. C’est l une injustice. Il faut faire cesser ce désordre, dans l’intérêt du peuple anglais.

Puis lord Halifax fit l’éloge de la religion chrétienne, blâma le papisme, et vota le subside.

Lord Halifax rassis, le clerc repartit:

— Milord Christoph, baron Barnard.

Lord Barnard, de qui devaient naître les ducs de Cleveland, se leva à l’appel de son nom.

— Content.

Et il mit quelque lenteur à se rasseoir, ayant un rabat de dentelle qui valait la peine d’être remarqué. C’était du reste un digne gentilhomme et un vaillant officier que lord Barnard.

Tandis que lord Barnard se rasseyait, le clerc, qui lisait de routine, eut quelque hésitation. Il raffermit ses lunettes et se pencha sur le registre avec un redoublement d’attention, puis, redressant la tête, il dit:

— Milord Fermain Clancharlie, baron Clancharlie et Hunkerville.

Gwynplaine se leva:

— Non content, dit-il.

Toutes les têtes se tournèrent. Gwynplaine était debout. Les gerbes de chandelles placées des deux côtés du trône éclairaient vivement sa face, et la faisaient saillir dans la vaste salle obscure avec le relief qu'aurait un masque sur un fond de fumée.

Gwynplaine avait fait sur lui cet effort qui, on s'en souvient, lui était, à la rigueur, possible. Par une concentration de volonté égale à celle qu'il faudrait pour dompter un tigre, il avait réussi à ramener pour un moment au sérieux le fatal rictus de son visage. Pour l'instant, il ne riait pas. Cela ne pouvait durer longtemps; les désobéissances à ce qui est notre loi, ou notre fatalité, sont courtes; parfois l'eau de la mer résiste la gravitation, s'enfle en trombe et fait une montagne, mais à la condition de retomber. Cette lutte était celle de Gwynplaine.

Pour une minute qu'il sentait solennelle, par une prodigieuse intensité de volonté, mais pour pas beaucoup plus de temps qu'un éclair, il avait jeté sur son front le sombre voile de son âme; il tenait en suspens son incurable rire; de cette face qu'on lui avait sculptée, il avait retiré la joie. Il n'était plus qu'effrayant.

— Qu'est cet homme? ce fut le cri.

Un frémissement indescriptible courut sur tous les bancs. Ces cheveux en forêt, ces enfoncements noirs sous les sourcils, ce regard profond d'un oeil qu'on ne voyait pas, le modelé farouche de cette tête mêlant hideusement l'ombre et la lumière, ce fut surprenant. Cela dépassait tout. On avait eu beau parler de Gwynplaine, le voir fut formidable. Ceux mêmes qui s'y attendaient ne s'y attendaient pas. Qu'on s'imagine, sur la montagne réservée aux dieux, dans la fête d'une soirée sereine, toute la troupe des tout-puissants réunie, et la face de Prométhée, ravagée par les coups de bec du vautour, apparaissant tout à coup comme une lune sanglante à l'horizon. L'Olympe apercevant le Caucase, quelle vision! Vieux et jeunes, béants, regardèrent Gwynplaine.

Un vieillard vénéré de toute la chambre, qui avait vu beaucoup d'hommes et beaucoup de choses, et qui était désigné pour être duc, Thomas, comte de Warton, se leva effrayé.

— Qu'est-ce que cela veut dire? cria-t-il. Qui a introduit cet homme dans la chambre? Qu'on mette cet homme dehors.

Et apostrophant Gwynplaine avec hauteur:

— Qui êtes-vous? d'où sortez-vous?

Gwynplaine répondit:

— Du gouffre.

Et, croisant les bras, il regarda les lords.

— Qui je suis? je suis la misère. Milords, j’ai à vous parler.

II y eut un frisson, et un silence. Gwynplainc continua.

— Milords, vous êtes en haut. C’est bien. Il faut croire que Dieu a ses raisons pour cela. Vous avez le pouvoir, l’opulence, la joie, le soleil immobile à votre zénith, l’autorité sans borne, la jouissance sans partage, l’immense oubli des autres.

Soit. Mais il y a au-dessous de vous quelque chose. Au-dessus peut-être. Milords, je viens vous apprendre une nouvelle. Le genre humain existe.

Les assemblées sont comme les enfants; les incidents sont leur boîte à surprises, et elles en ont la peur, et le goût. Il semble parfois qu’un ressort joue, et l’on voit jaillir du trou un diable. Ainsi en France Mirabeau, difforme lui aussi.

Gwynplaine en ce moment sentait en lui un grandissement étrange.

Un groupe d’hommes à qui l’on parle, c’est un trépied. On est, pour ainsi dire, debout sur une cime d’âmes. On a sous son talon un tressaillement d’entrailles humaines. Gwynplaine n’était plus l’homme qui, la nuit précédente, avait été, un instant, presque petit. Les fumées de cette élévation subite, qui l’avaient troublé, s’étaient allégées et avaient pris de la transparence, et là où Gwynplaine avait été séduit par une vanité, il voyait maintenant une fonction. Ce qui l’avait d’abord amoindri, présent le rehaussait. Il était illuminé d’un de ces grands éclairs qui viennent du devoir.

On cria de toutes parts autour de Gwynplaine:

— Écoutez! Écoutez!

Lui cependant, crispé et surhumain, réussissait à maintenir sur son visage la contraction sévère et lugubre, sous laquelle se cabrait le rictus, comme un cheval sauvage prêt à s’échapper. Il reprit:

— Je suis celui qui vient des profondeurs. Milords, vous êtes les grands et les riches. C’est périlleux. Vous profitez de la nuit. Mais prenez garde, il y a une grande puissance, l’aurore.

L’aube ne peut être vaincue. Elle arrivera. Elle arrive. Elle a en elle le jet du jour irrésistible. Et qui empêchera cette fronde de jeter le soleil dans le ciel? Le soleil, c’est le droit. Vous, vous êtes le privilège. Ayez peur. Le vrai maître de la maison va frapper à la porte. Quel est le père du privilège? le hasard. Et quel est son fils? l’abus. Ni le hasard ni l’abus ne sont solides. Ils ont l’un et l’autre un mauvais lendemain. Je viens vous avertir. Je viens vous dénoncer votre bonheur. Il est fait du malheur d’autrui. Vous avez tout, et ce tout se compose du rien des autres. Milords, je suis l’avocat désespéré, et je plaide la cause perdue. Cette cause, Dieu la regagnera. Moi, je ne suis rien, qu’une voix. Le genre humain est une bouche, et j’en suis le cri. Vous m’entendrez. Je viens ouvrir devant vous, pairs d’Angleterre, les grandes assises du peuple, ce souverain, qui est le patient, ce condamné, qui est le juge. Je plie sous ce que j’ai à dire.

Par où commencer? Je ne sais. J’ai ramassé dans la vaste diffusion des souffrances mon énorme plaidoirie éparse. Qu’en faire maintenant? elle m’accable, et je la jette pêle-mêle devant moi. Avais-je prévu ceci? non. Vous êtes étonnés, moi aussi. Hier j’étais un bateleur, aujourd’hui je suis un lord.

Jeux profonds. De qui? de l’inconnu. Tremblons tous. Milords, tout l’azur est de votre côté. De cet immense univers, vous ne voyez que la fête; sachez qu’il y a de l’ombre. Parmi vous je m’appelle lord Fermain Clancharlie, mais mon vrai nom est un nom de pauvre, Gwynplaine. Je suis un misérable taillé dans l’étoffe des grands par un roi, dont ce fut le bon plaisir. Voilà mon histoire. Plusieurs d’entre vous ont connu mon père, je ne l’ai pas connu. C’est par son côté féodal qu’il vous touche, et moi je lui adhère par son côté proscrit. Ce que Dieu a fait est bien. J’ai été jeté au gouffre. Dans quel but? pour que j’en visse le fond. Je suis un plongeur, et je rapporte la perle, la vérité. Je parle, parce que je sais. Vous m’entendrez, milords.

J’ai éprouvé. J’ai vu. La souffrance, non, ce n’est pas un mot, messieurs les heureux. La pauvreté, j’y ai grandi; l’hiver, j’y ai grelotté; la famine, j’en ai goûté; le mépris, je l’ai subi; la peste, je l’ai eue; la honte, je l’ai bue. Et je la revomirai devant vous, et ce vomissement de toutes les misères éclaboussera vos pieds et flamboiera. J’ai hésité avant de me laisser amener à cette place où je suis, car j’ai ailleurs d’autres devoirs. Et ce n’est pas ici qu’est mon coeur. Ce qui s’est passé en moi ne vous regarde pas; quand l’homme que vous nommez l’huissier de la verge noire est venu me chercher de la part de la femme que vous nommez la reine, j’ai eu un moment l’idée de refuser. Mais il m’a semblé que l’obscure main de Dieu me poussait de ce côté, et j’ai obéi. J’ai senti qu’il fallait que je vinsse parmi vous.

Pourquoi? à cause de mes haillons d’hier. C’est pour prendre la parole parmi les rassasiés que Dieu m’avait mêlé aux affamés.

Oh! ayez pitié! Oh! ce fatal monde dont vous croyez être, vous ne le connaissez point; si haut, vous êtes dehors; je vous dirai moi, ce que c'est. De l'expérience, j'en ai. J'arrive de dessous la pression. Je puis vous dire ce que vous pesez. O vous les maîtres, ce que vous êtes, le savez-vous? Ce que vous faites, le voyez-vous? Non. Ah! tout est terrible. Une nuit, une nuit de tempête, tout petit, abandonné, orphelin, seul dans la création démesurée, j'ai fait mon entrée dans cette obscurit que vous appelez la société. La première chose que j'ai vue, c'est la loi, sous la forme d'un gibet; la deuxième, c'est la richesse, c'est votre richesse, sous la forme d'une femme morte de froid et de faim; la troisième, c'est l'avenir, sous la forme d'un enfant agonisant; la quatrième, c'est le bon, le vrai, et le juste, sous la figure d'un vagabond n'ayant pour compagnon et pour ami qu'un loup.

En ce moment, Gwynplaine, pris d'une émotion poignante, sentit lui monter à la gorge les sanglots.

Ce qui fit, chose sinistre, qu'il éclata de rire.

La contagion fut immédiate. Il y avait sur l'assemblée un nuage; il pouvait crever en épouvante; il creva en joie. Le rire, cette démence épanouie, prit toute la chambre. Les cénacles d'hommes souverains ne demandent pas mieux que de bouffonner. Ils se vengent ainsi de leur sérieux.

Un rire de rois ressemble à un rire de dieux; cela a toujours une pointe cruelle. Les lords se mirent à jouer. Le ricanement aiguisa le rire. On battit des mains autour de celui qui parlait, et on l'outragea. Un pêle-mêle d'interjections joyeuses l'assaillit, grêle gaie et meurtrissante.

— Bravo, Gwynplaine! — Bravo, l'Homme qui Rit! — Bravo, le museau de la Green-Box! — Bravo, la hure du Tarrinzeau-field! — Tu viens nous donner une représentation. C'est bon! bavarde! — En voil un qui m'amuse! — Mais rit-il bien, cet animal-là! — Bonjour, pantin! — Salut à lord Clown! — Harangue, va! — C'est un pair d'Angleterre, ça! — Continue! — Non! non! — Si! si!

Le lord-chancelier était assez mal à son aise.

Un lord sourd, James Butler, duc d'Ormond, faisant de sa main son oreille un cornet acoustique, demandait à Charles Beauclerk, duc de Saint-Albans:

— Comment a-t-il voté?

Saint-Albans répondait:

— Non content.

— Parbleu, disait Ormond, je le crois bien. Avec ce visage-là!

Une foule échappée — et les assemblées sont des foules — ressaisissez-la donc. L'éloquence est un mors; si le mors casse, l'auditoire s'emporte, et rue jusqu'à ce qu'il ait désarçonné l'orateur. L'auditoire hait l'orateur. On ne sait pas assez cela. Se raidir sur la bride semble une ressource, et n'en est pas une. Tout orateur l'essaie. C'est l'instinct.

Gwynplaine l'essaya.

Il considéra un moment ces hommes qui riaient.

— Alors, cria-t-il, vous insultez la misère. Silence, pairs d'Angleterre! juges, écoutez la plaidoirie. Oh! je vous en conjure, ayez pitié! Pitié pour qui? Pitié pour vous. Qui est en danger? C'est vous. Est-ce que vous ne voyez pas que vous êtes dans une balance et qu'il y a dans un plateau votre puissance et dans l'autre votre responsabilité? Dieu vous pèse.

Oh! ne riez pas. Méditez. Cette oscillation de la balance de Dieu, c'est le tremblement de la conscience. Vous n'êtes pas méchants. Vous êtes des hommes comme les autres, ni meilleurs, ni pires. Vous vous croyez des dieux, soyez malades demain, et regardez frissonner dans la fièvre votre divinité. Nous nous valons tous. Je m'adresse aux esprits honnêtes, il y en a ici; je m'adresse aux intelligences élevées, il y en a; je m'adresse aux âmes généreuses, il y en a. Vous êtes pères, fils et frères, donc vous êtes souvent attendris. Celui de vous qui a regardé ce matin le réveil de son petit enfant est bon. Les coeurs sont les mêmes. L'humanité n'est pas autre chose qu'un coeur. Entre ceux qui oppriment et ceux qui sont opprimés, il n'y a de différence que l'endroit où ils sont situés. Vos pieds marchent sur des têtes, ce n'est pas votre faute. C'est la faute de la Babel sociale. Construction manquée, toute en surplombs. Un étage accable l'autre. Écoutez-moi, je vais vous dire. Oh! puisque vous êtes puissants, soyez fraternels; puisque vous êtes grands, soyez doux. Si vous saviez ce que j'ai vu! Hélas! en bas, quel tourment! Le genre humain est au cachot. Que de damnés, qui sont des innocents! Le jour manque, l'air manque, la vertu manque; on n'espère pas; et, ce qui est redoutable, on attend.

Rendez-vous compte de ces détresses. Il y a des êtres qui vivent dans la mort. Il y a des petites filles qui commencent à huit ans par la prostitution et qui finissent à vingt ans par la vieillesse. Quant aux sévérités pénales, elles sont épouvantables. Je parle un peu au hasard, et je ne choisis pas.

Je dis ce qui me vient à l'esprit. Pas plus tard qu'hier, moi qui suis ici, j'ai vu un homme enchaîné et nu, avec des pierres sur le ventre, expirer dans là torture. Savez-vous cela? non.

Si vous saviez ce qui se passe, aucun de vous n’oserait être heureux. Qui est-ce qui est allé à Newcastle-on-Tyne? Il y a dans les mines des hommes qui mâchent du charbon pour s’emplir l’estomac et tromper la faim. Tenez, dans le comté de Lancastre, Ribblechester, à force d’indigence, de ville est devenue village.

Je ne trouve pas que le prince Georges de Danemark ait besoin de cent mille guinées de plus. J’aimerais mieux recevoir l’hôpital l’indigent malade sans lui faire payer d’avance son enterrement. En Caernarvon, à Traith-maur comme à Traith-bichan, l’épuisement des pauvres est horrible. A Strafford, on ne peut dessécher le marais, faute d’argent. Les fabriques de draperie sont fermées dans tout le Lancashire. Chômage partout.

Savez-vous que les pêcheurs de hareng de Harlech mangent de l’herbe quand la pèche manque? Savez-vous qu’à Burton-Lazers il y a encore des lépreux traqués, et auxquels on tire des coups de fusil s’ils sortent de leurs tanières? A Ailesbury, ville dont un de vous est lord, la disette est en permanence. A Penckridge en Coventry, dont vous venez de doter la cathédrale et d’enrichir l’évêque, on n’a pas de lits dans les cabanes, et l’on creuse des trous dans la terre pour y coucher les petits enfants, de sorte qu’au lieu de commencer par le berceau, ils commencent par la tombe. J’ai vu ces choses-là. Milords, les impôts que vous votez, savez-vous qui les paie? Ceux qui expirent. Hélas! vous vous trompez. Vous faites fausse route. Vous augmentez la pauvreté du pauvre pour augmenter la richesse du riche. C’est le contraire qu’il faudrait faire. Quoi, prendre au travailleur pour donner à l’oisif, prendre au déguenillé pour donner au repu, prendre à l’indigent pour donner au prince! Oh, oui, j’ai du vieux sang républicain dans les veines. J’ai horreur de cela.

Ces rois, je les exècre! Et que les femmes sont effrontées! On m’a conté une triste histoire. Oh! je hais Charles II! Une femme que mon père avait aimée s’est donnée à ce roi, pendant que mon père mourait en exil, la prostituée! Charles II, Jacques II; après un vaurien, un scélérat! Qu’y a-t-il dans le roi? un homme, un faible et chétif sujet des besoins et des infirmités.

A quoi bon le roi? Cette royauté parasite, vous la gavez. Ce ver de terre, vous le faites boa. Ce ténia, vous le faites dragon. Grâce pour les pauvres! Vous alourdissez l’impôt au profit du trône. Prenez garde aux lois que vous décrétez.

Prenez garde au fourmillement douloureux que vous écrasez.

Baissez les yeux. Regardez à vos pieds. O grands, il y a des petits! ayez pitié. Oui! pitié de vous! car les multitudes agonisent, et le bas en mourant fait mourir le haut. La mort est une cessation qui n'excepte aucun membre. Quand la nuit vient, personne ne garde son coin de jour. Êtes-vous égoïstes? sauvez les autres. La perdition du navire n'est indifférente à aucun passager. Il n'y a pas naufrage de ceux-ci sans qu'il y ait engloutissement de ceux-là. Oh! sachez-le, l'abîme est pour tous.

Le rire redoubla, irrésistible. Du reste, pour égayer une assemblée, il suffisait de ce que ces paroles avaient d'extravagant.

Être comique au dehors, et tragique au dedans, pas de souffrance plus humiliante, pas de colère plus profonde. Gwynplaine avait cela en lui. Ses paroles voulaient agir dans un sens, son visage agissait dans l'autre; situation affreuse. Sa voix eut tout coup des éclats stridents.

— Ils sont joyeux, ces hommes! C'est bon. L'ironie fait face l'agonie. Le ricanement outrage le râle. Ils sont tout-puissants! C'est possible. Soit. On verra. Ah! je suis un des leurs. Je suis aussi un des vôtres, ô vous les pauvres!

Un roi m'a vendu, un pauvre m'a recueilli. Qui m'a mutilé? Un prince. Qui m'a guéri et nourri? Un meurt-de-faim. Je suis lord Clancharlie, mais je reste Gwynplaine. Je tiens aux grands, et j'appartiens aux petits. Je suis parmi ceux qui jouissent et avec ceux qui souffrent. Ah! cette société est fausse. Un jour viendra la société vraie. Alors il n'y aura plus de seigneurs, il y aura des vivants libres. Il n'y aura plus de maîtres, il y aura des pères. Ceci est l'avenir. Plus de prosternement, plus de bassesse, plus d'ignorance, plus d'hommes bêtes de somme, plus de courtisans, plus de valets, plus de rois, la lumière! En attendant, me voici. J'ai un droit, j'en use. Est-ce un droit?

Non, si j'en use pour moi. Oui, si j'en use pour tous. Je parlerai aux lords, en étant un. O mes frères d'en bas, je leur dirai votre dénûment. Je me dresserai avec la poignée des haillons du peuple dans la main, et je secouerai sur les maîtres la misère des esclaves, et ils ne pourront plus, eux les favorisés et les arrogants, se débarrasser du souvenir des infortunés, et se délivrer, eux les princes, de la cuisson des pauvres, et tant pis si c'est de la vermine, et tant mieux si elle tombe sur des lions!

Ici Gwynplaine se tourna vers les sous-clercs agenouillés qui écrivaient sur le quatrième sac de laine.

— Qu’est-ce que c’est que ces gens qui sont à genoux? Qu’est-ce que vous faites là? Levez-vous, vous êtes des hommes.

Cette brusque apostrophe à des subalternes qu’un lord ne doit pas même apercevoir, mit le comble aux joies. On avait crié bravo, on cria hurrah! Du battement des mains on passa au trépignement.

On eût pu se croire à la Green-Box. Seulement, à la Green-Box le rire fêtait Gwynplaine, ici il l’exterminait. Tuer, c’est l’effort du ridicule. Le rire des hommes fait quelquefois tout ce qu’il peut pour assassiner.

Le rire était devenu une voie de fait. Les quolibets pleuvaient.

C’est la bêtise des assemblées d’avoir de l’esprit. Leur ricanement ingénieux et imbécile écarte les faits au lieu de les étudier et condamne les questions au lieu de les résoudre. Un incident est un point d’interrogation. En rire, c’est rire de l’énigme. Le sphinx, qui ne rit pas, est derrière.

On entendait des clameurs contradictoires:

— Assez! assez! — Encore! encore!

William Farmer, baron Leimpster, jetait à Gwynplaine l’affront de Ryc-Quiney à Shakespeare:

— Histrio! mima!

Lord Vaughan, homme sentencieux, le vingt-neuvième du banc des barons, s’écriait:

— Nous revoici au temps où les animaux péroraient. Au milieu des bouches humaines, une mâchoire bestiale a la parole.

— Écoutons l’âne de Balaam, ajoutait lord Yarmouth.

Lord Yarmouth avait l’air sagace que donne un nez rond et une bouche de travers.

— Le rebelle Linnaeus est châtié dans son tombeau. Le fils est la punition du père, disait John Hough, évêque de Lichfield et de Coventry, dont Gwynplaine avait effleuré la prébende.

— Il ment, affirmait lord Cholmley, le législateur légiste. Ce qu’il appelle la torture, c’est la peine forte et dure, très bonne peine. La torture n’existe pas en Angleterre.

Thomas Wentworth, baron Raby, apostrophait le chancelier.

— Milord chancelier, levez la séance!

— Non! non! non! qu’il continue! il nous amuse! hurrah! hep! hep! hep!

Ainsi criaient les jeunes lords; leur gaîté était de la fureur.

Quatre surtout étaient en pleine exaspération d’hilarité et de haine. C’étaient

Laurence Hyde, comte de Rochester, Thomas Tufton, comte de Thanet, et le vicomte de Hatton, et le duc de Montagu.

— A la niche, Gwynplaine! disait Rochester.

— A bas! à bas! à bas! criait Thanet.

Le vicomte Hatton tirait de sa poche un penny, et le jetait Gwynplaine.

Et John Campbell, comte de Greenwich, Savage, comte Rivers, Thompson, baron Haversham, Warrigton, Escrik, Rolleston, Rockingham, Carteret, Langdale, Banester Maynard, Hundson, Caernarvon, Cavendish, Burlington, Robert Darcy, comte de Holderness, Other Windsor, comte de Plymouth, applaudissaient.

Tumulte de pandémonium ou de panthéon dans lequel se perdaient les paroles de Gwynplaine. On n'y distinguait que ce mot: Prenez garde!

Ralph, duc de Montagu, récemment sorti d'Oxford et ayant encore sa première moustache, descendit du banc des ducs où il siégeait dix-neuvième, et alla se poser les bras croisés en face de Gwynplaine. Il y a dans une lame l'endroit qui coupe le plus et dans une voix l'accent qui insulte le mieux. Montagu prit cet accent-là, et, ricanant au nez de Gwynplaine, lui cria:

— Qu'est-ce que tu dis?

— Je prédis, répondit Gwynplaine.

Le rire fit explosion de nouveau. Et sous ce rire grondait la colère en basse continue. Un des pairs mineurs, Lionel Cranseild Sackville, comte de Dorset et de Middlesex, se leva debout sur son banc, ne riant pas, grave comme il sied à un futur législateur, et, sans dire un mot, regarda Gwynplaine avec son frais visage de douze ans en haussant les épaules. Ce qui fit que l'évêque de Saint-Asaph se pencha à l'oreille de l'évêque de Saint-David assis à côté de lui, et lui dit, en montrant Gwynplaine: — Voilà le fou! et en montrant l'enfant: Voilà le sage!

Du chaos des ricanements se dégageaient des exclamations confuses, — Face de gorgone! — Que signifie cette aventure? — Insulte à la Chambre! — Quelle exception qu'un tel homme! — Honte! honte! — Qu'on lève la séance! — Non! qu'il achève! — Parle, bouffon!

Lord Lewis de Duras, les mains sur les hanches, criait: — Ah! que c'est bon de rire! ma rate est heureuse. Je propose un vote d'actions de grâces ainsi conçu: La Chambre des lords remercie la Green-Box.

Gwynplaine, on s'en souvient, avait rêvé un autre accueil.

Qui a gravi dans le sable une pente à pic toute friable au-dessus d'une profondeur vertigineuse, qui a senti sous ses mains, sous ses ongles, sous ses coudes, sous ses genoux, sous ses pieds, fuir et se dérober le point d'appui, qui, reculant au lieu d'avancer sur cet escarpement réfractaire, en proie à l'angoisse du glissement, s'enfonçant au lieu de gravir, descendant au lieu de monter, augmentant la certitude du naufrage par l'effort vers le sommet, et se perdant un peu plus à chaque mouvement pour se tirer de péril, a senti l'approche formidable de l'abîme, et a eu dans les os le froid sombre de la chute, gueule ouverte au-dessous de vous, celui-là a éprouvé ce qu'éprouvait Gwynplaine.

Il sentait son ascension crouler sous lui, et son auditoire était un précipice.

Il y a toujours quelqu'un qui dit le mot où tout se résume.

Lord Scarsdale traduisit en un cri l'impression de l'assemblée:

— Qu'est-ce que ce monstre vient faire ici?

Gwynplaine se dressa, éperdu et indigné, dans une sorte de convulsion suprême. Il les regarda tous fixement.

— Ce que je viens faire ici? Je viens être terrible. Je suis un monstre, dites-vous. Non, je suis le peuple. Je suis une exception? Non, je suis tout le monde. L'exception, c'est vous.

Vous êtes la chimère, et je suis la réalité. Je suis l'Homme.

Je suis l'effrayant Homme qui Rit. Qui rit de quoi? De vous.

De lui. De tout. Qu'est-ce que son rire? Votre crime, et son supplice. Ce crime, il vous le jette à la face; ce supplice, il vous le crache au visage. Je ris, cela veut dire: Je pleure.

Il s'arrêta. On se taisait. Les rires continuaient, mais bas.

Il put croire à une certaine reprise d'attention. Il respira, et poursuivit:

— Ce rire qui est sur mon front, c'est un roi qui l'y a mis. Ce rire exprime la désolation universelle. Ce rire veut dire haine, silence contraint, rage, désespoir. Ce rire est un produit des tortures. Ce rire est un rire de force. Si Satan avait ce rire, ce rire condamnerait Dieu. Mais l'éternel ne ressemble point aux périssables; étant l'absolu, il est le juste; et Dieu hait ce que font les rois. Ah! vous me prenez pour une exception! Je suis un symbole. O tout-puissants imbéciles que vous êtes, ouvrez les yeux. J'incarne tout. Je représente l'humanité telle que ses maîtres l'ont faite. L'homme est un mutilé. Ce qu'on m'a fait, on l'a fait au genre humain. On lui a déformé le droit, la justice, la vérité, la raison, l'intelligence, comme à moi les yeux, les narines et les oreilles; comme à moi, on lui a mis au coeur un cloaque de colère et de douleur, et sur la face un masque de contentement. Où s'était posé le doigt de Dieu, s'est appuyée la griffe du roi. Monstrueuse superposition. Évêques, pairs et princes, le peuple, c'est le souffrant profond qui rit la surface. Milords, je vous le dis, le peuple, c'est moi.

Aujourd'hui, vous l'opprimez, aujourd'hui vous me huez. Mais l'avenir, c'est le dégel sombre. Ce qui était pierre devient flot. L'apparence solide se change en submersion. Un craquement, et tout est dit. Il viendra une heure où une convulsion brisera votre oppression, où un rugissement répliquera à vos huées. Cette heure est déjà venue, — tu en étais, ô mon père! — cette heure de Dieu est venue, et s'est appelée République, on l'a chassée, elle reviendra. En attendant, souvenez-vous que la série des rois armés de l'épée est interrompue par Cromwell armé de la hache. Tremblez. Les incorruptibles solutions approchent, les ongles coupés repoussent, les langues arrachées s'envolent, et deviennent des langues de feu éparses au vent des ténèbres, et hurlent dans l'infini; ceux qui ont faim montrent leurs dents oisives, les paradis bâtis sur les enfers chancellent, on souffre, on souffre, on souffre, et ce qui est en haut penche, et ce qui est en bas s'entr'ouvre, l'ombre demande à devenir lumière, le damné discute l'élu, c'est le peuple qui vient, vous dis-je, c'est l'homme qui monte, c'est la fin qui commence, c'est la rouge aurore de la catastrophe, et voilà ce qu'il y a dans ce rire, dont vous riez!

Londres est une fête perpétuelle. Soit. L'Angleterre est d'un bout à l'autre une acclamation. Oui. Mais écoutez: Tout ce que vous voyez, c'est moi. Vous avez des fêtes, c'est mon rire.

Vous avez des joies publiques, c'est mon rire. Vous avez des mariages, des sacres et des couronnements, c'est mon rire. Vous avez des naissances de princes, c'est mon rire. Vous avez au-dessus de vous le tonnerre, c'est mon rire.

Le moyen de tenir à de telles choses! le rire recommença, cette fois accablant. De toutes les laves que jette la bouche humaine, ce cratère, la plus corrosive, c'est la joie. Faire du mal joyeusement, aucune foule ne résiste à cette contagion. Toutes les exécutions ne se font pas sur des échafauds, et les hommes, dès qu'ils sont réunis, qu'ils soient multitude ou assemblée, ont toujours au milieu d'eux un bourreau tout prêt, qui est le sarcasme. Pas de supplice comparable à celui du misérable risible. Ce supplice, Gwynplaine le subissait. L’allégresse, sur lui, était lapidation et mitraille. Il était hochet et mannequin, tête de turc, cible. On bondissait, on criait bis, on se roulait. On battait du pied. On s’empoignait au rabat. La majesté du lieu, la pourpre des robes, la pudeur des hermines, l’in-folio des perruques, n’y faisait rien. Les lords riaient, les évoques riaient, les juges riaient. Le banc des vieillards se déridait, le banc des enfants se tordait. L’archevêque de Canterbury poussait du coude l’archevêque d’York. Henry Compton, évêque de Londres, frère du comte de Northampton, se tenait les côtes. Le lord-chancelier baissait les yeux pour cacher son rire probable. Et à la barre, la statue du respect, l’huissier de la verge noire, riait.

Gwynplaine, pâle, avait croisé les bras; et, entouré de toutes ces figures, jeunes et vieilles, où rayonnait la grande jubilation homérique, dans ce tourbillon de battements de mains, de trépignements et de hourras, dans cette frénésie bouffonne dont il était le centre, dans ce splendide épanchement d’hilarité, au milieu de cette gaîté énorme, il avait en lui le sépulcre. C’était fini. Il ne pouvait plus maîtriser ni sa face qui le trahissait, ni son auditoire que l’insultait.

Jamais l’éternelle loi fatale, le grotesque cramponné au sublime, le rire répercutant le rugissement, la parodie en croupe du désespoir, le contre-sens entre ce qu’on semble et ce qu’on est, n’avait éclaté avec plus d’horreur. Jamais lueur plus sinistre n’avait éclairé la profonde nuit humaine.

Gwynplaine assistait à l’effraction définitive de sa destinée par un éclat de rire. L’irrémédiable était là. On se relève tombé, on ne se relève pas pulvérisé. Cette moquerie inepte et souveraine le mettait en poussière. Rien de possible désormais.

Tout est selon le milieu. Ce qui était triomphe à la Green-Box était chute et catastrophe à la chambre des lords.

L’applaudissement là-bas était ici imprécation. Il sentait quelque chose comme le revers de son masque. D’un côté de ce masque, il y avait la sympathie du peuple acceptant Gwynplaine, de l’autre la haine des grands rejetant lord Fermain Clancharlie.

D’un côté l’attraction, de l’autre la répulsion, toutes deux le ramenant vers l’ombre. Il se sentait comme frappé par derrière.

Le sort a des coups de trahison. Tout s’expliquera plus tard, mais, en attendant, la destinée est piège et l’homme tombe dans des chausse-trapes. Il avait cru monter, ce rire l’accueillait; les apothéoses ont des aboutissements lugubres. Il y a un mot sombre, être dégrisé. Sagesse tragique, celle qui naît de l’ivresse. Gwynplaine, enveloppé de cette tempête gaie et féroce, songeait.

A vau-l’eau, c’est le fou rire. Une assemblée en gaité, c’est la boussole perdue. On ne savait plus où l’on allait, ni ce qu’on faisait. Il fallut lever la séance.

Le lord-chancelier, «attendu l’incident», ajourna la suite du vote au lendemain. La chambre se sépara. Les lords firent la révérence à la chaise royale et s’en allèrent. On entendit les rires se prolonger et se perdre dans les couloirs. Les assemblées, outre leurs portes officielles, ont dans les tapisseries, dans les reliefs et dans les moulures, toutes sortes de portes dérobées par où elles se vident comme un vase par des fêlures. En peu de temps, la salle fut déserte. Cela se fait très vite, et presque sans transition. Ces lieux de tumulte sont tout de suite repris par le silence.

L’enfoncement dans la rêverie mène loin, et l’on finit, à force de songer, par être comme dans une autre planète. Gwynplaine tout à coup eut une sorte de réveil. Il était seul. La salle était vide. Il n’avait pas même vu que la séance avait ét levée. Tous les pairs avaient disparu, même ses deux parrains.

Il n’y avait plus çà et là que quelques bas officiers de la chambre attendant pour mettre les housses et éteindre les lampes que «sa seigneurie» fût partie. Il mit machinalement son chapeau sur sa tête, sortit de son banc, et se dirigea vers la grande porte ouverte sur la galerie. Au moment où il franchit la coupure de la barre, un door-keeper le débarrassa de sa robe de pair. Il s’en aperçut à peine. Un instant après, il était dans la galerie.

Les hommes de service qui étaient là remarquèrent avec étonnement que ce lord était sorti sans saluer le trône.

VIII

SERAIT BON FRÈRE S’IL N’ÉTAIT BON FILS

Il n’y avait plus personne dans la galerie. Gwynplaine traversa le rond-point, d’où l’on avait enlevé le fauteuil et les tables, et où il ne restait plus trace de son investiture. Des candélabres et des lustres de distance en distance indiquaient l’itinéraire de sortie.

Grâce à ce cordon de lumière, il put aisément retrouver, dans l’enchaînement des salons et des galeries, la route qu’il avait suivie en arrivant avec le roi d’armes et l’huissier de la verge noire. Il ne faisait aucune rencontre, si ce n’est ça et l quelque vieux lord tardigrade s’en allant pesamment et tournant le dos.

Tout à coup, dans le silence de toutes ces grandes salles désertes, des éclats de parole indistincts arrivèrent jusqu’ lui, sorte de tapage nocturne singulier en un tel lieu. Il se dirigea du côté où il entendait ce bruit, et brusquement il se trouva dans un spacieux vestibule faiblement éclairé qui était une des issues de la chambre. On apercevait une large porte vitrée ouverte, un perron, des laquais et des flambeaux; on voyait dehors une place; quelques carrosses attendaient au bas du perron.

C’est de là que venait le bruit qu’il avait entendu.

En dedans de la porte, sous le réverbère du vestibule, il y avait un groupe tumultueux et un orage de gestes et de voix.

Gwynplaine, dans la pénombre, approcha.

C’était une querelle. D’un côté il y avait dix ou douze jeunes lords voulant sortir, de l’autre un homme, le chapeau sur la tête comme eux, droit et le front haut, et leur barrant le passage.

Qui était cet homme? Tom-Jim-Jack.

Quelques-uns de ces lords étaient encore en robe de pair; d’autres avaient quitté l’habit de parlement et étaient en habit de ville.

Tom-Jim-Jack avait un chapeau à plumes, non blanches, comme les pairs, mais vertes et frisées d’orange; il était brodé et galonn de la tête aux pieds, avec des flots de rubans et de dentelles aux manches et au cou, et il maniait fiévreusement de son poing gauche la poignée d’une épée qu’il portait en civadière, et dont le baudrier et le fourreau étaient passementés d’ancres d’amiral.

C’était lui qui parlait, il apostrophait tous ces jeunes lords, et Gwynplaine entendit ceci:

— Je vous ai dit que vous étiez des lâches. Vous voulez que je retire mes paroles. Soit. Vous n’êtes pas des lâches. Vous êtes des idiots. Vous vous êtes mis tous contre un. Ce n’est pas couardise. Bon. Alors c’est ineptie. On vous a parlé, vous n’avez pas compris. Ici, les vieux sont sourds de l’oreille, et les jeunes, de l’intelligence. Je suis assez un des vôtres pour vous dire vos vérités. Ce nouveau venu est étrange, et il a débité un tas de folies, j’en conviens, mais dans ces folies il y avait des choses vraies. C’était confus, indigeste, mal dit; soit; il a répété trop souvent savez-vous, savez-vous; mais un homme qui était hier grimacier de la foire n’est pas forcé de parler comme Aristote et comme le docteur Gilbert Burnet évêque de Sarum. La vermine, les lions, l’apostrophe au sous-clerc, tout cela était de mauvais goût. Parbleu! qui vous dit le contraire? C’était une harangue insensée et décousue et qui allait tout de travers, mais il en sortait ça et là des faits réels. C’est déjà beaucoup de parler comme cela quand on n’en fait pas son métier, je voudrais vous y voir, vous! Ce qu’il a raconté des lépreux de Burton-Lazers est incontestable; d’ailleurs il ne serait pas le premier qui aurait dit des sottises; enfin, moi, milords, je n’aime pas qu’on s’acharne plusieurs sur un seul, telle est mon humeur, et je demande à vos seigneuries la permission d’être offensé. Vous m’avez déplu, j’en suis fâché. Moi, je ne crois pas beaucoup en Dieu, mais ce qui m’y ferait croire, c’est quand il fait de bonnes actions, ce qui ne lui arrive pas tous les jours. Ainsi je lui sais gré, ce bon Dieu, s’il existe, d’avoir tiré du fond de cette existence basse ce pair d’Angleterre, et d’avoir rendu son héritage à cet héritier, et, sans m’inquiéter si cela arrange ou non mes affaires, je trouve beau de voir subitement le cloporte se changer en aigle et Gwynplaine en Clancharlie. Milords, je vous défends d’être d’un autre avis que moi. Je regrette que Lewis de Duras ne soit pas là. Je l’insulterais avec plaisir. Milords, Fermain Clancharlie a été le lord, et vous avez été les saltimbanques. Quant à son rire, ce n’est pas sa faute. Vous avez ri de ce rire. On ne rit pas d’un malheur. Vous êtes des niais. Et des niais cruels. Si vous croyez qu’on ne peut pas rire de vous aussi, vous vous trompez; vous êtes laids, et vous vous habillez mal. Milord Haversham, j’ai vu l’autre jour ta maîtresse, elle est hideuse. Duchesse, mais guenon. Messieurs les rieurs, je répète que je voudrais bien vous voir essayer de dire quatre mots de suite. Beaucoup d’hommes jasent, très peu parlent. Vous vous imaginez savoir quelque chose parce que vous avez traîné vos grègues fainéantes à Oxford ou à Cambridge, et parce que, avant d’être pairs d’Angleterre sur les bancs de Westminster-Hall, vous avez été ânes sur les bancs du collége de Gonewill et de Caïus! Moi, je suis ici, et je tiens à vous regarder en face. Vous venez d’être impudents avec ce nouveau lord. Un monstre, soit. Mais livré aux bêtes. J’aimerais mieux être lui que vous. J’assistais à la séance, à ma place, comme héritier possible de pairie, j’ai tout entendu. Je n’avais pas le droit de parler, mais j’ai le droit d’être un gentilhomme.

Vos airs joyeux m’ont ennuyé. Quand je ne suis pas content, j’irais sur le Mont Pendlehill cueillir l’herbe des nuées, le clowdesbery, qui fait tomber la foudre sur qui l’arrache. C’est pourquoi je suis venu vous attendre à la sortie. Causer est utile, et nous avons des arrangements à prendre. Vous rendiez-vous compte que vous me manquiez un peu à moi-même?

Milords, j’ai le ferme dessein de tuer quelques-uns d’entre vous.

Vous tous qui êtes ici, Thomas Tufton, comte de Thanet, Savage, comte Rivers, Charles Spencer, comte de Sunderland, Laurence Hyde, comte de Rochester, vous barons, Gray de Rolleston, Cary Hunsdon, Escrick, Rockingham, toi, petit Carteret, toi, Robert Darcy, comte de Holderness, toi William, vicomte Halton, et toi, Ralph, duc de Montagu, et tous les autres qui voudront, moi, David Dirry-Moir, un des soldats de la flotte, je vous somme et je vous appelle, et je vous commande de vous pourvoir en diligence de seconds et de parrains, et je vous attends face contre face et poitrine contre poitrine, ce soir, tout de suite, demain, le jour, la nuit, en plein soleil, aux flambeaux, où, quand et comme bon vous semblera, partout où il y a assez de place pour deux longueurs d’épées, et vous ferez bien de visiter les batteries de vos pistolets et le tranchant de vos-estocs, attendu que j’ai l’intention de faire vos pairies vacantes. Ogle Cavendish, prends tes précautions et songe à ta devise: *Cavendo tutus*. Marmaduke Langdale, tu feras bien, comme ton ancêtre Gundold, de te faire suivre d’un cercueil. Georges Rooth, comte de Warington, tu ne reverras pas le comté palatin de Chester et ton labyrinthe à la façon de Crète et les hautes tourelles de Dunham Massie. Quant à lord Vaughan, il est assez jeune pour dire des impertinences et trop vieux pour en répondre; je demanderai compte de ses paroles à son neveu Richard Vaughan, membre des communes pour le bourg de Merioneth. Toi, John Campbell, comte de Greemvich, je te tuerai comme Achon tua Matas, mais d’un coup franc, et non par derrière, ayant coutume de montrer mon coeur et non mon dos à la pointe de l’espadon. Et c’est dit, milords. Sur ce, usez de maléfices, si bon vous semble, consultez des tireuses de cartes, graissez-vous la peau avec les onguents et les drogues qui font invulnérable, pendez-vous au cou des sachets du diable ou de la vierge, je vous combattrai bénits ou maudits, et je ne vous ferai point tâter pour savoir si vous avez sur vous des sorcelleries. A pied ou cheval. En plein carrefour, si vous voulez, à Piccadilly ou Charing-Cross, et l’on dépavera la rue pour notre rencontre comme on a dépavé la cour du Louvre pour le duel de Guise et de Bassompierre. Tous, entendez-vous? je vous veux tous. Dorme, comte de Caërnarvon, je te ferai avaler ma lame jusqu’à la coquille, comme fit Marolles à Lisle-Marivaux; et nous verrons ensuite, milord, si tu riras. Toi, Burlington, qui as l’air d’une fille avec tes dix-sept ans, tu auras le choix entre les pelouses de ta maison de Middlesex et ton beau jardin de Londesburg en Yorkshire pour te faire enterrer. J’informe vos seigneuries qu’il ne me convient pas qu’on soit insolent devant moi. Et je vous châtierai, milords. Je trouve mauvais que vous ayez bafoué lord Fermain Clancharlie. Il vaut mieux que vous.

Comme Clancharlie, il a la noblesse, que vous avez, et comme Gwynplaine, il a l’esprit, que vous n’avez pas. Je fais de sa cause ma cause, de son injure mon injure, et de vos ricanements ma colère. Nous verrons qui sortira de cette affaire vivant, car je vous provoque à outrance, entendez-vous bien? et à toute arme et de toute façon, et choisissez la mort qui vous plaira, et puisque vous êtes des manants en même temps que des gentilshommes, je proportionne le défi à vos qualités, et je vous offre toutes les manières qu’ont les hommes de se tuer, depuis l’épée comme les princes jusqu’à la boxe comme les goujats!

A ce jet furieux de paroles tout le groupe hautain des jeunes lords répondit par un sourire. — Convenu, dirent-ils.

— Je choisis le pistolet, dit Burlington.

— Moi, dit Escrick, l’ancien combat de champ clos à la masse d’armes et au poignard.

— Moi, dit Holderness, le duel aux deux couteaux, le long et le court, torses nus, et corps à corps.

— Lord David, dit le comte de Thanet, tu es écossais. Je prends la claymore.

— Moi, l’épée, dit Rockingham.

— Moi, dit le duc Ralph, je préfère la boxe. C’est plus noble.

Gwynplaine sortit de l’ombre.

Il se dirigea vers celui qu’il avait jusque-là nomm Tom-Jim-Jack, et en qui maintenant il commençait à entrevoir autre chose.

— Je vous remercie, dit-il. Mais ceci me regarde. Toutes les tètes se tournèrent.

Gwynplaine avança. Il se sentait poussé vers cet homme qu’il entendait appeler lord David, et qui était son défenseur, et plus encore peut-être. Lord David recula.

— Tiens! dit lord David, c’est vous! vous voilà! Cela se trouve bien. J’avais aussi un mot à vous dire. Vous avez tout l’heure parlé d’une femme qui, après avoir aimé lord Linnaeus Claucharlie, a aimé le roi Charles II

— C’est vrai.

— Monsieur, vous avez insulté ma mère.

— Votre mère? s’écria Gwynplaine. En ce cas, je le devinais, nous sommes...

— Frères, répondit lord David.

Et il donna un soufflet à Gwynplaine.

— Nous sommes frères, reprit-il. Ce qui fait que nous pouvons nous battre. On ne se bat qu’entre égaux. Qui est plus notre égal que notre frère? Je vous enverrai mes parrains. Demain, nous nous couperons la gorge.

LIVRE NEUVIEME

EN RUINE

I

C’EST A TRAVERS L’EXCÈS DE GRANDEUR QU’ON ARRIVE A L’EXCÈS DE MISÈRE

Comme minuit sonnait à Saint-Paul, un homme, qui venait de traverser le pont de Londres, entrait dans les ruelles de Southwark. Il n’y avait point de réverbères allumés, l’usage étant alors, à Londres comme à Paris, d’éteindre l’éclairage public à onze heures, c’est-à-dire de supprimer les lanternes au moment où elles deviennent nécessaires. Les rues, obscures, étaient désertes. Point de réverbères, cela fait peu de passants. L’homme marchait à grands pas. Il était étrangement vêtu pour aller dans la rue à pareille heure. Il avait un habit de soie brodé, l’épée au côté et un chapeau à plumes blanches, et point de manteau. Les watchmen qui le voyaient passer disaient: — C’est un seigneur qui a fait un pari. — Et ils s’écartaient avec le respect dû à un lord et à une gageure.

Cet homme était Gwynplaine.

Il avait pris la fuite.

Où en était-il? il ne le savait pas. L’âme, nous l’avons dit, a ses cyclones, tournoiements épouvantables où tout se mêle, le ciel, la mer, le jour, la nuit, la vie, la mort, dans une sorte d’horreur inintelligible. Le réel cesse d’être respirable. On est écrasé par des choses auxquelles on ne croit pas. Le néant s’est fait ouragan. Le firmament a blêmi. L’infini est vide.

On est dans l’absence. On se sent mourir. On désire un astre.

Qu’éprouvait Gwynplaine? une soif, voir Dea.

Il ne sentait plus que cela. Regagner la Green-Box, et l’inn Tadcaster, sonore, lumineux, plein de ce bon rire cordial du peuple; retrouver Ursus et Homo, revoir Dea, rentrer dans la vie!

Les désillusions se détendent comme l’arc, avec une force sinistre, et jettent l’homme, cette flèche, vers le vrai.

Gwynplaine avait hâte. Il approchait du Tarrinzeau-field. Il ne marchait plus, il courait. Ses yeux plongeaient dans l’obscurit en avant. Il se faisait précéder par son regard; recherche avide du port à l’horizon. Quel moment que celui où il allait apercevoir les fenêtres éclairées de l’inn Tadcaster!

Il déboucha sur le bowling-green. Il tourna un coin de mur, et eut, en face de lui, à l’autre bout du pré, à quelque distance, l’inn, qui était, on s’en souvient, la seule maison du champ de foire.

Il regarda. Pas de lumière. Une masse noire.

Il frissonna. Puis il se dit qu’il était tard, que la taverne était fermée, que c’était tout simple, qu’on dormait, qu’il n’y avait qu’à réveiller Nicless ou Govicum, qu’il fallait aller l’inn et frapper à la porte. Et il y alla. Il n’y courut pas.

Il s’y précipita.

Il arriva à l’inn, ne respirant plus. On est en pleine tourmente, on se débat dans les invisibles convulsions de l’âme, on ne sait plus si l’on est mort ou vivant, et l’on a pour ceux qu’on aime toutes sortes de délicatesses; c’est à cela que se reconnaissent les vrais coeurs. Dans l’engloutissement de tout, la tendresse surnage. Ne pas réveiller brusquement Dea, ce fut tout de suite la préoccupation de Gwynplaine.

Il approcha de l’inn en faisant le moins de bruit possible. Il connaissait le réduit, ancienne niche de chien de garde, o couchait Govicum; ce réduit, contigu à la salle basse, avait une lucarne sur la place, Gwynplaine gratta doucement la vitre.

Réveiller Govicum suffisait.

Il ne se fit aucun mouvement dans le bedroom de Govicum. A cet âge, se dit Gwynplaine, on a le sommeil dur. Il frappa du revers de sa main un petit coup sur la lucarne. Rien ne remua.

Il frappa plus vivement et deux coups. On ne bougea pas dans le réduit. Alors, avec quelque frémissement, il alla à la porte de l’inn, et cogna.

Personne ne répondit.

Il pensa, non sans ressentir le commencement d’un froid profond: — Maître Nicless est vieux, les enfants dorment durement et les vieillards lourdement. Allons! plus fort!

Il avait gratté. Il avait frappé. Il avait cogné. Il heurta.

Ceci lui rappela un lointain souvenir, Weymouth, quand il avait, tout petit, Dea toute petite dans ses bras.

Il heurta violemment, comme un lord, qu’il était, hélas!

La maison demeura silencieuse.

Il sentit qu’il devenait éperdu.

Il ne garda plus de ménagement. Il appela: Nicless! Govicum!

En même temps il regardait aux fenêtres pour voir si quelque chandelle s’allumait.

Rien dans l’inn. Pas une voix. Pas un bruit. Pas une lueur.

Il alla à la porte cochère et la heurta, et la poussa, et la secoua frénétiquement, en criant: Ursus! Homo!

Le loup n’aboya pas.

Une sueur glacée perla sur son front.

Il jeta les yeux autour de lui. La nuit était épaisse, mais il y avait assez d’étoiles pour que le champ de foire fût distinct.
Il vit une chose lugubre, l’évanouissement de tout. Il n’y avait plus une seule baraque sur le bowling-green. Le circus n’y était plus. Pas une tente. Pas un tréteau. Pas un chariot. Ce vagabondage aux mille vacarmes qui avait fourmillé là avait fait place à on ne sait quelle farouche noirceur vide. Tout s’en était allé.

La folie de l’anxiété le prit. Qu’est-ce que cela voulait dire?
Qu’était-il donc arrivé? Est-ce qu’il n’y avait plus personne?
Est-ce que sa vie se serait écroulée derrière lui? Qu’est-ce qu’on leur avait fait, à tous? Ah! mon Dieu! Il se rua comme une tempête sur la maison. Il frappa à la porte bâtarde, à la porte cochère, aux fenêtres, aux volets, aux murs, des poings et des pieds, furieux d’effroi et d’angoisse. Il appela Nicless, Govicum, Fibi, Vinos, Ursus, Homo. Toutes les clameurs, tous les bruits, il les jeta sur cette muraille. Par instants il s’interrompait et écoutait, la maison restait muette et morte.
Alors, exaspéré, il recommençait. Chocs, frappements, cris, roulements de coups faisant écho partout. On eût dit le tonnerre essayant de réveiller le sépulcre.

A un certain degré d’épouvanté, on devient terrible. Qui craint tout, ne craint plus rien. On donne des coups de pied au sphinx.
On rudoie l’inconnu. Il renouvela le tumulte sous toutes les formes possibles, s’arrêtant, reprenant, inépuisable en cris et en appels, donnant l’assaut à ce tragique silence.

Il appela cent fois tous ceux qui pouvaient être là, et cria tous les noms, excepté Dea. Précaution, obscure pour lui-même, dont il avait encore l’instinct dans son égarement.

Les cris et les appels épuisés, restait l’escalade. Il se dit: Il faut entrer dans la maison. Mais comment? Il cassa une vitre du réduit de Govicum, y fourra son poing en se déchirant la chair, tira le verrou du châssis et ouvrit la lucarne. Il s’aperçut que son épée allait le gêner; il l’arracha avec colère, fourreau, lame et ceinturon, et la jeta sur le pavé. Puis il se hissa aux reliefs de la muraille, et, bien que la lucarne fût étroite, il put y passer. Il pénétra dans l’inn. Le lit de Govicum, vaguement visible, était dans le réduit, mais Govicum n’y était pas. Pour que Govicum ne fût pas dans son lit, il fallait évidemment que Nicless ne fût pas dans le sien. Toute la maison était noire. On sentait dans cet intérieur ténébreux l’immobilité mystérieuse du vide, et cette vague horreur qui signifie: Il n’y a personne. Gwynplaine, convulsif, traversa la salle basse, se cogna aux tables, piétina sur les vaisselles, renversa les bancs, culbuta les brocs, enjamba les meubles, alla à la porte donnant sur la cour, et la défonça d’un coup de genou qui fit sauter le loquet. La porte tourna sur ses gonds. Il regarda dans la cour. La Green-Box n’y était plus.

II

RÉSIDU

Gwynplaine sortit de la maison, et se mit à explorer dans tous les sens le Tarrinzeau-fleld; il alla partout où, la veille, on voyait un tréteau, une tente, ou une cahute. Il n’y avait plus rien. Il frappa aux échoppes, quoique sachant très bien qu’elles étaient inhabitées. Il cogna à tout ce qui ressemblait à une fenêtre, ou à une porte. Pas une voix ne sortit de cette obscurité. Quelque chose comme la mort était venu là.

La fourmilière avait été écrasée. Visiblement une mesure de police avait été prise. Il y avait eu ce qu’on appellerait de nos jours une razzia. Le Tarrinzeau-field était plus que désert, il était désolé, et l’on y sentait dans tous les recoins le grattement d’une griffe féroce. On avait pour ainsi dire retourné les poches de ce misérable champ de foire, et tout vidé.

Gwynplaine, après avoir tout fouillé, quitta le bowling-green, entra dans les rues tortueuses de l’extrémité appelée l’East-point, et se dirigea vers la Tamise.

Il franchit quelques zigzags de ce réseau de ruelles où il n’y avait que des murs et des haies, puis il sentit dans l’air le frais de l’eau, il entendit le glissement sourd du fleuve, et brusquement il se trouva devant un parapet. C’était le parapet de l’Effroc-stone.

Ce parapet bordait un tronçon de quai très court et très étroit.

Sous le parapet la haute muraille Effroc-stone s’enfonçait à pic dans une eau obscure.

Gwynplaine s’arrêta à ce parapet, s’y accouda, prit sa tête dans ses mains, et se mit à penser, ayant cette eau au-dessous de lui.

Regardait-il l’eau? Non. Que regardait-il? L’ombre. Non pas l’ombre hors de lui, mais l’ombre au dedans de lui.

Dans le mélancolique paysage de nuit auquel il ne faisait pas attention, dans cette profondeur extérieure où son regard n’entrait point, on pouvait distinguer des silhouettes de vergues et de mâts. Sous l’Effroc-stone, il n’y avait que le flot, mais le quai en aval s’abaissait en rampe insensible et aboutissait, quelque distance, à une berge que longeaient plusieurs bateaux, les uns en arrivage, les autres en partance, communiquant avec la terre par de petits promontoires d’amarrage, construits exprès, en pierre ou en bois, ou par des passerelles en planches. Ces navires, les uns amarrés, les autres à l’ancre, étaient immobiles. On n’y entendait ni marcher ni parler; la bonne habitude des matelots étant de dormir le plus qu’ils peuvent et de ne se lever que pour la besogne. S’il y avait quelqu’un de ces bâtiments qui dût partir dans la nuit à l’heure de la marée, on n’y était pas encore réveillé.

On voyait à peine les coques, grosses ampoules noires, et les agrès, fils mêlés d’échelles. C’était livide et confus. Ça et là un falot rouge piquait la brume.

Gwynplaine ne percevait rien de tout cela. Ce qu’il considérait, c’était la destinée.

Il songeait, visionnaire éperdu devant la réalité inexorable.

Il lui semblait entendre derrière lui quelque chose comme un tremblement de terre. C’était le rire des lords.

Ce rire, il venait d’en sortir. Il en était sorti souffleté.

Souffleté par qui?

Par son frère.

Et en sortant de ce rire, avec ce soufflet, se réfugiant, oiseau blessé, dans son nid, fuyant la haine et cherchant l’amour, qu’avait-il trouvé?

Les ténèbres.

Personne.

Tout disparu.

Ces ténèbres, il les comparait au songe qu’il avait fait.

Quel écroulement!

Gwynplaine venait d’arriver à ce bord sinistre, le vide. La Green-Box partie, c’était l’univers évanoui.

La fermeture de son âme venait de se faire.

Il songeait.

Qu’avait-il pu se passer? Où étaient-ils? On les avait enlevés évidemment. Sa destinée avait été sur lui Gwynplaine un coup, la grandeur, et sur eux un contre-coup, l’anéantissement. Il était clair qu’il ne les reverrait jamais. On avait pris des précautions pour cela. Et l’on avait fait en même temps main basse sur tout ce qui habitait le champ de foire, à commencer par Nicless et Govicum, afin qu’aucun renseignement ne pût lui être donné. Dispersion inexorable. Cette redoutable force sociale, en même temps qu’elle le pulvérisait, lui, à la chambre des lords, les avait broyés, eux, dans leur pauvre cabane. Ils étaient perdus. Dea était perdue. Perdue pour lui. A jamais.

Puissances du ciel! où était-elle? Et il n’avait pas été l pour la défendre!

Faire des conjectures sur des absents qu’on aime, c’est se mettre à la question. Il s’infligeait cette torture. A chaque coin qu’il s’enfonçait, à chaque supposition qu’il faisait, il avait un sombre rugissement intérieur.

A travers une succession d’idées poignantes, il se souvenait de l’homme évidemment funeste qui lui avait dit se nommer Barkilphedro. Cet homme lui avait écrit dans le cerveau quelque chose d’obscur qui à présent reparaissait, et cela avait ét écrit d’une encre si horrible que c’était maintenant des lettres de feu, et Gwynplaine voyait flamboyer au fond de sa pensée ces paroles énigmatiques, aujourd’hui expliquées: Le destin n’ouvre pas une porte sans en fermer une autre.

Tout était consommé. Les dernières ombres étaient sur lui. Tout homme peut avoir dans sa destinée une fin du monde pour lui seul.

Cela s’appelle le désespoir. L’âme est pleine d’étoiles tombantes.

Voilà donc où il en était!

Une fumée avait passé. Il avait été mêlé à cette fumée. Elle s’était épaissie sur ses yeux; elle était entrée dans son cerveau. Il avait été, au dehors, aveuglé; au dedans, enivré.

Cela avait duré le temps qu’une fumée passe. Puis tout s’était dissipé, la fumée et sa vie. Réveillé de ce rêve, il se retrouvait seul.

Tout évanoui. Tout en allé. Tout perdu. La nuit. Rien.

C’était là son horizon.

Il était seul.

Seul a un synonyme: mort.

Le désespoir est un compteur. Il tient à faire son total. Rien ne lui échappe. Il additionne tout, il ne fait pas grâce des centimes. Il reproche à Dieu les coups de tonnerre et les coups d’épingle. Il veut savoir à quoi s’en tenir sur le destin. Il raisonne, pèse et calcule.

Sombre refroidissement extérieur sous lequel continue de couler la lave ardente.

Gwynplaine s’examina, et examina le sort.

Le coup d’oeil en arrière; résumé redoutable.

Quand on est au haut de la montagne, on regarde le précipice.

Quand on est au fond de la chute, on regarde le ciel.

Et l’on se dit: J’étais là!

Gwynplaine était tout en bas du malheur. Et comme cela était venu vite! Promptitude hideuse de l'infortune. Elle est si lourde qu'on la croirait lente. Point. Il semble que la neige doit avoir, étant froide, la paralysie de l'hiver, et, étant blanche, l'immobilité du linceul. Tout cela est démenti par l'avalanche!

L'avalanche, c'est la neige devenue fournaise. Elle reste glacée, et dévore. L'avalanche avait enveloppé Gwynplaine. Il avait été arraché comme un haillon, déraciné comme un arbre, précipité comme une pierre.

Il récapitula sa chute. Il se fit des demandes et des réponses.

La douleur est un interrogatoire. Aucun juge n'est minutieux comme la conscience instruisant son propre procès.

Quelle quantité de remords y avait-il dans son désespoir?

Il voulut s'en rendre compte et disséqua sa conscience; vivisection douloureuse.

Son absence avait produit une catastrophe. Cette absence avait-elle dépendu de lui? Dans tout ce qui venait de se passer, avait-il été libre? Point. Il s'était senti captif. Ce qui l'avait arrêté et retenu, qu'était-ce? Une prison? non. Une chaîne? non. Qu'était-ce donc? une glu. Il avait été embourb dans de la grandeur.

A qui cela n'est-il pas arrivé, d'être libre en apparence, et de se sentir les ailes empêtrées?

Il y avait eu quelque chose comme un panneau tendu. Ce qui est d'abord tentation finit par être captivité.

Toutefois, et sur ce point sa conscience le pressait, ce qui s'était offert, l'avait-il simplement subi? Non. Il l'avait accepté.

Qu'il lui eût été fait violence et surprise dans une certaine mesure, cela était vrai; mais lui, de son côté, dans une certaine mesure, il s'était laissé faire. S'être laissé enlever, ce n'était pas sa faute; s'être laissé enivrer, c'avait été sa défaillance. Il y avait eu un moment, moment décisif, où la question avait été posée; ce Barkilphedro l'avait mis en face d'un dilemme, et avait nettement donné à Gwynplaine l'occasion de résoudre son sort d'un mot. Gwynplaine pouvait dire non. Il avait dit oui.

De ce oui, prononcé dans l'étourdissement, tout avait découlé.

Gwynplaine le comprenait. Arrière-goût amer du consentement.

Cependant, car il se débattait, était-ce donc un si grand tort de rentrer dans son droit, dans son patrimoine, dans son héritage, dans sa maison, et, patricien, dans le rang de ses aïeux, et, orphelin, dans le nom de son père? Qu’avait-il accepté? une restitution. Faite par qui? par la providence.

Alors il sentait une révolte. Acceptation stupide! quel march il avait fait! quel échange inepte! Il avait traité à perte avec cette providence. Quoi donc! pour avoir deux millions de rente, pour avoir sept ou huit seigneuries, pour avoir dix ou douze palais, pour avoir des hôtels à la ville et des châteaux la campagne, pour avoir cent laquais, et des meutes, et des carrosses, et des armoiries, pour être juge et législateur, pour être couronné et en robe de pourpre comme un roi, pour être baron et marquis, pour être pair d’Angleterre, il avait donné la baraque d’Ursus et le sourire de Dea! Pour une immensit mouvante où l’on s’engloutit et où l’on naufrage, il avait donn le bonheur! Pour l’océan, il avait donné la perle. O insensé! ô imbécile! ô dupe!

Mais pourtant, et ici l’objection renaissait sur un terrain solide, dans cette fièvre de la haute fortune qui l’avait saisi, tout n’avait pas été malsain. Peut-être y aurait-il eu égoïsme dans la renonciation, peut-être y avait-il devoir dans l’acceptation. Brusquement transformé en lord, que devait-il faire? La complication de l’événement produit la perplexité de l’esprit. C’est ce qui lui était arrivé. Le devoir donnant des ordres en sens inverse, le devoir de tous les côtés à la fois, le devoir multiple, et presque contradictoire, il avait eu cet effarement. C’était cet effarement qui l’avait paralysé, notamment dans ce trajet de Corleone-lodge à la chambre des lords, auquel il n’avait pas résisté. Ce que, dans la vie, on appelle monter, c’est passer de l’itinéraire simple l’itinéraire inquiétant. Où est désormais la ligne droite? Envers qui est le premier devoir? Est-ce envers ses proches? Est-ce envers le genre humain? Ne passe-t-on pas de la petite famille à la grande? On monte, et l’on sent sur son honnêteté un poids qui s’accroît. Plus haut, on se sent plus obligé. L’élargissement du droit agrandit le devoir. On a l’obsession, l’illusion peut-être, de plusieurs routes s’offrant en même temps, et à l’entrée de chacune d’elles on croit voir le doigt indicateur de la conscience. Où aller? Sortir? rester? avancer? reculer? que faire? Que le devoir ait des carrefours, c’est étrange. La responsabilité peut être un labyrinthe.

Et quand un homme contient une idée, quand il est l’incarnation d’un fait, quand il est homme symbole en même temps qu’homme en chair et en os, la responsabilité n’est-elle pas plus troublante encore? De là la soucieuse docilité et l’anxiété muette de Gwynplaine; de là son obéissance à la sommation de siéger.

L’homme pensif est souvent homme passif. Il lui avait sembl entendre le commandement même du devoir. Cette entrée dans un lieu où l’on peut discuter l’oppression et la combattre, n’était-ce point la réalisation d’une de ses aspirations les plus profondes? Quand la parole lui était donnée, à lui formidable échantillon social, à lui spécimen vivant du bon plaisir sous lequel depuis six mille ans râle le genre humain, avait-il le droit de la refuser? avait-il le droit d’ôter sa tête de dessous la langue de feu tombant d’en haut et venant se poser sur lui?

Dans l’obscur et vertigineux débat de la conscience, que s’était-il dit? ceci: — Le peuple est un silence. Je serai l’immense avocat de ce silence. Je parlerai pour les muets. Je parlerai des petits aux grands et des faibles aux puissants.

C’est là le but de mon sort. Dieu veut ce qu’il veut, et il le fait. Certes, cette gourde de ce Hardquanonne où était la métamorphose de Gwynplaine en lord Clancharlie, il est surprenant qu’elle ait flotté quinze ans sur la mer, dans les houles, dans les ressacs, dans les rafales, et que toute cette colère ne lui ait fait aucun mal. Je vois pourquoi. Il y a des destinées secret; moi, j’ai la clef de la mienne, et j’ouvre mon énigme.

Je suis prédestiné! j’ai une mission. Je serai le lord des pauvres. Je parlerai pour tous les taciturnes désespérés. Je traduirai les bégaiements. Je traduirai les grondements, les hurlements, les murmures, la rumeur des foules, les plaintes mal prononcées, les voix inintelligibles, et tous ces cris de bêtes qu’à force d’ignorance et de souffrance on fait pousser aux hommes. Le bruit des hommes est inarticulé comme le bruit du vent; ils crient. Mais on ne les comprend pas, crier ainsi équivaut à se taire, et se taire est leur désarmement.

Désarmement forcé qui réclame le secours. Moi, je serai le secours. Moi, je serai la dénonciation. Je serai le Verbe du Peuple. Grâce à moi, on comprendra. Je serai la bouche sanglante dont le bâillon est arraché. Je dirai tout. Ce sera grand.

Oui, parler pour les muets, c’est beau; mais parler aux sourds, c’est triste. C’était là la seconde partie de son aventure.

Hélas! il avait avorté.

Il avait avorté irrémédiablement.

Cette élévation à laquelle il avait cru, cette haute fortune, cette apparence, s’était effondrée sous lui.

Quelle chute! tomber dans l’écume du rire.

Il se croyait fort, lui qui, pendant tant d’années, avait flotté, âme attentive, dans la vaste diffusion des souffrances, lui qui rapportait de toute cette ombre un cri lamentable. Il était venu s’échouer à ce colossal écueil, la frivolité des heureux. Il se croyait un vengeur, il était un clown. Il croyait foudroyer, il avait chatouillé. Au lieu de l’émotion, il avait recueilli la moquerie. Il avait sangloté, on était entré en joie. Sous cette joie, il avait sombré. Engloutissement funèbre.

Et de quoi avait-on ri? De son rire.

Ainsi, cette voie de fait exécrable dont il gardait à jamais la trace, cette mutilation devenue gaîté à perpétuité, ce rictus stigmate, image du contentement supposé des nations sous les oppresseurs, ce masque de joie fait par la torture, cet abîme du ricanement qu’il portait sur la face, cette cicatrice signifiant *jussu regis*, cette attestation du crime commis par le roi sur lui, symbole du crime commis par la royauté sur le peuple entier, c’était cela qui triomphait de lui, c’était cela qui l’accablait, c’était l’accusation contre le bourreau qui se tournait en sentence contre la victime! Prodigieux déni de justice. La royauté, après avoir eu raison de son père, avait raison de lui.

Le mal qu’on avait fait servait de prétexte et de motif au mal qui restait à faire. Contre qui les lords s’indignaient-ils?

Contre le tortureur? non. Contre le torturé. Ici le trône, l le peuple; ici Jacques II, là Gwynplaine. Certes, cette confrontation mettait en lumière un attentat, et un crime. Quel était l’attentat? se plaindre. Quel était le crime? souffrir.

Que la misère se cache et se taise, sinon elle est lèse-majesté.

Et ces hommes qui avaient traîné Gwynplaine sur la claie du sarcasme, étaient-ils méchants? non, mais ils avaient, eux aussi, leur fatalité; ils étaient heureux. Ils étaient bourreaux sans le savoir. Ils étaient de bonne humeur. Ils avaient trouv Gwynplaine inutile. Il s’était ouvert le ventre, il s’était arraché le foie et le coeur, il avait montré ses entrailles, et on lui avait crié: Joue ta comédie! Chose navrante, lui-même il riait. L’affreuse chaîne lui liait l’âme et empêchait sa pensée de monter jusqu’à son visage. La défiguration allait jusqu’à son esprit, et, pendant que sa conscience s’indignait, sa face lui donnait un démenti et ricanait. C’était fini. Il était l’Homme qui Rit, cariatide du monde qui pleure. Il était une angoisse pétrifiée en hilarité portant le poids d’un univers de calamité, et muré à jamais dans la jovialité, dans l’ironie, dans l’amusement d’autrui; il partageait avec tous les opprimés, dont il était l’incarnation, cette fatalité abominable d’être une désolation pas prise au sérieux; on badinait avec sa détresse; il était on ne sait quel bouffon énorme sorti d’une effroyable condensation d’infortune, évadé de son bagne, passé dieu, mont du fond des populaces au pied du trône, mêlé aux constellations, et, après avoir égayé les damnés, il égayait les élus! Tout ce qu’il y avait en lui de générosité, d’enthousiasme, d’éloquence, de coeur, d’âme, de fureur, de colère, d’amour, d’inexprimable douleur, aboutissait à ceci, un éclat de rire! Et il constatait, comme il l’avait dit aux lords, que ce n’était point là une exception, que c’était le fait normal, ordinaire, universel, le vaste fait souverain tellement amalgamé à la routine de vivre qu’on ne s’en apercevait plus. Le meurt-de-faim rit, le mendiant rit, le forçat rit, la prostituée rit, l’orphelin, pour gagner sa vie, rit, l’esclave rit, le soldat rit, le peuple rit; la sociét humaine est faite de telle façon que toutes les perditions, toutes les indigences, toutes les catastrophes, toutes les fièvres, tous les ulcères, toutes les agonies, se résolvent au-dessus du gouffre en une épouvantable grimace de joie. Cette grimace totale, il était cela. Elle était lui. La loi d’en haut, la force inconnue qui gouverne, avait voulu qu’un spectre visible et palpable, un spectre en chair et en os, résumât la monstrueuse parodie que nous appelons le monde; il était ce spectre.

Destinée incurable.

Il avait crié: Grâce pour les souffrants! En vain.

Il avait voulu éveiller la pitié; il avait éveillé l’horreur.
C’est la loi d’apparition des spectres.

En même temps que spectre, il était homme. C’était là sa complication poignante. Spectre extérieur, homme intérieur.
Homme, plus qu’aucun peut-être, car son double sort résumait toute l’humanité. Et en même temps qu’il avait l’humanité en lui, il la sentait hors de lui.

Il y avait dans son existence de l’infranchissable. Qu’était-il?
un déshérité? non, car il était un lord. Qu’était-il? un lord?
non, car il était un révolté. Il était l’Apporte-lumière; trouble-fête effrayant.
Il n’était pas Satan, certes, mais il était Lucifer. Il arrivait sinistre, un flambeau à la main.

Sinistre pour qui? pour les sinistres. Redoutable à qui? aux redoutés. Aussi ils le rejetaient. Entrer parmi eux? Être accepté? Jamais. L'obstacle qu'il avait sur la face était affreux, mais l'obstacle qu'il avait dans les idées était plus insurmontable encore. Sa parole avait paru plus difforme que sa figure. Il ne pensait pas une pensée possible en ce monde des grands et des puissants dans lequel une fatalité l'avait fait naître et dont une autre fatalité l'avait fait sortir. Il y avait, entre les hommes et son visage, un masque, et, entre la société et son esprit, une muraille. En se mêlant, dès l'enfance, bateleur nomade, à ce vaste milieu vivace et robuste qu'on nomme la foule, en se saturant de l'aimantation des multitudes, en s'imprégnant de l'immense âme humaine, il avait perdu, dans le sens commun de tout le monde, le sens spécial des classes reines. En haut, il était impossible. Il arrivait tout mouillé de l'eau du puits Vérité. Il avait la fétidité de l'abîme. Il répugnait à ces princes, parfumés de mensonges. A qui vit de fiction, la vérité est infecte. Qui a soif de flatterie revomit le réel, bu par surprise. Ce qu'il apportait, lui Gwynplaine, n'était pas présentable; c'était, quoi? la raison, la sagesse, la justice. On le rejetait avec dégoût.

Il y avait là des évêques. Il leur apportait Dieu. Qu'était-ce que cet intrus?

Les pôles extrêmes se repoussent. Nul amalgame possible. La transition manque. On avait vu, sans qu'il y eût eu d'autre résultat qu'un cri de colère, ce vis-à-vis formidable: toute la misère concentrée dans un homme face à face avec tout l'orgueil concentré dans une caste.

Accuser est inutile. Constater suffit. Gwynplaine constatait, dans cette méditation au bord de son destin, l'immensité inutile de son effort. Il constatait la surdité des hauts lieux. Les privilégiés n'ont pas d'oreille du côté des déshérités. Est-ce la faute des privilégiés? non. C'est leur loi, hélas!

Pardonnez-leur. S'émouvoir, ce serait abdiquer. Où sont les seigneurs et les princes, il ne faut rien attendre. Le satisfait, c'est l'inexorable. Pour l'assouvi, l'affamé n'existe point. Les heureux ignorent, et s'isolent. Au seuil de leur paradis comme au seuil de l'enfer, il faut écrire: «Laissez toute espérance.

Gwynplaine venait d'avoir la réception d'un spectre entrant chez les dieux.

Ici tout ce qu'il avait en lui se soulevait. Non, il n'était pas un spectre, il était un homme. Il le leur avait dit, il le leur avait crié, il était l'Homme.

Il n’était pas un fantôme. Il était une chair palpitante. Il avait un cerveau, et il pensait; il avait un coeur, et il aimait; il avait une âme, et il espérait. Avoir trop espéré, c’était même là toute sa faute.

Hélas! il avait exagéré l’espérance jusqu’à croire en cette chose éclatante et obscure, la société. Lui qui était dehors, il y était rentré.

La société lui avait tout de suite, d’emblée, à la fois, fait ses trois offres et donné ses trois dons, le mariage, la famille, la caste. Le mariage? il avait vu sur le seuil la prostitution.

La famille? son frère l’avait souffleté, et l’attendait le lendemain, l’épée à la main. La caste? elle venait de lui éclater de rire à la face, à lui patricien, à lui misérable. Il était rejeté presque avant même d’avoir été admis. Et ses trois premiers pas dans cette profonde ombre sociale avaient ouvert sous lui trois gouffres.

Et c’était par une transfiguration traître que son désastre avait débuté. Et cette catastrophe s’était approchée de lui avec le visage de l’apothéose! Monte! avait signifié: Descends!

Il était une sorte de contraire de Job. C’est par la prospérit que l’adversité lui était venue.

O tragique énigme humaine! Voilà donc les embûches! Enfant, il avait lutté contre la nuit, et il avait été plus fort qu’elle.

Homme, il avait lutté contre le destin, et il l’avait terrassé.

De défiguré, il s’était fait rayonnant, et de malheureux, heureux. De son exil il avait fait un asile. Vagabond, il avait lutté contre l’espace, et, comme les oiseaux du ciel, il y avait trouvé sa miette de pain. Sauvage et solitaire, il avait lutt contre la foule, et il s’en était fait une amie. Athlète, il avait lutté contre ce lion, le peuple, et il l’avait apprivoisé.

Indigent, il avait lutté contre la détresse, il avait fait face la sombre nécessité de vivre, et, à force d’amalgamer à la misère toutes les joies du coeur, il s’était fait de la pauvreté une richesse. Il avait pu se croire le vainqueur de la vie. Tout coup de nouvelles forces étaient arrivées contre lui du fond de l’inconnu, non plus avec des menaces, mais avec des caresses et des sourires; à lui, tout pénétré d’amour angélique, l’amour draconien et matériel était apparu; la chair l’avait saisi, lui qui vivait d’idéal; il avait entendu des paroles de volupt semblables à des cris de rage; il avait senti des étreintes de bras de femme faisant l’effet de noeuds de couleuvre; l’illumination du vrai avait succédé la fascination du faux; car ce n’est pas la chair, qui est le réel, c’est l’âme. La chair est cendre, l’âme est flamme. A ce groupe lié à lui par la parenté de la pauvreté et du travail, et qui était sa véritable famille naturelle, s'était substituée la famille sociale, famille du sang, mais du sang mêlé, et, avant même d'y être entré, il se trouvait face à face avec un fratricide ébauché. Hélas! il s'était laissé reclasser dans cette société dont Brantôme, qu'il n'avait pas lu, a dit: *Le fils peut justement appeler le père en duel*. La fortune fatale lui avait crié: Tu n'es pas de la foule, tu es de l'élite! et avait ouvert au-dessus de sa tête, comme une trappe dans le ciel, le plafond social, et l'avait lancé par cette ouverture, et l'avait fait surgir, inattendu et farouche, au milieu des princes et des maîtres.

Subitement, autour de lui, au lieu du peuple qui l'applaudissait, il avait vu les seigneurs qui le maudissaient. Métamorphose lugubre. Grandissement ignominieux. Brusque spoliation de tout ce qui avait été sa félicité! Pillage de sa vie par la huée!
arrachement de Gwynplaine, de Clancharlie, du lord, du bateleur, de son sort antérieur, de son sort nouveau, à coups de bec de tous ces aigles!

A quoi bon avoir commencé tout de suite la vie par la victoire sur l'obstacle? A quoi bon avoir triomphé d'abord? Hélas! il faut être précipité, sans quoi la destinée n'est pas complète.

Ainsi, moitié de force, moitié de gré, car après le wapentake, il avait eu affaire à Barkilphedro, et dans son rapt il y avait eu du consentement, il avait quitté le réel pour le chimérique, le vrai pour le faux, Dea pour Josiane, l'amour pour l'orgueil, la liberté pour la puissance, le travail fier et pauvre pour l'opulence pleine de responsabilité obscure, l'ombre où est Dieu pour le flamboiement où sont les démons, le paradis pour l'olympe!

Il avait mordu dans le fruit d'or. Il recrachait la bouchée de cendre.

Résultat lamentable. Déroute, faillite, chute et ruine, expulsion insolente de toutes ses espérances fustigées par le ricanement, désillusion démesurée. Et que faire désormais? S'il regardait le lendemain, qu'apercevait-il? une épée nue dont la pointe était devant sa poitrine et dont la poignée était dans la main de son frère. Il ne voyait que l'éclair hideux de cette épée. Le reste, Josiane, la chambre des lords, était derrière, dans un monstrueux clair-obscur plein de silhouettes tragiques.

Et ce frère, il lui apparaissait comme chevaleresque et vaillant!
Hélas! ce Tom-Jim-Jack qui avait défendu Gwynplaine, ce lord David qui avait défendu lord Clancharlie, il l'avait entrevu peine, il n'avait eu que le temps d'en être souffleté, et de l'aimer.

Que d'accablements!

Maintenant, aller plus loin, impossible. L’écroulement était de tous les côtés. D’ailleurs, à quoi bon? Toutes les fatigues sont au fond du désespoir.

L’épreuve était faite, et n’était plus à recommencer.

Un joueur qui a joué l’un après l’autre tous ses atouts, c’était Gwynplaine. Il s’était laissé entraîner au tripot formidable.

Sans se rendre exactement compte de ce qu’il faisait, car tel est le subtil empoisonnement de l’illusion, il avait joué Dea contre Josiane; il avait eu un monstre. Il avait joué Ursus contre une famille, il avait eu l’affront. Il avait joué son tréteau de saltimbanque contre un siège de lord; il avait l’acclamation, il avait eu l’imprécation. Sa dernière carte venait de tomber sur ce fatal tapis vert du bowling-green désert. Gwynplaine avait perdu. Il n’avait plus qu’à payer. Paye, misérable!

Les foudroyés s’agitent peu. Gwynplaine était immobile. Qui l’eût aperçu de loin dans cette ombre, droit et sans mouvement, au bord du parapet, eût cru voir une pierre debout.

L’enfer, le serpent et la rêverie s’enroulent sur eux-mêmes.

Gwynplaine descendait les spirales sépulcrales de l’approfondissement pensif.

Ce monde qu’il venait d’entrevoir, il le considérait, avec ce regard froid qui est le regard définitif. Le mariage, mais pas d’amour; la famille, mais pas de fraternité; la richesse, mais pas de conscience; la beauté, mais pas de pudeur; la justice, mais pas d’équité; l’ordre, mais pas d’équilibre; la puissance, mais pas d’intelligence; l’autorité, mais pas de droit; la splendeur, mais pas de lumière. Bilan inexorable. Il fit le tour de cette vision suprême où s’était enfoncée sa pensée. Il examina successivement la destinée, la situation, la société, et lui-même. Qu’était la destinée? un piège. La situation? un désespoir. La société? une haine. Et lui-même? un vaincu. Et au fond de son âme, il s’écria: La société est la marâtre. La nature est la mère. La société, c’est le monde du corps; la nature, c’est le monde de l’âme. L’une aboutit au cercueil, à la boîte de sapin dans la fosse, aux vers de terre, et finit là.

L’autre aboutit aux ailes ouvertes, à la transfiguration dans l’aurore, à l’ascension dans les firmaments, et recommence là.

Peu à peu le paroxysme s’emparait de lui. Tourbillonnement funeste. Les choses qui finissent ont un dernier éclair où l’on revoit tout.

Qui juge, confronte. Gwynplaine mit en regard ce que la sociét lui avait fait et ce que lui avait fait la nature. Comme la nature avait été bonne pour lui! comme elle l'avait secouru, elle qui est l'âme! Tout lui avait été pris, tout, jusqu'au visage; l'âme lui avait tout rendu. Tout, même le visage; car il y avait ici-bas une céleste aveugle, faite exprès pour lui, qui ne voyait pas sa laideur et qui voyait sa beauté.

Et c'est de cela qu'il s'était laissé séparer! c'est de cet être adorable, c'est de ce coeur, c'est de cette adoption, c'est de cette tendresse, c'est de ce divin regard aveugle, le seul qui le vît sur la terre, qu'il s'était éloigné! Dea, c'était sa soeur; car il sentait d'elle à lui la grande fraternité de l'azur, ce mystère qui contient tout le ciel. Dea, quand il était petit, c'était sa vierge; car tout enfant a une vierge, et la vie a toujours pour commencement un mariage d'âmes consommé en pleine innocence, par deux petites virginités ignorantes. Dea, c'était son épouse, car ils avaient le même nid sur la plus haute branche du profond arbre Hymen. Dea, c'était plus encore, c'était sa clarté; sans elle tout était le néant et le vide, et il lui voyait une chevelure de rayons. Que devenir sans Dea? que faire de tout ce qui était lui? Rien de lui ne vivait sans elle.

Comment donc avait-il pu la perdre de vue un moment? O infortuné! Entre son astre et lui il avait laissé se faire l'écart, et, dans ces redoutables gravitations ignorées, l'écart est tout de suite l'abîme! Où était-elle, l'étoile? Dea! Dea!

Dea! Dea! Hélas! il avait perdu sa lumière. Otez l'astre, qu'est le ciel? une noirceur. Mais pourquoi donc tout cela s'était-il en allé? Oh! comme il avait été heureux! Dieu pour lui avait refait l'éden; — trop, hélas! — jusqu'à y laisser rentrer le serpent! mais cette fois ce qui avait été tenté, c'était l'homme. Il avait été attiré au dehors, et là, piège affreux, il était tombé dans le chaos des rires noirs qui est l'enfer!

Malheur! malheur! que tout ce qui l'avait fasciné était effroyable! Cette Josiane, qu'était-ce? oh! l'horrible femme, presque bête, presque déesse! Gwynplaine était à présent sur le revers de son élévation, et il voyait l'autre côté.de son éblouissement. C'était funèbre. Cette seigneurie était difforme, cette couronne était hideuse, cette robe de pourpre était lugubre, ces palais étaient vénéneux, ces trophées, ces statues, ces armoiries étaient louches, l'air malsain et traître qu'on respirait là vous rendait fou. Oh! les haillons du saltimbanque Gwynplaine étaient des resplendissements! Oh! o étaient la Green-Box, la pauvreté, la joie, la douce vie errante ensemble comme des hirondelles? On ne se quittait pas, on se voyait à toute minute, le soir, le matin, à table on se poussait du coude, on se touchait du genou, on buvait au même verre, le soleil entrait par la lucarne, mais il n’était que le soleil, et Dea était l’amour. La nuit, on se sentait endormis pas loin les uns des autres, et le rêve de Dea venait se poser sur Gwynplaine, et le rêve de Gwynplaine allait mystérieusement s’épanouir au-dessus de Dea! On n’était pas bien sûr, au réveil, de n’avoir pas échangé des baisers dans la nuée bleue du songe. Toute l’innocence était dans Dea, toute la sagesse était dans Ursus.

On rôdait de ville en ville; on avait pour viatique et pour cordial la franche gaîté aimante du peuple. On était des anges vagabonds, ayant assez d’humanité pour marcher ici-bas, et pas tout à fait assez d’ailes pour s’envoler. Et maintenant, disparition! Où était tout cela? Était-ce possible que tout se fût effacé! Quel vent de la tombe avait soufflé? C’était donc éclipsé! c’était donc perdu! Hélas, la sourde toute-puissance qui pèse sur les petits dispose de toute l’ombre, et est capable de tout! Qu’est-ce qu’on leur avait fait? Et il n’avait pas ét là, lui, pour les protéger, pour se mettre au travers, pour les défendre, comme lord, avec son titre, sa seigneurie et son épée, comme bateleur, avec ses poings et ses ongles! Et ici survenait une réflexion amère, la plus amère de toutes peut-être. Eh bien, non, il n’eût pas pu les défendre! C’était lui précisément qui les perdait. C’était pour le préserver d’eux, lui lord Clancharlie, c’était pour isoler sa dignité de leur contact, que l’infâme omnipotence sociale s’était appesantie sur eux. La meilleure façon pour lui de les protéger, ce serait de disparaître, on n’aurait plus de raison de les persécuter. Lui de moins, on les laisserait tranquilles. Glaçante ouverture o sa pensée entrait. Ah! pourquoi s’était-il laissé séparer de Dea? Est-ce que son premier devoir n’était pas envers Dea?

Servir et défendre le peuple? mais Dea, c’était le peuple! Dea, c’était l’orpheline, c’était l’aveugle, c’était l’humanité! Oh!

que leur avait-on fait? Cuisson cruelle du regret! son absence avait laissé le champ libre à la catastrophe. Il eût partag leur sort. Ou il les eût pris et emportés avec lui, ou il se fût englouti avec eux. Que devenir sans eux maintevant? Gwynplaine sans Dea, était-ce possible? Dea de moins, c’est tout de moins!

Ah! c’était fini. Ce groupe bien-aimé était à jamais enfoui dans l’irréparable évanouissement. Tout était épuisé.

D’ailleurs, condamné et damné comme l’était Gwynplaine, à quoi bon lutter plus longtemps? Il n’y avait plus rien à attendre, ni des hommes, ni du ciel.

Dea! Dea! où est Dea? Perdue! Quoi, perdue! Qui a perdu son âme n'a plus pour la retrouver qu'un lieu, la mort.

Gwynplaine, égaré et tragique, posa fermement sa main sur le parapet comme sur une solution, et regarda le fleuve.

C'était la troisième nuit qu'il ne dormait pas. Il avait la fièvre. Ses idées, qu'il croyait claires, étaient troubles. Il sentait un impérieux besoin de sommeil. Il demeura ainsi quelques instants penché sur cette eau; l'ombre lui offrait le grand lit tranquille, l'infini des ténèbres. Tentation sinistre.

Il ôta son habit, le plia et le posa sur le parapet. Puis il déboutonna son gilet. Comme il allait l'ôter, sa main heurta dans la poche quelque chose. C'était le red-book que lui avait remis le librarian de la chambre des lords. Il retira ce carnet de cette poche, l'examina dans la lueur diffuse de la nuit, y vit un crayon, prit ce crayon, et écrivit, sur la première page blanche qui s'ouvrit, ces deux lignes:

«Je m'en vais. Que mon frère David me remplace et soit heureux.

Et il signa: FERMAIN CLANCHARLIE, pair d'Angleterre.

Puis il ôta le gilet et le posa sur l'habit. Il ôta son chapeau, et le posa sur le gilet. Il mit dans le chapeau le red-book ouvert à la page où il avait écrit. Il aperçut à terre une pierre, la prit et la mit dans le chapeau.

Cela fait, il regarda l'ombre infinie au-dessus de son front.

Puis, sa tête s'abaissa lentement comme tirée par le fil invisible des gouffres.

Il y avait un trou dans les pierres du soubassement du parapet, il y mit un pied, de telle sorte que son genou dépassait le haut du parapet, et qu'il n'avait presque plus rien à faire pour l'enjamber.

Il croisa ses mains derrière son dos et se pencha.

— Soit, dit-il.

Et il fixa ses yeux sur l'eau profonde.

En ce moment il sentit une langue qui lui léchait les mains.

Il tressaillit et se retourna.

C'était Homo qui était derrière lui.

CONCLUSION

LA MER ET LA NUIT

I

CHIEN DE GARDE PEUT ÊTRE ANGE GARDIEN

Gwynplaine poussa un cri:

— C’est toi, loup!

Homo remua la queue. Ses yeux brillaient dans l’ombre. Il regardait Gwynplaine.

Puis il se remit à lui lécher les mains. Gwynplaine demeura un moment comme ivre. La rentrée immense de l’espérance, il avait cette secousse. Homo, quelle apparition! Depuis quarante-huit heures, il avait épuisé ce qu’on pourrait nommer toutes les variétés du coup de foudre; il lui restait à recevoir le coup de foudre de la joie. C’était celui-là qui venait de tomber sur lui. La certitude ressaisie, ou du moins la clarté qui y mène, la soudaine intervention d’on ne sait quelle clémence mystérieuse qui est peut-être dans le destin, la vie disant: me voilà! au plus noir de la tombe, la minute où l’on n’attend plus rien ébauchant brusquement la guérison et la délivrance, quelque chose comme le point d’appui retrouvé à l’instant le plus critique de l’écroulement, Homo était tout cela. Gwynplaine voyait le loup dans de la lumière.

Cependant Homo s’était retourné. Il fit quelques pas, et regarda en arrière comme pour voir si Gwynplaine le suivait.

Gwynplaine s’était mis en marche à sa suite. Homo remua la queue et continua son chemin.

Ce chemin où le loup s’était engagé, c’était la pente du quai de l’Effrocstone. Cette pente aboutissait à la berge de la Tamise.

Gwynplaine, conduit par Homo, descendit cette pente.

De temps en temps, Homo tournait la tête pour s’assurer que Gwynplaine était derrière lui.

Dans de certaines situations suprêmes, rien ne ressemble à une intelligence comprenant tout comme le simple instinct de la bête aimante. L’animal est un somnambule lucide.

Il y a des cas où le chien sent le besoin de suivre son maître, d’autres où il sent le besoin de le précéder. Alors la bête prend la direction de l’esprit. Le flair imperturbable voit clair confusément dans notre crépuscule. Se faire guide apparaît vaguement à la bête comme une nécessité. Sait-elle qu'il y a un mauvais pas, et qu'il faut aider l'homme à le passer? non probablement; oui, peut-être; dans tous les cas, quelqu'un le sait pour elle; nous l'avons dit déjà, bien souvent dans la vie d'augustes secours qu'on croit venir d'en bas viennent d'en haut.

On ne sait pas toutes les figures que peut prendre Dieu. Quelle est cette bête? la providence.

Parvenu sur la berge, le loup s'avança en aval sur l'étroite langue de terre qui longeait la Tamise.

Il ne poussait aucun cri, il n'aboyait pas, il cheminait muet.

Homo, en toute occasion, suivait son instinct et faisait son devoir, mais avait la réserve pensive du proscrit.

Après une cinquantaine de pas, il s'arrêta. Une estacade s'offrait à droite. A l'extrémité de cette estacade, espèce d'embarcadère sur pilotis, on entrevoyait une masse obscure qui était un assez gros navire. Sur le pont de ce navire, vers la proue, il y avait une clarté presque indistincte, qui ressemblait à une veilleuse prête à s'éteindre.

Le loup s'assura une dernière fois que Gwynplaine était là, puis bondit sur l'estacade, long corridor plancheié et goudronné, porté par une claire-voie de madriers, et sous lequel coulait l'eau du fleuve. En quelques instants, Homo et Gwynplaine arrivèrent à la pointe.

Le bâtiment amarré au bout de l'estacade était une de ces panses de Hollande à double tillac rasé, l'un à l'avant, l'autre l'arrière, ayant, à la mode japonaise, entre les deux tillacs, un compartiment profond à ciel ouvert où l'on descendait par une échelle droite et qu'on emplissait de tous les colis de la cargaison. Cela faisait deux gaillards, l'un à la proue, l'autre à la poupe, comme à nos vieilles pataches de rivière, avec un creux au milieu. Le chargement lestait ce creux. Les galiotes de papier que font les enfants ont à peu près cette forme. Sous les tillacs étaient les cabines communiquant par des portes avec ce compartiment central et éclairées de hublots percés dans le bordage. En arrimant la cargaison, on ménageait des passages entre les colis. Les deux mâts de ces panses étaient plantés dans les deux tillacs. Le mât de proue s'appelait le Paul, le mât de poupe s'appelait le Pierre, le navire étant conduit par ses deux mâts comme l'église par ses deux apôtres. Une passerelle, faisant passavant, allait, comme un pont chinois, d'un tillac à l'autre, par-dessus le compartiment du centre.

Dans les mauvais temps, les deux garde-fous de la passerelle s'abaissaient à droite et à gauche, au moyen d'un mécanisme, ce qui faisait un toit sur le compartiment creux, de sorte que le navire, dans les grosses mers, était hermétiquement fermé. Ces barques, très massives, avaient pour barre une poutre, la force du gouvernail devant se proportionner à la lourdeur du gabarit.

Trois hommes, le patron avec deux matelots, plus un enfant, le mousse, suffisaient à manoeuvrer ces pesantes machines de mer.

Les tillacs d'avant et d'arrière de la panse étaient, nous l'avons dit déjà, sans parapet. Cette panse-ci était une large coque ventrue toute noire sur laquelle on lisait en lettres blanches, visibles dans la nuit: Vograat. Rotterdam.

A cette époque, divers événements de mer, et, tout récemment, la catastrophe des huit vaisseaux du baron de Pointi au cap Carnero, en forçant toute la flotte française de refluer sur Gibraltar, avaient balayé la Manche et nettoyé de tout navire de guerre le passage entre Londres et Rotterdam, ce qui permettait aux bâtiments marchands d'aller et venir sans escorte.

2l avril 1705.

Le bateau sur lequel on lisait *Vograat*, et près duquel Gwynplaine était parvenu, touchait l'estacade par le bâbord de son tillac d'arrière presque à niveau. C'était comme une marche à descendre; Homo d'un saut, et Gwynplaine d'une enjambée, furent dans le navire. Tous deux se trouvèrent sur le pont d'arrière.

Le pont était désert et l'on n'y voyait aucun mouvement; les passagers, s'il y en avait, et c'était probable, étaient à bord, vu que le bâtiment était prêt à partir, et que l'arrimage était terminé, ce qu'indiquait la plénitude du compartiment creux, encombré de balles et de caisses. Mais ils étaient sans doute couchés et probablement endormis dans les chambres de l'entre-pont sous les tillacs, la traversée devant se faire la nuit. En pareil cas, les passagers n'apparaissent sur le pont que le lendemain matin, au réveil. Quant à l'équipage, il soupait vraisemblablement, en attendant l'instant très prochain du départ, dans le réduit qu'on appelait alors «la cabine matelote». De là la solitude des deux points de poupe et de proue reliés par la passerelle.

Le loup sur l'estacade avait presque couru; sur le navire il se mit à marcher lentement, comme avec discrétion. Il remuait la queue, non plus joyeusement, mais avec l'oscillation faible et triste du chien inquiet. Il franchit, précédant toujours Gwynplaine, le tillac d’arrière, et il traversa le passavant.

Gwynplaine, en entrant sur la passerelle, aperçut devant lui une lueur. C’était la clarté qu’il avait vue de la berge. Une lanterne était posée à terre au pied du mât d’avant; la réverbération de cette lanterne découpait en noir sur l’obscur fond de nuit une silhouette qui avait quatre roues. Gwynplaine reconnut l’antique cahute d’Ursus.

Cette pauvre masure de bois, charrette et cabane, où avait roul son enfance, était amarrée au pied du mât par de grosses cordes dont on voyait les noeuds dans les roues. Après avoir été si longtemps hors de service, elle était absolument caduque; rien ne délabre les hommes et les choses comme l’oisiveté; elle avait un penchement misérable. La désuétude la faisait toute paralytique, et, de plus, elle avait cette maladie irrémédiable, la vieillesse. Son profil informe et vermoulu fléchissait avec une attitude de ruine. Tout ce dont elle était faite offrait un aspect d’avarie, les fers étaient rouillés, les cuirs étaient gercés, les bois étaient cariés. Les fêlures rayaient le vitrage de l’avant que traversait un rayon de la lanterne. Les roues étaient cagneuses. Les parois, le plancher et les essieux semblaient épuisés de fatigue, l’ensemble avait on ne sait quoi d’accablé et de suppliant. Les deux pointes dressées du brancard avaient l’air de deux bras levés au ciel. Toute la baraque était disloquée. Dessous, on distinguait la chaîne d’Homo, pendante.

Retrouver sa vie, sa félicité, son amour, et y courir éperdument, et se précipiter dessus, il semble que ce soit la loi et que la nature le veuille ainsi. Oui, excepté dans les cas de tremblement profond. Qui sort, tout ébranlé et tout désorienté, d’une série de catastrophes pareilles à des trahisons, devient prudent, même dans la joie, redoute d’apporter sa fatalité à ceux qu’il aime, se sent lugubrement contagieux, et n’avance dans le bonheur qu’avec précaution. Le paradis se rouvre; avant d’y rentrer, on l’observe.

Gwynplaine, chancelant sous les émotions, regardait.

Le loup était allé silencieusement se coucher près de sa chaîne.

II

BARKILPHEDRO A VISÉ L’AIGLE ET A ATTEINT LA COLOMBE

Le marchepied de la cahute était abaissé; la porte était entre-bâillée; il n’y avait personne dedans; le peu de lumière qui entrait par la vitre du devant modelait vaguement l’intérieur de la baraque, clair-obscur mélancolique. Les inscriptions d’Ursus glorifiant la grandeur des lords étaient distinctes sur les planches décrépites qui étaient tout à la fois la muraille au dehors et le lambris au dedans. A un clou, près de la porte, Gwynplaine vit son esclavine et son capingot, accrochés, comme dans une morgue les vêtements d’un mort.

Il n’avait, lui, en ce moment-là, ni gilet, ni habit.

La cahute masquait quelque chose qui était étendu sur le pont au pied du mât et que la lanterne éclairait. C’était un matelas dont on apercevait un coin. Sur le matelas quelqu’un était probablement couché. On y voyait de l’ombre se mouvoir.

On parlait. Gwynplaine, caché par l’interposition de la cahute, écouta.

C’était la voix d’Ursus.

Cette voix, si dure en dessus, si tendre en dessous, qui avait tant malmené et si bien conduit Gwynplaine depuis son enfance, n’avait plus son timbre sagace et vivant. Elle était vague et basse et se dissipait en soupirs à la fin de chaque phrase. Elle ne ressemblait que confusément à l’ancienne voix simple et ferme d’Ursus. C’était comme la parole de quelqu’un dont le bonheur est mort. La voix peut devenir ombre.

Ursus semblait monologuer plutôt que dialoguer. Du reste le soliloque était, on le sait, son habitude. Il passait pour maniaque à cause de cela.

Gwynplaine retint son haleine pour ne pas perdre un mot de ce que disait Ursus, et voici ce qu’il entendit:

— C’est très dangereux, cette espèce de bateau. Ça n’a pas de rebord. Si on roule à la mer, rien ne vous arrête. S’il y avait du gros temps, il faudrait la descendre sous le tillac, ce qui serait terrible. Un mouvement maladroit, une peur, et voilà une rupture d’anévrisme. J’en ai vu des exemples. Ah! mon Dieu, qu’est-ce que nous allons devenir? Dort-elle? oui. Elle dort. Je crois bien qu’elle dort. Est-elle sans connaissance? non.

Elle a le pouls assez fort. Certainement elle dort. Le sommeil, c'est un sursis. C'est le bon aveuglement. Comment faire pour qu'on ne vienne pas piétiner par ici? Messieurs, s'il y a l quelqu'un sur le pont, je vous en prie, ne faites pas de bruit.

N'approchez pas, si cela vous est égal. Vous savez, une personne d'une santé délicate, il faut des ménagements. Elle a de la fièvre, voyez-vous. C'est tout jeune. C'est une petite qui a de la fièvre. Je lui ai mis ce matelas dehors pour qu'elle ait un peu d'air. J'explique cela afin qu'on ait égard. Elle est tombée de lassitude sur le matelas, comme si elle perdait connaissance. Mais elle dort. Je voudrais bien qu'on ne la réveillât pas. Je m'adresse aux femmes, s'il y a là des ladies.

Une jeune fille, c'est une pitié. Nous ne sommes que de pauvres bateleurs, je demande qu'on ait un peu de bonté, et puis, s'il y a quelque chose à payer pour qu'on ne fasse pas de bruit, je paierai. Je vous remercie, mesdames et messieurs. Y a-t-il quelqu'un là? Non. Je crois qu'il n'y a personne. Je parle en pure perte. Tant mieux. Messieurs, je vous remercie si vous y êtes, et je vous remercie bien si vous n'y êtes pas. — Elle a le front tout en sueur. — Allons, rentrons au bagne, reprenons le collier. La misère est revenue. Nous revoilà à vau-l'eau. Une main, l'affreuse main qu'on ne voit pas, mais qu'on sent toujours sur soi, nous a subitement retournés vers le côté noir de la destinée. Soit; on aura du courage. Seulement, il ne faut pas qu'elle soit malade. J'ai l'air bête de parler haut tout seul comme cela, mais il faut bien qu'elle sente qu'elle a quelqu'un près d'elle si elle vient à se réveiller. Pourvu qu'on ne me la réveille pas brusquement! Pas de bruit, au nom du ciel! Une secousse qui la ferait lever en sursaut ne vaudrait rien. Il serait fâcheux qu'on vînt marcher de ce côté-ci. Je crois que les gens dorment dans le bateau. Je rends grâce à la providence de cette concession. Hé bien! et Homo, où est-il donc? Dans tout ce bouleversement-là, j'ai oublié de l'attacher, je ne sais plus ce que je fais, voilà plus d'une heure que je ne l'ai vu, il aura été chercher son souper dehors. Pourvu qu'il ne lui arrive pas malheur! Homo! Homo!

Homo cogna doucement de sa queue le plancher du pont.

— Tu es là! Ah! tu es là. Dieu soit béni! Homo perdu, c'eût été trop. Elle dérange son bras. Elle va peut-être se réveiller. Tais-toi, Homo. La marée descend. On partira tout l'heure. Je pense qu'il fera beau cette nuit. Il n'y a pas de bise. La banderole pend le long du mât, nous aurons une bonne traversée. Je ne sais plus où nous en sommes de la lune. Mais c'est à peine

si les nuages remuent. Il n’y aura pas de mer.
Nous aurons beau temps. Elle est pâle. C’est la faiblesse.
Mais non, elle est rouge. C’est la fièvre. Mais non, elle est rose. Elle se porte bien. Je n’y vois plus clair. Mon pauvre Homo, je n’y vois plus clair. Donc, il faut recommencer la vie.
Nous allons nous remettre à travailler. Il n’y a plus que nous deux, vois-tu. Nous travaillerons pour elle, toi et moi. C’est notre enfant. Ah! le bateau bouge. On part. Adieu, Londres!
bonsoir, bonne nuit, au diable! Ah! l’horrible Londres!

Le navire en effet avait la commotion sourde du dérapement. L’écart se faisait entre l’estacade et l’arrière. On apercevait à l’autre bout du bâtiment, à la poupe, un homme debout, le patron sans doute, qui venait de sortir de l’intérieur du navire et avait délié l’amarre, et qui manoeuvrait le gouvernail. Cet homme, attentif seulement au chenal, comme il convient lorsqu’on est composé du double flegme du hollandais et du matelot, n’entendant rien et ne voyant rien que l’eau et le vent, courb sous l’extrémité de la barre, mêlé à l’obscurité, marchait lentement sur le tillac d’arrière, allant et revenant de tribord à bâbord, espèce de fantôme ayant une poutre sur l’épaule. Il était seul sur le pont. Tant qu’on serait en rivière, aucun autre marin n’était nécessaire. En quelques minutes le bâtiment fut au fil du fleuve. Il descendait sans tangage ni roulis. La Tamise, peu troublée par le reflux, était calme. La marée l’entraînant, le navire s’éloignait rapidement. Derrière lui, le noir décor de Londres décroissait dans la brume.

Ursus poursuivit:

— C’est égal, je lui ferai prendre de la digitale. J’ai peur qu’il ne survienne du délire. Elle a de la sueur dans la paume de la main. Mais qu’est-ce que nous avons donc fait au bon Dieu?
Comme c’est venu vite tout ce malheur-là! Rapidité hideuse du mal. Une pierre tombe, elle a des griffes, c’est l’épervier sur l’alouette. C’est la destinée. Et te voilà gisante, ma douce enfant! On vient à Londres, on dit: c’est une grande ville qui a de beaux monuments. Southwark, c’est un superbe faubourg. On s’y établit. Maintenant, ce sont d’abominables pays. Que voulez-vous que j’y fasse? Je suis content de m’en aller. Nous sommes le 30 avril. Je me suis toujours défié du mois d’avril; le mois d’avril n’a que deux jours heureux, le 5 et le 27, et quatre jours malheureux, le 10, le 20, le 29 et le 30. Cela a été mis hors de doute par les calculs de Cardan. Je voudrais que ce jour-ci soit passé. Être parti, cela soulage. Nous serons au

petit jour à Gravesend et demain soir à Rotterdam. Parbleu, je recommencerai la vie d'autrefois dans la cahute, nous la traînerons, n'est-ce pas, Homo?

Un léger frappement annonça le consentement du loup.

Ursus continua;

— Si l'on pouvait sortir d'une douleur comme on sort d'une ville! Homo, nous pourrions encore être heureux. Hélas! il y aurait toujours celui qui n'y est plus. Une ombre, cela reste sur ceux qui survivent. Tu sais qui je veux dire, Homo. Nous étions quatre, nous ne sommes plus que trois. La vie n'est qu'une longue perte de tout ce qu'on aime. On laisse derrière soi une traînée de douleurs. Le destin nous ahurit par une prolixité de souffrances insupportables. Après cela on s'étonne que les vieilles gens rabâchent. C'est le désespoir qui fait les ganaches. Mon brave Homo, le vent arrière persiste. On ne voit plus du tout le dôme de Saint-Paul. Nous passerons tout l'heure devant Greenwich. Ce sera six bons milles de faits. Ah!
je leur tourne le dos pour jamais à ces odieuses capitales, pleines de prêtres, de magistrats, de populaces. J'aime mieux voir remuer les feuilles dans les bois. — Toujours le front en sueur! Elle a de grosses veines violettes que je n'aime pas sur l'avant-bras. C'est de la fièvre qui est là-dedans. Ah! tout cela me tue. Dors, mon enfant. Oh oui, elle dort.

Ici une voix s'éleva, voix ineffable, qui semblait lointaine, qui paraissait venir à la fois des hauteurs et des profondeurs, divinement sinistre, la voix de Dea.

Tout ce que Gwynplaine avait éprouvé jusqu'à ce moment ne fut plus rien. Son ange parlait. Il lui semblait entendre des paroles dites hors de la vie dans un évanouissement plein de ciel.

La voix disait:

— Il a bien fait de s'en aller. Ce monde-ci n'est pas celui qu'il lui faut. Seulement il faut que j'aille avec lui. Père, je ne suis pas malade, je vous entendais parler tout à l'heure, je suis très bien, je me porte bien, je dormais. Père, je vais être heureuse.

— Mon enfant, demanda Ursus avec l'accent de l'angoisse, qu'entends-tu par là?

La réponse fut:

— Père, ne vous faites pas de peine.

Il y eut une pause, comme pour une reprise d'haleine, puis ces quelques mots, prononcés lentement, arrivèrent à Gwynplaine:

— Gwynplaine n’est plus là. C’est à présent que je suis aveugle.
Je ne connaissais pas la nuit. La nuit, c’est l’absence.

La voix s’arrêta encore, puis poursuivit:

— J’avais toujours l’anxiété qu’il ne s’envolât; je le sentais céleste. Il a tout à coup pris son vol. Cela devait finir par là. Une âme, cela s’en va comme un oiseau. Mais le nid de l’âme est dans une profondeur où il y a le grand aimant qui attire tout, et je sais bien où retrouver Gwynplaine. Je ne suis pas embarrassée de mon chemin, allez. Père, c’est là-bas. Plus tard, vous nous rejoindrez. Et Homo aussi.

Homo, entendant prononcer son nom, frappa un petit coup sur le pont.

— Père, reprit la voix, vous comprenez bien que, du moment o Gwynplaine n’est plus là, c’est une chose finie. Je voudrais rester que je ne pourrais pas, parce qu’on est bien forcé de respirer. Il ne faut pas demander ce qui n’est pas possible.
J’étais avec Gwynplaine, c’était tout simple, je vivais.
Maintenant Gwynplaine n’y est plus, je meurs. C’est la même chose. Il faut ou qu’il revienne, ou que je m’en aille.
Puisqu’il ne peut pas revenir, je m’en vais. Mourir, c’est bien bon. Ce n’est pas difficile du tout. Père, ce qui s’éteint ici se rallume ailleurs. Vivre sur cette terre où nous sommes, c’est un serrement de coeur. Il ne se peut pas qu’on soit toujours malheureux. Alors on s’en va dans ce que vous appelez les étoiles, on se marie là, on ne se quitte plus jamais, on s’aime, on s’aime, on s’aime, et c’est cela qui est le bon Dieu.

— La, ne te fâche pas, dit Ursus.

La voix continua.

— Par exemple, eh bien, l’an passé, au printemps de l’an passé, on était ensemble, on était heureux, il y a à présent bien de la différence. Je ne me souviens plus dans quelle petite ville nous étions, il y avait des arbres, j’entendais chanter des fauvettes.
Nous sommes venus à Londres. Cela a changé. Ce n’est pas un reproche que je fais. On vient dans un pays, on ne peut pas savoir. Père, vous rappelez-vous? un soir il y a eu dans la grande loge une femme, vous avez dit: c’est une duchesse! j’ai été triste. Je crois qu’il aurait mieux valu rester dans les petites villes. Après cela, Gwynplaine a bien fait. Maintenant c’est mon tour. Puisque c’est vous-même qui m’avez raconté que j’étais toute petite, que ma mère était morte, que j’étais par terre dans la nuit avec de la neige qui tombait sur moi, et que lui, qui était petit aussi, et tout seul aussi,

il m’avait ramassée, et que c’était comme cela que j’étais en vie, vous ne pouvez pas vous étonner que j’aie aujourd’hui absolument besoin de partir, et que je veuille aller voir dans la tombe si Gwynplaine y est. Parce que la seule chose qui existe dans la vie, c’est le coeur, et, après la vie, c’est l’âme. Vous vous rendez bien compte de ce que je dis, n’est-ce pas, père? Qu’est-ce qui remue donc? il me semble que nous sommes dans une maison qui remue. Pourtant je n’entends pas le bruit des roues.

Après une interruption, la voix ajouta:

— Je ne distingue pas beaucoup entre hier et aujourd’hui. Je ne me plains pas. J’ignore ce qui s’est passé, mais il doit y avoir eu des choses.

Ces paroles étaient dites avec une profonde douceur inconsolable, et un soupir, que Gwynplaine entendit, s’acheva ainsi:

— Il faut que je m’en aille, à moins qu’il ne revienne.

Ursus, sombre, grommela à demi-voix:

— Je ne crois pas aux revenants.

Il reprit:

— C’est une barque. Tu demandes pourquoi la maison remue, c’est que nous sommes dans une barque. Calme-toi. Il ne faut pas trop parler. Ma fille, si tu as un peu d’amitié pour moi, ne t’agite pas, ne te donne pas de fièvre. Vieux comme je suis, je ne pourrais pas supporter une maladie que tu aurais. Épargne-moi, ne sois pas malade.

La voix recommença:

— Chercher sur la terre, à quoi bon? puisqu’on ne trouve qu’au ciel.

Ursus répliqua, presque avec un essai d’autorité:

— Calme-toi. Il y a des moments où tu n’as pas d’intelligence du tout. Je te recommande de rester en repos. Après ça, tu n’es pas forcée de savoir ce que c’est que la veine cave. Je serais tranquille si tu étais tranquille. Mon enfant, fais aussi quelque chose pour moi. Il t’a ramassée, mais je t’ai recueillie. Tu te rends malade. C’est mal. Il faut te calmer et dormir. Tout ira bien. Je te jure ma parole d’honneur que tout ira bien. Nous avons un très beau temps d’ailleurs. C’est comme une nuit faite exprès. Nous serons demain à Rotterdam qui est une ville en Hollande, à l’embouchure de la Meuse.

— Père, dit la voix, voyez-vous, quand c’est depuis l’enfance et qu’on a toujours été l’un avec l’autre, il ne faudrait pas que cela se dérangeât, parce qu’alors il faut mourir et qu’il n’y a même pas moyen de faire autrement. Je vous aime bien tout de même, mais je sens bien que je ne suis plus tout à fait avec vous, quoique je ne sois pas encore avec lui.

— Allons, insista Ursus, tâche de te rendormir.

La voix répondit:

— Ce n'est pas cela qui me manquera.

Ursus repartit, avec une intonation toute tremblante:

— Je te dis que nous allons en Hollande, à Rotterdam, qui est une ville.

— Père, continua la voix, je ne suis pas malade, si c'est cela qui vous inquiète, vous pouvez vous rassurer, je n'ai pas de fièvre, j'ai un peu chaud, voilà tout.

Ursus balbutia:

— A l'embouchure de la Meuse.

— Je me porte bien, père, mais voyez-vous, je me sens mourir.

— Ne va pas t'aviser d'une chose pareille, dit Ursus.

Et il ajouta:

— Surtout qu'elle n'ait pas de secousse, mon Dieu!

Il y eut un silence.

Tout à coup Ursus cria:

— Qu'est-ce que tu fais? Pourquoi te lèves-tu? Je t'en supplie, reste couchée!

Gwynplaine tressaillit, et avança la tête.

III

LE PARADIS RETROUVÉ ICI-BAS

Il aperçut Dea. Elle venait de se dresser toute droite sur le matelas. Elle avait une longue robe soigneusement fermée, blanche, qui ne laissait voir que la naissance des épaules et l'attache délicate de son cou. Les manches cachaient ses bras, les plis couvraient ses pieds. On voyait ses mains où se gonflait en embranchements bleuâtres le réseau des veines chaudes de fièvre. Elle était frissonnante, et oscillait plutôt qu'elle ne chancelait, comme un roseau. La lanterne l'éclairait d'en bas. Son beau visage était indicible. Ses cheveux dénoués flottaient. Aucune larme ne coulait sur ses joues. Il y avait dans ses prunelles du feu, et de la nuit. Elle était pâle de cette pâleur qui ressemble à la transparence de la vie divine sur une figure terrestre. Son corps exquis et frêle était comme mêl et fondu dans le plissement de sa robe. Elle ondoyait tout entière avec le tremblement d'une flamme. Et en même temps on sentait qu'elle commençait à n'être plus que de l'ombre. Ses yeux, tout grands ouverts, resplendissaient. On eût dit une sortie de sépulcre et une âme debout dans une aurore.

Ursus, dont Gwynplaine ne voyait que le dos, levait des bras effarés.

— Ma fille! ah! mon Dieu, voilà le délire qui la prend! le délire! c'est ce que je craignais. Il ne faudrait pas de secousse, car cela pourrait la tuer, et il en faudrait une pour l'empêcher de devenir folle. Morte, ou folle! quelle situation!
que faire, mon Dieu? Ma fille, recouche-toi!

Cependant Dea parlait. Sa voix était presque indistincte, comme si une épaisseur céleste était déjà interposée entre elle et la terre.

— Père, vous vous trompez. Je n'ai aucun délire. J'entends très bien tout ce que vous me dites. Vous me dites qu'il y a beaucoup de monde, qu'on attend, et qu'il faut que je joue ce soir, je veux bien, vous voyez que j'ai ma raison, mais je ne sais pas comment faire, puisque je suis morte et puisque Gwynplaine est mort. Moi, je viens tout de même. Je consens à jouer. Me voici; mais Gwynplaine n'y est plus.

— Mon enfant, répéta Ursus, allons, obéis-moi. Remets-toi sur ton lit.

— Il n'y est plus! il n'y est plus! oh! comme il fait noir!

— Noir! balbutia Ursus, voilà la première fois qu'elle dit ce mot!

Gwynplaine, sans plus de bruit qu'un glissement, monta le marchepied de la baraque, y entra, décrocha son capingot et son esclavine, endossa le capingot, mit l'esclavine à son cou et redescendit de la cahute, toujours caché par l'espèce d'encombrement que faisaient la cabane, les agrès et le mât.

Dea continuait de murmurer, elle remuait les lèvres, et peu à peu ce murmure devint une mélodie. Elle ébaucha, avec les intermittences et les lacunes du délire, le mystérieux appel qu'elle avait tant de fois adressé à Gwynplaine dans *Chaos vaincu*. Elle se mit à chanter, et ce chant était vague et faible comme un bourdonnement d'abeille:

Noche, quita te de alli, La alba canta...

Nuit, va-t'en. L'aube chante.

Elle s'interrompit:

— Non, ce n'est pas vrai, je ne suis pas morte. Qu'est-ce que je disais donc? Hélas! je suis vivante. Je suis vivante, et il est mort. Je suis en bas, et il est en haut. Il est parti, et moi je reste. Je ne l'entendrai plus parler et marcher. Dieu nous avait donné un peu de paradis sur la terre, il nous l'a retiré. Gwynplaine! c'est fini. Je ne le sentirai plus près de moi. Jamais. Sa voix! je n'entendrai plus sa voix.

Et elle chanta:

Es menester a cielos ir... ... Dexa, quiero, A tu negro Caparazon.

Il faut aller au ciel... ...Quitte, je le veux, Ta noire enveloppe!

Et elle étendit la main comme si elle cherchait où s'appuyer dans l'infini.

Gwynplaine, surgissant à côté d'Ursus brusquement pétrifié, s'agenouilla devant elle.

— Jamais! dit Dea. Jamais! je ne l'entendrai plus!

Et elle se remit à chanter, égarée:

Dexa, quiero, A tu negro Caparazon!

Alors elle entendit une voix, la voix bien-aimée, qui répondait:

O ven! ama! Eres aima, Soy corazon.

Oh! viens! aime! Tu es âme, Je suis coeur.

Et en même temps Dea sentit sous sa main la tête de Gwynplaine.
Elle jeta un cri inexprimable:

— Gwynplaine!

Une clarté d'astre apparut sur sa figure pâle, et elle chancela.

Gwynplaine la reçut dans ses bras.

— Vivant! cria Ursus.

Dea répéta: — Gwynplaine!

Et sa tête se ploya contre la joue de Gwynplaine. Elle dit, tout bas:

— Tu redescends! merci.

Et, relevant le front, assise sur le genou de Gwynplaine, enlacée dans son étreinte, elle tourna vers lui son doux visage, et fixa sur les yeux de Gwynplaine ses yeux pleins de ténèbres et de rayons, comme si elle le regardait.

— C'est toi! dit-elle.

Gwynplaine couvrait sa robe de baisers. Il y a des paroles qui sont à la fois des mots, des cris et des sanglots. Toute l'extase et toute la douleur s'y fondent et éclatent pêle-mêle.

Cela n'a aucun sens, et cela dit tout.

— Oui, moi! c'est moi! moi Gwynplaine! celui dont tu es l'âme, entends-tu? moi dont tu es l'enfant, l'épouse, l'étoile, le souffle! moi dont tu es l'éternité! C'est moi! je suis là, je te tiens dans mes bras. Je suis vivant. Je suis à toi. Ah!

quand je pense que j'étais au moment d'en finir! Une minute de plus! Sans Homo! Je te dirai cela. Comme c'est près de la joie le désespoir! Dea, vivons! Dea, pardonne-moi! Oui! à toi jamais! Tu as raison, touche mon front, assure-toi que c'est moi. Si tu savais! Mais rien ne peut plus nous séparer. Je sors de l'enfer et je remonte au ciel. Tu dis que je redescends, non, je remonte. Me revoici avec toi. A jamais, te dis-je!

Ensemble! nous sommes ensemble! qui aurait dit cela? Nous nous retrouvons. Tout le mal est fini. Il n'y a plus devant nous que de l'enchantement. Nous recommencerons notre vie heureuse, et nous en fermerons si bien la porte que le mauvais sort n'y pourra plus rentrer. Je te conterai tout. Tu seras étonnée. Le bateau est parti. Personne ne peut faire que le bateau ne soit pas parti. Nous sommes en route, et en liberté. Nous allons en Hollande, nous nous marierons, je ne suis pas embarrassé pour gagner ma vie, qui est-ce qui pourrait empêcher cela? Il n'y a plus rien à craindre. Je t'adore.

— Pas si vite! balbutia Ursus.

Dea, tremblante, et avec le frémissement d'un toucher céleste, promenait sa main sur le profil de Gwynplaine. Il l'entendit qui se disait à elle-même:

— C'est comme cela que Dieu est fait.

Puis elle toucha ses vêtements.

— L’esclavine, dit-elle. Le capingot. Il n’y a rien de changé. Tout est comme auparavant.

Ursus, stupéfait, épanoui, riant, inondé de larmes, les regardait et s’adressait à lui-même un aparté.

— Je ne comprends pas du tout. Je suis un absurde idiot. Moi qui l’ai vu porter en terre! Je pleure et je ris. Voilà tout ce que je sais. Je suis aussi bête que si, moi aussi, j’étais amoureux. Mais c’est que je le suis. Je suis amoureux des deux.
Vieille brute, va! Trop d’émotions. Trop d’émotions. C’est ce que je craignais. Non, c’est ce que je voulais. Gwynplaine, ménage-la. Au fait, qu’ils s’embrassent. Cela ne me regarde pas. J’assiste à l’incident. Ce que j’éprouve est drôle. Je suis le parasite de leur bonheur et j’en prends ma part. Je n’y suis pour rien, et il me semble que j’y suis pour quelque chose. Mes enfants, je vous bénis.

Et pendant qu’Ursus monologuait, Gwynplaine s’écriait:

— Dea, tu es trop belle. Je ne sais pas où j’avais l’esprit ces jours-ci. Il n’y a absolument que toi sur la terre. Je te revois, et je n’y crois pas encore. Sur cette barque! Mais, dis-moi, que s’est-il donc passé? Et voilà l’état où l’on vous a mis! Où donc est la Green-Box? On vous a volés, on vous a chassés. C’est infâme. Ah! je vous vengerai! je te vengerai, Dea! on aura affaire à moi. Je suis pair d’Angleterre.

Ursus, comme heurté par une planète en pleine poitrine, recula et considéra Gwynplaine attentivement.

— Il n’est pas mort, c’est clair, mais serait-il fou?

Et il tendit l’oreille avec défiance.

Gwynplaine reprit:

— Sois tranquille, Dea. Je porterai ma plainte à la chambre des lords.

Ursus l’examina encore, et se frappa le milieu du front avec le petit bout de son doigt.

Puis, prenant son parti:

— Ça m’est égal, murmura-t-il. Cela ira tout de même. Sois fou, si tu veux, mon Gwynplaine. C’est le droit de l’homme. Moi, je suis heureux. Mais qu’est-ce que c’est que tout cela?

Le navire continuait de fuir mollement et vite, la nuit était de plus en plus obscure, des brumes qui venaient de l’océan envahissaient le zénith d’où aucun vent ne les balayait, quelques grosses étoiles à peine étaient visibles et s’estompaient l’une après l’autre, et au bout de quelque temps il

n’y en eut plus du tout, et tout le ciel fut noir, infini et doux. Le fleuve s’élargissait, et ses deux rives à droite et à gauche n’étaient plus que deux minces lignes brunes presque amalgamées à la nuit.
De toute cette ombre sortait un profond apaisement. Gwynplaine s’était assis à demi, tenant Dea embrassée. Ils parlaient, s’écriaient, jasaient, chuchotaient. Dialogue éperdu. Comment vous peindre, ô joie?

— Ma vie!

— Mon ciel!

— Mon amour!

— Tout mon bonheur!

— Gwynplaine!

— Dea! je suis ivre. Laisse-moi baiser tes pieds.

— C’est toi donc!

— En ce moment-ci, j’ai trop à dire à la fois. Je ne sais par o commencer.

— Un baiser!

— O ma femme!

— Gwynplaine, ne me dis pas que je suis belle. C’est toi qui es beau.

— Je te retrouve, je t’ai sur mon coeur. Cela est. Tu es à moi.
Je ne rêve pas. C’est bien toi. Est-ce possible? oui. Je reprends possession de la vie. Si tu savais, il y a eu toutes sortes d’événements. Dea!

— Gwynplaine!

— Je t’aime!

Et Ursus murmurait:

— J’ai une joie de grand-père.

Homo était sorti de dessous la cahute, et, allant de l’un l’autre, discrètement, n’exigeant pas qu’on fit attention à lui, il donnait des coups de langue à tort et à travers, tantôt aux gros souliers d’Ursus, tantôt au capingot de Gwynplaine, tantôt la robe de Dea, tantôt au matelas. C’était sa façon à lui de bénir.

On avait dépassé Chatham et l’embouchure de la Medway. On approchait de la mer. La sérénité ténébreuse de l’étendue était telle que la descente de la Tamise se faisait sans complication; aucune manoeuvre n’était nécessaire, et aucun matelot n’avait ét appelé sur le pont. A l’autre extrémité du navire, le patron, toujours seul à la barre, gouvernait. A l’arrière, il n’y avait que cet homme; à l’avant, la lanterne éclairait l’heureux groupe de ces êtres qui venaient de faire, au fond du malheur subitement changé en félicité, cette jonction inespérée.

IV

NON. LA-HAUT

Tout à coup, Dea, se dégageant de l’embrassement de Gwynplaine, se souleva. Elle appuyait ses deux mains sur son coeur, comme pour l’empêcher de se déranger.

— Qu’est-ce que j’ai? dit-elle. J’ai quelque chose. La joie, cela étouffe. Ce n’est rien. C’est bon. En reparaissant, ô mon Gwynplaine, tu m’as donné un coup. Un coup de bonheur. Tout le ciel qui vous entre dans le coeur, c’est un enivrement. Toi absent, je me sentais expirer. La vraie vie qui s’en allait, tu me l’as rendue. J’ai eu en moi comme un déchirement, le déchirement des ténèbres, et j’ai senti monter la vie, une vie ardente, une vie de fièvre et de délices. C’est extraordinaire, cette vie-là, que tu viens de me donner. Elle est si céleste qu’on souffre un peu. C’est comme si l’âme grandissait et avait de la peine à tenir dans notre corps. Cette vie des séraphins, cette plénitude, elle reflue jusqu’à ma tête, et me pénètre.

J’ai comme un battement d’ailes dans la poitrine. Je me sens étrange, mais bien heureuse. Gwynplaine, tu m’as ressuscitée.

Elle rougit, puis pâlit, puis rougit encore, et tomba.

— Hélas! dit Ursus, tu l’as tuée.

Gwynplaine étendit les bras vers Dea. L’angoisse suprême survenant dans la suprême extase, quel choc! Il fût lui-même tombé, s’il n’eût eu à la soutenir.

— Dea! cria-t-il frémissant, qu’est-ce que tu as?

— Rien, dit-elle. Je t’aime.

Elle était dans les bras de Gwynplaine comme un linge qu’on a ramassé. Ses mains pendaient.

Gwynplaine et Ursus couchèrent Dea sur le matelas. Elle dit faiblement:

— Je ne respire pas couchée.

Ils la mirent sur son séant.

Ursus dit:

— Un oreiller!

Elle répondit:

— Pourquoi? j’ai Gwynplaine.

Et elle posa sa tête sur l’épaule de Gwynplaine, assis derrière elle et la soutenant, l’oeil plein d’un égarement infortuné.

— Ah! dit-elle, comme je suis bien!

Ursus lui avait saisi le poignet, et comptait les pulsations de l’artère. Il ne hochait pas le front, il ne disait rien, et l’on ne pouvait deviner ce qu’il pensait qu’aux rapides mouvements de ses paupières, s’ouvrant et se refermant convulsivement, comme pour empêcher un flot de larmes de sortir.

— Qu’a-t-elle? demanda Gwynplaine.

Ursus appuya son oreille contre le flanc gauche de Dea.

Gwynplaine répéta ardemment sa question, en tremblant qu’Ursus ne lui répondit.

Ursus regarda Gwynplaine, puis Dea. Il était livide. Il dit:

— Nous devons être à la hauteur de Canterbury. La distance d’ici à Gravesend n’est pas très grande. Nous aurons beau temps toute la nuit. Il n’y a pas à craindre d’attaque en mer, parce que les flottes de guerre sont sur la côte d’Espagne. Nous aurons un bon passage.

Dea, ployée et de plus en plus pâle, pétrissait dans ses doigts convulsifs l’étoffe de sa robe. Elle eut un soupir inexprimablement pensif, et murmura:

— Je comprends ce que c’est. Je meurs.

Gwynplaine se leva terrible. Ursus soutint Dea.

— Mourir! Toi mourir! non, cela ne sera pas. Tu ne peux pas mourir. Mourir à présent! mourir tout de suite! c’est impossible. Dieu n’est pas féroce. Te rendre et te reprendre dans la même minute! Non. Ces choses-là ne se font pas. Alors c’est que Dieu voudrait qu’on doute de lui. Alors c’est que tout serait un piège, la terre, le ciel, le berceau des enfants, l’allaitement des mères, le coeur humain, l’amour, les étoiles! c’est que Dieu serait un traître et l’homme une dupe! c’est qu’il n’y aurait rien! c’est qu’il faudrait insulter la création! c’est que tout serait un abîme! Tu ne sais ce que tu dis, Dea! tu vivras. J’exige que tu vives. Tu dois m’obéir. Je suis ton mari et ton maître. Je te défends de me quitter. Ah ciel! Ah misérables hommes! Non, cela ne se peut pas. Et je resterais sur cette terre après toi! Cela est tellement monstrueux qu’il n’y aurait plus de soleil. Dea, Dea, remets-toi. C’est un petit moment d’angoisse qui va passer. On a quelquefois des frissons, et puis on n’y pense plus. J’ai absolument besoin que tu te portes bien et que tu ne souffres plus. Toi mourir! qu’est-ce que je t’ai fait? D’y penser, ma raison s’en va. Nous sommes l’un à l’autre, nous nous aimons.

Tu n’as pas de motif de t’en aller. Ce serait injuste. Ai-je commis des crimes? Tu m’as pardonné d’ailleurs. Oh! tu ne veux pas que je devienne un désespéré, un scélérat, un furieux, un damné! Dea! je t’en prie, je t’en conjure, je t’en supplie mains jointes, ne meurs pas.

Et, crispant ses poings dans ses cheveux, agonisant d’épouvanté, étouffé de pleurs, il se jeta à ses pieds.

— Mon Gwynplaine, dit Dea, ce n’est pas ma faute.

Il lui vint aux lèvres un peu d’écume rose qu’Ursus essuya d’un pan de la robe sans que Gwynplaine prosterné le vît. Gwynplaine tenait les pieds de Dea embrassés, et l’implorait avec toutes sortes de mots confus.

— Je te dis que je ne veux pas. Toi, mourir! je n’en ai pas la force. Mourir oui, mais ensemble. Pas autrement. Toi mourir, Dea! Il n’y a pas moyen que j’y consente. Ma divinité! mon amour! comprends donc que je suis là. Je te jure que tu vivras.

Mourir! mais c’est qu’alors tu ne te figures pas ce que je deviendrais après ta mort. Si tu avais l’idée du besoin que j’ai de ne pas te perdre, tu verrais que c’est positivement impossible, Dea! Je n’ai que toi, vois-tu. Ce qui m’est arriv est extraordinaire. Tu ne t’imagines pas que je viens de traverser toute la vie en quelques heures. J’ai reconnu une chose, c’est qu’il n’y avait rien du tout. Toi, tu existes. Si tu n’y es pas, l’univers n’a plus de sens. Reste. Aie pitié de moi. Puisque tu m’aimes, vis. Je viens de te retrouver, c’est pour te garder. Attends un peu. On ne s’en va pas comme cela quand on est à peine ensemble depuis quelques instants. Ne t’impatiente pas. Ah! mon Dieu, que je souffre! Tu ne m’en veux pas, n’est-ce pas? Tu comprends bien que je n’ai pas pu faire autrement puisque c’est le wapentake qui est venu me chercher. Tu vas voir que tu vas respirer mieux tout à l’heure. Dea, tout vient de s’arranger. Nous allons être heureux. Ne me mets pas au désespoir. Dea! je ne t’ai rien fait!

Ces paroles n’étaient pas dites, mais sanglotées. On y sentait un mélange d’accablement et de révolte. Il sortait de la poitrine de Gwynplaine un gémissement qui eût attiré des colombes et un rugissement qui eût fait reculer des lions.

Dea lui répondit, d’une voix de moins en moins distincte, s’arrêtant presque à chaque mot:

— Hélas! c’est inutile. Mon bien-aimé, je vois bien que tu fais ce que tu peux. Il y a une heure, je voulais mourir, à présent je ne voudrais plus. Gwynplaine, mon Gwynplaine adoré, comme nous avons été heureux! Dieu t’avait mis dans ma vie, il me retire de la tienne. Voilà que je m’en vais. Tu te souviendras de la Green-Box, n’est-ce pas? et de ta pauvre petite Dea aveugle? Tu te souviendras de ma chanson. N’oublie pas mon son de voix, et la manière dont je te disais: Je t’aime! Je reviendrai te le dire, la nuit, quand tu dormiras. Nous nous étions retrouvés, mais c’était trop de joie. Cela devait finir tout de suite. C’est décidément moi qui pars la première. J’aime bien mon père Ursus, et notre frère Homo. Vous êtes bons.

L’air manque ici. Ouvrez la fenêtre. Mon Gwynplaine, je ne te l’ai pas dit, mais parce qu’il y a eu une fois une femme qui est venue, j’ai été jalouse. Tu ne sais même pas de qui je veux parler. Pas vrai? Couvrez-moi les bras. J’ai un peu froid. Et Fibi? et Vinos? où sont-elles? On finit par aimer tout le monde. On prend en amitié les personnes qui vous ont vu être heureux. On leur sait gré d’avoir été là pendant qu’on était content. Pourquoi tout cela est-il passé? Je n’ai pas bien compris ce qui est arrivé depuis deux jours. Maintenant je meurs. Vous me laisserez dans ma robe. Tantôt en la mettant je pensais bien que ce serait mon suaire. Je veux la garder. Il y a des baisers de Gwynplaine dessus. Oh! j’aurais pourtant bien voulu vivre encore. Quelle vie charmante nous avions dans notre pauvre cabane qui roulait! On chantait. J’écoutais les battements de mains! Comme c’était bon, n’être jamais séparés!

Il me semblait que j’étais dans un nuage avec vous, je me rendais bien compte de tout, je distinguais un jour de l’autre, quoique aveugle, je reconnaissais que c’était le matin parce que j’entendais Gwynplaine, je reconnaissais que c’était la nuit parce que je rêvais de Gwynplaine. Je sentais autour de moi une enveloppe qui était son âme. Nous nous sommes doucement adorés.

Tout cela s’en va, et il n’y aura plus de chansons. Hélas! ce n’est donc pas possible de vivre encore! Tu penseras à moi, mon bien-aimé.

Sa voix allait s’affaiblissant. La décroissance lugubre de l’agonie lui ôtait l’haleine. Elle repliait son pouce sous ses doigts, signe que la dernière minute approche. Le bégaiement de l’ange commençant semblait s’ébaucher dans le doux râle de la vierge.

Elle murmura:

— Vous vous souviendrez, n’est-ce pas, parce que ce serait bien triste que je sois morte si l’on ne se souvenait pas de moi.
J’ai quelquefois été méchante. Je vous demandée tous pardon. Je suis bien certaine que, si le bon Dieu avait voulu, comme nous ne tenons pas beaucoup de place, nous aurions encore été heureux, mon Gwynplaine, puisqu’on aurait gagné sa vie et qu’on aurait ét ensemble dans un autre pays, mais le bon Dieu n’a pas voulu. Je ne sais pas du tout pourquoi je meurs. Puisque je ne me plaignais pas d’être aveugle, je n’offensais personne. Je n’aurais pas mieux demandé que de rester toujours aveugle à côt de toi. Oh! comme c’est triste de s’en aller!

Ses paroles haletaient, et s’éteignaient l’une après l’autre, comme si l’on eût soufflé dessus. On ne l’entendait presque plus.

— Gwynplaine, reprit-elle, n’est-ce pas? tu penseras à moi.
J’en aurai besoin, quand je serai morte.

Et elle ajouta:

— Oh! retenez-moi!

Puis, après un silence, elle dit:

— Viens me rejoindre le plus tôt que tu pourras. Je vais être bien malheureuse sans toi, même avec Dieu. Ne me laisse pas trop longtemps seule, mon doux Gwynplaine! C’est ici qu’était le paradis. Là-haut, ce n’est que le ciel. Ah! j’étouffe! Mon bien-aimé, mon bien-aimé, mon bien-aimé!

— Grâce! cria Gwynplaine.

— Adieu! dit-elle.

— Grâce! répéta Gwynplaine.

Et il colla sa bouche aux belles mains glacées de Dea.

Elle fut un moment comme si elle ne respirait plus.

Puis elle se haussa sur ses coudes, un profond éclair traversa ses yeux, et elle eut un ineffable sourire. Sa voix éclata, vivante.

— Lumière! cria-t-elle. Je vois.

Et elle expira.

Elle retomba étendue et immobile sur le matelas.

— Morte, dit Ursus.

Et le pauvre vieux bonhomme, comme s’écroulant sous le désespoir, prosterna sa tète chauve et enfouit son visage sanglotant dans les plis de la robe aux pieds de Dea. Il demeura là, évanoui.

Alors Gwynplaine fut effrayant.

Il se dressa debout, leva le front, et considéra au-dessus de sa tête l’immense nuit.

Puis, vu de personne, regardé pourtant peut-être dans ces ténèbres par quelqu’un d’invisible, il étendit les bras vers la profondeur d’en haut, et dit:

— Je viens.

Et il se mit à marcher, dans la direction du bord, sur le pont du navire, comme si une vision l’attirait.

A quelques pas c’était l’abîme.

Il marchait lentement, il ne regardait pas à ses pieds.

Il avait le sourire que Dea venait d’avoir.

Il allait droit devant lui. Il semblait voir quelque chose. Il avait dans la prunelle une lueur qui était comme la réverbération d’une âme aperçue au loin.

Il cria: — Oui!

A chaque pas il se rapprochait du bord.

Il marchait tout d’une pièce, les bras levés, la tête renversée en arrière, l’oeil fixe, avec un mouvement de fantôme.

Il avançait sans hâte et sans hésitation, avec une précision fatale, comme s’il n’eût pas eu tout près le gouffre béant et la tombe ouverte.

Il murmurait: — Sois tranquille. Je te suis. Je distingue très bien le signe que tu me fais.

Il ne quittait pas des yeux un point du ciel, au plus haut de l’ombre. Il souriait.

Le ciel était absolument noir, il n’y avait plus d’étoiles, mais évidemment il en voyait une.

Il traversa le tillac.

Après quelques pas rigides et sinistres, il parvint à l’extrême bord.

— J’arrive, dit-il. Dea, me voilà.

Et il continua de marcher. Il n’y avait pas de parapet. Le vide était devant lui. Il y mit le pied.

Il tomba.

La nuit était épaisse et sourde, l’eau était profonde. Il s’engloutit. Ce fut une disparition calme et sombre. Personne ne vit ni n’entendit rien. Le navire continua de voguer et le fleuve de couler.

Peu après le navire entra dans l’océan.

Quand Ursus revint à lui, il ne vit plus Gwynplaine, et il aperçut près du bord Homo qui hurlait dans l’ombre en regardant la mer.

Au bas de la dernière page du manuscrit de l'*Homme qui Rit*, se trouve la note suivante:

Terminé le 23 août 1868, à dix heures et demie du matin.
Bruxelles, 4, place des Barricades.

Ce livre, dont la plus grande partie a été écrite à Guernesey, a été commencé à Bruxelles le 21 juillet 1866, et fini Bruxelles le 23 août 1868.

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NINETY-THREE

Anonymous translation, 1901

This is Hugo's last novel, which was first published in 1874, shortly after the bloody upheaval of the Paris Commune. The novel portrays the Revolt in the Vendée and Chouannerie, which were the counter-revolutionary revolts in 1793 during the French Revolution. Divided into three parts, though not in chronological order, the novel's three different stories mainly take place in France, as well as the Channel Islands, where Hugo lived in later years.

Ninety-Three begins in the year 1793. During the Royalist insurrection of the Chouannerie, a troop of French Republic soldiers in Brittany encounter Michelle Fléchard, a peasant woman, and her three young children, who are fleeing from the conflict. When she explains that her husband and parents have been killed, the troop's commander, Sergeant Radoub, convinces his men to look after the family.

Throughout the novel's many historical events, Hugo clearly supports the revolutionaries and yet he ensures the Royalist counter-revolutionaries are in no way villainous, giving his portrayal a somewhat realistic approach, despite his overall intentions.

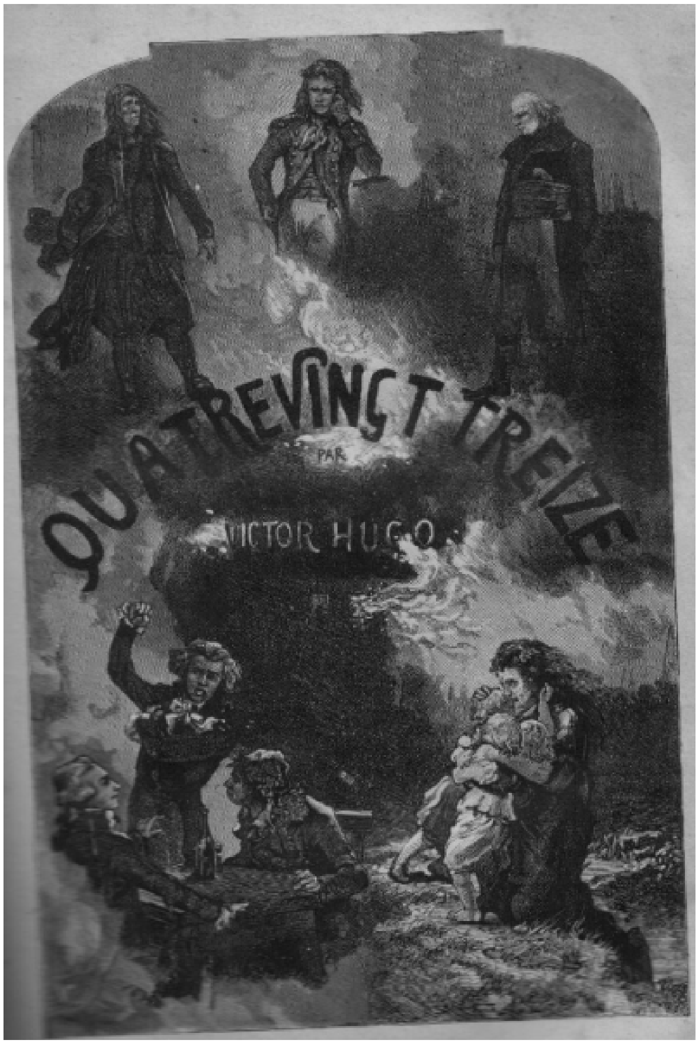
QUATREVINGT TREIZE
PAR
VICTOR HUGO

The original frontispiece

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PART FIRST. — AT SEA.

BOOK FIRST. — THE WOODS OF LA SAUDRAIE.

During the last of May, 1793, one of the Parisian battalions led into Brittany by Santerre was scouring the terrible woods of La Saudraie in Astillé. The battalion had only three hundred men left, for it had been decimated by the cruel war. It was at the time when after Argonne, Jemmapes, and Valmy, there remained of the first battalion of Paris, originally numbering six hundred volunteers, twenty-seven men; of the second battalion, thirty-three men; and of the third, fifty-seven. It was a time of epic conflicts.

The battalions sent from Paris to La Vendeé numbered nine hundred and twelve men. Each battalion had three pieces of cannon. The troops had been quickly raised. On the twenty-fifth of April, Gohier being minister of justice, and Bouchotte minister of war, the section of the *Bon Conseil*, had proposed to send battalions of volunteers to La Vendée. Lubin, member of the commune, had made the report: the first of May, Santerre was ready to send out twelve thousand soldiers, thirty field-pieces and a battalion of gunners. These battalions organized hastily were so well organized, that they serve as models to-day; the companies of the line are made up on the principle governing them; the only change has been in the proportion between the number of soldiers and non-commissioned officers.

On the twenty-eighth of April the commune of Paris gave this order to Santerre’s volunteers: “No mercy, no quarter.” At the end of May, of the twelve thousand Parisian troops, two-thirds were dead.

The battalion engaged in the woods of La Saudraie was proceeding cautiously. They took their time. They looked to the right and to the left, in front of them and behind them at the same time. Kléber has said: “The soldier has an eye in his back.” They had been marching for hours. What time could it be? What part of the day was it? It would have been difficult to say, for there is always a sort of twilight in such wild thickets, and it is never light in these woods.

The forest of La Saudraie was tragic. It was in these woods that the civil war began its crimes in the month of November, 1792. The ferocious cripple, Mousqueton, had come out of these gloomy depths; the number of murders committed there made one’s hair stand on end. There was no place more frightful. The soldiers penetrated there cautiously. Everywhere was abundance of flowers; one was surrounded with a trembling wall of branches, from which hung the charming freshness of the foliage; sunbeams here and there made their way through the green shade; on the ground the gladiolus, the yellow swamp flag, the meadow narcissus, the gênotte, the herald of fine weather, and the spring crocus formed the embroidery and decoration of a thick carpet of vegetation, luxuriant in every kind of moss, from that resembling velvet, to that like stars. The soldiers advanced step by step in silence, noiselessly pushing aside the underbrush. The birds warbled above their bayonets.

La Saudraie was one of those thickets where formerly in times of peace they used to hold the Houicheba, — hunting birds at night; now they were hunting men there.

The wood was full of birch trees, beeches, and oaks; the ground flat; the moss and thick grass deadened the sound of the marching men; every path lost itself abruptly among the holly, wild sloe, ferns, hedges of rest-harrow, tall briers; it was impossible to see a man ten feet away.

Occasionally, a heron or a waterfowl passed through the branches, showing that there were swamps near by.

They marched on. They went at haphazard, full of anxiety, and fearing to find what they they sought. From time to time they came across traces of encampments, burnt places, trodden-down grass, sticks in the form of a cross, bloody branches. There soup had been made, there mass had been said, there wounds had been dressed. But those who had passed this way had disappeared. Where were they? Far away, perhaps. Perhaps close by, concealed, gun in hand. The woods seemed deserted. The battalion redoubled its precaution. Solitude and suspicion. There was nobody to be seen; the more reason for fearing somebody. They had to do with a forest of ill-repute. An ambuscade was probable.

Thirty grenadiers, detached as scouts and commanded by a sergeant, were marching in advance at a considerable distance from the main body of the troop. The vivandière of the battalion accompanied them. The vivandières join the vanguards from choice. They run a risk, but they expect to see something. Curiosity is one form of feminine bravery.

Suddenly the soldiers in this little squad experienced that thrill familiar to huntsmen, which indicates that they have reached their prey. They had heard something like a whisper in the midst of a thicket, and it seemed that some one had just seen a movement among the leaves. The soldiers made signs to each other.

In the sort of watch and search entrusted to scouts, the officers do not need to take part; whatever must be done is done of itself.

In less than a minute, the spot where the movement had been seen was surrounded; a circle of pointed muskets enclosed it, the obscure centre of the thicket was aimed at from all sides at once, and the soldiers with fingers on the trigger and eyes on the suspected place, only waited for the sergeant's command to riddle it with bullets. The vivandière, however, ventured to look through the brambles, and at the instant when the sergeant was about to cry: "Fire!" this woman cried: "Halt!"

And turning towards the soldiers: "Don't shoot, comrades!"

She rushed headlong into the thicket. They followed her.

There was, indeed, some one there.

In the densest part of the thicket, on the edge of one of those little round clearings made in the woods by the charcoal furnaces in burning roots of trees, in a sort of recess among the branches, a kind of leafy chamber, half open like an alcove, a woman was sitting ou the moss, with an infant at the breast, and in her lap the blond heads of two sleeping children.

This was the ambuscade.

"What are you doing here?" cried the vivandière.

The woman raised her head.

The vivandière added fiercely, —

"Are you mad to be here!"

And she continued, —

"A little more and you would have been killed!"

And addressing the soldiers, she added, —

"It is a woman."

"By Jove, we see it is indeed!" said a grenadier.

The vivandière continued, —

"Come into the woods to be massacred! Did ever anybody imagine such stupidity as that?"

The woman stupefied, frightened, petrified, saw all about her as in a dream; these guns, these sabres, these bayonets, these fierce faces.

The two children woke up and began to cry.

"I'm hungry," said one.

"I'm afraid," said the other.

The little one went on nursing.

The vivandière spoke to it.

“You are quite right,” she said.

The mother was dumb with fright.

The sergeant cried out to her, —

“Don’t be afraid, we are the battalion of the *Bonnet-Rouge*.

The woman trembled from head to foot. She looked at the sergeant, whose rough face showed only his eyebrows, his moustache, and two coals which were his two eyes.

“Formerly the battalion of the *Croix-Rouge*, added the vivandière.

And the sergeant continued, —

“Who are you, madame?” The woman looked at him, terrified. She was thin, young, pale, and in rags; she wore the large hood of the Breton peasant, and the woollen cloak fastened at the neck with a string. She let her bare breast be seen with utter indifference. Her feet without stockings or shoes were bleeding.

“She is poor,” said the sergeant.

And the vivandière in her soldierly and feminine voice, tenderly withal, resumed, —

“What is your name?”

The woman stammered almost indistinctly, —

“Michelle Fléchard.”

Meanwhile the vivandière caressed the little head of the nursing child with her large hand.

“How old is this baby?” she asked.

The mother did not understand. The vivandière persisted.

“I asked you the age of the child.”

“Ah!” said the mother, “eighteen months.”

“It is too old,” said the vivandière. “It ought not to nurse any longer. You must wean it. We will give it some soup.”

The mother began to grow calmer. The two little ones which had awakened were more curious than frightened. They admired the plumes.

“Ah!” said the mother, “they are very hungry.”

And she added: “I have no more milk.”

“They shall have something to eat,” cried the sergeant, “and you too. But that is not all. What are your political opinions?”

The woman looked at the sergeant, but gave no answer.

"Did you hear my question?"

She stammered: "I was placed in a convent when very young, but I am married, I am not a nun. The sisters taught me to speak French. The village was set on fire. We escaped in such haste that I did not have time to put on my shoes."

"I ask what are your political opinions?"

"I don't know."

The sergeant continued, —

"There are spies about. If caught, spies are shot. You see. Speak. You are not a gypsy. What is your country?"

She still looked at him, evidently without understanding.

The sergeant asked once more: "What is your country?"

"I do not know," she said.

"What, you don't know your own country."

"Ah! my country, yes, indeed."

"Well, what is your country?"

The woman answered: " It is the farm of Siscoignard, in the parish of Azé."

It was the sergeant's turn to be amazed. He remained lost in thought for a moment, then replied, —

"What did you say?"

"Siscoignard."

"But that is not a country."

"It is my country."

And, after a moment of reflection, the woman added,— "I understand, sir. You are from France. I am from Brittany."

"Well?"

"It is not the same country."

"But it is the same fatherland!" exclaimed the sergeant.

The woman merely replied, —

"I am from Siscoignard!"

"Have it Siscoignard, then," replied the sergeant.

"Does your family belong there?"

"Yes."

"What do they do?"

"They are all dead. I have no relatives now."

The sergeant, who was clever with his tongue, continued to question her.

"People have parents, you devil, or have had them! Who are you? Speak!"

The woman heard in amazement this *ou on en a eu*, which sounded more like the cry of a wild-beast than human speech.

The vivandière felt the need of coming to her aid. She renewed her caresses to the nursing child, and patted the cheeks of the other two.

"What do you call the baby? " she asked; "I see it is a girl,"

The mother answered: "Georgette."

"And the oldest? he is a man, the scamp."

"René-Jean."

"And the younger one? He is a man, too, and a chubby-faced fellow besides."

"Gros-Alain," said the mother.

"They are pretty little things," said the vivandière; you seem to be somebody."

Meanwhile, the sergeant persisted in talking.

"Tell me, madame. Have you a house?"

"I had one."

"Where was it?"

"At Azé."

"Why are you not in your house?"

"Because it is burned."

"Who burned it?"

"I don't know. There was a battle."

"Where did you come from?"

"From there."

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know."

"Come to the point. Who are you?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know who you are?"

"We are people who have escaped."

"To what party do you belong?"

"I don't know."

"Do you belong to the Blues? Do you belong to the Whites? Whom are you with?"

"I am with my children."

Here was a pause. The vivandière said, —

“I never had any children. I didn’t have time.”

The sergeant began again, —

“But your parents. Come, madame, tell us about your parents. My name is Radoub; I am a sergeant, I belong in rue du Gherche-Midi; my father and mother belonged there, too. I can tell you about my parents. Tell us about yours. Tell us who your parents were.”

“They were the Fléchards.”

“Yes; the Fléchards are the Fléchards, as the Radoubs are the Radoubs. But people have some occupation. What was the occupation of your parents? What did they do? What did they make? What did they *fledge* these *Fledghards* of yours?”

“They were farmers. My father was infirm and unable to work, because he had been cudgelled by the seigneur, his seigneur, our seigneur, which was a kindness, for my father had poached a rabbit, and the penalty for this offence was death; but the seigneur had mercy and said; ‘Give him only a hundred blows,’ and my father was made a cripple.”

“Go on.”

“My grandfather was a Huguenot. The priest had him sent to the galleys. I was very young.”

“Go on.”

“My husband’s father was a salt smuggler. The king had him hanged.”

“And your husband, what does he do?”

“At the present time he is fighting.”

“For whom?”

“For the king.”

“For whom else?”

“Why, for his seigneur?”

“For whom else?”

“Why, for the priest.”

“The accursed names of brutes!” exclaimed a grenadier.

The woman shook with fear.

“You see, madame, we are Parisians,” said the vivandière kindly.

The woman clasped her hands and cried: “Oh, my Lord Jesus!”

“No superstitions,” resumed the sergeant.

The vivandière sat down beside the woman and drew to her the oldest of the children, who made no resistance. Children feel confidence just as they feel afraid, without knowing why. They have a monitor within.

“My poor good woman, you have some pretty brats, at any rate. I can guess their ages. The largest is four years old, his brother three. Indeed that nursing kid is a famous greedy-gut. You see, madame, you have nothing to fear. You shall join the battalion. You can do as I do. I call myself Houzarde; it is a nickname. But I prefer to be called Houzarde rather than Mamzelle Bicomeau, like my mother. I am the vivandière or canteen-woman, as the one is called who serves out the drink when any one is shot or killed. The devil and his train! Our feet are nearly the same size, I will give you some of my shoes. I was in Paris the tenth of August. I gave Westermann a drink. He was walking. I saw Louis XVI., Louis Capet they call him, guillotined. He didn’t like it. Why, just listen. They say that the thirteenth of January he was having chestnuts cooked, and laughing with his family! When they forced him to lie down on the *bascule*, as they call it, he had on neither coat nor shoe; he wore only his shirt, a quilted vest, gray cloth breeches, and gray silk stockings. I saw that myself. The carriage he was brought in was painted green. You see, come with us, we have good boys in the battalion; you shall be vivandière number two; I will teach you the profession. Oh! it is very simple! You have your can and your little bell, you go about in the tumult, in the midst of the firing of the platoons, among the cannon shots, in the uproar, shouting: “Who wants a drink, children?” It is no more difficult than that. I give everybody a drink. Yes, indeed. The Whites as well as the Blues; although I am a Blue, and a good Blue too. But I give everybody a drink. The wounded are thirsty. People die without regard for opinions. When people are dying you ought to press their hands. How silly it is to fight! Come with us. If I am killed you will be my successor. You see, that is the way I seem; but I am a good woman and a brave man. Don’t have any fear.”

When the vivandière had stopped speaking, the woman murmured: “ Our neighbor’s name was Marie-Jean, and our servant’s Maria-Claude.”

In the meantime the Sergeant Kadoub was reprimanding the grenadier, —

“Hold your tongue. You have frightened the woman. You mustn’t swear before ladies.”

“All the same, as far as an honest man can understand it, it is a genuine massacre,” replied the grenadier. “The idea of these Chinese peasants having their father-in-law crippled by the seigneur, their grandfather sent to the galleys by the priest, and their father hung by the king, and then insist on fighting. In the name of common sense! And they thrust themselves into a revolt and let themselves be crushed for the seigneur the priest and the king!”

“Silence in the ranks,” cried the sergeant.

“We’ll be silent, sergeant,” continued the grenadier, “but that won’t prevent its being a pity for a pretty woman like that to run the risk of having her neck broken for the handsome eyes of a priest.”

“Grenadier,” said the sergeant, “we are not in the Club des Piques at Paris. None of your eloquence.”

And he turned towards the woman.

“And your husband, madame? What is he doing? What has he become?”

“He hasn’t become anything, because he has been killed.”

“Where?”

“In the hedge.”

“When?”

“Three days ago.”

“Who killed him?”

“I don’t know.”

“What, you don’t know who killed your husband?”

“No.”

“Was it a Blue? Was it a White?”

“It was a bullet.”

“And three days ago?”

“Yes.”

“From which direction?”

“From Ernée. My husband fell. There!”

“And since your husband is dead, what are you going to do?”

“I am carrying away my children.”

“Where are you carrying them?”

“Straight ahead.”

“Where do you sleep?”

“On the ground.”

“What do you get to eat?”

“Nothing.”

The sergeant made up the military face of touching his nose with his moustache.

“Nothing.”

“That is to say wild plums, mulberries in the brambles, if there are any left from last year, myrtle seeds, fern shoots.”

“Yes. As much as to say nothing.”

The oldest of the children, seeming to understand, said: “I’m hungry.”

The sergeant took a piece of soldier’s bread out of his pocket and handed it to the mother. The mother broke the bread in two pieces, and gave them to the children. The little ones eagerly devoured it.

“She hasn’t kept any for herself,” muttered the sergeant.

“It is because she isn’t hungry,” said a soldier.

“It’s because she is their mother,” said the sergeant. The children interrupted them.

“I want a drink,” said one.

“I want a drink,” repeated the other.

“Is there no brook in these devilish woods?” said the sergeant.

The vivandière took the copper cup hanging from her belt beside her bell, turned the spigot of the keg which hung from her shoulder by a strap, let a few drops run into the cup, and held it to the children’s lips.

The first drank and made up a face.

The second one drank and spit it out.

“Why, it’s good,” said the vivandière.

“Is it Coupe-Figure?” asked the sergeant.

“Yes, and of the best. But they are peasants.”

And she wiped the cup.

The sergeant continued, —

“And you are making your escape in this way?”

“I am obliged to.”

“Across the country in a bee line.”

“I ran with all my might, and then I walked, and then I fell down.”

“Poor creature!” said the vivandière.

“People are fighting everywhere,” stammered the woman. “I am surrounded on all sides with gunshot. I don’t know what it all means. They have killed my husband. I only understand that.”

The sergeant thumped the ground with the butt of his musket, and exclaimed, —

“In the name of a jackass, what a beastly war this is!”

The woman continued: “Last night we slept in an *émousse*.”

“All four of you?”

“All four of us.”

“Slept?”

“Slept.”

“Then,” said the sergeant, “you slept standing.”

And he turned to the soldiers.

“Comrades, a great, old, hollow trunk of a tree, that a man would have to squeeze himself into as if ‘twere a knife-case, these shy creatures call that an *émousse*. What do you think about it? They are not obliged to be Parisians.”

“Slept in the trunk of a hollow tree!” said the vivandière; “and with three children!”

“And when the little ones bawled,” the sergeant went on to say, “it must have been funny enough for those who were passing and saw nothing at all, to hear a tree crying: ‘Papa! Mamma!’”

“Fortunately, it is summer-time,” sighed the woman.

She looked on the ground, resigned, with an expression in her eyes of that astonishment which comes from sudden misfortune.

The soldiers quietly formed a circle around the pitiful group.

A widow, three orphans, flight, desertion, solitude, mutterings of war all around the horizon, hunger, thirst, no food but grass, no roof but the heavens.

The sergeant approached the woman and looked at the nursing child. The little one left the breast, turned her head gently, looked with her beautiful blue eyes at the frightful hairy face, rough and tawny, which bent over her, and began to smile.

The sergeant straightened himself up, and a great tear was seen to roll down his cheek and rest on the end of his moustache like a pearl.

He raised his voice, —

“After all this, it is my opinion that the battalion ought to become a father. Is it agreed? Let us adopt these three children.”

“Long live the Republic!” cried the grenadiers.

“Done,” said the sergeant.

And he extended his hands above the heads of mother and children.

“Behold,” he said, “the children of the battalion of *Bonnet-Rouge*.”

The vivandière leaped for joy.

“Three heads in one bonnet!” she cried.

Then she burst into sobs, embraced the poor widow effusively, and said to her, —

“The baby already looks like a general!”

“Long live the Republic!” repeated the soldiers.

And the sergeant said to the mother, —

“Come, *citoyenne*.”

BOOK SECOND. — THE CORVETTE “CLAYMORE.”

CHAPTER I.

ENGLAND AND FRANCE.

In the spring of 1793, at the time when France, attacked on all her frontiers at once, was touchingly diverted by the fall of the Girondists, this is what took place in the Channel Islands.

One evening, the first of June, in Jersey, in the little lonely bay of Bonnenuit, about an hour before sunset, during one of those fogs convenient for escape, because they are dangerous for navigation, a corvette was preparing to set sail. The crew of this vessel was French, but it belonged to the English fleet stationed on the lookout at the eastern point of the island. The Prince of la Tour-d’Auvergne, who belonged to the house of Bouillon, commanded the English Fleet, and it was by his orders, and for an urgent and special service, that the corvette had been detached.

This corvette, enrolled at Trinity House as the “Claymore,” was to all appearances a merchant ship, but in reality was a sloop of war. She had the clumsy, peaceful aspect of a merchantman; this was a mere blind, however. She had been built for a double purpose, deception and strength: to deceive, if possible; to fight, if necessary. For the service that she had to perform this night, her cargo between decks had been replaced by thirty carronades of heavy calibre. Either because a storm was in prospect, or to give an innocent appearance to the vessel, these thirty carronades were shut in, that is securely fastened within by triple chains, and the mouths pushed up against the closed port-holes; there was nothing to be seen from the outside; the port-holes were concealed; the lids closed; it was as if the corvette wore a mask. These carronades had wheels with bronze spokes, an ancient model, called “*modèle radié*.”

Corvettes usually have no cannons except on the upper deck; this one, constructed for surprise and stratagem, had no guns on the upper deck and as we have just seen, had been built in such a way as to be able to carry a battery between decks.

The “Claymore” was of a heavy, dumpy build, and yet she was a good sailor. Her hull was one of the most solid in all the English navy, and in battle she was almost equal to a frigate, although her mizzen-mast was small, with merely a brigantine rig. Her rudder, of rare scientific shape, had a uniquely curved frame, which had cost fifty pounds sterling in the dockyards of Southampton.

The crew, all French, was composed of emigrant officers and deserted sailors. They were picked men, not one of them was not a good seaman, good soldier, and good royalist. They had a threefold fanaticism: the ship, the sword, and the king.

Half a battalion of marines, which could be disembarked in case of necessity, was scattered among the crew.

The captain of the corvette “Claymore” was a chevalier of Saint-Louis, the Count de Boisberthelot, one of the best officers of the old Royal Navy; the second officer was the chevalier de la Vieuville, who had commanded the company of the French guards, in which Hoche was the sergeant, and her pilot was Philip Gacquoil, the most intelggent sailor in Jersey.

It was evident that this vessel had some extraordinary service before her. Indeed, a man had just gone on board, who had every appearance of starting on an adventure. He was a tall old man, straight and sturdy, with a stern face, whose age it would have been difficult to tell exactly. because he seemed at once old and young; one of those men, full of years and strength, with white locks on his brow and fire in his eye; forty years in point of vigor, and eighty in point of authority.

At the moment he set foot on the corvette, his seacloak flew open, and it could be seen that underneath this cloak he was dressed in the wide breeches called ‘ *bragoubras*, top boots, and a vest of goat-skin, showing the upper side of the leather embroidered with silk, and the under side with the hair in its rough, natural state, the complete costume of the Breton peasant.

These old-fashioned Breton vests served a double purpose, being worn for festivals as well as work days, and were reversible, showing as was desirable either the hairy or the embroidered side; goat-skin all the week, gala dress on Sunday.

As if to add a studied and exact truthfulness to the peasant costume worn by the old man, it was threadbare at the elbows and knees, and appeared to have been in use a long time, and his cloak, made of coarse material, resembled that of a fisherman. This old man had on the round hat of the day, with high crown and broad brim, which when turned down gives it a rustic appearance, and when caught up with a cord and cockade has a military air. He wore this hat after the peasant fashion with the rim flattened out, without cord or cockade.

Lord Balcarras, governor of the island, and the Prince of la Tour-d'Auvergne, had accompanied him in person and installed him on board the vessel. Gélambre, the secret agent of the princes, and formerly one of the bodyguard of the Count d'Artois, had himself seen to the arrangement of his cabin, extending his care and attention, although himself an excellent gentleman, so far as to carry the old man's valise. On leaving him to go ashore again, M. de Gélambre had made a profound bow to this peasant; Lord Balcarras had said to him: " Good luck, general," and the Prince of la Tour-d'Auvergne had said: "*Au revoir*, cousin."

"The peasant" was the name by which the crew began at once to designate their passenger, in the short conversations seamen have together; but without knowing more about him, they understood that this peasant was no more a peasant than the man-of-war was a merchant man.

There was little wind. The "Claymore" left Bonnenuit, passed in front of Boulay Bay, and was for some ttme in sight, running along the shore, then she became dim in the increasing darkness, and was lost to view.

An hour later, Gélambre, having returned home to Saint-Hélier, despatched by the Southampton express to the Count d'Artois, at the Duke of York's headquarters, the following four lines, —

"Monseigneur, she has just sailed. Success certain. In a week the whole coast will be on fire from Granville to Saint-Malo."

Four days before, Prieur, the representative of Marne, on a mission to the army on the coast of Cherbourg, and for the time being residing at Granville, had received a message in the same handwriting as the preceding despatch, reading thus, —

"Citizen representative, June 1st, at flood-tide the sloop of war, "Claymore," with masked battery, will set sail, to carry to the coast of France a man whose description is as follows: tall, old, white hair, peasant's dress, aristocratic hands. I will send you more details to-morrow. He will land on the second, in the morning. Send word to the cruisers, capture the corvette, have the man guillotined."

CHAPTER II.

A NIGHT ON SHIPBOARD, AND CONCERNING THE PASSENGER.

The corvette, instead of going to the south and steering towards Saint-Catherine’s, bore to the north, then turned to the west and ran resolutely into the arm of the sea between Sark and Jersey, called the passage de la Déroute. There was at that time no lighthouse on any point along these two coasts.

The sun had set, the night was dark, more so than usual in summer; there was a moon, but heavy clouds more like autumn than summer covered the sky like a ceiling, and to judge from all appearances the moon would not be visible till she touched the horizon just before setting. Clouds hung low over the sea, and covered it with fog.

All this darkness was favorable.

The intention of the pilot, Gacquoil, was to leave Jersey on the left and Guernsey on the right, and by a bold course between the Hanois and the Douvres to make for a bay somewhere on the shore of Saint-Malo, not so short a route as by the Minquiers, but safer, because the French cruisers had standing orders to keep especial watch between Saint-Hélier and Granville.

If the wind were favorable, if nothing unexpected occurred, and by setting all sails, Gacquoil hoped to reach the French coast by daybreak.

All was going well; the corvette had just passed Gros-Nez; about nine o’clock it began to grow sulky, as the sailors say, and there was some wind and sea; but the wind was favorable, and the sea strong without being violent. However, occasionally a heavy sea swept over the bow of the vessel.

The “peasant” when Lord Balcarras had called “general,” and to whom the Prince of la Tour d’ Auvergne had said, “Cousin” had sea-legs had walked the deck with calm unconcern. He did not seem to notice that the vessel was very much tossed about. Now and then he drew out of his pocket a cake of chocolate, broke off a piece and ate it; although his hair was white, he had all his teeth.

He spoke to no one, except occasionally a few words in a low tone to the captain, who listened with deference, and seemed to consider this passenger more the commander than himself.

The “Claymore,” skilfully piloted, sailed, unnoticed in the fog, by the long northern cliff of Jersey, hugging the shore on account of the dangerous reef Pierres-de-Leeq, in the middle of the straits between Jersey and Sark. Gacquoil, standing at the helm signalling la Grève de Leeq, Gros-Nez, and Plimont in turn, guided the vessel through these chains of reefs, groping his way, as it were, but still with the certainty of a man who is at home and knows his way on the ocean. The corvette had no light forward, for fear of betraying its passage in these guarded waters. They congratulated themselves on having the fog. They reached the Grande-Etape; the fog was so thick that the outline of the tall pinnacle could hardly be discerned. Ten o’clock sounded from the tower of Saint-Ouen, a sign that the wind was still abaft. All continued to go well; the sea grew more tempestuous as they drew near to la Corbière.

A little after ten, the Count de Boisberthelot, and the Chevalier de la Vieuville accompanied the man in peasant’s garb to his cabin, which was the captain’s stateroom. Just as he was about to enter it, lowering his voice, he said to them, —

“You know, gentlemen, the important secret. Be silent till the moment the explosion occurs. You two are the only ones here who know my name.”

“We will carry it to the grave,” replied Boisberthelot. “As for me,” replied the old man, “if I were to die, I would not utter it.”

And he entered his cabin.

CHAPTER III.

NOBLE AND PLEBEIAN IN ALLIANCE.

The commander and the second officer went up on deck again and began to talk together, walking side by side. They were evidently speaking about their passenger, and this is very nearly the conversation that the wind scattered in the darkness.

Boisberthelot muttered low in la Vieuville's ear, —

"We shall see if he is a leader."

La Vieuville replied: "At any rate, he is a prince."

"Almost."

"A nobleman in France, but a prince in Brittany."

"Like the la Trémoilles, and like the Rohans."

"To whom he is related."

Boisberthelot continued: "In France and in the king's coaches, he is a marquis, as I am a count and as you are a chevalier."

"The coaches are far off!" exclaimed la Vieuville. "We are more likely to ride in a tumbril."

A silence ensued.

Boisberthelot went on, —

"For want of a French prince, they take a Breton prince."

"For want of a thrush — no, for want of an eagle — they take a crow."

"I should prefer a vulture," said Boisberthelot.

And la Vieuville replied: "Of course! a beak and talons."

"We shall see."

"Yes," replied la Vieuville, "it is time there was a leader. I am of Tinténiac's opinion: 'A leader and powder!' Wait, commander, I know nearly all the leaders, possible and impossible; those of to-day, of yesterday, and to-morrow; but not one is the figure-head needed. In this devilish la Vendée, a general is needed who is at the same time an attorney; he must annoy the enemy, dispute the mills, the thickets, the ditches, the pebbles with them, have serious quarrels with them, take advantage of everything, be constantly on the watch, make examples of them; he must neither sleep nor show pity. At the present time, there are heroes in this army of peasants, but there are no captains. D'Elbée is nobody; Lescure is ill, Bonchamps is tender-hearted, he is good, he is stupid; La Rochejacquelin is a splendid sub-lieutenant; Silz is an officer for the open field, unequal to a war of expedients; Cathelineau is an innocent wagoner; Stoffier is a tricky gamekeeper; Bérard is silly; Boulainvilliers is absurd; Charette is horrible; and I will say nothing at all of Gaston the barber. For, by thunder! what is the good of a revolution, and what difference is there between the republicans and ourselves, if we are to let noblemen be commanded by wig-makers?”

“This beastly revolution has taken hold of us, as well.”

“An itch that France has caught!’”

“Itch of the Third Estate,” replied Boisberthelot.

“England alone can save us from it.”

“She will do it without doubt, captain.”

“At any rate, it is hideous.”

“Certainly, louts everywhere! The monarchy which has Stoffiet for general-in-chief, M. de Maulevrier’s gamekeeper, has nothing to envy the republic, with Pache, son of the Duke de Castries’s porter, for minister. What counterparts in this war of la Vendée! On one side Santerre, the brewer; on the other, Gaston, the hairdresser!”

“My dear la Vieuville, I make an exception of this Gaston. He hasn’t acted badly in his command at Guéménée. He shot three hundred Blues very prettily, after making them dig their own graves.”

“Very good; but I could have done just as well myself.”

“Indeed, without doubt. And so could I.”

“The great deeds of war,” continued la Vieuville, “require nobility in those who accomplish them. These are matters for chevaliers, not for wig-makers.”

“Still in this Third Estate,” replied Boisberthelot, “there are estimable men. Take, for example, the clockmaker Joly. He was a sergeant in the Flanders regiment; he becomes a Vendéan chief; he commands a company on the coast; he has a son, who is a republican, and while the father serves with the Whites, the son serves with the Blues. They meet. Battle. The father takes his son prisoner, and blows his brains out.”

“That is good,” said la Vieuville.

“A royalist Brutus,” replied Boisberthelot.

“That doesn’t prevent it from being intolerable to be commanded by a Coquereau, a Jean-Jean, a Moulins, a Focart, a Bouju, a Chouppes!”

“My dear chevalier, the indignation is the same on both sides. We are full of *bourgeois*; they are full of nobles. Do you suppose that the *sans-culottes* are content to be commanded by the Count de Canclaux, the Viscount de Miraud, the Viscount de Beauharnais, the Count de Valence, the Marquis de Custine, and the Duke de Biron!”

“What slop!”

“And the Duke de Chartres!”

“Son of Egalité. Ah, when will he be king, that fellow? Never!”

“He is on his way to the throne. His crimes assist him.”

“And his vices hinder him,” said Boisberthelot.

Again there was a silence, and Boisberthelot went on to say, —

“He wished, however, for a reconciliation. He came to see the king. I was there at Versailles, when they spat on his back.”

“From the grand staircase?”

“Yes.”

“They did well.”

“We called him, Bourbon le Bourbeaux.”

“He is bald, he has pimples, he is a regicide. Bah!”

And la Vieuville added: “I was with him at Ouessant.”

“On the ‘Saint-Esprit’?”

“Yes.”

“If he had obeyed the signal that Admiral d’Orvilliers gave him to keep to the windward, he would have hindered the English from passing.”

“Certainly.”

“Is it true that he hid himself in the hold?”

“No, but we must say so, all the same.”

And la Vieuville burst out laughing.

Boisberthelot continued: “There are some fools yet. Take this Boulainvilliers, of whom you were speaking, M. Vieuville; I knew him, I have seen him near to. At first the peasants were armed with pikes; if he didn’t get it into his head to make pikemen of them! He wanted to teach them the exercise *de la pique-en-biais et de la pique-trainante-le-fer-devant!* He dreamed of transforming these savages into soldiers of the line. He pretended to teach them how to mass battalions, and to form battalions into hollow squares. He jabbered to them in the old military language; for chief of a squad, he said ‘*cap d’escade,’* a term applied to corporals under Louis XVI. He was determined to form a regiment with all these poachers;

he had regular companies, the sergeants of which formed a circle every evening, receiving the countersign from the colonel’s sergeant; he repeated it to the sergeant of the lieutenants, and he repeated it to his neighbor, who passed it to the one nearest, and so on from ear to ear, till the last. He cashiered an officer for not rising with head uncovered to receive the word of command from the mouth of the sergeant. You can judge how that succeeded. This booby couldn’t understand that peasants like to be led in peasant-fashion, and that you can’t make drilled soldiers out of backwoodsmen. Yes, I know that Boulainvilliers.”

They walked on a few steps, each busied with his own thoughts.

Then the conversation continued, —

“By the way, is it true that Dampierre has been killed?”

“Yes, commander.”

“Before Condé?”

“In the camp of Pamaro; by a cannon-ball.”

Boisberthelot sighed.

“The Count de Dampierres. Another one of us, who was on their side!”

“A pleasant journey to him!” said la Vieuville.

“And the ladies, where are they?”

“At Trieste.”

“Still?”

“Still.”

“And la Vieuville exclaimed: “Oh, this republic! What havoc to so little purpose! To think that this revolution has come about from the deficit of a few millions!”

“Look out for insignificant beginnings.”

“Everything is going wrong,” replied la Vieuville.

“Yes, la Rouarie is dead; du Dresnay, an idiot. What melancholy leaders all these bishops are: this Coucy, bishop of la Rochelle; this Beaupoil Saint-Aulaire, bishop of Poitiers; this Mercy, bishop of Luçon, Mme. de l’Eschasserie’s lover—”

“Her name is Servanteau, you know, commander: l’Eschasserie is the name of her estate.”

“And that false bishop of Agra, who is the curate of I don’t know what!”

“Of Dol. His name is Guillot de Folleville. He is brave, however, and he fights.”

“Priests when we want soldiers! Bishops, who are no bishops! Generals who are no generals!”

La Vieuville interrupted Boisberthelot.

“Commander, have you the *Moniteur* in your cabin?”

“Yes.”

“What are they playing in Paris, now?”

“‘Adèle,’ ‘Paulin’ and the ‘Cavern.’”

“I should like to see that.”

“You will see it. We shall be in Paris in a month.”

Boisberthelot thought a moment and added, —

“At the latest. Mr. Windham has told Lord Hood so.”

“Then, commander, everything is not going so badly?”

“Gracious! All would go well, if only the war in Brittany were well conducted.”

La Vieuville shook his head.

“Commander,” he asked, “shall we land the marines?”

“Yes, if the coast is for us; no, if it be hostile. Sometimes war has to break open the doors, sometimes she slips through. Civil war should always have a false key in her pocket. Everything possible will be done. The most important thing is the chief.”

And Boisberthelot added thoughtfully, —

“La Vieuville, what would you think of the Chevalier de Dieuzie?”

“The young man?”

“Yes.”

“For a commander?”

“Yes.”

“That he, again, is an officer for the open field, and for pitched battles. The thicket only knows the peasant.”

“Then resign yourself to General Stoffiet and to General Cathelineau.”

La Vieuville considered a moment and said, —

“We need a prince — a prince of France — a prince of the blood — a real prince.”

“Why? He who names a prince — —”

“Names a coward. I know it, commander. But it is for the effect on the great, stupid eyes of the louts.”

“My dear chevalier, princes would not come.”

“We can dispense with them.”

Boisberthelot made that mechanical movement of rubbing the forehead with the hand, as if expecting to bring out an idea.

He continued: “At last, let us consider the present general.”

“He is a great nobleman.”

“Do you believe that he will answer?”

“If he is strong!” said la Vieuville.

“That is to say, cruel,” said Boisberthelot.

The count and the chevalier looked at each other.

“Monsieur du Boisberthelot, you have spoken the word. Cruel. Yes that is what we need. This is a merciless war. It is the time for bloodthirsty men. Regicides have cut off Louis XVI.’s head; we will tear the four limbs from the regicides. Yes, the general necessary is General Inexorable. In Anjou and upper Poitou the chiefs play the magnanimous; they flounder in generosity, nothing succeeds. In the Marais and in the Retz country, the chiefs are terrible, everything moves on. It is because Charette is cruel that he holds out against Parrein. Hyena against hyena.”

Boisberthelot had no time to reply to la Vieuville. La Vieuville was suddenly cut short by a cry of despair, and at the same time a noise was heard wholly unlike any other sound. This cry and these sounds came from within the vessel.

The captain and lieutenant rushed towards the gun-deck, but could not get down. All the gunners were pouring up in dismay. Something terrible had just happened.

CHAPTER IV.

TORMENTUM BELLI.

One of the carronades of the battery, a twenty-four pounder, had broken loose.

This is the most dangerous accident that can possibly take place on shipboard. Nothing more terrible can happen to a sloop of war in open sea and under full sail.

A cannon that breaks its moorings suddenly becomes some strange, supernatural beast. It is a machine transformed into a monster. That short mass on wheels moves like a billiard-ball, rolls with the rolling of the ship, plunges with the pitching, goes, comes, stops, seems to meditate, starts on its course again, shoots like an arrow, from one end of the vessel to the other, whirls around, slips away, dodges, rears, bangs, crashes, kills, exterminates. It is a battering ram capriciously assaulting a wall. Add to this, the fact that the ram is of metal, the wall of wood.

It is matter set free; one might say, this eternal slave was avenging itself; it seems as if the total depravity concealed in what we call inanimate things had escaped, and burst forth all of a sudden; it appears to lose patience, and to take a strange mysterious revenge; nothing more relentless than this wrath of the inanimate. This enraged lump leaps like a panther, it has the clumsiness of an elephant, the nimbleness of a mouse, the obstinacy of an axe, the uncertainty of the billows, the zigzag of the lightning, the deafness of the grave. It weighs ten thousand pounds, and it rebounds like a child’s ball. It spins and then abruptly darts off at right angles.

And what is to be done? How put an end to it? A tempest ceases, a cyclone passes over, a wind dies down, a broken mast can be replaced, a leak can be stopped, a fire extinguished, but what will become of this enormous brute of bronze? How can it be captured? You can reason with a bull-dog, astonish a bull, fascinate a boa, frightened a tiger, tame a lion; but you have no resource against this monster, a loose cannon. You cannot kill it, it is dead; and at the same time it lives. It lives with a sinister life which comes to it from the infinite. The deck beneath it gives it full swing. It is moved by the ship, which is moved by the sea, which is moved by the wind. This destroyer is a toy. The ship, the waves, the winds, all play with it, hence its frightful animation. What is to be done with this apparatus? How fetter this stupendous engine of destruction? How anticipate its comings and goings, its returns, its stops, its shocks? Any one of its blows on the side of the ship may stave it in. How foretell its frightful meanderings? It is dealing with a projectile, which alters its mind, which seems to have ideas, and changes its direction every instant. How check the course of what must be avoided? The horrible cannon struggles, advances, backs, strikes right, strikes left, retreats, passes by, disconcerts expectation, grinds up obstacles, crushes men like flies. All the terror of the situation is in the fluctuations of the flooring. How fight an inclined plane subject to caprices? The ship has, so to speak, in its belly, an imprisoned thunderstorm, striving to escape; something like a thunderbolt rumbling above an earthquake.

In an instant the whole crew was on foot. It was the fault of the gun captain, who had neglected to fasten the screw-nut of the mooring-chain, and had insecurely clogged the four wheels of the gun carriage; this gave play to the sole and the framework, separated the two platforms, and finally the breeching. The tackle had given way, so that the cannon was no longer firm on its carriage. The stationary breeching, which prevents recoil, was not in use at this time. A heavy sea struck the port, the carronade insecurely fastened, had recoiled and broken its chain, and began its terrible course over the deck.

To form an idea of this strange sliding, let one image a drop of water running over glass.

At the moment when the fastenings gave way, the gunners were in the battery. Some in groups, others scattered about, busied with the customary work among sailors getting ready for a signal for action. The carronade, hurled forward by the pitching of the vessel, made a gap in this crowd of men and crushed four at the first blow; then sliding back and shot out again as the ship rolled, it cut in two a fifth unfortunate, and knocked a piece of the battery against the larboard side with such force as to unship it. This caused the cry of distress just heard. All the men rushed to the companion-way. The gun deck was vacated in a twinkling.

The enormous gun was left alone. It was given up to itself. It was its own master, and master of the ship. It could do what it pleased. This whole crew, accustomed to laugh in time of battle, now trembled. To describe the terror is impossible.

Captain Boisberthelot and Lieutenant la Vieuville, although both dauntless men, stopped at the head of the companion-way and dumb, pale, and hesitating, looked down on the deck below. Some one elbowed past and went down.

It was their passenger, the peasant, the man of whom they had just been speaking a moment before.

Reaching the foot of the companion-way, he stopped.

CHAPTER V.

VIS ET VIR.

The cannon was rushing back and forth on the deck. One might have supposed it to be the living chariot of the Apocalypse. The marine lantern swinging overhead added a dizzy shifting of light and shade to the picture. The form of the cannon disappeared in the violence of its course, and it looked now black in the light, now mysteriously white in the darkness.

It went on in its destructive work. It had already shattered four other guns and made two gaps in the side of the ship, fortunately above the water-line, but where the water would come in, in case of heavy weather. It rushed frantically against the framework; the strong timbers withstood the shock; the curved shape of the wood gave them great power of resistance; but they creaked beneath the blows of this huge club, beating on all sides at once, with a strange sort of ubiquity. The percussions of a grain of shot shaken in a bottle are not swifter or more senseless. The four wheels passed back and forth over the dead men, cutting them, carving them, slashing them, till the five corpses were a score of stumps rolling across the deck; the heads of the dead men seemed to cry out; streams of blood curled over the deck with the rolling of the vessel; the planks, damaged in several places, began to gape open. The whole ship was filled with the horrid noise and confusion.

The captain promptly recovered his presence of mind and ordered everything that could check and impede the cannon’s mad course to be thrown through the hatchway down on the gun deck — mattresses, hammocks, spare sails, rolls of cordage, bags belonging to the crew, and bales of counterfeit assignats, of which the corvette carried a large quantity — a characteristic piece of English villany regarded as legitimate warfare.

But what could these rags do? As nobody dared to go below to dispose of them properly, they were reduced to lint in a few minutes.

There was just sea enough to make the accident as bad as possible. A tempest would have been desirable, for it might have upset the cannon, and with its four wheels once in the air there would be some hope of getting it under control. Meanwhile, the havoc increased.

There were splits and fractures in the masts, which are set into the framework of the keel and rise above the decks of ships like great, round pillars. The convulsive blows of the cannon had cracked the mizzen-mast, and had cut into the main-mast.

The battery was being ruined. Ten pieces out of thirty were disabled; the breaches in the side of the vessel were increasing, and the corvette was beginning to leak.

The old passenger, having gone down to the gun deck, stood like a man of stone at the foot of the steps. He cast a stern glance over this scene of devastation. He did not move. It seemed impossible to take a step forward. Every movement of the loose carronade threatened the ship's destruction, A few moments more and shipwreck would be inevitable.

They must perish or put a speedy end to the disaster; some course must be decided on; but what? What an opponent was this carronade! Something must be done to stop this terrible madness — to capture this lightning — to overthrow this thunderbolt.

Boisberthelot said to La Vieuville, —

"Do you believe in God, chevalier?"

La Vieuville replied: "Yes — no. Sometimes."

"During a tempest."

"Yes, and in moments like this."

"God alone can save us from this," said Boisberthelot.

Everybody was silent, letting the carronade continue its horrible din.

Outside, the waves beating against the ship responded with their blows to the shocks of the cannon. It was like two hammers alternating.

Suddenly, in the midst of this inaccessible ring, where the escaped cannon was leaping, a man was seen to appear, with an iron bar in his hand. He was the author of the castastrophe, the captain of the gun, guilty of criminal carelessness, and the cause of the accident, the master of the carronade. Having done the mischief, he was anxious to repair it. He had seized the iron bar in one hand, a tiller-rope with a slip-noose in the other, and jumped down the hatchway to the gun deck.

Then began an awful sight; a Titanic scene; the contest between gun and gunner; the battle of matter and intelligence, the duel between man and the inanimate.

The man stationed himself in a corner, and with bar and rope in his two hands, he leaned against one of the riders, braced himself on his legs, which seemed two steel posts, and livid, calm, tragic, as if rooted to the deck, he waited.

He waited for the cannon to pass by him.

The gunner knew his gun, and it seemed to him as it the gun ought to know him. He had lived long with it. How many times he had thrust his hand into its mouth! It was his own familiar monster. He began to speak to it as if it were his dog.

“Come!” he said. Perhaps he loved it.

He seemed to wish it to come to him.

But to come to him was to come upon him. And then he would be lost. How could he avoid being crushed? That was the question. All looked on in terror.

Not a breast breathed freely, unless perhaps that of the old man, who was alone in the battery with the two contestants, a stern witness.

He might be crushed himself by the cannon. He did not stir.

Beneath them the sea blindly directed the contest.

At the moment when the gunner, accepting this frightful hand-to-hand conflict, challenged the cannon, some chance rocking of the sea caused the carronade to remain for an instant motionless and as if stupefied. “Come, now!” said the man. It seemed to listen.

Suddenly it leaped towards him. The man dodged the blow.

The battle began. Battle unprecedented. Frailty struggling against the invulnerable. The gladiator of flesh attacking the beast of brass. On one side, brute, force; on the other, a human soul.

All this was taking place in semi-darkness. It was like the shadowy vision of a miracle.

A soul — strange to say, one would have thought the cannon also had a soul; but a soul full of hatred and rage. This sightless thing seemed to have eyes. Th« monster appeared to lie in wait for the man. One would have at least believed that there was craft in this mass. It also chose its time. It was a strange, gigantic insect of metal, having or seeming to have the will of a demon. For a moment this colossal locust would beat against the low ceiling overhead, then it would come down on its four wheels like a tiger on its four paws, and begin to run at the man. He, supple, nimble, expert, writhed away like an adder from all these lightning movements. He avoided a collision, but the blows which he parried fell against the vessel, and continued their work of destruction.

An end of broken chain was left hanging to the carronade. This chain had in some strange way become twisted about the screw of the cascabel.

One end of the chain was fastened to the gun-carriage. The other, left loose, whirled desperately about the cannon, making all its blows more dangerous.

The screw held it in a firm grip, adding a thong to a battering-ram, making a terrible whirlwind around the cannon, an iron lash in a brazon hand. This chain complicated the contest.

However, the man went on fighting. Occasionally, it was the man who attacked the cannon; he would creep along the side of the vessel, bar and rope in hand; and the cannon, as if it understood, and as though suspecting some snare, would flee away. The man, bent on victory, pursued it.

Such things cannot long continue. The cannon seemed to say to itself, all of a sudden, “Come, now! Make an end of it!” and it stopped. One felt that the crisis was at hand. The cannon, as if in suspense, seemed to have, or really had — for to all it was a living being — a ferocious malice prepense. It made a sudden, quick dash at the gunner. The gunner sprang out of the way, let it pass by, and cried out to it with a laugh, “Try it again!” The cannon, as if enraged, smashed a carronade on the port side; then, again seized by the invisible sling which controlled it, it was hurled to the starboard side at the man, who made his escape. Three carronades gave way under the blows of the cannon; then, as if blind and not knowing what more to do, it turned its back on the man, rolled from stern to bow, injured the stern and made a breach in the planking of the prow. The man took refuge at the foot of the steps, not far from the old man who was looking on. The gunner held his iron bar in rest. The cannon seemed to notice it, and without taking the trouble to turn around, slid back on the man, swift as the blow of an axe. The man, driven against the side of the ship, was lost. The whole crew cried out with horror.

But the old passenger, till this moment motionless, darted forth more quickly than any of this wildly swift rapidity. He seized a package of counterfeit assignats, and, at the risk of being crushed, succeeded in throwing it between the wheels of the carronade. This decisive and perilous movement could not have been made with more exactness and precision by a man trained in all the exercises described in Durosel’s “Manual of Gun Practice at Sea.”

The package had the effect of a clog. A pebble may stop a log, the branch of a tree turn aside an avalanche. The carronade stumbled. The gunner, taking advantage of this critical opportunity, plunged his iron bar between the spokes of one of the hind wheels. The cannon stopped. It leaned forward. The man using the bar as a lever, held it in equilibrium. The heavy mass was overthrown, with the crash of a falling bell, and the man, rushing with all his might, dripping with perspiration, passed the slip-noose around the bronze neck of the subdued monster.

It was ended. The man had conquered. The ant had control over the mastodon; the pigmy had taken the thunderbolt prisoner.

The mariners and sailors clapped their hands.

The whole crew rushed forward with cables and chains, and in an instant the cannon was secured.

The gunner saluted the passenger.

“Sir,” he said, “you have saved my life.”

The old man had resumed his impassive attitude, and made no reply.

CHAPTER VI.

THE TWO SCALES OF THE BALANCE.

The man had conquered, but the cannon might be said to have conquered as well. Immediate shipwreck had been avoided, but the corvette was not saved. The damage to the vessel seemed beyond repair. There were five breaches in her sides, one, very large, in the bow; twenty of the thirty carronades lay useless in their frames. The one which had just been captured and chained again was disabled; the screw of the cascabel was sprung, and consequently levelling the gun made impossible. The battery was reduced to nine pieces. The ship was leaking. It was necessary to repair the damages at once, and to work the pumps.

The gun deck, now that one could look over it, was frightful to behold. The inside of an infuriated elephant's cage would not be more completely demolished.

However great might be the necessity of escaping observation, the necessity of immediate safety was still more imperative to the corvette. They had been obliged to light up the deck with lanterns hung here and there on the sides.

However, all the while this tragic play was going on, the crew were absorbed by a question of life and death, and they were wholly ignorant of what was taking place outside the vessel. The fog had grown thicker; the weather had changed; the wind had worked its pleasure with the ship; they were out of their course, with Jersey and Guernsey close at hand, farther to the south than they ought to have been, and in the midst of a heavy sea. Great billows kissed the gaping wounds of the vessel — kisses full of danger. The rocking of the sea threatened destruction. The breeze had become a gale. A squall, a tempest, perhaps, was brewing. It was impossible to see four waves ahead.

While the crew were hastily repairing the damages to the gun-deck, stopping the leaks, and putting in place the guns which had been uninjured in the disaster, the old passenger had gone on deck again.

He stood with his back against the main-mast.

He had not noticed a proceeding which had taken place on the vessel. The Chevalier de la Vieuville had drawn up the marines in line on both sides of the main-mast, and at the sound of the boatswain’s whistle the sailors formed in line, standing on the yards.

The Count de Boisberthelot approached the passenger.

Behind the captain walked a man, haggard, out of breath, his dress disordered, but still with a look of satisfaction on his face.

It was the gunner who had just shown himself so skilful in subduing monsters, and who had gained the mastery over the cannon.

The count gave the military salute to the old man in peasant’s dress, and said to him, —

“General, there is the man.”

The gunner remained standing, with downcast eyes, in military attitude.

The Count de Boisberthelot continued, —

“General, in consideration of what this man has done, do you not think there is something due him from his commander?”

“I think so,” said the old man.

“Please give your orders,” replied Boisberthelot.

“It is for you to give them, you are the captain.”

“But you are the general,” replied Boisberthelot.

The old man looked at the gunner.

“Come forward,” he said. The gunner approached.

The old man turned towards the Count de Boisberthelot, took off the cross of Saint-Louis from the captain’s coat and fastened it on the gunner’s jacket.

“Hurrah!” cried the sailors.

The mariners presented arms.

And the old passenger pointing to the dazzled gunner, added, —

“Now, have this man shot.”

Dismay succeeded the cheering.

Then in the midst of the death-like stillness, the old man raised his voice and said, —

“Carelessness has compromised this vessel. At this very hour, it is perhaps lost. To be at sea is to be in front of the enemy. A ship making a voyage is an array waging war. The tempest is concealed, but it is at hand. The whole sea is an ambuscade. Death is the penalty of any misdemeanor committed in the face of the enemy. No fault is reparable. Courage should be rewarded, and negligence punished.”

These words fell one after another, slowly, solemnly, in a sort of inexorable metre, like the blows of an axe upon an oak.

And the man, looking at the soldiers, added, —

“Let it be done.”

The man on whose jacket hung the sinning cross of Saint-Louis, bowed his head.

At a signal from Count de Boisberthelot, two sailors went below and came back bringing the hammock-shroud; the chaplain, who since they sailed had been at prayer in the officers’ quarters, accompanied the two sailors; a sergeant detached twelve marines from the line and arranged them in two files, six by six; the gunner, without uttering a word, placed himself between the two files. The chaplain, crucifix in hand, advanced and stood beside him. “March,” said the sergeant. — The platoon marched with slow steps to the bow of the vessel. The two sailors carrying the shroud, followed. A gloomy silence fell over the vessel. A hurricane howled in the distance.

A few moments later, a light flashed, a report sounded through the darkness, then all was still, and the sound of a body falling into the sea was heard.

The old passenger, still leaning against the mainmast, had crossed his arms, and was buried in thought.

Boisberthelot pointed to him with the forefinger of his left hand, and said to la Vieuville in a low voice, —

“La Vendée has a head.”

CHAPTER VII.

A VOYAGE IS A LOTTERY.

But what was to become of the corvette?

The clouds which all night long had mingled with the waves, at last shut down over the water till the horizon had entirely disappeared, and the sea was, as it were, wrapped in a mantle. Nothing but fog. Always a perilous situation, even for a ship in seaworthy condition.

In addition to the fog there was a heavy swell.

The time had been profitably employed; the corvette had been lightened by throwing overboard everything that could be cleared away of the wreck made by the carronade — the disabled guns, the broken gun carriages, timbers twisted off or unnailed, pieces of broken wood and iron; the portholes had been opened, and the corpses and human remains wrapped in tarpaulins, slid on planks into the sea.

The sea was beginning to be too rough for safety. Not that a tempest was exactly impending; on the contrary, the hurricane howling behind the horizon seemed to be decreasing in force, and the squall moving to the north; but the waves were still very high, indicating shallow water, and crippled as the vessel was, she had little power of resistance to the shocks of the great waves, and they might be death to her.

Gacquoil was at the helm, thoughtful.

Sea captains are wont to put the best face on the matter, in misfortune.

La Vieuville who was naturally gay in times of disaster, addressed Gacquoil, —

“Well, pilot,” he said, “the hurricane missed us. Its attempt to sneeze came to naught. We shall get out of it. We shall have wind, that is all.”

Gacquoil replied seriously, —

“A heavy wind makes a heavy sea.”

Neither gay nor sad, such is the sailor. His reply had a meaning of alarm in it. For a leaking ship to be in a heavy sea is to fill rapidly. Gacquoil had emphasized this prophecy with a slight frown. Perhaps la Vieuville had spoken these almost jovial and trifling words a little too soon after the disaster of the gun and the gunner. There are things which bode ill luck when at sea. The ocean is secret; one, never knows what she will do. It is necessary to be on the watch.

La Vieuville felt the need of becoming serious.

“Where are we, pilot?” he asked.

The pilot replied, —

“We are in the hands of God.”

A pilot is a master; it is always best to let him have his own way, and often to have his own say.

Besides, this sort of man speaks but little. La Vieuville walked away.

La Vieuville had asked the pilot a question, the horizon gave the answer.

The sea suddenly burst into sight.

The fog which hung over the waves lifted, all the dark upheaving of the billows was spread out in a mysterious twilight as far as one’s eyes could reach, and this is what was seen, —

The sky seemed to have a lid of clouds over it; but the clouds no longer touched the sea; in the east appeared a whiteness, which was the dawn of day; in the west, another fading whiteness, which was the setting of the moon. These two bright places opposite each other, made two narrow bands of pale light along the horizon, between the dark sea and the cloudy sky.

Against these two bright strips were outlined black figures, straight and motionless. To the west, three high rocks, standing like Celtic cromlechs, stood out against the moonlit sky.

To the east, against the pale morning sky, rose eight sail ranged in order, and at regular distances, in a threatening line.

The three rocks were a reef; the eight sail, a squadron.

Behind the corvette was the Minquiers, a rock of ill repute; before her, the French fleet. In the west, destruction; in the east carnage; she was between a shipwreck and a battle.

For facing the reef, the corvette had a broken hull, disjointed rigging, shattered masts; for facing battle, she had a battery of which twenty-one guns out of thirty were disabled, and the best of her gunners were dead.

The dawn was very faint, and there was still a little night before them. This darkness might even last for some time, being caused principally by high, heavy, dense clouds, having the appearance of a solid arch.

The wind which had at last carried away the low fog was driving the vessel on the Minquiers.

In her excessively weak and disabled condition, she scarcely obeyed the helm, she rolled rather than sailed, and buffeted by the waves gave herself up to their mercy.

The tragic reef of the Minquiers was more rugged then than at the present time. Several of the towers of this citadel of destruction have been worn away by the incessant undermining of the sea; the shape of the reefs is constantly changing; waves are not called *lames* without reason; each tide is a saw-tooth. At this time, to touch on the Minquiers, was to perish.

As for the cruisers, they were the squadron from Cancale, afterwards made famous under the command of that Captain Duchesne whom Léquinio called “Father Duchêne.”

The situation was critical. The corvette had unconsciously, while the cannon was loose, deviated from her course and sailed more towards Granville than towards Saint-Malo. Even if she had been manageable and able to carry sail, the Minquiers would have barred her return to Jersey, and the cruisers barred her from reaching France.

However, there was no tempest, but as the pilot had said, there was a heavy sea. The sea tumbling beneath a rough wind, and over the rocky bottom, was wild.

The sea never tells at once what it means to do. There is everything in this abyss, even chicanery. One might almost say that the sea had designs; it advances and retreats, it proposes and retracts, it prepares a squall and then gives up its plan, it promises destruction and does not keep its word, it threatens the North, and strikes the South. All night the corvette “Claymore” had been in the fog, and feared a storm; the sea had just broken its promise, and in a cruel fashion; it had given warning of a tempest and brought out a reef. It was still shipwreck in another form.

To destruction on the rocks was added extermination in battle. One enemy supplemented the other.

La Vieuville cried out with a bold laugh, —

“Shipwreck on one hand, battle on the other. Both sides have thrown double fives.”

CHAPTER VIII.

9 — 380.

The corvette was now nothing but a wreck.

In the pale, scattered light, in the blackness of the clouds, in the confused shifting of the horizon, in the mysterious wrinkling of the waves, there was a sepulchral solemnity. Except the hostile whistling of the wind, everything was silent. The catastrophe was rising majestically from the depths. It seemed more like an apparition than an attack. Nothing moved on the rocks, nothing stirred on the ships. It was a strange, colossal silence. Were they dealing with reality? It was like a dream passing over the sea. In legends there are such visions: the corvette was, in a certain sense, between a demon reef and a phantom fleet.

The Count de Boisberthelot gave orders in an undertone to La Vieuville, who went down to the gun-deck; then the captain seized his spyglass and came and stood at the stern near the pilot.

Gacquoil was bending all his efforts to keep the vessel out of the trough of the sea; for, if it were struck on the side by the wind and the waves, it would inevitably capsize.

“Pilot,” said the captain, “where are we?”

“Off the Minquiers.”

“On which side?”

“The worst.”

“What bottom?”

“Small rocks.”

“Can we bring the broadside to bear on them?”

“One can always die,” said the pilot.

The captain directed his glance toward the west and examined the Minquiers; then he turned it toward the east and scrutinized the sails in sight.

The pilot continued, as if talking to himself, —

“It is the Minquiers. It serves as a resting-place for the laughing sea-mew and the great black-mantled gull, on their way from Holland.”

In the meantime, the captain had counted the ships.

There really were eight vessels correctly disposed and raising their warlike profiles above the water. In the centre stood the lofty hull of a three-decker.

The captain questioned the pilot, —

“Do you know these ships?”

“Certainly!” replied Gacquoil.

“What are they?”

“It is the squadron.”

“Of France?”

“Of the devil.”

There was silence. The captain continued, —

“Are all the cruisers there?”

“Not all.”

In fact, the second of April, Valazé had announced to the Convention that ten frigates and six ships of the line were cruising in the channel. The captain recollected this.

“In all,” he said, “the squadron has sixteen vessels. “There are only eight here.”

“The rest,” said Gacquoil, “are spying along the coast farther down.”

The captain, still looking through the glass, murmured: “A three-decker, two first-class frigates, and five of the second class.”

“But I too made them out,” grumbled Gacquoil.

“Good vessels,” said the captain. “I have had some command of them myself.”

“For my part,” said Gacquoil, “I have seen them close to. I don’t mistake one for another. I have their description in my head.”

The captain handed his spyglass to the pilot.

“Pilot, can you make out the three-decker distinctly?”

“Yes, commander, it is the ‘Cöte d’Or.’”

“They have re-named her,” said the captain. “She used to be the ‘Etats de Bourgogne.’ A new ship. Hundred and twenty-eight guns.”

He took a note-book and pencil out of his pocket, and wrote in the former the number one hundred and twenty-eight.

He went on to say: “Pilot, what is the first sail to port?”

“It is the ‘Experimenté.’”

“First-class frigate; fifty-two guns. She was fitted out at Brest two months ago.”

The captain put the number fifty-two down in his note-book.

“Pilot,” he continued, “what is the second sail to port?”

“The’Dryade.’”

“First-class frigate; forty eighteen-pounders. She has been in India. She has a fine naval record.”

And he wrote down forty under the number fifty-two; then, raising his head, he said, —

“Now to starboard.”

“Commander, these are all second-class frigates. There are five of them.”

“What is the first, starting from the three-decker?”

“The ‘Résolue.’”

“Thirty-two eighteen-pounders. And the second?”

“The ‘Richemont.’”

“Same strength. Next?”

“The ‘Athée.’”

“Queer name to go to sea with. Next?”

“The ‘Calypso.’”

“What next?”

“The ‘Preneuse.’”

“Five frigates of thirty-two guns each.”

The captain wrote one hundred and sixty under the first numbers.

“Pilot,” he said, “you recognize them well.”

“You,” replied Gacquoil, “know them well, captain. To recognize is one thing, to know is better.”

The captain was looking intently at his note-book, and was adding up the numbers to himself.

“Hundred and twenty-eight, fifty-two, forty, hundred and sixty.”

Just at this moment, la Vieuville came up on deck.

“Chevalier,” the captain cried out to him, “we are in the face of three hundred and eighty cannon.”

“So be it,” said la Vieuville.

“You have just been inspecting, la Vieuville; just how many guns have we fit for use?”

“Nine.”

“So be it,” said Boisberthelot in his turn.

He took the spyglass from the pilot’s hands and studied the horizon.

The eight still, black ships seemed motionless, but they were growing larger.

They were approaching imperceptibly.

La Vieuville gave the military salute.

“Commander,” he said, “here is my report. I distrusted this corvette ‘Claymore.’ It is always annoying to embark suddenly on a vessel which does not know you, or that does not love you. English ship — traitor to the French — that slut of a carronade proved it. I have made the inspection. Anchors good. They are not of half-finished iron, but of forged bars soldered with the trip-hammer. The flukes are solid. Cables excellent, easy to pay out, of the regular length, hundred and twenty fathoms. Ammunition in abundance. Six gunners dead. A hundred and seventy-one rounds apiece.”

“Because there are only nine guns left,” murmured the captain.

Boisberthelot pointed his spyglass towards the horizon. The squadron was still slowly approaching.

There is one advantage about the carronades, three men are enough to work them, but they have one inconvenience, they do not carry as far nor aim as accurately as cannon. So it was necessary to let the squadron come within range of the carronades.

The captain gave his orders in an undertone. Silence reigned on the vessel. No signal to make ready for battle was given, but the order was executed all the same. The corvette was as unfit to fight against men as it was to battle with the waves. Every possible expedient was employed with this remnant of a war vessel. All the hawsers and spare cables were collected together at the gangway, near the tiller ropes, to use for strengthening the masts in case of necessity. The cockpit was prepared for the wounded. According to the naval custom of that day, the deck was barricaded, which was a safeguard against bullets but not against cannon balls. The ball-gauges were brought, although it was a little late to test their calibres; but so many accidents had not been foreseen. Each sailor received a cartridge-box, and placed a pair of pistols and a dirk in his belt. The hammocks were stowed away, the artillery pointed, the musketry prepared, the axes and grappling-irons put in their places, the stores of cartridges and bullets made ready, and the powder-magazine opened. Each man took his post. All this without a word spoken, and as if in a death chamber. It was swift and melancholy.

Then the corvette showed her broadside. She had six anchors, like a frigate. They cast all six of them; the cock-bill at the bow, the hedge anchor at the stern, the flood anchor toward the open sea, the ebb anchor toward the rocks, the bower anchor to starboard, and the sheet anchor to port.

The nine carronades remaining in good condition were]iut into form, all nine of them on one side, — the side toward the enemy.

The squadron had no less silently completed their preparations. The eight vessels now formed a semicircle, of which the “Minquiers” made the chord. The “Claymore,” enclosed in this semicircle, and pinioned by its own anchor besides, was backed by the reef; that is to say, by shipwreck.

It was like a pack of hounds around a wild boar, making no sound, but showing their teeth.

It seemed as if one side were waiting for the other.

The gunners of the “Claymore” were stationed by their guns.

Boisberthelot said to la Vieuville, —

“I think it would be well to open fire,”

“A flirt’s notion,” said la Vieuville.

CHAPTER IX.

SOME ONE ESCAPES.

The passenger had not left the deck, he was watching everything, unmoved.

Boisberthelot approached him. “Sir,” he said, “the preparations are completed. Here we are cramped into our tomb, but we shall not yield. We are prisoners of the squadron or of the reef. To surrender to the enemy or founder on the rocks, we have no other alternative. Only one resource remains, death. To fight is better than shipwreck. I would rather be shot than drowned; if I must die, I prefer fire to water. But to die is our fate, not yours. You are the man chosen by the princes, you have a great mission, to direct the war in La Vendée. Without you, the monarchy may be lost; you must live then. It is our duty to remain here, yours to get away. Go, general, — leave the ship. I will give you a man and a boat. It is not impossible to reach the shore by a roundabout way. It is not yet day, the waves are high, the sea is dark, you will escape. There are times when to flee is to conquer.”

With his stern head, the old man made a solemn sign of acquiescence.

The Count de Boisberthelot raised his voice,

“Soldiers and sailors,” he cried.

All movement ceased, and from every part of the vessel faces were turned toward the captain.

He continued, —

“The man who is among us represents the king. He has been entrusted to our care, we must preserve him. He is necessary to the throne of France; for want of a prince he will be, at least so we hope, the chief of la Vendée. He is a great general. He was to reach France with us, he must reach it without us. To save his life is to save all.”

“Aye, aye, aye!” cried all the voices of the crew.

The captain continued, —

“He too, will incur serious dangers. To reach the shore is no easy matter. It ought to be a large boat to brave the high sea, but it must be a small one to escape the cruisers. It is important to land at some point which will be safe, and rather in the vicinity of Fougères than of Coutances. It needs a plucky sailor, a good swimmer, and a good oarsman; one who belongs to this country and knows the channel. It is still dark enough for the boat to get away from the vessel without being discovered. And then we shall have smoke which will help to conceal her. Her small size will take her through shallow water. Where the panther is caught, the weasel escapes. There is no help for us; there is for him. The oars will carry the boat away: the hostile ships will not see it; and besides, we will divert their attention meanwhile. Is it agreed?”

“Aye, aye, sir!” cried the crew.

“There is not a minute to lose,” continued the captain, “Is there a man willing to go?”

A sailor stepped out of the ranks in the darkness and said: “I am.”

CHAPTER X.

DOES HE ESCAPE?

A few moments later, one of those little boats called a “gig,” especially designed for the captain’s use, left the ship. In this boat there were two men, the old passenger in the stern, and the sailor who had volunteered to go, in the bow. The night was still very dark. The sailor, conforming to the captain’s design, rowed vigorously in the direction of the Minquiers. No other way of escape was possible. Some provisions had been thrown in the bottom of the boat, a bag of biscuit, a smoked beefs tongue, and a cask of water.

“As soon as the boat touched the water, la Vieuville, scoffer even in the face of destruction, leaned over the stern of the corvette and sneered out this farewell to the boat: “She is a good one for escape, and a fine one for drowning.”

“Sir,” said the pilot, “jest no more.”

The boat quickly rowed off, and was almost immediately a good distance away from the corvette. Wind and waves seconded the oarsman, and the little craft was rapidly making her escape, rocking in the twilight, and concealed in the great furrows of the waves.

A strange, gloomy suspense hung over the sea.

Suddenly, in this vast, tumultuous ocean silence, rose a voice, which, increased by the speaking-trumpet, as by the brazen mask of ancient tragedy, seemed almost superhuman.

It was Captain Boisberthelot who was speaking, —

“Mariners of the king,” he cried, “nail the white flag to the main-mast. We are going to see our last sunrise.”

And a cannon shot left the corvette.

“Long live the king!” shouted the crew.

Then from the edge of the horizon was heard another cry, immense, distant, confused, but yet distinct, —

“Long live the Republic!”

And a noise like that of three hundred thunderbolts burst over the depths of the ocean.

The battle was beginning.

The sea was covered with fire and smoke.

Clouds of spray made by the shots falling into the water burst from the waves on every side.

The “Claymore” began to shower flame on the eight ships. At the same time, the whole squadron, grouped in a crescent around the “Claymore,” opened fire from all its batteries. The horizon was all ablaze. It was like a volcano rising out of the sea. The wind twisted round and round the vast crimson of battle, in the midst of which the ships appeared and disappeared like spectres. In the foreground, the corvette stood out against this red background like a black skeleton.

From the top of the main-mast the white banner with its design of fleur-de-lis could be made out.

The two men in the boat were silent.

The triangular-shaped shoals of the Minquiers, a kind of submarine Trinacrium, are larger than the whole island of Jersey; the sea covers them; their culminating point is a plateau, rising above the highest tides, and separated from this toward the northeast are six mighty rocks ranged in a straight line, giving the effect of a great wall crumbling away here and there. The sound between the plateau and the six rocks is only navigable to craft drawing very little water.

Beyond this sound is the open sea.

The sailor who had taken charge of the boat, entered the sound. In this way he put the Minquiers between the battle and the boat. He pulled skilfully through the narrow channel, avoiding the reef to port as well as to starboard; the rocks now concealed the battle. The glare on the horizon, and the furious din of the cannonading began to decrease as the distance became greater; but from the continuance of the reports it was evident that the corvette was still holding her own, and that she intended to exhaust her hundred and seventy-one broadsides to the very last. Soon the boat entered safe water, beyond the reef, beyond the battle, beyond the reach of bullets.

Gradually, the appearance of the sea became less gloomy, shimmering patches abruptly drowned in darkness increased in size, the foam burst into jets of light, pale gleams floated over the tops of the waves. Day dawned.

The boat was out of the reach of the enemy; but the most difficult task was yet to be accomplished. The boat was saved from the cannon shots, but not from shipwreck. It was in a high sea, a mere shell, without deck, without sail, without compass, with nothing to rely on but oars, in the face of the ocean and the storm, an atom at the mercy of monsters.

Then in this boundlessness, in this solitude, lifting a face made pallid by the dawn, the man in the bow of the boat fixed his gaze on the man in the stern and said to him, —

“I am the brother of the one you ordered shot.”

BOOK THIRD. — HALMALO.

CHAPTER I.

THE PERSUASIVE POWER OF HUMAN SPEECH.

The old man slowly raised his head.

The sailor who had just spoken to him was about thirty years old. His face was sea-tanned, his eyes were strange; they had the shrewd glance of the sailor and the open frankness of the peasant. He held the oars firmly in his two hands. He looked gentle.

In his belt he had a dirk, two pistols, and a rosary.

“Who are you?” said the old man.

“I have just told you.”

“What do you want of me?”

The man laid down his oars, folded his arms, and replied, —

“To kill you.”

“As you like,” said the old man.

The other raised his voice.

“Prepare.”

“For what?”

“To die.”

“Why?” asked the old man.

There was a silence. The sailor seemed confused for a moment by the question. He replied, —

“I say that I mean to kill you.”

“And I ask why?”

The sailor’s eyes flashed, —

“Because you have killed my brother.”

The old man replied calmly, —

“I began by saving his life.”

“That is true. You saved him first and then killed him.”

“It was not I who killed him.”

“Who did kill him, then?”

“His own fault.”

The sailor stared with open mouth at the old man; then his eyebrows contracted again into a savage frown.

“What is your name?” asked the old man.

"My name is Halmalo, but I can kill you without your knowing my name."

At this moment the sun rose. A sunbeam struck the sailor full in the eyes and vividly lighted up his wild face. The old man regarded him attentively.

The cannonading which still continued, now began to be interrupted and agonizingly irregular. A dense smoke sank down over the horizon. The boat, no longer guided by the oarsman, was drifting to leeward.

The sailor drew one of the pistols out of his belt with his right hand and took his rosary in his left.

The old man rose and drew himself up to his full height.

"Do you believe in God?" he asked.

"Our Father who art in Heaven," replied the sailor, making the sign of the cross.

"Have you a mother?"

"Yes."

He made the sign of the cross a second time. Then he continued, —

"I have said it. I give you one minute, monseigneur." And he cocked his pistol.

"Why do you call me monseigneur?"

"Because you are a seigneur. That is evident."

"Have you a seigneur, yourself?"

"Yes, and a great one. Can one live without a seigneur?"

"Where is he?"

"I don't know. He has left the country. He is the Marquis de Lantenac, Viscount de Fontenay, prince in Brittany; he is the seigneur of the Sept-Forêts (seven forests). I have never seen him, but that doesn't prevent his being my master."

"And if you were to see him, would you obey him?"

"Certainly. I should be a pagan if I didn't obey him! One owes obedience first to God; then to the king, who stands in the place of God; and then to the seigneur, who represents the king. But that is not the question; you have killed my brother, and I must kill you."

The old man replied, —

"In the first place, I killed your brother. I did right."

The sailor tightened his grasp on the pistol.

"Now then."

"Go on," said the old man.

And calmly added, “Where is the priest?”

The sailor looked at him. “The priest?”

“Yes, the priest. I gave your brother a priest, you owe me a priest.”

“I have none,” said the sailor.

And he added: “Do they have priests in mid-ocean?”

The convulsive reports of the battle were growing more and more distant.

“Those who are dying over yonder have theirs,” said the old man.

“It is true,” muttered the sailor. “They have the chaplain.”

The old man continued: “You will be the means of losing my soul, which is a serious matter.”

The sailor bowed his head in thought.

“And in losing my soul,” the old man went on to say, “you lose your, own. Listen. I pity you. You may do what you wish. As for me, I did my duty just now; first, in saving your brother’s life, and then in taking it from him; and I am doing my duty at this moment in trying to save your soul. Consider. It concerns you. Do you hear the cannon shots at this instant? There are men dying over there; there are desperate souls in mortal agony; there are husbands there who will nevermore see their wives; there are fathers who will nevermore see their children; brothers who, like yourself, will never see their brothers again. And whose fault is it? It is the fault of your own brother. You believe in God, do you not? Well, you know that God is suffering at this very moment; God suffers in His Christian son, the king of France, who is a child like the child Jesus, and who is imprisoned in the fortress of the Temple; God suffers in His church in Brittany; God suffers in His insulted cathedrals, in his desecrated Gospels, in His violated houses of prayer; God suffers in His assassinated priests. What did we come to do, we ourselves, in this vessel which is perishing at this very moment? We came to God’s assistance. If your brother had been a good servant, if he had faithfully performed the duty of a wise and useful man, the accident would not have happened to the carronade, the corvette would not have been disabled; she would not have gone out of her course; she would not have fallen into the hands of this fleet of destruction, and we should be landing on the shores of France now, of all us, brave warriors and seamen as we are, sword in hand, waving the white banner, numerous, content, joyful, and we should be aiding the brave peasants of La Vendée in saving France, in saving the king, in doing God’s work. That is what we came to do, that is what we should be doing, that is what I, the only one left, set out to do. But you are against it. In this contest of the godless against the priest, in this strife of regicides against the king, in this conflict of Satan against God, you are for Satan. Your brother was the first auxiliary of the devil, you are the second. He began, you are finishing it. You are for the regicides against the throne, you are for the godless against the church. You take God’s last resource away from Him. Because I shall not be there, — I who represent the king, — hamlets will go on burning, families weeping, priests bleeding, Brittany suffering, the king will remain in prison, and Jesus Christ in distress. And who will have done all this? You. Go on; it is your affair. I counted on you to bring about the contrary. I am deceived. Ah, yes, — it is true, — you are right, — I have killed your brother. Your brother was courageous, I rewarded him; he was guilty, I punished him. He failed in his duty; I have not failed in mine. What I have done, I would do again. And I swear it, by the great Saint Ann d’Auray, who sees us now, that, under similar circumstances to those in which I had your brother shot, I would shoot my own son. Now you are the master. Yes. I pity you. You have lied to your captain. You, a Christian, are faithless; you, a Breton, are without honor; I have been entrusted to your loyalty, and accepted by your treason; you give me dead to those to whom you promised me alive. Do you know whom you destroy here? It is yourself. You take my life from the king, and you give your eternity to the devil. Go on; commit your crime; it is well. You sell your part in Paradise cheaply. Because of you, the devil will conquer; because of you, the churches will fall; because of you, the pagans will continue to melt bells into cannon; they will shoot men with that which saved their souls. While I am speaking, the bell which rang for your baptism may be killing your mother. Go on; aid the devil. Don’t stop. Yes, I condemned your brother; but know this, that I am an instrument of God. Ah! you judge the means God chooses! Are you going to take it on yourself to judge the thunderbolt which is in heaven? Wretched man, it will judge you. Take care what you do. Do you even know whether I am in a state of grace? No. Go on all the same. Do what you will. You are free to cast me into hell, and to cast yourself in with me. The damnation of us both is in your hands. The one responsible before God will be yourself. We are alone, face to face in the abyss. Go on, — make an end of it, — finish. I am old, and you are young; I am without arms, and you are armed; kill me.”

While the old man, standing all the while, uttered these words in a voice above the noise of the sea, the undulations of the billows made him appear now in shadow, now in the light; the sailor had grown livid; great drops of sweat fell from his brow; he trembled like a leaf; occasionally, he kissed his beads; when the old man had ended, he threw down his pistol and fell on his knees.

“Forgive me, monseigneur! Pardon me,” he cried. “You speak like the good God. I am wrong. My brother did wrong. I will do everything to atone for his crime. Dispose of me. Order, and I will obey.”

“I forgive you,” said the old man.

CHAPTER II.

A PEASANT’S MEMORY IS WORTH A CAPTAIN’S KNOWLEDGE

The provisions in the boat were not useless.

The two fugitives, obliged to take a very circuitous route, were thirty-six hours in reaching the shore. They passed a night on the sea; but the night was fine, with too much moon, however, for people who were trying to escape.

They were obliged first to keep away from France, and to reach the open sea towards Jersey.

They heard the final cannonade of the battered corvette, like the final roar of a lion killed by hunters in the woods. Then silence fell over the sea.

This corvette, the “Claymore,” died in the same way as the “Vengeur,” but glory has ignored it. He who fights against his country is never a hero.

Halmalo was a marvellous mariner. He worked miracles of skill and intelligence; this improvised journey amid the reefs, the billows, and the enemy’s watch, was a masterpiece. The wind had decreased and the sea become smoother.

Halmalo avoided the Caux des Minquiers, passed the “Chausée-aux-Boeufs,” and, in order to rest a few hours, took shelter in the little creek situated to the north at low tide, and then rowing back to the south found a way to pass between Granville and the Chausey islands, without being detected either from the lookout at Chausey or at Granville. He entered the bay of Saint-Michael, a bold venture on account of the vicinity of Cancale, an anchorage for the cruisers.

On the evening of the second day, about an hour before sunset, he left Mount Saint-Michael behind him, and started to land on a beach which is always deserted, because its shifting sands are unsafe.

Fortunately, the tide was high.

Halmalo pushed the boat as far up as he could, tried the sand, found it firm, ran aground, and jumped ashore.

The old man stepped over the side of the boat after him, and examined the horizon.

“Monseigneur,” said Halmalo, “we are at the mouth of the Couesnon. There is Beauvoir to starboard, and Huisnes to port. The bell tower in front of us is Ardevon.”

The old man bent down over the boat, took a biscuit out of it and put it in his pocket, and said to Halmalo, —

“Take the rest.”

Halmalo put what remained of the meat, with the rest of the biscuits, in a bag, and threw it over his shoulder. Having done this, he said, —

“Monseigneur, shall I lead the way or follow you.”

“Neither.”

Halmalo looked in amazement at the old man.

The old man continued: “Halmalo, we are going to separate. It will not do for us to be together. There must be a thousand or only one.”

He paused and drew out of one of his pockets a bow of green silk, very like a cockade, in the centre of which was embroidered a fleur-de-lis, in gold. He continued, —

“Can you read?”

“No.”

“Very good. A man who can read is a nuisance. Have you a good memory?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Listen, Halmalo. You must go to the right, and I will go to the left. I shall go in the direction of Fougères, and you must go towards Bazouges. Keep your bag, which gives you the appearance of a peasant. Conceal your weapons. Cut a stick for yourself in the hedges. Creep through the rye, which is high. Crawl behind the fences. Climb over the hedges, and go across the fields. Keep at a distance from those you meet. Avoid the roads and bridges. Do not enter Pontorson. Ah! you will have to cross the Couesnon. How will you do that?”

“Swim across?”

“Good. And then there is a ford. Do you know where it is?”

“Between Ancey and Vieux-Viel.”

“Good. You really belong to the country.”

“But night is coming on. Where will monseigneur sleep?”

“I will take care of myself. But where will you sleep?”

“There are hollow-trees. Before I was a sailor, I was a peasant.”

“Throw away your sailor cap; it will betray you. You will easily find a *carapousse* somewhere.”

"Oh, a tarpaulin. — I can find that anywhere. The first fisherman I see will sell me his."

"Good. Now, listen. You know the woods."

"Everywhere."

"All over the country?"

"From Noirmoutier to Laval."

"Do you know their names too?"

"I know the woods, I know their names, I know all about them."

"You will not forget anything?"

"Nothing."

"Good. Now, pay attention. How many leagues can you walk a day?"

"Ten, fifteen, eighteen, twenty, if necessary."

"It will be necessary. Don't lose a word of what I am going to tell you. You must go to the woods of Saint-Aubin."

"Near Lamballe?"

"Yes. On the edge of the ravine between Saint-Rieul, and Plédélica there is a great chestnut-tree. You must stop there. You will see nobody."

"Which does not prove that nobody will be there, I know."

"You must make the call. Do you know how to make the call?"

Halmalo puffed out his cheeks, turned toward the sea, and the "to-who," of an owl was heard.

It seemed to come from the depths of night; it was a perfect imitation and uncanny.

"Good," said the old man. "You have it."

He handed the green silk bow to Halmalo,

"Here is my badge of command. Take it. It is important that nobody should know my name at present. But this bow will be enough. The fleur-de-lis was embroidered by Madame Royale, in the Temple prison."

Halmalo put one knee on the ground. He received the embroidered bow with trembling, and touched it to his lips; then, stopping, as if afraid to kiss it, —

"May I?" he asked.

"Yes, since you kiss your crucifix."

Halmalo kissed the fleur-de-lis.

"Get up," said the old man.

Halmalo rose and placed the knot in his breast. The old man continued: "Listen carefully to this. This is the order: 'Rise in revolt. No quarter.' Then on the edge of the woods of Saint-Aubin give the call. You must give it three times. The third time you will see a man come out of the ground.”

“From a hole under the trees, I know.”

“This man is Planchenault, also called Cœur-de-Roi. Show him this knot. He will understand. Then go, whatever way you can, to the woods of Astillé; you will find there a knock-kneed man surnamed Mousqueton, and who shows pity to nobody. You will tell him that I love him, and that he is to stir up his parishes. You will then go to the woods of Couesbon, which is one league from Ploërmel. Make the call of the owl; a man will come, out of a hole; it will be M. Thuault, seneschal of Ploërmel, who has belonged to what is called the Constitution Assembly, but on the good side. Tell him to arm the castle of Couesbon, belonging to the Marquis de Guer, a refugee. Ravines, groves, uneven ground, good place. M. Thuault is an upright man, and a man of sense. Then go to Saint-Guen-les-Toits, and speak to Jean Chouan, who is, in my eyes the real chief. Then go to the woods of Ville-Anglose, where you will see Guitter, called Saint-Martin. Tell him to have an eye or a certain Courmesnil, son-in-law of old Goupil de Préfeln, and who leads the Jacobins of Argentan. Remember all this well. I write nothing because nothing must be written. La Rouarie wrote out a list, but that lost everything. Then go to the woods of Rougefeu, where Miélette is, who leaps ravines, balancing himself on a long pole.”

“That is called a leaping-pole.”

“Do you know how to use it?”

“Should I be a Breton, and should I be a peasant, if I didn’t? The leaping-pole is our friend. It makes our arms large and our legs long.”

“That is to say, it makes the enemy small and the distance short. A good machine.”

“Once with my *ferte* I held out against three excise men armed with sabres.”

“When was that?”

“Ten years ago.”

“Under the king?”

“Indeed it was.”

“Did you fight under the king then?”

“Indeed I did.”

“Against whom?”

“Faith, I don’t know. I was a salt smuggler.”

"Good."

"They called that fighting against the gabelles. Are the gabelles the same thing as the king?"

"Yes, no. But it isn't necessary for you to understand that."

"I beg pardon of monseigneur, for having asked monseigneur a question."

"Let us go on. Do you know la Tourgue?"

"Do I know la Tourgue! I come from there."

"How is that?"

"Because I am from Parigné."

"To be sure, la Tourgue adjoins Parigné."

"Do I know la Tourgue! The big round castle which belongs to my seigneur's family. There is a great iron door separating the new building from the old; it couldn't be burst open with a cannon. In the new building is the famous book about Saint Bartholomew, that people come to see out of curiosity. There are frogs in the grass. I played with the frogs there when I was a little boy. And the underground passage! I know. There is, perhaps, no other person but myself who knows it."

"What underground passage? I don't know what you mean."

"It was made for other days, for the times when la Tourgue was besieged. The people inside could escape by passing through a tunnel under the ground which comes out in the forest."

"To be sure there is a subterranean passage of this kind from the castle of "la Jupellière," and one from the castle of la Hunaudaye, and from the tower of Champéon; but there is nothing of the kind at la Tourgue."

"Yes, there is, monseigneur. I don't know the passages which monseigneur mentions. I know the one at la Tourgue, because I belong to that country. And besides, there is nobody but myself who knows this way. It is never spoken of. It has been forbidden, because this passage served Monsieur de Rohan, in times of war. My father knew the secret, and he showed it to me. I know the secret of entering it, and the secret of getting out. If I am in the forest I can go into the tower, and if I am in the tower I can go into the forest, without being seen. And when the enemy enters, there is nobody there. That is what la Tourgue is. Ah! I know it." The old man remained silent for a moment.

"You are evidently mistaken; if there were such a secret there, I should know it."

"Monseigneur, I am sure of it. There is a turning stone there."

"Oh, yes! You peasants believe in turning stones, in singing stones, in stones which go to drink in the night from a neighboring brook. All sheer nonsense."

"But as I have made it turn, the stone—"

"As others have heard them sing, comrade. La Tourgue is a strong, secure fortress, easy to defend; but he who counted on getting out through an underground passage would be a simpleton."

"But, monseigneur,—"

The old man shrugged his shoulders.

"We have no time to lose. Let us talk business."

This peremptory tone put an end to Halmalo's persistence.

The old man continued, —

"Let us go on. Listen. From Rougefeu, go to the woods of Montchevrier, where Bénédicité is, — the chief of the Twelve. He is another good man. He says his *benedicite* while he is having people shot. In war, no sentimentality. From Montchevrier go to—"

He stopped short.

"I am forgetting the money."

He took from his pocket a purse and a pocketbook and placed them in Halmalo's hands.

"In this pocketbook there are thirty thousand francs in assignats, something like three livres, ten sous: to be sure the assignats are counterfeit, but the genuine ones are worth no more; and in this purse, — pay attention, — there are one hundred louis d'or. I give you all that I have. I do not need anything here. Besides, it is better that no money should be found on my person. To go back again. From Montchevrier go to Antrain, where you will see Monsieur de Frotté. From Antrain go to la Jupellière, where you will see Monsieur de Rochecotte; from la Jupellière to Noirieux, where you will see the Abbé Baudonin. Can you remember all that?"

"As well as my *Pater*."

"You will see Monsieur Dubois-Guy at Saint Brice-en-Cogle, M. de Turpin at Morannes, which is a fortified town, and the Prince de Talmont at Château Gonthier."

"Will a prince speak to me?"

"If I speak to you."

Halmalo took off his cap.

“Everybody will receive you well when they see Madame Royale’s fleur-de-lis. Do not forget that you will have to go to places where there are *montagnards* and *patards*. You must disguise yourself. That is easy enough. These republicans are so stupid, that with a blue blouse, a three-cornered hat and a tricolored cockade, you can go anywhere. There are no longer regiments, there are no longer uniforms, the companies are not numbered; everybody wears whatever rag he pleases. Go to Saint-Mhervé. There you will see Gaulier, called Grand-Pierre. Go to the district of Parmé, where the men blacken their faces. They put gravel and a double charge of powder in their guns in order to make more noise. They do well; but tell them above all to kill, to kill, to kill. Go to the camp of La Vache Noire, which is on a height, in the midst of the wood of La Charnie, then to the camp of L’Avoine, then to the camp of Vert, then to the camp of the Fourmis. Go to the Grand-Bordage, also called the Haut-du-Pré, which is inhabited by a widow whose daughter Treton, called the Englishman, married. The Grand-Bordage is in the parish of Quelaines. You must go to Epineux-le-Chevreuil, Sillé-le-Guillaume, Parannes, and all the men in every wood. You will find friends, and you must send them to the border of the upper and the lower Maine; see Jean Treton in the parish of Vaisges, Sans-Regret at Bignon, Chambord at Bonchamps, the Corbin brothers at Maisoncelles, and Petit-Sans-Peur at Saint-Jean-sur-Erve. He is the same as Bourdoiseau. Having done all this, and given the word of command ‘Revolt! No quarter!’ you must rejoin the grand army, the royal, catholic army, wherever it may be. You will see MM. d’Elbée, de Lescure, de la Rochejaquelein, all the chiefs who are still alive. Show them my badge of command. They will know what it means. You are only a sailor, but Cathelineau is only a carter. Tell them this from me: ‘It is time to unite the two wars, the great and the small.’ The great one makes more noise, the small one does more work. La Vendée is good, La Chouannerie is worse, and in civil war the worse is the better. The success of a war is measured by the amount of harm that it does.”

He stopped speaking.

“Halmalo, I am telling you all this. You do not understand the words, but you understand the meaning. You won my confidence by the way you managed the boat; you do not know geometry, but you work marvels of skill on the water: he who can steer a boat, can pilot an insurrection; from the way you managed the intricacies of the sea, I am sure that you will be successful in carrying out all my commissions. To return. Tell all this to the chiefs, as near as you can, in your own words, but it will be all right, —

"'I prefer war in the forest to war in the open field; I do not intend to draw up a hundred thousand peasants in line before the shot of the Blues, and Monsieur Carnot's artillery; before the end of a month, I want five hundred thousand slaughterers in ambush in the woods. The republican army is my game. Poaching is waging war. I am the strategist of the thickets.' Well, there is another word that you will not understand; never mind, you will take in this: No quarter! and ambuscades everywhere! I want a guerilla warfare in Vendée. Add that the English are on our side. Let us place the republic between two fires. Europe will help us. Let us put an end to the Revolution. Kings will war against it with kingdoms, let us war against it with parishes. Say that. Do you understand?"

"Yes. We must have fire and blood everywhere."

"That's it."

"No quarter."

"Not for anybody. That's it."

"I am to go everywhere."

"And be on your guard. For in this country it is an easy matter to put a man to death."

"Death doesn't concern me. He who takes his first step may be wearing his last shoes."

"You are a brave man."

"And if I am asked the name of monseigneur?"

"It must not be known yet. Say that you do not know it and that will be the truth."

"Where shall I see monseigneur again?"

"Where I shall be."

"How shall I know it?"

"Because everybody will know it. Before the end of a week, I shall be talked about. I shall make examples; I shall avenge the king and religion, and you will know that it is I of whom they are talking."

"I understand."

"Forget nothing."

"Have no fear."

"Start now. God be with you. Go."

“I will do all that you have told me. I will go. I will speak the word. I will obey. I will command.”

“Very well.”

“And if I succeed—”

“I will make you chevalier de Saint-Louis.”

“Like my brother; and if do not succeed, you will have me shot?”

“Like your brother.”

“Agreed, monseigneur.”

The old man bowed his head and seemed lost in deep reverie. When he raised his eyes, he was alone. Halmalo was only a black speck on the horizon.

The sun had just set. The gulls and the hooded seamews were flocking in from the sea outside.

That sort of restlessness just before night was felt in the air; the tree-frogs croaked, the kingfishers flew up whistling from the pools of water, the gulls, the rooks, the carabins, made their evening commotion; the birds on the shore called to each other; but not a human sound. It was a profound solitude. Not a sail in the bay, not a peasant on the land. As far as the eye could reach, a desert expanse. The great sand-thistles rustled. The white sky of twilight cast a broad pale gleam over the beach. The ponds in the distance, scattered over the dark plain, looked like sheets of pewter spread out on the ground. The wind blew from the sea.

BOOK FOURTH. — TELLMARCH.

CHAPTER I.

THE TOP OF THE DUNE.

The old man waited till Halmalo had disappeared from sight, then he wrapped his cloak about him and set forth. He walked slowly, thoughtfully. He went toward Huisnes, while Halmalo had gone toward Beauvoir.

Behind him, an enormous black triangle, with a cathedral for tiara, and a fortress for breastplate, with its two great towers to the east, one round, the other square, which help the mountain to bear the weight of church and village, rose Mount Saint-Michael, which is to the ocean what Cheops is to the desert.

The quicksands in the bay of Saint-Michael’s change their sand-dunes imperceptibly. At that time between Huisnes and Ardevon there was a very high dune, which has now entirely disappeared. This dune, levelled by an equinoctial storm, was exceptional in being ancient, and bearing on its summit a memorial stone erected in the twelfth century in commemoration of a council held at Avranches against the assassins of Saint Thomas of Canterbury. From the top of this dune, the whole country could be seen, and one could get his bearings.

The old man went toward this dune and ascended it. When he had reached the top, he stopped by the monument, sat down on one of the four posts which marked the corners, and began to examine the sort of map lying at his feet. He seemed to be trying to find a route in a country once familiar to him. In this vast landscape, indistinct in the twilight, there was nothing clear but the horizon, a black line on the white sky.

He could see the roofs of eleven towns and villages; he could make, out several leagues away, the steeples along the coast, which are very high, in order to serve as landmarks to people at sea.

After a few moments, the old man seemed to have found in the dim twilight what he was looking for; his eyes fastened on an enclosure of trees, walls, and roofs, which could just be seen half-way between the plain and the wood; this was a farm; he nodded his head with satisfaction as though saying to himself: “There it is,” and he began to trace with his finger in the air a way through the hedges and fields. Now and then he examined a rather indistinct and shapeless object, moving above the principal roof of the farm, and he seemed to ask: “What is it?” It was colorless and confused because of the gloom; it was not a weathercock, because it fluttered, and there was no reason why it should be a flag.

He was weary: he was willing to rest on this spot where he was sitting, and he gave himself up to that sort of vague forgetfulness, which the first moment of repose brings to a tired man. There is an hour of the day which might be called noiseless, it is the quiet twilight hour. It was that hour now. He was enjoying it; he was looking about; he was listening; to what? tranquillity. Even the cruel have their sad moments. Suddenly this tranquillity was not disturbed, but made more intense, by passing voices; they were the voices of women and children. There are sometimes such unexpected chimes of joy in the darkness. The group from which the voices came could not be seen on account of the thickets, but it was walking along at the foot of the dune, going toward the plain and the forest. These voices came up clear and fresh to the old man lost in thought; they were so near that he caught all they said.

A woman’s voice said, —

“We must hurry along, Flécharde. Is this the way?”

“No, it is this way.”

And the dialogue continued between the two voices, one loud, the other timid.

“What do you call this farm where we are living now?”

“L’Herbe-en-Pail.”

“Are we far from it?”

“About a quarter of an hour.”

“Let us hurry, so as to get our soup.”

“We really are late.”

“We must run. But your babies are tired. We are only two women, we can’t carry three brats. And then, Flécharde, you are already carrying one. A regular lump of lead. You have weaned the greedy little thing, but you are always carrying her. A bad habit; oblige me by making her walk. Well! so much the worse, our soup will be cold!”

“Oh, what good shoes you have given me! I should think they were made for me.”

“They are better than going barefooted.”

“Hurry up now, René-Jean.”

“He is the one who has kept us back. He has to speak to every little peasant girl he meets. That is because he is a man.”

“To be sure, he is going on five years.”

“Tell me, René-Jean, why did you speak to that little girl in the village?”

A child’s voice, — that of a boy, replied, —

“Because I know her.”

The woman added, —

“What, you know her?”

“Yes,” replied the boy, “ ever since she played with me this morning.”

“Oh, how big he is!” exclaimed the woman, “we have only been in the country three days, he is no larger than my thumb, and he has a sweetheart already.”

The voices grew fainter. All sound died away.

CHAPTER II.

AURES HABET ET NON AUDIET.

The old man remained still. He was not thinking, hardly even dreaming. All about him was peace, drowsiness, confidence, solitude. It was still daylight on the dune, but almost night on the plain, and entirely so in the woods. The moon was rising in the east. A few stars pierced the pale blue of the zenith. This man, though full of tremendous cares, had plunged himself into the unspeakable tenderness of the infinite. He felt arising in him that obscure dawn of hope, if the word hope can be applied to the expectations of civil war. For the moment, it seemed to him that in escaping from the sea which had been so inexorable to him, and in touching land, all danger had vanished. No one knew his name, he was alone, lost to the enemy, without a trace left behind him, for the surface of the sea betrays nothing, concealed, ignored, not even suspected. He felt a strange, supreme composure. A little more and he would have been asleep.

It was the profound silence over the earth and in the heavens which had for this man, who had been a prey to tumult within and without, such a strange charm in this serene hour.

Nothing was heard except the wind blowing from the sea, but the wind is a continuous bass, which almost ceases to be a sound, it is so habitual.

Suddenly, he started to his feet.

His attention had just been abruptly awakened; he looked about the horizon. Something gave his eye a peculiar fixed expression.

He was looking at the steeple of Cormeray, directly in front of him beyond the plain. Indeed, something extraordinary was taking place in this steeple.

The outline of this steeple was clearly defined; the tower could be seen, surmounted by the spire, and between the tower and the spire, the belfry, square, without screen, and open on all four sides, according to the style of Breton bell towers.

But this belfry appealed alternately open and closed at regular intervals; its lofty window showed all white, then all black; the sky could be seen through, then it was seen no longer; it would be light, then eclipsed, and the opening and shutting followed each other a second apart, with the regularity of a hammer on an anvil.

This steeple in Cormeray was about two leagues away in front of the old man; just about as far to his right on the horizon, he saw the steeple of Baguer-Pican; the belfry of this steeple was opening and shutting in the same way as that in Cormeray.

He looked to his left at the steeple of Tanis; the belfry of the tower at Tanis was opening and shutting just the same as that at Baguer-Pican.

He looked at all the steeples on the horizon, one after another, to the left, the steeples of Courtils, of Précey, of Crollon, and of Croix-Avranchin; to the right, the steeples of Raz-sur-Couesnon, Mordrey, and the Pas; in front of him, the steeple of Pontorson. The belfries of all the steeples were alternately black and white.

What did it all mean?

It signified that all the bells were ringing.

To appear and disappear in this way they must be pulled furiously.

What was it then? evidently the tocsin.

They were sounding the alarm, sounding it frantically, sounding it everywhere, in all the belfries, in every parish, in every village, and not a sound reached his ears.

This was owing to the distance, which prevented the sounds from reaching so far, and because of the sea breeze blowing from the opposite direction, which carried all land noises far away from him.

All these bells madly calling from every side, and at the same time, silence; nothing could be more weird.

The old man looked and listened.

He did not hear the tocsin, but he saw it.

To see the tocsin — a strange sensation.

With whom are these bells angry?

Against whom is this tocsin sounding?

CHAPTER III.

THE ADVANTAGE OF LARGE LETTERS.

Certainly they were after somebody.

Who?

This man of steel shuddered.

He could not be the one. No one could have found out his coming; it was impossible for the acting representatives to have been informed already; he had hardly landed. The corvette had evidently foundered without a man escaping. And even in the corvette no one knew his name except Boisberthelot and La Vieuville.

The bells continued their wild play. He watched them and counted them mechanically, and his thoughts, driven from one conjecture to another, fluctuated between complete security and terrible uncertainty. However, after all, this tocsin could be explained in many ways, and he finally assured himself, by repeating, “Surely, nobody knows of my arrival, and nobody knows my name.”

For some moments there had been a slight sound above and behind him. This sound was like the rustling of a leaf on a wind-shaken tree. At first, he paid no heed to it; then, as the sound continued, one might say insisted, he at last turned around. It was a leaf to be sure, but a leaf of paper. The wind was trying to detach a large placard pasted to the monument above his head. This placard had been put up only a short time before, for it was still damp, and yielded to the wind, which had begun to play with it and to unfasten it. The old man had climbed up the dune from the opposite side, and had not seen this placard when he reached the top.

He mounted the post on which he had been sitting, and placed his hand on the corner of the placard which was flapping in the wind; the sky was cloudless the twilights are long in June; the foot of the dune was dark, but the top was light; a part of the placard was printed in large letters, and there was still enough daylight to read them He read this, —

“The French Republic, one and indivisible.

“We, Prieur de la Marne, active representative of the people near the army of tlie coast of Cherbourg, order: The former Marquis de Lantenac, viscount de Fontenay, the so-called prince of Brittany, secretly landed on the coast of Granville, is declared an outlaw. A price is put on his head. The sum of sixty thousand livres will be paid to him who will deliver him up, dead or alive. This sum will not be paid in assignats, but in gold. A battalion of the army of the coast of Cherbourg will be sent immediately in pursuit of the former Marquis de Lantenac. The parishes are ordered to lend every assistance. Given at the town hall of Granville, this second day of June, 1793. Signed

“Prieur de la Marne.”

Underneath this name there was another signature in much smaller characters, which was not legible, because there was so little daylight left.

The old man pulled down his hat over his eyes, drew his cloak closely up under his chin, and went quickly down the dune. It was evidently unsafe to remain longer on this prominent summit.

He had possibly stayed there too long already; the top of the dune was the only point in the whole landscape which still remained visible.

When he reached the foot of the dune and was in darkness, he walked more slowly.

He started to go, as he had planned, towards the farm, probably having good reasons for thinking he would be safe in this direction.

Everything was deserted. It was an hour when there were no passers-by. He stopped behind a thicket, took off his cloak, turned the hairy side of his vest out, fastened his ragged cloak around his neck again by the cord, and started on his way.

It was bright moonlight.

He came to a place where two roads met and where there stood an old stone cross. On the pedestal of the cross, he noticed a white square, probably a placard like the one he had just read. He went nearer to it.

“Where are you going?” said a voice.

He turned around.

A man was there in the thicket, tall like himself, old like himself, like him with white hair, and with garments more ragged. Almost his double. This man was leaning on a long stick.

The man said again, —

“I ask where you are going?”

“In the first place, where am I?” he said, with an almost haughty calnmess.

The man replied, —

“You are in the seigneurie of Tanis. I am its beggar, you are its seigneur.”

“I?”

“Yes, you, sir, the Marquis de Lantenac.”

CHAPTER IV.

THE CAIMAND.

The Marquis de Lantenac, — henceforth we will call him by his name, — replied gravely, —

“You are right. Deliver me up.”

The man continued, —

“We are both at home here: you in the castle, I in the thicket.”

“Make an end of it. Do your work. Give me up,” said the marquis.

The man continued, —

“You were going to the farm of Herbe-en-Pail, were you not?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t go there.”

“Why?’”

“Because the Blues are there.”

“How long since?”

“For three days.”

“Did the inhabitants of the farm and the hamlet make any resistance?”

“No, they opened all the doors.”

“Ah!” said the marquis.

The man pointed to the roof of the farmhouse, which could be seen some distance away, above the trees.

“Do you see the roof, monsieur le marquis?”

“Yes.”

“Do you see what is above it?”

“Floating?”

“Yes.”

“It is a flag.”

“The Tricolor,” said the man.

This was the object which had already attracted the marquis’s attention when he was on the top of the dune.

Are they not sounding the tocsin?” asked the marquis.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Evidently on your account.”

“But it can’t be heard.”

“The wind prevents it.”

The man continued, “Have you seen your placard?”

“Yes.”

“They are searching for you;” and glancing towards the farm, he added, “There is a half battalion there.”

“Of repubicans?”

“Parisians.”

“Well,” said the marquis, “let us go on.”

And he took a step in the direction of the farm.

The man seized him by the arm.

“Don’t go there.”

“And where would you have me go?”

“Home with me.”

The marquis looked at the beggar.

“Listen, marquis, my home is not fine, but it is safe. A hut lower than a cave. For a floor, a bed of seaweed, for ceiling, a roof of branches and grass. Come. You would be shot at the farm. With me you will go to sleep. You must be tired; and to-morrow morning the Blues will march away, and you can go wherever you please.”

The marquis. scrutinized the man.

“On which side are you?” asked the marquis. “Are you a republican? Are you a royalist?”

“I am poor.”

“Neither royalist, nor republican?” “I think not.”

“Are you for or against the king?”

“I have no time for that.”

“What do you think of what is going on?”

“I have nothing to live on.”

“Why do you come to my assistance?”

“I saw that you were an outlaw. What is the law? So one can be out of it. I don’t understand. As for me, am I in the law? am I out of the law? I know nothing about it. To die of hunger, is that to be in the law?”

“How long have you been dying of hunger?”

“All my life.”

“And you wish to save me?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I said, ‘There is another poorer than I. I have the right to breathe, he has not.’”

“It is true. And you would save me?”

“Surely. We are brothers, monseigneur. I ask for bread, you ask for life. We are both beggars.”

“But do you know that a price has been put on my head?”

“Yes.”

“How did you know?”

“I read the placard.”

“You know how to read?”

“Yes, and to write, too. Why should I be a brute?”

“Then, since you know how to read, and since you have read the placard, you know that the man who betrays me will win sixty thousand francs.”

“I know it.”

“Not in assignats.”

“Yes, I know, in gold.”

“Do you know that sixty thousand francs is a fortune?”

“Yes.”

“And that the one who will deliver me up will make his fortune?”

“Well, what next?”

“His fortune!”

“That is just what I thought. When I saw you, I said to myself, ‘Only think of it, the one who betrays this very man, will win sixty thousand francs and make his fortune! Let us hasten to conceal him.’”

The marquis followed the poor man. They entered a thicket. Here was the beggar’s den. It was a sort of room that a grand old oak had let this man have in its heart. It was hollowed out under its roots, and covered with its branches. It was dark, low, concealed, out of sight. There was room for two people in it.

“I foresaw that I was going to have a guest,” said the beggar.

This sort of underground dwelling, more common than one would suppose in Brittany, is called in the language of the peasants, “*carnichot.*” This name also applies to hiding-places made inside of thick walls.

It was furnished with several pots, a pallet of straw or seaweed, washed and dried, with a thick covering of kersey; some tallow dips, with a tinder-box, and hollow twigs of furze for matches.

They bent down, crept along a little way, entered the room, cut up into odd compartments by the great tree-roots, and sat down on a heap of seaweed, which formed the bed. The space between two roots, where they entered, and which served as a doorway, let in some light. Night had come, but the eye adjusts itself to darkness, and there is always a trace of light to be found in darkness. A reflection of moonlight threw a mysterious pallor over the entrance. In a corner there was a jug of water, a loaf of buckwheat bread, and some chestnuts.

“Let us have some supper,” said the poor man.

They shared the chestnuts; the marquis added his piece of biscuit: they bit the same loaf of buckwheat, and drank from the jug one after the other.

They talked together.

The marquis began to question the man.

“So, whether anything happens or not, it is all the same to you?”

“Very nearly. You are seigneurs, you people. These are your affairs.”

“But what happens ”

“Happens beyond our reach.”

The beggar added, “And then there are other things happening still farther away from us, the sun rising, the moon waxing and waning; it is with such things that I am concerned.”

He took a alp from the jug, and said, —

“What good, fresh water!” Then he added, “How do you like this water, monseigneur?”

“What is your name?” said the marquis.

“My name is Tellmarch, and they call me the *caimand*.”

“I know. *Caimand* is one of your provincial words.”

“Which means beggar. They have named me besides, the old man.” He continued: “For forty years I have been called the old man.”

“Forty years! Why, you are young.”

“I never was young. You are always young, monsieur le marquis. You have the legs of twenty, you climb up the great dune; as for me I can hardly walk at all; a quarter of a league tires me out. Still, we are of the same age; but the rich have an advantage over us, for they eat every day. Eating preserves one.”

After a silence, the beggar continued: “Poverty and riches — it is a troublesome problem. That is the cause of calamities. At least, so it seems to me. The poor want to be rich, the rich do not want to be poor. I believe that is at the bottom of it. I don't mix myself up with it. Events are events. I am neither for the debtor nor for the creditor. I know that there is a debt and that it is being paid. That is all. I should have liked it better if they had not killed the king, but it would be difficult for me to tell why. In reply to that they tell me: But once they used to hang men to trees for nothing at all. I myself have seen a man with a wife and seven children hanged for shooting one of the king's deer. There are two sides to be considered."

He was silent again, then added, —

"You understand. I don't know exactly, people come and go, and things happen, but as for me, I am up among the stars."

Tellmarch stopped again to think, then continued, —

"I am a little of a bone-setter, a little of a doctor. I am familiar with herbs, and have some experience with plants; the peasants see me in a brown study and that makes me pass for a sorcerer. Because I dream, they think I know."

"You belong to this country?" asked the marquis.

"I have never been out of it."

"Do you know me?"

"Certainly. The last time I saw you was when you passed through here, two years ago. You went from here to England, Just now I noticed a man on the top of the dune. A tall man. Tall men are rare; Brittany is a country of small men. I looked carefully. I had read the placard. I said wait! And when you came down, it was moonlight and I recognized you."

"But I do not know you."

"You have seen me, but you never looked at me."

And Tellmarch, the *caimand,* added, —

"I used to see you. A beggar does not look with the same eyes as the passers-by."

"Have I ever met you before?"

"Often, for I am your own beggar. I was the poor man at the foot of the road to your castle. You used to give me alms, sometimes; but the giver pays no attention, the receiver watches and observes. A beggar is a spy. But as for me, though often sad, I try not to be a malicious spy. I held out my hand, you saw the hand only, and you dropped in it the alms which I needed in the morning to keep me from dying of hunger at night. I have sometimes been twenty-four hours without eating. Sometimes, a sou saved my life. I owe life to you. I give it back to you."

“’Tis true, you are saving me.”

“Yes, I am saving you, monseigneur.”

And Tellmarch’s voice grew serious.

“On one condition.”

“What is that?”

“That you do not come here to work evil.”

“I come here to do good,” said the marquis.

“Let us go to sleep,” said the beggar.

They lay down side by side on the bed of seaweed. The beggar fell asleep immediately. The marquis, although very tired, remained absorbed in thought for a time, then he looked at the poor man in the darkness, and lay down again. Lying on this pallet was like lying on the ground; he took advantage of it to put his ear to the earth and listen. There was a dull humming underground; sound is known to be propagated under the earth; he heard the noise of the bells.

The tocsin was still sounding.

The marquis fell asleep.

CHAPTER V.

SIGNED “GAUVAIN.”

When he awoke it was day.

The beggar was up, not in the hut, for there was not room to stand upright there, but outside near the entrance. He was leaning on his stick. The sun shone on his face.

“Monseigneur,” said Tellmarch, “it has just struck four from the belfry of Tanis. I heard the four strokes. So the wind has changed, it is blowing off shore: I hear no other sound, so the tocsin has ceased. Everything is quiet at the farm and in the hamlet of Herbe-en-Pail. The Blues are either asleep, or have gone. The worst of the danger is over; it would be wise for us to separate. It is my time for going away.”

He indicated a point on the horizon.

“I am going that way.”

He pointed in the opposite direction.

“You must go this way.”

The beggar saluted the marquis solemnly.

Pointing to what was left of the supper he added: “Carry the chestnuts with you, if you are hungry.”

A moment later, he had disappeared among the trees.

The marquis rose and went in the direction Tellmarch had pointed out to him.

It was the charming morning hour called in the old Norman peasant tongue, the “piperette du jour,” — the song sparrow of the day. The finches and hedge sparrows were chirping. The marquis followed the path by which they had come the night before. He left the thicket and was again at the parting of the roads marked by the stone cross. The placard was still there, white and almost gay in the light of the rising sun. He remembered that there was something at the bottom of the placard which he could not read the evening before because the letters were so small, and there was so little light. He went up to the pedestal of the cross. The placard ended, just under the signature, “Preur de la Marne” with these two lines in small characters: “The identity of the former Marquis de Lantenac verified, he will be immediately executed. Signed: Chief of battalion, commanding the reconnoitring column, Gauvain."

"Gauvain!" said the Marquis.

He stopped in deep amazement, his eyes fastened on the placard.

"Gauvain!" he repeated.

He started off, turned back, looked at the cross, retraced his steps and read the placard once more.

Then he walked slowly away. If any one had been near him, they would have heard him murmur in an undertone: "Gauvain!"

At the foot of the cross road where he was stealing along, the roofs of the farm, which lay behind him to his left, could not be seen. He was skirting a steep height, all covered with furze in bloom, of the species called long-thorn. The summit of this height was one of those points of land called in the country a *hure* or head. At the foot of the height the view was abruptly lost in the trees. The foliage was, as it were, soaked in light. All nature rejoices deeply in the morning.

Suddenly, the landscape became terrible. It was like an ambuscade bursting forth. A strange deluge of wild cries and gunshots fell over the fields and woods full of sunlight, and in the direction of the farm a great smoke pierced by bright flames arose, as if the hamlet and the farm were nothing but a bundle of straw burning. It was sudden and fearful, an abrupt change from peace to madness, a burst of hell in the clear dawn, a horror with, out warning. They were fighting near Herbe-en-Pail. The marquis stopped.

There is no one, who, under similiar circumstances would not have felt that curiosity is stronger than danger; one must know, if he has to die in consequence. He climbed up the height, at the foot of which passed the hollow path. From there he might be seen, but he could see. In a few moments he was on the "hure." He looked about him.

To be sure there was firing and a fire. The noise could be heard, the fire could be seen. The farm was the centre of some strange calamity. What was it? Was the farm of Herbe-en-Pail attacked? And by whom? Was it a battle? Was it not rather a military execution? The Blues, as they had been ordered by a revolutionary decree, very often punished refactory farms and villages by setting them on fire; to make an example of them they burned every farm and every hamlet which had not felled the trees prescribed by law, and which had not opened passages through the thickets for the republican cavalry. This had been notably carried out, and very recently, in the parish of Bourgon, near Ernée. Was Herbe-en-Pail in the same condition? It was evident that none of the strategic openings ordered by the decree had been made in the thickets and hedges of Tanis and Herbe-en-Pail. Was this the punishment? Had the advance guard now occupying the farm received orders? Was not this advance-guard a part of one of those investigating columns called *colonnes infernales*, or columns of hell.

The height on the summit of which the marquis had taken up his place of observation, was surrounded on every side by a very wild, dense thicket. This thicket, called the grove of Herbe-en-Pail, but which had the proportions of a wood, extended as far as the farm, and hid in its depths, like all Breton thickets, a network of ravines, paths, and byways, labyrinths where the republican armies would lose themselves.

The execution, if it were an execution, must have been cruel, for it was short. Like all brutal things it was soon over. The atrocity of civil warfare admits of such cruelties. While the marquis, multiplying his conjectures, hesitating to go down, hesitating to remain, was listening and watching, this din of extermination ceased, or rather was dispersed. The marquis was aware of something in the thicket like the scattering of an infuriated and joyous troop. There was a frightful swarming under the trees. They were rushing from the farm into the woods. Drums were beating. No more firing was heard. It was now like a battue; they seemed to be hunting about, pursuing, tracking; it was evident that they were in search of some one: the noise was widespread and deep; it was a medley of words of anger and of triumph, a clamorous uproar; nothing could be distinguished; suddenly, as a feature stands out against smoke, something became articulate and certain in this tumult. It was a name, — a name repeated by a thousand voices, and the marquis heard clearly this cry, —

“Lantenac! Lantenac! the Marquis de Lantenac!”

He was the one for whom they were searching.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SUDDEN CHANGES OF CIVIL WAR.

Suddenly all around him, and on every side at once, the thicket was filled with guns, bayonets, and swords, a tricolored flag arose in the shade, the cry of “Lantenac!” burst on his ear, and at his feet through the brambles and branches passionate faces appeared. The marquis was alone, standing on a summit which could be seen from every point of the wood. He could hardly see those who were crying his name, but all could see him. If there were a thousand guns in the woods, he was a target for them. He could distinguish nothing in the thicket but eager eyes fixed on him.

He took off his hat, turned up the rim, broke a long, dry thorn from a furze-bush, drew a white cockade from his pocket, fastened the brim and the cockade back to the crown of the hat with the thorn, and putting the hat on his head again, so that the raised rim showed his forehead and his cockade, he said in a loud voice, speaking to the whole forest at once, —

“I am the man you are seeking. I am the Marquis de Lantenac, Viscount de Fontenay, Prince of Brittany, Lieutenant-general of the armies of the king. Make an end of it. Aim! Fire!”

And opening his goat-skin vest, he exposed his bare breast.

He dropped his eyes, looking for the pointed guns, and saw himself surrounded with men on their knees.

A great cry arose: “Long live Lantenac! Long live monseigneur! Long live the general!”

At the same time, hats were thrown in the air, swords flourished joyfully, and throughout the whole thicket sticks were seen rising with brown woollen caps whirling on the end of them.

It was a Vendean band, which surrounded him. This band fell on their knees when they saw him.

A legend runs that in the old Thuringian forests there used to be strange beings, a race of giants, more or less than men, who were considered by the Romans as horrible beasts, and by the Germans as divine incarnations, and who, according to the occasion, ran the risk of being exterminated or worshipped.

The marquis felt something the same as one of these beings must have done, when, expecting to be treated as a monster, he was straightway worshipped as a god.

All these eyes, full of a terrible fire, were fixed on the marquis with a sort of savage love.

This tumultuous crowd was armed with guns, swords, scythes, poles, sticks; all had large felt hats, or brown caps, with white cockades, a profusion of rosaries and amulets, wide breeches open at the knee, sheepskin jackets, leather gaiters, bare legs, long hair, and while some looked fierce, ail had a frank expression in their faces.

A young, handsome-looking man made his way through the kneeling soldiers, and with long strides went up towards the marquis. Like the peasants, this man wore a felt hat with turned-up rim and a white cockade, and a sheepskin jacket, but his hands were white and his linen fine, and he wore outside his vest a scarf of white silk, from which hung a sword with a gold hilt.

When he reached the hure, he threw down his hat, unfastened his scarf, knelt on one knee, presented scarf and sword to the marquis, and said, —

“We were searching for you, and we have found you. Here is the sword of command. These men are now yours. I was their commander, I am promoted to a higher rank, I am your soldier. Accept our homage, monseigneur. Give your orders, general.”

Then he made a sign, and the men bearing the tricolored flag, came out of the woods. They climbed up to where the marquis stood, and laid down the flag at his feet. It was the flag he had just caught a glimpse of through the trees.

“General,” said the young man who had presented him with the sword and scarf, “this is the flag we have just taken from the Blues, who were at the farm of Herbe-en-Pail. Monseigneur, my name is Gavard. I belong to the Marquis de la Rouaire.”

“Very good,” said the marquis.

And, calm and serious, he put on the scarf. Then he drew the sword, and waving it above his head, he said, —

“Stand, and long live the king!”

All rose to their feet. And through the depths of the wood sounded a wild, triumphant shout: “Long live the king! Long live our marquis! Long live Lantenac!”

The marquis turned towards Gavard.

"How many are you?"

"Seven thousand."

As they were going down from the height, and while the peasants tore away the underbrush before the steps of the Marquis de Lantenae, Gavard continued, —

"Monseigneur, nothing could be more simple. Everything is explained by a word. The people were only waiting for a spark. The notice posted up by the republicans, in making known your presence, has roused the country to insurrection for the king. Besides, we had been secretly informed by the Mayor of Granville, who is one of our men, and the same who saved the Abbé Ollivier. Last night they sounded the tocsin."

"For whom?"

"For you."

"Ah!" said the marquis.

"And here we are," added Gavard.

"And there are seven thousand of you?"

"To-day. To-morrow there will be fifteen thousand. It is the contingent of the country. When Monsieur Henri de la Rochejaquelin set out to join the Catholic army, they sounded the tocsin, and in one night six parishes, Isernay, Corqueux, Echaubroignes, Aubiers, Saint-Aubin, and Nueil, raised ten thousand men for him. They had no ammunition, but they found sixty pounds of blasting-powder at a quarry-master's, and Monsieur de la Rochejaquelin set out with that. We were quite sure that you would be somewhere in this forest, and we were searching for you."

"And you attacked the Blues at the farm of Herbe-en-Pail?"

The wind had prevented their hearing the toscin. They suspected nothing; the people of the hamlet, who are a set of louts, had received them well. This morning we invested the farm, the Blues were asleep, and by a turn of the hand the thing was done. I have a horse. Will you condescend to accept it, general?"

"Yes."

A peasant led forward a white horse in military harness. The marquis, without making use of the assistance Gavard offered him, mounted the horse.

"Hurrah!" cried the peasants, for English cries are very much employed on the Breton coast, which has constant intercourse with the Channel

Islands.

Gavard gave the military salute, and asked, —

“Where will your headquarters be, monseigneur?”

“At first in the forest of Fougrèes.”

“That is one of your seven forests, marquis.”

“We must have a priest.”

“We have one.”

“Who?”

“The vicar of La Chapelle-Erbrée.”

“I know him. He has made the voyage to Jersey.”

A priest stepped out of the ranks and said, —

“Three times.”

The marquis turned his head.

“Good- morning, vicar. You are going to have some business.”

“So much the better, marquis.”

“You will have many to confess. Those who wish it. We force nobody.”

“Monsieur le Marquis,” said the priest, Gaston, at Guèménée forced the republicans to confession.”

“He is a wig-maker,” said the marquis; “but death should be free.”

Gavard, who had gone to give some orders, returned, —

“General, I await your command.”

“At first the rendezvous will be in the forest of Fougères. Let the men disperse and go there.”

“The order is given.”

“Didn’t you tell me that the people of Herbe-en-Pail had received the Blues well?”

“Yes, general.”

“Did you burn the farm?”

“Yes.”

“Did you burn the hamlet?”

“No.”

“Bum it.”

“The Blues tried to defend themselves, but they were a hundred and fifty, and we were seven thousand.”

“Who are these Blues?”

“Santerre’s Blues.”

“Who ordered the drums to beat while the king’s head was being cut off. So it is a Parisian battalion?”

“A half battalion.”

“What is it called?”

“General, ‘Battalion of Bonnet-Rouge’ is on their flag.”

“Wild beasts.”

“What is to be done with the wounded?”

“Put an end to them.”

“What is to be done with the prisoners?

“Shoot them.”

“There are about eighty.”

“Shoot them all.”

“There are two women.”

“Shoot them also.”

“There are three children.”

“Bring them here. We will see what can be done with them.”

And the marquis started off on his horse.

CHAPTER VII.

NO MERCY: THE WATCHWORD OF THE COMMUNE. NO QUARTER: THE WATCHWORD OF THE PRINCES.

While this was taking place near Tanis, the beggar was travelling toward Crollon. He penetrated the ravines, under vast hollow bowers, inattentive to everything, attentive to nothing, as he had said himself, dreaming rather than thinking, for thoughts have an aim, but dreams have none, wandering, roving, stopping, eating here and there a bunch of wild sorrel, drinking from the springs, occasionally raising his head to catch distant sounds, then returning to the dazzling fascination of nature, sunning his rags, perhaps hearing the noise of men but listening to the songs of the birds.

He was old and slow; he could not go far; as he had said to the Marquis de Lantenac, a quarter of a league wearied him; he took a short cut toward la Croix-Avranchin, and it was evening when he returned.

A little way beyond Macey, the path that he followed led over a sort of culminating point free from trees, from which one could see a long distance, and follow the whole horizon from the west to the sea.

His attention was attracted by smoke.

Nothing is more gentle than smoke, nothing more frightful. There is the smoke of peace, and the smoke of villany. Smoke, the density and color of smoke, it makes ail the difference between peace and war, between brotherhood and hatred, between hospitality and the grave, between life and death. Smoke rising through the trees may signify the most charming thing in the world, the hearth; or the most terrible, a conflagration; and all the happiness, as well as all the unhappiness of man, is sometimes centred in the very thing scattered to the wind.

The smoke that Tellmarch saw was alarming.

It was black, with now and then a sudden gleam of redness, as if the coals from which it came were irregular and had begun to die out, and it rose above Herbe-en-Pail.

Tellmarch hastened towards this smoke. He was very weary, but he was anxious to know what it was. He reached the top of a hill adjoining the hamlet and the farm.

Neither hamlet nor farm was there.

A heap of ruins was burning, and this was Herbe-en-Pail.

It is a more impressive sight to see a hut burn than a palace. A hut on fire is lamentable. Devastation falling on misery, a vulture attacking an earthworm, there is a strange contrariety about it that oppresses the heart.

According to the Bible story, the sight of a conflagration changes a human being to a statue; Tellmarch was for a moment such a statue. The spectacle under his eyes made him immovable. This destruction was going on in silence. Not a cry arose; not a human sigh mingled with the smoke; this furnace was struggling to devour this village, and succeeding, without a sound save the snapping of the timbers and the crackling of the thatch. Occasionally, the smoke cleared away, the roofs fallen in, displayed the yawning rooms, the brazier showed its rubies, scarlet rags and poor old crimson colored furniture appeared in these vermilion interiors, and Tellmarch was dazed with the viciousness of the disaster.

Some trees belonging to a chestnut-grove next the houses had taken fire and were blazing up.

He listened, trying to catch the sound of a voice, an appeal, a cry; nothing stirred except the flames; all was silent except the fire. Had all of them fled?

Where was that group of people living and working at Herbe-en-Pali? What had become of this little people?

Tellmarch came down from the hill.

A funereal enigma confronted him. He approached it slowly and with a steady gaze. He advanced toward this ruin with the slowness of a shadow; he felt like a phantom in this tomb.

He reached what had been the door of the farmhouse; and he looked into the court, which now was without walls and was confounded with the hamlet grouped around it.

What he had seen before was nothing. He had only seen the terrible as yet, — the horrible appeared to him now.

In the middle of the court, there was a black heap, vaguely outlined on one side by flames, on the other by the moon; this heap was a pile of men; these men were dead.

All around this heap there was a great pool, smoking a little; the fire was reflected in this pool; but it had no need of fire to make it red; it was blood.

Tellmarch approached it. He began to examine, one after another, these prostrate bodies; all were corpses.

The moon was shining; the fire too.

These corpses were soldiers. All were barefooted; their shoes had been taken off; their weapons had been taken away, too; they still had on their uniforms, which were blue. Here and there, in the heap of limbs and heads, could be seen hats full of holes with tricolored cockades. They were republicans. They were the Parisians who, the day before, were there all alive, keeping garrison in the farm of Herbe-en-Pail. These men had been executed; this was proved by the symmetrical position of the bodies: they had been struck down on the spot, and with care. They were all dead. Not a death-rattle sounded from the heap.

Tellmarch passed the corpses in review without omitting a single one; all were riddled with bullets.

Those who had shot them, probably in haste to go elsewhere, had not taken time to bury them.

As he was going away, his eyes fell on a low wall in the courtyard, and he saw four feet protruding from behind the corner of this wall.

These feet had shoes on; they were smaller than the others; Tellmarch went towards them. They were the feet of women.

Two women were lying side by side behind the wall; they also had been shot.

Tellmarch bent over them. One of these women wore a sort of uniform; beside her was a cask, broken and empty; she was a vivandière. She had four bullets in her head. She was dead.

Tellmarch examined the other. She was a peasant woman. She was pallid and her mouth was open. Her eyes were closed. There was no wound on her head. Her clothing, which her wearisome wandering had doubtless torn to rags, had come open in her fall, and exposed her half-naked body. Tellmarch pushed them open still more, and saw a round wound made by a bullet in her shoulder; her collar-bone was broken. He looked at her livid breasts.

“A nursing mother,” he murmured.

He touched her. She was not cold.

She had no other injury than the broken collar-bone and the wound on her shoulder.

He placed his hand on her heart and felt a feeble fluttering. She was not dead.

Tellmarch rose to his feet and cried in a terrible voice: —

“Is there nobody here?” “It is you, the caimand!” replied a voice, so low that he could hardly hear it.

And at the same time a head appeared from a hole ia the ruins.

Then another face appeared in another place.

They were two peasants, who were hiding; the only ones who had survived.

The familiar voice of the caimand had reassured them, and brought them out of the nook where they were crouching.

They came up to Tellmarch still all of a tremble.

Tellmarch could have screamed, but he was unable to speak: such are deep emotions.

He pointed to the woman stretched out at his feet.

“Is she still alive?” said one of the peasants.

Tellmarch nodded assent.

“Is the other woman alive?” asked the other peasant.

Tellmarch shook his head.

The peasant who appeared first added, —

“All the others are dead, are they not? I saw it all. I was in my cellar. How one thanks God in times like these for not having a family! My house was burned. Lord Jesus! they have killed them all. This woman had children. Three children, all little things! The children cried: “Mother!” The mother cried: “My children!” They killed the mother and carried away the children. I saw it all, my God! my God! my God! Those who massacred them all have gone. They were satisfied. They took away the little ones and killed the mother. But she is not dead, is she; she is not dead? Tell me, caimand, do you believe you can save her? Do you want us to help you carry her to your carnichot?”

Tellmarch nodded assent.

The woods touched the farm. They quickly fashioned a litter out of leaves and brakes. They placed the woman, still motionless, on the litter and started to go through the thicket, the two peasants carrying the litter, one at her head, the other at her feet, while Tellmarch held the woman’s arm, and felt her pulse.

As they went along, the two peasants talked, and, over the bleeding woman, whose pale face was lighted up by the moon, they gave utterance to exclamations of dismay.

“All killed!”

“Everything burned!”

“Ah, Lord God! Is this the way it is going to be now?”

“It was that tall old man who wanted it done.”

“Yes, he gave the orders.”

“I did not see him when they were shooting. Was he there?”

“No, he had gone. But it is all the same: it was all done by his order.”

“Then he was the one who did it all.”

“He said: ‘Kill! Burn! No quarter!’”

“He is a marquis.”

“Yes, for he is our marquis.”

“What do they call him?”

“He is Monsieur de Lantenac.”

Tellmarch raised his eyes towards heaven first, and muttered between his teeth, —

“If I had known it!”

PART SECOND — IN PARIS.

BOOK FIRST. — CIMOURDAIN.

CHAPTER I.

THE STREETS OF PARIS AT THIS PERIOD.

The people lived in public, they ate from tables spread in front of their doors, the women sat on church steps making lint and singing the Marseillaise; Pare Monceaux and the Luxembourg gardens were parade grounds; there were smiths' shops in full blast at every crossing; they made guns under the eyes of the passers-by, who applauded them; this was the word in everybody's mouth: "Patience, we are in the midst of revolution." The people smiled heroically. They went to the play as they did in Athens during the Peloponnesian War; there were notices posted at the corners of the streets: "The Siege of Thionville." "The Mother of a Family Rescued from the Flames."

"The Club of Sans Souci."

"The Oldest of the Popes Joan."

"The Philosopher-Soldiers."

"The Art of Loving in the Village."

The Germans were at the gates; it was rumored that the king of Prussia had engaged boxes at the opera. Everything was frightful and nobody was frightened. The mysterious law against the suspected, Merlin de Donai's crime, made the guillotine threaten the heads of all. A denounced lawyer, named Seran, sat by his window, in dressing-gown and slippers and played the flute while waiting to be arrested.

Nobody seemed to have time enough. Everybody was in haste. Not a hat without a cockade. The women said: The red cap is becoming to us. Paris seemed to be full of removals. The bric-à-brac shops were encumbered with crowns, mitres, sceptres of gilded wood and decorated with fleurs-de-lis, the relics of royal houses: the destruction of the monarchy was in progress. In old-clothes shops there were copes and rochets to be had for the asking. At the Porcherons' and at Ramponneau's, men decked out in surplices and stoles, mounted on asses, caparisoned with chasubles, had wine from the public-house poured into a cathedral ciboria. In Rue Saint-Jacques, barefooted street-pavers stopped a pedler's cart with boots and shoes to sell, clubbed together, and bought fifteen pairs of shoes to send to the Convention for our soldiers.

Busts of Franklin, Rousseau, Brutus, and it must be added, of Marat, were everywhere; underneath one of these busts of Marat, in Rue Cloche-Perce, was hung up under glass, in a black wooden frame, a speech against Malouet, with testimony in support of it and these two lines on the margin:

"These details were given me by Sylvian Bailly's mistress, a good patriot who was kindly disposed toward me. Signed: Marat."

In the Place du Palais-Royal, the inscription on the fountain: *Quantos effundit in usus!* was covered over with two great pictures painted in distemper, one representing Cahier de Gerville denouncing the rallying cry of the "Chiffonistes" of Aries to the National Assembly the other, Louis XVI., brought back from Varennes in his royal coach, and under this coach a plank fastened by ropes, on each end of which was a grenadier with fixed bayonet.

Few large shops were open; haberdashers' and toy shops on wheels were dragged about by women, and were lighted with candles, the tallow dripping over the goods; stalls in the open air were kept by ex-nuns in blonde wigs; one stocking-mender, darning stockings in a stall, was a countess: another seamstress was a marchioness: Madame de Bouffiers lived in a garret from which she could see her own mansion. Street criers went about, offering newspapers. Those who wore cravats hiding their chins were called "écrouelleux," — scrofulous. Strolling singers swarmed. The crowd hooted Pitou, the royalist song-writer, formerly so popular, because he had been imprisoned twenty-two times, and was brought before the revolutionary tribunal for having slapped his hindquarters in pronouncing the word *civisme;* seeing that his head was in danger, he exclaimed: "But it is the opposite of my head, which is guilty!" this made the judges laugh, and saved him. This same Pitou made fun of the fashion for Greek and Latin names; his favorite song was about a cobbler named "Cujus," and whose wife he called " Cujusdam."

They made revolutionary songs and dances; they no longer said gentleman and lady, but citizen and citizeness. They danced in ruined cloisters, with church lamps on the altar, with two sticks crossed and bearing four candles under the arched roof, and tombs beneath their feet.

They wore blue tyrant jackets. They had "liberty cap" shirt pins made of red, white, and blue stones. Rue Richelieu was called the Street of the Law; the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, was called the Faubourg of Glory; there was a statue of Nature in the Place de la Bastille.

Certain well-known characters were pointed out: Chatelet, Didier, Nicolas, and Garnier-Delaunay, who stood guard at Duplay the carpenter's door; Voullaut, who never missed a guillotine day, and followed the wagons carrying the condemned, and who called it, "going to the red mass"; Montflabert,a revolutionary juror, and a marquis, who called himself "Dix-Août" (tenth of August.)

People watched the pupils of the Military School as they passed by; they were termed by the decree of the Convention "aspirants to the School of Mars," and by the people, "Robespierre's pages."

The people read the proclamations of Fréron, denouncing those suspected of the crime of "negotiantism." Young swells collected at the door of the mayoralty, to scoff at civil marriages, placing themselves in the way of the bride and bridegroom and saying: "married civilly." At the Invalides the statues of saints and kings had on Phrygian caps. They played cards on the curbstones at the crossings; playing-cards, too, were in a state of revolution; kings were replaced by genii; queens, by the Goddess of Liberty; knaves, by Equality personified; and aces, by characters representing Law.

They tilled the public gardens; they ploughed up the gardens of the Tuileries. With all this, especially among the conquered parties, was mingled a strange, haughty weariness of life; a man wrote to Fouquier-Tinville, —

"Have the kindness to release me from life. Here is my address." Champcenetz was arrested for having cried out in full sight of the Palais-Royal: "When will the revolution of Turkey be? I want to see the republic *à la Porte.*"

Newspapers were everywhere. Wig-makers curled women's wigs in public, while the master read the *Moniteur* aloud; others, surrounded by a crowd, made comments, with vehement gesticulations, on the journal *Entendons-nous*, belonging to Dubois-Crancé, or the *Trompéte du Père Belle-rose.* Sometimes, barbers were also pork-butchers; and hams and chitterlings might be seen hanging beside a dummy with golden hair; Merchants sold wines of the *emigrés* on the public streets; one merchant proclaimed wines of fifty-two sorts; others sold second-hand harp-shaped clocks, and *duchesse* sofas; one wig-maker had this for a sign: "I shave the clergy, comb the hair of the nobility, accommodate the Third Estate."

“People went to have their fortunes told by Martin, number 173 Rue d’Anjou, formerly Rue Dauphine. There was lack of bread, there was lack of coal, there was lack of soap; numbers of milch cows might be seen passing along as they came from the provinces. At la Vallée, lamb sold for fifteen francs a pound. An order of the Commune assigned a pound of meat to each person every ten days. The people formed in line in front of the shops; one of these lines has become famous; it reached from the door of a grocer’s shop in Rue du Petit-Carreau to the middle of Rue Montorgueil. Forming the line, was called “holding the cord” on account of a long rope which those in file held in their hands one behind another. The women were brave and sweet in their misery. They spent whole nights awaiting their turn to enter the bakers’ shops. Expedients were used with success during the revolution; this universal distress was alleviated by two perilous means, the assignat and the maximum; the assignat was the lever, the maximum the fulcrum. This empiricism was the saving of France. The enemy, both in Coblentz and in London, gambled in assignats.

Girls went about selling lavender water, garters, and braids of hair, and dabbling in stocks. On the Perron, in Rue Vivienne, there were stockbrokers with dirty shoes, greasy hair, and fur capes trimmed with fox tails, and *magoiets* from Rue de Valois, in polished boots, toothpicks in their mouths, shaggy hats on their heads, to whom the girls spoke familiarly. The people went in pursuit of them as they did of the thieves, whom the royalists called “active citizens.” Beyond this, there was very little theft. Cruel destitution, stoical integrity. The barefooted and the starving, with eyes solemnly cast down, passed by the windows of the jewelry shops in the Palais Egalité. While the Section Antoine was searching the house of Beaumarchais, a woman picked a flower in the garden; the people boxed her ears. Wood cost four hundred francs in silver, a cord; people could be seen in the streets sawing up their beds for wood; in winter-time, the fountains were frozen: two pails of water cost twenty sous; everybody turned water-carrier. A Louis d’or was worth three thousand, nine hundred and fifty francs. A ride in a hackney-coach cost six hundred francs. After using a hackney-coach for a day this conversation was overheard: —

“Coachman, how much do I owe you?”

“Six thousand francs.”

A greengrocer woman made twenty thousand francs a day. A beggar said: “For the sake of charity, assist me! I need two hundred and thirty livres to pay for my shoes."

At the entrance to the bridges might be seen colossal figures sculptured and painted by David, which Mercier insulted by calling them: "Enormous wooden puppets." These enormous figures represented Federalism and Coalition overthrown. No faltering among this people. The gloomy joy of having made an end of thrones. Volunteers abounded, exposing their breasts. Each street had its battalion. The flags of the districts came and went, each with its own device. On the flag of the district of the Capucins was this inscription: "Nobody shall shave us." On another: "No more nobility except, in the heart." On every wall there were placards large, small, white, yellow, green, red, printed, and written, with this exclamation: "Long live the Republic!" The little children lisped: "*Ca ira!*"

These little children were to be the great future.

Later on, the tragic city was succeeded by the cynical city; the streets of had two very distinct aspects during the revolution, before and after the ninth Thermidor; the Paris of Saint-Just gave place to the Paris of Tallien; and, these are the continual antitheses of God; immediately after Sinai, la Courtille appeared.

An outburst of public madness now appeared. It was a repetition of what had been seen eighty years before. The people left Louis XIV. as they left Robespierre, with a great need for breath; hence the Regency which opens the century and the Directory with which it closes. Two saturnalia after two reigns of terror. France fled from the puritan cloister as from the monarchical cloister, with the joyfulness of an escaped nation.

After the ninth Thermidor, Paris was gay, insanely gay. An unhealthy joy burst forth. The frenzy of dying was succeeded by the frenzy of living, and grandeur outdid itself. They had a Trimalcion, called "*Grimod de la Regnière;*" they had the "*Almanach des Gourmands.*" They dined to the sound of trumpets in the entresols of the Palais Royal, with orchestras of women beating the drum and sounding the trumpet.

The "rigodooner" reigned, bow in hand; they took supper "in oriental fashion" at Méot's house, surrounded with perfumes. The artist Boze, painted his daughters, charming, innocent girls of sixteen years, "en guillotines," that is to say in low-necked dresses with red underwaists.

The boisterous dances in the ruined churches were followed by the balls of Ruggieri, of Luquet Wenzel, of Mauduit, of la Montansier; serious women making lint, were followed by sultanas, savages, nymphs;

barefooted soldiers covered with blood, mud, and dust, were followed by barefooted women decorated with diamonds; dishonesty appeared simultaneously with immodesty; it had its purveyors in the upper classes, and associations of thieves in the lower classes; a swarm of pickpockets filled Paris, and everybody was obliged to keep watch over his “luc,” that was his pocketbook; it was one of the pastimes to go to the Place-du-Palais-de-Justice to see the women thieves on the stool; they were obliged to fasten their petticoats securely.

As people came from the theatres, street-boys offered cabs, saying “citizen and citizeness there is room for two; they no longer cried “The old Franciscan” and the “Friend of the People,” but in their places “Punch’s Letter” and “The Rogues’ Petition;” the Marquis de Sade presided over the Section des Piques, in Place Vendôme.

The reaction was jocund and ferocious; the “Dragons of Liberty” of ‘92 came to life again under the name of “Chevaliers of the Dagger.” At the same time, there appeared in the booths the type, Jocrisse. They had “The Wonder,” and besides these marvellous women the “Inconceivables,” they swore by the “*paole victimé*” and the “*paole verte;*” they retrograded from Mirabeau to Bobèche.

Thus Paris sways to and fro; it is the enormous pendulum of civilization; it touches alternately one pole and then the other, Thermopylæ and Gomorrha. After ‘93, the, Revolution passed through a singular occultation, the century seemed to forget to finish what it had begun, some strange orgy was interposed, took the foreground, pushed the frightful apocalypse in to the background, veiled the inordinate vision, and burst into a laugh after the fright; tragedy disappeared in parody, and on the edge of the horizon, carnival smoke mysteriously effaced Medusa.

But in ‘93, where we now are, the streets of Paris still had all the grandiose and wild appearance of the beginning. They had their orators; there was Varlet, who went about in a booth on wheels, from the top of which he harangued to the passers-by; they had their heroes, one of which was called “the captain of the iron-tipped sticks.” They had their favorites — Guffroy, author of the pamphlet “Rougiff.” Some of these popular favorites were mischievous; others were healthful. One among them all was honest and fatal; he was Cimourdain.

CHAPTER II.

CIMOURDAIN.

Cimourdain was a pure-minded but gloomy man. He had “the absolute” within him. He had been a priest, which is a solemn thing. Man may have, like the sky, a dark and impenetrable serenity; that something should have caused night to fall in his soul is all that is required. Priesthood had been the cause of night within Cimourdain. Once a priest, always a priest.

Whatever causes night in our souls may leave stars. Cimourdain was full of virtues and truth, but they shine out of a dark background.

His history was quickly told. He had been a village priest and a tutor in a great family; then a little inheritance fell to him, and he became free.

He was, above all, an obstinate man. He made use of meditation as one does of pincers, he believed that he had no right to leave an idea till he had thought it out to the end; he thought desperately. He knew all the languages of Europe and others somewhat; this man studied ceaselessly, which helped him to keep his chastity, but there is nothing more dangerous than such repression.

As a priest he had, though pride, chance, or loftiness of soul, kept his vows; but he had not been able to keep his belief. Science had destroyed his faith; dogma had vanished in him. Then examining himself, he had felt as though he were mutilated, and being unable to change himself as a priest, he tried to make himself over as a man, but in an austere fashion; he had been deprived of a family, he adopted his country; he had been refused a wife, he espoused humanity. Such vast repletion is at bottom emptiness.

His parents, peasants, in making a priest, of him, had wished to remove him from the people; he had come back to the people.

And he had returned with passionate fondness. He regarded their suffering with a fierce tenderness. First a priest, then philosopher, and lastly, athlete. Louis XV. was still alive when Cimourdain began to feel dimly that he was a republican. Of what republic? The republic of Plato, perhaps, and perhaps also of the republic of Draco.

It was forbidden him to love, he began to hate. He hated lies, monarchy, theocracy, his priestly robes; he hated the present, and he called aloud to the future; he foresaw it, he anticipated it, he imagined it frightful and magnificent; he knew, that for the liberation of this lamentable human misery, something like an avenger, who would be at the same time a liberator, was needed. He worshipped the catastrophe from afar.

In 1789, this catastrophe came, and found him ready. Cimourdain threw himself into this vast plan of human renovation, logically, that means for a mind of his stamp inexorably; logic is pitiless. He had lived during the great years of the Revolution, and had been thrilled by all its commotions: in ‘89 the fall of the Bastille, the end of torture for the people; in ‘90, the nineteenth of June, the end of feudalism; in ‘91 Varennes, the end of royalty; in ‘92 the coming of the Republic. He had seen the sunrise of the Revolution; he was not a man to be afraid of this giantess; far from that, this growth on every side had given him new life; and although almost an old man, — he was fifty years old, and a priest ages sooner than other men, — he began to grow too. From year to year, he had watched events as they increased in size, and he had grown like them. At first, he had feared that the Revolution would miscarry, he watched it, it was in the right, he insisted that it would succeed; and in proportion to its frightfulness his confidence increased. He wished that this Minerva, crowned with the stars of the future, might be also a Pallas, with Medusa’s head for a buckler. He wished that her divine eye might be able in time of need to cast an infernal glare at the demons and pay them back terror for terror.

Thus he had come to ‘93.

“Ninety-three” was the war of Europe against France, and of France against Paris. And what was the Revolution? It was the victory of France over Europe, and of Paris over France. Hence the immensity of that terrible moment?, ‘93, greater than all the rest of the century.

Nothing could be more tragic than Europe attacking France and France attacking Paris. A drama with epic proportions.

“Ninety-three” was a year of intensity. The storm was raging then in all its fury and all its grandeur. Cimourdain felt at ease in it. This life of bewilderment, savage and splendid, suited his spread of wings. This man, like the sea-eagle, possessed a deep, internal composure, together with a taste for external danger. Certain winged creatures, ferocious and calm, are made to struggle against mighty winds. Souls of the tempest, like these, exist.

He was capable of exceptional pity, which he reserved alone for the wretched. To the kind of suffering which causes horror, he was ready to devote his life. Nothing was loathsome to him. In this consisted his characteristic kindness. He was hideously and divinely helpful. He sought for ulcers that he might kiss them. Fine actions, ugly in appearance, are the most difficult to perform; these he preferred. One day, at the Hôtel-Dieu, a man was dying, choked by a tumor in his throat, a horrible, fetid abscess, possibly contagious, and which had to be emptied at once. Cimourdain was there. He applied his mouth to the tumor, sucked it, spitting out as his mouth filled, emptied the abscess, and saved the man’s life. As he was still wearing the priest’s robes at this time, some one said, —

“If you should do that for the king, you would be made a bishop.”

“I would not do it for the king!” replied Cimourdain.

This action and this reply made him popular in the dismal quarters of Paris.

So much so that he could do what he pleased with those who suffered, those who wept, and those who threatened. At the time of the indignation against the monopolists, — an indignation so prolific in error, — it was Cimourdain who, without a word, prevented the plundering of a vessel laden with soap at the Saint-Nicholas quay, and scattered the infuriated mob who were stopping the carriages at the barrier of Saint-Lazare.

It was he who, ten days after the tenth of August, led the people to overthrow the statues of the kings. In their fall, they killed; in Place Vendôme, a woman, Reine Violet, was crushed by Louis XIV., around whose neck she had put a rope that she was pulling. This statue of Louis XIV. had been standing a hundred years; it was erected the twelfth of August, 1692; it was pulled down the twelfth of August, 1792. In the Place de la Concorde, a man named Guinguerlot, was beaten to death on the pedestal of Louis XV. for having called the demolishers rascals. The statue was broken to pieces. Later, they made it into sous. One arm alone escaped; it was Louis XV.’s right arm that he extended with the gesture of a Roman emperor. It was at Cimourdain’s request that the people sent a deputation to carry this arm to Latude, the man who had been buried thirty-seven years in the Bastille. When Latude, with the iron collar about his neck, and chains about his loins, lay rotting alive in the bottom of this prison, by order of the king whose statue dominated Paris, who could have told him that this prison would fall? that this statue would fall? that he would escape from the tomb, and that the monarchy would enter in? that he, the prisoner, would be master of this bronze hand which had signed his warrant? and that nothing would be left of this king of mud but this brazen arm?

Cimourdain was one of those men who have a voice within them, and who listen to it. Such men seem absent-minded; they are not; they are all attention.

Cimourdain knew everything and nothing. He knew everything about science, and nothing at all about life. Hence his inflexibility. His eyes were bandaged like Homer's Themis. He had the blind certainty of the arrow, which sees only the mark and flies to it. In a revolution, nothing is more terrible than a straight line. Cimourdain went straight ahead, as sure as fate.

Cimourdain believed that, in social geneses, the extreme point is the solid earth; an error peculiar to minds which replace reason with logic. He went beyond the Convention; he went beyond the Commune; he belonged to the Evêché.

This convention, called the Evêché because it holds its meetings in a hall of the old Episcopal palace, was rather a complication of men than an assembly. There, as at the Commune, were seen silent and significant spectators who, as Garat said, had as many pistols about them as pockets. The Evêché was a strange mixture, — a mixture both cosmopolitan and Parisian, which is not a contradiction, for Paris is the place where the heart of nations beats. There was the great plebeian incandescence. Compared to the Evêché, the Convention was cold, and the Commune lukewarm. The Evêché was one of those revolutionary formations, like volcanic formations. The Evêché was made up of everything: ignorance, stupidity, integrity, heroism, anger, and the police. Brunswick had agents in it. There were men in it worthy of Sparta, and men worthy of the galleys. Most of them were mad but honest. La Gironde, through the mouth of Isnard, temporary president of the Convention, had uttered this monstrous prediction, —

"Be on your guard, Parisians. There will not be left one stone on another of your city, and people will one day search for the place where Paris stood."

This speech created the Evêché. There were men, and, as we have just said, men of all nations, who had felt the need of gathering close about Paris. Cimourdain joined this group.

This group reacted against reaction. It was born of that public need of violence, which is the terrible and mysterious side of revolutions. Strong in this force, the Evêché began its work immediately. In the commotion of Paris, the Commune made use of the cannon, the Evêché sounded the tocsin.

Cimourdain believed, in his implacable ingenuousness, that everything is right in the service of truth; this fitted him for ruling the extreme parties. Rascals felt that he was honest, and were satisfied. Crimes are flattered to be presided over by a virtue. It both restrains them and pleases them. Palloy, the architect, who planned the destruction of the Bastille and sold the stones to his own profit, and who, when appointed to whitewash Louis XVI.’s dungeon, in his zeal covered the wall with bars, chains and iron collars; Gonchon, the suspected orator of the faubourg Saint-Antoine, whose receipts were afterwards found; Fournier, the American, who, on the seventeenth of July, fired a pistol at Lafayette, which it was said Lafayette had paid for; Henriot, who came out of Bicêtre, and had been valet, mountebank, thief and spy before he was a general, and levelled his guns at the convention; La Reynie, formerly grand vicar of Chartres, who had replaced his breviary with *Père Duchesne;* all these men respected Cimourdain, and at times, all that was necessary to keep the worst of them from flinching, was to let them feel this terrible, convincing frankness before them in judgment.

In this way, Saint-Just terrified Schneider.

At the same time, the majority of the Evêché, composed largely of poor, violent men, who were good, believed in Cimourdain and followed him. He had as vicar, or aide-de-camp, as one pleases, another republican priest, Danjou, whom the people loved because he was so tall, and they had christened him the Abbé Six-Pieds, or Six-Feet. Cimourdain had led that intrepid chief, called Général la Pique, wherever he pleased, and also that bold Truchon, called the Grand-Nichoias, who tried to save Madame de Lamballe’s life, by giving her his arm, and making her jump over the corpses; which would have been successful had it not been for the barber Carlot’s cruel jestings.

The Commune watched the Convention, the Evêché watched the Commune; Cimourdain, a just mind, and loathing intrigue, had broken many a mysterious thread in the hands of Pache, whom Beurnonville called the “man in black.” Cimourdain, at the Evêché, was on an equality with everybody. He was consulted by Dobsent and Momoro. He spoke Spanish to Gusman, Italian to Pio, English to Arthur, Flemish to Pereyra, German to the Austrian Proly, bastard son of a prince. He created an understanding between these discordant elements. Hence his situation was obscure but strong. Hébert feared him.

Cimourdain had, at this time, and among these tragic groups, the power of the fates. He was a spotless man who thought himself infallible. Nobody had ever seen him shed a tear. Unapproachable, icy virtue. He was the frightfully just man.

There was no half way for a priest in revolution. A priest could only give himself up to this prodigious and atrocious chance, from the lowest or the highest motives; he must be infamous or sublime. Cimourdain was sublime, but sublime in isolation, in inaccessibility, in inhospitable gloom; sublime when surrounded by precipices. The lofty mountains have such forbidding virginity.

Cimourdain had the appearance of an ordinary man, dressed in common clothes, poor in aspect. When young, he had been tonsured; when old, he was bald. The little hair he had was gray. His forehead was broad, and on this forehead there was a sign for a close observer. Cimourdain had an abrupt, impassioned, and solemn way of speaking; his voice, stern, his tone peremptory; his mouth sad and bitter; his eye clear and penetrating, and over all his face there was a strange look of scorn.

Such was Cimourdain.

No one to-day knows his name. History has more than one such terrible Unknown.

CHAPTER III.

A HEEL NOT DIPPED IN THE STYX.

Was such a man really a man? Could the servant of the human race have any affection? Had he not too much soul to have any heart? This world-wide embrace, which took in all and everything, could it reserve itself for any one person? Could Cimourdain love? Let us answer, Yes.

When he was young, and a tutor in an almost princely mansion, he had one pupil, the son and heir of the family, and he loved him. It is so easy to love a child. What can one not forgive a child? One can pardon him for being a seigneur, a prince, a king. The innocence of his tender years makes one forget the crimes of his race; the feebleness of the creature makes one forget the exaggeration of rank. He is so small that one pardons him for being great. The slave pardons him for being the master. The old negro worships the little white boy.

Cimourdain had conceived a passion for his pupil. Childhood is so ineffable that one can pour out all one's affection on it. All the power of loving in Cimourdain had, so to speak, fallen on this child; the sweet, innocent being had become a sort of prey to this heart condemned to solitude. He loved him with all the tenderness at once of father, brother, friend and creator. He was his son, the son not of his flesh, but of his spirit. He was not his father, and this was not his work; but he was the master, and this was his masterpiece. Of this little lord he had made a man. Who knows? a great man, perhaps. For such are dreams. Unknown to the family, — does one need permission to create an intelligence, a will, an integrity? — he had communicated to the young viscount, his pupil, all the progress that he had in himself, he had inoculated him with the dreadful virus of his virtue; he had infused into his veins his convictions, his conscience, his ideals; into this aristocratic brain he had poured the soul of the people.

The mind suckles, intelligence is a breast. There is an analogy between the nurse giving her milk, and the teacher giving his thought. Sometimes the teacher is more the father than the father himself, just as the nurse is more the mother than the mother herself.

This deep spiritual paternity bound Cimourdain closely to his pupil. The mere sight of this child touched him.

Let us add this: it was easy to replace the father, for the child had no father; he was an orphan; his father was dead, his mother was dead; he had no one to watch over him but a blind grandmother, and a great uncle who was away. The grandmother died; the great uncle, the head of the family, a soldier and possessed of great estates, appointed to offices at court, avoided the old family castle, lived at Versailles, went to the army, and left the orphan alone in the solitary towers. So the tutor was master in every sense of the word.

Let us add this, besides; Cimourdain had seen the child who had been his pupil, born. The orphan child when very small had had a serious illness; Cimourdain, at this time of danger, had watched over him day and night; the physician attends the patient, the nurse saves his life, and Cimourdain had saved the child. His pupil owed to him not only his education, his instruction, his knowledge, but he owed to him his recovery, and health; his pupil not only owed to him his thoughts, but he owed to him his life. We adore those who owe everything to us. Cimourdain adored this child.

The natural separation of their lives came about. When his education was completed, Cimourdain was obliged to leave the child, grown to a young man. With what cold and unconscionable cruelty those separations are made! How calmly families dismiss the teacher who has left his thought in a child, a nurse who leaves in it her love. Cimourdain, paid and sent away, left high life, and went back to the lower ranks of society; the partition between the great and the lowly was closed again; the young lord, an officer of birth and instantly made captain, set out for a garrison somewhere; the humble tutor already in the bottom of his heart an unsubmissive priest, hastened to go down again to that dark ground-floor of the church, called the lower clergy, and Cimourdain lost sight of his pupil.

The revolution had come; the memory of this being, of whom he had made a man, continued to smoulder in him, hidden but not extinguished by the immensity of public matters.

To model a statue and give it life is a noble work; to model an intelligence and give it truth, is still nobler. Cimourdain was the Pygmalion of a soul.

A mind can have a child.

This pupil, this child, this orphan, was the only being on earth that he loved.

But, even in such an affection, was such a man vulnerable?

We shall see.

BOOK SECOND. — THE PUBLIC HOUSE OF THE RUE DU PAON.

CHAPTER I.

MINOS, ÆACUS, AND RHADAMANTHUS.

In Rue du Paon there was a public house, called a café. This café had a back room, which is now historical. It was there that men, so powerful and so closely watched that they hesitated to speak to one another in public, occasionally met almost secretly. It was there, on the twenty-third of October, 1792, that the famous kiss was exchanged between la Montague and la Gironde. Although he does not admit it in his “ Mémoires,” it was there that Garat came for information that gloomy night, when he stopped his carriage on the Port-Royal, to listen to the tocsin, after he had put Clavière in a place of safety in Rue de Beaune.

On the twenty-eighth of June, 1793, three men were gathered around a table in this back room. Their chairs did not touch; they were seated on different sides of the table, leaving the fourth vacant. It was about eight o’clock in the evening; it was still light in the street, but dark in the back room, and a hanging lamp, then a luxury, lighted the table.

The first of these three men was pale, young, solemn, with thin lips, and a cold face. He had a nervous twitching in his cheek, which must have hindered him from smiling. He was powdered and gloved, there was not a wrinkle in his light blue coat, well brushed and buttoned up. He wore nankeen breeches, white stockings, a high cravat a plaited shirt frill, shoes with silver buckles.

The two other men were one, a sort of giant, the other a sort of dwarf. The tall man was carelessly dressed in a loose coat of scarlet cloth, his neck bare in a necktie unfastened and falling below his shirt frill, his vest open for lack of buttons; he wore top-boots; his hair was in disorder, though it showed traces of having been dressed, and there was horse-hair in his wig. His face was pitted with smallpox, he had an angry frown between his eyelids, a kindly pucker in the corners of his mouth, thick lips, large teeth, a porter’s hand, flashing eyes. The small man was yellow, and looked deformed when he was seated; he carried his head thrown back, his eyes were bloodshot, there were livid spots on his face; he wore a handkerchief tied over his smooth, greasy hair; he had no forehead, and a terrible, enormous mouth. He wore long pantaloons, slippers, a waistcoat which seemed to have been white satin once, and over this waistcoat, a loose jacket, in the folds of which a hard straight line betrayed a dagger.

The first of these men was called Robespierre; the second, Danton; the third, Marat.

They were alone in this room. In front of Danton stood a glass and a wine-bottle covered with dust, suggesting Luther's beer-glass; in front of Marat, a cup of coffee; in front of Robespierre, papers.

Near the papers was seen one of those heavy leaden inkstands, round and ridged, which will be remembered by those who were schoolboys in the beginning of this century. A pen was thrown down beside the inkstand. On the papers was placed a large copper seal bearing the words, " Palloy fecit," and which formed an exact miniature model of the Bastille.

A map of France was spread out in the centre of the table.

Outside the door was stationed Marat's watch-dog, that Laurent Basse, porter at number 18 Rue des Cordeliers, who, the thirteenth of July, or about two weeks after this twenty-eighth of June, was to strike the head of a woman named Charlotte Corday, with a chair; she was at this time in Caen, dreaming vague dreams. Laurent Basse was the printer's devil of the *Ami du Peuple*. This evening he had been brought by his master to the café in Rue du Paon, and ordered to keep the room closed where Marat, Danton, and Robespierre were, and not to let anybody enter unless it were some one from the Committee, of Public Safety, from the Commune, or the Évêché.

Robespierre did not wish to close the door against Saint-Just, Danton did not wish to close it against Pache, Marat did not wish to close it against Gusman.

The conference had already lasted a long time. Its subject was the pile of papers on the table which Robespierre had been reading. The voices began to grow higher. Something like anger was brewing between these three men. Outside, loud words were occasionally heard from within. At this period the custom of public tribunals seemed to have created the right to listen. It was the time when Fabricius Pâris, the copying clerk looked through the key-hole to see what the Committee of Public Safety was doing. Which, by the way, was not in vain, for it was Pâris who warned Danton the night of the thirtieth of March, 1794. Laurent Basse had put his ear to the door of the back room where Danton, Marat, and Robespierre were. Laurent Basse served Marat, but he belonged to the Évêché.

CHAPTER II.

MAGNA TESTANTUR VOCE PER UMBRAS.

Danton had just arisen, quickly pushing back his chair.

“Listen,” he cried. “There is only one urgency, the Republic in danger, I know but one thing, that is to deliver France from the enemy. For that all means are good. All! All! All! When I am dealing with every danger, I have recourse to every expedient, and when I fear everything, I risk everything. My thought is a lioness. No half-way measures, no prudery in revolution. Nemesis is not a prude. Let us be frightful and useful. Does the elephant look where he puts his foot? Let us crush the enemy.”

Robespierre replied gently,— “I am willing,” and he added, “The question is to know where the enemy is.”

“It is outside, and I have driven it there,” said Danton.

“It is within, and I am watching it,” said Robespierre.

“And I will drive it out again,” replied Danton.

“You cannot drive away an internal enemy.”

“What can be done then?”

“It must be exterminated.”

“I give my consent,” said Danton in his turn, and he continued: “I tell you it is outside, Robespierre.”

“Danton, I tell you it is within.”

“Robespierre, it is on the frontier.”

“Danton, it is in Vendée.”

“Calm yourselves,” said a third voice “it is every where; and you are lost.”

It was Marat who spoke.

Robespierre looked at Marat and replied calmly, —

“Truce to generalities. I am exact. Here are the facts.”

“Pedant!” grumbled Marat.

Robespierre placed his hand on the pile of papers before him, and continued, —

“I have just read you the despatches from Prieur de la Marne. I have just communicated to you the information given by this Gélainbre. Danton, listen, foreign war is nothing, civil war is everything. Foreign war is a scratch on the elbow; civil war is an ulcer which eats your vitals. This is the result of all that I have just read to you: La Vendée until now scattered among several chiefs, is on the point of concentrating herself. She is henceforth going to have a single captain,—”

“A central brigand,” murmured Danton.

“He is” continued Robespierre, “the man landed near Ponterson the second of June. You have seen what he is. Notice that this landing coincides with the arrest of the acting representatives, Prieur de la Côte d’Or and Rom me at Bayeux, by the traitorous district of Calvados, the second of June, the same day.”

“And their removal to the castle of Caen,” said Danton.

Robespierre went on: —

“I will continue the summing up of the despatches. The forest war is organizing on a vast scale. At the same time, a descent from the English is in preparation; Vendéans and English; that is, Britain with Brittany. The Hurons of Finisterre speak the same language as the Topinambous of Cornwall. I have laid before your eyes an intercepted letter from Puisaye, in which it says that ‘twenty thousand redcoats distributed among the insurgents will raise a hundred thousand.’ When the peasant insurrection is completed, the English will make their descent. This is the plan, follow it on the map.”

Robespierre placed his finger on the map and continued, —

“The English have the choice of landing from Cancale to Paimpol. Craig would prefer the bay of Saint-Brieuc; Cornwallis, the bay of Saint-Cast. That is mere detail. The left bank of the Loire is guarded by the Rebel Vendéan army, and for twenty-eight leagues of open country between Ancenis and Pontorson, forty Norman parishes have promised their aid. The invasion will be made at three points, Plérin, Iffiniac, and Pléneuf; from Plérin they will go to Saint-Brieuc, and from Pléneuf to Lamballe; the second day, they will reach Dinan, where there are nine hundred English prisoners, and at the same time they will occupy Saint Jouan and Saint-Méen, and will leave cavalry there; the third day, two columns will go, one toward Jouan-sur-Bédée, the other to Dinan-sur-Becherel, which is a natural fortress, and where they will set up two batteries; the fourth day, they will be at Rennes. Rennes is the key of Brittany. Whoever has Rennes has all. If Rennes is taken, Châteauneuf and Saint-Malo will fall. There are a million cartridges and fifty field-pieces at Rennes.”

“Which they would sweep away,” murmured Danton.

Robespierre continued, —

“I will finish. From Rennes, three columns will attack — one, Fougères; one, Vitré; the other, Redon. As the bridges are cut away, the enemy will provide themselves with pontoons and madriers, — you have seen this fact, stated precisely, — and they will have guides for the points where the cavalry can ford. From Fougères they will radiate to Avranches; from Redon, to Ancenis; and 115 from Vitré to Laval. Nantes will surrender, Brest will surrender. Redon opens the way the entire length of the Vilaine, Fougères gives them the road to Normandy, Vitré gives them the road to Paris. In two weeks they will have an array of brigands, with three hundred thousand men, and all Brittany will belong to the King of France.”

“ That is to say, to the King of England,” said Danton.

“No, to the King of France.”

And Robespierre added, —

“ The King of France is worse. A foreigner can be driven out in fifteen days, but it takes eighteen hundred years to root out a monarchy.”

Danton, who had sat down again, put his elbows on the table and rested his head in his hands, deep in thought.

“ You see the danger,” said Robespierre, “ Vitré gives the road to Paris to the English.”

Danton raised his head and brought his two great clenched hands down on the map, as though it were an anvil. “ Robespierre, didn’t Verdun open the way to Paris for the Prussians?”

“Well?”

“Well, we will drive out the English as we drove out the Prussians.”

And Danton rose from his seat again.

Robespierre laid his cold hand on Danton’s feverish fingers. “ Danton, Champagne was not for the Prussians, and Brittany is for the English. To recapture Verdun was foreign war; to recapture Vitré is civil war.”

And Robespierre muttered in a cold, deep voice, —

“A serious difference.”

He added, —

“ Sit down again, Danton, and look at the map instead of pounding it with your fist.”

But Danton clung to his own opinion.

“ That is carrying it too far! “ he exclaimed, “ to look for the catastrophe in the west, when it is coming in the east. Robespierre, I agree with you that England is rising on the ocean; but Spain is rising from the Pyrénées; but Italy is rising from the Alps, and Germany is rising across the Rhine. And the great Russian Bear is at the bottom of it. Robespierre, the danger is in a circle, and we are within it. Coalition without, treason within. In the South, Servant has left the door of France ajar for the king of Spain. In the North, Dumouriez is passing over to the enemy. Moreover, he has always threatened Holland less than Paris. Nerwinde wipes out Jemmapes and Valmy. The philosopher, Radaut SaintEtienne, a traitor, like the Protestant that he is, corresponds with the courtier Montesquieu. The army is reduced. There is not a battalion now with more than four hundred men; the brave regiment of Deux Ponts is reduced to a hundred and fifty men; the camp of Pamars has surrendered; there are no more than five hundred bags of flour left at Givet; we are falling back on Landau; Wurmser pressed Kléber; Mayence is yielding bravely; Condé, cowardly; Valenciennes, also. But this does not prevent Chancel, who is defending Valenciennes, and old Féraud, who is defending Condé from being two heroes, as well as Meunier, who was defending Mayence. But all the others are traitors: Dharville, at Aix-la-Chapelle; Mouton, at Brussels; Valence, at Bréda; Meuilly, at Limbourg; Miranda, at Maestricht; Stengel, a traitor; Lanou, a traitor; Ligonnier, a traitor; Menou, a traitor; Dillon, a traitor; — hideous com of Dumouriez. We ought to make examples of them. Custine’s countermarches look suspicious to me; I suspect Custine of preferring the lucrative prize of Frankfort to the useful prize of Coblentz. Frankfort can pay four millions of war tribute. Grant it. What is that compared to crushing that nest of refugees? Treason, I call it. Meunier died the thirteenth of June; Kléber is alone. Meantime, Brunswick is increasing and advancing. He sets up the German flag in all the French places that he takes. The Margrave of Brandenburg is the arbiter of Europe; he pockets our provinces, he will appropriate Belgium, you will see; one would say that we were working for Berlin. If that goes on, and if we do not see to it, the French Revolution will have been made for the benefit of Potsdam; its sole result will have been the enlargement of Frederick II.’s little state, and we shall have killed the King of France for the King of Prussia.”

And Danton burst into a frightful laugh.

Danton’s laugh made Marat smile.

“You each have your hobby; yours, Danton, is Prussia; yours, Robespierre, la Vendée. Now I will give my views. You do not see the real danger; it is here, — the cafés and the gaming-houses. The café of Choiseul is Jacobin, the café Patin is royalist; the café Rendez-Vous attacks the National Guard, the café of Porte-Saint-Martin defends it; the café of the Regence is against Brissot, the café Corezza is for it; the café Procope swears by Diderot, the café of the Théâtre-Français swears by Voltaire; at the Rotonde they tear up the assignats; the cafés Saint-Marçéau are in a rage; the café Manouri is debating the question of flour; at the café Foy there is gluttony and uproar; at the Perron, there is the buzzing of the hornet-drones of finance. This is the serious matter.”

Danton laughed no longer. Marat continued to smile. The smile of a dwarf, worse than a giant’s laugh.

“Are you jesting, Marat?” growled Danton.

Marat gave that convulsive movement of his hip, which was famous. His smile died away.

“Ah, I recognize you. Citizen Danton. It was you who called me that fellow Marat, before the whole convention. Listen. I pardon you. We are passing through a period of folly. Ah, am I jesting? Indeed, what sort of a man am I? I denounced Chazot, I denounced Pétion, I denounced Kersaint, I denounced Moreton, I denounced Dufriche-Valazé, I denounced Ligonnier, I denounced Menou, I denounced Banneville, I denounced Gensonné, I denounced Biron, I denounced Lidon and Chambon; was I wrong? I scent treason in the traitor, and I find it worth while to denounce the criminal before the crime. I am in the habit of saying the day before, what the rest of you say the day after. I am the man who proposed a complete plan of criminal legislation to the assembly. What have I done just now? I have asked that the sections be instructed, in order to discipline them for revolution; I have broken the seals of thirty-two strong boxes; I have reclaimed the diamonds placed in Roland’s hands; I have proved that the Brissotins gave blank warrants to the Committee of General Safety; I have noted the omissions in Lindet’s report on the crimes of Capet; I voted the execution of the tyrant within twenty-four hours; I defended the battalions, Mauconseil and Republican; I prevented the reading of the letter from Narbonne and from Malouet; I have made a motion in favor of the wounded soldiers; I caused the suppression of the Committee of Six; in the affair of Mons, I foresaw the treason of Dumouriez; I have asked that a hundred thousand relatives of the refugees be taken as hostages for the commissioners surrendered to the enemy; I proposed that all representatives who should cross the barriers be declared traitors; I unmasked the Rolandine faction in the troubles at Marseilles; I insisted that a price should be put on the head of the son of Egalite; I defended Bouchotte; I called for the nominal appeal that Isnard might be driven from the chair; I caused it to be declared that the Parisians were worthy of their country; — that is why I am treated like a dancing-jack by Louvet. Finisterre demanded my expulsion, the city of London hopes to have me exiled, the city of Amiens wishes to have me muzzled, Coburg wants to have me arrested, and Lecointe-Puiraveau proposes to the convention to declare me mad. Ah! Citizen Danton, why did you bring me to your secret meeting, if it was not to have my advice? Did I ask you for permission to come? Far from it. I have no taste for interviews with contra-revolutionists such as Robespierre and yourself. Moreover, I ought to have expected it, you have not understood me; you no more than Robespierre, Robespierre no more than you. So there is no statesman here? you must be taught to spell politics; you must dot your *i's*. What I have said to you, means this: you are both mistaken. The danger is neither in London, as Robespierre believes; nor in Berlin, as Danton believes: it is in Paris. It is in the absence of unity, in the right that each one has to draw his own conclusions; to commence with you two, in minds grovelling in the dust, in the anarchy of wills — —"

"Anarchy!" interrupted Danton, "who has caused that if not you?"

Marat did not stop.

"Robespierre, Danton, the danger is in this heap of cafés, in this heap of gaming-houses, in this heap of clubs: club of the Noirs; club of the Fédérés; club of the Dames; club of the Impartiaux, which dates from Clermont-Tonnerre, and was the monarchical club of 1790; a social circle conceived by the priest, Claude Fauché; club of the Bonnets de Laine, founded by the gazetteer Prudhomme, et cætera; without counting your club of the Jacobins, Robespierre; and your club of the Cordeliers, Danton. The danger is in the famine which caused the bag-porter Blin to hang the baker of the market Palu, Francois Denis, to the lantern of the Hotel de Ville, and in the justice which hung the bag-porter Blin for having hung the baker Denis. The danger is in the paper money, which is depreciating. An assignat of a hundred francs fell on the ground in Rue du Temple, and a passer-by, a man of the people, said: " It is not worth the trouble of picking it up. " The stockjobbers and the monopolists, there lies the danger! To hang the black flag from the Hotel de Ville, a fine step! You arrest the Baron of Trenck, that is not enough. I would have the neck of that old prison intriguer wrung. Do you think you have escaped from the difficulty because the president of the Convention placed a civic crown on the head of Labertèche who received forty-one sabre cuts at Jemmapes, and whose eulogist Chenier became? Comedies and jugglery. Ah! you do not look at Paris! Ah! you look for the danger from afar, when it is near at hand. What good does your police do, Robespierre? For you have your spies: Payan, in the Commune; Coffinhal, in the Revolutionary Tribunal; David, in the Committee of General Safety; Couthon, in the Committee of Public Welfare. You see that I am informed. Well, know this: the danger is above your heads, the danger is under your feet; conspiracy, conspiracy, conspiracy; the people in the streets read the papers together, and shake their heads at one another; six thousand men, without tickets of civism — returned refugees, Muscadins, and Mathevons, — are concealed in cellars and attics, and in the wooden galleries of the Palais-Royal; people form a line in the baker’s shop; good women wring their hands on the doorsteps, saying: “When shall we have peace?” It is of no use for you to shut yourselves up in the hall of the Executive Counsel to be by yourselves, for all that you say is known; and to prove it, Robespierre, here are the words you said last evening to Saint-Just: “ Barbaroux is beginning to have a big belly, which will hinder him in his flight.” Yes, the danger is everywhere, and, above all, at the centre. In Paris the ex -nobles plot, the patriots go barefooted, the aristocrats, arrested the ninth of March, are already released. The splendid horses, which ought to be put to the cannons on the frontier. spatter us in the streets; bread is worth three francs, twelve sous for four pounds, the theatres play immoral pieces, and Robespierre will have Danton guillotined.”

“Ugh!” said Danton.

Robespierre examined the map attentively.

“What we need,” cried Marat, abruptly, “is a dictator. Robespierre, you know that I want a dictator.”

Robespierre raised his head.

“I know, Marat, either you or me.”

“I or you,” said Marat.

Danton muttered, between his teeth, —

“The dictatorship, try it!”

Marat saw Danton's frown.

"Wait," he added. "One last effort. Let us come to some agreement. The situation is worth the trouble. Haven't we already come to an agreement about the thirty-first of May? The question as a whole is more serious than Girondism, which is a question of detail. There is truth in what you say; but the truth, the whole truth, the real truth, is what I say. In the South, Federalism; in the West, Royalism; in Paris, the duel of the Convention and the Commune; on the frontiers, the retreat of Custine, and the treason of Dumouriez. What does it all amount to? Dismemberment. What do we need? Union. Our safety lies in that; but we must make haste. Paris must take the management of the Revolution. If we lose an hour, the Vendéans may be at Orleans, and the Prussians in Paris to-morrow. I grant you this, Danton; I yield that to you, Robespierre. So be it. Well, the conclusion is the dictatorship. Let us take the dictatorship, and let us three represent the Revolution. We are the three heads of Cerberus. Of these three heads, one speaks, that is you, Robespierre; the other roars, that is you, Danton — —"

"The other bites," said Danton; "that is you, Marat."

"All three bite," said Robespierre.

There was a silence. Then the conversation, full of portentous repartees, began again.

"Listen, Marat; before marrying, we must become acquainted. How did you know what I said yesterday to Saint-Just?"

"That concerns me, Robespierre."

"Marat!"

"It is my duty to enlighten myself, and it is my business to keep myself informed."

"Marat!"

"I love knowledge."

"Marat!"

"Robespierre, I know what you said to Saint-Just, as I know what Danton said to Lacroix, as I know what happens on the Quai des Théatins, in the mansion of Labriffe, a den where the nymphs of emigration repair; as I know what takes place in the house of the Thilles, near Gonesse, belonging to Valmerange, former administrator of the posts, where Maury and Cazalès used to go, where Sieyès and Vergniaud have gone since, and where now a certain one goes once a week."

As he said "A certain one," Marat looked at Danton.

Danton exclaimed, —

"If I had two atoms of power, this would be terrible."

Marat continued, —

"I know what you said, Robespierre, as I know what happened in the tower of the Temple, when they fattened Louis XVI. there so well, that in the month of September alone, the wolf, the she- wolf, and the cubs ate eighty-six baskets of peaches. At the same time, the people were starving. I know this as I know that Roland was hidden in a house looking out on a back court in Rue de la Harpe; as I know that six hundred pikes of the fourteenth of July were made by Faure, the Duke of Orléans's locksmith; as I know what was done at the house of Saint-Hilaire, Sillery's mistress; on days when there was to be a ball, old Sillery himself rubbed chalk on the floors of the yellow drawing-room in Rue Neuve-des-Mathurin; Buzot and Kersaint dined there. Saladin dined there the twenty-seventh, and with whom, Robespierre? With your friend, Lasource."

"Words, words," murmured Robespierre. "Lasource is not my friend."

And he added thoughtfully, —

"Meanwhile, there are eighteen manufactories of false assignats in London."

Marat continued in a calm voice, but with a slight trembling, which was alarming, —

"You are the *Faction des Importants*. Yes, I know it all, in spite of what Saint-Just calls "State silence."

Marat emphasized these words, looked at Robespierre and went on to say, —

"I know what is said at your table when Lebas invites David to eat the cooking of his betrothed, Elizabeth Duplay, your future sister-in-law, Robespierre. I am the enormous eye of the people, and from the depths of my cellar, I look on. Yes, I see; yes, I hear; yes, I know. Little things content you. You admire yourself. Robespierre courts the admiration of his Madame de Chalabre, the daughter of the Marquis de Chalabre, who played whist with Louis XV. the evening of Damiens' execution. Yes, people carry their heads high. Saint-Just lives in a cravat. Legendre is proper, new overcoat and white vest, and a shirt frill to make one forget his apron. Robespierre imagines that history will care to know that he had on an olive frock coat at the Constituante, and a sky-blue coat at the Convention. He has his portrait all over the walls of his room — —"

Robespierre interrupted him in a voice even more calm than Marat's.

"And you, Marat, you have yours in all the sewers."

They continued in a conversational tone, the slowness of which emphasized their replies and repartees, and added a strange irony to the threats.

"Robespierre, you have termed those who desire the overthrow of thrones, the 'Don Quixotes of the human race.'"

"And you, Marat, after the fourth of August, in number 559 of your *Ami du Peuple*, — Ah, I have kept the number, it will be useful, — you have asked to have the nobles receive their titles back again. You said: 'A duke is always a duke.'"

"Robespierre, in the meeting of the seventh of December, you defended the Roland woman against Viard."

"Just as my brother defended you, Marat, when you were attacked at the Jacobins. What does that prove? Nothing."

"Robespierre, we know the cabinet of the Tuileries, where you said to Garat: 'I am weary of the Revolution.'"

"Marat, it was here in this public-house, that you embraced Barbaroux, the twenty-ninth of October."

"Robespierre, you said to Buzot: 'What is the Republic?'"

"Marat, it was in this public-house that you invited three men from Marseilles to breakfast with you."

"Robespierre, you have a strong marketman, armed with a cudgel, to escort you."

"And you, Marat, the day before the tenth of August, you asked Buzot to help you escape to Marseilles, disguised as a jockey."

"In September when the courts were in session, you hid yourself, Robespierre."

"And you, Marat, you displayed yourself."

"Robespierre, you flung the red cap on the ground."

"Yes, when a traitor hung it up. What adorns Dumouriez, defiles Robespierre."

"Robespierre, you refused to veil Louis XVI.'s head, while the soldiers were passing by."

"I did better than to veil his head, I cut it off."

Danton interfered, but as oil interferes in fire.

"Robespierre, Marat, calm yourselves."

Marat did not like to be named second. He turned round.

“Why does Danton meddle in this?” he said.

“Why do I meddle? For this reason. To prevent fratricide; to prevent a quarrel between two men who serve the people; because there is enough foreign war, because there is enough civil war, and because there will be too much domestic war; because it was I who brought about the Revolution, and I do not want it spoiled. That is why I am meddling.”

Marat replied without raising his voice, —

“You had better meddle with making your accounts.”

“My accounts!” exclaimed Danton. “Go ask for them in the defiles of Argonne, in Champagne delivered, in conquered Belgium, in the armies where I have already four times exposed my breast to bullets! Go ask for them in the Place de la Révolution, on the scaffold of the twenty-first of January, on the throne abolished, on the guillotine, that widow — —”

Marat interrupted Danton.

“The guillotine is a virgin; men lie with her, but she does not become fruitful.”

“What do you know about it, Danton? I would make her pregnant!”

“We shall see,” said Marat.

And he smiled.

Danton saw this smile.

“Marat,” he exclaimed, “you are a sneak, I am a man for open air and daylight. I hate the life of a reptile. It would not suit me to be a wood-louse. You live in a cellar; I live in the street. You have nothing to say to anybody; any passer-by can see me and speak to me.”

“Pretty boy, will you come up where I live?” muttered Marat.

And ceasing to smile, he assumed a peremptory tone.

“Danton, give account of the thirty-three thousand crowns, ready money, that Montmorin paid to you in the name of the king, under pretext of indemnifying you in your capacity of attorney at the Châtelet.”

“I was concerned with the fourteenth of July,” said Danton, haughtily.

“And the Garde-Meuble? and the crown diamonds?”

“I was concerned with the sixth of October.”

“And the plunder committed by your *alter ego*, Lacroix, in Belgium?”

“I was concerned with the twentieth of June.”

“And the loans made à la Montansier?”

“I impelled the people to the return from Varennes.”

“And the opera house, built with money furnished by you?”

“I armed the sections of Paris.”

“And the hundred thousand francs, the secret funds of the Minister of Justice?”

“I caused the tenth of August.”

“And the two millions for the Assembly’s secret expenses, of which you took a fourth?”

“I stopped the marching enemy and prevented the allied kings from passing.”

“Prostitute!” said Marat.

Danton rose.

“Yes,” he cried, “I am a harlot, I have sold my body, but I have saved the world.”

Robespierre began to bite his nails. He could neither laugh nor smile. Laughing, Danton’s lightning, and smiling, Marat’s sting, were left out of him.

Danton replied, —

“I am like the ocean; I have my ebb and flow; at low tide my shallow places appear, at high tide my billows are seen.”

“Your froth,” said Marat.

“My tempest,” said Danton.

Marat had arisen at the same time as Danton. He too burst forth. The adder suddenly became a dragon.

“Ah!” he cried, “ah, Robespierre! ah, Danton! You are now willing to listen to me! Well, I tell you, you are lost. Your policy results in the impossibility to go any farther; there is no exit for you; and you have managed to close all the doors before you, except that of the grave.”

“That is our greatness,” said Danton.

And he shrugged his shoulders.

Marat continued, —

“Danton, take care. Vergniaud, too, has a large mouth, thick lips, and an angry frown; Vergniaud, too, is pock-marked like Mirabeau and like you; that did not prevent the thirty-first of May. Ah! you shrug your shoulders. Sometimes shrugging the shoulders shakes off one’s head. Danton, I tell you, your harsh voice, your loose necktie, your Hessian boots, your little suppers, your big pockets, all look to Louisette.”

Louisette was the pet name Marat gave to the guillotine.

He continued, —

“And as for you, Robespierre, you are a Modérée, but that will not do you any good. Go, powder yourself, dress your hair, play the coxcomb, wear fine linen, prink, and be curled and painted, but you will go to Place-de-Grève, all the same; read Brunswick’s declaration; still you will be treated like the regicide Damiens, and you will look as fine as a new pin while waiting to be quartered alive.”

“Echo of Coblentz,” said Robespierre between his teeth.

“Robespierre, I am not an echo of anything, I am the outcry of all. Ah! you are young. How old are you, Danton? Thirty-four years. How old are you, Robespierre? Thirty-three. Well, as for me, I have always been alive; I am suffering humanity, I am six thousand years old.”

“That is true,” replied Danton, “for six thousand years, Cain has been preserved in hatred like a toad in a stone. The rock is broken, and Cain leaps forth among men, and that is Marat.”

“Danton!” exclaimed Marat, and a livid light appeared in his eyes.

“Well, what?” said Danton.

Thus these three terrible men went on talking. A quarrel of thunderbolts.

CHAPTER III.

THE THRILL OF HIDDEN CHORDS.

There was a lull in the conversation; for a moment these Titans each became lost in thought. Lions are disturbed by hydras. Robespierre had grown very pale, and Danton very red. Both trembled. The light died out of Marat's eye; a calmness, an imperious calmness came over the face of this man, the terror of the terrible."

Danton felt that he was conquered, but was unwilling to admit it. He resumed, —

"Marat talks very loud about dictatorship and unity, but he has only one power, that of dissolution."

Robespierre compressed his thin lips, and added, —

"I am of the opinion of Anacharsis Cloots; I say neither Roland nor Marat."

"And for my part," replied Marat, "I say, neither Danton nor Robespierre."

He looked steadily at both and added, —

"Let me give you some advice, Danton. You are in love, you think of marrying again, don't meddle any more with politics, be wise!"

And stepping back towards the door to go out, he gave them this ominous farewell.

"Adieu, gentlemen."

Danton and Robespierre shuddered.

At the same time, a voice rose from the other end of the room, saying, —

"You are wrong, Marat."

All turned round. During Marat's outburst, some one had come in by the rear door, without their notice.

"It is you, Citizen Cimourdain," said Marat. "Good evening."

It was Cimourdain, indeed.

"I say that you are wrong, Marat," he repeated.

Marat turned green, which was his way of growing pale.

Cimourdain added, —

"You are useful, but Robespierre and Danton are necessary. Why do you threaten them? Union, union, citizen! the people want to be united."

This coming in had the effect of cold water, and like the arrival of a stranger in midst of a family quarrel, it calmed at least the surface, if not the depths.

Cimourdain stepped towards the table.

Danton and Robespierre knew him. They had often noticed in the public tribunes of the Convention, this powerful but obscure man whom the people saluted. Robespierre, always inclined to formality, asked, —

"Citizen, how did you get in?"

"He belongs to the Evêché," replied Marat, in a voice with a strange touch of submission in it.

Marat defied the Convention, led the Commune, and feared the Evêché.

This is a law.

Mirabeau felt Robespierre moving at an unknown depth, Robespierre felt Marat moving, Marat felt Hébert moving, Hébert felt Babeuf moving. As long as the strata under-ground are quiet, the political man may walk along, but under the most revolutionary there is a subsoil, and the bravest stop in alarm when they feel beneath their feet the movement that they have caused above their heads.

To know how to distinguish the agitation arising from covetousness, from the agitation arising from principles, to fight the one and aid the other, in this lies the genius and the power of great revolutionary leaders.

Danton saw that Marat was yielding.

"Oh! Citizen Cimourdain is welcome," he said.

And he held out his hand to Cimourdain. Then he said, —

"Parbleu, let us explain the situation to Citizen Cimourdain. He comes at just the right moment. I represent the Mountain, Robespierre represents the Committee of Public Welfare, Marat represents the Commune, Cimourdain represents the Evêché. He shall be our umpire."

"So be it," said Cimourdain, solemnly and simply. "What is the question?"

"About la Vendée," replied Robespierre.

"La Vendée!" said Cimourdain.

And he added, —

"There lies the great danger. If the Revolution comes to naught, it will come to naught through la Vendée. One Vendée is more to be feared than ten Germanys. For France to live, Vendée must be killed."

These few words won Robespierre.

Robespierre, however, put this question, —

“Were you not formerly a priest?”

His priestly air did not escape Robespierre. He recognized by his exterior what was in the man.

Cimourdain replied: “Yes, citizen.”

“What of that?” exclaimed Danton. “When priests are good, they are worth more than other men. In times of revolution, priests are melted up into men, as bells into money and cannons. Danjou is a priest, Daunou is a priest, Thomas Lindet is bishop of Evreux. Robespierre, you sit at the Convention side by side with Massieu, Bishop of Beauvais. The grand-vicar Vaugeois belonged to the Committee of Insurrection of the tenth of August. Chabot is a Capuchin. It was Dom Gerle who invented the oath of the tennis court; it was the Abbé Audran who caused the National Assembly to be declared superior to the king; it was the Abbé Goutte who asked the Legislature to have the dais taken away from Louis XVI.’s arm-chair; it was the Abbé Grégoire who provoked the abolition of royalty.”

“Supported by the player, Collot-d’Herbois,” sneered Marat. “The two together did the work; the priest overthrew the throne, the comedian threw down the king.”

“Let us return to la Vendée,” said Robespierre.

“Well,” asked Cimourdain, “what is the matter there? What is this Vendée doing?”

Robespierre replied, —

“She has a chief. She is going to be tremendous.”

Who is this chief, Citizen Robespierre?”

“He is a former Marquis de Lautenac, who calls himself Prince of Brittany.”

Cimourdain started.

“I know him,” he said. “I have been a priest at his house.”

He thought for a moment, and then added, —

“He was fond of women before he became a warrior.”

“Like Biron, who was a Lauzun,” said Danton.

And Cimourdain added thoughtfully —

“Yes, he was formerly a man of pleasure. He must be terrible.”

“Frightful,” said Robespierre. “He burns villages, puts an end to the wounded, massacres the prisoners, shoots the women.”

“The women?”

“Yes, among others he had a mother of three children shot. Nobody knows what became of the children. Besides he is a captain. He understands warfare.”

“To be sure,” replied Cimourdain. “He was in the war with Hanover, and the soldiers said: ‘Richelieu uppermost, Lantenac at the bottom.’ Lantenac was the real general. Talk about him to your colleague, Dussaulx.”

Robespierre remained thoughtful for a moment, then the conversation continued between him and Cimourdain.

“Well, Citizen Cimourdain, this man is in Vendée.”

“How long has he been there?”

“Three weeks.”

“He must be outlawed.”

“That has been done.”

“A price must be set on his head.”

“It has been done.”

“A large sum of money must be offered to the one who captures him.”

“It has been done.”

“Not in assignats.”

“It has been done.”

“In gold.”

“It has been done.”

“And he must be guillotined.”

“It will be done.”

“By whom?”

“By you.”

“By me?”

“Yes, you will be commissioned by the Committee of Public Welfare with full power.”

“I accept,” said Cimourdain.

Robespierre was swift in his selections, a characteristic of a statesman. He took from the pile before him a sheet of white paper, with this printed heading: French Republic, one and indivisible. Committee of Public Welfare.

Cimourdain continued, —

“Yes, I accept. Terror against terror, Lantenac is cruel. I shall be cruel. War to the death against this man. I will deliver the Republic from him, so it please God.”

He stopped, then added, —

“I am a priest; all the same, I believe in God.”

“God has gone out of fashion.”

“I believe in God,” said Cimourdain, unmoved.

“With a nod of the head, Robespierre gloomily assented,

Cimourdain continued, —

“To whom shall I be sent as a delegate?”

“The commandant of the reconnoitring column sent against Lantenac. Only, I warn you, he is a noble.”

Danton exclaimed, —

“There is another thing that I care very little about.

A noble? Well, what of it? It is the same with nobles as with priests. If they are good, they are excellent. Nobility is a prejudice, but one must not have it more in one sense than in another, not more for than against it. Robespierre, isn’t Saint-Just a noble? Florelle de Saint-Just. Parbleu! Anacharsis Cloots is a baron. Our friend, Charles Hesse, who never misses a meeting of the Cordeliers, is a prince, and brother of the reigning landgrave of Hesse-Rothenburg. Montaut, Marat’s intimate friend, is Marquis de Montaut. In the Revolutionary tribunal, there is a member who is a priest, Vilate, and a member who is a noble, Leroy, Marquis de Montflabert. Both are trustworthy.”

“And you forget,” added Robespierre, “the head of the Revolutionary jury,—”

“Antonelle?”

“Who is the Marquis Antonelle,” said Robespierre.

Danton added, —

“Dampierre was a nobleman, who has just given his life before Condé, for the Republic; and Beaurepaire, who blew his brains out rather than open the gates of Verdun to the Prussians, was a nobleman.”

“Which does not alter the fact,” growled Marat, “that the day Condorcet exclaimed, ‘The Gracchi were noblemen!’ Danton cried out to him: ‘All noblemen are traitors, beginning with Mirabeau, and ending with yourself!’”

Cimourdain’s solemn voice now rose.

“Citizen Danton, Citizen Robespierre, perhaps you are right in your confidence, but the people are distrustful, and they are not wrong in their distrust. When a priest is charged to look after a nobleman, the responsibility is increased twofold, and the priest must be inflexible."

"Certainly," said Robespierre.

Cimourdain added: "And inexorable."

Robespierre continued, —

"Well said, Citizen Cimourdain. You will have to deal with a young man. You will have the advantage over him, being twice his age. You will have to direct him, but you must manage him. It seems that he has military talents; all accounts are agreed on that point. He belongs to a corps of the army of the Rhine, which has been detached to go to Vendée. He has reached the frontier, where he is showing admirable intelligence and bravery. He is leading the reconnoitring column in a superior manner. For two weeks, he has held the old Marquis de Lantenac in check. He restrains him and drives him before him. He will end by driving him back to the sea, and overthrowing him there. Lantenac has the art of an old general, and he has the audacity of a young captain. This young man already has enemies, and some are envious of him. The Adjutant-General, Léchelle, is jealous of him."

"This Léchelle," interrupted Danton, "wants to be general in chief! he has nothing to recommend him, but a pun: a ladder is needed to mount upon a wagon. Nevertheless, Charette is beating him."

"And he doesn't want any one but himself to beat Lantenac," continued Robespierre. "The misfortune of the Vendéan war lies in such rivalries as these. Heroes badly commanded, that is what our soldiers are. A mere captain of hussars, Chérin, enters Saumur with a trumpet playing. "Ca ira"; he takes Saumur, and might have gone on and taken Cholet, but he had no orders, and stopped. All the commands of la Vendée ought to be changed. The body-guards are scattered, the forces dispersed; a scattered army is a paralyzed army; it is a rock ground to powder. In the camp at Paramé there are nothing but tents. Between Tréguier and Dinan there are a hundred little useless posts which might be made into a division to cover the whole coast. Léchelle, supported by Parrein, is leaving the northern coast unguarded, under pretext of protecting the southern coast, and in this way opening France to the English. To raise half a million peasants, and a descent from England on France, is Lantenac's design. The young commander of the reconnoitring column is pushing on this Lantenac at the point of the sword, and defeating him without Léchelle's permission; but Léchelle is his general; so Léchelle complains of him. Opinions concerning this young man are divided. Léchelle wants to have him shot. Prieur de la Marne wants to make him adjutant-general.”

“This young man,” said Cimourdain, “has great qualities, so it seems to me.”

“But he has one fault.”

It was Marat who interrupted.

“What is it?” asked Cimourdain.

“Clemency,” said Marat.

And Marat added, —

“He is decided in battle and soft-hearted afterwards. That makes him indulgent, that makes him pardon; be merciful, protect the religieuses and nuns, save the wives and the daughters of the aristocracy, release prisoners, set priests at liberty.”

“A serious fault,” murmured Cimourdain.

“A crime,” said Marat.

“Sometimes,” said Danton.

“Often,” said Robespierre.

“Almost always,” added Marat.

“When dealing with the enemies of one’s own country, always,” said Cimourdain.

Marat turned toward Cimourdain.

“And what would you do with a Republican general who gave a Royalist general his liberty?”

“I should be of Léchelle’s opinion, I should have him shot.”

“Or guillotined,” said Marat.

“Either,” said Cimourdain.

Danton began to laugh.

“I should like one as well as the other.”

“You are sure to have one or the other,” growled Marat.

And his eyes, leaving Danton, turned to Cimourdain.

“So, Citizen Cimourdain, if a Republican general flinches, you would have his head cut off?”

“Within twenty-four hours.”

“Well,” replied Marat, “I am of Robespierre’s opinion; we must send Citzen Cimourdain as a delegate of the Committee of Public Welfare to the commandant of the reconnoitring column of the coast army. What is the name of this commandant?"

Robespierre replied, —

"He is a *ci-devant*, a noble."

And he began to turn over the papers.

"Let us send the priest to guard the noble," said Danton,

"I distrust a priest alone; I distrust a noble alone; when they are together, I am not afraid of them; one will watch over the other, and they will do."

The expression of indignation peculiar to Cimourdain's eyebrows deepened; but finding the observation just at bottom, he began to speak in his harsh voice, without looking toward Danton.

"If the Republican commandant who is entrusted to my care makes a false step, the penalty will be death."

Robespierre, with his eyes still on the papers, said, —

"Here is the name. Citzen Cimourdain, the commandant over whom you will have full power is a former viscount; his name is Gauvain."

Cimourdain grew pale.

"Gauvain!" he exclaimed.

Marat noticed Cimourdain's pale face.

"The Viscount Gauvain!" repeated Cimourdain.

"Yes," said Robespierre.

"Well?" said Marat, fixing his eye on Cimourdain.

There was a pause. Then Marat said, —

"Citzen Cimourdain, on the conditions named by yourself, do you accept the mission of delegate to the commandant, Gauvain? Is it agreed?"

"Agreed," said Cimourdain.

He grew paler and paler.

Robespierre took the pen near him, wrote in his slow and formal handwriting four lines on the sheet of paper with the heading, "Committee of Public Welfare," signed it, and passed the sheet and the pen to Danton; Danton signed it; and then Marat, who did not take his eyes from Cimourdain's pale face, signed it after Danton."

Robespierre took the sheet of paper again, dated it, and gave it to Cimourdain, who read, —

"Year II. of the Republic.

"Full power is granted to Citizen Cimourdain, delegated commissioner from the Committee of Public Welfare to Citizen Gauvain, commandant of the reconnoitring column of the coast army.

Robespierre. — Danton. — Marat."

And below these signatures, —

"Twenty-eighth of June, 1793."

The Revolutionary Calendar, called the Civil Calendar, was not in existence legally at this period, and was not adopted by the Convention, according to the proposition of Romme, till the fifth of October, 1793.

Marat watched Cimourdain while he read the paper.

Marat said in an undertone, as if speaking to himself:

"All that will have to be specified by a decree of the Convention, or by a special resolution of the Committee of Public Welfare. There is something yet to be done."

"Citzen Cimourdain," asked Robespierre, "where do you live?"

"Court of Commerce."

"Wait; so do I," said Danton; "you are my neighbor."

Robespierre added, —

"There is not a moment to be lost. To-morrow, you will receive your commission in due form, signed by all the members of the Committee of Public Welfare. This is a confirmation of the commission which will accredit you especially with the active representatives Phillieaux, Prieur de la Marne, Lecointre, Alquier, and others. We know who you are. Your powers are unlimited. You can make Gauvain general or send him to the scaffold. You will have your commission to-morrow at three o'clock. When will you start?"

"At four o'clock," said Cimourdain.

And they separated.

On his way home, Marat informed Simonne Evrard that he should go to the Convention the following day.

BOOK THIRD. — THE CONVENTION.

CHAPTER I.

THE CONVENTION.

We are approaching the mountain top.

Here is the Convention.

The attention must be fixed on this summit.

Never did anything higher appear on man’s horizon.

There is Mt. Himalaya, and there is the Convention.

The Convention is perhaps the culminating point in history.

During the lifetime of the Convention, for it lived as an assembly, people did not realize its significance. Its grandeur was exactly what escaped the contemporaries; they were too much frightened to be dazzled. There is a sacred horror about everything grand. It is easy to admire mediocrity and hills; but whatever is too lofty, a genius as well as a mountain, an assembly as well as a masterpiece, seen too near, is appalling. Every summit seems an exaggeration. Climbing wearies. The steepnesses take away one’s breath; we slip on the slopes, we are hurt by the sharp points which are its beauty; the foaming torrents betray the precipices, clouds hide the mountain tops; mounting is full of terror, as well as a fall. Hence, there is more dismay than admiration. People have a strange feeling of aversion to anything grand. They see abysses, they do not see sublimity; they see the monster, they do not see the prodigy. Thus the Convention was judged at first. The Convention was measured by the shortsighted, when it was made to be contemplated by eagles.

To-day it is in perspective, and it stands out against the deep sky in a serene and tragic distance — the immense profile of the Revolution.

II.

The fourteenth of July gave it birth.

The tenth of August thundered it forth.

The twenty-first of September founded it.

Tho twenty-first of September, the equinox, the equilibrium, Libra. The balance. In accordance with Romme’s suggestion, “t was under this sign of Equality and Justice that the Republic was proclaimed. A constellation announced its coming.

The Convention is the first avatar of the people. With the Convention, the great new page is turned, and the future of to-day begins.

Every idea must have a visible covering; every principle must have a dwelling-place; a church is God within four walls; every dogma must have a temple. When the Convention came into existence, there was a first problem to be solved; where to locate the Convention.

First, the Ménage was taken, then the Tuileries. A frame- work was raised, with scenery, a great camaieu, painted by David, seats systematically arranged, a square tribune, parallel pilasters, with socles like blocks, and long rectilinear stems, rectangular alveoles, where the multitude crowded, and which were called public tribunes; a Roman velarium, Greek draperies, and within these right angles and these straight lines the Convention was established; in this geometrical space the tempest was confined. On the tribune, the red cap was painted in gray. The Royalists began by laughing at this gray red cap, this artificial hall, this monument of pasteboard, this sanctuary of papier-maché, this pantheon of mud and spittle. How quickly all that was to disappear! The columns were of barrel staves, the arches of batten, the bas-reliefs of mastic, the entablatures were of deal boards; the statues were made of plaster, the marbles were paint, the walls were linen; and out of this temporary structure, France has made an everlasting institution.

When the Convention held its sessions in the hall of the Ménage, the walls were completed, covered with notices which had flooded Paris at the time of the return from Varennes. One read thus: “The king returns; whoever cheers him will be beaten, whoever insults him will be hanged.” Another, thus: “Peace. Hats on the head. He is going to pass before his judges.” Another, thus: “The king has aimed at the nation. He has hung fire; it is the nation’s turn to shoot now.” Another: “Law! Law!” It was within these walls that the Convention judged Louis XVI.

At the Tuilleries, where the Convention began to sit on the tenth of May, 1793, and which was called the National Palace, the place of assembly occupied the entire space between the Pavilion de I’Horloge, called Pavilion of Unity, and the Pavilion Marsan, called Pavilion of Liberty. The Pavilion de Flore was called the Pavilion of Equality. The assembly hall was reached by the grand staircase of Jean Bullant. Under the second story occupied by the assembly, the entire ground floor of the palace was a sort of long guardroom, filled with bundles and camp beds of the armed troops which watched over the Convention. The assembly had a guard of honor, called the “grenadiers of the Convention.”

A tricolored ribbon separated the castle, where the assembly was held, from the garden where the people came and went.

III.

Let us finish describing the hall where the sessions were held. Everything about that terrible place is full of interest.

What struck one’s notice on entering was a lofty statue of Liberty, standing between two large windows.

Forty-two metres long, ten metres wide, eleven metres high, these were the dimensions of what had once been the theatre of the king, and which was to be the theatre of the Revolution. The elegant, magnificent hall built by Vigarani for the courtiers disappeared beneath the rough timber-work which in ‘93 supported the weight of the people. This framework on which the public tribunes were erected, had for its only point of support, a single post, a detail worthy of note. This post was in one single piece, and was ten metres in length. Few caryatides have accomplished as much as this post; for years it held up the weight of the Revolution. It bore cheering, enthusiasm, insults, noise, tumult, the immense chaos of anger, riot. It never gave way. After the Convention, it saw the Conseil des Anciens. The eighteenth Brumaire relieved it.

Percier then replaced the wooden pillar with columns of marble, which were less durable.

The ideal of architecture is sometimes strange; the architect of the Rue de Rivoli had the trajectory of a cannon-ball for his ideal, the architect of Carlsruhe had a fan for his ideal; a gigantic bureau drawer seems to have been the ideal of the architect who planned the hall where the Convention first sat the tenth of May, 1793; it was long, high, and flat. On one of the long sides of the parallelogram was a wide semicircle; this was the amphitheatre, with seats for the representatives, but without tables or desk; Garan-Coulon, who wrote much, wrote on his knee; opposite the seats was the tribune; in front of the tribune, a bust of Lepelletier-Saint-Fargeau; behind the tribune, the president’s arm-chair.

The head of the bust came a little above the edge of the tribune, which caused its removal later on.

The amphitheatre was composed of nineteen semi-circular benches, rising one behind another; portions of the benches, prolonged the amphitheatre into the two corners.

Below, in the horseshoe at the foot of the tribune, stood the ushers.

On one side of the tribune, in a black wooden frame, was fastened to the wall a placard nine feet high, bearing on two pages, separated by a sort of sceptre, the declaration of the rights of man; on the other side was an empty space which was filled later by a similar frame containing the constitution of the year II., the two pages of which were separated by a sword. Above the tribune, above the head of the orator, from a deep box divided into two compartments, filled with people, fluttered three great tricolored flags resting almost horizontally on an altar bearing this word, “LAW.” Behind this altar rose, like the sentinel of free speech, an enormous Roman fasces, as tall as a column. Colossal statues straight against the wall, faced the representatives. The president had Lycurgus on his right and Solon on his left, above the Mountain was Plato.

The pedestals of these statues were simple dies, placed on a long, projecting cornice extending all around the hall and separating the people from the assembly. The spectators leaned their elbows on this cornice.

The black wooden frame containing the rights of man, reached to the cornice and cut into the design of the entablature, breaking the straight line; this caused Chabot to complain, “It is ugly,” he said to Vadier.

The heads of the statues were crowned alternately with wreaths of oak and laurel.

A green drapery, painted with similar crowns in a darker shade of green, fell in deep, straight folds from the cornice of the periphery, and entirely covered the wall of the lower part of the hall occupied by the assembly. Above this drapery, the wall was white and cold. In this wall, as if hollowed out with a punch, with neither moulding nor foliage were two rows of public tribunes, square at the base and round at the top; according to the rule, for Vitruvius was not dethroned; the archivaults were superimposed on the architraves. There were ten tribunes on each of the long sides of the hall, and at each of the two ends two huge boxes; in all, twenty-four. Into these the multitudes flocked.

The spectators in the lower row of tribunes overflowed on all the gunnels, and formed in groups on all the reliefs of the architecture. A long iron car, securely fastened breast high, served as a railing for the upper tribunes and protected the spectators from the crowding of the throngs coming up the staircase. Once, however, a man was pushed over into the assembly; he fell a little on Massieu, bishop of Beauvais, and so was not killed, and said: “Well! so a bishop is really good for something!”

The hall of the Convention could hold two thousand people: on days of insurrection, three thousand.

The convention had two sessions, one in the daytime, one in the evening.

The back of the president’s chair was round, decorated with gilt nails. His table rested on four winged monsters with a single foot, that seemed to have come out of the Apocalypse to be present at the Revolution. They looked as if they had been taken out of Ezekiel’s chariot to draw Samson’s tumbrel.

On the president’s table there was a great bell, almost as large as a church bell, a large copper inkstand, and a folio volume bound in parchment, which contained the official reports.

Decapitated heads, borne on the end of a pike, dripped blood on this table.

The tribune was reached by means of nine steps. These steps were high, steep, and difficult to mount; Gensonné stumbled one day as he was ascending them. “They are scaffold stairs!” he said. “Serve your apprenticeship,” exclaimed Carrier.

In the corners of the hall, where the wall semed too bare, the architect had placed fasces for ornamentation, with the axe outside.

On the right and on the left of the tribune, there were pedestals bearing two candelabra twelve feet high, each with four pairs of lamps. Each public box had similar candelabra. On the pedestals of these candelabra there were carved circles, which the people called “guillotine collars.”

The seats of the Assembly rose almost to the cornice of the tribunes; the representatives and the people could converse together.

The exits of the tribunes opened into a labyrinth of corridors, usually filled with a furious din.

The convention crowded the palace and overflowed into the neighboring mansions. Hôtel de Longueville and Hôtel de Coigny. Hôtel de Coigny was where the royal furniture was removed after the tenth of August, if a letter of Lord Bradford’s can be believed. It took two months to dismantle the Tuileries.

The commitee had their quarters in the vicinity of the hall; the Committees of Legislature, Agriculture, and Commerce were in the Pavilion Egalité; those of the Marine, Colonies, Finance, Assignats and Public Welfare in the Pavilion Liberté. The committee of War was in the Pavilion Unité.

The Committee of General Safety communicated directly with the Committee of Public Welfare by means of a dark passage lighted day and night by a reflector, where the spies of every party came and went. People never spoke there.

The bar of the Convention was several times removed. Usually, it was at the president's right hand.

At the ends of the hall, the vertical partitions which closed the concentric semicircles of the aniphithentre, left between them and the wall two narrow, deep lobbies from which opened two dark square doors. These were means of entrance and exit.

The representatives entered the hall directly by a door opening from the Terrace des Feuillants.

This hall, dimly lighted in the daytime by small windows, poorly lighted in the evening with ghastly lamps, had a strange nocturnal gloom about it. This dim illumination, together with the evening shades, made the sessions by lamplight dismal. The people could not see each other; from one end of the hall to the other, from right to left, groups of indistinct faces insulted each other. People met without recognizing one another. One day as Laignelot was hurrying to the tribune he ran against some one in the inclined passage. “Beg pardon, Robespierre,” he said. “Whom do you take me for?” replied a harsh voice. “Beg pardon, Marat,” said Laignelot.

Two of the lower tribunes, to the right and left of the president were reserved, for strange to say, there were privileged spectators at the Convention. These were the only tribunes having any drapery. In the centre of the architrave this drapery was caught up by two gold tassels. The tribunes for the people were bare.

The effect of all this was intense, savage, regular. Savage correctness; this is a suggestion of the whole Revolution. The hall of the Convention offers the most complete specimen of what artists have since called “architecture Messidor”; it was massive and slender. The builders of that period took symmetry for beauty. The last word of the Renaissance had been spoken under Louis XV., and a reaction followed. The noble in art had been carried to insipidity, and purity to monotony. There is such a thing as prudery in architecture. After the dazzling orgies in form and color of the eighteenth century, art was put on a diet, and allowed nothing but the straight line. This sort of progress ended in ugliness. Art reduced to a skeleton, was the result. This was the advantage of this kind of wisdom and abstinence; the style was so sober that it became lean.

Setting aside all political feeling, and looking at it from an architectural point of view, there was something about this hall that made one shiver. One recalled confusedly, the former theatre, the garlanded boxes, its blue and crimson ceiling, its facetted chandeliers, its girandoles, with diamond reflections, its dove-colored hangings, its profusion of cupids and nymphs on the curtains and draperies, the whole royal and erotic idyl painted, carved and gilded, which had filled this stern place with its smile, and one saw all about him these hard right angles, cold and sharp as steel; it was something like Boucher guillotined by David.

IV.

Whoever saw the Assembly never gave a second thought to the hall. Whoever saw the drama gave no thought to the theatre. Nothing was more deformed, nor more sublime. A pile of heroes, a herd of cowards. Wild beasts on a mountain, reptiles in a marsh. There swarmed, jostled, challenged, threatened, fought and lived, all those combatants who are to-day but phantoms.

A gathering of Titans.

On the right, the Gironde, — a legion of thinkers; on the left the mountain, — a group of athletes. On one side, Buissot, who received the keys of the Bastille; Barbaroux, whom the Marseilles troops obeyed; Kervélégan, who had the battalion of Brest garrisoned in the Faubourg Saint Marceau, under his hand; Gersonné, who established the supremacy of representatives over generals; the fatal Gaudet, to whom the queen showed the sleeping dauphin one night at the Tuileries, Gaudet kissed the child’s forehead and caused the father to lose his head; Salles, the fanciful denouncer of the intimacies between the Mountain and Austria; Sillery, the humpback of the Right, as Couthon was the cripple of the Left. Lause-Duperret, who when called a “rascal” by a journalist, invited him to dine with him, saying: “I know that rascal means simply a man who does not think as we do”; Rabaut-Saint-Etienne, who commenced his Almanac of

1790 with these words: “The revolution is ended”; Quinette, one of those who overthrew Louis XVI.; the Jansenist Camus, who framed the evil constitution of the clergy, believed in the miracles of the deacon Pâris, and knelt down every night before a Christ seven feet high, nailed against the wall of his room; Fauchet, a priest who, with Camille Desmoulins, caused the fourteenth of July; Isnarn, who committed the crime of saying “Paris will be destroyed,” at the same moment that Brunswick said: “Paris will be burned”; Jacob Dupont, the first one to exclaim “I am an Atheist,” and to whom Robespierre replied: “Atheism is aristocratic”; Lanjuinais, a stern, wise, and brave Breton; Ducos, the Euryalus of Boyer-Fonfréde; Rebecqui, the pylades of Barbaroux, Rebecqui gave in his resignation because Robespierre had not been guillotined; Richaud, who fought the permanency of the Sections; Lasource, who uttered this murderous apophthegm: “Woe to thankful nations!” and who afterwards at the foot of the scaffold, was to contradict himself by hurling this proud speech at those of the Mountain: “We die because the people are asleep, and you will die because the people will awaken”; Biroteau, who had the abolition of inviolability decreed, and was thus unconsciously the forger of the chopping-knife, and erected the scaffold for himself; Charles Villatte, who shielded his conscience behind this protestation: “I do not wish to vote under the knife”; Louvet, the author of *Faublas*, who was to end as a bookseller in the Palais Royal with Lodoïska behind the counter; Mercier, the author of the “Tableau de Paris,” who exclaimed: “Every king felt for the nape of his neck the twenty-first of January”; Marec, whose anxiety was the faction of ancient boundaries; the journalist Carra, who said to the executioner at the foot of the scaffold: “It annoys me to die. I should have liked to see what follows”; Vigée, who had the title of grenadier in the second battalion of Mayence-et-Loire, who, when threatened by the public tribunes, cried out: “I ask that at the first murmur of the public tribunes, we withdraw and march to Versailles, sword in hand!” Buzot, destined to die of hunger; Valazé, victim of his own dagger; Condorcet, who was to die at Bourg-la-Reine, changed to Bourg-Egalité, denounced by the Horace he carried in his pocket; Pétion, whose fate was to be worshipped by the multitude in 1792, and devoured by the wolves in 1794; twenty others beside, Pontécoulant, Marboz, Lidon, Saint-Martin, Dussaulx, the translator of “Juvenal,” who took part in the campaign of Hanover; Boileau, Bertrand, Lesterp-Beauvais, Lesage, Gomaire, Gardien, Mainvielle, Duplantier, Lacaze, Antiboul, and at their head a Barnave called Vergniaud.

On the other side, Antoine-Louise-Léon Florelle de Saint-Just, pale, with a low forehead, regular profile, mysterious eye, exceedingly melancholy, twenty-three years of age; Merlin de Thionville, whom the Germans called Feuer-Teufel, “fire devil”; Merlin de Douai, the guilty author of the “Law of the Suspected”; Soubrany, whom the people of Paris, on the first Prairial asked to have for a general; the former priest Lebon, holding a sword in his hand which had once scattered holy water; Billaud-Varennes, who foresaw the magistracy of the future, no judges but arbiters; Fabre d’Eglantine who made a charming discovery, the Republican calendar, just as Rouget de Lisle had a sublime inspiration, the Marseillaise, and neither were guilty of a second offence; the attorney of the Commune, who said: “A dead king is not a man less”; Grougon, who entered Tripstadt, Newstadt, and Spire, and saw the Prussian army flee; Lacroix, a lawyer turned general, made chevalier de Saint-Louis six days before the tenth of August; Fréron Thersite, son of Fréron-Zoile; Ruth the inexorable investigator of the iron press, destined for a great Republican suicide: — he was to kill himself the day the Republic died; Fouché, with the soul of a demon, and the face of a corpse; Camboulas, the friend of Father Duchesne, who said to Guillotin: “You belong to the club of the Feuillants, but your daughter belongs to the club of the Jacobins”; Jagot, who gave this savage reply to those complaining about the nakedness of the prisoner: “ A prison is a garment of stone; “Javogues, the terrible spoiler of the tombs of Saint-Denis; Osselin, the proscriber, who hid in his house Madame Charry, one of the proscribed; Bentabolle, who, when he presided, made signs to the tribunes to cheer or to hoot; the journalist Robert, the husband of Mademoiselle Kéralio, who wrote: “Neither Robespierre nor Marat come to my house; Robespierre may come whenever he wishes; Marat never”; Garan-Coulon, who had proudly demanded, when Spain interposed in the trial of Louis XVI., that the Assembly should not condescend to read a letter from a king in behalf of a king; Grégoire at first a worthy bishop of the Primitive Church, but who afterwards under the Empire obliterated the Republican Grégoire with Count Grégoire; Amar, who said, —

“The whole earth condemns Louis XVI. To whom then shall we appeal for judgment? To the planets?”

Rouyer, who was opposed to having the cannon fired from the Pont-Neuf the twenty-first of January, saying, —

“A king’s head will not make any more noise in falling than the head of any other man;” Chénier, André’s brother; Vadier, one of those who laid a pistol on the tribune; Tanis, who said to Momoro, —

“I want Marat and Robespierre to embrace each other at my table in my house.”

“Where do you live?”

“At Charenton.”

“I should have been surprised if it were anywhere else,” said Momoro. Legendre, who was the butcher of the French Revolution, as Pride was the butcher of the Revolution of England.

“Come, let me knock you down!” he exclaimed to Lanjuinais. And Lanjuinais replied, —

“First let it be decreed that I am an ox.” Collot d’Herbois, that melancholy comedian, wearing over his face the ancient mask with two mouths which said yes and no, approving with one what it blamed with the other, branding Carrier at Nantes and defying Châlier at Lyons, sending Robespierre to the scaffold, and Marat to the Pantheon; Génissieux who demanded the penalty of death for those who wore the medallion, “*Louis XVI. martyrisé*; Léonard Bourdon, the schoolmaster, who offered his house to the old man of Mont Jura; Topsent, the sailor; Goupilleau, the lawyer; Laurent Lecointre, a merchant; Duhem, a physician; Sergent, the sculptor; David, the painter; Joseph Egalité, a prince.

Besides these, Lecointe Puiraveau, who asked to have Marat decreed to be “in a state of lunacy;” Robert Lindet, the disquieting creator of that devil-fish, whose head was the Committee of General Safety, and which covered France with twenty-one thousand arms called the

Revolutionary Committees; Lebœuf, about whom Girey-Dupré, in his “Christmas of False Patriots” wrote this verse, —

“Lebœuf saw Legendre and bellowed.”

Thomas Paine, an American, and merciful; Anacharsis Cloots, a German baron, a millionaire, atheist, Hébertist, candid; the upright Lebas, friend of the Duplays; Rovére, one of those rare men who are wicked for wickedness’ sake, because art for art’s sake exists more than people are aware of; Charlier who wished to have the aristocrats formally addressed; Tallien, an elegist and cruel, who will cause the ninth Thermidor from love;

Cambacérès, an attorney who will be prince; Carrier, an attorney who will be a tiger; Laplanche, who exclaimed one day: “I demand priority for the alarm-gun;” Thuriot, who wanted to have the jury of the Revolutionary Tribunal vote by acclamation; Bourdon de I’Oise, who challenged Chambon, denounced Paine, and was denounced by Hébert; Fayau who proposed “to send an incendiary army” to la Vendée; Tavaux, who came near being a mediator between la Gironde and the Mountain; Venier, who asked to have the Girondist Chiefs and the chiefs of the Mountain serve as common soldiers; Rewbell, who shut himself up in Mayence; Bourbotte, who had his horse killed under him, at the taking of Saumur; Guimberteau, who directed the army of the coast of Cherbourg; Jard-Panvilliers, who directed the army of the coast of Rochelle; Lecarpentier, who directed the squadron of Cancale; Roberjot, for whom the ambush of Rastad was waiting; Prieur de la Marne, who in camp wore his old counter-epaulet of major; Levasseurde la Sarthe, who with a word decided Surrent, commandant of the battalion of Saint-Amand, to commit suicide; Reverchon, Maure, Bernard de Saintes, Charles Richard, Lequinio, and at the head of this group a Mirabeau called Danton.

Outside these two camps, and respected by both, rose a single man, Robespierre.

V.

Below crouched Terror, which can be noble, and Fear which is base. Beneath passion, beneath heroism, beneath devotion, beneath rage, was the melancholy crowd of the anonymous. The dregs of the Assembly were called la Plaine. It contained everything drifting; men who doubted, who hesitated, who recoiled, who procrastinated, those who were spies, each fearing somebody. The Mountain was the elite; la Plaine was the common crowd. La Plaine was summed up and condensed in Sieyés.

Sieyés was a deep man who had grown shallow. He had stopped at the Third-Estate and had never been able to rise to the height of the people. Certain minds are so constituted that they never pass beyond mediocrity. Sieyés called Robespierre a tiger, and he called Sieyés a mole. This metaphysician had arrived not at wisdom, but at prudence. He was the courtier, not the servitor of the Revolution. He took a shovel and went to work with the people in the Champ-de-Mars, harnessed to the same wagon with Alexandre de Beauharnais. He advised energy, but never made use of it. He said to the Girondists: “Put the cannon on your side.” There are thinkers who are fighters, such as Condorcet with Vergniaud, or Camille Desmoulins with Danton. There are thinkers who are anxious to live; such were with Sieyés.

The most generous vats have their dregs. Below even the Plaine there was the Marais. Hideous stagnation disclosing the transparencies of egotism. There the fearful trembled in dumb expectation. The infamous without shame; latent anger; revolt under servitude. They were cynically frightened; they had all the courage of cowardice; they preferred la Gironde and chose the Mountain; the final result depended on them; they poured out on the successful side; they delivered Louis XVI. to Vergniaud, Vergniaud to Danton, Danton to Robespierre, Robespierre to Tallien. They pilloried Marat while he was alive, and deified Marat after he was dead. They upheld everything till the day when they overthrew everything. Their instinct was to give a decisive push to everything that tottered. In their eyes, as they had been brought into service on condition that there should be solidity, to waver was to betray them. They were numbers, they were force, they were fear. Hence the daring of baseness.

They were the cause of May 31st, the eleventh Germinal, the ninth Thermidor; tragedies knotted by giants and untied by dwarfs.

VI.

With these men full of passion, were mingled men full of dreams. The Utopia was there in all its forms; in its warlike form, which admitted the scaffold, and in its innocent form which abolished capital punishment; a spectre when facing thrones, an angel when facing the people. Opposed to the fighting minds were the brooding minds. The first had war in their heads; the others, peace; one brain, Carnot, gave birth to fourteen armies; another brain, Jean Derby, meditated an universal democratic confederation. In the midst of this furious eloquence, among these voices howling and raging, there were fecund silences. Lakanal was silent, and thought out public national education; Lanthenas was silent, and created the primary schools; Revellière-Lepaux was silent, and dreamed of elevating philosophy to the dignity of religion. Others busied themselves with questions of detail, less pretentious and more practical. Guyton-Morveaux studied the salubrity of hospitals; Maire, the abolition of actual servitude; Jean-Bon-Saint-André, the suppression of arrest and imprisonment for debt; Romme, the proposition of Chappe; Duboë, the ordering of the archives; Coren-Fustier, the creation of the cabinet of Anatomy and the Museum of Natural History; Guyomard, river navigation and the damming of the Escaut.

Art had its monomaniacs; January 21st, while the head of the monarchy was falling in the place de la Revolution, Bézard, representative from l’Oise, went to see a picture by Rubens, found in a garret in Rue Saint-Lazare. Artists, orators, prophets, great men like Danton, petty men like Cloots, gladiators and philosophers, all were striving for the same end, — progress. Nothing disconcerted them. The grandeur of the Convention lay in finding out how much reality there was in what men called impossible. At one extreme, Robespierre had his eye fixed on Law; at the other extreme, Condorcet had his eye fixed on Duty.

Condorcet was a dreamer and a clear-sighted man; Robespierre was a man of executive ability; and sometimes in the final crises of worn-out societies, execution means extermination. Revolutions have two slopes, ascent and descent, and bear, terraced on these slopes, all the seasons from ice to flowers. Each zone of these slopes produces men suited to its climate, from those who live in the sun to those who live in lightning.

VII.

People showed each other the corner of the passage on the left where Robespierre whispered in the ear of Garat, Clavière’s friend, this terrible epigram: “Clavière has conspired wherever he has respired.” In this same nook, convenient for asides and whispered anger, Fabre and d’Eglantine had quarrelled with Romme, and reproached him for disfiguring his calendar by changing Fervidor to Thermidor.

People pointed out the corner where the seven representatives of the Haute-Garonne sat, elbow to elbow; the first called to pronounce their verdict on Louis XVI., they replied one after another: Mailhe, “death”; Delmas, “death”; Projean, “death”; Calés, “death”; Ayral, “death”; Julien, “death”; Dasaby, “death.”

An eternal reverberation which has filled all history, and which, since human justice exists, has always given the echo of the grave to the wall of the tribunal. People pointed out, among this riotous crowd of faces, all those men who had been the cause of the hubbub of tragic votes: — Paganel, who said, —

“Death. A king is of no use until he is dead.” Millaud, who said, —

"If death did not exist to-day, it would be necessary to invent it." The old Raffron du Trouillet, who said, —

"Death, come quickly!" Goupilleau, who exclaimed, —

"The scaffold immediately. Slowness aggravates death." Sieyés, who exclaimed with funereal conciseness, —

"Death." Thuriot, who rejected the appeal to the people proposed by Buzot, —

"What! primary assemblies! what! forty-four thousand tribunals! Trial without end. The head of Louis XVI. would have time to turn white before it would fall." Augustin-Bon Robespierre, who exclaimed after his brother, —

"I know nothing of a humanity which slaughters nations, and pardons despots; to ask a reprieve is to substitute an appeal to tyrants for the appeal to the people. Foussedoire, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's substitute, who said, —

"I have a horror of shedding human blood, but the blood of a king is not the blood of a man. Death." Jean-Bon-Saint-André, who said, —

"No free people, unless the tyrant dies." Lavicomterie, who proclaimed this formula, —

"While the tyrant breathes, liberty suffocates. Death." Chateauneuf-Randon, who cried, —

"The death of Louis the Last." Guyardin, who gave utterance to this wish, —

"Let the 'Barrière-Renversée' be executed (the Barrière-Renversée, or overthrown barrier, was the Barrière du Trône). Tellier, who said, —

"Let a cannon of the size of Louis XVI.'s head be forged, to use against the enemy."

And the indulgents: Gentil, who said, —

"I vote for imprisonment. To make a Charles I. is to make a Cromwell." Bancal, who said, —

"Exile. I want to see the first king of the universe condemned to learn a trade in order to earn his living." Albouys, who said, —

"Banishment. Let this living spectre go to wander about thrones." Zangiacomi, who said, —

"Let us keep Capet alive for a scarecrow." Chaillon, who said, —

"Let him live, I would not put to death one whom Rome would canonize."

While these sentences were falling from these stern lips, and one after another became historical, in the tribunes, women wearing low-necked dresses and jewels, holding the list, counted the voices and pricked each vote with a pin.

Wherever tragedy enters in, horror and pity remain.

To see the Convention during any period of its reign was to see the judgment of the last Capet over again; the legend of January 21st seemed mingled with all its proceedings; the dreadful assembly was full of those fatal breaths, which had blown over the old torch of monarchy lighted for eighteen centuries, and had put it out; the decisive trial for all kings in one king was like the crises in the great war on the Past; at whatever session of the Convention one was present, the shadow cast by the scaffold of Louis XVI. seemed to brood over it; the spectators related to each other the resignation of Kersaint, the resignation of Roland, how Duchâtel, the deputy of the Deux-Sèvres, being ill, was brought on his bed, and, while dying, voted for the king's life, which caused Marat to laugh; people looked around for the representative, forgotten by history to-day, who, after that session of thirty-seven hours, dropped on his bench overcome with weariness and sleep, and, awakened by the usher when it was his turn to vote, opened his eyes, said "Death!" and fell asleep again.

At the time Louis XVI. was condemned to die, Robespierre had eighteen months longer to live; Danton, fifteen months; Vergniaud, nine months; Marat, five months and three weeks; Lepelletier-Saint-Fargeau, one day. Short and terrible breath from human mouths!

VIII.

The people had one window opening on the Convention, the public tribunes, and when this was insufficient they opened the door, and the street entered the Assembly.

These invasions of the multitude into the senate are one of the most extraordinary sights of history. These irruptions were usually cordial. The street-crossing fraternized with the curule-chair. But it was a terrible cordiality which the people showed one day when in three hours they took the cannon and forty thousand guns, from the Invalides.

Each instant the session was interrupted by a march of men; deputations, petitions, homages, offerings were received at the bar. The pike of honor from the Faubourg-Saint-Antoine entered, borne by women. The English offered twenty thousand shoes to our bare-footed soldiers.

"Citizen Arnoux," said the *Moniteur*, "priest of Aubignan, commandant of the battalion de la Drôme, asks to march to the frontiers, and to have his parish preserved for him."

Delegates came from the sections, bringing on hand-barrows, dishes, patens, chalices, monstrances, piles of gold, silver, and silver-gilt, as offerings to the country from this multitude in rags, and asked as a recompense permission to dance the carmagnole, or Revolutionary dance, before the Convention. Chenard, Narbonne, and Vallière came singing verses in honor of the Mountain.

The Section of Mont-Blanc brought the bust of Lepelletier, and a woman placed a red cap on the head of the president, who kissed it; "the citizenesses of the Section du Mail" threw flowers to "the legislators"; the "pupils of the country" came, to the sound of music, to thank the Convention for having "prepared the prosperity of the age"; the women from the Section of the Gardes-Françaises offered roses; the women from the Section of the Champs-Elysées offered a wreath of oak leaves; the women from the Section of the Temple came to the bar to take the oath "to marry none but true Republicans"; the Section of Molière presented a medal of Franklin, which was decreed to be suspended from the crown of the statue of Liberty; the Enfants-Trouvés, declared "children of the Republic" filed in, dressed in the national uniform; the young girls from the Section of Ninety-two came in long, white dresses, and the following day the *Moniteur* contained this line: "The president received a bouquet from the hands of a young beauty."

The orators saluted the crowds; sometimes they flattered them, they said: "You are infallible, you are irreproachable, you are sublime"; the people have a childish side, they like these sugarplums. Sometimes the disturbance went through the Assembly, entering in a rage and going out peacefully, as the Rhône passes through Lake Leman, looking like mud when it enters, and deep blue when it leaves it.

Sometimes it was less pacific, and Henriot had gridirons for heating the cannon balls brought to the door of the Tuileries.

IX.

At the same time the Assembly freed itself from the revolution; it produced civilization. A furnace, but a forge. In this vat where terror boiled, progress fermented. Out of this chaos of shadow and this stormy flight of clouds, shone immense rays of light parallel to the eternal laws. Rays which have remained on the horizon and forever visible in the sky of the people, and which are justice, toleration, goodness, reason, truth, love.

The Convention promulgated this great axiom: “The liberty of one citizen ends where the liberty of another citizen begins,” which comprises in two lines the entire law of human society. It declared indigence sacred; it declared infirmity sacred, in the blind and the deaf-mutes who became wards of the State; maternity sacred, in the girl-mother, whom it consoled and relieved; childhood sacred, in the orphan that it caused to be adopted by the country; innocence sacred, in the acquittal of the accused, whom it indemnified. It branded the slave trade; it abolished slavery. It proclaimed civic joint responsibility. It decreed gratuitous instruction. It organized national education: by the normal school in Paris, by the central school in the principal towns, and primary schools in the Commune. It created conservatories and museums. It decreed unity of the Code, unity of weights and measures, unity of calculation by the decimal system. It established the finances of France, and caused public credit to follow the long monarchical bankruptcy. It brought the telegraph into use, gave endowed hospitals for the aged, clean hospitals to the sick, the Polytechnic school to instruction, the Bureau of Longitudes to science, the institute to the human mind.

It was cosmopolitan as well as national. Of the eleven thousand two hundred and ten decrees passed by the Convention, one third have a political aim, two thirds have a humanitarian aim. It declared morals to be the universal foundation of society, and conscience the universal foundation of law. And all this — slavery abolished, brotherhood proclaimed, humanity protected, human conscience rectified, the law of work transformed to a privilege, and from being onerous made helpful, national wealth strengthened, childhood brightened and assisted, letters and science propagated, light shed on every summit, help for all the wretched, encouragement of all principals, — all this the Convention brought about, having in its vitals that hydra, la Vendée, and on its shoulders that pile of tigers, the kings.

X.

Tremendous stage! All types; human, inhuman, and superhuman were there. Epic gathering of antagonism; Guillotine avoidmg David, Bagire insulting Chabot, Gaudet jeering at Saint-Just, Vergniaud scorning Danton, Louvet attacking Robespierre, Buzot denouncing Egalité, Chambon branding Pache, — all execrating Marat.

And how many other names ought to be recorded still! Armonville, called Bonnet-Rouge, because he would only sit in a Phrygian cap, a friend of Robespierre, and wishing “after Louis XVI. to have Robespierre guillotined” from a love of equilibrium; Massieu, a colleague and double of that good Lamourette, a bishop made to leave his name to a kiss; Lehardy du Morbihan stigmatizing the priests of Brittany; Barère, the man of majorities, who presided when Louis XVI. appeared at the bar, and who was to Paméla what Louvet was to Lodoïska: the orator Daunou, who said, “Let us gain time;” Dubois Crancé, in whose ear Marat stooped to whisper; the Marquis de Chateauneuf; Laclos, Hérault de Séchelles, who drew back before Henriot, exclaiming, “Gunners, to your guns!” Julien who compared the Mountain to Thermopylæ; Gamon, who wished to have one of the public tribunes reserved solely for women; Laloy, who bestowed the honors of the session on bishop Gobel, who came to the Convention to lay down the mitre and to don the red cap; Lecomte, who exclaimed, “So the honors are for any who will lay down his priestly robes!” Féraud, whose head Boissy-d’Anglas saluted, leaving it an open question to history, whether Boissy-d’Anglas saluted the head, that is to say the victim, or tbe pike, that is to say the assassins; the two brothers Duprat, one a Montagnard, the other, a Girondist, who hated each other, as did the two brothers Chénier.

At this tribune were spoken those giddy words which sometimes, though unknown to him who has uttered them, produce the prophetic accent of revolutions, and in consequence of which material facts seem abruptly to assume a strange discontent and passion, as if they had taken offence at the things they had just heard; passing events seem incensed at what is spoken; catastrophes arise full of wrath, and as if exasperated by the words of men. So a voice in the mountain is enough to let loose an avalanche. A word too much may be followed by a caving in. If the word had not been spoken, it would not have happened. It seems sometimes as if events were irascible.

It was in this way, by the chance word of an orator misunderstood, that Madame Elizabeth’s head was made to fall. At the Convention, intemperance of language was allowable. Threats flew and crossed each other in a discussion like firebrands in a conflagration.

Pétion. Robespierre come to the point.

Robespierre. The point is yourself, Pétion. I will come to it, and you will see it.

A Voice. Death to Marat.

Marat. The day Marat dies there will be no more Paris, and the day Paris perishes, there will be no more Republic.

Billaud-Varennes rises and says: “We are willing.” — Barère interrupts him: “You speak like a king.” Another day Phillipeaux said: “A member has drawn his sword on me.”

Audouin. President, call the assassin to order.

The President. Attention.

Audouin. President, I call you to order myself.

The people laughed rudely.

Lecointre. The priest of Chant-de-Bout complains of Fauchet, his bishop, who forbids him to marry.

A Voice. I don’t see why Fauchet, who has his mistresses, wishes to prevent others from having wives.

Another Voice. Priest take a wife!

The tribunes joined in the conversation. They addressed the Assembly familiarly. One day Representative Ruamps went up into the tribune. One of his hips was much larger than the other. One of the spectators cried out to him: “Turn that to the right side, for you have a cheek like David.” Such were the liberties that people took with the Convention. Once, however, in the tumult of April 11th, 1793, the president caused a disorderly spectator in the tribune to be arrested.

One day the session had old Buonarotti for a witness. Robespierre takes the floor and speaks two hours, looking at Danton, sometimes straight in the eye, which was serious, sometimes askance, which was worse. He thundered to the end, however. He ended in an explosion of indignation, full of ominous words: “We know the intriguers, we know the corrupters and the corrupted, we know the traitors; they are in this assembly. They hear us, we see them and our eyes do not leave their faces. Let them look above their heads, and they will see the sword of the law; let them look into their consciences and they will see their infamy. Let them be on their guard.” And when Robespierre had ended, Danton with his face turned to the ceiling, his eyes half-closed, one arm over the back of his seat, throws himself back and is heard to hum, —

“Cadet Roussel fait des discours
Qui ne sont pas longs quand ils sont courts.”

The imprecations called for retorts. — Conspirator! — Assassin! — Villain! — Factionist! — Moderate! — They denounced each other to the bust of Brutus which was there. Apostrophes, insults, challenges. Angry looks from one side to the other, threatening fists, pistols half shown, daggers half drawn. Tremendous blazing of the tribune. Some talked as if they were leaning against the guillotine. Heads wagged, ominous and terrible. Montagnards, Giroudins, Feuillants, Modérantistes, Terroristes, Jacobins, Cordeliers, eighteen regicide priests.

All these men! A mass of smoke driven in every direction.

XI.

Minds, a prey to the wind.

But this wind a miraculous wind.

To be a member of the Convention was to be a billow of the ocean. And this was true of the greatest. The impelling force came from above. In the Convention there was a will power belonging to all and belonging to none. This will power was an idea, indomitable and boundless, which blew from the height of heaven into the darkness below. We call this the Revolution. When this idea passed, it overcame one and lifted up another; it carried away some on the top of the wave, and shipwrecked others. This idea knew where it was going, and drove the gulf before it. To impute the Revolution to men is to impute the tide to the billows.

Revolution is an action of the Unknown. Call it good action or bad, according as you aspire to the future or the past, but leave it to whatever has caused it. It seems the common work of great events and great individuals combined, but it is in reality the resultant of events. Events spend, men pay. Events dictate, men sign. July 14 is signed Caraille Desmoulins, August 10 is signed Danton, September 2 is signed Marat, September 21 is signed Grégoire, January 21 is signed Robespierre; but Desmoulins, Danton, Marat, Grégoire, and Robespierre are mere clerks. The immense and awful author of these great pages has a name, God; and a mark, Fate. Robespierre believed in God. Of course!

Revolution is one form of the inherent phenomenon which presses us on every side, and which we call necessity.

Before this mysterious complication of benefits and suffering arises the "Why?" of history.

"Because." This, the reply of one who knows nothing, is also the reply of one who knows everything.

In the presence of these climacteric catastrophes which destroy and give life to civilization, one hesitates to judge the details. To blame or praise men on account of the result, is almost like praising or blaming figures on account of the sum total. Whatever is to happen, happens; whatever is to blow, blows. The eternal serenity does not suffer from these north winds. Above Revolutions, Truth and Justice reign, as the starry heavens above the tempest.

XII.

Such was this boundless Convention; an intrenched camp of the human race attacked by all the powers of darkness at once, the night fires of a besieged army of ideas, the immense bivouac of minds on the edge of a precipice. Nothing in history can be compared to this gathering, both senate and populace, conclave and street crossing, areopagus and public square, tribunal and the accused.

The Convention always yielded to the wind; but the wind came from the mouth of the people and was the breath of God.

And to-day, after eighty years have passed, each time that the Convention comes up before the thought of a man, whatever he may be, historian or philosopher, that man stops and meditates. It is impossible not to give attention to this great procession of shades.

CHAPTER II.

MARAT IN THE LOBBY.

As he had announced to Simonne Evrard, Marat went to the Convention the next day after the meeting in Rue du Paon.

At the Convention there was present a Maratist marquis, Louis de Montaut, the one who later on presented a decimal clock, surmounted by a bust of Marat, to the Convention.

As Marat entered, Chabot had just approached Montaut.

“Ci-devant,” he said.

Montaut raised his eyes.

“Why do you call me ci-devant?”

“Because that is what you are.”

“I?”

“Since you were a marquis.”

“Never.”

“Bah!”

“My father was a soldier, my grandfather was a weaver.”

“What are you singing about, Montaut?”

“My name is not Montaut?”

“What is it then?”

“I call myself Maribon.

“Indeed,” said Chabot, “it is all the same to me.”

And he added between his teeth, —

“He won’t be a marquis.”

Marat stopped in the passageway at the left and looked at Montaut and Chabot.

Every time that Marat entered, it created a commotion, but at a distance from him. All around him it was silent. Marat paid no attention to it. He scorned the “croaking in the marsh.”

In the obscurity of the lower row of seats, Conpé de l’Oise, Prunelle, Villars, a bishop who later became a member of the French Academy, Boutroue, Petit, Plaichard, Bonet, Thibaudeau, Valdruche, pointed him out one to another.

“See, Marat!” “Is he ill?”

“Yes, for he is in his dressing-gown.”

“In his dressing-gown?”

“By Heavens, yes!”

“He dares to do anything.”

“He dares to come to the Convention in this way!”

“Since he came here one day crowned with laurels, he may as well come in his dressing-gown!”

“Face of copper, teeth of verdigris.”

“His dressing-gown looks new.”

“What is it made of?”

“Of rep.”

“Striped.”

“Look at his lapels.”

“They are fur.”

“Tiger skin.”

“No, ermine.”

“Imitation.”

“And he has on stockings.”

“That is strange.”

“And buckles on his shoes.”

“Of silver!”

“The sabots of Camboulas will not forgive him that.”

On the other benches they pretended not to see Marat. The people talked of other things. Santhonax addressed Dussaulx.

“Dussaulx, you know—”

“What?”

“The ci-devant Count de Brienne?”

“Who was at la Force with the ci-devant duke de Villeroy?”

“Yes.”

“I knew both of them. Well?”

“They were so much frightened that they saluted all the redcaps of all the turnkeys, and one day they refused to play a game of piquet because they were given a pack of cards with kings and queens.”

“Well?”

“They were guillotined yesterday.”

“Both of them?”

“Both of them.”

"On the whole, how did they behave in prison?"

"Like cowards."

"And how were they on the scaffold?"

"Fearless."

And Dussaulx uttered this exclamation, —

"It is easier to die than to live."

Barère was in the midst of reading a report concerning la Vendée. Nine hundred men of Morbihan bad set out with cannon to the relief of Nantes. Redon was threatened by the peasants. Paimbœuf was attacked. A fleet was cruising about Maindrin to prevent invasion. From Ingrande to Maure, the entire left bank of the Loire was bristling with Royalist batteries. Ten thousand peasants had possession of Pornic. They were crying, "Long live the English!" A letter from Santerre to the Convention, which Barère read, ended thus: "Seven thousand peasants have attacked Vannes. We repulsed them and they left four cannon in our hands—"

"And how many prisoners?" interupted a voice.

Barére continued,— "Postscript of the letter: 'We have no prisoners, because we no longer take any.'"

Marat, always immovable, was not listening; he seemed to be absorbed by his own stern thoughts. In his hand he held a paper which he crumpled between his fingers, and if any one had unfolded this paper he could have read these lines in Momoro's handwriting and which were probably a reply to some question asked by Marat.

"Nothing can be done against the sovereign power of the delegated commissioners, above all, against the delegates of the Committee of Public Welfare. It was in vain that Génisseux said, in the session of May sixth: 'Each commissioner is more than a king,' it was of no use. They have power over life and death. Massade, at Angers; Trullard, at Saint-Amand; Nyon, near General Marcé's; Parrein, with the army of the Sables; Millier, with the army of the Niort; — each is all-powerful. The club of the Jacobins has gone so far as to name Parrein, brigadier-general. Circumstance pardons everything. A delegate from the Committee of Public Welfare holds in check a commander-in-chief."

Marat finished crumpling the paper, put it in his pocket, and went slowly towards Montaut and Chabot who were still talking and had not seen him enter.

Chabot was saying, —

“Maribon or Montaut, listen to this: I come from the Committee of Public Welfare.”

“And what are they doing there?”

“They are sendmg a noble to watch a priest.”

“Ah!”

“A noble like yourself—”

“I am not a noble,” said Montaut.

“To a priest—”

“Like yourself.”

“I am not a priest,” said Chabot.

Both burst out laughing.

“Give the particulars of the story,” continued Montaut.

“Here they are. A priest called Cimourdain has been delegated with full powers to a viscount named Gauvain; this viscount has command of the investigating column of the coast army. The question is to prevent the noble from cheating, and the priest from treason.”

“That is very simple,” replied Montaut; “all that is necessary is to introduce death into the matter.”

“I come for that,” said Marat.

They raised their heads.

“Good-morning, Marat,” said Chabot, “you come but seldom to our sessions.”

“My physician has ordered baths for me,” replied Marat.

“You must beware of baths,” replied Chabot. “Seneca lied in a bath.”

Marat smiled.

“Chabot, there is no Nero here.”

“You are here,” said a harsh voice.

It was Danton who passed by on his way up to his seat.

Marat did not turn around.

He bent his head down between the two faces of Montaut and Chabot.

“Listen, I have come for a serious matter, one of us three must propose to-day the draft of a decree to the Convention.”

“Not I,” said Montaut, “they would not listen to me, I am a marquis.”

“They would not listen to me,” said Chabot, “I am a Capuchin.”

“And they would not listen to me,” said Marat, “I am Marat.”

There was a silence between them.

It was not easy to question Marat when he was absorbed in thought. However Montaut ventured to ask, —

“Marat, what is the decree you wish for?”

“A decree for punishing with death any military leader who lets a rebel prisoner escape.”

Cabot interrupted him.

“This decree already exists; it was voted the last of April.”

“Then it is as good as a dead letter,” said Marat. “All through la Vendee they are letting prisoners go, and giving them protection with impunity.”

“Marat, that is because the decree is not in force.”

“Chabot, it must be given new life.”

“Without doubt.”

“And to do that, it is necessary to speak to the Convention.”

“The end will be reached,” added Montaut, “if the Committee of Public Welfare have the decree posted up in all the communes of la Vendée and make two or three good examples.”

“Of the great leaders,” continued Chabot. “Of the generals.”

Marat growled: “To be sure, that will do.”

“Marat,” continued Chabot, “go yourself and say so to the Committee of Public Welfare.”

Marat looked at him full in the face, which was not agreeable even for Chabot.

“Chabot,” he said, “the Committee of Public Welfare is at Robespierre’s house; I do not go to Robespierre’s house.”

“I will go myself,” said Montaut.

“Good,” said Marat.

The following day an order from the Committee of Public Welfare was sent in every direction, commanding notices to be put up in the towns and villages of Vendée, and the strict execution of the decree of death to any one conniving in the escape of brigands and rebel prisoners.

This decree was but a first step; the Convention was to go still farther. Some months later, the eleventh Brumaire, year II. (November, 1793), with regard to Laval which had opened its doors to the Vendéan fugitives, it decreed that any town which should give asylum to the rebels should be demolished and destroyed.

In their turn the princes of Europe, in the Duke of Brunswick’s manifesto, inspired by the refugees, and framed by the Marquis de Linnon, intendant of the Duke of Orleans, declared that all Frenchmen taken armed should be shot, and that if a hair fell from the king’s head, Paris should be razed.

Cruelty against barbarism.

PART THIRD. — IN VENDEE.

BOOK FIRST. — LA VENDEE.

CHAPTER I.

THE FORESTS.

At that time there were seven terrible forests in Brittany. The Véndèan war was a priestly revolt. The forests were an auxiliary to this revolt. The spirits of darkness give one another aid.

The seven Black Forests of Brittany were the forest of Fougères, which bars the way between Dol and Avranches; the forest of Princé, eight leagues in circumference; the forest of Paimpont, full of ravines and brooks, almost inaccessible from the side of Baignon, but easily penetrated from Concornet, a royalist market-town; the forest of Rennes, from which was heard the tocsin of the republican parishes, always numerous near the towns (it was there that Puysaye ruined Focard); the forest of Machecoul, where the wild beast Charette had his den; the forest of la Garnache, which belonged to la Trémoille, Gauvain, and the Rohans: the forest of Broceliande, which belonged to the fairies.

A nobleman in Brittany had the title of “Seigneur of the Seven Forests.” It was the Viscount de Fontenay, a Breton prince.

For the Breton prince was entirely distinct from the French prince. The Rohans were Breton princes. Garnier de Saintes, in his report to the Convention, the fifteenth Nivose, year II, thus described the Prince de Talmont: “That Capet of the brigands, Sovereign of the Marne and of Normandy.”

The history of the forests of Brittany, from 1792 to 1800, would form a history by itself, and it would mingle like a legend in the great scheme of La Vendée.

History has its truth, so has legend. Legendary truth is of a different nature from historical truth. Legendary truth is invention, the result of which is reality. Still, history and legend have the same end, depicting man eternal in the man of the passing moment.

La Vendée can only be fully explained by supplementing history with legend; history is necessary for the effect as a whole, and legend for the detail.

We may say that La Vendée is worth the trouble. La Vendée is a prodigy.

That war of the Ignorant, so stupid and so splendid, abominable and magnificent, desolated France and made it proud. La Vendée is a scar which is a glory.

At certain times human society has its problems; problems which are resolved into light for the wise, and for the ignorant into obscurity, violence, and barbarity. The philosopher hesitates to bestow blame. He takes account of the trouble that is caused by the problems. The problems do not pass without casting beneath them a shadow like that of clouds.

If you would understand la Vendée, imagine this antagonism: on one side the French Revolution; on the other, the Breton peasant. Opposite these unequalled events, seriously threatening all benefits at once, outburst of angry civilization, outburst of mad progress, boundless and unintelligible improvement, place this savage, serious and strange, this man with a clear eye and long hair, living on milk and chestnuts, limited to his thatched roof, his hedge, and his ditch, distinguishing each neighboring hamlet by the sound of its bell, using water only for drink, wearing a leather jacket ornamented with arabesques in silk, uneducated and wearing embroidered garments, tattooing his clothes as his ancestors the Celts tattooed their faces, respecting a master in his executioner, speaking a dead language, which causes him to dwell in a mental tomb, goading his oxen, whetting his scythe, hoeing his grain, kneading his buckwheat bread, venerating first his plough, then his grandmother, believing in the Blessed Virgin and the White Lady, a devotee before the altar and also before the tall, mysterious stone standing in the midst of the moor, a husbandman in the field, a fisherman on the sea-coast, a poacher in the thicket, loving his kings, his seigneurs, his priests, his lice; thoughtful, often perfectly still for hours together on the great deserted sandy shore, listening gloomily to the sound of the sea.

And ask yourself if this blind being could accept this light.

CHAPTER II.

THE MEN.

The peasant is dependent on two things; the field which yields his nourishment, the wood where he hides.

It would be difficult for one to imagine what the forests of Brittany were; they were towns. Nothing could be more silent, more mute and wild than those inextricable tangles of thorns and branches; those widespread thickets were the dwelling-places of silence and repose, no desert could seem more dead and more sepulchral.

If the trees could have been cut away suddenly and with a single stroke, like lightning, a swarm of men would have come abruptly into view.

Round, narrow pits, screened outside with coverings of stones and branches, first placed vertically, then horizontally, spread out underground like tunnels, ending in dark, gloomy chambers; that is what Cambyses found in Egypt, and Westermann found in Brittany; the former were in the desert, the latter in Brittany; in the caves of Egypt there were dead men, in the caves of Brittany there were living beings. One of the wildest clearings in the wood of Misdon, completely perforated with galleries and cells where a mysterious people came and went, was called “la Grande ville.” Another clearing not less deserted above ground, and not less inhabited below, was called “la Place royale.”

This subterranean life had existed in Brittany, from time immemorial. Man had always fled before man there. Hence these dens of reptiles hollowed out under the trees. They dated back to the Druids, and some of these crypts were as ancient as the cromlechs. The larvæ of legend and the monsters of history, all passed over this black country, Teutatès, Cæsar, Hoël, Néomènes, Geoffrey of England, Alain-gant-de-fer, Pierre Mauclerc, the French house of Blois, the English house of Montfort, kings and dukes, the nine barons of Brittany, the judges of the Grands-Jours, the counts of Nantes quarrelling with the counts of Rennes, highwaymen, banditti, the Free companies, René II., Viscount de Rohan, the governors for the king, the “good Duke de Chaulnes,” hanging peasants under Madame de Sévigné’s window , in the fifteenth century, the seigneurial butcheries; in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the religious wars; in the eighteenth century, thirty thousand dogs trained to hunt men; under this frightful trampling underfoot the people resolved to disappear. The Troglodytes to escape the Celts, the Celts to escape the Romans, the Britons to escape the Romans, the Huguenots to escape the Catholics, the smugglers to escape the excisemen, — each in turn took refuge first in the forests, then under the ground. The resource of wild beasts. Thus it is that tyranny reduces nations. For two thousand years, despotism in all its forms, conquest, feudalism, fanaticism, the exchequer, all hunted down this wretched, desperate Brittany; a sort of inexorable battue, which only ceased in one form to begin under another. The men went to ground.

Dismay, which is a kind of anger, was all ready in their souls, the caves were all ready in the woods, when the French Republic burst forth. Brittany rose in revolt, finding herself oppressed by this forced deliverance, the customary mistake of slaves.

CHAPTER III.

MEN AND FORESTS IN CONNIVANCE.

The tragic forests of Brittany resumed their old rôle again and became the servants and accomplices of this rebellion, as they had been of all the others.

The subsoil of these forests was a sort of madrepore, pierced and traversed in every direction by a labyrinth of saps, cells, and galleries. Each of these blind cells sheltered five or six men. The difficulty was in getting air there. There are certain strange figures, which explain this powerful organization of the widespread peasant revolt. In Ille-et-Vilaine, in the forest of Pertre, asylum of the Prince of Talmont, not a breath could be heard, not a human footstep was to be found, and yet there were six thousand men there with Focard. In Morbihan, in the forest of Meulac, no one was seen, and yet eight thousand men were there. These two forests, the Pertre and Meulac are not numbered among the great forests of Brittany. If one entered them it was terrible. These deceitful thickets, full of combatants crouching in a sort of underground labyrinth, were like enormous concealed sponges, from which, under pressure of that gigantic foot, the Revolution, gushed forth civil war.

Invisible battalions were lying in wait. These unknown armies meandered beneath the Republican troops, came suddenly out of the ground and then went back again, leaping forth in vast numbers and vanished out of sight, it was everywhere and nowhere; an avalanche, then dust, giants with the gift of diminishing in size; giants for fighting, dwarfs for disappearing. Jaguars with the habits of moles.

Beside the forests there were the woods. Just as below cities there are villages, so below forests there are thickets. The forests were bound together by a maze of woods spreading in every direction. The ancient castles, which were fortresses; hamlets, which were camps; freeholds which were enclosures of ambushes and snares; farms, surrounded with trenches and palisades of trees, — these were the meshes of that net which caught the Republican armies.

This whole was called the Bocage.

There was the wood of Misdon, in the centre of which was a pond, and which belonged to Jean Chouan; there was the wood of Gennes, belonging to Taillefer; there was the wood of la Huisserie, belonging to Gouge-le-Bruant; the wood of la Charnie, belonging to Courtillé-le-Batard, called the apostle Saint Paul, chief of the camp of the Vache-Noire; the wood of Burgault, belonging to that puzzling Monsieur Jacques, destined to a mysterious end in the vault of Juvardeil; there was the wood of Charreau, where Pimousse and Petit-Prince, attacked by the garrison of Châteauneuf, seized the grenadiers in the republican ranks around the waist and carried them away prisoner; the wood of la Heureuserie, scene of the rout of the post of the Longue-Faye; the wood of Aulne, from which the route between Rennes and Laval could be seen; the wood of la Gravelle, which a prince of la Trémoille won in playing bowls; the wood of Lorges on the Côtes-de-Nord, where Charles de Boishardy ruled after Bernard de Villeneuve; the wood of Bagnard near Fontenay, where Lescure challenged Chalbos, who, although one against five, accepted the offer; the wood of la Durondais, formerly disputed by Alain le Redru and Hérispoux, son of Charles the Bald; the wood of Croqueloup, on the boundary of that moor where Coquereau sheared the prisoners; the wood of la Croix-Bataille which lent its aid to the Homeric insults given by Jambe-d’Argent to Morière and by Morière to Jambe-d’Argent; the wood of la Saudraie, which we have seen scoured by a Parisian battalion. There were many others beside.

In several of these forests and woods, there were not only subterranean villages grouped about the leader’s burrow, but there were also veritable hamlets of low huts concealed under the trees, and so numerous that sometimes the forest was filled with them. Often their smoke betrayed them. Two of these hamlets in the wood of Misdon have become famous, Lorrière, near Létang, and the group of huts called Rue-de-Bau, on the side of Saint-Ouen-les-Toits.

The women lived in the huts, and the men, in the caves. For this war they made use of the galleries of fairies and the old Celtic mines. They brought food to the men buried in the caves. There were those who were forgotten and died of hunger. Beside, there were some who were not bright enough to know how to open their pits. Usually, the cover made of moss and branches, was so artistically fashioned that although impossible to distinguish it outside in the grass, it was very easily opened and closed from within. These retreats were hollowed out with great care. They threw the earth which they removed from the cave into some neighboring pond. The walls inside and the ground were covered with ferns and moss. They called this habitation “la loge.” They thrived in them although they were without daylight, without fire, without bread, and without air.

To rise without precaution among the living, and to exhume themselves unseasonably was a serious matter. They might find themselves among the legs of a marching army. Terrible woods; snares with a double trap. The Blues did not dare to enter; the Whites did not dare to leave.

CHAPTER IV.

THEIR LIFE UNDERGROUND.

The men in these dens became restless. Sometimes at night, in spite of the danger, they would leave them and go forth to dance on the neighboring moor. Or else they prayed, to kill time. “All day long,” said Bourdoiseau, “Jean Chouan made us tell our beads.”

It was almost impossible when the time came round, to prevent those of the lower Maine from leaving to take part in the Fête de la Gerbe. Some had their own ideas. Denys, called Tranche-Montagne, disguised himself as a woman to go to see the comedy at Laval; then he went back to his cave.

They would suddenly make away with themselves, leaving the dungeon for the grave.

Sometimes they would raise the cover of their hole and listen for distant fighting; they followed the struggle with their ears. The firing of the Republicans was regular, that of the Royalists, intermittent; this was their guide. If the firing of the platoons ceased suddenly, it was a sign that the Royalists were worsted; if the irregular firing continued and seemed to disappear in the distance, it was a sign that they had the advantage. The Whites always pursued; the Blues never, for the country was against them.

These underground warriors were admirably drilled. Nothing was swifter than their communications, nothing more mysterious. They had broken down all the bridges, they had destroyed all the wagons, and yet they found a way to tell each other everything and to warn each other in season. Relays of emissaries were established from forest to forest, from village to village, from farm to farm, from hut to hut, from bush to bush.

This stupid-looking peasant went along carrying messages in his stick, which was hollow.

A former constituent, Boétidoux, to enable them to go from one end of Brittany to the other, furnished them with Republican passports of the new design, with a blank for their names, of which this traitor had large bundles. It was impossible to detect them. “Secrets entrusted to more than four hundred thousand individuals,” said Puysaye, “were religiously kept.”

It seemed that this square, enclosed on the south by the boundary of the Sables to Thouars, on the east by the boundary of Thouars to Saumur and by the river of Thoué, on the north by the Loire, and on the west by the ocean, had a common nervous system, so that, not a point of this ground could stir without the whole being set in motion. In a twinkling, they were informed of Noirmoutier at Luçon, and the camp of La Loué knew what was going on in the camp of Croix-Morineau. One would have said that the birds had something to do with it. Hoche wrote, the seventh Messidor, year III: “One would have believed that they had telegraphs.”

They had clans, like the Scotch. Each parish had its captain. My father took part in that war, and I am able to say something about it.

CHAPTER V.

THEIR LIFE IN TIME OF WAR.

Many of them had no arms but pikes. They had plenty of good fowling-pieces. Their were no more skilful marksmen than the poachers of the Bocage and the smugglers of Loroux.

They were strange, frightful, fearless warriors. The decree to raise three hundred thousand men caused the tocsin to sound in six hundred villages. The crackling of fire burst from every point at once. Le Poitou and Anjou exploded the same day. We may say that the first peal of thunder was heard before 1792, the eighth of July, a month before the tenth of August, on the moor of Kerbader. Alain Redeler, to-day forgotten, was the forerunner of La Rochejaquelein and Jean Chouan. The royalists compelled all able-bodied men to march, under pain of death. They requisitioned horses, wagons, and provisions. Immediately, Sapinaud had three thousand soldiers; Cathelineau, ten thousand; Stofflet, twenty thousand, and Charette was master of Noirmontier. The Viscount de Scépeaux roused Haut Anjou; the Chevalier de Dieuzie, l’Entre-Vilaine-et-Loire; Tristan-l’Hermite, the Bas-Maine; the barber Gaston, the town of Guéménée; and the Abbé Bornier, all the rest. A little thing was enough to raise these multitudes.

In the tabernacle of a priest who had taken the oaths, a *préte jureur* as he was called, they placed a large black cat which jumped out suddenly during the mass. “It is the devil!” cried the peasants, and the whole canton rose in revolt. A breath of fire came from the confessionals.

For attacking the Blues and for leaping ravines, they had a long stick, fifteen feet in length, the *ferte*, a weapon and an aid to flight. In the thickest of the conflict, when the peasants were attacking the Republican squares, if they met a cross or a chapel on the battlefield, ail would fall on their knees, repeating their prayers under fire; as soon as their beads were told, those who were left jumped to their feet and rushed on the enemy. Alas, what giants! They loaded their guns as they ran, that was their talent. They could be made to believe anything; some priests showed them other priests whose necks they had reddened with a drawn cord, and said to them: “These are the guillotined brought back to life.” They had their fits of chivalry; they honored Fesque, a republican ensign, who let himself be sabred without dropping his flag. These peasants jested; they called the married priests Republicans: *des sans-calottes devenus sans-culottes.*

At first, they were afraid of the cannons; afterwards they jumped on them with their sticks and took them. To begin with, they took a fine bronze cannon, which they named the Missionary; then another dating back to the Catholic wars and on which were engraved the arms of Richelieu and a figure of the Virgin; they called it Marie-Jeanne. When they lost Fontenay, they lost Marie-Jeanne, around which six hundred peasants fell without flinching; then they recaptured Fontenay in order to recapture Marie-Jeanne, and they brought it back under the flag embroidered with a fleur-de-lis, covering it with flowers, and made the women kiss it as they passed by. But two cannons were very little. Stofflet had taken Marie-Jeanne; Cathelineau, jealous, left Poir-en-Mange, besieged Jallais, and took a third cannon; Forest attacked Saint Florent and took a fourth. Two other captains, Chouppes and Saint-Pol, did better; they represented cannons with trunks of trees and gunners with manikins, and with this artillery, which they laughed about heartily, they drove back the Blues at Mareuil. This was the period of their greatness.

Later, when Chalbos routed La Marsonnière, the peasants left thirty-two cannon, with the arms of England, behind them on the dishonored battlefield. Then England paid the French princes, and they sent “the funds to Monseigneur,” Nantiat wrote, the tenth of May, 1794, “because Pitt had been told that it was proper to do so.” Mellinet, in a report the thirty-first of March, said: “The cry of the rebels is: ‘Long live the English!’”

The peasants lingered behind to plunder. These devotees were robbers. Savages have vices. It was through these that civilization captured them later. Puysaye says, Vol. II., page 187: “I have several times saved the town of Plélan from pillage.” And further on, page 434, he abstains from entering Montfort: “I made a circuit to prevent the pillage of the houses of the Jacobins.” They plundered Cholet; the sacked Challans. After having missed Granville, they pillaged Ville-Dieu. They called the countrymen who joined the Blues, “the Jacobin crowd,” and they made an end of these sooner than any others. They loved carnage like soldiers, and massacre like brigands. To shoot the “Patauds” that is the *bourgeois*, pleased them; they called it “se décarémer or *unrelenting*. At Fontenay, one of their priests, the Curé Barbotin, struck down an old man with his sabre. At Saint-Germain-sur-Ille, one of their captains, a nobleman, shot the attorney of the

Commune dead, and took his watch. At Machecoul, they cut down the Republicans regularly, at the rate of thirty a day for five weeks; each chain of thirty was called “the rosary.” They placed the chain in front of a ditch and shot the men; as they were shot they fell into the ditch sometimes alive, but they were buried all the same. We have already seen this custom. Joubert, president of the district, had his hands sawed off. They put sharp-edged handcuffs, forged for the purpose, on the prisoners of the Blues. They put them to death in the public square, to the sound of war cries. Charette, who signed: “Fraternity; Chevalier Charette,” and who, like Marat, wore a handkerchief on his head, tied above his eyebrows, burned the city of Porni and the inhabitants in their houses.

At this time, Carrier was frightful. Terror answered to terror. The insurgent Breton had almost the same appearance as the insurgent Greek, with his short jacket, gun slung over his shoulder, leggings and wide breeches similar to the Greek fustand; the peasant boy resembled the Greek klephth. Henri de la Rochejaquelein, at the age of twenty-one, set out for this war with a stick and a pair of pistols.

The Vendéan army numbered a hundred and fifty-four divisions. They made regular sieges; they held Bressuire blockaded for three days. One Good Friday, ten thousand peasants, cannonaded the town of the Sables with red hot balls. They succeeded in destroying fourteen republican cantonments, from Montigné to Courbeveilles, in one single day.

On the high wall at Thouars, this superb dialogue was heard between La Rochejaquelein and a peasant boy, —

“Carl!”

“Here I am.”

“Let me climb up on your shoulders.”

“All right.”

“Your gun.”

“Take it.”

And la Rochejaquelein leaped into the town, and the towers which Dugueselin had beseiged, were taken without ladders.

They preferred a cartridge to a louis-d’or. They wept when they lost sight of their own belfry. To flee seemed easy to them; then their chiefs would exclaim: “Throw away your sabots, but keep your guns!” When ammunition gave out, they told their beads and took powder from the ammunition wagons of the Republicans; later d’Elbée demanded powder from the English. When the enemy drew near, if they had any wounded, they concealed them in the tall wheat or among the virgin ferns, and after the affair was ended came back to get them.

They wore no uniforms. Their clothing was in tatters. Peasants and noblemen were dressed in the first rags they could find. Roger Mouliniers wore a turban and a cloak taken from the wardrobe of the theatre of La Fleche; the Chevalier de Beauvilliers wore an attorney’s robe and a woman’s hat over a woollen cap. All wore the white scarf and belt; the different ranks were distinguished by knots. Stofflet had a red knot; La Rochejaquelein, a black knot; Wimpfen, a semi-Girondist, who never left Normandy, wore the brassart of the Carabots of Caen. They had women in their ranks; Madame de Lescure, who became Madame de Rochejaquelein later; Thérese de Mollien, La Rouaire’s mistress, who burned the list of the parish chiefs; Madame de La Rochefoucauld beautiful, young, sword in hand, rallying the peasants at the foot of the great towers of the castle of Puy-Rousseau; and Antoinette Adams, called Chevalier Adams, who was so courageous that after her capture when she was shot, they stood out of respect.

This epic time was cruel. The people were mad. Madame de Lescure purposely made her horse walk over the disabled republicans lying on the ground; “dead,” said she; perhaps they were only wounded.

Sometimes the men were traitors; the women, never. Mademoiselle Fleury of the Théâtre Français left Rouarie for Marat, but from love. The captains were often as ignorant as the soldiers; Monsieur de Sapinaud did not know how to spell; he wrote “*orions*” for *aurions*, “*couté*” instead of *côté*.

The leaders hated each other; the captains of the Marais cried: “Down with those of the High Country!” Their cavalry was not very numerous, and difficult to bring together. Puysaye wrote: “A man who would cheerfully give me his two sons grows cold if I ask for one of his horses.” Fertes, pitchforks, scythes, guns old and new, hunting knives, spits, cudgels tipped and studded with iron, such were their arms; some of them carried crosses made of dead men’s bones.

They made their attacks with loud cries, springing forth suddenly on every hand, from the woods, the hills, the underbrush, hollow paths; they formed crescents, killing, exterminating, blasting, and disappearing. When they passed through a Republican town, they cut down the Tree of Liberty, burned it and danced in a circle around the fire. All their pleasures were at night. This was the Vendéan rule, always to be unexpected. They would go fifteen leagues in silence without bending a blade of grass on their way. When evening came after determining between the chiefs and the war council, the place where they were to surprise the Republican posts the next morning, they would load their guns, mumble their prayers, take off their sabots, and file in long columns through the woods, barefooted, over the heather and moss, without a sound, without a word, without a breath. A march of cats in the darkness.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SOUL OF THE EARTH ABSORBED BY MEN.

La Vendee during the revolt numbered no less than five hundred thousand men, women, and children. Half a million of soldiers, these were the figures given by Tuffin de la Rouarie.

The federalists gave their assistance; the Gironde was a party to la Vendée, la Lozère sent thirty thousand men to the Bocage. Eight departments united; five in Brittany, three in Normandy. Evreux, which fraternized with Caen, was represented in the rebellion by Chaumont, its mayor, and Gardembas, one of its leading men. Buzot, Gorsas, and Barbaroux, at Caen; Brissot, at Moulins; Chassann, at Lyons; Rabaut Saint-Etienne, at Nismes: Meillan and Duchâtel, in Brittany, — all these mouths blew the furnace.

There were two Vendées, Great Vendée, which carried on the forest war; and Little Vendée, which carried on the war of the thickets, — that was the slight difference which separated Charette from Jean Chouan, Little Vendée was innocent; Great Vendée was corrupt. Little Vendée was more important. Charette was made marquis, lieutenant-general of the king’s armies and was decorated with the great cross of Saint Louis; Jean Chouan remained Jean Chouan. Charette inclined to the bandit, Jean Chouan was more of a knight-errant.

As for those magnanimous chiefs, Bonchamps, Lescure, la Rochejaquelein, they were mistaken. The great Catholic army was a foolish attempt; disaster was inevitable. Can one imagine a tempest of peasants attacking Paris? a coalition of villages besieging the Panthéon? a pack of Christmas carols and orisons barking around the Marseillaise? a crowd of sabots rushing on a legion of intellects? Le Mans and Savenay punished this madness. It was impossible for la Vendée to pass the Loire. She could accomplish anything except this stride. Civil war does not conquer. Crossing the Rhine is the crowning work of Cæsar and the additional glory of Napoleon; crossing the Loire kills la Rochejaquelein.

The true sphere of la Vendée is within her own boundaries, there she is more than invulnerable, she is intangible. The Vendéan at home is a smuggler, a farmer, soldier, shepherd, poacher, sharpshooter, goatherd, bellringer, peasant, spy, assassin, sacristan, wild beast of the woods.

La Rochejaquelein is only Achilles; Jean Chouau is Proteus.

La Vendée miscarried.

Other revolts have been successful; the Swiss insurrection for example. There was this difference between a mountainous revolt like the Swiss, and a forest revolt like the Vendéan, that almost always because of the fatal influence of environment, the one is struggling for an ideal, and the other for prejudices. One soars, the other crawls. One fights for humanity; the other, for solitude. One desires liberty; the other, isolation. One defends the Commune; the other, the parish.— “Communism! Communism!” cried the heroes of Marat. — One has to do with precipices; the other, with quagmires. One is the man of torrents and foamy waters; the other, the man of stagnant puddles where fever lurks. The head of one is among the stars; that of the other, in the thicket. The one is on a summit; the other, in a shadow.

Education arising from mountain tops and low lands is not the same.

The mountain is a citadel; the forest, an ambuscade: one inspires boldness; the other, strategy. Antiquity placed the gods on pinnacles, and satyrs in grooves. The satyr is the savage; half man, half beast. Free countries have their Appenines, their Alps, their Pyrenees an Olympus. Parnassus is a mountain. Mont Blanc was the colossal auxiliary of William Tell; behind and above the great contests of spirits, against the darkness which fills the poems of India, the Himalayas are seen. Greece, Spain, Italy, Helvetia, have the mountain for a type; Cimmeria, Germany, or Brittany have the woods. The forest is barbarous.

The formation of the ground affects many of man’s actions. It is more of an accomplice than is realized. In sight of some wild landscapes, one is tempted to exonerate man, and incriminate creation; one feels the silent rebellion of nature; the desert is sometimes injurious to conscience, especially an unenlightened conscience; conscience may be gigantic, as with Jesus and Socrates; it may be dwarfed, as with Atreus and Judas. A small conscience quickly becomes reptile; the shady forest trees, the brambles, the thorns, the marshes under the branches, are a fatal habitation for it; it is mysteriously permeated there by evil persuasions. Optical illusions, inexplicable shadows, terrors of the hour or place, throw men into a sort of fear, half religious, half brutal, which in ordinary times engenders superstition, and in periods of violence, brutality. Hallucinations hold the torch which lights the path of murder. There is a touch of madness in the brigand. Wonderful nature has a double meaning, which dazzles great minds and blinds uncultivated souls. When man is ignorant, when the desert is filled with visions, the darkness of solitude is added to the darkness of intelligence; hence, in man, the possibilities of perdition.

Certain rocks, certain ravines, certain copses, certain wild openings through the trees at evening, impel man to mad and awful deeds. One might almost say that there are evil places.

What tragic deeds that gloomy hill between Baignon and Plélan has witnessed!

Wide horizons lead the soul to broad ideas; circumscribed horizons engender narrow ideas; this sometimes condemns great hearts to become small minded: as, for example, Jean Chouan.

Broad ideas hated by narrow ideas, — this is the very struggle of progress.

Country, Fatherland, — these two words comprise the whole Vendéan war; a quarrel of the local idea with the universal idea; peasants against patriots.

CHAPTER VII.

LA VENDÉE WAS THE END OF BRITTANY.

Brittany is an old rebel. Every time that it had revolted for two thousand years, it had been in the right; the last time it was in the wrong. Still, in reality, against the Revolution as against the monarchy, against the acting representatives as against the governing dukes and peers, against the assignats as against the subsidies, whoever the combatants might be, Nicolas Rapin, François de la Noue, Captain Pluviaut and Lady de la Garnache, or Stofflet, Coquereau, and Lechandelier de Pierreville, under Monsieur de Rohan against the king, and under Monsieur de La Rochejaquelein for the king, Brittany was always waging the same war, — the war of the local mind against the central mind.

These ancient provinces were like a pond: these sluggish waters were averse to running; the winds blowing over them did not give them life, it irritated them. France ended at Finisterre; the field given to man terminated there, and there the march of generations stopped. Halt! cried the ocean to the earth, and barbarism to civilization. Every time that the centre, Paris, gives an impulse, whether it comes from royalty or the Republic, whether it be in the direction of despotism or liberty, it is a novelty and Brittany bristles. Let us be in peace. What do they want of us? The Marais takes its pitchfork, the Bocage takes its carbine. All our attempts, our initiative in legislation and education, our encyclopaedias, our philosophies, our geniuses, our glories, have come to naught before the Houroux; the tocsin in Bazouges threatens the French revolution, the moor of Faou revolts against our stormy public squares, and the bell of Haut-des Prés declares war on the tower of the Louvre.

Terrible blunder.

The Vendéan insurrection was a dismal mistake.

A colossal skirmish, chicanery of Titans, boundless rebellion, destined to leave to history but a single word, — a word notorious and black; committing suicide for the absent, devoted to egoism, spending its time in offering great bravery to cowardice, without calculation, without stratagem, without tactics, without plan, without aim, without a chief, without responsibility; showing to what extent will can be powerless; chivalric and savage; absurdity in rut, building a parapet of shadows against the light; ignorance making a long, stupid, superb resistance to truth, justice, right, reason, and deliverance; the dismay of eight years, the ravage of fourteen departments, the devastation of fields, the destruction of crops, burning villages, ruining towns, pillaging houses, the massacre of women and children, a torch in the cottages, a sword in the hearts of the people, the terror of civilization, the hope of Pitt; such was this war, — an unconscious attempt at parricide.

Taken all in all, by demonstrating the necessity of penetrating in every way the old Breton shadow and of piercing that thicket with all the arrows of light at once, la Vendée has been of service to progress. Catastrophes have a gloomy way of settling matters.

BOOK SECOND. — THE THREE CHILDREN.

CHAPTER I.

PLUS QUAM CIVILIA BELLA.

The summer of 1792 had been very rainy; the summer of 1793 was very hot. In consequence of the civil war, there were, so to speak, no roads in Brittany. People went about there, however, thanks to the beauty of the summer. The best route is dry ground.

At the end of a serene July day, about an hour after sunset, a man on horseback, who came from the direction of Avranches, stopped before the little inn called the Croix-Branchard, at the entrance of Pontorson, and the sign of which bore this inscription, that was still legible a few years ago: “Good cider on draught.” It had been hot all day, but the wind was beginning to blow.

This traveller was wrapped in a wide cloak, which covered the horse’s back. He wore a broad-brimmed hat with a tricolored cockade, a bold thing to do in this country of hedges and gunshots, where a cockade was a target. His cloak tied at the neck was thrown back to leave his arms free, and underneath was seen a tricolored belt and two pistols sticking out of the belt. A sabre hung down beyond the cloak.

As the horse stopped, the door of the inn opened, and the innkeeper came out with a lantern in his hand. It was just between daylight and darkness; it was light on the road and dark in the house.

The host looked at the cockade.

“Citizen,” said he, “do you stop here?”

“No.”

“Where are you going then?”

“To Dol.”

“In that case, return to Avranches or stay at Pontorson.”

“Why?”

“Because they are fighting in Dol.”

“Ah!” said the cavalier.

And he added,

“Give some oats to my horse.”

The host brought a bucket, emptied a bag of oats into it and unbridled the horse, which began to snort and to eat.

The conversation continued, —

"Citizens, is this a horse of requisition?"

"No."

"Is it yours?"

"Yes. I bought it and paid for it."

"Where do you come from?"

"From Paris."

"Not directly?"

"No."

"I knew it, the roads are closed. But the post-wagon still runs."

"As far as Alençon. I left it there."

"Ah! soon there will be no more posts in France. There are no more horses. A horse worth three hundred francs brings six hundred, and fodder is high. I have been post-master, and now I keep a cook-shop. Out of thirteen hundred and thirteen post-masters, two hundred have resigned. Citizen, have you travelled under the new tariff?"

"Of the first of May, — yes."

"Twenty sous per post in a carriage, twelve sous in a cab, five sous in a wagon. Did you buy this horse at Alençon?"

"Yes."

"You have been riding all day, to-day?"

"Since daybreak."

"And yesterday?"

"And the day before."

"I see that. You came by way of Domfront and Mortain?"

"And Avranches."

"Take my advice and rest yourself, citizen. You must be tired. Your horse is."

"Horses have a right to be tired, but men have not."

The host fixed his eyes again on the traveller. He had a solemn, calm, stern face, framed in gray hair.

The innkeeper glanced along the road, which was deserted as far as he could see, and said, —

"And you are travelling alone like this?"

"I have an escort."

"Where is it?"

"My sabre and my pistols."

The innkeeper went to get a pail of water, and watered the horse, and while the horse was drinking, the host contemplated the traveller, and said to himself, “All the same, he looks like a priest.”

The cavalier continued, —

“You say that they are fighting at Dol?”

“Yes. It ought to be beginning this very minute.”

“Who are fighting?”

“A ci-devant against a ci-devant.”

“What did you say?”

“I say that a ci-devant who is for the Republic is fighting against a ci-devant who is for the king.”

“But there is no king now.”

“There is the little one. And the strange part of it is that the two ex-nobles are two relatives.”

The cavalier listened attentively. The innkeeper went on:

“One is young, the other, old; it is a grand-nephew fighting against his great uncle. The uncle is a Royalist; the nephew, a patriot. The uncle commands the Whites, the nephew commands the Blues. Ah! they will give no quarter, be sure of that. It is war to the death.”

“To the death?”

“Yes, citizen. Wait, would you like to see the polite speeches they throw at each other’s heads? Here is a notice the old man found a way to have posted up everywhere, on all the houses and all the trees, and which he had stuck up even on my door.”

The host held his lantern near a square of paper fastened to one of the leaves of his double-door, and as the notice was in large letters, the cavalier was able to read from his horse, —

“The Marquis de Lantenac has the honor to inform his grand-nephew, Monsieur the Viscount Gauvain, that if Monsieur le Marquis has the good fortune to capture his person, he will have Monsieur le Viscount quietly shot.”

“And,” continued the innkeeper, here is the reply.”

He turned around and threw the light from his lantern on another notice posted opposite the first on the other leaf of the door. The traveller read, —

“Gauvain warns Lantenac that if he takes him he will have him shot.”

“Yesterday,” said the host; “the first placard was pasted up on my door, and this morning, the second. The reply was not long coming.”

The traveller, in an undertone, as if talking to himself, uttered these few words, which the innkeeper heard without taking in their full meaning, —

"Yes, it is more than civil war, it is domestic war. It is necessary, and it is well. The great rejuvenations of peoples are at this price."

And the traveller, raising his hand to his hat and fixing his eyes on the second notice, saluted it.

The host continued, —

"You see, citizen, this is how it is. In the cities and the large towns we are for the Revolution, in the country they are against it; that is to say, in the cities they are French, in the villages they are Breton. It is a war of bourgeois against the peasants. They call us boors, we call them clowns. The nobles and the priests are with them."

"Not all," interrupted the cavalier.

"Beyond a doubt, citizen, for we have here a viscount against a marquis."

And he added in a low voice to himself, —

"And I believe that I am speaking to a priest."

The cavalier continued, —

"And which is winning?"

"The viscount at present. But he has a hard time. The old man is terrible. These people belong to the family of Gauvain, nobles of this country here. It is a family with two branches; there is the large branch, the chief of which is called the Marquis de Lantenac, and the small branch, the chief of which is called the Viscount Gauvain. The two branches are now fighting. Such a thing is not seen among the trees, but it is seen among men. This Marquis de Lantenac is all-powerful in Brittany; among the peasants he is a prince. The day he landed he had eight thousand men in no time; in a week, three hundred parishes were raised. If he had been able to take a corner of the coast, the English would have landed. Fortunately, this Gauvain was there, who is his grand-nephew, — a strange occurrence. He is the Republican commander, and he repulsed his great-uncle. And, then, as luck would have it, this Lantenac, on his arrival, while massacring a lot of prisoners, had caused two women to be shot, one of whom had three children who had been adopted by a battalion from Paris. That made them a terrible battalion. It was called the battalion of Bonnet-Rouge. There are not many of these Parisians left, but they are furious soldiers. They have been incorporated into Commandant Gauvain's division. Nothing withstands them. They are determined to avenge the death of the women, and have the children again. Nobody knows what the old man has done with these little things. That is what enrages the Parisian grenadiers. If these children had not been mixed up in it, I suppose this war would not be what it is. The viscount is a good, brave young man. But the old man is a terrible marquis. The peasants call it the war of Saint Michael against Beelzebub. You know, perhaps that Saint Michael is an angel of this part of the country. He has a mountain in the bay. He is said to have overthrown the devil and to have buried him under another mountain which is near here, and is called Tombelaine."

"Yes," murmured the cavalier, "Tumba Beleni, the tomb of Belus, of Bel, of Belial, of Beelzebub."

"I see that you know about it."

And the host said, aside to himself, —

"He knows Latin, and he is surely a priest."

Then he added: "Well, citizen, for the peasants, it is that war over again. It is evident that to them Saint Michael is the Royalist general, and Beelzebub is the patriot commander; but if there is a devil, it is surely Lantenac, and if there is an angel it is Gauvain. Won't you take something, citizen?"

"I have my gourd and a piece of bread. But you have not told me what is going on in Dol."

"This is it. Gauvain is commanding the exploring column of the coast. Lantenac's aim was to rouse a general insurrection, to strengthen Lower Brittany with Lower Normandy, to open the doors to Pitt, and to increase the great Vendéan army with twenty thousand English and two hundred thousand peasants. Gauvain cut short this plan. He holds the coast, and is driving Lantenac into the interior and the English into the sea. Lantenac was here and he drove him away; he has taken Pont-au-Beau away from him, he has driven him from Avranches, he has driven him from Villedieu, he has prevented him from reaching Granville. He is manœuvring to drive him back into the forest of Fougères and to surround him there. All was going well yesterday. Gauvain was here with his column. Suddenly, there is an alarm. The old man, who is shrewd, makes a point; they learn that he is marching on Dol. If he takes Dol, and if he establishes a battery on Mont-Dol, for he has cannon, there is a point of the coast where the English can land, and all is lost. That is why, as there was not a minute to lose, Gauvain, who is a level-headed man, took counsel with no one but himself; did not ask for orders, nor wait for them, sounded the signal to saddle, put to his artillery, collected his troops, drew his sabre, and that is how, while Lantenac was rushing on Dol, Gauvain was rushing on Lantenac. It is at Dol, that these two Breton heads are going to butt. It will be a proud collision. They are there now."

"How long does it take to go to Dol?"

"For a troop with wagons, at least three hours; but they are there."

The traveller put his hand behind his ear and said, —

"To be sure, it seems to me that I hear the cannon."

The host listened.

"Yes, citizen; and the musketry. The fight has begun. You will have to spend the night here. There is no good in going there."

"I cannot stop. I must continue my journey."

"You are wrong. I don't know your business, but the risk is great, and unless it concerns what you hold dearest in the world — —"

"That is just it," replied the cavalier.

"Something like your own son — —"

"Very nearly," said the cavalier.

The innkeeper raised his head and said to himself, —

"And yet this citizen seems to me like a priest."

Then, after some thought, he added, —

"After all, a priest may have children."

"Put my horse's bridle back," said the traveller. "How much do I owe you?"

And he paid him.

The host set back the trough and the bucket by the side of the wall, and then came toward the traveller.

"Since you are bound to go on, take my advice. It is clear that you are going to Saint-Malo. Well, don't go through Dol. There are two routes, the road through Dol, and the road along the sea coast. One is as short as the other. The road along by the sea goes through Saint-Georges de Brehaigne Cherrueix, and Hirelle-Vivier. You leave Dol to the south and Cancal to the north. Citizen, at the end of the street, you will find the place where the two roads meet; the one to Dol is to the left, the one to Saint-Georges de Brehaigne is to the right. Listen to me now; if you go through Dol, you will fall in the massacre. That is why you must not take the left; take the right."

"Thank you," said the traveller.

And he spurred on his horse.

It had grown quite dark, he plunged into the night.

The innkeeper lost sight of him.

When the traveller came to the end of the street where the two roads branched off, he heard the innkeepers voice cry out from the distance,

“Go to the right!”

He went to the left.

CHAPTER II.

DOL.

Dol, a Spanish town of France in Brittany, as it is termed in the old charters, is not a town but a street. A grand old gothic street, all bordered on the right and on the left by houses with pillars, standing irregularly and making angles and corners in the street, which is everywhere wide. The rest of the town is nothing but a network of lanes running into this large street from opposite directions, and ending there like brooks in a river. The town, without gates or walls, open, overshadowed by Mont-Dol, could not withstand a siege; but the street could withstand one. These promontories of houses that could still be seen there fifty years ago, and the two-pillared galleries which bordered them, formed a very solid battle-ground, capable of great resistance. There were as many fortresses as there were houses, and it was necessary to take one after another. The old market house was very nearly in the middle of the street.

The innkeeper of the Croix-Branchard had told the truth, a furious conflict filled Dol at the time he was speaking. A nocturnal duel between the Whites who had reached there in the morning, and the Blues who had unexpectedly arrived there in the evening, had suddenly burst forth in the town. The forces were unequal, the Whites numbered six thousand, the Blues fifteen hundred, but their fury was equally divided. Strange to say, the fifteen hundred attacked the six thousand.

On one side, a riotous crowd; on the other, a phalanx. On one side, six thousand peasants with sacred hearts on their leather jackets, white ribbons on their round hats, Christian devices on their brassarts, rosaries hanging from their belts, armed with more pitchforks than sabres, and carbines without bayonets, dragging cannons by means of ropes, poorly equipped, badly disciplined, meanly armed, full of frenzy; on the other side, fifteen hundred soldiers wearing three cornered hats with the tricolored cockade, coats with full skirts and wide lappels, shoulder belts crossed, copper-hilted swords, guns with long bayonets, erect, well-trained, docile, and fierce, knowing how to obey like people who know how to command, volunteers, too, but volunteers for their country, in rags, moreover, and shoeless. For the monarchy, paladin peasants; for the republic, barefooted heroes. And the soul of each of these two troops was its chief: that of the royalists, an old man; of the republicans, a young man. On one side, Lantenac; on the other, Ganvain.

Besides gigantic young figures, such as Danton, Saint-Just, and Robespierre, the Revolution had young figures which were ideal, like Hoche and Marceau. Ganvain was one of these figures.

Gauvain was thirty years old, with Herculean form, a prophetic, serious eye, and the laugh of a child. He did not smoke, he did not drink, he did not swear. He carried a toilet case throughout the war, he took great care of his nails, his teeth, and his hair which was brown and abundant; during halts he himself shook his military clock, riddled with bullets and white with dust. Although he always rushed recklessly into the midst of the battle, he had never been wounded. His very gentle voice had, when necessary, a sharp tone of command. He set the example of sleeping on the ground, in wind, in rain, in snow, rolled up in his cloak, and his graceful head resting on a stone. He was a soul both heroic and innocent. The sword in his hand transfigured him. He had that effeminate appearance which in battle is terrible.

At the same time, he was a thinker and a philosopher — a young sage; Alcibiades to look at, Socrates to listen to.

This young man had at once become a leader in this great improvisation, the French Revolution.

His division, formed by himself, like the Roman legion, was a sort of complete little army; it was composed of infantry and cavalry; it had scouts, pioneers, sappers, pontooniers; and just as the Roman legion had catapults, this had cannons. Three pieces drawn by horses strengthened the column, and at the same time left it easily handled.

Lantenac also was a warrior and still more formidable. He was both more reflective and more daring. The real old heroes have more coolness than the young men because they are farther from the sunrise, and more audacious because they are nearer death. What have they to lose? so little! Hence, Lantenac’s rash movements, which were at the same time so skillful. But in the main, in this obstinate hand-to-hand conflict, Gauvain almost always had the advantage. It was more good fortune than anything else. All good luck, even good luck which is terrible, belongs to youth. Victory is in some respects like a young girl.

Lantenac was incensed against Gauvain; first because Gauvain was opposed to him, then because he was his relative. What right had he to be a Jacobin! this Gauvain! this scamp! his heir, for the marquis had no children; a grand-nephew, almost a grandson! “Ah,” said this *quasi* grandfather, “if I get my hand on him, I will kill him like a dog!”

Besides the Republic had reason to be troubled about this Marquis de Lantenac. He had hardly landed when he made them tremble. His name had run through the Vendéan insurrection like a train of powder, and Lantenac became at once the centre. In a revolt of this kind, where all are jealous of each other, and each has his bush or his ravine, the coming of a superior rallies the scattered chiefs, who are equals among themselves. Almost all the captains of the woods joined Lantenac, and from far and near, they obeyed him. One alone had left him; he had been the first to join him, — Gavard. Why? Because he was a man of trust. Gavard had known all the secrets, and adopted all the plans of the old system of civil warfare, that Lantenac came to supplant and replace. One cannot follow in the steps of a man of trust; the shoe of la Rouarie did not fit Lantenac. Gavard had gone to join Bonchamp.

Lantenac, as a soldier, belonged to the school of Fredderick II.; he knew how to combine the greater war with the less. He wished to have neither a “confused mass,” like the great catholic and royal army, a multitude destined to be destroyed; nor a scattering in the thickets and copses, good for harrassing, powerless to overthrow. The guerilla does not terminate, or terminates unfortunately; it begins by attacking a Republic, and ends by robbing a stage coach. Lantenac did not intend to carry on this Breton war either wholly in the open field, as La Rochejaquelin had done, or wholly in the forest, like Jean Chouan; neither Vendée nor Chouannerie; he wanted real war; to make use of the peasant, but to support him with the soldier. He wished to have bands of men for strategy, and regiment for tactics. He found these village armies, able to disappear so suddenly, excellent for attack, ambuscade and surprise; but he felt that they were too fluid; they were like water in his hand; he wished to create a solid point in this wavering and scattered war; he wished to add to this wild forest army, regular troops, which would be the pivot of the peasants’ manœuvres. A profound and awful thought; if it had succeeded, la Vendée would have been impregnable.

But where could he find regular troops? where find soldiers? where find regiments? where find an army ready made? In England. This was Lantenac's determination: to land the English. Thus party conscience capitulates; the white cockade concealed from his sight the red coat. Lantenac had but one thought: to get possession of a point of the sea-coast, and to give it up to Pitt. That is why, seeing Dol without defence, he rushed on it, in order, through Dol, to have Mont-Dol; and through Mont-Dol, the coast.

The place was well chosen. The cannon on Mont-Dol would sweep le Fresnois on one side, and Saint-Brelade on the other; would keep the cruisers from Cancale at a distance, and would make the coast from Raz-sur-Couesnon to Saint-Mêloir-des-Ondes, open to invasion.

To make this decisive move successful, Lantenac had brought with him a little more than six thousand men, the stoutest among the bands at his disposal, and all his artillery, ten sixteen-pound culverins, one eight-pounder, and a four-pounder. He proposed to establish a strong battery on Mont-Dol, on this principle, that a thousand shots from ten cannons would accomplish more than fifteen hundred shots with five cannons.

Success seemed certain. He had six thousand men. He had nothing to fear in the direction of Avranches but Gauvain and his fifteen hundred men, and in the direction of Dinan, only Léchelle. Léchelle, it is true, had twenty-five thousand men, but he was twenty leagues away. Lantenac was confident of success with regard to Léchelle, on account of the great distance against the great number; and, with regard to Gauvain, on account of the small number against the short distance. We may add that Léchelle was an idiot, and later on he allowed his twenty-five thousand men to be destroyed on the moors of la Croix-Bataille; a defeat which he paid for with suicide.

So Lantenac felt perfectly secure. His entrance into Dol was sudden and severe. The Marquis de Lantenac had a hard reputation; he was known to be merciless. No resistance was attempted. The terrified inhabitants shut themselves up in their houses. The six thousand Vendéans took up their quarters in the town with boorish confusion; it was almost a fair ground, without quartermasters, without definite camp, bivouacking at haphazard, cooking in the open air, scattering about in the churches, leaving their guns for their rosaries. Lantenac hastened with some artillery officers to reconnoitre Mont-Dol, leaving the lieutenancy to Gouge-le-Bruant, whom he had appointed field-sergeant.

This Gouge-le-Bruant has left a faint trace in history. He had two nicknames “Brise-bleu,” on account of his slaughtering of patriots, and “l’Imânus,” because he had in him something strangely, unutterably horrible. “Imânus,” derived from *immanis*, is an old word of Low Norman origin, expressing the superhuman and quasidivine ugliness, in the frightful, in devils, satyrs, and ogres. An ancient manuscript said: *“d’mes daeux iers j’ vis l’imanus*.” The old men of the Bocage, to-day have no knowledge of Gouge-le-Bruant, nor of the meaning of Brise-bleu; but they have a confused idea of l’Imânus. L’Imânus is connected with local superstition. They still speak of l’Imânus at Trémorel and Plumaugat, two villages where Gouge-le-Bruant left the print of his ominous foot. In la Vendée, others were savage. Gouge-le-Bruant was barbarous. He was a kind of cacique, tatooed with rude letters and fleurs-de-lis; in his face shone the hideous and almost superhuman glare of a soul unlike any other human being. He was infernally brave in battle, and atrocious afterward. He had a heart full of tortuous intricacies, ready for every kind of devotion, inclined to all sorts of madness. Did he reason? Yes, but as serpents crawl: in circles. He left heroism to come to murder. It was impossible to guess whence arose his resolutions, often magnificent on account of their monstrosity. He was capable of every unexpected horror. He had an epic ferocity.

Hence this misshapen nickname, “l’Imânus.”

The Marquis de Lantenac had confidence in his cruelty.

It was a fact that l’Imânus excelled in cruelty; but in strategy and tactics he was less superior, and perhaps the marquis was wrong to make him field-sergeant. However that may be, he left l’Imânus behind him, with orders to take his place and watch everything.

Gouge-le-Bruant, more of a warrior than a soldier, was more fit to slaughter a clan than to guard a city, but yet he stationed main guards.

When evening had come, as the Marquis de Lantenac was on his way back to Dol, after having decided on the situation of the projected battery, he suddenly heard the cannon. He looked. A red smoke was rising from the great street. There was a surprise, an irruption, an attack; they were fighting in the town.

Although it was hard to astonish him, he was stupefied. He was not expecting anything of the kind. Who could be there? Evidently, it was not

Gauvain. It would be foolish to attack with one against four. Was it Léchelle? But what a forced march to have made! Léchelle was improbable; Gauvain, impossible.

Lantenac spurred on his horse; on his way he met the inhabitants in flight; he questioned them, they were mad with fear. They cried: “The Blues! The Blues!” and when he reached the town, the situation was desperate.

This is what had happened.

CHAPTER III.

SMALL ARMIES AND GREAT BATTLES.

On reaching Dol, the peasants, as we have just seen, were scattered through the town, each working his own pleasure, as it happens when people “obey out of friendship,” as the Vendéans expressed it. The sort of obedience which makes heroes but not troopers. They had stowed away their artillery with the baggage under the arches of the old market house, and weary, drinking, eating, telling their beads, they lay down helter-skelter through the great street, which was rather blocked up than guarded. As night came on, most of them fell asleep, with their heads on their sacks, some with their wives beside them; for the peasent women often follow the peasants; in Vendée, pregnant women served as spies. It was a mild July night; the constellations shone brilliantly in the deep blue black of the sky. All this bivouac, which was more like the halt of a caravan than the encampment of an army, was beginning to sleep peacefully. Suddenly, in the glimmering twilight, those who had not yet closed their eyes saw three cannons pointed at the end of the great street.

It was Gauvain. He had surprised the main guards, he was in the town, and he held the head of the street with his column.

A peasant jumped up, cried “*Qui vive?*” and fired off his gun, a cannon shot gave answer. Then a furious discharge of musketry burst forth. The entire drowsy multitude leaped to their feet; a rude awakening. They had gone to sleep under the stars and woke under fire.

The first moment was terrible, there is nothing so tragic as the swarming of a bewildered multitude. They pounced on their arms, they screamed, they ran, many fell. The peasant boys assaulted in this way, did not know what to do and began to shoot each other. The people, astounded, rushed out of their houses, went back, came out again, and wandered about in the confusion, like maniacs. Families called out to each other. A dismal fight with women and children intermingled. Hissing bullets streaked through the darkness. There was firing from every dark corner. Everything was smoke and tumult. The entanglement of the baggage wagons and carts added to it. The horses kicked. The people trampled on the wounded. Shrieks rose from the ground. Some from horror, others from amazement. Soldiers and officers were looking for one another. In the midst of all this, there were some gloomily indifferent. A woman nursing her new-born babe, was sitting by a portion of a wall, against which leaned her husband, whose leg had been broken, and while his blood was flowing, he was calmly loading his carbine and shooting at random, killing those before him in the darkness. Men lying on their bellies shot through the wheels of the wagons. Occasionally, arose an uproarious shouting. The great voice of the cannon drowned everything else. It was frightful.

It was like the felling of trees; they all lay one above another. Gauvain, in ambush, fired with a steady shot and lost few of his men.

However, the intrepid disorder of the peasants ended in an attempt to defend themselves; they retreated under the market-house, a vast, dark redoubt, a forest of stone pillars. There they regained a footing; anything resembling a wood gave them confidence. L'Imânus did his best to make up for the absence of Lantenac. They had cannon, but, much to Gauvain's astonishment, they made no use of it; this was because the artillery officers had gone with the marquis to investigate Mont Dol, and the peasants only understood the culverines and eight-pounders; but they riddled with bullets the Blues who cannonaded them. The peasants answered the grapeshot with musketry. They were now under shelter. They had piled up the drays, the carts, the baggage, all the barrels in the old market, and improvised a high barricade with openings through which they passed their carbines. Their shooting through these holes was deadly. All this was quickly accomplished. In a quarter of an hour, the market had an impenetrable front.

This became serious for Gauvain. This market, suddenly transformed into a citadel, was unlooked for. The peasants were there in a solid mass. Gauvain had been successful in surprising them and failed in routing them. He had dismounted. Holding his sword in his hand, under his crossed arms, he stood in the flare of a torch which lighted up his battery, watching all this darkness attentively.

His tall figure in this bright light made him visible to the men behind the barricade. He was their aim, but he was not aware of it.

The discharge of bullets sent from the barricade fell all around Gauvain, who was absorbed in thought.

But against all these carbines he had the cannon. The cannon ball always gets the advantage. He who has artillery has victory. His battery, if made good use of, assured him the superiority.

Suddenly, there was a flash of lightning from the market so full of darkness, something like a peal of thunder was heard, and a cannon ball went through a house above Gauvain’s head.

The barricade answered cannon shot with cannon shot.

What had happened? Something new. The artillery was no longer on one side alone.

A second cannon ball followed the first and buried itself in the wall near Gauvain. A third knocked off his hat.

These balls were of large calibre. They came from a sixteen-pounder.

“They are aiming at you, commandant,” cried the artillery-men. And they put out the torch. Gauvain, as if in a dream, picked up his hat.

Some one indeed was aiming at Gauvain; it was Lantenac.

The marquis had just entered the barricade from the opposite side.

L’Imânus ran toward him.

“Monseigueur, we have been surprised.”

“By whom?”

“I do not know.”

“Is the road open from Dinan?”

“I think so.”

“We must begin a retreat.”

“It has begun. Many have already escaped.”

“We mustn’t escape; we must retreat. Why haven’t you used the artillery?”

“They lost their heads, and then the officers were not here.”

“I will attend to it.”

“Monseigneur, I have sent all that I could of the baggage, the women, and everything of no use, towards Fougères. What is to be done with the three little children?’

“Ah! those children?”

“Yes.”

They are our hostages. Have them taken to la Tourgue.”

Having said this, the marquis went to the barricade. The coming of the chief put a new face on the matter. The barricade was badly constructed for artillery, as there was room for but two cannon; the marquis put in position two sixteen-pounders, for which they made embrasures. As he was leaning over one of the cannons, looking at the battery of the enemy through the embrasure, he noticed Gauvain.

“It is he!” he cried out.

Then he took the sponge and rammer himself, loaded the piece, adjusted the sight, and aimed.

Three times he aimed at Gauvain, and missed him. The third shot only succeeded in knocking off his hat.

“Stupid!” muttered Lantenac. “A little lower and I should have had his head.”

Suddenly the torch went out, and he had nothing before him but darkness.

“So be it,” he said.

And turning toward the peasant gunner, he cried, —

“Fire away!”

Gauvain, on his side, was no less in earnest. The situation grew more serious. A new phase of the struggle presented itself. The barricade had begun to make use of cannon. Who knew but it might pass from the defensive to the offensive? He had before him, not counting the dead and those who had fled, at least five thousand combatants, and he himself had only twelve hundred able men left. What would become of the Republicans, if the enemy should notice their small number? The *rôles* would be reversed. They were attacking, they would be attacked. If the barricade were to make a sortie all would be lost.

What was to be done? attacking the barricade front was not to be dreamed of; to attempt at main force would be risky; twelve hundred men could not drive out five thousand. To hasten matters was impossible, to wait would be fatal. They must come to an end. But how?

Gauvain belonged to the country, he knew the town; he knew that back of the old market, where the Vendéans were embattled, was a maze of narrow, winding lanes.

He turned to his lieutenant who was that brave Captain Guéchamp, famous later for clearing the forest of Concise, where Jean Chouan was born, and for preventing the taking of Bourgneuf, by barring the rebels from the dyke of the pond of la Chaîne.

“Guéchamp,” he said, “1 leave you in command. Fire with all your might. Riddle the barricade with cannon balls. Keep all those people busy.”

“I understand,” said Guéchamp.

“Mass the whole column with arms loaded, and hold them ready for attack.”

He spoke a few words additional in Guéchamp’s ear.

“I understand,” said Guéchamp.

Gauvain continued, —

“Are all our drummers on hand?”

“Yes.”

“We have nine. Keep two, give me seven.”

The seven drummers ranged themselves silently before Gauvain.

Then Gauvain cried, —

“Battalion of Bonnet-Rouge!”

Twelve men, with a sergeant, left the main body of the troops.

“I ask for the whole battalion,” said Gauvain.

“Here we are!” replied the sergeant.

“Twelve of you!”

“There are twelve of us left.”

“Very good,” said Gauvain.

This sergeant was the rough, but kind-hearted, trooper Radoub, who had adopted in the name of the battalion the three children found in the woods of La Saudraie.

Only half a battalion, it will be remembered, had been exterminated at Herbe-en-Pail, and Radoub had the good luck not to form a part of it.

A forage wagon was near; Gauvain pointed it out to the sergeant.

“Sergeant, have your men make ropes of straw and twist them around their guns to prevent any sound if they knock against each other.”

In a moment’s time the order had been executed, in silence and darkness.

“It is done,” said the sergeant.

“Soldiers, take off your shoes,” added Gauvain.

“We haven’t any,” said the sergeant.

That made, with the seven drummers, nineteen men; Gauvain was the twentieth.

He cried, —

“Follow me in single file. The drummers behind me, the battalion next. Sergeant, you will command the battalion.”

He took the head of the column, and, while the cannonading continued on both sides, these twenty men, gliding along like ghosts, plunged into the deserted lanes.

They marched some time in this way, winding along by the houses. Everything seemed dead in the town; the citizens were crouching in the cellars. There was not a door which was not barred, not a blind which was not closed. No light anywhere.

The great street was making a furious din in the midst of this silence; the cannonading still continued; the Republician battery and the Royalist barricade were angrily spitting out all their volleys.

After twenty minutes of winding about, Gauvain, who led the way with certainty in the darkness, reached the end of a lane running into the principal street; only it was on the other side of the market.

The position was reversed. On this side there was no intrenchment, — such is the everlasting imprudence of those who build barricades, — the market was open and they could enter under the arches, where some baggage wagons were harnessed ready for departure. Gauvain and his nineteen men had before them the five thousand Vendéans, but they were behind the Vendéans’ backs and not in front of them.

Gauvain spoke in a low voice to the sergeant; they removed the straw from their guns; the twelve grenadiers stationed themselves in order of battle behind the corner of the lane, and the seven drummers held their drumsticks in readiness for orders.

The discharge of artillery was intermittent. Suddenly, in an interval between two reports, Gauvain raised his sword, and, in a voice which sounded like a trumpet in the silence, cried out, —

“Two hundred men to the right, two hundred men to the left, the rest in the centre!”

The twelve guns fired, the seven drums beat the charge.

And Gauvain uttered the terrible cry of the Blues, —

“Charge bayonets!”

The effect was wonderful.

This entire mass of peasants felt that they were surprised from the rear, and imagined that there was a new army behind them. At the same time, the column holding the head of the street and commanded by Guéchamp, hearing the drums, moved forward, beating the charge in return, and rushed in double-quick time on the barricade; the peasants saw that they were between two fires.

A panic exaggerates everything; in a panic, a pistol shot makes as much noise as a cannon, and sounds are magnified by the imagination, and the baying of a hound seems like the roar of a lion. We may add that the peasant takes fear as the thatch takes fire, and peasant’s fear increases to defeat, as easily as the burning thatch grows to a conflagration. Their flight was beyond description.

In a few moments, the market was empty, the terrified peasant boys scattered, in spite of the officers. L'Imânus killed two or three of the deserters to no purpose; this cry was heard above everything else: "Escape, if you can!" and this army fled through the streets of the town as though it were a sieve, out into the country, with the swiftness of clouds driven by a storm.

Some escaped in the direction of Chateauneuf, some toward Plerguer, and others toward Antrain.

The Marquis de Lantenac saw this defeat. He spiked the cannons with his own hand, then retired, the last, slowly and coolly, saying,— "The peasants are not to be depended upon, most decidedly. We must have the English."

CHAPTER IV.

IT IS THE SECOND TIME.

The victory was complete. Gauvain turned toward the men of the battalion of Bonnet-Rouge, and said, —

“There are only twelve of you, but you are worth a thousand.”

Praise from the chief meant the cross of honor at that time.

Guéchamp, sent out of the town by Gauvain, pursued the fugitives and took many of them.

They lighted the torches and ransacked the town.

All who could not escape surrendered. They lighted up the main streets with fire pots. It was strewn with dead and wounded. The end of a battle is always heartrending. A few groups of desperate men here and there still resisted; they were surrounded and they laid down their arms.

Gauvain had noticed in the lawless confusion of the rout, a bold man, a sort of nimble, hardy faun, who had aided the flight of others but had not fled himself. This peasant made masterly use of his carbine, shooting with the barrel, felling with the stock so well that he had broken it; now he had a pistol in one hand and a sword in the other. No one dared approach him. Suddenly, Gauvain saw him totter and lean against a post in the main street. The man had just been wounded. But he still held his sword and pistol. Gauvain put his sword under his arm and went to him.

“Surrender,” he said.

The man looked at him steadily. Blood was flowing from a wound under his clothing, and making a pool at his feet.

“You are my prisoner,” added Gauvain

The man remained speechless.

“What is your name?”

The man said, —

“My name is Danse-a-l’Ombre.”

“You are a brave fellow,” said Gauvain.

And he held out his hand to him.

The man replied: “Long live the king!” and collecting all the strength he had left, raising both arms at once, he fired his pistol at Gauvain’s heart, and aimed a blow at his head with his sword.

He did this with the swiftness of a tiger; but some one else was quicker still. It was a man on horseback who had just arrived, and had been there for some moments without attracting any one's attention. When this man saw the Vendéan raise his sword and pistol, he threw himself between him and Gauvain. But for this man, Gauvain would have been killed. The horse received the shot, the man received the blow from the sabre, and both fell. All this was done before there was time to cry out.

The Vendéan had dropped on the pavement.

The sabre had struck the man full in the face; he was on the ground, unconscious. The horse was killed.

Gauvain went to him.

"Who is this man?" he said.

He looked at him. The blood was pouring from the gash and formed a red mask over the wounded man's face. It was impossible to make out his features. One could see that he had gray hair.

"This man has saved my life," continued Gauvain.

"Does any one here know who he is?"

"My commandant," said a soldier, "this man has just entered the town. I saw him when he came. He came by the road Pontorson."

The surgeon of the column came running with his case. The wounded man was still unconscious. The surgeon examined him and said, —

"A mere cut. It is nothing. It will heal. In a week he will be on his feet. It is a fine sword cut."

The wounded man had a cloak, a tricolored belt, pistols, a sword. They laid him on a litter. They took off his clothes. They brought a pail of fresh water, the surgeon washed the wound, his face began to appear. Gauvain watched him with deep attention.

"Has he any papers about him?" asked Gauvain.

The surgeon felt in a side pocket and drew out a portfolio, which he handed to Gauvain.

In the meantime, the wounded man, refreshed by the cold water, came to himself. His eyelids moved slightly. Gauvain opened the portfolio; he found in it a sheet of paper folded twice, he unfolded it and read, —

"Committee of Public Welfare. Citizen Cimourdain,—"

He cried out: "Cimourdain!"

This cry made the wounded man open his eyes.

Gauvain was distracted.

“Cimourdain! It is you! This is the second time you have saved my life.”

Cimourdain looked at Gauvain. An unutterable joy lighted up his blood-stained face.

Gauvain fell on his knees before the wounded man, crying, —

“My master!” “Thy father,” said Cimourdain.

CHAPTER V.

THE DROP OF COLD WATER.

They had not seen each other for many years, but their hearts had never been separated; they recognized each other as though they had only parted the day before.

A hospital had been improvised at the Hotel de Ville in Dol. They laid Cimourdain on a bed in a little room, next to the large general hall for the wounded. The surgeon, who had sewed up the wound, put an end to the effusions between the two men, saying that Cimourdain must be left to go to sleep. Besides, Gauvain was required by the thousand cares which make the duties and anxieties of victory. Cimourdain remained alone, but he did not sleep; he had two fevers, one from his wound, one from his joy.

He did not sleep, and still it seemed to him that he was not awake. Was it possible? his dream was realized. He was one of those who do not believe in luck and he was lucky. He had found Gauvain again. He had left him a child, and found him a man; he found him great, terrible, fearless. He found him in the midst of triumph, and triumph for the people. Gauvain was the point of support to the Revolution in Vendée and it was he, Cimourdain, who had given this column to the Republic. This victorious man was his pupil. “What he saw radiating from this young form, destined perhaps for the Republican pantheon, was his own thoughts, — Cimourdain’s; his disciple, the child of his mind, was from this time forth a hero, and after a little would be a glory; it seemed to Cimourdain that he saw his own soul made into a genius; it was like Chiron seeing Achilles in battle. Mysterious relation between the priest and the centaur, for the priest is only a man to the waist.

All the dangers of this adventure, together with his sleeplessness after his wound, filled Cimourdain with a sort of mysterious intoxication. A young destiny was arising magnificently, and what added to his deep joy was the fact that he had full power over this life; another success like the one he had just seen, and Cimourdain would have to say but a word for the Republican to trust him with an army. Nothing dazzles like the astonishment at seeing everything succeed.

It was the time when each man had his own military dream, each wished to make a general: Danton wished to make a general of Westermann; Marat, of Rossignol; Hebert, of Ronsiu; Robespierre wanted to get rid of them all.

Why not Gauvain? said Cimourdain to himself; and he went on dreaming. The unbounded was before him; he passed from one hypothesis to another; all obstacles vanished; when one has once set his foot on this ladder he does not stop, it is an endless climb, one leaves man to reach the stars. A great general is only a chief of armies; a great captain is at the same time a chief of ideas; Cimourdain imagined Gauvain a great captain. It seemed to him, for dreams move swiftly, that he saw Gauvain on the ocean, repelling the English; on the Rhine, punishing the kings of the North; among the Pyrenees, repulsing the Spanish; in the Alps, making a signal for Rome to rise. There were in Cimourdain two men, a tender man and a gloomy man; both were satisfied; foras the inexorable was his ideal, he had seen Gauvain terrible as well as superb. Cimourdain thought of all that destruction must do before construction could begin, and surely, he thought, this is not the time for emotion. Gauvain will be "at the top" " — *á la hauteur*," — a phrase of that day. Cimourdain imagined Gauvain crushing the shades of night under his foot, having on a breastplate of light, with a meteoric gleam on his brow, spreading the great ideal wings of Justice, Reason, and Progress, and carrying a sword in his hand; an angel, but of destruction.

At the very height of this dream, which was almost an ecstasy, he heard, through the partly opened door, talking in the great hospital ward, next his room; he recognized Gauvain's voice; that voice, which in spite of years of absence was always sounding in his ear, and the voice of the child was recognizable in the voice of the man. He listened. There was a sound of steps. Some soldiers said, —

"Commander, this is the man who shot at you. While nobody was noticing him, he dragged himself to a cellar. We have found him. Here he is."

Then Cimourdain heard this conversation between Gauvain and the man, —

"Are you wounded?"

"I am well enough to be shot."

" Put this man in a bed. Dress his wounds, care for him, heal him."

"I want to die."

“You will live. You wished to kill me in the name of the king; I pardon you in the name of the Republic.”

A shadow passed over Cimourdain’s face. He woke as it were with a start, and he murmured with a sort of ominous despondency, —

“He is surely merciful.”

CHAPTER VI.

HEALED BREAST, A BLEEDING HEART.

A cut heals quickly; but there was some one elsewhere more seriously wounded than Cimourdain. It was the woman who had been shot at Herbe-en-Pail and had been picked up by the beggar Tellmarch in the great pool of blood.

Michelle Fléchard was in even greater danger than Tellmarch had supposed; there was a wound in her shoulder blade corresponding to the one above her breast; at the same time that the bullet broke her collar bone, another went through her shoulder; but as her lung had not been touched she might recover. Tellmarch was a “philosopher,” an expression among the peasants signifying something of a doctor, a little of a surgeon, a little of a sorcerer. He took care of the wounded woman in his den, on his pallet of seaweed, giving her those mysterious things called “simple remedies,” and, thanks to him, she lived.

The collar bone knit together, the wounds in her breast and shoulder closed up; after a few weeks the wounded woman was convalescent.

One morning she was able to go out of the carnichot, leaning on Tellmarch; she sat down under the trees in the sun. Tellmarch knew little about her, breast wounds require perfect quiet, and during the agony preceding her recovery, she had hardly spoken a word. “When she wished to talk, Tellmarch made her keep silent; but her delirium was persistent, and Tellmarch noticed in her eyes the gloomy coming and going of painful thoughts. This morning she was strong, she could almost walk by herself; a cure is a paternity, and Tellmarch looked at her with happiness. This good old man began to smile, He spoke to her.

“Well, we are on our feet, we have no more wounds.”

“Except in the heart,” she said.

And she added, —

“So you don’t know at all where they are?”

“ Who?” asked Tellmarch.

“My children.”

That “so” expressed a whole world of thoughts; it meant “since you never speak to me about them, since for so many days you have been by my side without opening your mouth about them, since you have made me keep silence every time I wished to break it, since you seem to fear that I should speak about them, it must be because you have nothing to tell me." Often in wandering and delirium of fever she had called her children, and had seen, for delirium takes note, that the old man did not answer her.

It was because Tellmarch really did not know what to say to her. It is not an easy matter to speak to a mother of her lost children. And, then, what did he know? Nothing. He knew that a mother had been shot, that this mother had been found on tho ground by him, that when he had picked her up she was almost a corpse, that this corpse had three children, and that the Marquis de Lantenac, after having the mother shot, had carried away the three childen. All his information ended here. What had become of these children? Were they even still living? He knew, for he had made inquiries, that there were two boys, and a little girl hardly weaned. Nothing more. He asked himself a multitude of questions about this unfortunate group, but he could answer none of them. The country people whom he questioned could do no more than shake their heads. Monsieur de Lantenac was a man whom they did not willingly talk about.

People did not like to speak of Lantenac and they did not like to speak to Tellmarch. Peasants have a kind of suspicion peculiar to themselves. They did not love Tellmarch. Tellmarch the Caimand was a disquieting man. Why was he always looking at the sky? What was he doing and what was he thinking about in his long hours of inertness? He was really a strange man. In this country full of war, full of conflagration, full of combustion; where all the men had but one business, devastation; and but one work, carnage; where whoever wished burned a house, cut the throats of a family, massacred a port, plundered a village; where people thought of nothing but laying ambushes for each other, drawing each other into snares, and killing one another; this solitary man, absorbed in nature, as it were, submerged in the vast peace of things, gathering herbs and plants, occupied solely with flowers, birds, and stars, was evidently dangerous. Plainly, he had lost his reason; he did not lie in ambush, he shot nobody. Hence there was a certain dread regarding him.

"This man is mad," said the peasants.

Tellmarch was more than an isolated man, he was a man who was avoided.

No one asked him questions, and no one gave him satisfactory answers. He had consequently not been able to get as much information as he would have wished. The war had spread beyond, they had gone to fight farther away, the Marquis de Lantenac had disappeared from sight, and in Tellmarch's state of mind, war had to put its foot on him before he would notice it.

After these words, "my children," Tellmarch no longer smiled, and the mother was lost in thought. "What was passing in her soul? It was like the depths of an abyss. Suddenly she looked up at Tellmarch and cried out again in almost an angry voice, —

"My childen!"

Tellmarch bowed his head as though he were guilty. He was thinking of the Marquis de Lantenac, who was certainly not thinking of him; and, who, probably, was no longer even aware of his existence. He was calling himself to account for it, saying to himself: "A seigneur, when he is in danger, recognizes you; when he is out of danger, he recognizes you no longer."

And he asked himself: "But, then, why did I save this seigneur?"

And he replied: "Because he is a man."

He thought it over for some time, and added to himself, —

"Am I sure of it?"

And he repeated his bitter remark: "If I had known!"

He was overwhelmed by this adventure, for what he had done puzzled him. It was painful for him to think of it. A good action may, then, be a bad action. He who saves the wolf kills the sheep. He who repairs the vulture's wing is responsible for his claw.

He really felt that he was guilty. This mother's unreasoning anger was justifiable.

However, having saved the mother consoled him for having saved this marquis.

But the children!

The mother was thinking about them, too. Their thoughts were in the same direction, and without speaking to each other, they may have met in the shadows of reverie.

However, her eyes, in whose depths was the darkness of night, fastened on Tellmarch again.

"But it cannot go on like this," she said.

"Hush!" said Tellmarch, putting his finger on his lips. She continued, —

"You did wrong to save me, and I am angry with you for it. I would rather be dead, because I am sure I should see them. I should know where they are. They would not see me, but I should be near them. One when dead may be able to protect."

He took her arm and felt her pulse.

"Calm yourself, you will bring on the fever again."

She asked him almost harshly, —

"When can I go away?"

"Go away?"

"Yes, walk,"

"Never, if you are not reasonable; to-morrow, if you are good."

"What do you call being good?"

"Having confidence in God."

"God! Where has he put my children?"

She was like one deranged. Her voice grew very gentle.

"You understand," she said to him, "I cannot stay like this. You have never had children, I have had them. That makes a difference. One cannot judge of a thing when he does not know what it is. You have never had any children, have you?"

"No," replied Tellmarch.

"As for me, I had nothing else. Without my children, what am I? I wish some one would tell me why I am without my children. I feel sure something has happened, but I do not understand. They have killed my husband, they shot me, but, all the same, I do not understand it."

"Come," said Tellmarch, "the fever is coming on again. Don't talk any more."

She looked at him and was silent.

After this day, she talked no more.

Tellmarch was obeyed more than he wished. She spent long hours crouching at the foot of the old tree, in a dull stupor. She pondered and was silent. Silence offers a strange protection to simple souls suddenly plunged into the gloomy depths of grief. She seemed to have given up understanding it. To a certain degree, despair is unintelligible to the despairing.

Tellmarch looked at her with emotion. In the presence of this suffering, this old man had a woman's thoughts. "Oh, yes," he said to himself, "her lips do not speak, but her eyes speak; I see what is the matter with her, one all-absorbing thought. To have been a mother and to be a mother no longer!

To have been a nurse, and to be so no more! She cannot be resigned to it. She thinks of the little one she nursed not long since. She thinks about it, and thinks about it, and thinks about it. It surely must be delightful to feel a little rosy mouth drawing your soul out of your body, and from your life making a life for itself!”

For his part he was silent too, feeling before such affliction, the powerlessness of words. The silence of an all-absorbing idea is terrible. And how to make this mother’s all-absorbing idea listen to reason? Maternity is illogical; one cannot reason with it. What makes a mother sublime is that she is a sort of animal. The maternal instinct is divinely animal. The mother is no longer a woman, she is a female.

Children are her young.

Hence, there is something in the mother inferior and superior to reason. A mother has a guiding scent. The vast mysterious will of creation is in her and guides her Blindness full of clear-sightedness.

Tellmarch now wanted to make this wretched woman talk; he did not succeed. Once, he said to her, —

“Unfortunately, I am old and unable to walk any longer. I come to the end of my strength before I come to the end of my journey. After a quarter of an hour, my legs refuse to go, and I am obliged to stop; otherwise, I should be able to accompany you. Perhaps in reality it is a good thing that I am not able. I should be more dangerous than useful to you; they tolerate me here; but I am suspected by the Blues as a peasant, and by the peasants as a sorcerer.”

He waited for her to reply. She did not even raise her eyes. An all-absorbing idea ends in madness or heroism. But of what heroism was a poor peasant woman capable? Of none. She could be a mother, and that was all. Each day she buried herself more deeply in her thoughts. Tellmarch watched her.

He tried to give her occupation; he brought her thread, needles, and a thimble; and she really began to sew, which pleased the poor caimand; she pondered, but she worked, a sign of health; strength was returning gradually; she mended her linen, her garments, her shoes; but her eye still looked glassy. While she sewed, she hummed unintelligible songs in a low voice. She murmured names, probably those of her children, but not distinctly enough for Tellmarch to understand. She stopped to listen to the birds, as if they had news to give her. She watched the signs of the weather.

Her lips moved. She talked to herself in a low voice. She made a bag and filled it with chestnuts. One morning, Tellmarch saw her starting away, looking at random into the depths of the forest.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

She replied, —

“I am going to look for them.”

He did not try to detain her.

CHAPTER VII.

THE TWO POLES OF TRUTH.

After a few weeks full of all the vicissitudes of civil war, there was nothing else talked of in the country of Fougères, except two men who were opposed to each other, and who, nevertheless, were doing the same work, that is to say, fighting side by side in the great Revolutionary struggle.

The savage Vendéan duel still continued, but la Vendée was losing ground. In l'Ille-et-Vilaine particularly, thanks to the young commandant who at Dol had so opportunely replied to the daring of six thousand Royalists with the daring of fifteen hundred patriots, the insurrection was, if not extinguished, at least, very much lessened and limited. Several more fortunate strokes had followed this, and, of multiplied successes, a new situation was born.

Things had changed in appearance, but a singular complication had unexpectedly arisen.

In all this part of la Vendée the Republic had the supremacy; this was beyond a doubt; but what Republic? In the triumph which was in prospect, two forms of the Republic were present, — the republic of terror, and the republic of mercy; one wishing to conquer by severity, and the other by gentleness. Which would prevail? These two forms, the conciliatory and the implacable, were represented by two men, each with his own influence and authority; one, a military commander, the other, a civil delegate; which of these two men would carry the day?

One of these two men, the delegate, had formidable support; he had come bringing the menacing watchword of the Commune of Paris to Santerre's battalions. "No mercy, no quarter!" To bring everything under his authority, he had the decree of the Convention carrying "pain of death to any one setting at liberty, or helping to escape a captive rebel chief;" he had full power emanating from the Committee of Public Welfare, and an injunction to obey him, as delegate, signed : Robespierre, Dantox, Marat. The other, the soldier, had in his behalf only this force, pity.

He had nothing to aid him but his arms, which conquered the enemy, and his heart, which gave them mercy. As a conqueror, he believed he had the right to spare the vanquished.

Hence, the latent but deep conflict between these two men. They were in different clouds, both fighting the rebellion, and each having his own thunderbolt, one, victory; the other, terror.

Throughout the Bocage, they talked of nothing but them; and what added to the anxiety of the attention everywhere fixed on them, was the fact that these two men, so absolutely opposed to each other, were, at the same time closely united. These two antagonists were two friends. Never were two hearts bound together by a deeper and more profound sympathy; the cruel one had saved the life of the merciful one, and his face bore a scar in consequence. These two were the incarnation, one of death, the other of life; one was the principle of terror; the other the principle of peace; and they loved each other. Strange problem Let one imagine Orestes compassionate, and Pylades merciless. Let one imagine Ahriman the brother of Ormuzd.

Let us add that the one called “cruel” was at the same time the most brotherly of men; he dressed the wounded, cared for the sick, spent his days and nights in the hospitals, was affected at the sight of barefooted children, had nothing of his own, gave all to the poor. When there was fighting, he was in the midst of it: he marched at the head of the columns, and in the thickest of the battle, armed, for he had a sabre and two pistols in his belt, and unarmed, for he had never been seen to draw his sabre or touch his pistols. He faced the shots, and gave none in return. They said he had been a priest.

One of these men was Gauvain, the other was Cimourdain.

There was friendship between these two men, but hatred between the two principles; it was like one soul cut in two, and divided; Gauvain really had received a half of Cimourdain’s soul, but the gentle half. It seemed as if Gauvain had received the white rays, and Cimourdain had kept for himself what might be called the black rays. This caused an intimate discord. It was impossible for this secret war not to burst forth. One morning the battle began.

Cimourdain said to Gauvain, —

“Where are we?”

Gauvain replied, —

“You know as well as I do. I have scattered Lantenac’s bands. He has only a few men with him. He is driven back into the forest of Fougères. In a week he will be surrounded.”

“And in two weeks?”

“He will be captured.”

“And then?”

“Have you seen my notice?”

“Yes. Well?”

“He will be shot.”

“Mercy again. He must be guillotined.

“For my part,” said Gauvain, “I am for military death.”

“And I,” replied Cimourdain, “am for revolutionary death.”

He looked Gauvain in the face, and said, —

“Why did you release those nuns of the convent of Saint-Marc-le-Blanc?”

“I am not making war on women,” replied Gauvain.

“These women hate the people. And for hatred a woman is equal to ten men. Why did you refuse to send all that flock of old fanatic priests taken at Louvigné, to the Revolutionary tribunal?”

“I am not making war on old men.”

“An old priest is worse than a young one. Rebellion is more dangerous when preached by white hairs. People have faith in wrinkles. No false pity, Gauvain. Regicides are liberators. Keep your eye on the tower of the temple.”

“The tower of the temple! I would release the dauphin. I am not making war on children.”

Cimourdain’s eye grew stern.

“Gauvain, know that it is necessary to make war on a woman when her name is Marie Antoinette, on an old man when his name is Pope Pius VI., and on a child, when his name is Louis Capet.”

“My master, I am not a politician.”

“Try not to be dangerous. Why, when the post of Cossé was attacked, and the rebel Jean Treton, driven back and lost, rushed alone, sword in hand, on the whole column, did you cry, ‘Open the ranks — let him pass?’”

“Because one does not set fifteen hundred men to kill a single man.”

“Why, at the Cailleterie d’Astillé, when you saw that your soldiers were going to kill the Vendéan, Joseph Bézier, who was wounded and dragging himself along, did you cry : ‘Forward, march! I will attend to him!’ and shoot your pistol into the air?”

“Because one does not shoot a man who is down.”

“And you did wrong. Both are to-day chiefs of bands; Joseph Bézier is Moustache, and Jean Treton is Jambe d’Argent. In saving these two men, you gave two enemies to the Republic.”

“Certainly, I should like to make friends for it and not give it enemies.”

“Why did you not have your three hundred peasant prisoners shot after the victory of Landéan?”

“Because as Bonchamp had pardoned the Republican prisoners, I wished to have it said that the Republic pardoned the Royalist prisoners.”

“But if you take Lantenac will you pardon him?”

“No.”

“Why not, since you pardoned three hundred prisoners?”

“The peasants are ignorant; Lantenac knows what he is doing.”

“But Lantenac is a relative of yours?”

“France is the great relative.”

“Lantenac is an old man.”

“Lantenac is a foreigner. Lantenac has no age. Lantenac is summoning the English. Lantenac is invasion. Lantenac is the enemy of the country. The duel between him and me can only end in his death or mine.”

“Gauvain, remember your words.”

“My promise is given.”

There was a silence and both looked at each other.

Gauvain added, —

“This year of ‘93 in which we aie living will be a bloody date.”

“Take care!” exclaimed Cimourdain. “Terrible duties are before us. Accuse no one who is not at fault. How long has the malady been the fault of the physician? Yes, that which characterizes this tremendous year is that it is pitiless. Why? Because it is the great revolutionary year. This present year is the incarnation of the Revolution. The Revolution has an enemy, the Old World, and is pitiless to it, just as the surgeon has an enemy, gangrene, and is pitiless to it. The Revolution exterminates royalty in the king, aristocracy in the noble, despotism in the soldier, superstition in the priest, barbarity in the judge; in short, everything tyrannous in everything which tyrannies. The operation is frightful, but the Revolution works with a sure hand. As to the amount of sound flesh that it sacrifices, ask Bœrhave what he thinks about it. What tumor can be removed without involving a loss of blood? What fire can be extinguished without requiring a part of the fire? These terrible necessities are the very condition of success. A surgeon resembles a butcher; a healer may give the effect of an executioner. The Revolution devotes itself to its fatal work. It mutilates, but it saves. What! you ask mercy for the virus! you wish it to show clemency toward what is venomous! It does not listen. It holds what has passed, it will finish it. It makes a deep incision in civilization, out of which will emerge the health of the human race. You suffer? Without doubt. How long will it last? during the operation. Then you will live. The Revolution is amputating the world. Hence this hemorrhage, '93."

"The surgeon is calm," said Gauvain, "and the men I see are violent."

"The Revolution," replied Cimourdain, "needs ferocious workmen to assist it. It rejects every hand that trembles. It has faith only in the inexorable. Danton is terrible, Robespierre is inflexible, Saint-Just is immutable, Marat is implacable. Be on your guard, Gauvain. These names are necessary. They are worth whole armies to us. They will terrify Europe."

"And perhaps also the future," said Gauvain.

He stopped and then added, —

"Besides, my master, you make a mistake; I accuse nobody. In my opinion, the chief characteristic of the Revolution is its irresponsibility. No one is innocent, no one is guilty. Louis XVI. is a sheep thrown among lions; he wants to flee, he wants to escape; he tries to defend himself; he would bite if he could. But not every one can be a lion. This desire of his passes for a crime. This sheep, in anger, shows his teeth. 'The traitor!' say the lions, and they devour him. Having done this, they fight among themselves."

"The sheep is a beast."

"And the lions, what are they?"

This reply made Cimourdain thoughtful. He raised his head and said, —

"These lions are consciences, these lions are ideas, these lions are principles."

"They cause the terror."

"Some day the Revolution will be the justification of the terror."

"Fear lest the terror be the calumny of the Revolution."

And Gauvain added, —

"Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, these are dogmas of peace and harmony. Why make them appear frightful? What is it that we wish for? To subject the people to one common Republic. Well, let us not make them afraid.

What is the good of intimidation? People are no more attracted by scarecrows than birds are. It is not necessary to do evil in order to accomplish good. The throne is not overturned to leave the scaffold standing. Death to kings and life to nations! Let us knock off the crowns, let us spare the heads! The Revolution is concord and not fright. Gentle ideas are not subserved by pitiless men. Amnesty is in my opinion the most beautiful word in human speech. I will shed blood only while risking my own. Besides, I only know how to fight, and I am only a soldier. But if one cannot pardon, it is not worth while to conquer. During battle, let us be the enemies of our enemies, and after the victory, their brothers."

"Take care!" repeated Cimourdain, for the third time, "Gauvain, you are more to me than a son. Take care!"

And he added, thoughtfully, —

"In times like ours, pity may be one form of treason."

Hearing these two men talk was like hearing the conversation of the sword and the axe.

CHAPTER VIII.

DOLOROSA.

In the meantime, the mother was looking for her little ones.

She went straight ahead. How did she live? Impossible to tell. She herself did not know. She walked days and nights; she begged, she ate grass, she slept on the ground, she slept in the open air, in the thickets, under the stars, sometimes in the rain and the wind.

She roved from village to village, from farm to farm, asking for information. She stopped on the thresholds; her dress was in rags; sometimes she was welcomed, sometimes she was driven away. When she could not go into the houses, she went into the woods. She was not acquainted with the country. No region was familiar to her except Siscoignard and the parish of Azé. She had no definite route; she went back on her steps; started on a road that she had already been over; went on useless paths. Sometimes she followed the road, sometimes the tracks of a wagon, sometimes footpaths in the copses. In this life of chance, she had worn out her wretched clothing; she had walked first in shoes, then barefooted, then with bleeding feet.

She went into the midst of the war, in the midst of the firing, hearing nothing, seeing nothing, avoiding nothing, looking for her children. As everything was in revolt, there were no policemen, no mayors, no authorities. She had to do only with those whom she met. She spoke to them, she asked, —

“Have you seen three little children anywhere?”

The passers-by raised their heads.

“Two boys and a girl,” she said.

She continued, —

“René-Jean, Gros-Alain, Georgette? You have not seen them?”

She went on.

“The oldest four years and a half, the little one twenty months old.”

She added, —

“Do you know where they are? They have taken them away from me.”

The people looked at her, and that was all.

Seeing that they did not understand, she said, —

“They are mine, that is why.”

The people went on their way. Then she would stop and say no more, tearing her breast with her nails.

One day, however, a peasant listened to her. The good man began to ponder.

“Wait,” he said. “Three children?”

“Yes.”

“Two boys?”

“And a girl.”

Then he asked again, —

“Are you looking for them?”

“Yes.”

“I have heard tell of a seigneur, who took three little children, and had them with him.”

“Where is this man,” she cried. “Where are they?”

The peasant replied, —

“Go to la Tourgue.”

“Shall I find my children there?”

“Probably, you will.”

“You said?”

“La Tourgue?”

“What is la Tourgue?”

“It is a place.”

“Is it a village? a castle? a farm?”

“I have never been there.”

“Is it far?”

“It is not near.”

“In what direction?”

“In the direction of Fourgères.”

“How do you get there?”

“You are in Ventortes,” said the peasant, “you leave Ernée on the left and Coxelles on the right, you pass by Lorchamps and you cross the Leroux.”

And the peasant pointed toward the west.

“Right ahead of you all the way, in the direction of the sunset.”

Before the peasant had dropped his arm, she had started.

The peasant called out, —

“But, take care. They are fighting over there.”

She did not turn around to reply to him, but continued on her way.

CHAPTER IX.

A PROVINCIAL BASTILLE.

I. — La Tourgue.

The traveller of forty years ago, who entered the forest of Fougères from the side of Laignelet, and came out on the side of Parigné, was confronted with a forbidding object on the edge of these dark woods. As he emerged from the thicket, la Tourgue arose abruptly before him.

Not the living la Tourgue, but the dead la Tourgue. La Tourgue rent, ruined, scarred, dismantled. A ruin is to an edifice what a ghost is to a man.

There was no more gloomy sight than la Tourgue. Before one's eyes was a lofty round tower, standing alone in a corner of the wood, like a malefactor. This tower, rising from a perpendicular rock, was almost Roman in appearance, it was so regular and solid, and the idea of power was so mingled with the idea of ruin in this mighty mass. It was slightly Roman, for it was Romanesque; it was begun in the ninth century and finished in the twelfth, after the third Crusade. The impost mouldings of its archways told its age.

If the traveller approached it, climbed up the escarpment, noticed a breach, took his risk in entering, went inside, he found it empty. It was something like the inside of a stone trumpet placed upright on the ground. From top to bottom there were no partitions; there was no roof, no ceiling, no floor; there were arch stones and chimney-pieces, and embrasures for ancient cannon; at different heights, bands of granite corbels, and some cross-beams, marking the stories; the beams were covered with the lime of night birds; the colossal wall was fifteen feet thick at the base, and twelve at the summit; here and there were crevices and holes which had been doorways, through which could be seen dark staircases inside the wall. The passer-by who came in here in the evening would have heard the cries of the brown owl, herons, goat-suckers, and other birds; and would have seen under his feet brambles, stones, and reptiles; and above his head, through a black circle, which was the top of the tower and seemed like the mouth of an enormous well, the stars.

There was a tradition in the country that in the upper stories of this tower there were secret doors, like the doors in the tombs of the kings of Judah, made of a single stone turning on a pivot, opening, then closing and losing itself in the wall; a style of architecture brought back from the Crusades with the pointed arch. When these doors were closed it was impossible to find them, they were so well blended with the other stones in the wall. Such doors may be seen at the present time in the mysterious cities of Anti-Lebanon, escaped from the twelve towns which were buried by the earthquakes in the time of Tiberius.

II. — The Breach.

The breach which formed the entrance to the ruin was the opening to a mine. For a connoisseur familiar with Errard, Sardi and Pagan, this mine had been coustructed according to rule. The fire chamber, shaped like a mitre, was proportioned to the power of the keep it had to rip open. It must have held at least two hundredweight of powder. It was reached by a winding passage, which is more advantageous than a straight one; the caving in caused by the mine laid bare, where the stones were torn away, the saucission having the diameter of a hen’s egg. The explosion had made a deep hole in the wall, through which the besiegers must have been able to enter. This tower had evidently sustained regular sieges at different times; it was riddled with grapeshot; and the grapeshot did not all belong to the same period; each projectile has its own way of marking a rampart; and all had left their scar on this keep, from the stone cannon balls of the fourteenth century to the iron cannon balls of the eighteenth.

The breach opened into what must have been the ground floor. Opposite the breach in the wall of the tower, opened the door to a crypt cut out in the rock, and extending in the foundations of the tower under the entire hall of the ground floor.

This crypt, three quarters filled up, was cleared out in 1835, under the direction of Monsieur Auguste le Prévost, the Antiquary of Bernay.

III. — The Dungeon.

This crypt was the oubliette.

Every keep has its dungeon. This keep, like many torture chambers of the same period, had two stories. The first story which was reached by the door, was a large arched room on a level with the hall of the ground floor. On the wall of this room were seen two parallel, vertical grooves, extending from one side to the other across the arched ceiling, where they made a deep indentation, giving the impression of two wheel tracks. They were two wheel tracks in reality. These two grooves had been hollowed out by two wheels. Formerly, in feudal times, victims had been quartered in this room, by a less noisy process than with the four horses. They had two wheels there, so strong and so large that they touched the walls and the arched ceiling; an arm and a leg of the prisoner were fastened to each of the wheels, then the wheels were revolved in opposite directions, which tore the man asunder. It required force, and this caused the grooves hollowed out in the stone ground by the wheels. At the present time, a room of this kind may still be seen at Vianden.

Under this room there was another. This was the real dungeon. It was not entered by a door, it was penetrated through a hole; the victim, naked, was let down by a rope under the armpits, into the lower chamber, through a hole in the centre of the pavement of the room above. If he persisted in living, food was thrown to him through this hole. A hole of this kind may still be seen at Bouillon.

Air came through this hole. The lower room, dug out under the hall of the ground floor, was rather a well than a room. There was water at the bottom, and it was filled with an icy draught. This draught, which was death to the prisoner below, kept the prisoner above alive; it made it possible to breathe in the prison. The prisoner above, groping about under his arched ceiling, received no air except through this hole. Moreover, whoever went down there, or fell down there never came out again. The prisoner had to keep away from it in the darkness. One false step might make the prisoner of the upper chamber a prisoner of the lower. This was ever before him. If he clung to life this hole was his danger; if he was weary of it, this hole was his resource. The upper story was the dungeon; the lower story, the tomb. A superposition resembling the society of that time.

This was what our ancestors called a “*cul-de-basse-fosse.*” As such a thing has gone out of existence, the name has no meaning for us. Thanks to the Revolution, we can utter these words with indifference.

Outside the tower, above the breach which forty years ago was the only entrance, was an opening larger than the other loopholes, from which hung an iron grating, broken and loose.

IV. — The Little Castle on the Bridge.

On the opposite side of the breach, a bridge of stone with three arches very little injured, was joined to this tower. The bridge had supported a building, some fragments of which were still remaining. There was nothing left of this building, which showed evidence of a conflagration, but charred timbers, a sort of framework through which the daylight penetrated, and which rose near the tower, like a skeleton beside a ghost.

This ruin is now entirely demolished, and not a trace of it is left. One day and one peasant were enough to undo the work of many centuries and many kings.

La Tourgue is a peasant abbreviation for la Tour-Gauvain, just as la Jupelle is an abbreviation of la Jupellière, and as the name of that humpbacked chief, Pinson-le-Tort, means Pinson-le-Tortu.

La Tourgue, which was in ruins forty years ago, and to-day is only a name, in 1793 was a fortress. It was the old bastille of the Gauvain family, guarding the western entrance to the forest of Fougeres, a forest which is hardly a grove now.

This citadel was built on one of those great blocks of schist which abound between Mayenne and Dinan, and are scattered everywhere through the thickets and moors, as though the giants had been throwing stones at each other’s heads.

The tower comprised the whole fortress; under the tower was the rock, at the foot of the rock one of those streams of water which the month of January changes to a torrent, and the month of June dries up entirely.

Simplified to this extent, the fortress in the middie ages was almost impregnable. The bridge weakened it. The Gothic Gauvains had built it without a bridge. It was reached by one of those movable foot bridges, which could be destroyed by a single axe blow. While the Gauvains were viscounts, it pleased them thus, and they were satisfied with it; but when they became marquises, and when they left the cave for the court, they threw three arches across the torrent, and made themselves accessible from the plain, just as they had made themselves accessible to the king. The marquises of the seventeenth century and the marchionesses of the eighteenth, did not care to be impregnable. Imitating Versailles took the place of keeping up the ancestral traditions.

In front of the tower on the western side was a very high table-land, extending to the plains; this table-land almost touched the tower, and was only separated from it by a very deep ravine, through which flowed the watercourse which is a tributary of the Couesnon. The bridge connecting the fortress and the table-land was built high on piers; and on these piers was constructed a building like that at Chenonceaux in the Mansard style, and more habitable than the tower. But manners were still very rude; the seigneurs held to the custom of living in the rooms of the keep, which were like dungeons. As for the building on the bridge, which was a sort of chatelet, it contained a long corridor which served as an entrance and was called the guard hall; above this guard hall, which was a sort of entresol, was the library, above the library, a granary. Long windows with little panes of Bohemian glass, pilasters between the windows, medallions carved in the wall; three stories: on the lower floor were the halberds and muskets; on the next, the books; on the next, bags of oats; all this was rather savage and very princely.

The tower beside it was fierce.

It rose above this coquettish building in all its gloomy haughtiness. From the platform, the bridge could be destroyed.

The two edifices, one rude, the other elegant, clashed rather than complimented each other. The two styles were not harmonious; although it seems as if two semicircles ought to be similar, nothing resembles a Roman semicircle less than a classic archivault. This tower, suited to the forest, was a strange neighbor to this bridge worthy of Versailles. Imagine Alain Barbe-Torte giving his arm to Louis XIV. The combination was terrible. A strange ferocity resulted from the union of these two majesties.

From a military point of view, the bridge, we must insist, almost betrayed the tower. It adorned it and disarmed it; in gaining ornamentation it had lost strength. The bridge placed it on a footing with the table-land. Although still impregnable on the side of the forest, it was now vulnerable on the side of the plain. Once it commanded the table-land, now it was commanded by the table-land. An enemy established there, would quickly become master of the bridge. The library and the granary were to the advantage of the besieger, and against the fortress. A library and a granary are alike in this respect, that books and straw are both combustible. It is all the same to a besieger, making use of fire, whether he burns Homer or a bundle of hay, provided it burns. The French proved this to the Germans when they burned the library at Heidelberg, and the Germans proved it to the French when they burned the library at Strasburg. Adding this bridge to la Tourgue was strategically a mistake; but in the seventeenth century, under Colbert and Louvois, the Gauvain princes, as well as the princes of Rohan and the princes of la Trémoille, believed that they would never be besieged again.

However, the builders of the bridge had taken some precautions. First, they had taken the possibility of fire into account; under the three windows on the side next the water they had hung crosswise, to hooks which could still be seen a half century ago, a strong ladder for escape, as long as the height of the first two stories of the bridge, a height greater than three ordinary stories. Second, they had taken the possibility of assault into account; they had isolated the bridge from the tower by means of a low, heavy iron door; this door was arched; it was locked with a large key, kept in a hiding-place known to the keeper alone, and once closed, this door could defy the battering-ram, and almost withstand cannon balls.

It was necessary to pass through the bridge to reach this door, and to pass through this door to enter the tower. There was no other entrance.

V. — The Iron Door.

The second story of the chatelet on the bridge, raised on the piers, corresponded to the second story of the tower; the iron door had been placed at this height to make it more secure.

The iron door opened from the side of the bridge into the library, and from the side of the tower into a great arched hall with a pillar in the centre. This hall, as has already been said, was in the second story of the keep. It was round, like the tower; long loopholes, looking out on the plains, lighted it. The wall was quite rough and bare, and nothing concealed the stones, which were very symmetrically laid. This hall was reached by a winding staircase made inside the wall, a thing easily done when the walls are fifteen feet thick. In the Middle Ages, a town was taken street by street; a street, house by house; a house, room by room. They besieged a fortress, story by story.

La Tourgue was in this respect very ingeniously arranged, very churlish, and very unapproachable. A spiral staircase, extremely steep and inaccessible, led from one story to another; the doors were slanting and not so high as a man, and it was necessary to bow one’s head in order to pass through; but a bowed head meant a head knocked off, and at each door the besieged awaited the besiegers.

Below the round hall with the column were two similar rooms, which formed the first story and the ground floor, and above there were three; above these six rooms placed one upon another, the tower was closed over with a roof of stone, which was the platform, and reached by a narrow watch-tower.

The fifteen feet, the thickness of the wall, which they must have had to cut through in order to place the iron door in the middle, imbedded it in a long coving, so that when the door closed, it was as much on the side of the tower as on the side of the bridge, under a porch six or seven feet deep; when it was open the two porches formed one and made the entrance arch.

Under the porch on the side of the bridge, inside the wall, was a low gate with a St. Gilles's staircase, leading to the corridor on the first floor, under the library; this was still another difficulty for the besieger. The chatelet on the bridge presented nothing but a perpendicular wall on the side next the table-land, and the bridge ended there. A draw-bridge, applied to a low door, put it in communication with the table-land, and this draw-bridge, never lowered except on an inclined plane, on account of the height, gave entrance to the long corridor, called the hall of the guards. Once master of this corridor, the besieger, in order to reach the iron door, was obliged to tear away the St. Giles's staircase leading to the second story.

VI. — The Library.

The library was an oblong hall of the same width and length as the bridge, and having a single door, the iron door. A false swinging door, padded with green cloth, and opening with a push, screened the arched entrance to the tower on the inside. The wall of the library from top to bottom, and from floor to ceiling was covered with cabinets having glass doors, in the beautiful style of carpentry of the seventeenth century.

Six large windows, three on each side, one above each arch, lighted this library. From the top of the plateau outside, one could look through these windows and see the inside. Between the windows, on carved oak terminals, stood six marble busts: Hermolaüs, of Byzantium; Athenæus, the grammarian of Naukratos; Suidas; Casaubon; Clovis, king of France; and his chancellor Anachalus, who, by the way, was no more a chancellor than Clovis was a king.

There were books of every kind in this library. One has become famous. It was an old quarto with prints, bearing the title, “Saint Bartholomew,” in large letters; and the sub-title, “Gospel according to Saint Bartholomew, preceded by a dissertation by Pantœnus, a Christian philosopher, on the question whether this gospel should be considered apocryphal, and whether Saint Bartholomew be the same as Nathaniel.”

This book, thought to be the only copy, rested on a desk in the centre of the library. In the last century, people went to see it out of curiosity.

VII. — The Granary.

The granary which, like the library, had the oblong form of the bridge, was merely the space under the timber-work of the roof. It made a large hall and was filled with straw and hay, and lighted by six garret windows. It’s only adornment was a figure of Saint Barnabas, carved on the door, with this verse beneath it, —

Barnabus sanctus falcem jubet ire per herbam.

A wide, lofty tower, with six stories, penetrated by an occasional loophole, having for its only means of entrance and exit an iron door opening on a castle bridge, closed by a drawbridge; behind the tower, the forest; in front of the tower, a plateau covered with heath: under the bridge, between the tower and the plateau, a deep ravine, narrow and full of brambles; a torrent in winter, a brook in spring, a stony ditch in summer; such was the Tour-Gauvain, called la Tourgue.

CHAPTER X.

THE HOSTAGES.

July passed, August came, a blast of heroism and cruelty blew over France; two spectres had just crossed the horizon, Marat with a dagger in his side, Charlotte Corday headless; everything was becoming terrible.

As for la Vendée, beaten in great strategic measures, she took refuge in small ones, more frightful, as we have already said; this war was now an immense skirmish in the woods.

The disasters to the great army called Catholic and Royal were beginning; a decree sent the army of Mayence to la Vendée; eight thousand Vendéans were killed at Ancenis; the Vendéans were repulsed at Nates, driven out of Montaigu, expelled from Thouars, driven from Noirmoutier, thrown headlong from Cholet, Mortagne, and Saumur; they evacuated Parthenay; they abandoned Clisson; they lost ground at Châtillon; they lost a flag at Saint-Hilaire; they were defeated at Pornic, at the Sables, at Fontenay, Doué, the Château d'Eau, the Ponts-de-Cé; they were held in check at Luçon; retreated from Châtaigneraye; were routed at Roche-sur-Yon: but, on the one hand, they were threatening la Rochelle, and, on the other, in the Guernsey waters, an English fleet, commanded by General Craig, carrying several English regiments together with the best officers of the French marine, was only waiting for a signal from the Marquis de Lantenac, to disembark.

This disembarkation might give back victory to the royalist insurrection. But Pitt was a State malefactor; treason is to statesmanship what the dagger is to the panoply; Pitt stabbed our country and betrayed his own; betraying his country was dishonoring it; England under him, and through him, waged a Punic war. She spied, cheated, lied. A poacher and a forger, no means were scorned by her; she even descended to the minutiæ of hatred. She caused a monopoly of tallow, which cost five francs a pound; a letter from Prizant, Pitt's agent in Vendée, was taken from an Englishman at Lille, containing these lines, —

"I beg you not to be sparing of money. We hope that the assassinations will be done with prudence; disguised priests and women are the suitable persons for this undertaking. Send sixty thousand livres to Rouen, and fifty thousand livres to Caen.”

This letter was read by Barér to the Convention the first of August. This treachery was answered by Parrein’s cruelties, and later on by Carrier’s atrocities. The Republicans of Metz and the Republicans of the South asked permission to march against the rebels. A decree ordered the forming of twenty-four companies of pioneers to burn the hedges and fences of the Bocage. An unprecedented crisis. The war only ceased in one direction to begin again in another. “No mercy! no prisoners!” was the cry of both parties. History was full of a terrible darkness.

In this month of August, la Tourgue was besieged.

One evening, as the stars were beginning to shine, in the quiet of a dog-day twilight, when not a leaf trembled in the forest, not a blade of grass stirred on the moor, through the silence of the approaching darkness, the sound of a horn was heard. The sound of this horn came from the top of the tower.

This horn was answered by a trumpet, which sounded from below.

At the top of the tower there was an armed man; below, in the darkness, there was a camp.

A swarm of black figures could be made out in the dim light around the Tour-Gauvain. This swarm was a bivouac. Fires were beginning to be lighted under the trees in the forest and in the heather on the plateau, piercing the darkness here and there with bright points of light, as if the earth wished to shine with stars as well as the sky, Gloomy stars, — those of war! The bivouac, in the direction of the plateau, reached as far as the plains, and in the direction of the forest, it extended into the thicket. La Tourgue was blockaded.

The extent of the besieger’s bivouac indicated a numerous force.

The camp was situated close to the fortress, and on the side of the tower, reached to the rock, and on the side of the bridge, to the edge of the ravine.

There was a second blast from the horn, followed by a second blowing of the trumpet.

This horn questioned, and the trumpet gave answer.

The horn was the tower asking the camp, “Can we speak to you?” And the trumpet replied, “Yes.”

At this period, as the Vendéans were not considered warriors by the Convention, and as a decree had forbidden the exchange of flags of truce with “these brigands,” they supplied, as best they could, the means of communication which the right of nations authorizes in ordinary warfare, and forbids in civil warfare. So on occasion, there was a certain understanding arranged between the peasant’s horn and the soldier’s trumpet. The first call was only to attract attention, the second call put the question, “Will you listen?” If after this second call the trumpet was silent, it meant refusal; if the trumpet answered, it meant consent. This signified a few moments’ truce.

The trumpet having replied to the second call, the man on the top of the tower spoke, and these were his words, —

“Ye men who hear me, I am Gouge-le-Bruant, called Brisebleu, because I have put an end to so many of your men; and called also l’Imânus, because I shall kill still more than I have killed; I had my finger cut off by a sabre stroke on the barrel of my gun, during the attack at Granville, and you had my father and mother, and my sister Jacqueline eighteen years old, guillotined at Laval; — this is who I am.

“I speak to you in the name of Monseigneur the Marquis Gauvain de Lantenac, Viscount de Fontenay, Prince of Brittany, seigneur of the seven forests, my master.

“Know first, that before Monseigneur le Marquis shut himself up in this tower where you have blockaded him, he distributed the war among six chiefs, his lieutenants; he gave to Delière the country between the road to Brest and the road to Ernée; to Treton, the country between la Roë and Laval; to Jacquet, called Taillefer, the boundary of the Upper Maine; to Gaulier, called Great Peter, Château-Gontier; to Leconte, Craon; Fougères to Monsieur Dubois-Guy; and all la Mayenne to Monsieur de Rochambeau; in order that you might accomplish nothing by taking this fortress, and that even if Monseigneur le Marquis should die, la Vendée of God and the king should not die.

“Know this, that what I tell you is to warn you.

“Monseigneur is here by my side. I am the mouth through which his words pass. Ye men, who besiege us, keep silence.

“This is what it is important for you to hear, —

“Do not forget that the war that you are waging against us is unjust. We are people living in our own country, and we are fighting honestly, and we are simple and pure beneath the will of God, as the grass beneath the dew. The Republic has attacked us; it came to disturb us in our fields, it has burned our houses and our crops, and cannonaded our farms, and our women and children have been obliged to flee barefooted into the woods while the winter birds were still singing.

“You, who are present and hear what I say, have driven us into the forest, and you are surrounding us in this tower; you have killed or scattered those who were united to us; you have cannon; you have joined to your column, the garrisons and posts of Mortain, Barenton, Teilleul, Landivy, d’Evran, Tinteniac and Vitré, and the result is that you are attacking us with four thousand five hundred soldiers, and we have but nineteen men for our defence.

“We have provisions and ammunition.

“You have succeeded in contriving a mine and in blowing up a piece of our rock and a piece of our wall.

“That made a hole at the foot of the tower, and this hole is a breach, through which you can enter, although it is not open to the sky, and the tower, still strong and firm, forms an arch above it.

“Now you are preparing to attack us.

“And we, first, monseigneur le marquis, who is Prince of Brittany and secular Prior of the abbey of Saint-Marie de Lantenac, where daily mass was established by Queen Jeanne; and next, the other defenders of the tower, among whom are Monsieur l’Abbé Turmeau, in war, Grand-Francœur; my comrade Guinoiseau, captain of Camp-Vert; my comrade, Chante-en-Hiver, captain of the camp of l’Avoine; my comrade, la Musette, captain of the camp of the Fourmis; and myself, a peasant, who was born in the market-town of Daon, through which the brook Moriandre flows, — we all of us have one thing to say to you.

“Men who are at the foot of this tower, listen.

“We have in our hands three prisoners, three children. These children were adopted by one of your battahons, and they are yours. We offer to give up these three children to you.

“On one condition.

“That is that you will let us go free.

“If you refuse, listen attentively. You can attack us in only two ways; by means of the breach, from the side of the forest; or by means of the bridge, from the side of the plateau. The building on the bridge is three stories high; in the lower story, I, l’Imânus, I who speak to you, have had six tons of tar and one hundred fagots of dried heath placed there; in the upper story, there is straw; the middle story is full of books and papers; the iron door leading from the bridge to the tower is closed, and monseigneur has the key; and I have made an opening under the door, and through this opening passes a sulphur slow-match, one end of which is in the hogsheads of tar, and the other within my reach, inside the tower; I shall set fire to it whenever it seems good to me. If you refuse to let us out, the three children will be placed in the second story of the bridge, between the story where the sulphur match ends and where the tar is, and the story filled with straw, and the iron door will be fastened on them. If you attack by the bridge you will be the ones to set fire to the building; if you attack by the breach, we shall be the ones; if you attack by the breach and the bridge at the same time, the fire will be set by you and by us; and in any case the children will perish.

“Now, accept or refuse.

“If you accept, we leave.

“If you refuse, the children die.

“I have said my say.”

The man who spoke from the top of the tower was silent.

A voice from below cried out, —

“We refuse.”

This voice was short and stern. Another voice, less harsh, but firm, added, —

“We give you twenty-four hours to surrender at discretion.”

Silence ensued, and the same voice continued, —

“To-morrow at this hour, if you do not surrender, we shall begin the attack.”

And the first voice added, —

“And then, no quarter.”

To this savage voice, another replied from the top of the tower. Between two battlements a tall shadow bent forward, in which, by the light of the stars, could be made out the formidable face of the Marquis de Lantenac, and this face which looked into the darkness as if trying to find some one, cried, —

“Hold, it is you, priest!”

“Yes, it is I, traitor!” replied the harsh voice from below.

CHAPTER XI.

TERRIBLE AS IN ANCIENT DAYS.

The relentless voice really was Cimourdain’s; the younger and less imperious voice was Gauvain’s.

The Marquis de Lantenac had not been mistaken in recognizing the Abbé Cimourdain.

In a few weeks, Cimourdain, as we know, had become famous in this country made bloody by civil war; there was no more ominous notoriety than his; people said: “Marat, in Paris; Châlier, in Lyons; Cimourdain, in Vendée. They cursed the Abbé Cimourdain in proportion as they had once revered him; such is the effect of a priest renouncing his robes. Cimourdain was a cause of horror. The stern are unfortunate; whoever sees their deeds condemns them, but if their consciences could be seen they would, perhaps, be forgiven. A Lycurgus, who is not explained seems a Tiberius. The two men, the Marquis de Lantenac and the Abbé Cimourdain were equal in the balance of hatred; the malediction of the Royalists against Cimourdain was counterbalanced by the execration of the Republicans against Lantenac. Each of these two men was a monster in the eyes of the opposite party; to such an extent that it produced this singular fact, that while Prieur de la Marne, at Granville, was putting a price on Lantenac’s head, Charette, at Noirmoutier was setting a price on the head of Cimourdain.

We may say that these two men, the marquis and the priest, were to a certain extent the same man. The bronze mask of civil war has two profiles; one turned toward the past, the other turned toward the future; both equally tragic. Lantenac was the first of these profiles, Cimourdain was the second; only Lantenac’s bitter sneer was full of darkness and night, while Cimourdain’s fatal brow glowed with the light of morning.

In the meantime, the siege of la Tourgue had a respite.

Thanks to the intervention of Gauvain, as we have just seen, a sort of twenty-four hours’ truce had been agreed upon.

L’Imânus had indeed been well posted, and in consequence of Cimourdain’s requisition Gauvain now had under his command four thousand five hundred men, as many National Guards as troops of the line, and with these he was surrounding Lantenac in la Tourgue; and he had been able to point twelve pieces of cannon at the fortress, a masked battery of six pieces on the edge of the forest toward the tower, and an open battery of six pieces on the plateau toward the bridge. He had been able to spring the mine and make a breach at the foot of the tower.

So, at the expiration of the twenty-four hours' truce, the struggle was going to begin under the following conditions, —

There were four thousand five hundred men on the plateau and in the forest.

In the tower, nineteen.

The names of these nineteen besieged men may be found by history among the lists of outlaws. Possibly, we shall come across them.

Cimourdain would have liked to have Gauvain made adjutant-general to command these four thousand five hundred men, who made almost an army. But Gauvain had refused, saying, "When Lantenac has been taken we will see. I have not yet done anything to deserve it."

Great commands with humble rank were, moreover, customary among the Republicans. Later on, Bonaparte was both colonel of artillery and general-in-chief of the army of Italy.

The Tour-Gauvain had a strange fate; it was attacked by a Gauvain, and it was a Gauvain who defended it. This caused some restraint in the attack, but not in the defence, for Monsieur de Lantenac was one of those men who have no regard for anything, and besides he had lived chiefly at Versailles, and had no superstitious feeling for la Tourgue, which he was hardly acquainted with. He had taken refuge because it was the only place, and that was all; but he had no scruple about destroying it. Gauvain was more respectful.

The weak point of the fortress was the bridge; but the library on the bridge contained the family archives; if the attack were made there, the burning of the bridge was inevitable; it seemed to Gauvain that burning the archives was attacking his ancestors. La Tourgue was the family mansion of the Gauvains; all their fiefs of Brittany centred about this tower, just as all the fiefs of France centred about the tower of the Louvre; the family relics of the Gauvains were there; he himself had been born there; the tortuous fatalities of life had brought him as a man to attack these walls which had protected him as a child. Should he be so irreverent toward this dwelling as to reduce it to ashes? Perhaps Gauvain's own cradle was in some corner of the granary over the library. Some reflections become emotions. Gauvain felt moved before the ancient family mansion. That is why he spared the bridge. He had limited himself to rendering all egress and escape impossible by this way, and out of respect guarded the bridge with a battery, and had chosen the opposite side for attack. Hence the mine and the sap at the foot of the tower.

Cimourdain had allowed him to do this; he reproached himself for it, because his severity frowned on all this Gothic rubbish, and he did not wish to be any more indulgent toward buildings than toward men. To care for a castle was a beginning of clemency. Now, clemency was Gauvain's weak side. Cimourdain, we know, watched him with his gloomy eyes and arrested this inclination. However, he himself, and he admitted it with anger, did not look on la Tourgue again without a secret thrill; he felt moved by that studious hall where the first books were which he had taught Gauvain to read; he had been priest of the neighboring village, Parigné; he, Cimourdain, had lived in the top of the castle on the bridge; in the library was where he used to hold the little Gauvain on his knees while he learned the alphabet; between these four old walls he had seen his dearly beloved pupil, the son of his soul, grow as a man and increase as a mind. This library, this castle, these walls, full of his blessings on the child, should he overthrow them and burn them? He pitied them. Not without remorse.

He had let Gauvain begin the siege on the opposite side. La Tourgue had its savage side, the tower, and its civilized side, the library. Cimourdain had allowed Gauvain to make a breach only on the savage side.

Moreover, this old dwelling, attacked by a Gauvain, defended by a Gauvain, was returning, in the midst of the French Revolution, to its feudal customs. Wars between relatives make up the entire history of the Middle Ages; the Eteocles and Polynices are Gothic as well as Greek, and Hamlet does at Elsinore what Orestes did in Argos.

CHAPTER XII.

A SCHEME FOR ESCAPE.

The whole night was spent on both sides in making preparations.

As soon as the ominous conference just heard, was ended, Gauvain’s first care was to call his lieutenant.

Guéchamp, whom it is necessary to know somewhat, was a man of secondary abilities, honest, fearless, ordinary, a better soldier than leader, strictly intelligent to the point where it was his duty to understand no further, never compassionate, inaccessible to corruption of any sort, to venality which corrupts conscience, as well as to pity which corrupts justice. Over his soul and his heart he had these two shades, discipline and order, as a horse has blinders over his two eyes, and he walked straight before him in the space which they left free to him. His gait was unswerving, but his path was narrow.

Moreover, he was a man to be depended upon; stern in command, unflinching in obedience.

Gauvain immediately addressed Guéchamp, —

“Guéchamp, a ladder.”

“Commandant, we have none.”

“We must have one.”

“For climbing?”

“No, for rescue.”

Guéchamp reflected and replied, —

“I understand. But for what you want, it must be very high.”

“At least three stories.”

“Yes, commander, that is very nearly the height.”

“And it must exceed this to be sure of success.”

“Certainly.”

“How does it happen that you are without a ladder?”

“Commander, you did not consider the matter of besieging la Tourge from the plateau; you were satisfied to blockade it from this side; you wanted to attack it, not by the bridge, but by the tower. We have paid no attention to anything but the mine and gave up the escalade. That is why we have no ladders.”

"Have one made immediately."

"A ladder three stories high cannot be improvised."

"Fasten together several short ladders."

"It is necessary to have short ones."

"Find them."

"They are not to be found. The peasants destroy the ladders everywhere, just as they break up the wagons and cut away the bridges."

"It is true; they want to paralyze the Republic."

"They want to make it impossible for us either to transport baggage, pass a river, or scale a wall."

"I must have a ladder, nevertheless."

"Now I think about it, commander, there is a large carpenter's shop at Javené, near Fougères. They may have one there."

"There is not a moment to lose."

"When do you wish to have the ladder?"

"To-morrow at this time at the very latest."

"I will send an express to Javené post haste. He will carry the order of requisition. There is cavalry stationed at Javené, which will furnish the escort. The ladder could be here to-morrow, before sunset."

"That is good, that will do," said Gauvain. "Be quick about it. Go."

Ten minutes later, Guéchamp returned and said to Gauvain, —

"Commander, the express has left for Javené."

Gauvain went up on the plateau, and remained a long time looking steadily at the bridge castle, which was just across the ravine. The gable of the châtelet, with no opening except the low entrance closed by raising the drawbridge, faced the escarpment of the ravine. To reach the foot of the piers of the bridge from the plateau, it was necessary to descend along this steep cliff, which was not impossible through the underbrush. But, once in the ditch, the assailants would be exposed to all the projectiles that could be rained down from the three stories. Gauvain came to the conclusion that, in view of the present state of the siege, the real assault must be by the breach in the tower.

He took every precaution to prevent the possibility of escape; he completed the close investment of la Tourgue; he drew the ranks of his battalions close together in such a way that nothing could pass through them. Gauvain and Cimourdain divided the investment of the fortress; Gauvain kept the side toward the forest, and gave the side next the plateau to Cimourdain. It was agreed that while Gauvain, aided by Guéchamp, was carrying on the assault by sapping, Cimourdain, with all the linstocks of the battery ready for use, should guard the bridge and the ravine.

CHAPTER XIII.

WHAT THE MARQUIS DOES.

While everything without was making ready for the attack, everything within was making ready for resistance.

There is a real analogy in calling a tower a “douve” and a tower is sometimes pierced by a mine as a cask is by an auger. A bunghole, as it were, is bored through the wall. This is what happened at la Tourgue.

The powerful blast made by two or three hundredweight of powder had made a breach right through the enormous wall. This breach started at the foot of the tower, went through the thickest part of the wall, and ended in a rude arch in the ground floor of the fortress. In order to make this breach practicable for the assault, the besiegers had enlarged it outside and shaped it with cannon shots.

The ground floor into which this breach opened was a large round hall, quite bare, with a central column holding up the keystone of the arch. This hall, the largest in the keep, was no less than forty feet in diameter. Each story in the tower formed a similar room, but smaller, with little cells in the embrasures of tbe loopholes. The hall on the ground floor had no loopholes, no air holes, no windows; about as much daylight and fresh air as a tomb.

The door to the oubliettes, made of iron rather than wood, was in the hall of the ground floor. Another door in this hall opened on a staircase leading to the upper rooms. All the staircases were built in the thickness of the wall.

The besiegers had an opportunity to reach this low hall through the breach which they had made. This hall taken, it remained for them to take the tower.

No one had ever been able to breathe in this low hall. No one had ever spent twenty-four hours there without being asphyxiated. Now, owing to the breach, it was possible to live there.

This is why the beleaguered did not close the breach.

Moreover, what would be the advantage? The cannon would open it again.

They fixed an iron cresset into the wall, placed a torch in it, and this lighted the ground floor.

Now, how could they defend themselves there?

To wall up the breach was easy, but of no use. A retirade would be more desirable. A retirade is an intrenchment at right angles, a sort of chevronned barricade, which admits of converging the musketry on the assailants, and, while leaving the breach open outside, obstructs it on the inside. The materials were not lacking; they constructed a retirade, with embrasures through which to pass the barrels of the guns. The angle of the retirade rested on the central column; the two sides touched the wall. Having got this ready, they put fougades in suitable places.

The marquis directed everything. Inspirer, disposer, guide, and master, — appalling soul.

Lantenac belonged to that race of warriors of the eighteenth century who, when eighty years old, saved cities. He resembled the Count d'Alberg who, when he was nearly a centenarian, drove the King of Poland from Riga.

"Courage, friends!" said the marquis; "in the beginning of this century, in 1713, at Bender, Charles XII., shut up in a house, with three hundred Swedes, resisted twenty thousand Turks."

They barricaded the two lower stories, they fortified the rooms, they embattled the alcoves, they strengthened the doors with joists driven down with mallets, forming a sort of flying buttresses; but the spiral staircase which communicated with each story they had to leave open, as it was necessary to have free passage through it; to cut this off from the besieger was to cut it off from the besieged. The defence of strongholds always has some such weak side.

The marquis, indefatigable, as robust as a young man, lifted beams, carried stones, set an example, worked, commanded, helped, fraternized, laughed with this savage clan, but still he was always the seigneur, haughty, easy, elegant, cruel.

He allowed no one to reply to him.

He said: "If one half of you were to revolt, I would have that half shot by the other, and I would defend the place with the rest." Such things make a chief adored.

CHAPTER XIV.

WHAT L’IMANUS DOES.

While the marquis was engaged with the breach and the tower, l’Imânus was engaged with the bridge. At the beginning of the siege, the ladder of escape, which hung horizontally outside and underneath the windows of the second story, had been taken away by order of the marquis, and put by l’Imânus in the hall of the library. Perhaps it was this ladder which Gauvain wished to replace. The windows of the entresol of the first story, called “hall of the guards,” were protected by a triple row of iron bars fastened in the stonework, and it was impossible to get in or out through them.

There were no bars at the library windows, but they were very high.

L’Imânus had three men, who, like himself, were full of resolution, and capable of anything. These men were Iloisnard, called Branche-d’Or, and the two brothers Pique-en-Bois. L’Imânus took a dark lantern, opened tho iron door, and carefully inspected the three stories of the bridge châtelet. Hoisnard Branche-d’Or was as implacable as I’lmanus, having had a brother killed by the Republicans.

L’Imanus examined the upper story, overflowing with hay and straw, and the lower story mto which he had brought some firepots in addition to the hogsheads of tar; he had the pile of heather fagots placed close to the hogsheads of tar, and he made sure that the sulphur match, one end of which was in the bridge and the other in the tower, was in a good condition. He poured out on the floor under the hogsheads and over the fagots a pool of tar, in which he placed the end of the sulphur slowmatch; then in the hall of the library, between the ground floor where the tar was and the granary where the straw was, he had placed the three cribs in which were René-Jean, Gros-Alain, and Georgette, sound asleep. They carried the cribs very gently, in order not to waken the little ones.

They were very simple little country cribs, a sort of very low osier baskets, that stand on the floor, allowing the child to get out alone and without assistance. Near each crib, l’Imânus had placed a porringer of soup with a wooden spoon. The ladder for escape, unfastened from its hooks, had been laid on the floor against the wall; l’Irimânus had the three cribs arranged, end to end, along the other wall, opposite the ladder. Then, thinking that a draught of air might be useful, he opened wide all six of the library windows. It was a summer night, hot and sultry.

He sent the brothers Pique-en-Bois to open the windows in the upper and lower stories; he noticed on the eastern façade of the building, a large, old, dried-up ivy, the color of tinder, covering one entire side of the bridge from top to bottom, and framing the windows of the three stories. He thought that this ivy would do no harm. L'Imânus took a last look around; after this the four men went out of the châtelet and went back to the keep. L'Imânus fastened the heavy iron door with a double lock, carefully examined the enormous, formidable fastening, and, with a nod of satisfaction, looked at the sulphur slow-match, which passed through the hole he had made, and was henceforth the only communication between the tower and the bridge.

This match started from the round room, passed under the iron door, entered under the coving, went down the staircase leading to the ground floor of the bridge, meandered over the winding stairs, crept along the floor of the corridor in the entresol, and ended in the pool of tar over the pile of dry fagots, L'Imânus calculated that it would take about a quarter of an hour for this match to set fire to the pool of tar in the library, after it had been lighted in the interior of the tower. Having made all these arrangements, and finished all this inspection, he carried the key of the iron door back to the Marquis de Lantenac, who put it in his pocket.

It was important to watch all the besieger's movements. L'Imânus, with his herdsman's horn in his belt, stationed himself like a vidette in the watch tower of the platform, on the top of the tower. While watching with an eye on the forest, and an eye on the plateau, he had beside him in the embrasure of the watch-tower window, a powder flask, a linen bag filled with musket-balls, and some old newspapers, which he tore up to make into cartridges.

When the sun appeared, its rays illumined, in the forest, eight battalions, their swords by their sides, cartridge boxes on their backs, bayonets in their guns, ready for the assault; on the plateau a battery of cannons, with ammunition wagons, cartridges and boxes of grapeshot; in the fortress, nineteen men loading blunderbusses, muskets, and pistols, and in the three cribs, three sleeping children.

BOOK THIRD. — THE MASSACRE OF SAINT BARTHOLOMEW.

CHAPTER I.

THE MASSACRE OF SAINT BARTHOLOMEW (I).

The children awoke.

The little girl first.

The wakening of children is like the opening of flowers; it seems as if a perfume came from their fresh souls.

Georgette, the one twenty months old, the youngest of the three, who was still nursing in May, raised her little head, sat up, looked at her feet, and began to prattle.

A ray of morning light fell on her crib; it would have been hard to tell which was the rosier, Georgette's foot or the dawn.

The other two were still asleep; men are more dull; Georgette, happy and serene, went on prattling.

Rene-Jean was dark, Gros-Alain was sandy, Georgette was fair. These shades of hair, in harmony with the age during childhood, may change later on. René-Jean looked like a little Hercules; he was sleeping en his stomach, with his two fists doubled up over his eyes. Both of Gros-Alain's legs were hanging out of his little bed.

All three were in rags; the clothes that the battalion of Bonnet-Rouge had given them were in tatters; they hadn't even a shirt on them; the two boys were almost naked. Georgette was dressed in a rag which had once been a skirt and was now nothing but a bodice. Who took care of these children? It was impossible to tell. No mother. These savage peasants, fighting, and dragging them along with them from forest to forest, gave them their share of soup. That was all. The little ones got on as they could. They had everybody for master, and no one for a father. But children's tatters are full of light. They were charming.

Georgette went on prattling.

What a bird sings, a child prattles. It is the same hymn. An indistinct hymn, lisped, profound. The child, more than the bird, has the mysterious destiny of man before it. Hence, the melancholy feeling of those who listen, mingled with the joy of the little one who sings. The sublimest song to be heard on the earth is the lisping of the human soul on the lips of children. This confused whispering of a thought, which is as yet only an instinct, contains a strange, unconscious appeal to eternal justice; perhaps it is a protestation on the threshold, before entering; a humble but poignant protestation; this ignorance smiling at the Infinite compromises all creation in the fate which is to be given to the feeble, helpless being. Misfortune, if it comes, will be an abuse of confidence.

The murmur of a child is more and less than speech; there are no notes, and yet it is a song; there are no syllables, and yet it is a language; this murmur had its beginning in heaven, and will not have its end on earth; it is before birth, and it will continue hereafter. This babbling is composed of what the child said when he was an angel, and of what he will say when he becomes a man; the cradle has a Yesterday, as much as the tomb has a Tomorrow; this to-morrow and this yesterday blend their double mystery in this unintelligible warbling; and nothing proves God, eternity, the responsibility, the duality of fate, like this awe-inspiring shadow on these rosy souls.

What Georgette was prattling about did not make her sad, for her whole lovely face beamed with a smile. Her mouth smiled, her eyes smiled, the dimples in her cheeks smiled. This smile revealed a mysterious acceptation of the morning. The soul has faith in light. The sky was blue, the weather was warm, it was beautiful. The frail creature, without knowing anything, without understanding anything, softly bathed in reverie where no thought is, felt secure in this nature, in these honest trees, in this sincere verdure, in this pure, peaceful country, in these sounds from nests, from brooks, flies, leaves, above which the vast innocence of the sun shone resplendent.

After Georgette, René-Jean, the oldest, the largest, the one who was four years old, awoke. He rose to his feet, gave a manly jump over the side of his basket, looked at his porringer, thought it quite natural, sat down on the floor and began to eat his soup.

Georgette’s prattling had not waken Gros-Alain, but at the sound of the spoon in the porringer, he turned over with a start, and opened his eyes. Gros-Alain was the one three years old. He saw his porringer, it was within reach, he took it and without getting out of bed placed the porringer on his knees, took the spoon in his hand, and like René-Jean began to eat.

Georgette did not hear them, and the undulations of her voice seemed to modulate the rocking of a dream. Her large open eyes were looking up and were divine; whether the ceiling or the heavens be above a child’s head, it is always the sky which is reflected in its eyes.

When René-Jean had finished, he scraped the bottom of the porringer with his spoon, sighed, and said with dignity, —

“I have eaten my soup.”

This woke Georgette from her reverie.

“Poupoupe,” said she.

And seeing that René-Jean had eaten his, and that Gros-Alain was eating, she took the porringer of soup beside her, and began also to eat, carrying her spoon much oftener to her ear than to her mouth.

From time to time, she renounced civilization and ate with her fingers.

Gros-Alain after having scraped the bottom of the porringer as his brother had done, went to join him and ran behind him.

CHAPTER II.

THE MASSACRE OF SAINT BARTHOLOMEW (II).

Suddenly, there was heard from without and below, on the side of the forest, the blast of a trumpet, a sort of flourish, haughty and stern. To this trumpet blast, the sound of a horn replied from the top of the tower.

This time it was the trumpet which called, and the horn which gave answer.

There was a second trumpet call, followed by a second sounding of the horn.

Then from the edge of the forest rose a distant but clear voice, which cried distinctly these words, —

“Brigands! a summons! If at sunset, you have not surrendered at discretion, we attack you.”

A voice roared out in reply from the platform of the tower, —

“Attack us, then.”

The voice below added, —

“A cannon will be fired, as a last warning, half an hour before the assault.”

And the voice from above repeated, —

“Attack us.”

These voices did not reach the children’s ears, but the trumpet and the horn sounded higher and farther, and Georgette at the first blast of the trumpet raised her head and stopped eating; at the sound of the horn, she put her spoon in her porringer; at the second trumpet blast, she lifted the little forefinger of her right hand, and letting it fall and raising it again alternately, marked the cadences of the flourish which prolonged the second blowing of the horn; when the horn and the trumpet were silent, she remained thoughtful, her finger in the air, and murmured half aloud, “Misic.”

We think that she meant “music.”

The two oldest, René-Jean and Gros-Alain, had paid no attention to the horn and the trumpet; they were absorbed by something else; a woodlouse was crossing the library.

Gros-Alain noticed it and exclaimed, —

“There’s a bug.”

René-Jean ran to look at it.

Gros-Alain added, —

“It stings.”

“Don’t hurt it,” said René-Jean.

And both began to watch it moving along.

In the meantime, Georgette finished her soup; she looked at her brothers. René-Jean and Gros-Alain were in the embrasure of a window, bending intently over the woodlouse; their foreheads touched, and their hair mingled; they were holding their breath in wonder, and examining the insect which had stopped and did not move, little pleased with so much admiration.

Georgette, seeing that her brothers were looking at something, wanted to know what it was. It was not an easy matter for her to reach them, but she undertook it; the journey bristled with difficulties; there were things on the floor; overthrown stools, piles of old papers, packing cases, unnailed and empty, chests, heaps of all sorts of things, around which she had to make her way, a perfect archipelago of reefs; Georgette ventured.

She began by getting out of her basket, the first difficulty; then she penetrated the reefs, meandered through the straits, pushed aside a stool, crawled between two trunks, went over a heap of papers, climbing up one side, rolling down the other, sweetly exposing her poor little bare body, and thus reached what a sailor would call the open sea, that is to say quite a wide space of unobstructed floor, where there were no more dangers; then she started forward, crossed this space, which was the whole width of the hall, on all fours, with the agility of a cat, and reached the window; here there was a formidable obstacle; the great ladder lying against the wall just reached to this window, and the end of it passed a little beyond the embrasure; this made a sort of cape to double between Georgette and her brothers; she stopped to meditate; having finished her interior monologue, she made up her mind; she resolutely grasped with her rosy fingers one of the rounds, which were vertical and not horizontal, as the ladder lay on one side; she tried to raise herself on her feet and fell back; she tried again twice, and failed; the third time she succeeded; then standing up straight, supporting herself with the rungs one after another, she began to walk along the ladder; when she reached the end, her support failed; she tumbled over, but seizing in her little hands the end of one of the side pieces, which was enormous, she pulled herself up again, rounded the promontory, looked at René-Jean and Gros-Alain and laughed.

CHAPTER III.

THE MASSACRE OF SAINT BARTHOLOMEW (III).

At this moment, René-Jean, satisfied with his observations concerning the woodlouse, raised his head and said, —

“It is a female.”

Georgette’s laugh made René-Jean laugh, and René-Jean’s laugh made Gros-Alain laugh.

Georgette sat down beside her brothers, and they formed a sort of little club together on the floor.

But the woodlouse had disappeared.

Georgette’s laugh had given him a chance to crawl into a hole in the floor.

Other events followed that of the woodlouse.

First some swallows flew by.

Their nests were probably under the edge of the roof. Somewhat disturbed by the children they flew close to the window, describing wide circles in the air, and uttering their gentle springtime call. This made the three children raise their eyes, and the woodlouse was forgotten.

Georgette pointed her finger towards the swallows, and exclaimed, —

“Chickies!”

René-Jean reprimanded her, —

“They are not chickens, they are birds.”

“Boords,” said Georgette.

And all three looked at the swallows.

Then a bee flew in.

Nothing is so like a soul as a bee. It goes from flower to flower as a soul from star to star, and it gathers honey as a soul gathers light.

This one made a great noise as he came in buzzing at the top of his voice, and he seemed to say: “I have just seen the roses, and now I come to see the children. What is going on here?”

A bee is a housewife, and it scolds while it sings.

As long as the bee remained, the children never took their eyes from it.

The bee explored the whole library, searched the corners, darted about as though it were at home in it’s hive, and making music on the wing, roved from bookcase to bookcase, looking at the titles of the books through the glass-windows, as though it were a mind.

His visit over, he went out.

“He has gone home,” said René-Jean.

“It is a monster,” said Gros-Alain.

“No,” replied René-Jean, “It is a fly.”

“Fly,” said Georgette.

Thereupon, Gros-Alain, who had just found on the floor a string with a knot in one end of it, took the other end of it between his thumb and forefinger, made a sort of little mill with the cord, and watched it turn with deep interest.

As for Georgette, having gotten down on all fours again, and taken up her capricious roving, she had discovered a venerable arm-chair covered with moth-eaten tapestry, from which the hair was escaping through numerous holes. She stopped by this chair. She made the holes larger and pulled out the hair as if her life depended upon it.

Suddenly she raised her finger, which meant: “Listsn!”

The two brothers turned their heads.

An indistinct, distant noise was heard from without; it was probably the attacking camp executing some strategic movement in the forest; horses neighed, drums beat, caissons rolled along, chains clanked, military signals called to each other and gave answer, confusion of savage sounds which as they mingled grew into a sort of harmony; the children listened, delighted.

“The good God is doing that.” aaid René-Jean.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MASSACRE OF SAINT BARTHOLOMEW (IV).

The noise ceased.

René-Jean remained thoughtful.

How are ideas lormed and scattered in these little brains? What is the mysterious commotion in their memories so dim and as yet so short? In this sweet, pensive mind arose a mixture of the good God, prayer, folded hands, a strange tender smile that used to rest on them, and that they had no longer, and René-Jean murmured, half aloud: “Mamma.”

“Mamma,” said Gros-Alain.

“M’ma,” said Georgette,

And then René-Jean began to jump.

Seeing him jump, Gross-Alain jumped too.

Gros-Alain followed René-Jean’s example in all his movements and gestures; Georgette not so much. Three years copies four years; but twenty months keeps its independence.

Georgette remained seated, saying a word now and then. Georgette did not put words together.

She was a thinker; she spoke in apothegms. She was monosyllabic.

Nevertheless, after a time, their example affected her, and she finally tried to do as her brothers were doing, and these three little pairs of bare feet began to dance, to run and totter in the dust on the old, polished oak floor, under the serious eyes of the marble busts, toward which Georgette occasionally cast an anxious glance, murmuring, —

“The mummums!”

In Georgette’s language a mummum was anything which looked like a man without really being one. Beings seem like phantoms to young children.

Georgette, swaying rather than walking, followed her brothers, but generally she preferred to go on all fours.

Suddenly, René-Jean, as he was approaching a window, raised his head, then dropped it and ran to hide in the corner of the wall made by the window embrasure.

He had just seen some one looking at him. It was a soldier of the Blues from the encampment on the plateau who, taking advantage of the truce and perhaps infringing on it a little, had ventured to the edge of the ravine where he could look into the library. Seeing René-Jean hide, Gros-Alain ran to hide; he took refuge beside René-Jean, and Georgette hid behind them. They stayed there in silence, perfectly still, and Georgette put her finger on her lips. After a few moments René-Jean ventured to put out his head; the soldier was still there. René-Jean drew his head back quickly; and the three little ones did not dare to breathe. This lasted for some time. At last Georgette grew tired of being afraid, and was bold enough to look out. The soldier had gone. They began to run and play again.

Gros-Alain, besides imitating and admiring René-Jean, had a specialty, — that of making discoveries. His brother and sister saw him suddenly whirl wildly around, dragging after him a little wagon with four wheels, which he had brought to light from some corner.

This doll’s carriage had been in the dust for years, forgotten, — a good neighbor to the books of geniuses and the busts of wise men. It was perhaps one of the toys which Gauvain had played with when he was a child.

Gros-Alain had made a whip with the string, and was snapping it; it was very fine. Such are discoverers. When they do not discover America, they discover little carts. It is always thus.

But it must be shared. René-Jean wanted to draw the wagon, and Georgette wanted to get into it.

She tried to sit down in it. René-Jean was the horse. Gros-Alain was the driver.

But the driver did not understand his business, the horse had to teach him.

René-Jean cried to Gros-Alain, —

“Say, ‘Go along.’”

“Go ‘long!” repeated Gros-Alain.

The wagon upset. Georgette tumbled out. Angels can scream. Georgette screamed.

Then she felt half inclined to cry.

“Young lady,” said René-Jean, “you are too big.”

“I big,” said Georgette.

And her size consoled her for her fall.

The cornice of entablature under the windows was very wide, the dust of the fields blown from the heather on the plateau had collected in heaps there; the rains had made earth of this dust; the wind had brought seeds to it, so that a briar had taken advantage of this bit of earth to take root there. This briar was the perennial variety called fox mulberry. It was August, the mulberry bush was covered with berries, and a branch of the briar came in through the window. This branch hung down almost to the floor.

Gros-Alain, after discovering the string, and discovering the wagon was the one to discover this briar. He went toward it.

He picked a berry and ate it.

“I’m hungry,” said René-Jean.

And Georgette, galloping along on her knees and hands, came following after.

The three plundered the branch and ate all the berries. They were daubed and stained, and all red with the crimson juice of the berries; the three little seraphs were changed to three little fauns, which would have shocked Dante and charmed Virgil. They laughed aloud.

Occasionally, the briar pricked their fingers. No pleasure without pain.

Georgette held out her finger, from which oozed a little drop of blood, to René-Jean and said pointing to the briar, “Pricks.”

Gros-Alain, who had been scratched too, looked scornfully at the briar and said, —

“It is a beast.”

“No,” replied René-Jean, “it is a stick.”

“A naughty stick,” added Gros-Alain.

Georgette, again felt like crying, but she began to laugh.

CHAPTER V.

THE MASSACRE OF SAINT BARTHOLOMEW (V).

In the meantime, René-Jean, possibly jealous of his younger brother, Gros-Alain's discoveries, had conceived a great plan. For some time, while he was picking the berries and pricking his fingers, his eyes had been frequently turning toward the reading-desk mounted on a pivot and standing by itself like a monument in the middle of the library. On this desk was displayed the famous volume of "Saint Bartholomew."

It was really a magnificent and notable folio. This "Saint Bartholomew" had been published in Cologne by the famous publisher of the Bible in 1682, Blœuw, in Latin, Cœsius. It had been printed on movable wooden types, held in position with a band made of ox-sinew.

It was printed, not on Holland paper, but on that beautiful Arabian paper so much admired by Edrisi, made of silk and cotton, and always retaining its whiteness.

The binding was of gilded leather, and the clasps of silver; the fly leaves were of that parchment which the parchment-makers of Paris swore they would buy in the Halle Saint Mathurin and "nowhere else."

This volume was full of woodcuts and copper engravings, and geographical maps of many countries; it was prefaced with a protestation of printers, paper-makers and booksellers against the edict of 1635, placing a tax on "leather, beer, cloven-footed animals, sea-fish, and paper," and on the reverse page of the frontispiece, there was a dedication addressed to the Gryphes, who are to Lyons what the Elzévirs are to Amsterdam.

All this resulted in a famous volume, almost as rare as the *Apostol* at Moscow.

It was a beautiful book; that was why René-Jean looked at it; perhaps too intently. The volume was open just where there was a large engraving representing Saint Bartholomew carrying his skin over his arm. This engraving could be seen from below. When all the berries had been eaten, René-Jean looked at it with a terrible longing, and Georgette, whose eyes followed her brother's, noticed the engraving and said, "Pickshur."

This word seemed to determine René-Jean. Then, to the great amazement of Gros-Alain, he did an extraordinary thing.

A great oak chair stood in a corner of the library; René-Jean walked to this chair, seized it and dragged it all by himself to the desk. Then when the chair touched the desk, he got up on it and placed his two hands on the book.

Having reached this height, he felt that it was necessary to be, generous; he took the “pickshur” by the upper corner and carefully tore it out; Saint Bartholomew’s picture tore crosswise, but that was not René-Jean’s fault; he left all the left side, with one eye and a little of the old apocryphal evangelist’s halo, in the book, and offered the other half of the saint, and all his skin, to Georgette. Georgette took the saint and said, —

“Mummum.”

“Give me one!” cried Gros-Alain.

The first torn page is like the first drop of blood shed. It decides slaughter.

René-Jean turned the leaf; after the saint came the commentator Pantœnus; René-Jean bestowed Pantœnus on Gros-Alain.

In the meantime, Georgette tore her large piece into two small ones, then the two small ones into four; so that history might say, that after having been flayed in Armenia, Saint-Bartholomew was quartered in Brittany.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MASSACRE OF SAINT BARTHOLOMEW (VI).

Having finished the quartering, Georgette held out her hand to René-Jean, saying, “More!”

After the saint and the commentator came stern portraits of the glossarists. The earliest was Gavantus; René-Jean tore Gavantus out and placed him in Georgette’s hand.

All Saint Bartholomew’s glossarists followed. Giving is a privilege. René-Jean kept nothing for himself. Gros-Alain and Georgette were gazing at him; this was enough; he was satisfied with the admiration of his public.

René-Jean, inexhaustible and magnanimous, offered Fabricio Pignatelli to Gros-Alain, and Father Stilting to Georgette; he offered Alphonse Tostat to Gros-Alain, and *Cornelius a Lapide* to Georgette; Gros-Alain had Henry Hammond, and Georgette had Roberti, besides a view of the town of Douai, where he was born in 1619. Gros-Alain received the protestation of the paper-makers, and Georgette had the dedication to the Gryphes bestowed upon her. Then there were the maps. René-Jean distributed these. He gave Ethiopia to Gros-Alain, and Lycaonia to Georgette. When this was done, he threw the book on the floor.

It was a terrible moment. Gros-Alain and Georgette, with an ecstasy of delight mingled with fear, saw René-Jean frown, brace his legs, contract his hands, and push the massive folio volume off the desk. A majestic old book losing countenance is a tragic sight. The heavy volume, displaced, hung for a moment from the desk, hesitated, balanced itself, then fell down; and, torn, rumpled, lacerated, out of its binding, its clasps broken, flattened itself out lamentably on the floor. Fortunately, it did not fall on the children.

They were bewildered, not crushed. The adventures of conquerors do not always end as well. Like all glorious deeds, it made a great noise and a cloud of dust.

Having thrown down the book, René-Jean dismounted from the chair.

There was a moment of silence and awe; victory has its terrors. The children took hold of each other’s hands, and drew away, to contemplate the great dilapidated volume.

But after some consideration, Gros-Alain started towards the book with determination and gave it a kick.

This was enough. There is such a thing as an appetite for destruction. René-Jean gave it a kick, Georgette gave it a kick, which made her tumble down, but in a sitting posture; she took advantage of this to throw herself on Saint Bartholomew; the spell was broken; René-Jean rushed on it, Gros-Alain made a dash for it; joyous, wild, triumphant, pitiless, tearing the engravings, slashing the leaves, pulling out the bookmarks, scratching the binding, ripping off the gilt leather, pulling out the nails, from the silver corners, breaking the parchment, marring the noble text, working with feet, hands, nails, and teeth, rosy, laughing, cruel, these three angels of destruction swooped down on the defenceless evangelist.

They annihilated Armenia, Judea, Benevento, where there are relics of the saint; Nathaniel, who is possibly the same as Bartholomew; Pope Gelasius, who declared the Bartholomew-Nathaniel gospel to be apocryphal, all the heads, all the maps, and the inexorable destruction of the old book absorbed them to such a degree that a mouse passed by without their noticing it.

It was an extermination.

To pull to pieces history, legend, science, miracles, true or false, church Latin, superstitions, fanaticisms, mysteries, to tear up a whole religion from top to bottom, is a work for three giants, as well as three children; the hours passed quickly over this labor, but they came to an end; nothing was left of Saint Bartholomew.

When this was at an end, when the last page was torn out, when the last engraving was destroyed, when nothing was left of the book but fragments of the text and pictures, in a skeleton of a binding, René-Jean jumped to his feet, looked at the floor strewn with all these scattered leaves, and clapped his hands.

Gros-Alain clapped his hands.

Georgette took one of the leaves from the floor, got up, leaned against the window, which came just to her chin, and began to tear the large page into little pieces, and threw them out.

Seeing this, René-Jean and Gros-Alain began to do the same. They picked up the leaves and tore them in pieces, picked up and tore them again and again, throwing the pieces out of the window as Georgette had done; and page by page, reduced to scraps by these destructive little fingers, almost the entire ancient book blew away in the wind. Georgette looked thoughtfully after these swarms of bits of white paper, scattered by all the breezes of the air and said, —

“Butterflies.”

And the massacre ended with a vanishing into thin air.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MASSACRE OF SAINT BARTHOLOMEW (VII).

Such was the second putting to death of Saint Bartholomew, who had already been martyred in the year 49 of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Meanwhile, evening was approaching, the heat was increasing, the air was full of drowsiness, Georgette's eyes grew heavy, René-Jean went to his crib, drew out the bag of straw which took the place of a mattress, dragged it to the window, stretched himself out on it, and said: "Let us go to bed."

Gros-Alain put his head on René-Jean, Georgette put her head on Gros-Alain, and the three malefactors went to sleep.

Hot breezes came in through the open windows; the perfume of wild flowers, blown from the ravines and hills, floated in, mingled with the evening zephyrs; space was calm and merciful; everything beamed, everything was at peace, everything loved everything else; the sun caressed creation with light; everywhere was felt that harmony which arises from the colossal sweetness of things; there was something of maternity in the Infinite; creation is a miracle in full bloom, its immensity is perfected by its goodness; it seemed as if some invisible power could be felt taking those mysterious precautions which, in the terrible conflict of life, protect the weak against the strong; at the same time it was beautiful, the splendor breathed forth mansuetude.

The landscape, full of an ineffable drowsiness, had that magnificent wavy appearance which the alternations of light and shade give to prairies and rivers; the smoke rose toward the clouds, as a dream toward a vision; flocks of birds whirled above la Tourgue; swallows looked in at the windows, and seemed to have come to see if the children were sleeping well.

They were gracefully grouped, one on the other, still, half-naked, in loving attitudes; they were adorable and pure, all three together were not nine years old, they had dreams of Paradise, which were reflected on their mouths in vague smiles; God, perhaps, was speaking in their ears; they were those whom every human tongue calls weak and blessed, they were innocents worthy of reverence; everything kept silence, as though the breath from their sweet breasts was of consequence to the universe, and was listened to by all creation; the leaves did not rustle, the grass did not quiver. It seemed as if the wide starry world held its breath, that it might not disturb these three humble, angelic sleepers, and nothing was so sublime as the immense respect of nature toward these little creatures.

The sun was going down, and almost touched the horizon. Suddenly, in the midst of this profound peace, there shot forth a bright light, coming from the forest, then a furious noise. A cannon had just been fired. The echoes seized this noise and turned it into an uproarious din. The rumbling, prolonged from hill to hill, was monstrous. It awoke Georgette.

She raised her head a little, lifted her little finger, listened, and said, —

“Boom!”

The sound died away, and silence returned. Georgette laid her head down on Gros-Alain, and went to sleep again.

BOOK FOURTH. — THE MOTHER.

CHAPTER I.

DEATH PASSES BY.

This same evening, the mother, whom we have seen making her way almost by chance, had been walking all day long. Moreover, it was the story of all her days, to go straight on and never stop. For her sleep of exhaustion in the first corner that she came to was no more rest than what she ate here and there, as birds go picking about, wag food. She ate and slept just enough to keep her from falling down dead.

She had spent the night before in a deserted house; civil war causes such ruins. She had found, in a neglected field, four walls, an open door, a little straw under a portion of the roof, and she slept on this straw and under this roof, feeling the rats run over the straw, and seeing the stars shine through the roof. She had slept some hours, then she awoke in the middle of the night and started on her journey again, in order to travel as far as possible before the full heat of the day. For those travelling on foot in summer, midnight is more agreeable than midday.

She followed to the best of her ability the general route indicated to her by the peasant at Vautortes; she went as nearly as possible toward the west. Any one near her would have heard her say repeatedly, in a low voice, “La Tourgue.” Besides the names of her three children, she knew nothing but this word.

As she walked along, she was deep in meditation. She thought of all the adventures which she had been through; she thought of all she had suffered, of all she had received; of the encounters, the indignities, the conditions made, the bargains proposed and undergone, sometimes for a shelter, sometimes for a piece of bread, sometimes merely to get some one to show her the way. A wretched woman is more unfortunate than a wretched man, because she is an instrument of pleasure. Frightful wandering on foot. But nothing made any difference to her so long as she found her children.

Her first encounter to-day had been a village on the way; it was scarcely daybreak, everything was still bathed in the gloom of night, still some doors were already ajar in the principal street of the village, and some curious heads were looking out of the windows. The inhabitants seemed as agitated as a hive which has been disturbed. This was on account of a sound of wheels and chains which had been heard.

In the square in front of the church, an astounded group, with upturned faces, was looking at something coming down the road toward the village from the top of a hill.

It was a wagon with four wheels, drawn by five horses harnessed with chains. On the wagon could be made out a heap which looked like a pile of long joists, in the middle of which was something strange and shapeless; it was covered over with an awning, which had the appearance of a shroud.

Ten men on horseback rode in front of the wagon, and ten others, behind. These men wore three-cornered hats, and rising above their shoulders could be seen points, which were apparently bare swords. All this procession, advancing slowly, stood out in clearly defined black against the horizon. The wagon looked black, the horses looked black, the cavaliers looked black. The pale morning light gleamed behind them.

It entered the village and went towards the square. It began to grow light as the wagon came down the hill, and the procession could be seen distinctly; it seemed like a march of ghosts, for not a word escaped the men.

The riders were military men. They had, indeed, drawn swords. The awning was black.

The wretched, wandering mother entered the village and drew near the gathering of peasants just as the team and the mounted men were coming into the square. In the group of spectators, voices whispered questions and answers, —

“What is that?”

“It is the guillotine passing by.”

“Where does it come from?”

“From Fougères.”

“Where is it going?”

“I do not know. They say that it is going to a castle toward Parigné.”

“Parigné!”

“Let it go wherever it will, provided it doesn’t stop here.”

This great wagon, with its burden covered with a sort of shroud; these horses; these military men; the noise of these chains; the silence of these riders; the dim light, — all this was ghastly.

The procession crossed the square and left the village; the village was in a hollow between two hills. After a quarter of an hour, the peasants, who had remained as though petrified, saw the gloomy procession come into sight again on the top of the hill toward the west. The large wheels jolted over the road, the horses' chains clanked in the morning wind, the sabres glistened; the sun was rising, there was a turn in the road, they all disappeared.

This was at just the moment when Georgette, in the ball of the library, awoke beside her brothers, who were still asleep, and said good morning to her rosy feet.

CHAPTER II.

DEATH SPEAKS.

The mother watched this dark object pass by, but had not understood it, nor tried to understand, for she had another vision before her eyes, — her children lost in the darkness.

She also went out of the village, a little after the procession which had just filed past, and followed the same road, at some distance behind the second squad of policemen. Suddenly, the word “guillotine “ came into her mind.

“Guillotine!” she said to herself; this peasant woman Michelle Fléchard, did not know what it was, but her instinct warned her against it; she shuddered without being able to tell why; it seemed horrible to her to walk behind it, and she turned to the left, went out of the road and entered some woods, which were the forest of Fougères.

After roaming for some time, she noticed a church tower and some roofs; it was one of the villages on the borders of the wood; she entered it. She was hungry.

This village was one of those where the Republicans had established military posts.

She went as far as the square where the town hall was.

In this village, too, there was agitation and anxiety. A crowd was gathered in front of a flight of steps which were the entrance to the town hall. On these steps were seen a man escorted by soldiers, holding in his hand a large, unrolled placard. On this man’s right stood a drummer, and on his left, a bill-poster carrying a pot of paste and a brush.

On the balcony above the door stood the mayor, wearing a tricolored scarf with his peasant’s dress.

The man with the placard was a public crier.

He had on a shoulder belt from which hung a little bag, which indicated that he went from village to village, and that he had something to cry throughout the country.

He had just unrolled the placard, as Michelle Fléchard drew near, and he began to read it. He said in a loud voice, —

“The French Republic. One and indivisible.”

The drum rolled. There was a sort of undulation in the crowd. Some took off their caps; others pulled their hats down over their eyes. At this time, and in this country, a person's opinion could almost be told by the headgear; hats were Royalist, caps were Republican.

The murmur of confused voices ceased, the people listened, the crier read, —

"In virtue of the orders to us given, and the power to us delegated, by the Committee of Public Welfare — —"

There was a second rolling of the drum. The crier continued, —

"And in execution of the decree of the National Convention, which outlaws rebels taken armed, and which orders capital punishment to whoever gives them shelter or helps them to escape."

One peasant asked his neighbor in a low voice, —

"What is capital punishment?"

The neighbor replied, "I don't know."

The crier waved the placard, —

"In accordance with Article 17 of the law of the thirtieth of April, giving full power to delegates and sub-delegates against the rebels, are outlawed —"

He paused and added, —

"The individuals designated by the name and surnames which follow—"

The crowd was all attention.

The voice of the crier thundered, —

"Lantenac, brigand."

" That is monseigneur," murmured a peasant.

And this was whispered through the crowd, "That is monseigneur."

The crier added, —

"Lantenac, ci-devant marquis, brigand."

"L'Imânus, brigand."

Two peasants looked at each other askance.

"That is Gouge-le-Bruant."

"Yes, it is Brise-Bleu." The crier went on reading the list, —

"Grand-Francœur, brigand."

The crowd murmured, —

"He is a priest."

"Yes, monsieur the Abbé Turmeau."

"Yes, he is a cure somewhere near the wood of la Chapelle."

“And a brigand,” said a man in a cap.

The crier read, —

“Boisnouveau, brigand. The two brothers Pique-en-Bois, brigands. Houzard, brigand — —”

“That is Monsieur de Quelen,” said a peasant.

“Panier, brigand — —”

“That is Monsieur Sepher.”

“Place-Nette, brigand — —”

“That is Monsieur Jamois.”

The crier continued his reading without paying attention to these comments.

“Guinoiseau, brigand. Chatenay, called Robi, brigand — —”

A peasant whispered: “Guinoiseau is the same as le Blond, Chatenay is Saint-Ouen.”

“Hoisnard, brigand,” added the crier.

And in the crowd was heard, —

“He is from Ruillé.”

“Yes, that is Branche d’Or.”

“He had his brother killed at the attack at Pontorson.”

“Yes, Hoisnard-Malonnière.”

“A fine young man, nineteen years old.”

“Attention,” said the crier, “ Here is the end of the list,—”

“Belle-Vigne, brigand. La Mussette, brigand. Sabretout, brigand. Brin-d’Amour, brigand — —”

A boy nudged a girl’s elbow. The girl smiled.

The crier went on, —

“Chante-en-hiver, brigand. Le Chat, brigand — —”

A peasant said: “That is Moulard.”

“Tabouze, brigand — —”

A peasant said: “That is Gauffre.”

“There are two of the Gauffres,” added a woman.

“Both good fellows,” growled a rustic.

The crier shook the placard and the drum beat a ban. The crier began to read again, —

“The above named, in whatever place they may be taken, will be immediately put to death after their identity has been established.”

There was a stir in the crowd.

The crier added, —

“Whoever gives them shelter, or helps them to escape will be taken before a court-martial and put to death. Signed—”

There was a profound silence.

“Signed: The Delegate of the Committee of Public Welfare, Cimourdain.”

“A priest,” said a peasant.

“The former cure of Parigné.” said another.

A citizen added, —

“Turmeau and Cimourdain. A White priest, and a Blue priest.”

“Both black,” said another citizen.

The mayor standing on the balcony, raised his hat and cried, —

“Long live the Republic!”

The beating of the drum announced that the crier had finished. Indeed, he made a sign with his hand.

“Attention,” he said. “Here are the four last lines of the notice of the government. They are signed by the chief of the reconnoitring column of the coasts of the north commanded by Gauvain.”

“Listen!” cried the voices of the crowd.

And the crier read, —

“Under pain of death—”

All were silent.

“It is forbidden, in fulfilment of the above order, to aid and assist the nineteen rebels above named, who are at the present time invested and surrounded in la Tourgue.”

“Hey?” said a voice.

It was a woman’s voice. It was the voice of the mother.

CHAPTER III.

MURMURINGS OF THE PEASANTS.

Michelle Flechard was in the midst of the crowd.

She had not listened, but one can hear what one does not listen to. She had heard this word, la Tourgue. She raised her head.

"Hey!" she repeated, "la Tourgue?"

The people stared at her. She looked as though she were demented. She was in rags. Voices murmured, —

"She looks like a brigand."

A peasant woman carrying some buckwheat cakes in a basket approached her, and said in an undertone, —

"Hold your tongue."

Michelle Fléchard looked at the woman in amazement.

Again she failed to understand. This name la Tourgue had passed by like a flash of lightning, and then it grew dark again. Had she no right to ask questions? What was the matter with them, that they looked at her so?

In the meantime, the drum had beaten a last ban, the bill-poster had pasted up the placard, the mayor had gone into the town hall, the crier had departed for some other village, and the crowd had scattered.

A group remained in front of the placard. Michelle Fléchard joined this group.

They were commenting on the names of those men who were outlawed.

There were peasants and citizens in the group; that is to say, Whites and Blues.

A peasant said, —

"No matter, they do not count everybody. Nineteen is only nineteen. They do not count Riou, they do not count Benjamin Moulins, they do not count Goupil, of the parish of Andouillé."

"Nor Lorieul, of Montjean," said another.

Others added,— "Nor Brice-Denys."

"Nor François Dudonet."

"Yes, the one from Laval."

"Nor Huet, from Launey-Villiers."

"Nor Gregis."

“Nor Pilon.”

“Nor Filleul.”

“Nor Ménicent.”

“Nor Guéharrée.”

“Nor the three brothers Logerais.”

“Nor Monsieur Lechandelier de Pierreville.”

“Fools!” said a stern old man with white hair. “They have them all, if they take Lantenac.”

“They haven’t taken him yet,” muttered one of the young fellows.

The old man replied, —

“If Lantenac is taken, the soul is taken. If Lantenac is dead, la Vendée is killed.”

“Who is this Lantenac, then?” asked a citizen.

A citizen replied: “He is a ci-devant.”

And another added: “He is one of those who shoot women.”

Michelle Fléchard heard that, and said: “That is true.”

The people turned round.

And she added: “Because they shot me.”

These words had a strange effect; it was as though one thought dead was found alive. They began to examine her, somewhat askance.

She was really distressing to look at; trembling at everything, scared, shivering, having a wildly anxious look, and so frightened that she was frightful. In a woman’s despair there is a strange helplessness which is terrible. It is like seeing a being suspended at the extremity of fate. But the peasants looked at it more roughly. One of them growled: “She may be a spy.”

“Hold your tongue, and go away,” said the good woman who had already spoken to her, in a low voice.

Michelle Fléchard replied, —

“I am not doing any harm. I am looking for my children.”

The good woman looked at those who were looking at Michelle Fléchard, tapped her forehead, winked, and said, —

“She is half-witted.”

Then she took her aside, and gave her a buckwheat biscuit.

Michelle Fléchard, without thanking her, bit eagerly into the biscuit.

“Yes,” said the peasants, “she eats like a pig, she is half-witted.”

And the rest of the group scattered. They all went away one after another.

When Michelle Fléchard had finished eating, she said to the peasant woman: “It is good; I have had something to eat. Now, for la Tourgue!”

“See how she clings to that!” exclaimed the peasant woman.

“I must go to la Tourgue. Tell me the way to la Tourgue.”

“Never,” said the peasant woman. “You want to be killed, do you? Besides, I don’t know. Ah, so you are really mad? Listen, my poor woman, you look tired. Will you rest in my house?”

“I cannot rest,” said the mother.

“Her feet are all raw,” muttered the peasant woman.

Michelle Fléchard added, —

“As I tell you, they have taken my children from me. A little girl and two little boys. I come from the carnichot in the forest. You can ask Tellmarch the Caimand about me. And then the man I met in the field down there. It was the Caimand who made me well. It seems that I had something broken. All these are things that have happened. Besides, there was the sergeant Radoub. You can ask him. He will tell you. For he it was who found us in a wood. Three. I tell you three children. And the oldest is called René-Jean. I can prove all this. The other is called Gros-Alain, and the other is called Georgette. My husband is dead. They killed him. He was a farmer in Siscoignard. You look like a good woman. Show me my way. I am not mad; I am a mother. I have lost my children. I am looking for them. I do not know exactly where I have come from. Last night I slept on some straw in a barn. La Tourgue is where I am going. I am not a thief. You see that I am telling the truth. You ought to help me find my children. I do not belong to this country. I have been shot, but I do not know where.”

The peasant woman shook her head, and said, —

“Listen, traveller. In times of revolution one must not say things that will not be understood. You may be arrested for it.”

“But la Tourgue!” cried the mother. “Madame, for the love of the child Jesus, and the holy, good Virgin in Paradise, I beseech you, madame, I beg you, I implore you, tell me how to go to reach la Tourgue!”

The peasant woman grew angry.

“I do not know! and, if I knew, I would not tell you! It is a bad place there. It is not best to go there.”

“Nevertheless, I am going there,” said the mother.

And she started on.

The peasant woman saw her going away, and grumbled, —

“She ought to have something to eat.”

She ran after Michelle Fléchard, and put a buckwheat biscuit in her hand.

“There’s something for your supper.”

Michelle Fléchard took the buckwheat bread, did not reply, did not turn her head, and went on her way.

She went out of the village. As she came to the last houses she met three little ragged and barefooted children passing by. She went to them, and said, —

“These are two girls and a boy.”

And when she saw how they eyed her bread, she gave it to them.

The children seized it, but were afraid of her.

She plunged into the forest.

CHAPTER IV.

A MISTAKE.

In the meantime, the following had been taking place that same morning before daybreak, in the gloomy depths of the forest, on the section of road leading from Javené to Lécousse.

All the roads in le Bocage are sunken, but the highway from Javené to Parigné, through Lécousse, is one of the most completely embanked. Moreover, it is winding. It is a ravine rather than a road. It starts from Vitré, and once had the distinction of jolting Madame de Sevigné’s coach. It is walled in, as it were, by hedges on right and left. No better place for an ambuscade.

This very morning, an hour before Michelle Fléchard, from another part of the forest, reached the village where she had seen the sepulchral vision of the cart escorted by mounted men, the thickets through which the Javené highway runs, after crossing the bridge over the Couesnou, were full of invisible men. All were hidden by interlacing branches.

These men were all peasants, dressed in the *grigo*, that sheepskin jacket worn by the Breton kings in the sixth century, and the peasants in the eighteenth. These men were armed; some with guns, others with axes. Those who had the axes had just made, in a clearing, a sort of funeral pyre of dry sticks and logs, all ready for the fire. Those who had guns were grouped on both sides of the road, in expectant attitudes. Any one who could have peered through the foliage would have seen everywhere fingers on triggers, and muzzles of carbines pointed through the embrasures made by the interlacing boughs. These men were lying in wait. All their guns were focussed on the road, which began to gleam white in the morning dawn.

In the twilight, muffled voices were conversing.

“Are you sure of this?”

“Surely; that is what they say.”

“Will it pass by here?”

“They say it’s in these parts.”

“It must not leave.”

“We must burn it.”

"Here are three villages met for that,"

"Yes, but the escort?"

"The escort must be killed."

"But is it coming this way?"

"That's what they say."

"It'll come from Vitré, then?"

"Why not?"

"Why, they said it was coming from Fougéres."

"Whether from Fougéres or Yitré, it comes from the devil."

"That's so."

"And must go back to him."

"Yes."

"Was it going to Parigné?"

"So it seems."

"It won't get there."

"No."

"No, no, no."

"Attention."

Indeed, prudence was now becoming imperative, for day was breaking.

Suddenly, the men in ambush held their breath. A noise of wheels and horses was heard. They peered through the branches and could indistinctly see a long wagon, an escort on horseback, something on the wagon; it was coming toward them.

"There it is!" said the one who appeared to be the chief.

"Yes," said one of the men on the watch, "with the escort."

"How many men in the escort?"

"Twelve."

"They said there were twenty."

"Twelve or twenty, let us kill them all."

"Wait till they are in full range."

Soon after, at a turn in the road, the wagon and escort appeared.

"Long live the king!" cried the chief peasant.

A hundred guns fired at once.

When the smoke disappeared, the escort had disappeared too. Seven of the horsemen had fallen, five had fled. The peasants ran to the wagon.

"Hold on," cried the chief;" it is not the guillotine. It is a ladder."

The wagon, indeed, had for its sole burden a long ladder.

The two horses had fallen, wounded; the driver had been killed, but not purposely.

“It’s all the same,” said the chief, “a ladder with an escort is suspicious. It was going toward Parigné. It was for scaling la Tourgue, most certainly.”

“Let us burn the ladder,” cried the peasants.

As for the funereal wagon, which they were looking for, It took another road and was already two leagues away, in the village where Michelle Fléchard saw it passing along at sunrise.

CHAPTER V.

VOX OF DESSERTO.

After leaving the three children to whom she gave her bread, Michelle Fléchard began to rove at random through the wood.

Since no one would show her the way, she must find it for herself. Every few moments she would sit down, then she would get up, and then sit down again. She felt that dismal weariness, which first affects the muscles and then passes to the bones, a slavish weariness. She was a slave in reality, — a slave to her lost children. She must find them; every lost instant might be their distraction; whoever has such a duty has no rights; she was forbidden to pause, even for breath. But she was very weary. In such a state of exhaustion, the possibility of one step more is a question. Could it be done? She had been walking since morning. She had seen no village, not even a house. At first she took the right path, then the wrong one, and finally she lost her way entirely among the branches, one just like another. Was she approaching the end? Was she touching the limit of her Passion? She was in the Via Dolorosa, and felt the agony of the "last station." Was she going to fall down on the road and die there? At one particular moment, it seemed impossible for her to go any farther; the sun was sinking, the forest was dark, paths were covered up in the grass, and she did not know what to do. She had nothing left but God. She began to call, no one replied.

She looked about her, she saw an opening among the branches, she went toward it, and suddenly found herself out of the woods.

Before her was a narrow vale like a trench, at the bottom of which, over the stones, ran a clear streamlet of water. Then, for the first time she became aware how very thirsty she was. She went to the brook, knelt down, and drank.

She took advantage of being on her knees to repeat her prayers.

When she arose, she tried to get her bearings.

She crossed the brook.

Beyond the little vale there stretched away as far as the eye could reach, a wide plateau covered with low underbrush, which sloped up from the brook and filled the whole horizon. The forest was a solitude, the plateau was a desert. In the forest behind each bush, there was a chance of meeting some one; on the plateau, as far as one could see, there was nothing. A few birds, which seemed to be escaping from something, flew into the heather.

Then, before this immense deserted plain, feeling her knees give way, as though she had become insane, the desperate mother flung this strange cry into the solitude; “Is there any one here?”

And she waited for the reply.

There was an answer.

A heavy, deep voice burst forth; this voice came from the edge of the horizon; it was reverberated from echo to echo; it resembled a peal of thunder or a cannon; and it seemed as if this voice replied to the mother’s question and said: “Yes.”

Then all was silent.

The mother rose, with new life; there was some one there. It seemed to her that now she had some one to speak to; she had just relieved her thirst and prayed; her strength returned, she began to ascend the slope in the direction from which she had heard that enormous distant voice.

Suddenly, she saw rising from the extreme edge of the horizon, a tall tower. The tower stood alone in this wild landscape; a ray from the setting sun lighted it up. She was more than a league away from it. Behind this tower, a wide expanse of verdure lost itself in the haze; this was the forest of Fougères.

This tower appeared to her to he on the very point of the horizon from which had come that roaring voice that seemed to her like a call. Had this tower made the noise?

Michelle Fléchard reached the top of the pleateau; she had nothing more before her except the plain. She walked toward the tower.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SITUATION.

The moment had come.

The inexorable held the merciless.

Cimourdain had Lantenac in his grasp.

The old Royalist rebel was taken in his ancestral seat, it was evident that he could not escape; and Cimourdain intended to have the marquis beheaded at his own home, on the spot, on his own territory, and in a certain sense in his own house, in order that the feudal dwelling should see the head of the feudal master fall, and that it might be a memorable example.

This is why he had sent to Fougères for the guillotine. It has just been seen on the way.

To kill Lantenace was to kill la Vendée; to kill la Vendée was to save France. Cimourdain did not hesitate. This man was familiar with the cruelty of duty.

The marquis seemed to be lost; in regard to this, Cimourdain felt easy, but in another respect he was anxious. The struggle would certainly be a frightful one; Gauvain would direct it, and would perhaps desire to take part in it; there was something of the soldier in this young chief; he was a man to throw himself into this hand-to hand encounter; supposing he should be killed? Gauvain! his child! the sole affection that he had on earth! Gauvain had been fortunate thus far, but good fortune becomes weary. Cimourdain trembled. His destiny was strange in this respect, that he was between two Gauvains, one of whom he wished to die, the other to live.

The cannon shot which had disturbed Georgette in her basket and called the mother out of the depths of solitude had done more than that. Whether it was by chance or from the intention of the gunner, the ball, which, however was only a ball of warning, had struck, broken, and half torn away the iron bars which masked and closed the great loophole in the first story of the tower. The besieged had not had time to repair this injury.

The besieged were boastful. They had very little ammunition. Their situation, we insist, was even more critical than the besiegers supposed. If they had had enough powder they would have blown up la Tourgue, with themselves and the enemy in it; this was their dream; but all their reserves were exhausted. They had hardly thirty shots apiece. They had plenty of guns, blunderbusses and pistols, and but few cartridges. They had loaded all their arms, in order to be able to keep up a continuous fire; but how long would this fire last? It would be necessary to use it lavishly and to husband it at the same time. Here was the difficulty

Fortunately, — ominous good fortune, — the contest would be principally man to man, and with side-arms, with sabre and dagger. There would be more hand-to-hand fighting than shooting. They would cut each other to pieces; this was what they hoped for.

The interior of the tower seemed impregnable. In the lower hall where the breach penetrated was the retirade, that barricade scientifically constructed by Lantenac, which obstructed the entrance. Behind the retirade, a long table was covered with loaded arms, — blunderbusses, carbines, and muskets, and with sabres, axes, and daggers As they had no powder to blow up the tower, they were unable to make use of the crypt of the oubliette communicating with the lower hall, and the marquis had ordered the door to this vault to be closed.

Above the lower hall was the round room of the first story, which could only be reached by a very narrow Saint-Gilles’s staircase; this room, furnished like the lower hall with a table covered with arms all ready for use, was lighted by the large loophole, the grating of which had just been smashed by a cannon ball; above this room the spiral staircase led to the round room in the second story, where the iron door opened into the bridge-châtelet.

This room in the second story was called both the “room with the iron door” and the “room of mirrors,” on account of the number of little mirrors hung up on old rusty nails against the bare stone, a strange mixture of elegance and barbarism. As upper rooms cannot be defended to advantage, this room of mirrors was what Manesson-Mallet, the authority on fortified places, calls “the last post where the besieged can capitulate.”

As we have already said, it was important to prevent the besiegers from reaching this room.

This round room in the second story was lighted by loop-holes; but a torch was burning there. This torch, placed in an iron cresset like the one in the lower hall, had been lighted by l’Imânus, who had placed the end of the sulphur slow-match close beside it. Terrible foresight.

At the end of the lower hall, on a long table made of boards, there was food, as in a Homeric cavern: large plates of rice; of “fur,” which is a porridge of buckwheat; of “godnivelle,” a hash of veal; rolls of “houichepote,” a paste made of flower and fruit cooked in water; and jugs of cider. Any one who wished could eat and drink.

The firing of the cannon put them all on guard. They had only half an hour more before them. L’Imânus, from the top of the tower, was watching the approach of the besiegers. Lantenac had commanded them not to fire, and to let them draw near. He had said, —

“There are four thousand, five hundred of them. It is useless to kill them outside. Don’t kill until they are inside. Once inside, we shall be equal.”

And he added, with a laugh, “Equality, Fraternity.” It was agreed that when the enemy began to advance, L’Imânus should sound a note of warning from his horn.

All, in silence, stationed behind the retirade or on the stairs, waited, with one hand on their muskets, the other on their rosaries.

To sum up, this was the situation:

For the assailants, a breach to penetrate; a barricade to storm; three halls, one above another, to take by main force, one by one; two winding staircases to carry, step by step, under a shower of fire. For the besieged — death.

CHAPTER VII.

PRELIMINARIES.

Gauvain on his side, was arranging the attack. He gave his last instructions to Cimourdain, who, it will be remembered, without taking part in the action was to guard the plateau; and to Guéchamp, who was to wait with the main part of the army in the camp of the forest. It was understood that neither the masked battery in the woods nor the open battery on the plateau should fire, unless there was a sortie or an attempt to escape. Gauvain reserved for himself the command of the attacking column. This was what troubled Cimourdain.

The sun had just set.

A tower on an open field is like a ship on the open sea. It must be attacked in the same way. It is rather a boarding than an assault. No cannon. Nothing useless. What is the good of cannonading walls fifteen feet thick? A port-hole, some storming it, others passing it, axes, knives, pistols, fists, and teeth. This is what takes place.

Gauvain felt that there was no other means of carrying la Tourgue. An attack where the combatants see the whites of each other's eyes is most deadly. He was familiar with the formidable interior of the tower, having lived there as a child. He was deep in thought.

In the meantime, a few steps from him his lieutenant, Guéchamp, with a spyglass in his hand, was scrutinizing the horizon toward Parigné. Suddenly Guechamp exclaimed, —

"Ah! at last!"

This exclamation roused Gauvain from his reverie.

"What is it, Guéchamp?"

"Commander, there is the ladder."

"The escape ladder?"

"Yes."

"What? Hasn't it come yet?"

"No, commander. I was anxious about it. The express which I sent to Javené has returned."

"I know it."

“He announced that, in the carpenter’s shop at Javené, he had found a ladder of the required length, that he had it requisitioned, that he had the ladder put on a wagon, that he obtained an escort of twelve horsemen, and that he had seen the wagon, the escort, and the ladder start for Parigné. After which he returned post haste.”

“And gave us this report, and he added that as the wagon was drawn by strong horses, and started about two o’clock in the morning, it would be here before sunset. I know all that. Well?”

“Well, commander, the sun has just set and the wagon with the ladder has not yet come.”

“Is it possible? Nevertheless, we must begin the attack. The hour has come. If we delay, the besieged will think we are retreating.”

“Commander, you can begin the attack.”

“But we must have the escape ladder.”

“Of course.”

“But it is not here.”

“It is here.”

“How is that?”

“That is why I said, ‘Ah! at last!’ The wagon had not come; I took my spyglass and examined the road from Parigné to la Tourgue, and, commander, I am satisfied. The wagon is yonder with the escort; it is coming down the slope. You can see it.”

Gauvain took his spyglass and looked.

“To be sure. Here it is. There is not enough daylight left to make it all out. But I see the escort; that is plain enough. But the escort seems to me to be larger than you told me, Guéchamp.”

“It seems so to me, too.”

“They are about a quarter of a league away.”

“Commander, the escape ladder will be here in a quarter of an hour.”

“We can begin the attack.”

It was really a wagon which was coming, but it was not the one they thought.

Gauvain, turning around, saw behind him Sergeant Radoub, erect, his eyes downcast, in attitude of military salute.

“What is it, Sergeant Radoub?”

“Citizen commander, we, the men of the battalion of Bonnet-Rouge, have a favor to ask of you.”

“What is it?”

“To have us killed.”

“Ah!” said Gauvain.

“Will you do us this kindness?”

“But — that depends on circumstances,” said Gauvain.

“You see, commander, since the affair at Dol you have been careful of us. There are still twelve of us.”

“Well?”

“This humiliates us.”

“You are the reserve.”

“We would rather be the advance-guard.”

“But I need you to decide the final success of an action. I hold you in reserve.”

“Too much so.”

“No matter. You are in the column, you march with it.”

“In the rear. Paris has the right to march ahead.”

“I will think about it. Sergeant Radoub.”

“Think about it to-day, commander. There is going to be an engagement. There will be a rough tripping-up, on one side or the other. It will be lively. La Tourgue will burn the fingers of those who touch it. We ask the privilege of being in the fight.”

The sergeant stopped short, twisted his moustache, and added in a different tone, —

“And then you see, commander, our babies are in that tower. Our children are there, the children of the battalion, our three children. The terrible face of Gribouille-mon-cul-to-baise, of Brise-bleu, of l’Imanus, that Gouge-le-Bruand, that Bouge-le-Gruand, that Fouge-le-Truand, that thunderbolt of God, man of the devil, threatens our children. Our children, our little ones, commander. When the tower quakes and tumbles, we do not want any harm to come to them. Do you understand this, master? we do not want any harm to happen to them. Just now, I took advantage of the truce to go up on the plateau, and I saw them through a window; yes, they are really there, you can see them from the edge of the ravine and I saw them, and they were afraid of me, the darlings. Commander, if a single hair falls from the heads of those little cherubs, I swear a thousand times by all that is holy that I, Sergeant Radoub, that I will do something desperate. And this is what all the battalion say: ‘We want the children saved, or we want to be all killed. This is our right, yes, to be all killed.’ And now, good luck and reverence.”

Gauvain held out his hand to Radoub, and said, —

“You are a brave man. You shall be in the attacking column. I will divide you. I will put six of you with the vanguard, that the troops may be sure to advance, and I will put six of you in the rearguard, to keep them from retreating.”

“Shall I still command the twelve?”

“Certainly.”

“Thank you, commander. For I belong to the vanguard.” Radoub saluted his commander and went back to the ranks.

Gauvain took out his watch, spoke a few words in Guéchamp’s ear, and the attacking column began to form.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SUMMONS AND THE REPLY.

In the meantime, Cimourdain, who had not yet taken up his position on the plateau and was still at Gauvain's side, stepped to a trumpeter.

"Blow the trumpet," he said to him.

The trumpet sounded, the horn replied.

A blast from the trumpet and an answering blast from the horn rang out again.

"What is it?" asked Gauvain of Guechamp. "What does Cimourdain want?"

Cimourdain had approached the tower with a white handkerchief in his hand.

He spoke.

"Men who are in the tower, do you know me?"

The voice of l'Imânus replied from the top of the tower, —

"Yes."

Then the two voices began to converse, and this was heard, —

"I am the envoy of the Republic."

"You are the former curé of Parigné."

"I am the delegate of the Committee of Public Welfare."

"You are a priest."

"I am the representative of the Law."

"You are a renegade."

"I am the messenger of the Revolution."

"You are an apostate."

"I am Cimourdain."

"You are the devil."

"Do you know me?"

"We hate you."

"Would you be satisfied to have me in your power?"

"There are eighteen of us here who would give our heads in exchange for yours."

"Well, I have come to give myself up to you."

From the top of the tower was heard a burst of savage laughter, and this exclamation, —

“Come on.”

There was deep silence in the camp as they awaited the result.

Cimourdain added, —

“On one condition.”

“What is it?”

“Listen.”

“Speak.”

“You hate me?”

“Yes.”

“As for me, I love you. I am your brother.”

The voice from the top of the tower replied, —

“Yes, Cain.”

Cimourdain replied with a singular inflection, both loud and gentle, —

“Insult me, but listen, I have come to parley with you. Yes, you are my brothers. You are poor misguided men. I am your friend. I am light speaking to ignorance. Light always comprises brotherly love. Besides, have we not all the same mother, our native land? Well, listen to me. You will know later, or your children will know, or your children’s children, that all that is taking place at this moment is done in fulfilment of the laws above, and that God has caused this Revolution. While waiting for the time when all minds, even yours, will understand this, and, all fanaticism, even yours will vanish, will any one pity your darkness? I have come to you to offer you my life; I do more, I extend my hand to you. I ask you the favor of destroying my life to save your own. I have full power, and what I say I am able to perform. It is a critical moment; I am making a last effort. Yes, he who speaks to you is a citizen, and in this citizen, yes, there is a priest. The citizen is fighting against you, but the priest implores you. Listen to me. Many of you have wives and children. I take the defence of your children and your wives. I take their defence against you. Oh, my brothers — —”

“Go on, preach away!” sneered l’Imânus.

Cimourdain continued, —

“My brothers, do not let the accursed hour come. There will be bloodshed here. Many of us who are here before you will not see to-morrow’s sun; yes, many of us will perish, and you, all of you, will die.

Have mercy on yourselves. Why shed all this blood when it is useless? Why kill so many men when two would suffice?”

“Two?” said l’Imânus.

“Yes. Two.”

“Who?”

“Lantenac and myself.”

And Cimourdain raised his voice, —

“Two men are enough; Lantenac, for us, myself for you. This is what I offer you, and it will be the saving of all your lives: give us Lantenac and take me. Lantenac will be guillotined, and you will have me to dispose of as you like.”

“Priest,” howled l’Imânus, “if we had you we would burn you over a slow fire.”

“I am willing,” said Cimourdain.

And he added, —

“You, condemned, who are in this tower can all be alive and free; in an hour I bring you safety. Do you accept it?”

L’Imânus thundered, —

“You are not only a villain; you are mad. Ah, indeed, why do you come to disturb us? who asked you to come to speak to us? we, give up monseigneur! what do you mean?”

“His head, and I offer you—”

“Your hide. For we would skin you like a dog. Curé Cimourdain. Well, no, your hide is not worth his head; get you gone.”

“The struggle will be terrible; once more, for the last time, reflect.”

Night fell during the exchange of these ominous words, which were heard inside the tower as well as without. The Marquis de Lantenac kept silent and let them alone. Leaders indulge in such portentous deeds of selfishness. This is one of the rights of responsibility. L’Imânus shouted to those beyond Cimourdain, exclaiming, —

“Men who attack us, we have told you our propositions; they have been made, and we have nothing to change about them. Accept them; if not, woe be unto you! do you consent? we will give up the three children here, to you, and you shall let us all go free and unharmed.”

“All of you, yes,” replied Cimourdain, “except one.”

“Which one?”

“Lantenac.”

“Monseigneur! give up monseigneur! never!”

“We must have Lantenac.”

“Never!”

“We cannot negotiate, except on this condition.”

“Then begin.”

Silence ensued.

L’Imânus, after sounding the signal with his horn, went down again; the marquis took the sword in his hand; the nineteen men besieged gathered in silence in the lower hall, behind the retirade, and knelt down; they heard the measured tread of the attacking column advancing towards the tower in the darkness; the sound drew nearer; suddenly, they felt that they were close upon them, at the very mouth of the breach. Then all kneeling down held their guns and their blunderbusses through the cracks in the retirade, and one of them, Grand-Francœur, the priest Turneau, rose, and, a drawn sword in his right hand, a crucifix in his left, said in a solemn voice, —

“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.”

All fired at once, and the struggle began.

CHAPTER IX.

TITANS AGAINST GIANTS.

It was indeed frightful.

This hand-to-hand struggle surpassed all that could have been imagined.

To find anything equal to it, one must go back to the great combats of Æschylus or to the carnage of old feudal times; or to those “attacks with short arms,” which lasted till the seventeenth century, when fortified places were penetrated by means of “fausse-brayes;” tragic assaults in which, says the old sergeant of the province of Alentijo, “when the mines have done their work, the besiegers will advance carrying planks covered with sheets of tins, armed with round shields and mantlets, and provided with plenty of grenades, causing the defenders to abandon the retrenchments or retirades, and, having taken possession, they will vigorously repulse the besieged.”

The place of attack was horrible; it was one of those breaches called technically “vaulted breaches;” that is to say, as will be remembered, an opening going through the wall from one side to the other, and not a rupture open to the sky. The powder had worked like a gimlet. The effect of the explosion had been so violent that the tower had been rent more than forty feet above the mine, but it was only a crack, and the practicable opening, serving as a breach and penetrating into the lower hall, resembled a spear-thrust which pierces, rather than an axe-blow which cleaves.

It was a puncture in the side of the tower, a long, deep fracture, something like a horizontal wall under ground, a passage winding and rising like an intestine through a wall fifteen feet thick, a peculiar, shapeless cylinder full of obstacles, snares, explosions, where a man would hit his forehead against the rocks, and would stumble over the rubbish and lose his sight in the darkness.

The assailants had before them this dark porch, like the mouth of an abyss with all the stones of the jagged wall for upper and lower jaws; the jaws of a shark have not more teeth than this terrible rent. It was necessary to enter and to come out by this hole.

Within, there was a rain of fire, outside rose the retirade. *Outside,* that is to say, in the lower hall on the ground floor.

Only in the encounter of sappers in covered galleries when the countermine cuts the mine, or in the carnage on the gun decks of vessels which grapple each other in naval battles, is such ferocity displayed. To fight at the bottom of a ditch is horrible to the last degree. It is frightful to have a battle under a roof.

At the moment when the first swarm of besiegers entered, the whole retirade was covered with lightning, and it was something like a thunderstorm bursting underground. The thunderbolts of the assailants replied to the thunderbolts of the ambuscade. Report answered report; Gauvain's voice shouted, —

"Break them in!"

Then Lantenac's cry: "Hold firm against the enemy!"

Then the cry of l'Imânus: "On, men of the Main!" Then the clashing of sword against sword, and blow on blow, terrible discharges, all devastating. The torch fastened against the wall lighted dimly all this horror. It was impossible to distinguish anything; it was in a reddish blackness; whoever entered there was suddenly deaf and blind, — deafened by the noise, blinded by the smoke. Disabled men were lying in the midst of the rubbish. Corpses were trodden down, the wounded were trampled upon, broken limbs were crushed, while howls of anguish arose; men had their feet bitten by the dying; now and then, there were moments of silence more hideous than the din.

They seized each other by the throat, groans were heard, then the gnashing of teeth, the death-rattle, imprecations; and the thundering began again. A stream of blood began to flow from the tower through the breach, and ran out into the darkness. This dismal pool steamed outside in the grass.

It seemed as if the tower itself were bleeding, as if a giant were wounded.

Wonderful to say, those outside heard hardly any sound. The night was very dark, and all around the fortress, on the plain and in the forest, there was a sort of funereal stillness. Inside, it was like hell; outside, it was like the grave. This conflict of men killing each other in the darkness, these volleys of musketry, this din, this madness, all this tumult died away under the walls and arches; the noise lacked air, and suffocation was added to slaughter. Outside the tower, there was scarcely a sound. The little children slept through it all.

The fury increased, the retirade held its own. Nothing is more difficult to storm than this kind of a barricade, with a re-entering angle. If the besieged had numbers against them, their position was in their favor. The attacking column lost a great many men. Stretched out in a long line outside, at the foot of the tower, it plunged slowly into the opening made by the breach and contracted, like an adder going into its hole.

Gauvain, with the imprudence of a young general, was in the lower hall, in the thickest of the fight, in the midst of all the firing. We may add that he had the confidence of a man who had never been wounded. As he turned round to give an order, a blaze of musketry lighted up a face close beside him.

“Cimourdain!” he exclaimed, “what are you doing here?”

It really was Cimourdain. Cimourdain replied, —

“I come to be near you.”

“But you will be killed!”

“Well, what are you doing here yourself?”

“But I am needed here. You are not.”

“Since you are here, I must be here also.”

“No, my master.”

“Yes, my child.”

Cimourdain stayed near Gauvain.

The dead were heaped up on the floors of the lower hall.

Although the retirade was not yet forced, the greater number would evidently conquer at last. The assailants were exposed to the enemy’s fire, and the besieged were protected. Ten besiegers fell to one besieged, but the besiegers were replaced. The besiegers increased and the besieged decreased.

The nineteen besieged were all behind the retirade, the attack being there. There were dead and wounded among them; fifteen at the outside were still fighting. One of the fiercest among them, Chante-en-Hiver, had been frightfully wounded. He was a thickset Breton, with curly hair, of the small, lively type. He had one of his eyes put out and his jawbone broken. He could still walk. He dragged himself up the winding staircase and went into the room on the first story, hoping to be able to say his prayers there and die.

He leaned back against the wall near the loophole to try to get a little air.

Below, the massacre before the retirade was growing more and more horrible. In an interval between two volleys, Cimourdain raised his voice.

“Besieged!” he cried, “why shed blood any longer? You are taken. Surrender. Remember that we are four thousand five hundred against nineteen, that is to say, more than two hundred to one. Surrender.”

“Let us put an end to this sentimentality,” replied the Marquis de Lantenac.

And twenty bullets answered Cimourdain.

The retirade did not reach as high as the arched roof; this allowed the besieged to shoot over it, but it also allowed the besiegers to scale it.

“Attack the retirade!” cried Gauvain. “Is there any one willing to scale the retirade?”

“I am,” said Sergeant Radoub.

CHAPTER X.

RADOUB.

Then the assailants were dumfounded at what took place. Radoub had entered through the breach at the head of the attacking column, with six others, and, out of these six men of the Prussian battalion, four had already fallen. After he had cried: “I am!” he was seen not to advance but to retreat, and bending down, stooping, crawling almost between the legs of the combatants, he reached the opening of the breach and went out. Was this flight? would such a man flee? what could it mean?

When outside the breach, Radoub, still blinded by the smoke, rubbed his eyes as if to put aside the horror and the darkness, and by the light of the stars looked at the wall of the tower. He gave a nod of satisfaction, as if to say, “I was not mistaken.”

Radoub had noticed that the deep cleft made by the explosion of the mine, reached above the breach to the loophole in the first story, the iron grating of which had been broken through and displaced by a cannon ball. The network of broken bars was hanging, half torn away, and a man would be able to creep through.

A man could creep through, but could he climb up there? By the cleft, yes, on condition that he was like a cat.

This was just what Radoub was. He belonged to that race which Pindar calls “agile athletes.” An old soldier may be a young man; Radoub, who had been a French Guard, was not forty years old. He was a nimble Hercules.

Radoub laid his musket on the ground, removed his shoulder belt, took off his coat and vest, and kept only his two pistols, which he put in the belt of his trousers, and his bare sword, which he took between his teeth. The handles of the two pistols protruded above his belt.

Thus freed from all encumbrances, and followed in the darkness by the eyes of all those in the attacking column who had not yet entered the breach, he began to mount the stones in the cleft of the wall, like the steps of a staircase. Being without shoes was an advantage to him; nothing clings like a bare foot; he curled his toes into the holes between the stones. He pulled himself up by main force, he braced himself with his knees. The ascent was rough. It was something like climbing over the teeth of a saw. “It is fortunate,” he thought, “that there is no one in the room of the first story, for they would not let me climb in this way.”

He had no less than forty feet to climb thus. As he mounted, hindered somewhat by the protruding handles of his pistols, the cleft grew narrower and the ascent became more and more difficult; at the same time, the risk of falling increased with the depth of the precipice.

At last he came to the edge of the loophole; he removed the twisted and broken grating so that he had room enough to pass through; by a powerful effort he raised himself up, placed his knee on the cornice of the window-sill, seized the end of a bar on the right, in one hand, and with the other a bar on the left, and rose to his waist in front of the embrasure of the loophole, his sword between his teeth, hanging by his two hands above the abyss.

He had but one more effort to make to enter the hall in the first story.

But a face appeared in the loophole.

Radoub suddenly saw before him in the dim light something frightful. An eye destroyed, a shattered jaw, a face covered with blood.

This one-eyed mask looked at him.

This mask had two hands; these two hands came out of the darkness and approached Radoub; one, with a single grasp, snatched the two pistols from his belt, the other removed his sword from between his teeth.

Radoub was disarmed. His knee was slipping on the inclined plane of the cornice, his two hands grasping the ends of the iron bars could hardly hold him, and he had beneath him forty feet of precipice.

This face and these hands belonged to Chante-en-hiver. Chante-en-hiver, suffocated by the smoke pouring up from below, had succeeded in entering the embrasure of the loophole, and here the outside air had revived him, the coolness of the night had stanched his blood, and he had regained a little strength; suddenly, he saw Radoub’s form rise up outside in front of the opening, then as Radoub, clinging to the bars with both hands, had only the choice of falling or being disarmed, Chante-en-hiver, calm and frightful, took the pistols out of his belt and his sword from between his teeth.

An extraordinary duel began. A duel between the unarmed and the wounded.

Without doubt, the dying man had the advantage. One bullet would be enough to hurl Radoub into the yawning gulf, under his feet.

Fortunately for Radoub, Chante-en-hiver, having both pistols in one hand, could shoot neither of them and was forced to make use of the sword. He thrust the point of it into Radoub's shoulder. This thrust wounded Radoub and saved him.

Radoub, without arms, but having all his strength scorned his wound, which did not reach to the bone, sprang forward, let go the bars, and leaped into the embrasure.

Then he found himself face to face with Chante-en-hiver who had thrown the sword behind him, and now held the two pistols in his two hands.

Chante-en-hiver, on his knees, aimed at Radoub who was almost close up to the muzzle; but his weakened arm trembled and he did not immediately shoot.

Radoub took advantage of this respite to burst out laughing.

"Tell me, ugly mug," he cried, "do you think I am going to be afraid of your à-la-mode beef jaws? Sapristi, how they have battered your pretty face!"

Chante-en-hiver was still aiming at him.

Radoub continued, —

"It's not a thing to talk about, but the grapeshot crimped your mouth very prettily. My poor boy, Bellona has smashed your physiognomy. Go ahead, go ahead, spit out your little pistol shot, my good fellow."

The pistol went off and the bullet passed so near Radoub's head that it tore off half of his ear. Chante-en-hiver raised his other arm with the second pistol, but Radoub did not give him time to aim.

"I have had enough of you taking my ears off," he cried. "You have wounded me twice, now it is my turn."

And he rushed at Chante-en-hiver, knocked his arm up making the pistol go off aimlessly, and seized hold of his dislocated jaw.

Chante-en-hiver shrieked and fainted away.

Rodoub stepped over him and left him in the embrasure.

"Now that I have let you know my ultimatum," said he, "don't move again. Stay there, you rascally sneak. You may rest assured that I am not going to amuse myself now with slaughtering you. Crawl about on the floor at you ease, fellow-citizen of my old shoes. Die; you can still do that. You will soon know what nonsense your curé has been telling you. Depart into the great regions of mystery, peasant."

And he sprang into the hall of the first story.

“You can’t see a thing here,” he growled.

Chante-en-hiver writhed convulsively and shrieked with agony. Radoub turned around.

“Silence! do me the kindness of keeping quiet, unworthy citizen. I will have nothing more to do with you. I scorn to put an end to you. Let me have peace.”

And he ran his hand through his hair in perplexity, as he looked at Chante-en-hiver.

“Ah, now what am I going to do? all this is very good, but here I am without arms. I had two shots to fire. You wasted them for me, you beast! and made such a smoke about it that it would blind a dog!”

And hitting his torn ear, —

“Ow!” he said. And he added, —

“It was very forward of you to confiscate one of my ears; but indeed, I would rather lose that than anything else, for it was only an ornament. You scratched my shoulder too, but that is nothing. Die, clown, I forgive you.”

He listened, the tumult in the lower hall was frightful. The fight was more furious than ever.

“They are getting on well down there. Never mind, they are howling ‘Long live the king.’ They are dying nobly,”

His feet hit against his sword on the floor. He picked it up, and said to Chante-en-hiver who no longer stirred and was perhaps dead, —

“You see, woodsman, this is what I wanted, my sword or ‘zut,’ it is the same. I will take it out of friendship. But I must have my pistols. Devil take you, savage! Now what shall I do? I am no good here.”

He groped along through the hall, trying to see and to get his bearings. Suddenly in the darkness, behind the central column, he made out a long table, and on this table something which shone indistinctly. He felt of it. They were blunderbusses, pistols, carbines, a row of firearms laid in order and seeming to be waiting for hands to lay hold of them; it was the reserve of weapons prepared by the besieged for the second phase of the assault; a perfect arsenal.

“A refreshment table!” exclaimed Radoub, and he pounced on them wildly.

Then he became terrible.

The door leading to the staircase communicating with the upper and lower stories was seen to be wide open beside the table loaded with arms. Radoub dropped his sword, seized a pistol in each hand and fired them together at random through the door into the stairway, then he seized a blunderbuss and discharged that, then he seized a musketoon loaded to the muzzle with buckshot, and discharged that. The musketoon, pouring forth fifteen bullets, seemed like a volley of grapeshot. Then Radoub, getting his breath, cried into the stairway in a thundering voice, —

“Long live Paris.”

And seizing another musketoon larger than the first, he aimed it under the archway of the Saint-Gilles’s staircase and waited.

The confusion in the lower hall was indescribable. Unexpected surpises like this demoralize resistance. Two of the bullets of Radoub’s triple discharges had hit; one had killed the elder of the two brothers, Pique-en-bois, the other had killed Houzard, who was Monsieur de Quélen.

“They are upstairs!” cried the marquis.

This cry brought about the instant abandonment of the retirade; a flock of birds could not be scattered more quickly, and they each tried to rush first into the stairway. The marquis encouraged this flight.

“Be quick,” he said. “It is courageous to escape now, let us all go up to the second story! there we will begin again.”

He was the last to leave the retirade.

This bravery saved him.

Radoub, in ambush on the first landing of the staircase, his finger on the trigger of the blunderbuss was on the watch for the rout. Those who first appreared around the corner received the discharge full in the face, and fell as if struck by lightning. If the marquis had been one of them he would have been killed.

Before Radoub had time to seize a new weapon, the rest passed by, the marquis last, and slower than the others. They believed the room on the first floor to be filled with the enemy; they did not stop there, but went on to the second story to the hall of mirrors. There was the iron door, the sulphur slow match was there, and there it would be necessary to capitulate or die.

Gauvain, as surprised as they were by the gunshots from the stairway and not being able to explain the assistance which had come to him, without trying to understand had taken advantage of it, had leaped with his men over the retirade, and drove the besieged at the point of the sword up to the first story.

There he found Radoub.

Radoub saluted him and said, —

“0ne minute, commander. It was I who did this. I remembered Dol. I did as you did. I put the enemy between two fires.”

“A good pupil,” said Gauvain, with a smile.

After being in the dark for some time one’s eyes become accustomed to it, like those of night birds; Gauvain noticed that Radoub was covered with blood.

“But you are wounded, comrade.”

“Never mind that, commander. What difference does it make, an ear more or less? I have a sword-cut too, but that is of no consequence. In breaking a pane of glass one always gets cut somewhat. But it is only a little of my blood.”

They came to a sort of halt in the halt of the first story, taken by Radoub. A lantern was brought. Cimourdain rejoined Gauvain. They stopped to consider. It was indeed time to reflect. The besiegers were not in the secret of the besieged. They were ignorant of their lack of ammunition. They did not know that the defenders of the place were short of powder; the second story was the last post of resistance; the besiegers knew that the staircase might be mined.

One thing was certain, that the enemy could not escape. Those who were not dead were as good as under lock and key. Lantenac was in a trap.

With this certainty, they could take a little time to try to find out the best possible course to pursue. They already had many dead. It was necessary to try not to lose too many men in this last assault. There would probably be a tough outburst at first to quell.

The combat was interrupted. The besiegers, masters of the ground floor and of the next story were waiting for the general’s order to go on. Gauvain and Cimourdain were holding counsel. Radoub listened in silence to their deliberation.

He ventured again to salute his general timidly, —

“Commander?”

“What is it, Radoub?”

“Have I the right to a slight reward?”

“Certainly. Ask what you like.”

“I should like to be the first to go up.”

It was impossible to refuse him. Besides, he would have done it without permission.

CHAPTER XI.

THE DESPERATE.

While they were taking counsel in the first story, they were building a barricade in the second. Success is madness, defeat is rage. The two stories were about to clash in desperate encounter. To touch victory is intoxicating. Below there was hope, which would be the greatest of all human forces if it were not for despair.

Above, there was despair.

A calm, cold, ominous despair.

On reaching this hall of refuge, beyond which there was nothing left for them, the first care of the besieged was to bar the entrance. It would be of no use to fasten the door. It would be better to block up the stairway. In a case like this, an obstacle through which it is possible to see and to fight is of more value than a fastened door.

The torch placed by l'Imânus in a cresset on the wall, near the sulphur slow match, gave them light.

In this hall on the second floor there was one of those large, heavy oak chests in which clothing and linen were kept before the invention of furniture with drawers. They dragged this chest, and stood it on end in the doorway of the staircase. It fitted in firmly and obstructed the entrance. It left only a narrow space open near the arch, large enough to let a man through, excellent for killing the assailants, one by one. It was doubtful if men would risk themselves there.

Having blocked up the entrance, they took a respite.

They counted their number.

Of the nineteen only seven were left, including l'Imânus. All were wounded except l'Imânus and the marquis.

The five who were wounded, but very active, — for in the heat of battle, all wounds not mortal allow men to come and go, — were Chatenay, called Robi, Guinoiseau, Hoisnard, Branche-d' Or, Brin-d'Amour and Grand-Francœur. All the rest were dead.

They had no ammunition. The cartridge boxes were exhausted. They counted the cartridges. How many shots for the seven had they? Four.

They had reached the moment when there was nothing left but to fall. They were driven to the very precipice, yawning and awful; it would have been difficult to be nearer the edge.

In the meantime, the attack was beginning; but slowly and all the more sure. The sound of the besiegers’ gunstocks was heard as they hit against the staircase, step by step.

No means of escape. Through the library? There were six cannons on the plateau pointed at it, with matches lighted. Through the rooms above? what would be the use? They only lead to the plateau. Then their only means of escape would be to throw themselves from the top to the bottom of the tower.

The seven survivors of this epic band saw themselves inexorably imprisoned and held by this thick wall, which protected them and betrayed them. They were not yet taken; but they were already prisoners.

The marquis addressed them, —

“My friends, it is all over.”

And after a silence he added, —

“Grand-Francœur, be the Abbé Turmeau once more.”

All knelt down, with their rosaries in their hands. The knocking of the assailants’ muskets came nearer. Grand-Francœur, covered with blood from the bullet which had grazed his skull and torn off the skin covered with hair, raised his crucifix in his right hand. The marquis, a skeptic at heart, placed one knee on the ground.

“Let each one,” said Grand-Francœur, “confess his faults aloud. Monseigneur, speak.”

The marquis replied, —

“I have killed.”

“I have killed,” said Hoisnard.

“I have killed,” said Guinoiseau.

“I have killed,” said Brin-d’Amour.

“I have killed,” said Chatenay.

“I have killed,” said l’Imânus.

And Grand-Francœur added, —

“In the name of the Most Holy Trinity, I absolve you. May your soul depart in peace.”

“Amen!” replied all the others.

The marquis arose.

“Now,” said he, “let us die.”

“And let us kill,” said l’Imânus.

The blows from the muskets began to shake the chest which barred the door.

“Think on God,” said the priest. “Earth no longer exists for us.”

“Yes,” added the marquis, “we are in the tomb.”

All bowed their heads and beat their breasts. The marquis and the priest alone remained standing. Their eyes were fixed on the floor, the priest was praying, the peasants were praying, the marquis was deep in thought; the chest, as though it were struck by hammers, gave forth a lugubrious, hollow sound.

At this moment, a quick, strong voice rang out behind them, crying, —

“I told you the truth, monseigneur.”

The heads of all turned around in amazement.

A hole had just opened in the wall.

A stone perfectly jointed with the others, but not cemented, and turning on a pivot above and below, had just revolved on itself like a turnstile, and in turning had opened the wall. The stone having turned on its axis, made a double opening and offered two passages, one to the right, the other to the left, narrow, but large enough to allow a man to pass through. Outside this unexpected door could be seen the first steps of a spiral staircase.

The face of a man appeared in the opening.

The marquis recognized Halmalo.

CHAPTER XII.

A DELIVERER.

“Is it you, Halmalo?”

“It is, monseigneur. You see now that turning stones do exist, and that it is possible to escape through here. I have come in time. But be quick. In ten minutes you will be in the midst of the forest.”

“God is great,” said the priest.

“Save yourself, monseigneur,” cried they all.

“All of you first,” said the marquis.

“You first, monseigneur,” said the Abbé Turmeau.

“I shall be the last.”

And the marquis added in a stern voice, —

“No struggle for generosity. We have no time to be magnanimous. You are wounded. I command you to live and to flee. Be quick and take advantage of this means of escape. Thank you, Halmalo.”

“Monsieur le marquis,” said the Abbé Turmeau. “Are we going to be separated?”

“Without doubt, below. We can only escape each for himself.”

“Monseigneur, will you appoint a rendezvous?”

“Yes. A clearing in the forest, the Pierre-Gauvain. Do you know the place?”

“We all know it.”

“I will be there to-morrow at noon. Let all who can walk be found there.”

“We will be there.”

“And we will begin the war over again,” said the marquis.

In the meanwhile, Halmalo pressing against the turning stone had just noticed that it no longer moved. The opening could not be closed.

“Monseigneur,” he said, “let us hurry, the stone resists now. I was able to open the passage, but I shall not be able to close it.”

Indeed, after long disuse the stone was, as it were, stiffened on its hinges. It would be impossible to stir it henceforth.

“Monseigneur,” added Halmalo, “I hoped to close the passage, and that when the Blues entered, they would find no one here, and failing to understand it would believe that you had all vanished into smoke. But here, the stone will not move. The enemy will see the place open, and will be able to pursue us. But do not lose a moment. Quick! all down the stairs."

L'Imânus placed his hand on Halmalo's shoulder, —

"Comrade, how long will it take to go through this passage and reach a place of safety in the forest?"

"No one is seriously wounded?" asked Halmalo.

They replied, —

"No one."

"In that case, a quarter of an hour will be enough."

"So," replied l'Imânus, "if the enemy should enter here in a quarter of an hour?"

"They could pursue us, but they would not reach us."

"But," said the marquis, "they will be here in five minutes, that old chest will not hinder them long. A few blows with the butt-ends of their muskets will finish it A quarter of an hour! who will keep them back for an quarter of an hour?"

"I will," said l'Imânus.

"You, Gouge-le-Bruant?"

"I, monseigneur. Listen. Out of six, five of you are wounded. As for me, I haven't a scratch."

"Neither have I," said the marquis.

"You are the chief, monseigneur; I am the soldier. The chief and the soldier are two different men."

"I know it, we have each a different duty."

"No, monseigneur, you and I have the same duty; that is to save you."

L'Imânus turned toward his comrades.

"Comrades, the enemy must be held in check and their pursuit retarded as long as possible. Listen! I have all my strength, I have not lost a drop of blood; as I am not wounded, I shall hold out longer than any of the rest of you. Go, all of you; leave me your guns, I shall make good use of them. I shall undertake to keep back the enemy a good half hour. How many loaded pistols are there?"

"Four."

"Put them on the floor."

They did as he desired.

“That is right; I will remain. They will find some one to speak to. Now, quick, go all of you.”

Critical situations make short thanks. They hardly took time to press his hand.

“I shall see you soon,” said the marquis.

“No, monseigneur, I hope not. Not soon; I am going to die.”

One after another they all entered the narrow staircase, the wounded going first. As they were descending, the marquis took the pencil from his note-book in his pocket, and wrote some words on the stone which could no longer be turned, and which loft the passage open.

“Come, monseigneur, there is no one left but you,” said Halmalo.

And Halmalo started to go down.

The marquis followed him.

L’Imânus was left alone.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE EXECUTIONER.

The four pistols had been placed on the flags, for this hall had no floor; l’Imânus picked up two of them, one in each hand.

He went cautiously toward the entrance to the staircase, which was obstructed and screened by the chest.

The assailants evidently feared some surprise. One of those final explosions which are the catastrophe of the conqueror as well as the conquered. The last attack was as slow and cautious as the first had been impetuous.

They had not been able, they had not wished perhaps, to break through the chest with violence; they had demolished the bottom by beating it in with their muskets, and had made holes in the cover with their bayonets, and through these holes they tried to see into the hall before venturing to enter it.

The light from the lanterns with which they illuminated the staircase came through these holes.

L’Imânus noticed an eye looking through one of these holes. He quickly aimed the barrel of one of his pistols at this hole and pulled the trigger. The shot went off, and l’Imânus was rejoiced to hear a horrible cry. The bullet had put out the eye and gone through the head of the soldier who was looking through the hole, and the man had just tumbled backwards down the stairs.

The assailants had broken through the lower part of the cover in two quite large places and had made two kinds of loopholes in it; l’Imânus took advantage of one of these holes to pass his arm through, and to fire his second pistol at random into the throng of besiegers. The ball probably rebounded, for several cries were heard, as if three or four had been killed or wounded, and a great tumult among the men followed in the stairway, as they lost their footing and fell back.

L’Imânus threw down the two pistols which he had discharged, and took the two others; then, with the two pistols in his two hands he looked through the holes in the chest.

He ascertained the first effect produced.

The assailants had gone back down the stairs. The dying were writhing on the steps; on account of the winding he could only see three or four stairs.

L'Imânus waited.

"So much time gained," he thought.

Just then he saw a man on his belly, crawling up the stairs, and at the same moment the head of a soldier lower down, appeared behind the central pillar of the spiral.

L'Imânus aimed at this head and fired. There was a cry, a soldier fell, and l'Imânus changed from his left hand to his right, the last loaded pistol remaining.

At the same time he felt a frightful pain, and it was his turn to shriek. A sword had entered his bowels. A hand, the hand of a man who was crawling, had just passed through the second loophole in the lower part of the chest, and this hand had plunged a sword into l'Imânus's belly.

The wound was frightful. His bowels were cut from one side to the other.

L'Imânus did not fall. He ground his teeth and said, —

"That is good!"

Then tottering and dragging himself along, he went back to the torch burning beside the iron door; he laid down his pistol and took the torch, and holding with his left hand his bowels, which were gushing out, he lowered the torch with his right, and lighted the sulphur match.

The fire caught, the match blazed. L'Imânus left the torch still burning on the floor, took his pistol again, and having fallen on the flags, but lifting himself up again, blew the match with the little breath he had left.

The flame ran along, passed under the iron door, and reached the castle bridge.

Then seeing his accursed success, more satisfied, perhaps, with his crime than with his valor, this man who had just been a hero and was now nothing but an assassin, and was about to die, smiled.

"They will remember me," he murmured; "in these little ones, I avenge our little one, the king in the Temple.

CHAPTER XIV.

L'IMANUS ALSO ESCAPES.

At this very instant a great noise was heard, the chest violently pushed, gave way, letting a man pass who rushed into the hall, sword in hand.

“It is I, Radoub, if you want to know it. I am tired of waiting; I am running a risk. No matter, I have just ripped open one. Now I will attack you all. How many are there of you?”

It was Radoub, indeed, and he was alone. After the slaughter just made by l'Imânus in the stairway, Gauvain, fearing a masked fougade, had recalled his men and consulted Cimourdain.

In this darkness through which the torch almost extinguished, faintly gleamed, Radoub, sword in hand on the threshold, repeated his question.

“I am alone. How many are you?”

Hearing nothing, he went forward. One of those jets of light occasionally given forth by a dying fire, and which might be called sobs of light, flashed from the torch and lighted up the whole hall.

Radoub caught sight of one of those little mirrors fastened to the wall, went towards it, looked at his bloodstained face and hanging ear, and said,—

“What a hideous mutilation.”

Then he turned round, astounded to see the hall empty.

“There is nobody here,” he exclaimed. “ The effective force is zero.”

He noticed the turned stone, the opening in the staircase.

“Ah! I see. The key to the fields. Come on, men, all of you! Comrades, come on! they are all gone. They have vanished, melted away, slunk away, decamped. This jug of an old tower was cracked. Here is the hole through which they escaped, the rascals! how can one expect to get the better of Pitt and Cobourg with such trickery as this! the devil himself came to their aid! There is no one here at all!”

Just then a pistol was fired, a bullet grazed his elbow and was flattened against the wall.

“But there is some one here, after all. Who was so kind as to be so polite to me?”

“I was,” said a voice.

Radoub looked around and made out something in the dim light which proved to be l’Imânus.

“Ah!” he exclaimed. “I have one of them. The others have escaped, but you will not escape.”

“Do you think so? “ replied l’Imânus.

Radoub took a step and stopped.

“Hallo, you man on the floor, who are you?”

“I am one who is down and who laughs at those who are on their feet.”

“What is that in your right hand?”

“A pistol.”

“And in your left hand?”

“My bowels.”

“I take you prisoner.”

“I defy you to do so.”

And l’Imânus, bending over the burning match, blew his last breath on the fire and died.

A few moments later, Gauvain and Cimourdain, and all the others entered the hall. All saw the opening. They explored the recesses, they examined the stairway. It led into the ravine. They assured themselves that the enemy had escaped. They shook l’Imânus. He was dead. Gauvain, with a lantern in his hand, examined the stone, which had given escape to the besieged; he had heard of this turning stone, but he, too, considered the legend as a fable. As he was looking at the stone he noticed something written with a pencil; he held the lantern near and read this, —

“*Au revoir, monsieur le vicomte*. — Lantenac.”

Guéchamp had rejoined Gauvain. Pursuit was evidently useless. Their escape was complete; the whole country was in favor of the fugitive; the thicket, the ravine, the copse, the natives; they were, doubtless, already far away; there was no way to find them; and the whole forest of Fougères was an immense hiding-place.

What was to be done? all would have to be begun over again. Gauvain and Guéchamp expressed their disappointment and their conjectures.

Cimourdain listened in solemn silence.

“By the way, Guéchamp,” said Gauvain, “where is the ladder?”

“Commander, it has not come.”

“But still we saw a wagon escorted by mounted men.”

Guechamp replied, —

“It did not bring the ladder.”

“What did it bring, then?”

“The guillotine,” said Cimourdain.

CHAPTER XV.

NEVER PUT A WATCH AND A KEY IN THE SAME POCKET.

The Marquis de Lantenac was not so far away as they thought.

He was, nevertheless, perfectly safe, and beyond their reach.

He had followed Halmalo.

The stairway down which he had gone with Halmalo, after the other fugitives, ended very near the ravine and the arches of the bridge, by a narrow arched passageway. This passageway terminated in a deep natural fissure in the ground, opening into the ravine on one side, and on the other into the forest.

This fissure, entirely concealed from sight, wound under impenetrable vegetation. It would be impossible to capture a man there. A fugitive, having once reached this fissure had only to crawl away like an adder, and was safe from pursuit. The entrance to the secret passage from the stairway was so obstructed by brambles that those who had made this subterranean passage considered it useless to close it in any other way.

The marquis had nothing to do now but to go on. There was no need of troubling himself about a disguise. Since his arrival in Brittany, he had not taken off his peasant’s costume, considering himself thus more of a great seigneur.

He merely took off his sword, the belt of which he unfastened and threw down.

When Halmalo and the marquis emerged from the passage into the fissure, the five others, Guinoiseau, Hoisnard Branche-d’Or, Brin-d’ Amour, Chatenay, and the Abbé Turmeau had disappeared.

“They were not long in getting away,” said Halmalo.

“Follow their example,” said the marquis.

“Does monseigneur wish me to leave him?”

“Certainly. I have already told you so. One can only escape alone. One can pass when two cannot. Together, we should attract attention. You would be the cause of their capturing me, and I should be the cause of their capturing you.”

“Does monseigneur know the country?”

“Yes.”

“Will monseigneur go to the rendezvous at the Pierre-Gauvain?”

“To-morrow, at noon.”

“I shall be there. We shall be there.”

Halmalo interrupted himself.

“Ah! monseigneur, when I think that we were together on the open sea, that we were alone, that I wanted to kill you, that you were my seigneur, that you could have told me so, and that you did not tell me! what a man you are!”

The marquis went on to say, —

“England; there is no other resource. The English must be in France in two weeks.”

“I shall have many accounts to give to monseigneur. I have fulfilled his commissions.”

“We will talk about that to-morrow.”

“Good-bye till to-morrow, monseigneur.”

“By the way, are you hungry?”

“Possibly, monseigneur. I was in such haste to reach you that I do not know that I have eaten anything today.”

The marquis took a cake of chocolate from his pocket, broke it in two, gave one half to Halmalo, and began to eat the other.

“Monseigneur,” said Halmalo, “to your right is the ravine, to your left, the forest.”

“Very good. Leave me. Go your way.”

Halmalo obeyed. He plunged into the darkness. A sound of brambles crackling was heard, then nothing more. After a few seconds it would have been impossible to retrace his footsteps. This land of the Bocage, rough and inextricable, was the fugitive’s aid. People did not disappear there; they vanished. It was this facility for swift passing out of sight which made our armies hesitate before this ever-retreating Vendée, and before its combatants — such formidable fugitives.

The marquis remained motionless. He was one of those men who tried to have no feelings; but he could not restrain the emotion of breathing free air after having breathed so much blood and carnage. To feel himself perfectly safe after having been completely lost; after seeing the tomb so near, to take possession of absolute security; to escape from death and come back to life, all this, even for a man like Lantenac, was a shock; and although he had passed through similar experience before, he could not restrain his imperturbable soul from violent emotion for some minutes. He acknowledged to himself, that he was happy. He quickly subdued this feeling which almost resembled joy.

He took out his watch and made it strike. What time was it?

To his great astonishment, it was only ten o’clock.

When one has gone through one of these sudden changes of fortune in human life, when everything has been questioned, one is always amazed to find that minutes so full are no longer than others.

The warning cannon had been fired a little before sunset, and La Tourgue had been approached by the attacking column a half-hour later, between seven and eight o’clock just at nightfall. So, this colossal struggle, begun at eight o’clock, was over at ten. This whole *epopée* had lasted one hundred and twenty minutes. Sometimes the rapidity of lightning is mingled with catastrophes. Events are so surprisingly short.

If we stop to reflect, it is the contrary which is really astonishing; a resistance of two hours with so small a number against a number so large was extraordinary, and surely it was not short or soon over, this battle of nineteen against four thousand.

But it was time to be on his way. Halmalo must be far distant, and the marquis decided that there was no need of staying there any longer. He put his watch back into his vest, not into the same pocket, for he had just noticed that it was in contact with the key of the iron door, which l’Imânus had brought to him, and that the crystal of his watch was liable to be broken against this key, and he prepared to reach the forest in his turn. As he was about to turn to the left, it seemed to him as if he saw a dim light.

He turned around and through the thicket, clearly defined against a red background, and suddenly made visible in its least details, he saw a great blaze in the ravine. Only a few strides separated him from the ravine. He went towards it, then changed his mind, finding that it was of no use to expose himself to this bright light; whatever it might be it did not concern him, after all; he took the direction which Halmalo had shown him, and went a few steps toward the forest.

Suddenly, deeply buried and hidden under the brambles as he was, he heard a terrible cry above his head; this cry seemed to come from the very edge of the plateau above the ravine. The marquis raised his eyes, and stopped.

BOOK FIFTH — IN DÆMONE DEUS.

CHAPTER I.

FOUND BUT LOST.

When Michelle Fléchard caught sight of the tower reddened by the setting sun, she was more than a league away from it. Although she could hardly walk a step, she never hesitated to traverse this league. Women are weak, but mothers are strong. She had walked.

The sun had set: twilight came, then thick darkness; as she walked along she heard from the distance eight o'clock, then nine, ring out from a belfry which could not be seen. This belfry was probably that of Parigné. Now and then she stopped to listen to certain strange sounds like dull blows, which were possibly some of the mysterious noises of the night.

She went on straight ahead, breaking away the furze bushes and the sharp heath under her bleeding feet. She was guided by a feeble light coming from the distant keep making it stand out, and giving a mysterious radiance to this tower. This light became brighter as the sound of blows grew more distinct, then it went out.

The vast plateau where Michelle Fléchard was passing along was nothing but grass and heather, without a house or a tree; it rose imperceptibly, and as far as one could see, rested its long, straight, hard line against the dark, starry horizon. What kept her up in this ascent was the fact that the tower was continually before her eyes.

She saw it slowly increase in size.

The muffled reports and the pale gleams of light coming from the tower, as we have just said, were intermittent; they would cease, then begin again, offering a strange, cruel enigma to the wretched mother in distress.

Suddenly they ceased; both sound and light, all disappeared; there was a moment of perfect silence, a sort of melancholy peace ensued.

At this very moment, Michelle Fléchard reached the edge of the plateau. She saw at her feet a ravine, the bottom of which was lost in the thick darkness of the night; at some distance on the top of the plateau an entanglement of wheels, taluses, and embrasures, which v/as a battery of cannons, and in front of her, dimly illumined by the lighted matches of the battery, an enormous edifice which seemed built with shadows blacker than all the other shadows which surrounded her.

This edifice was composed of a bridge, the arches of which plunged into the ravine, and of a sort of castle rising above the bridge, and the castle and the bridge were joined to a lofty, dark, round object, which was the tower towards which the mother had walked from so great a distance.

The lights were seen to come and go through the windows of the tower, and from the noise proceeding from it one would have guessed that it was filled with a crowd of men, and the shadows of some of them were cast above, even on the platform.

Near the battery there was an encampment, the mounted sentries of which Michelle Fléchard had noticed; but in the darkness among the brambles, she had not been seen by them.

She had come to the edge of the plateau, so near the bridge that it seemed to her as if she could almost touch it with her hand. The depth of the ravine separated her from it. In the darkness she could make out the three stories of the castle on the bridge.

All measure of time had been blotted out of her mind, and she remained long absorbed and dumb before this yawning chasm and this shadowy building.

What was it? what was going on there? was it la Tourgue? she was dizzy with a strange expectation, so that she could hardly tell whether she was just arriving or going away. She asked herself why she was there.

She looked, she listened.

Suddenly, she could no longer see anything. A cloud of smoke rose between her and what she was looking at. A keen smarting sensation made her shut her eyes. She had hardly closed her eyelids when they grew red and became luminous. She opened them again.

It was no longer night before her, it was light as day; but a kind of funereal daylight, the daylight which comes from a fire. The beginning of a conflagration was before her eyes.

The black smoke had grown scarlet and in it there was a great flame; this flame appeared, then disappeared, with the ferocious twisting peculiar to lightning and snakes.

This flame came out like a tongue from something resembling a mouth, and which was a window full of fire. This window grated with iron bars already red hot, was one of those in the lower story of the castle built on the bridge. This window was the only feature of the whole building which could be seen. The smoke covered everything, even the plateau, and only the edge of the ravine, black against the red flame, could be made out.

Michelle Fléchard looked on in astonishment. Smoke is a cloud; a cloud is a dream; she no longer knew what she saw. Ought she to go away? ought she to remain? she felt almost beyond reality.

A breath of wind passed by and broke through the curtain of smoke, and through the rent the tragic bastille, suddenly disclosed, rose visible in its entirety, — keep, bridge, châtelet; dazzling, terrible, magnificently gilded by the fire, illuminated by it from top to bottom. Michelle Fléchard, in the ominous distinctness of the fire, could see it all.

The lower story of the castle built on the bridge was burning.

Above it, the two other stories could be seen, still untouched, but as if borne in a basket of flames. From the edge of the plateau, where Michelle Fléchard was, the interior could be dimly seen through the rifts between the fire and the smoke. All the windows were open. Through the windows in the second story, which were very large, Michelle Fléchard could see, against the walls, the bookcases, which seemed to her to be filled with books, and, in front of one of the windows, on the floor, in the dim light, a little confused group; something which looked indistinct and huddled together, like a nest or a brood, and which looked as if it moved now and then.

She looked at it.

What was this little group of shadows?

Occasionally, it came into her mind that it resembled living forms; she was feverish, she had eaten nothing since morning, she had walked without resting, she was worn out, she felt as though she were in a sort of hallucination which she instinctively mistrusted; still, her eyes becoming more and more fixed, could not leave that dark heap of objects, probably inanimate, and apparently motionless, lying there on the floor of that hall above the fire.

Suddenly, the fire, as if it had a will power, sent forth from below, one of its jets, towards the great dead ivy covering the same front at which Michelle Fléchard was looking. It seemed as if the flame had just discovered this network of dry branches; a spark seized it eagerly, and began to mount along the shoots with the frightful swiftness of a train of powder. In a twinkling, the flame reached the second story. Then, from above, it lighted up the interior of the first. A sudden blaze brought into relief three little beings fast asleep.

It was a charming little heap, — arms and legs intertwined, eyelids closed, a smile on their fair faces.

The mother recognized her children.

She uttered a frightful cry.

This cry of inexpressible anguish is only given to mothers. Nothing is more fierce, and nothing more touching. When a woman utters it, one would think it was a she- wolf; when a she-wolf gives it, it sounds like a woman.

This cry of Michelle Fléchard's was a howl. Hecuba bayed, says Homer.

It was this cry which the Marquis de Lantenac had just heard.

We have seen that he stopped.

The marquis was between the outlet of the passage through which Halmalo had helped him to escape and the ravine. Through the brambles intertwined above him, he saw the bridge in flames, la Tourgue red from the reflection, and, through the opening between two branches, he saw above his head, on the other side, on the edge of the platform, opposite the burning castle and in the full light of the fire, a haggard, pitiful figure, a woman bending over the ravine.

This figure was no longer Michelle Fléchard; it was Medusa, The wretched are terrible. The peasant woman was transformed into one of the Eumenides. This country woman, vulgar, ignorant, unreasoning, had suddenly asumed the epic proportions of despair. Great sorrows have a gigantic power of enlarging the soul; this mother represented maternity; everything which sums up humanity is superhuman; she rose then, on the edge of this ravine, before this conflagration, before this crime, like a power from the grave; her cry was like that of a wild beast, and her gestures like those of a goddess; her face, from which proceeded imprecations, seemed like a masque of flame. Nothing could be more sovereign than the lightning of her eyes bathed in tears; her eyes flashed lightning on the fire.

The marquis listened. This fell on his ear; he heard something strangely inarticulate and heartrending, more like sobs than words.

"Ah! my God! my children! those are my children! help! fire! fire! fire! but you are bandits! is there no one there? but my children will be burned! Ah! how terrible! Georgette! my children! Gros-Alain, René-Jean! but what does it mean? who put my children there? they are asleep. I am mad! it is impossible! Help!”

Meanwhile, there was a great confusion in la Tourgue and on the plateau. The whole camp ran around the fire, which had just burst out. The besiegers, after being concerned with the firing, were now concerned with the fire, Gauvain, Cimourdain, Guéchamp, gave orders. What was to be done? there were but a few buckets of water to be drawn from the shallow brook in the ravine. Their distress increased. The whole edge of the plateau was covered with frightened faces looking on.

It was a frightful sight.

They looked on, and could do nothing.

The flames, by means of the ivy which had taken fire, Had reached the upper story. There it had found the granary full of straw and had seized upon it. The whole granary was now burning.

The flames danced; the joyfulness of flames is a doleful thing. It seemed as if some malicious breath were fanning the fire in this funereal pile. It might have been thought that the grim l’Imânus was wholly there, changed to a whirlwind of sparks, living in the murderous life of the conflagration, and as if this monster of a soul had turned to fire.

The story where the library was had not yet been reached, the height of its ceiling, and the thickness of its walls retarded the time when it would take fire, but the fatal moment was drawing near; the fire in the first story licked it, and the flames in the third story caressed it. The awful kiss of death touched it. Below, a cellar of lava, above, an arch of embers; if a hole should break through the ceiling, the children would be buried in the live coals. René-Jean, Gros-Alain, and Georgette were not yet awake, they were sleeping the deep, quiet sleep of childhood; and through the folds of flame and smoke, which alternately covered and disclosed the windows, they could be seen in this grotto of fire, behind this meteoric blaze, peaceful, graceful, motionless, like three confiding child Jesuses, asleep in a hell; and a tiger would have wept to see these roses in this furnace and these cradles in this tomb.

Meanwhile, the mother was wringing her hands.

“Fire! fire! I say. Are they all deaf that they do not come? They are burning my children! Come, you men over yonder. I have walked days and days, and and this is how I find them. Fire! help the angels! Indeed they are angels! What have those innocent little creatures done? the men shot me, and now they are burning them! Who does such things? Help! save my children! Don’t you hear me? One would take pity on a dog! My children! they are asleep! Ah! Georgette! I see her dear little stomach! René-Jean! Gros-Alain! Those are their names. You see that I am their mother. It is abominable that such a thing as this should happen. I have walked days and nights, as I told a woman this morning. Help! help! fire! You are monsters! It is horrible! the oldest is not five years old, the little one less than two. I see their little bare legs. They are asleep, good, holy Virgin! the hand of Heaven gave them to me. and the hand of hell is taking them from me. And I have walked so far! My children that I fed from my breast! And I thought I was unfortunate not to find them! Have pity on me! I want my children, I must have my children! And yet they are in the fire! See how my poor feet are all covered with blood. Help! It is not possible that there are men on the earth who would leave these poor little ones to die like this! Help! murder! The like of this was never seen before. Ah, yon brigands! What is this frightful house? You stole them away from me to kill them! Jesus have pity! I want my children. Oh, I do not know what I can do! I cannot let them die! help! help! help! Oh, if they should die like this I should hate God!”

During the mother’s awful supplication, voices were heard on the plateau and in the ravine.

“A ladder!”

“There is no ladder!”

“Water!”

“There is no water!”

“Up there in the tower, in the second story, there is a door.”

“It is of iron.”

“Burst it open!”

“It cannot be done!”

And the mother redoubled her desperate appeals, —

“Fire! help! Hurry! Oh, kill me! My children, my children! Ah! the horrible fire! Take them out of it, or throw me in, too!”

In the intervals between her cries was heard the calm crackling of the fire.

The marquis felt in his pocket and touched the key to the iron door. Then bending down under the archway through which he had made his escape, he went back into the passage from which he had just come out.

CHAPTER II.

FROM THE STONE DOOR TO THE IRON DOOR.

A whole army in despair over an impossible rescue; four thousand men unable to help three children; such was the situation.

They had no ladder; the ladder sent from Javené had not arrived; the conflagration increased like the opening of a crater; to try to put it out with water from the brook in the ravine, which was almost dry, was ridiculous; it would be like throwing a glass of water on a volcano.

Cimourdain, Guéchamp, and Radoub had gone down into the ravine; Gauvain had gone back into the hall in the second story of la Tourgue, where were the turning stone, the secret way of escape, and the iron door of the library. It was there that l'Imânus had lighted the sulphur match; it was there that the fire had started.

Gauvain had taken twenty sappers with him. The only resource was to break open the iron door. It was fatally closed.

They began by using axes. The axes broke. A sapper said, —

"Steel is like glass against this iron."

The door was made of double sheets of wrought iron, bolted together, each three fingers in thickness.

They took iron bars and tried to pry open the door. The iron bars broke.

"Like matches," said the sapper.

Gauvain, dubious, murmured, —

"Nothing but a cannon-ball could open this door. We should have to bring a cannon up here."

"But how?" said the sapper.

There was a moment of despair. All these powerless arms hung motionless. Dumb, conquered, dismayed, these men were considering the horrible immovable door.

A red reflection passed underneath. The fire was increasing behind it.

The frightful corpse of l'Imânus was there, ominously victorious.

A few minutes more, perhaps, and everything would give way.

What was to be done? there was no more hope.

Gauvain in exasperation cried, with his eye fixed on the turning stone in the wall and on the exit left open by the fugitives, —

“And yet here is where the Marquis de Lantenac made his escape!”

“And where he returns,” said a voice.

And a white head appeared in the stone framework of the secret door.

It was the marquis.

Gauvain had not seen him so near for many years. He drew back.

All who were there remained in the same position, petrified.

The marquis had a large key in his hand. He cast a haughty look at the sappers in front of him, walked to the iron door, bent under the arch and put the key into the key-hole. The lock grated, the door opened, a gulf of flame met their eyes, the marquis entered it.

He went into it with a firm step, holding his head high.

All followed him with their eyes, shuddering.

The marquis had taken but a few steps in the burning hall, when the floor, undermined by the fire and shaken by his footsteps, fell in behind him, leaving a precipice between him and the door. The marquis never turned his head but went straight on. He disappeared in the smoke.

Nothing more was seen of him.

Had he been able to go farther? Had a new pit of fire opened under him? Had he only succeeded in being lost himself? They could not tell. They had nothing before them but a wall of smoke and flames. The marquis was beyond it, dead or alive.

CHAPTER III.

THE CHILDREN AWAKEN.

In the meantime, the children had at last opened their eyes.

The fire, which had not yet reached the library, threw a rosy glow on the ceiling. The children were not familiar with this kind of a dawn. They looked at it, Georgette contemplated it.

All the splendors of the fire were displayed there; the black hydra and the scarlet dragon appeared in the shapeless smoke, superbly dark and vermilion. Long tongues of flame blew off and lighted up the darkness, and it seemed like a battle of comets running one after another.

A fire is prodigal; the live coals are full of jewels, which are scattered to the winds; it is not without reason that charcoal is identical with the diamond.

In the wall of the third story, cracks opened, through which the embers poured down into the ravine cascades of precious stones; the heaps of straw and oats burning in the granary began to stream through the windows in avalanches of gold dust, the oats became amethysts, and the straws, carbuncles.

“Pretty,” said Georgette.

All three had risen.

“Ah!” cried the mother; “they are waking up!”

René-Jean got up, then Gros-Alain got up, then Georgette got up.

René-Jean stretched out his arms, went towards the window and said, —

“I’m warm.”

“I warm,” repeated Georgette.

The mother called to them.

“My children: René! Alain! Georgette!”

The children looked around them. They tried to find out what it all meant. When men are terrified, children are only curious. It is difficult to frighten those who are easily astonished; ignorance causes fearlessness. Children have so little claim on hell, that if they should see it they would admire it.

The mother repeated, —

“René! Alain! Georgette!”

René-Jean turned his head; this voice attracted his attention; children have short memories, but their power of recollection is quick; to them the past is but yesterday.

René-Jean saw his mother, found it quite natural, and, surrounded as he was by strange objects, feeling a vague need of support, he cried, —

“Mamma!”

“Mamma!” said Gros-Alain.

“Mamma!” said Georgette.

And she held out her little arms.

And the mother shrieked, “My children!”

All three came to the window; fortunately, the fire was not on that side.

“I am too warm,” said René-Jean.

He added,— “It burns.”

And he looked at his mother.

“Come, mamma.”

“Tum, mamma,” repeated Georgette.

The mother with disordered hair, all scratched, and bleeding, had let herself roll through the brambles into the ravine. Cimourdain was there with Guéchamp, as helpless below as Gauvain was above. The soldiers, in despair at being of no use, swarmed around them. The heat was intolerable but no one felt it. They considered the escarpment of the bridge, the height of the arches, the elevation of the stories, the inaccessible windows, and the necessity for prompt action. Three stories to climb; no means of accomplishing it.

Radoub, wounded, with a sword-cut in his shoulder, and one ear torn off, dripping with sweat and blood, came running up; he saw Michelle Fléchard.

“Hold on,” said he, “you are the woman who was shot! so you have come back to life again?”

“My children,” said the mother.

“You are right,” replied Radoub; “we have no time to spend with ghosts.”

He began to scale the bridge, a futile attempt; he buried his nails in the stone, he climbed up a little way; but the courses were smooth, not a break, not a relief, the wall was as correctly pointed as though it had been new, and Radoub fell back.

The dreadful fire continued; in the window frame, now all red, could be seen the three fair heads. Then Radoub shook his fist towards heaven, as if looking for some one, and said, —

“Is this thy dealing, good God.”

The mother on her knees clasped the piers of the bridge, crying, “Mercy!”

Heavy cracking was heard above the snapping of the fire. The panes of glass in the bookcases in the library cracked, and fell with a crash. It was evident that the woodwork was yielding. No human power could avail. A moment more and all would be destroyed. They were waiting for the fatal moment. The little voices were heard calling: “Mamma! Mamma!” The people were in a paroxysm of despair. Suddenly, at the window next the one where the children were, against the crimson background of the flames, appeared a tall form.

Every head was raised, every eye became fixed. A man was up there, a man was in the library, a man was in the furnace. This form stood out black against the flames, but it had white hair. They recognized the Marquis de Lantenac.

He disappeared, then he appeared again.

The terrible old man rose before the window with an enormous ladder. It was the escape ladder which had been placed in the library, and which he had gone to look for, and had dragged from the side of the wall to the window. He seized it by one end, and with the masterly agility of an athlete he slid it out of the window, supporting it on a jutting of the wall, and let it down to the bottom of the ravine. Radoub, below, wild with delight, held out his hands, took the ladder, held it firmly in his arms, and cried: “Long live the Republic!”

The marquis replied: “Long live the King!”

And Radoub growled: “You may cry anything you like, and say all the foolish things you will, you are from the good God, all the same.”

The ladder was fixed in place; communication was established between the burning hall and the ground; twenty men ran forward, with Radoub at their head, and in a twinkling they placed themselves in a row on the rounds, like masons carrying stones. It made it a living ladder over the ladder of wood. Radoub at the top of the ladder touched the window. He was facing the fire.

The little array, scattered in the heather and on the slopes, pressed forward, distracted by every emotion at once, rushed over the plateau into the ravine, on the platform of the tower.

The marquis disappeared again, then re-appeared, bringing one of the children.

There was a tremendous clapping of hands.

The marquis happened to have seized the oldest. It was Gros-Alain.

Gros-Alain cried: “I’m afraid.”

The marquis gave Gros-Alain to Radoub, who passed him down behind him to a soldier, who passed him to another, and, while Gros-Alain, very much frightened and crying, was being taken thus from arm to arm to the bottom of the ladder, the marquis, after a moment’s absence, came back to the window with René-Jean struggling and crying. The little fellow struck Radoub just as the marquis passed him on to the sergeant.

The marquis went back into the hall full of flames. Georgette was left alone. He went to her. She smiled. This man of stone felt something moist come into his eyes. He asked: “What is your name?” “‘Orgette,” she said.

He took her in his arms; she was still smiling, and just as he gave her to Radoub this conscience so lofty and yet so dark was dazzled by her innocence, and the old man gave the child a kiss.

“It is the little girl!” said the soldiers; and Greorgette in her turn passed down from hand to hand to the ground, amidst cries of adoration.

They clapped their hands, they stamped their feet; the old grenadiers sobbed, and she smiled at them. The mother was at the foot of the ladder, panting for breath, beside herself, intoxicated with all this surprise, suddenly exalted from hell into paradise; excess of joy bruises the heart in its way. She held out her arras, she received first Gros-Alam, then René-Jean, then Georgette, she covered them with kisses, then she burst out laughing and fell down in a faint.

A great cry arose: “All are saved!”

Indeed, all were saved, except the old man.

But no one gave him a thought; perhaps, he did not even think of himself.

He remained at the edge of the window for some moments, in thought, as if he wished to give the gulf of flame time to decide upon its action. Then, slowly, deliberately, proudly, he stepped out through the window, and, without turning round, straight, erect, leaning back against the rounds, with the fire behind him, facing the precipice, he began to descend the ladder in silence, with the majesty of a phantom.

Those who were on the ladder hastened down; all present shuddered. This man coming from above filled them all with a holy horror, as though he had been a vision. But he plunged solemnly into the darkness before him; while they drew back, he was approaching them; the marble pallor of his face was without a change; his ghostly eyes had not a gleam of light; at each step that he took towards these men, whose frightened eyes were fixed on him in the darkness, he seemed taller, the ladder trembled and creaked under his solemn step, and he seemed like the statue of a commander going down into the tomb.

When the marquis was at the bottom, when he had reached the last round and had placed his foot on the ground, a hand was laid on his collar. He turned around.

“I arrest you,” said Cimourdain.

“I sanction it,” said Lantenac.

BOOK SIXTH — THE BATTLE AFTER THE VICTORY.

CHAPTER I.

LANTENAC TAKEN.

The marquis had really descended into the tomb.

They led him away.

The crypt dungeon in the ground floor of la Tourgue was immediately re-opened under Cimourdain's stern eye; a lamp, a jug of water, some hard tack, were placed in it, a bundle of straw was thrown into it, and, in less than a quarter of an hour after the moment when the priest's hand had seized the marquis, the door of the dungeon was closed on Lantenac.

Having done this, Cimourdain went to find Gauvain; just then the distant church of Parigné sounded eleven o'clock in the evening; Cimourdain said to Gauvain, —

"I am going to convoke a court-martial; you will not take part in it. You are a Gauvain, and Lantenac is a Gauvain. You are too nearly related to be a judge; and I blame Egalité for having judged Capet. The court martial will be composed of these judges: an officer, Captain Guéchamp; a sub-officer, Sergeant Radoub; and myself, who will preside. Nothing of all this will concern you. We shall conform to the decree of the Convention; we shall limit ourselves to establishing the identity of the former Marquis de Lantenac. To-morrow, the court-martial; the day after, the guillotine. La Vendée is dead."

Gauvain made no answer, and Cimourdain, preoccupied with the final duty which remained for him to perform, left him. Cimourdain bad hours to appoint and places to select. Like Lequinio at Granville, like Talien at Bordeaux, like Châlier at Lyons, and like Saint-Just at Strasbourg, he was in the habit of being present in person at executions, as it was considered a good example; the judge came to see the executioner do his work; a custom borrowed by the terror of '93 from the parliaments of France and the Inquisition of Spain.

Gauvain, too, was preoccupied.

A cold wind was blowing in the forest. Gauvain, leaving Guéchamp to give the necessary orders, went to his tent in the meadow on the border of the wood, at the foot of la Tourgue, and got his hooded cloak and wrapped himself up in it. This cloak was edged with the simple braid which, according to the Republican fashion for sober ornaments, designated the commander-in-chief. He began to walk about in this bloody meadow, where the assault had begun. He was alone there. The fire was still burning, although of no consequence now; Radoub was with the children and their mother, almost as maternal as she; the châtelet on the bridge was nearly burned to the ground, the sappers were attending to the fire, men were digging ditches, burying the dead, caring for the wounded; the retirade had been destroyed, the corpses removed from the rooms and stairways, the place made clean after the carnage, the terrible filth of victory swept away, the soldiers, with military quickness, did what might be called the house-work after the battle. Gauvain saw nothing of all this.

So deep in thought was he that he scarcely glanced at the post near the breach, doubled by Cimourdain’s orders.

He could see this breach in the darkness about two hundred feet from the corner of the meadow where he had, as it were, taken refuge. He saw the black opening. It was there that the attack had begun, three hours before; it was through this that Gauvain had entered the tower; there on the ground-floor was where the retirade had been; the door leading to the dungeon where the marquis was confined was on this ground floor. The men posted at the breach guarded the dungeon.

While he was straining his eyes to make out this breach, these words, like a knell, came back confusedly to his ear: “To-morrow, the court-martial; the day after, the guillotine.”

The fire, which had been isolated, and on which the sappers threw all the water they could obtain, did not die out without a struggle, and occasional flames still leaped forth; now and then the cracking of the ceilings and the crash of one story falling on another was heard; then eddies of sparks whirled through the air as though a torch had been shaken, a bright light illuminated the farthest horizon, and the shadow of le Tourgue, grown suddenly gigantic, stretched out as far as the forest.

Gauvain walked slowly back and forth in this shadow, in front of the breach of assault. Occasionally, he crossed his hands behind his head, covered with the hood of his war-cloak. He was lost in thought.

CHAPTER II.

FREEDOM OR DEATH — WHICH?

His thoughts were fathomless.

An unexpected change of opinion had just taken place in him.

The Marquis de Lantenac had been transfigured.

Gauvain had been a witness of this transfiguration.

He would never have believed that such things could result from any complication of events. Never, even in his dreams, had he imagined that anything of the kind could happen.

The unforeseen, that strange, haughty power which plays with man, had seized Gauvain and held him fast.

Gauvain had before him an impossibility become a reality, visible, palpable, inevitable, inexorable.

What did he, Gauvain, think of this?

It was not a matter to be evaded; it must be decided.

A question was asked him; he could not escape from it.

Asked by whom?

By events.

And not alone by events.

For when events, which are changeable, ask us a question, justice, which is immutable, calls upon us to reply.

Behind the cloud, which casts a shadow over us, there is a star, giving us a ray of light.

We can no more escape from the light than from the shadow.

Gauvain went through an examination.

He was in the presence of some one.

Before a formidable judge.

His own conscience.

Gauvain felt everything wavering within him. His firmest resolutions, his most carefully made promises, his most irrevocable decisions, everything was swaying in the depths of his will.

There are earthquakes in the soul.

The more he reflected on what he had just seen, the more he was disturbed.

Gauvain, a Republican, believed himself to be, and really was just.

A superior justice had just been revealed to him.

Above Revolutionary justice, there is human justice.

What was taking place was not to be evaded; the fact was solemn; Gauvin was a part of this fact; he was in it, and could not get out of it; and, although Cimourdain had said to him, “this no longer concerns you,” he felt something as a tree does when it is pulled up by the roots.

Every man has his base; if this base is shaken it causes a profound disturbance; Gauvain felt this disturbance.

He pressed his head between his hands, as if to press out the truth; to get at the exact bearings of such a situation was not an easy matter, nothing could be more difficult; he had formidable figures before him, of which he must get the sum total; to do the addition of destiny, how bewildering! he undertook it; he tried to give an account of himself; he endeavored to collect his ideas, to discipline the struggling forces which he felt within him, and to recapitulate the facts.

He laid them out before his mind.

Who has never taken a similar account of himself, and questioned himself, in extreme circumstances, on the course to pursue, whether to advance or retreat?

Gauvin had just seen a miraculous spectacle.

A celestial battle had taken place at the same time as the terrestrial.

The battle of good against evil.

A terrific soul had just been vanquished.

Gauvain had just seen a miracle performed in the case of a man full of all that is bad: — violence, error, blindness, unhealthy obstinacy, pride, selfishness.

The victory of humanity over man.

Humanity had conquered the inhuman.

And by what means? in what way? how had it overcome the giant of anger and hatred? What arms had it used? what engine of war? The cradle.

Gauvain had just been dazzled. In the midst of civil war, in the midst of the conflagration of all enmity and all vengeance, in the darkest and maddest moment of the tumult; just as the crime was giving forth all its fire and hatred, all its blackness; at that instant in conflict when everything becomes a projectile, when the struggle is so shrouded in darkness, that justice, honesty, and truth are lost sight of; — suddenly the Unknown, the mysterious monitor of souls, poured forth resplendently, above all human light and darkness, the great light eternal.

Above the dismal encounter, between the false and the relative, out of the depths, the face of truth had suddenly appeared.

All at once, the strength of the weak had intervened.

Three poor beings, almost newborn, unconscious, deserted, orphaned, alone, lisping, smiling, were seen face to face with civil war, retaliation, the frightful logic of reprisals, murder, carnage, fratricide, rage, malice, all the Gorgons, and yet triumphant. He had seen the failure and defeat of an infamous fire, set to commit a crime; he had seen atrocious intentions baffled and frustrated; he had seen the ancient feudal ferocity, the old inexorable disdain, the pretended experience of the necessities of war, the reason of State, all the arrogant determinations of a cruel old age, vanish before the blue eyes of those who had scarcely begun to live; and it was very natural, for one who has not yet lived can have done no harm; it was justice, it was truth, it was purity and the mighty angels of heaven are in little children.

A useful spectacle; advice; a lesson; the frantic participants in a merciless war had suddenly seen, in the face of all the crimes, of all the outrages, of all the fanaticism, of the murderer, of vengeance stirring the funeral pile, of death coming with a torch in his hand, above the enormous legion of sins, arise this all-conquering power, innocence.

And innocence had been victorious.

And one could say: “No, civil war does not exist; barbarity does not exist; hatred does not exist; crime does not exist; darkness does not exist: this aurora, childhood, is sufficient to scatter all these spectres.

Never, in any struggle, had Satan been more visible nor God.

This battle had had a human conscience for its arena.

The conscience of Lantenac.

Now, it was beginning over again, more furious and still more decisive, perhaps, in another conscience.

The conscience of Gauvain.

What a battle-field is man!

We are slaves to these gods, to these monsters, to these giants, — our thoughts.

Often, these terrible combatants trample our souls under foot.

Gauvain meditated.

The Marquis de Lantenac, surrounded, blockaded, condemned outlawed; held fast, like the wild beast in the circus, like a snail in pincers; shut up in his home, now become his prison; enclosed on all sides by a wall of iron and of fire, — had succeeded in getting away; he had performed a miracle of escape. He had made that masterstroke, the most difficult of all in such a war, flight. He had taken possession of the forest, to intrench himself there; of the country, to fight in it; of the darkness, to disappear in it. He had again become the terrible one, coming and going; the sinister wanderer; the captain of the invisible; the chief of underground men; the master of the woods. Gauvain had the victory; Lantenac had liberty. Lantenac, henceforth, had security, a boundless course before him, an inexhaustible choice of places of refuge. He was intangible, lost to sight, unapproachable. The lion had been taken in a snare, and had escaped from it.

Well, he had returned to it.

The Marquis de Lantenac had voluntarily, spontaneously, of his own free will, left the forest, darkness, security, liberty, to return undauntedly into the most frightful danger. Once, Gauvain had seen him, when he rushed into the fire at the risk of being swallowed up by it; a second time, when he came down the ladder to give himself up to his enemies — that ladder, a means of safety for others, for him a means of destruction.

And why had he done this?

To save three children.

And now, what was going to be done with him?

He would be guillotined.

Were these three children his own? No. Did they belong to his family? No. To his rank? No. For three poor little ones, foundlings, unknown, in rags, barefooted, this nobleman, this prince, this old man, saved, delivered, a conqueror, — for escape is a triumph, — had risked everything, compromised everything, put all things into doubt; and, while he was delivering the children, he proudly surrendered his life, — his life till then so terrible, now so majestic, he offered it up.

And what were they going to do with it?

Accept it.

The Marquis de Lantenac had the choice between the life of others and his own; in this superb option, he had chosen death.

And they were going to grant it to him.

They were going to kill him.

What a reward for heroism!

To respond to an act of generosity with an act of cruelty!

To give this stab to the Revolution!

What a belittling of the Republic!

While a man of prejudices and slavish ideas, suddenly transformed, was returning to humanity, they, the men of freedom and enfranchisment, clung to civil war, to the routine of blood, to fratricide.

And the lofty divine law of pardon, of abnegation, of redemption, of sacrifice, existed for the combatants of error, and did not exist for the soldiers of truth!

What! not engage in this struggle of magnanimity! Be resigned to this defeat; the stronger to become the weaker, the victors to become murderers, and to have it said that on the side of the monarchy there were those who saved children, and on the side of the Republic those who killed old men!

He would see this great soldier, this powerful octogenarian, this unarmed warrior, stolen rather than taken, captured while doing a good deed, bound ith his own permission, with the sweat of a splendid self-sacrifice still on his brow, mount the steps of the scaffold as one mounts the degrees of an apotheosis! And they would put this head, around which would soar in supplication the three souls of the little angels he had saved, under the chopping knife. And before this punishment so infamous for the executioners, a smile would be seen on the face of this man, and on the face of the Republic, a blush!

And this would take place in the presence of Grauvain, the chief!

And, although able to prevent it, he would refrain from doing so! And he could content himself with this haughty dismissal,— “this no longer concerns you! And he was not to perceive that in a deed so monstrous, between the one who accomplishes it and the one who allows it to be done; the one who allows it to be done is the worst, because he is a coward!

But the death of this man, had he not promised it? he, Gauvain, the merciful man, had he not declared that Lantenac was an exception, and that he would give Lantenac up to Cimourdain?

This head, it was his debt. Well, he was paying. That was all.

But was it the same life?

Thus far, Gauvain had only seen in Lantenac the barbarous warrior, the fanatic support of royalty and feudalism, the slaughterer of prisoners, the assassin set loose by war, the deadly man. He had not feared this man; this proscriber, he would proscribe him; this implacable one would find him implacable. Nothing could be more simple, the way was marked out, and dismally easy to follow, everything had been foreseen, they would kill him who killed others, they were in the straight line of horror. This line had been unexpectedly broken, an unforseen turning revealed a new horizon, a metamorphosis had taken place. An unknown Lantenac entered on the scene. A hero came forth from the monster; more than a hero, — a man. More than a soul, — a heart. It was no longer a murderer that Gauvain had before him, but a saviour. Gauvain was overcome by a flood of celestial light. Lantenac had just struck him with a thunderbolt of kindness.

And Lantenac transformed would not transform Gauvain! What! this blow of light would have no counterblow. The man of the past would go ahead, and the man of the future remain behind! The man of cruelty and superstition would spread sudden wings, and would soar above and see crawling under him, in the mire and in the darkness, the man of ideals! Gauvain would remain in the old cruel rut, while Lantenac would rise.

Still another thing.

The family!

This blood that he was going to shed, — for to allow it to be shed was the same as shedding it himself. Was it not his own blood, Gauvain’s? his grandfather was dead, but his great-uncle was alive; and this great-uncle was the Marquis de Lantenac. Would not the brother who was in the grave rise to prevent the other from entering it? would he not order his grandson henceforth to respect that crown of white hair, sister to his own halo? had there not passed between Gauvain and Lantenac the indignant glance of a spectre?

Was the aim of the Revolution then to pervert man’s nature? had it been brought about to destroy the family, to stifle humanity? far from it. It was to affirm these supreme realities, and not to deny them that ‘89 had arisen. Overthrowing the bastilles was delivering humanity; abolishing feudalism was founding the family. The author being the starting-point of authority, and authority being included in the author, there can be no other authority than fraternity; hence the legitimacy of the queen bee who creates her people, and, being mother, is queen; hence the absurdity of the man king who, as he is not the father, cannot be the master; hence the suppression; hence the Republic. What is all this? it is the family, it is humanity, it is the

Revolution. The Revolution is the accession of the people, and at bottom the people is man.

The question was whether, when Lantenac had just returned to humanity. Gauvain would return to the family.

The question was whether the uncle and the nephew would be united in the superior light, or whether the nephew would respond to the uncle's progress by taking a backward step.

The question, in this pathetic debate between Gauvain and his conscience stood thus, and seemed to solve itself: to save Lantenac.

Yes, but France?

Here the face of the perplexing problem suddenly changed.

What! France at bay I France betrayed, opened, dismantled! She was without a moat, Germany had crossed the Rhine; she was without a wall, Italy had passed the Alps, and Spain, the Pyrenees. She had the great gulf, the ocean, left. She had that in her favor. She could depend on that, and, a giantess, supported by the mighty sea, could fight against the whole earth. An impregnable situation after all.

Well, no, this situation would fail her. This ocean was no longer hers. In this ocean there was England. England, it is true, did not know how to cross it. Well, a man was going to throw a bridge across to her, a man was going to hold out his hand to her, a man was going to say to Pitt, to Craig, to Cornwallis, to Dundas, to the pirates:

"Come!" A man was going to cry: "England, take France!"

And this man was the Marquis de Lantenac!

They held this man. After three months of chasing, of pursuit, of desperation, they had finally captured him. The hand of the Revolution had just been laid on the wretch; the clenched hand of '93 had taken the royalist murderer by the collar; through one of the effects of that mysterious premeditation from on high which mingles with human affairs, this parricide was now awaiting punishment in his own family-dungeon; the feudal man was in the feudal oubliette; the stones of his own castle rose against him and closed over him, and he who wished to betray his own country was betrayed by his own house.

God had evidently planned all this; the hour of justice had come, the Revolution had taken this public enemy prisoner; he could no longer wage war, he could no longer fight, he could no longer do any harm; in this Vendée where there were so many arms, he was the only man with brains;

to put an end to him was to put an end to the civil war; they had possession of him; tragic but fortunate catastrophe; after so much massacre and carnage, he was there, the man who had killed others, and whose turn it was to die.

And if he should find some one to save him!

Cimourdain, that is to say ‘93, held Lantenac, that is to say the monarchy, and if he should find some one to snatch its prey from this claw of bronze! Lantenac, the man in whom concentrated that sheaf of scourges called the past, the Marquis de Lantenac was in the tomb, the heavy, eternal door was closed on him, and if some one should come from outside to slide the bolt! this social malefactor was dead, and with him the revolt, the fratricidal contest, the beastly war, and if some one should bring him back to life!

Oh! how this death’s head would laugh!

How this spectre would say, “Very good, here I am alive; idiots!”

How be would set himself to his hideous work again! How Lantenac would plunge again, implacable and full of delight, into the gulf of hatred and of war! The very next day how the people would again see houses burning, prisoners massacred, the wounded finished, women shot!

And, after all, did not Gauvain exaggerate this deed which fascinated him so?

Three children were lost; Lantenac had saved them.

But who was the cause of their being lost?

Was it not Lantenac?

Who had put those cradles into the fire?

Was it not l’Imânus?

Who was l’Imânus?

The lieutenant of the marquis.

The general is the one responsible.

So the incendiary and the assassin was Lantenac.

What had he done that was so admirable?

He had not carried out his purpose — nothing more.

After havng planned the crime he had retreated from it. It had seemed to him too horrible. The mother’s cry had awakened in him those inmost depths of human pity, a sort of storehouse of universal life, which exists in all souls, even the most hardened. At this cry he had retraced his steps. From the night into which he had plunged, he had gone back towards the daylight. After having done the crime, he undid it. All his merit lay in this, that he had not been a monster at the very last.

And for so little give him back everything! give him back space, the fields, the flames, the air, daylight; give him back the forest, which he would use to protect his bandits; give him back liberty, which he would use for servitude; give him back life, which he would use for death!

As for trying to come to an understanding with him, as for any desire to treat with this proud soul, as for proposing to give him his liberty conditionally, as for asking him to consent, provided his life was saved, to abstain henceforth from all hostility and all revolt, — what a mistake such an offer would be, what an advantage they would give him, what scorn they would strike against, as he would buffet the question with his reply, as he would say: “Keep your shame for yourselves! Kill me!”

There was really nothing to be done with this man but to kill him or to set him free. There was no way of access to this man.

He was always ready to take flight or to sacrifice himself; he was his own eagle and his own precipice. A strange soul.

Kill him? What an anxiety! Set him free? What a responsibility!

If Lantenac should be saved, the war with la Vendée would have to be begun all over again, as with a hydra, as long as its head is not cut off. In a twinkling, and with the swiftness of a meteor, the flame, extinguished by the disappearance of this man, would blaze forth again. Lantenac would not rest until he had realized that execrable plan of placing, like the cover of a tomb, the monarchy over the Republic, and England over France. To save Lantenac was to sacrifice France; Lantenac’s life meant the death of a multitude of innocent beings, men, women, and children, taken in the toils of domestic war; it meant the landing of the English, the retreat of the Revolution, towns plundered, the people slaughtered, Brittany bleeding, the prey given back to the lion’s claws. And Gauvain, in the midst of all sorts of uncertain glimmerings and contradictory lights, saw dimly outlined in his thoughts this problem rising before him: setting the tiger at liberty.

And then the question came back again under its first aspect; the stone of Sisyphus, which is nothing but the quarrel of man with himself, fell down again: Was Lantenac this tiger?

Perhaps he had been, but was he any longer? Gauvain went through those winding mazes of the mind coiling about itself, which make thought resemble an adder. Really, even after examination, could he deny

Lantenac's devotion, his stoic abnegation, his superb disinterestedness; What! In the presence of all the open mouths of civil war to testify to humanity! What! in the conflict of inferior truths to bring in truth superior! what! to prove that above royalties, above revolutions, above earthly questions, there is the immense emotion of the human soul? the protection due to the weak from the strong; safety due to those who are lost, from those who are safe; paternity due to all children, from all old men! To prove these magnificent things, and prove them by the gift of his life! What! to be a general, and renounce strategy, battle, revenge! What! to be a royalist, to take the scales, to place on one side the king of France, a monarchy of fifteen centuries, the reestablishing of old laws, the restoration of ancient society, and on the other, three little insignificant peasants, and to find the king, the throne, the sceptre, and the fifteen centuries of monarchy tip the beam, against this weight of three innocent children! What! all that go for nothing! What! one who had done that remain a tiger and deserve to be treated like a wild beast!

No! no! no! it was not a monster of a man who had just illuminated civil war with the light of a divine action! The sword-bearer had been metamorphosed into an angel of light. Infernal Satan had returned as the celestial Lucifer. Lantenac had been redeemed from all his barbarities by an act of sacrifice; in losing himself materially, he had saved himself morally; he had become innocent; he had signed his own pardon. Does not the right to pardon one's self exist? Henceforth, he would be worthy of worship.

Lantenac had just been extraordinary, it was now Gauvain's turn.

Gauvain was called upon to respond to him.

The struggling of good and evil passions at this moment were turning the world into chaos; Lantenac, ruling over this chaos, had just freed humanity from it; it was now for Gauvain to free the family from it.

What was he going to do?

Would Gauvain disappoint trust in God?

No. And he stammered in his inmost heart: "We must save Lantenac."

Well, that is good. Go on, help the English. Be a deserter. Pass over to the enemy. Save Lantenac and betray France.

And he shuddered.

Thy solution is no solution at all, oh dreamer! Gauvain saw in the darkness the ominous smile of the sphinx.

This situation was a sort of terrible meeting of roads, where struggling truths come to an end and confront each other, and where man's three highest ideas, humanity, the family, the fatherland, look each other steadily in the face.

Each of these voices in turn began to speak, and each in turn spoke the truth. How to choose? Each in turn seemed to find the union of wisdom and justice, and said: "Do this." Was this what he ought to do? Yes. No. Reason said one thing, sentiment said another; the two counsels were contrary. Reasoning is only reason; sentiment is often conscience; one comes from man, the other from above.

That is why sentiment has less clearness and more power.

But what strength in stern reason!

Gauvain hesitated.

Fierce perplexities.

Two abysses opened in front of Gauvain. To destroy the marquis? or to save him? It would be necessary to plunge into one or the other.

Which of these two abysses was duty?

CHAPTER III.

THE GENERAL'S CLOAK.

It was indeed a question of duty.

Duty rose forbidding, before Cimourdain; terrible before Gauvain.

Plain, before one; complex, varied, tortuous, before the other.

The hour of midnight struck, then one o'clock in the morning.

Without being aware of it, Gauvain had imperceptibly approached the entrance of the breach.

The fire now only threw a diffused reflection and was dying out.

The plateau, on the other side of the tower, was lighted with the reflection, and became visible occasionally, and then was eclipsed as the smoke covered the fire. This blaze, flaring up suddenly and then cut off by sudden darkness, robbed objects of their proportions, and gave the sentinels in the camp the appearance of ghosts. Gauvain, as he meditated, vaguely watched the flames and smoke come and go. This appearance and disappearance of light before his eyes was strangely analogous to the appearance and disappearance of truth in his mind.

Suddenly, between two clouds of smoke, a flame from the dying bed of coals vividly lighted up the top of the plateau and brought out the crimson form of a wagon. Gauvain looked at this wagon; it was surrounded by horsemen wearing military caps. It seemed to him that it was the wagon which Guéchamp's spyglass had brought into sight on the horizon, some hours before, just as the sun was setting. Some men were on the wagon, and seemed busy unloading it. What they were taking from the wagon seemed heavy, and occasionally gave out a sound like iron; it would have been difficult to tell what it was; it looked like framework; two of them got down and placed a box upon the ground, which, to judge from its shape, contained some triangular object.

The flame died out, everything disappeared in the darkness; Gauvain, with his eyes still fastened on the spot, wondered what there was over there in the darkness.

The lanterns were lighted, there was coming and going off the plateau; but the forms moving about were confused, and, moreover, Gauvain, below, and on the other side of the ravine, could not see what was on the very edge of the plateau.

Voices were talking, but he could not tell what they said. Now and then, blows sounded on wood. He heard too, a strange metallic grating, like the sound of the whetting of a scythe.

Two o'clock struck.

Gauvain went slowly towards the breach, like one who would willingly take two steps forward and three back. Recognizing, in the dim light, the cloak and braided hood of the commander, the sentinels presented arms at his approach. Gauvain went into the hall on the ground floor, now transformed into a guardroom. A lantern was hanging from the arch. It gave just light enough to enable one to cross the hall without stepping on the men belonging to the post, who were lying on the straw on the floor, and for the most part asleep.

They had lain down there; a few hours before, they had been fighting there; the grapeshot, scattered under them in grains of iron and lead, which had not been entirely swept away, disturbed their rest somewhat; but they were weary, and sank to sleep again. This hall had been the place of horror; here had been the attack; here they had roared, howled, gnashed their teeth, given blows, killed, expired; many of them had fallen dead on the pavement where they were now lying asleep; this straw which served them for beds had drunk up the blood of their comrades; now, it was over, the blood was stanched, the sabres were dried, the dead were dead; they were sleeping peacefully. Such is war. And then to-morrow everybody will sleep the same sleep.

As Gauvain entered, some of these drowsy men rose, among others, the officer commanding the post. Gauvain pointed to the door of the dungeon, —

"Open for me," he said.

The bolts were drawn, the door opened.

Gaavain went into the dungeon.

The door closed behind him.

BOOK SEVENTH. — FEUDALISM AND REVOLUTION.

CHAPTER I.

THE ANCESTOR.

A lamp stood on the flagstones of the crypt, beside the square air-hole of the oubliette.

The jug filled with water, the soldier’s bread, and a bundle of straw were also on the floor. As the crypt was hewn out of the rock, the prisoner who had a fancy for setting his straw on fire would have his trouble for his pains; no risk of fire for the prison; certain asphyxiation for the prisoner.

When the door turned on its hinges, the marquis was walking about his dungeon; a mechanical going to and fro, peculiar to all caged wild beasts.

At the noise made by opening and then closing the door, he raised his head, and the lamp on the floor between Gauvain and the marquis shone full on these two men, now face to face.

They looked at each other, and this look was such that it made them both motionless.

The marquis burst out laughing, and exclaimed, —

“Good-morning, sir. It is many years since I have had the good fortune to meet you. You are very kind to come to see me. I thank you. I ask for nothing better than to have a little talk. It was beginning to be tedious. Your friends are losing time, establishing identity, court-martial, all these formalities take a long time. I should be quicker about it. I am at home here. Have the goodness to come in. Well, what do you think of all that is going on? It is original, isn’t it? Once there was a king and a queen; the king was the king; the queen was France. They cut off the king’s head, and married the queen to Robespierre; this gentleman and this lady had a daughter whom they named the guillotine, and it seems that I am to make her acquaintance to-morrow morning. I shall be charmed to do so, — as I am to see you. Have you come for that? Have you risen in rank? Shall you be the executioner? If it is merely a visit of friendship, I am touched by it. Monsieur le Vicomte, perhaps you no longer know what a nobleman is. Well, here is one; that is, myself. Look at him. It is strange. He believes in God, he believes in tradition, he believes in the family, he believes in his forefathers, he believes in the example of his father, in fidelity, in loyalty, in the duty towards his prince, in respect for old laws, in virtue, in justice; and he would have you shot with pleasure. I beg of you, have the kindness to sit down. On the floor, it is true; for there are no easy-chairs in this drawing-room; but he who lives in the mire can sit on the floor. I do not say this to offend you, for what we call mire, you call the nation. Doubtless, you will not compel me to cry ‘Liberty! Equality! Fraternity!’ This was once a room in my own house; formerly, the seigneurs put peasants here; now, the peasants put seigneurs here. This nonsense is called a Revolution. It seems that I am to have my head cut off in thirty-six hours. I see no inconvenience in that. But, if they were polite, they would have sent me my snuff-box, which is up in the room of mirrors, where you played when a child, and where I used to trot you on my knee. Sir, I am going to tell you one thing; you are called Gauvain, and, strange to say, you have noble blood in your veins, by Heaven! the same blood as mine, and that blood which makes me a man of honor, makes you a blackguard. Such are circumstances. You will tell me that it is not your fault. Nor mine. By Heaven! one may be a malefactor without being aware of it. It is in the air one breathes; in times like ours, one is not responsible for his acts; the Revolution makes a rascal of everybody; and our great criminals are great innocents. What blockheads! Beginning with yourself. Allow me to admire you. Yes, I admire a boy like you, who, a man of rank, of good position in the State, having noble blood to shed for noble causes, viscount of this Tour-Gauvain, prince of Brittany, a duke by right, and a peer by inheritance, which is nearly all that can be desired here below, by a man of good sense, — amuses himself, being what he is, by being what you are, so that he seems to his enemies like a villain, and to his friends like an idiot. By the way, give my regards to monsieur the Abbé Cimourdain.”

The marquis spoke easily, calmly, without emphasizing any of his words, in his social tone of voice, his eye clear and quiet, both hands in his pockets. He stopped speaking, drew a long breath, and went on, —

“I will not conceal from you the fact that I did what I could to kill you. Just as you see me, I have myself personally aimed a cannon at you. A discourteous proceeding, I admit; but it would be depending on a bad maxim to imagine that an enemy in war should try to be agreeable to you. For we are at war, my nephew. Everything is fire and blood. Nevertheless, it is true that the king has been killed. Fine times!”

He stopped again, then went on, —

“To think that none of these things would have happened if Voltaire had been hanged and Rousseau had been sent to the galleys! Ah! People of intelligence, what a shame! Ah, what do you reproach this monarchy with? It is true, they sent the Abbé Pucelle to his abbey in Corbigny, giving him the choice of an equipage, and all the time he wished in which to make the journey; and, as for your Monsieur Titon, who, if you please, had been a very dissipated man, and who frequented the houses of loose women before taking part in the miracles of Deacon Pâris, — he, I say, was transferred from the castle of Vincennes to the castle of Ham in Picardy, which is, I confess, a pretty detestable place. There were grievances; I remember very well; I have also protested in my time; I was as stupid as you are!”

The marquis felt in his pocket, as though searching for his snuff-box, and went on, —

“But not so bad. We talked for the sake of talking. There was also a meeting in the way of investigations and petitions; and then came these philosophers, but they burned their works instead of their bodies; and court intriguers got themselves mixed up in it. We had all those boobies, — Turgot, Quesnay, Malesherbes, the physiocrats, etc., — and the quarrel began again. It was all the fault of these scribblers and poetasters. The Encyclopædia! Diderot! d’Alembert! Ah, those rascally good-for-nothings! The idea of a man of good birth like the King of Prussia getting taken in by them. If I had been he, I should have squelched all paper scratchers. Ah! we Gauvains used to be great lovers of justice in old days! Here, on the wall, you can see the marks left by the quartering- wheels! We did not allow any nonsense, No, no; no scribblers. As long as there are men like Arouët, there will be Marats. As long as there are low fellows who use their pens, there will be knaves who use their daggers; as long as there is ink, there will be blots; as long as the paw of man holds the goose quill, frivolous stupidities will engender cruel stupidities. Books cause crimes. The word ‘chimæra’ has two meanings: it signifies ‘dream’ and it signifies ‘monster.’ How dear we have to pay for trash. What is the meaning of your song about ‘rights’? Rights of man! rights of the people! All that is empty enough, stupid enough, imaginary enough, senseless enough! Now, when I say: ‘Havaise, sister of Conan II., brought the County of Brittany to Hoël, Count de Nantes, and Cornwall, who left the throne to Alain Fergant, uncle to Bertha, who married Alain le Noir, Seigneur of la Roche-sur-Yon, and had by him Conan le Petit, grandfather of Guy or Gauvain de Thouars, our ancestor,’ I make a definite statement, and there is a right for you. But your idiots, your knaves, your miserable wretches, what do they call their rights? Deicide and regicide. Ah! how hideous it all is! Ah, the scoundrels! I am sorry for you, sir; for you are of the proudest blood of Brittany; you and I have for our grandfather Gauvain do Thouars; we have, moreover, among our ancestors that great Duc de Montbazon, who was a peer of France, and honored with the Collar of the Orders, who attacked the suburb of Tours and was wounded at the battle of Arques, and died. Master of the Hounds, in his own house of Couziéres in Touraine, at the age of eighty-six. I might name to you also the Duc de Landunois, son of the Lady of la Garnache, of Claude de Lorraine, Due de Chevreuse and of Henri de Lenoncourt, and of Françoise de Laval-Boisdauphin. But what is the use? Monsieur has the honor of being an idiot, and he claims the right of being the equal of my groom. Know this: I was an old man when you were still a brat. I have wiped your nose for you, and I could do it still. In growing to the stature of a man, you have succeeded in belittling yourself. Since we last met, we have each gone in our own way: I, in the direction of honesty; you, in the opposite direction. Ah! I do not know how ail this will end: but these gentlemen, your friends, are noble beggars! Ah! yes; it is fine; I am in perfect sympathy with all these splendid signs of progress; in the army, the punishment of giving the drunken soldier a pint of cold water for three days running has been abolished; you have your maximum, your convention, your Bishop Gobel, your Monsieur Chaumette and Monsieur Hébert, and you have wiped out all the past at one fell swoop, from the Bastille to the Almanach. You are putting vegetables in place of saints. Ail right, citizens, be our masters, rule, take your ease, do what you please, do not stand on ceremony. But it will not in the least prevent religion from being religion, or royalty from filling fifteen hundred years of our history, and the old French nobles, even after you have cut off their heads, from standing higher than you.

“As to your quibbles about the historic right of royal families, we shrug our shoulders at it. Chilpéric, in reality, was only a monk named Daniel; Rainfroi set up Chilpéric to annoy Charles Martel. We know these things as well as you do. That is not the point. This is the question: to be a great Kingdom, to be the ancient France, to be this magnificent land of system, according to which first the sacred person of the monarch, absolute lord of the state, is regarded, then the princes, then the crown officers in charge of the army on land and sea, of the artillery, and the direction and superintendence of finances. Then came the judges of the higher and lower courts, followed by the officials engaged in the revenues and receipts of custom, and lastly the police of the kingdom in its three orders. There was something fine and noble in this system. You have destroyed it. You have destroyed provinces, like the miserable ignoramuses that you are, without having an idea of what the provinces were. The genius of France is made up of the very genius of the continent, and each one of the provinces of France represented a virtue of Europe. The ingenuousness of Germany was in Picardy; the generosity of Sweden, in Champaign; the industry of Holland, in Burgundy; the activity of Poland, in Languedoc; the sobriety of Spain, in Gascony; the wisdom of Italy, in Provence; the subtility of Greece, in Normandy; the fidelity of Switzerland, in Dauphiné.

"You knew nothing of all that. You have broken, shattered, smashed, destroyed, and you have been blindly acting like brutes. Ah! you will have no more nobility. Very well, your wishes will be gratified. Mourn for them. You will have no more paladins, no more heroes. Farewell, grandeur of old! Find me an Assas now! You are all afraid for your skins! You will have no more chevaliers like Fontenoy, who saluted before dealing the deathblow. You will have no more combatants like those who fought in silk stockings at the siege of Lérida; you will have no more of those proud tournaments when plumes flashed by like meteors; you are a people which has run its course; you will indure invasion, which is a rape. If Alaric II. returned from the dead he would not find himself confronting Clovis; if Abdérame came back he would not find Charles Martel to face him. If the Saxons came back they would not find Pepin. You will have no more heroes like Agnadel, Rocroy, Lens, Staffarde, Nerwinde, Steinkirk, La Marsaille, Raucoux, Lawfeld, Mahon. You will no longer have a Marignan with François I.; no longer Bouvines, with Philippe-Auguste taking prisoner with one-hand Renaud, Count of Bologna, and with the other, Ferrand, Count of Flanders. You will have Azincourt, but you will have no Sieur de Bacqueville, grand bearer of the oriflamme, wrapping himself in his banner, to meet his death. Go! go! do your work! Be the new men! Become pigmies!"

The marquis was silent for a moment and then continued, —

"But leave us great. Kill the kings, kill the nobles, kill the priests, slaughter, destroy, massacre, trample everything under foot; grind the ancient maxims under your heels, trample on the throne, stamp down the altar, blot out God, dance on the ruins! That is your affair. You are traitors and cowards, incapable of devotion and sacrifice. I have spoken. Now have me guillotined, monsieur le vicomte. I have the honor to be your most humble servant.”

And he added,

“Ah! I tell you the truth about yourself! What difference will it make to me? I am dead.”

“You are free,” said Gauvain.

And Gauvain stepped towards the marquis, took off his commander’s cloak, threw it over Lantenac’s shoulders and pulled the hood down over his eyes. They were of the same height.

“Well, what is this that you are doing?” said the marquis.

Gauvain raised his voice and cried: “Lieutenant, open the door!”

The door opened. Gauvain said: “Take care to close the door behind me.” And he pushed the astonished marquis outside.

The lower hall changed to a guardroom, as will be remembered, was lighted only by a horn lantern making objects dimly visible, and the darkness there was more powerful than the light. In this faint glimmer, those of the soldiers who were not asleep saw walk through their midst towards the entrance a tall man wearing the braided cloak and hood of the commander-in-chief; they gave the military salute, and the man passed on.

The marquis slowly crossed the guardroom, made his way through the breach, hitting his head more than once, and went out.

The sentinel, thinking it was Gauvain, presented arms.

When he was outside, with the grass of the fields under his feet, two hundred paces from the forest, with space, night, liberty, life, before him, he stopped and stood still for a moment like a man who has offered no resistance, who has yielded to surprise, and having taken advantage of an open door, tries to find out whether he has acted well or ill, hesitates before going farther, and listens to a last thought. After a few moments of careful reflection, he raised his right hand, snapped his thumb and middle finger, and said: “*Ma foi!*”

And he went on his way.

The door of the dungeon had closed again. Gauvain was inside.

CHAPTER II.

THE COURT-MARTIAL.

Courts-martial at that time were endowed with very nearly discretional powers. Dumas, at the legislative Assembly, had sketched out a plan for military legislation, revised later on by Talbot, at the Council of the Five Hundred, but a final code for councils of war was not framed till the time of the empire. It is from the empire, by the way, that dates the obligation imposed upon military tribunals to begin taking votes from officers of inferior rank. This law was not in existence at the time of the Revolution.

In 1793, the presiding officer of a military tribunal was practically the whole tribunal himself; he chose the members, classed the orders of rank, regulated the mode of voting; he was master as well as judge.

Cimourdain had selected for the council-room of the court-martial, this same hall on the ground floor where the retirade had been and where the guardroom was now. He intended to make short work of everything, the way from the prison to the tribunal, and the passage from the tribunal to the scaffold.

At noon, in conformance with his orders, the court was in session with the following adjuncts, — three straw-seated chairs, a deal table, two lighted candles, a stool in front of the table.

The chairs were for the judges and the stool for the accused. At each end of the table there was another stool, one for the commissioner-auditor, who was a quartermaster, the other for the clerk, who was a corporal.

On the table was a stick of red sealing-wax, the copper seal of the Republic, two ink-stands, some sheets of white paper, and two printed placards, spread out open, one containing the declaration of outlawing, the other the decree of the Convention.

Behind the middle chair was a group of tricolored flags; in these times of rude simplicity, decorations were quickly made, and it took little time to change a guardroom into a court of justice.

The middle chair, destined for the presiding officer, faced the door of the dungeon.

The soldiers were the public.

Two gendarmes guarded the stool.

Cimourdain was seated on the middle chair, having Captain Guéchamp on his right as first judge, and on his left the Sergeant Radoub, as second judge.

He wore his hat with a tricolored plume, his sabre at his side, his two pistols in his belt. His scar, which was a vivid red, added to his ferocious appearance.

Radoub had at last allowed his wound to be dressed. Around his head he had a handkerchief on which a bloodstain was slowly increasing in size.

At noon before the court had opened, an express, whose horse could be heard pawing the ground outside, stood near the table of the tribunal. Cimourdain was writing. He wrote this, —

“Citizens, members of the Committee of Public Welfare, —

Lantenac is taken. He will be executed to-morrow.”

He dated the despatch, signed it, folded it, sealed it, and gave it to the messenger who started away.

Having done this, Cimourdain said in a loud voice, —

“Open the dungeon.”

The two gendarmes drew back the bolts, opened the dungeon and went in. Cimourdain raised his head, folded his arms, looked at the door and cried, —

“Bring in the prisoner.”

A man appeared between the two gendarmes, under the arch of the open door.

It was Gauvain.

Cimourdain shuddered.

“Gauvain!” he exclaimed.

And he added, —

“I demand the prisoner.”

“I am the prisoner,” said Gauvain.

“You?”

“I myself.”

“But where is Lantenac?”

“He is free.”

“Free!”

“Yes.”

“Escaped?”

“Escaped.”

Cimourdain trembling stammered, —

“To be sure, this castle is his, he knows all the means of exit; perhaps the oubliette communicates with some way out; I ought to have thought that he would find some way to escape; he would need no one’s aid for that.”

“He was aided,” said Gauvain.

“To escape?”

“To escape.”

“Who aided him?”

“I did.”

“You?”

“Yes.”

“You are dreaming!”

“I entered the dungeon; I was alone with the prisoner; I took off my cloak, I threw it over his shoulders, I pulled the hood down over his eyes; he went out in my place, and I remained in his. Here I am.”

“You did not do that!”

“I did do it.”

“It is impossible.”

“It is a fact!”

“Bring Lantenac here!”

“He is no longer here. The soldiers, seeing the commander’s cloak, took him for me, and let him pass. It was still night.”

“You are mad.”

“I am telling you the truth.”

There was a silence. Cimourdain stammered, —

“Then you deserve——”

“Death,” said Gauvain.

Cimourdain was as pale as a corpse. He was as motionless as a man who has been struck by lightning. It seemed as if he could no longer breathe. Great drops of sweat stood on his forehead.

He steadied his voice and said, —

“Gendarmes, seat the accused.”

Gauvain sat down on the stool.

Cimourdain added, —

“Gendarmes, draw your swords.”

This was the customary formality when the accused was under sentence of capital punishment.

The gendarmes drew their swords.

Cimourdain’s voice had regained its usual tone.

“Accused,” he said, rise.”

He no longer addressed Gauvain familiarly.

CHAPTER III.

THE VOTES.

Gauvain rose.

“What is your name?” asked Cimourdain.

Gauvain replied, “Gauvain.”

Cimourdain questioned him further.

“Who are you?”

“I am commander-in-chief of the reconnoitring column of the Coasts of the North.”

“Are you a relative or connection of the man who has escaped?”

“I am his grand-nephew.”

“Are you familiar with the decree of the Convention?”

“I see the notice of it on your table.”

“What have you to say to this decree?”

“That I countersigned it, that I ordered it to be carried out, and that it was I who had the placard printed, and that my name is at the bottom of it.”

“Choose a defender.”

“I will defend myself.”

“You may speak.”

Cimourdain had grown calm again. Only his calmness was less like the composure of a man than the tranquillity of a rock.

Gauvain remained silent for a moment, and, as it were, collecting his thoughts.

Cimourdain spoke again.

“What have you to say in your defence?”

Gauvain slowly raised his head, without looking at anybody, and replied:—

“This: one thing prevented me from seeing any other; a good action, seen too near, concealed a hundred criminal actions from my eyes; on one side an old man, on the other, children, ail this came between me and duty. I forgot the villages burned, the fields ravaged, the prisoners massacred, the wounded murdered, the women shot. I forgot France betrayed to England; I liberated the murderer of his country. I am guilty. In speaking thus, I seem to speak against myself; it is a mistake. I am speaking for myself. When the guilty person confesses his fault, he saves the only thing worth the trouble of saving — honor."

"Is this," replied Cimourdain, "all that you have to say for your defence?"

"I will add that being the chief, I owe an example, and that you, for your part, being the judge, owe one too."

"What example do you demand?"

"My death."

"Do you think it just?"

"And necessary."

"Be seated."

The quartermaster, as commissioner-auditor, rose and gave a reading; first of the sentence, which outlawed the *ci-devant* Marquis de Lantenac; secondly, the decree of the Convention inflicting punishment of death on any one aiding the escape of a rebel prisoner. It ended with some lines printed at the bottom of the notice of the decree, forbidding any one "to carry aid and assistance" to the above-named rebel "under pain of death," and signed, —

"*The commander-in-chief of the reconnoitring column*, Gauvain."

Having finished these readings, the commissioner-auditor sat down again.

Cimourdain folded his arms and said, —

"Accused, pay attention. Audience, listen, look, and be silent. You have the law before you. It will now be put to vote. The sentence will be given according to the simple majority. Each judge will give his opinion in turn, aloud, in presence of the accused, justice having nothing to conceal.

Cimourdain continued, —

"The first judge has the floor. Speak, Captain Guéchamp."

Captain Guechamp appeared to see neither Cimourdain, nor Gauvain. He dropped his eyelids, which concealed his motionless eyes fixed on the notice of the decree, and considering it as one considers an abyss. He said, —

"The law is positive. A judge is more and less than a man; he is less than a man, for he has no heart; he is more than a man, because he has the sword. In the year 414 of Rome, Manlius put his son to death for the crime of having won a victory without his order. Violated discipline demands an expiation. In this case it is the law which has been violated; and the law is still higher than discipline. In consequence of an outburst of pity, the country is again placed in danger. Pity may have the proportions of a crime. Commander Gauvain has caused the escape of the rebel Lantenac. Gauvain is guilty. I vote death.”

“Write it down, clerk,” said Cimourdain.

The clerk wrote, “Captain Guéchamp: death.”

Gauvain raised his voice, —

“Guéchamp,” he said, you have voted well, and I thank you.”

Cimourdain proceeded, —

“The second judge has the floor. Speak, Sergeant Radoub.”

“Radoub rose, turned towards Gauvain and saluted the accused. Then he cried out, —

“If it is so, then, guillotine me, for I give you here, in the sight of God, my most sacred word of honor that I should like to have done, first what the old man did, and then what my commander has done. When I saw that man, eighty years old, throw himself into the fire to save three babies, I said, “Good man, you are brave!” and when I learn that my commander had saved this old man from your beast of a guillotine, by a thousand saints I say, “My commander, you ought to be my general, and you are a true man, and as for me, by thunder! I would give you the cross of Saint Louis, if there were still crosses, and if there were still saints, and if there were still Louis!”

“Ah! are you going to be idiots now? If it was for such things as this that we won the battle of Jemmapes, the battle of Valmy, the battle of Fleurus, and the battle of Wattignies, then it must be admitted. What! Here Commander Gauvain, for four months, has been leading these jackasses of royalists to the beat of the drum, and saving the Republic by his sword, and did a thing at Dol which required a pretty amount of cleverness, and when you have this man here, you try to have him no longer! And instead of making him your general, you want to chop off his head! I say that it is enough to make one throw himself head first over the parapet of the Pont-Neuf, and that if you yourself, Citizen Gauvain, my commander, were my corporal instead of my general, I would tell you that what you said just now was infernal nonsense. The old man did well in saving the children, you did well to save the old man; and if people are to be guillotined for good deeds, then get you gone to all the devils, for I don’t know at all what it is about. There is no reason at all for stopping anywhere. All this is not true, is it? I pinch myself to know whether I am awake. I do not understand. So the old man ought to have let the babies burn alive, my commander ought to let the old man's head be cut off. Yes, and then guillotine me. I like the one idea as much as the other. I suppose if the little ones had died, the battalion of Bonnet-Rouge would have been dishonored. Is that what was wanted? Then let us eat each other. I know my politics as well as you. I belonged to the club in the section of the Piques. Sapristi! We are growing brutal at last! I sum it all up according to my way of looking at it. I do not like things which have the inconvenience of making us unable to tell at all where we are. Why the devil do we have each other killed? Why kill our chief? Not that, Lisette. I want my chief! I must have my chief. I love him better to-day than I did yesterday. But to send him to the guillotine, why, you make me laugh! We want none of this: I have listened. You may say whatever you like, but it is not possible."

And Radoub sat down. His wound had opened again. A thread of blood carae out from under the bandage and ran down his neck, from the place where his ear had been.

Cimourdain turned towards Radoub, —

"Do you vote that the accused be absolved?"

"I vote," said Radoub, "to have him made generaL"

"I ask if you vote to have him acquitted."

"I vote to have him made the first in the Republic."

"Sergeant Radoub, do you vote to have the Commandant Gauvain acquitted, — yes or no?"

"I vote to have my head cut off instead of his."

"Acquittal," said Cimourdain. "Write, clerk."

The clerk wrote, "Sergeant Radoub: acquittal."

Then the clerk said, —

"One voice for death. One voice for acquittal."

It was Cimourdain's turn to vote.

He rose. He took off his hat and laid it on the table.

He was no longer pale nor livid. His face was the color of earth.

If all present had been lying in their shrouds, the silence would not have been more profound.

Cimourdain said in a solemn voice, slowly, and with decision, —

"Accused Gauvain, the cause has been heard. In the name of the Republic, the court-martial, by the majority of two to one—"

He stopped, there was a moment of suspense; did he hesitate before death? did he hesitate before life? All held their breath. Cimourdain continued, —

“Condemn you to death.”

His face expressed the torture of an awful triumph.

When Jacob compelled the angel whom he had overthrown in the darkness to bless him, he must have worn that terrible smile.

It was only a glimmer, and it passed away. Cimourdain became again like marble, sat down, put his hat on his head, and added, —

“Gauvain, you will be executed to-morrow, at sunrise.”

Gauvain rose, saluted him, and said, —

“I thank the court.”

“Lead away the condemned,” said Cimourdain.

Cimourdain made a sign, the door of the dungeon was opened, Gauvain went in, the dungeon was closed. The two gendarmes remained on guard at each side of the door, with drawn sabres.

They carried away Radoub, who had just fallen unconscious.

CHAPTER IV.

AFTER CIMOURDAIN AS A JUDGE, CIMOURDAIN AS MASTER.

A camp is a wasp's nest. Especially in times of Revolution. The civic sting which is in the soldier acts readily and quickly, and does not hesitate to attack the chief after having driven away the enemy.

The valiant troop which had taken la Tourgue made various complaints; at first against the Commander Gauvain, when they learned of Lantenac's escape. When they saw Gauvain come out of the dungeon which they supposed held Lantenac, it was like an electric shock, and in less than a minute the whole corps was informed. A murmur burst forth from the little army; the first murmur was, —

"They are judging Gauvain. But it is only a sham. Oh, yes, have great faith in ex-nobles and in priests! We have just seen a viscount save a marquis, and we shall see a priest pardon a noble!"

When they learned of Gauvain's sentence, there was a second murmur, "That is too much! our chief, our brave chief, our young commander, a hero! He is a viscount, well it is all the more credit to him for being Republican! What! he, the liberator of Pontorson, of Villedieu, of Pont-àu-Beau! The conqueror of Dol and of La Tourgue! He through whom we are invincible; he who is the sword of the Republic in la Vendée! The man who, for five months, has held the Chouans at bay, and made up for all the folly of Léchelle and the rest! This Cimourdain dares condemn him to death! Why? Because he saved an old man who had saved three children! A priest kill a soldier!"

Thus the victorious but discontented camp grumbled. A sullen anger surrounded Cimourdain. Four thousand men against one: it seems as if this must be strength; not at all. These four thousand men were a multitude, and Cimourdain was a will.

They knew that Cimourdain frowned easily, and nothing more was needed to hold the army in respect. In these times of severity, it was enough for the shadow of the Committee of Public Welfare to be behind a man to make this man feared, and to make an imprecation end in a whisper, and the whisper end in silence. After as well as before these murmurs, Cimourdain remained the arbiter of Gauvain's fate, and the fate of all. They knew there was nothing to ask of him, and that he would obey nothing but his conscience, a superhuman voice heard by himself alone.

Everything depended on him; what he had done as judge-martial, alone, he could undo as civil delegate. He alone was able to pardon him. He had full power; by a sign he could set Gauvain free; he was the master of life and of death; he was commander of the guillotine. At this tragic time, he was the man above all others.

They could only wait.

Night came on.

CHAPTER V.

THE DUNGEON.

The hall of justice had become the guardroom again; the watch was doubled, as the day before; two sentinels guarded the door of the closed dungeon.

About midnight a man holding a lantern in his hand, crossed the guardroom, made himself known, and had the dungeon opened.

It was Cimourdain.

He went in and the door remained ajar behind him.

The dungeon was dark and silent. Cimourdain took a step into the darkness, set the lantern on the floor, and stood still. He heard the regular breathing of a man asleep. Cimourdain listened thoughtfully to this peaceful sound.

Gauvain was on the bundle of straw on the floor of the dungeon. It was his breath which was heard. He was sound asleep.

Cimourdain went forward with the least possible noise, came close to Gauvain and began to look at him; a mother looking at her sleeping babe would have no more tender and unspeakable fondness in her face. This sight was perhaps too much for Cimourdain; Cimourdain pressed both hands over his eyes, as children do some times, and remained motionless for a moment. Then he knelt down and raised Gauvain's hand gently to his lips.

Gauvain stirred. He opened his eyes, with the vague surprise of one suddenly awakened. The lantern feebly lighted the dungeon. He recognized Cimourdain.

"Ah!" he said, "it is you, my master."

And he added, —

"I was dreaming that death kissed my hand."

Cimourdain shuddered, as we sometimes do at the abrupt invasion of a surge of thoughts; sometimes this tide is so high and so stormy that it seems as if it would drown the soul. Nothing escaped from the depths of Cimourdain's heart. He could only say —

"Gauvain!"

And they looked at each other; Cimourdain with his eyes full of those flames which burn tears, Gauvain with his gentlest smile.

Gauvain rose on his elbow, and said —

“This scar which I see on your face is from the sabre cut that you received for me. Yesterday, again; you were in the struggle beside me and on account of me. If Providence had not placed you near my cradle, where should I be to-day? In darkness. If I have any idea of duty, it has come from you. I was born bound. Prejudices are ligatures; you removed these bands from me, you have given me liberty of growth, and of what was only a mummy you made a child once more. You gave a consciousness to the abortion that would otherwise have been. Had it not been for you, I should have grown up a dwarf. I exist through you. I was only a seigneur, you made me a citizen. I was only a citizen, you made me an intellect; you made me fit, as a man, for this earthly life, and, as a soul, for the life celestial. You gave me the key of truth, that I might enter the reality of human life, and the key of light, that I might go beyond. Oh! my master, I thank you. You have created me.”

Cimourdain sat down on the straw beside Gauvain, and said to him, —

“I have come to take supper with you.”

Gauvain broke up the black bread and offered it to him. Cimourdain took a piece of it; then Gauvain passed him the jug of water.

“Drink first,” said Cimourdain.

Gauvain drank and passed the jug to Cimourdain, who drank after him. Gauvain only took one swallow.

Cimourdain took a long draught.

At this supper, Gauvain ate and Cimourdain drank, a sign of calmness in one and of feverishness in the other.

A strange, terrible serenity was in this dungeon. The two men talked.

Gauvain said, —

“Great things are being planned. What the Revolution is doing at this moment is mysterious. Behind its visible work there is a work invisible. One conceals the other. The visible work is cruel, the invisible work is sublime. At this moment I can see everything very clearly. It is strangely beautiful. It was necessary to make use of the materials of the past. Hence this extraordinary ‘93. Under a scaffolding of barbarism, a temple of civilization is building.”

“Yes,” replied Cimourdain. “Out of things temporal will arise the definitive. The definitive, that is to say right and duty, in parallel lines, proportional and progressive taxes, obligatory military service, levelling without deviation, and above all and through all, that straight line, law. The Republic of the Absolute.”

“I prefer,” said Gauvain, “the Republic of the Ideal.” He hesitated, then continued, —

“Oh, my master, in all that you have just said, where do you place devotion, sacrifice, abnegation, the magnanimous intertwining of benevolence, love? Putting everything in equilibrium is good; making everything harmonious is better. Above the scales is the lyre. Your republic doses, measures, and rules man; mine carries him up into the clear sky; that is the difference between a theorem and an eagle.”

“You will be lost in the clouds.”

“And you in mathematics.”

“Harmony is a dream.”

“There are unknown quantities in Algebra.”

“I would have man made according to Euclid.”

“And I,” said Gauvain, “I would rather have him made according to Homer.”

Cimourdain’s stern smile rested on Gauvain, as if to hold back his soul.

“Poetry. Place no trust in poets.”

“Yes, I know that saying. Put no trust in breezes, sunbeams, put no trust in perfumes, put no trust in flowers, put no trust in constellations.”

“None of them will give you anything to eat.”

“How do you know. Ideas too, are food. To think is to eat.”

“No abstractions. The Republic is two and two make four. When I have given to each what belongs to him——”

“It will remain for you to give to each what does not belong to him.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean the vast reciprocal concession that each owes to all, and all owe to each, and which is the whole social law.”

“There is nothing beyond strict law.”

“There is everything.”

“I see nothing but justice.”

“For my part, I see higher.”

“What is there above justice?”

“Equity.”

Occasionally, they stopped, as if to catch glimpses of light.

Cimourdain resumed, —

“I challenge you to explain.”

“I will do so. You would have military service obligatory; against whom? Against other men. But I would not have any military service at all. I want peace. You would have the wretched assisted, but I would have misery suppressed. You would have proportional taxes. I would have no taxes at all. I want the common expenses reduced to their simplest form, and paid by the overplus of society.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“This: first, to suppress every form of parasite; that represented by the priest, that represented by the judge, that represented by the soldier. Then make some use of your waste riches; you throw manure into the sewers, throw it on the fields. Three-quarters of the soil is waste land; clear up France. Put an end to useless pastures, divide the communal lands. Let every man have a piece of ground, and every piece of ground have a man. It would multiply the products of society a hundredfold. France, at the present time, only gives her peasants meat four days in the year; if well cultivated, she ought to feed three hundred millions of men, — all Europe. Utilize nature, that great auxiliary so much scorned. Make all the winds, all the waterfalls, all the magnetic effluvia work for you. The globe has a network of subterranean veins; in this network there is a prodigious circulation of water, oil, and fire; pierce the veins of the globe, and let this water gush forth for your fountains, this oil for your lamps, this fire for your hearths. Reflect on the motion of the waves, the flux and reflux, the ebb and flow of the tides. What is the ocean? An enormous force wasted. How stupid the earth is not to make use of the ocean.

“You are lost in a dream.”

“That is to say, in actual facts.”

Gauvain went on, —

“And woman — what use do you make of her?”

Cimourdain replied, —

“Let her be what she is, the servant of man.”

“Yes. On one condition.”

“What?”

“That man shall be the servant of woman.”

“Is that your belief?” exclaimed Cimourdain. “Man a servant! Never. Man is master. I admit but one royalty, that of the fireside. Man is king at home.”

“Yes. On one condition.”

“What is that?”

“That woman be queen there.”

“That is to say that you want for man and for woman——”

“Equality.”

“Equality! Are you dreaming? The two beings are different.”

“I said equality. I did not say identity.”

There was a pause again, like a sort of truce between these two minds exchanging flashes of thought. Cimourdain broke the silence.

“And the child? To whom would you give it?”

“First to the father who begets it, then to the mother who bears it, then to the master to teach it, then to the city to make a man of it, then to the country, which is the mother supreme, then to humanity, which is the great ancestor.”

“You say nothing of God.”

“Each of these steps, — father, mother, master, city, country, humanity, — is a round in the ladder which leads up to God.”

Cimourdain was silent. Gauvain went on, —

“When one is at the top of the ladder, one has reached God. God opens the door; there is nothing to do but to go in.”

Cimourdain made the gesture of a person who is calling some one back.

“Gauvain, come back to earth. We want to realize possibilities.”

“Begin by not making them impossible.”

“The possible can always be realized.”

“Not always. If Utopia is maltreated it is killed. Nothing is more defenceless than the egg.”

“But it is necessary to seize Utopia, place it under the yoke of reality, and frame it, in fact. Abstract ideas must be transformed to concrete ideas; what it loses in beauty it will gain in utility; it will be less but better. Right must enter into law; and when right has become law, it is absolute. This is what I call the possible.”

“The possible is more than that.”

“Ah! you are dreaming again.”

“The possible is a mysterious bird always hovering above man.”

“It must be caught.”

“Alive.”

Gauvain continued, —

“My motto is: Always forward. If God had wished man to go backward, he would have put an eye in the back of his head. Let us always look towards the sunrise, development, birth. Whatever falls encourages whatever is trying to rise. The shattering of the old tree is a call to the young tree. Each century will do its work; to-day, civic; to-morrow, humane. To-day the question of right, to-morrow the question of wage. Wage and right are the same word in reality. Man does not live to receive no wage; God, in giving life, contracts a debt: right is innate wage; wage is acquired right.”

Gauvain spoke with the assurance of a prophet. Cimourdain listened. The rôles were exchanged, and now it seemed as if the pupil had become the master.

Cimourdain murmured, —

“You go too fast.”

“Perhaps it is because I am somewhat pressed for time,” said Gauvain, with a smile.

And he added, —

“O my master, this is the difference between our two Utopias. You want the barracks obligatory, while I want a school. You dream of a man as a soldier, I dream of him as a citizen. You want him to be terrible, I would have him thoughtful. You would found a republic of swords, I would found — —”

He hesitated, —

“I would found a republic of intellects.”

Cimourdain looked at the pavement of the dungeon and said, —

“And till then what would you have?”

“What now exists.”

“Then you absolve the present moment?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because it is a tempest. A tempest always knows what it is about. For one oak struck by lightning, how many forests purified! Civilization had a pestilence, this great gale is sweeping it away. It does not discriminate enough, perhaps. Can it do otherwise? It has such a rough cleansing to perform. Before the horror of miasma, I understand the fury of the blast.”

Gauvain continued, —

“Moreover, what is the tempest to me, if I have the compass? and what difference can events make to me, if I have my conscience?”

And he added in a low voice, which was solemn as well, —

“There is one who must always be allowed to do his will.”

“Who?” asked Cimourdain.

Gauvain pointed above his head. Cimourdain followed the direction of his finger, and through the ceiling of the dungeon it seemed to him as if he saw the starry heavens.

They were again silent.

Cimourdain took up the discourse.

“Society greater than nature! I tell you it is not possible, it is a dream.”

“It is its aim. Otherwise, what is the good of society? Remain in nature; be savages. Otaheite is a paradise. Only, in that paradise they do not think. Much better an intelligent hell than a stupid paradise. But no, let us have no hell. Let us have human society. Greater than nature. Yes. If you add nothing to nature, why leave nature? then, be content with work like the ant, and with honey like the bee. Remain the stupid workman rather than sovereign intelligence. If you add something to nature, you will necessarily be greater than she is. To add is to increase, and to increase is to enlarge. Society is nature made sublime. I would have everything which beehives lack, everything which ant-hills lack, monuments, arts, poetry, heroes, geniuses; to carry everlasting burdens is not the law of man. No, no, no; no more pariahs, no more slaves, no more convicts, no more condemned! I would have each attribute of man a symbol of civilization, and a pattern of progress; I want liberty in the mind, equality in the heart, fraternity in the soul. No! no more bondage! man was made, not to drag chains, but to spread his wings. No more of man as a reptile. I would have the larva transformed to a lepidopter; I would have the earthworm changed to a living flower, and fly away. I would have — —”

He stopped. His eye grew bright.

His lips moved, he ceased speaking.

The door had been left open. Noises from outside penetrated into the dungeon. Sounds of distant trumpets were heard. It was probably the réveillé; then gun stocks striking the ground as the sentinels were relieved;

then, quite near the tower, as far as could be judged in the darkness, a sound, as if they were moving boards and planks, with dull, intermittent thuds, like the blows of a hammer. Cimourdain listened, and grew pale. Gauvain did not hear it. His reverie grew more and more profound. It seemed as if he no longer breathed, he was so absorbed in what he saw in the visions that haunted his brain. His frame underwent gentle tremors. The dawn-like brightness in his eyes increased.

Some time passed thus. Cimourdain asked, —

“What are you thinking about?”

“The future,” said Gauvain.

And he relapsed into thought again. Cimourdain rose from the bed of straw where they were sitting together. Gauvain did not notice him. Cimourdain, with his eyes fixed with infinite affection on the young dreamer, stepped slowly backwards to the door, and went out. The dungeon was closed.

CHAPTER VI.

NEVERTHELESS, THE SUN RISES.

Daylight did not delay appearing on the horizon. Just as day dawned, a strange, motionless, amazing object, which the birds of heaven were not familiar with, came into sight on the plateau of la Torgue, above the forest of Fougères.

It had been placed there in the night; it was set up, rather than built. From a distance, its straightened lines stood out against the horizon, having the appearance of a Hebrew letter or one of those Egyptian hieroglyphics which formed a part of the alphabet of the ancient enigma.

At first sight, the idea that this object awakened was the idea of uselessness. It stood there among the blossoming heather. One asked what purpose it could serve. Then one felt a shudder come over.

It was a sort of trestle-work, with four posts for legs. At the end of the trestle rose two high joists, upright and straight, joined together at the top by a crossbeam, from which was suspended a triangle which looked black against the blue morning sky. At the other end of the Framework there was a ladder. Between the two joists below, under the triangle, could be seen a sort of panel composed of two movable sections which, when fitted together, showed a round hole about the size of a man’s neck. The upper section of the panel slipped into a groove in such a way that it could be raised or lowered. For the time being, the two semicircles which, when united, formed the collar, were apart. At the foot of the two posts was seen a plank, which moved on hinges and looked like a balance. Beside this plank, there was a long basket, and between the two posts, in front, and at the end of the trestle, a square basket.

It was painted red.

Everything was of wood, except the triangle, which was of iron. One felt that this had been built by men, it was so ugly, mean, petty; and that it was worthy of being set up there by genii, it was so formidable.

This misshapen structure was the guillotine.

In front, a few feet away, in the ravine, there was another monster, la Tourgue. A monster of stone offering a counterpart to the monster of wood, and, we may add, when man has touched wood and stone, the wood and stone are no longer merely wood and stone, but become a part of man.

An edifice is a dogma, a machine is an idea.

La Tourgue was that fatal result of the past which is called the Bastille in Paris, the Tower of London in England, the Spielberg in Germany, the Escurial in Spain, the Kremlin in Moscow, the castle of Saint-Angelo in Rome.

Fifteen hundred years were condensed in la Tourgue, the Middle Ages, vassalage, serfdom, feudalism; in the guillotine, one year, '93; and these twelve months counterbalanced these fifteen centuries.

La Tourgue was the monarchy; the guillotine was the Revolution.

Tragic comparison.

On one side, debt; on the other, maturity. On one side, the inextricable Gothic complication, the serf, the seigneur, the slave, the master, the commonalty, the nobility, the complex code with its ramification of customs, judge and priest in coalition, innumerable bonds, the treasury, the salt taxes, the mortmain, the capitations, the exceptions, the prerogatives, the prejudices, the fanaticisms, the royal privilege of bankruptcy, the sceptre, the throne, the regal will, divine right; on the other side, this simple thing, — a chopping-knife.

On one side, a knot; on the other, an axe.

La Tourgue had long stood alone in this wilderness. It stood there filled with enormous tragedy; with his machicolations, out of which had been poured boiling oil, burning pitch, and melted lead; with its oubliettes, paved with bones; with its quartering room; its funereal form had dominated this forest; it had had fifteen centuries of cruel repose in this shady spot; it had been the sole power, the sole object of awe, and the sole terror in this land; it had reigned; it had been the unique example of barbarism: suddenly, there arose before it and against it something, — more than something, — some one as horrible as itself — the Guillotine.

Stone sometimes seem to have strange eyes. A statue observes, a tower watches, the façade of a building contemplates.

La Tourgue seemed to examine the guillotine.

It seemed to query it?

"What is that?"

That object seemed to have come up out of the earth.

And, in reality, it had come up out of the earth.

In the fatal earth had germinated the ill-favored tree. Out of this earth, watered with so much sweat, with so many tears, with so much blood; — out of this earth, where so many trenches had been dug, so many tombs, so many caves, so many ambushes; — out of this earth, where had rotted all kinds of dead, deprived of life by all kinds of tyranny; — out of this earth, placed over so many abysses, and where had been buried so many dreadful crimes, seeds of horror; — out of this deep earth had arisen, on a notable day, this strange avenger, this cruel swordbearer, and ‘93 had said to the old world: “Here I am!”

And the guillotine had the right to say to the keep: “I am thy daughter.”

And at the same time the keep — for these fatal objects live with a mysterious vitality — felt that it was killed by her.

La Tourgue, in the face of this terrible apparition, felt strangely frightened. It seemed as if it were afraid. The huge mass of granite was majestical and infamous; this plank, with its triangle, was worse. The declining omnipotence felt all the horror of the new omnipotence.

Criminal history surveyed justiciary history. The violence of the past was compared with the violence of the present: the ancient fortress, the ancient prison, the ancient seigneurie, where victims had shrieked as they were torn limb from limb; the building of war and of murder, now useless, disabled, profaned, dismantled, laid bare, a heap of stone, worth no more than a heap of ashes, hideous, magnificent, and dead, full of the dizziness of centuries of horror, — watched the terrible living hour of the present pass by.

Yesterday frowned on to-day, the old cruelty verified and submitted to the new power, that which was a mere nothingness opened its ghastly eyes before this terror, and the phantom regarded the spectre.

Nature is pitiless; she will not consent to withdraw her flowers, her music, her perfumes and her sunbeams from before the face of human abomination; she overwhelms man with the contrast between divine beauty and the ugliness of society; she spares him neither the wing of a butterfly, nor the song of a bird; in the midst of murder, in the midst of vengeance, in the midst of barbarity he must submit to the sight of holy things; he cannot get away from the vast reproach of the universal sweetness and the implacable serenity of the blue sky. The deformity of human laws must be exposed in their nakedness, in the midst of the dazzling beauty of the eternal. Man breaks and crushes, man destroys, man kills; the summer is summer still, the lily is the lily still, the stars of heaven are the stars of heaven still.

Never had the fresh sky of early dawn been more charming than on this morning. A mild breeze stirred the heather, the mists hovered gently over the trees, the forest of Fougères, permeated with the breath of the brooks, was steaming in the dawn like a great censer filled with incense; the blue firmament, the whiteness of the clouds, the clear transparency of the waters, the verdure, that harmonious scale of color from aquamarine to emerald, the groups of brotherly trees, the carpet of grass, the far-stretching plains, — all possessed that purity which is the eternal counsel of nature to man.

In the midst of all this was exposed the frightful shame of human beings; in the midst of all this appeared the fortress and the scaffold, war and punishment, the two figures of the bloodthirsty eld and the bloody present; the night-owl of the past, and the bat of the twilight of the future.

In the presence of creation, blooming, balmy, loving and lovely, the splendid heavens deluged La Tourgue and the guillotine with the light of morning, and seemed to say to man: “See my work, and behold what you are doing.”

Such are the terrible uses that the sun makes of his rays.

This spectacle had spectators.

The four thousand men belonging to the little reconnoitring army were ranged in order of battle on the plain. They surrounded the guillotine on three sides, in such a way as to form around it, in a geometrical figure, the shape of a letter E; the battery placed in the centre of the upright line made the notch of the E. The red machine was enclosed in these three battle fronts, a sort of wall of soldiers, reaching on two sides to the very edge of the escarpment of the plateau, the fourth side, the open side, was the ravine itself, and faced la Tourgue.

This made a long square, in the midst of which was the scaffold. As the day approached, the shadow of the guillotine decreased on the grass.

The artillery-men were at their guns, the matches lighted.

A gentle blue smoke was rising from the ravine; it came from the dying fire of the burning bridge.

This smoke covered without concealing la Tourgue, the high platform of which dominated the whole horizon. Between this platform and the guillotine there was only the ravine. They could talk across it.

The table of the tribunal and the chair draped with tricolored flags had been brought to this platform. The day was drawing behind la Tourgue, and making the mass of the fortress stand out black, and above it in the chair of the tribunal, and under the drapery of flags, the form of a man sitting motionless, with folded arms.

This man was Cimourdain. As on the day before, he wore his civil delegate’s dress, the hat with tricolored cockade on his head, his sabre by his side, and his pistols in his belt.

He was silent. All were silent. The soldiers stood with their guns grounded, their eyes downcast. Their elbows touched, but they did not speak. They were thinking confusedly about this war, — so many battles, the fusillades of the hedges so bravely faced, the swarms of furious peasants driven before their breath, the citadels taken, the battles won, the victories, and it seemed to them now that all this glory turned to shame. A gloomy expectation oppressed the hearts of all.

On the platform of the guillotine they saw the executioner, walking back and forth. The increasing brightness of the morning majestically filled the sky.

Suddenly there was heard that muffled sound made by drums covered with crape. The funereal rumbling came nearer; the ranks opened, and a procession entered the square, and went towards the scaffold.

At first the black drums; then a company of grenadiers, with arms lowered; then a platoon of gendarmes, with drawn swords; then the condemned, — Gauvain.

Gauvain walked free. Neither his feet nor his hands were bound. He was in undress uniform; he carried his sword.

Behind him came another platoon of gendarmes.

Gauvain still wore that expression of thoughtful joy on his face which had lighted it up when he said to Cimourdain, “I am thinking of the future.” Nothing could be more ineffably sublime than this lasting smile.

On reaching the melancholy spot, he first looked towards the top of the tower. He disdained the guillotine.

He knew that Cimourdain would consider it his duty to be present at the execution. His eyes sought him on the platform. He found him there.

Cimourdain was pale and cold. Those near him could not hear him breathe.

When he saw Gauvain, he did not stir.

Meanwhile, Gauvain was approaching the scaffold.

As he walked along, he looked at Cimourdain, and Cimourdain looked at him. It seemed as if Cimourdain strengthened himself with that look.

Gauvain reached the foot of the scaffold. He mounted it. The officer commanding the grenadiers followed him. He unfastnened his sword and gave it to the officer, he took off his cravat and gave it to the executioner.

He was like a vision. Never had he looked so beautiful. His brown hair floated in the wind; it was not the custom to cut off the hair at that time. His white neck was like a woman's, his heroic, sovereign eye was like an archangel's. He was on the scaffold, deep in thought. This place, too, is a summit. Gauvain stood there, superbly calm. The sun wrapped him about as with a halo of glory.

It was necessary, nevertheless, to bind the criminal. The executioner came with a rope in his hand.

At this moment, when the soldiers saw their young captain so evidently destined to the knife, they could contain themselves no longer; the hearts of these warriors burst. That enormous thing, the sob of an army, was heard. A shout arose, —

"Mercy! mercy!"

Some fell on their knees; others threw down their guns and raised their arms towards the platform where Cimourdain was.

A grenadier mounted the steps to the guillotine, crying, "Will you receive a substitute? Take me." All repeated frantically, "Mercy! mercy!" and if this had been heard by lions, they would have been moved or frightened, for soldiers' tears are terrible.

The executioner stopped, not knowing what to do.

Then a short, low voice, which could be heard by all, it was so gruesome, cried from the top of the tower, —

"Enforce the law!"

They recognized that inexorable tone. Cimourdain had spoken. A shudder passed over the army.

The executioner hesitated no longer. He approached, holding his cord.

"Wait," said Gauvain.

He turned towards Cimourdain, with his right hand, which was still free, waved a farewell to him, and then let it be bound.

After it was bound, he said to the executioner, —

"Pardon. One moment more."

And he cried, —

“Long live the Republic!”

They laid him on the plank. That lovely proud head was placed in the infamous collar. The executioner laid back his hair gently, he pressed the spring, the triangle became detached and slipped down slowly at first, then quickly; a hideous sound was heard —

At the same instant another sound was heard. A pistol shot responded to the blow of the axe. Cimourdain had just seized one of the pistols which he had in his belt, and, as Gauvain’s head rolled into the basket, Cimourdain sent a bullet through his heart. The blood poured from his mouth; he fell down dead.

And these two souls, tragic sisters, departed together, the darkness of one mingling with the light of the other.

THE END

NINETY-THREE

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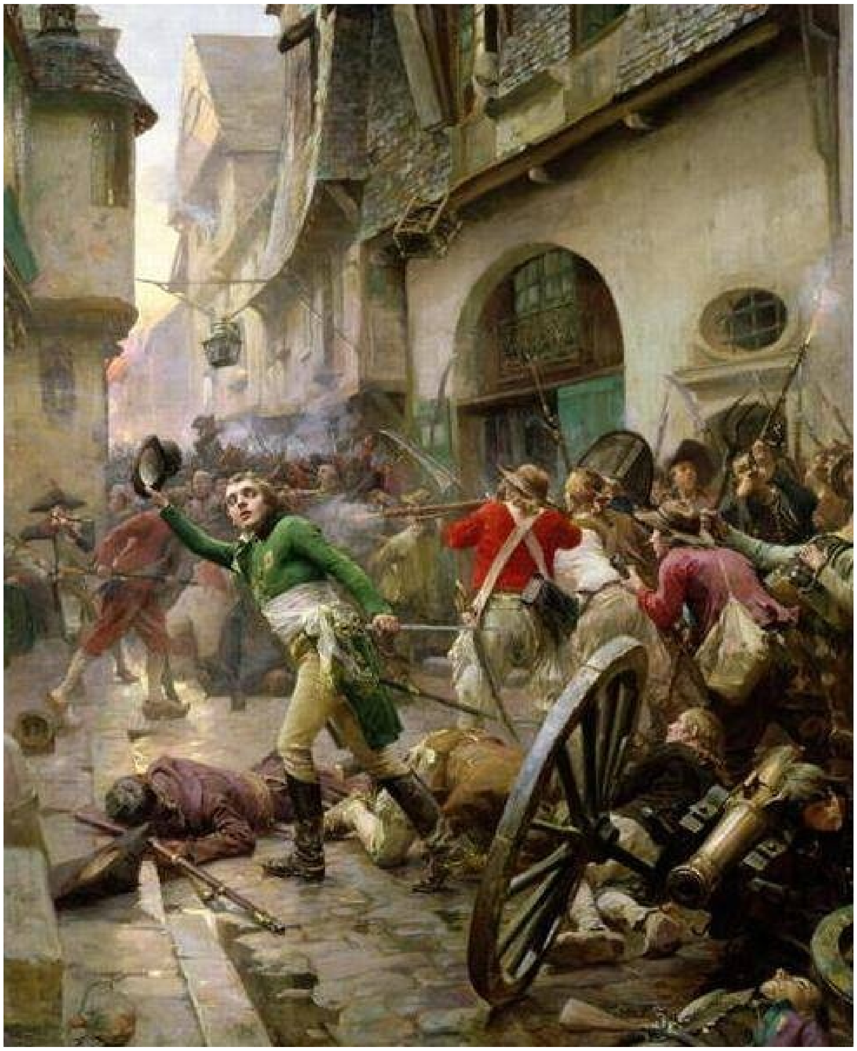

Henri de La Rochejaquelein au combat de Cholet, 17 octobre 1793, peinture de Paul-Émile Boutigny, Musée d’art et d’histoire de Cholet

PREMIÈRE PARTIE

EN MER

LIVRE PREMIER

LE BOIS DE LA SAUDRAIE

Dans les derniers jours de mai 1793, un des bataillons parisiens amenés en Bretagne par Santerre fouillait le redoutable bois de la Saudraie en Astillé. On n'était pas plus de trois cents, car le bataillon était décimé par cette rude guerre. C'était l'époque où, après l'Argonne, Jemmapes et Valmy, du premier bataillon de Paris, qui était de six cents volontaires, il restait vingt-sept hommes, du deuxième trente-trois, et du troisième cinquante-sept. Temps des luttes épiques.

Les bataillons envoyés de Paris en Vendée comptaient neuf cent douze hommes. Chaque bataillon avait trois pièces de canon. Ils avaient été rapidement mis sur pied. Le 25 avril, Gohier étant ministre de la justice et Bouchotte étant ministre de la guerre, la section du Bon-Conseil avait proposé d'envoyer des bataillons de volontaires en Vendée; le membre de la commune Lubin avait fait le rapport; le 1er mai, Santerre était prêt à faire partir douze mille soldats, trente pièces de campagne et un bataillon de canonniers. Ces bataillons, faits si vite, furent si bien faits, qu'ils servent aujourd'hui de modèles; c'est d'après leur mode de composition qu'on forme les compagnies de ligne, ils ont changé l'ancienne proportion entre le nombre des soldats et le nombre des sous-officiers.

Le 28 avril, la commune de Paris avait donné aux volontaires de Santerre cette consigne: *Point de grâce. Point de quartier*. A la fin de mai, sur les douze mille partis de Paris, huit mille étaient morts.

Le bataillon engagé dans le bois de la Saudraie se tenait sur ses gardes. On ne se hâtait point. On regardait à la fois à droite et à gauche, devant soi et derrière soi; Kléber a dit: *Le soldat a un oeil dans le dos*. Il y avait longtemps qu'on marchait. Quelle heure pouvait-il être? à quel moment du jour en était-on? Il eût été difficile de le dire, car il y a toujours une sorte de soir dans de si sauvages halliers, et il ne fait jamais clair dans ce bois-là.

Le bois de la Saudraie était tragique. C'était dans ce taillis que, dès le mois de novembre 1792, la guerre civile avait commencé ses crimes; Mousqueton, le boiteux féroce, était sorti de ces épaisseurs funestes; la quantité de meurtres qui s'étaient commis là faisait dresser les cheveux. Pas de lieu plus épouvantable. Les soldats s'y enfonçaient avec précaution. Tout était plein de fleurs; on avait autour de soi une tremblante muraille de branches d’où tombait la charmante fraîcheur des feuilles; des rayons de soleil trouaient çà et là ces ténèbres vertes; à terre, le glaïeul, la flambe des marais, le narcisse des prés, la gênotte, cette petite fleur qui annonce le beau temps, le safran printanier, brodaient et passementaient un profond tapis de végétation où fourmillaient toutes les formes de la mousse, depuis celle qui ressemble à la chenille jusqu’à celle qui ressemble à l’étoile. Les soldats avançaient pas à pas, en silence, en écartant doucement les broussailles. Les oiseaux gazouillaient au-dessus des bayonnettes.

La Saudraie était un de ces halliers où jadis, dans les temps paisibles, on avait fait la Houiche-ba, qui est la chasse aux oiseaux pendant la nuit; maintenant on y faisait la chasse aux hommes.

Le taillis était tout de bouleaux, de hêtres et de chênes; le sol plat; la mousse et l’herbe épaisse amortissaient le bruit des hommes en marche; aucun sentier, ou des sentiers tout de suite perdus; des houx, des prunelliers sauvages, des fougères, des haies d’arrête-boeuf, de hautes ronces; impossibilité de voir un homme à dix pas. Par instants passait dans le branchage un héron ou une poule d’eau indiquant le voisinage des marais.

On marchait. On allait à l’aventure, avec inquiétude, et en craignant de trouver ce qu’on cherchait.

De temps en temps on rencontrait des traces de campements, des places brûlées, des herbes foulées, des bâtons en croix, des branches sanglantes. Là on avait fait la soupe, là on avait dit la messe, là ou avait pansé des blessés. Mais ceux qui avaient passé avaient disparu. Où étaient-ils? Bien loin peut-être? peut-être là tout près, cachés, l’espingole au poing? Le bois semblait désert. Le bataillon redoublait de prudence. Solitude, donc défiance. On ne voyait personne; raison de plus pour redouter quelqu’un. On avait affaire à une forêt mal famée.

Une embuscade était probable.

Trente grenadiers, détachés en éclaireurs, et commandés par un sergent, marchaient en avant à une assez grande distance du gros de la troupe. La vivandière du bataillon les accompagnait. Les vivandières se joignent volontiers aux avant-gardes. On court des dangers, mais on va voir quelque chose. La curiosité est une des formes de la bravoure féminine.

Tout à coup les soldats de cette petite troupe d’avant-garde eurent ce tressaillement connu des chasseurs qui indique qu’on touche au gîte. On avait entendu comme un souffle au centre d’un fourré, et il semblait qu’on venait de voir un mouvement dans les feuilles. Les soldats se firent signe.

Dans l’espèce de guet et de quête confiée aux éclaireurs, les officiers n’ont pas besoin de s’en mêler; ce qui doit être fait se fait de soi-même.

En moins d’une minute le point où l’on avait remué fut cerné, un cercle de fusils braqués l’entoura; le centre obscur du hallier fut couché en joue de tous les côtés à la fois, et les soldats, le doigt sur la détente, l’oeil sur le lieu suspect, n’attendirent plus pour le mitrailler que le commandement du sergent.

Cependant la vivandière s’était hasardée à regarder à travers les broussailles, et, au moment où le sergent allait crier: Feu! cette femme cria: Halte!

Et se tournant vers les soldats: — Ne tirez pas, camarades!

Et elle se précipita dans le taillis. On l’y suivit.

Il y avait quelqu’un là en effet.

Au plus épais du fourré, au bord d’une de ces petites clairières rondes que font dans les bois les fourneaux à charbon en brûlant les racines des arbres, dans une sorte de trou de branches, espèce de chambre de feuillage, entr’ouverte comme une alcôve, une femme était assise sur la mousse, ayant au sein un enfant qui tétait et sur ses genoux les deux têtes blondes de deux enfants endormis.

C’était là l’embuscade.

— Qu’est-ce que vous faites ici, vous? cria la vivandière.

La femme leva la tête.

La vivandière ajouta, furieuse:

— Etes-vous folle d’être là!

Et elle reprit:

— Un peu plus, vous étiez exterminée!

Et, s’adressant aux soldats, la vivandière ajouta:

— C’est une femme.

— Pardine, nous le voyons bien! dit un grenadier.

La vivandière poursuivit:

— Venir dans les bois se faire massacrer! a-t-on idée de faire des bêtises comme ça!

La femme stupéfaite, effarée, pétrifiée, regardait autour d’elle, comme à travers un rêve, ces fusils, ces sabres, ces bayonnettes, ces faces farouches.

Les deux enfants se réveillèrent et crièrent.

— J’ai faim, dit l’un.

— J’ai peur, dit l’autre.

Le petit continuait de téter.

La vivandière lui adressa la parole.

— C’est toi qui as raison, lui dit-elle.

La mère était muette d’effroi.

Le sergent lui cria:

— N’ayez pas peur, nous sommes le bataillon du Bonnet-Rouge.

La femme trembla de la tête aux pieds. Elle regarda le sergent, rude visage dont on ne voyait que les sourcils, les moustaches, et deux braises qui étaient les deux yeux.

— Le bataillon de la ci-devant Croix-Rouge, ajouta la vivandière.

Et le sergent continua:

— Qui es-tu, madame?

La femme le considérait, terrifiée. Elle était maigre, jeune, pâle, en haillons; elle avait le gros capuchon des paysannes bretonnes et la couverture de laine rattachée au cou avec une ficelle. Elle laissait voir son sein nu avec une indifférence de femelle. Ses pieds, sans bas ni souliers, saignaient.

— C’est une pauvre, dit le sergent.

Et la vivandière reprit de sa voix soldatesque et féminine, douce en dessous:

— Comment vous appelez-vous?

La femme murmura dans un bégaiement presque indistinct:

— Michelle Fléchard.

Cependant la vivandière caressait avec sa grosse main la petite tête du nourrisson.

— Quel âge a ce môme? demanda-t-elle.

La mère ne comprit pas. La vivandière insista.

— Je vous demande l’âge de ça.

— Ah! dit la mère. Dix-huit mois.

— C’est vieux, dit la vivandière. Ça ne doit plus téter. Il faudra me sevrer ça. Nous lui donnerons de la soupe.

La mère commençait à se rassurer. Les deux petits qui s’étaient réveillés étaient plus curieux qu’effrayés. Ils admiraient les plumets.

— Ah! dit la mère, ils ont bien faim.

Et elle ajouta:

— Je n’ai plus de lait.

— On leur donnera à manger, cria le sergent, et à toi aussi. Mais ce n’est pas tout ça. Quelles sont tes opinions politiques?

La femme regarda le sergent et ne répondit pas.

— Entends-tu ma question?

Elle balbutia:

— J’ai été mise au couvent toute jeune, mais je me suis mariée, je ne suis pas religieuse. Les soeurs m’ont appris à parler français. On a mis le feu au village. Nous nous sommes sauvés si vite que je n’ai pas eu le temps de mettre des souliers.

— Je te demande quelles sont tes opinions politiques?

— Je ne sais pas ça.

Le sergent poursuivit:

— C’est qu’il y a des espionnes. Ça se fusille, les espionnes. Voyons.

Parle. Tu n’es pas bohémienne? Quelle est ta patrie?

Elle continua de le regarder comme ne comprenant pas.

Le sergent répéta:

— Quelle est ta patrie?

— Je ne sais pas, dit-elle.

— Comment! tu ne sais pas quel est ton pays?

— Ah! mon pays. Si fait.

— Eh bien, quel est ton pays?

La femme répondit:

— C’est la métairie de Siscoignard, dans la paroisse d’Azé.

Ce fut le tour du sergent d’être stupéfait. Il demeura un moment pensif.

Puis il reprit:

— Tu dis?

— Siscoignard.

— Ce n’est pas une patrie, ça.

— C’est mon pays.

Et la femme, après un instant de réflexion, ajouta:

— Je comprends, monsieur. Vous êtes de France, moi je suis de Bretagne.

— Eh bien?

— Ce n’est pas le même pays.

— Mais c’est la même patrie! cria le sergent.

La femme se borna à répondre:

— Je suis de Siscoignard!

— Va pour Siscoignard! reprit le sergent. C'est de là qu'est ta famille?

— Oui.

— Que fait-elle?

— Elle est toute morte. Je n'ai plus personne.

Le sergent, qui était un peu beau parleur, continua l'interrogatoire.

— On a des parents, que diable! ou on en a eu. Qui es-tu? Parle.

La femme écouta, ahurie, cet — *ou on en a eu* — qui ressemblait plus à un cri de bête fauve qu'à une parole humaine.

La vivandière sentit le besoin d'intervenir. Elle se remit à caresser l'enfant qui tétait, et donna une tape sur la joue aux deux autres.

— Comment s'appelle la téteuse? demanda-t-elle; car c'est une fille, ça.

La mère répondit: Georgette.

— Et l'aîné? Car c'est un homme, ce polisson-là.

— René-Jean.

— Et le cadet? car lui aussi, il est un homme, et joufflu encore!

— Gros-Alain, dit la mère.

— Ils sont gentils, ces petits, dit la vivandière; ça vous a déjà des airs d'être des personnes.

Cependant le sergent insistait.

— Parle donc, madame. As-tu une maison?

— J'en avais une.

— Où ça?

— A Azé.

— Pourquoi n'es-tu pas dans ta maison?

— Parce qu'on l'a brûlée.

— Qui ça?

— Je ne sais pas. Une bataille.

— D'où viens-tu?

— De là.

— Où vas-tu?

— Je ne sais pas.

— Arrive au fait. Qui es-tu?

— Je ne sais pas.

— Tu ne sais pas qui tu es?

— Nous sommes des gens qui nous sauvons.

— De quel parti es-tu?

— Je ne sais pas.

— Es-tu des bleus? Es-tu des blancs? Avec qui es-tu?

— Je suis avec mes enfants.

Il y eut une pause. La vivandière dit:

— Moi, je n'ai pas eu d'enfants. Je n'ai pas eu le temps.

Le sergent recommença.

— Mais tes parents! Voyons, madame, mets-nous au fait de tes parents. Moi, je m'appelle Radoub, je suis sergent, je suis de la rue du Cherche-Midi, mon père et ma mère en étaient, je peux parler de mes parents. Parle-nous des tiens. Dis-nous ce que c'était que tes parents.

— C'étaient les Fléchard. Voilà tout.

— Oui, les Fléchard sont les Fléchard, comme les Radoub sont les Radoub.

Mais on a un état. Quel était l'état de tes parents? Qu'est-ce qu'ils faisaient? Qu'est-ce qu'ils font? Qu'est-ce qu'ils fléchardaient, tes Fléchard?

— C'étaient des laboureurs. Mon père était infirme et ne pouvait travailler à cause qu'il avait reçu des coups de bâton que le seigneur, son seigneur, notre seigneur, lui avait fait donner, ce qui était une bonté, parce que mon père avait pris un lapin, pour le fait de quoi on était jugé à mort; mais le seigneur avait fait grâce, et avait dit: Donnez-lui seulement cent coups de bâton; et mon père était demeuré estropié.

— Et puis?

— Mon grand-père était huguenot. Monsieur le curé l'a fait envoyer aux galères. J'étais toute petite.

— Et puis?

— Le père de mon mari était un faux-saulnier. Le roi l'a fait pendre.

— Et ton mari, qu'est-ce qu'il fait?

— Ces jours-ci, il se battait.

— Pour qui?

— Pour le roi.

— Et puis?

— Dame, pour son seigneur.

— Et puis?

— Dame, pour monsieur le curé.

— Sacré mille noms de noms de brutes! cria un grenadier.

La femme eut un soubresaut d'épouvante.

— Vous voyez, madame, nous sommes des Parisiens, dit gracieusement la vivandière.

La femme joignit les mains et cria:

— O mon Dieu seigneur Jésus!

— Pas de superstitions! reprit le sergent.

La vivandière s’assit à côté de la femme et attira entre ses genoux l’aîné des enfants, qui se laissa faire. Les enfants sont rassurés comme ils sont effarouchés, sans qu’on sache pourquoi. Ils ont on ne sait quels avertissements intérieurs.

— Ma pauvre bonne femme de ce pays-ci, vous avez de jolis mioches, c’est toujours ça. On devine leur âge. Le grand a quatre ans, son frère a trois ans. Par exemple, la momignarde qui tette est fameusement gouliafre. Ah! la monstre! Veux-tu bien ne pas manger ta mère comme ça! Voyez-vous, madame, ne craignez rien. Vous devriez entrer dans le bataillon. Vous feriez comme moi. Je m’appelle Houzarde. C’est un sobriquet. Mais j’aime mieux m’appeler Houzarde que mamzelle Bicorneau, comme ma mère. Je suis la cantinière, comme qui dirait celle qui donne à boire quand on se mitraille et qu’on s’assassine. Le diable et son train. Nous avons à peu près le même pied, je vous donnerai des souliers à moi. J’étais à Paris le l0 août. J’ai donné à boire à Westermann. Ça a marché. J’ai vu guillotiner Louis XVI. Louis Capet, qu’on appelle. Il ne voulait pas. Dame, écoutez donc. Dire que le 13 janvier il faisait cuire des marrons et qu’il riait avec sa famille! Quand on l’a couché de force sur la bascule, qu’on appelle, il n’avait plus ni habit ni souliers; il n’avait que sa chemise, une veste piquée, une culotte de drap gris et des bas de soie gris. J’ai vu ça, moi. Le fiacre où on l’a amené était peint en vert. Voyez-vous, venez avec nous. On est des bons garçons dans le bataillon, vous serez la cantinière numéro deux, je vous montrerai l’état. Oh! c’est bien simple! on a son bidon et sa clochette, on s’en va dans le vacarme, dans les feux de peloton, dans les coups de canon, dans le hourvari, en criant: Qui est-ce qui veut boire un coup, les enfants? Ce n’est pas plus malaisé que ça. Moi, je verse à boire à tout le monde. Ma foi oui. Aux blancs comme aux bleus, quoique je sois une bleue. Et même une bonne bleue. Mais je donne à boire à tous. Les blessés, ça a soif. On meurt sans distinction d’opinion. Les gens qui meurent, ca devrait se serrer la main. Comme c’est godiche de se battre! Venez avec nous. Si je suis tuée, vous aurez ma survivance. Voyez-vous, j’ai l’air comme ça, mais je suis une bonne femme et un brave homme. Ne craignez rien.

Quand la vivandière eut cessé de parler, la femme murmura:

— Notre voisine s’appelait Marie-Jeanne et notre servante s’appelait Marie-Claude.

Cependant le sergent Radoub admonestait le grenadier.

— Tais-toi. Tu as fait peur à madame. On ne jure pas devant les dames.

— C’est que c’est tout de même un véritable massacrement pour l’entendement d’un honnête homme, répliqua le grenadier, que de voir des iroquois de la Chine qui ont eu leur beau-père estropié par le seigneur, leur grand-père galérien par le curé, et leur père pendu par le roi, et qui se battent, nom d’un petit bonhomme! et qui se fichent en révolte, et qui se font écrabouiller pour le seigneur, le curé et le roi!

Le sergent cria:

— Silence dans les rangs!

— On se tait, sergent, reprit le grenadier; mais ça n’empêche pas que c’est ennuyeux qu’une jolie femme comme ça s’expose à se faire casser la gueule pour les beaux yeux d’un calotin.

— Grenadier, dit le sergent, nous ne sommes pas ici au club de la section des Piques. Pas d’éloquence.

Et il se tourna vers la femme.

— Et ton mari, madame? que fait-il? Qu’est-ce qu’il est devenu?

— Il est devenu rien, puisqu’on l’a tué.

— Où ça?

— Dans la haie.

— Quand ça?

— Il y a trois jours.

— Qui ça?

— Je ne sais pas.

— Comment! tu ne sais pas qui a tué ton mari?

— Non.

— Est-ce un bleu? Est-ce un blanc?

— C’est un coup de fusil.

— Et il y a trois jours?

— Oui.

— De quel côté?

— Du côté d’Ernée. Mon mari est tombé. Voilà.

— Et depuis que ton mari est mort, qu’est-ce que tu fais?

— J’emporte mes petits.

— Où les emportes-tu?

— Devant moi.

— Où couches-tu?

— Par terre.

— Qu’est-ce que tu manges?

— Rien.

Le sergent eut cette moue militaire qui fait toucher le nez par les moustaches.

— Rien?

— C’est-à-dire des prunelles, des mûres dans les ronces, quand il y en a de reste de l’an passé, des graines de myrtille, des pousses de fougère.

— Oui. Autant dire rien.

L’aîné des enfants, qui semblait comprendre, dit: J’ai faim.

Le sergent tira de sa poche un morceau de pain de munition et le tendit à la mère. La mère rompit le pain en deux morceaux et les donna aux enfants. Les petits mordirent avidement.

— Elle n’en a pas gardé pour elle, grommela le sergent.

— C’est qu’elle n’a pas faim, dit un soldat.

— C’est qu’elle est la mère, dit le sergent.

Les enfants s’interrompirent.

— A boire, dit l’un.

— A boire, répéta l’autre.

— Il n’y a pas de ruisseau dans ce bois du diable, dit le sergent.

La vivandière prit le gobelet de cuivre qui pendait à sa ceinture à côté de sa clochette, tourna le robinet du bidon qu’elle avait en bandoulière, versa quelques gouttes dans le gobelet et approcha le gobelet des lèvres des enfants.

Le premier but et fit la grimace.

Le second but et cracha.

— C’est pourtant bon, dit la vivandière.

— C’est du coupe-figure? demanda le sergent.

— Oui, et du meilleur. Mais ce sont des paysans.

Et elle essuya son gobelet.

Le sergent reprit:

— Et comme ça, madame, tu te sauves?

— Il faut bien.

— A travers champs, va comme je te pousse?

— Je cours de toutes mes forces, et puis je marche, et puis je tombe.

— Pauvre paroissienne! dit la vivandière.

— Les gens se battent, balbutia la femme. Je suis tout entourée de coups de fusil. Je ne sais pas ce qu'on se veut. On m'a tué mon mari. Je n'ai compris que ça.

Le sergent fit sonner à terre la crosse de son fusil, et cria:

— Quelle bête de guerre! nom d'une bourrique!

La femme continua:

— La nuit passée, nous avons couché dans une émousse.

— Tous les quatre?

— Tous les quatre.

— Couché?

— Couché.

— Alors, dit le sergent, couché debout.

Et il se tourna vers les soldats.

— Camarades, un gros vieux arbre creux et mort où un homme peut se fourrer comme dans une gaîne, ces sauvages appellent ça une émousse. Qu'est-ce que vous voulez? Ils ne sont pas forcés d'être de Paris.

— Coucher dans le creux d'un arbre! dit la vivandière, et avec trois enfants!

— Et, reprit le sergent, quand les petits gueulaient, pour les gens qui passaient et qui ne voyaient rien du tout, ça devait être drôle d'entendre un arbre crier *papa, maman*!

— Heureusement, c'est l'été, soupira la femme.

Elle regardait la terre, résignée, ayant dans les yeux l'étonnement des catastrophes.

Les soldats silencieux faisaient cercle autour de cette misère.

Une veuve, trois orphelins, la fuite, l'abandon, la solitude, la guerre grondant tout autour de l'horizon, la faim, la soif, pas d'autre nourriture que l'herbe, pas d'autre toit que le ciel.

Le sergent s'approcha de la femme et fixa ses yeux sur l'enfant qui tétait. La petite quitta le sein, tourna doucement la tête, regarda avec ses belles prunelles bleues l'effrayante face velue, hérissée et fauve qui se penchait sur elle, et se mit à sourire.

Le sergent se redressa, et l'on vit une grosse larme rouler sur sa joue et s'arrêter au bout de sa moustache comme une perle.

Il éleva la voix.

— Camarades, de tout ça je conclus que le bataillon va devenir père. Est-ce convenu? Nous adoptons ces trois enfants-là.

— Vive la République! crièrent les grenadiers.

— C’est dit, fit le sergent.

Et il étendit les deux mains au-dessus de la mère et des enfants.

— Voilà, dit-il, les enfants du bataillon du Bonnet-Rouge.

La vivandière sauta de joie.

— Trois têtes dans un bonnet! cria-t-elle.

Puis elle éclata en sanglots, embrassa éperdument la pauvre veuve, et lui dit:

— Comme la petite a déjà l’air gamine!

— Vive la République! répétèrent les soldats.

Et le sergent dit à la mère:

— Venez, citoyenne.

LIVRE DEUXIÈME

LA CORVETTE CLAYMORE

I. ANGLETERRE ET FRANCE MÊLÉES

Au printemps de 1793, au moment où la France, attaquée à la fois à toutes ses frontières, avait la pathétique distraction de la chute des Girondins, voici ce qui se passait dans l'archipel de la Manche.

Un soir, le 1er juin, à Jersey, dans la petite baie déserte de Bonnenuit, une heure environ avant le coucher du soleil, par un de ces temps brumeux qui sont commodes pour s'enfuir parce qu'ils sont dangereux pour naviguer, Une corvette mettait à la voile. Ce bâtiment, était monté par un équipage français, mais faisait partie de la flottille anglaise placée en station et comme en sentinelle à la pointe orientale de l'île. Le prince de La Tour-d'Auvergne, qui était de la maison de Bouillon, commandait la flottille anglaise, et c'était par ses ordres, et pour un service urgent et Spécial, que la corvette en avait été détachée.

Cette corvette, immatriculée à la Trinity-House sous le nom de *The Claymore*, était en apparence une corvette de charge, mais en réalité une corvette de guerre. Elle avait la lourde et pacifique allure marchande; il ne fallait pas s'y fier pourtant. Elle avait été construite à deux fins, ruse et force: tromper, s'il est possible, combattre, s'il est nécessaire. Pour le service quelle avait à faire cette nuit-là, le chargement avait été remplacé dans l'entre-pont par trente caronades de fort calibre. Ces trente caronades, soit qu'on prévit une tempête, soit plutôt, qu'on voulût donner une figure débonnaire au navire, étaient à la serre, c'est-à-dire fortement amarrées en dedans par de triples chaînes et la volée appuyée aux écoutilles lamponnées; rien ne se voyait au dehors; les sabords étaient aveuglés: les panneaux étaient fermé; c'était comme un masque mis à la corvette. Ces caronades étaient à roue de bronze à rayons, ancien modèle, dit «modèle radié». Les corvettes d'ordonnance n'ont de canons que sur le pont; celle-ci, faite pour la surprise et l'embûche, était à pont désarmé, et avait été construite de façon à pouvoir porter, comme on vient de le voir, une batterie d'entre-pont. *La Claymore* était d'un gabarit massif et trapu, et pourtant bonne marcheuse: c'était la coque la plus solide de toute la marine anglaise, et au combat elle valait presque une frégate, quoiqu'elle n'eût pour mât d'artimon qu'un mâtereau avec une simple brigantine. Son gouvernail, de forme rare et savante, avait une membrure courbe presque unique qui avait coûté cinquante livres sterling dans les chantiers de Southampton.

L’équipage, tout français, était composé d’officiers émigrés et de matelots déserteurs. Ces hommes étaient triés; pas un qui ne fût bon marin, bon soldat et bon royaliste. Ils avaient le triple fanatisme du navire, de l’épée et du roi.

Un demi bataillon d’infanterie de marine, pouvant au besoin être débarqué, était amalgamé à l’équipage.

La corvette *Claymore* avait pour capitaine un chevalier de Saint-Louis, le comte du Boisberthelot, un des meilleurs officiers de l’ancienne marine royale, pour second le chevalier de La Vieuville qui avait commandé aux gardes-françaises la compagnie où Hoche avait été sergent, et pour pilote le plus sagace patron de Jersey, Philip Gacquoit.

On devinait que ce navire avait à faire quelque chose d’extraordinaire. Un homme en effet venait de s’y embarquer, qui avait tout l’air d’entrer dans une aventure. C’était un haut vieillard, droit et robuste, à figure sévère, dont il eût été difficile de préciser l’âge, parce qu’il semblait à la fois vieux et jeune; un de ces hommes qui sont pleins d’années et pleins de force, qui ont des cheveux blancs sur le front et un éclair dans le regard; quarante ans pour la rigueur et quatre-vingts ans pour l’autorité. Au moment où il était monté sur la corvette, son manteau de mer s’était entr’ouvert, et l’on avait pu le voir vêtu, sous ce manteau, de larges braies dites *bragou-bras*, de bottes-jambières, et d’une veste en peau de chèvre montrant en dessus le cuir passementé de soie, et en dessous le poil hérissé et sauvage, costume complet du paysan breton. Ces anciennes vestes bretonnes étaient à deux fins, servaient aux jours de fête comme aux jours de travail, et se retournaient, offrant à volonté le côté velu ou le côté brodé; peaux de bête toute la semaine, habits de gala le dimanche. Le vêtement de paysan que portait ce vieillard était, comme pour ajouter à une vraisemblance cherchée et voulue, usé aux genoux et aux coudes, et paraissait avoir été longtemps porté, et le manteau de mer, de grosse étoffe, ressemblait à un haillon de pêcheur. Ce vieillard avait sur la tête le chapeau rond du temps, à haute forme et à large bord, qui, rabattu, a l’aspect campagnard, et, relevé d’un côté par une ganse à cocarde, a l’aspect militaire. Il portait ce chapeau rabaissé à la paysanne, sans ganse ni cocarde.

Lord Balcarras, gouverneur de l’île, et le prince de la Tour-d’Auvergne, l’avaient en personne conduit et installé à bord. L’agent secret des princes, Gélambre, ancien garde du corps de M. le comte d’Artois, avait lui-même veillé à l’aménagement de sa cabine, poussant le soin et le respect, quoique fort bon gentilhomme, jusqu'à porter derrière ce vieillard sa valise. En le quittant pour retourner à terre, M. de Gélambre avait fait à ce paysan un profond salut; lord Balcarras lui avait dit: *Bonne chance, général,* et le prince de la Tour-d'Auvergne lui avait dit: *Au revoir, mon cousin*.

«Le paysan», c'était en effet le nom sous lequel les gens de l'équipage s'étaient mis tout de suite à désigner leur passager, dans les courts dialogues que les hommes de mer ont entre eux; mais, sans en savoir plus long, ils comprenaient que ce paysan n'était pas plus un paysan que la corvette de guerre n'était une corvette de charge.

Il y avait peu de vent. *La Claymore* quitta Bonnenuit, passa devant Boulay-Bay, et fut quelque temps en vue, courant des bordées; puis elle décrut dans la nuit croissante, et s'effaça.

Une heure après, Gélambre, rentré chez lui à Saint-Hélier, expédia, par l'exprès de Southampton, à M. le comte d'Artois, au quartier général du duc d'York, les quatre lignes qui suivent:

«Monseigneur, le départ vient d'avoir lieu. Succès certain. Dans huit jours toute la côte sera en feu, de Granville à Saint-Malo.»

Quatre jours auparavant, par émissaire secret, le représentant Prieur de la

Marne, en mission près de l'armée des côtes de Cherbourg, et momentanément

en résidence à Granville, avait reçu, écrit de la même écriture que la

Dépêche précédente, le message qu'on va lire:

«Citoyen représentant, le 1er juin, à l'heure de la marée, la corvette de guerre *Claymore,* à batterie masquée, appareillera pour déposer sur la côte de France un homme dont voici le signalement: haute taille, vieux, cheveux blancs, habits de paysan, mains d'aristocrate. Je vous enverrai demain plus de détails. Il débarquera le 2 au matin. Avertissez la croisière, capturez la corvette, faites guillotiner l'homme.»

II. NUIT SUR LE NAVIRE ET SUR LE PASSAGER

La corvette, au lieu de prendre par le sud et de se diriger vers Sainte-Catherine, avait mis le cap au nord, puis avait tourné à l’ouest et s’était résolument engagée entre Serk et Jersey dans le bras de mer qu’on appelle le Passage de la Déroute. Il n’y avait alors de phare sur aucun point de ces deux côtes.

Le soleil s’était bien couché; la nuit était noire, plus que ne le sont d’ordinaire les nuits d’été; c’était une nuit de lune, mais de vastes nuages, plutôt de l’équinoxe que du solstice, plafonnaient le ciel, et, selon toute apparence, la lune ne serait visible que lorsqu’elle toucherait l’horizon, au moment de son coucher. Quelques nuées pendaient jusque sur la mer et la couvraient de brume.

Toute cette obscurité était favorable.

L’intention du pilote Gacquoil était de laisser Jersey à gauche et Guernesey à droite, et de gagner, par une marche hardie entre les Hanois et les Douvres, une baie quelconque du littoral de Saint-Malo, route moins courte que par les Minquiers, mais plus sûre, la croisière française ayant pour consigne habituelle de faire surtout le guet entre Saint-Hélier et Granville.

Si le vent s’y prêtait, si rien ne survenait, et en couvrant la corvette de toile, Gacquoil espérait toucher la côte de France au point du jour.

Tout allait bien, la corvette venait de dépasser Gros-Nez; vers neuf heures, le temps fit mine de bouder, comme disent les marins, et il y eut du vent et de la mer; mais ce vent était bon, et cette mer était forte sans être violente. Pourtant, à de certains coups de lame, l’avant de la Corvette embarquait.

Le «paysan» que lord Balcarras avait appelé *général*, et auquel le prince de La Tour-d’Auvergne avait dit: *mon cousin*, avait le pied marin et se promenait avec une gravité tranquille sur le pont de la corvette. Il n’avait pas l’air de s’apercevoir qu’elle était fort secouée. De temps en temps il tirait de la poche de sa veste une tablette de chocolat dont il cassait et mâchait un morceau, ses cheveux blancs n’empêchant pas qu’il eût toutes ses dents.

Il ne parlait à personne, si ce n’est, par instants, bas et brièvement, au capitaine, qui l’écoutait avec déférence et semblait considérer ce passager comme plus commandant que lui-même.

La Claymore, habilement pilotée, côtoya, inaperçue dans le brouillard, le long escarpement nord de Jersey, serrant de près la côte, à cause du redoutable écueil Pierres-de-Leeq qui est au milieu du bras de mer entre Jersey et Serk. Gacquoil, debout à la barre, signalant tour à tour la Grève de Leeq, Gros-Nez, Plémont, faisait glisser la corvette parmi ces chaînes de récifs, en quelque sorte à tâtons, mais avec certitude, comme un homme qui est de la maison et qui connaît les êtres de l’océan. La corvette n’avait pas de feu à l’avant, de crainte de dénoncer son passage dans ces mers surveillées. On se félicitait du brouillard. On atteignit la Grande-Etape; la brume était si épaisse qu’à peine distinguait-on la haute silhouette du Pinacle. On entendit dix heures sonner au clocher de Saint-Ouen, signe que le vent se maintenait vent-arrière. Tout continuait d’aller bien; la mer devenait plus houleuse à cause du voisinage de la Corbière.

Un peu après dix heures, le comte du Boisberthelot et le chevalier de La Vieuville reconduisirent l’homme aux habits de paysan jusqu’à sa cabine, qui était la propre chambre du capitaine. An moment d’y entrer, il leur dit en baissant la voix:

— Vous le savez, messieurs, le secret importe. Silence jusqu’au moment de l’explosion. Vous seuls connaissez ici mon nom.

— Nous l’emporterons an tombeau, répondit Boisberthelot.

— Quant à moi, repartit le vieillard, fussé-je devant la mort, je ne le dirais pas.

Et il entra dans sa chambre.

III. NOBLESSE ET ROTURE MÊLÉES

Le commandant et le second remontèrent sur le pont et se mirent à marcher côte à côte en causant. Ils parlaient évidemment de leur passager, et voici à peu près le dialogue que le vent dispersait dans les ténèbres.

Boisberthelot grommela à demi-voix à l’oreille de La Vieuville:

— Nous allons voir si c’est un chef.

La Vieuville répondit:

— En attendant, c’est un prince.

— Presque.

— Gentilhomme en France, mais prince en Bretagne.

— Comme les La Trémoille, comme les Rohan.

— Dont il est l’allié.

Boisberthelot reprit:

— En France et dans les carrosses du roi, il est marquis comme je suis comte et comme vous êtes chevalier.

— Ils sont loin les carrosses! s’écria La Vieuville. Nous en sommes au tombereau.

Il y eut un silence.

Boisberthelot repartit:

— A défaut d’un prince français, on prend un prince breton.

— Faute de grives… Non, faute d’un aigle, on prend un corbeau.

— J’aimerais mieux un vautour, dit Boisberthelot. Et la Vieuville répliqua:

— Certes! un bec et des griffes.

— Nous allons voir.

— Oui, reprit La Vieuville, il est temps qu’il y ait un chef. Je suis de l’avis de Tinténiac: *un chef, et de la poudre*! Tenez, commandant, je connais à peu près tous les chefs possibles et impossibles; ceux d’hier, ceux d’aujourd’hui et ceux de demain; pas un n’est la caboche de guerre qu’il nous faut. Dans cette diable de Vendée, il faut un général qui soit en même temps un procureur; il faut ennuyer l’ennemi, lui disputer le moulin, le buisson, le fossé, le caillou, lui faire de mauvaises querelles, tirer parti de tout, veiller à tout, massacrer beaucoup, faire des exemples, n’avoir ni sommeil ni pitié. À cette heure, dans cette armée de paysans, il y a des héros, il n’y a pas de capitaines. D’Elbée est nul, Leseure est malade, Bonchamps fait grâce; il est bon, c'est bête. La Rochejaquelein est un magnifique sous-lieutenant; Silz est un officier de rase campagne, impropre à la guerre d'expédients; Cathelineau est un Charretier naïf, Stofflet est un garde-chasse rusé, Bérard est inepte, Boulainvilliers est ridicule, Charette est horrible. Et je ne parle pas du barbier Gaston. Car, Mordemonbleu! À quoi bon chamailler la révolution et quelle différence y a-t-il entre les républicains et nous si nous faisons commander les gentilshommes par les perruquiers?

— C'est que cette chienne de révolution nous gagne, nous aussi.

— Une gale qu'a la France?

— Gale du tiers état, reprit Boisberthelot. L'Angleterre seule peut nous tirer de là.

— Elle nous en tirera, n'en doutez pas, capitaine.

— En attendant, c'est laid.

— Certes, des manants partout; la monarchie qui a pour général en chef Stofflet, garde-chasse de M. de Maulevrier, n'a rien à envier à la république qui a pour ministre Pache, fils du portier du duc de Castries. Quel vis-à-vis que cette guerre de la Vendée: d'un côté Santerre le brasseur, de l'autre Gaston le merlan!

— Mon cher La Vieuville, je fais un certain cas de ce Gaston. Il n'a point mal agi dans son commandement de Guéménée. Il a gentiment arquebusé trois cents bleus après leur avoir fait creuser leur fosse par eux-mêmes.

— A la bonne heure, mais je l'eusse fait tout aussi bien que lui.

— Pardieu, sans doute. Et moi aussi.

— Les grands actes de guerre, reprit La Vieuville, veulent de la noblesse dans qui les accomplit. Ce sont choses de chevaliers et non de perruquiers.

— Il y a pourtant dans ce tiers état, répliqua Boisberthelot, des hommes estimables. Tenez, par exemple, cet horloger Joly. Il avait été sergent au régiment de Flandre, il se fait chef vendéen, il commande une bande de la côte; il a un fils, qui est républicain, et, pendant que le père sert dans les blancs, le fils sert dans les bleus. Rencontre. Bataille. Le père fait prisonnier son fils, et lui brûle la cervelle.

— Celui-là est bien, dit La Vieuville.

— Un Brutus royaliste, reprit Boisberthelot.

— Cela n'empêche pas qu'il est insupportable d'être commandé par un

Coquereau, un Jean-Jean, un Moulins, un Focart, un Bouju, un Chouppes!

— Mon cher chevalier, la colère est la même de l'autre côté. Nous sommes pleins de bourgeois; ils sont pleins de nobles. Croyez-vous que les sans-culottes soient contents d'être commandés par le comte de Canclaux, le vicomte de Miranda, le vicomte de Beauharnais, le comte de Valence, le marquis de Custine et le duc de Biron!

— Quel gâchis!

— Et le duc de Chartres!

— Fils d'Egalité. Ah çà, quand sera-t-il roi, celui-là?

— Jamais.

— Il monte au trône. Il est servi par ses crimes.

— Et desservi par ses vices, dit Boisberthelot.

Il y eut encore un silence, et Boisberthelot poursuivit:

— Il avait pourtant voulu se réconcilier. Il était venu voir le roi.

J'étais là, à Versailles, quand on lui a craché dans le dos.

— Du haut du grand escalier?

— Oui.

— On a bien fait.

— Nous l'appelions Bourbon le Bourbeux.

— Il est chauve, il a des pustules, il est régicide, pouah!

Et La Vieuville ajouta:

— Moi, j'étais à Ouessant avec lui.

— Sur le *Saint-Esprit?*

— Oui.

— S'il eût obéi au signal de tenir le vent que lui faisait l'amiral d'Orvilliers, il empêchait les anglais de passer.

— Certes.

— Est-il vrai qu'il se soit, caché à fond de cale?

— Non. Mais il faut le dire tout de même.

Et La Vieuville éclata de rire.

Boisberthelot reprit:

— Il y a des imbéciles. Tenez, ce Boulaivilliers dont vous parliez, La Vieuville, je l'ai connu, je l'ai vu de près. Au commencement, les paysans étaient armés de piques; ne s'était-il pas fourré dans la tête d'en faire des piquiers? Il voulait leur apprendre l'exercice de la pique-en-biais et de la pique-traînante-le-fer-devant. Il avait rêvé de transformer ces sauvages en soldats de ligne. Il prétendait leur enseigner à émousser les angles d'un carré et à faire des bataillons à centre vide. Il leur baragouinait la vieille langue militaire; pour dire un chef d'escouade, il disait, un *cap d'escadre*, ce qui était l'appellation des caporaux sous Louis XIV. Il s'obstinait à créer un régiment avec tous ces braconniers; il avait des compagnies régulières dont les sergents se rangeaient en rond tous les soirs, recevant le mot, et le contre-mot du sergent de la colonelle qui les disait tout bas au sergent de la lieutenance, lequel les disait à son voisin qui les transmettait au plus proche, et ainsi d'oreille en oreille jusqu'au dernier. Il cassa un officier qui ne s'était pas levé tête nue pour recevoir le mot d'ordre de la bouche du sergent. Vous jugez comme cela a réussi. Ce butor ne comprenait pas que les paysans veulent être menés à la paysanne, et qu'on ne fait pas des hommes de caserne avec des hommes des bois. Oui, j'ai connu ce Boulainvilliers-là.

Ils firent quelques pas, chacun songeant de son côté.

Puis la causerie continua.

— A propos, se confirme-t-il que Dampierre soit tué?

— Oui, commandant.

— Devant Condé?

— Au camp de Pamars. D'un boulet de canon.

Boisberthelot soupira.

— Le comte de Dampierre. Encore un des nôtres qui était des leurs!

— Bon voyage! dit La Vieuville.

— Et Mesdames? où sont-elles?

— A Trieste.

— Toujours?

— Toujours.

Et La Vieuville s'écria:

— Ah! cette république! que de dégâts pour peu de chose! Quand on pense que cette révolution est venue pour un déficit de quelques millions!

— Se défier des petits points de départ, dit Boisberthelot.

— Tout va mal, reprit La Vieuville.

— Oui, La Rouarie est mort, Du Dresnay est idiot. Quels tristes meneurs que tous ces évêques, ce Coucy, l'évêque de la Rochelle, ce Beaupoil Saint-Aulaire, l'évêque de Poitiers, ce Mercy, l'évêque de Luçon, amant de madame de L'Eschasserie!…

— Laquelle s'appelle Servanteau, vous savez, commandant; L'Eschasserie est un nom de terre.

— Et ce faux évêque d’Agra, qui est curé de je ne sais quoi!

— De Dol. Il s’appelle Guillot de Folleville. Il est brave, du reste, et se bat.

— Des prêtres quand il faudrait des soldats! Des évêques qui ne sont pas des évêques! des généraux qui ne sont pas des généraux!

La Vieuville interrompit Boisberthelot.

— Commandant, vous avez le *Moniteur* dans votre cabine?

— Oui.

— Qu’est-ce donc qu’on joue à Paris dans ce moment-ci?

— *Adèle et Paulin*, et *la Caverne*.

— Je voudrais voir ça.

— Vous le verrez. Nous serons à Paris dans un mois.

Boisberthelot réfléchit un instant et ajouta:

— Au plus tard. M. Windham l’a dit à milord Hood.

— Mais alors, commandant, tout ne va pas si mal?

— Tout irait bien, parbleu, à la condition que la guerre de Bretagne fût bien conduite.

La Vieuville hocha la tête.

— Commandant, reprit-il, débarquerons-nous l’infanterie de marine?

— Oui, si la côte est pour nous; non, si elle est hostile. Quelquefois il faut que la guerre enfonce les portes, quelquefois il faut qu’elle se lisse. La guerre civile doit toujours avoir dans sa poche une fausse clef. On fera le possible. Ce qui importe, c’est le chef.

Et Boisberthelot, pensif, ajouta:

— La Vieuville, que penseriez-vous du chevalier de Dieuzie?

— Du jeune?

— Oui.

— Pour commander?

— Oui.

— Que c’est encore un officier de plaine et de bataille rangée. La broussaille ne connaît que le paysan.

— Alors, résignez-vous au général Stofflet et au général Cathelineau.

La Vieuville rêva un moment, et dit:

— Il faudrait un prince, un prince de France, un prince du sang. Un vrai prince.

— Pourquoi? Qui dit prince…

— Dit poltron. Je le sais, commandant. Niais c’est pour l’effet sur les gros yeux bêtes des gars.

— Mon cher chevalier, les princes ne veulent pas venir.

— On s’en passera.

Boisberthelot fit ce mouvement machinal qui consiste à se presser le front avec la main, comme pour en faire sortir une idée.

Il reprit:

— Enfin, essayons de ce général-ci.

— C’est un grand gentilhomme.

— Croyez-vous qu’il suffira?

— Pourvu qu’il soit bon, dit La Vieuville.

— C’est-à-dire féroce, dit Boisberthelot.

Le comte et le chevalier se regardèrent.

— Monsieur du Boisberthelot, vous avez dit le mot. Féroce. Oui, c’est là ce qu’il nous faut. Ceci est la guerre sans miséricorde. L’heure est aux sanguinaires. Les régicides ont coupé la tête à Louis XVI, nous arracherons les quatre membres aux régicides. Oui, le général nécessaire est le général inexorable. Dans l’Anjou et dans le haut Poitou, les chefs font les magnanimes, on patauge dans la générosité, rien ne va. Dans le Marais et dans le pays de Retz, les chefs sont atroces, tout marche. C’est parce que Charette est féroce qu’il tient tête à Parrein. Hyène contre hyène.

Boisberthelot n’eut pas le temps de répondre à La Vieuville. La Vieuville eut la parole brusquement coupée par un cri désespéré, et en même temps on entendit un bruit qui ne ressemblait à aucun des bruits qu’on entend. Ce cri et ces bruits venaient du dedans du navire.

Le capitaine et le lieutenant se précipitèrent vers l’entrepont, mais ne purent y entrer. Tous les canonniers remontaient éperdus.

Une chose effrayante venait d’arriver.

IV. TORMENTUM BELLI

Une des caronades de la batterie, une pièce de vingt-quatre, s’était détachée. Ceci est le plus redoutable peut-être des évènements de mer. Rien de plus terrible ne peut arriver à un navire de guerre au large et en pleine marche.

Un canon qui casse son amarre devient brusquement on ne sait quelle bête surnaturelle. C’est une machine qui se transforme en un monstre. Cette masse court sur ses roues, a des mouvements de bille de billard, penche avec le roulis, plonge avec le tangage, va, vient, s’arrête, paraît méditer, reprend sa course, traverse comme une flèche le navire d’un bout à l’autre, pirouette, se dérobe, s’évade, se cabre, heurte, ébrèche, tue, extermine. C’est un bélier qui bat à sa fantaisie une muraille. Ajoutez ceci: le bélier est de fer, la muraille est de bois. C’est l’entrée en liberté de la matière; on dirait que cet esclave éternel se venge; il semble que la méchanceté qui est dans ce que nous appelons les objets inertes sorte et éclate tout à coup; cela a l’air de perdre patience et de prendre une étrange revanche obscure; rien de plus inexorable que la colère de l’inanimé. Ce bloc forcené a les sauts de la panthère, la lourdeur de l’éléphant, l’agilité de la souris, l’opiniâtreté de la cognée, l’inattendu de la houle, les coups de coude de l’éclair, la surdité du sépulcre. Il pèse dix mille, et il ricoche comme une balle d’enfant. Ce sont des tournoiements brusquement coupés d’angles droits. Et que faire? Comment en venir à bout? Une tempête cesse, un cyclone passe, un vent tombe, un mât brisé se remplace, une voie d’eau se bouche, un incendie s’éteint: mais que devenir avec cette énorme brute de bronze? De quelle façon s’y prendre? Vous pouvez raisonner un dogue, étonner un taureau, fasciner un boa, effrayer un tigre, attendrir un lion; aucune ressource avec ce monstre, un canon lâché. Vous ne pouvez pas le tuer, il est mort. Et en même temps, il vit. Il vit d’une vie sinistre qui lui vient de l’infini. Il a sous lui son plancher qui le balance. Il est remué par le navire qui est remué par la mer qui est remuée par le vent. Cet exterminateur est un jouet. Le navire, les flots, les souffles, tout cela le tient; de là sa vie affreuse. Que faire à cet engrenage? Comment entraver ce mécanisme monstrueux du naufrage? Comment prévoir ces allées et venues, ces retours, ces arrêts, ces chocs? Chacun de ses coups au bordage peut défoncer le navire. Comment deviner ces affreux méandres? On a affaire à un projectile qui se ravise, qui a l’air d’avoir des idées, et qui change à chaque instant de direction. Comment arrêter ce qu’il faut éviter? L’horrible canon se démène, mange, recule, frappe à droite, frappe à gauche, fuit, passe, déconcerte l’attente, broie l’obstacle, écrase les hommes comme des mouches. Toute la terreur de la situation est dans la mobilité du plancher. Comment combattre un plan incliné qui a des caprices? Le navire a, pour ainsi dire, dans le ventre la foudre prisonnière qui cherche à s’échapper; quelque chose comme un tonnerre roulant sur un tremblement de terre.

En un instant tout l’équipage fut sur pied. La faute était au chef de pièce qui avait négligé de serrer l’écrou de la chaîne d’amarrage et mal entravé les quatre roues de la caronade; ce qui donnait du jeu à la semelle et au châssis, désaccordait les deux plateaux, et avait fini par disloquer la brague. Le combleau s’était cassé, de sorte que le canon n’était plus ferme à l’affût. La brague fixe, qui empêche le recul, n’était pas encore en usage a cette époque. Un paquet de mer étant venu frapper le sabord, la caronade mal amarrée avait reculé et brisé sa chaîne, et s’était mise à errer formidablement dans l’entre-pont.

Qu’on se figure, pour avoir une idée de ce glissement étrange, une goutte d’eau courant sur une vitre.

Au moment où l’amarre cassa, les canonniers étaient dans la batterie. Les uns groupés, les autres épars, occupés aux ouvrages de mer que font les marins en prévoyance d’un branle-bas de combat. La caronade, lancée par le tangage, fit un trouée dans ce tas d’hommes et en écrasa quatre du premier coup, puis, reprise et décochée par le roulis, elle coupa en deux un cinquième misérable, et alla heurter à la muraille de bâbord une pièce de la batterie qu’elle démonta. De là le cri de détresse qu’on venait d’entendre. Tous les hommes se pressèrent à l’escalier-échelle. La batterie se vida en un clin d’oeil.

L’énorme pièce avait été laissée seule. Elle était livrée à elle-même. Elle était sa maîtresse, et la maîtresse du navire. Elle pouvait en faire ce qu’elle voulait. Tout cet équipage d’hommes accoutumés à rire dans la bataille tremblait. Dire l’épouvante est impossible.

Le capitaine Boisberthelot et le lieutenant La Vieuville, deux intrépides pourtant, s’étaient arrêtés au haut de l’escalier, et, muets, pâles, hésitants, regardaient dans l’entre-pont. Quelqu’un les écarta du coude et descendit.

C’était leur passager, le paysan, l’homme dont ils venaient de parler le moment d’auparavant.

Arrivé au bas de l’escalier-échelle, il s’arrêta.

V. VIS ET VIR

Le canon allait et venait dans l’entre-pont. On eût dit le chariot vivant de l’Apocalypse. Le falot de marine, oscillant sous l’étrave de la batterie, ajoutait à cette vision un vertigineux balancement d’ombre et de lumière. La forme du canon s’effaçait dans la violence de sa course, et il apparaissait, tantôt noir dans la clarté, tantôt reflétant de vagues blancheurs dans l’obscurité.

Il continuait l’exécution du navire. Il avait déjà fracassé quatre autres pièces et fait dans la muraille deux crevasses, heureusement au-dessus de la flottaison, mais par où l’eau entrerait, s’il survenait une bourrasque. Il se ruait frénétiquement sur la membrure; les porques très robustes résistaient, les bois courbes ont une solidité particulière; mais on entendait leurs craquements sous cette massue démesurée, frappant, avec une sorte d’ubiquité inouïe, de tous les côtés à la fois. Un grain de plomb secoué dans une bouteille n’a pas des percussions plus insensées et plus rapides. Les quatre roues passaient et repassaient sur les hommes tués, les coupaient, les dépeçaient et les déchiquetaient, et des cinq cadavres avaient fait vingt tronçons qui roulaient à travers la batterie; les têtes mortes semblaient crier; des ruisseaux de sang se tordaient sur le plancher selon les balancements du roulis. Le vaigrage, avarié en plusieurs endroits, commençait à s’entr’ouvrir. Tout le navire était plein d’un bruit monstrueux.

Le capitaine avait promptement repris son sang-froid, et sur son ordre ou avait jeté par le carré, dans l’entre-pont, tout ce qui pouvait amortir et entraver la course effrénée du canon, les matelas, les hamacs, les rechanges de voiles, les rouleaux de cordages, les sacs d’équipage, et les ballots de faux assignats dont la corvette avait tout un chargement, cette infamie anglaise étant regardée comme de bonne guerre.

Mais que pouvaient faire ces chiffons, personne n’osant descendre pour les disposer comme il eût fallu? En quelques minutes ce fut de la charpie.

Il y avait juste assez de mer pour que l’accident fût aussi complet que possible. Une tempête eût été désirable; elle eût peut-être culbuté le canon, et une fois les quatre roues en l’air, on eût pu s’en rendre maître.

Cependant le ravage s’aggravait. Il y avait des écorchures et même des fractures aux mâts, qui, emboîtés dans la charpente de la quille, traversent les étages des navires et y font comme de gros piliers ronds. Sous les frappements convulsifs du canon, le mât de misaine s'était lézardé, le grand mât lui-même était entamé. La batterie se disloquait. Dix pièces sur trente étaient hors de combat; les brèches au bordage se multipliaient, et la corvette commençait à faire eau.

Le vieux passager descendu dans l'entre-pont semblait un homme de pierre au bas de l'escalier. Il jetait sur cette dévastation un oeil sévère. Il ne bougeait point. Il paraissait impossible de faire un pas dans la batterie.

Chaque mouvement de la caronade en liberté ébauchait l'effondrement du navire. Encore quelques instants, et le naufrage était inévitable.

Il fallait périr ou couper court an désastre; prendre un parti; mais lequel?

Quelle combattante que cette caronade!

Il s'agissait d'arrêter cette épouvantable folle.

Il s'agissait de colleter cet éclair.

Il s'agissait de terrasser cette foudre.

Boisberthelot dit à La Vieuville:

— Croyez-vous en Dieu, chevalier?

La Vieuville répondit:

— Oui. Non. Quelquefois.

— Dans la tempête?

— Oui. Et dans des moments comme celui-ci.

— Il n'y a en effet que Dieu qui puisse nous tirer de là, dit Boisberthelot.

Tous se taisaient, laissant la caronade faire son fracas horrible.

Du dehors, le flot battant le navire répondait aux chocs du canon par des coups de mer. On eût dit deux marteaux alternant.

Tout à coup, dans cette espèce de cirque inabordable où bondissait le canon échappé, on vit un homme apparaître, une barre de fer à la main. C'était l'auteur de la catastrophe, le chef de pièce coupable de négligence et cause de l'accident, le maître de la caronade. Avant fait le mal, il voulait le réparer. Il avait empoigné une barre d'anspect d'une main, une drosse à nud coulant de l'autre main, et il avait sauté par le carré dans l'entre-pont.

Alors une chose farouche commença; spectacle titanique; le combat du canon contre le canonnier; la bataille de la matière et de l'intelligence, le duel de la chose contre l'homme.

L'homme s'était posté dans un angle, et, sa barre et sa corde dans ses deux poings, adossé à une porque, affermi sur ses jarrets qui semblaient deux piliers d’acier, livide, calme, tragique, comme enraciné dans le plancher, il attendait.

Il attendait que le canon passât près de lui.

Le canonnier connaissait sa pièce, et il lui semblait qu’elle devait le connaître. Il vivait depuis longtemps avec elle. Que de fois il lui avait fourré la main dans la gueule! C’était son monstre familier. Il se mit à lui parler comme à son chien. — Viens, disait-il. Il l’aimait peut-être.

Il paraissait souhaiter qu’elle vînt à lui.

Mais venir à lui, c’était venir sur lui. Et alors il était perdu. Comment éviter l’écrasement? Là était la question. Tous regardaient, terrifiés. Pas une poitrine ne respirait librement, excepté peut-être celle du vieillard qui était seul dans l’entre-pont avec les deux combattants, témoin sinistre.

Il pouvait lui-même être broyé par la pièce. Il ne bougeait pas.

Sous eux le flot, aveugle, dirigeait le combat.

Au moment où, acceptant ce corps-à-corps effroyable, le canonnier vint provoquer le canon, un hasard des balancements de la mer fit que la caronade demeura un moment immobile et comme stupéfaite. — Viens donc! lui disait l’homme. Elle semblait écouter.

Subitement elle sauta sur lui. L’homme esquiva le choc.

La lutte s’engagea. Lutte inouïe. Le fragile se colletant avec l’invulnérable. Le belluaire de chair attaquant la bête d’airain. D’un côté une force, de l’autre une âme.

Tout cela se passait dans une pénombre. C’était comme la vision indistincte d’un prodige.

Une âme, chose étrange, on eût dit que le canon en avait une, lui aussi; mais une âme de haine et de rage. Cette cécité paraissait avoir des yeux. Le monstre avait l’air de guetter l’homme. Il y avait, on l’eût pu croire du moins, de la ruse dans cette masse. Elle aussi choisissait son moment. C’était on ne sait quel gigantesque insecte de fer ayant ou semblant avoir une volonté de démon. Par moments, cette sauterelle colossale cognait le plafond bas de la batterie, puis elle retombait sur ses quatre roues comme un tigre sur ses quatre griffes, et se remettait à courir sur l’homme. Lui, souple, agile, adroit, se tordait comme une couleuvre sous tous ces mouvements de foudre. Il évitait les rencontres, mais les coups auxquels il se dérobait tombaient sur le navire et continuaient de le démolir.

Un bout de chaîne cassée était resté accroché à la caronade. Cette chaîne s’était enroulée on ne sait comment dans la vis du bouton de culasse. Une extrémité de la chaîne était fixée à l’affût. L’autre, libre, tournoyait éperdument autour du canon dont elle exagérait tous les soubresauts. La vis la tenait comme une main fermée, et cette chaîne, multipliant les coups de bélier par des coups de lanière, faisait autour du canon un tourbillon terrible, fouet de fer dans un poing d’airain. Cette chaîne compliquait le combat.

Pourtant l’homme luttait. Même, par instants, c’était l’homme qui attaquait le canon; il rampait le long du bordage, sa barre et sa corde à la main; et le canon avait l’air de comprendre, et, comme s’il devinait un piège, fuyait. L’homme, formidable, le poursuivait.

De telles choses ne peuvent durer longtemps. Le canon sembla se dire tout à coup: Allons! il faut en finir! et il s’arrêta. On sentit l’approche du dénoûment. Le canon, comme en suspens, semblait avoir ou avait, car pour tous c’était un être, une préméditation féroce. Brusquement, il se précipita sur le canonnier. Le canonnier se rangea de côté, le laissa passer, et lui cria en riant: A refaire! Le canon, comme furieux, brisa une caronade à bâbord; puis, ressaisi par la fronde invisible qui le tenait, il s’élança à tribord sur l’homme, qui échappa. Trois caronades s’effondrèrent sous la poussée du canon; alors, comme aveugle et ne sachant plus ce qu’il faisait, il tourna le dos à l’homme, roula de l’arrière à l’avant, détraqua l’étrave, et alla faire une brèche à la muraille de la proue. L’homme s’était réfugié au pied de l’escalier, à quelques pas du vieillard témoin. Le canonnier tenait sa barre d’anspect en arrêt. Le canon parut l’apercevoir, et, sans prendre la peine de se retourner, recula sur l’homme avec une promptitude de coup de hache. L’homme acculé au bordage était perdu. Tout l’équipage poussa un cri.

Mais le vieux passager jusqu’alors immobile s’était élancé, lui-même plus rapide que toutes ces rapidités farouches. Il avait saisi un ballot de faux assignats, et, au risque d’être écrasé, il avait réussi à le jeter entre les roues de la caronade. Ce mouvement décisif et périlleux n’eût pas été exécuté avec plus de justesse et de précision par un homme rompu à tous les exercices décrits dans le livre de Durosel sur la *Manoeuvre du canon de mer*.

Le ballot fit l’effet d’un tampon. Le caillou enraye un bloc, une branche d’arbre détourne une avalanche. La caronade trébucha. Le canonnier à son tour, saisissant ce joint redoutable, plongea sa barre de fer entre les rayons d’une des roues d’arrière. Le canon s’arrêta.

Il penchait. L’homme, d’un mouvement de levier imprimé à la barre, le fit basculer. La lourde masse se renversa, avec le bruit d’une cloche qui s’écroule, et l’homme se ruant à corps perdu, ruisselant de sueur, passa le noeud coulant de la drosse au cou de bronze du monstre terrassé.

C’était fini. L’homme avait vaincu. La fourmi avait eu raison du mastodonte; le pygmée avait fait le tonnerre prisonnier.

Les soldats et les marins battirent des mains.

Tout l’équipage se précipita avec des câbles et des chaînes, et en un instant le canon fut amarré.

Le canonnier salua le passager.

— Monsieur, lui dit-il, vous m’avez sauvé la vie.

Le vieillard avait repris son attitude impassible, et ne répondit pas.

VI. LES DEUX PLATEAUX DE LA BALANCE

L’homme avait vaincu, mais on pouvait dire que le canon avait vaincu aussi. Le naufrage immédiat était évité, mais la corvette n’était point sauvée. Le délabrement du navire paraissait irrémédiable. Le bordage avait cinq brèches, dont une fort grande à l’avant; vingt caronades sur trente gisaient dans leur cadre. La caronade ressaisie et remise à la chaîne était elle-même hors de service; la vis du bouton de culasse était forcée, et par conséquent le pointage impossible. La batterie était réduite à neuf pièces. La cale faisait eau. Il fallait tout de suite courir aux avaries et faire jouer les pompes.

L’entre-pont, maintenant qu’on le pouvait regarder, était effroyable à voir. Le dedans d’une cage d’éléphant furieux n’est pas plus démantelé.

Quelle que fût pour la corvette la nécessité de ne pas être aperçue, il y avait une nécessité plus impérieuse encore, le sauvetage immédiat. Il avait fallu éclairer le pont par quelques falots plantés çà et là dans le bordage.

Cependant, tout le temps qu’avait duré cette diversion tragique, l’équipage étant absorbé par une question de vie ou de mort, on n’avait guère su ce qui se passait hors de la corvette. Le brouillard s’était épaissi; le temps avait changé; le vent avait fait du navire ce qu’il avait voulu; on était hors de route, à découvert de Jersey et de Guernesey, plus au sud qu’on ne devait l’être; on se trouvait en présence d’une mer démontée. De grosses vagues venaient baiser les plaies béantes de la corvette, baisers redoutables. Le bercement de la mer était menaçant. La brise devenait bise. Une bourrasque, une tempête peut-être, se dessinait. On ne voyait pas à quatre lames devant soi.

Pendant que les hommes d’équipage réparaient en hâte et sommairement les ravages de l’entre-pont, aveuglaient les voies d’eau et remettaient en batterie les pièces échappées au désastre, le vieux passager était remonté sur le pont.

Il s’était adossé au grand mât.

Il n’avait point pris garde à un mouvement qui avait eu lieu dans le navire. Le chevalier de La Vieuville avait fait mettre en bataille des deux côtés du grand mât les soldats d’infanterie de marine, et, sur un coup de sifflet du maître d’équipage, les matelots occupés à la manoeuvre s’étaient rangés debout sur les vergues.

Le comte du Boisberthelot s’avança vers le passager.

Derrière le capitaine marchait un homme hagard, haletant, les habits en désordre, l’air satisfait pourtant.

C’était le canonnier qui venait de se montrer si à propos dompteur de monstres, et qui avait eu raison du canon.

Le comte fit au vieillard vêtu en paysan le salut militaire, et lui dit:

— Mon général, voilà l’homme.

Le canonnier se tenait debout, les yeux baissés, dans l’attitude d’ordonnance.

Le comte du Boisberthelot reprit:

— Mon général, en présence de ce qu’a fait cet homme, ne pensez-vous pas qu’il y a pour ses chefs quelque chose à faire?

— Je le pense, dit le vieillard.

— Veuillez donner des ordres, repartit Boisberthelot.

— C’est à vous de les donner. Vous êtes le capitaine.

— Mais vous êtes le général, reprit Boisberthelot.

Le vieillard regarda le canonnier.

— Approche, dit-il.

Le canonnier fit un pas.

Le vieillard se tourna vers le comte du Boisberthelot, détacha la croix de Saint-Louis du capitaine, et la noua à la vareuse du canonnier.

— Hurrah! crièrent les matelots.

Les soldats de marine présentèrent les armes.

Et le vieux passager, montrant du doigt le canonnier ébloui, ajouta:

— Maintenant, qu’on fusille cet homme.

La stupeur succéda à l’acclamation.

Alors, au milieu d’un silence de tombe, le vieillard éleva la voix. Il dit:

— Une négligence a compromis ce navire. A cette heure il est peut-être perdu. Etre en mer, c’est être devant l’ennemi. Un navire qui fait une traversée est une armée qui livre une bataille. La tempête se cache, mais ne s’absente pas. Toute la mer est une embuscade. Peine de mort à toute faute commise en présence de l’ennemi. Il n’y a pas de faute réparable. Le courage doit être récompensé, et la négligence doit être punie.

Ces paroles tombaient l’une après l’autre, lentement, gravement, avec une sorte de mesure inexorable, comme des coups de cognée sur un chêne.

Et le vieillard, regardant les soldats, ajouta:

— Faites.

L’homme à la veste duquel brillait la croix de Saint-Louis courba la tête.

Sur un signe du comte du Boisberthelot, deux matelots descendirent dans l’entre-pont, puis revinrent apportant le hamac-suaire; l’aumônier du bord, qui depuis le départ était en prière dans le carré des officiers, accompagnait les deux matelots; un sergent détacha de la ligne de bataille douze soldats qu’il rangea sur deux rangs, six par six; le canonnier, sans dire un mot, se plaça entre les deux files. L’aumônier, le crucifix à la main, s’avança et se mit près de lui.

— Marche, dit le sergent. Le peloton se dirigea à pas lents vers l’avant; les deux matelots, portant le suaire, suivaient.

Un morne silence se fit sur la corvette. Un ouragan lointain soufflait.

Quelques instants après, une détonation éclata dans les ténèbres, une lueur passa, puis tout se tut, et l’on entendit le bruit que fait un corps en tombant dans la mer.

Le vieux passager, toujours adossé au grand mât, avait croisé les bras, et songeait. Boisberthelot, dirigeant vers lui l’index de sa main gauche, dit bas à La Vieuville:

— La Vendée a une tête.

VII. QUI MET A LA VOILE MET A LA LOTERIE

Mais qu’allait devenir la corvette?

Les nuages, qui toute la nuit s’étaient mêlés aux vagues, avaient fini par s’abaisser tellement qu’il n’y avait plus d’horizon et que toute la mer était comme sous un manteau. Rien que le brouillard. Situation toujours périlleuse, même pour un navire bien portant.

A la brume s’ajoutait la houle.

On avait mis le temps à profit; on avait allégé la corvette en jetant à la mer tout ce qu’on avait pu déblayer du dégât. fait par la caronade, les canons démontés, les affûts brisés, les membrures tordues ou déclouées, les pièces de bois ou de fer fracassées; on avait ouvert les sabords, et l’on avait fait glisser sur des planches dans les vagues les cadavres et les débris humains enveloppés dans des prélarts.

La mer commençait à n’être plus tenable. Non que la tempête devînt précisément imminente; il semblait au contraire qu’on entendît décroître l’ouragan qui bruissait derrière l’horizon, et la rafale s’en allait au nord; mais les lames restaient très hautes, ce qui indiquait un mauvais fond de mer, et, malade comme était la corvette, elle était peu résistante aux secousses, et les grandes vagues pouvaient lui être funestes.

Gacquoil était à la barre, pensif.

Faire bonne mine à mauvais jeu, c’est l’habitude des commandants de mer.

La Vieuville, qui était une nature d’homme gai dans les désastres, accosta

Gacquoil.

— Eh bien, pilote, dit-il, l’ouragan rate. L’envie d’éternuer n’aboutit pas. Nous nous en tirerons. Nous aurons du vent. Voilà tout.

Gacquoil, sérieux, répondit:

— Qui a du vent a du flot.

Ni riant, ni triste, tel est le marin. La réponse avait un sens inquiétant. Pour un navire qui fait eau, avoir du flot c’est s’emplir vite. Gacquoil avait souligné ce pronostic d’un vague froncement de sourcil. Peut-être, après la catastrophe; du canon et du canonnier, La Vieuville avait-il dit, un peu trop tôt, des paroles presque joviales et légères. Il y a des choses qui portent malheur quand on est au large. La mer est secrète; on ne sait jamais ce qu’elle a. Il faut prendre garde.

La Vieuville, sentit le besoin de redevenir grave.

— Où sommes-nous, pilote? demanda-t-il.

Le pilote répondit:

— Nous sommes dans la volonté de Dieu.

Un pilote est un maître; il faut toujours le laisser faire et il faut souvent le laisser dire. D’ailleurs cette espèce d’homme parle peu. La Vieuville s’éloigna.

La Vieuville avait fait une question au pilote, ce fut l’horizon qui répondit.

La mer se découvrit tout à coup.

Les brumes qui traînaient sur les vagues se déchirèrent, tout l’obscur bouleversement des flots s’étala à perte de vue dans un demi-jour crépusculaire, et voici ce qu’on vit.

Le ciel avait comme un couvercle de nuages; mais les nuages ne touchaient plus la mer; à l’est apparaissait une blancheur qui était le lever du jour, à l’ouest blêmissait une autre blancheur qui était le coucher de la lune. Ce deux blancheurs faisaient sur l’horizon, vis-à-vis l’une de l’autre; deux bandes étroites de lueur pâle entre la mer sombre et le ciel ténébreux.

Sur ces deux clartés se dessinaient, droites et immobiles, des silhouettes noires.

Au couchant, sur le ciel éclairé par la lune se découpaient trois hautes roches, debout comme des peulvens celtiques.

Au levant, sur l’horizon pâle du matin se dressaient huit voiles rangées en ordre et espacées d’une façon redoutable.

Les trois roches étaient un écueil; les huit voiles étaient une escadre.

On avait derrière soi les Minquiers, un rocher qui avait mauvaise réputation, devant soi la croisière française. A l’ouest l’abîme, à l’est le carnage; on était entre un naufrage et un combat.

Pour faire face à l’écueil, la corvette avait titre coque trouée, un gréement disloqué, une mâture ébranlée dans sa racine; pour faire face à la bataille, elle avait une artillerie dont vingt et un canons sur trente étaient démontés, et dont les meilleurs canonniers étaient morts.

Le point du jour était très faible, et l’on avait un peu de nuit devant soi. Cette nuit pouvait même durer encore assez longtemps, étant surtout faite par les nuages, qui étaient hauts, épais et profonds, et avaient l'aspect solide d'une voûte.

Le vent qui avait fini par emporter les brumes d'en bas drossait la corvette sur les Minquiers.

Dans l'excès de fatigue et de délabrement où elle était, elle n'obéissait presque plus à la barre, elle roulait plutôt qu'elle ne voguait, et, souffletée par le flot, elle se laissait faire par lui.

Les Minquiers, écueil tragique, étaient plus âpres encore en ce temps-là qu'aujourd'hui. Plusieurs tours de cette citadelle de l'abîme ont été rasées par l'incessant dépècement que fait la mer; la configuration des écueils change; ce n'est pas en vain que les flots s'appellent les lames, chaque marée est un trait de scie. A cette époque, toucher les Minquiers, c'était périr.

Quant à la croisière, c'était cette escadre de Cancale, devenue depuis célèbre sous le commandement de ce capitaine Duchesne que Léquinio appelait «le Père Duchène».

La situation était critique. La corvette avait, sans le savoir, pendant le déchaînement de la caronade, dévié et marché plutôt vers Granville que vers Saint-Malo. Quand même elle eût pu naviguer et faire voile, les Minquiers lui barraient le retour vers Jersey et la croisière lui barrait l'arrivée en France.

Du reste, de tempête point. Mais, comme l'avait dit le pilote, il y avait du flot. La mer, roulant sous un vent rude et sur un fond déchirant, était sauvage.

La mer ne dit jamais tout de suite ce qu'elle veut. Il y a de tout dans le gouffre, même de la chicane. On pourrait presque dire que la mer a une procédure, elle avance et recule, elle propose et se dédit, elle ébauche une bourrasque et elle y renonce, elle promet l'abîme et ne le tient pas, elle menace le nord et frappe le sud. Toute la nuit la corvette la Claymore avait eu le brouillard et craint la tourmente; la mer venait de se démentir, mais d'une façon farouche; elle avait esquissé la tempête et réalisé l'écueil. C'était toujours, sous une autre forme, le naufrage.

Et à la perte sur les brisants s'ajoutait l'extermination par le combat. Un ennemi complétait l'autre.

La Vieuville s'écria à travers son vaillant rire:

— Naufrage ici, bataille là. Des deux côtés nous avons le quine.

VIII. 9 = 380

La corvette n’était presque plus qu’une épave.

Dans la blême clarté éparse, dans la noirceur des nuées, dans les mobilités confuses de l’horizon, dans les mystérieux froncements des vagues, il y avait une solennité sépulcrale. Excepté le vent soufflant d’un souffle hostile, tout se taisait. La catastrophe sortait du gouffre avec majesté. Elle ressemblait plutôt à une apparition qu’à une attaque. Rien ne bougeait dans les rochers, rien ne remuait dans les navires. C’était on ne sait quel colossal silence. Avait-on affaire à quelque chose de réel? On eût dit un rêve passant sur la mer. Les légendes ont de ces visions; la corvette était en quelque sorte entre l’écueil démon et la flotte fantôme.

Le comte du Boisberthelot donna à demi-voix des ordres à La Vieuville qui descendit dans la batterie, puis le capitaine saisit sa longue-vue et vint se placer à l’arrière à côté du pilote.

Tout l’effort de Gacquoil était de maintenir la corvette debout au flot; car, prise de côté par le vent et par la mer, elle eût inévitablement chaviré.

— Pilote, dit le capitaine, où sommes-nous?

— Sur les Minquiers.

— De quel côté?

— Du mauvais.

— Quel fond?

— Roche criarde.

— Peut-on s’embosser?

— On peut toujours mourir, dit le pilote.

Le capitaine dirigea sa lunette d’approche vers l’ouest et examina les Minquiers; puis il la tourna vers l’est et considéra les voiles en vue.

Le pilote continua, comme se parlant à lui-même:

— C’est les Minquiers. Cela sert de reposoir à la mouette rieuse quand elle s’en va de Hollande et au grand goëland à manteau noir.

Cependant le capitaine avait compté les voiles.

Il y avait bien en effet huit navires correctement disposés et dressant sur l’eau leur profil de guerre. On apercevait au centre la haute stature d’un vaisseau à trois ponts.

Le capitaine questionna le pilote.

— Connaissez-vous ces voiles?

— Certes! répondit Gacquoil.

— Qu’est-ce?

— C’est l’escadre.

— De France.

— Du diable.

Il y eut un silence. Le capitaine reprit:

— Toute la croisière est-elle là?

— Pas toute.

En effet, le 2 avril, Valazé avait annoncé à la Convention que dix frégates et six vaisseaux de ligne croisaient dans la Manche. Ce souvenir revint à l’esprit du capitaine.

— Au fait, dit-il, l’escadre est de seize bâtiments. Il n’y en a ici que huit.

— Le reste, dit Gacquoil, traîne par là-bas sur toute la côte, et espionne.

Le capitaine, tout en regardant à travers sa longue-vue, murmura:

— Un vaisseau à trois ponts, deux frégates de premier rang, cinq de deuxième rang.

— Mais moi aussi, grommela Gacquoil, je les ai espionnés.

— Bons bâtiments, dit le capitaine. J’ai un peu commandé tout cela.

— Moi, dit Gacquoil, je les ai vus de près. Je ne prends pas l’un pour l’autre. J’ai leur signalement dans la cervelle.

Le capitaine passa sa longue-vue au pilote.

— Pilote, distinguez-vous bien le bâtiment de haut bord?

— Oui, mon commandant, c’est, le vaisseau *la Côte-d’Or*.

— Qu’ils ont débaptisé, dit le capitaine. C’était autrefois *Les États-de-Bourgogne*. Un navire neuf. Cent vingt-huit canons.

Il tira de sa poche un carnet et un crayon, et écrivit sur le carnet le chiffre 128.

Il poursuivit:

— Pilote, quelle est la première voile à bâbord?

— C’est *l’Expérimentée*.

— Frégate de premier rang. Cinquante-deux canons. Elle était en armement à

Brest il y a deux mois.

Le capitaine marqua sur son carnet le chiffre 52.

— Pilote, reprit-il, quelle est la deuxième voile à bâbord?

— *La Dryade*.

— Frégate de premier rang. Quarante canons de dix-huit. Elle a été dans l'Inde. Elle a une belle histoire militaire.

Et il écrivit au-dessous du chiffre 52 le chiffre 40; puis, relevant la tête:

— A tribord, maintenant.

— Mon commandant, ce sont toutes des frégates de second rang. Il y en a cinq.

— Quelle est la première à partir du vaisseau?

— *La Résolue*.

— Trente-deux pièces de dix-huit. Et la seconde?

— *Le Richemont*.

— Même force. Après?

— *L'Athée*

[Footnote 1: *Archive de la Marine*. Etat de la flotte en mars 1793.]

— Drôle de nom pour aller en mer. Après?

— *La Calypso*.

— Après?

— *La Preneuse*.

— Cinq frégates de trente-deux chacune.

Le capitaine écrivit au-dessous des premiers chiffres, 160.

— Pilote, dit-il, vous les reconnaissez bien.

— Et vous, répondit Gacquoil, vous les connaissez bien, mon commandant.

Reconnaître est quelque chose, connaître est mieux.

Le capitaine avait l'oeil fixé sur son carnet et additionnait entre ses dents.

— Cent vingt-huit, cinquante-deux, quarante, cent soixante.

En ce moment, La Vieuville remontait sur le pont.

— Chevalier, lui cria le capitaine, nous sommes en présence de trois cent quatre-vingts pièces.

— Soit, dit La Vieuville.

— Vous revenez de l'inspection, La Vieuville; combien décidément avons-nous de pièces en état de faire feu?

— Neuf.

— Soit, dit à son tour Boisberthelot.

Il reprit la longue-vue des mains du pilote, et regarda l'horizon.

Les huit navires silencieux et noirs semblaient immobiles, mais ils grandissaient.

Ils se rapprochaient insensiblement.

La Vieuville fit le salut militaire.

— Commandant, dit La Vieuville, voici mon rapport. Je me défiais de cette corvette *Claymore*. C'est toujours ennuyeux d'être embarqué brusquement sur un navire qui ne vous connaît pas ou qui ne vous aime pas. Navire anglais, traître aux français. La chienne de caronade l'a prouvé. J'ai fait la visite. Bonnes ancres. Ce n'est pas du fer de loupe; c'est forgé avec des barres soudées au martinet. Les cigales des ancres sont solides. Câbles excellents, faciles à débiter, ayant la longueur d'ordonnance, cent vingt brasses. Force munitions. Six canonniers morts. Cent soixante-onze coups à tirer par pièce.

— Parce qu'il n'y a plus que neuf pièces, murmura le capitaine.

Boisberthelot braqua sa longue-vue sur l'horizon. La lente approche de l'escadre continuait.

Les caronades ont un avantage, trois hommes suffisent pour les manoeuvrer; mais elles ont un inconvénient, elles portent moins loin et tirent moins juste que les canons. Il fallait donc laisser arriver l'escadre à portée de caronade.

Le capitaine donna ses ordres à voix basse. Le silence se fit dans le navire. On ne sonna point le branle-bas, mais on l'exécuta. La corvette était aussi hors de combat contre les hommes que contre les flots. On tira tout le parti possible de ce reste d'un navire de guerre. On accumula près des drosses, sur le passavant, tout ce qu'il y avait d'aussières et de grelins de rechange pour raffermir au besoin la mâture. Ou mit en ordre le poste des blessés. Selon la mode navale d'alors, on bastingua le pont, ce qui est une garantie contre les balles, mais non contre les boulets. On apporta les passe-balles, bien qu'il fût un peu tard pour vérifier les calibres; mais on n'avait pas prévu tant d'incidents. Chaque matelot reçut une giberne et mit dans sa ceinture une paire de pistolets et un poignard. On plia les branles; on pointa l'artillerie; on prépara la mousqueterie; on disposa les haches et les grappins; on tint prêtes les soutes à gargousses et les soutes à boulets; ou ouvrit la soute aux poudres. Chaque homme prit son poste. Tout cela sans dire une parole et comme dans la chambre d'un mourant. Ce fut rapide et lugubre.

Puis on embossa la corvette. Elle avait six ancres comme une frégate. On les mouilla toutes les six; l'ancre de veille à l'avant, l'ancre de toue à l’arrière, l’ancre de flot du côté du large, l’ancre de jusant du côté des brisants, l’ancre d’affourche à tribord, et la maîtresse-ancre à bâbord.

Le neuf caronades qui restaient vivantes furent mises en batterie toutes les neuf d’un seul côté, du côté de l’ennemi.

L’escadre, non moins silencieuse, avait, elle aussi, complété sa manoeuvre. Les huit bâtiments formaient maintenant un demi-cercle dont les Minquiers faisaient la corde. *La Claymore*, enfermée dans ce demi-cercle, et d’ailleurs garrottée par ses propres ancres, était adossée à l’écueil, c’est-à-dire au naufrage.

C’était comme une meute autour d’un sanglier, ne donnant pas de voix, mais montrant les dents.

Il semblait de part et d’autre qu’on s’attendait.

Les canonniers de *la Claymore* étaient à leurs pièces.

Boisberthelot dit à La Vieuville:

— Je tiendrais à commencer le feu.

— Plaisir de coquette, dit La Vieuville.

IX. QUELQU’UN ÉCHAPPE

Le passager n’avait pas quitté le pont, il observait tout, impassible. Boisberthelot s’approcha de lui.

— Monsieur, lui dit-il, les préparatifs sont faits. Nous voilà maintenant cramponnés à notre tombeau, nous ne lâcherons pas prise. Nous sommes prisonniers de l’escadre ou de l’écueil. Nous rendre à l’ennemi ou sombrer dans les brisants, nous n’avons pas d’autre choix. Il nous reste une ressource, mourir. Combattre vaut mieux que naufrager. J’aime mieux être mitraillé que noyé; en fait de mort, je préfère le feu à l’eau. Mais mourir, c’est notre affaire à nous autres, ce n’est pas la vôtre, à vous. Vous êtes l’homme choisi par les princes, vous avez une grande mission, diriger la guerre de Vendée. Vous de moins, c’est peut-être la monarchie perdue; vous devez donc vivre. Notre honneur à nous est de rester ici, le vôtre est d’en sortir. Vous allez, mon général, quitter le navire. Je vais vous donner un homme et un canot. Gagner la côte par un détour n’est pas impossible. Il n’est pas encore jour. Les lames sont hautes, la mer est obscure, vous échapperez. Il y a des cas où fuir, c’est vaincre.

Le vieillard fit, de sa tète sévère, un grave signe d’acquiescement.

Le comte du Boisberthelot éleva la voix.

— Soldats et matelots! cria-t-il.

Tous les mouvements s’arrêtèrent, et, de tous les points du navire, les visages se tournèrent vers le capitaine.

Il poursuivit:

— L’homme qui est parmi nous représente le roi. Il nous est confié, nous devons le conserver. Il est nécessaire au trône de France; à défaut d’un prince, il sera, c’est du moins notre attente, le chef de la Vendée. C’est un grand officier de guerre. Il devait aborder en France avec nous, il faut qu’il y aborde sans nous. Sauver la tète, c’est tout sauver.

— Oui! oui! oui! crièrent toutes les voix de l’équipage.

Le capitaine continua:

— Il va courir, lui aussi, de sérieux dangers. Atteindre la côte n’est pas aisé. Il faudrait que le canot fût grand pour affronter la haute mer, et il faut qu’il soit petit pour échapper à la croisière. Il s’agit d’aller atterrir à un point quelconque, qui soit sûr, et plutôt du côté de Fougères que du côté de Coutances. Il faut un matelot solide, bon rameur et, bon nageur; qui soit du pays et qui connaisse les passes. Il y a encore assez de nuit pour que le canot puisse s'éloigner de la corvette sans être aperçu. Et puis, il va avoir de la fumée qui achèvera de le cacher. Sa petitesse l'aidera à se tirer des bas-fonds. Où la panthère est prise, la belette échappe. Il n'y a pas d'issue pour nous, il y en a pour lui. Le canot s'éloignera à force de rames, les navires ennemis ne le verront pas; et d'ailleurs, pendant ce temps-là, nous ici, nous allons les amuser. Est-ce dit?

— Oui! oui! oui! cria l'équipage.

— Il n'y a pas une minute à perdre, reprit le capitaine. Y a-t-il un homme de bonne volonté?

Un matelot dans l'obscurité sortit des rangs, et dit:

— Moi.

X. ÉCHAPPE-T-IL?

Quelques instants après, un de ces petits canots qu'on appelle you-you et qui sont spécialement affectés au service des capitaines s'éloignait du navire. Dans ce canot il y avait deux hommes, le vieux passager qui était à l'arrière, et le matelot «de bonne volonté» qui était à l'avant. La nuit était encore très obscure. Le matelot, conformément aux indications du capitaine, ramait vigoureusement dans la direction des Minquiers. Aucune autre issue n'était d'ailleurs possible.

On avait jeté au fond du canot quelques provisions, un sac de biscuit, une longe de boeuf fumé et un baril d'eau.

Au moment où le you-you prit la mer, La Vieuville, goguenard devant le gouffre, se pencha par-dessus l'étambot du gouvernail de la corvette, et ricana cet adieu au canot:

— C'est bon pour s'échapper, et excellent pour se noyer.

— Monsieur, dit le pilote, ne rions plus.

L'écart se fit vite et il y eut promptement bonne distance entre la corvette et le canot. Le vent et le flot étaient d'accord avec le rameur, et la petite barque fuyait rapidement, ondulant dans le crépuscule et cachée par les grands plis des vagues.

Il y avait sur la mer on ne sait quelle sombre attente.

Tout à coup, dans ce vaste et tumultueux silence de l'océan, il s'éleva une voix qui, grossie par le porte-voix comme par le masque d'airain de la tragédie antique, semblait presque surhumaine.

C'était le capitaine Boisberthelot qui prenait la parole.

— Marins du roi, cria-t-il, clouez le pavillon blanc au grand mât. Nous allons voir se lever notre dernier soleil.

Et un coup de canon partit de la corvette.

— Vive le roi! cria l'équipage.

Alors on entendit au fond de l'horizon un autre cri, immense, lointain, confus, distinct pourtant:

— Vive la République!

Et un bruit pareil au bruit de trois cents foudres éclata dans les profondeurs de l'océan.

La lutte commençait.

La mer se couvrit de fumée et de feu.

Les jets d’écume que font les boulets en tombant dans l’eau piquèrent les vagues de tous les côtés.

La Claymore se mit à cracher de la flamme sur les huit navires. En même temps toute l’escadre groupée en demi-lune autour de *la Claymore* faisait feu de toutes ses batteries. L’horizon s’incendia. On eût dit un volcan qui sort de la mer. Le vent tordait cette immense pourpre de la bataille où les navires apparaissaient et disparaissaient comme des spectres. Au premier plan, le squelette noir de la corvette se dessinait sur ce fond rouge.

On distinguait à la pointe du grand mât le pavillon fleurdelysé.

Les deux hommes qui étaient dans le canot se taisaient.

La bas-fond triangulaire des Minquiers, sorte de trinacrie sous-marine, est plus vaste que l’île entière de Jersey: la mer le couvre; il a pour point culminant un plateau qui émerge des plus hautes marées et duquel se détachent au nord-est six puissants rochers rangés en droite ligne, qui font l’effet d’une grande muraille écroulée çà et là. Le détroit entre le plateau et les six écueils n’est praticable qu’aux barques d’un très faible tirant d’eau. Au delà de ce détroit on trouve le large.

Le matelot qui s’était chargé du sauvetage du canot engagea l’embarcation dans le détroit. De cette façon il mettait les Minquiers entre la bataille et le canot. Il nagea avec adresse dans l’étroit chenal, évitant les récifs à bâbord comme à tribord; les rochers maintenant masquaient la bataille. La lueur de l’horizon et le fracas furieux de la canonnade commençaient à décroître, à cause de la distance qui augmentait; mais, à la continuité des détonations, on pouvait comprendre que la corvette tenait bon et qu’elle voulait épuiser, jusqu’à la dernière, ses cent quatrevingt-onze bordées.

Bientôt le canot se trouva dans une eau libre, hors de l’écueil, hors de la bataille, hors de la portée des projectiles.

Peu à peu le modelé de la mer devenait moins sombre, les luisants brusquement noyés de noirceurs s’élargissaient, les écumes compliquées se brisaient en jets de lumière, des blancheurs flottaient sur les méplats des vagues. Le jour parut.

Le canot était hors de l’atteinte de l’ennemi; mais le plus difficile restait à faire. Le canot était sauvé de la mitraille, mais non du naufrage. Il était en haute mer, coque imperceptible, sans pont, sans voile, sans mât, sans boussole, n’ayant de ressource que la rame, en présence de l’océan et de l’ouragan, atome à la merci des colosses.

Alors, dans cette immensité, dans cette solitude, levant sa face que blêmissait le matin, l’homme qui était à l’avant du canot regarda fixement l’homme qui était à l’arrière, et lui dit:

— Je suis le frère de celui que vous avez fait fusiller.

LIVRE TROISIÈME

HALMALO

I. LA PAROLE, C’EST LE VERBE

Le vieillard redressa lentement la tête.

L’homme qui lui parlait avait environ trente ans. Il avait sur le front le hâle de la mer; ses yeux étaient étranges; c’était le regard sagace du matelot dans la prunelle candide du paysan. Il tenait puissamment les rames dans ses deux poings. Il avait l’air doux.

On voyait à sa ceinture un poignard, deux pistolets et un rosaire.

— Qui êtes-vous? dit le vieillard.

— Je viens de vous le dire.

— Qu’est-ce que vous me voulez?

L’homme quitta les avirons, croisa les bras et répondit:

— Vous tuer.

— Comme vous voudrez, dit le vieillard.

L’homme haussa la voix.

— Préparez-vous.

— A quoi?

— A mourir.

— Pourquoi? demanda le vieillard.

Il y eut un silence. L’homme sembla un moment comme interdit de la question. Il reprit:

— Je dis que je veux vous tuer.

— Et je vous demande pourquoi.

Un éclair passa dans les yeux du matelot.

— Parce que vous avez tué mon frère.

Le vieillard repartit avec calme:

— J’ai commencé par lui sauver la vie.

— C’est vrai. Vous l’avez sauvé d’abord et tué ensuite.

— Ce n’est pas moi qui l’ai tué.

— Qui donc l’a tué?

— Sa faute.

Le matelot, béant, regarda le vieillard; puis ses sourcils reprirent leur froncement farouche.

— Comment vous appelez-vous? dit le vieillard.

— Je m’appelle Halmalo, mais vous n’avez pas besoin de savoir mon nom pour être tué par moi.

En ce moment le soleil se leva. Un rayon frappa le matelot en plein visage et éclaira vivement cette figure sauvage. Le vieillard le considérait attentivement.

La canonnade, qui se prolongeait toujours, avait maintenant des interruptions et des saccades d'agonie. Une vaste fumée s'affaissait sur l'horizon. Le canot, que ne maniait plus le rameur, allait à la dérive.

Le matelot saisit de sa main droite un des pistolets de sa ceinture et de sa main gauche son chapelet.

Le vieillard se dressa debout.

— Tu crois en Dieu? dit-il.

— Notre Père qui est au ciel, répondit le matelot. Et il fit le signe de la croix.

— As-tu ta mère?

— Oui.

Il fit un deuxième signe de croix. Puis il reprit:

— C'est dit. Je vous donne une minute, monseigneur. Et il arma le pistolet.

— Pourquoi m'appelles-tu monseigneur?

— Parce que vous êtes un seigneur. Cela se voit.

— As-tu un seigneur, toi?

— Oui. Et un grand. Est-ce qu'on vit sans seigneur?

— Où est-il?

— Je ne sais pas. Il a quitté le pays. Il s'appelle monsieur le marquis de Lantenac, vicomte de Fontenay, prince en Bretagne; il est le seigneur des Sept-Forêts. Je ne l'ai jamais vu, ce qui ne l'empêche pas d'être mon maître.

— Et si tu le voyais, lui obéirais-tu?

— Certes. Je serais donc un païen, si je ne lui obéissais pas! on doit obéissance à Dieu, et puis au roi qui est comme Dieu, et puis au seigneur qui est comme le roi. Mais ce n'est pas tout ça, vous avez tué mon frère, il faut que je vous tue.

Le vieillard répondit:

— D'abord, j'ai tué ton frère, j'ai bien fait.

Le matelot crispa son poing sur son pistolet.

— Allons, dit-il.

— Soit, dit le vieillard.

Et, tranquille, il ajouta:

— Où est le prêtre?

Le matelot le regarda.

— Le prêtre?

— Oui, le prêtre. J’ai donné un prêtre à ton frère. Tu me dois un prêtre.

— Je n’en ai pas, dit le matelot.

Et il continua:

— Est-ce qu’on a des prêtres en pleine mer?

On entendait les détonations convulsives du combat de plus en plus lointain.

— Ceux qui meurent là-bas ont le leur, dit le vieillard.

— C’est vrai, murmura le matelot. Ils ont monsieur l’aumônier.

Le vieillard poursuivit:

— Tu perds mon âme, ce qui est grave.

Le matelot baissa la tête, pensif.

— Et en perdant mon âme, reprit le vieillard, tu perds la tienne. Écoute. J’ai pitié de toi. Tu feras ce que tu voudras. Moi, j’ai fait mon devoir tout à l’heure, d’abord en sauvant la vie à ton frère et ensuite en la lui ôtant, et je fais mon devoir à présent en tâchant de sauver ton âme. Réfléchis. Cela te regarde. Entends-tu les coups de canon dans ce moment-ci? Il y a là des hommes qui périssent, il y a là des désespérés qui agonisent, il y a là des maris qui ne reverront plus leur femme, des pères qui ne reverront plus leur enfant, des frères qui, comme toi, ne reverront plus leur frère. Et par la faute de qui? par la faute de ton frère à toi. Tu crois en Dieu, n’est-ce pas? Eh bien, tu sais que Dieu souffre en ce moment; Dieu souffre dans son fils très chrétien le roi de France qui est enfant comme l’enfant Jésus et qui est en prison dans la tour du Temple; Dieu souffre dans son église de Bretagne; Dieu souffre dans ses cathédrales insultées, dans ses évangiles déchirés, dans ses maisons de prière violées; Dieu souffre dans ses prêtres assassinés. Qu’est-ce que nous venions faire, nous, dans ce navire qui périt en ce moment? Nous venions secourir Dieu. Si ton frère avait été un bon serviteur, s’il avait fidèlement fait son office d’homme sage et utile, le malheur de la canonnade ne serait pas arrivé, la corvette n’eût pas été désemparée, elle n’eût pas manqué sa route, elle ne fût pas tombée dans cette flotte de perdition, et nous débarquerions à cette heure en France, tous, en vaillants hommes de guerre et de mer que nous sommes, sabre au poing, drapeau blanc déployé, nombreux, contents, joyeux, et nous viendrions aider les braves paysans de Vendée à sauver la France, à sauver le roi, à sauver Dieu. Voilà ce que nous venions faire, voilà ce que nous ferions. Voilà ce que, moi, le seul qui reste, je viens faire. Mais tu t’y opposes. Dans cette lutte des impies contre les prêtres, dans cette lutte des régicides contre le roi, dans cette lutte de Satan contre Dieu, tu es pour Satan. Ton frère a été le premier auxiliaire du démon, tu es le second. Il a commencé, tu achèves. Tu es pour les régicides contre le trône, tu es pour les impies contre l’église. Tu ôtes à Dieu sa dernière ressource. Parce que je ne serai point là, moi qui représente le roi, les hameaux vont continuer de brûler, les familles de pleurer, les prêtres de saigner, la Bretagne de souffrir, et le roi d’être en prison, et Jésus-Christ d’être en détresse. Et qui aura fait cela? Toi. Va, c’est ton affaire. Je comptais sur toi pour tout le contraire. Je me suis trompé. Ah oui, c’est vrai, tu as raison, j’ai tué ton frère. Ton frère avait été courageux, je l’ai récompensé; il avait été coupable, je l’ai puni. Il avait manqué à son devoir, je n’ai pas manqué au mien. Ce que j’ai fait, je le ferais encore. Et, je le jure par la grande sainte Anne d’Auray qui nous regarde, en pareil cas, de même que j’ai fait fusiller ton frère, je ferais fusiller mon fils. Maintenant, tu es le maître. Oui, je te plains. Tu as menti à ton capitaine. Toi, chrétien, tu es sans foi; toi, breton, tu es sans honneur; j’ai été confié à ta loyauté et accepté par ta trahison; tu donnes ma mort à ceux à qui tu as promis ma vie. Sais-tu qui tu perds ici? C’est toi. Tu prends ma vie au roi et tu donnes ton éternité au démon. Va, commets ton crime, c’est bien. Tu fais bon marché de ta part de paradis. Grâce à toi, le diable vaincra, grâce à toi, les églises tomberont, grâce à toi, les païens continueront de fondre les cloches et d’en faire des canons; on mitraillera les hommes avec ce qui sauvait les âmes. En ce moment où je parle, la cloche qui a sonné ton baptême tue peut-être ta mère. Va, aide le démon. Ne t’arrête pas. Oui, j’ai condamné ton frère, mais, sache cela, je suis un instrument de Dieu. Ah! tu juges les moyens de Dieu! tu vas donc te mettre à juger la foudre qui est dans le ciel? Malheureux, tu seras jugé par elle. Prends garde à ce que tu vas faire. Sais-tu seulement si je suis en état de grâce! Non. Va tout de même. Fais ce que tu voudras. Tu es libre de me jeter en enfer et de t’y jeter avec moi. Nos deux damnations sont dans ta main. Le responsable devant Dieu, ce sera toi. Nous sommes seuls et face à face dans l’abîme. Continue, termine, achève. Je suis vieux et tu es jeune, je suis sans armes et tu es armé; tue-moi.

Pendant que le vieillard, debout, d’une voix plus haute que le bruit de la mer, disait ces paroles, les ondulations de la vague le faisaient apparaître tantôt dans l’ombre, tantôt dans la lumière; le matelot était devenu livide; de grosses gouttes de sueur lui tombaient du front; il tremblait comme la feuille; par moments il baisait son rosaire; quand le vieillard eut fini, il jeta son pistolet et tomba à genoux.

— Grâce, monseigneur! pardonnez-moi! cria-t-il; vous parlez comme le bon Dieu. J’ai tort. Mon frère a eu tort. Je ferai tout pour réparer son crime. Disposez de moi Ordonnez. J’obéirai.

— Je te fais grâce, dit le vieillard.

II. MÉMOIRE DE PAYSAN VAUT SCIENCE DE CAPITAINE

Les provisions qui étaient dans le canot ne furent pas inutiles.

Les deux fugitifs, obligés à de longs détours, mirent trente-six heures a atteindre la côte. Ils passèrent une nuit en mer; mais la nuit fut belle, avec trop de lune cependant pour des gens qui cherchaient à se dérober.

Ils durent d’abord s’éloigner de France et gagner le large vers Jersey.

Ils entendirent la suprême canonnade de la corvette foudroyée, comme on entend le dernier rugissement du lion que les chasseurs tuent dans les bois. Puis le silence se fit sur la mer.

Cette corvette *la Claymore* mourut de la même façon que *le*

Vengeur: mais la gloire l’a ignoré. On n’est pas héros contre son pays.

Halmalo était un marin surprenant. Il fit des miracles de dextérité et d’intelligence; cette improvisation d’un itinéraire à travers les écueils, les vagues et le guet de l’ennemi fut un chef-d’oeuvre. Le vent avait décru et la mer était devenue maniable.

Halmalo évita les Caux des Minquiers, contourna la Chaussée-aux-Boeufs, s’y abrita, afin de prendre quelques heures de repos dans la petite crique qui s’y fait au nord à mer basse, et, redescendant au sud, trouva moyen de passer entre Granville et les îles Chausey sans être aperçu ni de la vigie de Chausey ni de la vigie de Granville. Il s’engagea dans la baie de Saint-Michel, ce qui était hardi à cause du voisinage de Cancale, lieu d’ancrage de la croisière.

Le soir du second jour, environ une heure avant le coucher du soleil, il laissa derrière lui le mont Saint-Michel, et vint atterrir à une grève qui est toujours déserte, parce qu’elle est dangereuse; on s’y enlise.

Heureusement la marée était haute.

Halmalo poussa l’embarcation le plus avant qu’il put, tâta le sable, le trouva solide, y échoua le canot et sauta à terre.

Le vieillard après lui enjamba le bord et examina l’horizon.

— Monseigneur, dit Halmalo, nous sommes ici à l’embouchure du Couesnon.

Voilà Beauvoir à tribord et Huisnes à bâbord. Le clocher devant nous, c’est

Ardevon.

Le vieillard se pencha dans le canot, y prit un biscuit qu’il mit dans sa poche, et dit à Halmalo:

— Prends le reste.

Halmalo mit dans le sac ce qui restait de viande avec ce qui restait de biscuit, et chargea le sac sur son épaule. Cela fait, il dit:

— Monseigneur, faut-il vous conduire ou vous suivre?

— Ni l’un ni l’autre.

Halmalo stupéfait regarda le vieillard.

Le vieillard continua:

— Halmalo, nous allons nous séparer. Être deux ne vaut rien. Il faut être mille, ou seul.

Il s’interrompit et tira d’une de ses poches un noeud de soie verte, assez pareil à une cocarde, au centre duquel était brodée une fleur de lys en or. Il reprit:

— Sais-tu lire?

— Non.

— C’est bien. Un homme qui lit, ça gêne. As-tu bonne mémoire?

— Oui.

— C’est bien. Écoute, Halmalo. Tu vas prendre à droite et moi à gauche. J’irai du côté de Fougères, toi du côté de Bazouges. Garde ton sac qui te donne l’air d’un paysan. Cache tes armes. Coupe-toi un bâton dans les haies. Rampe dans les seigles qui sont hauts. Glisse-toi derrière les clôtures. Enjambe les échaliers pour aller à travers champs. Laisse à distance les passants. Evite les chemins et les ponts. N’entre pas à Pontorson. Ah! tu auras à traverser le Couesnon. Comment le passeras-tu?

— A la nage.

— C’est bien. Et puis il y a un gué. Sais-tu où il est?

— Entre Ancey et Vieux-Viel.

— C’est bien. Tu es vraiment du pays.

— Mais la nuit vient. Où monseigneur couchera-t-il?

— Je me charge de moi. Et toi, où coucheras-tu?

— Il y a des émousses. Avant d’être matelot, j’ai été paysan.

— Jette ton chapeau de marin qui te trahirait. Tu trouveras bien quelque part une carapousse.

— Oh! un tapabor, cela se trouve partout. Le premier pêcheur venu me vendra le sien.

— C’est bien. Maintenant, écoute. Tu connais les bois?

— Tous.

— De tout le pays?

— Depuis Noirmoutier jusqu’à Laval.

— Connais-tu aussi les noms?

— Je connais les bois, je connais les noms, je connais tout.

— Tu n’oublieras rien?

— Rien.

— C’est bien. A présent, attention. Combien peux-tu faire de lieues par jour?

— Dix, quinze, dix-huit. Vingt, s’il le faut.

— Il le faudra. Ne perds pas un mot de ce que je vais te dire. Tu iras au bois de saint-Aubin.

— Près de Lamballe?

— Oui. Sur la lisière du ravin qui est entre Saint-Rieul et Plédéliac il a un gros châtaignier. Tu t’arrêteras là. Tu ne verras personne.

— Ce qui n’empêche pas qu’il y aura quelqu’un. Je sais.

— Tu feras l’appel. Sais-tu faire l’appel?

Halmalo enfla ses joues, se tourna du côté de la mer, et l’on entendit le hou-hou de la chouette.

On eût dit que cela venait des profondeurs nocturnes. C’était ressemblant et sinistre.

— Bien, dit le vieillard. Tu en es.

Il tendit à Halmalo le noeud de soie verte.

— Voici mon noeud de commandement. Prends-le. Il importe que personne encore ne sache mon nom. Mais ce noeud suffit. La fleur de lys a été brodée par Madame Royale dans la prison du Temple.

Halmalo mit un genou en terre. Il reçu avec un tremblement le noeud fleurdelysé, et en approcha ses lèvres puis s’arrêtant, comme effrayé de ce baiser:

— Le puis-je? demanda-t-il.

— Oui, puisque tu baises le crucifix.

Halmalo baisa la fleur de lys.

— Relève-toi, dit le vieillard.

Halmalo se releva et mit le noeud dans sa poitrine. Le vieillard poursuivit:

— Écoute bien ceci. Voici l’ordre: *Insurgez-vous. Pas de quartier.* Donc, sur la lisière du bois de Saint-Aubin tu feras l’appel. Tu le feras trois fois. A la troisième fois tu verras un homme sortir de terre.

— D’un trou sous les arbres. Je sais.

— Cet homme, c’est Planchenault, qu’on appelle aussi Coeur-de-Roi. Tu lui montreras ce noeud. Il comprendra. Tu iras ensuite, par des chemins que tu inventeras, au bois d’Astillé; tu y trouveras un homme cagneux qui est surnommé Mousqueton, et qui ne fait miséricorde à personne. Tu lui diras que je l’aime, et qu’il mette en branle ses paroisses. Tu iras ensuite au bois de Couesbon qui est à une lieue de Ploërmel. Tu feras l’appel de la chouette; un homme sortira d’un trou; c’est M. Thuault, sénéchal de Ploërmel, qui a été de ce qu’on appelle l’assemblée constituante, mais du bon côté. Tu lui diras d’armer le château de Couesbon, qui est au marquis de Guer, émigré. Ravins, petits bois, terrain inégal, bon endroit. M. Thuault est un homme droit et d’esprit. Tu iras ensuite à Saint-Ouen-les-Toits, et tu parleras à Jean Chouan, qui est à mes yeux le vrai chef. Tu iras ensuite an bois de Ville-Anglose, tu y verras Guitter, qu’on appelle Saint-Martin, tu lui diras d’avoir l’oeil sur un certain Courmesnil, qui est gendre du vieux Goupil de Préfeln et qui mène la jacobinière d’Argentan. Retiens bien tout. Je n’écris rien parce qu’il ne faut rien écrire. La Rouarie a écrit une liste; cela a tout perdu. Tu iras ensuite au bois de Rougefeu où est Miélette qui saute par-dessus les ravins en s’arc-boutant sur une longue perche.

— Cela s’appelle une ferte.

— Sais-tu t’en servir?

— Je ne serais donc pas breton et je ne serais donc pas paysan? La ferte, c’est notre amie. Elle agrandit nos bras et allonge nos jambes.

— C’est-à-dire qu’elle rapetisse l’ennemi et raccourcit le chemin. Bon engin.

— Une fois, avec ma ferte, j’ai tenu tète à trois gabelous qui avaient des sabres.

— Quand ca?

— Il y a dix ans.

— Sous le roi?

— Mais oui.

— Tu t’es donc battu sous le roi?

— Mais oui.

— Contre qui?

— Ma foi, je ne sais pas. J’étais faux-saulnier.

— C’est bien.

— On appelait cela se battre contre les gabelles. Les gabelles, est-ce que c’est la même chose que le roi?

— Oui. Non. Mais il n’est pas nécessaire que tu comprennes cela.

— Je demande pardon â monseigneur d’avoir fait une question à monseigneur.

— Continuons. Connais-tu la Tourgue?

— Si je connais la Tourgue? j’en suis.

— Comment?

— Oui, puisque je suis de Parigué.

— En effet, la Tourgue est voisine de Parigué.

Si je connais la Tourgue? le gros château rond qui est le château de famille de mes seigneurs! Il y a une grosse porte de fer qui sépare le bâtiment neuf du bâtiment vieux et qu’on n’enfoncerait pas avec du canon. C’est dans le bâtiment neuf qu’est le fameux livre sur saint Barthélemy qu’on venait voir par curiosité. Il y a des grenouilles dans l’herbe. J’ai joué tout petit avec ces grenouilles-là. Et la passe souterraine! je la connais. Il n’y a peut-être plus que moi qui la connaisse.

— Quelle passe souterraine? Je ne sais pas ce que tu veux dire.

— C’était pour autrefois, dans les temps, quand la Tourgue était assiégée. Les gens du dedans pouvaient se sauver dehors en passant par un passage sous terre qui va aboutir à la forêt.

— En effet, il y a un passage souterrain de ce genre au château de la Jupellière, et au château de la Hunaudaye, et à la tour de Campéon; mais il n’y a rien de pareil à la Tourgue.

— Si fait, monseigneur. Je ne connais pas ces passages-là dont monseigneur parle. Je ne connais que celui de la Tourgue, parce que je suis du pays. Et encore, il n’y a guère que moi qui sache cette passe-là. On n’en parlait pas. C’était défendu, parce que ce passage avait servi du temps des guerres de M. de Rohan. Mon père savait le secret et il me l’a montré. Je connais le secret pour entrer et le secret pour sortir. Si je suis dans la forêt, je puis aller dans la tour, et si je suis dans la tour, je puis aller dans la forêt. Sans qu’on me voie. Et quand les ennemis entrent, il n’y a plus personne. Voilà ce que c’est que la Tourgue. Ah! je la connais.

Le vieillard demeura un moment silencieux.

— Tu te trompes évidemment; s’il y avait un tel secret, je le saurais.

— Monseigneur, j’en suis sûr. Il y a une pierre qui tourne.

— Ah bon! Vous autres paysans, vous croyez aux pierres qui tournent, aux pierres qui chantent, aux pierres qui vont boire la nuit au ruisseau d’à côté. Tas de contes.

— Mais puisque je l’ai fait tourner, la pierre…

— Comme d’autres l’ont entendue chanter. Camarade, la Tourgue est une bastille sûre et forte, facile à défendre; mais celui qui compterait sur une issue souterraine pour s’en tirer serait naïf.

— Mais, monseigneur…

Le vieillard haussa les épaules.

— Ne perdons pas de temps. Parlons de nos affaires.

Ce ton péremptoire coupa court à l’insistance de Halmalo.

Le vieillard reprit:

— Poursuivons. Ecoute. De Rougefeu tu iras au bois de Montchevrier, où est Bénédicité, qui est le chef des Douze. C’est encore un bon. Il dit son *Benedicite* pendant qu’il fait arquebuser les gens. En guerre, pas de sensiblerie. De Montchevrier, tu iras…

Il s’interrompit.

— J’oubliais l’argent.

Il prit dans sa poche et mit dans la main de Halmalo une bourse et un portefeuille.

— Voilà dans ce portefeuille trente mille francs en assignats, quelque chose comme trois livres dix sous; il faut dire que les assignats sont faux, mais les vrais valent juste autant; et voici dans cette bourse, attention, cent louis en or. Je te donne tout ce que j’ai. Je n’ai plus besoin de rien ici. D’ailleurs, il vaut mieux qu’on ne puisse pas trouver d’argent sur moi. Je reprends. De Montchevrier, tu iras à Antrain, où tu verras M. de Frotté; d’Antrain, à la Jupellière, où tu verras M. de Rochecotte; de la Jupellière, à Noirieux, où tu verras l’abbé Baudouin. Te rappelleras-tu tout cela?

— Comme mon *Pater*.

— Tu verras M. Dubois-Guy à Saint-Brice-en-Cogle, M. de Turpin à Morannes, qui est un bourg fortifié, et le prince de Talmont à Château-Gonthier.

— Est-ce qu’un prince me parlera?

— Puisque je te parle.

Halmalo ôta son chapeau.

— Tout le monde te recevra bien en voyant cette fleur de lys de Madame. N'oublie pas qu'il faut que tu ailles dans des endroits où il y a des montagnards et des patauds. Tu te déguiseras. C'est facile. Ces républicains sont si bêtes, qu'avec un habit bleu, un chapeau à trois cornes et une cocarde tricolore on passe partout. Il n'y a plus de régiments, il n'y a plus d'uniformes, les corps n'ont pas de numéros; chacun met la guenille qu'il veut. Tu iras à Saint-Mhervé. Tu y verras Gaulier, dit Grand-Pierre. Tu iras au cantonnement de Parné où sont les hommes aux visages noircis. Ils mettent du gravier dans leurs fusils et double charge de poudre pour faire plus de bruit; ils font bien. Mais surtout dis-leur de tuer, de tuer, de tuer. Tu iras au camp de la Vache-Noire qui est sur une hauteur au milieu du bois de la Charnie, puis au camp de l'Avoine, puis au camp Vert, puis au camp des Fourmis. Tu iras au Grand-Bordage, qu'on appelle aussi le Haut-des-Prés, et qui est habité par une veuve dont Treton, dit l'Anglais, a épousé la fille. Le Grand-Bordage est dans la paroisse de Quélaines. Tu visiteras Epineux-le-Chevreuil, Sillé-le-Guillaume, Parannes, et tous les hommes qui sont dans tous les bois. Tu auras des amis, et tu les enverras sur la lisière du Haut et du Bas Maine; tu verras Jean Treton dans la paroisse de Vaisges, Sans-Regret au Bignon, Chambord à Bonchamps, les frères Corbin à Maisoncelles, et le Petit-Sans-Peur à Saint-Jean-sur-Erve. C'est le même qui s'appelle Bourdoiseau. Tout cela fait, et le mot d'ordre, *Insurgez-vous, Pas de quartier*, donné partout, tu joindras la grande armée, l'armée catholique et royale, où elle sera. Tu verras MM. d'Elbée, de Lescure, de La Rochejaquelein, ceux des chefs qui vivront alors. Tu leur montreras mon noeud de commandement. Ils savent ce que c'est. Tu n'es qu'un matelot, mais Cathelineau n'est qu'un charretier. Tu leur diras de ma part ceci: Il est temps de faire les deux guerres ensemble; la grande et la petite. La grande fait plus de tapage, la petite plus de besogne. La Vendée est bonne, la Chouannerie est pire; et en guerre civile, c'est la pire qui est la meilleure. La bonté d'une guerre se juge à la quantité de mal qu'elle fait.

Il s'interrompit.

— Halmalo, je te dis tout cela. Tu ne comprends pas les mots, mais tu comprends les choses. J'ai pris confiance en toi en te voyant manuvrer le canot; tu ne sais pas la géométrie et tu fais des mouvements de mer surprenants; qui sait mener une barque peut piloter une insurrection; à la façon dont tu as manié l'intrigue de la mer, j'affirme que tu te tireras bien de toutes mes commissions. Je reprends. Tu diras donc ceci aux chefs, à peu près, comme tu pourras, mais ce sera bien; J’aime mieux la guerre des forêts que la guerre des plaines; je ne tiens pas à aligner cent mille paysans sous la mitraille des soldats bleus et sous l’artillerie de monsieur Carnot; avant un mois je veux avoir cinq cent mille tueurs embusqués dans les bois. L’armée républicaine est mon gibier. Braconner, c’est guerroyer. Je suis le stratège des broussailles. Bon, voilà encore un mot que tu ne saisiras pas, c’est égal, tu saisiras ceci: Pas de quartier! et des embuscades partout! Je veux faire plus de Chouannerie que de Vendée. Tu ajouteras que les anglais sont avec nous. Prenons la république entre deux feux. L’Europe nous aide. Finissons-en avec la révolution. Les rois lui font la guerre des royaumes, faisons-lui la guerre des paroisses. Tu diras cela. As-tu compris?

— Oui. Il faut tout mettre à feu et à sang.

— C’est ça.

— Pas de quartier.

— A personne. C’est ça.

— J’irai partout.

— Et prends garde. Car dans ce pays-ci on est facilement un homme mort.

— La mort, cela ne me regarde point. Qui fait son premier pas use peut-être ses derniers souliers.

— Tu es un brave.

— Et si l’on me demande le nom de monseigneur?

— On ne doit pas le savoir encore. Tu diras que tu ne le sais pas, et ce sera la vérité.

— Où reverrai-je monseigneur?

— Où je serai.

— Comment le saurai-je?

— Parce que tout le monde le saura. Avant huit jours on parlera de moi, je ferai des exemples, je vengerai le roi et la religion, et tu reconnaîtras bien que c’est de moi qu’on parle.

— J’entends.

— N’oublie rien.

— Soyez tranquille.

— Pars maintenant. Que Dieu te conduise. Va.

— Je ferai tout ce que vous m’avez dit. J’irai. Je parlerai. J’obéirai. Je commanderai.

— Bien.

— Et si je réussis….

— Je te ferai chevalier de Saint-Louis.

— Comme mon frère. Et si je ne réussis pas, vous me ferez fusiller.

— Comme ton frère.

— C’est dit, monseigneur.

Le vieillard baissa la tête et sembla tomber dans une sévère rêverie. Quand il releva les yeux, il était seul. Halmalo n’était plus qu’un point noir s’enfonçant dans l’horizon.

Le soleil venait de se coucher.

Les goëlands et les mouettes à capuchon rentraient; la mer, c’est dehors.

On sentait dans l’espace cette espèce d’inquiétude qui précède la nuit; les rainettes coassaient les jaquets s’envolaient des flaques d’eau en sifflant, les mauves, les freux, les carabins, les grolles, faisaient leur vacarme du soir; les oiseaux de rivage s’appelaient; mais pas un bruit humain. La solitude était profonde. Pas une voile dans la baie, pas un paysan dans la campagne. A perte de vue l’étendue déserte. Les grands chardons des sables frissonnaient. Le ciel blanc du crépuscule jetait sur la grève une vaste clarté livide. Au loin les étangs dans la plaine sombre ressemblaient à des plaques d’étain posées à plat sur le sol. Le vent soufflait du large.

LIVRE QUATRIÈME

TELLMARCH

I. LE HAUT DE LA DUNE

Le vieillard laissa disparaître Halmalo, puis serra son manteau de mer autour de lui, et se mit en marche. Il cheminait à pas lents, pensif. Il se dirigeait vers Huisnes, pendant que Halmalo s'en allait vers Beauvoir.

Derrière lui se dressait, énorme triangle noir, avec sa tiare de cathédrale et sa cuirasse de forteresse, avec ses deux grosses tours du levant, l'une ronde, l'autre carrée, qui aident la montagne à porter le poids de l'église et du village, le mont Saint-Michel, qui est à l'océan ce que Chéops est au désert.

Les sables mouvants de la baie du mont Saint-Michel déplacent insensiblement leurs dunes. Il y avait à cette époque entre Huisnes et Ardevon une dune très haute, effacée aujourd'hui. Cette dune, qu'un coup d'équinoxe a nivelée, avait cette rareté d'être ancienne et de porter à son Sommet une pierre milliaire érigée au XIIe siècle en commémoration du concile tenu à Avranches contre les assassins de saint Thomas de Cantorbéry. Du haut de cette dune on découvrait tout le pays, et l'on pouvait s'orienter.

Le vieillard marcha vers cette dune et y monta.

Quand il fut sur le sommet, il s'adossa à la pierre milliaire, s'assit sur une des quatre bornes qui en marquaient les angles, et se mit à examiner l'espèce de carte de géographie qu'il avait sous les pieds. Il semblait chercher une route dans un pays d'ailleurs connu. Dans ce vaste paysage, trouble à cause du crépuscule, il n'y avait de précis que l'horizon, noir sur le ciel blanc.

On y apercevait les groupes de toits de onze bourgs et villages; on distinguait à plusieurs lieues de distance tous les clochers de la côte, qui sont très hauts, afin de servir au besoin de points de repère aux gens qui sont en mer.

Au bout de quelques instants, le vieillard sembla avoir trouvé dans ce clair-obscur ce qu'il cherchait; son regard s'arrêta sur un enclos d'arbres, de murs et de toitures, à peu près visible au milieu de la plaine et des bois, et qui était une métairie; il eut ce hochement de tête satisfait d'un homme qui se dit mentalement: C'est là; et il se mit à tracer avec son doigt dans l'espace l'ébauche d'un itinéraire à travers les haies et les cultures. De temps en temps il examinait un objet informe et peu distinct, qui s'agitait au-dessus du toit principal de la métairie, et il semblait se demander: Qu'est-ce que c'est? Cela était incolore et confus à cause de l'heure; ce n'était pas une girouette puisque cela flottait, et il n'y avait aucune raison pour que ce fût un drapeau.

Il était las, il restait volontiers assis sur cette borne où il était, et il se laissait aller à cette sorte de vague oubli que donne aux hommes fatigués la première minute de repos.

Il y a une heure du jour qu'on pourrait appeler l'absence de bruit, c'est l'heure sereine, l'heure du soir. On était dans cette heure-là. Il en jouissait; il regardait, il écoutait, quoi? la tranquillité. Les farouches eux-mêmes ont leur instant de mélancolie. Subitement, cette tranquillité fut, non troublée, mais accentuée par des voix qui passaient; c'étaient des voix de femmes et d'enfants. Il y a parfois dans l'ombre de ces carillons de joie inattendus. On ne voyait point, à cause des broussailles, le groupe d'où sortaient les voix, mais ce groupe cheminait au pied de la dune et s'en allait vers la plaine et la forêt. Ces voix montaient claires et fraîches jusqu'au vieillard pensif; elles étaient si près qu'il n'en perdait rien.

Une voix de femme disait:

— Dépêchons-nous, la Flécharde. Est-ce par ici?

— Non, c'est par là.

Et le dialogue continuait entre les deux voix, l'une haute, l'autre timide.

— Comment appelez-vous cette métairie que nous habitons en ce moment?

— L'Herbe-en-Pail.

— En sommes-nous encore loin?

— A un bon quart d'heure.

— Dépêchons-nous d'aller manger la soupe.

— C'est vrai que nous sommes en retard.

— Il faudrait courir. Mais vos mômes sont fatigués. Nous ne sommes que deux femmes, nous ne pouvons pas porter trois mioches. Et puis, vous en portez déjà un, vous, la Flécharde. Un vrai plomb. Vous l'avez sevrée, cette goinfre, mais vous la portez toujours. Mauvaise habitude. Faites-moi donc marcher ça. Ah! tant pis, la soupe sera froide.

— Ah! les bons souliers que vous m'avez donnés là! On dirait qu'ils sont faits pour moi.

— Ça vaut mieux que d'aller nu-pattes.

— Dépêche-toi donc, René-Jean.

— C’est pourtant lui qui nous a retardées. Il faut qu’il parle à toutes les petites paysannes qu’on rencontre. Ça fait son homme.

— Dame, il va sur cinq ans.

— Dis-donc, René-Jean, pourquoi as-tu parlé à cette petite dans le village?

Une voix d’enfant, qui était une voix de garçon, répondit:

— Parce que c’est une que je connais.

La femme reprit.

— Comment! tu la connais?

— Oui, répondit le petit garçon, puisqu’elle m’a donné des bêtes ce matin.

— Voilà qui est fort! s’écria la femme, nous ne sommes dans le pays que depuis trois jours, c’est gros comme le poing, et ça vous a déjà une amoureuse!

Les voix s’éloignèrent. Tout bruit cessa.

II. AURES HABET. ET NON AUDIET

Le vieillard restait immobile. Il ne pensait pas: à peine songeait-il. Autour de lui tout était sérénité, assoupissement, confiance, solitude. Il faisait grand jour encore sur la dune, mais presque nuit dans la plaine et tout à fait nuit dans les bois. La lune montait à l'orient. Quelques étoiles piquaient le bleu pâle du zénith. Cet homme, bien que plein de préoccupations violentes, s'abîmait dans l'inexprimable mansuétude de l'infini. Il sentait monter en lui cette aube obscure, l'espérance, si le mot espérance peut s'appliquer aux attentes de la guerre civile. Pour l'instant, il lui semblait qu'en sortant de cette mer qui venait d'être si inexorable, et en touchant la terre, tout danger s'était évanoui. Personne ne savait son nom, il était seul, perdu pour l'ennemi, sans trace derrière lui, car la surface de la mer ne garde rien, caché, ignoré, pas même soupçonné. Il sentait on ne sait quel apaisement suprême. Un peu plus il se serait endormi.

Ce qui, pour cet homme en proie, au dedans comme au dehors, à tant de tumultes, donnait un charme étrange à cette heure calme qu'il traversait, c'était, sur la terre comme au ciel, un profond silence.

On n'entendait que le vent qui venait de la mer; mais le vent est une basse continue, et cesse presque d'être un bruit, tant il devient une habitude.

Tout à coup il se dressa debout.

Son attention venait d'être brusquement réveillée; il considéra l'horizon.

Quelque chose donnait à son regard une fixité particulière.

Ce qu'il regardait, c'était le clocher de Cormeray qu'il avait devant lui au fond de la plaine. On ne sait quoi d'extraordinaire se passait en effet dans ce clocher.

La silhouette de ce clocher se découpait nettement; on voyait la tour surmontée de sa pyramide, et, entre la tour et la pyramide, la cage de la cloche, carrée, à jour, sans abat-vent, et ouverte aux regards des quatre côtés, ce qui est la mode des clochers bretons.

Or, cette cage apparaissait alternativement ouverte et fermée; à intervalles égaux, sa haute fenêtre se dessinait toute blanche, puis toute noire; on voyait le ciel à travers, puis on ne le voyait plus; il y avait clarté, puis occultation; et l'ouverture et la fermeture se succédaient d'une seconde à l'autre avec la régularité du marteau sur l'enclume.

Le vieillard avait ce clocher de Cormeray devant lui, à une distance d’environ deux lieues; il regarda à sa droite le clocher de Baguer-Pican, également droit sur l’horizon; la cage de ce clocher s’ouvrait et se fermait comme celle de Cormeray.

Il regarda à sa gauche le clocher de Tanis; la cage du clocher de Tanis s’ouvrait et se fermait comme celle de Baguer-Pican.

Il regarda tous les clochers de l’horizon l’un après l’autre, à sa gauche les clochers de Courtils, de Précey, de Crollon et de la Croix-Avranchin; à sa droite les clochers de Raz-sur-Couesnon, de Mordrey et des Pas; en face de lui, le clocher de Pontorson. La cage de tous ces clochers était alternativement noire et blanche.

Qu’est-ce que cela voulait dire?

Cela signifiait que toutes les cloches étaient en branle.

Il fallait, pour apparaître ainsi, qu’elles fussent furieusement secouées.

Qu’était-ce donc? Évidemment le tocsin.

On sonnait le tocsin, on le sonnait frénétiquement, on le sonnait partout, dans tous les clochers, dans tous les villages, et l’on n’entendait rien.

Cela tenait à la distance qui empêchait les sons d’arriver et au vent de mer qui soufflait du côté opposé et qui emportait tous les bruits de la terre hors de l’horizon.

Toutes ces cloches forcenées appelant de toutes parts, et en même temps ce silence, rien de plus sinistre.

Le vieillard regardait et écoutait.

Il n’entendait pas le tocsin, et il le voyait. Voir le tocsin, sensation étrange.

A qui en voulaient ces cloches?

Contre qui ce tocsin?

III. UTILITÉ DES GROS CARACTÈRES

Certainement, quelqu'un était traqué.

Qui?

Cet homme d'acier eut un frémissement.

Ce ne pouvait être lui. On n'avait pu deviner son arrivée. Il était impossible que les représentants en mission fussent déjà informés; il venait à peine de débarquer. La corvette avait évidemment sombré sans qu'un homme échappât. Et dans la corvette même, excepté Boisberthelot et La Vieuville, personne ne savait son nom.

Les clochers continuaient leur jeu farouche. Il les examinait et les comptait machinalement, et sa rêverie, poussée d'une conjecture à l'autre, avait cette fluctuation que donne le passage d'une sécurité profonde à une incertitude terrible. Pourtant, après tout, ce tocsin pouvait s'expliquer de bien des façons, et il finissait par se rassurer en se répétant: En somme, personne ne sait mon arrivée et personne ne sait mon nom.

Depuis quelques instants il se faisait un léger bruit au-dessus de lui et derrière lui. Ce bruit ressemblait au froissement d'une feuille d'arbre agitée. Il n'y prit d'abord pas garde; puis, comme le bruit persistait, on pourrait dire insistait, il finit par se retourner. C'était une feuille en effet, mais une feuille de papier. Le vent était en train de décoller au-dessus de sa tête une large affiche appliquée sur la pierre milliaire. Cette affiche était placardée depuis peu de temps, par elle était encore humide et donnait prise au vent qui s'était mis à jouer avec elle et qui la détachait.

Le vieillard avait gravi la dune du côté opposé et n'avait pas vu cette affiche en arrivant.

Il monta sur la borne où il était assis, et posa sa main sur le coin du placard que le vent soulevait; le ciel était serein, les crépuscules sont longs en juin; le bas de la dune était ténébreux, mais le haut était éclairé; une partie de l'affiche était imprimée en grosses lettres, et il faisait encore assez de jour pour qu'on pût les lire. Il lut ceci:

RÉPUBLIQUE FRANÇAISE, UNE ET INDIVISIBLE.

«Nous, Prieur de la Marne, représentant du peuple en mission près de l’armée des Côtes-de-Cherbourg, — ordonnons: — Le ci-devant marquis de Lantenac, vicomte de Fontenay, soi-disant prince breton, furtivement débarqué sur la côte de Granville, est mis hors la loi. — Sa tête est mise à prix. — Il sera payé à qui le livrera, mort ou vivant, la somme de soixante mille livres. — Cette somme ne sera point payée en assignats, mais en or. — Un bataillon de l’armée des Côtes-de-Cherbourg sera immédiatement envoyé à la rencontre et à la recherche du ci-devant marquis de Lantenac. — Les communes sont requises de prêter main-forte. — Fait en la maison commune de Granville, le 2 juin 1793. — Signé:

«

PRIEUR DE LA MARNE.»

Au-dessous de ce nom il y avait une autre signature, qui était en beaucoup plus petit caractère, et qu'on ne pouvait lire à cause du peu de jour qui restait.

Le vieillard rabaissa son chapeau sur ses yeux, croisa sa cape de mer jusque sous son menton, et descendit rapidement la dune. Il était évidemment inutile de s'attarder sur ce sommet éclairé.

Il y avait été peut-être trop longtemps déjà; le haut de la dune était le seul point du paysage qui fût resté visible.

Quand il fut en bas et dans l'obscurité, il ralentit le pas.

Il se dirigeait dans le sens de l'itinéraire qu'il s'était tracé vers la métairie, ayant probablement des raisons de sécurité de ce côté-là.

Tout était désert. C'était l'heure où il n'y a plus de passants.

Derrière une broussaille, il s'arrêta, défit son manteau, retourna sa veste du côté velu, rattacha à sou cou son manteau qui était une guenille nouée d'une corde, et se remit en route.

Il faisait clair de lune.

Il arriva à un embranchement de deux chemins où se dressait une vieille croix de pierre. Sur le piédestal de la croix on distinguait un carré blanc qui était vraisemblablement une affiche pareille à celle qu'il venait de lire. Il s'en approcha.

— Où allez-vous? lui dit une voix.

Il se retourna.

Un homme était là dans les haies, de haute taille comme lui, vieux comme lui, comme lui en cheveux blancs, et plus en haillons encore que lui-même. Presque son pareil. Cet homme s'appuyait sur un long bâton.

L'homme reprit:

— Je vous demande où vous allez.

— D'abord où suis-je? dit-il avec un calme presque hautain.

L'homme répondit:

— Vous êtes dans la seigneurie de Tanis, et j'en suis le mendiant, et vous en êtes le seigneur.

— Moi?

— Oui, vous, monsieur le marquis de Lantenac.

IV. LE CAIMAND

Le marquis de Lantenac, nous le nommerons par son nom désormais, répondit gravement:

— Soit. Livrez-moi.

L’homme poursuivit:

— Nous sommes tous deux chez nous ici, vous dans le château, moi dans le buisson.

— Finissons. Faites. Livrez-moi, dit le marquis. L’homme continua:

— Vous alliez à la métairie d’herbe-en-Pail, n’est-ce pas?

— Oui.

— N’y allez point.

— Pourquoi?

— Parce que les bleus y sont.

— Depuis quand?

— Depuis trois jours.

— Les habitants de la ferme et du hameau ont-ils résisté?

— Non. Ils ont ouvert toutes les portes.

— Ah! dit le marquis.

L’homme montra du doigt le toit de la métairie qu’on apercevait à quelque distance par-dessus les arbres.

— Voyez-vous le toit, monsieur le marquis?

— Oui.

— Voyez-vous ce qu’il y a dessus?

— Qui flotte?

— Oui.

— C’est un drapeau.

— Tricolore, dit l’homme.

C’était l’objet qui avait déjà attiré l’attention du marquis quand il était au haut de la dune.

— Ne sonne-t-on pas le tocsin? demanda le marquis.

— Oui.

— À cause de quoi?

— Évidemment à cause de vous.

— Mais on ne l’entend pas?

— C’est le vent qui empêche.

L’homme continua:

— Vous avez vu votre affiche?

— Oui.

— On vous cherche.

Et, jetant un regard du côté de la métairie, il ajouta:

— Il y a là un demi-bataillon.

— De républicains?

— Parisiens.

— Eh bien, dit le marquis, marchons

Et il fit un pas vers la métairie.

L’homme lui saisit le bras.

— N’y allez pas.

— Et où voulez-vous que j’aille?

— Chez moi.

Le marquis regarda le mendiant.

— Écoutez, monsieur le marquis, ce n’est pas beau chez moi, mais c’est sûr. Une cabane plus basse qu’une cave. Pour plancher un lit de varech, pour plafond un toit de branches et d’herbes. Venez. A la métairie vous seriez fusillé. Chez moi vous dormirez. Vous devez être las; et demain matin les bleus se seront remis en marche, et vous irez où vous voudrez.

Le marquis considérait cet homme.

— De quel côté êtes-vous donc? demanda le marquis; êtes-vous républicain? êtes-vous royaliste?

— Je suis un pauvre.

— Ni royaliste, ni républicain?

— Je ne crois pas.

— Etes-vous pour ou contre le roi?

— Je n’ai pas le temps de ça.

— Qu’est-ce que vous pensez de ce qui se passe?

— Je n’ai pas de quoi vivre.

— Pourtant vous venez à mon secours.

— J’ai vu que vous étiez hors la loi. Qu’est-ce que cela la loi? On peut donc être dehors. Je ne comprends pas. Quant à moi, suis-je dans la loi? suis-je hors la loi? Je n’en sais rien. Mourir de faim, est-ce être dans la loi?

— Depuis quand mourez-sous de faim?

— Depuis toute ma vie.

— Et vous me sauvez?

— Oui.

— Pourquoi?

— Parce que j’ai dit: Voilà encore un plus pauvre que moi. J’ai le droit de respirer, lui, il ne l’a pas.

— C’est vrai. Et vous me sauvez!

— Sans doute. Nous voilà frères, monseigneur. Je demande du pain, vous demandez la vie. Nous sommes deux mendiants.

— Mais savez-vous que ma tête est mise à prix?

— Oui.

— Comment le savez-sous?

— J’ai lu l’affiche.

— Vous savez lire?

— Oui. Et écrire aussi. Pourquoi serais-je une brute?

— Alors, puisque vous savez lire, et puisque vous, avez lu l’affiche, vous savez qu’un homme qui me livrerait gagnerait soixante mille francs?

— Je le sais.

— Pas en assignats.

— Oui, je sais, en or.

— Vous savez que soixante mille francs, c’est une fortune?

— Oui.

— Et que quelqu’un qui me livrerait ferait sa fortune?

— Eh bien, après?

— Sa fortune.

— C’est justement ce que j’ai pensé. En vous voyant, je me suis dit: Quand je pense que quelqu’un qui livrerait cet homme-ci gagnerait soixante mille francs et ferait sa fortune! Dépêchons-nous de le cacher.

Le marquis suivit le pauvre.

Ils entrèrent dans un fourré. La tanière du mendiant était là. C’était une sorte de chambre qu’un grand vieux chêne avait laissé prendre chez lui à cet homme; elle était creusée sous ses racines et couverte de ses branches. C’était obscur, bas, caché, invisible. Il y avait place pour deux.

— J’ai prévu que je pouvais avoir un hôte, dit le mendiant.

Cette espèce de logis sous terre, moins rare en Bretagne qu’on ne croit, s’appelle en langue paysanne *carnichot*. Ce nom s’applique aussi à des cachettes pratiquées dans l’épaisseur des murs.

C’est meublé de quelques pots, d’un grabat de paille ou de goëmon lavé et séché, d’une grosse couverture de créseau, et de quelques mèches de suif avec un briquet et des tiges creuses de brane-ursine pour allumettes.

Ils se courbèrent, rampèrent un peu, pénétrèrent dans la chambre où les gosses racines de l'arbre découpaient des compartiments bizarres; et s'assirent sur un tas de varech sec qui était le lit. L'intervalle de deux racines par où l'on entrait et qui servait de porte donnait quelque clarté. La nuit était venue, mais le regard se proportionne à la lumière, et l'on finit par trouver toujours un peu de jour dans l'ombre. Un reflet du clair de lune blanchissait vaguement l'entrée. Il y avait dans un coin une cruche d'eau, une galette de sarrasin et des châtaignes.

— Soupons, dit le pauvre.

Ils se partagèrent les châtaignes, le marquis donna son morceau de biscuit, ils mordirent à la même miche de blé noir et burent à la cruche l'un après l'autre.

Ils causèrent.

Le marquis se mit à interroger cet homme.

— Ainsi, tout ce qui arrive ou rien, c'est pour vous la même chose?

— A peu près. Vous êtes des seigneurs, vous autres. Ce sont vos affaires.

— Mais enfin, ce qui se passe…

— Ça se passe là-haut.

Le mendiant ajouta:

— Et puis il y a des choses qui se passent encore plus haut, le soleil qui se lève, la lune qui augmente ou diminue, c'est de celles-là que je m'occupe.

Il but une gorgée à la cruche, et dit:

— La bonne eau fraîche!

Et il reprit:

— Comment trouvez-vous cette eau, monseigneur?

— Comment vous appelez-vous? dit le marquis.

— Je m'appelle Tellmarch, et l'on m'appelle le Caimand.

— Je sais. Caimand est un mot du pays.

— Qui veut dire mendiant. On me surnomme aussi le Vieux.

Il poursuivit:

— Voilà quarante ans qu'on m'appelle le Vieux.

— Quarante ans! mais vous étiez jeune.

— Je n'ai jamais été jeune. Vous l'êtes toujours, vous, monsieur le marquis. Vous avez des jambes de vingt ans, vous escaladez la grande dune;

moi, je commence à ne plus marcher, au bout d’un quart de lieue je suis las. Nous sommes pourtant du même âge; mais les riches, ça a sur nous un avantage, c’est que ça mange tous les jours. Manger conserve.

Le mendiant, après un silence, continua:

— Les pauvres, les riches, c’est une terrible affaire. C’est ce qui produit les catastrophes. Du moins, ça me fait cet effet-là. Les pauvres veulent être riches, les riches ne veulent pas être pauvres. Je crois que c’est un peu là le fond. Je ne m’en mêle pas. Les évènements sont les évènements. Je ne suis ni pour le créancier, ni pour le débiteur. Je sais qu’il y a une dette et qu’on la paye. Voilà tout. J’aurais mieux aimé qu’on ne tuât pas le roi, mais il me serait difficile de dire pourquoi. Après ça, on me répond: Mais, autrefois, comme on vous accrochait les gens aux arbres pour rien du tout! Tenez, moi, pour un méchant coup de fusil tiré à un chevreuil du roi, j’ai vu pendre un homme qui avait une femme et sept enfants. Il y a à dire des deux côtés.

Il se tut encore, puis ajouta:

— Vous comprenez, je ne sais pas au juste, on va, on vient, il se passe des choses: moi, je suis là sous les étoiles.

Tellmarch eut encore une interruption de rêverie, puis continua:

— Je suis un peu rebouteux, un peu médecin, je connais les herbes, je tire parti des plantes, les paysans me voient attentif devant rien, et cela me fait passer pour sorcier. Parce que je songe, on croit que je sais.

— Vous êtes du pays? dit le marquis.

— Je n’en suis jamais sorti.

— Vous me connaissez?

— Sans doute. La dernière fois que je vous ai vu, c’est à votre dernier passage, il y a deux ans. Vous êtes allé d’ici en Angleterre. Tout à l’heure j’ai aperçu un homme au haut de la dune. Un homme de grande taille. Les hommes grands sont rares; c’est un pays d’hommes petits, la Bretagne. J’ai bien regardé, j’avais lu l’affiche. J’ai dit: Tiens! Et quand vous êtes descendu, il y avait de la lune, je vous ai reconnu.

— Pourtant, moi, je ne vous connais pas.

— Vous m’avez vu, mais vous ne m’avez pas vu.

Et Tellmarch le Caimand ajouta:

— Je vous voyais, moi. De mendiant à passant, le regard n’est pas le même.

— Est-ce que je vous avais rencontré autrefois?

— Souvent, puisque je suis votre mendiant. J’étais le pauvre du bas du chemin de votre château. Vous m’avez dans l’occasion fait l’aumône; mais celui qui donne ne regarde pas, celui qui reçoit examine et observe. Qui dit mendiant, dit espion. Mais moi, quoique souvent triste, je tâche de ne pas être un mauvais espion. Je tendais la main, vous ne voyiez que la main, et vous y jetiez l’aumône dont j’avais besoin le matin pour ne pas mourir de faim le soir. On est des fois des vingt-quatre heures sans manger. Quelquefois un sou c’est la vie. Je vous dois la vie, je vous la rends.

— C’est vrai, vous me sauvez.

— Oui, je vous sauve, monseigneur.

Et la voix de Tellmarch devint grave.

— À une condition.

— Laquelle?

— C’est que vous ne venez pas ici pour faire le mal.

— Je viens ici pour faire le bien, dit le marquis.

— Dormons, dit le mendiant.

Ils se couchèrent côte à côte sur le lit de varech. Le mendiant fut tout De suite endormi. Le marquis, bien que très las, resta un moment rêveur, puis, dans cette ombre, il regarda le pauvre et se coucha. Se coucher sur ce lit, c’était se coucher sur le sol; il en profita pour coller son oreille à terre, et il écouta. Il y avait sous la terre un sombre bourdonnement: on sait que le son se propage dans les profondeurs du sol; on entendait le bruit des cloches.

Le tocsin continuait.

Le marquis s’endormit.

V. SIGNÉ GAUVAIN

Quand il se réveilla, il faisait jour.

Le mendiant était debout, non dans la tanière, car on ne pouvait s'y tenir droit, mais dehors et sur le seuil. Il était appuyé sur son bâton. Il avait du soleil sur son visage.

Monseigneur, dit Tellmarch, quatre heures du matin viennent de sonner an clocher de Tanis. J'ai entendu les quatre coups; donc le vent a changé, c'est le vent de terre. Je n'entends aucun autre bruit; donc le tocsin a cessé. Tout est tranquille dans la métairie et dans le hameau d'Herbe-en-Pail. Les bleus dorment ou sont partis. Le plus fort du danger est passé; il est sage de nous séparer. C'est mon heure de m'en aller.

Il désigna un point de l'horizon.

— Je m'en vais par là.

Et il désigna le point opposé.

— Vous, allez-vous-en par ici.

Le mendiant fit au marquis un grave salut de la main. Il ajouta en montrant ce qui restait, du souper:

— Emportez des châtaignes, si vous avez faim.

Un moment après, il avait disparu sous les arbres.

Le marquis se leva, et s'en alla du côté que lui avait indiqué Tellmarch.

C'était l'heure charmante que la vieille langue paysanne normande appelle la «piperette du jour». On entendait jaser les cardrounettes et les moineaux de haie. Le marquis suivit le sentier par où ils étaient venus la veille. Il sortit du fourré et se retrouva à l'embranchement de routes marqué par la crois de pierre. L'affiche y était, blanche et comme gaie au soleil levant. Il se rappela qu'il y avait au bas de l'affiche quelque chose qu'il n'avait pu lire la veille à cause de la finesse des lettres et du peu de jour qu'il faisait. Il alla au piédestal de la croix. L'affiche se terminait en effet, au-dessous de la signature PRIEUR DE LA MARNE, par ces deux lignes en petits caractères:

«L'identité du ci-devant marquis de Lantenac constatée, il sera immédiatement passé par les armes. — Signé: *Le chef de bataillon, commandant la colonne d'expédition,* GAUVAIN.»

— Gauvain! dit le marquis.

Il s'arrêta profondément pensif, l'oeil fixé sur l'affiche.

— Gauvain! répéta-t-il.

Il se remit en marche, se retourna, regarda la croix, revint sur ses pas, et lut l’affiche encore une fois.

Puis il s’éloigna à pas lents. Quelqu’un qui eût été près de lui l’eût entendu murmurer à demi-voix: «Gauvain!»

Du fond des chemins creux où il se glissait, on ne voyait pas les toits de la métairie qu’il avait laissée à sa gauche. Il côtoyait une éminence abrupte, toute couverte d’ajoncs en fleur, de l’espèce dite longue-épine. Cette éminence avait pour sommet une de ces pointes de terre qu’on appelle dans le pays une «hure». Au pied de l’éminence, le regard se perdait tout de suite sous les arbres. Les feuillages étaient comme trempés de lumière. Toute la nature avait la joie profonde du matin.

Tout à coup ce paysage fut terrible. Ce fut comme une embuscade qui éclate. On ne sait quelle trombe faite de cris sauvages et de coups de fusil s’abattit sur ces champs et ces bois pleins de rayons, et l’on vit s’élever, du côté où était la métairie, une grande fumée coupée de flammes claires, comme si le hameau et la ferme n’étaient plus qu’une botte de paille qui brûlait. Ce fut subit et lugubre, le passage brusque du calme à la furie, une explosion de l’enfer en pleine aurore, l’horreur sans transition. On se battait du côté d’Herbe-en-Pail. Le marquis s’arrêta.

Il n’est personne qui, en pareil cas, ne l’ait éprouvé, la curiosité est plus forte que le danger; on veut savoir, dût-on périr. Il monta sur l’éminence au bas de laquelle passait le chemin creux. De là on était vu, mais on voyait. Il fut sur la hure en quelques minutes. Il regarda.

En effet, il y avait une fusillade et un incendie. On entendait des clameurs, on voyait du feu. La métairie était comme le centre d’on ne sait quelle catastrophe. Qu’était-ce? La métairie d’Herbe-en-Pail était-elle attaquée? Mais par qui? Etait-ce un combat? N’était-ce pas plutôt une exécution militaire? Les bleus, et cela leur était ordonné par un décret révolutionnaire, punissaient très souvent, en y mettant le feu, les fermes et les villages réfractaires; on brillait, pour l’exemple, toute métairie et tout hameau qui n’avaient point fait les abattis d’arbres prescrits par la loi et qui n’avaient pas ouvert et taillé dans les fourrés des passages pour la cavalerie républicaine. On avait notamment exécuté ainsi tout récemment la paroisse de Bourgon, près d’Ernée. Herbe-en-Pail était-il dans le même cas? Il était visible qu’aucune des percées stratégiques commandées par le décret n’avait été faite dans les halliers et dans les enclos de Tanis et l’Herbe-en-

Pail. Etait-ce le châtiment? Etait-il arrivé un ordre à l’avant-garde qui occupait la métairie? Cette avant-garde ne faisait-elle pas partie d’une de ces colonnes d’expédition surnommées *colonnes Infernales?*

Un fourré très hérissé et très fauve entourait de toutes part l’éminence au sommet de laquelle le marquis s’était placé en observation. Ce fourré, qu’on appelait le bocage d’Herbe-en-Pail, mais qui avait les proportions d’un bois s’étendait jusqu’à la métairie, et cachait, comme tous les halliers bretons, un réseau de ravins, de sentiers et de chemins creux, labyrinthes où les armées républicaines se perdaient.

L’exécution, si c’était une exécution, avait dû être féroce, car elle fut courte. Ce fut, comme toutes les choses brutales, tout de suite fait. L’atrocité des guerres civiles comporte ces sauvageries. Pendant que le marquis, multipliant les conjonctures, hésitant à descendre, hésitant à rester, écoutait et épiait, ce fracas d’extermination cessa, ou pour mieux dire se dispersa. Le marquis constata dans le hallier comme l’éparpillement d’une troupe furieuse et joyeuse. Un effrayant fourmillement se fit sous les arbres. De la métairie on se jetait dans le bois. Il y avait des tambours qui battaient la charge. On ne tirait plus de coup de fusil; cela ressemblait maintenant à une battue; on semblait fouiller, poursuivre, traquer; il était évident qu’on cherchait quelqu’un; le bruit était diffus et profond; c’était une confusion de paroles de colère et de triomphe, une rumeur composée de clameurs; on n’y distinguait rien. Brusquement, comme un linéament se dessine dans une fumée, quelque chose devint articulé et précis dans ce tumulte, c’était un nom, un nom répété par mille voix, et le marquis entendit nettement ce cri:

— Lantenac! Lantenac! le marquis de Lantenac!

C’était lui qu’on cherchait.

VI. LES PÉRIPÉTIES DE LA GUERRE CIVILE

Et subitement, autour de lui, et de tous les côtés à la fois, le fourré se remplit de fusils, de bayonnettes et de sabres, un drapeau tricolore se dressa dans la pénombre, le cri *Lantenac!* éclata à son oreille, et à ses pieds, à travers les ronces et les branches, des faces violentes apparurent.

Le marquis était seul, debout sur un sommet, visible de tous les points du bois. Il voyait à peine ceux qui criaient son nom, mais il était vu de tous. S'il y avait mille fusils dans le bois, il était là comme une cible. Il ne distinguait rien dans le taillis que des prunelles ardentes fixées sur lui.

Il ôta son chapeau, en retroussa le bord, arracha une longue épine sèche à un ajonc, tira de sa poche une cocarde blanche, fixa avec l'épine le bord retroussé et la cocarde à la forme du chapeau, et, remettant sur la tête le chapeau dont le bord relevé laissait voir son front et sa cocarde, il dit d'une voix haute, parlant à toute la forêt à la fois:

— Je suis l'homme que vous cherchez. Je suis le marquis de Lantenac, vicomte de Fontenay, prince breton, lieutenant-général des armées du roi. Finissons-en. En joue! Feu!

Et, écartant de ses deux mains sa veste de peau de chèvre, il montra sa poitrine nue.

Il baissa les yeux, cherchant du regard les fusils braqués, et se vit entouré d'hommes à genoux.

Un immense cri s'éleva: — Vive Lantenac! Vive monseigneur! Vive le général!

En même temps des chapeaux sautaient en l'air, des sabres tournoyaient joyeusement, et l'on voyait dans tout le taillis se dresser des bâtons au bout desquels s'agitaient des bonnets de laine brune.

Ce qu'il avait autour de lui, c'était une bande vendéenne.

Cette bande s'était agenouillée en le voyant.

La légende raconte qu'il y avait dans les vieilles forêts thuringiennes des, êtres étranges, race des géants, plus et moins qu'hommes, qui étaient considérés par les romains comme des animaux horribles, et par les germains comme des incarnations divines, et qui, selon la rencontre, couraient la chance d'être exterminés ou adorés.

Le marquis éprouva quelque chose de pareil à ce que devait ressentir un de ces êtres quand, s'attendant à être traité comme un monstre, il était brusquement traité comme un dieu.

Tous ces yeux pleins d'éclairs redoutables se fixaient sur le marquis avec une sorte de sauvage amour.

Cette cohue était armée de fusils, de sabres, de faulx, de pioches, de bêtons; tous avaient de grands feutres ou des bonnets bruns, avec des cocardes blanche, une profusion de rosaires et d'amulettes, de larges culottes ouvertes au genou, des casaques de poil, des guêtres de cuir, le jarret nu, les cheveux longs, quelques-uns l'air féroce, tous l'oeil naïf.

Un homme, jeune et de belle mine, traversa ces gens agenouillés et monta à grands pas vers le marquis. Cet homme était, comme les paysans, coiffé d'un feutre à bord relevé et à cocarde blanche, et vêtu d'une casaque de poil, mais il avait les mains blanches et une chemise fine, et il portait par-dessus sa veste une écharpe de soie blanche à laquelle pendait une épée à poignée dorée.

Parvenu sur la hure, il jeta son chapeau, détacha son écharpe, mit un genou en terre, présenta au marquis l'écharpe et l'épée, et dit:

— Nous vous cherchions en effet, nous vous avons trouvé. Voici l'épée de commandement. Ces hommes sont maintenait à vous. J'étais leur commandant, je monte en grade, je suis votre soldat. Acceptez notre hommage, monseigneur. Donnez vos ordres, mon général.

Puis il fit un signe, et des hommes qui portaient un drapeau tricolore sortirent du bois. Ces hommes montèrent jusqu'au marquis et déposèrent le drapeau à ses pieds. C'était le drapeau qu'il venait d'entrevoir à travers les arbres.

— Mon général, dit le jeune homme qui lui avait présenté l'épée et l'écharpe, ceci est le drapeau que nous venons de prendre aux bleus qui étaient dans la ferme d'Herbe-en-pail. Monseigneur, je m'appelle Gavard. J'ai été au marquis de La Rouarie.

— C'est bien, dit le marquis.

Et, calme et grave, il ceignit l'écharpe.

Puis il tira l'épée, et, l'agitant nue au-dessus de sa tète: — Debout! dit-il, et vive le roi!

Tous se levèrent.

Et l'on entendit dans les profondeurs du bois une clameur éperdue et triomphante: *Vive le roi! Vive notre marquis! Vive Lantenac!*

Le marquis se tourna vers Gavard.

— Combien donc êtes-vous?

— Sept mille.

Et tout en descendant de l'éminence, pendant que les paysans écartaient les ajoncs devant les pas du marquis de Lantenac, Gavard continua:

— Monseigneur, rien de plus simple. Tout cela s'explique d'un mot. On n'attendait qu'une étincelle. L'affiche de la République, en révélant votre présence, a insurgé le pays pour le roi. Nous avions en outre été avertis sous main par le maire de Granville qui est un homme à nous; le même qui a sauvé l'abbé Olivier. Cette nuit, on a sonné le tocsin.

— Pour qui?

— Pour vous.

— Ah! dit le marquis.

— Et nous voilà, reprit Gavard.

— Et vous êtes sept mille?

— Aujourd'hui. Nous serons quinze mille demain. C'est le rendement du pays. quand M. Henri de La Rochejaquelein est parti pour l'armée catholique, ou a sonné le tocsin, et en une nuit six paroisses, Isernay, Corqueux, les Echaubroigues, les Aubiers, Saint-Aubin et Nueil, lui ont amené dix mille hommes. Ou n'avait pas de munitions, on a trouvé chez un maçon soixante livres de poudre de mine, et M. de La Rochejaquelein est parti avec cela. Nous pensions bien que vous deviez être quelque part dans cette forêt, et nous vous cherchions.

— Et vous avez attaqué les bleus dans la ferme d'Herbe-en-Pail?

— Le vent les avait empêchés d'entendre le tocsin. Ils ne se défiaient pas; les gens du hameau, qui sont patauds, les avaient bien reçus. Ce matin, nous avons investi la ferme, les bleus dormaient, et en un tour de main la chose a été faite. J'ai un cheval. Daignez-vous l'accepter, mon général?

— Oui.

Un paysan amena un cheval blanc militairement harnaché. Le marquis, sans user de l'aide que lui offrait Gavard, monta à cheval.

— Hurrah! crièrent les paysans. Car les cris anglais sont fort usités sur la côte bretonne-normande, en commerce perpétuel avec les îles de la Manche.

Gavard fit le salut militaire et demanda:

— Quel sera votre quartier général, monseigneur?

— D'abord la forêt de Fougères.

— C'est une de vos sept forêts, monsieur le marquis.

— Il faut un prêtre.

— Nous en avons un.

— Qui?

— Le vicaire de la Chapelle-Erbrée.

— Je le connais. Il a fait le voyage de Jersey.

Un prêtre sortit des rangs, et dit:

— Trois fois.

Le marquis tourna la tête.

— Bonjour, monsieur le vicaire. Vous allez avoir de la besogne.

— Tant mieux, monsieur le marquis.

— Vous aurez du monde à confesser. Ceux qui voudront. On ne force personne.

— Monsieur le marquis, dit le prêtre, Gaston, à Guéménée, force les républicains à se confesser.

— C’est un perruquier, dit le marquis. Mais la mort doit être libre.

Gavard, qui était allé donner quelques consignes, revint.

— Mon général, j’attends vos commandements.

— D’abord, le rendez-vous est à la forêt de Fougères. Qu’on se disperse et qu’on y aille.

— L’ordre est donné.

— Ne m’avez-vous pas dit que les gens d’Herbe-en-Pail avaient bien reçu les bleus?

— Oui, mon général.

— Vous avez brûlé la ferme?

— Oui.

— Avez-vous brûlé le hameau?

— Non.

— Brûlez-le.

— Les bleus ont essayé de se défendre; mais ils étaient cent cinquante et nous étions sept mille.

— Qu’est-ce que c’est que ces bleus-là?

— Des bleus de Santerre.

— Qui a commandé le roulement de tambours pendant qu’on coupait la tête au roi. Alors c’est un bataillon de Paris?

— Un demi-bataillon.

— Comment s’appelle ce bataillon?

— Mon général, il y a sur le drapeau: Bataillon du Bonnet-Rouge.

— Des bêtes féroces.

— Que faut-il faire des blessés?

— Achevez-les.

— Que faut-il faire des prisonniers?

— Fusillez-les.

— Il y en a environ quatre-vingts.

— Fusillez-les tous.

— Il y a deux femmes.

— Aussi.

— Il y a trois enfants.

— Emmenez-les. On verra ce qu'on en fera. Et le marquis poussa son cheval.

VII. PAS DE GRACE (MOT D'ORDRE DE LA COMMUNE) PAS DE QUARTIER (MOT D'ORDRE DES PRINCES)

Pendant que ceci se passait près de Tanis, le mendiant s'en était allé vers Grollon. Il s'était enfoncé dans les ravins, sous les vastes feuillées sourdes, inattentif à tout et attentif à rien, comme il l'avait dit lui-même, rêveur plutôt que pensif, car le pensif a un but et le rêveur n'en a pas, errant, rôdant, s'arrêtant, mangeant çà et là une pousse d'oseille sauvage, buvant aux sources, dressant la tête par moments à des fracas lointains, puis rentrant dans l'éblouissante fascination de la nature, offrant ses haillons au soleil, entendant peut-être le bruit des hommes, mais écoutant le chant des oiseaux.

Il était vieux et lent; il ne pouvait aller loin; comme il l'avait dit au marquis de Lantenac, un quart de lieue le fatiguait; il fit un court circuit vers la Croix-Avranchin, et le soir était venu quand il s'en retourna.

Un peu au delà de Macey, le sentier qu'il suivait le conduisit sur une sorte de point culminant dégagé d'arbres, d'où l'on voit de très loin et d'où l'on découvre tout l'horizon de l'ouest jusqu'à la mer.

Une fumée appela son attention.

Rien de plus doux qu'une fumée, rien de plus effrayant. Il y a les fumées paisibles et il y a les fumées scélérates. Une fumée, l'épaisseur et la couleur d'une fumée, c'est toute la différence entre la paix et la guerre, entre la fraternité et la haine, entre l'hospitalité et le sépulcre, entre la vie et la mort. Une fumée qui monte dans les arbres peut signifier ce qu'il y a de plus charmant au monde, le foyer, ou ce qu'il y a de plus affreux, l'incendie; et tout le bonheur comme tout le malheur de l'homme sont parfois dans cette chose éparse au vent.

La fumée que regardait Tellmarch était inquiétante.

Elle était noire avec des rougeurs subtiles, comme si le brasier d'où elle sortait avait des intermittences et achevait de s'éteindre, et elle s'élevait au-dessus d'Herbe-en-Pail.

Tellmarch hâta le pas et se dirigea vers cette fumée. Il était bien las, mais il voulait savoir ce que c'était.

Il arriva au sommet d’un coteau auquel étaient adossés le hameau et la métairie.

Il n’y avait plus ni métairie ni hameau.

Un tas de masures brûlait, et c’était là Herbe-en-Pail.

Il y a quelque chose de plus poignant à voir brûler qu’un palais, c’est une chaumière. Une chaumière en feu est lamentable. La dévastation s’abattant sur la misère, le vautour s’acharnant sur le ver de terre, il y a là on ne sait quel contre-sens qui serre le coeur.

A en croire la légende biblique, un incendie regardé change une créature humaine eu statue; Tellmarch fut un moment cette statue. Le spectacle qu’il avait sous les yeux le fit immobile. Cette destruction s’accomplissait en silence. Pas un cri ne s’élevait; pas un soupir humain ne se mêlait à cette fumée; cette fournaise travaillait, et achevait de dévorer ce village sans qu’on entendit d’autre bruit que le craquement des charpentes et le pétillement des chaumes. Par moments la fumée se déchirait, les toits effondrés laissaient voir les chambres béantes, le brasier montrait tous ses rubis, des guenilles écarlates et de pauvres vieux meubles couleur de pourpre se dressait dans des intérieurs vermeils, et Tellmarch avait le sinistre éblouissement du désastre.

Quelques arbres d’une châtaigneraie contiguë aux maisons avaient pris feu et flambaient.

Il écoutait, tâchant d’entendre une voix, un appel, une clameur; rien ne remuait, excepté les flammes; tout se taisait, excepté l’incendie. Est-ce donc que tous avaient fui?

Où était ce groupe vivant et travaillant d’Herbe-en-Pail? Qu’était devenu tout ce petit peuple?

Tellmarch descendit du coteau.

Une énigme funèbre était devant lui. Il s’en approchait sans hâte et l’il fixe. Il avançait vers cette ruine avec une lenteur d’ombre; il se sentait fantôme dans cette tombe.

Il arriva à ce qui avait été la porte de la métairie, et il regarda dans la cour qui, maintenant, n’avait plus de murailles et se confondait avec le hameau groupé autour d’elle.

Ce qu’il avait, vu n’était rien. Il n’avait encore aperçu que le terrible.

L’horrible lui apparut.

Au milieu de la cour il y avait un monceau noir, vaguement modelé d’un côté par la flamme, de l’autre par la lune; ce monceau était un tas d’hommes, ces hommes étaient morts.

Il y avait autour de ce tas une grande mare qui fumait un peu; l’incendie se reflétait dans cette mare, mais elle n’avait pas besoin du feu pour être rouge; c’était du sang.

Tellmarch s’approcha. Il se mit à examiner, l’un après l’autre, ces corps gisants: tous étaient des cadavres.

La lune éclairait, l’incendie aussi.

Ces cadavres étaient des soldats. Tous étaient pieds nus; on leur avait pris leurs souliers; ou leur avait aussi pris leurs armes; ils avaient encore leurs uniformes qui étaient bleus; çà et là on distinguait, dans l’amoncellement des membres et des têtes, du chapeaux troués avec des cocardes tricolores. C’étaient des républicains. C’étaient ces Parisiens qui, la veille encore, étaient là tous vivants, et tenaient garnison dans la ferme d’Herbe-en-Pail. Ces hommes avaient été suppliciés, ce qu’indiquait la chute symétrique des corps; ils avaient été foudroyés sur place, et avec soin. Ils étaient tous morts. Pas un râle ne sortait du tas.

Tellmarch passa cette revue des cadavres, sans en omettre un seul; tous étaient criblés de balles.

Ceux qui les avaient mitraillés, pressés probablement d’aller ailleurs, n’avaient pas pris le temps de les enterrer.

Comme il allait se retirer, ses yeux tombèrent sur un mur bas qui était dans la cour, et il vit quatre pieds qui passaient derrière l’angle de ce mur.

Ces pieds avaient des souliers; ils étaient plus petits que les autres;

Tellmarch approcha. C’étaient des pieds de femmes.

Deux femmes étaient gisantes côte à côte derrière le mur, fusillées aussi.

Tellmarch se pencha sur elles. L’une de ces femmes avait une sorte d’uniforme; à côté d’elle était un bidon brisé et vidé; c’était une vivandière. Elle avait quatre balles dans la tête. Elle était morte.

Tellmarch examina l’autre. C’était une paysanne. Elle était blême et béante. Ses yeux étaient fermés. Elle n’avait aucune plaie à la tête. Ses vêtements, dont les fatigues sans doute avaient fait des haillons, s’étaient ouverts dans sa chute, et laissaient voir son torse à demi nu. Tellmarch acheva de les écarter, et vit à une épaule la plaie ronde que fait une balle; la clavicule était cassée. Il regarda ce sein livide.

— Mère et nourrice, murmura-t-il.

Il la toucha. Elle n’était pas froide.

Elle n’avait pas d’autre blessure que la clavicule cassée et la plaie à l’épaule.

Il posa la main sur le coeur et sentit un faible battement. Elle n’était pas morte.

Tellmarch se redressa debout et cria d’une voix terrible:

— Il n’y a donc personne ici?

— C’est toi, le caimand! répondit une voix, si basse qu’on l’entendait à peine.

Et en même temps une tête sortit d’un trou de ruine.

Puis une autre face apparut dans une autre masure. C’étaient deux paysans qui s’étaient cachés; les seuls qui survécussent.

La voix connue du caimand les avait rassurés et les avait fait sortir des recoins où ils se blottissaient.

Ils avancèrent vers Tellmarch, fort tremblants encore.

Tellmarch avait pu crier, mais ne pouvait parler: les émotions profondes sont ainsi.

Il leur montra du doigt la femme étendue à ses pieds.

— Est-ce qu’elle est encore en vie? dit l’un des paysans.

Tellmarch fit de la tête signe que oui.

— L’autre femme est-elle vivante? demanda l’autre paysan.

Tellmarch fit signe que non.

Le paysan qui s’était montré le premier reprit:

— Tous les autres sont morts, n’est-ce pas? J’ai vu cela. J’étais dans ma cave. Comme on remercie Dieu dans ces moments-là de n’avoir pas de famille! Ma maison brûlait. Seigneur Jésus! on a tout tué. Cette femme-ci avait des enfants. Trois enfants. Tout petits! Les enfants criaient: Mère! La mère criait: Mes enfants! On a tué la mère et on a emmené les enfants. J’ai vu cela, mon Dieu! mon Dieu! mon Dieu! Ceux qui ont tout massacré sont partis. Ils étaient contents. Ils out emmené les petits et tué la mère. Mais elle n’est pas morte, n’est-ce pas, elle n’est pas morte? Dis donc, le caimand, est-ce que tu crois que tu pourrais la sauver? Veux-tu que nous t’aidions à la porter dans ton carnichot?

Tellmarch fit signe que oui.

Le bois touchait à la ferme. Ils eurent vite fait un brancard avec des feuillages et des fougères. Ils placèrent sur le brancard la femme toujours immobile, et se mirent en marche dans le hallier, les deux paysans portant le brancard l’un à la tète, l’autre aux pieds, Tellmarch soutenant le bras de la femme, et lui tâtant le pouls.

Tout en cheminant, les deux paysans causaient, et, par-dessus la femme sanglante dont la lune éclairait la face pâle, ils échangeaient des exclamations effarées.

— Tout tuer!

— Tout brûler!

— Ah! monseigneur Dieu! est-ce qu’on va être comme ça à présent?

— C’est ce grand homme vieux qui l’a voulu.

— Oui, c’est lui qui commandait.

— Je ne l’ai pas vu quand on a fusillé. Est-ce qu’il était là?

— Non. Il était parti. Mais c’est égal, tout s’est fait par son commandement.

— Alors, c’est lui qui a tout fait.

— Il avait dit: Tuez! brûlez! pas de quartier!

— C’est un marquis.

— Oui, puisque c’est notre marquis.

— Comment s’appelle-t-il donc déjà?

— C’est monsieur de Lantenac.

Tellmarch leva les yeux au ciel et murmura entre ses dents:

— Si j’avais su!

DEUXIÈME PARTIE

A PARIS

LIVRE PREMIER

CIMOURDAIN

I. LES RUES DE PARIS DANS CE TEMPS-LA

On vivait en public; on mangeait sur des tables dressées devant les portes; les femmes assises sur les perrons des églises faisaient de la charpie en chantant *la Marseillaise*; le parc Monceaux et le Luxembourg étaient des champs de manoeuvre; il y avait dans tous les carrefours des armureries en plein travail, on fabriquait des fusils sous les yeux des passants qui battaient des mains; on n'entendait que ce mot dans toutes les bouches: *Patience. Nous sommes en révolution.* On souriait héroïquement. On allait au spectacle comme à Athènes pendant la guerre du Péloponnèse; on voyait affichés au coin des rues: *Le Siège de Thionville. — La Mère de famille sauvée des flammes. — Le Club des Sans-Soucis. — L'Aînée des papesses Jeanne. — Les Philosophes soldats. — L'Art d'aimer au village.* — Les allemands étaient aux portes; le bruit courait que le roi de Prusse avait fait retenir des loges à l'Opéra. Tout était effrayant et personne n'était effrayé. La ténébreuse loi des suspects, qui est le crime de Merlin de Douai, faisait la guillotine visible au-dessus de toutes les têtes. Un procureur nommé Séran, dénoncé, attendait qu'on vint l'arrêter, en robe de chambre et en pantoufles, et en jouant de la flûte à sa fenêtre. Personne ne semblait avoir le temps. Tout le monde se hâtait. Pas un chapeau qui n'eût une cocarde. Les femmes disaient: *Nous sommes jolies sous le bonnet rouge.* Paris semblait plein d'un déménagement. Les marchands de bric-à-brac étaient encombrés de couronnes, de mitres, de sceptres en bois doré et de fleurs de lys, défroques des maisons royales. C'était la démolition de la monarchie qui passait. On voyait chez les fripiers des chapes et des rochets à vendre au *décrochez-moi-ça*. Aux Porcherons et chez Ramponneau, des hommes affublés de surplis et d'étoles, montés sur des ânes caparaçonnés de chasubles, se faisaient verser le vin du cabaret dans les ciboires des cathédrales. Rue Saint-Jacques, des paveurs, pieds nus, arrêtaient la brouette d'un colporteur qui offrait des chaussures à vendre, se cotisaient, et achetaient quinze paires de souliers qu'ils envoyaient à la Convention pour nos soldats. Les bustes de Franklin, de Rousseau, de Brutus, et il faut ajouter de Marat, abondaient; au-dessous d'un de ces bustes de Marat, rue Cloche-Perce, était accroché sous verre, dans un cadre de bois noir, un réquisitoire contre Malouet, avec faits à l'appui, et ces deux lignes en marge: «Ces détails m'ont été donnés par la maîtresse de Sylvain Bailly, bonne patriote qui a des bontés pour moi. — Signé: MARAT.» Sur la place du Palais-Royal, l'inscription de la fontaine: *Quantos effundit in usus!* était cachée par deux grandes toiles peintes à la détrempe, représentant l'une, Cahier de Gerville dénonçant à l'Assemblée nationale le signe de ralliement des «chiffonnistes» d'Arles, l'autre Louis XVI ramené de Varennes dans son carrosse royal, et sous ce carrosse une planche liée par des cordes portant à ses deux bouts deux grenadiers, la bayonnette au fusil. Peu de grandes boutiques étaient ouvertes; des merceries et des bimbeloteries roulantes circulaient traînées par des femmes, éclairées par des chandelles, les suifs fondant sur les marchandises; des boutiques en plein vent étaient tenues par des ex-religieuses en perruque blonde; telle ravaudeuse, raccommodant des bas dans une échoppe, était une comtesse; telle couturière était une marquise; madame de Boufflers habitait un grenier d'où elle voyait son hôtel. Des crieurs couraient, offrant les «papiers-nouvelles». On appelait *écrouelleux* ceux qui cachaient leur menton dans leur cravate. Les chanteurs ambulants pullulaient. La foule huait Pitou, le chansonnier royaliste, vaillant d'ailleurs, car il fut emprisonné vingt-deux fois, et fut traduit devant le tribunal révolutionnaire pour s'être frappé le bas des reins en prononçant le mot *civisme*; voyant sa tête en danger, il s'écria: *Mais c'est le contraire de ma tête qui est coupable!* ce qui fit rire les juges et le sauva. Ce Pitou raillait la mode des noms grecs et latins; sa chanson favorite était sur un savetier qu'il appelait *Cujus*, et dont il appelait la femme *Cujusdam*. On faisait des rondes de carmagnole; on ne disait pas le *cavalier et la dame*, on disait «le citoyen et la citoyenne». On dansait dans les cloîtres en ruine, avec des lampions sur l'autel, à la voûte deux bâtons en croix portant quatre chandelles, et des tombes sous la danse. On portait des vestes bleu de tyran. On avait des épingles de chemise «au bonnet de la Liberté» faites de pierres blanches, bleues et rouges. La rue de Richelieu se nommait rue de la Loi; le faubourg Saint-Antoine se nommait le faubourg de Gloire; il y avait sur la place de la Bastille une statue de la Nature. On se montrait certains passants connus, Chatelet, Didier, Nicolas, et Garnier-Delaunay, qui veillaient à la porte du menuisier Duplay; Voullant, qui ne manquait pas un jour de guillotine et suivait les charretées de condamnés, et qui appelait cela «aller à la messe rouge»; Montflabert, juré révolutionnaire et marquis, lequel se faisait appeler *Dix-Août*. On regardait défiler les élèves de l'Ecole militaire, qualifiés par les décrets de la Convention «aspirants à l'école de Mars», et par le peuple «pages de Robespierre». On lisait les proclamations de Fréron, dénonçant les suspects du crime de «négociantisme». Les «muscadins», ameutés aux portes des mairies, raillaient les mariages civils, s'attroupaient au passage de l'épousée et de l'époux, et disaient: «mariés *municipaliter*». Aux Invalides, les statues des rois et des saints étaient coiffées du bonnet phrygien. On jouait aux cartes sur la borne des carrefours; les jeux de cartes étaient, eux aussi, en pleine révolution, les rois étaient remplacés par les génies, les dames par les libertés, les valets par les égalités, et les as par les lois. On labourait les jardins publics; la charrue travaillait aux Tuileries. A tout cela était mêlée, surtout dans les partis vaincus, on ne sait quelle hautaine lassitude de vivre; un homme écrivait à Fouquier-Tinville; «Ayez la bonté de me délivrer de la vie. Voici mon adresse.» Champrenetz était arrêté pour s'être écrié en plein Palais-Royal: A quand la révolution de Turquie? Je voudrais voir la république à la Porte.» Partout des journaux. Des garçons perruquiers crêpaient en public des perruques de femmes, pendant que le patron lisait à haute voix le *Moniteur*; d'autres commentaient au milieu des groupes, avec force gestes, le journal *Entendons-nous*, de Dubois-Crancé, ou la Trompette du Père Bellerose. Quelquefois les barbiers étaient en même temps charcutiers, et l'on voyait des jambons et des andouilles pendre à côté d'une poupée coiffée de cheveux d'or. Des marchands vendaient sur la voie publique «des vins d'émigrés»; un marchand affichait des vins de cinquante- deux espèces; d'autres brocantaient des pendules en lyre et des sophas à la duchesse; un perruquier avait pour enseigne ceci; «Je rase le clergé, je peigne la noblesse, j'accommode le tiers-état.» On allait se faire tirer les cartes par Martin, au no. 175 de la rue d'Anjou, ci-devant Dauphine. Le pain manquait, le charbon manquait, le savon manquait; on voyait passer des bandes de vaches laitières arrivant des provinces. A la Vallée, l'agneau se vendait quinze francs la livre. Une affiche de la Commune assignait à chaque bouche une livre de viande par décade. On faisait queue aux portes des marchands; une de ces queues est restée légendaire, elle allait de la porte d'un épicier de la rue du Petit-Carreau jusqu'au milieu de la rue Montorgueil Faire queue, cela s'appelait «tenir la ficelle», à pause d'une longue corde que prenaient dans leur main, l'un derrière l'autre, ceux qui étaient à la file. Les femmes dans cette misère étaient vaillantes et douces. Elles passaient les nuits à attendre leur tour d'entrer chez le boulanger. Les expédients réussissaient à la révolution; elle soulevait cette détresse avec deux moyens périlleux, l'assignat et le maximum; l'assignat était le levier, le maximum était le point d’appui. Cet empirisme sauva la France. L’ennemi, aussi bien l’ennemi de Coblentz que l’ennemi de Londres, agiotait sur l’assignat. Des filles allaient et venaient, offrant de l’eau de lavande, des jarretières et des cadenettes, et faisant l’agio; il y avait les agioteurs du Perron de la rue Vivienne, en souliers crottés, en cheveux gras, en bonnet à poil à queue de renard, et les mayolets de la rue de Valois en bottes cirées, le cure-dents à la bouche, le chapeau velu sur la tête, tutoyés par les filles. Le peuple leur faisait la chasse, ainsi qu’aux voleurs, que les royalistes appelaient «citoyens actifs». Du reste, très peu de vols. Un dénûment farouche, une probité stoïque. Les va-nu-pieds et les meurt-de-faim passaient, les yeux gravement baissés, devant les devantures des bijoutiers du Palais-Égalité. Dans une visite domiciliaire que fit la section Antoine chez Beaumarchais, une femme cueillit dans le jardin une fleur; le peuple la souffleta. Le bois coûtait quatre cents francs, argent, la corde; on voyait dans les rues des gens scier leur bois de lit; l’hiver, les fontaines étaient gelées; l’eau coûtait vingt sous la voie; tout le monde se faisait porteur d’eau. Le louis d’or valait trois mille neuf cent cinquante francs. Une course en fiacre coûtait six cents francs. Après une journée de fiacre on entendait ce dialogue: — Cocher, combien vous dois-je? — Six mille livres. Une marchande d’herbe vendait pour vingt mille francs par jour. Un mendiant disait: *Par charité, secourez-moi! il me manque deux cent trente livres pour payer mes souliers.* A l’entrée des ponts, on voyait des colosses sculptés et peints par David que Mercier insultait: *Énormes polichinelles de bois,* disait-il. Ces colosses figuraient le fédéralisme et la coalition terrassés. Aucune défaillance dans ce peuple. La sombre joie d’en avoir fini avec les trônes. Les volontaires affluaient, offrant leurs poitrines. Chaque rue donnait un bataillon. Les drapeaux des districts allaient et venaient, chacun avec sa devise. Sur le drapeau du district des Capucins on lisait: *Nul ne nous fera la barbe*. Sur un autre: *Plus de noblesse que dans le cur*. Sur tous les murs, des affiches, grandes, petites, blanches, jaunes, vertes, rouges, imprimées, manuscrites, où on lisait ce cri: *Vive la République!* Les petits enfants bégayaient *Ça ira!*

Ces petits enfants, c’était l’immense avenir.

Plus tard, à la ville tragique succéda la ville cynique; les rues de Paris ont eu deux aspects révolutionnaires très distincts, avant et après le 9 thermidor; le Paris de Saint-Just fit place au Paris de Tallien; et, ce sont là les continuelles antithèses de Dieu, immédiatement après le Sinaï, la Courtille apparut.

Un accès de folie publique, cela se voit. Cela s'était déjà vu quatrevingts ans auparavant. On sort de Louis XIV comme on sort de Robespierre, avec un grand besoin de respirer; de là la Régence qui ouvre le siècle et le Directoire qui le termine. Deux saturnales après deux terrorismes. La France prend la clef des champs, hors du cloître puritain comme hors du cloître monarchique, avec une joie de nation échappée.

Après le 9 thermidor, Paris fut gai, d'une gaîté égarée. Une joie malsaine déborda. A la frénésie de mourir succéda la frénésie de vivre, et la grandeur s'éclipsa. On eut un Trimalcion qui s'appela Grimod de La Reynière: on eut l'*Almanach des Gourmands*. On dîna au bruit des fanfares dans les entresols du Palais-Royal, avec des orchestres de femmes battant du tambour et sonnant de la trompette; «le rigaudinier», l'archet au poing, régna; on soupa «à l'orientale» chez Méot, au milieu des cassolettes pleines de parfums. Le peintre Boze peignait ses filles, innocentes et charmantes têtes de seize ans, «en guillotinées», c'est-à-dire décolletées avec des chemises rouges. Aux danses violentes dans les églises en ruine succédèrent les bals de Ruggieri, de Luquet, de Wenzel, de Mauduit, de la Montansier; aux graves citoyennes qui faisaient de la charpie succédèrent les sultanes, les sauvages, les nymphes; aux pieds nus des soldats couverts de sang, de boue et de poussière succédèrent les pieds nus des femmes ornés de diamants; en même temps que l'impudeur, l'improbité reparut; il y eut en haut les fournisseurs et en bas «la petite pègre»; un fourmillement du filous emplit Paris, et chacun dut veiller sur son «luc», c'est-à-dire sur son portefeuille; un des passe-temps était d'aller voir, place du Palais-de-Justice, les voleuses au tabouret, on était obligé de leur lier les jupes; à la sortie des théâtres, des gamins offraient des cabriolets en disant: *Citoyen et citoyenne, il y a place pour deux*; on ne criait plus *le Vieux Cordelier* et *l'Ami du Peuple*, on criait *la Lettre de Polichinelle* et *la Pétition des Galopins*: le marquis de Sade présidait la section des Piques, place Vendôme. La réaction était joviale et féroce; les *Dragons de la Liberté* de 92 renaissaient sous le nom de *Chevaliers du Poignard*. En même temps surgit sur les tréteaux ce type, Jocrisse. On eut les «merveilleuses», et au delà des merveilleuses les «inconcevables»; on jura par sa *paole victimée* et par sa *paole vele*; on recula de Mirabeau jusqu'à Bobèche. C'est ainsi que Paris va et vient: il est l'énorme pendule de la civilisation; il touche tour à tour un pôle et l'autre, les Thermopyles et Gomorrhe. Après 93 la révolution traversa une occultation singulière, le siècle sembla oublier de finir ce qu'il avait commencé, on ne sait quelle orgie s'interposa, prit le premier plan, fit reculer au second l'effrayante apocalypse, voila la vision démesurée, et éclata de rire après l'épouvante; la tragédie disparut dans la parodie, et au fond de l'horizon une fumée de carnaval effaça vaguement Méduse.

Mais en 93, où nous sommes, les rues de Paris avaient encore tout l'aspect grandiose et farouche des commencements. Elles avaient leurs orateurs, Varlet qui promenait une baraque roulante du haut de laquelle il haranguait les passants; leurs héros, dont un s'appelait, «le capitaine des bâtons ferrés»; leurs favoris, Guffroy, l'auteur du pamphlet *Rougiff*. Quelques-unes de ces popularités étaient malfaisantes; d'autres étaient saines. Une entre toutes était honnête et fatale; c'était celle de Cimourdain.

II. CIMOURDAIN

Cimourdain était une conscience pure, mais sombre. Il avait en lui l'absolu. Il avait été prêtre, ce qui est grave. L'homme peut, comme le ciel, avoir une sérénité noire; il suffit que quelque chose fasse eu lui la nuit. La prêtrise avait fait la nuit dans Cimourdain. Qui a été prêtre l'est.

Ce qui fait la nuit en nous peut laisser en nous les étoiles. Cimourdain était plein de vertus et de vérités, mais qui brillaient dans le ténèbres.

Son histoire était courte à faire. Il avait été curé de village et précepteur dans une grande maison; puis un petit héritage lui était venu, et il s'était fait libre.

C'était par-dessus tout un opiniâtre. Il se servait de la méditation comme on se sert d'une tenaille; il ne se croyait le droit de quitter une idée que lorsqu'il était arrivé au bout; il pensait avec acharnement. Il savait toutes les langues de l'Europe et un peu les autres; cet homme étudiait sans cesse, ce qui l'aidait à porter sa chasteté; mais rien de plus dangereux qu'un tel refoulement.

Prêtre, il avait, par orgueil, hasard ou hauteur d'âme, observé ses voeux; mais il n'avait pu garder sa croyance. La science avait démoli sa foi; le dogme s'était évanoui en lui. Alors, s'examinant, il s'était senti comme mutilé, et ne pouvant se défaire prêtre, il avait travaillé à se refaire homme; mais d'une façon austère; on lui avait ôté la famille, il avait adopté la patrie; on lui avait refusé une femme, il avait épousé l'humanité. Cette plénitude énorme, au fond, c'est le vide.

Ses parents, paysans, en le faisant prêtre, avaient voulu le faire sortir du peuple; il était rentré dans le peuple.

Et il y était rentré passionnément. Il regardait les souffrants avec une tendresse redoutable. De prêtre il était devenu philosophe, et de philosophe athlète. Louis XV vivait encore que déjà Cimourdain se sentait vaguement républicain. De quelle république? De la république de Platon peut-être, et peut-être aussi de la république de Dracon.

Défense lui était faite d'aimer, il s'était mis à haïr. Il haïssait les mensonges, la monarchie, la théocratie, son habit de prêtre; il haïssait le présent; et il appelait à grands cris l'avenir; il le pressentait, il l'entrevoyait d'avance, il le devinait effrayant et magnifique; il comprenait, pour le dénoûment de la lamentable misère humaine, quelque chose comme un vengeur qui serait un libérateur. Il adorait de loin la catastrophe.

En 1789, cette catastrophe était arrivée, et l'avait trouvé prêt. Cimourdain s'était jeté dans ce vaste renouvellement humain avec logique, c'est-à-dire, pour un esprit de sa trempe, inexorablement. La logique ne s'attendrit pas. Il avait vécu les grandes années révolutionnaires, et avait eu le tressaillement de tous ces souffles, 89, la chute de la Bastille, la fin du supplice des peuples; 90, le 19 juin, la fin de la féodalité; 91, Varennes, la fin de la royauté; 92, l'avènement de la république. Il avait vu se lever la révolution; il n'était pas homme à avoir peur de cette géante; loin de là, cette croissance de tout l'avait vivifié; et, quoique déjà presque vieux, il avait cinquante ans et un prêtre est plus vite vieux qu'un autre homme, — il s'était mis à croître, lui aussi. D'année en année, il avait regardé les évènements grandir, et il avait grandi comme eux. Il avait craint d'abord que la révolution n'avortât, il l'observait, elle avait la raison et le droit, il exigeait qu'elle eût le succès et, à mesure qu'elle effrayait, il se sentait rassuré. Il voulait que cette Minerve, couronnée des étoiles de l'avenir, fût aussi Pallas, et eût pour bouclier le masque aux serpents. Il voulait que son oeil divin pût au besoin jeter aux démons la lueur infernale, et leur rendre terreur pour terreur.

Il était arrivé ainsi à 93.

93 est la guerre de l'Europe contre la France et de la France contre Paris. Et qu'est-ce la révolution? C'est la victoire de la France sur l'Europe et de Paris sur la France. De là l'immensité de cette minute épouvantable, 93, plus grande que tout le reste du siècle.

Rien de plus tragique. L'Europe attaquant la France et la France attaquant

Paris. Drame qui a la stature de l'épopée.

93 est une année intense. L'orage est là dans toute sa colère et dans toute sa grandeur. Cimourdain s'y sentait à l'aise. Ce milieu éperdu, sauvage et splendide convenait à son envergure. Cet homme avait, comme l'aigle de mer, un profond calme intérieur, avec le goût du risque au dehors. Certaines natures ailées, farouches et tranquilles sont faites pour les grands vents. Les âmes de tempête, cela existe.

Il avait une pitié à part, réservée seulement aux misérables. Devant l'espèce de souffrance qui fait horreur, il se dévouait. Rien ne lui répugnait. C'était là son genre de bonté. Il était hideusement secourable, et divinement. Il cherchait les ulcères pour les baiser. Les belles actions laides à voir sont les plus difficiles à faire: il préférait celles-là. Un jour à l'Hôtel-Dieu, un homme allait mourir, étouffé par une tumeur à la gorge, abcès fétide, affreux, contagieux peut-être, et qu'il fallait vider sur-le-champ. Cimourdain était là; il appliqua sa bouche à la tumeur, la pompa, recrachant à mesure que sa bouche était pleine, vida l'abcès, et sauva l'homme. Comme il portait encore à cette époque son habit de prêtre, quelqu'un lui dit: — Si vous faisiez cela au roi, vous seriez évêque. — Je ne le ferais pas au roi, répondit Cimourdain. L'acte et la réponse le firent populaire dans les quartiers sombres de Paris.

Si bien qu'il faisait de ceux qui souffrent, qui pleurent et qui menacent ce qu'il voulait. A l'époque des colères contre les accapareurs, colères si fécondes en méprises, ce fut Cimourdain qui, d'un mot, empêcha le pillage d'un bateau chargé de savon sur le port Saint-Nicolas, et qui dissipa les attroupements furieux arrêtant les voitures à la barrière Saint-Lazare.

Ce fut lui qui, dix jours après le 10 août, mena le peuple jeter bas les statues des rois. En tombant elles tuèrent. Place Vendòme, une femme, Reine Violet, fut écrasée par Louis XIV au cou duquel elle avait mis une corde qu'elle tirait. Cette statue de Louis XIV avait été cent ans debout; elle avait été érigée le 12 août 1692; elle fut reversée le 12 août 1792. Place de la Concorde, un nommé Guinguerlot ayant appelé les démolisseurs: canailles! fut assommé sur le piédestal de Louis XV. La statue fut mise en pièces. Plus tard on en fit des sous. Le bras seul échappa; c'était le bras droit que Louis XV étendait avec un geste d'empereur romain. Ce fut sur la demande de Cimourdain que le peuple donna et qu'une députation porta ce bras à Latude, l'homme enterré trente-sept ans à la Bastille. Quand Latude, le carcan an cou, la chaîne au ventre, pourrissait vivant au fond de cette prison par ordre de ce roi dont la statue dominait Paris, qui lui eût dit que cette prison tomberait, que cette statue tomberait, qu'il sortirait du sépulcre et que la monarchie y entrerait, que lui, le prisonnier, il serait le maître de cette main de bronze qui avait signé son écrou, et que de ce roi de boue il ne resterait que ce bras d'airain?

Cimourdain était de ces hommes qui ont en eux une voix, et qui l'écoutent.

Ces hommes-là semblent distraits; point; ils sont attentifs.

Cimourdain savait tout et ignorait tout. Il savait tout de la science et ignorait tout de la vie. De là sa rigidité. Il avait les yeux bandés comme la

Thémis d’Homère. Il avait la certitude aveugle de la flèche qui ne voit que le but et qui y va. En révolution rien de redoutable comme la ligne droite. Cimourdain allait devant lui, fatal.

Cimourdain croyait que, dans les genèses sociales, le point extrême est le terrain solide; erreur propre aux esprits qui remplacent la raison par la logique. Il dépassait la Convention; il dépassait la Commune; il était de l’Evêché.

La réunion, dite l’Evêché, parce qu’elle tenait ses séances dans une salle du vieux palais épiscopal, était plutôt une complication d’hommes qu’une réunion. Là assistaient, comme à la Commune, ces spectateurs silencieux et significatifs qui avaient sur eux, comme dit Garat, «autant de pistolets que de poches». L’Evêché était un pêle-mêle étrange; pêle-mêle cosmopolite et parisien, ce qui ne s’exclut point, Paris étant le lieu où bat le coeur des peuples. Là était la grande incandescence plébéienne. Près de l’Evêché la Convention était froide et la Commune était tiède. L’Evêché était une de ces formations révolutionnaires, pareilles aux formations volcaniques; l’Evêché contenait de tout, de l’ignorance, de la bêtise, de la probité, de l’héroïsme, de la colère, et de la police. Brunswick y avait des agents. Il y avait là des hommes dignes de Sparte et des hommes dignes du bagne. La plupart étaient forcenés et honnêtes. La Gironde, par la bouche d’Isnard, président momentané de la Convention, avait dit un mot monstrueux: — *Prenez garde, Parisiens. Il ne restera pas pierre sur pierre de notre ville, et l’on cherchera un jour la place où fut Paris.* — Ce mot avait créé l’Evêché. Des hommes, et, nous venons de le dire, des hommes de toutes nations, avaient senti la nécessité de se serrer autour de Paris. Cimourdain s’était rallié à ce groupe.

Ce groupe réagissait contre les réacteurs. Il était né de ce besoin public de violence qui est le côté redoutable et mystérieux des révolutions. Fort de cette force, l’Evêché s’était tout de suite fait sa part. Dans les commotions de Paris, c’était la Commune qui tirait le canon, c’était l’Evêché qui sonnait le tocsin.

Cimourdain croyait, dans son ingénuité implacable, que tout est équité au service du vrai; ce qui le rendait propre à dominer les partis extrêmes. Les coquins le sentaient honnête, et étaient contents. Des crimes sont flattés d’être présidés par une vertu. Cela les gène, et leur plaît. Palloy, l’architecte qui avait exploité la démolition de la Bastille, vendant ces pierres à son profit, et qui chargé de badigeonner le cachot de Louis XVI, avait, par zèle, couvert le mur de barreaux, de chaînes et de carcans; Gonchon, l'orateur suspect du faubourg Saint-Antoine, dont on a retrouvé plus tard les quittances; Fournier, l'Américain qui, le 17 juillet, avait tiré sur Lafayette un coup de pistolet payé, disait-on, par Lafayette; Henriot, qui sortait de Bicètre, et qui avait été valet, saltimbanque, voleur et espion avant d'être général et de pointer des canons sur la Convention, La Reynie, l'ancien grand vicaire de Chartres, qui avait remplacé son bréviaire par le Père Duchêne, tous ces hommes étaient tenus en respect par Cimourdain, et, à de certains moments, pour empêcher les pires de broncher, il suffisait qu'ils sentissent en arrêt devant eux cette redoutable candeur convaincue. C'est ainsi que Saint-Just terrifiait Schneider. En même temps, la majorité de l'Evêché, composée surtout de pauvres et d'hommes violents, qui étaient bons, croyaient en Cimourdain et le suivait. I1 avait pour vicaire, ou pour aide de camp, comme on voudra, cet autre prêtre républicain, Danjou, que le peuple aimait pour sa haute taille et avait baptisé l'abbé Six-Pieds. Cimourdain eût mené où il eût voulu cet intrépide chef qu'on appelait le général la Pique, et ce hardi Trunchon, dit le Grand-Nicolas, qui avait voulu sauver madame Lamballe, et lui avait donné le bras et fait enjamber les cadavres; ce qui eût réussi sans la féroce plaisanterie du barbier Charlot.

La Commune surveillait la Convention, l'Evêché surveillait la Commune. Cimourdain, esprit droit et répugnant à l'intrigue, avait cassé plus d'un lit mystérieux, dans la main de Pache, que Beurnonville appelait «l'homme noir». Cimourdain, à l'Evêché, était de plain-pied avec tous. Il était consulté par Dobsent et Momoro. Il parlait espagnol à Gusman, italien à Pio, anglais à Arthur, flamand à Pereyra, allemand à l'Autrichien Proly, bâtard d'un prince. Il créait l'entente entre ces discordances. De là une situation obscure et forte, Hébert le craignait.

Cimourdain avait, dans ces temps et dans ces groupes tragiques, la puissance des inexorables. C'était un impeccable qui se croit infaillible. Personne ne l'avait vu pleurer. Vertu inaccessible et glaciale. Il était l'effrayant homme juste.

Pas de milieu pour un prêtre dans la révolution. Un prêtre ne pouvait se donner à la prodigieuse aventure flagrante que pour les motifs les plus bas ou les plus hauts; il fallait qu'il fût infâme ou qu'il fût sublime. Cimourdain était sublime, mais sublime dans l'isolement, dans l'escarpement, dans la lividité inhospitalière; sublime dans un entourage de précipices. Les hautes montagnes ont cette virginité sinistre.

Cimourdain avait l’apparence d’un homme ordinaire, vêtu de vêtements quelconques, d’aspect pauvre. Jeune, il avait été tonsuré; vieux, il était chauve. Le peu de cheveux qu’il avait étaient gris. Son front était large, et sur ce front il y avait pour l’observateur un signe. Cimourdain avait une façon de parler brusque, passionnée et solennelle, la voix brève, l’accent péremptoire, la bouche triste et amère, l’oeil clair et profond, et sur tout le visage on ne sait quel air indigné.

Tel était Cimourdain.

Personne aujourd’hui ne sait son nom. L’histoire a de ces inconnus terribles.

III. UN COIN NON TREMPÉ DANS LE STYX

Un tel homme était-il un homme? Le serviteur du genre humain pouvait-il avoir une affection? N'était-il pas trop une âme pour être un coeur? Cet embrassement énorme qui admettait tout et tous, pouvait-il se réserver à quelqu'un? Cimourdain pouvait-il aimer? Disons-le. Oui.

Etant jeune, et précepteur dans une maison presque princière, il avait eu un élève, fils et héritier de la maison, et il l'aimait. Aimer un enfant est si facile. Que ne pardonne-t-on pas à un enfant? On lui pardonne d'être seigneur, d'être prince, d'être roi. L'innocence de l'âge fait oublier les crimes de la race; la faiblesse de l'être fait oublier l'exagération du rang. Il est si petit qu'on lui pardonne d'être grand. L'esclave lui pardonne d'être le maître. Le vieillard nègre idolâtre le marmot blanc. Cimourdain avait pris en passion son élève. L'enfance a cela d'ineffable qu'on peut épuiser sur elle tous les amours. Tout ce qui pouvait aimer dans Cimourdain s'était abattu, pour ainsi dire, sur cet enfant; ce doux être innocent était devenu une sorte de proie pour ce cur condamné à la solitude. Il l'aimait de toutes les tendresses à la fois, comme père, comme frère, comme ami, comme créateur. C'était son fils; le fils, non de sa chair, mais de son esprit. Il n'était pas le père, et ce n'était pas son uvre; mais il était le maître, et c'était son chef-d'oeuvre. De ce petit seigneur, il avait fait un homme. Qui sait? un grand homme peut-être. Car tels sont les rêves. A l'insu de la famille, — a-t-on besoin de permission pour créer une intelligence, une volonté et une droiture? — il avait communiqué au jeune vicomte, son élève, tout le progrès qu'il avait en lui; il lui avait inoculé le virus redoutable de sa vertu; il lui avait infusé dans les veines sa conviction, sa conscience, son idéal; dans ce cerveau d'aristocrate, il avait versé l'âme du peuple.

L'esprit allaite, l'intelligence est une mamelle. Il y a analogie entre la nourrice qui donne son lait et le précepteur qui donne sa pensée. Quelquefois le précepteur est plus père que le père, de même que souvent la nourrice est plus mère que la mère.

Cette profonde paternité spirituelle liait Cimourdain à son élève. La seule vue de cet enfant l'attendrissait.

Ajoutons ceci: remplacer le père était facile, l'enfant n'en avait plus; il était orphelin; son père était mort, sa mère était morte; il n'avait pour veiller sur lui qu'une grand-mère aveugle et un grand-oncle absent. La grand-mère mourut; le grand-oncle, chef de la famille, homme d'épée et de grande seigneurie, pourvu de charges à la cour, fuyait le vieux donjon de famille, vivait à Versailles, allait aux armés, et laissait l'orphelin seul dans le château solitaire. Le précepteur était donc le maître, dans toute l'acception du mot.

Ajoutons ceci encore: Cimourdain avait vu naître l'enfant qui avait été son élève. L'enfant, orphelin tout petit, avait eu une maladie grave. Cimourdain, en ce danger de mort, l'avait veillé jour et nuit; c'est le médecin qui soigne, c'est le garde-malade qui sauve, et Cimourdain avait sauvé l'enfant. Non seulement son élève lui avait dû l'éducation, l'instruction, la science; mais il lui avait dû la convalescence et la santé; non seulement son élève lui devait de penser, mais il lui devait de vivre. Ceux qui nous doivent tout on les adore; Cimourdain adorait cet enfant.

L'écart naturel de la vie s'était fait. L'éducation finie, Cimourdain avait, du quitter l'enfant devenu jeune homme. Avec quelle froide et inconsciente cruauté; ces séparations-là se font! Comme les familles congédient tranquillement le précepteur qui laisse sa pensée dans un enfant et la nourrice qui y laisse ses entrailles! Cimourdain, payé et mis dehors, était sorti du monde d'en haut et rentré dans le monde d'en bas; la cloison entre les grands et les petit s'était renfermée jeune seigneur, officier de naissance et fait d'emblée capitaine, était parti pour une garnison quelconque; l'humble précepteur, déjà au fond de son coeur prêtre insoumis, s'était hâté de redescendre dans cet obscur rez-de-chaussée de l'église qu'on appelait le bas clergé: et Cimourdain avait perdu de vue son élève.

La révolution était venue; le souvenir de cet être dont il avait fait un homme avait continué de couver en lui, caché, mais non éteint, par l'immensité des choses publiques.

Modeler une statue et lui donner la vie, c'est beau; modeler une intelligence et lui donner la vérité, c'est plus beau encore. Cimourdain était le Pygmalion d'une âme.

Un esprit peut avoir un enfant.

Cet élève, cet enfant, cet orphelin, était le seul être qu'il aimât sur la terre.

Mais, même dans une telle affection, un tel homme était-il vulnérable?

On va le voir.

LIVRE DEUXIÈME

LE CABARET DE LA RUE DE PAON

I. MINOS, ÉAQUE ET RADAMANTE

Il y avait rue du Paon un cabaret qu’on appelait café. Ce café avait une arrière-chambre, aujourd’hui historique. C’était là que se rencontraient parfois à peu près secrètement, des hommes tellement puissants et tellement surveillés qu’ils hésitaient à se parler en public. C’était là qu’avait été échangé, le 25 octobre 1792, un baiser fameux entre la Montagne et la Gironde. C’était là que Garat, bien qu’il n’en convienne pas dans ses *Mémoires,* était venu aux renseignements dans cette nuit lugubre où, après avoir mis Clavière en sûreté rue de Beaune, il arrêta sa voiture sur le Pont-Royal pour écouter le tocsin.

Le 28 juin 1793, trois hommes étaient réunis autour d’une table dans cette arrière-chambre. Leurs chaises ne se touchaient pas: ils étaient assis chacun à un des côtés de la table, laissant vide le quatrième. Il était environ huit heures du soir; il faisait jour encore dans la rue, mais il faisait nuit dans l’arrière-chambre, et un quinquet accroché au plafond, luxe d’alors, éclairait la table.

Le premier de ces trois hommes était pâle, jeune, grave, avec les lèvres minces et le regard froid. Il avait dans la joue un tic nerveux qui devait le gêner pour sourire. Il était poudré, ganté, brossé, boutonné. Son habit bleu clair ne faisait pas un pli. Il avait une culotte de nankin, des bas blancs, une haute cravate, un jabot plissé, des souliers à boucles d’argent. Les deux autres hommes étaient, l’un une espèce de géant, l’autre une espèce de nain. Le grand, débraillé dans un vaste habit de drap écarlate, le col nu dans une cravate dénouée tombant plus bas que le jabot, la veste ouverte avec des boutons arrachés, était botté de bottes à revers et avait les cheveux tout hérissés, quoiqu’on y vit un reste de coiffure et d’apprêt: il y avait de la crinière dans sa perruque. Il avait la petite vérole sur la face, une ride de colère entre les sourcils, le pli de la bonté au coin de la bouche, les lèvres épaisses, les dents grandes, un poing de portefaix, l’oeil éclatant. Le petit était un homme jaune qui, assis, semblait difforme: il avait la tête renversée en arrière, les yeux injectés de sang, des plaques livides sur le visage, un mouchoir noué sur ses cheveux gras et plats, pas de front, une bouche énorme et terrible. Il avait un pantalon à pied, de larges souliers, un gilet qui semblait avoir été de satin blanc, et par-dessus ce gilet une rouppe dans les plis de laquelle une ligne dure et droite laissait deviner un poignard.

Le premier de ces hommes s'appelait Robespierre, le second Danton, le troisième Marat.

Ils étaient seuls dans cette salle. Il y avait devant Danton un verre et une bouteille de vin couverte de poussière, rappelant la choppe de bière de Luther, devant Marat une tasse de café, devant Robespierre des papiers.

Auprès des papiers on voyait un de ces lourds encriers de plomb, ronds et striés, que se rappellent ceux qui étaient écoliers au commencement de ce siècle. Une plume était jetée à côté de l'écritoire. Sur les papiers était posé un gros cachet de cuivre sur lequel on lisait *Palloy fecil,* et qui figurait un petit modèle exact de la Bastille.

Une carte de France était étalée au milieu de la table.

A la porte et dehors se tenait le chien de garde de Marat, ce Laurent Basse, commissionnaire du numéro 18 de la rue des Cordeliers, qui, le 15 juillet, environ quinze jours après ce 28 juin, devait asséner un coup de chaise sur la tête d'une femme nommée Charlotte Corday, laquelle en ce moment-là était à Caen, songeant vaguement. Laurent Basse était le porteur d'épreuves de l'*Ami du peuple*. Ce soir-là, amené par son maître au café de la rue du Paon, il avait la consigne de tenir fermée la salle où étaient Marat, Danton et Robespierre, et de n'y laisser pénétrer personne, à moins que ce ne fût quelqu'un du comité de salut public, de la Commune ou de l'Evêché.

Robespierre ne voulait pas fermer la porte à Saint-Just, Danton ne voulait pas la fermer à Pache, Marat ne voulait pas la fermer à Gusman.

La conférence durait depuis longtemps déjà. Elle avait pour sujet les papiers étalés sur la table et dont Robespierre avait donné lecture. Les voix commençaient à s'élever. Quelque chose comme de la colère grondait entre ces trois hommes. Du dehors ou entendait par moments des éclats de parole. A cette époque l'habitude des tribunes publiques semblait avoir créé le droit d'écouter. C'était le temps où l'expéditionnaire Fabricius Pâris regardait par le trou de la serrure ce que faisait le comité de salut public. Ce qui, soit dit en passant, ne fut pas inutile, car ce fut ce Pâris qui avertit Danton la nuit du 30 au 31 mars 1794. Laurent Basse avait appliqué son oreille contre la porte de l'arrière-salle où étaient Danton, Marat et Robespierre. Laurent Basse servait Marat, mais il était de l'Evêché.

II. MAGNA TESTANTUR VOCE PER UMBRAS

Danton venait de se lever; il avait vivement reculé sa chaise.

— Ecoutez, cria-t-il. Il n'y a qu'une urgence, la république en danger. Je ne connais qu'une chose, délivrer la France de l'ennemi. Pour cela tous les moyens sont bons. Tous! Tous! tous! Quand j'ai affaire à tous les périls, j'ai recours à toutes les ressources, et quand je crains tout, je brave tout. Ma pensée est une lionne. Pas de demi-mesures, pas de pruderie en révolution. Némésis n'est pas une bégueule. Soyons épouvantables, et utiles. Est-ce que l'éléphant regarde où il met sa patte? Ecrasons l'ennemi.

Robespierre répondit avec douceur:

— Je veux bien.

Et il ajouta:

— La question est de savoir où est l'ennemi.

— Il est dehors et je l'ai chassé, dit Danton.

— Il est dedans, et je le surveille, dit Robespierre.

— Et je le chasserai encore, reprit Danton.

— On ne chasse pas l'ennemi du dedans.

— Qu'est-ce donc qu'on fait?

— On l'extermine.

— J'y consens, dit à son tour Danton.

Et il reprit:

— Je vous dis qu'il est dehors, Robespierre.

— Danton, je vous dis qu'il est dedans.

— Robespierre, il est à la frontière.

— Danton, il est en Vendée.

— Calmez-vous, dit une troisième voix, il est partout; et vous êtes perdus.

C'était Marat qui parlait.

Robespierre regarda Marat et repartit tranquillement:

— Trêve aux généralités. Je précise. Voici des faits.

— Pédant! grommela Marat.

Robespierre posa la main sur les papiers étalés devant lui et continua:

— Je viens de vous lire les dépêches de Prieur de la Marne. Je viens de vous communiquer les renseignements donnés par ce Gélambre. Danton, écoutez, la guerre étrangère n'est rien, la guerre civile est tout. La guerre étrangère, c’est une écorchure qu’on a au coude; la guerre civile, C’est l’ulcère qui vous mange le foie. De tout ce que je viens de vous lire, il résulte ceci: la Vendée, jusqu’à ce jour éparse entre plusieurs chefs, est au moment de se concentrer. Elle va désormais avoir un capitaine unique…

— Un brigand central, murmura Danton.

— C’est, poursuivit Robespierre, l’homme débarqué près de Pontorson le 2 juin. Vous avez vu ce qu’il est. Remarquez que ce débarquement coïncide avec l’arrestation des représentants en mission, Prieur de la Côte-d’Or et Romme à Bayeux, par ce district traître du Calvados, le 2 juin, le même jour.

— Et leur translation au château de Caen, dit Danton. Robespierre reprit:

— Je continue de résumer les dépêches. La guerre de forêt s’organise sur une vaste échelle. En même temps une descente anglaise se prépare; vendéens et anglais, c’est Bretagne avec Bretagne. Les hurons du Finistère parlent la même langue que les topinambous de Cornouailles. J’ai mis sous vos yeux une lettre interceptée de Puisaye où il est dit que «vingt mille habits rouges distribués aux insurgés en feront lever cent mille». Quand l’insurrection paysanne sera complète, la descente anglaise se fera. Voici le plan. Suivez-le sur la carte.

Robespierre posa le doigt sur la carte, et poursuivi:

— Les anglais ont le choix du point de descente, de Cancale à Paimpol. Craig préférerait la baie de Saint-Brieuc, Cornwallis la baie de Saint-Cast. C’est un détail. La rive gauche de la Loire est gardée par l’armée vendéenne royale, et, quant aux vingt-huit lieues à découvert entre Ancenis et Pontorson, quarante paroisses normandes ont promis leur concours. La descente se fera sur trois points, Plérin, Iffiniac et Pléneuf; de Plérin on ira à Saint-Brieuc, et de Pléneuf à Lamballe; le deuxième jour on gagnera Dinan où il y a neuf cents prisonniers anglais, et l’on occupera en même temps Saint-Jouan et Saint-Méen; on y laissera de la cavalerie; le troisième jour, deux colonnes se dirigeront l’une de Jouan sur Bédée, l’autre de Dinan sur Becherel qui est une forteresse naturelle, et où l’on établira deux batteries; le quatrième jour, on est à Rennes. Rennes, c’est la clef de la Bretagne. Qui a Rennes a tout. Rennes prise, Châteanneuf et Saint-Malo tombent. Il y a à Rennes un million de cartouches et cinquante pièces d’artillerie de campagne…

— Qu’ils rafleraient, murmura Danton.

Robespierre continua:

— Je termine. De Rennes, trois colonnes se jetteront l’une sur Fougères, l’autre sur Vitré, l’autre sur Redon. Comme les ponts sont coupés, les ennemis se muniront, vous avez vu ce fait précisé, de pontons et de madriers, et ils auront des guides pour les points guéables à la cavalerie. De Fougères on rayonnera sur Avranches, de Bedon Sur Ancenis, de Vitré sur Laval. Nantes se rendra, Brest se rendra. Redon donne tout le cours de la Vilaine, Fougères donne la route de Normandie, Vitré donne la route de Paris. Dans quinze jours, on aura une armée de brigands de trois cent mille hommes, et toute la Bretagne sera au roi de France.

— C’est-à-dire au roi d’Angleterre, dit Danton.

— Non. Au roi de France.

Et Robespierre ajouta:

— Le roi de France est pire. Il faut quinze jours pour chasser l’étranger, et dix-huit cents ans pour éliminer la monarchie.

Danton, qui s’était rassis, mit ses coudes sur la table et sa tête dans ses mains, rêveur.

— Vous voyez le péril, dit Robespierre. Vitré donne la route de Paris aux

Anglais.

Danton redressa le front et abattit ses deux grosses mains crispés sur la carte, comme sur une enclume.

— Robespierre, est-ce que Verdun ne donnait pas la route de Paris aux prussiens?

Eh bien?

— Eh bien, on chassera les anglais comme on a chassé les prussiens.

Et Danton se leva de nouveau.

Robespierre posa sa main froide sur le poing fièvreux de Danton.

— Danton, la Champagne n’était pas pour les prussiens, et la Bretagne est pour les anglais. Reprendre Verdun, c’est de la guerre étrangère; reprendre Vitré, c’est de la guerre civile.

— Et Robespierre murmura avec un accent froid et profond:

— Sérieuse différence.

Il reprit:

— Rasseyez-vous, Danton, et regardez la carte au lieu de lui donner des coups de poing.

Mais Danton était tout à sa pensée.

— Voilà qui est fort! s'écria-t-il, de voir la catastrophe à l'ouest quand elle est à l'est. Robespierre, je vous accorde que l'Angleterre se dresse sur l'Océan; mais l'Espagne se dresse aux Pyrénées, mais l'Italie se dresse aux Alpes, mais l'Allemagne se dresse sur le Rhin. Et le grand ours russe est au fond. Robespierre, le danger est un cercle et nous sommes dedans. A l'extérieur la coalition, à l'intérieur la trahison. Au midi Servant entre-bâille la porte de la France au roi d'Espagne, an nord Dumouriez passe à l'ennemi. Au reste il avait toujours moins menacé la Hollande que Paris. Nerwinde efface Jemmapes et Valmy. Le philosophe Rabaut Saint-Etienne, traître comme un protestant qu'il est, correspond avec le courtisan Montesquieu. L'armée est décimée. Pas un bataillon qui ait maintenant plus de quatre cents hommes; le vaillant régiment de Deux-Ponts est réduit à cent cinquante hommes; le camp de Pamars est livré; il ne reste plus à Givet que cinq cents sacs de farine; nous rétrogradons sur Landau; Wurmser presse Kléber; Mayence succombe vaillamment, Condé lâchement. Valenciennes aussi. Ce qui n'empêche pas Chancel qui défend Valenciennes et le vieux Férand qui défend Condé d'être deux héros, aussi bien que Meunier qui défendait Mayence. Mais tous les autres trahissent. Dharville trahit à Aix-la-Chapelle, Manton trahit à Bruxelles, Valence trahit à Bréda, Neuilly trahit à Limbourg, Miranda trahit à Maëstrich: Stengel, traître, Lanoue, traître, Ligonier, traître, Menon traître, Dillon, traître; monnaie hideuse de Dumouriez. Il faut des exemples. Les contre-marches de Custine me sont suspectes; je soupçonne Custine de préférer la prise lucrative de Francfort à la prise utile de Coblentz. Francfort peut payer quatre millions de contributions de guerre, soit. Qu'est-ce que cela à côté du nid des émigrés écrasé? Trahison, dis-je. Meunier est mort le 13 juin. Voilà Kléber seul. En attendant, Brunswick grossit et avance. Il arbore le drapeau allemand sur toutes les places françaises qu'il prend. Le margrave de Brandebourg est aujourd'hui l'arbitre de l'Europe; empoche nos provinces; il s'adjugera la Belgique, vous verrez; on dirait que c'est pour Berlin que nous travaillons; si cela continue, et si nous n'y mettons ordre, la révolution française se sera faite au profit de Potsdam, elle aura eu pour unique résultat d'agrandir le petit état de Frédéric II, et nous aurons tué le roi de France pour le roi de Prusse.

Et Danton, terrible, éclata de rire.

Le rire de Danton fit sourire Marat.

— Vous avez chacun votre dada; vous, Danton, la Prusse; vous, Robespierre, la Vendée. Je vais préciser, moi aussi. Vous ne voyez pas le vrai péril; le voici: les cafés et les tripots. Le café de Choiseul est jacobin, le café Patin est royaliste, le café du Rendez-vous attaque la garde nationale, le café de la Porte-Saint-Martin la défend, le café de la Régence est contre Brissot, le café Corazza est pour, le café Procope jure par Diderot, le café du Théâtre-Français jure par Voltaire, à la Rotonde on déchire les assignats, les cafés Saint-Marceau sont en fureur, le café Manouri agite la question des farines, au café de Foy tapages et gourmades, au Perron bourdonnement des frelons de finances. Voilà ce qui est sérieux.

Danton ne riait plus. Marat souriait toujours. Sourire de nain pire qu’un rire de colosse.

— Vous moquez-vous, Marat? gronda Danton.

Marat eut ce mouvement de hanche convulsif, qui était célèbre. Son sourire s’était effacé.

— Ah! je vous retrouve, citoyen Danton. C’est bien vous qui en pleine Convention m’avez appelé «l’individu Marat». Ecoutez. Je vous pardonne. Nous traversons un moment imbécile. Ah! je me moque! En effet, quel homme suis-je? J’ai dénoncé Chazot, j’ai dénoncé Pétion, j’ai dénoncé Kersaint, j’ai dénoncé Moreton, j’ai dénoncé Dufriche-Valazé, j’ai dénoncé Ligonnier, j’ai dénoncé Menou, j’ai dénoncé Banneville, j’ai dénoncé Gensonné, j’ai dénoncé Biron, j’ai dénoncé Lidon et Chambon; ai-je eu tort? je flaire la trahison dans le traître, et je trouve utile de dénoncer le criminel avant le crime. J’ai l’habitude de dire la veille ce que vous autres vous dites le lendemain. Je suis l’homme qui a proposé à l’assemblée un plan complet de législation criminelle. Qu’ai-je fait jusqu’à présent? J’ai demandé qu’on instruise les sections afin de les discipliner à la révolution, j’ai fait lever les scellés des trente-deux cartons, j’ai réclamé les diamants déposés dans les mains de Boland, j’ai prouvé que les brissotins avaient donné au comité de sûreté générale des mandats d’arrêt en blanc, j’ai signalé les omissions du rapport de Lindet sur les crimes de Capet, j’ai voté le supplice du tyran dans les vingt-quatre heures, j’ai défendu les bataillons le Manconseil et le Républicain, j’ai empêché la lecture de la lettre de Narbonne et de Malhouet, j’ai fait une motion pour les soldats blessés, j’ai fait supprimer la commission des six, j’ai pressenti dans l’affaire de Mons la trahison de Dumouriez, j’ai demandé qu’on prit cent mille parents d’émigrés comme otages pour les commissaires livrés à l’ennemi, j’ai proposé de déclarer traître tout représentant qui passerait les barrières, j'ai démasqué la faction rolandine dans les troubles de Marseille, j'ai insisté pour qu'on mit à prix la tête d'Egalité fils, j'ai défendu Bouchotte, j'ai voulu l'appel nominal pour chasser Isnard du fauteuil, j'ai fait déclarer que les parisiens ont bien mérité de la patrie; c'est pourquoi je suis traité de pantin par Louvet, le Ministère demande qu'on m'expulse, la ville de Loudun souhaite qu'on m'exile, la ville d'Amiens désire qu'on me mette une muselière, Cobourg veut qu'on m'arrête, et Lecointe-Puyraveau propose à la Convention de me décréter fou. Ah ça! citoyen Danton, pourquoi m'avez-vous fait venir à votre conciliabule, si ce n'est pour avoir mon avis? Est-ce que je vous demandais d'en être? loin de là. Je n'ai aucun goût pour les tête-à-tête avec des contre-révolutionnaires tels que Robespierre et vous. Du reste, je devais m'y attendre, vous ne m'avez pas compris; pas plus vous que Robespierre, pas plus Robespierre que vous. Il n'y a donc pas d'homme, d'état ici? Il faut donc vous faire épeler la politique, il faut donc vous mettre les points sur les *i?* Ce que je vous ai dit voulait dire ceci: Vous vous trompez tous les deux. Le danger n'est ni à Londres, comme le croit Robespierre, ni à Berlin comme le croit Danton; il est à Paris. Il est dans l'absence d'unité, dans le droit qu'a chacun de tirer de son côté, à commencer par vous deux, dans la mise en poussière des esprits, dans l'anarchie des volontés…

— L'anarchie! interrompit Danton, qui la fait, si ce n'est vous?

Marat ne s'arrêta pas.

— Robespierre, Danton, le danger est dans ce tas de cafés, dans ce tas de brelans, dans ce tas de clubs, club des Noirs, club des Fédérés, club des Dames, club des Impartiaux, qui date de Clermont-Tonnerre et qui a été le club monarchique de 1790, cercle social imaginé par le prêtre Claude Fauchet, club des Bonnets de laine fondé par le gazetier Prudhomme, *et Coetera*; sans compter votre club des Cordeliers, Danton. Le danger est, dans la famine, qui fait que le porte-sacs Blin a accroché à la lanterne de l'Hôtel-de-ville le boulanger du marché Palu, François Denis, et dans la justice, qui a pendu le porte-sacs Blin pour avoir pendu le boulanger Denis. Le danger est dans le papier-monnaie qu'on déprécie. Rue du Temple, un assignat de cent francs est tombé à terre, et un passant, un homme du peuple, a dit: *Il ne vaut pas la peine d'être ramassé.* Les agioteurs et les accapareurs, voilà le danger. Arborer le drapeau noir à l'Hôtel-de-Ville, la belle avance! Vous arrêtez le baron de Trenck, cela ne suffit pas. Tordez-moi le cou à ce vieil intrigant de prison. Vous croyez vous tirer d'affaire parce que le président de la Convention pose une couronne civique sur la tête de Labertèche, qui a reçu quarante et un coups de sabre à Jemmapes, et dont Chénier se fait le cornac? Comédies et batelages. Ah! vous ne regardez pas Paris! Ah! Vous cherchez le danger loin, quand il est près! A quoi vous sert votre police, Robespierre? Car vous avez vos espions, Payan, à la Commune, Coffinhal, au tribunal révolutionnaire, David, au comité de sûreté générale, Couthon, au comité de salut public. Vous voyez que je suis bien informé. Eh bien, sachez ceci: le danger est sur vos têtes, le danger est sous vos pieds; on conspire, on conspire, on conspire; les passants dans les rues s'entre-lisent les journaux et se font des signes de tête; six mille hommes, sans cartes de civisme, émigrés rentrés, muscadins et mathevons, sont cachés dans les caves et dans les greniers, et dans les galeries de bois du Palais-Royal; on fait queue chez les boulangers; les bonnes femmes, sur le pas des portes, joignent les mains et disent: Quand aura-t-on la paix? Vous avez beau aller vous enfermer, pour être entre vous, dans la salle du conseil exécutif, on sait tout ce que vous y dites; et la preuve, Robespierre, c'est que voici les paroles que vous avez dites hier soir à Saint-Just: «Barbaroux commence à prendre du ventre, cela va le gêner dans sa fuite.» Oui, le danger est partout, et surtout au centre, à Paris. Les ci-devant complotent, les patriotes vont pieds nus, les aristocrates arrêtés le 9 mars sont déjà relâchés, les chevaux de luxe qui devraient être attelés aux canons sur la frontière nous éclaboussent dans les rues, le pain de quatre livres vaut trois francs douze sous, les théâtres jouent des pièces impures, et Robespierre fera guillotiner Danton.

— Ouiche! dit Danton.

Robespierre regardait attentivement la carte.

— Ce qu'il faut, cria brusquement Marat, c'est un dictateur. Robespierre, vous savez que je veux un dictateur.

Robespierre releva la tête.

— Je sais, Marat, vous ou moi.

— Moi ou vous, dit Marat.

Danton grommela entre ses dents:

— La dictature, touchez-y!

Marat vit le froncement de sourcil de Danton.

— Tenez, reprit-il. Un dernier effort. Mettons-nous d'accord. La situation en vaut la peine. Ne nous sommes-nous déjà pas mis d'accord pour la journée du 31 mai? La question d'ensemble est plus grave encore que le girondinisme qui est une question de détail. Il y a du vrai dans ce que vous dites; mais le vrai, tout le vrai, le vrai vrai, c'est ce que je dis. Au midi, le fédéralisme; à l'ouest, le royalisme; à Paris, le duel de la Convention et de la Commune; aux frontières, la reculade de Custine et la trahison de Dumouriez. Qu'est-ce que tout cela? Le démembrement. Que nous faut-il? L'unité. Là est le salut. Mais hâtons-nous. Il faut que Paris prenne le gouvernement de la révolution. Si nous perdons une heure demain les vendéens peuvent être à Orléans les prussiens à Paris. Je vous accorde ceci, Danton, je vous concède cela, Robespierre. Soit. Eh bien, la conclusion, c'est la dictature. A nous trois nous représentons la révolution. Nous sommes les trois têtes de Cerbère. De ces trois tètes, l'une parle, c'est vous, Robespierre; l'autre rugit, vous, Danton….

— L'autre mord, dit Danton, c'est vous, Marat.

— Toutes trois mordent, dit Robespierre.

Il y eut un silence. Puis le dialogue, plein de secousses sombres, recommença.

— Ecoutez, Marat, avant de s'épouser, il faut se connaître. Comment avez-vous su le mot que j'ai dit hier à Saint-Just?

— Ceci me regarde, Robespierre.

— Marat!

— C'est mon devoir de m'éclairer, et c'est mon affaire de me renseigner.

— Marat!

— J'aime à savoir.

— Marat!

— Robespierre, je sais ce que vous dites à Saint-Just, comme je sais ce que Danton dit à Lacroix; comme je sais ce qui se passe quai des Théatins, à l'hôtel de Labriffe, repaire où se rendent les nymphes de l'émigration; comme je sais ce qui se passe dans la maison des Thilles, près Gonesse, qui est à Valmerange, l'ancien administrateur des postes, où allaient jadis Maury et Cazales, où sont allés depuis Sieyès et Vergniaud, et où, maintenant, on va une fois par semaine.

En prononçant cet *on*, Marat regarda Danton.

Danton s'écria:

— Si j'avais deux liards de pouvoir, ce serait terrible.

Marat poursuivit:

— Je sais ce que vous dites, Robespierre, comme je sais ce qui se passait à la tour du Temple quand on y engraissait Louis XVI, si bien que, seulement dans le mois de septembre, le loup, la louve et les louveteaux ont mangé quatre-vingt-six paniers de pêches. Pendant ce temps-là le peuple est affamé. Je sais cela, comme je sais que Roland a été caché dans un logis donnant sur une arrière-cour, rue de la Harpe; comme je sais que six cents des piques du 14 juillet avaient eté fabriquées par Faure, serrurier du duc d'Orléans; comme je sais ce qu'on fait chez la Saint-Hilaire, maîtresse de Sillery; les jours de bal, c'est le vieux Sillery qui frotte lui-même, avec de la craie, les parquets du salon jaune de la rue Neuve-des-Mathurins; Buzot et Kersaint y dînaient. Saladin y a dîné le 27, et avec qui, Robespierre? Avec votre ami, Lasource.

— Verbiage, murmura Robespierre. Lasource n'est pas mon ami.

Et il ajouta, pensif:

— En attendant il y a à Londres dix-huit fabriques de faux assignats.

Marat continua d'une voix tranquille, mais avec un léger tremblement, qui était effrayant:

— Vous êtes la faction des importants. Oui, je sais tout, malgré ce que

Saint-Just appelle *le silence d'état*…

Marat souligna ce mot par l'accent, regarda Robespierre, et poursuivit:

— Je sais ce qu'on dit à votre table les jours où Lebas invite David à venir manger la cuisine faite par sa promise, Elisabeth Duplay, votre future belle-soeur, Robespierre. Je suis l'oeil énorme du peuple, et, du fond de ma cave, je regarde. Oui, je vois, oui, j'entends, oui, je sais. Les petites choses vous suffisent. Vous vous admirez. Robespierre se fait contempler par sa madame de Chalabre, la fille de ce marquis de Chalabre qui fit le whist avec Louis XV le soir de l'exécution de Damiens. Oui, on porte haut la tète. Saint-Just habite une cravate. Legendre est correct, lévite neuve et gilet blanc, et un jabot, pour faire oublier son tablier. Robespierre s'imagine que l'histoire voudra savoir qu'il avait une redingote olive à la Constituante et un habit bleu-ciel à la Convention. Il a son portrait sur tous les murs de sa chambre…

Robespierre interrompit d'une voix plus calme encore que celle de Marat.

— Et vous, Marat, vous avez le vôtre dans tous les égouts.

Ils continuèrent sur un ton de causerie dont la lenteur accentuait la violence des répliques et des ripostes, et ajoutait on ne sait quelle ironie à la menace.

— Robespierre, vous avez qualifié ceux qui veulent le renversement des trônes, *les Don Quichottes du genre humain*.

— Et vous, Marat, après le 4 août, dans votre numéro 559 de *l'Ami du Peuple*, ah! j'ai retenu le chiffre, c'est utile, vous avez demandé qu'on rendît aux nobles leurs titres. Vous avez dit: *Un duc est toujours un duc*.

— Robespierre, dans la séance du 7 décembre, vous avez défendu la femme Roland contre Viard.

— De même que mon frère vous a défendu, Marat, quand on vous a attaqué aux Jacobins. Qu'est-ce que cela prouve? rien.

— Robespierre, on connaît le cabinet des Tuileries où vous avez dit à Garat: *Je suis las de la Révolution*.

— Marat, c'est ici, dans ce cabaret, que, le 29 octobre, vous avez embrassé Barbaroux.

— Robespierre, vous avez dit à Buzot: *La république, qu'est-ce que Cela?*

— Marat, c'est dans ce cabaret que vous avez invité à déjeuner trois Marseillais par compagnie.

— Robespierre, vous vous faites escorter d'un fort de la halle armé d'un bâton.

— Et vous, Marat, la veille du 10 août, vous avez demandé à Buzot de vous aider à fuir à Marseille déguisé en jockey.

— Pendant les justices de septembre, vous vous êtes caché, Robespierre.

— Et vous, Marat, vous vous êtes montré.

— Robespierre, vous avez jeté à terre le bonnet rouge.

— Oui, quand un traître l'arborait. Ce qui pare Dumouriez souille Robespierre.

— Robespierre, vous avez refusé, pendant le passage des soldats de Chateauvieux, de couvrir d'un voile la tête de Louis XVI.

— J'ai fait mieux que lui voiler la tête, je la lui ai coupée.

Danton intervint, mais comme l'huile intervient dans le feu.

— Robespierre, Marat, dit-il, calmez-vous.

Marat n'aimait pas à être nommé le second. Il se retourna.

— De quoi se mêle Danton? dit-il.

Danton bondit.

— De quoi je me mêle? De ceci. Qu’il ne faut pas de fratricide; qu’il ne faut pas de lutte entre deux hommes qui servent le peuple; que c’est assez de la guerre étrangère, que c’est assez de la guerre civile, et que ce serait trop de la guerre domestique; que c’est moi qui ai fait la révolution, et que je ne veux pas qu’on la défasse. Voilà de quoi je me mêle.

Marat répondit sans élever la voix.

— Mêlez-vous de rendre vos comptes.

— Mes comptes! cria Danton. Allez les demander aux défilés de l’Argonne, à la Champagne délivrée, à la Belgique conquise, aux armées où j’ai été quatre fois déjà offrir ma poitrine à la mitraille! allez les demander à la place de la Révolution, à l’échafaud du 21 janvier, au trône jeté à terre, à la guillotine, cette veuve…

Marat interrompit Danton.

— La guillotine est une vierge; on se couche sur elle, on ne la féconde pas.

— Qu’en savez-vous? répliqua Danton, je la féconderais, moi!

— Nous verrons, dit Marat.

Et il sourit.

Danton vit ce sourire.

— Marat, cria-t-il, vous êtes l’homme caché, moi je suis l’homme du grand air et du grand jour. Je hais la vie reptile. Etre cloporte ne me va pas. Vous habitez une cave; moi j’habite la rue. Vous ne communiquez avec personne; moi, quiconque passe peut me voir et me parler.

— Joli garçon, voulez-vous monter chez moi? Grommela Marat.

Et cessant de sourire, il reprit d’un accent péremptoire:

— Danton, rendez compte des trente-trois mille écus, argent sonnant, que Montmorin vous a payés au nom du roi, sous prétexte de vous indemniser de votre charge de procureur au Châtelet.

— J’étais du 14 juillet, dit Danton avec hauteur.

— Et le garde-meuble? et les diamants de la couronne?

— J’étais du 6 octobre.

— Et les vols de votre *alter ego* Lacroix en Belgique?

— J’étais du 20 juin.

— Et les prêts faits à la Montansier?

— Je poussais le peuple au retour de Varennes.

— Et la salle de l’Opéra qu’on bâtit avec l’argent fourni par vous?

— J’ai armé les sections de Paris.

— Et les cent mille livres de fonds secrets du ministère de la justice?

— J’ai fait le 10 août.

— Et les deux millions de dépenses secrètes de l’Assemblée, dont vous avez pris le quart?

— J’ai arrêté l’ennemi en marche et barré le passage aux rois coalisés.

— Prostitué! dit Marat.

Danton se dressa, effrayant.

— Oui, cria-t-il, je suis une fille publique, j’ai vendu mon ventre, mais j’ai sauvé le monde.

Robespierre s’était remis à se ronger les ongles. Il ne pouvait, lui, ni rire, ni sourire. Le rire, éclair de Danton, et le sourire, piqûre de Marat, lui manquaient.

Danton reprit:

— Je suis comme l’océan; j’ai mon flux et mon reflux; à mer basse on voit ses bas-fonds, à mer haute on voit mes flots.

— Votre écume, dit Marat.

— Ma tempête, dit Danton.

En même temps que Danton, Marat s’était levé. Lui aussi éclate. Le couleuvre devint subitement dragon.

— Ah! cria-t-il, ah! Robespierre! ah! Danton! vous ne voulez pas m’écouter! Eh bien, je vous le dis, vous êtes perdus. Votre politique aboutit à des impossibilités d’aller plus loin; vous n’avez plus d’issue; et vous faites des choses qui ferment devant vous toutes les portes, excepté celle du tombeau.

— C’est notre grandeur, dit Danton.

Et il haussa les épaules.

Marat continua:

— Danton, prends garde. Vergniaud aussi a la bouche large et les lèvres épaisses et les sourcils en colère, Vergniaud aussi est grêlé comme Mirabeau et comme toi, cela n’a pas empêché le 31 mai. Ah! tu hausses les épaules. Quelquefois hausser les épaules fait tomber la tête. Danton, je te le dis, ta grosse voix, ta cravate lâche, tes bottes molles, tes petits soupers, tes grandes poches, cela regarde Louisette.

Louisette était le nom d’amitié que Marat donnait à guillotine.

Il poursuivit:

— Et quant à toi, Robespierre, tu es un modéré, mais cela ne te servira de rien. Va, poudre-toi, coiffe-toi, brosse-toi, fais le faraud, aie du linge, sois pincé, frisé, calamistré, tu n’en iras pas moins en place de Grève, lis la déclaration de Brunstwick, tu n’en sera pas moins traité comme le régicide Damiens, et tu es tiré à quatre épingles en attendant que tu sois tiré à quatre chevaux.

— Echo de Coblentz! dit Robespierre entre ses dents.

— Robespierre, je ne suis l’écho de rien, je suis le cri de tout. Ah! vous êtes jeunes, vous. Quel âge as-tu, Danton? trente-quatre ans. Quel âge as-tu, Robespierre? trente-trois ans. Eh bien, moi, j’ai toujours vécu, je suis la vieille souffrance humaine, j’ai six mille ans.

— C’est vrai, répliqua Danton, depuis six mille ans, Caïn s’est conservé dans la haine comme le crapaud dans la pierre, le bloc se casse, Caïn saute parmi les hommes, et c’est Marat.

— Danton! cria Marat. Et une lueur livide apparut dans ses yeux.

— Eh bien quoi? dit Danton.

Ainsi parlaient ces trois hommes formidables. Querelle de tonnerres.

III. TRESSAILLEMENT DES FIBRES PROFONDES

Le dialogue eut un répit; ces titans rentrèrent un moment chacun dans sa pensée.

Les lions s'inquiètent des hydres. Robespierre était devenu très pâle et Danton très rouge. Tous deux avaient un frémissement. La prunelle fauve de Marat s'était éteinte; le calme, un calme impérieux, s'était refait sur la face de cet homme, redouté des redoutables.

Danton se sentait vaincu, mais ne voulait pas se rendre. Il reprit:

— Marat parle très haut de dictature et d'unité, mais il n'a qu'une puissance, dissoudre.

Robespierre, desserrant ses lèvres étroites, ajouta:

— Moi, je suis de l'avis d'Anacharsis Cloots; je dis: Ni Roland, ni Marat.

— Et moi, répondit Marat, je dis: Ni Danton, ni Robespierre.

Il les regarda tous deux fixement et ajouta:

— Laissez-moi vous donner un conseil, Danton. Vous êtes amoureux, vous songez à vous remarier, ne vous mêlez plus de politique, soyez sage.

Et, reculant d'un pas vers la porte pour sortir, il leur fit ce salut sinistre:

— Adieu, messieurs.

Danton et Robespierre eurent un frisson.

En ce moment une voix s'éleva au fond de la salle, et dit:

— Tu as tort, Marat.

Tous se retournèrent. Pendant l'explosion de Marat, et sans qu'ils s'en fussent aperçus, quelqu'un était entré par la porte du fond.

— C'est toi, citoyen Cimourdain, dit Marat. Bonjour.

C'était Cimourdain en effet.

— Je dis que tu as tort, Marat, reprit-il.

Marat verdit, ce qui était sa façon de pâlir.

Cimourdain ajouta:

— Tu es utile, mais Robespierre et Danton sont nécessaires. Pourquoi les menacer? Union, union, citoyens! Le peuple veut qu'on soit uni.

Cette entrée fit un effet d’eau froide, et, comme l’arrivée d’un étranger dans une querelle de ménage, apaisa, sinon le fond, du moins la surface.

Cimourdain s’avança vers la table.

Danton et Robespierre le connaissaient. Ils avaient souvent remarqué dans les tribunes publiques de la Convention ce puissant homme obscur que le peuple saluait. Robespierre pourtant, formaliste, demanda:

— Citoyen, comment êtes-vous entré?

— Il est de l’Evêché, répondit Marat d’une voix où l’on sentait on ne sait quelle soumission.

Marat bravait la Convention, menait la Commune et craignait l’Evêché.

Ceci est une loi.

Mirabeau sent remuer à une profondeur inconnue Robespierre, Robespierre sent remuer Marat, Marat sent remuer Hébert, Hébert sent remuer Babeuf. Tant que les couches souterraines sont tranquilles, l’homme politique peut marcher; mais sous le plus révolutionnaire il y a un sous-sol, et les plus hardis s’arrêtent inquiets quand ils sentent sous leurs pieds le mouvement qu’ils ont créé sur leur tête.

Savoir distinguer le mouvement qui vient des convoitises du mouvement qui vient des principes, combattre l’un et seconder l’autre, c’est là le génie et la vertu des grands révolutionnaires.

Danton vit plier Marat.

— Oh! le citoyen Cimourdain n’est pas de trop, dit-il.

Et il tendit la main à Cimourdain.

Puis:

— Parbleu, dit-il, expliquons la situation au citoyen Cimourdain. Il vient à propos. Je représente la Montagne, Robespierre représente le comité de salut public, Marat représente la Commune, Cimourdain représente l’Evêché. Il va nous départager.

— Soit, dit Cimourdain, grave et simple. De quoi s’agit-il?

— De la Vendée, répondit Robespierre.

— La Vendée! dit Cimourdain.

Et il reprit:

— C’est la grande menace. Si la Révolution meurt, elle mourra par la Vendée. Une Vendée est plus redoutable que dix Allemagnes. Pour que la France vive, il faut tuer la Vendée.

Ces quelques mots lui gagnèrent Robespierre.

Robespierre pourtant fit cette question:

— N’êtes-vous pas un ancien prêtre?

L’air prêtre n’échappait pas à Robespierre. Il reconnaissait hors de lui ce qu’il avait au dedans de lui.

Cimourdain répondit:

— Oui, citoyen.

— Qu’est-ce que cela fait? s’écria Danton. Quand les prêtres sont bons, ils valent mieux que les autres. En temps de révolution, les prêtres se fondent en citoyens comme les cloches en sous et en canons. Danjou est prêtre, Daunou est prêtre. Thomas Lindet est évêque d’Evreux. Robespierre, vous vous asseyez à la Convention coude à coude avec Massieu, évêque de Beauvais. Le grand-vicaire Vaugeois était du comité d’insurrection du 10 août. Chabot est capucin. C’est dom Gerle qui a fait le serment du Jeu de paume; c’est l’abbé Audran qui a fait déclarer l’Assemblée nationale supérieure au roi; c’est l’abbé Goutte qui a demandé à la Législative qu’on ôtât le dais du fauteuil de Louis XVI; c’est l’abbé Grégoire qui a provoqué l’abolition de la royauté.

— Appuyé, ricana Marat, par l’histrion Collot-d’Herbois. A eux deux, il ont fait la besogne; le prêtre a renversé le trône, le comédien a jeté bas le roi.

— Revenons à la Vendée, dit Robespierre.

— Eh bien, demanda Cimourdain, qu’y a-t-il? qu’est-ce qu’elle fait, cette Vendée?

Robespierre répondit:

— Ceci: elle a un chef. Elle va devenir épouvantable.

— Qui est ce chef, citoyen Robespierre?

— C’est un ci-devant marquis de Lantenac, qui s’intitule prince breton.

Cimourdain fit un mouvement.

— Je le connais, dit-il. J’ai été prêtre chez lui.

Il songea un moment, et reprit:

— C’était un homme à femmes avant d’être un homme de guerre.

— Comme Biron qui a été Lauzun, dit Danton.

Et Cimourdain, pensif, ajouta:

— Oui, c’est un ancien homme de plaisir. Il doit être terrible.

— Affreux, dit Robespierre. Il brûle les villages, achève les blessés, massacre les prisonniers, fusille les femmes.

— Les femmes?

— Oui. Il a fait fusiller entre autres une mère de trois enfants. On ne sait ce que les enfants sont devenus. En outre, c’est un capitaine. Il sait la guerre.

— En effet, répondit Cimourdain. Il a fait la guerre de Hanovre, et les soldats disaient: Richelieu en dessus, Lantenac en dessous; c’est Lantenac qui a été le vrai général. Parlez-en à Dussaulx, votre collègue.

Robespierre resta un moment pensif, puis le dialogue reprit entre lui et Cimourdain.

— Eh bien, citoyen Cimourdain, cet homme-là est en Vendée.

— Depuis quand?

— Depuis trois semaines.

— Il faut le mettre hors la loi.

— C’est fait.

— Il faut mettre sa tête à prix.

— C’est fait.

— Il faut offrir, à qui le prendra, beaucoup d’argent.

— C’est fait.

— Pas en assignats.

— C’est fait.

— En or.

— C’est fait.

— Et il faut le guillotiner.

— Ce sera fait.

— Par qui?

— Par vous.

— Par moi?

— Oui, vous serez délégué du Comité de salut public, avec pleins pouvoirs.

— J’accepte, dit Cimourdain.

Robespierre était rapide dans ses choix; qualité d’homme d’état. Il prit dans le dossier qui était devant lui une feuille de papier blanc sur laquelle on lisait cet en-tête imprimé: RÉPUBLIQUE FRANÇAISE, UNE ET INDIVISIBLE. COMITÉ DE SALUT PUBLIC.

Cimourdain continua:

— Oui, j’accepte. Terrible contre terrible. Lantenac est féroce, je le serai. Guerre à mort avec cet homme. J’en délivrerai la République, s’il plaît à Dieu.

Il s’arrêta, puis reprit:

— Je suis prêtre; c’est égal, je crois en Dieu.

— Dieu a vieilli, dit Danton.

— Je crois en Dieu, dit Cimourdain impassible.

D’un signe de tête, Robespierre, sinistre, approuva.

Cimourdain reprit:

— Près de qui serai-je délégué?

Robespierre répondit:

— Près du commandant de la colonne expéditionnaire envoyée contre Lantenac.

Seulement, je vous en préviens, c’est un noble.

Danton s’écria:

— Voilà encore de quoi je me moque. Un noble? Eh bien, après? Il en est du noble comme du prêtre. Quand il est bon, il est excellent. La noblesse est un préjugé; mais il ne faut pas plus l’avoir dans un sens que dans l’autre, pas plus contre que pour. Robespierre, est-ce que Saint-Just n’est pas un noble? Florelle de Saint-Just, parbleu! Anacharsis Cloots est baron. Notre ami Charles Hesse, qui ne manque pas une séance des Cordeliers, est prince et frère du landgrave régnant de Hesse-Rothenbourg. Montaut, l’intime de Marat, est marquis de Montaut. Il y a dans le tribunal révolutionnaire un juré qui est prêtre, Vilate, et un juré qui est noble, Leroy, marquis de Montflabert. Tous deux sont sûrs.

— Et vous oubliez, ajouta Robespierre, le chef du jury révolutionnaire….

— Antonelle?

— Qui est le marquis Antonelle, dit Robespierre.

Danton reprit:

— C’est un noble, Dampierre, qui vient de se faire tuer devant Condé pour la République, et c’est un noble, Beaurepaire, qui s’est brûlé la cervelle plutôt que d’ouvrir les portes de Verdun aux Prussiens.

— Ce qui n’empêche pas, grommela Marat, que, le jour où Condorcet a dit: *Les Gracques étaient des nobles*, Danton n’ait crié à Condorcet: *Tous les nobles sont des traîtres, à commencer par Mirabeau et à finir par toi*.

La voix grave de Cimourdain s’éleva.

— Citoyen Danton, citoyen Robespierre, vous avez raison peut-être de vous confier, mais le peuple se défie, et il n’a pas tort de se défier. Quand c’est un prêtre qui est chargé de surveiller un noble, la responsabilité est double, et il faut que le prêtre soit inflexible.

— Certes, dit Robespierre.

Cimourdain ajouta:

— Et inexorable.

Robespierre reprit:

— C’est bien dit, citoyen Cimourdain. Vous aurez affaire à un jeune homme. Vous aurez de l’ascendant sur lui, ayant le double de son âge. Il faut le diriger, mais le ménager. Il paraît qu’il a des talents militaires, tous les rapports sont unanimes là-dessus. Il fait partie d’un corps qu’on a détaché de l’armée du Rhin pour aller en Vendée. Il arrive de la frontière où il a été admirable d’intelligence et de bravoure. Il mène supérieurement la colonne expéditionnaire. Depuis quinze jours, il tient en échec ce vieux marquis de Lantenac. Il le réprime et le chasse devant lui. Il finira par l’acculer à la mer, et par l’y culbuter. Lantenac a la ruse d’un vieux général, et lui a l’audace d’un jeune capitaine. Ce jeune homme a déjà des ennemis et des envieux. L’adjudant-général Léchelle est jaloux de lui.

— Ce Léchelle, interrompit Danton, il veut être général en chef, il n’a pour lui qu’un calembour: *Il faut Léchelle pour monter sur Charette*. En attendant, Charette le bat.

— Et il ne veut pas, poursuivit Robespierre, qu’un autre que lui batte Lantenac. Le malheur de la guerre de Vendée est dans ces rivalités-là. Des héros mal commandés, voilà nos soldats. Un simple capitaine de hussards, Chambon, entre dans Saumur avec un trompette en sonnant *Ça ira*; il pourrait continuer et prendre Cholet, mais il n’a pas d’ordres, et il s’arrête. Il faut remanier tous les commandements de la Vendée. On éparpille les corps de garde, on disperse les forces; une armée éparse est une armée paralysée; c’est un bloc dont on fait de la poussière. Au camp de Paramé il n’y a plus que des lentes. Il y a entre Tréguier et Dinan cent petits postes inutiles avec lesquels on pourrait faire une division et couvrir tout le littoral. Léchelle, appuyé par Parrein, dégarnit la côte nord sous prétexte de protéger la côte sud, et ouvre ainsi la France aux anglais. Un demi-million de paysans soulevés, et une descente de l’Angleterre en France, tel est le plan de Lantenac. Le jeune commandant de la colonne expéditionnaire met l’épée aux reins à ce Lantenac et le presse et le bat, sans la permission de Léchelle; or Léchelle est son chef; aussi Léchelle le dénonce. Les avis sont partagés sur ce jeune homme. Léchelle veut le faire fusiller. Prieur de la Marne veut le faire adjudant-général.

— Ce jeune homme, dit Cimourdain, me semble avoir de grandes qualités.

— Mais il a un défaut!

L’interruption était de Marat.

— Lequel? demanda Cimourdain.

— La clémence, dit Marat.

Et Marat poursuivit:

— C’est ferme au combat, et mou après. Ça donne dans l’indulgence, ça pardonne, ça fait grâce, ça protège les religieuses et les nonnes, ça sauve les femmes et les filles des aristocrates, ça relâche les prisonniers, ça met en liberté les prêtres.

— Grave faute, murmura Cimourdain.

— Crime, dit Marat.

— Quelquefois, dit Danton.

— Souvent, dit Robespierre.

— Presque toujours, reprit Marat.

— Quand ou a affaire aux ennemis de la patrie, toujours, dit Cimourdain.

Marat se tourna vers Cimourdain.

— Et que ferais-tu donc d’un chef républicain qui mettrait en liberté un chef royaliste?

— Je serais de l’avis de Léchelle, je le ferais fusiller.

— Ou guillotiner, dit Marat.

— Au choix, dit Cimourdain.

Danton se mit à rire.

— J’aime autant l’un que l’autre.

— Tu es sûr d’avoir l’un ou l’autre, grommela Marat. Et son regard, quittant Danton, revint sur Cimourdain.

— Ainsi, citoyen Cimourdain, si un chef républicain bronchait, tu lui ferais couper la tête?

— Dans les vingt-quatre heures.

— Et bien, repartit Marat, je suis de l’avis de Robespierre, il faut envoyer le citoyen Cimourdain comme commissaire délégué du comité de salut public près du commandant de la colonne expéditionnaire de l’armée des côtes. Comment s’appelle-t-il déjà, ce commandant?

Robespierre répondit:

— C’est un ci-devant, un noble.

Et il se mit à feuilleter le dossier.

— Donnons au prêtre le noble à garder, dit Danton. Je me défie d’un prêtre qui est seul; je me défie d’un noble qui est seul; quand ils sont ensemble, je ne les crains pas: l’un surveille l’autre, et ils vont.

L’indignation propre au sourcil de Cimourdain s’accentua: mais trouvant sans doute l’observation juste au fond, il ne se tourna point vers Danton, et il éleva sa voix sévère.

— Si le commandant républicain qui m’est confié fait un faux pas, peine de mort.

Robespierre, les yeux sur le dossier, dit:

— Voici le nom, Citoyen Cimourdain, le commandant sur qui vous aurez pleins pouvoirs est un ci-devant vicomte. Il s’appelle Gauvain.

Cimourdain pâlit.

— Gauvain! s’écria-t-il.

Marat vit la pâleur de Cimourdain.

— Le vicomte Gauvain! répéta Cimourdain.

— Oui, dit Robespierre.

— Eh bien? dit Marat, l’oeil fixé sur Cimourdain.

Il y eut un temps d’arrêt. Marat reprit:

— Citoyen Cimourdain, aux conditions indiquées par vous-mêmes, acceptez-vous la commission de commissaire délégué près le commandant Gauvain? Est-ce dit?

— C’est dit, répondit Cimourdain.

Il était de plus en plus pâle.

Robespierre prit la plume qui était près de lui, écrivit de son écriture
lente et correcte quatre lignes sur la feuille de papier portant en tête:

COMITÉ DE SALUT PUBLIC, signa, et passa la feuille et la plume à Danton;

Danton signa, et Marat, qui ne quittait pas des yeux la face livide de
Cimourdain, signa après Danton.

Robespierre, reprenant la feuille, la data, et la remit à Cimourdain, qui lut:

A*N II DE LA RÉPUBLIQUE*

«Pleins pouvoirs sont donnés an citoyen Cimourdain, commissaire délégué du comité de salut public près le citoyen Gauvain, commandant la colonne expéditionnaire de l’armée des côtes.

«

ROBESPIERRE. — DANTON. — MARAT.»

Et au-dessous des signatures:
«28 juin 1793.»
Le calendrier révolutionnaire, dit calendrier civil, n’existait pas encore légalement à cette époque, et ne devait être adopté par la Convention, sur la proposition de Romme, que le 5 octobre 1793.

Pendant que Cimourdain lisait, Marat le regardait.

Marat dit à demi-voix, comme se parlant à lui-même:

— Il faudra faire préciser tout cela par un décret de la Convention ou par un arrêté spécial du comité de salut public. Il reste quelque chose à faire.

— Citoyen Cimourdain, demanda Robespierre, où demeurez-vous?

— Cour du Commerce.

— Tiens, moi aussi, dit Danton, vous êtes mon voisin.

Robespierre reprit:

— Il n’y a pas un moment à perdre. Demain vous recevrez votre commission en règle, signée de tous les membres du comité de salut public. Ceci est une confirmation de la commission, qui vous accréditera spécialement près des représentants en mission, Philippeaux, Prieur de la Marne, Lecointre, Alquier et les autres. Nous savons qui vous êtes. Vous pouvez faire Gauvain général ou l’envoyer à l’échafaud. Vous aurez votre commission demain à trois heures. Quand partirez-vous?

— A quatre heures, dit Cimourdain.

Et ils se séparèrent.

En rentrant chez lui, Marat prévint Simonne Evrard qu’il irait le lendemain à la Convention.

LIVRE TROISIÈME

LA CONVENTION

I. LA CONVENTION

i.

Nous approchons de la grande cime.

Voici la Convention.

Le regard devient fixe en présence de ce sommet.

Jamais rien de plus haut n’est apparu sur l’horizon des hommes.

Il y a l’Himalaya et il y a la Convention.

La Convention est peut-ètre le point culminant de l’histoire.

Du vivant de la Convention, car cela vit, une assemblée, on ne se rendait pas compte de ce qu’elle était. Ce qui échappait aux contemporains, c’était précisément sa grandeur; on était trop effrayé pour être ébloui. Tout ce qui est grand a une horreur sacrée. Admirer les médiocres et les collines, c’est aisé; mais ce qui est trop haut, un génie aussi bien qu’une montagne, une assemblée aussi bien qu’un chef-d’uvre, vus de trop près, épouvantent. Toute cime semble une exagération. Gravir fatigue. On s’essouffle aux escarpements, ou glisse sur les pentes, on se blesse à des aspérités qui sont des beautés; les torrents, en écumant, dénoncent les précipices, les nuages cachent les sommets; l’ascension terrifie autant que la chute. De là plus d’effroi que d’admiration. On éprouve ce sentiment bizarre, l’aversion du grand. On voit les abîmes, on ne voit pas les sublimités; on voit le monstre, on ne voit pas le prodige. Ainsi fut d’abord jugée La Convention. La Convention fut toisée par les myopes, elle, faite pour être contemplée par les aigles.

Aujourd’hui elle est en perspective, et elle dessine sur le ciel profond, dans un lointain serein et tragique, l’immense profil de la révolution française.

ii

Le 14 juillet avait délivré.

Le 10 août avait foudroyé.

Le 21 septembre fonda.

Le 21 septembre, l’équinoxe, l’équilibre. *Libra*. La balance. Ce fut, suivant la remarque de Romme, sous ce signe de l’Égalité et de la Justice que la république fut proclamée. Une constellation fit l’annonce.

La Convention est le premier avatar du peuple. C’est par la Convention que s’ouvrit la grande page nouvelle et que l’avenir d’aujourd’hui commença.

A toute idée il faut une enveloppe visible, à tout principe il faut une habitation; une église, c'est Dieu entre quatre murs, à tout dogme il faut un temple. Quand la Convention fut, il y eut un dernier problème à résoudre, loger la Convention.

On prit d'abord le Manège, puis les Tuileries. On y dressa un châssis, un décor, une grande grisaille peinte par David, des bancs symétriques, une tribune carrée, des pilastres parallèles, des socles pareils à des billots, de longues étraves rectilignes, des alvéoles rectangulaire où se pressait la multitude et qu'on appelait les tribunes publiques, un velarium romain, des draperies grecques, et dans ces angles droits et dans ces lignes droites on installa la Convention: dans cette géométrie on mit la tempête. Sur la tribune le bonnet rouge était peint en gris. Les royalistes commencèrent par rire de ce bonnet rouge gris, de cette salle postiche, de ce monument de carton, de ce sanctuaire de papier mâché, de ce panthéon de boue et de crachat. Comme cela devait, disparaître vite! Les colonnes étaient en douves de tonneau, les voûtes étaient en volige, les bas-reliefs étaient en mastic, les entablements étaient en sapin, les statues étaient en plâtre, les marbres étaient en peinture, les murailles étaient en toile; et dans ce provisoire la France a fait de l'éternel.

Les murailles de la salle du Manège, quand la Convention vint y tenir séance, étaient toutes couvertes des affiches qui avaient pullulé dans Paris à l'époque du retour de Varennes. On lisait sur l'une: — *Le roi rentre. Bâtonner qui l'applaudira, pendre qui l'insultera*. — Sur une autre: — Paix là. Chapeaux sur la tête. Il va passer devant ses juges. — Sur une autre: — Le roi a couché la nation en joue. Il a fait long feu. À la nation de tirer maintenant. — Sur une autre: — *La Loi! La Loi!* Ce fut entre ces murs-là que la Convention jugea Louis XVI.

Aux Tuileries, où la Convention vint siéger le 10 mai 1793, et qui s'appelèrent le Palais-National, la salle des séances occupait tout l'intervalle entre le pavillon de l'horloge appelé pavillon-Unité et le pavillon Marsan appelé pavillon-Liberté. Le pavillon de Flore s'appelait pavillon-Égalité. C'est par le grand-escalier de Jean Bullant qu'on montait à la salle des séances. Sous le premier étage occupé par l'assemblée, tout le rez-de-chaussée du palais était une sorte de longue salle des gardes, encombrée des faisceaux et des lits de camp des troupes de toutes armes qui veillaient autour de la Convention. L’assemblée avait une garde d’honneur qu’on appelait «les grenadiers de la Convention».

Un ruban tricolore séparait le château où était l’assemblée du jardin où le peuple allait et venait.

Ce qu’était la salle des séances, achevons de le dire. Tout intéresse de ce lieu terrible.

Ce qui, en entrant, frappait d’abord le regard, c’était, entre deux larges fenêtres, une haute statue de la Liberté.

Quarante-deux mètres de longueur, dix mètres de largeur, onze mètres de hauteur, telles étaient les dimensions de ce qui avait été le théâtre du roi et de ce qui devint le théâtre de la révolution. L’élégante et magnifique salle bâtie par Vigarani pour les courtisans disparut sous la sauvage charpente qui en 93 dut subir le poids du peuple. Cette charpente, sur laquelle s’échafaudaient les tribunes publiques, avait, détail qui vaut la peine d’être noté, pour point d’appui unique un poteau. Ce poteau était d’un seul morceau, et avait dix mètres de portée. Peu de cariatides ont travaillé comme ce poteau: il a soutenu pendant des années la rude poussée de la révolution. Il a porté l’acclamation, l’enthousiasme, l’injure, le bruit, le tumulte, l’immense chaos des colères, l’émeute. Il n’a pas fléchi. Après la Convention, il a vu le conseil des Anciens. Le 18 brumaire l’a relayé.

Percier alors remplaça le pilier de bois par des colonnes de marbre, qui ont moins duré.

L’idéal des architectes est parfois singulier; l’architecte de la rue de Rivoli a eu pour idéal la trajectoire d’un boulet de canon, l’architecte de Carlsruhe a eu pour idéal un éventail; un gigantesque tiroir de commode, tel semble avoir été l’idéal dr l’architecte qui construisit la salle où la Convention vint siéger le 10 mai 1793; c’était long, haut et plat. À l’un des grands côtés du parallélogramme était adossé un vaste demi-cirque; c’était l’amphithéâtre des bancs des représentants, sans tables ni pupitres: Garan-Coulon, qui écrivait beaucoup, écrivait sur son genou: en face des bancs, la tribune; devant la tribune, le buste de Lepelletier-Saint-Fargeau; derrière la tribune, le fauteuil du président.

La tête du buste dépassait un peu le rebord de la tribune; ce qui fit que, plus tard, on l’ôta de là.

L’amphithéâtre se composait de dix-neuf bancs demi-circulaires, étagés les uns derrière les autres; des tronçons de bancs prolongeaient cet amphithéâtre dans les deux encoignures.

En bas, dans le fer à cheval au pied de la tribune, se tenaient les huissiers.

D’un côté de la tribune, dans un cadre de bois noir, était appliqué au mur une pancarte de neuf pieds de haut, portant, sur deux pages séparées par une sorte de sceptre, la Déclaration des droits de l’homme; de l’autre côté, il y avait une place vide qui plus tard fut occupée par un cadre pareil contenant la Constitution de l’an II, dont les deux pages étaient séparées par un glaive. Au-dessus de la tribune, au-dessus de la tête de l’orateur, frissonnaient, sortant d’une profonde loge à deux compartiments pleine de peuple, trois immenses drapeaux tricolores, presque horizontaux, appuyés à un autel sur lequel on lisait: LA LOI. Derrière cet autel, se dressait, comme la sentinelle de la parole libre, un énorme faisceau romain, haut comme une colonne. Des statues colossales, droites contre le mur, faisaient face aux représentants. Le président avait à sa droite Lycurgue et à sa gauche Solon; au-dessus de la Montagne il y avait Platon.

Ces statues avaient pour piédestaux de simples dés, posés sur une longue corniche saillante qui faisait le tour de la salle et séparait le peuple de l’assemblée. Les spectateurs s’accoudaient à cette corniche.

Le cadre de bois noir du placard des *Droits de l’Homme* montait jusqu’à la corniche et entamait le dessin de l’entablement, effraction de la ligne droite qui faisait murmurer Chabot. — *C’est laid*, disait-il à Vadier.

Sur les têtes des statues, alternaient des couronnes de chêne et de laurier.

Une draperie verte, où étaient peintes en vert plus foncé les mêmes couronnes, descendait à gros plis droits de la corniche de pourtour et tapissait tout le rez-de-chaussée de la salle occupée par l’assemblée. Au-dessus de cette draperie la muraille était blanche et froide. Dans cette muraille se creusaient, coupés comme à l’emporte-pièce, sans moulure ni rinceau, deux étages de tribunes publiques, les carrées en bas, les rondes en haut; selon la règle, car Vitruve n’était pas détrôné, les archivoltes étaient superposées aux architraves. Il y avait dix tribunes sur chacun des grands côtés de la salle, et à chacune des deux extrémités deux loges démesurées: en tout vingt-quatre. Là s’entassaient les foules.

Les spectateurs des tribunes inférieures débordaient sur tous les plats-bords et se groupaient sur tous les reliefs de l’architecture. Une longue barre de fer, solidement scellée à hauteur d’appui servait de garde-fou aux tribunes hautes, et garantissait les spectateurs contre la pression des cohues montant les escaliers. Une fois pourtant, un homme fut précipité dans l’assemblée, il tomba un peu sur Massieu, évêque de Beauvais, ne se tua pas, et dit: *Tiens! C’est donc bon à quelque chose un évêque!*

La salle de la Convention pouvait contenir deux mille personnes, et, les jours d’insurrection, trois mille.

La Convention avait deux séances, une du jour, une du soir.

Le dossier du président était rond, à clous dorés. Sa table était contrebutée par quatre monstres ailés à un seul pied, qu’on eût dit sortis de l’apocalypse pour assister à la révolution. Ils semblaient avoir été dételés du char d’Ézéchiel pour venir traîner le tombereau de Sanson.

Sur la table du président il y avait une grosse sonnette, presque une cloche, un large encrier de cuivre, et un in-folio relié en parchemin qui était le livre des procès-verbaux.

Des têtes coupées, portées au bout d’une pique, se sont égouttées sur cette table.

On montait à la tribune par un degré de neuf marches. Ces marches étaient hautes, roides, et assez difficiles; elles firent un jour trébucher Gensonné qui les gravissait. C’est un escalier d’échafaud!dit-il. — *Fais ton apprentissage*, lui cria Carrier.

Là où le mur avait paru trop nu, dans les angles de la salle, l’architecte avait appliqué pour ornements des faisceaux, la hache en dehors.

À droite et à gauche de la tribune, des socles portaient deux candélabres de douze pieds de haut, ayant à leur sommet quatre paires de quinquets. Il y avait dans chaque loge publique un candélabre pareil. Sur les socles de ces candélabres étaient sculptés des ronds que le peuple appelait «colliers de guillotine».

Les bancs de l’assemblée montaient presque jusqu’à la corniche des tribunes; les représentants et le peuple pouvaient dialoguer.

Les vomitoires des tribunes se dégorgeaient dans un labyrinthe de corridors, plein parfois d’un bruit farouche.

La Convention encombrait le palais et refluait jusque dans les hôtels voisins, l’hôtel de Longueville, l’hôtel de Coigny. C’est à l’hôtel de Coigny qu’après le 10 août, si l’on en croit une lettre de lord Bradford, on transporta le mobilier royal. Il fallut deux mois pour vider les Tuileries.

Les comités étaient logés aux environs de la salle; au pavillon-Egalité, la législation, l’agriculture et le commerce; au pavillon-Liberté, la marine, les colonies, les finances, les assignats, le salut public; au pavillon-Unité, la guerre.

Le comité de sûreté générale communiquait directement avec le comité de salut public par un couloir obscur, éclairé nuit et jour d'un réverbère, où allaient et venaient les espions de tous les partis. On y parlait bas.

La barre de la Convention a été plusieurs fois déplacée. Habituellement elle était à la droite du président.

Aux deux extrémités se la salle, les deux cloisons verticales qui fermaient du côté droit et du coté gauche les demi-cercles concentriques de l'amphithéâtre laissaient entre elles et le mur deux couloirs étroits et profonds sur lesquels s'ouvraient deux sombres portes carrées. On entrait et on sortait par là.

Les représentants entraient directement dans la salle par une porte donnant sur la terrasse des Feuillants.

Cette salle, peu éclairée le jour par de pâles fenêtres, mal éclairée quand venait le crépuscule par des flambeaux livides, avait on ne sait quoi de nocturne. Ce demi-éclairage s'ajoutait aux ténèbres du soir; les séances aux lampes étaient lugubres. On ne se voyait pas; d'un bout de la salle à l'autre, de la droite à la gauche, des groupes de faces vagues s'insultaient. On se rencontrait sans se reconnaître. Un jour Laignelot, courant à la tribune, se heurte, dans le couloir de descente, à quelqu'un. — Pardon, Robespierre, dit-il. — Pour qui me prends-tu? répond une voix rauque. — Pardon, Marat, dit Laignelot.

En bas, à droite et à gauche du président, deux tribunes étaient réservées; car, chose étrange, il y avait à la Convention des spectateurs privilégiés. Ces tribunes étaient, les seules qui eussent une draperie. Au milieu de l'architrave, deux glands d'or relevaient cette draperie. Les tribunes du peuple étaient nues.

Tout cet ensemble était violent, sauvage, régulier. Le correct dans le farouche; c'est un peu toute la révolution. La salle de la Convention offrait le plus complet spécimen de ce que les artistes ont appelé depuis «l'architecture messidor». C'était massif et grêle. Les bâtisseurs de ce temps-là prenaient le symétrique pour le beau. Le dernier mot de la renaissance avait été dit sous Louis XV, et une réaction s'était faite. On avait poussé le noble jusqu'au fade, et la pureté jusqu'à l'ennui. La pruderie existe en architecture. Après les éblouissantes orgies de forme et de couleur du dix-huitième siècle, l'art s'était mis à la diète, et ne se permettait plus que la ligne droite. Ce genre de progrès aboutit à la laideur. L'art réduit au squelette, tel est le phénomène. C’est l’inconvénient de ces sortes de sagesses et d’abstinences; le style est si sobre qu’il devient maigre.

Eu dehors de toute émotion politique, et à ne voir que l’architecture, un certain frisson se dégageait de cette salle. On se rappelait confusément l’ancien théâtre, les loges enguirlandées, le plafond d’azur et de pourpre, le lustre à facettes, les girandoles à reflets de diamants, les tentures gorge de pigeon, la profusion d’amours et de nymphes sur le rideau et sur les draperies, toute l’idylle royale et galante, peinte, sculptée et dorée, qui avait empli de son sourire ce lieu sévère, et l’on regardait partout autour de soi ces durs angles rectilignes, froids et tranchants comme l’acier; c’était quelque chose comme Boucher guillotiné par David.

iv

Qui voyait l’assemblée ne songeait plus à la salle. Qui voyait le drame ne pensait plus au théâtre. Rien de plus difforme et de plus sublime. Un tas de héros, un troupeau de lâches. Des faunes sur une montagne, des reptiles dans un marais. Là fourmillaient, se coudoyaient, se provoquaient, se menaçaient, luttaient et vivaient tous ces combattants qui sont aujourd’hui des fantômes.

Dénombrement titanique.

À droite, la Gironde, légion de penseurs; à gauche, la Montagne, troupe d’athlètes. D’un côté, Brissot, qui avait reçu les clefs de la Bastille; Barbaroux, auquel obéissaient les Marseillais; Kervélégan, qui avait sous la main le bataillon de Brest, caserné au faubourg Saint-Marceau; Gensonné, qui avait établi la suprématie des représentants sur les généraux; le fatal Guadet, auquel une nuit, aux Tuileries, la reine avait montré le dauphin endormi; Guadet baisa le front de l’enfant et fit tomber la tête du père; Salles, le dénonciateur chimérique des intimités de la Montagne avec l’Autriche; Sillery, le boiteux de la droite, comme Couthon était le cul-de-jatte de la gauche; Lause-Duperret, qui, traité de *scélérat* par un journaliste, l’invita à dîner en disant: «*Je sais que «scélérat veut simplement dire l’homme qui ne pense pas comme nous.*» Banant-Saint-Étienne, qui avait commencé son almanach de 1790 par ce mot: *La révolution est finie*; Quinette, un de ceux qui précipitèrent Louis XVI; le janséniste Camus, qui rédigeait la constitution civile du clergé, croyait aux miracles du diacre Paris, et se prosternait toutes les nuits devant un christ de sept pieds de haut cloué au mur de sa chambre; Fauchet, un prêtre qui, avec Camille Desmoulins, avait fait le 14 juillet; Isnard, qui commit le crime de dire:

Paris sera détruit, au moment même où Brunswick disait: *Paris sera brûlé*; Jacob Dupont, le premier qui cria: *Je suis athée*, et à qui Robespierre répondit:*L'athéisme est aristocratique*; Lanjuinais, dure, sagace et vaillante tête bretonne, Ducos, l'Euryale de Boyer-Fonfrède; Rebecqui, le Pylade de Barbaroux, Rebecqui donnait sa démission parce qu'on n'avait pas encore guillotiné Robespierre; Richaud, qui combattait la permanence des sections; Lasource, qui avait émis cet apophtegme meurtrier: *Malheur aux nations Reconnaissantes!* et qui, au pied de l'échafaud, devait se contredire par cette fière parole jetée aux montagnards: *Nous mourons parce que le peuple dort, et vous mourrez parce que le peuple se réveillera*; Birotteau, qui fit décréter l'abolition de l'inviolabilité, fut ainsi, sans le savoir, le forgeron du couperet, et dressa l'échafaud pour lui-même; Charles Villette, qui abrita sa conscience sous cette protestation: *Je ne veux pas voter sous les couteaux*; Louvet, l'auteur de *Faublas*, qui devait finir libraire au Palais-Royal avec Lodoïska au comptoir; Mercier, l'auteur du *Tableau de Paris*, qui s'écriait: *Tous les rois ont senti sur leur nuque le 21 janvier*; Marec, qui avait pour souci «la faction des anciennes limites»; le journaliste Carra qui, au pied de l'échafaud, dit au bourreau: *Ça m'ennuie de mourir. J'aurais voulu voir la suite*; Vigée, qui s'intitulait grenadier dans le deuxième bataillon de Loire, et qui, menacé par les tribunes publiques, s'écriait: *Je demande qu'au premier murmure des tribunes, nous nous retirions tous, et marchions à Versailles le sabre à la main!* Buzot, réservé à la mort de faim; Valazé, promis à son propre poignard; Condorcet, qui devait mourir à Bourg-la-Reine devenu Bourg-Egalité, dénoncé par l'Horace qu'il avait dans sa poche; Pétion, dont la destinée était d'être adoré par la foule en 1792 et dévoré par les loups en 1794; vingt autres encore, Pontécoulant, Marboz, Lidon, Saint-Martin, Dussaulx, traducteur de Juvénal, qui avait fait la campagne du Hanovre; Boilleau, Bertrand, Lesterp-Beauvais, Lesage, Gomaire, Gardien, Minvielle, Duplantier, Lacaze, Antiboul, et en tête un Barnave qu'on appelait Vergniaud.

De l'autre côté, Antoine-Louis-Léon Florelle de Saint-Just, pâle, front bas, profil correct, oeil mystérieux, tristesse profonde, vingt-trois ans; Merlin de Thionville, que les allemands appelaient Feuer-Teufel, «le diable de feu»; Merlin de Douai, le coupable auteur de la loi des suspects; Soubrany, que le peuple de Paris, au premier prairial demanda pour général; l'ancien curé Lebon, tenant un sabre de la main qui avait jeté de l'eau bénite; Billaud-Varenne, qui entrevoyait la magistrature de l'avenir: pas de juges, des arbitres; Fabre d'Eglantine, qui eut une trouvaille charmante, le calendrier républicain, comme Rouget de Lisle eut une inspiration sublime, *la Marseillaise*, mais l'un et l'autre sans récidive; Manuel, le procureur de la Commune, qui avait dit: *Un roi mort n'est pas un homme de moins;* Gonjon, qui était entré dans Tripstadt, dans Newtadt et dans Spire, et avait vu fuir l'armée prussienne; Lacroix, avocat changé en général, fait chevalier de Saint-Louis six jours avant le 10 août; Fréron-Thersite, fils de Fréron-Zoile; Ruhl, l'inexorable fouilleur de l'armoire de fer, prédestiné au grand suicide républicain, devant se tuer le jour où mourrait la république; Fouché, âme de démon, face de cadavre; Camboulas, l'ami du père Duchêne, lequel disait à Guillotin: *Tu es du club des Feuillants, mais ta fille est du club des Jacobins;* Jagot, qui à ceux qui plaignaient la nudité des prisonniers répondait: *Une prison est un habit de pierre;* Javogues, l'effrayant déterreur des tombeaux de Saint-Denis; Osselin; proscripteur qui cachait chez lui une proscrite, madame Charry; Bentabole, qui, lorsqu'il présidait, faisait signe aux tribunes d'applaudir et de huer; le journaliste Robert, mari de mademoiselle de Kéralio, laquelle écrivait: *Ni Robespierre ni Marat ne viennent chez moi; Robespierre y viendra quand il voudra, Marat, Jamais;* Garan-Coulon, qui avait fièrement demandé, quand l'Espagne était intervenue dans le procès de Louis XVI, que l'assemblée ne daignât pas lire la lettre d'un roi pour un roi; Grégoire, évêque digne d'abord de la primitive église, mais qui plus tard sous l'empire effaça le républicain Grégoire par le comte Grégoire; Amar, qui disait:*Toute la terre condamne Louis XVI. A qui donc appeler du jugement? Aux planètes;* Rouyer, qui s'était opposé, le 21 janvier, à ce qu'on tirât le canon du Pont-Neuf, disant: *Une tête de roi ne doit pas faire en tombant plus de bruit que la tête d'un autre homme;* Chénier, frère d'André; Vadier, un de ceux qui posaient un pistolet sur la tribune; Tanis, qui disait à Momoro: *Je veux que Marat et Robespierre s'embrassent à ma table chez moi. — Où demeures-tu? — A Charenton. — Ailleurs, m'eût étonné*, disait Momoro; Legendre, qui fut le boucher de la révolution de France comme Pride avait été le boucher de la révolution d'Angleterre: — *Viens, que je T'assomme!* criait-il à Lanjuinais. Et Lanjuinais répondait: *Fais d'abord décréter que je suis un buf*; Collot d'Herbois, ce lugubre comédien, ayant sur la face l'antique masque aux deux bouches qui disent Oui et Non, approuvant par l'une ce qu'il blâmait par l'autre, flétrissant Carrier à Nantes et déifiant Châlier à Lyon, envoyant Robespierre à l'échafaud et Marat au Panthéon; Génissieux, qui demandait la peine de mort contre quiconque aurait sur lui la médaille *Louis XVI martyrisé*; Léonard Bourdon, le maître d'école, qui avait offert sa maison au vieillard du Mont-Jura; Topsent, marin, Goupilleau, avocat, Laurent Lecointre, marchand, Duhem, médecin, Sergent, statuaire, David, peintre, Joseph Egalité, prince. D'autres encore; Lecointe-Puiraveau, qui demandait que Marat fût déclaré par décret «en état de démence»; Robert Lindet, l'inquiétant créateur de cette pieuvre dont la tête était le comité de sûreté générale et qui couvrait la France de vingt et un mille bras qu'on appelait les comités révolutionnaires; Leboeuf, sur qui Girey-Dupré, dans son *Noël des faux patriotes*, avait fait ce vers:

Leboeuf vit Legendre et beugla.

Thomas Paine, américain, et clément; Anacharsis Cloots, allemand, baron millionnaire, athée, hébertiste, candide; l'intègre Lebas, l'ami des Duplay; Rovère, un des rares hommes qui sont méchants pour la méchanceté, car l'art pour l'art existe plus qu'on ne croit; Charlier, qui voulait qu'on dît *vous* aux aristocrates; Tallien, élégiaque et féroce, qui fera le 9 thermidor par amour; Cambacérès, procureur qui sera prince, Carrier, procureur qui sera tigre; Laplanche, qui s'écria un jour: *Je demande la priorité pour le canon d'alarme*; Thuriot, qui voulait le vote à haute voix des jurés du tribunal révolutionnaire; Bourdon de l'Oise, qui provoquait en duel Chambon, dénonçait Paine, et était dénoncé par Hébert; Fayau, qui proposait «l'envoi d'une armée incendiaire» dans la Vendée; Travot, qui le 15 avril fut presque un médiateur entre la Gironde et la Montagne; Vernier, qui demandait que les chefs girondins et les chefs montagnards allassent servir comme simples soldats; Rewbell, qui s'enferma dans Mayence; Bourbotte, qui eut son cheval tué sous lui à la prise de Saumur; Guimberteau, qui dirigea l'armée des Côtes de Cherbourg; Jard-Panvillier, qui dirigea l'armée des Côtes de la Rochelle; Lecarpentier, qui dirigea l'escadre de Cancale; Roberjot, qu'attendait le guet-apens de Rastadt; Prieur de la Marne, qui portait dans les camps sa vieille contre-épaulette de chef d'escadron; Levasseur de la Sarthe, qui, d'un mot, décidait Serrent, commandant du bataillon de Saint-Amand, à se faire tuer; Reverchon, Maure, Bernard de Saintes, Charles Richard, Lequinio, et au sommet de ce groupe un Mirabeau qu'on appelait Danton.

En dehors de ces deux camps, et les tenant tous deux en respect, se dressait un homme, Robespierre.

V

Au-dessous se courbaient l’épouvante, qui peut être noble, et la peur, qui est basse. Sous les passions, sous les héroïsmes, sous les dévouements, sous les rages, la morne cohue des anonymes. Les bas-fonds de l’assemblée s’appelaient la Plaine. Il y avait là tout ce qui flotte; les hommes qui doutent, qui hésitent, qui reculent, qui ajournent, qui épient, chacun craignant quelqu’un. La Montagne, c’était une élite, la Gironde, c’était une élite: la Plaine, c’était la foule. La Plaine se résumait et se condensait en Sieyès.

Sieyès, homme profond qui était devenu creux. Il s’était arrêté au tiers-état, et n’avait pu monter jusqu’au peuple. De certains esprits sont faits pour rester à mi-côte. Sieyès appelait tigre Robespierre qui l’appelait taupe. Ce métaphysicien avait abouti, non à la sagesse, mais à la prudence. Il était courtisan et non serviteur de la révolution. Il prenait une pelle et allait, avec le peuple, travailler au Champ de Mars, attelé à la même charrette qu’Alexandre de Beauharnais. Il conseillait l’énergie dont il n’usait point. Il disait aux Girondins: *Mettez le canon de votre parti*. Il y a les penseurs qui sont les lutteurs; ceux-là étaient, comme Condorcet, avec Vergniaud, ou, comme Camille Desmoulins, avec Danton. Il y a les penseurs qui veulent vivre, ceux-ci étaient avec Sieyès.

Les cuves les plus généreuses ont leur lie. Au-dessous même de la Plaine, il y avait le marais. Stagnation hideuse laissant voir les transparences de l’égoïsme. Là grelottait l’attente muette des trembleurs. Rien de plus misérable. Tous les opprobres, et aucune honte; la colère latente; la révolte sous la servitude. Ils étaient cyniquement effrayés; ils avaient tous les courages de la lâcheté; ils préféraient la Gironde et choisissaient la Montagne; le dénoûment dépendait d’eux; ils versaient du côté qui réussissait; ils livraient Louis XVI à Vergniaud, Vergniaud à Danton, Danton à Robespierre, Robespierre à Tallien. Ils piloriaient Marat vivant et divinisaient Marat mort. Ils soutenaient tout jusqu’au jour où ils renversaient tout. Ils avaient l’instinct de la poussée décisive à donner à tout ce qui chancelle. À leurs yeux, comme ils s’étaient mis en service à la condition qu’on fût solide, chanceler, c’était les trahir. Ils étaient le nombre, ils étaient la force, ils étaient la peur. De là l’audace des turpitudes.

De là le 31 mai, le 11 germinal, le 9 thermidor; tragédies nouées par les géants et dénouées par les nains.

vi

À ces hommes pleins de passions étaient mêlés les hommes pleins de songes. L'utopie était là sous toutes ses formes, sous sa forme belliqueuse qui admettait l'échafaud, et sous sa forme innocente qui abolissait la peine de mort; spectre du côté des trônes, ange du côté des peuples. En regard des esprits qui combattaient, il y avait les esprits qui couvaient. Les uns avaient dans la tête la guerre, les autres la paix; un cerveau, Carnot, enfantait quatorze armées; un autre cerveau, Jean Debry, méditait une fédération démocratique universelle. Parmi ces éloquences furieuses, parmi ces voix hurlantes et grondantes, il y avait des silences féconds. Lakanal se taisait, et combinait dans sa pensée l'éducation publique nationale; Lanthenas se taisait, et créait les écoles primaires; La Revellière-Lepeaux se taisait, et rêvait l'élévation de la philosophie à la dignité de religion. D'autres s'occupaient de questions de détail, plus petites et plus pratiques Guyton de Morveau étudiait l'assainissement des hôpitaux, Maire l'abolition des servitudes réelles, Jean-Bon-Saint-André la suppression de la prison pour dettes et de la contrainte par corps, Romme la proposition de Chappe, Duboë la mise en ordre des archives, Coren-Fustier la création du cabinet d'anatomie et du muséum d'histoire naturelle, Guyomard la navigation fluviale et le barrage de l'Escaut. L'art avait ses fanatiques et même ses monomanes; le 21 janvier, pendant que la tête de la monarchie tombait sur la place de la Révolution, Bézard, représentant de l'Oise, allait voir un tableau de Rubens trouvé dans un galetas de la rue Saint-Lazare. Artistes, orateurs, prophètes, hommes-colosses comme Danton, hommes-enfants, comme Cloots, gladiateurs et philosophes,tous allaient au même but, le progrès. Rien ne les déconcertait. La grandeur de la Convention fut de chercher la quantité de réel qui est dans ce que les hommes appellent l'impossible. A l'une de ses extrémités, Robespierre avait l'il fixé sur le droit; à l'autre extrémité, Condorcet avait l'il fixé sur le devoir.

Condorcet était un homme de rêverie et de clarté; Robespierre était un homme d'exécution; et quelquefois, dans les crises finales des sociétés vieillies, exécution signifie extermination. Les révolutions ont deux versants, montée et descente, et portent étagées sur ces versants toutes les saisons, depuis la glace jusqu'aux fleurs. Chaque zone de ces versants produit les hommes qui conviennent à son climat, depuis ceux qui vivent dans le soleil jusqu'à ceux qui vivent dans la foudre.

On se montrait le repli du couloir de gauche où Robespierre avait dit bas à l'oreille de Garat, l'ami de Clavière, ce mot redoutable: *Clavière a conspiré partout où il a respiré*. Dans ce même recoin, commode aux apartés et aux colères à demi-voix, Fabre d'Eglantine avait querellé Romme et lui avait reproché de défigurer son calendrier par le changement de *Fervidor* en *Thermidor*. On se montrait l'angle où siégeaient, se touchant le coude, les sept représentants de la Haute-Garonne qui, appelés les premiers à prononcer leur verdict sur Louis XVI, avaient ainsi répondu l'un après l'autre: Mailhe: la mort. — Delmas: la mort. — Projean: la mort. — Calès: la mort: — Ayral: la mort. — Julien: la mort. — Desasey: la mort. Éternelle répercussion qui emplit toute l'histoire, et qui, depuis que la justice humaine existe, a toujours mis l'écho du sépulcre sur le mur du tribunal. On désignait du doigt, dans la tumultueuse mêlée des visages, tous ces hommes d'où était sorti le brouhaha des votes tragiques; Paganel, qui avait dit: *La mort. Un roi n'est utile que par sa mort*; Millaud, qui avait dit: *Aujourd'hui, si la mort n'existait pas, il faudrait L'inventer*; le vieux Raffron du Trouillet, qui avait dit: *La mort Vite*! Goupilleau, qui avait crié: *L'échafaud tout de suite. La lenteur aggrave la mort*; Sieyès, qui avait eu cette concision funèbre: *La mort*; Thuriot, qui avait rejeté l'appel au peuple proposé par Buzot: *Quoi! les assemblées primaires! quoi! quarante mille tribunaux! Procès sans terme. La tête de Louis XVI aurait le temps de blanchir avant de tomber*; Augustin-Bon Robespierre, qui, après son frère, s'était écrié: *Je ne connais point l'humanité qui égorge les peuples et qui pardonne aux despotes. La mort! Demander un sursis, c'est substituer à l'appel au peuple un appel aux tyrans*; Foussedoire, le remplaçant de Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, qui avait dit: *J'ai en horreur l'effusion du sang humain, mais le sang d'un roi n'est pas le sang d'un homme. La Mort*; Jean-Bon-Saint-André, qui avait dit: *Pas de peuple libre sans le tyran mort*; Lavicomterie, qui avait proclamé cette formule: *Tant que le tyran respire, la liberté étouffe. La mort*; Chateauneuf-Randon, qui avait jeté ce cri: *La mort de Louis le Dernier*! Guyardin, qui avait émis ce vu: *Qu'on l'exécute Barrière Renversée*! la Barrière Renversée c'était la barrière du Trône; Tellier, qui avait dit: *Qu'on forge, pour tirer contre l'ennemi, un canon du calibre de la tête de Louis XVI*. Et les indulgents: Gentil, qui avait dit: *Je vote la réclusion. Faire un Charles Ier, c'est faire un Cromwell*; Bancal, qui avait dit: *L'exil. Je veux voir le premier roi de l'univers condamné à faire un métier pour gagner sa vie*; Albouys, qui avait dit: *Le bannissement. Que* *ce spectre vivant aille errer autour des trônes*; Zangiacomi, qui avait dit: *La détention. Gardons Capet vivant comme épouvantail*; Chaillon, qui avait dit: *Qu'il vive. Je ne veux pas faire un mort dont Rome fera un saint*. Pendant que ces sentences tombaient de ces lèvres sévères et, l'une après l'autre, se dispersaient dans l'histoire, dans les tribunes des femmes décolletées et parées comptaient les voix, une liste à la main, et piquaient des épingles sous chaque vote.

Où est entrée la tragédie, l'horreur et la pitié restent.

Voir la Convention, à quelque époque de son règne que ce fût, c'était revoir le jugement du dernier Capet; la légende du 21 janvier semblait mêlée à tous ses actes; la redoutable assemblée était pleine de ces haleines fatales qui avaient passé sur le vieux flambeau monarchique allumé depuis dix-huit siècles, et l'avaient éteint; le décisif procès de tous les rois dans un roi était comme le point de départ de la grande guerre qu'elle faisait au passé; quelle que fût la séance de la Convention à laquelle on assistât, on voyait s'y projeter l'ombre portée de l'échafaud de Louis XVI; les spectateurs se racontaient les uns aux autres la démission de Kersaint, la démission de Roland, Duchâtel le député des Deux-Sèvres, qui se fit apporter malade sur son lit, et, mourant, vota la vie, ce qui fit rire Marat; et l'on cherchait des yeux le représentant, oublié par l'histoire aujourd'hui, qui, après cette séance de trente-sept heures, tombé de lassitude et de sommeil sur son banc, et réveillé par l'huissier quand ce fut son tour de voter, entr'ouvrit les yeux, dit: *La Mort!* et se rendormit.

Au moment où ils condamnèrent à mort Louis XVI, Robespierre avait encore dix-huit mois à vivre, Danton quinze mois, Vergniaud neuf mois, Marat cinq mois et trois semaines, Lepelletier-Saint-Fargeau un jour. Court et terrible souffle des bouches humaines!

viii

Le peuple avait sur la Convention une fenêtre ouverte, les tribunes publiques, et, quand la fenêtre ne suffisait pas, il ouvrait la porte, et la rue entrait dans l'assemblée. Ces invasions de la foule dans ce sénat sont une des plus surprenantes visions de l'histoire. Habituellement, ces irruptions étaient cordiales. Le carrefour fraternisait avec la chaise curule. Mais c'est une cordialité redoutable que celle d'un peuple qui, un jour, en trois heures, avait pris les canons des Invalides et quarante mille fusils. A chaque instant, un défilé interrompait la séance; c'étaient des députations admises à la barre, des pétitions, des hommages, des offrandes. La pique d'honneur du faubourg Saint-Autoine entrait, portée par des femmes. Des anglais offraient vingt mille souliers aux pieds nus de nos soldats. «Le citoyen Arnoux, disait le *Moniteur*, curé d'Aubignan, commandant du bataillon de la Drôme, demande à marcher aux frontières, et que sa cure lui soit conservée.» Les délégués des sections arrivaient apportant sur des brancards des plats, des patènes, des calices, des ostensoirs, des monceaux d'or, d'argent et de vermeil, offerts à la patrie par cette multitude en haillons, et demandaient pour récompense la permission de danser la carmagnole devant la Convention. Chenard, Narbonne et Vallière venaient chanter des couplets en l'honneur de la Montagne. La section du Mont-Blanc apportait le buste de Lepelletier, et une femme posait un bonnet rouge sur la tête du président qui l'embrassait; «les citoyennes de la section du Mail» jetaient des fleurs «aux législateurs»; les «élèves de la patrie» venaient, musique en tête, remercier la Convention d'avoir «préparé la prospérité du siècle»; les femmes de la section des Gardes-Françaises offraient des roses; les femmes de la section des Champs-Élysées offraient une couronne de chêne; les femmes de la section du Temple venaient à la barre jurer *de ne s'unir qu'à de vrais Républicains*; la section de Molière présentait une médaille de Franklin qu'on suspendait, par décret, à la couronne de la statue de la Liberté; les enfants-trouvés, déclarés enfants de la république, défilaient, revêtus de l'uniforme national; les jeunes filles de la section de Quatre-vingt-douze arrivaient en longues robes blanches, et le lendemain le *Moniteur* contenait cette ligne: «Le président reçoit un bouquet des mains innocentes d'une jeune beauté.» Les orateurs saluaient les foules; parfois ils les flattaient; ils disaient à la multitude: — *Tu es infaillible, tu es irréprochable, tu es sublime*; — le peuple a un côté enfant, il aime ces sucreries. Quelquefois l'émeute traversait l'assemblée, y entrait furieuse et sortait apaisée comme le Rhône qui traverse le lac Léman, et qui est de fange en y entrant et d'azur en en sortant.

Parfois c'était moins pacifique, et Henriot faisait apporter devant la porte des Tuileries des grils à rougir les boulets.

ix

En même temps qu'elle dégageait de la révolution, cette assemblée produisait de la civilisation. Fournaise, mais forge. Dans cette cuve où bouillonnait la terreur, le progrès fermentait. De ce chaos d'ombre et de cette tumultueuse fuite de nuages, sortaient d'immenses rayons de lumière parallèles aux lois éternelles. Rayons restés sur l'horizon, visibles à jamais dans le ciel des peuples, et qui sont l'un la justice, l'autre la tolérance, l'autre la bonté, l'autre la raison, l'autre la vérité, l'autre l'amour. La Convention promulguait ce grand axiome: *La liberté du citoyen finit où la liberté d'un autre citoyen commence*; ce qui résume en deux lignes toute la sociabilité humaine. Elle déclarait l'indigence sacrée; elle déclarait l'infirmité sacrée dans l'aveugle et dans le sourd-muet devenus pupilles de l'état, la maternité sacrée dans la fille-mère qu'elle consolait et relevait, l'enfance sacrée dans l'orphelin qu'elle faisait adopter par la patrie, l'innocence sacrée dans l'accusé acquitté qu'elle indemnisait. Elle flétrissait la traite des noirs, elle abolissait l'esclavage. Elle proclamait la solidarité civique. Elle décrétait l'instruction gratuite. Elle organisait l'éducation nationale par l'école normale à Paris, l'école centrale au chef-lieu, et l'école primaire dans la commune. Elle créait les conservatoires et les musées. Elle décrétait l'unité de code, l'unité de poids et de mesures, et l'unité de calcul par le système décimal. Elle fondait les finances de la France, et à la longue banqueroute monarchique elle faisait succéder le crédit public. Elle donnait à la circulation le télégraphe, à la vieillesse les hospices dotés, à la maladie les hôpitaux purifiés, à l'enseignement l'école polytechnique, à la science le bureau des longitudes, à l'esprit humain l'institut. En même temps que nationale, elle était cosmopolite. Des onze mille deux cent dix décrets qui sont sortis de la Convention, un tiers a un but politique, les deux tiers ont un but humain. Elle déclarait la morale universelle base de la société et la conscience universelle base de la loi. Et tout cela, servitude abolie, fraternité proclamée, humanité protégée, conscience humaine rectifiée, loi du travail transformée en droit et d'onéreuse devenue secourable, richesse nationale consolidée, enfance éclairée et assistée, lettres et sciences propagées, lumière allumée sur tous les sommets, aide à toutes les misères, promulgation de tous les principes, la Convention le faisait, ayant dans les entrailles cette hydre, la Vendée, et sur les épaules ce tas de tigres, les rois.

x

Lieu immense. Tous les types humains, inhumains et surhumains étaient là. Amas épique d'antagonismes. Guillotin évitant David, Bazire insultant Chabot, Guadet raillant Saint-Just, Vergniaud dédaignant Danton, Louvet attaquant Robespierre, Buzot dénonçant Egalité, Chambon flétrissant Pache, tous exécrant Marat. Et que de noms encore il faudrait enregistrer! Arnonville dit Bonnet-Rouge, parce qu'il ne siégeait qu'en bonnet phrygien, ami de Robespierre, et voulant «après Louis XVI, guillotiner

Robespierre» par goût de l’équilibre; Massieu, collègue et ménechme de ce bon Lamourette, évêque fait pour laisser son nom à un baiser: Lehardy du Morbihan stigmatisant les prêtres de Bretagne; Barère, l’homme des majorités, qui présidait quand Louis XVI parut à la barre, et qui était à Paméla ce que Louvet était à Lodoïska; l’oratorien Daunou qui disait: *Gagnons du temps*; Dubois-Crancé, à l’oreille de qui se penchait Marat; le marquis de Chateauneuf, Laclos, Hérault de Séchelles qui reculait devant Henriot criant: *Canonniers, à vos pièces*! Julien, qui comparait la Montagne aux Thermopyles; Gamon, qui voulait une tribune publique réservée uniquement aux femmes; Laloy qui décerna les honneurs de la séance à l’évêque Gobel venant à la Convention déposer la mitre et coiffer le bonnet rouge; Lecomte, qui s’écriait: C’est donc à qui se déprêtrisera! Féraud, dont Boissy-d’Anglas saluera la tête, laissant. à l’histoire cette question: — Boissy-d’Anglas a-t-il salué la tête, c’est-à-dire la victime, ou la pique, c’est-à-dire les assassins? — Les deux frères Duprat, l’un montagnard, l’autre girondin, qui se haïssaient comme les deux frères Chénier.

Il s’est dit à cette tribune de ces vertigineuses paroles qui ont quelquefois à l’insu même de celui qui les prononce, l’accent fatidique des révolutions, et à la suite desquelles les faits matériels paraissent avoir brusquement on ne sait quoi de mécontent et de passionné, comme s’ils avaient mal pris les choses qu’on vient d’entendre. Ce qui se passe semble courroucé de ce qui se dit; les catastrophes surviennent furieuses et comme exaspérées par les paroles des hommes. Ainsi une voix dans la montagne suffit pour détacher l’avalanche. Un mot de trop peut être suivi d’un écroulement. Si l’on n’avait pas parlé, cela ne serait pas arrivé. On dirait parfois que les évènements sont irascibles.

C’est de cette façon, c’est par le hasard d’un mot d’orateur mal compris qu’est tombée la tête de madame Elisabeth.

A la Convention, l’intempérance de langage était de droit.

Les menaces volaient et se croisaient dans la discussion comme les flammèches dans l’incendie. — PETION: Robespierre, venez au fait. — ROBESPIERRE: Le fait, c’est vous, Pétion, J’y viendrai, et vous le verrez. — UNE VOIX: Mort à Marat! — MARAT: Le jour où Marat mourra, il n’y aura plus de Paris, et le jour où Paris périra, il n’y aura plus de république. — Billaud-Varenne se lève et dit: Nous voulons… — Barère l’interrompt: Tu parles comme un roi. — Un autre jour, PHILIPPEAUX: Un membre a tiré l’épée contre moi. — AUDOIN: Président, rappelez à l’ordre l’assassin.

Le Président: Attendez. — PANIS: Président, je vous rappelle à l'ordre moi. — On riait aussi, rudement. — LECOINTRE: Le curé de Chant-de-Bout se plaint de Fauchet son évêque, qui lui défend de se marier. — UNE VOIX: Je ne vois pas pourquoi Fauchet, qui a des maîtresses, veut empêcher les autres d'avoir des épouses. — UNE AUTRE VOIX: Prêtre, prends femme! — Les tribunes se mêlaient à la conversation. Elles tutoyaient l'assemblée. Un jour le représentant Ruamps monte à la tribune. Il avait une «hanche» beaucoup plus grosse que l'autre. Un des spectateurs lui cria: — Tourne ça du côté de la droite, puisque tu as une «joue» à la David! — Telles étaient les libertés que le peuple prenait avec la Convention. Une fois pourtant, dans le tumulte du 11 avril 1795, le président fit arrêter un interrupteur des tribunes.

Un jour, cette séance a eu pour témoin le vieux Buonarotti, Robespierre prend la parole et parle deux heures. Regardant Danton tantôt fixement, ce qui était grave, tantôt obliquement, ce qui était pire. Il foudroie à bout portant. Il termine par une explosion indignée, pleine de mots funèbres: — On connaît les intrigants, on connaît les corrupteurs et les corrompus, on connaît les traîtres; ils sont dans cette assemblée. Ils nous entendent, nous les voyons et nous ne les quittons pas des yeux. Qu'ils regardent au-dessus de leur tête, et ils y verront le glaive de la loi. Qu'ils regardent dans leur conscience, et ils y verront leur infamie. Qu'ils prennent garde à eux. — Et, quand Robespierre a fini, Danton, la face au plafond, les yeux à demi fermés, un bras pendant par-dessus le dossier de son banc, se renverse en arrière, et on l'entend fredonner:

Cadet Roussel fait des discours
Qui ne sont pas longs quand ils sont courts.

Les imprécations se donnaient la réplique. — Conspirateur! — Assassin! — Scélérat! — Factieux! — Modéré! — On se dénonçait au buste de Brutus qui était là. Apostrophes, injures, défis. Regards furieux d'un côté à l'autre. Poings montrés, pistolets entrevus, poignards à demi tirés. Enorme flamboiement de la tribune. Quelques-uns parlaient comme s'ils étaient adossés à la guillotine. Les têtes ondulaient, épouvantées et terribles. Montagnards, girondins, feuillants, modérantistes, terroristes, jacobins, cordeliers; dix-huit prêtres régicides.

Tous ces hommes! tas de fumées poussées dans tous les sens.

xi

Esprits en proie au vent.

Mais ce vent était un vent de prodige.

Etre un membre de la Convention, c'était être une vague de l'océan. Et ceci était vrai des plus grands. La force d'impulsion venait d'en haut. Il y avait dans la Convention une volonté qui était celle de tous et n'était celle de personne. Cette volonté était une idée, idée indomptable et démesurée qui soufflait dans l'ombre du haut du ciel. Nous appelons cela la Révolution. Quand cette idée passait, elle abattait l'un et soulevait l'autre; elle emportait celui-ci en écume et brisait celui-là aux écueils. Cette idée savait où elle allait, et poussait le gouffre devant elle. Imputer la révolution aux hommes, c'est imputer la marée aux flots.

La révolution est une action de l'Inconnu. Appelez-la bonne action ou mauvaise action, selon que vous aspirez à l'avenir ou au passé, mais laissez-la à celui qui l'a faite. Elle semble l'uvre en commun des grands évènements et des grands individus mêlés, mais elle est en réalité la résultante des évènements. Les évènements dépensent, les hommes payent. Les évènements dictent, les hommes signent. Le 14 juillet est signé Camille Desmoulins, le 10 août est signé Danton, le 2 septembre est signé Marat, le 21 septembre est signé Grégoire, le 21 janvier est signé Robespierre; mais Desmoulins, Danton, Marat, Grégoire et Robespierre ne sont que des greffiers. Le rédacteur énorme et sinistre de ces grandes pages a un nom, Dieu, et un masque, Destin. Robespierre croyait en Dieu. Certes!

La révolution est une forme du phénomène immanent qui nous presse de toutes parts et que nous appelons la Nécessité.

Devant cette mystérieuse complication de bienfaits et de souffrances se dresse le Pourquoi? de l'histoire.

Parce que. Cette réponse de celui qui ne sait rien est aussi la réponse de celui qui sait tout.

En présence de ces catastrophes climatériques qui dévastent et vivifient la civilisation, on hésite à juger le détail. Blâmer ou louer les hommes à cause du résultat, c'est presque comme si on louait ou blâmait les chiffres à cause du total. Ce qui doit passer passe, ce qui doit souffler souffle. La sérénité éternelle ne souffre pas de ces aquilons. Au-dessus des révolutions la vérité et la justice demeurent comme le ciel étoilé au-dessus des tempêtes.

xii

Telle était cette Convention démesurée; camp retranché du genre humain attaqué par toutes les ténèbres à la fois, feux nocturnes d'une armée d'idées assiégées, immense bivouac d’esprits sur un versant d’abîme. Rien dans l’histoire n’est comparable à ce groupe, à la fois sénat et populace, conclave et carrefour, aéropage et place publique, tribunal et accusé.

La Convention a toujours ployé au vent: mais ce vent sortait de la bouche du peuple et était le souffle de Dieu.

Et aujourd’hui, après quatre-vingts ans écoulés, chaque fois que devant la pensée d’un homme, quel qu’il soit, historien ou philosophe, la Convention apparaît, cet homme s’arrête et médite. Impossible de ne pas être attentif à ce grand passage d’ombres.

II. MARAT DANS LA COULISSE

Comme il l'avait annoncé à Simonne Evrard, Marat, le lendemain de la rencontre de la rue du Paon, alla à la Convention.

Il y avait à la Convention un marquis maratiste, Louis de Montaut, celui qui plus tard offrit à la Convention une pendule décimale surmontée du buste de Marat.

Au moment où Marat entrait, Chabot venait de s'approcher de Montaut.

— Ci-devant…, dit-il.

Montaut leva les yeux.

— Pourquoi m'appelles-tu ci-devant?

— Parce que tu l'es.

— Moi?

— Puisque tu étais marquis.

— Jamais.

— Bah!

— Mon père était soldat, mon grand-père était tisserand.

— Qu'est-ce que tu nous chantes là, Montaut?

— Je ne m'appelle pas Montaut.

— Comment donc t'appelles-tu?

— Je m'appelle Maribon.

— Au fait, dit Chabot, cela m'est égal.

Et il ajouta entre ses dents:

— C'est à qui ne sera pas marquis.

Marat s'était arrêté dans le couloir de gauche et regardait Montaut et Chabot.

Toutes les fois que Marat entrait, il y avait une rumeur; mais loin de lui. Autour de lui on se taisait. Marat n'y prenait pas garde. Il dédaignait le «coassement du marais».

Dans la pénombre des bancs obscurs d'en bas. Coupé de l'Oise, Prunelle,

Villars, évêque, qui plus tard fut membre de l'Académie française,

Boutroue, Petit, Plaichard, Bonet, Thibaudeau, Valdruche, se le montraient

du doigt.

— Tiens! Marat!

— Il n’est donc pas malade?

— Si, puisqu’il est en robe de chambre.

— En robe de chambre?

— Pardieu oui!

— Il se permet tout!

— Il ose venir ainsi à la Convention!

— Puisqu’un jour il y est venu coiffé de lauriers, il peut bien y venir en robe de chambre!

— Face de cuivre et dents de vert-de-gris.

— Sa robe de chambre paraît neuve.

— En quoi est-elle?

— En reps.

— Rayé.

— Regardez donc les revers.

— Ils sont en peau.

— De tigre.

— Non, d’hermine.

— Fausse.

— Et il a des bas!

— C’est étrange.

— Et des souliers à boucles.

— D’argent!

— Voilà ce que les sabots de Camboulas ne lui pardonneront pas.

Sur d’autres bancs on affectait de ne pas voir Marat. On causait d’autre chose. Santhonax abordait Dussaulx.

— Vous savez, Dussaulx?

— Quoi?

— Le ci-devant comte de Brienne?

— Qui était à la Force avec le ci-devant duc de Villeroy?

— Oui.

— Je les ai connus tous les deux. Eh bien?

— Ils avaient si grand’peur qu’ils saluaient tous les bonnets rouges de tous les guichetiers, et qu’un jour ils ont refusé de jouer une partie de piquet parce qu’on leur présentait un jeu de cartes à rois et à reines.

— Eh bien?

— On les a guillotinés hier.

— Tous les deux?

— Tous les deux.

— En somme, comment avaient-ils été dans la prison?

— Lâches.

— Et comment ont-ils été sur l'échafaud?

— Intrépides.

Et Dussaulx jetait cette exclamation:

— Mourir est plus facile que vivre.

Barère était en train de lire un rapport: il s'agissait de la Vendée. Neuf cents hommes du Morbihan étaient partis avec du canon pour secourir Nantes. Redon était menacé par les paysans. Paimboeuf était attaqué. Une station navale croisait à Maindrin pour empêcher les descentes. Depuis Ingrande jusqu'à Maure, toute la rive gauche de la Loire était hérissée de batteries royalistes. Trois mille paysans étaient maîtres de Pornic. Ils criaient *Vivent les Anglais!* Une lettre de Santerre à la Convention, que Barère lisait, se terminait ainsi: «Sept mille paysans ont attaqué Vannes. Nous les avons repoussés, et ils ont laissé dans nos mains quatre canons…»

— Et combien de prisonniers? interrompit une voix.

Barère continua… — Post-scriptum de la lettre: «Nous n'avons pas de prisonniers, parce que nous n'en faisons plus.»

[Footnote 1: *Moniteur*, t. XIX, p. 81.]

Marat toujours immobile n'écoutait pas, il était comme absorbé par une préoccupation sévère.

Il tenait dans sa main et froissait entre ses doigts un papier sur lequel quelqu'un qui l'eût déplié eût pu lire ces lignes, qui étaient de l'écriture de Momoro et qui étaient probablement une réponse à une question posée par Marat:

« — Il n'y a rien à faire contre l'omnipotence des commissaires délégués, surtout contre les délégués du Comité de salut public. Génissieux a eu beau dire dans la séance du 6 mai: «*Chaque commissaire est plus qu'un Roi*», cela n'y fait rien. Ils ont pouvoir de vie et de mort. Massade à Angers, Trullard à Saint-Amand, Nyon près du général Marcé, Parrein à l'armée des Sables, Millier à l'armée de Niort, sont tout-puissants. Le club des Jacobins a été jusqu'à nommer Parrein général de brigade. Les circonstances absolvent tout. Un délégué du Comité de salut public tient en échec un général en chef.»

Marat acheva de froisser le papier, le mit dans sa poche, et s'avança lentement vers Montaut et Chabot qui continuaient à causer et qui ne l’avaient pas vu entrer.

Chabot disait:

— Maribon ou Montaut, écoute ceci: je sors du comité de salut public.

— Et qu’y fait-on?

— On y donne un noble à garder à un prêtre.

— Ah!

— Un noble comme toi…

— Je ne suis pas noble, dit Montaut.

— A un prêtre…

— Comme toi.

— Je ne suis pas prêtre, dit Chabot.

Tous deux se mirent à rire.

— Précise l’anecdote, repartit Montaut.

Voici ce que c’est. Un prêtre appelé Cimourdain est délégué avec pleins pouvoirs près d’un vicomte nommé Gauvain; ce vicomte commande la colonne expéditionnaire de l’armée des Côtes. Il s’agit d’empêcher le noble de tricher et le prêtre de trahir.

— C’est bien simple, répondit Montaut. Il n’y a qu’à mettre la mort dans l’aventure.

— Je viens pour cela, dit Marat.

Ils levèrent la tête.

— Bonjour, Marat, dit Chabot, tu assistes rarement à nos séances.

— Mon médecin me commande les bains, répondit Marat.

— Il faut se défier des bains, reprit Chabot; Sénèque est mort dans un bain.

Marat sourit:

— Chabot, il n’y a pas ici de Néron.

— Il y a toi, dit une voix rude.

C’était Danton qui passait et qui montait à son banc.

Marat ne se retourna pas.

Il pencha sa tête entre les deux visages de Montaut et de Chabot.

— Ecoutez. Je viens pour une chose sérieuse. Il faut qu’un de nous trois propose aujourd’hui un projet de décret à la Convention.

— Pas moi, dit Montaut; on ne m’écoute pas, je suis marquis.

— Moi, dit Chabot, on ne m’écoute pas, je suis capucin.

— Et moi, dit Marat, on ne m’écoute pas, je suis Marat.

Il y eut entre eux un silence.

Marat préoccupé n’était pas aisé à interroger. Montaut pourtant hasarda une question.

— Marat, quel est le décret que tu désires?

— Un décret qui punisse de mort tout chef militaire qui fait évader un rebelle prisonnier.

Chabot intervint.

— Ce décret existe. On a voté cela fin avril.

— Alors c’est comme s’il n’existait pas, dit Marat. Partout, dans toute la Vendée, c’est à qui fera évader les prisonniers, et l’asile est impuni.

— Marat, c’est que le décret est en désuétude.

— Chabot, il faut le remettre en vigueur.

— Sans doute.

— Et pour cela parler à la Convention.

— Marat, la Convention n’est pas nécessaire; le comité de salut public suffit.

— Le but est atteint, ajouta Montaut, si le comité de salut public fait placarder le décret dans toutes les communes de la Vendée, et fait deux ou trois bons exemples.

— Sur les grandes têtes, reprit Chabot. Sur les généraux.

Marat grommela: — En effet, cela suffira.

— Marat, repartit Chabot, va toi-même dire cela au comité de salut public.

Marat le regarda entre les deux yeux, ce qui n’était pas agréable, même pour Chabot.

— Chabot, dit-il, le comité de salut public, c’est chez Robespierre. Je ne vais pas chez Robespierre.

— J’irai, moi, dit Montaut.

— Bien, dit Marat.

Le lendemain était expédié dans toutes les directions un ordre du comité de salut public enjoignant d’afficher dans les villes et villages de Vendée et de faire exécuter strictement le décret portant peine de mort contre toute connivence dans les évasions de brigands et d’insurgés prisonniers.

Ce décret n’était qu’un premier pas. La Convention devait aller plus loin encore. Quelques mois après, le 11 brumaire au 11 novembre 1795, à propos de Laval qui avait ouvert ses portes aux Vendéens fugitifs, elle décréta que toute ville qui donnerait asile aux rebelles serait démolie et détruite.

De leur côté, les princes de l’Europe, dans le manifeste du duc de Brunswick, inspiré par les émigrés et rédigé par le marquis de Linnon, intendant du duc d’Orléans, avaient déclaré que tout français pris les armes à la main serait fusillé, et que, si un cheveu tombait de la tête du roi, Paris serait rasé.

Sauvagerie contre barbarie.

TROISIÈME PARTIE

EN VENDÉE

LIVRE PREMIER

LA VENDÉE

I. LES FORÊTS

Il y avait alors en Bretagne sept forêts horribles. La Vendée, c'est la révolte-prêtre. Cette révolte a eu pour auxiliaire la forêt. Les ténèbres s'entr'aident.

Les sept forêts-Noires de Bretagne étaient la forêt de Fougères qui barre le passage entre Dol et Avranches; la forêt de Princé qui a huit lieues de tour; la forêt de Paimpont, pleine de ravines et de ruisseaux, presque inaccessible du côté de Baignon, avec une retraite facile sur Concornet qui était un bourg royaliste; la forêt de Rennes d'où l'on entendait le tocsin des paroisses républicaines, toujours nombreuses près des villes; c'est là que Puysaye perdit Focard; la forêt de Machecoul qui avait Charette pour bête fauve; la forêt de la Garnache qui était aux La Trémoille, aux Gauvain et aux Rohan; la forêt de Brocéliande qui était aux fées.

Un gentilhomme en Bretagne avait le titre de *seigneur des Sept-Forêts*.

C'était le vicomte de Fontenay, prince breton.

Car le prince breton existait, distinct du prince français. Les Rohan étaient princes bretons. Garnier de Saintes, dans son rapport à la Convention, 13 nivôse an II, qualifie ainsi le prince de Talmont: «Ce Capet des brigands, souverain du Maine et de la Normandie.»

L'histoire des forêts bretonnes, de 1792 à 1800 pourrait être faite à part, et elle se mêlerait de la vaste aventure de la Vendée comme une légende.

L'histoire a sa vérité, la légende a la sienne. La vérité légendaire est d'une autre nature que la vérité historique. La vérité légendaire, c'est l'invention ayant pour résultat la réalité. Du reste, l'histoire et la légende ont le même but, peindre sous l'homme momentané l'homme éternel.

La Vendée ne peut être complètement expliquée que si la légende complète l'histoire; il faut l'histoire pour l'ensemble et la légende pour le détail.

Disons que la Vendée en vaut la peine. La Vendée est un prodige.

Cette Guerre des Ignorants, si stupide et si splendide, abominable et magnifique, a désolé et enorgueilli la France. La Vendée est une plaie qui est une gloire.

A de certaines heures la société humaine a ses énigmes, énigmes qui pour les sages se résolvent en lumière et pour les ignorants en obscurité, en violence et en barbarie. Le philosophe hésite à accuser. Il tient compte du trouble que produisent les problèmes. Les problèmes ne passent point sans jeter au-dessous d’eux une ombre comme les nuages.

Si l’on veut comprendre la Vendée, qu’on se figure cet antagonisme, d’un côté la révolution française, de l’autre le paysan breton. En face de ces évènements incomparables, menace immense de tous les bienfaits à la fois, accès de colère de la civilisation, excès du progrès furieux, amélioration démesurée et inintelligible, qu’on place ce sauvage grave et singulier, cet homme à l’œil clair et aux longs cheveux, vivant de lait et de châtaignes, borné à son toit de chaume, à sa haie et à son fossé, distinguant chaque hameau du voisinage au son de la cloche, ne se servant de l’eau que pour boire, ayant sur le dos une veste de cuir avec des arabesques de soie, inculte et brodé, tatouant ses habits, comme ses ancêtres les celtes avaient tatoué leurs visages, respectant son maître dans son bourreau, Parlant une langue morte, ce qui est faire habiter une tombe à sa pensée, piquant ses bœufs, aiguisant sa faulx, sarclant son blé noir, pétrissant sa galette de sarrasin, vénérant sa charrue d’abord, sa grand’mère ensuite, croyant à la sainte Vierge et à la Dame blanche, dévot à l’autel et aussi à la haute pierre mystérieuse debout au milieu de la lande, laboureur dans la plaine, pêcheur sur la côte, braconnier dans le hallier, aimant ses rois, ses seigneurs, ses prêtres, ses poux: pensif, immobile souvent des heures entières sur la grande grève déserte, sombre écouteur de la mer.

Et qu’on se demande si cet aveugle pouvait accepter cette clarté.

II. LES HOMMES

Le paysan a deux points d’appui: le champ qui le nourrit, le bois qui le cache.

Ce qu’étaient les forêts bretonnes, on se le figurerait difficilement; c’étaient des villes. Rien de plus sourd, de plus muet et de plus sauvage que ces inextricables enchevêtrements d’épines et de branchages, ces vastes broussailles étaient des gîtes d’immobilité et de silence; pas de solitude d’apparence plus morte et plus sépulcrale; si l’on eût pu, subitement et d’un seul coup pareil à l’éclair, couper les arbres, on eût brusquement vu dans cette ombre un fourmillement d’hommes.

Des puits ronds et étroits, masqués au dehors par des le couvercles de pierre et de branches, verticaux, puis horizontaux, s’élargissant sous terre en entonnoir, et aboutissant à des chambres ténébreuses, voilà ce que Cambyse trouva en Egypte et ce que Westermann trouva en Bretagne; là c’était dans le désert, ici c’était dans la forêt; dans les caves d’Egypte il y avait des morts, dans les caves de Bretagne il y avait des vivants. Une des plus sauvages clairières du bois de Misdon, toute perforée de galeries et de cellules où allait et venait un peuple mystérieux, s’appelait «la Grande ville». Une autre clairière non moins déserte en dessus et non moins habitée en dessous, s’appelait «la Place royale».

Cette vie souterraine était immémoriale en Bretagne. De tout temps l’homme y avait été en fuite devant l’homme. De là les tanières de reptiles creusées sous les racines des arbres. Cela datait des druides, et quelques-unes de ces cryptes étaient aussi anciennes que les dolmens. Les larves de la légende et les monstres de l’histoire, tout avait passé sur ce noir pays. Teutatès, César, Noël, Néomène, Geoffroy d’Angleterre, Alain-gant-de-fer, Pierre Mauclair, la maison française de Blois, la maison anglaise de Montfort, les rois et les ducs, les neuf barons de Bretagne, les juges des Grands-Jours, les comtes de Nantes querellant les comtes de Rennes, les routiers, les malandrins, les grandes compagnies, René II, vicomte de Rohan, les gouverneurs pour le roi, le «bon duc de Chaulnes» branchant les paysans sous les fenêtres de madame de Sévigné, au quinzième siècle les boucheries seigneuriales, au seizième et au dix-septième siècles les guerres de religion, au dix-huitième siècle les trente mille chiens dressés à chasser aux hommes; sous ce piétinement effroyable le peuple avait pris le parti de disparaître. Tour à tour les troglodytes pour échapper aux celtes, les celtes pour échapper aux romains, les bretons pour échapper aux normands, les huguenots pour échapper aux catholiques, les contrebandiers pour échapper aux gabelous, s'étaient réfugiés d'abord dans les forêts, puis sous la terre. Ressource des bêtes. C'est là que la tyrannie réduit les nations. Depuis deux mille ans, le despotisme sous toutes ses espèces, la conquête, la féodalité, le fanatisme, le fisc, traquaient cette misérable Bretagne éperdue, sorte de battue inexorable qui ne cessait sous une forme que pour recommencer sous l'autre. Les hommes se terraient.

L'épouvante, qui est une sorte de colère, était toute prête dans les âmes, et les tanières étaient toutes prêtes dans les bois, quand la république française éclata. La Bretagne se révolta, se trouvant opprimée par cette délivrance de force. Méprise habituelle aux esclaves.

III. CONNIVENCE DES HOMMES ET DES FORÊTS

Les tragiques forêts bretonnes reprirent leur vieux rôle et furent servantes et complices de cette rébellion, comme elles l'avaient été de toutes les autres.

Le sous-sol de telle forêt était une sorte de madrépore percé et traversé en tous sens par une voirie inconnue de sapes, de cellules et de galeries. Chacune de ces cellules aveugles abritait cinq ou six hommes. La difficulté était d'y respirer. On a de certains chiffres étranges qui font comprendre cette puissante organisation de la vaste émeute paysanne. En Ille-et-Vilaine, dans la forêt du Pertre, asile du de Talmont, on n'entendait pas un souffle, on ne trouvait pas une trace humaine, et il y avait six mille hommes avec Focard; en Morbihan, dans la forêt de Meulac, on ne voyait personne, et il avait huit mille hommes. Ces deux forêts, le Pertre et Meulac, ne comptent pourtant pas parmi les grandes forêts bretonnes. Si l'on marchait là-dessus, c'était terrible. Ces halliers hypocrites, pleins de combattants tapis dans une sorte de labyrinthe sous-jacent, étaient comme d'énormes éponges obscures d'où, sous la pression de ce pied gigantesque, la révolution, jaillissait la guerre civile.

Des bataillons invisibles guettaient. Ces armées ignorées serpentaient sous les armées républicaines, sortaient de terre tout à coup et y rentraient, bondissaient innombrables et s'évanouissaient, douées d'ubiquité et de dispersion, avalanche puis poussière, colosses ayant le don de rapetissement, géants pour combattre, nains pour disparaître. Des jaguars ayant des murs de taupes.

Il n'y avait pas que les forêts, il y avait les bois. De même qu'au-dessous des cités il y a les villages, au-dessous des forêts il y avait les broussailles. Les forêts se reliaient entre elles par le dédale, partout épars, des bois. Les anciens châteaux qui étaient des forteresses, les hameaux qui étaient des camps, les fermes qui étaient des enclos faits d'embûches et de pièges, les métairies, ravinées de fossés et palissadées d'arbres, étaient les mailles de ce filet où se prirent les armées républicaines.

Cet ensemble était ce qu'on appelait le Bocage.

Il y avait le bois de Misdon, au centre duquel était un étang, et qui était à Jean Chouan; il y avait le bois de Gennes qui était à Taillefer; il y avait le bois de la Huisserie qui était à Gouge-le-Bruant; le bois de la Charnie qui était à Courtillé-le-Bâtard, dit l’Apôtre saint Paul, chef du camp de la Vache-Noire; le bois de Burgault qui était à cet énigmatique Monsieur Jacques, réservé à une fin mystérieuse dans le souterrain de Juvardeil; il y avait le bois de Charreau où Pimousse et Petit-Prince, attaqués par la garnison de Châteauneuf, allaient prendre à bras-le-corps dans les rangs républicains des grenadiers qu’ils rapportaient prisonniers; le bois de la Heureuserie, témoin de la déroute du poste de Longue-Faye; le bois de l’Aulne d’où l’on épiait la route entre Rennes et Laval; le bois de la Gravelle qu’un prince de la Trémoille avait gagné eu jouant à la boule; le bois de Lorges dans les Côtes-du-Nord, où Charles de Boishardy régna après Bernard de Villeneuve; le bois de Bagnard près Foutenay, où Lescure offrit le combat à Chalbos qui, étant un contre cinq, l’accepta; le bois de la Durondais que se disputèrent jadis Alain le Redru et Hérispoux, fils de Charles le Chauve; le bois de Croqueloup, sur la lisière de cette lande où Coquereau tondait les prisonniers; le bois de la Croix-Bataille qui assista aux insultes homériques de Jambe-d’Argent à Morière et de Morière à Jambe-d’Argent; le bois de la Saudraie que nous avons vu fouiller par un bataillon de Paris. Bien d’autres encore.

Dans plusieurs de ces forêts et de ces bois, il n’y avait pas seulement des villages souterrains groupés autour du terrier du chef; mais il y avait encore de véritables hameaux de huttes basses cachés sous les arbres, et si nombreux que parfois la forêt en était remplie. Souvent les fumées les trahissaient. Deux de ces hameaux du bois de Misdon sont restés célèbres, Lorrière, près de Létang, et, du côté de Saint-Ouen-les-Toits, le groupe de cabanes appelé la Rue-de-Bau.

Les femmes vivaient dans les huttes et les hommes dans les cryptes. Ils utilisaient pour cette guerre les galeries des fées et les vieilles sapes celtiques. On apportait à manger aux hommes enfouis. Il y en eut qui, oubliés, moururent de faim. C’étaient d’ailleurs des maladroits qui n’avaient pas su rouvrir leurs puits. Habituellement le couvercle fait de mousse et de branches était si artistement façonné, qu’impossible à distinguer du dehors dans l’herbe. Il était très facile à ouvrir et à fermer du dedans. Ces repaires étaient creusés avec soin. On allait jeter à quelque étang voisin la terre qu’on ôtait du puits. La paroi intérieure et le sol étaient tapissés de fougère et de mousse. Ils appelaient ce réduit «la loge». On était bien là, à cela près qu’on était sans jour, sans feu, sans pain et sans air.

Remonter sans précaution parmi les vivants et se déterrer hors de propos était grave. On pouvait se trouver entre les jambes d’une armée en marche. Bois redoutables; pièges à doubles trappes. Les bleus n’osaient entrer, les blancs n’osaient sortir.

IV. LEUR VIE SOUS TERRE

Les hommes dans ces caves de bêtes s’ennuyaient. La nuit, quelquefois, à tout risque, ils sortaient et s’en allaient danser sur la lande voisine. Ou bien ils priaient pour tuer le temps. *Tout le jour*, dit Bourdoiseau, *Jean Chouan nous faisait chapeletter*.

Il était presque impossible, la saison venue, d’empêcher ceux du Bas-Maine de sortir pour se rendre à la Fête de la Gerbe. Quelques-uns avaient des idées à eux. Denys, dit Tranche-Montagne, se déguisait en femme pour aller à la comédie à Laval; puis il rentrait dans son trou.

Brusquement ils allaient se faire tuer, quittant le cachot pour le sépulcre.

Quelquefois ils soulevaient le couvercle de leur fosse, et ils écoutaient si l’on se battait au loin; ils suivaient de l’oreille le combat. Le feu des républicains était régulier, le feu des royalistes était éparpillé; ceci les guidait. Si les feux de peloton cessaient subitement, c’était signe que les royalistes avaient le dessous; si les feux saccadés continuaient et s’enfonçaient à l’horizon, c’était signe qu’ils avaient le dessus. Les blancs poursuivaient toujours: les bleus jamais, ayant le pays contre eux.

Ces belligérants souterrains étaient admirablement renseignés. Bien de plus rapide que leurs communications, rien de plus mystérieux. Ils avaient rompu tous les ponts, ils avaient démonté toutes les charrettes, et ils trouvaient moyen de tout se dire et de s’avertir de tout. Des relais d’émissaires étaient établis de forêt à forêt, de village à village, de ferme à ferme, de chaumière à chaumière, de buisson à buisson.

Tel paysan qui avait l’air stupide passait portant des dépêches dans son bâton, qui était creux.

Un ancien constituant, Boétidoux, leur fournissait, pour aller et venir d’un bout à l’autre de la Bretagne, des passeports républicains nouveau modèle, avec les noms en blanc, dont ce traître avait des liasses. Il était impossible de les surprendre. *Des secrets livres,* dit Puysaye à *plus de quatre cent mille individus ont été religieusement gardés*.

Il semblait, que ce quadrilatère fermé au sud par la ligne des Sables à Thouars, à l’est par la ligne de Thouars à Saumur et par la rivière de Thoué, au nord par la Loire et à l’ouest par l’Océan, eût un même appareil nerveux, et qu’un point de ce sol ne pût tressaillir sans que tout s’ébranlât. En un clin d’oeil on était informé de Noirmoutier à Luçon, et le camp de la Loué savait ce que faisait le camp de la Croix-Morineau. Ou eût dit que les oiseaux s’en mêlaient. Hoche écrivait, 7 messidor, an III: *On croirait qu’ils ont des télégraphes*.

C’étaient des clans, comme eu Ecosse. Chaque paroisse avait son capitaine.

Cette guerre, mon père l’a faite, et j’en puis parler.

V. LEUR VIE EN GUERRE

Beaucoup n’avaient que des piques. Les bonnes carabines de chasse abondaient. Pas de plus adroits tireurs que les braconniers du Bocage et les contrebandiers du Loroux.

C’étaient des combattants étranges, affreux et intrépides. Le décret de la levée de trois cent mille hommes avait fait sonner le tocsin dans six cents villages. Le pétillement de l’incendie éclata sur tous les points à la fois. Le Poitou et l’Anjou firent explosion le même jour. Disons qu’un premier grondement s’était fait entendre dès 1792, le 8 juillet, un mois avant le 10 août, sur la lande de Kerbader. Alain Redeler, aujourd’hui ignoré, fut le précurseur de La Rochejaquelein et de Jean Chouan. Les royalistes forçaient, sous peine de mort, tous les hommes valides à marcher. Ils réquisitionnaient les attelages, les chariots, les vivres. Tout de suite, Sapinaud eut trois mille soldats. Cathelineau dix mille, Stofflet vingt mille, et Charette fut maître de Noirmoutier. Le vicomte de Scépeaux remua le Haut-Anjou, le chevalier de Dieuzie l’Entre-Vilaine-et- Loire, Tristan-l’Hermite le Bas-Maine, le barbier Gaston la ville de Guéménée, et l’abbé Bernier tout le reste. Pour soulever ces multitudes, peu de chose suffisait. On plaçait dans le tabernacle d’un curé assermenté, d’un *prêtre jureur*, comme ils disaient, un gros chat noir qui sautait brusquement dehors pendant la messe — *C’est le diable!* criaient les paysans, et tout un canton s’insurgeait. Un souffle de feu sortait des confessionnaux. Pour assaillir les bleds et pour franchir les ravins, ils avaient leur long bâton de quinze pieds de long, *la ferte*, arme de combat et de fuite. Au plus fort des mêlées, quand les paysans attaquaient les carrés républicains, s’ils rencontraient sur le champ de combat une croix ou une chapelle, tous tombaient, à genoux et disaient leur prière sous la mitraille; le rosaire fini, ceux qui restaient se relevaient et se ruaient sur l’ennemi. Quels géants, hélas! Ils chargeaient leur fusil en courant; c’était leur talent. On leur faisait accroire ce qu’on voulait: les prêtres leur montraient d’autres prêtres dont ils avaient rougi le cou avec une ficelle serrée, et leur disaient: *Ce sont des guillotinés ressuscités.* Ils avaient leurs accès de chevalerie; ils honorèrent Fresque, un porte-drapeau républicain qui s’était fait sabrer sans lâcher son drapeau. Ces paysans raillaient; ils appelaient les prêtres mariés républicains des *sans-calottes devenus sans-culottes*. Ils commencèrent par avoir peur des canons;

puis ils se jetèrent dessus avec des bâtons, et ils en prirent. Ils prirent d'abord un beau canon de bronze qu'ils baptisèrent *le Missionnaire*: puis un autre qui datait des guerres catholiques et où étaient gravées les armes de Richelieu et une figure de la Vierge; ils l'appelèrent *Marie-Jeanne*. Quand ils perdirent Fontenay, ils perdirent Marie-Jeanne, autour de laquelle tombèrent sans broncher six cents paysans; puis ils reprirent Fontenay afin de reprendre Marie-Jeanne, et ils la ramenèrent sous le drapeau fleurdelysé en la couvrant de fleurs et en la faisant baiser aux femmes qui passaient. Mais deux canons, c'était peu. Stofflet avait pris Marie-Jeanne; Cathelineau, jaloux, partit de Pin-en-Mauge, donna l'assaut à Jallais, et prit un troisième canon; Forest attaqua Saint-Florent et eu prit un quatrième. Deux autres capitaines, Chouppes et Saint-Pol, firent mieux: ils figurèrent des canons par des troncs d'arbres coupés, et des canonniers par des mannequins, et avec cette artillerie, dont ils riaient vaillamment, ils firent reculer les bleus à Mareuil. C'était là leur grande époque. Plus tard, quand Chalbos mit en déroute La Marsonnière, les paysans laissèrent derrière eux sur le champ de bataille déshonoré trente- deux canons aux armes d'Angleterre. L'Angleterre alors payait les princes français, et l'on envoyait «des fonds à monseigneur, écrivait Nantiat le 10 mai 1794, parce qu'on a dit à M. Pitt que cela était décent». Mélinet, dans un rapport du 31 mars, dit: «Le cri des rebelles est *Vivent les Anglais!*» Les paysans s'attardaient à piller. Ces dévots étaient des voleurs. Les sauvages ont des vices. C'est par là que les prend plus tard la civilisation. Puysaye dit, tome II, page 187: «J'ai préservé plusieurs fois le bourg de Pélan du pillage.» Et plus loin, page 454, il se prive d'entrer à Montfort: «Je fis un circuit pour éviter le pillage des maisons des jacobins.» Ils détroussèrent Chollet; ils mirent à sac Challans. Après avoir manqué Granville, ils pillèrent Ville-Dieu. Ils appelaient *masse jacobine* ceux des campagnards qui s'étaient ralliés aux bleus, et ils les exterminaient plus que les autres. Ils aimaient le carnage comme des soldats et le massacre comme des brigands. Fusiller les «patauds», c'est- à-dire les bourgeois, leur plaisait; ils appelaient cela «se décarêmer». A Fontenay, un de leurs prêtres, le curé Barbotin, abattit un vieillard d'un coup de sabre. A Saint-Germain-sur-Ille, un de leurs capitaines, gentilhomme, tua d'un coup de fusil le procureur de la commune et lui prit sa montre. A Machecoul, ils mirent les républicains en coupe réglée, à trente par jour; cela dura cinq semaines; chaque chaîne de trente s'appelait «le chapelet». On adossait la chaîne à une fosse creusée et l'on fusillait; les fusillés tombaient dans la fosse parfois vivants; on les enterrait tout de même. Nous avons revu ces murs. Joubert, président du district, eut les poings sciés. Ils mettaient aux prisonniers bleus des menottes coupantes, forgées exprès. Ils les assommaient sur les places publiques en sonnant l'hallali. Charette, qui signait: *Fraternité; le chevalier Charrette*, et qui avait pour coiffure, comme Marat, un mouchoir noué sur les sourcils, brûla la ville de Pornic et les habitants dans les maisons. Pendant ce temps-là, Carrier était épouvantable. La terreur répliquait à la terreur. L'insurgé breton avait presque la figure de l'insurgé grec, veste courte, fusil en bandoulière, jambières, larges braies pareilles à la fustanelle; le gars ressemblait au klephte. Henri de La Rochejaquelein, à vingt et un ans, partait pour cette guerre avec un bâton et une paire de pistolets. L'armée vendéenne comptait cent cinquante-quatre divisions. Ils faisaient des sièges en règle; ils tinrent trois jours Bressuire bloquée. Dix mille paysans, un vendredi saint, canonnèrent la ville des Sables à boulets rouges. Il leur arriva de détruire en un seul jour quatorze cantonnements républicains, de Montigné à Courbeveilles. À Thouars, sur la haute muraille, on entendait ce dialogue superbe entre La Rochejaquelein et un gars: — Carle! — Me voilà. — Tes épaules que je monte dessus. — Faites. — Ton fusil. — Prenez. — Et La Rochejaquelein sauta dans la ville, et l'on prit sans échelles ces tours qu'avait assiégées Duguesclin. Ils préféraient une cartouche à un louis d'or. Ils pleuraient quand ils perdaient de vue leur clocher. Fuir leur semblait simple; alors les chefs criaient: *Jetez vos sabots, gardez vos Fusils!* Quand les munitions manquaient, ils disaient leur chapelet et allaient prendre de la poudre dans les caissons de l'artillerie républicaine; plus tard d'Elbée en demanda aux anglais. Quand l'ennemi approchait, s'ils avaient des blessés, ils les cachaient dans les blés ou dans les fougères vierges, et, l'affaire finie, venaient les reprendre. D'uniformes point. Leurs vêtements se délabraient. Paysans et gentilshommes s'habillaient des premiers haillons venus. Roger Mouliniers portait un turban et un dolman pris au magasin de costumes du théâtre de la Flèche; Le chevalier de Beauvilliers avait une robe de procureur et un chapeau de femme par-dessus un bonnet de laine. Tous portaient l'écharpe et la ceinture blanches; les grades se distinguaient par le noeud. Stofflet avait un noeud rouge; La Rochejaquelein avait un noeud noir; Wimpfen, demi-girondin, qui du reste ne sortit pas de Normandie, portait le brassard des carabots de Caen. Ils avaient dans leurs rangs des femmes, madame de Lescure, qui fut plus tard madame de La

Rochejaquelein; Thérèse de Mollien, maitresse de La Rouarie, laquelle brûla la liste des chefs de paroisse; madame de La Rochefoucauld, belle, jeune, le sabre à la main, ralliant les paysans au pied de la grosse tour du chàteau du Puy-Rousseau, et cette Antoinette Adams, dite le chevalier Adams, si vaillante que, prise, on la fusilla, mais debout, par respect. Ce temps épique était cruel. On était des furieux. Madame de Lescure faisait exprès marcher son cheval sur les républicains gisant hors de combat: *morts*, dit-elle: blessés, peut-être. Quelquefois les hommes trahirent, les femmes jamais. Madeleine Fleury, du Théâtre-Français; passa de La Rouarie à Marat, mais par amour. Les capitaines étaient souvent aussi ignorants que les soldats; M. de Sapinaud ne savait pas l'orthographe, il écrivait: «nous *orions* de notre *cauté.*» Les chefs s'entre-haïssaient; les capitaines du marais criaient: *A bas ceux du pays haut!* Leur cavalerie était peu nombreuse et difficile à former. Puysaye écrit: *Tel homme qui me donne gaîment ses deux fils devient froid si je lui demande un de ses Chevaux.* Fertes, fourches, faulx, fusils vieux et neufs, couteaux de braconnage, broches gourdins ferrés et cloutés, c'étaient là leurs armes; quelques-uns portaient en sautoir une croix faite de deux os de mort. Ils attaquaient à grands cris, surgissaient subitement de partout, des bois, des collines, des cépées, des chemins creux, s'égaillaient, c'est-à-dire faisaient le croissant, tuaient, exterminaient, foudroyaient et se dissipaient. Quand ils traversaient un bourg républicain, ils coupaient l'arbre de la liberté, le brûlaient, et dansaient en rond autour du feu. Toutes leurs allures étaient nocturnes. Règle du vendéen: être toujours inattendu. Ils faisaient quinze lieues en silence, sans courber une herbe sur leur passage. Le soir venu, après avoir fixé, entre chefs et en conseil de guerre, le lieu où le lendemain matin ils surprendraient les postes républicains, ils chargeaient leurs fusils, marmottaient leur prière, ôtaient leurs sabots, et filaient en longues colonnes, à travers les bois, pieds nus sur la bruyère et sur la mousse, sans un bruit, sans un mot, sans un souffle. Marche de chats dans les ténèbres.

VI. L’AME DE LA TERRE PASSE DANS L’HOMME

La Vendée insurgée ne peut être évaluée à moins de cinq cent mille hommes, femmes et enfants. Un demi-million de combattants, c’est le chiffre donné par Tuffin de la Rouarie.

Les fédéralistes aidaient; la Vendée eut pour complice la Gironde. La Lozère envoyait au Bocage trente mille hommes. Huit départements se coalisaient, cinq en Bretagne, trois en Normandie. Evreux, qui fraternisait avec Caen, se faisait représenter dans la rébellion par Chaumont, son maire, et Gardembas, notable. Buzot, Gorsas et Barbaroux à Caen, Brissot à Mondins, Chassan à Lyon, Rabant-Saint-Etienne à Nîmes, Meillan et Duchâtel en Bretagne, toutes ces bouches soufflaient sur la fournaise.

Il y a en deux Vendées: la grande, qui faisait la guerre des forêts, la petite, qui faisait la guerre des buissons; là est la nuance qui sépare Charette de Jean Chouan. La petite Vendée était naïve, la grande était corrompue; la petite valait mieux. Charette fut fait marquis, lieutenant-général des armées du roi, et grand-croix de Saint-Louis; Jean Chouan resta Jean Chouan. Charette confine au bandit, Jean Chouan au paladin.

Quant à ces chefs magnanimes: Bonchamp, Leseure, La Rochejaquelein, ils se trompèrent. La grande armée catholique a été un effort insensé; le désastre devait suivre. Se figure-t-on une tempête paysanne attaquant Paris, une coalition de villages assiégeant le Panthéon, une meute de noëls et d’oremus aboyant autour de *la Marseillaise*, la cohue des sabots se ruant sur la légion des esprits? Le Mans et Savenay châtièrent cette folie. Passer la Loire était impossible à la Vendée. Elle pouvait tout, excepté cette enjambée. La guerre civile ne conquiert point. Passer le Rhin complète César et augmente Napoléon; passer la Loire tue La Rochejaquelein. La vraie Vendée, c’est la Vendée chez elle; là elle est plus qu’invulnérable, elle est insaisissable. Le vendéen chez lui est contrebandier, laboureur, soldat, pâtre, braconnier, franc-tireur, chevrier, sonneur de cloches, paysan, espion, assassin, sacristain, bête des bois.

La Rochejaquelein n’est qu’Achille, Jean Chouan est Protée.

La Vendée a avorté. D’autres révoltes ont réussi, la Suisse par exemple. Il y a cette différence entre l’insurgé de montagne comme le suisse et l’insurgé de forêt comme le vendéen, que, presque toujours, fatale influence du milieu, l’un se bat pour un idéal, et l’autre pour des préjugés. L’un plane, l’autre rampe. L’un combat pour l’humanité, l’autre pour la solitude; l’un veut la liberté, l’autre veut l’isolement; l’un défend la commune, l’autre la paroisse. Communes! communes! criaient les héros de Morat. L’un a affaire aux précipices, l’autre aux fondrières; l’un est l’homme des torrents et des écumes, l’autre est l’homme des flaques stagnantes d’où sort la fièvre; l’un a sur la tête l’azur, l’autre une broussaille; l’un est sur une cime, l’autre est dans une ombre.

L’éducation n’est point la même, faite par les sommets ou par les bas-fonds.

La montagne est une citadelle, la forêt est une embuscade; l’une inspire l’audace, l’autre le piège. L’antiquité plaçait les dieux sur les faites et les satyres dans les halliers. Le satyre c’est le sauvage; demi-homme, demi-bête. Les pays libres ont des Apennins, des Alpes, des Pyrénées, un Olympe. Le Parnasse est un mont. Le mont Blanc était le colossal auxiliaire de Guillaume Tell; au fond et au-dessus des immenses luttes des esprits contre la nuit qui emplissent les poèmes de l’Inde, on apertçoit l’Himalaya. La Grèce, l’Espagne, l’Italie, l’Helvétie, ont pour figure la montagne; la Cimmérie, Germanie ou Bretagne, a le bois. La forêt est barbare.

La configuration du sol conseille à l’homme beaucoup d’actions. Elle est complice, plus qu’on ne croit. En présence de certains paysages féroces, on est tenté d’exonérer l’homme et d’incriminer la création; on sent une sourde provocation de la nature; le désert est parfois malsain à la conscience, surtout à la conscience peu éclairée: la conscience peut être géante, cela fait Socrate et Jésus; elle peut être naine, cela fait Attrée et Judas. La conscience petite est vite reptile; les futaies crépusculaires, les ronces, les épines, les marais sous les branches, sont une fatale fréquentation pour elle; elle subit là la mystérieuse infiltration des persuasions mauvaises. Les illusions d’optique, les mirages inexpliqués, les effarements d’heure ou de lieu jettent l’homme dans une sorte d’effroi, demi-religieux, demi-bestial, qui engendre, en temps ordinaires, la superstition, et dans les époques violentes, la brutalité. Les hallucinations tiennent la torche qui éclaire le chemin du meurtre. Il y a du vertige dans le brigand. La prodigieuse nature a un double sens qui éblouit les grands esprits et aveugle les âmes fauves. Quand l’homme est ignorant, quand le désert est visionnaire, l’obscurité de la solitude s’ajoute à l’obscurité de l’intelligence; de là dans l’homme des ouvertures d’abîmes. De certains rochers, de certains ravins, de certains taillis, de certaines claires-voies farouches du soir à travers les arbres, poussent l’homme aux actions folles et atroces. On pourrait presque dire qu’il y a des lieux scélérats.

Que de choses tragiques a vues la sombre colline qui est entre Baignon et Plélan!

Les vastes horizons conduisent l’âme aux idées générales; les horizons circonscrits engendrent les idées partielles; ce qui condamne quelquefois de grands coeurs à être de petits esprits; témoin Jean Chouan.

Les idées générales haïes par les idées partielles, c’est là la lutte même du progrès.

Pays, Patrie, ces deux mots résument toute la guerre de Vendée; querelle de l’idée locale contre l’idée universelle. Paysans contre patriotes.

VII. LA VENDÉE A FINI LA BRETAGNE

La Bretagne est une vieille rebelle. Toutes les fois qu’elle s’était révoltée pendant deux mille ans, elle avait eu raison; la dernière fois, elle a eu tort. Et pourtant au fond, contre la révolution comme contre la monarchie, contre les représentants en mission comme contre les gouverneurs ducs et pairs, contre la planche aux assignats comme contre la ferme des gabelles, quels que fussent les personnages combattant. Nicolas Rapin, François de La Noue, le capitaine Pluviaut et la dame de la Garnache, ou Stofflet, Coquereau et Lechandelier de Pierreville, sous M. de Rohan contre le roi et sous M. de La Rochejaquelein pour le roi, c’était toujours la même guerre que la Bretagne faisait, la guerre de l’esprit local contre l’esprit central.

Ces antiques provinces étaient un étang; courir répugnait à cette eau dormante; le vent qui soufflait ne les vivifiait pas, il les irritait. Finisterre; c’était là que finissait la France, que le champ donné à l’homme se terminait et que la marche des générations s’arrêtait. Halte! criait l’océan à la terre et la barbarie à la civilisation. Toutes les fois que le centre, Paris, donne une impulsion, que cette impulsion vienne de la royauté ou de la république, qu’elle soit dans le sens du despotisme ou dans le sens de la liberté, c’est une nouveauté, et la Bretagne se hérisse. Laissez-nous tranquilles. Qu’est-ce qu’on nous veut? Le Marais prend sa fourche, le Bocage prend sa carabine. Toutes nos tentatives, notre initiative en législation et en éducation, nos encyclopédies, nos philosophies, nos génies, nos gloires, viennent échouer devant le Houroux; le tocsin de Bazouges menace la révolution française, la lande du Faon s’insurge contre nos orageuses places publiques, et la cloche du Haut-des-Prés déclare la guerre à la Tour du Louvre.

Surdité terrible.

L’insurrection vendéenne est un lugubre malentendu.

Échauffourée colossale, chicane de titans, rébellion démesurée, destinée à ne laisser à l’histoire qu’un mot, la Vendée, mot illustre et noir; se suicidant pour des absents, dévouée à l’égoïsme, passant son temps à faire à la lâcheté l’offre d’une immense bravoure; sans calcul, sans stratégie, sans tactique, sans plan, sans but, sans chef, sans responsabilité; montrant à quel point la volonté peut être l’impuissance; chevaleresque et sauvage; l’absurdité en rut, bâtissant contre la lumière un garde-fou de ténèbres; l’ignorance faisant à la vérité, à la justice, au droit, à la raison, à la délivrance, une longue résistance bête et superbe; l’épouvante de huit années, le ravage de quatorze départements, la dévastation des champs, l’écrasement des moissons, l’incendie des villages, la ruine des villes, le pillage des maisons, le massacre des femmes et des enfants, la torche dans les chaumes, l’épée dans les coeurs, l’effroi de la civilisation, l’espérance de M. Pitt; telle fut cette guerre, essai inconscient de parricide.

En somme, en démontrant la nécessité de trouer dans tous les sens la vieille ombre bretonne et de percer cette broussaille de toutes les flèches de la lumière à la fois, la Vendée a servi le progrès. Les catastrophes ont une sombre façon d’arranger les choses.

LIVRE DEUXIÈME

LES TROIS ENFANTS

I. *PLUS QUAM CIVILIA BELLA*

L’été de 1792 avait été très pluvieux; l’été de 1793 fut très chaud. Par suite de la guerre civile, il n’y avait, pour ainsi dire plus de chemins en Bretagne. On y voyageait pourtant, grâce à la beauté de l’été. La meilleure route est une terre sèche.

A la fin d’une sereine journée de juillet, une heure environ après le soleil couché, un homme à cheval, qui venait du côté d’Avranches, s’arrêta devant la petite auberge dite la Croix-Branchard, qui était à l’entrée de Pontorson, et dont l’enseigne portait cette inscription qu’on y lisait encore il y a quelques années: *Bon cidre à depoteyer.* Il avait fait chaud tout le jour, mais le vent commençait à souffler.

Ce voyageur était enveloppé d’un ample manteau qui couvrait la croupe de son cheval. Il portait un large chapeau avec cocarde tricolore, ce qui n’était point sans hardiesse dans ce pays de haies et de coups de fusil où une cocarde était une cible. Le manteau noué au cou s’écartait pour laisser les bras libres, et dessous on pouvait entrevoir une ceinture tricolore et deux pommeaux de pistolets sortant de la ceinture. Un sabre qui pendait dépassait le manteau.

Au bruit du cheval qui s’arrêtait, la porte de l’auberge s’ouvrit, et l’aubergiste parut, une lanterne à la main. C’était l’heure intermédiaire; il faisait jour sur la route et nuit dans la maison.

L’hôte regarda la cocarde.

— Citoyen, dit-il, vous arrêtez-vous ici?

— Non.

— Où donc allez-vous?

— A Dol.

— En ce cas, retournez à Avranches ou restez à Pontorson.

— Pourquoi?

— Parce qu’on se bat à Dol.

— Ah! dit le cavalier.

Et il reprit:

— Donnez l’avoine à mon cheval.

L’hôte apporta l’auge, y vida un sac d’avoine, et débrida le cheval qui se mit souffler et à manger.

Le dialogue continua.

— Citoyen, est-ce un cheval de réquisition?

— Non.

— Il est à vous?

— Oui. Je l’ai acheté et payé.

— D’où venez-vous?

— De Paris.

— Pas directement?

— Non.

— Je crois bien, les routes sont interceptées. Mais la poste marche encore.

— Jusqu’à Alençon. J’ai quitté la poste là.

— Ah! il n’y aura bientôt plus de postes en France. Il n’y a plus de chevaux. Un cheval de trois cents francs se paye six cents francs, et les fourrages sont hors de prix. J’ai été maître de poste et me voilà gargotier. Sur treize cent treize maîtres de poste qu’il y avait, deux cents ont donné leur démission. Citoyen, vous avez voyagé d’après le nouveau tarif?

— Du premier mai. Oui.

— Vingt sous par poste dans la voiture, douze sous dans le cabriolet, cinq sous dans le fourgon. C’est à Alençon que vous avez acheté ce cheval?

— Oui.

— Vous avez marché aujourd’hui toute la journée?

— Depuis l’aube.

— Et hier?

— Et avant-hier.

— Je vois cela. Vous êtes venu par Domfront et Mortain.

— Et Avranches.

— Croyez-moi, reposez-sous, citoyen. Vous devez être fatigué, votre cheval l’est.

— Les chevaux ont droit à la fatigue, les hommes non.

Le regard de l’hôte se fixa de nouveau sur le voyageur. C’était une figure grave, calme et sévère, encadrée de cheveux gris.

L’hôtelier jeta un coup d’oeil sur la route qui était déserte à perte de vue, et dit:

— Et vous voyagez seul comme cela?

— J’ai une escorte.

— Où ça?

— Mon sabre et mes pistolets.

L’aubergiste alla chercher un seau d’eau et fit boire le cheval, et, pendant que le cheval buvait, l’hôte considérait le voyageur et se disait en lui-même: — C’est égal, il a l’air d’un prêtre.

Le cavalier reprit:

— Vous dites qu’on se bat à Dol?

— Oui. Ça doit commencer dans ce moment-ci.

— Qui est-ce qui se bat?

— Un ci-devant contre un ci-devant.

— Vous dites?

— Je dis qu’un ci-devant qui est pour la république se bat contre un ci-devant qui est pour le roi.

— Mais il n’y a plus de roi.

— Il y a le petit. Et le curieux, c’est que les deux ci-devant sont deux parents.

Le cavalier écoutait attentivement. L’aubergiste poursuivit:

— L’un est jeune, l’autre est vieux. C’est le petit-neveu qui se bat contre le grand-oncle. L’oncle est royaliste, le neveu est patriote. L’oncle commande les blancs, le neveu commande les bleus. Ah! ils ne se feront pas quartier, allez. C’est une guerre à mort.

— A mort?

— Oui, citoyen. Tenez, voulez-vous voir les politesses qu’ils se jettent à la tête? Ceci est une affiche que le vieux trouve moyen de faire placarder partout, sur toutes les maisons et sur tous les arbres, et qu’il a fait coller jusque sur ma porte.

L’hôte approcha sa lanterne d’un carré de papier appliqué sur un des battants de sa porte, et, comme l’affiche était en très gros caractères, le cavalier, du haut de son cheval, put lire:

« — Le marquis de Lantenac a l’honneur d’informer son petit-neveu, monsieur le vicomte Gauvain, que, si monsieur le marquis a la bonne fortune de se saisir de sa personne, il fera bellement arquebuser monsieur le vicomte.»

— Et, poursuivit l’hôtelier, voici la réponse.

Il se retourna, et éclaira de sa lanterne une autre affiche placée en regard de la première sur l’autre battant de la porte. Le voyageur lut:

« — Gauvain prévient Lantenac que s’il le prend il le fera fusiller.»

— Hier, dit l’hôte, le premier placard a été collé sur ma porte, et ce matin le second. La réplique ne s’est pas fait attendre.

Le voyageur, à demi-voix, et comme se parlant à lui-même, prononça ces quelques mots, que l’aubergiste entendit sans trop les comprendre:

— Oui, c’est plus que la guerre dans la patrie, c’est la guerre dans la famille. Il le faut, et c’est bien. Les grands rajeunissements des peuples sont à ce prix.

Et le voyageur portant la main à son chapeau, l’il fixé sur la deuxième affiche, la salua.

L’hôte continua:

— Voyez-vous, citoyen, voici l’affaire. Dans les villes et dans les gros bourgs nous sommes pour la révolution, dans la campagne ils sont contre; autant dire dans les villes on est français et dans les villages on est breton. C’est une guerre de bourgeois à pays. Ils nous appellent patauds, nous les appelons rustauds. Les nobles et les prêtres sont avec eux.

— Pas tous, interrompit le cavalier.

— Sans doute, citoyen, puisque nous avons ici un vicomte contre un marquis.

Et il ajouta à part lui:

— Et que je crois bien que je parle à un prêtre.

Le cavalier continua:

— Et lequel des deux l’emporte?

— Jusqu’à présent, le vicomte. Mais il a de la peine. Le vieux est rude. Ces gens-là, c’est la famille Gauvain, des nobles d’ici. C’est une famille à deux branches; il y a la grande branche dont le chef s’appelle le marquis de Lantenac, et la petite branche dont le chef s’appelle le vicomte Gauvain. Aujourd’hui les deux branches se battent. Cela ne se voit pas chez les arbres, mais cela se voit chez les hommes. Ce marquis de Lantenac est tout-puissant en Bretagne; pour les paysans, c’est un prince. Le jour de son débarquement, il a eu tout de suite huit mille hommes; en une semaine trois cents paroisses ont été soulevées. S’il avait pu prendre un coin de la côte, les Anglais débarquaient. Heureusement ce Gauvain s’est trouvé là, qui est son petit-neveu, drôle d’aventure. Il est commandant républicain, et il a rembarré son grand-oncle. Et puis le bonheur a voulu que ce Lantenac, en arrivant et en massacrant une masse de prisonniers, ait fait fusiller deux femmes, dont une avait trois enfants qui étaient adoptés par un bataillon de

Paris. Alors cela a fait un bataillon terrible. Il s'appelle le bataillon du Bonnet-Rouge. Il n'en reste pas beaucoup de ces parisiens-là, mais ce sont de furieuses bayonnettes. Ils ont été incorporés dans la colonne du commandant Gauvain. Rien ne leur résiste. Ils veulent venger les femmes et ravoir les enfants. On ne sait pas ce que le vieux en a fait, de ces petits. C'est ce qui enrage les grenadiers de Paris. Supposez que ces enfants n'y soient pas mêlés, cette guerre-là ne serait pas ce qu'elle est. Le vicomte est un bon et brave jeune homme. Mais le vieux est un effroyable marquis. Les paysans appellent ça la guerre de saint Michel contre Belzébuth. Vous savez peut-être que saint Michel est un ange du pays. Il a une montagne à lui au milieu de la mer dans la baie. Il passe pour avoir fait tomber le démon et pour l'avoir enterré sous une autre montagne qui est près d'ici, et qu'on appelle Tombelaine.

— Oui, murmura le cavalier, Tumba Beleni, la tombe de Belenus, de Belus, de Bel, de Bélial, de Belzébuth.

— Je vois que vous êtes informé.

Et l'hôte se dit en aparté:

— Décidément, il sait le latin, c'est un prêtre.

Puis il reprit:

— Eh bien, citoyen, pour les paysans, c'est cette guerre-là qui recommence. Il va sans dire que pour eux saint Michel, c'est le général royaliste, et Belzébuth, c'est le commandant patriote; mais s'il y a un diable, c'est bien Lantenac, et s'il y a un ange, c'est Gauvain. Vous ne prenez rien, citoyen?

— J'ai ma gourde et un morceau de pain. Mais vous ne me dites pas ce qui se passe à Dol.

— Voici. Gauvain commande la colonne d'expédition de la côte. Le but de Lantenac était d'insurger tout, d'appuyer la Basse-Bretagne sur la Basse-Normandie, d'ouvrir la porte à Pitt, et de donner un coup d'épaule à la grande armée vendéenne avec vingt mille Anglais et deux cent mille Paysans. Gauvain a coupé court à ce plan. Il tient la côte, et il repousse Lantenac dans l'intérieur et les Anglais dans la mer. Lantenac était ici, et il l'en a délogé; il lui a repris le Pont-au-Beau; il l'a chassé d'Avranches, il l'a chassé de Villedieu, il l'a empêché d'arriver à Granville. Il manuvre pour le refouler dans la forêt de Fougères, et l'y cerner. Tout allait bien. Le vieux, qui est habile, a fait une pointe; on apprend qu'il a marché sur Dol. S'il prend Dol, et s'il établit sur le Mont-Dol une batterie, car il a du canon, voilà un point de la côte où les anglais peuvent aborder, et tout est perdu. C’est pourquoi, comme il n’y avait pas une minute à perdre. Gauvain, que est un home de tête, n’a pris conseil de lui-même, n’a pas demandé d’ordre et n’en a pas attendu, a sonné le boute-selle, attelé son artillerie, ramassé sa troupe, tiré son sabre, et voilà comment, pendant que Lantenac se jette sur Dol, Gauvain se jette sur Lantenac. C’est à Dol que ces deux fronts bretons vont se cogner. Ce sera un fier choc. Ils y sont maintenant.

— Combien de temps faut-il pour aller à Dol?

— A une troupe qui a des chariots, au moins trois heures; mais ils y sont.

Le voyageur prêta l’oreille et dit:

— En effet, il me semble que j’entends le canon.

L’hôte écouta.

— Oui, citoyen. Et la fusillade. On déchire de la toile. Vous devriez passer la nuit ici. Il n’y a rien de bon à attraper par là.

— Je ne puis m’arrêter. Je dois continuer ma route.

— Vous avez tort. Je ne connais pas vos affaires, mais le risque est grand, et, à moins qu’il ne s’agisse de ce que vous avez de plus cher au monde…

— C’est en effet de cela qu’il s’agit, répondit le cavalier.

— … De quelque chose comme votre fils…

— A peu près, dit le cavalier.

L’aubergiste leva la tête et se dit à part soi:

— Ce citoyen me fait pourtant l’effet d’être un prêtre. Puis, après réflexion:

— Après ça, un prêtre, ça a des enfants.

— Rebridez mon cheval, dit le voyageur. Combien vous dois-je?

Et il paya.

L’hôte rangea l’auge et le seau le long de son mur, et revint vers le voyageur.

— Puisque vous êtes décidé à partir, écoutez mon conseil. Il est clair que vous allez à Saint-Malo. Eh bien, n’allez pas par Dol. Il y a deux chemins, le chemin par Dol, et le chemin le long de la mer. L’un n’est guère plus court que l’autre. Le chemin le long de la mer va par Saint-Georges de Brehaigne, Cherrueix, et Hirel-le-Vivier. Vous laissez Dol au sud et Cancale au nord. Citoyen, au bout de la rue, vous allez trouver l’embranchement des deux routes; celle de Dol est à gauche, celle de Saint-Georges de Brehaigne est à droite. Ecoutez-moi bien, si vous allez par Dol, vous tombez dans le massacre. C’est pourquoi ne prenez pas à gauche, prenez à droite.

— Merci, dit le voyageur.

Et il piqua son cheval.

L’obscurité s’était faite, il s’enfonça dans la nuit.

L’aubergiste le perdit de vue.

Quand le voyageur fut au bout de la rue à l’embranchement des deux chemins, il entendit la voix de l’aubergiste qui lui criait de loin:

— Prenez à droite!

Il prit à gauche.

II. DOL

Dol, ville espagnole de France en Bretagne, ainsi la qualifient les cartulaires, n’est pas une ville, c’est une rue. Grande vieille rue gothique, toute bordée à droite et à gauche de maisons à piliers, point alignées, qui font des caps et des coudes dans la rue, d’ailleurs très large. Le reste de la ville n’est qu’un réseau de ruelles se rattachant à cette grande rue diamétrale et y aboutissant comme des ruisseaux à une rivière. La ville, sans portes ni murailles, ouverte, dominée par le Mont-Dol, ne pourrait soutenir un siège; mais la rue en peut soutenir un. Les promontoires de maisons qu’on y voyait encore il y a cinquante ans, et les deux galeries sous piliers qui la bordent en faisaient un lieu de combat très solide et très résistant. Autant de maisons, autant de forteresses; et il fallait enlever l’une après l’autre. La vieille halle était à peu près au milieu de la rue.

L’aubergiste de la Croix-Branchard avait dit vrai, une mêlée forcenée emplissait Dol au moment où il parlait. Un duel nocturne entre les blancs arrivés le matin et les bleus survenus le soir avait brusquement éclaté dans la ville. Les forces étaient inégales, les blancs étaient six mille, les bleus étaient quinze cents, mais il y avait égalité d’acharnement. Chose remarquable, c’étaient les quinze cents qui avaient attaqué les six mille.

D’un côté une cohue, de l’autre une phalange. D’un côté six mille paysans, avec des coeurs-de-Jésus sur leurs vestes de cuir, des rubans blancs à leurs chapeaux ronds, des devises chrétiennes sur leurs brassards, des chapelets à leurs ceinturons, ayant plus de fourches que de sabres et des carabines sans bayonnettes, traînant des canons attelés de cordes, mal équipés, mal disciplinés, mal armés, mais frénétiques. De l’autre quinze cents soldats avec le tricorne à cocarde tricolore, l’habit à grandes basques et à grands revers, le baudrier croisé, le briquet à poignée de cuivre et le fusil à longue bayonnette, dressés, alignés, dociles et farouches, sachant obéir en gens qui sauraient commander, volontaires eux aussi, mais volontaires de la patrie, en haillons du reste, et sans souliers; pour la monarchie, des paysans paladins, pour la révolution, des héros va-nu-pieds; et chacune des deux troupes ayant pour âme son chef; les royalistes un vieillard, les républicains un jeune homme. D’un côté Lantenac, de l’autre Gauvain.

La révolution, à côté des jeunes figures gigantesques, telles que Danton, Saint-Just, et Robespierre, a les jeunes figures idéales, comme Hoche et Marceau. Gauvain était une de ces figures.

Gauvain avait trente ans, une encolure d'Hercule, l'oeil sérieux d'un prophète et le rire d'un enfant. Il ne fumait pas, il ne buvait pas, il ne jurait pas. Il emportait à travers la guerre un nécessaire de toilette; il avait grand soin de ses ongles, de ses dents, de ses cheveux qui étaient bruns et superbes; et dans les haltes il secouait lui-même au vent son habit de capitaine qui était troué de balles et blanc de poussière. Toujours rué éperdument dans les mêlées, il n'avait jamais été blessé. Sa voix très douce avait à propos les éclats brusques du commandement. Il donnait l'exemple de coucher à terre, sous la bise, sous la pluie, dans la neige, roulé dans son manteau, et sa tête charmante posée sur une pierre. C'était une âme héroïque et innocente. Le sabre au poing le transfigurait. Il avait cet air efféminé qui dans la bataille est formidable.

Avec cela penseur et philosophe, un jeune sage; Alcibiade pour qui le voyait, Socrate pour qui l'entendait.

Dans cette immense improvisation qui est la révolution française, ce jeune homme avait été tout de suite un chef de guerre.

Sa colonne, formée par lui, était comme la légion romaine, une sorte de petite armée complète; elle se composait d'infanterie et de cavalerie; elle avait des éclaireurs, des pionniers, des sapeurs, des pontonniers; et, de même que la légion romaine avait des catapultes, elle avait des canons. Trois pièces bien attelées faisaient la colonne forte en la laissant maniable.

Lantenac aussi était un chef de guerre, pire encore. Il était à la fois plus réfléchi et plus hardi. Les vrais vieux héros ont plus de froideur que les jeunes parce qu'ils sont loin de l'aurore, et plus d'audace parce qu'ils sont près de la mort. Qu'ont-ils à perdre? si peu de chose. De là les manoeuvres téméraires, en même temps que savantes, de Lantenac. Mais en somme, et presque toujours, dans cet opiniâtre corps-à-corps du vieux et du jeune. Gauvain avait le dessus. C'était plutôt fortune qu'autre chose. Tous les bonheurs, même le bonheur terrible, font partie de la jeunesse. La victoire est un peu fille.

Lantenac était exaspéré contre Gauvain; d'abord parce que Gauvain le battait, ensuite parce que c'était son parent. Quelle idée a-t-il d'être jacobin? ce Gauvain! ce polisson! son héritier, car le marquis n'avait pas d'enfants, un petit-neveu, presque un petit-fils? — *Ah!* disait ce quasi grand-père, *si je mets la main dessus, je le tue comme un chien!*

Du reste, la république avait raison de s’inquiéter de ce marquis de Lantenac. A peine débarqué, il faisait trembler. Son nom avait couru dans l’insurrection vendéenne comme une traînée de poudre, et Lantenac était tout de suite devenu centre. Dans une révolte de cette nature où tous se jalousent et où chacun a son buisson ou son ravin, quelqu’un de haut qui survient rallie les chefs épars égaux entre eux. Presque tous les capitaines des bois s’étaient joints à Lantenac, et, de près ou de loin, lui obéissaient.

Un seul l’avait quitté, c’était le premier qui s’était joint à lui, Gavard. Pourquoi? C’est que c’était un homme de confiance. Gavard avait eu tous les secrets et adopté tous les plans de l’ancien système de guerre civile que Lantenac venait supplanter et remplacer. On n’hérite pas d’un homme de confiance; le soulier de La Rouarie n’avait pu chausser Lantenac. Gavard était allé rejoindre Bonchamp.

Lantenac, comme homme de guerre, était de l’école de Frédéric II; il entendait combiner la grande guerre avec la petite. Il ne voulait ni d’une «masse confuse», comme la grosse armée catholique et royale, foule destinée à l’écrasement; ni d’un éparpillement dans les halliers et les taillis, bon pour harceler, impuissant pour terrasser. La guérilla ne conclut pas, ou conclut mal; on commence par attaquer une république et l’on finit par détrousser une diligence. Lantenac ne comprenait cette guerre bretonne, ni toute en rase campagne comme La Rochejaquelein, ni toute dans la forêt comme Jean Chouan; ni Vendée, ni Chouanerie; il voulait la vraie guerre; se servir du paysan, mais l’appuyer sur le soldat. Il voulait des bandes pour la stratégie et des régiments pour la tactique. Il trouvait excellentes pour l’attaque, l’embuscade et la surprise, ces armées de village, tout de suite assemblées, tout de suite dispersées, mais il les sentait trop fluides; elles étaient dans sa main comme de l’eau; il voulait dans cette guerre flottante et diffuse créer un point solide; il voulait ajouter à la sauvage armée des forêts une troupe régulière qui fût le pivot de manoeuvre des paysans. Pensée profonde et affreuse; si elle eût réussi, la Vendée eût été inexpugnable.

Mais où trouver une troupe régulière? où trouver des soldats? où trouver des régiments? où trouver une armée toute faite? En Angleterre. De là l’idée fixe de Lantenac: faire débarquer les anglais. Ainsi capitule la conscience des partis; la cocarde blanche lui cachait l’habit rouge. Lantenac; n’avait qu’une pensée: s’emparer d’un point du littoral, et le livrer à Pitt. C’est pourquoi, voyant Dol sans défense, il s’était jeté dessus, afin d’avoir par Dol le Mont-Dol, et par le Mont-Dol la côte.

Le lieu était bien choisi. Le canon du Mont-Dol balayerait d’un côté le Fresnois, de l’autre Saint-Brelade, tiendrait à distance la croisière de Cancale et ferait toute la plage libre à une descente, du Ras-sur-Couesnon à Saint-Mèloir-des-Ondes.

Pour faire réussir cette tentative décisive, Lantenac avait amené avec lui un peu plus de six mille hommes, ce qu’il avait de plus robuste dans les bandes dont il disposait, et toute son artillerie, dix couleuvrines de seize, une bâtarde de huit et une pièce de régiment de quatre livres de balles. Il entendait établir une forte batterie sur le Mont-Dol, d’après ce principe que mille coups tirés avec dix canons font plus de besogne que quinze cents coups tirés avec cinq canons.

Le succès semblait certain. On était six mille hommes. On n’avait à craindre, vers Avranches, que Gauvain et ses quinze cents hommes, et vers Dinan que Léchelle. Léchelle, il est vrai, avait, vingt-cinq mille hommes, mais il était à vingt lieues. Lantenac était donc rassuré, du côté de Léchelle, par la grande distance contre le grand nombre, et, du côté de Gauvain, par le petit nombre contre la petite distance. Ajoutons que Léchelle était imbécile, et que, plus tard, il fit écraser ses vingt-cinq mille hommes aux landes de la Croix-Bataille, échec qu’il paya de son suicide.

Lantenac avait donc une sécurité complète. Son entrée à Dol fut brusque et dure. Le marquis de Lantenac avait une rude renommée; on le savait sans miséricorde. Aucune résistance ne fut essayée. Les habitants terrifiés se barricadèrent dans leurs maisons. Les six mille vendéens s’installèrent dans la ville avec la confusion campagnarde, presque en champ de foire, sans fourriers, sans logis marqués, bivouaquant au hasard, faisant la cuisine en plein vent, s’éparpillant dans les églises, quittant les fusils pour les rosaires. Lantenac alla en hâte avec quelques officiers d’artillerie reconnaître le Mont-Dol, laissant la lieutenance à Gouge-le-Bruant, qu’il avait nommé sergent de bataille.

Ce Gouge-le-Brouant a laissé une vague trace dans l’histoire. Il avait, deux surnoms, *Brise-bleu*, a cause de ses carnages de patriotes, et *l’Imânus*, parce qu’il avait en lui ou ne sait quoi d’inexprimablement horrible. *Imânus,* dérivé D’*immanis,* est un vieux mot bas-normand qui exprime la laideur surhumaine, et quasi divine, dans l’épouvante, le démon, le satyre, l’ogre. Un ancien manuscrit dit: *d’mes daeux iers j’vis L’imânus*. Les vieillards du Bocage ne savent plus aujourd’hui ce que c’est que Gouge-le-

Bruant, ni ce que signifie Brise-Bleu; mais ils connaissent confusément l'Imânus. L'Imânus est mêlé aux superstitions locales. On parle encore de l'Imânus à Trémorel et à Plumangat, deux villages où Gouge-le-Bruant a laissé la marque de son pied sinistre. Dans la Vendée, les autres étaient les sauvages, Gouge-le-Bruant était le barbare. C'était une espèce de cacique, tatoué de croix-de-par-Dieu et de Fleurs-de-lys; il avait sur sa face la lueur hideuse, et presque surnaturelle, d'une âme à laquelle ne ressemblait aucune autre âme humaine. Il était infernalement brave dans le combat, ensuite atroce. C'était un cur plein d'aboutissements tortueux, porté à tous les dévouements, enclin à toutes les fureurs. Raisonnait-il? Oui, mais comme les serpents rampent, en spirale. Il partait de l'héroïsme pour arriver à l'assassinat. Il était impossible de deviner d'où lui venaient ses résolutions, parfois grandioses à force d'être monstrueuses. Il était capable de tous les inattendus horribles. Il avait la férocité épique.

De là ce surnom difforme, *l'Imânus*.

Le marquis de Lantenac avait confiance en sa cruauté.

Cruauté, c'était juste, l'Imânus y excellait: mais en stratégie et en tactique il était moins supérieur, et peut-être le marquis avait-il tort d'en faire son sergent de bataille. Quoi qu'il en soit, il laissa derrière lui l'Imânus avec charge de le remplacer et de veiller à tout.

Gouge-le-Bruant, homme plus guerrier que militaire, était plus propre à égorger un clan qu'à garder une ville. Pourtant il posa des grand'gardes.

Le soir venu, comme le marquis de Lantenac, après avoir reconnu l'emplacement de la batterie projetée, s'en retournait vers Dol, tout à coup, il entendit le canon. I1 regarda. Une fumée rouge s'élevait de la grande rue. Il y avait surprise, irruption, assaut: on se battait dans la ville.

Bien que difficile à étonner, il fut stupéfait. Il ne s'attendait à rien de pareil. Qui cela pouvait-il être? Evidemment ce n'était pas Gauvain. On n'attaque pas à un contre quatre. Etait-ce Léchelle? Mais alors quelle marche forcée! Léchelle était improbable, Gauvain impossible.

Lantenac poussa son cheval: chemin faisant il rencontra des habitants qui s'enfuyaient, il les questionna, ils étaient fous de peur. Ils criaient: Les bleus! les bleus! et quand il arriva la situation était mauvaise.

Voici ce qui s'était passé.

III. PETITES ARMÉES ET GRANDES BATAILLES

En arrivant à Dol, les paysans, on vient de le voir, s’étaient dispersés dans la ville, chacun faisant à sa guise, comme cela arrive quand *«on obéit d’amitié»*, c’était le mot des vendéens. Genre d’obéissance qui fait des héros, mais non des troupiers. Ils avaient garé leur artillerie avec les bagages sous les voûtes de vieille halle, et, las, buvant, mangeant, «chapelettant», ils s’étaient couchés pèle-mêle en travers de la grande rue, plutôt encombrée que gardée. Comme la nuit tombait, la plupart s’endormirent, la tête sur leurs sacs, quelques-uns ayant leur femme à côté d’eux; car souvent les paysannes suivaient les paysans: en Vendée, les femmes grosses servaient d’espions. C’était une douce nuit de juillet; les constellations resplendissaient dans le profond bleu noir du ciel. Tout ce bivouac, qui était plutôt une halte de caravane qu’un campement d’armée, se mit à sommeiller paisiblement. Tout à coup, à la lueur du crépuscule, ceux qui n’avaient pas encore fermé les yeux virent trois pièces de canons braquées à l’entrée de la grande rue.

C’était Gauvain. Il avait surpris les grand’gardes, il était dans la ville, et il tenait avec sa colonne la tête de la rue.

Un paysan se dressa, cria: qui vive? et lâcha son coup de fusil: un coup de canon répliqua. Puis une mousqueterie furieuse éclata. Toute la cohue assoupie se leva en sursaut. Rude secousse. S’endormir sous les étoiles et se réveiller sous la mitraille.

Le premier moment fut terrible. Rien de tragique comme le fourmillement d’une foule foudroyée. Ils se jetèrent sur leurs armes. On criait, on courait, beaucoup tombaient. Les assaillis, ne savaient plus ce qu’ils faisaient et s’arquebusaient les uns les autres. Il y avait des gens ahuris qui sortaient des maisons, qui y rentraient, qui sortaient encore, et qui erraient dans la bagarre, éperdus. Des familles s’appelaient. Combat lugubre, mêlé de femmes et d’enfants. Les balles sifflantes rayaient l’obscurité. La fusillade partait de tous les coins noirs. Tout était fumée et tumulte. L’enchevêtrement des fourgons et des charrois s’y ajoutait. Les chevaux ruaient. On marchait sur les blessés. On entendait à terre des hurlement. Horreur de ceux-ci, stupeur de ceux-là. Les soldats et les officiers se cherchaient. Au milieu de tout cela, de sombres indifférences. Une femme allaitait son nouveau-né, assise contre un pan de mur auquel était adossé son mari qui avait la jambe cassée et qui, pendant que son sang coulait, chargeait tranquillement sa carabine et tirait au hasard, tuant devant lui dans l'ombre. Des hommes à plat ventre tiraient à travers les roues des charrettes. Par moments il s'élevait un hourvari de clameurs. La grosse voix du canon couvrait tout. C'était épouvantable.

Ce fut, comme un abatis d'arbres; tous tombaient les uns sur les autres.

Gauvain, embusqué, mitraillait à coup sûr et perdait peu de monde.

Pourtant l'intrépide désordre des paysans finit par se mettre sur la défensive; ils se replièrent sous la halle, vaste redoute obscure, forêt de piliers de pierre. Là ils reprirent pied; tout ce qui ressemblait à un bois leur donnait confiance. L'Imânus suppléait de son mieux à l'absence de Lantenac. Ils avaient du canon, mais, au grand étonnement de Gauvain, ils ne s'en servaient point; cela tenait à ce que, les officiers d'artillerie étant allés avec le marquis reconnaître le Mont-Dol, les gars ne savaient que faire des couleuvrines et des bâtardes; mais ils criblaient de balles les bleus qui les canonnaient. Les paysans ripostaient par la mousqueterie à la mitraille. C'étaient eux maintenant qui étaient abrités. Ils avaient entassé les baquets, les tombereaux, les bagages, toutes les futailles de la vieille halle, et improvisé une haute barricade avec des claires-voies par où passaient leurs carabines. Par ces trous leur fusillade était meurtrière. Tout cela se fit vite. En un quart d'heure la halle eut un front imprenable.

Ceci devenait grave pour Gauvain. Cette halle brusquement transformée en citadelle, c'était l'inattendu. Les paysans étaient là, massés et solides. Gauvain avait réussi la surprise et manqué la déroute. Il avait mis pied à terre. Attentif, ayant son épée au poing sous ses bras croisés, debout dans la lueur d'une torche qui éclairait sa batterie, il regardait toute cette ombre.

Sa haute taille dans cette clarté le faisait visible aux hommes de la barricade. Il était le point de mire, mais il n'y songeait pas.

Les volées de balles qu'envoyait la barricade s'abattaient autour de

Gauvain pensif.

Mais contre toutes ces carabines il avait du canon. Le boulet finit toujours par avoir raison. Qui a l'artillerie a la victoire. Sa batterie, bien servie, lui assurait la supériorité.

Subitement, un éclair jaillit de la halle pleine de ténèbres, on entendit comme un coup de foudre, et un boulet vint trouer une maison au-dessus de la tête de Gauvain.

La barricade répondait au canon par le canon.

Que se passait-il? Il y avait du nouveau. L’artillerie maintenant n’était plus d’un seul côté.

Un second boulet suivit le premier et vint s’enfoncer dans le mur tout près de Gauvain. Un troisième boulet jeta à terre son chapeau.

Ces boulets étaient de gros calibre. C’était une pièce de seize qui tirait.

— On vous vise, commandant, crièrent les artilleurs.

Et ils éteignirent la torche. Gauvain, rêveur, ramassa son chapeau.

Quelqu’un, en effet, visait Gauvain, c’était Lantenac.

Le marquis venait d’arriver dans la barricade par le côté opposé.

L’Imânus avait couru à lui.

— Monseigneur, nous sommes surpris.

— Par qui?

— Je ne sais.

— La route de Dinan est-elle libre?

— Je le crois.

— Il faut commencer la retraite.

— Elle commence. Beaucoup se sont déjà sauvés.

— Il ne faut pas se sauver; il faut se retirer. Pourquoi ne vous servez-vous pas de l’artillerie?

— On a perdu la tête, et puis les officiers n’étaient pas là.

— J’y vais.

— Monseigneur, j’ai dirigé sur Fougères le plus que j’ai pu des bagages, les femmes, tout l’inutile. Que faut-il faire des trois petits prisonniers?

— Ah! ces enfants?

— Oui.

— Ils sont nos otages. Fais-les conduire à la Tourgue.

Cela dit, le marquis alla à la barricade. Le chef venu, tout changea de face. La barricade était mal faite pour l’artillerie, il n’y avait place que pour deux canons: le marquis mit en batterie deux pièces de seize, auxquelles on fit des embrasures. Comme il était penché sur un des canons, observant la batterie ennemie par l’embrasure, il aperçut Gauvain.

— C’est lui! cria-t-il.

Alors il prit lui-même l’écouvillon et le fouloir, chargea la pièce, fixa le fronton de mire, et pointa.

Trois fois il ajusta Gauvain, et le manqua. Le troisième coup ne réussit qu’à le décoiffer.

— Maladroit! murmura Lantenac. Un peu plus bas, j’avais la tête.

Brusquement la torche s’éteignit, et il n’eut plus devant lui que les ténèbres.

— Soit, dit-il.

Et se tournant vers les canonniers paysans, il cria:

— A mitraille!

Gauvain de son côté n’était pas moins sérieux. La situation s’aggravait. Une phase nouvelle du combat se dessinait. La barricade en était à le canonner. Qui sait si elle n’allait point passer de la défensive à l’offensive? Il avait devant lui, en défalquant les morts et les fuyards, au moins cinq mille combattants, et il ne lui restait à lui que douze cents hommes maniables. Que deviendraient les républicains si l’ennemi s’apercevait de leur petit nombre? Les rôles seraient intervertis. On était assaillant, on serait assailli. Que la barricade fit une sortie, tout pouvait être perdu.

Que faire? Il ne fallait point songer à attaquer la barricade de front; un coup de vive force était chimérique: douze cents hommes ne débusquent pas cinq mille hommes. Brusquer était impossible, attendre était funeste. Il fallait en finir. Mais comment?

Gauvain était du pays, il connaissait la ville; il savait que la vieille halle, où les vendéens s’étaient crénelés, était adossée à un dédale de ruelles étroites et tortueuses.

Il se tourna vers son lieutenant qui était ce vaillant capitaine Guéchamp,

fameux plus tard pour avoir nettoyé la forêt de Concise où était né Jean

Chouan, et pour avoir, en barrant aux rebelles la chaussée de l’étang de la

Chaîne, empêché la prise de Bourgneuf.

— Guéchamp, dit-il, je vous remets le commandement. Faites tout le feu que vous pourrez. Trouez la barricade à coups de canon. Occupez-moi tous ces gars-là.

— C’est compris, dit Guéchamp.

— Massez toute la colonne, armes chargées, et tenez-la prête à l’attaque.

Il ajouta quelques mots à l’oreille de Guéchamp.

— C’est entendu, dit Guéchamp.

Gauvain reprit:

— Tous nos tambours sont-ils sur pied?

— Oui.

— Nous en avons neuf. Gardez-en deux, donnez-m’en sept.

Les sept tambours vinrent en silence se ranger devant Gauvain.

Alors Gauvain cria:

— A moi le bataillon du Bonnet-Rouge!

Douze hommes, dont un sergent, sortirent du gros de la troupe.

— Je demande tout le bataillon, dit Gauvain.

— Le voilà, répondit le sergent.

— Vous êtes douze!

— Nous restons douze.

— C’est bien, dit Gauvain.

Ce sergent était le bon et rude troupier Radoub, qui avait adopté au nom du bataillon les trois enfants rencontrés dans le bois de la Saudraie.

Un demi-bataillon seulement, on s’en souvient, avait été exterminé à

Herbe-en-Pail, et Radoub avait eu ce bon hasard de n’en point faire partie.

Un fourgon de fourrage était proche; Gauvain le montra du doigt au sergent.

— Sergent, faites faire à vos hommes des liens de paillé, et qu’on torde cette paille autour des fusils pour qu’on n’entende pas de bruit s’ils s’entre-choquent.

Une minute s’écoula, l’ordre fut exécuté, en silence et dans l’obscurité.

— C’est fait, dit le sergent.

— Soldats, ôtez vos souliers, reprit Gauvain.

— Nous n’en avons pas, dit le sergent.

Cela faisait, avec les sept tambours, dix-neuf hommes: Gauvain était le vingtième.

Il cria:

— Sur une seule file. Suivez-moi. Les tambours derrière moi. Le bataillon ensuite. Sergent, vous commanderez le bataillon.

Il prit la tête de la colonne, et, pendant que la canonnade continuait des deux côtés, ces vingt hommes, glissant comme des ombres s’enfoncèrent dans les ruelles désertes.

Ils marchèrent quelque temp de la sorte, serpentant le long des maisons. Tout semblait mort dans la ville; les bourgeois s’étaient blottis dans les caves. Pas une porte qui ne fût barrée, pas un volet qui ne fût fermé. De lumière nulle part.

La grande rue faisait dans ce silence un fracas furieux; le combat au canon continuait; la batterie républicaine et la barricade royaliste se crachaient toute leur mitraille avec rage.

Après vingt minutes de marche tortueuse, Gauvain, qui dans cette obscurité cheminait avec certitude, arriva à l'extrémité d'une ruelle d'où l'on rentrait dans la grande rue; seulement on était de l'autre côté de la halle.

La position était tournée. De ce côté-ci il n'y avait pas de retranchement, ceci est l'éternelle imprudence des constructeurs de barricades, la halle était ouverte, et l'on pouvait entrer sous les piliers où étaient attelés quelques chariots de bagages prêts à partir. Gauvain et ses dix-neuf hommes avaient devant eux les cinq mille Vendéens, mais de dos et non de front.

Gauvin parla à voix basse au sergent; on défit la paille nouée autour des fusils; les douze grenadiers se postèrent en bataille derrière l'angle de la ruelle, et les sept tambours, la baguette haute, attendirent.

Les décharges d'artillerie étaient intermittentes. Tout à coup, dans un intervalle, entre deux détonations, Gauvain leva son épée, et d'une voix qui, dans ce silence, sembla un éclat de clairon, il cria:

— Deux cents hommes par la droite, deux cents hommes par la gauche, tout le reste sur le centre!

Les douze coups de fusil partirent, et les sept tambours sonnèrent la charge.

Et Gauvain jeta le cri redoutable des bleus:

— A la bayonnette! Fonçons!

L'effet fut inouï.

Toute cette masse paysanne se sentit prise à revers, et s'imagina avoir une nouvelle armée dans le dos. En même temps, entendant le tambour, la colonne qui tenait le haut de la grande rue et que commandait Guéchamp s'ébranla, battant la charge de son côté, et se jeta au pas de course sur la barricade; les paysans se virent entre deux feux; la panique est un grossissement, dans la panique un coup de pistolet fait le bruit d'un coup de canon, toute clameur est fantôme, et l'aboiement d'un chien semble le rugissement d'un lion. Ajoutons que le paysan prend peur comme le chaume prend feu, et, aussi aisément qu'un feu de chaume devient incendie, une peur de paysan devient déroute. Ce fut une fuite inexprimable.

En quelques instants la halle fut vide, les gars terrifiés se désagrégèrent, rien à faire pour les officiers. L'Imânus tua inutilement deux ou trois fuyards, on n’entendait que ce cri: *Sauve qui peut!* et cette armée, à travers les rues de la ville comme à travers les trous d’un crible, se dispersa dans la campagne, avec une rapidité de nuée emportée par l’ouragan.

Les uns s’enfuirent vers Châteanneuf, les autres vers Merguer, les autres vers Antrain.

Le marquis de Lantenac vit cette déroute. Il encloua de sa main les canons, puis il se retira, le dernier, lentement et froidement, et il dit:

— Décidément les paysans ne tiennent pas. Il nous faut les anglais.

IV. C'EST LA SECONDE FOIS

La victoire était complète.

Gauvain se tourna vers les hommes du bataillon du Bonnet-Rouge, et leur dit:

— Vous êtes douze, mais vous en valez mille.

Un mot du chef, c'était la croix d'honneur de ce temps-là.

Guéchamp, lancé par Gauvain hors de la ville, poursuivit les fuyards et en prit beaucoup.

On alluma des torches et l'on fouilla la ville.

Tout ce qui ne put s'évader se rendit. On illumina la grande rue avec des pots à feu. Elle était jonchée de morts et de blessés. La fin d'un combat s'arrache toujours, quelques groupes désespérés résistaient encore çà et là, on les cerna, et ils mirent bas les armes.

Gauvain avait remarqué dans le pèle-mêle effréné de la déroute un homme intrépide, espèce de faune agile et robuste, qui avait protégé la fuite des autres et ne s'était pas enfui. Ce paysan s'était magistralement servi de sa carabine, fusillant avec le canon, assommant avec la crosse, si bien qu'il l'avait cassée; maintenant il avait un pistolet dans un poing et un sabre dans l'autre. On n'osait l'approcher. Tout à coup Gauvain le vit qui chancelait et qui s'adossait à un pilier de la grande rue. Cet homme venait d'être blessé. Mais il avait toujours aux poings son sabre et son pistolet. Gauvain mit son épée sous son bras et alla à lui.

— Rends-toi, dit-il.

L'homme le regarda fixement. Sou sang coulait sous ses vêtements d'une blessure qu'il avait, et faisait une mare à ses pieds.

— Tu es mon prisonnier, reprit Gauvain.

L'homme resta muet.

— Comment t'appelles-tu?

L'homme dit:

— Je m'appelle Danse-à-l'Ombre.

— Tu es un vaillant, dit Gauvain.

Et il lui tendit la main.

L'homme répondit:

— Vive le roi!

Et ramassant ce qui lui restait de force, levant les deux bras à la fois, il tira au cur de Gauvain un coup de pistolet et lui asséna sur la tête un coup de sabre.

Il fit cela avec une promptitude de tigre; mais quelqu’un fut plus prompt encore. Ce fut un homme à cheval qui venait d’arriver et qui était là depuis quelques instants, sans qu’on eût fait attention à lui. Cet homme, voyant le vendéen lever le sabre et le pistolet, se jeta entre lui et Gauvain. Sans cet homme, Gauvain était mort. Le cheval reçut le coup pistolet, l’homme reçut le coup de sabre, et tous deux tombèrent. Tout cela se fit le temps de jeter un cri.

Le vendéen de son côté s’était affaissé sur le pavé.

Le coup de sabre avait frappé l’homme en plein visage: il était à terre, évanoui. Le cheval était tué.

Gauvain s’approcha.

— Qui est cet homme? dit-il.

Il le considéra. Le sang de la balafre inondait le blessé et lui faisait un masque rouge. Il était impossible de distinguer sa figure. On lui voyait des cheveux gris.

— Cet homme m’a sauté la vie, poursuivit Gauvain. Quelqu’un d’ici le connaît-il?

Mon commandant, dit un soldat, cet homme est entré dans la ville tout à l’heure. Je l’ai vu arriver. Il venait par la route de Pontorson.

Le chirurgien-major de la colonne était accouru avec sa trousse. Le blessé était toujours sans connaissance. Le chirurgien l’examina et dit:

— Une simple balafre. Ce n’est rien. Cela se recoud. Dans huit jours il sera sur pied. C’est un beau coup de sabre.

Le blessé avait un manteau, une ceinture tricolore, des pistolets, un sabre. On le coucha sur une civière. On le déshabilla. On apporta un seau d’eau fraîche, le chirurgien lava la plaie. Le visage commença à apparaître. Gauvain le regardait avec une attention profonde.

— A-t-il des papiers sur lui? demanda Gauvain.

Le chirurgien tâta la poche de côté et en tira un portefeuille, qu’il tendit à Gauvain.

Cependant le blessé, ranimé par l’eau froide, revenait à lui. Ses paupières remuaient vaguement. Gauvain fouillait le portefeuille; il y trouva une feuille de papier pliée en quatre, il la déplia, il lut:

«Comité de salut public. Le citoyen Cimourdain…»

Il jeta un cri:

— Cimourdain!

Ce cri fit ouvrir les yeux au blessé.

Gauvain était éperdu.

— Cimourdain! c’est vous! C’est la seconde fois que vous me sauvez la vie.

Cimourdain regardait Gauvain. Un ineffable éclair de joie illuminait sa face sanglante.

Gauvain tomba à genoux devant le blessé en criant:

— Mon maître!

— Ton père, dit Cimourdain.

V. LA GOUTTE D'EAU FROIDE

Ils ne s'étaient pas vus depuis beaucoup d'années, mais leurs cœurs ne s'étaient jamais quittés; ils se reconnurent comme s'ils s'étaient séparés la veille.

On avait improvisé une ambulance à l'hôtel de ville de Dol. On porta Cimourdain sur un lit dans une petite chambre contiguë à la grande salle commune aux blessés. Le chirurgien, qui avait recousu la balafre, mit fin aux épanchements entre ces deux hommes, et jugea qu'il fallait laisser dormir Cimourdain. Gauvain d'ailleurs était réclamé par ces mille soins qui sont les devoirs et les soucis de la victoire. Cimourdain resta seul; mais il ne dormit pas; il avait deux fièvres, la fièvre de sa blessure et la fièvre de sa joie.

Il ne dormit pas, et pourtant il ne lui semblait pas être éveillé. Etait-ce possible? son rêve était réalisé. Cimourdain était de ceux qui ne croient pas au quine, et il l'avait. Il retrouvait Gauvain. Il l'avait quitté enfant, il le retrouvait homme: il la retrouvait, grand, redoutable, intrépide. Il le retrouvait triomphant, et triomphant pour le peuple. Gauvain était en Vendée le point d'appui de la révolution, et c'était lui, Cimourdain, qui avait fait cette colonne à la république. Ce victorieux était son élève. Ce qu'il voyait rayonner à travers cette jeune figure réservée peut-être au panthéon républicain, c'était sa pensée, à lui Cimourdain; son disciple, l'enfant de son esprit, était dès à présent un héros et serait avant peu une gloire; il semblait à Cimourdain qu'il revoyait sa propre âme faite Génie. Il venait de voir de ses yeux comment Gauvain faisait la guerre; il était comme Chiron ayant va combattre Achille. Rapport mystérieux entre le prêtre et le centaure; car le prêtre n'est homme qu'à mi-corps.

Tous les hasards de cette aventure, mêlés à l'insomnie de sa blessure, emplissaient Cimourdain d'une sorte d'enivrement mystérieux. Une jeune destinée se levait, magnifique, et, ce qui ajoutait à sa joie profonde, il avait plein pouvoir sur cette destinée; encore un succès comme celui qu'il venait de voir, et Cimourdain n'aurait qu'un mot à dire pour que la république confiât à Gauvain une armée. Rien n'éblouit comme l'étonnement de voir tout réussir. C'était le temps où chacun avait son rêve militaire; chacun voulait faire un général; Danton voulait faire Westermann, Marat voulait faire Rossignol, Hébert voulait faire Ronsin; Robespierre voulait les défaire tous. Pourquoi pas Gauvain? Se disait Cimourdain; et il songeait. L’illimité était devant lui; il passait d’une hypothèse à l’autre; tons les obstacles s’évanouissaient; une fois qu’on a mis le pied sur cette échelle-là, on ne s’arrête plus, c’est la montée infinie, on part de l’homme et l’on arrive à l’étoile. Un grand général n’est qu’un chef d’armées; un grand capitaine est en même temps un chef d’idées; Cimourdain rêvait Gauvain grand capitaine. Il lui semblait, car la rêverie va vite, voir Gauvain sur l’Océan, chassant les anglais; sur le Rhin, châtiant les rois du Nord; aux Pyrénées, repoussant l’Espagne; aux Alpes, faisant signe à Rome de se lever. Il y avait en Cimourdain deux hommes, un homme tendre et un homme sombre; tous deux étaient contents; car, l’inexorable étant son idéal en même temps qu’il voyait Gauvain superbe, il le voyait terrible. Cimourdain pensait à tout ce qu’il fallait détruire avant de construire, et, certes, se disait-il, ce n’est pas l’heure des attendrissements. Gauvain sera «à la hauteur», mot du temps. Cimourdain se figurait Gauvain écrasant du pied les ténèbres, cuirassé de lumière, avec une lueur de météore au front, ouvrant les grandes ailes idéales de la justice, de la raison et du progrès, et une épée là la main; ange, mais exterminateur.

Au plus fort de cette rêverie qui était presque une extase, il entendit, par la porte entr’ouverte, qu’on parlait dans la grande salle de l’ambulance, voisine de sa chambre; il reconnut la voix de l’homme. Il écouta. Il y avait un bruit de pas. Des soldats disaient:

— Mon commandant, cet homme-ci est celui qui a tiré sur vous. Pendant qu’on ne le voyait pas, il s’était traîné dans une cave. Nous l’avons trouvé. Le voilà.

Alors Cimourdain entendit ce dialogue entre Gauvain et l’homme:

— Tu es blessé?

— Je me porte assez bien pour être fusillé.

— Mettez cet homme dans un lit. Pansez-le, soignez-le, guérissez-le.

— Je veux mourir.

— Tu vivras. Tu as voulu me tuer au nom du roi; je te fais grâce au nom de la république.

Une ombre passa sur le front de Cimourdain. Il eut comme un réveil en sursaut, et il murmura avec une sorte d’accablement sinistre:

— En effet, c’est un clément.

VI. SEIN GUÉRI, CŒUR SAIGNANT

Une balafre se guérit vite; mais il y avait quelque part quelqu’un de plus gravement blessé que Cimourdain. C’était la femme fusillée que le mendiant Tellmarch avait ramassée dans la grande mare de sang de la ferme d’Herbe-en-Pail.

Michelle Fléchard était plus en danger encore que Tellmarch ne l’avait cru: au trou qu’elle avait au-dessus du sein correspondait un trou dans l’omoplate; en même temps qu’une balle lui cassait la clavicule, une autre balle lui traversait l’épaule; mais, comme le poumon n’avait pas été touché, elle put guérir. Tellmarch était un «philosophe», mot de paysans qui signifie un peu médecin, un peu chirurgien et un peu sorcier. Il soigna la blessée dans sa tanière de bête sur son grabat de varech, avec ces choses mystérieuses qu’on appelle des «simples», et, grâce à lui, elle vécut.

La clavicule se ressouda, les trous de la poitrine et de l’épaule se fermèrent; après quelques semaines, la blessée fut convalescente.

Un matin, elle put sortir du carnichot, appuyée sur Tellmarch; elle alla s’asseoir sous les arbres au soleil. Tellmarch savait d’elle peu de chose, les plaies de poitrine exigent le silence, et, pendant la quasi-agonie qui avait précédé sa guérison, elle avait à peine dit quelques paroles. Quand elle voulait parler, Tellmarch la faisait taire: mais elle avait une rêverie opiniâtre, et Tellmarch observait dans ses yeux une sombre allée et venue de pensées poignantes. Ce matin-là elle était forte, elle pouvait presque marcher seule; une cure, c’est une paternité, et Tellmarch la regardait, heureux. Ce bon vieux homme se mit à sourire. Il lui parla.

— Eh bien, nous sommes debout. Nous n’avons plus de plaie.

— Qu’au coeur, dit-elle.

Et elle reprit:

— Alors vous ne savez pas du tout où ils sont?

— Qui ça? demanda Tellmarch.

— Mes enfants.

Cet «alors» exprimait tout un monde de pensées; cela signifiait: «puisque vous ne m’en parlez pas, puisque depuis tant de jours vous êtes près de moi sans m’en ouvrir la bouche, puisque vous me faites taire chaque fois que je veux rompre le silence, puisque vous semblez craindre que je n’en parle, c’est que vous n’avez rien à m’en dire.» Souvent dans la fièvre, dans l’égarement, dans le délire, elle avait appelé ses enfants, et elle avait bien vu, car le délire fait ses remarques, que le vieux homme ne lui répondait pas.

C’est en effet Tellmarch ne savait que lui dire. Ce n’est pas aisé de parler à une mère de ses enfants perdus. Et puis, que savait-il? rien. Il savait qu’une mère avait été fusillée, que cette mère avait été trouvée à terre par lui, que lorsqu’il l’avait ramassée, c’était à peu près un cadavre, que ce cadavre avait trois enfants, et que le marquis de Lantenac, après avoir fait fusiller la mère, avait emmené les enfants.

Toutes ses informations s’arrêtaient là. Qu’est-ce que ces enfants étaient devenus? Etaient-ils même encore vivants? Il savait, pour s’en être informé, qu’il y avait deux garçons et une petite fille, à peine sevrée. Rien de plus. Il se faisait sur ce groupe infortuné une foule de questions, mais il n’y pouvait répondre. Les gens du pays qu’il avait interrogés s’étaient bornés à hocher la tête. M. de Lantenac était un homme dont on ne causait pas volontiers.

On ne parlait pas volontiers de Lantenac et on ne parlait pas volontiers à Tellmarch. Les paysans ont un genre de soupçon à eux. Ils n’aimaient pas Tellmarch. Tellmarch-le-Caimand était un homme inquiétant. Qu’avait-il à regarder toujours le ciel? que faisait-il, et à quoi pensait-il dans ses longues heures d’immobilité? Certes, il était étrange. Dans ce pays en pleine guerre, en pleine déflagration, en pleine combustion, où tous les hommes n’avaient qu’une affaire, la dévastation, et qu’un travail, le carnage, où c’était à qui brûlerait une maison, égorgerait une famille, massacrerait un poste, saccagerait un village, où l’on ne songeait qu’à se tendre des embuscades, qu’à s’attirer dans des pièges, et qu’à s’entre-tuer les uns les autres, ce solitaire, absorbé dans la nature, comme submergé dans la paix immense des choses, cueillant des herbes et des plantes, uniquement occupé des fleurs, des oiseaux et des étoiles, était évidemment dangereux. Visiblement, il n’avait pas sa raison; il ne s’embusquait derrière aucun buisson, il ne tirait aucun coup de fusil à personne. De là une certaine crainte autour de lui.

— Cet homme est fou, disaient les passants.

Tellmarch était plus qu’un homme isolé, c’était un homme évité.

On ne lui faisait pas de questions, et on ne lui faisait guère de réponses. Il n’avait donc pu se renseigner autant qu’il l’aurait voulu. La guerre s’était répandue ailleurs, on était allé se battre plus loin, le marquis de Lantenac avait disparu de l’horizon, et dans l’état d’esprit où était Tellmarch, pour qu’il s’aperçût de la guerre, il fallait qu’elle mît le pied sur lui.

Après ce mot, — *mes enfants,* — Tellmarch avait cessé de sourire, et la mère s’était mise à penser. Que se passait-il dans cette âme? Elle était comme au fond d’un gouffre. Brusquement elle regarda Tellmarch, et cria de nouveau et presque avec un accent de colère: Mes enfants!

Tellmarch baissa la tête comme un coupable.

Il songeait à ce marquis de Lantenac qui certes ne pensait pas à lui, et qui, probablement, ne savait même plus qu’il existât. Il s’en rendait compte, il se disait: Un seigneur, quand c’est dans le danger, ça vous connaît; quand c’est dehors, ça ne vous connaît plus.

Et il se demandait: — Mais alors pourquoi ai-je sauvé ce seigneur?

Et il se répondait: — Parce que c’est un homme.

Il fut là-dessus quelque temps pensif, et il reprit en lui-même:

— En suis-je bien sûr?

Et il se répéta son mot amer: — Si j’avais su!

Toute cette aventure l’accablait; car dans ce qu’il avait fait il voyait une sorte d’énigme. Il méditait douloureusement.

Une bonne action peut donc être une mauvaise action. Qui sauve le loup tue les brebis. Qui raccommode l’aile du vautour est responsable de sa griffe.

Il se sentait en effet coupable. La colère inconsciente de cette mère avait raison.

Pourtant, avoir sauvé cette mère le consolait d’avoir sauvé ce marquis.

Mais les enfants?

La mère aussi songeait. Ces deux pensées se côtoyaient et, sans se le dire, se rencontraient peut-être, dans les ténèbres de la rêverie.

Cependant son regard, au fond duquel était la nuit, se fixa de nouveau sur

Tellmarch.

— Ça ne peut pourtant pas se passer comme ça, dit-elle.

— Chut! fit Tellmarch, et il mit le doigt sur sa bouche.

Elle poursuivit:

— Vous avez eu tort de ne sauver, et je vous en veux. J’aimerais mieux être morte, parce que je suis sûre que je les verrais. Je saurais où ils sont. Ils ne me verraient pas, mais je serais près d’eux. Une morte, ça doit pouvoir protéger.

Il lui prit le bras et lui tâta le pouls.

— Calmez-vous, vous vous redonnez la fièvre.

Elle lui demanda presque durement:

— Quand pourrai-je m’en aller?

— Vous en aller?

— Oui. Marcher.

— Jamais, si vous n’êtes pas raisonnable. Demain, si vous êtes sage.

— Qu’appelez-vous être sage?

— Avoir confiance en Dieu.

— Dieu! où m’a-t-il mis mes enfants?

Elle était comme égarée. Sa voix devint très douce.

— Vous comprenez, lui dit-elle, je ne peux pas rester comme cela. Vous n’avez pas eu d’enfants, moi j’en ai eu. Cela fait une différence. On ne peut pas juger d’une chose quand on ne sait pas ce que c’est. Vous n’avez pas eu d’enfants, n’est-ce pas?

— Non, répondit Tellmarch.

— Moi, je n’ai eu que ça. Sans mes enfants, est-ce que je suis? Je voudrais qu’on m’expliquât pourquoi je n’ai pas mes enfants. Je sens bien qu’il se passe quelque chose, puisque je ne comprends pas. Ou a tué mon mari, on m’a fusillée, mais c’est égal, je ne comprends pas.

— Allons, dit Tellmarch, voilà que la fièvre vous reprend.

Ne parlez plus.

Elle le regarda, et se tut.

A partir de ce jour, elle ne parla plus.

Tellmarch fut obéi plus qu’il ne voulait. Elle passait de longues heures accroupie au pied du vieux mur, stupéfaite. Elle songeait et se taisait. Le silence offre ou ne sait quel abri aux âmes simples qui ont subi l’approfondissement sinistre de la douleur. Elle semblait renoncer à comprendre. A un certain degré le désespoir est inintelligible au désespéré.

Tellmarch l’examinait, ému. En présence de cette souffrance, ce vieux homme avait des pensées de femme. — Oh oui, se disait-il, ses lèvres ne parlent pas, mais ses yeux parlent, je vois bien ce qu’elle a, une idée fixe. Avoir été mère, et ne plus l’être! avoir été nourrice, et ne plus l’être! Elle ne peut pas se résigner. Elle pense à la toute petite qu’elle allaitait il n’y a pas longtemps. Elle y pense, elle y pense, elle y pense. Au fait, ce doit être si charmant de sentir une petite bouche rose qui vous tire votre âme de dedans le corps et qui avec votre vie à vous se fait une vie à elle!

Il se taisait de son côté, comprenant, devant un tel accablement, l’impuissance de la parole. Le silence d’une idée fixe est terrible. Et comment faire entendre raison à l’idée fixe d’une mère? La maternité est sans issue; on ne discute pas avec elle. Ce qui fait qu’une mère est sublime, c’est que c’est une espèce de bête. L’instinct maternel est divinement animal. La mère n’est plus femme, elle est femelle. Les enfants sont des petits.

De là dans la mère quelque chose d’inférieur et de supérieur au raisonnement. Une mère a un flair. L’immense volonté ténébreuse de la création est en elle, et la mène. Aveuglement plein de clairvoyance.

Tellmarch maintenant voulait faire parler cette malheureuse; il n’y réussissait pas. Une fois, il lui dit:

— Par malheur, je suis vieux, et je ne marche plus. J’ai plus vite trouvé le bout de ma force que le bout de mon chemin. Après un quart d’heure, mes jambes refusent, et il faut que je m’arrête; sans quoi je pourrais vous accompagner. Au fait, c’est peut-être un bien que je ne puisse pas. Je serais pour vous plus dangereux qu’utile: on me tolère ici; mais je suis suspect aux bleus comme paysan et aux paysans comme sorcier.

Il attendit ce quelle répondrait. Elle ne leva même pas les yeux.

Une idée fixe aboutit à la folie ou à l’héroïsme. Mais de quel héroïsme peut être capable une pauvre paysanne? d’aucun. Elle peut être mère, et voilà tout. Chaque jour elle s’enfonçait davantage dans sa rêverie. Tellmarch l’observait.

Il chercha à l’occuper; il lui apporta du fil, des aiguilles, un dé: et en effet, ce qui fit plaisir au pauvre caimand, elle se mit à coudre; elle songeait, mais elle travaillait, signe de santé; ses forces lui revenaient peu à peu; elle raccommoda son linge, ses vêtements, ses souliers; mais sa prunelle restait vitreuse. Tout en cousant elle chantait à demi-voix des chansons obscures. Elle murmurait des noms, probablement des noms d’enfants, pas assez distinctement pour que Tellmarch les entendît. Elle s’interrompait et écoutait les oiseaux, comme s’ils avaient des nouvelles à lui donner. Elle regardait le temps qu’il faisait. Ses lèvres remuaient. Elle se parlait bas. Elle fit un sac, et elle le remplit de châtaignes. Un matin Tellmarch la vit qui se mettait en marche, l’il fixé au hasard sur les profondeurs de la forêt.

— Où allez-vous? lui demanda-t-il.

Elle répondit:

— Je vais les chercher.

Il n’essaya pas de la retenir.

VII. LES DEUX POLES DU VRAI

Au bout de quelques semaines pleines de tous les va-et-vient de la guerre civile, il n'était bruit dans le pays de Fougères que de deux hommes dont l'un était l'opposé de l'autre, et qui cependant faisaient la même oeuvre, c'est-à-dire combattaient côte à côte le grand combat révolutionnaire.

Le sauvage duel vendéen continuait, mais la Vendée perdait du terrain. Dans l'Ille-et-Vilaine en particulier, grâce au jeune commandant qui, à Dol, avait si à propos riposté à l'audace des six mille royalistes par l'audace des quinze cents patriotes, l'insurrection était, sinon éteinte, du moins très amoindrie et très circonscrite. Plusieurs coups heureux avaient suivi celui-là, et de ces succès multipliés était née une situation nouvelle.

Les choses avaient changé de face, mais une singulière complication était survenue.

Dans toute cette partie de la Vendée, la république avait le dessus, ceci était hors de doute; mais quelle république? Dans le triomphe qui s'ébauchait, deux formes de la république étaient en présence, la république de la terreur et la république de la clémence, l'une voulant vaincre par la rigueur et l'autre par la douceur. Laquelle prévaudrait? Ces deux formes, la forme conciliante et la forme implacable, étaient représentées par deux hommes ayant chacun son influence et son autorité, l'un commandant militaire, l'autre délégué civil; lequel de ces deux hommes l'emporterait? De ces deux hommes, l'un, le délégué, avait de redoutables points d'appui; il était arrivé apportant la menaçante consigne de la commune de Paris aux bataillons de Santerre: «*Pas de grâce, pas de quartier!*» Il avait, pour tout soumettre à son autorité, le décret de la Convention portant «peine de mort contre quiconque mettrait en liberté et ferait évader un chef rebelle prisonnier», de pleins pouvoirs émanés du comité de salut public, et une injonction de lui obéir, à lui délégué, signée: ROBESPIERRE, DANTON, MARAT. L'autre, le soldat, n'avait pour lui que cette force, la pitié.

Il n'avait pour lui que son bras, qui battait les ennemis, et son coeur, qui leur faisait grâce. Vainqueur, il se croyait le droit d'épargner les vaincus.

De là un conflit latent, mais profond, entre ces deux hommes. Ils étaient tous les deux dans des nuages différents, tous les deux combattant la rébellion, et chacun ayant sa foudre à lui, l'un la victoire, l'autre la terreur.

Dans tout le Bocage on ne parlait que d’eux; et, ce qui ajoutait à l’anxiété des regards fixés sur eux de toutes parts, c’est que ces deux hommes, si absolument opposés, étaient en même temps étroitement unis. Ces deux antagonistes étaient deux amis. Jamais sympathie plus haute et plus profonde n’avait rapproché deux coeurs; le farouche avait sauvé la vie au débonnaire, et il en avait la balafre au visage. Ces deux hommes incarnaient, l’un la mort, l’autre la vie; l’un était le principe terrible, l’autre le principe pacifique, et ils s’aimaient. Problème étrange. Qu’on se figure Oreste miséricordieux et Pylade inclément. Qu’on se figure Arimane frère d’Ormus.

Ajoutons que celui des deux qu’on appelait «le féroce» était en même temps le plus fraternel des hommes; il pansait les blessés, soignait les malades, passait ses jours et ses nuits dans les ambulances et les hôpitaux, s’attendrissait sur des enfants pieds nus, n’avait rien à lui, donnait tout aux pauvres. Quand on se battait, il y allait; il marchait à la tête des colonnes et au plus fort du combat, armé, car il avait à sa ceinture un sabre et deux pistolets, et désarmé, car jamais on ne l’avait vu tirer son sabre et toucher à ses pistolets. Il affrontait les coups et n’en rendait pas. On disait qu’il avait été prêtre.

L’un de ces hommes était Gauvain, l’autre était Cimourdain.

L’amitié était entre les deux hommes, mais la haine était entre les deux principes; c’était comme une âme coupée en deux, et partagée; Gauvain, en effet, avait reçu une moitié de l’âme de Cimourdain, mais la moitié douce. Il semblait que Gauvain avait eu le rayon blanc et que Cimourdain avait gardé pour lui ce qu’on pourrait appeler le rayon noir. De là un désaccord intime. Cette sourde guerre ne pouvait pas ne point éclater. Un matin la bataille commença.

Cimourdain dit à Gauvain:

— Où en sommes-nous?

Gauvain répondit:

— Vous le savez aussi bien que moi. J’ai dispersé les bandes de Lantenac.

Il n’a plus avec lui que quelques hommes. Le voilà acculé à la forêt de Fougères. Dans huit jours, il sera cerné.

— Et dans quinze jours?

— Il sera pris.

— Et puis?

— Vous avez lu mon affiche?

— Oui. Eh bien?

— Il sera fusillé.

— Encore de la clémence. Il faut qu’il soit guillotiné.

— Moi, dit, Gauvain, je suis pour la mort militaire.

— Et moi, répliqua Cimourdain, pour la mort révolutionnaire.

Il regarda Gauvain en face et lui dit:

— Pourquoi as-tu fait mettre en liberté ces religieuses du couvent de Saint-Marc-le-Blanc?

— Je ne fais pas la guerre aux femmes, répondit Gauvain.

— Ces femmes-là haïssent le peuple. Et, pour la haine une femme vaut dix hommes. Pourquoi as-tu refusé d’envoyer au tribunal révolutionnaire tout ce troupeau de vieux prêtres fanatiques pris à Louvigné?

— Je ne fais pas la guerre aux vieillards.

— Un vieux prêtre est pire qu’un jeune. La rébellion est plus dangereuse, prêchée par les cheveux blancs. On a foi dans les rides. Pas de fausse pitié, Gauvain. Les régicides sont les libérateurs. Aie l’oeil fixé sur la tour du Temple.

— La tour du Temple. J’en ferais sortir le dauphin. Je ne fais pas la guerre aux enfants.

L’oeil de Cimourdain devint sévère.

— Gauvain, sache qu’il faut faire la guerre à la femme quand elle se nomme Marie-Antoinette, au vieillard quand il se nomme Pie VI, pape, et à l’enfant quand il se nomme Louis Capet.

— Mon maître, je ne suis pas un homme politique.

— Tâche de ne pas être un homme dangereux. Pourquoi, à l’attaque du poste de Cossé, quand le rebelle Jean Treton, acculé et perdu, s’est rué seul, le sabre au poing, contre toute ta colonne, as-tu crié: *Ouvrez les rangs. Laissez passer?*

— Parce qu’on ne se met pas à quinze cents pour tuer un homme.

— Pourquoi, à la Cailleterie d’Astillé, quand tu as vu que tes soldats allaient tuer le Vendéen Joseph Bézier, qui était blessé et qui se traînait, as-tu crié: *Allez en avant! J’en fais mon affaire!* et as-tu tiré ton coup de pistolet en l’air?

— Parce qu’on ne tue pas un homme à terre.

— Et tu as eu tort. Tous deux sont aujourd’hui chefs de bande; Joseph Bézier, c’est Moustache, et Jean Treton, c’est Jambe-d’Argent. En sauvant ces deux hommes, tu as donné deux ennemis à la république.

— Certes, je voudrais lui faire des amis, et non lui donner des ennemis.

— Pourquoi, après la victoire de Landéan, n’as-tu pas fait fusiller tes trois cents paysans prisonniers?

— Parce que, Bonchamp ayant fait grâce aux prisonniers républicains, j’ai voulu qu’il fût dit que la république faisait grâce aux prisonniers royalistes.

— Mais alors, si tu prends Lantenac, tu lui feras grâce?

— Non.

— Pourquoi? Puisque tu as fait grâce aux trois cents paysans?

— Les paysans sont des ignorants; Lantenac sait ce qu’il fait.

— Mais Lantenac est ton parent?

— La France est la grande parente.

— Lantenac est un vieillard.

— Lantenac est un étranger. Lantenac n’a pas d’âge. Lantenac appelle les Anglais. Lantenac c’est l’invasion. Lantenac est l’ennemi de la patrie. Le duel entre lui et moi ne peut finir que par sa mort, ou par la mienne.

— Gauvain, souviens-toi de cette parole.

— Elle est dite.

Il y eut un silence, et tous deux se regardèrent.

Et Gauvain reprit:

— Ce sera une date sanglante que cette année 93 où nous sommes.

— Prends garde, s’écria Cimourdain. Les devoirs terribles existent. N’accuse pas qui n’est point accusable. Depuis quand la maladie est-elle la faute du médecin? Oui, ce qui caractérise cette année énorme, c’est d’être sans pitié. Pourquoi? parce qu’elle est la grande année révolutionnaire. Cette année où nous sommes incarne la révolution. La révolution a un ennemi, le vieux monde, et elle est sans pitié pour lui, de même que le chirurgien a un ennemi, la gangrène, et est sans pitié pour elle. La révolution extirpe la royauté dans le roi, l’aristocratie dans le noble, le despotisme dans le soldat, la superstition dans le prêtre, la barbarie dans le juge, en un mot, tout ce qui est la tyrannie dans tout ce qui est le tyran. L’opération est effrayante, la révolution la fait d’une main sûre. Quant à la quantité de chair saine qu’elle sacrifie, demande à Boerhave ce qu’il en pense. Quelle tumeur à couper n’entraîne une perte de sang? Quel incendie à éteindre n’exige la part du feu? Ces nécessités redoutables sont la condition même du succès. Un chirurgien ressemble à un boucher; un guérisseur peut faire l’effet d’un bourreau. La révolution se dévoue à son uvre fatale. Elle mutile, mais elle sauve. Quoi! vous lui demandez grâce pour le virus! vous voulez qu’elle soit clémente pour ce qui est vénéneux! Elle n’écoute pas. Elle tient le passé, elle l’achèvera. Elle fait à la civilisation une incision profonde, d’où sortira la santé du genre humain. Vous souffrez? sans doute. Combien de temps cela durera-t-il? Le temps de l’opération. Ensuite vous vivrez. La révolution ampute le monde. De là cette hémorragie, 93.

— Le chirurgien est calme, dit Gauvain, et les hommes que je vois sont violents.

— La révolution, répliqua Cimourdain, veut pour l’aider des ouvriers farouches. Elle repousse toute main qui tremble. Elle n’a foi qu’aux inexorables. Danton, c’est le terrible, Robespierre, c’est l’inflexible, Saint-Just, c’est l’irréductible, Marat, c’est l’implacable. Prends-y garde, Gauvain. Ces noms-là sont nécessaires. Ils valent pour nous des armées. Ils terrifieront l’Europe.

— Et peut-être aussi l’avenir, dit Gauvain.

Il s’arrêta et repartit:

— Du reste, mon maître, vous faites erreur, je n’accuse personne. Selon moi, le vrai point de vue de la révolution, c’est l’irresponsabilité. Personne n’est innocent, personne n’est coupable. Louis XVI, c’est un mouton jeté parmi des lions. Il veut fuir, il veut se sauver, il cherche à se défendre; il mordrait, s’il pouvait. Mais n’est pas lion qui veut. Sa velléité passe pour crime. Ce mouton en colère montre les dents. Le traître! disent les lions. Et ils le mangent. Cela fait, ils se battent entre eux.

— Le mouton est une bête.

— Et les lions, que sont-ils?

Cette réplique fit songer Cimourdain. Il releva la tête et dit:

— Ces lions-là sont des consciences. Ces lions-là sont des idées. Ces lions-là sont des principes.

— Ils font la terreur.

— Un jour, la révolution sera la justification de la terreur.

— Craignez que la terreur ne soit la calomnie de la révolution.

Et Gauvain reprit:

— Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité, ce sont des dogmes de paix et d’harmonie. Pourquoi leur donner un aspect effrayant? Que voulons-nous? conquérir les peuples à la république universelle. Eh bien, ne leur faisons pas peur. A quoi bon l’intimidation? Pas plus que les oiseaux, les peuples ne sont attirés par l’épouvantail. Il ne faut pas faire le mal pour faire le bien. On ne renverse pas le trône pour laisser l’échafaud debout. Mort aux rois, et vie aux nations. Abattons les couronnes, épargnons les têtes. La révolution, c’est la concorde, et non l’effroi. Les idées douces sont mal servies par les hommes incléments. Amnistie est pour moi le plus beau mot de la langue humaine. Je ne veux verser de sang qu’en risquant le mien. Du reste je ne sais que combattre, et je ne suis qu’un soldat. Mais si l’on ne peut pardonner, cela ne vaut pas la peine de vaincre. Soyons pendant la bataille les ennemis de nos ennemis, et après la victoire leurs frères.

— Prends garde! répéta Cimourdain pour la troisième fois. Gauvain, tu es pour moi plus que mon fils, prends garde!

Et il ajouta, pensif:

— Dans des temps comme les nôtres, la pitié peut être une des formes de la trahison.

En entendant parler ces deux hommes, on eût cru entendre le dialogue de l’épée et de la hache.

VIII. DOLOROSA

Cependant la mère cherchait ses petits.

Elle allait devant elle. Comment vivait-elle? Impossible de le dire. Elle ne le savait pas elle-même. Elle marcha des jours et des nuits; elle mendia, elle mangea de l’herbe, elle coucha à terre, elle dormit en plein air, dans les broussailles, sous les étoiles, quelquefois sous la pluie et la bise.

Elle rôdait de village en village, de métairie en métairie, s’informant. Elle s’arrêtait aux seuils. Sa robe était en haillons. Quelquefois on l’accueillait, quelquefois on la chassait. Quand elle ne pouvait entrer dans les maisons, elle allait dans les bois.

Elle ne connaissait pas le pays, elle ignorait tout, excepté Siscoignard et la paroisse d’Azé, elle n’avait point d’itinéraire, elle revenait sur ses pas, recommençait une route déjà parcourue, faisait du chemin inutile. Elle suivait tantôt le pavé, tantôt l’ornière d’une charrette, tantôt les sentiers dans les taillis. A cette vie au hasard, elle avait usé ses misérables vêtements. Elle avait marché d’abord avec ses souliers, puis avec ses pieds nus, puis avec ses pieds sanglants.

Elle allait à travers la guerre, à travers les coups de fusil, sans rien entendre, sans rien voir, sans rien éviter, cherchant ses enfants. Tout étant en révolte, il n’y avait plus de gendarmes, plus de maires, plus d’autorité. Elle n’avait affaire qu’aux passants.

Elle leur parlait. Elle demandait:

— Avez-vous vu quelque part trois petits enfants?

Les passants levaient la tête.

— Deux garçons et une fille, disait-elle.

Elle continuait:

— René-Jean, Gros-Alain, Georgette? Vous n’avez pas vu ça?

Elle poursuivait:

— L’aîné a quatre ans et demi, la petite a vingt mois.

Elle ajoutait:

— Savez-vous où ils sont? on me les a pris.

On la regardait et c’était tout.

Voyant qu’on ne la comprenait pas, elle disait:

— C’est qu’ils sont à moi. Voilà pourquoi.

Les gens passaient leur chemin. Alors elle s'arrêtait et ne disait plus rien, et se déchirait le sein avec les ongles.

Un jour pourtant un paysan l'écouta. Le bonhomme se mit à réfléchir.

— Attendez donc, dit-il. Trois enfants?

— Oui.

— Deux garçons?…

— Et une fille.

— C'est ça que vous cherchez?

— Oui.

— J'ai ouï parler d'un seigneur qui avait pris trois petits enfants et qui les avait avec lui.

— Où est cet homme? cria-t-elle. Où sont-ils?

Le paysan répondit:

— Allez à la Tourgue.

— Est-ce que c'est là que je trouverai mes enfants?

— Peut-être bien que oui.

— Vous dites?…

— La Tourgue.

— Qu'est-ce que c'est que la Tourgue?

— C'est un endroit.

— Est-ce un village? un château? une métairie?

— Je n'y suis jamais allé.

— Est-ce loin?

— Ce n'est pas près.

— De quel côté?

— Du côté de Fougères.

— Par où y va-t-on?

— Vous êtes à Vantortes, dit le paysan, vous laisserez Ernée à gauche et Coxelles à droite, vous passerez par Lorchamp et vous traverserez le Leroux.

Et le paysan leva sa main vers l'occident.

— Toujours droit devant vous en allant du côté où le soleil se couche.

Avant que le paysan eût baissé son bras, elle était en marche.

Le paysan lui cria:

— Mais prenez garde. On se bat par là.

Elle ne se retourna point pour lui répondre, et continua d'aller en avant.

IX. UNE BASTILLE DE PROVINCE

i LA TOURGUE

Le voyageeur qui, il y a quarante ans, entré dans la forêt de Fougères du côté de Laignelet, en ressortait du côté de Parigné, faisait, sur la lisière de cette profonde futaie, une rencontre sinistre. En débouchant du hallier, il avait brusquement devant lui la Tourgue.

Non la Tourgue vivante, mais la Tourgue morte. La Tourgue lézardée, sabordée, balafrée, démantelée. La ruine est à l'édifice ce que le fantôme est à l'homme. Pas de plus lugubre vision que la Tourgue. Ce qu'on avait sous les yeux, c'était une haute tour ronde, toute seule au coin du bois comme un malfaiteur. Cette tour, droite sur un bloc de roche à pic, avait presque l'aspect romain tant elle était correcte et solide, et tant dans cette masse robuste l'idée de la puissance était mêlée à l'idée de la chute. Romaine, elle l'était même un peu, car elle était romane. Commencée au neuvième siècle, elle avait été achevée au douzième, après la troisième croisade. Les impostes à oreillons de ses baies disaient son âge. On approchait, on gravissait l'escarpement, on apercevait une brèche, on se risquait à entrer, on était dedans, c'était vide. C'était quelque chose comme l'intérieur d'un clairon de pierre posé debout sur le sol. Du haut en bas, aucun diaphragme; pas de toit, pas de plafonds, pas de planchers, des arrachements de voûtes et de cheminées, des embrasures à fauconneaux, à des hauteurs diverses, des cordons de corbeaux de granit et quelques poutres transversales marquant les étages; sur les poutres les fientes des oiseaux de nuit, la muraille colossale, quinze pieds d'épaisseur à la base et douze au sommet, çà et là des crevasses et des trous qui avaient été des portes, par où l'on entrevoyait des escaliers dans l'intérieur ténébreux du mur. Le passant qui pénétrait là le soir entendait crier les hulottes, les tette-chèvres, les bihoreaux et les crapauds-volants, et voyait sous ses pieds des ronces, des pierres, des reptiles, et sur sa tête, à travers une rondeur noire qui était le haut de la tour et qui semblait la bouche d'un puits énorme, les étoiles.

C'était la tradition du pays qu'aux étages supérieurs de cette tour il y avait des portes secrètes faites, comme les portes des tombeaux des rois de Juda, d'une grosse pierre tournant sur pivot, s'ouvrant, puis se refermant, et s'effaçant dans la muraille; mode architecturale rapportée des croisades avec l'ogive. Quand ces portes étaient closes, il était impossible de les retrouver, tant elles étaient bien mêlées aux autres pierres du mur. On voit encore aujourd’hui de ces portes-là dans les mystérieuses cités de l’Anti-Liban, échappées au tremblement des douze villes sous Tibère.

ii. LA BRÈCHE

La brèche par où l’on entrait dans la ruine était une trouée de mine. Pour un connaisseur, familier avec Errard, Sardi et Pagan, cette mine avait été savamment faite. La chambre à feu en bonnet de prêtre était proportionnée à la puissance du donjon qu’elle avait à éventrer. Elle avait dû contenir au moins deux quintaux de poudre. On y arrivait par un canal serpentant qui vaut mieux que le canal droit; l’écroulement produit par la mine montrait à nu dans le déchirement de la pierre le saucisson, qui avait le diamètre voulu d’un oeuf de poule. L’explosion avait fait à la muraille une blessure profonde par où les assiégeants avaient dû pouvoir entrer. Cette tour avait évidemment soutenu, à diverses époques, de vrais sièges en règle; elle était criblée de mitrailles; et ces mitrailles n’étaient pas toutes du même temps; chaque projectile a sa façon de marquer un rempart; et tous avaient laissé à ce donjon leur balafre, depuis les boulets de pierre du quatorzième siècle jusqu’aux boulets de fer du dix-huitième.

La brèche donnait entrée dans ce qui avait dû être le rez-de-chaussée. Vis-à-vis de la brèche, dans le mur de la tour, s’ouvrait le guichet d’une crypte taillée dans le roc et se prolongeant dans les fondations de la tour jusque sous la salle du rez-de-chaussée.

Cette crypte, aux trois quarts comblée, a été déblayée en 1855 par les soins de M. Auguste Le Prévost, l’antiquaire de Bernay.

iii. L’OUBLIETTE

Cette crypte était l’oubliette. Tout donjon avait la sienne. Cette crypte, comme beaucoup de caves pénales des mêmes époques, avait deux étages. Le premier étage, où l’on pénétrait par le guichet, était une chambre voûtée assez vaste, de plain-pied avec la salle du rez-de-chaussée. On voyait sur la paroi de cette chambre deux sillons parallèles et verticaux qui allaient d’un mur à l’autre en passant par la voûte où ils étaient profondément empreints, et qui donnaient l’idée de deux ornières. C’étaient deux ornières en effet. Ces deux sillons avaient été creusés par deux roues. Jadis, aux temps féodaux, c’était dans cette chambre que se faisait l’écartèlement, par un procédé moins tapageur que les quatre chevaux. Il y avait là deux roues, si fortes et si grandes qu’elles touchaient les murs et la voûte. On attachait à chacune de ces roues un bras et une jambe du patient, puis on faisait tourner les deux roues en sens inverse, ce qui arrachait l’homme. Il fallait de l’effort; de là les ornières creusées dans la pierre que les roues effleuraient. On peut voir encore aujourd’hui une chambre de ce genre à Vianden.

Au-dessous de cette chambre il y en avait une autre. C’était l’oubliette véritable. On n’y entrait point par une porte, on y pénétrait par un trou; le patient, nu, était descendu, au moyen d’une corde sous les aisselles, dans la chambre d’en bas par un soupirail pratiqué au milieu du dallage de la chambre d’en haut. S’il s’obstinait à vivre, on lui jetait sa nourriture par ce trou. On voit encore aujourd’hui un trou de ce genre à Bouillon.

Par ce trou il venait du vent. La chambre d’en bas, creusée sous la salle du rez-de-chaussée, était plutôt un puits qu’une chambre. Elle aboutissait à de l’eau, et un souffle glacial l’emplissait. Ce vent qui faisait mourir le prisonnier d’en bas faisait vivre le prisonnier d’en haut. Il rendait la prison respirable. Le prisonnier d’en haut, à tâtons sous sa voûte, ne recevait d’air que par ce trou. Du reste, qui y entrait, ou qui y tombait, n’en sortait plus. C’était au prisonnier à s’en garer dans l’obscurité. Un faux pas pouvait du patient d’en haut faire le patient d’en bas. Cela le regardait. S’il tenait à la vie, ce trou était son danger; s’il s’ennuyait, ce trou était sa ressource. L’étage supérieur était le cachot, l’étage inférieur était le tombeau. Superposition ressemblante à la société d’alors.

C’est là ce que nos aïeux appelaient «un cul-de-basse-fosse». La chose ayant disparu, le nom pour nous n’a plus de sens. Grâce à la révolution, nous entendons prononcer ces mots-là avec indifférence.

Du dehors de la tour, au-dessus de la brèche qui en était, il y a quarante ans, l’entrée unique, on apercevait une embrasure plus large que les autres meurtrières, à laquelle pendait un grillage de fer descellé et défoncé.

iv. LE PONT-CHATELET

A cette tour, et du côté opposé à la brèche, se rattachait un pont de pierre de trois arches peu endommagées. Le pont avait porté un corps de logis dont il restait quelques tronçons. Ce corps de logis, où étaient visibles les marques d’un incendie, n’avait plus que sa charpente noircie, sorte d’ossature à travers laquelle passait le jour, et qui se dressait auprès de la tour, comme un squelette à côté d’un fantôme.

Cette ruine est aujourd’hui tout à fait démolie, et il n’en reste aucune trace. Ce qu’ont fait beaucoup de siècles et beaucoup de rois, il suffit d’un jour et d’un paysan pour le défaire.

La Tourgue, abréviation paysanne, signifie la Tour-Gauvain, de même que *la Jupelle* signifie la Jupellière, et que ce nom d'un bossu chef de bande, *Pinson-le-Tort*, signifie Pinson-le-Tortu.

La Tourgue, qui il y a quarante ans était une ruine et qui aujourd'hui est une ombre, était en 1793 une forteresse. C'était la vieille bastille des Gauvain, gardant à l'occident l'entrée de la forêt de Fougères, forêt qui, elle-même, est à peine un bois maintenant.

On avait construit cette citadelle sur un de ces gros blocs de schiste qui abondent entre Mayenne et Dinan, et qui sont partout épars parmi les halliers et les bruyères, comme si les titans s'étaient jeté des pavés à la tête.

La tour était toute la forteresse; sous la tour le rocher, au pied du rocher un de ces cours d'eau que le mois de janvier change en torrents et que le mois de juin met à sec.

Simplifiée à ce point, cette forteresse était, au moyen-âge, à peu près imprenable. Le pont l'affaiblissait. Les Gauvain gothiques l'avaient bâtie sans pont. On y abordait par une de ces passerelles branlantes qu'un coup de hache suffisait à rompre. Tant que les Gauvain furent vicomtes, elle leur plut ainsi, et ils s'en contentèrent; mais quand ils furent marquis, et quand ils quittèrent la caverne pour la cour, ils jetèrent trois arches sur le torrent, et ils se firent accessibles du côté de la plaine de même qu'ils s'étaient faits accessibles du côté du roi. Les marquis au dix-septième siècle et les marquises au dix-huitième, ne tenaient plus à être imprenables. Copier Versailles remplaça ceci: continuer les aïeux.

En face de la tour, du côté occidental, il y avait un plateau assez élevé allant aboutir aux plaines; ce plateau venait presque toucher la tour, et n'en était séparé que par un ravin très creux où coulait le cours d'eau qui est un affluent du Couesnon. Le pont, trait d'union entre la forteresse et le plateau, fut fait haut sur piles; et sur ces piles on construisit, comme à Chenonceaux, un édifice en style Mansard, plus logeable que la tour. Mais les moeurs étaient encore très rudes; les seigneurs gardèrent la coutume d'habiter les chambres du donjon pareilles à des cachots. Quant au bâtiment sur le pont, qui était une sorte de petit châtelet, on y pratiqua un long couloir qui servait d'entrée et qu'on appela la salle des gardes; au-dessus de cette salle des gardes, qui était une sorte d'entresol, on mit une bibliothèque, au-dessus de la bibliothèque un grenier. De longues fenêtres à petites vitres en verre de Bohême, des pilastres entre les fenêtres, des médaillons sculptés dans le mur; trois étages; en bas, des pertuisanes Et des mousquets; au milieu, des livres; en haut, des sacs d'avoine; tout Cela était un peu sauvage et fort noble.

La tour à côté était farouche.

Elle dominait cette bâtisse coquette de toute sa hauteur lugubre. De la plate-forme on pouvait foudroyer le pont.

Les deux édifices, l'un abrupt, l'autre poli, se choquaient plus qu'ils ne s'accostaient. Les deux styles n'étaient point d'accord; bien que deux demi-cercles semblent devoir être identiques, rien ne ressemble moins à un plein-cintre roman qu'une archivolte classique. Cette tour digne des forêts était une étrange voisine pour ce pont digne de Versailles. Qu'on se figure Alain Barbe-Torte donnant le bras à Louis XIV. L'ensemble terrifiait. Des deux majestés mêlées sortait on ne sait quoi de féroce.

Au point de vue militaire, le pont, insistons-y, livrait presque la tour. Il l'embellissait et la désarmait; en gagnant de l'ornement elle avait perdu de la force. Le pont la mettait de plain pied avec le plateau. Toujours inexpugnable du côté de la forêt, elle était maintenant vulnérable du côté de la plaine. Autrefois elle commandait le plateau, à présent le plateau la commandait. Un ennemi installé là serait vite maître du pont. La bibliothèque et le grenier étaient pour l'assiégeant, et contre la forteresse. Une bibliothèque et un grenier se ressemblent en ceci que les livres et la paille sont du combustible. Pour un assiégeant qui utilise l'incendie, brûler Homère ou brûler une botte de foin, pourvu que cela brûle, c'est la même chose. Les français l'ont prouvé aux allemands en brûlant la bibliothèque de Heidelberg, et les allemands l'ont prouvé aux français en brûlant la bibliothèque de Strasbourg. Ce pont, ajouté à la Tourgue, était donc stratégiquement une faute; mais au dix-septième siècle, sous Colbert et Louvois, les princes Gauvain, pas plus que les princes de Rohan ou les princes de la Trémoille, ne se croyaient désormais assiégeables. Pourtant les constructeurs du pont avaient pris quelques précautions. Premièrement, ils avaient prévu l'incendie; au-dessous des trois fenêtres du côté aval, ils avaient accroché transversalement, à des crampons qu'on voyait encore il y a un demi-siècle, une forte échelle de sauvetage ayant pour longueur la hauteur des deux premiers étages du pont, hauteur qui dépassait celle de trois étages ordinaires; deuxièmement, ils avaient prévu l'assaut; ils avaient isolé le pont de la tour au moyen d'une lourde et basse porte de fer; cette porte était cintrée; on la fermait avec une grosse clef qui était dans une cachette connue du maître seul, et, une fois fermée, cette porte pouvait défier le bélier, et presque braver le boulet.

Il fallait passer par le pont pour arriver à cette porte, et passer par cette porte pour pénétrer dans la tour. Pas d'autre entrée.

v. LA PORTE DE FER

Le deuxième étage du châtelet du pont, surélevé à cause des piles, correspondait avec le deuxième étage de la tour; c'est à cette hauteur que, pour plus de sûreté, avait été placée la porte de fer.

La porte de fer s'ouvrait du côté du pont sur la bibliothèque et du côté de la tour sur une grande salle voûtée avec pilier au centre. Cette salle, on vient de le dire, était le second étage du donjon. Elle était ronde comme la tour; de longues meurtrières, donnant sur la campagne, l'éclairaient. La muraille, toute sauvage, était nue, et rien n'en cachait les pierres, d'ailleurs très symétriquement ajustées. On arrivait à cette salle par un escalier en colimaçon pratiqué dans la muraille, chose toute simple quand les murs ont quinze pieds d'épaisseur. Au moyen-âge on prenait une ville rue par rue, une rue maison par maison, une maison chambre par chambre. On assiégeait une forteresse étage par étage. La Tourgue était sous ce rapport fort savamment disposée et très revêche et très difficile. On montait d'un étage à l'autre par un escalier en spirale d'un abord malaisé; les portes étaient de biais et n'avaient pas hauteur d'homme, et il fallait baisser la tête pour y passer; or, tête baissée c'est tête assommée; et, à chaque porte, l'assiégé attendait l'assiégeant.

Il y avait au-dessous de la salle ronde à pilier deux chambres pareilles, qui étaient le premier étage et le rez-de-chaussée, et au-dessus trois; sur ces six chambres superposées la tour se fermait par un couvercle de pierre qui était la plate-forme, et où l'on arrivait par une étroite guérite.

Les quinze pieds d'épaisseur de muraille qu'on avait dû percer pour y placer la porte de fer, et au milieu desquels elle était scellée, l'emboîtaient dans une longue voussure; de sorte que la porte, quand elle était fermée, était, tant du côté de la tour que du côté du pont, sous un porche de six ou sept pieds de profondeur; quand elle était ouverte, ces deux porches se confondaient et faisaient la voûte d'entrée.

Sous le porche du côté du pont s'ouvrait dans l'épaisseur du mur le guichet bas d'une vis-de-Saint-Gilles qui menait au couloir du premier étage sous la bibliothèque; c'était encore là une difficulté pour l'assiégeant. Le châtelet sur le pont n'offrait à son extrémité du côté du plateau qu'un mur à pic, et le pont était coupé là. Un pont-levis, appliqué contre une porte basse, le mettait en communication avec le plateau, et ce pont-levis, qui, à cause de la hauteur du plateau, ne s'abaissait jamais qu'en plan incliné, donnait dans le long couloir dit salle des gardes. Une fois maître de ce couloir, l'assiégeant, pour arriver à la porte de fer, était forcé d'enlever de vive force l'escalier en vis-de-Saint-Gilles qui montait au deuxième étage.

vi. LA BIBLIOTHEQUE

Quant à la bibliothèque, c'était une salle oblongue ayant la largeur et la longueur du pont, et une porte unique, la porte de fer. Une fausse porte battante, capitonnée de drap vert, et qu'il suffisait de pousser, masquait à l'intérieur la voussure d'entrée de la tour. Le mur de la bibliothèque était du haut en bas, et du plancher au plafond, revêtu d'armoires vitrées dans le beau goût de menuiserie du dix-septième siècle. Six grandes fenêtres, trois de chaque côté, une au-dessus de chaque arche, éclairaient cette bibliothèque. Par ces fenêtres, du dehors et du haut du plateau, on en voyait l'intérieur. Dans les entre-deux de ces fenêtres se dressaient sur des gaines de chêne sculpté six bustes de marbre, Hermolaüs de Byzance, Athénée, grammairien naucratique, Suidas, Casaubon, Clovis, roi de France, et son chancelier Anachalus, lequel, du reste n'était pas plus chancelier que Clovis n'était roi.

Il y avait dans cette bibliothèque des livres quelconques.

Un est resté célèbre. C'était un vieil in-quarto avec estampes, portant pour titre en grosses lettres SAINT-BARTHÉLEMY, et pour sous-titre *Evangile selon saint Barthélemy, précédé d'une dissertation de Pantoenus, philosophe chrétien, sur la question de savoir si cet évangile doit être réputé apocryphe et si saint Barthélemy est le même que Nathanaél*. Ce livre, considéré comme exemplaire unique, était sur un pupitre au milieu de la bibliothèque. Au dernier siècle, on le venait voir par curiosité.

vii. LE GRENIER

Quant au grenier, qui avait, comme la bibliothèque, la forme oblongue du pont, c'était simplement le dessous de la charpente du toit. Cela faisait une grande halle encombrée de paille et de foin, et éclairée par six mansardes. Pas d'autre ornement qu'une figure de saint Barnabé sculptée sur la porte et au-dessous ce vers:

Barnabus sanctus falcem jubet ire per herbam.

Ainsi une haute et large tour, à six étages, percée çà et là de quelques meurtrières, ayant pour entrée et pour issue unique une porte de fer donnant sur un pont-châtelet fermé par un pont-levis; derrière la tour, la forêt; devant la tour un plateau de bruyères, plus haut que le pont, plus bas que la tour; sous le pont, entre la tour et le plateau, un ravin profond, étroit, plein de broussailles, torrent en hiver, ruisseau au printemps, fossé pierreux l’été, voilà ce que c’était que la Tour-Gauvain, dite la Tourgue.

X. LES OTAGES

Juillet s’écoula, août vint, un souffle héroïque et féroce passait sur la France, deux spectres venaient de traverser l’horizon, Marat un couteau au flanc, Charlotte Corday sans tête, tout devenait formidable. Quant à la Vendée, battue dans la grande stratégie, elle se réfugiait dans la petite, plus redoutable, nous l’avons dit; cette guerre était maintenant une immense bataille, déchiquetée dans les bois; les désastres de la grosse armée, dite catholique et royale, commençaient; un décret envoyait en Vendée l’armée de Mayence; huit mille vendéens étaient morts à Ancenis; les vendéens étaient repoussés de Nantes, débusqués de Montaigu, expulsés de Thouars, chassés de Noirmoutier, culbutés hors de Cholet, de Mortagne et de Saumur; ils évacuaient Parthenay; ils abandonnaient Clisson; ils lâchaient pied à Châtillon; ils perdaient un drapeau à Saint-Hilaire; ils étaient battus à Pornic, aux Sables, à Fontenay, à Doué, au Château-d’Eau, aux Ponts-de-Cé; ils étaient en échec à Luçon, en retraite à la Châtaigneraye, en déroute à la Roche-sur-Yon; mais, d’une part, ils menaçaient la Rochelle, et d’autre part, dans les eaux de Guernesey, une flotte anglaise, aux ordres du général Craig, portant, mêlés aux meilleurs officiers de la marine française, plusieurs régiments anglais, n’attendait qu’un signal du marquis de Lantenac pour débarquer. Ce débarquement pouvait redonner la victoire à la révolte royaliste. Pitt était d’ailleurs un malfaiteur d’état; dans la politique il y a la trahison de même que dans la panoplie il y a le poignard; Pitt poignardait notre pays et trahissait le sien; c’est trahir son pays que de le déshonorer; l’Angleterre, sous lui et par lui, faisait la guerre punique. Elle espionnait, fraudait, mentait. Braconnière et faussaire, rien ne lui répugnait; elle descendait jusqu’aux minuties de la haine. Elle faisait accaparer le suif, qui coûtait cinq francs la livre; on saisissait à Lille, sur un anglais, une lettre de Prigent, agent de Pitt en Vendée, où on lisait ces lignes: «Je vous prie de ne pas épargner l’argent. Nous espérons que les assassinats se feront avec prudence, les prêtres déguisés et les femmes sont les personnes les plus propres à cette opération. Envoyez soixante mille livres à Rouen et cinquante mille livres à Caen.» Cette lettre fut lue par Barère à la Convention le 1er août. A ces perfidies ripostaient les sauvageries de Parrein et plus tard les atrocités de Carrier. Les républicains de Metz et les républicains du Midi demandaient à marcher contre les rebelles. Un décret ordonnait la formation de vingt-quatre compagnies de pionniers pour incendier les haies et les clôtures du Bocage. Crise inouïe. La guerre ne cessait sur un point que pour recommencer sur l’autre. Pas de grâce! pas de prisonniers! était le cri des deux partis. L’histoire était pleine d’une ombre terrible.

Dans ce mois d’août la Tourgue était assiégée.

Un soir, pendant le lever des étoiles, dans le calme d’un crépuscule caniculaire, pas une feuille ne remuant dans la forêt, pas une herbe ne frissonnant dans la plaine, à travers le silence de la nuit tombante, un son de trompe se fit entendre. Ce son de trompe venait du haut de la tour.

A ce son de trompe répondit un coup de clairon qui venait d’en bas.

Au haut de la tour il y avait un homme armé; en bas, dans l’ombre, il y avait un camp.

On distinguait confusément dans l’obscurité autour de la Tour-Gauvain un fourmillement de formes noires. Ce fourmillement était un bivouac. Quelques feux commençaient à s’y allumer sous les arbres de la forêt et parmi les bruyères du plateau, et piquaient çà et là de points lumineux les ténèbres, comme si la terre voulait s’étoiler en même temps que le ciel. Sombres étoiles que celles de la guerre! Le bivouac du côté du plateau se prolongeait jusqu’aux plaines et du côté de la forêt s’enfonçait dans le hallier. La Tourgue était bloquée.

L’étendue du bivouac des assiégeants indiquait une troupe nombreuse.

Le camp serrait la forteresse étroitement, et venait du côté de la tour jusqu’au rocher et du côté du pont jusqu’au ravin.

Il y eut un deuxième bruit de trompe que suivit un deuxième coup de clairon.

Cette trompe interrogeait et ce clairon répondait.

Cette trompe, c’était la tour qui demandait au camp: Peut-on vous parler? et ce clairon, c’était le camp qui répondait: Oui.

A cette époque, les vendéens n’étant pas considérés par la Convention comme belligérants, et défense étant faite par décret d’échanger avec les «brigands» des parlementaires, on suppléait comme on pouvait aux communications que le droit des gens autorise dans la guerre ordinaire et interdit dans la guerre civile. De là, dans l’occasion, une certaine entente entre la trompe paysanne et le clairon militaire. Le premier appel n’était qu’une entrée en matière, le second appel posait la question: Voulez-vous écouter? Si, à ce second appel, le clairon se taisait, refus; si le clairon répondait, consentement. Cela signifiait: Trêve de quelques instants.

Le clairon ayant répondu au deuxième appel, l'homme qui était au haut de la tour parla, et l'on entendit ceci:

« — Hommes qui m'écoutez, je suis Gouge-le-Bruant, surnommé Brise-Bleu, parce que j'ai exterminé beaucoup des vôtres, et surnommé aussi l'Imânus, parce que j'en tuerai encore plus que je n'en ai tué; j'ai eu le doigt coupé d'un coup de sabre sur le canon de mon fusil à l'attaque de Granville, et vous avez fait guillotiner à Laval mon père et ma mère et ma soeur Jacqueline, âgée de dix-huit ans. Voilà ce que je suis.

«Je vous parle au nom de monseigneur le marquis Gauvain de Lantenac, vicomte de Fontenay, prince breton, seigneur des sept forêts, mon maître.

«Sachez d'abord que monseigneur le marquis, avant de s'enfermer dans cette tour où vous le tenez bloqué, a distribué la guerre entre six chefs, ses lieutenants; il a donné à Delière le pays entre la route de Brest et la route d'Entrée; à Treton le pays entre la Roë et Laval; à Jacquet, dit Taillefer, la lisière du Haut-Maine; à Gaulier, dit Grand-Pierre, Château-Gontier; à Lecomte, Craon; Fougères, à monsieur Dubois-Guy; et toute la Mayenne à monsieur de Rochambeau; de sorte que rien n'est fini pour vous par la prise de cette forteresse, et que, lors même que monseigneur le marquis mourrait, la Vendée de Dieu et du roi ne mourra pas.

«Ce que j'en dis, sachez cela, est pour vous avertir. Monseigneur est là, à mes côtés. Je suis la bouche par où passent ses paroles. Hommes qui nous assiégez, faites silence.

«Voici ce qu'il importe que vous entendiez:

«N'oubliez pas que la guerre que vous nous faites n'est point juste. Nous sommes des gens qui habitons notre pays, et nous combattons honnêtement, et nous sommes simples et purs sous la volonté de Dieu comme l'herbe sous la rosée. C'est la république qui nous a attaqués; elle est venue nous troubler dans nos campagnes, et elle a brûlé nos maisons et nos récoltes et mitraillé nos métairies, et nos femmes et nos enfants ont été obligés de s'enfuir pieds nus dans les bois pendant que la fauvette d'hiver chantait encore.

«Vous qui êtes ici et qui m'entendez, vous nous avez traqués dans la forêt, et vous nous cernez dans cette tour; vous avez tué ou dispersé ceux qui s'étaient joints à nous; vous avez du canon; vous avez réuni à votre colonne les garnisons et postes de Mortain, de Barenton, de Teilleul, de

Landivy, d'Evran, de Tinténiac et de Vitré, ce qui fait que vous êtes quatre mille cinq cents soldats qui nous attaquez; et nous, nous sommes dix-neuf hommes qui nous défendons.

«Nous avons des vivres et des munitions.

«Vous avez réussi à pratiquer une mine et à faire sauter un morceau de notre rocher et un morceau de notre mur.

«Cela a fait un trou au pied de la tour, et ce trou est une brèche par laquelle vous pouvez entrer, bien qu'elle ne soit pas à ciel ouvert et que la tour, toujours forte et debout, fasse voûte au-dessus d'elle.

«Maintenant vous préparez l'assaut.

«Et nous, d'abord monseigneur le marquis, qui est prince de Bretagne et prieur séculier de l'abbaye de Sainte-Marie de Lantenac, où une messe de tous les jours a été fondée par la reine Jeanne, ensuite les autres défenseurs de la tour, dont est monsieur l'abbé Turmeau, en guerre Grand-Francoeur, mon camarade Guinoiseau, qui est capitaine du Camp-Vert, mon camarade Chante-en-Hiver, qui est capitaine du camp de l'Avoine, mon camarade la Musette, qui est capitaine du camp des Fourmis, et moi, paysan, qui suis né au bourg de Daon, où coule le ruisseau Moriandre, nous tous, nous avons une chose à vous dire.

«Hommes qui êtes au bas de cette tour, écoutez.

«Nous avons en nos mains trois prisonniers, qui sont trois enfants. Ces enfants ont été adoptés par un de vos bataillons, et ils sont à vous. Nous vous offrons de vous rendre ces trois enfants.

«A une condition.

«C'est que nous aurons la sortie libre.

«Si vous refusez, écoutez bien, vous ne pouvez attaquer que de deux façons, par la brèche, du côté de la forêt, ou par le pont, du côté du plateau. Le bâtiment sur le pont a trois étages; dans l'étage d'en bas, moi l'Imânus, moi qui vous parle, j'ai fait mettre six tonnes de goudron et cent fascines de bruyères sèches; dans l'étage d'en haut, il y a de la paille; dans l'étage du milieu, il y a des livres et des papiers; la porte de fer qui communique du pont avec la tour est fermée, et monseigneur en a la clef sur lui; moi, j'ai fait sous la porte un trou, et par ce trou passe une mèche soufrée dont un bout est dans une des tonnes de goudron et l'autre bout à la portée de ma main, dans l'intérieur de la tour; j'y mettrai le feu quand bon me semblera. Si vous refusez de nous laisser sortir, les trois enfants seront placés dans le deuxième étage du pont, entre l'étage où aboutit la mèche soufrée et où est le goudron, et l’étage où est la paille, et la porte de fer sera refermée sur eux. Si vous attaquez par le pont, ce sera vous qui incendierez le bâtiment; si vous attaquez à la fois par la brèche et par le pont, le feu sera mis à la fois par vous et par nous; et, dans tous les cas, les trois enfants périront.

«A présent, acceptez ou refusez.

«Si vous acceptez, nous sortons.

«Si vous refusez, les enfants meurent.

«J’ai dit.»

L’homme qui parlait du haut de la tour se tut.

Une voix d’en bas cria:

— Nous refusons.

Cette voix était brève et sévère. Une autre voix moins dure, ferme pourtant, ajouta:

— Nous vous donnons vingt-quatre heures pour vous rendre à discrétion.

Il y eut un silence, et la même voix continua:

— Demain, à pareille heure, si vous n’êtes pas rendus, nous donnons l’assaut.

Et la première voix reprit:

— Et alors pas de quartier.

A cette voix farouche, une autre voix répondit du haut de la tour. On vit entre deux créneaux se pencher une haute silhouette dans laquelle on put, à la lueur des étoiles, reconnaître la redoutable figure du marquis de Lantenac, et cette figure d’où un regard tombait dans l’ombre et semblait chercher quelqu’un, cria:

— Tiens, c’est toi, prêtre!

— Oui, c’est moi, traître! répondit la rude voix d’en bas.

XI. AFFREUX COMME L’ANTIQUE

La voix implacable en effet était la voix de Cimourdain; la voix plus jeune et moins absolue était celle de Gauvain.

Le marquis de Lantenac, en reconnaissant l’abbé Cimourdain, ne s’était pas trompé.

En peu de semaines, dans ce pays que la guerre civile faisait sanglant, Cimourdain, on le sait, était devenu fameux; pas de notoriété plus lugubre que la sienne; on disait: Marat à Paris, Châlier à Lyon, Cimourdain en Vendée. On flétrissait l’abbé Cimourdain de tout le respect qu’on avait eu pour lui autrefois; c’est là l’effet de l’habit de prêtre retourné. Cimourdain faisait horreur. Les sévères sont des infortunés; qui voit leurs actes les condamne, qui verrait leur conscience les absoudrait peut-être. Un Lycurgue qui n’est pas expliqué semble un Tibère. Quoi qu’il en fût, deux hommes, le marquis de Lantenac et l’abbé Cimourdain, étaient égaux dans la balance de haine; la malédiction des royalistes sur Cimourdain faisait contre-poids à l’exécration des républicains pour Lantenac. Chacun de ces deux hommes était, pour le camp opposé, le monstre; à tel point qu’il se produisit ce fait singulier que, tandis que Prieur de la Marne à Granville mettait à prix la tête de Lantenac, Charette à Noirmoutier mettait à prix la tête de Cimourdain.

Disons-le, ces deux hommes, le marquis et le prêtre, étaient jusqu’à un certain point le même homme. Le masque de bronze de la guerre civile a deux profils, l’un tourné vers le passé, l’autre tourné vers l’avenir, mais aussi tragiques l’un que l’autre. Lantenac était le premier de ces profils, Cimourdain était le second; seulement l’amer rictus de Lantenac était couvert d’ombre et de nuit, et sur le front fatal de Cimourdain il y avait une lueur d’aurore.

Cependant la Tourgue assiégée avait un répit.

Grâce à l’intervention de Gauvain, on vient de le voir, une sorte de trêve de vingt-quatre heures avait été convenue.

L’Imânus, du reste, était bien renseigné, et, par suite des réquisitions de Cimourdain, Gauvain avait maintenant sous ses ordres quatre mille cinq cents hommes, tant garde nationale que troupe de ligne, avec lesquels il cernait Lantenac dans la Tourgue, et il avait pu braquer contre la forteresse douze pièces de canon, six du côté de la tour, sur la lisière de la forêt, en batterie enterrée, et six du côté du pont, sur le plateau, en batterie haute. Il avait pu faire jouer la mine, et la brèche était ouverte au pied de la tour.

Ainsi, sitôt les vingt-quatre heures de trêve expirées, la lutte allait s'engager dans les conditions que voici:

Sur le plateau et dans la forêt, on était quatre mille cinq cents.

Dans la tour, dix-neuf.

Les noms de ces dix-neuf assiégés peuvent être retrouvés par l'histoire dans les affiches de mise hors la loi. Nous les rencontrerons peut-être.

Pour commander à ces quatre mille cinq cents hommes qui étaient presque une armée, Cimourdain aurait voulu que Gauvain se laissât faire adjudant général. Gauvain avait refusé, et avait dit: — Quand Lantenac sera pris, nous verrons. Je n'ai encore rien mérité.

Ces grands commandements avec d'humbles grades étaient d'ailleurs dans les moeurs républicaines. Bonaparte, plus tard, fut en même temps chef d'escadron d'artillerie et général en chef de l'armée d'Italie.

La Tour-Gauvain avait une destinée étrange: un Gauvain l'attaquait, un Gauvain la défendait. De là, une certaine réserve dans l'attaque, mais non dans la défense, car M. de Lantenac était de ceux qui ne ménagent rien, et d'ailleurs il avait surtout habité Versailles et n'avait aucune superstition pour la Tourgue, qu'il connaissait à peine. Il était venu s'y réfugier, n'ayant plus d'autre asile, voilà tout; mais il l'eût démolie sans scrupule. Gauvain était plus respectueux.

Le point faible de la forteresse était le pont; mais dans la bibliothèque, qui était sur le pont, il y avait les archives de la famille; si l'assaut était donné là, l'incendie du pont était inévitable; il semblait à Gauvain que brûler les archives, c'était attaquer ses pères. La Tourgue était le manoir de famille des Gauvain; c'est de cette tour que mouvaient tous leurs fiefs de Bretagne, de même que tous les fiefs de France mouvaient de la tour du Louvre: les souvenirs domestiques des Gauvain étaient là; lui-même, il y était né; les fatalités tortueuses de la vie l'amenaient à attaquer, homme, cette muraille vénérable qui l'avait protégé enfant. Serait-il impie envers cette demeure jusqu'à la mettre en cendres? Peut-être son propre berceau, à lui Gauvain, était-il dans quelque coin du grenier de la bibliothèque. Certaines réflexions sont des émotions. Gauvain, en présence de l'antique maison de famille, se sentait ému. C'est pourquoi il avait épargné le pont. Il s'était borné à rendre toute sortie ou toute évasion impossible par cette issue et à tenir le pont en respect par une batterie, et il avait choisi pour l'attaque le côté opposé. De là, la mine et la sape au pied de la tour.

Cimourdain l'avait laissé faire; il se le reprochait; car son âpreté fronçait le sourcil devant toutes ces vieilleries gothiques, et il ne voulait pas plus l'indulgence pour les édifices que pour les hommes. Ménager un château, c'était un commencement de clémence. Or la clémence était le côté faible de Gauvain. Cimourdain, on le sait, le surveillait et l'arrêtait sur cette pente, à ses yeux funeste. Pourtant lui-même, et en ne se l'avouant qu'avec une sorte de colère, il n'avait pas revu la Tourgue sans un secret tressaillement; il se sentait attendri devant cette salle studieuse où étaient les premiers livres qu'il eût fait lire à Gauvain; il avait été curé du village voisin, Parigné; il avait, lui Cimourdain, habité les combles du châtelet du pont; c'est dans la bibliothèque qu'il tenait entre ses genoux le petit Gauvain épelant l'alphabet; c'est entre ces vieux quatre murs-là qu'il avait vu son élève bien-aimé, le fils de son âme, grandir comme homme et croître comme esprit. Cette bibliothèque, ce châtelet, ces murs pleins de ses bénédictions sur l'enfant, allait-il les foudroyer et les brûler? Il leur faisait grâce. Non sans remords.

Il avait laissé Gauvain entamer le siège sur le point opposé. La Tourgue avait son côté sauvage, la tour, et son côté civilisé, la bibliothèque. Cimourdain avait permis à Gauvain de ne battre en brèche que le côté sauvage.

Du reste, attaquée par un Gauvain, défendue par un Gauvain, cette vieille demeure revenait, en pleine révolution française, à ses habitudes féodales. Les guerres entre parents sont toute l'histoire du moyen-âge; les Etéocles et les Polynices sont gothiques aussi bien que grecs, et Hamlet fait dans Elseneur ce qu'Oreste a fait dans Argos.

XII. LE SAUVETAGE S’EBAUCHE

Toute la nuit se passa de part et d’autre en préparatifs.

Sitôt le sombre pourparler qu’on vient d’entendre terminé, le premier soin de Gauvain fut d’appeler son lieutenant.

Guéchamp, qu’il faut un peu connaître, était un homme de second plan, honnête, intrépide, médiocre, meilleur soldat que chef, rigoureusement intelligent jusqu’au point où c’est le devoir de ne plus comprendre, jamais attendri, inaccessible à la corruption, quelle qu’elle fût, aussi bien à la vénalité qui corrompt la conscience qu’à la pitié qui corrompt la justice. Il avait sur l’âme et sur le coeur ces deux abat-jour, la discipline et la consigne, comme un cheval a ses garde-vue sur les deux yeux, et il marchait devant lui dans l’espace que cela lui laissait libre. Son pas était droit, mais sa route était étroite.

Du reste, homme sûr; rigide dans le commandement, exact dans l’obéissance.

Gauvain adressa vivement la parole à Guéchamp.

— Guéchamp, une échelle.

— Mon commandant, nous n’en avons pas.

— Il faut en avoir une.

— Pour escalade?

— Non. Pour sauvetage.

Guéchamp réfléchit et répondit:

— Je comprends. Mais pour ce que vous voulez, il la faut très haute.

— D’au moins trois étages.

— Oui, mon commandant, c’est à peu près la hauteur.

Et il faut dépasser cette hauteur, car il faut être sûr de réussir.

— Sans doute.

— Comment se fait-il que vous n’ayez pas d’échelle?

— Mon commandant, vous n’avez pas jugé à propos d’assiéger la Tourgue par le plateau; vous vous êtes contenté de la bloquer de ce côté-là; vous avez voulu attaquer, non par le pont, mais par la tour. On ne s’est plus occupé que de la mine, et l’on a renoncé à l’escalade. C’est pourquoi nous n’avons pas d’échelles.

— Faites-en faire une sur-le-champ.

— Une échelle de trois étages ne s’improvise pas.

— Faites ajouter bout à bout plusieurs échelles courtes.

— Il faut en avoir.

— Trouvez-en.

— On n’en trouvera pas. Partout les paysans détruisent les échelles, de même qu’ils démontent les charrettes et qu’ils coupent les ponts.

— Ils veulent paralyser la république, c’est vrai.

— Ils veulent que nous ne puissions ni traîner un charroi, ni passer une rivière, ni escalader un mur.

— Il me faut une échelle, pourtant.

— J’y songe, mon commandant, il y a à Javené, près de Fougères, une grande charpenterie. On peut en avoir une là.

— Il n’y a pas une minute à perdre.

— Quand voulez-vous avoir l’échelle?

— Demain, à pareille heure, au plus tard.

— Je vais envoyer à Javené un exprès à franc-étrier. Il portera l’ordre de réquisition. Il y a à Javené un poste de cavalerie qui fournira l’escorte. L’échelle pourra être ici demain avant le coucher du soleil.

— C’est bien, cela suffira, dit Gauvain, faites vite. Allez.

Dix minutes après, Guéchamp revint et dit à Gauvain:

— Mon commandant, l’exprès est parti pour Javené.

Gauvain monta sur le plateau et demeura longtemps l’œil fixé sur le pont-châtelet qui était en travers du ravin. Le pignon du châtelet, sans autre baie que la basse entrée fermée par le pont-levis dressé, faisait face à l’escarpement du ravin. Pour arriver du plateau au pied des piles du pont, il fallait descendre le long de cet escarpement, ce qui n’était pas impossible, de broussaille en broussaille. Mais une fois dans le fossé, l’assaillant serait exposé à tous les projectiles pouvant pleuvoir des trois étages. Gauvain acheva de se convaincre qu’au point où le siège en était, la véritable attaque était par la brèche de la tour.

Il prit toutes ses mesures pour qu’aucune fuite ne fût possible; il compléta l’étroit blocus de la Tourgue; il resserra les mailles de ses bataillons de façon que rien ne pût passer au travers. Gauvain et Cimourdain se partagèrent l’investissement de la forteresse; Gauvain se réserva le côté de la forêt et donna à Cimourdain le côté du plateau. Il fut convenu que, tandis que Gauvain, secondé par Guéchamp, conduirait l’assaut par la sape, Cimourdain, toutes les mèches de la batterie haute allumées, observerait le pont et le ravin.

XIII. CE QUE FAIT LE MARQUIS

Pendant qu’au dehors tout s’apprêtait pour l’attaque, au dedans tout s’apprêtait pour la résistance.

Ce n’est pas sans une réelle analogie qu’une tour se nomme une douve, et l’on frappe quelquefois une tour d’un coup de mine comme une douve d’un coup de poinçon. La muraille se perce comme une bonde. C’est ce qui était arrivé à la Tourgue.

Le puissant coup de poinçon donné par deux ou trois quintaux de poudre avait troué de part en part le mur énorme. Ce trou partait du pied de la tour, traversait la muraille dans sa plus grande épaisseur et venait aboutir en arcade informe dans le rez-de-chaussée de la forteresse. Du dehors, les assiégeants, afin de rendre ce trou praticable à l’assaut, l’avaient élargi et façonné à coups de canon.

Le rez-de-chaussée où pénétrait cette brèche était une grande salle ronde toute nue, avec pilier central portant la clef de voûte. Cette salle, qui était la plus vaste de tout le donjon, n’avait pas moins de quarante pieds de diamètre. Chacun des étages de la tour se composait d’une chambre pareille, mais moins large, avec des logettes dans les embrasures des meurtrières. La salle du rez-de-chaussée n’avait pas de meurtrières, pas de soupiraux, pas de lucarnes; juste autant de jour et d’air qu’une tombe.

La porte des oubliettes, faite de plus de fer que de bois, était dans la salle du rez-de-chaussée. Une autre porte de cette salle ouvrait sur un escalier qui conduisait aux chambres supérieures. Tous les escaliers étaient pratiqués dans l’épaisseur du mur.

C’est dans cette salle basse que les assiégeants avaient chance d’arriver par la brèche qu’ils avaient faite. Cette salle prise, il leur restait la tour à prendre.

On n’avait jamais respiré dans cette salle basse. Nul n’y passait vingt-quatre heures sans être asphyxié. Maintenant, grâce à la brèche, on y pouvait vivre.

C’est pourquoi les assiégés ne fermèrent pas la brèche.

D’ailleurs, à quoi bon? Le canon l’eût rouverte.

Ils piquèrent dans le mur une torchère de fer, y plantèrent une torche, et cela éclaira le rez-de-chaussée.

Maintenant comment s’y défendre?

Murer le trou était facile, mais inutile. Une retirade valait mieux. Une retirade, c'est un retranchement à angle rentrant, sorte de barricade chevronnée qui permet de faire converger les feux sur les assaillants, et qui, en laissant à l'extérieur la brèche ouverte, la bouche à l'intérieur. Les matériaux ne leur manquaient pas; ils construisirent une retirade, avec fissures pour le passage des canons de fusil. L'angle de la retirade s'appuyait au pilier central; les deux ailes touchaient le mur des deux côtés. Cela fait, on disposa dans les bons endroits des fougasses.

Le marquis dirigeait tout. Inspirateur, ordonnateur, guide et maître, âme terrible. Lantenac était de cette race d'hommes de guerre du dix-huitième siècle qui, à quatre-vingts ans, sauvaient des villes. Il ressemblait à ce comte d'Alberg qui, presque centenaire, chassa de Riga le roi de Pologne.

— Courage, amis! disait le marquis, au commencement de ce siècle, en 1715, à Bender, Charles XII, enfermé dans une maison, a tenu tête, avec trois cents suédois, à vingt mille turcs.

On barricada les deux étages d'en bas, on fortifia les chambres, on crénela les alcôves, on contrebuta les portes avec des solives enfoncées à coups de maillet, qui faisaient comme des arcs-boutants; seulement on dut laisser libre l'escalier en spirale qui communiquait à tous les étages, car il fallait pouvoir y circuler; et l'entraver pour l'assiégeant, c'eût été l'entraver pour l'assiégé. La défense des places a toujours ainsi un côté faible.

Le marquis, infatigable, robuste comme un jeune homme, soulevant des poutres, portant des pierres, donnait l'exemple, mettait la main à la besogne, commandait, aidait, fraternisait, riait avec ce clan féroce, toujours le seigneur pourtant, haut, familier, élégant, farouche.

Il ne fallait pas lui répliquer. Il disait: *Si une moitié de vous se révoltait, je la ferais fusiller par l'autre, et je défendrais la place avec le reste*. Ces choses-là font qu'on adore un chef.

XIV. CE QUE FAIT L’IMANUS

Pendant que le marquis s’occupait de la brèche et de la tour, l’Imânus s’occupait du pont. Dès le commencement du siège, l’échelle de sauvetage suspendue transversalement en dehors et au-dessous des fenêtres du deuxième étage, avait été retirée par ordre du marquis, et placée par l’Imânus dans la salle de la bibliothèque. C’est peut-être à cette échelle-là que Gauvain voulait suppléer. Les fenêtres du premier étage entre-sol, dit salle des gardes, étaient défendues par une triple armature de barreaux de fer scellés dans la pierre, et l’on ne pouvait ni entrer ni sortir par là.

Il n’y avait point de barreaux aux fenêtres de la bibliothèque, mais elles étaient très hautes.

L’Imânus se fit accompagner de trois hommes, comme lui capables de tout et résolus à tout. Ces hommes étaient Hoisnard, dit Branche-d’Or, et les deux frères Pique-en-Bois. L’Imânus prit une lanterne sourde, ouvrit la porte de fer, et visita minutieusement les trois étages du châtelet du pont. Hoisnard Branche-d’Or était aussi implacable que l’Imânus, ayant eu un frère tué par les républicains.

L’Imânus examina l’étage d’en haut, regorgeant de foin et de paille, et l’étage d’en bas, dans lequel il fit apporter quelques pots à feu, qu’il ajouta aux tonnes de goudron; il fit mettre le tas de fascines de bruyères en contact avec les tonnes de goudron, et il s’assura du bon état de la mèche soufrée dont une extrémité était dans le pont et l’autre dans la tour. Il répandit sur le plancher, sous les tonnes et sous les fascines, une mare de goudron où il immergea le bout de la mèche soufrée; puis il fit placer dans la salle de la bibliothèque, entre le rez-de-chaussée où était le goudron et le grenier où était la paille, les trois berceaux où étaient René-Jean, Gros-Alain et Georgette, plongés dans un profond sommeil. On apporta les berceaux très doucement pour ne point réveiller les petits.

C’étaient de simples petites crèches de campagne, sorte de corbeilles d’osier très basses qu’on pose à terre, ce qui permet à l’enfant de sortir du berceau seul et sans aide. Près de chaque berceau, l’Imânus fit placer une écuelle de soupe avec une cuiller de bois. L’échelle de sauvetage décrochée de ses crampons avait été déposée sur le plancher, contre le mur; l’Imânus fit ranger les trois berceaux bout à bout le long de l’autre mur en regard de l’échelle. Puis, pensant que des courants d’air pouvaient être utiles, il ouvrit toutes grandes les six fenêtres de la bibliothèque. C’était une nuit d’été, bleue et tiède.

Il envoya les frères Pique-en-Bois ouvrir les fenêtres de l’étage inférieur et de l’étage supérieur. Il avait remarqué, sur la façade orientale de l’édifice, un grand vieux lierre desséché, couleur d’amadou, qui couvrait tout un côté du pont du haut en bas et encadrait les fenêtres des trois étages. Il pensa que ce lierre ne nuirait pas. L’Imânus jeta partout un dernier coup d’oeil; après quoi, ces quatre hommes sortirent du châtelet et rentrèrent dans le donjon. L’Imânus referma la lourde porte de fer à double tour, considéra attentivement la serrure énorme et terrible, et examina, avec un signe de tête satisfait, la mèche soufrée qui passait par le trou pratiqué par lui, et était désormais la seule communication entre la tour et le pont. Cette mèche partait de la chambre ronde, passait sous la porte de fer, entrait sous la voussure, descendait l’escalier du rez-de-chaussée du pont, serpentait sur les degrés en spirale, rampait sur le plancher du couloir entre-sol, et allait aboutir à la mare de goudron sous le tas de fascines sèches. L’Imânus avait calculé qu’il fallait environ un quart d’heure pour que cette mèche, allumée dans l’intérieur de la tour, mit le feu à la mare de goudron sous la bibliothèque. Tous ces arrangements pris, et toutes ces inspections faites, il rapporta la clef de la porte de fer au marquis de Lantenac, qui la mit dans sa poche.

Il importait de surveiller tous les mouvements des assiégeants. L’Imânus alla se poster en vedette, sa trompe de bouvier à la ceinture, dans la guérite de la plate-forme, au haut de la tour. Tout en observant, un oeil sur la forêt, un oeil sur le plateau, il avait près de lui, dans l’embrasure de la lucarne de la guérite, une poire à poudre, un sac de toile plein de balles de calibre, et de vieux journaux qu’il déchirait, et il faisait des cartouches.

Quand le soleil parut, il éclaira dans la forêt huit bataillons, le sabre au côté, la giberne au dos, la bayonnette au fusil, prêts à l’assaut; sur le plateau, une batterie de canons, avec caissons, gargousses et boîtes à mitraille; dans la forteresse, dix-neuf hommes chargeant des tromblons, des mousquets, des pistolets et des espingoles; et dans les trois berceaux trois enfants endormis.

LIVRE TROISIEME

LE MASSACRE DE SAINT-BARTHELEMY

i

Les enfants se réveillèrent.

Ce fut d’abord la petite.

Un réveil d’enfants, c’est une ouverture de fleurs; il semble qu’un parfum sorte de ces fraîches âmes.

Georgette, celle de vingt mois, la dernière née des trois, qui tétait encore en mai, souleva sa petite tête, se dressa sur son séant, regarda ses pieds, et se mit à jaser.

Un rayon du matin était sur son berceau; il eût été difficile de dire quel était le plus rose, du pied de Georgette ou de l’aurore.

Les deux autres dormaient encore; c’est plus lourd, les hommes; Georgette, gaie et calme, jasait.

René-Jean était brun, Gros-Alain était châtain, Georgette était blonde. Ces nuances des cheveux, d’accord dans l’enfance avec l’âge, peuvent changer plus tard. René-Jean avait l’air d’un petit Hercule; il dormait sur le ventre, avec ses deux poings dans ses yeux. Gros-Alain avait les deux jambes hors de son petit lit.

Tous trois étaient en haillons; les vêtements que leur avait donnés le bataillon du Bonnet-Rouge s’en étaient allés en loques; ce qu’ils avaient sur eux n’était même pas une chemise; les deux garçons étaient presque nus, Georgette était affublée d’une guenille qui avait été une jupe et qui n’était plus guère qu’une brassière. Qui avait soin de ces enfants? On n’eût pu le dire. Pas de mère. Ces sauvages paysans combattants, qui les traînaient avec eux de forêt en forêt, leur donnaient leur part de soupe. Voilà tout. Les petits s’en tiraient comme ils pouvaient. Ils avaient tout le monde pour maître et personne pour père. Mais les haillons des enfants, c’est plein de lumière. Ils étaient charmants.

Georgette jasait.

Ce qu’un oiseau chante, un enfant le jase. C’est le même hymne. Hymne indistinct, balbutié, profond. L’enfant a de plus que l’oiseau la sombre destinée humaine devant lui. De là la tristesse des hommes qui écoutent, mêlée à la joie du petit qui chante. Le cantique le plus sublime qu’on puisse entendre sur la terre, c’est le bégaiement de l’âme humaine sur les lèvres de l’enfance. Ce chuchotement confus d’une pensée qui n’est encore qu’un instinct contient on ne sait quel appel inconscient à la justice éternelle; peut-être est-ce une protestation sur le seuil avant d’entrer; protestation humble et poignante; cette ignorance souriant à l’infini compromet toute la création dans le sort qui sera fait à l’être faible et désarmé. Le malheur, s’il arrive, sera un abus de confiance.

Le murmure de l’enfant, c’est plus et moins que la parole; ce ne sont pas des notes, et c’est un chant; ce ne sont pas des syllabes, et c’est un langage; ce murmure a eu son commencement dans le ciel et n’aura pas sa fin sur la terre; il est d’avant la naissance, et il continue; c’est une suite. Ce bégaiement se compose de ce que l’enfant disait quand il était ange et de ce qu’il dira quand il sera homme; le berceau a un Hier de même que la tombe a un Demain; ce demain et cet hier amalgament dans ce gazouillement obscur leur double inconnu; et rien ne prouve Dieu, l’éternité, la responsabilité, la dualité du destin, comme cette ombre formidable dans cette âme rose.

Ce que balbutiait Georgette ne l’attristait pas, car tout son doux visage était un sourire. Sa bouche souriait, ses yeux souriaient, les fossettes de ses joues souriaient. Il se dégageait de ce sourire une mystérieuse acceptation du matin. L’âme a foi dans le rayon. Le ciel était bleu, il faisait chaud, il faisait beau. La frêle créature, sans rien savoir, sans rien connaître, sans rien comprendre, mollement noyée dans la rêverie qui ne pense pas, se sentait en sûreté dans cette nature, dans ces arbres honnêtes, dans cette verdure sincère, dans cette campagne pure et paisible, dans ces bruits de nids, de sources, de mouches, de feuilles, au-dessus desquels resplendissait l’immense innocence du soleil.

Après Georgette, René-Jean, l’aîné, le grand, qui avait quatre ans passés, se réveilla. Il se leva debout, enjamba virilement son berceau, aperçut son écuelle, trouva cela tout simple, s’assit par terre et commença à manger sa soupe.

La jaserie de Georgette n’avait pas éveillé Gros-Alain, mais au bruit de la cuiller dans l’écuelle, il se retourna en sursaut, et ouvrit les yeux. Gros-Alain était celui de trois ans. Il vit son écuelle, il n’avait que le bras à étendre, il la prit, et, sans sortir de son lit, son écuelle sur ses genoux, sa cuiller au poing, il fit comme René-Jean, il se mit à manger.

Georgette ne les entendait pas, et les ondulations de sa voix semblaient moduler le bercement d'un rêve. Ses yeux grands ouverts regardaient en haut, et étaient divins; quel que soit le plafond ou la voûte qu'un enfant a au-dessus de sa tête, ce qui se reflète dans ses yeux, c'est le ciel.

Quand René-Jean eut fini, il gratta avec la cuiller le fond de l'écuelle, soupira, et dit avec dignité: — J'ai mangé ma soupe.

Ceci tira Georgette de sa rêverie.

— Poupoupe, dit-elle.

Et voyant que René-Jean avait mangé et que Gros-Alain mangeait, elle prit l'écuelle de soupe qui était à côté d'elle, et mangea, non sans porter sa cuiller beaucoup plus souvent à son oreille qu'à sa bouche.

De temps en temps elle renonçait à la civilisation et mangeait avec ses doigts.

Gros-Alain, après avoir, comme son frère, gratté le fond de l'écuelle, était allé le rejoindre et courait derrière lui.

ii.

Tout à coup on entendit au dehors, en bas, du côté de la forêt, un bruit de clairon, sorte de fanfare hautaine et sévère. A ce bruit de clairon répondit du haut de la tour un son de trompe.

Cette fois, c'était le clairon qui appelait et la trompe qui donnait la réplique.

Il y eut un deuxième coup de clairon que suivit un deuxième son de trompe.

Puis, de la lisière de la forêt, s'éleva une voix lointaine, mais précise, qui cria distinctement ceci:

— Brigands! sommation. Si vous n'êtes pas rendus à discrétion au coucher du soleil, nous attaquons.

Une voix, qui ressemblait à un grondement, répondit de la plate-forme de la tour:

— Attaquez.

La voix d'en bas reprit:

— Un coup de canon sera tiré, comme dernier avertissement, une demi-heure avant l'assaut.

Et la voix d'en haut répéta:

— Attaquez.

Ces voix n'arrivaient pas jusqu'aux enfants, mais le clairon et la trompe portaient plus haut et plus loin, et Georgette, au premier coup de clairon, dressa le cou, et cessa de manger; au son de trompe, elle posa sa cuiller dans son écuelle; au deuxième coup de clairon, elle leva le petit index de sa main droite, et l'abaissant et le relevant tour à tour, marqua les cadences de la fanfare, que vint prolonger le deuxième son de trompe; quand la trompe et le clairon se turent, elle demeura pensive le doigt en l'air, et murmura à demi-voix: — Misique.

Nous pensons qu'elle voulait dire «musique».

Les deux aînés, René-Jean et Gros-Alain, n'avaient pas fait attention à la trompe et au clairon; ils étaient absorbés par autre chose; un cloporte était en train de traverser la bibliothèque.

Gros-Alain l'aperçut et cria:

— Une bête.

René-Jean accourut.

Gros-Alain reprit:

— Ça pique.

— Ne lui fais pas de mal, dit René-Jean.

Et tous deux se mirent à regarder ce passant.

Cependant Georgette avait fini sa soupe; elle chercha des yeux ses frères. René-Jean et Gros-Alain étaient dans l'embrasure d'une fenêtre, accroupis et graves au-dessus du cloporte; ils se touchaient du front et mêlaient leurs cheveux; ils retenaient leur respiration, émerveillés, et considéraient la bête, qui s'était arrêtée et ne bougeait plus, peu contente de tant d'admiration.

Georgette, voyant ses frères en contemplation, voulut savoir ce que c'était. Il n'était pas aisé d'arriver jusqu'à eux, elle l'entreprit pourtant; le trajet était hérissé de difficultés; il y avait des choses par terre, des tabourets renversés, des tas de paperasses, des caisses d'emballage déclouées et vides, des bahuts, des monceaux quelconques autour desquels il fallait cheminer, tout un archipel d'écueils; Georgette s'y hasarda. Elle commença par sortir de son berceau, premier travail; puis elle s'engagea dans les récifs, serpenta dans les détroits, poussa un tabouret, rampa entre deux coffres, passa par-dessus une liasse de papiers, grimpant d'un côté, roulant de l'autre, montrant avec douceur sa pauvre petite nudité, et parvint ainsi à ce qu'un marin appellerait la mer libre, c'est-à-dire à un assez large espace de plancher qui n'était plus obstrué et où il n'y avait plus de périls; alors elle s'élança, traversa cet espace qui était tout le diamètre de la salle, à quatre pattes, avec une vitesse de chat, et arriva près de la fenêtre; là il y avait un obstacle redoutable; la grande échelle gisante le long du mur venait aboutir à cette fenêtre, et l’extrémité de l’échelle dépassait un peu le coin de l’embrasure; cela faisait entre Georgette et ses frères une sorte de cap à franchir; elle s’arrêta et médita; son monologue intérieur terminé, elle prit son parti; elle empoigna résolument de ses doigts roses un des échelons, lesquels étaient verticaux et non horizontaux, l’échelle étant couchée sur un de ses montants; elle essaya de se lever sur ses pieds et retomba; elle recommença deux fois, elle échoua; à la troisième fois, elle réussit; alors, droite et debout, s’appuyant successivement à chacun des échelons, elle se mit à marcher le long de l’échelle; arrivée à l’extrémité, le point d’appui lui manquait, elle trébucha, mais saisissant de ses petites mains le bout du montant qui était énorme, elle se redressa, doubla le promontoire, regarda René-Jean et Gros-Alain, et rit.

iii.

En ce moment-là, René-Jean, satisfait du résultat de ses observations sur le cloporte, relevait la tête et disait:

— C’est une femelle.

Le rire de Georgette fit rire René-Jean, et le rire de René-Jean fit rire Gros-Alain. Georgette opéra sa jonction avec ses frères, et cela fit un petit cénacle assis par terre.

Mais le cloporte avait disparu.

Il avait profité du rire de Georgette pour se fourrer dans un trou du plancher.

D’autres événements suivirent le cloporte.

D’abord des hirondelles passèrent.

Leurs nids étaient probablement sous le rebord du toit. Elles vinrent voler tout près de la fenêtre, un peu inquiètes des enfants, décrivant de grands cercles dans l’air, et poussant leur doux cri du printemps. Cela fit lever les yeux aux trois enfants et le cloporte fut oublié.

Georgette braqua son doigt sur les hirondelles et cria: — Cocos!

René-Jean la réprimanda.

— Mamoiselle, on ne dit pas des cocos, on dit des oseaux.

— Zozo, dit Georgette.

Et tous les trois regardèrent les hirondelles.

Puis une abeille entra.

Rien ne ressemble à une âme comme une abeille. Elle va de fleur en fleur comme une âme d’étoile en étoile, et elle rapporte le miel comme l’âme rapporte la lumière.

Celle-ci fit grand bruit en entrant, elle bourdonnait à voix haute, et elle avait l’air de dire: J’arrive, je viens de voir les roses, maintenant je viens voir les enfants. Qu’est-ce qui se passe ici?

Une abeille, c’est une ménagère, et cela gronde en chantant.

Tant que l’abeille fut là, les trois petits ne la quittèrent pas des yeux.

L’abeille explora toute la bibliothèque, fureta les recoins, voleta ayant l’air d’être chez elle et dans une ruche, et rôda, ailée et mélodieuse, d’armoire en armoire, regardant à travers les vitres les titres des livres, comme si elle eût été un esprit.

Sa visite faite, elle partit.

— Elle va dans sa maison, dit René-Jean.

— C’est une bête, dit Gros-Alain.

— Non, repartit René-Jean, c’est une mouche.

— Muche, dit Georgette.

Là-dessus, Gros-Alain, qui venait de trouver à terre une ficelle à l’extrémité de laquelle il y avait un noeud, prit entre son pouce et son index le bout opposé au noeud, fit de la ficelle une sorte de moulinet, et la regarda tourner avec une attention profonde.

De son côté, Georgette, redevenue quadrupède et ayant repris son va-et-vient capricieux sur le plancher, avait découvert un vénérable fauteuil de tapisserie mangé des vers dont le crin sortait par plusieurs trous. Elle s’était arrêtée à ce fauteuil. Elle élargissait les trous et tirait le crin avec recueillement.

Brusquement, elle leva un doigt, ce qui voulait dire: Écoutez.

Les deux frères tournèrent la tête.

Un fracas vague et lointain s’entendait au dehors; c’était probablement le camp d’attaque qui exécutait quelque mouvement stratégique dans la forêt; des chevaux hennissaient, des tambours battaient, des caissons roulaient, des chaînes s’entre-heurtaient, des sonneries militaires s’appelaient et se répondaient, confusion de bruits farouches qui en se mêlant devenaient une sorte d’harmonie; les enfants écoutaient, charmés.

— C’est le mondieu qui fait ça, dit René-Jean.

iv.

Le bruit cessa.

René-Jean était demeuré rêveur.

Comment les idées se décomposent-elles et se recomposent-elles dans ces petits cerveaux-là? Quel est le remuement mystérieux de ces mémoires si troubles et si courtes encore? Il se fit dans cette douce tête pensive un mélange du mondieu, de la prière, des mains jointes, d'on ne sait quel tendre sourire qu'on avait sur soi autrefois, et qu'on n'avait plus, et René-Jean chuchota à demi-voix: Maman.

— Maman, dit Gros-Alain.

— Mman, dit Georgette.

Et puis René-Jean se mit à sauter.

Ce que voyant, Gros-Alain sauta.

Gros-Alain reproduisait tous les mouvements et tous les gestes de René-Jean; Georgette moins. Trois ans, cela copie quatre ans; mais vingt mois, cela garde son indépendance. Georgette resta assise, disant de temps en temps un mot. Georgette ne faisait pas de phrases. C'était une penseuse; elle parlait par apophtegmes. Elle était monosyllabique.

Au bout de quelque temps néanmoins, l'exemple la gagna, et elle finit par tâcher de faire comme ses frères, et ces trois petites paires de pieds nus se mirent à danser, à courir et à chanceler, dans la poussière du vieux parquet de chêne poli, sous le grave regard des bustes de marbre auxquels Georgette jetait de temps en temps de côté un oeil inquiet, en Murmurant: — Les momommes!

Dans le langage de Georgette, un «momomme», c'était tout ce qui ressemblait à un homme et pourtant n'en était pas un. Les êtres n'apparaissent à l'enfant que mêlés aux fantômes.

Georgette, marchant moins qu'elle n'oscillait, suivait ses frères, mais plus volontiers à quatre pattes.

Subitement, René-Jean, s'étant approché d'une croisée, leva la tête, puis la baissa, et alla se réfugier derrière le coin du mur de l'embrasure de la fenêtre. Il venait d'apercevoir quelqu'un qui le regardait. C'était un soldat bleu du campement du plateau qui, profitant de la trêve et l'enfreignant peut-être un peu, s'était hasardé jusqu'à venir au bord de l'escarpement du ravin d'où l'on découvrait l'intérieur de la bibliothèque. Voyant René-Jean se réfugier, Gros-Alain se réfugia; il se blottit à côté de René-Jean, et Georgette vint se cacher derrière eux. Ils demeurèrent là en silence, immobiles, et Georgette mit son doigt sur ses lèvres. Au bout de quelques instants, René-Jean se risqua à avancer la tête; le soldat y était encore. René-Jean rentra sa tête vivement; et les trois petits n'osèrent plus souffler. Cela dura assez longtemps. Enfin cette peur ennuya Georgette, elle eut de l'audace, elle regarda. Le soldat s'en était allé. Ils se remirent à courir et à jouer.

Gros-Alain, bien qu'imitateur et admirateur de René-Jean, avait une spécialité, les trouvailles. Son frère et sa soeur le virent tout à coup caracoler éperdument en tirant après lui un petit chariot à quatre roues qu'il avait déterré je ne sais où.

Cette voiture à poupée était là depuis des années dans la poussière, oubliée, faisant bon voisinage avec les livres des génies et les bustes des sages. C'était peut-être un des hochets avec lesquels avait joué Gauvain enfant.

Gros-Alain avait fait de sa ficelle un fouet qu'il faisait claquer; il était très fier. Tels sont les inventeurs. Quand on ne découvre pas l'Amérique, on découvre une petite charrette. C'est toujours cela.

Mais il fallut partager. René-Jean voulut s'atteler à la voiture et

Georgette voulut monter dedans.

Elle essaya de s'y asseoir. René-Jean fut le cheval. Gros-Alain fut le cocher.

Mais le cocher ne savait pas son métier, le cheval le lui apprit.

René-Jean cria à Gros-Alain:

— Dis: Hu!

— Hu! répéta Gros-Alain.

La voiture versa. Georgette roula. Cela crie, les anges, Georgette cria.

Puis elle eut une vague envie de pleurer.

— Mamoiselle, dit René-Jean, vous êtes trop grande.

— J'ai grande, dit Georgette.

Et sa grandeur la consola de sa chute.

La corniche d'entablement au-dessous des fenêtres était fort large; la poussière des champs envolée du plateau de bruyère avait fini par s'y amasser, les pluies avaient refait de la terre avec cette poussière, le vent y avait apporté des graines, si bien qu'une ronce avait profité de ce peu de terre pour pousser là. Cette ronce était de l'espèce vivace dite *mûrier de renard*. On était en août, la ronce était couverte de mûres, et une branche de la ronce entrait par une fenêtre. Cette branche pendait presque jusqu'à terre.

Gros-Alain, après avoir découvert la ficelle, après avoir découvert la charrette, découvrit cette ronce. Il s'en approcha.

Il cueillit une mûre et la mangea.

— J'ai faim, dit René-Jean.

Et Georgette, galopant sur ses genoux et sur ses mains, arriva.

A eux trois ils pillèrent la branche et mangèrent toutes les mûres. Ils s'en grisèrent et s'en barbouillèrent, et, tout vermeils de cette pourpre de la ronce, ces trois petits séraphins finirent par être trois petits faunes, ce qui eût choqué Dante et charmé Virgile. Ils riaient aux éclats.

De temps en temps la ronce leur piquait les doigts. Rien pour rien.

Georgette tendit à René-Jean son doigt où perlait une petite goutte de sang et dit en montrant la ronce: Pique.

Gros-Alain, piqué aussi, regarda la ronce avec défiance et dit:

— C'est une bête.

— Non, répondit René-Jean, c'est un bâton.

— Un bâton, c'est méchant, reprit Gros-Alain.

Georgette, cette fois encore, eut envie de pleurer, mais elle se mit à rire.

v.

Cependant René-Jean, jaloux peut-être des découvertes de son frère cadet Gros-Alain, avait conçu un grand projet. Depuis quelque temps, tout en cueillant des mûres et en se piquant les doigts, ses yeux se tournaient fréquemment du côté du lutrin-pupitre monté sur pivot et isolé comme un monument au milieu de la bibliothèque. C'est sur ce lutrin que s'étalait le célèbre volume *Saint-Barthélemy*.

C'était vraiment un in-quarto magnifique et mémorable. Ce *Saint-Barthélemy* avait été publié à Cologne par le fameux éditeur de la Bible de 1682, Bloeuw, en latin Csius. Il avait été fabriqué par des presses à boîtes et à nerfs de boeuf; il était imprimé, non sur papier de Hollande, mais sur ce beau papier arabe, si admiré par Edrisi, qui est en soie et coton et toujours blanc; la reliure était de cuir doré et les fermoirs étaient d'argent; les gardes étaient de ce parchemin que les parcheminiers de Paris faisaient serment d'acheter à la salle Saint-Mathurin «et point ailleurs». Ce volume était plein de gravures sur bois et sur cuivre et de figures géographiques de beaucoup de pays; il était précédé d'une protestation des imprimeurs, papetiers et libraires contre l'édit de 1633 qui frappait d'un impôt «les cuirs, les bières, le pied fourché, le poisson de mer et le papier»; et au verso du frontispice on lisait une dédicace adressée aux Gryphes, qui sont à Lyon ce que les Elzévirs sont à Amsterdam. De tout cela, il résultait un exemplaire illustre, presque aussi rare que l'*Apostol* de Moscou.

Ce livre était beau; c'est pourquoi René-Jean le regardait, trop peut-être. Le volume était précisément ouvert à une grande estampe représentant saint

Barthélemy portant sa peau sur son bras. Cette estampe se voyait d’en bas. Quand toutes les mûres furent mangées, René-Jean la considéra avec un regard d’amour terrible, et Georgette, dont l’oeil suivait la direction des yeux de son frère, aperçut l’estampe et dit: — Gimage.

Ce mot sembla déterminer René-Jean. Alors, à la grande stupeur de Gros-Alain, il fit une chose extraordinaire.

Une grosse chaise de chêne était dans un angle de la bibliothèque; René-Jean marcha à cette chaise, la saisit, et la traîna à lui tout seul jusqu’au pupitre. Puis, quand la chaise toucha le pupitre, il monta dessus et posa ses deux poings sur le livre.

Parvenu à ce sommet, il sentit le besoin d’être magnifique; il prit la «gimage» par le coin d’en haut et la déchira soigneusement; cette déchirure de saint Barthélemy se fit de travers, mais ce ne fut pas la faute de René-Jean; il laissa dans le livre tout le côté gauche avec un oeil et un peu de l’auréole du vieil évangéliste apocryphe, et offrit à Georgette l’autre moitié du saint et toute sa peau. Georgette reçut le saint et dit:

— Momomme.

— Et moi! cria Gros-Alain.

Il en est de la première page arrachée comme du premier sang versé. Cela décide le carnage.

René-Jean tourna le feuillet; derrière le saint il y avait le commentateur, Pantoenus; René-Jean décerna Pantoenus à Gros-Alain.

Cependant Georgette déchira son grand morceau en deux petits, puis les deux petits en quatre; si bien que l’histoire pourrait dire que saint Barthélemy, après avoir été écorché en Arménie, fut écartelé en Bretagne.

vi.

L’écartèlement terminé, Georgette tendit la main à René-Jean et dit:

— Encore!

Après le saint et le commentateur venaient, portraits rébarbatifs, les glossateurs. Le premier en date était Gavantus; René-Jean l’arracha et mit dans la main de Georgette Gavantus.

Tous les glossateurs de saint Barthélemy y passèrent.

Donner est une supériorité. René-Jean ne se réserva rien. Gros-Alain et Georgette le contemplaient; cela lui suffisait; il se contenta de l’admiration de son public.

René-Jean, inépuisable et magnanime, offrit à Gros-Alain Fabricio Pignatelli et à Georgette le père Stilting; il offrit à Gros-Alain Alphonse

Tostat et à Georgette *Cornelius a Lapide*; Gros-Alain eut Henri Hammond,

et Georgette eut le père Roberti, augmenté d’une vue de la ville de Douai,

où il naquit en 1619. Gros-Alain reçut la protestation des papetiers et

Georgette obtint la dédicace aux Gryphes. Il y avait aussi des cartes.

René-Jean les distribua. Il donna l’Ethiopie à Gros-Alain et la Lycaonie à

Georgette. Cela fait, il jeta le livre à terre.

Ce fut un moment effrayant. Gros-Alain et Georgette virent, avec une extase mêlée d’épouvante, René-Jean froncer ses sourcils, roidir ses jarrets, crisper ses poings et pousser hors du lutrin l’in-quarto massif. Un bouquin majestueux qui perd contenance, c’est tragique. Le lourd volume désarçonné pendit un moment, hésita, se balança, puis s’écroula, et, rompu, froissé, lacéré, déboîté dans sa reliure, disloqué dans ses fermoirs, s’aplatit lamentablement sur le plancher. Heureusement il ne tomba point sur eux.

Ils furent éblouis, point écrasés. Toutes les aventures des conquérants ne finissent pas aussi bien.

Comme toutes les gloires, cela fit un grand bruit et un nuage de poussière.

Ayant terrassé le livre, René-Jean descendit de la chaise. Il y eut un instant de silence et de terreur, la victoire a ses effrois. Les trois enfants se prirent les mains et se tinrent à distance, considérant le vaste volume démantelé.

Mais après un peu de rêverie, Gros-Alain s’approcha énergiquement et lui donna un coup de pied.

Ce fut fini. L’appétit de la destruction existe. René-Jean donna son coup de pied, Georgette donna son coup de pied, ce qui la fit tomber par terre, mais assise; elle en profita pour se jeter sur Saint-Barthélemy; tout prestige disparut; René-Jean se précipita, Gros-Alain se rua, et joyeux, éperdus, triomphants, impitoyables, déchirant les estampes, balafrant les feuillets, arrachant les signets, égratignant la reliure, décollant le cuir doré, déclouant les clous des coins d’argent, cassant le parchemin, déchiquetant le texte auguste, travaillant des pieds, des mains, des ongles, des dents, roses, riants, féroces, les trois anges de proie s’abattirent sur l’évangéliste sans défense.

Ils anéantirent l’Arménie, la Judée, le Bénévent où sont les reliques du saint, Nathanaël, qui est peut-être le même que Barthélemy, le pape Gélase, qui déclara apocryphe l’évangile Barthélemy-Nathanaël, toutes les figures, toutes les cartes, et l’exécution inexorable du vieux livre les absorba tellement qu’une souris passa sans qu’ils y prissent garde.

Ce fut une extermination.

Tailler en pièces l’histoire, la légende, la science, les miracles vrais ou faux, le latin d’église, les superstitions, les fanatismes, les mystères, déchirer toute une religion du haut en bas, c’est un travail pour trois géants, et même pour trois enfants; les heures s’écoulèrent dans ce labeur, mais ils en vinrent à bout; rien ne resta de Saint-Barthélemy.

Quand ce fut fini, quand la dernière page fut détachée, quand la dernière estampe fut par terre, quand il ne resta plus du livre que des tronçons de texte et d’images dans un squelette de reliure, René-Jean se dressa debout, regarda le plancher jonché de toutes ces feuilles éparses, et battit des mains.

Gros-Alain battit des mains.

Georgette prit à terre une de ces feuilles, se leva, s’appuya contre la fenêtre qui lui venait au menton et se mit à déchiqueter par la croisée la grande page en petits morceaux.

Ce que voyant, René-Jean et Gros-Alain en firent autant. Ils ramassèrent et déchirèrent, ramassèrent encore et déchirèrent encore, par la croisée comme Georgette; et, page à page, émietté par ces petits doigts acharnés, presque tout l’antique livre s’envola dans le vent. Georgette, pensive, regarda ces essaims de petits papiers blancs se disperser à tous les souffles de l’air, et dit:

— Papillons.

Et le massacre se termina par un évanouissement dans l’azur.

vii.

Telle fut la deuxième mise à mort de saint Barthélemy qui avait été déjà une première fois martyr l’an 49 de Jésus-Christ.

Cependant le soir venait, la chaleur augmentait, la sieste était dans l’air, les yeux de Georgette devenaient vagues, René-Jean alla à son berceau, en tira le sac de paille qui lui tenait lieu de matelas, le traîna jusqu’à la fenêtre, s’allongea dessus et dit: — Couchons-nous.

Gros-Alain mit sa tête sur René-Jean, Georgette mit sa tête sur Gros-Alain, et les trois malfaiteurs s’endormirent.

Les souffles tièdes entraient par les fenêtres ouvertes; des parfums de fleurs sauvages, envolés des ravins et des collines, erraient mêlés aux haleines du soir; l’espace était calme et miséricordieux, tout rayonnait, tout s’apaisait, tout aimait tout; le soleil donnait à la création cette caresse, la lumière; on percevait par tous les pores l'harmonie qui se dégage de la douceur colossale des choses; il y avait de la maternité dans l'infini; la création est un prodige en plein épanouissement, elle complète son énormité par sa bonté; il semblait que l'on sentît quelqu'un d'invisible prendre ces mystérieuses précautions qui dans le redoutable conflit des êtres protègent les chétifs contre les forts; en même temps, c'était beau; la splendeur égalait la mansuétude. Le paysage, ineffablement assoupi, avait cette moire magnifique que font sur les prairies et sur les rivières les déplacements de l'ombre et de la clarté; les fumées montaient vers les nuages, comme des rêveries vers des visions; des vols d'oiseaux tourbillonnaient au-dessus de la Tourgue; les hirondelles regardaient par les croisées, et avaient l'air de venir voir si les enfants dormaient bien. Ils étaient gracieusement groupés l'un sur l'autre, immobiles, demi-nus dans des poses d'amours; ils étaient adorables et purs, à eux trois ils n'avaient pas neuf ans, ils faisaient des songes de paradis qui se reflétaient sur leurs bouches en vagues sourires, Dieu leur parlait peut-être à l'oreille, ils étaient ceux que toutes les langues humaines appellent les faibles et les bénis, ils étaient les innocents vénérables; tout faisait silence comme si le souffle de leurs douces poitrines était l'affaire de l'univers et était écouté de la création entière, les feuilles ne bruissaient pas, les herbes ne frissonnaient pas; il semblait que le vaste monde étoilé retînt sa respiration pour ne point troubler ces trois humbles dormeurs angéliques, et rien n'était sublime comme l'immense respect de la nature autour de cette petitesse.

Le soleil allait se coucher et touchait presque à l'horizon. Tout à coup, dans cette paix profonde, éclata un éclair qui sortit de la forêt, puis un bruit farouche. On venait de tirer un coup de canon. Les échos s'emparèrent de ce bruit et en firent un fracas. Le grondement prolongé de colline en colline fut monstrueux. Il réveilla Georgette.

Elle souleva un peu sa tête, dressa son petit doigt, écouta et dit:

— Poum!

Le bruit cessa, tout rentra dans le silence, Georgette remit sa tête sur Gros-Alain, et se rendormit.

LIVRE QUATRIÈME

LA MÈRE

I. LA MORT PASSE

Ce soir-là, la mère, qu’on a vue cheminant presque au hasard, avait marché toute la journée. C’était, du reste, son histoire de tous les jours; aller devant elle et ne jamais s’arrêter. Car ses sommeils d’accablement dans le premier coin venu n’étaient pas plus du repos que ce qu’elle mangeait çà et là, comme les oiseaux picorent, n’était de la nourriture. Elle mangeait et dormait juste autant qu’il fallait pour ne pas tomber morte.

C’était dans une grange abandonnée qu’elle avait passé la nuit précédente; les guerres civiles font de ces masures-là; elle avait trouvé dans un champ désert quatre murs, une porte ouverte, un peu de paille sous un reste de toit, et elle s’était couchée sur cette paille et sous ce toit, sentant à travers la paille le glissement des rats et voyant à travers le toit le lever des astres. Elle avait dormi quelques heures; puis s’était réveillée au milieu de la nuit, et remise en route afin de faire le plus de chemin possible avant la grande chaleur du jour. Pour qui voyage à pied l’été, minuit est plus clément que midi.

Elle suivait de son mieux l’itinéraire sommaire que lui avait indiqué le paysan de Vantortes; elle allait le plus possible au couchant. Qui eût été près d’elle l’eût entendue dire sans cesse à demi-voix: — La Tourgue. — Avec les noms de ses trois enfants, elle ne savait plus guère que ce mot-là.

Tout en marchant, elle songeait. Elle pensait aux aventures qu’elle avait traversées; elle pensait à tout ce qu’elle avait souffert, à tout ce qu’elle avait accepté; aux rencontres, aux indignités, aux conditions faites, aux marchés proposés et subis, tantôt pour un asile, tantôt pour un morceau de pain, tantôt simplement pour obtenir qu’on lui montrât sa route. Une femme misérable est plus malheureuse qu’un homme misérable, parce qu’elle est instrument de plaisir. Affreuse marche errante! Du reste tout lui était bien égal pourvu qu’elle retrouvât ses enfants.

Sa première rencontre, ce jour-là, avait été un village sur la route; l’aube paraissait à peine; tout était encore baigné du sombre de la nuit; pourtant quelques portes étaient déjà entre-bâillées dans la grande rue du village, et des têtes curieuses sortaient des fenêtres. Les habitants avaient l’agitation d’une ruche inquiétée. Cela tenait à un bruit de roues et de ferrailles qu’on avait entendu.

Sur la place, devant l’église, un groupe ahuri, les yeux en l’air, regardait quelque chose descendre par la route vers le village du haut d’une colline. C’était un chariot à quatre roues traîné par cinq chevaux attelés de chaînes. Sur le chariot on distinguait un entassement qui ressemblait à un monceau de longues solives au milieu desquelles il y avait on ne sait quoi d’informe; c’était recouvert d’une grande bâche, qui avait l’air d’un linceul. Dix hommes à cheval marchaient en avant du chariot et dix autres en arrière. Ces hommes avaient des chapeaux à trois cornes et l’on voyait se dresser au-dessus de leurs épaules des pointes qui paraissaient être des sabres nus. Tout ce cortège, avançant lentement, se découpait en vive noirceur sur l’horizon. Le chariot semblait noir, l’attelage semblait noir, les cavaliers semblaient noirs. Le matin blêmissait derrière.

Cela entra dans le village et se dirigea vers la place.

Il s’était fait un peu de jour pendant la descente de ce chariot et l’on put voir distinctement le cortège, qui paraissait une marche d’ombres, car il n’en sortait pas une parole.

Les cavaliers étaient des gendarmes. Ils avaient en effet le sabre nu. La bâche était noire.

La misérable mère errante entra de son côté dans le village et s’approcha de l’attroupement des paysans au moment où arrivaient sur la place cette voiture et ces gendarmes. Dans l’attroupement, des voix chuchotaient des questions et des réponses.

— Qu’est-ce que c’est que ça?

— C’est la guillotine qui passe.

— D’où vient-elle?

— De Fougères.

— Où va-t-elle?

— Je ne sais pas. On dit qu’elle va à un château du côté de Parigné.

— A Parigné!

— Qu’elle aille où elle voudra, pourvu qu’elle ne s’arrête pas ici!

Cette grande charrette avec son chargement voilé d’une sorte de suaire, cet attelage, ces gendarmes, le bruit de ces chaînes, le silence de ces hommes, l’heure crépusculaire, tout cet ensemble était spectral.

Ce groupe traversa la place et sortit du village; le village était dans un fond entre une montée et une descente; au bout d’un quart d’heure, les paysans, restés là comme pétrifiés, virent reparaître la lugubre procession au sommet de la colline qui était à l’occident. Les ornières cahotaient les grosses roues, les chaînes de l’attelage grelottaient au vent du matin, les sabres brillaient; le soleil se levait, la route tourna, tout disparut.

C’était le moment même où Georgette, dans la salle de la bibliothèque, se réveillait à côté de ses frères encore endormis, et disait bonjour à ses pieds roses.

II. LA MORT PARLE

La mère avait regardé cette chose obscure passer, mais n’avait pas compris ni cherché à comprendre, ayant devant les yeux une autre vision, ses enfants perdus dans les ténèbres.

Elle sortit du village, elle aussi, peu après le cortège qui venait de défiler, et suivit la même route, à quelque distance en arrière de la deuxième escouade de gendarmes. Subitement le mot «guillotine» lui revint; «guillotine», pensa-t-elle; cette sauvage, Michelle Fléchard, ne savait pas ce que c’était; mais l’instinct avertit; elle eut, sans pouvoir dire pourquoi, un frémissement, il lui sembla horrible de marcher derrière cela, et elle prit à gauche, quitta la route, et s’engagea sous des arbres qui étaient la forêt de Fougères.

Après avoir rôdé quelque temps, elle aperçut un clocher et des toits, c’était un des villages de la lisière du bois, elle y alla. Elle avait faim.

Ce village était un de ceux où les républicains avaient établi des postes militaires.

Elle pénétra jusqu’à la place de la mairie.

Dans ce village-là aussi il y avait émoi et anxiété. Un rassemblement se pressait devant un perron de quelques marches qui était l’entrée de la mairie. Sur ce perron on apercevait un homme escorté de soldats qui tenait à la main un grand placard déployé. Cet homme avait à sa droite un tambour et à sa gauche un afficheur portant un pot à colle et un pinceau.

Sur le balcon au-dessus de la porte le maire était debout, ayant son écharpe tricolore mêlée à ses habits de paysan.

L’homme au placard était un crieur public.

Il avait son baudrier de tournée auquel était suspendue une petite sacoche, ce qui indiquait qu’il allait de village en village, et qu’il avait quelque chose à crier dans tout le pays.

Au moment où Michelle Fléchard approcha, il venait de déployer le placard, et il en commençait la lecture. Il dit d’une voix haute:

— «République française. Une et indivisible.»

Le tambour fit un roulement. Il y eut dans le rassemblement une sorte d’ondulation. Quelques-uns ôtèrent leurs bonnets; d’autres renfoncèrent leurs chapeaux. Dans ce temps-là et dans ce pays-là, on pouvait presque reconnaître l’opinion à la coiffure; les chapeaux étaient royalistes, les bonnets étaient républicains. Les murmures de voix confuses cessèrent, on écouta, le crieur lut:

— «… En vertu des ordres à nous donnés et des pouvoirs à nous délégués par le comité de salut public…»

Il y eut un deuxième roulement de tambour. Le crieur poursuivit:

— «… Et en exécution du décret de la Convention nationale qui met hors la loi les rebelles pris les armes à la main, et qui frappe de la peine capitale quiconque leur donnera asile ou les fera évader…»

Un paysan demanda bas à son voisin:

— Qu’est-ce que c’est que ça, la peine capitale?

Le voisin répondit:

— Je ne sais pas.

Le crieur agita le placard:

— «… Vu l’article 17 de la loi du 30 avril qui donne tout pouvoir aux délégués et aux subdélégués contre les rebelles.

«Sont mis hors la loi…»

Il fit une pause et reprit:

— «… Les individus désignés sous les noms et surnoms qui suivent…»

Tout l’attroupement prêta l’oreille.

La voix du crieur devint tonnante. Il dit:

— «… Lantenac, brigand.»

— C’est monseigneur, murmura un paysan.

Et l’on entendit dans la foule ce chuchotement: C’est monseigneur.

Le crieur reprit:

— «… Lantenac, ci-devant marquis, brigand. — L’Imânus, brigand…»

Deux paysans se regardèrent de côté.

— C’est Gouge-le-Bruant.

— Oui, c’est Brise-Bleu.

Le crieur continuait de lire la liste:

— «… Grand-Francoeur, brigand…»

Le rassemblement murmura:

— C’est un prêtre.

— Oui, monsieur l’abbé Turmeau.

— Oui, quelque part, du côté du bois de la Chapelle, il est curé.

— Et brigand, dit un homme à bonnet.

Le crieur lut:

— «… Boisnouveau, brigand. — Les deux frères Pique-en-bois, brigands.

— Houzard, brigand…»

— C’est monsieur de Quélen, dit un paysan.

— «Panier, brigand…»

— C’est monsieur Sepher.

— «… Place-nette, brigand…»

— C’est monsieur Jamois.

Le crieur poursuivait sa lecture sans s’occuper de ces commentaires.

— «… Guinoiseau, brigand. — Chatenay, dit Robi, brigand…»

Un paysan chuchota:

— Guinoiseau est le même que le Blond, Chatenay est de Saint-Ouen.

— «… Hoisnard, brigand», reprit le crieur.

Et l’on entendit dans la foule:

— Il est de Ruillé.

— Oui, c’est Branche-d’Or.

— Il a eu son frère tué à l’attaque de Pontorson.

— Oui, Hoisnard-Malonnière.

— Un beau jeune homme de dix-neuf ans.

— Attention, dit le crieur. Voici la fin de la liste: — «… Belle-Vigne, brigand. — La Musette, brigand. — Sabre-tout, brigand. — Brin-d’Amour, brigand…»

Un garçon poussa le coude d’une fille. La fille sourit.

Le crieur continua:

— «… Chante-en-hiver, brigand. — Le Chat, brigand…»

Un paysan dit:

— C’est Moulard.

— «… Tabouze, brigand…»

Un paysan dit:

— C’est Gauffre.

— Ils sont deux, les Gauffre, ajouta une femme.

— Tous des bons, grommela un gars.

Le crieur secoua l’affiche et le tambour battit un ban.

Le crieur reprit sa lecture:

— «… Les susnommés, en quelque lieu qu’ils soient saisis, et après l’identité constatée, seront immédiatement mis à mort.»

Il y eut un mouvement.

Le crieur poursuivit:

— «… Quiconque leur donnera asile ou aidera à leur évasion sera traduit en cour martiale, et mis à mort. Signé…»

Le silence devint profond.

— «… Signé: le délégué du Comité de salut public, CIMOURDAIN.»

— Un prêtre, dit un paysan.

— L’ancien curé de Parigné, dit un autre.

Un bourgeois ajouta:

— Turmeau et Cimourdain. Un prêtre blanc et un prêtre bleu.

— Tous deux noirs, dit un autre bourgeois.

Le maire, qui était sur le balcon, souleva son chapeau, et cria:

— Vive la république!

Un roulement de tambour annonça que le crieur n’avait pas fini. En effet il fit un signe de la main.

— Attention, dit-il. Voici les quatre dernières lignes de l’affiche du gouvernement. Elles sont signées du chef de la colonne d’expédition des Côtes-du-Nord, qui est le commandant Gauvain.

— Ecoutez! dirent les voix de la foule.

Et le crieur lut:

— «Sous peine de mort…»

Tous se turent.

— «… Défense est faite, en exécution de l’ordre ci-dessus, de porter aide et secours aux dix-neuf rebelles susnommés qui sont à cette heure investis et cernés dans la Tourgue.»

— Hein? dit une voix.

C’était une voix de femme. C’était la voix de la mère.

III. BOURDONNEMENT DE PAYSANS

Michelle Fléchard était mêlée à la foule. Elle n’avait rien écouté, mais ce qu’on n’écoute pas, on l’entend. Elle avait entendu ce mot, la Tourgue. Elle dressait la tête.

— Hein? répéta-t-elle, la Tourgue?

On la regarda. Elle avait l’air égaré. Elle était en haillons. Des voix murmurèrent: — Ça a l’air d’une brigande.

Une paysanne qui portait des galettes de sarrasin dans un panier s’approcha et lui dit tout bas:

— Taisez-vous.

Michelle Fléchard considéra cette femme avec stupeur. De nouveau, elle ne comprenait plus. Ce nom, la Tourgue, avait passé comme un éclair, et la nuit se refaisait. Est-ce qu’elle n’avait pas le droit de s’informer? Qu’est-ce qu’on avait donc à la regarder ainsi?

Cependant le tambour avait battu un dernier ban, l’afficheur avait collé l’affiche, le maire était rentré dans la mairie, le crieur était parti pour quelque autre village, et l’attroupement se dispersait.

Un groupe était resté devant l’affiche. Michelle Fléchard alla à ce groupe.

On commentait les noms des hommes mis hors la loi.

Il y avait là des paysans et des bourgeois; c’est-à-dire des blancs et des bleus.

Un paysan disait:

— C’est égal, ils ne tiennent pas tout le monde. Dix-neuf, ça n’est que dix-neuf. Ils ne tiennent pas Priou, ils ne tiennent pas Benjamin Moulins, ils ne tiennent pas Goupil, de la paroisse d’Andouillé.

— Ni Lorieul, de Monjean, dit un autre.

D’autres ajoutèrent:

— Ni Brice-Denys.

— Ni François Dudouet.

— Oui, celui de Laval.

— Ni Huet, de Launey-Villiers.

— Ni Grégis.

— Ni Pilon.

— Ni Filleul.

— Ni Ménicent.

— Ni Guéharrée.

— Ni les trois frères Logerais.

— Ni monsieur Lechandelier de Pierreville.

— Imbéciles! dit un vieux sévère à cheveux blancs. Ils ont tout, s’ils ont Lantenac.

— Ils ne l’ont pas encore, murmura un des jeunes.

Le vieillard répliqua:

— Lantenac pris, l’âme est prise. Lantenac mort, la Vendée est tuée.

— Qu’est-ce que c’est donc que ce Lantenac? demanda un bourgeois.

Un bourgeois répondit:

— C’est un ci-devant.

Et un autre reprit:

— C’est un de ceux qui fusillent les femmes.

Michelle Fléchard entendit, et dit:

— C’est vrai.

On se retourna.

Et elle ajouta:

— Puisqu’on m’a fusillée.

Le mot était singulier; il fit l’effet d’une vivante qui se dit morte. On se mit à l’examiner, un peu de travers.

Elle était inquiétante à voir en effet; tressaillant de tout, effarée, frissonnante, ayant une anxiété fauve, et si effrayée qu’elle était effrayante. Il y a dans le désespoir de la femme on ne sait quoi de faible qui est terrible. On croit voir un être suspendu à l’extrémité du sort. Mais les paysans prennent la chose plus en gros. L’un d’eux grommela:

— Ça pourrait bien être une espionne.

— Taisez-vous donc, et allez-vous-en, lui dit tout bas la bonne femme qui lui avait déjà parlé.

Michelle Fléchard répondit:

— Je ne fais pas de mal. Je cherche mes enfants.

La bonne femme regarda ceux qui regardaient Michelle Fléchard, se toucha le front du doigt en clignant de l’œil, et dit:

— C’est une innocente.

Puis elle la prit à part, et lui donna une galette de sarrasin.

Michelle Fléchard, sans remercier, mordit avidement dans la galette.

— Oui, dirent les paysans, elle mange comme une bête, c’est une innocente.

Et le reste du rassemblement se dissipa. Tous s’en allèrent l’un après l’autre.

Quand Michelle Fléchard eut mangé, elle dit à la paysanne:

— C’est bon, j’ai mangé. Maintenant, la Tourgue?

— Voilà que ça la reprend! s’écria la paysanne.

— Il faut que j’aille à la Tourgue. Dites-moi le chemin de la Tourgue.

— Jamais! dit la paysanne. Pour vous faire tuer, n’est-ce pas? D’ailleurs, je ne sais pas. Ah ça, vous êtes donc vraiment folle? Ecoutez, pauvre femme, vous avez l’air fatiguée. Voulez-vous vous reposer chez moi?

— Je ne me repose pas, dit la mère.

— Elle a les pieds tout écorchés, murmura la paysanne.

Michelle Fléchard reprit:

— Puisque je vous dis qu’on m’a volé mes enfants. Une petite fille et deux petits garçons. Je viens du carnichot qui est dans la forêt. On peut parler de moi à Tellmarch-le-Caimand. Et puis à l’homme que j’ai rencontré dans le champ là-bas. C’est le caimand qui m’a guérie. Il paraît que j’avais quelque chose de cassé. Tout cela, ce sont des choses qui sont arrivées. Il y a encore le sergent Radoub. On peut lui parler. Il dira. Puisque c’est lui qui nous a rencontrés dans un bois. Trois. Je vous dis trois enfants. Même que l’aîné s’appelle René-Jean. Je puis prouver tout cela. L’autre s’appelle Gros-Alain, et l’autre s’appelle Georgette. Mon mari est mort. On l’a tué. Il était métayer à Siscoignard. Vous avez l’air d’une bonne femme. Enseignez-moi mon chemin. Je ne suis pas une folle, je suis une mère. J’ai perdu mes enfants. Je les cherche. Voilà tout. Je ne sais pas au juste d’où je viens. J’ai dormi cette nuit-ci sur de la paille dans une grange. La Tourgue, voilà où je vais. Je ne suis pas une voleuse. Vous voyez bien que je dis la vérité. On devrait m’aider à retrouver mes enfants. Je ne suis pas du pays. J’ai été fusillée, mais je ne sais pas où.

La paysanne hocha la tête et dit:

— Ecoutez, la passante. Dans des temps de révolution, il ne faut pas dire des choses qu’on ne comprend pas. Ça peut vous faire arrêter.

— Mais la Tourgue! cria la mère. Madame, pour l’amour de l’enfant Jésus et de la sainte bonne Vierge du paradis, je vous en prie, madame, je vous en supplie, je vous en conjure, dites-moi par où l’on va pour aller à la Tourgue!

La paysanne se mit en colère.

— Je ne le sais pas! et je le saurais que je ne le dirais pas! Ce sont là de mauvais endroits. On ne va pas là.

— J’y vais pourtant, dit la mère.

Et elle se remit en route.

La paysanne la regarda s’éloigner et grommela:

— Il faut cependant qu’elle mange.

Elle courut après Michelle Fléchard et lui mit une galette de blé noir dans la main.

— Voilà pour votre souper.

Michelle Fléchard prit le pain de sarrasin, ne répondit pas, ne tourna pas la tête, et continua de marcher.

Elle sortit du village. Comme elle atteignait les dernières maisons, elle rencontra trois petits enfants déguenillés et pieds nus, qui passaient. Elle s’approcha d’eux et dit:

— Ceux-ci, c’est deux filles et un garçon.

Et voyant qu’ils regardaient son pain, elle le leur donna.

Les enfants prirent le pain et eurent peur.

Elle s’enfonça dans la forêt.

IV. UNE MEPRISE

Cependant, ce jour-là même, avant que l’aube parût, dans l’obscurité indistincte de la forêt, il s’était passé, sur le tronçon de chemin qui va de Javené à Lécousse, ceci:

Tout est chemin creux dans le Bocage, et, entre toute, la route de Javené à Parigné par Lécousse est très encaissée. De plus, tortueuse. C’est plutôt un ravin qu’un chemin. Cette route vient de Vitré et a eu l’honneur de cahoter le carrosse de madame de Sévigné. Elle est comme murée à droite et à gauche par les haies. Pas de lieu meilleur pour une embuscade.

Ce matin-là, une heure avant que Michelle Fléchard, sur un autre point de la forêt, arrivât dans ce premier village où elle avait eu la sépulcrale apparition de la charrette escortée de gendarmes, il y avait dans les halliers que la route de Javené traverse au sortir du pont sur le Couesnon, un pêle-mêle d’hommes invisibles. Les branches cachaient tout. Ces hommes étaient des paysans, tous vêtus du grigo, sayon de poil que portaient les rois de Bretagne au sixième siècle et les paysans au dix-huitième. Ces hommes étaient armés, les uns de fusils, les autres de cognées. Ceux qui avaient des cognées venaient de préparer dans une clairière une sorte de bûcher de fagots secs et de rondins auquel on n’avait plus qu’à mettre le feu. Ceux qui avaient des fusils étaient groupés des deux côtés du chemin dans une posture d’attente. Qui eût pu voir à travers les feuilles eût aperçu partout des doigts sur des détentes et des canons de carabine braqués dans les embrasures que font les entrecroisements des branchages. Ces gens étaient à l’affût. Tous les fusils convergeaient sur la route, que le point du jour blanchissait.

Dans ce crépuscule des voix basses dialoguaient.

— Es-tu sûr de ça?

— Dame, on le dit.

— Elle va passer?

— On dit qu’elle est dans le pays.

— Il ne faut pas qu’elle en sorte.

— Il faut la brûler.

— Nous sommes trois villages venus pour cela.

— Oui, mais l’escorte?

— On tuera l’escorte.

— Mais est-ce que c’est par cette route-ci qu’elle passe?

— On le dit.

— C’est donc alors qu’elle viendrait de Vitré?

— Pourquoi pas?

— Mais c’est qu’on disait qu’elle venait de Fougères.

— Qu’elle vienne de Fougères ou de Vitré, elle vient du diable.

— Oui.

— Et il faut qu’elle y retourne.

— Oui.

— C’est donc à Parigné qu’elle irait?

— Il paraît.

— Elle n’ira pas.

— Non.

— Non, non, non!

— Attention.

Il devenait utile de se taire en effet, car il commençait à faire un peu jour.

Tout à coup les hommes embusqués retinrent leur respiration; on entendit un bruit de roues et de chevaux. Ils regardèrent à travers les branches et distinguèrent confusément dans le chemin creux une longue charrette, une escorte à cheval, quelque chose sur la charrette; cela venait à eux.

— La voilà! dit celui qui paraissait le chef.

— Oui, dit un des guetteurs, avec l’escorte.

— Combien d’hommes d’escorte?

— Douze.

— On disait qu’ils étaient vingt.

— Douze ou vingt, tuons tout.

— Attendons qu’ils soient en pleine portée.

Peu après, à un tournant du chemin, la charrette et l’escorte apparurent.

— Vive le roi! cria le chef paysan.

Cent coups de fusil partirent à la fois.

Quand la fumée se dissipa, l’escorte aussi était dissipée. Sept cavaliers étaient tombés, cinq s’étaient enfuis. Les paysans coururent à la charrette.

— Tiens, s’écria le chef, ce n’est pas la guillotine. C’est une échelle.

La charrette avait en effet pour tout chargement une longue échelle.

Les deux chevaux s’étaient abattus, blessés; le charretier avait été tué, mais pas exprès.

— C’est égal, dit le chef, une échelle escortée est suspecte. Cela allait du côté de Parigné. C’était pour l’escalade de la Tourgue, bien sûr.

— Brûlons l’échelle, crièrent les paysans.

Et ils brûlèrent l’échelle.

Quant à la funèbre charrette qu’ils attendaient, elle suivait une autre route, et elle était déjà à deux lieues plus loin, dans ce village où Michelle Fléchard la vit passer au soleil levant.

V. VOX IN DESERTO

Michelle Fléchard, en quittant les trois enfants auxquels elle avait donné son pain, s’était mise à marcher au hasard à travers le bois.

Puisqu’on ne voulait pas lui montrer son chemin, il fallait bien qu’elle le trouvât toute seule. Par instants elle s’asseyait, et elle se relevait, et elle s’asseyait encore. Elle avait cette fatigue lugubre qu’on a d’abord dans les muscles, puis qui passe dans les os; fatigue d’esclave. Elle était esclave en effet. Esclave de ses enfants perdus. Il fallait les retrouver; chaque minute écoulée pouvait être leur perte; qui a un tel devoir n’a plus de droit; reprendre haleine lui était interdit. Mais elle était bien lasse. A ce degré d’épuisement, un pas de plus est une question. Le pourra-t-on faire? Elle marchait depuis le matin; elle n’avait plus rencontré de village, ni même de maison. Elle prit d’abord le sentier qu’il fallait, puis celui qu’il ne fallait pas, et elle finit par se perdre au milieu des branches pareilles les unes aux autres. Approchait-elle du but? Touchait-elle au terme de sa passion? Elle était dans la voie douloureuse, et elle sentait l’accablement de la dernière station. Allait-elle tomber sur la route et expirer là? À un certain moment, avancer encore lui sembla impossible, le soleil déclinait, la forêt était obscure, les sentiers s’étaient effacés sous l’herbe, et elle ne sut plus que devenir. Elle n’avait plus que Dieu. Elle se mit à appeler, personne ne répondit.

Elle regarda autour d’elle, elle vit une claire-voie dans les branches, elle se dirigea de ce côté-là, et brusquement se trouva hors du bois.

Elle avait devant elle un vallon étroit comme une tranchée, au fond duquel coulait dans les pierres un clair filet d’eau. Elle s’aperçut alors qu’elle avait une soif ardente. Elle alla à cette eau, s’agenouilla, et but.

Elle profita de ce qu’elle était à genoux pour faire sa prière.

En se relevant, elle chercha à s’orienter.

Elle enjamba le ruisseau.

Au delà du petit vallon se prolongeait à perte de vue un vaste plateau couvert de broussailles courtes, qui, à partir du ruisseau, montait en plan incliné et emplissait tout l’horizon. La forêt était une solitude, ce plateau était un désert. Dans la forêt, derrière chaque buisson on pouvait rencontrer quelqu’un; sur le plateau, aussi loin que le regard pouvait s’étendre, on ne voyait rien. Quelques oiseaux qui avaient l’air de fuir volaient dans les bruyères.

Alors, en présence de cet abandon immense, sentant fléchir ses genoux, et comme devenue insensée, la mère éperdue jeta à la solitude ce cri étrange:

— Y a-t-il quelqu’un ici?

Et elle attendit la réponse.

On répondit.

Une voix sourde et profonde éclata, cette voix venait du fond de l’horizon, elle se répercuta d’écho en écho; cela ressemblait à un coup de tonnerre à moins que ce ne fût un coup de canon; et il semblait que cette voix répliquait à la question de la mère et qu’elle disait: Oui.

Puis le silence se fit.

La mère se dressa, ranimée; il y avait quelqu’un. Il lui paraissait qu’elle avait maintenant à qui parler; elle venait de boire et de prier; les forces lui revenaient, elle se mit à gravir le plateau du côté où elle avait entendu l’énorme voix lointaine.

Tout à coup elle vit sortir de l’extrême horizon une haute tour. Cette tour était seule dans ce sauvage paysage; un rayon du soleil couchant l’empourprait. Elle était à plus d’une lieue de distance. Derrière cette tour se perdait dans la brume une grande verdure diffuse qui était la forêt de Fougères.

Cette tour lui apparaissait sur le même point de l’horizon d’où était venu ce grondement qui lui avait semblé un appel. Etait-ce cette tour qui avait fait ce bruit?

Michelle Fléchard était arrivée sur le sommet du plateau; elle n’avait plus devant elle que de la plaine.

Elle marcha vers la tour.

VI. SITUATION

Le moment était venu.

L’inexorable tenait l’impitoyable.

Cimourdain avait Lantenac dans sa main.

Le vieux royaliste rebelle était pris au gîte; évidemment il ne pouvait échapper; et Cimourdain entendait que le marquis fût décapité chez lui, sur place, sur ses terres, et en quelque sorte dans sa maison, afin que la demeure féodale vît tomber la tête de l’homme féodal, et que l’exemple fût mémorable.

C’est pourquoi il avait envoyé chercher à Fougères la guillotine. On vient de la voir en route.

Tuer Lantenac, c’était tuer la Vendée; tuer la Vendée, c’était sauver la France. Cimourdain n’hésitait pas. Cet homme était à l’aise dans la férocité du devoir.

Le marquis semblait perdu; de ce côté Cimourdain était tranquille, mais il était inquiet d’un autre côté. La lutte serait certainement affreuse; Gauvain la dirigerait, et voudrait s’y mêler peut-être; il y avait du soldat dans ce jeune chef; il était homme à se jeter dans ce pugilat; pourvu qu’il n’y fût pas tué? Gauvain! son enfant! l’unique affection qu’il eût sur la terre! Gauvain avait eu du bonheur jusque-là, mais le bonheur se lasse. Cimourdain tremblait. Sa destinée avait cela d’étrange qu’il était entre deux Gauvain, l’un dont il voulait la mort, l’autre dont il voulait la vie.

Le coup de canon qui avait secoué Georgette dans son berceau et appelé la mère du fond des solitudes n’avait pas fait que cela. Soit hasard, soit intention du pointeur, le boulet, qui n’était pourtant qu’un boulet d’avertissement, avait frappé, crevé et arraché à demi l’armature de barreaux de fer qui masquait et fermait la grande meurtrière du premier étage de la tour. Les assiégés n’avaient pas eu le temps de réparer cette avarie.

Les assiégés s’étaient vantés. Ils avaient très peu de munitions. Leur situation, insistons-y, était plus critique encore que les assiégeants ne le supposaient. S’ils avaient eu assez de poudre, ils auraient fait sauter la Tourgue, eux et l’ennemi dedans; c’était leur rêve; mais toutes leurs réserves étaient épuisées. A peine avaient-ils trente coups à tirer par homme. Ils avaient beaucoup de fusils, d’espingoles et de pistolets, et peu de cartouches. Ils avaient chargé toutes les armes afin de pouvoir faire un feu continu; mais combien de temps durerait ce feu? Il fallait à la fois le nourrir et le ménager. Là était la difficulté. Heureusement — bonheur sinistre — la lutte serait surtout d'homme à homme, et à l'arme blanche; au sabre et au poignard. On se colleterait plus qu'on ne se fusillerait. On se hacherait; c'était là leur espérance.

L'intérieur de la tour semblait inexpugnable. Dans la salle basse où aboutissait le trou de brèche, était la retirade, cette barricade savamment construite par Lantenac, qui obstruait l'entrée. En arrière de la retirade, une longue table était couverte d'armes chargées, tromblons, carabines et mousquetons, et de sabres, de haches et de poignards. N'ayant pu utiliser pour faire sauter la tour le cachot-crypte des oubliettes qui communiquait avec la salle basse, le marquis avait fait fermer la porte de ce caveau. Au-dessus de la salle basse était la chambre ronde du premier étage à laquelle on n'arrivait que par une vis-de-Saint-Gilles très étroite; cette chambre, meublée, comme la salle basse,d'une table couverte d'armes toutes prêtes et sur lesquelles on n'avait qu'à mettre la main, était éclairée par la grande meurtrière dont un boulet venait de défoncer le grillage; au-dessus de cette chambre, l'escalier en spirale menait à la chambre ronde du second étage où était la porte de fer donnant sur le pont-châtelet. Cette chambre du second s'appelait indistinctement *la chambre de la porte de fer* ou *la chambre des miroirs*, à cause de beaucoup de petits miroirs, accrochés à cru sur la pierre nue à de vieux clous rouillés, bizarre recherche mêlée à la sauvagerie. Les chambres d'en haut ne pouvant être utilement défendues, cette chambre des miroirs était ce que Mannesson-Mallet, le législateur des places fortes, appelle «le dernier poste où les assiégés font une capitulation». Il s'agissait, nous l'avons dit déjà, d'empêcher les assiégeants d'arriver là.

Cette chambre ronde du second étage était éclairée par des meurtrières; pourtant une torche y brûlait. Cette torche, plantée dans une torchère de fer pareille à celle de la salle basse, avait été allumée par l'Imânus, qui avait placé tout à côté l'extrémité de la mèche soufrée. Soins horribles.

Au fond de la salle basse, sur un long tréteau, il y avait à manger, comme dans une caverne homérique; de grands plats de riz, du fur, qui est une bouillie de blé noir, de la godnivelle, qui est un hachis de veau, des rondeaux de houichepote, pâte de farine et de fruits cuits à l'eau, de la badrée, des pots de cidre. Buvait et mangeait qui voulait.

Le coup de canon les mit tous en arrêt. On n’avait plus qu’une demi-heure devant soi.

L’Imânus, du haut de la tour, surveillait l’approche des assiégeants. Lantenac avait commandé de ne pas tirer et de les laisser arriver. Il avait dit:

— Ils sont quatre mille cinq cents. Tuer dehors est inutile. Ne tuez que dedans. Dedans, l’égalité se refait.

Et il avait ajouté en riant: — Egalité, Fraternité.

Il était convenu que lorsque l’ennemi commencerait son mouvement, l’Imânus, avec sa trompe, avertirait.

Tous, en silence, postés derrière la retirade, ou sur les marches des escaliers, attendaient, une main sur leur mousquet, l’autre sur leur rosaire.

La situation se précisait, et était ceci:

Pour les assaillants, une brèche à gravir, une barricade à forcer, trois salles superposées à prendre de haute lutte l’une après l’autre, deux escaliers tournants à emporter marche par marche, sous une nuée de mitraille; pour les assiégés, mourir.

VII. PRÉLIMINAIRES

Gauvain de son côté mettait en ordre l’attaque. Il donnait ses dernières instructions à Cimourdain, qui, on s’en souvient, devait, sans prendre part à l’action, garder le plateau, et à Guéchamp qui devait rester en observation avec le gros de l’armée dans le camp de la forêt. Il était entendu que ni la batterie basse du bois ni la batterie haute du plateau ne tireraient, à moins qu’il n’y eût sortie ou tentative d’évasion. Gauvain se réservait le commandement de la colonne de brèche. C’est là ce qui troublait Cimourdain.

Le soleil venait de se coucher.

Une tour en rase campagne ressemble à un navire en pleine mer. Elle doit être attaquée de la même façon. C’est plutôt un abordage qu’un assaut. Pas de canon. Rien d’inutile. A quoi bon canonner des murs de quinze pieds d’épaisseur? Un trou dans le sabord, les uns qui le forcent, les autres qui le barrent, des haches, des couteaux, des pistolets, les poings et les dents. Telle est l’aventure.

Gauvain sentait qu’il n’y avait pas d’autre moyen d’enlever la Tourgue. Une attaque où l’on se voit le blanc des yeux, rien de plus meurtrier. Il connaissait le redoutable intérieur de la tour, y ayant été enfant.

Il songeait profondément.

Cependant, à quelques pas de lui, son lieutenant, Guéchamp, une longue-vue à la main, examinait l’horizon du côté de Parigné. Tout à coup Guéchamp s’écria:

— Ah! enfin!

Cette exclamation tira Gauvain de sa rêverie.

— Qu’y a-t-il, Guéchamp?

— Mon commandant, il y a que voici l’échelle.

— L’échelle de sauvetage?

— Oui.

— Comment? nous ne l’avions pas encore?

— Non, commandant. Et j’étais inquiet. L’exprès que j’avais envoyé à Javené était revenu.

— Je le sais.

— Il avait annoncé qu’il avait trouvé à la charpenterie de Javené l’échelle de la dimension voulue, qu’il l’avait réquisitionnée, qu’il avait fait mettre l’échelle sur une charrette, qu’il avait requis une escorte de douze cavaliers, et qu’il avait vu partir pour Parigné la charrette, l’escorte et l’échelle. Sur quoi, il était revenu à franc étrier.

— Et nous avait fait ce rapport. Et il avait ajouté que la charrette, étant bien attelée et partie vers deux heures du matin, serait ici avant le coucher du soleil. Je sais tout cela. Eh bien?

— Eh bien, mon commandant, le soleil vient de se coucher et la charrette qui apporte l’échelle n’est pas encore arrivée.

— Est-ce possible? Mais il faut pourtant que nous attaquions. L’heure est venue. Si nous tardions, les assiégés croiraient que nous reculons.

— Mon commandant, on peut attaquer.

— Mais l’échelle de sauvetage est nécessaire.

— Sans doute.

— Mais nous ne l’avons pas.

— Nous l’avons.

— Comment?

— C’est ce qui m’a fait dire: Ah! enfin! La charrette n’arrivait pas; j’ai pris ma longue-vue, et j’ai examiné la route de Parigné à la Tourgue, et, mon commandant, je suis content. La charrette est là-bas avec l’escorte. Elle descend une côte. Vous pouvez la voir.

Gauvain prit la longue-vue et regarda.

— En effet. La voici. Il ne fait plus assez de jour pour tout distinguer. Mais on voit l’escorte, c’est bien cela. Seulement l’escorte me paraît plus nombreuse que vous ne le disiez, Guéchamp.

— Et à moi aussi.

— Ils sont à environ un quart de lieue.

— Mon commandant, l’échelle de sauvetage sera ici dans un quart d’heure.

— On peut attaquer.

C’était bien une charrette en effet qui arrivait, mais ce n’était pas celle qu’ils croyaient.

Gauvain, en se retournant, vit derrière lui le sergent Radoub, droit, les yeux baissés, dans l’attitude du salut militaire.

— Qu’est-ce, sergent Radoub?

— Citoyen commandant, nous, les hommes du bataillon du Bonnet-Rouge, nous avons une grâce à vous demander.

— Laquelle?

— De nous faire tuer.

— Ah! dit Gauvain.

— Voulez-vous avoir cette bonté?

— Mais … c’est selon, dit Gauvain.

— Voici, commandant. Depuis l’affaire de Dol, vous nous ménagez. Nous sommes encore douze.

— Eh bien?

— Ça nous humilie.

— Vous êtes la réserve.

— Nous aimons mieux être l’avant-garde.

— Mais j’ai besoin de vous pour décider le succès à la fin d’une action. Je vous conserve.

— Trop.

— C’est égal. Vous êtes dans la colonne. Vous marchez.

— Derrière. C’est le droit de Paris de marcher devant.

— J’y penserai, sergent Radoub.

— Pensez-y aujourd’hui, mon commandant. Voici une occasion. Il va y avoir un rude croc-en-jambe à donner ou à recevoir. Ce sera dru. La Tourgue brûlera les doigts de ceux qui y toucheront. Nous demandons la faveur d’en être.

Le sergent s’interrompit, se tordit la moustache, et reprit d’une voix

Altérée:

— Et puis, voyez-vous, mon commandant, dans cette tour, il y a nos mômes. Nous avons là nos enfants, les enfants du bataillon, nos trois enfants. Cette affreuse face de Gribouille-mon-cul-te-baise, le nommé Brise-Bleu, le nommé Imânus, ce Gouge-le-Bruant, ce Bouge-le-Gruand, ce Fouge-le-Truand, ce tonnerre de Dieu d’homme du diable, menace nos enfants. Nos enfants, nos mioches, mon commandant! Quand tous les tremblements s’en mêleraient, nous ne voulons pas qu’il leur arrive malheur. Entendez-vous ça, autorité? Nous ne le voulons pas. Tantôt, j’ai profité de ce qu’on ne se battait pas, et je suis monté sur le plateau, et je les ai regardés par une fenêtre, oui, ils sont vraiment là, on peut les voir du bord du ravin, et je les ai vus, et je leur ai fait peur, à ces amours. Mon commandant, s’il tombe un seul cheveu de leurs petites caboches de chérubins, je le jure, mille noms de noms de tout ce qu’il y a de sacré, moi le sergent Radoub, je m’en prends à la carcasse du Père Eternel. Et voici ce que dit le bataillon: nous voulons que les mômes soient sauvés, ou être tous tués. C’est notre droit, ventraboumine! oui, tous tués. Et maintenant, salut et respect.

Gauvain tendit la main à Radoub, et dit:

— Vous êtes des braves. Vous serez de la colonne d’attaque. Je vous partage en deux. Je mets six de vous à l’avant-garde, afin qu’on avance, et j’en mets six à l’arrière-garde, afin qu’on ne recule pas.

— Est-ce toujours moi qui commande les douze?

— Certes.

— Alors, mon commandant, merci. Car je suis de l’avant-garde.

Radoub refit le salut militaire et regagna le rang.

Gauvain tira sa montre, dit quelques mots à l’oreille de Guéchamp, et la colonne d’attaque commença à se former.

VIII. LE VERBE ET LE RUGISSEMENT

Cependant Cimourdain, qui n’avait pas encore gagné son poste du plateau, et qui était à côté de Gauvain, s’approcha d’un clairon.

— Sonne à la trompe, lui dit-il.

Le clairon sonna, la trompe répondit.

Un son de clairon et un son de trompe s’échangèrent encore.

— Qu’est-ce que c’est? demanda Gauvain à Guéchamp. Que veut Cimourdain?

Cimourdain s’était avancé vers la tour, un mouchoir blanc à la main.

Il éleva la voix.

— Hommes qui êtes dans la tour, me connaissez-vous?

Une voix, la voix de l’Imânus, répliqua du haut de la tour:

— Oui.

Les deux voix alors se parlèrent et se répondirent et l’on entendit ceci:

— Je suis l’envoyé de la république.

— Tu es l’ancien curé de Parigné.

— Je suis le délégué du comité du salut public.

— Tu es un prêtre.

— Je suis le représentant de la loi.

— Tu es un renégat.

— Je suis le commissaire de la révolution.

— Tu es un apostat.

— Je suis Cimourdain.

— Tu es le démon.

— Vous me connaissez?

— Nous t’exécrons.

— Seriez-vous contents de me tenir en votre pouvoir?

— Nous sommes ici dix-huit qui donnerions nos têtes pour avoir la tienne.

— Eh bien, je viens me livrer à vous.

On entendit au haut de la tour un éclat de rire sauvage et ce cri:

— Viens!

Il y avait dans le camp un profond silence d’attente.

Cimourdain reprit:

— A une condition.

— Laquelle?

— Ecoutez.

— Parle.

— Vous me haïssez?

— Oui.

— Moi, je vous aime. Je suis votre frère.

La voix du haut de la tour répondit:

— Oui, Caïn.

Cimourdain repartit avec une inflexion singulière, qui était à la fois haute et douce:

— Insultez, mais écoutez. Je viens ici en parlementaire. Oui, vous êtes mes frères. Vous êtes de pauvres hommes égarés. Je suis votre ami. Je suis la lumière et je parle à l'ignorance. La lumière contient toujours de la fraternité. D'ailleurs, est-ce que nous n'avons pas tous la même mère, la patrie? Eh bien, écoutez-moi. Vous saurez plus tard, ou vos enfants sauront, ou les enfants de vos enfants sauront que tout ce qui se fait en ce moment se fait par l'accomplissement des lois d'en haut, et que ce qu'il y a dans la révolution, c'est Dieu. En attendant le moment où toutes les consciences, même les vôtres, comprendront, et où tous les fanatismes, même les nôtres, s'évanouiront, en attendant que cette grande clarté soit faite, personne n'aura-t-il pitié de vos ténèbres? Je viens à vous, je vous offre ma tête; je fais plus, je vous tends la main. Je vous demande la grâce de me perdre pour vous sauver. J'ai pleins pouvoirs, et ce que je dis, je le puis. C'est un instant suprême; je fais un dernier effort. Oui, celui qui vous parle est un citoyen, et dans ce citoyen, oui, il y a un prêtre. Le citoyen vous combat, mais le prêtre vous supplie. Ecoutez-moi. Beaucoup d'entre vous ont des femmes et des enfants. Je prends la défense de vos enfants et de vos femmes. Je prends leur défense contre vous. O mes frères…

— Va, prêche! ricana l'Imânus.

Cimourdain continua:

— Mes frères, ne laissez pas sonner l'heure exécrable. On va ici s'entr'égorger. Beaucoup d'entre nous qui sommes ici devant vous ne verront pas le soleil de demain; oui, beaucoup d'entre nous périront, et vous, vous tous, vous allez mourir. Faites-vous grâce à vous-mêmes. Pourquoi verser tout ce sang quand c'est inutile? Pourquoi tuer tant d'hommes quand deux suffisent?

— Deux? dit l'Imânus.

— Oui. Deux.

— Qui?

— Lantenac et moi.

Et Cimourdain éleva la voix:

— Deux hommes sont de trop, Lantenac pour nous, moi pour vous. Voici ce que je vous offre, et vous aurez tous la vie sauve: donnez-nous Lantenac, et prenez-moi. Lantenac sera guillotiné, et vous ferez de moi ce que vous voudrez.

— Prêtre, hurla l’Imânus, si nous t’avions, nous te brûlerions à petit feu.

— J’y consens, dit Cimourdain.

Et il reprit:

— Vous, les condamnés qui êtes dans cette tour, vous pouvez tous dans une heure être vivants et libres. Je vous apporte le salut. Acceptez-vous?

L’Imânus éclata.

— Tu n’es pas seulement scélérat, tu es fou. Ah çà, pourquoi viens-tu nous déranger? Qui est-ce qui te prie de venir nous parler? Nous, livrer monseigneur! Qu’est-ce que tu veux?

— Sa tête. Et je vous offre…

— Ta peau. Car nous t’écorcherions comme un chien, curé Cimourdain. Eh bien, non, ta peau ne vaut pas sa tête. Va-t’en.

— Cela va être horrible. Une dernière fois, réfléchissez.

La nuit venait pendant ces paroles sombres qu’on entendait au dedans de la tour comme au dehors. Le marquis de Lantenac se taisait et laissait faire. Les chefs ont de ces sinistres égoïsmes. C’est un des droits de la responsabilité.

L’Imânus jeta sa voix par-dessus Cimourdain, et cria:

— Hommes qui nous attaquez, nous vous avons dit nos propositions, elles sont faites, et nous n’avons rien à y changer. Acceptez-les, sinon, malheur! Consentez-vous? Nous vous rendrons les trois enfants qui sont là, et vous nous donnerez la sortie libre et la vie sauve, à tous.

— A tous, oui, répondit Cimourdain, excepté un.

— Lequel?

— Lantenac.

— Monseigneur! Livrer monseigneur! Jamais.

— Il nous faut Lantenac.

— Jamais.

— Nous ne pouvons traiter qu’à cette condition.

— Alors commencez.

Le silence se fit.

L’Imânus, après avoir sonné avec sa trompe le coup de signal, redescendit; le marquis mit l’épée à la main; les dix-neuf assiégés se groupèrent en silence dans la salle basse, en arrière de la retirade, et se mirent à genoux; ils entendaient le pas mesuré de la colonne d’attaque qui avançait vers la tour dans l’obscurité; ce bruit se rapprochait; tout à coup ils le sentirent tout près d’eux, à la bouche même de la brèche. Alors tous, agenouillés, épaulèrent à travers les fentes de la retirade leurs fusils et leurs espingoles, et l’un d’eux, Grand-Francoeur, qui était le prêtre Turmeau, se leva, et, un sabre nu dans la main droite, un crucifix dans la main gauche, dit d’une voix grave:

— Au nom du Père, du Fils et du Saint-Esprit!

Tous firent feu à la fois, et la lutte s’engagea.

IX. TITANS CONTRE GÉANTS

Cela fut en effet épouvantable.

Ce corps à corps dépassa tout ce qu’on avait pu rêver.

Pour trouver quelque chose de pareil, il faudrait remonter aux grands duels d’Eschyle ou aux antiques tueries féodales; à ces «*attaques à armes courtes*» qui ont duré jusqu’au dix-septième siècle, quand on pénétrait dans les places fortes par les fausses brayes; assauts tragiques, où, dit le vieux sergent de la province d’Alentejo, «les fourneaux ayant fait leur effet, les assiégeants s’avanceront portant des planches couvertes de lames de fer-blanc, armés de rondaches et de mantelets, et fournis de quantité de grenades, faisant abandonner les retranchements ou retirades à ceux de la place, et s’en rendront maîtres, poussant vigoureusement les assiégés».

Le lieu d’attaque était horrible; c’était une de ces brèches qu’on appelle en langue du métier *brèches sans voûte*, c’est-à-dire, on se le rappelle, une crevasse traversant le mur de part en part et non une fracture évasée à ciel ouvert. La poudre avait agi comme une vrille. L’effet de la mine avait été si violent que la tour avait été fendue par l’explosion à plus de quarante pieds au-dessus du fourneau, mais ce n’était qu’une lézarde, et la déchirure praticable qui servait de brèche et donnait entrée dans la salle basse ressemblait plutôt au coup de lance qui perce qu’au coup de hache qui entaille.

C’était une ponction au flanc de la tour, une longue fracture pénétrante, quelque chose comme un puits couché à terre, un couloir serpentant et montant comme un intestin à travers une muraille de quinze pieds d’épaisseur, on ne sait quel informe cylindre encombré d’obstacles, de pièges, d’explosions, où l’on se heurtait le front aux granits, les pieds aux gravats, les yeux aux ténèbres.

Les assaillants avaient devant eux ce porche noir, bouche de gouffre ayant pour mâchoires, en bas et en haut, toutes les pierres de la muraille déchiquetée; une gueule de requin n’a pas plus de dents que cet arrachement effroyable. Il fallait entrer dans ce trou, et en sortir.

Dedans éclatait la mitraille, dehors se dressait la retirade. Dehors, c’est-à-dire dans la salle basse du rez-de-chaussée.

Les rencontres de sapeurs dans les galeries couvertes quand la contre-mine vient couper la mine, les boucheries à la hache sous les entre-ponts des vaisseaux qui s’abordent dans les batailles navales, ont seules cette férocité. Se battre au fond d’une fosse, c’est le dernier degré de l’horreur. Il est affreux de s’entre-tuer avec un plafond sur la tête. Au moment où le premier flot des assiégeants entra, toute la retirade se couvrit d’éclairs, et ce fut quelque chose comme la foudre éclatant sous terre. Le tonnerre assaillant répliqua au tonnerre embusqué. Les détonations se ripostèrent; le cri de Gauvain s’éleva: Fonçons! Puis le cri de Lantenac: Faites ferme contre l’ennemi! Puis le cri de l’Imânus: A moi les Mainiaux! Puis des cliquetis, sabres contre sabres, et, coup sur coup, d’effroyables décharges tuant tout. La torche accrochée au mur éclairait vaguement toute cette épouvante. Impossible de rien distinguer; on était dans une noirceur rougeâtre; qui entrait là était subitement sourd et aveugle, sourd du bruit, aveugle de la fumée. Les hommes mis hors de combat gisaient parmi les décombres, on marchait sur des cadavres, on écrasait des plaies, on broyait des membres cassés d’où sortaient des hurlements, on avait les pieds mordus par des mourants. Par instants, il y avait des silences plus hideux que le bruit. On se colletait, on entendait l’effrayant souffle des bouches, puis des grincements, des râles, des imprécations, et le tonnerre recommençait. Un ruisseau de sang sortait de la tour par la brèche, et se répandait dans l’ombre. Cette flaque sombre fumait dehors dans l’herbe.

On eût dit que c’était la tour elle-même qui saignait et que la géante était blessée.

Chose surprenante, cela ne faisait presque pas de bruit dehors. La nuit était très noire, et dans la plaine et dans la forêt il y avait autour de la forteresse attaquée une sorte de paix funèbre. Dedans c’était l’enfer, dehors c’était le sépulcre. Ce choc d’hommes s’exterminant dans les ténèbres, ces mousqueteries, ces clameurs, ces rages, tout ce tumulte expirait sous la masse des murs et des voûtes, l’air manquait au bruit, et au carnage s’ajoutait l’étouffement. Hors de la tour, cela s’entendait à peine. Les petits enfants dormaient pendant ce temps-là.

L’acharnement augmentait. La retirade tenait bon. Rien de plus malaisé à forcer que ce genre de barricade en chevron rentrant. Si les assiégés avaient contre eux le nombre, ils avaient pour eux la position. La colonne d’attaque perdait beaucoup de monde. Alignée et allongée dehors au pied de la tour, elle s’enfonçait lentement dans l’ouverture de la brèche, et se raccourcissait, comme une couleuvre qui entre dans son trou.

Gauvain, qui avait des imprudences de jeune chef, était dans la salle basse au plus fort de la mêlée, avec toute la mitraille autour de lui. Ajoutons qu’il avait la confiance de l’homme qui n’a jamais été blessé.

Comme il se retournait pour donner un ordre, une lueur de mousqueterie éclaira un visage tout près de lui.

— Cimourdain! s’écria-t-il, qu’est-ce que vous venez faire ici?

C’était Cimourdain en effet. Cimourdain répondit:

— Je viens être près de toi.

— Mais vous allez vous faire tuer!

— Hé bien, toi, qu’est-ce que tu fais donc?

— Mais je suis nécessaire ici. Vous pas.

— Puisque tu y es, il faut que j’y sois.

— Non, mon maître.

— Si, mon enfant!

Et Cimourdain resta près de Gauvain.

Les morts s’entassaient sur les pavés de la salle basse.

Bien que la retirade ne fût pas forcée encore, le nombre évidemment devait finir par vaincre. Les assaillants étaient à l’abri; dix assiégeants tombaient contre un assiégé, mais les assiégeants se renouvelaient. Les assiégeants croissaient et les assiégés décroissaient.

Les dix-neuf assiégés étaient tous derrière la retirade, l’attaque étant là. Ils avaient des morts et des blessés. Quinze tout au plus combattaient encore. Un des plus farouches, Chante-en-hiver, avait été affreusement mutilé. C’était un breton trapu et crépu, de l’espèce petite et vivace. Il avait un oeil crevé et la mâchoire brisée. Il pouvait encore marcher. Il se traîna dans l’escalier en spirale, et monta dans la chambre du premier étage, espérant pouvoir là prier et mourir.

Il s’était adossé au mur près de la meurtrière pour tâcher de respirer un peu.

En bas la boucherie devant la retirade était de plus en plus horrible. Dans une intermittence, entre deux décharges, Cimourdain éleva la voix:

— Assiégés! cria-t-il. Pourquoi faire couler le sang plus longtemps? Vous êtes pris. Rendez-vous. Songez que nous sommes quatre mille cinq cents contre dix-neuf, c’est-à-dire plus de deux cents contre un. Rendez-vous.

— Cessons ce marivaudage, répondit le marquis de Lantenac.

Et vingt balles ripostèrent à Cimourdain.

La retirade ne montait pas jusqu’à la voûte; cela permettait aux assiégés de tirer par-dessus, mais cela permettait aux assiégeants de l’escalader.

— L’assaut à la retirade! cria Gauvain. Y a-t-il quelqu’un de bonne volonté pour escalader la retirade?

— Moi, dit le sergent Radoub.

X. RADOUB

Ici les assaillants eurent une stupeur. Radoub était entré par le trou de brèche, à la tête de la colonne d’attaque, lui sixième, et sur ces six hommes du bataillon parisien, quatre étaient déjà tombés. Après qu’il eut jeté ce cri: Moi! on le vit, non avancer, mais reculer, et, baissé, courbé, rampant presque entre les jambes des combattants, regagner l’ouverture de la brèche, et sortir. Etait-ce une fuite? Un tel homme fuir? Qu’est-ce que cela voulait dire?

Arrivé hors de la brèche, Radoub, encore aveuglé par la fumée, se frotta les yeux comme pour en ôter l’horreur et la nuit, et, à la lueur des étoiles, regarda la muraille de la tour. Il fit ce signe de tête satisfait qui veut dire: Je ne m’étais pas trompé.

Radoub avait remarqué que la lézarde profonde de l’explosion de la mine montait au-dessus de la brèche jusqu’à cette meurtrière du premier étage dont un boulet avait défoncé et disloqué l’armature de fer. Le réseau des barreaux rompus pendait à demi arraché, et un homme pouvait passer.

Un homme pouvait passer, mais un homme pouvait-il monter? Par la lézarde, oui, à la condition d’être un chat.

C’est ce qu’était Radoub. Il était de cette race que Pindare appelle «les athlètes agiles». On peut être vieux soldat et homme jeune; Radoub, qui avait été garde-française, n’avait pas quarante ans. C’était un Hercule leste.

Radoub posa à terre son mousqueton, ôta sa buffleterie, quitta son habit et sa veste, et ne garda que ses deux pistolets qu’il mit dans la ceinture de son pantalon et son sabre nu qu’il prit entre ses dents. La crosse des deux pistolets passait au-dessus de sa ceinture.

Ainsi allégé de l’inutile, et suivi des yeux dans l’obscurité par tous ceux de la colonne d’attaque qui n’étaient pas encore entrés dans la brèche, il se mit à gravir les pierres de la lézarde du mur comme les marches d’un escalier. N’avoir pas de souliers lui fut utile; rien ne grimpe comme un pied nu; il crispait ses orteils dans les trous des pierres. Il se hissait avec ses poings et s’affermissait avec ses genoux. La montée était rude. C’était quelque chose comme une ascension le long des dents d’une scie. — Heureusement, pensait-il, qu’il n’y a personne dans la chambre du premier étage, car on ne me laisserait pas escalader ainsi.

Il n'avait pas moins de quarante pieds à gravir de cette façon. A mesure qu'il montait, un peu gêné par les pommeaux saillants de ses pistolets, la lézarde allait se rétrécissant, et l'ascension devenait de plus en plus difficile. Le risque de la chute augmentait en même temps que la profondeur du précipice.

Enfin il parvint au rebord de la meurtrière; il écarta le grillage tordu et descellé, il avait largement de quoi passer; il se souleva d'un effort puissant, appuya son genou sur la corniche du rebord, saisit d'une main un tronçon de barreau à droite, de l'autre main un tronçon à gauche, et se dressa jusqu'à mi-corps devant l'embrasure de la meurtrière, le sabre aux dents, suspendu par ses deux poings sur l'abîme.

Il n'avait plus qu'une enjambée à faire pour sauter dans la salle du premier étage.

Mais une face apparut dans la meurtrière.

Radoub vit brusquement devant lui dans l'ombre quelque chose d'effroyable; un oeil crevé, une mâchoire fracassée, un masque sanglant.

Ce masque, qui n'avait plus qu'une prunelle, le regardait.

Ce masque avait deux mains; ces deux mains sortirent de l'ombre et s'avancèrent vers Radoub; l'une, d'une seule poignée, lui prit ses deux pistolets dans sa ceinture, l'autre lui ôta son sabre des dents.

Radoub était désarmé. Son genou glissait sur le plan incliné de la corniche, ses deux poings crispés aux tronçons du grillage suffisaient à peine à le soutenir, et il avait derrière lui quarante pieds de précipice.

Ce masque et ces mains, c'était Chante-en-hiver.

Chante-en-hiver, suffoqué par la fumée qui montait d'en bas, avait réussi à entrer dans l'embrasure de la meurtrière, là l'air extérieur l'avait ranimé, la fraîcheur de la nuit avait figé son sang, et il avait repris un peu de force; tout à coup il avait vu surgir au dehors devant l'ouverture le torse de Radoub; alors, Radoub ayant les mains cramponnées aux barreaux et n'ayant que le choix de se laisser tomber ou de se laisser désarmer, Chante-en-hiver, épouvantable et tranquille, lui avait cueilli ses pistolets à sa ceinture et son sabre entre les dents.

Un duel inouï commença. Le duel du désarmé et du blessé.

Evidemment, le vainqueur c'était le mourant. Une balle suffisait pour jeter

Radoub dans le gouffre béant sous ses pieds.

Par bonheur pour Radoub, Chante-en-hiver, ayant les deux pistolets dans une seule main, ne put en tirer un et fut forcé de se servir du sabre. Il porta un coup de pointe à l’épaule de Radoub. Ce coup de sabre blessa Radoub et le sauva.

Radoub, sans armes, mais ayant toute sa force, dédaigna sa blessure qui d’ailleurs n’avait pas entamé l’os, fit un soubresaut en avant, lâcha les barreaux et bondit dans l’embrasure.

Là il se trouva face à face avec Chante-en-hiver, qui avait jeté le sabre derrière lui et qui tenait les deux pistolets dans ses deux poings.

Chante-en-hiver, dressé sur ses genoux, ajusta Radoub presque à bout portant, mais son bras affaibli tremblait, et il ne tira pas tout de suite.

Radoub profita de ce répit pour éclater de rire.

— Dis donc, cria-t-il, Vilain-à-voir! est-ce que tu crois me faire peur avec ta gueule en boeuf à la mode? Sapristi, comme on t’a délabré le minois!

Chante-en-hiver le visait.

Radoub continua:

— Ce n’est pas pour dire, mais tu as eu la gargoine joliment chiffonnée par la mitraille. Mon pauvre garçon, Bellone t’a fracassé la physionomie. Allons, allons, crache ton petit coup de pistolet, mon bonhomme.

Le coup partit et passa si près de la tête qu’il arracha à Radoub la moitié de l’oreille. Chante-en-hiver éleva l’autre bras armé du second pistolet, mais Radoub ne lui laissa pas le temps de viser.

— J’ai assez d’une oreille de moins, cria-t-il. Tu m’as blessé deux fois. A moi la belle!

Et il se rua sur Chante-en-hiver, lui rejeta le bras en l’air, fit partir le coup qui alla n’importe où, et lui saisit et lui mania sa mâchoire disloquée.

Chante-en-hiver poussa un rugissement et s’évanouit.

Radoub l’enjamba et le laissa dans l’embrasure.

— Maintenant que je t’ai fait savoir mon ultimatum, dit-il, ne bouge plus. Reste là, méchant traîne-à-terre. Tu penses bien que je ne vais pas à présent m’amuser à te massacrer. Rampe à ton aise sur le sol, concitoyen de mes savates. Meurs, c’est toujours ça de fait. C’est tout à l’heure que tu vas savoir que ton curé ne te disait que des bêtises. Va-t’en dans le grand mystère, paysan.

Et il sauta dans la salle du premier étage.

— On n’y voit goutte, grommela-t-il.

Chante-en-hiver s’agitait convulsivement et hurlait à travers l’agonie.

Radoub se retourna.

— Silence! fais-moi le plaisir de te taire, citoyen sans le savoir. Je ne me mêle plus de ton affaire. Je méprise de t’achever. Fiche-moi la paix.

Et, inquiet, il fourra son poing dans ses cheveux, tout en considérant

Chante-en-hiver.

— Ah çà, qu’est-ce que je vais faire? C’est bon tout ça, mais me voilà désarmé. J’avais deux coups à tirer. Tu me les as gaspillés, animal! Et avec ça une fumée qui vous fait aux yeux un mal de chien!

Et rencontrant son oreille déchirée:

— Aïe! dit-il.

Et il reprit:

— Te voilà bien avancé de m’avoir confisqué une oreille! Au fait, j’aime mieux avoir ça de moins qu’autre chose, ça n’est guère qu’un ornement. Tu m’as aussi égratigné à l’épaule, mais ce n’est rien. Expire, villageois, je te pardonne.

Il écouta. Le bruit dans la salle basse était effrayant. Le combat était plus forcené que jamais.

— Ça va bien en bas. C’est égal, ils gueulent vive le roi. Ils crèvent noblement.

Ses pieds cognèrent son sabre à terre. Il le ramassa, et il dit à

Chante-en-hiver qui ne bougeait plus et qui était peut-être mort:

— Vois-tu, homme des bois, pour ce que je voulais faire, mon sabre ou zut, c’est la même chose. Je le reprends par amitié. Mais il me fallait mes pistolets. Que le diable t’emporte, sauvage! Ah çà, qu’est-ce que je vais faire? Je ne suis bon à rien ici.

Il avança dans la salle tâchant de voir et de s’orienter. Tout à coup dans la pénombre, derrière le pilier du milieu, il aperçut une longue table, et sur cette table quelque chose qui brillait vaguement. Il tâta. C’étaient des tromblons, des pistolets, des carabines, une rangée d’armes à feu disposées en ordre et semblant n’attendre que des mains pour les saisir; c’était la réserve de combat préparée par les assiégés pour la deuxième phase de l’assaut; tout un arsenal.

— Un buffet! s’écria Radoub.

Et il se jeta dessus, ébloui.

Alors il devint formidable.

La porte de l’escalier communiquant aux étages d’en haut et d’en bas était visible, toute grande ouverte, à côté de la table chargée d’armes. Radoub laissa tomber son sabre, prit dans ses deux mains deux pistolets à deux coups et les déchargea à la fois au hasard sous la porte dans la spirale de l’escalier, puis il saisit une espingole et la déchargea, puis il empoigna un tromblon gorgé de chevrotines et le déchargea. Le tromblon, vomissant quinze balles, sembla un coup de mitraille. Alors Radoub, reprenant haleine, cria d’une voix tonnante dans l’escalier: Vive Paris!

Et s’emparant d’un deuxième tromblon plus gros que le premier, il le braqua sous la voûte tortueuse de la vis-de-Saint-Gilles, et attendit.

Le désarroi dans la salle basse fut indescriptible. Ces étonnements imprévus désagrègent la résistance.

Deux des balles de la triple décharge de Radoub avaient porté; l’une avait tué Houzard, qui était M. de Quélen.

— Ils sont en haut! cria le marquis.

Ce cri détermina l’abandon de la retirade, une volée d’oiseaux n’est pas plus vite en déroute, et ce fut à qui se précipiterait dans l’escalier. Le marquis encourageait cette fuite.

— Faites vite, disait-il. Le courage est d’échapper. Montons tous au deuxième étage! Là nous recommencerons.

Il quitta la retirade le dernier.

Cette bravoure le sauva.

Radoub, embusqué au haut du premier étage de l’escalier, le doigt sur la détente du tromblon, guettait la déroute. Les premiers qui apparurent au tournant de la spirale reçurent la décharge en pleine face, et tombèrent foudroyés. Si le marquis en eût été, il était mort. Avant que Radoub eût eu le temps de saisir une nouvelle arme, les autres passèrent, le marquis après tous, et plus lent que les autres. Ils croyaient la chambre du premier pleine d’assiégeants, ils ne s’y arrêtèrent pas, et gagnèrent la salle du second étage, la chambre des miroirs. C’est là qu’était la porte de fer, c’est là qu’était la mèche soufrée, c’est là qu’il fallait capituler ou mourir.

Gauvain, aussi surpris qu’eux-mêmes des détonations de l’escalier et ne s’expliquant pas le secours qui lui arrivait, en avait profité sans chercher à comprendre, avait sauté, lui et les siens, par-dessus la retirade, et avait poussé les assiégés l’épée aux reins jusqu’au premier étage.

Là il trouva Radoub.

Radoub commença par le salut militaire et dit:

— Une minute, mon commandant. C’est moi qui ai fait ça. Je me suis souvenu de Dol. J’ai fait comme vous. J’ai pris l’ennemi entre deux feux.

— Bon élève, dit Gauvain en souriant.

Quand on est un certain temps dans l’obscurité, les yeux finissent par se faire à l’ombre comme ceux des oiseaux de nuit; Gauvain s’aperçut que Radoub était tout en sang.

— Mais tu es blessé, camarade!

— Ne faites pas attention, mon commandant. Qu’est-ce que c’est que ça, une oreille de plus ou de moins? J’ai aussi un coup de sabre, je m’en fiche. Quand on casse un carreau, on s’y coupe toujours un peu. D’ailleurs il n’y a pas que de mon sang.

On fit une sorte de halte dans la salle du premier étage, conquise par Radoub. On apporta une lanterne. Cimourdain rejoignit Gauvain. Ils délibérèrent. Il y avait lieu à réfléchir en effet. Les assiégeants n’étaient pas dans le secret des assiégés; ils ignoraient leur pénurie de munitions; ils ne savaient pas que les défenseurs de la place étaient à court de poudre; le deuxième étage était le dernier poste de résistance; les assiégeants pouvaient croire l’escalier miné.

Ce qui était certain, c’est que l’ennemi ne pouvait échapper. Ceux qui n’étaient pas morts étaient là comme sous clef. Lantenac était dans la souricière.

Avec cette certitude, on pouvait se donner un peu le temps de chercher le meilleur dénoûment possible. On avait déjà bien des morts. Il fallait tâcher de ne pas perdre trop de monde dans ce dernier assaut.

Le risque de cette suprême attaque serait grand. Il y aurait probablement un rude premier feu à essuyer.

Le combat était interrompu. Les assiégeants, maîtres du rez-de-chaussée et du premier étage, attendaient, pour continuer, le commandement du chef. Gauvain et Cimourdain tenaient conseil. Radoub assistait en silence à leur délibération.

Il hasarda un nouveau salut militaire, timide.

— Mon commandant?

— Qu’est-ce, Radoub?

— Ai-je droit à une petite récompense?

— Certes. Demande ce que tu voudras.

— Je demande à monter le premier.

On ne pouvait le lui refuser. D’ailleurs il l’eût fait sans permission.

XI. LES DÉSESPÉRÉS

Pendant qu'on délibérait au premier étage, on se barricadait au second. Le succès est une fureur, la défaite est une rage. Les deux étages allaient se heurter éperdument. Toucher à la victoire, c'est une ivresse. En bas il y avait l'espérance, qui serait la plus grande des forces humaines si le désespoir n'existait pas.

Le désespoir était en haut.

Un désespoir calme, froid, sinistre.

En arrivant à cette salle de refuge, au delà de laquelle il n'y avait rien pour eux, le premier soin des assiégés fut de barrer l'entrée. Fermer la porte était inutile, encombrer l'escalier valait mieux. En pareil cas, un obstacle à travers lequel on peut voir et combattre vaut mieux qu'une porte fermée.

La torche plantée dans la torchère du mur par l'Imânus près de la mèche soufrée les éclairait.

Il y avait dans cette salle du second un de ces gros et lourds coffres de chêne où l'on serrait les vêtements et le linge avant l'invention des meubles à tiroirs.

Ils traînèrent ce coffre et le dressèrent debout sous la porte de l'escalier. Il s'y emboîtait solidement et bouchait l'entrée. Il ne laissait d'ouvert, près de la voûte, qu'un espace étroit, pouvant laisser passer un homme, excellent pour tuer les assaillants un à un. Il était douteux qu'on s'y risquât.

L'entrée obstruée leur donnait un répit.

Ils se comptèrent.

Les dix-neuf n'étaient plus que sept, dont l'Imânus. Excepté l'Imânus et le marquis, tous étaient blessés.

Les cinq qui étaient blessés, mais très vivants, car, dans la chaleur du combat, toute blessure qui n'est pas mortelle vous laisse aller et venir, étaient Chatenay, dit Robi, Guinoiseau, Hoisnard Branche-d'Or, Brin-d'Amour et Grand-Francur. Tout le reste était mort.

Ils n'avaient plus de munitions. Les gibernes étaient épuisées. Ils comptèrent les cartouches. Combien, à eux sept, avaient-ils de coups à tirer? Quatre.

On était arrivé à ce moment où il n'y a plus qu'à tomber. On était acculé à l'escarpement, béant et terrible. Il était difficile d'être plus près du bord.

Cependant l’attaque venait de recommencer; mais lente et d’autant plus sûre. On entendait les coups de crosse des assiégeants sondant l’escalier marche à marche.

Nul moyen de fuir. Par la bibliothèque? Il y avait là sur le plateau six canons braqués, mèche allumée. Par les chambres d’en haut? A quoi bon? elles aboutissaient à la plate-forme. Là on trouvait la ressource de se jeter du haut en bas de la tour.

Les sept survivants de cette bande épique se voyaient inexorablement enfermés et saisis par cette épaisse muraille qui les protégeait et qui les livrait. Ils n’étaient pas encore pris; mais ils étaient déjà prisonniers.

Le marquis éleva la voix:

— Mes amis, tout est fini.

Et après un silence, il ajouta:

— Grand-Francoeur redevient l’abbé Turmeau.

Tous s’agenouillèrent, le rosaire à la main. Les coups de crosse des assaillants se rapprochaient.

Grand-Francoeur, tout sanglant d’une balle qui lui avait effleuré le crâne et arraché le cuir chevelu, dressa de la main droite son crucifix. Le marquis, sceptique au fond, mit un genou en terre.

— Que chacun, dit Grand-Francoeur, confesse ses fautes à haute voix.

Monseigneur, parlez.

Le marquis répondit:

— J’ai tué.

— J’ai tué, dit Hoisnard.

— J’ai tué, dit Guinoiseau.

— J’ai tué, dit Brin-d’Amour.

— J’ai tué, dit Châtenay.

— J’ai tué, dit l’Imânus.

Et Grand-Francoeur reprit:

— Au nom de la très sainte Trinité, je vous absous. Que vos âmes aillent en paix.

— Ainsi soit-il, répondirent toutes les voix.

Le marquis se releva.

— Maintenant, dit-il, mourons.

— Et tuons, dit l’Imânus.

Les coups de crosse commençaient à ébranler le coffre qui barrait la porte.

— Pensez à Dieu, dit le prêtre. La terre n’existe plus pour vous.

— Oui, reprit le marquis, nous sommes dans la tombe.

Tous courbèrent le front et se frappèrent la poitrine. Le marquis seul et le prêtre étaient debout. Les yeux étaient fixés à terre, le prêtre priait, les paysans priaient, le marquis songeait. Le coffre, battu comme par des marteaux, sonnait lugubrement.

En ce moment une voix vive et forte, éclatant brusquement derrière eux, cria:

— Je vous l’avais bien dit, monseigneur!

Toutes les têtes se retournèrent, stupéfaites.

Un trou venait de s’ouvrir dans le mur.

Une pierre, parfaitement rejointoyée avec les autres, mais non cimentée, et ayant un piton en haut et un piton en bas, venait de pivoter sur elle-même à la façon des tourniquets, et en tournant avait ouvert la muraille. La pierre ayant évolué sur son axe, l’ouverture était double et offrait deux passages, l’un à droite, l’autre à gauche, étroits, mais suffisants Pour laisser passer un homme. Au delà de cette porte inattendue on apercevait les premières marches d’un escalier en spirale. Une face d’homme apparaissait à l’ouverture.

Le marquis reconnut Halmalo.

XII. SAUVEUR

— C’est toi, Halmalo?

— Moi, monseigneur. Vous voyez bien que les pierres qui tournent, cela existe, et qu’on peut sortir d’ici. J’arrive à temps, mais faites vite. Dans dix minutes, vous serez en pleine forêt.

— Dieu est grand, dit le prêtre.

— Sauvez-vous, monseigneur, crièrent toutes les voix.

— Vous tous d’abord, dit le marquis.

— Vous le premier, monseigneur, dit l’abbé Turmeau.

— Moi le dernier.

Et le marquis reprit d’une voix sévère:

— Pas de combat de générosité. Nous n’avons pas le temps d’être magnanimes. Vous êtes blessés. Je vous ordonne de vivre et de fuir. Vite! et profitez de cette issue. Merci, Halmalo.

— Monsieur le marquis, dit l’abbé Turmeau, nous allons nous séparer?

— En bas, sans doute. On ne s’échappe jamais qu’un à un.

— Monseigneur nous assigne-t-il un rendez-vous?

— Oui. Une clairière dans la forêt. La Pierre-Gauvaine. Connaissez-vous l’endroit?

— Nous le connaissons tous.

— J’y serai demain, à midi. Que tous ceux qui pourront marcher s’y trouvent.

— On y sera.

— Et nous recommencerons la guerre, dit le marquis.

Cependant Halmalo, en pesant sur la pierre tournante, venait de s’apercevoir qu’elle ne bougeait plus. L’ouverture ne pouvait plus se clore.

— Monseigneur, dit-il, dépêchons-nous, la pierre résiste à présent. J’ai pu ouvrir le passage, mais je ne pourrai le fermer.

La pierre, en effet, après une longue désuétude, était comme ankylosée dans sa charnière. Impossible désormais de lui imprimer un mouvement.

— Monseigneur, reprit Halmalo, j’espérais refermer le passage, et que les bleus, quand ils entreraient, ne trouveraient plus personne, et n’y comprendraient rien, et vous croiraient en allés en fumée. Mais voilà la pierre qui ne veut pas. L’ennemi verra la sortie ouverte et pourra poursuivre. Au moins ne perdons pas une minute. Vite, tous dans l’escalier.

L’Imânus posa la main sur l’épaule de Halmalo:

— Camarade, combien de temps faut-il pour qu'on sorte par cette passe et qu'on soit en sûreté dans la forêt?

— Personne n'est blessé grièvement? demanda Halmalo.

Ils répondirent: — Personne.

— En ce cas, un quart d'heure suffit.

— Ainsi, repartit l'Imânus, si l'ennemi n'entrait ici que dans un quart d'heure?

— Il pourrait nous poursuivre, il ne nous atteindrait pas.

— Mais, dit le marquis, ils seront ici dans cinq minutes, ce vieux coffre n'est pas pour les gêner longtemps. Quelques coups de crosse en viendront à bout. Un quart d'heure! Qui est-ce qui les arrêtera un quart d'heure?

— Moi, dit l'Imânus.

— Toi, Gouge-le-Bruant?

— Moi, monseigneur. Ecoutez. Sur six, vous êtes cinq blessés. Moi je n'ai pas une égratignure.

— Ni moi, dit le marquis.

— Vous êtes le chef, monseigneur. Je suis le soldat. Le chef et le soldat, c'est deux.

— Je le sais, nous avons chacun un devoir différent.

— Non, monseigneur, nous avons, vous et moi, le même devoir, qui est de vous sauver.

L'Imânus se tourna vers ses camarades.

— Camarades, il s'agit de tenir en échec l'ennemi et de retarder la poursuite le plus possible. Ecoutez. J'ai toute ma force, je n'ai pas perdu une goutte de sang; n'étant pas blessé, je durerai plus longtemps qu'un autre. Partez tous. Laissez-moi vos armes. J'en ferai bon usage. Je me charge d'arrêter l'ennemi une bonne demi-heure. Combien y a-t-il de pistolets chargés?

— Quatre.

— Mettez-les à terre.

On fit ce qu'il voulait.

— C'est bien. Je reste. Ils trouveront à qui parler. Maintenant, vite, allez-vous-en.

Les situations à pic suppriment les remerciements. A peine prit-on le temps de lui serrer la main.

— A bientôt, lui dit le marquis.

— Non, monseigneur. J’espère que non. Pas à bientôt; car je vais mourir.

Tous s’engagèrent l’un après l’autre dans l’étroit escalier, les blessés d’abord. Pendant qu’ils descendaient, le marquis prit le crayon de son carnet de poche, et écrivit quelques mots sur la pierre qui ne pouvait plus tourner et qui laissait le passage béant.

— Venez, monseigneur, il n’y a plus que vous, dit Halmalo.

Et Halmalo commença à descendre.

Le marquis le suivit.

L’Imânus resta seul.

XIII. BOURREAU

Les quatre pistolets avaient été posés sur les dalles, car cette salle n’avait pas de plancher. L’Imânus en prit deux, un dans chaque main.

Il s’avança obliquement vers l’entrée de l’escalier que le coffre obstruait et masquait.

Les assaillants craignaient évidemment quelque surprise, une de ces explosions finales qui sont la catastrophe du vainqueur en même temps que celle du vaincu. Autant la première attaque avait été impétueuse, autant la dernière était lente et prudente. Ils n’avaient pas pu, ils n’avaient pas voulu peut-être, enfoncer violemment le coffre; ils en avaient démoli le fond à coups de crosse, et troué le couvercle à coups de bayonnette, et par ces trous ils tâchaient de voir dans la salle avant de se risquer à y pénétrer.

La lueur des lanternes dont ils éclairaient l’escalier passait à travers ces trous.

L’Imânus aperçut à un de ces trous une de ces prunelles qui regardaient. Il ajusta brusquement à ce trou le canon d’un de ses pistolets et pressa la détente. Le coup partit, et l’Imânus, joyeux, entendit un cri horrible. La balle avait crevé l’oeil et traversé la tête, et le soldat qui regardait venait de tomber dans l’escalier à la renverse.

Les assaillants avaient entamé assez largement le bas du couvercle en deux endroits, et y avaient pratiqué deux espèces de meurtrières, l’Imânus profita de l’une de ces entailles, y passa le bras, et lâcha au hasard dans le tas des assiégeants son deuxième coup de pistolet. La balle ricocha probablement, car on entendit plusieurs cris, comme si trois ou quatre étaient tués ou blessés, et il se fit dans l’escalier un grand tumulte d’hommes qui lâchent pied et qui reculent.

L’Imânus jeta les deux pistolets qu’il venait de décharger, et prit les deux qui restaient, puis, les deux pistolets à ses deux poings, il regarda par les trous du coffre.

Il constata le premier effet produit.

Les assaillants avaient redescendu l’escalier. Des mourants se tordaient sur les marches; le tournant de la spirale ne laissait voir que trois ou quatre degrés.

L’Imânus attendit.

— C’est du temps de gagné, pensait-il.

Cependant il vit un homme, à plat ventre, monter en rampant les marches de l'escalier, et en même temps, plus bas, une tête de soldat apparut derrière le pilier central de la spirale. L'Imânus visa cette tête et tira. Il y eut un cri, le soldat tomba, et l'Imânus fit passer de sa main gauche dans sa main droite le dernier pistolet chargé qui lui restait.

En ce moment-là il sentit une affreuse douleur, et ce fut lui qui, à son tour, jeta un hurlement. Un sabre lui fouillait les entrailles. Un poing, le poing de l'homme qui rampait, venait de passer à travers la deuxième meurtrière du bas du coffre, et ce poing avait plongé un sabre dans le ventre de l'Imânus.

La blessure était effroyable. Le ventre était fendu de part en part.

L'Imânus ne tomba pas. Il grinça des dents, et dit: C'est bon!

Puis chancelant et se traînant, il recula jusqu'à la torche qui brûlait à côté de la porte de fer, il posa son pistolet à terre et empoigna la torche, et, soutenant de la main gauche ses intestins qui sortaient, de la main droite il abaissa la torche et mit le feu à la mèche soufrée.

Le feu prit, la mèche flamba. L'Imânus lâcha la torche, qui continua de brûler à terre, ressaisit son pistolet, et, tombé sur la dalle, mais se soulevant encore, attisa la mèche du peu de souffle qui lui restait.

La flamme courut, passa sous la porte de fer et gagna le pont-châtelet.

Alors, voyant cette exécrable réussite, plus satisfait peut-être de son crime que de sa vertu, cet homme qui venait d'être un héros et qui n'était plus qu'un assassin, et qui allait mourir, sourit.

— Ils se souviendront de moi, murmura-t-il. Je venge, sur leurs petits, notre petit à nous, le roi qui est au Temple.

XIV. L’IMANUS AUSSI S’EVADE

En cet instant-là, un grand bruit se fit, le coffre violemment poussé s’effondra, et livra passage à un homme qui se rua dans la salle, le sabre à la main.

— C’est moi, Radoub. Qui en veut? Ça m’ennuie d’attendre. Je me risque. C’est égal, je viens toujours d’en éventrer un. Maintenant je vous attaque tous. Qu’on me suive ou qu’on ne me suive pas, me voilà. Combien êtes-vous?

C’était Radoub, en effet, et il était seul. Après le massacre que l’Imânus venait de faire dans l’escalier, Gauvain, redoutant quelque fougasse masquée, avait fait replier ses hommes et se concertait avec Cimourdain.

Radoub, le sabre à la main sur le seuil, dans cette obscurité où la torche presque éteinte jetait à peine une lueur, répéta sa question:

— Je suis un. Combien êtes-vous?

N’entendant rien, il avança. Un de ces jets de clarté qu’exhalent par instants les foyers agonisants et qu’on pourrait appeler des sanglots de lumière, jaillit de la torche et illumina toute la salle.

Radoub avisa un des petits miroirs accrochés au mur, s’en approcha, regarda sa face ensanglantée et son oreille pendante, et dit:

— Démantibulage hideux.

Puis il se retourna, stupéfait de voir la salle vide.

— Il n’y a personne! s’écria-t-il. Zéro d’effectif.

Il aperçut la pierre qui avait tourné, l’ouverture et l’escalier.

— Ah! je comprends. Clef des champs. Venez donc tous! camarades, venez! ils s’en sont allés. Ils ont filé, fusé, fouiné, fichu le camp. Cette cruche de vieille tour était fêlée. Voici le trou par où ils ont passé, canailles! Comment veut-on qu’on vienne à bout de Pitt et Cobourg avec des farces comme ça! C’est le bon Dieu du diable qui est venu à leur secours! Il n’y a plus personne! Un coup de pistolet partit, une balle lui effleura le coude et s’aplatit contre le mur.

— Mais si! il y a quelqu’un. Qui est-ce qui a la bonté de me faire cette politesse?

— Moi, dit une voix.

Radoub avança la tête et distingua dans le clair-obscur quelque chose qui était l’Imânus.

— Ah! cria-t-il. J’en tiens un. Les autres se sont échappés, mais toi, tu n’échapperas pas.

— Crois-tu? répondit l’Imânus.

Radoub fit un pas et s’arrêta.

— Hé, l’homme qui es par terre, qui es-tu?

— Je suis celui qui est par terre et qui se moque de ceux qui sont debout.

— Qu’est-ce que tu as dans ta main droite?

— Un pistolet.

— Et dans ta main gauche?

— Mes boyaux.

— Je te fais prisonnier.

— Je t’en défie.

Et l’Imânus, se penchant sur la mèche en combustion, soufflant son dernier soupir sur l’incendie, expira.

Quelques instants après, Gauvain et Cimourdain, et tous, étaient dans la salle. Tous virent l’ouverture. On fouilla les recoins, on sonda l’escalier; il aboutissait à une sortie dans le ravin. On constata l’évasion. On secoua l’Imânus, il était mort. Gauvain, une lanterne à la main, examina la pierre qui avait donné issue aux assiégés; il avait entendu parler de cette pierre tournante, mais lui aussi tenait cette légende pour une fable. Tout en considérant la pierre, il aperçut quelque chose qui était écrit au crayon; il approcha la lanterne et lut ceci:

— *Au revoir, monsieur le vicomte.* —

LANTENAC.

Guéchamp avait rejoint Gauvain. La poursuite était évidemment inutile, la fuite était consommée et complète, les évadés avaient pour eux tout le pays, le buisson, le ravin, le taillis, l'habitant; ils étaient sans doute déjà bien loin; nul moyen de les retrouver; et la forêt de Fougères tout entière était une immense cachette. Que faire? Tout était à recommencer. Gauvain et Guéchamp échangeaient leurs désappointements et leurs conjectures.

Cimourdain écoutait, grave, sans dire une parole.

— A propos, Guéchamp, dit Gauvain, et l'échelle?

— Commandant, elle n'est pas arrivée.

— Mais pourtant nous avons vu venir une voiture escortée par des gendarmes.

Guéchamp répondit:

— Elle n'apportait pas l'échelle.

— Qu'est-ce donc qu'elle apportait?

— La guillotine, dit Cimourdain.

XV. NE PAS METTRE DANS LA MÊME POCHE UNE MONTRE ET UNE CLEF

Le marquis de Lantenac n’était pas si loin qu’ils le croyaient.

Il n’en était pas moins entièrement en sûreté et hors de leur atteinte.

Il avait suivi Halmalo.

L’escalier par où Halmalo et lui étaient descendus, à la suite des autres fugitifs, se terminait tout près du ravin et des arches du pont par un étroit couloir voûté. Ce couloir s’ouvrait sur une profonde fissure naturelle du sol qui d’un côté aboutissait au ravin, et de l’autre à la forêt. Cette fissure, absolument dérobée aux regards, serpentait sous des végétations impénétrables. Impossible de reprendre là un homme. Un évadé, une fois parvenu dans cette fissure, n’avait plus qu’à faire une fuite de couleuvre, et était introuvable. L’entrée du couloir secret de l’escalier était tellement obstruée de ronces que les constructeurs du passage souterrain avaient considéré comme inutile de la fermer autrement.

Le marquis n’avait plus maintenant qu’à s’en aller. Il n’avait pas à s’inquiéter d’un déguisement. Depuis son arrivée en Bretagne, il n’avait pas quitté ses habits de paysan, se jugeant plus grand seigneur ainsi.

Il s’était borné à ôter son épée, dont il avait débouclé et jeté le ceinturon.

Quand Halmalo et le marquis débouchèrent du couloir dans la fissure, les cinq autres, Guinoiseau, Hoisnard Branche-d’Or, Brin-d’Amour, Chatenay et l’abbé Turmeau, n’y étaient déjà plus.

— Ils n’ont pas été longtemps à prendre leur volée, dit Halmalo.

— Fais comme eux, dit le marquis.

— Monseigneur veut que je le quitte?

— Sans doute. Je te l’ai dit déjà. On ne s’évade bien que seul. Où un passe, deux ne passent pas. Ensemble nous appellerions l’attention. Tu me ferais prendre et je te ferais prendre.

— Monseigneur connaît le pays?

— Oui.

— Monseigneur maintient le rendez-vous à la Pierre-Gauvaine?

— Demain. A midi.

— J’y serai. Nous y serons.

Halmalo s’interrompit.

— Ah! monseigneur, quand je pense que nous avons été en pleine mer, que nous étions seuls, que je voulais vous tuer, que vous étiez mon seigneur, que vous pouviez me le dire, et que vous ne me l'avez pas dit! Quel homme vous êtes!

Le marquis reprit:

— L'Angleterre. Il n'y a plus d'autre ressource. Il faut que dans quinze jours les Anglais soient en France.

— J'aurai bien des comptes à rendre à monseigneur. J'ai fait ses commissions.

— Nous parlerons de tout cela demain.

— A demain, monseigneur.

— A propos, as-tu faim?

— Peut-être, monseigneur. J'étais si pressé d'arriver que je ne sais pas si j'ai mangé aujourd'hui.

Le marquis tira de sa poche une tablette de chocolat, la cassa en deux, en donna une moitié à Halmalo et se mit à manger l'autre.

— Monseigneur, dit Halmalo, à votre droite, c'est le ravin; à votre gauche, c'est la forêt.

— C'est bien. Laisse-moi. Va de ton côté.

Halmalo obéit. Il s'enfonça dans l'obscurité. On entendit un bruit de broussailles froissées, puis plus rien. Au bout de quelques secondes il eût été impossible de ressaisir sa trace. Cette terre du Bocage, hérissée et inextricable, était l'auxiliaire du fugitif. On ne disparaissait pas, on s'évanouissait. C'est cette facilité des dispersions rapides qui faisait hésiter nos armées devant cette Vendée toujours reculante, et devant ses combattants si formidablement fuyards.

Le marquis demeura immobile. Il était de ces hommes qui s'efforcent de ne rien éprouver; mais il ne put se soustraire à l'émotion de respirer l'air libre après avoir respiré tant de sang et de carnage. Se sentir complètement sauvé après avoir été complètement perdu; après la tombe, vue de si près, prendre possession de la pleine sécurité; sortir de la mort et rentrer dans la vie, c'était là, même pour un homme comme Lantenac, une secousse; et, bien qu'il en eût déjà traversé de pareilles, il ne put soustraire son âme imperturbable à un ébranlement de quelques instants. Il s'avoua à lui-même qu'il était content. Il dompta vite ce mouvement qui ressemblait presque à de la joie.

Il tira sa montre, et la fit sonner. Quelle heure était-il?

A son grand étonnement, il n’était que dix heures. Quand on vient de subir une de ces péripéties de la vie humaine où tout a été mis en question, on est toujours stupéfait que des minutes si pleines ne soient pas plus longues que les autres. Le coup de canon d’avertissement avait été tiré un peu avant le coucher du soleil, et la Tourgue avait été abordée par la colonne d’attaque une demi-heure après, entre sept et huit heures, à la nuit tombante. Ainsi, ce colossal combat, commencé à huit heures, était fini à dix. Toute cette épopée avait duré cent vingt minutes. Quelquefois une rapidité d’éclair est mêlée aux catastrophes. Les événements ont de ces raccourcis surprenants.

En y réfléchissant, c’est le contraire qui eût pu étonner; une résistance de deux heures d’un si petit nombre contre un si grand nombre était extraordinaire, et certes elle n’avait pas été courte, ni tout de suite finie, cette bataille de dix-neuf contre quatre mille.

Cependant il était temps de s’en aller, Halmalo devait être loin, et le marquis jugea qu’il n’était pas nécessaire de rester là plus longtemps. Il remit sa montre dans sa veste, non dans la même poche, car il venait de remarquer qu’elle y était en contact avec la clef de la porte de fer que lui avait rapportée l’Imânus, et que le verre de sa montre pouvait se briser contre cette clef; et il se disposa à gagner à son tour la forêt.

Comme il allait prendre à gauche, il lui sembla qu’une sorte de rayon vague pénétrait jusqu’à lui.

Il se retourna, et, à travers les broussailles nettement découpées sur un fond rouge et devenues tout à coup visibles dans leurs moindres détails, il aperçut une grande lueur dans le ravin. Il y marcha, puis se ravisa, trouvant inutile de s’exposer à cette clarté; quelle qu’elle fût, ce n’était pas son affaire après tout; il reprit la direction que lui avait montrée Halmalo et fit quelques pas vers la forêt.

Tout à coup, profondément enfoui et caché sous les ronces, il entendit sur sa tête un cri terrible; ce cri semblait partir du rebord même du plateau au-dessus du ravin. Le marquis leva les yeux, et s’arrêta.

LIVRE CINQUIEME

IN DAEMONE DEUS

I. TROUVÉS, MAIS PERDUS

Au moment où Michelle Fléchard avait aperçu la tour rougie par le soleil couchant, elle en était à plus d’une lieue. Elle qui pouvait à peine faire un pas, elle n’avait point hésité devant cette lieue à faire. Les femmes sont faibles, mais les mères sont fortes. Elle avait marché.

Le soleil s’était couché; le crépuscule était venu, puis l’obscurité profonde; elle avait entendu, marchant toujours, sonner au loin, à un clocher qu’on ne voyait pas, huit heures, puis neuf heures. Ce clocher était probablement celui de Parigné. De temps en temps elle s’arrêtait pour écouter des espèces de coups sourds, qui étaient peut-être un des fracas vagues de la nuit.

Elle avançait droit devant elle, cassant les ajoncs et les landes aiguës sous ses pieds sanglants. Elle était guidée par une faible clarté qui se dégageait du donjon lointain, le faisait saillir, et donnait dans l’ombre à cette tour un rayonnement mystérieux. Cette clarté devenait plus vive quand Les coups devenaient plus distincts, puis elle s’effaçait.

Le vaste plateau où cheminait Michelle Fléchard n’était qu’herbe et bruyère, sans une maison ni un arbre; il s’élevait insensiblement, et, à perte de vue, appuyait sa longue ligne droite et dure sur le sombre horizon étoilé. Ce qui la soutint dans cette montée, c’est qu’elle avait toujours la tour sous les yeux.

Elle la voyait grandir lentement. Les détonations étouffées et les lueurs pâles qui sortaient de la tour avaient, nous venons de le dire, des intermittences; elles s’interrompaient, puis reprenaient, proposant on ne sait quelle poignante énigme à la misérable mère en détresse.

Brusquement elles cessèrent; tout s’éteignit, bruit et clarté; il y eut un moment de plein silence, une sorte de paix lugubre se fit.

C’est en cet instant-là que Michelle Fléchard arriva au bord du plateau.

Elle aperçut à ses pieds un ravin dont le fond se perdait dans une blême épaisseur de nuit; à quelque distance, sur le haut du plateau, un enchevêtrement de roues, de talus et d’embrasures qui était une batterie de canons, et devant elle, confusément éclairé par les mèches allumées de la batterie, un énorme édifice qui semblait bâti avec des ténèbres plus noires que toutes les autres ténèbres qui l’entouraient.

Cet édifice se composait d’un pont dont les arches plongeaient dans le ravin, et d’une sorte de château qui s’élevait sur le pont, et le château et le pont s’appuyaient à une haute rondeur obscure, qui était la tour vers laquelle cette mère avait marché de si loin.

On voyait des clartés aller et venir aux lucarnes de la tour, et, à une rumeur qui en sortait, on la devinait pleine d’une foule d’hommes dont quelques silhouettes débordaient en haut jusque sur la plate-forme.

Il y avait près de la batterie un campement dont Michelle Fléchard distinguait les vedettes, mais, dans l’obscurité et dans les broussailles, elle n’en avait pas été aperçue.

Elle était parvenue au bord du plateau, si près du pont qu’il lui semblait presque qu’elle y pouvait toucher avec la main. La profondeur du ravin l’en séparait. Elle distinguait dans l’ombre les trois étages du château du pont.

Elle resta un temps quelconque, car les mesures du temps s’effaçaient dans son esprit, absorbée et muette devant ce ravin béant et cette bâtisse ténébreuse. Qu’était-ce que cela? Que se passait-il là? Etait-ce la Tourgue? Elle avait le vertige d’on ne sait quelle attente qui ressemblait à l’arrivée et au départ. Elle se demandait pourquoi elle était là.

Elle regardait, elle écoutait.

Subitement elle ne vit plus rien.

Un voile de fumée venait de monter entre elle et ce qu’elle regardait. Une âcre cuisson lui fit fermer les yeux. A peine avait-elle clos les paupières qu’elles s’empourprèrent et devinrent lumineuses. Elle les rouvrit.

Ce n’était plus la nuit qu’elle avait devant elle, c’était le jour; mais une espèce de jour funeste, le jour qui sort du feu. Elle avait sous les yeux un commencement d’incendie.

La fumée de noire était devenue écarlate, et une grande flamme était dedans; cette flamme apparaissait, puis disparaissait, avec ces torsions farouches qu’ont les éclairs et les serpents.

Cette flamme sortait comme une langue de quelque chose qui ressemblait à une gueule et qui était une fenêtre pleine de feu. Cette fenêtre, grillée de barreaux de fer déjà rouges, était une des croisées de l’étage inférieur du château construit sur le pont. De tout l’édifice on n’apercevait que cette fenêtre. La fumée couvrait tout, même le plateau, et l’on ne distinguait que le bord du ravin, noir sur la flamme vermeille.

Michelle Fléchard, étonnée, regardait. La fumée est nuage, le nuage est rêve; elle ne savait plus ce qu’elle voyait. Devait-elle fuir? Devait-elle rester? Elle se sentait presque hors du réel.

Un souffle de vent passa et fendit le rideau de fumée, et dans la déchirure la tragique bastille, soudainement démasquée, se dressa visible tout entière, donjon, pont, châtelet, éblouissante, horrible, avec la magnifique dorure de l’incendie, réverbéré sur elle de haut en bas. Michelle Fléchard put tout voir dans la netteté sinistre du feu.

L’étage inférieur du château bâti sur le pont brûlait.

Au-dessus on distinguait les deux autres étages encore intacts, mais comme portés par une corbeille de flammes. Du rebord du plateau, où était Michelle Fléchard, on en voyait vaguement l’intérieur à travers des interpositions de feu et de fumée. Toutes les fenêtres étaient ouvertes.

Par les fenêtres du second étage qui étaient très grandes, Michelle Fléchard apercevait, le long des murs, des armoires qui lui semblaient pleines de livres, et, devant une des croisées, à terre, dans la pénombre, un petit groupe confus, quelque chose qui avait l’aspect indistinct et amoncelé d’un nid ou d’une couvée, et qui lui faisait l’effet de remuer par moments.

Elle regardait cela.

Qu’était-ce que ce petit groupe d’ombre?

A de certains instants, il lui venait à l’esprit que cela ressemblait à des formes vivantes, elle avait la fièvre, elle n’avait pas mangé depuis le matin, elle avait marché sans relâche, elle était exténuée, elle se sentait dans une sorte d’hallucination dont elle se défiait instinctivement; pourtant ses yeux de plus en plus fixes ne pouvaient se détacher de cet obscur entassement d’objets quelconques, inanimés probablement, et en apparence inertes, qui gisait là sur le parquet de cette salle superposée à l’incendie.

Tout à coup le feu, comme s’il avait une volonté, allongea d’en bas un de ses jets vers le grand lierre mort qui couvrait précisément cette façade que Michelle Fléchard regardait. On eût dit que la flamme venait de découvrir ce réseau de branches sèches; une étincelle s’en empara avidement, et se mit à monter le long des sarments avec l’agilité affreuse des traînées de poudre. En un clin d’oeil, la flamme atteignit le second étage. Alors, d’en haut, elle éclaira l’intérieur du premier. Une vive lueur mit subitement en relief trois petits êtres endormis.

C’était un petit tas charmant, bras et jambes mêlés, paupières fermées, blondes têtes souriantes.

La mère reconnut ses enfants.

Elle jeta un cri effrayant.

Ce cri de l’inexprimable angoisse n’est donné qu’aux mères. Rien n’est plus farouche et rien n’est plus touchant. Quand une femme le jette, on croit entendre une louve; quand une louve le pousse, on croit entendre une femme.

Ce cri de Michelle Fléchard fut un hurlement. Hécube aboya, dit Homère.

C’était ce cri que le marquis de Lantenac venait d’entendre.

On a vu qu’il s’était arrêté.

Le marquis était entre l’issue du passage par où Halmalo l’avait fait échapper, et le ravin. A travers les broussailles entre-croisées sur lui, il vit le pont en flammes, la Tourgue rouge de la réverbération, et, par l’écartement de deux branches, il aperçut au-dessus de sa tête, de l’autre côté, sur le rebord du plateau, vis-à-vis du château brûlant et dans le plein jour de l’incendie, une figure hagarde et lamentable, une femme penchée sur le ravin.

C’était de cette femme qu’était venu ce cri.

Cette figure, ce n’était plus Michelle Fléchard, c’était Gorgone. Les misérables sont les formidables. La paysanne s’était transfigurée en Euménide. Cette villageoise quelconque, vulgaire, ignorante, inconsciente, venait de prendre brusquement les proportions épiques du désespoir. Les grandes douleurs sont une dilatation gigantesque de l’âme; cette mère, c’était la maternité; tout ce qui résume l’humanité est surhumain; elle se dressait là, au bord de ce ravin, devant cet embrasement, devant ce crime, comme une puissance sépulcrale; elle avait le cri de la bête et le geste de la déesse; sa face, d’où tombaient des imprécations, semblait un masque de flamboiement. Rien de souverain comme l’éclair de ses yeux noyés de larmes; son regard foudroyait l’incendie.

Le marquis écoutait. Cela tombait sur sa tête; il entendait on ne sait quoi d’inarticulé et de déchirant, plutôt des sanglots que des paroles.

— Ah! mon Dieu! mes enfants! Ce sont mes enfants! Au secours! au feu! au feu! au feu! Mais vous êtes donc des bandits! Est-ce qu’il n’y a personne là? Mais mes enfants vont brûler! Ah! voilà une chose! Georgette! mes enfants! Gros-Alain, René-Jean! Mais qu’est-ce que cela veut dire? Qui donc a mis mes enfants là? Ils dorment. Je suis folle! C’est une chose impossible. Au secours!

Cependant un grand mouvement se faisait dans la Tourgue et sur le plateau. Tout le camp accourait autour du feu qui venait d'éclater. Les assiégeants, après avoir eu affaire à la mitraille, avaient affaire à l'incendie. Gauvain, Cimourdain, Guéchamp donnaient des ordres. Que faire? Il y avait à peine quelques seaux d'eau à puiser dans le maigre ruisseau du ravin. L'angoisse allait croissant. Tout le rebord du plateau était couvert de visages effarés qui regardaient.

Ce qu'on voyait était effroyable.

On regardait, et l'on n'y pouvait rien.

La flamme, par le lierre qui avait pris feu, avait gagné l'étage d'en haut. Là elle avait trouvé le grenier plein de paille et elle s'y était précipitée. Tout le grenier brûlait maintenant. La flamme dansait; la joie de la flamme, chose lugubre. Il semblait qu'un souffle scélérat attisait ce bûcher. On eût dit que l'épouvantable Imânus tout entier était là changé en tourbillon d'étincelles, vivant de la vie meurtrière du feu, et que cette âme monstre s'était faite incendie.

L'étage de la bibliothèque n'était pas encore atteint, la hauteur de son plafond et l'épaisseur de ses murs retardaient l'instant où il prendrait feu, mais cette minute fatale approchait; il était léché par l'incendie du premier étage et caressé par celui du troisième. L'affreux baiser de la mort l'effleurait. En bas une cave de lave, en haut une voûte de braise; qu'un trou se fît au plancher, c'était l'écroulement dans la cendre rouge; qu'un trou se fît au plafond, c'était l'ensevelissement sous les charbons ardents. René-Jean, Gros-Alain et Georgette ne s'étaient pas encore réveillés, ils dormaient du sommeil profond et simple de l'enfance, et, à travers les plis de flamme et de fumée qui tour à tour couvraient et découvraient les fenêtres, on les apercevait dans cette grotte de feu, au fond d'une lueur de météore, paisibles, gracieux, immobiles, comme trois enfants-Jésus confiants endormis dans un enfer; et un tigre eût pleuré de voir ces roses dans cette fournaise et ces berceaux dans ce tombeau.

Cependant la mère se tordait les bras:

— Au feu! je crie au feu! on est donc des sourds qu'on ne vient pas! on me brûle mes enfants! arrivez donc, vous les hommes qui êtes là. Voilà des jours et des jours que je marche, et c'est comme ça que je les retrouve! Au feu! Au secours! des anges! dire que ce sont des anges! Qu'est-ce qu'ils ont fait, ces innocents-là! moi on m'a fusillée, eux on les brûle! Qui est-ce donc qui fait ces choses-là! Au secours! sauvez mes enfants! est-ce que vous ne m’entendez pas? Une chienne, on aurait pitié d’une chienne! Mes enfants! Mes enfants! ils dorment! Ah! Georgette! je vois son petit ventre à cet amour! René-Jean! Gros-Alain! c’est comme cela qu’ils s’appellent. Vous voyez bien que je suis leur mère. Ce qui se passe dans ce temps-ci est abominable. J’ai marché des jours et des nuits. Même que j’ai parlé ce matin à une femme. Au secours! au secours! au feu! On est donc des monstres! C’est une horreur! l’aîné n’a pas cinq ans, la petite n’a pas deux ans. Je vois leurs petites jambes nues. Ils dorment, bonne sainte Vierge! la main du ciel me les rend et la main de l’enfer me les reprend. Dire que j’ai tant marché! Mes enfants que j’ai nourris de mon lait! moi qui me croyais malheureuse de ne pas les retrouver! Ayez pitié de moi! Je veux mes enfants, il me faut mes enfants! C’est pourtant vrai qu’ils sont là dans le feu! Voyez mes pauvres pieds comme ils sont tout en sang. Au secours! Ce n’est pas possible qu’il y ait des hommes sur la terre et qu’on laisse ces pauvres petits mourir comme cela! au secours! à l’assassin! Des choses comme on n’en voit pas de pareilles. Ah! les brigands! Qu’est-ce que c’est que cette affreuse maison-là? On me les a volés pour me les tuer! Jésus misère! Je veux mes enfants. Oh! je ne sais pas ce que je ferais! Je ne veux pas qu’ils meurent! au secours! au secours! au secours! Oh! s’ils devaient mourir comme cela, je tuerais Dieu!

En même temps que la supplication terrible de la mère, des voix s’élevaient sur le plateau et dans le ravin:

— Une échelle!

— On n’a pas d’échelle!

— De l’eau!

— On n’a pas d’eau!

— Là-haut, dans la tour, au second étage, il y a une porte!

— Elle est en fer.

— Enfoncez-la!

— On ne peut pas.

Et la mère redoublait ses appels désespérés:

— Au feu! au secours! Mais dépêchez-vous donc! Alors, tuez-moi! Mes enfants! mes enfants! Ah! l’horrible feu! qu’on les en ôte, ou qu’on m’y jette!

Dans les intervalles de ces clameurs on entendait le pétillement tranquille de l’incendie.

Le marquis tâta sa poche et y toucha la clef de la porte de fer. Alors, se courbant sous la voûte par laquelle il s'était évadé, il rentra dans le passage d'où il venait de sortir.

II. DE LA PORTE DE PIERRE A LA PORTE DE FER

Toute une armée éperdue autour d’un sauvetage impossible; quatre mille hommes ne pouvant secourir trois enfants; telle était la situation.

On n’avait pas d’échelle en effet; l’échelle envoyée de Javené n’était pas arrivée; l’embrasement s’élargissait comme un cratère qui s’ouvre; essayer de l’éteindre avec le ruisseau du ravin presque à sec était dérisoire; autant jeter un verre d’eau sur un volcan.

Cimourdain, Guéchamp et Radoub étaient descendus dans le ravin; Gauvain était remonté dans la salle du deuxième étage de la Tourgue où étaient la pierre tournante, l’issue secrète et la porte de fer de la bibliothèque.

C’est là qu’avait été la mèche soufrée allumée par l’Imânus; c’était de là que l’incendie était parti.

Gauvain avait amené avec lui vingt sapeurs. Enfoncer la porte de fer, il n’y avait plus que cette ressource. Elle était effroyablement bien fermée.

On commença par des coups de hache. Les haches cassèrent. Un sapeur dit:

— L’acier est du verre sur ce fer-là.

La porte était en effet de fer battu, et faite de doubles lames boulonnées ayant chacune trois pouces d’épaisseur.

On prit des barres de fer et l’on essaya des pesées sous la porte. Les barres de fer cassèrent.

— Comme des allumettes, dit le sapeur.

Gauvain, sombre, murmura:

— Il n’y a qu’un boulet qui ouvrirait cette porte. Il faudrait pouvoir monter ici une pièce de canon.

— Et encore! dit le sapeur.

Il y eut un moment d’accablement. Tous ces bras impuissants s’arrêtèrent. Muets, vaincus, consternés, ces hommes considéraient l’horrible porte inébranlable. Une réverbération rouge passait par-dessous. Derrière, l’incendie croissait.

L’affreux cadavre de l’Imânus était là, sinistre victorieux.

Encore quelques minutes peut-être, et tout allait s’effondrer.

Que faire? Il n’y avait plus d’espérance.

Gauvain exaspéré s’écria, l’oeil fixé sur la pierre tournante du mur et sur l’issue ouverte de l’évasion:

— C’est pourtant par là que le marquis de Lantenac s’en est allé!

— Et qu’il revient, dit une voix.

Et une tête blanche se dessina dans l’encadrement de pierre de l’issue secrète.

C’était le marquis.

Depuis bien des années Gauvain ne l’avait pas vu de si près. Il recula.

Tous ceux qui étaient là restèrent dans l’attitude où ils étaient, pétrifiés.

Le marquis avait une grosse clef à la main, il refoula d’un regard altier quelques-uns des sapeurs qui étaient devant lui, marcha droit à la porte de fer, se courba sous la voûte et mit la clef dans la serrure. La serrure grinça, la porte s’ouvrit, on vit un gouffre de flamme, le marquis y entra.

Il y entra d’un pied ferme, la tête haute.

Tous le suivaient des yeux, frissonnants.

A peine le marquis eut-il fait quelques pas dans la salle incendiée que le parquet miné par le feu et ébranlé par son talon s’effondra derrière lui et mit entre lui et la porte un précipice. Le marquis ne tourna pas la tête et continua d’avancer. Il disparut dans la fumée.

On ne vit plus rien.

Avait-il pu aller plus loin? Une nouvelle fondrière de feu s’était-elle ouverte sous lui? N’avait-il réussi qu’à se perdre lui-même? On ne pouvait rien dire. On n’avait devant soi qu’une muraille de fumée et de flamme. Le marquis était au delà, mort ou vivant.

III. OU L’ON VOIT SE REVEILLER LES ENFANTS QU’ON A VUS SE RENDORMIR

Cependant les enfants avaient fini par ouvrir les yeux.

L’incendie, qui n’était pas encore entré dans la salle de la bibliothèque, jetait au plafond un reflet rose. Les enfants ne connaissaient pas cette espèce d’aurore-là. Ils la regardèrent. Georgette la contempla.

Toutes les splendeurs de l’incendie se déployaient; l’hydre noire et le dragon écarlate apparaissaient dans la fumée difforme, superbement sombre et vermeille. De longues flammèches s’envolaient au loin et rayaient l’ombre, et l’on eût dit des comètes combattantes, courant les unes après les autres. Le feu est une prodigalité; les brasiers sont pleins d’écrins qu’ils sèment au vent; ce n’est pas pour rien que le charbon est identique au diamant. Il s’était fait au mur du troisième étage des crevasses par où la braise versait dans le ravin des cascades de pierreries; les tas de paille et d’avoine qui brûlaient dans le grenier commençaient à ruisseler parles fenêtres en avalanches de poudre d’or, et les avoines devenaient des améthystes, et les brins de paille devenaient des escarboucles.

— Joli! dit Georgette.

Ils s’étaient dressés tous les trois.

— Ah! cria la mère, ils se réveillent!

René-Jean se leva, alors Gros-Alain se leva, alors Georgette se leva.

René-Jean étira ses bras, alla vers la croisée et dit:

— J’ai chaud.

— Ai chaud, répéta Georgette.

La mère les appela.

— Mes enfants! René! Alain! Georgette!

Les enfants regardaient autour d’eux. Ils cherchaient à comprendre. Où les hommes sont terrifiés, les enfants sont curieux. Qui s’étonne aisément s’effraye difficilement; l’ignorance contient de l’intrépidité. Les enfants ont si peu droit à l’enfer que, s’ils le voyaient, ils l’admireraient.

La mère répéta:

— René! Alain! Georgette!

René-Jean tourna la tête; cette voix le tira de sa distraction; les enfants ont la mémoire courte, mais ils ont le souvenir rapide; tout le passé est pour eux hier; René-Jean vit sa mère, trouva cela tout simple, et, entouré comme il l’était de choses étranges, sentant un vague besoin d’appui, il cria:

— Maman!

— Maman! dit Gros-Alain.

— M’man! dit Georgette.

Et elle tendit ses petits bras.

Et la mère hurla: — Mes enfants!

Tous les trois vinrent au bord de la fenêtre; par bonheur, l’embrasement n’était pas de ce côté-là.

— J’ai trop chaud, dit René-Jean.

Il ajouta:

— Ça brûle.

Et il chercha des yeux sa mère.

— Viens donc, maman!

— Don, m’man, répéta Georgette.

La mère échevelée, déchirée, saignante, s’était laissé rouler de broussaille en broussaille dans le ravin. Cimourdain y était avec Guéchamp, aussi impuissants en bas que Gauvain en haut. Les soldats, désespérés d’être inutiles, fourmillaient autour d’eux. La chaleur était insupportable, personne ne la sentait. On considérait l’escarpement du pont, la hauteur des arches, l’élévation des étages, les fenêtres inaccessibles, et la nécessité d’agir vite. Trois étages à franchir. Nul moyen d’arriver là. Radoub, blessé, un coup de sabre à l’épaule, une oreille arrachée, ruisselant de sueur et de sang, était accouru; il vit Michelle Fléchard.

— Tiens, dit-il, la fusillée, vous êtes donc ressuscitée!

— Mes enfants! dit la mère.

— C’est juste, répondit Radoub; nous n’avons pas le temps de nous occuper des revenants. Et il se mit à escalader le pont, essai inutile, il enfonça ses ongles dans la pierre, il grimpa quelques instants; mais les assises étaient lisses, pas une cassure, pas un relief, la muraille était aussi correctement rejointoyée qu’une muraille neuve, et Radoub retomba. L’incendie continuait, épouvantable; on apercevait, dans l’encadrement de la croisée toute rouge, les trois têtes blondes. Radoub, alors, montra le poing au ciel, comme s’il y cherchait quelqu’un du regard, et dit: C’est donc ça une conduite, bon Dieu! La mère embrassait à genoux les piles du pont en criant: Grâce!

De sourds craquements se mêlaient aux pétillements du brasier. Les vitres des armoires de la bibliothèque se fêlaient, et tombaient avec bruit. Il était évident que la charpente cédait. Aucune force humaine n'y pouvait rien. Encore un moment et tout allait s'abîmer. On n'attendait plus que la catastrophe. On entendait les petites voix répéter: Maman! maman! On était au paroxysme de l'effroi.

Tout à coup, à la fenêtre voisine de celle où étaient les enfants, sur le fond pourpre du flamboiement, une haute figure apparut.

Toutes les têtes se levèrent, tous les yeux devinrent fixes. Un homme était là-haut, un homme était dans la salle de la bibliothèque, un homme était dans la fournaise. Cette figure se découpait en noir sur la flamme, mais elle avait des cheveux blancs. On reconnut le marquis de Lantenac.

Il disparut, puis il reparut.

L'effrayant vieillard se dressa à la fenêtre maniant une énorme échelle. C'était l'échelle de sauvetage déposée dans la bibliothèque qu'il était allé chercher le long du mur et qu'il avait traînée jusqu'à la fenêtre. Il la saisit par une extrémité, et, avec l'agilité magistrale d'un athlète, il la fit glisser hors de la croisée, sur le rebord de l'appui extérieur jusqu'au fond du ravin. Radoub, en bas, éperdu, tendit les mains, reçut l'échelle, la serra dans ses bras, et cria:

— Vive la République!

Le marquis répondit: — Vive le Roi!

Et Radoub grommela: — Tu peux bien crier tout ce que tu voudras, et dire des bêtises si tu veux, tu es le bon Dieu.

L'échelle était posée; la communication était établie entre la salle incendiée et la terre; vingt hommes accoururent, Radoub en tête, et en un clin d'oeil ils s'étagèrent du haut en bas, adossés aux échelons, comme les maçons qui montent et qui descendent des pierres. Cela fit sur l'échelle de bois une échelle humaine. Radoub, au faîte de l'échelle, touchait à la fenêtre. Il était, lui, tourné vers l'incendie.

La petite armée, éparse dans les bruyères et sur les pentes, se pressait, bouleversée de toutes les émotions à la fois, sur le plateau, dans le ravin, sur la plate-forme de la tour.

Le marquis disparut encore, puis reparut, apportant un enfant.

Il y eut un immense battement de mains.

C'était le premier que le marquis avait saisi au hasard. C'était

Gros-Alain.

Gros-Alain criait: — J’ai peur.

Le marquis donna Gros-Alain à Radoub, qui le passa derrière lui et au-dessous de lui à un soldat qui le passa à un autre, et, pendant que Gros-Alain, très effrayé et criant, arrivait ainsi de bras en bras jusqu’au bas de l’échelle, le marquis, un moment absent, revint à la fenêtre avec René-Jean qui résistait et pleurait, et qui battit Radoub au moment où le marquis le passa au sergent.

Le marquis rentra dans la salle pleine de flammes. Georgette était restée seule. Il alla à elle. Elle sourit. Cet homme de granit sentit quelque chose d’humide lui venir aux yeux. Il demanda: — Comment t’appelles-tu?

— Orgette, dit-elle.

Il la prit dans ses bras, elle souriait toujours, et au moment où il la remettait à Radoub, cette conscience si haute et si obscure eut l’éblouissement de l’innocence, le vieillard donna à l’enfant un baiser.

— C’est la petite môme! dirent les soldats; et Georgette, à son tour, descendit de bras en bras jusqu’à terre parmi des cris d’adoration. On battait des mains, on trépignait; les vieux grenadiers sanglotaient, et elle leur souriait.

La mère était au pied de l’échelle, haletante, insensée, ivre de tout cet inattendu, jetée sans transition de l’enfer dans le paradis. L’excès de joie meurtrit le coeur à sa façon. Elle tendait les bras, elle reçut d’abord Gros-Alain, ensuite René-Jean, ensuite Georgette, elle les couvrit pêle-mêle de baisers, puis elle éclata de rire et tomba évanouie.

Un grand cri s’éleva:

— Tous sont sauvés!

Tous étaient sauvés, en effet, excepté le vieillard.

Mais personne n’y songeait, pas même lui peut-être.

Il resta quelques instants rêveur au bord de la fenêtre, comme s’il voulait laisser au gouffre de flamme le temps de prendre un parti. Puis sans se hâter, lentement, fièrement, il enjamba l’appui de la croisée, et, sans se retourner, droit, debout, adossé aux échelons, ayant derrière lui l’incendie, faisant face au précipice, il se mit à descendre l’échelle en silence avec une majesté de fantôme. Ceux qui étaient sur l’échelle se précipitèrent en bas, tous les assistants tressaillirent, il se fit autour de cet homme qui arrivait d’en haut un recul d’horreur sacré comme autour d’une vision. Lui, cependant, s’enfonçait gravement dans l’ombre qu’il avait devant lui; pendant qu’ils reculaient, il s’approchait d’eux; sa pâleur de marbre n’avait pas un pli, son regard de spectre n’avait pas un éclair; à chaque pas qu’il faisait vers ces hommes dont les prunelles effarées se fixaient sur lui dans les ténèbres, il semblait plus grand, l’échelle tremblait et sonnait sous son pied lugubre, et l’on eût dit la statue du commandeur redescendant dans le sépulcre.

Quand le marquis fut en bas, quand il eut atteint le dernier échelon et posé son pied à terre, une main s’abattit sur son collet. Il se retourna.

— Je t’arrête, dit Cimourdain.

— Je t’approuve, dit Lantenac.

LIVRE SIXIEME

C’EST APRES LA VICTOIRE QU’A LIEU LE COMBAT

I. LANTENAC PRIS

C’était dans le sépulcre en effet que le marquis était redescendu.

On l’emmena.

La crypte-oubliette du rez-de-chaussée de la Tourgue fut immédiatement rouverte sous l’oeil sévère de Cimourdain; on y mit une lampe, une cruche d’eau et un pain de soldat, on y jeta une botte de paille, et, moins d’un quart d’heure après la minute où la main du prêtre avait saisi le marquis, la porte du cachot se refermait sur Lantenac.

Cela fait, Cimourdain alla trouver Gauvain; en ce moment-là l’église lointaine de Parigné sonnait onze heures du soir; Cimourdain dit à Gauvain:

— Je vais convoquer la cour martiale. Tu n’en seras pas. Tu es Gauvain et Lantenac est Gauvain. Tu es trop proche parent pour être juge, et je blâme Egalité d’avoir jugé Capet. La cour martiale sera composée de trois juges, un officier, le capitaine, Guéchamp, un sous-officier, le sergent Radoub, et moi, qui présiderai. Rien de tout cela ne te regarde plus. Nous nous conformerons au décret de la Convention; nous nous bornerons à constater l’identité du ci-devant marquis de Lantenac. Demain la cour martiale, après-demain la guillotine. La Vendée est morte.

Gauvain ne répliqua pas une parole, et Cimourdain, préoccupé de la chose suprême qui lui restait à faire, le quitta. Cimourdain avait des heures à désigner et des emplacements à choisir. Il avait comme Lequinio à Granville, comme Tallien à Bordeaux, comme Châlier à Lyon, comme Saint-Just à Strasbourg, l’habitude, réputée de bon exemple, d’assister de sa personne aux exécutions; le juge venant voir travailler le bourreau; usage emprunté par la Terreur de 93 aux parlements de France et à l’inquisition d’Espagne.

Gauvain aussi était préoccupé.

Un vent froid soufflait de la forêt. Gauvain, laissant Guéchamp donner les ordres nécessaires, alla à sa tente qui était dans le pré de la lisière du bois, au pied de la Tourgue, et y prit son manteau à capuchon, dont il s’enveloppa. Ce manteau était bordé de ce simple galon qui, selon la mode républicaine, sobre d’ornements, désignait le commandant en chef. Il se mit à marcher dans ce pré sanglant où l’assaut avait commencé. Il était là seul. L’incendie continuait, désormais dédaigné; Radoub était près des enfants et de la mère, presque aussi maternel qu’elle; le châtelet du pont achevait de brûler, les sapeurs faisaient la part du feu, on creusait des fosses, on enterrait les morts, on pansait les blessés, on avait démoli la retirade, on désencombrait de cadavres les chambres et les escaliers, on nettoyait le lieu du carnage, on balayait le tas d'ordures terrible de la victoire, les soldats faisaient, avec la rapidité militaire, ce qu'on pourrait appeler le ménage de la bataille finie. Gauvain ne voyait rien de tout cela.

A peine jetait-il un regard, à travers sa rêverie, au poste de la brèche doublé sur l'ordre de Cimourdain.

Cette brèche, il la distinguait dans l'obscurité, à environ deux cents pas du coin de la prairie où il s'était comme réfugié. Il voyait cette ouverture noire. C'était par là que l'attaque avait commencé, il y avait trois heures de cela; c'était par là que lui Gauvain avait pénétré dans la tour; c'était là le rez-de-chaussée où était la retirade; c'était dans ce rez-de-haussée que s'ouvrait la porte du cachot où était le marquis. Ce poste de la brèche gardait ce cachot.

En même temps que son regard apercevait vaguement cette brèche, son oreille entendait confusément revenir, comme un glas qui tinte, ces paroles: Demain la cour martiale, après-demain la guillotine.

L'incendie, qu'on avait isolé et sur lequel les sapeurs lançaient toute l'eau qu'on avait pu se procurer, ne s'éteignait pas sans résistance et jetait des flammes intermittentes; on entendait par instants craquer les plafonds et se précipiter l'un sur l'autre les étages croulants; alors des tourbillons d'étincelles s'envolaient comme d'une torche secouée, une clarté d'éclair faisait visible l'extrême horizon, et l'ombre de la Tourgue, subitement gigantesque, s'allongeait jusqu'à la forêt.

Gauvain allait et venait à pas lents dans cette ombre et devant la brèche de l'assaut. Par moments il croisait ses deux mains derrière sa tête recouverte de son capuchon de guerre. Il songeait.

II. GAUVAIN PENSIF

Sa rêverie était insondable.

Un changement à vue inouï venait de se faire.

Le marquis de Lantenac s’était transfiguré.

Gauvain avait été témoin de cette transfiguration.

Jamais il n’aurait cru que de telles choses pussent résulter d’une complication d’incidents, quels qu’ils fussent. Jamais il n’aurait, même en rêve, imaginé qu’il pût arriver rien de pareil. L’imprévu, cet on ne sait quoi de hautain qui joue avec l’homme, avait saisi Gauvain et le tenait. Gauvain avait devant lui l’impossible devenu réel, visible, palpable, inévitable, inexorable.

Que pensait-il de cela, lui, Gauvain?

Il ne s’agissait pas de tergiverser; il fallait conclure.

Une question lui était posée; il ne pouvait prendre la fuite devant elle.

Posée par qui?

Par les événements.

Et pas seulement par les événements.

Car lorsque les événements, qui sont variables, nous font une question, la justice, qui est immuable, nous somme de répondre.

Derrière le nuage, qui nous jette son ombre, il y a l’étoile, qui nous jette sa clarté.

Nous ne pouvons pas plus nous soustraire à la clarté qu’à l’ombre.

Gauvain subissait un interrogatoire.

Il comparaissait devant quelqu’un.

Devant quelqu’un de redoutable.

Sa conscience.

Gauvain sentait tout vaciller en lui. Ses résolutions les plus solides, ses promesses les plus fermement faites, ses décisions les plus irrévocables, tout cela chancelait dans les profondeurs de sa volonté.

Il y a des tremblements d’âme.

Plus il réfléchissait à ce qu’il venait de voir, plus il était bouleversé.

Gauvain, républicain, croyait être, et était, dans l’absolu. Un absolu supérieur venait de se révéler.

Au-dessus de l’absolu révolutionnaire, il y a l’absolu humain.

Ce qui se passait ne pouvait être éludé; le fait était grave; Gauvain faisait partie de ce fait; il en était; il ne pouvait s'en retirer; et, bien que Cimourdain lui eût dit: — «Cela ne te regarde plus,» — il sentait en lui quelque chose comme ce qu'éprouve l'arbre au moment où on l'arrache de sa racine.

Tout homme a une base; un ébranlement à cette base cause un trouble profond; Gauvain sentait ce trouble.

Il pressait sa tête dans ses deux mains, comme pour en faire jaillir la vérité. Préciser une telle situation n'était pas facile; simplifier le complexe, rien de plus malaisé; il avait devant lui de redoutables chiffres dont il fallait faire le total; faire l'addition de la destinée, quel vertige! Il l'essayait; il tâchait de se rendre compte; il s'efforçait de rassembler ses idées, de discipliner les résistances qu'il sentait en lui, et de récapituler les faits.

Il se les exposait à lui-même.

A qui n'est-il pas arrivé de se faire un rapport, et de s'interroger, dans une circonstance suprême, sur l'itinéraire à suivre, soit pour avancer, soit pour reculer?

Gauvain venait d'assister à un prodige.

En même temps que le combat terrestre, il y avait eu un combat céleste.

Le combat du bien contre le mal.

Un coeur effrayant venait d'être vaincu.

Etant donné l'homme avec tout ce qui est mauvais en lui, la violence, l'erreur, l'aveuglement, l'opiniâtreté malsaine, l'orgueil, l'égoïsme, Gauvain venait de voir un miracle.

La victoire de l'humanité sur l'homme.

L'humanité avait vaincu l'inhumain.

Et par quel moyen? de quelle façon? comment avait-elle terrassé un colosse de colère et de haine? quelles armes avait-elle employées? quelle machine de guerre? Le berceau.

Un éblouissement venait de passer sur Gauvain. En pleine guerre sociale, en pleine conflagration de toutes les inimitiés et de toutes les vengeances, au moment le plus obscur et le plus furieux du tumulte, à l'heure où le crime donnait toute sa flamme et la haine toutes ses ténèbres, à cet instant des luttes où tout devient projectile, où la mêlée est si funèbre qu'on ne sait plus où est le juste, où est l'honnête, où est le vrai; brusquement, l'Inconnu, l'avertisseur mystérieux des âmes, venait de faire resplendir, au-dessus des clartés et des noirceurs humaines, la grande lueur éternelle.

Au-dessus du sombre duel entre le faux et le relatif, dans les profondeurs, la face de la vérité avait tout à coup apparu.

Subitement la force des faibles était intervenue.

On avait vu trois pauvres êtres, à peine nés, inconscients, abandonnés, souriants, ayant contre eux la guerre civile, le talion, l’affreuse logique des représailles, le meurtre, le carnage, le fratricide, la rage, la rancune, toutes les gorgones, triompher; on avait vu l’avortement et la défaite d’un infâme incendie, chargé de commettre un crime; on avait vu les préméditations atroces déconcertées et déjouées; on avait vu l’antique férocité féodale, le vieux dédain inexorable, la prétendue expérience des nécessités de la guerre, la raison d’état, tous les arrogants partis-pris de la vieillesse farouche, s’évanouir devant le bleu regard de ceux qui n’ont pas vécu; et c’est tout simple, car celui qui n’a pas vécu encore n’a pas fait le mal, il est la justice, il est la vérité, il est la blancheur, et les immenses anges du ciel sont dans les petits enfants.

Spectacle utile; conseil; leçon; les combattants frénétiques de la guerre sans merci avaient soudainement vu, en face de tous les forfaits, de tous les attentats, de tous les fanatismes, de l’assassinat, de la vengeance attisant les bûchers, de la mort arrivant une torche à la main, au-dessus de l’énorme légion des crimes, se dresser cette toute-puissance, l’innocence.

Et l’innocence avait vaincu.

Et l’on pouvait dire: Non, la guerre civile n’existe pas, la barbarie n’existe pas, la haine n’existe pas, le crime n’existe pas, les ténèbres n’existent pas; pour dissiper ces spectres, il suffit de cette aurore, l’enfance.

Jamais, dans aucun combat, Satan n’avait été plus visible, ni Dieu.

Ce combat avait eu pour arène une conscience.

La conscience de Lantenac.

Maintenant il recommençait, plus acharné et plus décisif encore peut-être, dans une autre conscience.

La conscience de Gauvain.

Quel champ de bataille que l’homme!

Nous sommes livrés à ces dieux, à ces monstres, à ces géants, nos pensées.

Souvent ces belligérants terribles foulent aux pieds notre âme.

Gauvain méditait.

Le marquis de Lantenac, cerné, bloqué, condamné, mis hors la loi, serré, comme la bête dans le cirque, comme le clou dans la tenaille, enfermé dans son gîte devenu sa prison, étreint de toutes parts par une muraille de fer et de feu, était parvenu à se dérober. Il avait fait ce miracle d'échapper. Il avait réussi ce chef-d'oeuvre, le plus difficile de tous dans une telle guerre, la fuite. Il avait repris possession de la forêt pour s'y retrancher, du pays pour y combattre, de l'ombre pour y disparaître. Il était redevenu le redoutable allant et venant, l'errant sinistre, le capitaine des invisibles, le chef des hommes souterrains, le maître des bois. Gauvain avait la victoire, mais Lantenac avait la liberté. Lantenac désormais avait la sécurité, la course illimitée devant lui, le choix inépuisable des asiles. Il était insaisissable, introuvable, inaccessible. Le lion avait été pris au piège, et il en était sorti.

Eh bien, il y était rentré.

Le marquis de Lantenac avait volontairement, spontanément de sa pleine préférence, quitté la forêt, l'ombre, la sécurité, la liberté, pour rentrer dans le plus effroyable péril, intrépidement, une première fois, Gauvain l'avait vu, en se précipitant dans l'incendie au risque de s'y engouffrer, une deuxième fois, en descendant cette échelle qui le rendait à ses ennemis, et qui, échelle de sauvetage pour les autres, était pour lui échelle de perdition.

Et pourquoi avait-il fait cela?

Pour sauver trois enfants.

Et maintenant qu'allait-on en faire de cet homme?

Le guillotiner.

Ainsi, cet homme, pour trois enfants, les siens? non; de sa famille? non; de sa caste? non; pour trois petits pauvres, les premiers venus, des enfants trouvés, des inconnus, des déguenillés, des va-nu-pieds, ce gentilhomme, ce prince, ce vieillard, sauvé, délivré, vainqueur, car l'évasion est un triomphe, avait tout risqué, tout compromis, tout remis en question, et, hautainement, en même temps qu'il rendait les enfants, il avait apporté sa tête, et cette tête, jusqu'alors terrible, maintenant auguste, il l'avait offerte.

Et qu'allait-on faire?

L'accepter.

Le marquis de Lantenac avait eu le choix entre la vie d'autrui et la sienne; dans cette option superbe, il avait choisi sa mort.

Et on allait la lui accorder.

On allait le tuer.

Quel salaire de l'héroïsme!

Répondre à un acte généreux par un acte sauvage!

Donner ce dessous à la révolution!

Quel rapetissement pour la république!

Tandis que l’homme des préjugés et des servitudes, subitement transformé, rentrait dans l’humanité, eux, les hommes de la délivrance et de l’affranchissement, ils resteraient dans la guerre civile, dans la routine du sang, dans le fratricide!

Et la haute loi divine de pardon, d’abnégation, de rédemption, de sacrifice, existerait pour les combattants de l’erreur, et n’existerait pas pour les soldats de la vérité!

Quoi! ne pas lutter de magnanimité! se résigner à cette défaite, étant les plus forts, d’être les plus faibles, étant les victorieux, d’être les meurtriers, et de faire dire qu’il y a, du côté de la monarchie, ceux qui sauvent les enfants, et du côté de la république, ceux qui tuent les vieillards!

On verrait ce grand soldat, cet octogénaire puissant, ce combattant désarmé, volé plutôt que pris, saisi en pleine bonne action, garrotté avec sa permission, ayant encore au front la sueur d’un dévouement grandiose, monter les marches de l’échafaud comme on monte les degrés d’une apothéose! Et l’on mettrait sous le couperet cette tête, autour de laquelle voleraient suppliantes les trois âmes des petits anges sauvés! et, devant ce supplice infamant pour les bourreaux, on verrait le sourire sur la face de cet homme, et sur la face de la république la rougeur!

Et cela s’accomplirait en présence de Gauvain, chef! Et pouvant l’empêcher, il s’abstiendrait! Et il se contenterait de ce congé altier, — *cela ne te regarde plus!* — Et il ne se dirait point qu’en pareil cas, abdication, c’est complicité! Et il ne s’apercevrait pas que, dans une action si énorme, entre celui qui fait et celui qui laisse faire, celui qui laisse faire est le pire, étant le lâche!

Mais cette mort, ne l’avait-il pas promise? lui, Gauvain, l’homme clément, n’avait-il pas déclaré que Lantenac faisait exception à la clémence, et qu’il livrerait Lantenac à Cimourdain?

Cette tête, il la devait. Eh bien, il la payait. Voilà tout.

Mais était-ce bien la même tête?

Jusqu’ici Gauvain n’avait vu dans Lantenac que le combattant barbare, le fanatique de royauté et de féodalité, le massacreur de prisonniers, l’assassin déchaîné par la guerre, l’homme sanglant. Cet homme-là, il ne le craignait pas; ce proscripteur, il le proscrirait; cet implacable le trouverait implacable. Rien de plus simple, le chemin était tracé et lugubrement facile à suivre, tout était prévu, on tuera celui qui tue, on était dans la ligne droite de l’horreur. Inopinément, cette ligne droite s’était rompue, un tournant imprévu révélait un horizon nouveau, une métamorphose avait eu lieu. Un Lantenac inattendu entrait en scène. Un héros sortait du monstre; plus qu’un héros, un homme. Plus qu’une âme, un coeur. Ce n’était plus un tueur que Gauvain avait devant lui, mais un sauveur. Gauvain était terrassé par un flot de clarté céleste. Lantenac venait de le frapper d’un coup de foudre de bonté.

Et Lantenac transfiguré ne transfigurerait pas Gauvain! Quoi! ce coup de lumière serait sans contre-coup! L’homme du passé irait en avant, et l’homme de l’avenir en arrière! L’homme des barbaries et des superstitions ouvrirait des ailes subites, et planerait, et regarderait ramper sous lui, dans de la fange et dans de la nuit, l’homme de l’idéal! Gauvain resterait à plat ventre dans la vieille ornière féroce, tandis que Lantenac irait dans le sublime courir les aventures!

Autre chose encore.

Et la famille!

Ce sang qu’il allait répandre, — car le laisser verser, c’est le verser soi-même, — est-ce que ce n’était pas son sang, à lui Gauvain? Son grand-père était mort, mais son grand-oncle vivait; et ce grand-oncle, c’était le marquis de Lantenac. Est-ce que celui des deux frères qui était dans le tombeau ne se dresserait pas pour empêcher l’autre d’y entrer? Est-ce qu’il n’ordonnerait pas à son petit-fils de respecter désormais cette couronne de cheveux blancs, soeur de sa propre auréole? Est-ce qu’il n’y avait pas là, entre Gauvain et Lantenac, le regard indigné d’un spectre?

Est-ce donc que la révolution avait pour but de dénaturer l’homme? Est-ce pour briser la famille, est-ce pour étouffer l’humanité, qu’elle était faite? Loin de là. C’est pour affirmer ces réalités suprêmes, et non pour les nier, que 89 avait surgi. Renverser les bastilles, c’est délivrer l’humanité; abolir la féodalité, c’est fonder la famille. L’auteur étant le point de départ de l’autorité, et l’autorité étant incluse dans l’auteur, il n’y a point d’autre autorité que la paternité; de là la légitimité de la reine-abeille qui crée son peuple, et qui, étant mère, est reine; de là l’absurdité du roi-homme, qui, n’étant pas le père, ne peut être le maître; de là la suppression du roi; de là la république. Qu’est-ce que tout cela? C’est la famille, c’est l’humanité, c’est la révolution. La révolution, c’est l’avènement des peuples; et, au fond, le Peuple, c’est l’Homme.

Il s’agissait de savoir si, quand Lantenac venait de rentrer dans l’humanité, Gauvain, allait, lui, rentrer dans la famille.

Il s’agissait de savoir si l’oncle et le neveu allaient se rejoindre dans la lumière supérieure, ou bien si à un progrès de l’oncle répondrait un recul du neveu.

La question, dans ce débat pathétique de Gauvain avec sa conscience, arrivait à se poser ainsi, et la solution semblait se dégager d’elle-même: sauver Lantenac.

Oui, mais la France?

Ici le vertigineux problème changeait de face brusquement.

Quoi! la France était aux abois! la France était livrée, ouverte, démantelée! elle n’avait plus de fossé, l’Allemagne passait le Rhin; elle n’avait plus de muraille, l’Italie enjambait les Alpes et l’Espagne les Pyrénées. Il lui restait le grand abîme, l’Océan. Elle avait pour elle le gouffre. Elle pouvait s’y adosser, et, géante, appuyée à toute la mer, combattre toute la terre. Situation, après tout, inexpugnable. Eh bien non, cette situation allait lui manquer. Cet Océan n’était plus à elle. Dans cet Océan, il y avait l’Angleterre. L’Angleterre, il est vrai, ne savait comment passer. Eh bien, un homme allait lui jeter le pont, un homme allait lui tendre la main, un homme allait dire à Pitt, à Craig, à Cornwallis, à Dundas, aux pirates: venez! un homme allait crier: Angleterre, prends la France! Et cet homme était le marquis de Lantenac.

Cet homme, on le tenait. Après trois mois de chasse, de poursuite, d’acharnement, on l’avait enfin saisi. La main de la révolution venait de s’abattre sur le maudit; le poing crispé de 93 avait pris le meurtrier royaliste au collet; par un de ces effets de la préméditation mystérieuse qui se mêle d’en haut aux choses humaines, c’était dans son propre cachot de famille que ce parricide attendait maintenant son châtiment; l’homme féodal était dans l’oubliette féodale; les pierres de son château se dressaient contre lui et se fermaient sur lui, et celui qui voulait livrer son pays était livré par sa maison. Dieu avait visiblement édifié tout cela; l’heure juste avait sonné; la révolution avait fait prisonnier cet ennemi public; il ne pouvait plus combattre, il ne pouvait plus lutter, il ne pouvait plus nuire; dans cette Vendée où il y avait tant de bras, il était le seul cerveau; lui fini, la guerre civile était finie; on l’avait; dénouement tragique et heureux; après tant de massacres et de carnages, il était là, l’homme qui avait tué, et c’était son tour de mourir.

Et il se trouverait quelqu’un pour le sauver!

Cimourdain, c’est-à-dire 93, tenait Lantenac, c’est-à-dire la monarchie, et il se trouverait quelqu’un pour ôter de cette serre de bronze cette proie! Lantenac, l’homme en qui se concentrait cette gerbe de fléaux qu’on nomme le passé, le marquis de Lantenac était dans la tombe, la lourde porte éternelle s’était refermée sur lui, et quelqu’un viendrait, du dehors, tirer le verrou! ce malfaiteur social était mort, et avec lui la révolte, la lutte fratricide, la guerre bestiale, et quelqu’un le ressusciterait!

Oh! comme cette tête de mort rirait!

Comme ce spectre dirait: c’est bon, me voilà vivant, imbéciles!

Comme il se remettrait à son oeuvre hideuse! Comme Lantenac se replongerait, implacable et joyeux, dans le gouffre de haine et de guerre! comme on reverrait, dès le lendemain, les maisons brûlées, les prisonniers massacrés, les blessés achevés, les femmes fusillées!

Et après tout, cette action qui fascinait Gauvain, Gauvain ne se l’exagérait-il pas?

Trois enfants étaient perdus; Lantenac les avait sauvés.

Mais qui donc les avait perdus?

N’était-ce pas Lantenac?

Qui avait mis ces berceaux dans cet incendie?

N’était-ce pas l’Imânus?

Qu’était-ce que l’Imânus?

Le lieutenant du marquis.

Le responsable, c’est le chef.

Donc l’incendiaire et l’assassin, c’était Lantenac.

Qu’avait-il donc fait de si admirable?

Il n’avait point persisté, rien de plus.

Après avoir construit le crime, il avait reculé devant. Il s’était fait horreur à lui-même. Le cri de la mère avait réveillé en lui ce fond de vieille pitié humaine, sorte de dépôt de la vie universelle, qui est dans toutes les âmes, même les plus fatales. A ce cri, il était revenu sur ses pas.

De la nuit où il s’enfonçait, il avait rétrogradé vers le jour. Après avoir fait le crime, il l’avait défait. Tout son mérite était ceci: n’avoir pas été un monstre jusqu’au bout.

Et pour si peu, lui rendre tout! lui rendre l’espace, les champs, les plaines, l’air, le jour, lui rendre la forêt dont il userait pour le banditisme, lui rendre la liberté dont il userait pour la servitude, lui rendre la vie dont il userait pour la mort!

Quant à essayer de s'entendre avec lui, quant à vouloir traiter avec cette âme altière, quant à lui proposer sa délivrance sous condition, quant à lui demander s'il consentirait, moyennant la vie sauve, à s'abstenir désormais de toute hostilité et de toute révolte; quelle faute ce serait qu'une telle offre, quel avantage on lui donnerait, à quel dédain on se heurterait, comme il souffletterait la question par la réponse! comme il dirait: Gardez les hontes pour vous. Tuez-moi!

Rien à faire en effet avec cet homme, que le tuer ou le délivrer. Cet homme était à pic: il était toujours prêt à s'envoler ou à se sacrifier; il était à lui-même son aigle et son précipice. Ame étrange.

Le tuer? quelle anxiété! le délivrer? quelle responsabilité!

Lantenac sauvé, tout serait à recommencer avec la Vendée comme avec l'hydre tant que la tête n'est pas coupée. En un clin d'oeil, et avec une course de météore, toute la flamme, éteinte par la disparition de cet homme, se rallumerait. Lantenac ne se reposerait pas tant qu'il n'aurait point réalisé ce plan exécrable, poser, comme un couvercle de tombe, la monarchie sur la république et l'Angleterre sur la France. Sauver Lantenac, c'était sacrifier la France; la vie de Lantenac, c'était la mort d'une foule d'êtres innocents, hommes, femmes, enfants, repris par la guerre domestique; c'était le débarquement des Anglais, le recul de la révolution, les villes saccagées, le peuple déchiré, la Bretagne sanglante, la proie rendue à la griffe. Et Gauvain, au milieu de toutes sortes de lueurs incertaines et de clartés en sens contraires, voyait vaguement s'ébaucher dans sa rêverie et se poser devant lui ce problème: la mise en liberté du tigre.

Et puis, la question reparaissait sous son premier aspect; la pierre de Sisyphe, qui n'est pas autre chose que la querelle de l'homme avec lui-même, retombait: Lantenac, était-ce donc le tigre?

Peut-être l'avait-il été; mais l'était-il encore? Gauvain subissait ces spirales vertigineuses de l'esprit revenant sur lui-même, qui font la pensée pareille à la couleuvre. Décidément, même après examen, pouvait-on nier le dévouement de Lantenac, son abnégation stoïque, son désintéressement superbe? Quoi! en présence de toutes les gueules de la guerre civile ouvertes, attester l'humanité! quoi! dans le conflit des vérités inférieures, apporter la vérité supérieure! quoi! Prouver qu'au-dessus des royautés, au-dessus des révolutions, au-dessus des questions terrestres, il y a l'immense attendrissement de l'âme humaine, la protection due aux faibles par les forts, le salut dû à ceux qui sont perdus par ceux qui sont sauvés, la paternité due à tous les enfants par tous les vieillards! Prouver ces choses magnifiques, et les prouver par le don de sa tête! Quoi! être un général et renoncer à la stratégie, à la bataille, à la revanche! Quoi! être un royaliste, prendre une balance, mettre dans un plateau le roi de France, une monarchie de quinze siècles, les vieilles lois à rétablir, l'antique société à restaurer, et dans l'autre, trois petits paysans quelconques, et trouver le roi, le trône, le sceptre et les quinze siècles de monarchie légers, pesés à ce poids de trois innocences! quoi! tout cela ne serait rien! quoi! celui qui a fait cela resterait le tigre et devrait être traité en bête fauve! non! non! non! ce n'était pas un monstre l'homme qui venait d'illuminer de la clarté d'une action divine le précipice des guerres civiles! le porte-glaive s'était métamorphosé en porte-lumière. L'infernal Satan était redevenu le Lucifer céleste. Lantenac s'était racheté de toutes ses barbaries par un acte de sacrifice; en se perdant matériellement il s'était sauvé moralement; il s'était refait innocent; il avait signé sa propre grâce. Est-ce que le droit de se pardonner à soi-même n'existe pas? Désormais il était vénérable.

Lantenac venait d'être extraordinaire. C'était maintenant le tour de

Gauvain.

Gauvain était chargé de lui donner la réplique.

La lutte des passions bonnes et des passions mauvaises faisait en ce moment sur le monde le chaos; Lantenac, dominant ce chaos, venait d'en dégager l'humanité; c'était à Gauvain maintenant d'en dégager la famille.

Qu'allait-il faire?

Gauvain allait-il tromper la confiance de Dieu?

Non. Et il balbutiait en lui-même: — Sauvons Lantenac.

Alors c'est bien. Va, fais les affaires des Anglais. Déserte. Passe à l'ennemi. Sauve Lantenac et trahis la France.

Et il frémissait.

Ta solution n'en est pas une, ô songeur! — Gauvain voyait dans l'ombre le sinistre sourire du sphinx.

Cette situation était une sorte de carrefour redoutable où les vérités combattantes venaient aboutir et se confronter, et où se regardaient fixement les trois idées suprêmes de l'homme, l'humanité, la famille, la patrie.

Chacune de ces voix prenait à son tour la parole, et chacune à son tour disait vrai. Comment choisir? chacune à son tour semblait trouver le joint de sagesse et de justice, et disait: Fais cela. Etait-ce cela qu’il fallait faire? Oui. Non. Le raisonnement disait une chose; le sentiment en disait une autre; les deux conseils étaient contraires. Le raisonnement n’est que la raison; le sentiment est souvent la conscience; l’un vient de l’homme, l’autre de plus haut.

C’est ce qui fait que le sentiment a moins de clarté et plus de puissance.

Quelle force pourtant dans la raison sévère!

Gauvain hésitait.

Perplexités farouches.

Deux abîmes s’ouvraient devant Gauvain. Perdre le marquis? ou le sauver? Il fallait se précipiter dans l’un ou dans l’autre.

Lequel de ces deux gouffres était le devoir?

III. LE CAPUCHON DU CHEF

C’est au devoir en effet qu’on avait affaire.

Le devoir se dressait; sinistre devant Cimourdain, formidable devant Gauvain.

Simple devant l’un; multiple, divers, tortueux, devant l’autre. Minuit sonna, puis une heure du matin.

Gauvain s’était, sans s’en apercevoir, insensiblement rapproché de l’entrée de la brèche.

L’incendie ne jetait plus qu’une réverbération diffuse et s’éteignait.

Le plateau, de l’autre côté de la tour, en avait le reflet, et devenait visible par instants, puis s’éclipsait, quand la fumée couvrait le feu. Cette lueur, ravivée par soubresauts et coupée d’obscurités subites, disproportionnait les objets et donnait aux sentinelles du camp des aspects de larves. Gauvain, à travers sa méditation, considérait vaguement ces effacements de la fumée par le flamboiement et du flamboiement par la fumée. Ces apparitions et ces disparitions de la clarté devant ses yeux avaient on ne sait quelle analogie avec les apparitions et les disparitions de la vérité dans son esprit.

Soudain, entre deux tourbillons de fumée une flammèche envolée du brasier décroissant éclaira vivement le sommet du plateau et y fit saillir la silhouette vermeille d’une charrette. Gauvain regarda cette charrette; elle était entourée de cavaliers qui avaient des chapeaux de gendarme. Il lui sembla que c’était la charrette que la longue-vue de Guéchamp lui avait fait voir à l’horizon, quelques heures auparavant, au moment où le soleil se couchait. Des hommes étaient sur la charrette et avaient l’air occupés à la décharger. Ce qu’ils retiraient de la charrette paraissait pesant, et rendait par moments un son de ferraille; il eût été difficile de dire ce que c’était; cela ressemblait à des charpentes; deux d’entre eux descendirent et posèrent à terre une caisse qui, à en juger par sa forme, devait contenir un objet triangulaire. La flammèche s’éteignit, tout rentra dans les ténèbres; Gauvain, l’oeil fixe, demeura pensif devant ce qu’il y avait là dans l’obscurité.

Des lanternes s’étaient allumées, on allait et venait sur le plateau, mais les formes qui se mouvaient étaient confuses, et d’ailleurs Gauvain d’en bas, et de l’autre côté du ravin, ne pouvait voir que ce qui était tout à fait sur le bord du plateau.

Des voix parlaient, mais on ne percevait pas les paroles. Çà et là, des chocs sonnaient sur du bois. On entendait aussi on ne sait quel grincement métallique pareil au bruit d'une faulx qu'on aiguise.

Deux heures sonnèrent.

Gauvain lentement, et comme quelqu'un qui ferait volontiers deux pas en avant et trois pas en arrière, se dirigea vers la brèche. A son approche, reconnaissant dans la pénombre le manteau et le capuchon galonné du commandant, la sentinelle présenta les armes. Gauvain pénétra dans la salle du rez-de-chaussée, transformée en corps de garde. Une lanterne était pendue à la voûte. Elle éclairait juste assez pour qu'on pût traverser la salle sans marcher sur les hommes du poste, gisant à terre sur de la paille, et la plupart endormis.

Ils étaient couchés là; ils s'y étaient battus quelques heures auparavant; la mitraille, éparse sous eux en grains de fer et de plomb, et mal balayée, les gênait un peu pour dormir; mais ils étaient fatigués, et ils se reposaient. Cette salle avait été le lieu horrible; là on avait attaqué; là on avait rugi, hurlé, grincé, frappé, tué, expiré; beaucoup des leurs étaient tombés morts sur ce pavé où ils se couchaient assoupis; cette paille qui servait à leur sommeil buvait le sang de leurs camarades; maintenant c'était fini, le sang était étanché, les sabres étaient essuyés, les morts étaient morts; eux ils dormaient paisibles. Telle est la guerre. Et puis, demain, tout le monde aura le même sommeil.

A l'entrée de Gauvain, quelques-uns de ces hommes assoupis se levèrent, entre autres l'officier qui commandait le poste. Gauvain lui désigna la porte du cachot:

— Ouvrez-moi, dit-il.

Les verrous furent tirés, la porte s'ouvrit.

Gauvain entra dans le cachot.

La porte se referma derrière lui.

LIVRE SEPTIÈME

FÉODALITÉ ET RÉVOLUTION

I. L’ANCÊTRE

Une lampe était posée sur la dalle de la crypte, à côté du soupirail carré de l’oubliette.

On apercevait aussi sur la dalle la cruche pleine d’eau, le pain de munition et la botte de paille. La crypte étant taillée dans le roc, le prisonnier qui eût eu la fantaisie de mettre le feu à la paille eût perdu sa peine; aucun risque d’incendie pour la prison, certitude d’asphyxie pour le prisonnier.

A l’instant où la porte tourna sur ses gonds, le marquis marchait dans son cachot; va-et-vient machinal propre à tous les fauves mis en cage.

Au bruit que fit la porte en s’ouvrant puis en se refermant, il leva la tête, et la lampe qui était à terre entre Gauvain et le marquis éclaira ces deux hommes en plein visage.

Ils se regardèrent, et ce regard était tel qu’il les fit tous deux immobiles.

Le marquis éclata de rire et s’écria:

— Bonjour, monsieur. Voilà pas mal d’années que je n’ai eu la bonne fortune de vous rencontrer. Vous me faites la grâce de venir me voir. Je vous remercie. Je ne demande pas mieux que de causer un peu. Je commençais à m’ennuyer. Vos amis perdent le temps, des constatations d’identité, des cours martiales, c’est long toutes ces manières-là. J’irais plus vite en besogne. Je suis ici chez moi. Donnez-vous la peine d’entrer. Eh bien, qu’est-ce que vous dites de tout ce qui se passe? C’est original, n’est-ce pas? Il y avait une fois un roi et une reine; le roi, c’était le roi; la reine, c’était la France. On a tranché la tête au roi et marié la reine à Robespierre; ce monsieur et cette dame ont eu une fille qu’on nomme la guillotine, et avec laquelle il paraît que je ferai connaissance demain matin. J’en serai charmé. Comme de vous voir. Venez-vous pour cela? Avez-vous monté en grade? Seriez-vous le bourreau? Si c’est une simple visite d’amitié, j’en suis touché. Monsieur le vicomte, vous ne savez peut-être plus ce que c’est qu’un gentilhomme. Eh bien, en voilà un; c’est moi. Regardez ça. C’est curieux; ça croit en Dieu, ça croit à la tradition, ça croit à la famille, ça croit à ses aïeux, ça croit à l’exemple de son père, à la fidélité, à la loyauté, au devoir envers son prince, au respect des vieilles lois, à la vertu, à la justice; et ça vous ferait fusiller avec plaisir. Ayez, je vous prie, la bonté de vous asseoir. Sur le pavé, c’est vrai; car il n’y a pas de fauteuil dans ce salon; mais qui vit dans la boue peut s’asseoir par terre. Je ne dis pas cela pour vous offenser, car ce que nous appelons la boue, vous l'appelez la nation. Vous n'exigez sans doute pas que je crie Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité? Ceci est une ancienne chambre de ma maison; jadis les seigneurs y mettaient les manants; maintenant les manants y mettent les seigneurs. Ces niaiseries-là se nomment une révolution. Il paraît qu'on me coupera le cou d'ici à trente-six heures. Je n'y vois pas d'inconvénient. Par exemple, si l'on était poli, on m'aurait envoyé ma tabatière, qui est là-haut dans la chambre des miroirs, où vous avez joué tout enfant et où je vous ai fait sauter sur mes genoux. Monsieur, je vais vous apprendre une chose, vous vous appelez Gauvain, et, chose bizarre, vous avez du sang noble dans les veines, pardieu, le même sang que le mien, et ce sang qui fait de moi un homme d'honneur fait de vous un gueusard. Telles sont les particularités. Vous me direz que ce n'est pas votre faute. Ni la mienne. Parbleu, on est un malfaiteur sans le savoir. Cela tient à l'air qu'on respire; dans des temps comme les nôtres, on n'est pas responsable de ce qu'on fait, la révolution est coquine pour tout le monde; et tous vos grands criminels sont de grands innocents. Quelles buses! A commencer par vous. Souffrez que je vous admire. Oui, j'admire un garçon tel que vous, qui, homme de qualité, bien situé dans l'état, ayant un grand sang à répandre pour les grandes causes, vicomte de cette Tour-Gauvain, prince de Bretagne, pouvant être duc par droit et pair de France par héritage, ce qui est à peu près tout ce que peut désirer ici-bas un homme de bon sens, s'amuse, étant ce qu'il est, à être ce que vous êtes, si bien qu'il fait à ses ennemis l'effet d'un scélérat et à ses amis l'effet d'un imbécile. A propos, faites mes compliments à monsieur l'abbé Cimourdain.

Le marquis parlait à son aise, paisiblement, sans rien souligner, avec sa voix de bonne compagnie, avec son il clair et tranquille, les deux mains dans ses goussets. Il s'interrompit, respira longuement, et reprit:

— Je ne vous cache pas que j'ai fait ce que j'ai pu pour vous tuer. Tel que vous me voyez, j'ai trois fois, moi-même, en personne, pointé un canon sur vous. Procédé discourtois, je l'avoue; mais ce serait faire fond sur une mauvaise maxime que de s'imaginer qu'en guerre l'ennemi cherche à nous être agréable. Car nous sommes en guerre, monsieur mon neveu. Tout est à feu et à sang. C'est pourtant vrai qu'on a tué le roi. Joli siècle.

Il s'arrêta encore, puis poursuivit:

— Quand on pense que rien de tout cela ne serait arrivé si l'on avait pendu Voltaire et mis Rousseau aux galères! Ah! les gens d'esprit, quel fléau! Ah çà, qu'est-ce que vous lui reprochez à cette monarchie? c'est vrai, on envoyait l’abbé Pucelle à son abbaye de Corbigny, en lui laissant le choix de la voiture et tout le temps qu’il voudrait pour faire le chemin; et quant à votre monsieur Titon, qui avait été, s’il vous plaît, un fort débauché, et qui allait chez les filles avant d’aller aux miracles du diacre Pâris, on le transférait du château de Vincennes au château de Ham en Picardie, qui est, j’en conviens, un assez vilain endroit. Voilà les griefs; je m’en souviens; j’ai crié aussi dans mon temps; j’ai été aussi bête que vous.

Le marquis tâta sa poche comme s’il y cherchait sa tabatière, et continua:

— Mais pas aussi méchant. On parlait pour parler. Il y avait aussi la mutinerie des enquêtes et des requêtes; et puis ces messieurs les philosophes sont venus, on a brûlé les écrits au lieu de brûler les auteurs, les cabales de la cour s’en sont mêlées; il y a eu tous ces benêts, Turgot, Quesnay, Malesherbes, les physiocrates, et caetera, et le grabuge a commencé. Tout est venu des écrivailleurs et des rimailleurs. L’Encyclopédie! Diderot! d’Alembert! Ah! les méchants bélîtres! Un homme bien né comme ce roi de Prusse, avoir donné là-dedans! Moi, j’eusse supprimé tous les gratteurs de papier. Ah! nous étions des justiciers, nous autres. On peut voir ici, sur le mur, la marque des roues d’écartèlement. Nous ne plaisantions pas. Non, non, point d’écrivassiers! Tant qu’il y aura des Arouet, il y aura des Marat. Tant qu’il y aura des grimauds qui griffonnent, il y aura des gredins qui assassinent; tant qu’il y aura de l’encre, il y aura de la noirceur; tant que la patte de l’homme tiendra la plume de l’oie, les sottises frivoles engendreront les sottises atroces. Les livres font les crimes. Le mot chimère a deux sens, il signifie rêve, et il signifie monstre. Comme on se paye de billevesées! Qu’est-ce que vous nous chantez avec nos droits? Droits de l’homme! droits du peuple! Cela est-il assez creux, assez stupide, assez imaginaire, assez vide de sens! Moi, quand je dis: Havoise, soeur de Conan II, apporta le comté de Bretagne à Hoël, comte de Nantes et de Cornouailles, qui laissa le trône à Alain Fergant, oncle de Berthe, qui épousa Alain le Noir, seigneur de la Roche-sur-Yon, et en eut Conan le Petit, aïeul de Guy ou Gauvain de Thouars, notre ancêtre, je dis une chose claire, et voilà un droit. Mais vos drôles, vos marauds, vos croquants, qu’appellent-ils leurs droits? Le déicide et le régicide. Si ce n’est pas hideux! Ah! les maroufles! J’en suis fâché pour vous, monsieur; mais vous êtes de ce fier sang de Bretagne; vous et moi, nous avons Gauvain de Thouars pour grand-père; nous avons encore pour aïeul ce grand duc de Montbazon qui fut pair de France et honoré du collier des ordres, qui attaqua le faubourg de Tours et fut blessé au combat d'Arques, et qui mourut grand-veneur de France en sa maison de Couzières en Touraine, âgé de quatre-vingt-six ans. Je pourrais vous parler encore du duc de Laudunois, fils de la dame de la Garnache, de Claude de Lorraine, duc de Chevreuse, et de Henri de Lenoncourt, et de Françoise de Laval-Boisdauphin. Mais à quoi bon? Monsieur a l'honneur d'être un idiot, et il tient à être l'égal de mon palefrenier. Sachez ceci, j'étais déjà un vieil homme que vous étiez encore un marmot. Je vous ai mouché, morveux, et je vous moucherai encore. En grandissant, vous avez trouvé moyen de vous rapetisser. Depuis que nous ne nous sommes vus, nous sommes allés chacun de notre côté, moi du côté de l'honnêteté, vous du côté opposé. Ah! je ne sais pas comment tout cela finira; mais messieurs vos amis sont de fiers misérables. Ah! oui, c'est beau, j'en tombe d'accord, les progrès sont superbes, on a supprimé dans l'armée la peine de la chopine d'eau infligée trois jours consécutifs au soldat ivrogne; on a le maximum, la Convention, l'évêque Gobel, monsieur Chaumette et monsieur Hébert, et l'on extermine en masse tout le passé, depuis la Bastille jusqu'à l'almanach. On remplace les saints par les légumes. Soit, messieurs les citoyens, soyez les maîtres, régnez, prenez vos aises, donnez-vous-en, ne vous gênez pas. Tout cela n'empêchera point que la religion ne soit la religion, que la royauté n'emplisse quinze cents ans de notre histoire, et que la vieille seigneurie française, même décapitée, ne soit plus haute que vous. Quant à vos chicanes sur le droit historique des races royales, nous en haussons les épaules. Chilpéric, au fond, n'était qu'un moine appelé Daniel; ce fut Rainfroy qui inventa Chilpéric pour ennuyer Charles Martel; nous savons ces choses-là aussi bien que vous. Ce n'est pas la question. La question est ceci: être un grand royaume; être la vieille France, être ce pays d'arrangement magnifique, où l'on considère premièrement la personne sacrée des monarques, seigneurs absolus de l'état, puis les princes, puis les officiers de la couronne, pour les armes sur terre et sur mer, pour l'artillerie, direction et surintendance des finances. Ensuite il y a la justice souveraine et subalterne, suivie du maniement des gabelles et recettes générales, et enfin la police du royaume dans ses trois ordres. Voilà qui était beau et noblement ordonné; vous l'avez détruit. Vous avez détruit les provinces, comme de lamentables ignorants que vous êtes, sans même vous douter de ce que c'était que les provinces. Le génie de la France est composé du génie même du continent, et chacune des provinces de France représentait une vertu de l’Europe; la franchise de l’Allemagne était en Picardie, la générosité de la Suède en Champagne, l’industrie de la Hollande en Bourgogne, l’activité de la Pologne en Languedoc, la gravité de l’Espagne en Gascogne, la sagesse de l’Italie en Provence, la subtilité de la Grèce en Normandie, la fidélité de la Suisse en Dauphiné. Vous ne saviez rien de tout cela; vous avez cassé, brisé, fracassé, démoli, et vous avez été tranquillement des bêtes brutes. Ah! vous ne voulez plus avoir de nobles! Eh bien, vous n’en aurez plus. Faites-en votre deuil. Vous n’aurez plus de paladins, vous n’aurez plus de héros. Bonsoir les grandeurs anciennes. Trouvez-moi un d’Assas à présent! Vous avez tous peur pour votre peau. Vous n’aurez plus les chevaliers de Fontenoy qui saluaient avant de tuer, vous n’aurez plus les combattants en bas de soie du siège de Lérida; vous n’aurez plus de ces fières journées militaires où les panaches passaient comme des météores; vous êtes un peuple fini; vous subirez ce viol, l’invasion; si Alaric II revient, il ne trouvera plus en face de lui Clovis; si Abdérame revient, il ne trouvera plus en face de lui Charles Martel; si les Saxons reviennent, ils ne trouveront plus devant eux Pépin; vous n’aurez plus Agnadel, Rocroy, Lens, Staffarde, Nerwinde, Steinkerque, la Marsaille, Raucoux, Lawfeld, Mahon; vous n’aurez plus Marignan avec François Ier; vous n’aurez plus Bouvines avec Philippe-Auguste faisant prisonnier, d’une main, Renaud, comte de Boulogne, et de l’autre, Ferrand, comte de Flandre. Vous aurez Azincourt, mais vous n’aurez plus pour s’y faire tuer, enveloppé de son drapeau, le sieur de Bacqueville, le grand porte-oriflamme! Allez! Allez! faites! Soyez les hommes nouveaux. Devenez petits!

Le marquis fit un moment silence, et repartit:

— Mais laissez-nous grands. Tuez les rois, tuez les nobles, tuez les prêtres, abattez, ruinez, massacrez, foulez tout aux pieds, mettez les maximes antiques sous le talon de vos bottes, piétinez le trône, trépignez l’autel, écrasez Dieu, dansez dessus! c’est votre affaire. Vous êtes des traîtres et des lâches, incapables de dévouement et de sacrifice. J’ai dit. Maintenant faites-moi guillotiner, monsieur le vicomte. J’ai l’honneur d’être votre très humble.

Et il ajouta:

— Ah! je vous dis vos vérités! Qu’est-ce que cela me fait? Je suis mort.

— Vous êtes libre, dit Gauvain.

Et Gauvain s’avança vers le marquis, défit son manteau de commandant, le lui jeta sur les épaules, et lui rabattit le capuchon sur les yeux. Tous deux étaient de même taille.

— Eh bien, qu’est-ce que tu fais? dit le marquis.

Gauvain éleva la voix et cria:

— Lieutenant, ouvrez-moi.

La porte s’ouvrit.

Gauvain cria:

— Vous aurez soin de refermer la porte derrière moi.

Et il poussa dehors le marquis stupéfait.

La salle basse, transformée en corps de garde, avait, on s’en souvient, pour tout éclairage, une lanterne de corne qui faisait tout voir trouble, et donnait plus de nuit que de jour. Dans cette lueur confuse, ceux des soldats qui ne dormaient pas virent marcher au milieu d’eux, se dirigeant vers la sortie, un homme de haute stature ayant le manteau et le capuchon galonné de commandant en chef; ils firent le salut militaire, et l’homme passa.

Le marquis, lentement, traversa le corps de garde, traversa la brèche, non sans s’y heurter la tête plus d’une fois, et sortit.

La sentinelle, croyant voir Gauvain, lui présenta les armes.

Quand il fut dehors, ayant sous ses pieds l’herbe des champs, à deux cents pas de la forêt, et devant lui l’espace, la nuit, la liberté, la vie, il s’arrêta et demeura un moment immobile comme un homme qui s’est laissé faire, qui a cédé à la surprise, et qui, ayant profité d’une porte ouverte, cherche s’il a bien ou mal agi, hésite avant d’aller plus loin, et donne audience à une dernière pensée. Après quelques secondes de rêverie attentive, il leva sa main droite, fit claquer son médius contre son pouce et dit: Ma foi!

Et il s’en alla.

II. LA COUR MARTIALE

La porte du cachot s’était refermée. Gauvain était dedans.

Tout alors dans les cours martiales était à peu près discrétionnaire. Dumas, à l’Assemblée législative, avait esquissé une ébauche de législation militaire, retravaillée plus tard par Talot au conseil des Cinq-Cents, mais le code définitif des conseils de guerre n’a été rédigé que sous l’empire. C’est de l’empire que date, par parenthèse, l’obligation imposée aux tribunaux militaires de ne recueillir les votes qu’en commençant par le grade inférieur. Sous la révolution cette loi n’existait pas.

En 1793, le président d’un tribunal militaire était presque à lui seul tout le tribunal; il choisissait les membres, classait l’ordre des grades, réglait le mode du vote; il était le maître en même temps que le juge.

Cimourdain avait désigné, pour prétoire de la cour martiale, cette salle même du rez-de-chaussée où avait été la retirade et où était maintenant le corps de garde. Il tenait à tout abréger, le chemin de la prison au tribunal et le trajet du tribunal à l’échafaud.

A midi, conformément à ses ordres, la cour était en séance avec l’apparat que voici: trois chaises de paille, une table de sapin, deux chandelles allumées, un tabouret devant la table.

Les chaises étaient pour les juges et le tabouret pour l’accusé. Aux deux bouts de la table il y avait deux autres tabourets, l’un pour le commissaire-auditeur qui était un fourrier, l’autre pour le greffier qui était un caporal.

Il y avait sur la table un bâton de cire rouge, le sceau de la République en cuivre, deux écritoires, des dossiers de papier blanc, et deux affiches imprimées, étalées toutes grandes ouvertes, contenant l’une, la mise hors la loi, l’autre, le décret de la Convention.

La chaise du milieu était adossée à un faisceau de drapeaux tricolores; dans ces temps de rude simplicité, un décor était vite posé, et il fallait peu de temps pour changer un corps de garde en cour de justice.

La chaise du milieu, destinée au président, faisait face à la porte du cachot.

Pour public, les soldats.

Deux gendarmes gardaient la sellette.

Cimourdain était assis sur la chaise du milieu, ayant à sa droite le capitaine Guéchamp, premier juge, et à sa gauche le sergent Radoub, deuxième juge.

Il avait sur la tête son chapeau à panache tricolore, à son côté son sabre, dans sa ceinture ses deux pistolets. Sa balafre, qui était d'un rouge vif, ajoutait à son air farouche.

Radoub avait fini par se faire panser. Il avait autour de la tête un mouchoir sur lequel s'élargissait lentement une plaque de sang.

A midi, l'audience n'était pas encore ouverte, une estafette, dont on entendait dehors piaffer le cheval, était debout près de la table du tribunal. Cimourdain écrivait. Il écrivait ceci:

«Citoyens membres du Comité de salut public.

«Lantenac est pris. Il sera exécuté demain.»

Il data et signa, plia et cacheta la dépêche, et la remit à l'estafette, qui partit.

Cela fait, Cimourdain dit d'une voix haute:

— Ouvrez le cachot.

Les deux gendarmes tirèrent les verrous, ouvrirent le cachot, et y entrèrent.

Cimourdain leva la tête, croisa les bras, regarda la porte, et cria:

— Amenez le prisonnier.

Un homme apparut entre les deux gendarmes, sous le cintre de la porte ouverte.

C'était Gauvain.

Cimourdain eut un tressaillement.

— Gauvain! s'écria-t-il.

Et il reprit:

— Je demande le prisonnier.

— C'est moi, dit Gauvain.

— Toi?

— Moi.

— Et Lantenac?

— Il est libre.

— Libre!

— Oui.

— Evadé?

— Evadé.

Cimourdain balbutia avec un tremblement:

— En effet, ce château est à lui, il en connaît toutes les issues, l’oubliette communique peut-être à quelque sortie, j’aurais dû y songer, il aura trouvé moyen de s’enfuir, il n’aura eu besoin pour cela de l’aide de personne.

— Il a été aidé, dit Gauvain.

— A s’évader?

— A s’évader.

— Qui l’a aidé?

— Moi.

— Toi!

— Moi.

— Tu rêves!

— Je suis entré dans le cachot, j’étais seul avec le prisonnier, j’ai ôté mon manteau, je le lui ai mis sur le dos, je lui ai rabattu le capuchon sur le visage, il est sorti à ma place et je suis resté à la sienne. Me voici.

— Tu n’as pas fait cela!

— Je l’ai fait.

— C’est impossible.

— C’est réel.

— Amenez-moi Lantenac!

— Il n’est plus ici. Les soldats, lui voyant le manteau de commandant, l’ont pris pour moi et l’ont laissé passer. Il faisait encore nuit.

— Tu es fou.

— Je dis ce qui est.

Il y eut un silence. Cimourdain bégaya:

— Alors tu mérites…

— La mort, dit Gauvain.

Cimourdain était pâle comme une tête coupée. Il était immobile comme un homme sur qui vient de tomber la foudre. Il semblait ne plus respirer. Une grosse goutte de sueur perla sur son front.

Il raffermit sa voix et dit:

— Gendarmes, faites asseoir l’accusé.

Gauvain se plaça sur le tabouret.

Cimourdain reprit:

— Gendarmes, tirez vos sabres.

C’était la formule usitée quand l’accusé était sous le poids d’une sentence capitale.

Les gendarmes tirèrent leurs sabres.

La voix de Cimourdain avait repris son accent ordinaire.

— Accusé, dit-il, levez-vous.

Il ne tutoyait plus Gauvain.

III. LES VOTES

Gauvain se leva.

— Comment vous nommez-vous? demanda Cimourdain.

Gauvain répondit:

— Gauvain.

Cimourdain continua l’interrogatoire.

— Qui êtes-vous?

— Je suis commandant en chef de la colonne expéditionnaire des Côtes-du-Nord.

— Etes-vous parent ou allié de l’homme évadé?

— Je suis son petit-neveu.

— Vous connaissez le décret de la Convention?

— J’en vois l’affiche sur votre table.

— Qu’avez-vous à dire sur ce décret?

— Que je l’ai contresigné, que j’en ai ordonné l’exécution, et que c’est moi qui ai fait faire cette affiche au bas de laquelle est mon nom.

— Faites choix d’un défenseur.

— Je me défendrai moi-même.

— Vous avez la parole.

Cimourdain était redevenu impassible. Seulement son impassibilité ressemblait moins au calme d’un homme qu’à la tranquillité d’un rocher.

Gauvain demeura un moment silencieux et comme recueilli.

Cimourdain reprit:

— Qu’avez-vous à dire pour votre défense?

Gauvain leva lentement la tête, ne regarda personne, et répondit:

— Ceci: une chose m’a empêché d’en voir une autre; une bonne action, vue de trop près, m’a caché cent actions criminelles; d’un côté un vieillard, de l’autre des enfants, tout cela s’est mis entre moi et le devoir. J’ai oublié les villages incendiés, les champs ravagés, les prisonniers massacrés, les blessés achevés, les femmes fusillées, j’ai oublié la France livrée à l’Angleterre; j’ai mis en liberté le meurtrier de la patrie. Je suis coupable. En parlant ainsi, je semble parler contre moi; c’est une erreur. Je parle pour moi. Quand le coupable reconnaît sa faute, il sauve la seule chose qui vaille la peine d’être sauvée, l’honneur.

— Est-ce là, repartit Cimourdain, tout ce que vous avez à dire pour votre défense?

— J'ajoute qu'étant le chef, je devais l'exemple, et qu'à votre tour, étant les juges, vous le devez.

— Quel exemple demandez-vous?

— Ma mort.

— Vous la trouvez juste?

— Et nécessaire.

— Asseyez-vous.

Le fourrier, commissaire-auditeur, se leva et donna lecture, premièrement, de l'arrêté qui mettait hors la loi le ci-devant marquis de Lantenac; deuxièmement, du décret de la Convention édictant la peine capitale contre quiconque favoriserait l'évasion d'un rebelle prisonnier. Il termina par les quelques lignes imprimées au bas du décret, intimant défense «de porter aide et secours» au rebelle susnommé «sous peine de mort», et signées: *le commandant en chef de la colonne expéditionnaire*, GAUVAIN.

Ces lectures faites, le commissaire-auditeur se rassit.

Cimourdain croisa les bras et dit:

— Accusé, soyez attentif. Public, écoutez, regardez, et taisez-vous. Vous avez devant vous la loi. Il va être procédé au vote. La sentence sera rendue à la majorité simple. Chaque juge opinera à son tour, à haute voix, en présence de l'accusé, la justice n'ayant rien à cacher.

Cimourdain continua:

— La parole est au premier juge. Parlez, capitaine Guéchamp.

Le capitaine Guéchamp ne semblait voir ni Cimourdain, ni Gauvain. Ses paupières abaissées cachaient ses yeux immobiles fixés sur l'affiche du décret et la considérant comme on considérerait un gouffre.

Il dit:

— La loi est formelle. Un juge est plus et moins qu'un homme; il est moins qu'un homme, car il n'a pas de cœur; il est plus qu'un homme, car il a le glaive. L'an 414 de Rome, Manlius fit mourir son fils pour le crime d'avoir vaincu sans son ordre. La discipline violée voulait une expiation. Ici, c'est la loi qui a été violée; et la loi est plus haute encore que la discipline. Par suite d'un accès de pitié, la patrie est remise en danger. La pitié peut avoir les proportions d'un crime. Le commandant Gauvain a fait évader le rebelle Lantenac. Gauvain est coupable. Je vote la mort.

— Ecrivez, greffier, dit Cimourdain.

Le greffier écrivit: «Capitaine Guéchamp: la mort.»

Gauvain éleva la voix.

— Guéchamp, dit-il, vous avez bien voté, et je vous remercie.

Cimourdain reprit:

— La parole est au deuxième juge. Parlez, sergent Radoub.

Radoub se leva, se tourna vers Gauvain et fit à l'accusé le salut militaire. Puis il s'écria:

— Si c'est ça, alors, guillotinez-moi, car j'en donne ici ma nom de Dieu de parole d'honneur la plus sacrée, je voudrais avoir fait, d'abord ce qu'a fait le vieux, et ensuite ce qu'a fait mon commandant. Quand j'ai vu cet individu de quatre-vingts ans se jeter dans le feu pour en tirer les trois mioches, j'ai dit: Bonhomme, tu es un brave homme! Et quand j'apprends que c'est mon commandant qui a sauvé ce vieux de votre bête de guillotine, mille noms de noms, je dis: Mon commandant, vous devriez être mon général, et vous êtes un vrai homme, et moi, tonnerre! je vous donnerais la croix de Saint-Louis, s'il y avait encore des croix, s'il y avait encore des saints, et s'il y avait encore des louis! Ah çà! est-ce qu'on va être des imbéciles, à présent? Si c'est pour des choses comme ça qu'on a gagné la bataille de Jemmapes, la bataille de Valmy, la bataille de Fleurus et la bataille de Wattignies, alors il faut le dire. Comment! voilà le commandant Gauvain qui depuis quatre mois mène toutes ces bourriques de royalistes tambour battant, et qui sauve la république à coups de sabre, et qui a fait la chose de Dol où il fallait joliment de l'esprit, et, quand vous avez cet homme-là, vous tâchez de ne plus l'avoir! et, au lieu d'en faire votre général, vous voulez lui couper le cou! je dis que c'est à se jeter la tête la première par-dessus le parapet du Pont-Neuf, et que vous-même, citoyen Gauvain, mon commandant, si, au lieu d'être mon général, vous étiez mon caporal, je vous dirais que vous avez dit de fichues bêtises tout à l'heure. Le vieux a bien fait de sauver les enfants, vous avez bien fait de sauver le vieux, et si l'on guillotine les gens parce qu'ils ont fait de bonnes actions, alors va-t'en à tous les diables, je ne sais plus du tout de quoi il est question. Il n'y a plus de raison pour qu'on s'arrête. C'est pas vrai, n'est-ce pas, tout ça? Je me pince pour savoir si je suis éveillé. Je ne comprends pas. Il fallait donc que le vieux laisse brûler les mômes tout vifs, il fallait donc que mon commandant laisse couper le cou au vieux. Tenez, oui, guillotinez-moi. J'aime autant ça. Une supposition, les mioches seraient morts, le bataillon du Bonnet-Rouge était déshonoré. Est-ce que c’est ça qu’on voulait? Alors mangeons-nous les uns les autres. Je me connais en politique aussi bien que vous qui êtes là, j’étais du club de la section des Piques. Sapristi! nous nous abrutissons à la fin! Je résume ma façon de voir. Je n’aime pas les choses qui ont l’inconvénient de faire qu’on ne sait plus du tout où on en est. Pourquoi diable nous faisons-nous tuer? Pour qu’on nous tue notre chef! Pas de ça, Lisette. Je veux mon chef! Il me faut mon chef! Je l’aime encore mieux aujourd’hui qu’hier. L’envoyer à la guillotine, mais vous me faites rire! Tout ça, nous n’en voulons pas. J’ai écouté. On dira tout ce qu’on voudra. D’abord, pas possible.

Et Radoub se rassit. Sa blessure s’était rouverte. Un filet de sang qui sortait du bandeau coulait le long de son cou, de l’endroit où avait été son oreille.

Cimourdain se tourna vers Radoub.

— Vous votez pour que l’accusé soit absous?

— Je vote, dit Radoub, pour qu’on le fasse général.

— Je vous demande si vous votez pour qu’il soit acquitté.

— Je vote pour qu’on le fasse le premier de la république.

— Sergent Radoub, votez-vous pour que le commandant Gauvain soit acquitté, oui ou non?

— Je vote pour qu’on me coupe la tête à sa place.

— Acquittement, dit Cimourdain. Ecrivez, greffier.

Le greffier écrivit: «Sergent Radoub: acquittement.»

Puis le greffier dit:

— Une voix pour la mort. Une voix pour l’acquittement. Partage.

C’était à Cimourdain de voter.

Il se leva. Il ôta son chapeau et le posa sur la table.

Il n’était plus pâle ni livide. Sa face était couleur de terre.

Tous ceux qui étaient là eussent été couchés dans des suaires que le silence n’eût pas été plus profond.

Cimourdain dit d’une voix grave, lente et ferme:

— Accusé Gauvain, la cause est entendue. Au nom de la république, la cour martiale, à la majorité de deux voix contre une….

Il s’interrompit, il eut comme un temps d’arrêt; hésitait-il devant la mort? hésitait-il devant la vie? toutes les poitrines étaient haletantes. Cimourdain continua:

— … Vous condamne à la peine de mort.

Son visage exprimait la torture du triomphe sinistre. Quand Jacob dans les ténèbres se fit bénir par l’ange qu’il avait terrassé, il devait avoir ce sourire effrayant.

Ce ne fut qu’une lueur, et cela passa. Cimourdain redevint de marbre, se rassit, remit son chapeau sur sa tête, et ajouta:

— Gauvain, vous serez exécuté demain, au lever du soleil.

Gauvain se leva, salua et dit:

— Je remercie la cour.

— Emmenez le condamné, dit Cimourdain.

Cimourdain fit un signe, la porte du cachot se rouvrit, Gauvain y entra, le cachot se referma. Les deux gendarmes restèrent en faction des deux côtés de la porte, le sabre nu.

On emporta Radoub, qui venait de tomber sans connaissance.

IV. APRÈS CIMOURDAIN JUGE, CIMOURDAIN MAITRE

Un camp, c’est un guêpier. En temps de révolution surtout. L’aiguillon civique, qui est dans le soldat, sort volontiers et vite, et ne se gêne pas pour piquer le chef après avoir chassé l’ennemi. La vaillante troupe qui avait pris la Tourgue eut des bourdonnements variés, d’abord contre le commandant Gauvain quand on apprit l’évasion de Lantenac. Lorsqu’on vit Gauvain sortir du cachot où l’on croyait tenir Lantenac, ce fut comme une commotion électrique, et en moins d’une minute tout le corps fut informé. Un murmure éclata dans la petite armée, ce premier murmure fut: — Ils sont en train de juger Gauvain. Mais c’est pour la frime. Fiez-vous donc aux ci-devant et aux calotins! Nous venons de voir un vicomte qui sauve un marquis, et nous allons voir un prêtre qui absout un noble! — Quand on sut la condamnation de Gauvain, il y eut un deuxième murmure: — Voilà qui est fort! notre chef, notre brave chef, notre jeune commandant, un héros! C’est un vicomte, eh bien, il n’en a que plus de mérite à être républicain! Comment! lui, le libérateur de Pontorson, de Villedieu, de Pont-au-Beau! le vainqueur de Dol et de la Tourgue! celui par qui nous sommes invincibles! celui qui est l’épée de la république dans la Vendée! l’homme qui depuis cinq mois tient tête aux chouans et répare toutes les sottises de Léchelle et des autres! ce Cimourdain ose le condamner à mort! pourquoi? parce qu’il a sauvé un vieillard qui avait sauvé trois enfants! un prêtre tuer un soldat! —

Ainsi grondait le camp victorieux et mécontent. Une sombre colère entourait Cimourdain. Quatre mille hommes contre un seul, il semble que ce soit une force; ce n’en est pas une. Ces quatre mille hommes étaient une foule, et Cimourdain était une volonté. On savait que Cimourdain fronçait aisément le sourcil, et il n’en fallait pas davantage pour tenir l’armée en respect. Dans ces temps sévères, il suffisait que l’ombre du Comité de salut public fût derrière un homme pour faire cet homme redoutable et pour faire aboutir l’imprécation au chuchotement et le chuchotement au silence. Avant comme après les murmures, Cimourdain restait l’arbitre du sort de Gauvain comme du sort de tous. On savait qu’il n’y avait rien à lui demander et qu’il n’obéirait qu’à sa conscience, voix surhumaine entendue de lui seul. Tout dépendait de lui. Ce qu’il avait fait comme juge martial, seul, il pouvait le défaire comme délégué civil. Seul il pouvait faire grâce. Il avait pleins pouvoirs; d'un signe il pouvait mettre Gauvain en liberté; il était le maître de la vie et de la mort; il commandait à la guillotine. En ce moment tragique, il était l'homme suprême.

On ne pouvait qu'attendre.

La nuit vint.

V. LE CACHOT

La salle de justice était redevenue corps de garde; le poste était doublé comme la veille; deux factionnaires gardaient la porte du cachot fermée.

Vers minuit, un homme, qui tenait une lanterne à la main, traversa le corps de garde, se fit reconnaître et se fit ouvrir le cachot.

C’était Cimourdain.

Il entra et la porte resta entr’ouverte derrière lui.

Le cachot était ténébreux et silencieux. Cimourdain fit un pas dans cette obscurité, posa la lanterne à terre, et s’arrêta. On entendait dans l’ombre la respiration égale d’un homme endormi. Cimourdain écouta, pensif, ce bruit paisible.

Gauvain était au fond du cachot, sur la botte de paille. C’était son souffle qu’on entendait. Il dormait profondément.

Cimourdain s’avança avec le moins de bruit possible, vint tout près et se mit à regarder Gauvain; une mère regardant son nourrisson dormir n’aurait pas un plus tendre et plus inexprimable regard. Ce regard était plus fort peut-être que Cimourdain; Cimourdain appuya, comme font quelquefois les enfants, ses deux poings sur ses yeux, et demeura un moment immobile. Puis il s’agenouilla, souleva doucement la main de Gauvain et posa ses lèvres dessus.

Gauvain fit un mouvement. Il ouvrit les yeux, avec le vague étonnement du réveil en sursaut. La lanterne éclairait faiblement la cave. Il reconnut Cimourdain.

— Tiens, dit-il, c’est vous, mon maître.

Et il ajouta:

— Je rêvais que la mort me baisait la main.

Cimourdain eut cette secousse que nous donne parfois la brusque invasion d’un flot de pensées; quelquefois ce flot est si haut et si orageux qu’il semble qu’il va éteindre l’âme. Rien ne sortit du profond coeur de Cimourdain. Il ne put dire que: — Gauvain!

Et tous deux se regardèrent; Cimourdain avec des yeux pleins de ces flammes qui brûlent les larmes, Gauvain avec son plus doux sourire.

Gauvain se souleva sur son coude et dit:

— Cette balafre que je vois sur votre visage, c’est le coup de sabre que vous avez reçu pour moi. Hier encore vous étiez dans cette mêlée à côté de moi et à cause de moi. Si la providence ne vous avait pas mis près de mon berceau, où serais-je aujourd’hui? dans les ténèbres. Si j’ai la notion du devoir, c’est de vous qu’elle me vient. J’étais né noué. Les préjugés sont des ligatures, vous m’avez ôté ces bandelettes, vous avez remis ma croissance en liberté, et de ce qui n’était déjà plus qu’une momie, vous avez refait un enfant. Dans l’avorton probable vous avez mis une conscience. Sans vous, j’aurais grandi petit. J’existe par vous. Je n’étais qu’un seigneur, vous avez fait de moi un citoyen; je n’étais qu’un citoyen, vous avez fait de moi un esprit; vous m’avez fait propre, comme homme, à la vie terrestre, et, comme âme, à la vie céleste. Vous m’avez donné, pour aller dans la réalité humaine, la clef de vérité, et, pour aller au delà, la clef de lumière. O mon maître, je vous remercie. C’est vous qui m’avez créé.

Cimourdain s’assit sur la paille à côté de Gauvain et lui dit:

— Je viens souper avec toi.

Gauvain rompit le pain noir, et le lui présenta. Cimourdain en prit un morceau; puis Gauvain lui tendit la cruche d’eau.

— Bois le premier, dit Cimourdain.

Gauvain but et passa la cruche à Cimourdain qui but après lui. Gauvain n’avait bu qu’une gorgée; Cimourdain but à longs traits.

Dans ce souper, Gauvain mangeait et Cimourdain buvait. Signe du calme de l’un et de la fièvre de l’autre. On ne sait quelle sérénité terrible était dans ce cachot. Ces deux hommes causaient.

Gauvain disait:

— Les grandes choses s’ébauchent. Ce que la révolution fait en ce moment est mystérieux. Derrière l’oeuvre visible il y a l’oeuvre invisible. L’une cache l’autre. L’oeuvre visible est farouche, l’oeuvre invisible est sublime. En cet instant je distingue tout très nettement. C’est étrange et beau. Il a bien fallu se servir des matériaux du passé. De là cet extraordinaire 93. Sous un échafaudage de barbarie se construit un temple de civilisation.

— Oui, répondit Cimourdain. De ce provisoire sortira le définitif. Le définitif, c’est-à-dire le droit et le devoir parallèles, l’impôt proportionnel et progressif, le service militaire obligatoire, le nivellement, aucune déviation, et, au-dessus de tous et de tout, cette ligne droite, la loi. La république de l’absolu.

— Je préfère, dit Gauvain, la république de l’idéal.

Il s’interrompit, puis continua:

— O mon maître, dans tout ce que vous venez de dire, où placez-vous le dévouement, le sacrifice, l’abnégation, l’entrelacement magnanime des bienveillances, l’amour? Mettre tout en équilibre, c’est bien; mettre tout en harmonie, c’est mieux. Au-dessus de la balance il y a la lyre. Votre république dose, mesure et règle l’homme; la mienne l’emporte en plein azur; c’est la différence qu’il y a entre un théorème et un aigle.

— Tu te perds dans le nuage.

— Et vous dans le calcul.

— Il y a du rêve dans l’harmonie.

— Il y en a aussi dans l’algèbre.

— Je voudrais l’homme fait par Euclide.

— Et moi, dit Gauvain, je l’aimerais mieux fait par Homère.

Le sourire sévère de Cimourdain s’arrêta sur Gauvain comme pour tenir cette âme en arrêt.

— Poésie. Défie-toi des poètes.

— Oui, je connais ce mot. Défie-toi des souffles, défie-toi des rayons, défie-toi des parfums, défie-toi des fleurs, défie-toi des constellations.

— Rien de tout cela ne donne à manger.

— Qu’en savez-vous? l’idée aussi est nourriture. Penser, c’est manger.

— Pas d’abstraction. La république c’est deux et deux font quatre. Quand j’ai donné à chacun ce qui lui revient….

— Il vous reste à donner à chacun ce qui ne lui revient pas.

— Qu’entends-tu par là?

— J’entends l’immense concession réciproque que chacun doit à tous et que tous doivent à chacun, et qui est toute la vie sociale.

— Hors du droit strict, il n’y a rien.

— Il y a tout.

— Je ne vois que la justice.

— Moi, je regarde plus haut.

— Qu’y a-t-il donc au-dessus de la justice?

— L’équité.

Par moments ils s’arrêtaient comme si des lueurs passaient.

Cimourdain reprit:

— Précise, je t’en défie.

— Soit. Vous voulez le service militaire obligatoire. Contre qui? contre d’autres hommes. Moi, je ne veux pas de service militaire. Je veux la paix. Vous voulez les misérables secourus, moi je veux la misère supprimée. Vous voulez l’impôt proportionnel. Je ne veux point d’impôt du tout. Je veux la dépense commune réduite à sa plus simple expression et payée par la plus-value sociale.

— Qu’entends-tu par là?

— Ceci: d’abord supprimez les parasitismes; le parasitisme du prêtre, le parasitisme du juge, le parasitisme du soldat. Ensuite, tirez parti de vos richesses; vous jetez l’engrais à l’égout, jetez-le au sillon. Les trois quarts du sol sont en friche, défrichez la France, supprimez les vaines pâtures; partagez les terres communales. Que tout homme ait une terre, et que toute terre ait un homme. Vous centuplerez le produit social. La France, à cette heure, ne donne à ses paysans que quatre jours de viande par an; bien cultivée, elle nourrirait trois cent millions d’hommes, toute l’Europe. Utilisez la nature, cette immense auxiliaire dédaignée. Faites travailler pour vous tous les souffles de vent, toutes les chutes d’eau, tous les effluves magnétiques. Le globe a un réseau veineux souterrain; il y a dans ce réseau une circulation prodigieuse d’eau, d’huile, de feu; piquez la veine du globe, et faites jaillir cette eau pour vos fontaines, cette huile pour vos lampes, ce feu pour vos foyers. Réfléchissez au mouvement des vagues, au flux et reflux, au va-et-vient des marées. Qu’est-ce que l’océan? une énorme force perdue. Comme la terre est bête! ne pas employer l’océan!

— Te voilà en plein songe.

— C’est-à-dire en pleine réalité.

Gauvain reprit:

— Et la femme? qu’en faites-vous?

Cimourdain répondit:

— Ce qu’elle est. La servante de l’homme.

— Oui. A une condition.

— Laquelle?

— C’est que l’homme sera le serviteur de la femme.

— Y penses-tu? s’écria Cimourdain, l’homme serviteur! jamais. L’homme est maître. Je n’admets qu’une royauté, celle du foyer. L’homme chez lui est roi.

— Oui. A une condition.

— Laquelle?

— C’est que la femme y sera reine.

— C’est-à-dire que tu veux pour l’homme et pour la femme….

— L’égalité.

— L’égalité! y songes-tu? les deux êtres sont divers.

— J’ai dit l’égalité. Je n’ai pas dit l’identité.

Il y eut encore une pause, comme une sorte de trêve entre ces deux esprits échangeant des éclairs. Cimourdain la rompit.

— Et l’enfant! à qui le donnes-tu?

— D’abord au père qui l’engendre, puis à la mère qui l’enfante, puis au maître qui l’élève, puis à la cité qui le virilise, puis à la patrie qui est la mère suprême, puis à l’humanité qui est la grande aïeule.

— Tu ne parles pas de Dieu.

— Chacun de ces degrés, père, mère, maître, cité, patrie, humanité, est un des échelons de l’échelle qui monte à Dieu.

Cimourdain se taisait, Gauvain poursuivit:

— Quand on est au haut de l’échelle, on est arrivé à Dieu. Dieu s’ouvre; on n’a plus qu’à entrer.

Cimourdain fit le geste d’un homme qui en rappelle un autre.

— Gauvain, reviens sur la terre. Nous voulons réaliser le possible.

— Commencez par ne pas le rendre impossible.

— Le possible se réalise toujours.

— Pas toujours. Si l’on rudoie l’utopie, on la tue. Rien n’est plus sans défense que l’oeuf.

— Il faut pourtant saisir l’utopie, lui imposer le joug du réel, et l’encadrer dans le fait. L’idée abstraite doit se transformer en idée concrète; ce qu’elle perd en beauté, elle le regagne en utilité; elle est moindre, mais meilleure. Il faut que le droit entre dans la loi; et, quand le droit s’est fait loi, il est absolu. C’est là ce que j’appelle le possible.

— Le possible est plus que cela.

— Ah! te revoilà dans le rêve.

— Le possible est un oiseau mystérieux toujours planant au-dessus de l’homme.

— Il faut le prendre.

— Vivant.

Gauvain continua:

— Ma pensée est: Toujours en avant. Si Dieu avait voulu que l’homme reculât, il lui aurait mis un oeil derrière la tête. Regardons toujours du côté de l’aurore, de l’éclosion, de la naissance. Ce qui tombe encourage ce qui monte. Le craquement du vieil arbre est un appel à l’arbre nouveau. Chaque siècle fera son oeuvre, aujourd’hui civique, demain humaine. Aujourd’hui la question du droit, demain la question du salaire. Salaire et droit, au fond c’est le même mot. L’homme ne vit pas pour n’être point payé; Dieu en donnant la vie contracte une dette; le droit, c’est le salaire inné; le salaire, c’est le droit acquis.

Gauvain parlait avec le recueillement d’un prophète. Cimourdain écoutait. Les rôles étaient intervertis, et maintenant il semblait que c’était l’élève qui était le maître.

Cimourdain murmura:

— Tu vas vite.

— C’est que je suis peut-être un peu pressé, dit Gauvain en souriant.

Et il reprit:

— O mon maître, voici la différence entre nos deux utopies. Vous voulez la caserne obligatoire, moi, je veux l’école. Vous rêvez l’homme soldat, je rêve l’homme citoyen. Vous le voulez terrible, je le veux pensif. Vous fondez une république de glaives, je fonde….

Il s’interrompit:

— Je fonderais une république d’esprits.

Cimourdain regarda le pavé du cachot, et dit:

— Et en attendant que veux-tu?

— Ce qui est.

— Tu absous donc le moment présent?

— Oui.

— Pourquoi?

— Parce que c’est une tempête. Une tempête sait toujours ce qu’elle fait. Pour un chêne foudroyé, que de forêts assainies! La civilisation avait une peste, ce grand vent l’en délivre. Il ne choisit pas assez peut-être. Peut-il faire autrement? Il est chargé d’un si rude balayage! Devant l’horreur du miasme, je comprends la fureur du souffle.

Gauvain continua:

— D’ailleurs, que m’importe la tempête, si j’ai la boussole, et que me font les événements, si j’ai ma conscience!

Et il ajouta de cette voix basse qui est aussi la voix solennelle:

— Il y a quelqu’un qu’il faut toujours laisser faire.

— Qui? demanda Cimourdain.

Gauvain leva le doigt au-dessus de sa tête. Cimourdain suivit du regard la direction de ce doigt levé, et, à travers la voûte du cachot, il lui sembla voir le ciel étoilé.

Ils se turent encore.

Cimourdain reprit:

— Société plus grande que nature. Je te le dis, ce n’est plus le possible, c’est le rêve.

— C’est le but. Autrement, à quoi bon la société? Restez dans la nature. Soyez les sauvages. Otaïti est un paradis. Seulement, dans ce paradis on ne pense pas. Mieux vaudrait encore un enfer intelligent qu’un paradis bête. Mais non, point d’enfer. Soyons la société humaine. Plus grande que nature. Oui. Si vous n’ajoutez rien à la nature, pourquoi sortir de la nature? Alors, contentez-vous du travail comme la fourmi, et du miel comme l’abeille. Restez la bête ouvrière au lieu d’être l’intelligence reine. Si vous ajoutez quelque chose à la nature, vous serez nécessairement plus grand qu’elle; ajouter, c’est augmenter; augmenter, c’est grandir. La société, c’est la nature sublimée. Je veux tout ce qui manque aux ruches, tout ce qui manque aux fourmilières, les monuments, les arts, la poésie, les héros, les génies. Porter des fardeaux éternels, ce n’est pas la loi de l’homme. Non, non, non, plus de parias, plus d’esclaves, plus de forçats, plus de damnés! Je veux que chacun des attributs de l’homme soit un symbole de civilisation et un patron de progrès; je veux la liberté devant l’esprit, l’égalité devant le coeur, la fraternité devant l’âme. Non! plus de joug! l’homme est fait, non pour traîner des chaînes, mais pour ouvrir des ailes. Plus d’homme reptile. Je veux la transfiguration de la larve en lépidoptère; je veux que le ver de terre se change en une fleur vivante, et s’envole. Je veux….

Il s’arrêta. Son oeil devint éclatant.

Ses lèvres remuaient. Il cessa de parler.

La porte était restée ouverte. Quelque chose des rumeurs du dehors pénétrait dans le cachot. On entendait de vagues clairons, c’était probablement la diane; puis des crosses de fusil sonnant à terre, c’étaient les sentinelles qu’on relevait; puis, assez près de la tour, autant qu’on en pouvait juger dans l’obscurité, un mouvement pareil à un remuement de planches et de madriers, avec des bruits sourds et intermittents qui ressemblaient à des coups de marteau.

Cimourdain, pâle, écoutait. Gauvain n’entendait pas.

Sa rêverie était de plus en plus profonde. Il semblait qu’il ne respirât plus, tant il était attentif à ce qu’il voyait sous la voûte visionnaire de son cerveau. Il avait de doux tressaillements. La clarté d’aurore qu’il avait dans la prunelle grandissait.

Un certain temps se passa ainsi. Cimourdain lui demanda:

— A quoi penses-tu?

— A l’avenir, dit Gauvain.

Et il retomba dans sa méditation. Cimourdain se leva du lit de paille où ils étaient assis tous les deux. Gauvain ne s’en aperçut pas. Cimourdain, couvant du regard le jeune homme pensif, recula lentement jusqu’à la porte, et sortit Le cachot se referma.

VI. CEPENDANT LE SOLEIL SE LÈVE

Le jour ne tarda pas à poindre à l’horizon.

En même temps que le jour, une chose étrange, immobile, surprenante, et que les oiseaux du ciel ne connaissaient pas, apparut sur le plateau de la Tourgue au-dessus de la forêt de Fougères.

Cela avait été mis là dans la nuit. C’était dressé, plutôt que bâti. De loin sur l’horizon c’était une silhouette faite de lignes droites et dures ayant l’aspect d’une lettre hébraïque ou d’un de ces hiéroglyphes d’Egypte qui faisaient partie de l’alphabet de l’antique énigme.

Au premier abord, l’idée que cette chose éveillait était l’idée de l’inutile. Elle était là parmi les bruyères en fleur. On se demandait à quoi cela pouvait servir. Puis on sentait venir un frisson. C’était une sorte de tréteau ayant pour pieds quatre poteaux. A un bout du tréteau, deux hautes solives, debout et droites, reliées à leur sommet par une traverse, élevaient et tenaient suspendu un triangle qui semblait noir sur l’azur du matin. A l’autre bout du tréteau, il y avait une échelle. Entre les deux solives, en bas, au-dessous du triangle, on distinguait une sorte de panneau composé de deux sections mobiles qui, en s’ajustant l’une à l’autre, offraient au regard un trou rond à peu près de la dimension du cou d’un homme. La section supérieure du panneau glissait dans une rainure, de façon à pouvoir se hausser ou s’abaisser. Pour l’instant, les deux croissants qui en se rejoignant formaient le collier étaient écartés. On apercevait au pied des deux piliers portant le triangle une planche pouvant tourner sur charnière et ayant l’aspect d’une bascule. A côté de cette planche il y avait un panier long, et entre les deux piliers, en avant, et à l’extrémité du tréteau, un panier carré. C’était peint en rouge. Tout était en bois, excepté le triangle qui était en fer. On sentait que cela avait été construit par des hommes, tant c’était laid, mesquin et petit; et cela aurait mérité d’être apporté là par des génies, tant c’était formidable.

Cette bâtisse difforme, c’était la guillotine.

En face, à quelques pas, dans le ravin, il y avait un autre monstre, la Tourgue. Un monstre de pierre faisant pendant au monstre de bois. Et, disons-le, quand l’homme a touché au bois et à la pierre, le bois et la pierre ne sont plus ni bois ni pierre, et prennent quelque chose de l’homme. Un édifice est un dogme, une machine est une idée.

La Tourgue était cette résultante fatale du passé qui s’appelait la Bastille à Paris, la Tour de Londres en Angleterre, le Spielberg en Allemagne, l’Escurial en Espagne, le Kremlin à Moscou, le château Saint-Ange à Rome.

Dans la Tourgue étaient condensés quinze cents ans, le moyen âge, le vasselage, la glèbe, la féodalité; dans la guillotine une année, 93; et ces douze mois faisaient contre-poids à ces quinze siècles.

La Tourgue, c’était la monarchie; la guillotine, c’était la révolution.

Confrontation tragique.

D’un côté, la dette; de l’autre, l’échéance. D’un côté, l’inextricable complication gothique, le serf, le seigneur, l’esclave, le maître, la roture, la noblesse, le code multiple ramifié en coutumes, le juge et le prêtre coalisés, les ligatures innombrables, le fisc, les gabelles, la mainmorte, les capitations, les exceptions, les prérogatives, les préjugés, les fanatismes, le privilège royal de banqueroute, le sceptre, le trône, le bon plaisir, le droit divin; de l’autre, cette chose simple, un couperet.

D’un côté, le noeud; de l’autre, la hache.

La Tourgue avait été longtemps seule dans ce désert. Elle était là avec ses mâchicoulis d’où avaient ruisselé l’huile bouillante, la poix enflammée et le plomb fondu, avec ses oubliettes pavées d’ossements, avec sa chambre aux écartèlements, avec la tragédie énorme dont elle était remplie; elle avait dominé de sa figure funeste cette forêt, elle avait eu dans cette ombre quinze siècles de tranquillité farouche, elle avait été dans ce pays l’unique puissance, l’unique respect et l’unique effroi; elle avait régné; elle avait été, sans partage, la barbarie; et tout à coup elle voyait se dresser devant elle et contre elle, quelque chose, — plus que quelque chose, — quelqu’un d’aussi horrible qu’elle, la guillotine.

La pierre semble quelquefois avoir des yeux étranges. Une statue observe, une tour guette, une façade d’édifice contemple. La Tourgue avait l’air d’examiner la guillotine.

Elle avait l’air de s’interroger.

Qu’était-ce que cela?

Il semblait que cela était sorti de terre.

Et cela en était sorti en effet.

Dans la terre fatale avait germé l’arbre sinistre. De cette terre, arrosée de tant de sueurs, de tant de sang, de cette terre où avaient été creusées tant de fosses, tant de tombes, tant de cavernes, tant d’embûches, de cette terre où avaient pourri toutes les espèces de morts faits par toutes les espèces de tyrannies, de cette terre superposée à tant d'abîmes, et où avaient été enfouis tant de forfaits, semences affreuses, de cette terre profonde, était sortie, au jour marqué, cette inconnue, cette vengeresse, cette féroce machine porte-glaive,et 93 avait dit au vieux monde: — Me voilà.

Et la guillotine avait le droit de dire au donjon: — Je suis ta fille.

Et en même temps le donjon, car ces choses fatales vivent d'une vie obscure, se sentait tué par elle.

La Tourgue, devant la redoutable apparition, avait on ne sait quoi d'effaré. On eût dit qu'elle avait peur. La monstrueuse masse de granit était majestueuse et infâme, cette planche avec son triangle était pire. La toute-puissante déchue avait l'horreur de la toute-puissante nouvelle. L'histoire criminelle considérait l'histoire justicière. La violence d'autrefois se comparait à la violence d'à-présent; l'antique forteresse, l'antique prison, l'antique seigneurie, où avaient hurlé les patients démembrés, la construction de guerre et de meurtre, hors de service et hors de combat, violée, démantelée, découronnée, tas de pierres valant un tas de cendres, hideuse, magnifique et morte, toute pleine du vertige des siècles effrayants, regardait passer la terrible heure vivante. Hier frémissait devant Aujourd'hui, la vieille férocité constatait et subissait la nouvelle épouvante, ce qui n'était plus que le néant ouvrait des yeux d'ombre devant ce qui était la terreur, et le fantôme regardait le spectre.

La nature est impitoyable; elle ne consent pas à retirer ses fleurs, ses musiques, ses parfums et ses rayons devant l'abomination humaine; elle accable l'homme du contraste de la beauté divine avec la laideur sociale; elle ne lui fait grâce ni d'une aile de papillon ni d'un chant d'oiseau; il faut qu'en plein meurtre, en pleine vengeance, en pleine barbarie, il subisse le regard des choses sacrées; il ne peut se soustraire à l'immense reproche de la douceur universelle et à l'implacable sérénité de l'azur. Il faut que la difformité des lois humaines se montre toute nue au milieu de l'éblouissement éternel. L'homme brise et broie, l'homme stérilise, l'homme tue; l'été reste l'été, le lys reste le lys, l'astre reste l'astre.

Ce matin-là, jamais le ciel frais du jour levant n'avait été plus charmant. Un vent tiède remuait les bruyères, les vapeurs rampaient mollement dans les branchages, la forêt de Fougères, toute pénétrée de l'haleine qui sort des sources, fumait dans l'aube comme une vaste cassolette pleine d'encens; le bleu du firmament, la blancheur des nuées, la claire transparence des eaux, la verdure, cette gamme harmonieuse qui va de l’aigue-marine à l’émeraude, les groupes d’arbres fraternels, les nappes d’herbes, les plaines profondes, tout avait cette pureté qui est l’éternel conseil de la nature à l’homme. Au milieu de tout cela s’étalait l’affreuse impudeur humaine; au milieu de tout cela apparaissaient la forteresse et l’échafaud, la guerre et le supplice, les deux figures de l’âge sanguinaire et de la minute sanglante; la chouette de la nuit du passé et la chauve-souris du crépuscule de l’avenir. En présence de la création fleurie, embaumée, aimante et charmante, le ciel splendide inondait d’aurore la Tourgue et la guillotine, et semblait dire aux hommes: Regardez ce que je fais et ce que vous faites.

Tels sont les formidables usages que le soleil fait de sa lumière.

Ce spectacle avait des spectateurs.

Les quatre mille hommes de la petite armée expéditionnaire étaient rangés en ordre de combat sur le plateau. Ils entouraient la guillotine de trois côtés, de façon à tracer autour d’elle, en plan géométral, la figure d’un E; la batterie placée au centre de la plus grande ligne faisait le cran de l’E. La machine rouge était comme enfermée dans ces trois fronts de bataille, sorte de muraille de soldats repliée des deux côtés jusqu’aux bords de l’escarpement du plateau; le quatrième côté, le côté ouvert, était le ravin même, et regardait la Tourgue.

Cela faisait une place en carré long, au milieu de laquelle était l’échafaud. A mesure que le jour montait, l’ombre portée de la guillotine décroissait sur l’herbe.

Les artilleurs étaient à leurs pièces, mèches allumées.

Une douce fumée bleue s’élevait du ravin; c’était l’incendie du pont qui achevait d’expirer.

Cette fumée estompait sans la voiler la Tourgue dont la haute plate-forme dominait tout l’horizon. Entre cette plate-forme et la guillotine il n’y avait que l’intervalle du ravin. De l’une à l’autre on pouvait se parler.

Sur cette plate-forme avaient été transportées la table du tribunal et la chaise ombragée de drapeaux tricolores. Le jour se levait derrière la Tourgue et faisait saillir en noir la masse de la forteresse et, à son sommet, sur la chaise du tribunal et sous le faisceau de drapeaux, la figure d’un homme assis, immobile et les bras croisés.

Cet homme était Cimourdain. Il avait, comme la veille, son costume de délégué civil, sur la tête le chapeau à panache tricolore, le sabre au côté et les pistolets à la ceinture.

Il se taisait. Tous se taisaient. Les soldats avaient le fusil au pied et baissaient les yeux. Ils se touchaient du coude, mais ne se parlaient pas. Ils songeaient confusément à cette guerre, à tant de combats, aux fusillades des haies si vaillamment affrontées, aux citadelles prises, aux batailles gagnées, aux victoires, et il leur semblait maintenant que toute cette gloire leur tournait en honte. Une sombre attente serrait toutes les poitrines. On voyait sur l'estrade de la guillotine le bourreau qui allait et venait. La clarté grandissante du matin emplissait majestueusement le ciel.

Soudain on entendit ce bruit voilé que font les tambours couverts d'un crêpe. Ce roulement funèbre approcha; les rangs s'ouvrirent, et un cortège entra dans le carré, et se dirigea vers l'échafaud.

D'abord, les tambours noirs, puis une compagnie de grenadiers, l'arme basse, puis un peloton de gendarmes, le sabre nu, puis le condamné, — Gauvain.

Gauvain marchait librement. Il n'avait de cordes ni aux pieds ni aux mains.

Il était en petit uniforme; il avait son épée.

Derrière lui venait un autre peloton de gendarmes.

Gauvain avait encore sur le visage cette joie pensive qui l'avait illuminé au moment où il avait dit à Cimourdain: Je pense à l'avenir. Rien n'était ineffable et sublime comme ce sourire continué.

En arrivant sur le lieu triste, son premier regard fut pour le haut de la tour. Il dédaigna la guillotine.

Il savait que Cimourdain se ferait un devoir d'assister à l'exécution. Il le chercha des yeux sur la plate-forme. Il l'y trouva.

Cimourdain était blême et froid. Ceux qui étaient près de lui n'entendaient pas son souffle.

Quand il aperçut Gauvain, il n'eut pas un tressaillement.

Gauvain cependant s'avançait vers l'échafaud.

Tout en marchant, il regardait Cimourdain et Cimourdain le regardait. Il semblait que Cimourdain s'appuyât sur ce regard.

Gauvain arriva au pied de l'échafaud. Il y monta. L'officier qui commandait les grenadiers l'y suivit. Il défit son épée et la remit à l'officier; il ôta sa cravate et la remit au bourreau.

Il ressemblait à une vision. Jamais il n'avait apparu plus beau. Sa chevelure brune flottait au vent; on ne coupait pas les cheveux alors. Son cou blanc faisait songer à une femme, et son oeil héroïque et souverain faisait songer à un archange. Il était sur l’échafaud, rêveur. Ce lieu-là aussi est un sommet. Gauvain y était debout, superbe et tranquille. Le soleil, l’enveloppant, le mettait comme dans une gloire.

Il fallait pourtant lier le patient. Le bourreau vint, une corde à la main.

En ce moment-là, quand ils virent leur jeune capitaine si décidément engagé sous le couteau, les soldats n’y tinrent plus; le coeur de ces gens de guerre éclata. On entendit cette chose énorme, le sanglot d’une armée. Une clameur s’éleva. Grâce! grâce! Quelques-uns tombèrent à genoux; d’autres jetaient leurs fusils et levaient les bras vers la plate-forme où était Cimourdain. Un grenadier cria en montrant la guillotine:

— Reçoit-on des remplaçants pour ça? Me voici. — Tous répétaient frénétiquement: Grâce! grâce! et des lions qui auraient entendu cela eussent été émus ou effrayés, car les larmes des soldats sont terribles.

Le bourreau s’arrêta, ne sachant plus que faire.

Alors une voix brève et basse, et que tous pourtant entendirent, tant elle était sinistre, cria du haut de la tour:

— Force à la loi!

On reconnut l’accent inexorable. Cimourdain avait parlé. L’armée frissonna.

Le bourreau n’hésita plus. Il s’approcha tenant sa corde.

— Attendez, dit Gauvain.

Il se tourna vers Cimourdain, lui fit, de sa main droite encore libre, un geste d’adieu, puis se laissa lier.

Quand il fut lié, il dit au bourreau:

— Pardon. Un moment encore.

Et il cria:

— Vive la République!

On le coucha sur la bascule. Cette tête charmante et fière s’emboîta dans l’infâme collier. Le bourreau lui releva doucement les cheveux, puis pressa le ressort; le triangle se détacha et glissa lentement d’abord, puis rapidement; on entendit un coup hideux…

Au même instant on en entendit un autre. Au coup de hache répondit un coup de pistolet. Cimourdain venait de saisir un des pistolets qu’il avait à sa ceinture, et, au moment où la tête de Gauvain roulait dans le panier, Cimourdain se traversait le coeur d’une balle. Un flot de sang lui sortit de la bouche, il tomba mort.

Et ces deux âmes, soeurs tragiques, s’envolèrent ensemble, l’ombre de l’une mêlée à la lumière de l’autre.

FIN

The Novels in French

BUG-JARGAL
HAN D’ISLANDE
LE DERNIER JOUR D’UN CONDAMNE
NOTRE-DAME DE PARIS
CLAUDE GUEUX
LES MISÉRABLES
LES TRAVAILLEURS DE LA MER
L’HOMME QUI RIT
QUATREVINGT-TREIZE NINETY-THREE

The Poetry

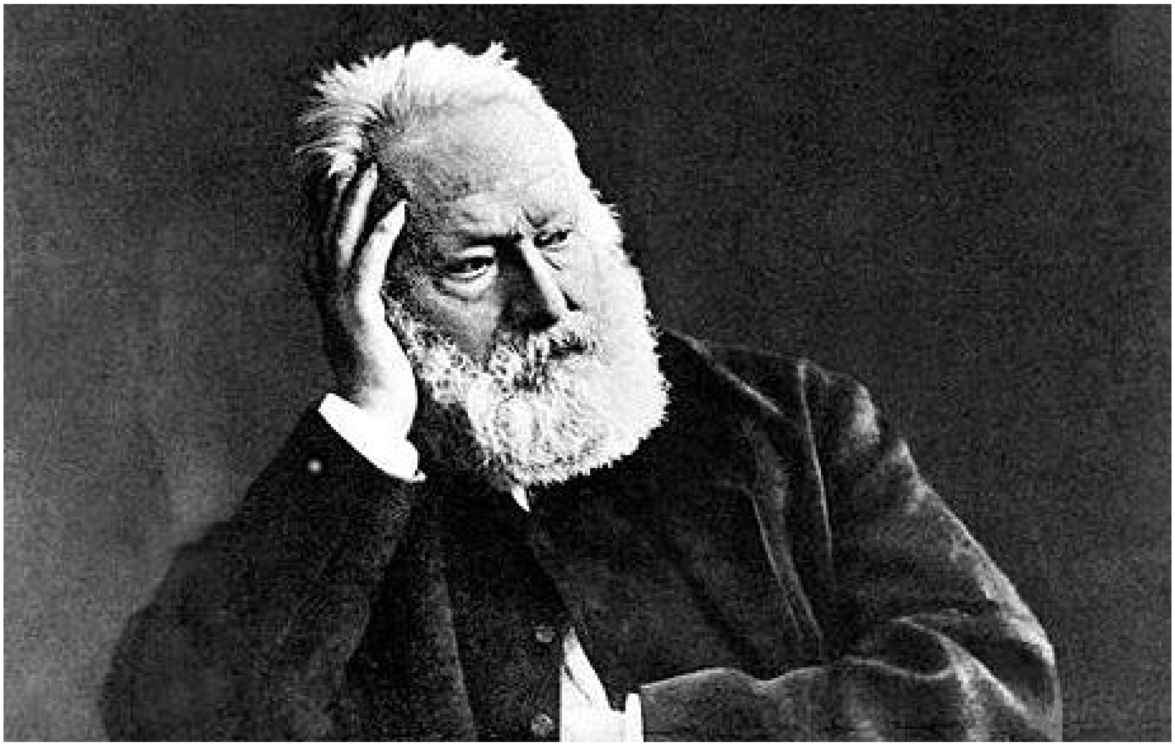

POEMS IN TRANSLATION

This section contains English translations of some of Hugo’s finest poetry, with examples ranging from his earliest poems to his later religious epics. Hugo’s complete poetry in the original French follows after this section.

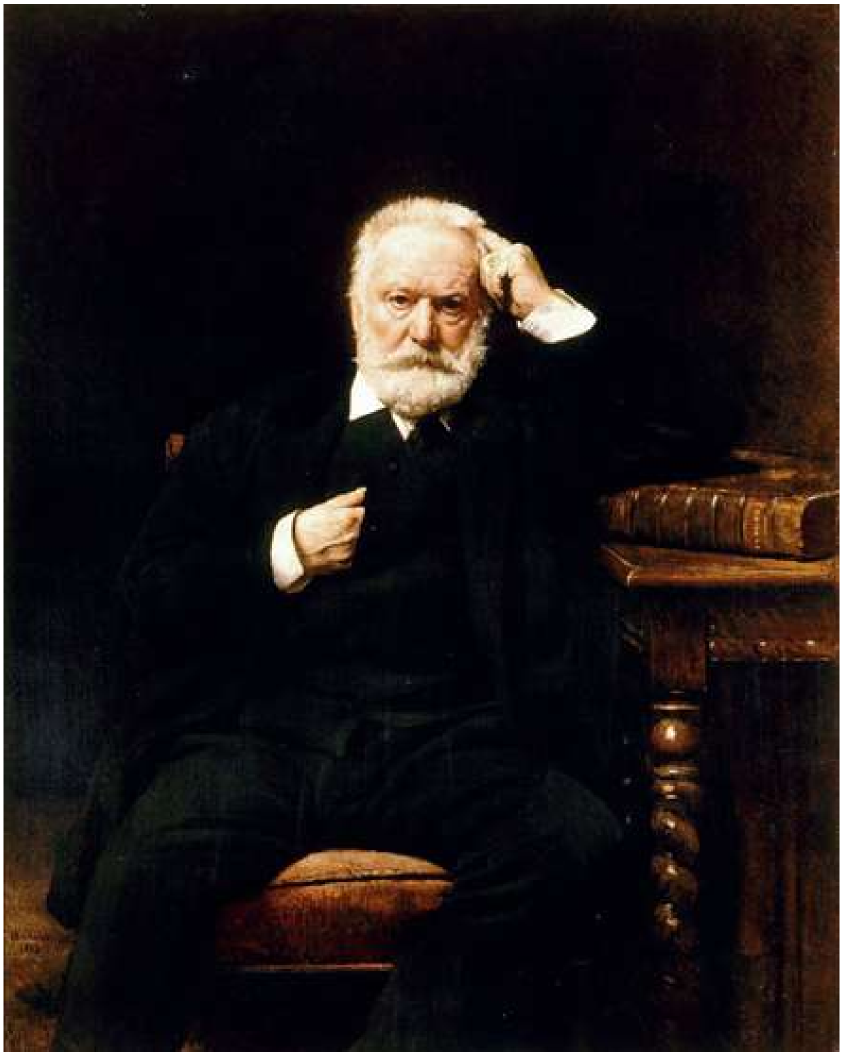

Portrait of Victor Hugo by Léon Bonnat, 1879

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MOSES ON THE NILE.

(“Mes soeurs, l’onde est plus fraiche.”)

[TO THE FLORAL GAMES, Toulouse, Feb. 10, 1820.]

“Sisters! the wave is freshest in the ray
  Of the young morning; the reapers are asleep;
The river bank is lonely: come away!
  The early murmurs of old Memphis creep
Faint on my ear; and here unseen we stray, —
  Deep in the covert of the grove withdrawn,
  Save by the dewy eye-glance of the dawn.

“Within my father’s palace, fair to see,
  Shine all the Arts, but oh! this river side,
Pranked with gay flowers, is dearer far to me
  Than gold and porphyry vases bright and wide;
How glad in heaven the song-bird carols free!
  Sweeter these zephyrs float than all the showers
  Of costly odors in our royal bowers.

“The sky is pure, the sparkling stream is clear:
  Unloose your zones, my maidens! and fling down
To float awhile upon these bushes near
  Your blue transparent robes: take off my crown,
And take away my jealous veil; for here
  To-day we shall be joyous while we lave
  Our limbs amid the murmur of the wave.

“Hasten; but through the fleecy mists of morn,
  What do I see? Look ye along the stream!
Nay, timid maidens — we must not return!
  Coursing along the current, it would seem
An ancient palm-tree to the deep sea borne,

That from the distant wilderness proceeds,
Downwards, to view our wondrous Pyramids.

“But stay! if I may surely trust mine eye, —
It is the bark of Hermes, or the shell
Of Iris, wafted gently to the sighs
Of the light breeze along the rippling swell;
But no: it is a skiff where sweetly lies
An infant slumbering, and his peaceful rest
Looks as if pillowed on his mother’s breast.

“He sleeps — oh, see! his little floating bed
Swims on the mighty river’s fickle flow,
A white dove’s nest; and there at hazard led
By the faint winds, and wandering to and fro,
The cot comes down; beneath his quiet head
The gulfs are moving, and each threatening wave
Appears to rock the child upon a grave.

“He wakes — ah, maids of Memphis! haste, oh, haste!
He cries! alas! — What mother could confide
Her offspring to the wild and watery waste?
He stretches out his arms, the rippling tide
Murmurs around him, where all rudely placed,
He rests but with a few frail reeds beneath,
Between such helpless innocence and death.

“Oh! take him up! Perchance he is of those
Dark sons of Israel whom my sire proscribes;
Ah! cruel was the mandate that arose
Against most guiltless of the stranger tribes!
Poor child! my heart is yearning for his woes,
I would I were his mother; but I’ll give
If not his birth, at least the claim to live.”

Thus Iphis spoke; the royal hope and pride
Of a great monarch; while her damsels nigh,
Wandered along the Nile’s meandering side;

And these diminished beauties, standing by
The trembling mother; watching with eyes wide
Their graceful mistress, admired her as stood,
More lovely than the genius of the flood!

The waters broken by her delicate feet
Receive the eager wader, as alone
By gentlest pity led, she strives to meet
The wakened babe; and, see, the prize is won!
She holds the weeping burden with a sweet
And virgin glow of pride upon her brow,
That knew no flush save modesty’s till now.

Opening with cautious hands the reedy couch,
She brought the rescued infant slowly out
Beyond the humid sands; at her approach
Her curious maidens hurried round about
To kiss the new-born brow with gentlest touch;
Greeting the child with smiles, and bending nigh
Their faces o’er his large, astonished eye!

Haste thou who, from afar, in doubt and fear,
Dost watch, with straining eyes, the fated boy —
The loved of heaven! come like a stranger near,
And clasp young Moses with maternal joy;
Nor fear the speechless transport and the tear
Will e’er betray thy fond and hidden claim,
For Iphis knows not yet a mother’s name!

With a glad heart, and a triumphal face,
The princess to the haughty Pharaoh led
The humble infant of a hated race,
Bathed with the bitter tears a parent shed;
While loudly pealing round the holy place
Of Heaven’s white Throne, the voice of angel choirs
Intoned the theme of their undying lyres!

“No longer mourn thy pilgrimage below —
O Jacob! let thy tears no longer swell
The torrent of the Egyptian river: Lo!
Soon on the Jordan’s banks thy tents shall dwell;
And Goshen shall behold thy people go
Despite the power of Egypt’s law and brand,
From their sad thrall to Canaan’s promised land.

“The King of Plagues, the Chosen of Sinai,
Is he that, o’er the rushing waters driven,
A vigorous hand hath rescued for the sky;
Ye whose proud hearts disown the ways of heaven!
Attend, be humble! for its power is nigh
Israel! a cradle shall redeem thy worth —
A Cradle yet shall save the widespread earth!”

Dublin University Magazine, 1839

ENVY AND AVARICE.

(“L’Avarice et l’Envie.”)

[LE CONSERVATEUR LIITÉRAIRE, 1820.]

Envy and Avarice, one summer day,
  Sauntering abroad
  In quest of the abode
Of some poor wretch or fool who lived that way —
You — or myself, perhaps — I cannot say —
Along the road, scarce heeding where it tended,
Their way in sullen, sulky silence wended;

For, though twin sisters, these two charming creatures,
Rivals in hideousness of form and features,
Wasted no love between them as they went.
  Pale Avarice,
  With gloating eyes,
And back and shoulders almost double bent,
Was hugging close that fatal box
  For which she’s ever on the watch
  Some glance to catch
Suspiciously directed to its locks;
And Envy, too, no doubt with silent winking
  At her green, greedy orbs, no single minute
Withdrawn from it, was hard a-thinking
  Of all the shining dollars in it.

The only words that Avarice could utter,
Her constant doom, in a low, frightened mutter,
  “There’s not enough, enough, yet in my store!”
While Envy, as she scanned the glittering sight,
Groaned as she gnashed her yellow teeth with spite,
  “She’s more than me, more, still forever more!”

Thus, each in her own fashion, as they wandered,
Upon the coffer's precious contents pondered,
  When suddenly, to their surprise,
  The God Desire stood before their eyes.
Desire, that courteous deity who grants
All wishes, prayers, and wants;
Said he to the two sisters: "Beauteous ladies,
As I'm a gentleman, my task and trade is
  To be the slave of your behest —
Choose therefore at your own sweet will and pleasure,
Honors or treasure!
  Or in one word, whatever you'd like best.
But, let us understand each other — she
Who speaks the first, her prayer shall certainly
  Receive — the other, the same boon *redoubled!*"

Imagine how our amiable pair,
At this proposal, all so frank and fair,
  Were mutually troubled!
Misers and enviers, of our human race,
Say, what would you have done in such a case?
Each of the sisters murmured, sad and low
  "What boots it, oh, Desire, to me to have
  Crowns, treasures, all the goods that heart can crave,
Or power divine bestow,
Since still another must have always more?"

So each, lest she should speak before
The other, hesitating slow and long
Till the god lost all patience, held her tongue.
  He was enraged, in such a way,
  To be kept waiting there all day,
With two such beauties in the public road;
  Scarce able to be civil even,
  He wished them both — well, not in heaven.

Envy at last the silence broke,
  And smiling, with malignant sneer,
  Upon her sister dear,
    Who stood in expectation by,
Ever implacable and cruel, spoke
    ”I would be blinded of *one* eye!”

American Keepsake

ODES. — 1818-28.

KING LOUIS XVII.

(“En ce temps-là du ciel les portes.”)

[Bk. I. v., December, 1822.]

The golden gates were opened wide that day,
All through the unveiled heaven there seemed to play
  Out of the Holiest of Holy, light;
And the elect beheld, crowd immortal,
  A young soul, led up by young angels bright,
Stand in the starry portal.

A fair child fleeing from the world’s fierce hate,
In his blue eye the shade of sorrow sate,
  His golden hair hung all dishevelled down,
On wasted cheeks that told a mournful story,
  And angels twined him with the innocent’s crown,
The martyr’s palm of glory.

The virgin souls that to the Lamb are near,
Called through the clouds with voices heavenly clear,
  God hath prepared a glory for thy brow,
Rest in his arms, and all ye hosts that sing
His praises ever on untired string,
  Chant, for a mortal comes among ye now;
Do homage—”’Tis a king.”

And the pale shadow saith to God in heaven:
  ”I am an orphan and no king at all;
I was a weary prisoner yestereven,
  My father’s murderers fed my soul with gall.
Not me, O Lord, the regal name beseems.
  Last night I fell asleep in dungeon drear,
But then I saw my mother in my dreams,
  Say, shall I find her here?”

The angels said: “Thy Saviour bids thee come,
Out of an impure world He calls thee home,
  From the mad earth, where horrid murder waves
  Over the broken cross her impure wings,
  And regicides go down among the graves,
  Scenting the blood of kings.”

He cries: “Then have I finished my long life?
Are all its evils over, all its strife,
And will no cruel jailer evermore
Wake me to pain, this blissful vision o’er?
Is it no dream that nothing else remains
  Of all my torments but this answered cry,
And have I had, O God, amid my chains,
  The happiness to die?

“For none can tell what cause I had to pine,
What pangs, what miseries, each day were mine;
And when I wept there was no mother near
To soothe my cries, and smile away my tear.
Poor victim of a punishment unending,
  Torn like a sapling from its mother earth,
So young, I could not tell what crime impending
  Had stained me from my birth.

“Yet far off in dim memory it seems,
With all its horror mingled happy dreams,
Strange cries of glory rocked my sleeping head,
And a glad people watched beside my bed.
One day into mysterious darkness thrown,
  I saw the promise of my future close;
I was a little child, left all alone,
  Alas! and I had foes.

“They cast me living in a dreary tomb,
Never mine eyes saw sunlight pierce the gloom,
Only ye, brother angels, used to sweep
Down from your heaven, and visit me in sleep.

‘Neath blood-red hands my young life withered there.
  Dear Lord, the bad are miserable all,
Be not Thou deaf, like them, unto my prayer,
  It is for them I call.”

The angels sang: “See heaven’s high arch unfold,
  Come, we will crown thee with the stars above,
Will give thee cherub-wings of blue and gold,
  And thou shalt learn our ministry of love,
Shalt rock the cradle where some mother’s tears
  Are dropping o’er her restless little one,
Or, with thy luminous breath, in distant spheres,
  Shalt kindle some cold sun.”

Ceased the full choir, all heaven was hushed to hear,
Bowed the fair face, still wet with many a tear,
In depths of space, the rolling worlds were stayed,
Whilst the Eternal in the infinite said:

“O king, I kept thee far from human state,
  Who hadst a dungeon only for thy throne,
O son, rejoice, and bless thy bitter fate,
  The slavery of kings thou hast not known,
What if thy wasted arms are bleeding yet,
  And wounded with the fetter’s cruel trace,
No earthly diadem has ever set
  A stain upon thy face.

“Child, life and hope were with thee at thy birth,
But life soon bowed thy tender form to earth,
  And hope forsook thee in thy hour of need.
Come, for thy Saviour had His pains divine;
Come, for His brow was crowned with thorns like thine,
  His sceptre was a reed.”

Dublin University Magazine.

THE FEAST OF FREEDOM.

(“Lorsqu’à l’antique Olympe immolant l’evangile.”)

[Bk. II. v., 1823.]

[There was in Rome one antique usage as follows: On the eve of the execution day, the sufferers were given a public banquet — at the prison gate — known as the “Free Festival.” — CHATEAUBRIAND’S “Martyrs.”]

TO YE KINGS.

When the Christians were doomed to the lions of old
By the priest and the praetor, combined to uphold
An idolatrous cause,
Forth they came while the vast Colosseum throughout
Gathered thousands looked on, and they fell ‘mid the shout
Of “the People’s” applause.

On the eve of that day of their evenings the last!
At the gates of their dungeon a gorgeous repast,
Rich, unstinted, unpriced,
That the doomed might (forsooth) gather strength ere they bled,
With an ignorant pity the jailers would spread
For the martyrs of Christ.

Oh, ’twas strange for a pupil of Paul to recline
On voluptuous couch, while Falernian wine
Fill’d his cup to the brim!
Dulcet music of Greece, Asiatic repose,
Spicy fragrance of Araby, Italian rose,
All united for him!

Every luxury known through the earth’s wide expanse,
In profusion procured was put forth to enhance
The repast that they gave;
And no Sybarite, nursed in the lap of delight,
Such a banquet ere tasted as welcomed that night
The elect of the grave.

And the lion, meantime, shook his ponderous chain,
Loud and fierce howled the tiger, impatient to stain
The bloodthirsty arena;
Whilst the women of Rome, who applauded those deeds
And who hailed the forthcoming enjoyment, must needs
Shame the restless hyena.

They who figured as guests on that ultimate eve,
In their turn on the morrow were destined to give
To the lions their food;
For, behold, in the guise of a slave at that board,
Where his victims enjoyed all that life can afford,
Death administering stood.

Such, O monarchs of earth! was your banquet of power,
But the tocsin has burst on your festival hour —
’Tis your knell that it rings!
To the popular tiger a prey is decreed,
And the maw of Republican hunger will feed
On *a banquet of Kings!*

“FATHER PROUT” (FRANK MAHONY)

GENIUS.

(DEDICATED TO CHATEAUBRIAND.)

[Bk. IV. vi., July, 1822.]

Woe unto him! the child of this sad earth,
Who, in a troubled world, unjust and blind,
Bears Genius — treasure of celestial birth,
Within his solitary soul enshrined.
Woe unto him! for Envy’s pangs impure,
Like the undying vultures’, will be driven
Into his noble heart, that must endure
Pangs for each triumph; and, still unforgiven,
Suffer Prometheus’ doom, who ravished fire from Heaven.

Still though his destiny on earth may be
Grief and injustice; who would not endure
With joyful calm, each proffered agony;
Could he the prize of Genius thus ensure?
What mortal feeling kindled in his soul
That clear celestial flame, so pure and high,
O’er which nor time nor death can have control,
Would in inglorious pleasures basely fly
From sufferings whose reward is Immortality?
No! though the clamors of the envious crowd
Pursue the son of Genius, he will rise

From the dull clod, borne by an effort proud
Beyond the reach of vulgar enmities.
’Tis thus the eagle, with his pinions spread,
Reposing o’er the tempest, from that height
Sees the clouds reel and roll above our head,
While he, rejoicing in his tranquil flight,
More upward soars sublime in heaven’s eternal light.

MRS. TORRE HULME

THE GIRL OF OTAHEITE.

("O! dis-moi, tu veux fuir?")

[Bk. IV, vii., Jan. 31, 1821.]

Forget? Can I forget the scented breath
  Of breezes, sighing of thee, in mine ear;
The strange awaking from a dream of death,
  The sudden thrill to find thee coming near?
  Our huts were desolate, and far away
  I heard thee calling me throughout the day,
  No one had seen thee pass,
  Trembling I came. Alas!
      Can I forget?

Once I was beautiful; my maiden charms
  Died with the grief that from my bosom fell.
Ah! weary traveller! rest in my loving arms!
  Let there be no regrets and no farewell!
  Here of thy mother sweet, where waters flow,
  Here of thy fatherland we whispered low;
    Here, music, praise, and prayer
    Filled the glad summer air.
      Can I forget?

Forget? My dear old home must I forget?
  And wander forth and hear my people weep,
Far from the woods where, when the sun has set,
  Fearless but weary to thy arms I creep;
  Far from lush flow'rets and the palm-tree's moan
  I could not live. Here let me rest alone!
    Go! I must follow nigh,
    With thee I'm doomed to die,
      Never forget!

CLEMENT SCOTT

NERO’S INCENDIARY SONG.

(“Amis! ennui nous tue.”)

[Bk. IV. xv., March, 1825.]

Aweary unto death, my friends, a mood by wise abhorred,
Come to the novel feast I spread, thrice-consul, Nero, lord,
The Caesar, master of the world, and eke of harmony,
Who plays the harp of many strings, a chief of minstrelsy.

My joyful call should instantly bring all who love me most, —
For ne’er were seen such arch delights from Greek or Roman host;
Nor at the free, control-less jousts, where, spite of cynic vaunts,
Austere but lenient Seneca no “Ercles” bumper daunts;

Nor where upon the Tiber floats Aglae in galley gay,
‘Neath Asian tent of brilliant stripes, in gorgeous array;
Nor when to lutes and tambourines the wealthy prefect flings
A score of slaves, their fetters wreathed, to feed grim, greedy things.

I vow to show ye Rome aflame, the whole town in a mass;
Upon this tower we’ll take our stand to watch the ‘wildered pass;
How paltry fights of men and beasts! here be my combatants, —
The Seven Hills my circus form, and fiends shall lead the dance.

This is more meet for him who rules to drive away his stress —
He, being god, should lightnings hurl and make a wilderness —
But, haste! for night is darkling — soon, the festival it brings;
Already see the hydra show its tongues and sombre wings,

And mark upon a shrinking prey the rush of kindling breaths;
They tap and sap the threatened walls, and bear uncounted deaths;
And ‘neath caresses scorching hot the palaces decay —
Oh, that I, too, could thus caress, and burn, and blight, and slay!

Hark to the hubbub! scent the fumes! Are those real men or ghosts?
The stillness spreads of Death abroad — down come the temple posts,
Their molten bronze is coursing fast and joins with silver waves
To leap with hiss of thousand snakes where Tiber writhes and raves.

All’s lost! in jasper, marble, gold, the statues totter — crash!
Spite of the names divine engraved, they are but dust and ash.
The victor-scourge sweeps swollen on, whilst north winds sound the horn
To goad the flies of fire yet beyond the flight forlorn.

Proud capital! farewell for e’er! these flames nought can subdue —
The Aqueduct of Sylla gleams, a bridge o’er hellish brew.
’Tis Nero’s whim! how good to see Rome brought the lowest down;
Yet, Queen of all the earth, give thanks for such a splendrous crown!

When I was young, the Sybils pledged eternal rule to thee;
That Time himself would lay his bones before thy unbent knee.
Ha! ha! how brief indeed the space ere this “immortal star”
Shall be consumed in its own glow, and vanished — oh, how far!

How lovely conflagrations look when night is utter dark!
The youth who fired Ephesus’ fane falls low beneath my mark.
The pangs of people — when I sport, what matters? — See them whirl
About, as salamanders frisk and in the brazier curl.

Take from my brow this poor rose-crown — the flames have made it pine;
If blood rains on your festive gowns, wash off with Cretan wine!
I like not overmuch that red — good taste says “gild a crime?”
“To stifle shrieks by drinking-songs” is — thanks! a hint sublime!

I punish Rome, I am avenged; did she not offer prayers
Erst unto Jove, late unto Christ? — to e’en a Jew, she dares!
Now, in thy terror, own my right to rule above them all;
Alone I rest — except this pile, I leave no single hall.

Yet I destroy to build anew, and Rome shall fairer shine —
But out, my guards, and slay the dolts who thought me not divine.

The stiffnecks, haste! annihilate! make ruin all complete —
And, slaves, bring in fresh roses — what odor is more sweet?

H.L. WILLIAMS

REGRET.

(“Oui, le bonheur bien vite a passé.”)

[Bk. V. ii., February, 1821.]

Yes, Happiness hath left me soon behind!
  Alas! we all pursue its steps! and when
We’ve sunk to rest within its arms entwined,
Like the Phoenician virgin, wake, and find
  Ourselves alone again.

Then, through the distant future’s boundless space,
  We seek the lost companion of our days:
“Return, return!” we cry, and lo, apace
Pleasure appears! but not to fill the place
  Of that we mourn always.

I, should unhallowed Pleasure woo me now,
  Will to the wanton sorc’ress say, “Begone!
Respect the cypress on my mournful brow,
Lost Happiness hath left regret — but *thou*
  Leavest remorse, alone.”

Yet, haply lest I check the mounting fire,
  O friends, that in your revelry appears!
With you I’ll breathe the air which ye respire,
And, smiling, hide my melancholy lyre
  When it is wet with tears.

Each in his secret heart perchance doth own
  Some fond regret ‘neath passing smiles concealed; —
Sufferers alike together and alone
Are we; with many a grief to others known,
  How many unrevealed!

Alas! for natural tears and simple pains,
  For tender recollections, cherished long,
For guileless griefs, which no compunction stains,
We blush; as if we wore these earthly chains
  Only for sport and song!

Yes, my blest hours have fled without a trace:
  In vain I strove their parting to delay;
Brightly they beamed, then left a cheerless space,
Like an o’erclouded smile, that in the face
  Lightens, and fades away.

Fraser’s Magazine

THE MORNING OF LIFE.

(“Le voile du matin.”)

[Bk. V. viii., April, 1822.]

The mist of the morning is torn by the peaks,
  Old towers gleam white in the ray,
And already the glory so joyously seeks
  The lark that’s saluting the day.

Then smile away, man, at the heavens so fair,
  Though, were you swept hence in the night,
From your dark, lonely tomb the owlets would stare
  At the sun rising newly as bright.

But out of earth’s trammels your soul would have flown
  Where glitters Eternity’s stream,
And you shall have waked ‘midst pure glories unknown,
  As sunshine disperses a dream.

BELOVED NAME.

(“Le parfum d’un lis.”)

[Bk. V. xiii.]

The lily’s perfume pure, fame’s crown of light,
  The latest murmur of departing day,
Fond friendship’s plaint, that melts at piteous sight,
The mystic farewell of each hour at flight,
  The kiss which beauty grants with coy delay, —

The sevenfold scarf that parting storms bestow
  As trophy to the proud, triumphant sun;
The thrilling accent of a voice we know,
The love-enthralled maiden’s secret vow,
  An infant’s dream, ere life’s first sands be run, —

The chant of distant choirs, the morning’s sigh,
  Which erst inspired the fabled Memnon’s frame, —
The melodies that, hummed, so trembling die, —
The sweetest gems that ‘mid thought’s treasures lie,
  Have naught of sweetness that can match HER NAME!

Low be its utterance, like a prayer divine,
  Yet in each warbled song be heard the sound;
Be it the light in darksome fanes to shine,
The sacred word which at some hidden shrine,
  The selfsame voice forever makes resound!

O friends! ere yet, in living strains of flame,
  My muse, bewildered in her circlings wide,
With names the vaunting lips of pride proclaim,
Shall dare to blend the *one*, the purer name,
Which love a treasure in my breast doth hide, —

Must the wild lay my faithful harp can sing,
  Be like the hymns which mortals, kneeling, hear;
To solemn harmonies attuned the string,
As, music show’ring from his viewless wing,
  On heavenly airs some angel hovered near.

CAROLINE BOWLES (MRS. SOUTHEY)

THE PORTRAIT OF A CHILD.

(“Oui, ce front, ce sourire.”)

[Bk. V. xxii., November, 1825.]

That brow, that smile, that cheek so fair,
  Beseem my child, who weeps and plays:
  A heavenly spirit guards her ways,
From whom she stole that mixture rare.
  Through all her features shining mild,
The poet sees an angel there,
  The father sees a child.

And by their flame so pure and bright,
  We see how lately those sweet eyes
  Have wandered down from Paradise,
And still are lingering in its light.

All earthly things are but a shade
  Through which she looks at things above,
And sees the holy Mother-maid,
  Athwart her mother’s glance of love.

She seems celestial songs to hear,
And virgin souls are whispering near.
  Till by her radiant smile deceived,
  I say, “Young angel, lately given,
  When was thy martyrdom achieved?
  And what name lost thou bear in heaven?”

Dublin University Magazine.

BALLADES. — 1823-28.

THE GRANDMOTHER

(“Dors-tu? mère de notre mère.”)

[III., 1823.]

“To die — to sleep.” — SHAKESPEARE.

Still asleep! We have been since the noon thus alone.
  Oh, the hours we have ceased to number!
Wake, grandmother! — speechless say why thou art grown.
Then, thy lips are so cold! — the Madonna of stone
  Is like thee in thy holy slumber.
We have watched thee in sleep, we have watched thee at prayer,
  But what can now betide thee?
Like thy hours of repose all thy orisons were,
And thy lips would still murmur a blessing whene’er
  Thy children stood beside thee.

Now thine eye is unclosed, and thy forehead is bent
  O’er the hearth, where ashes smoulder;
And behold, the watch-lamp will be speedily spent.
Art thou vexed? have we done aught amiss? Oh, relent!
  But — parent, thy hands grow colder!
Say, with ours wilt thou let us rekindle in thine
  The glow that has departed?
Wilt thou sing us some song of the days of lang syne?
Wilt thou tell us some tale, from those volumes divine,
  Of the brave and noble-hearted?

Of the dragon who, crouching in forest green glen,
  Lies in wait for the unwary —
Of the maid who was freed by her knight from the den
Of the ogre, whose club was uplifted, but then
  Turned aside by the wand of a fairy?
Wilt thou teach us spell-words that protect from all harm,
  And thoughts of evil banish?

What goblins the sign of the cross may disarm?
What saint it is good to invoke? and what charm
  Can make the demon vanish?

Or unfold to our gaze thy most wonderful book,
  So feared by hell and Satan;
At its hermits and martyrs in gold let us look,
At the virgins, and bishops with pastoral crook,
  And the hymns and the prayers in Latin.
Oft with legends of angels, who watch o’er the young,
  Thy voice was wont to gladden;
Have thy lips yet no language — no wisdom thy tongue?
Oh, see! the light wavers, and sinking, bath flung
  On the wall forms that sadden.

Wake! awake! evil spirits perhaps may presume
  To haunt thy holy dwelling;
Pale ghosts are, perhaps, stealing into the room —
Oh, would that the lamp were relit! with the gloom
  These fearful thoughts dispelling.
Thou hast told us our parents lie sleeping beneath
  The grass, in a churchyard lonely:
Now, thine eyes have no motion, thy mouth has no breath,
And thy limbs are all rigid! Oh, say, *Is this death*,
  Or thy prayer or thy slumber only?

ENVOY.

Sad vigil they kept by that grandmother’s chair,
  Kind angels hovered o’er them —
And the dead-bell was tolled in the hamlet — and there,
On the following eve, knelt that innocent pair,
  With the missal-book before them.

“FATHER PROUT” (FRANK S. MAHONY).

THE GIANT IN GLEE.

("Ho, guerriers! je suis né dans le pays des Gaules.")

[V., March 11, 1825.]

Ho, warriors! I was reared in the land of the Gauls;
O'er the Rhine my ancestors came bounding like balls
Of the snow at the Pole, where, a babe, I was bathed
Ere in bear and in walrus-skin I was enswathed.

Then my father was strong, whom the years lowly bow, —
A bison could wallow in the grooves of his brow.
He is weak, very old — he can scarcely uptear
A young pine-tree for staff since his legs cease to bear;

But here's to replace him! — I can toy with his axe;
As I sit on the hill my feet swing in the flax,
And my knee caps the boulders and troubles the trees.
How they shiver, yea, quake if I happen to sneeze!

I was still but a springald when, cleaving the Alps,
I brushed snowy periwigs off granitic scalps,
And my head, o'er the pinnacles, stopped the fleet clouds,
Where I captured the eagles and caged them by crowds.

There were tempests! I blew them back into their source!
And put out their lightnings! More than once in a course,
Through the ocean I went wading after the whale,
And stirred up the bottom as did never a gale.

Fond of rambling, I hunted the shark 'long the beach,
And no osprey in ether soared out of my reach;
And the bear that I pinched 'twixt my finger and thumb,
Like the lynx and the wolf, perished harmless and dumb.

But these pleasures of childhood have lost all their zest;
It is warfare and carnage that now I love best:
The sounds that I wish to awaken and hear
Are the cheers raised by courage, the shrieks due to fear;

When the riot of flames, ruin, smoke, steel and blood,
Announces an army rolls along as a flood,
Which I follow, to harry the clamorous ranks,
Sharp-goading the laggards and pressing the flanks,
Till, a thresher ‘mid ripest of corn, up I stand
With an oak for a flail in my unflagging hand.

Rise the groans! rise the screams! on my feet fall vain tears
As the roar of my laughter redoubles their fears.
I am naked. At armor of steel I should joke —
True, I’m helmed — a brass pot you could draw with ten yoke.

I look for no ladder to invade the king’s hall —
I stride o’er the ramparts, and down the walls fall,
Till choked are the ditches with the stones, dead and quick,
Whilst the flagstaff I use ‘midst my teeth as a pick.

Oh, when cometh my turn to succumb like my prey,
May brave men my body snatch away from th’ array
Of the crows — may they heap on the rocks till they loom
Like a mountain, befitting a colossus’ tomb!

Foreign Quarterly Review (adapted)

THE CYMBALEER’S BRIDE.

(“Monseigneur le Duc de Bretagne.”)

[VI., October, 1825.]

My lord the Duke of Brittany
  Has summoned his barons bold —
Their names make a fearful litany!
Among them you will not meet any
  But men of giant mould.

Proud earls, who dwell in donjon keep,
  And steel-clad knight and peer,
Whose forts are girt with a moat cut deep —
But none excel in soldiership
  My own loved cymbaleer.

Clashing his cymbals, forth he went,
  With a bold and gallant bearing;
Sure for a captain he was meant,
To judge his pride with courage blent,
  And the cloth of gold he’s wearing.

But in my soul since then I feel
  A fear in secret creeping;
And to my patron saint I kneel,
That she may recommend his weal
  To his guardian-angel’s keeping.

I’ve begged our abbot Bernardine
  His prayers not to relax;
And to procure him aid divine
I’ve burnt upon Saint Gilda’s shrine
  Three pounds of virgin wax.

Our Lady of Loretto knows
  The pilgrimage I’ve vowed:
“To wear the scallop I propose,
If health and safety from the foes
  My lover be allowed.”

No letter (fond affection’s gage!)
  From him could I require,
The pain of absence to assuage —
A vassal-maid can have no page,
  A liegeman has no squire.

This day will witness, with the duke’s,
  My cymbaleer’s return:
Gladness and pride beam in my looks,
Delay my heart impatient brooks,
  All meaner thoughts I spurn.

Back from the battlefield elate
  His banner brings each peer;
Come, let us see, at the ancient gate,
The martial triumph pass in state —
  With the princes my cymbaleer.

We’ll have from the rampart walls a glance
  Of the air his steed assumes;
His proud neck swells, his glad hoofs prance,
And on his head unceasing dance,
  In a gorgeous tuft, red plumes!

Be quick, my sisters! dress in haste!
  Come, see him bear the bell,
With laurels decked, with true love graced,
While in his bold hands, fitly placed,
  The bounding cymbals swell!

Mark well the mantle that he’ll wear,
  Embroidered by his bride!

Admire his burnished helmet’s glare,
O’ershadowed by the dark horsehair
  That waves in jet folds wide!

The gypsy (spiteful wench!) foretold,
  With a voice like a viper hissing.
(Though I had crossed her palm with gold),
That from the ranks a spirit bold
  Would be to-day found missing.

But I have prayed so much, I trust
  Her words may prove untrue;
Though in a tomb the hag accurst
Muttered: “Prepare thee for the worst!”
  Whilst the lamp burnt ghastly blue.

My joy her spells shall not prevent.
  Hark! I can hear the drums!
And ladies fair from silken tent
Peep forth, and every eye is bent
  On the cavalcade that comes!

Pikemen, dividing on both flanks,
  Open the pageantry;
Loud, as they tread, their armor clanks,
And silk-robed barons lead the ranks —
  The pink of gallantry!

In scarfs of gold the priests admire;
  The heralds on white steeds;
Armorial pride decks their attire,
Worn in remembrance of some sire
  Famed for heroic deeds.

Feared by the Paynim’s dark divan,
  The Templars next advance;
Then the tall halberds of Lausanne,

Foremost to stand in battle van
  Against the foes of France.

Now hail the duke, with radiant brow,
  Girt with his cavaliers;
Round his triumphant banner bow
Those of his foe. Look, sisters, now!
  Here come the cymbaleers!

She spoke — with searching eye surveyed
  Their ranks — then, pale, aghast,
Sunk in the crowd! Death came in aid —
’Twas mercy to that loving maid —
  The cymbaleers had passed!

“FATHER PROUT” (FRANK S. MAHONY)

BATTLE OF THE NORSEMEN AND THE GAELS.

(“Accourez tous, oiseaux de proie!”)

[VII., September, 1825.]

Ho! hither flock, ye fowls of prey!
Ye wolves of war, make no delay!
For foemen ‘neath our blades shall fall
Ere night may veil with purple pall.
The evening psalms are nearly o’er,
  And priests who follow in our train
  Have promised us the final gain,
And filled with faith our valiant corps.

Let orphans weep, and widows brood!
To-morrow we shall wash the blood
Off saw-gapped sword and lances bent,
So, close the ranks and fire the tent!
And chill yon coward cavalcade
  With brazen bugles blaring loud,
  E’en though our chargers’ neighing proud
Already has the host dismayed.

Spur, horsemen, spur! the charge resounds!
On Gaelic spear the Northman bounds!
Through helmet plumes the arrows flit,
And plated breasts the pikeheads split.
The double-axe fells human oaks,
  And like the thistles in the field
  See bristling up (where none must yield!)
The points hewn off by sweeping strokes!

We, heroes all, our wounds disdain;
Dismounted now, our horses slain,

Yet we advance — more courage show,
Though stricken, seek to overthrow
The victor-knights who tread in mud
  The writhing slaves who bite the heel,
  While on caparisons of steel
The maces thunder — cudgels thud!

Should daggers fail hide-coats to shred,
Seize each your man and hug him dead!
Who falls unslain will only make
A mouthful to the wolves who slake
Their month-whet thirst. No captives, none!
  We die or win! but should we die,
  The lopped-off hand will wave on high
The broken brand to hail the sun!

MADELAINE.

("Ecoute-moi, Madeline.")

[IX., September, 1825.]

List to me, O Madelaine!
Now the snows have left the plain,
  Which they warmly cloaked.
Come into the forest groves,
Where the notes that Echo loves
  Are from horns evoked.

Come! where Springtide, Madelaine,
Brings a sultry breath from Spain,
  Giving buds their hue;
And, last night, to glad your eye,
Laid the floral marquetry,
  Red and gold and blue.

Would I were, O Madelaine,
As the lamb whose wool you train
  Through your tender hands.
Would I were the bird that whirls
Round, and comes to peck your curls,
  Happy in such bands.

Were I e'en, O Madelaine,
Hermit whom the herd disdain
  In his pious cell,
When your purest lips unfold
Sins which might to all be told,
  As to him you tell.

Would I were, O Madelaine,
Moth that murmurs 'gainst your pane,
  Peering at your rest,

As, so like its woolly wing,
Ceasing scarce its fluttering,
  Heaves and sinks your breast.

If you seek it, Madelaine,
You may wish, and not in vain,
  For a serving host,
And your splendid hall of state
Shall be envied by the great,
  O’er the Jew-King’s boast.

If you name it, Madelaine,
Round your head no more you’ll train
  Simple marguerites,
No! the coronet of peers,
Whom the queen herself oft fears,
  And the monarch greets.

If you wish, O Madelaine!
Where you gaze you long shall reign —
  For I’m ruler here!
I’m the lord who asks your hand
If you do not bid me stand
  Loving shepherd here!

THE FAY AND THE PERI.

("Où vas-tu donc, jeune âme.")

[XV.]

THE PERI.

Beautiful spirit, come with me
Over the blue enchanted sea:
  Morn and evening thou canst play
In my garden, where the breeze
Warbles through the fruity trees;
  No shadow falls upon the day:
There thy mother's arms await
Her cherished infant at the gate.
Of Peris I the loveliest far —
My sisters, near the morning star,
In ever youthful bloom abide;
But pale their lustre by my side —
A silken turban wreathes my head,
Rubies on my arms are spread,
While sailing slowly through the sky,
By the uplooker's dazzled eye
Are seen my wings of purple hue,
Glittering with Elysian dew.
  Whiter than a far-off sail
  My form of beauty glows,
  Fair as on a summer night
  Dawns the sleep star's gentle light;
  And fragrant as the early rose
  That scents the green Arabian vale,
  Soothing the pilgrim as he goes.

THE FAY.

Beautiful infant (said the Fay),
  In the region of the sun
I dwell, where in a rich array
The clouds encircle the king of day,
  His radiant journey done.
My wings, pure golden, of radiant sheen
  (Painted as amorous poet’s strain),
Glimmer at night, when meadows green
  Sparkle with the perfumed rain
  While the sun’s gone to come again.
And clear my hand, as stream that flows;
  And sweet my breath as air of May;
  And o’er my ivory shoulders stray
  Locks of sunshine; — tunes still play
From my odorous lips of rose.

Follow, follow! I have caves
Of pearl beneath the azure waves,
And tents all woven pleasantly
In verdant glades of Faëry.
Come, belovèd child, with me,
And I will bear thee to the bowers
Where clouds are painted o’er like flowers,
And pour into thy charmed ear
Songs a mortal may not hear;
  Harmonies so sweet and ripe
  As no inspired shepherd’s pipe
  E’er breathed into Arcadian glen,
  Far from the busy haunts of men.

THE PERI.

My home is afar in the bright Orient,
Where the sun, like a king, in his orange tent,
Reigneth for ever in gorgeous pride —
  And wafting thee, princess of rich countree,
  To the soft flute’s lush melody,

My golden vessel will gently glide,
Kindling the water ‘long the side.

Vast cities are mine of power and delight,
  Lahore laid in lilies, Golconda, Cashmere;
And Ispahan, dear to the pilgrim’s sight,
  And Bagdad, whose towers to heaven uprear;
  Alep, that pours on the startled ear,
From its restless masts the gathering roar,
As of ocean hamm’ring at night on the shore.

Mysore is a queen on her stately throne,
  Thy white domes, Medina, gleam on the eye, —
  Thy radiant kiosques with their arrowy spires,
  Shooting afar their golden fires
    Into the flashing sky, —
Like a forest of spears that startle the gaze
Of the enemy with the vivid blaze.

Come there, beautiful child, with me,
Come to the arcades of Araby,
To the land of the date and the purple vine,
Where pleasure her rosy wreaths doth twine,
And gladness shall be alway thine;
Singing at sunset next thy bed,
Strewing flowers under thy head.
  Beneath a verdant roof of leaves,
  Arching a flow’ry carpet o’er,
  Thou mayst list to lutes on summer eves
  Their lays of rustic freshness pour,
  While upon the grassy floor
  Light footsteps, in the hour of calm,
  Ruffle the shadow of the palm.

THE FAY.

Come to the radiant homes of the blest,
Where meadows like fountain in light are drest,

And the grottoes of verdure never decay,
And the glow of the August dies not away.
Come where the autumn winds never can sweep,
And the streams of the woodland steep thee in sleep,
Like a fond sister charming the eyes of a brother,
Or a little lass lulled on the breast of her mother.
Beautiful! beautiful! hasten to me!
Colored with crimson thy wings shall be;
Flowers that fade not thy forehead shall twine,
Over thee sunlight that sets not shall shine.

The infant listened to the strain,
Now here, now there, its thoughts were driven —
  But the Fay and the Peri waited in vain,
  The soul soared above such a sensual gain —
The child rose to Heaven.

Asiatic Journal

LES ORIENTALES. — 1829.

THE SCOURGE OF HEAVEN.

("Là, voyez-vous passer, la nuée.")

[I., November, 1828.]

I.

Hast seen it pass, that cloud of darkest rim?
Now red and glorious, and now gray and dim,
  Now sad as summer, barren in its heat?
One seems to see at once rush through the night
The smoke and turmoil from a burning site
  Of some great town in fiery grasp complete.

Whence comes it? From the sea, the hills, the sky?
Is it the flaming chariot from on high
  Which demons to some planet seem to bring?
Oh, horror! from its wondrous centre, lo!
A furious stream of lightning seems to flow
  Like a long snake uncoiling its fell ring.

II.

The sea! naught but the sea! waves on all sides!
Vainly the sea-bird would outstrip these tides!
  Naught but an endless ebb and flow!
Wave upon wave advancing, then controlled
Beneath the depths a stream the eyes behold
  Rolling in the involved abyss below!

Whilst here and there great fishes in the spray
Their silvery fins beneath the sun display,
  Or their blue tails lash up from out the surge,
Like to a flock the sea its fleece doth fling;
The horizon's edge bound by a brazen ring;
  Waters and sky in mutual azure merge.

"Am I to dry these seas?" exclaimed the cloud.
"No!" It went onward 'neath the breath of God.

III.

Green hills, which round a limpid bay
Reflected, bask in the clear wave!
The javelin and its buffalo prey,
The laughter and the joyous stave!
The tent, the manger! these describe
A hunting and a fishing tribe
Free as the air — their arrows fly
Swifter than lightning through the sky!
By them is breathed the purest air,
Where'er their wanderings may chance!
Children and maidens young and fair,
And warriors circling in the dance!
Upon the beach, around the fire,
Now quenched by wind, now burning higher,
Like spirits which our dreams inspire
To hover o'er our trance.

Virgins, with skins of ebony,
Beauteous as evening skies,
Laughed as their forms they dimly see
In metal mirrors rise;
Others, as joyously as they,
Were drawing for their food by day,
With jet-black hands, white camels' whey,
Camels with docile eyes.

Both men and women, bare,
Plunged in the briny bay.
Who knows them? Whence they were?
Where passed they yesterday?
Shrill sounds were hovering o'er,
Mixed with the ocean's roar,

Of cymbals from the shore,
And whinnying courser’s neigh.

“Is’t there?” one moment asked the cloudy mass;
“Is’t there?” An unknown utterance answered: “Pass!”

IV.

Whitened with grain see Egypt’s lengthened plains,
Far as the eyesight farthest space contains,
Like a rich carpet spread their varied hues.
The cold sea north, southwards the burying sand
Dispute o’er Egypt — while the smiling land
Still mockingly their empire does refuse.

Three marble triangles seem to pierce the sky,
And hide their basements from the curious eye.
Mountains — with waves of ashes covered o’er!
In graduated blocks of six feet square
From golden base to top, from earth to air
Their ever heightening monstrous steps they bore.

No scorching blast could daunt the sleepless ken
Of roseate Sphinx, and god of marble green,
Which stood as guardians o’er the sacred ground.
For a great port steered vessels huge and fleet,
A giant city bathed her marble feet
In the bright waters round.

One heard the dread simoom in distance roar,
Whilst the crushed shell upon the pebbly shore
Crackled beneath the crocodile’s huge coil.
Westwards, like tiger’s skin, each separate isle
Spotted the surface of the yellow Nile;
Gray obelisks shot upwards from the soil.

The star-king set. The sea, it seemed to hold
In the calm mirror this live globe of gold,

This world, the soul and torchbearer of our own.
In the red sky, and in the purple streak,
Like friendly kings who would each other seek,
Two meeting suns were shown.

“Shall I not stop?” exclaimed the impatient cloud.
“Seek!” trembling Tabor heard the voice of God.

V.

Sand, sand, and still more sand!
The desert! Fearful land!
Teeming with monsters dread
And plagues on every hand!
Here in an endless flow,
Sandhills of golden glow,
Where’er the tempests blow,
Like a great flood are spread.
Sometimes the sacred spot
Hears human sounds profane, when
As from Ophir or from Memphre
Stretches the caravan.
From far the eyes, its trail
Along the burning shale
Bending its wavering tail,
Like a mottled serpent scan.
These deserts are of God!
His are the bounds alone,
Here, where no feet have trod,
To Him its centre known!
And from this smoking sea
Veiled in obscurity,
The foam one seems to see
In fiery ashes thrown.

“Shall desert change to lake?” cried out the cloud.
“Still further!” from heaven’s depths sounded that Voice aloud.

VI.

Like tumbled waves, which a huge rock surround;
Like heaps of ruined towers which strew the ground,
  See Babel now deserted and dismayed!
Huge witness to the folly of mankind;
Four distant mountains when the moonlight shined
  Seem covered with its shade.

O’er miles and miles the shattered ruins spread
Beneath its base, from captive tempests bred,
  The air seemed filled with harmony strange and dire;
While swarmed around the entire human race
A future Babel, on the world’s whole space
  Fixed its eternal spire.

Up to the zenith rose its lengthening stair,
While each great granite mountain lent a share
  To form a stepping base;
Height upon height repeated seemed to rise,
For pyramid on pyramid the strainèd eyes
  Saw take their ceaseless place.

Through yawning walls huge elephants stalked by;
Under dark pillars rose a forestry,
  Pillars by madness multiplied;
As round some giant hive, all day and night,
Huge vultures, and red eagles’ wheeling flight
  Was through each porch descried.

“Must I complete it?” said the angered cloud.
“On still!” “Lord, whither?” groaned it, deep not loud.

VII.

Two cities, strange, unknown in history’s page,
Up to the clouds seemed scaling, stage by stage,
Noiseless their streets; their sleeping inmates lie,

Their gods, their chariots, in obscurity!
Like sisters sleeping ‘neath the same moonlight,
O’er their twin towers crept the shades of night,
Whilst scarce distinguished in the black profound,
Stairs, aqueducts, great pillars, gleamed around,
And ruined capitals: then was seen a group
Of granite elephants ‘neath a dome to stoop,
Shapeless, giant forms to view arise,
Monsters around, the spawn of hideous ties!
Then hanging gardens, with flowers and galleries:
O’er vast fountains bending grew ebon-trees;
Temples, where seated on their rich tiled thrones,
Bull-headed idols shone in jasper stones;
Vast halls, spanned by one block, where watch and stare
Each upon each, with straight and moveless glare,
Colossal heads in circles; the eye sees
Great gods of bronze, their hands upon their knees.
Sight seemed confounded, and to have lost its powers,
‘Midst bridges, aqueducts, arches, and round towers,
Whilst unknown shapes fill up the devious views
Formed by these palaces and avenues.
Like capes, the lengthening shadows seem to rise
Of these dark buildings, pointed to the skies,
Immense entanglement in shroud of gloom!
The stars which gleamed in the empyrean dome,
Under the thousand arches in heaven’s space
Shone as through meshes of the blackest lace.
Cities of hell, with foul desires demented,
And monstrous pleasures, hour by hour invented!
Each roof and home some monstrous mystery bore!
Which through the world spread like a twofold sore!
Yet all things slept, and scarce some pale late light
Flitted along the streets through the still night,
Lamps of debauch, forgotten and alone,
The feast’s lost fires left there to flicker on;
The walls’ large angles clove the light-lengthening shades
‘Neath the white moon, or on some pool’s face played.

Perchance one heard, faint in the plain beneath,
The kiss suppressed, the mingling of the breath;
And the two sister cities, tired of heat,
In love’s embrace lay down in murmurs sweet!
Whilst sighing winds the scent of sycamore
From Sodom to Gomorrah softly bore!
Then over all spread out the blackened cloud,
“’Tis here!” the Voice on high exclaimed aloud.

VIII.

From a cavern wide
In the rent cloud’s side,
In sulphurous showers
The red flame pours.
The palaces fall
  In the lurid light,
Which casts a red pall
  O’er their facades white!

Oh, Sodom! Gomorrah!
What a dome of horror
Rests now on your walls!
On you the cloud falls,
Nation perverse!
  On your fated heads,
From its fell jaws, a curse
  Its lightning fierce spreads!

The people awaken
  Which godlessly slept;
Their palaces shaken,
  Their offences unwept!
Their rolling cars all
  Meet and crash in the street;
And the crowds, for a pall,
  Find flames round their feet!

Numberless dead,
Round these high towers spread,
Still sleep in the shade
By their rugged heights made;
Colossi of rocks
In ill-steadied blocks!
So hang on a wall
Black ants, like a pall!

To escape is in vain
From this horrible rain!
  Alas! all things die;
In the lightning’s red flash
The bridges all crash;
‘Neath the tiles the flame creeps;
From the fire-struck steeps
Falls on the pavements below,
All lurid in glow,
  Rolling down from on high!

Beneath every spark,
  The red, tyrannous fire
Mounts up in the dark
  Ever redder and higher;
More swiftly than steed
  Uncontrolled, see it pass!
  Horrid idols all twist,
  By the crumbling flame kissed
In their infamous dread,
  Shrivelled members of brass!

It grows angry, flows on,
Silver towers fall down
Unforeseen, like a dream
In its green and red stream,
Which lights up the walls
Ere one crashes and falls,

Like the changeable scale
Of a lizard’s bright mail.
Agate, porphyry, cracks
And is melted to wax!
Bend low to their doom
These stones of the tomb!
E’en the great marble giant
Called Nabo, sways pliant
Like a tree; whilst the flare
  Seemed each column to scorch
  As it blazed like a torch
Round and round in the air.

The magi, in vain,
From the heights to the plain
Their gods’ images carry
  In white tunic: they quake —
  No idol can make
The blue sulphur tarry;
The temple e’en where they meet,
Swept under their feet
In the folds of its sheet!
Turns a palace to coal!
Whence the straitened cries roll
From its terrified flock;
  With incendiary grips
It loosens a block,
  Which smokes and then slips
From its place by the shock;
  To the surface first sheers,
  Then melts, disappears,
Like the glacier, the rock!
The high priest, full of years,
On the burnt site appears,
  Whence the others have fled.
Lo! his tiara’s caught fire
As the furnace burns higher,

And pale, full of dread,
See, the hand he would raise
To tear his crown from the blaze
Is flaming instead!

Men, women, in crowds
Hurry on — the fire shrouds
And blinds all their eyes
As, besieging each gate
Of these cities of fate
To the conscience-struck crowd,
In each fiery cloud,
Hell appears in the skies!

IX.

Men say that *then*, to see his foe’s sad fall
As some old prisoner clings to his prison wall,
Babel, accomplice of their guilt, was seen
O’er the far hills to gaze with vision keen!
And as was worked this dispensation strange,
A wondrous noise filled the world’s startled range;
Reached the dull hearing that deep, direful sound
Of their sad tribe who live below the ground.

X.

‘Gainst this pitiless flame who condemned could prevail?
Who these walls, burnt and calcined, could venture to scale?
Yet their vile hands they sought to uplift,
Yet they cared still to ask from what God, by what law?
In their last sad embrace, ‘midst their honor and awe,
Of this mighty volcano the drift.
‘Neath great slabs of marble they hid them in vain,
‘Gainst this everliving fire, God’s own flaming rain!
’Tis the rash whom God seeks out the first;
They call on their gods, who were deaf to their cries,
For the punishing flame caused their cold granite eyes

  In tears of hot lava to burst!
Thus away in the whirlwind did everything pass,
The man and the city, the soil and its grass!
  God burnt this sad, sterile champaign;
Naught living was left of this people destroyed,
And the unknown wind which blew over the void,
  Each mountain changed into a plain.

XI.

The palm-tree that grows on the rock to this day,
Feels its leaf growing yellow, its slight stem decay,
  In the blasting and ponderous air;
These towns are no more! but to mirror their past,
O’er their embers a cold lake spread far and spread fast,
  With smoke like a furnace, lies there!

J.N. FAZAKERLEY

PIRATES’ SONG.

(“Nous emmenions en esclavage.”)

[VIII., March, 1828.]

We’re bearing fivescore Christian dogs
  To serve the cruel drivers:
Some are fair beauties gently born,
  And some rough coral-divers.
We hardy skimmers of the sea
  Are lucky in each sally,
And, eighty strong, we send along
  The dreaded Pirate Galley.

A nunnery was spied ashore,
  We lowered away the cutter,
And, landing, seized the youngest nun
  Ere she a cry could utter;
Beside the creek, deaf to our oars,
  She slumbered in green alley,
As, eighty strong, we sent along
  The dreaded Pirate Galley.

“Be silent, darling, you must come —
  The wind is off shore blowing;
You only change your prison dull
  For one that’s splendid, glowing!
His Highness doats on milky cheeks,
  So do not make us dally” —
We, eighty strong, who send along
  The dreaded Pirate Galley.

She sought to flee back to her cell,
  And called us each a devil!
We dare do aught becomes Old Scratch,
  But like a treatment civil,

So, spite of buffet, prayers, and calls —
  Too late her friends to rally —
We, eighty strong, bore her along
  Unto the Pirate Galley.

The fairer for her tears profuse,
  As dews refresh the flower,
She is well worth three purses full,
  And will adorn the bower —
For vain her vow to pine and die
  Thus torn from her dear valley:
She reigns, and we still row along
  The dreaded Pirate Galley.

THE TURKISH CAPTIVE.

(“Si je n’était captive.”)

[IX., July, 1828.]

Oh! were I not a captive,
  I should love this fair countree;
Those fields with maize abounding,
  This ever-plaintive sea:
I’d love those stars unnumbered,
  If, passing in the shade,
Beneath our walls I saw not
  The spahi’s sparkling blade.

I am no Tartar maiden
  That a blackamoor of price
Should tune my lute and hold to me
  My glass of sherbet-ice.
Far from these haunts of vices,
  In my dear countree, we
With sweethearts in the even
  May chat and wander free.

But still I love this climate,
  Where never wintry breeze
Invades, with chilly murmur,
  These open lattices;
Where rain is warm in summer,
  And the insect glossy green,
Most like a living emerald,
  Shines ‘mid the leafy screen.

With her chapelles fair Smyrna —
  A gay princess is she!
Still, at her summons, round her
  Unfading spring ye see.

And, as in beauteous vases,
  Bright groups of flowers repose,
So, in her gulfs are lying
  Her archipelagoes.

I love these tall red turrets;
  These standards brave unrolled;
And, like an infant's playthings,
  These houses decked with gold.
I love forsooth these reveries,
  Though sandstorms make me pant,
Voluptuously swaying
  Upon an elephant.

Here in this fairy palace,
  Full of such melodies,
Methinks I hear deep murmurs
  That in the deserts rise;
Soft mingling with the music
  The Genii's voices pour,
Amid the air, unceasing,
  Around us evermore.

I love the burning odors
  This glowing region gives;
And, round each gilded lattice,
  The trembling, wreathing leaves;
And, 'neath the bending palm-tree,
  The gayly gushing spring;
And on the snow-white minaret,
  The stork with snowier wing.

I love on mossy couch to sing
  A Spanish roundelay,
And see my sweet companions
  Around commingling gay, —
A roving band, light-hearted,
  In frolicsome array, —

Who ‘neath the screening parasols
  Dance down the merry day.
But more than all enchanting
  At night, it is to me,
To sit, where winds are sighing,
  Lone, musing by the sea;
And, on its surface gazing,
  To mark the moon so fair,
Her silver fan outspreading,
  In trembling radiance there.

W.D., *Tait’s Edin. Magazine*

MOONLIGHT ON THE BOSPHORUS.

(“La lune était sereine.”)

[X., September, 1828.]

Bright shone the merry moonbeams dancing o’er the wave;
  At the cool casement, to the evening breeze flung wide,
  Leans the Sultana, and delights to watch the tide,
With surge of silvery sheen, yon sleeping islets lave.

From her hand, as it falls, vibrates the light guitar.
  She listens — hark! that sound that echoes dull and low.
  Is it the beat upon the Archipelago
Of some long galley’s oar, from Scio bound afar?

Is it the cormorants, whose black wings, one by one,
  Cut the blue wave that o’er them breaks in liquid pearls?
  Is it some hovering sprite with whistling scream that hurls
Down to the deep from yon old tower a loosened stone?

Who thus disturbs the tide near the seraglio?
  ’Tis no dark cormorants that on the ripple float,
  ’Tis no dull plume of stone — no oars of Turkish boat,
With measured beat along the water creeping slow.

’Tis heavy sacks, borne each by voiceless dusky slaves;
  And could you dare to sound the depths of yon dark tide,
  Something like human form would stir within its side.
Bright shone the merry moonbeams dancing o’er the wave.

JOHN L. O’SULLIVAN.

THE VEIL.

(“Qu’avez-vous, mes frères?”)

[XI., September, 18288.]

“Have you prayed tonight, Desdemona?”

THE SISTER
What has happened, my brothers? Your spirit to-day
  Some secret sorrow damps
There’s a cloud on your brow. What has happened? Oh, say,
For your eyeballs glare out with a sinister ray
  Like the light of funeral lamps.
And the blades of your poniards are half unsheathed
  In your belt — and ye frown on me!
There’s a woe untold, there’s a pang unbreathed
  In your bosom, my brothers three!

ELDEST BROTHER.

Gulnara, make answer! Hast thou, since the dawn,
To the eye of a stranger thy veil withdrawn?

THE SISTER.

As I came, oh, my brother! at noon — from the bath —
  As I came — it was noon, my lords —
And your sister had then, as she constantly hath,
Drawn her veil close around her, aware that the path
  Is beset by these foreign hordes.
But the weight of the noonday’s sultry hour
Near the mosque was so oppressive
That — forgetting a moment the eye of the Giaour —
  I yielded to th’ heat excessive.

SECOND BROTHER.

Gulnara, make answer! Whom, then, hast thou seen,
In a turban of white and a caftan of green?

THE SISTER.

Nay, *he* might have been there; but I muflled me so,
  He could scarcely have seen my figure. —
But why to your sister thus dark do you grow?
What words to yourselves do you mutter thus low,
  Of “blood” and “an intriguer”?
Oh! ye cannot of murder bring down the red guilt
  On your souls, my brothers, surely!
Though I fear — from the hands that are chafing the hilt,
  And the hints you give obscurely.

THIRD BROTHER.

Gulnara, this evening when sank the red sun,
Didst thou mark how like blood in descending it shone?

THE SISTER.

Mercy! Allah! have pity! oh, spare!
  See! I cling to your knees repenting!
Kind brothers, forgive me! for mercy, forbear!
Be appeased at the cry of a sister’s despair,
  For our mother’s sake relenting.
O God! must I die? They are deaf to my cries!
  Their sister’s life-blood shedding;
They have stabbed me each one — I faint — o’er my eyes
  A *veil of Death* is spreading!

THE BROTHERS.

Gulnara, farewell! take *that* veil; ’tis the gift
Of thy brothers — a veil thou wilt never lift!

“FATHER PROUT” (FRANK S. MAHONY).

THE FAVORITE SULTANA.

(“N’ai-je pas pour toi, belle juive.”)

[XII., Oct. 27, 1828.]

To please you, Jewess, jewel!
  I have thinned my harem out!
Must every flirting of your fan
  Presage a dying shout?

Grace for the damsels tender
  Who have fear to hear your laugh,
For seldom gladness gilds your lips
  But blood you mean to quaff.

In jealousy so zealous,
  Never was there woman worse;
You’d have no roses but those grown
  Above some buried corse.

Am I not pinioned firmly?
  Why be angered if the door
Repulses fifty suing maids
  Who vainly there implore?

Let them live on — to envy
  My own empress of the world,
To whom all Stamboul like a dog
  Lies at the slippers curled.

To you my heroes lower
  Those scarred ensigns none have cowed;
To you their turbans are depressed
  That elsewhere march so proud.

To you Bassora offers
Her respect, and Trebizonde
Her carpets richly wrought, and spice
And gems, of which you’re fond.

To you the Cyprus temples
Dare not bar or close the doors;
For you the mighty Danube sends
The choicest of its stores.

Fear you the Grecian maidens,
Pallid lilies of the isles?
Or the scorching-eyed sand-rover
From Baalbec’s massy piles?

Compared with yours, oh, daughter
Of King Solomon the grand,
What are round ebon bosoms,
High brows from Hellas’ strand?

You’re neither blanched nor blackened,
For your tint of olive’s clear;
Yours are lips of ripest cherry,
You are straight as Arab spear.

Hence, launch no longer lightning
On these paltry slaves of ours.
Why should your flow of tears be matched
By their mean life-blood showers?

Think only of our banquets
Brought and served by charming girls,
For beauties sultans must adorn
As dagger-hilts the pearls.

THE PASHA AND THE DERVISH.

(“Un jour Ali passait.”)

[XIII, Nov. 8, 1828.]

Ali came riding by — the highest head
Bent to the dust, o’ercharged with dread,
  Whilst “God be praised!” all cried;
But through the throng one dervish pressed,
Aged and bent, who dared arrest
  The pasha in his pride.

“Ali Tepelini, light of all light,
Who hold’st the Divan’s upper seat by right,
  Whose fame Fame’s trump hath burst —
Thou art the master of unnumbered hosts,
Shade of the Sultan — yet he only boasts
  In thee a dog accurst!

“An unseen tomb-torch flickers on thy path,
Whilst, as from vial full, thy spare-naught wrath
  Splashes this trembling race:
These are thy grass as thou their trenchant scythes
Cleaving their neck as ‘twere a willow withe —
  Their blood none can efface.

“But ends thy tether! for Janina makes
A grave for thee where every turret quakes,
  And thou shalt drop below
To where the spirits, to a tree enchained,
Will clutch thee, there to be ‘mid them retained
  For all to-come in woe!

“Or if, by happy chance, thy soul might flee
Thy victims, after, thou shouldst surely see
  And hear thy crimes relate;

Streaked with the guileless gore drained from their veins,
Greater in number than the reigns on reigns
  Thou hopedst for thy state.

“This so will be! and neither fleet nor fort
Can stay or aid thee as the deathly port
  Receives thy harried frame!
Though, like the cunning Hebrew knave of old,
To cheat the angel black, thou didst enfold
  In altered guise thy name.”

Ali deemed anchorite or saint a pawn —
The crater of his blunderbuss did yawn,
  Sword, dagger hung at ease:
But he had let the holy man revile,
Though clouds o’erswept his brow; then, with a smile,
  He tossed him his pelisse.

THE LOST BATTLE.

(“Allah! qui me rendra-”)

[XVL, May, 1828.]

Oh, Allah! who will give me back my terrible array?
My emirs and my cavalry that shook the earth to-day;
My tent, my wide-extending camp, all dazzling to the sight,
Whose watchfires, kindled numberless beneath the brow of night,
Seemed oft unto the sentinel that watched the midnight hours,
As heaven along the sombre hill had rained its stars in showers?
Where are my beys so gorgeous, in their light pelisses gay,
And where my fierce Timariot bands, so fearless in the fray;
My dauntless khans, my spahis brave, swift thunderbolts of war;
My sunburnt Bedouins, trooping from the Pyramids afar,
Who laughed to see the laboring hind stand terrified at gaze,
And urged their desert horses on amid the ripening maize?
These horses with their fiery eyes, their slight untiring feet,
That flew along the fields of corn like grasshoppers so fleet —
What! to behold again no more, loud charging o’er the plain,
Their squadrons, in the hostile shot diminished all in vain,
Burst grandly on the heavy squares, like clouds that bear the storms,
Enveloping in lightning fires the dark resisting swarms!
Oh! they are dead! their housings bright are trailed amid their gore;
Dark blood is on their manes and sides, all deeply clotted o’er;
All vainly now the spur would strike these cold and rounded flanks,
To wake them to their wonted speed amid the rapid ranks:
Here the bold riders red and stark upon the sands lie down,
Who in their friendly shadows slept throughout the halt at noon.
Oh, Allah! who will give me back my terrible array?
See where it straggles ‘long the fields for leagues on leagues away,
Like riches from a spendthrift’s hand flung prodigal to earth.
Lo! steed and rider; — Tartar chiefs or of Arabian birth,
Their turbans and their cruel course, their banners and their cries,
Seem now as if a troubled dream had passed before mine eyes —

My valiant warriors and their steeds, thus doomed to fall and bleed!
Their voices rouse no echo now, their footsteps have no speed;
They sleep, and have forgot at last the sabre and the bit —
Yon vale, with all the corpses heaped, seems one wide charnel-pit.
Long shall the evil omen rest upon this plain of dread —
To-night, the taint of solemn blood; to-morrow, of the dead.
Alas! ’tis but a shadow now, that noble armament!
How terribly they strove, and struck from morn to eve unspent,
Amid the fatal fiery ring, enamoured of the fight!
Now o’er the dim horizon sinks the peaceful pall of night:
The brave have nobly done their work, and calmly sleep at last.
The crows begin, and o’er the dead are gathering dark and fast;
Already through their feathers black they pass their eager beaks.
Forth from the forest’s distant depth, from bald and barren peaks,
They congregate in hungry flocks and rend their gory prey.
Woe to that flaunting army’s pride, so vaunting yesterday!
That formidable host, alas! is coldly nerveless now
To drive the vulture from his gorge, or scare the carrion crow.
Were now that host again mine own, with banner broad unfurled,
With it I would advance and win the empire of the world.
Monarchs to it should yield their realms and veil their haughty brows;
My sister it should ever be, my lady and my spouse.
Oh! what will unrestoring Death, that jealous tyrant lord,
Do with the brave departed souls that cannot swing a sword?
Why turned the balls aside from me? Why struck no hostile hand
My head within its turban green upon the ruddy sand?
I stood all potent yesterday; my bravest captains three,
All stirless in their tigered selle, magnificent to see,
Hailed as before my gilded tent rose flowing to the gales,
Shorn from the tameless desert steeds, three dark and tossing tails.
But yesterday a hundred drums were heard when I went by;
Full forty agas turned their looks respectful on mine eye,
And trembled with contracted brows within their hall of state.
Instead of heavy catapults, of slow unwieldy weight,
I had bright cannons rolling on oak wheels in threatening tiers,
And calm and steady by their sides marched English cannoniers.
But yesterday, and I had towns, and castles strong and high,

And Greeks in thousands, for the base and merciless to buy.
But yesterday, and arsenals and harems were my own;
While now, defeated and proscribed, deserted and alone,
I flee away, a fugitive, and of my former power,
Allah! I have not now at least one battlemented tower.
And must he fly — the grand vizier! the pasha of three tails!
O’er the horizon’s bounding hills, where distant vision fails,
All stealthily, with eyes on earth, and shrinking from the sight,
As a nocturnal robber holds his dark and breathless flight,
And thinks he sees the gibbet spread its arms in solemn wrath,
In every tree that dimly throws its shadow on his path!

Thus, after his defeat, pale Reschid speaks.
Among the dead we mourned a thousand Greeks.
Lone from the field the Pasha fled afar,
And, musing, wiped his reeking scimitar;
His two dead steeds upon the sands were flung,
And on their sides their empty stirrups hung.

W.D., *Bentley’s Miscellany*, 1839.

THE GREEK BOY.

(“Les Turcs ont passés là.”)

[XVIII., June 10, 1828.]

All is a ruin where rage knew no bounds:
Chio is levelled, and loathed by the hounds,
  For shivered yest’reen was her lance;
Sulphurous vapors envenom the place
Where her true beauties of Beauty’s true race
  Were lately linked close in the dance.

Dark is the desert, with one single soul;
Cerulean eyes! whence the burning tears roll
  In anguish of uttermost shame,
Under the shadow of one shrub of May,
Splashed still with ruddy drops, bent in decay
  Where fiercely the hand of Lust came.

“Soft and sweet urchin, still red with the lash
Of rein and of scabbard of wild Kuzzilbash,
  What lack you for changing your sob —
If not unto laughter beseeming a child —
To utterance milder, though they have defiled
  The graves which they shrank not to rob?

“Would’st thou a trinket, a flower, or scarf,
Would’st thou have silver? I’m ready with half
  These sequins a-shine in the sun!
Still more have I money — if you’ll but speak!”
He spoke: and furious the cry of the Greek,
  “Oh, give me your dagger and gun!”

ZARA, THE BATHER

(“Sara, belle d’indolence.”)

[XIX., August, 1828.]

In a swinging hammock lying,
  Lightly flying,
Zara, lovely indolent,
 O’er a fountain’s crystal wave
  There to lave
Her young beauty — see her bent.

As she leans, so sweet and soft,
  Flitting oft,
O’er the mirror to and fro,
 Seems that airy floating bat,
  Like a feather
From some sea-gull’s wing of snow.

Every time the frail boat laden
  With the maiden
Skims the water in its flight,
 Starting from its trembling sheen,
  Swift are seen
A white foot and neck so white.

As that lithe foot’s timid tips
  Quick she dips,
Passing, in the rippling pool,
 (Blush, oh! snowiest ivory!)
  Frolic, she
Laughs to feel the pleasant cool.

Here displayed, but half concealed —
  Half revealed,
Each bright charm shall you behold,

In her innocence emerging,
As a-verging
On the wave her hands grow cold.

For no star howe’er divine
Has the shine
Of a maid’s pure loveliness,
Frightened if a leaf but quivers
As she shivers,
Veiled with naught but dripping trees.

By the happy breezes fanned
See her stand, —
Blushing like a living rose,
On her bosom swelling high
If a fly
Dare to seek a sweet repose.

In those eyes which maiden pride
Fain would hide,
Mark how passion’s lightnings sleep!
And their glance is brighter far
Than the star
Brightest in heaven’s bluest deep.

O’er her limbs the glittering current
In soft torrent
Rains adown the gentle girl,
As if, drop by drop, should fall,
One and all
From her necklace every pearl.

Lengthening still the reckless pleasure
At her leisure,
Care-free Zara ever slow
As the hammock floats and swings
Smiles and sings,
To herself, so sweet and low.

“Oh, were I a capitana,
Or sultana,
Amber should be always mixt
In my bath of jewelled stone,
Near my throne,
Griffins twain of gold betwixt.

“Then my hammock should be silk,
White as milk;
And, more soft than down of dove,
Velvet cushions where I sit
Should emit
Perfumes that inspire love.

“Then should I, no danger near,
Free from fear,
Revel in my garden’s stream;
Nor amid the shadows deep
Dread the peep,
Of two dark eyes’ kindling gleam.

“He who thus would play the spy,
On the die
For such sight his head must throw;
In his blood the sabre naked
Would be slakèd,
Of my slaves of ebon brow.

“Then my rich robes trailing show
As I go,
None to chide should be so bold;
And upon my sandals fine
How should shine
Rubies worked in cloth-of-gold!”

Fancying herself a queen,
All unseen,
Thus vibrating in delight;

In her indolent coquetting
Quite forgetting
How the hours wing their flight.

As she lists the showery tinkling
Of the sprinkling
By her wanton curvets made;
Never pauses she to think
Of the brink
Where her wrapper white is laid.

To the harvest-fields the while,
In long file,
Speed her sisters' lively band,
Like a flock of birds in flight
Streaming light,
Dancing onward hand in hand.

And they're singing, every one,
As they run
This the burden of their lay:
"Fie upon such idleness!
Not to dress
Earlier on harvest-day!"

JOHN L. O'SULLIVAN.

EXPECTATION.

("Moune, écureuil.")

[xx.]

Squirrel, mount yon oak so high,
To its twig that next the sky
  Bends and trembles as a flower!
Strain, O stork, thy pinion well, —
From thy nest 'neath old church-bell,
Mount to yon tall citadel,
  And its tallest donjon tower!
To your mountain, eagle old,
Mount, whose brow so white and cold,
  Kisses the last ray of even!
And, O thou that lov'st to mark
Morn's first sunbeam pierce the dark,
Mount, O mount, thou joyous lark —
  Joyous lark, O mount to heaven!
And now say, from topmost bough,
Towering shaft, and peak of snow,
  And heaven's arch — O, can you see
One white plume that like a star,
Streams along the plain afar,
And a steed that from the war
  Bears my lover back to me?

JOHN L. O'SULLIVAN.

THE LOVER’S WISH.

(“Si j’étais la feuille.”)

[XXII., September, 1828.]

Oh! were I the leaf that the wind of the West,
  His course through the forest uncaring;
To sleep on the gale or the wave’s placid breast
  In a pendulous cradle is bearing.

All fresh with the morn’s balmy kiss would I haste,
  As the dewdrops upon me were glancing;
When Aurora sets out on the roseate waste,
  And round her the breezes are dancing.

On the pinions of air I would fly, I would rush
  Thro’ the glens and the valleys to quiver;
Past the mountain ravine, past the grove’s dreamy hush,
  And the murmuring fall of the river.

By the darkening hollow and bramble-bush lane,
  To catch the sweet breath of the roses;
Past the land would I speed, where the sand-driven plain
  ’Neath the heat of the noonday reposes.

Past the rocks that uprear their tall forms to the sky,
  Whence the storm-fiend his anger is pouring;
Past lakes that lie dead, tho’ the tempest roll nigh,
  And the turbulent whirlwind be roaring.

On, on would I fly, till a charm stopped my way,
  A charm that would lead to the bower;
Where the daughter of Araby sings to the day,
  At the dawn and the vesper hour.

Then hovering down on her brow would I light,
’Midst her golden tresses entwining;
That gleam like the corn when the fields are bright,
And the sunbeams upon it shining.

A single frail gem on her beautiful head,
I should sit in the golden glory;
And prouder I’d be than the diadem spread
Round the brow of kings famous in story.

V., *Eton Observer*.

THE SACKING OF THE CITY.

("La flamme par ton ordre, O roi!")

[XXIII., November, 1825.]

Thy will, O King, is done! Lighting but to consume,
  The roar of the fierce flames drowned even the shouts and shrieks;
Reddening each roof, like some day-dawn of bloody doom,
  Seemed they in joyous flight to dance about their wrecks.

Slaughter his thousand giant arms hath tossed on high,
  Fell fathers, husbands, wives, beneath his streaming steel;
Prostrate, the palaces, huge tombs of fire, lie,
  While gathering overhead the vultures scream and wheel!

Died the pale mothers, and the virgins, from their arms,
  O Caliph, fiercely torn, bewailed their young years' blight;
With stabs and kisses fouled, all their yet quivering charms,
  At our fleet coursers' heels were dragged in mocking flight.

Lo! where the city lies mantled in pall of death;
  Lo! where thy mighty hand hath passed, all things must bend!
Priests prayed, the sword estopped blaspheming breath,
  Vainly their cheating book for shield did they extend.

Some infants yet survived, and the unsated steel
  Still drinks the life-blood of each whelp of Christian-kind,
To kiss thy sandall'd foot, O King, thy people kneel,
  And golden circlets to thy victor-ankle bind.

JOHN L. O'SULLIVAN.

NOORMAHAL THE FAIR.

(“Entre deux rocs d’un noir d’ébène.”)

[XXVII., November, 1828.]

Between two ebon rocks
  Behold yon sombre den,
Where brambles bristle like the locks
  Of wool between the horns of scapegoat banned by men!

Remote in ruddy fog
  Still hear the tiger growl
At the lion and stripèd dog
  That prowl with rusty throats to taunt and roar and howl;

Whilst other monsters fast
  The hissing basilisk;
The hippopotamus so vast,
  And the boa with waking appetite made brisk!

The orfrey showing tongue,
  The fly in stinging mood,
The elephant that crushes strong
  And elastic bamboos an the scorpion’s brood;

And the men of the trees
  With their families fierce,
Till there is not one scorching breeze
  But brings here its venom — its horror to pierce —

Yet, rather there be lone,
  ’Mid all those horrors there,
Than hear the sickly honeyed tone
  And see the swimming eyes of Noormahal the Fair!

THE DJINNS.

("Murs, ville et port.")

[XXVIII., Aug. 28, 1828.]

Town, tower,
Shore, deep,
Where lower
Cliff's steep;
Waves gray,
Where play
Winds gay,
All sleep.

Hark! a sound,
Far and slight,
Breathes around
On the night
High and higher,
Nigh and nigher,
Like a fire,
Roaring, bright.

Now, on 'tis sweeping
With rattling beat,
Like dwarf imp leaping
In gallop fleet
He flies, he prances,
In frolic fancies,
On wave-crest dances
With pattering feet.

Hark, the rising swell,
With each new burst!
Like the tolling bell
Of a convent curst;

Like the billowy roar
On a storm-lashed shore, —
Now hushed, but once more
Maddening to its worst.

O God! the deadly sound
Of the Djinn’s fearful cry!
Quick, ‘neath the spiral round
Of the deep staircase fly!
See, see our lamplight fade!
And of the balustrade
Mounts, mounts the circling shade
Up to the ceiling high!

’Tis the Djinns’ wild streaming swarm
Whistling in their tempest flight;
Snap the tall yews ‘neath the storm,
Like a pine flame crackling bright.
Swift though heavy, lo! their crowd
Through the heavens rushing loud
Like a livid thunder-cloud
With its bolt of fiery might!

Ho! they are on us, close without!
Shut tight the shelter where we lie!
With hideous din the monster rout,
Dragon and vampire, fill the sky!
The loosened rafter overhead
Trembles and bends like quivering reed;
Shakes the old door with shuddering dread,
As from its rusty hinge ’twould fly!
Wild cries of hell! voices that howl and shriek!
The horrid troop before the tempest tossed —
O Heaven! — descends my lowly roof to seek:

Bends the strong wall beneath the furious host.
Totters the house as though, like dry leaf shorn
From autumn bough and on the mad blast borne,

Up from its deep foundations it were torn
To join the stormy whirl. Ah! all is lost!

O Prophet! if thy hand but now
Save from these hellish things,
A pilgrim at thy shrine I'll bow,
Laden with pious offerings.
Bid their hot breath its fiery rain
Stream on the faithful's door in vain;
Vainly upon my blackened pane
Grate the fierce claws of their dark wings!

They have passed! — and their wild legion
Cease to thunder at my door;
Fleeting through night's rayless region,
Hither they return no more.
Clanking chains and sounds of woe
Fill the forests as they go;
And the tall oaks cower low,
Bent their flaming light before.

On! on! the storm of wings
Bears far the fiery fear,
Till scarce the breeze now brings
Dim murmurings to the ear;
Like locusts' humming hail,
Or thrash of tiny flail
Plied by the fitful gale
On some old roof-tree sere.

Fainter now are borne
Feeble mutterings still;
As when Arab horn
Swells its magic peal,
Shoreward o'er the deep
Fairy voices sweep,
And the infant's sleep
Golden visions fill.

Each deadly Djinn,
Dark child of fright,
Of death and sin,
Speeds in wild flight.
Hark, the dull moan,
Like the deep tone
Of Ocean’s groan,
Afar, by night!

More and more
Fades it slow,
As on shore
Ripples flow, —
As the plaint
Far and faint
Of a saint
Murmured low.

Hark! hist!
Around,
I list!
The bounds
  Of space
  All trace
  Efface
Of sound.

JOHN L. O’SULLIVAN.

THE OBDURATE BEAUTY.

("A Juana la Grenadine!")

[XXIX., October, 1843.]

To Juana ever gay,
Sultan Achmet spoke one day
  "Lo, the realms that kneel to own
  Homage to my sword and crown
All I'd freely cast away,
  Maiden dear, for thee alone."

"Be a Christian, noble king!
For it were a grievous thing:
  Love to seek and find too well
  In the arms of infidel.
Spain with cry of shame would ring,
  If from honor faithful fell."

"By these pearls whose spotless chain,
Oh, my gentle sovereign,
  Clasps thy neck of ivory,
  Aught thou askest I will be,
If that necklace pure of stain
  Thou wilt give for rosary."

JOHN L. O'SULLIVAN.

DON RODRIGO.

A MOORISH BALLAD.

(“Don Roderique est à la chasse.”)

[XXX., May, 1828.]

Unto the chase Rodrigo’s gone,
  With neither lance nor buckler;
A baleful light his eyes outshone —
  To pity he’s no truckler.

He follows not the royal stag,
  But, full of fiery hating,
Beside the way one sees him lag,
  Impatient at the waiting.

He longs his nephew’s blood to spill,
  Who ‘scaped (the young Mudarra)
That trap he made and laid to kill
  The seven sons of Lara.

Along the road — at last, no balk —
  A youth looms on a jennet;
He rises like a sparrow-hawk
  About to seize a linnet.

“What ho!” “Who calls?” “Art Christian knight,
  Or basely born and boorish,
Or yet that thing I still more slight —
  The spawn of some dog Moorish?

“I seek the by-born spawn of one
  I e’er renounce as brother —
Who chose to make his latest son
  Caress a Moor as mother.

“I’ve sought that cub in every hole,
’Midland, and coast, and islet,
For he’s the thief who came and stole
Our sheathless jewelled stilet.”

“If you well know the poniard worn
Without edge-dulling cover —
Look on it now — here, plain, upborne!
And further be no rover.

“Tis I — as sure as you’re abhorred
Rodrigo — cruel slayer,
’Tis I am Vengeance, and your lord,
Who bids you crouch in prayer!

“I shall not grant the least delay —
Use what you have, defending,
I’ll send you on that darksome way
Your victims late were wending.

“And if I wore this, with its crest —
Our seal with gems enwreathing —
In open air— ’twas in your breast
To seek its fated sheathing!”

CORNFLOWERS.

(“Tandis que l’étoile inodore.”)

[XXXII.]

While bright but scentless azure stars
  Be-gem the golden corn,
And spangle with their skyey tint
  The furrows not yet shorn;
While still the pure white tufts of May
  Ape each a snowy ball, —
Away, ye merry maids, and haste
  To gather ere they fall!

Nowhere the sun of Spain outshines
  Upon a fairer town
Than Peñafiel, or endows
  More richly farming clown;
Nowhere a broader square reflects
  Such brilliant mansions, tall, —
Away, ye merry maids, etc.

Nowhere a statelier abbey rears
  Dome huger o’er a shrine,
Though seek ye from old Rome itself
  To even Seville fine.
Here countless pilgrims come to pray
 And promenade the Mall, —
Away, ye merry maids, etc.

Where glide the girls more joyfully
  Than ours who dance at dusk,
With roses white upon their brows,
  With waists that scorn the busk?
Mantillas elsewhere hide dull eyes —

  Compared with these, how small!
Away, ye merry maids, etc.

A blossom in a city lane,
  Alizia was our pride,
And oft the blundering bee, deceived,
  Came buzzing to her side —
But, oh! for one that felt the sting,
  And found, ‘neath honey, gall —
Away, ye merry maids, etc.

Young, haughty, from still hotter lands,
  A stranger hither came —
Was he a Moor or African,
  Or Murcian known to fame?
None knew — least, she — or false or true,
  The name by which to call.
Away, ye merry maids, etc.

Alizia asked not his degree,
  She saw him but as Love,
And through Xarama’s vale they strayed,
  And tarried in the grove, —
Oh! curses on that fatal eve,
  And on that leafy hall!
Away, ye merry maids, etc.

The darkened city breathed no more;
  The moon was mantled long,
Till towers thrust the cloudy cloak
  Upon the steeples’ throng;
The crossway Christ, in ivy draped,
  Shrank, grieving, ‘neath the pall, —
Away, ye merry maids, etc.

But while, alone, they kept the shade,
  The other dark-eyed dears
Were murmuring on the stifling air

  Their jealous threats and fears;
Alizia was so blamed, that time,
  Unheeded rang the call:
Away, ye merry maids, etc.

Although, above, the hawk describes
  The circle round the lark,
It sleeps, unconscious, and our lass
  Had eyes but for her spark —
A spark? — a sun! ’Twas Juan, King!
  Who wears our coronal, —
Away, ye merry maids, etc.

A love so far above one’s state
  Ends sadly. Came a black
And guarded palanquin to bear
  The girl that ne’er comes back;
By royal writ, some nunnery
  Still shields her from us all
Away, ye merry maids, and haste
  To gather ere they fall!

H. L. WILLIAMS

MAZEPPA.

(“Ainsi, lorsqu’un mortel!”)

[XXXIV., May, 1828.]

As when a mortal — Genius’ prize, alack!
Is, living, bound upon thy fatal back,
  Thou reinless racing steed!
In vain he writhes, mere cloud upon a star,
Thou bearest him as went Mazeppa, far
  Out of the flow’ry mead, —
So — though thou speed’st implacable, (like him,
Spent, pallid, torn, bruised, weary, sore and dim,
  As if each stride the nearer bring
Him to the grave) — when comes *the time,*
After the fall, he rises — KING!

H.L. WILLIAMS

THE DANUBE IN WRATH.

("Quoi! ne pouvez-vous vivre ensemble?")

[XXXV., June, 1828.]

The River Deity upbraids his Daughters, the contributary Streams: —

Ye daughters mine! will naught abate
Your fierce interminable hate?
Still am I doomed to rue the fate
  That such unfriendly neighbors made?
The while ye might, in peaceful cheer,
Mirror upon your waters clear,
Semlin! thy Gothic steeples dear,
  And thy bright minarets, Belgrade!

Fraser's Magazine

OLD OCEAN.

("J'étais seul près des flots.")

[XXXVII., September 5, 1828.]

I stood by the waves, while the stars soared in sight,
Not a cloud specked the sky, not a sail shimmered bright;
  Scenes beyond this dim world were revealed to mine eye;
And the woods, and the hills, and all nature around,
Seem'd to question with moody, mysterious sound,
  The waves, and the pure stars on high.
And the clear constellations, that infinite throng,
While thousand rich harmonies swelled in their song,
  Replying, bowed meekly their diamond-blaze —
And the blue waves, which nothing may bind or arrest,
Chorus'd forth, as they stooped the white foam of their crest
  "Creator! we bless thee and praise!"

R.C. ELLWOOD

MY NAPOLEON.

("Toujours lui! lui partout!")

[XL., December, 1828.]

Above all others, everywhere I see
  His image cold or burning!
My brain it thrills, and oftentime sets free
  The thoughts within me yearning.
My quivering lips pour forth the words
  That cluster in his name of glory —
The star gigantic with its rays of swords
  Whose gleams irradiate all modern story.

I see his finger pointing where the shell
  Should fall to slay most rabble,
And save foul regicides; or strike the knell
  Of weaklings 'mid the tribunes' babble.
A Consul then, o'er young but proud,
  With midnight poring thinned, and sallow,
But dreams of Empire pierce the transient cloud,
  And round pale face and lank locks form the halo.

And soon the Caesar, with an eye a-flame
  Whole nations' contact urging
To gain his soldiers gold and fame
  Oh, Sun on high emerging,
Whose dazzling lustre fired the hells
  Embosomed in grim bronze, which, free, arose
To change five hundred thousand base-born Tells,
  Into his host of half-a-million heroes!

What! next a captive? Yea, and caged apart.
  No weight of arms enfolded
Can crush the turmoil in that seething heart
  Which Nature — not her journeymen — self-moulded.

Let sordid jailers vex their prize;
But only bends that brow to lightning,
As gazing from the seaward rock, his sighs
Cleave through the storm and haste where France looms bright’ning.

Alone, but greater! Broke the sceptre, true!
Yet lingers still some power —
In tears of woe man’s metal may renew
The temper of high hour;
For, bating breath, e’er list the kings
The pinions clipped may grow! the Eagle
May burst, in frantic thirst for home, the rings
And rend the Bulldog, Fox, and Bear, and Beagle!

And, lastly, grandest! ‘tween dark sea and here
Eternal brightness coming!
The eye so weary’s freshened with a tear
As rises distant drumming,
And wailing cheer — they pass the pale
His army mourns though still’s the end hid;
And from his war-stained cloak, he answers “Hail!”
And spurns the bed of gloom for throne aye-splendid!

H.L. WILLIAMS.

LES FEUILLES D’AUTOMNE. — 1831.

THE PATIENCE OF THE PEOPLE.

(“Il s’est dit tant de fois.”)

[III., May, 1830.]

How often have the people said: “What’s power?”
Who reigns soon is dethroned? each fleeting hour
Has onward borne, as in a fevered dream,
Such quick reverses, like a judge supreme —
Austere but just, they contemplate the end
To which the current of events must tend.
Self-confidence has taught them to forbear,
And in the vastness of their strength, they spare.
Armed with impunity, for *one in vain*
Resists a *nation*, they let others reign.

G.W.M. REYNOLDS.

DICTATED BEFORE THE RHONE GLACIER.

("Souvent quand mon esprit riche.")

[VII., May 18, 1828.]

When my mind, on the ocean of poesy hurled,
Floats on in repose round this wonderful world,
  Oft the sacred fire from heaven —
Mysterious sun, that gives light to the soul —
Strikes mine with its ray, and above the pole
  Its upward course is driven,

Like a wandering cloud, then, my eager thought
Capriciously flies, to no guidance brought,
  With every quarter's wind;
It regards from those radiant vaults on high,
Earth's cities below, and again doth fly,
  And leaves but its shadow behind.

In the glistening gold of the morning bright,
It shines, detaching some lance of light,
  Or, as warrior's armor rings;
It forages forests that ferment around,
Or bathed in the sun-red gleams is found,
  Where the west its radiance flings.

Or, on mountain peak, that rears its head
Where snow-clad Alps around are spread,
  By furious gale 'tis thrown.
From the yawning abyss see the cloud scud away,
And the glacier appears, with its multiform ray,
  The giant mountain's crown!

Like Parnassian pinnacle yet to be scaled,
In its form from afar, by the aspirant hailed;
  On its side the rainbow plays,

And at eve, when the shadow sinks sleeping below,
The last slanting ray on its crest of snow
  Makes its cap like a crater to blaze.

In the darkness, its front seems some pale orb of light,
The chamois with fear flashes on in its flight,
  The eagle afar is driven;
The deluge but roars in despair to its feet,
And scarce dare the eye its aspect to meet,
  So near doth it rise to heaven.

Alone on these altitudes, feeling no fear,
Forgetful of earth, my spirit draws near;
  On the starry vault to gaze,
And nearer, to gaze on those glories of night,
On th’ horizon high heaving, like arches of light,
  Till again the sun shall blaze.

For then will the glacier with glory be graced,
On its prisms will light streaked with darkness be placed,
  The morn its echoes greet;
Like a torrent it falls on the ocean of life,
Like Chaos unformed, with the sea-stormy strife,
  When waters on waters meet.

As the spirit of poesy touches my thought,
It is thus my ideas in a circle are brought,
  From earth, with the waters of pain.
As under a sunbeam a cloud ascends,
These fly to the heavens — their course never ends,
  But descend to the ocean again.

Author of “Critical Essays.”

THE POET'S LOVE FOR LIVELINESS.

("Moi, quelque soit le monde.")

[XV., May 11, 1830.]

For me, whate'er my life and lot may show,
Years blank with gloom or cheered by mem'ry's glow,
  Turmoil or peace; never be it mine, I pray,
To be a dweller of the peopled earth,
Save 'neath a roof alive with children's mirth
  Loud through the livelong day.

So, if my hap it be to see once more
Those scenes my footsteps tottered in before,
  An infant follower in Napoleon's train:
Rodrigo's holds, Valencia and Leon,
And both Castiles, and mated Aragon;
  Ne'er be it mine, O Spain!

  To pass thy plains with cities scant between,
Thy stately arches flung o'er deep ravine,
  Thy palaces, of Moor's or Roman's time;
Or the swift makings of thy Guadalquiver,
Save in those gilded cars, where bells forever
  Ring their melodious chime.

Fraser's Magazine

INFANTILE INFLUENCE.

("Lorsque l'enfant parait.")

[XIX., May 11, 1830.]

The child comes toddling in, and young and old
With smiling eyes its smiling eyes behold,
  And artless, babyish joy;
A playful welcome greets it through the room,
The saddest brow unfolds its wrinkled gloom,
  To greet the happy boy.

If June with flowers has spangled all the ground,
Or winter bleak the flickering hearth around
  Draws close the circling seat;
The child still sheds a never-failing light;
We call; Mamma with mingled joy and fright
  Watches its tottering feet.

Perhaps at eve as round the fire we draw,
We speak of heaven, or poetry, or law,
  Or politics, or prayer;
The child comes in, 'tis now all smiles and play,
Farewell to grave discourse and poet's lay,
  Philosophy and care.

When fancy wakes, but sense in heaviest sleep
Lies steeped, and like the sobs of them that weep
  The dark stream sinks and swells,
The dawn, like Pharos gleaming o'er the sea,
Bursts forth, and sudden wakes the minstrelsy
  Of birds and chiming bells;

Thou art my dawn; my soul is as the field,
Where sweetest flowers their balmy perfumes yield
  When breathed upon by thee,

Of forest, where thy voice like zephyr plays,
And morn pours out its flood of golden rays,
  When thy sweet smile I see.

Oh, sweetest eyes, like founts of liquid blue;
And little hands that evil never knew,
  Pure as the new-formed snow;
Thy feet are still unstained by this world’s mire,
Thy golden locks like aureole of fire
  Circle thy cherub brow!

Dove of our ark, thine angel spirit flies
On azure wings forth from thy beaming eyes.
  Though weak thine infant feet,
What strange amaze this new and strange world gives
To thy sweet virgin soul, that spotless lives
  In virgin body sweet.

Oh, gentle face, radiant with happy smile,
And eager prattling tongue that knows no guile,
  Quick changing tears and bliss;
Thy soul expands to catch this new world’s light,
Thy mazed eyes to drink each wondrous sight,
  Thy lips to taste the kiss.

Oh, God! bless me and mine, and these I love,
And e’en my foes that still triumphant prove
  Victors by force or guile;
A flowerless summer may we never see,
Or nest of bird bereft, or hive of bee,
  Or home of infant’s smile.

HENRY HIGHTON, M.A.

THE WATCHING ANGEL.

("Dans l'alcôve sombre.")

[XX., November, 1831.]

In the dusky nook,
  Near the altar laid,
Sleeps the child in shadow
  Of his mother's bed:
Softly he reposes,
And his lid of roses,
Closed to earth, uncloses
  On the heaven o'erhead.

Many a dream is with him,
  Fresh from fairyland,
Spangled o'er with diamonds
  Seems the ocean sand;
Suns are flaming there,
Troops of ladies fair
Souls of infants bear
  In each charming hand.

Oh, enchanting vision!
  Lo, a rill upsprings,
And from out its bosom
  Comes a voice that sings
Lovelier there appear
Sire and sisters dear,
While his mother near
  Plumes her new-born wings.

But a brighter vision
  Yet his eyes behold;
Roses pied and lilies
  Every path enfold;

Lakes delicious sleeping,
Silver fishes leaping,
Through the wavelets creeping
  Up to reeds of gold.

Slumber on, sweet infant,
  Slumber peacefully
Thy young soul yet knows not
  What thy lot may be.
Like dead weeds that sweep
O’er the dol’rous deep,
Thou art borne in sleep.
  What is all to thee?

Thou canst slumber by the way;
  Thou hast learnt to borrow
Naught from study, naught from care;
  The cold hand of sorrow
On thy brow unwrinkled yet,
Where young truth and candor sit,
Ne’er with rugged nail hath writ
  That sad word, “To-morrow!”

Innocent! thou sleepest —
  See the angelic band,
Who foreknow the trials
  That for man are planned;
Seeing him unarmed,
Unfearing, unalarmed,
With their tears have warmed
  This unconscious hand.

Still they, hovering o’er him,
  Kiss him where he lies,
Hark, he sees them weeping,
  ”Gabriel!” he cries;
“Hush!” the angel says,
On his lip he lays

One finger, one displays
  His native skies.

Foreign Quarterly Review

SUNSET.

("Le soleil s'est couché")

[XXXV. vi., April, 1829.]

The sun set this evening in masses of cloud,
  The storm comes to-morrow, then calm be the night,
Then the Dawn in her chariot refulgent and proud,
  Then more nights, and still days, steps of Time in his flight.
The days shall pass rapid as swifts on the wing.
  O'er the face of the hills, o'er the face of the seas,
O'er streamlets of silver, and forests that ring
  With a dirge for the dead, chanted low by the breeze;
The face of the waters, the brow of the mounts
Deep scarred but not shrivelled, and woods tufted green,
Their youth shall renew; and the rocks to the founts
Shall yield what these yielded to ocean their queen.
But day by day bending still lower my head,
  Still chilled in the sunlight, soon I shall have cast,
At height of the banquet, my lot with the dead,
  Unmissed by creation aye joyous and vast.

TORU DUTT.

THE UNIVERSAL PRAYER.

("Ma fille, va prier!")

[XXXVII., June, 1830.]

I.

Come, child, to prayer; the busy day is done,
  A golden star gleams through the dusk of night;
The hills are trembling in the rising mist,
  The rumbling wain looms dim upon the sight;
All things wend home to rest; the roadside trees
  Shake off their dust, stirred by the evening breeze.

The sparkling stars gush forth in sudden blaze,
  As twilight open flings the doors of night;
The fringe of carmine narrows in the west,
  The rippling waves are tipped with silver light;
The bush, the path — all blend in one dull gray;
The doubtful traveller gropes his anxious way.

Oh, day! with toil, with wrong, with hatred rife;
  Oh, blessed night! with sober calmness sweet,
The sad winds moaning through the ruined tower,
  The age-worn hind, the sheep's sad broken bleat —
All nature groans opprest with toil and care,
And wearied craves for rest, and love, and prayer.

At eve the babes with angels converse hold,
  While we to our strange pleasures wend our way,
Each with its little face upraised to heaven,
  With folded hands, barefoot kneels down to pray,
At selfsame hour with selfsame words they call
On God, the common Father of them all.

And then they sleep, and golden dreams anon,
  Born as the busy day’s last murmurs die,
In swarms tumultuous flitting through the gloom
  Their breathing lips and golden locks descry.
And as the bees o’er bright flowers joyous roam,
Around their curtained cradles clustering come.

Oh, prayer of childhood! simple, innocent;
  Oh, infant slumbers! peaceful, pure, and light;
Oh, happy worship! ever gay with smiles,
  Meet prelude to the harmonies of night;
As birds beneath the wing enfold their head,
Nestled in prayer the infant seeks its bed.

HENRY HIGHTON, M.A.

II.

To prayer, my child! and O, be thy first prayer
For her who, many nights, with anxious care,
  Rocked thy first cradle; who took thy infant soul
From heaven and gave it to the world; then rife
  With love, still drank herself the gall of life,
And left for thy young lips the honeyed bowl.

And then — I need it more — then pray for me!
For she is gentle, artless, true like thee; —
  She has a guileless heart, brow placid still;
Pity she has for all, envy for none;
Gentle and wise, she patiently lives on;
  And she endures, nor knows who does the ill.

In culling flowers, her novice hand has ne’er
Touched e’en the outer rind of vice; no snare
  With smiling show has lured her steps aside:
On her the past has left no staining mark;
Nor knows she aught of those bad thoughts which, dark
  Like shade on waters, o’er the spirit glide.

She knows not — nor mayest thou — the miseries
In which our spirits mingle: vanities,
  Remorse, soul-gnawing cares, Pleasure’s false show:
Passions which float upon the heart like foam,
Bitter remembrances which o’er us come,
  And Shame’s red spot spread sudden o’er the brow.

I know life better! when thou’rt older grown
I’ll tell thee — it is needful to be known —
  Of the pursuit of wealth — art, power; the cost.
That it is folly, nothingness: that shame
For glory is oft thrown us in the game
  Of Fortune; chances where the soul is lost.

The soul will change. Although of everything
The cause and end be clear, yet wildering
  We roam through life (of vice and error full).
We wander as we go; we feel the load
Of doubt; and to the briars upon the road
  Man leaves his virtue, as the sheep its wool.

Then go, go pray for me! And as the prayer
Gushes in words, be this the form they bear: —
  ”Lord, Lord, our Father! God, my prayer attend;
Pardon! Thou art good! Pardon — Thou art great!”
Let them go freely forth, fear not their fate!
  Where thy soul sends them, thitherward they tend.

There’s nothing here below which does not find
Its tendency. O’er plains the rivers wind,
  And reach the sea; the bee, by instinct driven,
Finds out the honeyed flowers; the eagle flies
To seek the sun; the vulture where death lies;
  The swallow to the spring; the prayer to Heaven!

And when thy voice is raised to God for me,
I’m like the slave whom in the vale we see
  Seated to rest, his heavy load laid by;

I feel refreshed — the load of faults and woe
Which, groaning, I drag with me as I go,
  Thy wingèd prayer bears off rejoicingly!

Pray for thy father! that his dreams be bright
With visitings of angel forms of light,
  And his soul burn as incense flaming wide,
Let thy pure breath all his dark sins efface,
So that his heart be like that holy place,
  An altar pavement each eve purified!

C., *Tait's Magazine*

LES CHANTS DU CRÉPUSCULE. — 1849.

PRELUDE TO “THE SONGS OF TWILIGHT.”

(“De quel non te nommer?”)

[PRELUDE, a, Oct. 20, 1835.]

How shall I note thee, line of troubled years,
  Which mark existence in our little span?
One constant twilight in the heaven appears —
  One constant twilight in the mind of man!

Creed, hope, anticipation and despair,
  Are but a mingling, as of day and night;
The globe, surrounded by deceptive air,
  Is all enveloped in the same half-light.

And voice is deadened by the evening breeze,
  The shepherd’s song, or maiden’s in her bower,
Mix with the rustling of the neighboring trees,
  Within whose foliage is lulled the power.

Yet all unites! The winding path that leads
  Thro’ fields where verdure meets the trav’ller’s eye.
The river’s margin, blurred with wavy reeds,
  The muffled anthem, echoing to the sky!

The ivy smothering the armèd tower;
  The dying wind that mocks the pilot’s ear;
The lordly equipage at midnight hour,
  Draws into danger in a fog the peer;

The votaries of Satan or of Jove;
  The wretched mendicant absorbed in woe;
The din of multitudes that onward move;
  The voice of conscience in the heart below;

The waves, which Thou, O Lord, alone canst still;
  Th’ elastic air; the streamlet on its way;
And all that man projects, or sovereigns will;
  Or things inanimate might seem to say;

The strain of gondolier slow streaming by;
  The lively barks that o’er the waters bound;
The trees that shake their foliage to the sky;
  The wailing voice that fills the cots around;

And man, who studies with an aching heart —
  For now, when smiles are rarely deemed sincere,
In vain the sceptic bids his doubts depart —
  Those doubts at length will arguments appear!

Hence, reader, know the subject of my song —
  A mystic age, resembling twilight gloom,
Wherein we smile at birth, or bear along,
  With noiseless steps, a victim to the tomb!

G.W.M. REYNOLDS

THE LAND OF FABLE.

(“L’Orient! qu’y voyez-vous, poëtes?”)

[PRELUDE, b.]

Now, vot’ries of the Muses, turn your eyes,
  Unto the East, and say what there appears!
“Alas!” the voice of Poesy replies,
  ”Mystic’s that light between the hemispheres!”

“Yes, dread’s the mystic light in yonder heaven —
  Dull is the gleam behind the distant hill;
Like feeble flashes in the welkin driven,
  When the far thunder seems as it were still!

“But who can tell if that uncertain glare
  Be Phoebus’ self, adorned with glowing vest;
Or, if illusions, pregnant in the air,
  Have drawn our glances to the radiant west?

“Haply the sunset has deceived the sight —
  Perchance ’tis evening, while we look for morning;
Bewildered in the mazes of twilight,
  That lucid sunset may *appear* a dawning!”

G.W.M. REYNOLDS

THE THREE GLORIOUS DAYS.

("Frères, vous avez vos journées.")

[I., July, 1830.]

Youth of France, sons of the bold,
Your oak-leaf victor-wreaths behold!
Our civic-laurels — honored dead!
  So bright your triumphs in life's morn,
  Your maiden-standards hacked and torn,
On Austerlitz might lustre shed.

All that your fathers did re-done —
A people's rights all nobly won —
Ye tore them living from the shroud!
  Three glorious days bright July's gift,
  The Bastiles off our hearts ye lift!
Oh! of such deeds be ever proud!

Of patriot sires ye lineage claim,
Their souls shone in your eye of flame;
Commencing the great work was theirs;
  On you the task to finish laid
  Your fruitful mother, France, who bade
Flow in one day a hundred years.

E'en chilly Albion admires,
The grand example Europe fires;
America shall clap her hands,
  When swiftly o'er the Atlantic wave,
  Fame sounds the news of how the brave,
In three bright days, have burst their bands!

With tyrant dead your fathers traced
A circle wide, with battles graced;
Victorious garland, red and vast!

  Which blooming out from home did go
  To Cadiz, Cairo, Rome, Moscow,
From Jemappes to Montmirail passed!

Of warlike Lyceums ye are
The favored sons; there, deeds of war
Formed e'en your plays, while o'er you shook
  The battle-flags in air aloft!
  Passing your lines, Napoleon oft
Electrified you with a look!

Eagle of France! whose vivid wing
Did in a hundred places fling
A bloody feather, till one night
  The arrow whelmed thee 'neath the wave!
  Look up — rejoice — for now thy brave
And worthy eaglets dare the light.

ELIZABETH COLLINS.

TRIBUTE TO THE VANQUISHED.

("Laissez-moi pleurer sur cette race.")

[I. v.]

  Oh! let me weep that race whose day is past,
  By exile given, by exile claimed once more,
  Thrice swept away upon that fatal blast.
  Whate'er its blame, escort we to our shore
  These relics of the monarchy of yore;
And to th' outmarching oriflamme be paid
War's honors by the flag on Fleurus' field displayed!

Fraser's Magazine

ANGEL OR DEMON.

("Tu domines notre âge; ange ou démon, qu'importe!")

[I. vii.]

Angel or demon! thou, — whether of light
The minister, or darkness — still dost sway
This age of ours; thine eagle's soaring flight
Bears us, all breathless, after it away.
The eye that from thy presence fain would stray,
Shuns thee in vain; thy mighty shadow thrown
Rests on all pictures of the living day,
And on the threshold of our time alone,
Dazzling, yet sombre, stands thy form, Napoleon!

Thus, when the admiring stranger's steps explore
The subject-lands that 'neath Vesuvius be,
Whether he wind along the enchanting shore
To Portici from fair Parthenope,
Or, lingering long in dreamy reverie,
O'er loveliest Ischia's od'rous isle he stray,
Wooed by whose breath the soft and am'rous sea
Seems like some languishing sultana's lay,
A voice for very sweets that scarce can win its way.

Him, whether Paestum's solemn fane detain,
Shrouding his soul with meditation's power;
Or at Pozzuoli, to the sprightly strain
Of tarantella danced 'neath Tuscan tower,
Listening, he while away the evening hour;
Or wake the echoes, mournful, lone and deep,
Of that sad city, in its dreaming bower
By the volcano seized, where mansions keep
The likeness which they wore at that last fatal sleep;

Or be his bark at Posillippo laid,
While as the swarthy boatman at his side
Chants Tasso’s lays to Virgil’s pleased shade,
Ever he sees, throughout that circuit wide,
From shaded nook or sunny lawn espied,
From rocky headland viewed, or flow’ry shore,
From sea, and spreading mead alike descried,
The Giant Mount, tow’ring all objects o’er,
And black’ning with its breath th’ horizon evermore!

Fraser’s Magazine

THE ERUPTION OF VESUVIUS.

(“Quand longtemps a grondé la bouche du Vésuve.”)

[I. vii.]

When huge Vesuvius in its torment long,
Threatening has growled its cavernous jaws among,
When its hot lava, like the bubbling wine,
Foaming doth all its monstrous edge incarnadine,
Then is alarm in Naples.

With dismay,
Wanton and wild her weeping thousands pour,
Convulsive grasp the ground, its rage to stay,
Implore the angry Mount — in vain implore!
For lo! a column tow’ring more and more,
Of smoke and ashes from the burning crest
Shoots like a vulture’s neck reared from its airy nest.

Sudden a flash, and from th’ enormous den
Th’ eruption’s lurid mass bursts forth amain,
Bounding in frantic ecstasy. Ah! then
Farewell to Grecian fount and Tuscan fane!
Sails in the bay imbibe the purpling stain,
The while the lava in profusion wide
Flings o’er the mountain’s neck its showery locks untied.

It comes — it comes! that lava deep and rich,
That dower which fertilizes fields and fills
New moles upon the waters, bay and beach.
Broad sea and clustered isles, one terror thrills
As roll the red inexorable rills;
While Naples trembles in her palaces,
More helpless than the leaves when tempests shake the trees.

  Prodigious chaos, streets in ashes lost,
  Dwellings devoured and vomited again.
  Roof against neighbor-roof, bewildered, tossed.
  The waters boiling and the burning plain;
While clang the giant steeples as they reel,
Unprompted, their own tocsin peal.

  Yet ‘mid the wreck of cities, and the pride
  Of the green valleys and the isles laid low,
  The crash of walls, the tumult waste and wide,
  O’er sea and land; ‘mid all this work of woe,
  Vesuvius still, though close its crater-glow,
Forgetful spares — Heaven wills that it should spare,
The lonely cell where kneels an aged priest in prayer.

Fraser’s Magazine.

MARRIAGE AND FEASTS.

(“La salle est magnifique.”)

[IV. Aug. 23, 1839.]

The hall is gay with limpid lustre bright —
The feast to pampered palate gives delight —
The sated guests pick at the spicy food,
And drink profusely, for the cheer is good;
And at that table — where the wise are few —
Both sexes and all ages meet the view;
The sturdy warrior with a thoughtful face —
The am’rous youth, the maid replete with grace,
The prattling infant, and the hoary hair
Of second childhood’s proselytes — are there; —
And the most gaudy in that spacious hall,
Are e’er the young, or oldest of them all
Helmet and banner, ornament and crest,
The lion rampant, and the jewelled vest,
The silver star that glitters fair and white,
The arms that tell of many a nation’s might —
Heraldic blazonry, ancestral pride,
And all mankind invents for pomp beside,
The wingèd leopard, and the eagle wild —
All these encircle woman, chief and child;
Shine on the carpet burying their feet,
Adorn the dishes that contain their meat;
And hang upon the drapery, which around
Falls from the lofty ceiling to the ground,
Till on the floor its waving fringe is spread,
As the bird’s wing may sweep the roses’ bed. —

Thus is the banquet ruled by Noise and Light,
Since Light and Noise are foremost on the site.

The chamber echoes to the joy of them
Who throng around, each with his diadem —
Each seated on proud throne — but, lesson vain!
Each sceptre holds its master with a chain!
Thus hope of flight were futile from that hall,
Where chiefest guest was most enslaved of all!
The godlike-making draught that fires the soul
The Love — sweet poison-honey — past control,
(Formed of the sexual breath — an idle name,
Offspring of Fancy and a nervous frame) —
Pleasure, mad daughter of the darksome Night,
Whose languid eye flames when is fading light —
The gallant chases where a man is borne
By stalwart charger, to the sounding horn —
The sheeny silk, the bed of leaves of rose,
Made more to soothe the sight than court repose;
The mighty palaces that raise the sneer
Of jealous mendicants and wretches near —
The spacious parks, from which horizon blue
Arches o’er alabaster statues new;
Where Superstition still her walk will take,
Unto soft music stealing o’er the lake —
The innocent modesty by gems undone —
The qualms of judges by small brib’ry won —
The dread of children, trembling while they play —
The bliss of monarchs, potent in their sway —
The note of war struck by the culverin,
That snakes its brazen neck through battle din —
The military millipede
That tramples out the guilty seed —
The capital all pleasure and delight —
And all that like a town or army chokes
The gazer with foul dust or sulphur smokes.
The budget, prize for which ten thousand bait
A subtle hook, that ever, as they wait
Catches a weed, and drags them to their fate,

While gleamingly its golden scales still spread —
Such were the meats by which these guests were fed.

A hundred slaves for lazy master cared,
And served each one with what was e’er prepared
By him, who in a sombre vault below,
Peppered the royal pig with peoples’ woe,
And grimly glad went laboring till late —
The morose alchemist we know as Fate!
That ev’ry guest might learn to suit his taste,
Behind had Conscience, real or mock’ry, placed;
Conscience a guide who every evil spies,
But royal nurses early pluck out both his eyes!

Oh! at the table there be all the great,
Whose lives are bubbles that best joys inflate!
Superb, magnificent of revels — doubt
That sagest lose their heads in such a rout!
In the long laughter, ceaseless roaming round,
Joy, mirth and glee give out a maelström’s sound;
And the astonished gazer casts his care,
Where ev’ry eyeball glistens in the flare.

But oh! while yet the singing Hebes pour
Forgetfulness of those without the door —
At very hour when all are most in joy,
And the hid orchestra annuls annoy,
Woe — woe! with jollity a-top the heights,
With further tapers adding to the lights,
And gleaming ‘tween the curtains on the street,
Where poor folks stare — hark to the heavy feet!
Some one smites roundly on the gilded grate,
Some one below will be admitted straight,
Some one, though not invited, who’ll not wait!
Close not the door! Your orders are vain breath —
That stranger enters to be known as Death —

Or merely Exile — clothed in alien guise —
Death drags away — with *his* prey Exile flies!

Death is that sight. He promenades the hall,
And casts a gloomy shadow on them all,
’Neath which they bend like willows soft,
Ere seizing one — the dumbest monarch oft,
And bears him to eternal heat and drouth,
While still the toothsome morsel’s in his mouth.

G.W.M. REYNOLDS.

THE MORROW OF GRANDEUR.

(“Non, l’avenir n’est à personne!”)

[V. ii., August, 1832.]

Sire, beware, the future’s range
  Is of God alone the power,
Naught below but augurs change,
  E’en with ev’ry passing hour.
Future! mighty mystery!
All the earthly goods that be,
Fortune, glory, war’s renown,
King or kaiser’s sparkling crown,
Victory! with her burning wings,
Proud ambition’s covetings, —
  These may our grasp no more detain
Than the free bird who doth alight
Upon our roof, and takes its flight
  High into air again.

Nor smile, nor tear, nor haughtiest lord’s command,
Avails t’ unclasp the cold and closèd hand.
  Thy voice to disenthrall,
Dumb phantom, shadow ever at our side!
Veiled spectre, journeying with us stride for stride,
  Whom men “To-morrow” call.

Oh, to-morrow! who may dare
  Its realities to scan?
God to-morrow brings to bear
  What to-day is sown by man.
’Tis the lightning in its shroud,
’Tis the star-concealing cloud,
Traitor, ’tis his purpose showing,
Engine, lofty tow’rs o’erthrowing,

Wand’ring star, its region changing,
“Lady of kingdoms,” ever ranging.
  To-morrow! ’Tis the rude display
Of the throne’s framework, blank and cold,
That, rich with velvet, bright with gold,
  Dazzles the eye to-day.

To-morrow! ’tis the foaming war-horse falling;
To-morrow! thy victorious march appalling,
  ’Tis the red fires from Moscow’s tow’rs that wave;
’Tis thine Old Guard strewing the Belgian plain;
’Tis the lone island in th’ Atlantic main:
  To-morrow! ’tis the grave!

Into capitals subdued
  Thou mayst ride with gallant rein,
Cut the knots of civil feud
  With the trenchant steel in twain;
With thine edicts barricade
Haughty Thames’ o’er-freighted trade;
Fickle Victory’s self enthrall,
Captive to thy trumpet call;
Burst the stoutest gates asunder;
Leave the names of brightest wonder,
  Pale and dim, behind thee far;
And to exhaustless armies yield
Thy glancing spur, — o’er Europe’s field
  A glory-guiding star.

God guards duration, if lends space to thee,
Thou mayst o’er-range mundane immensity,
  Rise high as human head can rise sublime,
Snatch Europe from the stamp of Charlemagne,
Asia from Mahomet; but never gain
  Power o’er the Morrow from the Lord of Time!

Fraser’s Magazine.

THE EAGLET MOURNED.

(“Encore si ce banni n’eût rien aimé sur terre.”)

[V, iv., August, 1832.]

Too hard Napoleon’s fate! if, lone,
No being he had loved, no single one,
  Less dark that doom had been.
But with the heart of might doth ever dwell
The heart of love! and in his island cell
  Two things there were — I ween.

Two things — a portrait and a map there were —
Here hung the pictured world, an infant there:
That framed his genius, this enshrined his love.
And as at eve he glanced round th’ alcove,
Where jailers watched his very thoughts to spy,
What mused he *then* — what dream of years gone by
Stirred ‘neath that discrowned brow, and fired that glistening eye?

’Twas not the steps of that heroic tale
That from Arcola marched to Montmirail
  On Glory’s red degrees;
Nor Cairo-pashas’ steel-devouring steeds,
Nor the tall shadows of the Pyramids —
  Ah! Twas not always these;

’Twas not the bursting shell, the iron sleet,
The whirlwind rush of battle ‘neath his feet,
  Through twice ten years ago,
When at his beck, upon that sea of steel
Were launched the rustling banners — there to reel
  Like masts when tempests blow.

’Twas not Madrid, nor Kremlin of the Czar,
Nor Pharos on Old Egypt’s coast afar,

Nor shrill *réveillé's* camp-awakening sound,
Nor bivouac couch'd its starry fires around,
Crested dragoons, grim, veteran grenadiers,
Nor the red lancers 'mid their wood of spears
Blazing like baleful poppies 'mong the golden ears.

No— 'twas an infant's image, fresh and fair,
With rosy mouth half oped, as slumbering there.
  It lay beneath the smile,
Of her whose breast, soft-bending o'er its sleep,
Lingering upon that little lip doth keep
  One pendent drop the while.

Then, his sad head upon his hands inclined,
He wept; that father-heart all unconfined,
  Outpoured in love alone.
My blessing on thy clay-cold head, poor child.
Sole being for whose sake his thoughts, beguiled,
  Forgot the world's lost throne.

Fraser's Magazine

INVOCATION.

[V, vi., August, 1832.]

Say, Lord! for Thou alone canst tell
Where lurks the good invisible
Amid the depths of discord's sea —
That seem, alas! so dark to me!
Oppressive to a mighty state,
Contentions, feuds, the people's hate —
But who dare question that which fate
  Has ordered to have been?
Haply the earthquake may unfold
The resting-place of purest gold,
And haply surges up have rolled
  The pearls that were unseen!

G.W.M. REYNOLDS.

OUTSIDE THE BALL-ROOM.

(“Ainsi l’Hôtel de Ville illumine.”)

[VI., May, 1833.]

Behold the ball-room flashing on the sight,
From step to cornice one grand glare of light;
The noise of mirth and revelry resounds,
Like fairy melody on haunted grounds.
But who demands this profuse, wanton glee,
These shouts prolonged and wild festivity —
Not sure our city — web, more woe than bliss,
In any hour, requiring aught but this!

Deaf is the ear of all that jewelled crowd
To sorrow’s sob, although its call be loud.
Better than waste long nights in idle show,
To help the indigent and raise the low —
To train the wicked to forsake his way,
And find th’ industrious work from day to day!
Better to charity those hours afford,
Which now are wasted at the festal board!

And ye, O high-born beauties! in whose soul
Virtue resides, and Vice has no control;
Ye whom prosperity forbids to sin,
So fair without — so chaste, so pure within —
Whose honor Want ne’er threatened to betray,
Whose eyes are joyous, and whose heart is gay;
Around whose modesty a hundred arms,
Aided by pride, protect a thousand charms;
For you this ball is pregnant with delight;
As glitt’ring planets cheer the gloomy night: —
But, O, ye wist not, while your souls are glad,
How millions wander, homeless, sick and sad!

Hazard has placed you in a happy sphere,
And like your own to you all lots appear;
For blinded by the sun of bliss your eyes
Can see no dark horizon to the skies.

Such is the chance of life! Each gallant thane,
Prince, peer, and noble, follow in your train; —
They praise your loveliness, and in your ear
They whisper pleasing things, but insincere;
Thus, as the moths enamoured of the light,
Ye seek these realms of revelry each night.
But as ye travel thither, did ye know
What wretches walk the streets through which you go.
Sisters, whose gewgaws glitter in the glare
Of your great lustre, all expectant there,
Watching the passing crowd with avid eye,
Till one their love, or lust, or shame may buy;
Or, with commingling jealousy and rage,
They mark the progress of your equipage;
And their deceitful life essays the while
To mask their woe beneath a sickly smile!

G.W.M. REYNOLDS.

PRAYER FOR FRANCE.

("O Dieu, si vous avez la France.")

[VII., August, 1832.]

O God! if France be still thy guardian care,
Oh! spare these mercenary combats, spare!
The thrones that now are reared but to be broke;
The rights we render, and anon revoke;
The muddy stream of laws, ideas, needs,
Flooding our social life as it proceeds;
Opposing tribunes, even when seeming one —
Soft, yielding plaster put in place of stone;
Wave chasing wave in endless ebb and flow;
War, darker still and deeper in its woe;
One party fall'n, successor scarce preludes,
Than, straight, new views their furious feuds;
The great man's pressure on the poor for gold,
Rumors uncertain, conflicts, crimes untold;
Dark systems hatched in secret and in fear,
Telling of hate and strife to every ear,
That even to midnight sleep no peace is given,
For murd'rous cannon through our streets are driven.

J.S. MACRAE.

TO CANARIS, THE GREEK PATRIOT.

(“Canaris! nous t’avons oublié.”)

[VIII., October, 1832.]

O Canaris! O Canaris! the poet’s song
Has blameful left untold thy deeds too long!
But when the tragic actor’s part is done,
When clamor ceases, and the fights are won,
When heroes realize what Fate decreed,
When chieftains mark no more which thousands bleed;
When they have shone, as clouded or as bright,
As fitful meteor in the heaven at night,
And when the sycophant no more proclaims
To gaping crowds the glory of their names, —
’Tis then the mem’ries of warriors die,
And fall — alas! — into obscurity,
Until the poet, in whose verse alone
Exists a world — can make their actions known,
And in eternal epic measures, show
They are not yet forgotten here below.
And yet by us neglected! glory gloomed,
Thy name seems sealed apart, entombed,
Although our shouts to pigmies rise — no cries
To mark thy presence echo to the skies;
Farewell to Grecian heroes — silent is the lute,
And sets your sun without one Memnon bruit?

There was a time men gave no peace
To cheers for Athens, Bozzaris, Leonidas, and Greece!
And Canaris’ more-worshipped name was found
On ev’ry lip, in ev’ry heart around.
But now is changed the scene! On hist’ry’s page
Are writ o’er thine deeds of another age,

And thine are not remembered. — Greece, farewell!
The world no more thine heroes' deeds will tell.

Not that this matters to a man like thee!
To whom is left the dark blue open sea,
Thy gallant bark, that o'er the water flies,
And the bright planet guiding in clear skies;
All these remain, with accident and strife,
Hope, and the pleasures of a roving life,
Boon Nature's fairest prospects — land and main —
The noisy starting, glad return again;
The pride of freeman on a bounding deck
Which mocks at dangers and despises wreck,
And e'en if lightning-pinions cleave the sea,
'Tis all replete with joyousness to thee!

Yes, these remain! blue sky and ocean blue,
Thine eagles with one sweep beyond the view —
The sun in golden beauty ever pure,
The distance where rich warmth doth aye endure —
Thy language so mellifluously bland,
Mixed with sweet idioms from Italia's strand,
As Baya's streams to Samos' waters glide
And with them mingle in one placid tide.

Yes, these remain, and, Canaris! thy arms —
The sculptured sabre, faithful in alarms —
The broidered garb, the yataghan, the vest
Expressive of thy rank, to thee still rest!
And when thy vessel o'er the foaming sound
Is proud past storied coasts to blithely bound,
At once the point of beauty may restore
Smiles to thy lip, and smoothe thy brow once more.

G.W.M. REYNOLDS.

POLAND.

(“Seule au pied de la tour.”)

[IX., September, 1833.]

Alone, beneath the tower whence thunder forth
The mandates of the Tyrant of the North,
Poland’s sad genius kneels, absorbed in tears,
Bound, vanquished, pallid with her fears —
Alas! the crucifix is all that’s left
To her, of freedom and her sons bereft;
And on her royal robe foul marks are seen
Where Russian hectors’ scornful feet have been.
Anon she hears the clank of murd’rous arms, —
The swordsmen come once more to spread alarms!
And while she weeps against the prison walls,
And waves her bleeding arm until it falls,
To France she hopeless turns her glazing eyes,
And sues her sister’s succor ere she dies.

G.W.M. REYNOLDS.

INSULT NOT THE FALLEN.

(“Oh! n’insultez jamais une femme qui tombe.”)

[XIV., Sept. 6, 1835.]

I tell you, hush! no word of sneering scorn —
  True, fallen; but God knows how deep her sorrow.
Poor girl! too many like her only born
  To love one day — to sin — and die the morrow.
What know you of her struggles or her grief?
  Or what wild storms of want and woe and pain
Tore down her soul from honor? As a leaf
  From autumn branches, or a drop of rain
That hung in frailest splendor from a bough —
  Bright, glistening in the sunlight of God’s day —
So had she clung to virtue once. But now —
  See Heaven’s clear pearl polluted with earth’s clay!
The sin is yours — with your accursed gold —
  Man’s wealth is master — woman’s soul the slave!
Some purest water still the mire may hold.
  Is there no hope for her — no power to save?
Yea, once again to draw up from the clay
  The fallen raindrop, till it shine above,
Or save a fallen soul, needs but one ray
  Of Heaven’s sunshine, or of human love.

W.C.K. WILDE.

MORNING.

("L'aurore s'allume.")

[XX. a, December, 1834.]

Morning glances hither,
  Now the shade is past;
Dream and fog fly thither
  Where Night goes at last;
Open eyes and roses
As the darkness closes;
And the sound that grows is
  Nature walking fast.

Murmuring all and singing,
  Hark! the news is stirred,
Roof and creepers clinging,
  Smoke and nest of bird;
Winds to oak-trees bear it,
Streams and fountains hear it,
Every breath and spirit
  As a voice is heard.

All takes up its story,
  Child resumes his play,
Hearth its ruddy glory,
  Lute its lifted lay.
Wild or out of senses,
Through the world immense is
Sound as each commences
  Schemes of yesterday.

W.M. HARDINGE.

SONG OF LOVE.

("S'il est un charmant gazon.")

[XXII, Feb. 18, 1834.]

If there be a velvet sward
  By dewdrops pearly drest,
Where through all seasons fairies guard
  Flowers by bees carest,
Where one may gather, day and night,
Roses, honeysuckle, lily white,
I fain would make of it a site
  For thy foot to rest.

If there be a loving heart
  Where Honor rules the breast,
Loyal and true in every part,
  That changes ne'er molest,
Eager to run its noble race,
Intent to do some work of grace,
I fain would make of it a place
  For thy brow to rest.

And if there be of love a dream
  Rose-scented as the west,
Which shows, each time it comes, a gleam, —
  A something sweet and blest, —
A dream of which heaven is the pole,
A dream that mingles soul and soul,
I fain of it would make the goal
  Where thy mind should rest.

TORU DUTT.

SWEET CHARMER.

(“L’aube naît et ta porte est close.”)

[XXIII., February, 18 — .]

Though heaven’s gate of light uncloses,
  Thou stirr’st not — thou’rt laid to rest,
Waking are thy sister roses,
  One only dreamest on thy breast.
    Hear me, sweet dreamer!
      Tell me all thy fears,
    Trembling in song,
      But to break in tears.

Lo! to greet thee, spirits pressing,
  Soft music brings the gentle dove,
And fair light falleth like a blessing,
  While my poor heart can bring thee only love.
Worship thee, angels love thee, sweet woman?
  Yes; for that love perfects my soul.
None the less of heaven that my heart is human,
  Blent in one exquisite, harmonious whole.

H.B. FARNIE.

MORE STRONG THAN TIME.

(“Puisque j’ai mis ma lèvre à ta coupe.”)

[XXV., Jan. 1, 1835.]

Since I have set my lips to your full cup, my sweet,
  Since I my pallid face between your hands have laid,
Since I have known your soul, and all the bloom of it,
  And all the perfume rare, now buried in the shade;

Since it was given to me to hear one happy while,
  The words wherein your heart spoke all its mysteries,
Since I have seen you weep, and since I have seen you smile,
  Your lips upon my lips, and your gaze upon my eyes;

Since I have known upon my forehead glance and gleam,
  A ray, a single ray, of your star, veiled always,
Since I have felt the fall upon my lifetime’s stream,
  Of one rose-petal plucked from the roses of your days;

I now am bold to say to the swift-changing hours,
  Pass — pass upon your way, for I grow never old.
Flee to the dark abysm with all your fading flowers,
  One rose that none may pluck, within my heart I hold.

Your flying wings may smite, but they can never spill
  The cup fulfilled of love, from which my lips are wet.
My heart has far more fire than you have frost to chill,
  My soul more love than you can make my love forget.

A. LANG.

ROSES AND BUTTERFLIES.

("Roses et Papillons.")

[XXVII., Dec. 7, 1834.]

The grave receives us all:
  Ye butterflies and roses gay and sweet
Why do ye linger, say?
  Will ye not dwell together as is meet?
Somewhere high in the air
  Would thy wing seek a home 'mid sunny skies,
In mead or mossy dell —
  If there thy odors longest, sweetest rise.

Have where ye will your dwelling,
  Or breath or tint whose praise we sing;
Butterfly shining bright,
  Full-blown or bursting rosebud, flow'r or wing.
Dwell together ye fair,
  'Tis a boon to the loveliest given;
Perchance ye then may choose your home
  On the earth or in heaven.

W.C. WESTBROOK

A SIMILE.

(“Soyez comme l’oiseau.”)

[XXXIII. vi.]

Thou art like the bird
  That alights and sings
Though the frail spray bends —
  For he knows he has wings.

FANNY KEMBLE (BUTLER)

THE POET TO HIS WIFE.

(“À toi, toujours à toi.”)

[XXXIX., 1823]

To thee, all time to thee,
My lyre a voice shall be!
Above all earthly fashion,
  Above mere mundane rage,
Your mind made it my passion
  To write for noblest stage.

Whoe’er you be, send blessings to her — she
Was sister of my soul immortal, free!
My pride, my hope, my shelter, my resource,
When green hoped not to gray to run its course;
She was enthronèd Virtue under heaven’s dome,
My idol in the shrine of curtained home.

LES VOIX INTÉRIEURES. — 1840.

THE BLINDED BOURBONS.

(“Qui leur eût dit l’austère destineé?”)

[II. v., November, 1836.]

Who *then*, to them had told the Future’s story?
Or said that France, low bowed before their glory,
  One day would mindful be
Of them and of their mournful fate no more,
Than of the wrecks its waters have swept o’er
  The unremembering sea?

That their old Tuileries should see the fall
Of blazons from its high heraldic hall,
  Dismantled, crumbling, prone;
Or that, o’er yon dark Louvre’s architrave
A Corsican, as yet unborn, should grave
  An eagle, then unknown?

That gay St. Cloud another lord awaited,
Or that in scenes Le Nôtre’s art created
  For princely sport and ease,
Crimean steeds, trampling the velvet glade,
Should browse the bark beneath the stately shade
  Of the great Louis’ trees?

Fraser’s Magazine.

TO ALBERT DÜRER.

(“Dans les vieilles forêts.”)

[X., April 20, 1837.]

Through ancient forests — where like flowing tide
The rising sap shoots vigor far and wide,
Mounting the column of the alder dark
And silv’ring o’er the birch’s shining bark —
Hast thou not often, Albert Dürer, strayed
Pond’ring, awe-stricken — through the half-lit glade,
Pallid and trembling — glancing not behind
From mystic fear that did thy senses bind,
Yet made thee hasten with unsteady pace?
Oh, Master grave! whose musings lone we trace
Throughout thy works we look on reverently.
Amidst the gloomy umbrage thy mind’s eye
Saw clearly, ‘mong the shadows soft yet deep,
The web-toed faun, and Pan the green-eyed peep,
Who deck’d with flowers the cave where thou might’st rest,
Leaf-laden dryads, too, in verdure drest.
A strange weird world such forest was to thee,
Where mingled truth and dreams in mystery;
There leaned old ruminating pines, and there
The giant elms, whose boughs deformed and bare
A hundred rough and crooked elbows made;
And in this sombre group the wind had swayed,
Nor life — nor death — but life in death seemed found.
The cresses drink — the water flows — and round
Upon the slopes the mountain rowans meet,
And ‘neath the brushwood plant their gnarled feet,
Intwining slowly where the creepers twine.
There, too, the lakes as mirrors brightly shine,
And show the swan-necked flowers, each line by line.
Chimeras roused take stranger shapes for thee,

The glittering scales of mailèd throat we see,
And claws tight pressed on huge old knotted tree;
While from a cavern dim the bright eyes glare.
Oh, vegetation! Spirit! Do we dare
Question of matter, and of forces found
‘Neath a rude skin-in living verdure bound.
Oh, Master — I, like thee, have wandered oft
Where mighty trees made arches high aloft,
But ever with a consciousness of strife,
A surging struggle of the inner life.
Ever the trembling of the grass I say,
And the boughs rocking as the breezes play,
Have stirred deep thoughts in a bewild’ring way.
Oh, God! alone Great Witness of all deeds,
Of thoughts and acts, and all our human needs,
God only knows how often in such scenes
Of savage beauty under leafy screens,
I’ve felt the mighty oaks had spirit dower —
Like me knew mirth and sorrow — sentient power,
And whisp’ring each to each in twilight dim,
Had hearts that beat — and owned a soul from Him!

MRS. NEWTON CROSLAND

TO HIS MUSE.

("Puisqu'ici-bas tout âme.")

[XL, May 19, 1836.]

Since everything below,
  Doth, in this mortal state,
Its tone, its fragrance, or its glow
  Communicate;

Since all that lives and moves
  Upon the earth, bestows
On what it seeks and what it loves
  Its thorn or rose;

Since April to the trees
  Gives a bewitching sound,
And sombre night to grief gives ease,
  And peace profound;

Since day-spring on the flower
  A fresh'ning drop confers,
And the fresh air on branch and bower
  Its choristers;

Since the dark wave bestows
  A soft caress, imprest
On the green bank to which it goes
  Seeking its rest;

I give thee at this hour,
  Thus fondly bent o'er thee,
The best of all the things in dow'r
  That in me be.

Receive,-poor gift, ’tis true,
  Which grief, not joy, endears, —
My thoughts, that like a shower of dew,
  Reach thee in tears.

My vows untold receive,
  All pure before thee laid;
Receive of all the days I live
  The light or shade!

My hours with rapture fill’d,
  Which no suspicion wrongs;
And all the blandishments distill’d
  From all my songs.

My spirit, whose essay
  Flies fearless, wild, and free,
And hath, and seeks, to guide its way
  No star but thee.

No pensive, dreamy Muse,
  Who, though all else should smile,
Oft as thou weep’st, with thee would choose,
  To weep the while.

Oh, sweetest mine! this gift
  Receive;— ’tis throe alone; —
My heart, of which there’s nothing left
  When Love is gone!

Fraser’s Magazine.

THE COW.

("Devant la blanche ferme.")

[XV., May, 1837.]

Before the farm where, o'er the porch, festoon
Wild creepers red, and gaffer sits at noon,
Whilst strutting fowl display their varied crests,
And the old watchdog slumberously rests,
They half-attentive to the clarion of their king,
Resplendent in the sunshine op'ning wing —
There stood a cow, with neck-bell jingling light,
Superb, enormous, dappled red and white —
Soft, gentle, patient as a hind unto its young,
Letting the children swarm until they hung
Around her, under — rustics with their teeth
Whiter than marble their ripe lips beneath,
And bushy hair fresh and more brown
Than mossy walls at old gates of a town,
Calling to one another with loud cries
For younger imps to be in at the prize;
Stealing without concern but tremulous with fear
They glance around lest Doll the maid appear; —
Their jolly lips — that haply cause some pain,
And all those busy fingers, pressing now and 'gain,
The teeming udders whose small, thousand pores
Gush out the nectar 'mid their laughing roars,
While she, good mother, gives and gives in heaps,
And never moves. Anon there creeps
A vague soft shiver o'er the hide unmarred,
As sharp they pull, she seems of stone most hard.
Dreamy of large eye, seeks she no release,
And shrinks not while there's one still to appease.
  Thus Nature — refuge 'gainst the slings of fate!
Mother of all, indulgent as she's great!

Lets us, the hungered of each age and rank,
Shadow and milk seek in the eternal flank;
Mystic and carnal, foolish, wise, repair,
The souls retiring and those that dare,
Sages with halos, poets laurel-crowned,
All creep beneath or cluster close around,
And with unending greed and joyous cries,
From sources full, draw need’s supplies,
Quench hearty thirst, obtain what must eftsoon
Form blood and mind, in freest boon,
Respire at length thy sacred flaming light,
From all that greets our ears, touch, scent or sight —
Brown leaves, blue mountains, yellow gleams, green sod —
Thou undistracted still dost dream of God.

TORU DUTT.

MOTHERS.

("Regardez: les enfants.")

[XX., June, 1884.]

See all the children gathered there,
Their mother near; so young, so fair,
An eider sister she might be,
And yet she hears, amid their games,
The shaking of their unknown names
  In the dark urn of destiny.

She wakes their smiles, she soothes their cares,
On that pure heart so like to theirs,
  Her spirit with such life is rife
That in its golden rays we see,
Touched into graceful poesy,
  The dull cold commonplace of life.

Still following, watching, whether burn
The Christmas log in winter stern,
  While merry plays go round;
Or streamlets laugh to breeze of May
That shakes the leaf to break away —
  A shadow falling to the ground.

If some poor man with hungry eyes
Her baby's coral bauble spies,
  She marks his look with famine wild,
For Christ's dear sake she makes with joy
An alms-gift of the silver toy —
  A smiling angel of the child.

Dublin University Magazine

TO SOME BIRDS FLOWN AWAY.

(“Enfants! Oh! revenez!”)

[XXII, April, 1837]

Children, come back — come back, I say —
You whom my folly chased away
A moment since, from this my room,
With bristling wrath and words of doom!
What had you done, you bandits small,
With lips as red as roses all?
What crime? — what wild and hapless deed?
  What porcelain vase by you was split
To thousand pieces? Did you need
  For pastime, as you handled it,
Some Gothic missal to enrich
  With your designs fantastical?
  Or did your tearing fingers fall
On some old picture? Which, oh, which
Your dreadful fault? Not one of these;
Only when left yourselves to please
This morning but a moment here
  ’Mid papers tinted by my mind
You took some embryo verses near —
  Half formed, but fully well designed
To open out. Your hearts desire
Was but to throw them on the fire,
Then watch the tinder, for the sight
Of shining sparks that twinkle bright
As little boats that sail at night,
Or like the window lights that spring
From out the dark at evening.

’Twas all, and you were well content.
Fine loss was this for anger’s vent —

A strophe ill made midst your play,
Sweet sound that chased the words away
In stormy flight. An ode quite new,
With rhymes inflated — stanzas, too,
That panted, moving lazily,
  And heavy Alexandrine lines
That seemed to jostle bodily,
  Like children full of play designs
That spring at once from schoolroom’s form.
Instead of all this angry storm,
Another might have thanked you well
For saving prey from that grim cell,
That hollowed den ‘neath journals great,
  Where editors who poets flout
  With their demoniac laughter shout.
And I have scolded you! What fate
For charming dwarfs who never meant
  To anger Hercules! And I
Have frightened you! — My chair I sent
  Back to the wall, and then let fly
A shower of words the envious use —
“Get out,” I said, with hard abuse,
“Leave me alone — alone I say.”
Poor man alone! Ah, well-a-day,
What fine result — what triumph rare!
  As one turns from the coffin’d dead
So left you me: — I could but stare
  Upon the door through which you fled —
I proud and grave — but punished quite.
And what care you for this my plight! —
You have recovered liberty,
Fresh air and lovely scenery,
The spacious park and wished-for grass;
  The running stream, where you can throw
A blade to watch what comes to pass;
  Blue sky, and all the spring can show;
Nature, serenely fair to see;

The book of birds and spirits free,
God’s poem, worth much more than mine,
Where flowers for perfect stanzas shine —
Flowers that a child may pluck in play,
No harsh voice frightening it away.
And I’m alone — all pleasure o’er —
  Alone with pedant called “Ennui,”
For since the morning at my door
  Ennui has waited patiently.
That docto-r-London born, you mark,
One Sunday in December dark,
Poor little ones — he loved you not,
And waited till the chance he got
To enter as you passed away,
  And in the very corner where
You played with frolic laughter gay,
  He sighs and yawns with weary air.

What can I do? Shall I read books,
Or write more verse — or turn fond looks
Upon enamels blue, sea-green,
And white — on insects rare as seen
Upon my Dresden china ware?
Or shall I touch the globe, and care
To make the heavens turn upon
Its axis? No, not one — not one
Of all these things care I to do;
All wearies me — I think of you.
In truth with you my sunshine fled,
And gayety with your light tread —
Glad noise that set me dreaming still.
’Twas my delight to watch your will,
And mark you point with finger-tips
  To help your spelling out a word;
To see the pearls between your lips
  When I your joyous laughter heard;
Your honest brows that looked so true,

  And said “Oh, yes!” to each intent;
Your great bright eyes, that loved to view
  With admiration innocent
My fine old Sèvres; the eager thought
That every kind of knowledge sought;
The elbow push with “Come and see!”

Oh, certes! spirits, sylphs, there be,
And fays the wind blows often here;
The gnomes that squat the ceiling near,
In corners made by old books dim;
The long-backed dwarfs, those goblins grim
That seem at home ‘mong vases rare,
And chat to them with friendly air —
Oh, how the joyous demon throng
Must all have laughed with laughter long
To see you on my rough drafts fall,
My bald hexameters, and all
The mournful, miserable band,
And drag them with relentless hand
From out their box, with true delight
To set them each and all a-light,
And then with clapping hands to lean
Above the stove and watch the scene,
How to the mass deformed there came
A soul that showed itself in flame!

Bright tricksy children — oh, I pray
Come back and sing and dance away,
And chatter too — sometimes you may,
A giddy group, a big book seize —
Or sometimes, if it so you please,
With nimble step you’ll run to me
  And push the arm that holds the pen,
Till on my finished verse will be
  A stroke that’s like a steeple when
Seen suddenly upon a plain.

My soul longs for your breath again
To warm it. Oh, return — come here
With laugh and babble — and no fear
  When with your shadow you obscure
  The book I read, for I am sure,
Oh, madcaps terrible and dear,
That you were right and I was wrong.
But who has ne’er with scolding tongue
Blamed out of season. Pardon me!
You must forgive — for sad are we.

The young should not be hard and cold
And unforgiving to the old.
Children each morn your souls ope out
  Like windows to the shining day,
Oh, miracle that comes about,
  The miracle that children gay
Have happiness and goodness too,
Caressed by destiny are you,
  Charming you are, if you but play.
But we with living overwrought,
And full of grave and sombre thought,
Are snappish oft: dear little men,
We have ill-tempered days, and then,
Are quite unjust and full of care;
It rained this morning and the air
Was chill; but clouds that dimm’d the sky
Have passed. Things spited me, and why?
But now my heart repents. Behold
What ’twas that made me cross, and scold!
All by-and-by you’ll understand,
When brows are mark’d by Time’s stern hand;
Then you will comprehend, be sure,
When older — that’s to say, less pure.

The fault I freely own was mine.
But oh, for pardon now I pine!

Enough my punishment to meet,
You must forgive, I do entreat
With clasped hands praying — oh, come back,
Make peace, and you shall nothing lack.
See now my pencils — paper — here,
And pointless compasses, and dear
Old lacquer-work; and stoneware clear
Through glass protecting; all man’s toys
So coveted by girls and boys.
Great China monsters — bodies much
Like cucumbers — you all shall touch.
I yield up all! my picture rare
  Found beneath antique rubbish heap,
My great and tapestried oak chair
  I will from you no longer keep.
You shall about my table climb,
  And dance, or drag, without a cry
From me as if it were a crime.
  Even I’ll look on patiently
If you your jagged toys all throw
Upon my carved bench, till it show
The wood is torn; and freely too,
I’ll leave in your own hands to view,
My pictured Bible — oft desired —
But which to touch your fear inspired —
With God in emperor’s robes attired.

Then if to see my verses burn,
Should seem to you a pleasant turn,
Take them to freely tear away
Or burn. But, oh! not so I’d say,
If this were Méry’s room to-day.
That noble poet! Happy town,
Marseilles the Greek, that him doth own!
Daughter of Homer, fair to see,
Of Virgil’s son the mother she.
To you I’d say, Hold, children all,

Let but your eyes on his work fall;
These papers are the sacred nest
In which his crooning fancies rest;
To-morrow winged to Heaven they’ll soar,
  For new-born verse imprisoned still
In manuscript may suffer sore
  At your small hands and childish will,
Without a thought of bad intent,
Of cruelty quite innocent.
You wound their feet, and bruise their wings,
And make them suffer those ill things
That children’s play to young birds brings.

But mine! no matter what you do,
My poetry is all in you;
You are my inspiration bright
That gives my verse its purest light.
Children whose life is made of hope,
Whose joy, within its mystic scope,
Owes all to ignorance of ill,
You have not suffered, and you still
Know not what gloomy thoughts weigh down
The poet-writer weary grown.
What warmth is shed by your sweet smile!
How much he needs to gaze awhile
Upon your shining placid brow,
When his own brow its ache doth know;
With what delight he loves to hear
Your frolic play ‘neath tree that’s near,
Your joyous voices mixing well
With his own song’s all-mournful swell!
Come back then, children! come to me,
If you wish not that I should be
As lonely now that you’re afar
As fisherman of Etrétat,
Who listless on his elbow leans
Through all the weary winter scenes,

As tired of thought — as on Time flies —
And watching only rainy skies!

MRS. NEWTON CROSLAND.

MY THOUGHTS OF YE.

(“À quoi je songe?”)

[XXIIL, July, 1836.]

What do I dream of? Far from the low roof,
Where now ye are, children, I dream of you;
Of your young heads that are the hope and crown
Of my full summer, ripening to its fall.
Branches whose shadow grows along my wall,
Sweet souls scarce open to the breath of day,
Still dazzled with the brightness of your dawn.
I dream of those two little ones at play,
Making the threshold vocal with their cries,
Half tears, half laughter, mingled sport and strife,
Like two flowers knocked together by the wind.
Or of the elder two — more anxious thought —
Breasting already broader waves of life,
A conscious innocence on either face,
My pensive daughter and my curious boy.
Thus do I dream, while the light sailors sing,
At even moored beneath some steepy shore,
While the waves opening all their nostrils breathe
A thousand sea-scents to the wandering wind,
And the whole air is full of wondrous sounds,
From sea to strand, from land to sea, given back
Alone and sad, thus do I dream of you.
Children, and house and home, the table set,
The glowing hearth, and all the pious care
Of tender mother, and of grandsire kind;
And while before me, spotted with white sails,
The limpid ocean mirrors all the stars,
And while the pilot, from the infinite main,
Looks with calm eye into the infinite heaven,
I dreaming of you only, seek to scan

And fathom all my soul’s deep love for you —
Love sweet, and powerful, and everlasting —
And find that the great sea is small beside it.

Dublin University Magazine.

THE BEACON IN THE STORM.

("Quels sont ces bruits sourds?")

[XXIV., July 17, 1836.]

Hark to that solemn sound!
  It steals towards the strand. —
Whose is that voice profound
  Which mourns the swallowed land,
      With moans,
      Or groans,
  New threats of ruin close at hand?
It is Triton — the storm to scorn
Who doth wind his sonorous horn.

How thick the rain to-night!
  And all along the coast
The sky shows naught of light
  Is it a storm, my host?
      Too soon
      The boon
  Of pleasant weather will be lost
Yes, 'tis Triton, etc.

Are seamen on that speck
  Afar in deepening dark?
Is that a splitting deck
  Of some ill-fated bark?
      Fend harm!
      Send calm!
  O Venus! show thy starry spark!
Though 'tis Triton, etc.

The thousand-toothèd gale, —
 Adventurers too bold! —
Rips up your toughest sail

And tears your anchor-hold.
You forge
Through surge,
To be in rending breakers rolled.
While old Triton, etc.

Do sailors stare this way,
Cramped on the Needle’s sheaf,
To hail the sudden ray
Which promises relief?
Then, bright;
Shine, light!
Of hope upon the beacon reef!
Though ’tis Triton, etc.

LOVE’S TREACHEROUS POOL

(“Jeune fille, l’amour c’est un miroir.”)

[XXVI., February, 1835.]

Young maiden, true love is a pool all mirroring clear,
  Where coquettish girls come to linger in long delight,
For it banishes afar from the face all the clouds that besmear
  The soul truly bright;
But tempts you to ruffle its surface; drawing your foot
  To subtilest sinking! and farther and farther the brink
That vainly you snatch — for repentance, ’tis weed without root, —
  And struggling, you sink!

THE ROSE AND THE GRAVE.

(“La tombe dit à la rose.”)

[XXXI., June 3, 1837]

The Grave said to the rose
  ”What of the dews of dawn,
Love’s flower, what end is theirs?”
  ”And what of spirits flown,
The souls whereon doth close
  The tomb’s mouth unawares?”
The Rose said to the Grave.

The Rose said: “In the shade
From the dawn’s tears is made
A perfume faint and strange,
  Amber and honey sweet.”
  ”And all the spirits fleet
Do suffer a sky-change,
  More strangely than the dew,
  To God’s own angels new,”
The Grave said to the Rose.

A. LANG.

LES RAYONS ET LES OMBRES. — 1840.

HOLYROOD PALACE.

(“O palais, sois bénié.”)

[II., June, 1839.]

Palace and ruin, bless thee evermore!
Grateful we bow thy gloomy tow’rs before;
For the old King of France hath found in thee
That melancholy hospitality
Which in their royal fortune’s evil day,
Stuarts and Bourbons to each other pay.

Fraser’s Magazine.

THE HUMBLE HOME.

(“L’église est vaste et haute.”)

[IV., June 29, 1839.]

The Church is vast; its towering pride, its steeples loom on high;
The bristling stones with leaf and flower are sculptured wondrously;
  The portal glows resplendent with its “rose,”
And ‘neath the vault immense at evening swarm
Figures of angel, saint, or demon’s form,
  As oft a fearful world our dreams disclose.
But not the huge Cathedral’s height, nor yet its vault sublime,
Nor porch, nor glass, nor streaks of light, nor shadows deep with time;
  Nor massy towers, that fascinate mine eyes;
  No, ’tis that spot — the mind’s tranquillity —
  Chamber wherefrom the song mounts cheerily,
  Placed like a joyful nest well nigh the skies.

Yea! glorious is the Church, I ween, but Meekness dwelleth here;
Less do I love the lofty oak than mossy nest it bear;
  More dear is meadow breath than stormy wind:
And when my mind for meditation’s meant,
The seaweed is preferred to the shore’s extent, —
  The swallow to the main it leaves behind.

Author of “Critical Essays.”

THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY.

("O dix-huitième siècle!")

[IV. vi]

  O Eighteenth Century! by Heaven chastised!
Godless thou livedst, by God thy doom was fixed.
Thou in one ruin sword and sceptre mixed,
  Then outraged love, and pity's claim despised.
Thy life a banquet — but its board a scaffold at the close,
Where far from Christ's beatic reign, Satanic deeds arose!
Thy writers, like thyself, by good men scorned —
  Yet, from thy crimes, renown has decked thy name,
  As the smoke emplumes the furnace flame,
A revolution's deeds have thine adorned!

Author of "Critical Essays."

STILL BE A CHILD.

(“O vous que votre âge défende”)

[IX., February, 1840.]

In youthful spirits wild,
  Smile, for all beams on thee;
Sport, sing, be still the child,
  The flower, the honey-bee.

Bring not the future near,
  For Joy too soon declines —
What is man’s mission here?
  Toil, where no sunlight shines!

Our lot is hard, we know;
  From eyes so gayly beaming,
Whence rays of beauty flow,
  Salt tears most oft are streaming.

Free from emotions past,
  All joy and hope possessing,
With mind in pureness cast,
  Sweet ignorance confessing.

Plant, safe from winds and showers,
  Heart with soft visions glowing,
In childhood’s happy hours
  A mother’s rapture showing.

Loved by each anxious friend,
  No carking care within —
When summer gambols end,
  My winter sports begin.

Sweet poesy from heaven
  Around thy form is placed,
A mother's beauty given,
  By father's thought is graced!

Seize, then, each blissful second,
  Live, for joy *sinks in night*,
And those whose tale is reckoned,
  Have had their days of light.

Then, oh! before we part,
  The poet's blessing take,
Ere bleeds that aged heart,
  Or child the woman make.

Dublin University Magazine.

THE POOL AND THE SOUL.

("Comme dans les étangs.")

[X., May, 1839.]

As in some stagnant pool by forest-side,
In human souls two things are oft descried;
The sky, — which tints the surface of the pool
With all its rays, and all its shadows cool;
The basin next, — where gloomy, dark and deep,
Through slime and mud black reptiles vaguely creep.

R.F. HODGSON

YE MARINERS WHO SPREAD YOUR SAILS.

(“Matelôts, vous déploirez les voiles.”)

[XVI., May 5, 1839.]

Ye mariners! ye mariners! each sail to the breeze unfurled,
In joy or sorrow still pursue your course around the world;
And when the stars next sunset shine, ye anxiously will gaze
Upon the shore, a friend or foe, as the windy quarter lays.

Ye envious souls, with spiteful tooth, the statue’s base will bite;
Ye birds will sing, ye bending boughs with verdure glad the sight;
The ivy root in the stone entwined, will cause old gates to fall;
The church-bell sound to work or rest the villagers will call.

Ye glorious oaks will still increase in solitude profound,
Where the far west in distance lies as evening veils around;
Ye willows, to the earth your arms in mournful trail will bend,
And back again your mirror’d forms the water’s surface send.

Ye nests will oscillate beneath the youthful progeny;
Embraced in furrows of the earth the germing grain will lie;
Ye lightning-torches still your streams will cast into the air,
Which like a troubled spirit’s course float wildly here and there.

Ye thunder-peals will God proclaim, as doth the ocean wave;
Ye violets will nourish still the flower that April gave;
Upon your ambient tides will be man’s sternest shadow cast;
Your waters ever will roll on when man himself is past.

All things that are, or being have, or those that mutely lie,
Have each its course to follow out, or object to descry;
Contributing its little share to that stupendous whole,
Where with man’s teeming race combined creation’s wonders roll.

The poet, too, will contemplate th’ Almighty Father’s love,
Who to our restless minds, with light and darkness from above,
Hath given the heavens that glorious urn of tranquil majesty,
Whence in unceasing stores we draw calm and serenity.

Author of “Critical Essays.”

ON A FLEMISH WINDOW-PANE.

(“J’aime le carillon dans tes cités antiques.”)

[XVIII., August, 1837.]

Within thy cities of the olden time
Dearly I love to list the ringing chime,
Thou faithful guardian of domestic worth,
Noble old Flanders! where the rigid North
A flush of rich meridian glow doth feel,
Caught from reflected suns of bright Castile.
The chime, the clinking chime! To Fancy’s eye —
Prompt her affections to personify —
It is the fresh and frolic hour, arrayed
In guise of Andalusian dancing maid,
Appealing by a crevice fine and rare,
As of a door oped in “th’ incorporal air.”
She comes! o’er drowsy roofs, inert and dull,
Shaking her lap, of silv’ry music full,
Rousing without remorse the drones abed,
Tripping like joyous bird with tiniest tread,
Quiv’ring like dart that trembles in the targe,
By a frail crystal stair, whose viewless marge
Bears her slight footfall, tim’rous half, yet free,
In innocent extravagance of glee
The graceful elf alights from out the spheres,
While the quick spirit — thing of eyes and ears —
As now she goes, now comes, mounts, and anon
Descends, those delicate degrees upon,
Hears her melodious spirit from step to step run on.

Fraser’s Magazine

THE PRECEPTOR.

(“Homme chauve et noir.”)

[XIX., May, 1839.]

A gruesome man, bald, clad in black,
Who kept us youthful drudges in the track,
Thinking it good for them to leave home care,
And for a while a harsher yoke to bear;
Surrender all the careless ease of home,
And be forbid from schoolyard bounds to roam;
For this with blandest smiles he softly asks
That they with him will prosecute their tasks;
Receives them in his solemn chilly lair,
The rigid lot of discipline to share.
At dingy desks they toil by day; at night
To gloomy chambers go uncheered by light,
Where pillars rudely grayed by rusty nail
Of heavy hours reveal the weary tale;
Where spiteful ushers grin, all pleased to make
Long scribbled lines the price of each mistake.
By four unpitying walls environed there
The homesick students pace the pavements bare.

E.E. FREWER

GASTIBELZA.

("Gastibelza, l'homme à la carabine.")

[XXII., March, 1837.]

Gastibelza, with gun the measure beating,
Would often sing:
"Has one o' ye with sweet Sabine been meeting,
As, gay, ye bring
Your songs and steps which, by the music,
Are reconciled —
Oh! this chill wind across the mountain rushing
Will drive me wild!

"You stare as though you hardly knew my lady —
Sabine's her name!
Her dam inhabits yonder cavern shady,
A witch of shame,
Who shrieks o' nights upon the Haunted Tower,
With horrors piled —
Oh! this chill wind, etc.

"Sing on and leap — enjoying all the favors
Good heaven sends;
She, too, was young — her lips had peachy savors
With honey blends;
Give to that hag — not always old — a penny,
Though crime-defiled —
Oh! this chill wind, etc.

"The queen beside her looked a wench uncomely,
When, near to-night,
She proudly stalked a-past the maids so homely,
In bodice tight
And collar old as reign of wicked Julian,

By fiend beguiled —
Oh! this chill wind, etc.

“The king himself proclaimed her peerless beauty
Before the court,
And held it were to win a kiss his duty
To give a fort,
Or, more, to sign away all bright Dorado,
Tho’ gold-plate tiled —
Oh! this chill wind, etc.

“Love her? at least, I know I am most lonely
Without her nigh;
I’m but a hound to follow her, and only
At her feet die.
I’d gayly spend of toilsome years a dozen —
A felon styled —
Oh! this chill wind, etc.

“One summer day when long — so long? I’d missed her,
She came anew,
To play i’ the fount alone but for her sister,
And bared to view
The finest, rosiest, most tempting ankle,
Like that of child —
Oh! this chill wind, etc.

“When I beheld her, I — a lowly shepherd —
Grew in my mind
Till I was Caesar — she that crownèd leopard
He crouched behind,
No Roman stern, but in her silken leashes
A captive mild —
Oh! this chill wind, etc.

“Yet dance and sing, tho’ night be thickly falling; —
In selfsame time
Poor Sabine heard in ecstasy the calling,

In winning rhyme,
Of Saldane’s earl so noble, ay, and wealthy,
Name e’er reviled —
Oh! this chill wind, etc.

“(Let me upon this bench be shortly resting,
So weary, I!)
That noble bore her smiling, unresisting,
By yonder high
And ragged road that snakes towards the summit
Where crags are piled —
Oh! this chill wind, etc.

“I saw her pass beside my lofty station —
A glance— ’twas all!
And yet I loathe my daily honest ration,
The air’s turned gall!
My soul’s in chase, my body chafes to wander —
My dagger’s filed —
Oh! this chill wind may change, and o’er the mountain
May drive me wild!”

HENRY L. WILLIAMS.

GUITAR SONG.

(“Comment, disaient-ils.”)

[XXIII., July 18, 1838.]

How shall we flee sorrow — flee sorrow? said he.
How, how! How shall we flee sorrow — flee sorrow? said he.
How — how — how? answered she.

How shall we see pleasure — see pleasure? said he.
How, how! How shall we see pleasure — see pleasure? said he.
Dream — dream — dream! answered she.

How shall we be happy — be happy? said he.
How, how! How shall we be happy — be happy? said he.
Love — love — love! whispered she.

EVELYN JERROLD

COME WHEN I SLEEP.

(“Oh, quand je dors.”)

[XXVII.]

Oh! when I sleep, come near my resting-place,
  As Laura came to bless her poet’s heart,
And let thy breath in passing touch my face —
      At once a space
        My lips will part.

And on my brow where too long weighed supreme
  A vision — haply spent now — black as night,
Let thy look as a star arise and beam —
      At once my dream
        Will seem of light.

Then press my lips, where plays a flame of bliss —
  A pure and holy love-light — and forsake
The angel for the woman in a kiss —
      At once, I wis,
        My soul will wake!

WM. W. TOMLINSON.

EARLY LOVE REVISITED.

(“O douleur! j’ai voulu savoir.”)

[XXXIV. i., October, 183-.]

I have wished in the grief of my heart to know
  If the vase yet treasured that nectar so clear,
And to see what this beautiful valley could show
  Of all that was once to my soul most dear.
In how short a span doth all Nature change,
  How quickly she smoothes with her hand serene —
And how rarely she snaps, in her ceaseless range,
  The links that bound our hearts to the scene.

Our beautiful bowers are all laid waste;
  The fir is felled that our names once bore;
Our rows of roses, by urchins’ haste,
  Are destroyed where they leap the barrier o’er.
The fount is walled in where, at noonday pride,
  She so gayly drank, from the wood descending;
In her fairy hand was transformed the tide,
  And it turned to pearls through her fingers wending

The wild, rugged path is paved with spars,
  Where erst in the sand her footsteps were traced,
When so small were the prints that the surface mars,
  That they seemed *to smile* ere by mine effaced.
The bank on the side of the road, day by day,
  Where of old she awaited my loved approach,
Is now become the traveller’s way
  To avoid the track of the thundering coach.

Here the forest contracts, there the mead extends,
  Of all that was ours, there is little left —
Like the ashes that wildly are whisked by winds,
  Of all souvenirs is the place bereft.

Do we live no more — is our hour then gone?
Will it give back naught to our hungry cry?
The breeze answers my call with a mocking tone,
The house that was mine makes no reply.

True! others shall pass, as we have passed,
As we have come, so others shall meet,
And the dream that our mind had sketched in haste,
Shall others continue, but never complete.
For none upon earth can achieve his scheme,
The best as the worst are futile here:
We awake at the selfsame point cf the dream —
All is here begun, and finished elsewhere.

Yes! others shall come in the bloom of the heart,
To enjoy in this pure and happy retreat,
All that nature to timid love can impart
Of solemn repose and communion sweet.
In *our* fields, in *our* paths, shall strangers stray,
In *thy* wood, my dearest, new lovers go lost,
And other fair forms in the stream shall play
Which of old thy delicate feet have crossed.

Author of “Critical Essays.”

SWEET MEMORY OF LOVE.

("Toutes les passions s'éloignent avec l'âge.")

[XXXIV. ii., October, 183-.]

As life wanes on, the passions slow depart,
  One with his grinning mask, one with his steel;
Like to a strolling troupe of Thespian art,
  Whose pace decreases, winding past the hill.
But naught can Love's all charming power efface,
  That light, our misty tracks suspended o'er,
In joy thou'rt ours, more dear thy tearful grace,
  The young may curse thee, but the old adore.

But when the weight of years bow down the head,
  And man feels all his energies decline,
His projects gone, himself tomb'd with the dead,
  Where virtues lie, nor more illusions shine,
When all our lofty thoughts dispersed and o'er,
  We count within our hearts so near congealed,
Each grief that's past, each dream, exhausted ore!
  As counting dead upon the battle-field.

As one who walks by the lamp's flickering blaze,
  Far from the hum of men, the joys of earth —
Our mind arrives at last by tortuous ways,
  At that drear gulf where but despair has birth.
E'en there, amid the darkness of that night,
  When all seems closing round in empty air,
Is seen through thickening gloom one trembling light!
  'Tis Love's sweet memory that lingers there!

Author of "Critical Essays."

THE MARBLE FAUN.

(“Il semblait grelotter.”)

[XXXVI., December, 1837.]

He seemed to shiver, for the wind was keen.
’Twas a poor statue underneath a mass
Of leafless branches, with a blackened back
And a green foot — an isolated Faun
In old deserted park, who, bending forward,
Half-merged himself in the entangled boughs,
Half in his marble settings. He was there,
Pensive, and bound to earth; and, as all things
Devoid of movement, he was there — forgotten.

Trees were around him, whipped by icy blasts —
Gigantic chestnuts, without leaf or bird,
And, like himself, grown old in that same place.
Through the dark network of their undergrowth,
Pallid his aspect; and the earth was brown.
Starless and moonless, a rough winter’s night
Was letting down her lappets o’er the mist.
This — nothing more: old Faun, dull sky, dark wood.

Poor, helpless marble, how I’ve pitied it!
Less often man — the harder of the two.

So, then, without a word that might offend
His ear deformed — for well the marble hears
The voice of thought — I said to him: “You hail
From the gay amorous age. O Faun, what saw you
When you were happy? Were you of the Court?

”Speak to me, comely Faun, as you would speak
To tree, or zephyr, or untrodden grass.
Have you, O Greek, O mocker of old days,

Have you not sometimes with that oblique eye
Winked at the Farnese Hercules? — Alone,
Have you, O Faun, considerately turned
From side to side when counsel-seekers came,
And now advised as shepherd, now as satyr? —
Have you sometimes, upon this very bench,
Seen, at mid-day, Vincent de Paul instilling
Grace into Gondi? — Have you ever thrown
That searching glance on Louis with Fontange,
On Anne with Buckingham; and did they not
Start, with flushed cheeks, to hear your laugh ring forth
From corner of the wood? — Was your advice
As to the thyrsis or the ivy asked,
When, in grand ballet of fantastic form,
God Phoebus, or God Pan, and all his court,
Turned the fair head of the proud Montespan,
Calling her Amaryllis? — La Fontaine,
Flying the courtiers' ears of stone, came he,
Tears on his eyelids, to reveal to you
The sorrows of his nymphs of Vaux? — What said
Boileau to you — to you — O lettered Faun,
Who once with Virgil, in the Eclogue, held
That charming dialogue? — Say, have you seen
Young beauties sporting on the sward? — Have you
Been honored with a sight of Molière
In dreamy mood? — Has he perchance, at eve,
When here the thinker homeward went, has he,
Who — seeing souls all naked — could not fear
Your nudity, in his inquiring mind,
Confronted you with Man?"

Under the thickly-tangled branches, thus
Did I speak to him; he no answer gave.

I shook my head, and moved myself away;
Then, from the copses, and from secret caves
Hid in the wood, methought a ghostly voice

Came forth and woke an echo in my souls
As in the hollow of an amphora.

”Imprudent poet,” thus it seemed to say,
“What dost thou here? Leave the forsaken Fauns
In peace beneath their trees! Dost thou not know,
Poet, that ever it is impious deemed,
In desert spots where drowsy shades repose —
Though love itself might prompt thee — to shake down
The moss that hangs from ruined centuries,
And, with the vain noise of throe ill-timed words,
To mar the recollections of the dead?”

Then to the gardens all enwrapped in mist
I hurried, dreaming of the vanished days,
And still behind me — hieroglyph obscure
Of antique alphabet — the lonely Faun
Held to his laughter, through the falling night.

I went my way; but yet — in saddened spirit
Pondering on all that had my vision crossed,
Leaves of old summers, fair ones of old time —
Through all, at distance, would my fancy see,
In the woods, statues; shadows in the past!

WILLIAM YOUNG

A LOVE FOR WINGED THINGS.

[XXXVII., April 12, 1840.]

My love flowed e’er for things with wings.
  When boy I sought for forest fowl,
And caged them in rude rushes’ mesh,
  And fed them with my breakfast roll;
So that, though fragile were the door,
  They rarely fled, and even then
Would flutter back at faintest call!

Man-grown, I charm for men.

BABY’S SEASIDE GRAVE.

(“Vieux lierre, frais gazon.”)

[XXXVIII., 1840.]

Brown ivy old, green herbage new;
  Soft seaweed stealing up the shingle;
An ancient chapel where a crew,
  Ere sailing, in the prayer commingle.
A far-off forest’s darkling frown,
  Which makes the prudent start and tremble,
Whilst rotten nuts are rattling down,
  And clouds in demon hordes assemble.

Land birds which twit the mews that scream
  Round walls where lolls the languid lizard;
Brine-bubbling brooks where fishes stream
  Past caves fit for an ocean wizard.
Alow, aloft, no lull — all life,
  But far aside its whirls are keeping,
As wishfully to let its strife
  Spare still the mother vainly weeping
  O’er baby, lost not long, a-sleeping.

LES CHÂTIMENTS. — 1853.

INDIGNATION!

(“Toi qu’aimais Juvénal.”)

[Nox (PRELUDE) ix., Jersey, November, 1852.]

Thou who loved Juvenal, and filed
  His style so sharp to scar imperial brows,
And lent the lustre lightening
  The gloom in Dante’s murky verse that flows —
Muse Indignation! haste, and help
  My building up before this roseate realm,
And its so fruitless victories,
  Whence transient shame Right’s prophets overwhelm,
So many pillories, deserved!
  That eyes to come will pry without avail,
Upon the wood impenetrant,
  And spy no glimmer of its tarnished tale.

IMPERIAL REVELS.

("Courtisans! attablés dans le splendide orgie.")

[Bk. I. x., Jersey, December, 1852.]

Cheer, courtiers! round the banquet spread —
  The board that groans with shame and plate,
Still fawning to the sham-crowned head
  That hopes front brazen turneth fate!
Drink till the comer last is full,
And never hear in revels' lull,
Grim Vengeance forging arrows fleet,
    Whilst I gnaw at the crust
    Of Exile in the dust —
But *Honor* makes it sweet!

Ye cheaters in the tricksters' fane,
  Who dupe yourself and trickster-chief,
In blazing *cafés* spend the gain,
  But draw the blind, lest at *his* thief
Some fresh-made beggar gives a glance
And interrupts with steel the dance!
But let him toilsomely tramp by,
    As I myself afar
    Follow no gilded car
In ways of *Honesty*.

Ye troopers who shot mothers down,
  And marshals whose brave cannonade
Broke infant arms and split the stone
  Where slumbered age and guileless maid —
Though blood is in the cup you fill,
Pretend it "rosy" wine, and still
Hail Cannon "King!" and Steel the "Queen!"
    But I prefer to sup

From Philip Sidney’s cup —
True soldier’s draught serene.

Oh, workmen, seen by me sublime,
When from the tyrant wrenched ye peace,
Can you be dazed by tinselled crime,
And spy no wolf beneath the fleece?
Build palaces where Fortunes feast,
And bear your loads like well-trained beast,
Though once such masters you made flee!
But then, like me, you ate
Food of a blessed *fête* —
The bread of *Liberty*!

H.L.W.

POOR LITTLE CHILDREN.

(“La femelle! elle est morte.”)

[Bk. I. xiii., Jersey, February, 1853.]

Mother birdie stiff and cold,
  Puss has hushed the other’s singing;
Winds go whistling o’er the wold, —
  Empty nest in sport a-flinging.
    Poor little birdies!

Faithless shepherd strayed afar,
  Playful dog the gadflies catching;
Wolves bound boldly o’er the bar,
  Not a friend the fold is watching —
    Poor little lambkins!

Father into prison fell,
  Mother begging through the parish;
Baby’s cot they, too, will sell, —
  Who will now feed, clothe and cherish?
    Poor little children!

APOSTROPHE TO NATURE.

(“O Soleil!”)

[Bk. II. iv., Anniversary of the Coup d’État, 1852.]

O Sun! thou countenance divine!
  Wild flowers of the glen,
Caves swoll’n with shadow, where sunshine
  Has pierced not, far from men;
Ye sacred hills and antique rocks,
  Ye oaks that worsted time,
Ye limpid lakes which snow-slide shocks
  Hurl up in storms sublime;
And sky above, unruflfed blue,
  Chaste rills that alway ran
From stainless source a course still true,
  What think ye of this man?

NAPOLEON “THE LITTLE.”

(“Ah! tu finiras bien par hurler!”)

[Bk. III. ii., Jersey, August, 1852.]

How well I knew this stealthy wolf would howl,
  When in the eagle talons ta’en in air!
Aglow, I snatched thee from thy prey — thou fowl —
  I held thee, abject conqueror, just where
All see the stigma of a fitting name
  As deeply red as deeply black thy shame!
And though thy matchless impudence may frame
  Some mask of seeming courage — spite thy sneer,
And thou assurest sloth and skunk: “It does not smart!”
  Thou feel’st it burning, in and in, — and fear
None will forget it till shall fall the deadly dart!

FACT OR FABLE?

(BISMARCK AND NAPOLEON III.)

("Un jour, sentant un royal appétit.")

[Bk. III. iii., Jersey, September, 1852.]

One fasting day, itched by his appetite,
  A monkey took a fallen tiger's hide,
  And, where the wearer had been savage, tried
To overpass his model. Scratch and bite
Gave place, however, to mere gnash of teeth and screams,
  But, as he prowled, he made his hearers fly
With crying often: "See the Terror of your dreams!"
  Till, for too long, none ventured thither nigh.
Left undisturbed to snatch, and clog his brambled den,
  With sleepers' bones and plumes of daunted doves,
And other spoil of beasts as timid as the men,
  Who shrank when he mock-roared, from glens and groves —
He begged his fellows view the crannies crammed with pelf
  Sordid and tawdry, stained and tinselled things,
As ample proof he was the Royal Tiger's self!
  Year in, year out, thus still he purrs and sings
Till tramps a butcher by — he risks his head —
  In darts the hand and crushes out the yell,
  And plucks the hide — as from a nut the shell —
He holds him nude, and sneers: "An ape you dread!"

H.L.W.

A LAMENT.

("Sentiers où l'herbe se balance.")

[Bk. III. xi., July, 1853.]

O paths whereon wild grasses wave!
  O valleys! hillsides! forests hoar!
Why are ye silent as the grave?
  For One, who came, and comes no more!

Why is thy window closed of late?
  And why thy garden in its sear?
O house! where doth thy master wait?
  I only know he is not here.

Good dog! thou watchest; yet no hand
  Will feed thee. In the house is none.
Whom weepest thou? child! My father. And
  O wife! whom weepest thou? The Gone.

Where is he gone? Into the dark. —
  O sad, and ever-plaining surge!
Whence art thou? From the convict-bark.
  And why thy mournful voice? A dirge.

EDWIN ARNOLD, C.S.I.

NO ASSASSINATION.

("Laissons le glaive à Rome.")

[Bk. III. xvi., October, 1852.]

Pray Rome put up her poniard!
  And Sparta sheathe the sword;
Be none too prompt to punish,
  And cast indignant word!
Bear back your spectral Brutus
  From robber Bonaparte;
Time rarely will refute us
  Who doom the hateful heart.

Ye shall be o'ercontented,
  My banished mates from home,
But be no rashness vented
  Ere time for joy shall come.
No crime can outspeed Justice,
  Who, resting, seems delayed —
Full faith accord the angel
  Who points the patient blade.

The traitor still may nestle
  In balmy bed of state,
But mark the Warder, watching
  His guardsman at his gate.
He wears the crown, a monarch —
  Of knaves and stony hearts;
But though they're blessed by Senates,
  None can escape the darts!

Though shored by spear and crozier,
  All know the arrant cheat,
And shun the square of pavement
  Uncertain at his feet!

Yea, spare the wretch, each brooding
  And secret-leaguers’ chief,
And make no pistol-target
  Of stars upon the thief.

The knell of God strikes seldom
  But in the aptest hour;
And when the life is sweetest,
  The worm will feel His power!

THE DESPATCH OF THE DOOM.

(“Pendant que dans l’auberge.”)

[Bk. IV. xiii., Jersey, November, 1852.]

While in the jolly tavern, the bandits gayly drink,
Upon the haunted highway, sharp hoof-beats loudly clink?
Yea; past scant-buried victims, hard-spurring sturdy steed,
A mute and grisly rider is trampling grass and weed,
And by the black-sealed warrant which in his grasp shines clear,
I known it is *the Future* — God’s Justicer is here!

THE SEAMAN’S SONG.

(“Adieu, patrie.”)

[Bk. V. ix., Aug. 1, 1852.]

Farewell the strand,
The sails expand
Above!
Farewell the land
We love!
Farewell, old home where apples swing!
Farewell, gay song-birds on the wing!

Farewell, riff-raff
Of Customs’ clerks who laugh
And shout:
”Farewell!” We’ll quaff
One bout
To thee, young lass, with kisses sweet!
Farewell, my dear — the ship flies fleet!

The fog shuts out the last fond peep,
As ‘neath the prow the cast drops weep.
Farewell, old home, young lass, the bird!
The whistling wind alone is heard:
Farewell! Farewell!

THE RETREAT FROM MOSCOW.

(“Il neigeait.”)

[Bk. V. xiii., Nov. 25-30, 1852.]

It snowed. A defeat was our conquest red!
For once the eagle was hanging its head.
Sad days! the Emperor turned slowly his back
On smoking Moscow, blent orange and black.
The winter burst, avalanche-like, to reign
Over the endless blanched sheet of the plain.
Nor chief nor banner in order could keep,
The wolves of warfare were ‘wildered like sheep.
The wings from centre could hardly be known
Through snow o’er horses and carts o’erthrown,
Where froze the wounded. In the bivouacs forlorn
Strange sights and gruesome met the breaking morn:
Mute were the bugles, while the men bestrode
Steeds turned to marble, unheeding the goad.
The shells and bullets came down with the snow
As though the heavens hated these poor troops below.
Surprised at trembling, though it was with cold,
Who ne’er had trembled out of fear, the veterans bold
Marched stern; to grizzled moustache hoarfrost clung
‘Neath banners that in leaden masses hung.

It snowed, went snowing still. And chill the breeze
Whistled upon the glassy endless seas,
Where naked feet on, on for ever went,
With naught to eat, and not a sheltering tent.
They were not living troops as seen in war,
But merely phantoms of a dream, afar
In darkness wandering, amid the vapor dim, —
A mystery; of shadows a procession grim,
Nearing a blackening sky, unto its rim.

Frightful, since boundless, solitude behold
Where only Nemesis wove, mute and cold,
A net all snowy with its soft meshes dense,
A shroud of magnitude for host immense;
Till every one felt as if left alone
In a wide wilderness where no light shone,
To die, with pity none, and none to see
That from this mournful realm none should get free.
Their foes the frozen North and Czar — That, worst.
Cannon were broken up in haste accurst
To burn the frames and make the pale fire high,
Where those lay down who never woke or woke to die.
Sad and commingled, groups that blindly fled
Were swallowed smoothly by the desert dread.

‘Neath folds of blankness, monuments were raised
O’er regiments. And History, amazed,
Could not record the ruin of this retreat,
Unlike a downfall known before or the defeat
Of Hannibal — reversed and wrapped in gloom!
Of Attila, when nations met their doom!
Perished an army — fled French glory then,
Though there the Emperor! he stood and gazed
At the wild havoc, like a monarch dazed
In woodland hoar, who felt the shrieking saw —
He, living oak, beheld his branches fall, with awe.
Chiefs, soldiers, comrades died. But still warm love
Kept those that rose all dastard fear above,
As on his tent they saw his shadow pass —
Backwards and forwards, for they credited, alas!
His fortune’s star! it could not, could not be
That he had not his work to do — a destiny?
To hurl him headlong from his high estate,
Would be high treason in his bondman, Fate.
But all the while he felt himself alone,
Stunned with disasters few have ever known.
Sudden, a fear came o’er his troubled soul,

What more was written on the Future’s scroll?
Was this an expiation? It must be, yea!
He turned to God for one enlightening ray.
“Is this the vengeance, Lord of Hosts?” he sighed,
But the first murmur on his parched lips died.
“Is this the vengeance? Must my glory set?”
A pause: his name was called; of flame a jet
Sprang in the darkness; — a Voice answered; “No!
Not yet.”

Outside still fell the smothering snow.
Was it a voice indeed? or but a dream?
It was the vulture’s, but how like the *sea-bird’s scream.*

TORU DUTT.

THE OCEAN’S SONG.

(“Nous nous promenions à Rozel-Tower.”)

[Bk. VI. iv., October, 1852.]

We walked amongst the ruins famed in story
  Of Rozel-Tower,
And saw the boundless waters stretch in glory
  And heave in power.

O ocean vast! we heard thy song with wonder,
  Whilst waves marked time.
“Appeal, O Truth!” thou sang’st with tone of thunder,
  “And shine sublime!

“The world’s enslaved and hunted down by beagles, —
  To despots sold,
Souls of deep thinkers, soar like mighty eagles,
  The Right uphold.

“Be born; arise; o’er earth and wild waves bounding
  Peoples and suns!
Let darkness vanish; — tocsins be resounding,
  And flash, ye guns!

“And you, — who love no pomps of fog, or glamour,
  Who fear no shocks,
Brave foam and lightning, hurricane and clamor,
  Exiles — the rocks!”

TORU DUTT

THE TRUMPETS OF THE MIND.

(“Sonnez, clairons de la pensée!”)

[Bk. VII. i., March 19, 1853.]

Sound, sound for ever, Clarions of Thought!

When Joshua ‘gainst the high-walled city fought,
He marched around it with his banner high,
His troops in serried order following nigh,
But not a sword was drawn, no shaft outsprang,
Only the trumpets the shrill onset rang.
At the first blast, smiled scornfully the king,
And at the second sneered, half wondering:
“Hop’st thou with noise my stronghold to break down?”
At the third round, the ark of old renown
Swept forward, still the trumpets sounding loud,
And then the troops with ensigns waving proud.
Stepped out upon the old walls children dark
With horns to mock the notes and hoot the ark.
At the fourth turn, braving the Israelites,
Women appeared upon the crenelated heights —
Those battlements embrowned with age and rust —
And hurled upon the Hebrews stones and dust,
And spun and sang when weary of the game.
At the fifth circuit came the blind and lame,
And with wild uproar clamorous and high
Railed at the clarion ringing to the sky.
At the sixth time, upon a tower’s tall crest,
So high that there the eagle built his nest,
So hard that on it lightning lit in vain,
Appeared in merriment the king again:
“These Hebrew Jews musicians are, meseems!”
He scoffed, loud laughing, “but they live on dreams.”
The princes laughed submissive to the king,

Laughed all the courtiers in their glittering ring,
And thence the laughter spread through all the town.

At the seventh blast — the city walls fell down.

TORU DUTT.

AFTER THE COUP D’ÊTAT.

(“Devant les trahisons.”)

[Bk. VII, xvi., Jersey, Dec. 2, 1852.]

Before foul treachery and heads hung down,
  I’ll fold my arms, indignant but serene.
Oh! faith in fallen things — be thou my crown,
  My force, my joy, my prop on which I lean:

Yes, whilst *he’s* there, or struggle some or fall,
  O France, dear France, for whom I weep in vain.
Tomb of my sires, nest of my loves — my all,
  I ne’er shall see thee with these eyes again.

I shall not see thy sad, sad sounding shore,
  France, save my duty, I shall all forget;
Amongst the true and tried, I’ll tug my oar,
  And rest proscribed to brand the fawning set.

O bitter exile, hard, without a term,
  Thee I accept, nor seek nor care to know
Who have down-truckled ‘mid the men deemed firm,
  And who have fled that should have fought the foe.

If true a thousand stand, with them I stand;
  A hundred? ’tis enough: we’ll Sylla brave;
Ten? put my name down foremost in the band;
  One? — well, alone — until I find my grave.

TORU DUTT.

PATRIA.

("Là-haut, qui sourit.")

[Bk. VII. vii., September, 1853.]

Who smiles there? Is it
A stray spirit,
Or woman fair?
  Sombre yet soft the brow!
  Bow, nations, bow;
O soul in air,
  Speak — what art thou?

In grief the fair face seems —
What means those sudden gleams?
Our antique pride from dreams
Starts up, and beams
Its conquering glance, —
To make our sad hearts dance,
And wake in woods hushed long
The wild bird's song.
Angel of Day!
Our Hope, Love, Stay,
Thy countenance
  Lights land and sea
  Eternally,
Thy name is France
  Or Verity.

Fair angel in thy glass
When vile things move or pass,
Clouds in the skies amass;
Terrible, alas!
Thy stern commands are then:
"Form your battalions, men,

The flag display!”
And all obey.
Angel of might
Sent kings to smite,
The words in dark skies glance,
  ”Mené, Mené,” hiss
  Bolts that never miss!
Thy name is France,
  Or Nemesis.

As halcyons in May,
O nations, in his ray
Float and bask for aye,
Nor know decay!
One arm upraised to heaven
Seals the past forgiven;
One holds a sword
To quell hell’s horde,
Angel of God!
Thy wings stretch broad
  As heaven’s expanse!
  To shield and free
  Humanity!
Thy name is France,
 Or Liberty!

THE UNIVERSAL REPUBLIC.

("Temps futurs.")

[Part "Lux," Jersey, Dec. 16-20, 1853.]

O vision of the coming time!
When man has 'scaped the trackless slime
  And reached the desert spring;
When sands are crossed, the sward invites
The worn to rest 'mid rare delights
  And gratefully to sing.

E'en now the eye that's levelled high,
Though dimly, can the hope espy
  So solid soon, one day;
For every chain must then be broke,
And hatred none will dare evoke,
  And June shall scatter May.

E'en now amid our misery
The germ of Union many see,
  And through the hedge of thorn,
Like to a bee that dawn awakes,
On, Progress strides o'er shattered stakes,
  With solemn, scathing scorn.

Behold the blackness shrink, and flee!
Behold the world rise up so free
  Of coroneted things!
Whilst o'er the distant youthful States,
Like Amazonian bosom-plates,
  Spread Freedom's shielding wings.

Ye, liberated lands, we hail!
Your sails are whole despite the gale!
Your masts are firm, and will not fail —

  The triumph follows pain!
Hear forges roar! the hammer clanks —
It beats the time to nations’ thanks —
  At last, a *peaceful* strain!

’Tis rust, not gore, that gnaws the guns,
And shattered shells are but the runs
  Where warring insects cope;
And all the headsman’s racks and blades
And pincers, tools of tyrants’ aids,
  Are buried with the rope.

Upon the sky-line glows i’ the dark
The Sun that now is but a spark;
  But soon will be unfurled —
The glorious banner of us all,
The flag that rises ne’er to fall,
  Republic of the World!

LES CONTEMPLATIONS. — 1830-56.

THE VALE TO YOU, TO ME THE HEIGHTS.

A FABLE.

[Bk. III. vi., October, 1846.]

A lion camped beside a spring, where came the Bird
    Of Jove to drink:
When, haply, sought two kings, without their courtier herd,
    The moistened brink,
Beneath the palm — *they* always tempt pugnacious hands —
    Both travel-sore;
But quickly, on the recognition, out flew brands
    Straight to each core;
As dying breaths commingle, o’er them rose the call
    Of Eagle shrill:
“Yon crownèd couple, who supposed the world too small,
    Now one grave fill!
Chiefs blinded by your rage! each bleachèd sapless bone
    Becomes a pipe
Through which siroccos whistle, trodden ‘mong the stone
    By quail and snipe.
Folly’s liege-men, what boots such murd’rous raid,
    And mortal feud?
I, Eagle, dwell as friend with Leo — none afraid —
    In solitude:
At the same pool we bathe and quaff in placid mood.
    Kings, he and I;
For I to him leave prairie, desert sands and wood,
    And he to me the sky.”

H.L.W.

CHILDHOOD.

("L'enfant chantait.")

[Bk. I. xxiii., Paris, January, 1835.]

The small child sang; the mother, outstretched on the low bed,
  With anguish moaned, — fair Form pain should possess not long;
For, ever nigher, Death hovered around her head:
  I hearkened there this moan, and heard even there that song.

The child was but five years, and, close to the lattice, aye
  Made a sweet noise with games and with his laughter bright;
And the wan mother, aside this being the livelong day
  Carolling joyously, coughed hoarsely all the night.

The mother went to sleep 'mong them that sleep alway;
  And the blithe little lad began anew to sing…
Sorrow is like a fruit: God doth not therewith weigh
  Earthward the branch strong yet but for the blossoming.

NELSON R. TYERMAN.

SATIRE ON THE EARTH.

(“Une terre au flanc maigre.”)

[Bk. III. xi., October, 1840.]

A clod with rugged, meagre, rust-stained, weather-worried face,
Where care-filled creatures tug and delve to keep a worthless race;
And glean, begrudgedly, by all their unremitting toil,
Sour, scanty bread and fevered water from the ungrateful soil;
Made harder by their gloom than flints that gash their harried hands,
And harder in the things they call their hearts than wolfish bands,
Perpetuating faults, inventing crimes for paltry ends,
And yet, perversest beings! hating Death, their best of friends!
Pride in the powerful no more, no less than in the poor;
Hatred in both their bosoms; love in one, or, wondrous! two!
Fog in the valleys; on the mountains snowfields, ever new,
That only melt to send down waters for the liquid hell,
In which, their strongest sons and fairest daughters vilely fell!
No marvel, Justice, Modesty dwell far apart and high,
Where they can feebly hear, and, rarer, answer victims’ cry.
At both extremes, unflinching frost, the centre scorching hot;
Land storms that strip the orchards nude, leave beaten grain to rot;
Oceans that rise with sudden force to wash the bloody land,
Where War, amid sob-drowning cheers, claps weapons in each hand.
And this to those who, luckily, abide afar —
This is, ha! ha! *a star*!

HOW BUTTERFLIES ARE BORN.

(“Comme le matin rit sur les roses.”)

[Bk. I. xii.]

The dawn is smiling on the dew that covers
The tearful roses — lo, the little lovers —
That kiss the buds and all the flutterings
In jasmine bloom, and privet, of white wings
That go and come, and fly, and peep, and hide
With muffled music, murmured far and wide!
Ah, Springtime, when we think of all the lays
That dreamy lovers send to dreamy Mays,
Of the proud hearts within a billet bound,
Of all the soft silk paper that men wound,
The messages of love that mortals write,
Filled with intoxication of delight,
Written in April, and before the Maytime
Shredded and flown, playthings for the winds’ playtime.
We dream that all white butterflies above,
Who seek through clouds or waters souls to love,
And leave their lady mistress to despair,
To flirt with flowers, as tender and more fair,
Are but torn love-letters, that through the skies
Flutter, and float, and change to Butterflies.

A. LANG.

HAVE YOU NOTHING TO SAY FOR YOURSELF?

(“Si vous n’avez rien à me dire.”)

[Bk. II. iv., May, 18 — .]

Speak, if you love me, gentle maiden!
  Or haunt no more my lone retreat.
If not for me thy heart be laden,
  Why trouble mine with smiles so sweet?

Ah! tell me why so mute, fair maiden,
  Whene’er as thus so oft we meet?
If not for me thy heart be, Aideen,
  Why trouble mine with smiles so sweet?

Why, when my hand unconscious pressing,
  Still keep untold the maiden dream?
In fancy thou art thus caressing
  The while we wander by the stream.

If thou art pained when I am near thee,
  Why in my path so often stray?
For in my heart I love yet fear thee,
  And fain would fly, yet fondly stay.

C.H. KENNY.

INSCRIPTION FOR A CRUCIFIX.

(“Vous qui pleurez, venez à ce Dieu.”)

[Bk. III. iv., March, 1842.]

Ye weepers, the Mourner o’er mourners behold!
Ye wounded, come hither — the Healer enfold!
Ye gloomy ones, brighten ‘neath smiles quelling care —
Or pass — for *this* Comfort is found ev’rywhere.

DEATH, IN LIFE.

(“Ceux-ci partent.”)

[Bk. III. v., February, 1843.]

We pass — these sleep
Beneath the shade where deep-leaved boughs
Bend o’er the furrows the Great Reaper ploughs,
And gentle summer winds in many sweep
Whirl in eddying waves
The dead leaves o’er the graves.

And the living sigh:
Forgotten ones, so soon your memories die.
Ye never more may list the wild bird’s song,
Or mingle in the crowded city-throng.
Ye must ever dwell in gloom,
‘Mid the silence of the tomb.

And the dead reply:
God giveth us His life. Ye die,
Your barren lives are tilled with tears,
For glory, ye are clad with fears.
Oh, living ones! oh, earthly shades!
We live; your beauty clouds and fades.

THE DYING CHILD TO ITS MOTHER.

(“Oh! vous aurez trop dit.”)

[Bk. III. xiv., April, 1843.]

Ah, you said too often to your angel
  There are other angels in the sky —
There, where nothing changes, nothing suffers,
  Sweet it were to enter in on high.

To that dome on marvellous pilasters,
  To that tent roofed o’er with colored bars,
That blue garden full of stars like lilies,
  And of lilies beautiful as stars.

And you said it was a place most joyous,
  All our poor imaginings above,
With the wingèd cherubim for playmates,
  And the good God evermore to love.

Sweet it were to dwell there in all seasons,
  Like a taper burning day and night,
Near to the child Jesus and the Virgin,
  In that home so beautiful and bright.

But you should have told him, hapless mother,
  Told your child so frail and gentle too,
That you were all his in life’s beginning,
  But that also he belonged to you.

For the mother watches o’er the infant,
  He must rise up in her latter days,
She will need the man that was her baby
  To stand by her when her strength decays.

Ah, you did not tell enough your darling
  That God made us in this lower life,
Woman for the man, and man for woman,
  In our pains, our pleasures and our strife.

So that one sad day, O loss, O sorrow!
  The sweet creature left you all alone;
’Twas your own hand hung the cage door open,
  Mother, and your pretty bird is flown.

BP. ALEXANDER.

EPITAPH.

("Il vivait, il jouait.")

[Bk. III. xv., May, 1843.]

He lived and ever played, the tender smiling thing.
What need, O Earth, to have plucked this flower from blossoming?
Hadst thou not then the birds with rainbow-colors bright,
  The stars and the great woods, the wan wave, the blue sky?
  What need to have rapt this child from her thou hadst placed him by —
Beneath those other flowers to have hid this flower from sight?

Because of this one child thou hast no more of might,
O star-girt Earth, his death yields thee not higher delight!
But, ah! the mother's heart with woe for ever wild,
  This heart whose sovran bliss brought forth so bitter birth —
  This world as vast as thou, even *thou*, O sorrowless Earth,
Is desolate and void because of this one child!

NELSON K. TYERMAN.

ST. JOHN.

("Un jour, le morne esprit.")

[Bk. VI. vii., Jersey, September, 1855.]

One day, the sombre soul, the Prophet most sublime
  At Patmos who aye dreamed,
And tremblingly perused, without the vast of Time,
  Words that with hell-fire gleamed,

Said to his eagle: "Bird, spread wings for loftiest flight —
  Needs must I see His Face!"
The eagle soared. At length, far beyond day and night,
  Lo! the all-sacred Place!

And John beheld the Way whereof no angel knows
  The name, nor there hath trod;
And, lo! the Place fulfilled with shadow that aye glows
  Because of very God.

NELSON R. TYERMAN.

THE POET’S SIMPLE FAITH.

You say, “Where goest thou?” I cannot tell,
And still go on. If but the way be straight,
It cannot go amiss! before me lies
Dawn and the Day; the Night behind me; that
Suffices me; I break the bounds; I *see*,
And nothing more; *believe*, and nothing less.
My future is not one of my concerns.

PROF. E. DOWDEN.

I AM CONTENT.

(“J’habite l’ombre.”)

True; I dwell lone,
Upon sea-beaten cape,
Mere raft of stone;
Whence all escape
Save one who shrinks not from the gloom,
And will not take the coward’s leap i’ the tomb.

My bedroom rocks
With breezes; quakes in storms,
When dangling locks
Of seaweed mock the forms
Of straggling clouds that trail o’erhead
Like tresses from disrupted coffin-lead.

Upon the sky
Crape palls are often nailed
With stars. Mine eye
Has scared the gull that sailed
To blacker depths with shrillest scream,
Still fainter, till like voices in a dream.

My days become
More plaintive, wan, and pale,
While o’er the foam
I see, borne by the gale,
Infinity! in kindness sent —
To find me ever saying: “I’m content!”

LA LÉGENDE DES SIÈCLES.

CAIN.

(“Lorsque avec ses enfants Cain se fût enfui.”)

[Bk. II]

Then, with his children, clothed in skins of brutes,
Dishevelled, livid, rushing through the storm,
Cain fled before Jehovah. As night fell
The dark man reached a mount in a great plain,
And his tired wife and his sons, out of breath,
Said: “Let us lie down on the earth and sleep.”
Cain, sleeping not, dreamed at the mountain foot.
Raising his head, in that funereal heaven
He saw an eye, a great eye, in the night
Open, and staring at him in the gloom.
“I am too near,” he said, and tremblingly woke up
His sleeping sons again, and his tired wife,
And fled through space and darkness. Thirty days
He went, and thirty nights, nor looked behind;
Pale, silent, watchful, shaking at each sound;
No rest, no sleep, till he attained the strand
Where the sea washes that which since was Asshur.
“Here pause,” he said, “for this place is secure;
Here may we rest, for this is the world’s end.”
And he sat down; when, lo! in the sad sky,
The selfsame Eye on the horizon’s verge,
And the wretch shook as in an ague fit.
“Hide me!” he cried; and all his watchful sons,
Their finger on their lip, stared at their sire.
Cain said to Jabal (father of them that dwell
In tents): “Spread here the curtain of thy tent,”
And they spread wide the floating canvas roof,
And made it fast and fixed it down with lead.

“You see naught now,” said Zillah then, fair child
The daughter of his eldest, sweet as day.
But Cain replied, “That Eye — I see it still.”
And Jubal cried (the father of all those
That handle harp and organ): “I will build
A sanctuary;” and he made a wall of bronze,
And set his sire behind it. But Cain moaned,
“That Eye is glaring at me ever.” Henoch cried:
“Then must we make a circle vast of towers,
So terrible that nothing dare draw near;
Build we a city with a citadel;
Build we a city high and close it fast.”
Then Tubal Cain (instructor of all them
That work in brass and iron) built a tower —
Enormous, superhuman. While he wrought,
His fiery brothers from the plain around
Hunted the sons of Enoch and of Seth;
They plucked the eyes out of whoever passed,
And hurled at even arrows to the stars.
They set strong granite for the canvas wall,
And every block was clamped with iron chains.
It seemed a city made for hell. Its towers,
With their huge masses made night in the land.
The walls were thick as mountains. On the door
They graved: “Let not God enter here.” This done,
And having finished to cement and build
In a stone tower, they set him in the midst.
To him, still dark and haggard, “Oh, my sire,
Is the Eye gone?” quoth Zillah tremblingly.
But Cain replied: “Nay, it is even there.”
Then added: “I will live beneath the earth,
As a lone man within his sepulchre.
I will see nothing; will be seen of none.”
They digged a trench, and Cain said: “’Tis enow,”
As he went down alone into the vault;
But when he sat, so ghost-like, in his chair,

And they had closed the dungeon o’er his head,
The Eye was in the tomb and fixed on Cain.

Dublin University Magazine

BOAZ ASLEEP.

(“Booz s’était couché.”)

[Bk. II. vi.]

At work within his barn since very early,
  Fairly tired out with toiling all the day,
  Upon the small bed where he always lay
Boaz was sleeping by his sacks of barley.

Barley and wheat-fields he possessed, and well,
  Though rich, loved justice; wherefore all the flood
  That turned his mill-wheels was unstained with mud
And in his smithy blazed no fire of hell.

His beard was silver, as in April all
  A stream may be; he did not grudge a stook.
  When the poor gleaner passed, with kindly look,
Quoth he, “Of purpose let some handfuls fall.”

He walked his way of life straight on and plain,
  With justice clothed, like linen white and clean,
  And ever rustling towards the poor, I ween,
Like public fountains ran his sacks of grain.

Good master, faithful friend, in his estate
  Frugal yet generous, beyond the youth
  He won regard of woman, for in sooth
The young man may be fair — the old man’s great.

Life’s primal source, unchangeable and bright,
  The old man entereth, the day eterne;
  And in the young man’s eye a flame may burn,
But in the old man’s eye one seeth light.

As Jacob slept, or Judith, so full deep
  Slept Boaz ‘neath the leaves. Now it betided,
  Heaven’s gate being partly open, that there glided
A fair dream forth, and hovered o’er his sleep.

And in his dream to heaven, the blue and broad,
  Right from his loins an oak tree grew amain.
  His race ran up it far, like a long chain;
Below it sung a king, above it died a God.

Whereupon Boaz murmured in his heart,
  ”The number of my years is past fourscore:
  How may this be? I have not any more,
Or son, or wife; yea, she who had her part.

“In this my couch, O Lord! is now in Thine;
  And she, half living, I half dead within,
  Our beings still commingle and are twin,
It cannot be that I should found a line!

“Youth hath triumphal mornings; its days bound
  From night, as from a victory. But such
  A trembling as the birch-tree’s to the touch
Of winter is an eld, and evening closes round.

“I bow myself to death, as lone to meet
  The water bow their fronts athirst.” He said.
  The cedar feeleth not the rose’s head,
Nor he the woman’s presence at his feet!

For while he slept, the Moabitess Ruth
  Lay at his feet, expectant of his waking.
  He knowing not what sweet guile she was making;
She knowing not what God would have in sooth.

Asphodel scents did Gilgal’s breezes bring —
  Through nuptial shadows, questionless, full fast

  The angels sped, for momently there passed
A something blue which seemed to be a wing.

Silent was all in Jezreel and Ur —
  The stars were glittering in the heaven’s dusk meadows.
  Far west among those flowers of the shadows.
The thin clear crescent lustrous over her,

Made Ruth raise question, looking through the bars
  Of heaven, with eyes half-oped, what God, what comer
  Unto the harvest of the eternal summer,
Had flung his golden hook down on the field of stars.

BP. ALEXANDER.

SONG OF THE GERMAN LANZKNECHT

("Sonnex, clarions!")

[Bk. VI. vii.]

Flourish the trumpet! and rattle the drum!
The *Reiters* are mounted! the Reiters will come!

When our bullets cease singing
And long swords cease ringing
  On backplates of fearsomest foes in full flight,
We'll dig up their dollars
To string for girls' collars —
  They'll jingle around them before it is night!
      When flourish the trumpets, etc.

We're the Emperor's winners
Of right royal dinners,
  Where cities are served up and flanked by estates,
While we wallow in claret,
Knowing not how to spare it,
  Though beer is less likely to muddle our pates —
      While flourish the trumpets, etc.

Gods of battle! red-handed!
Wise it was to have banded
  Such arms as are these for embracing of gain!
Hearken to each war-vulture
Crying, "Down with all culture
  Of land or religion!" *Hoch*! to our refrain
      Of flourish the trumpets, etc.

Give us "bones of the devil"
To exchange in our revel
  The ingot, the gem, and yellow doubloon;
Coronets are but playthings —

We reck not who say things
  When the Reiters have ridden to death! none too soon! —
To flourish of trumpet and rattle of drum,
The Reiters will finish as firm as they come!

H.L.W.

KING CANUTE.

(“Un jour, Kanut mourut.”)

[Bk. X. i.]

King Canute died. Encoffined he was laid.
Of Aarhuus came the Bishop prayers to say,
And sang a hymn upon his tomb, and held
That Canute was a saint — Canute the Great,
That from his memory breathed celestial perfume,
And that they saw him, they the priests, in glory,
Seated at God’s right hand, a prophet crowned.

I.

Evening came,
And hushed the organ in the holy place,
And the priests, issuing from the temple doors,
Left the dead king in peace. Then he arose,
Opened his gloomy eyes, and grasped his sword,
And went forth loftily. The massy walls
Yielded before the phantom, like a mist.

There is a sea where Aarhuus, Altona,
And Elsinore’s vast domes and shadowy towers
Glass in deep waters. Over this he went
Dark, and still Darkness listened for his foot
Inaudible, itself being but a dream.
Straight to Mount Savo went he, gnawed by time,
And thus, “O mountain buffeted of storms,
Give me of thy huge mantle of deep snow
To frame a winding-sheet.” The mountain knew him,
Nor dared refuse, and with his sword Canute
Cut from his flank white snow, enough to make
The garment he desired, and then he cried,
“Old mountain! death is dumb, but tell me thou

The way to God." More deep each dread ravine
And hideous hollow yawned, and sadly thus
Answered that hoar associate of the clouds:
"Spectre, I know not, I am always here."
Canute departed, and with head erect,
All white and ghastly in his robe of snow,
Went forth into great silence and great night
By Iceland and Norway. After him
Gloom swallowed up the universe. He stood
A sovran kingdomless, a lonely ghost
Confronted with Immensity. He saw
The awful Infinite, at whose portal pale
Lightning sinks dying; Darkness, skeleton
Whose joints are nights, and utter Formlessness
Moving confusedly in the horrible dark
Inscrutable and blind. No star was there,
Yet something like a haggard gleam; no sound
But the dull tide of Darkness, and her dumb
And fearful shudder. "'Tis the tomb," he said,
"God is beyond!" Three steps he took, then cried:
'Twas deathly as the grave, and not a voice
Responded, nor came any breath to sway
The snowy mantle, with unsullied white
Emboldening the spectral wanderer.
Sudden he marked how, like a gloomy star,
A spot grew broad upon his livid robe;
Slowly it widened, raying darkness forth;
And Canute proved it with his spectral hands
It was a drop of blood.

R. GARNETT.

II.

But he saw nothing; space was black — no sound.
"Forward," said Canute, raising his proud head.
There fell a second stain beside the first,

Then it grew larger, and the Cimbrian chief
Stared at the thick vague darkness, and saw naught.
Still as a bloodhound follows on his track,
Sad he went on. ‘There fell a third red stain
On the white winding-sheet. He had never fled;
Howbeit Canute forward went no more,
But turned on that side where the sword arm hangs.
A drop of blood, as if athwart a dream,
Fell on the shroud, and reddened his right hand.
Then, as in reading one turns back a page,
A second time he changed his course, and turned
To the dim left. There fell a drop of blood.
Canute drew back, trembling to be alone,
And wished he had not left his burial couch.
But, when a blood-drop fell again, he stopped,
Stooped his pale head, and tried to make a prayer.
Then fell a drop, and the prayer died away
In savage terror. Darkly he moved on,
A hideous spectre hesitating, white,
And ever as he went, a drop of blood
Implacably from the darkness broke away
And stained that awful whiteness. He beheld
Shaking, as doth a poplar in the wind,
Those stains grow darker and more numerous:
Another, and another, and another.
They seem to light up that funereal gloom,
And mingling in the folds of that white sheet,
Made it a cloud of blood. He went, and went,
And still from that unfathomable vault
The red blood dropped upon him drop by drop,
Always, for ever — without noise, as though
From the black feet of some night-gibbeted corpse.
Alas! Who wept those formidable tears?
The Infinite! — Toward Heaven, of the good
Attainable, through the wild sea of night,
That hath not ebb nor flow, Canute went on,
And ever walking, came to a closed door,

That from beneath showed a mysterious light.
Then he looked down upon his winding-sheet,
For that was the great place, the sacred place,
That was a portion of the light of God,
And from behind that door Hosannas rang.
The winding-sheet was red, and Canute stopped.
This is why Canute from the light of day
Draws ever back, and hath not dared appear
Before the Judge whose face is as the sun.
This is why still remaineth the dark king
Out in the night, and never having power
To bring his robe back to its first pure state,
But feeling at each step a blood-drop fall,
Wanders eternally ‘neath the vast black heaven.

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THE BOY-KING’S PRAYER.

(“Le cheval galopait toujours.”)

[Bk. XV. ii. 10.]

The good steed flew o’er river and o’er plain,
Till far away, — no need of spur or rein.
The child, half rapture, half solicitude,
Looks back anon, in fear to be pursued;
Shakes lest some raging brother of his sire
Leap from those rocks that o’er the path aspire.

On the rough granite bridge, at evening’s fall,
The white horse paused by Compostella’s wall,
(’Twas good St. James that reared those arches tall,)
Through the dim mist stood out each belfry dome,
And the boy hailed the paradise of home.

Close to the bridge, set on high stage, they meet
A Christ of stone, the Virgin at his feet.
A taper lighted that dear pardoning face,
More tender in the shade that wrapped the place,
And the child stayed his horse, and in the shine
Of the wax taper knelt down at the shrine.

“O, my good God! O, Mother Maiden sweet!”
He said, “I was the worm beneath men’s feet;
My father’s brethren held me in their thrall,
But Thou didst send the Paladin of Gaul,
O Lord! and show’dst what different spirits move
The good men and the evil; those who love
And those who love not. I had been as they,
But Thou, O God! hast saved both life and soul to-day.
I saw Thee in that noble knight; I saw
Pure light, true faith, and honor’s sacred law,
My Father, — and I learnt that monarchs must

Compassionate the weak, and unto all be just.
O Lady Mother! O dear Jesus! thus
Bowed at the cross where Thou didst bleed for us,
I swear to hold the truth that now I learn,
Leal to the loyal, to the traitor stern,
And ever just and nobly mild to be,
Meet scholar of that Prince of Chivalry;
And here Thy shrine bear witness, Lord, for me.”

The horse of Roland, hearing the boy tell
His vow, looked round and spoke: “O King, ’tis well!”
Then on the charger mounted the child-king,
And rode into the town, while all the bells ‘gan ring.

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EVIRADNUS.

THE KNIGHT ERRANT.

(“Qu’est-ce que Sigismond et Ladislas ont dit.”)

[Bk. XV. iii. 1.]

I.

THE ADVENTURER SETS OUT.

What was it Sigismond and Ladisläus said?

I know not if the rock, or tree o’erhead,
Had heard their speech; — but when the two spoke low,
Among the trees, a shudder seemed to go
Through all their branches, just as if that way
A beast had passed to trouble and dismay.
More dark the shadow of the rock was seen,
And then a morsel of the shade, between
The sombre trees, took shape as it would seem
Like spectre walking in the sunset’s gleam.

It is not monster rising from its lair,
Nor phantom of the foliage and the air,
It is not morsel of the granite’s shade
That walks in deepest hollows of the glade.
’Tis not a vampire nor a spectre pale
But living man in rugged coat of mail.
It is Alsatia’s noble Chevalier,
Eviradnus the brave, that now is here.

The men who spoke he recognized the while
He rested in the thicket; words of guile
Most horrible were theirs as they passed on,
And to the ears of Eviradnus one —
One word had come which roused him. Well he knew
The land which lately he had journeyed through.

He down the valley went into the inn
Where he had left his horse and page, Gasclin.
The horse had wanted drink, and lost a shoe;
And now, “Be quick!” he said, “with what you do,
For business calls me, I must not delay.”
He strides the saddle and he rides away.

II.

EVIRADNUS.

Eviradnus was growing old apace,
The weight of years had left its hoary trace,
But still of knights the most renowned was he,
Model of bravery and purity.
His blood he spared not; ready day or night
To punish crime, his dauntless sword shone bright
In his unblemished hand; holy and white
And loyal all his noble life had been,
A Christian Samson coming on the scene.
With fist alone the gate he battered down
Of Sickingen in flames, and saved the town.
’Twas he, indignant at the honor paid
To crime, who with his heel an onslaught made
Upon Duke Lupus’ shameful monument,
Tore down, the statue he to fragments rent;
Then column of the Strasburg monster bore
To bridge of Wasselonne, and threw it o’er
Into the waters deep. The people round
Blazon the noble deeds that so abound
From Altorf unto Chaux-de-Fonds, and say,
When he rests musing in a dreamy way,
“Behold, ’tis Charlemagne!” Tawny to see
And hairy, and seven feet high was he,
Like John of Bourbon. Roaming hill or wood
He looked a wolf was striving to do good.
Bound up in duty, he of naught complained,

The cry for help his aid at once obtained.
Only he mourned the baseness of mankind,
And — that the beds too short he still doth find.
When people suffer under cruel kings,
With pity moved, he to them succor brings.
’Twas he defended Alix from her foes
As sword of Urraca — he ever shows
His strength is for the feeble and oppressed;
Father of orphans he, and all distressed!
Kings of the Rhine in strongholds were by him
Boldly attacked, and tyrant barons grim.
He freed the towns — confronting in his lair
Hugo the Eagle; boldly did he dare
To break the collar of Saverne, the ring
Of Colmar, and the iron torture thing
Of Schlestadt, and the chain that Haguenau bore.
Such Eviradnus was a wrong before,
Good but most terrible. In the dread scale
Which princes weighted with their horrid tale
Of craft and violence, and blood and ill,
And fire and shocking deeds, his sword was still
God’s counterpoise displayed. Ever alert
More evil from the wretched to avert,
Those hapless ones who ‘neath Heaven’s vault at night
Raise suppliant hands. His lance loved not the plight
Of mouldering in the rack, of no avail,
His battle-axe slipped from supporting nail
Quite easily; ’twas ill for action base
To come so near that he the thing could trace.
The steel-clad champion death drops all around
As glaciers water. Hero ever found
Eviradnus is kinsman of the race
Of Amadys of Gaul, and knights of Thrace,
He smiles at age. For he who never asked
For quarter from mankind — shall he be tasked
To beg of Time for mercy? Rather he
Would girdle up his loins, like Baldwin be.

Aged he is, but of a lineage rare;
The least intrepid of the birds that dare
Is not the eagle barbed. What matters age,
The years but fire him with a holy rage.
Though late from Palestine, he is not spent, —
With age he wrestles, firm in his intent.

III.

IN THE FOREST.

If in the woodland traveller there had been
That eve, who lost himself, strange sight he'd seen.
Quite in the forest's heart a lighted space
Arose to view; in that deserted place
A lone, abandoned hall with light aglow
The long neglect of centuries did show.
The castle-towers of Corbus in decay
Were girt by weeds and growths that had their way.
Couch-grass and ivy, and wild eglantine
In subtle scaling warfare all combine.
Subject to such attacks three hundred years,
The donjon yields, and ruin now appears,
E'en as by leprosy the wild boars die,
In moat the crumbled battlements now lie;
Around the snake-like bramble twists its rings;
Freebooter sparrows come on daring wings
To perch upon the swivel-gun, nor heed
Its murmuring growl when pecking in their greed
The mulberries ripe. With insolence the thorn
Thrives on the desolation so forlorn.
But winter brings revenges; then the Keep
Wakes all vindictive from its seeming sleep,
Hurls down the heavy rain, night after night,
Thanking the season's all-resistless might;
And, when the gutters choke, its gargoyles four

From granite mouths in anger spit and pour
Upon the hated ivy hour by hour.

As to the sword rust is, so lichens are
To towering citadel with which they war.
Alas! for Corbus — dreary, desolate,
And yet its woes the winters mitigate.
It rears itself among convulsive throes
That shake its ruins when the tempest blows.
Winter, the savage warrior, pleases well,
With its storm clouds, the mighty citadel, —
Restoring it to life. The lightning flash
Strikes like a thief and flies; the winds that crash
Sound like a clarion, for the Tempest bluff
Is Battle’s sister. And when wild and rough,
The north wind blows, the tower exultant cries
“Behold me!” When hail-hurling gales arise
Of blustering Equinox, to fan the strife,
It stands erect, with martial ardor rife,
A joyous soldier! When like yelping hound
Pursued by wolves, November comes to bound
In joy from rock to rock, like answering cheer
To howling January now so near —
“Come on!” the Donjon cries to blasts o’erhead —
It has seen Attila, and knows not dread.
Oh, dismal nights of contest in the rain
And mist, that furious would the battle gain,
‘The tower braves all, though angry skies pour fast
The flowing torrents, river-like and vast.
From their eight pinnacles the gorgons bay,
And scattered monsters, in their stony way,
Are growling heard; the rampart lions gnaw
The misty air and slush with granite maw,
The sleet upon the griffins spits, and all
The Saurian monsters, answering to the squall,
Flap wings; while through the broken ceiling fall
Torrents of rain upon the forms beneath,

Dragons and snak'd Medusas gnashing teeth
In the dismantled rooms. Like armored knight
The granite Castle fights with all its might,
Resisting through the winter. All in vain,
The heaven's bluster, January's rain,
And those dread elemental powers we call
The Infinite — the whirlwinds that appall —
Thunder and waterspouts; and winds that shake
As 'twere a tree its ripened fruit to take.
The winds grow wearied, warring with the tower,
The noisy North is out of breath, nor power
Has any blast old Corbus to defeat,
It still has strength their onslaughts worst to meet.
Thus, spite of briers and thistles, the old tower
Remains triumphant through the darkest hour;
Superb as pontiff, in the forest shown,
Its rows of battlements make triple crown;
At eve, its silhouette is finely traced
Immense and black — showing the Keep is placed
On rocky throne, sublime and high; east, west,
And north and south, at corners four, there rest
Four mounts; Aptar, where flourishes the pine,
And Toxis, where the elms grow green and fine;
Crobius and Bleyda, giants in their might,
Against the stormy winds to stand and fight,
And these above its diadem uphold
Night's living canopy of clouds unrolled.

The herdsman fears, and thinks its shadow creeps
To follow him; and superstition keeps
Such hold that Corbus as a terror reigns;
Folks say the Fort a target still remains
For the Black Archer — and that it contains
The cave where the Great Sleeper still sleeps sound.
The country people all the castle round
Are frightened easily, for legends grow
And mix with phantoms of the mind; we know

The hearth is cradle of such fantasies,
And in the smoke the cotter sees arise
From low-thatched but he traces cause of dread.
Thus rendering thanks that he is lowly bred,
Because from such none look for valorous deeds.
The peasant flies the Tower, although it leads
A noble knight to seek adventure there,
And, from his point of honor, dangers dare.

Thus very rarely passer-by is seen;
But — it might be with twenty years between,
Or haply less — at unfixed interval
There would a semblance be of festival.
A Seneschal and usher would appear,
And troops of servants many baskets bear.
Then were, in mystery, preparations made,
And they departed — for till night none stayed.
But ‘twixt the branches gazers could descry
The blackened hall lit up most brilliantly.
None dared approach — and this the reason why.

IV.

THE CUSTOM OF LUSACE.

When died a noble Marquis of Lusace
’Twas custom for the heir who filled his place
Before assuming princely pomp and power
To sup one night in Corbus’ olden tower.
From this weird meal he passed to the degree
Of Prince and Margrave; nor could ever he
Be thought brave knight, or she — if woman claim
The rank — be reckoned of unblemished fame
Till they had breathed the air of ages gone,
The funeral odors, in the nest alone
Of its dead masters. Ancient was the race;
To trace the upward stem of proud Lusace
Gives one a vertigo; descended they

From ancestor of Attila, men say;
Their race to him — through Pagans — they hark back;
Becoming Christians, race they thought to track
Through Lechus, Plato, Otho to combine
With Ursus, Stephen, in a lordly line.
Of all those masters of the country round
That were on Northern Europe's boundary found —
At first were waves and then the dykes were reared —
Corbus in double majesty appeared,
Castle on hill and town upon the plain;
And one who mounted on the tower could gain
A view beyond the pines and rocks, of spires
That pierce the shade the distant scene acquires;
A walled town is it, but 'tis not ally
Of the old citadel's proud majesty;
Unto itself belonging this remained.
Often a castle was thus self-sustained
And equalled towns; witness in Lombardy
Crama, and Plato too in Tuscany,
And in Apulia Barletta; — each one
Was powerful as a town, and dreaded none.
Corbus ranked thus; its precincts seemed to hold
The reflex of its mighty kings of old;
Their great events had witness in these walls,
Their marriages were here and funerals,
And mostly here it was that they were born;
And here crowned Barons ruled with pride and scorn;
Cradle of Scythian majesty this place.
Now each new master of this ancient race
A duty owed to ancestors which he
Was bound to carry on. The law's decree
It was that he should pass alone the night
Which made him king, as in their solemn sight.
Just at the forest's edge a clerk was met
With wine in sacred cup and purpose set,
A wine mysterious, which the heir must drink
To cause deep slumber till next day's soft brink.

Then to the castle tower he wends his way,
And finds a supper laid with rich display.
He sups and sleeps: then to his slumbering eyes
The shades of kings from Bela all arise.
None dare the tower to enter on this night,
But when the morning dawns, crowds are in sight
The dreamer to deliver, — whom half dazed,
And with the visions of the night amazed,
They to the old church take, where rests the dust
Of Borivorus; then the bishop must,
With fervent blessings on his eyes and mouth,
Put in his hands the stony hatchets both,
With which — even like death impartially —
Struck Attila, with one arm dexterously
The south, and with the other arm the north.

This day the town the threatening flag set forth
Of Marquis Swantibore, the monster he
Who in the wood tied up his wife, to be
Devoured by wolves, together with the bull
Of which with jealousy his heart was full.

Even when woman took the place of heir
The tower of Corbus claimed the supper there;
’Twas law — the woman trembled, but must dare.

V.

THE MARCHIONESS MAHAUD.

Niece of the Marquis — John the Striker named —
Mahaud to-day the marquisate has claimed.
A noble dame — the crown is hers by right:
As woman she has graces that delight.
A queen devoid of beauty is not queen,
She needs the royalty of beauty’s mien;
God in His harmony has equal ends
For cedar that resists, and reed that bends,

And good it is a woman sometimes rules,
Holds in her hand the power, and manners schools,
And laws and mind; — succeeding master proud,
With gentle voice and smile she leads the crowd,
The sombre human troop. But sweet Mahaud
On evil days had fallen; gentle, good,
Alas! she held the sceptre like a flower;
Timid yet gay, imprudent for the hour,
And careless too. With Europe all in throes,
Though twenty years she now already knows,
She has refused to marry, although oft
Entreated. It is time an arm less soft
Than hers — a manly arm — supported her;
Like to the rainbow she, one might aver,
Shining on high between the cloud and rain,
Or like the ewe that gambols on the plain
Between the bear and tiger; innocent,
She has two neighbors of most foul intent:
For foes the Beauty has, in life’s pure spring,
The German Emp’ror and the Polish King.

VI.

THE TWO NEIGHBORS.

The difference this betwixt the evil pair,
Faithless to God — for laws without a care —
One was the claw, the other one the will
Controlling. Yet to mass they both went still,
And on the rosary told their beads each day.
But none the less the world believed that they
Unto the powers of hell their souls had sold.
Even in whispers men each other told
The details of the pact which they had signed
With that dark power, the foe of human kind;
In whispers, for the crowd had mortal dread
Of them so high, and woes that they had spread.

One might be vengeance and the other hate,
Yet lived they side by side, in powerful state
And close alliance. All the people near
From red horizon dwelt in abject fear,
Mastered by them; their figures darkly grand
Had ruddy reflex from the wasted land,
And fires, and towns they sacked. Besides the one,
Like David, poet was, the other shone
As fine musician — rumor spread their fame,
Declaring them divine, until each name
In Italy’s fine sonnets met with praise.
The ancient hierarch in those old days
Had custom strange, a now forgotten thing,
It was a European plan that King
Of France was marquis, and th’ imperial head
Of Germany was duke; there was no need
To class the other kings, but barons they,
Obedient vassals unto Rome, their stay.
The King of Poland was but simple knight,
Yet now, for once, had strange unwonted right,
And, as exception to the common state,
This one Sarmatian King was held as great
As German Emperor; and each knew how
His evil part to play, nor mercy show.
The German had one aim, it was to take
All land he could, and it his own to make.
The Pole already having Baltic shore,
Seized Celtic ports, still needing more and more.
On all the Northern Sea his crafts roused fear:
Iceland beheld his demon navy near.
Antwerp the German burnt; and Prussias twain
Bowed to the yoke. The Polish King was fain
To help the Russian Spotocus — his aid
Was like the help that in their common trade
A sturdy butcher gives a weaker one.
The King it is who seizes, and this done,
The Emp’ror pillages, usurping right

In war Teutonic, settled but by might.
The King in Jutland cynic footing gains,
The weak coerced, the while with cunning pains
The strong are duped. But ’tis a law they make
That their accord themselves should never break.
From Arctic seas to cities Transalpine,
Their hideous talons, curved for sure rapine,
Scrape o’er and o’er the mournful continent,
Their plans succeed, and each is well content.
Thus under Satan’s all paternal care
They brothers are, this royal bandit pair.
Oh, noxious conquerors! with transient rule
Chimera heads — ambition can but fool.
Their misty minds but harbor rottenness
Loathsome and fetid, and all barrenness —
Their deeds to ashes turn, and, hydra-bred,
The mystic skeleton is theirs to dread.
The daring German and the cunning Pole
Noted to-day a woman had control
Of lands, and watched Mahaud like evil spies;
And from the Emp’ror’s cruel mouth — with dyes
Of wrath empurpled — came these words of late:
“The empire wearies of the wallet weight
Hung at its back — this High and Low Lusace,
Whose hateful load grows heavier apace,
That now a woman holds its ruler’s place.”
Threatening, and blood suggesting, every word;
The watchful Pole was silent — but he heard.

Two monstrous dangers; but the heedless one
Babbles and smiles, and bids all care begone —
Likes lively speech — while all the poor she makes
To love her, and the taxes off she takes.
A life of dance and pleasure she has known —
A woman always; in her jewelled crown
It is the pearl she loves — not cutting gems,
For these can wound, and mark men’s diadems.

She pays the hire of Homer’s copyists,
And in the Courts of Love presiding, lists.

Quite recently unto her Court have come
Two men — unknown their names or native home,
Their rank or race; but one plays well the lute,
The other is a troubadour; both suit
The taste of Mahaud, when on summer eve,
‘Neath opened windows, they obtain her leave
To sing upon the terrace, and relate
The charming tales that do with music mate.
In August the Moravians have their fête,
But it is radiant June in which Lusace
Must consecrate her noble Margrave race.
Thus in the weird and old ancestral tower
For Mahaud now has come the fateful hour,
The lonely supper which her state decrees.
What matters this to flowers, and birds, and trees,
And clouds and fountains? That the people may
Still bear their yoke — have kings to rule alway?
The water flows, the wind in passing by
In murmuring tones takes up the questioning cry.

VII.

THE BANQUET HALL.

The old stupendous hall has but one door,
And in the dusk it seems that more and more
The walls recede in space unlimited.
At the far end there is a table spread
That in the dreary void with splendor shines;
For ceiling we behold but rafter lines.
The table is arranged for one sole guest,
A solitary chair doth near it rest,
Throne-like, ‘neath canopy that droopeth down
From the black beams; upon the walls are shown
The painted histories of the olden might,

The King of the Wends Thassilo’s stern fight
On land with Nimrod, and on ocean wide
With Neptune. Rivers too personified
Appear — the Rhine as by the Meuse betrayed,
And fading groups of Odin in the shade,
And the wolf Fenrir and the Asgard snake.
One might the place for dragons’ stable take.
The only lights that in the shed appear
Spring from the table’s giant chandelier
With seven iron branches — brought from hell
By Attila Archangel, people tell,
When he had conquered Mammon — and they say
That seven souls were the first flames that day.
This banquet hall looks an abyss outlined
With shadowy vagueness, though indeed we find
In the far depth upon the table spread
A sudden, strong, and glaring light is shed,
Striking upon the goldsmith’s burnished works,
And on the pheasants killed by traitor hawks.
Loaded the table is with viands cold,
Ewers and flagons, all enough of old
To make a love feast. All the napery
Was Friesland’s famous make; and fair to see
The dishes, silver-gilt and bordered round
With flowers; for fruit, here strawberries were found
And citrons, apples too, and nectarines.
The wooden bowls were carved in cunning lines
By peasants of the Murg, whose skilful hands
With patient toil reclaim the barren lands
And make their gardens flourish on a rock,
Or mountain where we see the hunters flock.
Gold fountain-cup, with handles Florentine,
Shows Acteons horned, though armed and booted fine,
Who fight with sword in hand against the hounds.
Roses and gladioles make up bright mounds
Of flowers, with juniper and aniseed;
While sage, all newly cut for this great need,

Covers the Persian carpet that is spread
Beneath the table, and so helps to shed
Around a perfume of the balmy spring.
Beyond is desolation withering.
One hears within the hollow dreary space
Across the grove, made fresh by summer’s grace,
The wind that ever is with mystic might
A spirit ripple of the Infinite.
The glass restored to frames to creak is made
By blustering wind that comes from neighboring glade.
Strange in this dream-like place, so drear and lone,
The guest expected should be living one!
The seven lights from seven arms make glow
Almost with life the staring eyes that show
On the dim frescoes — and along the walls
Is here and there a stool, or the light falls
O’er some long chest, with likeness to a tomb.
Yet was displayed amid the mournful gloom
Some copper vessels, and some crockery ware.
The door — as if it must, yet scarcely dare —
Had opened widely to the night’s fresh air.

No voice is heard, for man has fled the place;
But Terror crouches in the corners’ space,
And waits the coming guest. This banquet hall
Of Titans is so high, that he who shall
With wandering eye look up from beam to beam
Of the confused wild roof will haply seem
To wonder that the stars he sees not there.
Giants the spiders are, that weave with care
Their hideous webs, which float the joists amid,
Joists whose dark ends in griffins’ jaws are hid.
The light is lurid, and the air like death,
And dark and foul. Even Night holds its breath
Awhile. One might suppose the door had fear
To move its double leaves — their noise to hear.

VIII.

WHAT MORE WAS TO BE SEEN.

But the great hall of generations dead
Has something more sepulchral and more dread
Than lurid glare from seven-branched chandelier
Or table lone with stately daïs near —
Two rows of arches o’er a colonnade
With knights on horseback all in mail arrayed,
Each one disposed with pillar at his back
And to another vis-à-vis. Nor lack
The fittings all complete; in each right hand
A lance is seen; the armored horses stand
With chamfrons laced, and harness buckled sure;
The cuissarts’ studs are by their clamps secure;
The dirks stand out upon the saddle-bow;
Even unto the horses’ feet do flow
Caparisons, — the leather all well clasped,
The gorget and the spurs with bronze tongues hasped,
The shining long sword from the saddle hung,
The battle-axe across the back was flung.
Under the arm a trusty dagger rests,
Each spiked knee-piece its murderous power attests.
Feet press the stirrups — hands on bridle shown
Proclaim all ready, with the visors down,
And yet they stir not, nor is audible
A sound to make the sight less terrible.

Each monstrous horse a frontal horn doth bear,
If e’er the Prince of Darkness herdsman were,
These cattle black were his by surest right,
Like things but seen in horrid dreams of night.
The steeds are swathed in trappings manifold,
The armed knights are grave, and stern, and cold,
Terrific too; the clench’d fists seem to hold
Some frightful missive, which the phantom hands

Would show, if opened out at hell’s commands.
The dusk exaggerates their giant size,
The shade is awed — the pillars coldly rise.
Oh, Night! why are these awful warriors here?

Horses and horsemen that make gazers fear
Are only empty armor. But erect
And haughty mien they all affect
And threatening air — though shades of iron still.
Are they strange larvae — these their statues ill?
No. They are dreams of horror clothed in brass,
Which from profoundest depths of evil pass
With futile aim to dare the Infinite!
Souls tremble at the silent spectre sight,
As if in this mysterious cavalcade
They saw the weird and mystic halt was made
Of them who at the coming dawn of day
Would fade, and from their vision pass away.
A stranger looking in, these masks to see,
Might deem from Death some mandate there might be
At times to burst the tombs — the dead to wear
A human shape, and mustering ranks appear
Of phantoms, each confronting other shade.

Grave-clothes are not more grim and sombre made
Than are these helms; the deaf and sealed-up graves
Are not more icy than these arms; the staves
Of hideous biers have not their joints more strong
Than are the joinings of these legs; the long
Scaled gauntlet fingers look like worms that shine,
And battle robes to shroud-like folds incline.
The heads are skull-like, and the stony feet
Seem for the charnel house but only meet.
The pikes have death’s-heads carved, and seem to be
Too heavy; but the shapes defiantly
Sit proudly in the saddle — and perforce
The rider looks united to the horse!

The network of their mail doth clearly cross.
The Marquis’ mortar beams near Ducal wreath,
And on the helm and gleaming shield beneath
Alternate triple pearls with leaves displayed
Of parsley, and the royal robes are made
So large that with the knightly harness they
Seem to o’ermaster palfreys every way.
To Rome the oldest armor might be traced,
And men and horses’ armor interlaced
Blent horribly; the man and steed we feel
Made but one hydra with its scales of steel.
Yet is there history here. Each coat of mail
Is representant of some stirring tale.
Each delta-shaped escutcheon shines to show
A vision of the chief by it we know.
Here are the blood-stained Dukes’ and Marquis’ line,
Barbaric lords, who amid war’s rapine
Bore gilded saints upon their banners still
Painted on fishes’ skin with cunning skill.
Here Geth, who to the Slaves cried “Onward go,”
And Mundiaque and Ottocar — Plato
And Ladisläus Kunne; and Welf who bore
These words upon his shield his foes before;
“Nothing there is I fear.” Otho blear-eyed,
Zultan and Nazamustus, and beside
The later Spignus, e’en to Spartibor
Of triple vision, and yet more and more
As if a pause at every age were made,
And Antaeus’ fearful dynasty portrayed.

What do they here so rigid and erect?
What wait they for — and what do they expect?
Blindness fills up the helm ‘neath iron brows;
Like sapless tree no soul the hero knows.
Darkness is now where eyes with flame were fraught,
And thrice-bored visor serves for mask of naught.
Of empty void is spectral giant made,

And each of these all-powerful knights displayed
Is only rind of pride and murderous sin;
Themselves are held the icy grave within.
Rust eats the casques enamoured once so much
Of death and daring — which knew kiss-like touch
Of banner — mistress so august and dear —
But not an arm can stir its hinges here;
Behold how mute are they whose threats were heard
Like savage roar — whose gnashing teeth and word
Deadened the clarion’s tones; the helmets dread
Have not a sound, and all the armor spread,
The hauberks, that strong breathing seemed to sway,
Are stranded now in helplessness alway
To see the shadows, still prolonged, that seem
To take at night the image of a dream.

These two great files reach from the door afar
To where the table and the daïs are,
Leaving between their fronts a narrow lane.
On the left side the Marquises maintain
Their place, but the right side the Dukes retain,
And till the roof, embattled by Spignus,
But worn by time that even that subdues,
Shall fall upon their heads, these forms will stand
The grades confronting — one on either hand.
While in advance beyond, with haughty head —
As if commander of this squadron dread —
All waiting signal of the Judgment Day,
In stone was seen in olden sculptors’ way
Charlemagne the King, who on the earth had found
Only twelve knights to grace his Table Round.

The crests were an assembly of strange things,
Of horrors such as nightmare only brings.
Asps, and spread eagles without beak or feet,
Sirens and mermaids here and dragons meet,
And antlered stags and fabled unicorn,

And fearful things of monstrous fancy born.
Upon the rigid form of morion’s sheen
Winged lions and the Cerberus are seen,
And serpents winged and finned; things made to fright
The timid foe, alone by sense of sight.
Some leaning forward and the others back,
They looked a growing forest that did lack
No form of terror; but these things of dread
That once on barons’ helms the battle led
Beneath the giant banners, now are still,

As if they gaped and found the time but ill,
Wearied the ages passed so slowly by,
And that the gory dead no more did lie
Beneath their feet — pined for the battle-cry,
The trumpet’s clash, the carnage and the strife,
Yawning to taste again their dreadful life.
Like tears upon the palfreys’ muzzles were
The hard reflections of the metal there;
From out these spectres, ages past exhumed,
And as their shadows on the roof-beams loomed,
Cast by the trembling light, each figure wan
Seemed growing, and a monstrous shape to don,
So that the double range of horrors made
The darkened zenith clouds of blackest shade,
That shaped themselves to profiles terrible.

All motionless the coursers horrible,
That formed a legion lured by Death to war,
These men and horses masked, how dread they are!
Absorbed in shadows of the eternal shore,
Among the living all their tasks are o’er.
Silent, they seem all mystery to brave,
These sphinxes whom no beacon light can save
Upon the threshold of the gulf so near,
As if they faced the great enigma here;
Ready with hoofs, between the pillars blue

To strike out sparks, and combats to renew,
Choosing for battle-field the shades below,
Which they provoked by deeds we cannot know,
In that dark realm thought dares not to expound
False masks from heaven lowered to depths profound.

IX.

A NOISE ON THE FLOOR.

This is the scene on which now enters in
Eviradnus; and follows page Gasclin.

The outer walls were almost all decayed,
The door, for ancient Marquises once made —
Raised many steps above the courtyard near —
Commanded view of the horizon clear.
The forest looked a great gulf all around,
And on the rock of Corbus there were found
Secret and blood-stained precipices tall.
Duke Plato built the tower and banquet hall
Over great pits, — so was it Rumor said.
The flooring sounds ‘neath Eviradnus’ tread
Above abysses many.
”Page,” said he,
“Come here, your eyes than mine can better see,
For sight is woman-like and shuns the old;
Ah! he can see enough, when years are told,
Who backwards looks. But, boy, turn towards the glade
And tell me what you see.”
The boy obeyed,
And leaned across the threshold, while the bright,
Full moon shed o’er the glade its white, pure light.

“I see a horse and woman on it now,”
Said Gasclin, “and companions also show.”
“Who are they?” asked the seeker of sublime
Adventures. “Sir, I now can hear like chime

The sound of voices, and men’s voices too,
Laughter and talk; two men there are in view,
Across the road the shadows clear I mark
Of horses three.”
”Enough. Now, Gasclin, hark!”
Exclaimed the knight, “you must at once return
By other path than that which you discern,
So that you be not seen. At break of day
Bring back our horses fresh, and every way
Caparisoned; now leave me, boy, I say.”
The page looked at his master like a son,
And said, “Oh! if I might stay on,
For they are two.”

“Go — I suffice alone!”

X.

EVIRADNUS MOTIONLESS.

And lone the hero is within the hall,
And nears the table where the glasses all
Show in profusion; all the vessels there,
Goblets and glasses gilt, or painted fair,
Are ranged for different wines with practised care.
He thirsts; the flagons tempt; but there must stay
One drop in emptied glass, and ’twould betray
The fact that some one living had been here.
Straight to the horses goes he, pauses near
That which is next the table shining bright,
Seizes the rider — plucks the phantom knight
To pieces — all in vain its panoply
And pallid shining to his practised eye;
Then he conveys the severed iron remains
To corner of the hall where darkness reigns;
Against the wall he lays the armor low
In dust and gloom like hero vanquished now —
But keeping pond’rous lance and shield so old,

Mounts to the empty saddle, and behold!
A statue Eviradnus has become,
Like to the others in their frigid home.
With visor down scarce breathing seemed maintained
Throughout the hall a death-like silence reigned.

XI.

A LITTLE MUSIC.

Listen! like hum froth unseen nests we hear
A mirthful buzz of voices coming near,
Of footsteps — laughter — from the trembling trees.
And now the thick-set forest all receives
A flood of moonlight — and there gently floats
The sound of a guitar of Inspruck; notes
Which blend with chimes — vibrating to the hand —
Of tiny bell — where sounds a grain of sand.
A man’s voice mixes with the melody,
And vaguely melts to song in harmony.

”If you like we’ll dream a dream.
Let us mount on palfreys two;
Birds are singing, — let it seem
You lure me — and I take you.

”Let us start— ’tis eve, you see,
I’m thy master and thy prey.
My bright steed shall pleasure be;
Yours, it shall be love, I say.

”Journeying leisurely we go,
We will make our steeds touch heads,
Kiss for fodder, — and we so
Satisfy our horses’ needs.

”Come! the two delusive things
Stamp impatiently it seems,

Yours has heavenward soaring wings,
Mine is of the land of dreams.

”What’s our baggage? only vows,
Happiness, and all our care,
And the flower that sweetly shows
Nestling lightly in your hair.

”Come, the oaks all dark appear,
Twilight now will soon depart,
Railing sparrows laugh to hear
Chains thou puttest round my heart.

”Not my fault ‘twill surely be
If the hills should vocal prove,
And the trees when us they see,
All should murmur — let us love!

”Oh, be gentle! — I am dazed,
See the dew is on the grass,
Wakened butterflies amazed
Follow thee as on we pass.

”Envious night-birds open wide
Their round eyes to gaze awhile,
Nymphs that lean their urns beside
From their grottoes softly smile,

”And exclaim, by fancy stirred,
‘Hero and Leander they;
We in listening for a word
Let our water fall away.’

”Let us journey Austrian way,
With the daybreak on our brow;
I be great, and you I say
Rich, because we love shall know.

”Let us over countries rove,
On our charming steeds content,
In the azure light of love,
And its sweet bewilderment.

”For the charges at our inn,
You with maiden smiles shall pay;
I the landlord’s heart will win
In a scholar’s pleasant way.

”You, great lady — and I, Count —
Come, my heart has opened quite,
We this tale will still recount,
To the stars that shine at night.”

The melody went on some moments more
Among the trees the calm moon glistened o’er,
Then trembled and was hushed; the voice’s thrill
Stopped like alighting birds, and all was still.

XII.

GREAT JOSS AND LITTLE ZENO.

Quite suddenly there showed across the door,
Three heads which all a festive aspect wore.
Two men were there; and, dressed in cloth of gold,
A woman. Of the men one might have told
Some thirty years, the other younger seemed,
Was tall and fair, and from his shoulder gleamed
A gay guitar with ivy leaves enlaced.
The other man was dark, but pallid-faced
And small. At the first glance they seemed to be
But made of perfume and frivolity.
Handsome they were, but through their comely mien
A grinning demon might be clearly seen.
April has flowers where lurk the slugs between.

“Big Joss and little Zeno, pray come here;
Look now — how dreadful! can I help but fear!”
Madame Mahaud was speaker. Moonlight there
Caressingly enhanced her beauty rare,
Making it shine and tremble, as if she
So soft and gentle were of things that be
Of air created, and are brought and ta’en
By heavenly flashes. Now, she spoke again
“Certes, ’tis heavy purchase of a throne,
To pass the night here utterly alone.
Had you not slyly come to guard me now,
I should have died of fright outright I know.”
The moonbeams through the open door did fall,
And shine upon the figure next the wall.

Said Zeno, “If I played the Marquis part,
I’d send this rubbish to the auction mart;
Out of the heap should come the finest wine,
Pleasure and gala-fêtes, were it all mine.”
And then with scornful hand he touched the thing,
And made the metal like a soul’s cry ring.
He laughed — the gauntlet trembled at his stroke.
“Let rest my ancestors”— ’twas Mahaud spoke;
Then murmuring added she, “For you are much
Too small their noble armor here to touch.”

And Zeno paled, but Joss with laugh exclaimed,
“Why, all these good black men so grandly named
Are only nests for mice. By Jove, although
They lifelike look and terrible, we know
What is within; just listen, and you’ll hear
The vermins’ gnawing teeth, yet ’twould appear
These figures once were proudly named Otho,
And Ottocar, and Bela, and Plato.
Alas! the end’s not pleasant — puts one out;
To have been kings and dukes — made mighty rout —
Colossal heroes filling tombs with slain,

And, Madame, this to only now remain;
A peaceful nibbling rat to calmly pierce
A prince’s noble armor proud and fierce.”

“Sing, if you will — but do not speak so loud;
Besides, such things as these,” said fair Mahaud,
“In your condition are not understood.”
“Well said,” made answer Zeno, “’tis a place
Of wonders — I see serpents, and can trace
Vampires, and monsters swarming, that arise
In mist, through chinks, to meet the gazer’s eyes.”

Then Mahaud shuddered, and she said: “The wine
The Abbé made me drink as task of mine,
Will soon enwrap me in the soundest sleep —
Swear not to leave me — that you here will keep.”
“I swear,” cried Joss, and Zeno, “I also;
But now at once to supper let us go.”

XIII.

THEY SUP.

With laugh and song they to the table went.
Said Mahaud gayly: “It is my intent
To make Joss chamberlain. Zeno shall be
A constable supreme of high degree.”
All three were joyous, and were fair to see.
Joss ate — and Zeno drank; on stools the pair,
With Mahaud musing in the regal chair.
The sound of separate leaf we do not note —
And so their babble seemed to idly float,
And leave no thought behind. Now and again
Joss his guitar made trill with plaintive strain
Or Tyrolean air; and lively tales they told
Mingled with mirth all free, and frank, and bold.
Said Mahaud: “Do you know how fortunate
You are?” “Yes, we are young at any rate —

Lovers half crazy — this is truth at least.”
“And more, for you know Latin like a priest,
And Joss sings well.”
”Ah, yes, our master true,
Yields us these gifts beyond the measure due.”
“Your master! — who is he?” Mahaud exclaimed.
“Satan, we say — but Sin you’d think him named,”
Said Zeno, veiling words in raillery.
“Do not laugh thus,” she said with dignity;
“Peace, Zeno. Joss, you speak, my chamberlain.”
“Madame, Viridis, Countess of Milan,
Was deemed superb; Diana on the mount
Dazzled the shepherd boy; ever we count
The Isabel of Saxony so fair,
And Cleopatra’s beauty all so rare —
Aspasia’s, too, that must with theirs compare —
That praise of them no fitting language hath.
Divine was Rhodope — and Venus’ wrath
Was such at Erylesis’ perfect throat,
She dragged her to the forge where Vulcan smote
Her beauty on his anvil. Well, as much
As star transcends a sequin, and just such
As temple is to rubbish-heap, I say,
You do eclipse their beauty every way.
Those airy sprites that from the azure smile,
Peris and elfs the while they men beguile,
Have brows less youthful pure than yours; besides
Dishevelled they whose shaded beauty hides
In clouds.”
”Flatt’rer,” said Mahaud, “you but sing
Too well.”
Then Joss more homage sought to bring;
“If I were angel under heav’n,” said he,
“Or girl or demon, I would seek to be
By you instructed in all art and grace,
And as in school but take a scholar’s place.
Highness, you are a fairy bright, whose hand

For sceptre vile gave up your proper wand.”
Fair Mahaud mused — then said, “Be silent now;
You seem to watch me; little ’tis I know,
Only that from Bohemia Joss doth come,
And that in Poland Zeno hath his home.
But you amuse me; I am rich, you poor —
What boon shall I confer and make secure?
What gift? ask of me, poets, what you will
And I will grant it — promise to fulfil.”
“A kiss,” said Joss.
        “A kiss!” and anger fraught
Amazed at minstrel having such a thought —
While flush of indignation warmed her cheek.
“You do forget to whom it is you speak,”
She cried.
    ”Had I not known your high degree,
Should I have asked this royal boon,” said he,
“Obtained or given, a kiss must ever be.
No gift like king’s — no kiss like that of queen!”
Queen! And on Mahaud’s face a smile was seen.

XIV.

AFTER SUPPER.

But now the potion proved its subtle power,
And Mahaud’s heavy eyelids ‘gan to lower.
Zeno, with finger on his lip, looked on —
Her head next drooped, and consciousness was gone.
Smiling she slept, serene and very fair,
He took her hand, which fell all unaware.

“She sleeps,” said Zeno, “now let chance or fate
Decide for us which has the marquisate,
And which the girl.”

        Upon their faces now
A hungry tiger’s look began to show.

“My brother, let us speak like men of sense,”
Said Joss; “while Mahaud dreams in innocence,
We grasp all here — and hold the foolish thing —
Our Friend below to us success will bring.
He keeps his word; ’tis thanks to him I say,
No awkward chance has marred our plans to-day.
All has succeeded — now no human power
Can take from us this woman and her dower.
Let us conclude. To wrangle and to fight
For just a yes or no, or to prove right
The Arian doctrines, all the time the Pope
Laughs in his sleeve at you — or with the hope
Some blue-eyed damsel with a tender skin
And milkwhite dainty hands by force to win —
This might be well in days when men bore loss
And fought for Latin or Byzantine Cross;
When Jack and Rudolf did like fools contend,
And for a simple wench their valor spend —
When Pepin held a synod at Leptine,
And times than now were much less wise and fine.
We do no longer heap up quarrels thus,
But better know how projects to discuss.
Have you the needful dice?”

”Yes, here they wait
For us.”

“Who wins shall have the Marquisate;
Loser, the girl.”

“Agreed.”

”A noise I hear?”
“Only the wind that sounds like some one near —
Are you afraid?” said Zeno.

”Naught I fear
Save fasting — and that solid earth should gape.

Let’s throw and fate decide — ere time escape.”
Then rolled the dice.

“’Tis four.”

’Twas Joss to throw.
“Six! — and I neatly win, you see; and lo!
At bottom of this box I’ve found Lusace,
And henceforth my orchestra will have place;
To it they’ll dance. Taxes I’ll raise, and they
In dread of rope and forfeit well will pay;
Brass trumpet-calls shall be my flutes that lead,
Where gibbets rise the imposts grow and spread.”

Said Zeno, “I’ve the girl and so is best,”
“She’s beautiful,” said Joss.

”Yes, ’tis confess’d.”
“What shall you do with her?” asked Joss.

”I know.
Make her a corpse,” said Zeno; “marked you how
The jade insulted me just now! Too small
She called me — such the words her lips let fall.
I say, that moment ere the dice I threw
Had yawning Hell cried out, ‘My son, for you
The chance is open still: take in a heap
The fair Lusace’s seven towns, and reap
The corn, and wine, and oil of counties ten,
With all their people diligent, and then
Bohemia with its silver mines, and now
The lofty land whence mighty rivers flow
And not a brook returns; add to these counts
The Tyrol with its lovely azure mounts
And France with her historic fleurs-de-lis;
Come now, decide, what ’tis your choice must be?’
I should have answered, ‘Vengeance! give to me
Rather than France, Bohemia, or the fair

Blue Tyrol, I my choice, O Hell! declare
For government of darkness and of death,
Of grave and worms.’ Brother, this woman hath
As marchioness with absurdity set forth
To rule o’er frontier bulwarks of the north.
In any case to us a danger she,
And having stupidly insulted me
’Tis needful that she die. To blurt all out —
I know that you desire her; without doubt
The flame that rages in my heart warms yours;
To carry out these subtle plans of ours,
We have become as gypsies near this doll,
You as her page — I dotard to control —
Pretended gallants changed to lovers now.
So, brother, this being fact for us to know
Sooner or later, ‘gainst our best intent
About her we should quarrel. Evident
Is it our compact would be broken through.
There is one only thing for us to do,
And that is, kill her.”

”Logic very clear,”
Said musing Joss, “but what of blood shed here?”
Then Zeno stooped and lifted from the ground
An edge of carpet — groped until he found
A ring, which, pulled, an opening did disclose,
With deep abyss beneath; from it there rose
The odor rank of crime. Joss walked to see
While Zeno pointed to it silently.
But eyes met eyes, and Joss, well pleased, was fain
By nod of head to make approval plain.

XV.

THE OUBLIETTES.

If sulphurous light had shone from this vile well
One might have said it was a mouth of hell,

So large the trap that by some sudden blow
A man might backward fall and sink below.
Who looked could see a harrow's threatening teeth,
But lost in night was everything beneath.
Partitions blood-stained have a reddened smear,
And Terror unrelieved is master here.
One feels the place has secret histories
Replete with dreadful murderous mysteries,
And that this sepulchre, forgot to-day,
Is home of trailing ghosts that grope their way
Along the walls where spectre reptiles crawl.
"Our fathers fashioned for us after all
Some useful things," said Joss; then Zeno spoke:
"I know what Corbus hides beneath its cloak,
I and the osprey know the castle old,
And what in bygone times the justice bold."

"And are you sure that Mahaud will not wake?"
"Her eyes are closed as now my fist I make;
She is in mystic and unearthly sleep;
The potion still its power o'er her must keep."
"But she will surely wake at break of day?"
"In darkness."

        "What will all the courtiers say
When in the place of her they find two men?"
"To them we will declare ourselves — and then
They at our feet will fall."

                "Where leads this hole?"
"To where the crow makes feast and torrents roll
To desolation. Let us end it now."

These young and handsome men had seemed to grow
Deformed and hideous — so doth foul black heart
Disfigure man, till beauty all depart.
So to the hell within the human face
Transparent is. They nearer move apace;

And Mahaud soundly sleeps as in a bed.
“To work.”

Joss seizes her and holds her head
Supporting her beneath her arms, in his;
And then he dared to plant a monstrous kiss
Upon her rosy lips, — while Zeno bent
Before the massive chair, and with intent
Her robe disordered as he raised her feet;
Her dainty ankles thus their gaze to meet.
And while the mystic sleep was all profound,
The pit gaped wide like grave in burial ground.

XVI.

WHAT THEY ATTEMPT BECOMES DIFFICULT.

Bearing the sleeping Mahaud they moved now
Silent and bent with heavy step and slow.
Zeno faced darkness — Joss turned towards the light —
So that the hall to Joss was quite in sight.
Sudden he stopped — and Zeno, “What now!” called,
But Joss replied not, though he seemed appalled,
And made a sign to Zeno, who with speed
Looked back. Then seemed they changed to stone indeed.
For both perceived that in the vaulted hall
One of the grand old knights ranged by the wall
Descended from his horse. Like phantom he
Moved with a horrible tranquillity.
Masked by his helm towards them he came; his tread
Made the floor tremble — and one might have said
A spirit of th’ abyss was here; between
Them and the pit he came — a barrier seen;
Then said, with sword in hand and visor down,
In measured tones that had sepulchral grown
As tolling bell, “Stop, Sigismond, and you,
King Ladisläus;” at those words, though few,

They dropped the Marchioness, and in such a way
That at their feet like rigid corpse she lay.

The deep voice speaking from the visor’s grate
Proceeded — while the two in abject state
Cowered low. Joss paled, by gloom and dread o’ercast,
And Zeno trembled like a yielding mast.
“You two who listen now must recollect
The compact all your fellow-men suspect.
’Tis this: ‘I, Satan, god of darkened sphere,
The king of gloom and winds that bring things drear,
Alliance make with my two brothers dear,
The Emperor Sigismond and Polish King
Named Ladisläus. I to surely bring
Aid and protection to them both alway,
And never to absent myself or say
I’m weary. And yet more — I, being lord
Of sea and land, to Sigismond award
The earth; to Ladisläus all the sea.
With this condition that they yield to me
When I the forfeit claim — the King his head,
But shall the Emperor give his soul instead.’”

Said Joss, “Is’t he? — Spectre with flashing eyes,
And art thou Satan come to us surprise?”
“Much less am I and yet much more.
Oh, kings of crimes and plots! your day is o’er,
But I your lives will only take to-day;
Beneath the talons black your souls let stay
To wrestle still.”

The pair looked stupefied
And crushed. Exchanging looks ’twas Zeno cried,
Speaking to Joss, “Now who — who can it be?”
Joss stammered, “Yes, no refuge can I see;
The doom is on us. But oh, spectre! say
Who are you?”

“I’m the judge.”

”Then mercy, pray.”
The voice replied: “God guides His chosen hand
To be th’ Avenger in your path to stand.
Your hour has sounded, nothing now indeed
Can change for you the destiny decreed,
Irrevocable quite. Yes, I looked on.
Ah! little did you think that any one
To this unwholesome gloom could knowledge bring
That Joss a kaiser was, and Zeno king.
You spoke just now — but why? — too late to plead.
The forfeit’s due and hope should all be dead.
Incurables! For you I am the grave.
Oh, miserable men! that naught can save.
Yes, Sigismond a kaiser is, and you
A king, O Ladisläus! — it is true.
You thought of God but as a wheel to roll
Your chariot on; you who have king’s control
O’er Poland and its many towns so strong.
You, Milan’s Duke, to whom at once belong
The gold and iron crowns. You, Emperor made
By Rome, a son of Hercules ’tis said;
And you of Spartibor. And your two crowns
Are shining lights; and yet your shadow frowns
From every mountain land to trembling sea.
You are at giddy heights twin powers to be
A glory and a force for all that’s great —
But ‘neath the purple canopy of state,
Th’ expanding and triumphant arch you prize,
‘Neath royal power that sacred veils disguise,
Beneath your crowns of pearls and jewelled stars,
Beneath your exploits terrible and wars,
You, Sigismond, have but a monster been,
And, Ladisläus, you are scoundrel seen.
Oh, degradation of the sceptre’s might
And swords — when Justice has a hand like night,

Foul and polluted; and before this thing,
This hydra, do the Temple’s hinges swing —
The throne becomes the haunt of all things base
Oh, age of infamy and foul disgrace!
Oh, starry heavens looking on the shame,
No brow but reddens with resentful flame —
And yet the silent people do not stir!
Oh, million arms! what things do you deter —
Poor sheep, whom vermin-majesties devour,
Have you not nails with strong desiring power
To rend these royalties, that you so cower?
But two are taken, — such as will amaze
E’en hell itself, when it on them shall gaze.
Ah, Sigismond and Ladisläus, you
Were once triumphant, splendid to the view,
Stifling with your prosperity — but now
The hour of retribution lays you low.
Ah, do the vulture and the crocodile
Shed tears! At such a sight I fain must smile.
It seems to me ’tis very good sometimes
That princes, conquerors stained with bandits’ crimes,
Sparkling with splendor, wearing crowns of gold,
Should know the deadly sweat endured of old,
That of Jehoshaphat; should sob and fear,
And after crime th’ unclean be brought to bear.
’Tis well — God rules — and thus it is that I
These masters of the world can make to lie
In ashes at my feet. And this was he
Who reigned — and this a Caesar known to be!
In truth, my old heart aches with very shame
To see such cravens with such noble name.
But let us finish — what has just passed here
Demands thick shrouding, and the time is near.
Th’ accursed dice that rolled at Calvary
You rolled a woman’s murder to decree
It was a dark disastrous game to play;
But not for me a moral to essay.

This moment to the misty grave is due,
And far too vile and little human you
To see your evil ways. Your fingers lack
The human power your shocking deeds to track.
What use in darkness mirror to uphold?
What use your doings to be now retold?
Drink of the darkness — greedy of the ill
To which from habit you’re attracted still,
Not recognizing in the draught you take
The stench that your atrocities must make.
I only tell you that this burdened age
Tires of your Highnesses, that soil its page,
And of your villanies — and this is why
You now must swell the stream that passes by
Of refuse filth. Oh, horrid scene to show
Of these young men and that young girl just now!
Oh! can you really be of human kind
Breathing pure air of heaven? Do we find
That you are men? Oh, no! for when you laid
Foul lips upon the mouth of sleeping maid,
You seemed but ghouls that had come furtively
From out the tombs; only a horrid lie
Your human shape; of some strange frightful beast
You have the soul. To darkness I at least
Remit you now. Oh, murderer Sigismond
And Ladisläus pirate, both beyond
Release — two demons that have broken ban!
Therefore ’tis time their empire over man
And converse with the living, should be o’er;
Tyrants, behold your tomb your eyes before;
Vampires and dogs, your sepulchre is here.
Enter.”

He pointed to the gulf so near.
All terrified upon their knees they fell.
“Oh! take us not in your dread realm to dwell,”
Said Sigismond. “But, phantom! do us tell

What thou wouldst have from us — we will obey.
Oh, mercy!— ’tis for mercy now we pray.”
“Behold us at your feet, oh, spectre dread!”
And no old crone in feebler voice could plead
Than Ladisläus did.

But not a word
Said now the figure motionless, with sword
In hand. This sovereign soul seemed to commune
With self beneath his metal sheath; yet soon
And suddenly, with tranquil voice said he,
“Princes, your craven spirit wearies me.
No phantom — only man am I. Arise!
I like not to be dreaded otherwise
Than with the fear to which I’m used; know me,
For it is Eviradnus that you see!”

XVII.

THE CLUB.

As from the mist a noble pine we tell
Grown old upon the heights of Appenzel,
When morning freshness breathes round all the wood,
So Eviradnus now before them stood,
Opening his visor, which at once revealed
The snowy beard it had so well concealed.
Thin Sigismond was still as dog at gaze,
But Ladisläus leaped, and howl did raise,
And laughed and gnashed his teeth, till, like a cloud
That sudden bursts, his rage was all avowed.
“’Tis but an old man after all!” he cried.

Then the great knight, who looked at both, replied,
“Oh, kings! an old man of my time can cope
With two much younger ones of yours, I hope.
To mortal combat I defy you both
Singly; or, if you will, I’m nothing loth

With two together to contend; choose here
From out the heap what weapon shall appear
Most fit. As you no cuirass wear, I see,
I will take off my own, for all must be
In order perfect — e'en your punishment."

Then Eviradnus, true to his intent,
Stripped to his Utrecht jerkin; but the while
He calmly had disarmed — with dexterous guile
Had Ladisläus seized a knife that lay
Upon the damask cloth, and slipped away
His shoes; then barefoot, swiftly, silently
He crept behind the knight, with arm held high.
But Eviradnus was of all aware,
And turned upon the murderous weapon there,
And twisted it away; then in a trice
His strong colossal hand grasped like a vice
The neck of Ladisläus, who the blade
Now dropped; over his eyes a misty shade
Showed that the royal dwarf was near to death.

"Traitor!" said Eviradnus in his wrath,
"I rather should have hewn your limbs away,
And left you crawling on your stumps, I say, —
But now die fast."

          Ghastly, with starting eyes,
The King without a cry or struggle dies.
One dead — but lo! the other stands bold-faced,
Defiant; for the knight, when he unlaced
His cuirass, had his trusty sword laid down,
And Sigismond now grasps it as his own.
The monster-youth laughed at the silv'ry beard,
And, sword in hand, a murderer glad appeared.
Crossing his arms, he cried, "'Tis my turn now!"
And the black mounted knights in solemn row
Were judges of the strife. Before them lay

The sleeping Mahaud — and not far away
The fatal pit, near which the champion knight
With evil Emperor must contend for right,
Though weaponless he was. And yawned the pit
Expectant which should be engulfed in it.

“Now we shall see for whom this ready grave,”
Said Sigismond, “you dog, whom naught can save!”
Aware was Eviradnus that if he
Turned for a blade unto the armory,
He would be instant pierced — what can he do?
The moment is for him supreme. But, lo!
He glances now at Ladisläus dead,
And with a smile triumphant and yet dread,
And air of lion caged to whom is shown
Some loophole of escape, he bends him down.

“Ha! ha! no other club than this I need!”
He cried, as seizing in his hands with speed
The dead King’s heels, the body lifted high,
Then to the frightened Emperor he came nigh,
And made him shake with horror and with fear,
The weapon all so ghastly did appear.
The head became the stone to this strange sling,
Of which the body was the potent string;
And while ’twas brandished in a deadly way,
The dislocated arms made monstrous play
With hideous gestures, as now upside down
The bludgeon corpse a giant force had grown.
“’Tis well!” said Eviradnus, and he cried,
“Arrange between yourselves, you two allied;
If hell-fire were extinguished, surely it
By such a contest might be all relit;
From kindling spark struck out from dead King’s brow,
Batt’ring to death a living Emperor now.”

And Sigismond, thus met and horrified,
Recoiled to near the unseen opening wide;
The human club was raised, and struck again * * *
And Eviradnus did alone remain
All empty-handed — but he heard the sound
Of spectres two falling to depths profound;
Then, stooping o’er the pit, he gazed below,
And, as half-dreaming now, he murmured low,
“Tiger and jackal meet their portion here,
’Tis well together they should disappear!”

XVIII.

DAYBREAK.

Then lifts he Mahaud to the ducal chair,
And shuts the trap with noiseless, gentle care;
And puts in order everything around,
So that, on waking, naught should her astound.

“No drop of blood the thing has cost,” mused he,
“And that is best indeed.”

                    But suddenly
Some distant bells clang out. The mountains gray
Have scarlet tips, proclaiming dawning day;
The hamlets are astir, and crowds come out —
Bearing fresh branches of the broom — about
To seek their Lady, who herself awakes
Rosy as morn, just when the morning breaks;
Half-dreaming still, she ponders, can it be
Some mystic change has passed, for her to see
One old man in the place of two quite young!
Her wondering eyes search carefully and long.
It may be she regrets the change: meanwhile,
The valiant knight salutes her with a smile,
And then approaching her with friendly mien,
Says, “Madam, has your sleep all pleasant been?”

MRS. NEWTON CROSLAND.

THE SOUDAN, THE SPHINXES, THE CUP, THE LAMP.

(“Zim-Zizimi, Soudan d’Égypte.”)

[Bk. XVI. i.]

Zim Zizimi — (of the Soudan of burnt Egypt,
  The Commander of Believers, a Bashaw
Whose very robes were from Asia’s greatest stript,
  More powerful than any lion with resistless paw)
A master weighed on by his immense splendor —
  Once had a dream when he was at his evening feast,
When the broad table smoked like a perfumed censer,
  And its grateful odors the appetite increased.
The banquet was outspread in a hall, high as vast,
  With pillars painted, and with ceiling bright with gold,
Upreared by Zim’s ancestors in the days long past,
  And added to till now worth a sum untold.
Howe’er rich no rarity was absent, it seemed,
  Fruit blushed upon the side-boards, groaning ‘neath rich meats,
With all the dainties palate ever dreamed
  In lavishness to waste — for dwellers in the streets
Of cities, whether Troy, or Tyre, or Ispahan,
  Consume, in point of cost, food at a single meal
Much less than what is spread before this crowned man —
  Who rules his couchant nation with a rod of steel,
And whose servitors’ chiefest arts it was to squeeze
  The world’s full teats into his royal helpless mouth.
Each hard-sought dainty that never failed to please,
  All delicacies, wines, from east, west, north or south,
Are plenty here — for Sultan Zizimi drinks wine
  In its variety, trying to find what never sates.
Laughs at the holy writings and the text divine,
  O’er which the humble dervish prays and venerates.
There is a common saying which holds often good:

  That cruel is he who is sparing in his cups.
That they are such as are most thirsty of man's blood —
  Yet he will see a slave beheaded whilst he sups.
But be this as it all may, glory gilds his reign,
  He has overrun Africa, the old and black;
Asia as well — holding them both beneath a rain
  Of bloody drops from scaffold, pyre, the stake, or rack,
To leave his empire's confines, one must run a race
  Far past the river Baxtile southward; in the north,
To the rude, rocky, barren land of Thrace,
  Yet near enough to shudder when great Zim is wroth.
Conquering in every field, he finds delight
  In battle-storms; his music is the shout of camps.
On seeing him the eagle speeds away in fright,
  Whilst hid 'mong rocks, the grisly wolf its victim champs.
Mysore's as well as Agra's rajah is his kin;
  The great sheiks of the arid sands confess him lord;
Omar, who vaunting cried: "Through me doth Allah win!"
  Was of his blood — a dreaded line of fire and sword.
The waters of Nagain, sands of Sahara warm,
  The Atlas and the Caucasus, snow-capped and lone,
Mecca, Marcatta, these were massed in part to form
  A portion of the giant shadow of Zim's throne.
Before his might, to theirs, as hardest rock to dust,
  There have recoiled a horde of savage, warlike chiefs,
Who have been into Afric's fiery furnace thrust —
  Its scorching heat to his rage greatest of reliefs.
There is no being but fears Zim; to him bows down
  Even the sainted Llama in the holy place;
And the wild Kasburder chieftain at his dark power
  Turns pale, and seeks a foeman of some lesser race.
Cities and states are bought and sold by Soudan Zim,
  Whose simple word their thousand people hold as law.
He ruins them at will, for what are men to him,
  More than to stabled cattle is the sheaf of straw?

The Soudan is not pleased, for he is e’er alone,
  For who may in his royal sports or joys be leagued.
He must never speak to any one in equal tones,
  But be by his own dazzling weightiness fatigued.
He has exhausted all the pastimes of the earth;
  In vain skilled men have fought with sword, the spear, or lance,
The quips and cranks most laughed at have to him no mirth;
  He gives a regal yawn as fairest women dance;
Music has outpoured all its notes, the soft and loud,
  But dully on his wearied ear its accents roll,
As dully as the praises of the servile crowd
  Who falsely sing the purity of his black soul.
He has had before his daïs from the prison brought
  Two thieves, whose terror makes their chains to loudly ring,
Then gaping most unkingly, he dismissed his slaves,
  And tranquilly, half rising, looked around to seek
In the weighty stillness — such as broods round graves —
  Something within his royal scope to which to speak.

The throne, on which at length his eyes came back to rest,
  Is upheld by rose-crowned Sphinxes, which lyres hold,
All cut in whitest marble, with uncovered breast,
  While their eyes contain that enigma never told.
Each figure has its title carved upon its head:
  Health, and *Voluptuousness, Greatness*, *Joy*, and *Play*,
With *Victory, Beauty, Happiness*, may be read,
  Adorning brands they wear unblushing in the day.

The Soudan cried: “O, Sphinxes, with the torch-like eye,
  I am the Conqueror — my name is high-arrayed
In characters like flame upon the vaulted sky,
  Far from oblivion’s reach or an effacing shade.
Upon a sheaf of thunderbolts I rest my arm,
  And gods might wish my exploits with them were their own.
I live — I am not open to the points of harm,
  And e’en my throne will be with age an altar-stone.
When the time comes for me to cast off earthly robe,

And enter — being Day — into the realms of light,
The gods will say, we call Zizimi from his globe
That we may have our brother nearer to our sight!
Glory is but my menial, Pride my own chained slave,
Humbly standing when Zizimi is in his seat.
I scorn base man, and have sent thousands to the grave.
They are but as a rushen carpet to my feet.
Instead of human beings, eunuchs, blacks, or mutes,
Be yours, oh, Sphinxes, with the glad names on your fronts!
The task, with voice attuned to emulate the flute's,
To charm the king, whose chase is man, and wars his hunts.

"Some portion of your splendor back on me reflect,
Sing out in praiseful chains of melodious links!
Oh, throne, which I with bloody spoils have so bedecked,
Speak to your lord! Speak you, the first rose-crested Sphinx!"

Soon on the summons, once again was stillness broke,
For the ten figures, in a voice which all else drowned,
Parting their stony lips, alternatively spoke —
Spoke clearly, with a deeply penetrative sound.

THE FIRST SPHINX.

So lofty as to brush the heavens' dome,
Upon the highest terrace of her tomb
Is Queen Nitrocis, thinking all alone,
Upon her line, long tenants of the throne,
Terrors, scourges of the Greeks and Hebrews,
Harsh and bloodthirsty, narrow in their views.
Against the pure scroll of the sky, a blot,
Stands out her sepulchre, a fatal spot
That seems a baneful breath around to spread.
The birds which chance to near it, drop down dead.
The queen is now attended on by shades,
Which have replaced, in horrid guise, her maids.
No life is here — the law says such as bore
A corpse alone may enter through yon door.

Before, behind, around the queen, her sight
Encounters but the same blank void of night.
Above, the pilasters are like to bars,
And, through their gaps, the dead look at the stars,
While, till the dawn, around Nitrocis’ bones,
Spectres hold council, crouching on the stones.

THE SECOND SPHINX.

Howe’er great is pharaoh, the magi, king,
Encompassed by an idolizing ring,
None is so high as Tiglath Pileser.
Who, like the God before whom pales the star,
Has temples, with a prophet for a priest,
Who serves up daily sacrilegious feast.
His anger there are none who dare provoke,
His very mildness is looked on as a yoke;
And under his, more feared than other rules,
He holds his people bound, like tamèd bulls.
Asia is banded with his paths of war;
He is more of a scourge than Attila.
He triumphs glorious — but, day by day,
The earth falls at his feet, piecemeal away;
And the bricks for his tomb’s wall, one by one,
Are being shaped — are baking in the sun.

THE THIRD SPHINX.

Equal to archangel, for one short while,
Was Nimroud, builder of tall Babel’s pile.
His sceptre reached across the space between
The sites where Sol to rise and set is seen.
Baal made him terrible to all alike,
The greatest cow’ring when he rose to strike.
Unbelief had shown in ev’ry eye,
Had any dared to say: “Nimroud will die!”
He lived and ruled, but is — at this time, where?
Winds blow free o’er his realm — a desert bare!

THE FOURTH SPHINX.

There is a statue of King Chrem of old,
Of unknown date and maker, but of gold.
How many grandest rulers in his day
Chrem pluckèd down, there are now none can say.
Whether he ruled with gentle hand or rough,
None know. He once was — no longer is — enough,
Crowned Time, whose seat is on a ruined mass,
Holds, and aye turns, a strange sand in his glass,
A sand scraped from the mould, brushed from the shroud
Of all passed things, mean, great, lowly, or proud.
Thus meting with the ashes of the dead
How hours of the living have quickly fled.
The sand runs, monarchs! the clepsydra weeps.
Wherefore? They see through future’s gloomy deeps,
Through the church wall, into the catacomb,
And mark the change when thrones do graves become.

THE FIFTH SPHINX.

To swerve the earth seemed from its wonted path
When marched the Four of Asia in their wrath,
And when they were bound slaves to Cyrus’ car,
The rivers shrank back from their banks afar.
“Who can this be,” was Nineveh’s appeal;
“Who dares to drag the gods at his car-wheel?”
The ground is still there that these wheel-rims tore —
The people and the armies are no more.

THE SIXTH SPHINX.

Never again Cambyses earth will tread.
He slept, and rotted, for his ghost had fled.
So long as sovereigns live, the subjects kneel,
Crouching like spaniels at their royal heel;
But when their might flies, they are shunned by all,
Save worms, which — human-like — still to them crawl

On Troy or Memphis, on Pyrrhus the Great,
Or on Psammeticus, alike falls fate.
Those who in rightful purple are arrayed,
The prideful vanquisher, like vanquished, fade.
Death grins as he the fallen man bestrides —
And less of faults than of his glories hides.

THE SEVENTH SPHINX.

The time is come for Belus' tomb to fall,
Long has been ruined its high granite wall;
And its cupola, sister of the cloud,
Has now to lowest mire its tall head bowed.
The herdsman comes to it to choose the stones
To build a hut, and overturns the bones,
From which he has just scared a jackal pack,
Waiting to gnaw them when he turns his back.
Upon this scene the night is doubly night,
And the lone passer vainly strains his sight,
Musing: Was Belus not buried near this spot?
The royal resting-place is now forgot.

THE EIGHTH SPHINX.

The inmates of the Pyramids assume
The hue of Rhamesis, black with the gloom.
A Jailer who ne'er needs bolts, bars, or hasps,
Is Death. With unawed hand a god he grasps,
He thrusts, to stiffen, in a narrow case,
Or cell, where struggling air-blasts constant moan;
Walling them round with huge, damp, slimy stone;
And (leaving mem'ry of bloodshed as drink,
And thoughts of crime as food) he stops each chink.

THE NINTH SPHINX.

Who would see Cleopatra on her bed?
Come in. The place is filled with fog like lead,

Which clammily has settled on the frame
Of her who was a burning, dazzling flame
To all mankind — who durst not lift their gaze,
And meet the brightness of her beauty’s rays.
Her teeth were pearls, her breath a rare perfume.
Men died with love on entering her room.
Poised ‘twixt the world and her — acme of joys!
Antony took her of the double choice.
The ice-cold heart that passion seldom warms,
Would find heat torrid in that queen’s soft arms.
She won without a single woman’s wile,
Illumining the earth with peerless smile.
Come in! — but muffle closely up your face,
No grateful scents have ta’en sweet odors’ place.

THE TENTH SPHINX.

What did the greatest king that e’er earth bore,
Sennacherib? No matter — he’s no more!
What were the words Sardanapalus said?
Who cares to hear — that ruler long is dead.

The Soudan, turning pale, stared at the TEN aghast.
  ”Before to-morrow’s night,” he said, “in dust to rest,
These walls with croaking images shall be downcast;
  I will not have fiends speak when angels are addressed.”
But while Zim at the Sphinxes clenched his hand and shook,
  The cup in which it seems the rich wine sweetly breathes,
The cup with jewels sparkling, met his lowered look,
  Dwelling on the rim which the rippling wine enwreathes.
“Ha! You!” Zim cried, “have often cleared my heated head
  Of heavy thoughts which your great lord have come to seek
And torture with their pain and weight like molten lead.
  Let us two — power, I — you, wine — together speak.”

THE CUP.

“Phur,” spoke the Cup, “O king, dwelt as Day’s god,
Ruled Alexandria with sword and rod.
He from his people drew force after force,
Leaving in ev’ry clime an army’s corse.
But what gained he by having, like the sea,
Flooded with human waves to enslave the free?
Where lies the good in having been the chief
In conquering, to cause a nation’s grief?
Darius, Assar-addon, Hamilcar;
Who have led men in legions out to war,
Or have o’er Time’s shade cast rays from their seat,
Or throngs in worship made their name repeat,
These were, but all the cup of life have drank;
Rising ‘midst clamor, they in stillness sank.
Death’s dart beat down the sword — the kings high reared,
Were brought full low — judges, like culprits, feared.
The body — when the soul had ceased its sway —
Was placed where earth upon it heavy lay,
While seek the mouldering bones rare oils anoint
Claw of tree’s root and tooth of rocky point.
Weeds thrive on them who made the world a mart
Of human flesh, plants force their joints apart.
No deed of eminence the greatest saves,
And of mausoleums make panthers caves.”

The Cup, Zim, in his fury, dashed upon the floor,
  Crying aloud for lights. Slaves, at his angry call,
In to him hastily, a candelabra bore,
  And set it, branching o’er the table, in the hall,
From whose wide bounds it hunted instantly the gloom.
  ”Ah, light!” exclaimed the Soudan, “welcome light, all hail!
Dull witnesses were yonder Sphinxes of this room;
  The Cup was always drunk, in wit did ever fail;
But you fling gleams forth brightly, dazzling as a torch;
  Vainly to quell your power all Night’s attempts are spent;
The murky, black-eyed clouds you eat away and scorch,
  Making where’er you spring to life an Orient.

To charm your lord give voice, thou spark of paradise!
  Speak forth against the Sphinxes' enigmatic word,
And 'gainst the Wine-Cup, with its sharp and biting spice!"

THE LAMP.

Oh, Crusher of Countless Cities, such as earth knew
Scarce once before him, Ninus (who his brother slew),
Was borne within the walls which, in Assyrian rite,
Were built to hide dead majesty from outer sight.
If eye of man the gift uncommon could assume,
And pierce the mass, thick, black as hearse's plume,
To where lays on a horrifying bed
What was King Ninus, now hedged round with dread,
'Twould see by what is shadow of the light,
A line of feath'ry dust, bones marble-white.
A shudder overtakes the pois'nous snakes
When they glide near that powder, laid in flakes.
Death comes at times to him — *Life* comes no more!
And sets a jug and loaf upon the floor.
He then with bony foot the corpse o'erturns,
And says: "It is I, Ninus! 'Tis Death who spurns!
I bring thee, hungry king, some bread and meat."
"I have no hands," Ninus replies. "Yet, eat!"

Zim pierced to the very quick by these repeated stabs,
  Sprang to his feet, while from him pealed a fearful shout,
And, furious, flung down upon the marble slabs
  The richly carved and golden Lamp, whose light went out —
Then glided in a form strange-shaped,
  In likeness of a woman, moulded in dense smoke,
Veiled in thick, ebon fog, in utter darkness draped,
  A glimpse of which, in short, one's inmost fears awoke.
Zim was alone with her, this Goddess of the Night.
  The massy walls of stone like vapor part and fade,
Zim, shuddering, tried to call guard or satellite,
  But as the figure grasped him firmly, "Come!" she said.

BP. ALEXANDER

A QUEEN FIVE SUMMERS OLD.

(“Elle est toute petite.”)

[Bk. XXVI.]

She is so little — in her hands a rose:
A stern duenna watches where she goes,
What sees Old Spain’s Infanta — the clear shine
Of waters shadowed by the birch and pine.
What lies before? A swan with silver wing,
The wave that murmurs to the branch’s swing,
Or the deep garden flowering below?
Fair as an angel frozen into snow,
The royal child looks on, and hardly seems to know.

As in a depth of glory far away,
Down in the green park, a lofty palace lay,
There, drank the deer from many a crystal pond,
And the starred peacock gemmed the shade beyond.
Around that child all nature shone more bright;
Her innocence was as an added light.
Rubies and diamonds strewed the grass she trode,
And jets of sapphire from the dolphins flowed.

Still at the water’s side she holds her place,
Her bodice bright is set with Genoa lace;
O’er her rich robe, through every satin fold,
Wanders an arabesque in threads of gold.
From its green urn the rose unfolding grand,
Weighs down the exquisite smallness of her hand.
And when the child bends to the red leafs tip,
Her laughing nostril, and her carmine lip,
The royal flower purpureal, kissing there,
Hides more than half that young face bright and fair,
So that the eye deceived can scarcely speak

Where shows the rose, or where the rose-red cheek.
Her eyes look bluer from their dark brown frame:
Sweet eyes, sweet form, and Mary’s sweeter name.
All joy, enchantment, perfume, waits she there,
Heaven in her glance, her very name a prayer.

Yet ‘neath the sky, and before life and fate,
Poor child, she feels herself so vaguely great.
With stately grace she gives her presence high
To dawn, to spring, to shadows flitting by,
To the dark sunset glories of the heaven,
And all the wild magnificence of even;
On nature waits, eternal and serene,
With all the graveness of a little queen.
She never sees a man but on his knee,
She Duchess of Brabant one day will be,
Or rule Sardinia, or the Flemish crowd
She is the Infanta, five years old, and proud.

Thus is it with kings’ children, for they wear
A shadowy circlet on their forehead fair;
Their tottering steps are towards a kingly chair.
Calmly she waits, and breathes her gathered flower
Till one shall cull for her imperial power.
Already her eye saith, “It is my right;”
Even love flows from her, mingled with affright.
If some one seeing her so fragile stand,
Were it to save her, should put forth his hand,
Ere he had made a step, or breathed a vow,
The scaffold’s shadow were upon his brow.
While the child laughs, beyond the bastion thick
Of that vast palace, Roman Catholic,
Whose every turret like a mitre shows,
Behind the lattice something dreadful goes.
Men shake to see a shadow from beneath
Passing from pane to pane, like vapory wreath,
Pale, black, and still it glides from room to room;

In the same spot, like ghost upon a tomb;
Or glues its dark brown to the casement wan,
Dim shade that lengthens as the night draws on.
Its step funereal lingers like the swing
Of passing bell— ’tis death, or else the king.
’Tis he, the man by whom men live and die;
But could one look beyond that phantom eye,
As by the wall he leans a little space,
And see what shadows fill his soul’s dark place,
Not the fair child, the waters clear, the flowers
Golden with sunset — not the birds, the bowers —
No; ‘neath that eye, those fatal brows that keep
The fathomless brain, like ocean, dark and deep,
There, as in moving mirage, should one find
A fleet of ships that go before the wind:
On the foamed wave, and ‘neath the starlight pale,
The strain and rattle of a fleet in sail,
And through the fog an isle on her white rock
Hearkening from far the thunder’s coming shock.

Still by the water’s edge doth silent stand
The Infanta with the rose-flower in her hand,
Caresses it with eyes as blue as heaven;
Sudden a breeze, such breeze as panting even
From her full heart flings out to field and brake,
Ruffles the waters, bids the rushes shake,
And makes through all their green recesses swell
The massive myrtle and the asphodel.
To the fair child it comes, and tears away
On its strong wing the rose-flower from the spray.
On the wild waters casts it bruised and torn,
And the Infanta only holds a thorn.
Frightened, perplexed, she follows with her eyes
Into the basin where her ruin lies,
Looks up to heaven, and questions of the breeze
That had not feared her highness to displease;
But all the pond is changed; anon so clear,

Now back it swells, as though with rage and fear;
A mimic sea its small waves rise and fall,
And the poor rose is broken by them all.
Its hundred leaves tossed wildly round and round
Beneath a thousand waves are whelmed and drowned;
It was a foundering fleet you might have said;
And the duenna with her face of shade, —
“Madam,” for she had marked her ruffled mind,
“All things belong to princes — but God’s wind.”

BP. ALEXANDER

SEA-ADVENTURERS’ SONG.

(“En partant du Golfe d’Otrante.”)

[Bk. XXVIII.]

We told thirty when we started
  From port so taut and fine,
But soon our crew were parted,
  Till now we number nine.

Tom Robbins, English, tall and straight,
  Left us at Aetna light;
He left us to investigate
  What made the mountain bright;
“I mean to ask Old Nick himself,
  (And here his eye he rolls)
If I can’t bring Newcastle pelf
  By selling him some coals!”

In Calabree, a lass and cup
  Drove scowling Spada wild:
She only held her finger up,
  And there he drank and smiled;
And over in Gaëta Bay,
  Ascanio — ashore
A fool! — must wed a widow gay
  Who’d buried three or four.

At Naples, woe! poor Ned they hanged —
  Hemp neckcloth he disdained —
And prettily we all were banged —
  And two more blades remained

To serve the Duke, and row in chains —
  Thank saints! ’twas not my cast!

We drank deliverance from pains —
  We who'd the ducats fast.

At Malta Dick became a monk —
  (What vineyards have those priests!)
And Gobbo to quack-salver sunk,
  To leech vile murrained beasts;
And lazy André, blown off shore,
  Was picked up by the Turk,
And in some harem, you be sure,
  Is forced at last to work.

Next, three of us whom nothing daunts,
  Marched off with Prince Eugene,
To take Genoa! oh, it vaunts
  Girls fit — each one — for queen!
Had they but promised us the pick,
  Perchance we had joined, all;
But battering bastions built of brick —
  Bah, give me wooden wall!

By Leghorn, twenty caravels
  Came 'cross our lonely sail —
Spinoza's Sea-Invincibles!
  But, whew! our shots like hail
Made shortish work of galley long
  And chubby sailing craft —
Our making ready first to close
  Sent them a-spinning aft.

Off Marseilles, ne'er by sun forsook
  We friends fell-to as foes!
For Lucca Diavolo mistook
  Angelo's wife for Rose,

And hang me! soon the angel slid
  The devil in the sea,

And would of lass likewise be rid —
  And so we fought it free!

At Palmas eight or so gave slip,
  Pescara to pursue,
And more, perchance, had left the ship,
  But Algiers loomed in view;
And here we cruised to intercept
  Some lucky-laden rogues,
Whose gold-galleons but slowly crept,
  So that we trounced the dogs!

And after making war out there,
  We made love at “the Gib.”
We ten — no more! we took it fair,
  And kissed the gov’nor’s “rib,”
And made the King of Spain our take,
  Believe or not, who cares?
I tell ye that he begged till black
  I’ the face to have his shares.

We’re rovers of the restless main,
  But we’ve some conscience, mark!
And we know what it is to reign,
  And finally did heark —
Aye, masters of the narrow Neck,
  We hearkened to our heart,
And gave him freedom on our deck,
  His town, and gold — in part.

My lucky mates for that were made
  Grandees of Old Castile,
And maids of honor went to wed,
  Somewhere in sweet Seville;

Not they for me were fair enough,
  And so his Majesty

Declared his daughter— ’tis no scoff!
  My beauteous bride should be.

“A royal daughter!” think of that!
  But I would never one.
I have a lass (I said it pat)
  Who’s not been bred like nun —
But, merry maid with eagle eye,
  It’s proud she smiles and bright,
And sings upon the cliff, to spy
  My ship a-heave in sight!

My Faenzetta has my heart!
  In Fiesoné she
The fairest! Nothing shall us part,
  Saving, in sooth, the Sea!
And that not long! its rolling wave
  And such breeze holding now
Will send me along to her I love —
  And so I made my bow.

We told thirty when we started
  From port so taut and fine,
But thus our crew were parted,
  And now we number nine.

THE SWISS MERCENARIES.

(“Lorsque le regiment des hallebardiers.”)

[Bk. XXXI.]

When the regiment of Halberdiers
  Is proudly marching by,
The eagle of the mountain screams
  From out his stormy sky;
Who speaketh to the precipice,
  And to the chasm sheer;
Who hovers o’er the thrones of kings,
  And bids the caitiffs fear.
King of the peak and glacier,
  King of the cold, white scalps —
He lifts his head, at that close tread,
  The eagle of the Alps.

O shame! those men that march below —
  O ignominy dire!
Are the sons of my free mountains
  Sold for imperial hire.
Ah! the vilest in the dungeon!
  Ah! the slave upon the seas —
Is great, is pure, is glorious,
  Is grand compared with these,
Who, born amid my holy rocks,
  In solemn places high,
Where the tall pines bend like rushes
  When the storm goes sweeping by;

Yet give the strength of foot they learned
  By perilous path and flood,
And from their blue-eyed mothers won,
  The old, mysterious blood;

The daring that the good south wind
  Into their nostrils blew,
And the proud swelling of the heart
  With each pure breath they drew;
The graces of the mountain glens,
  With flowers in summer gay;
And all the glories of the hills
  To earn a lackey’s pay.

Their country free and joyous —
  She of the rugged sides —
She of the rough peaks arrogant
  Whereon the tempest rides:
Mother of the unconquered thought
  And of the savage form,
Who brings out of her sturdy heart
  The hero and the storm:
Who giveth freedom unto man,
  And life unto the beast;
Who hears her silver torrents ring
  Like joy-bells at a feast;

Who hath her caves for palaces,
  And where her châlets stand —
The proud, old archer of Altorf,
  With his good bow in his hand.
Is she to suckle jailers?
  Shall shame and glory rest,
Amid her lakes and glaciers,
  Like twins upon her breast?
Shall the two-headed eagle,
  Marked with her double blow,
Drink of her milk through all those hearts
  Whose blood he bids to flow?

Say, was it pomp ye needed,
  And all the proud array

Of courtly joust and high parade
  Upon a gala day?
Look up; have not my valleys
  Their torrents white with foam —
Their lines of silver bullion
  On the blue hillocks of home?
Doth not sweet May embroider
  My rocks with pearls and flowers?
Her fingers trace a richer lace
  Than yours in all my bowers.

Are not my old peaks gilded
  When the sun arises proud,
And each one shakes a white mist plume
  Out of the thunder-cloud?
O, neighbor of the golden sky —
  Sons of the mountain sod —
Why wear a base king's colors
  For the livery of God?
O shame! despair! to see my Alps
  Their giant shadows fling
Into the very waiting-room
  Of tyrant and of king!

O thou deep heaven, unsullied yet,
  Into thy gulfs sublime —
Up azure tracts of flaming light —
  Let my free pinion climb;
Till from my sight, in that clear light,
  Earth and her crimes be gone —
The men who act the evil deeds —
  The caitiffs who look on.
Far, far into that space immense,
  Beyond the vast white veil,
Where distant stars come out and shine,
  And the great sun grows pale.

BP. ALEXANDER

THE CUP ON THE BATTLE-FIELD.

(“Mon pére, ce héros au sourire.”)

[Bk. XLIX. iv.]

My sire, the hero with the smile so soft,
And a tall trooper, his companion oft,
Whom he loved greatly for his courage high
And strength and stature, as the night drew nigh
Rode out together. The battle was done;
The dead strewed the field; long sunk was the sun.
It seemed in the darkness a sound they heard, —
Was it feeble moaning or uttered word?
’Twas a Spaniard left from the force in flight,
Who had crawled to the roadside after fight;
Shattered and livid, less live than dead,
Rattled his throat as hoarsely he said:
“Water, water to drink, for pity’s sake!
Oh, a drop of water this thirst to slake!”
My father, moved at his speech heart-wrung,
Handed the orderly, downward leapt,
The flask of rum at the holster kept.
“Let him have some!” cried my father, as ran
The trooper o’er to the wounded man, —
A sort of Moor, swart, bloody and grim;
But just as the trooper was nearing him,
He lifted a pistol, with eye of flame,
And covered my father with murd’rous aim.
The hurtling slug grazed the very head,
And the helmet fell, pierced, streaked with red,
And the steed reared up; but in steady tone:
“Give him the whole!” said my father, “and on!”

TORU DUTT

HOW GOOD ARE THE POOR.

(“Il est nuit. La cabane est pauvre.”)

[Bk. LII. iii.]

’Tis night — within the close stout cabin door,
  The room is wrapped in shade save where there fall
Some twilight rays that creep along the floor,
  And show the fisher’s nets upon the wall.

In the dim corner, from the oaken chest,
  A few white dishes glimmer; through the shade
Stands a tall bed with dusky curtains dressed,
  And a rough mattress at its side is laid.

Five children on the long low mattress lie —
  A nest of little souls, it heaves with dreams;
In the high chimney the last embers die,
  And redden the dark room with crimson gleams.

The mother kneels and thinks, and pale with fear,
  She prays alone, hearing the billows shout:
While to wild winds, to rocks, to midnight drear,
  The ominous old ocean sobs without.

Poor wives of fishers! Ah! ’tis sad to say,
  Our sons, our husbands, all that we love best,
Our hearts, our souls, are on those waves away,
  Those ravening wolves that know not ruth, nor rest.

Think how they sport with these beloved forms;
  And how the clarion-blowing wind unties
Above their heads the tresses of the storms:
  Perchance even now the child, the husband, dies.

For we can never tell where they may be
  Who, to make head against the tide and gale,
Between them and the starless, soulless sea
  Have but one bit of plank, with one poor sail.

Terrible fear! We seek the pebbly shore,
  Cry to the rising billows, “Bring them home.”
Alas! what answer gives their troubled roar,
  To the dark thought that haunts us as we roam.

Janet is sad: her husband is alone,
  Wrapped in the black shroud of this bitter night:

His children are so little, there is none
  To give him aid. “Were they but old, they might.”
Ah, mother! when they too are on the main,
How wilt thou weep: “Would they were young again!”

She takes his lantern— ’tis his hour at last
  She will go forth, and see if the day breaks,
And if his signal-fire be at the mast;
  Ah, no — not yet — no breath of morning wakes.

No line of light o’er the dark water lies;
  It rains, it rains, how black is rain at morn:
The day comes trembling, and the young dawn cries —
  Cries like a baby fearing to be born.

Sudden her humane eyes that peer and watch
  Through the deep shade, a mouldering dwelling find,
No light within — the thin door shakes — the thatch
  O’er the green walls is twisted of the wind,

Yellow, and dirty, as a swollen rill,
  ”Ah, me,” she saith, “here does that widow dwell;
Few days ago my good man left her ill:
  I will go in and see if all be well.”

She strikes the door, she listens, none replies,
  And Janet shudders. “Husbandless, alone,
And with two children — they have scant supplies.
  Good neighbor! She sleeps heavy as a stone.”

She calls again, she knocks, ’tis silence still;
  No sound — no answer — suddenly the door,
As if the senseless creature felt some thrill
  Of pity, turned — and open lay before.

She entered, and her lantern lighted all
  The house so still, but for the rude waves’ din.
Through the thin roof the plashing rain-drops fall,
  But something terrible is couched within.

* * * * *

“So, for the kisses that delight the flesh,
  For mother’s worship, and for children’s bloom,
For song, for smile, for love so fair and fresh,
  For laugh, for dance, there is one goal — the tomb.”

And why does Janet pass so fast away?
  What hath she done within that house of dread?
What foldeth she beneath her mantle gray?
  And hurries home, and hides it in her bed:
  With half-averted face, and nervous tread,
  What hath she stolen from the awful dead?

The dawn was whitening over the sea’s verge
  As she sat pensive, touching broken chords
Of half-remorseful thought, while the hoarse surge
  Howled a sad concert to her broken words.

“Ah, my poor husband! we had five before,
  Already so much care, so much to find,
For he must work for all. I give him more.
  What was that noise? His step! Ah, no! the wind.

“That I should be afraid of him I love!
  I have done ill. If he should beat me now,
I would not blame him. Did not the door move?
  Not yet, poor man.” She sits with careful brow
Wrapped in her inward grief; nor hears the roar
  Of winds and waves that dash against his prow,
Nor the black cormorant shrieking on the shore.

Sudden the door flies open wide, and lets
  Noisily in the dawn-light scarcely clear,
And the good fisher, dragging his damp nets,
  Stands on the threshold, with a joyous cheer.

“’Tis thou!” she cries, and, eager as a lover,
  Leaps up and holds her husband to her breast;
Her greeting kisses all his vesture cover;
  ”’Tis I, good wife!” and his broad face expressed

How gay his heart that Janet’s love made light.
  ”What weather was it?” “Hard.” “Your fishing?” “Bad.
The sea was like a nest of thieves to-night;
  But I embrace thee, and my heart is glad.

“There was a devil in the wind that blew;
  I tore my net, caught nothing, broke my line,
And once I thought the bark was broken too;
  What did you all the night long, Janet mine?”

She, trembling in the darkness, answered, “I!
  Oh, naught — I sew’d, I watch’d, I was afraid,
The waves were loud as thunders from the sky;
  But it is over.” Shyly then she said —

“Our neighbor died last night; it must have been
  When you were gone. She left two little ones,
So small, so frail — William and Madeline;
  The one just lisps, the other scarcely runs.”

The man looked grave, and in the corner cast
  His old fur bonnet, wet with rain and sea,
Muttered awhile, and scratched his head, — at last
  ”We have five children, this makes seven,” said he.

“Already in bad weather we must sleep
  Sometimes without our supper. Now! Ah, well —
’Tis not my fault. These accidents are deep;
  It was the good God’s will. I cannot tell.

“Why did He take the mother from those scraps,
  No bigger than my fist. ’Tis hard to read;
A learned man might understand, perhaps —
  So little, they can neither work nor need.

“Go fetch them, wife; they will be frightened sore,
  If with the dead alone they waken thus.
That was the mother knocking at our door,
  And we must take the children home to us.

“Brother and sister shall they be to ours,
  And they will learn to climb my knee at even;
When He shall see these strangers in our bowers,
  More fish, more food, will give the God of Heaven.

“I will work harder; I will drink no wine —
  Go fetch them. Wherefore dost thou linger, dear?
Not thus were wont to move those feet of thine.”
  She drew the curtain, saying, “They are here!”

BP. ALEXANDER

LA VOIX DE GUERNESEY.

MENTANA.

(VICTOR HUGO TO GARIBALDI.)

(“Ces jeunes gens, combien étaient-ils.”)

[LA VOIX DE GUERNESEY, December, 1868.]

I.

Young soldiers of the noble Latin blood,
How many are ye — Boys? Four thousand odd.
How many are there dead? Six hundred: count!
Their limbs lie strewn about the fatal mount,
Blackened and torn, eyes gummed with blood, hearts rolled
Out from their ribs, to give the wolves of the wold
A red feast; nothing of them left but these
Pierced relics, underneath the olive trees,
Show where the gin was sprung — the scoundrel-trap
Which brought those hero-lads their foul mishap.
See how they fell in swathes — like barley-ears!
Their crime? to claim Rome and her glories theirs;
To fight for Right and Honor; — foolish names!
Come — Mothers of the soil! Italian dames!
Turn the dead over! — try your battle luck!
(Bearded or smooth, to her that gave him suck
The man is always child) — Stay, here’s a brow
Split by the Zouaves’ bullets! This one, now,
With the bright curly hair soaked so in blood,
Was yours, ma donna! — sweet and fair and good.

The spirit sat upon his fearless face
Before they murdered it, in all the grace
Of manhood’s dawn. Sisters, here’s yours! his lips,
Over whose bloom the bloody death-foam slips,

Lisped house-songs after you, and said your name
In loving prattle once. That hand, the same
Which lies so cold over the eyelids shut,
Was once a small pink baby-fist, and wet
With milk beads from thy yearning breasts.

Take thou
Thine eldest, — thou, thy youngest born. Oh, flow
Of tears never to cease! Oh, Hope quite gone,
Dead like the dead! — Yet could they live alone —
Without their Tiber and their Rome? and be
Young and Italian — and not also free?
They longed to see the ancient eagle try
His lordly pinions in a modern sky.
They bore — each on himself — the insults laid
On the dear foster-land: of naught afraid,
Save of not finding foes enough to dare
For Italy. Ah; gallant, free, and rare
Young martyrs of a sacred cause, — Adieu!
No more of life — no more of love — for you!
No sweet long-straying in the star-lit glades
At Ave-Mary, with the Italian maids;
No welcome home!

II.

This Garibaldi now, the Italian boys
Go mad to hear him — take to dying — take
To passion for “the pure and high”; — God’s sake!
It’s monstrous, horrible! One sees quite clear
Society — our charge — must shake with fear,
And shriek for help, and call on us to act
When there’s a hero, taken in the fact.
If Light shines in the dark, there’s guilt in that!
What’s viler than a lantern to a bat?

III.

Your Garibaldi missed the mark! You see
The end of life’s to cheat, and not to be
Cheated: The knave is nobler than the fool!
Get all you can and keep it! Life’s a pool,
The best luck wins; if Virtue starves in rags,
I laugh at Virtue; here’s my money-bags!
Here’s righteous metal! We have kings, I say,
To keep cash going, and the game at play;
There’s why a king wants money — he’d be missed
Without a fertilizing civil list.
                Do but try
The question with a steady moral eye!
The colonel strives to be a brigadier,
The marshal, constable. Call the game fair,
And pay your winners! Show the trump, I say!
A renegade’s a rascal — till the day
They make him Pasha: is he rascal then?
What with these sequins? Bah! you speak to Men,
And Men want money — power — luck — life’s joy —
Those take who can: we could, and fobbed Savoy;
For those who live content with honest state,
They’re public pests; knock we ’em on the pate!
They set a vile example! Quick — arrest
That Fool, who ruled and failed to line his nest.
Just hit a bell, you’ll see the clapper shake —
Meddle with Priests, you’ll find the barrack wake —
Ah! Princes know the People’s a tight boot,
March ’em sometimes to be shot and to shoot,
Then they’ll wear easier. So let them preach
The righteousness of howitzers; and teach
At the fag end of prayer: “Now, slit their throats!
My holy Zouaves! my good yellow-coats!”
We like to see the Holy Father send
Powder and steel and lead without an end,
To feed Death fat; and broken battles mend.
So they!

IV.

But thou, our Hero, baffled, foiled,
The Glorious Chief who vainly bled and toiled.
The trust of all the Peoples — Freedom’s Knight!
The Paladin unstained — the Sword of Right!
What wilt thou do, whose land finds thee but jails!
The banished claim the banished! deign to cheer
The refuge of the homeless — enter here,
And light upon our households dark will fall
Even as thou enterest. Oh, Brother, all,
Each one of us — hurt with thy sorrows’ proof,
Will make a country for thee of his roof.
Come, sit with those who live as exiles learn:
Come! Thou whom kings could conquer but not yet turn.
We’ll talk of “Palermo”— “the Thousand” true,
Will tell the tears of blood of France to you;
Then by his own great Sea we’ll read, together,
Old Homer in the quiet summer weather,
And after, thou shalt go to thy desire
While that faint star of Justice grows to fire.

V.

Oh, Italy! hail your Deliverer,
Oh, Nations! almost he gave Rome to her!
Strong-arm and prophet-heart had all but come
To win the city, and to make it “Rome.”
Calm, of the antique grandeur, ripe to be
Named with the noblest of her history.
He would have Romanized your Rome — controlled
Her glory, lordships, Gods, in a new mould.
Her spirits’ fervor would have melted in
The hundred cities with her; made a twin
Vesuvius and the Capitol; and blended
Strong Juvenal’s with the soul, tender and splendid,
Of Dante — smelted old with new alloy —

Stormed at the Titans’ road full of bold joy
Whereby men storm Olympus. Italy,
Weep! — This man could have made one Rome of thee!

VI.

But the crime’s wrought! Who wrought it?
            Honest Man —
Priest Pius? No! Each does but what he can.
Yonder’s the criminal! The warlike wight
Who hides behind the ranks of France to fight,
Greek Sinon’s blood crossed thick with Judas-Jew’s,
The Traitor who with smile which true men woos,
Lip mouthing pledges — hand grasping the knife —
Waylaid French Liberty, and took her life.
Kings, he is of you! fit companion! one
Whom day by day the lightning looks upon
Keen; while the sentenced man triples his guard
And trembles; for his hour approaches hard.
Ye ask me “when?” I say *soon*! Hear ye not
Yon muttering in the skies above the spot?
Mark ye no coming shadow, Kings? the shroud
Of a great storm driving the thunder-cloud?
Hark! like the thief-catcher who pulls the pin,
God’s thunder asks to *speak to one within*!

VII.

And meanwhile this death-odor — this corpse-scent
Which makes the priestly incense redolent
Of rotting men, and the Te Deums stink —
Reeks through the forests — past the river’s brink,
O’er wood and plain and mountain, till it fouls
Fair Paris in her pleasures; then it prowls,
A deadly stench, to Crete, to Mexico,
To Poland — wheresoe’er kings’ armies go:
And Earth one Upas-tree of bitter sadness,
Opening vast blossoms of a bloody madness.

Throats cut by thousands — slain men by the ton!
Earth quite corpse-cumbered, though the half not done!
They lie, stretched out, where the blood-puddles soak,
Their black lips gaping with the last cry spoke.
“Stretched;” nay! *sown broadcast*; yes, the word is “sown.”
The fallows Liberty — the harsh wind blown
Over the furrows, Fate: and these stark dead
Are grain sublime, from Death’s cold fingers shed
To make the Abyss conceive: the Future bear
More noble Heroes! Swell, oh, Corpses dear!
Rot quick to the green blade of Freedom! Death!
Do thy kind will with them! They without breath,
Stripped, scattered, ragged, festering, slashed and blue,
Dangle towards God the arms French shot tore through
And wait in meekness, Death! for Him and You!

VIII.

Oh, France! oh, People! sleeping unabashed!
Liest thou like a hound when it was lashed?
Thou liest! thine own blood fouling both thy hands,
And on thy limbs the rust of iron bands,
And round thy wrists the cut where cords went deep.
Say did they numb thy soul, that thou didst sleep?
Alas! sad France is grown a cave for sleeping,
Which a worse night than Midnight holds in keeping,
Thou sleepest sottish — lost to life and fame —
While the stars stare on thee, and pale for shame.
Stir! rouse thee! Sit! if thou know’st not to rise;
Sit up, thou tortured sluggard! ope thine eyes!
Stretch thy brawn, Giant! Sleep is foul and vile!
Art fagged, art deaf, art dumb? art blind this while?
They lie who say so! Thou dost know and feel
The things they do to thee and thine. The heel
That scratched thy neck in passing — whose? Canst say?
Yes, yes, ’twas *his*, and this is his *fête-day*.
Oh, thou that wert of humankind — couched so —

A beast of burden on this dunghill! oh!
Bray to them, Mule! Oh, Bullock! bellow then!
Since they have made thee blind, grope in thy den!
Do something, Outcast One, that wast so grand!
Who knows if thou putt’st forth thy poor maimed hand,
There may be venging weapon within reach!
Feel with both hands — with both huge arms go stretch
Along the black wall of thy cellar. Nay,
There *may* be some odd thing hidden away?
Who knows — there *may*! Those great hands might so come
In course of ghastly fumble through the gloom,
Upon a sword — a *sword*! The hands once clasp
Its hilt, must wield it with a Victor’s grasp.

EDWIN ARNOLD, C.S.I.

LES CHANSONS DES RUES ET DES BOIS.

LOVE OF THE WOODLAND.

(“Orphée au bois du Caystre.”)

[Bk. I. ii.]

Orpheus, through the hellward wood
Hurried, ere the eve-star glowed,
For the fauns’ lugubrious hoots
Followed, hollow, from crookèd roots;
Aeschylus, where Aetna smoked,
Gods of Sicily evoked
With the flute, till sulphur taint
Dulled and lulled the echoes faint;
Pliny, soon his style mislaid,
Dogged Miletus’ merry maid,
As she showed eburnean limbs
All-multiplied by brooklet brims;
Plautus, see! like Plutus, hold
Bosomfuls of orchard-gold,
Learns he why that mystic core
Was sweet Venus’ meed of yore?
Dante dreamt (while spirits pass
As in wizard’s jetty glass)
Each black-bossed Briarian trunk
Waved live arms like furies drunk;
Winsome Will, ‘neath Windsor Oak,
Eyed each elf that cracked a joke
At poor panting grease-hart fast —
Obese, roguish Jack harassed;
At Versailles, Molière did court
Cues from Pan (in heron port,
Half in ooze, half treeward raised),
“Words so witty, that Boileau’s ‘mazed!”

Foliage! fondly you attract!
Dian’s faith I keep intact,
And declare that thy dryads dance
Still, and will, in thy green expanse!

SHOOTING STARS.

[FOR MY LITTLE CHILD ONLY.]

(“Tas de feux tombants.”)

[Bk. III. vii.]

See the scintillating shower!
  Like a burst from golden mine —
Incandescent coals that pour
  From the incense-bowl divine,
And around us dewdrops, shaken,
  Mirror each a twinkling ray
‘Twixt the flowers that awaken
  In this glory great as day.
Mists and fogs all vanish fleetly;
  And the birds begin to sing,
Whilst the rain is murm’ring sweetly
  As if angels echoing.
And, methinks, to show she’s grateful
  For this seed from heaven come,
Earth is holding up a plateful
  Of the birds and buds a-bloom!

L’ANNÉE TERRIBLE.

TO LITTLE JEANNE.

(“Vous eûtes donc hier un an.”)

[September, 1870.]

You’ve lived a year, then, yesterday, sweet child,
Prattling thus happily! So fledglings wild,
New-hatched in warmer nest ‘neath sheltering bough,
Chirp merrily to feel their feathers grow.
Your mouth’s a rose, Jeanne! In these volumes grand
Whose pictures please you — while I trembling stand
To see their big leaves tattered by your hand —
Are noble lines; but nothing half your worth,
When all your tiny frame rustles with mirth
To welcome me. No work of author wise
Can match the thought half springing to your eyes,
And your dim reveries, unfettered, strange,
Regarding man with all the boundless range
Of angel innocence. Methinks, ’tis clear
That God’s not far, Jeanne, when I see you here.

Ah! twelve months old: ’tis quite an age, and brings
Grave moments, though your soul to rapture clings,
You’re at that hour of life most like to heaven,
When present joy no cares, no sorrows leaven
When man no shadow feels: if fond caress
Round parent twines, children the world possess.
Your waking hopes, your dreams of mirth and love
From Charles to Alice, father to mother, rove;
No wider range of view your heart can take
Than what her nursing and his bright smiles make;
They two alone on this your opening hour
Can gleams of tenderness and gladness pour:

They two — none else, Jeanne! Yet ’tis just, and I,
Poor grandsire, dare but to stand humbly by.
You come — I go: though gloom alone my right,
Blest be the destiny which gives you light.

Your fair-haired brother George and you beside
Me play — in watching you is all my pride;
And all I ask — by countless sorrows tried —
The grave; o’er which in shadowy form may show
Your cradles gilded by the morning’s glow.

Pure new-born wonderer! your infant life
Strange welcome found, Jeanne, in this time of strife.
Like wild-bee humming through the woods your play,
And baby smiles have dared a world at bay:
Your tiny accents lisp their gentle charms
To mighty Paris clashing mighty arms.
Ah! when I see you, child, and when I hear
You sing, or try, with low voice whispering near,
And touch of fingers soft, my grief to cheer,
I dream this darkness, where the tempests groan,
Trembles, and passes with half-uttered moan.
For though these hundred towers of Paris bend,
Though close as foundering ship her glory’s end,
Though rocks the universe, which we defend;
Still to great cannon on our ramparts piled,
God sends His blessing by a little child.

MARWOOD TUCKER.

TO A SICK CHILD DURING THE SIEGE OF PARIS.

(“Si vous continuez toute pâle.”)

[November, 1870.]

If you continue thus so wan and white;
  If I, one day, behold
You pass from out our dull air to the light,
  You, infant — I, so old:
If I the thread of our two lives must see
  Thus blent to human view,
I who would fain know death was near to me,
  And far away for you;
If your small hands remain such fragile things;
  If, in your cradle stirred,
You have the mien of waiting there for wings,
  Like to some new-fledged bird;
Not rooted to our earth you seem to be.
  If still, beneath the skies,
You turn, O Jeanne, on our mystery
  Soft, discontented eyes!
If I behold you, gay and strong no more;
  If you mope sadly thus;
If you behind you have not shut the door,
  Through which you came to us;
If you no more like some fair dame I see
  Laugh, walk, be well and gay;
If like a little soul you seem to me
  That fain would fly away —
I’ll deem that to this world, where oft are blent
  The pall and swaddling-band,
You came but to depart — an angel sent
  To bear me from the land.

LUCY H. HOOPER.

THE CARRIER PIGEON.

(“Oh! qu’est-ce que c’est donc que l’Inconnu.”)

[January, 1871.]

Who then — oh, who, is like our God so great,
Who makes the seed expand beneath the mountain’s weight;
Who for a swallow’s nest leaves one old castle wall,
Who lets for famished beetles savory apples fall,
Who bids a pigmy win where Titans fail, in yoke,
And, in what we deem fruitless roar and smoke,
Makes Etna, Chimborazo, still His praises sing,
And saves a city by a word lapped ‘neath a pigeon’s wing!

TOYS AND TRAGEDY.

("Enfants, on vous dira plus tard.")

[January, 1871.]

In later years, they'll tell you grandpapa
  Adored his little darlings; for them did
His utmost just to pleasure them and mar
  No moments with a frown or growl amid
Their rosy rompings; that he loved them so
  (Though men have called him bitter, cold, and stern,)
That in the famous winter when the snow
  Covered poor Paris, he went, old and worn,
To buy them dolls, despite the falling shells,
At which laughed Punch, and they, and shook his bells.

MOURNING.

("Charle! ô mon fils!")

[March, 1871.]

Charles, Charles, my son! hast thou, then, quitted me?
  Must all fade, naught endure?
Hast vanished in that radiance, clear for thee,
  But still for us obscure?

My sunset lingers, boy, thy morn declines!
  Sweet mutual love we've known;
For man, alas! plans, dreams, and smiling twines
  With others' souls his own.

He cries, "This has no end!" pursues his way:
  He soon is downward bound:
He lives, he suffers; in his grasp one day
  Mere dust and ashes found.

I've wandered twenty years, in distant lands,
  With sore heart forced to stay:
Why fell the blow Fate only understands!
  God took my home away.

To-day one daughter and one son remain
  Of all my goodly show:
Wellnigh in solitude my dark hours wane;
  God takes my children now.

Linger, ye two still left me! though decays
  Our nest, our hearts remain;
In gloom of death your mother silent prays,
  I in this life of pain.

Martyr of Sion! holding Thee in sight,
  I’ll drain this cup of gall,
And scale with step resolved that dangerous height,
  Which rather seems a fall.

Truth is sufficient guide; no more man needs
  Than end so nobly shown.
Mourning, but brave, I march; where duty leads,
  I seek the vast unknown.

MARWOOD TUCKER.

THE LESSON OF THE PATRIOT DEAD.

("O caresse sublime.")

[April, 1871.]

Upon the grave's cold mouth there ever have caresses clung
For those who died ideally good and grand and pure and young;
Under the scorn of all who clamor: "There is nothing just!"
And bow to dread inquisitor and worship lords of dust;
Let sophists give the lie, hearts droop, and courtiers play the worm,
Our martyrs of Democracy the Truth sublime affirm!
And when all seems inert upon this seething, troublous round,
And when the rashest knows not best to flee ar stand his ground,
When not a single war-cry from the sombre mass will rush,
When o'er the universe is spread by Doubting utter hush,
Then he who searches well within the walls that close immure
Our teachers, leaders, heroes slain because they lived too pure,
May glue his ear upon the ground where few else came to grieve,
And ask the austere shadows: "Ho! and must one still believe?
Read yet the orders: 'Forward, march!' and 'charge!'" Then from the lime,
Which burnt the bones but left the soul (Oh! tyrants' useless crime!)
Will rise reply: "Yes!" "yes!" and "yes!" the thousand, thousandth time!

H.L.W.

THE BOY ON THE BARRICADE.

(“Sur une barricade.”)

[June, 1871.]

Like Casabianca on the devastated deck,
  In years yet younger, but the selfsame core.
Beside the battered barricado’s restless wreck,
  A lad stood splashed with gouts of guilty gore,
  But gemmed with purest blood of patriot more.

Upon his fragile form the troopers’ bloody grip
  Was deeply dug, while sharply challenged they:
“Were you one of this currish crew?” — pride pursed his lip,
  As firm as bandog’s, brought the bull to bay —
  While answered he: “I fought with others. Yea!”

“Prepare then to be shot! Go join that death-doomed row.”
  As paced he pertly past, a volley rang —
And as he fell in line, mock mercies once more flow
  Of man’s lead-lightning’s sudden scathing pang,
  But to his home-turned thoughts the balls but sang.

“Here’s half-a-franc I saved to buy my mother’s bread!” —
  The captain started — who mourns not a dear,
The dearest! mother!— “Where is she, wolf-cub?” he said
  Still gruffly. “There, d’ye see? not far from here.”
  ”Haste! make it hers! then back to swell *their* bier.”

He sprang aloof as springald from detested school,
  Or ocean-rover from protected port.
“The little rascal has the laugh on us! no fool
  To breast our bullets!” — but the scoff was short,
  For soon! the rogue is racing from his court;

And with still fearless front he faces them and calls:
"READY! but level low — *she's* kissed these eyes!"
From cooling hands of *men* each rifle falls,
And their gray officer, in grave surprise,
Life grants the lad whilst his last comrade dies.

Brave youth! I know not well what urged thy act,
Whether thou'lt pass in palace, or die rackt;
But *then*, shone on the guns, a sublime soul. —
A Bayard-boy's, bound by his pure parole!
Honor redeemed though paid by parlous price,
Though lost be sunlit sports, wild boyhood's spice,
The Gates, the cheers of mates for bright device!

Greeks would, whilom, have choicely clasped and circled thee,
Set thee the first to shield some new Thermopylae;
Thy deed had touched and tuned their true Tyrtaeus tongue,
And staged by Aeschylus, grouped thee grand gods among.

And thy lost name (now known no more) been gilt and graved
On cloud-kissed column, by the sweet south ocean laved.
From us no crown! no honors from the civic sheaf —
Purely this poet's tear-bejewelled, aye-green leaf!

H.L.W.

TO HIS ORPHAN GRANDCHILDREN.

("O Charles, je te sens près de moi.")

[July, 1871.]

I feel thy presence, Charles. Sweet martyr! down
  In earth, where men decay,
I search, and see from cracks which rend thy tomb,
  Burst out pale morning's ray.

Close linked are bier and cradle: here the dead,
  To charm us, live again:
Kneeling, I mourn, when on my threshold sounds
  Two little children's strain.

George, Jeanne, sing on! George, Jeanne, unconscious play!
  Your father's form recall,
Now darkened by his sombre shade, now gilt
  By beams that wandering fall.

Oh, knowledge! what thy use? did we not know
  Death holds no more the dead;
But Heaven, where, hand in hand, angel and star
  Smile at the grave we dread?

A Heaven, which childhood represents on earth.
  Orphans, may God be nigh!
That God, who can your bright steps turn aside
  From darkness, where I sigh.

All joy be yours, though sorrow bows me down!
  To each his fitting wage:
Children, I've passed life's span, and men are plagued
  By shadows at that stage.

Hath any done — nay, only half performed —
  The good he might for others?
Hath any conquered hatred, or had strength
  To treat his foes like brothers?

E’en he, who’s tried his best, hath evil wrought:
  Pain springs from happiness:
My heart has triumphed in defeat, my pulse
  Ne’er quickened at success.

I seemed the greater when I felt the blow:
  The prick gives sense of gain;
Since to make others bleed my courage fails,
  I’d rather bear the pain.

To grow is sad, since evils grow no less;
  Great height is mark for all:
The more I have of branches, more of clustering boughs,
  The ghastlier shadows fall.

Thence comes my sadness, though I grant your charms:
  Ye are the outbursting
Of the soul in bloom, steeped in the draughts
  Of nature’s boundless spring.

George is the sapling, set in mournful soil;
  Jeanne’s folding petals shroud
A mind which trembles at our uproar, yet
  Half longs to speak aloud.

Give, then, my children — lowly, blushing plants,
  Whom sorrow waits to seize —
Free course to instincts, whispering ‘mid the flowers,
  Like hum of murmuring bees.

Some day you’ll find that chaos comes, alas!
  That angry lightning’s hurled,

When any cheer the People, Atlas huge,
  Grim bearer of the world!

You’ll see that, since our fate is ruled by chance,
  Each man, unknowing, great,
Should frame life so, that at some future hour
  Fact and his dreamings meet.

I, too, when death is past, one day shall grasp
  That end I know not now;
And over you will bend me down, all filled
  With dawn’s mysterious glow.

I’ll learn what means this exile, what this shroud
  Enveloping your prime;
And why the truth and sweetness of one man
  Seem to all others crime.

I’ll hear — though midst these dismal boughs you sang —
  How came it, that for me,
Who every pity feel for every woe,
  So vast a gloom could be.

I’ll know why night relentless holds me, why
  So great a pile of doom:
Why endless frost enfolds me, and methinks
  My nightly bed’s a tomb:

Why all these battles, all these tears, regrets,
  And sorrows were my share;
And why God’s will of me a cypress made,
  When roses bright ye were.

MARWOOD TUCKER.

TO THE CANNON "VICTOR HUGO."

[Bought with the proceeds of Readings of "Les Châtiments" during the Siege of Paris.]

  Thou deadly crater, moulded by my muse,
Cast thou thy bronze into my bowed and wounded heart,
And let my soul its vengeance to thy bronze impart!

L’ART D’ÊTRE GRANDPÊRE.

THE CHILDREN OF THE POOR.

(“Prenez garde à ce petit être.”)

[LAUS PUER: POEM V.]

Take heed of this small child of earth;
  He is great: in him is God most high.
Children before their fleshly birth
  Are lights in the blue sky.

In our brief bitter world of wrong
  They come; God gives us them awhile.
His speech is in their stammering tongue,
  And His forgiveness in their smile.

Their sweet light rests upon our eyes:
  Alas! their right to joy is plain.
If they are hungry, Paradise
  Weeps, and if cold, Heaven thrills with pain.

The want that saps their sinless flower
  Speaks judgment on Sin’s ministers.
Man holds an angel in his power.
  Ah! deep in Heaven what thunder stirs.

When God seeks out these tender things,
  Whom in the shadow where we keep,
He sends them clothed about with wings,
  And finds them ragged babes that weep!

Dublin University Magazine.

THE EPIC OF THE LION.

(“Un lion avait pris un enfant.”)

[XIII.]

A Lion in his jaws caught up a child —
Not harming it — and to the woodland, wild
With secret streams and lairs, bore off his prey —
The beast, as one might cull a bud in May.
It was a rosy boy, a king’s own pride,
A ten-year lad, with bright eyes shining wide,
And save this son his majesty beside
Had but one girl, two years of age, and so
The monarch suffered, being old, much woe;
His heir the monster’s prey, while the whole land
In dread both of the beast and king did stand;
Sore terrified were all.

By came a knight
That road, who halted, asking, “What’s the fright?”
They told him, and he spurred straight for the site!
The beast was seen to smile ere joined they fight,
The man and monster, in most desperate duel,
Like warring giants, angry, huge, and cruel.
Stout though the knight, the lion stronger was,
And tore that brave breast under its cuirass,
Scrunching that hero, till he sprawled, alas!
Beneath his shield, all blood and mud and mess:
Whereat the lion feasted: then it went
Back to its rocky couch and slept content.
Sudden, loud cries and clamors! striking out
Qualm to the heart of the quiet, horn and shout
Causing the solemn wood to reel with rout.
Terrific was this noise that rolled before;
It seemed a squadron; nay, ’twas something more —

A whole battalion, sent by that sad king
With force of arms his little prince to bring,
Together with the lion’s bleeding hide.

Which here was right or wrong? Who can decide?
Have beasts or men most claim to live? God wots!
He is the unit, we the cipher-dots.
Ranged in the order a great hunt should have,
They soon between the trunks espy the cave.
“Yes, that is it! the very mouth of the den!”
The trees all round it muttered, warning men;
Still they kept step and neared it. Look you now,
Company’s pleasant, and there were a thou —
Good Lord! all in a moment, there’s its face!
Frightful! they saw the lion! Not one pace
Further stirred any man; but bolt and dart
Made target of the beast. He, on his part,
As calm as Pelion in the rain or hail,
Bristled majestic from the teeth to tail,
And shook full fifty missiles from his hide,
But no heed took he; steadfastly he eyed,
And roared a roar, hoarse, vibrant, vengeful, dread,
A rolling, raging peal of wrath, which spread,
Making the half-awakened thunder cry,
“Who thunders there?” from its black bed of sky.
This ended all! Sheer horror cleared the coast;
As fogs are driven by the wind, that valorous host
Melted, dispersed to all the quarters four,
Clean panic-stricken by that monstrous roar.
Then quoth the lion, “Woods and mountains, see,
A thousand men, enslaved, fear one beast free!”
He followed towards the hill, climbed high above,
Lifted his voice, and, as the sowers sow
The seed down wind, thus did that lion throw
His message far enough the town to reach:
“King! your behavior really passes speech!
Thus far no harm I’ve wrought to him your son;

But now I give you notice — when night's done,
I will make entry at your city-gate,
Bringing the prince alive; and those who wait
To see him in my jaws — your lackey-crew —
Shall see me eat him in your palace, too!"
Next morning, this is what was viewed in town:
Dawn coming — people going — some adown
Praying, some crying; pallid cheeks, swift feet,
And a huge lion stalking through the street.
It seemed scarce short of rash impiety
To cross its path as the fierce beast went by.
So to the palace and its gilded dome
With stately steps unchallenged did he roam;
He enters it — within those walls he leapt!
No man!

For certes, though he raged and wept,
His majesty, like all, close shelter kept,
Solicitous to live, holding his breath
Specially precious to the realm. Now death
Is not thus viewed by honest beasts of prey;
And when the lion found *him* fled away,
Ashamed to be so grand, man being so base,
He muttered to himself, "A wretched king!
'Tis well; I'll eat his boy!" Then, wandering,
Lordly he traversed courts and corridors,
Paced beneath vaults of gold on shining floors,
Glanced at the throne deserted, stalked from hall
To hall — green, yellow, crimson — empty all!
Rich couches void, soft seats unoccupied!
And as he walked he looked from side to side
To find some pleasant nook for his repast,
Since appetite was come to munch at last
The princely morsel! — Ah! what sight astounds
That grisly lounger?

In the palace grounds
An alcove on a garden gives, and there
A tiny thing — forgot in the general fear,
Lulled in the flower-sweet dreams of infancy,
Bathed with soft sunlight falling brokenly
Through leaf and lattice — was at that moment waking;
A little lovely maid, most dear and taking,
The prince's sister — all alone, undressed —
She sat up singing: children sing so best.
Charming this beauteous baby-maid; and so
The beast caught sight of her and stopped —

And then
Entered — the floor creaked as he stalked straight in.
Above the playthings by the little bed
The lion put his shaggy, massive head,
Dreadful with savage might and lordly scorn,
More dreadful with that princely prey so borne;
Which she, quick spying, "Brother, brother!" cried,
"Oh, my own brother!" and, unterrified,
She gazed upon that monster of the wood,
Whose yellow balls not Typhon had withstood,
And — well! who knows what thoughts these small heads hold?
She rose up in her cot — full height, and bold,
And shook her pink fist angrily at him.
Whereon — close to the little bed's white rim,
All dainty silk and laces — this huge brute
Set down her brother gently at her foot,
Just as a mother might, and said to her,
"Don't be put out, now! There he is, dear, there!"

EDWIN ARNOLD, C.S.I.

LES QUATRE VENTS DE L’ESPRIT.

ON HEARING THE PRINCESS ROYAL SING.

(“Dans ta haute demeure.”)

[Bk. III. ix., 1881.]

In thine abode so high
  Where yet one scarce can breathe,
Dear child, most tenderly
  A soft song thou dost wreathe.

Thou singest, little girl —
  Thy sire, the King is he:
Around thee glories whirl,
  But all things sigh in thee.

Thy thought may seek not wings
  Of speech; dear love’s forbidden;
Thy smiles, those heavenly things,
  Being faintly born, are chidden.

Thou feel’st, poor little Bride,
  A hand unknown and chill
Clasp thine from out the wide
  Deep shade so deathly still.

Thy sad heart, wingless, weak,
  Is sunk in this black shade
So deep, thy small hands seek,
  Vainly, the pulse God made.

Thou art yet but highness, thou
  That shaft be majesty:
Though still on thy fair brow
  Some faint dawn-flush may be,

Child, unto armies dear,
  Even now we mark heaven’s light
Dimmed with the fume and fear
  And glory of battle-might.

Thy godfather is he,
  Earth’s Pope, — he hails thee, child!
Passing, armed men you see
  Like unarmed women, mild.

As saint all worship thee;
  Thyself even hast the strong
Thrill of divinity
  Mingled with thy small song.

Each grand old warrior
  Guards thee, submissive, proud;
Mute thunders at thy door
  Sleep, that shall wake most loud.

Around thee foams the wild
  Bright sea, the lot of kings.
Happier wert thou, my child,
  I’ the woods a bird that sings!

NELSON R. TYERMAN.

MY HAPPIEST DREAM.

(“J’aime à me figure.”)

[Bk. III. vii. and viii.]

I love to look, as evening fails,
On vestals streaming in their veils,
Within the fane past altar rails,
  Green palms in hand.
My darkest moods will always clear
When I can fancy children near,
With rosy lips a-laughing — dear,
  Light-dancing band!

Enchanting vision, too, displayed,
That of a sweet and radiant maid,
Who knows not why she is afraid, —
  Love’s yet unseen!
Another — rarest ‘mong the rare —
To see the gaze of chosen fair
Return prolonged and wistful stare
  Of eager een.

But — dream o’er all to stir my soul,
And shine the brightest on the roll,
Is when a land of tyrant’s toll
  By sword is rid.
I say not dagger — with the sword
When Right enchampions the horde,
All in broad day — so that the bard
May sing the victor with the starred
  Bayard and Cid!

AN OLD-TIME LAY.

(“Jamais elle ne raille.”)

[Bk. III. xiii.]

  Where your brood seven lie,
  Float in calm heavenly,
  Life passing evenly,
Waterfowl, waterfowl! often I dream
    For a rest
    Like your nest,
    Skirting the stream.

  Shine the sun tearfully
  Ere the clouds clear fully,
  Still you skim cheerfully,
Swallow, oh! swallow swift! often I sigh
    For a home
    Where you roam
    Nearing the sky!

  Guileless of pondering;
  Swallow-eyes wandering;
  Seeking no fonder ring
Than the rose-garland Love gives thee apart!
    Grant me soon —
    Blessed boon!
    Home in thy heart!

JERSEY.

(“Jersey dort dans les flots.”)

[Bk. III. xiv., Oct. 8, 1854.]

Dear Jersey! jewel jubilant and green,
  ’Midst surge that splits steel ships, but sings to thee!
Thou fav’rest Frenchmen, though from England seen,
  Oft tearful to that mistress “North Countree”;
Returned the third time safely here to be,
I bless my bold Gibraltar of the Free.

Yon lighthouse stands forth like a fervent friend,
  One who our tempest buffets back with zest,
And with twin-steeple, eke our helmsman’s end,
  Forms arms that beckon us upon thy breast;
Rose-posied pillow, crystallized with spray,
Where pools pellucid mirror sunny ray.

A frigate fretting yonder smoothest sky,
  Like pauseless petrel poising o’er a wreck,
Strikes bright athwart the dearly dazzled eye,
  Until it lessens to scarce certain speck,
‘Neath Venus, sparkling on the agate-sprinkled beach,
  For fisher’s sailing-signal, just and true,
  Until Aurora frights her from the view.

In summer, steamer-smoke spreads as thy veil,
  And mists in winter sudden screen thy sight,
When at thy feet the galley-breakers wail
  And toss their tops high o’er the lofty flight
Of horrid storm-worn steps with shark-like bite,
That only ope to swallow up in spite.

L’ENVOY.

But penitent in calm, thou givest a balm,
  To many a man who’s felt thy rage,
And many a sea-bird — thanks be heard! —
  Thou shieldest — sea-bird — exiled bard and sage.

THEN, MOST, I SMILE.

("Il est un peu tard.")

[Bk. III. xxx., Oct. 30, 1854.]

Late it is to look so proud,
  Daisy queen! come is the gloom
Of the winter-burdened cloud! —
  "But, in winter, most I bloom!"

Star of even! sunk the sun!
  Lost for e'er the ruddy line;
And the earth is veiled in dun, —
  "Nay, in darkness, best I shine!"

O, my soul! art 'bove alarm,
  Quaffing thus the cup of gall —
Canst thou face the grave with calm? —
  "Yes, the Christians smile at all."

THE EXILE’S DESIRE.

(“Si je pouvais voir, O patrie!”)

[Bk. III. xxxvii.]

Would I could see you, native land,
Where lilacs and the almond stand
Behind fields flowering to the strand —
    But no!

Can I — oh, father, mother, crave
Another final blessing save
To rest my head upon your grave? —
    But no!

In the one pit where ye repose,
Would I could tell of France’s woes,
My brethren, who fell facing foes —
    But no!

Would I had — oh, my dove of light,
After whose flight came ceaseless night,
One plume to clasp so purely white. —
    But no!

Far from ye all — oh, dead, bewailed!
The fog-bell deafens me empaled
Upon this rock — I feel enjailed —
    Though free.

Like one who watches at the gate
Lest some shall ‘scape the doomèd strait.
I watch! the tyrant, howe’er late,
    Must fall!

THE REFUGEE’S HAVEN.

(“Vous voilà dans la froide Angleterre.”)

[Bk. III. xlvii., Jersey, Sept. 19, 1854.]

You may doubt I find comfort in England
  But, there, ’tis a refuge from dangers!
Where a Cromwell dictated to Milton,
  Republicans ne’er can be strangers!

VARIOUS PIECES.

TO THE NAPOLEON COLUMN.

[Oct. 9, 1830.]

When with gigantic hand he placed,
For throne, on vassal Europe based,
  That column’s lofty height —
Pillar, in whose dread majesty,
In double immortality,
  Glory and bronze unite!
Aye, when he built it that, some day,
Discord or war their course might stay,
  Or here might break their car;
And in our streets to put to shame
Pigmies that bear the hero’s name
  Of Greek and Roman war.
It was a glorious sight; the world
His hosts had trod, with flags unfurled,
  In veteran array;
Kings fled before him, forced to yield,
He, conqueror on each battlefield,
  Their cannon bore away.
Then, with his victors back he came;
All France with booty teemed, her name
  Was writ on sculptured stone;
And Paris cried with joy, as when
The parent bird comes home again
  To th’ eaglets left alone.
Into the furnace flame, so fast,
Were heaps of war-won metal cast,
  The future monument!
His thought had formed the giant mould,
And piles of brass in the fire he rolled,
  From hostile cannon rent.

When to the battlefield he came,
He grasped the guns spite tongues of flame,
  And bore the spoil away.
This bronze to France’s Rome he brought,
And to the founder said, “Is aught
  Wanting for our array?”
And when, beneath a radiant sun,
That man, his noble purpose done,
  With calm and tranquil mien,
Disclosed to view this glorious fane,
And did with peaceful hand contain
  The warlike eagle’s sheen.
Round *thee*, when hundred thousands placed,
As some great Roman’s triumph graced,
  The little Romans all;
We boys hung on the procession’s flanks,
Seeking some father in thy ranks,
  And loud thy praise did call.
Who that surveyed thee, when that day
Thou deemed that future glory ray
  Would here be ever bright;
Feared that, ere long, all France thy grave
From pettifoggers vain would crave
  Beneath that column’s height?

Author of “Critical Essays.”

CHARITY.

("Je suis la Charité.")

[February, 1837.]

"Lo! I am Charity," she cries,
  "Who waketh up before the day;
While yet asleep all nature lies,
  God bids me rise and go my way."

How fair her glorious features shine,
  Whereon the hand of God hath set
An angel's attributes divine,
  With all a woman's sweetness met.

Above the old man's couch of woe
  She bows her forehead, pure and even.
There's nothing fairer here below,
  There's nothing grander up in heaven,

Than when caressingly she stands
  (The cold hearts wakening 'gain their beat),
And holds within her holy hands
  The little children's naked feet.

To every den of want and toil
  She goes, and leaves the poorest fed;
Leaves wine and bread, and genial oil,
  And hopes that blossom in her tread,

And fire, too, beautiful bright fire,
  That mocks the glowing dawn begun,
Where, having set the blind old sire,
  He dreams he's sitting in the sun.

Then, over all the earth she runs,
  And seeks, in the cold mists of life,
Those poor forsaken little ones
  Who droop and weary in the strife.

Ah, most her heart is stirred for them,
  Whose foreheads, wrapped in mists obscure,
Still wear a triple diadem —
  The young, the innocent, the poor.

And they are better far than we,
  And she bestows a worthier meed;
For, with the loaf of charity,
  She gives the kiss that children need.

She gives, and while they wondering eat
  The tear-steeped bread by love supplied,
She stretches round them in the street
  Her arm that passers push aside.

If, with raised head and step alert,
  She sees the rich man stalking by,
She touches his embroidered skirt,
  And gently shows them where they lie.

She begs for them of careless crowd,
  Of earnest brows and narrow hearts,
That when it hears her cry aloud,
  Turns like the ebb-tide and departs.

O miserable he who sings
  Some strain impure, whose numbers fall
Along the cruel wind that brings
  Death to some child beneath his wall.

O strange and sad and fatal thing,
  When, in the rich man’s gorgeous hall,

The huge fire on the hearth doth fling
  A light on some great festival,

To see the drunkard smile in state,
  In purple wrapt, with myrtle crowned,
While Jesus lieth at the gate
  With only rags to wrap him round.

Dublin University Magazine

SWEET SISTER.

(“Vous qui ne savez pas combien l’enfance est belle.”)

Sweet sister, if you knew, like me,
The charms of guileless infancy,
No more you’d envy riper years,
Or smiles, more bitter than your tears.

But childhood passes in an hour,
As perfume from a faded flower;
The joyous voice of early glee
Flies, like the Halcyon, o’er the sea.

Enjoy your morn of early Spring;
Soon time maturer thoughts must bring;
Those hours, like flowers that interclimb,
Should not be withered ere their time.

Too soon you’ll weep, as we do now,
O’er faithless friend, or broken vow,
And hopeless sorrows, which our pride
In pleasure’s whirl would vainly hide.

Laugh on! unconscious of thy doom,
All innocence and opening bloom;
Laugh on! while yet thine azure eye
Mirrors the peace that reigns on high.

MRS. B. SOMERS.

THE PITY OF THE ANGELS.

("Un Ange vit un jour.")

[LA PITIÉ SUPREME VIII., 1881.]

When an angel of kindness
  Saw, doomed to the dark,
Men framed in his likeness,
  He sought for a spark —
Stray gem of God's glory
    That shines so serene —
  And, falling like lark,
To brighten our story,
    Pure Pity was seen.

THE SOWER.

Sitting in a porchway cool,
  Fades the ruddy sunlight fast,
Twilight hastens on to rule —
  Working hours are wellnigh past

Shadows shoot across the lands;
  But one sower lingers still,
Old, in rags, he patient stands, —
  Looking on, I feel a thrill.

Black and high his silhouette
  Dominates the furrows deep!
Now to sow the task is set,
  Soon shall come a time to reap.

Marches he along the plain,
  To and fro, and scatters wide
From his hands the precious grain;
  Moody, I, to see him stride.

Darkness deepens. Gone the light.
  Now his gestures to mine eyes
Are august; and strange — his height
  Seems to touch the starry skies.

TORU DUTT.

OH, WHY NOT BE HAPPY?

(“A quoi bon entendre les oiseaux?”)

[RUY BLAS, Act II.]

Oh, why not be happy this bright summer day,
‘Mid perfume of roses and newly-mown hay?
Great Nature is smiling — the birds in the air
Sing love-lays together, and all is most fair.
Then why not be happy
This bright summer day,
’Mid perfume of roses
And newly-mown hay?

The streamlets they wander through meadows so fleet,
Their music enticing fond lovers to meet;
The violets are blooming and nestling their heads
In richest profusion on moss-coated beds.
Then why not be happy
This bright summer day,
When Nature is fairest
And all is so gay?

LEOPOLD WRAY.

FREEDOM AND THE WORLD.

[Inscription under a Statue of the Virgin and Child, at Guernsey. — The poet sees in the emblem a modern Atlas, i.e., Freedom supporting the World.]

(“Le peuple est petit.”)

Weak is the People — but will grow beyond all other —
Within thy holy arms, thou fruitful victor-mother!
O Liberty, whose conquering flag is never furled —
Thou bearest Him in whom is centred all the World.

SERENADE.

(“Quand tu chantes.”)

When the voice of thy lute at the eve
  Charmeth the ear,
In the hour of enchantment believe
  What I murmur near.
That the tune can the Age of Gold
  With its magic restore.
Play on, play on, my fair one,
  Play on for evermore.

When thy laugh like the song of the dawn
  Riseth so gay
That the shadows of Night are withdrawn
  And melt away,
I remember my years of care
  And misgiving no more.
Laugh on, laugh on, my fair one,
  Laugh on for evermore.

When thy sleep like the moonlight above
  Lulling the sea,
Doth enwind thee in visions of love,
  Perchance, of me!
I can watch so in dream that enthralled me,
  Never before!
Sleep on, sleep on, my fair one!
  Sleep on for evermore.

HENRY F. CHORLEY.

AN AUTUMNAL SIMILE.

(“Les feuilles qui gisaient.”)

The leaves that in the lonely walks were spread,
Starting from off the ground beneath the tread,
    Coursed o’er the garden-plain;
Thus, sometimes, ‘mid the soul’s deep sorrowings,
Our soul a moment mounts on wounded wings,
    Then, swiftly, falls again.

TO CRUEL OCEAN.

Where are the hapless shipmen? — disappeared,
  Gone down, where witness none, save Night, hath been,
Ye deep, deep waves, of kneeling mothers feared,
  What dismal tales know ye of things unseen?
  Tales that ye tell your whispering selves between
  The while in clouds to the flood-tide ye pour;
  And this it is that gives you, as I ween,
  Those mournful voices, mournful evermore,
  When ye come in at eve to us who dwell on shore.

ESMERALDA IN PRISON.

(“Phoebus, n’est-il sur la terre?”)

[OPERA OF “ESMERALDA,” ACT IV., 1836.]

Phoebus, is there not this side the grave,
    Power to save
Those who’re loving? Magic balm
That will restore to me my former calm?
Is there nothing tearful eye
Can e’er dry, or hush the sigh?
I pray Heaven day and night,
As I lay me down in fright,
To retake my life, or give
All again for which I’d live!
Phoebus, hasten from the shining sphere
    To me here!
Hither hasten, bring me Death; then Love
May let our spirits rise, ever-linked, above!

LOVER’S SONG.

(“Mon âme à ton coeur s’est donnée.”)

[ANGELO, Act II., May, 1835.]

My soul unto thy heart is given,
  In mystic fold do they entwine,
So bound in one that, were they riven,
  Apart my soul would life resign.
Thou art my song and I the lyre;
Thou art the breeze and I the brier;
The altar I, and thou the fire;
  Mine the deep love, the beauty thine!
As fleets away the rapid hour
  While weeping — may
  My sorrowing lay
Touch thee, sweet flower.

ERNEST OSWALD COE.

A FLEETING GLIMPSE OF A VILLAGE.

(“Tout vit! et se pose avec grâce.”)

How graceful the picture! the life, the repose!
  The sunbeam that plays on the porchstone wide;
And the shadow that fleets o’er the stream that flows,
  And the soft blue sky with the hill’s green side.

Fraser’s Magazine.

LORD ROCHESTER’S SONG.

(“Un soldat au dur visage.”)

[CROMWELL, ACT I.]

“Hold, little blue-eyed page!”
  So cried the watchers surly,
Stern to his pretty rage
  And golden hair so curly —
“Methinks your satin cloak
  Masks something bulky under;
I take this as no joke —
  Oh, thief with stolen plunder!”

“I am of high repute,
  And famed among the truthful:
This silver-handled lute
  Is meet for one still youthful
Who goes to keep a tryst
  With her who is his dearest.
I charge you to desist;
  My cause is of the clearest.”

But guardsmen are so sharp,
  Their eyes are as the lynx’s:
“That’s neither lute nor harp —
  Your mark is not the minxes.
Your loving we dispute —
  That string of steel so cruel
For music does not suit —
  You go to fight a duel!”

THE BEGGAR’S QUATRAIN.

(“Aveugle comme Homère.”)

[Improvised at the Café de Paris.]

Blind, as was Homer; as Belisarius, blind,
  But one weak child to guide his vision dim.
The hand which dealt him bread, in pity kind —
  He’ll never see; God sees it, though, for him.

H.L.C., “*London Society.*”

THE QUIET RURAL CHURCH.

It was a humble church, with arches low,
  The church we entered there,
Where many a weary soul since long ago
  Had past with plaint or prayer.

Mournful and still it was at day’s decline,
  The day we entered there;
As in a loveless heart, at the lone shrine,
  The fires extinguished were.

Scarcely was heard to float some gentlest sound,
  Scarcely some low breathed word,
As in a forest fallen asleep, is found
  Just one belated bird.

A STORM SIMILE.

("Oh, regardez le ciel!")

[June, 1828.]

See, where on high the moving masses, piled
By the wind, break in groups grotesque and wild,
    Present strange shapes to view;
Oft flares a pallid flash from out their shrouds,
As though some air-born giant 'mid the clouds
    Sudden his falchion drew.

DRAMATIC PIECES.

THE FATHER’S CURSE.

(“Vous, sire, écoutez-moi.”)

[LE ROI S’AMUSE, Act I.]

M. ST. VALLIER (*an aged nobleman, from whom King Francis I. decoyed his daughter, the famous beauty, Diana of Poitiers*).

A king should listen when his subjects speak:
’Tis true your mandate led me to the block,
Where pardon came upon me, like a dream;
I blessed you then, unconscious as I was
That a king’s mercy, sharper far than death,
To save a father doomed his child to shame;
Yes, without pity for the noble race
Of Poitiers, spotless for a thousand years,
You, Francis of Valois, without one spark
Of love or pity, honor or remorse,
Did on that night (thy couch her virtue’s tomb),
With cold embraces, foully bring to scorn
My helpless daughter, Dian of Poitiers.
To save her father’s life a knight she sought,
Like Bayard, fearless and without reproach.
She found a heartless king, who sold the boon,
Making cold bargain for his child’s dishonor.
Oh! monstrous traffic! foully hast thou done!
My blood was thine, and justly, tho’ it springs
Amongst the best and noblest names of France;
But to pretend to spare these poor gray locks,
And yet to trample on a weeping woman,
Was basely done; the father was thine own,
But not the daughter! — thou hast overpassed
The right of monarchs! — yet ’tis mercy deemed.
And I perchance am called ungrateful still.
Oh, hadst thou come within my dungeon walls,

I would have sued upon my knees for death,
But mercy for my child, my name, my race,
Which, once polluted, is my race no more.
Rather than insult, death to them and me.
I come not now to ask her back from thee;
Nay, let her love thee with insensate love;
I take back naught that bears the brand of shame.
Keep her! Yet, still, amidst thy festivals,
Until some father’s, brother’s, husband’s hand
(‘Twill come to pass!) shall rid us of thy yoke,
My pallid face shall ever haunt thee there,
To tell thee, Francis, it was foully done!…

TRIBOULET *(the Court Jester), sneering.* The poor man raves.

ST. VILLIER. Accursed be ye both!
Oh Sire! ’tis wrong upon the dying lion
To loose thy dog! *(Turns to Triboulet)*
          And thou, whoe’er thou art,
That with a fiendish sneer and viper’s tongue
Makest my tears a pastime and a sport,
My curse upon thee! — Sire, thy brow doth bear
The gems of France! — on mine, old age doth sit;
Thine decked with jewels, mine with these gray hairs;
We both are Kings, yet bear a different crown;
And should some impious hand upon thy head
Heap wrongs and insult, with thine own strong arm
Thou canst avenge them! *God avenges mine!*

FREDK. L. SLOUS.

PATERNAL LOVE.

(“Ma fille! ô seul bonheur.”)

[LE ROI S’AMUSE, Act II]

My child! oh, only blessing Heaven allows me!
Others have parents, brothers, kinsmen, friends,
A wife, a husband, vassals, followers,
Ancestors, and allies, or many children.
I have but thee, thee only. Some are rich;
Thou art my treasure, thou art all my riches.
And some believe in angels; I believe
In nothing but thy soul. Others have youth,
And woman’s love, and pride, and grace, and health;
Others are beautiful; thou art my beauty,
Thou art my home, my country and my kin,
My wife, my mother, sister, friend — my child!
My bliss, my wealth, my worship, and my law,
My Universe! Oh, by all other things
My soul is tortured. If I should ever lose thee —
Horrible thought! I cannot utter it.
Smile, for thy smile is like thy mother’s smiling.
She, too, was fair; you have a trick like her,
Of passing oft your hand athwart your brow
As though to clear it. Innocence still loves
A brow unclouded and an azure eye.
To me thou seem’st clothed in a holy halo,
My soul beholds thy soul through thy fair body;
E’en when my eyes are shut, I see thee still;
Thou art my daylight, and sometimes I wish
That Heaven had made me blind that thou might’st be
The sun that lighted up the world for me.

FANNY KEMBLE-BUTLER.

THE DEGENERATE GALLANTS.

("Mes jeunes cavaliers.")

[HERNANI, Act I., March, 1830.]

What business brings you here, young cavaliers?
Men like the Cid, the knights of bygone years,
Rode out the battle of the weak to wage,
Protecting beauty and revering age.
Their armor sat on them, strong men as true,
Much lighter than your velvet rests on you.
Not in a lady's room by stealth they knelt;
In church, by day, they spoke the love they felt.
They kept their houses' honor bright from rust,
They told no secret, and betrayed no trust;
And if a wife they wanted, bold and gay,
With lance, or axe, or falchion, and by day,
Bravely they won and wore her. As for those
Who slip through streets when honest men repose,
With eyes turned to the ground, and in night's shade
The rights of trusting husbands to invade;
I say the Cid would force such knaves as these
To beg the city's pardon on their knees;
And with the flat of his all-conquering blade
Their rank usurped and 'scutcheon would degrade.
Thus would the men of former times, I say,
Treat the degenerate minions of to-day.

LORD F. LEVESON GOWER (1ST EARL OF ELLESMERE.)

THE OLD AND THE YOUNG BRIDEGROOM.

(“L’homme auquel on vous destina.”)

[HERNANI, Act I.]

Listen. The man for whom your youth is destined,
Your uncle, Ruy de Silva, is the Duke
Of Pastrana, Count of Castile and Aragon.
For lack of youth, he brings you, dearest girl,
Treasures of gold, jewels, and precious gems,
With which your brow might outshine royalty;
And for rank, pride, splendor, and opulence,
Might many a queen be envious of his duchess!
Here is one picture. I am poor; my youth
I passed i’ the woods, a barefoot fugitive.
My shield, perchance, may bear some noble blazons
Spotted with blood, defaced though not dishonored.
Perchance I, too, have rights, now veiled in darkness, —
Rights, which the heavy drapery of the scaffold
Now hides beneath its black and ample folds;
Rights which, if my intent deceive me not,
My sword shall one day rescue. To be brief: —
I have received from churlish Fortune nothing
But air, light, water, — Nature’s general boon.
Choose, then, between us two, for you must choose; —
Say, will you wed the duke, or follow me?

DONNA SOL. I’ll follow you.

HERN. What, ‘mongst my rude companions,
Whose names are registered in the hangman’s book?
Whose hearts are ever eager as their swords,
Edged by a personal impulse of revenge?
Will you become the queen, dear, of my band?
Will you become a hunted outlaw’s bride?

When all Spain else pursued and banished me, —
In her proud forests and air-piercing mountains,
And rocks the lordly eagle only knew,
Old Catalonia took me to her bosom.
Among her mountaineers, free, poor, and brave,
I ripened into manhood, and, to-morrow,
One blast upon my horn, among her hills,
Would draw three thousand of her sons around me.
You shudder, — think upon it. Will you tread
The shores, woods, mountains, with me, among men
Like the dark spirits of your haunted dreams, —
Suspect all eyes, all voices, every footstep, —
Sleep on the grass, drink of the torrent, hear
By night the sharp hiss of the musket-ball
Whistling too near your ear, — a fugitive
Proscribed, and doomed mayhap to follow me
In the path leading to my father’s scaffold?

DONNA SOL. I’ll follow you.

HERN. This duke is rich, great, prosperous,
No blot attaches to his ancient name.
He is all-powerful. He offers you
His treasures, titles, honors, with his hand.

DONNA SOL. We will depart to-morrow. Do not blame
What may appear a most unwomanly boldness.

CHARLES SHERRY.

THE SPANISH LADY'S LOVE.

DONNA SOL *to* HERNANI.

("Nous partirons demain.")

[HERNANI, ACT I.]

To mount the hills or scaffold, we go to-morrow:
Hernani, blame me not for this my boldness.
Art thou mine evil genius or mine angel?
I know not, but I am thy slave. Now hear me:
Go where thou wilt, I follow thee. Remain,
And I remain. Why do I thus? I know not.
I feel that I must see thee — see thee still —
See thee for ever. When thy footstep dies,
It is as if my heart no more would beat;
When thou art gone, I am absent from myself;
But when the footstep which I love and long for
Strikes on mine ear again — then I remember
I live, and feel my soul return to me.

G. MOIR.

THE LOVER’S SACRIFICE.

(“Fuyons ensemble.”)

[HERNANI, Act II.]

DONNA SOL. Together let us fly!

HERNANI. Together? No! the hour is past for flight.
Dearest, when first thy beauty smote my sight,
I offered, for the love that bade me live,
Wretch that I was, what misery had to give:
My wood, my stream, my mountain. Bolder grown,
By thy compassion to an outlaw shown,
The outlaw’s meal beneath the forest shade,
The outlaw’s couch far in the greenwood glade,
I offered. Though to both that couch be free,
I keep the scaffold block reserved for me.

DONNA SOL. And yet you promised?

HERNANI *(falls on his knee.)* Angel! in this hour,
Pursued by vengeance and oppressed by power —
Even in this hour when death prepares to close
In shame and pain a destiny of woes —
Yes, I, who from the world proscribed and cast,
Have nursed one dark remembrance of the past,
E’en from my birth in sorrow’s garment clad,
Have cause to smile and reason to be glad;
For you have loved the outlaw and have shed
Your whispered blessings on his forfeit head.

DONNA SOL. Let me go with you.

HERNANI. No! I will not rend
From its fair stem the flower as I descend.
Go — I have smelt its perfume. Go — resume

All that this grasp has brushed away of bloom.
Wed the old man, — believe that ne’er we met;
I seek my shade — be happy, and forget!

LORD F. LEVESON GOWER (1ST EARL OF ELLESMERE).

THE OLD MAN'S LOVE.

("Dérision! que cet amour boiteux.")

[HERNANI, Act III.]

O mockery! that this halting love
That fills the heart so full of flame and transport,
Forgets the body while it fires the soul!
If but a youthful shepherd cross my path,
He singing on the way — I sadly musing,
He in his fields, I in my darksome alleys —
Then my heart murmurs: "O, ye mouldering towers!
Thou olden ducal dungeon! O how gladly
Would I exchange ye, and my fields and forests,
Mine ancient name, mine ancient rank, my ruins —
My ancestors, with whom I soon shall lie,
For *his* thatched cottage and his youthful brow!"
His hair is black — his eyes shine forth like *thine*.
Him thou might'st look upon, and say, fair youth,
Then turn to me, and think that I am old.
And yet the light and giddy souls of cavaliers
Harbor no love so fervent as their words bespeak.
Let some poor maiden love them and believe them,
Then die for them — they smile. Aye! these young birds,
With gay and glittering wing and amorous song,
Can shed their love as lightly as their plumage.
The old, whose voice and colors age has dimmed,
Flatter no more, and, though less fair, are faithful.
When *we* love, we love true. Are our steps frail?
Our eyes dried up and withered? Are our brows
Wrinkled? There are no wrinkles in the heart.
Ah! when the graybeard loves, he should be spared;
The heart is young — *that* bleeds unto the last.
I love thee as a spouse, — and in a thousand
Other fashions, — as sire, — as we love

The morn, the flowers, the overhanging heavens.
Ah me! when day by day I gaze upon thee,
Thy graceful step, thy purely-polished brow,
Thine eyes' calm fire, — I feel my heart leap up,
And an eternal sunshine bathe my soul.
And think, too! Even the world admires,
When age, expiring, for a moment totters
Upon the marble margin of a tomb,
To see a wife — a pure and dove-like angel —
Watch over him, soothe him, and endure awhile
The useless old man, only fit to die;
A sacred task, and worthy of all honor,
This latest effort of a faithful heart;
Which, in his parting hour, consoles the dying,
And, without loving, wears the look of love.
Ah! thou wilt be to me this sheltering angel,
To cheer the old man's heart — to share with him
The burden of his evil years; — a daughter
In thy respect, a sister in thy pity.

DONNA SOL. My fate may be more to precede than follow.
My lord, it is no reason for long life
That we are young! Alas! I have seen too oft
The old clamped firm to life, the young torn thence;
And the lids close as sudden o'er their eyes
As gravestones sealing up the sepulchre.

G. MOIR.

THE ROLL OF THE DE SILVA RACE.

("Celui-ci, des Silvas, c'est l'aîné.")

[HERNANI, Act III.]

In that reverend face
Behold the father of De Silva's race,
Silvius; in Rome he filled the consul's place
Three times (your patience for such honored names).
This second was Grand Master of St. James
And Calatrava; his strong limbs sustained
Armor which ours would sink beneath. He gained
Thirty pitched battles, and took, as legends tell,
Three hundred standards from the Infidel;
And from the Moorish King Motril, in war,
Won Antiquera, Suez, and Nijar;
And then died poor. Next to him Juan stands,
His son; his plighted hand was worth the hands
Of kings. Next Gaspar, of Mendoza's line —
Few noble stems but chose to join with mine:
Sandoval sometimes fears, and sometimes woos
Our smiles; Manriquez envies; Lara sues;
And Alancastre hates. Our rank we know:
Kings are but just above us, dukes below.
Vasquez, who kept for sixty years his vow —
Greater than he I pass. This reverend brow,
This was my sire's — the greatest, though the last:
The Moors his friend had taken and made fast —
Alvar Giron. What did my father then?
He cut in stone an image of Alvar,
Cunningly carved, and dragged it to the war;
He vowed a vow to yield no inch of ground
Until that image of itself turned round;
He reached Alvar — he saved him — and his line

Was old De Silva’s, and his name was mine —
Ruy Gomez.

King CARLOS. Drag me from his lurking-place
The traitor!

[DON RUY *leads the* KING *to the portrait behind which* HERNANI *is hiding*.]

Sire, your highness does me grace.
This, the last portrait, bears my form and name,
And you would write this motto on the frame!
“This last, sprung from the noblest and the best,
Betrayed his plighted troth, and sold his guest!”

LORD F. LEVESON GOWER (1ST EARL OF ELLESMERE)

THE LOVERS' COLLOQUY.

("Mon duc, rien qu'un moment.")

[HERNANI, Act V.]

One little moment to indulge the sight
With the rich beauty of the summer's night.
The harp is hushed, and, see, the torch is dim, —
Night and ourselves together. To the brim
The cup of our felicity is filled.
Each sound is mute, each harsh sensation stilled.
Dost thou not think that, e'en while nature sleeps,
Some power its amorous vigils o'er us keeps?
No cloud in heaven; while all around repose,
Come taste with me the fragrance of the rose,
Which loads the night-air with its musky breath,
While everything is still as nature's death.
E'en as you spoke — and gentle words were those
Spoken by you, — the silver moon uprose;
How that mysterious union of her ray,
With your impassioned accents, made its way
Straight to my heart! I could have wished to die
In that pale moonlight, and while thou wert by.

HERNANI. Thy words are music, and thy strain of love
Is borrowed from the choir of heaven above.

DONNA SOL. Night is too silent, darkness too profound
Oh, for a star to shine, a voice to sound —
To raise some sudden note of music now
Suited to night.

HERN. Capricious girl! your vow
Was poured for silence, and to be released
From the thronged tumult of the marriage feast.

DONNA SOL. Yes; but one bird to carol in the field, —
A nightingale, in mossy shade concealed, —
A distant flute, — for music’s stream can roll
To soothe the heart, and harmonize the soul, —
O! ’twould be bliss to listen.

[*Distant sound of a horn, the signal that* HERNANI *must go to* DON RUY, *who, having saved his life, had him bound in a vow to yield it up.*]

LORD F. LEVESON GOWER (1ST EARL OF ELLESMERE).

CROMWELL AND THE CROWN.

(“Ah! je le tiens enfin.”)

[CROMWELL, Act II., October, 1827.]

THURLOW *communicates the intention of Parliament to offer* CROMWELL *the crown*.

  CROMWELL. And is it mine? And have my feet at length
Attained the summit of the rock i’ the sand?

THURLOW. And yet, my lord, you have long reigned.

  CROM. Nay, nay!
Power I have ‘joyed, in sooth, but not the name.
Thou smilest, Thurlow. Ah, thou little know’st
What hole it is Ambition digs i’ th’ heart
What end, most seeming empty, is the mark
For which we fret and toil and dare! How hard
With an unrounded fortune to sit down!
Then, what a lustre from most ancient times
Heaven has flung o’er the sacred head of kings!
King — Majesty — what names of power! No king,
And yet the world’s high arbiter! The thing
Without the word! no handle to the blade!
Away — the empire and the name are one!
Alack! thou little dream’st how grievous ’tis,
Emerging from the crowd, and at the top
Arrived, to feel that there is *something* still
Above our heads; something, nothing! no matter —
That word is everything.

LEITCH RITCHIE.

MILTON’S APPEAL TO CROMWELL.

(“Non! je n’y puis tenir.”)

[CROMWELL, Act III. sc. iv.]

Stay! I no longer can contain myself,
But cry you: Look on John, who bares his mind
To Oliver — to Cromwell, Milton speaks!
Despite a kindling eye and marvel deep
A voice is lifted up without your leave;
For I was never placed at council board
To speak *my* promptings. When awed strangers come
Who’ve seen Fox-Mazarin wince at the stings
In my epistles — and bring admiring votes
Of learned colleges, they strain to see
My figure in the glare — the usher utters,
“Behold and hearken! that’s my Lord Protector’s
Cousin — that, his son-in-law — that next” — who cares!
Some perfumed puppet! “Milton?” “He in black —
Yon silent scribe who trims their eloquence!”
Still ‘chronicling small-beer,’ — such is my duty!
Yea, one whose thunder roared through martyr bones
Till Pope and Louis Grand quaked on their thrones,
And echoed “Vengeance for the Vaudois,” where
The Sultan slumbers sick with scent of roses.
He is but the mute in this seraglio —
“Pure” Cromwell’s Council!
But to be dumb and blind is overmuch!
Impatient Issachar kicks at the load!
Yet diadems are burdens painfuller,
And I would spare thee that sore imposition.
Dear brother Noll, I plead against thyself!
Thou aim’st to be a king; and, in thine heart,
What fool has said: “There is no king but thou?”
For thee the multitude waged war and won —

The end thou art of wrestlings and of prayer,
Of sleepless watch, long marches, hunger, tears
And blood prolifically spilled, homes lordless,
And homeless lords! The mass must always suffer
That one should reign! the collar's but newly clamp'd,
And nothing but the name thereon is changed —
Master? still masters! mark you not the red
Of shame unutterable in my sightless white?
Still hear me, Cromwell, speaking for your sake!
These fifteen years, we, to you whole-devoted,
Have sought for Liberty — to give it thee?
To make our interests your huckster gains?
The king a lion slain that you may flay,
And wear the robe — well, worthily — I say't,
For I will not abase my brother!
No! I would keep him in the realm serene,
My own ideal of heroes! loved o'er Israel,
And higher placed by me than all the others!
And such, for tinkling titles, hollow haloes
Like that around yon painted brow — thou! thou!
Apostle, hero, saint-dishonor thyself!
And snip and trim the flag of Naseby-field
As scarf on which the maid-of-honor's dog
Will yelp, some summer afternoon! That sword
Shrink into a sceptre! brilliant bauble! Thou,
Thrown on a lonely rock in storm of state,
Brain-turned by safety's miracle, thou risest
Upon the tott'ring stone whilst ocean ebbs,
And, reeking of no storms to come to-morrow,
Or to-morrow — deem that a certain pedestal
Whereon thou'lt be adored for e'er — e'en while
It shakes — o'ersets the rider! Tremble, thou!
For he who dazzles, makes men Samson-blind,
Will see the pillars of his palace kiss
E'en at the whelming ruin! Then, what word
Of answer from your wreck when I demand
Account of Cromwell! glory of the people

Smothered in ashes! through the dust thou'lt hear;
"What didst thou with thy virtue?" Will it respond:
"When battered helm is doffed, how soft is purple
On which to lay the head, lulled by the praise
Of thousand fluttering fans of flatterers!
Wearied of war-horse, gratefully one glides
In gilded barge, or in crowned, velvet car,
From gay Whitehall to gloomy Temple Bar—"
(Where — had you slipt, that head were bleaching now!
And that same rabble, splitting for a hedge,
Had joined their rows to cheer the active headsman;
Perchance, in mockery, they'd gird the skull
With a hop-leaf crown! Bitter the brewing, Noll!)
Are crowns the end-all of ambition? Remember
Charles Stuart! and that they who make can break!
This same Whitehall may black its front with crape,
And this broad window be the portal twice
To lead upon a scaffold! Frown! or laugh!
Laugh on as they did at Cassandra's speech!
But mark — the prophetess was right! Still laugh,
Like the credulous Ethiop in his faith in stars!
But give one thought to Stuart, two for yourself!
In his appointed hour, all was forthcoming —
Judge, axe, and deathsman veiled! and my poor eyes
Descry — as would thou saw'st! — a figure veiled,
Uplooming there — afar, like sunrise, coming!
With blade that ne'er spared Judas 'midst free brethren!
Stretch not the hand of Cromwell for the prize
Meant not for him, nor his! Thou growest old,
The people are ever young! Like her i' the chase
Who drave a dart into her lover, embowered,
Piercing the incense-clouds, the popular shaft
May slay thee in a random shot at Tyranny!
Man, friend, remain a Cromwell! in thy name,
Rule! and if thy son be worthy, he and his,
So rule the rest for ages! be it grander thus
To be a Cromwell than a Carolus.

No lapdog combed by wantons, but the watch
Upon the freedom that we won! Dismiss
Your flatterers — let no harpings, no gay songs
Prevent your calm dictation of good laws
To guard, to fortify, and keep enlinked
England and Freedom! Be thine old self alone!
And make, above all else accorded me,
My most desired claim on all posterity,
That thou in Milton’s verse wert foremost of the free!

FIRST LOVE.

(“Vous êtes singulier.”)

[MARION DELORME, Act I., June, 1829, *played* 1831.]

MARION *(smiling.)* You’re strange, and yet I love you thus.

DIDIER. You love me?
Beware, nor with light lips utter that word.
You love me! — know you what it is to love
With love that is the life-blood in one’s veins,
The vital air we breathe, a love long-smothered,
Smouldering in silence, kindling, burning, blazing,
And purifying in its growth the soul.
A love that from the heart eats every passion
But its sole self; love without hope or limit,
Deep love that will outlast all happiness;
Speak, speak; is such the love you bear me?

MARION. Truly.

DIDIER. Ha! but you do not know how I love you!
The day that first I saw you, the dark world
Grew shining, for your eyes lighted my gloom.
Since then, all things have changed; to me you are
Some brightest, unknown creature from the skies.
This irksome life, ‘gainst which my heart rebelled,
Seems almost fair and pleasant; for, alas!
Till I knew you wandering, alone, oppressed,
I wept and struggled, I had never loved.

FANNY KEMBLE-BUTLER.

THE FIRST BLACK FLAG.

(“Avez-vous oui dire?”)

[LES BURGRAVES, Part I., March, 1843.]

JOB. Hast thou ne’er heard men say
That, in the Black Wood, ‘twixt Cologne and Spire,
Upon a rock flanked by the towering mountains,
A castle stands, renowned among all castles?
And in this fort, on piles of lava built,
A burgrave dwells, among all burgraves famed?
Hast heard of this wild man who laughs at laws —
Charged with a thousand crimes — for warlike deeds
Renowned — and placed under the Empire’s ban
By the Diet of Frankfort; by the Council
Of Pisa banished from the Holy Church;
Reprobate, isolated, cursed — yet still
Unconquered ‘mid his mountains and in will;
The bitter foe of the Count Palatine
And Treves’ proud archbishop; who has spurned
For sixty years the ladder which the Empire
Upreared to scale his walls? Hast heard that he
Shelters the brave — the flaunting rich man strips —
Of master makes a slave? That here, above
All dukes, aye, kings, eke emperors — in the eyes
Of Germany to their fierce strife a prey,
He rears upon his tower, in stern defiance,
A signal of appeal to the crushed people,
A banner vast, of Sorrow’s sable hue,
Snapped by the tempest in its whirlwind wrath,
So that kings quiver as the jades at whips?
Hast heard, he touches now his hundredth year —
And that, defying fate, in face of heaven,
On his invincible peak, no force of war
Uprooting other holds — nor powerful Cæsar —

Nor Rome — nor age, that bows the pride of man —
Nor aught on earth — hath vanquished, or subdued,
Or bent this ancient Titan of the Rhine,
The excommunicated Job?

Democratic Review.

THE SON IN OLD AGE.

(“Ma Regina, cette noble figure.”)

[LES BURGRAVES, Part II.]

Thy noble face, Regina, calls to mind
My poor lost little one, my latest born.
He was a gift from God — a sign of pardon —
That child vouchsafed me in my eightieth year!
I to his little cradle went, and went,
And even while ’twas sleeping, talked to it.
For when one’s very old, one is a child!
Then took it up and placed it on my knees,
And with both hands stroked down its soft, light hair —
Thou wert not born then — and he would stammer
Those pretty little sounds that make one smile!
And though not twelve months old, he had a mind.
He recognized me — nay, knew me right well,
And in my face would laugh — and that child-laugh,
Oh, poor old man! ’twas sunlight to my heart.
I meant him for a soldier, ay, a conqueror,
And named him George. One day — oh, bitter thought!
The child played in the fields. When thou art mother,
Ne’er let thy children out of sight to play!
The gypsies took him from me — oh, for what?
Perhaps to kill him at a witch’s rite.
I weep! — now, after twenty years — I weep
As if ‘twere yesterday. I loved him so!
I used to call him “my own little king!”
I was intoxicated with my joy
When o’er my white beard ran his rosy hands,
Thrilling me all through.

Foreign Quarterly Review.

THE EMPEROR’S RETURN.

(“Un bouffon manquait à cette fête.”)

[LES BURGRAVES, Part II.]

The EMPEROR FREDERICK BARBAROSSA, believed to be dead, appearing as a beggar among the Rhenish nobility at a castle, suddenly reveals himself.

HATTO. This goodly masque but lacked a fool!
First gypsy; next a beggar; — good! Thy name?

BARBAROSSA. Frederick of Swabia, Emperor of Almain.

ALL. The Red Beard?

BARBAROSSA. Aye, Frederick, by my mountain birthright Prince
O’ th’ Romans, chosen king, crowned emperor,
Heaven’s sword-bearer, monarch of Burgundy
And Arles — the tomb of Karl I dared profane,
But have repented me on bended knees
In penance ‘midst the desert twenty years;
My drink the rain, the rocky herbs my food,
Myself a ghost the shepherds fled before,
And the world named me as among the dead.
But I have heard my country call — come forth,
Lifted the shroud — broken the sepulchre.
This hour is one when dead men needs must rise.
Ye own me? Ye mind me marching through these vales
When golden spur was ringing at my heel?
Now know me what I am, your master, earls!
Brave knights you deem! You say, “The sons we are
Of puissant barons and great noblemen,
Whose honors we prolong.” You *do* prolong them?
Your sires were soldiers brave, not prowlers base,
Rogues, miscreants, felons, village-ravagers!

They made great wars, they rode like heroes forth,
And, worthy, won broad lands and towers and towns,
So firmly won that thirty years of strife
Made of their followers dukes, their leaders kings!
While you! like jackal and the bird of prey,
Who lurk in copses or ‘mid muddy beds —
Crouching and hushed, with dagger ready drawn,
Hide in the noisome marsh that skirts the way,
Trembling lest passing hounds snuff out your lair!
Listen at eventide on lonesome path
For traveller’s footfall, or the mule-bell’s chime,
Pouncing by hundreds on one helpless man,
To cut him down, then back to your retreats —
You dare to vaunt your sires? I call your sires,
Bravest of brave and greatest ‘mid the great,
A line of warriors! you, a pack of thieves!

Athenaeum.

ODES ET BALLADES

Published in 1827, this collection of poems contains youthful works composed from 1822 to 1827. The theme of the poems ranges from monarchist to Catholic persuasions.

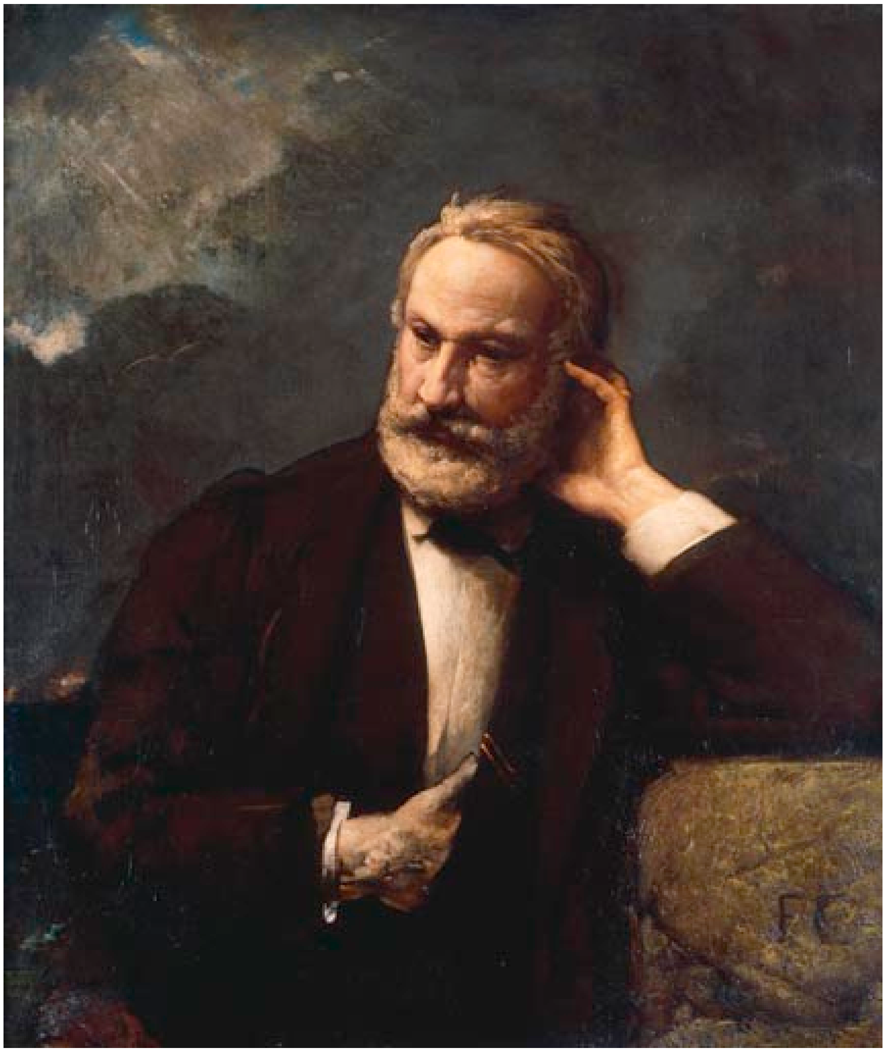

Victor Hugo by François Chifflart, 1868

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Préface de 1822

Il y a deux intentions dans la publication de ce livre, l’intention littéraire et l’intention politique; mais, dans la pensée de l’auteur, la dernière est la conséquence de la première, car l’histoire des hommes ne présente de poésie que jugée du haut des idées monarchiques et des croyances religieuses. On pourra voir dans l’arrangement de ces Odes une division qui, néanmoins, n’est pas méthodiquement tracée. Il a semblé à l’auteur que les émotions d’une âme n’étaient pas moins fécondes pour la poésie que les révolutions d’un empire. Au reste, le domaine de la poésie est illimité. Sous le monde réel, il existe un monde idéal, qui se montre resplendissant à l’œil de ceux que des méditations graves ont accoutumés à voir dans les choses plus que les choses. Les beaux ouvrages de poésie en tout genre, soit en vers, soit en prose, qui ont honoré notre siècle, ont révélé cette vérité, à peine soupçonnée auparavant, que la poésie n’est pas dans la forme des idées, mais dans les idées elles-mêmes. La poésie, c’est tout ce qu’il y a d’intime dans tout.

Les changements survenus dans les évènements rendent nécessaire de rappeler que les Odes II, VI, VII, VIII et XV de ce recueil ont été publiées successivement depuis l’année 1819.

Préface de 1823

Il est permis peut-être aujourd’hui à l’auteur d’ajouter à ce peu de lignes quelques autres observations sur le but qu’il s’est proposé en composant ces Odes. Convaincu que tout écrivain, dans quelque sphère que s’exerce son esprit, doit avoir pour objet principal d’être utile, et espérant qu’une intention honorable lui ferait pardonner la témérité de ses essais, il a tenté de solenniser quelques-uns de ceux des principaux souvenirs de notre époque qui peuvent être des leçons pour les sociétés futures. Il a adopté, pour consacrer ces évènements, la forme de l’Ode, parce que c’était sous cette forme que les inspirations des premières poëtes apparaissaient jadis aux premiers peuples. Cependant l’Ode française, généralement accusée de froideur et de monotonie, paraissait peu propre à retracer ce que les trente dernières années de notre histoire présentent de touchant et de terrible, de sombre et d’éclatant, de monstrueux et de merveilleux. L’auteur de ce recueil, en réfléchissant sur cet obstacle, a cru découvrir que cette froideur n’était point dans l’essence de l’Ode, mais seulement dans la forme que lui ont jusqu’ici donnée les poëtes lyriques. Il lui a semblé que la cause de cette monotonie était dans l’abus des apostrophes, des exclamations, des prosopopées et autres figures véhémentes que l’on prodiguait dans l’Ode; moyens de chaleur qui glacent lorsqu’ils sont trop multipliés, et étourdissent au lieu d’émouvoir. Il a donc pensé que si l’on plaçait le mouvement de l’Ode dans les idées plutôt que dans les mots, si de plus on en asseyait la composition sur une idée fondamentale quelconque qui fût appropriée au sujet, et dont le développement s’appuyât dans toutes ses parties sur le développement de l’évènement qu’elle raconterait, en substituant aux couleurs usées et fausses de la mythologie païenne les couleurs neuves et vraies de la théogonie chrétienne, on pourrait jeter dans l’Ode quelque chose de l’intérêt du drame, et lui faire parler en outre ce langage austère, consolant et religieux, dont a besoin une vieille société qui sort, encore toute chancelante, des saturnales de l’athéisme et de l’anarchie. Voilà ce que l’auteur de ce livre a tenté, mais sans se flatter du succès; voilà ce qu’il ne pouvait dire à la première édition de son recueil, de peur que l’exposé de ses doctrines ne parût la défense de ses ouvrages. Il peut, aujourd’hui que ses Odes ont subi l’épreuve hasardeuse de la publication, livrer au lecteur la pensée qui les a inspirées, et qu’il a eu la satisfaction de voir déjà, sinon approuvée, du moins comprise en partie. Au reste, ce qu’il désire avant tout, c’est qu’on ne lui croie pas la prétention de frayer une route ou de créer un genre. La plupart des idées qu’il vient d’énoncer s’appliquent principalement à la première partie de ce recueil; mais le lecteur pourra, sans que nous nous étendions davantage, remarquer dans le reste le même but littéraire et un semblable système de composition. Nous arrêterons ici ces observations préliminaires qui exigeraient un volume de développements, et auxquelles on ne fera peut-être pas attention; mais il faut toujours parler comme si l’on devait être entendu, écrire comme si l’on devait être lu, et penser comme si l’on devait être médité.

La première édition de ce recueil d’odes était suivie de trois poëmes de différents genres qui n’entraient pas dans le but de cette publication et que l’on a cru devoir supprimer. Cette seconde édition est augmentée de deux odes nouvelles, “Louis XVII” et “Jéhovah”.

Préface de 1824

Voici de nouvelles preuves pour ou contre le système de composition lyrique indiqué ailleurs par l'auteur de ces Odes. Ce n'est pas sans une défiance extrême qu'il les présente à l'examen des gens de goût; car, s'il croit à des théories nées d'études consciencieuses et de méditations assidues, d'un autre côté, il croît fort peu à son talent. Il prie donc les hommes éclairés de vouloir bien ne pas étendre jusqu'à ses principes littéraires l'arrêt qu'ils seront sans doute fondés à prononcer contre ses essais poétiques. Aristote n'est-il pas innocent des tragédies de l'abbé d'Aubignac?

Cependant, malgré son obscurité, il a déjà eu la douleur de voir ses principes littéraires, qu'il croyait irréprochables, calomniés ou du moins mal interprétés. C'est ce qui détermine aujourd'hui à fortifier cette publication nouvelle d'une déclaration simple et loyale, laquelle le mette à l'abri de tout soupçon d'hérésie dans la querelle qui divise aujourd'hui le public lettré. Il y a maintenant deux partis dans la littérature comme dans l'état; et la guerre poétique ne paraît pas devoir être moins acharnée que la guerre sociale n'est furieuse. Les deux camps semblent plus impatients de combattre que de traiter. Ils s'obstinent à ne vouloir point parler la même langue; ils n'ont d'autre langage que le mot d'ordre à l'intérieur et le cri de guerre à l'extérieur: ce n'est pas le moyen de s'entendre.

Quelques voix importantes néanmoins se sont élevées, depuis quelque temps, parmi les clameurs des deux armées. Des conciliateurs se sont présentés avec de sages paroles entre les deux fronts d'attaque. Ils seront peut-être les premiers immolés, mais n'importe! C'est dans leurs rangs que l'auteur de ce livre veut être placé, dût-il y être confondu. Il discutera sinon avec la même autorité, du moins avec la même bonne foi. Ce n'est pas qu'il ne s'attende aux imputations les plus étranges, aux accusations les plus singulières. Dans le trouble où sont les esprits, le danger de parler est plus grand encore que celui de se taire; mais, quand il s'agit d'éclairer et d'être éclairé, il faut regarder où est le devoir, et non où est le péril; il se résigne donc. Il agitera, sans hésitation, les questions les plus délicates, et, comme le petit enfant thébain, il osera secouer la peau du lion.

Et d'abord, pour donner quelques dignité à cette discussion impartiale, dans laquelle il cherche la lumière bien plus qu'il ne l'apporte, il répudie tous ces termes de convention que les partis se rejettent réciproquement comme des ballons vides, signes sans signification, expressions sans expression, mots vagues que chacun définit au besoin de ses haines ou de ses préjugés, et qui ne servent de raisons qu'à ceux qui n'en ont pas. Pour lui, il ignore profondément ce que c'est que le "genre classique" et que le "genre romantique". Selon une femme de génie, qui, la première, a prononcé le mot de "littérature romantique" en France, "cette division se rapporte aux deux grandes ères du monde, celle qui a précédé l'établissement du christianisme et celle qui l'a suivi." D'après le sens littéral de cette explication, il semble que le "Paradis perdu" serait un poème "classique" et la "Henriade" une œuvre "romantique". Il ne paraît pas rigoureusement démontré que les deux mots importés par Mme de Staël soient aujourd'hui compris de cette façon.

En littérature, comme en toute chose, il n'y a que le bon et le mauvais, le beau et le difforme, le vrai et le faux. Or, sans établir ici de comparaisons qui exigeraient des restrictions et des développements, le "beau" dans Shakespeare est tout aussi classique (si "classique" signifie digne d'être étudié) que le "beau" dans Racine; et le "faux" dans Voltaire est tout aussi romantique (si "romantique" veut dire mauvais) que le "faux" dans Calderon. Ce sont là de ces vérités naïves qui ressemblent plus encore à des pléonasmes qu'à des axiomes; mais où n'est-on pas obligé de descendre pour convaincre l'entêtement et pour déconcerter la mauvaise foi?

On objectera peut-être ici que les deux mots de guerre ont depuis quelque temps changé encore d'acception, et que certains critiques sont convenus d'honorer désormais du nom de "classique" toute production de l'esprit antérieure à notre époque, tandis que la qualification de "romantique" serait spécialement restreinte à cette littérature qui grandit et se développe avec le dix-neuvième siècle. Avant d'examiner en quoi cette littérature est propre à notre siècle, on demande en quoi elle peut avoir mérité ou encouru une désignation exceptionnelle. Il est reconnu que chaque littérature s'empreint plus ou moins profondément du ciel, des mœurs et de l'histoire du peuple dont elle est l'expression. Il y a donc autant de littératures diverses qu'il y a de société différentes. David, Homère, Virgile, Le Tasse, Milton et Corneille, ces hommes dont chacun représente une poésie et une nation, n'ont de commun entre eux que le génie. Chacun d'eux a exprimé et a fécondé la pensée publique dans son pays et dans son temps. Chacun d'eux a créé pour sa sphère sociale un monde d’idées et de sentiments approprié au mouvement et à l’étendue de cette sphère. Pourquoi donc envelopper d’une désignation vague et collective ces créations, qui, pour être toutes animées de la même âme, la vérité, n’en sont pas moins dissemblables et souvent contraires dans leurs formes, dans leurs éléments et dans leurs natures? pourquoi, en même temps, cette contradiction bizarre de décerner à une autre littérature, expression imparfaite encore d’une époque encore incomplète, l’honneur ou l’outrage d’une qualification également vague, mais exclusive, qui la sépare des littératures qui l’ont précédée? Comme si elle ne pouvait être pesée que dans l’autre plateau de la balance! comme si elle ne devait être inscrite que sur le revers du livre des fastes littéraires! D’où lui vient ce nom de romantique? Est-ce que vous lui avez découvert quelque rapport bien évident et bien intime avec la langue “romance” ou “romane”? Alors expliquez-vous; examinons la valeur de cette allégation; prouvez d’abord qu’elle est fondée; il vous restera ensuite à démontrer qu’elle n’est pas insignifiante.

Mais on se garde fort aujourd’hui d’entamer de ce côté une discussion qui pourrait n’enfanter que le “ridiculus mus”; on veut laisser à ce mot de “romantique” un certain vague fantastique et indéfinissable qui en redouble l’horreur. Aussi tous les anathèmes lancés contre d’illustres écrivains et poëtes contemporains peuvent-ils se réduire à cette argumentation: “ – Nous condamnons la littérature du dix-neuvième siècle, parce qu’elle est “romantique… - Et pourquoi est-elle “romantique”? - Parce qu’elle est la littérature du dix-neuvième siècle.” – On ose affirmer ici, après un mûr examen, que l’évidence d’un tel raisonnement ne paraît pas absolument incontestable.

Abandonnons enfin cette question de mots, qui ne peut suffire qu’aux esprits superficiels dont elle est le risible labeur. Laissons en paix la procession des rhéteurs et des pédagogues apporter gravement de l’eau claire au tonneau vide. Souhaitons longue haleine à tous ces pauvres Sisyphes essoufflés, qui vont roulant et roulant sans cesse leur pierre au haut d’une butte;

Palus inamabilis undâ
Alligat, et novies Styx interfusa coercet.

Passons, et abordons la question de choses, car la frivole querelle des “romantiques” et des “classiques” n’est que la parodie d’une importante discussion qui occupe aujourd’hui les esprits judicieux et les âmes méditatives. Quittons donc la “Batrachomyomachie” pour l’”Iliade”. Ici, du moins les adversaires peuvent espérer de s’entendre, parce qu’ils en sont dignes. Il y a une discordance absolue entre les rats et les grenouilles, tandis qu’un intime rapport de noblesse et de grandeur existe entre Achille et Hector.

Il faut en convenir, un mouvement vaste et profond travaille intérieurement la littérature de ce siècle. Quelques hommes distingués s’en étonnent, et il n’y a précisément dans tout cela d’étonnant que leur surprise. En effet, si, après une révolution politique qui a frappé la société dans toutes ses sommités et dans toutes ses racines, qui a touché à toutes les gloires et à toutes les infamies, qui a tout désuni et tout mêlé, au point d’avoir dressé l’échafaud à l’abri de la tente, et mis la hache sous la garde du glaive; après une commotion effrayante qui n’a rien laissé dans le cœur des hommes qu’elle n’ait remué, rien dans l’ordre des choses qu’elle n’ait déplacé; si, disons-nous, après un si prodigieux évènement, nul changement n’apparaissait dans l’esprit et dans le caractère d’un peuple, n’est-ce pas alors qu’il faudrait s’étonner, et d’un étonnement sans bornes? – Ici se présente une objection spécieuse et déjà développée avec une conviction respectable par des hommes de talent et d’autorité. C’est précisément, disent-ils, parce que cette “révolution littéraire” est le résultat de notre “révolution politique” que nous en déplorons le triomphe, que nous en condamnons les œuvres. – Cette conséquence ne paraît pas juste. La littérature actuelle peut être en partie le “résultat” de la révolution, sans en être l’ “expression”. La société, telle que l’avait faite la révolution, a eu sa littérature, hideuse et inepte comme elle. Cette littérature et cette société sont mortes ensemble et ne revivront plus. L’ordre renaît de toutes parts dans les institutions; il renaît également dans les lettres. La religion consacre la liberté, nous avons des citoyens. La foi épure l’imagination, nous avons des poëtes. La vérité revient partout, dans les mœurs, dans les lois, dans les arts. La littérature nouvelle est vraie. Et qu’importe qu’elle soit le résultat de la révolution? La moisson est-elle moins belle, parce qu’elle a mûri sur le volcan? Quel rapport trouvez-vous entre les laves qui ont consumé votre maison et l’épi de blé qui vous nourrit?

Les plus grands poëtes du monde sont venus après de grandes calamités publiques. Sans parler des chantres sacrés, toujours inspirés par des malheurs passés ou futurs, nous voyons Homère apparaître après la chute de Troie et les catastrophes de l’Argolide; Virgile, après le triumvirat. Jeté au milieu des discordes des Guelfes et des Gibelins, Dante avait été proscrit avant d’être poëte. Milton rêvait Satan chez Cromwell. Le meurtre de Henri IV précéda Corneille, Racine, Molière, Boileau, avaient assisté aux orages de la Fronde. Après la révolution française, Chateaubriand s’élève, et la proportion est gardée.

Et ne nous étonnons point de cette liaison remarquable entre les grandes époques politiques et les belles époques littéraires. La marche sombre et imposante des évènements par lesquels le pouvoir d’en haut se manifeste aux pouvoirs d’ici-bas, l’unité éternelle de leur cause, l’accord solennel de leurs résultats, ont quelque chose qui frappe profondément la pensée. Ce qu’il y a de sublime et d’immortel dans l’homme se réveille comme en sursaut, au bruit de toutes ces voix merveilleuses qui avertissent de Dieu. L’esprit des peuples, en un religieux silence, entend longtemps retentir de catastrophe en catastrophe la parole mystérieuse qui témoigne dans les ténèbres:

Admonet, et magna testatur voce per umbras.

Quelques âmes choisies recueillent cette parole et s’en fortifient. Quand elle a cessé de tonner dans les évènements, elles la font éclater dans leurs inspirations, et c’est ainsi que les enseignements célestes se continuent par des chants. Telle est la mission du génie; ses élus sont “ces sentinelles laissées par le Seigneur sur les tours de Jérusalem, et qui ne se tairont ni jour, ni nuit.”

La littérature présente, telle que l’on créée les Chateaubriand, les Staël, les La Mennais, n’appartient donc en rien à la révolution. De même que les écrits sophistiques et déréglés des Voltaire, des Diderot et des Helvétius ont été d’avance l’expression des innovations sociales écloses dans la décrépitude du dernier siècle, la littérature actuelle, que l’on attaque avec tant d’instinct d’un côté, et si peu de sagacité de l’autre, est l’expression anticipée de la société religieuse et monarchique qui sortira sans doute du milieu de tant d’anciens débris, de tant de ruines récentes. Il faut le dire et le redire, ce n’est pas un besoin de nouveauté qui tourmente les esprits, c’est un besoin de vérité; et il est immense.

Ce besoin de vérité, la plupart des écrivains supérieurs de l’époque tendent à le satisfaire. Le goût, qui n’est autre chose que l’”autorité” en littérature, leur a enseigné que leurs ouvrages, vrais pour le fond, devaient être également vrais dans la forme; sous ce rapport, ils ont fait faire un pas à la poésie. Les écrivains des autres peuples et des autres temps, même les admirables poëtes du grand siècle, ont trop souvent oublié, dans l’exécution, le principe de vérité dont ils vivifiaient leur composition. On rencontre fréquemment dans leurs plus beaux passages des détails empruntés à des mœurs, à des religions ou à des époques trop étrangères au sujet. Ainsi l’”horloge” qui, au grand amusement de Voltaire, désigne au Brutus de Shakespeare l’heure où il doit frapper César, cette “horloge”, qui existait, comme on voit, bien avant qu’il y eût des horlogers, se retrouve, au milieu d’une brillante description des dieux mythologiques, placée par Boileau “à la main du TEMPS”. Le “canon”, dont Calderon arme les soldats d’Héraclius et Milton les archanges des ténèbres, est tiré, dans l’”Ode sur Namur” par “dix mille vaillans ALCIDES” qui en font “pétiller les remparts”. Et certes, puisque les “Alcides” du législateur du Parnasse tirent du canon, le “Satan” de Milton peut, à toute force, considérer cet anachronisme comme de “bonne guerre”. Si dans un siècle littéraire encore barbare, le père Lemoyne, auteur d’un poëme de “Saint Louis”, fait sonner “les vespres siciliennes” par les “cors des noires Euménides”, un âge éclairé nous montre J.-B. Rousseau envoyant (dans son “Ode au comte de Luc”, dont le mouvement lyrique est fort remarquable) un “PROPHETE fidèle jusque chez les DIEUX interroger le Sort”; et en trouvant fort ridicules les “Néréides” dont Camoëns obsède les compagnons de Gama, on désirerait, dans le célèbre “Passage du Rhin” de Boileau, voir autre chose que des “naïades craintives” fuir devant Louis, par la grâce de Dieu, roi de France et de Navarre, accompagné de ses maréchaux-des-camps-et-armées.

Des citations de ce genre se prolongeraient à l’infini, mais il est inutile de les multiplier. Se de pareilles fautes de vérité se présentent fréquemment dans nos meilleurs auteurs, il faut se garder de leur en faire un crime. Ils auraient pu sans doute se borner à étudier les formes pures des divinités grecques, sans leur emprunter leurs attributs païens. Lorsqu’à Rome on voulut convertir en “Saint Pierre” un “Jupiter Olympien”, on commença du moins par ôter au maître du tonnerre l’aigle qu’il foulait sous ses pieds. Mais quand on considère les immenses services rendus à la langue et aux lettres par nos premiers grands poëtes, on s’humilie devant leur génie, et on ne se sent pas la force de leur reprocher un défaut de goût. Certainement ce défaut a été bien funeste, puisqu’il a introduit en France je ne sais quel genre faux, qu’on a fort bien nommé le “genre scholastique”, genre qui est au “classique” ce que la superstition et le fanatisme sont à la religion, et qui ne contre-balance aujourd’hui le triomphe de la vraie poésie que par l’autorité respectable des illustres maîtres chez lesquels il trouve malheureusement des modèles. On a rassemblé ci-dessus quelques exemples pareils entre eux de ce faux goût, empruntés à la fois aux écrivains les plus opposés, à ceux que les scholastiques appellent “classiques” et à ceux qu’ils qualifient de “romantiques”; on espère par là faire voir que si Calderon a pu pécher par excès d’ignorance, Boileau a pu faillir aussi par excès de science; et que si, lorsqu’on étudie les écrits de ce dernier, on doit suivre religieusement les règles imposées au langage par le critique, il faut en même temps se garder scrupuleusement d’adopter les fausses couleurs employées quelquefois par le poëte.

Et remarquons, en passant, que, si la littérature du grand siècle de Louis le Grand eût invoqué le christianisme au lieu d’adorer les dieux païens, si ses poëtes eussent été ce qu’étaient ceux des temps primitifs, des prêtres chantant les grandes choses de leur religion et de leur patrie, le triomphe des doctrines sophistiques du dernier siècle eût été beaucoup plus difficile, peut-être même impossible. Aux premières attaques des novateurs, la religion et la morale se fussent réfugiées dans le sanctuaire des lettres, sous la garde de tant de grands hommes. Le goût national, accoutumé à ne point séparer les idées de religion et de poésie, eût répudié tout essai de poésie irréligieuse, et flétri cette monstruosité non moins comme un sacrilège littéraire que comme un sacrilège social. Qui peut calculer ce qui fût arrivé de la “philosophie” si la cause de Dieu, défendue en vain par la vertu, eût été aussi plaidée par le génie? Mais la France n’eut pas ce bonheur; ses poëtes nationaux étaient presque tous des poëtes païens; et notre littérature était plutôt l’expression d’une société idolâtre et démocratique que d’une société monarchique et chrétienne. Aussi les philosophes parvinrent-ils, en moins d’un siècle, à chasser des cœurs une religion qui n’était pas dans les esprits.

C’est surtout à réparer le mal fait par les sophistes que doit s’attacher aujourd’hui le poëte. Il doit marcher devant les peuples comme une lumière et leur montrer le chemin. Il doit les ramener à tous les grands principes d’ordre, de morale et d’honneur; et, pour que sa puissance leur soit douce, il faut que toutes les fibres du cœur humain vibrent sous ses doigts comme les cordes d’une lyre. Il ne sera jamais l’écho d’aucune parole, si ce n’est de celle de Dieu. Il se rappellera toujours ce que ses prédécesseurs ont trop oublié, que lui aussi il a une religion et une patrie. Ses chants célébreront sans cesse les gloires et les infortunes de son pays, les austérités et les ravissements de son culte, afin que ses aïeux et ses contemporains recueillent quelque chose de son génie et de son âme, et que, dans la postérité, les autres peuples ne disent pas de lui: “Celui-là chantait dans une terre barbare.”

In quâ scribebat, barbara terra fuit!

Février 1824

Préface de 1826

Pour la première fois, l’auteur de ce recueil de compositions lyriques, dont les “Odes et Ballades” forment le troisième volume, a cru devoir séparer les genres de ces compositions par une division marquée.

Il continue à comprendre sous le titre d’”Odes” toute inspiration purement religieuse, tout étude purement antique, toute traduction d’un évènement contemporain ou d’une impression personnelle. Les pièces qu’il intitule “Ballades” ont un caractère différent; ce sont des esquisses d’un genre capricieux: tableaux, rêves, scènes, récits, légendes superstitieuses, traditions populaires. L’auteur, en les composant, a essayé de donner quelque idée de ce que pouvaient être les poëmes des premiers troubadours du moyen-âge, de ces rapsodes chrétiens qui n’avaient au monde que leur épée et leur guitare, et s’en allaient de château en château, payant l’hospitalité avec des chants.

S’il n’y avait beaucoup de trop de pompe dans ces expressions, l’auteur dirait, pour compléter son idée, qu’il a mis plus de son âme dans les “Odes”, plus de son imagination dans les “Ballades”.

Au reste, il n’attache pas à ces classifications plus d’importance qu’elles n’en méritent. Beaucoup de personnes, dont l’opinion est grave, ont dit que ses “Odes” n’étaient pas des odes; soit. Beaucoup d’autres diront sans doute, avec non moins de raison, que ses “Ballades” ne sont pas des ballades; passe encore. Qu’on leur donne tel autre titre qu’on voudra; l’auteur y souscrit d’avance.

A cette occasion, mais en laissant absolument de côté ses propres ouvrages, si imparfaits et si incomplets, il hasardera quelques réflexions.

On entend tous les jours, à propos de productions littéraires, parler de le “dignité” de tel guerre, des “convenances” de tel autre, des “limites” de celui-ci, des “latitudes” de celui-là; la “tragédie” interdit ce que le “roman” permet; la “chanson” tolère ce que l’”ode” défend, etc. l’auteur de ce livre a le malheur de ne rien comprendre à tout cela; il y cherche des choses et n’y voit que des mots; il lui semble que ce qui est réellement beau et vrai est beau et vrai partout; que ce qui est dramatique dans un roman sera dramatique sur la scène; que ce qui est lyrique dans un couplet sera lyrique dans une strophe; qu’enfin et toujours la seule distinction véritable dans les œuvres de l’esprit est celle du bon et du mauvais. La pensée est une terre vierge et féconde dont les productions veulent croître librement, et, pour ainsi dire, au hasard, sans se classer, sans s’aligner en plates-bandes comme les bouquets dans un jardin classique de Le Nôtre, ou comme les fleurs du langage dans un traité de rhétorique.

Il ne faut pas croire pourtant que cette liberté doive produire le désordre; bien au contraire. Développons notre idée. Comparez un moment au jardin royal de Versailles, bien nivelé, bien taillé, bien nettoyé, bien ratissé, bien sablé, tout plein de petites cascades, de petits bassins, de petits bosquets, de tritons de bronze folâtrant en cérémonie sur des océans pompés à grands frais dans la Seine, de faunes de marbre courtisant les dryades allégoriquement renfermées dans une multitude d’ifs coniques, de lauriers cylindriques, d’orangers sphériques, de myrtes elliptiques, et d’autres arbres dont la forme naturelle, trop triviale sans doute, a été gracieusement corrigée par la serpette du jardinier; comparez ce jardin si vanté à une forêt primitive du Nouveau-Monde, avec ses arbres géants, ses hautes herbes, sa végétation profonde, ses mille oiseaux de mille couleurs, ses larges avenues où l’ombre et la lumière ne se jouent que sur de la verdure, ses sauvages harmonies, ses grands fleuves qui charrient des îles de fleurs, ses immenses cataractes qui balancent des arcs-en-ciel! Nous ne dirons pas: Où est la magnificence? où est la grandeur? où est la beauté? mais simplement: Où est l’ordre? où est le désordre? Là, des eaux captives ou détournées de leurs cours, ne jaillissant que pour croupir; des dieux pétrifiés; des arbres transplantés de leur sol natal, arrachés de leur climat, privés même de leur forme, de leurs fruits, et forcés de subir les grotesques caprices de la serpe et du cordeau; partout enfin l’ordre naturel contrarié, interverti, bouleversé, détruit. Ici, au contraire, tout obéit à une loi invariable; un Dieu semble vivre en tout. Les gouttes d’eau suivent leur pente et font des fleuves, qui feront des mers; les semences choisissent leur terrain et produisent une forêt. Chaque plante, chaque arbuste, chaque arbre naît dans sa saison, croît en son lieu, produit son fruit, meurt à son temps. La ronce même y est belle. Nous le demandons encore: Où est l’ordre?

Choisissez donc du chef-d’œuvre du jardinage ou de l’œuvre de la nature, de ce qui est beau de convention ou de ce qui est beau sans les règles, d’une littérature artificielle ou d’une poésie originale!

On nous objectera que la forêt vierge cache dans ses magnifiques solitudes mille animaux dangereux, et que les bassins marécageux du jardin français recèlent tout au plus quelques bêtes insipides. C’est un malheur sans doute; mais, à tout prendre, nous aimons mieux un crocodile qu'un crapaud; nous préférons une barbarie de Shakespeare à une ineptie de Campistron.

Ce qu'il est très important de fixer, c'est qu'en littérature comme en politique l'ordre se concilie merveilleusement avec la liberté; il en est même le résultat. Au reste, il faut bien se garder de confondre l'ordre avec la régularité. La régularité ne s'attache qu'à la forme extérieure; l'ordre résulte du fond même des choses, de la disposition intelligente des éléments intimes d'un sujet. La régularité est une combinaison matérielle et purement humaine; l'ordre est pour ainsi dire divin. Ces deux qualités si diverses dans leur essence marchent fréquemment l'une sans l'autre. Une cathédrale gothique présente un ordre admirable dans sa naïve irrégularité; nos édifices français modernes, auxquels on a si gauchement appliqué l'architecture grecque ou romaine, n'offrent qu'un désordre régulier. Un homme ordinaire pourra toujours faire un ouvrage régulier; il n'y a que les grands esprits qui sachent ordonner une composition. Le créateur, qui voit de haut, ordonne; l'imitateur, qui regarde de près, régularise; le premier procède selon la loi de sa nature, le dernier suivant les règles de son école. L'art est une inspiration pour l'un; il n'est qu'une science pour l'autre. En deux mots, et nous ne nous opposons pas à ce qu'on juge d'après cette observation les deux littératures dites "classique" et "romantique", la régularité est le goût de la médiocrité, l'ordre est le goût du génie.

Il est bien entendu que la liberté ne doit jamais être l'anarchie; que l'originalité ne peut en aucun cas servir de prétexte à l'incorrection. Dans une œuvre littéraire, l'exécution doit être d'autant plus irréprochable que la conception est plus hardie. Si vous voulez avoir raison autrement que les autres, vous devez avoir dix fois raison. Plus on dédaigne la rhétorique, plus il sied de respecter la grammaire. On ne doit détrôner Aristote que pour faire régner Vaugelas, et il faut aimer l'"Art poétique" de Boileau, sinon pour les préceptes, du moins pour le style. Un écrivain qui a quelque souci de la postérité cherchera sans cesse à purifier sa diction, sans effacer toutefois le caractère particulier par lequel son expression révèle l'individualité de son esprit. Le néologisme n'est d'ailleurs qu'une triste ressource pour l'impuissance. Des fautes de langue ne rendront jamais une pensée, et le style est comme le cristal: sa pureté fait son éclat.

L'auteur de ce recueil développera peut-être ailleurs tout ce qui n'est ici qu'indiqué. Qu'il lui soit permis de déclarer, avant de terminer, que l'esprit d’imitation, recommandé par d’autres comme le salut des écoles, lui a toujours paru le fléau de l’art, et il ne condamnerait pas moins l’imitation qui s’attache aux écrivains dits “romantiques” que celle dont on poursuit les auteurs dits “classiques”. Celui qui imite un poëte “romantique” devient nécessairement un “classique”, puisqu’il imite. Que vous soyez l’écho de Racine ou le reflet de Shakespeare, vous n’êtes toujours qu’un écho et qu’un reflet. Quand vous viendriez à bout de calquer exactement un homme de génie, il vous manquera toujours son originalité, c’est-à-dire son génie. Admirons les grands maîtres, ne les imitons pas. Faisons autrement. Si nous réussissons, tant mieux; si nous échouons, qu’importe? Il existe certaines eaux qui, si vous y plongez une fleur, un fruit, un oiseau, ne vous les rendent, au bout de quelque temps, que revêtus d’une épaisse croûte de pierre, sous laquelle on devine encore, il est vrai, leur forme primitive, mais le parfum, la saveur, la vie, ont disparu. Les pédantesques enseignements, les préjugés scholastiques, la contagion de la routine, la manie d’imitation, produisent le même effet. Si vous y ensevelissez vos facultés natives, votre imagination, votre pensée, elles n’en sortiront pas. Ce que vous en retirerez conservera bien peut-être quelque apparence d’esprit, de talent, de génie, mais ce sera pétrifié.

A entendre des écrivains qui se proclament “classiques”, celui-là s’écarte de la route du vrai et du beau qui ne suit pas servilement les vestiges que d’autres y ont imprimés avant lui. Erreur! ces écrivains confondent la routine avec l’art; ils prennent l’ornière pour le chemin.

Le poëte ne doit avoir qu’un modèle, la nature; qu’un guide, la vérité. Il ne doit pas écrire avec ce qui a été écrit, mais avec son âme et avec son cœur. De tous les livres qui circulent entre les mains des hommes, deux seuls doivent être étudiés par lui, Homère et la Bible. C’est que ces deux libres vénérables, les premiers de tous par leur date et par leur valeur, presque aussi anciens que le monde, sont eux-mêmes deux mondes pour la pensée. On y retrouve en quelque sorte la création toute entière considérée sous son double aspect, dans Homère par le génie de l’homme, dans la Bible par l’esprit de Dieu.

Août 1826

Préface de 1828

Ce recueil n'avait été jusqu'ici publié que sous le format in-18, en trois volumes. Pour fondre ces trois volumes en deux tomes dans la présente réimpression, divers changements dans la disposition des matières ont été nécessaires; on a tâché que ces changements fussent des améliorations.

Chacun des trois volumes des précédents éditions représentait la manière de l'auteur à trois moments, et pour ainsi dire à trois âges différents; car, sa méthode consistant à amender son esprit plutôt qu'à retravailler ses livres, et, comme il l'a dit ailleurs, "à corriger un ouvrage dans un autre ouvrage", on conçoit que chacun des écrits qu'il publie peut, et c'est là sans doute leur seul mérite, offrir une physionomie particulière à ceux qui ont du goût pour certaines études de langue et de style, et qui aiment à relever, dans les œuvres d'un écrivain, les dates de sa pensée.

Il était donc peut-être nécessaire d'observer quelque ordre dans la fusion des trois volumes in-18 en deux in-8°.

Une distinction toute naturelle se présentait d'abord, celle des poëmes qui se rattachent par un côté quelconque à l'histoire de nos jours, et des poëmes qui y sont étrangers. Cette double division répond à chacun des deux volumes de la présente édition. Ainsi le premier volume contient toutes les Odes relatives à des évènements ou à des personnages contemporains; les pièces d'un sujet capricieux composent le second. Des subdivisions ont ensuite semblé utiles. Les Odes historiques, qui constituent le premier volume, et qui offrent sous un côté le développement de la pensée de l'auteur dans un espace de dix années (1818-1828), ont été partagées en trois livres. Chacun de ces livres répond à un des volumes des précédentes éditions, et renferme, dans leur ancien classement, les Odes politiques que ce volume contenait. Ces trois livres sont respectivement l'un à l'autre comme étaient entre eux les trois volumes. Le second corrige le premier; le troisième corrige le second. Ainsi le petit nombre de personnes que ce genre d'études intéresse pourra comparer, et pour la forme et pour le fond, les trois manières de l'auteur à trois époques différentes, rapprochées, et en quelque sorte confrontées dans le même volume. On conviendra peut-être qu'il y a quelque bonne foi, quelque désintéressement à faciliter de cette façon les dissections de la critique.

Le deuxième volume contient le quatrième et le cinquième livre des Odes, l’un consacré aux sujets de fantaisie, l’autre à des traductions d’impressions personnelles. Les Ballades complètent ce volume, qui, de cette manière, est, comme l’autre, divisé en trois sections. Les poëmes sont le plus souvent rangés par ordre de dates.

Pour en finir de ces détails, peut-être inutiles et à coup sûr minutieux, nous ferons observer que les préfaces qui avaient accompagné les trois recueils aux époques de leur publications ont été imprimées, avec celle-ci, également par ordre de dates. On pourra remarquer, dans les idées qui y sont avancées, une progression de liberté qui n’est ni sans signification ni sans enseignement.

Enfin dix pièces nouvelles, sans compter l’”Ode à la colonne de la place Vendôme”, ont été ajoutées à la présente édition.

Il faut tout dire. Les modifications apportées à ce recueil ne se bornent pas peut-être à ces changements matériels. Quelque puérile que paraisse à l’auteur l’habitude de faire “des corrections” érigée en système, il est très loin d’avoir fui, ce qui serait aussi un système non moins fâcheux, les corrections qui lui ont paru importantes; mais il a fallu pour cela qu’elles se présentassent naturellement, invinciblement, comme d’elles-mêmes, et en quelque sorte avec le caractère de l’inspiration. Ainsi, bon nombre de vers se sont trouvés refaits, bon nombre de strophes remaniées, remplacées ou ajoutées. Au reste, tout cela ne valait peut-être pas plus la peine d’être fait que d’être dit.

C’aurait sans doute été plutôt ici le lieu d’agiter quelques-unes des hautes questions de langue, de style, de versification, et particulièrement de rhythme, qu’un recueil de poésie lyrique française au dix-neuvième siècle peut et doit soulever. Mais il est rare que de semblables dissertations ne ressemblent pas plus ou moins à des apologies. L’auteur s’en abstiendra donc ici, en se réservant d’exposer ailleurs les idées qu’il a pu recueillir sur ces matières, et, qu’on lui pardonne la présomption de ces paroles, de dire ce qu’il croit que l’art lui a appris. En attendant, il appelle sur ces questions l’attention de tous les critiques qui comprennent quelque chose au mouvement progressif de la pensée humaine, qui ne cloîtrent pas l’art dans les poétiques et les règles, et qui ne concentrent pas toute la poésie d’une nation dans un genre, dans une école, dans un siècle hermétiquement fermé.

Au reste, ces idées sont de jour en jour mieux comprises. Il est admirable de voir quels pas de géant l’art fait et fait faire. Une forte école s’élève, une génération forte croît dans l’ombre pour elle. Tous les principes que cette époque a posés, pour le monde des intelligences comme pour le monde des affaires, amènent déjà rapidement leurs conséquences. Espérons qu’un jour le dix-neuvième siècle, politique et littéraire, pourra être résumé d’un mot: la liberté dans l’ordre, la liberté dans l’art.

Août 1828

Préface de 1853

L’histoire s’extasie volontiers sur Michel Ney, qui, né tonnelier, devint maréchal de France, et sur Murat, qui, né garçon d’écurie, devint roi. L’obscurité de leur point de départ leur est comptée comme un titre de plus à l’estime, et rehausse l’éclat du point d’arrivée.

De toutes les échelles qui vont de l’ombre à la lumière, la plus méritoire et la plus difficile à gravir, certes, c’est celle-ci: être né aristocrate et royaliste, et devenir démocrate.

Monter d’une échoppe à un palais, c’est rare et beau, si vous voulez; monter de l’erreur à la vérité, c’est plus rare et c’est plus beau. Dans la première de ces deux ascensions, à chaque pas qu’on a fait, on a gagné quelque chose et augmenté son bien-être, sa puissance et sa richesse; dans l’autre ascension, c’est tout le contraire. Dans cette âpre lutte contre les préjugés sucés avec le lait, dans cette lente et rude élévation du faux au vrai, qui fait en quelque sorte de la vie d’un homme et du développement d’une conscience le symbole abrégé du progrès humain, à chaque échelon qu’on a franchi, on a dû payer d’un sacrifice matériel son accroissement moral, abandonner quelque intérêt, dépouiller quelque vanité, renoncer aux biens et aux honneurs du monde, risquer sa fortune, risque son foyer, risquer sa vie. Aussi, ce labeur accompli, est-il permis d’en être fier; et – s’il est vrai que Murat aurait pu montrer avec quelque orgueil son fouet de postillon à côté de son sceptre de roi, et dire: Je suis parti de là! – c’est avec un orgueil plus légitime, certes, et avec une conscience plus satisfaite, qu’on peut montrer ces odes royalistes d’enfant et d’adolescent à côté des poëmes et des livres démocratiques de l’homme fait; cette fierté est permis, nous le pensons, surtout lorsque, l’ascension faite, on a trouvé au sommet de l’échelle de lumière la proscription, et qu’on peut dater cette préface de l’exil.

Jersey. – Juillet 1853

LIVRE PREMIER

1818 - 1822

Vox clamabat in deserto.

ODE PREMIÈRE

LE POETE DANS LES REVOLUTIONS

à M. Alexandre Soumet

Mourir sans vider mon carquois!
Sans percer, sans fouler, sans pétrir dans leur fange
Ces bourreaux barbouilleurs de lois!
ANDRÉ CHÉNIER, Iambes.

“ Le vent chasse loin des campagnes
Le gland tombé des rameaux verts;
Chêne, il le bat sur les montagnes;
Esquif, il le bat sur les mers.
Jeune homme, ainsi le sort nous presse.
Ne joins pas, dans ta folle ivresse,
Les maux du monde à tes malheurs;
Gardons, coupables et victimes,
Nos remords pour nos propres crimes,
Nos pleurs pour nos propres douleurs! “

Quoi! mes chants sont-ils téméraires?
Faut-il donc, en ces jours d’effroi,
Rester sourd aux cris de ses frères!
Ne souffrir jamais que pour soi?
Non, le poète sur la terre
Console, exilé volontaire,
Les tristes humains dans leurs fers;
Parmi les peuples en délire,
Il s’élance, armé de sa lyre,
Comme Orphée au sein des enfers!

“ Orphée aux peines éternelles
Vint un moment ravir les morts;
Toi, sur les têtes criminelles,

Tu chantes l’hymne du remords.
Insensé! quel orgueil t’entraîne?
De quel droit viens-tu dans l’arène
Juger sans avoir combattu?
Censeur échappé de l’enfance,
Laisse vieillir ton innocence,
Avant de croire à ta vertu! “

Quand le crime, Python perfide,
Brave, impuni, le frein des lois,
La Muse devient l’Euménide,
Apollon saisit son carquois!
Je cède au Dieu qui me rassure;
J’ignore à ma vie encor pure
Quels maux le sort veut attacher;
Je suis sans orgueil mon étoile;
L’orage déchire la voile:
La voile sauve le nocher.

“ Les hommes vont aux précipices!
Tes chants ne les sauveront pas.
Avec eux, loin des cieux propices,
Pourquoi donc égarer tes pas?
Peux-tu, dès tes jeunes années,
Sans briser d’autres destinées,
Rompre la chaîne de tes jours?
Epargne ta vie éphémère;
Jeune homme, n’as-tu pas de mère?
Poète, n’as-tu pas d’amours? “

Eh bien! à mes terrestres flammes,
Si je meurs, les cieux vont s’ouvrir.
L’amour chaste agrandit les âmes,
Et qui sait aimer sait mourir.
Le Poète, en des temps de crime,
Fidèle aux justes qu’on opprime,
Célèbre, imite les héros;

Il a, jaloux de leur martyre,
Pour les victimes une lyre,
Une tête pour les bourreaux!

“ On dit que jadis le Poète,
Chantant des jours encor lointains,
Savait à la terre inquiète
Révéler ses futurs destins.
Mais toi, que peux-tu pour le monde?
Tu partages sa nuit profonde;
Le ciel se voile et veut punir;
Les lyres n’ont plus de prophète,
Et la Muse, aveugle et muette,
Ne sait plus rien de l’avenir! “

Le mortel qu’un Dieu même anime
Marche à l’avenir, plein d’ardeur;
C’est en s’élançant dans l’abîme
Qu’il en sonde la profondeur.
Il se prépare au sacrifice;
Il sait que le bonheur du vice
Par l’innocent est expié;
Prophète à son jour mortuaire,
La prison est son sanctuaire,
Et l’échafaud est son trépied!

“ Que n’es-tu né sur les rivages
Des Abbas et des Cosroës,
Aux rayons d’un ciel sans nuages,
Parmi le myrte et l’aloès!
Là, sourd aux maux que tu déplores,
Le poète voit ses aurores
Se lever sans trouble et sans pleurs;
Et la colonne, chère aux sages,
Porte aux vierges ses doux messages
Où l’amour parle avec des fleurs! “

Qu’un autre au céleste martyre
Préfère un repos sans honneur!
La gloire est le but où j’aspire;
On n’y va point par le bonheur.
L’alcyon, quand l’Océan gronde,
Craint que les vents ne troublent l’onde
Où se berce son doux sommeil;
Mais pour l’aiglon, fils des orages,
Ce n’est qu’à travers les nuages
Qu’il prend son vol vers le soleil!

ODE DEUXIÈME

LA VENDÉE

à M. le vicomte de Chateaubriand

Ave, Cæsar, morituri te salutant.

I

“ Qui de nous, en posant une urne cinéraire,
N’a trouvé quelque ami pleurant sur un cercueil?
Autour du froid tombeau d’une épouse ou d’un frère,
Qui de nous n’a mené le deuil? “
— Ainsi sur les malheurs de la France éplorée
Gémissait la Muse sacrée
Qui nous montra le ciel ouvert,
Dans ces chants où, planant sur Rome et sur Palmyre,
Sublime, elle annonçait les douceurs du martyre
Et l’humble bonheur du désert!

Depuis, à nos tyrans rappelant tous leurs crimes,
Et vouant aux remords ces coeurs sans repentirs,
Elle a dit: “ En ces temps la France eut des victimes;
Mais la Vendée eut des martyrs! “
— Déplorable Vendée, a-t-on séché tes larmes?
Marches-tu, ceinte de tes armes,
Au premier rang de nos guerriers?
Si l’Honneur, si la Foi n’est pas un vain fantôme,
Montre-moi quels palais ont remplacé le chaume
De tes rustiques chevaliers!

Hélas! tu te souviens des jours de ta misère!
Des flots de sang baignaient tes sillons dévastés,
Et le pied des coursiers n’y foulait de poussière
Que la cendre de tes cités.

Ceux-là qui n’avaient pu te vaincre avec l’épée
Semblaient, dans leur rage trompée,
Implorer l’enfer pour appui
Et, roulant sur la plaine en torrents de fumée,
Le vaste embrasement poursuivait ton armée,
Qui ne fuyait que devant lui!

II

La Loire vit alors, sur ses plages désertes,
S’assembler les tribus des vengeurs de nos rois,
Peuple qui ne pleurait, fier de ses nobles pertes,
Que sur le Trône et sur la Croix.
C’étaient quelques vieillards fuyant leurs toits en flammes,
C’étaient des enfants et des femmes,
Suivis d’un reste de héros;
Au milieu d’eux marchait leur Patrie exilée,
Car ils ne laissaient plus qu’une terre peuplée
De cadavres et de bourreaux.

On dit qu’en ce moment, dans un divin délire,
Un vieux prêtre parut parmi ces fiers soldats,
Comme un saint, chargé d’ans, qui parle du martyre
Aux nobles anges des combats;
Tranquille, en proclamant de sinistres présages,
Les souvenirs des anciens âges
S’éveillaient dans son coeur glacé;
Et, racontant le sort qu’ils devaient tous attendre,
La voix de l’avenir semblait se faire entendre
Dans ses discours pleins du passé.

III

“ Au-delà du Jourdain, après quarante années,
Dieu promit une terre aux enfants d’Israël;
Au-delà de ces flots, après quelques journées,
Le Seigneur vous promet le ciel.

Ces bords ne verront plus vos phalanges errantes.
Dieu, sur des plaines dévorantes,
Vous prépare un tombeau lointain;
Votre astre doit s’éteindre, à peine à son aurore;
Mais Samson expirant peut ébranler encore
Les colonnes du Philistin!

“ Vos guerriers périront. Mais, toujours invincibles,
S’ils ne peuvent punir, ils sauront se venger;
Car ils verront encor fuir ces soldats terribles,
Devant qui fuyait l’étranger!
Vous ne mourrez pas tous sous des bras intrépides;
Les uns, sur des nefs homicides,
Seront jetés aux flots mourants;
Ceux-là promèneront des os sans sépulture,
Et cacheront leurs morts sous une terre obscure,
Pour les dérober aux vivants!

“ Et vous, Ô jeune Chef, ravi par la victoire
Aux hasards de Mortagne, aux périls de Saumur,
L’honneur de vous frapper dans un combat sans gloire
Rendra célèbre un bras obscur.
Il ne sera donné qu’à bien peu de nos frères
De revoir, après tant de guerres,
La place où furent leurs foyers;
Alors, ornant son toit de ses armes oisives,
Chacun d’eux attendra que Dieu donne à nos rives
Les lys, qu’il préfère aux lauriers.

“ Vendée, Ô noble terre! Ô ma triste patrie!
Tu dois payer bien cher le retour de tes rois!
Avant que sur nos bords croisse la fleur chérie,
Ton sang l’arrosera deux fois.
Mais aussi, lorsqu’un jour l’Europe réunie
De l’arbre de la tyrannie
Aura brisé les rejetons,
Tous les rois vanteront leurs camps, leur flotte immense,

Et, seul, le Roi Chrétien mettra dans la balance
L’humble glaive des vieux Bretons!

“ Grand Dieu! - Si toutefois, après ces jours d’ivresse,
Blessant le coeur aigri du héros oublié,
Une voix insultante offrait à sa détresse
Les dons ingrats de la pitié;
Si sa mère, et sa veuve, et sa fille, éplorées,
S’arrêtaient, de faim dévorées,
Au seuil d’un favori puissant,
Rappelant à celui qu’implore leur misère,
Qu’elles n’ont plus ce fils, cet époux et ce père
Qui croyait leur léguer son sang;

“ Si, pauvre et délaissé, le citoyen fidèle,
Lorsqu’un traître enrichi se rirait de sa foi,
Entendait au sénat calomnier son zèle
Par celui qui jugea son roi;
Si, pour comble d’affronts, un magistrat injuste,
Déguisant sous un nom auguste
L’abus d’un insolent pouvoir,
Venait, de vils soupçons chargeant sa noble tête,
Lui demander ce fer, sa première conquête, -
Peut-être son dernier espoir;

“ Qu’il se résigne alors. - Par ses crimes prospères
L’impie heureux insulte au fidèle souffrant;
Mais que le juste pense aux forfaits de nos pères,
Et qu’il songe à son Dieu mourant.
Le Seigneur veut parfois le triomphe du vice,
Il veut aussi, dans sa justice
Que l’innocent verse des pleurs;
Souvent, dans ses desseins, Dieu suit d’étranges voies,
Lui qui livre Satan aux infernales joies,
Et Marie aux saintes douleurs! “

IV

Le vieillard s’arrêta. Sans croire à son langage,
Ils quittèrent ces bords, pour n’y plus revenir;
Et tous croyaient couvert des ténèbres de l’âge
L’esprit qui voyait l’avenir! -
Ainsi, faible en soldats, mais fort en renommée,
Ce débris d’une illustre armée
Suivait sa bannière en lambeaux;
Et ces derniers Français, que rien ne put défendre,
Loin de leur temple en deuil et de leur chaume en cendre,
Allaient conquérir des tombeaux!

ODE TROISIÈME

LES VIERGES DE VERDUN

Le prêtre portera l'étole blanche et noire
Lorsque les saints flambeaux pour vous s'allumeront;
Et, de leurs longs cheveux voilant leurs fronts d'ivoire,
Les jeunes filles pleureront.
A. GUIRAUD.

I

Pourquoi m'apportez-vous ma lyre,
Spectres légers? - que voulez-vous?
Fantastiques beautés, ce lugubre sourire
M'annonce-t-il votre courroux?
Sur vos écharpes éclatantes
Pourquoi flotte à longs plis ce crêpe menaçant?
Pourquoi sur des festons ces chaînes insultantes,
Et ces roses, teintes de sang?

Retirez-vous: rentrez dans les sombres abîmes...
Ah! que me montrez-vous?... quels sont ces trois tombeaux?
Quel est ce char affreux, surchargé de victimes?
Quels sont ces meurtriers, couverts d'impurs lambeaux?
J'entends des chants de mort, j'entends des cris de fête.
Cachez-moi le char qui s'arrête!...
Un fer lentement tombe à mes regards troublés; -
J'ai vu couler du sang... Est-il bien vrai, parlez,
Qu'il ait rejailli sur ma tête?
Venez-vous dans mon âme éveiller le remord?
Ce sang... je n'en suis point coupable!
Fuyez, vierges; fuyez, famille déplorable...
Lorsque vous n'étiez plus, je n'étais pas encor!
Qu'exigez-vous de moi? J'ai pleuré vos misères;
Dois-je donc expier les crimes de mes pères?

Pourquoi troublez-vous mon repos?
Pourquoi m'apportez-vous ma lyre frémissante?
Demandez-vous des chants à ma voix innocente,
Et des remords à vos bourreaux?

II

Sous des murs entourés de cohortes sanglantes,
Siège le sombre tribunal.
L'accusateur se lève, et ses lèvres tremblantes
S'agitent d'un rire infernal.
C'est Tinville: on le voit, au nom de la patrie,
Convier aux forfaits cette horde flétrie
D'assassins, juges à leur tour;
Le besoin du sang le tourmente;
Et sa voix homicide à la hache fumante
Désigne les têtes du jour.

Il parle: - ses licteurs vers l'enceinte fatale
Traînent les malheureux que sa fureur signale;
Les portes devant eux s'ouvrent avec fracas;
Et trois vierges, de grâce et de pudeur parées,
De leurs compagnes entourées,
Paraissent parmi les soldats.
Le peuple, qui se tait, frémit de son silence;
Il plaint son esclavage en plaignant leurs malheurs,
Et repose sur l'innocence
Ses regards las du crime et troublés par ses pleurs.

Eh quoi! quand ces beautés, lâchement accusées,
Vers ces juges de mort s'avançaient dans les fers,
Ces murs n'ont pas, croulant sous leurs voûtes brisées,
Rendu les monstres aux enfers!
Que faisaient nos guerriers?... Leur vaillance trompée
Prêtait au vil couteau le secours de l'épée;
Ils sauvaient ces bourreaux qui souillaient leurs combats.
Hélas! un même jour, jour d'opprobre et de gloire,

Voyait Moreau monter au char de la victoire.
Et son père au char du trépas!

Quand nos chefs, entourés des armes étrangères,
Couvrant nos cyprès de lauriers,
Vers Paris lentement reportaient leurs bannières,
Frédéric sur Verdun dirigeait ses guerriers.
Verdun, premier rempart de la France opprimée,
D’un roi libérateur crut saluer l’armée.
En vain tonnaient d’horribles lois;
Verdun se revêtit de sa robe de fête,
Et, libre de ses fers, vint offrir sa conquête
Au monarque vengeur des rois.

Alors, Vierges, vos mains (ce fut là votre crime!)
Des festons de la joie ornèrent les vainqueurs.
Ah! pareilles à la victime,
La hache à vos regards se cachait sous des fleurs.
Ce n’est pas tout; hélas! sans chercher la vengeance,
Quand nos bannis, bravant la mort et l’indigence,
Combattaient nos tyrans encor mal affermis,
Vos nobles coeurs ont plaint de si nobles misères;
Votre or a secouru ceux qui furent nos frères
Et n’étaient pas nos ennemis!

Quoi! ce trait glorieux, qui trahit leur belle âme,
Sera donc l’arrêt de leur mort!
Mais non, l’Accusateur, que leur aspect enflamme,
Tressaille d’un honteux transport.
Il veut, Vierges, au prix d’un affreux sacrifice,
En taisant vos bienfaits, vous ravir au supplice;
Il croit vos chastes coeurs par la crainte abattus.
Du mépris qui le couvre acceptez le partage,
Souillez-vous d’un forfait, l’infâme aréopage
Vous absoudra de vos vertus!

Répondez-moi, Vierges timides;

Qui, d’un si noble orgueil arma ces yeux si doux?
Dites, qui fit rouler dans vos regards humides
Les pleurs généreux du courroux?
Je le vois à votre courage:
Quand l’oppresseur qui vous outrage
N’eût pas offert la honte en offrant son bienfait,
Coupables de pitié pour des Français fidèles,
Vous n’auriez pas voulu, devant des lois cruelles,
Nier un si noble forfait!

C’en est donc fait; déjà sous la lugubre enceinte
A retenti l’arrêt dicté par la fureur.
Dans un muet murmure, étouffé par la crainte,
Le peuple, qui l’écoute, exhale son horreur.
Regagnez des cachots les sinistres demeures,
Ô Vierges! encor quelques heures...
Ah! priez sans effroi, votre âme est sans remord.
Coupez ces longues chevelures,
Où la main d’une mère enlaçait des fleurs pures,
Sans voir qu’elle y mêlait les pavots de la mort!

Bientôt ces fleurs encor pareront votre tête;
Les anges vous rendront ces symboles touchants;
Votre hymne de trépas sera l’hymne de fête
Que les Vierges du ciel rediront dans leurs chants.
Vous verrez près de vous, dans ces choeurs d’innocence,
Charlotte, autre Judith, qui vous vengea d’avance;
Cazotte; Elisabeth, si malheureuse en vain;
Et Sombreuil, qui trahit par ses pâleurs soudaines
Le sang glacé des morts circulant dans ses veines;
Martyres, dont l’encens plaît au Martyr divin!

III

Ici, devant mes yeux erraient des lueurs sombres
Des visions troublaient mes sens épouvantés;
Les Spectres sur mon front balançaient dans les ombres

De longs linceuls ensanglantés.
Les trois tombeaux, le char, les échafauds funèbres,
M’apparurent dans les ténèbres;
Tout rentra dans la nuit des siècles révolus;
Les vierges avaient fui vers la naissante aurore;
Je me retrouvai seul, et je pleurais encore
Quand ma lyre ne chantait plus!

ODE QUATRIÈME

QUIBERON

Pudor inde et miseratio. TACITE.

I

Par ses propres fureurs le Maudit se dévoile,
Dans le Démon vainqueur on voit l'ange proscrit;
L'anathème éternel, qui poursuit son étoile,
Dans ses succès même est écrit.
Il est, lorsque des cieux nous oublions la voie,
Des jours, que Dieu sans doute envoie
Pour nous rappeler les enfers;
Jours sanglants qui, voués au triomphe du crime,
Comme d'affreux rayons échappés de l'abîme,
Apparaissent sur l'univers.

Poètes qui toujours, loin du siècle où nous sommes,
Chantres des pleurs sans fin et des maux mérités,
Cherchez des attentats tels que la voix des hommes
N'en ait point encor racontés,
Si quelqu'un vient à vous vantant la jeune France,
Nos exploits, notre tolérance,
Et nos temps féconds en bienfaits,
Soyez contents; lisez nos récentes histoires,
Evoquez nos vertus, interrogez nos gloires:
Vous pourrez choisir des forfaits!

Moi, je n'ai point reçu de la Muse funèbre
Votre lyre de bronze, Ô chantres des remords!
Mais je voudrais flétrir les bourreaux qu'on célèbre,
Et venger la cause des morts.
Je voudrais, un moment, troublant l'impur Génie,
Arrêter sa gloire impunie

Qu’on pousse à l’immortalité;
Comme autrefois un grec, malgré les vents rapides,
Seul, retint de ses bras, de ses dents intrépides,
L’esquif sur les mers emporté!

II

Quiberon vit jadis, sur son bord solitaire,
Des Français assaillis s’apprêter à mourir,
Puis, devant les deux chefs, l’airain fumant se taire,
Et les rangs désarmés s’ouvrir.
Pour sauver ses soldats l’un d’eux offrit sa tête;
L’autre accepta cette conquête,
De leur traité gage inhumain;
Et nul guerrier ne crut sa promesse frivole,
Car devant les drapeaux, témoins de leur parole,
Tous deux s’étaient donné la main!

La phalange fidèle alors livra ses armes.
Ils marchaient; une armée environnait leurs pas,
Et le peuple accourait, en répandant des larmes,
Voir ces preux, sauvés du trépas.
Ils foulaient en vaincus les champs de leurs ancêtres;
Ce fut un vieux temple, sans prêtres,
Qui reçut ces vengeurs des rois;
Mais l’humble autel manquait à la pieuse enceinte,
Et, pour se consoler, dans cette prison sainte,
Leurs yeux en vain cherchaient la croix.

Tous prièrent ensemble, et, d’une voix plaintive,
Tous, se frappant le sein, gémirent à genoux.
Un seul ne pleurait pas dans la tribu captive:
C’était lui qui mourait pour tous;
C’était Sombreuil, leur chef; jeune et plein d’espérance,
L’heure de son trépas s’avance;
Il la salue avec ferveur.
Le supplice, entouré des apprêts funéraires,

Est beau pour un chrétien qui, seul, va pour ses frères
Expirer, semblable au Sauveur.

“ Oh! cessez, disait-il, ces larmes, ces reproches,
Guerriers; votre salut prévient tant de douleurs!
Combien à votre mort vos amis et vos proches,
Hélas! auraient versé de pleurs!
Je romps avec vos fers mes chaînes éphémères;
À vos épouses, à vos mères,
Conservez vos jours précieux.
On vous rendra la paix, la liberté, la vie;
Tout ce bonheur n’a rien que mon coeur vous envie;
Vous, ne m’enviez pas les cieux. “

Le sinistre tambour sonna l’heure dernière,
Les bourreaux étaient prêts; on vit Sombreuil partir.
La soeur ne fut point là pour leur ravir le frère, -
Et le héros devint martyr.
L’exhortant de la voix et de son saint exemple,
Un évêque, exilé du temple,
Le suivit au funeste lieu;
Afin que le vainqueur vît, dans son camp rebelle,
Mourir, près d’un soldat à son prince fidèle,
Un prêtre fidèle à son Dieu!

III

Vous pour qui s’est versé le sang expiatoire,
Bénissez le Seigneur, louez l’heureux Sombreuil;
Celui qui monte au ciel, brillant de tant de gloire,
N’a pas besoin de chants de deuil!
Bannis, on va vous rendre enfin une patrie;
Captifs, la liberté chérie
Se montre à vous dans l’avenir.
Oui, de vos longs malheurs chantez la fin prochaine;
Vos prisons vont s’ouvrir, on brise votre chaîne;
Chantez! votre exil va finir.

En effet, - des cachots la porte à grand bruit roule,
Un étendard paraît, qui flotte ensanglanté;
Des chefs et des soldats l'environnent en foule,
En invoquant la Liberté!
“ Quoi! disaient les captifs, déjà l'on nous délivre!... “
Quelques-uns s'empressent de suivre
Les bourreaux devenus meilleurs.
“ Adieu, leur criait-on, adieu, plus de souffrance;
Nous nous reverrons tous, libres, dans notre France! “
Ils devaient se revoir ailleurs.

Bientôt, jusqu'aux prisons des captifs en prières,
Arrive un sourd fracas, par l'échÔ répété:
C'étaient leurs fiers vainqueurs qui délivraient leurs frères,
Et qui remplissaient leur traité!
Sans troubler les proscrits, ce bruit vint les surprendre;
Aucun d'eux ne savait comprendre
Qu'on pût se jouer des serments;
Ils disaient aux soldats: “ Votre foi nous protège; “
Et, pour toute réponse, un lugubre cortège
Les traîna sur des corps fumants!

Le jour fit place à l'ombre et la nuit à l'aurore,
Hélas! et, pour mourir traversant la cité,
Les crédules proscrits passaient, passaient encore,
Aux yeux du peuple épouvanté!
Chacun d'eux racontait, brûlant d'un saint délire,
À ses compagnons de martyre
Les malheurs qu'il avait soufferts;
Tous succombaient sans peur, sans faste, sans murmure,
Regrettant seulement qu'il fallût un parjure,
Pour les immoler dans les fers.

À coups multipliés la hache abat les chênes.
Le vil chasseur, dans l'antre ignoré du soleil,
Égorge lentement le lion dont ses chaînes

Ont surpris le noble sommeil.
On massacra longtemps la tribu sans défense.
À leur mort assistait la France,
Jouet des bourreaux triomphants;
Comme jadis, aux pieds des idoles impures,
Tour à tour, une veuve, en de longues tortures,
Vit expirer ses sept enfants.

C'étaient là les vertus d'un Sénat qu'on nous vante!
Le sombre Esprit du mal sourit en le créant;
Mais ce corps aux cent bras, fort de notre épouvante,
En son sein portait son néant.
Le colosse de fer s'est dissous dans la fange.
L'Anarchie, alors que tout change,
Pense voir ses oeuvres durer;
Mais ce Pygmalion, dans ses travaux frivoles,
Ne peut donner la vie aux horribles idoles
Qu'il se fait pour les adorer.

IV

On dit que, de nos jours, viennent, versant des larmes,
Prier au champ fatal où ces preux sont tombés,
Les vierges, les soldats fiers de leurs jeunes armes,
Et les vieillards lents et courbés.
Du ciel sur les bourreaux appelant l'indulgence,
Là, nul n'implore la vengeance,
Tous demandent le repentir;
Et chez ces vieux Bretons, témoins de tant de crimes,
Le pèlerin, qui vient invoquer les victimes,
Souvent lui-même est un martyr!

ODE CINQUIÈME

LOUIS XVII

Capet, éveille-toi!

I

En ce temps-là, du ciel les portes d'or s'ouvrirent;
Du Saint des Saints ému les feux se découvrirent;
Tous les cieux un moment brillèrent dévoilés;
Et les élus voyaient, lumineuses phalanges,
Venir une jeune âme entre de jeunes anges
Sous les portiques étoilés.
C'était un bel enfant qui fuyait de la terre; -
Son oeil bleu du malheur portait le signe austère;
Ses blonds cheveux flottaient sur ses traits pâlissants;
Et les vierges du ciel, avec des chants de fête,
Aux palmes du Martyre unissaient sur sa tête
La couronne des innocents.

II

On entendit des voix qui disaient dans la nue:
—" Jeune ange, Dieu sourit à ta gloire ingénue;
Viens, rentre dans ses bras pour ne plus en sortir;
Et vous, qui du Très-Haut racontez les louanges,
Séraphins, prophètes, archanges,
Courbez-vous, c'est un Roi; chantez, c'est un Martyr! "

—" Où donc ai-je régné? demandait la jeune ombre.
Je suis un prisonnier, je ne suis point un roi.
Hier je m'endormis au fond d'une tour sombre.
Où donc ai-je régné? Seigneur, dites-le moi.
Hélas! mon père est mort d'une mort bien amère;
Ses bourreaux, Ô mon Dieu, m'ont abreuvé de fiel;

Je suis un orphelin; je viens chercher ma mère,
Qu’en mes rêves j’ai vue au ciel. “

Les anges répondaient:—” Ton Sauveur te réclame.
Ton Dieu d’un monde impie a rappelé ton âme.
Fuis la terre insensée où l’on brise la Croix,
Où jusque dans la mort descend le Régicide,
Où le Meurtre, d’horreurs avide,
Fouille dans les tombeaux pour y chercher des rois! “

—” Quoi! de ma lente vie ai-je achevé le reste?
Disait-il; tous mes maux, les ai-je enfin soufferts?
Est-il vrai qu’un geôlier, de ce rêve céleste,
Ne viendra pas demain m’éveiller dans mes fers?
Captif, de mes tourments cherchant la fin prochaine,
J’ai prié; Dieu veut-il enfin me secourir?
Oh! n’est-ce pas un songe? a-t-il brisé ma chaîne?
Ai-je eu le bonheur de mourir?

“ Car vous ne savez point quelle était ma misère!
Chaque jour dans ma vie amenait des malheurs;
Et, lorsque je pleurais, je n’avais pas de mère
Pour chanter à mes cris, pour sourire à mes pleurs.
D’un châtiment sans fin languissante victime,
De ma tige arraché comme un tendre arbrisseau,
J’étais proscrit bien jeune, et j’ignorais quel crime
J’avais commis dans mon berceau.

“ Et pourtant, écoutez: bien loin dans ma mémoire,
J’ai d’heureux souvenirs avant ces temps d’effroi;
J’entendais en dormant des bruits confus de gloire,
Et des peuples joyeux veillaient autour de moi.
Un jour tout disparut dans un sombre mystère;
Je vis fuir l’avenir à mes destins promis;
Je n’étais qu’un enfant, faible et seul sur la terre,
Hélas! et j’eus des ennemis!

“ Ils m’ont jeté vivant sous des murs funéraires;
Mes yeux voués aux pleurs n’ont plus vu le soleil;
Mais vous que je retrouve, anges du ciel, mes frères,
Vous m’avez visité souvent dans mon sommeil.
Mes jours se sont flétris dans leurs mains meurtrières,
Seigneur, mais les méchants sont toujours malheureux;
Oh! ne soyez pas sourd comme eux à mes prières,
Car je viens vous prier pour eux. “

Et les anges chantaient:— “L’arche à toi se dévoile,
Suis-nous; sur ton beau front nous mettrons une étoile.
Prends les ailes d’azur des chérubins vermeils;
Tu viendras avec nous bercer l’enfant qui pleure,
Ou, dans leur brûlante demeure,
D’un souffle lumineux rajeunir les soleils! “

III

Soudain le choeur cessa, les élus écoutèrent;
Il baissa son regard par les larmes terni;
Au fond des cieux muets les mondes s’arrêtèrent,
Et l’éternelle voix parla dans l’infini:
“ Ô roi! je t’ai gardé loin des grandeurs humaines.
Tu t’es réfugié du trône dans les chaînes.
Va, mon fils, bénis tes revers.
Tu n’as point su des rois l’esclavage suprême,
Ton front du moins n’est pas meurtri du diadème,
Si tes bras sont meurtris de fers.

“ Enfant, tu t’es courbé sous le poids de la vie;
Et la terre, pourtant, d’espérance et d’envie
Avait entouré ton berceau!
Viens, ton Seigneur lui-même eut ses douleurs divines,
Et mon Fils, comme toi, Roi couronné d’épines,
Porta le sceptre de roseau! “

ODE SIXIÈME

LE RÉTABLISSEMENT DE LA STATUE DE HENRI IV

Accingunt omnes operi, pedibusque rotarum Subjiciunt lapsus, et stupea vincula collo Intendunt... Pueri circum innuptæque puellæ Sacra canunt, funemque manu contingere gaudent! VIRGILE.

I

Je voyais s’élever, dans le lointain des âges,
Ces monuments, espoir de cent rois glorieux;
Puis je voyais crouler les fragiles images
De ces fragiles demi-dieux.
Alexandre, un pêcheur des rives du Pirée
Foule ta statue ignorée,
Sur le pavé du Parthénon;
Et les premiers rayons de la naissante aurore
En vain dans le désert interrogent encore
Les muets débris de Memnon.

Ont-ils donc prétendu, dans leur esprit superbe,
Qu’un bronze inanimé dût les rendre immortels?
Demain le temps peut-être aura caché sous l’herbe
Leurs imaginaires autels.
Le proscrit à son tour peut remplacer l’idole;
Des piédestaux du Capitole
Sylla détrône Marius.
Aux outrages du sort insensé qui s’oppose!
Le sage, de l’affront dont frémit Théodose,
Sourit avec Démétrius.

D’un héros toutefois l’image auguste et chère
Hérite du respect qui payait ses vertus;
Trajan domine encor les champs que de Tibère
Couvrent les temples abattus.

Souvent, lorsqu'en l'horreur des discordes civiles,
La terreur planait sur les villes,
Aux cris des peuples révoltés,
Un héros, respirant dans le marbre immobile,
Arrêtait tout à coup par son regard tranquille
Les factieux épouvantés!

II

Eh quoi! sont-ils donc loin, ces jours de notre histoire
Où Paris sur son prince osa lever son bras?
Où l'aspect de Henri, ses vertus, sa mémoire,
N'ont pu désarmer des ingrats?
Que dis-je? ils ont détruit sa statue adorée.
Hélas! cette horde égarée
Mutilait l'airain renversé;
Et cependant, des morts souillant le saint asile,
Leur sacrilège main demandait à l'argile
L'empreinte de son front glacé.

Voulaient-ils donc jouir d'un portrait plus fidèle
Du héros dont leur haine a payé les bienfaits?
Voulaient-ils, réprouvant leur fureur criminelle,
Le rendre à nos yeux satisfaits?
Non; mais c'était trop peu de briser son image;
Ils venaient encor, dans leur rage,
Briser son cercueil outragé;
Tel, troublant le désert d'un rugissement sombre,
Le tigre, en se jouant, cherche à dévorer l'ombre
Du cadavre qu'il a rongé.

Assis près de la Seine, en mes douleurs amères,
Je me disais: “ La Seine arrose encore Ivry,
Et les flots sont passés où, du temps de nos pères,
Se peignaient les traits de Henri.
Nous ne verrons jamais l'image vénérée
D'un roi qu'à la France éplorée

Enleva sitôt le trépas;
Sans saluer Henri nous irons aux batailles,
Et l’étranger viendra chercher dans nos murailles
Un héros qu’il n’y verra pas! “

III

Où courez-vous? - Quel bruit naît, s’élève et s’avance?
Qui porte ces drapeaux, signe heureux de nos rois?
Dieu! quelle masse au loin semble, en sa marche immense,
Broyer la terre sous son poids?
Répondez... Ciel! c’est lui! je vois sa noble tête...
Le peuple, fier de sa conquête,
Répète en choeur son nom chéri.
Ô ma lyre! tais-toi dans la publique ivresse;
Que seraient tes concerts près des chants d’allégresse
De la France aux pieds de Henri?

Par mille bras traîné, le lourd colosse roule.
Ah! volons, joignons-nous à ces efforts pieux.
Qu’importe si mon bras est perdu dans la foule!
Henri me voit du haut des cieux.
Tout un peuple a voué ce bronze à ta mémoire,
Ô chevalier, rival en gloire
Des Bayard et des Duguesclin!
De l’amour des français reçois la noble preuve,
Nous devons ta statue au denier de la veuve,
À l’obole de l’orphelin.

N’en doutez pas, l’aspect de cette image auguste
Rendra nos maux moins grands; notre bonheur plus doux;
Ô Français! louez Dieu, vous voyez un roi juste,
Un Français de plus parmi vous.
Désormais, dans ses yeux, en volant à la gloire,
Nous viendrons puiser la victoire;
Henri recevra notre foi;
Et quand on parlera de ses vertus si chères,

Nos enfants n’iront pas demander à nos pères
Comment souriait le bon Roi!

IV

Jeunes amis, dansez autour de cette enceinte;
Mêlez vos pas joyeux, mêlez vos heureux chants.
Henri, car sa bonté dans ses traits est empreinte,
Bénira vos transports touchants.
Près des vains monuments que des tyrans s’élèvent,
Qu’après de longs siècles achèvent
Les travaux d’un peuple opprimé,
Qu’il est beau, cet airain où d’un roi tutélaire
La France aime à revoir le geste populaire
Et le regard accoutumé!

Que le fier conquérant de la Perse avilie,
Las de léguer ses traits à de frêles métaux,
Menace, dans l’accès de sa vaste folie,
D’imposer sa forme à l’Athos;
Qu’un Pharaon cruel, superbe en sa démence,
Couvre d’un obélisque immense
Le grand néant de son cercueil;
Son nom meurt, et bientôt l’ombre des Pyramides
Pour l’étranger, perdu dans ces plaines arides,
Est le seul bienfait de l’orgueil!

Un jour (mais repoussons tout présage funeste!)
Si des ans ou du sort les coups encor vainqueurs
Brisaient de notre amour le monument modeste,
Henri, tu vivrais dans nos coeurs;
Cependant que du Nil les montagnes altières,
Cachant cent royales poussières,
Du monde inutile fardeau,
Du temps et de la mort attestent le passage,
Et ne sont déjà plus, à l’oeil ému du sage,
Que la ruine d’un tombeau.

ODE SEPTIÈME

LA MORT DU DUC DE BERRY

Le Meurtre, d’une main violente, brise les liens les plus sacrés; la Mort vient enlever le jeune homme florissant, et le Malheur s’approche comme un ennemi rusé au milieu des jours de fête. SCHILLER.

I

Modérons les transports d’une ivresse insensée;
Le passage est bien court de la joie aux douleurs;
La mort aime à poser sa main lourde et glacée
Sur des fronts couronnés de fleurs.
Demain, souillés de cendre, humbles, courbant nos têtes,
Le vain souvenir de nos fêtes
Sera pour nous presque un remords;
Nos jeux seront suivis des pompes sépulcrales;
Car chez nous, malheureux! l’hymne des Saturnales
Sert de prélude au chant des Morts.

II

Fuis les banquets, fais trêve à ton joyeux délire,
Paris, triste cité! détourne tes regards
Vers le cirque où l’on voit aux accords de la lyre
S’unir les prestiges des arts.
Choeurs, interrompez-vous; cessez, danses légères;
Qu’on change en torches funéraires
Ces feux purs, ces brillants flambeaux; -
Dans cette enceinte, auprès d’une couche sanglante,
J’entends un prêtre saint dont la voix chancelante
Dit la prière des tombeaux!

Sous ces lambris, frappés des éclats de la joie,
Près d’un lit où soupire un mourant étendu,

D’une famille auguste, au désespoir en proie,
Je vois le cortège éperdu.
C’est un père à genoux, c’est un frère en alarmes,
Une soeur qui n’a point de larmes
Pour calmer ses sombres douleurs;
Car ses affreux revers ont, dès son plus jeune âge,
Dans ses yeux, enflammés d’un si mâle courage,
Tari la source de ses pleurs.

Sur l’échafaud, aux cris d’un sénat sanguinaire,
Sa mère est morte en reine et son père en héros;
Elle a vu dans les fers périr son jeune frère,
Et n’a pu trouver des bourreaux.
Et, quand des rois ligués la main brisa ses chaînes,
Longtemps, sur des rives lointaines,
Elle a fui nos bords désolés;
Elle a revu la France, après tant de misères,
Pour apprendre, en rentrant au palais de ses pères,
Que ses maux n’étaient pas comblés!

Plus loin, c’est une épouse... Oh! qui peindra ses craintes,
Sa force, ses doux soins, son amour assidu?
Hélas! et qui dira ses lamentables plaintes,
Quand tout espoir sera perdu?
Quels étaient nos transports, ô vierge de Sicile,
Quand naguère à ta main docile
Berry joignit sa noble main!
Devais-tu donc, princesse, en touchant ce rivage,
Voir sitôt succéder le crêpe du veuvage
Au chaste voile de l’hymen?

Berry, quand nous vantions ta paisible conquête,
Nos chants ont réveillé le dragon endormi;
L’Anarchie en grondant a relevé sa tête,
Et l’enfer même en a frémi.
Elle a rugi; soudain, du milieu des ténèbres,
Clément poussa des cris funèbres,

Ravaillac agita ses fers;
Et le monstre, étendant ses deux ailes livides,
Aux applaudissements des ombres régicides,
S’envola du fond des enfers!

Le démon, vers nos bords tournant son vol funeste,
Voulut, brisant ces lys qu’il flétrit tant de fois,
Épuiser d’un seul coup le déplorable reste
D’un sang, trop fertile en bons rois.
Longtemps le sbire obscur qu’il arma pour son crime,
Rêveur, autour de la victime
Promena ses affreux loisirs;
Enfin le ciel permet que son voeu s’accomplisse;
Pleurons tous, car le meurtre a choisi pour complice
Le tumulte de nos plaisirs!

Le fer brille... un cri part: guerriers, volez aux armes!
C’en est fait; la duchesse accourt en pâlissant;
Son bras soutient Berry, qu’elle arrose de larmes,
Et qui l’inonde de son sang.
Dressez un lit funèbre: est-il quelque espérance?...
Hélas! un lugubre silence
A condamné son triste époux.
Assistez-le, madame, en ce moment horrible;
Les soins cruels de l’art le rendront plus terrible,
Les vôtres le rendront plus doux.

Monarque en cheveux blancs, hâte-toi, le temps presse;
Un Bourbon va rentrer au sein de ses aïeux;
Viens, accours vers ce fils, l’espoir de ta vieillesse;
Car ta main doit fermer ses yeux!
Il a béni sa fille, à son amour ravie;
Puis, des vanités de sa vie
Il proclame un noble abandon;
Vivant, il pardonna ses maux à la patrie;
Et son dernier soupir, digne du Dieu qu’il prie,
Est encore un cri de pardon.

Mort sublime! ô regrets! vois sa grande âme, et pleure,
Porte au ciel tes clameurs, ô peuple désolé.
Tu l'as trop peu connu; c'est à sa dernière heure
Que le héros s'est révélé.
Pour consoler la veuve, apportez l'orpheline;
Donnez sa fille à Caroline,
La nature encore a ses droits,
Mais, quand périt l'espoir d'une tige féconde,
Qui pourra consoler, dans sa terreur profonde,
La France, veuve de ses rois?

À l'horrible récit, quels cris expiatoires
Vont pousser nos guerriers, fameux par leur valeur!
L'Europe, qu'ébranlait le bruit de leurs victoires,
Va retentir de leur douleur.
Mais toi, que diras-tu, chère et noble Vendée?
Si longtemps de sang inondée,
Tes regrets seront superflus;
Et tu seras semblable à la mère accablée,
Qui s'assied sur sa couche et pleure inconsolée,
Parce que son enfant n'est plus!

Bientôt vers Saint-Denis, désertant nos murailles,
Au bruit sourd des clairons, peuple, prêtres, soldats,
Nous suivrons à pas lents le char des funérailles,
Entouré des chars des combats.
Hélas! jadis souillé par des mains téméraires,
Saint-Denis, où dormaient ses pères,
A vu déjà bien des forfaits;
Du moins, puisse, à l'abri des complots parricides,
Sous ces murs profanés, parmi ces tombes vides,
Sa cendre reposer en paix!

III

D'Enghien s'étonnera, dans les célestes sphères,

De voir sitôt l'ami, cher à ses jeunes ans,
À qui le vieux Condé, prêt à quitter nos terres,
Léguait ses devoirs bienfaisants.
À l'aspect de Berry, leur dernière espérance,
Des rois que révère la France
Les ombres frémiront d'effroi;
Deux héros gémiront sur leurs races éteintes,
Et le vainqueur d' Ivry viendra mêler ses plaintes
Aux pleurs du vainqueur de Rocroy.

Ainsi, Bourbon, au bruit du forfait sanguinaire,
On te vit vers d'Artois accourir désolé;
Car tu savais les maux que laisse au coeur d'un père
Un fils avant l'âge immolé.
Mais bientôt, chancelant dans ta marche incertaine,
L'affreux souvenir de Vincenne
Vint s'offrir à tes sens glacés;
Tu pâlis; et d'Artois, dans la douleur commune,
Sembla presque oublier sa récente infortune,
Pour plaindre tes revers passés.

Et toi, veuve éplorée, au milieu de l'orage
Attends des jours plus doux, espère un sort meilleur;
Prends ta soeur pour modèle, et puisse ton courage
Être aussi grand que ton malheur!
Tu porteras comme elle une urne funéraire;
Comme elle, au sein du sanctuaire,
Tu gémiras sur un cercueil;
L'Hydre des factions, qui, par des morts célèbres,
A marqué pour ta soeur tant d'époques funèbres,
Te fait aussi ton jour de deuil!

IV

Pourtant, ô frêle appui de la tige royale,
Si Dieu par ton secours signale son pouvoir,
Tu peux sauver la France, et de l'Hydre infernale

Tromper encor l’affreux espoir.
Ainsi, quand le Serpent, auteur de tous les crimes,
Vouait d’avance aux noirs abîmes
L’homme que son forfait perdit,
Le Seigneur abaissa sa farouche arrogance;
Une femme apparut, qui, faible et sans défense,
Brisa du pied son front maudit!

ODE HUITIÈME

LA NAISSANCE DU DUC DE BORDEAUX

Le ciel ... prodigue en leur faveur les miracles. La postérité de Joseph rentre dans la terre de Gessen; et cette conquête, due aux larmes des vainqueurs, ne coûte pas une larme aux vaincus. CHATEAUBRIAND, Martyrs.

I

Savez-vous, voyageur, pourquoi, dissipant l'ombre,
D'innombrables clartés brillent dans la nuit sombre?
Quelle immense vapeur rougit les cieux couverts?
Et pourquoi mille cris, frappant la nue ardente,
Dans la ville, au loin rayonnante,
Comme un concert confus, s'élèvent dans les airs?

II

Ô joie! ô triomphe! ô mystère!
Il est né, l'Enfant glorieux,
L'Ange que promit à la terre
Un Martyr partant pour les cieux!
L'avenir voilé se révèle.
Salut à la flamme nouvelle
Qui ranime l'ancien flambeau!
Honneur à ta première aurore,
Ô jeune lys qui viens d'éclore,
Tendre fleur qui sors d'un tombeau!

C'est Dieu qui l'a donné, le Dieu de la prière:
La cloche, balancée aux tours du sanctuaire,
Comme aux jours du repos, y rappelle nos pas.
C'est Dieu qui l'a donné, le Dieu de la victoire! -
Chez les vieux martyrs de la gloire
Les canons ont tonné, comme au jour des combats.

Ce bruit, si cher à ton oreille,
Joint aux voix des temples bénis,
N'a-t-il donc rien qui te réveille,
Ô toi qui dors à Saint-Denis?
Lève-toi! Henri doit te plaire
Au sein du berceau populaire;
Accours! ô père triomphant!
Enivre sa lèvre trompée,
Et viens voir si ta grande épée
Pèse aux mains du royal enfant.

Hélas! il est absent, il est au sein des justes.
Sans doute, en ce moment, de ses aïeux augustes
Le cortège vers lui s'avance consolé:
Car il rendit, mourant sous des coups parricides,
Un héros à leurs tombes vides,
Une race de rois à leur trône isolé.

Parmi tous ces nobles fantômes,
Qu'il élève un front couronné,
Qu'il soit fier dans les saints royaumes,
Le père du roi nouveau-né!
Une race longue et sublime
Sort de l'immortelle victime;
Tel un fleuve mystérieux,
Fils d'un mont frappé du tonnerre,
De son cours fécondant la terre,
Cache sa source dans les cieux!

Honneur au rejeton qui deviendra la tige!
Henri, nouveau Joas, sauvé par un prodige,
À l'ombre de l'autel croîtra vainqueur du sort;
Un jour, de ses vertus notre France embellie,
À ses soeurs, comme Cornélie,
Dira: Voilà mon fils, c'est mon plus beau trésor.

III

Ô toi, de ma pitié profonde
Reçois l’hommage solennel,
Humble objet des regards du monde
Privé du regard paternel!
Puisses-tu, né dans la souffrance,
Et de ta mère et de la France
Consoler la longue douleur!
Que le bras divin t’environne,
Et puisse, ô Bourbon! la couronne
Pour toi ne pas être un malheur!

Oui, souris, orphelin, aux larmes de ta mère!
Écarte, en te jouant, ce crêpe funéraire
Qui voile ton berceau des couleurs du cercueil;
Chasse le noir passé qui nous attriste encore;
Sois à nos yeux comme une aurore!
Rends le jour et la joie à notre ciel en deuil.

Ivre d’espoir, ton roi lui-même,
Consacrant le jour où tu nais,
T’impose, avant le saint baptême,
Le baptême du Béarnais.
La Veuve t’offre à l’Orpheline;
Vers toi, conduit par l’Héroïne,
Vient ton Aïeul en cheveux blancs;
Et la foule, bruyante et fière,
Se presse à ce Louvre, où naguère,
Muette, elle entrait à pas lents.

Guerriers, peuple, chantez; Bordeaux, lève ta tête,
Cité qui, la première, aux jours de la conquête,
Rendue aux fleurs de lys, as proclamé ta foi.
Et toi, que le martyr aux combats eût guidée,
Sors de ta douleur, ô Vendée!
Un roi naît pour la France, un soldat naît pour toi.

IV

Rattachez la nef à la rive:
La Veuve reste parmi nous,
Et de sa patrie adoptive
Le ciel lui semble enfin plus doux.
L'espoir à la France l'enchaîne;
Aux champs où fut frappé le chêne
Dieu fait croître un frêle roseau.
L'amour retient l'humble colombe;
Il faut prier sur une tombe,
Il faut veiller sur un berceau.

Dis, qu'irais-tu chercher au lieu qui te vit naître,
Princesse? Parthénope outrage son vieux maître:
L'étranger, qu'attiraient des bords exempts d'hivers,
Voit Palerme en fureur, voit Messine en alarmes,
Et, plaignant la Sicile en armes,
De ce funèbre Éden fuit les sanglantes mers!

Mais que les deux Volcans s'éveillent!
Que le souffle du Dieu jaloux
Des sombres géants qui sommeillent
Rallume enfin l'ardent courroux;
Devant les flots brûlants des laves,
Que seront ces hautains esclaves,
Ces chefs d'un jour, ces grands soldats?
Courage! ô vous, vainqueurs sublimes! -
Tandis que vous marchez aux crimes,
La terre tremble sous vos pas!

Reste au sein des français, ô fille de Sicile!
Ne fuis pas, pour des bords d'où le bonheur s'exile,
Une terre où le lys se relève immortel;
Où du peuple et des rois l'union salutaire
N'est point cet hymen adultère

Du trône et des partis, des camps et de l’autel.

V

Nous, ne craignons plus les tempêtes!
Bravons l’horizon menaçant:
Les forfaits qui chargeaient nos têtes
Sont rachetés par l’innocent!
Quand les nochers, dans la tourmente,
Jadis voyaient l’onde écumante
Entrouvrir leur frêle vaisseau,
Sûrs de la clémence éternelle,
Pour sauver la nef criminelle
Ils y suspendaient un berceau.

ODE NEUVIÈME

LE BAPTÊME DU DUC DE BORDEAUX

Sinite parvulos venire ad me. - Venerunt reges. ÉVANGILE.

I

“ Oh! disaient les peuples du monde,
Les derniers temps sont-ils venus?
Nos pas, dans une nuit profonde,
Suivent des chemins inconnus.
Où va-t-on? dans la nuit perfide,
Quel est ce fanal qui nous guide,
Tous courbés sous un bras de fer?
Est-il propice? est-il funeste?
Est-ce la colonne céleste?
Est-ce une flamme de l’enfer?

“ Les tribus des chefs se divisent;
Les troupeaux chassent les pasteurs;
Et les sceptres des rois se brisent
Devant les faisceaux des préteurs.
Les trônes tombent; l’autel croule;
Les factions naissent en foule
Sur les bords des deux Océans;
Et les ambitions serviles,
Qui dormaient comme des reptiles,
Se lèvent comme des géants.

“ Ah! malheur! nous avons fait gloire,
Hélas! d’attentats inouïs,
Tels qu’en cherche en vain la mémoire
Dans les siècles évanouis.
Malheur! tous nos forfaits l’appellent,
Tous les signes nous le révèlent,

Le jour des arrêts solennels.
L’homme est digne enfin des abîmes;
Et rien ne manque à ses longs crimes
Que les châtiments éternels. “

Le Très-Haut a pris leur défense,
Lorsqu’ils craignaient son abandon;
L’homme peut épuiser l’offense,
Dieu n’épuise pas le pardon.
Il mène au repentir l’impie;
Lui-même, pour nous, il expie
L’oubli des lois qu’il nous donna;
Pour lui seul il reste sévère;
C’est la Victime du Calvaire
Qui fléchit le Dieu du Sina!

II
Par un autre berceau sa main nous sauve encore!
Le monde du bonheur n’ose entrevoir l’aurore,
Quoique Dieu des méchants ait puni les défis,
Et, troublant leurs conseils, dispersant leurs phalanges,
Nous ait donné l’un de ses Anges,
Comme aux antiques jours il nous donna son Fils.

Tel, lorsqu’il sort vivant du gouffre de ténèbres,
Le Prophète voit fuir les visions funèbres!
La terre est sous ses pas, le jour luit à ses yeux;
Mais lui, tout ébloui de la flamme éternelle,
Longtemps à sa vue infidèle
La lueur de l’enfer voile l’éclat des cieux.

Peuples, ne doutez pas! chantez votre victoire.
Un sauveur naît, vêtu de puissance et de gloire;
Il réunit le glaive et le sceptre en faisceau;
Des leçons du malheur naîtront nos jours prospères,
Car de soixante Rois, ses pères,
Les ombres sans cercueils veillent sur son berceau!

Son nom seul a calmé nos tempêtes civiles;
Ainsi qu’un bouclier il a couvert les villes.
La révolte et la haine ont déserté nos murs.
Tel du jeune lion, qui lui-même s’ignore,
Le premier cri, paisible encore,
Fait de l’antre royal fuir cent monstres impurs.

III

Quel est cet Enfant débile
Qu’on porte aux sacrés parvis?
Toute une foule immobile
Le suit de ses yeux ravis;
Son front est nu, ses mains tremblent,
Ses pieds, que des noeuds rassemblent,
N’ont point commencé de pas;
La faiblesse encor l’enchaîne;
Son regard ne voit qu’à peine
Et sa voix ne parle pas.

C’est un Roi parmi les hommes;
En entrant dans le saint lieu,
Il devient ce que nous sommes;
C’est un homme aux pieds de Dieu.
Cet enfant est notre joie;
Dieu pour sauveur nous l’envoie;
Sa loi l’abaisse aujourd’hui.
Les Rois, qu’arme son tonnerre,
Sont tout par lui sur la terre,
Et ne sont rien devant lui.

Que tout tremble et s’humilie.
L’orgueil mortel parle en vain;
Le Lion royal se plie
Au joug de l’Agneau divin.
Le Père, entouré d’étoiles,

Vers l’Enfant, faible et sans voiles,
Descend, sur les vents porté;
L’Esprit-Saint de feux l’inonde;
Il n’est encor né qu’au monde,
Qu’il naisse à l’éternité!

Marie, aux rayons modestes,
Heureuse et priant toujours,
Guide les Vierges célestes
Vers son vieux temple aux deux tours.
Toutes les saintes Armées,
Parmi les soleils semées,
Suivent son char triomphant;
La Charité les devance,
La Foi brille, et l’Espérance
S’assied près de l’humble Enfant!

IV

Jourdain! te souvient-il de ce qu’ont vu tes rives?
Naguère un pèlerin près de tes eaux captives
Vint s’asseoir et pleura, pareil en sa ferveur
À ces Preux qui jadis, terrible et saint cortège,
Ravirent au joug sacrilège
Ton onde baptismale et le tombeau sauveur!

Ce chrétien avait vu, dans la France usurpée,
Trône, autel, chartes, lois, tomber sous une épée,
Les vertus sans honneur, les forfaits impunis;
Et lui, des vieux, croisés cherchait l’ombre sublime,
Et, s’exilant près de Solime,
Aux lieux où Dieu mourut pleurait ses Rois bannis!

L’eau du saint fleuve emplit sa gourde voyageuse;
Il partit; il revit notre rive orageuse,
Ignorant quel bonheur attendait son retour,
Et qu’à l’enfant des rois, du fond de l’Arabie,

Il apportait, nouveau Tobie,
Le remède divin qui rend l'aveugle au jour.

Qu'il soit fier dans ses flots, le fleuve des prophètes!
Peuples, l'eau du salut est présente à nos fêtes;
Le ciel sur cet Enfant a placé sa faveur;
Qu'il reçoive les eaux que reçut Dieu lui-même;
Et qu'à l'onde de son baptême,
Le monde rassuré reconnaisse un Sauveur!

À vous, comme à Clovis, prince, Dieu se révèle.
Soyez du temple saint la colonne nouvelle.
Votre âme en vain du lys enlace la blancheur;
Quittez l'orgueil du rang, l'orgueil de l'innocence;
Dieu vous offre, dans sa puissance,
La piscine du pauvre et la croix du pécheur.

V

L'Enfant, quand du Seigneur sur lui brille l'aurore,
Ignore le martyre et sourit à la croix;
Mais un autre baptême, hélas! attend encore
Le front infortuné des Rois. -
Des jours viendront, jeune homme, où ton âme troublée,
Du fardeau d'un peuple accablée,
Frémira d'un effroi pieux,
Quand l'évêque sur toi répandra l'huile austère,
Formidable présent qu'aux maîtres de la terre
La colombe apporta des cieux.

Alors, ô Roi chrétien! au Seigneur sois semblable;
Sache être grand par toi, comme il est grand par lui;
Car le sceptre devient un fardeau redoutable
Dès qu'on veut s'en faire un appui.
Un vrai Roi sur sa tête unit toutes les gloires;
Et si, dans ses justes victoires,
Par la mort il est arrêté,

Il voit, comme Bayard, une croix dans son glaive,
Et ne fait, quand le ciel à la terre l’enlève,
Que changer d’immortalité!

À LA MUSE

Je vais, ô Muse! où tu m’envoies!
Je ne sais que verser des pleurs;
Mais qu’il soit fidèle à leurs joies,
Ce luth fidèle à leurs douleurs!
Ma voix, dans leur récente histoire,
N’a point, sur des tons de victoire,
Appris à louer le Seigneur.
Ô Rois, victimes couronnées!
Lorsqu’on chante vos destinées,
On sait mal chanter le bonheur.

ODE DIXIÈME

VISION

à M. le comte Gaspard de Pons

7. Quia defecimus in irâ tuâ, et in furore tuÔ turbati sumus;
8. Posuisti iniquitates nostras in conspectu tuo, sæculum nostrum in illuminatione vultus tui;
9. Quoniam omnes dies nostri defecerunt, et in ira tuâ defecimus. PSAUME LXXXIX.

Parce que nous sommes tombés dans votre colère, et que nous avons été troublés dans votre fureur;
Vous avez placé nos iniquités en votre présence, et notre siècle dans la lumière de votre face;
Puisque tous nos jours ont failli, et que nous sommes tombés dans votre colère!

Voici ce qu'ont dit les Prophètes,
Aux jours où ces hommes pieux
Voyaient en songe sur leurs têtes
L'Esprit-Saint descendre des cieux:
“ Dès qu'un siècle, éteint pour le monde,
Redescend dans la nuit profonde,
De gloire ou de honte chargé,
Il va répondre et comparaître
Devant le Dieu qui le fit naître,
Seul juge qui n'est pas jugé. “

Or écoutez, fils de la terre,
Vil peuple à la tombe appelé,
Ce qu'en un rêve solitaire
La vision m'a révélé. -
C'était dans la cité flottante,
De joie et de gloire éclatante,

Où le jour n’a pas de soleil,
D’où sortit la première aurore,
Et d’où résonneront encore
Les clairons du dernier réveil!

Adorant l’Essence inconnue,
Les Saints, les Martyrs glorieux
Contemplaient, sous l’ardente nue,
Le Triangle mystérieux!
Près du trône où dort le tonnerre
Parut un Spectre centenaire
Par l’Ange des Français conduit;
Et l’Ange, vêtu d’un long voile,
Était pareil à l’humble étoile
Qui mène au ciel la sombre nuit.

Dans les cieux et dans les abîmes
Une Voix alors s’entendit,
Qui, jusque parmi ses victimes,
Fit trembler l’Archange maudit.
Le char des Séraphins fidèles,
Semé d’yeux, brillant d’étincelles,
S’arrêta sur son triple essieu;
Et la roue, aux flammes bruyantes,
Et les quatre ailes tournoyantes
Se turent au souffle de Dieu.

LA VOIX

Déjà du Livre séculaire
La page a dix-sept fois tourné;
Le gouffre attend que ma colère
Te pardonne ou t’ait condamné!
Approche: - je tiens la balance:
Te voilà nu dans ma présence,
Siècle innocent ou criminel.
Faut-il que ton souvenir meure?

Réponds: un siècle est comme une heure
Devant mon regard éternel.

LE SIÈCLE

J’ai, dans mes pensers magnanimes
Tout divisé, tout réuni;
J’ai soumis à mes lois sublimes
Et l’Immuable et l’Infini;
J’ai pesé tes volontés mêmes...

LA VOIX

Fantôme, arrête! tes blasphèmes
Troublent mes Saints d’un juste effroi;
Sors de ton orgueilleuse ivresse;
Doute aujourd’hui de ta sagesse;
Car tu ne peux douter de moi.

Fier de tes aveugles sciences,
N’as-tu pas ri, dans tes clameurs,
Et de mon être et des croyances
Qui gardent les lois et les moeurs?
De la mort souillant le mystère,
N’as-tu pas effrayé la terre
D’un crime aux humains inconnu?
Des Rois, avant les temps célestes,
N’as-tu pas réveillé les restes?

LE SIÈCLE

Ô Dieu! votre jour est venu!

LA VOIX

Pleure, ô Siècle! D’abord timide,
L’erreur grandit comme un géant;

L’athée invite au régicide;
Le chaos est fils du néant.
J’aimais une terre lointaine;
Un Roi bon, une belle Reine,
Conduisaient son peuple joyeux,
Je bénissais leurs jours augustes
Réponds, qu’as-tu fait de ces justes?

LE SIÈCLE

Seigneur, je les vois dans vos cieux.

LA VOIX

Oui, l’épouvante enfin t’éclaire!
C’est moi qui marque leur séjour
Aux réprouvés de ma colère,
Comme aux élus de mon amour.
Qu’un rayon tombe de ma face,
Soudain tout s’anime ou s’efface,
Tout naît ou retourne au tombeau.
Mon souffle, propice ou terrible,
Allume l’incendie horrible,
Comme il éteint le pur flambeau!

Que l’oubli muet te dévore!

LE SIÈCLE

Seigneur, votre bras s’est levé;
Seigneur, le maudit vous implore!

LA VOIX

Non; tais-toi, Siècle réprouvé!

LE SIÈCLE

Eh bien donc! l’Âge qui va naître
Absoudra mes forfaits peut-être
Par des forfaits plus odieux! “

Ici gémit l’humble Espérance,
Et le bel Ange de la France
De son aile voila ses yeux.

LA VOIX

Va, ma main t’ouvre les abîmes;
Un siècle nouveau prend l’essor,
Mais, loin de t’absoudre, ses crimes,
Maudit! t’accuseront encor. “

Et, comme l’ouragan qui gronde
Chasse à grand bruit jusque sur l’onde
Le flocon vers les mers jeté;
Longtemps la Voix inexorable
Poursuit le Siècle coupable,
Qui tombait dans l’Éternité.

ODE ONZIÈME

BUONAPARTE

De Deo.

I

Quand la terre engloutit les cités qui la couvrent;
Que le vent sème au loin un poison voyageur;
Quand l'ouragan mugit; quand des monts brûlants s'ouvrent;
C'est le réveil du Dieu vengeur.
Et si, lassant enfin les clémences célestes,
Le monde à ces signes funestes
Ose répondre en les bravant,
Un homme alors, choisi par la main qui foudroie,
Des aveugles fléaux ressaisissant la proie,
Paraît, comme un fléau vivant!

Parfois, élus maudits de la fureur suprême,
Entre les nations des hommes sont passés,
Triomphateurs longtemps armés de l'anathème, -
Par l'anathème renversés!
De l'esprit de Nemrod héritiers formidables,
Ils ont sur les peuples coupables
Régné par la flamme et le fer;
Et dans leur gloire impie, en désastres féconde,
Ces envoyés du ciel sont apparus au monde,
Comme s'ils venaient de l'enfer!

II

Naguère, de lois affranchie,
Quand la Reine des nations
Descendit de la monarchie,
Prostituée aux factions,

On vit, dans ce chaos fétide,
Naître de l’hydre régicide
Un despote, empereur d’un camp.
Telle souvent la mer qui gronde
Dévore une plaine féconde
Et vomit un sombre volcan.

D’abord, troublant du Nil les hautes catacombes,
Il vint, chef populaire, y combattre en courant,
Comme pour insulter des tyrans dans leurs tombes,
Sous sa tente de conquérant. -
Il revint pour régner sur ses compagnons d’armes.
En vain l’auguste France en larmes
Se promettait des jours plus beaux;
Quand des vieux pharaons il foulait la couronne,
Sourd à tant de néant, ce n’était qu’un grand trône
Qu’il rêvait sur leurs grands tombeaux!

Un sang royal teignit sa pourpre usurpatrice;
Un guerrier fut frappé par ce guerrier sans foi;
L’anarchie, à Vincenne, admira son complice, -
Au Louvre elle adora son roi.
Il fallut presque un Dieu pour consacrer cet homme.
Le Prêtre-Monarque de Rome
Vint bénir son front menaçant;
Car, sans doute en secret effrayé de lui-même,
Il voulait recevoir son sanglant diadème
Des mains d’où le pardon descend.

III

Lorsqu’il veut, le Dieu secourable,
Qui livre au méchant le pervers,
Brise le jouet formidable
Dont il tourmentait l’univers.
Celui qu’un instant il seconde
Se dit le seul maître du monde;

Fier, il s’endort dans son néant;
Enfin, bravant la loi commune,
Quand il croit tenir sa fortune,
Le fantôme échappe au géant.

IV

Dans la nuit des forfaits, dans l’éclat des victoires,
Cet homme, ignorant Dieu qui l’avait envoyé,
De cités en cités promenant ses prétoires,
Marchait, sur sa gloire appuyé.
Sa dévorante armée avait, dans son passage,
Asservi les fils de Pélage
Devant les fils de Galgacus;
Et, quand dans leurs foyers il ramenait ses braves,
Aux fêtes qu’il vouait à ces vainqueurs esclaves,
Il invitait les rois vaincus!

Dix empires conquis devinrent ses provinces.
Il ne fut pas content dans son orgueil fatal. -
Il ne voulait dormir qu’en une cour de princes,
Sur un trône continental!
Ses aigles, qui volaient sous vingt cieux parsemées,
Au nord, de ses longues armées
Guidèrent l’immense appareil;
Mais là parut l’écueil de sa course hardie.
Les peuples sommeillaient: un sanglant incendie
Fut l’aurore du grand réveil!

Il tomba Roi; - puis, dans sa route,
Il voulut, fantôme ennemi,
Se relever, afin sans doute
De ne plus tomber à demi.
Alors, loin de sa tyrannie,
Pour qu’une effrayante harmonie
Frappât l’orgueil anéanti,
On jeta ce captif suprême

Sur un rocher, débris lui-même
De quelque ancien monde englouti!

Là, se refroidissant comme un torrent de lave,
Gardé par ses vaincus, chassé de l'univers,
Ce reste d'un tyran, en s'éveillant esclave,
N'avait fait que changer de fers.
Des trônes restaurés écoutant la fanfare,
Il brillait de loin comme un phare,
Montrant l'écueil au nautonier.
Il mourut. - Quand ce bruit éclata dans nos villes,
Le monde respira dans les fureurs civiles,
Délivré de son prisonnier!

Ainsi l'orgueil s'égare en sa marche éclatante,
Colosse né d'un souffle et qu'un regard abat. -
Il fit du glaive un sceptre, et du trône une tente.
Tout son règne fut un combat.
Du fléau qu'il portait lui-même tributaire,
Il tremblait, prince de la terre;
Soldat, on vantait sa valeur.
Retombé dans son coeur comme dans un abîme,
Il passa par la gloire, il passa par le crime,
Et n'est arrivé qu'au malheur.

V

Peuples, qui poursuivez d'hommages
Les victimes et les bourreaux,
Laissez-le fuir seul dans les âges; -
Ce ne sont point là les héros!
Ces faux dieux, que leur siècle encense,
Dont l'avenir hait la puissance,
Vous trompent dans votre sommeil;
Tels que ces nocturnes aurores
Où passent de grands météores,
Mais que ne suit pas le soleil.

LIVRE DEUXIÈME

Nos canimus surdis.

ODE PREMIÈRE

À MES

ODES

... Tentanda via est qua me quoque possim. Tollere humo, victorque virum volitare per ora. VIRGILE.

I

Mes odes, c’est l’instant de déployer vos ailes.
Cherchez d’un même essor les voûtes immortelles;
Le moment est propice... Allons!
La foudre en grondant vous éclaire,
Et la tempête populaire
Se livre au vol des aquilons.

Pour qui rêva longtemps le jour du sacrifice,
Oui, l’heure où vient l’orage est une heure propice;
Mais moi, sous un ciel calme et pur,
Si j’avais, fortuné génie,
Dans la lumière et l’harmonie
Vu flotter vos robes d’azur;

Si nul profanateur n’eût touché vos offrandes;
Si nul reptile impur sur vos chastes guirlandes,
N’eût traîné ses noeuds flétrissants;
Si la terre, à votre passage,
N’eût exhalé d’autre nuage
Que la vapeur d’un doux encens;

J’aurais béni la muse et chanté ma victoire.
J’aurais dit au poète, élancé vers la gloire:
“ Ô ruisseau! qui cherches les mers,
Coule vers l’océan du monde
Sans craindre d’y mêler ton onde;
Car ses flots ne sont pas amers. “

II

Heureux qui de l’oubli ne fuit point les ténèbres!
Heureux qui ne sait pas combien d’échos funèbres
Le bruit d’un nom fait retentir!
Et si la gloire est inquiète!
Et si la palme du poète
Est une palme de martyr!

Sans craindre le chasseur, l’orage ou le vertige,
Heureux l’oiseau qui plane et l’oiseau qui voltige!
Heureux qui ne veut rien tenter!
Heureux qui suit ce qu’il doit suivre!
Heureux qui ne vit que pour vivre,
Qui ne chante que pour chanter!

III

Vous! ô mes chants, adieu! cherchez votre fumée!
Bientôt, sollicitant ma porte refermée,
Vous pleurerez, au sein du bruit,
Ce temps où, cachés sous des voiles,
Vous étiez pareils aux étoiles
Qui ne brillent que pour la nuit;

Quand, tour à tour, prenant et rendant la balance,
Quelques amis, le soir, vous jugeaient en silence,
Poètes, par la lyre émus,
Qui fuyaient la ville sonore,
Et transplantaient les fleurs d’Isaure
Dans les jardins d’Académus.

Comme un ange porté sur ses ailes dorées,
Vous veniez, murmurant des paroles sacrées;
Pour abattre et pour relever,
Vous disiez, dans votre délire,
Tout ce que peut chanter la lyre,
Tout ce que l’âme peut rêver.

Disputant un prix noble en une sainte arène,
Vous laissiez tout l'Olympe aux fils de l'Hippocrène,
Rivaux de votre ardent essor;
Ainsi que l'amant d'Atalante,
Pour rendre leur course plus lente,
Vous leur jetiez les pommes d'or.

On vous voyait, suivis de sylphes et de fées,
Liant d'anciens faisceaux à nos jeunes trophées,
Chanter les camps et leurs travaux,
Ou pousser des cris prophétiques,
Ou demander aux temps gothiques
Leurs vieux contes, toujours nouveaux.

Souvent vos luths pieux consolaient les couronnes,
Et du haut du trépied vous défendiez les trônes;
Souvent, appuis de l'innocent,
Comme un tribut expiatoire,
Vous mêliez, pour fléchir l'histoire,
Une larme à des flots de sang.

IV

C'en est fait maintenant, pareils aux hirondelles,
Partez; qu'un même but vous retrouve fidèles.
Et moi, pourvu qu'en vos combats
De votre foi nul coeur ne doute,
Et qu'une âme en secret écoute
Ce que vous lui direz tout bas;

Pourvu, quand sur les flots en vingt courants contraires
L'ouragan chassera vos voiles téméraires,
Qu'un seul ami, plaignant mon sort,
Vous voyant battus de l'orage,
Pose un fanal sur le rivage,
S'afflige, et vous souhaite un port;

D’un oeil moins désolé je verrai vos naufrages.
Mais le temps presse, allez! rassemblez vos courages.
Il faut combattre les méchants.
C’est un sceptre aussi que la lyre!
Dieu, dont nos âmes sont l’empire,
A mis un pouvoir dans les chants.

V

Le poète, inspiré lorsque la terre ignore,
Ressemble à ces grands monts que la nouvelle aurore
Dore avant tous à son réveil,
Et qui, longtemps vainqueurs de l’ombre,
Gardent jusque dans la nuit sombre
Le dernier rayon du soleil.

ODE DEUXIÈME

L'HISTOIRE

Ferrea vox. VIRGILE.

I

Le sort des nations, comme une mer profonde,
A ses écueils cachés et ses gouffres mouvants.
Aveugle qui ne voit, dans les destins du monde,
Que le combat des flots sous la lutte des vents!

Un souffle immense et fort domine ces tempêtes.
Un rayon du ciel plonge à travers cette nuit.
Quand l'homme aux cris de mort mêle le cri des fêtes,
Une secrète voix parle dans ce vain bruit.

Les siècles tour à tour, ces gigantesques frères,
Différents par leur sort, semblables dans leurs voeux,
Trouvent un. but pareil par des routes contraires,
Et leurs fanaux divers brillent des mêmes feux.

II

Muse, il n'est point de temps que tes regards n'embrassent;
Tu suis dans l'avenir leur cercle solennel;
Car les jours, et les ans, et les siècles ne tracent
Qu'un sillon passager dans le fleuve éternel.

Bourreaux, n'en doutez pas; n'en doutez pas, victimes!
Elle porte en tous lieux son immortel flambeau,
Plane au sommet des monts, plonge au fond des abîmes,
Et souvent fonde un temple où manquait un tombeau.

Elle apporte leur palme aux héros qui succombent,

Du char des conquérants brise le frêle essieu,
Marche en rêvant au bruit des empires qui tombent,
Et dans tous les chemins montre le pas de Dieu!

Du vieux palais des temps elle pose le faîte;
Les siècles à sa voix viennent se réunir;
Sa main, comme un captif honteux de sa défaite,
Traîne tout le passé jusque dans l’avenir.

Recueillant les débris du monde en ses naufrages,
Son oeil de mers en mers suit le vaste vaisseau,
Et sait tout voir ensemble, aux deux bornes des âges,
Et la première tombe et le dernier berceau!

ODE TROISIÈME

LA BANDE NOIRE

Voyageur obscur, mais religieux, au travers des ruines de la patrie... je priais. CH. NODIER.

I

“ Ô murs! ô créneaux! ô tourelles!
Remparts! fossés aux ponts mouvants!
Lourds faisceaux de colonnes frêles!
Fiers châteaux! modestes couvents!
Cloîtres poudreux, salles antiques,
Où gémissaient les saints cantiques,
Où riaient les banquets joyeux!
Lieux où le coeur met ses chimères!
Églises où priaient nos mères,
Tours où combattaient nos aïeux!

“ Parvis où notre orgueil s’enflamme!
Maisons de Dieu! manoirs des rois!
Temples que gardait l’oriflamme,
Palais que protégeait la croix!
Réduits d’amour! arcs de victoires!
Vous qui témoignez de nos gloires,
Vous qui proclamez nos grandeurs!
Chapelles, donjons, monastères!
Murs voilés de tant de mystères!
Murs brillants de tant de splendeurs!

“ Ô débris! ruines de France
Que notre amour en vain défend,
Séjours de joie ou de souffrance,
Vieux monuments d’un peuple enfant!
Restes, sur qui le temps s’avance!

De l’Armorique à la Provence,
Vous que l’honneur eut pour abri!
Arceaux tombés! voûtes brisées!
Vestiges des races passées!
Lit sacré d’un fleuve tari!

“ Oui, je crois, quand je vous contemple,
Des héros entendre l’adieu;
Souvent, dans les débris du temple,
Brille comme un rayon du dieu.
Mes pas errants cherchent la trace
De ces fiers guerriers dont l’audace
Faisait un trône d’un pavois;
Je demande, oubliant les heures,
Au vieil écho de leurs demeures
Ce qui lui reste de leur voix.

“ Souvent ma muse aventurière,
S’enivrant de rêves soudains,
Ceignit la cuirasse guerrière
Et l’écharpe des paladins;
S’armant d’un fer rongé de rouille,
Elle déroba leur dépouille
Aux lambris du long corridor;
Et, vers des régions nouvelles,
Pour hâter son coursier sans ailes,
Osa chausser l’éperon d’or.

“ J’aimais le manoir dont la route
Cache dans les bois ses détours,
Et dont la porte sous la voûte
S’enfonce entre deux larges tours;
J’aimais l’essaim d’oiseaux funèbres
Qui sur les toits, dans les ténèbres,
Vient grouper ses noirs bataillons,
Ou, levant des voix sépulcrales,
Tournoie en mobiles spirales

Autour des légers pavillons.

“ J’aimais la tour, verte de lierre,
Qu’ébranle la cloche du soir;
Les marches de la croix de pierre
Où le voyageur vient s’asseoir;
L’église veillant sur les tombes,
Ainsi qu’on voit d’humbles colombes
Couver les fruits de leur amour;
La citadelle crénelée,
Ouvrant ses bras sur la vallée,
Comme les ailes d’un vautour.

“ J’aimais le beffroi des alarmes;
La cour où sonnaient les clairons;
La salle où, déposant leurs armes,
Se rassemblaient les hauts barons;
Les vitraux éclatants ou sombres;
Le caveau froid où, dans les ombres,
Sous des murs que le temps abat,
Les preux, sourds au vent qui murmure,
Dorment, couchés dans leur armure,
Comme la veille d’un combat.

“ Aujourd’hui, parmi les cascades,
Sous le dôme des bois touffus,
Les piliers, les sveltes arcades,
Hélas! penchent leurs fronts confus;
Les forteresses écroulées,
Par la chèvre errante foulées,
Courbent leurs têtes de granit;
Restes qu’on aime et qu’on vénère!
L’aigle à leurs tours suspend son aire,
L’hirondelle y cache son nid.

“ Comme cet oiseau de passage,
Le poète, dans tous les temps,

Chercha, de voyage en voyage,
Les ruines et le printemps.
Ces débris, chers à la patrie,
Lui parlent de chevalerie;
La gloire habite leurs néants;
Les héros peuplent ces décombres; -
Si ce ne sont plus que des ombres,
Ce sont des ombres de géants!

“ Ô Français! respectons ces restes!
Le ciel bénit les fils pieux
Qui gardent, dans leurs jours funestes,
L’héritage de leurs aïeux.
Comme une gloire dérobée,
Comptons chaque pierre tombée;
Que le temps suspende sa loi;
Rendons les Gaules à la France,
Les souvenirs à l’espérance,
Les vieux palais au jeune roi!... “

II

— Tais-toi, lyre! Silence, ô lyre du poète!
Ah! laisse en paix tomber ces débris glorieux
Au gouffre où nul ami, dans sa douleur muette,
Ne les suivra longtemps des yeux!
Témoins que les vieux temps ont laissés dans notre âge,
Gardiens d’un passé qu’on outrage,
Ah! fuyez ce siècle ennemi!
Croulez, restes sacrés, ruines solennelles!
Pourquoi veiller encor, dernières sentinelles
D’un camp, pour jamais endormi?

Ou plutôt, - que du temps la marche soit hâtée.
Quoi donc! n’avons-nous point parmi nous ces héros
Qui chassèrent les rois de leur tombe insultée,
Que les morts ont eu pour bourreaux?

Honneur à ces vaillants que notre orgueil renomme!
Gloire à ces braves! Sparte et Rome
Jamais n’ont vu d’exploits plus beaux!
Gloire! ils ont triomphé de ces funèbres pierres,
Ils ont brisé des os, dispersé des poussières!
Gloire! ils ont proscrit des tombeaux!

Quel Dieu leur inspira ces travaux intrépides?
Tout joyeux du néant par leurs soins découvert,
Peut-être ils ne voulaient que des sépulcres vides,
Comme ils n’avaient qu’un ciel désert?
Ou, domptant les respects dont la mort nous fascine,
Leur main peut-être, en sa racine,
Frappait quelque auguste arbrisseau;
Et, courant en espoir à d’autres hécatombes,
Leur sublime courage, en attaquant ces tombes,
S’essayait à vaincre un berceau?...

Qu’ils viennent maintenant, que leur foule s’élance,
Qu’ils se rassemblent tous, ces soldats aguerris!
Voilà des ennemis dignes de leur vaillance:
Des ruines et des débris.
Qu’ils entrent sans effroi sous ces portes ouvertes;
Qu’ils assiègent ces tours désertes;
Un tel triomphe est sans dangers.
Mais qu’ils n’éveillent pas les preux de ces murailles;
Ces ombres qui jadis ont gagné des batailles
Les prendraient pour des étrangers!

Ce siècle entre les temps veut être solitaire.
Allons! frappez ces murs, des ans encor vainqueurs.
Non, qu’il ne reste rien des vieux jours sur la terre;
Il n’en reste rien dans nos coeurs.
Cet héritage immense, où nos gloires s’entassent,
Pour les nouveaux peuples qui passent,
Est trop pesant à soutenir;
Il retarde leurs pas, qu’un même élan ordonne.

Que nous fait le passé? Du temps que Dieu nous donne
Nous ne gardons que l’avenir.

Qu’on ne nous vante plus nos crédules ancêtres!
Ils voyaient leurs devoirs où nous voyons nos droits.
Nous avons nos vertus. Nous égorgeons les prêtres,
Et nous assassinons les rois. -
Hélas! il est trop vrai, l’antique honneur de France,
La Foi, soeur de l’humble Espérance,
Ont fui notre âge infortuné;
Des anciennes vertus le crime a pris la place;
Il cache leurs sentiers, comme la ronce efface
Le seuil d’un temple abandonné.

Quand de ses souvenirs la France dépouillée,
Hélas! aura perdu sa vieille majesté,
Lui disputant encor quelque pourpre souillée,
Ils riront de sa nudité!
Nous, ne profanons point cette mère sacrée;
Consolons sa gloire éplorée,
Chantons ses astres éclipsés.
Car notre jeune muse, affrontant l’anarchie,
Ne veut pas secouer sa bannière, blanchie
De la poudre des temps passés.

ODE QUATRIÈME

À MON PÈRE

Domestica facta. HORACE.

I

Quoi! toujours une lyre et jamais une épée!
Toujours d’un voile obscur ma vie enveloppée!
Point d’arène guerrière à mes pas éperdus!...
Mais jeter ma colère en strophes cadencées!
Consumer tous mes jours en stériles pensées,
Toute mon âme en chants perdus!

Et cependant, livrée aux tyrans qu’elle brave,
La Grèce aux rois chrétiens montre sa croix esclave!
Et l’Espagne à grands cris appelle nos exploits!
Car elle a de l’erreur connu l’ivresse amère;
Et, comme un orphelin qu’on arrache à sa mère,
Son vieux trône a perdu l’appui des vieilles lois.

Je rêve quelquefois que je saisis ton glaive,
Ô mon père! et je vais, dans l’ardeur qui m’enlève,
Suivre au pays du Cid nos glorieux soldats,
Ou faire dire aux fils de Sparte révoltée
Qu’un Français, s’il ne put rendre aux Grecs un Tyrtée,
Leur sut rendre un Léonidas.

Songes vains! Mais du moins ne crois pas que ma muse
Ait pour tes compagnons des chants quelle refuse,
Mon père! le poète est fidèle aux guerriers.
Des honneurs immortels il revêt la victoire;
Il chante sur leur vie; et l’amant de la gloire
Comme toutes les fleurs aime tous les lauriers.

II

Ô français! des combats la palme vous décore:
Courbés sous un tyran, vous étiez grands encore.
Ce Chef prodigieux par vous s’est élevé;
Son immortalité sur vos gloires se fonde,
Et rien n’effacera des annales du monde
Son nom, par vos glaives gravé.

Ajoutant une page à toutes les histoires,
Il attelait des Rois au char de ses victoires.
Dieu dans sa droite aveugle avait mis le trépas.
L’univers haletait sous son poids formidable;
Comme ce qu’un enfant a tracé sur le sable,
Les empires confus s’effaçaient sous ses pas.

Flatté par la fortune, il fut puni par elle.
L’imprudent confiait son destin vaste et frêle
À cet orgueil, toujours sur la terre expié.
Où donc, en sa folie, aspirait ta pensée,
Malheureux! qui voulais, dans ta route insensée,
Tous les trônes pour marchepied?

Son jour vint: on le vit, vers la France alarmée,
Fuir, traînant après lui comme un lambeau d’armée,
Chars, coursiers et soldats, pressés de toutes parts.
Tel, en son vol immense atteint du plomb funeste,
Le grand aigle, tombant de l’empire céleste,
Sème sa trace au loin de son plumage épars.

Qu’il dorme maintenant dans son lit de poussière!
On ne voit plus, autour de sa couche guerrière,
Vingt courtisans royaux épier son réveil;
L’Europe, si longtemps sous son bras palpitante,
Ne compte plus, assise aux portes de sa tente,
Les heures de son noir sommeil.

Reprenez, ô Français! votre gloire usurpée.
Assez dans tant d’exploits on n’a vu qu’une épée!
Assez de la louange il fatigua la voix!
Mesurez la hauteur du géant sur la poudre.
Quel aigle ne vaincrait, armé de votre foudre?
Et qui ne serait grand, du haut de vos pavois?

L’étoile de Brennus luit encor sur vos têtes.
La Victoire eut toujours des Français à ses fêtes.
La paix du monde entier dépend de leur repos.
Sur les pas des Moreau, des Condé, des Xaintrailles,
Ce peuple glorieux dans les champs de batailles
A toujours usé ses drapeaux.

III

Toi, mon père, ployant ta tente voyageuse,
Conte-nous les écueils de ta route orageuse,
Le soir, d’un cercle étroit en silence entouré.
Si d’opulents trésors ne sont plus ton partage,
Va, tes fils sont contents de ton noble héritage:
Le plus beau patrimoine est un nom révéré.

Pour moi, puisqu’il faut voir, et mon coeur en murmure,
Pendre aux lambris poudreux ta vénérable armure;
Puisque ton étendard dort près de ton foyer,
Et que, sous l’humble abri de quelques vieux portiques,
Le coursier, qui m’emporte aux luttes poétiques,
Laisse rouiller ton char guerrier;

Lègue à mon luth obscur l’éclat de ton épée;
Et du moins qu’à ma voix, de ta vie occupée,
Ce beau souvenir prête un charme solennel.
Je dirai tes combats aux muses attentives,
Comme un enfant joyeux, parmi ses soeurs craintives,
Traîne, débile et fier, le glaive paternel.

ODE CINQUIÈME

LE REPAS LIBRE

aux rois de l’Europe

Il y avait à Rome un antique usage: la veille de l’exécution des condamnés à mort, on leur donnait, à la porte de la prison, un repas public appelé le Repas libre. CHATEAUBRIAND, les Martyrs.

I

Lorsqu’à l’antique Olympe immolant l’Évangile,
Le préteur, appuyant d’un tribunal fragile
Ses temples odieux,
Livide, avait proscrit des chrétiens pleins de joie,
Victimes qu’attendaient, acharnés sur leur proie,
Les tigres et les dieux;

Rome offrait un festin à leur élite sainte;
Comme si, sur les bords du calice d’absinthe
Versant un peu de miel,
Sa pitié des martyrs ignorait l’énergie,
Et voulait consoler par une folle orgie
Ceux qu’appelait le ciel.

La pourpre recevait ces convives austères:
Le falerne écumait dans de larges cratères
Ceints de myrtes fleuris;
Le miel d’Hybla dorait les vins de Malvoisie,
Et, dans les vases d’or, les parfums de l’Asie
Lavaient leurs pieds meurtris.

Un art profond, mêlant les tributs des trois mondes,
Dévastait les forêts et dépeuplait les ondes
Pour ce libre repas;

On eût dit qu’épuisant la prodigue nature,
Sybaris conviait aux banquets d’Épicure
Ces élus du trépas.

Les tigres cependant s’agitaient dans leur chaîne;
Les léopards captifs de la sanglante arène
Cherchaient le noir chemin;
Et bientôt, moins cruels que les femmes de Rome,
Ces monstres s’étonnaient d’être applaudis par l’homme,
Baignés de sang humain.

On jetait aux lions les confesseurs, les prêtres.
Telle une main sénile à de dédaigneux maîtres
Offre un mets savoureux.
Lorsqu’au pompeux banquet siégeait leur saint conclave,
La pâle mort, debout, comme un muet esclave,
Se tenait derrière eux.

II

Ô rois! comme un festin s’écoule votre vie.
La coupe des grandeurs, que le vulgaire envie,
Brille dans votre main:
Mais au concert joyeux de la fête éphémère
Se mêle le cri sourd du tigre populaire
Qui vous attend demain!

ODE SIXIÈME

LA LIBERTÉ

Christus nos liberavit.

I

Quand l’impie a porté l’outrage au sanctuaire,
Tout fuit le temple en deuil, de splendeur dépouillé;
Mais le prêtre fidèle, à genoux sur la pierre,
Prodigue plus d’encens, répand plus de prière,
Courbe plus bas son front devant l’autel souillé.

II

Non, sur nos tristes bords, ô belle voyageuse!
Soeur auguste des rois, fille sainte de Dieu,
Liberté! pur flambeau de la gloire orageuse,
Non, je ne t’ai point dit adieu!
Car mon luth est de ceux dont les voix importunes
Pleurent toutes les infortunes,
Bénissent toutes les vertus,
Mes hymnes dévoués ne traînent point la chaîne
Du vil gladiateur, mais ils vont dans l’arène,
Du linceul des martyrs vêtus.

Dans l’âge où le coeur porte un souffle magnanime,
Où l’homme à l’avenir jette un défi sublime
Et montre à sa menace un sourire hardi;
Avant l’heure où périt la fleur de l’espérance,
Quand l’âme, lasse de souffrance,
Passe du frais matin à l’aride midi;

Je disais: “ Ô salut, vierge aimable et sévère!
Le monde, ô Liberté, suit tes nobles élans;

Comme une jeune épouse il t’aime, et te révère
Comme une aïeule en cheveux blancs!
Salut! tu sais, de l’âme écartant les entraves,
Descendre au cachot des esclaves
Plutôt qu’au palais des tyrans;
Aux concerts du Cédron mêlant ceux du Permesse,
Ta voix douce a toujours quelque illustre promesse
Qu’entendent les héros mourants. “

Je disais. Souriant à mon ivresse austère,
Je vis venir à moi les sages de la terre:
“ Voici la Liberté! plus de sang! plus de pleurs!
Les peuples réveillés s’inclinent devant elle.
Viens, ô son jeune amant! car voici l’Immortelle!... “
Et j’accourus, portant des palmes et des fleurs.

III

Ô Dieu! leur Liberté, c’était un monstre immense,
Se nommant Vérité parce qu’il était nu,
Balbutiant les cris de l’aveugle démence,
Et l’aveu du vice ingénu!
La fable eût pu donner à ses fureurs impies
L’ongle flétrissant des harpies
Et les mille bras d’AEgéon.
La dépouille de Rome ornait l’impure idole.
Le vautour remplaçait l’aigle à son Capitole.
L’Enfer peuplait son Panthéon.

Le Supplice hagard, la Torture écumante,
Lui conduisaient la Mort comme une heureuse amante.
Le monstre aux pieds foulait tout un peuple innocent;
Et les sages menteurs, aux paroles divines,
Soutenaient ses pas lourds, quand, parmi les ruines,
Il chancelait, ivre de sang!

Mêlant les lois de Sparte aux fêtes de Sodome,

Dans tous les attentats cherchant tous les fléaux,
Par le néant de l’âme il croyait grandir l’homme,
Et réveillait le vieux chaos.
Pour frapper leur couronne osant frapper leur tête,
Des rois, perdus dans la tempête,
Il brisait le trône avili;
Et, de l’éternité lui laissant quelque reste,
Daignait à Dieu, muet dans son exil céleste,
Offrir un échange d’oubli!

IV

Et les sages disaient: “ Gloire à notre sagesse!
Voici les jours de Rome et les temps de la Grèce!
Nations, de vos Rois brisez l’indigne frein.
Liberté! N’ayez plus de maîtres que vous-même:
Car nous tenons de toi notre pouvoir suprême,
Sois donc heureux et libre, ô peuple souverain!... “

Tyrans adulateurs! caresses mensongères!
Ô honte!... Asie, Afrique, où sont tous vos sultans?
Que leurs sceptres sont doux, et leurs chaînes légères,
Près de ces bourreaux insultants!
Rends gloire, ô foule abjecte en tes fers assoupie,
Au vil monstre d’Éthiopie,
Par un fer jaloux mutilé!
Gloire aux muets cachés au harem du Prophète!
Gloire à l’esclave obscur, qui leur livre sa tête,
Du moins en silence immolé!

Le sultan, sous des murs de jaspe et de porphyre,
Jetant à cent beautés un dédaigneux sourire,
Foule la pourpre et l’or, et l’ambre et le corail;
Et de loin, en passant, le peuple peut connaître
Où sont les plaisirs de son maître,
À la tête, qui pend aux portes du sérail.

Peuple heureux! éveillant la révolte hardie,
Parmi ses toits troublés, dans l’ombre, bien souvent
L’inquiet janissaire égare l’incendie
Sur l’aile bruyante du vent.
Peuple heureux! d’un vizir sa vie est le domaine;
Un poison, que la mort promène,
Flétrit son rivage infecté;
L’esclavage le courbe au joug de l’épouvante.
Peuple trois fois heureux! divins sages qu’on vante,
Il n’a pas votre Liberté!

V

Ô France! c’est au ciel qu’en nos jours de colère
A fui la Liberté, mère des saints exploits;
Il faut, pour réfléchir cet astre tutélaire,
Que, pur dans tous ses flots, le fleuve populaire
Coule à l’ombre du trône appuyé sur les lois.

Un dieu du joug du mal a délivré le monde.
Parmi les opprimés il vint prendre son rang;
Rois! - en voeux fraternels sa parole est féconde;
Peuple! - il fut pauvre, humble et souffrant.
La Liberté sourit à toutes les victimes,
À tous les dévouements sublimes,
Sauveurs des états secourus;
À ses yeux la Vendée est soeur des Thermopyles:
Et le même laurier, dans les mêmes asiles,
Unit Malesherbe et Codrus.

VI

Quand l’impie a porté l’outrage au sanctuaire,
Tout fuit le temple en deuil, de splendeur dépouillé;
Mais le prêtre fidèle, assis dans la poussière,
Prodigue plus d’encens, répand plus de prière,
Courbe plus bas son front devant l’autel souillé.

ODE SEPTIÈME

LA GUERRE D'ESPAGNE

Sine clade victor.

I

Oh! que la Royauté, puissante et vénérable,
Fille, aux cheveux blanchis, des âges révolus,
Perçant de ses clartés leur nuit impénétrable,
Où tant d'astres ne brillent plus;
Soumettant l'aigle au cygne et l'autour aux colombes;
S'élevant de tombes en tombes;
Géant, que grandit son fardeau;
Consacrant sur l'autel le fer dont elle est ceinte,
Et mêlant les rayons de l'auréole sainte
Aux fleurons du royal bandeau;

Oh! que la Royauté, peuples, est douce et belle! -
À force de bienfaits elle achète ses droits.
Son bras fort, quand bouillonne une foule rebelle,
Couvre les sceptres d'une croix.
Ce colosse d'airain, de ses mains séculaires,
Dans les nuages populaires
Lève un phare aux feux éclatants;
Et, liant au passé l'avenir qu'il féconde,
Pose à la fois ses pieds, en vain battus de l'onde,
Sur les deux rivages du temps.

II

Aussi, que de malheurs suprêmes
Elle impose aux infortunés,
Qui, sous le joug des diadèmes,
Courbèrent leurs fronts condamnés!

Il faut que leur coeur soit sublime.
Affrontant la foudre et l’abîme,
Leur nef ne doit pas fuir l’écueil.
Un roi, digne de la couronne,
Ne sait pas descendre du trône,
Mais il sait descendre au cercueil.

Il faut, comme un soldat, qu’un prince ait une épée,
Il faut, des factions quand l’astre impur a lui,
Que nuit et jour, bravant leur attente trompée,
Un glaive veille auprès de lui;
Ou que de son armée il se fasse un cortège;
Que son fier palais se protège
D’un camp au front étincelant;
Car de la Royauté la Guerre est la compagne:
On ne peut te briser, sceptre de Charlemagne,
Sans briser le fer de Roland!

III

Roland! - N’est-il pas vrai, noble élu de la guerre,
Que ton ombre, éveillée aux cris de nos guerriers,
Aux champs de Roncevaux lorsqu’ils passaient naguère,
Les prit pour d’anciens chevaliers?
Car le héros, assis sur sa tombe célèbre,
Les voyait, vers les bords de l’Èbre
Déployant leur vol immortel,
Du haut des monts, pareils à l’aigle ouvrant ses ailes,
Secouer, pour chasser de nouveaux infidèles,
L’éclatant cimier de Martel!

Mais un autre héros encore,
Pélage, l’effroi des tyrans,
Pélage, autre vainqueur du Maure,
Dans les cieux saluait nos rangs;
Au char où notre gloire brille,
Il attelait de la Castille

Le vieux lion fier et soumis;
Répétant notre cri d’alarmes,
Il mêlait sa lance à nos armes,
Et sa voix nous disait: Amis!

IV

Des pas d’un conquérant l’Espagne encor fumante
Pleurait, prostituée à notre Liberté,
Entre les bras sanglants de l’effroyable amante,
Sa royale virginité.
Ce peuple altier, chargé de despotes vulgaires,
Maudissait, épuisé de guerres,
Le monstre en ses champs accouru;
Si las des vils tribuns et des tyrans serviles,
Que lui-même appelait l’étranger dans ses villes,
Sans frémir d’être secouru!

Les français sont venus: - du Rhin jusqu’au Bosphore,
Peuples de l’aquilon, du couchant, du midi,
Pourquoi, vous dont le front, que l’effroi trouble encore,
Se courba sous leur pied hardi;
Nations, de la veille à leur chaîne échappées,
Qu’on vit tomber sous leurs épées,
Ou qui par eux avez vécu;
Empires, potentats, cités, royaumes, princes!
Pourquoi, puissants états, qui fûtes nos provinces,
Me demander s’ils ont vaincu?

Ils ont appris à l’anarchie
Ce que pèse le fer gaulois;
Mais par eux l’Espagne affranchie
Ne peut rougir de leurs exploits;
Tous les peuples, que Dieu seconde,
Quand l’hydre, en désastre féconde,
Tourne vers eux son triple dard,
Ont, ligués contre sa furie,

Le temple pour même patrie,
La croix pour commun étendard.

V

Pourtant, que désormais Madrid taise à l’histoire
Des succès trop longtemps par son orgueil redits,
Et le royal captif que l’ingrate victoire
Dans ses murs envoya jadis.
Cadix nous a vengés de l’affront de Pavie.
À l’ombre d’un héros ravie
La gloire a rendu tous ses droits;
Oubliant quel Français a porté ses entraves,
La fière Espagne a vu si les mains de nos braves
Savent briser les fers des rois!

Préparez, Castillans, des fêtes solennelles,
Des murs de Saragosse aux champs d’Almonacid.
Mêlez à nos lauriers vos palmes fraternelles;
Chantez Bayard - chantons le Cid!
Qu’au vieil Escurial le vieux Louvre réponde;
Que votre drapeau se confonde
À nos drapeaux victorieux;
Que Gadès édifie un autel sur sa plage!
Que de lui-même, aux monts d’où se leva Pélage,
S’allume un feu mystérieux!

Pour témoigner de leurs paroles,
Où sont ces nouveaux Décius?
Le brasier attend les Scévoles!
Le gouffre attend les Curtius!
Quoi! traînant leurs fronts dans la poudre,
Tous, de Bourbon, qui tient la foudre,
Embrassent les sacrés genoux!... -
Ah! la victoire est généreuse,
Leur cause inique est malheureuse,
Ils sont vaincus, ils sont absous!

VI

Un Bourbon pour punir ne voudrait pas combattre.
Le droit de son triomphe est toujours le pardon.
Pourtant des factions que son bras vient d’abattre,
Il éteint le dernier brandon.
Oh! de combien de maux, peuples, il vous délivre!
Hélas! à quels forfaits se livre
Le monstre, à ses pieds frémissant!
Nous qui l’avons vaincu, nous fûmes sa conquête.
Nous savons, lorsque tombe une royale tête,
Combien il en coule de sang!

Ô nos guerriers, venez! vos mères sont contentes!
Vos bras, terreur du monde, en deviennent l’appui.
Assez on vit crouler de trônes sous vos tentes!
Relevez les rois aujourd’hui.
Dieu met sur votre char son arche glorieuse;
Votre tente victorieuse
Est son tabernacle immortel;
Des saintes légions votre étendard dispose;
Il veut que votre casque à sa droite repose
Entre les vases de l’autel!

VII

C’en est fait; loin de l’espérance
Chassant le crime épouvanté,
Les cieux commettent à la France
La garde de la Royauté.
Son génie, éclairant les trames,
Luit comme la lampe aux sept flammes,
Cachée aux temples du Jourdain;
Gardien des trônes qu’il relève,
Son glaive est le céleste glaive
Qui flamboie aux portes d’Éden!

ODE HUITIÈME

À L’ARC DE TRIOMPHE DE L’ÉTOILE

Non deficit alter. VIRGILE.

I

La France a des palais, des tombeaux, des portiques,
De vieux châteaux tout pleins de bannières antiques,
Héroïques joyaux conquis dans les dangers;
Sa pieuse valeur, prodigue en fiers exemples,
Pour parer ces superbes temples,
Dépouille les camps étrangers.

On voit dans ses cités, de monuments peuplées,
Rome et ses dieux, Memphis et ses noirs mausolées;
Le lion de Venise en leurs murs a dormi;
Et quand, pour embellir nos vastes Babylones,
Le bronze manque à ses colonnes,
Elle en demande à l’ennemi!

Lorsque luit aux combats son armure enflammée,
Son oriflamme auguste et de lys parsemée
Chasse les escadrons ainsi que des troupeaux;
Puis elle offre aux vaincus des dons après les guerres,
Et, comme des hochets vulgaires,
Y mêle leurs propres drapeaux.

II

Arc triomphal! la foudre, en terrassant ton maître,
Semblait avoir frappé ton front encore à naître.
Par nos exploits nouveaux te voilà relevé!
Car on n’a pas voulu, dans notre illustre armée,
Qu’il fût de notre renommée

Un monument inachevé!

Dis aux siècles le nom de leur chef magnanime.
Qu’on lise sur ton front que nul laurier sublime
À des glaives français ne peut se dérober.
Lève-toi jusqu’aux cieux, portique de victoire!
Que le géant de notre gloire
Puisse passer sans se courber!

ODE NEUVIÈME

LA MORT DE MADEMOISELLE DE SOMBREUIL

Sunt lacrymæ rerum. VIRGILE.

I

Lyre! encore un hommage à la vertu qui t’aime!
Assez tu dérobas des hymnes d’anathème
Au funèbre Isaïe, au triste Ézéchiel!
Pour consoler les morts, pour pleurer les victimes,
Lyre, il faut de ces chants sublimes
Dont tous les échos sont au ciel.

Elle aussi, Dieu l’a rappelée!... -
Les cieux nous enviaient Sombreuil;
Ils ont repris leur exilée;
Nous tous, bannis, traînons le deuil.
Répondez, a-t-on vu son ombre
S’évanouir dans la nuit sombre,
Ou fuir vers le jour immortel?
La vit-on monter ou descendre?
Où déposerons-nous sa cendre?
Est-ce à la tombe? est-ce à l’autel?

Ne pleurez pas, prions: les saints l’ont réclamée;
Prions: adorez-la, vous qui l’avez aimée!
Elle est avec ses soeurs, anges purs et charmants,
Ces vierges qui, jadis, sur la croix attachées,
Ou, comme au sein des fleurs sur des brasiers couchées,
S’endormirent dans les tourments.

Sa vie était un pur mystère
D’innocence et de saints remords;
Cette âme a passé sur la terre

Entre les vivants et les morts.
Souvent, hélas! l’infortunée,
Comme si de sa destinée
La mort eût rompu le lien,
Sentit, avec des terreurs vaines,
Se glacer dans ses pâles veines
Un sang, qui n’était pas le sien!

II

Ô jour! où le trépas perdit son privilège,
Où, rachetant un meurtre au prix d’un sacrilège,
Le sang des morts coula dans son sein virginal!
Entre l’impur breuvage et le fer parricide,
Les bourreaux poursuivaient l’héroïne timide
D’une insulte funèbre et d’un rire infernal!

Son triomphe est dans son supplice.
Elle a, levant ses yeux au ciel,
Bu le sang au même calice
Où Jésus mourant but le fiel.
Oh! que d’amour dans ce courage!...
Mais, quand périrent dans l’orage
Ses parents, que la France a plaints,
Pour consoler l’auguste fille
Dieu lui confia sa famille
Et de veuves et d’orphelins.

III

Car il lui fut donné de survivre au martyre: -
Elle fut sur nos bords, d’où la foi se retire,
Comme un rayon du soir resté sur l’horizon;
Dieu la marqua d’un signe entre toutes les femmes,
Et voulut dans son champ, où glanent si peu d’âmes,
Laisser cet épi mûr de la sainte moisson.

Elle était heureuse, ici même!
Du bras dont il venge ses droits,
Le Seigneur soutient ceux qu’il aime,
Et les aide à porter la croix.
Il montre, en visions étranges,
À Jacob l’échelle des anges,
À Saül les antres d’Endor;
Sa main mystérieuse et sainte,
Sait cacher le miel dans l’absinthe,
Et la cendre dans les fruits d’or.

Sa constante équité n’est jamais assoupie;
Le méchant, sous la pourpre où son bonheur s’expie,
Envie un toit de chaume au fidèle abattu;
Et, quand l’impie heureux, bercé sur des abîmes,
Se crée un enfer de ses crimes,
Le juste en pleurs se fait un ciel de sa vertu.

On dit qu’en dépouillant la vie
Elle parut la regretter,
Et jeta des regards d’envie
Sur les fers qu’elle allait quitter.
“ — Ô mon Dieu! retardez mon heure.
Loin de la vallée où l’on pleure,
Suis-je digne de m’envoler?
Ce n’est pas la mort que j’implore,
Seigneur; je puis souffrir encore,
Et je veux encor consoler.

“ Je pars; ayez pitié de ceux que j’abandonne!
Quel amour leur rendra l’amour que je leur donne?
Pourquoi du saint bonheur sitôt me couronner?
Laissez mon âme encor sur leurs maux se répandre;
Je n’aurai plus au ciel d’opprimés à défendre,
Ni d’oppresseurs à pardonner! “

Il faut donc que le juste meure! -

En vain, dans ses regrets nommés,
Ont passé devant sa demeure
Tous ses pauvres accoutumés.
Maintenant, ô fils des chaumières!
Payez son aumône en prières;
Suivez-la d’un pieux adieu,
Orphelins, veuves déplorables,
Vous tous, faibles et misérables,
Images augustes de Dieu!

IV

Ô Dieu! ne reprends pas ceux que ta flamme anime.
Si la vertu s’en va, que deviendra le crime?
Où pourront du méchant se reposer les yeux?
N’enlève pas au monde un espoir salutaire.
Laisse des justes sur la terre!
N’as-tu donc pas, Seigneur, assez d’anges aux cieux?

ODE DIXIÈME

LE DERNIER CHANT

Ô muse, qui daignas me soutenir dans une carrière aussi longue que périlleuse, retourne maintenant aux célestes demeures!... Adieu! consolatrice de mes jours, toi qui partageas mes plaisirs, et bien plus souvent mes douleurs! CHATEAUBRIAND, les Martyrs.

Et toi, dépose aussi la lyre!
Qu'importe le Dieu qui t'inspire
À ces mortels vains et grossiers?
On en rit quand ta main l'encense.
Brise donc ce luth sans puissance!
Descends de ce char sans coursiers!

— Oh! qu'il est saint et pur le transport du poète,
Quand il voit en espoir, bravant la mort muette,
Du voyage des temps sa gloire revenir!
Sur les âges futurs, de sa hauteur sublime
Il se penche, écoutant son lointain souvenir;
Et son nom, comme un poids jeté dans un abîme,
Éveille mille échos au fond de l'avenir.

Je n'ai point cette auguste joie,
Les siècles ne sont point ma proie;
La gloire ne dit pas mon rang.
Ma muse, en l'orage qui gronde,
Est tombée au courant du monde,
Comme un lys aux flots d'un torrent.

Pourtant, ma douce muse est innocente et belle.
L'astre de Bethléem a des regards pour elle:
J'ai suivi l'humble étoile, aux rois pasteurs pareil.
Le Seigneur m'a donné le don de sa parole,
Car son peuple l'oublie en un lâche sommeil;

Et, soit que mon luth pleure, ou menace, ou console,
Mes chants volent à Dieu, comme l'aigle au soleil.

Mon âme à sa source embrasée
Monte de pensée en pensée;
Ainsi du ruisseau précieux
Où l'Arabe altéré s'abreuve,
La goutte d'eau passe au grand fleuve,
Du fleuve aux mers, des mers aux cieux.

Mais, ô fleurs sans parfums, foyers sans étincelles,
Hommes! l'air parmi vous manque à mes larges ailes.
Votre monde est borné, votre souffle est mortel!
Les lyres sont pour vous comme des voix vulgaires.
Je m'enivre d'absinthe: enivrez-vous de miel.
Bien: - aimez vos amours et guerroyez vos guerres,
Vous, dont l'oeil mort se ferme à tout rayon du ciel!

Sans éveiller d'écho sonore
J'ai haussé ma voix faible encore;
Et ma lyre aux fibres d'acier
A passé sur ces âmes viles,
Comme sur le pavé des villes
L'ongle résonnant du coursier.

En vain j'ai fait gronder la vengeance éternelle;
En vain j'ai, pour fléchir leur âme criminelle,
Fait parler le pardon par la voix des douleurs.
Du haut des cieux tonnants, mon austère pensée,
Sur cette terre ingrate où germent les malheurs,
Tombant, pluie orageuse ou propice rosée,
N'a point flétri l'ivraie et fécondé des fleurs.

Du tombeau tout franchit la porte.
L'homme, hélas! que le temps emporte,
En vain contre lui se débat.
Rien de Dieu ne trompe l'attente;

Et la vie est comme une tente
Où l’on dort avant le combat.

Voilà, tristes mortels, ce que leur âme oublie!
L’urne des ans pour tous n’est pas toujours remplie.
Mais qu’ils passent en paix sous le ciel outragé!
Qu’ils jouissent des jours dans leurs frêles demeures!
Quand dans l’éternité leur sort sera plongé,
Les insensés en vain s’attacheront aux heures,
Comme aux débris épars d’un vaisseau submergé.

Adieu donc ce luth qui soupire!
Muse, ici tu n’as plus d’empire,
Ô muse, aux concerts immortels!
Fuis la foule qui te contemple;
Referme les voiles du temple;
Rends leur ombre aux chastes autels.

Je vous rapporte, ô Dieu! le rameau d’espérance. -
Voici le divin glaive et la céleste lance:
J’ai mal atteint le but où j’étais envoyé.
Souvent, des vents jaloux jouet involontaire,
L’aiglon suspend son vol, à peine déployé;
Souvent, d’un trait de feu cherchant en vain la terre,
L’éclair remonte au ciel sans avoir foudroyé.

LIVRE TROISIÈME

Le temps, qui dérobe à la jeunesse ses années, m’en a déjà ravi vingt-trois sur son aile. Mes jours s’écoulent à longs flots... Mais, quelle que soit mon intelligence, étendue ou bornée, précoce ou tardive, elle sera toujours mesurée au but vers lequel m’entraîne le temps, me guide le ciel; car j’userai sans cesse de moi-même sous l’oeil de celui qui me donne ma tâche, de mon divin Créateur. MILTON, Sonnet.

ODE PREMIÈRE

À M. ALPHONSE DE L.

Or, sachant ces choses, nous venons enseigner aux hommes la crainte de Dieu. II COR., V.

I

Pourtant je m'étais dit: “ Abritons mon navire.
Ne livrons plus ma voile au vent qui la déchire.
Cachons ce luth. Mes chants peut-être auraient vécu!...
Soyons comme un soldat qui revient sans murmure
Suspendre à son chevet un vain reste d'armure,
Et s'endort, vainqueur ou vaincu! “

Je ne demandais plus à la muse que j'aime
Qu'un seul chant pour ma mort, solennel et suprême!
Le Poète avec joie au tombeau doit s'offrir;
S'il ne souriait pas au moment où l'on pleure,
Chacun lui dirait: “ Voici l'heure!
Pourquoi ne pas chanter, puisque tu vas mourir? “

C'est que la mort n'est pas ce que la foule en pense!
C'est l'instant où notre âme obtient sa récompense,
Où le fils exilé rentre au sein paternel.
Quand nous penchons près d'elle une oreille inquiète,
La voix du trépassé, que nous croyons muette,
A commencé l'hymne éternel!

II

Plus tôt que je n'ai dû, je reviens dans la lice;
Mais tu le veux, ami! ta muse est ma complice;
Ton bras m'a réveillé; c'est toi qui m'as dit: “ Va!
Dans la mêlée encor jetons ensemble un gage.

De plus en plus elle s’engage.
Marchons, et confessons le nom de Jéhova! “

J’unis donc à tes chants quelques chants téméraires.
Prends ton luth immortel: nous combattrons en frères
Pour les mêmes autels et les mêmes foyers.
Montés au même char, comme un couple homérique,
Nous tiendrons, pour lutter dans l’arène lyrique,
Toi la lance, moi les coursiers.

Puis, pour faire une part à la faiblesse humaine,
Je ne sais quelle pente au combat me ramène.
J’ai besoin de revoir ce que j’ai combattu,
De jeter sur l’impie un dernier anathème,
De te dire, à toi, que je t’aime,
Et de chanter encore un hymne à la vertu!

III

Ah! nous ne sommes plus au temps où le poète
Parlait au ciel en prêtre, à la terre en prophète!
Que Moïse, Isaïe, apparaisse en nos champs,
Les peuples qu’ils viendront juger, punir, absoudre,
Dans leurs yeux pleins d’éclairs méconnaîtront la foudre
Qui tonne en éclats dans leurs chants.

Vainement ils iront s’écriant dans les villes:
“ Plus de rébellions! plus de guerres civiles!
Aux autels du Veau-d’Or pourquoi danser toujours?
Dagon va s’écrouler; Baal va disparaître.
Le Seigneur a dit à son prêtre:
“ Pour faire pénitence ils n’ont que peu de jours! “

“ Rois, peuples, couvrez-vous d’un sac souillé de cendre!
Bientôt sur la nuée un juge doit descendre.
Vous dormez! que vos yeux daignent enfin s’ouvrir.
Tyr appartient aux flots, Gomorrhe à l’incendie.

Secouez le sommeil de votre âme engourdie,
Et réveillez-vous pour mourir!

“ Ah! malheur au puissant qui s’enivre en des fêtes,
Riant de l’opprimé qui pleure, et des prophètes!
Ainsi que Balthazar, ignorant ses malheurs,
Il ne voit pas aux murs de la salle bruyante
Les mots qu’une main flamboyante
Trace en lettres de feu parmi les noeuds de fleurs!

“ Il sera rejeté comme ce noir Génie,
Effrayant par sa gloire et par son agonie,
Qui tomba jeune encor, dont ce siècle est rempli.
Pourtant Napoléon du monde était le faîte.
Ses pieds éperonnés des rois pliaient la tête,
Et leur tête gardait le pli.

“ Malheur donc! - Malheur même au mendiant qui frappe,
Hypocrite et jaloux, aux portes du satrape!
À l’esclave en ses fers! au maître en son château!
À qui, voyant marcher l’innocent aux supplices,
Entre deux meurtriers complices,
N’étend point sous ses pas son plus riche manteau!

“ Malheur à qui dira: Ma mère est adultère!
À qui voile un coeur vil sous un langage austère!
À qui change en blasphème un serment effacé!
Au flatteur médisant, reptile à deux visages!
À qui s’annoncera sage entre tous les sages!
Oui, malheur à cet insensé!

“ Peuples, vous ignorez le Dieu qui vous fit naître!
Et pourtant vos regards le peuvent reconnaître
Dans vos biens, dans vos maux, à toute heure, en tout lieu!
Un Dieu compte vos jours, un Dieu règne en vos fêtes!
Lorsqu’un chef vous mène aux conquêtes,
Le bras qui vous entraîne est poussé par un Dieu!

“ À sa voix, en vos temps de folie et de crime,
Les Révolutions ont ouvert leur abîme.
Les justes ont versé tout leur sang précieux;
Et les peuples, troupeau qui dormait sous le glaive,
Ont vu, comme Jacob, dans un étrange rêve,
Des anges remonter aux cieux!

“ Frémissez donc! Bientôt, annonçant sa venue,
Le clairon de l’Archange entrouvrira la nue.
Jour d’éternels tourments! jour d’éternel bonheur,
Resplendissant d’éclairs, de rayons, d’auréoles,
Dieu vous montrera vos idoles,
Et vous demandera: - Qui donc est le Seigneur?

“ La trompette, sept fois sonnant dans les nuées,
Poussera jusqu’à lui, pâles, exténuées,
Les races, à grands flots se heurtant dans la nuit;
Jésus appellera sa mère virginale;
Et la porte céleste, et la porte infernale,
S’ouvriront ensemble avec bruit!

“ Dieu vous dénombrera d’une voix solennelle.
Les rois se courberont sous le vent de son aile.
Chacun lui portera son espoir, ses remords.
Sous les mers, sur les monts, au fond des catacombes,
À travers le marbre des tombes,
Son souffle remûra la poussière des morts!

“ Ô siècle! arrache-toi de tes pensers frivoles.
L’air va bientôt manquer dans l’espace où tu voles!
Mortels! gloire, plaisirs, biens, tout est vanité!
À quoi pensez-vous donc, vous qui dans vos demeures
Voulez voir en riant entrer toutes les heures?...
L’Éternité! l’Éternité! “

IV

Nos sages répondront:—” Que nous veulent ces hommes?
Ils ne sont pas du monde et du temps dont nous sommes.
Ces poètes sont-ils nés au sacré vallon?
Où donc est leur Olympe? où donc est leur Parnasse?
Quel est leur Dieu qui nous menace?
A-t-il le char de Mars? A-t-il l’arc d’Apollon?

“ S’ils veulent emboucher le clairon de Pindare,
N’ont-ils pas Hiéron, la fille de Tyndare,
Castor, Pollux, l’Élide et les Jeux des vieux temps;
L’arène où l’encens roule en longs flots de fumée,
La roue aux rayons d’or, de clous d’airain semée,
Et les quadriges éclatants?

“ Pourquoi nous effrayer de clartés symboliques?
Nous aimons qu’on nous charme en des chants bucoliques,
Qu’on y fasse lutter Ménalque et Palémon.
Pour dire l’avenir à notre âme débile,
On a l’écumante Sibylle,
Que bat à coups pressés l’aile d’un noir démon.

“ Pourquoi dans nos plaisirs nous suivre comme une ombre?
Pourquoi nous dévoiler dans sa nudité sombre
L’affreux sépulcre, ouvert devant nos pas tremblants?
Anacréon, chargé du poids des ans moroses,
Pour songer à la mort se comparait aux roses
Qui mouraient sur ses cheveux blancs.

“ Virgile n’a jamais laissé fuir de sa lyre
Des vers qu’à Lycoris son Gallus ne pût lire.
Toujours l’hymne d’Horace au sein des ris est né;
Jamais il n’a versé de larmes immortelles:
La poussière des cascatelles
Seule a mouillé son luth, de myrtes couronné! “

V

Voilà de quels dédains leurs âmes satisfaites
Accueilleraient, ami, Dieu même et ses prophètes!
Et puis, tu les verrais, vainement irrité,
Continuer, joyeux, quelque festin folâtre,
Ou pour dormir aux sons d’une lyre idolâtre
Se tourner de l’autre côté.

Mais qu’importe! accomplis ta mission sacrée.
Chante, juge, bénis; ta bouche est inspirée!
Le Seigneur en passant t’a touché de sa main;
Et, pareil au rocher qu’avait frappé Moïse,
Pour la foule au désert assise,
La poésie en flots s’échappe de ton sein!

Moi, fussé-je vaincu, j’aimerai ta victoire.
Tu le sais, pour mon coeur, ami de toute gloire,
Les triomphes d’autrui ne sont pas un affront.
Poète, j’eus toujours un chant pour les poètes;
Et jamais le laurier qui pare d’autres têtes
Ne jeta d’ombre sur mon front!

Souris même à l’envie amère et discordante.
Elle outrageait Homère, elle attaquait le Dante.
Sous l’arche triomphale elle insulte au guerrier.
Il faut bien que ton nom dans ses cris retentisse;
Le temps amène la justice:
Laisse tomber l’orage et grandir ton laurier!

VI

Telle est la majesté de tes concerts suprêmes,
Que tu sembles savoir comment les anges mêmes
Sur les harpes du ciel laissent errer leurs doigts!
On dirait que Dieu même, inspirant ton audace,
Parfois dans le désert t’apparaît face à face,
Et qu’il te parle avec la voix!

ODE DEUXIÈME

À M. DE CHATEAUBRIAND

On ne tourmente pas les arbres stériles et desséchés; ceux-là seulement sont battus de pierres dont le front est couronné de fruits d’or. ABENHAMED.

I

Il est, Chateaubriand, de glorieux navires
Qui veulent l’ouragan plutôt que les zéphires.
Il est des astres, rois des cieux étincelants,
Mondes volcans jetés parmi les autres mondes,
Qui volent dans les nuits profondes,
Le front paré des feux qui dévorent leurs flancs.

Le génie a partout des symboles sublimes.
Ses plus chers favoris sont toujours des victimes,
Et doivent aux revers l’éclat que nous aimons;
Une vie éminente est sujette aux orages;
La foudre a des éclats, le ciel a des nuages
Qui ne s’arrêtent qu’aux grands monts!

Oui, tout grand coeur a droit aux grandes infortunes;
Aux âmes que le sort sauve des lois communes
C’est un tribut d’honneur par la terre payé.
Le grand homme en souffrant s’élève au rang des justes.
La gloire en ses trésors augustes
N’a rien qui soit plus beau qu’un laurier foudroyé!

II

Aussi, dans une cour, dis-moi, qu’allais-tu faire?
N’es-tu pas, noble enfant d’une orageuse sphère,
Que nul malheur n’étonne et ne trouve en défaut,
De ces amis des rois, rares dans les tempêtes,

Qui, ne sachant flatter qu’au péril de leurs têtes,
Les courtisent sur l’échafaud?

Ce n’est pas lorsqu’un trône a retrouvé le faîte,
Ce n’est pas dans les temps de puissance et de fête,
Que la faveur des cours sur de tels fronts descend.
Il faut l’onde en courroux, l’écueil et la nuit sombre
Pour que le pilote qui sombre
Jette au phare sauveur un oeil reconnaissant.

Va, c’est en vain déjà qu’aux cours de la conquête
Une main de géant a pesé sur ta tête;
Et, chaque fois qu’au gouffre entraînée à grands pas,
La tremblante patrie errait au gré du crime,
Elle eut pour s’appuyer au penchant de l’abîme
Ton front qui ne se courbe pas!

III

À ton tour soutenu par la France unanime,
Laisse donc s’accomplir ton destin magnanime!
Chacun de tes revers pour ta gloire est compté.
Quand le sort t’a frappé, tu lui dois rendre grâce,
Toi qu’on voit à chaque disgrâce
Tomber plus haut encor que tu n’étais monté!

ODE TROISIÈME

LES FUNÉRAILLES DE LOUIS XVIII

Ces changements lui sont peu difficiles; c’est l’oeuvre de la droite du Très-Haut. PS. LXXVI, 10.

I

La foule, au seuil d’un temple en priant est venue.
Mères, enfants, vieillards, gémissent réunis;
Et l’airain qu’on balance ébranle dans la nue
Les hauts clochers de Saint-Denis.
Le sépulcre est troublé dans ses mornes ténèbres.
La Mort, de ces couches funèbres,
Resserre les rangs incomplets.
Silence au noir séjour que le trépas protège! -
Le Roi Chrétien, suivi de son dernier cortège,
Entre dans son dernier palais.

II

Un autre avait dit: “ De ma race
Ce grand tombeau sera le port;
Je veux, aux rois que je remplace,
Succéder jusque dans la mort.
Ma dépouille ici doit descendre!
C’est pour faire place à ma cendre
Qu’on dépeupla ces noirs caveaux.
Il faut un nouveau maître au monde:
À ce sépulcre, que je fonde,
Il faut des ossements nouveaux.

“ Je promets ma poussière à ces voûtes funestes.
À cet insigne honneur ce temple a seul des droits;
Car je veux que le ver qui rongera mes restes

Ait déjà dévoré des rois.
Et lorsque mes neveux, dans leur fortune altière,
Domineront l’Europe entière,
Du Kremlin à l’Escurial,
Ils viendront tour à tour dormir dans ces lieux sombres,
Afin que je sommeille, escorté de leurs ombres,
Dans mon linceul impérial! “

Celui qui disait ces paroles
Croyait, soldat audacieux,
Voir, en magnifiques symboles,
Sa destinée écrite aux cieux.
Dans ses étreintes foudroyantes,
Son aigle aux serres flamboyantes
Eût étouffé l’aigle romain;
La Victoire était sa compagne;
Et le globe de Charlemagne
Était trop léger pour sa main.

Eh bien! des potentats ce formidable maître
Dans l’espoir de sa mort par le ciel fut trompé.
De ses ambitions c’est la seule peut-être
Dont le but lui soit échappé.
En vain tout secondait sa marche meurtrière;
En vain sa gloire incendiaire
En tous lieux portait son flambeau;
Tout chargé de faisceaux, de sceptres, de couronnes,
Ce vaste ravisseur d’empires et de trônes
Ne put usurper un tombeau!

Tombé sous la main qui châtie,
L’Europe le fit prisonnier.
Premier roi de sa dynastie,
Il en fut aussi le dernier.
Une île où grondent les tempêtes
Reçut ce géant des conquêtes,
Tyran que nul n’osait juger,

Vieux guerrier qui, dans sa misère,
Dut l’obole de Bélisaire
À la pitié de l’étranger.

Loin du sacré tombeau qu’il s’arrangeait naguère,
C’est là que, dépouillé du royal appareil,
Il dort enveloppé de son manteau de guerre,
Sans compagnon de son sommeil.
Et, tandis qu’il n’a plus de l’empire du monde
Qu’un noir rocher battu de l’onde,
Qu’un vieux saule battu du vent,
Un roi longtemps banni, qui fit nos jours prospères,
Descend au lit de mort où reposaient ses pères,
Sous la garde du Dieu vivant.

III

C’est qu’au gré de l’humble qui prie,
Le Seigneur, qui donne et reprend,
Rend à l’Exilé sa patrie,
Livre à l’exil le Conquérant!
Dieu voulait qu’il mourût en France,
Ce Roi, si grand dans la souffrance,
Qui des douleurs portait le sceau,
Pour que, victime consolée,
Du seuil noir de son mausolée,
Il pût voir encor son berceau.

IV

Oh! qu’il s’endorme en paix dans la nuit funéraire!
N’a-t-il pas oublié ses maux pour nos malheurs?
Ne nous lègue-t-i1 pas à son généreux frère,
Qui pleure en essuyant nos pleurs?
N’a-t-i1 pas, dissipant nos rêves politiques,
De notre âge et des temps antiques
Proclamé l’auguste traité?

Loi sage qui, domptant la fougue populaire,
Donne aux sujets égaux un maître tutélaire,
Esclave de leur liberté!

Sur nous un Roi Chevalier veille.
Qu'il conserve l'aspect des cieux!
Que nul bruit de longtemps n'éveille
Ce sépulcre silencieux!
Hélas! le démon régicide,
Qui, du sang des Bourbons avide,
Paya de meurtres leurs bienfaits,
A comblé d'assez de victimes
Ces murs, dépeuplés par des crimes,
Et repeuplés par des forfaits!

Qu'il sache que jamais la couronne ne tombe!
Ce haut sommet échappe à son fatal niveau.
Le supplice où des rois le corps mortel succombe
N'est pour eux qu'un sacre nouveau.
Louis, chargé de fers par des mains déloyales,
Dépouillé des pompes royales,
Sans cour, sans guerriers, sans hérauts,
Gardant sa royauté devant la hache même,
Jusque sur l'échafaud prouva son droit suprême,
En faisant grâce à ses bourreaux!

V

De Saint-Denis, de Sainte-Hélène,
Ainsi je méditais le sort,
Sondant d'une vue incertaine
Ces grands mystères de la mort.
Qui donc êtes-vous, Dieu superbe?
Quel bras jette les tours sous l'herbe,
Change la pourpre en vil lambeau?
D'où vient votre souffle terrible?
Et quelle est la main invisible

Qui garde les clefs du tombeau?

ODE QUATRIÈME

LE SACRE DE CHARLES X

Os superbum conticescat,
Simplex fides acquiescat
Dei magisterio.

Que l’orgueil se taise, que la simple foi contemple l’exercice du pouvoir de Dieu. PROSE, Prières du sacre.

I

L’orgueil depuis trente ans est l’erreur de la terre.
C’est lui qui sous les droits étouffa le devoir;
C’est lui qui dépouilla de son divin mystère
Le sanctuaire du pouvoir.
L’orgueil enfanta seul nos fureurs téméraires,
Et ces lois dont tant de nos frères
Ont subi l’arrêt criminel,
Et ces règnes sanglants, et ces hideuses fêtes,
Où, sur un échafaud se proclamant prophètes,
Des bourreaux créaient l’Éternel!

En vain, pour dissiper cette ingrate folie,
Les leçons du Seigneur sur nous ont éclaté;
Dans les faits merveilleux que notre siècle oublie,
En vain Dieu s’est manifesté!
En vain un conquérant, aux ailes enflammées,
A rempli du bruit des armées
Le monde en ses fers engourdi;
Des peuples obstinés l’aveuglement vulgaire
N’a point vu quelle main poussait ses chars de guerre
Du Septentrion au Midi!

II

Qui jamais de Clovis surpassa l’insolence,
Peuples? dans son orgueil il plaçait son appui.
Ne mettant que le monde et lui dans la balance,
Il crut qu’elle penchait sous lui.
Il bravait de vingt rois les armes épuisées;
Des nations s’étaient brisées
Sur ce Sicambre audacieux;
Sur la terre à ses yeux rien n’était redoutable:
Il fallut, pour courber cette tête indomptable,
Qu’une colombe vînt des cieux!

Peuples! au même autel elle est redescendue!
Elle vient, échappée aux profanations,
Comme elle a de Clovis fléchi l’âme éperdue,
Vaincre l’orgueil des nations.
Que le siècle à son tour comme un roi s’humilie.
De la voix qui réconcilie
L’oracle est enfin entendu;
La royauté, longtemps veuve de ses couronnes,
De la chaîne d’airain qui lie au ciel les trônes
A retrouvé l’anneau perdu.

III

Naguère on avait vu les tyrans populaires,
Attaquant le passé comme un vieil ennemi,
Poursuivre, sous l’abri des marbres séculaires,
Le trésor gardé par Remy.
Du pontife endormi profanant le front pâle,
De sa tunique épiscopale
Ils déchirèrent les lambeaux;
Car ils bravaient la mort dans sa majesté sainte;
Et les vieillards souvent s’écriaient, pleins de crainte:
“ Que leur ont donc fait les tombeaux? “

Mais, trompant des vautours la fureur criminelle,

Dieu garda sa colombe au lys abandonné.
Elle va sur un roi poser encor son aile:
Ce bonheur à Charles est donné!
Charles sera sacré suivant l’ancien usage,
Comme Salomon, le roi sage,
Qui goûta les célestes mets,
Quand Sadoch et Nathan d’un baume l’arrosèrent,
Et, s’approchant de lui, sur le front le baisèrent,
En disant: “ Qu’il vive à jamais! “

IV

Le vieux pays des Francs, parmi ses métropoles,
Compte une église illustre, où venaient tous nos rois,
De ce pas triomphant dont tremblent les deux pôles,
S’humilier devant la Croix.
Le peuple en racontait cent prodiges antiques:
Ce temple a des voûtes gothiques,
Dont les saints aimaient les détours;
Un séraphin veillait à ses portes fermées;
Et les anges du ciel, quand passaient leurs armées,
Plantaient leurs drapeaux sur ses tours!

C’est là que pour la fête on dresse des trophées.
L’or, la moire et l’azur parent les noirs piliers,
Comme un de ces palais où voltigeaient les fées,
Dans les rêves des chevaliers.
D’un trône et d’un autel les splendeurs s’y répondent;
Des festons de flambeaux confondent
Leurs rayons purs dans le saint lieu;
Le lys royal s’enlace aux arches tutélaires;
Le soleil, à travers les vitraux circulaires,
Mêle aux fleurs des roses de feu.

V

Voici que le cortège à pas égaux s’avance.

Le pontife aux guerriers demande CHARLES DIX.
L’autel de Reims revoit l’oriflamme de France
Retrouvée aux murs de Cadix.
Les cloches dans les airs tonnent; le canon gronde;
Devant l’aîné des rois du monde
Tout un peuple tombe à genoux;
Mille cris de triomphe en sons confus se brisent;
Puis le roi se prosterne, et les évêques disent:
“ Seigneur, ayez pitié de nous!

“ Celui qui vient en pompe à l’autel du Dieu juste,
C’est l’héritier nouveau du vieux droit de Clovis,
Le chef des Douze Pairs, que son appel auguste
Convoque en ces sacrés parvis.
Ses preux, quand de sa voix leur oreille est frappée,
Touchent le pommeau de l’épée,
Et l’ennemi pâlit d’effroi;
Lorsque ses légions rentrent après la guerre,
Leur marche pacifique ébranle encor la terre:
Ô Dieu! prenez pitié du Roi!

“ Car vous êtes plus grand que la grandeur des hommes!
Nous vous louons, Seigneur, nous vous confessons Dieu!
Vous nous placez au faîte, et dès que nous y sommes,
À la vie il faut dire adieu!
Vous êtes Sabaoth, le Dieu de la victoire!
Les chérubins, remplis de gloire,
Vous ont proclamé Saint trois fois;
Dans votre éternité le temps se précipite;
Vous tenez dans vos mains le monde qui palpite
Comme un passereau sous nos doigts! “

VI

Le Roi dit: “ Nous jurons, comme ont juré nos pères,
De rendre à nos sujets paix, amour, équité;
D’aimer, aux mauvais jours comme en des temps prospères,

La Charte de leur liberté.
Nous vivrons dans la foi par nos aïeux chérie.
Des Ordres de chevalerie
Nous suivrons le chemin étroit.
Pour sauver l’opprimé nos pas seront agiles.
Ainsi nous le jurons sur les saints Évangiles:
Que Dieu soit en aide au bon droit! “

Montjoie et Saint-Denis! - Voilà que Clovis même
Se lève pour l’entendre; et les deux saints guerriers,
Charlemagne et Louis, portant pour diadème
Une auréole de lauriers;
Et Charles sept, guidé par Jeanne encor ravie;
Et François premier, dont Pavie
Trouva l’armure sans défaut;
Et du dernier Martyr l’héroïque fantôme,
Ce Roi, deux fois sacré pour un double royaume,
À l’autel et sur l’échafaud!

Devant ces grands témoins de la grandeur française,
Le Saint-Chrême de Charle a rajeuni les droits.
Il reçoit, sans faiblir, cette couronne où pèse
La gloire de soixante rois.
L’Archevêque bénit l’Épée héréditaire,
Et le Sceptre, et la Main austère
Dont nul signe n’est démenti;
Puis il plonge à leur tour dans le divin calice
Ces Gants, qu’un roi jamais n’a jetés dans la lice,
Sans qu’un monde en ait retenti!

VII

Entre, ô peuple! - Sonnez, clairons, tambours, fanfare!
Le prince est sur le trône; il est grand et sacré!
Sur la foule ondoyante il brille comme un phare
Des flots d’une mer entouré.
Mille chantres des airs, du peuple heureuse image,

Mêlant leur voix et leur plumage,
Croisent leur vol sous les arceaux;
Car les Francs, nos aïeux, croyaient voir dans la nue
Planer la Liberté, leur mère bien connue,
Sur l'aile errante des oiseaux.

Le voilà Prêtre et Roi! - De ce titre sublime
Puisque le double éclat sur sa couronne a lui,
Il faut qu'il sacrifie. Où donc est la Victime? -
La Victime, c'est encor lui!
Ah! pour les Rois français qu'un sceptre est formidable!
Ils guident ce peuple indomptable,
Qui des peuples règle l'essor;
Le monde entier gravite et penche sur leur trône;
Mais aussi l'indigent, que cherche leur aumône,
Compte leurs jours comme un trésor!

VIII

PRIÈRE

Ô Dieu! garde à jamais ce roi qu'un peuple adore!
Romps de ses ennemis les flèches et les dards,
Qu'ils viennent du couchant, qu'ils viennent de l'aurore,
Sur des coursiers ou sur des chars!
Charles, comme au Sina, t'a pu voir face à face!
Du moins qu'un long bonheur efface
Ses bien longues adversités.
Qu'ici-bas des élus il ait l'habit de fête.
Prête à son front royal deux rayons de ta tête;
Mets deux anges à ses côtés!

ODE CINQUIÈME

AU COLONEL G.-A. GUSTAFFSON

Habet sua sidera tellus. Ancienne devise.

I

Ce siècle, jeune encore, est déjà pour l’histoire
Presque une éternité de malheurs et de gloire.
Tous ceux qu’il a vus naître ont vieilli dans vingt ans.
Il semble, tant sa place est vaste en leur mémoire,
Qu’il ne peut achever ses destins éclatants
Sans fermer avec lui le grand cercle des temps.

Chez des peuples fameux, en des jours qu’on renomme,
Pour un siècle de gloire il suffisait d’un homme.
Le nôtre a déjà vu passer bien des flambeaux!
Il peut lutter sans crainte avec Athène et Rome:
Que lui fait la grandeur des âges les plus beaux?
Il les domine tous, rien que par ses tombeaux!

À peine il était né, que d’Enghien sur la poudre
Mourut, sous un arrêt que rien ne peut absoudre.
Il vit périr Moreau; Byron, nouveau Rhiga.
Il vit des cieux vengés tomber avec sa foudre
Cet aigle dont le vol douze ans se fatigua
Du Caire au Capitole et du Tage au Volga!

—” Qu’importe? dit la foule. Ah! laissons les tempêtes
Naître, grossir, tonner sur ces sublimes têtes;
Pourvu que chaque jour amène son festin,
Que toujours le soleil rayonne pour nos fêtes,
Et qu’on nous laisse en paix couler notre destin,
Oublier jusqu’au soir, dormir jusqu’au matin!

“ Que le crime s’élève et que l’innocent tombe,
Qu’importe? - Des héros sont morts? paix à leur tombe!
Et nous-mêmes?... qui sait si demain nous vivrons?
Quand nous aurons atteint le terme où tout succombe,
Nous dirons: Le temps passe! et nous ignorerons
Quels vents ont amené l’orage sur nos fronts. “

II

Ce ne sont point là tes paroles,
Toi dont nul n’a jamais douté,
Toi qui sans relâche t’immoles
Au culte de la Vérité!
Victime, et vengeur des victimes,
Ton coeur aux dévouements sublimes
S’offrit en tout temps, en tout lieu;
Toute ta vie est un exemple,
Et ta grande âme est comme un temple
D’où ne sort que la voix d’un Dieu!

Il suffit de ton témoignage
Pour que tout mortel, incliné,
Aille rendre un public hommage
À ce qu’il avait profané.
Ta bouche, pareille au temps même,
N’a besoin que d’un mot suprême
Pour récompenser ou punir;
Et, parlant plus haut dans notre âge
Que la flatterie et l’outrage,
Dicte l’histoire à l’avenir!

Puisqu’il n’est plus d’autres miracles
Que les hommes nés parmi nous,
Tu succèdes aux vieux oracles
Que l’on écoutait à genoux.
À ta voix, qui juge les races,
Nos demi-dieux changent de places;

Comme, à des chants mystérieux,
Quand la nuit déroulait ses voiles,
Jadis on voyait les étoiles
Descendre ou monter dans les cieux!

Pour mériter ce rang auguste
Aux vertus par le ciel offert,
Qui plus que lui fut noble et juste?
Et qui, surtout, a plus souffert?
Cet homme a payé tant de gloire
Par des malheurs que la mémoire
Ne peut rappeler sans effroi;
C’est un enfant des Scandinaves,
C’est Gustave, fils des Gustaves;
C’est un exilé; c’est un roi!

III

Il avait un ami dans ses fraîches années,
Comme lui tout empreint du sceau des destinées.
C’est ce jeune d’Enghien qui fut assassiné!
Gustave à ce forfait se jeta sur ses armes;
Mais, quand il vit l’Europe insensible à ses larmes,
Calme et stoïque, il dit: “ Pourquoi donc suis-je né?

“ Puisque du meurtrier les nations vassales
Courbent leurs fronts tremblants sous ses mains colossales;
Puisque sa volonté des princes est la loi;
Puisqu’il est le soleil qui domine leur sphère;
Sur un trône aujourd’hui je n’ai plus rien à faire,
Moi qui voudrais régner en roi! “

Il céda. - Dieu montrait, par cet exemple insigne,
Qu’il refuse parfois la victoire au plus digne;
Que plus tard, pour punir, il apparaît soudain;
Qu’il fait seul ici-bas tomber ce qu’il élève;
Et que, pour balancer Bonaparte et son glaive,

Il fallait déjà plus que le sceptre d’Odin!

Gustave, jeune encor, quitta le diadème,
Pour que rien ne manquât à sa grandeur suprême;
Et, tant que de l’Europe, en proie aux longs revers,
Sous les pas du géant vacilla l’équilibre,
Plus haut que tous les rois il leva son front libre,
Échappé du trône et des fers!

IV

Combien d’un tel exil diffère
Le malheur du tyran banni,
Lorsqu’au fond de l’autre hémisphère
Il tomba, confus et puni!
Quand sous la haine universelle
L’usurpateur enfin chancelle,
Dans sa chute il est insulté;
En vain il lutte, opiniâtre,
Et de sa pourpre de théâtre
Rien ne reste à sa nudité!

Sa morne infortune est pareille
À la mer aux bords détestés,
Dont l’eau morte à jamais sommeille
Sur de fastueuses cités.
Ce lac, noir vengeur de leurs crimes,
Du ciel, qui maudit ses abîmes,
Ne peut réfléchir les tableaux;
Et l’oeil cherche en vain quelque dôme
De l’éblouissante Sodome,
Sous les ténèbres de ses flots.

Gustave! âme forte et loyale!
Si parfois, d’un bras raffermi,
Tu reprends ta robe royale,
C’est pour couvrir quelque ennemi.

Dans ta retraite que j’envie,
Tu portes sur ta noble vie
Un souvenir calme et sans fiel;
Reine, comme toi sans asile,
La Vertu, que la terre exile,
Dans ton grand coeur retrouve un ciel!

V

Ah! laisse croître l’herbe en tes cours solitaires!
Que t’importe, au milieu de tes pensers austères,
Qu’on n’ose, de nos jours, saluer un héros;
Et que, chez d’autres rois, puissants, heureux encore,
Une foule de chars ébranle dès l’aurore
Les grands pavés de marbre et l’azur des vitraux!

Tu règnes cependant! tu règnes sur toute âme
Dont ce siècle glacé n’a pas éteint la flamme;
Sur tout coeur né pour croire, aimer et secourir;
Sur tous ces chevaliers que tant d’oubli protège,
Étranges courtisans dont le rare cortège
N’accourt au seuil des rois qu’à l’heure d’y mourir!

En tous lieux où la foi, l’honneur et le génie
Rendent un libre hommage à la vertu bannie,
Ton nom règne, entouré d’un éclat immortel.
Par un beau dévouement toute vie animée,
Toute gloire nouvelle, en notre âge allumée,
Est un flambeau de plus brûlant sur ton autel!

Ni maître! ni sujet! - Seul homme sur la terre
Qui d’un pouvoir humain ne soit pas tributaire,
Dieu seul sur tes destins a de suprêmes droits;
Et, comme la comète aux clartés vagabondes
Marche libre à travers les soleils et les mondes,
Tu passes à côté des peuples et des rois!

ODE SIXIÈME

LES DEUX ÎLES

Dites-moi d’où il est venu, je vous dirai où il est allé. E. H.

I

Il est deux îles dont un monde
Sépare les deux Océans,
Et qui de loin dominent l’onde,
Comme des têtes de géants.
On devine, en voyant leurs cimes,
Que Dieu les tira des abîmes
Pour un formidable dessein;
Leur front de coups de foudre fume,
Sur leurs flancs nus la mer écume,
Des volcans grondent dans leur sein.

Ces îles, où le flot se broie
Entre des écueils décharnés,
Sont comme deux vaisseaux de proie,
D’une ancre éternelle enchaînés.
La main qui de ces noirs rivages
Disposa les sites sauvages,
Et d’effroi les voulut couvrir,
Les fit si terribles, peut-être,
Pour que Bonaparte y pût naître,
Et Napoléon y mourir!

“ - Là fut son berceau! - Là sa tombe! “
Pour les siècles, c’en est assez.
Ces mots, qu’un monde naisse ou tombe,
Ne seront jamais effacés.
Sur ces îles à l’aspect sombre
Viendront, à l’appel de son ombre,

Tous les peuples de l’avenir;
Les foudres qui frappent leurs crêtes,
Et leurs écueils, et leurs tempêtes,
Ne sont plus que son souvenir!

Loin de nos rives, ébranlées
Par les orages de son sort,
Sur ces deux îles isolées
Dieu mit sa naissance et sa mort;
Afin qu’il pût venir au monde
Sans qu’une secousse profonde
Annonçât son premier moment;
Et que sur son lit militaire,
Enfin, sans remuer la terre,
Il pût expirer doucement!

II

Comme il était rêveur au matin de son âge!
Comme il était pensif au terme du voyage!
C’est qu’il avait joui de son rêve insensé;
Du trône et de la gloire il savait le mensonge;
Il avait vu de près ce que c’est qu’un tel songe,
Et quel est le néant d’un avenir passé!

Enfant, des visions, dans la Corse, sa mère,
Lui révélaient déjà sa couronne éphémère,
Et l’aigle impérial planant sur son pavois;
Il entendait d’avance, en sa superbe attente,
L’hymne qu’en toute langue, aux portes de sa tente,
Son peuple universel chantait tout d’une voix:

III

ACCLAMATION

“ Gloire à Napoléon! gloire au maître suprême!

Dieu même a sur son front posé le diadème.
Du Nil au Borysthène il règne triomphant.
Les rois, fils de cent rois, s’inclinent quand il passe,
Et dans Rome il ne voit d’espace
Que pour le trône d’un enfant!

“ Pour porter son tonnerre aux villes effrayées,
Ses aigles ont toujours les ailes déployées.
Il régit le Conclave, il commande au Divan.
Il mêle à ses drapeaux, de sang toujours humides,
Des croissants pris aux Pyramides,
Et la croix d’or du grand Yvan!

“ Le Mamelouk bronzé, le Goth plein de vaillance,
Le Polonais, qui porte une flamme à sa lance,
Prêtent leur force aveugle à ses ambitions.
Ils ont son voeu pour loi, pour foi sa renommée.
On voit marcher dans son armée
Tout un peuple de nations!

“ Sa main, s’il touche un but où son orgueil aspire,
Fait à quelque soldat l’aumône d’un empire,
Ou fait veiller des rois au seuil de son palais,
Pour qu’il puisse, en quittant les combats ou les fêtes,
Dormir en paix dans ses conquêtes,
Comme un pêcheur sur ses filets!

“ Il a bâti si haut son aire impériale,
Qu’il nous semble habiter cette sphère idéale
Où jamais on n’entend un orage éclater!
Ce n’est plus qu’à ses pieds que gronde la tempête;
Il faudrait, pour frapper sa tête,
Que la foudre pût remonter! “

IV

La foudre remonta! - Renversé de son aire,

Il tomba, tout fumant de cent coups de tonnerre.
Les rois punirent leur tyran.
On l’exposa vivant sur un roc solitaire;
Et le géant captif fut remis par la terre
À la garde de l’océan.

Oh! comme à Sainte-Hélène il dédaignait sa vie,
Quand le soir il voyait, avec un oeil d’envie,
Le soleil fuir sous l’horizon,
Et qu’il s’égarait seul sur le sable des grèves,
Jusqu’à ce qu’un Anglais, l’arrachant de ses rêves,
Le ramenât dans sa prison!

Comme avec désespoir ce prince de la guerre
S’entendait accuser par tous ceux qui naguère
Divinisaient son bras vainqueur!
Car des peuples ligués la clameur solennelle
Répondait à la voix implacable, éternelle,
Qui se lamentait dans son coeur!

V

IMPRÉCATION

“ Honte! opprobre! malheur! anathème! vengeance!
Que la terre et les cieux frappent d’intelligence!
Enfin nous avons vu le colosse crouler!
Que puissent retomber sur ses jours, sur sa cendre,
Tous les pleurs qu’il a fait répandre,
Tout le sang qu’il a fait couler!

“ Qu’à son nom, du Volga, du Tibre, de la Seine,
Des murs de l’Alhambra, des fossés de Vincenne,
De Jaffa, du Kremlin qu’il brûla sans remords,
Des plaines du carnage et des champs de victoire,
Tonne, comme un écho de sa fatale gloire,
La malédiction des morts!

“ Qu’il voie autour de lui se presser ses victimes!
Que tout ce peuple, en foule échappé des abîmes,
Innombrable, annonçant les secrets du cercueil,
Mutilé par le fer, sillonné par la foudre,
Heurtant confusément des os noircis de poudre,
Lui fasse un Josaphat de Sainte-Hélène en deuil!

“ Qu’il vive pour mourir tous les jours, à toute heure!
Que le fier conquérant baisse les yeux, et pleure!
Sachant sa gloire à peine et riant de ses droits,
Des geôliers ont chargé d’une chaîne glacée
Cette main qui s’était lassée
À courber la tête des rois!

“ Il crut que sa fortune, en victoires féconde,
Vaincrait le souvenir du peuple roi du monde;
Mais Dieu vient, et d’un souffle éteint son noir flambeau,
Et ne laisse au rival de l’éternelle Rome
Que ce qu’il faut de place et de temps à tout homme
Pour se coucher dans le tombeau.

“ Ces mers auront sa tombe, et l’oubli la devance.
En vain à Saint-Denis il fit parer d’avance
Un sépulcre de marbre et d’or étincelant;
Le ciel n’a pas voulu que de royales ombres
Vissent, en revenant pleurer sous ces murs sombres,
Dormir dans leur tombeau son cadavre insolent! “

VI

Qu’une coupe vidée est amère! et qu’un rêve,
Commencé dans l’ivresse, avec terreur s’achève!
Jeune, on livre à l’espoir sa crédule raison;
Mais on frémit plus tard, quand l’âme est assouvie,
Hélas! et qu’on revoit sa vie
De l’autre bord de l’horizon!

Ainsi, quand vous passez au pied d’un mont sublime,
Longtemps en conquérant vous admirez sa cime,
Et ses pics, que jamais les ans n’humilieront,
Ses forêts, vert manteau qui pend aux rocs sauvages,
Et ces couronnes de nuages
Qui s’amoncellent sur son front!

Montez donc, et tentez ces zones inconnues! -
Vous croyiez fuir aux cieux... vous vous perdez aux nues!
Le mont change à vos yeux d’aspect et de tableaux;
C’est un gouffre, obscurci de sapins centenaires,
Où les torrents et les tonnerres
Croisent des éclairs et des flots!

VII

Voilà l’image de la gloire:
D’abord, un prisme éblouissant,
Puis un miroir expiatoire,
Où la pourpre paraît du sang!
Tour à tour puissante, asservie,
Voilà quel double aspect sa vie
Offrit à ses âges divers.
Il faut à son nom deux histoires:
Jeune, il inventait ses victoires;
Vieux, il méditait ses revers.

En Corse, à Sainte-Hélène encore,
Dans les nuits d’hiver, le nocher,
Si quelque orageux météore
Brille au sommet d’un noir rocher,
Croit voir le sombre capitaine,
Projetant son ombre lointaine,
Immobile, croiser ses bras;
Et dit que, pour dernière fête,
Il vient régner dans la tempête,

Comme il régnait dans les combats!

VIII

S’il perdit un empire, il aura deux patries,
De son seul souvenir illustres et flétries,
L’une aux mers d’Annibal, l’autre aux mers de Vasco;
Et jamais, de ce siècle attestant la merveille,
On ne prononcera son nom, sans qu’il n’éveille
Aux bouts du monde un double écho!

Telles, quand une bombe ardente, meurtrière,
Décrit dans un ciel noir sa courbe incendiaire,
Se balance au-dessus des murs épouvantés,
Puis, comme un vautour chauve, à la serre cruelle,
Qui frappe en s’abattant la terre de son aile,
Tombe, et fouille à grand bruit le pavé des cités;

Longtemps après sa chute, on voit fumer encore
La bouche du mortier, large, noire et sonore,
D’où monta pour tomber le globe au vol pesant,
Et la place où la bombe, éclatée en murailles,
Mourut, en vomissant la mort de ses entrailles,
Et s’éteignit en embrasant!

ODE SEPTIÈME

À LA COLONNE DE LA PLACE VENDÔME

Parva magnis.

I

Ô monument vengeur! trophée indélébile!
Bronze qui, tournoyant sur ta base immobile,
Sembles porter au ciel ta gloire et ton néant;
Et, de tout ce qu'a fait une main colossale,
Seul es resté debout; - ruine triomphale
De l'édifice du géant!

Débris du Grand Empire et de la Grande Armée,
Colonne, d'où si haut parle la renommée!
Je t'aime: l'étranger t'admire avec effroi.
J'aime tes vieux héros, sculptés par la Victoire,
Et tous ces fantômes de gloire
Qui se pressent autour de toi.

J'aime à voir sur tes flancs, colonne étincelante,
Revivre ces soldats qu'en leur onde sanglante
Ont roulés le Danube, et le Rhin, et le Pô!
Tu mets comme un guerrier le pied sur ta conquête.
J'aime ton piédestal d'armures, et ta tête
Dont le panache est un drapeau!

Au bronze de Henri mon orgueil te marie.
J'aime à vous voir tous deux, honneur de la patrie,
Immortels, dominant nos troubles passagers,
Sortir, signes jumeaux d'amour et de colère,
Lui, de l'épargne populaire,
Toi, des arsenaux étrangers!

Que de fois, tu le sais, quand la nuit sous ses voiles
Fait fuir la blanche lune ou trembler les étoiles,
Je viens, triste, évoquer tes fastes devant moi;
Et, d’un oeil enflammé dévorant ton histoire,
Prendre, convive obscur, ma part de tant de gloire,
Comme un pâtre au banquet d’un Roi!

Que de fois j’ai cru voir, ô Colonne française,
Ton airain ennemi rugir dans la fournaise!
Que de fois, ranimant tes combattants épars,
Heurtant sur tes parois leurs armes dérouillées,
J’ai ressuscité ces mêlées
Qui t’assiègent de toutes parts!

Jamais, ô monument, même ivres de leur nombre,
Les étrangers sans peur n’ont passé sous ton ombre.
Leurs pas n’ébranlent point ton bronze souverain.
Quand le sort une fois les poussa vers nos rives,
Ils n’osaient étaler leurs parades oisives
Devant tes batailles d’airain!

II

Mais quoi! n’entends-je point, avec de sourds murmures,
De ta base à ton front bruire les armures?
Colonne! il m’a semblé qu’éblouissant mes yeux,
Tes bataillons cuivrés cherchaient à redescendre...
Que tes demi-dieux, noirs d’une héroïque cendre,
Interrompaient soudain leur marche vers les cieux!

Leur voix mêlait des noms à leur vieille devise:
“TARENTE, REGGIO, DALMATIE et TRÉVISE!”
Et leurs aigles, sortant de leur puissant sommeil,
Suivaient d’un bec ardent cette aigle à double tête,
Dont l’oeil, ami de l’ombre où son essor s’arrête,
Se baisse à leur regard, comme aux feux du soleil!

Qu’est-ce donc? - Et pourquoi, bronze envié de Rome,
Vois-je tes légions frémir comme un seul homme?
Quel impossible outrage à ta hauteur atteint?
Qui donc a réveillé ces ombres immortelles,
Ces aigles qui, battant ta base de leurs ailes,
Dans leur ongle captif pressent leur foudre éteint?

III

Je comprends: - l’étranger, qui nous croit sans mémoire,
Veut, feuillet par feuillet, déchirer notre histoire,
Écrite avec du sang, à la pointe du fer. -
Ose-t-il, imprudent! heurter tant de trophées?
De ce bronze, forgé de foudres étouffées,
Chaque étincelle est un éclair!

Est-ce Napoléon qu’il frappe en notre armée?
Veut-il, de cette gloire en tant de lieux semée,
Disputer l’héritage à nos vieux généraux?
Pour un fardeau pareil il a la main débile:
L’empire d’Alexandre et les armes d’Achille
Ne se partagent qu’aux héros.

Mais non: l’Autrichien, dans sa fierté qu’il dompte,
Est content si leurs noms ne disent que sa honte.
Il fait de sa défaite un titre à nos guerriers,
Et, craignant des vainqueurs moins que des feudataires,
Il pardonne aux fleurons de nos ducs militaires,
Si ce ne sont que des lauriers.

Bronze! Il n’a donc jamais, fier pour une victoire,
Subi de tes splendeurs l’aspect expiatoire?
D’où vient tant de courage à cet audacieux?
Croit-il impunément toucher à nos annales?
Et comment donc lit-il ces pages triomphales
Que tu déroules dans les cieux?

Est-ce un langage obscur à ses regards timides?
Eh! qu'il s'en fasse instruire au pied des Pyramides,
À Vienne, au vieux Kremlin, au morne Escurial!
Qu'il en parle à ces Rois, cour dorée et nombreuse,
Qui naguère peuplait d'une tente poudreuse
Le vestibule impérial!

IV

À quoi pense-t-il donc, l'étranger qui nous brave?
N'avions-nous pas hier l'Europe pour esclave?
Nous, subir de son joug l'indigne talion!
Non! au champ du combat nous pouvons reparaître.
On nous a mutilés; mais le temps a peut-être
Fait croître l'ongle du lion.

De quel droit viennent-ils découronner nos gloires?
Les Bourbons ont toujours adopté des victoires.
Nos rois t'ont défendu d'un ennemi tremblant,
Ô trophée! à leurs pieds tes palmes se déposent;
Et si tes quatre aigles reposent,
C'est à l'ombre du drapeau blanc.

Quoi! le globe est ému de volcans électriques;
Derrière l'océan grondent les Amériques;
Stamboul rugit; Hellé remonte aux jours anciens;
Lisbonne se débat aux mains de l'Angleterre...
Seul, le vieux peuple franc s'indigne que la terre
Tremble à d'autres pas que les siens!

Prenez garde, étrangers: - nous ne savons que faire!
La paix nous berce en vain dans son oisive sphère,
L'arène de la guerre a pour nous tant d'attrait!
Nous froissons dans nos mains, hélas! inoccupées,
Des lyres, à défaut d'épées!
Nous chantons, comme on combattrait!

Prenez garde! - La France, où grandit un autre âge,
N'est pas si morte encor qu'elle souffre un outrage!
Les partis pour un temps voileront leur tableau.
Contre une injure, ici, tout s'unit, tout se lève,
Tout s'arme, et la Vendée aiguisera son glaive
Sur la pierre de Waterloo.

Vous dérobez des noms! - Quoi donc! faut-il qu'on aille
Lever sur tous vos champs des titres de bataille?
Faut-il, quittant ces noms par la valeur trouvés,
Pour nos gloires, chez vous, chercher d'autres baptêmes?
Sur l'airain de vos canons mêmes
Ne sont-ils point assez gravés?

L'étranger briserait le blason de la France!
On verrait, enhardi par notre indifférence,
Sur nos fiers écussons tomber son vil marteau!
Ah!... comme ce Romain qui remuait la terre,
Vous portez, ô Français! et la paix et la guerre
Dans le pli de votre manteau.

Votre aile en un moment touche, à sa fantaisie,
L'Afrique par Cadix et par Moscou l'Asie.
Vous chassez en courant Anglais, Russes, Germains;
Les tours croulent devant vos trompettes fatales;
Et de toutes les capitales
Vos drapeaux savent les chemins.

Quand leur destin se pèse avec vos destinées,
Toutes les nations s'inclinent détrônées.
La gloire pour vos noms n'a point assez de bruit.
Sans cesse autour de vous les états se déplacent.
Quand votre astre paraît, tous les autres s'effacent;
Quand vous marchez, l'univers suit!

Que l'Autriche en rampant de noeuds vous environne,
Les deux géants de France ont foulé sa couronne!

L’histoire, qui des temps ouvre le Panthéon,
Montre empreints aux deux fronts du vautour d’Allemagne
La sandale de Charlemagne,
L’éperon de Napoléon.

Allez! - Vous n’avez plus l’aigle qui de son aire
Sur tous les fronts trop hauts portait votre tonnerre;
Mais il vous reste encor l’oriflamme et les lys.
Mais c’est le Coq gaulois qui réveille le monde;
Et son cri peut promettre à votre nuit profonde
L’aube du soleil d’Austerlitz!

V

C’est moi qui me tairais.! Moi qu’enivrait naguère
Mon nom saxon, mêlé parmi des cris de guerre!
Moi, qui suivais le vol d’un drapeau triomphant!
Qui, joignant aux clairons ma voix entrecoupée,
Eus pour premier hochet le noeud d’or d’une épée!
Moi, qui fus un soldat quand j’étais un enfant!

Non, Frères! non, Français de cet âge d’attente!
Nous avons tous grandi sur le seuil de la tente.
Condamnés à la paix, aiglons bannis des cieux,
Sachons du moins, veillant aux gloires paternelles,
Garder de tout affront, jalouses sentinelles,
Les armures de nos aïeux!

ODE HUITIÈME

FIN

Ubi defuit orbis.

I

Ainsi d’un peuple entier je feuilletais l’histoire!
Livre fatal de deuil, de grandeur, de victoire.
Et je sentais frémir mon luth contemporain,
Chaque fois que passait un grand nom, un grand crime,
Et que l’une sur l’autre, avec un bruit sublime,
Retombaient les pages d’airain.

Fermons-le maintenant, ce livre formidable.
Cessons d’interroger ce sphinx inabordable
Qui le garde en silence, à la fois monstre et dieu.
L’énigme qu’il propose échappe à bien des lyres;
Il n’en écrit le mot sur le front des empires
Qu’en lettres de sang et de feu.

II

Ne cherchons pas ce mot. - Alors, pourquoi, poète,
Ne t’endormais-tu pas sur ta lyre muette?
Pourquoi la mettre au jour et la prostituer?
Pourquoi ton chant sinistre et ta voix insensée?... -
C’est qu’il fallait à ma pensée
Tout un grand peuple à remuer.

Des révolutions j’ouvrais le gouffre immonde?
C’est qu’il faut un chaos à qui veut faire un monde.
C’est qu’une grande voix dans ma nuit m’a parlé.
C’est qu’enfin je voulais, menant au but la foule,
Avec le siècle qui s’écoule

Confronter le siècle écoulé.

Le génie a besoin d’un peuple que sa flamme
Anime, éclaire, échauffe, embrase comme une âme.
Il lui faut tout un monde à régir en tyran.
Dès qu’il a pris son vol du haut de la falaise,
Pour que l’ouragan soit à l’aise,
Il n’a pas trop de l’océan!

C’est là qu’il peut ouvrir ses ailes; là, qu’il gronde
Sur un abîme large et sur une eau profonde;
C’est là qu’il peut bondir, géant capricieux,
Et tournoyer, debout dans l’orage qui tombe,
D’un pied s’appuyant sur la trombe,
Et d’un bras soutenant les cieux!

LIVRE QUATRIÈME

Spiritus flat ubi vuit.

ODE PREMIÈRE

LE POÈTE

Muse! contemple ta victime! LAMARTINE, L’Enthousiasme.

I

Qu’il passe en paix, au sein d’un monde qui l’ignore,
L’auguste infortuné que son âme dévore!
Respectez ses nobles malheurs;
Fuyez, ô plaisirs vains, son existence austère;
Sa palme qui grandit, jalouse et solitaire,
Ne peut croître parmi vos fleurs.

Il souffre assez de maux, sans y joindre vos joies!
Chaque pas qui l’enfonce en de sublimes voies,
Par une douleur est compté.
Il pleure sa jeunesse avant l’âge envolée,
Sa vie, humble roseau, qui se courbe accablée
Du poids de l’immortalité.

Il pleure, ô belle enfance, et ta grâce et tes charmes,
Et ton rire innocent et tes naïves larmes,
Ton bonheur doux et turbulent,
Et, loin des vastes cieux, l’aile que tu reposes,
Et, dans les jeux bruyants, ta couronne de roses
Que flétrirait son front brûlant!

Il accuse et son siècle, et ses chants, et sa lyre,
Et la coupe enivrante où, trompant son délire,
La gloire verse tant de fiel,
Et ses voeux, poursuivant des promesses funestes,
Et son coeur, et la Muse, et tous ces dons célestes,
Hélas! qui ne sont pas le ciel!

II

Ah! si du moins, couché sur le char de la vie,
L’hymne de son triomphe et les cris de l’envie
Passaient sans troubler son sommeil!
S’il pouvait dans l’oubli préparer sa mémoire!
Ou, voilé de rayons, se cacher dans sa gloire,
Comme un ange dans le soleil!

Mais sans cesse il faut suivre, en la commune arène,
Le flot qui le repousse et le flot qui l’entraîne!
Les hommes troublent son chemin!
Sa voix grave se perd dans leurs vaines paroles,
Et leur fol orgueil mêle à leurs jouets frivoles
Le spectre qui pèse à sa main!

Pourquoi traîner ce roi si loin de ses royaumes?
Qu’importe à ce géant un cortège d’atomes!
Fils du monde, c’est vous qu’il fuit.
Que fait à l’immortel votre éphémère empire?
Sans les chants de sa voix, sans les sons de sa lyre,
N’avez-vous point assez de bruit?

III

Laissez-le dans son ombre où descend la lumière.
Savez-vous qu’une Muse, épurant sa poussière,
Y charme en secret ses ennuis?
Et que, laissant pour lui les éternelles fêtes,
La colombe du Christ et l’aigle des Prophètes
Souvent y visitent ses nuits?

Sa veille redoutable, en ses visions saintes,
Voit les soleils naissants et les sphères éteintes
Passer en foule au fond du ciel;
Et, suivant dans l’espace un choeur brûlant d’archanges,
Cherche, aux mondes lointains, quelles formes étranges

Y revêt l’Être universel.

Savez-vous que ses yeux ont des regards de flamme?
Savez-vous que le voile, étendu sur son âme,
Ne se lève jamais en vain?
De lumière dorée et de flammes rougie,
Son aile, en un instant, de l’infernale orgie
Peut monter au banquet divin.

Laissez donc loin de vous, ô mortels téméraires,
Celui que le Seigneur marqua, parmi ses frères,
De ce signe funeste et beau,
Et dont l’oeil entrevoit plus de mystères sombres
Que les morts effrayés n’en lisent, dans les ombres,
Sous la pierre de leur tombeau!

IV

Un jour vient dans sa vie, où la Muse elle-même,
D’un sacerdoce auguste armant son luth suprême,
L’envoie au monde ivre de sang,
Afin que, nous sauvant de notre propre audace,
Il apporte d’en haut à l’homme qui menace
La prière du Tout-Puissant.

Un formidable esprit descend dans sa pensée.
Il paraît; et soudain, en éclairs élancée,
Sa parole luit comme un feu.
Les peuples prosternés en foule l’environnent;
Sina mystérieux, les foudres le couronnent,
Et son front porte tout un Dieu!

ODE DEUXIÈME

LA LYRE ET LA HARPE

à M. Alph. De L.

Alternis dicetis, amant alterna Camoenae. VIRGILE.

Et caepit loqui, prout Spiritus Sanctus dabat loqui. ACT. APOST.

LA LYRE

Dors, ô fils d'Apollon! ses lauriers te couronnent,
Dors en paix! Les neuf Soeurs t'adorent comme un roi;
De leurs choeurs nébuleux les Songes t'environnent;
La lyre chante auprès de toi!

LA HARPE

Éveille-toi, jeune homme, enfant de la misère!
Un rêve ferme au jour tes regards obscurcis,
Et pendant ton sommeil, un indigent, ton frère,
À ta porte en vain s'est assis!

LA LYRE

Ton jeune âge est cher à la Gloire.
Enfant, la Muse ouvrit tes yeux,
Et d'une immortelle mémoire
Couronna ton nom radieux.
En vain Saturne te menace;
Va, l'Olympe est né du Parnasse,
Les poètes ont fait les dieux!

LA HARPE

Homme, une femme fut ta mère;
Elle a pleuré sur ton berceau;
Souffre donc. Ta vie éphémère
Brille et tremble, ainsi qu’un flambeau.
Dieu, ton maître, a d’un signe austère
Tracé ton chemin sur la terre,
Et marqué ta place au tombeau.

LA LYRE

Chante! Jupiter règne et l’univers l’implore;
Vénus embrase Mars d’un souris gracieux;
Iris brille dans l’air, dans les champs brille Flore;
Chante: Les immortels, du couchant à l’aurore,
En trois pas parcourent les Cieux.

LA HARPE

Prie! Il n’est qu’un vrai Dieu, juste dans sa clémence,
Par la fuite des temps sans cesse rajeuni.
Tout s’achève dans lui, par lui tout recommence;
Son être emplit le monde ainsi qu’une âme immense;
L’Éternel vit dans l’Infini.

LA LYRE

Ta douce Muse à fuir t’invite.
Cherche un abri calme et serein;
Les mortels, que le sage évite,
Subissent le siècle d’airain.
Viens; près de tes Lares tranquilles,
Tu verras de loin dans les villes
Mugir la Discorde aux cent voix.
Qu’importe à l’heureux solitaire
Que l’autan dévaste la terre,
S’il ne fait qu’agiter ses bois!

LA HARPE

Dieu, par qui tout forfait s’expie,
Marche avec celui qui le sert.
Apparais dans la foule impie,
Tel que Jean, qui vint du désert.
Va donc, parle aux peuples du monde;
Dis-leur la tempête qui gronde,
Révèle le juge irrité;
Et, pour mieux frapper leur oreille,
Que ta voix s’élève, pareille
À la rumeur d’une cité!

LA LYRE

L’Aigle est l’oiseau du Dieu qu’avant tous on adore.
Du Caucase à l’Athos l’Aigle planant dans l’air,
Roi du feu qui féconde et du feu qui dévore,
Contemple le soleil et vole sur l’éclair!

LA HARPE

La Colombe descend du ciel qui la salue.
Et, voilant l’Esprit-Saint sous son regard de feu,
Chère au Vieillard choisi comme à la Vierge élue,
Porte un rameau dans l’arche, annonce au monde un Dieu!

LA LYRE

Aime! Eros règne à Gnide, à l’Olympe, au Tartare.
Son flambeau de Sestos allume le doux phare,
Il consume Ilion par la main de Pâris.
Toi, fuis de belle en belle, et change avec leurs charmes.
L’Amour n’enfante que des larmes;
Les Amours sont frères des Ris!

LA HARPE

L’Amour divin défend de la Haine infernale.
Cherche pour ton coeur pur une âme virginale;
Chéris-la, Jéhovah chérissait Israël.
Deux êtres que dans l’ombre unit un saint mystère
Passent en s’aimant sur la terre,
Comme deux exilés du ciel!

LA LYRE

Jouis! c’est au fleuve des ombres
Que va le fleuve des vivants.
Le sage, s’il a des jours sombres,
Les laisse aux dieux, les jette aux vents.
Enfin, comme un pale convive,
Quand la mort imprévue arrive,
De sa couche il lui tend la main;
Et, riant de ce qu’il ignore,
S’endort dans la nuit sans aurore,
En rêvant un doux lendemain!

LA HARPE

Soutiens ton frère qui chancelle,
Pleure si tu le vois souffrir;
Veille avec soin, prie avec zèle,
Vis en songeant qu’il faut mourir.
Le pécheur croit, lorsqu’il succombe,
Que le néant est dans la tombe,
Comme il est dans la volupté;
Mais quand l’ange impur le réclame,
Il s’épouvante d’être une âme,
Et frémit de l’Éternité!

Le poète écoutait, à peine à son aurore,
Ces deux lointaines voix qui descendaient du ciel;
Et plus tard il osa parfois, bien faible encore,

Dire à l’écho du Pinde un hymne du Carmel.

ODE TROISIÈME

MOÏSE SUR LE NIL

à Mme Amable Tastu

En ce même temps, la fille de Pharaon vint au fleuve pour se baigner, accompagnée de ses filles, qui marchaient le long du bord de l’eau. Exode.

“ Mes soeurs, l’onde est plus fraîche aux premiers feux du jour!
Venez: le moissonneur repose en son séjour;
La rive est solitaire encore;
Memphis élève à peine un murmure confus;
Et nos chastes plaisirs, sous ces bosquets touffus,
N’ont d’autre témoin que l’aurore.

“ Au palais de mon père on voit briller les arts;
Mais ces bords pleins de fleurs charment plus mes regards
Qu’un bassin d’or ou de porphyre;
Ces chants aériens sont mes concerts chéris;
Je préfère aux parfums qu’on brûle en nos lambris
Le souffle embaumé du zéphire!

“ Venez: l’onde est si calme et le ciel est si pur!
Laissez sur ces buissons flotter les plis d’azur
De vos ceintures transparentes;
Détachez ma couronne et ces voiles jaloux;
Car je veux aujourd’hui folâtrer avec vous,
Au sein des vagues murmurantes.

“ Hâtons-nous... Mais parmi les brouillards du matin,
Que vois-je? - Regardez à l’horizon lointain...
Ne craignez rien, filles timides!
C’est sans doute, par l’onde entraîné vers les mers,
Le tronc d’un vieux palmier qui, du fond des déserts,
Vient visiter les Pyramides.

“ Que dis-je? Si j’en crois mes regards indécis,
C’est la barque d’Hermès ou la conque d’Isis,
Que pousse une brise légère.
Mais non; c’est un esquif où, dans un doux repos,
J’aperçois un enfant qui dort au sein des flots,
Comme on dort au sein de sa mère.

“ Il sommeille; et, de loin, à voir son lit flottant,
On croirait voir voguer sur le fleuve inconstant
Le nid d’une blanche colombe.
Dans sa couche enfantine il erre au gré du vent;
L’eau le balance, il dort, et le gouffre mouvant
Semble le bercer dans sa tombe!

“ Il s’éveille: accourez, ô vierges de Memphis!
Il crie... Ah! quelle mère a pu livrer son fils
Au caprice des flots mobiles?
Il tend les bras; les eaux grondent de toute part.
Hélas! contre la mort il n’a d’autre rempart
Qu’un berceau de roseaux fragiles.

“ Sauvons-le... - C’est peut-être un enfant d’Israël.
Mon père les proscrit; mon père est bien cruel
De proscrire ainsi l’innocence!
Faible enfant! ses malheurs ont ému mon amour,
Je veux être sa mère: il me devra le jour,
S’il ne me doit pas la naissance. “

Ainsi parlait Iphis, l’espoir d’un roi puissant,
Alors qu’aux bords du Nil son cortège innocent
Suivait sa course vagabonde;
Et ces jeunes beautés qu’elle effaçait encor,
Quand la Fille des Rois quittait ses voiles d’or,
Croyaient voir la Fille de l’Onde.

Sous ses pieds délicats déjà le flot frémit.

Tremblante, la pitié vers l’enfant qui gémit
La guide en sa marche craintive;
Elle a saisi l’esquif! Fière de ce doux poids,
L’orgueil sur son beau front, pour la première fois,
Se mêle à la pudeur naïve.

Bientôt, divisant l’onde et brisant les roseaux,
Elle apporte à pas lents l’enfant sauvé des eaux
Sur le bord de l’arène humide;
Et ses soeurs tour à tour, au front du nouveau-né,
Offrant leur doux sourire à son oeil étonné,
Déposaient un baiser timide!

Accours, toi qui, de loin, dans un doute cruel,
Suivais des yeux ton fils sur qui veillait le ciel;
Viens ici comme une étrangère;
Ne crains rien: en pressant Moïse entre tes bras,
Tes pleurs et tes transports ne te trahiront pas,
Car Iphis n’est pas encor mère!

Alors, tandis qu’heureuse et d’un pas triomphant,
La vierge au roi farouche amenait l’humble enfant,
Baigné des larmes maternelles,
On entendait en choeur, dans les cieux étoilés,
Des anges, devant Dieu de leurs ailes voilés,
Chanter les lyres éternelles.

“ Ne gémis plus, Jacob, sur la terre d’exil;
Ne mêle plus tes pleurs aux flots impurs du Nil:
Le Jourdain va t’ouvrir ses rives.
Le jour enfin approche où vers les champs promis
Gessen verra s’enfuir, malgré leurs ennemis,
Les tribus si longtemps captives.

“ Sous les traits d’un enfant délaissé sur les flots,
C’est l’élu du Sina, c’est le roi des fléaux,
Qu’une vierge sauve de l’onde.

Mortels, vous dont l’orgueil méconnaît l’Éternel,
Fléchissez: un berceau va sauver Israël,
Un berceau doit sauver le monde! “

ODE QUATRIÈME

LE DÉVOUEMENT

In urbi omne mortalium genus vis pestilentiae depopulabatur, nulla coeli intemperie quae occurreret oculis. Sed domus corporibus exanimis, itinera funeribus complebantur; non sexus, non aetas periculo vacua. TACITE.

Dans la ville, la peste dévorait tout ce qui meurt; aucun nuage dans le ciel ne s’offrait aux yeux; mais les maisons étaient pleines de corps sans vie, les voies de funérailles. Ni le sexe ni l’âge n’étaient exempts du péril.

I

Je rends grâce au Seigneur: il m’a donné la vie!
La vie est chère à l’homme, entre les dons du ciel;
Nous bénissons toujours le Dieu qui nous convie
Au banquet d’absinthe et de miel.
Un noeud de fleurs se mêle aux fers qui nous enlacent;
Pour vieillir parmi ceux qui passent,
Tout homme est content de souffrir;
L’éclat du jour nous plaît; l’air des cieux nous enivre.
Je rends grâce au Seigneur: - c’est le bonheur de vivre
Qui fait la gloire de mourir!

Malheureux le mortel qui meurt, triste victime,
Sans qu’un frère sauvé vive par son trépas,
Sans refermer sur lui, comme un Romain sublime,
Le gouffre où se perdent ses pas!
Infortuné le peuple, en proie à l’anathème,
Qui voit, se consumant lui-même,
Périr son nom et son orgueil,
Sans que toute la terre à sa chute s’incline,
Sans qu’un beau souvenir reste sur sa ruine,
Comme un flambeau sur un cercueil!

II

Quand Dieu, las de forfaits, se lève en sa colère,
Il suscite un Fléau formidable aux cités,
Qui laisse après sa fuite un effroi séculaire
Aux murs, longtemps inhabités.
D’un vil germe, ignoré des peuples en démence,
Un Géant pâle, un Spectre immense
Sort et grandit au milieu d’eux;
Et la Ville veut fuir, mais le Monstre fidèle,
Comme un horrible époux, la couvre de son aile,
Et l’étreint de ses bras hideux!

Le peuple en foule alors sous le mal qui fermente
Tombe, ainsi qu’en nos champs la neige aux blancs flocons;
Tout succombe, et partout la mort qui s’alimente
Renaît des cadavres féconds.
Le monstre l’une à l’autre enchaîne ses victimes;
Il les traîne aux mêmes abîmes;
Il se repaît de leurs lambeaux;
Et, parmi les bûchers, le deuil et les décombres,
Les vivants sans abris, tels que d’impures ombres,
Errent loin des morts sans tombeaux.

Quand le cirque s’ouvrait, aux jours des funérailles,
Tous les Romains en paix, par leurs licteurs couverts,
Voyaient de loin lutter les captifs des batailles,
Livrés aux tigres des déserts.
Ainsi dans leur effroi les nations s’assemblent;
Un long cri monte aux cieux qui tremblent,
Au loin de mers en mers porté.
Le monde armé, craignant l’Hydre aux ailes rapides,
Garde sous leur fléau ces mourants homicides,
Et les menace, épouvanté!

III

Alors n’est-il pas vrai, sybarites des villes,
Que les jeux sont plus doux, et les plaisirs meilleurs,
Lorsqu’un mal plus affreux que les haines civiles
Sème en d’autres murs les douleurs?
Loin des couches de feu qu’infecte un germe immonde,
Qu’avec charme l’enfant du monde
Sur un lit parfumé s’endort!
Et qu’on savoure mieux l’air natal de la vie,
Quand tout un peuple en deuil, qui pleure et nous envie,
Respire ailleurs un vent de mort!

Chacun reste absorbé dans un cercle éphémère.
La mère embrasse en paix l’enfant qui lui sourit,
Sans s’informer des lieux où le sein d’une mère
Est mortel au fils qu’il nourrit!
Quelque pitié vulgaire au fond des coeurs s’éveille,
Entre les fêtes de la veille
Et les fêtes du lendemain;
Car tels sont les humains, plaindre les importune.
Ils passent à côté d’une grande infortune,
Sans s’arrêter sur le chemin.

IV

Quelques hommes pourtant, qu’un feu secret anime,
Se lèvent de la foule, et chacun dans leurs yeux
Cherche quel beau destin, quel avenir sublime
Rayonne sur leurs fronts joyeux. -
Un triomphe éclatant peut-être les réclame?
Quel espoir enivre leur âme?
Quel bien? quel trésor? quel honneur?... -
Ainsi toujours, hélas! dans ce monde stérile,
Si la vertu paraît, à son aspect tranquille
Nous la prenons pour le bonheur!

Ô peuples! ces mortels, qu’un Dieu guide et seconde,
Vont d’un pas assuré, d’un regard radieux,

Combattre le fléau devant qui fuit le monde:
Adressez-leur vos longs adieux.
Et vous, ô leurs parents, leurs épouses, leurs mères!
Contenez vos larmes amères;
Laissez les victimes s’offrir;
Ne les poursuivez pas de plaintes téméraires;
Devaient-ils préférer aucun d’entre leurs frères
À ceux pour qui l’on peut mourir?

Bientôt s’ouvre pour eux la cité solitaire.
Mille spectres vivants les appellent en pleurs,
Surpris qu’il soit encore un. mortel sur la terre
Qui vienne au cri de leurs douleurs.
Ils parlent; et déjà leur voix rassure et guide
Ces peuples qu’un fléau livide
Pousse au tombeau d’un bras de fer,
Et le monstre, attaqué dans les murs qu’il opprime,
Frémit comme Satan, quand, sauveur et victime,
Un Dieu parut dans son enfer!

Ils contemplent de près l’hydre non assouvie.
Pour ravir ses secrets résignés à leur sort,
Leur art audacieux lui dispute la vie,
Ou l’interroge dans la mort.
Quand leurs secours sont vains, leur prière console.
Le mourant croit à leur parole
Que le ciel ne peut démentir;
Et si le trépas même, enfin, frappe leur tête,
De l’apôtre serein l’humble voix ne s’arrête
Qu’au dernier souffle du martyr!

V

Ô mortels trop heureux! qui pourrait vous atteindre,
Vous qui domptez la mort en affrontant ses coups?
Lorsqu’en vous admirant la foule ose vous plaindre
Je vous suis de mes pleurs jaloux.

Infortuné! jamais, victime volontaire,
Je n’irai, pour. sauver la terre,
Braver un fléau dévorant,
Ni, calmant par mes soins ses douleurs meurtrières,
Mêler ma plainte amie et mes saintes prières
Aux soupirs impurs d’un mourant!

Hélas! ne puis-je aussi m’immoler pour mes frères?
N’est-il plus d’opprimés? n’est-il plus de bourreaux?
Sur quel noble échafaud, dans quels murs funéraires
Chercher le trépas des héros?
Oui, que brisant mon corps, la torture sanglante,
Sur la croix, à ma soif brûlante
Offre le breuvage de fiel;
Fier et content, Seigneur, je dirai vos louanges;
Car l’ange du martyre est le plus beau des anges
Qui portent les âmes au ciel!

ODE CINQUIÈME

À L’ACADÉMIE DES JEUX FLORAUX

At mihi jam puero coelestia sacra placebant,
Inque suum furtim musa trahebat opus. OVIDE.

Vous dont le poétique empire
S’étend des bords du Rhône aux rives de l’Adour,
Vous dont l’art tout-puissant n’est qu’un joyeux délire,
Rois des combats du chant, rois des jeux de la lyre,
Ô maîtres du savoir d’amour!

Aussi belle qu’à sa naissance,
Votre muse se rit des ans et des douleurs;
Le temps semble en passant respecter son enfance;
Et la gloire, à ses yeux se voilant d’innocence,
Cache ses lauriers sous des fleurs.

Salut! - Enfant, j’ai pour ma mère
Cueilli quelques rameaux dans vos sacrés bosquets,
Votre main s’est offerte à ma main téméraire;
Étranger, vous m’avez accueilli comme un frère,
Et fait asseoir dans vos banquets.

Parmi les juges de l’arène
L’athlète fut admis, vainqueur bien faible encor.
Jamais pourtant, errant sur les monts de Pyrène,
Il n’avait réveillé de belle suzeraine
Aux sons hospitaliers du cor.

D’une fée, aux lointaines sphères,
Jamais il n’avait dit les magiques jardins;
Ni, le soir, pour charmer des dames peu sévères,
Conté, près du foyer, les exploits des trouvères,
Et les amours des paladins.

D’autres, d’une voix immortelle,
Vous peindront d’heureux jours en de joyeux accords.
Moi, la douleur m’éprouve, et mes chants viennent d’elle.
Je souffre et je console, et ma muse fidèle
Se souvient de ceux qui sont morts!

ODE SIXIÈME

LE GÉNIE

à M. Le Vicomte de Chateaubriand

Les circonstances ne forment pas les hommes; elles les montrent: elles dévoilent, pour ainsi dire, la royauté du Génie, dernière ressource des peuples éteints. Ces rois qui n'en ont pas le nom, mais qui règnent véritablement par la force du caractère et la grandeur des pensées, sont élus par les événements auxquels ils doivent commander. Sans ancêtres et sans postérité, seuls de leur race, leur mission remplie ils disparaissent en laissant à l'avenir des ordres qu'il exécutera fidèlement. F. DE LA MENNAIS.

I

Malheur à l'enfant de la terre,
Qui, dans ce monde injuste et vain,
Porte en son âme solitaire
Un rayon de l'esprit divin!
Malheur à lui! l'impure envie
S'acharne sur sa noble vie,
Semblable au Vautour éternel,
Et, de son triomphe irritée,
Punit ce nouveau Prométhée
D'avoir ravi le feu du ciel!

La Gloire, fantôme céleste,
Apparaît de loin à ses yeux;
Il subit le pouvoir funeste
De son sourire impérieux!
Ainsi l'oiseau, faible et timide,
Veut en vain fuir l'hydre perfide
Dont l'oeil le charme et le poursuit,
Il voltige de cime en cime,

Puis il accourt, et meurt victime
Du doux regard qui l'a séduit.

Ou, s'il voit luire enfin l'aurore
Du jour, promis à ses efforts;
Vivant, si son front se décore
Du laurier, qui croît pour les morts;
L'erreur, l'ignorance hautaine,
L'injure impunie et la haine
Usent les jours de l'immortel.
Du malheur imposant exemple,
La Gloire l'admet dans son temple,
Pour l'immoler sur son autel!

II

Pourtant, fallût-il être en proie
À l'injustice, à la douleur,
Qui n'accepterait avec joie
Le génie, au prix du malheur?
Quel mortel, sentant dans son âme
S'éveiller la céleste flamme
Que le temps ne saurait ternir,
Voudrait, redoutant sa victoire,
Au sein d'un bonheur sans mémoire,
Fuir son triste et noble avenir?

Chateaubriand, je t'en atteste,
Toi qui, déplacé parmi nous,
Reçus du ciel le don funeste
Qui blesse notre orgueil jaloux:
Quand ton nom doit survivre aux âges,
Que t'importe, avec ses outrages,
À toi, géant, un peuple nain?
Tout doit un tribut au génie.
Eux, ils n'ont que la calomnie:
Le serpent n'a que son venin.

Brave la haine empoisonnée;
Le nocher rit des flots mouvants,
Lorsque sa poupe couronnée
Entre au port, à l'abri des vents.
Longtemps ignoré dans le monde,
Ta nef a lutté contre l'onde
Souvent prête à l'ensevelir;
Ainsi jadis le vieil Homère
Errait inconnu sur la terre,
Qu'un jour son nom devait remplir.

III

Jeune encor, quand des mains du crime
La France en deuil reçut des fers,
Tu fuis: le souffle qui t'anime
S'éveilla dans l'autre univers.
Contemplant ces vastes rivages,
Ces grands fleuves, ces bois sauvages,
Aux humains tu disais adieu;
Car dans ces lieux que l'homme ignore
Du moins ses pas n'ont point encore
Effacé les traces de Dieu.

Tu vins, dans un temps plus tranquille,
Fouler cette terre des arts
Où croît le laurier de Virgile,
Où tombent les murs des Césars.
Tu vis la Grèce humble et domptée:
Hélas! il n'est plus de Tyrtée
Chez ces peuples, jadis si grands;
Les grecs courbent leurs fronts serviles,
Et le rocher des Thermopyles
Porte les tours de leurs tyrans!

Ces cités, que vante l'histoire,

Pleurent leurs enfants aguerris;
Le vieux souvenir de leur gloire
N'habite plus que leurs débris.
Les dieux ont fui: dans les prairies,
Adieu les blanches théories!
Plus de jeux, plus de saints concerts!
Adieu les fêtes fraternelles!
L'airain, qui gronde aux Dardanelles,
Trouble seul les temples déserts.

Mais si la Grèce est sans prestiges,
Tu savais des lieux solennels
Où sont de plus sacrés vestiges,
Des monuments plus éternels,
Une tombe pleine de vie,
Et Jérusalem asservie
Qu'un pacha foule sans remord,
Et le bédouin, fils du Numide,
Et Carthage, et la Pyramide,
Tente immobile de la mort!

Enfin, au foyer de tes pères,
Tu vins, rapportant pour trésor
Tes maux aux rives étrangères,
Et les hautes leçons du sort.
Tu déposas ta douce lyre:
Dès lors, la raison qui t'inspire
Au sénat parla par ta voix;
Et la Liberté rassurée
Confia sa cause sacrée
À ton bras, défenseur des Rois.

Dans cette arène où l'on t'admire,
Sois fier d'avoir tant combattu,
Honoré du double martyre
Du génie et de la vertu.
Poursuis, remplis notre espérance;

Sers ton prince, éclaire la France,
Dont les destins vont s’accomplir.
L’Anarchie, altière et servile,
Pâlit devant ton front tranquille
Qu’un tyran n’a point fait pâlir.

Que l’envie, aux pervers unie,
Te poursuive de ses clameurs,
Ton noble essor, fils du Génie,
T’enlève à ces vaines rumeurs;
Tel l’oiseau du Cap des Tempêtes
Voit les nuages sur nos têtes
Rouler leurs flots séditieux;
Pour lui, loin des bruits de la terre,
Bercé par son vol solitaire,
Il va s’endormir dans les cieux!

ODE SEPTIÈME

LA FILLE D’O-TAÏTI

Que fait-il donc, celui que sa douleur attend?
Sans doute il n’arrive pas, celui qu’elle aime tant.
ALFRED DE VIGNY, Dolorida.

“ Oh! dis-moi, tu veux fuir? et la voile inconstante
Va bientôt de ces bords t’enlever à mes yeux?
Cette nuit j’entendais, trompant ma douce attente,
Chanter les matelots qui repliaient leur tente.
Je pleurais à leurs cris joyeux.

“ Pourquoi quitter notre île? En ton île étrangère,
Les cieux sont-ils plus beaux? a-t-on moins de douleurs?
Les tiens, quand tu mourras, pleureront-ils leur frère?
Couvriront-ils tes os du plane funéraire
Dont on ne cueille pas les fleurs?

“ Te souvient-il du jour où les vents salutaires
T’amenèrent vers nous pour la première fois?
Tu m’appelas de loin sous nos bois solitaires,
Je ne t’avais point vu jusqu’alors sur nos terres,
Et pourtant je vins à ta voix.

“ Oh! j’étais belle alors; mais les pleurs m’ont flétrie.
Reste, ô jeune étranger! ne me dis pas adieu.
Ici, nous parlerons de ta mère chérie;
Tu sais que je me plais aux chants de ta patrie,
Comme aux louanges de ton Dieu.

“ Tu rempliras mes jours; à toi je m’abandonne.
Que t’ai-je fait pour fuir? Demeure sous nos cieux.
Je guérirai tes maux, je serai douce et bonne,
Et je t’appellerai du nom que l’on te donne

Dans le pays de tes aïeux!

“ Je serai, si tu veux, ton esclave fidèle,
Pourvu que ton regard brille à mes yeux ravis.
Reste, ô jeune étranger! reste, et je serai belle.
Mais tu n’aimes qu’un temps, comme notre hirondelle;
Moi, je t’aime comme je vis.

“ Hélas! tu veux partir. - Aux monts qui t’ont vu naître,
Sans doute quelque vierge espère ton retour.
Eh bien! daigne avec toi m’emmener, ô mon maître!
Je lui serai soumise, et l’aimerai peut-être,
Si ta joie est dans son amour!

“ Loin de mes vieux parents, qu’un tendre orgueil enivre,
Du bois où dans tes bras j’accourus sans effroi,
Loin des fleurs, des palmiers, je ne pourrai plus vivre.
Je mourrais seule ici. Va, laisse-moi te suivre,
Je mourrai du moins près de toi.

“ Si l’humble bananier accueillit ta venue,
Si tu m’aimas jamais, ne me repousse pas.
Ne t’en va pas sans moi dans ton île inconnue,
De peur que ma jeune âme, errante dans la nue,
N’aille seule suivre tes pas! “

Quand le matin dora les voiles fugitives,
En vain on la chercha sous son dôme léger;
On ne la revit plus dans les bois, sur les rives.
Pourtant la douce vierge, aux paroles plaintives,
N’était pas avec l’étranger.

ODE HUITIÈME

L’HOMME HEUREUX

à M. Ulric Guttinguer

Beatus qui non prosper!

“ Je vous abhorre, ô dieux! Hélas! Si jeune encore,
Je puis déjà ce que je veux!
Accablé de vos dons, ô dieux, je vous abhorre.
Que vous ai-je donc fait pour combler tous mes voeux?

“ Du détroit de Léandre aux colonnes d’Alcide,
Mes vaisseaux parcourent les mers;
Mon palais engloutit, ainsi qu’un gouffre avide,
Les trésors des cités et les fruits des déserts.

“ Je dors au bruit des eaux, au son lointain des lyres,
Sur un lit aux pieds de vermeil;
Et sur mon front brûlant appelant les zéphires,
Dix vierges de l’Indus veillent pour mon sommeil.

“ Je laisse, en mes banquets, à l’ingrat parasite
Des mets que repousse ma main;
Et, dans les plats dorés, ma faim que rien n’excite
Dédaigne des poissons nourris de sang humain.

“ Aux bords du Tibre, aux monts qui vomissent les laves,
J’ai des jardins délicieux;
Mes domaines, partout couverts de mes esclaves,
Fatiguent mes coursiers, importunent mes yeux!

“ Je vois les grands me craindre et César me sourire;
Je protège les suppliants;
J’ai des pavés de marbre et des bains de porphyre;

Mon char est salué d’un peuple de clients.

“ Je m’ennuie au forum, je m’ennuie aux arènes;
Je demande à tous: Que fait-on?
Je fais jeter par jour un esclave aux murènes,
Et je m’amuse à peine à ce jeu de Caton.

“ Les femmes de l’Europe et celles de l’Asie
Touchent peu mon coeur déjà mort;
Dans une coupe d’or l’ennui me rassasie,
Et le pauvre qui pleure est jaloux de mon sort!

“ D’implacables faveurs me poursuivant sans cesse,
Vous m’avez flétri dans ma fleur,
Dieux! donnez l’espérance à ma froide jeunesse;
Je vous rends tous ces biens pour un peu de bonheur. “

Dans le temple, traînant sa langueur opulente,
Ainsi parlait Celsus de sa couche indolente.
Il blasphémait ses dieux; et, bénissant le ciel,
Un martyr expirait devant l’impur autel!

ODE NEUVIÈME

L’ÂME

Je ne sais quel destin trouble l’esprit des mortels; semblables à des cylindres, ils roulent çà et là, accablés d’une infinité de maux... Mais prends courage, la race des hommes est divine; lorsque, dépouillé de ton corps, tu t’élèveras dans les régions éthérées, la mort n’aura plus sur toi de pouvoir, tu seras un dieu immortel et incorruptible. Vers dorés de Pythagore.

I

Fils du ciel, je fuirai les honneurs de la terre;
Dans mon abaissement je mettrai mon orgueil;
Je suis le roi banni, superbe et solitaire,
Qui veut le trône ou le cercueil.
Je hais le bruit du monde, et je crains sa poussière.
La retraite, paisible et fière,
Réclame un coeur indépendant;
Je ne veux point d’esclave, et ne veux point de maître;
Laissez-moi rêver seul au désert de mon être: -
J’y cherche le buisson ardent.

Toi, qu’aux douleurs de l’homme un Dieu caché convie,
Compagne sous les cieux de l’humble humanité,
Passagère immortelle, esclave de la vie,
Et reine de l’éternité,
Âme! aux instants heureux comme aux heures funèbres,
Rayonne au fond de mes ténèbres,
Règne sur mes sens combattus;
Oh! de ton sceptre d’or romps leur chaîne fatale,
Et nuit et jour, pareille à l’antique vestale,
Veille au feu sacré des vertus.

Est-ce toi dont le souffle a visité ma lyre,
Ma lyre, chaste soeur des harpes de Sion;

Et qui viens dans ma nuit, avec un doux sourire,
Comme une belle vision?
Sur mes terrestres fers, ô vierge glorieuse,
Pose l’aile mystérieuse
Qui t’emporte au ciel dévoilé.
Viens-tu m’apprendre, écho de la voix infinie,
Quelque secret d’amour, de joie ou d’harmonie,
Que les anges t’ont révélé?

II

Vis-tu ces temps d’innocence,
Où, quand rien n’était maudit,
Dieu, content de sa puissance,
Fit le monde et s’applaudit?
Vis-tu, dans ces jours prospères,
Du jeune aïeul de nos pères
Ève enchanter le réveil,
Et, dans la sainte phalange,
Au front du premier archange
Luire le premier soleil?

Vis-tu, des torrents de l’être,
Parmi de brûlants sillons,
Les astres, joyeux de naître,
S’échapper en tourbillons;
Quand Dieu, dans sa paix féconde,
Penché de loin sur le monde,
Contemplait ces grands tableaux,
Lui, centre commun des âmes,
Foyer de toutes les flammes,
Océan de tous les flots?

III

Suivais-tu du Seigneur la marche solennelle,
Lorsque l’Esprit porta la parole éternelle

De l’abîme des eaux aux régions du feu;
Au jour où, menaçant la terre virginale,
Comme, d’un char léger pressant l’ardent essieu,
Un roi vaincu refuse une lutte inégale,
Le Chaos éperdu s’enfuyait devant Dieu?

As-tu vu, loin des cieux, châtiant ses complices,
Le Roi du mal, armé du sceptre des supplices,
Dans le gouffre où jamais la terreur ne s’endort?
Lieu funèbre, où, pleurant les songes de la terre,
Le crime se réveille, enfantant le remord,
Et qu’un Dieu visita, revêtu de mystère,
Quand d’enfer en enfer il poursuivit la Mort?

IV

Montre-moi l’Éternel, donnant, comme un royaume,
Le temps à l’éphémère et l’espace à l’atome;
Le vide obscur, des nuits tombeau silencieux;
Les foudres se croisant dans leur sphère tonnante,
Et la comète rayonnante,
Tramant sa chevelure éparse dans les cieux.

Mon esprit sur ton aile, ô puissante compagne,
Vole de fleur en fleur, de montagne en montagne,
Remonte aux champs d’azur d’où l’homme fut banni,
Du secret éternel lève le voile austère;
Car il voit plus loin que la terre;
Ma pensée est un monde errant dans l’infini.

V

Mais la vie, ô mon âme! a des pièges dans l’ombre.
Sois le guerrier captif qui garde sa prison,
Des feux de l’ennemi compte avec soin le nombre,
Et, sous le jour brûlant ainsi qu’en la nuit sombre,
Surveille au loin tout l’horizon.

Je ne suis point celui qu'une ardeur vaine enflamme,
Qui refuse à son coeur un amour chaste et saint,
Porte à Dagon l'encens que Jéhovah réclame,
Et, voyageur sans guide, erre autour de son âme,
Comme autour d'un cratère éteint.

Il n'ose, offrant à Dieu sa nudité parée,
Flétrir les fleurs d'Eden d'un souffle criminel;
Fils banni, qui, tramant sa misère ignorée,
Mendie et pleure, assis sur la borne sacrée
De l'héritage paternel.

Et les anges entre eux disent: " Voilà l'impie!
Il a bu des faux biens le philtre empoisonneur;
Devant le juste heureux que son crime s'expie;
Dieu rejette son âme! elle s'est assoupie
Durant la veille du Seigneur. "

Toi, - puisses-tu bientôt, secouant ma poussière,
Retourner radieuse au radieux séjour!
Tu remonteras pure à la source première,
Et, comme le soleil emporte sa lumière,
Tu n'emporteras que l'amour!

VI

Malheureux l'insensé dont la vue asservie
Ne sent point qu'un esprit s'agite dans la vie!
Mortel, il reste sourd à la voix du tombeau;
Sa pensée est sans aile et son coeur est sans flamme;
Car il marche, ignorant son âme,
Tel qu'un aveugle errant qui porte un vain flambeau.

ODE DIXIÈME

LE CHANT DE L’ARÈNE

Généreux Grecs, voilà les prix que remporteront les vainqueurs. HOMÈRE.

L’athlète, vainqueur dans l’arène,
Est en honneur dans la cité;
    Son nom, sans que le temps l’entraîne,
    Par les peuples est répété,
    Depuis cette plage inféconde
    Où dort sur la borne du monde
    L’Hiver, vieillard au dur sommeil,
    Jusqu’aux lieux où, quand naît l’aurore,
    On entend, sous l’onde sonore,
    Hennir les coursiers du Soleil.

    Voici la fête d’Olympie!
    Tressez l’acanthe et le laurier!
    Que les dieux confondent l’impie!
    Que l’antique audace assoupie
    Se réveille au coeur du guerrier!

    Venez, vous que la gloire enchaîne!
    Voyez les prêtres d’Apollon,
    Pour votre victoire prochaine,
    Ravir des couronnes au chêne
    Qui jadis a vaincu Milon!

    Venez de Corinthe et de Crète,
    De Tyr aux tissus précieux,
    De Scylla, que bat la tempête,
    Et d’Athos, où l’aigle s’arrête
    Pour voir de plus haut dans les cieux!

    Venez de l’île des Colombes,

Venez des mers de l’Archipel,
De Rhode, aux riches hécatombes,
Dont les guerriers jusqu’en leurs tombes
De Bellone entendent l’appel!

Venez du palais centenaire
Dont Cécrops a fondé la tour;
D’Argos, de Sparte qu’on vénère;
De Lemnos où naît le tonnerre,
D’Amathonte où naquit l’amour!

Les temples saints, les gynécées,
Chargés de verdoyant festons,
Tels que de jeunes fiancées,
Sous des guirlandes enlacées,
Ont caché leurs chastes frontons.

Les Archontes et les Éphores
Dans le stade se sont assis;
Les vierges et les canéphores
Ont purifié les amphores
Suivant les rites d’Éleusis.

On a consulté la Pythie,
Et ceux qui parlent en rêvant.
À l’heure où s’éveille Clytie,
D’un vautour fauve de Scythie
On a jeté la plume au vent.

Le vainqueur de la course agile
Recevra deux trépieds divins,
Et la coupe, agreste et fragile,
Dont Bacchus a touché l’argile,
Lorsqu’il goûta les premiers vins.

Celui dont le disque mobile
Renversera les trois faisceaux,

Aura cette urne indélébile,
Que sculpta d’une main habile
Phlégon, du pays de Naxos.

Juges de la gloire innocente,
Nous offrons au lutteur ardent
Une chlamyde éblouissante
De Sydon, qui, riche et puissante,
Joint le caducée au trident.

Lutteurs, discoboles, athlètes,
Réparez vos forces au bain;
Puis venez vaincre dans nos fêtes,
Afin d’obtenir des poètes
Un chant sur le mode thébain!

L’athlète, vainqueur dans l’arène,
Est en honneur dans la cité;
Son nom, sans que le temps l’entraîne,
Par les peuples est répété,
Depuis cette plage inféconde
Où dort sur la borne du monde
L’Hiver, vieillard au dur sommeil,
Jusqu’aux lieux où, quand naît l’aurore,
On entend sous l’onde sonore
Hennir les coursiers du Soleil.

ODE ONZIÈME

LE CHANT DU CIRQUE

Panem et circenses! JUVÉNAL.

César, empereur magnanime,
Le monde, à te plaire unanime,
À tes fêtes doit concourir!
Éternel héritier d’Auguste,
Salut! prince immortel et juste,
César! sois salué par ceux qui vont mourir!

Seul entre tous les rois, César aux dieux de Rome
Peut en libations offrir le sang de l’homme.
À nos solennités nous invitons la Mort.
De monstres pour nos jeux nous dépeuplons le monde;
Nous mêlons dans le cirque, où fume un sang immonde,
Les tigres d’Hyrcanie aux barbares du Nord.

Des colosses d’airain, des vases de porphyre,
Des ancres, des drapeaux que gonfle le zéphyre,
Parent du champ fatal les murs éblouissants;
Les parfums chargent l’air d’un odorant nuage,
Car le peuple romain aime que le carnage
Exhale ses vapeurs parmi des flots d’encens.

Des portes tout à coup les gonds d’acier g émissent.
La foule entre en froissant les grilles qui frémissent;
Les panthères dans l’ombre ont tressailli d’effroi,
Et, poussant mille cris qu’un long bruit accompagne,
Comme un fleuve épandu de montagne en montagne,
De degrés en degrés roule le peuple-roi.

Les deux chaises d’ivoire ont reçu les édiles.
L’hippopotame informe et les noirs crocodiles

Nagent autour du cirque en un large canal;
Dans leurs cages de fer les cinq cents lions grondent;
Les vestales en choeur, dont les chants se répondent,
Apportent l’autel chaste et le feu virginal.

L’oeil ardent, le sein nu, l’impure courtisane
Près du foyer sacré pose un trépied profane.
On voile de cyprès l’autel des suppliants.
À travers leur cortège et de rois et d’esclaves,
Les sénateurs, vêtus d’augustes laticlaves,
Dans la foule, de loin, comptent tous leurs clients.

Chaque vierge est assise auprès d’une matrone.
À la voix des tribuns, on voit autour du trône
Les soldats du prétoire en cercle se ranger;
Les prêtres de Cybèle entonnent la louange;
Et, sur de vils tréteaux, les histrions du Gange
Chantent, en attendant ceux qui vont s’égorger.

Les voilà!... - Tout le peuple applaudit et menace
Ces captifs, que César d’un bras puissant ramasse
Des temples de Manès aux antres d’ Irmensul.
Ils entrent tour à tour, et le licteur les nomme;
Vil troupeau, que la mort garde aux plaisirs de Rome,
Et que d’un fer brûlant a marqué le consul!

On découvre en leurs rangs, à leur tête penchée,
Des Juifs, traînant partout une honte cachée;
Plus loin, d’altiers Gaulois que nul péril n’abat;
Et d’infâmes Chrétiens, qui, dépouillés d’armures,
Refusant aux bourreaux leurs chants ou leurs murmures,
Vont souffrir sans orgueil et mourir sans combat.

Bientôt, quand rugiront les bêtes échappées,
Les murs, tout hérissés de piques et d’épées,
Livreront cette proie entière à leur fureur.
Du trône de César la pourpre orne le faîte,

Afin qu’un jour plus doux, durant l’ardente fête,
Flatte les yeux divins du clément empereur.

César, empereur magnanime,
Le monde, à te plaire unanime,
À tes fêtes doit concourir!
Éternel héritier d’Auguste,
Salut! prince immortel et juste,
César! sois salué par ceux qui vont mourir!

ODE DOUZIÈME

LE CHANT DU TOURNOI

Servants d’amour, regardez doucement
Aux échafauds anges de paradis;
Lors jouterez fort et joyeusement,
Et vous serez honorés et chéris.
Ancienne ballade.

Largesse, ô chevaliers! largesse aux suivants d’armes!
Venez tous! soit qu’au sein des jeux ou des alarmes,
Votre écu de Milan porte le vert dragon,
Le manteau noir d’Agra, semé de blanches larmes,
La fleur de lys de France, ou la croix d’Aragon.

Déjà la lice est ouverte;
Les clercs en ont fait le tour;
La bannière blanche et verte
Flotte au front de chaque tour;
La foule éclate en paroles:
Les légères banderoles
Se mêlent en voltigeant;
Et le héros du portique
Sur l’or de sa dalmatique
Suspend le griffon d’argent.

Les maisons peuplent leur faîte;
Au loin gronde le beffroi;
Tout nous promet une fête
Digne des regards du roi.
La reine, à ce jour suprême,
A de son épargne même
Consacré douze deniers,
Et pour l’embellir encore,
Racheté des fers du Maure

Douze chrétiens prisonniers.

Or, comme la loi l’ordonne,
Chevaliers au coeur loyal,
Avant que le clairon sonne,
Écoutez l’édit royal!
Car, sans l’entendre en silence,
Celui qui saisit la lance
N’a plus qu’un glaive maudit.
Croyez ces conseils prospères!
C’est ce qu’ont dit à nos pères
Ceux à qui Dieu l’avait dit!

D’abord, des saintes louanges
Chantez les versets bénis,
Chantez Jésus, les Archanges,
Et monseigneur saint Denis!
Jurez sur les Évangiles
Que, si vos bras sont fragiles,
Rien ne ternit votre honneur;
Que vous pourrez, s’il se lève,
Montrer au roi votre glaive,
Comme votre âme au Seigneur!

D’un saint touchez la dépouille!
Jurez, comtes et barons,
Que nulle fange ne souille
L’or pur de vos éperons!
Que de ses vassaux fidèles,
Dans ses noires citadelles,
Nul de vous n’est le bourreau!
Que, du sort bravant l’épreuve,
Pour l’orphelin et la veuve
Votre épée est sans fourreau!

Preux que l’honneur accompagne,
N’oubliez pas les vertus

Des vieux pairs de Charlemagne,
Des vieux champions d’Artus!
Malheur au vainqueur sans gloire,
Qui doit sa lâche victoire
À de hideux nécromants!
Honte au guerrier sans vaillance
Qui combat la noble lance
Avec d’impurs talismans!

Un jour, sur les murs funestes
De son infâme château,
On voit pendre ses vils restes
Aux bras d’un sanglant poteau;
Éternisant ses supplices,
Les enchanteurs, ses complices,
Dans les ombres déchaînés,
Parmi d’affreux sortilèges
À leurs festins sacrilèges
Mêlent ses os décharnés!

Mais gloire au guerrier austère!
Gloire au pieux châtelain!
Chaque belle sans mystère
Brode son nom sur le lin.
Le mélodieux trouvère
À son glaive, qu’on révère,
Consacre un chant immortel;
Dans sa tombe est une fée;
Et l’on donne à son trophée
Pour piédestal un autel.

Donc, en vos âmes courtoises,
Gravez, pairs et damoisels,
La loi des joutes gauloises
Et des galants carrousels!
Par les juges de l’épée,
Par leur belle détrompée,

Les félons seront honnis.
Leur opprobre est sans refuges;
Ceux qui condamnent les juges
Par les dames sont punis!

Largesse, ô chevaliers! largesse aux suivants d’armes!
Venez tous! soit qu’au sein des jeux ou des alarmes,
Votre écu de Milan porte le vert dragon,
Le manteau noir d’Agra, semé de blanches larmes,
La fleur de lys de France, ou la croix d’Aragon.

ODE TREIZIÈME

L'ANTÉCHRIST

Après que les mille ans seront accomplis, Satan sera délié; il sortira de sa prison, et il séduira les nations qui sont aux quatre coins du monde, Gog et Magog. SAINT JEAN, Apocalypse.

I

Il viendra, - quand viendront les dernières ténèbres;
Que la source des jours tarira ses torrents;
Qu'on verra les soleils, au front des nuits funèbres,
Pâlir comme des yeux mourants;
Quand l'abîme inquiet rendra des bruits dans l'ombre;
Que l'enfer comptera le nombre
De ses soldats audacieux;
Et qu'enfin le fardeau de la suprême voûte
Fera, comme un vieux char tout poudreux de sa route,
Crier l'axe affaibli des cieux.

Il viendra, - quand la mère, au fond de ses entrailles,
Sentira tressaillir son fruit épouvanté;
Quand nul ne suivra plus les saintes funérailles
Du juste, en sa tombe attristé;
Lorsqu'approchant des mers sans lit et sans rivages,
L'homme entendra gronder, sous le vaisseau des âges,
La vague de l'éternité.

Il viendra, - quand l'orgueil, et le crime, et la haine,
De l'antique Alliance enfreint le voeu;
Quand les peuples verront, craignant leur fin prochaine,
Du monde décrépit se détacher la chaîne;
Les astres se heurter dans leurs chemins de feu;
Et dans le ciel, - ainsi qu'en ses salles oisives
Un hôte se promène, attendant ses convives, -

Passer et repasser l’ombre immense de Dieu.

II

Parmi les nations il luira comme un signe.
Il viendra des captifs dissiper la rançon;
Le Seigneur l’enverra pour dévaster la vigne,
Et pour disperser la moisson.
Les peuples ne sauront, dans leur stupeur profonde,
Si ses mains dans quelque autre monde
Ont porté le sceptre ou les fers;
Et dans leurs chants de deuil et leurs hymnes de fête,
Ils se demanderont si les feux de sa tête
Sont des rayons ou des éclairs.

Tantôt ses traits au ciel emprunteront leurs charmes;
Tel qu’un ange, vêtu de radieuses armes,
Tout son corps brillera de reflets éclatants,
Et ses yeux souriront, baignés de douces larmes,
Comme la jeune aurore au front du beau printemps.

Tantôt, hideux amant de la nuit solitaire,
Noir dragon, déployant l’aile aux ongles de fer,
Pâle, et s’épouvantant de son propre mystère,
Du sein profané de la terre
Ses pas feront monter les vapeurs de l’enfer.

La nature entendra sa voix miraculeuse.
Son souffle emportera les cités aux déserts;
Il guidera des vents la course nébuleuse;
Il aura des chars dans les airs;
Il domptera la flamme, il marchera sur l’onde;
On verra l’arène inféconde
Sous ses pieds de fleurs s’émailler;
Et les astres sur lui descendre en auréole;
Et les morts tressaillir au bruit de sa parole,
Comme s’ils allaient s’éveiller!

Fleuve aux flots débordés, volcan aux noires laves,
Il n’aura point d’amis pour avoir plus d’esclaves;
Il pèsera sur tous de toute sa hauteur;
Le monde, où passera le funeste fantôme,
Paraîtra sa conquête et non pas son royaume;
Il ne sera qu’un maître où Dieu fut un pasteur.

Il semblera, courbé sur la terre asservie,
Porter un autre poids, vivre d’une autre vie.
Il ne pourra vieillir, il ne pourra changer.
Les fleurs que nous cueillons pour lui seront flétries;
Sans tendresse et sans foi, dans toutes nos patries
Il sera comme un étranger.

Son attente jamais ne sera l’espérance;
Battu de ses désirs comme d’un flot des mers,
Sa science en secret envîra l’ignorance,
Et n’aura que des fruits amers.
Il bravera l’arrêt suspendu sur sa tête
Calme, comme avant la tempête,
Et muet, comme après la mort;
Et son coeur ne sera qu’une arène insensible
Où, dans le noir combat d’un hymen impossible,
Le Crime étreindra le Remord!

Du temps prêt à finir il saisira le reste.
Son bras du dernier port éteindra le fanal!
Dieu, qui combla de maux son envoyé céleste,
Accablera de biens le Messie infernal.
Couché sur ses plaisirs ainsi que sur des proies,
Ses yeux n’exprimeront, durant son vain pouvoir,
Que la honte cachée au sein des fausses joies,
Et l’orgueil qui se lève au fond du désespoir.

De l’enfer aux mortels apportant les messages,
Sa main, semant l’erreur au champ de la raison,

Mêlera dans sa coupe, où boiront les faux sages,
Les venins aux parfums et le miel au poison.
Comme un funèbre mur, entre le ciel et l’homme
Il osera placer un effroyable adieu;
Ses forfaits n’auront pas de langue qui les nomme;
Et l’athée effrayé dira: Voilà mon Dieu!

III

Enfin, quand ce héraut du suprême mystère
Aura de crime en crime usé ses noirs destins,
Que la sainte vertu, que la foi salutaire
Trouveront tous les coeurs éteints;
Quand du signe du meurtre et du sceau des supplices
Il aura marqué ses complices;
Que son troupeau sera compté;
Il quittera la vie ainsi qu’une demeure,
Et son règne ici-bas n’aura pour dernière heure
Que l’heure de l’éternité.

ODE QUATORZIÈME

ÉPITAPHE

Hic praeteritos commemora dies, aeternos meditare.

Jeune ou vieux, imprudent ou sage,
Toi qui, de cieux en cieux errant comme un nuage,
Suis l'instinct d'un plaisir ou l'appel d'un besoin,
Voyageur, où vas-tu si loin? -
N'est-ce donc pas ici le but de ton voyage?

La Mort, qui partout pose un pied victorieux,
A couvert mes splendeurs d'ombres expiatoires.
Mon nom même a subi son voile injurieux;
Et le morne oubli cache à ton oeil curieux
S'il est dans mon néant quelqu'une de tes gloires.

Passant, comme toi j'ai passé.
Le fleuve est revenu se perdre dans sa source.
Fais silence; assieds-toi sur ce marbre brisé.
Pose un instant le poids qui fatigue ta course:
J'eus de même un fardeau qu'ici j'ai déposé.

Si tu veux du repos, si tu cherches de l'ombre,
Ta couche est prête, accours! loin du bruit on y dort.
Si ton fragile esquif lutte sur la mer sombre,
Viens, c'est ici l'écueil; viens, c'est ici le port!

Ne sens-tu rien ici dont tressaille ton âme?
Rien, qui borne tes pas d'un cercle impérieux?
Sur l'asile qui te réclame,
Ne lis-tu pas ton nom en mots mystérieux?

Éphémère histrion qui sait son rôle à peine,
Chaque homme, ivre d'audace ou palpitant d'effroi,

Sous le sayon du pâtre ou la robe du roi,
Vient passer à son tour son heure sur la scène.

Ne foule pas les morts d’un pied indifférent:
Comme moi, dans leur ville il te faudra descendre;
L’homme de jour en jour s’en va pâle et mourant,
Et tu ne sais quel vent doit emporter ta cendre.

Mais devant moi ton coeur à peine est agité!
Quoi donc! pas un soupir! pas même une prière!
Tout ton néant te parle, et n’est point écouté!

Tu passes! - en effet, qu’importe cette pierre?
Que peut cacher la tombe à ton oeil attristé?
Quelques os desséchés, un reste de poussière,
Rien peut-être, - et l’éternité!

ODE QUINZIÈME

UN CHANT DE FÊTE DE NÉRON

À M. le comte Alfred de V.

Nescio quid molle atque facetum. HORACE.

Amis! l'ennui nous tue, et le sage l'évite!
Venez tous admirer la fête où vous invite
Néron, César, Consul pour la troisième fois;
Néron, maître du monde et dieu de l'harmonie,
Qui, sur le mode d'Ionie,
Chante, en s'accompagnant de la lyre à dix voix!

Que mon joyeux appel sur l'heure vous rassemble!
Jamais vous n'aurez eu tant de plaisirs ensemble,
Chez Pallas l'affranchi, chez le grec Agénor;
Ni dans ces gais festins, d'où s'exilait la gêne,
Où l'austère Sénèque, en louant Diogène,
Buvait le falerne dans l'or;

Ni lorsque sur le Tibre, Aglaé, de Phalère,
Demi-nue, avec nous voguait dans sa galère,
Sous des tentes d'Asie aux brillantes couleurs;
Ni quand, au son des luths, le préfet des Bataves
Jetait aux lions vingt esclaves,
Dont on avait caché les chaînes sous des fleurs!

Venez, Rome à vos yeux va brûler, - Rome entière!
J'ai fait sur cette tour apporter ma litière
Pour contempler la flamme en bravant ses torrents.
Que sont les vains combats des tigres et de l'homme?
Les sept monts aujourd'hui sont un grand cirque, où Rome
Lutte avec les feux dévorants.

C’est ainsi qu’il convient au maître de la terre
De charmer son ennui profond et solitaire!
Il doit lancer parfois la foudre, comme un dieu!
Mais, venez, la nuit tombe et la fête commence.
Déjà l’Incendie, hydre immense,
Lève son aile sombre et ses langues de feu!

Voyez-vous? voyez-vous? sur sa proie enflammée,
Il déroule en courant ses replis de fumée;
Il semble caresser ces murs qui vont périr;
Dans ses embrassements les palais s’évaporent...
— Oh! que n’ai-je aussi, moi, des baisers qui dévorent,
Des caresses qui font mourir!

Écoutez ces rumeurs, voyez ces vapeurs sombres,
Ces hommes dans les feux errant comme des ombres,
Ce silence de mort par degrés renaissant!
Les colonnes d’airain, les portes d’or s’écroulent!
Des fleuves de bronze qui roulent
Portent des flots de flamme au Tibre frémissant!

Tout périt! jaspe, marbre, et porphyre, et statues,
Malgré leurs noms divins dans la cendre abattues.
Le fléau triomphant vole au gré de mes voeux,
Il va tout envahir dans sa course agrandie,
Et l’Aquilon joyeux tourmente l’incendie,
Comme une tempête de feux.

Fier Capitole, adieu! - Dans les feux qu’on excite,
L’aqueduc de Sylla semble un pont du Cocyte.
Néron le veut: ces tours, ces dômes tomberont.
Bien: sur Rome, à la fois, partout, la flamme gronde!
— Rends-lui grâces, Reine du monde:
Vois quel beau diadème il attache à ton front!

Enfant, on me disait que les voix sibyllines
Promettaient l’avenir aux murs des sept collines,

Qu’aux pieds de Rome, enfin, mourrait le temps dompté,
Que son astre immortel n’était qu’à son aurore... -
Mes amis! dites-moi combien d’heures encore
Peut durer son éternité?

Qu’un incendie est beau lorsque la nuit est noire!
Érostrate lui-même eût envié ma gloire.
D’un peuple à mes plaisirs qu’importent les douleurs?
Il fuit: de toutes parts le brasier l’environne... -
Otez de mon front ma couronne,
Le feu qui brûle Rome en flétrirait les fleurs.

Quand le sang rejaillit sur vos robes de fête,
Amis, lavez la tache avec du vin de Crète;
L’aspect du sang n’est doux qu’au regard des méchants.
Couvrons un jeu cruel de voluptés sublimes.
Malheur à qui se plaît au cri de ses victimes! -
Il faut l’étouffer dans des chants.

Je punis cette Rome et je me venge d’elle!
Ne poursuit-elle pas d’un encens infidèle
Tour à tour Jupiter et ce Christ odieux?
Qu’enfin à leur niveau sa terreur me contemple!
Je veux avoir aussi mon temple,
Puisque ces vils Romains n’ont point assez de dieux.

J’ai détruit Rome, afin de la fonder plus belle.
Mais que sa chute au moins brise la croix rebelle!
Plus de chrétiens! allez, exterminez-les tous!
Que Rome de ses maux punisse en eux les causes;
Exterminez!... - Esclave! apporte-moi des roses,
Le parfum des roses est doux!

ODE SEIZIÈME

LA DEMOISELLE

Un rien sait l'animer; curieuse et volage,
Elle va parcourant tous les objets flatteurs,
Sans se fixer jamais, non plus que sur les fleurs
Les zéphyrs vagabonds, doux rivaux des abeilles,
Ou le baiser ravi sur des lèvres vermeilles.
ANDRÉ CHÉNIER.

Quand la demoiselle dorée
S'envole au départ des hivers,
Souvent sa robe diaprée,
Souvent son aile est déchirée
Aux mille dards des buissons verts.

Ainsi, jeunesse vive et frêle,
Qui, t'égarant de tous côtés,
Voles où ton instinct t'appelle,
Souvent tu déchires ton aile
Aux épines des voluptés.

ODE DIX-SEPTIÈME

À MON AMI S.-B.

Perseverando. DEVISE DES DUCIE.

L’aigle, c’est le génie! oiseau de la tempête,
Qui des monts les plus hauts cherche le plus haut faîte;
Dont le cri fier, du jour chante l’ardent réveil;
Qui ne souille jamais sa serre dans la fange,
Et dont l’oeil flamboyant incessamment échange
Des éclairs avec le soleil.

Son nid n’est pas un nid de mousse; c’est une aire,
Quelque rocher, creusé par un coup de tonnerre,
Quelque brèche d’un pic, épouvantable aux yeux,
Quelque croulant asile, aux flancs des monts sublimes,
Qu’on voit, battu des vents, pendre entre deux abîmes,
Le noir précipice et les cieux!

Ce n’est pas l’humble ver, les abeilles dorées,
La verte demoiselle aux ailes bigarrées
Qu’attendent ses petits, béants, de faim pressés;
Non! c’est l’oiseau douteux, qui dans la nuit végète;
C’est l’immonde lézard, c’est le serpent qu’il jette,
Hideux, aux aiglons hérissés.

Nid Royal! palais sombre, et que d’un flot de neige
La roulante avalanche en bondissant assiège!
Le génie y nourrit ses fils avec amour,
Et, tournant au soleil leurs yeux remplis de flammes,
Sous son aile de feu couve de jeunes âmes,
Qui prendront des ailes un jour!

Pourquoi donc t’étonner, Ami, si sur ta tête,
Lourd de foudres, déjà le nuage s’arrête?

Si quelque impur reptile en ton nid se débat?
Ce sont tes premiers jeux, c’est ta première fête:
Pour vous autres aiglons, chaque heure a sa tempête,
Chaque festin est un combat.

Rayonne, il en est temps! et, s’il vient un orage,
En prisme éblouissant change le noir nuage.
Que ta haute pensée accomplisse sa loi.
Viens, joins ta main de frère à ma main fraternelle.
Poète, prends ta lyre; aigle, ouvre ta jeune aile;
Étoile, étoile, lève-toi!

La brume de ton aube, Ami, va se dissoudre.
Fais-toi connaître, aiglon, du soleil, de la foudre.
Viens arracher un nom par tes chants inspirés;
Viens; cette gloire, en butte à tant de traits vulgaires,
Ressemble aux fiers drapeaux qu’on rapporte des guerres,
Plus beaux quand ils sont déchirés!

Vois l’astre chevelu qui, royal météore,
Roule, en se grossissant des mondes qu’il dévore;
Tel, ô jeune géant, qui t’accrois tous les jours,
Tel ton génie ardent, loin des routes tracées,
Entraînant dans son cours des mondes de pensées,
Toujours marche et grandit toujours!

ODE DIX-HUITIÈME

JÉHOVAH

Domini enim sunt cardines terræ, et posuit super eos orbem. CANT. ANNAE, I.

Jéhovah est le maître des deux pôles, et sur eux il faut tourner le monde. JOSEPH DE MAISTRE, Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg.

Gloire à Dieu seul! son nom rayonne en ses ouvrages!
Il porte dans sa main l’univers réuni;
Il mit l’éternité par delà tous les âges,
Par delà tous les cieux il jeta l’infini.

Il a dit au chaos sa parole féconde,
Et d’un mot de sa voix laissé tomber le monde!
L’archange auprès de lui compte les nations;
Quand, des jours et des lieux franchissant les espaces,
Il dispense aux siècles leurs races,
Et mesure leur temps aux générations!

Rien n’arrête en son cours sa puissance prudente.
Soit que son souffle immense, aux ouragans pareil,
Pousse de sphère en sphère une comète ardente,
Ou dans un coin du monde éteigne un vieux soleil!

Soit qu’il sème un volcan sous l’océan qui gronde,
Courbe ainsi que des flots le front altier des monts,
Ou de l’enfer troublé touchant la voûte immonde,
Au fond des mers de feu chasse les noirs démons!

Oh! la création se meut dans ta pensée,
Seigneur! tout suit la voie en tes desseins tracée;
Ton bras jette un rayon au milieu des hivers,
Défend la veuve en pleurs du publicain avide,

Ou dans un ciel lointain, séjour désert du vide,
Crée en passant un univers!

L’homme n’est rien sans lui, l’homme, débile proie,
Que le malheur dispute un moment au trépas.
Dieu lui donne le deuil ou lui reprend la joie.
Du berceau vers la tombe il a compté ses pas.

Son nom, que des élus la harpe d’or célèbre,
Est redit par les voix de l’univers sauvé;
Et lorsqu’il retentit dans son écho funèbre,
L’enfer maudit son roi par les cieux réprouvé!

Oui, les anges, les saints, les sphères étoilées,
Et les âmes des morts devant toi rassemblées,
Ô Dieu! font de ta gloire un concert solennel;
Et tu veux bien que l’homme, être humble et périssable,
Marchant dans la nuit sur le sable,
Mêle un chant éphémère à cet hymne éternel!

Gloire à Dieu seul! son nom rayonne en ses ouvrages,
Il porte dans sa main l’univers réuni;
Il mit l’éternité par delà tous les âges,
Par delà tous les cieux il jeta l’infini!

LIVRE CINQUIÈME

Prend-moy tel que je suy. Devise des Ély.

ODE PREMIÈRE

PREMIER SOUPIR

C’est que j’ai rencontré des regards dont la flamme
Semble avec mes regards ou briller ou mourir,
Et cette âme, soeur de mon âme,
Hélas! que j’attendais pour aimer et souffrir.
ÉMILE DESCHAMPS.

Sois heureuse, ô ma douce amie,
Salue en paix la vie et jouis des beaux jours;
Sur le fleuve du temps mollement endormie,
Laisse les flots suivre leur cours!

Va, le sort te sourit encore,
Le ciel ne peut vouloir, dissipe tout effroi,
Qu’un jour triste succède à ta joyeuse aurore.
Le ciel doit m’écouter quand pour toi je l’implore.
Notre avenir commun ne pèse que sur moi!
Bientôt tu peux m’être ravie:
Peut-être, loin de toi, demain j’irai languir.
Quoi, déjà tout est sombre, et fatal dans ma vie!
J’ai dû t’aimer, je dois te fuir!

Puis, - hélas! sur mon front que le malheur retombe!
Il faudra qu’à l’absence, à de nouveaux désirs,
Un sentiment bien doux succombe:
Tu m’oublîras dans les plaisirs,
Je me souviendrai dans la tombe.

Oui, je mourrai; déjà ma lyre est en deuil.
Jeune, je m’éteindrai, laissant peu de mémoire,
Sans peur; puisque de front j’ai contemplé la gloire,
Je puis voir de près le cercueil.
L’Élysée immortel est près des noirs royaumes,

Et la gloire et la mort ne sont que deux fantômes,
En habits de fête ou de deuil!

Sois heureuse, ô ma douce amie,
Jouis en paix de tes beaux jours;
Sur le fleuve du temps mollement endormie,
Laisse les flots suivre leur cours!

ODE DEUXIÈME

REGRET

Il s’est trouvé parfois, comme pour faire voir
Que du bonheur en nous est encor le pouvoir,
Deux âmes s’élevant sur les plaines du monde,
Toujours l’une pour l’autre existence féconde,
Puissantes à sentir avec un feu pareil,
Double et brûlant rayon né d’un même soleil,
Vivant comme un seul être, intime et pur mélange,
Semblables dans leur vol aux deux ailes d’un ange,
Ou telles que des nuits les jumeaux radieux
D’un fraternel éclat illuminent les cieux.
Si l’homme a séparé leur ardeur mutuelle,
C’est alors que l’on voit, et rapide et fidèle,
Chacune, de la foule écartant l’épaisseur,
Traverser l’univers et voler à sa soeur.
ALFRED DE VIGNY, Héléna.

Oui, le bonheur bien vite a passé dans ma vie!
On le suit; dans ses bras on se livre au sommeil;
Puis, comme cette vierge aux champs crétois ravie,
On se voit seul à son réveil.

On le cherche de loin dans l’avenir immense;
On lui crie: “ Oh! reviens, compagnon de mes jours. “
Et le plaisir accourt; mais sans remplir l’absence
De celui qu’on pleure toujours.

Moi, si l’impur plaisir m’offre sa vaine flamme,
Je lui dirai: “ Va, fuis, et respecte mon sort:
Le bonheur a laissé le regret dans mon âme;
Mais toi, tu laisses le remord! “

Pourtant je ne dois point troubler votre délire,

Amis; je veux paraître ignorer les douleurs;
Je souris avec vous, je vous cache ma lyre
Lorsqu’elle est humide de pleurs!

Chacun de vous peut-être, en son coeur solitaire,
Sous des ris passagers étouffe un long regret;
Hélas! nous souffrons tous ensemble sur la terre,
Et nous souffrons tous en secret!

Tu n’as qu’une colombe, à tes lois asservie;
Tu mets tous tes amours, vierge, dans une fleur.
Mais à quoi bon? La fleur passe comme la vie,
L’oiseau fuit comme le bonheur!

On est honteux des pleurs; on rougit de ses peines,
Des innocents chagrins, des souvenirs touchants;
Comme si nous n’étions sous les terrestres chaînes
Que pour la joie et pour les chants!

Hélas! il m’a donc fui sans me laisser de trace,
Mais pour le retenir j’ai fait ce que j’ai pu,
Ce temps où le bonheur brille, et soudain s’efface,
Comme un sourire interrompu!

ODE TROISIÈME

AU VALLON DE CHERIZY

Factus sum peregrinus... et quaesivi qui simul contristaretur, et non fuit. PS. LXVIII.
Perfide gressus meos semitis tuis. PS. XVI.

Je suis devenu voyageur... et j’ai cherché qui s’affligerait avec moi, et nul n’est venu.

Permets à mes pas de suivre ta trace.

Le voyageur s’assied sous votre ombre immobile,
Beau vallon; triste et seul, il contemple en rêvant
L’oiseau qui fuit l’oiseau, l’eau que souille un reptile,
Et le jonc qu’agite le vent!

Hélas! l’homme fuit l’homme; et souvent avant l’âge
Dans un coeur noble et pur se glisse le malheur;
Heureux l’humble roseau qu’alors un prompt orage
En passant brise dans sa fleur!

Cet orage, ô vallon, le voyageur l’implore.
Déjà las de sa course, il est bien loin encore
Du terme où ses maux vont finir;
Il voit devant ses pas, seul pour se soutenir,
Aux rayons nébuleux de sa funèbre aurore,
Le grand désert de l’avenir!

De dégoûts en dégoûts il va traîner sa vie.
Que lui font ces faux biens qu’un faux orgueil envie?
Il cherche un coeur fidèle, ami de ses douleurs;
Mais en vain: nuls secours n’aplaniront sa voie,
Nul parmi les mortels ne rira de sa joie,
Nul ne pleurera de ses pleurs!

Son sort est l’abandon; et sa vie isolée

Ressemble au noir cyprès qui croît dans la vallée.
Loin de lui, le lys vierge ouvre au jour son bouton;
Et jamais, égayant son ombre malheureuse,
Une jeune vigne amoureuse
À ses sombres rameaux n'enlace un vert feston.

Avant de gravir la montagne,
Un moment au vallon le voyageur a fui.
Le silence du moins répond à son ennui.
Il est seul dans la foule: ici, douce compagne,
La solitude est avec lui!

Isolés comme lui, mais plus que lui tranquilles,
Arbres, gazons, riants asiles,
Sauvez ce malheureux du regard des humains!
Ruisseaux, livrez vos bords, ouvrez vos flots dociles
À ses pieds qu'a souillés la fange de leurs villes,
Et la poudre de leurs chemins!

Ah! laissez-lui chanter, consolé sous vos ombres,
Ce long songe idéal de nos jours les plus sombres,
La vierge au front si pur, au sourire si beau!
Si pour l'hymen d'un jour c'est en vain qu'il l'appelle,
Laissez du moins rêver à son âme immortelle
L'éternel hymen du tombeau!

La terre ne tient point sa pensée asservie;
Le bel espoir l'enlève au triste souvenir;
Deux ombres désormais dominent sur sa vie:
L'une est dans le passé, l'autre dans l'avenir!

Oh! dis, quand viendras-tu? quel Dieu va te conduire,
Être charmant et doux, vers celui que tu plains?
Astre ami, quand viendras-tu luire,
Comme un soleil nouveau, sur ses jours orphelins?

Il ne t'obtiendra point, chère et noble conquête,

Au prix de ces vertus qu’il ne peut oublier;
Il laisse au gré du vent le jonc courber sa tête;
Il sera le grand chêne, et devant la tempête
Il saura rompre et non plier.

Elle approche, il la voit; mais il la voit sans crainte.
Adieu, flots purs, berceaux épais,
Beau vallon où l’on trouve un écho pour sa plainte,
Bois heureux où l’on souffre en paix!

Heureux qui peut au sein du vallon solitaire,
Naître, vivre et mourir dans le champ paternel!
Il ne connaît rien de la terre,
Et ne voit jamais que le ciel!

ODE QUATRIÈME

À TOI

Sub umbra alarum tuarum protege me. PS. XVI.
Couvre-moi de l’ombre de tes ailes.

Lyre longtemps oisive, éveillez-vous encore.
Il se lève, et nos chants le salueront toujours,
Ce jour que son doux nom décore,
Ce jour sacré parmi les jours!

Ô Vierge! à mon enfance un Dieu t’a révélée,
Belle et pure; et rêvant mon sort mystérieux,
Comme une blanche étoile aux nuages mêlée,
Dès mes plus jeunes ans je te vis dans mes cieux!

Je te disais alors: “ Ô toi, mon espérance,
Viens, partage un bonheur qui ne doit pas finir. “
Car de ma vie encor, dans ces jours d’ignorance,
Le passé n’avait point obscurci l’avenir.

Ce doux penchant devint une indomptable flamme;
Et je pleurai ce temps, écoulé sans retour,
Où la vie était pour mon âme
Le songe d’un enfant que berce un vague amour.

Aujourd’hui, réveillant sa victime endormie,
Sombre, au lieu du bonheur que j’avais tant rêvé,
Devant mes yeux, troublés par l’espérance amie,
Avec un rire affreux le malheur s’est levé!

Quand seul dans cette vie, hélas! d’écueils semée,
Il faut boire le fiel dont le calice est plein,
Sans les pleurs de sa bien-aimée
Que reste-t-il à l’orphelin?

Si les heureux d’un jour parent de fleurs leurs têtes,
Il fuit, souillé de cendre et vêtu de lambeaux;
Et pour lui la coupe des fêtes
Ressemble à l’urne des tombeaux!

Il est chez les vivants comme une lampe éteinte.
Le monde en ses douleurs se plaît à l’exiler,
Seulement vers le ciel il élève sans crainte
Ses yeux, chargés de pleurs qui ne peuvent couler.

Mais toi, console-moi, viens, consens à me suivre,
Arrache de mon sein le trait envenimé,
Daigne vivre pour moi, pour toi laisse-moi vivre,
J’ai bien assez souffert, Vierge, pour être aimé!

Oh! de ton doux sourire embellis-moi la vie!
Le plus grand des bonheurs est encor dans l’amour.
La lumière à jamais ne me fut point ravie,
Viens, je suis dans la nuit, mais je puis voir le jour!

Mes chants ne cherchent pas une illustre mémoire;
Et s’il faut me courber sous ce fatal honneur,
Ne crains rien, ton époux ne veut pas que sa gloire
Retentisse dans son bonheur.

Goûtons du chaste hymen le charme solitaire.
Que la félicité nous cache à tous les yeux.
Le serpent couché sur la terre
N’entend pas deux oiseaux qui volent dans les cieux!

Mais si ma jeune vie, à tant de flots livrée,
Si mon destin douteux t’inspire un juste effroi,
Alors fuis, toi qui fus mon épouse adorée; -
Toi qui fus ma mère, attends-moi.

Bientôt j’irai dormir d’un sommeil sans alarmes,

Heureux si, dans la nuit dont je serai couvert,
Un oeil indifférent donne en passant des larmes
À mon luth oublié, sur mon tombeau désert!

Toi, que d’aucun revers les coups n’osent t’atteindre,
Et puisses-tu jamais, gémissant à ton tour,
Ne regretter celui qui mourut sans se plaindre,
Et qui t’aimait de tant d’amour!

ODE CINQUIÈME

LA CHAUVE-SOURIS

Que me veux-tu? Un ange planait sur mon coeur, et tu l’as effrayé... Viens donc, je te chanterai des chansons que les esprits des cimetières m’ont apprises. MATURIN, Bertram.

Oui, je te reconnais, je t’ai vu dans mes songes,
Triste oiseau! mais sur moi vainement tu prolonges
Les cercles inégaux de ton vol ténébreux;
Des spectres réveillés porte ailleurs les messages;
Va, pour craindre tes noirs présages;
Je ne suis point coupable et ne suis point heureux!

Attends qu’enfin la vierge, à mon sort asservie,
Que le ciel comme un ange envoya dans ma vie,
De ma longue espérance ait couronné l’orgueil;
Alors tu reviendras, troublant la douce fête,
Joyeuse, déployer tes ailes sur ma tête,
Ainsi que deux voiles de deuil!

Soeur du hibou funèbre et de l’orfraie avide,
Mêlant le houx lugubre au nénuphar livide,
Les filles de Satan t’invoquent sans remords;
Fuis l’abri qui me cache et l’air que je respire;
De ton ongle hideux ne touche pas ma lyre,
De peur de réveiller des morts!

La nuit, quand les démons dansent sous le ciel sombre,
Tu suis le choeur magique en tournoyant dans l’ombre.
L’hymne infernal t’invite au conseil malfaisant.
Fuis! car un doux parfum sort de ces fleurs nouvelles;
Fuis, il faut à tes mornes ailes
L’air du tombeau natal et la vapeur du sang.

Qui t’amène vers moi? Viens-tu de ces collines
Où la lune s’enfuit sur de blanches ruines?
Son front est, comme toi, sombre dans sa pâleur.
Tes yeux dans leur route incertaine
Ont donc suivi les feux de ma lampe lointaine?
Attiré par la gloire, ainsi vient le malheur!

Sors-tu de quelque tour qu’habite le Vertige,
Nain bizarre et cruel, qui sur les monts voltige,
Prête aux feux du marais leur errante rougeur,
Rit dans l’air, des grands pins courbe en criant les cimes,
Et chaque soir, rôdant sur le bord des abîmes,
Jette aux vautours du gouffre un pâle voyageur?

En vain autour de moi ton vol qui se promène
Sème une odeur de tombe et de poussière humaine;
Ton aspect m’importune et ne peut m’effrayer.
Fuis donc, fuis, ou demain je livre aux yeux profanes
Ton corps sombre et velu, tes ailes diaphanes,
Dont le pâtre conteur orne son noir foyer.

Des enfants se joueront de ta dent furieuse;
Une vierge viendra, tremblante et curieuse,
De son rire craintif t’effrayer à grand bruit;
Et le jour te verra, dans le ciel exilée,
À mille oiseaux joyeux mêlée,
D’un vol aveugle et lourd chercher en vain la nuit!

ODE SIXIÈME

LE NUAGE

J’erre au hasard, en tous lieux, d’un mouvement plus doux que la sphère de la lune. SHAKESPEARE.

Ce beau nuage, ô Vierge, aux hommes est pareil.
Bientôt tu le verras, grondant sur notre tête,
Aux champs de la lumière amasser la tempête,
Et leur rendre en éclairs les rayons du soleil.

Oh! qu’un ange longtemps d’un souffle salutaire
Le soutienne en son vol, tel que l’ont vu tes yeux!
Car s’il descend vers nous, le nuage des cieux
N’est plus qu’un brouillard sur la terre.

Vois, pour orner le soir, ce matin il est né.
L’astre géant, fécond en splendeurs inconnues,
Change en cortège ardent l’amas jaloux des nues:
Le génie est plus grand d’envieux couronné!

La tempête qui fuit d’un orage est suivie:
L’âme a peu de beaux jours; mais, dans son ciel obscur,
L’amour, soleil divin, peut dorer d’un feu pur
Le nuage errant de la vie.

Hélas! ton beau nuage aux hommes est pareil.
Bientôt tu le verras, grondant sur notre tête,
Aux champs de la lumière amasser la tempête,
Et leur rendre en éclairs les rayons du soleil!

ODE SEPTIÈME

LE CAUCHEMAR

Oh! j’ai fait un songe!... Il est au-dessus des facultés de l’homme de dire ce qu’était mon songe... L’oeil de l’homme n’a jamais vu, l’oreille de l’homme n’a jamais ouï, la main de l’homme ne peut jamais tâter, ni ses sens concevoir,
ni sa langue exprimer en paroles ce qu’était mon rêve. SHAKESPEARE.

Sur mon sein haletant, sur ma tête inclinée,
Écoute, cette nuit il est venu s’asseoir;
Posant sa main de plomb sur mon âme enchaînée,
Dans l’ombre il la montrait, comme une fleur fanée,
Aux spectres qui naissent le soir.

Ce monstre aux éléments prend vingt formes nouvelles,
Tantôt d’une eau dormante il lève son front bleu;
Tantôt son rire éclate en rouges étincelles;
Deux éclairs sont ses yeux, deux flammes sont ses ailes;
Il vole sur un lac de feu!

Comme d’impurs miroirs, des ténèbres mouvantes
Répètent son image en cercle autour de lui;
Son front confus se perd dans des vapeurs vivantes;
Il remplit le sommeil de vagues épouvantes,
Et laisse à l’âme un long ennui.

Vierge! ton doux repos n’a point de noir mensonge.
La nuit d’un pas léger court sur ton front vermeil.
Jamais jusqu’à ton coeur un rêve affreux ne plonge;
Et quand ton âme au ciel s’envole comme un songe,
Un ange garde ton sommeil!

ODE HUITIÈME

LE MATIN

Moriturus moriturae.

Le voile du matin sur les monts se déploie.
Vois, un rayon naissant blanchit la vieille tour;
Et déjà dans les cieux s’unit avec amour,
    Ainsi que la gloire à la joie,
    Le premier chant des bois aux premiers feux du jour.

    Oui, souris à l’éclat dont le ciel se décore! -
    Tu verras, si demain le cercueil me dévore,
    Luire à tes yeux en pleurs un soleil aussi beau,
    Et les mêmes oiseaux chanter la même aurore,
    Sur mon noir et muet tombeau!

    Mais dans l’autre horizon l’âme alors est ravie.
    L’avenir sans fin s’ouvre à l’être illimité.
    Au matin de l’éternité,
    On se réveille de la vie,
    Comme d’une nuit sombre ou d’un rêve agité!

ODE NEUVIÈME

MON ENFANCE

Voilà que tout cela est passé... Mon enfance n’est plus; elle est morte pour ainsi dire, quoique je vive encore. SAINT AUGUSTIN, Confessions.

I

J’ai des rêves de guerre en mon âme inquiète;
J’aurais été soldat, si je n’étais poète.
Ne vous étonnez point que j’aime les guerriers!
Souvent, pleurant sur eux, dans ma douleur muette,
J’ai trouvé leur cyprès plus beau que nos lauriers.

Enfant, sur un tambour ma crèche fut posée.
Dans un casque pour moi l’eau sainte fut puisée.
Un soldat, m’ombrageant d’un belliqueux faisceau,
De quelque vieux lambeau d’une bannière usée
Fit les langes de mon berceau.

Parmi les chars poudreux, les armes éclatantes,
Une muse des camps m’emporta sous les tentes;
Je dormis sur l’affût des canons meurtriers;
J’aimai les fiers coursiers, aux crinières flottantes,
Et l’éperon froissant les rauques étriers.

J’aimai les forts tonnants, aux abords difficiles;
Le glaive nu des chefs guidant les rangs dociles;
La vedette, perdue en un bois isolé;
Et les vieux bataillons qui passaient dans les villes,
Avec un drapeau mutilé.

Mon envie admirait, et le hussard rapide,
Parant de gerbes d’or sa poitrine intrépide,
Et le panache blanc des agiles lanciers,

Et les dragons, mêlant sur leur casque gépide
Le poil taché du tigre aux crins noirs des coursiers.

Et j’accusais mon âge: - “ Ah! dans une ombre obscure,
Grandir, vivre! laisser refroidir sans murmure
Tout ce sang jeune et pur, bouillant chez mes pareils,
Qui dans un noir combat, sur l’acier d’une armure,
Coulerait à flots si vermeils! “

Et j’invoquais la guerre, aux scènes effrayantes;
Je voyais en espoir, dans les plaines bruyantes,
Avec mille rumeurs d’hommes et de chevaux,
Secouant à la fois leurs ailes foudroyantes,
L’un sur l’autre à grands cris fondre deux camps rivaux.

J’entendais le son clair des tremblantes cymbales,
Le roulement des chars, le sifflement des balles,
Et de monceaux de morts semant leurs pas sanglants,
Je voyais se heurter, au loin, par intervalles
Les escadrons étincelants!

II

Avec nos camps vainqueurs, dans l’Europe asservie
J’errai, je parcourus la terre avant la vie;
Et, tout enfant encor, les vieillards recueillis
M’écoutaient racontant, d’une bouche ravie,
Mes jours si peu nombreux et déjà si remplis!

Chez dix peuples vaincus je passai sans défense,
Et leur respect craintif étonnait mon enfance;
Dans l’âge où l’on est plaint, je semblais protéger
Quand je balbutiais le nom chéri de France,
Je faisais pâlir l’étranger.

Je visitai cette île, en noirs débris féconde,
Plus tard, premier degré d’une chute profonde.

Le haut Cenis, dont l’aigle aime les rocs lointains,
Entendit, de son antre où l’avalanche gronde,
Ses vieux glaçons crier sous mes pas enfantins.

Vers l’Adige et l’Arno je vins des bords du Rhône.
Je vis de l’Occident l’auguste Babylone,
Rome, toujours vivante au fond de ses tombeaux,
Reine du monde encor sur un débris de trône,
Avec une pourpre en lambeaux.

Puis Turin, puis Florence aux plaisirs toujours prête,
Naple, aux bords embaumés, où le printemps s’arrête
Et que Vésuve en feu couvre d’un dais brûlant,
Comme un guerrier jaloux qui, témoin d’une fête,
Jette au milieu des fleurs son panache sanglant.

L’Espagne m’accueillit, livrée à la conquête.
Je franchis le Bergare, où mugit la tempête;
De loin, pour un tombeau, je pris l’Escurial;
Et le triple aqueduc vit s’incliner ma tête
Devant son front impérial.

Là, je voyais les feux des haltes militaires
Noircir les murs croulants des villes solitaires;
La tente, de l’église envahissait le seuil;
Les rires des soldats, dans les saints monastères,
Par l’écho répétés, semblaient des cris de deuil.

III

Je revins, rapportant de mes courses lointaines
Comme un vague faisceau de lueurs incertaines.
Je rêvais, comme si j’avais, durant mes jours,
Rencontré sur mes pas les magiques fontaines
Dont l’onde enivre pour toujours.

L’Espagne me montrait ses couvents, ses bastilles;

Burgos, sa cathédrale aux gothiques aiguilles;
Irun, ses toits de bois; Vittoria, ses tours;
Et toi, Valladolid, tes palais de familles,
Fiers de laisser rouiller des chaînes dans leurs cours.

Mes souvenirs germaient dans mon âme échauffée;
J’allais chantant des vers d’une voix étouffée;
Et ma mère, en secret observant tous mes pas,
Pleurait et souriait, disant: “ C’est une fée
Qui lui parle, et qu’on ne voit pas! “

ODE DIXIÈME

À G......Y

O rus! Virgile.

Il est pour tout mortel, soit que, loin de l’envie,
Un astre aux rayons purs illumine sa vie;
Soit qu’il suive à pas lents un cercle de douleurs,
Et, regrettant quelque ombre à son amour ravie,
Veille auprès de sa lampe, et répande des pleurs;

Il est des jours de paix, d’ivresse et de mystère,
Où notre coeur savoure un charme involontaire,
Où l’air vibre, animé d’ineffables accords,
Comme si l’âme heureuse entendait de la terre
Le bruit vague et lointain de la cité des morts.

Souvent ici, domptant mes douleurs étouffées,
Mon bonheur s’éleva comme un château de fées,
Avec ses murs de nacre, aux mobiles couleurs,
Ses tours, ses portes d’or, ses pièges, ses trophées,
Et ses fruits merveilleux, et ses magiques fleurs.

Puis soudain tout fuyait: sur d’informes décombres
Tour à tour à mes yeux passaient de pâles ombres;
D’un crêpe nébuleux le ciel était voilé;
Et de spectres en deuil peuplant ces déserts sombres,
Un tombeau dominait le palais écroulé.

Vallon! j’ai bien souvent laissé dans ta prairie,
Comme une eau murmurante, errer ma rêverie;
Je n’oublierai jamais ces fugitifs instants;
Ton souvenir sera, dans mon âme attendrie,
Comme un son triste et doux qu’on écoute longtemps!

ODE ONZIÈME

Hoc erat in votis! Horace.

Lorsque j’étais enfant: - “ Viens, me disait la Muse,
Viens voir le beau génie assis sur mon autel!
Il n’est dans mes trésors rien que je te refuse,
Soit que l’altier clairon ou l’humble cornemuse
Attendent ton souffle immortel.

“ Mais fuis d’un monde étroit l’impure turbulence;
Là, rampent les ingrats, là, règnent les méchants.
Sur un luth inspiré lorsqu’une âme s’élance,
Il faut que, l’écoutant dans un chaste silence,
L’écho lui rende tous ses chants!

“ Choisis quelque désert pour y cacher ta vie,
Dans une ombre sacrée emporte ton flambeau.
Heureux qui, loin des pas d’une foule asservie,
Dérobant ses concerts aux clameurs de l’envie,
Lègue sa gloire à son tombeau!

“ L’horizon de ton âme est plus haut que la terre.
Mais cherche à ta pensée un monde harmonieux,
Où tout, en l’exaltant, charme ton coeur austère,
Où des saintes clartés, que nulle ombre n’altère,
Le doux reflet suive tes yeux.

“ Qu’il soit un frais vallon, ton paisible royaume,
Où parmi l’églantier, le saule et le glaïeul,
Tu penses voir parfois, errant comme un fantôme,
Ces magiques palais qui naissent sous le chaume,
Dans les beaux contes de l’aïeul.

“ Qu’une tour en ruine, au flanc de la montagne,
Pende, et jette son ombre aux flots d’un lac d’azur.

Le soir qu’un feu de pâtre, au fond de la campagne,
Comme un ami dont l’oeil de loin nous accompagne,
Perce le crépuscule obscur.

“ Quand, guidant sur le lac deux rames vagabondes,
Le ciel, dans ce miroir, t’offrira ses tableaux,
Qu’une molle nuée, en déroulant ses ondes,
Montre à tes yeux, baissés sur les vagues profondes,
Des flots se jouant dans les flots.

“ Que, visitant parfois une île solitaire
Et des bords ombragés de feuillages mouvants,
Tu puisses, savourant ton exil volontaire,
En silence épier s’il est quelque mystère
Dans le bruit des eaux et des vents.

“ Qu’à ton réveil joyeux, les chants des jeunes mères
T’annoncent et l’enfance, et la vie et le jour.
Qu’un ruisseau passe auprès de tes fleurs éphémères,
Comme entre les doux soins et les tendres chimères
Passent l’espérance et l’amour.

“ Qu’il soit dans la contrée un souvenir fidèle
De quelque bon seigneur, de hauteur dépourvu,
Ami de l’indigence et toujours aimé d’elle;
Et que chaque vieillard, le citant pour modèle,
Dise: Vous ne l’avez pas vu!

“ Loin du monde surtout mon culte te réclame.
Sois le Prophète ardent, qui vit le ciel ouvert,
Dont l’oeil, au sein des nuits, brillait comme une flamme,
Et qui, de l’Esprit Saint ayant rempli son âme,
Allait, parlant dans le désert! “

Tu le disais, ô Muse! Et la cité bruyante
Autour de moi pourtant mêle ses mille voix!
Muse! et je ne fuis pas la sphère tournoyante

Où le sort, agitant la foule imprévoyante,
Meut tant de destins à la fois!

C’est que, pour m’amener au terme où tout aspire,
Il m’est venu du ciel un guide au front joyeux;
Pour moi, l’air le plus pur est l’air qu’elle respire;
Je vois tous mes bonheurs, Muse, dans son sourire,
Et tous mes rêves dans ses yeux!

ODE DOUZIÈME

ENCORE À TOI

Ahora y siempre. Devise des Pomfret.

À toi! toujours à toi! Que chanterait ma lyre?
À toi l'hymne d'amour! à toi l'hymne d'hymen!
Quel autre nom pourrait éveiller mon délire?
Ai-je appris d'autres chants? sais-je un autre chemin?

C'est toi, dont le regard éclaire ma nuit sombre;
Toi, dont l'image luit sur mon sommeil joyeux;
C'est toi qui tiens ma main quand je marche dans l'ombre,
Et les rayons du ciel me viennent de tes yeux!

Mon destin est gardé par ta douce prière:
Elle veille sur moi, quand mon ange s'endort;
Lorsque mon coeur entend ta voix modeste et fière,
Au combat de la vie il provoque le sort.

N'est-il pas dans le ciel de voix qui te réclame?
N'es-tu pas une fleur étrangère à nos champs?
Soeur des vierges du ciel, ton âme est pour mon âme
Le reflet de leurs feux et l'écho de leurs chants!

Quand ton oeil noir et doux me parle et me contemple,
Quand ta robe m'effleure avec un léger bruit,
Je crois avoir touché quelque voile du temple,
Je dis comme Tobie: Un ange est dans ma nuit!

Lorsque de mes douleurs tu chassas le nuage,
Je compris qu'à ton sort mon sort devait s'unir,
Pareil au saint pasteur, lassé d'un long voyage,
Qui vit vers la fontaine une vierge venir!

Je t’aime comme un être au-dessus de ma vie,
Comme une antique aïeule aux prévoyants discours,
Comme une soeur craintive, à mes maux asservie,
Comme un dernier enfant, qu’on a dans ses vieux jours.

Hélas! je t’aime tant qu’à ton nom seul je pleure,
Je pleure, car la vie est si pleine de maux!
Dans ce morne désert tu n’as point de demeure,
Et l’arbre où l’on s’assied lève ailleurs ses rameaux.

Mon Dieu! mettez la paix et la joie auprès d’elle.
Ne troublez pas ses jours, ils sont à vous, Seigneur!
Vous devez la bénir, car son âme fidèle
Demande à la vertu le secret du bonheur.

ODE TREIZIÈME

SON NOM

Nomen aut numen.

Le parfum d’un lis pur, l’éclat d’une auréole,
La dernière rumeur du jour,
La plainte d’un ami qui s’afflige et console,
L’adieu mystérieux de l’heure qui s’envole,
Le doux bruit d’un baiser d’amour,

L’écharpe aux sept couleurs que l’orage en la nue
Laisse, comme un trophée, au soleil triomphant,
L’accent inespéré d’une voix reconnue,
Le voeu le plus secret d’une vierge ingénue,
Le premier rêve d’un enfant,

Le chant d’un choeur lointain, le soupir qu’à l’aurore
Rendait le fabuleux Memnon,
Le murmure d’un son qui tremble et s’évapore...
Tout ce que la pensée a de plus doux encore,
Ô lyre, est moins doux que son nom!

Prononce-le tout bas, ainsi qu’une prière,
Mais que dans tous nos chants il résonne à la fois!
Qu’il soit du temple obscur la secrète lumière!
Qu’il soit le mot sacré qu’au fond du sanctuaire
Redit toujours la même voix!

Ô mes amis! avant qu’en paroles de flamme,
Ma muse, égarant son essor,
Ose aux noms profanés qu’un vain orgueil proclame,
Mêler ce chaste nom, que l’amour dans mon âme
A caché, comme un saint trésor,

Il faudra que le chant de mes hymnes fidèles
Soit comme un de ces chants qu’on écoute à genoux;
Et que l’air soit ému de leurs voix solennelles,
Comme si, secouant ses invisibles ailes,
Un ange passait près de nous!

ODE QUATORZIÈME

ACTIONS DE GRÂCES

Ceux qui auront semé dans les larmes moissonneront dans l’allégresse. SALOMON, Ps, CXXV, 5.

Vous avez dans le port poussé ma voile errante;
Ma tige a refleuri de sève et de verdeur;
Seigneur, je vous bénis! de ma lampe mourante
Votre souffle vivant rallume la splendeur.

Surpris par l’ouragan comme un aiglon sans ailes,
Qui tombe du grand chêne au pied de l’arbrisseau,
Faible enfant, du malheur j’ai su les lois cruelles.
L’orage m’assaillit voguant dans mon berceau.

Oui, la vie a pour moi commencé dès l’enfance,
Quoique le ciel jamais n’ait foudroyé de fleurs,
Et qu’il ne veuille pas qu’un être sans défense
Mêle à ses premiers jours l’amertume des pleurs.

La jeunesse en riant m’apporta ses mensonges,
Son avenir de gloire, et d’amour, et d’orgueil;
Mais quand mon coeur brûlant poursuivait ces beaux songes,
Hélas!je m’éveillai dans la nuit d’un cercueil.

Alors je m’exilai du milieu de mes frères.
Calme, car ma douleur n’était pas le remords,
J’accompagnai de loin les pompes funéraires:
L’hymne de l’orphelin est écouté des morts.

L’oeil tourné vers le ciel, je marchais dans l’abîme;
Bien souvent, de mon sort bravant l’injuste affront,
Les flammes ont jailli de ma pensée intime,
Et la langue de feu descendit sur mon front.

Mon esprit de Pathmos connut le saint délire,
L’effroi qui le précède et l’effroi qui le suit;
Et mon âme était triste, et les chants de ma lyre
Étaient comme ces voix qui pleurent dans la nuit.

J’ai vu sans murmurer la fuite de ma joie,
Seigneur; à l’abandon vous m’aviez condamné.
J’ai, sans plainte, au désert tenté la triple voie;
Et je n’ai pas maudit le jour où je suis né.

Voici la vérité qu’au monde je révèle:
Du ciel dans mon néant je me suis souvenu.
Louez Dieu! la brebis vient quand l’agneau l’appelle;
J’appelais le Seigneur, le Seigneur est venu.

Il m’a dit: “ Va, mon fils, ma loi n’est pas pesante!
Toi qui, dans la nuit même, as suivi mes chemins,
Tu ceindras des heureux la robe éblouissante;
Parmi les innocents tu laveras tes mains. “

Je ne veux plus de loin t’offrir ma vie obscure,
Gloire, immortel reflet de l’éternel flambeau,
Du génie en son cours trace éclatante et pure,
Ou rayon merveilleux, émané d’un tombeau!

Un ange sur mon coeur ploie aujourd’hui ses ailes.
Pour Elle un orphelin n’est pas un étranger;
Les heures de mes jours à ses côtés sont belles:
Car son joug est aimable et son fardeau léger.

Vous avez dans le port poussé ma voile errante;
Ma tige a refleuri de sève et de verdeur;
Seigneur, je vous bénis! de ma lampe mourante
Votre souffle vivant rallume la splendeur.

ODE QUINZIÈME

À MES AMIS

Ô combien est heureux celui qui, solitaire,
Ne va point mendiant de ce sot populaire
L'appui ni la faveur; qui, paisible, s'étant
Retiré de la cour et du monde inconstant,
Ne s'entremêlant point des affaires publiques,
Ne s'assujettissant aux plaisirs tyranniques
D'un seigneur inconstant, et ne vivant qu'à soi,
Est lui-même sa cour, son seigneur et son roi!
JEAN DE LA TAILLE.

Sans monter au char de victoire,
Meurt le poète créateur;
Son siècle est trop près de sa gloire
Pour en mesurer la hauteur.
C'est Bélisaire au Capitole:
La foule court à quelque idole,
Et jette en passant une obole
Au mendiant triomphateur.

Amis, dans ma douce retraite
À tous vos maux je dis adieu.
Là, ma vie est molle et secrète:
J'ai des autels pour chaque dieu.
Le myrte, qu'au laurier j'enchaîne,
Y croît sous l'ombrage du chêne;
J'y mets Horace avec Mécène,
Et Corneille sans Richelieu.

Là, dans l'ombre descend ma muse,
À l'oeil fier, aux traits ingénus,
Image éclatante et confuse
Des anges à l'homme inconnus.

Ses rayons cherchent le mystère:
Son aile, chaste et solitaire,
Jamais ne permet à la terre
D’effleurer ses pieds blancs et nus.

Là, je cache un hymen prospère;
Et, sur mon seuil hospitalier,
Parfois tu t’assieds, ô mon père!
Comme un antique chevalier;
Ma famille est ton humble empire;
Et mon fils, avec un sourire,
Dort aux sons de ma jeune lyre,
Bercé dans ton vieux bouclier.

ODE SEIZIÈME

À L’OMBRE D’UN ENFANT

Qui es in caelis.

Ô! parmi les soleils, les sphères, les étoiles,
Les portiques d’azur, les palais de saphir,
Parmi les saints rayons, parmi les sacrés voiles
Qu’agite un éternel zéphyr!

Dans le torrent d’amour où toute âme se noie,
Où s’abreuve de feux le séraphin brûlant;
Dans l’orbe flamboyant qui sans cesse tournoie
Autour du trône étincelant!

Parmi les jeux sans fin des âmes enfantines;
Quand leurs soins, d’un vieil astre, égaré dans les cieux,
Avec de longs efforts et des voix argentines,
Guident les chancelants essieux;

Ou lorsqu’entre ses bras quelque vierge ravie
Les prend, d’un saint baiser leur imprime le sceau,
Et rit, leur demandant si l’aspect de la vie
Les effrayait dans leur berceau;

Ou qu’enfin, dans son arche éclatante et profonde,
Rangeant de cieux en cieux son cortège ébloui,
Jésus, pour accomplir ce qui fut dit au monde,
Les place le plus près de lui;

Ô! dans ce monde auguste où rien n’est éphémère,
Dans ces flots de bonheur que ne trouble aucun fiel,
Enfant! loin du sourire et des pleurs de ta mère,
N’es-tu pas orphelin au ciel?

ODE DIX-SEPTIÈME

À UNE JEUNE FILLE

Pourquoi te plaindre, tendre fille? Tes jours n'appartiennent-ils pas à ta première jeunesse? Daïno lithuanien.

Vous qui ne savez pas combien l'enfance est belle,
Enfant! n'enviez point notre âge de douleurs,
Où le coeur tour à tour est esclave et rebelle,
Où le rire est souvent plus triste que vos pleurs.

Votre âge insouciant est si doux qu'on l'oublie!
Il passe, comme un souffle au vaste champ des airs,
Comme une voix joyeuse en fuyant affaiblie,
Comme un alcyon sur les mers.

Oh! ne vous hâtez point de mûrir vos pensées!
Jouissez du matin, jouissez du printemps;
Vos heures sont des fleurs l'une à l'autre enlacées;
Ne les effeuillez pas plus vite que le temps.

Laissez venir les ans! Le destin vous dévoue,
Comme nous, aux regrets, à la fausse amitié,
À ces maux sans espoir que l'orgueil désavoue,
À ces plaisirs qui font pitié!

Riez pourtant! du sort ignorez la puissance;
Riez! n'attristez pas votre front gracieux,
Votre oeil d'azur, miroir de paix et d'innocence,
Qui révèle votre âme et réfléchit les cieux!

ODE DIX-HUITIÈME

AUX RUINES DE MONTFORT-L'AMAURY

La voyez-vous croître,
La tour du vieux cloître,
Et le grand mur noir
Du royal manoir?
ALFRED DE VIGNY.

I

Je vous aime, ô débris! et surtout quand l'automne
Prolonge en vos échos sa plainte monotone.
Sous vos abris croulants je voudrais habiter,
Vieilles tours, que le temps l'une vers l'autre incline,
Et qui semblez de loin sur la haute colline,
Deux noirs géants prêts à lutter.

Lorsque d'un pas rêveur foulant les grandes herbes,
Je monte jusqu'à vous, restes forts et superbes!
Je contemple longtemps vos créneaux meurtriers,
Et la tour octogone et ses briques rougies,
Et mon oeil, à travers vos brèches élargies,
Voit jouer des enfants où mouraient des guerriers.

Écartez de vos murs ceux que leur chute amuse!
Laissez le seul poète y conduire sa muse,
Lui qui donne du moins une larme au vieux fort;
Et, si l'air froid des nuits sous vos arceaux murmure,
Croit qu'une ombre a froissé la gigantesque armure
D'Amaury, comte de Montfort!

II

Là, souvent je m'assieds, aux jours passés fidèle

Sur un débris qui fut un mur de citadelle.
Je médite longtemps, en mon coeur replié;
Et la ville, à mes pieds, d’arbres enveloppée,
Étend ses bras en croix et s’allonge en épée,
Comme le fer d’un preux dans la plaine oublié.

Mes yeux errent, du pied de l’antique demeure.
Sur les bois éclairés ou sombres, suivant l’heure,
Sur l’église gothique, hélas! prête à crouler,
Et je vois, dans le champ où la mort nous appelle,
Sous l’arcade de pierre et devant la chapelle,
Le sol immobile onduler.

Foulant créneaux, ogives, écussons, astragales,
M’attachant comme un lierre aux pierres inégales,
Au faîte des grands murs je m’élève parfois;
Là je mêle des chants au sifflement des brises;
Et, dans les cieux profonds suivant ses ailes grises,
Jusqu’à l’aigle effrayé j’aime à lancer ma voix!

Là quelquefois j’entends le luth doux et sévère
D’un ami qui sait rendre aux vieux temps un trouvère.
Nous parlons des héros, du ciel, des chevaliers,
De ces âmes en deuil dans le monde orphelines;
Et le vent qui se brise à l’angle des ruines
Gémit dans les hauts peupliers!

ODE DIX-NEUVIÈME

LE VOYAGE

... Je veux que mon retour
Te paraisse bien long. Je veux que nuit et jour
Tu m'aimes. (Nuit et jour, hélas! je me tourmente!)
Présente au milieu d'eux, sois seule, sois absente.
Dors en pensant à moi, rêve-moi près de toi,
Ne vois que moi sans cesse, et sois toute avec moi!
ANDRÉ CHÉNIER.

I

Le cheval fait sonner son harnois qu'il secoue,
Et l'éclair du pavé va jaillir sous la roue:
Il faut partir, adieu! de ton coeur inquiet
Chasse la crainte amère, adieu! point de faiblesse!
Mais quoi! le char s'ébranle et m'emporte, et te laisse...
Hélas! j'ai cru qu'il t'oubliait!

Oh! suis-le bien longtemps d'une oreille attentive!
Ne t'en va pas avant d'avoir, triste et pensive,
Écouté des coursiers s'évanouir le bruit!
L'un à l'autre déjà l'espace nous dérobe;
Je ne vois plus de loin flotter ta blanche robe,
Et toi, tu n'entends plus rouler le char qui fuit!...

Quoi! plus même un vain bruit! plus même une vaine ombre!
L'absence a sur mon âme étendu sa nuit sombre;
C'en est fait; chaque pas m'y plonge plus avant,
Et dans cet autre enfer, plein de douleurs amères,
De tourments insensés, d'angoisses, de chimères,
Me voilà descendu vivant!

II

Que faire maintenant de toutes mes pensées,
De mon front, qui dormait dans tes mains enlacées,
De tout ce que j’entends, de tout ce que je vois?
Que faire de mes maux, sans toi pleins d’amertume,
De mes yeux dont la flamme à tes regards s’allume,
De ma voix qui ne sait parler qu’après ta voix?

Et mon oeil tour à tour, distrait, suit dans l’espace
Chaque arbre du chemin qui paraît et qui passe,
Les bois verts, le flot d’or de la jaune moisson,
Et les monts, et du soir l’étincelante étoile,
Et les clochers aigus, et les villes que voile
Un dais de brume à l’horizon!

Qu’importent les bois verts, la moisson, la colline,
Et l’astre qui se lève et l’astre qui décline,
Et la plainte et les monts, si tu ne les vois pas?
Que me font ces châteaux, ruines féodales,
Si leur donjon moussu n’entend point sur ses dalles
Tes pas légers courir à côté de mes pas?

Ainsi donc aujourd’hui, demain, après encore,
Il faudra voir sans toi naître et mourir l’aurore,
Sans toi! sans ton sourire et ton regard joyeux;
Sans t’entendre marcher près de moi quand je rêve;
Sans que ta douce main, quand mon front se soulève,
Se pose en jouant sur mes yeux!

Pourtant, il faut encore, à tant d’ennuis en proie,
Dans mes lettres du soir t’envoyer quelque joie,
Dire: “ Console-toi, le calme m’est rendu! “;
Quand je crains chaque instant qui loin de toi s’écoule,
Et qu’inventant des maux qui t’assiègent en foule,
Chaque heure est sur ma tête un glaive suspendu!

III

Que fais-tu maintenant? Près du foyer sans doute
La carte est déployée, et ton oeil suit ma route;
Tu dis: “ Où peut-il être? - Ah, qu’il trouve en tous lieux
De tendres soins, un coeur qui l’estime et qui l’aime,
Et quelque bonne hôtesse, ayant, comme moi-même,
Un être cher sous d’autres cieux!

Comme il s’éloigne vite, hélas! J’en suis certaine,
Il a déjà franchi cette ville lointaine,
Ces forêts, ce vieux pont d’un grand exploit témoin;
Peut-être en ce moment il roule en ces vallées,
Par une croix sinistre aux passants signalées,
Où, l’an dernier... Pourvu qu’il soit déjà plus loin! “

Et mon père, essuyant une larme qui brille,
T’invite en souriant à sourire à ta fille:
“ Rassurez-vous! bientôt nous le reverrons tous.
Il rit, il est tranquille, il visite à cette heure
De quelque vieux héros la tombe ou la demeure;
Il prie à quelque autel pour vous.

Car, vous le savez bien, ma fille, il aime encore
Ces créneaux, ces portails qu’un art naïf décore;
Il nous a dit souvent, assis à vos côtés,
L’ogive chez les Goths de l’Orient venue,
Et la flèche romane aiguisant dans la nue
Ses huit angles de pierre en écailles sculptés! “

IV

Et puis le Vétéran, à ta douleur trompée,
Conte sa vie errante, et nos grands coups d’épée,
Et quelque ancien combat du Tage ou du Tésin,
Et l’empereur, du siècle imposante merveille, -
Tout en baissant sa voix de peur qu’elle n’éveille
Ton enfant qui dort sur ton sein!

ODE VINGTIÈME

PROMENADE

Voici les lieux chers à ma rêverie,
voici les prés dont j'ai chanté les fleurs...
AMABLE TASTU, la Lyre égarée

Ceins le voile de gaze aux pudiques couleurs,
Où la féconde aiguille a semé tant de fleurs!
Viens respirer sous les platanes;
Couvre-toi du tissu, trésor de Cachemir,
Qui peut-être a caché le poignard d'un émir,
Ou le sein jaloux des sultanes.

Aux lueurs du couchant vois fumer les hameaux.
La vapeur monte et passe; ainsi s'en vont nos maux,
Gloire, ambition, renommée!
Nous brillons tour à tour, jouets d'un fol espoir:
Tel ce dernier rayon, ce dernier vent du soir
Dore et berce un peu de fumée.

A l'heure où le jour meurt à l'horizon lointain,
Qu'il m'est doux, près d'un coeur qui bat pour mon destin
D'égarer mes pas dans la plaine!
Qu'il m'est doux, près de toi d'errer libre d'ennuis,
Quand tu mêles, pensive, à la brise des nuits
Le parfum de ta douce haleine!

C'est pour un tel bonheur, dès l'enfance rêvé,
Que j 'ai longtemps souffert et que j'ai tout bravé!
Dans nos temps de fureurs civiles,
Je te dois une paix que rien ne peut troubler.
Plus de vide en mes jours! Pour moi tu sais peupler
Tous les déserts, même les villes!

Chaque étoile à son tour vient apparaître au ciel.
Tels, quand un grand festin d’ambroisie et de miel
Embaume une riche demeure,
Souvent sur le velours et le damas soyeux,
On voit les plus hâtifs des convives joyeux
S’asseoir au banquet avant l’heure.

Vois, - c’est un météore! il éclate et s’éteint.
Plus d’un grand homme aussi, d’un mal secret atteint,
Rayonne et descend dans la tombe.
Le vulgaire l’ignore et suit le tourbillon;
Au laboureur courbé le soir sur le sillon,
Qu’importe l’étoile qui tombe!

Ah! tu n’es point ainsi, toi dont les nobles pleurs
De toute âme sublime honorent les malheurs!
Toi qui gémis sur le poète!
Toi qui plains la victime et surtout les bourreaux!
Qui visites souvent la tombe des héros,
Silencieuse, et non muette!

Si quelque ancien château, devant tes pas distraits,
Lève son donjon noir sur les noires forêts,
Bien loin de la ville importune, Tu t’arrêtes soudain; et ton oeil tour à tour
Cherche et perd à travers les créneaux de la tour
Le pâle croissant de la lune.

C’est moi qui t’inspirai d’aimer ces vieux piliers,
Ces temples où jadis les jeunes chevaliers
Priaient, armés par leur marraine;
Ces palais où parfois le poète endormi
A senti sur sa bouche entrouverte à demi
Tomber le baiser d’une reine.

Mais rentrons; vois le ciel d’ombres s’environner;
Déjà le frêle esquif qui nous doit ramener

Sur les eaux du lac étincelle;
Cette barque ressemble à nos jours inconstants
Qui flottent dans la nuit sur l’abîme des temps;
Le gouffre porte la nacelle!

La vie à chaque instant fuit vers l’éternité;
Et le corps, sur la terre où l’âme l’a quitté,
Reste comme un fardeau frivole.
Ainsi quand meurt la rose, aux royales couleurs,
Sa feuille, que l’aurore en vain baigne de pleurs,
Tombe, et son doux parfum s’envole!

ODE VINGT ET UNIÈME

À RAMON, DUC DE BENAV.

Par la bora de su herida. GUILLEN DE CASTRO.

Hélas! j ‘ai compris ton sourire,
Semblable au ris du condamné,
Quand le mot qui doit le proscrire
À son oreille a résonné!
En pressant ta main convulsive,
J’ai compris ta douleur pensive,
Et ton regard morne et profond,
Qui, pareil à l’éclair des nues,
Brille sur des mers inconnues,
Mais ne peut en montrer le fond.

“ Pourquoi faut-il donc qu’on me plaigne,
M’as-tu dit, je n’ai pas gémi?
Jamais de mes pleurs je ne baigne
La main d’un frère ou d’un ami!
Je n’en ai pas. Puisqu’à ma vie
La joie est pour toujours ravie,
Qu’on m’épargne au moins la pitié!
Je paye assez mon infortune
Pour que nulle voix importune
N’ose en réclamer la moitié!

“ D’ailleurs, vaut-elle tant de larmes?
Appelle-t-on cela malheur? -
Oui! ce qui pour l’homme a des charmes
Pour moi n’a qu’ennuis et douleur.
Sur mon passé rien ne surnage
Des vains rêves de mon jeune âge
Que le sort chaque jour dément;
L’amour éteint pour moi sa flamme;

Et jamais la voix d’une femme
Ne dira mon nom doucement!

“Jamais d’enfants! jamais d’épouse!
Nul coeur près du mien n’a battu;
Jamais une bouche jalouse
Ne m’a demandé: D’où viens-tu?
Point d’espérance qui me reste!
Mon avenir sombre et funeste
Ne m’offre que des jours mauvais;
Dans cet horizon de ténèbres
Ont passé vingt spectres funèbres,
Jamais l’ombre que je rêvais!

“ Ma tête ne s’est point courbée;
Mais la main du sort ennemi
Est plus lourdement retombée
Sur mon front toujours raffermi.
À la jeunesse qui s’envole,
À la gloire, au plaisir frivole,
J’ai dit l’adieu fier de Caton
Toutes fleurs pour moi sont fanées;
Mais c’est l’ordre des destinées;
Et si je souffre, qu’en sait-on?

“ Esclaves d’une loi fatale,
Sachons taire les maux soufferts.
Pourquoi veux-tu donc que j ‘étale
La meurtrissure de mes fers?
Aux yeux que la misère effraie,
Qu’importe ma secrète plaie?
Passez, je dois vivre isolé;
Vos voix ne sont qu’un bruit sonore;
Passez tous! j ‘aime mieux encore
Souffrir que d’être consolé!

“ Je n’appartiens plus à la vie.

Qu’importe si parfois mes yeux,
Soit qu’on me plaigne ou qu’on m’envie,
Lancent un feu sombre ou joyeux!
Qu’importe, quand la coupe est vide,
Que ses bords, sur la lèvre avide,
Laissent encore un goût amer!
A-t-il vaincu le flot qui gronde,
Le vaisseau qui, perdu sous l’onde,
Lève encor son mât sur la mer?

“ Qu’importe mon deuil solitaire?
D’autres coulent des jours meilleurs.
Qu’est-ce que le bruit de la terre?
Un concert de ris et de pleurs.
Je veux, comme tous les fils d’Ève,
Sans qu’une autre main le soulève,
Porter mon fardeau jusqu’au soir;
À la foule qui passe et tombe,
Qu’importe au seuil de quelle tombe
Mon ombre un jour ira s’asseoir! “

Ainsi, quand tout bas tu soupires,
De ton coeur partent des sanglots,
Comme un son s’échappe des lyres,
Comme un murmure sort des flots!
Va, ton infortune est ta gloire!
Les fronts marqués par la victoire
Ne se couronnent pas de fleurs.
De ton sein la joie est bannie;
Mais tu sais bien que le génie
Prélude à ses chants par des pleurs.

Comme un soc de fer, dès l’aurore,
Fouille le sol de son tranchant,
Et l’ouvre, et le sillonne encore,
Aux derniers rayons du couchant;
Sur chaque heure qui t’est donnée

Revient l’infortune acharnée,
Infatigable à t’obséder;
Mais si de son glaive de flamme
Le malheur déchire ton âme,
Ami, c’est pour la féconder!

ODE VINGT-DEUXIÈME

LE PORTRAIT D’UNE ENFANT

à Mlle J.-D. de M.

Quand je voy tant de couleurs
Et de fleurs
Qui esmaillent un nuage,
Je pense voir le beau teint
Qui est peint
Si vermeil en son visage.

Quand te sens parmi les prez
Diaprez,
Les fleurs dont la terre est pleine,
Lors te fais croire à mes sens
Que te sens
La douceur de son haleine.
RONSARD.

Oui, ce front, ce sourire et cette fraîche joue,
C’est bien l’enfant qui pleure et joue,
Et qu’un esprit du ciel défend!
De ses doux traits, ravis à la Sainte phalange,
C’est bien le délicat mélange;
Poète, j ‘y crois voir un ange,
Père, j’y trouve mon enfant.

On devine à ses yeux pleins d’une pure flamme,
Qu’au paradis, d’où vient son âme,
Elle a dit un récent adieu.
Son regard, rayonnant d’une joie éphémère,
Semble en suivre encor la chimère,
Et revoir dans sa douce mère
L’humble mère de l’Enfant-Dieu!

On dirait qu’elle écoute un choeur de voix célestes,
Que, de loin, des vierges modestes
Elle entend l’appel gracieux;
À son joyeux regard, à son naïf sourire,
On serait tenté de lui dire:
— Jeune ange, quel fut ton martyre,
Et quel est ton nom dans les cieux?

II

Ô toi dont le pinceau me la fit si touchante,
Tu me la peins, je te la chante!
Car tes nobles travaux vivront;
Une force virile à ta grâce est unie;
Tes couleurs sont une harmonie;
Et dans ton enfance, un Génie
Mît une flamme sur ton front!

Sans doute quelque fée, à ton berceau venue,
Des sept couleurs que dans la nue
Suspend le prisme aérien,
Des roses de l’aurore humide et matinale,
Des feux de l’aube boréale,
Fit une palette idéale
Pour ton pinceau magicien!

ODE VINGT-TROISIÈME

À MADAME LA COMTESSE A. H.

Sur ma lyre, l’autre fois
Dans un bois,
Ma main préludait à peine,
Une colombe descend
En passant,
Blanche sur le luth d’ébène.

Mais au lieu d’accords touchants,
De doux chants,
La colombe gémissante me demande par pitié
Sa moitié,
Sa moitié loin d’elle absente.
SAINTE.BEUVE.

Oh! quel que soit le rêve, ou paisible, ou joyeux,
Qui dans l’ombre à cette heure illumine tes yeux,
C’est le bonheur qu’il te signale;
Loin des bras d’un époux qui n’est encor qu’amant,
Dors tranquille, ma soeur! passe-la doucement,
Ta dernière nuit virginale!

Dors: nous prierons pour toi, jusqu’à ce beau matin!
Tu devais être à nous, et c’était ton destin,
Et rien ne pouvait t’y soustraire.
Oui, la voix de l’autel va te nommer ma soeur;
Mais ce n’est que l’écho d’une voix de mon coeur
Qui déjà me nommait ton frère.

Dors, cette nuit encor, d’un sommeil pur et doux!
Demain, serments, transports, caresses d’un époux,
Festins que la joie environne,
Et soupirs inquiets dans ton sein renaissant,

Quand une main fera de ton front rougissant
Tomber la tremblante couronne!

Ah! puisse dès demain se lever sur tes jours
Un bonheur qui jamais ne s’éclipse, et toujours
Brille, plus beau qu’un rêve même!
Vers le ciel étoilé laisse monter nos voeux.
Dors en paix cette nuit où nous veillons tous deux,
Moi qui te chante, et lui qui t’aime!

ODE VINGT-QUATRIÈME

PLUIE D'ÉTÉ

L'aubépine et l'églantin,
Et le thym,
L'oeillet, le lys et les roses,
En cette belle saison,
À foison
Montrent leurs robes écloses.

Le gentil rossignolet,
Doucelet,
Découpe, dessous l'ombrage,
Mille fredons babillards.
Frétillards,
Aux doux sons de son ramage.
RÉMI BELLEAU.

Que la soirée est fraîche et douce!
Oh! viens! il a plu ce matin;
Les humides tapis de mousse
Verdissent tes pieds de satin.
L'oiseau vole sous les feuillées,
Secouant ses ailes mouillées;
Pauvre oiseau que le ciel bénit!
Il écoute le vent bruire,
Chante, et voit des gouttes d'eau luire,
Comme des perles, dans son nid.

La pluie a versé ses ondées;
Le ciel reprend son bleu changeant;
Les terres luisent fécondées
Comme sous un réseau d'argent.
Le petit ruisseau de la plaine,
Pour une heure enflé, roule et traîne

Brins d’herbe, lézards endormis,
Court, et précipitant son onde
Du haut d’un caillou qu’il inonde,
Fait des Niagaras aux fourmis!

Tourbillonnant dans ce déluge,
Des insectes sans avirons,
Voguent pressés, frêle refuge!
Sur des ailes de moucherons;
D’autres pendent, comme à des îles,
À des feuilles, errants asiles;
Heureux, dans leur adversité,
Si, perçant les flots de sa cime,
Une paille au bord de l’abîme
Retient leur flottante cité!

Les courants ont lavé le sable;
Au soleil montent les vapeurs,
Et l’horizon insaisissable
Tremble et fuit sous leurs plis trompeurs.
On voit seulement sous leurs voiles,
Comme d’incertaines étoiles,
Des points lumineux scintiller,
Et les monts, de la brume enfuie,
Sortir, et, ruisselants de pluie,
Les toits d’ardoise étinceler.

Viens errer dans la plaine humide.
À cette heure nous serons seuls.
Mets sur mon bras ton bras timide;
Viens, nous prendrons par les tilleuls.
Le soleil rougissant décline
Avant de quitter la colline,
Tourne un moment tes yeux pour voir,
Avec ses palais, ses chaumières,
Rayonnants des mêmes lumières,
La ville d’or sur le ciel noir.

Oh! vois voltiger les fumées
Sur les toits de brouillards baignés!
Là, sont des épouses aimées,
Là, des coeurs doux et résignés.
La vie, hélas! dont on s’ennuie,
C’est le soleil après la pluie. -
Le voilà qui baisse toujours!
De la ville, que ses feux noient,
Toutes les fenêtres flamboient
Comme des yeux au front des tours.

L’arc-en-ciel! l’arc-en-ciel! Regarde. -
Comme il s’arrondit pur dans l’air!
Quel trésor le Dieu bon nous garde
Après le tonnerre et l’éclair!
Que de fois, sphères éternelles,
Mon âme a demandé ses ailes,
Implorant quelque Ithuriel,
Hélas! pour savoir à quel monde
Mène cette courbe profonde,
Arche immense d’un pont du ciel!

ODE VINGT-CINQUIÈME

RÊVES

En la amena soledad
de aquesta apacible estancia,
bellisimo laberinto
de árboles, flores, y plantas,
Podeis dexarme, dexando
conmigo, que ellos me bastan
por campania, los libros
que os mande sacar de casa;
que yo, en tanto que Antioquia
celebra con fiestas tantas
la fabrica de esse templo,
que oy à Jupiter consagra,
...
huyendo del gran bullicio,
que hay en sus calles, y plazas,
passar estudiando quiero
la edad que al dia le falta.
CALDERON, El Mágico prodigioso.

I

Amis, loin de la ville,
Loin des palais de roi,
Loin de la cour servile,
Loin de la foule vile,
Trouvez-moi, trouvez-moi,

Aux champs où l’âme oisive
Se recueille en rêvant,
Sur une obscure rive
Où du monde n’arrive
Ni le flot, ni le vent,

Quelque asile sauvage,
Quelque abri d’autrefois,
Un port sur le rivage,
Un nid sous le feuillage,
Un manoir dans les bois!

Trouvez-le-moi bien sombre,
Bien calme, bien dormant,
Couvert d’arbres sans nombre,
Dans le silence et l’ombre,
Caché profondément!

Que là, sur toute chose,
Fidèle à ceux qui m’ont,
Mon vers plane, et se pose
Tantôt sur une rose,
Tantôt sur un grand mont.

Qu’il puisse avec audace,
De tout noeud détaché,
D’un vol que rien ne lasse,
S’égarer dans l’espace
Comme un oiseau lâché.

II

Qu’un songe au ciel m’enlève,
Que plein d’ombre et d’amour,
Jamais il ne s’achève,
Et que la nuit je rêve
À mon rêve du jour!

Aussi blanc que la voile
Qu’à l’horizon je voi,
Qu’il recèle une étoile,
Et qu’il soit comme un voile

Entre la vie et moi!

Que la muse qui plonge
En ma nuit pour briller,
Le dore et le prolonge,
Et de l’éternel songe
Craigne de m’éveiller!

Que toutes mes pensées
Viennent s’y déployer,
Et s’asseoir, empressées,
Se tenant embrassées,
En cercle à mon foyer.

Qu’à mon rêve enchaînées,
Toutes, l’oeil triomphant,
Le bercent inclinées,
Comme des soeurs aînées
Bercent leur frère enfant!

III

On croit sur la falaise,
On croit dans les forêts,
Tant on respire à l’aise,
Et tant rien ne nous pèse,
Voir le ciel de plus près!

Là, tout est comme un rêve;
Chaque voix a des mots,
Tout parle, un chant s’élève
De l’onde sur la grève,
De l’air dans les rameaux.

C’est une voix profonde,
Un choeur universel,
C’est le globe qui gronde,

C’est le roulis du monde
Sur l’océan du ciel.

C’est l’écho magnifique
Des voix de Jéhova,
C’est l’hymne séraphique
Du monde pacifique
Où va ce qui s’en va;

Où, sourde aux cris de femmes,
Aux plaintes, aux sanglots,
L’âme se mêle aux âmes,
Comme la flamme aux flammes,
Comme le flot aux flots!

IV

Ce bruit vaste, à toute heure,
On l’entend au désert.
Paris, folle demeure,
Pour cette voix qui pleure
Nous donne un vain concert.

Oh! la Bretagne antique!
Quelque roc écumant!
Dans la forêt celtique
Quelque donjon gothique!
Pourvu que seulement

La tour hospitalière
Où je pendrai mon nid,
Ait, vieille chevalière,
Un panache de lierre
Sur son front de granit!

Pourvu que, blasonnée
D’un écusson altier,

La haute cheminée,
Béante, illuminée,
Dévore un chêne entier!

Que, l’été, la charmille
Me dérobe un ciel bleu;
Que l’hiver ma famille,
Dans l’âtre assise, brille
Toute rouge au grand feu!

Dans les bois, mes royaumes,
Si le soir l’air bruit,
Qu’il semble, à voir leurs dômes,
Des têtes de fantôme
Se heurtant dans la nuit!

Que des vierges, abeilles
Dont les cieux sont remplis,
Viennent sur moi, vermeilles,
Secouer dans mes veilles
Leur robe à mille plis!

Qu’avec des voix plaintives,
Les ombres des héros
Repassent fugitives,
Blanches sous mes ogives,
Sombres sur mes vitraux!

V

Si ma muse envolée
Porte son nid si cher
Et sa famille ailée
Dans la salle écroulée
D’un vieux baron de fer;

C’est que j’aime ces âges

Plus beaux, sinon meilleurs,
Que nos siècles plus sages;
À leurs débris sauvages
Je m’attache, et d’ailleurs

L’hirondelle enlevée
Par son vol sur la tour,
Parfois, des vents sauvée,
Choisit pour sa couvée
Un vieux nid de vautour.

Sa famille humble et douce,
Souvent, en se jouant,
Du bec remue et pousse,
Tout brisé sur la mousse,
L’oeuf de l’oiseau géant.

Dans les armes antiques
Mes vers ainsi joûront,
Et remuant des piques,
Riront, nains fantastiques,
De grands casques au front!

VI

Ainsi, noués en gerbe,
Reverdiront mes jours
Dans le donjon superbe,
Comme une touffe d’herbe
Dans les brèches des tours.

Mais, donjon ou chaumière,
Du monde délié,
Je vivrai de lumière,
D’extase et de prière,
Oubliant, oublié!

BALLADES

Renouvelle aussi
Toute vieille pensée.
JOACHIM DU BELLAY

BALLADE PREMIÈRE

UNE FÉE

...La reine Mab m’a visité. C’est elle
Qui fait dans le sommeil veiller l’âme immortelle.
ÉMILE DESCHAMPS, Roméo et Juliette.

Que ce soit Urgèle ou Morgane,
J’aime, en un rêve sans effroi,
Qu’une fée, au corps diaphane,
Ainsi qu’une fleur qui se fane, Vienne pencher son front sur moi.

C’est elle dont le luth d’ivoire
Me redit, sur un mâle accord,
Vos contes, qu’on n’oserait croire,
Bons paladins, si votre histoire
N’était plus merveilleuse encor.

C’est elle, aux choses qu’on révère
Qui m’ordonne de m’allier,
Et qui veut que ma main sévère
Joigne la harpe du trouvère
Au gantelet du chevalier.

Dans le désert qui me réclame,
Cachée en tout ce que je vois,
C’est elle qui fait, pour mon âme,
De chaque rayon une flamme,
Et de chaque bruit une voix;

Elle, - qui dans l’onde agitée
Murmure en sortant du rocher;
Et, de me plaire tourmentée,
Suspend la cigogne argentée
Au faîte aigu du noir clocher;

Quand, l’hiver, mon foyer pétille,
C’est elle qui vient s’y tapir,
Et me montre, au ciel qui scintille,
L’étoile qui s’éteint et brille,
Comme un oeil prêt à s’assoupir;

Qui, lorsqu’en des manoirs sauvages
J’erre, cherchant nos vieux berceaux,
M’environnant de mille images,
Comme un bruit du torrent des âges,
Fait mugir l’air sous les arceaux;

Elle, - qui, la nuit, quand je veille,
M’apporte de confus abois,
Et pour endormir mon oreille,
Dans le calme du soir, éveille
Un cor lointain au fond des bois!

Que ce soit Urgèle ou Morgane,
J’aime, en un rêve sans effroi,
Qu’une fée, au corps diaphane,
Ainsi qu’une fleur qui se fane,
Vienne pencher son front sur moi!

BALLADE DEUXIÈME

LE SYLPHE

Le vent, le froid et l’orage
Contre l’enfant faisaient rage.
— Ouvrez, dit-il, je suis nu!
LA FONTAINE, Imitation d’Anacréon.

“ Toi, qu’en ces murs, pareille aux rêveuses Sylphides,
Ce vitrage éclairé montre à mes yeux avides,
Jeune fille, ouvre-moi! Voici la nuit, j ‘ai peur,
La nuit, qui, peuplant l’air de figures livides,
Donne aux âmes des morts des robes de vapeur!

“ Vierge, je ne suis point de ces pèlerins sages
Qui font de longs récits après de longs voyages;
Ni de ces paladins, qu’aime et craint la beauté,
Dont le cor, éveillant les varlets et les pages,
Porte un appel de guerre à l’hospitalité.

“ Je n’ai ni lourd bâton, ni lance redoutée,
Point de longs cheveux noirs, point de barbe argentée,
Ni d’humble chapelet, ni de glaive vainqueur.
Mon souffle, dont une herbe est à peine agitée,
N’arrache au cor des preux qu’un murmure moqueur.

“ Je suis l’enfant de l’air, un sylphe, moins qu’un rêve,
Fils du printemps qui naît, du matin qui se lève,
L’hôte du clair foyer, durant les nuits d’hiver,
L’esprit que la lumière à la rosée enlève,
Diaphane habitant de l’invisible éther.

“ Ce soir un couple heureux, d’une voix solennelle,
Parlait tout bas d’amour et de flamme éternelle.
J’entendais tout; près d’eux je m’étais arrêté

Ils ont dans un baiser pris le bout de mon aile,
Et la nuit est venue avant ma liberté.

“ Hélas! il est trop tard pour rentrer dans ma rose!
Châtelaine, ouvre-moi, car ma demeure est close.
Recueille un fils du jour, égaré dans la nuit;
Permets, jusqu’à demain, qu’en ton lit je repose;
Je tiendrai peu de place et ferai peu de bruit.

“ Mes frères ont suivi la lumière éclipsée,
Ou les larmes du soir dont l’herbe est arrosée;
Les lys leur ont ouvert leurs calices de miel;
Où fuir?... Je ne vois plus de gouttes de rosée,
Plus de fleurs dans les champs! plus de rayons au ciel!

“ Damoiselle, entends-moi, de peur que la Nuit sombre,
Comme en un grand filet, ne me prenne en son ombre,
Parmi les spectres blancs et les fantômes noirs,
Les démons, dont l’enfer même ignore le nombre,
Les hiboux du sépulcre et l’autour des manoirs!

“ Voici l’heure où les morts dansent d’un pied débile.
La lune au pâle front les regarde, immobile;
Et le hideux vampire, ô comble de frayeur!
Soulevant d’un bras fort une pierre inutile,
Traîne en sa tombe ouverte un tremblant fossoyeur.

“ Bientôt, nains monstrueux, noirs de poudre et de cendre,
Dans leur gouffre sans fond les Gnomes vont descendre.
Le follet fantastique erre sur les roseaux.
Au frais Ondin s’unit l’ardente Salamandre,
Et de bleuâtres feux se croisent sur les eaux.

“ Oh!... Si pour amuser son ennui taciturne,
Un mort, parmi ses os, m’enfermait dans son urne!
Si quelque nécromant, riant de mon effroi,
Dans la tour, d’où minuit lève sa voix nocturne,

Liait mon vol paisible au sinistre beffroi!

“ Que ta fenêtre s’ouvre!... Ah! si tu me repousses,
Il me faudra chercher quelques vieux nids de mousses,
À des lézards troublés livrer de grands combats...
Ouvre!... mes yeux sont purs, mes paroles sont douces
Comme ce qu’à sa belle un amant dit tout bas.

“ Et je suis si joli! Si tu voyais mes ailes
Trembler aux feux du jour, transparentes et frêles!...
J’ai la blancheur des lys où, le soir, nous fuyons;
Et les roses, nos soeurs, se disputent entr’elles
Mon souffle de parfums et mon corps de rayons.

“ Je veux qu’un rêve heureux te révèle ma gloire.
Près de moi (ma Sylphide en garde la mémoire),
Les papillons sont lourds, les colibris sont laids,
Quand, roi vêtu d’azur, et de nacre et de moire,
Je vais de fleurs en fleurs visiter mes palais.

“ J’ai froid: l’ombre me glace, et vainement je pleure.
Si je pouvais t’offrir, pour m’ouvrir ta demeure,
Ma goutte de rosée ou mes corolles d’or!
Mais non: je n’ai plus rien, il faudra que je meure.
Chaque soleil me donne et me prend mon trésor.

“ Que veux-tu qu’en dormant je t’apporte en échange?
L’écharpe d’une fée, ou le voile d’un ange?...
J’embellirai ta nuit des prestiges du jour!
Ton sommeil passera, sans que ton bonheur change,
Des beaux songes du ciel aux doux rêves d’amour.

“ Mais mon haleine en vain ternit la vitre humide!
Ô Vierge, crois-tu donc que, dans la nuit perfide,
La voix du Sylphe errant cache un amant trompeur?
Ne me crains pas, c’est moi qui suis faible et timide,
Et Si j ‘avais une ombre, hélas! j’en aurais peur. “

Il pleurait. - Tout à coup devant la tour antique,
S’éleva, murmurant comme un appel mystique,
Une voix... ce n’était sans doute qu’un esprit!
Bientôt parut la dame à son balcon gothique: -
On ne sait si ce fut au Sylphe qu’elle ouvrit.

BALLADE TROISIÈME

LA GRAND-MÈRE

To die - to sleep.
SHAKESPEARE

“ Dors-tu?... réveille-toi, mère de notre mère!
D’ordinaire en dormant ta bouche remuait;
Car ton sommeil souvent ressemble à ta prière.
Mais, ce soir, on dirait la madone de pierre;
Ta lèvre est immobile et ton souffle est muet.

“ Pourquoi courber ton front plus bas que de coutume.
Quel mal avons-nous fait, pour ne plus nous chérir?
Vois, la lampe pâlit, l’âtre scintille et fume;
Si tu ne parles pas, le feu qui se consume,
Et la lampe, et nous deux, nous allons tous mourir!

“ Tu nous trouveras morts près de la lampe éteinte.
Alors, que diras-tu quand tu t’éveilleras?
Tes enfants à leur tour seront sourds à ta plainte.
Pour nous rendre la vie, en invoquant ta sainte,
Il fraudra bien longtemps nous serrer dans tes bras!

“ Donne-nous donc tes mains dans nos mains réchauffées.
Chante-nous quelque chant de pauvre troubadour.
Dis-nous ces chevaliers qui, servis par les fées,
Pour bouquets à leur dame apportaient des trophées,
Et dont le cri de guerre était un nom d’amour.

“ Disnous quel divin signe est funeste aux fantômes;
Quel ermite dans l’air vit Lucifer volant;
Quel rubis étincelle au front du roi des Gnomes;
Et si le noir démon craint plus, dans ses royaumes,
Les psaumes de Turpin que le fer de Roland.

“ Ou, montre-nous ta Bible et les belles images,
Le ciel d’or, les saints bleus, les saintes à genoux,
L’enfant-Jésus, la crèche, et le boeuf, et les mages;
Fais-nous lire du doigt, dans le milieu des pages,
Un peu de ce latin, qui parle à Dieu de nous.

“ Mère!... - Hélas! par degrés s’affaisse la lumière,
L’ombre joyeuse danse autour du noir foyer,
Les esprits vont peut-être entrer dans la chaumière...
Oh! sors de ton sommeil, interromps ta prière;
Toi qui nous rassurais, veux-tu nous effrayer?

“ Dieu! que tes bras sont froids! rouvre les yeux... Naguère
Tu nous parlais d’un monde, où nous mènent nos pas,
Et de ciel, et de tombe, et de vie éphémère,
Tu parlais de la mort... dis-nous, ô notre mère!
Qu’est-ce donc que la mort? - Tu ne nous réponds pas! “

Leur gémissante voix longtemps se plaignit seule.
La jeune aube parut sans réveiller l’aïeule.
La cloche frappa l’air de ses funèbres coups;
Et, le soir, un passant, par la porte entrouverte
Vit, devant le saint livre et la couche déserte,
Les deux petits enfants qui priaient à genoux.

BALLADE QUATRIÈME

À TRILBY, LE LUTIN D’ARGAIL

À vous, ombre légère,
Qui d’aile passagère
Par le monde volez,
Et d’un sifflant murmure
L’ombrageuse verdure
Doucement esbranlez;

J’offre ces violettes,
Ces lys et ces fleurettes.
Et ces roses ici,
Ces vermeillettes roses,
Tout fraischement escloses
Et ces oeillets aussi.
Vieille chanson.

C’est toi, Lutin! - Qui t’amène?
Sur ce rayon du couchant
Es-tu venu? Ton haleine
Me caresse en me touchant!
À mes yeux tu te révèles.
Tu m’inondes d’étincelles!
Et tes frémissantes ailes
Ont un bruit doux comme un chant.

Ta voix, de soupirs mêlée,
M’apporte un accent connu.
Dans ma cellule isolée,
Beau Trilby, sois bienvenu!
Ma demeure hospitalière
N’a point d’humble batelière
Dont ta bouche familière
Baise le sein demi-nu!

Viens-tu, dans l’âtre perfide,
Chercher mon Follet qui fuit,
Et ma Fée et ma Sylphide,
Qui me visitent sans bruit,
Et m’apportent, empressées,
Sur leurs ailes nuancées,
Le jour de douces pensées,
Et de doux rêves la nuit!

Viens-tu pas voir mes Ondines
Ceintes d’algue et de glaïeul?
Mes Nains, dont les voix badines
N’osent parler qu’à moi seul?
Viens-tu réveiller mes Gnomes?
Poursuivre en l’air les atomes,
Et lutiner mes Fantômes
En jouant dans leur linceul?

Hélas! fuis! - Ces lieux que j’aime
N’ont plus ces hôtes chéris!
Des cruels à l’anathème
Ont livré tous mes Esprits!
Mon Ondine est étouffée;
Et comme un double trophée,
Leurs mains ont cloué ma Fée
Près de ma Chauve-Souris!

Mes Spectres, mes Nains si frêles,
Quand leur courroux gronde encor,
N’osent plus sur les tourelles
S’appeler au son du cor;
Ma cour magique, en alarmes,
A fui leurs pesantes armes;
Ils ont de mon Sylphe en larmes
Arraché les ailes d’or!

Toi-même, crains leur tonnerre,
Crains un combat inégal,
Plus que la voix centenaire
Qui jadis vengea Dougal,
Dont la cabane fumeuse
Voit, durant la nuit brumeuse,
Sur une roche écumeuse,
S’asseoir l’ombre de Fingal!

Celui qui de ta montagne
T’a rapporté dans nos champs,
Eut comme toi pour compagne
L’Espérance aux voeux touchants.
Longtemps la France, sa mère,
Vit fuir sa jeunesse amère
Dans l’exil, où comme Homère,
Il n’emportait que ses chants!

À la fois triste et sublime,
Grave en son vol gracieux,
Le Poète aime l’abîme
Où fuit l’aigle audacieux,
Le parfum des fleurs mourantes,
L’or des comètes errantes,
Et les cloches murmurantes
Qui se plaignent dans les cieux!

Il aime un désert sauvage
Où rien ne borne ses pas;
Son coeur, pour fuir l’esclavage,
Vit plus loin que le trépas.
Quand l’opprimé le réclame,
Des peuples il devient l’âme;
Il est pour eux une flamme
Que le tyran n’éteint pas.

Tel est Nodier, le poète! -

Va, dis à ce noble ami
Que ma tendresse inquiète
De tes périls a frémi;
Dis-lui bien qu’il te surveille;
De tes jeux charme sa veille,
Enfant! Et lorsqu’il sommeille,
Dors sur son front endormi!

N’erre pas à l’aventure!
Car on en veut aux Trilbys.
Crains les maux et la torture
Que mon doux Sylphe a subis.
S’ils te prenaient, quelle gloire!
Ils souilleraient d’encre noire,
Hélas! ton manteau de moire,
Ton aigrette de rubis!

Ou, pour danser avec Faune,
Contraignant tes pas tremblants,
Leurs Satyres au pied jaune,
Leurs vieux Sylvains pétulants
Joindraient tes mains enchaînées
Aux vieilles mains décharnées
De leurs Naïades fanées,
Mortes depuis deux mille ans!

BALLADE CINQUIÈME

LE GÉANT

Les nuées du ciel elles-mêmes craignent que je ce vienne chercher mes ennemis dans leur sein...
MOTTENABBI.

Ô guerriers! je suis né dans le pays des Gaules.
Mes aïeux franchissaient le Rhin comme un ruisseau,
Ma mère me baigna dans la neige des pôles
Tout enfant, et mon père, aux robustes épaules,
De trois grandes peaux d’ours décora mon berceau.

Car mon père était fort! L’âge à présent l’enchaîne.
De son front tout ridé tombent ses cheveux blancs.
Il est faible; il est vieux. Sa fin est si prochaine,
Qu’à peine il peut encor déraciner un chêne
Pour soutenir ses pas tremblants!

C’est moi qui le remplace! et j’ai sa javeline,
Ses boeufs, son arc de fer, ses haches, ses colliers;
Moi! qui peux, succédant au vieillard qui décline,
Les pieds dans le vallon, m’asseoir sur la colline,
Et de mon souffle au loin courber les peupliers!

À peine adolescent, sur les Alpes sauvages,
De rochers en rochers je m’ouvrais des chemins;
Ma tête ainsi qu’un mont arrêtait les nuages;
Et souvent, dans les cieux épiant leurs passages,
J’ai pris des aigles dans mes mains!

Je combattais l’orage, et ma bruyante haleine
Dans leur vol anguleux éteignait les éclairs;
Ou, joyeux, devant moi chassant quelque baleine,
L’océan à mes pas ouvrait sa vaste plaine,

Et mieux que l’ouragan mes jeux troublaient les mers!

J’errais, je poursuivais d’une atteinte trop sûre
Le requin dans les flots, dans les airs l’épervier;
L’ours, étreint dans mes bras, expirait sans blessure,
Et j’ai souvent, l’hiver, brisé dans leur morsure
Les dents blanches du loup-cervier!

Ces plaisirs enfantins pour moi n’ont plus de charmes.
J’aime aujourd’hui la guerre et son mâle appareil,
Les malédictions des familles en larmes,
Les camps, et le soldat, bondissant dans ses armes,
Qui vient du cri d’alarme égayer mon réveil!

Dans la poudre et le sang, quand l’ardente Mêlée
Broie et roule une armée en bruyants tourbillons,
Je me lève, je suis sa course échevelée,
Et, comme un cormoran fond sur l’onde troublée,
Je plonge dans les bataillons!

Ainsi qu’un moissonneur parmi des gerbes mûres,
Dans les rangs écrasés, seul debout, j’apparais.
Leurs clameurs dans ma voix se perdent en murmures;
Et mon poing désarmé martèle les armures
Mieux qu’un chêne noueux choisi dans les forêts.

Je marche toujours nu. Ma valeur souveraine
Rit des soldats de fer dont vos camps sont peuplés.
Je n’emporte au combat que ma pique de frêne,
Et ce casque léger que traîneraient sans peine
Dix taureaux au joug accouplés.

Sans assiéger les forts d’échelles inutiles,
Des chaînes de leurs ponts je brise les anneaux.
Mieux qu’un bélier d’airain je bats leurs murs fragiles.
Je lutte corps à corps avec les tours des villes.
Pour combler les fossés j’arrache les créneaux.

Ô! quand mon tour viendra de suivre mes victimes,
Guerriers! ne laissez pas ma dépouille au corbeau;
Ensevélissez-moi parmi des monts sublimes,
Afin que l’étranger cherche en voyant leurs cimes
Quelle montagne est mon tombeau!

BALLADE SIXIÈME

LA FIANCÉE DU TIMBALIER

à M. J. F.

Douce est la mort qui vient en bien aimant!
DESPORTES, Sonnet.

“ Monseigneur le duc de Bretagne
A, pour les combats meurtriers,
Convoqué de Nantes à Mortagne,
Dans la plaine et sur la montagne,
L’arrière-ban de ses guerriers.

“ Ce sont des barons dont les armes
Ornent des forts ceints d’un fossé;
Des preux vieillis dans les alarmes,
Des écuyers, des hommes d’armes;
L’un d’entre eux est mon fiancé.

“ Il est parti pour l’Aquitaine
Comme timbalier, et pourtant
On le prend pour un capitaine,
Rien qu’à voir sa mine hautaine,
Et son pourpoint, d’or éclatant!

“ Depuis ce jour, l’effroi m’agite.
J’ai dit, joignant son sort au mien:
Ma patronne, sainte Brigitte,
Pour que jamais il ne le quitte,
Surveillez son ange gardien!

“ J’ai dit à notre abbé: Messire,
Priez bien pour tous nos soldats! -
Et, comme on sait qu’il le désire,

J’ai brûlé trois cierges de cire
Sur la châsse de saint Gildas.

“ À Notre-Dame de Lorette
J’ai promis, dans mon noir chagrin,
D’attacher sur ma gorgerette,
Fermée à la vue indiscrète,
Les coquilles du pèlerin.

“ Il n’a pu, par d’amoureux gages,
Absent, consoler mes foyers;
Pour porter les tendres messages,
La vassale n’a point de pages,
Le vassal n’a pas d’écuyers.

“ Il doit aujourd’hui de la guerre
Revenir avec monseigneur;
Ce n’est plus un amant vulgaire;
Je lève un front baissé naguère,
Et mon orgueil est du bonheur!

“ Le duc triomphant nous rapporte
Son drapeau dans les camps froissé;
Venez tous sous la vieille porte
Voir passer la brillante escorte,
Et le prince, et mon fiancé,

“ Venez voir pour ce jour de fête
Son cheval caparaçonné,
Qui sous son poids henrtit, s’arrête,
Et marche en secouant la tête,
De plumes rouges couronné!

“ Mes soeurs, à vous parer si lentes,
Venez voir près de mon vainqueur
Ces timbales étincelantes
Qui sous sa main toujours tremblantes

Sonnent et font bondir le coeur!

“ Venez surtout le voir lui-même
Sous le manteau que j’ai brodé.
Qu’il sera beau! c’est lui que j’aime!
Il porte comme un diadème
Son casque de crins inondé!

“ L’Égyptienne sacrilège,
M’attirant derrière un pilier,
M’a dit hier (Dieu nous protège!)
Qu’à la fanfare du cortège
Il manquerait un timbalier.

“ Mais j’ai tant prié, que j’espère!
Quoique, me montrant de la main
Un sépulcre, son noir repaire,
La vieille aux regards de vipère,
M’ait dit: Je t’attends là demain!

“ Volons! plus de noires pensées!
Ce sont les tambours que j ‘entends.
Voici les dames entassées,
Les tentes de pourpre dressées,
Les fleurs et les drapeaux flottants!

“ Sur deux rangs le cortège ondoie
D’abord, les piquiers aux pas lourds;
Puis, sous l’étendard qu’on déploie,
Les barons, en robe de soie,
Avec leurs toques de velours.

“ Voici les chasubles des prêtres;
Les hérauts sur un blanc coursier.
Tous, en souvenir des ancêtres,
Portent l’écusson de leurs maîtres,
Peint sur leur corselet d’acier.

“ Admirez l’armure persane
Des Templiers, craints de l’enfer;
Et, sous la longue pertuisane,
Les archers venus de Lausanne,
Vêtus de buffle, armés de fer.

“ Le duc n’est pas loin ses bannières
Flottent parmi les chevaliers;
Quelques enseignes prisonnières,
Honteuses, passent les dernières... -
— Mes soeurs! voici les timbaliers!... “

Elle dit, et sa vue errante
Plonge, hélas! dans les rangs pressés;
Puis, dans la foule indifférente,
Elle tomba, froide et mourante...
— Les timbaliers étaient passés.

BALLADE SEPTIÈME

LA MÊLÉE

Les armées s’ébranlent, le choc est terrible, les combattants sont terribles, les blessures sont terribles, la mêlée est terrible. GONZALO BERCEO, la Bataille de Simancas.

Pâtre! change de route. - Au pied de ces collines
Vois onduler deux rangs d’épaisses javelines;
Vois ces deux bataillons l’un vers l’autre marchant;
Au signal de leurs chefs que divise la haine,
Ils se sont pour combattre arrêtés dans la plaine.
Écoute ces clameurs... tu frémis c’est leur chant!

“ Accourez tous, oiseaux de proie,
Aigles, hiboux, Vautours, corbeaux!
Volez! Volez tous pleins de joie
À ces champs comme à des tombeaux!
Que l’ennemi sous notre glaive
Tombe avec le jour qui s’achève!
Les psaumes du soir sont finis.
Le prêtre, qui suit leurs bannières,
Leur a dit leurs vêpres dernières,
Et le nôtre nous a bénis! “

Halbert, baron normand, Ronan, prince de Galles,
Vont mesurer ici leurs forces presqu ‘égales;
Les Normands sont adroits; les Gallois sont ardents.
Ceux-là viennent chargés d’une armure sonore;
Ceux-ci font, pour couvrir leur front sauvage encore,
De la gueule des loups un casque armé de dents!

“ Que nous fait la plainte des veuves,
Et de l’orphelin gémissant?
Demain nous laverons aux fleuves

Nos bras teints de fange et de sang.
Serrons nos rangs, brûlons nos tentes!
Que nos trompettes éclatantes
Glacent l’ennemi méprisé!
En vain leurs essaims se déroulent;
Dans chacun des sillons qu’ils foulent
Leur sépulcre est déjà creusé! “

Le signal est donné. - Parmi des flots de poudre,
Leurs pas courts et pressés roulent comme la foudre... -
Comme deux chevaux noirs qui dévorent le frein,
Comme deux grands taureaux luttant dans les vallées,
Les deux masses de fer, à grand bruit ébranlées,
Brisent d’un même choc leur double front d’airain.

“ Allons, guerriers! la charge sonne!
Courrez, frappez, c’est le moment!
Aux sons de la trompe saxonne,
Aux accords du clairon normand!
Dagues, hallebardes, épées,
Pertuisanes de sang trempées,
Haches, poignards à deux tranchants,
Parmi les cuirasses froissées,
Mêlez vos pointes hérissées,
Comme la ronce dans les champs! “

Où est donc le soleil? - Il luit dans la fumée
Comme un bouclier rouge en la forge enflammée.
Dans les vapeurs de sang on voit briller le fer;
La vallée au loin semble une fournaise ardente;
On dirait qu’au milieu de la plaine grondante
S’est ouverte soudain la bouche de l’enfer.

“ Le jeu des héros se prolonge,
Les rangs s’enfoncent dans les rangs,
Le pied des combattants se plonge
Dans la blessure des mourants.

Avançons! avançons! courage!
Le fantassin mord avec rage
Le poitrail de fer du coursier;
Les chevaux blanchissants frissonnent,
Et les masses d’armes résonnent
Sur leurs caparaçons d’acier!

Noir chaos de coursiers, d’hommes, d’armes heurtées!
Les Gallois, tout couverts de peaux ensanglantées,
Se roulent sur le dard des écus meurtriers;
À mourir sur leurs morts obstinés et fidèles,
Ils semblent assiéger comme des citadelles
Les cavaliers normands sur leurs grands destriers.

“ Que ceux qui brisent leur épée
Luttent des ongles et des dents,
S’ils veulent fuir la faim trompée
Des loups autour de nous rôdants!
Point de prisonniers! point d’esclaves!
S’il faut mourir, mourrons en braves
Sur nos compagnons immolés.
Que demain le jour, s’il se lève,
Voie encor des tronçons de glaive
Étreints par nos bras mutilés!... “

Viens, berger: la nuit tombe, et plus de sang ruisselle;
De coups plus furieux chaque armure étincelle;
Les chevaux éperdus se dérobent aux mors.
Viens, laissons achever cette lutte brûlante.
Ces hommes acharnés à leur tache sanglante
Se reposeront tous demain, vainqueurs ou morts!

BALLADE HUITIÈME

LES DEUX ARCHERS

à M. Louis Boulanger

Dames, oyez un conte lamentable.
BAÏF.

C’était l’instant funèbre où la nuit est si sombre,
Qu’on tremble à chaque pas de réveiller dans l’ombre
Un démon, ivre encor du banquet des sabbats;
Le moment où, liant à peine sa prière,
Le voyageur se hâte à travers la clairière;
C’était l’heure où l’on parle bas!

Deux francs archers passaient au fond de la vallée,
Là-bas! où vous voyez une tour isolée,
Qui, lorsqu’en Palestine allaient mourir nos rois,
Fut bâtie en trois nuits, au dire de nos pères,
Par un ermite saint qui remuait les pierres
Avec le signe de la croix.

Tous deux, sans craindre l’heure, en ce lieu taciturne
Allumèrent un feu pour leur repas nocturne;
Puis ils vinrent s’asseoir en déposant leur cor,
Sur un saint de granit, dont l’image grossière,
Les mains jointes, le front couché dans la poussière,
Avait l’air de prier encor.

Cependant sur la tour, les monts, les bois antiques,
L’ardent foyer jetait des clartés fantastiques;
Les hiboux s’effrayaient au fond des vieux manoirs;
Et les chauves-souris que tout sabbat réclame,
Volaient, et par moments épouvantaient la flamme
De leur grande aile aux ongles noirs!

Le plus vieux des archers alors dit au plus jeune:
“ Portes-tu le cilice? - Observes-tu le jeûne? “
Reprit l’autre, et leur rire accompagna leur voix.
D’autres rires de loin tout à coup s’entendirent.
Le val était désert, l’ombre épaisse; ils se dirent:
“ C’est l’écho qui rit dans les bois. “

Soudain à leurs regards une lueur rampante
En bleuâtres sillons sur la hauteur serpente;
Les deux blasphémateurs, hélas! sans s’effrayer,
Jetèrent au brasier d’autres branches de chênes,
Disant: “ C’est, au miroir des cascades prochaines
Le reflet de notre foyer. “

Or cet écho (d’effroi qu’ici chacun s’incline!)
C’était Satan, riant tout haut sur la colline!
Ce reflet, émané du corps de Lucifer,
C’était le pâle jour qu’il traîne en nos ténèbres,
Le rayon sulfureux qu’en des songes funèbres
Il nous apporte de l’enfer!

Aux profanes éclats de leur coupable joie,
Il était accouru comme un loup vers sa proie.
Sur les archers dans l’ombre erraient ses yeux ardents.
—” Riez et blasphémez dans vos heures oisives.
Moi, je ferai passer vos bouches convulsives
Du rire au grincement de dents! “

À l’aube du matin, un peu de cendre éteinte
D’un pied large et fourchu portait l’étrange empreinte.
Le val fut tout le jour désert, silencieux.
Mais, au lieu du foyer, à minuit même, un pâtre
Vit soudain apparaître une flamme bleuâtre
Qui ne montait pas vers les cieux!

Dès qu’au sol attachée elle rampa livide,

De longs rires soudain éclatant dans le vide,
Glacèrent le berger d’un grand effroi saisi;
Il ne vit point Satan et ceux de l’autre monde,
Et ne put concevoir, dans sa terreur profonde,
Ce qu’ils souffraient pour rire ainsi!

Dès lors, toutes les nuits, aux monts, aux bois antiques,
L’ardent foyer jeta ses clartés fantastiques;
Des rires effrayaient les hiboux des manoirs;
Et les chauves-souris que tout sabbat réclame,
Volaient, et par moments épouvantaient la flamme
De leur grande aile aux ongles noirs.

Rien, avant le rayon de l’aube matinale,
Enfants, rien n’éteignait cette flamme infernale.
Si l’orage, à grands flots tombant, grondait dans l’air,
Les rires éclataient aussi haut que la foudre,
La flamme en tournoyant s’élançait de la poudre,
Comme pour s’unir à l’éclair!

Mais enfin une nuit, Vêtu de scapulaire,
Se leva du Vieux saint le marbre séculaire;
Il fit trois pas, armé de son rameau bénit;
De l’effrayant prodige effrayant exorciste,
De ses lèvres de pierre il dit: “ Que Dieu m’assiste! “
En ouvrant ses bras de granit!

Alors tout s’éteignit, flammes, rires, phosphore,
Tout! et le lendemain, on trouva dès l’aurore
Les deux gens d’armes morts sur la statue assis;
On les ensevelit; et, suivant sa promesse,
Le seigneur du hameau, pour fonder une messe,
Légua trois deniers parisis.

Si quelque enseignement se cache en cette histoire,
Qu’importe! il ne faut pas la juger, mais la croire.
La croire! Qu’ai-je dit? ces temps sont loin de nous!

Ce n’est plus qu’à demi qu’on se livre aux croyances.
Nul, dans notre âge aveugle et vain de ses sciences,
Ne sait plier les deux genoux!

BALLADE NEUVIÈME

L’AVEU DU CHATELAIN

Pource aimez-moy, cependant qu’estes belle.
RONSARD.

Écoute-moi, Madeleine!
L’hiver a quitté la plaine
Qu’hier il glaçait encor.
Viens dans ces bois d’où ma suite
Se retire, au loin conduite
Par les sons errants du cor!

Viens! on dirait, Madeleine,
Que le Printemps, dont l’haleine
Donne aux roses leurs couleurs,
A cette nuit, pour te plaire,
Secoué sur la bruyère
Sa robe pleine de fleurs!

Si j ‘étais, ô Madeleine,
L’agneau dont la blanche laine
Se démêle sous tes doigts!...
Si j’étais l’oiseau qui passe,
Et que poursuit dans l’espace
Un doux appel de ta voix!...

Si j’étais, ô Madeleine,
L’ermite de Tombelaine
Dans son pieux tribunal,
Quand ta bouche à son oreille
De tes péchés de la veille
Livre l’aveu virginal!...

Si j’avais, ô Madeleine,

L’oeil du nocturne phalène,
Lorsqu’au sommeil tu te rends,
Et que son aile indiscrète
De ta cellule secrète
Bat les vitraux transparents;

Quand ton sein, ô Madeleine,
Sort du corset de baleine,
Libre enfin du velours noir;
Quand, de peur de te voir nue.
Tu jettes, fille ingénue,
Ta robe sur ton miroir!

Si tu voulais, Madeleine,
Ta demeure serait pleine
De pages et de vassaux;
Et ton splendide oratoire
Déroberait sous la moire
La pierre de ses arceaux!...

Si tu voulais, Madeleine,
Au lieu de la marjolaine
Qui pare ton chaperon,
Tu porterais la couronne
De comtesse ou de baronne,
Dont la perle est le fleuron!

Si tu voulais, Madeleine,
Je te ferais châtelaine;
Je suis le comte Roger;
Quitte pour moi ces chaumières,
À moins que tu ne préfères
Que je me fasse berger!

BALLADE DIXIÈME

À UN PASSANT

LA CHASSE DU BURGRAVE *

Au soleil couchant
Toi qui vas cherchant
Fortune,
Prends garde de choir:
La terre, le soir,
Est brune.

L’océan trompeur
Couvre de vapeur
La dune.
Vois: à l’horizon,
Aucune maison!
Aucune!

Maint voleur te suit;
La chose est, la nuit,
Commune.
Les dames des bois
Nous gardent parfois
Rancune.

Elles vont errer;
Crains d’en rencontrer
Quelqu’une.
Les lutins de l’air
Vont danser au clair
De lune.
La Chanson du fou.

Voyageur qui, la nuit, sur le pavé sonore

De ton chien inquiet passes accompagné,
Après le jour brûlant, pourquoi marcher encore?
Où mènes-tu si tard ton cheval résigné?

La nuit! - Ne crains-tu pas d’entrevoir la stature
Du brigand dont un sabre a chargé la ceinture?
Ou qu’un de ces vieux loups près des routes rôdants,
Qui du fer des coursiers méprisent l’étincelle,
D’un bond brusque et soudain s’attachant à ta selle,
Ne mêle à ton sang noir l’écume de ses dents?

Ne crains-tu pas surtout qu’un follet à cette heure
N’allonge sous tes pas le chemin qui te leurre,
Et ne te fasse, hélas! ainsi qu’aux anciens jours,
Rêvant quelque logis dont la vitre scintille
Et le faisan doré par l’âtre qui pétille,
Marcher vers des clartés qui reculent toujours?

Crains d’aborder la plaine où le sabbat s’assemble,
Où les démons hurlants viennent danser ensemble;
Ces murs maudits par Dieu, par Satan profanés,
Ce magique château dont l’enfer sait l’histoire,
Et qui, désert le jour, quand tombe la nuit noire
Enflamme ses vitraux dans l’ombre illuminés!

Voyageur isolé, qui t’éloignes si vite,
De ton chien inquiet la nuit accompagné,
Après le jour brûlant, quand le repos t’invite,
Où mènes-tu si tard ton cheval résigné?

BALLADE ONZIÈME

LA CHASSE DU BURGRAVE

à Paul

Un vieux faune en riait dans sa grotte sauvage.
SEGRAIS.

“ Daigne protéger notre chasse,
Châsse
De monseigneur saint-Godefroi,
Roi!

“ Si tu fais ce que je désire,
Sire,
Nous t’édifîrons un tombeau,
Beau;

“ Puis je te donne un cor d’ivoire,
Voire
Un dais neuf à pans de velours,
Lourds,

“ Avec dix chandelles de cire,
Sire!
Donc, te prions à deux genoux,
Nous,

“ Nous qui, né de bons gentilshommes,
Sommes
Le Seigneur burgrave Alexis
Six! “ -

Voilà ce que dit le burgrave,
Grave,

Au tombeau de saint-Godefroi
Froid.

—” Mon page, emplis mon escarcelle,
Selle
Mon cheval de Calatrava;
Va!

“ Piqueur, va convier le comte,
Conte
Que ma meute aboie en mes cours.
Cours!

“Archers, mes compagnons de fêtes,
Faites
Votre épieu lisse et vos cornets
Nets.

“Nous ferons ce soir une chère
Chère;
Vous n’y recevrez, maître-queux,
Qu’eux.

“ En chasse, amis! je vous invite.
Vite!
En chasse! allons courre les cerfs,
Serfs! “

Il part, et madame Isabelle,
Belle,
Dit gaiement du haut des remparts
— Pars!

Tous les chasseurs sont dans la plaine,
Pleine
D’ardents seigneurs, de sénéchaux
Chauds.

Ce ne sont que baillis et prêtres,
Reitres
Qui savent traquer à pas lourds
L’ours,

Dames en brillants équipages,
Pages,
Fauconniers, clercs, et peu bénins
Nains.

En chasse! - Le maître en personne
Sonne.
Fuyez! voici les paladins,
Daims.

Il n’est pour vous comte d’empire
Pire
Que le vieux burgrave Alexis
Six!

Fuyez! - Mais un cerf dans l’espace
Passe,
Et disparaît comme l’éclair,
Clair!

“ Taïaut les chiens, taïaut les hommes!
Sommes
D’argent et d’or paieront sa chair
Cher!

“ Mon château pour ce cerf! - Marraine,
Reine
Des beaux sylphes et des follets
Laids!

“ Donne-moi son bois pour trophée,

Fée!
Mère du brave, et du chasseur
Soeur!

“ Tout ce qu’un prêtre à sa madone
Donne,
Moi, je te le promets ici,
Si

“ Notre main, ta serve et sujette,
Jette
Ce beau cerf qui s’enfuit là-bas
Bas! “

Du Chasseur Noir craignant l’injure,
Jure
Le vieux burgrave haletant,
Tant

Que déjà sa meute qui jappe
Happe,
Et fête le pauvre animal
Mal.

Il fuit. La bande malévole
Vole
Sur sa trace, et par le plus court
Court.

Adieu clos, plaines diaprées,
Prées,
Vergers fleuris, jardins sablés,
Blés!

Le cerf, s’échappant de plus belle,
Bêle;
Un bois à sa course est ouvert,

Vert.

Il entend venir sur ses traces
Races
De chiens dont vous seriez jaloux,
Loups;

Piqueurs, ardentes haquenées,
Nées
De ces étalons aux longs crins
Craints,

Leurs flancs, que de blancs harnois ceignent,
Saignent
Des coups fréquents des éperons
Prompts.

Le cerf, que le son de la trompe
Trompe,
Se jette dans les bois épais... -
Paix!

Hélas, en vain!... la meute cherche,
Cherche,
Et là tu retentis encor,
Cor!

Où fuir? dans le lac! Il s’y plonge,
Longe
Le bord où maint buisson rampant
Pend.

Ah! dans les eaux du lac agreste
Reste!
Hélas! pauvre cerf aux abois,
Bois!

Contre toi la fanfare ameute
Meute,
Et veneurs sonnant du hautbois...
Bois!

Les archers sournois qui t’attendent
Tendent
Leurs arcs dans l’épaisseur du bois!...
Bois!

Ils sont avides de carnage;
Nage!
C’est ton seul espoir désormais;
Mais

L’essaim, que sa chair palpitante
Tente,
Après lui dans le lac profond
Fond.

Il sort. - Plus d’espoir qui te leurre!
L’heure
Vient où pour toi tout est fini.
Ni

Tes pieds vifs, ni saint Marc de Leyde,
L’aide
Du cerf qu’un chien, à demi-mort,
Mord,

Ne te sauveront des morsures
Sûres
Des limiers ardents de courroux,
Roux.

Vois ces chiens qu’un serf bas et lâche
Lâche,

Vois les épieux à férir prêts,
Près!

Meurs donc! la fanfare méchante
Chante
Ta chute au milieu des clameurs.
Meurs!

Et ce soir, sur les délectables
Tables,
Tu feras un excellent mets;
Mais

On t’a vengé. - Fille d’Autriche
Triche
Quand l’hymen lui donne un barbon
Bon.

Or, sans son hôte le bon comte
Compte;
Il revient, quoique fatigué,
Gai.

Et tandis que ton sang ruisselle,
Celle
Qu’épousa le comte Alexis
Six,

Sur le front ridé du burgrave,
Grave,
Pauvre cerf, des rameaux aussi;
Si

Qu’au burg vous rentrez à la brune,
Brune,
Après un jour si hasardeux,
Deux!

BALLADE DOUZIÈME

LE PAS D’ARMES DU ROI JEAN

Plus de six cents lances y furent brisées; on se battit à pied et à cheval, à la barrière, à coups d’épée et de pique, où partout les tenants et les assaillants ne firent rien qui ne répondît à la haute estime qu’ils s’étaient déjà acquise; ce qui fit éclater ces tournois doublement. Enfin, au dernier, un gentilhomme nommé de Fontaines, beau-frère de Chandiou, grand prévôt des maréchaux, fut blessé à mort; et au second encore, Saint-Aubin, autre gentilhomme, fut tué d’un coup de lance. Ancienne chronique.

Çà, qu’on selle,
Écuyer,
Mon fidèle
Destrier.
Mon coeur ploie
Sous la joie,
Quand je broie,
L’étrier.

Par saint Gille,
Viens-nous-en,
Mon agile
Alezan;
Viens, écoute,
Par la route,
Voir la joute
Du Roi Jean.

Qu’un gros carme
Chartrier
Ait pour arme
L’encrier;
Qu’une fille,
Sous la grille,

S’égosille
À prier;

Nous qui sommes,
De par Dieu,
Gentilshommes
De haut lieu,
Il faut faire
Bruit sur terre,
Et la guerre
N’est qu’un jeu.

Ma vieille âme
Enrageait;
Car ma lame,
Que rongeait
Cette rouille
Qui la souille,
En quenouille
Se changeait.

Cette ville,
Aux longs cris,
Qui profile
Son front gris,
Des toits frêles,
Cent tourelles,
Clochers grêles,
C’est Paris!

Quelle foule,
Par mon sceau!
Qui s’écoule
En ruisseau,
Et se rue,
Incongrue,
Par la rue,

Saint-Marceau.

Notre-Dame!
Que c’est beau!
Sur mon âme
De corbeau,
Voudrais être
Clerc ou prêtre
Pour y mettre
Mon tombeau!

Les quadrilles,
Les chansons
Mêlent filles
Et garçons.
Quelles fêtes!
Que de têtes
Sur les faîtes
Des maisons!

Un maroufle,
Mis à neuf,
Joue et souffle
Comme un boeuf,
Une marche
De Luzarche
Sur chaque arche
Du Pont-Neuf.

Le vieux Louvre! -
Large et lourd,
Il ne s’ouvre
Qu’au grand jour,
Emprisonne
La couronne,
Et bourdonne
Dans sa tour.

Los aux dames!
Au roi los!
Vois les flammes
Du champ clos,
Où la foule,
Qui s’écroule,
Hurle et roule
À grands flots!

Sans attendre,
Çà, piquons!
L’oeil bien tendre,
Attaquons
De nos selles
Les donzelles,
Roses, belles,
Aux balcons.

Saulx-Tavane
Le ribaud
Se pavane,
Et Chabot
Qui ferraille,
Bossu, raille
Mons Fontraille
Le pied-bot.

Là-bas, Serge
Qui fit voeu
D’aller vierge
Au saint lieu;
Là, Lothaire,
Duc sans terre
Sauveterre,
Diable et dieu.

Le vidame
De Conflans
Suit sa dame
À pas lents,
Et plus d’une
S’importune
De la brune
Aux bras blancs.

Là-haut brille,
Sur ce mur,
Yseult, fille
Au front pur;
Là-bas, seules,
Force aïeules
Portant gueules
Sur azur.

Dans la lice,
Vois encor
Berthe, Alice,
Léonor,
Dame Irène,
Ta marraine,
Et la reine
Toute en or.

Dame Irène
Parle ainsi;
— Quoi! la reine
Triste ici!
Son altesse
Dit: — Comtesse,
J’ai tristesse et souci.

On commence!
Le beffroi!

Coups de lance,
Cris d’effroi!
On se forge,
On s’égorge,
Par saint George!
Par le roi!

La cohue,
Flot de fer,
Frappe, hue,
Remplit l’air,
Et, profonde,
Tourne et gronde,
Comme une onde
Sur la mer!

Dans la plaine
Un éclair
Se promène
Vaste et clair;
Quels mélanges!
Sang et franges!
Plaisirs d’anges!
Bruit d’enfer!

Sus, ma bête,
De façon
Que je fête
Ce grison!
Je te baille
Pour ripaille
Plus de paille,
Plus de son

Qu’un gros frère,
Gai, friand,
Ne peut faire,

Mendiant,
Par les places
Où tu passes,
De grimaces
En priant!

Dans l’orage,
Lys courbé,
Un beau page
Est tombé.
Il se pâme,
Il rend l’âme;
Il réclame
Un abbé.

La fanfare
Aux sons d’or,
Qui t’effare,
Sonne encor
Pour sa chute;
Triste lutte
De la flûte
Et du cor!

Moines, vierges,
Porteront
De grands cierges
Sur son front;
Et dans l’ombre
Du lieu sombre,
Deux yeux d’ombre
Pleureront

Car madame
Isabeau
Suit son âme
Au tombeau.

Que d’alarmes!
Que de larmes!... -
Un pas d’armes,
C’est très beau!

Çà, mon frère,
Viens, rentrons
Dans notre aire
De barons.
Va plus vite,
Car au gîte
Qui t’invite,
Trouverons,

Toi, l’avoine
Du matin,
Moi, le moine
Augustin,
Ce saint homme,
Suivant Rome,
Qui m’assomme
De latin,

Et rédige
En romain
Tout prodige
De ma main,
Qu’à ma charge
Il émarge
Sur un large
Parchemin.

Un vrai sire
Châtelain
Laisse écrire
Le vilain;
Sa main digne,

Quand il signe,
Égratigne
Le vélin.

BALLADE TREIZIÈME

LA LÉGENDE DE LA NONNE

à M. Louis Boulanger

Acabòse vuestrÔ bien
Y vuestros males nÔ acaban.
Reproches al Rey Rodrigo.

Venez, vous dont l’oeil étincelle
Pour entendre une histoire encor,
Approchez: je vous dirai celle
De doña Padilla del Flor.
Elle était d’Alanje, où s’entassent
Les collines et les halliers. -
Enfants, voici des boeufs qui passent,
Cachez vos rouges tabliers!

Il est des filles à Grenade,
Il en est à Séville aussi,
Qui, pour la moindre sérénade,
À l’amour demandent merci;
Il en est que d’abord embrassent,
Le soir, de hardis cavaliers. -
Enfants, voici des boeufs qui passent,
Cachez vos rouges tabliers!

Ce n’est pas sur ce ton frivole
Qu’il faut parler de Padilla,
Car jamais prunelle espagnole
D’un feu plus chaste ne brilla;
Elle fuyait ceux qui pourchassent
Les filles sous les peupliers. -
Enfants, voici des boeufs qui passent,
Cachez vos rouges tabliers!

Rien ne touchait ce coeur farouche,
Ni doux soins, ni propos joyeux;
Pour un mot d’une belle bouche,
Pour un signe de deux beaux yeux,
On sait qu’il n’est rien que ne fassent
Les seigneurs et les bacheliers. -
Enfants, voici des boeufs qui passent,
Cachez vos rouges tabliers!

Elle prit le voile à Tolède
Au grand soupir des gens du lieu,
Comme si, quand on n’est pas laide,
On avait droit d’épouser Dieu.
Peu s’en fallut que ne pleurassent
Les soudards et les écoliers. -
Enfants, voici des boeufs qui passent,
Cachez vos rouges tabliers!

Mais elle disait: “ Loin du monde,
Vivre et prier pour les méchants!
Quel bonheur! quelle paix profonde
Dans la prière et dans les chants!
Là, si les démons nous menacent,
Les anges sont nos boucliers! “ -
Enfants, voici des boeufs qui passent,
Cachez vos rouges tabliers!

Or, la belle à peine cloîtrée
Amour en son coeur s’installa
Un fier brigand de la contrée
Vint alors et dit: Me voilà!
Quelquefois les brigands surpassent
En audace les chevaliers. -
Enfants, voici des boeufs qui passent,
Cachez vos rouges tabliers!

Il était laid: des traits austères,
La main plus rude que le gant;
Mais l’amour a bien des mystères,
Et la nonne aima le brigand.
On voit des biches qui remplacent
Leurs beaux cerfs par des sangliers. -
Enfants, voici des boeufs qui passent,
Cachez vos rouges tabliers!

Pour franchir la sainte limite,
Pour approcher du saint couvent,
Souvent le brigand d’un ermite
Prenait le cilice, et souvent
La cotte de maille où s’enchâssent
Les croix noires des Templiers. -
Enfants, voici des boeufs qui passent,
Cachez vos rouges tabliers!

La nonne osa, dit la chronique,
Au brigand par l’enfer conduit,
Aux pieds de Sainte Véronique
Donner un rendez-vous la nuit,
À l’heure où les corbeaux croassent,
Volant dans l’ombre par milliers. -
Enfants, voici des boeufs qui passent,
Cachez vos rouges tabliers!

Padilla voulait, anathème!
Oubliant sa vie en un jour,
Se livrer, dans l’église même,
Sainte à l’enfer, vierge à l’amour,
Jusqu’à l’heure pâle où s’effacent
Les cierges sur les chandeliers. -
Enfants, voici des boeufs qui passent,
Cachez vos rouges tabliers!

Or quand, dans la nef descendue

La nonne appela le bandit,
Au lieu de la voix attendue,
C’est la foudre qui répondit.
Dieu voulu que ses coups frappassent
Les amants par Satan liés. -
Enfants, voici des boeufs qui passent,
Cachez vos rouges tabliers!

Aujourd’hui, des fureurs divines
Le pâtre enflammant ses récits,
Vous montre au penchant des ravines
Quelques tronçons de murs noircis,
Deux clochers que les ans crevassent,
Dont l’abri tuerait ses béliers. -
Enfants, voici des boeufs qui passent,
Cachez vos rouges tabliers!

Quand la nuit, du cloître gothique
Brunissant les portails béants,
Change à l’horizon fantastique
Les deux clochers en deux géants;
À l’heure où les corbeaux croassent,
Volant dans l’ombre par milliers... -
Enfants, voici des boeufs qui passent,
Cachez vos rouges tabliers!

Une nonne, avec une lampe,
Sort d’une cellule à minuit;
Le long des murs le spectre rampe,
Un autre fantôme le suit;
Des chaînes sur leurs pieds s’amassent,
De lourds carcans sont leurs colliers. -
Enfants, voici des boeufs qui passent,
Cachez vos rouges tabliers!

La lampe vient, s’éclipse, brille,
Sous les arceaux court se cacher,

Puis tremble derrière une grille,
Puis scintille au bout d’un clocher;
Et ses rayons dans l’ombre tracent
Des fantômes multipliés. -
Enfants, voici des boeufs qui passent,
Cachez vos rouges tabliers!

Les deux spectres qu’un feu dévore,
Traînant leur suaire en lambeaux,
Se cherchent pour s’unir encore,
En trébuchant sur des tombeaux;
Leurs pas aveugles s’embarrassent
Dans les marches des escaliers. -
Enfants, voici des boeufs qui passent,
Cachez vos rouges tabliers!

Mais ce sont des escaliers fées,
Qui sous eux s’embrouillent toujours;
L’un est aux caves étouffées,
Quand l’autre marche au front des tours;
Sous leurs pieds, sans fin se déplacent
Les étages et les paliers. -
Enfants, voici des boeufs qui passent,
Cachez vos rouges tabliers!

Élevant leurs voix sépulcrales,
Se cherchant les bras étendus,
Ils vont... Les magiques spirales
Mêlent leurs pas toujours perdus;
Ils s’épuisent et se harassent
En détours, sans cesse oubliés. -
Enfants, voici des boeufs qui passent,
Cachez vos rouges tabliers!

La pluie alors, à larges gouttes,
Bat les vitraux frêles et froids;
Le vent siffle aux brèches des voûtes;

Une plainte sort des beffrois;
On entend des soupirs qui glacent,
Des rires d'esprits familiers. -
Enfants, voici des boeufs qui passent,
Cachez vos rouges tabliers!

Une voix faible, une voix haute,
Disent: " Quand finiront les jours?
Ah! nous souffrons par notre faute;
Mais l'éternité, c'est toujours!
Là, les mains des heures se lassent
À retourner les sabliers... " -
Enfants, voici des boeufs qui passent,
Cachez vos rouges tabliers!

L'enfer, hélas! ne peut s'éteindre.
Toutes les nuits, dans ce manoir,
Se cherchent sans jamais s'atteindre
Une ombre blanche, un spectre noir,
Jusqu'à l'heure pâle où s'effacent
Les cierges sur les chandeliers. -
Enfants, voici des boeufs qui passent,
Cachez vos rouges tabliers!

Si, tremblant à ces bruits étranges,
Quelque nocturne voyageur,
En se signant demande aux anges
Sur qui sévit le Dieu vengeur,
Des serpents de feu qui s'enlacent
Tracent deux noms sur les piliers. -
Enfants, voici des boeufs qui passent,
Cachez vos rouges tabliers!

Cette histoire de la novice
Saint Ildefonse, abbé, voulut
Qu'afin de préserver du vice
Les vierges qui font leur salut

Les prieures la racontassent
Dans tous les couvents réguliers. -
Enfants, voici des boeufs qui passent,
Cachez vos rouges tabliers!

BALLADE QUATORZIÈME

LA RONDE DU SABBAT

à M. Charles N.

Hic chorus ingens
... Colit orgia.
AVIENUS.

Voyez devant les murs de ce noir monastère
La lune se voiler, comme pour un mystère!
L’esprit de minuit passe, et, répandant l’effroi,
Douze fois se balance au battant du beffroi.
Le bruit ébranle l’air, roule, et longtemps encore
Gronde, comme enfermé sous la cloche sonore,
Le silence retombe avec l’ombre... Écoutez!
Qui pousse ces clameurs? qui jette ces clartés?
Dieu! les voûtes, les tours, les portes découpées,
D’un long réseau de feu semblent enveloppées,
Et l’on entend l’eau sainte, où trempe un buis bénit,
Bouillonner à grands flots dans l’urne de granit!...
À nos patrons du ciel recommandons nos âmes!
Parmi les rayons bleus, parmi les rouges flammes,
Avec des cris, des chants, des soupirs, des abois,
Voilà que de partout, des eaux, des monts, des bois,
Les larves, les dragons, les vampires, les gnomes,
Des monstres dont l’enfer rêve seul les fantômes,
La sorcière, échappée aux sépulcres déserts,
Volant sur le bouleau qui siffle dans les airs,
Les nécromants, parés de tiares mystiques
Où brillent flamboyants les mots cabalistiques,
Et les graves démons, et les lutins rusés,
Tous, par les toits rompus, par les portails brisés,
Par les vitraux détruits que mille éclairs sillonnent,
Entrent dans le vieux cloître où leurs flots tourbillonnent!

Debout au milieu d’eux, leur prince Lucifer
Cache un front de taureau sous la mitre de fer;
La chasuble a voilé son aile diaphane,
Et sur l’autel croulant il pose ûn pied profane.
Ô terreur! Les voilà qui chantent dans ce lieu
Où veille incessamment l’oeil éternel de Dieu.
Les mains cherchent les mains... Soudain la ronde immense,
Comme un ouragan sombre, en tournoyant commence.
À l’oeil qui n’en pourrait embrasser le contour,
Chaque hideux convive apparaît à son tour;
On croirait voir l’enfer tourner dans les ténèbres
Son zodiaque affreux, plein de signes funèbres.
Tous volent, dans le cercle emportés à la fois.
Satan règle du pied les éclats de leur voix;
Et leurs pas, ébranlant les arches colossales,
Troublent les morts couchés sous le pavé des salles.

“ Mêlons-nous sans choix!
Tandis que la foule
Autour de lui roule,
Satan joyeux foule
L’autel et la croix.
L’heure est solennelle.
La flamme éternelle
Semble, sur son aile,
La pourpre des rois! “

Et leurs pas, ébranlant les arches colossales,
Troublent les morts couchés sous le pavé des salles.

“ Oui, nous triomphons!
Venez, soeurs et frères,
De cent points contraires;
Des lieux funéraires,
Des antres profonds.
L’enfer vous escorte;
Venez en cohorte

Sur des chars qu’emporte
Le vol des griffons! “

Et leurs pas, ébranlant les arches colossales,
Troublent les morts couchés sous le pavé des salles.

“ Venez sans remords,
Nains aux pieds de chèvre,
Goules, dont la lèvre
Jamais ne se sèvre
Du sang noir des morts!
Femmes infernales,
Accourez rivales!
Pressez vos cavales
Qui n’ont point de mors! “

Et leurs pas, ébranlant les arches colossales,
Troublent les morts couchés sous le pavé des salles.

“ Juifs, par Dieu frappés,
Zingaris, Bohèmes,
Chargés d’anathèmes,
Follets, spectres blêmes
La nuit échappés,
Glissez sur la brise,
Montez sur la frise
Du mur qui se brise,
Volez, ou rampez! “

Et leurs pas, ébranlant les arches colossales,
Troublent les morts couchés sous le pavé des salles.

“ Venez, boucs méchants,
Psylles aux corps grêles,
Aspioles frêles,
Comme un flot de grêles,
Fondre dans ces champs!

Plus de discordance!
Venez en cadence
Élargir la danse,
Répéter les chants! “

Et leurs pas, ébranlant les arches colossales,
Troublent les morts couchés sous le pavé des salles.

“ Qu’en ce beau moment
Les clercs en magie
Brûlent dans l’orgie
Leur barbe rougie
D’un sang tout fumant;
Que chacun envoie
Au feu quelque proie,
Et sous ses dents broie
Un pâle ossement! “

Et leurs pas, ébranlant les arches colossales,
Troublent les morts couchés sous le pavé des salles.

“ Riant au saint lieu,
D’une voix hardie,
Satan parodie
Quelque psalmodie
Selon saint Matthieu,
Et dans la chapelle
Où son roi l’appelle,
Un démon épelle
Le livre de Dieu!

Et leurs pas, ébranlant les arches colossales,
Troublent les morts couchés sous le pavé des salles.

“ Sorti des tombeaux,
Que dans chaque stalle
Un faux moine étale

La robe fatale
Qui brûle ses os,
Et qu’un noir lévite
Attache bien vite
La flamme maudite
Aux sacrés flambeaux! “

Et leurs pas, ébranlant les arches colossales,
Troublent les morts couchés sous le pavé des salles. ~

“ Satan vous verra!
De vos mains grossières
Parmi des poussières,
Écrivez, sorcières
ABRACADABRA!
Volez, oiseaux fauves,
Dont les ailes chauves
Aux ciels des alcôves
Suspendent Smarra! “

Et leurs pas, ébranlant les arches colossales,
Troublent les morts couchés sous le pavé des salles.

“ Voici le signal! -L’enfer nous réclame
Puisse un jour toute âme
N’avoir d’autre flamme
Que son noir fanal!
Puisse notre ronde,
Dans l’ombre profonde,
Enfermer le monde
D’un cercle infernal! “

L’aube pâle a blanchi les arches colossales.
Il fuit, l’essaim confus des démons dispersés!
Et les morts rendôrmis sous le pavé des salles,
Sur leurs chevets poudreux posent leurs fronts glacés.

BALLADE QUINZIÈME

LA FÉE ET LA PÉRI

Leur ombre vagabonde, a travers le feuillage,
Frémira; sur les vents ou sur quelque nuage,
Tu les verras descendre; ou, du sein de la mer
S'élevant comme un songe, étinceler dans l'air;
Et leur voix, toujours tendre et doucement plaintive,
Caresser en fuyant ton oreille attentive.
ANDRÉ CHÉNIER.

I

Enfants! Si vous mouriez, gardez bien qu'un esprit
De la route des cieux ne détourne votre âme!
Voici ce qu'autrefois un vieux sage m'apprit: -
Quelques démons, sauvés de l'éternelle flamme,
Rebelles moins pervers que l'Archange proscrit,
Sur la terre, où le feu, l'onde ou l'air les réclame,
Attendent, exilés, le jour de Jésus-Christ.
Il en est qui, bannis des célestes phalanges,
Ont de si douces voix qu'on les prend pour des anges.
Craignez-les: pour mille ans exclus du paradis,
Ils vous entraîneraient, enfants, au purgatoire! -
Ne me demandez pas d'où me vient cette histoire;
Nos pères l'ont contée; et moi, je la redis.

II

LA PÉRI

Où vas-tu donc jeune âme?... Écoute!
Mon palais pour toi veut s'ouvrir.
Suis-moi, des cieux quitte la route;
Hélas! tu t'y perdrais sans doute,

Nouveau-né, qui viens de mourir!

Tu pourras jouer à toute heure
Dans mes beaux jardins aux fruits d’or;
Et de ma riante demeure
Tu verras ta mère qui pleure
Près de ton berceau, tiède encor.

Des Péris je suis la plus belle:
Mes soeurs règnent où naît le jour;
Je brille en leur troupe immortelle,
Comme, entre les fleurs, brille celle
Que l’on cueille en rêvant d’amour,

Mon front porte un ruban de soie;
Mes bras de rubis sont couverts;
Quand mon vol ardent se déploie,
L’aile de pourpre qui tournoie
Roule trois yeux de flamme ouverts.

Plus blanc qu’une lointaine voile,
Mon corps n’en a point la pâleur;
En quelque lieu qu’il se dévoile,
Il l’éclaire comme une étoile,
Il l’embaume comme une fleur!

LA FÉE

Viens, bel enfant! je suis la Fée.
Je règne aux bords où le soleil
Au sein de l’onde réchauffée,
Se plonge éclatant et vermeil.
Les peuples d’Occident m’adorent
Les vapeurs de leur ciel se dorent,
Lorsque je passe en les touchant;
Reine des ombres léthargiques,
Je bâtis mes palais magiques

Dans les nuages du couchant.

Mon aile bleue est diaphane:
L’essaim des Sylphes enchantés
Croit voir sur mon dos, quand je plane,
Frémir deux rayons argentés.
Ma main luit, rose et transparente;
Mon souffle est la brise odorante
Qui, le soir, erre dans les champs;
Ma chevelure est radieuse,
Et ma bouche mélodieuse
Mêle un sourire à tous ses chants!

J’ai des grottes de coquillages;
J’ai des tentes de rameaux verts;
C’est moi que bercent les feuillages,
Moi que berce le flot des mers.
Si tu me suis, ombre ingénue,
Je puis t’apprendre où va la nue,
Te montrer d’où viennent les eaux;
Viens, sois ma compagne nouvelle,
Si tu veux que je te révèle
Ce que dit la voix des oiseaux.

III

LA PÉRI

Ma sphère est l’Orient, région éclatante,
Où le soleil est beau comme un roi dans sa tente!
Son disque s’y promène en un ciel toujours pur.
Ainsi, portant l’émir d’une riche contrée,
Aux sons de la flûte sacrée,
Vogue un navire d’or sur une mer d’azur.

Tous les dons ont comblé la zone orientale.
Dans tout autre climat, par une loi fatale,

Près des fruits savoureux croissent les fruits amers;
Mais Dieu, qui pour l'Asie a des yeux moins austères,
Y donne plus de fleurs aux terres,
Plus d'étoiles aux cieux, plus de perles aux mers!

Mon royaume s'étend depuis ces catacombes
Qui paraissent des monts et ne sont que des tombes,
Jusqu'à ce mur qu'un peuple ose en vain assiéger,
Qui, tel qu'une ceinture où le Cathay respire,
Environnant tout un empire,
Garde dans l'univers comme un monde étranger!

J'ai de vastes cités qu'en tous lieux on admire,
Lahore aux champs fleuris; Golconde; Cachemire;
La guerrière Damas; la royale Ispahan;
Bagdad, que ses remparts couvrent comme une armure;
Alep dont l'immense murmure
Semble au pâtre lointain le bruit d'un Océan.

Mysore est sur son trône une reine placée;
Médine aux mille tours, d'aiguilles hérissée,
Avec ses fléches d'or, ses kiosques brillants,
Est comme un bataillon, arrêté dans les plaines,
Qui, parmi ses tentes hautaines,
Élève une forêt de dards étincelants.

On dirait qu'au désert, Thèbes, debout encore,
Attend son peuple entier, absent depuis l'aurore.
Madras a deux cités dans ses larges contours.
Plus loin brille Delhy, la ville sans rivales,
Et sous ses portes triomphales
Douze éléphants de front passent avec leurs tours.

Bel enfant! viens errer, parmi tant de merveilles
Sur ces toits pleins de fleurs ainsi que des corbeilles,
Dans le camp vagabond des Arabes ligués.
Viens; nous verrons danser les jeunes bayadères,

Le soir, lorsque les dromadaires
Près du puits du désert s’arrêtent fatigués.

Là, sous de verts figuiers, sous d’épais sycomores,
Luit le dôme d’étain du minaret des Maures;
La pagode de nacre au toit rose et changeant;
La tour de porcelaine aux clochettes dorées,
Et, dans les jonques azurées,
Le palanquin de pourpre aux longs rideaux d’argent.

J’écarterai pour toi les rameaux du platane
Qui voile dans son bain la rêveuse sultane;
Viens, nous rassurerons contre un ingrat oubli
La vierge, qui, tirnide, ouvrant la nuit sa porte,
Écoute si le vent lui porte
La voix qu’elle préfère au chant du bengali.

L’Orient fut jadis le paradis du monde. -
Un printemps éternel de ses roses l’inonde,
Et ce vaste hémisphère est un riant jardin.
Toujours autour de nous sourit la douce joie;
Toi qui gémis, suis notre voie:
Que t’importe le Ciel, quand je t’ouvre l’Eden?

LA FÉE

L’Occident nébuleux est ma patrie heureuse.
Là, variant dans l’air sa forme vaporeuse,
Fuit la blanche nuée, ... et de loin bien souvent
Le mortel isolé qui, radieux ou sombre,
Poursuit un songe ou pleure une ombre,
Assis, la contemple en rêvant!

Car il est des douceurs pour les âmes blessées
Dans les brumes du lac sur nos bois balancées,
Dans nos monts où l’hiver semble à jamais s’asseoir;
Dans l’étoile, pareille à l’espoir solitaire,

Qui vient, quand le jour fuit la terre,
Mêler son orient au soir.

Nos cieux voilés plairont à ta douleur amère,
Enfant, que Dieu retire et qui pleures ta mère!
Viens, l'écho des vallons, les soupirs du ruisseau,
Et la voix des forêts au bruit des vents unie,
Te rendront la vague harmonie
Qui t'endormait dans ton berceau!

Crains des bleus horizons le cercle monotone.
Les brouillards, les vapeurs, le nuage qui tonne,
Tempèrent le soleil dans nos cieux parvenu;
Et l'oeil voit au loin fuir leurs lignes nébuleuses,
Comme des flottes merveilleuses
Qui viennent d'un monde inconnu!

C'est pour moi que les vents font, sur nos mers bruyantes
Tournoyer l'air et l'onde en trombes foudroyantes;
La tempête à mes chants suspend son vol fatal;
L'arc-en-ciel pour mes pieds, qu'un or fluide arrose,
Comme un pont de nacre, se pose sur les cascades de cristal.
Du moresque Aihambra j 'ai les frêles portiques;
J'ai la grotte enchantée aux piliers basaltiques,
Où la mer de Staffa brise un flot inégal;
Et j'aide le pêcheur, roi des vagues brumeuses,
À bâtir ses huttes fumeuses
Sur les vieux palais de Fingal.

Épouvantant les nuits d'une trompeuse aurore,
Là, souvent à ma voix un rouge météore
Croise en voûte de feu ses gerbes dans les airs;
Et le chasseur, debout sur la roche pendante,
Croit voir une comète ardente
Baignant ses flammes dans les mers!

Viens, jeune âme, avec moi, de mes soeurs obéie,

Peupler de gais follets la morose abbaye;
Mes nains et mes géants te suivront à ma voix;
Viens, troublant de ton cor les monts inaccessibles,
Guider ces meutes invisibles
Qui la nuit chassent dans nos bois.

Tu verras les barons, sous leurs tours féodales,
De l’humble pèlerin détachant les sandales;
Et les sombres créneaux d’écussons décorés;
Et la dame tout bas priant, pour un beau page,
Quelque mystérieuse image
Peinte sur des vitraux dorés.

C’est nous qui, visitant les gothiques églises,
Ouvrons leur nef sonore au murmure des brises;
Quand la lune du tremble argente les rameaux,
Le pâtre voit dans l’air, avec des chants mystiques,
Folâtrer nos choeurs fantastiques
Autour du clocher des hameaux.

De quels enchantements l’Occident se décore!
Viens, le ciel est bien loin, ton aile est faible encore!
Oublie en notre empire un voyage fatal.
Un charme s’y révèle aux lieux les plus sauvages;
Et l’étranger dit nos rivages
Plus doux que le pays natal!

IV

Et l’enfant hésitait, et déjà moins rebelle
Écoutait des esprits l’appel fallacieux;
La terre qu’il fuyait semblait pourtant si belle! -
Soudain il disparut à leur vue infidèle...
Il avait entrevu les cieux!

TABLE DES MATIERES

LES ORIENTALES

This collection of poems was written and published by Hugo in 1829. Composed of forty-one poems, of which 36 date back to 1828, the book is notable for its Philhellenism and respect for all things related to Ancient Greece.

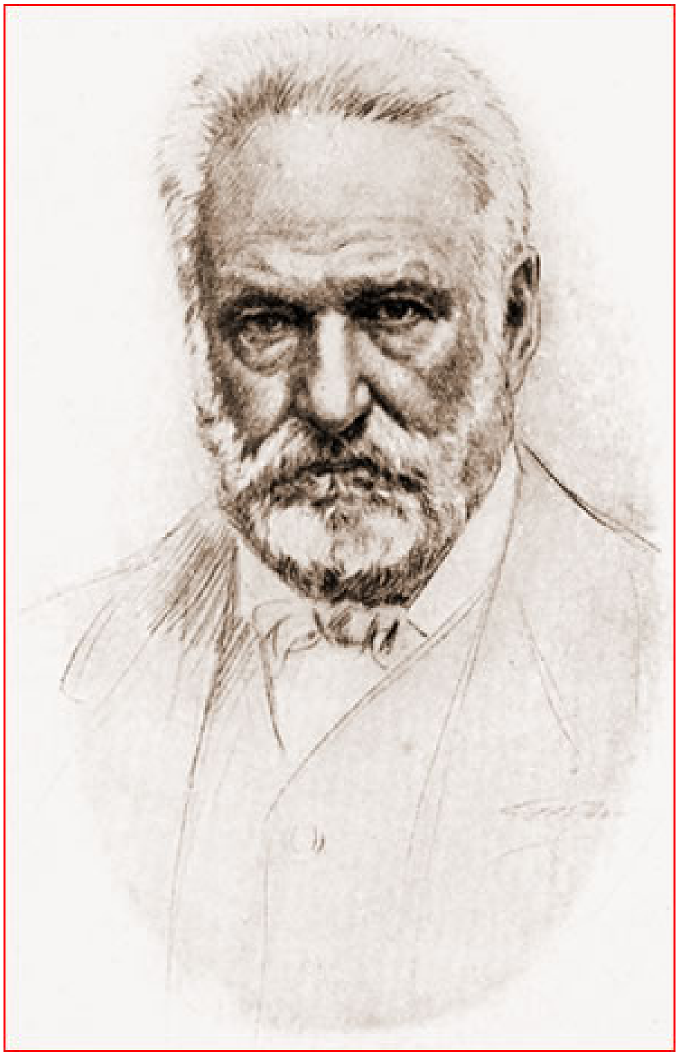

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I

LE FEU DU CIEL

24. Alors le Seigneur fit descendre du ciel sur Sodome et sur Gomorrhe une pluie de soufre et de feu.
25. Et il perdit ces villes avec tous leurs habitant, tout le pays à l’entour avec ceux qui l’habitaient, et tout ce qui avait quelque verdeur sur la terre.
Genèse

I

La voyez-vous passer, la nuée au flanc noir?
Tantôt pâle, tantôt rouge et splendide à voir,
Morne comme un été stérile?
On croit voir à la fois, sur le vent de la nuit,
Fuir toute la fumée ardente et tout le bruit
De l’embrasement d’une ville.

D’où vient-elle? des cieux, de la mer ou des monts?
Est-ce le char de feu qui porte les démons
À quelque planète prochaine?
Ô terreur! de son sein, chaos mystérieux,
D’où vient que par moments un éclair furieux
Comme un long serpent se déchaîne?

II

La mer! partout la mer! des flots, des flots encor.
L’oiseau fatigue en vain son inégal essor.
Ici les flots, là-bas les ondes;
Toujours des flots sans fin par des flots repoussés;
L’oeil ne voit que des flots dans l’abîme entassés
Rouler sous les vagues profondes.

Parfois de grands poissons, à fleur d’eau voyageant,
Font reluire au soleil leurs nageoires d’argent,
Ou l’azur de leurs larges queues.
La mer semble un troupeau secouant sa toison:
Mais un cercle d’airain ferme au loin l’horizon;
Le ciel bleu se mêle aux eaux bleues.

— Faut-il sécher ces mers? dit le nuage en feu.
— Non! - Il reprit son vol sous le souffle de Dieu.

III

Un golfe aux vertes collines
Se mirant dans le flot clair! -
Des buffles, des javelines,
Et des chants joyeux dans l’air! -
C’était la tente et la crèche,
La tribu qui chasse et pêche,
Qui vit libre, et dont la flèche
Jouterait avec l’éclair.

Pour ces errantes familles
Jamais l’air ne se corrompt.
Les enfants, les jeunes filles,
Les guerriers dansaient en rond,
Autour d’un feu sur la grève,
Que le vent courbe et relève,
Pareils aux esprits qu’en rêve
On voit tourner sur son front.

Les vierges aux seins d’ébène,
Belles comme les beaux soirs,
Riaient de se voir à peine
Dans le cuivre des miroirs;
D’autres, joyeuses comme elles,
Faisaient jaillir des mamelles
De leurs dociles chamelles

Un lait blanc sous leurs doigts noirs.

Les hommes, les femmes nues
Se baignaient au gouffre amer. -
Ces peuplades inconnues,
Où passaient-elles hier? -
La voix grêle des cymbales,
Qui fait hennir les cavales,
Se mêlait par intervalles
Aux bruits de la grande mer.

La nuée un moment hésita dans l'espace.
— Est-ce là? - Nul ne sait qui lui répondit: — Passe!

IV

L'Égypte! - Elle étalait, toute blonde d'épis,
Ses champs, bariolés comme un riche tapis,
Plaines que des plaines prolongent;
L'eau vaste et froide au nord, au sud le sable ardent
Se dispute l'Égypte: elle rit cependant
Entre ces deux mers qui la rongent.

Trois monts bâtis par l'homme au loin perçaient les cieux
D'un triple angle de marbre, et dérobaient aux yeux
Leurs bases de cendre inondées;
Et de leur faîte aigu jusqu'aux sables dorés,
Allaient s'élargissant leurs monstrueux degrés,
Faits pour des pas de six coudées.

Un sphinx de granit rose, un dieu de marbre vert,
Les gardaient, sans qu'il fût vent de flamme au désert
Qui leur fît baisser la paupière.
Des vaisseaux au flanc large entraient dans un grand port.
Une ville géante, assise sur le bord,
Baignait dans l'eau ses pieds de pierre.

On entendait mugir le semoun meurtrier,
Et sur les cailloux blancs les écailles crier
Sous le ventre des crocodiles.
Les obélisques gris s’élançaient d’un seul jet.
Comme une peau de tigre, au couchant s’allongeait
Le Nil jaune, tacheté d’îles.

L’astre-roi se couchait. Calme, à l’abri du vent,
La mer réfléchissait ce globe d’or vivant,
Ce monde, âme et flambeau du nôtre;
Et dans le ciel rougeâtre et dans les flots vermeils,
Comme deux rois amis, on voyait deux soleils
Venir au-devant l’un de l’autre.

— Où faut-il s’arrêter? dit la nuée encor.
— Cherche! dit une voix dont trembla le Thabor.

V

Du sable, puis du sable!
Le désert! noir chaos
Toujours inépuisable
En monstres, en fléaux!
Ici rien ne s’arrête.
Ces monts à jaune crête,
Quand souffle la tempête,
Roulent comme des flots!

Parfois, de bruits profanes
Troublant ce lieu sacré,
Passent les caravanes
D’Ophir ou de Membré.
L’oeil de loin suit leur foule,
Qui sur l’ardente houle
Ondule et se déroule
Comme un serpent marbré.

Ces solitudes mornes,
Ces déserts sont à Dieu:
Lui seul en sait les bornes,
En marque le milieu.
Toujours plane une brume
Sur cette mer qui fume,
Et jette pour écume
Une cendre de feu.

— Faut-il changer en lac ce désert? dit la nue.
— Plus loin! dit l’autre voix du fond des cieux venue.

VI

Comme un énorme écueil sur les vagues dressé,
Comme un amas de tours, vaste et bouleversé,
Voici Babel, déserte et sombre.
Du néant des mortels prodigieux témoin,
Aux rayons de la lune, elle couvrait au loin
Quatre montagnes de son ombre.

L’édifice écroulé plongeait aux lieux profonds.
Les ouragans captifs sous ses larges plafonds
Jetaient une étrange harmonie.
Le genre humain jadis bourdonnait à l’entour,
Et sur le globe entier Babel devait un jour
Asseoir sa spirale infinie.

Ses escaliers devaient monter jusqu’au zénith.
Chacun des plus grands monts à ses flancs de granit
N’avait pu fournir qu’une dalle.
Et des sommets nouveaux d’autres sommets chargés
Sans cesse surgissaient aux yeux découragés
Sur sa tête pyramidale.

Les boas monstrueux, les crocodiles verts,
Moindres que des lézards sur ses murs entrouverts,

Glissaient parmi les blocs superbes;
Et, colosses perdus dans ses larges contours,
Les palmiers chevelus, pendant au front des tours,
Semblaient d’en bas des touffes d’herbes.

Des éléphants passaient aux fentes de ses murs;
Une forêt croissait sous ses piliers obscurs
Multipliés par la démence;
Des essaims d’aigles roux et de vautours géants
Jour et nuit tournoyaient à ses porches béants,
Comme autour d’une ruche immense.

— Faut-il l’achever? dit la nuée en courroux. —
Marche! — Seigneur, dit-elle, où donc m’emportez-vous?

VII

Voilà que deux cités, étranges, inconnues,
Et d’étage en étage escaladant les nues,
Apparaissent, dormant dans la brume des nuits,
Avec leurs dieux, leur peuple, et leurs chars, et leurs bruits.
Dans le même vallon c’étaient deux soeurs couchées.
L’ombre baignait leurs tours par la lune ébauchées;
Puis l’oeil entrevoyait, dans le chaos confus,
Aqueducs, escaliers, piliers aux larges fûts,
Chapiteaux évasés; puis un groupe difforme
D’éléphants de granit portant un dôme énorme;
Des colosses debout, regardant autour d’eux
Ramper des monstres nés d’accouplements hideux;
Des jardins suspendus, pleins de fleurs et d’arcades,
Où la lune jetait son écharpe aux cascades;
Des temples où siégeaient sur de riches carreaux
Cent idoles de jaspe à têtes de taureaux;
Des plafonds d’un seul bloc couvrant de vastes salles,
Où, sans jamais lever leurs têtes colossales,
Veillaient, assis en cercle, et se regardant tous,
Des dieux d’airain, posant leurs mains sur leurs genoux.

Ces rampes, ces palais, ces sombres avenues
Où partout surgissaient des formes inconnues,
Ces ponts, ces aqueducs, ces arcs, ces rondes tours,
Effrayaient l'oeil perdu dans leurs profonds détours;
On voyait dans les cieux, avec leurs larges ombres,
Monter comme des caps ces édifices sombres,
Immense entassement de ténèbres voilé!
Le ciel à l'horizon scintillait étoilé,
Et, sous les mille arceaux du vaste promontoire,
Brillait comme à travers une dentelle noire.

Ah! villes de l'enfer, folles dans leurs désirs!
Là, chaque heure inventait de monstrueux plaisirs,
Chaque toit recelait quelque mystère immonde,
Et, comme un double ulcère, elles souillaient le monde.

Tout dormait cependant: au front des deux cités,
À peine encor glissaient quelques pâles clartés,
Lampes de la débauche, en naissant disparues,
Derniers feux des festins oubliés dans les rues,
De grands angles de murs, par la lune blanchis,
Coupaient l'ombre, ou tremblaient dans une eau réfléchis.
Peut-être on entendait vaguement dans les plaines
S'étouffer des baisers, se mêler des haleines,
Et les deux villes soeurs, lasses des feux du jour,
Murmurer mollement d'une étreinte d'amour!

Et le vent, soupirant sous le frais sycomore,
Allait tout parfumé de Sodome à Gomorrhe.
C'est alors que passa le nuage noirci,
Et que la voix d'en haut lui cria: — C'est ici!

VIII

La nuée éclate!
La flamme écarlate
Déchire ses flancs,

L’ouvre comme un gouffre,
Tombe en flots de soufre
Aux palais croulants,
Et jette, tremblante,
Sa lueur sanglante
Sur leurs frontons blancs!

Gomorrhe! Sodome!
De quel brûlant dôme
Vos murs sont couverts!
L’ardente nuée
Sur vous s’est ruée,
Ô peuples pervers!
Et ses larges gueules
Sur vos têtes seules
Soufflent leurs éclairs!

Ce peuple s’éveille,
Qui dormait la veille
Sans penser à Dieu.
Les grands palais croulent;
Mille chars qui roulent
Heurtent leur essieu;
Et la foule accrue,
Trouve en chaque rue
Un fleuve de feu.

Sur ces tours altières,
Colosses de pierres
Trop mal affermis,
Abondent dans l’ombre
Des mourants sans nombre
Encore endormis.
Sur des murs qui pendent
Ainsi se répandent
De noires fourmis!

Se peut-il qu’on fuie
Sous l’horrible pluie?
Tout périt, hélas!
Le feu qui foudroie
Bat les ponts qu’il broie,
Crève les toits plats,
Roule, tombe, et brise
Sur la dalle grise
Ses rouges éclats!

Sous chaque étincelle
Grossit et ruisselle
Le feu souverain.
Vermeil et limpide,
Il court plus rapide
Qu’un cheval sans frein;
Et l’idole infâme,
Croulant dans la flamme,
Tord ses bras d’airain!

Il gronde, il ondule,
Du peuple incrédule
Bat les tours d’argent;
Son flot vert et rose,
Que le soufre arrose,
Fait, en les rongeant,
Luire les murailles
Comme les écailles
D’un lézard changeant.

Il fond comme cire
Agate, porphyre,
Pierres du tombeau,
Ploie, ainsi qu’un arbre,
Le géant de marbre
Qu’ils nommaient Nabo,
Et chaque colonne

Brûle et tourbillonne
Comme un grand flambeau.

En vain quelques mages
Portent les images
Des dieux du haut lieu;
En vain leur roi penche
Sa tunique blanche
Sur le soufre bleu;
Le flot qu'il contemple
Emporte leur temple
Dans ses plis de feu!

Plus loin il charrie
Un palais, où crie
Un peuple à l'étroit;
L'onde incendiaire
Mord l'îlot de pierre
Qui fume et décroît,
Flotte à sa surface,
Puis fond et s'efface
Comme un glaçon froid!

Le grand-prêtre arrive
Sur l'ardente rive
D'où le reste a fui.
Soudain sa tiare
Prend feu comme un phare,
Et pâle, ébloui,
Sa main qui l'arrache
À son front s'attache,
Et brûle avec lui.

Le peuple, hommes, femmes,
Court... Partout les flammes
Aveuglent les yeux;
Des deux villes mortes

Assiégeant les portes
À flots furieux,
La foule maudite
Croit voir, interdite,
L’enfer dans les cieux!

IX

On dit qu’alors, ainsi que pour voir un supplice
Un vieux captif se dresse aux murs de sa prison,
On vit de loin Babel, leur fatale complice,
Regarder par-dessus les monts de l’horizon.

On entendit, durant cet étrange mystère,
Un grand bruit qui remplit le monde épouvanté,
Si profond qu’il troubla, dans leur morne cité,
Jusqu’à ces peuples sourds qui vivent sous la terre.

X

Le feu fut sans pitié! Pas un des condamnés
Ne put fuir de ces murs brûlant et calcinés.
Pourtant, ils levaient leurs mains viles,
Et ceux qui s’embrassaient dans un dernier adieu,
Terrassés, éblouis, se demandaient quel dieu
Versait un volcan sur leurs villes.

Contre le feu vivant, contre le feu divin,
De larges toits de marbre ils s’abritaient en vain.
Dieu sait atteindre qui le brave.
Ils invoquaient leurs dieux; mais le feu qui punit
Frappait ces dieux muets dont les yeux de granit
Soudain fondaient en pleurs de lave!

Ainsi tout disparut sous le noir tourbillon,
L’homme avec la cité, l’herbe avec le sillon!
Dieu brûla ces mornes campagnes;

Rien ne resta debout de ce peuple détruit,
Et le vent inconnu qui souffla cette nuit
Changea la forme des montagnes.

XI

Aujourd’hui le palmier qui croît sur le rocher
Sent sa feuille jaunie et sa tige sécher
À cet air qui brûle et qui pèse.
Ces villes ne sont plus; et, miroir du passé,
Sur leurs débris éteints s’étend un lac glacé,
Qui fume comme une fournaise!

II

CANARIS

Lorsqu’un vaisseau vaincu dérive en pleine mer;
Que ses voiles carrées
Pendent le long des mâts, par les boulets de fer
Largement déchirées;

Qu’on n’y voit que des morts tombés de toutes parts,
Ancres, agrès, voilures,
Grands mâts rompus, traînant leurs cordages épars
Comme des chevelures;

Que le vaisseau, couvert de fumée et de bruit,
Tourne ainsi qu’une roue;
Qu’un flux et qu’un reflux d’hommes roule et s’enfuit
De la poupe à la proue;

Lorsqu’à la voix des chefs nul soldat ne répond;
Que la mer monte et gronde;
Que les canons éteints nagent dans l’entrepont,
S’entrechoquant dans l’onde;

Qu’on voit le lourd colosse ouvrir au flot marin
Sa blessure béante,
Et saigner, à travers son armure d’airain,
La galère géante;

Qu’elle vogue au hasard, comme un corps palpitant,
La carène entrouverte,
Comme un grand poisson mort, dont le ventre flottant
Argente l’onde verte;

Alors gloire au vainqueur! Son ancre noir s’abat
Sur la nef qu’il foudroie;

Tel un aigle puissant pose, après le combat,
Son ongle sur sa proie!

Puis, il pend au grand mât, comme au front d’une tour,
Son drapeau que l’air ronge,
Et dont le reflet d’or dans l’onde, tour à tour,
S’élargit et s’allonge.

Et c’est alors qu’on voit les peuples étaler
Les couleurs les plus fières,
Et la pourpre, et l’argent, et l’azur onduler
Aux plis de leurs bannières.

Dans ce riche appareil leur orgueil insensé
Se flatte et se repose,
Comme si le flot noir, par le flot effacé,
En gardait quelque chose!

Malte arborait sa croix; Venise, peuple-roi,
Sur ses poupes mouvantes,
L’héraldique lion qui fait rugir d’effroi
Les lionnes vivantes.

Le pavillon de Naple est éclatant dans l’air,
Et quand il se déploie
On croit voir ondoyer de la poupe à la mer
Un flot d’or et de soie.

Espagne peint aux plis des drapeaux voltigeant
Sur ses flottes avares,
Léon aux lions d’or, Castille aux tours d’argent,
Les chaînes des Navarres.

Rome a les clefs; Milan, l’enfant qui hurle encor
Dans les dents de la guivre;
Et les vaisseaux de France ont des fleurs de lis d’or
Sur leurs robes de cuivre.

Stamboul la turque autour du croissant abhorré
Suspend trois blanches queues;
L’Amérique enfin libre étale un ciel doré
Semé d’étoiles bleues.

L’Autriche a l’aigle étrange, aux ailerons dressés,
Qui, brillant sur la moire,
Vers les deux bouts du monde à la fois menacés
Tourne une tête noire.

L’autre aigle au double front, qui des czars suit les lois,
Son antique adversaire,
Comme elle regardant deux mondes à la fois,
En tient un dans sa serre.

L’Angleterre en triomphe impose aux flots amers
Sa splendide oriflamme,
Si riche qu’on prendrait son reflet dans les mers
Pour l’ombre d’une flamme.

C’est ainsi que les rois font aux mâts des vaisseaux
Flotter leurs armoiries,
Et condamnent les nefs conquises sur les eaux
À changer de patries.

Ils traînent dans leurs rangs ces voiles dont le sort
Trompa les destinées,
Tout fiers de voir rentrer plus nombreuses au port
Leurs flottes blasonnées.

Aux navires captifs toujours ils appendront
Leurs drapeaux de victoire,
Afin que le vaincu porte écrite à son front
Sa honte avec leur gloire!

Mais le bon Canaris, dont un ardent sillon

Suit la barque hardie,
Sur les vaisseaux qu’il prend, comme son pavillon,
Arbore l’incendie!

III

LES TÊTES DU SÉRAIL

O horrible! o horrible! most horrible!
Shakespeare, Hamlet.

On a cru devoir réimprimer cette ode telle qu’elle a été composée et publiée en juin 1826, à l’époque du désastre de Missolonghi. Il est important de se rappeler, en la lisant, que tous les journaux d’Europe annoncèrent alors la mort de Canaris, tué dans son brûlot par une bombe turque, devant la ville qu’il venait secourir. Depuis, cette nouvelle fatale a été heureusement démentie.

I

Le dôme obscur des nuits, semé d’astres sans nombre,
Se mirait dans la mer resplendissante et sombre;
La riante Stamboul, le front d’étoiles voilé,
Semblait, couchée au bord du golfe qui l’inonde,
Entre les feux du ciel et les reflets de l’onde,
Dormir dans un globe étoilé.

On eût dit la cité dont les esprits nocturnes
Bâtissent dans les airs les palais taciturnes,
À voir ses grands harems, séjours des longs ennuis,
Ses dômes bleus, pareils au ciel qui les colore,
Et leurs mille croissants, que semblaient faire éclore
Les rayons du croissant des nuits.

L’oeil distinguait les tours par leurs angles marquées,
Les maisons aux toits plats, les flèches des mosquées,
Les moresques balcons en trèfles découpés,
Les vitraux, se cachant sous des grilles discrètes,
Et les palais dorés, et comme des aigrettes
Les palmiers sur leur front groupés.

Là, de blancs minarets dont l’aiguille s’élance
Tels que des mâts d’ivoire armés d’un fer de lance;
Là, des kiosques peints; là, des fanaux changeants;
Et sur le vieux sérail, que ses hauts murs décèlent,
Cent coupoles d’étain, qui dans l’ombre étincellent
Comme des casques de géants!

II

Le sérail...! Cette nuit il tressaillait de joie.
Au son des gais tambours, sur des tapis de soie,
Les sultanes dansaient sous son lambris sacré;
Et, tel qu’un roi couvert de ses joyaux de fête,
Superbe, il se montrait aux enfants du prophète,
De six mille têtes paré!

Livides, l’oeil éteint, de noirs cheveux chargés,
Ces têtes couronnaient, sur les créneaux rangées,
Les terrasses de rose et de jasmins en fleur:
Triste comme un ami, comme lui consolante,
La lune, astre des morts, sur leur pâleur sanglante
Répandait sa douce pâleur.

Dominant le sérail, de la porte fatale
Trois d’entre elles marquaient l’ogive orientale;
Ces têtes, que battait l’aile du noir corbeau,
Semblaient avoir reçu l’atteinte meurtrière,
L’une dans les combats, l’autre dans la prière,
La dernière dans le tombeau.

On dit qu’alors, tandis qu’immobiles comme elles,
Veillaient stupidement les mornes sentinelles,
Les trois têtes soudain parlèrent; et leurs voix
Ressemblaient à ces chants qu’on entend dans les rêves,
Aux bruits confus du flot qui s’endort sur les grèves,
Du vent qui s’endort dans les bois!

III
La première voix

“ Où suis-je...? mon brûlot! à la voile! à la rame!
Frères, Missolonghi fumante nous réclame,
Les Turcs ont investi ses remparts généreux.
Renvoyons leurs vaisseaux à leurs villes lointaines,
Et que ma torche, ô capitaines!
Soit un phare pour vous, soit un foudre pour eux!

“ Partons! Adieu Corinthe et son haut promontoire,
Mers dont chaque rocher porte un nom de victoire,
Écueils de l’Archipel sur tous les flots semés,
Belles îles, des cieux et du printemps chéries,
Qui le jour paraissez des corbeilles fleuries,
La nuit, des vases parfumés!

“ Adieu, fière patrie, Hydra, Sparte nouvelle!
Ta jeune liberté par des chants se révèle;
Des mâts voilent tes murs, ville de matelots!
Adieu! j’aime ton île où notre espoir se fonde,
Tes gazons caressés par l’onde,
Tes rocs battus d’éclairs et rongés par les flots!

“ Frères, si je reviens, Missolonghi sauvée,
Qu’une église nouvelle au Christ soit élevée.
Si je meurs, si je tombe en la nuit sans réveil,
Si je verse le sang qui me reste à répandre,
Dans une terre libre allez porter ma cendre,
Et creusez ma tombe au soleil!

“ Missolonghi! - Les Turcs! - Chassons, ô camarades,
Leurs canons de ses forts, leurs flottes de ses rades.
Brûlons le capitan sous son triple canon.
Allons! que des brûlots l’ongle ardent se prépare.
Sur sa nef, si je m’en empare,

C’est en lettres de feu que j’écrirai mon nom.

“ Victoire! amis...! - Ô ciel! de mon esquif agile
Une bombe en tombant brise le pont fragile...
Il éclate, il tournoie, il s’ouvre aux flots amers!
Ma bouche crie en vain, par les vagues couverte!
Adieu! je vais trouver mon linceul d’algue verte,
Mon lit de sable au fond des mers.

“ Mais non! Je me réveille enfin...! Mais quel mystère?
Quel rêve affreux...! mon bras manque à mon cimeterre.
Quel est donc près de moi ce sombre épouvantail?
Qu’entends-je au loin...? des choeurs... sont-ce des voix de femmes?
Des chants murmurés par des âmes?
Ces concerts...! suis-je au ciel? - Du sang... c’est le sérail!

IV
La deuxième voix

“ Oui, Canaris, tu vois le sérail et ma tête
Arrachée au cercueil pour orner cette fête.
Les Turcs m’ont poursuivi sous mon tombeau glacé.
Vois! ces os desséchés sont leur dépouille opime:
Voilà de Botzaris ce qu’au sultan sublime
Le ver du sépulcre a laissé!

“ Écoute: Je dormais dans le fond de ma tombe,
Quand un cri m’éveilla: Missolonghi succombe!
Je me lève à demi dans la nuit du trépas;
J’entends des canons sourds les tonnantes volées,
Les clameurs aux clameurs mêlées,
Les chocs fréquents du fer, le bruit pressé des pas.

“ J’entends, dans le combat qui remplissait la ville,
Des voix crier: “ Défends d’une horde servile,
Ombre de Botzaris, tes Grecs infortunés! “
Et moi, pour m’échapper, luttant dans les ténèbres,

J’achevais de briser sur les marbres funèbres
Tous mes ossements décharnés.

“ Soudain, comme un volcan, le sol s’embrase et gronde... -
Tout se tait; - et mon oeil ouvert pour l’autre monde
Voit ce que nul vivant n’eût pu voir de ses yeux.
De la terre, des flots, du sein profond des flammes,
S’échappaient des tourbillons d’âmes
Qui tombaient dans l’abîme ou s’envolaient aux cieux!

“ Les Musulmans vainqueurs dans ma tombe fouillèrent;
Ils mêlèrent ma tête aux vôtres qu’ils souillèrent.
Dans le sac du Tartare on les jeta sans choix.
Mon corps décapité tressaillit d’allégresse;
Il me semblait, ami, pour la Croix et la Grèce
Mourir une seconde fois.

“ Sur la terre aujourd’hui notre destin s’achève.
Stamboul, pour contempler cette moisson du glaive,
Vile esclave, s’émeut du Fanar aux Sept-Tours;
Et nos têtes, qu’on livre aux publiques risées,
Sur l’impur sérail exposées,
Repaissent le sultan, convive des vautours!

“ Voilà tous nos héros! Costas le palicare;
Christo, du mont Olympe; Hellas, des mers d’Icare;
Kitzos, qu’aimait Byron, le poète immortel;
Et cet enfant des monts, notre ami, notre émule,
Mayer, qui rapportait aux fils de Thrasybule
La flèche de Guillaume Tell!

“ Mais ces morts inconnus, qui dans nos rangs stoïques
Confondent leurs fronts vils à des fronts héroïques,
Ce sont des fils maudits d’Eblis et de Satan,
Des Turcs, obscur troupeau, foule au sabre asservie,
Esclaves dont on prend la vie,
Quand il manque une tête au compte du sultan!

“ Semblable au Minotaure inventé par nos pères,
Un homme est seul vivant dans ces hideux repaires,
Qui montrent nos lambeaux aux peuples à genoux;
Car les autres témoins de ces fêtes fétides,
Ses eunuques impurs, ses muets homicides,
Ami, sont aussi morts que nous.

“ Quels sont ces cris...? - C’est l’heure où ses plaisirs infâmes
Ont réclamé nos soeurs, nos filles et nos femmes.
Ces fleurs vont se flétrir à son souffle inhumain.
Le tigre impérial, rugissant dans sa joie,
Tour à tour compte chaque proie,
Nos vierges cette nuit, et nos têtes demain! “

V
La troisième voix

“ Ô mes frères! Joseph, évêque, vous salue.
Missolonghi n’est plus! À sa mort résolue,
Elle a fui la famine et son venin rongeur.
Enveloppant les Turcs dans son malheur suprême,
Formidable victime, elle a mis elle-même
La flamme à son bûcher vengeur.

“ Voyant depuis vingt jours notre ville affamée,
J’ai crié: “ Venez tous; il est temps, peuple, armée!
Dans le saint sacrifice il faut nous dire adieu.
Recevez de mes mains, à la table céleste,
Le seul aliment qui nous reste,
Le pain qui nourrit l’âme et la transforme en dieu!”

“ Quelle communion! Des mourants immobiles,
Cherchant l’hostie offerte à leurs lèvres débiles,
Des soldats défaillants, mais encor redoutés,
Des femmes, des vieillards, des vierges désolées,
Et sur le sein flétri des mères mutilées

Des enfants de sang allaités!

“ La nuit vint, on partit; mais les Turcs dans les ombres
Assiégèrent bientôt nos morts et nos décombres.
Mon église s’ouvrit à leurs pas inquiets.
Sur un débris d’autel, leur dernière conquête,
Un sabre fit rouler ma tête...
J’ignore quelle main me frappa: je priais.

“ Frères, plaignez Mahmoud! Né dans sa loi barbare,
Des hommes et de Dieu son pouvoir le sépare.
Son aveugle regard ne s’ouvre pas au ciel.
Sa couronne fatale, et toujours chancelante,
Porte à chaque fleuron une tête sanglante;
Et peut-être il n’est pas cruel!

“ Le malheureux, en proie, aux terreurs implacables,
Perd pour l’éternité ses jours irrévocables.
Rien ne marque pour lui les matins et les soirs.
Toujours l’ennui! Semblable aux idoles qu’ils dorent,
Ses esclaves de loin l’adorent,
Et le fouet d’un spahi règle leurs encensoirs.

“ Mais pour vous tout est joie, honneur, fête, victoire.
Sur la terre vaincus, vous vaincrez dans l’histoire.
Frères, Dieu vous bénit sur le sérail fumant.
Vos gloires par la mort ne sont pas étouffées:
Vos têtes sans tombeaux deviennent vos trophées;
Vos débris sont un monument!

“ Que l’apostat surtout vous envie! Anathème
Au chrétien qui souilla l’eau sainte du baptême!
Sur le livre de vie en vain il fut compté:
Nul ange ne l’attend dans les cieux où nous sommes;
Et son nom, exécré des hommes,
Sera, comme un poison, des bouches rejeté!

“ Et toi, chrétienne Europe, entends nos voix plaintives.
Jadis, pour nous sauver, saint Louis vers nos rives
Eût de ses chevaliers guidé l’arrière-ban.
Choisis enfin, avant que ton Dieu ne se lève,
De Jésus et d’Omar, de la croix et du glaive,
De l’auréole et du turban. “

VI

Oui, Botzaris, Joseph, Canaris, ombres saintes,
Elle entendra vos voix, par le trépas éteintes;
Elle verra le signe empreint sur votre front;
Et soupirant ensemble un chant expiatoire,
À vos débris sanglants portant leur double gloire,
Sur la harpe et le luth les deux Grèces diront:

“ Hélas! vous êtes saints et vous êtes sublimes,
Confesseurs, demi-dieux, fraternelles victimes!
Votre bras aux combats s’est longtemps signalé;
Morts, vous êtes tous trois souillés par des mains viles.
Voici votre Calvaire après vos Thermopyles;
Pour tous les dévouements votre sang a coulé!

“ Ah! si l’Europe en deuil, qu’un sang si pur menace,
Ne suit jusqu’au sérail le chemin qu’il lui trace,
Le Seigneur la réserve à d’amers repentirs.
Marin, prêtre, soldat, nos autels vous demandent;
Car l’Olympe et le Ciel à la fois vous attendent,
Pléiade de héros! Trinité de martyrs! “

IV

ENTHOUSIASME

Allons, jeune homme! allons, marche...!
André Chénier.

En Grèce! en Grèce! adieu, vous tous! il faut partir!
Qu’enfin, après le sang de ce peuple martyr,
Le sang vil des bourreaux ruisselle!
En Grèce, ô mes amis! vengeance! liberté!
Ce turban sur mon front! ce sabre à mon côté!
Allons! ce cheval, qu’on le selle!

Quand partons-nous? ce soir! demain serait trop long.
Des armes! des chevaux! un navire à Toulon!
Un navire, ou plutôt des ailes!
Menons quelques débris de nos vieux régiments,
Et nous verrons soudain ces tigres ottomans
Fuir avec des pieds de gazelles!

Commande-nous, Fabvier, comme un prince invoqué!
Toi qui seul fus au poste où les rois ont manqué,
Chef des hordes disciplinées,
Parmi les grecs nouveaux ombre d’un vieux Romain,
Simple et brave soldat, qui dans ta rude main
D’un peuple as pris les destinées!

De votre long sommeil éveillez-vous là-bas,
Fusils français! et vous, musique des combats,
Bombes, canons, grêles cymbales!
Éveillez-vous, chevaux au pied retentissant,
Sabres, auxquels il manque une trempe de sang,
Longs pistolets gorgés de balles!

Je veux voir des combats, toujours au premier rang!

Voir comment les spahis s’épanchent en torrent
Sur l’infanterie inquiète;
Voir comment leur damas, qu’emporte leur coursier,
Coupe une tête au fil de son croissant d’acier!
Allons...! - mais quoi, pauvre poète,

Où m’emporte moi-même un accès belliqueux?
Les vieillards, les enfants m’admettent avec eux!
Que suis-je? - Esprit qu’un souffle enlève.
Comme une feuille morte échappée aux bouleaux,
Qui sur une onde en pente erre de flots en flots,
Mes jours s’en vont de rêve en rêve.

Tout me fait songer: l’air, les prés, les monts, les bois.
J’en ai pour tout un jour des soupirs d’un hautbois,
D’un bruit de feuilles remuées;
Quand vient le crépuscule, au fond d’un vallon noir,
J’aime un grand lac d’argent, profond et clair miroir
Où se regardent les nuées.

J’aime une lune, ardente et rouge comme l’or,
Se levant dans la brume épaisse, ou bien encor
Blanche au bord d’un nuage sombre;
J’aime ces chariots lourds et noirs, qui la nuit,
Passant devant le seuil des fermes avec bruit,
Font aboyer les chiens dans l’ombre.

V

NAVARIN

Hélas! hélas! nos vaisseaux
Hélas! hélas! sont détruits!
ESCHYLE, les Perses.

I

Canaris! Canaris! pleure! cent vingt vaisseaux!
Pleure! une flotte entière! - Où donc, démon des eaux,
Où donc était ta main hardie?
Se peut-il que sans toi l'Ottoman succombât?
Pleure comme Crillon exilé d'un combat:
Tu manquais à cet incendie!

Jusqu'ici, quand parfois la vague de tes mers
Soudain s'ensanglantait, comme un lac des enfers,
D'une lueur large et profonde,
Si quelque lourd navire éclatait à nos yeux,
Couronné tout à coup d'une aigrette de feux,
Comme un volcan s'ouvrant dans l'onde;

Si la lame roulait turbans, sabres courbés,
Voiles, tentes, croissants des mâts rompus tombés,
Vestiges de flotte et d'armée,
Pelisses de vizirs, sayons de matelots,
Rebuts stigmatisés de la flamme et des flots,
Blancs d'écume et noirs de fumée;

Si partait de ces mers d'Égine ou d'Iolchos
Un bruit d'explosion, tonnant dans mille échos,
Et roulant au loin dans l'espace,
L'Europe se tournait vers le rouge Orient;
Et, sur la poupe assis, le nocher souriant

Disait: — C’est Canaris qui passe!

Jusqu’ici, quand brûlaient au sein des flots fumants
Les capitans-pachas avec leurs armements,
Leur flotte dans l’ombre engourdie,
On te reconnaissait à ce terrible jeu;
Ton brûlot expliquait tous ces vaisseaux en feu;
Ta torche éclairait l’incendie!

Mais pleure aujourd’hui, pleure, on s’est battu sans toi!
Pourquoi, sans Canaris, sur ces flottes, pourquoi
Porter la guerre et ses tempêtes?
Du Dieu qui garde Hellé n’est-il plus le bras droit?
On aurait dû l’attendre! Et n’est-il pas de droit
Convive de toutes ces fêtes?

II

Console-toi: la Grèce est libre.
Entre les bourreaux, les mourants,
L’Europe a remis l’équilibre;
Console-toi: plus de tyrans!
La France combat: le sort change.
Souffre que sa main qui vous venge
Du moins te dérobe en échange
Une feuille de ton laurier.
Grèces de Byron et d’Homère,
Toi, notre soeur, toi, notre mère,
Chantez! si votre voix amère
Ne s’est pas éteinte à crier.

Pauvre Grèce! qu’elle était belle
Pour être couchée au tombeau!
Chaque vizir, de la rebelle
S’arrachait un sacré lambeau.
Où la fable mit ses Ménades,
Où l’amour eut ses sérénades,

Grondaient les sombres canonnades
Sapant les temples du vrai Dieu;
Le ciel de cette terre aimée
N’avait, sous sa voûte embaumée,
De nuages que la fumée
De toutes ses villes en feu.

Voilà six ans qu’ils l’ont choisie!
Six ans qu’on voyait accourir
L’Afrique au secours de l’Asie
Contre un peuple instruit à mourir!
Ibrahim, que rien ne modère,
Vole de l’Isthme au Belvédère,
Comme un faucon qui n’a plus d’aire,
Comme un loup qui règne au bercail;
Il court où le butin le tente,
Et lorsqu’il retourne à sa tente,
Chaque fois sa main dégouttante
Jette des têtes au sérail!

III

Enfin! - C’est Navarin, la ville aux maisons peintes,
La ville aux dômes d’or, la blanche Navarin,
Sur la colline assise entre les térébinthes,
Qui prête son beau golfe aux ardentes étreintes
De deux flottes heurtant leurs carènes d’airain.

Les voilà toutes deux! - La mer en est chargée,
Prête à noyer leurs feux, prête à boire leur sang.
Chacune par son dieu semble au combat rangée:
L’une s’étend en croix sur les flots allongée;
L’autre ouvre ses bras lourds et se courbe en croissant.

Ici l’Europe: enfin l’Europe qu’on déchaîne!
Avec ses grands vaisseaux voguant comme des tours.
Là, l’Égypte des Turcs, cette Asie africaine,

Ces vivaces forbans, mal tués par Duquesne,
Qui mit en vain le pied sur ces nids de vautours!

IV

Écoutez! - Le canon gronde.
Il est temps qu’on lui réponde.
Le patient est le fort.
Éclatent donc les bordées!
Sur ces nefs intimidées,
Frégates, jetez la mort!
Et qu’au souffle de vos bouches,
Fondent ces vaisseaux farouches,
Broyés aux rochers du port!

La bataille enfin s’allume:
Tout à la fois tonne et fume.
La mort vole où nous frappons.
Là, tout brûle pêle-mêle.
Ici, court le brûlot frêle,
Qui jette aux mâts ses crampons,
Et, comme un chacal dévore
L’éléphant qui lutte encore,
Ronge un navire à trois ponts.

— L’abordage! l’abordage! -
On se suspend au cordage;
On s’élance des haubans.
La poupe heurte la proue.
La mêlée a dans sa roue
Rameurs courbés sur leurs bancs,
Fantassins pleurant la terre,
L’épée et le cimeterre,
Les casques et les turbans!

La vergue aux vergues s’attache;
La torche insulte à la hache;

Tout s’attaque en même temps.
Sur l’abîme la mort nage.
Épouvantable carnage!
Champs de bataille flottants,
Qui, battus de cent volées,
S’écroulent sous les mêlées,
Avec tous leurs combattants!

V

Lutte horrible! Ah! quand l’homme, à l’étroit sur la terre,
Jusque sur l’Océan précipite la guerre,
Le sol tremble sous lui, tandis qu’il se débat.
La mer, la grande mer joue avec ses batailles.
Vainqueurs, vaincus, à tous elle ouvre ses entrailles:
Le naufrage éteint le combat.

Ô spectacle! Tandis que l’Afrique grondante
Bat nos puissants vaisseaux de sa flotte imprudente,
Qu’elle épuise à leurs flancs sa rage et ses efforts,
Chacun d’eux, géant fier, sur ces hordes bruyantes,
Ouvrant à temps égaux ses gueules foudroyantes,
Vomit tranquillement la mort de tous ses bords!

Tout s’embrase: voyez! l’eau de cendre est semée,
Le vent aux mâts en flamme arrache la fumée,
Le feu sur les tillacs s’abat en ponts mouvants.
Déjà brûlent les nefs: déjà, sourde et profonde,
La flamme en leurs flancs noirs ouvre un passage à l’onde;
Déjà, sur les ailes des vents,

L’incendie, attaquant la frégate amirale,
Déroule autour de mâts son ardente spirale,
Prend les marins hurlants dans ses brûlants réseaux,
Couronne de ses jets la poupe inabordable,
Triomphe, et jette au loin un reflet formidable
Qui tremble, élargissant ses cercles sur les eaux!

VI

Où sont, enfants du Caire,
Ces flottes qui naguère
Emportaient à la guerre
Leurs mille matelots?
Ces voiles, où sont-elles,
Qu’armaient les infidèles,
Et qui prêtaient leurs ailes
À l’ongle des brûlots?

Où sont tes mille antennes,
Et tes hunes hautaines,
Et tes fiers capitaines,
Armada du sultan?
Ta ruine commence,
Toi qui, dans ta démence,
Battais les mers, immense
Comme Léviathan!

Le capitan qui tremble
Voit éclater ensemble
Ces chébecs que rassemble
Alger ou Tetuan.
Le feu vengeur embrasse
Son vaisseau dont la masse
Soulève, quand il passe,
Le fond de l’Océan.

Sur les mers irritées,
Dérivent, démâtées,
Nefs par les nefs heurtées,
Yachts aux mille couleurs,
Galères capitanes,
Caïques et tartanes
Qui portaient aux sultanes

Des têtes et des fleurs!

Adieu, sloops intrépides,
Adieu, jonques rapides,
Qui sur les eaux limpides
Berçaient les icoglans!
Adieu la goélette
Dont la vague reflète
Le flamboyant squelette,
Noir dans les feux sanglants!

Adieu, la barcarolle
Dont l’humble banderole
Autour des vaisseaux vole,
Et qui, peureuse, fuit,
Quand du souffle des brises
Les frégates surprises,
Gonflant leurs voiles grises,
Déferlent à grand bruit!

Adieu, la caravelle
Qu’une voile nouvelle
Aux yeux de loin révèle;
Adieu, le dogre ailé,
Le brick dont les amures
Rendent de sourds murmures,
Comme un amas d’armures
Par le vent ébranlé.

Adieu, la brigantine
Dont la voile latine
Du flot qui se mutine
Fend les vallons amers!
Adieu, la balancelle
Qui sur l’onde chancelle,
Et, comme une étincelle,
Luit sur l’azur des mers!

Adieu, lougres difformes,
Galéaces énormes,
Vaisseaux de toutes formes,
Vaisseaux de tous climats,
L’yole aux triples flammes,
Les mahonnes, les prames,
La felouque à six rames,
La polacre à deux mâts!

Chaloupes canonnières!
Et lanches marinières
Où flottaient les bannières
Du pacha souverain!
Bombardes que la houle,
Sur son front qui s’écroule,
Soulève, emporte et roule
Avec un bruit d’airain!

Adieu, ces nefs bizarres,
Caraques et gabarres,
Qui de leurs cris barbares
Troublaient Chypre et Délos!
Que sont donc devenues
Ces galères chenues?
La mer les jette aux nues,
Le ciel les rend aux flots!

VII

Silence! Tout est fait: tout retombe à l’abîme.
L’écume des hauts mâts a recouvert la cime.
Des vaisseaux du sultan les flots se sont joués.
Quelques-uns, bricks rompus, prames désemparées,
Comme l’algue des eaux qu’apportent les marées,
Sur la grève noircie expirent échoués.

Ah! c’est une victoire! - Oui, l’Afrique défait,
Le vrai Dieu sous ses pieds foulant le faux prophète,
Les tyrans, les bourreaux criant grâce! à leur tour,
Ceux qui meurent enfin sauvés par ceux qui règnent,
Hellé lavant ses flancs qui saignent,
Et six ans vengés dans un jour!

Depuis assez longtemps les peuples disaient: “ Grèce!
Grèce! Grèce! tu meurs. Pauvre peuple en détresse,
À l’horizon en feu chaque jour tu décrois.
En vain, pour te sauver, patrie illustre et chère,
Nous réveillons le prêtre endormi dans sa chaire,
En vain nous mendions une armée à nos rois.

“ Mais les rois restent sourds, les chaires sont muettes.
Ton nom n’échauffe ici que des coeurs de poètes.
À la gloire, à la vie on demande tes droits?
À la croix grecque, Hellé, ta valeur se confie...
C’est un peuple qu’on crucifie!
Qu’importe, hélas! sur quelle croix?

“ Tes dieux s’en vont aussi. Parthénon, Propylées,
Murs de Grèce, ossements des villes mutilées,
Vous devenez une arme aux mains des mécréants.
Pour battre ses vaisseaux du haut des Dardanelles,
Chacun de vos débris, ruines solennelles,
Donne un boulet de marbre à leurs canons géants! “

Qu’on change cette plainte en joyeuse fanfare!
Une rumeur surgit de l’Isthme jusqu’au Phare.
Regardez ce ciel noir plus beau qu’un ciel serein.
Le vieux colosse turc sur l’Orient retombe,
La Grèce est libre, et dans la tombe
Byron applaudit Navarin.

Salut, donc, Albion, vieille reine des ondes!
Salut, aigle des Czars, qui planes sur deux mondes!

Gloire à nos fleurs de lis, dont l’éclat est si beau!
L’Angleterre aujourd’hui reconnaît sa rivale.
Navarin la lui rend. Notre gloire navale
À cet embrasement rallume son flambeau.

Je te retrouve, Autriche! - Oui, la voilà, c’est elle!
Non, pas ici, mais là, - dans la flotte infidèle.
Parmi les rangs chrétiens en vain on te chercha.
Nous surprenons, honteuse et la tête penchée,
Ton aigle au double front cachée
Sous les crinières d’un pacha!

C’est bien ta place, Autriche! - On te voyait naguère
Briller près d’Ibrahim, ce Tamerlan vulgaire;
Tu dépouillais les morts qu’il foulait en passant;
Tu l’admirais, mêlée aux eunuques serviles,
Promenant au hasard sa torche dans les villes,
Horrible, et n’éteignant le feu qu’avec du sang.

Tu préférais ces feux aux clartés de l’aurore.
Aujourd’hui qu’à leur tour la flamme enfin dévore
Ses noirs vaisseaux, vomis des ports égyptiens,
Rouvre les yeux, regarde, Autriche abâtardie!
Que dis-tu de cet incendie?
Est-il aussi beau que les siens?

VI

CRI DE GUERRE DU MUFTI

Hierro, despierta te! CRI DE GUERRE DES ALMOGAVARES
Fer, réveille-toi

En guerre les guerriers! Mahomet! Mahomet!
Les chiens mordent les pieds du lion qui dormait,
Ils relèvent leur tête infâme.
Écrasez, ô croyants du prophète divin,
Ces chancelants soldats qui s’enivrent de vin,
Ces hommes qui n’ont qu’une femme!

Meure la race franque et ses rois détestés!
Spahis, timariots, allez, courez, jetez
À travers les sombres mêlées
Vos sabres, vos turbans, le bruit de votre cor,
Vos tranchants étriers, larges triangles d’or,
Vos cavales échevelées!

Qu’Othman, fils d’Ortogrul, vive en chacun de vous.
Que l’un ait son regard et l’autre son courroux.
Allez, allez, ô capitaines!
Et nous te reprendrons, ville aux dômes d’azur,
Molle Setiniah, qu’en leur langage impur
Les barbares nomment Athènes!

VII

LA DOULEUR DU PACHA

Séparé de tout ce qui m’était cher, je me consume solitaire et désolé. BYRON.

— Qu’a donc l’ombre d’Allah? disait l’humble derviche;
Son aumône est bien pauvre et son trésor bien riche!
Sombre, immobile, avare, il rit d’un rire amer.
A-t-il donc ébréché le sabre de son père?
Ou bien de ses soldats autour de son repaire
Vu rugir l’orageuse mer?

— Qu’a-t-il donc le pacha, le vizir des armées?
Disaient les bombardiers, leurs mèches allumées.
Les imams troublent-ils cette tête de fer?
A-t-il du ramadan rompu le jeûne austère?
Lui font-ils voir en rêve, aux bornes de la terre,
L’ange Azraël debout sur le pont de l’enfer?

— Qu’a-t-il donc? murmuraient les icoglans stupides.
Dit-on qu’il ait perdu, dans les courants rapides,
Le vaisseau des parfums qui le font rajeunir?
Trouve-t-on à Stamboul sa gloire assez ancienne?
Dans les prédictions de quelque égyptienne
A-t-il vu le muet venir?

— Qu’a donc le doux sultan? demandaient les sultanes.
A-t-il avec son fils surpris sous les platanes
Sa brune favorite aux lèvres de corail?
A-t-on souillé son bain d’une essence grossière?
Dans le sac du fellah, vidé sur la poussière,
Manque-t-il quelque tête attendue au sérail?

— Qu’a donc le maître? ainsi s’agitent les esclaves.

Tous se trompent. - Hélas! si, perdu pour ses braves,
Assis, comme un guerrier qui dévore un affront,
Courbé comme un vieillard sous le poids des années,
Depuis trois longues nuits et trois longues journées,
Il croise ses mains sur son front,

Ce n'est pas qu'il ait vu la révolte infidèle,
Assiégeant son harem comme une citadelle,
Jeter jusqu'à sa couche un sinistre brandon;
Ni d'un père en sa main s'émousser le vieux glaive;
Ni paraître Azraël; ni passer dans un rêve
Les muets bigarrés armés du noir cordon.

Hélas! l'ombre d'Allah n'a pas rompu le jeûne;
La sultane est gardée, et son fils est trop jeune;
Nul vaisseau n'a subi d'orages importuns;
Le tartare avait bien sa charge accoutumée;
Il ne manque au sérail, solitude embaumée,
Ni les têtes ni les parfums.

Ce ne sont pas non plus les villes écroulées,
Les ossements humains noircissant les vallées,
La Grèce incendiée, en proie aux fils d'Omar,
L'orphelin, ni la veuve, et ses plaintes amères,
Ni l'enfance égorgée aux yeux des pauvres mères,
Ni la virginité marchandée au bazar;

Non, non, ce ne sont pas ces figures funèbres,
Qui, d'un rayon sanglant luisant dans les ténèbres,
En passant dans son âme ont laissé le remord.
Qu'a-t-il donc ce pacha, que la guerre réclame,
Et qui, triste et rêveur, pleure comme une femme?...
Son tigre de Nubie est mort.

VIII

CHANSONS DE PIRATES

Nous emmenions en esclavage
Cent chrétiens, pêcheurs de corail;
Nous recrutions pour le sérail
Dans tous les moûtiers du rivage.
En mer, les hardis écumeurs!
Nous allions de Fez à Catane...
Dans la galère capitane
Nous étions quatre-vingts rameurs.

On signale un couvent à terre.
Nous jetons l’ancre près du bord.
À nos yeux s’offre tout d’abord
Une fille du monastère.
Prés des flots, sourde à leurs rumeurs,
Elle dormait sous un platane...
Dans la galère capitane
Nous étions quatre-vingts rameurs.

— La belle fille, il faut vous taire,
Il faut nous suivre. Il fait bon vent.
Ce n’est que changer de couvent.
Le harem vaut le monastère.
Sa hautesse aime les primeurs,
Nous vous ferons mahométane...
Dans la galère capitane
Nous étions quatre-vingts rameurs.

Elle veut fuir vers sa chapelle.
— Osez-vous bien, fils de Satan?
— Nous osons, dit le capitan.
Elle pleure, supplie, appelle.
Malgré sa plainte et ses clameurs,

On l’emporta dans la tartane...
Dans la galère capitane
Nous étions quatre-vingts rameurs.

Plus belle encor dans sa tristesse,
Ses yeux étaient deux talismans.
Elle valait mille tomans;
On la vendit à sa hautesse.
Elle eut beau dire: Je me meurs!
De nonne elle devint sultane...
Dans la galère capitane
Nous étions quatre-vingts rameurs.

IX

LA CAPTIVE

Si je n’étais captive,
J’aimerais ce pays,
Et cette mer plaintive,
Et ces champs de maïs,
Et ces astres sans nombre,
Si le long du mur sombre
N’étincelait dans l’ombre
Le sabre des spahis.

Je ne suis point tartare
Pour qu’un eunuque noir
M’accorde ma guitare,
Me tienne mon miroir.
Bien loin de ces Sodomes,
Au pays dont nous sommes,
Avec les jeunes hommes
On peut parler le soir.

Pourtant j’aime une rive
Où jamais des hivers
Le souffle froid n’arrive
Par les vitraux ouverts,
L’été, la pluie est chaude,
L’insecte vert qui rôde
Luit, vivante émeraude,
Sous les brins d’herbe verts.

Smyrne est une princesse
Avec son beau chapel;
L’heureux printemps sans cesse
Répond à son appel,
Et, comme un riant groupe

De fleurs dans une coupe,
Dans ses mers se découpe
Plus d’un frais archipel.

J’aime ces tours vermeilles,
Ces drapeaux triomphants,
Ces maisons d’or, pareilles
À des jouets d’enfants;
J’aime, pour mes pensées
Plus mollement bercées,
Ces tentes balancées
Au dos des éléphants.

Dans ce palais de fées,
Mon coeur, plein de concerts,
Croit, aux voix étouffées
Qui viennent des déserts,
Entendre les génies
Mêler les harmonies
Des chansons infinies
Qu’ils chantent dans les airs!

J’aime de ces contrées
Les doux parfums brûlants,
Sur les vitres dorées
Les feuillages tremblants,
L’eau que la source épanche
Sous le palmier qui penche,
Et la cigogne blanche
Sur les minarets blancs.

J’aime en un lit de mousses
Dire un air espagnol,
Quand mes compagnes douces,
Du pied rasant le sol,
Légion vagabonde
Où le sourire abonde,

Font tournoyer leur ronde
Sous un rond parasol.

Mais surtout, quand la brise
Me touche en voltigeant,
La nuit j’aime être assise,
Être assise en songeant,
L’oeil sur la mer profonde,
Tandis que, pâle et blonde,
La lune ouvre dans l’onde
Son éventail d’argent.

X

CLAIR DE LUNE.

La lune était sereine et jouait sur les flots. -
La fenêtre enfin libre est ouverte à la brise,
La sultane regarde, et la mer qui se brise,
Là-bas, d’un flot d’argent brode les noirs îlots.

De ses doigts en vibrant s’échappe la guitare.
Elle écoute... Un bruit sourd frappe les sourds échos.
Est-ce un lourd vaisseau turc qui vient des eaux de Cos,
Battant l’archipel grec de sa rame tartare?

Sont-ce des cormorans qui plongent tour à tour,
Et coupent l’eau, qui roule en perles sur leur aile?
Est-ce un djinn qui là-haut siffle d’une voix grêle,
Et jette dans la mer les créneaux de la tour?

Qui trouble ainsi les flots près du sérail des femmes?
Ni le noir cormoran, sur la vague bercé,
Ni les pierres du mur, ni le bruit cadencé
Du lourd vaisseau, rampant sur l’onde avec des rames.

Ce sont des sacs pesants, d’où partent des sanglots.
On verrait, en sondant la mer qui les promène,
Se mouvoir dans leurs flancs comme une forme humaine...
La lune était sereine et jouait sur les flots.

XI

LE VOILE

Avez-vous prié Dieu ce soir, Desdemona? SHAKESPEARE.

LA SOEUR
Qu’avez-vous, qu’avez-vous, mes frères?
Vous baissez des fronts soucieux.
    Comme des lampes funéraires,
    Vos regards brillent dans vos yeux.
    Vos ceintures sont déchirées;
    Déjà trois fois, hors de l’étui,
    Sous vos doigts, à demi tirées,
    Les lames des poignards ont lui.

    LE FRÈRE AÎNÉ
    N’avez-vous pas levé votre voile aujourd’hui?

    LA SOEUR
    Je revenais du bain, mes frères,
    Seigneurs, du bain je revenais,
    Cachée aux regards téméraires
    Des Giaours et des Albanais.
    En passant près de la mosquée
    Dans mon palanquin recouvert,
    L’air de midi m’a suffoquée:
    Mon voile un instant s’est ouvert.

    LE SECOND FRÈRE
    Un homme alors passait? un homme en caftan vert?

    LA SOEUR
    Oui..., peut-être..., mais son audace
    N’a point vu mes traits dévoilés...
    Mais vous vous parlez à voix basse,

À voix basse vous vous parlez.
Vous faut-il du sang? sur votre âme,
Mes frères, il n’a pu me voir.
Grâce! tuerez-vous une femme,
Faible et nue en votre pouvoir?

LE TROISIÈME FRÈRE
Le soleil était rouge à son coucher ce soir!

LA SOEUR
Grâce! qu’ai-je fait? grâce! grâce!
Dieu! quatre poignards dans mon flanc!
Ah! par vos genoux que j’embrasse...
Ô mon voile! ô mon voile blanc!
Ne fuyez pas mes mains qui saignent,
Mes frères, soutenez mes pas!
Car sur mes regards qui s’éteignent
S’étend un voile de trépas.

LE QUATRIÈME FRÈRE
C’en est un que du moins tu ne lèveras pas!

XII

LA SULTANE FAVORITE

Perfide comme l’onde. SHAKESPEARE.

N’ai-je pas pour toi, belle juive,
Assez dépeuplé mon sérail?
Souffre qu’enfin le reste vive:
Faut-il qu’un coup de hache suive
Chaque coup de ton éventail?

Repose-toi, jeune maîtresse;
Fais grâce au troupeau qui me suit.
Je te fais sultane et princesse:
Laisse en paix tes compagnes, cesse
D’implorer leur mort chaque nuit.

Quand à ce penser tu t’arrêtes
Tu viens plus tendre à mes genoux;
Toujours je comprends dans les fêtes
Que tu vas demander des têtes
Quand ton regard devient plus doux.

Ah! jalouse entre les jalouses!
Si belle avec ce coeur d’acier!
Pardonne à mes autres épouses.
Voit-on que les fleurs des pelouses
Meurent à l’ombre du rosier?

Ne suis-je pas à toi? qu’importe,
Quand sur toi mes bras sont fermés,
Que cent femmes qu’un feu transporte
Consument en vain à ma porte
Leur souffle en soupirs enflammés?

Dans leur solitude profonde,
Laisse-les t’envier toujours;
Vois-les passer comme fuit l’onde;
Laisse-les vivre: à toi le monde,
À toi mon trône, à toi mes jours!

À toi tout mon peuple qui tremble!
À toi Stamboul qui, sur ce bord
Dressant mille flèches ensemble,
Se berce dans la mer, et semble
Une flotte à l’ancre qui dort!

À toi, jamais à tes rivales,
Mes spahis aux rouges turbans,
Qui, se suivant sans intervalles,
Volent courbés sur leurs cavales
Comme des rameurs sur leurs bancs!

À toi Bassora, Trébizonde,
Chypre où de vieux noms sont gravés,
Fez où la poudre d’or abonde,
Mosul où trafique le monde,
Erzeroum aux chemins pavés!

À toi Smyrne et ses maisons neuves,
Où vient blanchir le flot amer!
Le Gange redouté des veuves!
Le Danube qui par cinq fleuves
Tombe échevelé dans la mer!

Dis, crains-tu les filles de Grèce?
Les lys pâles de Damanhour?
Ou l’oeil ardent de la négresse
Qui, comme une jeune tigresse,
Bondit rugissante d’amour?

Que m’importe, juive adorée,

Un sein d’ébène, un front vermeil!
Tu n’es point blanche ni cuivrée:
Mais il semble qu’on t’a dorée
Avec un rayon de soleil.

N’appelle donc plus la tempête,
Princesse, sur ces humbles fleurs;
Jouis en paix de ta conquête,
Et n’exige pas qu’une tête
Tombe avec chacun de tes pleurs!

Ne songe plus qu’aux frais platanes
Au bain mêlé d’ambre et de nard,
Au golfe où glissent les tartanes...
Il faut au sultan des sultanes;
Il faut des perles au poignard!

XIII

LE DERVICHE

Quand la perte d'un mortel est écrite dans le livre fatal de la destinée, quoi qu'il fasse, il n'échappera jamais à son funeste avenir; la mort le poursuit partout; elle le surprend même dans son lit, suce de ses lèvres avides son sang et l'emporte sur ses épaules. PANAGO SOUTZO.

Un jour Ali passait: les têtes les plus hautes
Se courbaient au niveau des pieds de ses arnautes.
Tout le peuple disait: Allah!
Un derviche soudain, cassé par l'âge aride,
Fendit la foule, prit son cheval par la bride,
Et voici comme il lui parla:

“ Ali-Tépéléni, lumière des lumières,
Qui sièges au divan sur les marches premières,
Dont le grand nom toujours grandit,
Écoute-moi, vizir de ces guerriers sans nombre,
Ombre du padischah qui de Dieu même est l'ombre,
Tu n'es qu'un chien et qu'un maudit!

“ Un flambeau du sépulcre à ton insu t'éclaire.
Comme un vase trop plein tu répands ta colère
Sur tout un peuple frémissant;
Tu brilles sur leurs fronts comme une faux dans l'herbe,
Et tu fais un ciment à ton palais superbe
De leurs os broyés dans leur sang.

“ Mais ton jour vient. Il faut, dans Janina qui tombe,
Que sous tes pas enfin croule et s'ouvre ta tombe!
Dieu te garde un carcan de fer
Sous l'arbre du seglin chargé d'âmes impies
Qui sur ses rameaux noirs frissonnent accroupies,
Dans la nuit du septième enfer!

“ Ton âme fuira nue! au livre de tes crimes
Un démon te lira les noms de tes victimes;
Tu les verras autour de toi,
Ces spectres, teints du sang qui n’est plus dans leurs veines,
Se presser, plus nombreux que les paroles vaines
Que balbutiera ton effroi!

“ Ceci t’arrivera, sans que ta forteresse
Ou ta flotte te puisse aider, dans ta détresse,
De sa rame ou de son canon;
Quand même Ali-Pacha, comme le juif immonde,
Pour tromper l’ange noir qui l’attend hors du monde,
En mourant changerait de nom! “

Ali sous sa pelisse avait un cimeterre,
Un tromblon tout chargé, s’ouvrant comme un cratère,
Trois longs pistolets, un poignard:
Il écouta le prêtre et lui laissa tout dire,
Pencha son front rêveur, puis avec un sourire
Donna sa pelisse au vieillard.

XIV

LE CHÂTEAU FORT

À quoi pensent ces flots qui baisent sans murmure
Les flancs de ce rocher luisant comme une armure?
Quoi donc! n'ont-ils pas vu, dans leur propre miroir,
Que ce roc, dont le pied déchire leurs entrailles,
A sur sa tête un fort, ceint de blanches murailles,
Roulé comme un turban autour de son front noir?

Que font-ils? à qui donc gardent-ils leur colère?
Allons! acharne-toi sur ce cap séculaire,
Ô mer! trêve un moment aux pauvres matelots!
Ronge, ronge ce roc! qu'il chancelle, qu'il penche,
Et tombe enfin, avec sa forteresse blanche,
La tête la première, enfoncé dans les flots!

Dis, combien te faut-il de temps, ô mer fidèle,
Pour jeter bas ce roc avec sa citadelle?
Un jour? un an? un siècle..? au nid du criminel
Précipite toujours ton eau jaune de sable!
Que t'importe le temps, ô mer intarissable?
Un siècle est comme un flot dans ton gouffre éternel.

Engloutis cet écueil! que ta vague l'efface
Et sur son front perdu toujours passe et repasse!
Que l'algue aux verts cheveux dégrade ses contours!
Que, sur son flanc couché, dans ton lit sombre il dorme!
Qu'on n'y distingue plus sa forteresse informe!
Que chaque flot emporte une pierre à ses tours!

Afin que rien n'en reste au monde, et qu'on respire
De ne plus voir la tour d'Ali, pacha d'Épire;
Et qu'un jour, côtoyant les bords qu'Ali souilla,
Si le marin de Cos dans la mer ténébreuse

Voit un grand tourbillon dont le centre se creuse,
Aux passagers muets il dise: c’était là!

XV

MARCHE TURQUE

Là - Allah! - Ellàllah!
Il n’y a pas d’autre Dieu que Dieu. KORAN.

Ma dague d’un sang noir à mon côté ruisselle,
Et ma hache est pendue à l’arçon de ma selle.

J’aime le vrai soldat, effroi de Bélial:
Son turban évasé rend son front plus sévère;
Il baise avec respect la barbe de son père,
Il voue à son vieux sabre un amour filial,
Et porte un doliman percé dans les mêlées
De plus de coups que n’a de taches étoilées
La peau du tigre impérial.

Ma dague d’un sang noir à mon côté ruisselle,
Et ma hache est pendue à l’arçon de ma selle.

Un bouclier de cuivre à son bras sonne et luit,
Rouge comme la lune au milieu d’une brume;
Son cheval hennissant mâche un frein blanc d’écume;
Un long sillon de poudre en sa course le suit.
Quand il passe au galop sur le pavé sonore,
On fait silence, on dit: C’est un cavalier maure!
Et chacun se retourne au bruit.

Ma dague d’un sang noir à mon côté ruisselle,
Et ma hache est pendue à l’arçon de ma selle.

Quand dix mille Giaours viennent au son du cor,
Il leur répond; il vole, et d’un souffle farouche
Fait jaillir la terreur du clairon qu’il embouche,
Tue, et parmi les morts sent croître son essor,

Rafraîchit dans leur sang son caftan écarlate,
Et pousse son coursier qui se lasse, et le flatte
Pour en égorger plus encor!

Ma dague d’un sang noir à mon côté ruisselle,
Et ma hache est pendue à l’arçon de ma selle.

J’aime s’il est vainqueur, quand s’est tu le tambour,
Qu’il ait sa belle esclave aux paupières arquées,
Et, laissant les imams qui prêchent aux mosquées
Boire du vin la nuit, qu’il en boive au grand jour!
J’aime, après le combat, que sa voix enjouée
Rie, et des cris de guerre encor tout enrouée,
Chante les houris et l’amour!

Ma dague d’un sang noir à mon côté ruisselle,
Et ma hache est pendue à l’arçon de ma selle.

Qu’il soit grave, et rapide à venger un affront;
Qu’il aime mieux savoir le jeu du cimeterre
Que tout ce qu’à vieillir on apprend sur la terre;
Qu’il ignore quel jour les soleils s’éteindront,
Quand rouleront les mers sur les sables arides;
Mais qu’il soit brave et jeune, et préfère à des rides
Des cicatrices sur son front.

Ma dague d’un sang noir à mon côté ruisselle,
Et ma hache est pendue à l’arçon de ma selle.

Tel est, comparadgis, spahis, timariots,
Le vrai guerrier croyant! mais celui qui se vante,
Et qui tremble au moment de semer l’épouvante,
Qui le dernier arrive aux camps impériaux,
Qui, lorsque d’une ville on a forcé la porte,
Ne fait pas, sous le poids du butin qu’il rapporte,
Plier l’essieu des chariots;

Ma dague d’un sang noir à mon côté ruisselle,
Et ma hache est pendue à l’arçon de ma selle.

Celui qui d’une femme aime les entretiens;
Celui qui ne sait pas dire dans une orgie
Quelle est d’un beau cheval la généalogie;
Qui cherche ailleurs qu’en soi force, amis et soutiens,
Sur de soyeux divans se couche avec mollesse,
Craint le soleil, sait lire, et par scrupule laisse
Tout le vin de Chypre aux chrétiens;

Ma dague d’un sang noir à mon côté ruisselle,
Et ma hache est pendue à l’arçon de ma selle.

Celui-là, c’est un lâche, et non pas un guerrier.
Ce n’est pas lui qu’on voit dans la bataille ardente
Pousser un fier cheval, à la housse pendante,
Le sabre en main, debout sur le large étrier;
Il n’est bon qu’à presser des talons une mule,
En murmurant tout bas quelque vaine formule,
Comme un prêtre qui va prier!

Ma dague d’un sang noir à mon côté ruisselle,
Et ma hache est pendue à l’arçon de ma selle.

XVI

LA BATAILLE PERDUE

Sur la plus haute colline
Il monte, et sa javeline
Soutenant ses membres lourds,
Il voit son armée en fuite
Et de sa tente détruite
Pendre en lambeaux le velours.
Ém. Deschamps Rodrigue pendant la bataille.

“ Allah! qui me rendra ma formidable armée,
Émirs, cavalerie au carnage animée,
Et ma tente, et mon camp, éblouissant à voir,
Qui la nuit allumait tant de feux qu’à leur nombre,
On eût dit que le ciel sur la colline sombre
Laissait ses étoiles pleuvoir?

“ Qui me rendra mes beys aux flottantes pelisses?
Mes fiers timariots, turbulentes milices?
Mes khans bariolés? mes rapides spahis?
Et mes bédouins hâlés, venus des Pyramides,
Qui riaient d’effrayer les laboureurs timides,
Et poussaient leurs chevaux par les champs de maïs?

“ Tous ces chevaux, à l’oeil de flamme, aux jambes grêles,
Qui volaient dans les blés comme des sauterelles,
Quoi, je ne verrai plus, franchissant les sillons,
Leurs troupes, par la mort en vain diminuées,
Sur les carrés pesants s’abattant par nuées,
Couvrir d’éclairs les bataillons!

“ Ils sont morts: dans le sang traînent leurs belles housses;
Le sang souille et noircit leur croupe aux taches rousses;
L’éperon s’userait sur leur flanc arrondi

Avant de réveiller leurs pas jadis rapides,
Et près d’eux sont couchés leurs maîtres intrépides
Qui dormaient à leur ombre aux halles de midi!

“ Allah! qui me rendra ma redoutable armée?
La voilà par les champs tout entière semée,
Comme l’or d’un prodigue épars sur le pavé.
Quoi! chevaux, cavaliers, Arabes et Tartares,
Leurs turbans, leur galop, leurs drapeaux, leurs fanfares,
C’est comme si j’avais rêvé!

“ Ô mes vaillants soldats et leurs coursiers fidèles!
Leur voix n’a plus de bruit et leurs pieds n’ont plus d’ailes.
Ils ont oublié tout, et le sabre et le mors.
De leurs corps entassés cette vallée est pleine:
Voilà pour bien longtemps une sinistre plaine!
Ce soir, l’odeur du sang: demain, l’odeur des morts.

“ Quoi! c’était une armée, et ce n’est plus qu’une ombre!
Ils se sont bien battus! de l’aube à la nuit sombre,
Dans le cercle fatal ardents à se presser.
Les noirs linceuls des nuits sur l’horizon se posent.
Les braves ont fini: maintenant ils reposent,
Et les corbeaux vont commencer.

“ Déjà, passant leur bec entre leurs plumes noires,
Du fond des bois, du haut des chauves promontoires,
Ils accourent: des morts ils rongent les lambeaux;
Et cette armée, hier formidable et suprême,
Cette puissante armée, hélas! ne peut plus même
Effaroucher un aigle et chasser des corbeaux!

“ Oh! si j’avais encor cette armée immortelle,
Je voudrais conquérir des mondes avec elle;
Je la ferais régner sur les rois ennemis;
Elle serait ma soeur, ma dame et mon épouse.
Mais que fera la mort, inféconde et jalouse,

De tant de braves endormis?

“ Que n’ai-je été frappé! que n’a sur la poussière
Roulé mon vert turban avec ma tête altière!
Hier j’étais puissant; hier trois officiers,
Immobiles et fiers sur leur selle tigrée,
Portaient, devant le seuil de ma tente dorée,
Trois panaches ravis aux croupes des coursiers.

“ Hier j’avais cent tambours tonnant à mon passage;
J’avais quarante agas contemplant mon visage,
Et d’un sourcil froncé tremblant dans leurs palais.
Au lieu des lourds pierriers qui dorment sur les proues,
J’avais de beaux canons, roulant sur quatre roues,
Avec leurs canonniers anglais.

“ Hier j’avais des châteaux; j’avais de belles villes;
Des Grecques par milliers à vendre aux juifs serviles;
J’avais de grands harems et de grands arsenaux.
Aujourd’hui, dépouillé, vaincu, proscrit, funeste,
Je fuis... De mon empire, hélas! rien ne me reste;
Allah! je n’ai plus même une tour à créneaux!

“ Il faut fuir, moi, pacha, moi, vizir à trois queues!
Franchir l’horizon vaste et les collines bleues,
Furtif, baissant les yeux, presque tendant la main,
Comme un voleur qui fuit troublé dans les ténèbres,
Et croit voir des gibets dressant leurs bras funèbres
Dans tous les arbres du chemin! “

Ainsi parlait Reschid, le soir de sa défaite.
Nous eûmes mille Grecs tués à cette fête.
Mais le vizir fuyait, seul, ce champ meurtrier.
Rêveur, il essuyait son rouge cimeterre;
Deux chevaux près de lui du pied battaient la terre,
Et, vides, sur leurs flancs sonnaient les étriers.

XVII

LE RAVIN

... alte fosse che vallan quella terra sconsolata. DANTE.

Un ravin de ces monts coupe la noire crête;
Comme si, voyageant du Caucase au Cédar,
    Quelqu’un de ces Titans que nul rempart n’arrête
    Avait fait passer sur la tête
    La roue immense de son char.

    Hélas! combien de fois, dans nos temps de discorde,
    Des flots de sang chrétien et de sang mécréant,
    Baignant le cimeterre et la miséricorde,
    Ont changé tout à coup en torrent qui déborde
    Cette ornière d’un char géant!

XVIII

L’ENFANT

O horror! horror! horror! SHAKESPEARE. Macbeth

Les Turcs ont passé là: tout est ruine et deuil.
Chio, l’île des vins, n’est plus qu’un sombre écueil,
Chio, qu’ombrageaient les charmilles,
Chio, qui dans les flots reflétait ses grands bois,
Ses coteaux, ses palais, et le soir quelquefois
Un choeur dansant de jeunes filles.

Tout est désert: mais non, seul près des murs noircis,
Un enfant aux yeux bleus, un enfant grec, assis,
Courbait sa tête humiliée;
Il avait pour asile, il avait pour appui
Une blanche aubépine, une fleur, comme lui
Dans le grand ravage oubliée.

Ah! pauvre enfant, pieds nus sur les rocs anguleux!
Hélas! pour essuyer les pleurs de tes yeux bleus
Comme le ciel et comme l’onde,
Pour que dans leur azur, de larmes orageux,
Passe le vif éclair de la joie et des jeux,
Pour relever ta tète blonde,

Que veux-tu? bel enfant, que te faut-il donner
Pour rattacher gaîment et gaîment ramener
En boucles sur ta blanche épaule
Ces cheveux qui du fer n’ont pas subi l’affront,
Et qui pleurent épars autour de ton beau front,
Comme les feuilles sur le saule?

Qui pourrait dissiper tes chagrins nébuleux?
Est-ce d’avoir ce lis, bleu comme tes yeux bleus,

Qui d’Iran borde le puits sombre?
Ou le fruit du tuba, de cet arbre si grand,
Qu’un cheval au galop met toujours en courant,
Cent ans à sortir de son ombre?

Veux-tu, pour me sourire, un bel oiseau des bois,
Qui chante avec un chant plus doux que le hautbois,
Plus éclatant que les cymbales?
Que veux-tu? fleur, beau fruit ou l’oiseau merveilleux?
— Ami, dit l’enfant grec, dit l’enfant aux yeux bleus,
Je veux de la poudre et des balles.

XIX

SARA LA BAIGNEUSE

Le soleil et les vents, dans ces bocages sombres,
Des feuilles sur son front faisaient flotter les ombres.
ALFRED DE VIGNY

Sara, belle d’indolence,
Se balance
Dans un hamac, au-dessus
Du bassin d’une fontaine
Toute pleine
D’eau puisée à l’Ilyssus;

Et la frêle escarpolette
Se reflète
Dans le transparent miroir,
Avec la baigneuse blanche
Qui se penche,
Qui se penche pour se voir.

Chaque fois que la nacelle
Qui chancelle,
Passe à fleur d’eau dans son vol,
On voit sur l’eau qui s’agite
Sortir vite
Son beau pied et son beau col.

Elle bat d’un pied timide
L’onde humide
Qui ride son clair tableau,
Du beau pied rougit l’albâtre;
La folâtre,
Rit de la fraîcheur de l’eau.

Reste ici caché: demeure!
Dans une heure,
D’un oeil ardent tu verras
Sortir du bain l’ingénue,
Toute nue,
Croisant ses mains sur ses bras!

Car c’est un astre qui brille
Qu’une fille
Qui sort d’un bain au flot clair,
Cherche s’il ne vient personne,
Et frissonne,
Toute mouillée au grand air!

Elle est là, sous la feuillée,
Éveillée
Au moindre bruit de malheur;
Et rouge, pour une mouche
Qui la touche,
Comme une grenade en fleur.

On voit tout ce que dérobe
Voile ou robe;
Dans ses yeux d’azur en feu,
Son regard que rien ne voile
Est l’étoile
Qui brille au fond d’un ciel bleu.

L’eau sur son corps qu’elle essuie
Roule en pluie,
Comme sur un peuplier;
Comme si, gouttes à gouttes,
Tombaient toutes
Les perles de son collier.

Mais Sara la nonchalante
Est bien lente

À finir ses doux ébats;
Toujours elle se balance
En silence,
Et va murmurant tout bas:

“ Oh! si j’étais capitane,
Ou sultane,
Je prendrais des bains ambrés,
Dans un bain de marbre jaune,
Prés d’un trône,
Entre deux griffons dorés!

“ J’aurais le hamac de soie
Qui se ploie
Sous le corps prêt à pâmer;
J’aurais la molle ottomane
Dont émane
Un parfum qui fait aimer.

“ Je pourrais folâtrer nue,
Sous la nue,
Dans le ruisseau du jardin,
Sans craindre de voir dans l’ombre
Du bois sombre
Deux yeux s’allumer soudain.

“ Il faudrait risquer sa tête
Inquiète,
Et tout braver pour me voir,
Le sabre nu de l’heyduque,
Et l’eunuque
Aux dents blanches, au front noir!

“ Puis, je pourrais, sans qu’on presse
Ma paresse,
Laissez avec mes habits
Traîner sur les larges dalles

Mes sandales
De drap brodé de rubis. “

Ainsi se parle en princesse,
Et sans cesse
Se balance avec amour,
La jeune fille rieuse,
Oublieuse
Des promptes ailes du jour.

L’eau, du pied de la baigneuse
Peu soigneuse,
Rejaillit sur le gazon,
Sur sa chemise plissée,
Balancée
Aux branches d’un vert buisson.

Et cependant des campagnes
Ses compagnes
Prennent toutes le chemin.
Voici leur troupe frivole
Qui s’envole
En se tenant par la main.

Chacune, en chantant comme elle,
Passe, et mêle
Ce reproche à sa chanson:
— Oh! la paresseuse fille
Qui s’habille
Si tard un jour de moisson!

XX

ATTENTE

Esperaba, desperada.

Monte, écureuil, monte au grand chêne,
Sur la branche des cieux prochaine,
Qui plie et tremble comme un jonc.
Cigogne, aux vieilles tours fidèle,
Oh! vole! et monte à tire-d’aile
De l’église à la citadelle,
Du haut clocher au grand donjon.

Vieux aigle, monte de ton aire
À la montagne centenaire
Que blanchit l’hiver éternel;
Et toi qu’en ta couche inquiète
Jamais l’aube ne vit muette,
Monte, monte, vive alouette,
Vive alouette, monte au ciel!

Et maintenant, du haut de l’arbre,
Des flèches de la tour de marbre,
Du grand mont, du ciel enflammé,
À l’horizon, parmi la brume,
Voyez-vous flotter une plume,
Et courir un cheval qui fume,
Et revenir mon bien-aimé?

XXI

LAZZARA

Et cette femme était fort belle. Rois, XI, 2.

Comme elle court! voyez! - par les poudreux sentiers,
Par les gazons tout pleins de touffes d’églantiers,
Par les blés où le pavot brille,
Par les chemins perdus, par les chemins frayés,
Par les monts, par les bois, par les plaines, voyez
Comme elle court, la jeune fille!

Elle est grande, elle est svelte, et quand, d’un pas joyeux,
Sa corbeille de fleurs sur la tête, à nos yeux
Elle apparaît vive et folâtre,
À voir sur son beau front s’arrondir ses bras blancs,
On croirait voir de loin, dans nos temples croulants,
Une amphore aux anses d’albâtre.

Elle est jeune et rieuse, et chante sa chanson.
Et, pieds nus, près du lac, de buisson en buisson,
Poursuit les vertes demoiselles.
Elle lève sa robe et passe les ruisseaux.
Elle va, court, s’arrête, et vole, et les oiseaux
Pour ses pieds donneraient leurs ailes.

Quand le soir, pour la danse on va se réunir,
À l’heure où l’on entend lentement revenir
Les grelots du troupeau qui bêle,
Sans chercher quels atours à ses traits conviendront,
Elle arrive, et la fleur qu’elle attache à son front
Nous semble toujours la plus belle.

Certes, le vieux Omer, pacha de Négrepont,
Pour elle eût tout donné, vaisseaux à triple pont,

Foudroyantes artilleries,
Harnois de ses chevaux, toisons de ses brebis,
Et son rouge turban de soie, et ses habits
Tout ruisselants de pierreries;

Et ses lourds pistolets, ses tromblons évasés,
Et leurs pommeaux d’argent par sa main rude usés,
Et ses sonores espingoles,
Et son courbe damas, et, don plus riche encor,
La grande peau de tigre où pend son carquois d’or,
Hérissé de flèches mogoles.

Il eût donné sa housse et son large étrier;
Donné tous ses trésors avec le trésorier;
Donné ses trois cents concubines;
Donné ses chiens de chasse aux colliers de vermeil;
Donné ses Albanais, brûlés par le soleil,
Avec leurs longues carabines.

Il eût donné les Francs, les Juifs et leur rabbin;
Son kiosque rouge et vert, et ses salles de bain
Aux grands pavés de mosaïque;
Sa haute citadelle aux créneaux anguleux;
Et sa maison d’été qui se mire aux flots bleus
D’un golfe de Cyrénaïque.

Tout! jusqu’au cheval blanc, qu’il élève au sérail,
Dont la sueur à flots argente le poitrail;
Jusqu’au frein que l’or damasquine;
Jusqu’à cette Espagnole, envoi du dey d’Alger,
Qui soulève, en dansant son fandango léger,
Les plis brodés de sa basquine!

Ce n’est point un pacha, c’est un klephte à l’oeil noir
Qui l’a prise, et qui n’a rien donné pour l’avoir;
Car la pauvreté l’accompagne;
Un klephte a pour tous biens l’air du ciel, l’eau des puits,

Un bon fusil bronzé par la fumée, et puis
La liberté sur la montagne.

XXII

VOEU

Ainsi qu'on choisit une rose
Dans les guirlandes de Sarons,
Choisissez une vierge éclose
Parmi les lis de vos vallons.
LAMARTINE.

Si j'étais la feuille que roule
L'aile tournoyante du vent,
Qui flotte sur l'eau qui s'écoule,
Et qu'on suit de l'oeil en rêvant;

Je me livrerais, fraîche encore,
De la branche me détachant,
Au zéphyr qui souffle à l'aurore,
Au ruisseau qui vient du couchant.

Plus loin que le fleuve, qui gronde,
Plus loin que les vastes forêts,
Plus loin que la gorge profonde,
Je fuirais, je courrais, j'irais!

Plus loin que l'antre de la louve,
Plus loin que le bois des ramiers,
Plus loin que la plaine où l'on trouve
Une fontaine et trois palmiers;

Par delà ces rocs qui répandent
L'orage en torrent dans les blés,
Par delà ce lac morne, où pendent
Tant de buissons échevelés;

Plus loin que les terres arides
Du chef maure au large ataghan,
Dont le front pâle a plus de rides
Que la mer un jour d’ouragan.

Je franchirais comme la flèche
L’étang d’Arta, mouvant miroir,
Et le mont dont la cime empêche
Corinthe et Mykos de se voir.

Comme par un charme attirée,
Je m’arrêterais au matin
Sur Mykos, la ville carrée,
La ville aux coupoles d’étain.

J’irais chez la fille du prêtre,
Chez la blanche fille à l’oeil noir,
Qui le jour chante à sa fenêtre,
Et joue à sa porte le soir.

Enfin, pauvre feuille envolée,
Je viendrais, au gré de mes voeux,
Me poser sur son front, mêlée
Aux boucles de ses blonds cheveux;

Comme une perruche au pied leste
Dans le blé jaune, ou bien encor
Comme, dans un jardin céleste,
Un fruit vert sur un arbre d’or.

Et là, sur sa tète qui penche,
Je serais, fût-ce peu d’instants,
Plus fière que l’aigrette blanche
Au front étoilé des sultans.

XXIII

LA VILLE PRISE

La flamme par ton ordre, ô Roi, luit et dévore.
De ton peuple en grondant elle étouffe les cris,
Et, rougissant les toits comme une sombre aurore,
Semble en son vol joyeux danser sur leurs débris.

Le meurtre aux mille bras comme un géant se lève;
Les palais embrasés se changent en tombeaux;
Pères, femmes, époux, tout tombe sous le glaive;
Autour de la cité s’appellent les corbeaux.

Les mères ont frémi; les vierges palpitantes,
Ô calife! ont pleuré leurs jeunes ans flétris,
Et les coursiers fougueux ont traîné hors des tentes
Leurs corps vivants, de coups et de baisers meurtris.

Vois d’un vaste linceul la ville enveloppée;
Vois! quand ton bras puissant passe, il fait tout plier.
Les prêtres qui priaient ont péri par l’épée,
Jetant leur livre saint comme un vain bouclier.

Les tout petits enfants, écrasés sous les dalles,
Ont vécu; de leur sang le fer s’abreuve encor...
Ton peuple baise, ô Roi, la poudre des sandales
Qu’à ton pied glorieux attache un cercle d’or!

XXIV

ADIEUX DE L’HÔTESSE ARABE

Puisque rien ne t’arrête en cet heureux pays,
Ni l’ombre du palmier, ni le jaune maïs,
Ni le repos, ni l’abondance,
Ni de voir à ta voix battre le jeune sein
De nos soeurs, dont, les soirs, le tournoyant essaim
Couronne un coteau de sa danse,

Adieu, voyageur blanc! J’ai sellé de ma main,
De peur qu’il ne te jette aux pierres du chemin,
Ton cheval à l’oeil intrépide;
Ses pieds fouillent le sol, sa croupe est belle à voir,
Ferme, ronde et luisante ainsi qu’un rocher noir
Que polit une onde rapide.

Tu marches donc sans cesse! Oh! que n’es-tu de ceux
Qui donnent pour limite à leurs pieds paresseux
Leur toit de branches ou de toiles!
Qui, rêveurs, sans en faire, écoutent les récits,
Et souhaitent, le soir, devant leur porte assis,
De s’en aller dans les étoiles!

Si tu l’avais voulu, peut-être une de nous,
Ô jeune homme, eût aimé te servir à genoux
Dans nos huttes toujours ouvertes;
Elle eût fait, en berçant ton sommeil de ses chants,
Pour chasser de ton front les moucherons méchants,
Un éventail de feuilles vertes.

Mais tu pars! - Nuit et jour, tu vas seul et jaloux.
Le fer de ton cheval arrache aux durs cailloux
Une poussière d’étincelles;
À ta lance qui passe et dans l’ombre reluit,

Les aveugles démons qui volent dans la nuit
Souvent ont déchiré leurs ailes.

Si tu reviens, gravis, pour trouver ce hameau,
Ce mont noir qui de loin semble un dos de chameau;
Pour trouver ma hutte fidèle,
Songe à son toit aigu comme une ruche à miel,
Qu’elle n’a qu’une porte, et qu’elle s’ouvre au ciel
Du côté d’où vient l’hirondelle.

Si tu ne reviens pas, songe un peu quelquefois
Aux filles du désert, soeurs à la douce voix,
Qui dansent pieds nus sur la dune;
Ô beau jeune homme blanc, bel oiseau passager,
Souviens-toi, car peut-être, ô rapide étranger,
Ton souvenir reste à plus d’une!

Adieu donc! - Va tout droit. Garde-toi du soleil,
Qui dore nos fronts bruns, mais brûle un teint vermeil;
De l’Arabie infranchissable;
De la vieille qui va seule et d’un pas tremblant;
Et de ceux qui le soir, avec un bâton blanc,
Tracent des cercles sur le sable!

XXV

MALÉDICTION

Ed altro disse: ma non l’ho a mente. DANTE.

Qu’il erre sans repos, courbé dès sa jeunesse,
En des sables sans borne où le soleil renaisse
Sitôt qu’il aura lui!
Comme un noir meurtrier qui fuit dans la nuit sombre,
S’il marche, que sans cesse il entende dans l’ombre
Un pas derrière lui!

En des glaciers polis comme un tranchant de hache,
Qu’il glisse, et roule, et tombe, et tombe et se rattache
De l’ongle à leurs parois!
Qu’il soit pris pour un autre, et, râlant sur la roue,
Dise: je n’ai rien fait! et qu’alors on le cloue
Sur un gibet en croix!

Qu’il pende échevelé, la bouche violette!
Que, visible à lui seul, la mort, chauve squelette,
Rie en le regardant!
Que son cadavre souffre, et vive assez encore
Pour sentir, quand la mort le ronge et le dévore,
Chaque coup de sa dent!

Qu’il ne soit plus vivant, et ne soit pas une âme!
Que sur ses membres nus tombe un soleil de flamme
Ou la pluie à ruisseaux!
Qu’il s’éveille en sursaut chaque nuit dans la brume,
Et lutte, et se secoue, et vainement écume
Sous des griffes d’oiseaux!

XXVI

LES TRONÇONS DU DÉSERT

D’ailleurs les sages ont dit: il ne faut point attacher son coeur aux choses passagères. SADI, Gullistan.

Je veille, et nuit et jour mon front rêve enflammé,
Ma joue en pleurs ruisselle
Depuis qu’Albaydé dans la tombe a fermé
Ses beaux yeux de gazelle.

Car elle avait quinze ans, un sourire ingénu,
Et m’aimait sans mélange,
Et quand elle croisait ses bras sur son sein nu,
On croyait voir un ange!

Un jour, pensif, j’errais au bord d’un golfe ouvert
Entre deux promontoires,
Et je vis sur le sable un serpent jaune et vert,
Jaspé de taches noires.

La hache en vingt tronçons avait coupé vivant
Son corps que l’onde arrose,
Et l’écume des mers que lui jetait le vent
Sur son sang flottait rose.

Tous ses anneaux vermeils rampaient en se tordant
Sur la grève isolée,
Et le sang empourprait d’un rouge plus ardent
Sa crête dentelée.

Ces tronçons déchirés, épars, près d’épuiser
Leurs forces languissantes,
Se cherchaient, se cherchaient, comme pour un baiser
Deux bouches frémissantes!

Et comme je rêvais, triste et suppliant Dieu
Dans ma pitié muette,
La tête aux mille dents rouvrit son oeil de feu,
Et me dit: “ Ô poète!

“ Ne plains que toi! ton mal est plus envenimé,
Ta plaie est plus cruelle;
Car ton Albaydé dans la tombe a fermé
Ses beaux yeux de gazelle.

“ Ce coup de hache aussi brise ton jeune essor.
Ta vie et tes pensées
Autour d’un souvenir, chaste et dernier trésor,
Se traînent dispersés.

“ Ton génie, au vol large, éclatant, gracieux,
Qui, mieux que l’hirondelle,
Tantôt rasait la terre et tantôt dans les cieux
Donnait de grands coups d’aile,

“ Comme moi maintenant, meurt près des flots troublés;
Et se forces s’éteignent,
Sans pouvoir réunir ses tronçons mutilés
Qui rampent et qui saignent. “

XXVII

NOURMAHAL-LA-ROUSSE

No es bestia que non fus hy trobada. JOAN LORENZO SEGURA DE ASTORGA
Pas de bête fauve qui ne s'y trouvât.

Entre deux rocs d'un noir d'ébène
Voyez-vous ce sombre hallier
Qui se hérisse dans la plaine,
Ainsi qu'une touffe de laine
Entre les cornes du bélier?

Là, dans une ombre non frayée,
Grondent le tigre ensanglanté,
La lionne, mère effrayée,
Le chacal, l'hyène rayée
Et le léopard tacheté.

Là, des monstres de toute forme
Rampent: - le basilic rêvant,
L'hippopotame au ventre énorme,
Et le boa, vaste et difforme,
Qui semble un tronc d'arbre vivant.

L'orfraie aux paupières vermeilles,
Le serpent, le singe méchant,
Sifflent comme un essaim d'abeilles;
L'éléphant aux larges oreilles,
Casse les bambous en marchant.

Là, vit la sauvage famille
Qui glapit, bourdonne et mugit.
Le bois entier hurle et fourmille.
Sous chaque buisson un oeil brille,

Dans chaque antre une voix rugit.

Eh bien! seul et nu sur la mousse,
Dans ce bois-là je serais mieux
Que devant Nourmahal-la-Rousse,
Qui parle avec une voix douce
Et regarde avec de doux yeux!

XXVIII

LES DJINNS

Murs, ville,
Et port,
Asile
De mort,
Mer grise
Où brise
La brise,
Tout dort.

Dans la plaine
Naît un bruit.
C’est l’haleine
    De la nuit.
    Elle brame
    Comme une âme
    Qu’une flamme
    Toujours suit!

    La voix plus haute
    Semble un grelot.
    D’un nain qui saute
    C’est le galop.
    Il fuit, s’élance,
    Puis en cadence
    Sur un pied danse
    Au bout d’un flot.

    La rumeur approche.
    L’écho la redit.
    C’est comme la cloche
    D’un couvent maudit;
    Comme un bruit de foule,

Qui tonne et qui roule,
Et tantôt s’écroule,
Et tantôt grandit,

Dieu! la voix sépulcrale
Des Djinns!... Quel bruit ils font!
Fuyons sous la spirale
De l’escalier profond.
Déjà s’éteint ma lampe,
Et l’ombre de la rampe,
Qui le long du mur rampe,
Monte jusqu’au plafond.

C’est l’essaim des Djinns qui passe,
Et tourbillonne en sifflant!
Les ifs, que leur vol fracasse,
Craquent comme un pin brûlant.
Leur troupeau, lourd et rapide,
Volant dans l’espace vide,
Semble un nuage livide
Qui porte un éclair au flanc.

Ils sont tout près! - Tenons fermée
Cette salle, où nous les narguons.
Quel bruit dehors! Hideuse armée
De vampires et de dragons!
La poutre du toit descellée
Ploie ainsi qu’une herbe mouillée,
Et la vieille porte rouillée
Tremble, à déraciner ses gonds!

Cris de l’enfer! voix qui hurle et qui pleure!
L’horrible essaim, poussé par l’aquilon,
Sans doute, ô ciel! s’abat sur ma demeure.
Le mur fléchit sous le noir bataillon.
La maison crie et chancelle penchée,
Et l’on dirait que, du sol arrachée,

Ainsi qu’il chasse une feuille séchée,
Le vent la roule avec leur tourbillon!

Prophète! si ta main me sauve
De ces impurs démons des soirs,
J’irai prosterner mon front chauve
Devant tes sacrés encensoirs!
Fais que sur ces portes fidèles
Meure leur souffle d’étincelles,
Et qu’en vain l’ongle de leurs ailes
Grince et crie à ces vitraux noirs!

Ils sont passés! - Leur cohorte
S’envole, et fuit, et leurs pieds
Cessent de battre ma porte
De leurs coups multipliés.
L’air est plein d’un bruit de chaînes,
Et dans les forêts prochaines
Frissonnent tous les grands chênes,
Sous leur vol de feu pliés!

De leurs ailes lointaines
Le battement décroît,
Si confus dans les plaines,
Si faible, que l’on croit
Ouïr la sauterelle
Crier d’une voix grêle,
Ou pétiller la grêle
Sur le plomb d’un vieux toit.

D’étranges syllabes
Nous viennent encor; -
Ainsi, des Arabes
Quand sonne le cor,
Un chant sur la grève
Par instants s’élève,
Et l’enfant qui rêve

Fait des rêves d’or.

Les Djinns funèbres,
Fils du trépas,
Dans les ténèbres
Pressent leurs pas;
Leur essaim gronde:
Ainsi, profonde,
Murmure une onde
Qu’on ne voit pas.

Ce bruit vague
Qui s’endort,
C’est la vague
Sur le bord;
C’est la plainte
Presque éteinte
D’une sainte
Pour un mort.

On doute
La nuit...
J’écoute: -
Tout fuit,
Tout passe
L’espace
Efface
Le bruit.

XXIX

SULTAN ACHMET

Oh! permets, charmante fille, que j'enveloppe mon cou avec tes bras. HAFIZ.

À Juana la Grenadine,
Qui toujours chante et badine,
Sultan Achmet dit un jour:
— Je donnerais sans retour
Mon royaume pour Médine,
Médine pour ton amour.

— Fais-toi chrétien, roi sublime!
Car il est illégitime,
Le plaisir qu'on a cherché
Aux bras d'un Turc débauché.
J'aurais peur de faire un crime:
C'est bien assez du péché.

— Par ces perles dont la chaîne
Rehausse, ô ma souveraine,
Ton cou blanc comme le lait,
Je ferai ce qui te plaît,
Si tu veux bien que je prenne
Ton collier pour chapelet.

XXX

ROMANCE MAURESQUE

Dixó le: - dime, buen hombre,
Lo que preguntarte queria. ROMANCERO GENERAL.

Don Rodrigue est à la chasse.
Sans épée et sans cuirasse,
Un jour d'été, vers midi,
Sous la feuillée et sur l'herbe
Il s'assied, l'homme superbe,
Don Rodrigue le hardi.

La haine en feu le dévore.
Sombre, il pense au bâtard maure.
À son neveu Mudarra,
Dont ses complots sanguinaires
Jadis ont tué les frères,
Les sept infants de Lara.

Pour le trouver en campagne,
Il traverserait l'Espagne
De Figuère à Setuval.
L'un des deux mourrait sans doute.
En ce moment sur la route
Il passe un homme à cheval.

— Chevalier, chrétien ou maure,
Qui dors sous le sycomore,
Dieu te guide par la main!
— Que Dieu répande ses grâces
Sur toi, l'écuyer qui passes,
Qui passes par le chemin!

— Chevalier, chrétien ou maure,

Qui dors sous le sycomore,
Parmi l’herbe du vallon,
Dis ton nom, afin qu’on sache
Si tu portes le panache
D’un vaillant ou d’un félon.

— Si c’est là ce qui t’intrigue,
On m’appelle don Rodrigue,
Don Rodrigue de Lara,
Doña Sanche est ma soeur même.
Du moins, c’est à mon baptême
Ce qu’un prêtre déclara.

J’attends sous ce sycomore:
J’ai cherché d’Albe à Zamore
Ce Mudarra le bâtard,
Le fils de la renégate,
Qui commande une frégate
Du roi maure Aliatar.

Certe, à moins qu’il ne m’évite,
Je le reconnaîtrais vite:
Toujours il porte avec lui
Notre dague de famille;
Une agate au pommeau brille,
Et la lame est sans étui.

Oui, par mon âme chrétienne,
D’une autre main que la mienne
Ce mécréant ne mourra.
C’est le bonheur que je brigue...
— On t’appelle don Rodrigue,
Don Rodrigue de Lara?

Eh bien! Seigneur, le jeune homme
Qui te parle et qui te nomme,
C’est Mudarra le bâtard.

C’est le vengeur et le juge.
Cherche à présent un refuge! -
L’autre dit: — Tu viens bien tard!

— Moi, fils de la renégate,
Qui commande une frégate
Du roi maure Aliatar,
Moi, ma dague et ma vengeance,
Tous les trois d’intelligence,
Nous voici! — Tu viens bien tard!

— Trop tôt pour toi, don Rodrigue,
À moins qu’il ne te fatigue
De vivre... Ah! la peur t’émeut,
Ton front pâlit; rends, infâme,
À moi ta vie, et ton âme
À ton ange, s’il en veut!

Si mon poignard de Tolède
Et mon Dieu me sont en aide,
Regarde mes yeux ardents,
Je suis ton seigneur, ton maître,
Et je t’arracherai, traître,
Le souffle d’entre les dents!

Le neveu de doña Sanche
Dans ton sang enfin étanche
La soif qui le dévora.
Mon oncle, il faut que tu meures.
Pour toi plus de jours ni d’heures...!
— Mon bon neveu Mudarra,

Un moment! attends que j’aille
Chercher mon fer de bataille.
— Tu n’auras d’autres délais
Que celui qu’ont eu mes frères:
Dans les caveaux funéraires

Où tu les as mis, suis-les!

Si jusqu’à l’heure venue,
J’ai gardé ma lame nue,
C’est que je voulais, bourreau,
Que, vengeant la renégate,
Ma dague au pommeau d’agate
Eût ta gorge pour fourreau.

XXXI

GRENADE

Quien no ha vista á Sevilla
No ha visto á maravilla.

Soit lointaine, soit voisine,
Espagnole ou sarrasine,
Il n’est pas une cité
Qui dispute, sans folie,
À Grenade la jolie
La pomme de la beauté,
Et qui, gracieuse, étale
Plus de pompe orientale
Sous un ciel plus enchanté.

Cadix a les palmiers; Murcie a les oranges;
Jaén son palais goth aux tourelles étranges;
Agreda son couvent bâti par Saint Edmond;
Ségovie a l’autel dont on baise les marches,
Et l’aqueduc aux trois rangs d’arches
Qui lui porte un torrent pris au sommet d’un mont.

Llers a des tours; Barcelone
Au faîte d’une colonne
Lève un phare sur la mer;
Aux rois d’Aragon fidèle,
Dans leurs vieux tombeaux, Tudèle
Garde leur sceptre de fer;
Tolose a des forges sombres
Qui semblent, au sein des ombres,
Des soupiraux de l’enfer.

Le poisson qui rouvrit l’oeil mort du vieux Tobie
Se joue au fond du golfe où dort Fontarabie;

Alicante aux clochers mêle les minarets;
Compostelle a son saint; Cordoue aux maisons vieilles
A sa mosquée où l’oeil se perd dans les merveilles;
Madrid a le Manzanarès.

Bilbao, des flots couverte,
Jette une pelouse verte,
Sur les murs noirs et caducs;
Medina la chevalière,
Cachant sa pauvreté fière
Sous le manteau de ses ducs,
N’a rien que ses sycomores,
Car ses beaux ponts sont aux Maures,
Aux romains, ses aqueducs.

Valence a les clochers de ses trois cents églises;
L’austère Alcantara livre au souffle des brises
Les drapeaux turcs, pendus en foule à ses piliers;
Salamanque en riant s’assied sur trois collines,
S’endort au son des mandolines,
Et s’éveille en sursaut aux cris des écoliers.

Tortose est chère à saint Pierre;
Le marbre est comme la pierre
Dans la riche Puycerda;
De sa bastille octogone
Tuy se vante, et Tarragone
De ses murs qu’un roi fonda;
Le Douro coule à Zamore;
Tolède a l’alcazar maure,
Séville a la giralda.

Burgos de son chapitre étale la richesse;
Peñaflor est marquise, et Girone est duchesse;
Bivar est une nonne aux sévères atours;
Toujours prête au combat, la sombre Pampelune,
Avant de s’endormir aux rayons de la lune,

Ferme sa ceinture de tours.

Toutes ces villes d’Espagne
S’épandent dans la campagne
Ou hérissent la Sierra;
Toutes ont des citadelles
Dont sous des mains infidèles
Aucun beffroi ne vibra;
Toutes sur leurs cathédrales
Ont des clochers en spirales;
Mais Grenade a l’Alhambra.

L’Alhambra! l’Alhambra! palais que les Génies
Ont doré comme un rêve et rempli d’harmonies;
Forteresse aux créneaux festonnés et croulants,
Où l’on entend la nuit de magiques syllabes,
Quand la lune, à travers les mille arceaux arabes,
Sème les murs de trèfles blancs!

Grenade a plus de merveilles
Que n’a de graines vermeilles
Le beau fruit de ses vallons;
Grenade, la bien nommée,
Lorsque la guerre enflammée
Déroule ses pavillons,
Cent fois plus terrible éclate
Que la grenade écarlate
Sur le front des bataillons.

Il n’est rien de plus beau ni de plus vivant au monde;
Soit qu’à Vivataubin Vivaconlud réponde,
Avec son clair tambour de clochettes orné;
Soit que, se couronnant de feux comme un calife,
L’éblouissant Généralife
Élève dans la nuit son faîte illuminé.

Les clairons des Tours-Vermeilles

Sonnent comme les abeilles
Dont le vent chasse l’essaim;
Alcacava pour les fêtes
A des cloches toujours prêtes
À bourdonner dans son sein ,
Qui dans leurs tours africaines
Vont éveiller les dulcaynes
Du sonore Albaycin.

Grenade efface en tout ses rivales: Grenade
Chante plus mollement la molle sérénade;
Elle peint ses maisons de plus riches couleurs;
Et l’on dit que les vents suspendent leurs haleines
Quand par un soir d’été Grenade dans ses plaines
Répand ses flammes et ses fleurs.

L’Arabie est son aïeule.
Les Maures, pour elle seule,
Aventuriers hasardeux,
Joueraient l’Asie et l’Afrique;
Mais Grenade est catholique,
Grenade se raille d’eux;
Grenade, la belle ville,
Serait une autre Séville
S’il en pouvait être deux.

XXXII

LES BLEUETS

Si es verdad ó non, yo no lo he hy de ver,
Pero non lo quiero en olvido poner. JOAN LORENZO SEGURA DE ASTORGA
Si cela est vrai ou non, je n’ai pas à le voir ici,
mais je ne le veux pas mettre en oubli.

Tandis que l’étoile inodore
Que l’été mêle aux blonds épis,
Émaille de son bleu lapis
Les sillons que la moisson dore,
Avant que, de fleurs dépeuplés,
Les champs n’aient subi les faucilles,
Allez, allez, ô jeunes filles,
Cueillir des bleuets dans les blés!

Entre les villes andalouses,
Il n’en est pas qui sous le ciel
S’étende mieux que Peñafiel
Sur les gerbes et les pelouses;
Pas qui dans ses murs crénelés
Lève de plus fières bastilles...
Allez, allez, ô jeunes filles,
Cueillir des bleuets dans les blés!

Il n’est plus de cité chrétienne,
Pas de monastère à beffroi,
Chez le Saint-Père et chez le Roi,
Où, vers la Saint-Ambroise, il vienne
Plus de bon pèlerins hâlés,
Portant bourdon, gourde et coquilles...
Allez, allez, ô jeunes filles,
Cueillir des bleuets dans les blés!

Dans nul pays, les jeunes femmes,
Les soirs, lorsque l’on danse en rond,
N’ont plus de roses sur le front,
Et n’ont dans le coeur plus de flammes;
Jamais plus vifs et plus voilés
Regards n’ont lui sous les mantilles...
Allez, allez, ô jeunes filles,
Cueillir des bleuets dans les blés!

La perle de l’Andalousie,
Alice, était de Peñafiel,
Alice qu’en faisant son miel,
Pour fleur une abeille eût choisie.
Ces jours, hélas! sont envolés!
On la citait dans les familles...
Allez, allez, ô jeunes filles,
Cueillir des bleuets dans les blés!

Un étranger vint dans la ville,
Jeune, et parlant avec dédain.
Était-ce un Maure grenadin?
Un de Murcie ou de Séville?
Venait-il des bords désolés
Où Tunis a ses escadrilles...?
Allez, allez, ô jeunes filles,
Cueillir des bleuets dans les blés!

On ne savait. - La pauvre Alice
En fut aimée, et puis l’aima.
Le doux vallon du Xarama
De leur doux péché fut complice.
Le soir, sous les cieux étoilés,
Tous deux erraient par les charmilles...
Allez, allez, ô jeunes filles,
Cueillir des bleuets dans les blés!

La ville était lointaine et sombre;
Et la lune, douce aux amours,
Se levant derrière les tours
Et les clochers perdus dans l’ombre,
Des édifices dentelés
Découpait en noir les aiguilles...
Allez, allez, ô jeunes filles,
Cueillir des bleuets dans les blés!

Cependant, d’Alice jalouses,
En rêvant au bel étranger,
Sous l’arbre à soie et l’oranger
Dansaient les brunes Andalouses;
Les cors, aux guitares mêlés,
Animaient les joyeux quadrilles...
Allez, allez, ô jeunes filles,
Cueillir des bleuets dans les blés!

L’oiseau dort dans le lit de mousse
Que déjà menace l’autour;
Ainsi dormait dans son amour
Alice confiante et douce.
Le jeune homme aux cheveux bouclés,
C’était don Juan, roi des Castilles...
Allez, allez, ô jeunes filles,
Cueillir des bleuets dans les blés!

Or, c’est péril qu’aimer un prince.
Un jour, sur un noir palefroi
On la jeta de par le Roi;
On l’arracha de la province;
Un cloître sur ses jours troublés
De par le Roi ferma ses grilles...
Allez, allez, ô jeunes filles,
Cueillir des bleuets dans les blés!

XXXIII

FANTÔMES

Luenga es su noche, y cerrados
Estan sus ojos pesados.
Idos, idos en paz, vientos alados!
Longue est sa nuit, et fermés sont ses yeux lourds.
Allez, allez en paix, vents ailés!

I

Hélas! que j’en ai vu mourir de jeunes filles!
C’est le destin. Il faut une proie au trépas.
Il faut que l’herbe tombe au tranchant des faucilles;
Il faut que dans le bal les folâtres quadrilles
Foulent des roses sous leurs pas.

Il faut que l’eau s’épuise à courir les vallées;
Il faut que l’éclair brille, et brille peu d’instants;
Il faut qu’Avril jaloux brûle de ses gelées
Le beau pommier, trop fier de ses fleurs étoilées,
Neige odorante du printemps.

Oui, c’est la vie. Après le jour, la nuit livide.
Après tout, le réveil, infernal ou divin.
Autour du grand banquet siège une foule avide;
Mais bien des conviés laissent leur place vide,
Et se lèvent avant la fin.

II

Que j’en ai vu mourir! - l’une était rose et blanche;
L’autre semblait ouïr de célestes accords;
L’autre, faible, appuyait d’un bras son front qui penche,
Et, comme en s’envolant l’oiseau courbe la branche,

Son âme avait brisé son corps.

Une, pâle, égarée, en proie au noir délire,
Disait tout bas un nom dont nul ne se souvient;
Une s’évanouit, comme un chant sur la lyre;
Une autre en expirant avait le doux sourire
D’un jeune ange qui s’en revient.

Toutes fragiles fleurs, sitôt mortes que nées!
Alcyons engloutis avec leurs nids flottants!
Colombes, que le ciel au monde avait données!
Qui, de grâce, et d’enfance, et d’amour couronnées,
Comptaient leurs ans par les printemps!

Quoi, mortes! quoi, déjà, sous la pierre couchées!
Quoi! tant d’êtres charmants sans regard et sans voix!
Tant de flambeaux éteints! tant de fleurs arrachées...!
Oh! laissez-moi fouler les feuilles desséchées,
Et m’égarer au fond des bois!

Doux fantômes! c’est là, quand je rêve dans l’ombre,
Qu’ils viennent tour à tour m’entendre et me parler.
Un jour douteux me montre et me cache leur nombre;
À travers les rameaux et le feuillage sombre,
Je vois leurs yeux étinceler.

Mon âme est une soeur pour ces ombres si belles.
La vie et le tombeau pour nous n’ont plus de loi.
Tantôt j’aide leurs pas, tantôt je prends leurs ailes.
Vision ineffable où je suis mort comme elles,
Elles, vivantes comme moi!

Elles prêtent leur forme à toutes mes pensées.
Je les vois! je les vois! Elles me disent: viens!
Puis autour d’un tombeau dansent entrelacées;
Puis s’en vont lentement, par degrés éclipsées;
Alors je songe et je me souviens...

III

Une surtout. - Un ange, une jeune Espagnole! -
Blanches mains, sein gonflé de soupirs innocents,
Un oeil noir, où luisaient des regards de créole,
Et ce charme inconnu, cette fraîche auréole
Qui couronne un front de quinze ans!

Non, ce n'est point d'amour qu'elle est morte: pour elle,
L'amour n'avait encor ni plaisirs ni combats;
Rien ne faisait encor battre son coeur rebelle;
Quand tous en la voyant s'écriaient: qu'elle est belle!
Nul ne le lui disait tout bas.

Elle aimait trop le bal, c'est ce qui l'a tuée.
Le bal éblouissant! le bal délicieux!
Sa cendre encor frémit, doucement remuée,
Quand dans la nuit sereine, une blanche nuée
Danse autour du croissant des cieux.

Elle aimait trop le bal. - Quand venait une fête,
Elle y pensait trois jours, trois nuits elle en rêvait;
Et femmes, musiciens, danseurs que rien n'arrête,
Venaient dans son sommeil, troublant sa jeune tête,
Rire et bruire à son chevet.

Puis c'étaient des bijoux, des colliers, des merveilles!
Des ceintures de moire aux ondoyants reflets;
Des tissus plus légers que des ailes d'abeilles;
Des festons; des rubans, à remplir des corbeilles;
Des fleurs, à payer un palais!

La fête commencée, avec ses soeurs rieuses
Elle accourait, froissant l'éventail sous ses doigts;
Puis s'asseyait parmi les écharpes soyeuses,
Et son coeur éclairait en fanfares joyeuses,

Avec l’orchestre aux mille voix.

C’était plaisir de voir danser la jeune fille!
Sa basquine agitait ses paillettes d’azur;
Ses grands yeux noirs brillaient sous la noire mantille:
Telle une double étoile au front des nuits scintille
Sous les plis d’un nuage obscur.

Tout en elle était danse, et rire, et folle joie.
Enfant! - Nous l’admirions dans nos tristes loisirs;
Car ce n’est point au bal que le coeur se déploie:
La cendre y vole autour des tuniques de soie,
L’ennui sombre autour des plaisirs.

Mais elle, par la valse ou la ronde emportée,
Volait, et revenait, et ne respirait pas,
Et s’enivrait des sons de la flûte vantée,
Des fleurs, des lustres d’or, de la fête enchantée,
Du bruit des voix, du bruit des pas.

Quel bonheur de bondir, éperdue, en la foule,
De sentir par le bal ses sens multipliés,
Et de ne pas savoir si dans la nue on roule,
Si l’on chasse en fuyant la terre, ou si l’on foule
Un flot tournoyant sous ses pieds!

Mais hélas! il fallait, quand l’aube était venue,
Partir, attendre au seuil le manteau de satin.
C’est alors que souvent la danseuse ingénue
Sentit en frissonnant sur son épaule nue
Glisser le souffle du matin.

Quels tristes lendemains laisse le bal folâtre!
Adieu, parure, et danse, et rires enfantins!
Aux chansons succédait la toux opiniâtre,
Au plaisir rose et frais la fièvre au teint bleuâtre,
Aux yeux brillants les yeux éteints.

IV

Elle est morte. - À quinze ans, belle, heureuse, adorée!
Morte au sortir d’un bal qui nous mit en deuil,
Morte, hélas! et des bras d’une mère égarée
La mort aux froides mains la prit toute parée,
Pour l’endormir dans le cercueil.

Pour danser d’autres bals elle était encor prête,
Tant la mort fut pressée à prendre un corps si beau!
Et ces roses d’un jour qui couronnaient sa tête,
Qui s’épanouissaient la veille en une fête,
Se fanèrent dans un tombeau.

V

Sa pauvre mère! - hélas! de son sort ignorante,
Avoir mis tant d’amour sur ce frêle roseau,
Et si longtemps veillé son enfance souffrante,
Et passé tant de nuits à l’endormir pleurante
Toute petite en son berceau!

À quoi bon? - Maintenant la jeune trépassée,
Sous le plomb du cercueil, livide, en proie au ver,
Dort; et si, dans la tombe où nous l’avons laissée,
Quelque fête des morts la réveille glacée,
Par une belle nuit d’hiver,

Un spectre, au rire affreux, à sa morne toilette
Préside au lieu de mère, et lui dit: il est temps!
Et, glaçant d’un baiser sa lèvre violette,
Passe les doigts noueux de sa main de squelette
Sous ses cheveux longs et flottants.

Puis, tremblante, il la mène à la danse fatale,
Au choeur aérien dans l’ombre voltigeant;

Et sur l’horizon gris la lune est large et pâle,
Et l’arc-en-ciel des nuits teint d’un reflet d’opale
Le nuage aux franges d’argent.

VI

Vous toutes qu’à ses jeux le bal riant convie,
Pensez à l’Espagnole éteinte sans retour,
Jeunes filles! joyeuse et d’une main ravie,
Elle allait moissonnant les roses de la vie,
Beauté, plaisir, jeunesse, amour!

La pauvre enfant, de fête en fête promenée,
De ce bouquet charmant arrangeait les couleurs;
Mais qu’elle a passé vite, hélas! l’infortunée!
Ainsi qu’Ophelia par le fleuve entraînée,
Elle est morte en cueillant des fleurs!

XXXIV

MAZEPPA

à M. Louis Boulanger

Away! - Away! - BYRON, Mazeppa.
En avant! En avant!

I

Ainsi, quand Mazeppa, qui rugit et qui pleure,
A vu ses bras, ses pieds, ses flancs qu’un sabre effleure,
Tous ses membres liés
Sur un fougueux cheval, nourri d’herbes marines,
Qui fume, et fait jaillir le feu de ses narines
Et le feu de ses pieds;

Quand il s’est dans ses noeuds roulé comme un reptile,
Qu’il a bien réjoui de sa rage inutile
Ses bourreaux tout joyeux,
Et qu’il retombe enfin sur la croupe farouche,
La sueur sur le front, l’écume dans la bouche,
Et du sang dans les yeux,

Un cri part; et soudain voilà que par la plaine
Et l’homme et le cheval , emportés, hors d’haleine,
Sur les sables mouvants,
Seuls, emplissant de bruit un tourbillon de poudre
Pareil au nuage noir où serpente la foudre,
Volent avec les vents!

Ils vont. Dans les vallons comme un orage ils passent,
Comme ces ouragans qui dans les monts s’entassent,
Comme un globe de feu;
Puis déjà ne sont plus qu’un point noir dans la brume,

Puis s’effacent dans l’air comme un flocon d’écume
Au vaste océan bleu.

Ils vont. L’espace est grand. Dans le désert immense,
Dans l’horizon sans fin qui toujours recommence,
Ils se plongent tous deux.
Leur course comme un vol les emporte, et grands chênes,
Villes et tours, monts noirs liés en longues chaînes,
Tout chancelle autour d’eux.

Et si l’infortuné, dont la tête se brise,
Se débat, le cheval, qui devance la brise,
D’un bond plus effrayé,
S’enfonce au désert vaste, aride, infranchissable,
Qui devant eux s’étend, avec ses plis de sable,
Comme un manteau rayé.

Tout vacille et se peint de couleurs inconnues:
Il voit courir les bois, courir les larges nues,
Le vieux donjon détruit,
Les monts dont un rayon baigne les intervalles;
Il voit; et des troupeaux de fumantes cavales
Le suivent à grand bruit!

Et le ciel, où déjà les pas du soir s’allongent,
Avec ses océans de nuages où plongent
Des nuages encor,
Et son soleil qui fend leurs vagues de sa proue,
Sur son front ébloui tourne comme une roue
De marbre aux veines d’or!

Son oeil s’égare et luit, sa chevelure traîne,
Sa tête pend; son sang rougit la jaune arène,
Les buissons épineux;
Sur ses membres gonflés la corde se replie,
Et comme un long serpent resserre et multiplie
Sa morsure et ses noeuds.

Le cheval, qui ne sent ni le mors ni la selle,
Toujours fuit, et toujours son sang coule et ruisselle,
Sa chair tombe en lambeaux;
Hélas! voici déjà qu’aux cavales ardentes
Qui le suivaient, dressant leurs crinières pendantes,
Succèdent les corbeaux!

Les corbeaux, le grand-duc à l’oeil rond, qui s’effraie,
L’aigle effaré des champs de bataille, et l’orfraie,
Monstre au jour inconnu,
Les obliques hiboux, et le grand vautour fauve
Qui fouille au flanc des morts où son col rouge et chauve
Plonge comme un bras nu!

Tous viennent élargir la funèbre volée;
Tous quittent pour le suivre et l’yeuse isolée,
Et les nids du manoir.
Lui, sanglant, éperdu, sourd à leurs cris de joie,
Demande en les voyant qui donc là-haut déploie
Ce grand éventail noir.

La nuit descend lugubre, et sans robe étoilée.
L’essaim s’acharne, et suit, tel qu’une meute ailée,
Le voyageur fumant.
Entre le ciel et lui, comme un tourbillon sombre
Il les voit, puis les perd, et les entend dans l’ombre
Voler confusément.

Enfin, après trois jours d’une course insensée,
Après avoir franchi fleuves à l’eau glacée,
Steppes, forêts, déserts,
Le cheval tombe aux cris de mille oiseaux de proie,
Et son ongle de fer sur la pierre qu’il broie
Éteint ses quatre éclairs.

Voilà l’infortuné, gisant, nu, misérable,

Tout tacheté de sang, plus rouge que l’érable
Dans la saison des fleurs.
Le nuage d’oiseaux sur lui tourne et s’arrête;
Maint bec ardent aspire à ronger dans sa tête
Ses yeux brûlés de pleurs.

Eh bien! ce condamné qui hurle et qui se traîne,
Ce cadavre vivant, les tribus de l’Ukraine
Le feront prince un jour.
Un jour, semant les champs de morts sans sépultures,
Il dédommagera par de larges pâtures
L’orfraie et le vautour.

Sa sauvage grandeur naîtra de son supplice.
Un jour, des vieux hetmans il ceindra la pelisse,
Grand à l’oeil ébloui;
Et quand il passera, ces peuples de la tente,
Prosternés, enverront la fanfare éclatante
Bondir autour de lui!

II

Ainsi, lorsqu’un mortel, sur qui son dieu s’étale,
S’est vu lier vivant sur ta croupe fatale,
Génie, ardent coursier,
En vain il lutte, hélas! tu bondis, tu l’emportes
Hors du monde réel dont tu brises les portes
Avec tes pieds d’acier!

Tu franchis avec lui déserts, cimes chenues
Des vieux monts, et les mers, et, par delà les nues,
De sombres régions;
Et mille impurs esprits que ta course réveille
Autour du voyageur, insolente merveille,
Pressent leurs légions!

Il traverse d’un vol, sur tes ailes de flamme,

Tous les champs du possible, et les mondes de l’âme;
Boit au fleuve éternel;
Dans la nuit orageuse ou la nuit étoilée,
Sa chevelure, aux crins des comètes mêlée,
Flamboie au front du ciel.

Les six lunes d’Herschel, l’anneau du vieux Saturne,
Le pôle, arrondissant une aurore nocturne
Sur son front boréal,
Il voit tout; et pour lui ton vol, que rien ne lasse,
De ce monde sans borne à chaque instant déplace
L’horizon idéal.

Qui peut savoir, hormis les démons et les anges,
Ce qu’il souffre à te suivre, et quels éclairs étranges
À ses yeux reluiront,
Comme il sera brûlé d’ardentes étincelles,
Hélas! et dans la nuit combien de froides ailes
Viendront battre son front?

Il crie épouvanté, tu poursuis implacable.
Pâle, épuisé, béant, sous ton vol qui l’accable
Il ploie avec effroi;
Chaque pas que tu fais semble creuser sa tombe.
Enfin le terme arrive... il court, il vole, il tombe,
Et se relève roi!

XXXV

LE DANUBE EN COLÈRE

Admonet, et magna testatur voce per umbras, VIRGILE.

Belgrade et Semlin sont en guerre.
Dans son lit, paisible naguère,
Le vieillard Danube leur père
S’éveille au bruit de leur canon.
Il doute s’il rêve, il tressaille,
Puis entend gronder la bataille,
Et frappe dans ses mains d’écaille,
Et les appelle par leur nom.

“ Allons! la turque et la chrétienne!
Semlin! Belgrade! qu’avez-vous?
On ne peut, le ciel me soutienne!
Dormir un siècle, sans que vienne
Vous éveiller d’un bruit jaloux
Belgrade ou Semlin en courroux!

“ Hiver, été, printemps, automne,
Toujours votre canon qui tonne!
Bercé du courant monotone,
Je sommeillais dans mes roseaux;
Et, comme des louves marines
Jettent l’onde de leurs narines,
Voilà vos longues couleuvrines
Qui soufflent du feu sur mes eaux!

“ Ce sont des sorcières oisives
Qui vous mirent, pour rire un jour,
Face à face sur mes deux rives,
Comme au même plat deux convives,
Comme au front de la même tour

Une aire d’aigle, un nid d’autour.

“ Quoi! ne pouvez-vous vivre ensemble,
Mes filles? faut-il que je tremble
Du destin qui vous rassemble
Que pour vous haïr de plus près,
Quand vous pourriez, soeurs pacifiques,
Mirer dans mes eaux magnifiques,
Semlin, tes noirs clochers gothiques,
Belgrade, tes blancs minarets!

“ Mon flot, qui dans l’océan tombe,
Vous sépare en vain, large et clair;
Du haut du château qui surplombe
Vous vous unissez, et la bombe,
Entre vous courbant son éclair,
Vous trace un pont de feu dans l’air.

“ Trêve! taisez-vous, les deux villes!
Je m’ennuie aux guerres civiles.
Nous sommes vieux, soyons tranquilles.
Dormons à l’ombre des bouleaux.
Trêve à ces débats de familles!
Hé! sans le bruit de vos bastilles,
N’ai-je donc point assez, mes filles,
De l’assourdissement des flots?

“ Une croix, un croissant fragile
Changent en enfer ce beau lieu?
Vous échangez la bombe agile
Pour le koran et l’évangile?
C’est perdre le bruit et le feu:
Je le sais, moi qui fus un dieu!

“ Vos dieux m’ont chassé de leur sphère
Et dégradé, c’est leur affaire!
L’ombre est le bien que je préfère,

Pourvu qu’ils gardent leurs palais,
Et ne viennent pas sur mes plages
Déracines mes verts feuillages,
Et m’écraser mes coquillages
Sous leurs bombes et leurs boulets!

“ De leurs abominables cultes
Ces inventions sont le fruit.
De mon temps point de ces tumultes.
Si la pierre des catapultes
Battait les cités jour et nuit,
C’était sans fumée et sans bruit.

“ Voyez Ulm, votre soeur jumelle:
Tenez-vous en repos comme elle.
Que le fil des rois se démêle,
Tournez vos fuseaux, et riez.
Voyez Bude, votre voisine;
Voyez Dristra la sarrasine!
Que dirait l’Etna si Messine
Faisait tout ce bruit à ses pieds?

“ Semlin est la plus querelleuse:
Elle a toujours les premiers torts.
Croyez-vous que mon eau houleuse,
Suivant sa pente rocailleuse,
N’ait rien à faire entre ses bords
Qu’à porter à l’Euxin vos morts?

“ Vos mortiers ont tant de fumée
Qu’il fait nuit dans ma grotte aimée,
D’éclats d’obus toujours semée!
Du jour j’ai perdu le tableau;
Le soir, la vapeur de leur bouche
Me couvre d’une ombre farouche,
Quand je cherche à voir de ma couche
Les étoiles à travers l’eau.

“ Soeurs, à vous cribler de blessures
Espérez-vous un grand renom?
Vos palais deviendront masures.
Ah! qu’en vos noires embrasures
La guerre se taise, ou sinon
J’éteindrai, moi, votre canon.

“ Car je suis le Danube immense.
Malheur à vous, si je commence!
Je vous souffre ici par clémence.
Si je voulais, de leur prison,
Mes flots lâchés dans les campagnes,
Emportant vous et vos compagnes,
Comme une chaîne de montagnes
Se lèveraient à l’horizon! “

Certe, on peut parler de la sorte
Quand c’est au canon qu’on répond;
Quand des rois on baigne la porte,
Lorsqu’on est Danube, et qu’on porte,
Comme l’Euxin et l’Hellespont,
De grands vaisseaux au triple pont;

Lorsqu’on ronge cent ponts de pierres,
Qu’on traverse les huit Bavières,
Qu’on reçoit soixante rivières
Et qu’on les dévore en fuyant;
Qu’on a, comme une mer, sa houle;
Quand sur le globe on se déroule
Comme un serpent, et quand on coule
De l’occident à l’orient!

XXXVI

RÊVERIE

Lo giorno se n’andava, e l’aer bruno Toglieva gli animai che sono’n terra Dalle fatiche loro. DANTE.

Oh! laissez-moi! c’est l’heure où l’horizon qui fume
Cache un front inégal sous un cercle de brume;
L’heure où l’astre géant rougit et disparaît.
Le grand bois jaunissant dore seul la colline:
On dirait qu’en ces jours où l’automne décline,
Le soleil et la pluie ont rouillé la forêt.

Oh! qui fera surgir soudain, qui fera naître,
Là-bas, - tandis que seul je rêve à la fenêtre
Et que l’ombre s’amasse au fond du corridor, -
Quelque ville mauresque, éclatante, inouïe,
Qui, comme la fusée en gerbe épanouie,
Déchire ce brouillard avec ses flèches d’or!

Qu’elle vienne inspirer, ranimer, ô génies!
Mes chansons, comme un ciel d’automne rembrunies,
Et jeter dans mes yeux son magique reflet,
Et longtemps, s’éteignant en rumeurs étouffées,
Avec les mille tours de ses palais de fées,
Brumeuse, denteler l’horizon violet!

XXXVII

EXTASE

Et j’entendis une grande voix. Apocalypse.

J’étais seul près des flots, par une nuit d’étoiles.
Pas un nuage aux cieux, sur les mers pas de voiles.
    Mes yeux plongeaient plus loin que le monde réel.
    Et les bois, et les monts, et toute la nature,
    Semblaient interroger dans un confus murmure
    Les flots des mers, les feux du ciel.

    Et les étoiles d’or, légions infinies,
    À voix haute, à voix basse, avec mille harmonies,
    Disaient, en inclinant leurs couronnes de feu;
    Et les flots bleus, que rien ne gouverne et n’arrête,
    Disaient, en recourbant l’écume de leur crête:
    — C’est le Seigneur, le Seigneur Dieu!

XXXVIII

LE POÈTE AU CALIFE

Tous les habitants de la terre sont devant lui comme un néant; il fait tout ce qui lui plaît;

et nul ne peut résister à sa main puissante, ni lui dire: Pourquoi avez-vous fait ainsi? DANIEL.

Ô sultan Noureddin, calife aimé de Dieu!
Tu gouvernes, seigneur, l’empire du milieu,
De la mer Rouge au fleuve Jaune.
Les rois des nations, vers ta face tournés,
Pavent, silencieux, de leurs fronts prosternés
Le chemin qui mène à ton trône.

Ton sérail est très grand, tes jardins sont très beaux.
Tes femmes ont des yeux vifs comme des flambeaux,
Qui pour toi seul percent leurs voiles.
Lorsque, astre impérial, aux peuples pleins d’effroi
Tu luis, tes trois cents fils brillent autour de toi
Comme ton cortège d’étoiles.

Ton front porte une aigrette et ceint le turban vert.
Tu peux voir folâtrer dans leur bain, entrouvert
Sous la fenêtre où tu te penches,
Les femmes de Madras plus douces qu’un parfum,
Et les filles d’Alep qui sur leur beau sein brun
Ont des colliers de perles blanches.

Ton sabre large et nu semble en ta main grandir.
Toujours dans la bataille on le voit resplendir,
Sans trouver turban qui le rompe,
Au point où la mêlée a de plus noirs détours,
Où les grands éléphants, entrechoquant leurs tours,
Prennent des chevaux dans leur trompe.

Une fée est cachée en tout ce que tu vois.
Quand tu parles, calife, on dirait que ta voix
Descend d’un autre monde au nôtre;
Dieu lui-même t’admire, et de félicités
Emplit la coupe d’or que tes jours enchantés,
Joyeux, se passent l’un à l’autre.

Mais souvent dans ton coeur, radieux Noureddin,
Une triste pensée apparaît, et soudain
Glace ta grandeur taciturne:
Telle en plein jour, parfois, sous un soleil de feu,
La lune, astre des morts, blanche au fond d’un ciel bleu,
Montre à demi son front nocturne.

XXXIX

BOUNABERDI

Grand comme le monde.

Souvent Bounaberdi, sultan des Francs d’Europe,
Que, comme un noir manteau, le semoun enveloppe,
Monte, géant lui-même, au front d’un mont géant,
D’où son regard, errant sur le sable et sur l’onde,
Embrasse d’un coup d’oeil les deux moitiés du monde,
Gisantes à ses pieds dans l’abîme béant.

Il est seul et debout sur ce sublime faîte.
À sa droite couché, le désert qui le fête
D’un nuage de poudre importune ses yeux;
À sa gauche, la mer, dont jadis il fut l’hôte,
Élève jusqu’à lui sa voix profonde et haute,
Comme aux pieds de son maître aboie un chien joyeux.

Et le vieil empereur, que tour à tour réveille
Ce nuage à ses yeux, ce bruit à son oreille,
Rêve, et, comme à l’amante on voit songer l’amant,
Croit que c’est une armée, invisible et sans nombre,
Qui fait cette poussière et ce bruit pour son ombre,
Et sous l’horizon gris passe éternellement!

PRIÈRE

Oh! quand tu reviendras rêver sur la montagne,
Bounaberdi! regarde un peu dans la campagne
Ma tente qui blanchit dans les sables grondants,
Car je suis libre et pauvre, un Arabe du Caire,
Et quand j’ai dit: Allah! mon bon cheval de guerre
Vole, et sous sa paupière a deux charbons ardents!

XL

LUI

J’étais géant alors, et haut de cent coudées. BUONAPARTE.

I

Toujours lui! lui partout! - ou brûlante ou glacée,
Son image sans cesse ébranle ma pensée.
Il verse à mon esprit le souffle créateur.
Je tremble, et dans ma bouche abondent les paroles
Quand son nom gigantesque, entouré d’auréoles,
Se dresse dans mon vers de toute sa grandeur.

Là, je le vois, guidant l’obus aux bonds rapides;
Là, massacrant le peuple au nom des régicides;
Là, soldat, aux tribuns arrachant leurs pouvoirs;
Là, consul jeune et fier, amaigri par des veilles
Que des rêves d’empire emplissaient de merveilles,
Pâle sous ses longs cheveux noirs.

Puis, empereur puissant, dont la tête s’incline,
Gouvernant un combat du haut de la colline,
Promettant une étoile à ses soldats joyeux,
Faisant signe aux canons qui vomissent les flammes,
De son âme à la guerre armant six cent mille âmes,
Grave et serein, avec un éclair dans les yeux.

Puis, pauvre prisonnier, qu’on raille et qu’on tourmente,
Croisant ses bras oisifs sur son sein qui fermente,
En proie aux geôliers vils comme un vil criminel,
Vaincu, chauve, courbant son front noir de nuages,
Promenant sur un roc où passent les orages
Sa pensée, orage éternel.

Qu’il est grand, là surtout! quand, puissance brisée,
Des porte-clefs anglais misérable risée,
Au sacre du malheur il retrempe ses droits;
Tient au bruit de ses pas deux mondes en haleine,
Et mourant de l’exil, gêné dans Sainte-Hélène,
Manque d’air dans la cage où l’exposent les rois!

Qu’il est grand à cette heure, où, prêt à voir Dieu même,
Son oeil qui s’éteint roule une larme suprême!
Il évoque à sa mort sa vieille armée en deuil,
Se plaint à ses guerriers d’expirer solitaire,
Et, prenant pour linceul son manteau militaire,
Du lit de camp passe au cercueil!

II

À Rome, où du Sénat hésite le conclave,
À l’Elbe, aux monts blanchis de neige ou noirs de lave,
Au menaçant Kremlin, à l’Alhambra riant,
Il est partout! - Au Nil je le retrouve encore.
L’Égypte resplendit des feux de son aurore;
Son astre impérial se lève à l’orient.

Vainqueur, enthousiaste, éclatant de prestiges,
Prodige, il étonna la terre des prodiges.
Les vieux scheiks vénéraient l’émir jeune et prudent;
Le peuple redoutait ses armes inouïes;
Sublime, il apparut aux tribus éblouies
Comme un Mahomet d’occident.

Leur féerie a déjà réclamé son histoire.
La tente de l’Arabe est pleine de sa gloire.
Tout Bédouin libre était son hardi compagnon;
Les petits enfants, l’oeil tourné vers nos rivages,
Sur un tambour français règlent leurs pas sauvages,
Et les ardents chevaux hennissent à son nom.

Parfois il vient, porté sur l’ouragan numide,
Prenant pour piédestal la grande pyramide,
Contempler les déserts, sablonneux océans;
Là, son ombre, éveillant le sépulcre sonore,
Comme pour la bataille y ressuscite encore
Les quarante siècles géants.

Il dit: debout! soudain chaque siècle se lève,
Ceux-ci portant le sceptre et ceux-là ceints du glaive,
Satrapes, pharaons, mages, peuple glacé.
Immobiles, poudreux, muets, sa voix les compte;
Tous semblent, adorant son front qui les surmonte,
Faire à ce roi des temps une cour du passé.

Ainsi tout, sous les pas de l’homme ineffaçable,
Tout devient monument; il passe sur le sable,
Mais qu’importe qu’Assur de ses flots soit couvert,
Que l’Aquilon sans cesse y fatigue son aile,
Son pied colossal laisse une trace éternelle
Sur le front mouvant du désert.

III

Histoire, poésie, il joint du pied vos cimes.
Éperdu, je ne puis dans ces mondes sublimes
Remuer rien de grand sans toucher à son nom;
Oui, quand tu m’apparais, pour le culte ou le blâme,
Les chants volent pressés sur mes lèvres de flamme,
Napoléon! soleil dont je suis le Memnon!

Tu domines notre âge; ange ou démon, qu’importe!
Ton aigle dans son vol, haletants, nous emporte.
L’oeil même qui te fuit te retrouve partout.
Toujours dans nos tableaux tu jettes ta grande ombre;
Toujours Napoléon, éblouissant et sombre,
Sur le seuil du siècle est debout.

Ainsi, quand du Vésuve explorant le domaine,
De Naple à Portici l’étranger se promène,
Lorsqu’il trouble, rêveur, de ses pas importuns,
Ischia, de ses fleurs embaumant l’onde heureuse
Dont le bruit, comme un chant de sultane amoureuse,
Semble une voix qui vole au milieu des parfums;

Qu’il hante de Paestum l’auguste colonnade;
Qu’il écoute à Pouzzol la vive sérénade
Chantant la tarentelle au pied d’un mur toscan;
Qu’il éveille en passant cette cité momie,
Pompéi, corps gisant d’une ville endormie,
Saisie un jour par le volcan;

Qu’il erre au Pausilippe avec la barque agile
D’où le brun marinier chante Tasse à Virgile;
Toujours, sous l’arbre vert, sur les lits de gazon,
Toujours il voit, du sein des mers ou des prairies,
Du haut des caps, du bord des presqu’îles fleuries,
Toujours le noir géant qui fume à l’horizon!

XLI

NOVEMBRE

Je lui dis: la rose du jardin, comme tu sais, dure peu; et la saison des roses est bien vite écoulée. SADI.

Quand l’Automne, abrégeant les jours qu’elle dévore,
Éteint leurs soirs de flamme et glace leur aurore,
Quand Novembre de brume inonde le ciel bleu,
Que le bois tourbillonne et qu’il neige des feuilles,
Ô ma muse! en mon âme alors tu te recueilles,
Comme un enfant transi qui s’approche du feu.

Devant le sombre hiver de Paris qui bourdonne,
Ton soleil d’orient s’éclipse et s’abandonne,
Ton beau rêve d’Asie avorte, et tu ne vois,
Sous tes yeux, que la rue au bruit accoutumée,
Brouillard à ta fenêtre, et longs fleuves de fumée
Qui baignent en fuyant l’angle noirci des toits.

Alors s’en vont en foule et sultans et sultanes,
Pyramides, palmiers, galères capitanes,
Et le tigre vorace, et le chameau frugal,
Djinns au vol furieux, danses des bayadères,
L’Arabe qui se penche au cou des dromadaires,
Et la fauve girafe au galop inégal!

Alors, éléphants blancs chargés de femmes brunes,
Cités aux dômes d’or où les mois sont des lunes,
Imans de Mahomet, mages, prêtres de Bel,
Tout fuit, tout disparaît: - plus de minaret maure,
Plus de sérail fleuri, plus d’ardente Gomorrhe
Qui jette un reflet rouge au front noir de Babel!

C’est Paris, c’est l’hiver. - À ta chanson confuse

Odalisques, émirs, pachas, tout se refuse.
Dans ce vaste Paris le klephte est à l’étroit;
Le Nil déborderait; les roses du Bengale
Frissonnent dans ces champs où se tait la cigale;
À ce soleil brumeux les Péris auraient froid.

Pleurant ton Orient, alors, muse ingénue,
Tu viens à moi, honteuse, et seule, et presque nue.
— N’as-tu pas, me dis-tu, dans ton coeur jeune encor
Quelque chose à chanter, ami? car je m’ennuie
À voir ta blanche vitre où ruisselle la pluie,
Moi qui dans mes vitraux avais un soleil d’or!

Puis, tu prends mes deux mains dans tes mains diaphanes,
Et nous nous asseyons, et loin des yeux profanes,
Entre mes souvenirs je t’offre les plus doux,
Mon jeune âge, et ses jeux, et l’école mutine,
Et les serments sans fin de la vierge enfantine,
Aujourd’hui mère heureuse aux bras d’un autre époux.

Je te raconte comment, aux Feuillantines,
Jadis tintaient pour moi les cloches argentines;
Comment, jeune et sauvage, errait ma liberté,
Et qu’à dix ans, parfois, resté seul à la brune,
Rêveur, es yeux cherchaient les deux yeux de la lune,
Comme la fleur qui s’ouvre aux tièdes nuits d’été.

Puis tu me vois du pied pressant l’escarpolette
Qui d’un vieux marronnier fait crier le squelette,
Et vole, de ma mère éternelle terreur!
Puis je te dis les noms de mes amis d’Espagne,
Madrid, et son collège où l’ennui t’accompagne,
Et nos combats d’enfants pour le grand empereur!

Puis encor mon bon père, ou quelque jeune fille
Morte à quinze ans, à l’âge où l’oeil s’allume et brille.
Mais surtout tu te plais aux premières amours,

Frais papillons dont l’aile, en fuyant rajeunie,
Sous le doigt qui la fixe est si vite ternie,
Essaim doré qui n’a qu’un jour dans tous nos jours!

LES FEUILLES D’AUTOMNE

‘Autumn Leaves’ is a collection of poems published in 1831. It includes in particular six well known poems called ‘Soleils couchants’.

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LES FEUILLES D’AUTOMNE

Préface

Le moment politique est grave: personne ne le conteste, et l’auteur de ce livre moins que personne. Au dedans, toutes les solutions sociales remises en question; toutes les membrures du corps politique tordues, refondues ou reforgées dans la fournaise d’une révolution, sur l’enclume sonore des journaux; le vieux mot pairie, jadis presque aussi reluisant que le mot royauté, qui se transforme et change de sens; le retentissement perpétuel de la tribune sur la presse et de la presse sur la tribune; l’émeute qui fait la morte. Au dehors, çà et là , sur la face de l’Europe, des peuples tout entiers qu’on assassine, qu’on déporte en masse ou qu’on met aux fers, l’Irlande dont on fait un cimetière, l’Italie dont on fait un bagne, la Sibérie qu’on peuple avec la Pologne; partout d’ailleurs, dans les états même les plus paisibles, quelque chose de vermoulu qui se disloque, et, pour les oreilles attentives, le bruit sourd que font les révolutions, encore enfouies dans la sape, en poussant sous tous les royaumes de l’Europe leurs galeries souterraines, ramifications de la grande révolution centrale dont le cratère est Paris. Enfin, au dehors comme au dedans, les croyances en lutte, les consciences en travail; de nouvelles religions, chose sérieuse! qui bégayent des formules, mauvaises d’un côté, bonnes de l’autre; les vieilles religions qui font peau neuve; Rome, la cité de la foi, qui va se redresser peut-être à la hauteur de Paris, la cité de l’intelligence; les théories, les imaginations et les systèmes aux prises de toutes parts avec le vrai; la question de l’avenir déjà explorée et sondée comme celle du passé. Voilà où nous en sommes au mois de novembre 1831.

Sans doute, en un pareil moment, au milieu d’un si orageux conflit de toutes les choses et de tous les hommes, en présence de ce concile tumultueux de toutes les idées, de toutes les croyances, de toutes les erreurs, occupées à rédiger et à débattre en discussion publique la formule de l’humanité au dix-neuvième siècle, c’est folie de publier un volume de pauvres vers désintéressés. Folie! pourquoi?

L’art, et l’auteur de ce livre n’a jamais varié dans cette pensée, l’art a sa loi qu’il suit, comme le reste a la sienne. Parce que la terre tremble, est-ce une raison pour qu’il ne marche pas? Voyez le seizième siècle. C’est une immense époque pour la société humaine, mais c'est une immense époque pour l'art. C'est le passage de l'unité religieuse et politique à la liberté de conscience et de cité, de l'orthodoxie au schisme, de la discipline à l'examen, de la grande synthèse sacerdotale qui a fait le moyen-âge à l'analyse philosophique qui va le dissoudre; c'est tout cela; et c'est aussi le tournant, magnifique et éblouissant de perspectives sans nombre, de l'art gothique à l'art classique. Ce n'est partout, sur le sol de la vieille Europe, que guerres religieuses, guerres civiles, guerres pour un dogme, guerres pour un sacrement, guerres pour une idée, de peuple à peuple, de roi à roi, d'homme à homme, que cliquetis d'épées toujours tirées et de docteurs toujours irrités, que commotions politiques, que chutes et écroulements des choses anciennes, que bruyant et sonore avènement des nouveautés; en même temps, ce n'est dans l'art que chefs-d'œuvre. On convoque la diète de Worms, mais on peint la chapelle Sixtine. Il y a Luther, mais il y a Michel-Ange.

Ce n'est donc pas une raison, parce que aujourd'hui d'autres vieilleries croulent à leur tour autour de nous, et remarquons en passant que Luther est dans les vieilleries et que Michel-Ange n'y est pas, ce n'est pas une raison parce qu'à leur tour aussi d'autres nouveautés surgissent dans ces décombres, pour que l'art, cette chose éternelle, ne continue pas de verdoyer et de florir entre la ruine d'une société qui n'est plus et l'ébauche d'une société qui n'est pas encore.

Parce que la tribune aux harangues regorge de Démosthènes, parce que les rostres sont encombrés de Cicérons, parce que nous avons trop de Mirabeaux, ce n'est pas une raison pour que nous n'ayons pas, dans quelque coin obscur, un poëte. Il est donc tout simple, quel que soit le tumulte de la place publique, que l'art persiste, que l'art s'entête, que l'art se reste fidèle à lui-même, tenax propositi. Car la poésie ne s'adresse pas seulement au sujet de telle monarchie, au sénateur de telle oligarchie, au citoyen de telle république, au natif de telle nation; elle s'adresse à l'homme, à l'homme tout entier. A l'adolescent, elle parle de l'amour; au père, de la famille; au vieillard, du passé; et, quoi qu'on fasse, quelles que soient les révolutions futures, soit qu'elles prennent les sociétés caduques aux entrailles, soit qu'elles leur écorchent seulement l'épiderme, à travers tous les changements politiques possibles, il y aura toujours des enfants, des mères, des jeunes filles, des vieillards, des hommes enfin, qui aimeront, qui se réjouiront, qui souffriront. C'est à eux que va la poésie. Les révolutions, ces glorieux changements d’âge de l’humanité, les révolutions transforment tout, excepté le cœur humain. Le cœur humain est comme la terre; on peut semer, on peut planter, on peut bâtir ce qu’on veut à sa surface; mais il n’en continuera pas moins à produire ses verdures, ses fleurs, ses fruits naturels; mais jamais pioches ni sondes ne le troubleront à de certaines profondeurs; mais, de même qu’elle sera toujours la terre, il sera toujours le cœur humain; la base de l’art, comme elle de la nature.

Pour que l’art fût détruit, il faudrait donc commencer par détruire le cœur humain.

Ici se présente une objection d’une autre espèce: - Sans contredit, dans le moment même le plus critique d’une crise politique, un pur ouvrage d’art peut apparaître à l’horizon; mais toutes les passions, toutes les attentions, toutes les intelligences ne seront-elles pas trop absorbées par l’œuvre sociale qu’elles élaborent en commun, pour que le lever de cette sereine étoile de poésie fasse tourner les yeux à la foule? Ceci n’est plus qu’une question de second ordre, la question de succès, la question du libraire et non du poëte. Le fait répond d’ordinaire oui ou non aux questions de ce genre, et, au fond, il importe peu. Sans doute il y a des moments où les affaires matérielles de la société vont mal, où le courant ne les porte pas, où, accrochées à tous les accidents politiques qui se rencontrent chemin faisant, elles se gênent, s’engorgent, se barrent et s’embarrassent les unes dans les autres. Mais qu’est-ce que cela fait? D’ailleurs, parce que le vent, comme on dit, n’est pas à la poésie, ce n’est pas un motif pour que la poésie ne prenne pas son vol. Tout au contraire des vaisseaux, les oiseaux ne volent bien que contre le vent. Or la poésie tient de l’oiseau. Musa ales, dit un ancien.

Et c’est pour cela même qu’elle est plus belle et plus forte, risquée au milieu des orages politiques. Quand on sent la poésie d’une certaine faon, on l’aime mieux habitant la montagne et la ruine, planant sur l’avalanche, bâtissant son aire dans la tempête, qu’en fuite vers un perpétuel printemps. On l’aime mieux aigle qu’hirondelle. Hâtons-nous de déclarer ici, car il en est peut-être temps, que dans tout ce que l’auteur de ce livre vient de dire pour expliquer l’opportunité d’un volume de véritable poésie qui apparaîtrait dans un moment où il y a tant de prose dans les esprits, et à cause de cette prose même, il est très loin d’avoir voulu faire la moindre allusion à son propre ouvrage. Il en sent l’insuffisance et l’indigence tout le premier. L’artiste, comme l’auteur le comprend, qui prouve la vitalité de l’art au milieu d’une révolution, le poëte qui fait acte de poésie entre deux émeutes, est un grand homme, un génie, un œil comme dit admirablement la métaphore grecque. L’auteur n’a jamais prétendu à la splendeur de ces titres, au-dessus desquels il n’y a rien. Non; s’il publie en ce mois de novembre 1831 Les Feuilles d’Automne, c’est que le contraste entre la tranquillité de ces vers et l’agitation fébrile des esprits lui a paru curieux à voir au grand jour. Il ressent, en abandonnant ce livre inutile au flot populaire qui emporte tant d’autres choses meilleures, un peu de ce mélancolique plaisir qu’on éprouve à jeter une fleur dans un torrent, et à voir ce qu’elle devient.

Qu’on lui passe une image un peu ambitieuse, le volcan d’une révolution était ouvert devant ses yeux. Le volcan l’a tenté. Il s’y précipite. Il sait fort bien du reste qu’Empédocle n’est pas un grand homme, et qu’il n’est resté de lui que sa chaussure.

II laisse donc aller ce livre à sa destinée, quelle qu’elle soit, liber, ibis in urbem, et demain il se tournera d’un autre côté. Qu’est-ce d’ailleurs que ces pages qu’il livre ainsi, au hasard, au premier vent qui en voudra? Des feuilles tombées, des feuilles mortes, comme toutes feuilles d’automne. Ce n’est point là de la poésie de tumulte et de bruit; ce sont des vers sereins et paisibles, des vers comme tout le monde en fait ou en rêve, des vers de la famille, du foyer domestique, de la vie privée; des vers de l’intérieur de l’âme. C’est un regard mélancolique et résigné, jeté çà et là sur ce qui est, surtout sur ce qui a été. C’est l’écho de ces pensées, souvent inexprimables, qu’éveillent confusément dans notre esprit les mille objets de la création qui souffrent ou qui languissent autour de nous, une fleur qui s’en va, une étoile qui tombe, un soleil qui se couche, une église sans toit, une rue pleine d’herbe; ou l’arrivée imprévue d’un ami de collège presque oublié, quoique toujours aimé dans un repli obscur du cœur; ou la contemplation de ces hommes à volonté forte qui brisent le destin ou se font briser par lui; ou le passage d’un de ces êtres faibles qui ignorent l’avenir, tantôt un enfant, tantôt un roi. Ce sont enfin, sur la vanité des projets et des espérances, sur l’amour à vingt ans, sur l’amour à trente ans, sur ce qu’il y a de triste dans le bonheur, sur cette infinité de choses douloureuses dont se composent nos années, ce sont de ces élégies comme le cœur du poëte en laisse sans cesse écouler par toutes les fêlures que lui font les secousses de la vie. Il y a deux mille ans que Térence disait:

Plenus rimarum sum; hac atque illac

Perfluo.

C’est maintenant le lieu de répondre à la question des personnes qui ont bien voulu demander à l’auteur si les deux ou trois odes inspirées par les événements contemporains, qu’il a publiées à différentes époques depuis dix-huit mois, seraient comprises dans Les Feuilles d’automne. Non. Il n’y a point ici place pour cette poésie qu’on appelle politique et qu’il voudrait qu’on appelât historique. Ces poésies véhémentes et passionnées auraient troublé le calme et l’unité de ce volume. Elles font d’ailleurs partie d’un recueil de poésie politique, que l’auteur tient en réserve. Il attend pour le publier un moment plus littéraire.

Ce que sera ce recueil, quelles sympathies et quelles antipathies l’inspireront, on peut en juger, si l’on en est curieux, par la pièce XL du livre que nous mettons au jour. Cependant, dans la position indépendante, désintéressée et laborieuse où l’auteur a voulu rester, dégagé de toute haine comme de toute reconnaissance politique, ne devant rien à aucun de ceux qui sont puissants aujourd’hui, prêt à se laisser reprendre tout ce qu’on aurait pu lui laisser par indifférence ou par oubli, il croit avoir le droit de dire d’avance que ses vers seront ceux d’un homme honnête, simple et sérieux, qui veut toute liberté, toute amélioration, tout progrès, et en même temps toute précaution, tout ménagement et toute mesure; qui n’a plus, il est vrai, la même opinion qu’il y a dix ans sur ces choses variables qui constituent les questions politiques, mais qui, dans ses changements de conviction, s’est toujours laissé conseiller par sa conscience, jamais par son intérêt. Il répétera en outre ici ce qu’il a déjà dit ailleurs et ce qu’il ne se lassera jamais de dire et de prouver: que, quelle que soit sa partialité passionnée pour les peuples dans l’immense querelle qui s’agite au dix-neuvième siècle entre eux et les rois, jamais il n’oubliera quelles ont été les opinions, les crédulités, et même les erreurs de sa première jeunesse. Il n’attendra jamais qu’on lui rappelle qu’il a été, à dix-sept ans, stuartiste, jacobite et cavalier; qu’il a presque aimé la Vendée avant la France; que si son père a été un des premiers volontaires de la grande république, sa mère, pauvre fille de quinze ans, en fuite à travers le Bocage, a été une brigande, comme madame de Bonchamp et madame de Larochejaquelein. Il n’insultera pas la race tombée, parce qu’il est de ceux qui ont eu foi en elle et qui, chacun pour sa part et selon son importance, avaient cru pouvoir répondre d’elle à la France. D’ailleurs, quelles que soient les fautes, quels que soient même les crimes, c’est le cas plus que jamais de prononcer le nom de Bourbon avec précaution, gravité et respect, maintenant que le vieillard qui a été le roi n’a plus sur la tête que des cheveux blancs.

Paris, 24 novembre 1831.

I

Ce siècle avait deux ans!

Data fata secutus. DEVISE DES SAINT-JOHN

Ce siècle avait deux ans! Rome remplaçait Sparte,
Déjà Napoléon perçait sous Bonaparte,
Et du premier consul, déjà, par maint endroit,
Le front de l’empereur brisait le masque étroit.
Alors dans Besançon, vieille ville espagnole,
Jeté comme la graine au gré de l’air qui vole,
Naquit d’un sang breton et lorrain à la fois
Un enfant sans couleur, sans regard et sans voix;
Si débile qu’il fut, ainsi qu’une chimère,
Abandonné de tous, excepté de sa mère,
Et que son cou ployé comme un frêle roseau
Fit faire en même temps sa bière et son berceau.
Cet enfant que la vie effaçait de son livre,
Et qui n’avait pas même un lendemain à vivre,
C’est moi. -
Je vous dirai peut-être quelque jour
Quel lait pur, que de soins, que de voeux, que d’amour,
Prodigués pour ma vie en naissant condamnée,
M’ont fait deux fois l’enfant de ma mère obstinée,
Ange qui sur trois fils attachés à ses pas
Épandait son amour et ne mesurait pas!
Ô l’amour d’une mère! amour que nul n’oublie!
Pain merveilleux qu’un dieu partage et multiplie!
Table toujours servie au paternel foyer!
Chacun en a sa part et tous l’ont tout entier!

Je pourrai dire un jour, lorsque la nuit douteuse
Fera parler les soirs ma vieillesse conteuse,
Comment ce haut destin de gloire et de terreur
Qui remuait le monde aux pas de l’empereur,

Dans son souffle orageux m’emportant sans défense
À tous les vents de l’air fit flotter mon enfance.
Car, lorsque l’aquilon bat ses flots palpitants,
L’océan convulsif tourmente en même temps
Le navire à trois ponts qui tonne avec l’orage,
Et la feuille échappée aux arbres du rivage!

Maintenant, jeune encore et souvent éprouvé,
J’ai plus d’un souvenir profondément gravé,
Et l’on peut distinguer bien des choses passées
Dans ces plis de mon front que creusent mes pensées.
Certes, plus d’un vieillard sans flamme et sans cheveux,
Tombé de lassitude au bout de tous ses voeux,
Pâlirait s’il voyait, comme un gouffre dans l’onde,
Mon âme où ma pensée habite, comme un monde,
Tout ce que j’ai souffert, tout ce que j’ai tenté,
Tout ce qui m’a menti comme un fruit avorté,
Mon plus beau temps passé sans espoir qu’il renaisse,
Les amours, les travaux, les deuils de ma jeunesse,
Et quoiqu’encore à l’âge où l’avenir sourit,
Le livre de mon coeur à toute page écrit!

Si parfois de mon sein s’envolent mes pensées,
Mes chansons par le monde en lambeaux dispersées;
S’il me plaît de cacher l’amour et la douleur
Dans le coin d’un roman ironique et railleur;
Si j’ébranle la scène avec ma fantaisie,
Si j’entrechoque aux yeux d’une foule choisie
D’autres hommes comme eux, vivant tous à la fois
De mon souffle et parlant au peuple avec ma voix;
Si ma tête, fournaise où mon esprit s’allume,
Jette le vers d’airain qui bouillonne et qui fume
Dans le rythme profond, moule mystérieux
D’où sort la strophe ouvrant ses ailes dans les cieux;
C’est que l’amour, la tombe, et la gloire, et la vie,
L’onde qui fuit, par l’onde incessamment suivie,
Tout souffle, tout rayon, ou propice ou fatal,

Fait reluire et vibrer mon âme de cristal,
Mon âme aux mille voix, que le Dieu que j’adore
Mit au centre de tout comme un écho sonore!

D’ailleurs j’ai purement passé les jours mauvais,
Et je sais d’où je viens, si j’ignore où je vais.
L’orage des partis avec son vent de flamme
Sans en altérer l’onde a remué mon âme.
Rien d’immonde en mon coeur, pas de limon impur
Qui n’attendît qu’un vent pour en troubler l’azur!

Après avoir chanté, j’écoute et je contemple,
À l’empereur tombé dressant dans l’ombre un temple,
Aimant la liberté pour ses fruits, pour ses fleurs,
Le trône pour son droit, le roi pour ses malheurs;
Fidèle enfin au sang qu’ont versé dans ma veine
Mon père vieux soldat, ma mère vendéenne!

II

À M. LOUIS B.

Lyrnessi domus alta, solo Laurente sepulcrum. VIRGILE.

Louis, quand vous irez, dans un de vos voyages,
Voir Bordeaux, Pau, Bayonne et ses charmants rivages,
Toulouse la romaine où dans des jours meilleurs
J’ai cueilli tout enfant la poésie en fleurs,
Passez par Blois. - Et là, bien volontiers sans doute,
Laissez dans le logis vos compagnons de route,
Et tandis qu’ils joueront, riront ou dormiront,
Vous, avec vos pensers qui haussent votre front,
Montez à travers Blois cet escalier de rues
Que n’inonde jamais la Loire au temps des crues;
Laissez là le château, quoique sombre et puissant,
Quoiqu’il ait à la face une tache de sang;
Admirez, en passant, cette tour octogone
Qui fait à ses huit pans hurler une gorgone;
Mais passez. - Et sorti de la ville, au midi,
Cherchez un tertre vert, circulaire, arrondi,
Que surmonte un grand arbre, un noyer, ce me semble,
Comme au cimier d’un casque une plume qui tremble.
Vous le reconnaîtrez, ami, car, tout rêvant,
Vous l’aurez vu de loin sans doute en arrivant.

Sur le tertre monté, que la plaine bleuâtre,
Que la ville étagée en long amphithéâtre,
Que l’église, ou la Loire, et ses voiles aux vents,
Et ses mille archipels plus que ses flots mouvants,
Et de Chambord là-bas au loin les cent tourelles
Ne fassent pas voler votre pensée entre elles.
Ne levez pas vos yeux si haut que l’horizon,
Regardez à vos pieds. -

Louis, cette maison
Qu’on voit, bâtie en pierre et d’ardoise couverte,
Blanche et carrée, au bas de la colline verte,
Et qui, fermée à peine aux regards étrangers,
S’épanouit charmante entre ses deux vergers,
C’est là. - Regardez bien. C’est le toit de mon père.
C’est ici qu’il s’en vint dormir après la guerre,
Celui que tant de fois mes vers vous ont nommé,
Que vous n’avez pas vu, qui vous aurait aimé!

Alors, ô mon ami, plein d’une extase amère,
Pensez pieusement, d’abord à votre mère,
Et puis à votre soeur, et dites: “ Notre ami
Ne reverra jamais son vieux père endormi!

“ Hélas! il a perdu cette sainte défense
Qui protège la vie encore après l’enfance,
Ce pilote prudent, qui pour dompter le flot
Prête une expérience au jeune matelot!
Plus de père pour lui! plus rien qu’une mémoire!
Plus d’auguste vieillesse à couronner de gloire!
Plus de récits guerriers, plus de beaux cheveux blancs
À faire caresser par les petits enfants!
Hélas! il a perdu la moitié de sa vie,
L’orgueil de faire voir à la foule ravie
Son père, un vétéran, un général ancien!
Ce foyer où l’on est plus à l’aise qu’au sien,
Et le seuil paternel qui tressaille de joie
Quand du fils qui revient le chien fidèle aboie!

“ Le grand arbre est tombé! resté seul au vallon,
L’arbuste est désormais à nu sous l’aquilon.
Quand l’aïeul disparaît du sein de la famille,
Tout le groupe orphelin, mère, enfants, jeune fille,
Se rallie inquiet autour du père seul
Que ne dépasse plus le front blanc de l’aïeul.
C’est son tour maintenant. Du soleil, de la pluie,

On s’abrite à son ombre, à sa tige on s’appuie.
C’est à lui de veiller, d’enseigner, de souffrir,
De travailler pour tous, d’agir et de mourir!
Voilà que va bientôt sur sa tête vieillie
Descendre la sagesse austère et recueillie;
Voilà que ses beaux ans s’envolent tour à tour,
Emportant l’un sa joie et l’autre son amour,
Ses songes de grandeur et de gloire ingénue,
Et que pour travailler son âme reste nue,
Laissant là l’espérance et les rêves dorés,
Ainsi que la glaneuse, alors que dans les prés
Elle marche, d’épis emplissant sa corbeille,
Quitte son vêtement de fête de la veille!
Mais le soir, la glaneuse aux branches d’un buisson
Reprendra ses atours, et chantant sa chanson
S’en reviendra parée, et belle, et consolée;
Tandis que cette vie, âpre et morne vallée,
N’a point de buisson vert où l’on retrouve un jour
L’espoir, l’illusion, l’innocence et l’amour!

“ Il continuera donc sa tâche commencée,
Tandis que sa famille autour de lui pressée,
Sur son front, où des ans s’imprimera le cours,
Verra tomber sans cesse et s’amasser toujours,
Comme les feuilles d’arbre au vent de la tempête,
Cette neige des jours qui blanchit notre tête!

“ Ainsi du vétéran par la guerre épargné,
Rien ne reste à son fils, muet et résigné,
Qu’un tombeau vide, et toi, la maison orpheline
Qu’on voit blanche et carrée au bas de la colline,
Gardant, comme un parfum dans le vase resté,
Un air de bienvenue et d’hospitalité!

“ Un sépulcre à Paris! de pierre ou de porphyre,
Qu’importe! Les tombeaux des aigles de l’empire
Sont auprès. Ils sont là tous ces vieux généraux

Morts un jour de victoire en antiques héros,
Ou, regrettant peut-être et canons et mitraille,
Tombés à la tribune, autre champ de bataille.
Ses fils ont déposé sa cendre auprès des leurs,
Afin qu'en l'autre monde, heureux pour les meilleurs,
Il puisse converser avec ses frères d'armes.
Car sans doute ces chefs, pleurés de tant de larmes,
Ont là-bas une tente. Ils y viennent le soir
Parler de guerre; au loin, dans l'ombre, ils peuvent voir
Flotter de l'ennemi les enseignes rivales;
Et l'empereur au fond passe par intervalles.

" Une maison à Blois! riante, quoique en deuil,
Élégante et petite, avec un lierre au seuil,
Et qui fait soupirer le voyageur d'envie
Comme un charmant asile à reposer sa vie,
Tant sa neuve façade a de fraîches couleurs,
Tant son front est caché dans l'herbe et dans les fleurs!

" Maison! sépulcre! hélas, pour retrouver quelque ombre
De ce père parti sur le navire sombre,
Où faut-il que le fils aille égarer ses pas?
Maison, tu ne l'as plus! tombeau, tu ne l'as pas!"

III

RÊVERIE D’UN PASSANT À PROPOS D’UN ROI

Praebete aures, vos qui continetis multitudines et placetis vobis in turbis nationum, quoniam non custodistis legem justitiae, neque secundum voluntatem Dei ambulastis. SAP. VI.

Voitures et chevaux à grand bruit, l’autre jour,
Menaient le roi de Naples au gala de la cour.
J’étais au Carrousel, passant avec la foule
Qui par ses trois guichets incessamment s’écoule
Et traverse ce lieu quatre cents fois par an
Pour regarder un prince ou voir l’heure au cadran.
Je suivais lentement, comme l’onde suit l’onde,
Tout ce peuple, songeant qu’il était dans le monde,
Certes, le fils aîné du vieux peuple romain,
Et qu’il avait un jour, d’un revers de sa main,
Déraciné du sol les tours de la Bastille.
Je m’arrêtai: le suisse avait fermé la grille.

Et le tambour battait, et parmi les bravos
Passait chaque voiture avec ses huit chevaux.
La fanfare emplissait la vaste cour, jonchée
D’officiers redressant leur tête empanachée;
Et les royaux coursiers marchaient sans s’étonner,
Fiers de voir devant eux des drapeaux s’incliner.
Or, attentive au bruit, une femme, une vieille,
En haillons, et portant au bras quelque corbeille,
Branlant son chef ridé, disait à haute voix:
— Un roi! sous l’empereur, j’en ai tant vu, des rois!

Alors je ne vis plus des voitures dorées
La haute impériale et les rouges livrées,
Et, tandis que passait et repassait cent fois
Tout ce peuple inquiet, plein de confuses voix,

Je rêvai. Cependant la vieille vers la Grève
Poursuivait son chemin en me laissant mon rêve,
Comme l'oiseau qui va, dans la forêt lâché,
Laisse trembler la feuille où son aile a touché.

Oh! disais-je, la main sur mon front étendue,
Philosophie, au bas du peuple descendue!
Des petits sur les grands grave et hautain regard!
Où ce peuple est venu, le peuple arrive tard;
Mais il est arrivé. Le voilà qui dédaigne!
Il n'est rien qu'il admire, ou qu'il aime, ou qu'il craigne.
Il sait tirer de tout d'austères jugements,
Tant le marteau de fer des grands événements
A, dans ces durs cerveaux qu'il façonnait sans cesse,
Comme un coin dans le chêne enfoncé la sagesse!

Il s'est dit tant de fois: — Où le monde en est-il?
Que font les rois? à qui le trône? à qui l'exil?
Qu'il médite aujourd'hui, comme un juge suprême,
Sachant la fin de tout, se croyant en soi-même
Assez fort pour tout voir et pour tout épargner,
Lui qu'on n'exile pas et qui laisse régner!

La cour est en gala! pendant qu'au-dessous d'elle,
Comme sous le vaisseau l'océan qui chancelle,
Sans cesse remué, gronde un peuple profond
Dont nul regard de roi ne peut sonder le fond.
Démence et trahison qui disent sans relâche:
— Ô rois, vous êtes rois! confiez votre tâche
Aux mille bras dorés qui soutiennent vos pas.
Dormez, n'apprenez point et ne méditez pas
De peur que votre front, qu'un prestige environne,
Fasse en s'élargissant éclater la couronne! -

Ô rois, veillez, veillez! tâchez d'avoir régné.
Ne nous reprenez pas ce qu'on avait gagné;
Ne faites point, des coups d'une bride rebelle,

Cabrer la liberté qui vous porte avec elle;
Soyez de votre temps, écoutez ce qu’on dit,
Et tâchez d’être grands, car le peuple grandit.

Écoutez! écoutez, à l’horizon immense,
Ce bruit qui parfois tombe et soudain recommence,
Ce murmure confus, ce sourd frémissement
Qui roule, et qui s’accroît de moment en moment.
C’est le peuple qui vient, c’est la haute marée
Qui monte incessamment, par son astre attirée.
Chaque siècle, à son tour, qu’il soit d’or ou de fer,
Dévoré comme un cap sur qui monte la mer,
Avec ses lois, ses moeurs, les monuments qu’il fonde,
Vains obstacles qui font à peine écumer l’onde,
Avec tout ce qu’on vit et ce qu’on ne verra plus,
Disparaît sous ce flot qui n’a pas de reflux.
Le sol toujours s’en va, le flot toujours s’élève.
Malheur à qui le soir s’attarde sur la grève,
Et ne demande pas au pêcheur qui s’enfuit
D’où vient qu’à l’horizon l’on entend ce grand bruit!
Rois, hâtez-vous! rentrez dans le siècle où nous sommes,
Quittez l’ancien rivage! - À cette mer des hommes
Faites place, ou voyez si vous voulez périr
Sur le siècle passé que son flot doit couvrir!

Ainsi ce qu’en passant avait dit cette femme
Remuait mes pensers dans le fond de mon âme,
Quand un soldat soudain, du poste détaché,
Me cria: — Compagnon, le soleil est couché.

IV

Que t’importe, mon cœur, ces naissances de rois?

De todo, nada. De todos, nadie. CALDERON.

Que t’importe, mon coeur, ces naissances des rois,
Ces victoires, qui font éclater à la fois
Cloches et canons en volées,
Et louer le Seigneur en pompeux appareil,
Et la nuit, dans le ciel des villes en éveil,
Monter des gerbes étoilées?

Porte ailleurs ton regard sur Dieu seul arrêté!
Rien ici-bas qui n’ait en soi sa vanité:
La gloire fuit à tire-d’aile;
Couronnes, mitres d’or, brillent, mais durent peu;
Elles ne valent pas le brin d’herbe que Dieu
Fait pour le nid de l’hirondelle!

Hélas! plus de grandeur contient plus de néant!
La bombe atteint plutôt l’obélisque géant
Que la tourelle des colombes.
C’est toujours par la mort que Dieu s’unit aux rois;
Leur couronne dorée a pour faîte sa croix,
Son temple est pavé de leurs tombes.

Quoi! hauteur de nos tours, splendeur de nos palais,
Napoléon, César, Mahomet, Périclès,
Rien qui ne tombe et ne s’efface!
Mystérieux abîme où l’esprit se confond!
À quelques pieds sous terre un silence profond,
Et tant de bruit à la surface!

V

CE QU'ON ENTEND SUR LA MONTAGNE

O altitudo!

Avez-vous quelquefois, calme et silencieux,
Monté sur la montagne, en présence des cieux?
Était-ce aux bords du Sund? aux côtes de Bretagne?
Aviez-vous l'océan au pied de la montagne?
Et là, penché sur l'onde et sur l'immensité,
Calme et silencieux avez-vous écouté?

Voici ce qu'on entend: - du moins un jour qu'en rêve
Ma pensée abattit son vol sur une grève,
Et, du sommet d'un mont plongeant au gouffre amer,
Vit d'un côté la terre et de l'autre la mer,
J'écoutai, j'entendis, et jamais voix pareille
Ne sortit d'une bouche et n'émut une oreille.

Ce fut d'abord un bruit large, immense, confus,
Plus vague que le vent dans les arbres touffus,
Plein d'accords éclatants, de suaves murmures,
Doux comme un chant du soir, fort comme un choc d'armures
Quand la sourde mêlée étreint les escadrons
Et souffle, furieuse, aux bouches des clairons.
C'était une musique ineffable et profonde,
Qui, fluide, oscillait sans cesse autour du monde,
Et dans les vastes cieux, par ses flots rajeunis,
Roulait élargissant ses orbes infinis
Jusqu'au fond où son flux s'allait perdre dans l'ombre
Avec le temps, l'espace et la forme et le nombre.
Comme une autre atmosphère épars et débordé,
L'hymne éternel couvrait tout le globe inondé.
Le monde, enveloppé dans cette symphonie,
Comme il vogue dans l'air, voguait dans l'harmonie.

Et pensif, j’écoutais ces harpes de l’éther,
Perdu dans cette voix comme dans une mer.
Bientôt je distinguai, confuses et voilées,
Deux voix, dans cette voix l’une à l’autre mêlées,
De la terre et des mers s’épanchant jusqu’au ciel,
Qui chantaient à la fois le chant universel;
Et je les distinguai dans la rumeur profonde,
Comme on voit deux courants qui se croisent sous l’onde.

L’une venait des mers; chant de gloire! hymne heureux!
C’était la voix des flots qui se parlaient entre eux;
L’autre, qui s’élevait de la terre où nous sommes,
Était triste; c’était le murmure des hommes;
Et dans ce grand concert, qui chantait jour et nuit,
Chaque onde avait sa voix et chaque homme son bruit.

Or, comme je l’ai dit, l’océan magnifique
Épandait une voix joyeuse et pacifique,
Chantait comme la harpe aux temples de Sion,
Et louait la beauté de la création.
Sa clameur, qu’emportaient la brise et la rafale,
Incessamment vers Dieu montait plus triomphale,
Et chacun de ses flots que Dieu seul peut dompter,
Quand l’autre avait fini, se levait pour chanter.
Comme ce grand lion dont Daniel fut l’hôte,
L’océan par moments abaissait sa voix haute;
Et moi je croyais voir, vers le couchant en feu,
Sous sa crinière d’or passer la main de Dieu.

Cependant, à côté de l’auguste fanfare,
L’autre voix, comme un cri de coursier qui s’effare,
Comme le gond rouillé d’une porte d’enfer,
Comme l’archet d’airain sur la lyre de fer,
Grinçait; et pleurs, et cris, l’injure, l’anathème,
Refus du viatique et refus du baptême,
Et malédiction, et blasphème, et clameur,

Dans le flot tournoyant de l’humaine rumeur
Passaient, comme le soir on voit dans les vallées
De noirs oiseaux de nuit qui s’en vont par volées.
Qu’était-ce que ce bruit dont mille échos vibraient?
Hélas! c’était la terre et l’homme qui pleuraient.

Frère! de ces deux voix étranges, inouïes,
Sans cesse renaissant, sans cesse évanouies,
Qu’écoute l’Éternel durant l’éternité,
L’une disait: NATURE! et l’autre: HUMANITÉ!

Alors je méditai; car mon esprit fidèle,
Hélas! n’avait jamais déployé plus grande aile;
Dans mon ombre jamais n’avait lui tant de jour;
Et je rêvai longtemps, contemplant tour à tour,
Après l’abîme obscur que me cachait la lame,
L’autre abîme sans fond qui s’ouvrait dans mon âme.
Et je me demandai pourquoi l’on est ici,
Quel peut être après tout le but de tout ceci,
Que fait l’âme, lequel vaut mieux d’être ou de vivre,
Et pourquoi le Seigneur, qui seul lit à son livre,
Mêle éternellement dans un fatal hymen
Le chant de la nature au cri du genre humain?

VI

À UN VOYAGEUR

L’une partie du monde ne sait point comme l’autre vit et se gouverne. PHILIPPE DE COMMINES.

Ami, vous revenez d’un de ces longs voyages
Qui nous font vieillir vite, et nous changent en sages
Au sortir du berceau.
De tous les océans votre course a vu l’onde,
Hélas! et vous feriez une ceinture au monde
Du sillon du vaisseau.

Le soleil de vingt cieux a mûri votre vie.
Partout où vous mena votre inconstante envie,
Jetant et ramassant,
Pareil au laboureur qui récolte et qui sème,
Vous avez pris des lieux et laissé de vous-même
Quelque chose en passant.

Tandis que votre ami, moins heureux et moins sage,
Attendait des saisons l’uniforme passage
Dans le même horizon,
Et comme l’arbre vert qui de loin la dessine,
À sa porte effeuillant ses jours, prenait racine,
Au seuil de sa maison!

Vous êtes fatigué, tant vous avez vu d’hommes!
Enfin vous revenez, las de ce que nous sommes,
Vous reposer en Dieu.
Triste, vous me contez vos courses infécondes,
Et vos pieds ont mêlé la poudre de trois mondes
Aux cendres de mon feu.

Or, maintenant, le coeur plein de choses profondes,

Des enfants dans vos mains tenant les têtes blondes,
Vous me parlez ici,
Et vous me demandez, sollicitude amère!
— Où donc ton père? où donc ton fils? où donc ta mère?
— Ils voyagent aussi!

Le voyage qu'ils font n'a ni soleil, ni lune;
Nul homme n'y peut rien porter de sa fortune,
Tant le maître est jaloux!
Le voyage qu'ils font est profond et sans bornes,
On le fait à pas lents, parmi des faces mornes,
Et nous le ferons tous!

J'étais à leur départ comme j'étais au vôtre.
En diverses saisons, tous trois, l'un après l'autre,
Ils ont pris leur essor.
Hélas! j'ai mis en terre, à cette heure suprême,
Ces têtes que j'aimais. Avare, j'ai moi-même
Enfoui mon trésor.

Je les ai vus partir. J'ai, faible et plein d'alarmes,
Vu trois fois un drap noir semé de blanches larmes
Tendre ce corridor.
J'ai sur leurs froides mains pleuré comme une femme.
Mais, le cercueil fermé, mon âme a vu leur âme
Ouvrir deux ailes d'or!

Je les ai vus partir comme trois hirondelles
Qui vont chercher bien loin des printemps plus fidèles
Et des étés meilleurs.
Ma mère vit le ciel, et partit la première.
Et son oeil en mourant fut plein d'une lumière
Qu'on n'a point vue ailleurs.

Et puis mon premier-né la suivit; puis mon père,
Fier vétéran âgé de quarante ans de guerre,
Tout chargé de chevrons.

Maintenant ils sont là! tous trois dorment dans l’ombre,
Tandis que leurs esprits font le voyage sombre,
Et vont où nous irons!

Si vous voulez, à l’heure où la lune décline,
Nous monterons tous deux la nuit sur la colline
Où gisent nos aïeux.
Je vous dirai, montrant à votre vue amie
La ville morte auprès de la ville endormie;
Laquelle dort le mieux!

Venez; muets tous deux et couchés contre terre,
Nous entendrons, tandis que Paris fera taire
Son vivant tourbillon,
Ces millions de morts, moisson du fils de l’homme,
Sourdre confusément dans leurs sépulcres, comme
Le grain dans le sillon!

Combien vivent joyeux qui devaient, soeurs ou frères,
Faire un pleur éternel de quelques ombres chères!
Pouvoir des ans vainqueurs!
Les morts durent bien peu. Laissons-les sous la pierre!
Hélas! dans le cercueil ils tombent en poussière
Moins vite qu’en nos coeurs!

Voyageur! voyageur! Quelle est notre folie!
Qui sait combien de morts à chaque heure on oublie?
Des plus chers, de plus beaux?
Qui peut savoir combien toute douleur s’émousse,
Et combien sur la terre un jour d’herbe qui pousse
Efface de tombeaux!

VII

DICTÉ EN PRÉSENCE DU GLACIER DU RHÔNE

Causa tangor ab omni. OVIDE.

Souvent, quand mon esprit riche en métamorphoses
Flotte et roule endormi sur l’océan des choses,
Dieu, foyer du vrai jour qui ne luit point aux yeux,
Mystérieux soleil dont l’âme est embrasée;
Le frappe d’un rayon, et, comme une rosée,
Le ramasse et l’enlève aux cieux.

Alors, nuage errant, ma haute poésie
Vole capricieuse et sans route choisie,
De l’occident au sud, du nord à l’orient;
Et regarde, du haut des radieuses voûtes,
Les cités de la terre, et, les dédaignant toutes,
Leur jette son ombre en fuyant.

Puis, dans l’or du matin luisant comme une étoile,
Tantôt elle y découpe une frange à son voile,
Tantôt, comme un guerrier qui résonne en marchant,
Elle frappe d’éclairs la forêt qui murmure;
Et tantôt en passant rougit sa noire armure
Dans la fournaise du couchant.

Enfin sur un vieux mont, colosse à tête grise,
Sur des Alpes de neige un vent jaloux la brise.
Qu’importe! Suspendu sur l’abîme béant
Le nuage se change en un glacier sublime,
Et des mille fleurons qui hérissent sa cime,
Fait une couronne au géant!

Comme le haut cimier du mont inabordable,
Alors il dresse au loin sa crête formidable.

L’arc-en-ciel vacillant joue à son flanc d’acier;
Et, chaque soir, tandis que l’ombre en bas l’assiège,
Le soleil, ruisselant en lave sur sa neige,
Change en cratère le glacier.

Son front blanc dans la nuit semble une aube éternelle;
Le chamois effaré, dont le pied vaut une aile,
L’aigle même le craint, sombre et silencieux;
La tempête à ses pieds tourbillonne et se traîne;
L’oeil ose à peine atteindre à sa face sereine,
Tant il est avant dans les cieux!

Et seul, à ces hauteurs, sans crainte et sans vertige,
Mon esprit, de la terre oubliant le prestige,
Voit le jour étoilé, le ciel qui n’est plus bleu,
Et contemple de près ces splendeurs sidérales
Dont la nuit sème au loin ses sombres cathédrales,
Jusqu’à ce qu’un rayon de Dieu

Le frappe de nouveau, le précipite, et change
Les prismes du glacier en flots mêlés de fange;
Alors il croule, alors, éveillant mille échos,
Il retombe en torrent dans l’océan du monde,
Chaos aveugle et sourd, mer immense et profonde,
Où se ressemblent tous les flots!

Au gré du divin souffle ainsi vont mes pensées,
Dans un cercle éternel incessamment poussées.
Du terrestre océan dont les flots sont amers,
Comme sous un rayon monte une nue épaisse,
Elles montent toujours vers le ciel, et sans cesse
Redescendent des cieux aux mers.

VIII

À M. DAVID, STATUAIRE

D’hommes tu nous fais dieux. RÉGNIER.

Oh! que ne suis-je un de ces hommes
Qui, géants d’un siècle effacé,
Jusque dans le siècle où nous sommes
Règnent du fond de leur passé!
Que ne suis-je, prince ou poète,
De ces mortels à haute tête,
D’un monde à la fois base et faîte,
Que leur temps ne peut contenir;
Qui dans le calme ou dans l’orage,
Qu’on les adore ou les outrage,
Devançant le pas de leur âge,
Marchent un pied dans l’avenir!

Que ne suis-je une de ces flammes,
Un de ces pôles glorieux,
Vers qui penchent toutes les âmes,
Sur qui se fixent tous les yeux!
De ces hommes dont les statues,
Du flot des temps toujours battues,
D’un tel signe sont revêtues
Que, si le hasard les abat,
S’il les détrône de leur sphère,
Du bronze auguste on ne peut faire
Que des cloches pour la prière
Ou des canons pour le combat!

Que n’ai-je un de ces fronts sublimes,
David! Mon corps, fait pour souffrir,
Du moins sous tes mains magnanimes
Renaîtrait pour ne plus mourir!

Du haut du temple ou du théâtre,
Colosse de bronze ou d’albâtre,
Salué d’un peuple idolâtre,
Je surgirais sur la cité,
Comme un géant en sentinelle,
Couvrant la ville de mon aile,
Dans quelque attitude éternelle
De génie et de majesté!

Car c’est toi, lorsqu’un héros tombe,
Qui le relèves souverain!
Toi qui le scelles sur sa tombe
Qu’il foule avec des pieds d’airain!
Rival de Rome et de Ferrare,
Tu pétris pour le mortel rare
Ou le marbre froid de Carrare,
Ou le métal qui fume et bout.
Le grand homme au tombeau s’apaise
Quand ta main, à qui rien ne pèse,
Hors du bloc ou de la fournaise
Le jette vivant et debout!

Sans toi peut-être sa mémoire
Pâlirait d’un oubli fatal;
Mais c’est toi qui sculptes sa gloire
Visible sur un piédestal.
Ce fanal, perdu pour le monde,
Feu rampant dans la nuit profonde,
S’éteindrait, sans montrer sur l’onde
Ni les écueils ni le chemin;
C’est ton souffle qui le ranime;
C’est toi qui, sur le sombre abîme,
Dresses le colosse sublime
Qui prend le phare dans sa main.

Lorsqu’à tes yeux une pensée
Sous les traits d’un grand homme a lui,

Tu la fais marbre, elle est fixée,
Et les peuples disent: C’est lui!
Mais avant d’être pour la foule,
Longtemps dans ta tête elle roule
Comme une flamboyante houle
Au fond du volcan souverain;
Loin du grand jour qui la réclame
Tu la fais bouillir dans ton âme;
Ainsi de ses langues de flamme
Le feu saisit l’urne d’airain.

Va! que nos villes soient remplies
De tes colosses radieux!
Qu’à jamais tu te multiplies
Dans un peuple de demi-dieux!
Fais de nos cités des Corinthes!
Oh! ta pensée a des étreintes
Dont l’airain garde les empreintes,
Dont le granit s’enorgueillit!
Honneur au sol que ton pied foule!
Un métal dans tes veines coule;
Ta tête ardente est un grand moule
D’où l’idée en bronze jaillit!

Bonaparte eût voulu renaître
De marbre et géant sous ta main;
Cromwell, son aïeul et son maître,
T’eût livré son front surhumain;
Ton bras eût sculpté pour l’Espagne
Charles Quint; pour nous, Charlemagne,
Un pied sur l’hydre d’Allemagne,
L’autre sur Rome aux sept coteaux;
Au sépulcre prêt à descendre,
César t’eût confié sa cendre;
Et c’est toi qu’eût pris Alexandre
Pour lui tailler le mont Athos!

IX

À M. DE LAMARTINE

Te referent fluctus! HORACE.

Naguère une même tourmente,
Ami, battait nos deux esquifs;
Une même vague écumante
Nous jetait aux mêmes récifs;
Les mêmes haines débordées
Gonflaient sous nos nefs inondées
Leurs flots toujours multipliés,
Et, comme un océan qui roule,
Toutes les têtes de la foule
Hurlaient à la fois sous nos pieds!

Qu’allais-je faire en cet orage,
Moi qui m’échappais du berceau?
Moi qui vivais d’un peu d’ombrage,
D’un peu d’air, comme l’oiseau?
À cette mer qui le repousse
Pourquoi livrer mon nid de mousse
Où le jour n’osait pénétrer?
Pourquoi donner à la rafale
Ma belle robe nuptiale
Comme une voile à déchirer?

C’est que, dans mes songes de flamme,
C’est que, dans mes rêves d’enfant,
J’avais toujours présents à l’âme
Ces hommes au front triomphant,
Qui, tourmentés d’une autre terre,
En ont deviné le mystère
Avant que rien en soit venu,
Dont la tête au ciel est tournée,

Dont l’âme, boussole obstinée,
Toujours cherche un pôle inconnu!

Ces Gamas en qui rien n’efface
Leur indomptable ambition,
Savent qu’on n’a vu qu’une face
De l’immense création.
Ces Colombs, dans leur main profonde,
Pèsent la terre et pèsent l’onde
Comme à la balance du ciel,
Et, voyant d’en haut toute cause,
Sentent qu’il manque quelque chose
À l’équilibre universel!

Ce contre-poids qui se dérobe,
Ils le chercheront, ils iront;
Ils rendront sa ceinture au globe,
À l’univers son double front;
Ils partent, on plaint leur folie!
L’onde les emporte; on oublie
Le voyage et le voyageur!... -
Tout à coup de la mer profonde
Ils ressortent avec leur monde,
Comme avec sa perle un plongeur!

Voilà quelle était ma pensée.
Quand sur le flot sombre et grossi
Je risquai ma nef insensée,
Moi, je cherchais un monde aussi!
Mais, à peine loin du rivage,
J’ai vu sur l’océan sauvage
Commencer dans un tourbillon
Cette lutte qui me déchire
Entre les voiles du navire
Et les ailes de l’aquilon!

C’est alors qu’en l’orage sombre

J’entrevis ton mât glorieux
Qui bien avant le mien, dans l’ombre,
Fatiguait l’autan furieux.
Alors, la tempête était haute,
Nous combattîmes côte à côte,
Tous deux, moi barque, toi vaisseau,
Comme le frère auprès du frère,
Comme le nid auprès de l’aire,
Comme auprès du lit le berceau!

L’autan criait dans nos antennes,
Le flot lavait nos ponts mouvants,
Nos banderoles incertaines
Frissonnaient au souffle des vents.
Nous voyions les vagues humides,
Comme des cavales numides,
Se dresser, hennir, écumer;
L’éclair, rougissant chaque lame,
Mettait des crinières de flamme
À tous ces coursiers de la mer!

Nous, échevelés dans la brume,
Chantant plus haut dans l’ouragan,
Nous admirions la vaste écume
Et la beauté de l’océan!
Tandis que la foudre sublime
Planait tout en feu sur l’abîme,
Nous chantions, hardis matelots,
La laissant passer sur nos têtes,
Et; comme l’oiseau des tempêtes,
Tremper ses ailes dans ses flots!

Échangeant nos signaux fidèles
Et nous saluant de la voix,
Pareils à deux soeurs hirondelles,
Nous voulions, tous deux à la fois,
Doubler le même promontoire,

Remporter la même victoire,
Dépasser le siècle en courroux;
Nous tentions le même voyage;
Nous voyions surgir dans l’orage
Le même Adamastor jaloux!

Bientôt la nuit toujours croissante,
Ou quelque vent qui t’emportait,
M’a dérobé ta nef puissante
Dont l’ombre auprès de moi flottait!
Seul je suis resté sous la nue.
Depuis, l’orage continue,
Le temps est noir, le vent mauvais;
L’ombre m’enveloppe et m’isole,
Et, si je n’avais ma boussole,
Je ne saurais pas où je vais!

Dans cette tourmente fatale
J’ai passé les nuits et les jours,
J’ai pleuré la terre natale,
Et mon enfance et mes amours.
Si j’implorais le flot qui gronde,
Toutes les cavernes de l’onde
Se rouvraient jusqu’au fond des mers;
Si j’invoquais le ciel, l’orage,
Avec plus de bruit et de rage,
Secouait sa gerbe d’éclairs!

Longtemps, laissant le vent bruire,
Je t’ai cherché, criant ton nom!
Voici qu’enfin je te vois luire
À la cime de l’horizon.
Mais ce n’est plus la nef ployée,
Battue, errante, foudroyée
Sous tous les caprices des cieux,
Rêvant d’idéales conquêtes,
Risquant à travers les tempêtes

Un voyage mystérieux!

C’est un navire magnifique
Bercé par le flot souriant,
Qui, sur l’océan pacifique,
Vient du côté de l’orient!
Toujours en avant de sa voile
On voit cheminer une étoile
Qui rayonne à l’oeil ébloui;
Jamais on ne le voit éclore
Sans une étincelante aurore
Qui se lève derrière lui!

Le ciel serein, la mer sereine
L’enveloppent de tous côtés;
Par ses mâts et par sa carène
Il plonge aux deux immensités!
Le flot s’y brise en étincelles;
Ses voiles sont comme des ailes
Au souffle qui vient les gonfler;
Il vogue, il vogue vers la plage,
Et, comme le cygne qui nage,
On sent qu’il pourrait s’envoler!

Le peuple, auquel il se révèle
Comme une blanche vision,
Roule, prolonge, et renouvelle
Une immense acclamation.
La foule inonde au loin la rive.
Oh! dit-elle, il vient, il arrive!
Elle l’appelle avec des pleurs,
Et le vent porte au beau navire,
Comme à Dieu l’encens et la myrrhe,
L’haleine de la terre en fleurs!

Oh! rentre au port, esquif sublime!
Jette l’ancre loin des frimas!

Vois cette couronne unanime
Que la foule attache à tes mâts!
Oublie et l'onde et l'aventure,
Et le labeur de la mâture,
Et le souffle orageux du nord;
Triomphe à l'abri des naufrages,
Et ris-toi de tous les orages
Qui rongent les chaînes du port!

Tu reviens de ton Amérique!
Ton monde est trouvé! - Sur les flots
Ce monde, à ton souffle lyrique,
Comme un oeuf sublime est éclos!
C'est un univers qui s'éveille!
Une création pareille
À celle qui rayonne au jour!
De nouveaux infinis qui s'ouvrent!
Un de ces mondes que découvrent
Ceux qui de l'âme ont fait le tour!

Tu peux dire à qui doute encore:
" J'en viens! j'en ai cueilli ce fruit!
Votre aurore n'est pas l'aurore,
Et votre nuit n'est pas la nuit.
Votre soleil ne vaut pas l'autre.
Leur jour est plus bleu que le vôtre.
Dieu montre sa face en leur ciel.
J'ai vu luire une croix d'étoiles
Clouée à leurs nocturnes voiles
Comme un labarum éternel!"

Tu dirais la verte savane,
Les hautes herbes des déserts,
Et les bois dont le zéphyr vanne
Toutes les graines dans les airs;
Les grandes forêts inconnus;
Les caps d'où s'envolent les nues

Comme l’encens des saints trépieds;
Les fruits de lait et d’ambroisie,
Et les mines de poésie
Dont tu jettes l’or à leurs pieds!

Et puis encor tu pourrais dire,
Sans épuiser ton univers,
Ses monts d’agate et de porphyre,
Ses fleuves qui noieraient leurs mers;
De ce monde, né de la veille,
Tu peindrais la beauté vermeille,
Terre vierge et féconde à tous,
Patrie où rien ne nous repousse;
Et ta voix magnifique et douce
Les ferait tomber à genoux!

Désormais, à tous les voyages
Vers ce monde trouvé par toi,
En foule ils courront aux rivages
Comme un peuple autour de son roi!
Mille acclamations sur l’onde
Suivront longtemps ta voile blonde
Brillante en mer comme un fanal,
Salueront le vent qui t’enlève,
Puis sommeilleront sur la grève
Jusqu’à ton retour triomphal!

Ah! soit qu’au port ton vaisseau dorme,
Soit qu’il se livre sans effroi
Aux baisers de la mer difforme
Qui hurle béante sous moi,
De ta sérénité sublime
Regarde parfois dans l’abîme,
Avec des yeux de pleurs remplis,
Ce point noir dans ton ciel limpide,
Ce tourbillon sombre et rapide
Qui roule une voile en ses plis!

C’est mon tourbillon, c’est ma voile!
C’est l’ouragan qui, furieux,
À mesure éteint chaque étoile
Qui se hasarde dans mes cieux!
C’est la tourmente qui m’emporte!
C’est la nuée ardente et forte
Qui se joue avec moi dans l’air,
Et tournoyant comme une roue,
Fait étinceler sur ma proue
Le glaive acéré de l’éclair!

Alors, d’un coeur tendre et fidèle,
Ami, souviens-toi de l’ami
Que toujours poursuit à coups d’aile
Le vent dans ta voile endormi.
Songe que du sein de l’orage
Il t’a vu surgir au rivage
Dans un triomphe universel,
Et qu’alors il levait la tête,
Et qu’il oubliait sa tempête
Pour chanter l’azur de ton ciel!

Et si mon invisible monde
Toujours à l’horizon me fuit,
Si rien ne germe dans cette onde
Que je laboure jour et nuit,
Si mon navire de mystère
Se brise sur cette ingrate terre
Que cherchent mes yeux obstinés,
Pleure, ami, mon ombre jalouse!
Colomb doit plaindre Lapeyrouse.
Tous deux étaient prédestinés!

X

Un jour au mont Atlas les collines jalouses

Aestuat infelix.

Un jour au mont Atlas les collines jalouses
Dirent: — Vois nos prés verts, vois nos fraîches pelouses
Où vient la jeune fille, errante en liberté,
Chanter, rire, et rêver après qu'elle a chanté;
Nos pieds que l'océan baise en grondant à peine,
Le sauvage océan! notre tête sereine,
À qui l'été de flamme et la rosée en pleurs
Font tant épanouir de couronnes de fleurs!

Mais toi, géant! - d'où vient que sur ta tête chauve
Planent incessamment des aigles à l'oeil fauve?
Qui donc, comme une branche où l'oiseau fait son nid,
Courbe ta large épaule et ton dos de granit?
Pourquoi dans tes flancs noirs tant d'abîmes pleins d'ombre?
Quel orage éternel te bat d'un éclair sombre?
Qui t'a mis tant de neige et de rides au front?
Et ce front, où jamais printemps ne souriront,
Qui donc le courbe ainsi? quelle sueur l'inonde?... -

Atlas leur répondit: — C'est que je porte un monde.

XI

DÉDAIN

Yo contra todos y todos contra yo Romance de Viejo Arias.

I

Qui peut savoir combien de jalouses pensées,
De haines, par l’envie en tous lieux ramassées,
De sourds ressentiments, d’inimitiés sans frein,
D’orages à courber les plus sublimes têtes,
Combien de passions, de fureurs, de tempêtes,
Grondent autour de toi, jeune homme au front serein!

Tu ne le sais pas, toi! - Car tandis qu’à ta base
La gueule des serpents s’élargit et s’écrase,
Tandis que ces rivaux, que tu croyais meilleurs,
Vont t’assiégeant en foule, ou dans la nuit secrète
Creusent maint piège infâme à ta marche distraite,
Pensif, tu regardes ailleurs!

Ou si parfois leurs cris montent jusqu’à ton âme,
Si ta colère, ouvrant ses deux ailes de flamme,
Veut foudroyer leur foule acharnée à ton nom,
Avant que le volcan n’ait trouvé son issue,
Avant que tu n’aies mis la main à ta massue,
Tu te prends à sourire et tu dis: À quoi bon?

Puis voilà que revient ta chère rêverie,
Famille, enfance, amour, Dieu, liberté, patrie;
La lyre à réveiller; la scène à rajeunir;
Napoléon, ce dieu dont tu seras le prêtre;
Les grands hommes, mépris du temps qui les voit naître,
Religion de l’avenir!

II

Allez donc! ennemis de son nom! foule vaine!
Autour de son génie épuisez votre haleine!
Recommencez toujours! ni trêve, ni remord.
Allez, recommencez, veillez, et sans relâche
Roulez votre rocher, refaites votre tâche,
Envieux! - Lui, poète, il chante, il rêve, il dort.

Votre voix, qui s’aiguise et vibre comme un glaive,
N’est qu’une voix de plus dans le bruit qu’il soulève.
La gloire est un concert de mille échos épars,
Choeurs de démons, accords divins, chants angéliques,
Pareil au bruit que font dans les places publiques
Une multitude de chars.

Il ne vous connaît pas. - Il dit par intervalles
Qu’il faut aux jours d’été l’aigre cri des cigales,
L’épine à mainte fleur; que c’est le sort commun;
Que ce serait pitié d’écraser la cigale;
Que le trop bien est mal! que la rose au Bengale
Pour être sans épine est aussi sans parfum.

Et puis, qu’importe! amis, ennemis, tout s’écroule.
C’est au même tombeau que va toute la foule.
Rien ne touche un esprit que Dieu même a saisi.
Trônes, sceptres, lauriers, temples, chars de victoire,
On ferait à des rois des couronnes de gloire
De tout ce qu’il dédaigne ici!

Que lui font donc ces cris où votre voix s’enroue?
Que sert au flot amer d’écumer sur la proue?
Il ignore vos noms, il n’en a point souci,
Et quand, pour ébranler l’édifice qu’il fonde,
La sueur de vos fronts ruisselle et vous inonde,
Il ne sait même pas qui vous fatigue ainsi!

III

Puis, quand il le voudra, scribes, docteurs, poètes,
Il sait qu’il peut, d’un souffle, en vos bouches muettes
Éteindre vos clameurs,
Et qu’il emportera toutes vos voix ensemble
Comme le vent de mer emporte où bon lui semble
La chanson des rameurs!

En vain vos légions l’environnent sans nombre,
Il n’a qu’à se lever pour couvrir de son ombre
À la fois tous vos fronts;
Il n’a qu’à dire un mot pour couvrir vos voix grêles,
Comme un char en passant couvre le bruit des ailes
De mille moucherons!

Quand il veut, vos flambeaux, sublimes auréoles
Dont vous illuminez vos temples, vos idoles,
Vos dieux, votre foyer,
Phares éblouissants, clartés universelles,
Pâlissent à l’éclat des moindres étincelles
Du pied de son coursier!

XII

Ô toi, qui si longtemps vis luire à mon côté

In God is all. DEVISE DES SALTOUN.

Ô toi qui si longtemps vis luire à mon côté
Le jour égal et pur de la prospérité,
Toi qui, lorsque mon âme allait de doute en doute,
Et comme un voyageur te demandait sa route,
Endormis sur ton sein tes rêves ténébreux,
Et pour toute raison disais: Soyons heureux!
Hélas! ô mon amie, hélas! voici que l'ombre
Envahit notre ciel, et que la vie est sombre;
Voici que le malheur s'épanche lentement
Sur l'azur radieux de notre firmament;
Voici qu'à nos regards s'obscurcit et recule
Notre horizon, perdu dans un noir crépuscule;
Or, dans ce ciel, où va la nuit se propageant,
Comme un oeil lumineux, vivant, intelligent,
Vois-tu briller là-bas cette profonde étoile?
Des milles vérités que le bonheur nous voile,
C'est une qui paraît! c'est la première encor
Qui nous ait éblouis de sa lumière d'or!
Notre ciel, que déjà la sombre nuit réclame,
N'a plus assez d'éclat pour cacher cette flamme,
Et du sud, du couchant, ou du septentrion,
Chaque ombre qui survient donne à l'astre un rayon.
Et plus viendra la nuit, et plus, à plis funèbres,
S'épaissiront sur nous son deuil et ses ténèbres,
Plus, dans ce ciel sublime, à nos yeux enchantés,
En foule apparaîtront de splendides clartés!
Plus nous verrons dans l'ombre, où leur loi les rassemble,
Toutes les vérités étinceler ensemble,
Et graviter autour d'un centre impérieux,
Et rompre et renouer leur coeur mystérieux!

Cette fatale nuit, que le malheur amène,
Fait voir plus clairement la destinée humaine,
Et montre à ses deux bouts, écrits en traits de feu,
Ces mots: Âme immortelle! éternité de Dieu!
Car tant que luit le jour, de son soleil de flamme
Il accable nos yeux, il aveugle notre âme,
Et nous nous reposons dans un doute serein
Sans savoir si le ciel est d’azur ou d’airain.
Mais la nuit rend aux cieux leurs étoiles, leurs gloires,
Candélabres que Dieu pend à leurs voûtes noires.
L’oeil dans leurs profondeurs découvre à chaque pas
Mille mondes nouveaux qu’il ne soupçonnait pas,
Soleils plus flamboyants, plus chevelus dans l’ombre
Qu’en l’abîme sans fin il voit luire sans nombre!

XIII

C’est une chose grande et que tout homme envie

À Monsieur Fontaney

Quot libras in duce summo? JUVÉNAL.

C’est une chose grande et que tout homme envie
D’avoir un lustre en soi qu’on répand sur sa vie,
D’être choisi d’un peuple à venger son affront,
De ne point faire un pas qui n’ait trace en l’histoire,
Ou de chanter les yeux au ciel, et que la gloire
Fasse avec un regard reluire votre front.

Il est beau de courir par la terre usurpée,
Disciplinant les rois du plat de son épée,
D’être Napoléon, l’empereur radieux;
D’être Dante, à son nom rendant les voix muettes.
Sans doute ils sont heureux les héros, les poètes,
Ceux que le bras fait rois, ceux que l’esprit fait dieux!

Il est beau, conquérant, législateur, prophète,
De marcher dépassant les hommes de la tête;
D’être en la nuit de tous un éclatant flambeau;
Et que de vos vingt ans vingt siècles se souviennent!...
— Voilà ce que je dis: puis des pitiés me viennent
Quand je pense à tous ceux qui sont dans le tombeau!

XIV

Ô MES LETTRES D'AMOUR

Oh primavera! gioventù dell'anno!
Oh gioventù! primavera della vita!

Ô mes lettres d'amour, de vertu, de jeunesse,
C'est donc vous! Je m'enivre encore à votre ivresse;
Je vous lis à genoux.
Souffrez que pour un jour je reprenne votre âge!
Laissez-moi me cacher, moi, l'heureux et le sage,
Pour pleurer avec vous!

J'avais donc dix-huit ans! j'étais donc plein de songes!
L'espérance en chantant me berçait de mensonges.
Un astre m'avait lui!
J'étais un dieu pour toi qu'en mon coeur seul je nomme!
J'étais donc cet enfant, hélas! devant qui l'homme
Rougit presque aujourd'hui!

Ô temps de rêverie, et de force, et de grâce!
Attendre tous les soirs une robe qui passe!
Baiser un gant jeté!
Vouloir tout de la vie, amour, puissance et gloire!
Être pur, être fier, être sublime et croire
À toute pureté!

À présent j'ai senti, j'ai vu, je sais. - Qu'importe
Si moins d'illusions viennent ouvrir ma porte
Qui gémit en tournant!
Oh! que cet âge ardent, qui me semblait si sombre,
À côté du bonheur qui m'abrite à son ombre,
Rayonne maintenant!

Que vous ai-je donc fait, ô mes jeunes années!

Pour m’avoir fui si vite et vous être éloignées,
Me croyant satisfait?
Hélas! pour revenir m’apparaître si belles,
Quand vous ne pouvez plus me prendre sur vos ailes,
Que vous ai-je donc fait?

Oh! quand ce doux passé, quand cet âge sans tache,
Avec sa robe blanche où notre amour s’attache,
Revient dans nos chemins,
On s’y suspend et puis que de larmes amères
Sur les lambeaux flétris de vos jeunes chimères
Qui vous restent aux mains!

Oublions! oublions! Quand la jeunesse est morte,
Laissons-nous emporter par le vent qui l’emporte
À l’horizon obscur,
Rien ne reste de nous; notre oeuvre est un problème.
L’homme, fantôme errant, passe sans laisser même
Son ombre sur le mur!

XV

Laissez. Tous ces enfants sont bien là

Sinite parvulos venire ad me. JÉSUS.

Laissez. - Tous ces enfants sont bien là. - Qui vous dit
Que la bulle d’azur que mon souffle agrandit
À leur souffle indiscret s’écroule?
Qui vous dit que leurs voix, leurs pas, leurs jeux, leurs cris,
Effarouchent la muse et chassent les péris? ... -
Venez, enfants, venez en foule!

Venez autour de moi. Riez, chantez, courez!
Votre oeil me jettera quelques rayons dorés,
Votre voix charmera mes heures.
C’est la seule en ce monde où rien ne nous sourit
Qui vienne du dehors sans troubler dans l’esprit
Le choeur des voix intérieures!

Fâcheux! qui les vouliez écarter! - Croyez-vous
Que notre coeur n’est pas plus serein et plus doux
Au sortir de leurs jeunes rondes?
Croyez-vous que j’ai peur quand je vois au milieu
De mes rêves rougis ou de sang ou de feu
Passer toutes ces têtes blondes?

La vie est-elle donc si charmante à vos yeux
Qu’il faille préférer à tout ce bruit joyeux
Une maison vide et muette?
N’ôtez pas, la pitié même vous le défend,
Un rayon de soleil, un sourire d’enfant,
Au ciel sombre, au coeur du poète!

— Mais ils s’effaceront à leurs bruyants ébats
Ces mots sacrés que dit une muse tout bas,

Ces chants purs d’où l’âme se noie?... -
Eh! que m’importe à moi, muse, chants, vanité,
Votre gloire perdue et l’immortalité,
Si j’y gagne une heure de joie!

La belle ambition et le rare destin!
Chanter! toujours chanter pour un écho lointain,
Pour un vain bruit qui passe et tombe!
Vivre abreuvé de fiel, d’amertume et d’ennuis!
Expier dans ses jours les rêves de ses nuits!
Faire un avenir à sa tombe!

Oh! que j’aime bien mieux ma joie et mon plaisir,
Et toute ma famille avec tout mon loisir,
Dût la gloire ingrate et frivole,
Dussent mes vers, troublés de ces ris familiers,
S’enfuir, comme devant un essaim d’écoliers
Une troupe d’oiseaux s’envole!

Mais non. Au milieu d’eux rien ne s’évanouit.
L’orientale d’or plus riche épanouit
Ses fleurs peintes et ciselées;
La ballade est plus fraîche, et dans le ciel grondant
L’ode ne pousse pas d’un souffle moins ardent
Le groupe des strophes ailées!

Je les vois reverdir dans leurs jeux éclatants,
Mes hymnes, parfumés comme un champ de printemps.
Ô vous, dont l’âme est épuisée,
Ô mes amis! l’enfance aux riantes couleurs
Donne la poésie à nos vers, comme aux fleurs
L’aurore donne la rosée!

Venez, enfants! - À vous jardins, cours, escaliers!
Ébranlez et planchers, et plafonds, et piliers!
Que le jour s’achève ou renaisse,
Courez et bourdonnez comme l’abeille aux champs!

Ma joie et mon bonheur et mon âme et mes chants
Iront où vous irez, jeunesse!

Il est pour les coeurs sourds aux vulgaires clameurs
D'harmonieuses voix, des accords, des rumeurs,
Qu'on n'entend que dans les retraites,
Notes d'un grand concert interrompu souvent,
Vents, flots, feuilles des bois, bruits dont l'âme en rêvant
Se fait des musiques secrètes!

Moi, quel que soit le monde et l'homme et l'avenir,
Soit qu'il faille oublier ou se ressouvenir,
Que Dieu m'afflige ou me console,
Je ne veux habiter la cité des vivants
Que dans une maison qu'une rumeur d'enfants
Fasse toujours vivante et folle.

De même, si jamais enfin je vous revois,
Beau pays dont la langue est faite pour ma voix,
Dont mes yeux aimaient les campagnes,
Bords où mes pas enfants suivaient Napoléon,
Fortes villes du Cid! ô Valence, ô Léon,
Castille, Aragon, mes Espagnes!

Je ne veux traverser vos plaines, vos cités,
Franchir vos ponts d'une arche entre deux monts jetés,
Voir vos palais romains ou maures,
Votre Guadalquivir qui serpente et s'enfuit,
Que dans ces chars dorés qu'emplissent de leur bruit
Les grelots des mules sonores.

XVI

Quand le livre où s’endort chaque soir ma pensée

Sed satis est jam posse mori. LUCAIN

Quand le livre où s’endort chaque soir ma pensée,
Quand l’air de la maison, les soucis du foyer,
Quand le bourdonnement de la ville insensée
Où toujours on entend quelque chose crier,

Quand tous ces mille soins de misère ou de fête
Qui remplissent nos jours, cercle aride et borné,
Ont tenu trop longtemps, comme un joug sur ma tête,
Le regard de mon âme à la terre tourné;

Elle s’échappe enfin, va, marche, et dans la plaine
Prend le même sentier qu’elle prendra demain,
Qui l’égare au hasard et toujours la ramène,
Comme un coursier prudent qui connaît le chemin.

Elle court aux forêts où dans l’ombre indécise
Flottent tant de rayons, de murmures, de voix,
Trouve la rêverie au premier arbre assise,
Et toutes deux s’en vont ensemble dans les bois!

XVII

Oh! pourquoi te cacher? Tu pleurais seule ici.

Flebile nescio quid. OVIDE.

Oh! pourquoi te cacher? Tu pleurais seule ici.
Devant tes yeux rêveurs qui donc passait ainsi?
Quelle ombre flottait dans ton âme?
Était-ce long regret ou noir pressentiment,
Ou jeunes souvenirs dans le passé dormant,
Ou vague faiblesse de femme?

Voyais-tu fuir déjà l'amour et ses douceurs,
Ou les illusions, toutes ces jeunes soeurs
Qui le matin, devant nos portes,
Dans l'avenir sans borne ouvrant mille chemins,
Dansent, des fleurs au front et les mains dans les mains,
Et bien avant le soir sont mortes?

Ou bien te venait-il des tombeaux endormis
Quelque ombre douloureuse avec des traits amis,
Te rappelant le peu d'années,
Et demandant tout bas quand tu viendrais le soir
Prier devant ces croix de pierre ou de bois noir
Où pendent tant de fleurs fanées?

Mais non, ces visions ne te poursuivaient pas.
Il suffit pour pleurer de songer qu'ici-bas
Tout miel est amer, tout ciel sombre,
Que toute ambition trompe l'effort humain,
Que l'espoir est un leurre, et qu'il n'est pas de main
Qui garde l'onde ou prenne l'ombre!

Toujours ce qui là-bas vole au gré du zéphyr
Avec des ailes d'or, de pourpre et de saphir,

Nous fait courir et nous devance;
Mais adieu l’aile d’or, pourpre, émail, vermillon,
Quand l’enfant a saisi le frêle papillon,
Quand l’homme a pris son espérance!

Pleure. Les pleurs vont bien, même au bonheur; tes chants
Sont plus doux dans les pleurs; tes yeux purs et touchants
Sont plus beaux quand tu les essuies.
L’été, quand il a plu, le champ est plus vermeil,
Et le ciel fait briller plus au beau soleil
Son azur lavé par les pluies!

Pleure comme Rachel, pleure comme Sara.
On a toujours souffert ou bien on souffrira.
Malheur aux insensés qui rient!
Le Seigneur nous relève alors que nous tombons.
Car s’il préfère encor les malheureux aux bons,
Ceux qui pleurent à ceux qui prient!

Pleure afin de savoir! Les larmes sont un don.
Souvent les pleurs, après l’erreur et l’abandon,
Raniment nos forces brisées!
Souvent l’âme, sentant, au doute qui s’enfuit,
Qu’un jour l’intérieur se lève dans sa nuit,
Répand de ces douces rosées!

Pleure! mais, tu fais bien, cache-toi pour pleurer.
Aie un asile en toi. Pour t’en désaltérer,
Pour les savourer avec charmes,
Sous le riche dehors de ta prospérité,
Dans le fond de ton coeur, comme un fruit pour l’été,
Mets à part ton trésor de larmes!

Car la fleur, qui s’ouvrit avec l’aurore en pleurs,
Et qui fait à midi de ses belles couleurs
Admirer la splendeur timide,
Sous ses corolles d’or, loin des yeux importuns,

Au fond de ce calice où sont tous ses parfums,
Souvent cache une perle humide!

XVIII

Où donc est le bonheur? disais-je. - Infortuné!

Sed satis est jam posse mori. LUCAIN

Où donc est le bonheur? disais-je. - Infortuné!
Le bonheur, ô mon Dieu, vous me l’avez donné.

Naître, et ne pas savoir que l’enfance éphémère,
Ruisseau de lait qui fuit sans une goutte amère,
Est l’âge du bonheur, et le plus beau moment
Que l’homme, ombre qui passe, ait sous le firmament!

Plus tard, aimer, - garder dans son coeur de jeune homme
Un nom mystérieux que jamais on ne nomme,
Glisser un mot furtif dans une tendre main,
Aspirer aux douceurs d’un ineffable hymen,
Envier l’eau qui fuit, le nuage qui vole,
Sentir son coeur se fondre au son d’une parole,
Connaître un pas qu’on aime et que jaloux on suit,
Rêver le jour, brûler et se tordre la nuit,
Pleurer surtout cet âge où sommeillent les âmes,
Toujours souffrir; parmi tous les regards de femmes,
Tous les buissons d’avril, les feux du ciel vermeil,
Ne chercher qu’un regard, qu’une fleur, qu’un soleil!

Puis effeuiller en hâte et d’une main jalouse
Les boutons d’orangers sur le front de l’épouse;
Tout sentir, être heureux, et pourtant, insensé!
Se tourner presque en pleurs vers le malheur passé;
Voir aux feux de midi, sans espoir qu’il renaisse,
Se faner son printemps, son matin, sa jeunesse,
Perdre l’illusion, l’espérance, et sentir
Qu’on vieillit au fardeau croissant du repentir!
Effacer de son front des taches et des rides;

S’éprendre d’art, de vers, de voyages arides,
De cieux lointains, de mers où s’égarent nos pas;
Redemander cet âge où l’on ne dormait pas;
Se dire qu’on était bien malheureux, bien triste,
Bien fou, que maintenant on respire, on existe,
Et, plus vieux de dix ans, s’enfermer tout un jour
Pour relire avec pleurs quelques lettres d’amour!

Vieillir enfin, vieillir! comme des fleurs fanées
Voir blanchir nos cheveux et tomber nos années,
Rappeler notre enfance et nos beaux jours flétris,
Boire le reste amer de ces parfums aigris,
Être sage, et railler l’amant et le poète,
Et, lorsque nous touchons à la tombe muette,
Suivre en les rappelant d’un oeil mouillé de pleurs
Nos enfants qui déjà sont tournés vers les leurs!

Ainsi l’homme, ô mon Dieu! marche toujours plus sombre
Du berceau qui rayonne au sépulcre plein d’ombre.
C’est donc avoir vécu! c’est donc avoir été!
Dans la joie et l’amour et la félicité
C’est avoir eu sa part! et se plaindre est folie.
Voilà de quel nectar la coupe est remplie!

Hélas! naître pour vivre en désirant la mort!
Grandir en regrettant l’enfance où le coeur dort,
Vieillir en regrettant la jeunesse ravie,
Mourir en regrettant la vieillesse et la vie!

Où donc est le bonheur, disais-je? - Infortuné!
Le bonheur, ô mon Dieu, vous me l’avez donné!

XIX

Lorsque l’enfant paraît, le cercle de famille

Le toit s’égaie et rit. ANDRÉ CHÉNIER.

Lorsque l’enfant paraît, le cercle de famille
Applaudit à grands cris; son doux regard qui brille
Fait briller tous les yeux,
Et les plus tristes fronts, les plus souillés peut-être,
Se dérident soudain à voir l’enfant paraître,
Innocent et joyeux.

Soit que juin ait verdi mon seuil, ou que novembre
Fasse autour d’un grand feu vacillant dans la chambre
Les chaises se toucher,
Quand l’enfant vient, la joie arrive et nous éclaire.
On rit, on se récrie, on l’appelle, et sa mère
Tremble à le voir marcher.

Quelquefois nous parlons, en remuant la flamme,
De patrie et de Dieu, des poètes, de l’âme
Qui s’élève en priant;
L’enfant paraît, adieu le ciel et la patrie
Et les poètes saints! la grave causerie
S’arrête en souriant.

La nuit, quand l’homme dort, quand l’esprit rêve, à l’heure
Où l’on entend gémir, comme une voix qui pleure,
L’onde entre les roseaux,
Si l’aube tout à coup là-bas luit comme un phare,
Sa clarté dans les champs éveille une fanfare
De cloches et d’oiseaux!

Enfant, vous êtes l’aube et mon âme est la plaine
Qui des plus douces fleurs embaume son haleine

Quand vous la respirez;
Mon âme est la forêt dont les sombres ramures
S’emplissent pour vous seul de suaves murmures
Et de rayons dorés!

Car vos beaux yeux sont pleins de douceurs infinies,
Car vos petites mains, joyeuses et bénies,
N’ont point mal fait encor;
Jamais vos jeunes pas n’ont touché notre fange,
Tête sacrée! enfant aux cheveux blonds! bel ange
À l’auréole d’or!

Vous êtes parmi nous la colombe de l’arche.
Vos pieds tendres et purs n’ont point l’âge où l’on marche;
Vos ailes sont d’azur.
Sans le comprendre encor vous regardez le monde.
Double virginité! corps où rien n’est immonde,
Âme où rien n’est impur!

Il est si beau, l’enfant, avec son doux sourire,
Sa douce bonne foi, sa voix qui veut tout dire,
Ses pleurs vite apaisés,
Laissant errer sa vue étonnée et ravie,
Offrant de toutes parts sa jeune âme à la vie
Et sa bouche aux baisers!

Seigneur! préservez-moi, préservez ceux que j’aime,
Frères, parents, amis, et mes ennemis même
Dans le mal triomphants,
De jamais voir, Seigneur! l’été sans fleurs vermeilles,
La cage sans oiseaux, la ruche sans abeilles,
La maison sans enfants!

XX

Dans l’alcôve sombre,

Beau, frais, souriant d’aise à cette vie amère. Sainte-Beuve.

Dans l’alcôve sombre,
Près d’un humble autel,
L’enfant dort à l’ombre
Du lit maternel.
Tandis qu’il repose,
Sa paupière rose,
Pour la terre close,
S’ouvre pour le ciel.

Il fait bien des rêves.
Il voit par moments
Le sable des grèves
Plein de diamants,
Des soleils de flammes,
Et de belles dames
Qui portent des âmes
Dans leurs bras charmants.

Songe qui l’enchante!
Il voit des ruisseaux.
Une voix qui chante
Sort du fond des eaux.
Ses sœurs sont plus belles.
Son père est près d’elles.
Sa mère a des ailes
Comme les oiseaux.

Il voit mille choses
Plus belles encor;
Des lys et des roses

Plein le corridor;
Des lacs de délice
Où le poisson glisse,
Où l’onde se plisse
À des roseaux d’or!

Enfant, rêve encore!
Dors, ô mes amours!
Ta jeune âme ignore
Où s’en vont tes jours.
Comme une algue morte
Tu vas, que t’importe!
Le courant t’emporte,
Mais tu dors toujours!

Sans soin, sans étude,
Tu dors en chemin;
Et l’inquiétude,
À la froide main,
De son ongle aride
Sur ton front candide
Qui n’a point de ride,
N’écrit pas: Demain!

Il dort, innocence!
Les anges sereins
Qui savent d’avance
Le sort des humains,
Le voyant sans armes,
Sans peur, sans alarmes,
Baisent avec larmes
Ses petites mains.

Leurs lèvres effleurent
Ses lèvres de miel.
L’enfant voit qu’ils pleurent
Et dit: Gabriel!

Mais l’ange le touche,
Et, berçant sa couche,
Un doigt sur sa bouche,
Lève l’autre au ciel!

Cependant sa mère,
Prompte à le bercer,
Croit qu’une chimère
Le vient oppresser.
Fière, elle l’admire,
L’entend qui soupire,
Et le fait sourire
Avec un baiser.

XXI

Parfois, lorsque tout dort, je m’assieds plein de joie

Tout est en harmonie avec moi de ce qui est en harmonie avec toi, ô monde; rien ne me vient trop tôt ou trop tard de ce qui vient à point pour toi; tout m’est fruit de ce qu’apportent tes saisons, ô nature; de toi toutes choses; en toi toutes choses; vers toi toutes choses. MARC-AURÈLE.

Parfois, lorsque tout dort, je m’assieds plein de joie
Sous le dôme étoilé qui sur nos fronts flamboie;
J’écoute si d’en haut il tombe quelque bruit;
Et l’heure vainement me frappe de son aile
Quand je contemple, ému, cette fête éternelle
Que le ciel rayonnant donne au monde la nuit!

Souvent alors j’ai cru que ces soleils de flamme
Dans ce monde endormi n’échauffaient que mon âme;
Qu’à les comprendre seul j’étais prédestiné;
Que j’étais, moi, vaine ombre obscure et taciturne,
Le roi mystérieux de la pompe nocturne;
Que le ciel pour moi seul s’était illuminé!

XXII

À UNE FEMME

C’est une âme charmante. DIDEROT.

Enfant! si j’étais roi, je donnerais l’empire,
Et mon char, et mon sceptre, et mon peuple à genoux,
  Et ma couronne d’or, et mes bains de porphyre,
  Et mes flottes, à qui la mer ne peut suffire,
  Pour un regard de vous!

  Si j’étais Dieu, la terre et l’air avec les ondes,
  Les anges, les démons courbés devant ma loi,
  Et le profond chaos aux entrailles fécondes,
  L’éternité, l’espace, et les cieux, et les mondes,
  Pour un baiser de toi!

XXIII

Oh! qui que vous soyez, jeune ou vieux, riche ou sage,

Quien no ama, no vive.

Oh! qui que vous soyez, jeune ou vieux, riche ou sage,
Si jamais vous n’avez épié le passage,
Le soir, d’un pas léger, d’un pas mélodieux,
D’un voile blanc qui glisse et fuit dans les ténèbres,
Et, comme un météore au sein des nuits funèbres,
Vous laisse dans le coeur un sillon radieux;

Si vous ne connaissez que pour l’entendre dire
Au poète amoureux qui chante et qui soupire,
Ce suprême bonheur qui fait nos jours dorés,
De posséder un coeur sans réserve et sans voiles,
De n’avoir pour flambeaux, de n’avoir pour étoiles,
De n’avoir pour soleils que deux yeux adorés;

Si vous n’avez jamais attendu, morne et sombre,
Sous les vitres d’un bal qui rayonne dans l’ombre,
L’heure où pour le départ les portes s’ouvriront,
Pour voir votre beauté, comme un éclair qui brille,
Rose avec des yeux bleus et toute jeune fille,
Passer dans la lumière avec des fleurs au front;

Si vous n’avez jamais senti la frénésie
De voir la main qu’on veut par d’autres mains choisie,
De voir le coeur aimé battre sur d’autres coeurs;
Si vous n’avez jamais vu d’un oeil de colère
La valse impure, au vol lascif et circulaire,
Effeuiller en courant les femmes et les fleurs;

Si jamais vous n’avez descendu les collines,
Le coeur tout débordant d’émotions divines;

Si jamais vous n’avez, le soir, sous les tilleuls,
Tandis qu’au ciel luisaient des étoiles sans nombre,
Aspiré, couple heureux, la volupté de l’ombre,
Cachés, et vous parlant tout bas, quoique tout seuls;

Si jamais une main n’a fait trembler la vôtre;
Si jamais ce seule mot qu’on dit l’un après l’autre,
JE T’AIME! n’a rempli votre âme tout un jour;
Si jamais vous n’avez pris en pitié les trônes
En songeant qu’on cherchait les sceptres, les couronnes,
Et la gloire, et l’empire, et qu’on avait l’amour!

La nuit, quand la veilleuse agonise dans l’urne,
Quand Paris, enfoui sous la brume nocturne
Avec la tour saxonne et l’église des Goths,
Laisse sans les compter passer les heures noires
Qui, douze fois, semant les rêves illusoires,
S’envolent des clochers par groupes inégaux;

Si jamais vous n’avez, à l’heure où tout sommeille,
Tandis qu’elle dormait, oublieuse et vermeille,
Pleuré comme un enfant à force de souffrir,
Crié cent fois son nom du soir jusqu’à l’aurore,
Et cru qu’elle viendrait en l’appelant encore,
Et maudit votre mère, et désiré mourir;

Si jamais vous n’avez senti que d’une femme
Le regard dans votre âme allumait une autre âme,
Que vous étiez charmé, qu’un ciel s’était ouvert,
Et que pour cette enfant, qui de vos pleurs se joue,
Il vous serait bien doux, d’expirer sur la roue;..
Vous n’avez point aimé, vous n’avez point souffert!

XXIV

Madame, autour de vous tant de grâce étincelle,

Mens blanda in corpore blando.

Madame, autour de vous tant de grâce étincelle,
Votre chant est si pur, votre danse recèle
Un charme si vainqueur,
Un si touchant regard baigne votre prunelle,
Toute votre personne a quelque chose en elle
De si doux pour le coeur,

Que, lorsque vous venez, jeune astre qu'on admire,
Éclairer notre nuit d'un rayonnant sourire
Qui nous fait palpiter,
Comme l'oiseau des bois devant l'aube vermeille,
Une tendre pensée au fond des coeurs s'éveille
Et se met à chanter!

Vous ne l'entendez pas, vous l'ignorez, madame.
Car la chaste pudeur enveloppe votre âme
De ses voiles jaloux,
Et l'ange que le ciel commit à votre garde
N'a jamais à rougir quand, rêveur, il regarde
Ce qui se passe en vous.

XXV

Contempler dans son bain sans voiles

Amor, ch’a null’ amato amar perdona,
Mi prese del costui placer si forte
Che, come vedi, ancor non m’abbandona. DANTE.

Contempler dans son bain sans voiles
Une fille aux yeux innocents;
Suivre de loin de blanches voiles;
Voir au ciel briller les étoiles
Et sous l’herbe les vers luisants;

Voir autour des mornes idoles
Des sultanes danser en rond;
D’un bal compter les girandoles;
La nuit, voir sur l’eau les gondoles
Fuir avec une étoile au front;

Regarder la lune sereine;
Dormir sous l’arbre du chemin;
Être le roi lorsque la reine,
Par son sceptre d’or souveraine,
L’est aussi par sa blanche main;

Ouïr sur les harpes jalouses
Se plaindre la romance en pleurs;
Errer, pensif, sur les pelouses,
Le soir, lorsque les andalouses
De leurs balcons jettent des fleurs;

Rêver, tandis que les rosées
Pleuvent d’un beau ciel espagnol,
Et que les notes embrasées
S’épanouissent en fusées

Dans la chanson du rossignol;

Ne plus se rappeler le nombre
De ses jours, songes oubliés;
Suivre fuyant dans la nuit sombre
Un Esprit qui traîne dans l’ombre
Deux sillons de flamme à ses pieds;

Des boutons d’or qu’avril étale
Dépouiller le riche gazon;
Voir, après l’absence fatale,
Enfin, de sa ville natale
Grandir la flèche à l’horizon;

Non, tout ce qu’a la destinée
De bien réels ou fabuleux
N’est rien pour mon âme enchaînée
Quand tu regardes inclinée
Mes yeux noirs avec tes yeux bleus!

XXVI

Vois, cette branche est rude, elle est noire, et la nue

Ô que les tendres propos et les charmantes choses
Que me disait Aline en la saison des roses!
Doux zéphyrs qui passiez alors ces beaux lieux,
N’en rapportiez-vous rien à l’oreille des dieux?
SEGRAIS.

Vois, cette branche est rude, elle est noire, et la nue
Verse la pluie à flots sur son écorce nue;
Mais attends que l’hiver s’en aille, et tu vas voir
Une feuille percer ces noeuds si dur pour elle,
Et tu demanderas comment un bourgeon frêle
Peut, si tendre et si vert, jaillir de ce bois noir.

Demande alors pourquoi, ma jeune bien-aimée,
Quand sur mon âme, hélas! endurcie et fermée,
Ton souffle passe, après tant de maux expiés,
Pourquoi remonte et court ma sève évanouie,
Pourquoi mon âme en fleur et tout épanouie
Jette soudain des vers que j’effeuille à tes pieds!

C’est que tout a sa loi, le monde et la fortune;
C’est qu’une claire nuit succède aux nuits sans lune;
C’est que tout ici-bas a ses reflux constants;
C’est qu’il faut l’arbre au vent et la feuille au zéphyre;
C’est qu’après le malheur m’est venu ton sourire;
C’est que c’était l’hiver et que c’est le printemps!

XXVII

À MES AMIS L. B. ET S.-B.

Here’s a sigh to those who love me,
And a smile to those who hate;
And whatever sky’s above me,
Here’s a heart for every fate.
BYRON.

Amis! c’est donc Rouen, la ville aux vieilles rues,
Aux vieilles tours, débris des races disparues,
La ville aux cent clochers carillonnant dans l’air,
Le Rouen des châteaux, des hôtels, des bastilles,
Dont le front hérissé de flèches et d’aiguilles
Déchire incessamment les brumes de la mer;

C’est Rouen qui vous a! Rouen qui vous enlève!
Je ne m’en plaindrai pas. J’ai souvent fait ce rêve
D’aller voir Saint-Ouen à moitié démoli,
Et tout m’a retenu, la famille, l’étude,
Mille soins, et surtout la vague inquiétude
Qui fait que l’homme craint son désir accompli.

J’ai différé. La vie à différer se passe.
De projets en projets et d’espace en espace
Le fol esprit de l’homme en tout temps s’envola.
Un jour enfin, lassés du songe qui nous leurre,
Nous disons: “ Il est temps. Exécutons! c’est l’heure.”
Alors nous retournons les yeux: - la mort est là!

Ainsi de mes projets. - Quand vous verrai-je, Espagne,
Et Venise et son golfe, et Rome et sa campagne,
Toi, Sicile que ronge un volcan souterrain,
Grèce qu’on connaît trop, Sardaigne qu’on ignore,
Cités de l’aquilon, du couchant, de l’aurore,

Pyramides du Nil, cathédrales du Rhin!

Qui sait? Jamais peut-être. - Et quand m’abriterai-je
Près de la mer, ou bien sous un mont blanc de neige,
Dans quelque vieux donjon, tout plein d’un vieux héros,
Où le soleil, dorant les tourelles du faîte,
N’enverra sur mon front que des rayons de fête
Teints de pourpre et d’azur au prisme des vitraux?

Jamais non plus, sans doute. - En attendant, vaine ombre,
Oublié dans l’espace et perdu dans le nombre,
Je vis. J’ai trois enfants en cercle à mon foyer;
Et lorsque la sagesse entr’ouvre un peu ma porte,
Elle me crie: Ami! sois content. Que t’importe
Cette tente d’un jour qu’il faut sitôt ployer!

Et puis, dans mon esprit, des choses que j’espère
Je me fais cent récits, comme à son fils un père.
Ce que je voudrais voir je le rêve si beau!
Je vois en moi des tours, des Romes, des Cordoues,
Qui jettent mille feux, muse, quand tu secoues
Sous leurs sombres piliers ton magique flambeau!

Ce sont des Alhambras, de hautes cathédrales,
Des Babels, dans la nue enfonçant leurs spirales,
De noirs Escurials, mystérieux séjour,
Des villes d’autrefois, peintes et dentelées,
Où chantent jour et nuit mille cloches ailées,
Joyeuses d’habiter dans des clochers à jour!

Et je rêve! Et jamais villes impériales
N’éclipseront ce rêve aux splendeurs idéales.
Gardons l’illusion; elle fuit assez tôt.
Chaque homme, dans son coeur, crée à sa fantaisie
Tout un monde enchanté d’art et de poésie.
C’est notre Chanaan que nous voyons d’en haut.

Restons où nous voyons. Pourquoi vouloir descendre,
Et toucher ce qu’on rêve, et marcher dans la cendre?
Que ferons-nous après? où descendre? où courir?
Plus de but à chercher! plus d’espoir qui séduise!
De la terre donnée à la terre promise
Nul retour; et Moïse a bien fait de mourir!

Restons loin des objets dont la vue est charmée.
L’arc-en-ciel est vapeur, le nuage est fumée.
L’idéal tombe en poudre au toucher du réel.
L’âme en songes de gloire ou d’amour se consume.
Comme un enfant qui souffle en un flocon d’écume,
Chaque homme enfle une bulle où se reflète un ciel!

Frêle bulle d’azur, au roseau suspendue,
Qui tremble au moindre choc et vacille éperdue!
Voilà tous nos projets, nos plaisirs, notre bruit!
Folle création qu’un zéphyr inquiète!
Sphère aux mille couleurs, d’une goutte d’eau faite!
Monde qu’un souffle crée et qu’un souffle détruit!

Le saurons-nous jamais? - Qui percera nos voiles,
Noirs firmaments, semés de nuages d’étoiles?
Mer, qui peut dans ton lit descendre et regarder?
Où donc est la science? Où donc est l’origine?
Cherchez au fond des mers cette perle divine,
Et, l’océan connu, l’âme reste à sonder!

Que faire et que penser? - Nier, douter, ou croire?
Carrefour ténébreux! triple route! nuit noire!
Le plus sage s’assied sous l’arbre du chemin,
Disant tout bas: J’irai, Seigneur, où tu m’envoies.
Il espère, et, de loin, dans les trois sombres voies,
Il écoute, pensif, marcher le genre humain!

XXVIII

À MES AMIS S.-B. ET L. B.

Buen viage! GOYA.

Amis, mes deux amis, mon peintre, mon poète!
Vous me manquez toujours, et mon âme inquiète
Vous redemande ici.
Des deux amis, si chers à ma lyre engourdie,
Pas un ne m’est resté. Je t’en veux, Normandie,
De me les prendre ainsi!

Ils emportent en eux toute ma poésie;
L’un, avec son doux luth de miel et d’ambroisie,
L’autre avec ses pinceaux.
Peinture et poésie où s’abreuvait ma muse,
Adieu votre onde! Adieu l’Alphée et l’Aréthuse
Dont je mêlais les eaux!

Adieu surtout ces coeurs et ces âmes si hautes,
Dont toujours j’ai trouvé pour mes maux et mes fautes
Si tendre la pitié!
Adieu toute la joie à leur commerce unie!
Car tous deux, ô douceur! si divers de génie,
Ont la même amitié!

Je crois d’ici les voir, le poète et le peintre.
Ils s’en vont, raisonnant de l’ogive et du cintre
Devant un vieux portail;
Ou, soudain, à loisir, changeant de fantaisie,
Poursuivent un oeil noir dessous la jalousie,
À travers l’éventail.

Oh! de la jeune fille et du vieux monastère,
Toi, peins-nous la beauté, toi, dis-nous le mystère.

Charmez-nous tour à tour.
À travers le blanc voile et la muraille grise
Votre oeil, ô mes amis, sait voir Dieu dans l’église,
Dans la femme l’amour!

Marchez, frères jumeaux, l’artiste avec l’apôtre!
L’un nous peint l’univers que nous explique l’autre;
Car, pour notre bonheur,
Chacun de vous sur terre a sa part qu’il réclame.
À toi, peintre, le monde! à toi, poète, l’âme!
À tous deux le Seigneur!

XXIX

LA PENTE DE LA RÊVERIE

Obscuritate rerum verba saepè obscurantur. GERVASIUS TILBERIENSIS.

Amis, ne creusez pas vos chères rêveries;
Ne fouillez pas le sol de vos plaines fleuries;
Et quand s'offre à vos yeux un océan qui dort,
Nagez à la surface ou jouez sur le bord;
Car la pensée est sombre! Une pente insensible
Va du monde réel à la sphère invisible;
La spirale est profonde, et quand on y descend,
Sans cesse se prolonge et va s'élargissant,
Et pour avoir touché quelque énigme fatale,
De ce voyage obscur souvent on revient pâle!

L'autre jour, il venait de pleuvoir, car l'été,
Cette année, est de bise et de pluie attristé,
Et le beau mois de mai dont le rayon nous leurre,
Prend le masque d'avril qui sourit et qui pleure.
J'avais levé le store aux gothiques couleurs.
Je regardais au loin les arbres et les fleurs.
Le soleil se jouait sur la pelouse verte
Dans les gouttes de pluie, et ma fenêtre ouverte
Apportait du jardin à mon esprit heureux
Un bruit d'enfants joueurs et d'oiseaux amoureux.
Paris, les grands ormeaux, maison, dôme, chaumière,
Tout flottait à mes yeux dans la riche lumière
De cet astre de mai dont le rayon charmant
Au bout de tout brin d'herbe allume un diamant!
Je me laissais aller à ces trois harmonies,
Printemps, matin, enfance, en ma retraite unies;
La Seine, ainsi que moi, laissait son flot vermeil
Suivre nonchalamment sa pente, et le soleil
Faisait évaporer à la fois sur les grèves

L’eau du fleuve en brouillards et ma pensée en rêves!

Alors, dans mon esprit, je vis autour de moi
Mes amis, non confus, mais tels que je les voi
Quand ils viennent le soir, troupe grave et fidèle,
Vous avec vos pinceaux dont la pointe étincelle,
Vous, laissant échapper vos vers au vol ardent,
Et nous tous écoutant en cercle, ou regardant.
Ils étaient bien là tous, je voyais leurs visages,
Tous, même les absents qui font de longs voyages.
Puis tous ceux qui sont morts vinrent après ceux-ci,
Avec l’air qu’ils avaient quand ils vivaient aussi.
Quand j’eus, quelques instants, des yeux de ma pensée,
Contemplé leur famille à mon foyer pressée,
Je vis trembler leurs traits confus, et par degrés
Pâlir en s’effaçant leurs fronts décolorés,
Et tous, comme un ruisseau qui dans un lac s’écoule,
Se perdre autour de moi dans une immense foule.
Foule sans nom! chaos! des voix, des yeux, des pas.
Ceux qu’on n’a jamais vus, ceux qu’on ne connaît pas.
Tous les vivants! - cités bourdonnant aux oreilles
Plus qu’un bois d’Amérique ou des ruches d’abeilles,
Caravanes campant sur le désert en feu,
Matelots dispersés sur l’océan de Dieu,
Et, comme un pont hardi sur l’onde qui chavire,
Jetant d’un monde à l’autre un sillon de navire,
Ainsi que l’araignée entre deux chênes verts
Jette un fil argenté qui flotte dans les airs!

Les deux pôles! le monde entier! la mer, la terre,
Alpes aux fronts de neige, Etnas au noir cratère,
Tout à la fois, automne, été, printemps, hiver,
Les vallons descendant de la terre à la mer
Et s’y changeant en golfe, et des mers aux campagnes
Les caps épanouis en chaînes de montagnes,
Et les grands continents, brumeux, verts ou dorés,
Par les grands océans sans cesse dévorés,

Tout, comme un paysage en une chambre noire
Se réfléchit avec ses rivières de moire.
Ses passants, ses brouillards flottant comme un duvet,
Tout dans mon esprit sombre allait, marchait, vivait!
Alors, en attachant, toujours plus attentives,
Ma pensée et ma vue aux mille perspectives
Que le souffle du vent ou le pas des saisons
M’ouvrait à tous moments dans tous les horizons,
Je vis soudain surgir, parfois du sein des ondes,
À côté des cités vivantes des deux mondes,
D’autres villes aux fronts étranges, inouïs,
Sépulcres ruinés des temps évanouis,
Pleines d’entassements, de tours de pyramides,
Baignant leurs pieds aux mers, leur tête aux cieux humides.
Quelques-unes sortaient de dessous des cités
Où les vivants encor bruissent agités,
Et des siècles passés jusqu’à l’âge où nous sommes
Je pus compter ainsi trois étages de Romes.
Et tandis qu’élevant leurs inquiètes voix,
Les cités des vivants résonnaient à la fois
Des murmures du peuple ou du pas des armées,
Ces villes du passé, muettes et fermées,
Sans fumée à leurs toits, sans rumeurs dans leurs seins,
Se taisaient, et semblaient des ruches sans essaims.

J’attendais. Un grand bruit se fit. Les races mortes
De ces villes en deuil vinrent ouvrir les portes,
Et je les vis marcher ainsi que les vivants,
Et jeter seulement plus de poussière aux vents.
Alors, tours, aqueducs, pyramides, colonnes,
Je vis l’intérieur des vieilles Babylones,
Les Carthages, les Tyrs, les Thèbes, les Sions,
D’où sans cesse sortaient des générations.

Ainsi j’embrassais tout: et la terre, et Cybèle;
La face antique auprès de la face nouvelle;
Le passé, le présent; les vivants et les morts;

Le genre humain complet comme au jour du remords.
Tout parlait à la fois, tout se faisait comprendre,
Le pelage d’Orphée et l’étrusque d’Évandre,
Les runes d’Irmensul, le sphinx égyptien,
La voix du nouveau monde aussi vieux que l’ancien.

Or ce que je voyais, je doute que je puisse
Vous le peindre: c’était comme un grand édifice
Formé d’entassements de siècles et de lieux;
On n’en pouvait trouver les bords ni les milieux;
À toutes les hauteurs, nations, peuples, races,
Mille ouvriers humains, laissant partout leurs traces,
Travaillaient nuit et jour, montant, croisant leurs pas,
Parlant chacun leur langue et ne s’entendant pas;
Et moi je parcourais, cherchant qui me réponde,
De degrés en degrés cette Babel du monde.

La nuit avec la foule, en ce rêve hideux,
Venait, s’épaississant ensemble toutes deux,
Et, dans ces régions que nul regard ne sonde,
Plus l’homme était nombreux, plus l’ombre était profonde.
Tout devenait douteux et vague, seulement
Un souffle qui passait de moment en moment,
Comme pour me montrer l’immense fourmilière,
Ouvrait dans l’ombre au loin des vallons de lumière,
Ainsi qu’un coup de vent fait sur les flots troublés
Blanchir l’écume, ou creuse une onde dans les blés.

Bientôt autour de moi les ténèbres s’accrurent,
L’horizon se perdit, les formes disparurent,
Et l’homme avec la chose et l’être avec l’esprit
Flottèrent à mon souffle, et le frisson me prit.
J’étais seul. Tout fuyait. L’étendue était sombre.
Je voyais seulement au loin, à travers l’ombre,
Comme d’un océan les flots noirs et pressés,
Dans l’espace et le temps les nombres entassés!

Oh! cette double mer du temps et de l’espace
Où le navire humain toujours passe et repasse,
Je voulus la sonder, je voulus en toucher
Le sable, y regarder, y fouiller, y chercher,
Pour vous en rapporter quelque richesse étrange,
Et dire si son lit est de roche ou de fange.
Mon esprit plongea donc sous ce flot inconnu,
Au profond de l’abîme il nagea seul et nu,
Toujours de l’ineffable allant à l’invisible...
Soudain il s’en revint avec un cri terrible,
Ébloui, haletant, stupide, épouvanté,
Car il avait au fond trouvé l’éternité.

XXX

SOUVENIR D’ENFANCE

à Joseph, comte de S.

Cuncta supercilio. HORACE.

Dans une grande fête, un jour, au Panthéon,
J’avais sept ans, je vis passer Napoléon.

Pour voir cette figure illustre et solennelle,
Je m’étais échappé de l’aile maternelle;
Car il tenait déjà mon esprit inquiet;
Mais ma mère aux doux yeux, qui souvent s’effrayait
En m’entendant parler guerre, assauts et bataille,
Craignait pour moi la foule, à cause de ma taille.

Et ce qui me frappa, dans ma sainte terreur,
Quand au front du cortège apparut l’empereur,
Tandis que les enfants demandaient à leurs mères
Si c’est là ce héros dont on fait cent chimères,
Ce ne fut pas de voir tout ce peuple à grand bruit
Le suivre comme on suit un phare dans la nuit,
Et se montrer de loin sur sa tête suprême
Ce chapeau tout usé plus beau qu’un diadème,
Ni, pressés sur ses pas, dix vassaux couronnés
Regarder en tremblant ses pieds éperonnés,
Ni ses vieux grenadiers, se faisant violence,
Des cris universels s’enivrer en silence;
Non, tandis qu’à genoux la ville tout en feu,
Joyeuse comme on est lorsqu’on a qu’un seul voeu,
Qu’on n’est qu’un même peuple et qu’ensemble on respire
Chantait en choeur: VEILLONS AU SALUT DE L’EMPIRE!

Ce qui me frappa, dis-je, et me resta gravé,

Même après que le cri sur sa route élevé
Se fut évanoui dans ma jeune mémoire,
Ce fut de voir, parmi ces fanfares de gloire,
Dans le bruit qu’il faisait, cet homme souverain
Passer, muet et grave, ainsi qu’un dieu d’airain!

Et le soir, curieux, je le dis à mon père,
Pendant qu’il défaisait son vêtement de guerre,
Et que je me jouais sur son dos indulgent
De l’épaulette d’or aux étoiles d’argent.

Mon père secoua la tête sans réponse.

Mais souvent une idée en notre esprit s’enfonce,
Ce qui nous a frappés nous revient par moments,
Et l’enfance naïve a ses étonnements.

Le lendemain, pour voir le soleil qui s’incline,
J’avais suivi mon père du haut de la colline
Qui domine Paris du côté du levant,
Et nous allions tous deux, lui pensant, moi rêvant.
Cet homme en mon esprit restait comme un prodige,
Et, parlant à mon père: “ Ô mon père, lui dis-je,
Pourquoi notre empereur, cet envoyé de Dieu,
Lui qui fait tout mouvoir et qui met tout en feu,
A-t-il ce regard froid et cet air immobile?”
Mon père dans ses mains prit ma tête débile,
Et, me montrant au loin l’horizon spacieux:
“ Vois, mon fils! cette terre, immobile à tes yeux,
Plus que l’air, plus que l’onde et la flamme, est émue,
Car le germe de tout dans son ventre remue.
Dans ses flancs ténébreux, nuit et jour, en rampant,
Elle sent se plonger la racine, serpent
Qui s’abreuve aux ruisseaux des sèves toujours prêtes,
Et fouille et boit sans cesse avec ses mille têtes.
Mainte flamme y ruisselle, et tantôt lentement
Imbibe le cristal qui devient diamant,

Tantôt, dans quelque mine éblouissante et sombre,
Allume des monceaux d’escarboucles sans nombre,
Ou, s’échappant au jour, plus magnifique encor,
Au front du vieil Etna met une aigrette d’or.
Toujours l’intérieur de la terre travaille.
Son flanc universel incessamment tressaille.
Goutte à goutte, et sans bruit qui réponde à son bruit,
La source de tout fleuve y filtre dans la nuit.
Elle porte à la fois, sur sa face où nous sommes,
Les blés et les cités, les forêts et les hommes.
Vois, tout est vert au loin, tout rit, tout est vivant.
Elle livre le chêne et le brin d’herbe au vent.
Les fruits et les épis la couvrent à cette heure.
Eh bien! déjà, tandis que ton regard l’effleure,
Dans son sein, que n’épuise aucun enfantement,
Les futures moissons tremblent confusément!

“ Ainsi travaille, enfant, l’âme active et féconde
Du poète qui crée et du soldat qui fonde.
Mais ils n’en font rien voir. De la flamme à pleins bords,
Qui les brûle au dedans, rien ne luit au dehors.
Ainsi Napoléon, que l’éclat environne
Et qui fit tant de bruit en forgeant sa couronne,
Ce chef que tout célèbre et que pourtant tu vois
Immobile et muet, passer sur le pavois,
Quand le peuple l’étreint, sent en lui ses pensées,
Qui l’étreignent aussi, se mouvoir plus pressées.
Déjà peut-être en lui mille choses se font,
Et tout l’avenir germe en son cerveau profond.
Déjà dans sa pensée, immense et clairvoyante,
L’Europe ne fait plus qu’une France géante,
Berlin, Vienne, Madrid, Moscou, Londres, Milan,
Viennent rendre à Paris hommage une fois l’an,
Le Vatican n’est plus que le vassal du Louvre,
La terre à chaque instant sous les vieux trônes s’ouvre,
Et de tous leurs débris sort pour le genre humain
Un autre Charlemagne, un autre globe en main!

Et, dans le même esprit où ce grand dessein roule,
Les bataillons futurs déjà marchent en foule,
Le conscrit résigné, sous un avis fréquent,
Se dresse, le tambour résonne au front du camp,
D’ouvriers et d’outils Cherbourg couvre sa grève,
Le vaisseau colossal sur le chantier s’élève,
L’obusier rouge encor sort du fourneau qui bout,
Une marine flotte, une armée est debout!
Car la guerre toujours l’illumine et l’enflamme,
Et peut-être déjà, dans la nuit de cette âme,
Sous ce crâne, où le monde en silence est couvé,
D’un second Austerlitz le soleil s’est levé!”

Plus tard, une autre fois, je vis passer cet homme,
Plus grand dans son Paris que César dans sa Rome.
Des discours de mon père alors je me souvins.
On l’entourait encor d’honneurs presque divins,
Et je lui retrouvai, rêveur à son passage,
Et la même pensée et le même visage.
Il méditait toujours son projet surhumain.
Cent aigles l’escortaient en empereur romain.
Ses régiments marchaient, enseignes déployées;
Ses lourds canons, baissant leurs boucles essuyées,
Couraient, et, traversant la foule aux pas confus,
Avec un bruit d’airain sautaient sur leurs affûts.
Mais bientôt, au soleil, cette tête admirée
Disparut dans un flot de poussière dorée,
Il passa. Cependant son nom sur la cité
Bondissait, des canons aux cloches rejeté;
Son cortège emplissait de tumulte les rues,
Et, par mille clameurs de sa présence accrues,
Par mille cris de joie et d’amour furieux,
Le peuple saluait ce passant glorieux!

XXXI

À MADAME MARIE M.

Ave, Maria, gratia plena.

Oh! votre oeil est timide et votre front est doux.
Mais quoique, par pudeur ou par pitié pour nous,
Vous teniez secrète votre âme,
Quand du souffle d’en haut votre coeur est touché,
Votre coeur, comme un feu sous la cendre caché,
Soudain étincelle et s’enflamme.

Élevez-là souvent cette voix qui se tait.
Quand vous vîntes au jour un rossignol chantait;
Un astre charmant vous vit naître.
Enfant, pour vous marquer du poétique sceau,
Vous eûtes au chevet de votre heureux berceau
Un dieu, votre père peut-être!

Deux vierges, Poésie et Musique, deux soeurs,
Vous font une pensée infinie en douceurs;
Votre génie a deux aurores,
Et votre esprit tantôt s’épanche en vers touchants,
Tantôt sur le clavier, qui frémit sous vos chants,
S’éparpille en notes sonores!

Oh! vous faites rêver le poète, le soir!
Souvent il songe à vous, lorsque le ciel est noir,
Quand minuit déroule ses voiles;
Car l’âme du poète, âme d’ombre et d’amour,
Est une fleur des nuits qui s’ouvre après le jour
Et s’épanouit aux étoiles!

XXXII

POUR LES PAUVRES

Qui donne au pauvre prête à Dieu. V.H.

Dans vos fêtes d’hiver, riches, heureux du monde,
Quand le bal tournoyant de ses feux vous inonde,
Quand partout à l’entour de vos pas vous voyez
Briller et rayonner cristaux, miroirs, balustres,
Candélabres ardents, cercle étoilé des lustres,
Et la danse, et la joie au front des conviés;

Tandis qu’un timbre d’or sonnant dans vos demeures
Vous change en joyeux chant la voix grave des heures,
Oh! songez-vous parfois que, de faim dévoré,
Peut-être un indigent dans les carrefours sombres
S’arrête, et voit danser vos lumineuses ombres
Aux vitres du salon doré;

Songez-vous qu’il est là sous le givre et la neige,
Ce père sans travail que la famine assiège?
Et qu’il se dit tout bas: “ Pour un seul que de biens!
À son large festin que d’amis se récrient!
Ce riche est bien heureux, ses enfants lui sourient!
Rien que dans leurs jouets que de pain pour les miens!”

Et puis à votre fête il compare en son âme
Son foyer où jamais ne rayonne une flamme,
Ses enfants affamés, et leur mère en lambeau,
Et, sur un peu de paille, étendue et muette,
L’aïeule, que l’hiver, hélas! a déjà faite
Assez froide pour le tombeau!

Car Dieu mit ces degrés aux fortunes humaines.
Les uns vont tout courbés sous le fardeau des peines;

Au banquet du bonheur bien peu sont conviés.
Tous n’y sont point assis également à l’aise.
Une loi, qui d’en bas semble injuste et mauvaise,
Dit aux uns: JOUISSEZ! aux autres: ENVIEZ!

Cette pensée est sombre, amère, inexorable,
Et fermente en silence au coeur du misérable.
Riches, heureux du jour, qu’endort la volupté,
Que ce ne soit pas lui qui des mains vous arrache
Tous ces biens superflus où son regard s’attache; -
Oh! que ce soit la charité!

L’ardente charité, que le pauvre idolâtre!
Mère de ceux pour qui la fortune est marâtre,
Qui relève et soutient ceux qu’on foule en passant,
Qui, lorsqu’il le faudra, se sacrifiant toute,
Comme le Dieu martyr dont elle suit la route,
Dira: “ Buvez! mangez! c’est ma chair et mon sang.”

Que ce soit elle, oh! oui, riches! que ce soit elle
Qui, bijoux, diamants, rubans, hochets, dentelle,
Perles, saphirs, joyaux toujours faux, toujours vains,
Pour nourrir l’indigent et pour sauver vos âmes,
Des bras de vos enfants et du sein de vos femmes
Arrache tout à pleines mains!

Donnez, riches! L’aumône est soeur de la prière.
Hélas! quand un vieillard, sur votre seuil de pierre,
Tout roidi par l’hiver, en vain tombe à genoux;
Quand les petits enfants, les mains de froid rougies,
Ramassent sous vos pieds les miettes des orgies,
La face du Seigneur se détourne de vous.

Donnez! afin que Dieu, qui dote les familles,
Donne à vos fils la force, et la grâce à vos filles;
Afin que votre vigne ait toujours un doux fruit;
Afin qu’un blé plus mûr fasse plier vos granges;

Afin d’être meilleurs; afin de voir les anges
Passer dans vos rêves la nuit!

Donnez! il vient un jour où la terre nous laisse.
Vos aumônes là-haut vous font une richesse.
Donnez! afin qu’on dise: “ Il a pitié de nous!”
Afin que l’indigent que glacent les tempêtes,
Que le pauvre qui souffre à côté de vos fêtes,
Au seuil de vos palais fixe un oeil moins jaloux.

Donnez! pour être aimés du Dieu qui se fit homme,
Pour que le méchant même en s’inclinant vous nomme,
Pour que votre foyer soit calme et fraternel;
Donnez! afin qu’un jour à votre heure dernière,
Contre tous vos péchés vous ayez la prière
D’un mendiant puissant au ciel!

XXXIII

A ***, TRAPPISTE À LA MEILLERAYE

T'is vain to struggle - let me perish young -
Live as I have lived; and love as I have loved;
To dust if I return, from dust I sprung,
And then, at least, my heart can ne'er be moved. BYRON.

Mon frère, la tempête a donc été bien forte,
Le vent impétueux qui souffle et nous emporte
De récif en récif
A donc, quand vous partiez, d'une aile bien profonde
Creusé le vaste abîme et bouleversé l'onde
Autour de votre esquif,

Que tour à tour, en hâte, et de peur du naufrage,
Pour alléger la nef en butte au sombre orage,
En proie au flot amer,
Il a fallu, plaisirs, liberté, fantaisie,
Famille, amour, trésors, jusqu'à la poésie,
Tout jeter à la mer!

Et qu'enfin, seul et nu, vous voguez solitaire,
Allant où va le flot, sans jamais prendre terre,
Calme, vivant de peu.
Ayant dans votre esquif, qui des nôtres s'isole,
Deux choses seulement, la voile et la boussole,
Votre âme et votre Dieu!

XXXIV

BIÈVRE

À Mademoiselle Louise B.

Un horizon fait à souhait pour le plaisir des yeux. FÉNELON.

I

Oui, c'est bien le vallon! le vallon calme et sombre!
Ici l'été plus frais s'épanouit à l'ombre.
Ici durent longtemps les fleurs qui durent peu.
Ici l'âme contemple, écoute, adore, aspire,
Et prend pitié du monde, étroit et fol empire
Où l'homme tous les jours fait moins de place à Dieu!

Une rivière au fond; des bois sur les deux pentes.
Là, des ormeaux, brodés de cent vignes grimpantes;
Des prés, où le faucheur brunit son bras nerveux;
Là, des saules pensifs qui pleurent sur la rive,
Et, comme une baigneuse indolente et naïve,
Laissent tremper dans l'eau le bout de leurs cheveux.

Là-bas, un gué bruyant dans des eaux poissonneuses
Qui montrent aux passants les jambes des faneuses;
Des carrés de blé d'or; des étangs au flot clair;
Dans l'ombre, un mur de craie et des toits noirs de suie;
Les ocres des ravins, déchirés par la pluie;
Et l'aqueduc au loin qui semble un pont-de-l'air.

Et, pour couronnement à ces collines vertes,
Les profondeurs du ciel toutes grandes ouvertes,
Le ciel, bleu pavillon par Dieu même construit,
Qui, le jour, emplissant de plis d'azur l'espace,
Semble un dais suspendu sur le soleil qui passe,

Et dont on ne peut voir les clous d’or que la nuit!

Oui, c’est un de ces lieux où notre coeur sent vivre
Quelque chose des cieux qui flotte et qui l’enivre;
Un de ces lieux qu’enfant j’aimais et je rêvais,
Dont la beauté sereine, inépuisable, intime,
Verse à l’âme un oubli sérieux et sublime
De tout ce que la terre et l’homme ont de mauvais!

II

Si dès l’aube on suit les lisières
Du bois, abri des jeunes faons,
Par l’âpre chemin dont les pierres
Offensent les mains des enfants,
À l’heure où le soleil s’élève,
Où l’arbre sent monter la sève,
La vallée est comme un beau rêve.
La brume écarte son rideau.
Partout la nature s’éveille;
La fleur s’ouvre, rose et vermeille;
La brise y suspend une abeille,
La rosée une goutte d’eau!

Et dans ce charmant paysage
Où l’esprit flotte, où l’oeil s’enfuit,
Le buisson, l’oiseau de passage,
L’herbe qui tremble et qui reluit,
Le vieil arbre que l’âge ploie,
Le donjon qu’un moulin coudoie,
Le ruisseau de moire et de soie,
Le champ où dorment les aïeux,
Ce qu’on voit pleurer ou sourire,
Ce qui chante et ce qui soupire,
Ce qui parle et ce qui respire,
Tout fait un bruit harmonieux!

III

Et si le soir, après mille errantes pensées,
De sentiers en sentiers en marchant dispersées,
Du haut de la colline on descend vers ce toit
Qui vous a tout le jour, dans votre rêverie,
Fait regarder en bas, au fond de la prairie,
Comme une belle fleur qu’on voit;

Et si vous êtes là, vous dont la main de flamme
Fait parler au clavier la langue de votre âme;
Si c’est un des moments, doux et mystérieux,
Où la musique, esprit d’extase et de délire
Dont les ailes de feu font le bruit d’une lyre,
Réverbère en vos chants la splendeur de vos yeux;

Si les petits enfants, qui vous cherchent sans cesse,
Mêlent leur joyeux rire au chant qui vous oppresse;
Si votre noble père à leurs jeux turbulents
Sourit, en écoutant votre hymne commencée,
Lui, le sage et l’heureux, dont la jeune pensée
Se couronne de cheveux blancs;

Alors, à cette voix qui remue et pénètre,
Sous ce ciel étoilé qui luit à la fenêtre,
On croit à la famille, au repos, au bonheur;
Le coeur se fond en joie, en amour, en prière;
On sent venir des pleurs au bord de sa paupière;
On lève au ciel les mains en s’écriant: Seigneur!

IV

Et l’on ne songe plus, tant notre âme saisie
Se perd dans la nature et dans la poésie,
Que tout près, par les bois et les ravins caché,
Derrière le ruban de ces collines bleues,
À quatre de ces pas que nous nommons des lieues,

Le géant Paris est couché!

On ne s’informe plus si la ville fatale,
Du monde en fusion ardente capitale,
Ouvre et ferme à tel jour ses cratères fumants;
Et de quel air les rois, à l’instant où nous sommes,
Regardent bouillonner dans ce Vésuve d’hommes
La lave des événements!

XXXV

SOLEILS COUCHANTS

Merveilleux tableaux que la vue découvre à la pensée. CH. NODIER.

I

J’aime les soirs sereins et beaux, j’aime les soirs,
Soit qu’ils dorent le front des antiques manoirs
Ensevelis dans les feuillages;
Soit que la brume au loin s’allonge en bancs de feu;
Soit que mille rayons brisent dans un ciel bleu
À des archipels de nuages.

Oh! regardez le ciel! cent nuages mouvants,
Amoncelés là-haut sous le souffle des vents,
Groupent leurs formes inconnues;
Sous leurs flots par moments flamboie un pâle éclair,
Comme si tout à coup quelque géant de l’air
Tirait son glaive dans les nues.

Le soleil, à travers leurs ombres, brille encor;
Tantôt fait, à l’égal des larges dômes d’or,
Luire le toit d’une chaumière;
Ou dispute aux brouillards les vagues horizons;
Ou découpe, en tombant sur les sombres gazons,
Comme de grands lacs de lumière.

Puis voilà qu’on croit voir, dans le ciel balayé,
Pendre un grand crocodile au dos large et rayé,
Aux trois rangs de dents acérées;
Sous son ventre plombé glisse un rayon du soir;
Cent nuages ardents luisent sous son flanc noir
Comme des écailles dorées.

Puis se dresse un palais; puis l’air tremble, et tout fuit.
L’édifice effrayant des nuages détruit
S’écroule en ruines pressées;
Il jonche au loin le ciel, et ses cônes vermeils
Pendent, la pointe en bas, sur nos têtes, pareils
À des montagnes renversées.

Ces nuages de plomb, d’or, de cuivre, de fer,
Où l’ouragan, la trombe, et la foudre, et l’enfer
Dorment avec de sourds murmures,
C’est Dieu qui les suspend en foule aux cieux profonds,
Comme un guerrier qui pend aux poutres des plafonds
Ses retentissantes armures.

Tout s’en va! Le soleil, d’en haut précipité,
Comme un globe d’airain qui, rouge, est rejeté
Dans les fournaises remuées,
En tombant sur leurs flots que son choc désunit
Fait en flocons de feu jaillir jusqu’au zénith
L’ardente écume des nuées.

Oh! contemplez le ciel! et dès qu’a fui le jour,
En tout temps, en tout lieu, d’un ineffable amour,
Regardez à travers ses voiles;
Un mystère est au fond de leur grave beauté,
L’hiver, quand ils sont noirs comme un linceul, l’été,
Quand la nuit les brode d’étoiles.

II

Le jour s’enfuit des cieux; sous leur transparent voile
De moments en moments se hasarde une étoile;
La nuit, pas à pas, monte au trône obscur des soirs;
Un coin du ciel est brun, l’autre lutte avec l’ombre,
Et déjà, succédant au couchant rouge et sombre,
Le crépuscule gris meurt sur les coteaux noirs.

Et là-bas, allumant ses vitres étoilées,
Avec sa cathédrale aux flèches dentelées,
Les tours de son palais, les tours de sa prison,
Avec ses hauts clochers, sa bastille obscurcie,
Posée au bord du ciel comme une longue scie,
La ville aux mille toits découpe l'horizon.

Oh! qui m'emportera sur quelque tour sublime
D'où la cité sous moi s'ouvre comme un abîme!
Que j'entende, écoutant la ville où nous rampons,
Mourir sa vaste voix, qui semble un cri de veuve,
Et qui, le jour, gémit plus haut que le grand fleuve,
Le grand fleuve irrité, luttant contre les ponts!

Que je voie, à mes yeux en fuyant apparues,
Les étoiles des chars se croiser dans les rues,
Et serpenter le peuple en l'étroit carrefour,
Et tarir la fumée au bout des cheminées,
Et, glissant sur le front des maisons blasonnées,
Cent clartés naître, luire et passer tour à tour!

Que la vieille cité, devant moi, sur sa couche
S'étende, qu'un soupir s'échappe de sa bouche,
Comme si de fatigue on l'entendait gémir!
Que, veillant seul, debout sur son front que je foule,
Avec mille bruits sourds d'océan et de foule,
Je regarde à mes pieds la géante dormir!

III

Plus loin! allons plus loin! - Aux feux du couchant sombre,
J'aime à voir dans les champs croître et marcher mon ombre.
Et puis, la ville est là! je l'entends, je la voi.
Pour que j'écoute en paix ce que dit ma pensée,
Ce Paris, à la voix cassée,
Bourdonne encor trop près de moi.

Je veux fuir assez loin pour qu’un buisson me cache
Ce brouillard, que son front porte comme un panache,
Ce nuage éternel sur ses tours arrêté;
Pour que du moucheron, qui bruit et qui passe,
L’humble et grêle murmure efface
La grande voix de la cité!

IV

Oh! sur des ailes dans les nues
Laissez-moi fuir! laissez-moi fuir!
Loin des régions inconnues
C’est assez rêver et languir!
Laissez-moi fuir vers d’autres mondes.
C’est assez, dans les nuits profondes,
Suivre un phare, chercher un mot.
C’est assez de songe et de doute.
Cette voix que d’en bas j’écoute,
Peut-être on l’entend mieux là-haut.

Allons! des ailes ou des voiles!
Allons! un vaisseau tout armé!
Je veux voir les autres étoiles
Et la croix du sud enflammé.
Peut-être dans cette autre terre
Trouve-t-on la clef du mystère
Caché sous l’ordre universel;
Et peut-être aux fils de la lyre
Est-il plus facile de lire
Dans cette autre page du ciel!

V

Quelquefois, sous les plis des nuages trompeurs,
Loin dans l’air, à travers les brèches des vapeurs
Par le vent du soir remuées,
Derrière les derniers brouillards, plus loin encor,

Apparaissent soudain les milles étages d’or
D’un édifice de nuées!

Et l’oeil épouvanté, par delà tous nos cieux,
Sur une île de l’air au vol audacieux,
Dans l’éther libre aventurée,
L’oeil croit voir jusqu’au ciel monter, monter toujours,
Avec ses escaliers, ses ponts, ses grandes tours,
Quelque Babel démesurée!

VI

Le soleil s’est couché ce soir dans les nuées;
Demain viendra l’orage, et le soir, et la nuit;
Puis l’aube, et ses clartés de vapeurs obstruées;
Puis les nuits, puis les jours, pas du temps qui s’enfuit!

Tous ces jours passeront; ils passeront en foule
Sur la face des mers, sur la face des monts,
Sur les fleuves d’argent, sur les forêts où roule
Comme un hymne confus des morts que nous aimons.

Et la face des eaux, et le front des montagnes,
Ridés et non vieillis, et les bois toujours verts
S’iront rajeunissant; le fleuve des campagnes
Prendra sans cesse aux monts le flot qu’il donne aux mers.

Mais moi, sous chaque jour courbant plus bas ma tête,
Je passe, et, refroidi sous ce soleil joyeux,
Je m’en irai bientôt, au milieu de la fête,
Sans que rien manque au monde, immense et radieux!

XXXVI

Un jour vient où soudain l’artiste généreux

Oh! talk not to me of a name great in story;
The days of our youth are the days of our glory;
And the myrtle and ivy of sweet two-and-twenty
Are worth all your laurels, though ever so plenty. BYRON.

Un jour vient où soudain l’artiste généreux
À leur poids sur son front sent les ans plus nombreux.
Un matin il s’éveille avec cette pensée:
— Jeunesse aux jours dorés, je t’ai donc dépensée!
Oh! qu’il m’en reste peu! Je vois le fond du sort,
Comme un prodigue en pleurs le fond du coffre-fort. -

Il sent, sous le soleil qui plus ardent s’épanche,
Comme à midi les fleurs, sa tête qui se penche;
Si d’aventure il trouve, en suivant son destin,
Le gazon sous ses pas mouillé comme au matin,
Il dit, car il sait bien que son aube est passée:
— C’est de la pluie, hélas! et non de la rosée! -

C’en est fait. Son génie est plus mûr désormais.
Son aile atteint peut-être à de plus fiers sommets;
La fumée est plus rare au foyer qu’il allume;
Son astre haut monté soulève moins de brume;
Son coursier applaudi parcourt mieux le champ clos;
Mais il n’a plus en lui, pour l’épandre à grands flots
Sur des oeuvres, de grâce et d’amour couronnées,
Le frais enchantement de ses jeunes années!
Oh! rien ne rend cela! - Quand il s’en va cherchant
Ces pensers de hasard que l’on trouve en marchant,
Et qui font que le soir l’artiste chez son hôte
Rentre le coeur plus fier et la tête plus haute;
Quand il sort pour rêver, et qu’il erre incertain,

Soit dans les prés lustrés, au gazon de satin,
Soit dans un bois qu’emplit cette chanson sonore
Que le petit oiseau chante à la jeune aurore,
Soit dans le carrefour bruyant et fréquenté,
 — Car Paris et la foule ont aussi leur beauté,
Et les passants ne sont, le soir, sur les quais sombres,
Qu’un flux et qu’un reflux de lumières et d’ombres; -
Toujours, au fond de tout, toujours dans son esprit,
Même quand l’art le tient, l’enivre et lui sourit,
Même dans ses chansons, même dans ses pensées
Les plus joyeusement écloses et bercées,
Il retrouve, attristé, le regret morne et froid
Du passé disparu, du passé, quel qu’il soit.

XXXVII

LA PRIÈRE POUR TOUS

Ora pro nobis!

I

Ma fille, va prier! - Vois, la nuit est venue.
Une planète d’or là-bas perce la nue;
La brume des coteaux fait trembler le contour;
À peine un char lointain glisse dans l’ombre... Écoute!
Tout rentre et se repose; et l’arbre de la route
Secoue au vent du soir la poussière du jour!

Le crépuscule, ouvrant la nuit qui les recèle,
Fait jaillir chaque étoile en ardente étincelle;
L’occident amincit sa frange de carmin;
La nuit de l’eau dans l’ombre argente la surface;
Sillons, sentiers, buissons, tout se mêle et s’efface;
Le passant inquiet doute de son chemin.

Le jour est pour le mal, la fatigue et la haine.
Prions, voici la nuit! la nuit grave et sereine!
Le vieux pâtre, le vent aux brèches de la tour,
Les étangs, les troupeaux avec leur voix cassée,
Tout souffre et tout se plaint. La nature lassée
A besoin de sommeil, de prière et d’amour!

C’est l’heure où les enfants parlent avec les anges.
Tandis que nous courons à nos plaisirs étranges,
Tous les petits enfants, les yeux levés au ciel,
Mains jointes et pieds nus, à genoux sur la pierre,
Disant à la même heure une même prière,
Demandent pour nous grâce au père universel!

Et puis ils dormiront. - Alors, épars dans l’ombre,
Les rêves d’or, essaim tumultueux, sans nombre,
Qui naît aux derniers bruits du jour à son déclin,
Voyant de loin leur souffle et leurs boucles vermeilles,
Comme volent aux fleurs de joyeuses abeilles,
Viendront s’abattre en foule à leurs rideaux de lin!

Ô sommeil du berceau! prière de l’enfance!
Voix qui toujours caresse et qui jamais n’offense!
Douce religion, qui s’égaye et qui rit!
Prélude du concert de la nuit solennelle!
Ainsi que l’oiseau met sa tête sous son aile,
L’enfant dans la prière endort son jeune esprit!

II

Ma fille, va prier! - D’abord, surtout, pour celle
Qui berça tant de nuits ta couche qui chancelle,
Pour celle qui te prit jeune âme dans le ciel,
Et qui te mit au monde, et depuis, tendre mère,
Faisant pour toi deux parts dans cette vie amère,
Toujours a bu l’absinthe et t’a laissé le miel!

Puis ensuite pour moi! j’en ai plus besoin qu’elle!
Elle est, ainsi que toi, bonne, simple et fidèle!
Elle a le coeur limpide et le front satisfait.
Beaucoup ont sa pitié, nul ne lui fait envie;
Sage et douce, elle prend patiemment la vie;
Elle souffre le mal sans savoir qui le fait.

Tout en cueillant des fleurs, jamais sa main novice
N’a touché seulement à l’écorce du vice;
Nul piège ne l’attire à son riant tableau;
Elle est pleine d’oubli pour les choses passées;
Elle ne connaît pas les mauvaises pensées
Qui passent dans l’esprit comme une ombre sur l’eau.

Elle ignore - à jamais ignore-les comme elle! -
Ces misères du monde où notre âme se mêle,
Faux plaisirs, vanités, remords, soucis rongeurs,
Passions sur le coeur flottant comme une écume,
Intimes souvenirs de honte et d'amertume
Qui font monter au front de subites rougeurs!

Moi, je sais mieux la vie; et je pourrai te dire,
Quand tu seras plus grande et qu'il faudra t'instruire,
Que poursuivre l'empire et la fortune et l'art,
C'est folie et néant; que l'urne aléatoire
Nous jette bien souvent la honte pour la gloire,
Et que l'on perd son âme à ce jeu de hasard!

L'âme en vivant s'altère; et, quoique en toute chose
La fin soit transparente et laisse voir la cause,
On vieillit sous le vice et l'erreur abattu;
À force de marcher l'homme erre, l'esprit doute.
Tous laissent quelque chose aux buissons de la route,
Les troupeaux leur toison, et l'homme sa vertu!

Va donc prier pour moi! - Dis pour toute prière:
— Seigneur, Seigneur mon Dieu, vous êtes notre père,
Grâce, vous êtes bon! grâce, vous êtes grand! -
Laisse aller ta parole où ton âme l'envoie;
Ne t'inquiète pas, toute chose a sa voie,
Ne t'inquiète pas du chemin qu'elle prend!

Il n'est rien ici-bas qui ne trouve sa pente.
Le fleuve jusqu'aux mers dans les plaines serpente;
L'abeille sait la fleur qui recèle le miel.
Toute aile vers son but incessamment retombe,
L'aigle vole au soleil, le vautour à la tombe,
L'hirondelle au printemps, et la prière au ciel!

Lorsque pour moi vers Dieu ta voix s'est envolée,
Je suis comme l'esclave, assis dans la vallée,

Qui dépose sa charge aux bornes du chemin;
Je me sens plus léger; car ce fardeau de peine,
De fautes et d’erreurs qu’en gémissant je traîne,
Ta prière en chantant l’emporte dans sa main!

Va prier pour ton père! - Afin que je sois digne
De voir passer en rêve un ange au vol de cygne,
Pour que mon âme brûle avec les encensoirs!
Efface mes péchés sous ton souffle candide,
Afin que mon coeur soit innocent et splendide
Comme un pavé d’autel qu’on lave tous les soirs!

III

Prie encor pour tous ceux qui passent
Sur cette terre des vivants!
Pour ceux dont les sentiers s’effacent
À tous les flots, à tous les vents!
Pour l’insensé qui met sa joie
Dans l’éclat d’un manteau de soie,
Dans la vitesse d’un cheval!
Pour quiconque souffre et travaille,
Qu’il s’en revienne ou qu’il s’en aille,
Qu’il fasse le bien ou le mal!

Pour celui que le plaisir souille
D’embrassements jusqu’au matin,
Qui prend l’heure où l’on s’agenouille
Pour sa danse et pour son festin,
Qui fait hurler l’orgie infâme
Au même instant du soir où l’âme
Répète son hymne assidu,
Et, quand la prière est éteinte,
Poursuit, comme s’il avait crainte
Que Dieu ne l’ait pas entendu!

Enfant! pour les vierges voilées!

Pour le prisonnier dans sa tour!
Pour les femmes échevelées
Qui vendent le doux nom d’amour!
Pour l’esprit qui rêve et médite!
Pour l’impie à la voix maudite
Qui blasphème la sainte loi! -
Car la prière est infinie!
Car tu crois pour celui qui nie!
Car l’enfance tient lieu de foi!

Prie aussi pour ceux que recouvre
La pierre du tombeau dormant,
Noir précipice qui s’entrouvre
Sous notre foule à tout moment!
Toutes ces âmes en disgrâce
Ont besoin qu’on les débarrasse
De la vieille rouille du corps.
Souffrent-elles moins pour se taire?
Enfant! regardons sous la terre!
Il faut avoir pitié des morts!

IV

À genoux, à genoux, à genoux sur la terre
Où ton père a son père, où ta mère a sa mère,
Où tout ce qui vécut dort d’un sommeil profond!
Abîme où la poussière est mêlée aux poussières,
Où sous son père encore on retrouve des pères,
Comme l’onde sous l’onde en une mer sans fond!

Enfant! quand tu t’endors, tu ris! L’essaim des songes
Tourbillonne, joyeux, dans l’ombre où tu te plonges,
S’effarouche à ton souffle, et puis revient encor;
Et tu rouvres enfin tes yeux divins que j’aime,
En même temps que l’aube, oeil céleste elle-même,
Entrouvre à l’horizon sa paupière aux cils d’or!

Mais eux, si tu savais de quel sommeil ils dorment!
Leurs lits sont froids et lourds à leurs os qu’ils déforment.
Les anges autour d’eux ne chantent pas en choeur.
De tout ce qu’ils ont fait le rêve les accable.
Pas d’aube pour leur nuit; le remords implacable
S’est fait ver du sépulcre et leur ronge le coeur.

Tu peux avec un mot, tu peux d’une parole
Faire que le remords prenne une aile et s’envole!
Qu’une douce chaleur réjouisse les os!
Qu’un rayon touche encor leur paupière ravie,
Et qu’il leur vienne un bruit de lumière et de vie,
Quelque chose des vents, des forêts et des eaux!

Oh! dis-moi, quand tu vas, jeune et déjà pensive,
Errer au bord d’un flot qui se plaint sur sa rive,
Sous des arbres dont l’ombre emplit l’âme d’effroi,
Parfois, dans les soupirs de l’onde et de la brise,
N’entends-tu pas de souffle et de voix qui te dise:
— Enfant! quand vous prierez, prierez-vous pas pour moi? -

C’est la plainte des morts! - Les morts pour qui l’on prie
Ont sur leur lit de terre une herbe plus fleurie.
Nul démon ne leur jette un sourire moqueur.
Ceux qu’on oublie, hélas! - leur nuit est froide et sombre,
Toujours quelque arbre affreux, qui les tient sous son ombre,
Leur plonge sans pitié des racines au coeur!

Prie! afin que le père, et l’oncle, et les aïeules,
Qui ne demandent plus que nos prières seules,
Tressaillent dans leur tombe en s’entendant nommer,
Sachent que sur la terre on se souvient encore,
Et, comme le sillon qui sent la fleur éclore,
Sentent dans leur oeil vide une larme germer!

V

Ce n’est pas à moi, ma colombe,
De prier pour tous les mortels,
Pour les vivants dont la foi tombe,
Pour tous ceux qu’enferme la tombe,
Cette racine des autels!

Ce n’est pas moi, dont l’âme est vaine,
Pleine d’erreurs, vide de foi,
Qui prierais pour la race humaine,
Puisque ma voix suffit à peine,
Seigneur, à vous prier pour moi!

Non, si pour la terre méchante
Quelqu’un peut prier aujourd’hui,
C’est toi, dont la parole chante,
C’est toi! ta prière innocente,
Enfant, peut se charger d’autrui!

Ah! demande à ce père auguste
Qui sourit à ton oraison
Pourquoi l’arbre étouffe l’arbuste,
Et qui fait du juste à l’injuste
Chanceler l’humaine raison?

Demande-lui si la sagesse
N’appartient qu’à l’éternité?
Pourquoi son souffle nous abaisse?
Pourquoi dans la tombe sans cesse
Il effeuille l’humanité?

Pour ceux que les vices consument,
Les enfants veillent au saint lieu ,
Ce sont des fleurs qui le parfument,
Ce sont des encensoirs qui fument,
Ce sont des voix qui vont à Dieu!

Laissons faire ces voix sublimes,

Laissons les enfants à genoux.
Pécheurs! nous avons tous nos crimes,
Nous penchons tous sur les abîmes,
L'enfance doit prier pour tous!

VI

Comme une aumône, enfant, donne donc ta prière
À ton père, à ta mère, aux pères de ton père;
Donne au riche à qui Dieu refuse le bonheur,
Donne au pauvre, à la veuve, au crime, au vice immonde.
Fais en priant le tour des misères du monde;
Donne à tous! donne aux morts! - Enfin donne au Seigneur!

“ Quoi! murmure ta voix qui veut parler et n'ose.
Au Seigneur, au Très-Haut manque-t-il quelque chose?
Il est le saint des saints, il est le roi des rois!
Il se fait des soleils un cortège suprême!
Il fait baisser la voix à l'océan lui-même!
Il est seul! Il est tout! à jamais! à la fois!”

Enfant, quand tout le jour vous avez en famille,
Tes deux frères et toi, joué sous la charmille,
Le soir vous êtes las, vos membres sont pliés,
Il vous faut un lait pur et quelques noix frugales,
Et, baisant tour à tour vos têtes inégales,
Votre mère à genoux lave vos faibles pieds.

Eh bien! il est quelqu'un dans ce monde où nous sommes
Qui tout le jour aussi marche parmi les hommes,
Servant et consolant, à toute heure, en tout lieu,
Un bon pasteur qui suite sa brebis égarée,
Un pèlerin qui va de contrée en contrée.
Ce passant, ce pasteur, ce pèlerin, c'est Dieu!

Le soir il est bien las! il faut, pour qu'il sourie,
Une âme qui le serve, un enfant qui le prie,

Un peu d’amour! Ô toi, qui ne sais pas tromper,
Porte-lui ton coeur plein d’innocence et d’extase,
Tremblante et l’oeil baissé, comme un précieux vase
Dont on craint de laisser une goutte échapper!

Porte-lui ta prière! et quand, à quelque flamme
Qui d’une chaleur douce emplira ta jeune âme,
Tu verras qu’il est proche, alors, ô mon bonheur,
Ô mon enfant! sans craindre affront ni raillerie,
Verse, comme autrefois Marthe, soeur de Marie,
Verse tout ton parfum sur les pieds du Seigneur!

VII

Ô myrrhe! ô cinname!
Nard cher aux époux!
Baume! éther! dictame!
De l’eau, de la flamme,
Parfums les plus doux!

Prés que l’onde arrose!
Vapeurs de l’autel!
Lèvres de la rose
Où l’abeille pose
Sa bouche de miel!

Jasmin! asphodèle!
Encensoirs flottants!
Branche verte et frêle
Où fait l’hirondelle
Son nid au printemps!

Lis que fait éclore
Le frais arrosoir!
Ambre que Dieu dore!
Souffle de l’aurore,
Haleine du soir!

Parfum de la sève
Dans les bois mouvants!
Odeur de la grève
Qui la nuit s’élève
Sur l’aile des vents!

Fleurs dont la chapelle
Se fait un trésor!
Flamme solennelle,
Fumée éternelle
Des sept lampes d’or!

Tiges qu’a brisées
Le tranchant du fer!
Urnes embrasées!
Esprits des rosées
Qui flottez dans l’air!

Fêtes réjouies
D’encens et de bruits!
Senteurs inouïes!
Fleurs épanouies
Au souffle des nuits!

Odeurs immortelles
Que les Ariel,
Archanges fidèles,
Prennent sur leurs ailes
En venant du ciel!

Ô couche première
Du premier époux!
De la terre entière,
Des champs de lumière
Parfums les plus doux!

Dans l’auguste sphère,
Parfums, qu’êtes-vous,
Près de la prière
Qui dans la poussière
S’épanche à genoux!

Près du cri d’une âme
Qui fond en sanglots,
Implore et réclame,
Et s’exhale en flamme,
Et se verse à flots!

Près de l’humble offrande
D’un enfant de lin
Dont l’extase est grande
Et qui recommande son père orphelin!

Bouche qui soupire,
Mais sans murmurer!
Ineffable lyre!
Voix qui fait sourire et qui fait pleurer!

VIII

Quand elle prie, un ange est debout auprès d’elle,
Caressant ses cheveux des plumes de son aile,
Essuyant d’un baiser son oeil de pleurs terni,
Venu pour l’écouter sans que l’enfant l’appelle,
Esprit qui tient le livre où l’innocente épèle,
Et qui pour remonter attend qu’elle ait fini.

Son beau front incliné semble un vase qu’il penche
Pour recevoir les flots de ce coeur qui s’épanche;
Il prend tout, pleurs d’amour et soupirs de douleur;
Sans changer de nature il s’emplit de cette âme,
Comme le pur cristal que notre soif réclame
S’emplit d’eau jusqu’aux bords sans changer de couleur.

Ah! c’est pour le Seigneur sans doute qu’il recueille
Ces larmes goutte à goutte et ce lis feuille à feuille!
Et puis il reviendra se ranger au saint lieu,
Tenant prêts ces soupirs, ces parfums, cette haleine,
Pour étancher le soir, comme une coupe pleine,
Ce grand besoin d’amour, la seule soif de Dieu!

Enfant! dans ce concert qui d’en bas le salue,
La voix par Dieu lui-même entre toutes élue,
C’est la tienne, ô ma fille! elle a tant de douceur,
Sur des ailes de flamme elle monte si pure,
Elle expire si bien en amoureux murmure,
Que les vierges du ciel disent: c’est une soeur!

IX

Oh! bien loin de la voie
Où marche le pécheur,
Chemine où Dieu t’envoie!
Enfant, garde ta joie!
Lis, garde ta blancheur!

Sois humble! que t’importe
Le riche et le puissant!
Un souffle les emporte.
La force la plus forte
C’est un coeur innocent!

Bien souvent Dieu repousse
Du pied les hautes tours;
Mais dans le nid de mousse
Où chante une voix douce
Il regarde toujours!

Reste à la solitude!
Reste à la pauvreté!

Vis sans inquiétude,
Et ne te fais étude
Que de l’éternité!

Il est, loin de nos villes
Et loin de nos douleurs,
Des lacs purs et tranquilles,
Et dont toutes les îles
Sont des bouquets de fleurs!

Flots d’azur où l’on aime
À laver ses remords!
D’un charme si suprême
Que l’incrédule même
S’agenouille à leurs bords!

L’ombre qui les inonde
Calme et nous rend meilleurs;
Leur paix est si profonde
Que jamais à leur onde
On n’a mêlé de pleurs!

Et le jour, que leur plaine
Reflète éblouissant,
Trouve l’eau si sereine
Qu’il y hasarde à peine
Un nuage en passant!

Ces lacs que rien n’altère,
Entre des monts géants
Dieu les met sur la terre,
Loin du souffle adultère
Des sombres océans,

Pour que nul vent aride,
Nul flot mêlé de fiel
N’empoisonne et ne ride

Ces gouttes d’eau limpide
Où se mire le ciel!

Ô ma fille, âme heureuse!
Ô lac de pureté!
Dans la vallée ombreuse,
Reste où ton Dieu te creuse
Un lit plus abrité!

Lac que le ciel parfume!
Le monde est une mer;
Son souffle est plein de brume,
Un peu de son écume
Rendrait ton flot amer!

X

Et toi, céleste ami qui gardes son enfance,
Qui le jour et la nuit lui fais une défense
De tes ailes d’azur!
Invisible trépied où s’allume sa flamme!
Esprit de sa prière, ange de sa jeune âme,
Cygne de ce lac pur!

Dieu te l’a confiée et je te la confie!
Soutiens, relève, exhorte, inspire et fortifie
Sa frêle humanité!
Qu’elle garde à jamais, réjouie ou souffrante,
Cet oeil plein de rayons, cette âme transparente,
Cette sérénité

Qui fait que tout le jour, et sans qu’elle te voie,
Écartant de son coeur faux désirs, fausse joie,
Mensonge et passion,
Prosternant à ses pieds ta couronne immortelle,
Comme elle devant Dieu, tu te tiens devant elle
En adoration!

XXXVIII

PAN

Tout entier esprit, tout entier lumière, tout entier oeil. CLÉM. ALEX.

Si l’on vous dit que l’art et que la poésie
C’est un flux éternel de banale ambroisie,
Que c’est le bruit, la foule, attachés à vos pas,
Ou d’un salon doré l’oisive fantaisie,
Ou la rime en fuyant par la rime saisie,
Oh! ne le croyez pas!

Ô poètes sacrés, échevelés, sublimes,
Allez, et répandez vos âmes sur les cimes,
Sur les sommets de neige en butte aux aquilons,
Sur les déserts pieux où l’esprit se recueille,
Sur les bois que l’automne emporte feuille à feuille,
Sur les lacs endormis dans l’ombre des vallons!

Partout où la nature est gracieuse et belle,
Où l’herbe s’épaissit pour le troupeau qui bêle,
Où le chevreau lascif mord le cytise en fleurs,
Où chante un pâtre, assis sous une antique arcade,
Où la brise du soir fouette avec la cascade
Le rocher tout en pleurs;

Partout où va la plume et le flocon de laine;
Que ce soit une mer, que ce soit une plaine,
Une vieille forêt aux branchages mouvants,
Îles au sol désert, lacs à l’eau solitaire,
Montagnes, océans, neige ou sable, onde ou terre,
Flots ou sillons, partout où vont les quatre vents;

Partout où le couchant grandit l’ombre des chênes,
Partout où les coteaux croisent leurs molles chaînes,

Partout où sont des champs, des moissons, des cités,
Partout où pend un fruit à la branche épuisée,
Partout où l’oiseau boit des gouttes de rosée,
Allez, voyez, chantez!

Allez dans les forêts, allez dans les vallées,
Faites-vous un concert des notes isolées!
Cherchez dans la nature, étalée à vos yeux,
Soit que l’hiver attriste ou que l’été l’égaye,
Le mot mystérieux que chaque voix bégaye.
Écoutez ce que dit la foudre dans les cieux!

C’est Dieu qui remplit tout. Le monde, c’est son temple.
Oeuvre vivante, où tout l’écoute et le contemple!
Tout lui parle et le chante. Il est seul, il est un.
Dans sa création tout est joie et sourire;
L’étoile qui regarde et la fleur qui respire,
Tout est flamme ou parfum!

Enivrez-vous de tout! enivrez-vous, poètes,
Des gazons, des ruisseaux, des feuilles inquiètes,
Du voyageur de nuit dont on entend la voix,
De ces premières fleurs dont février s’étonne,
Des eaux, de l’air, des prés, et du bruit monotone
Que font les chariots qui passent les bois!

Frères de l’aigle! aimez la montagne sauvage:
Surtout à ces moments où vient un vent d’orage,
Un vent sonore et lourd qui grossit par degrés,
Emplit l’espace au loin de nuages et d’ombres,
Et penche sur le bord des précipices ombres
Les arbres effarés!

Contemplez du matin la pureté divine,
Quand la brume en flocons inonde la ravine,
Quand le soleil, que cache à demi la forêt,
Montrant sur l’horizon sa rondeur échancrée,

Grandit, comme ferait la coupole dorée
D’un palais d’Orient dont on approcherait!

Enivrez-vous du soir! à cette heure où, dans l’ombre,
Le paysage obscur, plein de formes sans nombre,
S’efface, de chemins et de fleuves rayé;
Quand le mont, dont la tête à l’horizon s’élève,
Semble un géant couché qui regarde et qui rêve
Sur son coude appuyé!

Si vous avez en vous, vivantes et pressées,
Un monde intérieur d’images, de pensées,
De sentiments, d’amour, d’ardente passion,
Pour féconder ce monde, échangez-le sans cesse
Avec l’autre univers visible qui vous presse!
Mêlez toute votre âme à la création!

Car, ô poètes saints! l’art est le son sublime,
Simple divers, profond, mystérieux; intime,
Fugitif comme l’eau qu’un rien fait dévier,
Redit par un écho dans toute créature,
Que sous vos doigts puissants exhale la nature,
Cet immense clavier!

XXXIX

Avant que mes chansons aimées,

Amor de mi pecho,
Pecho de mi amor!
Arbol, que has hecho,
Que has hecho del flor? ROMANCE.

Avant que mes chansons aimées,
Si jeunes et si parfumées,
Du monde eussent subi l'affront,
Loin du peuple ingrat qui les foule,
Vertes et fraîches sur mon front!

De l'arbre à présent détachées,
Fleurs par l'aquilon desséchées,
Vains débris qu'on traîne en rêvant,
Elles errent éparpillées,
De fange ou de poudre souillées,
Au gré du flot, au gré du vent.

Moi, comme des feuilles flétries,
Je les vois, toutes défleuries,
Courir sur le sol dépouillé;
Et la foule qui m'environne,
En broyant du pied ma couronne,
Passe et rit de l'arbre effeuillé!

XL

Amis, un dernier mot! - et je ferme à jamais

Toi, vertu, pleure si je meurs! André Chénier.

Amis, un dernier mot! - et je ferme à jamais
Ce livre, à ma pensée étranger désormais.
Je n’écouterai pas ce qu’en dira la foule.
Car, qu’importe à la source où son onde s’écoule?
Et que m’importe, à moi, sur l’avenir penché,
Où va ce vent d’automne au souffle desséché
Qui passe, en emportant sur son aile inquiète
Et les feuilles de l’arbre et les vers du poète?

Oui, je suis jeune encore, et quoique sur mon front,
Où tant de passions et d’oeuvres germeront,
Une ride de plus chaque jour soit tracée,
Comme un sillon qu’y fait le soc de ma pensée,
Dans le cours incertain du temps qui m’est donné,
L’été n’a pas encor trente fois rayonné.
Je suis fils de ce siècle! Une erreur, chaque année,
S’en va de mon esprit, d’elle-même étonnée,
Et, détrompé de tout, mon culte n’est resté
Qu’à vous, sainte patrie et sainte liberté!

Je hais l’oppression d’une haine profonde.
Aussi, lorsque j’entends, dans quelque coin du monde,
Sous un ciel inclément, sous un roi meurtrier,
Un peuple qu’on égorge appeler et crier;
Quand, par les rois chrétiens aux bourreaux turcs livrée,
La Grèce, notre mère, agonise éventrée;
Quand l’Irlande saignante expire sur sa croix;
Quand Teutonie aux fers se débat sous dix rois;
Quand Lisbonne, jadis belle et toujours en fête,
Pend au gibet, les pieds de Miguel sur sa tête;

Lorsqu’Albani gouverne au pays de Caton;
Que Naples mange et dort; lorsqu’avec son bâton,
Sceptre honteux et lourd que la peur divinise,
L’Autriche casse l’aile au lion de Venise;
Quand Modène étranglé râle sous l’archiduc;
Quand Dresde lutte et pleure au lit d’un roi caduc;
Quand Madrid se rendort d’un sommeil léthargique;
Quand Vienne tient Milan; quand le lion belgique
Courbé comme le boeuf qui creuse un vil sillon,
N’a plus même de dents pour mordre son bâillon;
Quand un Cosaque affreux, que la rage transporte,
Viole Varsovie échevelée et morte,
Et, souillant son linceul, chaste et sacré lambeau,
Se vautre sur la vierge étendue au tombeau;
Alors, oh! je maudis, dans leur cour, dans leur antre,
Ces rois dont les chevaux ont du sang jusqu’au ventre!
Je sens que le poète est leur juge! je sens
Que la muse indignée, avec ses poings puissants,
Peut, comme au pilori, les lier sur leur trône
Et leur faire un carcan de leur lâche couronne,
Et renvoyer ces rois, qu’on aurait pu bénir,,
Marqués au front d’un vers que lira l’avenir!
Oh! la muse se doit aux peuples sans défense.
J’oublie alors l’amour, la famille, l’enfance,
Et les molles chansons, et le loisir serein,
Et j’ajoute à ma lyre une corde d’airain!

LES CHANTS DU CREPUSCULE

This is a collection of poems that was first published in 1836.

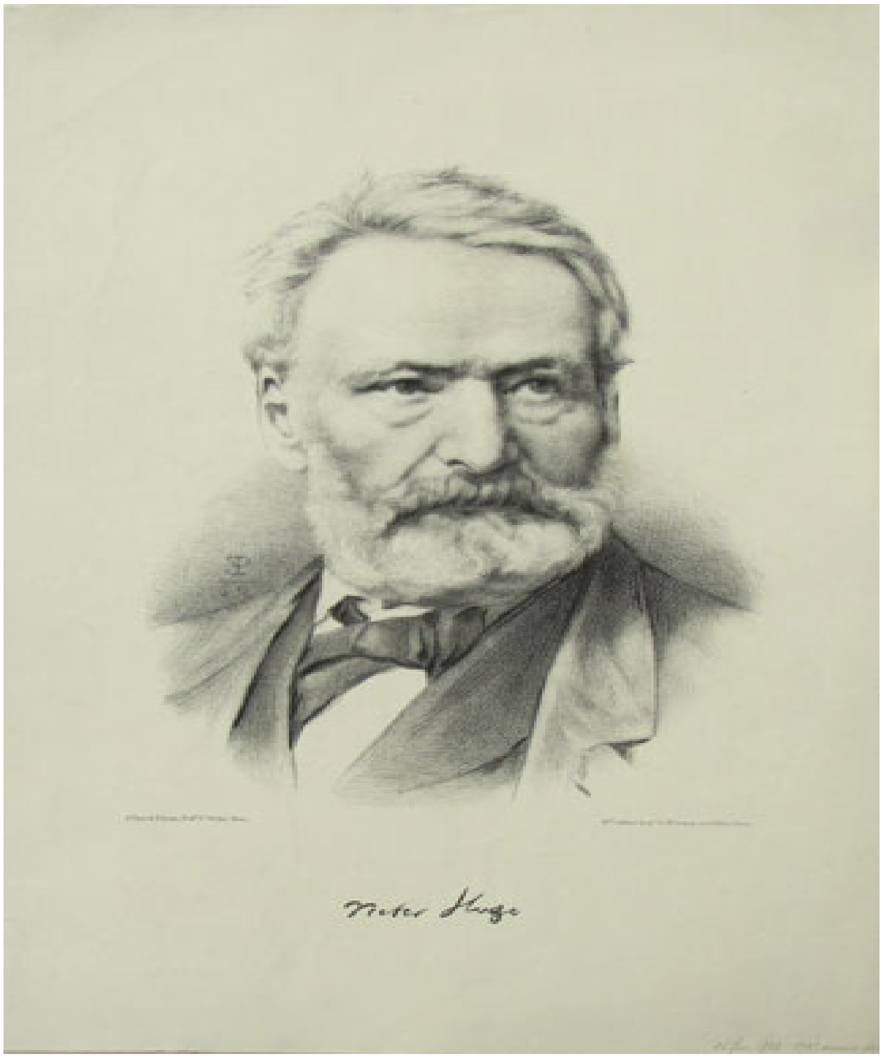

Victor Hugo

TABLE DES MATIERES

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Écrit sur la première page d’un Pétrarque
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Que nous avons le doute en nous.
Date lilia

Préface

Les quelques vers placés en tête de ce volume indiquent la pensée qu’il contient. Le prélude explique les chants.

Tout aujourd’hui, dans les idées comme dans les choses, dans la société comme dans l’individu, est à l’état de crépuscule. De quelle nature est ce crépuscule? de quoi sera-t-il suivi? Question immense, la plus haute de toutes celles qui s’agitent confusément dans ce siècle où un point d’interrogation se dresse à la fin de tout. La société attend que ce qui est à l’horizon s’allume tout à fait ou s’éteigne complètement. Il n’y a rien de plus à dire.

Quant à ce volume en lui-même, l’auteur n’en dira rien non plus. A quoi bon faire remarquer le fil, à peine visible peut-être, qui lie ce livre aux livres précédents? C’est toujours la même pensée avec d’autres soucis, la même onde avec d’autres vents, le même front avec d’autres rides, la même vie avec un autre âge.

Il insistera peu sur cela. Il ne laisse même subsister dans ses ouvrages ce qui est personnel que parce que c’est peut-être quelquefois un reflet de ce qui est général. Il ne croit pas que son “Individualité”, comme on dit aujourd’hui en assez mauvais style, vaille la peine d’être autrement étudiée. Aussi, quelque idée qu’on veuille bien s’en faire, n’est-elle que très peu clairement entrevue dans ses livres. L’auteur est fort loin de croire que toutes les parties de celui-ci en particulier puissent jamais être considérées comme matériaux positifs pour l’histoire d’un cœur humain quelconque. Il y a dans ce volume beaucoup de choses rêvées.

Ce qui est peut-être exprimé parfois dans ce recueil, ce qui a été la principale préoccupation de l’auteur en jetant ça et là les vers qu’on va lire, c’est cet étrange état crépusculaire de l’âme et de la société dans le siècle où nous vivons; c’est cette brume au dehors, cette incertitude au-dedans; c’est ce je ne sais quoi d’à demi éclairé qui nous environne. De là, dans ce livre, ces cris d’espoir mêlés d’hésitation, ces chants d’amour coupés de plaintes, cette sérénité pénétrée de tristesse, ces abattements qui se réjouissent tout à coup, ces défaillances relevées soudain, cette tranquillité qui souffre, ces troubles intérieurs qui remuent à peine la surface du vers au dehors, ces tumultes politiques contemplés avec calme, ces retours religieux de la place publique à la famille, cette crainte que tout n’aille s’obscurcissant, et par moments cette foi joyeuse et bruyante à l’épanouissement possible de l’humanité. Dans ce livre, bien petit cependant en présence d’objets si grands, il y a tous les contraires, le doute et le dogme, le jour et la nuit, le coin sombre et le point lumineux, comme dans tout ce que nous voyons, comme dans tout ce que nous pensons en ce siècle; comme dans nos théories politiques, comme dans nos opinions religieuses, comme dans notre existence domestique; comme dans l’histoire qu’on nous fait, comme dans la vie que nous nous faisons.

Le dernier mot que doit ajouter ici l’auteur, c’est que dans cette époque livrée à l’attente et à la transition, dans cette époque où la discussion est si acharnée, si tranchée, si absolument arrivée à l’extrême, qu’il n’y a guère aujourd’hui d’écoutés, de compris et d’applaudis que deux mots, le Oui et le Non, il n’est pourtant, lui, ni de ceux qui nient, ni de ceux qui affirment. Il est de ceux qui espèrent.

25 octobre 1835

Prélude

De quel nom te nommer, heure trouble où nous sommes?
Tous les fronts sont baignés de livides sueurs.
Dans les hauteurs du ciel et dans le cœur des hommes
Les ténèbres partout se mêlent aux lueurs.

Croyances, passions, désespoir, espérances,
Rien n’est dans le grand jour et rien n’est dans la nuit;
Et le monde, sur qui flottent les apparences,
Est à demi couvert d’une ombre où tout reluit.

Le bruit que fait cette ombre assourdit la pensée.
Tout s’y mêle, depuis le chant de l’oiseleur
Jusqu’au frémissement de la feuille froissée
Qui cache un nid peut-être ou qui couve une fleur.

Tout s’y mêle! les pas égarés hors des voies
Qui cherchent leur chemin dans les champs spacieux;
Les roseaux verts froissant leurs luisantes courroies;
Les angelus lointains dispersés dans les cieux;

Le lierre tressaillant dans les fentes des voûtes;
Le vent, funeste au loin au nocher qui périt;
Les chars embarrassés dans les tournants des routes,
S’accrochant par l’essieu comme nous par l’esprit;

La mendiante en pleurs qui marche exténuée;
Celui qui dit Satan ou qui dit Jéhova;
La clameur des passants bientôt diminuée;
La voix du cœur qui sent, le bruit du pied qui va;

Les ondes que toi seul, ô Dieu, comptes et nommes;
L’air qui fuit; le caillou par le ruisseau lavé;
Et tout ce que, chargés des vains projets des hommes
Le soc dit au sillon et la roue au pavé;

Et la barque, où dans l’ombre on entend une lyre,
Qui passe, et loin du bord s’abandonne au courant;
Et l’orgue des forêts qui sur les monts soupire;
Et cette voix qui sort des villes en pleurant!

Et l’homme qui gémit à côté de la chose;
Car dans ce siècle, en proie aux sourires moqueurs,
Toute conviction en peu d’instants dépose
Le doute, lie affreuse, au fond de tous les cœurs!

Et de ces bruits divers, redoutable ou propice,
Sort l’étrange chanson que chante sans flambeau
Cette époque ne travail, fossoyeur ou nourrice,
Qui prépare une crèche ou qui creuse un tombeau!

— L’orient! l’orient! qu’y voyez-vous poëtes?
Tournez vers l’orient vos esprits et vos yeux! –
“Hélas! ont répondu leurs voix longtemps muettes,
Nous voyons bien là-bas un jour mystérieux!

“Un jour mystérieux dans le ciel taciturne,
Qui blanchit l’horizon derrière les coteaux,
Pareil au feu lointain d’une forge nocturne
Qu’on voit sans en entendre encore les marteaux!

“Mais nous ne savons pas si cette aube lointaine
Vous annonce le jour, le vrai soleil ardent;
Car, survenus dans l’ombre à cette heure incertaine,
Ce qu’on croit l’orient peut-être est l’occident!
“C’est peut-être le soir qu’on prend pour une aurore!
Peut-être ce soleil vers qui l’homme est penché,
Ce soleil qu’on appelle à l’horizon qu’il dore,
Ce soleil qu’on espère est un soleil couché!”

Seigneur! est-ce vraiment l’aube qu’on voit éclore?
Oh! l’anxiété croît de moment en moment.

N’y voit-on déjà plus? n’y voit-on pas encore?
Est-ce la fin, Seigneur, ou le commencement?

Dans l’âme et sur la terre effrayant crépuscule!
Les yeux pour qui fut fait, dans un autre univers,
Ce soleil inconnu qui vient ou qui recule,
Sont-ils déjà fermés ou pas encore ouvert?

Ce tumulte confus, où nos esprits s’arrêtent,
Peut-être c’est le bruit, fourmillant en tout lieu,
Des ailes qui partout pour le départ s’apprêtent.
Peut-être en ce moment la terre dit: adieu!

Ce tumulte confus qui frappe notre oreille,
Parfois pur comme un souffle et charmant comme un luth,
Peut-être c’est le bruit d’un éden qui s’éveille.
Peut-être en ce moment la terre dit: salut!

Là-bas l’arbre frissonne. Est-ce allégresse ou plainte?
Là-bas chante un oiseau. Pleure-t-il? a-t-il ri?
Là-bas l’océan parle. Est-ce joie? est-ce crainte?
Là-bas l’homme murmure. Est-ce un chant? Est-ce un cri?

A si peu de clarté nulle âme n’est sereine.
Triste, assis sur le banc qui s’appuie à son mur,
Le vieux prêtre se courbe, et, n’y voyant qu’à peine,
A ce jour ténébreux épèle un livre obscur.

O prêtre! vainement tu rêves, tu travailles.
L’homme ne comprend plus ce que Dieu révéla.
Partout des sens douteux hérissent leurs broussailles;
La menace est ici, mais la promesse est là!

Et qu’importe! bien loin de ce qui doit nous suivre,
Le destin nous emporte, éveillés ou dormant.
Que ce soit pour mourir ou que ce soit pour vivre,
Notre siècle va voir un accomplissement!

Cet horizon, qu’emplit un bruit vague et sonore,
Doit-il pâlir bientôt? doit-il bientôt rougir?
Esprit de l’homme! attends quelques instants encore.
Ou l’ombre va descendre, ou l’astre va surgir!

Vers l’orient douteux tourné comme les autres,
Recueillant tous les bruits formidables et doux,
Les murmures d’en haut qui répondent aux nôtres,
Le soupir de chacun et la rumeur de tous,

Le poëte, en ses chants où l’amertume abonde,
Reflétait, écho triste et calme cependant,
Tout ce que l’âme rêve et tout ce que le monde
Chante, bégaie ou dit dans l’ombre en attendant!
20 octobre 1835

Dicté après juillet 1830

I

Frères! et vous aussi, vous avez vos journées!
Vos victoires, de chêne et de fleurs couronnées,
Vos civiques lauriers, vos morts ensevelis,
Vos triomphes, si beaux à l’aube de la vie,
Vos jeunes étendards, troués à faire envie
A de vieux drapeaux d’Austerlitz!

Soyez fiers! vous avez fait autant que vos pères.
Les droits d’un peuple entier, conquis par tant de guerres,
Vous les avez tirés tout vivants du linceul.
Juillet vous a donné, pour sauver vos familles,
Trois de ces beaux soleils qui brûlent les bastilles:
Vos pères n’en ont eu qu’un seul!

Vous êtes bien leurs fils! c’est leur sang, c’est leur âme
Qui fait vos bras d’airain et vos regards de flamme.
Ils ont tout commencé. Vous avez votre tour.
Votre mère, c’est bien cette France féconde
Qui fait, quand il lui plaît, pour l’exemple du monde,
Tenir un siècle dans un jour!

L’Angleterre jalouse et la Grèce homérique,
Toute l’Europe admire, et la jeune Amérique
Se lève et bat des mains, du bord des océans.
Trois jours vous ont suffi pour briser vos entraves:
Vous êtes les aînés d’une race de braves,
Vous êtes les fils des géants!

C’est pour vous qu’ils traçaient avec des funérailles
Ce cercle triomphal de plaines de batailles,
Chemin victorieux, prodigieux travail,
Qui, de France parti pour enserrer la terre,

En passant par Moscou, Cadix, Rome et le Caire,
Va de Jemmape à Montmirail!

Vous êtes les enfants des belliqueux lycées!
Là vous applaudissiez nos victoires passées;
Tous vos jeux s'ombrageaient des plis d'un étendard.
Souvent Napoléon, plein de grandes pensées,
Passant, les bras croisés, dans vos lignes pressées,
Aimanta vos fronts d'un regard!

Aigle qu'ils devaient suivre! aigle de notre armée
Dont la plume sanglante en cent lieux est semée,
Dont le tonnerre un soir s'éteignit dans les flots,
Toi qui les as couvés dans l'aire paternelle,
Regarde, et sois joyeuse, et crie, et bats de l'aile!
Mère, tes aiglons sont éclos!

II

Quand notre ville épouvantée,
Surprise un matin et sans voix,
S'éveilla toute garrottée
Sous un réseau d'iniques lois,
Chacun de vous dit en son âme:
“C'est une trahison infâme!
Les peuples ont leur lendemain.
Pour rendre leur route douteuse
Suffit-il qu'une main honteuse
Change l'écriteau du chemin?

“La parole éclate et foudroie
Tous les obstacles imprudents;
Vérité, tu sais comme on broie
Tous les bâillons entre ses dents;
Un roi peut te fermer son Louvre;
Ta flamme importune, on la couvre,
On la fait éteindre aux valets;

Mais elle brûle qui la touche!
Mais on ne ferme pas ta bouche
Comme la porte d’un palais!

“Quoi! ce que le temps nous amène,
Quoi! ce que nos pères ont fait,
Ce travail de la race humaine,
Ils nous prendraient tout en effet!
Quoi! les lois! la Charte! chimère!
Comme un édifice éphémère
Nous verrions, en un jour d’été,
Crouler sous leurs mains acharnées
Ton œuvre de quarante années,
Laborieuse liberté!

“C’est donc pour eux que les épées
Ont relui du nord au midi!
Pour eux que les têtes coupées
Sur les pavés ont rebondi!
C’est pour ces tyrans satellites
Que nos pères, braves élites,
Ont dépassé grecs et romains!
Que tant de villes sont désertes!
Que tant de plaines, jadis vertes,
Sont blanches d’ossements humains!
“Les insensés qui font ce rêve
N’ont-ils donc pas des yeux pour voir,
Depuis que leur pouvoir s’élève,
Comme notre horizon est noir!
N’ont-ils pas vu dans leur folie
Que déjà la coupe est remplie,
Qu’on les suit des yeux en rêvant,
Qu’un foudre lointain nous éclaire,
Et que le lion populaire
Regarde ses ongles souvent!”

III

Alors tout se leva. – L’homme, l’enfant, la femme,
Quiconque avait un bras, quiconque avait une âme,
Tout vint, tout accourut. Et la ville à grand bruit
Sur les lourds bataillons se rua jour et nuit.
En vain boulets, obus, la balle et les mitrailles,
De la vieille cité déchiraient les entrailles
Pavés et pans de murs croulant sous mille efforts
Aux portes des maisons amoncelaient les morts;
Les bouches des canons trouaient au loin la foule;
Elle se refermait comme une mer qui roule,
Et de son râle affreux ameutant les faubourgs,
Le tocsin haletant bondissait dans les tours!

IV

Trois jours, trois nuits, dans la fournaise
Tout ce peuple en feu bouillonna.
Crevant l’écharpe béarnaise
Du fer de lance d’Iéna.
En vain dix légions nouvelles
Vinrent s’abattre à grand bruit d’ailes
Dans le formidable foyer;
Chevaux, fantassins et cohortes
Fondaient comme des branches mortes
Qui se tordent dans le brasier!

Comment donc as-tu fait pour calmer ta colère,
Souveraine cité qui vainquis en trois jours?
Comment donc as-tu fait, ô fleuve populaire,
Pour rentrer dans ton lit et reprendre ton cours?
O terre qui tremblais! ô tempête! ô tourmente!
Vengeance de la foule au sourire effrayant!
Comment donc as-tu fait pour être intelligente
Et pour choisir en foudroyant?

C’est qu’il est plus d’un cœur stoïque

Parmi vous, fils de la cité;
C’est qu’une jeunesse héroïque
Combattait à votre côté.
Désormais, dans toute fortune,
Vous avez une âme commune
Qui dans tous vos exploits a lui.
Honneur au grand jour qui s’écoule!
Hier vous n’étiez qu’une foule:
Vous êtes un peuple aujourd’hui!

Ces mornes conseillers de parjure et d’audace,
Voilà donc à quel peuple ils se sont attaqués!
Fléaux qu’aux derniers rois d’une fatale race
Toujours la providence envoie aux jours marqués!
Malheureux qui croyaient, dans leur erreur profonde
(Car Dieu les voulait perdre, et Dieu les aveuglait),
Qu’on prenait un matin la liberté d’un monde
Comme un oiseau dans un filet!

N’effacez rien. – Le coup d’épée
Embellit le front du soldat.
Laissons à la ville frappée
Les cicatrices du combat!
Adoptons héros et victimes.
Emplissons de ces morts sublimes
Les sépulcres du Panthéon.
Que nul souvenir ne nous pèse;
Rendons sa tombe à Louis seize,
Sa colonne à Napoléon!

V

Oh! laissez-moi pleurer sur cette race morte
Que rapporta l’exil et que l’exil remporte,
Vent fatal qui trois fois déjà les enleva!
Reconduisons au moins ces vieux rois de nos pères.
Rends, drapeau de Fleurus, les honneurs militaires

A l’oriflamme qui s’en va!

Je ne leur dirai point de mot qui les déchire.
Qu’ils ne se plaignent pas des adieux de la lyre!
Pas d’outrage au vieillard qui s’exile à pas lents!
C’est une piété d’épargner les ruines.
Je n’enfoncerai pas la couronne d’épines
Que la main du malheur met sur des cheveux blancs!

D’ailleurs, infortunés! ma voix achève à peine
L’hymne de leurs douleurs dont s’allonge la chaîne.
L’exile et les tombeaux dans mes chants sont bénis;
Et, tandis que d’un règne on saluera l’aurore,
Ma poésie en deuil ira longtemps encore
De Sainte-Hélène à Saint-Denis!

Mais que la leçon reste, éternelle et fatale,
A ces nains, étrangers sur la terre natale,
Qui font régner les rois pour leurs ambitions,
Et, pétrifiant tout sous leur groupe immobile,
Tourmentent, accroupis, de leur souffle débile
La cendre rouge encor des révolutions!

VI

Oh! l’avenir est magnifique!
Jeunes français, jeunes amis,
Un siècle pur et pacifique
S’ouvre à vos pas mieux affermis.
Chaque jour aura sa conquête.
Depuis la base jusqu’au faîte,
Nous verrons avec majesté,
Comme une mer sur ses rivages,
Monter d’étages en étages
L’irrésistible liberté!

Vos pères, hauts de cent coudées,

Ont été forts et généreux.
Les nations intimidées
Se faisaient adopter par eux.
Ils ont fait une telle guerre
Que tous les peuples de la terre
De la France prenaient le nom,
Quittaient leur passé qui s’écroule,
Et venaient s’abriter en foule
A l’ombre de Napoléon!

Vous n’avez pas l’âme embrasée
D’une moins haute ambition!
Faites libre toute pensée
Et reine toute nation;
Montrez la liberté dans l’ombre
A ceux qui sont dans la nuit sombre!
Allez, éclairez le chemin,
Guidez notre marche unanime,
Et faites, vers le but sublime,
Doubler le pas au genre humain!

Que l’esprit dans sa fantaisie
Suive, d’un vol plus détaché,
Ou les arts, ou la poésie,
Ou la science au front penché!
Qu’ouvert à quiconque l’implore
Le trône ait un écho sonore
Qui, pour rendre le roi meilleur,
Grossisse et répète sans cesse
Tous les conseils de la sagesse,
Toutes les plaintes du malheur!

Revenez prier sur les tombes,
Prêtres! que craignez-vous encor?
Qu’allez-vous faire aux catacombes
Tout reluisants de pourpre et d’or?
Venez! – mais plus de mitre ardente,

Plus de vaine pompe imprudente,
Plus de trône dans le sain lieu!
Rien que l’aumône et la prière!
La croix de bois, l’autel de pierre
Suffit aux hommes comme à Dieu!

VII

Et désormais, chargés du seul fardeau des âmes,
Pauvres comme le peuple, humbles comme les femmes,
Ne redoutez plus rien. Votre église est le port!
Quand longtemps a grondé la bouche du Vésuve,
Quand sa lave, écumant comme un vin dans la cuve,
Apparaît toute rouge au bord,

Naples s’émeut; pleurante, effarée et lascive,
Elle accourt, elle étreint la terre convulsive;
Elle demande grâce au volcan courroucé;
Point de grâce! un long jet de cendre et de fumée
Grandit incessamment sur la cime enflammée,
Comme un cou de vautour hors de l’air dressé.

Soudain un éclair luit! Hors du cratère immense
La sombre éruption bondit comme en démence.
Adieu le fronton grec et le temple toscan!
La flamme des vaisseaux empourpre la voilure.
La lave se répand comme une chevelure
Sur les épaules du volcan.

Elle vient, elle vient, cette lave profonde
Qui féconde les champs et fait des ports dans l’onde;
Plages, mer, archipels, tout tressaille à la fois;
Ses flots roulent, vermeils, fumants, inexorables;
Et Naple et ses palais tremblent, plus misérables
Qu’au souffle de l’orage une feuille des bois!

Chaos prodigieux! la cendre emplit les rues,

La terre revomit des maisons disparues;
Chaque toit éperdu se heurte au toit voisin;
La mer bout dans le golfe et la plaine s’embrase;
Et les clochers géants, chancelant sur leur base,
Sonnent d’eux-mêmes le tocsin!

Mais – c’est Dieu qui le veut – tout en brisant des villes,
En comblant les vallons, en effaçant les îles,
En charriant les tours sur son flot en courroux,
Tout en bouleversant les ondes et la terre,
Toujours Vésuve épargne en son propre cratère
L’humble ermitage où prie un vieux prêtre à genoux!
10 août 1830

À la colonne

Plusieurs pétitionnaires demandent que la Chambre intevienne pour faire transporter les cendres de Napoléon sous la colonne de la place Vendôme.

Après une courte délibération, la Chambre passe à l'ordre du jour.

(CHAMBRE DES DEPUTES. – séance du 7 octobre 1830

I

Oh! quand il bâtissait, de sa main colossale,
Pour son trône, appuyé sur l'Europe vassale,
Ce pilier souverain,
Ce bronze, devant qui tout n'est que poudre et sable,
Sublime monument, deux fois impérissable,
Fait de gloire et d'airain;

Quand il le bâtissait, pour qu'un jour dans la ville
Ou la guerre étrangère ou la guerre civile
Y brisassent leur char,
Et pour qu'il fît pâlir sur nos places publiques
Les frêles héritiers de vos noms magnifiques,
Alexandre et César!

C'était un beau spectacle! – Il parcourait la terre
Avec ses vétérans, nation militaire
Dont il savait les noms;
Les rois fuyaient; les rois n'étaient point de sa taille;
Et, vainqueur, il allait par les champs de bataille
Glanant tous leurs canons.

Et puis, il revenait avec la grande armée,
Encombrant de butin sa France bien-aimée,
Son Louvre de granit,
Et les Parisiens poussaient des cris de joie,
Comme font les aiglons, alors qu'avec sa proie
L'aigle rentre à son nid!

Et lui, poussant du pied tout ce métal sonore,
Il courait à la cuve où bouillonnait encore
Le monument promis.
Le moule en était fait d’une de ses pensées.
Dans la fournaise ardente il jetait à brassées
Les canons ennemis!

Puis il s’en revenait gagner quelque bataille.
Il dépouillait encore à travers la mitraille
Maints affûts dispersés;
Et, rapportant ce bronze à la Rome française,
Il disait aux fondeurs penchés sur la fournaise:
— En avez-vous assez?

C’était son œuvre à lui! – Les feux du polygone,
Et la bombe, et le sabre, et l’or de la dragonne
Furent ses premiers jeux.
Général, pour hochets il prit les Pyramides;
Empereur, il voulut, dans ses vœux moins timides
Quelque chose de mieux.

Il fit cette colonne! – Avec sa main romaine
Il tordit et mêla dans l’œuvre surhumaine
Tout un siècle fameux,
Les Alpes se courbant sous sa marche tonnante,
Le Nil, le Rhin, le Tibre, Austerlitz rayonnante,
Eylau froid et brumeux.

Car c’est lui qui, pareil à l’antique Encelade,
Du trône universel essaya l’escalade,
Qui vingt ans entassa,
Remuant terre et cieux avec une parole,
Wagram
sur Marengo, Champaubert sur Arcole,
Pélion sur Ossa!

Oh! quand par un beau jour, sur la place Vendôme,

Homme dont tout un peuple adorait le fantôme,
Tu vins grave et serein,
Et que tu découvris ton œuvre magnifique,
Tranquille, et contenant d’un geste pacifique
Tes quatre aigles d’airain;

A cette heure où les tiens t’entouraient par cent mille;
Où, comme se pressaient autour de Paul-Emile
Tous les petits romains,
Nous, enfants de six ans, rangés sur ton passage,
Cherchant dans ton cortège un père au fier visage,
Nous te battions des mains;

Oh! qui t’eût dit alors, à ce faîte sublime,
Tandis que tu rêvais sur le trophée opime
Un avenir si beau,
Qu’un jour à cet affront il te faudrait descendre
Que trois cents avocats oseraient à ta cendre
Chicaner ce tombeau!

II

Attendez donc, jeunesse folle,
Nous n’avons pas le temps encor!
Que vient-on nous parler d’Arcole,
Et de Wagram et du Thabor?
Pour avoir commandé peut-être
Quelque armée, et s’être fait maître
De quelque ville dans son temps,
Croyez-vous que l’Europe tombe
S’il n’ameute autour de sa tombe
Les Démosthènes haletants?

D’ailleurs le ciel n’est pas tranquille;
Les soucis ne leur manquent pas;
L’inégal pavé de la ville
Fait encor trébucher leurs pas.

Et pourquoi ces honneurs suprêmes?
Ont-ils des monuments eux-mêmes?
Quel temple leur a-t-on dressé?
Etrange peuple que nous sommes!
Laissez passer tous ces grands hommes!
Napoléon est bien pressé!

Toute crainte est-elle étouffée?
Nous songerons à l’immortel
Quand ils auront tous leur trophée,
Quand ils auront tous leur autel!
Attendons, attendons, mes frères.
Attendez, restes funéraires,
Dépouille de Napoléon,
Que leur courage se rassure
Et qu’ils aient donné leur mesure
Au fossoyeur du Panthéon!

III

Ainsi, — cent villes assiégées;
Memphis, Milan, Cadix, Berlin;
Soixante batailles rangées;
L’univers d’un seul homme plein;
N’avoir rien laissé dans le monde,
Dans la tombe la plus profonde,
Qu’il n’ait dompté, qu’il n’ait atteint;
Avoir, dans sa course guerrière,
Ravi le Kremlin au czar Pierre,
L’Escurial à Charles-Quint;

Ainsi, — ce souvenir qui pèse
Sur nos ennemis effarés;
Ainsi, dans une cage anglaise
Tant de pleurs amers dévorés;
Cette incomparable fortune,
Cette gloire aux rois importune,

Ce nom si grand, si vite acquis,
Sceptre unique, exil solitaire,
Ne valent pas six pieds de terre
Sous les canons qu’il a conquis!

IV

Encore si c’était crainte austère!
Si c’était l’âpre liberté
Qui d’une cendre militaire
N’ose ensemencer la cité!
Si c’était la vierge stoïque
Qui proscrit un nom héroïque
Fait pour régner et conquérir,
Qui se rappelle Sparte et Rome,
Et craint que l’ombre d’un grand homme
N’empêche son fruit de mûrir! –

Mais non; la liberté sait aujourd’hui sa force.
Un trône est sous sa main comme un gui sur l’écorce
Quand les races de rois manquent au droit juré;
Nous avons parmi nous vu passer, ô merveille!
La plus nouvelle et la plus vieille!
Ce siècle, avant trente ans, avait tout dévoré.

La France, guerrière et paisible,
A deux filles du même sang: -
L’une fait l’armée invincible,
L’autre fait le peuple puissant.
La Gloire, qui n’est pas l’aînée,
N’est plus armée et couronnée;
Ni pavois, ni sceptre oppresseur;
La Gloire n’est plus décevante,
Et n’a plus rien dont s’épouvante
La Liberté, sa grande sœur!

V

Non. S’ils ont repoussé la relique immortelle,
C’est qu’ils en sont jaloux! qu’ils tremblent devant elle!
Qu’ils en sont tout pâlis!
C’est qu’ils ont peur d’avoir l’empereur sur leur tête,
Et de voir s’éclipser leurs lampions de fête
Au soleil d’Austerlitz!

Pourtant, c’eût été beau! – Lorsque, sous la colonne,
On eût senti présents dans notre Babylone
Ces ossements vainqueurs,
Qui pourrait dire, au jour d’une guerre civile,
Ce qu’une si grande ombre, hôtesse de la ville,
Eût mis dans tous les cœurs!

Si jamais l’étranger, ô cité souveraine,
Eût ramené brouter les chevaux de l’Ukraine
Sur ton sol bien-aimé,
Enfantant des soldats dans ton enceinte émue,
Sans doute qu’à travers ton pavé qui remue
Ces os eussent germé!

Et toi, colonne! un jour, descendu sous ta base,
Le pèlerin pensif, contemplant en extase
Ce débris surhumain,
Serait venu peser, à genoux sur la pierre,
Ce qu’un Napoléon peut laisser de poussière
Dans le creux de la main!

O merveille! ô néant! – tenir cette dépouille!
Compter et mesurer ces os que de sa rouille
Rongea le flot marin,
Ce genou qui jamais n’a ployé sous la crainte,
Ce pouce de géant dont tu portes l’empreinte
Partout sur ton airain!

Contempler le bras fort, la poitrine féconde,

Le talon qui, douze ans, éperonna le monde,
Et, d’un œil filial,
L’orbite du regard qui fascinait la foule,
Ce front prodigieux, ce crâne fait au moule
Du globe impérial!

Et croire entendre, en haut, dans tes noires entrailles,
Sortir du cliquetis des confuses batailles,
Des bouches du canon,
Des chevaux hennissants, des villes crénelées,
Des clairons, des tambours, du souffle des mêlées,
Ce bruit: Napoléon!

Rhéteurs embarrassés dans votre toge neuve,
Vous n’avez pas voulu consoler cette veuve
Vénérable aux partis!
Tout en vous partageant l’empire d’Alexandre,
Vous avez peur d’une ombre et peur d’un peu de cendre:
Oh! vous êtes petits!

VI

Hélas! hélas! garde ta tombe!
Garde ton rocher écumant,
Où t’abattant comme la bombe
Tu vins tomber, tiède et fumant!
Garde ton âpre Sainte-Hélène
Où de ta fortune hautaine
L’œil ébloui voit le revers;
Garde l’ombre où tu te recueilles,
Ton saule sacré dont les feuilles
S’éparpillent dans l’univers!

Là, du moins, tu dors sans outrage.
Souvent tu t’y sens réveillé
Par les pleurs d’amour et de rage
D’un soldat rouge agenouillé!

Là, si parfois tu te relèves,
Tu peux voir, du haut de ces grèves,
Sur le globe azuré des eaux,
Courir vers ton roc solitaire,
Comme au vrai centre de la terre,
Toutes les voiles des vaisseaux!

VII

Dors, nous t'irons chercher! ce jour viendra peut-être!
Car nous t'avons pour dieu sans t'avoir eu pour maître!
Car notre œil s'est mouillé de ton destin fatal,
Et, sous les trois couleurs comme sous l'oriflamme,
Nous ne nous pendons pas à cette corde infâme
Qui t'arrache à ton piédestal!

Oh! va, nous te ferons de belles funérailles!
Nous aurons bien aussi peut-être nos batailles;
Nous en ombragerons ton cercueil respecté!
Nous y convierons tout, Europe, Afrique, Asie!
Et nous t'amènerons la jeune Poésie
Chantant la jeune Liberté!

Tu sera bien chez nous! –couché sous ta colonne,
Dans ce puissant Paris qui fermente et bouillonne,
Sous ce ciel, tant de fois d'orages obscurci,
Sous ces pavés vivants qui grondent et s'amassent,
Où roulent les canons, où les lésions passent; -
Le peuple est une mer aussi.

S'il ne garde aux tyrans qu'abîme et que tonnerre,
Il a pour le tombeau, profond et centenaire
(La seule majesté dont il soit courtisan),
Un long gémissement, infini, doux et sombre,
Qui ne laissera pas regretter à ton ombre
Le murmure de l'océan!
9 octobre 1830

Hymne

Ceux qui pieusement sont morts pour la patrie
Ont droit qu'à leur cerceuil la foule vienne et prie.
Entre les plus beaux noms leur nom est le plus beau.
   Toute gloire près d'eux passe et tombe éphémère;
   Et, comme ferait une mère,
   La voix d'un peuple entier les berce en leur tombeau.

   Gloire à notre France éternelle!
   Gloire à ceux qui sont morts pour elle!
   Aux martyrs! aux vaillants! aux forts!
   A ceux qu'enflamme leur exemple,
   Qui veulent place dans le temple,
   Et qui mourrons comme ils sont morts!

   C'est pour ces morts, dont l'ombre est ici bienvenue,
   Que le haut Panthéon élève dans la nue,
   Au-dessus de Paris,la ville aux mille tours,
   La reine de nos Tyrs et de nos Babylones,
   Cette couronne de colonnes
   Que le soleil levant redore tous les jours!

   Gloire à notre France éternelle!
   Gloire à ceux qui sont morts pour elle!
   Aux martyrs! aux vaillants! aux forts!
   A ceux qu'enflamme leur exemple,
   Qui veulent place dans le temple,
   Et qui mourrons comme ils sont morts!

   Ainsi, quand de tels morts sont couchés dans la tombe,
   En vain l'oubli, nuit sombre où va tout ce qui tombe,
   Passe sur leur sépulcre où nous nous inclinons;
   Chaque jour,pour eux seuls se levant plus fidèle,
   La gloire, aube toujours nouvelle,
   Fait luire leur mémoire et redore leurs noms!

Gloire à notre France éternelle!
Gloire à ceux qui sont morts pour elle!
Aux martyrs! aux vaillants! aux forts!
A ceux qu’enflamme leur exemple,
Qui veulent place dans le temple,
Et qui mourrons comme ils sont morts!
Juillet 1831

Noces et festins

La salle est magnifique et la table est immense.
Toujours par quelque bout le banquet recommence,
Un magique banquet, sans cesse amoncelé
Dans l’or et le cristal et l’argent ciselé.
A cette table auguste, où siègent peu de sages,
Tous les sexes ont place ainsi que tous les âges.
Guerrier de quarante ans au profil sérieux,
Jeune homme au blond duvet, jeune fille aux doux yeux,
Enfant qui balbutie et vieillard qui bégaye,
Tous mangent, tous ont faim, et leur faim les égaye,
Et les plus acharnés sont, autour des plats d’or,
Ceux qui n’ont plus de dents ou n’en ont pas encor!
Casques, cimiers, fleurons, bannières triomphales
Les lions couronnés, les vautours bicéphales,
Les étoiles d’argent sur le sinople obscur,
L’abeille dans la pourpre et le lys dans l’azur,
Les chaînes, les chevrons, les lambels, les losanges,
Tout ce que le blason a de formes étranges,
De léopards ailés, d’aigles et de griffons,
Tourbillonne autour d’eux, se cramponne aux plafonds,
Se tord dans l’arabesque entre leurs pieds jetée,
Plonge un bec familier dans leur coupe sculptée,
Et suspend aux lambris main drapeau rayonnant,
Qui, des poutres du toit jusqu’à leurs fronts traînant,
Les effleure du bout de sa frange superbe,
Comme un oiseau dont l’aile en passant touche l’herbe.

Et comme à ce banquet tout résonne ou reluit,
On y croit voir jouter la lumière et le bruit.

La salle envoie au ciel une rumeur de fête.
Les convives ont tous une couronne en tête,
Tous un trône sous eux où leur orgueil s’assied,
Tous un sceptre à la main, tous une chaîne au pied;

Car il en est plus d’un qui voudrait fuir peut-être,
Et l’esclave le mieux attaché c’est le maître.

Le pouvoir enivrant qui change l’homme en dieu;
L’amour, miel et poison, l’amour, philtre de feu
Fait du souffle mêlé de l’homme et de la femme,
Des frissons de la chair et des rêves de l’âme;
Le plaisir, fils des nuits, dont l’œil brûlant d’espoir
Languit vers le matin et sa rallume au soir;
Les meutes, les piqueurs, les chasses effrénées
Tout le jour par les champs au son du cor menées;
La soie et l’or; les lits de cèdre et de vermeil,
Faits pour la volupté plus que pour le sommeil,
Où, quand votre maîtresse en vos bras est venue,
Sur une peau de tigre on peut la coucher nue;
Les palais effrontés, les palais imprudents
Qui, du pauvre enviées, lui font grincer des dents;
Les parcs majestueux, pleins d’horizons bleuâtres,
Où l’œil sous le feuillage entrevoit des albâtres,
Où le grand peuplier tremble auprès du bouleau,
Où l’on entend la nuit des musiques sur l’eau;
La pudeur des beautés facilement vaincue;
La justice du juge à prix d’or convaincue;
La terreur des petits, le respect des passants,
Cet assaisonnement du bonheur des puissants;
La guerre; le canon tout gorgé de mitrailles
Qui passe son long cou par-dessus les murailles;
Le régiment marcheur, polype aux mille pieds;
La grande capitale aux bruits multipliés;
Tout ce qui jette au ciel, soit ville, soit armée,
Des vagues de poussière et des flots de fumée;
Le budget, monstre énorme, admirable poisson
A qui de toutes parts on jette l’hameçon,
Et qui, laissant à flots l’or couler de ses plaies,
Traîne un ventre splendide, écaillé de monnaies;
Tels sont les mets divins que sur des plats dorés
Leur servent à la fois cent valets affairés,

Et que dans son fourneau, laboratoire sombre,
Souterrain qui flamboie au-dessous d’eux dans l’ombre,
Prépare nuit et jour pour le royal festin
Ce morose alchimiste, appelé le Destin!

Le sombre amphitryon ne veut pas de plats vides,
Et la profusion lasse les plus avides;
Et, pour choisir parmi tant de mets savoureux,
Pour les bien conseiller, sans cesse, derrière eux,
Ils ont leur conscience ou ce qu’ainsi l’on nomme,
Compagnon clairvoyant, guide sûr de tout homme,
A qui, par imprudence et dès les premiers jeux,
Les nourrices des rois crèvent toujours les yeux.

Oh! ce sont là les grands et les heureux du monde!
O vie intarissable où le bonheur abonde!
O magnifique orgie! ô superbe appareil!
Comme on s’enivre bien dans un festin pareil!
Comme il doit, à travers ces splendeurs éclatantes,
Vous passer dans l’esprit mille images flottantes!
Que les rires, les voix, les lampes et le vin
Vous doivent faire en l’âme un tourbillon divin!
Et que l’œil ébloui doit errer avec joie
De tout ce qui ruisselle à tout ce qui flamboie!

Mais tout à coup, tandis que l’échanson rieur
Leur verse à tous l’oubli du monde extérieur;
A l’heure où table, et salle, et valets, et convives,
Et flambeaux couronnés d’auréoles plus vives,
Et l’orchestre caché qui chante jour et nuit,
Epanchent plus de joie, et de flamme, et de bruit,
Hélas! à cet instant d’ivresse et de délire,
Où le banquet hautain semble éclater de rire,
Narguant le peuple assis à la porte en haillons,
Quelqu’un frappe soudain l’escalier des talons,
Quelqu’un survient, quelqu’un en bas se fait entendre,
Quelqu’un d’inattendu qu’on devrait bien attendre.

Ne fermez pas la porte. Il faut ouvrir d'abord.
Il faut qu'on laisse entrer. – Et tantôt c'est la mort,
Tantôt l'exil qui vient, la bouche haletante,
L'une avec un tombeau, l'autre avec une tente,
La mort au pied pesant, l'exil au pas léger,
Spectre toujours vêtu d'un habit étranger.

Le spectre est effrayant. Il entre dans la salle,
Jette sur tous les fronts son ombre colossale,
Courbe chaque convive ainsi qu'un arbre au vent,
Puis il en choisit un, le plus ivre souvent,
L'arrache du milieu de la table effrayée,
Et l'emporte, la bouche encor mal essuyée!
20 août 1832

Napoléon III

Mil huit cent onze! – O temps où des peuples sans nombre
Attendaient prosternés sous un nuage sombre
Que le ciel eût dit oui!
Sentaient trembler sous eux les états centenaires,
    Et regardaient le Louvre entouré de tonnerres,
    Comme un mont Sinaï!

    Courbés comme un cheval qui sent venir son maître,
    Ils se disaient entre eux: — Quelqu’un de grand va naître!
    L’immense empire attend un héritier demain.
    Qu’est-ce que le Seigneur va donner à cet homme
    Qui, plus grand que César, plus grand même que Rome,
    Absorbe dans son sort le sort du genre humain? –

    Comme ils parlaient, la nue éclatante et profonde
    S’entr’ouvrit, et l’on vit se dresser sur le monde
    L’homme prédestiné,
    Et les peuples béants ne purent que se taire,
    Car ses deux bras levés présentaient à la terre
    Un enfant nouveau-né.

    Au souffle de l’enfant, dôme des Invalides,
    Les drapeaux prisonniers sous tes voûtes splendides
    Frémirent, comme au vent frémissent les épis;
    Et son cri, ce doux cri qu’une nourrice apaise,
    Fit, nous l’avons tous vu, bondir et hurler d’aise
    Les canons monstrueux à ta porte accroupis!

    Et lui! l’orgueil gonflait sa puissante narine;
    Ses deux bras, jusqu’alors croisés sur sa poitrine,
    S’étaient enfin ouverts!
    Et l’enfant, soutenu dans sa main paternelle,
    Inondé des éclairs de sa fauve prunelle,
    Rayonnait au travers!

Quand il eut bien fait voir l’héritier de ses trônes
Aux vieilles nations comme aux vieilles couronnes,
Eperdu, l’œil fixé sur quiconque était roi,
Comme un aigle arrivé sur une haute cime,
Il cria tout joyeux avec un air sublime:
— L’avenir! l’avenir! l’avenir est à moi!

II

Non, l’avenir n’est à personne!
Sire, l’avenir est à Dieu!
A chaque fois que l’heure sonne,
Tout ici-bas nous dit adieu.
L’avenir! l’avenir! mystère!
Toutes les choses de la terre,
Gloire, fortune militaire,
Couronne éclatante des rois,
Victoire aux ailes embrasées,
Ambitions réalisées,
Ne sont jamais sur nous posées
Que comme l’oiseau sur nos toits!

Non, si puissant qu’on soit, non, qu’on rie ou qu’on pleure,
Nul ne te fait parler, nul ne peut avant l’heure
Ouvrir ta froide main,
O fantôme muet, ô notre ombre, ô notre hôte,
Spectre toujours masqué qui nous suis côte à côte,
Et qu’on nomme demain!

Oh! demain, c’est la grande chose!
De quoi demain sera-t-il fait?
L’homme aujourd’hui sème la cause,
Demain Dieu fait mûrir l’effet.
Demain, c’est l’éclair dans la voile,
C’est le nuage sur l’étoile,
C’est un traître qui se dévoile,

C’est le bélier qui bat les tours,
C’est l’astre qui change de zone,
C’est Paris qui suit Babylone;
Demain, c’est le sapin du trône
Aujourd’hui, c’en est le velours!

Demain, c’est le cheval qui s’abat blanc d’écume.
Demain, ô conquérant, c’est Moscou qui s’allume,
La nuit, comme un flambeau.
C’est votre vieille garde au loin jonchant la plaine.
Demain, c’est Waterloo! demain, c’est Sainte-Hélène!
Demain, c’est le tombeau!

Vous pouvez entrer dans les villes
Au galop de votre coursier,
Dénouer les guerres civiles
Avec le tranchant de l’acier;
Vous pouvez, ô mon capitaine,
Barrer la Tamise hautaine,
Rendre la victoire incertaine
Amoureuse de vos clairons,
Briser toutes portes fermées,
Dépasser toutes renommées,
Donner pour astre à des armées
L’étoile de vos éperons!

Dieux garde la durée et vous laisse l’espace;
Vous pouvez sur la terre avoir toute la place,
Etre aussi grand qu’un front peut l’être sous le ciel;
Sire, vous pouvez prendre, à votre fantaisie,
L’Europe à Charlemagne, à Mahomet l’Asie; -
Mais tu ne prendras pas demain à l’Eternel!

III

O revers! ô leçon! – Quand l’enfant de cet homme
Eut reçu pour hochet la couronne de Rome;

Lorsqu’on l’eut revêtu d’un nom qui retentit;
Lorsqu’on eut bien montré son front royal qui tremble
Au peuple émerveillé qu’on puisse tout ensemble
Etre si grand et si petit;

Quand son père eut pour lui gagné bien des batailles;
Lorsqu’il eut épaissi de vivantes murailles
Autour du nouveau-né riant sur son chevet;
Quand ce grand ouvrier, qui savait comme on fonde,
Eut, à coups de cognée, à peu près fait le monde
Selon le songe qu’il rêvait;

Quant tout fut préparé par les mains paternelles
Pour doter l’humble enfant de splendeurs éternelles;
Lorsqu’on eut de sa vie assuré les relais;
Quand, pour loger un jour ce maître héréditaire,
On eut enraciné bien avant dans la terre
Les pieds de marbre des palais;

Lorsqu’on eut pour sa soif posé devant la France
Un vase tout rempli du vin de l’espérance, -
Avant qu’i eût goûté de ce poison doré,
Avant que de sa lèvre il eût touché la coupe,
Un cosaque survint qui prit l’enfant en croupe
Et l’emporta tout effaré!

IV

Oui, l’aigle, un soir, planait aux voûtes éternelles,
Lorsqu’un grand coup de vent lui cassa les deux ailes;
Sa chute fit dans l’air un foudroyant sillon;
Tous alors sur son nid fondirent pleins de joie;
Chacun selon ses dents se partagea la proie;
L’Angleterre prit l’aigle, et l’Autriche l’aiglon.

Vous savez ce qu’on fit du géant historique.
Pendant sic ans on vit, loin derrière l’Afrique,

Sous le verrou des rois prudents,
— Oh! n'exilons personne! oh! l'exil est impie! -
Cette grande figure en sa cage accroupie,
Ployée, et les genoux aux dents.

Encor si ce banni n'eût rien aimé sur terre!
Mais les cœurs de lion sont les vrais cœurs de père.
Il aimait son fils, ce vainqueur!
Deux choses lui restaient dans sa cage inféconde,
Le portrait d'un enfant et la carte du monde,
Tout son génie et tout son cœur!

Le soir, quand son regard se perdait dans l'alcôve,
Ce qui se remuait dans cette tête chauve,
Ce que son œil cherchait dans le passé profond,
— Tandis que ses geôliers, sentinelles placées
Pour guetter nuit et jour le vol de ses pensées,
En regardaient passer les ombres sur son front; -

Ce n'était pas toujours, sire, cette épopée
Que vous aviez naguère écrite avec l'épée;
Arcole, Austerlitz, Montmirail;
Ni l'apparition des vieilles pyramides;
Ni le pacha du Caire et ses chevaux numides
Qui mordaient le vôtre au poitrail;

Ce n'était pas le bruit de bombe et de mitraille
Que vingt ans, sous ses pieds, avait fait la bataille
Déchaînée en noirs tourbillons,
Quand son souffle poussait sur cette mer troublée
Les drapeaux frisonnants, penchés dans la mêlée
Comme les mâts des bataillons;

Ce n'était pas Madrid, le Kremlin et la Phare,
La diane au matin fredonnant sa fanfare,
Le bivouac sommeillant dans les feux étoilés,
Les dragons chevelus, les grenadiers épiques,

Et les rouges lanciers fourmillant dans les piques,
Comme des fleurs de pourpre en l’épaisseur des blés;

Non, ce qui l’occupait, c’est l’ombre blonde et rose
D’un bel enfant qui dort la bouche demi-close,
Gracieux comme l’orient,
Tandis qu’avec amour sa nourrice enchantée
D’une goutte de lait au bout du sein restée
Agace sa lèvre en riant.

Le père alors posait ses coudes sur sa chaise,
Son cœur plein de sanglots se dégonflait à l’aise,
Il pleurait, d’amour éperdu… -
Sois béni, pauvre enfant, tête aujourd’hui glacée,
Seul être qui pouvais distraire sa pensée
Du trône du monde perdu!

V

Tous deux sont morts. – Seigneur, votre droite est terrible!
Vous avez commencé par le maître invincible,
Par l’homme triomphant;
Puis vous avez enfin complété l’ossuaire;
Dix ans vous ont suffi pour filer le suaire
Du père et de l’enfant!

Gloire, jeunesse, orgueil, biens que la tombe emporte!
L’homme voudrait laisser quelque chose à la porte,
Mais la mort lui dit non!
Chaque élément retourne où tout doit redescendre.
L’air reprend la fumée, et la terre la cendre.
L’oubli reprend le nom.

VI

O révolutions! j’ignore,
Moi, le moindre des matelots,

Ce que Dieu dans l’ombre élabore
Sous le tumulte de vos flots.
La foule vous hait et vous raille.
Mais qui sait comment Dieu travaille?
Qui sait si l’onde qui tressaille,
Si le cri des gouffres amers,
Si la trombe aux ardentes serres,
Si les éclairs et les tonnerres,
Seigneur, ne sont pas nécessaires
A la perle que font les mers!

Pourtant cette tempête est lourde
Aux princes comme aux nations;
Oh! quelle mer aveugle et sourde
Qu’un peuple en révolutions!
Que sert ta chanson, ô poëte?
Ces chants que ton génie émiette
Tombent à la vague inquiète
Qui n’a jamais rien entendu!
Ta voix s’enroue en cette brume,
Le vent disperse au loin ta plume,
Pauvre oiseau chantant dans l’écume
Sur le mât d’un vaisseau perdu!

Longue nuit! tourmente éternelle!
Le ciel n’a pas un coin d’azur.
Hommes et choses, pêle-mêle,
Vont roulant dans l’abîme obscur.
Tout dérive et s’en va sous l’onde,
Rois au berceau, maîtres du monde,
Le front chauve et la tête blonde,
Grand et petit Napoléon!
Tout s’efface, tout se délie,
Le flot sur le flot se replie,
Et la vague qui passe oublie
Léviathan comme Alcyon!
Août 1832 Napoléon

Sur le bal de l’hôtel-de-ville

Ainsi l’hôtel de ville illumine son faîte.
Le prince et les flambeaux, tout y brille, et la fête
Ce soir va resplendir sur ce comble éclairé,
Comme l’idée au front du poëte sacré.
Mais cette fête, amis, n’est pas une pensée.
Ce n’est pas d’un banquet que la France est pressée,
Et ce n’est pas un bal qu’il faut, en vérité,
A ce tas de douleurs qu’on nomme la cité!

Puissants! nous ferions mieux de panser quelque plaie
Dont le sage rêveur à cette heure s’effraie,
D’étayer l’escalier qui d’en bas monte en haut,
D’agrandir l’atelier, d’amoindrir l’échafaud,
De songer aux enfants qui sont sans pain dans l’ombre,
De rendre un paradis au pauvre impie et sombre,
Que d’allumer un lustre et de tenir la nuit
Quelques fous éveillés autour d’un peu de bruit!

O reines de nos toits, femmes chastes et saintes,
Fleurs qui de nos maisons parfumez les enceintes,
Vous à qui le bonheur conseille la vertu,
Vous qui contre le mal n’avez pas combattu,
A qui jamais la faim, empoisonneuse infâme,
N’a dit: Vends-moi ton corps, — c’est-à-dire votre âme!
Vous dont le cœur de joie et d’innocence est plein,
Dont la pudeur a plus d’enveloppes de lin
Que n’en avait Isis, la déesse voilée,
Cette fête est pour vous comme une aube étoilée!
Vous riez d’y courir tandis qu’on souffre ailleurs!
C’est que votre belle âme ignore les douleurs;
Le hasard vous posa dans la sphère suprême;
Vous vivez, vous brillez, vous ne voyez pas même,
Tant vos yeux éblouis de rayons sont noyés,
Ce qu’au-dessous de vous dans l’ombre on foule aux pieds!

Oui, c’est ainsi. – Le prince, et le riche, et le monde
Cherche à vous réjouir, vous pour qui tout abonde.
Vous avez la beauté, vous avez l’ornement;
La fête vous enivre à son bourdonnement,
Et, comme à la lumière un papillon de soie,
Vous volez à la porte ouverte qui flamboie!
Vous allez à ce bal, et vous ne songez pas
Que parmi ces passants amassés sur vos pas,
En foule émerveillés des chars et des livrées,
D’autres femmes sont là, non moins que vous parées,
Qu’on farde et qu’on expose à vendre au carrefour;
Spectres où saigne encor la place de l’amour;
Comme vous pour le bal, belles et demi-nues;
Pour vous voir au passage, hélas! exprès venues,
Voilant leur feuil affreux d’un sourire moqueur,
Les fleurs au front, la boue aux pieds, la haine au cœur!
Mai 1832

Ô Dieu! si vous avez la France sous vos ailes

Ô Dieu! si vous avez la France sous vos ailes,
Ne souffrez pas, Seigneur, ces luttes éternelles,
Ces trônes qu’on élève et qu’on brise en courant,
Ces tristes libertés qu’on donne et qu’on reprend,
Ce noir torrent de lois, de passions, d’idées,
Qui répand sur les mœurs ses vagues débordées,
Ces tribuns opposant, lorsqu’on les réunit,
Une charte de plâtre aux abus de granit,
Ces flux et ces reflux de l’onde contre l’onde,
Cette guerre, toujours plus sombre et plus profonde,
Des partis au pouvoir, du pouvoir aux partis,
L’aversion des grands qui ronge les petits,
Et toutes ces rumeurs, ces chocs, ces cris sans nombre,
Ces systèmes affreux échafaudés dans l’ombre,
Qui font que le tumulte et la haine et le bruit
Emplissent les discours, et qu’on entend la nuit
À l’heure où le sommeil veut des moments tranquilles,
Les lourds canons rouler sur le pavé des villes!
30 août 1835

À Canaris

Canaris! Canaris! nous t’avons oublié!
Lorsque sur un héros le temps s’est replié,
Quand le sublime acteur a fait pleurer ou rire,
Et qu’il a dit le mot que Dieu lui donne à dire;
Quand, venus au hasard des révolutions,
Les grands hommes ont fait leurs grandes actions,
Qu’ils ont jeté leur lustre, étincelant ou sombre,
Et qu’ils sont pas à pas redescendus dans l’ombre,
Leur nom, s’éteint aussi. Tout est vain! tout est vain!
Et jusqu’à ce qu’un jour le poëte divin
Qui peut créer un monde avec une parole,
Les prenne, et leur rallume au front une auréole,
Nul ne se souvient d’eux, et la foule aux cent voix
Qui rien qu’en les voyant hurlait d’aise autrefois,
Hélas! si par hasard devant elle on les nomme,
Interroge et s’étonne, et dit: Quel est cet homme?

Nous t’avons oublié. Ta gloire est dans la nuit.
Nous faisons bien encor toujours beaucoup de bruit;
Mais plus de cris d’amour, plus de chants, plus de culte,
Plus d’acclamations pour toi dans ce tumulte!
Le bourgeois ne sait plus épeler ton grand nom.
Soleil qui t’es couché, tu n’as plus de Memnon!
Nous avons un instant crié: — La Grèce! Athènes!
Sparte! Léonidas! Botzaris! Démosthènes!
Canaris, demi-dieu de gloire rayonnant!… –
Puis l’entracte est venu, c’est bien; et maintenant
Dans notre esprit, si plein de ton apothéose,
Nous avons tout rayé pour écrire autre chose.
Adieu les héros grecs! leurs lauriers sont fanés!
Vers d’autres orients nos regards sont tournés.
On n’entend plus sonner ta gloire sur l’enclume
De la presse, géant par qui tout feu s’allume,
Prodigieux cyclope à la tonnante voix,

A qui plus d’un Ulysse a crevé l’œil parfois.
Oh! la presse! ouvrier qui chaque jour s’éveille,
Et qui défait souvent ce qu’il a fait la veille;
Mais qui forge du moins, de son bras souverain,
A toute chose juste une armure d’airain!

Nous t’avons oublié! Mais à toi, que t’importe?
Il te reste, ô marin, la vague qui t’emporte,
Ton navire, un bon vent toujours prêt à souffler,
Et l’étoile du soir qui te regarde aller.
Il te reste l’espoir, le hasard, l’aventure,
Le voyage à travers une belle nature,
L’éternel changement de choses et de lieux,
La joyeuse arrivée et le départ joyeux;
L’orgueil qu’un homme libre a de se sentir vivre
Dans un brick fin voilier et bien doublé de cuivre,
Soit qu’il ait à franchir un détroit sinueux,
Soit que, par un beau temps, l’océan monstrueux,
Qui brise quand il veut les rocs et les murailles,
Le berce mollement sur ses larges écailles,
Soit que l’orage noir, envolé dans les airs,
Le battre à coups pressés de son aile d’éclairs!

Mais il te reste, ô grec! ton ciel bleu, ta mer bleue,
Tes grands aigles qui font d’un coup d’aile une lieue,
Ton soleil toujours pur dans toutes les saisons,
La sereine beauté des tièdes horizons,
Ta langue harmonieuse, ineffable, amollie,
Que le temps a mêlée aux langues d’Italie
Comme aux flots de Baia la vague de Samos;
Langue d’Homère où Dante a jeté quelques mots!
Il te reste, trésor du grand homme candide,
Ton long fusil sculpté, ton yatagan splendide,
Tes larges caleçons de toile, tes caftans
De velours rouge et d’or, aux coudes éclatants!

Quand ton navire fuit sur les eaux écumeuses,

Fier de ne côtoyer que des rives fameuses,
Il te reste, ô mon grec, la douceur d’entrevoir
Tantôt un fronton blanc dans les brumes du soir,
Tantôt, sur le sentier qui près des mers chemine,
Une femme de Thèbe ou bien de Salamine,
Paysanne à l’œil fier qui va vendre ses blés
Et pique gravement deux grands bœufs accouplés,
Assise sur un char d’homérique origine
Comme l’antique Isis des bas-reliefs d’Egine!
Octobre 1832

Seule au pied de la tour

Seule au pied de la tour d’où sort la voix du maître
Dont l’ombre à tout moment au seuil vient apparaître,
Prête à voir en bourreau se changer ton époux,
Pâle et sur le pavé tombée à deux genoux,
Triste Pologne! hélas! te voilà onc liée,
Et vaincue, et déjà pour la tombe pliée!
Hélas! tes blanches mains, à défaut de tes fils,
Pressent sur ta poitrine un sanglant crucifix.
Les baskirs ont marché sur ta robe royale
Où sont encore empreints les clous de leur sandale:
Par instants un voix gronde, on entend le bruit
D’un pas lourd, et l’on voit un sabre qui reluit,
Et toi, serrée au mur qui sous tes pleurs ruisselle,
Levant tes bras meurtris et ton front qui chancelle
Et tes yeux que déjà la mort semble ternir,
Tu dis: France, ma sœur! ne vois-tu rien venir?
12 septembre 1835

À l’homme qui a livré une femme

Ô honte! ce n’est pas seulement cette femme,
Sacrée alors pour tous, faible cœur, mais grande âme,
Mais c’est lui, c’est son nom dans l’avenir maudit,
Ce sont les cheveux blancs de son père interdit,
C’est la pudeur publique en face regardée
Tandis qu’il s’accouplait à son infâme idée,
C’est l’honneur, c’est la foi, la pitié, le serment,
Voilà ce que ce juif a vendu lâchement!

Juif: les impurs traitants à qui l’on vend son âme
Attendront bien longtemps avant qu’un plus infâme
Vienne réclamer d’eux, dans quelque jour d’effroi,
Le fond du sac plein d’or qu’on fit vomir sur toi!

Ce n’est pas même un juif! C’est un payen immonde,
Un renégat, l’opprobre et le rebut du monde,
Un fétide apostat, un oblique étranger
Qui nous donne du moins le bonheur de songer
Qu’après tant de revers et de guerres civiles
Il n’est pas un bandit écumé dans nos villes,
Pas un forçat hideux blanchi dans les prisons,
Qui veuille mordre en France au pain des trahisons!

Rien ne te disait donc dans l’âme, ô misérable!
Que la proscription est toujours vénérable,
Qu’on ne bat pas le sein qui nous donna son lait,
Qu’une fille des rois dont on fut le valet
Ne se met point en vente au fond d’un antre infâme,
Et que, n’étant plus reine, elle était encor femme!

Rentre dans l’ombre où sont tous les monstres flétris
Qui depuis quarante ans bavent sur nos débris!
Rentre dans ce cloaque! et que jamais ta tête,
Dans un jour de malheur ou dans un jour de fête,

Ne songe à reparaître au soleil des vivants!
Qu'ainsi qu'une fumée abandonnée aux vents,
Infecte, et don chacun se détourne au passage,
Ta vie erre au hasard de rivage en rivage!

Et tais-toi! que veux-tu balbutier encor!
Dis, n'as-tu pas vendu l'honneur, le vrai trésor?
Garde tous les soufflets entassés sur ta joue.
Que fait l'excuse au crime et le fard sur la boue!

Sans qu'un ami t'abrite à l'ombre de son toit,
Marche, autre juif errant! marche avec l'or qu'on voit
Luire à travers les doigts de tes mains mal fermées!
Tous les biens de ce monde en grappes parfumées
Pendent sur ton chemin, car le riche ici-bas
A tout, hormis l'honneur qui ne s'achète pas!
Hâte-toi de jouir, maudit! et sans relâche
Marche! et qu'en te voyant on dise: C'est ce lâche!
Marche! et que le remords soit ton seul compagnon!
Marche! sans rien pouvoir arracher de ton nom!
Car le mépris public, ombre de la bassesse,
Croît d'année en année et repousse sans cesse,
Et va s'épaississant sur les traîtres pervers
Comme la feuille au front des sapins toujours verts!

Et quand la tombe un jour, cette embûche profonde
Qui s'ouvre tout à coup sous les choses du monde,
Te fera, d'épouvante et d'horreur agité,
Passer de cette vie à la réalité,
La réalité sombre, éternelle, immobile!
Quand, d'instant en instant plus seul et plus débile,
Tu te cramponneras en vain à ton trésor;
Quand la mort, t'accostant couché sur des tas d'or,
Videra brusquement ta main crispée et pleine
Comme une main d'enfant qu'un homme ouvre sans peine,
Alors, dans cet abîme où tout traître descend,
L'un roulé dans la fange et l'autre teint de sang,

Tu tomberas damné, désespéré, banni!
Afin que ton forfait ne soit pas impuni,
Et que ton âme, errante au milieu de ces âmes,
Y soit la plus abjecte entre les plus infâmes!
Et lorsqu’ils te verront paraître au milieu d’eux,
Ces fourbes dont l’histoire inscrit les noms hideux,
Que l’or tenta jadis, mais à qui d’âge en âge
Chaque peuple en passant vient cracher au visage,
Tous ceux, les plus obscurs comme les plus fameux,
Qui portent sur leur lèvre un baiser venimeux,
Judas qui vend son Dieu, Leclerc qui vend sa ville,
Groupe au louche regard, engeance ingrate et vile,
Tous en foule accourront joyeux sur ton chemin,
Et Louvel indigné repoussera ta main!
Juillet 1835

À monsieur le duc d’O.

Prince, vous avez fait une sainte action.
Loin de la haute sphère où rit l’ambition,
Un père et ses enfants, cheveux blancs, têtes blondes,
Marchaient enveloppés de ténèbres profondes,
Prêts à se perdre au fond d’un gouffre de douleurs,
Le père dans le crime et les filles ailleurs.
Comme des voyageurs, lorsque la nuit les gagne,
Vont s’appelant l’un l’autre aux flancs de la montagne,

Au penchant de l’abîme et rampant à genoux,
Ils ont crié vers moi; moi, j’ai crié vers vous.
Je vous ai dit: — Voici, tout près du précipice,
Des malheureux perdus dont le pied tremble et glisse!
Oh! venez à leur aide et tendez-leur la main! –
Vous vous êtes penché sur le bord du chemin,
Sans demander leurs noms vos mains se sont tendues,
Et vous avez sauvé ces âmes éperdues.
Puis à moi, qui, de joie et de pitié saisi,
Vous contemplais rêveur, vous avez dit: Merci!

C’est bien. C’est noble et grand. – Sous la tente empressée
Que vos mains sur leurs fronts à la hâte ont dressée,
Ils sont là maintenant, recueillant leur espoir,
Leur force et leur courage, et tachant d’entrevoir,
Grâce à votre rayon qui perce leur nuage,
Quelque horizon moins sombre à leur triste voyage,
Groupe encor frissonnant à sa perte échappé!
Pareil au pauvre oiseau, par l’orage trempé,
Qui, s’abritant d’un chêne aux branches éternelles,
Attend pour repartir qu’il ait séché ses ailes!

Jeune homme au cœur royal, soyez toujours ainsi.
La porte qui fait dire au pauvre: C’est ici!
La main toujours tendue au bord de cet abîme

Où tombe le malheur, d’où remonte le crime!
La clef sainte, qu’on trouve au besoin sans flambeau,
Qui rouvre l’espérance et ferme le tombeau!

Soyez l’abri, le toit, le port, l’appui, l’asile!
Faites au prisonnier qu’on frappe et qu’on exile,
A cette jeune fille, hélas, vaincue enfin,
Que marchandent dans l’ombre et le froid et la faim,
Au vieillard qui des jours vide la lie amère,
Aux enfants grelottants qui n’ont ni pain ni mère,
Faites aux malheureux, sans cesse, nuit et jour,
Verser sur vos deux mains bien des larmes d’amour!
Car Dieu fait quelquefois sous ces saintes rosées
Regermer des fleurons aux couronnes rasées.

Comme la nue altière, en son sublime essor,
Se laisse dérober son fluide trésor
Par ces flèches de fer au ciel toujours dressées,
Heureux le prince, empli de pieuses pensées,
Qui sent, du haut des cieux sombres et flamboyants,
Tout son or s’en aller aux mains des suppliants!

Décembre 1834

À Canaris

D’où vient que ma pensée encor revole à toi,
Grec illustre à qui nul ne songe, excepté moi?
D’où vient que me voilà, seul et dans la nuit noire,
Grave et triste, essayant de redorer ta gloire?
Tandis que là, dehors, cent rhéteurs furieux
Grimpent sur des tréteaux pour attirer les yeux,
D’où vient que c’est vers toi que mon esprit retourne,
Vers toi sur qui l’oubli s’enracine et séjourne?
C’est que tu fus tranquille et grand sous les lauriers.
Nous autres qui chantons, nous aimons les guerriers,
Comme sans doute aussi vous aimez les poëtes.
Car ce que nous chantons vient de ce que vous faites!
Car le héros est fort et le poëte est saint!
Les poëtes profonds qu’aucun souffle n’éteint
Sont pareils au volcan de la Sicile blonde
Que tes regards sans doute ont vu fumer sur l’onde;
Comme le haut Etna, flamboyant et fécond,
Ils ont la lave au cœur et l’épi sur le front!

Et puis, ce fut toujours un instinct de mon âme;
Quand ce chaos mêlé de fumée et de flamme,
Quand ce grand tourbillon, par Dieu même conduit,
Qui nous emporte tous au jour ou dans la nuit,
A passé sur le front des héros et des sages,
Comme après la tempête on court sur les rivages,
Moi je vais ramasser ceux qu’il jette dehors,
Ceux qui sont oubliés comme ceux qui sont morts!

Va, ne regrette rien. Ta part est la meilleure.
Vieillir dans ce Paris qui querelle et qui pleure
Et qui chante ébloui par mille visions
Comme une courtisane aux folles passions;
Rouler sur cet amas de têtes sans idées
Pleines chaque matin et chaque soir vidées;

Croître, fruit ignoré, dans ces rameaux touffus;
Etre admiré deux jours par tous ces yeux confus;
Ecouter dans ce gouffre où tout ruisseau s’écoule
Le bruit que fait un nom en tombant sur la foule;
Si des mœurs du passé quelque reste est debout
Se répandre à torrents, comme une onde qui bout,
Sur cette forteresse autrefois glorieuse
Par la brèche qu’y fait la presse furieuse;
Contempler jour et nuit ces flots et leur rumeur,
Et s’y mêler soi-même, inutile rameur;
Voir de près, haletants sous la main qui les pique,
Les ministres traîner la machine publique,
Charrue embarrassée en des sillons bourbeux
Dont nous sommes le soc et dont ils sont les bœufs;
Tirer sur le théâtre, en de funèbres drames,
Du choc des passions l’étincelle des âmes,
Et comme avec la main tordre et presser les cœur(s
Pour en faire sortir goutte à goutte les pleurs;
Emplir de son fracas la tribune aux harangues,
Babel où de nouveau se confondent les langues,
Harceler les pouvoirs; jeter sur ce qu’ils font
L’écume d’un discours au flot sombre et profond;
Etre un gond de la porte, une clef de la voûte;
S’i l’on est grand et fort, chaque jour dans sa route
Ecraser des serpents tout gonflés de venins;
Etre arbuste dans l’herbe et géant chez les nains;
Tout cela ne vaut pas, ô noble enfant de l’onde,
Le bonheur de flotter sur cette mer féconde
Qui vit partir Argo, qui vit naître Colomb,
D’y jeter par endroits la sonde aux pieds de plomb,
Et de voir, à travers la vapeur du cigare,
Décroître à l’horizon Mantinée ou Mégare!

Que si tu nous voyais, ô fils de l’Archipel,
Quand la presse a battu l’unanime rappel,
Créneler à la hâte un droit qu’on veut détruire,
Ou, foule dévouée à qui veut nous conduire,

Contre un pouvoir pygmée agitant son beffroi,
Nous ruer pêle-mêle à l’assaut d’une loi,
Sur ces combats d’enfants, sur ces frêles trophées,
Oh! que tu jetterais le dédain par bouffées,
Toi qui brises tes fers rien qu’en les secouant,
Toi dont le bras, la nuit, envoie en se jouant,
Avec leurs icoglans, leurs noirs, leurs femmes nues,
Les capitans-pachas s’éveiller dans les nues!

Va, que te fait l’oubli de ceux dont tu rirais
Si tu voyais leurs mains et leurs âmes de près?
Que t’importe ces cœurs faits de cire ou de pierre,
Ces mémoires en qui tout est cendre et poussière,
Ce traitant qui, du peuple infructueux fardeau,
N’est bon qu’à s’emplir d’or comme l’éponge d’eau,
Ce marchand accoudé sur son comptoir avide,
Et ce jeune énervé, face imbécile et vide,
Eunuque par le cœur, qui n’admire à Paris
Que les femmes de race et les chevaux de prix?
Que t’importe l’oubli de l’Europe, où tout roule,
L’homme et l’évènement, sous les pieds de la foule?
De Paris qui s’éveille et s’endort tour à tour,
Et fait un mauvais rêve en attendant le jour?
De Londre où l’hôpital ne vaut pas l’hippodrome?
De Rome qui n’est plus que l’écaille de Rome?
Et de ceux qui sont rois ou tribuns, et de ceux
Qui tiennent ton Hellé sous leur joug paresseux,
Vandales vernissés, blonds et pâles barbares,
Qui viennent au pays des rudes palikares,
Tout restaurer, mœurs, peuple et monuments, hélas!
Civiliser la Grèce et gratter Phidias!
Et puis, qui sait – candeur que j’admire et que j’aime! –
Si tu n’as pas fini par t’oublier toi-même!

Que t’importe! Tandis que, debout sur le port,
Tu vends à quelque anglais un passage à ton bord;
Ou que tu fais rouler et ranger sur la grève

Des ballots que longtemps le marchand vit en rêve;
Ou que ton joyeux rire accueille tes égaux,
Tes amis, les patrons de Corinthe et d’Argos;
Peut-être en ce moment quelque femme de Grèce,
Dont un bandeau païen serre la noire tresse,
Mère féconde, ou fille avec de vieux parents,
Tourne sur toi ses yeux fixes et transparents,
Se souvient de Psara, de Chio, de Nauplie,
Et de toute la mer de Canaris remplie,
Et, t’admirant de loin comme on admire un roi,
Sans oser te parler, passe en priant pour toi!

18 septembre 1835

Il n’avait pas vingt ans

Il n’avait pas vingt ans. Il avait abusé
De tout ce qui peut être aimé, souillé, brisé.
Il avait tout terni sous ses mains effrontées.
Les blêmes voluptés sur sa trace ameutées
Sortaient, pour l’appeler, de leur repaire impur
Quand son ombre passait à l’angle de leur mur.
Sa sève nuit et jour s’épuisait aux orgies
Comme la cire ardente aux mèches des bougies
Chassant l’été, l’hiver il posait au hasard
Son coude à l’Opéra sur Gluck ou sur Mozart.
Jamais il ne trempait sa tête dans ces ondes
Qu’Homère et que Shakspeare épanchent si profondes.
Il ne croyait à rien; jamais il ne rêvait;
Le bâillement hideux siégeait à son chevet;
Toujours son ironie, inféconde et morose,
Jappait sur les talons de quelque grande chose;
Il se faisait de tout le centre et le milieu;
Il achetait l’amour, il aurait vendu Dieu.
La nature, la mer, le ciel bleu, les étoiles,
Tous ces vents pour qui l’âme a toujours quelques voiles,
N’avaient rien dont son cœur fût dans l’ombre inquiet.
Il n’aimait pas les champs. Sa mère l’ennuyait.
Enfin, ivre, énervé, ne sachant plus que faire,
Sans haine, sans amour, et toujours, ô misère!
Avant la fin du jour blasé du lendemain,
Un soir qu’un pistolet se trouva sous sa main,
Il rejeta son âme au ciel, voûte fatale,
Comme le fond du verre au plafond de la salle!

Jeune homme, tu fus lâche, imbécile et méchant.
Nous ne te plaindrons pas. Lorsque le soc tranchant
A passé, donne-t-on une larme à l’ivraie?

Mais ce que nous plaindrons une douleur bien vraie,

C’est celle sur laquelle un tel fils est tombé,
C’est ta mère, humble femme au dos lent et courbé,
Qui sent fléchir sans toi son front que l’âge plombe,
Et qui fit le berceau de qui lui fait sa tombe!

Nous ne te plaindrons pas, mais ce que nous plaindrons,
Ce qui nous est encor sacré sous les affronts,
C’est cette triste enfant qui jadis pure et tendre
Chantait à sa mansarde où ton or l’alla prendre,
Qui s’y laissa tenter comme au soleil levant,
Croyant la faim derrière et le bonheur devant;
Qui voit son âme hélas, qu’on mutile et qu’on foule,
Eparse maintenant sous les pieds de la foule;
Qui pleure son parfum par tout souffle enlevé;
Pauvre vase de fleurs tombé sur le pavé!

Non, ce que nous plaindrons, ce n’est pas toi, vaine ombre,
Chiffre qu’on n’a jamais compté dans aucun nombre,
C’est ton nom jadis pur, maintenant avili,
C’est ton père expiré, ton père enseveli,
Vénérable soldat de notre armée ancienne,
Que ta tombe en s’ouvrant réveille dans la sienne!
Ce sont tes serviteurs, tes parents, tes amis,
Tous ceux qui t’entouraient, tous ceux qui s’étaient mis
Follement à ton ombre, et dont la destinée
Par malheur dans la tienne était enracinée;
C’est tout ce qu’ont flétri tes caprices ingrats;
C’est ton chien qui t’aimait et que tu n’aimais pas!

Pour toi, triste orgueilleux, riche au cœur infertile,
Qui vivais impuissant et qui meurs inutile,
Toi qui tranchas tes jours pour faire un peu de bruit,
Sans même être aperçu, retourne dans la nuit!
C’est bien. Sors du festin sans qu’un flambeau s’efface!
Tombe au torrent, sans même en troubler la surface!
Ce siècle a son idée, elle marche à grand pas,

Et toujours à son but! Ton sépulcre n’est pas
De ceux qui le feront trébucher dans sa route.
Ta porte en se fermant ne vaut pas qu’on l’écoute.
Va donc! Qu’as-tu trouvé, ton caprice accompli?
Voluptueux, la tombe, et vaniteux, l’oubli!

Avril 1831

Certe, une telle mort, ignorée ou connue,
N’importe pas au siècle, et rien n’en diminue;
On n’en parle pas même et l’on passe à côté.
Mais lorsque, grandissant sous le ciel attristé,
L’aveugle suicide étend son aile sombre,
Et prend à chaque instant plus d’âmes sous son ombre;
Quand il éteint partout, hors des desseins de Dieu,
Des fronts pleins de lumière et des cœurs pleins de feu;
Quand Robert, qui voilait, peintre au pinceau de flamme,
Sous un regard serein l’orage de son âme,
Rejette le calice avant la fin du jour
Dès qu’il en a vidé ce qu’il contient d’amour;
Quand Castlereagh, ce taon qui piqua Bonaparte,
Cet anglais mélangé de Carthage et de Sparte,
Se plonge au cœur l’acier et meurt désabusé,
Assouvi de pouvoir, de ruses épuisé;
Quand Rabbe de poison inonde ses blessures;
Comme un cerf poursuivi d’aboyantes morsures,
Lorsque Gros haletant se jette, faible et vieux,
Au fleuve, pour tromper sa meute d’envieux;
Quand de la mère au fils et du père à la fille
Partout ce vent de mort ébranche la famille;
Lorsqu’on voit le vieillard se hâter au tombeau

Après avoir longtemps trouvé le soleil beau,
Et l’épouse quittant le foyer domestique,
Et l’écolier lisant dans quelque livre antique,
Et tous ces beaux enfants, hélas! trop tôt mûris,
Qui ne connaissaient pas les hommes, qu’à Paris

Souvent un songe d’or jusques au ciel enlève,
Et qui se sont tués quand du haut de leur rêve
De gloire, de vertu, d’amour, de liberté,
Ils sont tombés le front sur la société!
Alors le croyant prie et le penseur médite!
Hélas! l’humanité va peut-être trop vite.
Où tend ce siècle? où court le troupeau des esprits?
Rien n’est encor trouvé, rien n’est encor compris,
Car beaucoup ici-bas sentent que l’espoir tombe,
Et se brisent la tête à l’angle de la tombe
Comme vous briseriez le soir sur le pavé
Un œuf où rien ne germe et qu’on n’a pas couvé!
Mal d’un siècle en travail où tout se décompose!
Quel en est le remède et quelle en est la cause?
Serait-ce que la foi derrière la raison
Décroît comme un soleil qui baisse à l’horizon?
Que Dieu n’est plus compté dans ce que l’homme fonde?
Et qu’enfin il se fait une nuit trop profonde
Dans ces recoins du cœur, du monde inaperçus,
Que peut seule éclairer votre lampe, ô Jésus!
Est-il temps, matelots mouillés par la tempête,
De rebâtir l’autel et de courber la tête?
Devons-nous regretter ces jours anciens et forts
Où les vivants croyaient ce qu’avaient cru les morts,
Jours de piété grave et de force féconde,
Lorsque la Bible ouverte éblouissait le monde!

Amas sombre et mouvant de méditations!
Problèmes périlleux! obscures questions
Qui font que, par moments s’arrêtant immobile,
Le poëte pensif erre encor dans la ville

A l’heure où sur ses pas on ne rencontre plus
Que le passant tardif aux yeux irrésolus
Et la ronde de nuit, comme un rêve apparue,
Qui va tâtant dans l’ombre à tous les coins de rue!

4 septembre 1835

Oh! n’insultez jamais

Oh! n’insultez jamais une femme qui tombe!
Qui sait sous quel fardeau la pauvre âme succombe!
Qui sait combien de jours sa faim a combattu!
Quand le vent du malheur ébranlait leur vertu,
Qui de nous n’a pas vu de ces femmes brisées
S’y cramponner longtemps de leurs mains épuisées!
Comme au bout d’une branche on voit étinceler
Une goutte de pluie où le ciel vient briller,
Qu’on secoue avec l’arbre et qui tremble et qui lutte,
Perle avant de tomber et fange après sa chute!

La faute en est à nous. A toi, riche! à ton or!
Cette fange d’ailleurs contient l’eau pure encor.
Pour que la goutte d’eau sorte de la poussière,
Et redevienne perle en sa splendeur première,
Il suffit, c’est ainsi que tout remonte au jour,
D’un rayon de soleil ou d’un rayon d’amour!
6 septembre 1835

Conseil

Rien encore n’a germé de vos rameaux flottants
Sur notre jeune terre où, depuis quarante ans,
Tant d’âmes se sont échouées,
Doctrines aux fruits d’or, espoir des nations,
Que la hâtive main des révolutions
Sur nos têtes a secouées!

Nous attendons toujours! Seigneur, prenez pitié
Des peuples qui, toujours satisfaits à moitié,
Vont d’espérance en espérance;
Et montrez-nous enfin l’homme de votre choix
Parmi tous ces tribuns et parmi tous ces rois
Que vous essayez à la France!

Qui peut se croire fort, puissant et souverain?
Qui peut dire en scellant des barrières d’airain:
Jamais vous ne serez franchies!
Dans ce siècle de bruit, de gloire et de revers,
Où les roseaux penchés au bord des étangs verts
Durent plus que les monarchies!

Rois! la bure est souvent jalouse du velours.
le peuple a froid l’hiver, le peuple a faim toujours.
Rendez-lui son sort plus facile.
Le peuple souvent porte un bien rude collier.
Ouvrez l’école aux fils, aux pères l’atelier,
A tous vos bras, auguste asile!

Par la bonté des rois rendez les peuples bons.
Sous d’étranges malheurs souvent nous nous courbons.
Songez que Dieu seul est le maître.
Un bienfait par quelqu’un est toujours ramassé.
Songez-y, rois minés sur qui pèse un passé
Gros du même avenir peut-être!

Donnez à tous. Peut-être un jour tous vous rendront!
Donnez, — on ne sait pas quels épis germeront
Dans notre siècle autour des trônes! –
De la main droite aux bons, de la gauche aux méchants!
Comme le laboureur sème sa graine aux champs,
Ensemencez les cœurs d'aumônes!

O rois! le pain qu'on porte au vieillard desséché,
La pauvre adolescente enlevée au marché,
Le bienfait souriant, toujours prêt à toute heure,
Qui vient, riche et voilé, partout où quelqu'un pleure,
Le cri reconnaissant d'une mère à genoux,
L'enfant sauvé qui lève, entre le peuple et vous,
Ses deux petites mains sincères et joyeuses,
Sont la meilleure digue aux foules furieuses.

Hélas! je vous le dis, ne vous endormez pas
Tandis que l'avenir s'amoncelle là-bas!

Il arrive parfois, dans le siècle où nous sommes,
Qu'un grand vent tout à coup soulève à flots les hommes;
Vent de malheur, formé, comme tous les autans,
De souffles quelque part comprimés trop longtemps;
Vent qui de tout foyer disperse la fumée;
Dont s'attise l'idée à cette heure allumée;
Qui passe sur tout homme, et, torche ou flot amer,
Le fait étinceler ou le fait écumer;
Ebranle tout digue et toute citadelle;
Dans la société met à nu d'un coup d'aile
Des sommets jusqu'alors par des brumes voilés,
Des gouffres ténébreux ou des coins étoilés;
Vent fatal qui confond les meilleurs et les pires,
Arrache mainte tuile au vieux toit des empires,
Et prenant dans l'état, en haut, en bas, partout,
Tout esprit qui dérive et toute âme qui bout,
Tous ceux dont un zéphyr fait remuer les têtes,

Tout ce qui devient onde à l’heure des tempêtes,
Amoncelant dans l’ombre et chassant à la fois
Ces flots, ces bruits, ce peuple, et ces pas et ces voix,
Et ces groupes sans forme et ces rumeurs sans nombre,
Pousse tout cet orage au seuil d’un palais sombre!

Palais sombre en effet, et plongé dans la nuit!
D’où les illusions s’envolent à grand bruit,
Quelques-unes en pleurs, d’autres qu’on entend rire!
C’en est fait. L’heure vient, le voile se déchire,
Adieu les songes d’or! On se réveille, on voit
Un spectre aux mains de chair qui vous touche du doigt.
C’est la réalité! qu’on sent là, qui vous pèse.
On rêvait Charlemagne, on pense à Louis seize!
Heure grande et terrible où, doutant des canons,
La royauté, nommant ses amis par leurs noms,
Recueillant tous les bruits que la tempête apporte,
Attend, l’œil à la vitre et l’oreille à la porte!
Où l’on voit dans un coin, ses filles dans ses bras,
La reine qui pâlit, pauvre étrangère, hélas!

Où les petits enfants des familles royales
De quelque vieux soldat pressent les mains loyales,
Et demandent, avec des sanglots superflus,
Aux valets, qui déjà ne leur répondent plus,
D’où viennent ces rumeurs, ces terreurs, ce mystère,
Et les ébranlements de cette affreuse terre
Qu’ils sentent remuer comme la mer aux vents,
Et qui ne tremble pas sous les autres enfants!

Hélas! vous crénelez vos mornes Tuileries,
Vous encombrez les ponts de vos artilleries,
Vous gardez chaque rue avec un régiment,
A quoi bon? à quoi bon? De moment en moment
La tourbe s’épaissit, grosse et désespérée
Et terrible, et qu’importe, à l’heure où leur marée
Sort et monte en hurlant du fond du gouffre amer,

La mitraille à la foule et la grêle à la mer!

O redoutable époque! et quels temps que les nôtres!
Où, rien qu'en se serrant les uns contre les autres,
Les hommes dans leurs plis écrasent tours, châteaux,
Donjons que les captifs rayaient de leurs couteaux,
Créneaux, portes d'airain comme un carton ployées,
Et sur leurs boulevards vainement appuyées
Les pâles garnisons, et les canons de fer
Broyés avec le mur comme l'os dans la chair!

Comment se défendra ce roi qu'un peuple assiège?
Plus léger sur ce flot que sur l'onde un vain liège,
Plus vacillant que l'ombre aux approches du soir,
Ecoutant sans entendre et regardant sans voir,
Il est là qui frissonne, impuissant, infertile,
Sa main tremble, et sa tête est un crible inutile,
— Hélas! hélas! les rois en ont seuls de pareils! -
Qui laisse tout passer, hors les mauvais conseils!
Que servent maintenant ces sabres, ces épées,
Ces lignes de soldats par des caissons coupées,
Ces bivouacs, allumés dans les jardins profonds,
Dont la lueur sinistre empourpre ses plafonds,
Ce général choisi, qui déjà, vaine garde,
Sent peut-être à son front sourdre une autre cocarde,
Et tous ces cuirassiers, soldats vieux ou nouveaux,
Qui plantent dans la cour des pieux pour leurs chevaux?
Que sert la grille close et la mèche allumée?
Il faudrait une tête, et tu n'as qu'une armée!

Que faire de ce peuple à l'immense roulis,
Mer qui traîne du moins une idée en ses plis,
Vaste inondation d'hommes, d'enfants, de femmes,
Flots qui tous ont des yeux, vagues qui sont des âmes?

Malheur alors! O Dieu! faut-il que nous voyions
Le côté monstrueux des révolutions!

Qui peut dompter la mer? Seigneur! qui peut répondre
Des ondes de Paris et des vagues de Londre,
Surtout lorsque la ville, ameutée aux tambours
Sent ramper dans ses flots l’hydre de ses faubourgs!
Dans ce palais fatal où l’empire s’écroule,
Dont la porte bientôt va ployer sous la foule,
Où l’on parle tout bas de passages secrets,
Où le roi sent déjà qu’on le sert de moins près,
Où la mère en tremblant rit à l’enfant qui pleure,
O mon Dieu! que va-t-il se passer tout à l’heure?
Comment vont-ils jouer avec ce nid de rois?
Pourquoi faut-il qu’aux jours où le pauvre aux abois
Sent sa haine des grands de ce qu’il souffre accrue,
Notre faute ou la leur le lâchent dans la rue?
Temps de deuil où l’émeute en fureur sort de tout!
Où le peuple devient difforme tout à coup!

Malheur donc! c’est fini. Plus de barrière au trône!
Mais Dieu garde un trésor à qui lui fit l’aumône.
Si le prince a laissé, dans des temps moins changeants,
L’empreinte de ses pas à des seuils indigents,
Si des bienfaits cachés il fut parfois complice,
S’il a souvent dit: grâce! où la loi dit: supplice!
Ne désespérez pas. Le peuple aux mauvais jours
A pu tout oublier, Dieu se souvient toujours!
Souvent un cri du cœur sorti d’une humble bouche
Désarme, impérieux, une foule farouche
Qui tenait une proie en ses poings triomphants.
Les mères aux lions font rendre les enfants!

Oh! dans cet instant même où le naufrage gronde,
Où l’on sent qu’un boulet ne peut rien contre une onde,
Où, liquide et fangeuse et pleine de courroux,
La populace à l’œil stupide, aux cheveux roux,
Aboyant sur le seuil comme un chien pour qu’on ouvre,
Arrive, éclaboussant les chapiteaux du Louvre,
Océan qui n’a pas d’heure pour son reflux!

Au moment où l’on voit que rien n’arrête plus
Ce flot toujours grossi, que chaque instant apporte,
Qui veut monter, qui hurle et qui mouille la porte,…
C’est un spectacle auguste et que j’ai vu déjà
Souvent, quand mon regard dans l’histoire plongea,
Qu’une bonne action, cachée en un coin sombre,
Qui sort subitement toute blanche de l’ombre,
Et comme autrefois Dieu qu’elle prend à témoin,
Dit au peuple écumant: Tu n’iras pas plus loin!
28 décembre 1834

Le grand homme vaincu

Le grand homme vaincu peut perdre en un instant
Sa gloire, son empire, et son trône éclatant,
Et sa couronne qu'on renie,
Tout, jusqu'à ce prestige à sa grandeur mêlé
Qui faisait voir son front dans un ciel étoilé;
Il garde toujours son génie!

Ainsi, quand la bataille enveloppe un drapeau,
Tout ce qui n'est qu'azur, écarlate, oripeau,
Frange d'or, tunique de soie,
Tombe sous la mitraille en un moment haché,
Et, lambeau par lambeau, s'en va comme arraché
Par le bec d'un oiseau de proie;

Et, qu'importe! à travers les cris, les pas, les voix,
Et la mêlée en feu qui sur tous à la fois
Fait tourner son horrible meule,
Au plus haut de la hmape, orgeuil des bataillons,
Où pendait cette pourpre envolée en haillons,
L'aigle de bronze reste seule!
21 février 1835

À Alphonse Rabbe

Mort le 31 décembre 1829

Hélas! que fais-tu donc, ô Rabbe, ô mon ami,
Sévère historien dans la tombe endormi!

Je l’ai pensé souvent dans mes heures funèbres,
Seul près de mon flambeau qui rayait les ténèbres,
O noble ami, pareil aux hommes d’autrefois,
Il manque parmi nous ta voix, ta forte voix
Pleine de l’équité qui gonflait ta poitrine,
Il nous manque ta main qui grave et qui burine,
Dans ce siècle où par l’or les sages sont distraits,
Où l’idée est servante auprès des intérêts,
Temps de fruits avortés et de tiges rompues,
D’instincts dénaturés, de raisons corrompues,
Où, dans l’esprit humain tout étant dispersé,
Le présent au hasard flotte sur le passé!

Si parmi nous ta tête était debout encore,
Cette cime où vibrait l’éloquence sonore,
Au milieu de nos flots tu serais calme et grand.
Tu serais comme un pont posé sur ce courant.

Tu serais pour chacun la voix haute et sensée
Qui fait que tout brouillard s’en va de la pensée,
Et que la vérité, qu’en vain nous repoussions,
Sort de l’amas confus des sombres visions!

Tu dirais aux partis qu’ils font trop de poussière
Autour de la raison pour qu’on la voie entière;
Au peuple, que la loi du travail est sur tous
Et qu’il est assez fort pour n’être pas jaloux;
Au pouvoir, que jamais le pouvoir ne se venge,
Et que pour le penseur c’est un spectacle étrange

Et triste quand la loi, figure au bras d'airain,
Déesse qui ne doit avoir qu'un front serein,
Sort à de certains jours de l'urne consulaire
L'œil hagard, écumante et folle de colère!

Et ces jeunes esprits, à qui tu souriais,
Et que leur âge livre aux rêves inquiets,
Tu leurs dirais: “Amis, nés pour des temps prospères,
Oh! n'allez pas errer comme ont erré vos pères!
Laissez mûrir vos fronts! gardez-vous, jeunes gens,
Des systèmes dorés aux plumages changeants
Qui dans les carrefours s'en vont faire la roue!
Et de ce qu'en vos cœurs l'Amérique secoue,
Peuple à peine essayé, nation de hasard,
Sans tige, sans passé, sans histoire et sans art!
Et de cette' sagesse impie, envenimée,
Du cerveau de Voltaire éclose toute armée,
Fille de l'ignorance et de l'orgueil, posant
Les lois des anciens jours sur les mœurs d'à présent,
Qui refait un chaos partout où fut un monde,
Qui rudement enfonce, ô démence profonde!
Le casque étroit de Sparte au front du vieux Paris,
Qui dans les temps passés, mal lus et mal compris,
Viole effrontément tout sage pour lui faire
Un monstre qui serait la terreur de son père!
Si bien que les héros antiques tout tremblants
S'en sont voilé la face, et qu'après trois mille ans,
Par ses embrassements réveillé sous la pierre,
Lycurgue qu'elle épouse enfante Robespierre!”

Tu nous dirais à tous: “Ne vous endormez pas!
Veillez, et soyez prêts! car déjà pas à pas
La main de l'oiseleur dans l'ombre s'est glissée
Partout où chante un nid couvé par la pensée!
Car les plus nobles cœurs sont vaincus ou sont las!
Car la Pologne aux fers ne peut plus même, hélas!
Mordre le pied du czar appuyé sur sa gorge!

Car on voit chaque jour s’allonger dans la forge
La chaîne que les rois, craignant la liberté,
Font pour cette géante endormie à côté!
Ne vous endormez pas! travaillez sans relâche!
Car les grands ont leur œuvre et les petits leur tâche,
Chacun a son ouvrage à faire. Chacun met
Sa pierre à l’édifice encor loin du sommet.
Qui croit avoir fini pour un roi qu’on dépose
Se trompe. Un roi qui tombe est toujours peu de chose.
Il est plus difficile et c’est un plus grand poids
De relever les mœurs que d’abattre les rois.
Rien chez vous n’est complet. La ruine ou l’ébauche.
L’épi n’est pas formé que votre main le fauche!
Vous êtes encombrés de plans toujours rêvés
Et jamais accomplis. Hommes, vous ne savez
Tant vous connaissez peu ce qui convient aux âmes,
Que faire des enfants ni que faire des femmes!
Où donc en êtes-vous? Vous vous applaudissez
Pour quelques blocs de lois au hasard entassés!
Ah: l’heure du repos pour aucun n’est venue.
Travaillez! Vous cherchez une chose inconnue,
Vous n’avez pas de foi, vous n’avez pas d’amour,
Rien chez vous n’est encore éclairé du vrai jour!
Crépuscule et brouillards que vos plus clairs systèmes!
Dans vos lois, dans vos mœurs, et dans vos esprits mêmes
Partout l’aube blanchâtre ou le couchant vermeil!
Nulle part le midi! nulle part le soleil!”

Tu parlerais ainsi dans des livres austères,
Comme parlaient jadis les anciens solitaires,
Comme parlent tous ceux devant qui l’on se tait,
Et l’on t’écouterait comme on les écoutait.
Et l’on viendrait vers toi dans ce siècle plein d’ombre
Où, chacun se heurtant aux obstacles sans nombre
Que faute de lumière on tâte avec la main,
Le conseil manque à l’âme et le guide au chemin!

Hélas! à chaque instant des souffles de tempêtes
Amassent plus de brume et d’ombre sur nos têtes.
De moment en moment l’avenir s’assombrit.
Dans le calme du cœur, dans la paix de l’esprit,
Je t’adressais ces vers où mon âme sereine
N’a laissé sur ta pierre écumer nulle haine,
A toi qui dors couché dans le tombeau profond,
A toi qui ne sais plus ce que les hommes font!
Je t’adressais ces vers pleins de tristes présages.
Car c’est bien follement que nous nous croyions sages!
Le combat furieux recommence à gronder
Entre le droit de croître et le droit d’émonder;
La bataille où les lois attaquent les idées
Se mêle de nouveau sur des mers mal sondées;
Chacun se sent troublé comme l’eau sous le vent;
Et moi-même, à cette heure, à mon foyer rêvant,
Voilà, depuis cinq ans qu’on oubliait Procuste,
Que j’entends aboyer au seuil du drame auguste
La censure à l’haleine immonde, aux ongles noirs,
Cette chienne au front bas qui suit tous les pouvoirs,
Vile, et mâchant toujours dans sa gueule souillée,
O muse! quelque pan de ta robe étoilée!

Hélas! que fais-tu donc, ô Rabbe, ô mon ami,
Sévère historien dans la tombe endormi!

14 septembre 1835

Envoi des feuilles d’automne à madame

A Madame ***

I

Ce livre errant qui va l’aile brisée,
Et que le vent jette à votre croisée
Comme un grêlon à tous les murs cogné,

Hélas! il sort des tempêtes publiques.
Le froid, la pluie, et mille éclairs obliques
L’ont assailli, le pauvre nouveau-né.

Il est puni d’avoir fui ma demeure.
Après avoir chanté, voici qu’il pleure;
Voici qu’il boite après avoir plané!

II

En attendant que le vent le remporte,
Ouvrez, Marie, ouvrez-lui votre porte.
Raccomodez ses vers estropiés!

Dans votre alcôve à tous les vents bien close,
Pour un instant souffrez qu’il se repose,
Qu’il se réchauffe au feu de vos trépieds,

Qu’à vos côtés, à votre ombre, il se couche,
Oiseau plumé, qui, frileux et farouche,
Tremble et palpite, abrité sous vos pieds!
18 janvier 1832

Anacréon, poëte

Anacréon, poëte aux ondes érotiques
Qui filtres du sommet des sagesses antiques,
Et qu’on trouve à mi-côte alors qu’on y gravit,
Clair, à l’ombre, épandu sur l’herbe qui revit,
Tu me plais, doux poëte au flot calme et limpide!
quand le sentier qui monte aux cimes est rapide,
Bien souvent, fatigués du soleil, nous aimons
Boire au petit ruisseau tamisé par les monts!
21 août 1835

L’aurore s’allume

I

L’aurore s’allume;
L’ombre épaisse fuit;
Le rêve et la brume
Vont où va la nuit;
Paupières et roses
S’ouvrent demi-closes;
Du réveil des choses
    On entend le bruit.

    Tout chante et murmure,
    Tout parle à la fois,
    Fumée et verdure,
    Les nids et les toits;
    Le vent parle aux chênes,
    L’eau parle aux fontaines;
    Toutes les haleines
    Deviennent des voix!

    Tout reprend son âme,
    L’enfant son hochet,
    Le foyer sa flamme,
    Le luth son archet;
    Folie ou démence,
    Dans le monde immense,
    Chacun recommence
    Ce qu’il ébauchait.

    Qu’on pense ou qu’on aime,
    Sans cesse agité,
    Vers un but suprême,
    Tout vole emporté;
    L’esquif cherche un môle,

L’abeille un vieux saule,
La boussole un pôle,
Moi la vérité.

II

Vérité profonde!
Granit éprouvé
Qu’au fond de toute onde
Mon ancre a trouvé!
De ce monde sombre,
Où passent dans l’ombre
Des songes sans nombre,
Plafond et pavé!

Vérité, beau fleuve
Que rien ne tarit!
Source où tout s’abreuve,
Tige où tout fleurit!
Lampe que Dieu pose
Près de toute cause!
Clarté que la chose
Envoie à l’esprit!

Arbre à rude écorce,
Chêne au vaste front,
Que selon sa force
L’homme ploie ou rompt,
D’où l’ombre s’épanche,
Où chacun se penche,
L’un sur une branche,
L’autre sur le tronc!

Mont d’où tout ruisselle!
Gouffre où tout s’en va!
Sublime étincelle
Que fait Jéhova!

Rayon qu’on blasphème!
Œil calme et suprême
Qu’au front de Dieu même
L’homme un jour creva!

III

Ô terre! ô merveilles
Dont l’éclat joyeux
Emplit nos oreilles,
Eblouit nos yeux!
Bords où meurt la vague,
Bois qu’un souffle élague,
De l’horizon vague
Plis mystérieux!

Azur dont se voile
L’eau du gouffre amer,
Quand, laissant ma voile
Fuir au gré de l’air,
Penché sur la lame,
J’écoute avec l’âme
Cet épithalame
Que chante la mer!

Azur non moins tendre
Du ciel qui sourit
Quand, tâchant d’entendre
Ce que dit l’esprit,
Je cherche, ô nature,
La parole obscure
Que le vent murmure,
Que l’étoile écrit!

Création pure!
Etre universel!
Océan, ceinture

De tout sous le ciel!
Astres que fait naître
Le souffle du maître,
Fleurs où Dieu peut-être
Cueille quelque miel!

O champs, ô feuillages!
Monde fraternel
Clocher des villages
Humble et solennel!
Mont qui portes l’aire!
Aube fraîche et claire,
Sourire éphémère
De l’astre éternel!

N’êtes-vous qu’un livre,
Sans fin ni milieu,
Où chacun pour vivre
Cherche à lire un peu!
Phrase si profonde
Qu’en vain on la sonde!
L’œil y voit un monde,
L’âme y trouve un Dieu!

Beau livre qu’achèvent
Les cœurs ingénus,
Où les penseurs rêvent
Des sens inconnus,
Où ceux que Dieu charge
D’un front vaste et large
Ecrivent en marge:
Nous sommes venus!

Saint livre où la voile
Qui flotte en tous lieux,
Saint livre où l’étoile
Qui rayonne aux yeux,

Ne trace, ô mystère!
Qu’un nom solitaire,
Qu’un nom sur la terre,
Qu’un nom dans les cieux!

Livre salutaire
Où le cœur s’emplit!
Où tout sage austère
Travaille et pâlit!
Dont le sens rebelle
Parfois se révèle!
Pythagore épèle
Et Moïse lit!

Décembre 1834

Hier, la nuit d’été

Hier, la nuit d’été, qui nous prêtait ses voiles,
Etait digne de toi, tant elle avait d’étoiles!
Tant son calme était frais! tant son souffle était doux!
Tant elle éteignait bien ses rumeurs apaisées!
Tant elle répandait d’amoureuses rosées
Sur les fleurs et sur nous!

Moi, j’étais devant toi, plein de joie et de flamme,
Car tu me regardais avec toute ton âme!
J’admirais la beauté dont ton front se revêt.
Et sans même qu’un mot révélât ta pensée,
La tendre rêverie en ton cœur commencée
Dans mon cœur s’achevait!

Et je bénissais Dieu, dont la grâce infinie
Sur la nuit et sur toi jeta tant d’harmonie,
Qui, pour me rendre calme et pour me rendre heureux,
Vous fit, la nuit et toi, si belles et si pures,
Si pleines de rayons, de parfums, de murmures,
Si douces toutes deux!

Oh oui, bénissons Dieu dans notre foi profonde!
C’est lui qui fit ton âme et qui créa le monde!
Lui qui charme mon cœur! lui qui ravit mes yeux!
C’est lui que je retrouve au fond de tout mystère!
C’est lui qui fait briller ton regard sur la terre
Comme l’étoile aux cieux!

C’est Dieu qui mit l’amour au bout de toute chose,
L’amour en qui tout vit, l’amour sur qui tout pose!
C’est Dieu qui fait la nuit plus belle que le jour.
C’est Dieu qui sur ton corps, ma jeune souveraine,
A versé la beauté, comme une coupe pleine,
Et dans mon cœur l’amour!

Laisse-toi donc aimer! — Oh! l’amour, c’est la vie.
C’est tout ce qu’on regrette et tout ce qu’on envie
Quand on voit sa jeunesse au couchant décliner.
Sans lui rien n’est complet, sans lui rien ne rayonne.
La beauté c’est le front, l’amour c’est la couronne:
Laisse-toi couronner!

Ce qui remplit une âme, hélas! tu peux m’en croire,
Ce n’est pas un peu d’or, ni même un peu de gloire,
Poussière que l’orgueil rapporte des combats,
Ni l’ambition folle, occupée aux chimères,
Qui ronge tristement les écorces amères
Des choses d’ici-bas;

Non, il lui faut, vois-tu, l’hymen de deux pensées,
Les soupirs étouffés, les mains longtemps pressées,
Le baiser, parfum pur, enivrante liqueur,
Et tout ce qu’un regard dans un regard peut lire,
Et toutes les chansons de cette douce lyre
Qu’on appelle le cœur!

Il n’est rien sous le ciel qui n’ait sa loi secrète,
Son lieu cher et choisi, son abri, sa retraite,
Où mille instincts profonds nous fixent nuit et jour;
Le pêcheur a la barque où l’espoir l’accompagne,
Les cygnes ont le lac, les aigles la montagne,
Les âmes ont l’amour!
21 mai 1833

Nouvelle chanson sur un vieil air

S’il est un charmant gazon
Que le ciel arrose,
Où brille en toute saison
Quelque fleur éclose,
Où l’on cueille à pleine main
Lys, chèvrefeuille et jasmin,
J’en veux faire le chemin
Où ton pied se pose!

S’il est un sein bien aimant
Dont l’honneur dispose,
Dont le ferme dévouement
N’ait rien de morose,
Si toujours ce noble sein
Bat pour un digne dessein,
J’en veux faire le coussin
Où ton front se pose!

S’il est un rêve d’amour
Parfumé de rose,
Où l’on trouve chaque jour
Quelque douce chose,
Un rêve que Dieu bénit,
Où l’âme à l’âme s’unit,
Oh! j’en veux faire le nid
Où ton cœur se pose!
18 février 1834

Autre chanson

L’aube naît, et ta porte est close!
Ma belle, pourquoi sommeiller?
A l’heure où s’éveille la rose
Ne vas-tu pas te réveiller?

O ma charmante,
Ecoute ici
L’amant qui chante
Et pleure aussi!

Tout frappe à ta porte bénie.
L’aurore dit: Je suis le jour!
L’oiseau dit: Je suis l’harmonie!
Et mon cœur dit: Je suis l’amour!

O ma charmante,
Ecoute ici
L’amant qui chante
Et pleure aussi!

Je t’adore ange et t’aime femme.
Dieu qui par toi m’a complété
A fait mon amour pour ton âme
Et mon regard pour ta beauté!

O ma charmante,
Ecoute ici
L’amant qui chante
Et pleure aussi!

Oh! pour remplir de moi

Oh! pour remplir de moi ta rêveuse pensée,
Tandis que tu m’attends, par la marche lassée,
Sous l’arbre au bord du lac, loin des yeux importuns,
Tandis que sous tes pieds l’odorante vallée,
Toute pleine de brume au soleil envolée,
Fume comme un beau vase où brûlent des parfums;

Que tout ce que tu vois, les coteaux et les plaines,
Les doux buissons de fleurs aux charmantes haleines,
La vitre au vif éclair,
Le pré vert, le sentier qui se noue aux villages,
Et le ravin profond débordant de feuillages
Comme d’ondes la mer;

Que le bois, le jardin, la maison, la nuée,
Dont midi ronge au loin l’ombre diminuée;
Que tous les points confus qu’on voit là-bas trembler;
Que la branche aux fruits mûrs; que la feuille séchée;
Que l’automne, déjà par septembre ébauchée;
Que tout ce qu’on entend ramper, marcher, voler;

Que ce réseau d’objets qui t’entoure et te presse,
Et dont l’arbre amoureux qui sur ton front se dresse
Est le premier chaînon;
Herbe et feuille, onde et terre, ombre, lumière et flamme,
Que tout prenne une voix, que tout devienne une âme,
Et te dise mon nom!
Enghien, 19 septembre 1834

Puisque j’ai mis ma lèvre

Puisque j’ai mis ma lèvre à ta coupe encor pleine;
Puisque j’ai dans tes mains posé mon front pâli;
Puisque j’ai respiré parfois la douce haleine
De ton âme, parfum dans l’ombre enseveli;

Puisqu’il me fut donné de t’entendre me dire
Les mots où se répand le cœur mystérieux;
Puisque j’ai vu pleurer, puisque j’ai vu sourire
Ta bouche sur ma bouche et tes yeux sur mes yeux;

Puisque j’ai vu briller sur ma tête ravie
Un rayon de ton astre, hélas! voilé toujours;
Puisque j’ai vu tomber dans l’onde de ma vie
Une feuille de rose arrachée à tes jours;

Je puis maintenant dire aux rapides années:
— Passez! Passez toujours! je n’ai plus à vieillir;
Allez-vous-en avec vos fleurs toutes fanées;
J’ai dans l’âme une fleur que nul ne peut cueillir!

Votre aile en le heurtant ne fera rien répandre
Du vase où je m’abreuve et que j’ai bien rempli.
Mon âme a plus de feu que vous n’avez de cendre!
Mon cœur a plus d’amour que vous n’avez d’oubli!

À mademoiselle J.

Chantez! chantez! jeune inspirée!
La femme qui chante est sacrée
Même aux jaloux, même aux pervers!
La femme qui chante est bénie!
Sa beauté défend son génie.
Les beaux yeux sauvent les beaux vers!
Moi que déchire tant de rage,
J’aime votre aube sans orage;
Je souris à vos yeux sans pleurs.
Chantez donc vos chansons divines.
A moi la couronne d’épines!
A vous la couronne de Beurs!
Il fut un temps, un temps d’ivresse,
Où l’aurore qui vous caresse
Rayonnait sur mon beau printemps
Où l’orgueil, la joie et l’extase,
Comme un vin pur d’un riche vase,
Débordaient de mes dix-sept ans 1’
Alors, à tous mes pas présente,
Une chimère éblouissante
Fixait sur moi ses yeux dorés;
Alors, prés verts, ciels bleus, eaux vives,
Dans les riantes perspectives
Mes regards flottaient égarés!

Alors je disais aux étoiles:
O mon astre, en vain tu te voiles.
Je sais que tu brilles là-haut!
Alors je disais à la rive:
Vous êtes la gloire, et j’arrive.
Chacun de mes jours est un flot!

Je disais au bois: forêt sombre,
J’ai comme toi des bruits sans nombre.

A l’aigle: contemple mon front!
Je disais aux coupes vidées:
Je suis plein d’ardentes idées
Dont les âmes s’enivreront!

Alors, du fond de vingt calices,
Rosée, amour, parfums, délices,
Se répandaient sur mon sommeil;
J’avais des fleurs plein mes corbeilles;
Et comme un vif essaim d’abeilles,
Mes pensers volaient au soleil!

Comme un clair de lune bleuâtre
Et le rouge brasier du pâtre
Se mirent au même ruisseau;
Comme dans les forêts mouillées,
A travers le bruit des feuillées
On entend le bruit d’un oiseau;

Tandis que tout me disait: Aime!
Écoutant tout hors de moi-même,
Ivre d’harmonie et d’encens,
J’entendais, ravissant murmure,
Le chant de toute la nature
Dans le tumulte de mes sens!

Et roses par avril fardées,
Nuits d’été de lune inondées,
Sentiers couverts de pas humains,
Tout, l’écueil aux hanches énormes,
Et les vieux troncs d’arbres difformes
Qui se penchent sur les chemins,

Me parlaient cette langue austère,
Langue de l’ombre et du mystère,
Qui demande à tous: Que sait-on?
Qui, par moments presque étouffée,

Chante des notes pour Orphée,
Prononce des mots pour Platon!

La terre me disait Poète!
Le ciel me répétait Prophète!
Marche! parle! enseigne! bénis!
Penche l’urne des chants sublimes!
Verse aux vallons noirs comme aux cimes,
Dans les aires et dans les nids!

Ces temps sont passés. — A cette heure,
Heureux pour quiconque m’effleure,
Je suis triste au dedans de moi;
J’ai sous mon toit un mauvais hôte;
Je suis la tour splendide et haute
Qui contient le sombre beffroi.

L’ombre en mon cœur s’est épanchée;
Sous mes prospérités cachée
La douleur pleure en ma maison;
Un ver ronge ma grappe mûre;
Toujours un tonnerre murmure
Derrière mon vague horizon!

L’espoir mène à des portes closes.
Cette terre est pleine de choses
Dont nous ne voyons qu’un côté.
Le sort de tous nos vœux se joue;
Et la vie est comme la roue
D’un char dans la poudre emporté!

A mesure que les années,
Plus pâles et moins couronnées,
Passent sur moi du haut du ciel,
Je vois s’envoler mes chimères
Comme des mouches éphémères

Qui n’ont pas su faire de miel!

Vainement j’attise en moi-même
L’amour, ce feu doux et suprême
Qui brûle sur tous les trépieds,
Et toute mon âme enflammée
S’en va dans le ciel en fumée
Ou tombe en cendre sous mes pieds!

Mon étoile a fui sous la nue.
La rose n’est plus revenue
Se poser sur mon rameau noir.
Au fond de la coupe est la lie,
Au fond des rêves la folie,
Au fond de l’aurore le soir!

Toujours quelque bouche flétrie,
Souvent par ma pitié nourrie,
Dans tous mes travaux m’outragea.
Aussi que de tristes pensées,
Aussi que de cordes brisées
Pendent à ma lyre déjà!

Mon avril se meurt feuille à feuille;
Sur chaque branche que je cueille
Croît l’épine de la douleur;
Toute herbe a pour moi sa couleuvre;
Et la haine monte à mon œuvre
Comme un bouc au cytise en fleur!

La nature grande et touchante,
La nature qui vous enchante
Blesse mes regards attristés.
Le jour est dur, l’aube est meilleure.
Hélas! la voix qui me dit: Pleure!
Est celle qui vous dit: Chantez!

Chantez! chantez! belle inspirée!
Saluez cette aube dorée
Qui jadis aussi m’enivra.
Tout n’est pas sourire et lumière.
Quelque jour de votre paupière
Peut-être une larme éclora!

Alors je vous plaindrai, pauvre “âme!
Hélas! les larmes d’une femme,
Ces larmes où tout est amer,
Ces larmes où tout est sublime,
Viennent d’un plus profond abîme
Que les gouttes d’eau de la mer!
Mars 18…

La pauvre fleur disait au papillon céleste
— Ne fuis pas!
Vois comme nos destins sont différents. Je reste,
Tu t’en vas!
Pourtant nous nous aimons, nous vivons sans les hommes
Et loin d’eux,
Et nous nous ressemblons, et l’on dit que nous sommes
Fleurs tous deux!
Mais, hélas! l’air t’emporte et la terre m’enchaîne.
Sort cruel!
Je voudrais embaumer ton vol de mon haleine
Dans le ciel!
Mais non, tu vas trop loin! — Parmi des fleurs sans nombre
Vous fuyez,
Et moi je reste seule à voir tourner mon ombre
A mes pieds!
Tu fins, puis tu reviens, puis tu t’en vas encore
Luire ailleurs.
Aussi me trouves-tu toujours à chaque aurore
Toute en pleurs!
Oh! pour que notre amour coule des jours fidèles,
O mon roi,

Prends comme moi racine, ou donne-moi des ailes
Comme à toi!

ENVOI A ***

Roses et papillons, la tombe nous rassemble
Tôt ou tard.
Pourquoi l’attendre, dis? Veux-tu pas vivre ensemble
Quelque part?

Quelque part dans les airs, si c’est là que se berce
Ton essor;
Aux champs, si c’est aux champs que ton calice verse
Son trésor.

Où tu voudras! qu’importe! oui, que tu sois haleine
Ou couleur,
Papillon rayonnant, corolle à demi pleine,
Aile ou fleur!

Vivre ensemble, d’abord! c’est le bien nécessaire
Et réel!
Après on peut choisir au hasard, ou la terre
Ou le ciel!
7 décembre 1834

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Septembre 18…

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Luire ailleurs.
Aussi me trouves-tu toujours à chaque aurore
Toute en pleurs!
Oh! pour que notre amour coule des jours fidèles,
O mon roi,
Prends comme moi racine, ou donne-moi des ailes
Comme à toi!

Au bord de la mer

Vois, ce spectacle est beau. — Ce paysage immense
Qui toujours devant nous finit et recommence;
Ces blés, ces eaux, ces prés; ce bois charmant aux yeux
Ce chaume où l’on entend rire un groupe joyeux;
L’océan qui s’ajoute à la plaine où nous sommes
Ce golfe, fait par Dieu, puis refait par les hommes,
Montrant la double main empreinte en ses contours,
Et des amas de rocs sous des monceaux de tours;
Ces landes, ces forêts, ces crêtes déchirées;
Ces antres à fleur d’eau qui boivent les marées;
Cette montagne, au front de nuages couvert,
Qui dans un de ses plis porte un beau vallon vert,
Comme un enfant des fleurs dans un pan de sa robe;
La ville que la brume à demi nous dérobe,
Avec ses mille toits bourdonnants et pressés;
Ce bruit de pas sans nombre et de rameaux froissés,
De voix et de chansons qui par moments s’élève;
Ces lames que la mer amincit sur la grève,
Où les longs cheveux verts des sombres goémons
Tremblent dans l’eau moirée avec l’ombre des monts;
Cet oiseau qui voyage et cet oiseau qui joue;
Ici, cette charrue, et là-bas, cette proue,
Traçant en même temps chacune leur sillon
Ces arbres et ces mâts, jouets de l’aquilon
Et là-bas, par-delà les collines lointaines,
Ces horizons remplis de formes incertaines;
Tout ce que nous voyons, brumeux ou transparent,
Flottant dans les clartés, dans les ombres errant,
Fuyant, debout, penché, fourmillant, solitaire,
Vagues, rochers, gazons, — regarde, c’est la terre!

Et là-haut, sur ton front, ces nuages si beaux
Où pend et se déchire une pourpre en lambeaux;

Cet azur, qui ce soir sera l’ombre infinie;
Cet espace qu’emplit l’éternelle harmonie;
Ce merveilleux soleil, ce soleil radieux,
Si puissant à changer toute forme à nos yeux
Que parfois, transformant en métaux les bruines,
On ne voit plus dans l’air que splendides ruines,
Entassements confus, amas étincelants
De cuivres et d’airains l’un sur l’autre croulants,
Cuirasses, boucliers, armures dénouées,
Et caparaçons d’or aux croupes des nuées,
L’éther, cet océan si liquide et si bleu,
Sans rivage et sans fond, sans borne et sans milieu,
Que l’oscillation de toute haleine agite,
Où tout ce qui respire, ou remue, ou gravite,
A sa vague et son flot, à d’autres flots uni,
Où passent à la fois, mêlés dans l’infini,
Air tiède et vents glacés, aubes et crépuscules,
Brises d’hiver, ardeur des chaudes canicules,
Les parfums de la fleur et ceux de l’encensoir,
Les astres scintillant sur la robe du soir,
Et les brumes de gaze, et la douteuse étoile,
Paillette qui se perd dans les plis noirs du voile,
La clameur des soldats qu’enivre le tambour,
Le froissement du nid qui tressaille d’amour,
Les souffles, les échos, les brouillards, les fumées,
Mille choses que l’homme encor n’a pas nommées,
Les flots de la lumière et les ondes du bruit,
Tout ce qu’on voit le jour, tout ce qu’on sent la nuit;
Eh bien! nuage, azur, espace, éther, abîmes,
Ce fluide océan, ces régions sublimes
Toutes pleines de feux, de lueurs, de rayons,
Où l’âme emporte l’homme, où tous deux nous fuyons,
Où volent sur nos fronts, selon des lois profondes,
Près de nous les oiseaux et loin de nous les mondes,
Cet ensemble ineffable, immense, universel,
Formidable et charmant, — contemple, c’est le ciel!

Oh oui! la terre est belle et le ciel est superbe;
Mais quand ton sein palpite et quand ton œil reluit,
Quand ton pas gracieux court si léger sur l’herbe,
Que le bruit d’une lyre est moins doux que son bruit;
Lorsque ton frais sourire, aurore de ton âme,
Se lève rayonnant sur moi qu’il rajeunit,
Et de ta bouche rose, où naît sa douce flamme,
Monte jusqu’à ton front comme l’aube au zénith;

Quand, parfois, sans te voir, ta jeune voix m’arrive,
Disant des mots confus qui m’échappent souvent,
Bruit d’une eau qui se perd sous l’ombre de sa rive,
Chanson d’oiseau caché qu’on écoute en rêvant;

Lorsque ma poésie, insultée et proscrite,
Sur ta tête un moment se repose en chemin;
Quand ma pensée en deuil sous la tienne s’abrite,
Comme un flambeau de nuit sous une blanche main;

Quand nous nous asseyons tous deux dans la vallée;
Quand ton âme, soudain apparue en tes yeux,
Contemple, avec les pleurs d’une sœur exilée,
Quelque vertu sur terre ou quelque étoile aux cieux;

Quand brille sous tes cils, comme un feu sous les branches,
Ton beau regard terni par de longues douleurs;
Quand sur les maux passés tout-à-coup tu te penches,
Que tu veux me sourire et qu’il te vient des pleurs;

Quand mon corps et ma vie à ton souffle résonnent,
Comme un tremblant clavier qui vibre à tout moment;
Quant tes doigts, se posant sur mes doigts qui frissonnent,

Font chanter dans mon cœur un céleste instrument;

Lorsque je te contemple, ô mon charme suprême!
Quand ta noble nature, épanouie aux yeux,
Comme l’ardent buisson qui contenait Dieu même,
Ouvre toutes ses fleurs et jette tous ses feux;

Ce qui sort à la fois de tant de douces choses,
Ce qui de ta beauté s’exhale nuit et jour,
Comme un parfum formé du souffle de cent roses,
C’est bien plus que la terre et le ciel, — c’est l’amour!
Octobre 18.

Puisque nos heures sont remplies

Puisque nos heures sont remplies
De trouble et de calamités;
Puisque les choses que tu lies
Se détachent de tous côtés;

Puisque nos pères et nos mères
Sont allés où nous irons tous,
Puisque des enfants, têtes chères,
Se sont endormis avant nous;

Puisque la terre où tu t’inclines
Et que tu mouilles de tes pleurs,
A déjà toutes nos racines
Et quelques-unes de nos fleurs;

Puisqu’à la voix de ceux qu’on aime
Ceux qu’on aima mêlent leurs voix;
Puisque nos illusions même
Sont pleines d’ombres d’autrefois;

Puisqu’à l’heure où l’on boit l’extase
On sent la douleur déborder,
Puisque la vie est comme un vase
Qu’on ne peut emplir ni vider;

Puisqu’à mesure qu’on avance
Dans plus d’ombre on sent flotter;
Puisque la menteuse espérance
N’a plus de conte à nous conter;

Puisque le cadran, quand il sonne,
Ne nous promet rien pour demain,
Puisqu’on ne connaît plus personne
De ceux qui vont dans le chemin,

Mets ton esprit hors de ce monde!
Mets ton rêve ailleurs qu'ici-bas!
Ta perle n'est pas dans notre onde!
Ton sentier n'est point sous nos pas!

Quand la nuit n'est pas étoilée,
Viens te bercer aux flots des mers;
Comme la mort elle est voilée,
Comme la vie ils sont amers.

L'ombre et l'abîme ont un mystère
Que nul mortel ne pénétra;
C'est Dieu qui leur dit de se taire
Jusqu'au jour où tout parlera!

D'autres yeux de ces flots sans nombre
Ont vainement cherche le fond;
D'autres yeux se sont emplis d'ombre
A contempler ce ciel profond.

Toi, demande au monde nocturne
De la paix pour ton cœur désert!
Demande une goutte à cette urne!
Demande un chant à ce concert!

Plane au-dessus des autres femmes,
Et laisse errer tes yeux si beaux
Entre le ciel où sont les âmes
Et la terre où sont les tombeaux!
19 février 1835

Espoir en dieu

Espère, enfant! demain! et puis demain encore!
Et puis toujours demain! croyons dans l’avenir.
Espère! et chaque fois que se lève l’aurore,
Soyons là pour prier comme Dieu pour bénir!

Nos fautes, mon pauvre ange, ont causé nos souffrances.
Peut-être qu’en restant bien longtemps à genoux,
Quand il aura béni toutes les innocences,
Puis tous les repentirs, Dieu finira par nous!

Octobre 18…

Puisque mai tout en fleurs

Puisque mai tout en fleurs dans les prés nous réclame,
Viens! ne te lasse pas de mêler à ton âme
La campagne, les bois, les ombrages charmants,
Les larges clairs de lune au bord des flots dormants,
Le sentier qui finit où le chemin commence,
Et l’air et le printemps et l’horizon immense,
L’horizon que ce monde attache humble et joyeux
Comme une lèvre au bas de la robe des cieux!
Viens! et que le regard des pudiques étoiles
Qui tombe sur la terre à travers tant de voiles,
Que l’arbre pénétré de parfums et de chants,
Que le souffle embrasé de midi dans les champs,
Et l’ombre et le soleil et l’onde et la verdure,
Et le rayonnement de toute la nature
Fassent épanouir, comme une double fleur,
La beauté sur ton front et l’amour dans ton cœur!
21 mai 1835

À Louis B.

Ami, le voyageur que vous avez connu,
Et dont tant de douleurs ont mis le cœur à nu,
Monta, comme le soir s’épanchait sur la terre,
Triste et seul, dans la tour lugubre et solitaire;
Tour sainte où la pensée est mêlée au granit,
Où l’homme met son âme, où l’oiseau fait son nid!
Il gravit la spirale aux marches presque usées,
Dont le mur s’entr’ouvrait aux bises aiguisées,
Sans regarder les toits amoindris sous ses pieds;
Puis entra sous la voûte aux arceaux étayés,
Où la cloche, attendant la prière prochaine,
Dormait, oiseau d’airain, dans sa cage de chêne!
Vaste et puissante cloche au battant monstrueux!
Un câble aux durs replis chargeait son cou noueux.
L’œil qui s’aventurait sous sa coupole sombre
Y voyait s’épaissir de larges cercles d’ombre.
Les reflets sur ses bords se fondaient mollement.
Au fond tout était noir. De moment en moment
Sous cette voûte obscure où l’air vibrait encore
On sentait remuer comme un lambeau sonore.
On entendait des bruits glisser sur les parois,
Comme si, se parlant d’une confuse voix,
Dans cette ombre, où dormaient leurs légions ailées,
Les notes chuchotaient à demi réveillées.
Bruits douteux pour l’oreille et de l’âme écoutés!
Car même en sommeillant, sans souffle et sans clartés,
Toujours le volcan fume et la cloche soupire;
Toujours de cet airain la prière transpire,
Et l’on n’endort pas plus la cloche aux sons pieux
Que l’eau sur l’océan ou le vent dans les cieux!

La cloche, écho du ciel placé près de la terre!
Voix grondante qui parle à côté du tonnerre,

Faite pour la cité comme lui pour la mer!
Vase plein de rumeur qui se vidé dans l’air!

Sur cette cloche, auguste et sévère surface,
Hélas! chaque passant avait laissé sa trace.
Partout des mots impurs creusés dans le métal
Rompaient l’inscription du baptême natal.
On distinguait encore, au sommet ciselée,
Une couronne à coups de couteau mutilée.
Chacun, sur cet airain par Dieu même animé,
Avait fait son sillon où rien n’avait germé!
Ils avaient semé là, ceux-ci leur vie immonde,
Ceux-là leurs vœux perdus comme une onde dans l’onde,
D’autres l’amour des sens dans la fange accroupi,
Et tous l’impiété, ce chaume sans épi.
Tout était profané dans la cloche bénie.
La rouille s’y mêlait, autre amère ironie!
Sur le nom du Seigneur l’un avait mis son nom!
Où le prêtre dit oui, l’autre avait écrit non!
Lâche insulte! affront vil! vain outrage d’une heure
Que fait tout ce qui passe à tout ce qui demeure!

Alors, tandis que l’air se jouait dans les cieux,
Et que sur les chemins gémissaient les essieux,
Que les champs exhalaient leurs senteurs embaumées,
Les hommes leurs rumeurs et les toits leurs fumées,
Il sentit, à l’aspect du bronze monument 74
Comme un arbre inquiet qui sent confusément
Des ailes se poser sur ses feuilles froissées,
S’abattre sur son front un essaim de pensées.

I

Seule en ta sombre tour aux faîtes dentelés,
D’où ton souffle descend sur les toits ébranlés,

O cloche suspendue au milieu des nuées,
Par ton vaste roulis si souvent remuées,
Tu dors en ce moment dans l’ombre, et rien ne luit
Sous ta voûte profonde où sommeille le bruit!
Oh! tandis qu’un esprit qui jusqu’à toi s’élance,
Silencieux aussi, contemple ton silence,
Sens-tu, par cet instinct vague et plein de douceur
Qui révèle toujours une sœur à la sœur,
Qu’à cette heure où s’endort la soirée expirante,
Une âme est près de toi, non moins que toi vibrante,
Qui bien souvent aussi jette un bruit solennel,
Et se plaint dans l’amour comme toi dans le ciel!

II

Oh 1 dans mes premiers temps de jeunesse et d’aurore 75,
Lorsque ma conscience était joyeuse encore,
Sur son vierge métal mon âme avait aussi
Son auguste origine écrite comme ici,
Et sans doute à côté quelque inscription sainte,
Et, n’est-ce pas, ma mère? une couronne empreinte!
Mais des passants aussi, d’impérieux passants
Qui vont toujours au cœur par le chemin des sens. 76,!
Qui, lorsque le hasard jusqu’à nous les apporte,
Montent notre escalier et poussent notre porte,
Qui viennent bien souvent trouver l’homme au saint lieu,
Et qui le font tinter pour d’autres que pour Dieu;
Les passions, hélas! tourbe un jour accourue,
Pour visiter mon âme ont monté de la rue,
Et de quelque couteau se faisant un burin,
Sans respect pour le verbe “ écrit sur son airain,
Toutes, mêlant ensemble injure, erreur, blasphême,
L’ont rayée en tous sens comme ton bronze même,
Où le nom du Seigneur, ce nom grand et sacré,
N’est pas plus illisible et plus défiguré!

III

Mais qu’importe à la cloche et qu’importe à mon âme!
Qu’à son heure, à son jour, l’esprit saint les réclame,
Les touche l’une et l’autre et leur dise: chantez!
Soudain, par toute voie et de tous les côtés,
De leur sein ébranlé, rempli d’ombres obscures,
A travers leur surface, à travers leurs souillures,
Et la cendre et la rouille, amas injurieux,
Quelque chose de grand s’épandra dans les cieux!
Ce sera l’hosanna de toute créature!
Ta pensée, ô Seigneur! ta parole, ô nature!
Oui, ce qui sortira, par sanglots, par éclairs,
Comme l’eau du glacier, comme le vent des mers,
Comme le jour à flots des urnes de l’aurore,
Ce qu’on verra jaillir, et puis jaillir encore,
Du clocher toujours droit, du front toujours debout,
Ce sera l’harmonie immense qui dit tout!
Tout! les soupirs du cœur, les élans de la foule;
Le cri de ce qui monte et de ce qui s’écroule;
Le discours de chaque homme à chaque passion
L’adieu qu’en s’en allant chante l’illusion;
L’espoir éteint; la barque échouée à la grève;
La femme qui regrette et la vierge qui rêve;
La vertu qui se fait de ce que le malheur
A de plus douloureux, hélas! et de meilleur;
L’autel enveloppé d’encens et de fidèles;
Les mères retenant les enfants auprès d’elles
La nuit qui chaque soir fait taire l’univers
Et ne laisse ici-bas la parole qu’aux mers;
Les couchants flamboyants; les aubes étoilées;
Les heures de soleil et de lune mêlées;
Et les monts et les flots proclamant à la fois
Ce grand nom qu’on retrouve au fond de toute voix;
Et l’hymne inexpliqué qui, parmi des bruits d’ailes,
Va de l’aire de l’aigle au nid des hirondelles 11,
Et ce cercle dont l’homme a sitôt fait le tour,

L’innocence, la foi, la prière et l’amour!
Et l’éternel reflet de lumière et de flamme
Que l’âme verse au monde et que Dieu verse à l’âme!

IV

Oh 1 c’est alors qu’émus et troublés par ces chants,
Le peuple dans la ville et l’homme dans les champs,
Et le sage attentif aux voix intérieures,
A qui l’éternité fait oublier les heures,
S’inclinent en silence; et que l’enfant joyeux
Court auprès de sa mère et lui montre les cieux;
C’est alors que chacun sent un baume qui coule
Sur tous ses maux cachés; c’est alors que la foule
Et le cœur isolé qui souffre obscurément
Boivent au même vase un même enivrement;
Et que la vierge, assise au rebord des fontaines,
Suspend sa rêverie à ses 79 rumeurs lointaines;
C’est alors que les bons, les faibles, les méchants,
Tous à la fois, la veuve en larmes, les marchands
Dont l’échoppe a poussé sous le sacré portique
Comme un champignon vil au pied d’un chêne antique,
Et le croyant soumis, prosterné sous la tour,
Écoutent, effrayés et ravis tour à tour,
Comme
on rêve au bruit sourd d’une mer écumante,
La grande âme d’airain qui là-haut se lamente!

V

Hymne de la nature et de l’humanité!
Hymne par tout écho sans cesse répété!
Grave, inouï, joyeux, désespéré, sublime!
Hymne qui des hauts lieux ruisselle dans J’abîme,
Et qui, des profondeurs du gouffre harmonieux,

Comme une onde en brouillard, remonte dans les cieux!
Cantique qu'on entend sur les monts, dans les plaines,
Passer, chanter, pleurer par toutes les haleines,
Écumer dans le fleuve et frémir dans les bois,
A l'heure où nous voyons s'allumer à la fois,
Au bord du ravin sombre, au fond du ciel bleuâtre,
L'étoile du berger avec le feu du pâtre!
Hymne qui le matin s'évapore des eaux,
Et qui le soir s'endort dans le nid des oiseaux!
Verbe que dit la cloche aux cloches ébranlées,
Et que l'âme redit aux âmes consolées!
Psaume immense et sans fin que ne traduiraient pas
Tous les mots fourmillants des langues d'ici-bas,
Et qu'exprime en entier dans un seul mot suprême
Celui qui dit: je prie, et celui qui dit: j'aime!
Et ce psaume éclatant, cet hymne aux chants vainqueurs
Qui tinte dans les airs moins haut que dans les cœurs,
Pour sortir plus à flots de leurs gouffres sonores,
De l'âme et de la cloche ouvrira tous les pores.
Toutes deux le diront d'une ineffable voix,
Pure comme le bruit des sources dans les bois,
Chaste comme un soupir de l'amour qui s'ignore,
Vierge comme le chant que chante chaque aurore.
Alors tout parlera dans les deux instruments
D'amour et d'harmonie et d'extase écumants.
Alors, non-seulement ce qui sur leur surface
Reste du Verbe saint que chaque jour efface,
Mais tout ce que grava dans leur bronze souillé
Le passant imbécile avec son clou rouillé,
L'ironie et l'affront, les mots qui perdent l'âme,
La couronne tronquée et devenue infâme,
Tout puisant vie et source en leurs vibrations,
Tout se transfigurant dans leurs commotions,
Mêlera, sans troubler l'ensemble séraphique,
Un chant plaintif et tendre à leur voix magnifique!
Oui, le blasphême inscrit sur le divin métal
Dans ce concert sacré perdra son cri fatal;

Chaque mot qui renie et chaque mot qui doute
Dans ce torrent d'amour exprimera sa goutte;
Et, pour faire éclater l'hymne pur et serein,
Rien ne sera souillure et tout sera l'airain!

VI

Oh! c'est un beau triomphe à votre loi sublime,
Seigneur, pour vos regards dont le feu nous ranime
C'est un spectacle auguste, ineffable et bien doux
A l'homme comme à l'ange, à l'ange comme à vous,
Qu'une chose en passant par l'impie avilie,
Qui, dès que votre esprit la touche, se délie,
Et sans même songer à son indigne affront,
Chante, l'amour au cœur et le blasphême au front!
Voilà sur quelle pente, en ruisseaux divisée,
S'écoulait flots à flots l'onde de sa pensée,
Grossie à chaque instant par des sanglots du cœur.
La nuit, que la tristesse aime comme une sœur,
Quand il redescendit, avait couvert le monde;
Il partit; et la vie incertaine et profonde
Emporta vers des jours plus mauvais ou meilleurs,
Vers des événements amoncelés ailleurs,
Cet homme au flanc blessé, ce front sévère où tremble
Une âme en proie au sort, soumise et tout ensemble
Rebelle au dur battant qui la vient tourmenter,
De verre pour gémir, d'airain pour résister.
Août 1834.

Dans l’église de ***

I

C’était une humble église au cintre surbaissé,
L’église où nous entrâmes,
Où depuis trois cents ans avaient déjà passé
Et pleuré bien des âmes.

Elle était triste et calme à la chute du jour,
L’église où nous entrâmes;
L’autel sans serviteur, comme un cœur sans amour,
Avait éteint ses flammes.

Les antiennes du soir, dont autrefois saint Paul
Réglait les chants fidèles,
Sur les stalles du chœur d’où s’élance leur vol
Avaient ployé leurs ailes.

L’ardent musicien qui sur tous à pleins bords
Verse la sympathie,
L’homme-esprit n’était plus dans l’orgue, vaste corps
Dont l’âme était partie.

La main n’était plus là, qui, vivante et jetant
Le bruit par tous les pores,
Tout à l’heure pressait le clavier palpitant,
Plein de notes sonores,

Et les faisait jaillir sous son doigt souverain
Qui se crispe et s’allonge,
Et ruisseler le long des grands tubes d’airain
Comme l’eau d’une éponge.

L’orgue majestueux se taisait gravement
Dans la nef solitaire;

L’orgue, le seul concert, le seul gémissement
Qui mêle aux cieux la terre!

La seule voix qui puisse, avec le flot dormant
Et les forêts bénies,
Murmurer ici-bas quelque commencement
Des choses infinies!

L’église s’endormait à l’heure où tu t’endors,
Ô sereine nature!
À peine,quelque lampe au fond des corridors
Étoilait l’ombre obscure.

À peine on entendait flotter quelque soupir,
Quelque basse parole,
Comme en une forêt qui vient de s’assoupir
Un dernier oiseau vole;

Hélas! et l’on sentait, de moment en moment,
Sous cette voûte sombre,
Quelque chose de grand, de saint et de charmant
S’évanouir dans l’ombre!

Elle était triste et calme à la chute du jour
L’église où nous entrâmes;
L’autel sans serviteur, comme un cœur sans amour,
Avait éteint ses flammes.

Votre front se pencha, morne et tremblant alors,
Comme une nef qui sombre,
Tandis qu’on entendait dans la ville au dehors
Passer des voix sans nombre.

II
Et ces voix qui passaient disaient joyeusement
«Bonheur! gaîté! délices!
» À nous les coupes d’or pleines d’un vin charmant!

» À d’autres les calices!

» Jouissons! l’heure est courte et tout fuit promptement
» L’urne est vite remplie!
» Le nœud de l’âme au corps, hélas 1 à tout moment
» Dans l’ombre se délie!

» Tirons de chaque objet ce qu’il a de meilleur,
» La chaleur de la flamme,
» Le vin du raisin mûr, le parfum de la fleur,
» Et l’amour de la femme!

» Épuisons tout! Usons du printemps enchanté
» Jusqu’au dernier zéphire,
» Du jour jusqu’au dernier rayon, de la beauté
» Jusqu’au dernier sourire!

» Allons jusqu’à la fin de tout, en bien vivant,
» D’ivresses en ivresses,
» Une chose qui meurt, mes amis, a souvent
» De charmantes caresses!

» Dans le vin que je bois, ce que j’aime le mieux
» C’est la dernière goutte.
» L’enivrante saveur du breuvage joyeux
» Souvent s’y cache toute!

» Sur chaque volupté pourquoi nous hâter tous,
» Sans plonger dans son onde,
» Pour voir si quelque perle ignorée avant nous
» N’est pas sous l’eau profonde?

» Que sert de n’effleurer qu’à peine ce qu’on tient,
» Quand on a les mains pleines,
» Et de vivre essoufflé comme un enfant qui vient
» De courir dans les plaines?

» Jouissons à loisir! Du loisir tout renaît!
» Le bonheur nous convie!
» Faisons, comme un tison qu’on heurte au dur chenet,
» Étinceler la vie!

» N’imitons pas ce fou que l’ennui tient aux fers,
» Qui pleure et qui s’admire.
» Toujours les plus beaux fruits d’ici-bas sont offerts
» Aux belles dents du rire!

» Les plus tristes d’ailleurs, comme nous qui rions,
» Souillent parfois leur âme.
» Pour fondre ces grands cœurs il suffit des rayons
» De l’or ou de la femme.

» Ils tombent comme nous, malgré leur fol orgueil
» Et leur vaine amertume;
» Les flots les plus hautains, dès que vient un écueil,
» S’écroulent en écume!

» Vivons donc! et buvons, du soir jusqu’au matin,
» Pour l’oubli de nous-même,
» Et déployons gaîment la nappe du festin,
» Linceul du chagrin blême!

» L’ombre attachée aux pas du beau plaisir vermeil,
» C’est la tristesse sombre.
» Marchons les yeux toujours tournés vers le soleil;
» Nous ne verrons pas l’ombre!
» Qu’importe le malheur, le deuil, le désespoir,
» Que projettent nos joies,
» Et que derrière nous quelque chose de noir
» Se traîne sur nos voies!

» Nous ne le savons pas. — Arrière les douleurs,
» Et les regrets moroses!
» Faut-il donc, en fanant des couronnes de fleurs,

» Avoir pitié des roses?

» Les vrais biens dans ce monde, — et l’autre est importun!
» C’est tout ce qui nous fête,
» Tout ce qui met un chant, un rayon, un parfum,
» Autour de notre tête!

» Ce n’est jamais demain, c’est toujours aujourd’hui!
» C’est la joie et le rire!
» C’est un sein éclatant peut-être plein d’ennui,
» Qu’on baise et qui soupire!

» C’est l’orgie opulente, enviée au-dehors,
» Contente, épanouie,
» Qui rit, et qui chancelle, et qui boit à pleins bords,
» De flambeaux éblouie!”

III

Et tandis que ces voix, que tout semblait grossir,
Voix d’une ville entière,
Disaient: Santé, bonheur, joie, orgueil et plaisir!
Votre œil disait: Prière!

IV

Elles parlaient tout haut et vous parliez tout bas
— « Dieu qui m’avez fait naître,
» Vous m’avez réservée ici pour des combats
» Dont je tremble, ô mon maître!

» Ayez pitié! — L’esquif où chancellent mes pas
» Est sans voile et sans rames.
» Comme pour les enfants, pourquoi n’avez-vous pas
» Des anges pour les femmes?

» Je sais que tous nos jours ne sont rien, Dieu tonnant,
» Devant vos jours sans nombre.
» Vous seul êtes réel, palpable et rayonnant;
» Tout le reste est de l’ombre.

» Je le sais. Mais cette ombre où nos cœurs sont flottants,
» J’y demande ma route.
» Quelqu’un répondra-t-il? Je prie, et puis j’attends!
» J’appelle, et puis j’écoute!

» Nul ne vient. Seulement par instants, sous mes pas,
» Je sens d’affreuses trames.
» Comme pour les enfants, pourquoi n’avez-vous pas
» Des anges pour les femmes?

» Seigneur! autour de moi, ni le foyer joyeux,
» Ni la famille douce,
» Ni l’orgueilleux palais qui touche presque aux cieux,
» Ni le nid dans la mousse,

» Ni le fanal pieux qui montre le chemin,
» Ni pitié, ni tendresse,
» Hélas! ni l’amitié qui nous serre la main,
» Ni l’amour qui la presse,

» Seigneur, autour de moi rien n’est resté debout!
» Je pleure et je végète,
» Oubliée au milieu des ruines de tout,
» Comme ce qu’on rejette!

» Pourtant je n’ai rien fait à ce monde d’airain,
» Vous le savez vous-même.
» Toutes mes actions passent le front serein
» Devant votre œil suprême.

» Jusqu’à ce que le pauvre en ait pris la moitié,
» Tout ce que j’ai me pèse.
» Personne ne me plaint. Moi, de tous j’ai pitié.
» Moi, je souffre et j’apaise!

» Jamais de votre haine ou de votre faveur

» Je n’ai dit: Que m’importe!
» J’ai toujours au passant que je voyais rêveur
» Enseigné votre porte.

» Vous le savez. — Pourtant mes pleurs que vous voyez,
» Seigneur, qui les essuie?
» Tout se rompt sous ma main, tout tremble sous mes pieds,
» Tout coule où je m’appuie.

» Ma vie est sans bonheur, mon berceau fut sans jeux.
» Cette loi, c’est la vôtre!
» Tous les rayons de jour de mon ciel orageux
» S’en vont l’un après l’autre.

» Je n’ai plus même, hélas! le flux et le reflux
» Des clartés et des ombres.
» Mon esprit chaque jour descend de plus en plus
» Parmi les rêves sombres.

» On dit que sur les cœurs, pleins de trouble et d’effroi,
» Votre grâce s’épanche.
» Soutenez-moi, Seigneur! Seigneur, soutenez-moi,
» Car je sens que tout penche!”

V

Et moi, je contemplais celle qui priait Dieu
Dans l’enceinte sacrée,
La trouvant grave et douce et digne du saint lieu,
Cette belle éplorée.

Et je lui dis, tâchant de ne pas la troubler,
La pauvre enfant qui pleure,
Si par hasard dans l’ombre elle entendait parler
Quelque autre voix meilleure,

Car au déclin des ans comme au matin des jours,
Joie, extase ou martyre,
Un autel que rencontre une femme a toujours

Quelque chose à lui dire!

VI

«Ô madame! pourquoi ce chagrin qui vous suit,
» Pourquoi pleurer encore,
» Vous, femme au cœur charmant, sombre comme la nuit,
» Douce comme l'aurore?

» Qu'importe que la vie, inégale ici-bas
» Pour l'homme et pour la femme,
» Se dérobe et soit prête à rompre sous vos pas?
» N'avez-vous pas votre âme?

»Votre âme qui bientôt fuira peut-être ailleurs
» Vers les régions pures,
» Et vous emportera plus loin que nos douleurs,
» Plus loin que nos murmures!

» Soyez comme l'oiseau, posé pour un instant
» Sur des rameaux trop frêles,
» Qui sent ployer la branche et qui chante pourtant,
» Sachant qu'il a des ailes!”
Octobre 18…

Écrit sur la première page d'un Pétrarque

Quand d'une aube d'amour mon âme se colore,
Quand je sens ma pensée, ô chaste amant de Laure,
Loin du souffle glacé d'un vulgaire moqueur,
Eclore feuille à feuille au plus profond du cœur,
Je prends ton livre saint qu'un feu céleste embrase,
Où si souvent murmure à côté de l'extase
La résignation au sourire fatal,
Ton beau livre, où l'on voit, comme un flot de cristal
Qui sur un sable d'or coule à sa fantaisie,
Tant d'amour ruisseler sur tant de poésie!
Je viens à ta fontaine, ô maître! et je relis
Tes vers mystérieux par la grâce amollis,
Doux trésor, fleur d'amour qui, dans les bois recluse,
Laisse après cinq cents ans sont odeur à Vaucluse!
Et tandis que je lis, rêvant, presque priant,
Celui qui me verrait me verrait souriant,
Car, loin des bruits du monde et des sombres orgies,
Tes pudiques chansons, tes nobles élégies,
Vierges au doux profil, sœurs au regard d'azur,
Passent devant mes yeux, portant sur leur front pur,
Dans les sonnets sculptés, comme dans des amphores,
Ton beau style, étoilé de fraîches métaphores!
14 octobre 1835

Les autres en tout sens

Les autres en tout sens laissent aller leur vie,
Leur âme, leur désir, leur instinct, leur envie.
Tout marche en eux, au gré des choses qui viendront,
L’action sans l’idée et le pied sans le front.
Ils suivent au hasard le projet ou le rêve,
Toute porte qui s’ouvre ou tout vent qui s’élève.
Le présent les absorbe en sa brièveté.
Ils ne seront jamais et n’ont jamais été;
Ils sont, et voilà tout. Leur esprit flotte et doute.
Ils vont, le voyageur ne tient pas à la route,
Et tout s’efface en eux à mesure, l’ennui
Par la joie, oui par non, hier par aujourd’hui.
Ils vivent jour à jour et pensée à pensée.
Aucune règle au fond de leurs vœux n’est tracée;
Nul accord ne les tient dans ses proportions.
Quand ils pensent une heure, au gré des passions,
Rien de lointain ne vient de derrière leur vie
Retentir dans l’idée à cette heure suivie;
Et pour leur cœur terni l’amour est sans douleurs,
Le passé sans racine et l’avenir sans fleurs.

Mais vous qui répandez tant de jour sur mon âme,
Vous qui, depuis douze ans, tour-à-tour ange et femme,
Me soutenant là-haut ou m’aidant ici-bas,
M’avez pris sous votre aile ou calmé dans vos bras;
Vous qui, mettant toujours le cœur dans la parole,
Rendez visible aux yeux, comme un vivant symbole,
Le calme intérieur par la paix du dehors,
La douceur de l’esprit par la santé du corps,
La bonté par la joie, et comme les dieux même
La suprême vertu par la beauté suprême;
Vous, mon phare, mon but, mon pôle, mon aimant!
Tandis que nous flottons à tout événement,

Vous savez que toute âme a sa règle auprès d’elle;
Tout en vous est serein, rayonnant et fidèle,
Vous ne dérangez pas le tout harmonieux,
Et vous êtes ici comme une sphère aux cieux!
Rien ne se heurte en vous; tout se tient avec grâce;
Votre âme en souriant à votre esprit s’enlace;
Votre vie, où les pleurs se mêlent quelquefois,
Secrète comme un nid qui gémit dans les bois,
Comme un flot lent et sourd qui coule sur des mousses,
Est un concert charmant des choses les plus douces.
Bonté, vertu, beauté, frais sourire, œil de feu,
Toute votre nature est un hymne vers Dieu.
Il semble, en vous voyant si parfaite et si belle,
Qu’une pure musique, égale et solennelle,
De tous vos mouvements se dégage en marchant.
Les autres sont des bruits, vous, vous êtes un chant!
Octobre 18…

Toi! sois bénie à jamais

Toi! sois bénie à jamais!
Ève qu'aucun fruit ne tente Il!
Qui de la vertu contente
Habite les purs sommets!
Ame sans tache et sans rides,
Baignant tes ailes candides,
A l'ombre et bien loin des yeux,
Dans un flot mystérieux,
Moiré de reflets splendides!

Sais-tu ce qu'en te voyant
L'indigent dit quand tu passes?
— « Voici le front plein de grâces
Qui sourit au suppliant!
Notre infortune la touche.
Elle incline à notre couche
Un visage radieux;
Et les -mots mélodieux
Sortent charmants de sa bouche!" -

Sais-tu, les yeux vers le ciel,
Ce que dit la pauvre veuve?
— « Un ange au fiel qui m'abreuve
Est venu mêler son miel.
Comme à l'herbe la rosée,
Sur ma misère épuisée,
Ses bienfaits sont descendus.
Nos cœurs se sont entendus,
Elle heureuse, et moi brisée!

J'ai senti que rien d'impur

Dans sa gaîté ne se noie,
Et que son front a la joie
Comme le ciel a l’azur.
Son œil de même a su lire
Que le deuil qui me déchire
N’a que de saintes douleurs.
Comme elle a compris mes pleurs,
Moi, j’ai compris son sourire!” -

Pour parler des orphelins,
Quand, près du foyer qui tremble,
Dans mes genoux je rassemble
Tes enfants de ton cœur pleins;
Quand je leur dis l’hiver sombre,
La faim, et les maux sans nombre
Des petits abandonnés,
Et qu’à peine sont-ils nés
Qu’ils s’en vont pieds nus dans l’ombre;

Tandis que, silencieux,
Le groupe écoute et soupire,
Sais-tu ce que semblent dire
Leurs yeux pareils à tes yeux?
— « Vous qui n’avez rien sur terre,
Venez chez nous! pour vous plaire
Nous nous empresserons tous;
Et vous aurez comme nous
Votre part de notre mère!”

Sais-tu ce que dit mon cœur?
— « Elle est indulgente et douce,
Et sa lèvre ne repousse
Aucune amère liqueur.
Mère pareille à sa fille,

Elle luit dans ma famille
Sur mon front que l’ombre atteint.
Le front se ride et s’éteint,
La couronne toujours brille!” -

Au-dessus des passions,
Au-dessus de la colère,
Ton noble esprit ne sait faire
Que de nobles actions.
Quand jusqu’à nous tu te penches,
C’est ainsi que tu t’épanches
Sur nos cœurs que tu soumets.
D’un cygne il ne peut jamais
Tomber que des plumes blanches!
Octobre 18.

À mademoiselle Louise B.

I

L’année en s’enfuyant par l’année est suivie.
Encore une qui meurt! encore un pas du temps;
Encore une limite atteinte dans la vie!
    Encore un sombre hiver jeté sur nos printemps!
    Le temps! les ans! les jours! mots que la foule ignore!
    Mots profonds qu’elle croit à d’autres mots pareils!
    Quand l’heure tout-à-coup lève sa voix sonore,
    Combien peu de mortels écoutent ses conseils!
    L’homme les use, hélas! ces fugitives heures,
    En folle passion, en folle volupté,
    Et croit que Dieu n’a pas fait de choses meilleures
    Que les chants, les banquets, le rire et la beauté!
    Son temps dans les plaisirs s’en va sans qu’il y pense.
    Imprudent! est-il sûr de demain? d’aujourd’hui?
    En dépensant ses jours, sait-il ce qu’il dépense?
    Le nombre en est compté par un autre que lui.
    A peine lui vient-il une grave pensée
    Quand, au sein d’un festin qui satisfait ses vœux,
    Ivre, il voit tout-à-coup de sa tête affaissée
    Tomber en même temps les fleurs et les cheveux;
    Quand ses projets hâtifs l’un sur l’autre s’écroulent;
    Quand ses illusions meurent à son côté;
    Quand il sent le niveau de ses jours qui s’écoulent,
    Baisser rapidement comme un torrent d’été.
    Alors en chancelant il s’écrie, il réclame,
    Il dit: Ai-je donc bu toute cette liqueur?
    Plus de vin pour ma soif! plus d’amour pour mon âme!
    Qui donc vide à la fois et ma coupe et mon cœur?
    Mais rien ne lui répond. — Et triste, et le front blême,
    De ses débiles mains, de son souffle glacé,
    Vainement il remue, en s’y cherchant lui-même,
    Ce tas de cendre éteint qu’on nomme le passé!

II

Ainsi nous allons tous. — Mais vous dont l’âme est forte,
Vous dont le cœur est grand, vous dites: — Que m’importe
Si le temps fuit toujours,
Et si toujours un souffle emporte quand il passe,
Pêle-mêle à travers la durée et l’espace,
Les hommes et les jours! —
Car vous avez le goût de ce qui seul peut vivre;
Sur Dante et sur Mozart, sur la note et le livre,
Votre front est courbé.
Car vous avez l’amour des choses immortelles;
Rien de ce que le temps emporte sur ses ailes
Des vôtres n’est tombé!
Quelquefois, quand l’esprit vous presse et vous réclame,
Une musique en feu s’échappe de votre âme,
Musique aux chants vainqueurs,
Au souffle pur, plus doux que l’aile des zéphires,
Qui palpite et qui fait vibrer comme des lyres
Les fibres de nos cœurs!
Dans ce siècle où l’éclair reluit sur chaque tête,
Où le monde, jeté de tempête en tempête,
S’écrie avec frayeur,
Vous avez su vous faire, en la nuit qui redouble,
Une sérénité qui traverse sans trouble
L’orage extérieur!
Soyez toujours ainsi! l’amour d’une famille;
Le centre autour duquel tout gravite et tout brille;
La sœur qui nous défend;
Prodigue d’indulgence et de blâme économe;
Femme au cœur grave et doux; sérieuse avec l’homme,
Folâtre avec l’enfant!
Car pour garder toujours la beauté de son âme,
Pour se remplir le cœur, riche ou pauvre, homme ou femme,
De pensers bienveillants,
Vous avez ce qu’on peut, après Dieu, sur la terre,
Contempler de plus saint et de plus salutaire,

Un père en cheveux blancs!

31 décembre 1831.

Que nous avons le doute en nous.

De nos jours, — plaignez-nous, vous, douce et noble femme! —
L’intérieur de l’homme offre un sombre tableau.
Un serpent est visible en la source de l’eau,
Et l’incrédulité rampe au fond de notre âme.

Vous qui n’avez jamais de sourire moqueur
Pour les accablements dont une âme est troublée,
Vous qui vivez sereine, attentive et voilée,
Homme par la pensée et femme par le cour,

Si vous me demandez, vous muse, à moi poète,
D’où vient qu’un rêve obscur semble agiter mes jours,
Que mon front est couvert d’ombres, et que toujours,
Comme un rameau dans l’air, ma vie est inquiète;

Pourquoi je cherche un sens au murmure des vents;
Pourquoi souvent, morose et pensif dès la veille,
Quand l’horizon blanchit à peine, je m’éveille
Même avant les oiseaux, même avant les enfants;

Et pourquoi, quand la brume a déchiré ses voiles,
Comme dans un palais dont je ferais le tour,
Je vais dans le vallon, contemplant tour-à-tour
Et le tapis de fleurs et le plafond d’étoiles?
Je vous dirai qu’en moi je porte un ennemi,
Le doute, qui m’emmène errer dans le bois sombre,
Spectre myope et sourd, qui, fait de jour et d’ombre,
Montre et cache à la fois toute chose à demi!
Je vous dirai qu’en moi j’interroge à toute heure
Un instinct qui bégaie, en mes sens prisonnier,
Près du besoin de croire un désir de nier,
Et l’esprit qui ricane auprès du cœur qui, pleure!
Aussi vous me voyez souvent parlant tout bas;
Et comme un mendiant, à la bouche affamée,

Qui rêve assis devant une porte fermée,
On dirait que j’attends quelqu’un qui n’ouvre pas.
Le doute! mot funèbre et qu’en lettres de flammes,
Je vois écrit partout, dans l’aube, dans l’éclair,
Dans l’azur de ce ciel, mystérieux et clair,
Transparent pour les yeux, impénétrable aux âmes!

C’est notre mal à nous, enfants des passions
Dont l’esprit n’atteint pas votre calme sublime;
A nous dont le berceau, risqué sur un abîme,
Vogua sur le flot noir des révolutions.

Les superstitions, ces hideuses vipères,
Fourmillent sous nos fronts où tout germe est flétri.
Nous portons dans nos cœurs le cadavre pourri
De la religion qui vivait dans nos pères.
Voilà pourquoi je vais, triste et réfléchissant,
Pourquoi souvent, la nuit, je regarde et j’écoute.
Solitaire, et marchant au hasard sur la route
A l’heure où le passant semble étrange au passant.
Heureux qui peut aimer, et qui dans la nuit noire,
Tout en cherchant la foi, peut rencontrer l’amour!
Il a du moins la lampe en attendant le jour.
Heureux ce cœur! Aimer, c’est la moitié de croire.
Octobre 1834.

Date lilia

Oh! si vous rencontrez quelque part sous les cieux
Une femme au front pur, au pas grave, aux doux yeux,
Que suivent quatre enfants dont le dernier chancelle,
Les surveillant bien tous, et, s'il passe auprès d'elle
Quelque aveugle indigent que l'âge appesantit,
Mettant une humble aumône aux mains du plus petit;
Si, quand la diatribe autour d'un nom s'élance,
Vous voyez une femme écouter en silence,
Et douter, puis vous dire: — Attendons pour juger.
Quel est celui de nous qu'on ne pourrait charger?
On est prompt à ternir les choses les plus belles.
La louange est sans pieds et le blâme a des ailes. —
Si, lorsqu'un souvenir, ou peut-être un remords,
Ou le hasard vous mène à la cité des morts,
Vous voyez, au détour d'une secrète allée,
Prier sur un tombeau dont la route est foulée,
Seul avec des enfants, un être gracieux
Qui pleure en souriant comme l'on pleure aux cieux;
Si de ce sein brisé la douleur et l'extase
S'épanchent comme l'eau des fêlures d'un vase;
Si rien d'humain ne reste à cet ange éploré;
Si, terni par le deuil, son œil chaste et sacré,
Bien plus levé là-haut que baissé vers la tombe,
Avec tant de regret sur la terre retombe
Qu'on dirait que son cœur n'a pas encor choisi
Entre sa mère au ciel et ses enfants ici;
Quand, vers Pâque ou Noël, l'église, aux nuits tombantes,
S'emplit de pas confus et de cires flambantes,
Quand la fumée en flots déborde aux encensoirs
Comme la blanche écume aux lèvres des pressoirs,
Quand au milieu des chants d'hommes, d'enfants, de femmes,
Une âme selon Dieu sort de toutes ces âmes,
Si, loin des feux, des voix, des bruits et des splendeurs,
Dans un repli perdu parmi les profondeurs,

Sur quatre jeunes fronts groupés près du mur sombre,
Vous voyez se pencher un regard voilé d’ombre
Où se mêle, plus doux encor que solennel,
Le rayon virginal au rayon maternel;

Oh! qui que vous soyez, bénissez-la. C’est elle!
La sœur, visible aux yeux, de mon âme immortelle!
Mon orgueil, mon espoir, mon abri, mon recours!
Toit de mes jeunes ans qu’espèrent mes vieux jours!

C’est elle! la vertu sur ma tête penchée;
La figure d’albâtre en ma maison cachée;
L’arbre qui, sur la route où je marche à pas lourds,
Verse des fruits souvent et de l’ombre toujours;
La femme dont ma joie est le bonheur suprême;
Qui, si nous chancelons, ses enfants ou moi-même,
Sans parole sévère et sans regard moqueur,
Les soutient de la main et me soutient du cœur;
Celle qui, lorsqu’au mal, pensif, je m’abandonne,
Seule peut me punir et seule me pardonne;
Qui de mes propres torts me console et m’absout;
A qui j’ai dit: toujours! et qui m’a dit: partout!
Elle! tout dans un mot! c’est dans ma froide brume
Une fleur de beauté que la bonté parfume!
D’une double nature hymen mystérieux!
La fleur est de la terre et le parfum des cieux!

LES VOIX INTÉRIEURES

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A
JOSEPH-LEOPOLD-SIGISBERT,
COMTE HUGO,
LIEUTENANT GENERAL DES ARMEES DU ROI
NE EN 1774.
VOLONTAIRE EN 1791.
COLONEL EN 1803.
GENERAL DE BRIGADE EN 1809.
GOUVERNEUR DE PROVINCE EN 1810.
LIEUTENANT GENERAL EN 1825.
MORT EN 1828.
NON INSCRIT SUR L'ARC DE L'ETOILE.
SON FILS RESPECTUEUX,
V. H.

Préface

La Porcia de Shakespeare parle quelque part de cette musique que tout homme à en soi. - Malheur, dit-elle, à qui ne l'entend pas! - Cette musique, la nature aussi l'a en elle. Si le livre qu'on va lire est quelque chose, il est l'écho, bien confus et bien affaibli sans doute, mais fidèle, l'auteur le croit, de ce chant qui répond en nous au chant que nous entendons hors de nous.

Au reste, cet écho intime et secret étant, aux yeux de l'auteur, la poésie même, ce volume, avec quelques nuances nouvelles peut-être et les développements que le temps a amenés, ne fait que continuer ceux qui l'ont précédé. Ce qu'il contient, les autre le contenaient; à cette différence près que dans les Orientales, par exemple, la fleur serait plus épanouie, dans les Voix intérieures, la goutte de rosée ou de pluie serait plus cachée. La poésie, en supposant que ce soit ici le lieu de prononcer un si grand mot, la poésie est comme Dieu: une et inépuisable.

Si l'homme a sa voix, si la nature a la sienne, les événement ont aussi la leur. L'auteur a toujours pensé que la mission du poète était de fondre dans un même groupe de chants cette triple parole qui renferme un triple enseignement, car la première s'adresse plus particulièrement au coeur, la seconde à l'âme, la troisième à l'esprit. Tres radios.

Et puis, dans l'époque où nous vivons, tout l'homme ne se retrouve-t-il pas là? N'est-il pas entièrement compris sous ce triple aspect de notre vie: Le foyer, le champ, la rue? Le foyer, qui est notre coeur même; le champ, où la nature nous parle; la rue, ou tempête, à travers les coups de fouet des partis, cet embarras de charrettes qu'on appelle les événements politiques.

Et, disons-le en passant, dans cette mêlée d’hommes, de doctrines et d’intérêts qui se ruent si violemment tous les jours sur chacune des oeuvres qu’il est donné à ce siècle de faire, le poète a une fonction sérieuse. Sans parler même ici de son influence civilisatrice, c’est à lui qu’il appartient d’élever, lorsqu’ils le méritent, les événements politiques à la dignité d’événements historiques. Il faut, pour cela, qu’il jette sur ses contemporains ce tranquille regard que l’histoire jette sur le passé; il faut que, sans se laisser tromper aux illusions d’optique, aux mirages menteurs, aux voisinages momentanés, il mette dès à présent tout en perspective, diminuant ceci, grandissant cela. Il faut qu’il ne trempe dans aucune voie de fait. Il faut qu’il sache se maintenir, au-dessus du tumulte, inébranlable, austère et bienveillant; indulgent quelquefois, chose difficile, impartial toujours, chose plus difficile encore; qu’il ait dans le coeur cette sympathique intelligence des révolutions qui implique le dédain de l’émeute, ce grave respect du peuple qui s’allie au mépris de la foule; que son esprit ne concède rien aux petites colères ni petites vanités; que son éloge comme son blâme prenne souvent à rebours, tantôt l’esprit de cour, tantôt l’esprit de faction. Il faut qu’il puisse saluer le drapeau tricolore sans insulter les fleur de lys; il faut qu’il puisse dans le même livre, presque à la même page, flétrir “l’homme qui a vendu une femme” et louer un noble jeune prince pour une bonne action bien faite, glorifier la haute idée sculptée sur l’arc de l’Etoile et consoler la triste pensée enfermée dans la tombe de Charles X. Il faut qu’il soit attentif à tout, sincère en tout, désintéressé sur tout, et que, nous l’avons déjà dit ailleurs, il ne dépende de rien, pas même de ses propres ressentiments, pas même de ses griefs personnels; sachant être, dans l’occasion, tout à la fois irrité comme homme et calme comme poète. Il faut enfin que, dans ces temps livrés à la lutte furieuse des opinions, au milieu des attractions violentes que sa raison devra subir sans dévier, il ait sans cesse présent à l’esprit ce but sévère: être de tous les partis par leur côté généreux, n’être d’aucun par leur côté mauvais.

La puissance du poète est faite d’indépendance.

L’auteur, on le voit, ne se dissimule aucune des conditions rigoureuses de la mission qu’il s’est imposée, en attendant qu’un meilleur vienne. Le résultat de l’art ainsi compris, c’est l’adoucissement des esprits et des moeurs, c’est la civilisation même. Ce résultat, quoique l’auteur de ce livre soit bien peu de chose pour une fonction si haute, il continuera d’y tendre par toutes les voie ouvertes à sa pensée, par le théâtre comme par le livre, par le roman comme par le drame, par l’histoire comme par la poésie. Il tâche, il essaie, il entreprend. Voilà tout. Bien des sympathies, nobles et intelligentes, l’appuient. S’il réussit, c’est à elles et non à lui que sera dû le succès.

Quant à la dédicace placée en tête de ce volume, l’auteur, surtout après les ligne qui précèdent, pense n’avoir pas besoin de dire combien est calme et religieux le sentiment qui l’a dictée. On le comprendra, en présence de ces deux monuments, le trophée de l’Etoile, le tombeau de son père, l’un national, l’autre domestique, tous deux sacrés, il ne pouvait y avoir place dans son âme que pour une pensée grave, paisible et sereine. Il signale une omission, et, en attendant qu’elle soit réparée où elle doit l’être, il la répare ici autant qu’il est en lui. Il donne à son père cette pauvre feuille de papier, tout ce qu’il a, en regrettant de n’avoir pas de granit. Il agit comme tout autre agirait dans la même situation. C’est donc tout simplement un devoir qu’il accomplit, rien de plus, rien de moins, et qu’il accomplit comme s’accomplissent les devoirs, sans bruit, sans colère, sans étonnement. Personne ne s’étonnera non plus de le voir faire ce qu’il fait. Après tout, la France peut bien, sans trop de souci, laisser tomber une feuille de son épaisse et glorieuse couronne; cette feuille, un fils doit la ramasser. Une nation est grande, une famille petite; ce qui n’est rien pour l’une est tout pour l’autre. La France a le droit d’oublier, la famille a le droit de se souvenir.

24 juin 1837. Paris.

I

«Ce siècle est grand et fort”

Ce siècle est grand et fort. Un noble instinct le mène.
Partout on voit marcher l’Idée en mission;
Et le bruit du travail, plein de parole humaine,
Se mêle au bruit divin de la création.

Partout, dans les cités et dans les solitudes,
L’homme est fidèle au lait dont nous le nourrissions;
Et dans l’informe bloc des sombres multitudes
La pensée en rêvant sculpte des nations.

L’échafaud vieilli croule, et la Grève se lave.
L’émeute se rendort. De meilleurs jours sont prêts.
Le peuple a sa colère et le volcan sa lave
Qui dévaste d’abord et qui féconde après.

Des poètes puissants, tête par Dieu touchées,
Nous jettent les rayons de leurs fronts inspirés.
L’art a de frais vallon où les âmes penchées
Boivent la poésie à des ruisseaux sacrés.

Pierre à pierre, en songeant aux vieilles moeurs éteintes,
Sous la société qui chancelle à tous vents,
Le penseur reconstruit ces deux colonnes saintes,
Le respect des vieillards et l’amour des enfants.

Le devoir, fils du droit, sous nos toits domestiques
Habite comme un hôte auguste et sérieux.
Les mendiants groupés dans l’ombre des portiques
Ont moins de haine au coeur et moins de flamme aux yeux.

L’austère vérité n’a plus de portes closes.
Tout verbe est déchiffré. Notre esprit éperdu,

Chaque jour, en lisant dans le livre des choses,
Découvre à l’univers un sens inattendu.

O poètes! le fer et la vapeur ardente
Effacent de la terre, à l’heure où vous rêvez,
L’antique pesanteur, à tout objet pendante,
Qui sous les lourds essieux broyait les durs pavés.

L’homme se fait servir par l’aveugle matière.
Il pense, il cherche, il crée! A son souffle vivant
Les germes dispersés dans la nature entière
Tremblent comme frissonne une forêt au vent!

Oui, tout va, tout s’accroît. Les heures fugitives
Laissent toutes leur trace. Un grand siècle a surgi.
Et, contemplant de loin de lumineuses rives,
L’homme voit son destin comme un fleuve élargi.

Mais parmi ces progrès dont notre âge se vante,
Dans tout ce grand éclat d’un siècle éblouissant,
Une chose, ô Jésus, en secret m’épouvante,
C’est l’écho de ta voix qui va s’affaiblissant.

15 avril 1837

II

Sunt Lacrymae Rerum

I

Il est mort. Rien de plus. Nul groupe populaire,
Urne d'où se répand l'amour et la colère,
N'a jeté sur son nom pitié, gloire ou respect.
Aucun signe n'a lui. Rien n'a changé l'aspect
De ce siècle orageux, mer de récifs bordée,
Où le fait, ce flot sombre, écume sur l'idée.
Nul temple n'a gémi dans nos villes. Nul glas
N'a passé sur nos fronts criant: Hélas! hélas!
La presse aux mille voix, cette louve hargneuse,
A peine a retourné sa tête dédaigneuse;
Nous ne l'avons pas vue, irritée et grondant,
Donner à cette pourpre un dernier coup de dent.
Et chacun vers son but, la marée à la grève,
La foule vers l'argent, la penseur vers son rêve,
Tout a continué de marcher, de courir,
Et rien n'a dit au monde: Un roi vient de mourir!

II

Sombres canons rangés devant les Invalides,
Comme des sphinx au pied des grandes pyramides,
Dragons d'airain, hideux, verts, énormes, béants,
Gardiens de ce palais, bâti pour des géants,
Qui dresse et fait au loin reluire à la lumière
Un casque monstrueux sur sa tête de pierre!
A ce bruit qui jadis vous eût fait rugir tous,
— Le roi de France est mort! - d'où vient qu'aucun de vous,
Comme un lion captif qui secouerait sa chaîne,
Aucun n'a tressailli sur sa base de chêne,
Et n'a, se réveillant par un subit effort,

Dit à son noir voisin: - Le roi de France est mort! -
D’où vient qu’il s’est fermé sans vos salves funèbres,
Ce cercueil qu’on clouait là-bas dans les ténèbres?
Et que rien n’est sorti de vos mornes affûts,
Pas même, ô canons sourds, ce murmure confus
Qu’au vague battement de ses ailes livides
le vent des nuits arrache à des armures vides?
C’est que, prostitués dans nos troubles civils,
Vous êtes comme nous fiers, sonores et vils!
C’est que, rouillés, vieillis, rivés à votre place,
Toujours agenouillés devant tout ce qui passe,
Retirés des combats, et dans ce coin obscur
Par des soldats boiteux gardés sous un vieux mur,
Vains foudres de parade oubliés de l’armée,
Autour de tout vainqueur faisant de la fumée,
Réservés pour la pompe et la solennité,
Vous avez pris racine en cette lâcheté!
Soyez flétris! canons que la guerre repousse,
Dont la voix sans terreur dans les fêtes s’émousse,
Vous qui glorifiez de votre cri profond
ceux qui viennent, toujours, jamais ceux qui s’en vont!
Vous qui, depuis trente ans, noirs courtisans de bronze,
Avez, comme Henri Quatre adorant Louis Onze,
Toujours tout applaudi, toujours tout salué,
Vous taisant seulement quand le peuple a hué!
Lâches, vous préférez ceux que le sort préfère!
Dans le moule brûlant le fondeur pour vous faire
Mit l’étain et le cuivre et l’oubli du vaincu;
Car qui meurt exilé pour vous n’a pas vécu,
Car vos poumons de fer, où gronde une âpre haleine,
Sont muets pour Goritz, comme pour Sainte-Hélène!
Soyez flétris!

Mais non. C’est à nous, insensés,
Que le mépris revient. Vous nous obéissez.
Vous êtes prisonniers et vous êtes esclaves.
La guerre qui vous fit de ses bouillantes laves

Vous fit pour la bataille, et nous vous avons pris
Pour vous éclabousser des fanges de Paris,
Pour vous sceller au seuil d'un palais centenaire,
Et pour vous mettre au ventre un éclair sans tonnerre!
C'est nous qu'il faut flétrir, nous qui, déshonorés,
Donnons notre âme abjecte à ces bronzes sacrés.
Nous passons dans l'opprobre! hélas! ils y demeurent.
Mornes captifs! le jour où des rois proscrits meurent,
Vous ne pouvez, jetant votre fumée à flots,
Prolonger sur Paris vos éclatants sanglots,
Et, pareils à des chiens liés à des murailles,
D'un hurlement plaintif suivre leurs funérailles!
Muets, et vos longs cous baissés vers les pavés,
Vous restez là pensifs, et, tristes, vous rêvez
Aux hommes, froids esprits, coeurs bas, âmes douteuses,
Qui font faire à l'airain tant de choses honteuses!

III

Vous vous taisez. - Mais moi, moi dont parfois le chant
Se refuse à l'aurore et jamais au couchant,
Moi que jadis à Reims Charle admit comme un hôte,
Moi qui plaignis ses maux, moi qui blâmai sa faute,
Je ne me tairai pas. Je descendrai, courbé,
Jusqu'au caveau profond, où dort ce roi tombé;
Je suspendrai ma lampe à cette voûte noire;
Et sans cesse, à côté de sa triste mémoire,
Mon esprit, dans ces temps d'oubli contagieux,
Fera veiller dans l'ombre un vers religieux!

Et que m'importe à moi qui, déployant mon aile,
Touche parfois d'en bas à la lyre éternelle,
A moi qui n'ai d'amour que pour l'onde et les champs,
Et pour tout ce qui souffre, excepté les méchants,
A moi qui prends souci, quand la nef s'aventure,
De tous les matelots risqués dans la mâture,
Et dont la pitié grave hésite quelquefois

De la sueur du peuple à la sueur des rois,
Que m'importe après tout que depuis six années
Ce roi fût retranché des têtes couronnées,
Froide ruine au bord de nos flots écumants,
Vain fantôme penché sur les événements!
Qu'il ne changeât de rien ni le poids ni le nombre,
Que, rasé dès longtemps, son front plongeât dans l'ombre,
Et que déjà, vieillard sans trône et sans pavois,
Il eût subi l'exil, première mort des rois!
Je le dirai, sans peur que la haine renaisse,
Son avènement pur eut pour soeur ma jeunesse;
Saint Rémi nous reçut sous son mur triomphant
Tous deux le même jour, lui vieux, moi presque enfant;
Et moi je ne veux pas, harpe qu'il a connue,
Qu'on mette mon roi mort dans une bière nue!
Tandis qu'au loin la foule emplit l'air de ses cris,
L'auguste piété, servante des proscrits,
Qui les ensevelit dans sa plus blanche toile,
N'aura pas, dans la nuit que son regard étoile,
Demandé vainement à ma pensée en deuil
Un lambeau de velours pour couvrir ce cercueil!

IV

Oh! que Versailles était superbe
Dans ces jours purs de tout affront
Où les prospérités en gerbe
S'épanouissaient sur son front!
Là, tout faste était sans mesure;
Là, tout arbre avait sa parure;
Là, tout homme avait sa dorure;
Tout du maître suivait la loi.
Comme au même but vont cent routes,
Là les grandeurs abondaient toutes;
L'olympe ne pendait aux voûtes
Que pour compléter le grand roi!

Vers le temps où naissaient nos pères
Versailles rayonnait encor.
Les lions ont de grands repaires;
Les princes ont des palais d'or.
Chaque fois que, foule asservie,
Le peuple au coeur rongé d'envie
Contemplait du fond de sa vie
Ce fier château si radieux,
Rentrant dans sa nuit plus livide,
Il emportait dans son oeil vide
Un éblouissement splendide
De rois, de femmes et de dieux!
Alors riaient dans l'espérance
Trois enfants sous ces nobles toits,
Les deux Louis, aînés de France,
Le beau Charles, comte d'Artois.
Tous trois nés sous les dais de soie,
Frêles enfants, mais pleins de joie
Comme ceux qu'un chaud soleil noie
De rayons purs sous le ciel bleu.
Oh! d'un beau sort quelle semence!
Près d'eux le roi d'où tout commence,
Au-dessous d'eux le peuple immense,
Au-dessus la bonté de Dieu!

V

Qui leur eût dit alors l'austère destinée?
Qui leur eût dit qu'un jour cette France, inclinée
Sous leurs fronts de fleurons chargés,
Ne se souviendrait d'eux ni de leur morne histoire,
Pas plus que l'océan sans fond et sans mémoire
Ne se souvient des naufragés!

Que, chaînes, lys, dauphins, un jour les Tuileries
Verraient l'illustre amas des vieilles armoiries
S'écrouler de leur plafond nu,

Et qu’en ces temps lointains que le mystère couvre,
Un Corse, encore à naître, au noir fronton du Louvre
Sculpterait un aigle inconnu!

Que leur royal Saint-Cloud se meublait pour un autre,
Et qu’en ces fiers jardins du rigide Lenôtre,
Amour de leurs yeux éblouis,
Beaux parcs où dans les jeux croissait leur jeune force,
Les chevaux de Crimée un jour mordraient l’écorce
Des vieux arbres du grand Louis!

VI

Dans ces temps radieux, dans cette aube enchantée
Dieu! comme avec terreur leur mère épouvantée
Les eût contre son coeur pressés, pâle et sans voix,
Si quelque vision, troublant ces jours de fêtes,
Eût jeté tout à coup sur ces fragiles têtes
Ce cri terrible: - Enfants! vous serez rois tous trois!

Et la voix prophétique aurait pu dire encore:
— Enfants, que votre aurore est une triste aurore!
Que les sceptres pour vous sont d’odieux présents!
D’où vient donc que le Dieu qui punit Babylone
Vous fait à pareille heure éclore au pied du trône?
Et qu’avez-vous donc fait, ô pauvres innocents?

Beaux enfants qu’on berce et qu’on flatte,
Tout surpris, vous si purs, si doux,
Que des vieux en robe écarlate
Viennent vous parler à genoux!
Quand les sévères Malesherbes
Ont relevé leurs fronts superbes,
Vous courez jouer dans les herbes,
Sans savoir que tout doit finir,
Et que votre race qui sombre
Porte à ses deux bouts couverts d’ombre

Ravaillac dans le passé sombre,
Robespierre dans l’avenir!

Dans ce Louvre où de vieux murs gardent
Les portraits des rois hasardeux,
Allez voir comme vous regardent
Charles premier et Jacques deux!
Sur vous un nuage s’étale.
Sol étranger, terre natale,
L’émeute, la guerre fatale,
Dévoreront vos jours maudits.
De vous trois, enfants sur qui pèse
L’antique masure française,
Le premier sera Louis seize,
Le dernier sera Charles dix!

Que l’aîné, peu crédule à la vie, à la gloire,
Au peuple ivre d’amour, sache d’une nuit noire
D’avance emplir son coeur de courage pourvu;
Qu’il rêve un ciel de pluie, un tombereau qui roule,
Et là-bas, tout au fond, au-dessus de la foule,
Quelque étrange échafaud dans la brume entrevu!

Frères par la naissance et par le malheur frères,
Les deux autres fuiront, battus des vents contraires.
Le règne de Louis, roi de quelques bannis,
Commence dans l’exil, celui de Charle y tombe.
L’un n’aura pas de sacre et l’autre pas de tombe.
A l’un Reims doit manquer, à l’autre Saint-Denisl!”

VII

Quel rêve horrible! - C’est l’histoire.
De nos pères couchés dans les tombeaux profonds
Ce qu’aucun n’aurait voulu croire,
Nous l’avons vu, nous qui vivons!

Tous ces maux, et d’autres encore,
Sont tombés sur ces fronts de la main du Seigneur.
Maintenant croyez à l’aurore!
Maintenant croyez au bonheur!

Croyez au ciel pur et sans rides!
Saluez l’avenir qui vous flatte si bien!
L’avenir, fantôme aux mains vides,
Qui promet tout et qui n’a rien!

O rois! ô familles tronquées!
Brusques écroulements des vieilles majestés!
O calamités embusquées
Au tournant des prospérités!

Tout colosse a des pieds de sable.
Votre abîme est, Seigneur, un abîme infini.
Louis quinze fut le coupable,
Louis seize fut le puni!

La peine se trompe et dévie.
Celui qui fit le mal, c’est la loi du Très-Haut,
A le trône et la longue vie,
Et l’innocent a l’échafaud.

Les fautes que l’aïeul peut faire
Te poursuivront, ô fils! en vain tu t’en défends.
Quand il a neigé sous le père,
L’avalanche est pour les enfants!

Révolutions! mer profonde!
Que de choses, hélas! pleines d’enseignement,
Dans les ténèbres de votre onde
On voit flotter confusément!

VIII

Charles Dix! - Oh! le Dieu qui retire et qui donne
Forgea pour cette tête une lourde couronne!
L’empire était penchant et les temps étaient durs.
Une ombre quand il vint couvrait encor nos murs,
L’ombre de l’empereur, figure colossale.
Peuple, armée, et la France, et l’Europe vassale,
Par cette vaste main depuis quinze ans pétris,
Demandaient un grand règne, et, pour remplir Paris
Ainsi qu’après César Auguste remplit Rome,
Après Napoléon il fallait plus qu’un homme.
Charles ne fut qu’un homme. A ce faîte il eut peur.
Le gouffre attire. Pris d’un vertige trompeur,
Dans l’abîme, fermant les yeux à la lumière,
Il se précipita la tête la première.
Silence à son tombeau! car tout vient de finir.
A peine il aura teint d’un vague souvenir
Le peuple à l’eau pareil, qui passe, clair ou sombre,
Près de tout sans en prendre autre chose que l’ombre!

Je n’aurai pas pour lui de reproches amers.
Je ne suis pas l’oiseau qui crie au bord des mers
Et qui, voyant tomber la foudre des nuées
Jette aux marins perdus ses sinistres huées.
Des passions de tous isolé bien souvent,
Je n’ai jamais cherché les baisers que nous vend
Et l’hymne dont nous berce avec sa voix flatteuse
La popularité, cette grande menteuse.
Aussi n’attendez pas que j’achète aujourd’hui
Des louanges pour moi par des affronts pour lui.
Qu’un autre, aux rois déchus donnant un nom sévère
Fasse un vil pilori de leur fatal calvaire;
Moi je n’affligerai pas plus, ô Charles dix,
Ton cercueil maintenant que ton exil jadis!

IX

Repose, fils de France, en ta tombe exilée!

Dormez, sire! - Il convient que cette ombre voilée,
Que ce vieux pasteur mort sans peuple et sans troupeaux,
Roi presque séculaire, ait au moins le repos,
Qu'il ait au moins la paix où la mort nous convie,
Puisqu'il eut le travail d'une si dure vie!
Peuple! soyons cléments! soyons forts! oublions!
Jamais l'odeur des morts n'attire les lions.
La haine d'un grand peuple est une haine grande
Qui veut que le pardon au sépulcre descende
Et n'a pour ennemis que ceux qui sont debout.
Hélas! quel poids encor pourrions-nous après tout
Jeter sur ce vieillard cassé par la misère,
Qui dort sous le fardeau de la terre étrangère!

Roi, puissant, vous l'avez brisé; c'est un grand pas.
Il faut l'épargner mort. Et moi, je ne crois pas
Qu'il soit digne du peuple en qui Dieu se reflète
De joindre au bras qui tue une main qui soufflette.

X

Nous, pasteurs des esprits, qui, du bord du chemin
Regardons tous les pas que fait le genre humain,
Poètes, par nos chants, penseurs, par nos idées,
Hâtons vers la raison les âmes attardées!
Hâtons l'ère où viendront s'unir d'un noeud loyal
Le travail populaire et le labeur royal;
Où colère et puissance auront fait leur divorce;
Où tous ceux qui sont forts auront peur de leur force,
Et d'un saint tremblement frémiront à la fois,
Rois, devant leurs devoirs, peuples, devant leurs droits!
Aidons tous ces grands faits que le Seigneur envoie
Pour ouvrir une route ou pour clore une voie,
Les révolutions dont la surface bout,
Les changements soudains qui font vaciller tout,
A dégager du fond des nuages de l'âme,
A poser au-dessus des lois comme une flamme

Ce sentiment profond en nous tous replié
Que l'homme appelle doute et la femme pitié!
Expliquons au profit de la sainte clémence
Ces hauts événements où l'état recommence,
Et qui font, quand l'oeil va des vaincus aux vainqueurs,
Trembler la certitude humaine au fond des coeurs!
Faisons venir bientôt l'heure où l'on pourra dire
Que sur le froid sépulcre on ne doit rien écrire
Hors des mots de pardon, d'espérance et de paix;
Et que, l'empereur mort comme les vieux Capets,
On a tort d'exiler, lorsque rien ne bouillonne,
Eux de leur Saint-Denis et lui de sa colonne.
A quoi sert, Dieu clément, cette vaine action?
Et comment se fait-il que la Proscription
Ne brise pas ses dents au marbre de la tombe?
N'est-ce donc pas assez que, cygne, aigle ou colombe,
Dès qu'un vent de malheur lui jette un nid de rois,
Sortant de ce bois noir qu'on appelle les lois,
Cette hyène, acharnée aux grandes races mortes,
Vienne, là, sous nos murs, les ronger à nos portes!

Un jour, - mais nous serons couchés sous le gazon
Quand cette aube de Dieu blanchira l'horizon! -
— Un jour on comprendra, même en changeant de règne,
Qu'aucune loi ne peut, sans que l'équité saigne,
Faire expier à tous ce qu'a commis un seul,
Et faire boire au fils ce qu'a versé l'aïeul.
On fera ce que nul aujourd'hui ne peut faire.
Quand un aiglon royal tombera de sa sphère,
On ne l'abattra pas sur l'aigle foudroyé.
Et, tout en gardant bien le droit qu'il a payé
De mettre le pouvoir sur un front comme un signe
Et de donner le trône et le Louvre au plus digne,
Un grand peuple pourra, sans être épouvanté,
Voir un enfant de plus jouer dans la cité.
Car tous les coeurs diront: C'est une juste aumône
De laisser la patrie à qui n'a plus le trône!

Alors, jetant enfin l’ancre dans un port sûr,
Ayant les biens germés sur nos maux, et l’azur
Du ciel nouveau dont Dieu nous donne la tempête,
Proscription! nos fils broieront du pied ta tête!
Démon qui tiens du tigre et qui tiens du serpent!
Dans les prospérités invisible et rampant,
Qui, lâche et patient, épiant en silence
Ce que dans son palais le roi dit, rêve, ou pense,
Horrible, en attendant l’heure d’être lâché,
Vis, monstre ténébreux, sous le trône caché!
O poésie! au ciel ton vol se réfugie
Quand les partis hurlants luttent à pleine orgie,
Quand la nécessité sous son code étouffant
Brise le fort, le faible, hélas! l’innocent même,
Et sourde et sans pitié promène l’anathème
Du front blanc du vieillard au front pur de l’enfant!

Tu fuis alors à tire-d’aile
Vers le ciel éternel et pur,
Vers la 1umière à tous fidèle,
Vers l’innocence, vers l’azur!
Afin que ta pureté fière
N’ait pas la fange et la poussière
Des vils chemins par nous frayés,
Et que, nuages et tempêtes,
Tout ce qui passe sur nos têtes
Ne puisse passer qu’à tes pieds!

Tu sais qu’étoile sans orbite,
L’homme erre au gré de tous les vents;
Tu sais que l’injustice habite
Dans la demeure des vivants;
Et que nos coeurs sont des arènes
Où les passions souveraines,
Groupe horrible en vain combattu,
Lionnes, louves affamées,
Tigresses de taches semées,

Dévorent la chaste vertu!

Tout ce qui souffre est plein de haine.
Tout ce qui vit traîne un remords.
Les morts seuls ont rompu leur chaîne.
Tout est méchant, hormis les morts!
Aussi, voyant partout la vie
Palpiter de rage et d’envie,
Et que parmi nous rien n’est beau,
Si parfois, oiseau solitaire,
Tu redescends sur cette terre,
Tu te poses sur un tombeau!

15 mai 1837

III

«Quelle est la fin de tout?”

Quelle est la fin de tout? la vie, ou bien la tombe?
Est-ce l’onde où l’on flotte? est-ce l’onde où l’on tombe?
De tant de pas croisés quel est le but lointain?
Le berceau contient-il l’homme ou bien le destin?
Sommes-nous ici-bas, dans nos maux, dans nos joies,
Des rois prédestinés ou de fatales proies?

O seigneur, dites-nous, dites-nous, ô Dieu fort,
Si vous n’avez créé l’homme que pour le sort?
Si déjà le calvaire est caché dans la crèche
Et si les nids soyeux, dorés par l’aube fraîche,
Où la plume naissante éclôt parmi des fleurs,
Sont faits pour les oiseaux ou pour les oiseleurs?

24 mars 1837

IV

A l’Arc de Triomphe

I

Toi dont la courbe au loin, par le couchant dorée
S’emplit d’azur céleste, arche démesurée
Toi qui lèves si haut ton front large et serein
Fait pour changer sous lui la campagne en abîme,
Et pour servir de base à quelque aigle sublime
Qui viendra s’y poser et qui sera d’airain!

O vaste entassement ciselé par l’histoire!
Monceau de pierre assis sur un monceau de gloire!
Edifice inouï!
Toi que l’homme par qui notre siècle commence,
De loin, dans les rayons de l’avenir immense,
Voyait, tout ébloui!

Non, tu n’es pas fini quoique tu sois superbe!
Non; puisque aucun passant, dans l’ombre assis sur l’herbe,
Ne fixe un oeil rêveur à ton mur triomphant,
Tandis que triviale, errante et vagabonde,
Entre tes quatre pieds toute la ville abonde
Comme une fourmilière aux pieds d’un éléphant!

A ta beauté royale il manque quelque chose.
Les siècles vont venir pour ton apothéose
Qui te l’apporteront.
Il manque sur ta tête un sombre amas d’années
Qui pendent pêle-mêle et toutes ruinées
Aux brèches de ton front!

Il te manque la ride et l’antiquité fière,
Le passé, pyramide où tout siècle a sa pierre,

Les chapiteaux brisés, l’herbe sur les vieux fûts;
Il manque sous ta voûte où notre orgueil s’élance
Ce bruit mystérieux qui se mêle au silence,
Le sourd chuchotement des souvenirs confus!

La vieillesse couronne et la ruine achève.
Il faut à l’édifice un passé dont on rêve,
Deuil, triomphe ou remords.
Nous voulons, en foulant son enceinte pavée,
Sentir dans la poussière à nos pieds soulevée
De la cendre des morts!

Il faut que le fronton s’effeuille comme un arbre.
I1 faut que le lichen, cette rouille du marbre,
De sa lèpre dorée au loin couvre le mur;
Et que la vétusté, par qui tout art s’efface,
Prenne chaque sculpture et la ronge à la face,
Comme un avide oiseau qui dévore un fruit mûr.

Il faut qu’un vieux dallage ondule sous les portes,
Que le lierre vivant grimpe aux acanthes mortes,
Que l’eau dorme aux fossés,
Que la cariatide, en sa lente révolte,
Se refuse, enfin lasse, à porter l’archivolte,
Et dise: C’est assez!

Ce n’est pas, ce n’est pas entre des pierres neuves
Que la bise et la nuit pleurent comme des veuves.
Hélas! d’un beau palais le débris est plus beau.
Pour que la lune émousse à travers la nuit sombre
L’ombre par le rayon et le rayon par l’ombre,
Il lui faut la ruine à défaut du tombeau!

Voulez-vous qu’une tour, voulez-vous qu’une église
Soient de ces monuments dont l’âme idéalise
La forme et la hauteur,
Attendez que de mousse elles soient revêtues,

Et laissez travailler à toutes les statues
Le temps, ce grand sculpteur!

Il faut que le vieillard, chargé de jours sans nombre,
Menant son jeune fils sous l’arche pleine d’ombre,
Nomme Napoléon comme on nomme Cyrus,
Et dise en la montrant de ses mains décharnées:
“Vois cette porte énorme! elle a trois mille années.
C’est par là qu’ont passé des hommes disparus!”

II

Oh! Paris est la cité mère!
Paris est le lieu solennel
Où le tourbillon éphémère
Tourne sur un centre éternel!
Paris! feu sombre ou pure étoile!
Morne Isis couverte d’un voile!
Araignée à l’immense toile
Où se prennent les nations!
Fontaine d’urnes obsédée!
Mamelle sans cesse inondée
Où pour se nourrir de l’idée
Viennent les générations!

Quand Paris se met à l’ouvrage
Dans sa forge aux mille clameurs,
A tout peuple, heureux, brave ou sage,
Il prend ses lois, ses dieux, ses moeurs.
Dans sa fournaise, pêle-mêle,
Il fond, transforme et renouvelle
Cette science universelle
Qu’il emprunte à tous les humains;
Puis il rejette aux peuples blêmes
Leurs sceptres et leurs diadèmes,
Leurs préjugés et leurs systèmes,
Tout tordus par ses fortes mains!

Paris, qui garde, sans y croire,
Les faisceaux et les encensoirs,
Tous les matins dresse une gloire,
Eteint un soleil tous les soirs;
Avec l'idée, avec le glaive,
Avec la chose, avec le rêve,
Il refait, recloue et relève
L'échelle de la terre aux cieux;
Frère des Memphis et des Romes,
Il bâtit au siècle où nous sommes
Une Babel pour tous les hommes,
Un Panthéon pour tous les dieux!

Ville qu'un orage enveloppe!
C'est elle, hélas! qui, nuit et jour,
Réveille le géant Europe
Avec sa cloche et son tambour!
Sans cesse, qu'il veille ou qu'il dorme,
Il entend la cité difforme
Bourdonner sur sa tête énorme
Comme un essaim dans la forêt.
Toujours Paris s'écrie et gronde.
Nul ne sait, question profonde!
Ce que perdrait le bruit du monde
Le jour où Paris se tairait!

III

Il se taira pourtant! - Après bien des aurores,
Bien des mois, bien des ans, bien des siècles couchés,
Quand cette rive où l'eau se brise aux ponts sonores
Sera rendue aux joncs murmurants et penchés;

Quand la Seine fuira de pierres obstruée,
Usant quelque vieux dôme écroulé dans ses eaux,
Attentive au doux vent qui porte à la nuée

Le frisson du feuillage et le chant des oiseaux;

Lorsqu’elle coulera, la nuit, blanche dans l’ombre,
Heureuse, en endormant son flot longtemps troublé,
De pouvoir écouter enfin ces voix sans nombre
Qui passent vaguement sous le ciel étoilé;

Quand de cette cité, folle et rude ouvrière,
Qui, hâtant les destins à ses murs réservés,
Sous son propre marteau s’en allant en poussière,
Met son bronze en monnaie et son marbre en pavés;

Quand, des toits des clochers, des ruches tortueuses,
Des porches, des frontons, des dômes pleins d’orgueil
Qui faisaient cette ville, aux voix tumultueuses,
Touffue, inextricable et fourmillante à l’oeil,

Il ne restera plus dans l’immense campagne,
Pour toute pyramide et pour tout panthéon,
Que deux tours de granit faites par Charlemagne,
Et qu’un pilier d’airain fait par Napoléon;

Toi, tu compléteras le triangle sublime!
L’airain sera la gloire et le granit la foi;
Toi, tu seras la porte ouverte sur la cime
Qui dit: il faut monter pour venir jusqu’à moi!

Tu salueras là-bas cette église si vieille,
Cette colonne altière au nom toujours accru,
Debout peut-être encore, ou tombée, et pareille
Au clairon monstrueux d’un Titan disparu.

Et sur ces deux débris que les destins rassemblent,
Pour toi l’aube fera resplendir à la fois
Deux signes triomphants qui de loin se ressemblent.
De près l’un est un glaive et l’autre est une croix!

Sur vous trois poseront mille ans de notre France.
La colonne est le chant d’un règne à peine ouvert,
C’est toi qui finiras l’hymne qu’elle commence.
Elle dit: Austerlitz! tu diras: Champaubert!

IV

Arche! alors tu seras éternelle et complète,
Quand tout ce que la Seine en son onde reflète
Aura fui pour jamais,
Quand de cette cité qui fut égale à Rome
Il ne restera plus qu’un ange, un aigle, un homme,
Debout sur trois sommets!

C’est alors que le roi, le sage, le poète,
Tous ceux dont le passé presse l’âme inquiète,
T’admireront vivante auprès de Paris mort;
Et, pour mieux voir ta face où flotte un sombre rêve,
Lèveront à demi ton lierre, ainsi qu’on lève
Un voile sur le front d’une aïeule qui dort!

Sur ton mur qui pour eux n’aura rien de vulgaire,
Ils chercheront nos moeurs, nos héros, notre guerre,
Tous pensifs à tes pieds;
Ils croiront vous voir, le long de ta frise animée,
Revivre le grand peuple avec la grande armée!
— “Oh! diront-ils, voyez!

Là, c’est le régiment, ce serpent des batailles,
Traînant sur mille pieds ses luisantes écailles,
Qui tantôt, furieux, se roule au pied des tours,
Tantôt, d’un mouvement formidable et tranquille,
Troue un rempart de pierre et traverse une ville
Avec son front sonore où battent vingt tambours!

Là-haut, c’est l’empereur avec ses capitaines,
Qui songe s’il ira vers ces terres lointaines

Où se tourne son char,
Et s’il doit préférer pour vaincre ou se défendre
La courbe d’Annibal ou l’ange d’Alexandre
Au carré de César.

Là, c’est l’artillerie aux cent gueules de fonte,
D’où la fumée à flots monte, tombe et remonte,
Qui broie une cité, détruit les garnisons,
Ruine par la brèche incessamment accrue
Tours, dômes, ponts, clochers, et, comme une charrue,
Creuse une horrible rue à travers les maisons!”

Et tous les souvenirs qu’à ton front taciturne
Chaque siècle en passant versera de son urne
Leur reviendront au coeur.
Ils feront de ton mur jaillir ta vieille histoire,
Et diront, en posant un panache de gloire
Sur ton cimier vainqueur:

— “Oh! que tout était grand dans cette époque antique!
Si les ans n’avaient pas dévasté ce portique,
Nous en retrouverions encor les lambeaux!
Mais le temps, grand semeur de la ronce et du lierre,
Touche les monuments d’une main familière,
Et déchire le livre aux endroits les plus beaux!”

V

Non, le temps n’ôte rien aux choses.
Plus d’un portique à tort vanté
Dans ses lentes métamorphoses
Arrive enfin à la beauté.
Sur les monuments qu’on révère
Le temps jette un charme sévère
De leur façade à leur chevet.
Jamais, quoiqu’il brise et qu’il rouille,
La robe dont il les dépouille

Ne vaut celle qu’il leur revêt.

C’est le temps qui creuse une ride
Dans un claveau trop indigent;
Qui sur l’ange d’un marbre aride
Passe son pouce intelligent;
C’est lui qui, pour corriger l’oeuvre,
Mêle une vivante couleuvre
Aux noeuds d’une hydre de granit.
Je cois voir rire un toit gothique
Quand le temps dans la frise antique
Ote une pierre et met un nid!

Aussi, quand vous venez, c’est lui qui vous accueille;
Lui qui verse l’odeur du vague chèvrefeuille
Sur ce pavé souillé peut-être d’ossements;
Lui qui remplit d’oiseaux les sculptures farouches,
Met la vie en leurs flancs, et de leurs mornes bouches
Fait sortir mille cris charmants!

Si quelque Vénus toute nue
Gémit, pauvre marbre désert,
C’est lui, dans la verte avenue,
Qui la caresse et qui la sert.
A l’abri d’un porche héraldique
Sous un beau feuillage pudique
Il la cache jusqu’au nombril;
Et sous son pied blanc et superbe
Etend les mille fleurs de l’herbe,
Cette mosaïque d’avril!

La mémoire des morts demeure
Dans les monuments ruinés.
Là, douce et clémente, à toute heure,
Elle parle aux fronts inclinés.
Elle est là, dans l’âme affaissée
Filtrant de pensée en pensée,

Comme une nymphe au front dormant
Qui, seule sous l’obscure voûte
D’où son eau suinte goutte à goutte,
Penche son vase tristement!

VI

Mais, hélas! hélas! dit l’histoire,
Bien souvent le passé couvre plus d’un secret
Dont sur un mur vieilli la tache reparaît!
Toute ancienne muraille est noire!

Souvent, par le désert et par l’ombre absorbé,
L’édifice déchu ressemble au roi tombé.
Plus de gloire où n’est plus la foule!
Rome est humiliée et Venise est en deuil.
La ruine de tout commence par l’orgueil;
C’est le premier fronton qui croule!

Athène est triste, et cache au front du Parthénon
Les traces de l’Anglais et celles du canon,
Et, pleurant ses tours mutilées,
Rêve à l’artiste grec qui versa de sa main
Quelque chose de beau comme un sourire humain
Sur le profil des propylées!

Thèbe a des temples morts où rampe en serpentant
La vipère au front plat, au regard éclatant,
Autour de la colonne torse;
Et, seul, quelque grand aigle habite en souverain
Les piliers de Rhamsès d’où les lames d’airain
S’en vont comme une vieille écorce!

Dans les débris de Gur, pleins du cri des hiboux,
Le tigre en marchant ploie et casse les bambous,
D’où s’envole le vautour chauve,
Et la lionne au pied d’un mur mystérieux

Met le groupe inquiet des lionceaux sans yeux
Qui fouillent sous son ventre fauve.

La morne Palenquè gît dans les marais verts.
A peine entre ses blocs d’herbe haute couverts
Entend-on le lézard qui bouge.
Ses murs sont obstrués d’arbres au fruit vermeil
Où volent, tout moirés par l’ombre et le soleil,
De beaux oiseaux de cuivre rouge!

Muette en la douleur, Jumièges gravement
Etouffe un triste écho sous son portail normand,
Et laisse chanter sur ses tombes
Tous ces nids dans ses tours abrités et couvés
D’où le souffle du soir fait sur les noirs pavés
Neiger des plumes de colombes!

Comme une mère sombre, et qui, dans sa fierté,
Cache sous son manteau son enfant souffleté,
L’Egypte au bord du Nil assise
Dans sa robe de sable enfonce enveloppés
Ses colosses camards à la face frappés
Par le pied brutal de Cambyse.

C’est que toujours les ans contiennent quelque affront.
Toute ruine, hélas! pleure et penche le front!

VII

Mais toi! rien s’atteindra ta majesté pudique,
Porte sainte! jamais ton marbre véridique
Ne sera profané.
Ton cintre virginal sera pur sous la nue;
Et les peuples à naître accourront tête nue
Vers ton front couronné!

Toujours le pâtre, au loin accroupi dans les seigles,

Verra sur ton sommeil planer un cercle d’aigles.
Les chênes à tes blocs noueront leur large tronc.
La gloire sur ta cime allumera son phare.
Ce n’est qu’en te chantant une haute fanfare
Que sous ton arc altier le siècles passeront!

Jamais rien qui ressemble à quelque ancienne honte
N’osera sur ton mur où le flot des ans monte
Répandre sa noirceur.
Tu pourras, dans ces champs où vous resterez seules,
Contempler fièrement les deux tours tes aïeules,
Ne mêle à tes lauriers son feuillage hideux!

Tandis que ces cités, dans leurs cendres enfouies,
Furent pleines jadis d’actions inouïes,
Ivres de sang versé,
Si bien que le seigneur a dit à la nature:
Refais-toi des palais dans cette architecture
Dont l’homme a mal usé!

Aussi tout est fini. Le chacal les visite;
Les murs vont décroissant sous l’herbe parasite;
L’étang s’installe et dort sous le dôme brisé;
Sur les Nérons sculptés marche la bête fauve;
L’antre se creuse où fut l’incestueuse alcôve.
Le tigre peut venir où le crime a passé!

VIII

Oh! dans ces jours lointains où l’on n’ose descendre,
Quand trois mille ans auront passé sur notre cendre
A nous qui maintenant vivons, pensons, allons,
Quand nos fosses auront fait place à des sillons,
Si, vers le soir, un homme assis sur la colline
S’oublie à contempler cette Seine orpheline,
O Dieu! de quel aspect triste et silencieux
Les lieux où fut Paris étonneront ses yeux!

Si c’est l’heure où déjà des vapeurs sont tombées
Sur le couchant rougi de l’or des scarabées,
Si la touffe de l’arbre est noire sur le ciel,
Dans ce demi-jour pâle où plus rien n’est réel,
Ombre où la fleure s’endort, où s’éveille l’étoile,
De quel oeil il verra, comme à travers un voile,
Comme un songe aux contours grandissant et noyés,
La plaine immense et brune apparaître à ses pieds,
S’élargir lentement dans le vague nocturne,
Et comme une eau qui s’enfle et monte aux dors de l’urne,
Absorbant par degrés forêt, coteau, gazon,
Quand la nuit sera noire, emplir tout l’horizon!
Oh! dans cette heure sombre où l’on croit voir les choses
Fuir, sous une autre forme étrangement éclose,
Quelle extase de voir dormir, quant rien ne luit,
Ces champs dont chaque pierre a contenu du bruit!
Comme il tendra l’oreille aux rumeurs indécises!
Comme il ira rêvant des figures assises
Dans le buisson penché, dans l’arbre aux bord des eaux,
Dans le vieux pan de mur que lèchent les roseaux!
Qu’il cherchera de vie en ce tombeau suprême!
Et comme il se fera, s’éblouissant lui-même,
A travers la nuit trouble et les rameaux touffus,
Des visions de chars et de passants confus!
— Mais non, tout sera mort. Plus rien dans cette plaine
Qu’un peuple évanoui dont elle est encor pleine;
Que l’oeil éteint de l’homme et l’oeil vivant de dieu;
Un arc, une colonne, et, là-bas, au milieu
De ce fleuve argenté dont on entend l’écume,
Une église échouée à demi dans la brume!

O spectacle! - ainsi meurt ce que les peuples fonts!
Qu’un tel passé pour l’âme est un gouffre profond!
Pour ce passant pieux quel poids de notre histoire!
Surtout si tout à coup réveillant sa mémoire,
L’année a ce soir-là ramené dans son cours
Une des grandes nuits, veilles de nos grands jours,

Où l’empereur, rêvant un lendemain de gloire,
Dormait en attendant l’aube d’une victoire!

Lorsqu’enfin, fatigué de songes, vers minuit,
Las d’écouter au seuil de ce monde détruit,
Après s’être accoudé longtemps, oubliant,
Au bord de ce néant immense où rien ne pleure,
Il aura lentement regagné son chemin;
Quant ce grand désert, pur de tout pas humain,
Rien ne troublera plus cette pudeur que Rome
Ou Paris ruiné doit avoir devant l’homme;
Lorsque la solitude, enfin libre et sans bruit,
Pourra continuer ce qu’elle fait la nuit,
Si quelque être animé veille encor dans la plaine
Peut-être verra-t-il, comme sous une haleine
Soudain un pâle éclair de ta tête jaillir,
Et la colonne au loin répondre et tressaillir!
Et ses soldats de cuivre et tes soldats de pierre
Ouvrir subitement leur pesante paupière!
Et tous s’entre-heurter, réveil miraculeux!
Tels que d’anciens guerriers d’un âge fabuleux
Qu’un noir magicien, loin des temps où nous sommes,
Jadis aurait fait marbre et qu’il referait homme!
Alors l’aigle d’airain à ton faîte endormi,
Superbe, et tout à coup se dressant à demi,
Sur ces héros baignés du feu de ses prunelles
Secouera largement ses ailes éternelles!
D’où viendra ce réveil? d’où viendront ces clartés?
Et ce vent qui, soufflant sur ces guerriers sculptés,
Les fera remuer sur ta face hautaine
Comme tremble un feuillage autour du tronc de chêne?
Qu’importe? Dieu le sait. Le mystère est dans tout.
L’un à l’autre à voix basse ils se diront: Debout!
Ceux de quatre-vingt-seize et de mil huit cent onze,
Ceux que conduit au ciel la spirale de bronze,
Ceux que scelle à la terre un socle de granit,
Tous, poussant au combat le cheval qui hennit,

Le drapeau qui se gonfle et le canon qui roule,
A l’immense mêlée ils se rueront en foule!
Alors on entendra sur ton mur les clairons,
Les bombes, les tambours, le choc des escadrons,
Les cris, et le bruit sourd des plaines ébranlées,
Sortir confusément des pierres ciselées,
Et du pied au sommet du pilier souverain
Cent batailles rugir avec des voix d’airain.
Tout à coup, écrasant l’ennemi qui s’effare,
La victoire aux cent voix sonnera sa fanfare.
De la colonne à toi les cris se répondront.
Et puis tout se taira sur votre double front;
Une rumeur de fête emplira la vallée,
Et Notre-Dame au loin, aux ténèbres mêlée,
Illuminant sa croix ainsi qu’un labarum,
Vous chantera dans l’ombre un vague Te Deum!

Monument! voilà donc la rêverie immense
Qu’à ton ombre déjà le poète commence!
Piédestal qu’eût aimé Bélénus ou Mithra!
Arche aujourd’hui guerrière, un jour religieuse!
Rêve en pierre ébauché! porte prodigieuse
D’un palais de géants qu’on se figurera!

Quand d’un lierre poudreux je couvre tes sculptures,
Lorsque je vois, au fond des époques futures,
La liste des héros sur ton mur constellé
Reluire et rayonner, malgré les destinées,
A travers les rameaux des profondes années,
Comme à travers un bois brille un ciel étoilé;

Quand ma pensée ainsi, vieillissant ton attique,
Te fait de l’avenir un passé magnifique,
Alors sous ta grandeur je me courbe effrayé,
J’admire, et, fils pieux, passant que l’art anime,
Je ne regrette rien devant ton mur sublime
Que Phidias absent et mon père oublié!

2 février 1837

V

Dieu est toujours là

I

Quand l’été vient, le pauvre adore!
L’été, c’est la saison de feu,
C’est l’air tiède et la fraîche aurore;
L’été, c’est le regard de Dieu.

L’été, la nuit bleue et profonde
S’accouple au jour limpide et claire;
Le soir est d’or, la plaine est blonde;
On entend des chansons dans l’air.

L’été, la nature éveillée
Partout se répand en tous sens,
Sur l’arbre en épaisse feuillée,
Sur l’homme en bienfaits caressants.

Tout ombrage alors semble dire:
Voyageur, viens te reposer!
Elle met dans l’aube un sourire,
Elle met dans l’onde un baiser.

Elle cache et recouvre d’ombre,
Loin du monde sourd et moqueur,
Une lyre dans le bois sombre,
Une oreille dans notre coeur!

Elle donne vie et pensée
Aux pauvres de l’hiver sauvés,
Du soleil à pleine croisée,
Et le ciel pur qui dit: Vivez!

Sur les chaumières dédaignées
Par les maîtres et les valets,
Joyeuse, elle jette à poignées
Les fleurs qu’elle vend aux palais.

Son luxe aux pauvres seuils s’étale.
Ni les parfums ni les rayons
N’ont peur, dans leur candeur royale,
De se salir à des haillons.

Sur un toit où l’herbe frissonne
Le jasmin veut bien se poser.
Le lys ne méprise personne,
Lui qui pourrait tout mépriser!

Alors la masure où la mousse
Sur l’humble chaume a débordé
Montre avec une fierté douce
Son vieux mur de roses brodé.

L’aube alors de clartés baignée,
Entrant dans le réduit profond,
Dore la toile d’araignée
Entre les poutres du plafond.

Alors l’âme du pauvre est pleine.
Humble, il bénit ce Dieu lointain
Dont il sent la céleste haleine
Dans tous les souffles du matin!

L’air le réchauffe et le pénètre.
Il fête le printemps vainqueur.
Un oiseau chante à sa fenêtre,
La gaîté chante dans son coeur!

Alors, si l’orphelin s’éveille,
Sans toit, sans mère et priant Dieu,

Une voix lui dit à l’oreille:
“Eh bien! viens sous mon dôme bleu!

Le Louvre est égal aux chaumières
Sous ma coupole de saphirs.
Viens sous mon ciel plein de lumières,
Viens sous mon ciel plein de zéphirs!

J’ai connu ton père et ta mère
Dans leurs bons et leurs mauvais jours.
Pour eux la vie était amère,
Mais moi je fut douce toujours.

C’est moi qui sur leur sépulture
Ai mis l’herbe qui la défend.
Viens, je suis la grande nature!
Je suis l’aïeule, et toi l’enfant.

Viens, j’ai des fruits d’or, j’ai des roses,
J’en remplirai tes petits bras,
Je te dirai de douces choses,
Et peut-être tu souriras!

Car je voudrais te voir sourire,
Pauvre enfant si triste et si beau!
Et puis tout bas j’irais le dire
A ta mère dans son tombeau!”

Et l’enfant à cette voix tendre,
De la vie oubliant le poids,
Rêve et se hâte de descendre
Le long des coteaux dans les bois.

Là du plaisir tout a la forme;
L’arbre a des fruits, l’herbe a des fleurs;
Il entend dans le chêne énorme
Rire les oiseaux querelleurs.

Dans l’onde, il mire son visage;
Tout lui parle; adieu son ennui!
Le buisson l’arrête au passage,
Et le caillou joue avec lui.

Le soir, point d’hôtesse cruelle
Qui l’accueille d’un front hagard.
Il trouve l’étoile si belle
Qu’il s’endort à son doux regard!

— Oh! qu’en dormant rien ne t’oppresse!
Dieu sera là pour ton réveil!-
La lune vient qui le caresse
Plus doucement que le soleil.

Car elle a de plus molles trêves
Pour nos travaux et nos douleurs.
Elle fait éclore nos rêves,
Lui ne fait naître que les fleurs!

Oh! quand la fauvette dérobe
Son nid sous les rameaux penchants,
Lorsqu’au soleil séchant sa robe
Mai tout mouillé rit dans les champs

J’ai souvent pensé dans mes veilles
Que la nature au front sacré
Dédiait tout bas ses merveilles
A ceux qui l’hiver ont pleuré!

Pour tous et pour le méchant même
Elle est bonne, Dieu le permet,
Dieu le veut, mais surtout elle aime
Le pauvre que Jésus aimait!

Toujours sereine et pacifique,

Elle offre à l’auguste indigent
Des dons de reine magnifique,
Des soins d’esclave intelligent!

A-t-il faim? au fruit de la branche
Elle dit: - Tombe, ô fruit vermeil!
A-t-il soif? - Que l’onde s’épanche!
A-t-il froid? - Lève-toi, soleil!

II

Mais hélas! juillet fait sa gerbe;
L’été, lentement effacé,
Tombe feuille à feuille dans l’herbe
Et jour à jour dans le passé.

Puis octobre perd sa dorure;
Et les bois dans les lointains bleus
Couvrent de leur rousse fourrure
L’épaule des coteaux frileux.

L’hiver des nuages sans nombre
Sort, et chasse l’été du ciel,
Pareil au temps, ce faucheur sombre
Qui suit le semeur éternel!

Le pauvre alors s’effraie te prie.
L’hiver, hélas! c’est Dieu qui dort;
C’est la faim livide et maigrie
Qui tremble auprès du foyer mort!

Il croit voir une main de marbre
Qui, mutilant le jour obscur,
Retire tous les fruits de l’arbre
Et tout les rayons d’azur.

Il pleure, la nature est morte!

O rude hiver! ô dure loi!
Soudain un ange ouvre sa porte
Et dit en souriant: C’est moi!

Cet ange qui donne et tremble,
C’est l’aumône aux yeux de douceur,
Au front crédule, et qui ressemble
A la foi dont elle est la soeur!

Je suis la Charité, l’amie
Qui se réveille avant le jour,
Quand la nature est rendormie,
Et que dieu m’a dit: A ton tour!

“Je viens visiter ta chaumière
Veuve de l’été si charmant!
Je suis fille de la prière.
J’ai des mains qu’on ouvre aisément.

“J’accours, car la saison est dure,
j’accours, car l’indigent a froid”
J’accours, car la tiède verdure
Ne fait plus d’ombre sur le toit!

“je prie, et jamais je n’ordonne.
Chère à tout homme quel qu’il soit,
Je laisse la joie à qui donne
Et je l’apporte à qui reçoit.”

O figure auguste et modeste,
Où le Seigneur mêla pour nous
Ce que l’ange a de plus céleste,
Ce que la femme a de plus doux!

Au lit du vieillard solitaire
Elle penche un front gracieux,
et rien n’est plus beau sur la terre

Et rien n’est plus grand sous les cieux,

Lorsque, réchauffant leurs poitrines
Entre ses genoux triomphants,
Elle tient dans ses mains divines
Les pieds nus des petits enfants!

Elle va dans chaque masure,
Laissant au pauvre réjoui
Le vin, le pain frais, l’huile pure,
Et le courage épanoui!

Et le feu! le beau feu folâtre,
A la pourpre ardente pareil,
Qui fait qu’amené devant l’âtre
L’aveugle croit rire au soleil!

Puis elle cherche au coin des bornes,
Transis par la froide vapeur,
Ces enfants qu’on voit nus et mornes
Et se mourant avec stupeur.

Oh! voilà surtout ceux qu’elle aime!
Faibles fronts dans l’ombre engloutis!
Parés d’un triple diadème,
Innocents, pauvres et petits!

Ils sont meilleurs que nous ne sommes!
Elle leur donne en même temps,
Avec le pain qu’il faut aux hommes,
Le baiser qu’il faut aux enfants!

Tandis que leur faim secourue
Mange ce pain de pleurs noyé,
Elle étend sur eux dans la rue
Son bras de passants coudoyé.

Et si, le front dans la lumière,
Un riche passe en ce moment,
Par le bord de sa robe altière
Elle le tire doucement!

Puis pour eux elle prie encore
La grande foule au coeur étroit,
La foule qui, dès qu’on l’implore,
S’en va comme l’eau qui décroît!

“- Oh! malheureux celui qui chante
Un chant joyeux, peut-être impur,
Pendant que la bise méchante
Mord un pauvre enfant sous son mur!

Oh! la chose triste et fatale,
Lorsque chez le riche hautain
Un grand feu tremble dans la salle,
Reflété par un grand festin,

De voir, quand l’orgie enrouée
Dans la pourpre s’égaie et rit,
A peine une toile trouée
Sur les membres de Jésus-Christ!

Oh! donnez-moi pour que je donne!
J’ai des oiseaux nus dans mon nid.
Donnez, méchants, Dieu vous pardonne!
Donnez, ô bons, Dieu vous bénit!

Heureux ceux que mon zèle enflamme!
Qui donne au pauvres prête à Dieu.
Le bien qu’on fait parfume l’âme;
On s’en souvient toujours un peu!

Le soir, au seuil de sa demeure,
Heureux celui qui sait encor

Ramasser un enfant qui pleure,
Comme un avare un sequin d’or!

Le vrai trésor rempli de charmes,
C’est un groupe pour vous priant
D’enfants qu’on a trouvés en larmes
Et qu’on a laissés souriant!

Les biens que je donne à qui m’aime,
Jamais Dieu ne les retira.
L’or que sur le pauvre je sème
Pour le riche au ciel germera!”

III

Oh! que l’été brille ou s’éteigne,
Pauvres, ne désespérez pas!
Le Dieu qui souffrit et qui règne
A mis ses pieds où sont vos pas!

Pour vous couvrir il se dépouille;
Bon même pour l’homme fatal
Qui, comme l’airain dans la rouille,
Va s’endurcissant dans le mal!
Tendre, même durant l’absinthe,
Pour l’impie au regard obscur
Qui l’insulte sans plus de crainte
Qu’un passant qui raie un vieux mur!

Ils ont beau traîner sur les claies
Ce Dieu mort dans leur abandon;
Ils ne font couler de ses plaies
Qu’un intarissable pardon.

Il n’est pas l’aigle altier qui vole,
Ni le grand lion ravisseur;
Il compose son auréole

D’une lumineuse douceur!

Quand sur nous une chaîne tombe,
Il la brise anneau par anneau.
Pour l’esprit il se fait colombe,
Pour le coeur il se fait agneau!

Vous pour qui la vie est mauvaise,
Espérez! il veille sur vous!
Il sait bien ce que cela pèse,
Lui qui tomba sur ses genoux!

Il est le Dieu de l’évangile;
Il tient votre coeur dans sa main,
Et c’est une chose fragile
Qu’il ne veut pas briser, enfin!

Lorsqu’il est temps que l’été meure
Sous l’hiver sombre et solennel,
Même à travers le ciel qui pleure
On voit son sourire éternel!

Car sur les familles souffrantes,
L’hiver, l’été, la nuit, le jour,
Avec des urnes différentes
Dieu verse à grands flots son amour!

Et dans ses bontés éternelles
Il penche sur l’humanité
Ces mères au triples mamelles,
La nature et la charité.

VI

«Oh! vivons! disent-ils dans leur enivrement”

Oh! vivons! disent-ils dans leur enivrement.
Voyez la longue table et le festin charmant
Qui rayonne dans nos demeures!
Nous semons tous nos biens n’importe en quels sillons.
Riches, nous dépensons, nous perdons, nous pillons
Nos onces d’or; jeunes, nos heures

Jette ta vielle Bible, ô jeune homme pieux!
Quitte église et collège, et viens chez nous! - Joyeux,
Entourés de cent domestiques,
Buvant, chantant, riant, nous n’insultons pas Dieu,
Et nous lui permettons de montrer son ciel bleu
Par le cintre de nos portiques!

De quoi te servira ton labeur ennuyeux?
Sais-tu ce que diront les belles aux doux yeux
Dont le sourire vaut un trône?
— O jeune homme inutile! - Et puis elles riront.
— Oh! que de peine il prend pour donner à son front
La couleur de son livre jaune!

Nous, éblouis de feux, de concerts, de seins nus,
Nous vivons! - Nous avons des bonheurs inconnus
A la foule avare et grossière,
Quand dans l’orchestre, où rien ne grandit qu’en tremblant,
La fanfare, tantôt montant, tantôt croulant,
S’enfle en onde ou vole en poussière!

L’homme à tout ce qu’il fait dans tous les temps mêla
La musique et les chants. - Amis c’est pour cela
Que la Guerre qui nous enivre,
Noble déesse à qui tout enfants nous songions,
Fait chanter en avant des sombres légions

Les clairons aux bouches de cuivre!

O rois, pour vous la guerre et pour nous le plaisir!
Vous vivez par l’orgueil et nous par le désir.
Nous avons tous notre part d’âmes.
Nous avons, les uns craints et les autres aimés,
Vous les empires, nous les boudoirs parfumés,
Vous les homme, et nous les femmes.

Prêtres, mages, docteurs, savants, nous font pitié!
Pauvres songeurs qui vont expliquant à moitié
L’ombre dont l’Eternel se voile,
Tantôt lisant un livre et hués des valets,
Tantôt assis la nuit sur le toit des palais,
Epelant d’étoile en étoile!

Fous qui cherchent un centre au globe obscur du ciel!
Nous, rions! - Il n’est rien ici-bas de réel
Que ce que tient la main e l’homme.
Donnons leur saint bonheur pour les plaisirs maudits,
Pour une Eve au front pur leur vague paradis,
Et leur sphère pour une pomme!

Qu’est-ce que la science à côté de l’amour?
L’hiver donne la neige et le soleil le jour.
Aimons! chantons! trêve aux paroles!
Préférons, puisque enfin, nos coeurs flambent encor,
Aux discours larmoyants le choc des coupes d’or,
Aux vieux sages les belles folles!

Nature, nous buvons aux flots que tu répands!
Toujours nous nos hâtons de jouir aux dépens
Du penseur prudent qui diffère.
Nous ne songeons, prenant les biens sans les choisir,
Qu’à dissoudre ici-bas toute chose en plaisir.
Quant à Dieu, nous le laissons faire!”

Le sage cependant, qui songe à leur destin,
Ramasse tristement les miettes du festin,
Tandis que l’un l’autre ils s’enchantent;
Puis il donne ce pain aux pauvres oubliés,
Aux mendiants rêveurs, en leur disant: - Priez,
Priez pour ces hommes qui chantent!

4 mars 1837

VII

A Virgile

O Virgile! ô poète! ô mon maître divin!
Viens, quittons cette ville au cri sinistre et vain,
Qui, géante, et jamais ne fermant la paupière,
Presse un flot écumant entre ses flancs de pierre,
Lutèce, si petite au temps de tes Césars,
Et qui jette aujourd'hui, cité pleine de chars,
Sous le nom éclatant dont le monde la nomme,
Plus de clarté qu'Athène et plus de bruit que Rome.

Pour toi qui dans les bois fais, comme l'eau des cieux,
Tomber de feuille en feuille un vers mystérieux,
Pour toi dont la pensée emplit ma rêverie,
J'ai trouvé dans une ombre où rit l'herbe fleurie,
Entre Buc et Meudon, dans un profond oubli,
— Et quand je dis Meudon, suppose Tivoli! -
J'ai trouvé, mon poète, une chaste vallée
A des coteaux charmants nonchalamment mêlée,
Retraite favorable à des amants cachés,
Faite de flots dormants et de rameaux penchés,
Où midi baigne en vain de ses rayons sans nombre
La grotte et la forêt, frais asiles de l'ombre!

Pour toi je l'ai cherchée, un matin, fier, joyeux,
Avec l'amour au coeur et l'aube dans les yeux;
Pour toi je l'ai cherchée, accompagné de celle
Qui sait tous les secrets que mon âme recèle,
Et qui, seule avec moi sous les bois chevelus,
Serait ma Lycoris si j'étais ton Gallus.

Car elle a dans le coeur cette fleur large et pure,
L'amour mystérieux de l'antique nature!
Elle aime comme nous, maître, ces douces voix,

Ce bruit de nids joyeux qui sort des sombres bois,
Et, le soir, tout au fond de la vallée étroite,
Les coteaux renversés dans le lac qui miroite,
Et, quand le couchant morne a perdu sa rougeur,
Les marais irrités des pas du voyageur,
Et l'humble chaume, et l'antre obstrué d'herbe verte,
Et qui semble une bouche avec terreur ouverte,
Les eaux, les prés, les monts, les refuges charmants,
Et les grands horizons pleins de rayonnements!

Maître! puisque voici la saison des pervenches,
Si tu veux, chaque nuit, en écartant les branches,
Sans éveiller d'échos à nos pas hasardeux,
Nous irons tous les trois, c'est-à-dire tous deux,
Dans ce vallon sauvage, et de la solitude,
Rêveurs, nous surprendrons la secrète attitude.
Dans la brune clairière où l'arbre au tronc noueux
Prend le soir un profil humain et monstrueux,
Nous laisserons fumer, à côté d'un cytise,
Quelque feu qui s'éteint sans pâtre qui l'attise,
Et, l'oreille tendue à leurs vagues chansons,
Dans l'ombre, au clair de lune, à travers les buissons,
Avides, nous pourrons voir à la dérobée
Les satyres dansants qu'imite Alphésibée.

23 mars 18...

VIII

Venez que je vous parle, ô jeune enchanteresse!

Venez que je vous parle, ô jeune enchanteresse!
Dante vous eût faite ange et Virgile déesse.
Vous avez le front haut, le pied vif et charmant,
Une bouche qu’entrouvre un bel air d’enjouement,
Et vous pourriez porter, fière entre les plus fières,
La cuirasse d’azur des antiques guerrières.

Tout essaim de beautés, gynécée ou sérail,
Madame, admirerait vos lèvres de corail.
Cellini sourirait à votre grâce pure,
Et, dans un vase grec sculptant votre figure,
Il vous ferait sortir d’un beau calice d’or,
D’un lys qui devient femme en restant lys encor,
Ou d’un de ces lotus qui lui doivent la vie,
Etranges fleurs de l’art que la nature envie!

Venez que je vous parle, ô belle aux yeux divins,
Pour la première fois quand près de vous je vins,
Ce fut un jour doré. Ce souvenir, madame,
A-t-il comme en mon coeur son rayon dans votre âme?
Vous souriez. Mettez votre main dans ma main,
Venez. Le printemps rit, l’ombre est sur le chemin,
L’air est tiède, et là-bas, dans les forêts prochaines,
La mousse épaisse et verte abonde au pied des chênes.

21 avril 1837

IX

Pendant que la fenêtre était ouverte

Poète, ta fenêtre était ouverte au vent,
Quand celle à qui tout bas ton coeur parle souvent
Sur ton fauteuil posait sa tête:
— “Oh! disait-elle, ami, ne vous y fiez pas!
Parce que maintenant, attachée à vos pas,
Ma vie à votre ombre s’arrête;

Parce que mon regard est fixé sur vos yeux;
Parce que je n’ai plus de sourire joyeux
Que pour votre grave sourire;
Parce que, de l’amour me faisant un linceul,
Je vous offre mon coeur comme un livre où vous seul
Avez encor le droit d’écrire;

Il n’est pas dit qu’enfin je n’aurai pas un jour
La curiosité de troubler votre amour
Et d’alarmer votre oeil sévère,
Et l’inquiet caprice et le désir moqueur
De renverser soudain la paix de votre coeur
Comme un enfant renverse un verre!

Hommes, vous voulez tous qu’une femme ait longtemps
Des fiertés, des hauteurs, puis vous êtes contents,
Dans votre orgueil que rien ne brise,
Quand, aux feux de l’amour qui rayonne sur nous,
Pareille à ces fruits verts que le soleil fait doux,
La hautaine devient soumise!

Aimez-moi d’être ainsi! - Ces hommes, ô mon roi,
Que vous voyez passer si froids autour de moi,
Empressés près des autres femmes,
Je n’y veux pas songer, car le repos vous plaît;

Mais mon oeil endormi ferait, s’il le voulait,
De tous ces fronts jaillir des flammes!”

Elle parlait, charmante et fière et tendre encor,
Laissant sur le dossier de velours à clous d’or
Déborder sa manche traînante;
Et toi tu croyais voir à ce beau front si doux
Sourire ton vieux livre ouvert sur tes genoux,
Ton Iliade rayonnante!

Beau livre que souvent vous lisez tous les deux!
Elle aime comme toi ces combats hasardeux
Où la guerre agite ses ailes.
Femme, elle ne hait pas, en t’y voyant rêver,
Le poète qui chante Hélène, et fait lever
Les plus vieux devant les plus belles.

Elle vient là, du haut de ses jeunes amours,
Regarder quelquefois dans le flot des vieux jours
Quelle ombre y fait cette chimère;
Car, ainsi que d’un mont tombe de vivent eaux,
Le passé murmurant sort et coule à ruisseaux
De ton flanc, ô géant Homère!

26 février 1837

X

A Albert Dürer

Dans les vieilles forêts où la sève à grands flots
Court du fût noir de l’aulne au tronc blanc des bouleaux,
Bien des fois, n’est ce pas? à travers la clairière,
Pâle, effaré, n’osant regarder en arrière,
Tu t’es hâté, tremblant et d’un pas convulsif,
O mon maître Albert Dure, ô vieux peintre pensif!

On devine, devant tes tableaux qu’on vénère,
que dans les noirs taillis ton oeil visionnaire
Voyait distinctement, par l’ombre recouverts,
Le faune aux doigts palmés, le sylvain aux yeux verts,
Pan, qui revêt de fleurs l’antre où tu te recueilles,
Et l’antique dryade aux mains pleines de feuilles.

Une forêt pour toi, c’est un monde hideux.
Le songe et le réel s’y mêlent tous les deux.
Là se penchent rêveurs les vieux pins, les grands ormes
Dont les rameaux tordus font cent coudes difformes,
Et dans ce groupe sombre agité par le vent
Rien n’est tout à fait mort ni tout à fait vivant.
Le cresson boit; l’eau court; les frênes sur les pentes,
Sous la broussaille horrible et les ronces grimpantes,
Contractent lentement leurs pieds noueux et noirs;
Les fleurs au cou de cygne ont les lacs pour miroirs:
Et, sur vous qui passez et l’avez réveillée,
Mainte chimère étrange à la gorge écaillée,
D’un arbre entre ses doigts serrant les larges noeuds,
Du fond d’un antre obscur fixe un oeil lumineux.
O végétation! esprit! matière! force!
Couverte de peau rude ou de vivante écorce!

Aux bois, ainsi que toi, je n’ai jamais erré,

Maître, sans qu’en mon coeur l’horreur ait pénétré,
Sans voir tressaillir l’herbe, et, par le vent bercées,
Pendre à tous les rameaux de confuses pensées.
Dieu seul, ce grand témoin des faits mystérieux,
Dieu seul le sait, souvent, en de sauvages lieux,
J’ai senti, moi qu’échauffe une secrète flamme,
Comme moi palpiter et vivre avec une âme,
Et rire, et se parler dans l’ombre à demi-voix,
Les chênes monstrueux qui remplissent les bois.

20 avril 1837

XI

Puisqu’ici-bas toute âme

Puisqu’ici-bas toute âme
Donne à quelqu’un
Sa musique, sa flamme,
Ou son parfum;

Puisqu’ici toute chose
Donne toujours
Son épine ou sa rose
A ses amours;

Puisqu’avril donne aux chênes
Un bruit charmant;
Que la nuit donne aux peines
L’oubli dormant;

Puisque l’air à la branche
Donne l’oiseau;
Que l’aube à la pervenche
Donne un peu d’eau;

Puisque, lorsqu’elle arrive
S’y reposer,
L’onde amère à la rive
Donne un baiser;

Je te donne à cette heure,
Penché sur toi,
La chose la meilleure
Que j’ai en moi!

Reçois donc ma pensée,
Triste d’ailleurs,

Qui, comme une rosée,
T’arrive en pleurs!
Reçois mes voeux sans nombre,
O mes amours!
Reçois la flamme ou l’ombre
De tout mes jours!

Mes transports pleins d’ivresses,
Pur de soupçons,
Et toutes les caresses
De mes chansons!

Mon esprit qui sans voile
Vogue au hasard,
Et qui n’a pour étoile
Que ton regard!

Ma muse, que les heures
Bercent rêvant,
Qui, pleurant quand tu pleures,
Pleure souvent!

Reçois, mon bien céleste,
O ma beauté,
Mon coeur, dont rien ne reste,
L’amour ôté!

19 mai 1837

XII

A Ol.

O poète! je vais dans ton âme blessée
Remuer jusqu’au fond ta profonde pensée.

Tu ne l’avais pas vue encore, ce fut un soir,
A l’heure ou dans le ciel les astres se font voir,
Qu’elle apparut soudain à tes yeux, fraîche et belle,
Dans un lieu radieux qui rayonnait moins qu’elle.
Ses cheveux pétillaient de mille diamants;
Un orchestre tremblait à tous ses mouvements
Tandis qu’elle enivrait la foule haletante,
Blanche avec des yeux noirs, jeune, grande, éclatante.
Tout en elle était feu qui brille, ardeur qui rit.
La parole parfois tombait de son esprit
Comme un épi doré du sac de la glaneuse,
Où sortait de sa bouche en vapeur lumineuse.
Chacun se récriait, admirant tour à tour
Son front plein de pensées éclose avant l’amour,
Son sourire entrouvert comme une vive aurore,
Et son ardente épaule, et, plus ardente encore,
Comme les soupiraux d’un centre étincelant,
Ses yeux ou l’on voyait luire son coeur brûlant.
Elle allait et passait comme un oiseau de flamme,
Mettant sans le savoir le feu dans plus d’une âme,
Et dans les yeux fixés sur tous ses pas charmants
Jetant de toute part des éblouissements!

Toi, tu la contemplais n’osant approcher d’elle,
Car le baril de poudre a peur de l’étincelle.

26 mai 1837

XIII

Jeune homme, ce méchant fait une lâche guerre.

Jeune homme, ce méchant fait une lâche guerre.
Ton indignation ne l’épouvante guère.
Crois-moi donc, laisse en paix, jeune homme au noble
Ce Zoïle à l’oeil faux, ce malheureux moqueur. Coeur,
Ton mépris? mais c’est l’air qui respire. Ta haine?
La haine est son odeur, sa sueur, son haleine:
Il sait qu’il peut souiller sans peur les noms fameux,
Et que pour qu’on le touche il est trop venimeux.
Il ne craint rien; pareil au champignon difforme
Poussé dans une nuit au pied d’un chêne énorme,
Qui laisse les chevreaux autour de lui paissant
Essayer leur dent folle à l’arbuste innocent;
Sachant qu’il porte en lui des vengeances trop sûres,
Tout gonflé de poison il attend les morsures.

18 mai 1837

XIV

Avril - A Louis B.

Louis, voici le temps de respirer les roses,
Et d’ouvrir bruyamment les vitres longtemps closes;
Le temps d’admirer en rêvant
Tout ce que la nature a de beautés divines
Qui flottent sur les monts, les bois et les ravines,
Avec l’onde, l’ombre et le vent.

Louis voici le temps de reposer son âme
Dans ce calme sourire empreint de vague flamme
Qui rayonne au front du ciel pur;
De dilater son coeur ainsi qu’une eau qui fume,
Et d’en faire envoler la nuée et la brume
A travers le limpide azur!

O Dieu! que les amants sous les vertes feuillées
S’en aillent, par l’hiver pauvres ailes mouillées!
Qu’ils errent joyeux et vainqueurs!
Que le rossignol chante, oiseau dont la voix tendre
Contient de l’harmonie assez pour en répandre
Sur tout l’amour qui sort des coeurs!

Que, blé qui monte, enfant qui joue, eau qui murmure,
Fleur rose où le semeur rêve une pêche mûre,
Que tout semble rire ou prier!
Que le chevreau gourmand, furtif et plein de grâces,
De quelques arbre incliné mordant les feuilles basses,
Fasse accourir le chevrier!

Qu’on songe aux deuils passés en se disant: qu’était-ce?
Que rien sous le soleil ne garde de tristesse!
Qu’un nid chante sur les vieux troncs!
Nous, tandis que de joie au loin tout vibre et tremble,

Allons dans la forêt, et là, marchant ensemble,
Si vous voulez, nous songerons,
Nous songerons tous deux à cette belle fille
Qui dort là bas sous l’herbe où le bouton d’or brille,
Où l’oiseau cherche un grain de mil,
Et qui voulait avoir, et qui, triste chimère,
S’était fait cet hiver promettre par sa mère,
Une robe verte en avril.

Avril 1837

XV

La Vache

Devant la blanche ferme où parfois vers midi
Un vieillard vient s’asseoir sur le seuil attiédi,
Où cent poules gaîment mêlent leurs crêtes rouge,
Où, gardiens du sommeil, les dogues dans leurs bouges

Ecoutant les chansons du gardien du réveil,
Du beau coq vernissé qui reluit au soleil,
Une vache était là tout à l’heure arrêtée.
Superbe, énorme, rousse et de blanc tachetée,
Douce comme une biche avec ses jeunes faons,
Elle avait sous le ventre un beau groupe d’enfants,
D’enfants aux dents de marbre, aux cheveux en broussailles
Frais, et plus charbonnés que de vieilles murailles,
Qui, bruyants, tous ensemble, à grands cris appelant
D’autres qui, tout petits, se hâtaient en tremblant,
Dérobant sans pitié quelque laitière absente,
Sous leur bouche joyeuse et peut-être blessante
Et sous leurs doigts pressant le lait par mille trous,
Tiraient le pis fécond de la mère au poil roux.
Elle, bonne et puissante et de son trésor pleine,
Sous leurs mains par moments faisant frémir à peine
Son beau flanc plus ombré qu’un flanc de léopard,
Distraite, regardait vaguement quelque part.

Ainsi, Nature! abri de toute créature!
O mère universelle! indulgente Nature!
Ainsi, tous à la fois, mystiques et charnels,
Cherchant l’ombre et le lait sous tes flancs éternels,
Nous sommes là, savants, poètes, pêle-mêle,
Pendus de toutes parts à ta forte mamelle!
Et tandis qu’affamés, avec des cris vainqueurs,
A tes sources sans fin désaltérant nos coeurs,

Pour en faire plus tard notre sang et notre âme,
Nous aspirons à flots ta lumière et ta flamme,
Les feuillages, le sommets, les prés verts, le ciel bleu,
Toi, sans te déranger, tu rêves à ton Dieu!

XVI

Passé

C’était un grand château du temps de Louis treize.
Le couchant rougissait ce palais oublié.
Chaque fenêtre au loin, transformée en fournaise,
Avait perdu sa forme et n’était plus que braise.
Le toit disparaissait dans les rayons noyé.

Sous nos yeux s’étendait, gloire antique abattue,
Un de ces parcs dont l’herbe inonde le chemin,
Où dans un coin, de lierre à demi revêtue,
Sur un piédestal gris, l’hiver, morne statue,
Se chauffe avec un feu de marbre sous sa main.

O deuil! Le grand bassin, lac solitaire.
Un Neptune verdâtre y moisissait dans l’eau.
Les roseaux cachaient l’onde et l’eau rongeait la terre.
Et les arbres mêlaient leur vieux branchage austère,
D’où tombaient autrefois des rimes pour Boileau.

On voyait par moments errer dans la futaie
De beaux cerfs qui semblaient regretter les chasseur;
Et, pauvres marbres blancs qu’un vieux tronc d’arbre étaie
Seules, sous la charmille, hélas! changé en haie,
Soupirer Gabrielle et Vénus, ces deux soeurs!

Les manteaux relevés par la longue rapière,
Hélas! ne passaient plus dans ce jardin sans voix;
Les tritons avaient l’air de fermer la paupière.
Et, dans l’ombre, entr’ouvrant ses mâchoires de pierre,
Un vieux antre ennuyé bâillait au fond du bois.

Et je vous dis alors:- Ce château dans son ombre

A contenu l'amour, frais comme en votre coeur,
Et la gloire, et le rire, et les fêtes sans nombre,
Et toute cette joie aujourd'hui le rend sombre,
Comme un vaste noircit rouillé par sa liqueur.

Dans cet antre, où la mousse a recouvert la dalle,
Venait, les yeux baissés et le sein palpitant,
Ou la belle Caussade ou la jeune Candale,
Qui, d'un royal amant conquête féodale,
En entrant disait Sire, et Louis en sortant.

Alors comme aujourd'hui, pour Candale ou Caussade,
La nuée au ciel bleu mêlait son blond duvet,
Un doux rayon dorait le toit grave et maussade,
Les vitres flamboyaient sur toute la façade,
Le soleil souriait, la nature rêvait!

Alors comme aujourd'hui, deux coeurs unis, deux âmes,
Erraient sous ce feuillage où tant d'amour a lui;
Il nommait sa duchesse un ange entre les femmes,
Et l'oeil plein de rayons et l'oeil rempli de flammes
S'éblouissaient l'un l'autre, alors comme aujourd'hui!

Au loin dans le bois vague on entendait des rires.
C'étaient d'autres amants, dans leur bonheur plongés.
Par moments un silence arrêtait leurs délires.
Tendre il lui demandait: D'où vient que tu soupires?
Douce, elle répondait: D'où vient que vous songez?

Tous deux, l'ange et le roi, les mains entrelacées,
Ils marchaient, fiers, joyeux, foulant le vert gazon,
Ils mêlaient leurs regards, leur souffle, leurs pensées..-
O temps évanouis! ô splendeurs éclipsées!
O soleils descendus derrière l'horizon!

1 er avril 1835

XVII

Soirée en mer

Près du pêcheur qui ruisselle,
Quand tous deux, au jour baissant,
Nous errons dans la nacelle,
Laissant chanter l’homme frêle
Et gémir le flot puissant;

Sous l’abri que font les voiles
Lorsque nous nous asseyons,
Dans cette ombre où tu te voiles
Quand ton regard aux étoiles
Semble cueillir des rayons;

Quand tous deux nous croyons lire
Ce que la nature écrit,
Réponds, ô toi que j’admire,
D’où vient que mon coeur soupire?
D’où vient que ton front sourit?

Dis, d’où vient qu’à chaque lame
Comme une coupe de fiel,
La pensée emplit mon âme?
C’est que moi je vois la rame
Tandis que tu vois le ciel!

C’est que je vois les flots sombres,
Toi, les astres enchantés!
C’est que, perdu dans leurs nombres,
Hélas! je compte les ombres
Quand tu comptes les clartés!

Chacun, c’est la loi suprême,
Rame, hélas! jusqu’à la fin.

Pas d’homme, ô fatal problème!
Qui ne laboure ou ne sème
Sur quelque chose de vain!

L’homme est sur un flot qui gronde.
L’ouragan tord son manteau.
Il rame en la nuit profonde,
Et l’espoir s’en va dans l’onde
Par les fentes du bateau.

Sa voile que le vent troue
Se déchire à tout moment,
De sa route l’eau se joue,
Les obstacles sur sa proue
Ecument incessamment!

Hélas! hélas! tout travaille
Sous tes yeux, ô Jéhova!
De quelque côté qu’on aille,
Partout un flot qui tressaille,
Partout un homme qui va!

Où vas-tu? - Vers la nuit noire.
Où vas-tu? - Vers le grand jour.
Toi!- Je cherche s’il faut croire.
Et toi?- Je vais à la gloire.
Et toi?- Je vais à l’amour.

Vous allez tous à la tombe!
Vous allez à l’inconnu!
Aigle, vautour, ou colombe,
Vous allez où tout retombe
Et d’où rien n’est revenu!

Vous allez où vont encore
Ceux qui font le plus de bruit!
Où va la fleur qu’avril dore!

Vous allez où va l’aurore!
Vous allez où va la nuit!

A quoi bon toutes ces peines?
Pourquoi tant de soins jaloux?
Buvez l’onde des fontaines,
Secouez le gland des chênes,
Aimez, et rendormez- vous!

Lorsque ainsi que des abeilles
On a travaillé toujours;
Qu’on a rêvé des merveilles;
Lorsqu’on a sur bien des veilles
Amoncelé bien des jours;

Sur votre plus belle rose,
Sur votre lys le plus beau,
Savez-vous ce qui se pose?
C’est l’oubli pour toute chose,
Pour tout homme le tombeau!

Car le Seigneur nous retire
Les fruits à peine cueillis.
Il dit: Echoue! au navire.
Il dit à la flamme: Expire!
Il dit à la fleur: Pâlis!

Il dit au guerrier qui fonde:
— Je garde le dernier mot.
Monte, monte, ô roi du monde!
La chute la plus profonde
Pend au sommet le plus haut. -

Il a dit à la mortelle:
— Vite! éblouis ton amant.
Avant de mourir sois belle.
Sois un instant étincelle,

Puis cendre éternellement! -

Cet ordre auquel tu t’opposes
T’enveloppe et l’engloutit.
Mortel, plains-toi, si tu l’oses,
Au Dieu qui fit ces deux choses,
Le ciel grand, l’homme petit!

Chacun, qu’il doute ou qu’il nie,
Lutte en frayant son chemin;
Et l’éternelle harmonie
Pèse comme une ironie
Sur tout ce tumulte humain!

Tous ces faux biens qu’on envie
Passent comme un soir de mai.
Vers l’ombre, hélas! tout dévie.
Que reste-t-il de la vie,
Excepté d’avoir aimé!

Ainsi je courbe ma tête
Quand tu redresses ton front.
Ainsi, sur l’onde inquiète,
J’écoute, sombre poète,
Ce que les flots me diront.

Ainsi, pour qu’on me réponde,
J’interroge avec effroi;
Et dans ce gouffre où je sonde
La fange se mêle à l’onde...
Oh! ne fais pas comme moi!

Que sur la vague troublée
J’abaisse un sourcil hagard;
Mais toi, belle âme voilée,
Vers l’espérance étoilée
Lève un tranquille regard!

Tu fais bien. Vois les cieux luire.
Vois les astres s’y mirer.
Un instinct là-haut t’attire.
Tu regardes Dieu sourire;
Moi, je vois l’homme pleurer!

9 novembre 1836. Minuit et demi

XVIII

Dans Virgile parfois

Dans Virgile parfois, dieu tout près d'être un ange,
Le vers porte à sa cime une lueur étrange.
C'est que, rêvant déjà ce qu'à présent on sait,
Il chantait presque à l'heure où jésus vagissait.
C'est qu'à son issu même il est une des âmes
Que l'orient lointain teignait de vagues flammes.
C'est qu'il est un des coeur que, déjà sous les cieux,
Dorait le jour naissant du Christ Mystérieux!

Dieu voulait qu'avant tout, rayon du fils de l'homme,
L'aube de Bethléem blanchit le front de Rome.

Nuit du 21 au 22 mars 1837

XIX

A un riche

Jeune homme! je te plains; et cependant j'admire
Ton grand parc enchanté qui semble nous sourire,
Qui fait, vu de ton seuil, le tour de l'horizon,
Grave ou joyeux suivant le jour et la saison,
Coupé d'herbe et d'eau vive, et remplissant huit lieues
De ses vagues massifs et de ses ombres bleues.
J'admire ton domaine, et pourtant je te plains!
Car dans ces bois touffus de tant de grandeur pleins,
Où le printemps épanche un faste sans mesure,
Quelle plus misérable et plus pauvre masure
Qu'un homme usé, flétri, mort pour l'illusion,
Riche et sans volupté, jeune et sans passion,
Dont le coeur délabré, dans ses recoins livides,
N'a plus qu'un triste amas d'anciennes coupes vides,
Vases brisés qui n'ont rien gardé que l'ennui,
Et d'où l'amour, la joie et la candeur ont fui!

Oui, tu me fais pitié, toi qui crois faire envie!
Ce splendide séjour sur ton coeur, sur ta vie,
Jette une ombre ironique, et rit en écrasant
Ton front terne et chétif d'un cadre éblouissant.

Dis-moi, crois-tu, vraiment posséder ce royaume
D'ombre et de fleurs, où l'arbre arrondi comme un dôme,
L'étang, lame d'argent que le couchant fait d'or,
L'allée entrant au bois comme un noir corridor,
Et là, sur la forêt, ce mont qu'une tour garde,
Font un groupe si beau pour l'âme qui regarde!
Lieu sacré pour qui sait dans l'immense univers,
Dans les prés, dans les eaux et dans les vallons verts,
Retrouver les profils de la face éternelle
Dont le visage humain n'est qu'une ombre charnelle!

Que fais-tu donc ici? Jamais on ne te voit,
Quand le matin blanchit l’angle ardoisé du toit,
sortir, songer, cueillir la fleur, coupe irisée
Que la plante à l’oiseau tend pleine de rosée,
Et parfois t’arrêter, laissant pendre à ta main
Un livre interrompu, debout sur le chemin,
Quand le bruit du vent coupe en strophes incertaines
Cette longue chanson qui coule des fontaines.

Jamais tu n’as suivi de sommets en sommets
La ligne des coteaux qui fait rêve; jamais
Tu n’as joui de voir, sur l’eau qui reflète,
Quelque saule noueux tordu comme un athlète.
Jamais, sévère esprit au mystère attaché,
Tu n’as questionné le vieux orme penché
Qui regarde à ses pieds toute la pleine vivre
Comme un sage qui rêve attentif à son livre.

L’été, lorsque le jour est par midi frappé,
Lorsque la lassitude a tout enveloppé,
A l’heure où l’andalouse et l’oiseau font la sieste,
Jamais le faon peureux, tapi dans l’antre agreste,
Ne te vois, à pas lents, loin de l’homme importun,
Grave, et comme ayant peur de réveiller quelqu’un,
Errer dans les forêts ténébreuses et douces
Où le silence dort sur le velours des mousses.

Que te fais tout cela? Les nuages des cieux,
La verdure et l’azur sont l’ennui de tes yeux.
Tu n’est pas de ces fous qui vont, et qui s’en vantent,
Tendant partout l’oreille aux voix qui partout chantent,
Rendant au Seigneur d’avoir fait le printemps,
Qui ramasse un nid, ou contemple longtemps
Quelque noir champignon, monstre étrange de l’herbe.
Toi, comme un sac d’argent, tu vois passer la gerbe.
Ta futaie, en avril, sous ses bras plus nombreux

A l’air de réclamer bien des pas amoureux,
Bien des coeurs soupirants, bien des têtes pensives;

Toi qui jouis aussi sous ses branches massives,
Tu songes, calculant le taillis qui s’accroît,
Que Paris, ce vieillard qui, l’hiver, a si froid,
Attend, sous ses vieux quais percés de rampes neuves,
Ces longs serpents de bois qui descendent les fleuves!
Ton regard voit, tandis que ton oeil flotte au loin,
Les blés d’or en farine et la prairie en foin;
Pour toi le laboureur est un rustre qu’on paie;
Pour toi toute fumée ondulant, noire ou gaie,
Sur le clair paysage, est un foyer impur
Où l’on cuit quelque viande à l’angle d’un vieux mur.
Quand le soir tend le ciel de ses moires ardentes
Au dos d’un fort cheval assis, jambes pendantes,
Quand les bouviers hâlés, de leur bras vigoureux
Pique tes boeufs géants qui par le chemin creux
Se hâtent pêle-mêle et s’en vont à la crèche,
Toi, devant ce tableau tu rêves à la brèche
Qu’il faudra réparer, en vendant tes silos,
Dans ta rente qui tremble aux pas de don Carlos!

Au crépuscule, après un long jour monotone,
Tu t’enferme chez toi. Les tièdes nuits d’automne
Versent leur chaste haleine aux coteaux veloutés.
Tu n’en sais rien. D’ailleurs, qu’importe! A tes côtés,
Belles, leur bruns cheveux appliqués sur les tempes,
Fronts roses empourprés par le reflet des lampes,
Des femmes aux yeux purs sont assises, formant
Un cercle frais qui borde et cause doucement;
Toutes, dans leurs discours où rien n’ose apparaître,
Cachant leurs voeux, leur âmes et leur coeur que peut-être
Embaume un vague amour, fleur qu’on ne cueille pas,
Parfum qu’on sentirait en se baissant tout bas.
Tu n’en sais rien. Tu fais, parmi ces élégies,
Tomber ton froid sourire, où, sous quatre bougies,

D’autres hommes et toi, dans un coin attablés
Autour d’un tapis vert, bruyants, vous querellez
Les caprices du whist, du brelan ou de l’hombre.
La fenêtre est pourtant pleine de lune et d’ombre!

O risible insensé! vraiment, je te le dis,
Cette terre, ces prés, ces vallons arrondis,
Nids de feuilles et d’herbe où jasent les villages,
Ces blés où les moineaux ont leurs joyeux pillages,
Ces champs qui, l’hiver même, ont d’austères appas,
Ne t’appartiennent point: tu ne les comprends pas.

Vois-tu, tous les passants, les enfants, les poètes,
Sur qui ton bois répand ses ombres inquiètes,
Le pauvre jeune peintre épris de ciel et d’air,
L’amant plein d’un seul nom, le sage au coeur amer,
Qui viennent rafraîchir dans cette solitude,
Hélas! l’un son amour et l’autre son étude,
Tous ceux qui, savourant la beauté de ce lieu,
Aiment, en quittant l’homme, à s’approcher de Dieu,
Et qui, laissant ici le bruit vague et morose
Des troubles de leur âme, y prennent quelque chose
De l’immense repos de la création,
Tous ces hommes, sans or et sans ambition,
Et dont le pied poudreux ou tout mouillé par l’herbe
Te fait rire emporté par ton landau superbe,
Sont dans ce parc touffu, que tu crois sous ta loi,
Plus riches, plus chez eux, plus les maîtres que toi,
Quoique de leur forêt que ta main grille et mure
Tu puisses couper l’ombre et vendre le murmure!

Pour eux rien n’est stérile en ces asiles frais.
Pour qui les sait cueillir tout a des dons secrets.
De partout sort un flot de sagesse abondante.
L’esprit qu’a déserté la passion grondante,
Médite à l’arbre mort, aux débris du vieux pont.
Tout objet dont le bois se compose répond

A quelque objet pareil dans la forêt de l’âme.
Un feu de pâtre éteint parle à l’amour en flamme.
Tout donne des conseils au penseur, jeune ou vieux.
On se pique aux chardons ainsi qu’aux envieux;
La feuille invite à croître; et l’onde, en coulant vite,
Avertit qu’on se hâte et que l’heure nous quitte.
Pour eux rien n’est muet, rien n’est froid, rien n’est mort.
Un peu de plume en sang leur éveille un remord;
Les sources sont des pleurs; la fleur qui boit aux fleuves,
Leur dit: Souvenez-vous, ô pauvres âmes veuves!

Pour eux l’antre profond cache un songe étoilé;
Et la nuit, sous l’azur d’un beau ciel constellé,
L’arbre sur ses rameaux, comme à travers ses branches,
Leur montre l’astre d’or et les colombes blanches,
Choses douces aux coeurs par le malheur ployés,
Car l’oiseau dit: Aimez! et l’étoile: Croyez!

Voilà ce que chez toi verse aux âmes souffrantes
La chaste obscurité des branches murmurantes!
Mais toi, qu’en fais tu? dis. - Tous les ans, en flots d’or,
Ce murmure, cette ombre, ineffable trésor,
Ces bruits de vent qui joue et d’arbre qui tressaille,
Vont s’enfouir au fond de ton coffre qui bâille;
Et tu changes ces bois où l’amour s’enivra,
Toute cette nature, en loge à l’opéra!

Encor si la musique arrivait à ton âme!
Mais entre l’art et toi l’or met son mur infâme.
L’esprit qui comprend l’art comprend le reste aussi.
Tu vas donc dormir là! sans te douter qu’ainsi
Que tous ces verts trésors que dévore ta bourse,
Gluck est une forêt et Mozart une source.

Tu dors; et quand parfois la mode, en souriant,
Te dit: Admire, riche! alors, joyeux, criant,
Tu surgis, demandant comment l’auteur se nomme,

Pourvu que toutefois la muse soit un homme!
Car tu te roidiras dans ton étrange orgueil
Si l'on t'apporte, un soir, quelque musique en deuil,
Urne que la pensée a chauffée à sa flamme,
Beau vase où s'est versé tout le coeur d'une femme.

O seigneur malvenu de ce superbe lieu!
Caillou vil incrusté dans ces rubis en feu!
Maître pour qui ces champs sont pleins de sourdes haines!
Gui parasite enflé de la sève des chênes!
Pauvre riche! - Vis donc, puisque cela pour toi
C'est vivre. Vis sans coeur, sans pensée et sans foi.
Vis pour l'or, chose vile, et l'orgueil, chose vaine.
Végète, toi qui n'as que du sang dans la veine,

Toi qui ne sens pas Dieu frémir dans le roseau,
Regarder dans l'aurore et chanter dans l'oiseau!

Car, - et bien que tu sois celui qui rit aux belles
Et, le soir, se récrie aux romances nouvelles, -
Dans les coteaux penchants où fument les hameaux,
Près des lacs, près des fleurs, sous les larges rameaux,
Dans tes propres jardins, tu vas aussi stupide,
Aussi peu clairvoyant dans ton instinct cupide,
Aussi sourd à la vie à l'harmonie, aux voix,
Qu'un loup sauvage errant au milieu des grands bois!

22 mai 1837

XX

Regardez: les enfants se sont assis en rond.

Regardez: les enfants se sont assis en rond.
Leur mère est à coté, leur mère au jeune front
Qu’on prend pour une soeur aînée;
Inquiète, au milieu de leurs jeux ingénus,
De sentir s’agiter leurs chiffres inconnus
Dans l’urne de la destinée.

Près d’elle naît leur rire et finissent leurs pleurs,
Et son coeur est si pur et si pareil aux leurs.
Et sa lumière est si choisie,
Qu’en passant à travers les rayons de ses jours,
La vie aux mille soins, laborieux et lourds,
Se transfigure en poésie!

Toujours elle les suit, veillant et regardant,
Soit que janvier rassemble au coin de l’âtre ardent
Leur joie aux plaisirs occupée;
Soit qu’un doux vent de mai, qui ride le ruisseau,
Remue au-dessus d’eux les feuilles, vert monceau
D’où tombe une ombre découpée.
Parfois, lorsque, passant près d’eux, un indigent
Contemple avec envie un beau hochet d’argent
Que sa faim dévorante admire,
La mère est là; pour faire, au nom du Dieu vivant,
Du hochet une aumône, un ange de l’enfant,
Il ne lui faut qu’un doux sourire!

Et moi qui, mère, enfants, les vois tous sous mes yeux,
Tandis qu’auprès de moi les petits sont joyeux
Comme des oiseaux sur les grèves,
Mon coeur gronde et bouillonne, et je sens lentement,
Couvercle soulevé par un flot écumant,

S’entr’ouvrir mon front plein de rêves.

12 juin 1837

XXI

Dans ce jardin antique où les grandes allées

Dans ce jardin antique où les grandes allées
Passent sous les tilleuls si chastes, si voilées
Que toute fleur qui s'ouvre y semble un encensoir,
Où, marquant tous ses pas de l'aube jusqu'au soir,
L'heure met tour à tour dans les vases de marbre
Les rayons du soleil et les ombres de l'arbre,
Anges, vous le savez, oh! comme avec amour,
Rêveur, je regardais dans la clarté du jour
Jouer l'oiseau qui vole et la branche qui plie,
Et de quels doux pensers mon âme était remplie,
Tandis que l'humble enfant dont je baise le front,
Avec son pas joyeux pressant mon pas moins prompt,
Marchait en m'entraînant vers la grotte où le lierre
Met une barbe verte au vieux fleuve de pierre!

20 février 1837

XXII

A des oiseaux envolés

Enfants! - Oh! revenez! tout à l’heure, imprudent,
je vous ai de ma chambre exilés en grondant,
Rauque et tout hérissé de paroles morose.
Et qu’aviez-vous donc fait, bandits aux lèvres roses?
Quel crime? Quel exploit? Quel forfait insensé?
Quel vase du japon en mille éclats brisé?
Quel vieux portrait crevé? Quel beau missel gothique
Enrichi par vos mains d’un dessin fantastique?
Non, rien de tout cela. Vous aviez seulement,
Ce matin, restés seuls dans ma chambre un moment,
Pris, parmi ces papiers que mon esprit colore,
Quelques vers, groupe informe, embryons près d’éclore,
Puis vous les aviez mis, prompts à vous accorder,
Dans le feu, pour jouer, pour voir, pour regarder
Dans une cendre noire errer de nocturnes nacelles,
Ou comme, de fenêtre en fenêtre, on peut voir
Des lumières courir dans les maisons le soir.

Voilà tout. Vous jouiez et vous croyiez bien faire.

Belle perte, en effet! beau sujet de colère!
Une strophe, mal née au doux bruit de vos jeux,
Qui remuait les mots d’un vol trop orageux!
Une ode qui chargeait d’une rime gonflée
Sa stance paresseuse en marchant essoufflée!
De lourds alexandrins l’un sur l’autre enjambant
Comme des écoliers qui sortent de leur banc!
Un autre eût dit: - Merci! Vous ôtez une proie
Au feuilleton méchant qui bondissait de joie
Et d’avance poussait des rires infernaux
Dans l’antre qu’il se creuse au bas des grands journaux
Moi, je vous ai grondés. Tort grave et ridicule!

Nains charmants que n’eût pas voulu fâcher Hercule,
Moi, je vous ai fait peur. J’ai, rêveur triste et dur,
Reculé brusquement ma chaise jusqu’au mur,
Et, vous jetant ces noms dont l’envieux vous nomme,
J’ai dit: - Allez-vous-en! laissez-moi seul! - Pauvre homme!
Seul! le beau résultat! le beau triomphe! seul!
Comme on oublie un mort roulé dans son linceul,
Vous m’avez laissé là, l’oeil fixé sur ma porte,
Hautain, grave et puni. - Mais vous, que vous importe!
Vous avez retrouvé dehors la liberté,
Le grand air, le beau parc, le gazon souhaité,
L’eau courante où l’on jette une herbe à l’aventure,
Le ciel bleu, le printemps, la sereine nature,
Ce livre des oiseaux et des bohémiens,
Ce poème de Dieu qui vaut mieux que les miens,
Où l’enfant peut cueillir la fleur, strophe vivante,
Sans qu’une grosse voix tout à coup l’épouvante!
Moi, je suis resté seul, toute joie ayant fui,
Seul avec ce pédant qu’on appelle l’ennui.
Car, depuis le matin assis dans l’antichambre,
Ce docteur, né dans Londre, un dimanche, en décembre,
Qui ne vous aime pas, ô mes pauvres petits,
Attendait pour entrer que vous fussiez sortis.
Dans l’angle où vous jouiez il est là qui soupire,
Et je le vois bâiller, moi qui vous voyais rire!

Que faire? lire un livre? oh non! - Dicter des vers?
A quoi bon? - Emaux bleus ou blancs, céladons verts,
Sphère qui fait tourner tout le ciel sur son axe,
Les beaux insectes peints sur mes tasses de Saxe,
Tout m’ennuie, et je pense à vous. En vérité,
Vous partis, j’ai perdu le soleil, la gaîté,
Le bruit joyeux qui fait qu’on rêve, le délire
De voir le tout petit s’aider du doigt pour lire,
Les fronts pleins de candeur qui disent toujours oui,
L’éclat de rire franc, sincère, épanoui,
Qui met subitement des perles sur les lèvres,

Les beaux grands yeux naïfs admirant mon vieux Sèvres,
La curiosité qui cherche à tour savoir,
Et les coudes qu’on pousse en disant: Viens donc voir!

Oh! certes, les esprits, les sylphes et les fées
Que le vent dans ma chambre apporte par bouffées,
Les gnomes accroupis là-haut, près du plafond,
Dans les angles obscurs que mes vieux livres font,
Les lutins familiers, nains à la longue échine,
Qui parlent dans les coins à mes vases de Chine.
Tout l’invisible essaim de ces démons joyeux
A dû rire aux éclats, quand là, devant leurs yeux,
Ils vous ont vus saisir dans la boîte aux ébauches
Ces hexamètres nus, boiteux, difformes, gauches,
Les traîner au grand jour, pauvres hiboux fâchés,
Et puis, battant des mains, autour du feu penchés,
De tout ces corps hideux soudain tirant une âme,
Avec ces vers si laids faire une belle flamme!

Espiègles radieux que j’ai fait envoler,
Oh! revenez ici chanter, danser, parler,
Tantôt, groupe folâtre, ouvrir un gros volume,
Tantôt courir, pousser mon bras qui tient ma plume,
Et faire dans le vers que je viens retoucher
Saillir soudain un angle aigu comme un clocher
Qui perce tout à coup un horizon de plaines.
Mon âme se réchauffe à vos douces haleines.
Revenez près de moi, souriant de plaisir,
Bruire et gazouiller, et sans peur obscurcir
Le vieux livre où je lis de vos ombres penchées,
Folles têtes d’enfants! gaîtés effarouchées!

J’en conviens, j’avais tort, et vous aviez raison.
Mais qui n’a quelquefois grondé hors de saison?
Il faut être indulgent. Nous avons nos misères.
Les petits pour les grands ont tort d’être sévères.
Enfants! chaque matin, votre âme avec amour

S’ouvre à la joie ainsi que la fenêtre au jour.
Beau miracle, vraiment, que l’enfant, gai sans cesse,
Ayant tout le bonheur, ait toute la sagesse!
Le destin vous caresse en vos commencements.
Vous n’avez qu’à jouer et vous êtes charmants.
Mais nous, nous qui pensons, nous qui vivons, nous somme
Hargneux, tristes, mauvais, ô mes chers petits hommes!

On a ses jours d’humeur, de déraison, d’ennui.
Il pleuvait ce matin. Il fait froid aujourd’hui.
Un nuage mal fait dans le ciel tout à l’heure
A passé. Que nous veut cette cloche qui pleure?
Puis on a dans le coeur quelque remords. Voilà
Ce qui nous rend méchants. Vous saurez tout cela,
Quand l’âge à votre tour ternira vos visages,
Quand vous serez plus grands, c’est-à-dire moins sages.

J’ai donc eu tort. C’est dit. Mais c’est assez punir,
Mais il faut pardonner, mais il faut revenir.
voyons, faisons la paix, je vous prie à mains jointes.
Tenez, crayons, papiers, mon vieux compas sans pointes,
Mes laques et mes grès, qu’une vitre défend,
Tous ces hochets de l’homme enviés par l’enfant,
Mes gros chinois ventrus faits comme des concombres,
Mon vieux tableau trouvé sous d’antiques décombres,
Je vous livrerai tout, vous toucherez à tout!
Vous pourrez sur ma table être assis ou debout,
Et chanter, et traîner, sans que je me récrie,
Mon grand fauteuil de chêne et de tapisserie,
Et sur mon banc sculpté jeter tous à la fois
Vos jouets anguleux qui déchirent le bois!
Je vous laisserai même, et gaîment, et sans crainte,
O prodige! en vos mains tenir ma bible peinte,
Que vous n’avez touchée encor qu’avec terreur,
Où l’on voit Dieu le père en habit d’empereur!

Et puis, brûlez les vers dont ma table est semée,

Si vous tenez à voir ce qu’ils font de fumée!
Brûlez ou déchirez! - Je serais moins clément
Si c’était chez Méry, le poète charmant,
Que Marseille la grecque, heureuse et noble ville,
Blonde fille d’Homère, a fait fils de Virgile.
Je vous dirais: - “Enfants, ne touchez que des yeux
A ces vers qui demain s’envoleront aux cieux.
Ces papiers, c’est le nid, retraite caressée,
Où du poète ailé rampe encor la pensée.
Oh! n’en approchez pas! car les vers nouveau-nés,
Au manuscrit natal encore emprisonnés,
Souffrent entre vos mains innocemment cruelles.
Vous leur blessez le pied, vous leur froissez les ailes;
Et, sans vous en douter, vous leur faites ces maux
Que les petits enfants font aux petits oiseaux.” -

Mais qu’importe les miens! - Toute ma poésie,
C’est vous, et mon esprit suit votre fantaisie.
Vous êtes les reflets et les rayonnements
Dont j’éclaire mon vers si sombre par moments.
Enfants, vous dont la vie est faite d’espérance,
Enfants, vous dont la joie est faite d’ignorance,
Vous n’avez pas souffert et vous ne savez pas,
Quand la pensée en nous a marché pas à pas,
Sur le poète morne et fatigué d’écrire
Quelle douce chaleur répand votre sourire!
Combien il a besoin, quand sa tête se rompt,
De la sérénité qui luit sur votre front;
Et quel enchantement l’enivre et le fascine,
Quand le charmant hasard de quelque cour voisine,
Où vous vous ébattez sous un arbre penchant,
Mêle vos joyeux cris à son douloureux chant!

Revenez donc, hélas! revenez dans mon ombre,
Si vous ne voulez pas que je sois triste et sombre,
Pareil, dans l’abandon où vous m’avez laissé,
Au pêcheur d’Etretat, d’un long hiver lassé,

Qui médite appuyé sur son coude, et s’ennuie
De voir à sa fenêtre un ciel rayé de pluie.

23 avril 1837

XXIII

A quoi je songe?

A quoi je songe? - Hélas! loin du toit où vous êtes,
Enfants, je songe à vous! à vous, mes jeunes têtes,
Espoir de mon été déjà penchant et mûr,
Rameaux dont, tous les ans, l'ombre croît sur mon mur,
Douces âmes à peine au jour épanouies,
Des rayons de votre aube encor tout éblouies!
Je songe aux deux petits qui pleurent en riant,
Et qui font gazouiller sur le seuil verdoyant,
Comme deux jeunes fleures qui se heurtent entre elles,
Leurs jeux charmants mêlés de charmantes querelles!
Et puis, père inquiet, je rêve aux deux aînés
Qui s'avancent déjà de plus de flot baignés,
Laissant pencher parfois leur tête encor naïve,
L'un déjà curieux, l'autre déjà pensive!

Seul et triste au milieu des chants des matelots,
Le soir, sous la falaise, à cette heure où les flots,
S'ouvrant et se fermant comme autant de narines,
Mêlent au vent des cieux mille haleines marines,
Où l'on entend dans l'air d'ineffables échos
Qui viennent de la terre ou qui viennent des eaux,
Ainsi je songe! - à vous, enfants, maisons, famille,
A la table qui rit, au foyer qui pétille,
A tous les soins pieux que répandent sur vous
Votre mère si tendre et votre aïeul si doux!
Et tandis qu'à mes pieds s'étend, couvert de voiles,
Le limpide océan, ce miroir des étoiles,
Tandis que les nochers laissent errer leurs yeux
De l'infini des mers à l'infini des cieux,
Moi, rêvant à vous seuls, je contemple et je sonde
L'amour que j'ai pour vous dans mon âme profonde,
Amour doux et puissant qui toujours m'est resté.

Et cette grande mer est petite à côté!

15 juillet 1837. - Fécamp. - Ecrit au bord de la mer.

XXIV

Une nuit qu’on entendait la mer sans la voir

Quels sont ces bruits sourds?
Ecoutez vers l’onde
Cette voix profonde
Qui pleure toujours
Et qui toujours gronde,
    Quoiqu’un son plus clair
    Parfois l’interrompe... -
    Le vent de la mer
    Souffle dans sa trompe.

    Comme il pleut ce soir!
    N’est-ce pas, mon hôte?
    Là-bas, à la côte,
    Le ciel est bien noir,
    La mer est bien haute!
    On dirait l’hiver;
    Parfois on s’y trompe... -
    Le vent de la mer
    Souffle dans sa trompe.

    Oh! marins perdus!
    Au loin, dans cette ombre
    Sur la nef qui sombre,
    Que de bras tendus
    Vers la terre sombre!
    Pas d’ancre de fer
    Que le flot ne rompe. -
    Le vent de la mer
    Souffle dans sa trompe.

    Nochers imprudents!
    Le vent dans la voile

Déchire la toile
Comme avec les dents!
Là-haut pas d’étoile!
L’un lutte avec l’air,
L’autre est à la pompe. -
Le vent de la mer
Souffle dans sa trompe.

C’est toi, c’est ton feu
Que le nocher rêve,
Quand le flot s’élève,
Chandelier que Dieu
Pose sur la grève,
Phare au rouge éclair
Que la brume estompe!
Le vent de la mer
Souffle dans sa trompe

17 juillet 1836

XXV

Tentanda via est

Ne vous effrayez pas, douce mère inquiète
Dont la bonté partout dans la maison s'émiette,
De le voir si petit, si grave et si pensif.
Comme un pauvre oiseau blanc qui, seul sur un récif,
Voit l'océan vers lui monter du fond de l'ombre,
Il regarde déjà la vie immense et sombre.
Il rêve de le voir s'avancer pas à pas.
O mère au coeur divin, ne vous effrayez pas,
Vous en qui, - tant votre âme est un charmant mélange! -
L'ange voit un enfant et l'enfant voit un ange.

Allons, mère, sans trouble et d'un air triomphant
Baisez-moi le grand front de ce petit enfant.
Ce n'est pas un savant, ce n'est pas un prodige,
C'est un songeur; tant mieux. Soyez fière, vous dis-je!
La méditation du génie est la soeur,
Mère, et l'enfant songeur fait un homme penseur,
Et la pensée est tout, et la pensée ardente
Donne à Milton le ciel, donne l'enfer à Dante!
Un jour il sera grand. L'avenir glorieux
Attend, n'en doutez pas, l'enfant mystérieux
Qui veut savoir comment chaque chose se nomme,
Et questionne tout, un mur autant qu'un homme.
Qui sait si, ramassant à terre sans effort
Le ciseau colossal de Michel-Ange mort,
Il ne doit pas, livrant au granit des batailles,
Faire au marbre étonné de superbes entailles?
Ou, comme Bonaparte ou bien François premier,
Prendre, joueur d'échecs, l'Europe pour damier?
Qui sait s'il n'ira point, voguant à toute voile,
Ajoutant à son oeil, que l'ombre humaine voile,
L'oeil du long télescope au regard effrayant,

Ou l’oeil de la pensée encor plus clairvoyant,
Saisir, dans l’azur vaste ou dans la mer profonde,
Un astre comme Herschell, comme Colomb un monde?

Qui sait? Laissez grandir ce petit sérieux.
Il ne voit même pas nos regards curieux.
Peut-être que déjà ce pauvre enfant fragile
Rêve, comme rêvait l’enfant qui fut Virgile,
Au combat que poursuit le poète éclatant;
Et qu’il veut, aussi lui, tenter, vaincre, et sortant
Par un chemin nouveau de la sphère où nous sommes,
Voltiger, nom ailé, sur les bouches des hommes.

9 juin 1837

XXVI

Jeune fille, l’amour, c’est d’abord un miroir

Jeune fille, l’amour, c’est d’abord un miroir
Où la femme coquette et belle aime à se voir,
Et, gaie ou rêveuse, se penche;
Puis, comme la vertu, quand il a votre coeur,
Il en chasse le mal et le vice moqueur,
Et vous fait l’âme pure et blanche;

Puis on descend un peu, le pied vous glisse... - Alors
C’est un abîme! en vain la main s’attache aux bords,
On s’en va dans l’eau qui tournoie! -
L’amour est charmant, pur, et mortel. N’y crois pas!
Tel l’enfant, par un fleuve attiré pas à pas,
S’y mire, s’y lave et s’y noie.

25 février 1837

XXVII

Après une Lecture de Dante

Quand le poète peint l’enfer, il peint sa vie:
Sa vie, ombre qui fuit de spectres poursuivie;
Forêt mystérieuse où ses pas effrayés
S’égarent à tâtons hors des chemins frayés;
Noir voyage obstrué de rencontres difformes;
Spirale aux bords douteux, aux profondeurs énormes,
Dont les cercles hideux vont toujours plus avant
Dans une ombre où se meut l’enfer vague et vivant!
Cette rampe se perd dans la bruime indécise;

Au bas de chaque marche une plainte est assise,
Et l’on y voit passer avec un faible bruit
Des grincements de dents blancs dans la sombre nuit.
Là sont les visions, les rêves, les chimères;
Les yeux que la douleur change en sources amères,
L’amour, couple enlacé, triste, et toujours brûlant,
Qui dans un tourbillon passe une plaie au flanc;
Dans un coin la vengeance et la faim, soeurs impies,
Sur un crâne rongé côte à côte accroupies;
Puis la pâle misère au sourire appauvri;
L’ambition, l’orgueil, de soi-même nourri,
Et la luxure immonde, et l’avarice infâme,
Tous les manteaux de plomb dont peut se charger l’âme!
Plus loin, la lâcheté, la peur, la trahison
Offrant des clefs à vendre et goûtant du poison;
Et puis, plus bas encore, et tout au fond du gouffre,
Le masque grimaçant de la Haine qui souffre!

Oui, c’est bien là la vie, ô poète inspiré,
Et son chemin brumeux d’obstacles encombré.
Mais, pour que rien n’y manque, en cette route étroite
Vous nous montrez toujours debout à votre droite

Le génie au front calme, aux yeux pleins de rayons,
Le Virgile serein qui dit: Continuons!

6 août 1836

XXVIII

Pensar, Dudar

A Mlle Louise B.

Je vous l’ai déjà dit, notre incurable plaie,
Notre nuage noir qu’aucun vent ne balaie,
Notre plus lourd fardeau, notre pire douleur,
Ce qui met sur nos fronts la ride et la pâleur,
Ce qui fait flamboyer l’enfer sur nos murailles,
C’est l’âpre anxiété qui nous tient aux entrailles,
C’est la fatale angoisse et le trouble profond
Qui fait que notre coeur en abîmes se fond,
Quand un matin le sort, qui nous a dans sa serre,
Nous mettant face à face avec notre misère,
Nous jette brusquement, lui notre maître à tous,
Cette question sombre:- Ame, que croyez-vous?
C’est l’hésitation redoutable et profonde
Qui prend, devant ce sphinx qu’on appelle le monde,
Notre esprit effrayé plus encor qu’ébloui,
Qui n’ose dire non et ne peut dire oui!

C’est là l’infirmité de toute notre race.
De quoi l’homme est-il sûr? qui demeure? qui passe?
Quel est le chimérique et quel est le réel?
Quand l’explication viendra-t-elle du ciel?
D’où vient qu’en nos sentiers que le sophisme encombre
Nous trébuchons toujours? d’où vient qu’esprits faits d’ombre,

Nous tremblons tous, la nuit, à l’heure où lentement
La brume monte au coeur ainsi qu’au firmament?
Que l’aube même est sombre et cache un grand problème?
Et que plus d’un penseur, ô misère suprême!
Jusque dans les enfants trouvant de noirs écueils,
Doute auprès des berceaux comme auprès des cercueils?

Voyez: cet homme est juste, il est bon; c’est un sage.
Nul fiel intérieur ne verdit son visage;
Si par quelques endroits son coeur est déjà mort,
Parmi tous ses regrets il n’a pas un remord;
Les ennemis qu’il a, s’il faut qu’il s’en souvienne,
Lui viennent de leur haine et non pas de la sienne;
C’est un sage - du temps d’Aurèle ou d’Adrien.
Il est pauvre, et s’y plaît. Il ne tombe plus rien
De sa tête vieillie aux rumeurs apaisées,
Rien que des cheveux blancs et de douces pensées.
Tous les hommes pour lui d’un seul flanc sont sortis,
Et, frère aux malheureux, il est père aux petits.
Sa vie est simple, et fuit la ville qui bourdonne.
Les champs où tout guérit, les champs où tout pardonne,
Les villageois dansant au bruit des tambourins,
Quelque ancien livre grec où revivent sereins
Les vieux héros d’Athène et de Lacédémone,
Les enfants rencontrés à qui l’on fait l’aumône,
Le chien à qui l’on parle et dont l’oeil vous comprend,
L’étude d’un insecte en des mousses errant,
Le soir, quelque humble vieille au logis ramenée:
Voilà de quels rayons est faite sa journée.
Chaque jour, car pour lui chaque jour passe ainsi,
Quand le soleil descend, il redescend aussi;
Il regagne, abordé des passants qui l’accueillent,
Son toit sur qui, l’hiver, de grands chênes s’effeuillent.
Si sa table, où jamais rien ne peut abonder,
N’a qu’un maigre repas, il sourit, sans gronder
La servante au front gris, qui sous les ans chancelle,
A qui manque aujourd’hui la force et non le zèle;
Puis il rentre à sa chambre où le sommeil l’attend.
Et là, seul, que fait-il? lui, ce juste content?
Lui, ce coeur sans désirs, sans fautes et sans peines?
Il pense, il rêve, il doute... - O ténèbres humaines!

Sombre loi! tout est donc brumeux et vacillant!

Oh! surtout dans ces jours où tout s’en va croulant,
Où le malheur saisit notre âme qui dévie,
Et souffle affreusement sur notre folle vie,
Où le sort envieux nous tient, où l’on a plus
Que le caprice obscur du flux et du reflux,
Qu’un livre déchiré, qu’une nuit ténébreuse,
Qu’une pensée en proie au gouffre qui se creuse,
Qu’un coeur désemparé de ses illusions,
Frêle esquif démâté, sur qui les passions,
Matelots furieux, qu’en vain l’esprit écoute,
Trépignent, se battant pour le choix de la route;
Quand on ne songe plus, triste et mourant effort,
Qu’à chercher un salut, une boussole, un port,
Une ancre où l’on s’attache, un phare où l’on s’adresse,
Oh! comme avec terreur, pilotes en détresse,
Nous nous apercevons qu’il nous manque la foi,
La foi, ce pur flambeau qui rassure l’effroi,
Ce mot d’espoir écrit sur la dernière page,
Cette chaloupe où peut se sauver l’équipage!

Comment donc se fait-il, ô pauvres insensés,
Que nous soyons si fiers? - Dites, vous qui pensez,
Vous que le sort expose, âme toujours sereine,
Si modeste à la gloire et si douce à la haine,
Vous dont l’esprit, toujours égal et toujours pur,
Dans la calme raison, cet immuable azur,
Bien haut, bien loin de nous, brille, grave et candide,
Comme une étoile fixe au fond du ciel splendide,
Soleil que n’atteint pas, tant il est abrité,
Ce roulis de l’abîme et de l’immensité,
Où flottent, dispersés par les vents qui s’épanchent,
Tant d’astres fatigués et de mondes qui penchent!
Hélas! que vous devez méditer à côté
De l’arrogance unie à notre cécité!
Que vous devez sourire en voyant notre gloire!
Et, comme un feu brillant jette une vapeur noire,

Que notre fol orgueil au néant appuyé
Vous doit jeter dans l'âme une étrange pitié!

Hélas! ayez pitié, mais une pitié tendre;
Car nous écoutons tout sans pouvoir rien entendre!

Cette absence de foi, cette incrédulité,
Ignorance ou savoir, sagesse ou vanité,
Est-ce, de quelque nom que notre orgueil la nomme,
Le vice de ce siècle ou le malheur de l'homme?
Est-ce un mal passager? est-ce un mal éternel?
Dieu peut-être a fait l'homme ainsi pour que le ciel,
Plein d'ombres pour nos yeux, soit toujours notre étude?
Dieu n'a scellé dans l'homme aucune certitude.
Penser, ce n'est pas croire. A peine par moment
Entend-on une voix dire confusément:
— "Ne vous y fiez pas, votre oeuvre est périssable!
Tout ce que bâtit l'homme est bâti sur le sable;
Ce qu'il fait tôt ou tard par l'herbe est recouvert;
Ce qu'il dresse est dressé pour le vent du désert.
Tous ces asiles vains où vous mettez votre âme,
Gloire qui n'est que pourpre, amour qui n'est que flamme,
L'altière ambition aux manteaux étoilés
Qui livre à tous les vents ses pavillons gonflés,
La richesse toujours assise sur sa gerbe,
La science de loin si haute et si superbe,
Le pouvoir sous le dais, le plaisir sous les fleurs,
Tentes que tout cela! l'édifice est ailleurs.
Passez outre! cherchez plus loin les biens sans nombre.
Une tente, ô mortels, ne contient que de l'ombre."

On entend cette voix et l'on rêve longtemps.
Et l'on croit voir le ciel, moins obscur par instants,
Comme à travers la brume on distingue des rives,
Presque entr'ouvert, s'emplir de vagues perspectives!

Que croire? Oh! j'ai souvent, d'un oeil peut-être expert,

Fouillé ce noir problème où la sonde se perd!
Ces vastes questions dont l’aspect toujours change,
Comme la mer tantôt cristal et tantôt fange,
J’en ai tout remué! la surface et le fond!
J’ai plongé dans ce gouffre et l’ai trouvé profond!

Je vous atteste, ô vents du soir et de l’aurore,
Etoiles de la nuit, je vous atteste encore,
Par l’austère pensée à toute heure asservi,
Que de fois j’ai tenté, que de fois j’ai gravi,
Seul, cherchant dans l’espace un point qui me réponde,
Ces hauts lieux d’où l’on voit la figure du monde!
Le glacier sur l’abîme ou le cap sur les mers!
Que de fois j’ai songé sur les sommets déserts,
Tandis que fleuves, champs, forêts, cité, ruines
Que tous les monts fumaient comme des encensoirs,
Et qu’au loin l’océan, répandant ses flots noirs,
Sculptant des fiers écueils la haute architecture,
Mêlait son bruit sauvage à l’immense nature!

Et je disais aux flots: Flots qui grondez toujours!
Je disais aux donjons, croulant avec leurs tours:
Tours où vit le passé! donjons que les années
Mordent incessamment de leurs dents acharnées!
Je disais à la nuit: Nuit pleine de soleils!
Je disais aux torrents, aux fleurs, aux fruits vermeils,
A ces formes sans nom que la mort décompose,
Aux monts, aux champs, aux bois: Savez-vous quelque chose?

Bien des fois, à cette heure où le soir et le vent
Font que le voyageur s’achemine en rêvant,
Je me suis dit en moi:- cette grande nature,
Cette création qui sert la créature,
Sait tout! Tout serait clair pour qui la comprendrait!-
Comme un muet qui sait le mot d’un grand secret
Et dont la lèvre écume à ce mot qu’il déchire,
Il semble par moment qu’elle voudrait tout dire.

Mais Dieu le lui défend! En vain vous écoutez.
Aucun verbe en ces bruits l’un par l’autre heurtés!
Cette chanson qui sort des campagnes fertiles,
Mêlée à la rumeur qui déborde des villes,
Les tonnerres grondants, les vents plaintifs et sourds,
La vague de la mer, gueule ouverte toujours,
Qui vient, hurle, et s’en va, puis sans fin recommence,
Toutes ces voix ne sont qu’un bégaiement immense!

L’homme seul peut parler et l’homme ignore, hélas!
Inexplicable arrêt! quoi qu’il rêve ici-bas,
Tout se voile à ses yeux sous un nuage austère.
Et l’âme du mourant s’en va dans le mystère!
Aussi repousser Rome et rejeter Sion,
Rire, et conclure tout par la négation,
Comme c’est plus aisé, c’est ce que font les hommes.
Le peu que nous croyons tient au peu que nous sommes.

Puisque Dieu l’a voulu, c’est qu’ainsi tout est mieux!
Plus de clarté peut-être aveuglerait nos yeux.
Souvent la branche casse où trop de fruit abonde.
Que deviendrons-nous si, sans mesurer l’onde,
Le Dieu vivant, du haut de son éternité,
Sur l’humaine raison versait la vérité?
Le vase est trop petit pour la contenir toute.

Il suffit que chaque âme en recueille une goutte,
Même à l’erreur mêlée! Hélas! tout homme en soi
Porte un obscur repli qui refuse la foi.
Dieu! la mort! mots sans fond qui cachent un abîme!
L’épouvante saisit le coeur le plus sublime
Dès qu’il s’est hasardé sur de si grandes eaux.
On ne les franchit pas tout d’un vol. Peu d’oiseaux
Traversent l’océan sans reposer leur aile.
Il n’est pas de croyant si pur et si fidèle
Qui ne tremble et n’hésite à de certains moments.
Quelle âme est sans faiblesse et sans accablements?

Enfants! résignons-nous et suivons notre route.
Tout corps traîne son ombre, et tout esprit son doute.

8 septembre 1837

XXIX

A Eugène Vicomte H.

Puisqu’il plut au Seigneur de te briser, poète;
Puisqu’il plut au Seigneur de comprimer ta tête
De son doigt souverain,
D’en faire une urne sainte à contenir l’extase,
D’y mettre le génie, et de sceller ce vase
Avec un sceau d’airain;

Puisque le Seigneur Dieu t’accorda, noir mystère!
Un puits pour ne point boire, une voix pour te taire,
Et souffla sur ton front,
Et, comme une nacelle errante et d’eau remplie,
Fit rouler ton esprit à travers la folie,
Cet océan sans fond;

Puisqu’il voulut ta chute, et que la mort glacée,
Seule, te fît revivre en rouvrant ta pensée
Pour un autre horizon;
Puisque Dieu, t’enfermant dans la cage charnelle,
Pauvre aigle, te donna l’aile et non la prunelle,
L’âme et non la raison;

Tu pars du moins, mon frère, avec ta robe blanche!
Tu retournes à Dieu comme l’eau qui s’épanche
Par son poids naturel!
Tu retournes à Dieu, tête de candeur pleine,
Comme y va la lumière, et comme y va l’haleine
Qui des fleurs monte au ciel!

Tu n’as rien dit de mal, tu n’as rien fait d’étrange.
Comme une vierge meurt, comme s’envole un ange,
Jeune homme, tu t’en vas!
Rien n’a souillé ta main ni ton coeur; dans ce monde

Où chacun court, se hâte, se forge, et crie, et gronde,
A peine tu rêvas!

Comme le diamant, quant le feu le vient prendre,
Disparaît tout entier, et sans laisser de cendre,
Au regard ébloui,
Comme un rayon s’enfuit sans rien jeter de sombre,
Sur la terre après toi tu n’as pas laissé d’ombre,
Esprit évanoui!

Doux et blond compagnon de toute mon enfance,
Oh! dis-moi, maintenant, frère marqué d’avance
Pour un morne avenir,
Maintenant que la mort a rallumé ta flamme,
Maintenant que la mort a réveillé ton âme,
Tu dois te souvenir!

Tu dois te souvenir de nos jeunes années!
Quand les flots transparents de nos deux destinées
Se côtoyaient encor,
Lorsque Napoléon flamboyait comme un phare,
Et qu’enfants nous prêtions l’oreille à sa fanfare
Comme un meute au cor!

Tu dois te souvenir des vertes Feuillantines,
Et de la grande allée où nos voix enfantines,
Nos purs gazouillements,
Ont laissé dans les coins des murs, dans les fontaines,
Dans le nid des oiseaux et dans le creux des chênes,
Tant d’échos si charmants!

O temps! jours radieux! aube trop tôt ravie!
Pourquoi Dieu met-il donc le meilleur de la vie
Tout au commencement?
Nous naissions! on eût dit que le vieux monastère
Pour nous voir rayonner ouvrait avec mystère
Son doux regard dormant.

T’en souviens-tu, mon frère? après l’heure d’étude,
Oh! comme nous courions dans cette solitude!
Sous les arbres blottis,
Nous avions, en chassant quelque insecte qui saute,
L’herbe jusqu’aux genoux, car l’herbe était bien haute,
Nos genoux bien petits.

Vives têtes d’enfants par la course effarées,
Nous poursuivons dans l’air cent ailes bigarrées;
Le soir nous étions las,
Nous revenions, jouant avec tout ce qui joue,
Frais, joyeux, et tous deux baisés à pleine joue
Par notre mère, hélas!

Elle grondait: - Voyez! comme ils sont faits! ces hommes!
Les monstres! ils auront cueilli toutes nos pommes!
Pourtant nous les aimons.
Madame, les garçons sont les soucis des mères,
Car ils ont la fureur de courir dans les pierres
Comme font les démons! -

Puis un même sommeil, nous berçant comme un hôte,
Tous deux au même lit nous couchait côte à côte;
Puis un même réveil.
Puis, trempé dans un lait sorti chaud de l’étable,
Le même pain faisait rire à la même table
Notre appétit vermeil!

Et nous recommencions nos jeux, cueillant par gerbe
Les fleurs, tous les bouquets qui réjouissent l’herbe,
Le lys à Dieu pareil,
Surtout ces fleurs de flamme et d’or qu’on voit, si belles,
Luire à terre en avril comme des étincelles
Qui tombent du soleil!

On nous voyait tous deux, gaîté de la famille,

Le front épanoui, courir sous la charmille,
L’oeil de joie enflammé... -
Hélas! hélas! quel deuil pour ma tête orpheline!
Tu vas donc désormais dormir sur la colline,
Mon pauvre bien-aimé!

Tu vas dormir là-haut sur la colline verte,
Qui, livrée à l’hiver, à tous les vents ouverte,
A le ciel pour plafond;
Tu vas dormir, poussière, au fond d’un lit d’argile;
Et moi je resterai parmi ceux de la ville
Qui parlent et qui vont!

Et moi je vais rester, souffrir, agir et vivre;
Voir mon nom se grossir dans les bouches de cuivre
De la célébrité;
Et cacher, comme à Sparte, en riant quand on entre,
Le renard envieux qui me ronge le ventre,
Sous ma robe abrité!

Je vais reprendre, hélas! mon oeuvre commencée,
Rendre ma barque frêle à l’onde courroucée,
Lutter contre le sort;
Enviant souvent ceux qui dorment sans murmure,
Comme un doux nid couvé pour la saison future,
Sous l’aile de la mort!

J’ai d’austères plaisirs. Comme un prêtre à l’église,
Je rêve à l’art qui charme, à l’art qui civilise,
Qui change l’homme un peu,
Et qui, comme un semeur qui jette au loin sa graine,
En semant la nature à travers l’âme humaine,
Y fera germer Dieu!

Quand le peuple au théâtre écoute ma pensée,
J’y cours, et là, courbé vers la foule pressée,
L’étudiant de près,

Sur mon drame touffu dont le branchage plie,
J’entends tomber ses pleurs comme la large pluie
Aux feuilles des forêts!

Mais quel labeur aussi! que de flots! quelle écume!
Surtout lorsque l’envie, au coeur plein d’amertume,
Au regard vide et mort,
Fait, pour les vils besoins de ses luttes vulgaires,
D’une bouche d’ami qui souriait naguères
Une bouche qui mord!

Quel vie! et quel siècle alentour! - Vertu, gloire,
Pouvoir, génie et foi, tout ce qu’il faudrait croire,
Tout ce que nous valons,
Le peu qui nous restait de nos splendeurs décrues,
Est traîné sur la claie et suivi dans les rues
Par le rire en haillons!

Combien de calomnie et combien de bassesse!
Combien de pamphlets vils qui flagellent sans cesse
Quiconque vient du ciel,
Et qui font, la blessant de leur lance payée,
Boire à la vérité, pâle et crucifiée,
Leur éponge de fiel!

Combien d’acharnements sur toutes les victimes!
Que de rhéteurs, penchés sur le bord des abîmes,
Riant, ô cruauté!
De voir l’affreux poison qui de leurs doigts découle,
Goutte à goutte, ou par flots, quand leurs mains sur la foule
Tordent l’impiété!

L’homme, vers le plaisir se ruant par cent voies,
Ne songent qu’à bien vivre et qu’à chercher des proies;
L’argent est adoré;
Hélas! nos passions ont des serres infâmes
Où pend, triste lambeau, tout ce qu’avaient nos âmes

De chaste et de sacré!

A quoi bon, cependant? à quoi bon tant de haine,
Et faire tant de mal, et prendre tant de peine,
Puisque la mort viendra!
Pour aller avec tous où tous doivent descendre!
Et pour n'être après tout qu'une ombre, un peu de cendre
Sur qui l'herbe croîtra!

A quoi bon s'épuiser en voluptés diverses?
A quoi bon se bâtir des fortunes perverses
Avec les maux d'autrui?
Tout s'écroule; et, fruit vert qui pend à la ramée,
Demain ne mûrit pas pour la bouche affamée
Qui dévore aujourd'hui!

Ce que nous croyons être avec ce que nous sommes,
Beauté, richesse, honneurs, ce que rêvent les hommes,
Hélas! et ce qu'ils font,
Pêle-mêle, à travers les champs ou les huées,
Comme s'est emporté par rapides nuées
Dans un oubli profond!

Et puis quelle éternelle et lugubre fatigue
De voir le peuple enflé monter jusqu'à sa digue,
Dans ces terribles jeux!
Sombre océan d'esprits dont l'eau n'est pas sondée,
Et qui vient faire autour de toute grande idée
Un murmure orageux!

Quel choc d'ambitions luttant le long des routes,
Toutes contre chacune et chacune avec toutes!
Quel tumulte ennemi!
Comme on raille d'un bas tout astre qui décline!... -
Oh! ne regrette rien sur la haute colline
Où tu t'es endormi!

Là, tu reposes, toi! Là, meurt toute voix fausse.
Chaque jour, du Levant au Couchant, sur ta fosse
Promenant son flambeau,
L’impartial soleil, pareil à l’espérance,
Dore des deux côtés sans choix ni préférence
La croix de ton tombeau!

Là, tu n’entends plus rien que l’herbe et la broussaille,
Le pas du fossoyeur dont la terre tressaille
La chute du fruit mûr
Et, par moments, le chant, dispersé dans l’espace,
Du bouvier qui descend dans la plaine et qui passe
Derrière le vieux mur!

6 mars 1837

XXX

A Olympio

Un jour l’ami qui reste à ton coeur qu’on déchire
Contemplait tes malheurs,
Et, tandis qu’il parlait, ton sublime sourire
Se mêlait à ses pleurs:

I

“Te voilà donc, ô toi dont la foule rampante
Admirait la vertu,
Déraciné, flétri, tombé sur une pente
Comme un cèdre abattu!

Te voilà sous les pieds des envieux sans nombre
Et des passants rieurs
Toi dont le front superbe accoutumait à l’ombre
Les fronts inférieurs!

Ta feuille est dans la poudre, et ta racine austère
Est découverte aux yeux.
Hélas! tu n’as plus rien d’abrité dans la terre
Ni d’éclos dans les cieux!

Jeune homme, on vénérait jadis ton oeil sévère,
Ton front calme et tonnant;
Ton nom était de ceux qu’on craint et qu’on révère,
Hélas! et maintenant

Les méchants, accourus pour déchirer ta vie,
L’ont prise entre leurs dents,
Et les hommes alors se sont avec envie
Penchés pour voir dedans!

Avec des cris de joie ils ont compté tes plaies
Et compté tes douleurs,
Comme sur une pierre on compte des monnaies
Dans l’antre des voleurs.

Ta chaste renommée, aux exemples utiles,
N’a plus rien qui reluit,
Sillonnée en tous sens par les hideux reptiles
Qui viennent dans la nuit.

Eclairée à la flamme, à toute heure visible,
De ton nom rayonnant,
Au bord du grand chemin, ta vie est une cible
Offerte à tout venant

Où cent flèches, toujours sifflant dans la nuit noire,
S’enfoncent tour à tour,
Chacun cherchant ton coeur, l’un visant à ta gloire
Et l’autre à ton amour!

Ta réputation, dont souvent nous nous sommes
Ecriés en rêvant,
Se disperse et s’en va dans les discours des hommes,
Comme un feuillage au vent!

Ton âme, qu’autrefois on prenait pour arbitre
Du droit et du devoir,
Est comme une taverne où chacun à la vitre
Vient regarder le soir,

Afin d’y voir à table une orgie aux chants grêles,
Au propos triste et vain,
Qui renverse à grand bruit les coeurs pleins de querelles
Et les brocs pleins de vin!

Tes ennemis ont pris ta belle destinée
Et l’ont brisée en fleur.

Ils ont fait de ta gloire aux carrefours traînée
Ta plus grande douleur!

Leurs mains ont retourné ta robe, dont le lustre
Irritait leur fureur;
Avec la même pourpre ils t’ont fait vil d’illustre,
Et forçat d’empereur!

Nul ne te défend plus. On se fait une fête
De tes maux aggravés.
On ne parle de toi qu’en secouant la tête,
Et l’on dit: Vous savez!

Hélas! pour te haïr tous les coeurs se rencontrent.
Tous t’ont abandonné.
Et tes amis pensifs sont comme ceux qui montrent
Un palais ruiné.

II

Mais va, pour qui comprend ton âme haute et grave,
Tu n’en es que plus grand.
Ta vie a, maintenant que l’obstacle l’entrave,
La rumeur du torrent.

Tous ceux qui de tes jours orageux et sublimes
S’approchent sans effroi
Reviennent en disant qu’ils ont vu des abîmes
En se penchant sur toi!

Mais peut-être, à travers l’eau de ce gouffre immense
Et de ce coeur profond,
On verrait cette perle appelée innocence,
En regardant au fond!

On s’arrête aux brouillards dont ton âme est voilée,
Mais moi, juge et témoin,

Je sais qu’on trouverait une voûte étoilée
Si l’on allait plus loin!

Et qu’importe, après tout, que le monde t’assiège
De ses discours mouvants,
Et que ton nom se mêle à ces flocons de neige
Poussés à tous les vents!

D’ailleurs que savent-ils? Nous devrions nous taire.
De quel droit jugeons-nous?
Nous qui ne voyons rien au ciel ou sur la terre
Sans nous mettre à genoux!

La certitude - hélas! insensés que nous sommes
De croire à l’oeil humain! -
Ne séjourne pas plus dans la raison des hommes
Que l’onde dans leur main.

Elle mouille un moment, puis s’écoule infidèle,
Sans que l’homme, ô douleur!
Puisse désaltérer à ce qui reste d’elle
Ses lèvres ou son coeur!

L’apparence de tout nous trompe et nous fascine.
Est-il jour? Est-il nuit?
Rien d’absolu. Tout fruit contient une racine,
Toute racine un fruit.

Le même objet qui rend votre visage sombre
Fait ma sérénité.
Toute chose ici-bas par une face est ombre
Et par l’autre clarté.

Le lourd nuage, effroi des matelots livides
Sur le pont accroupis,
Pour le brun laboureur dont les champs sont arides
Est un sac plein d’épis!

Pour juger un destin il en faudrait connaître
Le fond mystérieux;
Ce qui gît dans la frange aura bientôt peut-être
Des ailes dans les cieux!

Cette âme se transforme, elle est tout près d’éclore,
Elle rampe, elle attend,
Aujourd’hui larve informe, et demain dès l’aurore
Papillon éclatant!

III

Tu souffres cependant! toi sur qui l’ironie
Epuise tous ses traits,
Et qui te sens poursuivre, et par la calomnie
Mordre aux endroits secrets!

Tu fuis, pâle et saignant, et, pénétrant dans l’ombre
Par ton flanc déchiré,
La tristesse en ton âme ainsi qu’en un puits sombre
Goutte à goutte a filtré!

Tu fuis, lion blessé, dans une solitude,
Rêvant sur ton destin,
Et le soir te retrouve en la même attitude
Où t’a vu le matin!

Là, pensif, cherchant l’ombre où ton âme repose,
L’ombre que nous aimons;
Ne songeant quelquefois, de l’aube à la nuit close,
Qu’à la forme des monts;

Attentif aux ruisseaux, aux mousses étoilées,
Aux champs silencieux,
A la virginité des herbes non foulées,
A la beauté des cieux;

Ou parfois contemplant, de quelque grève austère,
L’esquif en proie aux flots
Qui fuit, rompant les fils qui liaient à la terre
Les coeurs des matelots;

Contemplant le front vert et la noire narine
De l’autre ténébreux
Et l’arbre qui, rongé par la brise marine,
Tord ses bras douloureux,

Et l’immense océan où la voile s’incline,
Où le soleil descend,
L’océan qui respire ainsi qu’une poitrine,
S’enflant et s’abaissant;

Du haut de la falaise aux rumeurs infinies,
Du fond des bois touffus,
Tu mêles ton esprit aux grandes harmonies
Plaines de sens confus,

Qui, tenant ici-bas toute chose embrassée,
Vont de l’aigle au serpent,
Que toute voix grossit, et que sur la pensée
La nature répand!

IV

Console-toi, poète! - Un jour, bientôt peut-être,
Les coeurs te reviendront,
Et pour tous les regards on verra reparaître
Les flammes de ton front.

Tous les côté ternis par ta gloire outragée,
Nettoyés un matin,
Seront comme une dalle avec soin épongée
Après un grand festin.

En vain tes ennemis auront armé le monde
De leur rire moqueur,
Et sur les grands chemins répandu comme l’onde
Les secrets de ton coeur.

En vain ils jetteront leur rage humiliée
Sur ton nom ravagé.
Comme un chien qui remâche une chair oubliée
Sur l’os déjà rongé.

Ils ne prévaudront pas, ces hommes qui t’entourent
De leurs obscurs réseaux
Ils passeront ainsi que ces lueurs qui courent
A travers les roseaux.

Ils auront bien toujours pour toi toute la haine
Des démons pour le Dieu;
Mais un souffle éteindra leur bouche impure pleine
De parole de feu.

Ils s’évanouiront, et la foule et ravie
Verra, d’un oeil pieux,
Sortir de ce tas d’ombre amassé par l’envie
Ton front majestueux!

En attendant, regarde en pitié cette foule
Qui méconnaît tes chants,
Et qui de toutes parts se répand et s’écoule
Dans les mauvais penchant.

Laisse en ce noir chaos qu’aucun rayon n’éclaire
Ramper les ignorants;
L’orgueilleux dont la voix grossit dans la colère
Comme l’eau des torrents;

La beauté sans amour dont les pats nous entraîne,

Femme aux yeux exercés
Dont la robe flottante est un piège ou se prennent
Les pieds insensés;

Les rhéteurs qui de bruit emplissent leur parole
Quand nous les écoutons;
Et ces hommes sans foi, sans culte, sans boussole,
Qui vivent à tâtons;

Et les flatteurs courbés, aux douceurs familières,
Aux fronts bas et rampants;
Et les ambitieux qui sont comme des lierres
L'un sur l'autre grimpants!

Non, tu ne portes pas, ami, la même chaîne
Que ces hommes d'un jour.
Ils sont vils, et toi grand. Leur joug est fait de haine,
Le tien est fait d'amour!

Tu n'as rien de commun avec le monde infime
Au souffle empoisonneur;
Car c'est pour tous les yeux un spectacle sublime
Quand la main du Seigneur

Loin du sentier banal où la foule se rue
Sur quelque illusion,
Laboure le génie avec cette charrue
Qu'on nomme passion!"

Et quand il eut fini, toi que la haine abreuve,
Tu lui dis d'une voix attendrie un instant,
Voix pareille à la sienne et plus haute pourtant,
Comme la grande mer qui parlerait au fleuve;

"Ne me console point et ne t'afflige pas.
Je suis calme et paisible.
Je ne regarde point le monde d'ici-bas,

Mais le monde invisible.

Les hommes sont meilleurs, ami, que tu ne crois.
Mais le sort est sévère.
C’est lui qui teint de vin ou de lie à son choix
Le pur cristal du verre.

Moi, je rêve! écoutant le cyprès soupirer
Autour des croix d’ébène,
Et murmurer le fleuve et la cloche pleurer
Dans un coin de la plaine,

Recueillant le cri sourd de l’oiseau qui s’enfuit,
Du char traînant la gerbe
Et la plainte qui sort des roseaux, et le bruit
Que fait la touffe d’herbe,

Prêtant l’oreille aux flots qui ne peuvent dormir,
A l’air dans la nuée,
J’erre sur les hauts lieux d’ou l’on entend gémir
Toute chose crée!

Là, je vois, comme un vase allumé sur l’autel,
Le toit lointain qui fume;
Et le soir je compare aux purs flambeaux du ciel
Tout flambeau qui s’allume.

Là j’abandonne aux vents mon esprit sérieux,
Comme l’oiseau sa plume;
Là, je songe au malheur de l’homme, et j’entends mieux
Le bruit de cette enclume,

Là, je contemple, ému, tout ce qui s’offre aux yeux,
Onde, terre, verdure;
Et je vois l’homme au loin, mage mystérieux,
Traverser la nature!

Pourquoi me plaindre, ami? Tout homme à tout
Souffre des maux sans nombre. [moment
Moi, sur qui vient la nuit, j'ai gardé seulement
Dans mon horizon sombre,

Comme un rayon du soir au front d'un mont obscur,
L'amour, divine flamme,
L'amour, qui dore encor ce que j'ai de plus pur
Et de plus haut dans l'âme!

Sans doute en mon avril, ne sachant rien à fond,
Jeune, crédule, austère,
J'ai fait des songes d'or comme tous ceux qui font
Des songes sur la terre!

J'ai vu la vie en fleur sur mon front s'élever
Pleine de douces choses.
Mais quoi! me crois-tu assez fou pour rêver
L'éternité des roses?

Les chimères, qu'enfant mes mains croyaient toucher,
Maintenant sont absentes;
Et je dis au bonheur ce que dit le nocher
Aux rives décroissantes.

Qu'importe! je m'abrite en un calme profond,
Plaignant surtout les femmes;
Et je vis l'oeil fixé sur le ciel où s'en vont
Les ailes et les âmes.

Dieu nous donne à chacun notre part du destin,
Au fort, au faible, au lâche,
Comme un maître soigneux levé dès le matin
Divise à tous leur tâche.

Soyons grands. Le grand coeur à Dieu même est pareil.
Laissons, doux ou funestes,

Se croiser sur nos pieds la foudre et le soleil,
Ces deux clartés célestes.

Laissons gronder en bas cet orage irrité
Qui toujours nous assiège;
Et gardons au-dessus notre tranquillité,
Comme le mont sa neige.

Va, nul mortel ne brise avec la passion,
Vainement obstinée,
Cette âpre loi que l’un nomme Expiation
Et l’autre Destinée.

Hélas! de quelque nom que, broyé sous l’essieu,
L’orgueil humain la nomme,
Roue immense et fatale, elle tourne sur Dieu,
Elle roule sur l’homme!”

15 octobre 1837

XXXI

La tombe dit à la rose:

La tombe dit à la rose:
— Des pleurs dont l’aube t’arrose
Que fais-tu, fleur des amours?
La rose dit à la tombe:
— Que fais-tu de ce qui tombe
Dans ton gouffre ouvert toujours?

La rose dit: - Tombeau sombre,
De ces pleurs je fais dans l’ombre
Un parfum d’ambre et de miel.
La tombe dit: - Fleur plaintive,
De chaque âme qui m’arrive
Je fais un ange du ciel!

3 juin 1837

XXXII

O Muse, contiens-toi! muse aux hymnes d'airain!

O Muse, contiens-toi! muse aux hymnes d'airain!
Muse de loi juste et du droit souverain!
Toi dont la bouche abonde en mots trempés de flamme,
Etincelles de feu qui sortent de ton âme,

Oh! ne dis rien encore et laisse-les aller!
Attends que l'heure vienne où tu puisses parler.
Endure le spectacle en vierge résignée.
Qu'à peine un mouvement de ta lèvre indignée.
Révèle ton courroux au fond du coeur grondant.
Dans ce siècle où chacun, noyant ou fécondant,
Se répand au hasard comme l'eau d'un orage,
Où l'on ne voit partout qu'impuissance et que rage,
Qu'inutiles fardeaux qu'on s'obstine à rouler,
Que Samsons écrasés sous ce qu'il font crouler,
Le plus fort est celui qui tient sa force en bride.
L'océan quelquefois montre à peine une ride.
Jusqu'au jour d'éclater, plus proche qu'on ne croit,
Ne te dépense pas. Qui se contient s'accroît.

Aie au milieu de tous l'attitude élevée
D'une lente déesse à punir réservée,
Qui, recueillant sa force ainsi qu'un saint trésor,
Pourrait depuis longtemps et ne veut pas encor!

Va cependant! - contemple et le ciel et le monde.
Et que tous ceux qui font quelque travail immonde,
Que ces trafiquants vils épris d'un sac d'argent,
Que ces menteurs publics, au langage changeant,
Pleins de méchanceté dans leur âme hypocrite
Et dorés au dehors de quelque faux mérite,
Toux ceux, grands et petits, que marque un sceau fatal,

Que l’envieux bâtard accroupi dans le mal,
Que ce tribun valet, plus lâche qu’une femme,
Qui dans les carrefours vend sa parole infâme,
Toujours prêt pour l’or à souffleter la loi,
Forgeant l’émeute au peuple ou la censure au roi,
Que l’ami faux par qui la haine s’ensemence,
Et ceux qui nuit et jour occupent leur démence
D’une orgie effrontée au tumulte hideux,
Te regardent passer tranquille au milieu d’eux,
Saluant gravement les fronts que tu révères,
Muette, et l’oeil pourtant plein de choses sévères!
Fouille ces coeurs profonds de ton regard ardent.
Et que, lorsque le peuple ira se demandant:
— Sur qui donc va tomber, dans la foule éperdue,
Cette foudre en éclairs dans ses yeux suspendue? -
Chacun d’eux, contemplant son oeuvre avec effroi,
Se dise en frissonnant: C’est peut-être sur moi!

En attendant, demeure impassible et sereine.
Qu’aucun pan de ta robe en leur fange ne traîne;
Et que tous ces pervers tremblent dès à présent
De voir auprès de toi, formidable, et posant
Son ongle de lion sur ta lyre étoilée,
Ta colère superbe à tes pieds muselée!
6 septembre 1836.

LES RAYONS ET LES OMBRES

This collection of poems was written after 1830 and published in 1840. Through this publication, Hugo sought to bring poetry closer to men, exploring universal paths, struggles and concerns.

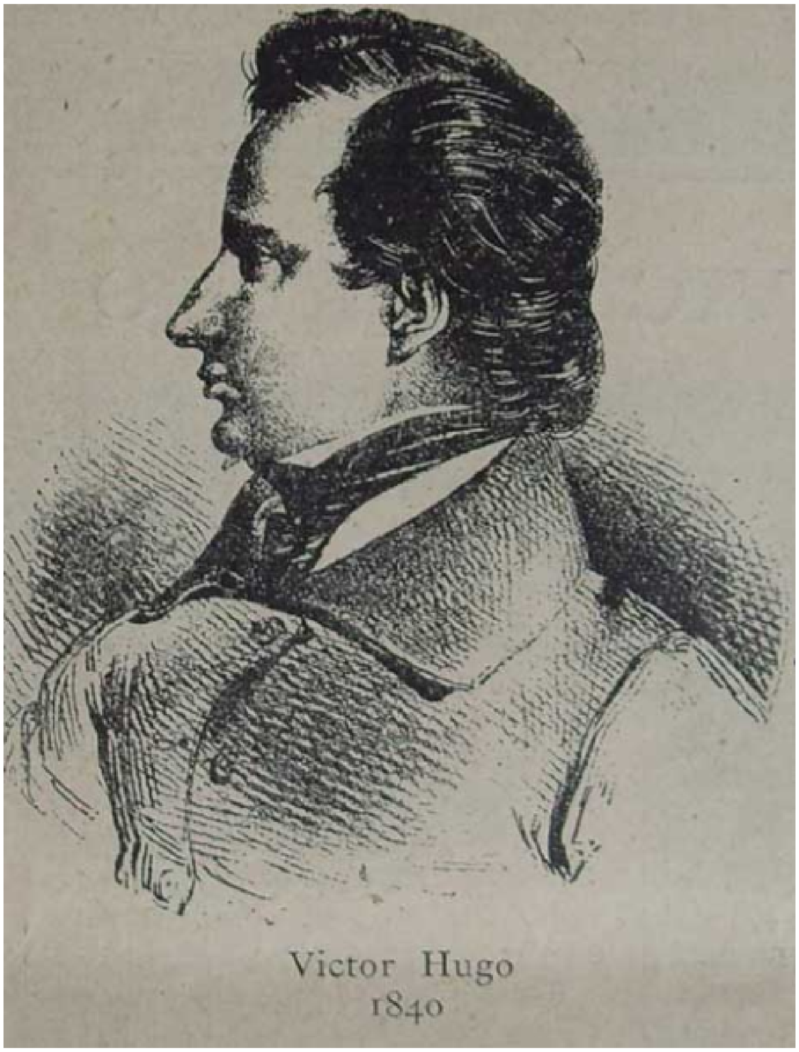
Victor Hugo
1840

Hugo at the time of publication

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I

FONCTION DU POÈTE

I

Pourquoi t’exiler, ô poète,
Dans la foule où nous te voyons?
Que sont pour ton âme inquiète
Les partis, chaos sans rayons?
Dans leur atmosphère souillée
Meurt ta poésie effeuillée;
Leur souffle égare ton encens.
Ton coeur, dans leurs luttes serviles,
Est comme ces gazons des villes
Rongés par les pieds des passants.

Dans les brumeuses capitales
N’entends-tu pas avec effroi,
Comme deux puissances fatales,
Se heurter le peuple et le roi?
De ces haines que tout réveille
À quoi bon emplir ton oreille,
Ô Poète, ô maître, ô semeur?
Tout entier au Dieu que tu nommes,
Ne te mêle pas à ces hommes
Qui vivent dans une rumeur!

Va résonner, âme épurée,
Dans le pacifique concert!
Va t’épanouir, fleur sacrée,
Sous les larges cieux du désert!
Ô rêveur, cherche les retraites,
Les abris, les grottes discrètes,
Et l’oubli pour trouver l’amour,
Et le silence, afin d’entendre

La voix d’en haut, sévère et tendre,
Et l’ombre, afin de voir le jour!

Va dans les bois! va sur les plages!
Compose tes chants inspirés
Avec la chanson des feuillages
Et l’hymne des flots azurés!
Dieu t’attend dans les solitudes;
Dieu n’est pas dans les multitudes;
L’homme est petit, ingrat et vain.
Dans les champs tout vibre et soupire.
La nature est la grande lyre,
Le poète est l’archet divin!

Sors de nos tempêtes, ô sage!
Que pour toi l’empire en travail,
Qui fait son périlleux passage
Sans boussole et sans gouvernail,
Soit comme un vaisseau qu’en décembre
Le pêcheur, du fond de sa chambre
Où pendent les filets séchés,
Entend la nuit passer dans l’ombre
Avec un bruit sinistre et sombre
De mâts frissonnants et penchés!

II

Hélas! hélas! dit le poète,
J’ai l’amour des eaux et des bois;
Ma meilleure pensée est faite
De ce que murmure leur voix.
La création est sans haine.
Là, point d’obstacle et point de chaîne.
Les prés, les monts, sont bienfaisants;
Les soleils m’expliquent les roses;
Dans la sérénité des choses
Mon âme rayonne en tous sens.

Je vous aime, ô sainte nature!
Je voudrais m’absorber en vous;
Mais, dans ce siècle d’aventure,
Chacun, hélas! se doit à tous.
Toute pensée est une force.
Dieu fit la sève pour l’écorce,
Pour l’oiseau les rameaux fleuris,
Le ruisseau pour l’herbe des plaines,
Pour les bouches, les coupes pleines,
Et le penseur pour les esprits!

Dieu le veut, dans les temps contraires,
Chacun travaille et chacun sert.
Malheur à qui dit à ses frères:
Je retourne dans le désert!
Malheur à qui prend des sandales
Quand les haines et les scandales
Tourmentent le peuple agité;
Honte au penseur qui se mutile,
Et s’en va, chanteur inutile,
Par la porte de la cité!

Le poète en des jours impies
Vient préparer des jours meilleurs.
Il est l’homme des utopies;
Les pieds ici, les yeux ailleurs.
C’est lui qui sur toutes les têtes,
En tout temps, pareil aux prophètes,
Dans sa main, où tout peut tenir,
Doit, qu’on l’insulte ou qu’on le loue,
Comme une torche qu’il secoue,
Faire flamboyer l’avenir!

Il voit, quand les peuples végètent!
Ses rêves, toujours pleins d’amour,
Sont faits des ombres que lui jettent

Les choses qui seront un jour.
On le raille. Qu’importe? il pense.
Plus d’une âme inscrit en silence
Ce que la foule n’entend pas.
Il plaint ses contempteurs frivoles;
Et maint faux sage à ses paroles
Rit tout haut et songe tout bas!

Foule qui répands sur nos rêves
Le doute et l’ironie à flots,
Comme l’océan sur les grèves
Répand son râle et ses sanglots,
L’idée auguste qui t’égaie
À cette heure encore bégaie;
Mais de la vie elle a le sceau!
Ève contient la race humaine,
Un oeuf l’aiglon, un gland le chêne!
Une utopie est un berceau!

De ce berceau, quand viendra l’heure,
Vous verrez sortir, éblouis,
Une société meilleure
Pour des coeurs mieux épanouis,
Le devoir que le droit enfante,
L’ordre saint, la foi triomphante,
Et les moeurs, ce groupe mouvant
Qui toujours, joyeux ou morose,
Sur ses pas sème quelque chose
Que la loi récolte en rêvant!

Mais, pour couver ces puissants germes,
Il faut tous les coeurs inspirés,
Tous les coeurs purs, tous les coeurs fermes,
De rayons divins pénétrés.
Sans matelots la nef chavire;
Et, comme aux deux flancs d’un navire,
Il faut que Dieu, de tous compris,

Pour fendre la foule insensée,
Aux deux côtés de sa pensée
Fasse ramer de grands esprits!

Loin de vous, saintes théories,
Codes promis à l’avenir,
Ce rhéteur aux lèvres flétries,
Sans espoir et sans souvenir,
Qui jadis suivait votre étoile,
Mais qui, depuis, jetant le voile
Où s’abrite l’illusion,
A laissé violer son âme
Par tout ce qu’ont de plus infâme
L’avarice et l’ambition!

Géant d’orgueil à l’âme naine,
Dissipateur du vrai trésor,
Qui, repu de science humaine,
A voulu se repaître d’or,
Et, portant des valets au maître
Son faux sourire d’ancien prêtre
Qui vendit sa divinité,
S’enivre, à l’heure où d’autres pensent,
Dans cette orgie impure où dansent
Les abus au rire effronté!

Loin ces scribes au coeur sordide,
Qui dans l’ombre ont dit sans effroi
À la corruption splendide:
Courtisane, caresse-moi!
Et qui parfois, dans leur ivresse,
Du temple où rêva leur jeunesse
Osent reprendre les chemins,
Et, leurs faces encor fardées,
Approcher les chastes idées,
L’odeur de la débauche aux mains!

Loin ces docteurs dont se défie
Le sage, sévère à regret!
Qui font de la philosophie
Une échoppe à leur intérêt!
Marchands vils qu’une église abrite!
Qu’on voit, noire engeance hypocrite,
De sacs d’or gonfler leur manteau,
Troubler le prêtre qui contemple,
Et sur les colonnes du temple
Clouer leur immonde écriteau!

Loin de vous ces jeunes infâmes
Dont les jours, comptés par la nuit,
Se passent à flétrir des femmes
Que la faim aux antres conduit!
Lâches à qui, dans leur délire,
Une voix secrète doit dire:
Cette femme que l’or salit,
Que souille l’orgie où tu tombes,
N’eut qu’à choisir entre deux tombes:
La morgue hideuse ou ton lit!

Loin de vous les vaines colères
Qui s’agitent au carrefour!
Loin de vous ces chats populaires
Qui seront tigres quelque jour!
Les flatteurs du peuple ou du trône!
L’égoïste qui de sa zone
Se fait le centre et le milieu!
Et tous ceux qui, tisons sans flamme,
N’ont pas dans leur poitrine une âme,
Et n’ont pas dans leur âme un Dieu!

Si nous n’avions que de tels hommes,
Juste Dieu! comme avec douleur
Le poète au siècle où nous sommes
Irait criant: Malheur! malheur!

On le verrait voiler sa face;
Et, pleurant le jour qui s’efface,
Debout au seuil de sa maison,
Devant la nuit prête à descendre,
Sinistre, jeter de la cendre
Aux quatre points de l’horizon!

Tels que l’autour dans les nuées,
On entendrait rire, vainqueurs,
Les noirs poètes des huées,
Les Aristophanes moqueurs.
Pour flétrir nos hontes sans nombre,
Pétrone, réveillé dans l’ombre,
Saisirait son stylet romain.
Autour de notre infâme époque
L’iambe boiteux d’Archiloque
Bondirait, le fouet à la main!

Mais Dieu jamais ne se retire.
Non! jamais, par les monts caché,
Ce soleil, vers qui tout aspire,
Ne s’est complètement couché!
Toujours, pour les mornes vallées,
Pour les âmes d’ombre aveuglées,
Pour les coeurs que l’orgueil corrompt,
Il laisse au-dessus de l’abîme,
Quelques rayons sur une cime,
Quelques vérités sur un front!

Courage donc! esprit, pensées,
Cerveaux d’anxiétés rongés,
Coeurs malades, âmes blessées,
Vous qui priez, vous qui songez!

Ô générations! courage!
Vous qui venez comme à regret,
Avec le bruit que fait l’orage

Dans les arbres de la forêt!

Douteurs errants sans but ni trêve,
Qui croyez, étendant la main,
Voir les formes de votre rêve
Dans les ténèbres du chemin!

Philosophes dont l’esprit souffre,
Et qui, pleins d’un effroi divin,
Vous cramponnez au bord du gouffre,
Pendus aux ronces du ravin!

Naufragés de tous les systèmes,
Qui de ce flot triste et vainqueur
Sortez tremblants et de vous-mêmes
N’avez sauvé que votre coeur!

Sages qui voyez l’aube éclore
Tous les matins parmi les fleurs,
Et qui revenez de l’aurore,
Trempés de célestes lueurs!

Lutteurs qui pour laver vos membres
Avant le jour êtes debout!
Rêveurs qui rêvez dans vos chambres,
L’oeil perdu dans l’ombre de tout!

Vous, hommes de persévérance,
Qui voulez toujours le bonheur,
Et tenez encor l’espérance,
Ce pan du manteau du Seigneur!

Chercheurs qu’une lampe accompagne!
Pasteurs armés de l’aiguillon!
Courage à tous sur la montagne!
Courage à tous dans le vallon!

Pourvu que chacun de vous suive
Un sentier ou bien un sillon;
Que, flot sombre, il ait Dieu pour rive,
Et, nuage, pour aquilon;

Pourvu qu’il ait sa foi qu’il garde,
Et qu’en sa joie ou sa douleur
Parfois doucement il regarde
Un enfant, un astre, une fleur;

Pourvu qu’il sente, esclave ou libre,
Tenant à tout par un côté,
Vibrer en lui par quelque fibre
L’universelle humanité;

Courage! - Dans l’ombre et l’écume
Le but apparaîtra bientôt!
Le genre humain dans une brume,
C’est l’énigme et non pas le mot!

Assez de nuit et de tempête
A passé sur vos fronts penchés.
Levez les yeux! levez la tête!
La lumière est là-haut! marchez!

Peuples! écoutez le poète!
Écoutez le rêveur sacré!
Dans votre nuit, sans lui complète,
Lui seul a le front éclairé.
Des temps futurs perçants les ombres,
Lui seul distingue en leurs flancs sombres
Le germe qui n’est pas éclos.
Homme, il est doux comme une femme.
Dieu parle à voix basse à son âme
Comme aux forêts et comme aux flots.

C’est lui qui, malgré les épines,

L’envie et la dérision,
Marche, courbé dans vos ruines,
Ramassant la tradition.
De la tradition féconde
Sort tout ce qui couvre le monde,
Tout ce que le ciel peut bénir,
Toute idée, humaine ou divine,
Qui prend le passé pour racine
A pour feuillage l’avenir.

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Il rayonne! il jette sa flamme
Sur l’éternelle vérité!
Il la fait resplendir pour l’âme
D’une merveilleuse clarté.
Il inonde de sa lumière

Ville et désert, Louvre et chaumière,
Et les plaines et les hauteurs;
À tous d’en haut il la dévoile;
Car la poésie est l’étoile
Qui mène à Dieu rois et pasteurs!

II

LE SEPT AOÛT MIL HUIT CENT VINGT-NEUF

C’était le sept août. Ô sombre destinée!
C’était le premier jour de leur dernière année.

Seuls dans un lieu royal, côte à côté marchant,
Deux hommes, par endroits du coude se touchant,
Causaient. Grand souvenir qui dans mon coeur se grave!
Le premier avait l’air fatigué, triste et grave,
Comme un trop faible front qui porte un lourd projet.
Une double épaulette à couronne chargeait
Son uniforme vert à ganse purpurine,
Et l’ordre et la toison faisaient sur sa poitrine,
Près du large cordon moiré de bleu changeant,
Deux foyers lumineux, l’un d’or, l’autre d’argent.
C’était un roi; vieillard à la tête blanchie,
Penché du poids des ans et de la monarchie.
L’autre était un jeune homme étranger chez les rois,
Un poète, un passant, une inutile voix.

Ils se parlaient tous deux, sans témoins, sans mystère,
Dans un grand cabinet, simple, nu, solitaire,
Majestueux pourtant. Ce que les hommes font
Laisse une empreinte aux murs. Sous ce même plafond
Avaient passé jadis, ô splendeurs effacées!
De grands événements et de grandes pensées.
Là, derrière son dos, croisant ses fortes mains,
Ébranlant le plancher sous ses pas surhumains,
Bien souvent l’empereur quand il était le maître,
De la porte en rêvant allait à la fenêtre.

Dans un coin une table, un fauteuil de velours,
Miraient dans le parquet leurs pieds dorés et lourds.
Par une porte en vitre, au dehors, l’oeil en foule

Apercevait au loin des armoires de Boulle,
Des vases du Japon, des laques, des émaux,
Et des chandeliers d'or aux immenses rameaux.
Un salon rouge orné de glaces de Venise,
Plein de ces bronzes grecs que l'esprit divinise,
Multipliait sans fin ses lustres de cristal;
Et, comme une statue à lames de métal,
On voyait, casque au front, luire dans l'encoignure
Un garde argent et bleu d'une fière tournure.

Or entre le poète et le vieux roi courbé,
De quoi s'agissait-il?
D'un pauvre ange tombé
Dont l'amour refaisait l'âme avec son haleine;
De Marion, lavée ainsi que Madeleine,
Qui boitait et traînait son pas estropié,
La censure, serpent, l'ayant mordue au pied.

Le poète voulait faire un soir apparaître
Louis treize, ce roi sur qui régnait un prêtre;
— Tout un siècle, marquis, bourreaux, fous, bateleurs;
Et que la foule vînt, et qu'à travers des pleurs,
Par moments, dans un drame étincelant et sombre,
Du pâle cardinal on crût voir passer l'ombre.

Le vieillard hésitait: — Que sert de mettre à nu
Louis treize, ce roi chétif et mal venu?
À quoi bon remuer un mort dans une tombe?
Que veut-on? où court-on? sait-on bien où l'on tombe?
Tout n'est-il pas déjà croulant de tout côté?
Tout ne s'en va-t-il pas dans trop de liberté?
N'est-il pas temps plutôt, après quinze ans d'épreuve,
De relever la digue et d'arrêter le fleuve?
Certe, un roi peut reprendre alors qu'il a donné.
Quant au théâtre, il faut, le trône étant miné,
Étouffer des deux mains sa flamme trop hardie;
Car la foule est le peuple, et d'une comédie

Peut jaillir l’étincelle aux livides rayons
Qui met le feu dans l’ombre aux révolutions. -
Puis il niait l’histoire, et, quoi qu’il puisse en être,
À ce jeune rêveur disputait son ancêtre;
L’accueillant bien d’ailleurs, bon, royal, gracieux,
Et le questionnant sur ses propres aïeux.

Tout en laissant aux rois les noms dont on les nomme,
Le poète luttait fermement, comme un homme
Épris de liberté, passionné pour l’art,
Respectueux pourtant pour ce noble vieillard.
Il disait: — Tout est grave en ce siècle où tout penche.
L’art, tranquille et puissant, veut une allure franche.
Les rois morts sont sa proie; il faut la lui laisser.
Il n’est pas ennemi; pourquoi le courroucer,
Et le livrer dans l’ombre à des tortionnaires,
Lui dont la main fermée est pleine de tonnerres?
Cette main, s’il l’ouvrait, redoutable envoyé,
Sur la France éblouie et le Louvre effrayé,
On l’épouvanterait - trop tard, s’il faut le dire -
D’y voir subitement tant de foudres reluire!
Oh! les tyrans d’en bas nuisent au roi d’en haut.
Le peuple est toujours là qui prend la muse au mot,
Quand l’indignation, jusqu’au roi qu’on révère,
Monte du front pensif de l’artiste sévère!
— Sire à ce qui chancelle est-on bien appuyé?
La censure est un toit mauvais, mal étayé,
Toujours prêt à tomber sur les noms qu’il abrite.
Sire, un souffle imprudent, loin de l’éteindre, irrite
Le foyer, tout à coup terrible et tournoyant,
Et d’un art lumineux fait un art flamboyant!
D’ailleurs, ne cherchât-on que la splendeur royale,
Pour cette nation moqueuse, mais loyale,
Au lieu des grands tableaux qu’offrait le grand Louis,
Roi-soleil, fécondant les lys épanouis,
Qui, tenant sous son sceptre un monde en équilibre,
Faisait Racine heureux, laissait Molière libre,

Quel spectacle, grand Dieu! qu’un groupe de censeurs
Armés et parlant bas, vils esclaves chasseurs,
À plat ventre couchés, épiant l’heure où rentre
Le drame, fier lion, dans l’histoire, son antre! -

Ici, voyant vers lui, d’un front plus incliné,
Se tourner doucement ce vieillard étonné,
Il hasardait plus loin sa pensée inquiète,
Et, laissant de côté le drame et le poète,
Attentif, il sondait le dessein vaste et noir
Qu’au fond de ce roi triste il venait d’entrevoir.
Se pourrait-il? quelqu’un aurait cette espérance?
Briser le droit de tous! retrancher à la France,
Comme on ôte un jouet à l’enfant dépité,
De l’air, de la lumière, et de la liberté!
Le roi ne voudrait pas! lui, roi sage et roi juste!

Puis, choisissant les mots pour cette oreille auguste,
Il disait que les temps ont des flots souverains;
Que rien, ni ponts hardis, ni canaux souterrains,
Jamais, excepté Dieu, rien n’arrête et ne dompte
Le peuple qui grandit ou l’océan qui monte;
Que le plus fort vaisseau sombre et se perd souvent
Qui veut rompre de front et la vague et le vent;
Et que, pour s’y briser, dans la lutte insensée,
On a derrière soi, roche partout dressée,
Tout son siècle, les moeurs, l’esprit qu’on veut braver,
Le port même où la nef aurait pu se sauver!
Il osait s’effrayer. Fils d’une Vendéenne,
Coeur n’ayant plus d’amour, mais n’ayant pas de haine,
Il suppliait qu’au moins on l’en crût un moment,
Lui qui sur le passé s’incline gravement,
Et dont la piété, lierre qui s’enracine,
Hélas, s’attache aux rois comme à toute ruine!
Le destin a parfois de formidable jeux.
Les rois doivent songer dans ces jours orageux
Où, mer qui vient, esprit des temps, nuée obscure,

Derrière l’horizon quelque chose murmure!
À quoi bon provoquer d’avance et soulever
Les générations qu’on entend arriver?
Pour des regards distraits la France était sereine;
Mais dans ce ciel troublé d’un peu de brume à peine,
Où tout semblait azur, où rien n’agitait l’air,
Lui, rêveur, il voyait par instants un éclair! -

Charles dix souriant répondit: — Ô poète!

Le soir, tout rayonnait de lumière et de fête.
Regorgeant de soldats, de princes, de valets,
Saint-Cloud joyeux et vert, autour du fier palais
Dont la Seine en fuyant reflète les beaux marbres,
Semblait avec amour presser sa touffe d’arbres.
L’arc de triomphe orné de victoires d’airain,
Le Louvre étincelant, fleurdelysé, serein,
Lui répondaient de loin du milieu de la ville;
Tout ce royal ensemble avait un air tranquille,
Et, dans le calme aspect d’un repos solennel,
Je ne sais quoi de grand qui semblait éternel.

Holyrood! Holyrood! ô fatale abbaye,
Où la loi du destin, dure, amère, obéie,
S’inscrit de tous côtés!
Cloître! palais! tombeau! qui sous tes murs austères
Gardes les rois, la mort et Dieu; trois grands mystères,
Trois sombres majestés!

Château découronné! Vallée expiatoire!
Où le penseur entend dans l’air et dans l’histoire,
Comme un double conseil pour nos ambitions,
Comme une double voix qui se mêle et qui gronde,
La rumeur de la mer profonde,
Et le bruit éloigné des révolutions!

Solitude où parfois des collines prochaines

On voit venir les faons qui foulent sous les chênes
Le gazon endormi,
Et qui, pour aspirer le vent dans la clairière,
Effarés, frissonnants, sur leurs pieds de derrière
Se dressent à demi!

Fière église où priait le roi des temps antiques,
Grave, ayant pour pavé sous les arches gothiques
Les tombeaux paternels qu'il usait du genou!
Porte où superbement tant d'archers et de gardes
Veillaient, multipliant l'éclair des hallebardes,
Et qu'un pâtre aujourd'hui ferme avec un vieux clou!

Patrie où, quand la guerre agitait leurs rivages,
Les grands lords montagnards comptaient leurs clans sauvages
Et leurs noirs bataillons;
Où maintenant sur l'herbe, au soleil, sous des lierres,
Les vieilles aux pieds nus qui marchent dans les pierres
Font sécher des haillons!

Holyrood! Holyrood! la ronce est sur tes dalles.
Le chevreau broute au bas de tes tours féodales.
Ô fureur des rivaux ardents à se chercher!
Amours! - Darnley! Rizzio! quel néant est le vôtre!
Tous deux sont là, - l'un près de l'autre; -
L'un est une ombre, et l'autre une tâche au plancher!

Hélas! que de leçons sous tes voûtes funèbres!
Oh! que d'enseignements on lit dans les ténèbres
Sur ton seuil renversé,
Sur tes murs tout empreints d'une étrange fortune,
Vaguement éclairés dans ce reflet de lune
Que jette le passé!

Ô palais, sois béni! soyez bénie, ô ruine!
Qu'une auguste auréole à jamais t'illumine!
Devant tes noirs créneaux, pieux, nous nous courbons,

Car le vieux roi de France a trouvé sous ton ombre
Cette hospitalité mélancolique et sombre
Qu’on reçoit et qu’on rend de Stuarts à Bourbons!

III

AU ROI LOUIS-PHILIPPE, APRÈS L'ARRÊT DE MORT PRONONCÉ LE 12 JUILLET 1839

Par votre ange envolée ainsi qu'une colombe!
Par ce royal enfant, doux et frêle roseau!
    Grâce encore une fois! grâce au nom de la tombe!
    Grâce au nom du berceau!

IV

REGARD JETÉ DANS UNE MANSARDE

I

L’église est vaste et haute. À ses clochers superbes
L’ogive en fleur suspend ses trèfles et ses gerbes;
Son portail resplendit, de sa rose pourvu;
Le soir fait fourmiller sous la voussure énorme
Anges, vierges, le ciel, l’enfer sombre et difforme,
Tout un monde effrayant comme un rêve entrevu.

Mais ce n’est pas l’église, et ses voûtes sublimes,
Ses porches, ses vitraux, ses lueurs, ses abîmes,
Sa façade et ses tours, qui fascinent mes yeux;
Non; c’est, tout près, dans l’ombre où l’âme aime à descendre
Cette chambre d’où sort un chant sonore et tendre,
Posée au bord d’un toit comme un oiseau joyeux.

Oui, l’édifice est beau, mais cette chambre est douce.
J’aime le chêne altier moins que le nid de mousse;
J’aime le vent des prés plus que l’âpre ouragan;
Mon coeur, quand il se perd vers les vagues béantes,
Préfère l’algue obscure aux falaises géantes.
Et l’heureuse hirondelle au splendide océan.

II

Frais réduit! à travers une claire feuillée
Sa fenêtre petite et comme émerveillée
S’épanouit auprès du gothique portail.
Sa verte jalousie à trois clous accrochée,
Par un bout s’échappant, par l’autre rattachée,
S’ouvre coquettement comme un grand éventail.

Au-dehors un beau lys, qu’un prestige environne,
Emplit de sa racine et de sa fleur couronne
— Tout près de la gouttière où dort un chat sournois -
Un vase à forme étrange en porcelaine bleue
Où brille, avec des paons ouvrant leur large queue,
Ce beau pays d’azur que rêvent les Chinois.

Et dans l’intérieur par moments luit et passe
Une ombre, une figure, une fée, une grâce,
Jeune fille du peuple au chant plein de bonheur,
Orpheline, dit-on, et seule en cet asile,
Mais qui parfois a l’air, tant son front est tranquille,
De voir distinctement la face du Seigneur.

On sent, rien qu’à la voir, sa dignité profonde.
De ce coeur sans limon nul vent n’a troublé l’onde.
Ce tendre oiseau qui jase ignore l’oiseleur.
L’aile du papillon a toute sa poussière.
L’âme de l’humble vierge a toute sa lumière.
La perle de l’aurore est encor dans la fleur.

À l’obscure mansarde il semble que l’oeil voie
Aboutir doucement tout un monde de joie,
La place, les passants, les enfants, leurs ébats,
Les femmes sous l’église à pas lents disparues,
Des fronts épanouis par la chanson des rues,
Mille rayons d’en haut, mille reflets d’en bas.

Fille heureuse! autour d’elle ainsi qu’autour d’un temple,
Tout est modeste et doux, tout donne un bon exemple.
L’abeille fait son miel, la fleur rit au ciel bleu,
La tour répand de l’ombre, et, devant la fenêtre,
Sans faute, chaque soir, pour obéir au maître,
L’astre allume humblement sa couronne de feu.

Sur son beau col, empreint de virginité pure,
Point d’altière dentelle ou de riche guipure;

Mais un simple mouchoir noué pudiquement.
Pas de perle à son front, mais aussi pas de ride,
Mais un oeil chaste et vif, mais un regard limpide.
Où brille le regard que sert le diamant?

III

L’angle de la cellule abrite un lit paisible.
Sur la table est ce livre où Dieu se fait visible,
La légende des saints, seul et vrai panthéon.
Et dans un coin obscur, près de la cheminée,
Entre la bonne Vierge et le buis de l’année,
Quatre épingles au mur fixent Napoléon.

Cet aigle en cette cage! - et pourquoi non? dans l’ombre
De cette chambre étroite et calme, où rien n’est sombre,
Où dort la belle enfant, douce comme son lys,
Où tant de paix, de grâce et de joie est versée,
Je ne hais pas d’entendre au fond de ma pensée
Le bruit des lourds canons roulant vers Austerlitz.

Et près de l’empereur devant qui tout s’incline,
— Ô légitime orgueil de la pauvre orpheline! -
Brille une croix d’honneur, signe humble et triomphant,
Croix d’un soldat, tombé comme tout héros tombe,
Et qui, père endormi, fait du fond de sa tombe
Veiller un peu de gloire auprès de son enfant.

IV

Croix de Napoléon! joyau guerrier! pensée!
Couronne de laurier de rayons traversée!
Quand il menait ses preux aux combats acharnés,
Il la laissait, afin de conquérir la terre,
Pendre sur tous les fronts durant toute la guerre;
Puis, la grande oeuvre faite, il leur disait: Venez!

Puis il donnait sa croix à ces hommes stoïques,
Et des larmes coulaient de leurs yeux héroïques;
Muets, ils admiraient leur demi-dieu vainqueur;
On eût dit qu’allumant leur âme avec son âme,
En touchant leur poitrine avec son doigt de flamme,
Il leur faisait jaillir cette étoile du coeur!

V

Le matin elle chante et puis elle travaille,
Sérieuse, les pieds sur sa chaise de paille,
Cousant, taillant, brodant quelques dessins choisis;
Et, tandis que, songeant à Dieu, simple et sans crainte,
Cette vierge accomplit sa tâche auguste et sainte,
Le silence rêveur à sa porte est assis.

Ainsi, Seigneur, vos mains couvrent cette demeure.
Dans cet asile obscur, qu’aucun souci n’effleure,
Rien qui ne soit sacré, rien qui ne soit charmant!
Cette âme, en vous priant pour ceux dont la nef sombre,
Peut monter chaque soir vers vous sans faire d’ombre
Dans la sérénité de votre firmament!

Nul danger! nul écueil! - Si! l’aspic est dans l’herbe!
Hélas! hélas! le ver est dans le fruit superbe!
Pour troubler une vie il suffit d’un regard.
Le mal peut se montrer même aux clartés d’un cierge.
La curiosité qu’a l’esprit de la vierge
Fait une plaie au coeur de la femme plus tard.

Plein de ces chants honteux, dégoût de la mémoire,
Un vieux livre est là-haut sur une vieille armoire,
Par quelque vil passant dans cette ombre oublié;
Roman du dernier siècle! oeuvre d’ignominie!
Voltaire alors régnait, ce singe de génie
Chez l’homme en mission par le diable envoyé.

VI

Époque qui gardas, de vin, de sang rougie,
Même en agonisant, l'allure de l'orgie!
Ô dix-huitième siècle, impie et châtié!
Société sans dieu, par qui Dieu fus frappée!
Qui, brisant sous la hache et le sceptre et l'épée,
Jeune offensas l'amour, et vieille la pitié!

Table d'un long festin qu'un échafaud termine!
Monde, aveugle pour Christ, que Satan illumine!
Honte à tes écrivains devant les nations!
L'ombre de tes forfaits est dans leur renommée
Comme d'une chaudière il sort une fumée,
Leur sombre gloire sort des révolutions!

VII

Frêle barque assoupie à quelques pas d'un gouffre!
Prends garde, enfant! coeur tendre où rien encor ne souffre!
Ô pauvre fille d'Ève! ô pauvre jeune esprit!
Voltaire, le serpent, le doute, l'ironie,
Voltaire est dans un coin de ta chambre bénie!
Avec son oeil de flamme il t'espionne, et rit.

Oh! tremble! ce sophiste a sondé bien des fanges!
Oh! tremble! ce faux sage a perdu bien des anges!
Ce démon, noir milan, fond sur les coeurs pieux,
Et les brise, et souvent, sous ses griffes cruelles,
Plume à plume j'ai vu tomber ces blanches ailles
Qui font qu'une âme vole et s'enfuit dans les cieux!

Il compte de ton sein les battements sans nombre.
Le moindre mouvement de ton esprit dans l'ombre,
S'il penche un peu vers lui, fait resplendir son oeil.
Et, comme un loup rôdant, comme un tigre qui guette,
Par moments, de Satan, visible au seul poète,

La tête monstrueuse apparaît à ton seuil!

VIII

Hélas! si ta main chaste ouvrait ce livre infâme,
Tu sentirais soudain Dieu mourir dans ton âme.
Ce soir tu pencherais ton front triste et boudeur
Pour voir passer au loin dans quelque verte allée
Les chars étincelants à la roue étoilée,
Et demain tu rirais de la sainte pudeur!

Ton lit, troublé la nuit de visions étranges,
Ferait fuir le sommeil, le plus craintif des anges!
Tu ne dormirais plus, tu ne chanterais plus,
Et ton esprit, tombé dans l'océan des rêves,
Irait, déraciné comme l'herbe des grèves,
Du plaisir à l'opprobre et du flux au reflux!

IX

Oh! la croix de ton père est là qui te regarde!
La croix du vieux soldat mort dans la vieille garde!
Laisse-toi conseiller par elle, ange tenté!
Laisse-toi conseiller, guider, sauver peut-être
Par ce lys fraternel penché sur ta fenêtre,
Qui mêle son parfum à ta virginité!

Par toute ombre qui passe en baissant la paupière!
Par les vieux saints rangés sous le portail de pierre!
Par la blanche colombe aux rapides adieux!
Par l'orgue ardent dont l'hymne en longs sanglots se brise!
Laisse-toi conseiller par la pensive église!
Laisse-toi conseiller par le ciel radieux!

Laisse-toi conseiller par l'aiguille ouvrière,
Présente à ton labeur, présente à ta prière,
Qui dit tout bas: Travaille! - Oh! crois-la! - Dieu, vois-tu,

Fit naître du travail, que l’insensé repousse,
Deux filles, la vertu, qui fait la gaîté douce,
Et la gaîté, qui rend charmante la vertu!

Entends ces mille voix, d’amour accentuées,
Qui passent dans le vent, qui tombent des nuées,
Qui montent vaguement des seuils silencieux,
Que la rosée apporte avec ses chastes gouttes,
Que le chant des oiseaux te répète, et qui toutes
Te disent à la fois: Sois pure sous les cieux!

Sois pure sous les cieux! comme l’onde et l’aurore,
Comme le joyeux nid, comme la tour sonore,
Comme la gerbe blonde, amour du moissonneur,
Comme l’astre incliné, comme la fleur penchante,
Comme tout ce qui rit, comme tout ce qui chante,
Comme tout ce qui dort dans la paix du Seigneur!

Sois calme. Le repos va du coeur au visage;
La tranquillité fait la majesté du sage.
Sois joyeuse. La foi vit sans l’austérité;
Un des reflets du ciel, c’est le rire des femmes;
La joie est la chaleur que jette dans les âmes
Cette clarté d’en haut qu’on nomme Vérité.

La joie est pour l’esprit une riche ceinture.
La joie adoucit tout dans l’immense nature.
Dieu sur les vieilles tours pose le nid charmant
Et la broussaille en fleur qui luit dans l’herbe épaisse;
Car la ruine même autour de sa tristesse
A besoin de jeunesse et de rayonnement!

Sois bonne. La bonté contient les autres choses.
Le Seigneur indulgent sur qui tu te reposes
Compose de bonté le penseur fraternel.
La bonté, c’est le fond des natures augustes.
D’une seule vertu Dieu fait le coeur des justes,

Comme d’un seul saphir la coupole du ciel.

Ainsi, tu resteras, comme un lys, comme un cygne,
Blanche entre les fronts purs marqués d’un divin signe
Et tu seras de ceux qui, sans peur, sans ennuis,
Des saintes actions amassant la richesse,
Rangent leur barque au port, leur vie à la sagesse
Et, priant tous les soirs, dorment toutes les nuits!

LE POÈTE À LUI-MÊME

Tandis que sur les bois, les prés et les charmilles,
S’épanchent la lumière et la splendeur des cieux,
Toi, poète serein, répands sur les familles,
Répands sur les enfants et sur les jeunes filles,
Répands sur les vieillards ton chant religieux!

Montre du doigt la rive à tous ceux qu’une voile
Traîne sur le flot noir par les vents agité;
Aux vierges, l’innocence, heureuse et noble étoile;
À la foule, l’autel que l’impiété voile;
Aux jeunes, l’avenir; aux vieux, l’éternité!

Fais filtrer ta raison dans l’homme et dans la femme.
Montre à chacun le vrai du côté saisissant.
Que tout penseur en toi trouve ce qu’il réclame.
Plonge Dieu dans les coeurs, et jette dans chaque âme
Un mot révélateur, propre à ce qu’elle sent.

Ainsi, sans bruit, dans l’ombre, ô songeur solitaire,
Ton esprit, d’où jaillit ton vers que Dieu bénit,
Du peuple sous tes pieds perce le crâne austère; -
Comme un coin lent et sûr, dans les flancs de la terre
La racine du chêne entr’ouvre le granit.

V

ON CROYAIT DANS CES TEMPS OU LE PATRE NOCTURNE

On croyait dans ces temps où le pâtre nocturne,
Loin dans l’air, au-dessus de son front taciturne,
Voyait parfois, témoin par l’ombre recouvert,
Dans un noir tourbillon de tonnerre et de pluie,
Passer rapidement la figure éblouie
D’un prophète emporté par l’Esprit au désert!

On croyait dans les jours du barde et du trouvère!
Quand tout un monde armé se ruait au Calvaire,
Pour délivrer la croix,
Et pour voir le lac sombre où Jésus sauva Pierre,
L’Horeb et le Cédron, et les portes de pierre
Du sépulcre des rois!

On croyait dans ce siècle où tout était prière;
Où Louis, au moment de ravir La Vallière,
S’arrêtait éperdu devant un crucifix;
Où l’autel rayonnait près du trône prospère;
Où, quand le roi disait: Dieu seul est grand, mon père?
L’évêque répondait: Dieu seul est grand, mon fils!

Les pâtres maintenant dorment dans les ravines;
Jérusalem est turque; et les moissons divines
N’ont plus de moissonneur;
La royauté décline et le peuple se lève.
— Hélas! l’homme aujourd’hui ne croit plus, mais il rêve. -
Lequel vaut mieux, Seigneur?

VI

SUR UN HOMME POPULAIRE

Ô peuple! sous ce crâne où rien n’a pénétré,
Sous l’auguste sourcil morose et vénéré
Du tribun et du cénobite,
Sous ce front dont un jour les révolutions
Feront en l’entr’ouvrant sortir les visions,
Une pensée affreuse habite.

Dans l’Inde ainsi parfois le passant curieux
Contemple avec respect un mont mystérieux,
Cime des nuages touchée,
Rêve et croit respirer, sans approcher trop près,
Dans ces rocs, dans ces eaux, dans ces mornes forêts,
Une divinité cachée.

L’intérieur du mont en pagode est sculpté.
Puis vient enfin le jour de la solennité.
On brise la porte murée.
Le peuple accourt en poussant des cris tumultueux; -
L’idole alors, foetus aveugle et monstrueux,
Sort de la montagne éventrée.

VII

LE MONDE ET LE SIÈCLE

Que faites-vous, Seigneur? à quoi sert votre ouvrage?
À quoi bon l’eau du fleuve et l’éclair de l’orage?
Les prés? les ruisseaux purs qui lavent le gazon?
    Et, sur les coteaux verts dont s’emplit l’horizon,
    Les immenses troupeaux aux fécondes haleines
    Que l’aboiement des chiens chasse à travers les plaines?
    Pourquoi, dans ce doux mois où l’air semble attiédi,
    Quand un calice s’ouvre aux souffles de midi,
    Y plonger, ô Seigneur, l’abeille butinante,
    Et changer toute fleur en cloche bourdonnante?
    Pourquoi le brouillard d’or qui monte des hameaux?
    Pourquoi l’ombre et la paix qui tombent des rameaux?
    Pourquoi le lac d’azur semé de molles îles?
    Pourquoi les bois profonds, les grottes, les asiles?
    À quoi bon, chaque soir, quand luit l’été vermeil,
    Comme un charbon ardent déposant le soleil
    Au milieu des vapeurs par les vents remuées,
    Allumer au couchant un brasier de nuées?
    Pourquoi rougir la vigne et jeter aux vieux murs
    Le rayon qui revient gonfler les raisins mûrs?
    À quoi bon incliner sur ses axes mobiles
    Ce globe monstrueux avec toutes ses villes,
    Et ses monts et ses mers qui flottent alentour,
    À quoi bon, ô Seigneur, l’incliner tour à tour,
    Pour que l’ombre l’éteigne ou que le jour le dore,
    Tantôt vers la nuit sombre et tantôt vers l’aurore?
    À quoi vous sert le flot, le nuage, le bruit
    Qu’en secret dans la fleur fait le germe du fruit?
    À quoi bon féconder les éthers et les ondes,
    Faire à tous les soleils des ceintures de mondes,
    Peupler d’astres errants l’arche énorme des cieux,

Seigneur! et sur nos fronts, d’où rayonnent nos yeux,
Entasser en tous sens des millions de lieues
Et du vague infini poser les plaines bleues?
Pourquoi sur les hauteurs et dans les profondeurs
Cet amas effrayant d’ombres et de splendeurs?
À quoi bon parfumer, chauffer, nourrir et luire,
Tout aimer, et, Dieu bon! incessamment traduire,
Pour l’oeil intérieur comme pour l’oeil charnel,
L’éternelle pensée en spectacle éternel?
Si c’est pour qu’en ce siècle où la loi tombe en cendre
L’homme passe sans voir, sans croire, sans comprendre,
Sans rien chercher dans l’ombre, et sans lever les yeux
Vers les conseils divins qui flottent dans les cieux,
Sous la forme sacrée ou sous l’éclatant voile
Tantôt d’une nuée et tantôt d’une étoile!
Si c’est pour que ce temps fasse, en son morne ennui,
De l’opprimé d’hier l’oppresseur d’aujourd’hui;
Pour que l’on s’entre-déchire à propos de cent rêves;
Pour que le peuple, foule où dorment tant de sèves,
Aussi bien que les rois, - grave et haute leçon! -
Ait la brutalité pour dernière raison,
Et réponde, troupeau qu’on tue ou qui lapide,
À l’aveugle boulet par le pavé stupide!
Si c’est pour que l’émeute ébranle la cité!
Pour que tout soit tyran, même la liberté!
Si c’est pour que l’honneur des anciens gentilshommes,
Aux projets des partis s’attelle tristement;
Si c’est pour qu’à sa haine on ajoute un serment
Comme à son vieux poignard on remet une lame;
Si c’est pour que le prince, homme né d’une femme,
Né pour briller bien vite et pour vivre bien peu,
S’imagine être roi comme vous êtes Dieu!
Si c’est pour que la joie aux justes soit ravie;
Pour que l’iniquité règne, pour que l’envie,
Emplissant tant de fronts de brasiers dévorants,
Fasse petits des coeurs que l’amour ferait grands!
Si c’est pour que le prêtre, infirme et triste apôtre,

Marche avec ses deux yeux, ouvrant l’un fermant l’autre,
Insulte à la nature au nom du verbe écrit,
Et ne comprenne pas qu’ici tout est l’esprit,
Que Dieu met comme en nous son souffle dans l’argile,
Et que l’arbre et la fleur commentent l’Évangile!
Si c’est pour que personne enfin, grand ou petit,
Pas même le vieillard que l’âge appesantit,
Personne, du tombeau sondant les avenues,
N’ait l’austère souci des choses inconnues,
Et que, pareil au boeuf par l’instinct assoupi,
Chacun trace un sillon sans songer à l’épi!
Car l’humanité, morne et manquant de prophètes,
Perd l’admiration des oeuvres que vous faites;
L’homme ne sent plus luire en son coeur triomphant
Ni l’aube, ni le lys, ni l’ange, ni l’enfant,
Ni l’âme, ce rayon fait de lumière pure,
Ni la création, cette immense figure!

De là vient que souvent je rêve et que je dis:
— Est-ce que nous serions condamnés et maudits?
Est-ce que ces vivants, chétivement prospères,
Seraient déshérités du souffle de leurs pères?
Ô Dieu! considérez les hommes de ce temps,
Aveugles, loin de vous sous tant d’ombre flottants.
Éteignez vos soleils, ou rallumez leur flamme!
Reprenez votre monde, ou donnez-leur une âme!

VIII

À M. LE D. DE ***

Jules, votre château, tour vieille et maison neuve,
Se mire dans la Loire, à l’endroit où le fleuve,
Sous Blois, élargissant son splendide bassin,
Comme une mère presse un enfant sur son sein
En lui parlant tout bas d’une voix recueillie,
Serre une île charmante en ses bras qu’il replie.
Vous avez tous les biens que l’homme peut tenir.
Déjà vous souriez, voyant l’été venir,
Et vous écouterez bientôt sous le feuillage
Les rires éclatants qui montent du village.
Vous vivez! avril passe, et voici maintenant
Que mai, le mois d’amour, mai rose et rayonnant,
Mai dont la robe verte est chaque jour plus ample,
Comme un lévite enfant chargé d’orner le temple,
Suspend aux noirs rameaux, qu’il gonfle en les touchant,
Les fleurs d’où sort l’encens, les nids d’où sort le chant.

Et puis vous m’écrivez que votre cheminée
Surcharge en ce moment sa frise blasonnée
D’un tas d’anciens débris autrefois triomphants,
De glaives, de cimiers essayés des enfants,
Qui souillent les doigts blancs de vos belles duchesses;
Et qu’enfin - et c’est là d’où viennent vos richesses, -
Vos paysans, piquant les boeufs de l’aiguillon,
Ont ouvert un sépulcre en creusant un sillon.
Votre camp de César a subi leur entaille.
Car vous avez à vous tout un champ de bataille,
Et vos durs bûcherons, tout hâlés par le vent,
Du bruit de leur cognée ont troublé bien souvent,
Avec les noirs corbeaux s’enfuyant par volées,
Les ombres des héros à vos chênes mêlées.

Ami, vous le savez, spectateur sérieux,
J’ai rêvé bien des fois dans ces champs glorieux,
Qui, forcés par le soc, eux, vieux témoins des guerres,
À donner des moissons comme des champs vulgaires,
Pareils au roi déchu qui, craignant le réveil,
Revoit sa gloire en songe aux heures du sommeil,
Le jour, laissent marcher le bouvier dans leurs seigles,
Et reçoivent, la nuit, la visite des aigles!

Oh! respectez, enfant d’un siècle où tout se vend,
Rome morte à côté d’un village vivant!
Que votre piété, qui sur tout veut descendre,
Laisse en paix cette terre ou plutôt cette cendre!
Vivez content! dès l’aube, en vos secrets chemins,
Errez avec la main d’une femme en vos mains;
Contemplez, du milieu de tant de douces choses,
Dieu qui se réjouit dans la saison des roses;
Et puis, le soir, au fond d’un coffre vermoulu,
Prenez ce vieux Virgile où tant de fois j’ai lu!
Cherchez l’ombre, et, tandis que dans la galerie
Jase et rit au hasard la folle causerie,
Vous, éclairant votre âme aux antiques clartés,
Lisez mon doux Virgile, ô Jule, et méditez!

Car les temps sont venus qu’a prédits le poète.
Aujourd’hui, dans ces champs, vaste plaine muette,
Parfois le laboureur, sur le sillon courbé,
Trouve un noir javelot qu’il croit des cieux tombé,
Puis heurte pêle-mêle, au fond du sol qu’il fouille,
Casques vides, vieux dards qu’amalgame la rouille,
Et, rouvrant des tombeaux pleins de débris humains,
Pâlit de la grandeur des ossements romains!

IX

À MADEMOISELLE FANNY DE P.

Ô vous que votre âge défend,
Riez! tout vous caresse encore.
Jouez! chantez! soyez l’enfant!
Soyez la fleur; soyez l’aurore!

Quant au destin, n’y songez pas.
Le ciel est noir, la vie est sombre.
Hélas! que fait l’homme ici-bas?
Un peu de bruit dans beaucoup d’ombre.

Le sort est dur, nous le voyons,
Enfant! souvent l’oeil plein de charmes
Qui jette le plus de rayons
Répand aussi le plus de larmes.

Vous que rien ne vient éprouver,
Vous avez tout, joie et délire,
L’innocence qui fait rêver,
L’ignorance qui fait sourire.

Vous avez, lys sauvé des vents,
Coeur occupé d’humbles chimères,
Ce calme bonheur des enfants,
Pur reflet du bonheur des mères.

Votre candeur vous embellit.
Je préfère à toute autre flamme
Votre prunelle que remplit
La clarté qui sort de votre âme.

Pour vous ni soucis ni douleurs,
La famille vous idolâtre.

L’été, vous courez dans les fleurs;
L’hiver, vous jouez près de l’âtre.

La poésie, esprit des cieux,
Près de vous, enfant, s’est posée;
Votre mère l’a dans ses yeux,
Votre père dans sa pensée.

Profitez de ce temps si doux!
Vivez! - La joie est vite absente;
Et les plus sombres d’entre nous
Ont eu leur aube éblouissante.

Comme on prie avant de partir,
Laissez-moi vous bénir, jeune âme, -
Ange qui serez un martyr!
Enfant qui serez une femme!

X

COMME DANS LES ETANGS ASSOUPIS SOUS LES BOIS

Comme dans les étangs assoupis sous les bois,
Dans plus d’une âme on voit deux choses à la fois,
Le ciel, qui teint les eaux à peine remuées
    Avec tous ses rayons et toutes ses nuées,
    Et la vase, - fond morne, affreux, sombre et dormant,
    Où des reptiles noirs fourmillent vaguement.

XI

FIAT VOLUNTAS

Pauvre femme! son lait à sa tête est monté.
Et, dans ses froids salons, le monde a répété,
Parmi les vains propos que chaque jour emporte,
Hier, qu’elle était folle, aujourd’hui, qu’elle est morte;
Et, seul au champ des morts, je foule ce gazon,
Cette tombe où sa vie a suivi sa raison!

Folle! morte! pourquoi? Mon Dieu! pour peu de chose!
Pour un fragile enfant dont la paupière est close,
Pour un doux nouveau-né, tête aux fraîches couleurs,
Qui naguère à son sein, comme une mouche aux fleurs,
Pendait, riait, pleurait, et, malgré ses prières,
Troublant tout leur sommeil pendant des nuits entières,
Faisait mille discours, pauvre petit ami!
Et qui ne dit plus rien, car il est endormi.

Quand elle vit son fils, le soir d’un jour bien sombre,
Car elle l’appelait son fils, cette vaine ombre!
Quand elle vit l’enfant glacé dans sa pâleur,
— Oh! ne consolez point une telle douleur!
Elle ne pleura pas. Le lait avec la fièvre
Soudain troubla sa tête et fit trembler sa lèvre;
Et depuis ce jour-là, sans voir et sans parler,
Elle allait devant elle et regardait aller.
Elle cherchait dans l’ombre une chose perdue,
Son enfant disparu dans la vague étendue;
Et par moments penchait son oreille en marchant,
Comme si sous la terre elle entendait un chant.

Une femme du peuple, un jour que dans la rue
Se pressait sur ses pas une foule accourue,
Rien qu’à la voir souffrir devina son malheur.

Les hommes, en voyant ce beau front sans couleur,
Et cet oeil froid toujours suivant une chimère,
S'écriaient: Pauvre folle! Elle dit: Pauvre mère!

Pauvre mère, en effet! Un soupir étouffant
Parfois coupait sa voix qui murmurait: L'enfant!
Parfois elle semblait, dans la cendre enfouie,
Chercher une lueur au ciel évanouie;
Car la jeune âme enfuie, hélas! de sa maison
Avait en s'en allant emporté sa raison!

On avait beau lui dire, en parlant à voix basse,
Que la vie est ainsi; que tout meurt, que tout passe;
Et qu'il est des enfants, - mères, sachez-le bien!
Que Dieu, qui prête tout et qui ne donne rien,
Pour rafraîchir nos fronts avec leurs ailes blanches,
Met comme des oiseaux pour un jour sur nos branches!
On avait beau lui dire, elle n'entendait pas.
L'oeil fixe, elle voyait toujours devant ses pas
S'ouvrir les bras charmants de l'enfant qui l'appelle.
Elle avait des hochets fait une humble chapelle.
Car rien n'est plus puissant que ces petits bras morts
Pour tirer promptement les mères dans la tombe.
Où l'enfant est tombé bientôt la femme tombe.
Qu'est-ce qu'une maison dont le seuil est désert?
Qu'un lit sans un berceau? Dieu clément! à quoi sert
Le regard maternel sans l'enfant qui repose?
À quoi bon ce sein blanc sans cette bouche rose?

Après avoir longtemps, le coeur mort, les yeux morts,
Erré sur le tombeau comme étant en dehors,
— Longtemps! ce sont ici des paroles humaines,
Hélas! il a suffi de bien peu de semaines! -
Malheureuse! en deux mois tout s'est évanoui.
Hier elle était folle, elle est morte aujourd'hui!

Il suffit qu'un oiseau vienne sur une rive

Pour qu’un deuxième oiseau tout en hâte l’y suive.
Sur deux il en est un toujours qui va devant.
Après avoir à peine ouvert son aile au vent,
Il vint, le bel enfant, s’abattre sur la tombe;
Elle y vint après lui, comme une autre colombe.

On a creusé la terre, et là, sous le gazon,
On a mis la nourrice auprès du nourrisson.

Et moi je dis: — Seigneur! votre règne est austère!
Seigneur! vous avez mis partout un noir mystère,
Dans l’homme et dans l’amour, dans l’arbre et dans l’oiseau,
Et jusque dans ce lait que réclame un berceau,
Ambroisie et poison, doux miel, liqueur amère,
Fait pour nourrir l’enfant ou pour tuer la mère!

XII

À LAURE, DUCH. D'A.

[Le conseil municipal de la ville de Paris a refusé de donner six pieds de terre dans le cimetière du Père-Lachaise pour le tombeau de la veuve de Junot, ancien gouverneur de Paris.

Le ministre de l'intérieur a également refusé un morceau de marbre pour ce monument. (Journaux de février 1840)]

Puisqu'ils n'ont pas compris dans leur étroite sphère,
Qu'après tant de splendeur, de puissance et d'orgueil,
Il était grand et beau que la France dût faire
L'aumône d'une fosse à ton noble cercueil;

Puisqu'ils n'ont pas senti que celle qui sans crainte
Toujours loua la gloire et flétrit les bourreaux
A le droit de dormir sur la colline sainte,
A le droit de dormir à l'ombre des héros;

Puisque le souvenir de nos grandes batailles
Ne brûle pas en eux comme un sacré flambeau;
Puisqu'ils n'ont pas de coeur; puisqu'ils n'ont point d'entrailles;
Puisqu'ils t'ont refusé la pierre d'un tombeau;

C'est à nous de chanter un chant expiatoire!
C'est à nous de t'offrir notre deuil à genoux!
C'est à nous, c'est à nous de prendre ta mémoire
Et de l'ensevelir dans un vers triste et doux!

C'est à nous cette fois de garder, de défendre
La mort contre l'oubli, son pâle compagnon;
C'est à nous d'effeuiller des roses sur ta cendre;
C'est à nous de jeter des lauriers sur ton nom!

Puisqu’un stupide affront, pauvre femme endormie,
Monte jusqu’à ton front que César étoila,
C’est à moi, dont ta main pressa la main amie,
De te dire tout bas: Ne crains rien! je suis là!

Car j’ai ma mission! car, armé d’une lyre,
Plein d’hymnes irrités ardents à s’épancher,
Je garde le trésor des gloires de l’empire;
Je n’ai jamais souffert qu’on osât y toucher!

Car ton coeur abondait en souvenirs fidèles!
Dans notre ciel sinistre et sur nos tristes jours,
Ton noble esprit planait avec de nobles ailes,
Comme un aigle souvent, comme un ange toujours!

Car, forte pour tes maux et bonne pour les nôtres,
Livrée à la tempête et femme en proie au sort,
Jamais tu n’imitas l’exemple de tant d’autres,
Et d’une lâcheté tu ne te fis un port!

Car toi, la muse illustre, et moi, l’obscur apôtre,
Nous avons dans ce monde eu le même mandat,
Et c’est un noeud profond qui nous joint l’un à l’autre,
Toi, veuve d’un héros, et moi, fils d’un soldat!

Aussi, sans me lasser, dans cette Babylone,
Des drapeaux insultés baisant chaque lambeau,
J’ai dit pour l’empereur: Rendez-lui sa colonne!
Et je dirai pour toi: Donnez-lui son tombeau!

XIII

PUITS DE L’INDE! TOMBEAUX!

Puits de l’Inde! tombeaux! monuments constellés!
Vous dont l’intérieur n’offre aux regards troublés
Qu’un amas tournoyant de marches et de rampes,
Froids cachots, corridors où rayonnent des lampes,
Poutres où l’araignée a tendu ses longs fils,
Blocs ébauchant partout de sinistres profils,
Toits de granit, troués comme une frêle toile,
Par où l’oeil voit briller quelque profonde étoile,
Et des chaos de murs, de chambres, de paliers,
Où s’écroule au hasard un gouffre d’escaliers!
Cryptes qui remplissez d’horreur religieuse
Votre voûte sans fin, morne et prodigieuse!
Cavernes où l’esprit n’ose aller trop avant!
Devant vos profondeurs j’ai pâli bien souvent
Comme sur un abîme ou sur une fournaise,
Effrayantes Babels que rêvait Piranèse!

Entrez si vous l’osez!
Sur le pavé dormant
Les ombres des arceaux se croisent tristement;
La dalle par endroits, pliant sous les décombres,
S’entr’ouvre pour laisser passer des degrés sombres
Qui fouillent, vis de pierre, un souterrain sans fond;
D’autres montent là-haut et crèvent le plafond.
Où vont-ils? Dieu le sait. Du creux d’une arche vide
Une eau qui tombe envoie une lueur livide.
Une voûte au front vert s’égoutte dans un puits,
Dans l’ombre un lourd monceau de roches sans appuis
S’arrête retenu par des ronces grimpantes;
Une corde qui pend d’un amas de charpentes
S’offre, mystérieuse, à la main du passant.
Dans un caveau, penché sur un livre, et lisant,

Un vieillard surhumain, sous le roc qui surplombe,
Semble vivre oublié par la mort dans sa tombe.
Des sphinx, des boeufs d’airain, sur l’étrave accroupis,
Ont fait des chapiteaux aux piliers décrépits;
L’aspic à l’oeil de braise, agitant ses paupières,
Passe sa tête plate aux crevasses des pierres.
Tout chancelle et fléchit sous les toits entr’ouverts.
Le mur suinte, et l’on voit fourmiller à travers
De grands feuillages roux, sortant d’entre les marbres,
Des monstres qu’on prendrait pour des racines d’arbres.
Partout, sur les parois du morne monument,
Quelque chose d’affreux rampe confusément;
Et celui qui parcourt ce dédale difforme,
Comme s’il était pris par un polype énorme,
Sur son front effaré, sous son pied hasardeux,
Sent vivre et remuer l’édifice hideux!

Aux heures où l’esprit, dont l’oeil partout se pose,
Cherche à voir dans la nuit le fond de toute chose,
Dans ces lieux effrayants mon regard se perdit.
Bien souvent je les ai contemplés, et j’ai dit:

— Ô rêves de granit! grottes visionnaires!
Cryptes! palais! tombeaux, pleins de vagues tonnerres!
Vous êtes moins brumeux, moins noirs, moins ignorés,
Vous êtes moins profonds et moins désespérés
Que le destin, cet antre habité par nos craintes,
Où l’âme entend, perdue, en d’affreux labyrinthes,
Au fond, à travers l’ombre, avec mille bruits sourds,
Dans un gouffre inconnu tomber le flot des jours!

XIV

DANS LE CIMETIÈRE DE...

La foule des vivants rit et suit sa folie,
Tantôt pour son plaisir, tantôt pour son tourment;
Mais par les morts muets, par les morts qu’on oublie,
Moi, rêveur, je me sens regardé fixement.

Ils savent que je suis l’homme des solitudes,
Le promeneur pensif sous les arbres épais,
L’esprit qui trouve, ayant ses douleurs pour études,
Au seuil de tout le trouble, au fond de tout la paix!

Ils savent l’attitude attentive et penchée
Que j’ai parmi les buis, les fosses et les croix;
Ils m’entendent marcher sur la feuille séchée;
Ils m’ont vu contempler des ombres dans les bois,

Ils comprennent ma voix sur le monde épanchée,
Mieux que vous, ô vivants bruyants et querelleurs!
Les hymnes de la lyre en mon âme cachée,
Pour vous ce sont des chants, pour eux ce sont des pleurs.

Moi, c’est là que je vis! - cueillant les roses blanches,
Consolant les tombeaux délaissés trop longtemps,
Je passe et je reviens, je dérange les branches,
Je fait du bruit dans l’herbe, et les morts sont contents.

Là je rêve! et, rôdant dans le champ léthargique,
Je vois, avec des yeux dans ma pensée ouverts,
Se transformer mon âme en un monde magique,
Miroir mystérieux du visible univers.

Regardant sans les voir de vagues scarabées,
Des rameaux indistincts, des formes, des couleurs,

Là, j’ai dans l’ombre, assis sur des pierres tombées,
Des éblouissements de rayons et de fleurs.

Là, le songe idéal qui remplit ma paupière
Flotte, lumineux voile, entre la terre et nous;
Là, mes doutes ingrats se fondent en prière;
Je commence debout et j’achève à genoux.

Comme au creux du rocher vole l’humble colombe,
Cherchant la goutte d’eau qui tombe avant le jour,
Mon esprit altéré, dans l’ombre de la tombe,
Va boire un peu de foi, d’espérance et d’amour!

XV

MERES, L’ENFANT QUI JOUE A VOTRE SEUIL JOYEUX

Mères, l’enfant qui joue à votre seuil joyeux,
Plus frêle que les fleurs, plus serein que les cieux,
Vous conseille l’amour, la pudeur, la sagesse.
L’enfant, c’est un feu pur dont la chaleur caresse;
C’est de la gaîté sainte et du bonheur sacré,
C’est le nom paternel dans un rayon doré;
Et vous n’avez besoin que de cette humble flamme
Pour voir distinctement dans l’ombre de votre âme.
Mères, l’enfant que l’on pleure et qui s’en est allé,
Si vous levez vos fronts vers le ciel constellé,
Verse à votre douleur une lumière auguste;
Car l’innocent éclaire aussi bien que le juste!
Il montre, clarté douce, à vos yeux abattus,
Derrière notre orgueil, derrière nos vertus,
Derrière nos malheurs, Dieu profond et tranquille.
Que l’enfant vive ou dorme, il rayonne toujours!
Sur cette terre où rien ne va loin sans secours,
Où nos jours incertains sur tant d’abîmes pendent,
Comme un guide au milieu des brumes que répandent
Nos vices ténébreux et nos doutes moqueurs,
Vivant, l’enfant fait voir le devoir à vos coeurs;
Mort, c’est la vérité qu’à votre âme il dévoile.
Ici, c’est un flambeau; là-haut, c’est une étoile.

XVI

MATELOTS! MATELOTS!

Matelots! matelots! vous déploierez les voiles;
Vous voguerez, joyeux parfois, mornes souvent;
Et vous regarderez aux lueurs des étoiles
    La rive, écueil ou port, selon le coup de vent.

    Envieux, vous mordrez la base des statues.
    Oiseaux, vous chanterez! vous verdirez, rameaux!
    Portes, vous croulerez de lierres revêtues.
    Cloches, vous ferez vivre et rêver les hameaux.

    Teignant votre nature aux moeurs de tous les hommes,
    Voyageurs, vous irez comme d’errants flambeaux;
    Vous marcherez pensifs sur la terre où nous sommes,
    En vous ressouvenant quelquefois des tombeaux.

    Chênes, vous grandirez au fond des solitudes.
    Dans les lointains brumeux, à la clarté des soirs,
    Vieux saules, vous prendrez de tristes attitudes,
    Et vous vous mirerez vaguement aux lavoirs.

    Nids, vous tressaillirez sentant croître des ailes;
    Sillons, vous frémirez sentant sourdre le blé.
    Torches, vous jetterez de rouges étincelles
    Qui tourbillonneront comme un esprit troublé.

    Foudres, vous nommerez le Dieu que la mer nomme.
    Ruisseaux, vous nourrirez la fleur qu’avril dora;
    Vos flots refléteront l’ombre austère de l’homme.
    Et vos flots crouleront, et l’homme passera.

    Chaque chose et chacun, âme, être, objet ou nombre,
    Suivra son cours, sa loi, son but, sa passion,

Portant sa pierre à l’oeuvre indéfinie et sombre
Qu’avec le genre humain fait la création!

Moi, je contemplerai le Dieu père du monde,
Qui livre à notre soif, dans l’ombre ou la clarté,
Le ciel, cette grande urne, adorable et profonde,
Où l’on puise le calme et la sérénité!

XVII

SPECTACLE RASSURANT

Tout est lumière, tout est joie,
L’araignée au pied diligent
Attache aux tulipes de soie
Ses rondes dentelles d’argent.

La frissonnante libellule
Mire les globes de ses yeux
Dans l’étang splendide où pullule
Tout un monde mystérieux!

La rose semble, rajeunie,
S’accoupler au bouton vermeil;
L’oiseau chante plein d’harmonie
Dans les rameaux pleins de soleil.

Sa voix bénit le Dieu de l’âme
Qui, toujours visible au coeur pur,
Fait l’aube, paupière de flamme,
Pour le ciel, prunelle d’azur!

Sous les bois, où tout bruit s’émousse,
Le faon craintif joue en rêvant;
Dans les verts écrins de la mousse
Luit le scarabée, or vivant.

La lune au jour est tiède et pâle
Comme un joyeux convalescent;
Tendre, elle ouvre ses yeux d’opale
D’où la douceur du ciel descend!

La giroflée avec l’abeille
Folâtre en baisant le vieux mur;

Le chaud sillon gaîment s’éveille,
Remué par le germe obscur.

Tout vit, et se pose avec grâce,
Le rayon sur le seuil ouvert,
L’ombre qui fuit sur l’eau qui passe,
Le ciel bleu sur le coteau vert!

La plaine brille, heureuse et pure;
Le bois jase; l’herbe fleurit. -
Homme! ne crains rien! la nature
Sait le grand secret, et sourit.

XVIII

ÉCRIT SUR LA VITRE D'UNE FENÊTRE FLAMANDE

J'aime le carillon dans tes cités antiques,
Ô vieux pays gardien de tes moeurs domestiques,
Noble Flandre, où le Nord se réchauffe engourdi
Au soleil de Castille et s'accouple au Midi!
Le carillon, c'est l'heure inattendue et folle,
Que l'oeil croit voir, vêtue en danseuse espagnole,
Apparaître soudain par le trou vif et clair
Que ferait en s'ouvrant une porte de l'air.
Elle vient, secouant sur les toits léthargiques
Son tablier d'argent plein de notes magiques,
Réveillant sans pitié les dormeurs ennuyeux,
Sautant à petits pas comme un oiseau joyeux,
Vibrant, ainsi qu'un dard qui tremble dans la cible;
Par un frêle escalier de cristal invisible,
Effarée et dansante, elle descend des cieux;
Et l'esprit, ce veilleur fait d'oreilles et d'yeux,
Tandis qu'elle va, vient, monte et descend encore,
Entend de marche en marche errer son pied sonore!

XIX

CE QUI SE PASSAIT AUX FEUILLANTINES VERS 1813

Enfants, beaux fronts naïfs penchés autour de moi,
Bouches aux dents d’émail disant toujours: Pourquoi?
Vous qui, m’interrogeant sur plus d’un grand problème,
Voulez de chaque chose, obscure pour moi-même,
Connaître le vrai sens et le mot décisif,
Et qui touchez à tout dans mon esprit pensif;
— Si bien que, vous partis, souvent je passe
Des heures, fort maussade, à remettre à leur place
Au fond de mon cerveau mes plans, mes visions,
Mes sujets éternels de méditations,
Dieu, l’homme, l’avenir, la raison, la démence,
Mes systèmes, tas sombre, échafaudage immense,
Dérangés tout à coup, sans tort de votre part,
Par une question d’enfant, faite au hasard! -
Puisqu’enfin vous voilà sondant mes destinées,
Et que vous me parlez de mes jeunes années,
De mes premiers instincts, de mon premier espoir,
Écoutez, doux amis, qui voulez tout savoir!

J’eus dans ma blonde enfance, hélas! trop éphémère,
Trois maîtres: - un jardin, un vieux prêtre et ma mère.

Le jardin était grand, profond, mystérieux,
Fermé par de hauts murs aux regards curieux,
Semé de fleurs s’ouvrant ainsi que des paupières,
Et d’insectes vermeils qui couraient sur les pierres;
Plein de bourdonnements et de confuses voix;
Au milieu, presque un champ, dans le fond, presque un bois.
Le prêtre, tout nourri de Tacite et d’Homère,
Était un doux vieillard. Ma mère - était ma mère!

Ainsi je grandissais sous ce triple rayon.

Un jour... - Oh! si Gautier me prêtait son crayon,
Je vous dessinerais d’un trait une figure
Qui chez ma mère un jour entra, fâcheux augure!
Un docteur au front pauvre, au maintien solennel,
Et je verrais éclore à vos bouches sans fiel,
Portes de votre coeur qu’aucun souci ne mine,
Ce rire éblouissant qui parfois m’illumine!

Lorsque cet homme entra, je jouais au jardin.
Et rien qu’en le voyant je m’arrêtai soudain.

C’était le principal d’un collège quelconque.

Les tritons que Coypel groupe autour d’une conque,
Les faunes que Watteau dans les bois fourvoya,
Les sorciers de Rembrandt, les gnomes de Goya,
Les diables variés, vrais cauchemars de moine
Dont Callot en riant taquine saint Antoine,
Sont laids, mais sont charmants; difformes, mais remplis
D’un feu qui de leur face anime tous les plis
Et parfois dans leurs yeux jette un éclair rapide.
— Notre homme était fort laid, mais il était stupide.

Pardon, j’en parle encor comme un franc écolier.
C’est mal. Ce que j’ai dit, tâchez de l’oublier;
Car de votre âge heureux, qu’un pédant embarrasse,
J’ai gardé la colère et j’ai perdu la grâce.

Cet homme chauve et noir, très effrayant pour moi,
Et dont ma mère aussi d’abord eut quelque effroi,
Tout en multipliant les humbles attitudes,
Apportait des avis et des sollicitudes:
— Que l’enfant n’était pas dirigé; - que parfois
Il emportait son livre en rêvant dans les bois;
Qu’il croissait au hasard dans cette solitude;
Qu’on devait y songer; que la sévère étude

Était fille de l’ombre et des cloîtres profonds;
Qu’une lampe pendue à de sombres plafonds,
Qui de cent écoliers guide la plume agile,
Éclairait mieux Horace et Catulle et Virgile,
Et versait à l’esprit des rayons bien meilleurs
Que le soleil qui joue à travers l’arbre en fleurs;
Et qu’enfin il fallait aux enfants, - loin des mères, -
Le joug, le dur travail et les larmes amères.
Là-dessus, le collège, aimable et triomphant,
Avec un doux sourire offrait au jeune enfant
Ivre de liberté, d’air, de joie et de roses,
Ses bancs de chêne noirs, ses longs dortoirs moroses,
Ses salles qu’on verrouille et qu’à tous leurs piliers
Sculpte avec un vieux clou l’ennui des écoliers,
Ses magisters qui font, parmi les paperasses,
Manger l’heure du jeu par les pensums voraces,
Et, sans eux, sans gazon, sans arbres, sans fruits mûrs,
Sa grande cour pavée entre quatre murs.

L’homme congédié, de ses discours frappée,
Ma mère demeura triste et préoccupée.
Que faire? que vouloir? qui donc avait raison,
Ou le morne collège, ou l’heureuse maison?
Qui sait mieux de la vie accomplir l’oeuvre austère,
L’écolier turbulent, ou l’enfant solitaire?
Problèmes! questions! elle hésitait beaucoup.
L’affaire était bien grave. Humble femme après tout,
Âme par le destin, non par les livres faite,
De quel front repousser ce tragique prophète,
Au ton si magistral, aux gestes si certains,
Qui lui parlait au nom des Grecs et des Latins?
Le prêtre était savant sans doute; mais, que sais-je?
Apprend-on par le maître ou bien par le collège?
Et puis, enfin, - souvent ainsi nous triomphons! -
L’homme le plus vulgaire a de grands mots profonds:
“ Il est indispensable! - il convient! - il importe! “
Qui troublent quelquefois la femme la plus forte.

Pauvre mère! lequel choisir des deux chemins?
Tout le sort de son fils se pesait dans ses mains.
Tremblante, elle tenait cette lourde balance,
Et croyait bien la voir par moments en silence
Pencher vers le collège, hélas! en opposant
Mon bonheur à venir à mon bonheur présent.

Elle songeait ainsi sans sommeil et sans trêve.

C’était l’été. Vers l’heure où la lune se lève,
Par un de ces beaux soirs qui ressemblent au jour
Avec moins de clarté, mais avec plus d’amour,
Dans son parc, où jouaient le rayon et la brise,
Elle errait, toujours triste et toujours indécise,
Questionnant tout bas l’eau, le ciel, la forêt,
Écoutant au hasard les voix qu’elle entendait.

C’est dans ces moments-là que le jardin paisible,
La broussaille où remue un insecte invisible,
Le scarabée ami des feuilles, le lézard
Courant au clair de lune au fond du vieux puisard,
La faïence à fleur bleue où vit la plante grasse,
Le dôme oriental du sombre Val-de-Grâce,
Le cloître du couvent, brisé, mais doux encor,
Les marronniers, la verte allée aux boutons-d’or,
La statue où sans bruit se meut l’ombre des branches,
Les pâles liserons, les pâquerettes blanches,
Les cent fleurs du buisson, de l’arbre, du roseau,
Qui rendent en parfums ses chansons à l’oiseau,
Se mirent dans la mare ou se cachent dans l’herbe,
Ou qui, de l’ébénier chargeant le front superbe,
Au bord des clairs étangs se mêlant au bouleau,
Tremblent en grappes d’or dans les moires de l’eau,
Et le ciel scintillant derrière les ramées,
Et les toits répandant de charmantes fumées,
C’est dans ces moments-là, comme je vous le dis,
Que tout ce beau jardin, radieux paradis,

Tous ces vieux murs croulants, toutes ces jeunes roses,
Tous ces objets pensifs, toutes ces douces choses,
Parlèrent à ma mère avec l’onde et le vent,
Et lui dirent tout bas: “ Laisse-nous cet enfant! “

“ Laisse-nous cet enfant, pauvre mère troublée!
Cette prunelle ardente, ingénue, étoilée,
Cette tête au front pur qu’aucun deuil ne voila,
Cette âme neuve encor, mère, laisse-nous-la!
Ne vas pas la jeter au hasard dans la foule.
La foule est un torrent qui brise ce qu’il roule.
Ainsi que les oiseaux les enfants ont leurs peurs.
Laisse à notre air limpide, à nos moites vapeurs,
À nos soupirs, légers comme l’aile d’un songe,
Cette bouche où jamais n’a passé le mensonge,
Ce sourire naïf que sa candeur défend!
Ô mère au coeur profond, laisse-nous cet enfant!
Nous ne lui donnerons que de bonnes pensées;
Nous changerons en jour ses lueurs commencées;
Dieu deviendra visible à ses yeux enchantés;
Car nous sommes les fleurs, les rameaux, les clartés,
Nous sommes la nature et la source éternelle
Où toute soif s’épanche, où se lave toute aile;
Et les bois et les champs, du sage seul compris,
Font l’éducation de tous les grands esprits!
Laisse croître l’enfant parmi nos bruits sublimes.
Nous le pénétrerons de ces parfums intimes,
Nés du souffle céleste épars dans tout beau lieu,
Qui font sortir de l’homme et monter jusqu’à Dieu,
Comme le chant d’un luth, comme l’encens d’un vase,
L’espérance, l’amour, la prière, et l’extase!
Nous pencherons ses yeux vers l’ombre d’ici-bas,
Vers le secret de tout entr’ouvert sous ses pas.
D’enfant nous le ferons homme, et d’homme poète.
Pour former de ses sens la corolle inquiète,
C’est nous qu’il faut choisir; et nous lui montrerons
Comment, de l’aube au soir, du chêne aux moucherons,

Emplissant tout, reflets, couleurs, brumes, haleines,
La vie aux mille aspects rit dans les vertes plaines.
Nous te le rendrons simple et des cieux ébloui:
Et nous ferons germer de toutes parts en lui
Pour l’homme, triste effet perdu sous tant de causes,
Cette pitié qui naît du spectacle des choses!
Laissez-nous cet enfant! nous lui ferons un coeur
Qui comprendra la femme; un esprit non moqueur,
Où naîtront aisément le songe et la chimère,
Qui prendra Dieu pour livre et les champs pour grammaire,
Un âme, pur foyer de secrètes faveurs,
Qui luira doucement sur tous les fronts rêveurs,
Et, comme le soleil dans les fleurs fécondées,
Jettera des rayons sur toutes les idées! “

Ainsi parlaient, à l’heure où la ville se tait,
L’astre, la plante et l’arbre, - et ma mère écoutait.

Enfants! ont-ils tenu leur promesse sacrée?
Je ne sais. Mais je sais que ma mère adorée
Les crut, et, m’épargnant d’ennuyeuses prisons,
Confia ma jeune âme à leurs douces leçons.

Dès lors, en attendant la nuit, heure où l’étude
Rappelait ma pensée à sa grave attitude,
Tout le jour, libre, heureux, seul sous le firmament,
Je pus errer à l’aise en ce jardin charmant,
Contemplant les fruits d’or, l’eau rapide ou stagnante,
L’étoile épanouie et la fleur rayonnante,
Et les prés et les bois, que mon esprit le soir,
Revoyait dans Virgile ainsi qu’en un miroir.

Enfants! aimez les champs, les vallons, les fontaines,
Les chemins que le soir emplit de voix lointaines,
Et l’onde et le sillon, flanc jamais assoupi,
Où germe la pensée à côté de l’épi.
Prenez-vous par la main et marchez dans les herbes;

Regardez ceux qui vont liant les blondes gerbes;
Épelez dans le ciel plein de lettres de feu,
Et, quand un oiseau chante, écoutez parler Dieu.
La vie avec le choc des passions contraires
Vous attend; soyez bons, soyez vrais, soyez frères;
Unis contre le monde où l'esprit se corrompt,
Lisez au même livre en vous touchant du front,
Et n'oubliez jamais que l'âme humble et choisie
Faite pour la lumière et pour la poésie,
Que les coeurs où Dieu met des échos sérieux
Pour tous les bruits qu'anime un sens mystérieux,
Dans un cri, dans un son, dans un vague murmure,
Entendent les conseils de toute la nature!

XX

AU STATUAIRE DAVID

I

David! comme un grand roi qui partage à des princes
Les états paternels provinces par provinces,
Dieu donne à chaque artiste un empire divers;
Au poète le souffle épars dans l’univers,
La vie et la pensée et les foudres tonnantes,
Et le splendide essaim des strophes frissonnantes
Volant de l’homme à l’ange et du monstre à la fleur;
La forme au statuaire; au peintre la couleur;
Au doux musicien, rêveur limpide et sombre,
Le monde obscur des sons qui murmure dans l’ombre.

La forme au statuaire! - Oui, mais, tu le sais bien,
La forme, ô grand sculpteur, c’est tout et ce n’est rien.
Ce n’est rien sans l’esprit, c’est tout avec l’idée!
Il faut que, sous le ciel, de soleil inondée,
Debout sous les flambeaux d’un grand temple doré,
Ou seule avec la nuit dans un antre sacré,
Au fond des bois dormants comme au seuil d’un théâtre,
La figure de pierre, ou de cuivre, ou d’albâtre,
Porte divinement sur son front calme et fier
La beauté, ce rayon, la gloire, cet éclair!
Il faut qu’un souffle ardent lui gonfle la narine,
Que la force puissante emplisse sa poitrine,
Que la grâce en riant ait arrondi ses doigts,
Que sa bouche muette ait pourtant une voix!
Il faut qu’elle soit grave et pour les mains glacée,
Mais pour les yeux vivante, et, devant la pensée,
Devant le pur regard de l’âme et du ciel bleu,
Nue avec majesté comme Adam devant Dieu!
Il faut que, Vénus chaste, elle sorte de l’onde,

Semant au loin la vie et l'amour sur le monde,
Et faisant autour d'elle, en son superbe essor,
Partout où s'éparpille et tombe en gouttes d'or,
L'eau de ses longs cheveux, humide et sacré voile,
De toute herbe une fleur, de tout oeil une étoile!
Il faut, si l'art chrétien anime le sculpteur,
Qu'avec le même charme elle ait plus de hauteur;
Qu'Âme ailée, elle rie et de Satan se joue;
Que, Martyre, elle chante à côté de la roue;
Ou que, Vierge divine, astre du gouffre amer,
Son regard soit si doux qu'il apaise la mer!

II

Voilà ce que tu sais, ô noble statuaire!
Toi qui dans l'art profond, comme en un sanctuaire,
Entras bien jeune encor pour n'en sortir jamais!
Esprit, qui, te posant sur les plus purs sommets
Pour créer ta grande oeuvre, où sont tant d'harmonies,
Près de la flamme au front de tous les fiers génies!
Voilà ce que tu sais, toi qui sens, toi qui vois!
Maître sévère et doux qu'éclairent à la fois,
Comme un double rayon qui jette un jour étrange,
Le jeune Raphaël et le vieux Michel-Ange!
Et tu sais bien aussi quel souffle inspirateur
Parfois, comme un vent sombre, emporte le sculpteur,
Âme dans Isaïe et Phidias trempée,
De l'ode étroite et haute à l'immense épopée!

III

Les grands hommes, héros ou penseurs, - demi-dieux! -
Tour à tour sur le peuple ont passé radieux,
Les uns armés d'un glaive et les autres d'un livre,
Ceux-ci montrant du doigt la route qu'il faut suivre,
Ceux-là forçant la cause à sortir de l'effet;
L'artiste ayant un rêve et le savant un fait;

L’un a trouvé l’aimant, la presse, la boussole,
L’autre un monde où l’on va, l’autre un vers qui console;
Ce roi, juste et profond, pour l’aider en chemin,
A pris la liberté franchement par la main;
Ces tribuns ont forgé des freins aux républiques;
Ce prêtre, fondateur d’hospices angéliques,
Sous son toit, que réchauffe une haleine de Dieu,
A pris l’enfant sans mère et le vieillard sans feu,
Ce mage, dont l’esprit réfléchit les étoiles,
D’Isis l’un après l’autre a levé tous les voiles;
Ce juge, abolissant l’infâme tombereau,
A raturé le code à l’endroit du bourreau;
Ensemençant malgré les clameurs insensées,
D’écoles les hameaux et les coeurs de pensées,
Pour nous rendre meilleurs ce vrai sage est venu;
En de graves instant cet autre a contenu,
Sous ses puissantes mains à la foule imposées,
Le peuple, grand faiseur de couronnes brisées;
D’autres ont traversé sur un pont chancelant,
Sur la mine qu’un fort recelait en son flanc,
Sur la brèche par où s’écroule une muraille,
Un horrible ouragan de flamme et de mitraille;
Dans un siècle de haine, âge impie et moqueur,
Ceux-là, poètes saints, ont fait entendre en choeur,
Aux sombres nations que la discorde pousse,
Des champs et des forêts la voix auguste et douce
Car l’hymne universel éteint les passions;
Car c’est surtout aux jours des révolutions,
Morne et brûlant désert où l’homme s’aventure,
Que l’art se désaltère à ta source, ô nature!
Tous ces hommes, coeurs purs, esprits de vérité,
Fronts où se résuma toute l’humanité,
Rêveurs ou rayonnants, sont debout dans l’histoire,
Et tous ont leur martyre auprès de leur victoire.
La vertu, c’est un livre austère et triomphant
Où tout père doit faire épeler son enfant;
Chaque homme illustre, ayant quelque divine empreinte,

De ce grand alphabet est une lettre sainte.
Sous leurs pieds sont groupés leurs symboles sacrés,
Astres, lyres, compas, lions démesurés,
Aigles à l’oeil de flamme, aux vastes envergures.
— Le sculpteur ébloui contemple ces figures! -
Il songe à la patrie, aux tombeaux solennels,
Aux cités à remplir d’exemples éternels;
Et voici que déjà, vision magnifique!
Mollement éclairés d’un reflet pacifique,
Grandissant hors du sol de moment en moment,
De vagues bas-reliefs chargés confusément,
Au fond de son esprit, que la pensée encombre,
Les énormes frontons apparaissent dans l’ombre!

IV

N’est-ce pas? c’est ainsi qu’en ton cerveau, sans bruit,
L’édifice s’ébauche et l’oeuvre se construit?
C’est là ce qui se passe en ta grande âme émue
Quand tout un panthéon ténébreux s’y remue?
C’est ainsi, n’est-ce pas, ô maître! que s’unit
L’homme à l’architecture et l’idée au granit?
Oh! qu’en ces instants-là ta fonction est haute!
Au seuil de ton fronton tu reçois comme un hôte
Ces hommes plus qu’humains. Sur un bloc de Paros
Tu t’assieds face à face avec tous ces héros
Et là, devant tes yeux qui jamais ne défaillent,
Ces ombres, qui seront bronze et marbre, tressaillent.
L’avenir est à toi, ce but de tous leurs voeux,
Et tu peux le donner, ô maître, à qui tu veux!
Toi, répandant sur tous ton équité complète,
Prêtre autant que sculpteur, juge autant que poète,
Accueillant celui-ci, rejetant celui-là,
Louant Napoléon, gourmandant Attila,
Parfois grandissant l’un par le contact de l’autre,
Dérangeant le guerrier pour mieux placer l’apôtre,
Tu fais des dieux! - tu dis, abaissant ta hauteur,

Au pauvre vieux soldat, à l’humble vieux pasteur:
— Entrez! je vous connais. Vos couronnes sont prêtes.
Et tu dis à des rois: — Je ne sais qui vous êtes.

V

Car il ne suffit point d’avoir été des rois,
D’avoir porté le sceptre, et le globe, et la croix,
Pour que le fier poète et l’altier statuaire
Étoilent dans sa nuit votre drap mortuaire,
Et des hauts panthéons vous ouvrent les chemins!

C’est vous-mêmes, ô rois, qui de vos propres mains
Bâtissez sur vos noms ou la gloire ou la honte!
Ce que nous avons fait tôt ou tard nous raconte.
On peut vaincre le monde, avoir un peuple, agir
Sur un siècle, guérir sa plaie ou l’élargir, -
Lorsque vos missions seront enfin remplies,
Des choses qu’ici-bas vous aurez accomplies
Une voix sortira, voix de haine ou d’amour,
Sombre comme le bruit du verrou dans la tour,
Ou douce comme un chant dans le nid des colombes,
Qui fera remuer la pierre de vos tombes.
Cette voix, l’avenir, grave et fatal témoin,
Est d’avance penché qui l’écoute de loin.
Et là, point de caresse et point de flatterie,
Point de bouche à mentir façonnée et nourrie,
Pas d’hosanna payé, pas d’écho complaisant
Changeant la plainte amère en cri reconnaissant.
Non, les vices hideux, les trahisons, les crimes,
Comme les dévouements et les vertus sublimes,
Portent un témoignage intègre et souverain.
Les actions qu’on fait ont des lèvres d’airain.

VI

Que sur ton atelier, maître, un rayon demeure!

Là, dans le silence, l’art, l’étude oubliant l’heure,
Dans l’ombre les essais que tu répudias,
D’un côté Jean Goujon, de l’autre Phidias,
Des pierres, de pensée à demi revêtues,
Un tumulte muet d’immobiles statues,
Les bustes méditant dans les coins assombris,
Je ne sais quelle paix qui tombe des labris,
Tout est grand, tout est beau, tout charme et tout domine.
Toi qu’à l’intérieur l’art divin illumine,
Tu regardes passer, grave et sans dire un mot,
Dans ton âme tranquille où le jour vient d’en haut,
Tous les nobles aspects de la figure humaine.
Comme dans une église à pas lents se promène
Un grand peuple pensif auquel un dieu sourit,
Ces fantômes sereins marchent dans ton esprit.
Ils errent à travers tes rêves poétiques
Faits d’ombres et de lueurs et de vagues portiques,
Parfois palais vermeil, parfois tombeau dormant,
Secrète architecture, immense entassement
Qui, jetant des rumeurs joyeuses et plaintives,
De ta grande pensée emplit les perspectives,
Car l’antique Babel n’est pas morte, et revit
Sous les front des songeurs. Dans ta tête, ô David!
La spirale se tord, le pilier se projette;
Et dans l’obscurité de ton cerveau végète
La profonde forêt, qu’on ne voit point ailleurs,
Des chapiteaux touffus pleins d’oiseaux et de fleurs!

VII

Maintenant, - toi qui vas hors des routes tracées,
Ô pétrisseur de bronze, ô mouleur de pensées,
Considère combien les hommes sont petits,
Et maintiens-toi superbe au-dessus des partis!
Garde la dignité de ton ciseau sublime.
Ne laisse pas toucher ton marbre par la lime
Des sombres passions qui rongent tant d’esprits.

Michel-Ange avait Rome et David a Paris.
Donne donc à ta ville, ami, ce grand exemple
Que, si les marchands vils n’entrent pas dans le temple,
Les fureurs des tribuns et leur songe abhorré
N’entrent pas dans le coeur de l’artiste sacré.
Refuse aux cours ton art, donne aux peuples tes veilles,
C’est bien, ô mon sculpteur! mais loin de tes oreilles
Chasse ceux qui s’en vont flattant les carrefours.
Toi, dans ton atelier, tu dois rêver toujours,
Et, de tout vice humain écrasant la couleuvre,
Toi-même par degrés t’éblouir de ton oeuvre!
Ce que ces hommes-là font dans l’ombre ou défont
Ne vaut pas ton regard levé vers le plafond
Cherchant la beauté pure et le grand et le juste.
Leur mission est basse et la tienne est auguste.
Et qui donc oserait mêler un seul moment
Aux mêmes visions, au même aveuglement,
Aux mêmes voeux haineux, insensés ou féroces,
Eux, esclaves des nains, toi, père des colosses!

XXI

À UN POÈTE

Ami, cache ta vie et répands ton esprit.

Un tertre, où le gazon diversement fleurit;
Des ravins où l'on voit grimper les chèvres blanches;
Un vallon, abrité sous un réseau de branches
Pleines de nids d'oiseaux, de murmures, de voix,
Qu'un vent joyeux remue, et d'où tombe parfois,
Comme un sequin jeté par une main distraite,
Un rayon de soleil dans ton âme secrète;
Quelques rocs, par Dieu même arrangés savamment
Pour faire des échos au fond du bois dormant;
Voilà ce qu'il te faut pour séjour, pour demeure!
C'est là, - que ta maison chante, aime, rie ou pleure, -
Qu'il faut vivre, enfouir ton toit, borner tes jours,
Envoyant un soupir à peine aux antres sourds,
Mirant dans ta pensée intérieure et sombre
La vie obscure et douce et les heures sans nombre,
Bon d'ailleurs, et tournant, sans trouble ni remords,
Ton coeur vers les enfants, ton âme vers les morts!
Et puis, en même temps, au hasard, par le monde,
Suivant sa fantaisie auguste et vagabonde,
Loin de toi, par delà ton horizon vermeil,
Laisse ta poésie aller en plein soleil!
Dans les rauques cités, dans les champs taciturnes,
Effleurée en passant des lèvres et des urnes,
Laisse-la s'épancher, cristal jamais terni,
Et fuir, roulant toujours vers Dieu, gouffre infini,
Calme et pure, à travers les âmes fécondées,
Un immense courant de rêves et d'idées,
Qui recueille en passant, dans son flot solennel,
Toute eau qui sort de la terre ou qui descend du ciel!
Toi, sois heureux dans l'ombre. En ta vie ignorée,

Dans ta tranquillité vénérable et sacrée,
Reste réfugié, penseur mystérieux!
Et que le voyageur malade et sérieux
Puisse, si le hasard l’amène en ta retraite,
Puiser en toi la paix, l’espérance discrète,
L’oubli de la fatigue et l’oubli du danger,
Et boire à ton esprit limpide, sans songer
Que, là-bas, tout un peuple aux mêmes eaux s’abreuve.

Sois petit comme source et sois grand comme fleuve.

XXII

GUITARE

Gastibelza, l’homme à la carabine,
Chantait ainsi:
“ Quelqu’un a-t-il connu doña Sabine?
Quelqu’un d’ici?
Dansez, chantez, villageois! la nuit gagne
Le mont Falù.
— Le vent qui vient à travers la montagne
Me rendra fou!

“ Quelqu’un de vous a-t-il connu Sabine,
Ma señora?
Sa mère était la vieille maugrabine
D’Antequera,
Qui chaque nuit criait dans la Tour-Magne
Comme un hibou... -
Le vent qui vient à travers la montagne
Me rendra fou!

“ Dansez, chantez! Des biens que l’heure envoie
Il faut user.
Elle était jeune et son oeil plein de joie
Faisait penser. -
À ce vieillard qu’un enfant accompagne
Jetez un sou! ... -
Le vent qui vient à travers la montagne
Me rendra fou.

“ Vraiment, la reine eût près d’elle été laide
Quand, vers le soir,
Elle passait sur le pont de Tolède
En corset noir.
Un chapelet du temps de Charlemagne

Ornait son cou... -
Le vent qui vient à travers la montagne
Me rendra fou.

“ Le roi disait en la voyant si belle
À son neveu: — Pour un baiser, pour un sourire d’elle,
Pour un cheveu,
Infant don Ruy, je donnerais l’Espagne
Et le Pérou! -
Le vent qui vient à travers la montagne
Me rendra fou.

“ Je ne sais pas si j’aimais cette dame,
Mais je sais bien
Que pour avoir un regard de son âme,
Moi, pauvre chien,
J’aurais gaîment passé dix ans au bagne
Sous le verrou... -
Le vent qui vient à travers la montagne
Me rendra fou.

“ Un jour d’été que tout était lumière,
Vie et douceur,
Elle s’en vint jouer dans la rivière
Avec sa soeur,
Je vis le pied de sa jeune compagne
Et son genou... -
Le vent qui vient à travers la montagne
Me rendra fou.

“ Quand je voyais cette enfant, moi le pâtre
De ce canton,
Je croyais voir la belle Cléopâtre,
Qui, nous dit-on,
Menait César, empereur d’Allemagne,
Par le licou... -
Le vent qui vient à travers la montagne

Me rendra fou.

“ Dansez, chantez, villageois, la nuit tombe!
Sabine, un jour,
A tout vendu, sa beauté de colombe,
Et son amour,
Pour l’anneau d’or du comte de Saldagne,
Pour un bijou... -
Le vent qui vient à travers la montagne
Me rendra fou.

“ Sur ce vieux banc souffrez que je m’appuie,
Car je suis las.
Avec ce comte elle s’est donc enfuie!
Enfuie, hélas!
Par le chemin qui va vers la Cerdagne,
Je ne sais où... -
Le vent qui vient à travers la montagne
Me rendra fou.

“ Je la voyais passer de ma demeure,
Et c’était tout.
Mais à présent je m’ennuie à toute heure,
Plein de dégoût,
Rêveur oisif, l’âme dans la campagne,
La dague au clou... -
Le vent qui vient à travers la montagne
M’a rendu fou! “

XXIII

AUTRE GUITARE

Comment, disaient-ils,
Avec nos nacelles,
Fuir les alguazils?
— Ramez, disaient-elles.

Comment, disaient-ils,
Oublier querelles,
Misère et périls?
— Dormez, disaient-elles.

Comment, disaient-ils,
Enchanter les belles
Sans philtres subtils?
— Aimez, disaient-elles.

XXIV

QUAND TU ME PARLES DE GLOIRE

Quand tu me parles de gloire,
Je souris amèrement.
Cette voix que tu veux croire,
Moi, je sais bien qu’elle ment.

La gloire est vite abattue;
L’envie au sanglant flambeau
N’épargne cette statue
Qu’assise au seuil d’un tombeau.

La prospérité s’envole,
Le pouvoir tombe et s’enfuit.
Un peu d’amour qui console
Vaut mieux et fait moins de bruit.

Je ne veux pas d’autres choses
Que ton sourire et ta voix,
De l’air, de l’ombre et des roses,
Et des rayons dans les bois!

Je ne veux, moi qui me voile
Dans la joie ou la douleur,
Que ton regard, mon étoile!
Que ton haleine, ô ma fleur!

Sous ta paupière vermeille
Qu’inonde un céleste jour,
Tout un univers sommeille.
Je n’y cherche que l’amour!

Ma pensée, urne profonde,
Vase à la douce liqueur,

Qui pourrait emplir le monde,
Ne veut emplir que ton coeur!

Chante! en moi l’extase coule.
Ris-moi! c’est mon seul besoin.
Que m’importe cette foule
Qui fait sa rumeur au loin!

Dans l’ivresse où tu me plonges,
En vain, pour briser nos noeuds,
Je vois passer dans mes songes
Les poètes lumineux.

Je veux, quoi qu’ils me conseillent,
Préférer, jusqu’à la mort,
Aux fanfares qui m’éveillent
Ta chanson qui me rendort.

Je veux, dût mon nom suprême
Au front des cieux s’allumer,
Qu’une moitié de moi-même
Reste ici-bas pour t’aimer!

Laisse-moi t’aimer dans l’ombre,
Triste, ou du moins sérieux.
La tristesse est un lieu sombre
Où l’amour rayonne mieux.

Ange aux yeux pleins d’étincelles,
Femme aux jours de pleurs noyés,
Prends mon âme sur tes ailes,
Laisse mon coeur à tes pieds!

XXV

EN PASSANT DANS LA PLACE LOUIS XV UN JOUR DE FÊTE PUBLIQUE

— Allons, dit-elle, encor! pourquoi ce front courbé?
Songeur, dans votre puits vous voilà retombé!
À quoi bon pour rêver venir dans une fête?
Moi, je lui dis, tandis qu'elle inclinait la tête,
Et que son bras charmant à mon bras s'appuyait:
— Oui, c'est dans cette place où notre âge inquiet
Mit une pierre afin de cacher une idée,
C'est bien ici qu'un jour de soleil inondée,
La grande nation dans la grande cité
Vint voir passer en pompe une douce beauté!
Ange à qui l'on rêvait des ailes repliées!
Vierge la veille encor, des jeunes mariées
Ayant l'étonnement et la fraîche pâleur,
Qui, reine et femme, étoile en même temps que fleur,
Unissait, pour charmer cette foule attendrie,
Le doux nom d'Antoinette au beau nom de Marie!

Son prince la suivait, ils souriaient entre eux,
Et tous en la voyant disaient: Qu'il est heureux! -

Et je me tus alors, car mon coeur était sombre;
La laissant contempler la fête aux bruits sans nombre,
Le fleuve où se croisaient cent bateaux pavoisés,
Le peuple, les vieillards à l'ombre reposés,
Les écoliers jouant par bandes séparées,
Et le soleil tranquille, et, de joie enivrées,
Les bouches qui, couvrant l'orchestre aux vagues sons,
Jetaient une vapeur de confuses chansons.

Moi, vers ce qui se meut dans une ombre éternelle,
Je m'étais retourné. L'âme est une prunelle.

— Oh! pensais-je, pouvoir étrange et surhumain
De celui qui nous tient palpitants dans sa main!
Ô volonté du ciel! abîme où l’oeil se noie!
Gouffre où depuis Adam le genre humain tournoie!
Comme vous nous prenez et vous nous rejetez!
Comme vous vous jouez de nos prospérités!
Sur votre sable, ô Dieu, notre granit se fonde!
Oh! que l’homme est plongé dans une nuit profonde!
Comme tout ce qu’il fait, hélas! en s’achevant
Sur lui croule! et combien il arrive souvent
Qu’à l’heure où nous rêvons un avenir suprême,
Le sort de nous se rit, et que, sous nos pas même,
Dans cette terre où rien ne nous semble creusé,
Quelque chose d’horrible est déjà déposé!
Louis seize, le jour de sa noce royale,
Avait déjà le pied sur la place fatale
Où, formé lentement au souffle du Très-Haut,
Comme un grain dans le sol, germait son échafaud!

XXVI

MILLE CHEMINS, UN SEUL BUT

Le chasseur songe dans les bois
À des beautés sur l’herbe assises,
Et dans l’ombre il croit voir parfois
Danser des formes indécises.

Le soldat pense à ses destins
Tout en veillant sur les empires,
Et dans ses souvenirs lointains
Entrevoit de vagues sourires.

Le pâtre attend sous le ciel bleu
L’heure où son étoile paisible
Va s’épanouir, fleur de feu,
Au bout d’une tige invisible.

Regarde-les, regarde encor
Comme la vierge, fille d’Ève,
Jette en courant dans les blés d’or
Sa chanson qui contient son rêve!

Vois errer dans les champs en fleur,
Dos courbé, paupières baissées,
Le poète, cet oiseleur,
Qui cherche à prendre des pensées.

Vois sur la mer les matelots
Implorant la terre embaumée,
Lassés de l’écume des flots,
Et demandant une fumée!

Se rappelant quand le flot noir
Bat les flancs plaintifs du navire,

Les hameaux si joyeux le soir,
Les arbres pleins d’éclats de rire!

Vois le prêtre, priant pour tous,
Front pur qui sous nos fautes penche,
Songer dans le temple, à genoux
Sur les plis de sa robe blanche.

Vois s’élever sur les hauteurs
Tous ces grands penseurs que tu nommes,
Sombres esprit dominateurs,
Chênes dans la forêt des hommes.

Vois, couvant des yeux son trésor,
La mère contempler, ravie,
Son enfant, coeur sans ombre encor,
Vase que remplira la vie!

Tous, dans la joie ou dans l’affront,
Portent, sans nuage et sans tache,
Un mot qui rayonne à leur front,
Dans leur âme un mot qui se cache.

Selon les desseins du Seigneur,
Le mot qu’on voit pour tous varie;
— L’un a: Gloire! l’autre a: Bonheur!
L’un dit: Vertu! l’autre: Patrie!

Le mot caché ne change pas.
Dans tous les coeurs toujours le même;
Il y chante ou gémit tout bas;
Et ce mot, c’est le mot suprême!

C’est le mot qui peut assoupir
L’ennui du front le plus morose!
C’est le mystérieux soupir
Qu’à toute heure fait toute chose!

C’est le mot d’où les autres mots
Sortent comme d’un tronc austère,
Et qui remplit de ses rameaux
Tous les langages de la terre!

C’est le verbe, obscur ou vermeil,
Qui luit dans le reflet des fleuves,
Dans le phare, dans le soleil,
Dans la sombre lampe des veuves!

Qui se mêle au bruit des roseaux,
Au tressaillement des colombes;
Qui jase et rit dans les berceaux,
Et qu’on sent vivre au fond des tombes!

Qui fait éclore dans les bois
Les feuilles, les souffles, les ailes,
La clémence au coeur des grands rois,
Le sourire aux lèvres des belles!

C’est le noeud des prés et des eaux!
C’est le charme qui se compose
Du plus tendre cri des oiseaux,
Du plus doux parfum de la rose!

C’est l’hymne que le gouffre amer
Chante en poussant au port des voiles!
C’est le mystère de la mer,
Et c’est le secret des étoiles!

Ce mot, fondement éternel
De la seconde des deux Romes,
C’est Foi dans la langue du ciel,
Amour dans la langue des hommes!

Aimer, c’est avoir dans les mains

Un fil pour toutes les épreuves,
Un flambeau pour tous les chemins,
Une coupe pour tous les fleuves!

Aimer, c’est comprendre les cieux.
C’est mettre, qu’on dorme ou qu’on veille,
Une lumière dans ses yeux,
Une musique en son oreille!

C’est se chauffer à ce qui bout!
C’est pencher son âme embaumée
Sur le côté divin de tout!
Ainsi, ma douce bien-aimée,

Tu mêles ton coeur et tes sens,
Dans la retraite où tu m’accueilles,
Aux dialogues ravissants
Des flots, des astres et des feuilles!

La vitre laisse voir le jour;
Malgré nos brumes et nos doutes,
Ô mon ange! à travers l’amour
Les vérités paraissent toutes!

L’homme et la femme, couple heureux,
À qui le coeur tient lieu d’apôtre,
Laissent voir le ciel derrière eux,
Et sont transparents l’un pour l’autre.

Ils ont en eux, comme un lac noir
Reflète un astre en son eau pure,
Du Dieu caché qu’on ne peut voir
Une lumineuse figure!

Aimons! prions! les bois sont verts,
L’été resplendit sur la mousse,
Les germes vivent entr’ouverts,

L’onde s’épanche et l’herbe pousse!

Que la foule, bien loin de nous
Suive ses routes insensées.
Aimons, et tombons à genoux,
Et laissons aller nos pensées!

L’amour, qu’il vienne tôt ou tard,
Prouve Dieu dans notre âme sombre.
Il faut bien un corps quelque part
Pour que le miroir ait une ombre.

XXVII

Oh! quand je dors, viens auprès de ma couche,

Oh! quand je dors, viens auprès de ma couche,
Comme à Pétrarque apparaissait Laura,
Et qu'en passant ton haleine me touche... -
Soudain ma bouche
S'entrouvrira!

Sur mon front morne où peut-être s'achève
Un songe noir qui trop longtemps dura,
Que ton regard comme un astre se lève... -
Soudain mon rêve
Rayonnera!

Puis sur ma lèvre où voltige une flamme,
Éclair d'amour que Dieu même épura,
Pose un baiser, et d'ange deviens femme... -
Soudain mon âme
S'éveillera!

XXVIII

À UNE JEUNE FEMME

Voyez-vous, un parfum éveille la pensée.
Repliez, belle enfant par l’aube caressée,
Cet éventail ailé, pourpre, or et vermillon,
Qui tremble dans vos mains comme un grand papillon,
Et puis écoutez-moi. - Dieu fait l’odeur des roses
Comme il fait un abîme, avec autant de choses.
Celui-ci, qui se meurt sur votre sein charmant,
N’aurait pas ce parfum qui monte doucement
Comme un encens divin vers votre beauté pure,
Si sa tige, parmi l’eau, l’air et la verdure,
Dans la création prenant sa part de tout,
N’avait profondément plongé par quelque bout,
Pauvre et fragile fleur pour tous les vents béante,
Au sein mystérieux de la terre géante.
Là, par un lent travail que Dieu lui seul connaît,
Fraîcheur du flot qui court, blancheur du jour qui naît,
Souffle de ce qui coule, ou végète, ou se traîne,
L’esprit de ce qui vit dans la nuit souterraine,
Fumée, onde, vapeur, de loin comme de près,
— Non sans faire avec tout des échanges secrets, -
Elle a dérobé tout, son calme à l’antre sombre,
Au diamant sa flamme, à la forêt son ombre,
Et peut-être, qui sait? sur l’aile du matin
Quelque ineffable haleine à l’océan lointain!
Et vivant alambic que Dieu lui-même forme,
Où filtre et se répand la terre, vase énorme,
Avec les bois, les champs, les nuages, les eaux,
Et l’air tout pénétré des chansons des oiseaux,
La racine, humble, obscure, au travail résignée,
Pour la superbe fleur par le soleil baignée,
A, sans en rien garder, fait ce parfum si doux,
Qui vient si mollement de la nature à vous,

Qui vous charme, et se mêle à votre esprit, madame,
Car l’âme d’une fleur parle au coeur d’une femme.

Encore un mot, et puis je vous laisse rêver.
Pour qu’atteignant au but où tout doit s’élever,
Chaque chose ici-bas prenne un attrait suprême,
Pour que la fleur embaume et pour que la vierge aime,
Pour que, puisant la vie au grand centre commun,
La corolle ait une âme et la femme un parfum,
Sous le soleil qui luit, sous l’amour qui fascine,
Il faut, fleur de beauté, tenir par la racine,
L’une au monde idéal, l’autre au monde réel,
Les roses à la terre et les femmes au ciel.

XXIX

À LOUIS B.

Ô Louis! je songeais! - Baigné d’ombre sereine,
Le soir tombait; des feux scintillaient dans la plaine;
Les vastes flots berçaient le nid de l’alcyon;
J’écoutais vers le ciel, où toute aube commence,
Monter confusément une louange immense
Des deux extrémités de la création.

Ce que Dieu fit petit chantait dans son délire
Tout ce que Dieu fait grand, et je voyais sourire
Le colosse à l’atome et l’étoile au flambeau;
La nature semblait n’avoir qu’une âme aimante.
La montagne disait: Que la fleur est charmante!
Le moucheron disait: Que l’océan est beau!

XXX

À cette terre, où l’on ploie

À cette terre, où l’on ploie
Sa tente au déclin du jour,
Ne demande pas la joie.
Contente-toi de l’amour!

Excepté lui, tout s’efface.
La vie est un sombre lieu
Où chaque chose qui passe
Ébauche l’homme pour Dieu.

L’homme est l’arbre à qui la sève
Manque avant qu’il soit en fleur.
Son sort jamais ne s’achève
Que du côté du malheur.

Tous cherchent la joie ensemble;
L’esprit rit à tout venant;
Chacun tend sa main qui tremble
Vers quelque objet rayonnant.

Mais vers toute âme, humble ou fière,
Le malheur monte à pas lourds,
Comme un spectre aux pieds de pierre;
Le reste flotte toujours!

Tout nous manque, hormis la peine!
Le bonheur, pour l’homme en pleurs,
N’est qu’une figure vaine
De choses qui sont ailleurs.

L’espoir c’est l’aube incertaine;
Sur notre but sérieux

C’est la dorure lointaine
D’un rayon mystérieux.

C’est le reflet, brume ou flamme,
Que dans leur calme éternel
Versent d’en haut sur notre âme
Les félicités du ciel.

Ce sont les visions blanches
Qui, jusqu’à nos yeux maudits,
Viennent à travers les branches
Des arbres du paradis!

C’est l’ombre que sur nos grèves
Jettent ces arbres charmants
Dont l’âme entend dans ses rêves
Les vagues frissonnements!

Ce reflet des biens sans nombre,
Nous l’appelons le bonheur;
Et nous voulons saisir l’ombre
Quand la chose est au Seigneur!

Va, si haut nul ne s’élève;
Sur terre il faut demeurer;
On sourit de ce qu’on rêve,
Mais ce qu’on a, fait pleurer.

Puisqu’un Dieu saigne au Calvaire,
Ne nous plaignons pas, crois-moi.
Souffrons! c’est la loi sévère.
Aimons! c’est la douce loi.

Aimons! soyons deux! Le sage
N’est pas seul dans son vaisseau.
Les deux yeux font le visage;
Les deux ailes font l’oiseau.

Soyons deux! - Tout nous convie
À nous aimer jusqu’au soir.
N’ayons à deux qu’une vie!
N’ayons à deux qu’un espoir!

Dans ce monde de mensonges,
Moi, j’aimerai mes douleurs,
Si mes rêves sont tes songes,
Si mes larmes sont tes pleurs!

XXXI

RENCONTRE

Après avoir donné son aumône au plus jeune,
Pensif, il s’arrêta pour les voir. - Un long jeûne
Avait maigri leur joue, avait flétri leur front.
Ils s’étaient tous les quatre à terre assis en rond,
Puis, s’étant partagé, comme feraient des anges,
Un morceau de pain noir ramassé dans nos fanges,
Ils mangeaient; mais d’un air si morne et si navré
Qu’en les voyant ainsi toute femme eût pleuré.
C’est qu’ils étaient perdus sur la terre où nous sommes,
Et tout seuls, quatre enfants, dans la foule des hommes!
— Oui, sans père ni mère! Et pas même un grenier.
Pas d’abri. Tous pieds nus; excepté le dernier
Qui traînait, pauvre amour, sous son pied qui chancelle,
De vieux souliers trop grands noués d’une ficelle.
Dans des fossés, la nuit, ils dorment bien souvent.
Aussi, comme ils ont froid, le matin, en plein vent,
Quand l’arbre, frissonnant au cri de l’alouette,
Dresse sur un ciel clair sa noire silhouette!
Leurs mains rouges étaient roses quand Dieu les fit.
Le dimanche, au hameau, cherchant un vil profit,
Ils errent. Le petit, sous sa pâleur malsaine,
Chante, sans la comprendre, une chanson obscène,
Pour faire rire - hélas! lui qui pleure en secret! -
Quelque immonde vieillard au seuil d’un cabaret;
Si bien que, quelquefois, du bouge qui s’égaie
Il tombe à leur faim sombre une abjecte monnaie,
Aumône de l’enfer que jette le péché,
Sou hideux sur lequel le démon a craché!
Pour l’instant, ils mangeaient derrière une broussaille,
Cachés, et plus tremblants que le faon qui tressaille,
Car souvent on les bat, on les chasse toujours!
C’est ainsi qu’innocents condamnés, tous les jours

Ils passent affamés, sous mes murs, sous les vôtres,
Et qu’ils vont au hasard, l’aîné menant les autres.

Alors, lui qui rêvait, il regarda là-haut.
Et son oeil ne vit rien que l’éther calme et chaud,
Le soleil bienveillant, l’air plein d’ailes dorées,
Et la sérénité des voûtes azurées,
Et le bonheur, les cris, les rires triomphants
Qui des oiseaux du ciel tombaient sur ces enfants.

XXXII

QUAND VOUS VOUS ASSEMBLEZ, BRUYANTE MULTITUDE,

Quand vous vous assemblez, bruyante multitude,
Pour aller le traquer jusqu’en sa solitude,
Vous excitant l’un l’autre, acharnés furieux,
— Ne le sentez-vous pas? - le peuple sérieux,
Qui rêvait à vos cris un dragon dans son antre,
Avec la flamme aux yeux, avec l’écaille au ventre,
S’étonne de ne voir d’autre objet à vos coups
Que cet homme pensif, mystérieux et doux.

XXXIII

L'OMBRE

Il lui disait: — Vos chants sont tristes. Qu'avez-vous?
Ange inquiet, quels pleurs mouillent vos yeux si doux?
Pourquoi, pauvre âme tendre, inclinée et fidèle,
Comme un jonc que le vent a ployé d'un coup d'aile,
Pencher votre beau front assombri par instants?
Il faut vous réjouir, car voici le printemps,
Avril, saison dorée, où, parmi les zéphires,
Les parfums, les chansons, les baisers, les sourires,
Et les charmants propos qu'on dit à demi-voix,
L'amour revient aux coeurs comme la feuille aux bois! -
Elle lui répondit de sa voix grave et douce:
— Ami, vous êtes fort. Sûr du Dieu qui vous pousse,
L'oeil fixé sur un but, vous marchez droit et fier,
Sans la peur de demain, sans le souci d'hier,
Et rien ne peut troubler, pour votre âme ravie,
La belle vision qui vous cache la vie.
Mais moi je pleure! - Morne, attachée à vos pas,
Atteinte à tous ces coups que vous ne sentez pas,
Coeur fait, moins l'espérance, à l'image du vôtre,
Je souffre dans ce monde et vous chantez dans l'autre.
Tout m'attriste, avenir que je vois à faux jour,
Aigreur de la raison qui querelle l'amour,
Et l'âcre jalousie alors qu'une autre femme
Veut tirer de vos yeux un regard de votre âme,
Et le sort qui nous frappe et qui n'est jamais las.
Plus le soleil reluit, plus je suis ombre, hélas!
Vous allez, moi je suis; vous marchez, moi je tremble,
Et tandis que, formant mille projets ensemble,
Vous semblez ignorer, passant robuste et doux,
Tous les angles que fait le monde autour de nous,
Je me traîne après vous, pauvre femme blessée.
D'un corps resté debout l'ombre est parfois brisée.

XXXIV

TRISTESSE D’OLYMPIO

Les champs n’étaient point noirs, les cieux n’étaient pas mornes.
Non, le jour rayonnait dans un azur sans bornes
Sur la terre étendu,
L’air était plein d’encens et les prés de verdures
Quand il revit ces lieux où par tant de blessures
Son coeur s’est répandu!

L’automne souriait; les coteaux vers la plaine
Penchaient leurs bois charmants qui jaunissaient à peine;
Le ciel était doré;
Et les oiseaux, tournés vers celui que tout nomme,
Disant peut-être à Dieu quelque chose de l’homme,
Chantaient leur chant sacré!

Il voulut tout revoir, l’étang près de la source,
La masure où l’aumône avait vidé leur bourse,
Le vieux frêne plié,
Les retraites d’amour au fond des bois perdues,
L’arbre où dans les baisers leurs âmes confondues
Avaient tout oublié!

Il chercha le jardin, la maison isolée,
La grille d’où l’oeil plonge en une oblique allée,
Les vergers en talus.
Pâle, il marchait. - Au bruit de son pas grave et sombre,
Il voyait à chaque arbre, hélas! se dresser l’ombre
Des jours qui ne sont plus!

Il entendait frémir dans la forêt qu’il aime
Ce doux vent qui, faisant tout vibrer en nous-même,
Y réveille l’amour,
Et, remuant le chêne ou balançant la rose,

Semble l’âme de tout qui va sur chaque chose
Se poser tour à tour!

Les feuilles qui gisaient dans le bois solitaire,
S’efforçant sous ses pas de s’élever de terre,
Couraient dans le jardin;
Ainsi, parfois, quand l’âme est triste, nos pensées
S’envolent un moment sur leurs ailes blessées,
Puis retombent soudain.

Il contempla longtemps les formes magnifiques
Que la nature prend dans les champs pacifiques;
Il rêva jusqu’au soir;
Tout le jour il erra le long de la ravine,
Admirant tour à tour le ciel, face divine,
Le lac, divin miroir!

Hélas! se rappelant ses douces aventures,
Regardant, sans entrer, par-dessus les clôtures,
Ainsi qu’un paria,
Il erra tout le jour. Vers l’heure où la nuit tombe,
Il se sentit le coeur triste comme une tombe,
Alors il s’écria:

“ Ô douleur! j’ai voulu, moi dont l’âme est troublée,
Savoir si l’urne encor conservait la liqueur,
Et voir ce qu’avait fait cette heureuse vallée
De tout ce que j’avais laissé là de mon coeur!

“ Que peu de temps suffit pour changer toutes choses!
Nature au front serein, comme vous oubliez!
Et comme vous brisez dans vos métamorphoses
Les fils mystérieux où nos coeurs sont liés!

“ Nos chambres de feuillage en halliers sont changées!
L’arbre où fut notre chiffre est mort ou renversé;
Nos roses dans l’enclos ont été ravagées

Par les petits enfants qui sautent le fossé!

“ Un mur clôt la fontaine où, par l’heure échauffée,
Folâtre, elle buvait en descendant des bois;
Elle prenait de l’eau dans sa main, douce fée,
Et laissait retomber des perles de ses doigts!

“ On a pavé la route âpre et mal aplanie,
Où, dans le sable pur se dessinant si bien,
Et de sa petitesse étalant l’ironie,
Son pied charmant semblait rire à côté du mien!

“ La borne du chemin, qui vit des jours sans nombre,
Où jadis pour m’attendre elle aimait à s’asseoir,
S’est usée en heurtant, lorsque la route est sombre,
Les grands chars gémissants qui reviennent le soir.

“ La forêt ici manque et là s’est agrandie.
De tout ce qui fut nous presque rien n’est vivant;
Et, comme un tas de cendre éteinte et refroidie,
L’amas des souvenirs se disperse à tout vent!

“ N’existons-nous donc plus? Avons-nous eu notre heure?
Rien ne la rendra-t-il à nos cris superflus?
L’air joue avec la branche au moment où je pleure;
Ma maison me regarde et ne me connaît plus.

“ D’autres vont maintenant passer où nous passâmes.
Nous y sommes venus, d’autres vont y venir;
Et le songe qu’avaient ébauché nos deux âmes,
Ils le continueront sans pouvoir le finir!

“ Car personne ici-bas ne termine et n’achève;
Les pires des humains sont comme les meilleurs;
Nous nous réveillons tous au même endroit du rêve.
Tout commence en ce monde et tout finit ailleurs.

“ Oui, d’autres à leur tour viendront, couples sans tache,
Puiser dans cet asile heureux, calme, enchanté,
Tout ce que la nature à l’amour qui se cache
Mêle de rêverie et de solennité!

“ D’autres auront nos champs, nos sentiers, nos retraites;
Ton bois, ma bien-aimée, est à des inconnus.
D’autres femmes viendront, baigneuses indiscrètes,
Troubler le flot sacré qu’ont touché tes pieds nus!

“ Quoi donc! c’est vainement qu’ici nous nous aimâmes!
Rien ne nous restera de ces coteaux fleuris
Où nous fondions notre être en y mêlant nos flammes!
L’impassible nature a déjà tout repris.

“ Oh! dites-moi, ravins, frais ruisseaux, treilles mûres,
Rameaux chargés de nids, grottes, forêts, buissons,
Est-ce que vous ferez pour d’autres vos murmures?
Est-ce que vous direz à d’autres vos chansons?

“ Nous vous comprenions tant! doux, attentifs, austères,
Tous nos échos s’ouvraient si bien à votre voix!
Et nous prêtions si bien, sans troubler vos mystères,
L’oreille aux mots profonds que vous dites parfois!

“ Répondez, vallon pur, répondez, solitude,
Ô nature abritée en ce désert si beau,
Lorsque nous dormirons tous deux dans l’attitude
Que donne aux morts pensifs la forme du tombeau;

“ Est-ce que vous serez à ce point insensible
De nous savoir couchés, morts avec nos amours,
Et de continuer votre fête paisible,
Et de toujours sourire et de chanter toujours?

“ Est-ce que, nous sentant errer dans vos retraites,
Fantômes reconnus par vos monts et vos bois,

Vous ne nous direz pas de ces choses secrètes
Qu’on dit en revoyant des amis d’autrefois?

“ Est-ce que vous pourriez, sans tristesse et sans plainte,
Voir nos ombres flotter où marchèrent nos pas,
Et la voir m’entraîner, dans une morne étreinte,
Vers quelque source en pleurs qui sanglote tout bas?

“ Et s’il est quelque part, dans l’ombre où rien ne veille,
Deux amants sous vos fleurs abritant leurs transports,
Ne leur irez-vous pas murmurer à l’oreille:
— Vous qui vivez, donnez une pensée aux morts!

“ Dieu nous prête un moment les prés et les fontaines,
Les grands bois frissonnants, les rocs profonds et sourds
Et les cieux azurés et les lacs et les plaines,
Pour y mettre nos coeurs, nos rêves, nos amours!

“ Puis il nous les retire. Il souffle notre flamme;
Il plonge dans la nuit l’antre où nous rayonnons;
Et dit à la vallée, où s’imprima notre âme,
D’effacer notre trace et d’oublier nos noms.

“ Eh bien! oubliez-nous, maison, jardin, ombrages!
Herbe, use notre seuil! ronce, cache nos pas!
Chantez, oiseaux! ruisseaux, coulez! croissez, feuillages!
Ceux que vous oubliez ne vous oublieront pas.

“ Car vous êtes pour nous l’ombre de l’amour même!
Vous êtes l’oasis qu’on rencontre en chemin!
Vous êtes, ô vallon, la retraite suprême
Où nous avons pleuré nous tenant par la main!

“ Toutes les passions s’éloignent avec l’âge,
L’une emportant son masque et l’autre son couteau,
Comme un essaim chantant d’histrions en voyage
Dont le groupe décroît derrière le coteau.

“Mais toi, rien ne t’efface, amour! toi qui nous charmes,
Toi qui, torche ou flambeau, luis dans notre brouillard!
Tu nous tiens par la joie, et surtout par les larmes;
Jeune homme on te maudit, on t’adore vieillard.

“ Dans ces jours où la tête au poids des ans s’incline,
Où l’homme, sans projets, sans but, sans visions,
Sent qu’il n’est déjà plus qu’une tombe en ruine
Où gisent ses vertus et ses illusions;

“ Quand notre âme en rêvant descend dans nos entrailles,
Comptant dans notre coeur, qu’enfin la glace atteint,
Comme on compte les morts sur un champ de batailles,
Chaque douleur tombée et chaque songe éteint,

“ Comme quelqu’un qui cherche en tenant une lampe,
Loin des objets réels, loin du monde rieur,
Elle arrive à pas lents par une obscure rampe
Jusqu’au fond désolé du gouffre intérieur;

“ Et là, dans cette nuit qu’aucun rayon n’étoile,
L’âme, en un repli sombre où tout semble finir,
Sent quelque chose encor palpiter sous un voile...
C’est toi qui dors dans l’ombre, ô sacré souvenir! “

XXXV

QUE LA MUSIQUE DATE DU SEIZIÈME SIÈCLE

I

Ô vous, mes vieux amis, si jeunes autrefois,
Qui comme moi des jours avez porté le poids,
Qui de plus d'un regret frappez la tombe sourde,
Et qui marchez courbés, car la sagesse est lourde;
Mes amis! qui de vous, qui de nous n'a souvent,
Quand le deuil à l'oeil sec, au visage rêvant,
Cet ami sérieux qui blesse et qu'on révère,
Avait sur notre front posé sa main sévère,
Qui de nous n'a cherché le calme dans un chant!
Qui n'a, comme une soeur qui guérit en touchant,
Laissé la mélodie entrer dans sa pensée!
Et, sans heurter des morts la mémoire bercée,
N'a retrouvé le rire et les pleurs à la fois
Parmi les instruments, les flûtes et les voix!

Qui de nous, quand sur lui quelque douleur s'écoule,
Ne s'est glissé, vibrant au souffle de la foule,
Dans le théâtre empli de confuses rumeurs!
Comme un soupir parfois se perd dans des clameurs,
Qui n'a jeté son âme, à ces âmes mêlée,
Dans l'orchestre où frissonne une musique ailée,
Où la marche guerrière expire en chant d'amour,
Où la basse en pleurant apaise le tambour!

II

Écoutez! écoutez! du maître qui palpite,
Sur tous les violons l'archet se précipite.
L'orchestre tressaillant rit dans son antre noir.
Tout parle. C'est ainsi qu'on entend sans les voir,

Le soir, quand la campagne élève un sourd murmure,
Rire les vendangeurs dans une vigne mûre.
Comme sur la colonne un frêle chapiteau,
La flûte épanouie a monté sur l'alto.
Les gammes, chastes soeurs dans la vapeur cachées,
Vident et remplissent leurs amphores penchées,
Se tiennent par la main et chantent tour à tour.
Tandis qu'un vent léger fait flotter alentour,
Comme un voile folâtre autour d'un divin groupe,
Ces dentelles du son que le fifre découpe.
Ciel! voilà le clairon qui sonne. À cette voix,
Tout s'éveille en sursaut, tout bondit à la fois.
La caisse aux mille échos, battant ses flancs énormes,
Fait hurler le troupeau des instruments difformes,
Et l'air s'emplit d'accords furieux et sifflants
Que les serpents de cuivre ont tordus dans leurs flancs.
Vaste tumulte où passe un hautbois qui soupire!
Soudain du haut en bas le rideau se déchire;
Plus sombre et plus vivante à l'oeil qu'une forêt,
Toute la symphonie en un hymne apparaît.
Puis, comme en un chaos qui reprendrait un monde,
Tout se perd dans les plis d'une brume profonde.
Chaque forme du chant passe en disant: Assez!
Les sons étincelants s'éteignent dispersés.
Une nuit qui répand ses vapeurs agrandies
Efface le contour des vagues mélodies,
Telles que des esquifs dont l'eau couvre les mâts;
Et la strette, jetant sur leur confus amas
Ses tremblantes lueurs largement étalées,
Retombe dans cette ombre en grappes étoilées!

Ô concert qui s'envole en flamme à tous les vents!
Gouffre où le crescendo gonfle ses flots mouvants!
Comme l'âme s'émeut! comme les coeurs écoutent!
Et comme cet archet d'où les notes dégouttent,
Tantôt dans le lumière et tantôt dans la nuit,
Remue avec fierté cet orage de bruit!

III

Puissant Palestrina, vieux maître, vieux génie,
Je vous salue ici, père de l’harmonie,
Car, ainsi qu’un grand fleuve où boivent les humains,
Toute cette musique a coulé dans vos mains!
Car Gluck et Beethoven, rameaux sous qui l’on rêve,
Sont nés de votre souche et faits de votre sève!
Car Mozart, votre fils, a pris sur vos autels
Cette nouvelle lyre inconnue aux mortels,
Plus tremblante que l’herbe au souffle des aurores,
Née au seizième siècle entre vos doigts sonores!
Car, maître, c’est à vous que tous nos soupirs vont,
Sitôt qu’une voix chante et qu’une âme répond!

Oh! ce maître, pareil au créateur qui fonde,
Comment dit-il jaillir de sa tête profonde
Cet univers de sons, doux et sombre à la fois,
Écho du Dieu caché dont le monde est la voix?
Où ce jeune homme, enfant de la blonde Italie,
Prit-il cette âme immense et jusqu’aux bords remplie?
Quel souffle, quel travail, quelle intuition,
Fit de lui ce géant, dieu de l’émotion,
Vers qui se tourne l’oeil qui pleure et qui s’essuie,
Sur qui tout un côté du coeur humain s’appuie?
D’où lui vient cette voix qu’on écoute à genoux?
Et qui donc verse en lui ce qu’il reverse en nous?

IV

Ô mystère profond des enfances sublimes!
Qui fait naître la fleur au penchant des abîmes,
Et le poète au bord des sombres passions?
Quel dieu lui trouble l’oeil d’étranges visions?
Quel dieu lui montre l’astre au milieu des ténèbres,
Et, comme sous un crêpe aux plis noirs et funèbres

On voit d’une beauté le sourire enivrant,
L’idéal à travers le réel transparent?
Qui donc prend par la main un enfant dès l’aurore
Pour lui dire:—” En ton âme il n’est pas jour encore.
Enfant de l’homme! avant que de son feu vainqueur
Le midi de la vie ait desséché ton coeur,
Viens, je vais t’entrouvrir des profondeurs sans nombre!
Viens, je vais de clarté remplir tes yeux pleins d’ombre!
Viens, écoute avec moi ce qu’on explique ailleurs,
Le bégaiement confus des sphères et des fleurs;
Car, enfant, astre au ciel ou rose dans la haie,
Toute chose innocente ainsi que toi bégaie!
Tu seras le poète, un homme qui voit Dieu!
Ne crains pas la science, âpre sentier de feu,
Route austère, il est vrai, mais des grands coeurs choisies,
Que la religion et que la poésie
Bordent des deux côtés de leur buisson fleuri.
Quand tu peux en chemin, ô bel enfant chéri,
Cueillir l’épine blanche et les clochettes bleues,
Ton petit pas se joue avec les grandes lieues.
Ne crains donc pas l’ennui ni la fatigue. - Viens!
Écoute la nature aux vagues entretiens.
Entends sous chaque objet sourdre la parabole.
Sous l’être universel vois l’éternel symbole,
Et l’homme et le destin, et l’arbre et la forêt,
Les noirs tombeaux, sillons où germe le regret;
Et, comme à nos douleurs des branches attachées,
Les consolations sur notre front penchées,
Et, pareil à l’esprit du juste radieux,
Le soleil, cette gloire épanouie aux cieux! “

V

Dieu! que Palestrina, dans l’homme et dans les choses,
Dut entendre de voix joyeuse et moroses!
Comme on sent qu’à cet âge où notre coeur sourit,
Où lui déjà pensait, il a dans son esprit

Emporté, comme un fleuve à l’onde fugitive,
Tout ce que lui jetait la nuée ou la rive!
Comme il s’est promené, tout enfant, tout pensif,
Dans les champs, et, dès l’aube, au fond du bois massif,
Et près du précipice, épouvante des mères!
Tour à tour noyé d’ombre, ébloui de chimères,
Comme il ouvrait son âme alors que le printemps
Trempe la berge en fleur dans l’eau des clairs étangs,
Que le lierre remonte aux branches favorites,
Que l’herbe aux boutons d’or mêle les marguerites!

À cette heure indécise où le jour va mourir,
Où tout s’endort, le coeur oubliant de souffrir,
Les oiseaux de chanter et les troupeaux de paître,
Que de fois sous ses yeux un chariot champêtre,
Groupe vivant de bruit, de chevaux et de voix,
A gravi sur le flanc du coteau dans les bois
Quelque route creusée entre les ocres jaunes,
Tandis que, près d’une eau qui fuyait sous les aulnes,
Il écoutait gémir dans les brumes du soir
Une cloche enrouée au fond d’un vallon noir!

Que de fois, épiant la rumeur des chaumières,
Le brin d’herbe moqueur qui siffle entre deux pierres,
Le cri plaintif du soc gémissant et traîné,
Le nid qui jase au fond du cloître ruiné
D’où l’ombre se répand sur les tombes des moines,
Le champ doré par l’aube où causent les avoines
Qui pour nous voir passer, ainsi qu’un peuple heureux,
Se penchent en tumulte au bord du chemin creux,
L’abeille qui gaiement chante et parle à la rose,
Parmi tous ces objets dont l’être se compose,
Que de fois il rêva, scrutateur ténébreux,
Cherchant à s’expliquer ce qu’ils disaient entre eux!

Et chaque soir, après ses longues promenades,
Laissant sous les balcons rire les sérénades,

Quand il s’en revenait content, grave et muet,
Quelque chose de plus dans son coeur remuait.
Mouche, il avait son miel; arbuste, sa rosée.
Il en vint par degrés à ce qu’en sa pensée
Tout vécut. - Saint travail que les poètes font! -
Dans sa tête, pareille à l’univers profond,
L’air courait, les oiseaux chantaient, la flamme et l’onde
Se courbaient, la moisson dorait la terre blonde,
Et les toits et les monts et l’ombre qui descend
Se mêlaient, et le soir venait, sombre et chassant
La brute vers son antre et l’homme vers son gîte,
Et les hautes forêts, qu’un vent du ciel agite,
Joyeuses de renaître au départ des hivers,
Secouaient follement leurs grands panaches verts!

C’est ainsi qu’esprit, forme, ombre, lumière et flamme,
L’urne du monde entier s’épancha dans son âme!

VI

Ni peintre, ni sculpteur! Il fut musicien.
Il vint, nouvel Orphée, après l’Orphée ancien;
Et, comme l’océan n’apporte que sa vague,
Il n’apporta que l’art du mystère et du vague!
La lyre qui tout bas pleure en chantant bien haut!
Qui verse à tous un son où chacun trouve un mot!
Le luth où se traduit, plus ineffable encore,
Le rêve inexprimé qui s’efface à l’aurore!
Car il ne voyait rien par l’angle étincelant,
Car son esprit, du monde immense et fourmillant
Qui pour ses yeux nageait dans l’ombre indéfinie,
Éteignait la couleur et tirait l’harmonie!
Ainsi toujours son hymne, en descendant des cieux,
Pénètre dans l’esprit par le côté pieux,
Comme un rayon des nuits par un vitrail d’église!
En écoutant ses chants que l’âme idéalise,
Il semble, à ces accords qui, jusqu’au coeur touchant,

Font sourire le juste et songer le méchant,
Qu’on respire un parfum d’encensoirs et de cierges,
Et l’on croit voir passer un de ces anges-vierges
Comme en rêvait Giotto, comme Dante en voyait,
Êtres sereins posés sur ce monde inquiet,
À la prunelle bleue, à la robe d’opale,
Qui, tandis qu’au milieu d’un azur déjà pâle
Le point d’or d’une étoile éclate à l’orient,
Dans un beau champ de trèfle errent en souriant!

VII

Heureux ceux qui vivaient dans ce siècle sublime
Où, du génie humain dorant encor la cime,
Le vieux soleil gothique à l’horizon mourait!
Où déjà, dans la nuit emportant son secret,
La cathédrale morte en un sol infidèle
Ne faisait plus jaillir d’églises autour d’elle!
Être immense obstruée encore à tous degrés,
Ainsi qu’une Babel aux abords encombrés,
De donjons, de beffrois, de flèches élancées,
D’édifices construits pour toutes les pensées;
De génie et de pierre énorme entassement;
Vaste amas d’où le jour s’en allait lentement!
Siècle mystérieux où la science sombre
De l’antique Dédale agonisait dans l’ombre,
Tandis qu’à l’autre bout de l’horizon confus,
Entre Tasse et Luther, ces deux chênes touffus,
Sereine, et blanchissant de sa lumière pure
Ton dôme merveilleux, ô sainte Architecture,
Dans ce ciel, qu’Albert Düre admirait à l’écart,
La Musique montait, cette lune de l’art!

XXXVI

LA STATUE

Il semblait grelotter, car la bise était dure.
C’était, sous un amas de rameaux sans verdure,
Une pauvre statue, au dos noir, au pied vert,
Un vieux faune isolé dans le vieux parc désert,
Qui, de son front penché touchant aux branches d’arbre,
Se perdait à mi-corps dans sa gaine de marbre.

Il était là, pensif, à la terre lié,
Et, comme toute chose immobile, - oublié!

Des arbres l’entouraient, fouettés d’un vent de glace,
Et comme lui vieillis à cette même place;
Des marronniers géants, sans feuilles, sans oiseaux
Sous leurs tailles brouillés en ténébreux réseaux,
Pâle, il apparaissait, et la terre était brune.
Une âpre nuit d’hiver, sans étoile et sans lune,
Tombait à larges pans dans le brouillard diffus.
D’autres arbres plus loin croisaient leurs sombres fûts;
Plus loin d’autre encore, estompés par l’espace,
Poussaient dans le ciel gris où le vent du soir passe
Mille petits rameaux noirs, tordus et mêlés,
Et se posaient partout, l’un par l’autre voilés,
Sur l’horizon, perdu dans les vapeurs informes,
Comme un grand troupeau roux de hérissons énormes.

Rien de plus. Ce vieux faune, un ciel morne, un bois noir.

Peut-être dans la brume au loin pouvait-on voir
Quelque longue terrasse aux verdâtres assises,
Ou, près d’un grand bassin, des nymphes indécises,
Honteuses à bon droit dans ce parc aboli,
Autrefois des regards, maintenant de l’oubli.

Le vieux faune riait. - Dans leurs ombres douteuses
Laissant le bassin triste et les nymphes honteuses,
Le vieux faune riait, c’est à lui que je vins;
Ému, car sans pitié tous ces sculpteurs divins
Condamnent pour jamais, contents qu’on les admire,
Les nymphes à la honte et les faunes au rire.

Moi, j’ai toujours pitié du pauvre marbre obscur.
De l’homme moins souvent, parce qu’il est plus dur.

Et, sans froisser d’un mot son oreille blessée,
Car le marbre entend bien la voix de la pensée,
Je lui dis:—” Vous étiez du beau siècle amoureux.
Sylvain, qu’avez-vous vu quand vous étiez heureux?
Vous étiez de la cour? Vous assistiez aux fêtes?
C’est pour vous divertir que ces nymphes sont faites.
C’est pour vous, dans ces bois, que de savantes mains
Ont mêlé les dieux grecs et les césars romains,
Et, dans les claires eaux mirant les vases rares,
Tordu tout ce jardin en dédales bizarres.
Quand vous étiez heureux, qu’avez-vous vu, Sylvain?
Contez-moi les secrets de ce passé trop vain,
De ce passé charmant, plein de flammes discrètes,
Où parmi les grands rois croissaient les grands poètes.
Que de frais souvenirs dont encor vous riez!
Parlez-moi, beau Sylvain, comme vous parleriez
À l’arbre, au vent qui souffle, à l’herbe non foulée.
D’un bout à l’autre bout de cette épaisse allée,
Avez-vous quelquefois, moqueur antique et grec,
Quand près de vous passait avec le beau Lautrec
Marguerite aux yeux doux, la reine béarnaise,
Lancé votre oeil oblique à l’Hercule Farnèse?
Seul sous votre antre vert de feuillage mouillé,
Ô Sylvain complaisant, avez-vous conseillé,
Vous tournant vers chacun du côté qui l’attire,
Racan comme berger, Regnier comme satyre?

Avez-vous vu parfois, sur ce banc, vers midi,
Suer Vincent de Paul à façonner Gondi?
Faune! avez-vous suivi de ce regard étrange
Anne avec Buckingham, Louis avec Fontange,
Et se retournaient-ils, la rougeur sur le front,
En vous entendant rire au coin du bois profond?
Étiez-vous consulté sur le thyrse ou le lierre,
Lorsqu’en un grand ballet de forme singulière
La cour du dieu Phoebus ou la cour du dieu Pan
Du nom d’Amaryllis enivraient Montespan?
Fuyant des courtisans les oreilles de pierre,
La Fontaine vint-il, les pleurs dans la paupière,
De ses nymphes de Vaux vous conter les regrets?
Que vous disait Boileau, que vous disait Segrais,
À vous, faune lettré qui jadis dans l’églogue
Aviez avec Virgile un charmant dialogue,
Et qui faisiez sauter, sur le gazon naissant,
Le lourd spondée au pas du dactyle dansant?
Avez-vous vu jouer les beautés dans les herbes,
Chevreuse aux yeux noyés, Thiange aux airs superbes?
Vous ont-elles parfois de leur groupe vermeil
Entouré follement, si bien que le soleil
Découpait tout à coup, en perçant quelque nue,
Votre profil lascif sur leur gorge ingénue?
Votre arbre a-t-il reçu sous son abri serein
L’écarlate linceul du pâle Mazarin?
Avez-vous eu l’honneur de voir rêver Molière?
Vous a-t-il quelquefois, d’une voix familière,
Vous jetant brusquement un vers mélodieux,
Tutoyé, comme on fait entre les demi-dieux?
En revenant un soir du fond des avenues,
Ce penseur, qui, voyant les âmes toutes nues,
Ne pouvait avoir peur de votre nudité,
À l’homme en son esprit vous a-t-il confronté?
Et vous a-t-il trouvé, vous le spectre cynique,
Moins triste, moins méchant, moins froid, moins ironique,
Alors qu’il comparait, s’arrêtant en chemin,

Votre rire de marbre à notre rire humain? “

Ainsi je lui parlais sous l’épaisse ramure.
Il ne répondit pas même par un murmure.
J’écoutais, incliné sur le marbre glacé,
Mais je n’entendis rien remuer du passé.
La blafarde lueur du jour qui se retire
Blanchissait vaguement l’immobile satyre,
Muet à ma parole et sourd à ma pitié.
À le voir là, sinistre, et sortant à moitié
De son fourreau noirci par l’humide feuillée,
On eût dit la poignée en torse ciselée
D’un vieux glaive rouillé qu’on laisse dans l’étui.

Je secouai la tête et m’éloignai de lui.
Alors des buissons noirs, des branches desséchées
Comme des soeurs en deuil sur sa tête penchées,
Et des antres secrets dispersés dans les bois,
Il me sembla soudain qu’il sortait une voix,
Qui dans mon âme obscure et vaguement sonore
Éveillait un écho comme au fond d’une amphore.

—” Ô poète imprudent, que fais-tu? laisse en paix
Les faunes délaissés sous les arbres épais!
Poète! ignores-tu qu’il est toujours impie
D’aller, aux lieux déserts où dort l’ombre assoupie,
Secouer, par l’amour fussiez-vous entraînés,
Cette mousse qui pend aux siècles ruinés,
Et troubler, du vain bruit de vos voix indiscrètes,
Le souvenir des morts dans ses sombres retraites! “

Alors dans les jardins sous la brume enfouis
Je m’enfonçai, rêvant aux jours évanouis,
Tandis que les rameaux s’emplissaient de mystère,
Et que derrière moi le faune solitaire,
Hiéroglyphe obscur d’un antique alphabet,
Continuait de rire à la nuit qui tombait.

J’allais, et contemplant d’un regard triste encore
Tous ces doux souvenirs, beauté, printemps, aurore,
Dans l’air et sous mes pieds épars, mêlés, flottants,
Feuilles de l’autre été, femmes de l’autre temps,
J’entrevoyais au loin, sous les branchages sombres,
Des marbres dans le bois, dans le passé des ombres!

XXXVII

J’EUS TOUJOURS DE L’AMOUR POUR LES CHOSES AILEES

J’eus toujours de l’amour pour les choses ailées.
Lorsque j’étais enfant, j’allais sous les feuillées,
J’y prenais dans les nids de tout petits oiseaux.
D’abord je leur faisais des cages de roseaux
Où je les élevais parmi des mousses vertes.
Plus tard je leur laissais les fenêtres ouvertes.
Ils ne s’envolaient point; ou, s’ils fuyaient aux bois,
Quand je les rappelais ils venaient à ma voix.
Une colombe et moi longtemps nous nous aimâmes.
Maintenant je sais l’art d’apprivoiser les âmes.

XXXVIII

ÉCRIT SUR LE TOMBEAU D’UN PETIT ENFANT AU BORD DE LA MER

Vieux lierre, frais gazon, herbe, roseaux, corolles;
Église où l’esprit voit le Dieu qu’il rêve ailleurs;
Mouches qui murmurez d’ineffables paroles
À l’oreille du pâtre assoupi dans les fleurs;

Vents, flots, hymne orageux, choeur sans fin, voix sans nombre;
Bois qui faites songer le passant sérieux;
Fruits qui tombez de l’arbre impénétrable et sombre,
Étoiles qui tombez du ciel mystérieux;

Oiseaux aux cris joyeux, vague aux plaintes profondes;
Froid lézard des vieux murs dans les pierres tapi;
Plaines qui répandez vos souffles sur les ondes;
Mer où la perle éclôt, terre où germe l’épi;

Nature d’où tout sort, nature où tout retombe,
Feuilles, nids, doux rameaux que l’air n’ose effleurer,
Ne faites pas de bruit autour de cette tombe;
Laissez l’enfant dormir et la mère pleurer!

XXXIX

A. L.

Toute espérance, enfant, est un roseau.
Dieu dans ses mains tient nos jours, ma colombe;
Il les dévide à son fatal fuseau,
Puis le fil casse et notre joie en tombe;
Car dans tout berceau
Il germe une tombe.

Jadis, vois-tu, l’avenir, pur rayon,
Apparaissait à mon âme éblouie,
Ciel avec l’astre, onde avec l’alcyon,
Fleur lumineuse à l’ombre épanouie.
Cette vision
S’est évanouie!

Si, près de toi, quelqu’un pleure en rêvant,
Laisse pleurer sans en chercher la cause.
Pleurer est doux, pleurer est bon souvent
Pour l’homme, hélas! sur qui le sort se pose.
Toute larme, enfant,
Lave quelque chose.

XL

CAERULEUM MARE

Quand je rêve sur la falaise,
Ou dans les bois, les soirs d'été,
Sachant que la vie est mauvaise,
Je contemple l'éternité.

À travers mon sort mêlé d'ombres,
J'aperçois Dieu distinctement,
Comme à travers des branches sombres
On entrevoit le firmament!

Le firmament! où les faux sages
Cherchent comme nous des conseils!
Le firmament plein de nuages,
Le firmament plein de soleils!

Un souffle épure notre fange.
Le monde est à Dieu, je le sens.
Toute fleur est une louange,
Et tout parfum est un encens.

La nuit on croit sentir Dieu même
Penché sur l'homme palpitant.
La terre prie et le ciel aime.
Quelqu'un parle et quelqu'un entend.

Pourtant, toujours à notre extase,
Ô Seigneur, tu te dérobas;
Hélas! tu mets là-haut le vase,
Et tu laisses la lèvre en bas!

Mais un jour ton oeuvre profonde,
Nous la saurons, Dieu redouté!

Nous irons voir de monde en monde
S’épanouir ton unité;

Cherchant dans ces cieux que tu règles
L’ombre de ceux que nous aimons,
Comme une troupe de grands aigles
Qui s’envole à travers les monts!

Car, lorsque la mort nous réclame,
L’esprit des sens brise le sceau.
Car la tombe est un nid où l’âme
Prend des ailes comme l’oiseau!

Ô songe! ô vision sereine!
Nous saurons le secret de tout,
Et ce rayon qui sur nous traîne,
Nous en pourrons voir l’autre bout!

Ô Seigneur! l’humble créature
Pourra voir enfin à son tour
L’autre côté de la nature
Sur lequel tombe votre jour!

Nous pourrons comparer, poètes,
Penseurs croyant en nos raisons,
À tous les mondes que vous faites
Tous les rêves que nous faisons!

En attendant, sur cette terre,
Nous errons, troupeau désuni,
Portant en nous ce grand mystère:
Oeil borné, regard infini.

L’homme au hasard choisit sa route;
Et toujours, quoi que nous fassions,
Comme un bouc sur l’herbe qu’il broute,
Vit courbé sur ses passions.

Nous errons, et dans les ténèbres,
Allant où d’autres sont venus,
Nous entendons des voix funèbres
Qui disent des mots inconnus.

Dans ces ombres où tout s’oublie,
Vertu, sagesse, espoir, honneur,
L’un va criant: Élie! Élie!
L’autre appelant: Seigneur! Seigneur!

Hélas! tout penseur semble avide
D’épouvanter l’homme orphelin;
Le savant dit: Le ciel est vide!
Le prêtre dit: L’enfer est plein!

Ô deuil! médecins sans dictames,
Vains prophètes aux yeux déçus,
L’un donne Satan à nos âmes,
L’autre leur retire Jésus!

L’humanité, sans loi, sans arche,
Suivant son sentier desséché,
Est comme un voyageur qui marche
Après que le jour est couché.

Il va! la brume est sur la plaine.
Le vent tord l’arbre convulsif.
Les choses qu’il distingue à peine
Ont un air sinistre et pensif.

Ainsi, parmi de noirs décombres,
Dans ce siècle le genre humain
Passe et voit des figures sombres
Qui se penchent sur son chemin.

Nous, rêveurs, sous un toit qui croule,

Fatigués, nous nous abritons,
Et nous regardons cette foule
Se plonger dans l’ombre à tâtons!

Et nous cherchons, souci morose!
Hélas! à deviner pour tous
Le problème que nous propose
Toute cette ombre autour de nous!

Tandis que, la tête inclinée,
Nous nous perdons en tristes voeux,
Le souffle de la destinée
Frissonne à travers nos cheveux.

Nous entendons, race asservie,
Ce souffle passant dans la nuit
Du livre obscur de notre vie
Tourner les pages avec bruit!

Que faire? - À ce vent de la tombe,
Joignez les mains, baissez les yeux,
Et tâchez qu’une lueur tombe
Sur le livre mystérieux!

— D’où viendra la lueur, ô père?
Dieu dit: — De vous, en vérité.
Allumez, pour qu’il vous éclaire,
Votre coeur par quelque côté!

Quand le coeur brûle, on peut sans crainte
Lire ce qu’écrit le Seigneur.
Vertu, sous cette clarté sainte,
Est le même mot que Bonheur.

Il faut aimer! l’ombre en vain couvre
L’oeil de notre esprit, quel qu’il soit.
Croyez, et la paupière s’ouvre!

Aimez, et la prunelle voit!

Du haut des cieux qu’emplit leur flamme,
Les trop lointaines vérités
Ne peuvent au livre de l’âme
Jeter que de vagues clartés.

La nuit, nul regard ne sait lire
Aux seuls feux des astres vermeils;
Mais l’amour près de nous vient luire,
Une lampe aide les soleils.

Pour que, dans l’ombre où Dieu nous mène,
Nous puissions lire à tous moments,
L’amour joint sa lumière humaine
Aux célestes rayonnements!

Aimez donc! car tout le proclame,
Car l’esprit seul éclaire peu,
Et souvent le coeur d’une femme
Est l’explication de Dieu!

Ainsi je rêve, ainsi je songe,
Tandis qu’aux yeux des matelots
La nuit sombre à chaque instant plonge
Des groupes d’astres dans les flots!

Moi, que Dieu tient sous son empire,
J’admire, humble et religieux,
Et par tous les pores j’aspire
Ce spectacle prodigieux!

Entre l’onde, des vents bercée,
Et le ciel, gouffre éblouissant,
Toujours, pour l’oeil de la pensée,
Quelque chose monte ou descend.

Goutte d’eau pure ou jet de flamme,
Ce verbe intime et non écrit
Vient se condenser dans mon âme
Ou resplendir dans mon esprit;

Et l’idée à mon coeur sans voile,
À travers la vague ou l’éther,
Du fond des cieux arrive étoile,
Ou perle du fond de la mer!

XLI

DIEU QUI SOURIT ET QUI DONNE

Dieu qui sourit et qui donne
Et qui vient vers qui l’attend,
Pourvu que vous soyez bonne,
Sera content.

Le monde où tout étincelle,
Mais où rien n’est enflammé,
Pourvu que vous soyez belle,
Sera charmé.

Mon coeur, dans l’ombre amoureuse
Où l’enivre deux beaux yeux,
Pourvu que tu sois heureuse,
Sera joyeux.

XLII

OCEANO NOX

Saint-Valery-Sur-Somme.

Oh! combien de marins, combien de capitaines
Qui sont partis joyeux pour des courses lointaines,
Dans ce morne horizon se sont évanouis!
    Combien ont disparu, dure et triste fortune!
    Dans une mer sans fond, par une nuit sans lune,
    Sous l’aveugle océan à jamais enfouis!

    Combien de patrons morts avec leurs équipages!
    L’ouragan de leur vie a pris toutes les pages
    Et d’un souffle il a tout dispersé sur les flots!
    Nul ne saura leur fin dans l’abîme plongée.
    Chaque vague en passant d’un butin s’est chargée;
    L’une a saisi l’esquif, l’autre les matelots!

    Nul ne sait votre sort, pauvres têtes perdues!
    Vous roulez à travers les sombres étendues,
    Heurtant de vos fronts morts des écueils inconnus.
    Oh! que de vieux parents, qui n’avaient plus qu’un rêve,
    Sont morts en attendant tous les jours sur la grève
    Ceux qui ne sont pas revenus!

    On s’entretient de vous parfois dans les veillées.
    Maint joyeux cercle, assis sur des ancres rouillées,
    Mêle encor quelque temps vos noms d’ombre couverts
    Aux rires, aux refrains, aux récits d’aventures,
    Aux baisers qu’on dérobe à vos belles futures,
    Tandis que vous dormez dans les goémons verts!

    On demande: — Où sont-ils? sont-ils rois dans quelque île?
    Nous ont-ils délaissés pour un bord plus fertile? -

Puis votre souvenir même est enseveli.
Le corps se perd dans l’eau, le nom dans la mémoire.
Le temps, qui sur toute ombre en verse une plus noire,
Sur le sombre océan jette le sombre oubli.

Bientôt des yeux de tous votre ombre est disparue.
L’un n’a-t-il pas sa barque et l’autre sa charrue?
Seules, durant ces nuits où l’orage est vainqueur,
Vos veuves aux fronts blancs, lasses de vous attendre,
Parlent encor de vous en remuant la cendre
De leur foyer et de leur coeur!

Et quand la tombe enfin a fermé leur paupière,
Rien ne sait plus vos noms, pas même une humble pierre
Dans l’étroit cimetière où l’écho nous répond,
Pas même un saule vert qui s’effeuille à l’automne,
Pas même la chanson naïve et monotone
Que chante un mendiant à l’angle d’un vieux pont!

Où sont-ils, les marins sombrés dans les nuits noires?
Ô flots, que vous savez de lugubres histoires!
Flots profonds redoutés des mères à genoux!
Vous vous les racontez en montant les marées,
Et c’est ce qui vous fait ces voix désespérées
Que vous avez le soir quand vous venez vers nous!

XLIII

NUITS DE JUIN

L’été, lorsque le jour a fui, de fleurs couverte
La plaine verse au loin un parfum enivrant;
Les yeux fermés, l’oreille aux rumeurs entrouverte,
    On ne dort qu’à demi d’un sommeil transparent.

    Les astres sont plus purs, l’ombre paraît meilleure;
    Un vague demi-jour teint le dôme éternel;
    Et l’aube douce et pâle, en attendant son heure,
    Semble toute la nuit errer au bas du ciel.

XLIV

SAGESSE

à Mademoiselle Louise B.

I

— Ainsi donc rien de grand, rien de saint, rien de pur,
Rien qui soit digne, ô ciel! de ton regret d’azur!
Rien qui puisse anoblir le vil siècle où nous sommes,
Ne sortira du coeur de l’homme enfant des hommes!
Homme! esprit enfoui sous les besoins du corps!
Ainsi, jouir; descendre à tâtons chez les morts;
Être à tout ce qui rampe, à tout ce qui s’envole,
À l’intérêt sordide, à la vanité folle;
Ne rien savoir - qu’emplir, sans souci du devoir,
Une charte de mots ou d’écus un comptoir;
Ne jamais regarder les voûtes étoilées;
Rire du dévouement et des vertus voilées;
Voilà ta vie, hélas! et tu n’as, nuit et jour,
Pour espoir et pour but, pour culte et pour amour,
Qu’une immonde monnaie aux carrefours traînée
Et qui te laisse aux mains sa rouille empoissonnée!
Et tu ne comprends pas que ton destin, à toi,
C’est de penser! c’est d’être un mage et d’être un roi;
C’est d’être un alchimiste alimentant la flamme
Sous ce sombre alambic que tu nommes ton âme,
Et de faire passer par ce creuset de feu
La nature et le monde, et d’en extraire Dieu!

II

Comme je m’écriais ainsi, vous m’entendîtes;
Et vous, dont l’âme brille en tout ce que vous dites,
Vous tournâtes alors vers moi paisiblement

Votre sourire triste, ineffable et calmant:

— L’humanité se lève, elle chancelle encore,
Et, le front baigné d’ombre, elle va vers l’aurore.
Tout l’homme sur la terre a deux faces, le bien
Et le mal. Blâmer tout, c’est ne comprendre rien.
Les âmes des humains d’or et de plomb sont faites.
L’esprit du sage est grave, et sur toutes les têtes
Ne jette pas sa foudre au hasard en éclats.
Pour le siècle où l’on vit - comme on y souffre, hélas! -
On est toujours injuste, et tout y paraît crime.
Notre époque insultée a son côté sublime.
Vous l’avez dit vous-même, ô poète irrité! -

Dans votre chambre, asile illustre et respecté,
C’est ainsi que, sereine et simple, vous parlâtes.
Votre front, au reflet des damas écarlates,
Rayonnait, et pour moi, dans cet instant profond,
Votre regard levé fit un ciel du plafond.

L’accent de la raison, auguste et pacifique,
L’équité, la pitié, la bonté séraphique,
L’oubli des torts d’autrui, cet oubli vertueux
Qui rend à leur insu les fronts majestueux,
Donnaient à vos discours, pleins de clartés si belles,
La tranquille grandeur des choses naturelles,
Et par moments semblaient mêler à votre voix
Ce chant doux et voilé qu’on entend dans les bois.

III

Pourquoi devant mes yeux revenez-vous sans cesse,
Ô jours de mon enfance et de mon allégresse?
Qui donc toujours vous rouvre en nos coeurs presque éteints
Ô lumineuse fleur des souvenirs lointains?

Oh! que j’étais heureux! oh! que j’étais candide!

En classe, un banc de chêne, usé, lustré, splendide,
Une table, un pupitre, un lourd encrier noir,
Une lampe, humble soeur de l’étoile du soir,
M’accueillaient gravement et doucement. Mon maître,
Comme je vous l’ai dit souvent, était un prêtre
À l’accent calme et bon, au regard réchauffant,
Naïf comme un savant, malin comme un enfant,
Qui m’embrassait, disant, car un éloge excite:
— Quoiqu’il n’ait que neuf ans, il explique Tacite. -
Puis près d’Eugène, esprit qu’hélas! Dieu submergea,
Je travaillais dans l’ombre, - et je songeais déjà.
Tandis que j’écrivais, - sans peur, mais sans système,
Versant le barbarisme à grands flots sur le thème,
Inventant les auteurs de sens inattendus,
Le dos courbé, le front touchant presque au Gradus, -
Je croyais, car toujours l’esprit de l’enfant veille,
Ouïr confusément, tout près de mon oreille,
Les mots grecs et latins, bavards et familiers,
Barbouillés d’encre, et gais comme des écoliers,
Chuchoter, comme font les oiseaux dans une aire,
Entre les noirs feuillets du lourd dictionnaire.
Bruits plus doux que le bruit d’un essaim qui s’enfuit,
Souffles plus étouffés qu’un soupir de la nuit,
Qui faisaient par instants, sous les fermoirs de cuivre,
Frissonner vaguement les pages du vieux livre!

Le devoir fait, légers comme de jeunes daims,
Nous fuyions à travers les immenses jardins,
Éclatant à la fois en cent propos contraires.
Moi, d’un pas inégal je suivais mes grands frères;
Et les astres sereins s’allumaient dans les cieux,
Et les mouches volaient dans l’air silencieux,
Et le doux rossignol, chantant dans l’ombre obscure,
Enseignait la musique à toute la nature,
Tandis qu’enfant jaseur aux gestes étourdis,
Jetant partout mes yeux ingénus et hardis
D’où jaillissait la joie en vives étincelles,

Je portais sous mon bras, noués par trois ficelles,
Horace et les festins, Virgile et les forêts,
Tout l’Olympe, Thésée, Hercule, et toi Cérès,
La cruelle Junon, Lerne et l’hydre enflammée,
Et le vaste lion de la roche Némée.

Mais, lorsque j’arrivais chez ma mère, souvent,
Grâce au hasard taquin qui joue avec l’enfant,
J’avais de grands chagrins et de grandes colères.
Je ne retrouvais plus, près des ifs séculaires,
Le beau petit jardin par moi-même arrangé.
Un gros chien en passant avait tout ravagé.
Ou quelqu’un dans ma chambre avait ouvert mes cages,
Et mes oiseaux étaient partis pour les bocages,
Et, joyeux, s’en étaient allés de fleur en fleur
Chercher la liberté bien loin, - ou l’oiseleur.
Ciel! alors j’accourais, rouge, éperdu, rapide,
Maudissant le grand chien, le jardinier stupide,
Et l’infâme oiseleur et son hideux lacet,
Furieux! - D’un regard ma mère m’apaisait.

IV

Aujourd’hui, ce n’est pas pour une cage vide,
Pour des oiseaux jetés à l’oiseleur avide,
Pour un dogue aboyant lâché parmi les fleurs,
Que mon courroux s’émeut. Non, les petits malheurs
Exaspèrent l’enfant; mais, comme en une église,
Dans les grandes douleurs l’homme se tranquillise.
Après l’ardent chagrin, au jour brûlant pareil,
Le repos vient au coeur comme aux yeux le sommeil.
De nos maux, chiffres noirs, la sagesse est la somme.
En l’éprouvant toujours, Dieu semble dire à l’homme:
— Fais passer ton esprit à travers le malheur;
Comme le grain du crible, il sortira meilleur. -
J’ai vécu, j’ai souffert, je juge et je m’apaise.
Ou si parfois encor la colère mauvaise

Fait pencher dans mon âme avec son doigt vainqueur
La balance où je pèse et le monde et mon coeur;
Si, n'ouvrant qu'un seul oeil, je condamne et je blâme,
Avec quelques mots purs, vous, sainte et noble femme,
Vous ramenez ma voix qui s'irrite et s'aigrit
Au calme sur lequel j'ai posé mon esprit;
Je sens sous vos rayons mes tempêtes se taire;
Et vous faites pour l'homme incliné, triste, austère,
Ce que faisait jadis pour l'enfant doux et beau
Ma mère, ce grand coeur qui dort dans le tombeau!

V

Écoutez à présent. - Dans ma raison qui tremble,
Parfois l'une après l'autre et quelquefois ensemble,
Trois voix, trois grandes voix murmurent.

L'une dit:
—" Courrouce-toi, poète. Oui, l'enfer applaudit
Tout ce que cette époque ébauche, crée ou tente.
Reste indigné. Ce siècle est une impure tente
Où l'homme appelle à lui, voyant le soir venu,
La volupté, la chair, le vice infâme et nu.
La vérité, qui fit jadis resplendir Rome,
Est toujours dans le ciel; l'amour n'est plus dans l'homme.
Tout rayon jaillissant trouve tout oeil fermé.
Oh! ne repousse pas la muse au bras armé
Qui visitait jadis comme une austère amie,
Ces deux sombres géants, Amos et Jérémie!
Les hommes sont ingrats, méchants, menteurs, jaloux.
Le crime est dans plusieurs, la vanité dans tous;
Car, selon le rameau dont ils ont bu la sève,
Ils tiennent, quelques-uns de Caïn, et tous d'Ève.

" Seigneur! ta croix chancelle et le respect s'en va.
La prière décroît. Jéhova! Jéhova!
On va parlant tout haut de toi-même en ton temple.

Le livre était la loi, le prêtre était l’exemple;
Livre et prêtre sont morts. Et la foi maintenant,
Cette braise allumée à ton foyer tonnant,
Qui, marquant pour ton Christ ceux qu’il préfère aux autres,
Jadis purifiait la lèvre des apôtres,
N’est qu’un charbon éteint dont les petits enfants
Souillent ton mur avec des rires triomphants! “ -

L’autre voix dit:—” Pardonne! aime! Dieu qu’on révère,
Dieu pour l’homme indulgent ne sera point sévère.
Respecte la fourmi non moins que le lion.
Rêveur! rien n’est petit dans la création.
De l’être universel l’atome se compose;
Dieu vit un peu dans tout, et rien n’est peu de chose.
Cultive en toi l’amour, la pitié, les regrets.
Si le sort te contraint d’examiner de près
L’homme souvent frivole, aveugle et téméraire,
Tempère l’oeil du juge avec les pleurs du frère.
Et que tout ici-bas, l’air, la fleur, le gazon;
Le groupe heureux qui joue au seuil de ta maison;
Un mendiant assis à côté d’une gerbe;
Un oiseau qui regarde une mouche dans l’herbe;
Les vieux livres du quai, feuilletés par le vent,
D’où l’esprit des anciens, subtil, libre et vivant,
S’envole, et, souffle errant, se mêle à tes pensées;
La contemplation de ces femmes froissées
Qui vivent dans les pleurs comme l’algue dans l’eau;
L’homme, ce spectateur; le monde, ce tableau;
Que cet ensemble auguste où l’insensé se blase
Tourne de plus en plus ta vie et ton extase
Vers l’oeil mystérieux qui nous regarde tous,
Invisible veilleur! témoin intime et doux!
Principe! but! milieu! clarté! chaleur! dictame!
Secret de toute chose entrevu par toute l’âme!

“ N’allume aucun enfer au tison d’aucun feu.
N’aggrave aucun fardeau. Démontre l’âme et Dieu,

L’impérissable esprit, la tombe irrévocable;
Et rends douce à nos fronts, que souvent elle accable,
La grande main qui grave en signes immortels
JAMAIS! sur les tombeaux; TOUJOURS! sur les autels. “

La troisième voix dit:—” Aimer? haïr? qu’importe!
Qu’on chante ou qu’on maudisse, et qu’on entre ou qu’on sorte,
Le mal, le bien, la mort, les vices, les faux dieux,
Qu’est-ce que tout cela fait au ciel radieux?
La végétation, vivante, aveugle et sombre,
En couvre-t-elle moins de feuillages sans nombre,
D’arbres et de lichens, d’herbe et de goëmons,
Les prés, les champs, les eaux, les rochers et les monts?
L’onde est-elle moins bleue et le bois moins sonore?
L’air promène-t-il moins, dans l’ombre et dans l’aurore,
Sur les clairs horizons, sur les flots décevants,
Ces nuages heureux qui vont aux quatre vents?
Le soleil qui sourit aux fleurs dans les campagnes,
Aux rois dans les palais, aux forçats dans les bagnes,
Perd-il, dans la splendeur dont il est revêtu,
Un rayon quand la terre oublie une vertu?
Non, Pan n’a pas besoin qu’on le prie et qu’on l’aime.
Ô sagesse! esprit pur! sérénité suprême!
Zeus! Irmensul! Wishnou! Jupiter! Jéhova!
Dieu que cherchait Socrate et que Jésus trouva!
Unique Dieu! vrai Dieu! seul mystère! seule âme!
Toi qui, laissant tomber ce que la mort réclame,
Fis les cieux infinis pour les temps éternels!
Toi qui mis dans l’éther plein de bruits solennels,
Tente dont ton haleine émeut les sombres toiles,
Des millions d’oiseaux, des millions d’étoiles!
Que te font, ô Très-Haut! les hommes insensés,
Vers la nuit au hasard l’un par l’autre poussés,
Fantômes dont jamais tes yeux ne se souviennent,
Devant ta face immense ombres qui vont et viennent! “

VI

Dans ma retraite obscure où, sous mon rideau vert,
Luit comme un oeil ami maint vieux livre entrouvert,
Où ma bible sourit dans l’ombre à mon Virgile,
J’écoute ces trois voix. Si mon cerveau fragile
S’étonne, je persiste; et, sans peur, sans effroi,
Je les laisse accomplir ce qu’elles font en moi.
Car les hommes, troublés de ces métamorphoses,
Composent leur sagesse avec trop peu de choses.
Tous ont la déraison de voir la Vérité
Chacun de sa fenêtre et rien que d’un côté,
Sans qu’aucun d’eux, tenté par ce rocher sublime,
Aille en faire le tour et monte sur sa cime.
Et de ce triple aspect des choses d’ici-bas,
De ce triple conseil que l’homme n’entend pas,
Pour mon coeur où Dieu vit, où la haine s’émousse,
Sort une bienveillance universelle et douce
Qui dore comme une aube et d’avance attendrit
Le vers qu’à moitié fait j’emporte en mon esprit
Pour l’achever aux champs avec l’odeur des plaines
Et l’ombre du nuage et le bruit des fontaines!

LES CHATIMENTS

This collection of satirical poems was published in 1853. Following the coup of 2nd December 1851, which saw the arrival of Prince Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, Hugo was exiled. These poems were, for the poet, a weapon designed to discredit and bring down the regime of Napoleon III.

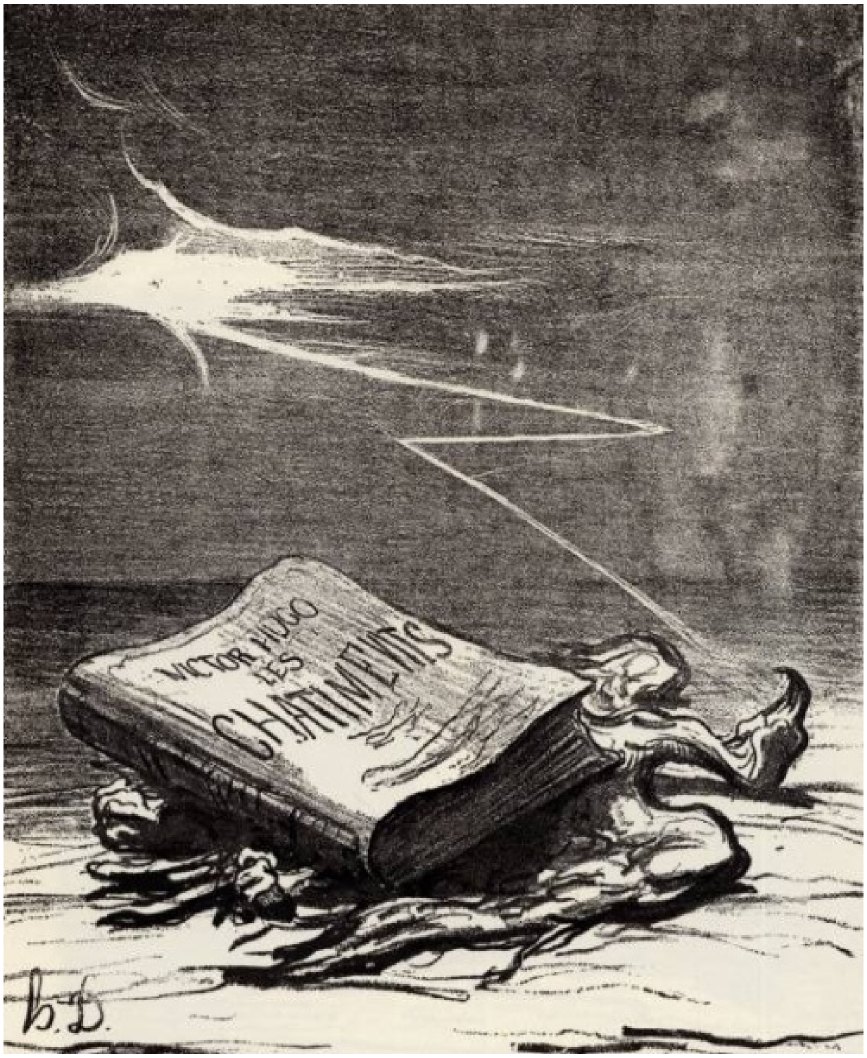
VICTOR HUGO
LES
CHATIMENTS
h.D.

An original illustration

TABLE DES MATIERES

AU MOMENT DE RENTRER EN FRANCE
NOX

LIVRE I: LA SOCIÉTÉ EST SAUVÉE

France! à l’heure où tu te prosternes
Toulon
Approchez-vous. Ceci, c’est le tas des dévots
Aux morts du 4 décembre
Cette nuit-là
Le Te Deum du 1er janvier 1852
Ad majorem Dei gloriam
À un martyr
L’Art et le Peuple
Chanson
Oh! je sais qu’ils feront des mensonges sans nombre
Carte d’Europe
Chanson
C’est la nuit; la nuit noire, assoupie et profonde

LIVRE II: L’ORDRE EST RETABLI.

Idylles
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Ô soleil, ô face divine
Puisque le juste est dans l’abîme
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LIVRE III: LA FAMILLE EST RESTAURÉE

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“Ainsi les plus abjects, les plus vils, les plus minces
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Splendeurs
Joyeuse vie
L’Empereur s’amuse
Sentiers où l’herbe se balance
Ô Robert, un conseil. Ayez l’air moins candide
“L’histoire a pour égout des temps comme les nôtres
À propos de la loi Faider
Le Bord de la mer
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LIVRE IV: LA RELIGION EST GLORIFIEE

Sacer esto
Ce que le poète se disait en 1848
Les Commissions mixtes
À des journalistes de robe courte
Quelqu’un
Écrit le 17 juillet 1851, en descendant de la tribune
Un autre
Déjà nommé
Ceux qui vivent, ce sont ceux qui luttent; ce sont …
Aube
“Vicomte de Foucault, lorsque vous empoignâtes
À quatre prisonniers
On loge à la nuit

LIVRE V: L’AUTORITÉ EST SACRÉE

Le Sacre
Chanson
Le Manteau impérial
Tout s’en va
Ô drapeau de Wagram! ô pays de Voltaire
“On est Tibère, on est Judas, on est Dracon
Les Grands Corps de l’État
“Le Progrès calme et fort, et toujours innocent
Le Chant de ceux qui s’en vont sur mer

À un qui veut se détacher
Pauline Roland
L’Expiation

LIVRE VI: LA STABILITE EST ASSUREE

Napoléon III
Les Martyres
Hymne des transportés
Chanson
Éblouissements
À ceux qui dorment
Luna
Aux femmes
Au peuple
Apportez vos chaudrons, sorcières de Shakespeare
Le Parti du crime
On dit: — Soyez prudents. — Puis vient ce dithyrambe
À Juvénal
Floréal
Stella
Les Trois Chevaux
Applaudissement

LIVRE VII: LES SAUVEURS SE SAUVERONT

Sonnez, sonnez toujours, clairons de la pensée
La Reculade
Le Chasseur noir
L’Égout de Rome
“C’était en juin, j’étais à Bruxelle; on me dit …
Chanson
Patria
La Caravane
Cette nuit, il pleuvait, la marée était haute
Ce serait une erreur de croire que ces choses
Quand l’eunuque régnait à côté du césar
Paroles d’un conservateur à propos d’un perturbateur
Force des choses

Chanson
“Il est des jours abjects où, séduits par la joie
Ultima verba
LUX
LA FIN

LES CHATIMENTS

PREFACE

Il a été publié, à Bruxelles, une édition tronquée de ce livre, précédée des lignes que voici:

“Le faux serment est un crime.

“Le guet-apens est un crime.

“La séquestration arbitraire est un crime.

“La subornation des fonctionnaires publics est un crime.

“La subornation des juges est un crime.

“Le vol est un crime.

“Le meurtre est un crime.

“Ce sera un des plus douloureux étonnements de l’avenir que, dans de nobles pays qui, au milieu de la prostration de l’Europe, avaient maintenu leur Constitution et semblaient être les derniers et sacrés asiles de la probité et de la liberté, ce sera, disons-nous, l’étonnement de l’avenir que, dans ces pays-là, il ait été fait des lois pour protéger ce que toutes les lois humaines, d’accord avec toutes les lois et divines, ont dans tous les temps appelé crime.

“L’honnêteté universelle proteste contre ces lois protectrices du mal.

“Pourtant, que les patriotes qui défendent la liberté, que les généreux peuples auxquels la force voudrait imposer l’immoralité, ne désespèrent pas; que, d’un autre côté, les coupables, en apparence tout-puissants, ne se hâtent pas trop de triompher en voyant les pages tronquées de ce livre.

“Quoi que fassent ceux qui règnent chez eux par la violence et hors de chez eux par la menace, quoi que fassent ceux qui se croient les maîtres des peuples et qui ne sont que des tyrans de consciences, l’homme qui lutte pour la justice et la vérité trouvera toujours le moyen d’accomplir son devoir tout entier.

“La toute-puissance du mal n’a jamais abouti qu’à des efforts inutiles. La pensée échappe toujours à qui tente de l’étouffer. Elle se fait insaisissable à la compression; elle se réfugie d’une forme dans l’autre. Le flambeau rayonne; si on l’éteint, si on l’engloutit dans les ténèbres, le flambeau devient une voix, et l’on ne fait pas la nuit sur la parole; si l’on met un bâillon à la bouche qui parle, la parole se change en lumière, el l’on ne bâillonne pas la lumière.

“Rien ne dompte la conscience de l’homme, car la conscience de l’homme, c’est la pensée de Dieu.

“V.H.”

Les quelques lignes qu’on vient de lire, préface d’un livre mutilé, contenaient l’engagement de publier le livre complet. Cet engagement, nous le tenons aujourd’hui.

“V.H.”

Jersey, 1853.

AU MOMENT DE RENTRER EN FRANCE

Qui peut en ce moment où Dieu peut-être échoue,
Deviner
Si c'est du côté sombre ou joyeux que la roue
Va tourner?

Qu'est-ce qui va sortir de ta main qui se voile,
O destin?
Sera-ce l'ombre infâme et sinistre, ou l'étoile
Du matin?

Je vois en même temps le meilleur et le pire;
Noir tableau!
Car la France mérite Austerlitz, et l'empire
Waterloo.

J'irai, je rentrerai dans ta muraille sainte,
O Paris!
Je te rapporterai l'âme jamais éteinte
Des proscrits.

Puisque c'est l'heure où tous doivent se mettre à l'oeuvre,
Fiers, ardents,
Écraser au dehors le tigre, et la couleuvre
Au dedans;

Puisque l'idéal pur, n'ayant pu nous convaincre,
S'engloutit;
Puisque nul n'est trop grand pour mourir, ni pour vaincre
Trop petit;

Puisqu'on voit dans les cieux poindre l'aurore noire
Du plus fort;
Puisque tout devant nous maintenant est la gloire
Ou la mort;

Puisqu’en ce jour le sang ruisselle, les toits brûlent,
Jour sacré!
Puisque c’est le moment où les lâches reculent,
J’accourrai.

Et mon ambition, quand vient sur la frontière
L’étranger,
La voici: part aucune au pouvoir, part entière
Au danger.

Puisque ces ennemis, hier encor nos hôtes,
Sont chez nous,
J’irai, je me mettrai, France, devant tes fautes
A genoux!

J’insulterai leurs chants, leurs aigles noirs, leurs serres,
Leurs défis;
Je te demanderai ma part de tes misères,
Moi ton fils.

Farouche, vénérant, sous leurs affronts infâmes,
Tes malheurs,
Je baiserai tes pieds, France, l’oeil plein de flammes
Et de pleurs.

France, tu verras bien qu’humble tête éclipsée
J’avais foi,
Et que je n’eus jamais dans l’âme une pensée
Que pour toi.

Tu me permettras d’être en sortant des ténèbres
Ton enfant;
Et tandis que rira ce tas d’hommes funèbres
triomphant,

Tu ne trouveras pas mauvais que je t’adore,

En priant,
Ébloui par ton front invincible, que dore
L’Orient.

Naguère, aux jours d’orgie où l’homme joyeux brille,
Et croit peu,
Pareil aux durs sarments desséchés où petille
Un grand feu,

Quand, ivre de splendeur, de triomphe et de songes,
Tu dansais
Et tu chantais, en proie aux éclatants mensonges
Du succès,

Alors qu’on entendait ta fanfare de fête
Retentir,
O Paris, je t’ai fui comme noir prophète
Fuyait Tyr.

Quand l’empire en Gomorrhe avait changé Lutèce,
Morne, amer,
Je me suis envolé dans la grande tristesse
De la mer.

Là, tragique, écoutant ta chanson, ton délire,
Bruits confus,
J’opposais à ton luxe, à ton rève, à ton rire,
Un refus.

Mais aujourd’hui qu’arrive avec sa sombre foule
Attila,
Aujourd’hui que le monde autour de toi s’écroule,
Me voilà.

France, être sur ta claie à l’heure où l’on te traîne
Aux cheveux,
O ma mère, et porter mon anneau de ta chaîne,

Je le veux!

J’accours, puisque sur toi la bombe et la mitraille
Ont craché;
Tu me regarderas debout sur ta muraille,
Ou couché.

Et peut-être, en la terre où brille l’espérance,
Pur flambeau,
Pour prix de mon exil, tu m’accorderas, France,
Un tombeau.
Bruxelles, 31 aoùt 1870.

NOX

I

C’est la date choisie au fond de ta pensée,
Prince! il faut en finir, - Cette nuit est glacée, viens, lève-toi!
Flairant dans l’ombre les escrocs,
Le dogue Liberté gronde et montre ses crocs.
Quoique mis par Carlier à la chaîne, il aboie.
N’attends pas plus longtemps! c’est l’heure de la proie.
Vois, décembre épaissit son brouillard le plus noir.
Comme un baron voleur qui sort de son manoir,
Surprends, brusque assaillant, l’ennemi que tu cernes.
Debout! les régiments sont là dans les casernes,

Sac au dos, abrutis de vin et de fureur,
N’attendant qu’un bandit pour faire un empereur.
Mets ta main sur ta lampe et viens d’un pas oblique,
Prends ton couteau, l’instant est bon: la République,
Confiante, et sans voir tes yeux sombres briller,
Dort, avec ton serment, prince, pour oreiller.

Cavaliers, fantassins, sortez! dehors les hordes!
Sus aux représentants! soldats, liez de cordes
Vos généraux jetés dans la cave aux forçats!
Poussez, la crosse aux reins, l’Assemblée à Mazas!
Chassez la haute-cour à coups de plat de sabre!
Changez-vous, preux de France, en brigands de Calabre!
Vous, bourgeois, regardez, vil troupeau, vil limon,
Comme un glaive rougi qu’agite un noir démon,
Le coup d’état qui sort flamboyant de la forge!
Les tribuns pour le droit luttent; qu’on les égorge.
Routiers, condottieri, vendus, prostitués,
Frappez! tuez Baudin! tuez Dussoubs! tuez!
Que fait hors des maisons ce peuple? Qu’il s’en aille.
Soldats, mitraillez-moi toute cette canaille!

Feu! feu! Tu voteras ensuite, ô peuple roi!
Sabrez le droit, sabrez l'honneur, sabrez la loi!
Que sur les boulevards le sang coule en rivières!
Du vin plein les bidons! des morts plein les civières!
Qui veut de l'eau-de-vie? En ce temps pluvieux
Il faut boire. Soldats, fusillez-moi ce vieux.
Tuez-moi cet enfant. Qu'est-ce que cette femme?
C'est la mère? tuez. Que tout ce peuple infâme
Tremble, et que les pavés rougissent ses talons!

Ce Paris odieux bouge et résiste. Allons!
Qu'il sente le mépris, sombre et plein de vengeance,
Que nous, la force, avons pour lui, l'intelligence!
L'étranger respecta Paris: soyons nouveaux!
Traînons-le dans la boue aux crins de nos chevaux!
Qu'il meure! qu'on le broie et l'écrase et l'efface!
Noirs canons, crachez-lui vos boulets à la face!

II

C'est fini. Le silence est partout, et l'horreur.
Vive Poulmann César et Soufflard empereur!
On fait des feux de joie avec les barricades;
La porte Saint-Denis sous ses hautes arcades
Voit les brasiers trembler au vent et rayonner.
C'est fait, reposez-vous; et l'on entend sonner
Dans les fourreaux le sabre et l'argent dans les poches.
De la banque aux bivouacs on vide les sacoches.
Ceux qui tuaient le mieux et qui n'ont pas bronché
Auront la croix d'honneur par-dessus le marché.
Les vainqueurs en hurlant dansent sur les décombres.
Des tas de corps saignants gisent dans les coins sombres.
Le soldat, gai, féroce, ivre, complice obscur,
Chancelle, et, de la main dont il s'appuie au mur,
Achève d'écraser quelque cervelle humaine.
On boit, on rit, on chante, on ripaille, on amène
Des vaincus qu'on fusille, hommes, femmes, enfants.

Les généraux dorés galopent triomphants,
Regardés par les morts tombés à la renverse.
Bravo! César a pris le chemin de traverse!
Courons féliciter l’Élysée à présent.
Du sang dans les maisons, dans les ruisseaux du sang,
Partout! Pour enjamber ces effroyables mares
Les juges lestement retroussent leurs simarres,
Et l’Église joyeuse en emporte un caillot
Tout fumant, pour servir d’écritoire à Veuillot.
Oui, c’est bien vous qu’hier, riant de vos férules,
Un caporal chassa de vos chaises curules,
Magistrats! Maintenant que, reprenant du cœur,
Vous êtes bien certains que Mandrin est vainqueur,
Que vous ne serez pas obligés d’être intègres,
Que Mandrin dotera vos dévouements allègres,
Que c’est lui qui paîra désormais, et très bien,
Qu’il a pris le budget, que vous ne risquez rien,
Qu’il a bien étranglé la loi, qu’elle est bien morte,
Et que vous trouverez ce cadavre à la porte,
Accourez, acclamez, et chantez Hosanna!
Oubliez le soufflet qu’hier il vous donna,
Et puisqu’il a tué vieillards, mères et filles,
Puisqu’il est dans le meurtre entré jusqu’aux chevilles,
Prosternez-vous devant l’assassin tout-puissant,
Et léchez-lui les pieds pour effacer le sang!
III

Donc cet homme s’est dit: - « Le maître des armées,
L’empereur surhumain
Devant qui, gorge au vent, pieds nus, les renommées
Volaient, clairons en main,

«Napoléon, quinze ans régna dans les tempêtes
Du Sud à l’Aquilon.
Tous les rois l’adoraient, lui, marchant sur leurs têtes,
Eux, baisant son talon;

«Il prit, embrassant tout dans sa vaste espérance,
Madrid, Berlin, Moscou;
Je ferai mieux; je vais enfoncer à la France
Mes ongles dans le cou!

«La France libre et fière et chantant la concorde
Marche à son but sacré;
Moi, je vais lui jeter par derrière une corde
Et je l’étranglerai.

«Nous nous partagerons, mon oncle et moi, l’histoire;
Le plus intelligent,
C’est moi, certes! il aura la fanfare de gloire,
J’aurai le sac d’argent.
«Je me sers de son nom, splendide et vain tapage,
Tombé dans mon berceau.
Le nain grimpe au géant. Je lui laisse sa page,
Mais j’en prends le verso.

«Je me cramponne à lui. C’est moi qui suis son maître.
J’ai pour sort et pour loi
De surnager sur lui dans l’histoire, ou peut-être
De l’engloutir sous moi.

«Moi, chat-huant, je prends cet aigle dans ma serre.
Moi si bas, lui si haut,
Je le tiens! je choisis son grand anniversaire,
C’est le jour qu’il me faut.

«Ce jour-là, je serai comme un homme qui monte
Le manteau sur ses yeux;
Nul ne se doutera que j’apporte la honte
A ce jour glorieux;

«J’irai plus aisément saisir mon ennemie
Dans mes poings meurtriers;

La France ce jour-là sera mieux endormie
Sur son lit de lauriers.» -

Alors il vint, cassé de débauches, l’œil terne,
Furtif, les traits pâlis,
Et ce voleur de nuit alluma sa lanterne
Au soleil d’Austerlitz!
IV

Victoire! il était temps, prince, que tu parusses!
Les filles d’opéra manquaient de princes russes;
Les révolutions apportent de l’ennui
Aux Jeannetons d’hier, Pamélas d’aujourd’hui;
Dans don Juan qui s’effraie un Harpagon éclate,
Un maigre filet d’or sort de sa bourse plate;
L’argent devenait rare aux tripots; les journaux
Faisaient le vide autour des confessionnaux;
Le sacré-cœur, mourant de sa mort naturelle,
Maigrissait; les protêts, tourbillonnant en grêle,
Drus et noirs, aveuglaient le portier de Magnan;
On riait aux sermons de l’abbé Ravignan;
Plus de pur-sang piaffant aux portes des donzelles;
L’hydre de l’anarchie apparaissait aux belles
Sous la forme effroyable et triste d’un cheval
De fiacre les traînant pour trente sous au bal.
La désolation était sur Babylone.
Mais tu surgis, bras fort; tu te dresses, colonne
Tout renaît, tout revit, tout est sauvé. Pour lors
Les figurantes vont récolter des milords,
Tous sont contents, soudards, francs viveurs, gent dévote,
Tous chantent, monseigneur l’archevêque, et Javotte.

Allons! congratulons, triomphons, partageons!

Les vieux partis, coiffés en ailes de pigeons,
Vont s’inscrire, adorant Mandrin, chez son concierge.
Falstaff allume un punch, Tartuffe brûle un cierge.

Vers l’Élysée en joie, où sonne le tambour,
Tous se hâtent, Parieu, Montalembert, Sibour,
Rouher, cette catin, Troplong, cette servante,
Grecs, juifs, quiconque a mis sa conscience en vente,
Quiconque vole et ment cum privilegio;
L’homme du bénitier, l’homme de l’agio,
Quiconque est méprisable et désire être infâme,
Quiconque, se jugeant dans le fond de son âme,
Se sent assez forçat pour être sénateur.
Myrmidon de César admire la hauteur.
Lui, fait la roue et trône au centre de la fête.
— Eh bien, messieurs, la chose est-elle un peu bien faite?
Qu’en pense Papavoine et qu’en dit Loyola?
Maintenant nous ferons voter ces drôles-là.
Partout en lettres d’or nous écrirons le chiffre. -
Gai! tapez sur la caisse et soufflez dans le fifre;
Braillez vos salvum fac, messeigneurs; en avant
Des églises, abri profond du Dieu vivant,
On dressera des mâts avec des oriflammes.
Victoire! venez voir les cadavres, mesdames.

V

Où sont-ils? Sur les quais, dans les cours, sous les ponts,
Dans l’égout, dont Maupas fait lever les tampons,
Dans la fosse commune affreusement accrue,
Sur le trottoir, au coin des portes, dans la rue,
Pêle-mêle entassés, partout; dans les fourgons
Que vers la nuit tombante escortent les dragons,
Convoi hideux qui vient du Champ de Mars, et passe,
Et dont Paris tremblant s’entretient à voix basse.
Ô vieux mont des martyrs, hélas, garde ton nom!
Les morts, sabrés, hachés, broyés par le canon,
Dans ce champ que la tombe emplit de son mystère,
Etaient ensevelis la tête hors de terre.
Cet homme les avait lui-même ainsi placés,
Et n’avait pas eu peur de tous ces fronts glacés.

Ils étaient là, sanglants, froids, la bouche entrouverte,
La face vers le ciel, blêmes dans l’herbe verte,
Effroyables à voir dans leur tranquillité,
Eventrés, balafrés, le visage fouetté
Par la ronce qui tremble au vent du crépuscule
Tous, l’homme du faubourg qui jamais ne recule,
Le riche à la main blanche et le pauvre au bras fort,
La mère qui semblait montrer son enfant mort,
Cheveux blancs, tête blonde, au milieu des squelettes,
La belle jeune fille aux lèvres violettes,

Côte à côte rangés dans l’ombre au pied des ifs,
Livides, stupéfaits, immobiles, pensifs,
Spectres du même crime et des mêmes désastres,
De leur œil fixe et vide ils regardaient les astres.
Dès l’aube, on s’en venait chercher dans ce gazon
L’absent qui n’était pas rentré dans la maison;
Le peuple contemplait ces têtes effarées;
La nuit, qui de décembre abrège les soirées,
Pudique, les couvrait du moins de son linceul.
Le soir, le vieux gardien des tombes, resté seul,
Hâtait le pas parmi les pierres sépulcrales,
Frémissant d’entrevoir toutes ces faces pâles
Et tandis qu’on pleurait dans les maisons en deuil,
L’âpre bise soufflait sur ces fronts sans cercueil,
L’ombre froide emplissait l’enclos aux murs funèbres;
Ô morts, que disiez-vous à Dieu dans ces ténèbres?

On eût dit, en voyant ces morts mystérieux
Le cou hors de la terre et le regard aux cieux,
Que, dans le cimetière où le cyprès frissonne,
Entendant le clairon du jugement qui sonne,
Tous ces assassinés s’éveillaient brusquement,
Qu’ils voyaient, Bonaparte, au seuil du firmament
Amener devant Dieu ton âme horrible et fausse,
Et que, pour témoigner, ils sortaient de leur fosse.

Montmartre! enclos fatal! quand vient le soir obscur
Aujourd’hui le passant évite encor ce mur.

VI

Un mois après, cet homme allait à Notre-Dame.

Il entra le front haut; la myrrhe et le cinname
Brûlaient; les tours vibraient sous le bourdon sonnant;
L’archevêque était là, de gloire rayonnant;
Sa chape avait été taillée en un suaire;
Sur une croix dressée au fond du sanctuaire
Jésus avait été cloué pour qu’il restât.
Cet infâme apportait à Dieu son attentat.
Comme un loup qui se lèche après qu’il vient de mordre,
Caressant sa moustache, il dit: - J’ai sauvé l’ordre!
Anges, recevez-moi dans votre légion!
J’ai sauvé la famille et la religion! -
Et dans son œil féroce, où Satan se contemple,
On vit luire une larme... - Ô colonnes du temple!
Abîmes qu’à Pathmos vit s’entrouvrir saint-Jean,
Cieux qui vîtes Néron, soleil qui vis Séjan,
Vents qui jadis meniez Tibère vers Caprée
Et poussiez sur les flots sa galère dorée,
Ô souffles de l’aurore et du septentrion,
Dites si l’assassin dépasse l’histrion!

VII

Toi qui bats de ton flux fidèle
La roche où j’ai ployé mon aile,
Vaincu, mais non pas abattu,
Gouffre où l’air joue, où l’esquif sombre
Pourquoi me parles-tu dans l’ombre?
Ô sombre mer, que me veux-tu?

Tu n’y peux rien! Ronge tes digues,
Epands l’onde que tu prodigues,
Laisse-moi souffrir et rêver;

Toutes les eaux de ton abîme,
Hélas! passeraient sur ce crime,
Ô vaste mer, sans le laver!

Je comprends, tu veux m’en distraire
Tu me dis: - Calme-toi, mon frère,
Calme-toi, penseur orageux! -
Mais toi-même alors, mer profonde,
Calme ton flot puissant qui gronde,
Toujours amer, jamais fangeux!

Tu crois en ton pouvoir suprême,
Toi qu’on admire, toi qu’on aime,

Toi qui ressembles au destin,
Toi que les cieux ont azurée,
Toi qui dans ton onde sacrée
Laves l’étoile du matin!

Tu me dis: - Viens, contemple, oublie!
Tu me montres le mât qui plie,
Les blocs verdis, les caps croulants,
L’écume au loin dans les décombres,
S’abattant sur les rochers sombres
Comme une troupe d’oiseaux blancs;

La pêcheuse aux pieds nus qui chante,
L’eau bleue où fuit la nef penchants,
Le marin, rude laboureur,
Les hautes vagues en démence;
Tu me montres ta grâce immense
Mêlée à ton immense horreur;

Tu me dis: - Donne-moi ton âme;
Proscrit, éteins en moi ta flamme,
Marcheur, jette aux flots ton bâton
Tourne vers moi ta vue ingrate. -

Tu me dis: - J’endormais Socrate!-
Tu me dis: - J’ai calmé Caton!

Non! respecte l’âpre pensée,
L’âme du juste courroucée,
L’esprit qui songe aux noirs forfaits!
Parle aux vieux rochers, tes conquêtes,

Et laisse en repos mes tempêtes!
D’ailleurs, mer sombre, je te hais!

Ô mer! n’est-ce pas toi, servante,
Qui traînes sur ton eau mouvante,
Parmi les vents et les écueils,
Vers Cayenne aux fosses profondes
Ces noirs pontons qui sur tes ondes
Passent comme de grands cercueils!

N’est-ce pas toi qui les emportes
Vers le sépulcre ouvrant ses portes,
Tous nos martyrs au front serein,
Dans la cale où manque la paille,
Où les canons pleins de mitraille,
Béants, passent leur cou d’airain!

Et s’ils pleurent, si les tortures
Font fléchir ces hautes natures,
N’est-ce pas toi, gouffre exécré,
Qui te mêles à leur supplice,
Et qui de ta rumeur complice,
Couvres leur cri désespéré!
VIII

Voilà ce qu’on a vu! l’histoire le raconte,
Et lorsqu’elle a fini pleure, rouge de honte.

Quand se réveillera la grande nation,

Quand viendra le moment de l’expiation,
Glaive des jours sanglants, oh! ne sors pas de l’ombre!
Non! non! il n’est pas vrai qu’en plus d’une âme sombre,
Pour châtier ce traître et cet homme de nuit,
A cette heure, ô douleur! ta nécessité luit!
Souvenirs où l’esprit grave et pensif s’arrête!
Gendarmes, sabre nu, conduisant la charrette,
Roulements des tambours, peuple criant: frappons!
Foule encombrant les toits, les seuils, les quais, les ponts,
Grèves des temps passés, mornes places publiques
Où l’on entrevoyait des triangles obliques,
Oh! ne revenez pas, lugubres visions!
Ciel! nous allions en paix devant nous, nous faisions
Chacun notre travail dans le siècle où nous sommes,
Le poëte chantait l’œuvre immense des hommes,
La tribune parlait avec sa grande voix,
On brisait échafauds, trônes, carcans, pavois,
Chaque jour décroissaient la haine et la souffrance,
Le genre humain suivait le progrès saint, la France
Marchait devant, avec sa flamme sur le front;

Ces hommes sont venus! lui, ce vivant affront,
Lui, ce bandit qu’on lave avec l’huile du sacre,
Ils sont venus, portant le deuil et le massacre,
Le meurtre, les linceuls, le fer, le sang, le feu,
Ils ont semé cela sur l’avenir. Grand Dieu!

Et maintenant, pitié, voici que tu tressailles
A ces mots effrayants - vengeance! représailles!

Et moi, proscrit qui saigne aux ronces des chemins,
Triste, je rêve et j’ai mon front dans mes deux mains,
Et je sens, par instants, d’une aile hérissée
Dans les jours qui viendront s’enfoncer ma pensée!
Géante aux chastes yeux, à l’ardente action,
Que jamais on ne voie, ô Révolution,
Devant ton fier visage où la colère brille,

L’Humanité, tremblante et te criant: ma fille!
Et couvrant de son corps même les scélérats,
Se traîner à tes pieds en se tordant les bras!
Ah! tu respecteras cette douleur amère,
Et tu t’arrêteras, Vierge, devant la Mère!

Ô travailleur robuste, ouvrier demi-nu,
Moissonneur envoyé par Dieu même, et venu
Pour faucher en un jour dix siècles de misère,
Sans peur, sans pitié, vrai, formidable et sincère,
Egal par la stature au colosse romain,
Toi qui vainquis l’Europe et qui pris dans ta main
Les rois, et les brisas les uns contre les autres,
Né pour clore les temps d’où sortirent les nôtres,

Toi qui par la terreur sauvas la liberté,
Toi qui portes ce nom sombre: Nécessité!
Dans l’Histoire où tu luis comme en une fournaise,
Reste seul à jamais, Titan quatrevingt-treize!
Rien d’aussi grand que toi ne viendrait après toi.

D’ailleurs, né d’un régime où dominait l’effroi,
Ton éducation sur ta tête affranchie
Pesait, et malgré toi, fils de la monarchie,
Nourri d’enseignements et d’exemples mauvais,
Comme elle tu versas le sang; tu ne savais
Que ce qu’elle t’avait appris: le mal, la peine,
La loi de mort mêlée avec la loi de haine;
Et jetant bas tyrans, parlements, rois, Capets,
Tu te levais contre eux et comme eux tu frappais.

Nous, grâce à toi, géant qui gagnas notre cause,
Fils de la liberté, nous savons autre chose.
Ce que la France veut pour toujours désormais,
C’est l’amour rayonnant sur ses calmes sommets,
La loi sainte du Christ, la fraternité pure.
Ce grand mot est écrit dans toute la nature:

Aimez-vous! aimez-vous! - Soyons frères; ayons
L’œil fixé sur l’Idée, ange aux divins rayons.
L’Idée à qui tout cède et qui toujours éclaire
Prouve sa sainteté même dans sa colère,
Elle laisse toujours les principes debout.
Etre vainqueurs, c’est peu, mais rester grands, c’est tout.
Quand nous tiendrons ce traître, abject, frissonnant, blême
Affirmons le progrès dans le châtiment même.

La honte, et non la mort. - Peuples, couvrons d’oubli
L’affreux passé des rois, pour toujours aboli,
Supplices, couperets, billots, gibets, tortures!
Hâtons l’heure promise aux nations futures
Où, calme et souriant aux bons, même aux ingrats,
La Concorde, serrant les hommes dans ses bras,
Penchera sur nous tous sa tête vénérable!
Oh! qu’il ne soit pas dit que, pour ce misérable,
Le monde en son chemin sublime a reculé!
Que Jésus et Voltaire auront en vain parlé!
Qu’il n’est pas vrai qu’après tant d’efforts et de peine,
Notre époque ait enfin sacré la vie humaine,
Hélas! et qu’il suffit d’un moment indigné
Pour perdre le trésor par les siècles gagné!
On peut être sévère et de sang économe.
Oh! qu’il ne soit pas dit qu’à cause de cet homme
La guillotine au noir panier, qu’avec dégoût
Février avait prise et jetée à l’égout,
S’est réveillée avec les bourreaux dans leurs bouges,
A ressaisi sa hache entre ses deux bras rouges,
Et, dressant son poteau dans les tombes scellé,
Sinistre, a reparu sous le ciel étoilé!
IX
Toi qu’aimait Juvénal gonflé de lave ardente,
Toi dont la clarté luit dans l’œil fixe de Dante,
Muse Indignation! viens, dressons maintenant,
Dressons sur cet empire heureux et rayonnant,
Et sur cette victoire au tonnerre échappée,

Assez de piloris pour faire une épopée!
16-22 novembre 1852. Jersey

LIVRE I: LA SOCIÉTÉ EST SAUVÉE

France! à l’heure où tu te prosternes

I

France! à l’heure où tu te prosternes,
Le pied d’un tyran sur ton front,
La voix sortira des cavernes;
Les enchaînés tressailleront.

Le banni, debout sur la grève,
Contemplant l’étoile et le flot,
Comme ceux qu’on entend en rêve,
Parlera dans l’ombre tout haut;

Et ses paroles qui menacent,
Ses paroles dont l’éclair luit,

Seront comme des mains qui passent
Tenant des glaives dans la nuit.

Elles feront frémir les marbres
Et les monts que brunit le soir,
Et les chevelures des arbres
Frissonneront sous le ciel noir;

Elles seront l’airain qui sonne,
Le cri qui chasse les corbeaux,
Le souffle inconnu dont frissonne
Le brin d’herbe sur les tombeaux;

Elles crieront: Honte aux infâmes,
Aux oppresseurs, aux meurtriers!
Elles appelleront les âmes
Comme on appelle des guerriers!

Sur les races qui se transforment,

Sombre orage, elles planeront;
Et si ceux qui vivent s’endorment,
Ceux qui sont morts s’éveilleront.

30 mars. Jersey.

Toulon

I

En ces temps-là, c’était une ville tombée
Au pouvoir des anglais, maîtres des vastes mers,
Qui, du canon battue et de terreur courbée,
Disparaissait dans les éclairs.

C’était une cité qu’ébranlait le tonnerre
A l’heure où la nuit tombe, à l’heure où le jour naît,
Qu’avait prise en sa griffe Albion, qu’en sa serre
La République reprenait.

Dans la rade couraient les frégates meurtries;
Les pavillons pendaient troués par le boulet;
Sur le front orageux des noires batteries
La fumée à longs flots roulait.
On entendait gronder les forts, sauter les poudres
Le brûlot flamboyait sur la vague qui luit;
Comme un astre effrayant qui se disperse en foudres,
La bombe éclatait dans la nuit.

Sombre histoire! Quels temps! Et quelle illustre page!
Tout se mêlait, le mât coupé, le mur détruit,
Les obus, le sifflet des maîtres d’équipage,
Et l’ombre, et l’horreur, et le bruit.

Ô France! tu couvrais alors toute la terre
Du choc prodigieux de tes rébellions.
Les rois lâchaient sur toi le tigre et la panthère,
Et toi, tu lâchais les lions.

Alors la République avait quatorze armées;
On luttait sur les monts et sur les océans.
Cent victoires jetaient au vent cent renommées.

On voyait surgir les géants!

Alors apparaissaient des aubes rayonnantes.
Des inconnus, soudain éblouissant les yeux,
Se dressaient, et faisaient aux trompettes sonnantes
Dire leurs noms mystérieux.

Ils faisaient de leurs jours de sublimes offrandes;
Ils criaient: Liberté! guerre aux tyrans! mourons!
Guerre! - et la gloire ouvrait ses ailes toutes grandes
Au-dessus de ces jeunes fronts!

II

Aujourd’hui c’est la ville où toute honte échoue.
Là, quiconque est abject, horrible et malfaisant,
Quiconque un jour plongea son honneur dans la boue,
Noya son âme dans le sang,

Là, le faux monnayeur pris la main sur sa forge,
L’homme du faux serment et l’homme du faux poids,
Le brigand qui s’embusque et qui saute à la gorge
Des passants, la nuit, dans les bois,

Là, quand l’heure a sonné, cette heure nécessaire,
Toujours, quoi qu’il ait fait pour fuir, quoi qu’il ait dit,
Le pirate hideux, le voleur, le faussaire,
Le parricide, le bandit,

Qu’il sorte d’un palais ou qu’il sorte d’un bouge,
Vient, et trouve une main, froide comme un verrou,
Qui sur le dos lui jette une casaque rouge,
Et lui met un carcan au cou.

L’aurore luit, pour eux sombre et pour nous vermeille.
Allons! debout! Ils vont vers le sombre océan.
Il semble que leur chaîne avec eux se réveille,
Et dit: me voilà; viens-nous-en!

Ils marchent, au marteau présentant leurs manilles,
À leur chaîne cloués, mêlant leurs pas bruyants,
Traînant leur pourpre infâme en hideuses guenilles,
Humbles, furieux, effrayants.

Les pieds nus, leur bonnet baissé sur leurs paupières,
Dès l’aube harassés, l’œil mort, les membres lourds,
Ils travaillent, creusant des rocs, roulant des pierres,
Sans trêve, hier, demain, toujours.

Pluie ou soleil, hiver, été, que juin flamboie,
Que janvier pleure, ils vont, leur destin s’accomplit,
Avec le souvenir de leurs crimes pour joie,
Avec une planche pour lit.

Le soir, comme un troupeau l’argousin vil les compte.
Ils montent deux à deux l’escalier du ponton,
Brisés, vaincus, le cœur incliné sous la honte,
Le dos courbé sous le bâton.

La pensée implacable habite encor leurs têtes.
Morts vivants, aux labeurs voués, marqués au front,
Ils rampent, recevant le fouet comme des bêtes,
Et comme des hommes l’affront.

III

Ville que l’infamie et la gloire ensemencent,
Où du forçat pensif le fer tond les cheveux,
Ô Toulon! c’est par toi que les oncles commencent,
Et que finissent les neveux!

Va, maudit! ce boulet que, dans des temps stoïques,
Le grand soldat, sur qui ton opprobre s’assied,
Mettait dans les canons de ses mains héroïques,
Tu le traîneras à ton pied!

Jersey, 28 octobre 1852

Approchez-vous. Ceci, c’est le tas des dévots

Approchez-vous. Ceci, c’est le tas des dévots.
Cela hurle en grinçant un benedicat vos;
C’est laid, c’est vieux, c’est noir. Cela fait des gazettes.
Pères fouetteurs du siècle, à grands coups de garcettes.
Ils nous mènent au ciel. Ils font, blêmes grimauds,
De l’âme et de Jésus des querelles de mots
Comme à Byzance au temps des Jeans et des Eudoxes.
Méfions-nous; ce sont des gredins orthodoxes.
Ils auraient fait pousser des cris à Juvénal.
La douairière aux yeux gris s’ébat sur leur journal
Comme sur les marais la grue et la bécasse.
Ils citent Poquelin, Pascal, Rousseau, Boccace,
Voltaire, Diderot, l’aigle au vol inégal,
Devant l’official et le théologal.
L’esprit étant gênant, ces saints le congédient.
Ils mettent Escobar sous bande et l’expédient
Aux bedeaux rayonnants, pour quatre francs par mois.
Avec le vieux savon des jésuites sournois
Ils lavent notre époque incrédule et pensive,
Et le bûcher fournit sa cendre à leur lessive.

Leur gazette, où les mots de venin sont verdis,
Est la seule qui soit reçue au paradis.
Ils sont, là, tout-puissants; et tandis que leur bande
Prêche ici-bas la dîme et défend la prébende,
Ils font chez Jéhovah la pluie et le beau temps.
L’ange au glaive de feu leur ouvre à deux battants
La porte bienheureuse, effrayante et vermeille;
Tous les matins, à l’heure où l’oiseau se réveille,
Quand l’aube, se dressant au bord du ciel profond,
Rougit en regardant ce que les hommes font
Et que des pleurs de honte emplissent sa paupière,
Gais, ils grimpent là-haut, et, cognant chez saint-Pierre,
Jettent à ce portier leur journal impudent.

Ils écrivent à Dieu comme à leur intendant,
Critiquant, gourmandant, et lui demandant compte
Des révolutions, des vents, du flot qui monte,
De l’astre au pur regard qu’ils voudraient voir loucher,
De ce qu’il fait tourner notre terre et marcher
Notre esprit, et, d’un timbre ornant l’eucharistie,
Ils cachettent leur lettre immonde avec l’hostie.
Jamais marquis. voyant son carrosse broncher,
N’a plus superbement tutoyé son cocher;
Si bien que, ne sachant comment mener le monde,
Ce pauvre vieux bon Dieu, sur qui leur foudre gronde,
Tremblant, cherchant un trou dans ses cieux éclatants,
Ne sait où se fourrer quand ils sont mécontents.
Ils ont supprimé Rome; ils auraient détruit Sparte.
Ces drôles sont charmés de monsieur Bonaparte.

Aux morts du 4 décembre

Jouissez du repos que vous donne le maître.
Vous étiez autrefois des cœurs troublés peut-être,
Qu’un vain songe poursuit;
L’erreur vous tourmentait, ou la haine, ou l’envie;
Vos bouches, d’où sortait la vapeur de la vie,
Étaient pleines de bruit.

Faces confusément l’une à l’autre apparues,
Vous alliez et veniez en foule dans les rues,
Ne vous arrêtant pas,
Inquiets comme l’eau qui coule des fontaines,
Tous, marchant au hasard, souffrant les mêmes peines,
Mêlant les mêmes pas.

Peut-être un feu creusait votre tête embrasée,
Projets, espoirs, briser l’homme de l’Élysée,
L’homme du Vatican,

Verser le libre esprit à grands flots sur la terre
Car dans ce siècle ardent toute âme est un cratère
Et tout peuple un volcan.

Vous aimiez, vous aviez le cœur lié de chaînes
Et le soir vous sentiez, livrés aux craintes vaines,
Pleins de soucis poignants,
Ainsi que l’océan sent remuer ses ondes,
Se soulever en vous mille vagues profondes
Sous les cieux rayonnants.

Tous, qui que vous fussiez, tête ardente, esprit sage,
Soit qu’en vos yeux brillât la jeunesse, ou que l’âge
Vous prît et vous courbât,
Que le destin pour vous fût deuil, énigme ou fête,
Vous aviez dans vos cœurs l’amour, cette tempête,

La douleur, ce combat.

Grâce au quatre décembre, aujourd’hui, sans pensée,
Vous gisez étendus dans la fosse glacée
Sous les linceuls épais;
Ô morts, l’herbe sans bruit croît sur vos catacombes,
Dormez dans vos cercueils! taisez-vous dans vos tombes
L’empire, c’est la paix.

10 novembre. Jersey.

Cette nuit-là

Trois amis l’entouraient. C’était à l’Élysée.
On voyait du dehors luire cette croisée.
Regardant venir l’heure et l’aiguille marcher,
Il était là, pensif; et rêvant d’attacher
Le nom de Bonaparte aux exploits de Cartouche,
Il sentait approcher son guet-apens farouche.
D’un pied distrait dans l’âtre il poussait le tison,
Et voici ce que dit l’homme de trahison:
«Cette nuit vont surgir mes projets invisibles.
Les Saint-Barthélemy sont encore possibles.
Paris dort, comme aux temps de Charles de Valois.
Vous allez dans un sac mettre toutes les lois,
Et par-dessus le pont les jeter dans la Seine.”
Ô ruffians! bâtards de la fortune obscène,
Nés du honteux coït de l’intrigue et du sort!
Rien qu’en songeant à vous mon vers indigné sort,
Et mon cœur orageux dans ma poitrine gronde
Comme le chêne au vent dans la forêt profonde!

Comme ils sortaient tous trois de la maison Bancal,
Morny, Maupas le grec, Saint-Arnaud le chacal,
Voyant passer ce groupe oblique et taciturne,
Les clochers de Paris, sonnant l’heure nocturne,
S’efforçaient vainement d’imiter le tocsin;
Les pavés de Juillet criaient à l’assassin!
Tous les spectres sanglants des antiques carnages,
Réveillés, se montraient du doigt ces personnages
La Marseillaise, archange aux chants aériens,
Murmurait dans les cieux: aux armes, citoyens!

Paris dormait, hélas! et bientôt, sur les places,
Sur les quais, les soldats, dociles populaces,
Janissaires conduits par Reibell et Sauboul,
Payés comme à Byzance, ivres comme à Stamboul,

Ceux de Dulac, et ceux de Korte et d’Espinasse,
La cartouchière au flanc et dans l’œil la menace,
Vinrent, le régiment après le régiment,
Et le long des maisons ils passaient lentement,
À pas sourds, comme on voit les tigres dans les jongles
Qui rampent sur le ventre en allongeant leurs ongles
Et la nuit était morne, et Paris sommeillait
Comme un aigle endormi pris sous un noir filet.

Les chefs attendaient l’aube en fumant leurs cigares.

Ô cosaques! voleurs! chauffeurs! routiers! bulgares!
Ô généraux brigands! bagne, je te les rends!
Les juges d’autrefois pour des crimes moins grands
Ont brûlé la Voisin et roué vif Desrues!

Éclairant leur affiche infâme au coin des rues
Et le lâche armement de ces filons hardis,
Le jour parut. La nuit, complice des bandits,
Prit la fuite, et, traînant à la hâte ses voiles,
Dans les plis de sa robe emporta les étoiles
Et les mille soleils dans l’ombre étincelant,
Comme les sequins d’or qu’emporte en s’en allant
Une fille, aux baisers du crime habituée,
Qui se rhabille après s’être prostituée.
17 janvier

Le Te Deum du 1er janvier 1852

Prêtre, ta messe, écho des feux de peloton,
Est une chose impie.
Derrière toi, le bras ployé sous le menton,
Rit la mort accroupie.

Prêtre, on voit frissonner, aux cieux d’où nous venons
Les anges et les vierges,
Quand un évêque prend la mèche des canons
Pour allumer les cierges.

Tu veux être au sénat, voir ton siège élevé
Et ta fortune accrue.
Soit; mais pour bénir l’homme, attends qu’on ait lavé
Le pavé de la rue.

Peuples, gloire à Gessler! meure Guillaume Tell!
Un râle sort de l’orgue.
Archevêque, on a pris pour bâtir ton autel
Les dalles de la morgue.

Quand tu dis: - Te Deum! nous vous louons, Dieu fort!
Sabaoth des armées! -
Il se mêle à l’encens une vapeur qui sort
Des fosses mal fermées.

On a tué, la nuit, on a tué, le jour,
L’homme, l’enfant, la femme!
Crime et deuil! Ce n’est plus l’aigle, c’est le vautour
Qui vole à Notre-Dame.

Va, prodigue au bandit les adorations
Martyrs, vous l’entendîtes!
Dieu te voit, et là-haut tes bénédictions,
Ô prêtre, sont maudites!

Les proscrits sont partis, aux flancs du ponton noir,
Pour Alger, pour Cayenne;
Ils ont vu Bonaparte à Paris, ils vont voir
En Afrique l’hyène.

Ouvriers, paysans qu’on arrache au labour,
Le sombre exil vous fauche!
Bien, regarde à ta droite, archevêque Sibour,
Et regarde à ta gauche:

Ton diacre est Trahison et ton sous-diacre est Vol
Vends ton Dieu, vends ton âme.
Allons, coiffe ta mitre, allons, mets ton licol,
Chante, vieux prêtre infâme!

Le meurtre à tes côtés suit l’office divin,
Criant: feu sur qui bouge!
Satan tient la burette, et ce n’est pas de vin
Que ton ciboire est rouge.
7 novembre. Jersey.

Ad majorem Dei gloriam

“Vraiment, notre siècle est étrangement délicat. S’imagine-t-il donc que la cendre des bûchers soit totalement éteinte? qu’il n’en soit pas resté le plus petit tison pour allumer une seule torche? Les insensés! en nous appelant jésuites, ils croient nous couvrir d’opprobre! Mais ces jésuites leur réservent la censure, un bâillon et du feu... Et, un jour, ils seront les maîtres de leurs maîtres...”

(LE PÈRE ROOTHAAN, GÉNÉRAL DES JÉSUITES, À LA CONFÉRENCE DE CHIÉRI.)
Ils ont dit: « Nous serons les vainqueurs et les maîtres.
Soldats par la tactique et par la robe prêtres,
Nous détruirons progrès, lois, vertus, droits, talents.
Nous nous ferons un fort avec tous ces décombres,
Et pour nous y garder, comme des dogues sombres,
Nous démusèlerons les préjugés hurlants.

» Oui, l’échafaud est bon; la guerre est nécessaire;
Acceptez l’ignorance, acceptez la misère;
L’enfer attend l’orgueil du tribun triomphant;
L’homme parvient à l’ange en passant par la buse.
Notre gouvernement fait de force et de ruse
Bâillonnera le père, abrutira l’enfant.

» Notre parole, hostile au siècle qui s’écoule,
Tombera de la chaire en flocons sur la foule
Elle refroidira les cœurs irrésolus,
Y glacera tout germe utile ou salutaire,
Et puis elle y fondra comme la neige à terre,
Et qui la cherchera ne la trouvera plus.

Seulement un froid sombre aura saisi les âmes;
Seulement nous aurons tué toutes les flammes
Et si quelqu’un leur crie, à ces français d’alors
Sauvez la liberté pour qui luttaient vos pères!

Ils riront, ces français sortis de nos repaires,
De la liberté morte et de leurs pères morts.

«Prêtres, nous écrirons sur un drapeau qui brille
— Ordre, Religion, Propriété, Famille. -
Et si quelque bandit, corse, juif ou payen,
Vient nous aider avec le parjure à la bouche,
Le sabre aux dents, la torche au poing, sanglant, farouche
Volant et massacrant, nous lui dirons: c'est bien!

«Vainqueurs, fortifiés aux lieux inabordables,
Nous vivrons arrogants, vénérés, formidables.
Que nous importe au fond Christ, Mahomet, Mithra!
Régner est notre but, notre moyen proscrire.
Si jamais ici-bas on entend notre rire,
Le fond obscur du cœur de l'homme tremblera.

» Nous garrotterons l'âme au fond d'une caverne.
Nations, l'idéal du peuple qu'on gouverne,
C'est le moine d'Espagne ou le fellah du Nil.
À bas l'esprit! à bas le droit! vive l'épée!
Qu'est-ce que la pensée? une chienne échappée.
Mettons Jean-Jacques au bagne et Voltaire au chenil.

» Si l'esprit se débat, toujours nous l'étouffâmes.
Nous parlerons tout bas à l'oreille des femmes.
Nous aurons les pontons, l'Afrique, le Spielberg.
Les vieux bûchers sont morts, nous les ferons revivre
N'y pouvant jeter l'homme, on y jette le livre;
À défaut de Jean Huss, nous brûlons Gutenberg.

» Et quant à la raison, qui prétend juger Rome,
Flambeau qu'allume Dieu sous le crâne de l'homme,
Dont s'éclairait Socrate et qui guidait Jésus,
Nous, pareils au voleur qui se glisse et qui rampe,
Et commence en entrant par éteindre la lampe,
En arrière et furtifs, nous soufflerons dessus.

«Alors dans l’âme humaine obscurité profonde.
Sur le néant des cœurs le vrai pouvoir se fonde.
Tout ce que nous voudrons, nous le ferons sans bruit.
Pas un souffle de voix, pas un battement d’aile
Ne remuera dans l’ombre, et notre citadelle
Sera comme une tour plus noire que la nuit.

» Nous régnerons. La tourbe obéit comme l’onde.
Nous serons tout-puissants, nous régirons le monde
Nous posséderons tout, force, gloire et bonheur;
Et nous ne craindrons rien, n’ayant ni foi ni règles...
— Quand vous habiteriez la montagne des aigles,
Je vous arracherais de là, dit le Seigneur!
8 novembre. Jersey.

À un martyr

On lit dans les Annales de la propagation de la Foi:

«Une lettre de Hong-Kong (Chine), en date du 24 juillet 1852,
nous annonce que M. Bonnard, missionnaire du Tong-King,
a été décapité pour la foi, le 1er mai dernier.
» Ce nouveau martyr était né dans le diocèse de Lyon
et appartenait à la Société des Missions étrangères.
Il était parti pour le Tong-King en 1849.”

I

Ô saint prêtre! grande âme! oh! je tombe à genoux!
Jeune, il avait encor de longs jours parmi nous,
Il n’en a pas compté le nombre;
Il était à cet âge où le bonheur fleurit;
Il a considéré la croix de Jésus-Christ
Toute rayonnante dans l’ombre.

Il a dit: « C’est le Dieu de progrès et d’amour.
Jésus, qui voit ton front croit voir le front du jour.
Christ sourit à qui le repousse.
Puisqu’il est mort pour nous, je veux mourir pour lui;
Dans son tombeau, dont j’ai la pierre pour appui,
Il m’appelle d’une voix douce.
» Sa doctrine est le ciel entr’ouvert; par la main,
Comme un père l’enfant, il tient le genre humain;
Par lui nous vivons et nous sommes;
Au chevet des geôliers dormant dans leurs maisons,
Il dérobe les clefs de toutes les prisons
Et met en liberté les hommes.

» Or il est, loin de nous, une autre humanité
Qui ne le connaît point, et dans l’iniquité
Rampe enchaînée, et souffre et tombe;

Ils font pour trouver Dieu de ténébreux efforts;
Ils s'agitent en vain; ils sont comme des morts
Qui tâtent le mur de leur tombe.

» Sans loi, sans but, sans guide, ils errent ici-bas.
Ils sont méchants, étant ignorants; ils n'ont pas
Leur part de la grande conquête.
J'irai. Pour les sauver je quitte le saint lieu.
Ô mes frères, je viens vous apporter mon Dieu,
Je viens vous apporter ma tête!"

Prêtre, il s'est souvenu, calme en nos jours troublés,
De la parole dite aux apôtres: - Allez,
Bravez les bûchers et les claies! -
Et de l'adieu du Christ au suprême moment:
— Ô vivant, aimez-vous! aimez. En vous aimant,
Frères, vous fermerez mes plaies. -

Il s'est dit qu'il est bon d'éclairer dans leur nuit
Ces peuples égarés loin du progrès qui luit,
Dont l'âme est couverte de voiles;
Puis il s'en est allé, dans les vents, dans les flots,
Vers les noirs chevalets et les sanglants billots,
Les yeux fixés sur les étoiles.

II

Ceux vers qui cet apôtre allait l'ont égorgé.

III

Oh! tandis que là-bas, hélas! chez ces barbares,
S'étale l'échafaud de tes membres chargé,
Que le bourreau, rangeant ses glaives et ses barres,
Frotte au gibet son ongle où ton sang s'est figé;

Ciel! tandis que les chiens dans ce sang viennent boire,

Et que la mouche horrible, essaim au vol joyeux,
Comme dans une ruche entre en ta bouche noire
Et bourdonne au soleil dans les trous de tes yeux;

Tandis qu’échevelée, et sans voix, sans paupières,
Ta tête blême est là sur un infâme pieu,
Livrée aux vils affronts, meurtrie à coups de pierres,
Ici, derrière toi, martyr, on vend ton Dieu!

Ce Dieu qui n’est qu’à toi, martyr, on te le vole!
On le livre à Mandrin, ce Dieu pour qui tu meurs!
Des hommes, comme toi revêtus de l’étole,
Pour être cardinaux, pour être sénateurs,
Des prêtres, pour avoir des palais, des carrosses,
Et des jardins l’été riant sous le ciel bleu,
Pour argenter leur mitre et pour dorer leurs crosses,
Pour boire de bon vin, assis près d’un bon feu,

Au forban dont la main dans le meurtre est trempée,
Au larron chargé d’or qui paye et qui sourit,
Grand Dieu! retourne-toi vers nous, tête coupée!
Ils vendent Jésus-Christ! ils vendent Jésus-Christ!

Ils livrent au bandit, pour quelques sacs sordides,
L’évangile, la loi, l’autel épouvanté,
Et la justice aux yeux sévères et candides,
Et l’étoile du coeur humain, la vérité!

Les bons jetés, vivants, au bagne, ou morts, aux fleuves,
L’homme juste proscrit par Cartouche Sylla,
L’innocent égorgé, le deuil sacré des veuves,
Les pleurs de l’orphelin, ils vendent tout cela!

Tout! la foi, le serment que Dieu tient sous sa garde,
Le saint temple où, mourant, tu dis: Introïbo,
Ils livrent tout! pudeur, vertu! - martyr, regarde,
Rouvre tes yeux qu’emplit la lueur du tombeau; -

Ils vendent l’arche auguste où l’hostie étincelle!
Ils vendent Christ, te dis-je! et ses membres liés!
Ils vendent la sueur qui sur son front ruisselle,
Et les clous de ses mains, et les clous de ses pieds!

Ils vendent au brigand qui chez lui les attire
Le grand crucifié sur les hommes penché;
Ils vendent sa parole, ils vendent son martyre,
Et ton martyre à toi par-dessus le marché!

Tant pour les coups de fouet qu’il reçut à la porte!
César! tant pour l’amen, tant pour l’alleluia!
Tant pour la pierre où vint heurter sa tête morte!
Tant pour le drap rougi que sa barbe essuya!

Ils vendent ses genoux meurtris, sa palme verte,
Sa plaie au flanc, son oeil tout baigné d’infini,
Ses pleurs, son agonie, et sa bouche entrouverte,
Et le cri qu’il poussa: Lamma Sabacthani!

Ils vendent le sépulcre! ils vendent les ténèbres!
Les séraphins chantant au seuil profond des cieux,
Et la mère debout sous l’arbre aux bras funèbres,
Qui, sentant là son fils, ne levait pas les yeux!

Oui, ces évêques, oui, ces marchands, oui, ces prêtres
A l’histrion du crime, assouvi, couronné,
A ce Néron repu qui rit parmi les traîtres,
Un pied sur Thraséas, un coude sur Phryné,

Au voleur qui tua les lois à coups de crosse,
Au pirate empereur Napoléon dernier,
Ivre deux fois, immonde encor plus que féroce,
Pourceau dans le cloaque et loup dans le charnier,

Ils vendent, ô martyr, le Dieu pensif et pâle

Qui, debout sur la terre et sous le firmament,
Triste et nous souriant dans notre nuit fatale,
Sur le noir Golgotha saigne éternellement!
5-8 décembre. Jersey.

L’Art et le Peuple

I

L’art, c’est la gloire et la joie.
Dans la tempête il flamboie;
Il éclaire le ciel bleu.
L’art, splendeur universelle,
Au front du peuple étincelle,
Comme l’astre au front de Dieu.

L’art est un champ magnifique
Qui plaît au cœur pacifique,
Que la cité dit aux bois,
Que l’homme dit à la femme,
Que toutes les voix de l’âme
Chantent en chœur à la fois!

L’art, c’est la pensée humaine
Qui va brisant toute chaîne!
L’art, c’est le doux conquérant!
A lui le Rhin et le Tibre!
Peuple esclave, il te fait libre;
Peuple libre, il te fait grand!

II

O bonne France invincible,
Chante ta chanson paisible!
Chante, et regarde le ciel!
Ta voix joyeuse et profonde
Est l’espérance du monde,
O grand peuple fraternel!

Bon peuple, chante à l’aurore,
Quand le soir vient, chante encore!

Le travail fait la gaîté.
Ris du vieux siècle qui passe!
Chante l’amour à voix basse,
Et tout haut la liberté!

Chante la sainte Italie,
La Pologne ensevelie,
Naples qu’un sang pur rougit,
La Hongrie agonisante… -
O tyrans! le peuple chante
Comme le lion rugit!

7 novembre 1851

Chanson

Courtisans! attablés dans la splendide orgie,
La bouche par le rire et la soif élargie,
Vous célébrez César, très bon, très grand, très pur;
Vous buvez, apostats à tout ce qu'on révère,
Le chypre à pleine coupe et la honte à plein verre… -
Mangez, moi je préfère,
Vérité, ton pain dur.

Boursier qui tonds le peuple, usurier qui le triches,
Gais soupeurs de Chevet, ventrus, coquins et riches,
Amis de Fould le juif et de Maupas le grec,
Laissez le pauvre en pleurs sous la porte cochère,
Engraissez-vous, vivez, et faites bonne chère… -
Mangez, moi je préfère,
Probité, ton pain sec.

L'opprobre est une lèpre et le crime une dartre.
Soldats qui revenez du boulevard Montmartre,
Le vin, au sang mêlé, jaillit sur vos habits;
Chantez: la table emplit l'Ecole militaire,
Le festin fume, on trinque, on boit, on roule à terre… -
Mangez, moi je préfère,
O gloire, ton pain bis.

O peuple des faubourgs, je vous ai vu sublime.
Aujourd'hui vous avez, serf grisé par le crime,
Plus d'argent dans la poche, au cœur moins de fierté.
On va, chaîne au cou, rire et boire à la barrière.
Et vive l'empereur! et vive le salaire!... –
Mangez, moi je préfère,
Ton pain noir, Liberté

Oh! je sais qu’ils feront des mensonges sans nombre

I

Oh! je sais qu’ils feront des mensonges sans nombre
Pour s’évader des mains de la Vérité sombre,
Qu’ils nieront, qu’ils diront: ce n’est pas moi, c’est lui.
Mais, n’est-il pas vrai, Dante, Eschyle, et vous, prophètes?
Jamais, du poignet des poëtes,
Jamais, pris en collet, les malfaiteurs n’ont fui.
J’ai fermé sur ceux-ci mon livre expiatoire;
J’ai mis des verrous à l’histoire;
L’histoire est un bagne aujourd’hui.
Le poëte n’est plus l’esprit qui rêve et prie;
Il a la grosse clef de la conciergerie.
Quand ils entrent au greffe, où pend leur chaîne au clou,
On regarde le prince aux poches, comme un drôle,
Et les empereurs à l’épaule;
Macbeth est un escroc, César est un filou.
Vous gardes des forçats, ô mes strophes ailées!
Les Calliopes étoilées
Tiennent des registres d’écrou.

II

Ô peuples douloureux, il faut bien qu’on vous venge!
Les rhéteurs froids m’ont dit: Le poëte, c’est l’ange,
Il plane, ignorant Fould, Magnan, Morny, Maupas;
Il contemple la nuit sereine avec délices... -
Non, tant que vous serez complices
De ces crimes hideux que je suis pas à pas,
Tant que vous couvrirez ces brigands de vos voiles,
Cieux azurés, soleils, étoiles,
Je ne vous regarderai pas!

Tant qu'un gueux forcera les bouches à se taire,
Tant que la liberté sera couchée à terre
Comme une femme morte et qu'on vient de noyer,
Tant que dans les pontons on entendra des râles,
J'aurai des clartés sépulcrales
Pour tous ces fronts abjects qu'un bandit fait ployer;
Je crierai: Lève-toi, peuple! ciel, tonne et gronde!
La France, dans sa nuit profonde,
Verra ma torche flamboyer!

III

Ces coquins vils qui font de la France une Chine,
On entendra mon fouet claquer sur leur échine.
Ils chantent: Te Deum, je crierai: Memento!
Je fouaillerai les gens, les faits, les noms, les titres,
Porte-sabres et porte-mitres;
Je les tiens dans mon vers comme dans un étau.
On verra choir surplis, épaulettes, bréviaires,
Et César, sous mes étrivières,
Se sauver, troussant son manteau!
Et les champs, et les prés, le lac, la fleur, la plaine,
Les nuages, pareils à des flocons de laine,
L'eau qui fait frissonner l'algue et les goëmons,
Et l'énorme océan, hydre aux écailles vertes,
Les forêts de rumeurs couvertes,
Le phare sur les flots, l'étoile sur les monts,
Me reconnaîtront bien et diront à voix basse
C'est un esprit vengeur qui passe,
Chassant devant lui les démons!
13 novembre. Jersey.

Carte d’Europe

Des sabres sont partout posés sur les provinces.
L’autel ment. On entend ceux qu’on nomme les princes
Jurer, d’un front tranquille et sans baisser les yeux,
De faux serpents qui font, tant ils navrent les âmes,
Tant ils sont monstrueux, effroyables, infâmes,
Remuer le tonnerre endormi dans les cieux.

Les soldats ont fouetté des femmes dans les rues.
Où sont la liberté, la vertu? disparues!
Dans l’exil! dans l’horreur des pontons étouffants!
Ô nations! où sont vos âmes les plus belles?
Le boulet, c’est trop peu contre de tels rebelles
Haynau dans les canons met des têtes d’enfants.

Peuple russe, tremblant et morne, tu chemines,
Serf à Saint-Pétersbourg, ou forçat dans les mines.
Le pôle est pour ton maître un cachot vaste et noir;
Russie et Sibérie, ô czar! tyran! vampire!
Ce sont les deux moitiés de ton funèbre empire;
L’une est l’oppression, l’autre est le Désespoir.

Les supplices d’Ancône emplissent les murailles.
Le pape Mastaï fusille ses ouailles;
Il pose là l’hostie et commande le feu.
Simoncelli périt le premier; tous les autres
Le suivent sans pâlir, tribuns, soldats, apôtres;
Ils meurent, et s’en vont parler du prêtre à Dieu.

Saint-Père, sur tes mains laisse tomber tes manches!
Saint-Père, on voit du sang à tes sandales blanches!
Borgia te sourit, le pape empoisonneur.
Combien sont morts? combien mourront? qui sait le nombre?
Ce qui mène aujourd’hui votre troupeau dans l’ombre,
Ce n’est pas le berger, c’est le boucher, Seigneur!

Italie! Allemagne! ô Sicile! ô Hongrie!
Europe, aïeule en pleurs, de misère amaigrie,
Vos meilleurs fils sont morts; l’honneur sombre est absent.
Au midi l’échafaud, au nord un ossuaire.
La lune chaque nuit se lève en un suaire,
Le soleil chaque soir se couche dans du sang.

Sur les français vaincus un saint-office pèse.
Un brigand les égorge, et dit: je les apaise.
Paris lave à genoux le sang qui l’inonda;
La France garrottée assiste à l’hécatombe.
Par les pleurs, par les cris, réveillés dans la tombe,
— Bien! dit Laubardemont; - Va! dit Torquemada.

Batthyani, Sandor, Poërio, victimes!
Pour le peuple et le droit en vain nous combattîmes.
Baudin tombe, agitant son écharpe en lambeau.
Pleurez dans les forêts, pleurez sur les montagnes!
Où Dieu mit des édens les rois mettent des bagnes
Venise est une chiourme et Naple est un tombeau.

Le gibet sur Arad! le gibet sur Palerme!
La corde à ces héros qui levaient d’un bras ferme
Leur drapeau libre et fier devant les rois tremblants!
Tandis qu’on va sacrer l’empereur Schinderhannes,
Martyrs, la pluie à flots ruisselle sur vos crânes,
Et le bec des corbeaux fouillé vos yeux sanglants.

Avenir! avenir! voici que tout s’écroule!
Les pâles rois ont fui, la mer vient, le flot roule,
Peuples! le clairon sonne aux quatre coins du ciel;
Quelle fuite effrayante et sombre! les armées
S’en vont dans la tempête en cendres enflammées,
L’épouvante se lève. - Allons, dit l’Eternel!
Jersey, 5 novembre 1852

Chanson

La femelle? elle est morte.
Le mâle? un chat l’emporte
Et dévore ses os.
Au doux nid qui frissonne
Qui reviendra? personne.
Pauvres petits oiseaux!

Le pâtre absent par fraude!
Le chien mort! le loup rôde,
Et tend ses noirs panneaux.
Au bercail qui frissonne
Qui veillera? personne.
Pauvres petits agneaux!

L’homme au bagne! la mère
A l’hospice! ô misère!
Le logis tremble aux vents
L’humble berceau frissonne.
Qui reste-t-il? personne.
Pauvres petits enfants!
22 février. Jersey.

C’est la nuit; la nuit noire, assoupie et profonde

C’est la nuit; la nuit noire, assoupie et profonde.
L’ombre immense élargit ses ailes sur le monde.
Dans vos joyeux palais gardés par le canon,
Dans vos lits de velours, de damas, de linon,

Sous vos chauds couvre-pieds de martres zibelines
Sous le nuage blanc des molles mousselines,
— Derrière vos rideaux qui cachent sous leurs plis
Toutes les voluptés avec tous les oublis,
Aux sons d’une fanfare amoureuse et lointaine,
Tandis qu’une veilleuse, en tremblant, ose à peine
Eclairer le plafond de pourpre et de lampas,
Vous, duc de Saint-Arnaud, vous, comte de Maupas,
Vous, sénateurs, préfets, généraux, juges, princes,
Toi, César, qu’à genoux adorent tes provinces,
Toi qui rêvas l’empire et le réalisas,
Dormez, maîtres... - Voici le jour. Debout, forçats!
Jersey, 28 octobre 1852

LIVRE II: L’ORDRE EST RETABLI.

Idylles

LE SÉNAT
Vibrez, trombone et chanterelle!
Les oiseaux chantent dans les nids.
La joie est chose naturelle.
Que Magnan danse la trénis
Et Saint-Arnaud la pastourelle!

LES CAVES DE LILLE
Miserere!
Miserere!

LE CONSEIL D'ÉTAT
Des lampions dans les charmilles!
Des lampions dans les buissons!
Mêlez vous, sabres et mantilles!
Chantez en choeur, les beaux garçons!
Dansez en rond, les belles filles!

LES GRENIERS DE ROUEN
Miserere!
Miserere!

LE CORPS LÉGISLATIF
Jouissons! l'amour nous réclame.
Chacun, pour devenir meilleur,
Cueille son miel, nourrit son âme,
L'abeille aux lèvres de la fleur,
Le sage aux lèvres de la femme!

BRUXELLES, LONDRES, BELLE-ISLE, JERSEY
Miserere!
Miserere!

L'HOTEL DE VILLE

L’empire se met aux croisées
Rions, jouons, soupons, dînons.
Des pétards aux Champs-Elysées!
A l’oncle il fallait des canons,
Il faut au neveu des fusées.

LES PONTONS
Miserere!
Miserere!

L’ARMÉE
Pas de scrupules! pas de morgue!
A genoux! un bedeau paraît.
Le tambour obéit à l’orgue.
Notre ardeur sort du cabaret,
Et notre gloire est à la morgue.

LAMBESSA
Miserere!
Miserere!

LA MAGISTRATURE
Mangeons, buvons, tout le conseille!
Heureux l’ami du raisin mûr,
Qui toujours, riant sous sa treille,
Trouve une grappe sur son mur
Et dans sa cave une bouteille!

CAYENNE
Miserere!
Miserere!

LES ÉVÈQUES
Jupiter l’ordonne, on révère
Le succès, sur le trône assis.
Trinquons! Le prêtre peu sévère
Vide son âme de soucis

Et de vin vieux emplit son verre!

LE CIMETIÈRE MONTMARTRE

Miserere!
Miserere!
7 avril. Jersey.

Au peuple

Partout pleurs, sanglots, cris funèbres.
Pourquoi dors-tu dans les ténèbres?
Je ne veux pas que tu sois mort.
Pourquoi dors-tu dans les ténèbres?
Ce n’est pas l’instant où l’on dort.
La pâle Liberté gît sanglante à ta porte.
Tu le sais, toi mort, elle est morte.
Voici le chacal sur ton seuil,
Voici les rats et les belettes,
Pourquoi t’es-tu laissé lier de bandelettes?
Ils te mordent dans ton cercueil!
De tous les peuples on prépare
Le convoi… -
Lazare! Lazare! Lazare!
Lève-toi!

Paris sanglant, au clair de lune,
Rêve sur la fosse commune;
Gloire au général Trestaillon!
Plus de presse, plus de tribune.
Quatrevingt-neuf porte un bâillon.
La Révolution, terrible à qui la touche,
Est couchée à terre! un Cartouche
Peut ce qu’aucun titan ne put.
Escobar rit d’un rire oblique.
On voit traîner sur toi, géante République,
Tous les sabres de Lilliput.

Le juge, marchand en simarre,
Vend la loi… -
Lazare! Lazare! Lazare!
Lève-toi!

Sur Milan, sur Vienne punie,

Sur Rome étranglée et bénie,
Sur Pesth, torturé sans répit,
La vieille louve Tyrannie,
Fauve et joyeuse, s’accroupit.
Elle rit; son repaire est orné d’amulettes
Elle marche sur des squelettes
De la Vistule au Tanaro;
Elle a ses petits qu’elle couve.
Qui la nourrit? qui porte à manger à la louve?
C’est l’évêque, c’est le bourreau.
Qui s’allaite à son flanc barbare?
C’est le roi… -
Lazare! Lazare! Lazare!
Lève-toi!

Jésus, parlant à ses apôtres,
Dit: Aimez-vous les uns les autres.
Et voilà bientôt deux mille ans
Qu’il appelle nous et les nôtres
Et qu’il ouvre ses bras sanglants.
Rome commande et règne au nom du doux prophète.
De trois cercles sacrés est faite
La tiare du Vatican;
Le premier est une couronne,
Le second est le nœud des gibets de Vérone,
Et le troisième est un carcan.
Mastaï met cette tiare
Sans effroi… -
Lazare! Lazare! Lazare!
Lève-toi!

Ils bâtissent des prisons neuves.
Ô dormeur sombre, entends les fleuves
Murmurer, teints de sang vermeil;
Entends pleurer les pauvres veuves,
Ô noir dormeur au dur sommeil!
Martyrs, adieu! le vent souffle, les pontons flottent;

Les mères au front gris sanglotent;
Leurs fils sont en proie aux vainqueurs;
Elles gémissent sur la route;
Les pleurs qui de leurs yeux s’échappent goutte à goutte
Filtrent en haine dans nos coeurs.

Les juifs triomphent, groupe avare
Et sans foi… -
Lazare! Lazare! Lazare!
Lève-toi!

Mais il semble qu’on se réveille!
Est-ce toi que j’ai dans l’oreille,
Bourdonnement du sombre essaim?
Dans la ruche frémit l’abeille;
J’entends sourdre un vague tocsin.
Les Césars, oubliant qu’il est des gémonies,
S’endorment dans les symphonies
Du lac Baltique au mont Etna;
Les peuples sont dans la nuit noire
Dormez, rois; le clairon dit aux tyrans: victoire!
Et l’orgue leur chante: hosanna!
Qui répond à cette fanfare?
Le beffroi… -
Lazare! Lazare! Lazare!
Lève-toi!
Jersey, mai 1853

Souvenir de la nuit du 4

L’enfant avait reçu deux balles dans la tête.
Le logis était propre, humble, paisible, honnête;
On voyait un rameau bénit sur un portrait.
Une vieille grand’mère était là qui pleurait.
Nous le déshabillions en silence. Sa bouche,
Pâle, s’ouvrait; la mort noyait son œil farouche;
Ses bras pendants semblaient demander des appuis.
Il avait dans sa poche une toupie en buis.
On pouvait mettre un doigt dans les trous de ses plaies.
Avez-vous vu saigner la mûre dans les haies?
Son crâne était ouvert comme un bois qui se fend.
L’aïeule regarda déshabiller l’enfant,
Disant: -Comme il est blanc! approchez donc la lampe.
Dieu! ses pauvres cheveux sont collés sur sa tempe!
Et quand ce fut fini, le prit sur ses genoux.
La nuit était lugubre; on entendait des coups
De fusil dans la rue où l’on en tuait d’autres.
— Il faut ensevelir l’enfant, dirent les nôtres.
Et l’on prit un drap blanc dans l’armoire en noyer.
L’aïeule cependant l’approchait du foyer
Comme pour réchauffer ses membres déjà roides.
Hélas! ce que la mort touche de ses mains froides
Ne se réchauffe plus aux foyers d’ici-bas!
Elle pencha la tête et lui tira ses bas,
Et dans ses vieilles mains prit les pieds du cadavre.
— Est-ce que ce n’est pas une chose qui navre!
Cria-t-elle; monsieur, il n’avait pas huit ans!
Ses maîtres, il allait en classe, étaient contents.
Monsieur, quand il fallait que je fisse une lettre,
C’est lui qui l’écrivait. Est-ce qu’on va se mettre
À tuer les enfants maintenant? Ah! mon Dieu!
On est donc des brigands! Je vous demande un peu,
Il jouait ce matin, là, devant la fenêtre!
Dire qu’ils m’ont tué ce pauvre petit être

Il passait dans la rue, ils ont tiré dessus.
Monsieur, il était bon et doux comme un Jésus.
Moi je suis vieille, il est tout simple que je parte
Cela n’aurait rien fait à monsieur Bonaparte
De me tuer au lieu de tuer mon enfant! -
Elle s’interrompit, les sanglots l’étouffant,
Puis elle dit, et tous pleuraient près de l’aïeule.
— Que vais-je devenir à présent toute seule?
Expliquez-moi cela, vous autres, aujourd’hui.
Hélas! je n’avais plus de sa mère que lui.
Pourquoi l’a-t-on tué? je veux qu’on me l’explique.
L’enfant n’a pas crié vive la République. -
Nous nous taisions, debout et graves, chapeau bas,
Tremblant devant ce deuil qu’on ne console pas.

Vous ne compreniez point, mère, la politique.
Monsieur Napoléon, c’est son nom authentique,
Est pauvre, et même prince; il aime les palais;
Il lui convient d’avoir des chevaux, des valets,
De l’argent pour son jeu, sa table, son alcôve,
Ses chasses; par la même occasion, il sauve
La famille, l’église et la société;
Il veut avoir Saint-Cloud, plein de roses l’été,
Où viendront l’adorer les préfets et les maires
C’est pour cela qu’il faut que les vieilles grand’mères,
De leurs pauvres doigts gris que fait trembler le temps
Cousent dans le linceul des enfants de sept ans.
2 décembre 1852. Jersey

Ô soleil, ô face divine

Ô soleil, ô face divine,
Fleurs sauvages de la ravine,
Grottes où l'on entend des voix,
Parfums que sous l'herbe ou devine,
Ô ronces farouches des bois,

Monts sacrés, hauts comme l'exemple,
Blancs comme le fronton d'un temple,
Vieux rocs, chêne des ans vainqueur,
Dont je sens, quand je vous contemple,
L'âme éparse entrer dans mon cœur,

Ô vierge forêt, source pure,
Lac limpide que l'ombre azure,
Eau chaste où le ciel resplendit,
Conscience de la nature,
Que pensez-vous de ce bandit?
Jersey, 2 décembre 1852

Puisque le juste est dans l’abîme

Puisque le juste est dans l’abîme,
Puisqu’on donne le sceptre au crime,
Puisque tous les droits sont trahis,
Puisque les plus fiers restent mornes,
Puisqu’on affiche au coin des bornes
Le déshonneur de mon pays;

Ô République de nos pères,
Grand Panthéon plein de lumières,
Dôme d’or dans le libre azur,
Temple des ombres immortelles,
Puisqu’on vient avec des échelles
Coller l’empire sur ton mur -

Puisque toute âme est affaiblie,
Puisqu’on rampe, puisqu’on oublie
Le vrai, le pur, le grand, le beau,
Les yeux indignés de l’histoire,
L’honneur, la loi, le droit, la gloire,
Et ceux qui sont dans le tombeau;

Je t’aime, exil! douleur, je t’aime!
Tristesse, sois mon diadème!
Je t’aime, altière pauvreté!
J’aime ma porte aux vents battue.
J’aime le deuil, grave statue
Qui vient s’asseoir à mon côté.

J’aime le malheur qui m’éprouve,
Et cette ombre où je vous retrouve,
Ô vous à qui mon cœur sourit,
Dignité, foi, vertu voilée,
Toi, liberté, fière exilée,
Et toi, dévouement, grand proscrit!

J’aime cette île solitaire,
Jersey, que la libre Angleterre
Couvre de son vieux pavillon,
L’eau noire, par moments accrue,
Le navire, errante charrue,
Le flot, mystérieux sillon.

J’aime ta mouette, Ô mer profonde,
Qui secoue en perles ton onde
Sur son aile aux fauves couleurs,
Plonge dans les lames géantes,
Et sort de ces gueules béantes
Comme l’âme sort des douleurs.

J’aime la roche solennelle
D’où j’entends la plainte éternelle,
Sans trêve comme le remords,
Toujours renaissant dans les ombres,
Des vagues sur les écueils sombres,
Des mères sur leurs enfants morts.
10 décembre. Jersey.

L’Autre Président

I

Donc, vieux partis, voilà votre homme consulaire!
Aux jours sereins, quand rien ne nous vient assiéger,
Dogue aboyant, dragon farouche, hydre en colère;
Taupe aux jours du danger!
Pour le mettre à leur tête, en nos temps que visite
La tempête, brisant le cèdre et le sapin,
Ils prirent le plus lâche, et, n’ayant pas Thersite,
Ils choisirent Dupin.

Tandis que ton bras fort pioche, laboure et bêche,
Ils te trahissaient, peuple, ouvrier souverain;
Ces hommes opposaient le président Bobèche
Au président Mandrin.

II

Sa voix aigre sonnait comme une calebasse;
Ses quolibets mordaient l’orateur au cœur chaud -
Ils avaient, insensés, mis l’âme la plus basse
Au faîte le plus haut;
Si bien qu’un jour, ce fut un dénouement immonde,
Des soldats, sabre au poing, quittant leur noir chevet
Entrèrent dans ce temple auguste où, pour le monde,
L’aurore se levait!

Devant l’autel des lois qu’on renverse et qu’on brûle,
Honneur, devoir, criaient à cet homme: — Debout!
Dresse-toi, foudre en main, sur ta chaise curule! -
Il plongea dans l’égout.

III

Qu’il y reste à jamais! qu’à jamais il y dorme!
Que ce vil souvenir soit à jamais détruit!
Qu’il se dissolve là! qu’il y devienne informe,
Et pareil à la nuit!
Que, même en l’y cherchant, ou le distingue à peine
Dans ce profond cloaque, affreux, morne, béant!
Et que tout ce qui rampe et tout ce qui se traîne
Se mêle à son néant!

Et que l’histoire un jour ne s’en rende plus compte,
Et dise en le voyant dans la fange étendu:
— On ne sait ce que c’est. C’est quelque vieille honte
Dont le nom s’est perdu! -

IV

Oh! si ces âmes-là par l’enfer sont reçues,
S’il ne les chasse pas dans son amer orgueil,
Poëtes qui, portant dans vos mains des massues,
Gardez ce sombre seuil,

N’est-ce pas? dans ce gouffre où la justice habite,
Dont l’espérance fuit le flamboyant fronton,
Dites, toi, de Pathmos lugubre cénobite,
Toi Dante, toi Milton,

Toi, vieil Eschyle, ami des plaintives Electres,
Ce doit être une joie, ô vengeurs des vertus,
De faire souffleter les masques par les spectres,
Et Dupin par Brutus!
Bruxelles. Décembre 1851.

À l’obéissance passive

I

Ô soldats de l’an deux! ô guerres! épopées!
Contre les rois tirant ensemble leurs épées,
Prussiens, autrichiens,
Contre toutes les Tyrs et toutes les Sodomes,
Contre le czar du nord, contre ce chasseur d’hommes
Suivi de tous ses chiens,

Contre toute l’Europe avec ses capitaines,
Avec ses fantassins couvrant au loin les plaines,
Avec ses cavaliers,
Tout entière debout comme une hydre vivante,
Ils chantaient, ils allaient, l’âme sans épouvante
Et les pieds sans souliers!

Au levant, au couchant, partout, au sud, au pôle,
Avec de vieux fusils sonnant sur leur épaule,
Passant torrents et monts,
Sans repos, sans sommeil, coudes percés, sans vivres,
Ils allaient, fiers, joyeux, et soufflant dans des cuivres
Ainsi que des démons!
La Liberté sublime emplissait leurs pensées.
Flottes prises d’assaut, frontières effacées
Sous leur pas souverain,
Ô France, tous les jours, c’était quelque prodige,
Chocs, rencontres, combats; et Joubert sur l’Adige,
Et Marceau sur le Rhin!

On battait l’avant-garde, on culbutait le centre;
Dans la pluie et la neige et de l’eau jusqu’au ventre,
On allait! en avant!
Et l’un offrait la paix, et l’autre ouvrait ses portes,
Et les trônes, roulant comme des feuilles mortes,

Se dispersaient au vent!

Oh! que vous étiez grands au milieu des mêlées,
Soldats! L’œil plein d’éclairs, faces échevelées
Dans le noir tourbillon,
Ils rayonnaient, debout, ardents, dressant la tête
Et comme les lions aspirent la tempête
Quand souffle l’aquilon,

Eux, dans l’emportement de leurs luttes épiques,
Ivres, ils savouraient tous les bruits héroïques,
Le fer heurtant le fer,
La Marseillaise ailée et volant dans les balles,
Les tambours, les obus, les bombes, les cymbales,
Et ton rire, ô Kléber!

La Révolution leur criait: — Volontaires,
Mourez pour délivrer tous les peuples vos frères! -
Contents, ils disaient oui.
— Allez, mes vieux soldats, mes généraux imberbes! -
Et l’on voyait marcher ces va-nu-pieds superbes
Sur le monde ébloui!

La tristesse et la peur leur étaient inconnues.
Ils eussent, sans nul doute, escaladé les nues
Si ces audacieux,
En retournant les yeux dans leur course olympique,
Avaient vu derrière eux la grande République
Montrant du doigt les cieux!

II

Oh! vers ces vétérans quand notre esprit s’élève,
Nous voyons leur front luire et resplendir leur glaive,
Fertile en grands travaux.
C’étaient là les anciens. Mais ce temps les efface!
France, dans ton histoire ils tiennent trop de place.

France, gloire aux nouveaux!

Oui, gloire à ceux d’hier! ils se mettent cent mille,
Sabres nus, vingt contre un, sans crainte, et par la ville
S’en vont, tambours battants.
À mitraille! leur feu brille, l’obusier tonne,
Victoire! ils ont tué, carrefour Tiquetonne,
Un enfant de sept ans!

Ceux-ci sont des héros qui n’ont pas peur des femmes
Ils tirent sans pâlir, gloire à ces grandes âmes!
Sur les passants tremblants.
On voit, quand dans Paris leur troupe se promène,
Aux fers de leurs chevaux de la cervelle humaine
Avec des cheveux blancs!

Ils montent à l’assaut des lois; sur la patrie
Ils s’élancent; chevaux, fantassins, batterie,
Bataillon, escadron,
Gorgés, payés, repus, joyeux, fous de colère,
Sonnant la charge, avec Maupas pour vexillaire
Et Veuillot pour clairon.

Tout, le fer et le plomb, manque à nos bras farouches,
Le peuple est sans fusils, le peuple est sans cartouches,
Braves! c’est le moment!
Avec quelques tribuns la loi demeure seule.
Derrière vos canons chargés jusqu’à la gueule
Risquez-vous hardiment!
Ô soldats de décembre! ô soldats d’embuscades
Contre votre pays! honte à vos cavalcades
Dans Paris consterné!
Vos pères, je l’ai dit, brillaient comme le phare;
Ils bravaient, en chantant une haute fanfare,
La mort, spectre étonné;

Vos pères combattaient les plus fières armées,

Le prussien blond, le russe aux foudres enflammées,
Le catalan bruni,
Vous, vous tuez des gens de bourse et de négoce.
Vos pères, ces géants, avaient pris Saragosse,
Vous prenez Tortoni!

Histoire, qu’en dis-tu? les vieux dans les batailles
Couraient sur les canons vomissant les mitrailles;
Ceux-ci vont, sans trembler,
Foulant aux pieds vieillards sanglants, femmes mourantes
Droit au crime. Ce sont deux façons différentes
De ne pas reculer.

III

Cet homme fait venir, à l’heure où la nuit voile
Paris dormant encor.
Des généraux français portant la triple étoile
Sur l’épaulette d’or;

Il leur dit: « Ecoutez, pour vos yeux seuls j’écarte
L’ombre que je répands;
Vous crûtes jusqu’ici que j’étais Bonaparte,
Mon nom est Guet-apens.

» C’est demain le grand jour, le jour des funérailles
Et le jour des douleurs.
Vous allez vous glisser sans bruit sous les murailles
Comme font les voleurs;

«Vous prendrez cette pince, à mon service usée,
Que je cache sur moi,
Et vous soulèverez avec une pesée
La porte de la loi;

» Puis, hourrah! sabre au vent, et la police en tête!
Et main basse sur tout,

Sur vos chefs africains, sur quiconque est honnête,
Sur quiconque est debout,

Sur les représentants, et ceux qu'ils représentent,
Sur Paris terrassé!
Et je vous paîrai bien!" les généraux consentent
Vidocq eût refusé.

IV

Maintenant, largesse au prétoire!
Trinquez, soldats! et depuis quand
A-t-on peur de rire et de boire?
Fête aux casernes! fête au camp!
L'orgie a rougi leur moustache,
Les rouleaux d'or gonflent leur sac;
Pour capitaine ils ont Gamache,
Ils ont Cocagne pour bivouac.

La bombance après l'équipée.
On s'attable. Hier on tua.
Ô Napoléon, ton épée
Sert de broche à Gargantua.

Le meurtre est pour eux la victoire
Leur œil, par l'ivresse endormi,
Prend le déshonneur pour la gloire
Et les français pour l'ennemi.

France, ils t'égorgèrent la veille.
Ils tiennent, c'est leur lendemain,
Dans une main une bouteille
Et ta tête dans l'autre main.

Ils dansent en rond, noirs quadrilles,
Comme des gueux dans le ravin;
Troplong leur amène des filles,

Et Sibour leur verse du vin.

Et leurs banquets sans fin ni trêves
D’orchestres sont environnés… -
Nous faisions pour vous d’autres rêves,
Ô nos soldats infortunés!

Nous rêvions pour vous l’âpre bise,
La neige au pied du noir sapin,
La brèche où la bombe se brise,
Les nuits sans feu, les jours sans pain.

Nous rêvions les marches forcées,
La faim, le froid, les coups hardis,
Les vieilles capotes usées,
Et la victoire un contre dix;

Nous rêvions, ô soldats esclaves,
Pour vous et pour vos généraux,
La sainte misère des braves,
La grande tombe des héros!

Car l’Europe en ses fers soupire,
Car dans les cœurs un ferment bout,
Car voici l’heure où Dieu va dire:
Chaînes, tombez! Peuples, debout!

L’histoire ouvre un nouveau registre
Le penseur, amer et serein,
Derrière l’horizon sinistre
Entend rouler des chars d’airain.

Un bruit profond trouble la terre;
Dans les fourreaux s’émeut l’acier;
Ce vent qui souffle sort, ô guerre,
Des naseaux de ton noir coursier!

Vers l’heureux but où Dieu nous mène,
Soldats! rêveurs, nous vous poussions,
Tête de la colonne humaine,
Avant-garde des nations!

Nous rêvions, bandes aguerries,
Pour vous, fraternels conquérants,
La grande guerre des patries,
La chute immense des tyrans!

Nous réservions votre effort juste,
Vos fiers tambours, vos rangs épais,
Soldats, pour cette guerre auguste
D’où sortira l’auguste paix!

Dans nos songes visionnaires,
Nous vous voyions, ô nos guerriers,
Marcher joyeux dans les tonnerres,
Courir sanglants dans les lauriers,

Sous la fumée et la poussière
Disparaître en noirs tourbillons,
Puis tout à coup dans la lumière
Surgir, radieux bataillons,

Et passer, légion sacrée
Que les peuples venaient bénir,
Sous la haute porte azurée
De l’éblouissant avenir!

V

Donc, les soldats français auront vu, jours infâmes!
Après Brune et Desaix, après ces grandes âmes
Que nous admirons tous,
Après Turenne, après Xaintraille, après Lahire,
Poulailler leur donner des drapeaux et leur dire

Je suis content de vous!
Ô drapeaux du passé, si beaux dans les histoires,
Drapeaux de tous nos preux et de toutes nos gloires,
Redoutés du fuyard,
Percés, troués, criblés, sans peur et sans reproche,
Vous qui dans vos lambeaux mêlez le sang de Hoche
Et le sang de Bayard,

Ô vieux drapeaux! sortez des tombes. des abîmes!
Sortez en foule, ailés de vos haillons sublimes,
Drapeaux éblouissants!
Comme un sinistre essaim qui sur l'horizon monte,
Sortez, venez, volez, sur toute cette honte
Accourez frémissants!

Délivrez nos soldats de ces bannières viles!
Vous qui chassiez les rois, vous qui preniez les villes,
Vous en qui l'âme croit,
Vous qui passiez les monts, les gouffres et les fleuves,
Drapeaux sous qui l'on meurt, chassez ces aigles neuves,
Drapeaux sous qui l'on boit!

Que nos tristes soldats fassent la différence!
Montrez-leur ce que c'est que les drapeaux de France,
Montrez vos sacrés plis
Qui flottaient sur le Rhin, sur la Meuse et la Sambre,
Et faites, ô drapeaux, auprès du Deux-Décembre
Frissonner Austerlitz!

VI

Hélas! tout est fini. Fange! néant! nuit noire!
Au-dessus de ce gouffre où croula notre gloire,
Flamboyez, noms maudits!
Maupas, Morny, Magnan, Saint-Arnaud, Bonaparte!
Courbons nos fronts! Gomorrhe a triomphé de Sparte!
Cinq hommes! cinq bandits!
Toutes les nations tour à tour sont conquises:

L’Angleterre, pays des antiques franchises,
Par les vieux neustriens,
Rome par Alaric, par Mahomet Byzance,
La Sicile par trois chevaliers, et la France
Par cinq galériens.

Soit. Régnez! emplissez de dégoût la pensée,
Notre-Dame d’encens, de danses l’Elysée,
Montmartre d’ossements.
Régnez! liez ce peuple, à vos yeux populace,
Liez Paris, liez la France à la culasse
De vos canons fumants!

VII

Quand sur votre poitrine il jeta sa médaille,
Ses rubans et sa croix, après cette bataille
Et ce coup de lacet,
Ô soldats dont l’Afrique avait hâlé la joue,
N’avez-vous donc pas vu que c’était de la boue
Qui vous éclaboussait?
Oh! quand je pense à vous, mon œil se mouille encore!
Je vous pleure, soldats! je pleure votre aurore,
Et ce qu’elle promit.
Je pleure! car la gloire est maintenant voilée
Car il est parmi vous plus d’une âme accablée
Qui songe et qui frémit!

Ô soldats! nous aimions votre splendeur première;
Fils de la république et fils de la chaumière,
Que l’honneur échauffait,
Pour servir ce bandit qui dans leur sang se vautre,
Hélas! pour trahir l’une et déshonorer l’autre,
Que vous ont-elles fait?

Après qui marchez-vous, ô légion trompée?
L’homme à qui vous avez prostitué l’épée,
Ce criminel flagrant,

Cet aventurier vil en qui vous semblez croire,
Sera Napoléon le Petit dans l'histoire,
Ou Cartouche le Grand.

Armée! ainsi ton sabre a frappé par derrière
Le serment, le devoir, la loyauté guerrière,
Le droit aux vents jeté,
La révolution sur ce grand siècle empreinte,
Le progrès, l'avenir, la République sainte,
La sainte Liberté,

Pour qu'il puisse asservir ton pays que tu navres,
Pour qu'il puisse s'asseoir sur tous ces grands cadavres,
Lui, ce nain tout-puissant,
Qui préside l'orgie immonde et triomphale,
Qui cuve le massacre et dont la gorge exhale
L'affreux hoquet du sang!

VIII

Ô Dieu, puisque voilà ce qu'a fait cette armée,
Puisque, comme une porte est barrée et fermée,
Elle est sourde à l'honneur,
Puisque tous ces soldats rampent sans espérance,
Et puisque dans le sang ils ont éteint la France,
Votre flambeau, Seigneur!

Puisque la conscience en deuil est sans refuge
Puisque le prêtre assis dans la chaire, et le juge
D'hermine revêtu,
Adorent le succès, seul vrai, seul légitime,
Et disent qu'il vaut mieux réussir par le crime,
Que choir par la vertu;

Puisque les âmes sont pareilles à des filles;
Puisque ceux-là sont morts qui brisaient les bastilles,
Ou bien sont dégradés;

Puisque l’abjection, aux conseils misérables,
Sortant de tous les cœurs, fait les bouches semblables
Aux égouts débordés;

Puisque l’honneur décroît pendant que César monte;
Puisque dans ce Paris on n’entend plus, ô honte,
Que des femmes gémir;
Puisqu’on n’a plus de cœur devant les grandes tâches,
Puisque les vieux faubourgs, tremblant comme des lâches
Font semblant de dormir,

Ô Dieu vivant, mon Dieu! prêtez-moi votre force,
Et, moi qui ne suis rien, j’entrerai chez ce corse
Et chez cet inhumain;
Secouant mon vers sombre et plein de votre flamme,
J’entrerai là, Seigneur, la justice dans l’âme
Et le fouet à la main,

Et, retroussant ma manche ainsi qu’un belluaire,
Seul, terrible, des morts agitant le suaire
Dans ma sainte fureur,
Pareil aux noirs vengeurs devant qui l’on se sauve,
J’écraserai du pied l’antre et la bête fauve,
L’empire et l’empereur!
7-13 janvier 1853. Jersey.

LIVRE III: LA FAMILLE EST RESTAURÉE

Apothéose

Méditons. Il est bon que l'esprit se repaisse
De ces spectacles-là. L'on n'était qu'une espèce
De perroquet ayant un grand nom pour perchoir,
Pauvre diable de prince, usant son habit noir,
Auquel mil huit cent quinze avait coupé les vivres.
On n'avait pas dix sous, on emprunte cinq livres.
Maintenant, remarquons l'échelle, s'il vous plaît.
De l'écu de cinq francs on s'élève au billet
Signé Garat; bravo! puis du billet de banque
On grimpe au million, rapide saltimbanque;
Le million gobé fait mordre au milliard.
On arrive au lingot en partant du liard.
Puis carrosses, palais, bals, festins, opulence
On s'attable au pouvoir et l'on mange la France.
C'est ainsi qu'un filou devient homme d'état.

Qu'a-t-il fait? Un délit? Fi donc! un attentat;
Un grand acte, un massacre, un admirable crime
Auquel la haute cour prête serment. L'abîme
Se referme en poussant un grognement bourru.
La Révolution sous terre a disparu
En laissant derrière elle une senteur de soufre.
Romieu montre la trappe et dit: Voyez le gouffre!

Vivat Mascarillus! roulement de tambours.
On tient sous le bâton parqués dans les faubourgs
Les ouvriers ainsi que des noirs dans leurs cases
Paris sur ses pavés voit neiger les ukases
La Seine devient glace autant que la Néva.
Quant au maître, il triomphe; il se promène, va
De préfet en préfet, vole de maire en maire,
Orné du Deux-Décembre, du Dix-huit Brumaire,
Bombardé de bouquets, voituré dans des chars,
Laid, joyeux, salué par es chœurs de mouchards.

Puis il rentre empereur au Louvre, il parodie
Napoléon, il lit l’histoire, il étudie
L’honneur et la vertu dans Alexandre six;
Il s’installe au palais du spectre Médicis;
Il quitte par moments sa pourpre ou sa casaque,
Flâne autour du bassin en pantalon cosaque,
Et riant, et semant les miettes sur ses pas,
Donne aux poissons le pain que les proscrits n’ont pas.
La caserne l’adore, on le bénit au prône;
L’Europe est sous ses pieds et tremble sous son trône;
Il règne par la mitre et par le hausse-col.
Ce trône a trois degrés, parjure, meurtre et vol.
Ô Carrare! ô Paros! ô marbres pentéliques!
Ô tous les vieux héros des vieilles républiques!
Ô tous les dictateurs de l’empire latin!
Le moment est venu d’admirer le destin.
Voici qu’un nouveau dieu monte au fronton du temple.
Regarde, peuple, et toi, froide histoire, contemple.
Tandis que nous, martyrs du droit, nous expions,
Avec les Périclès, avec les Scipions,
Sur les frises où sont les victoires aptères,
Au milieu des césars trainés par des panthères,
Vêtus de pourpre et ceints du laurier souverain,
Parmi les aigles d’or et les louves d’airain,
Comme un astre apparaît parmi ses satellites,
Voici qu’à la hauteur des empereurs stylites,
Entre Auguste à l’œil calme et Trajan au front pur,
Resplendit, immobile en l’éternel azur,
Sur vous, ô panthéons, sur vous, ô propylées,
Robert Macaire avec ses bottes éculées!
31 janvier.

L’Homme a ri

«M. Victor Hugo vient de publier à Bruxelles un livre qui a pour titre: Napoléon le Petit, et qui renferme les calomnies les plus odieuses contre le prince-président.

» On raconte qu’un des jours de la semaine dernière un fonctionnaire apporte ce libellé à Saint-Cloud. Lorsque Louis-Napoléon le vit, il le prit, l’examina un instant avec le sourire du mépris sur les lèvres, puis s’adressant aux personnes qui l’entouraient, il dit, en leur montrant le pamphlet:

“Voyez, messieurs, voici Napoléon le Petit, par Victor Hugo le Grand.”

(JOURNAUX ÉLYSÉENS, AOUT 1852.)

Ah! tu finiras bien par hurler, misérable!
Encor tout haletant de ton crime exécrable,
Dans ton triomphe abject, si lugubre et si prompt,
Je t’ai saisi. J’ai mis l’écriteau sur ton front;
Et maintenant la foule accourt, et te bafoue.
Toi, tandis qu’au poteau le châtiment te cloue,
Que le carcan te force à lever le menton,
Tandis que, de ta veste arrachant le bouton,
L’histoire à mes côtés met à nu ton épaule,
Tu dis: je ne sens rien! et tu nous railles, drôle!
Ton rire sur mon nom gaîment vient écumer;
Mais je tiens le fer rouge et vois ta chair fumer.
Jersey. 30 octobre 1852.

Fable ou Histoire

Un jour, maigre et sentant un royal appétit,
Un singe d’une peau de tigre se vêtit.
Le tigre avait été méchant; lui, fut atroce.
Il avait endossé le droit d’être féroce.
Il se mit à grincer des dents, criant: Je suis
Le vainqueur des halliers, le roi sombre des nuits!
Il s’embusqua, brigand des bois, dans les épines
Il entassa l’horreur, le meurtre, les rapines,
Egorgea les passants, dévasta la forêt,
Fit tout ce qu’avait fait la peau qui le couvrait.
Il vivait dans un antre, entouré de carnage.
Chacun, voyant la peau, croyait au personnage.
Il s’écriait, poussant d’affreux rugissements:
Regardez, ma caverne est pleine d’ossements;
Devant moi tout recule et frémit, tout émigre,
Tout tremble; admirez-moi, voyez, je suis un tigre!
Les bêtes l’admiraient, et fuyaient à grands pas.
Un belluaire vint, le saisit dans ses bras,
Déchira cette peau comme on déchire un linge,
Mit à nu ce vainqueur, et dit: Tu n’es qu’un singe!
6 novembre. Jersey.

“Ainsi les plus abjects, les plus vils, les plus minces

Ainsi les plus abjects, les plus vils, les plus minces
Vont régner! ce n’était pas assez des vrais princes
Qui de leur sceptre d’or insultent le ciel bleu,
Et sont rois et méchants par la grâce de Dieu!
Quoi! tel gueux qui, pourvu d’un titre en bonne forme,
À pour toute splendeur sa bâtardise énorme,
Tel enfant du hasard, rebut des échafauds,
Dont le nom fut un vol et la naissance un faux,
Tel bohème pétri de ruse et d’arrogance,
Tel intrus entrera dans le sang de Bragance,
Dans la maison d’Autriche ou dans la maison d’Est,
Grâce à la fiction légale is pater est,
Criera: je suis Bourbon, ou: je suis Bonaparte,
Mettra cyniquement ses deux poings sur la carte,
Et dira: c’est à moi! je suis le grand vainqueur!
Sans que les braves gens, sans que les gens de coeur
Rendent à Curtius ce monarque de cire!
Et, quand je dis: faquin! l’écho répondra: sire!
Quoi! ce royal croquant, ce maraud couronné,
Qui, d’un boulet de quatre à la cheville orné,
Devrait dans un ponton pourrir à fond de cale,
Cette altesse en ruolz, ce prince en chrysocale,
Se fait devant la France, horrible, ensanglanté,
Donner de l’empereur et de la majesté,
Il trousse sa moustache en croc et la caresse,
Sans que sous les soufflets sa face disparaisse,
Sans que, d’un coup de pied l’arrachant à Saint-Cloud,
On le jette au ruisseau, dût-on salir l’égout!

— Paix! disent cent crétins. C’est fini. Chose faite.
Le Trois pour cent est Dieu, Mandrin est son prophète.
Il règne. Nous avons voté! Vox populi. -
Oui, je comprends, l’opprobre est un fait accompli.
Mais qui donc a voté? Mais qui donc tenait l’urne?

Mais qui donc a vu clair dans ce scrutin nocturne?
Où donc était la loi dans ce tour effronté?
Où donc la nation? Où donc la liberté?
Ils ont voté!

Troupeau que la peur mène paître
Entre le sacristain et le garde champêtre
Vous qui, pleins de terreur. voyez, pour vous manger,
Pour manger vos maisons, vos bois, votre verger,
Vos meules de luzerne et vos pommes à cidre,
S’ouvrir tous les matins les mâchoires d’une hydre
Braves gens, qui croyez en vos foins, et mettez
De la religion dans vos propriétés;
Âmes que l’argent touche et que l’or fait dévotes
Maires narquois, traînant vos paysans aux votes;
Marguilliers aux regards vitreux; curés camus
Hurlant à vos lutrins: Dæmonem laudamus;
Sots, qui vous courroucez comme flambe une bûche;
Marchands dont la balance incorrecte trébuche;
Vieux bonshommes crochus, hiboux hommes d’état,
Qui déclarez, devant la fraude et l’attentat,
La tribune fatale et la presse funeste;
Fats, qui, tout effrayés de l’esprit, cette peste,
Criez, quoique à l’abri de la contagion;
Voltairiens, viveurs, fervente légion,
Saints gaillards, qui jetez dans la même gamelle
Dieu, l’orgie et la messe, et prenez pêle-mêle
La défense du ciel et la taille à Goton;
Bons dos, qui vous courbez, adorant le bâton;
Contemplateurs béats des gibets de l’Autriche
Gens de bourse effarés, qui trichez et qu’on triche;
Invalides, lions transformés en toutous;
Niais, pour qui cet homme est un sauveur; vous tous
Qui vous ébahissez, bestiaux de Panurge,
Aux miracles que fait Cartouche thaumaturge;
Noircisseurs de papier timbré, planteurs de choux,
Est-ce que vous croyez que la France, c’est vous,

Que vous êtes le peuple, et que jamais vous eûtes
Le droit de nous donner un maître, ô tas de brutes?
Ce droit, sachez-le bien, chiens du berger Maupas,
Et la France et le peuple eux-mêmes ne l’ont pas.
L’altière Vérité jamais ne tombe en cendre.
La Liberté n’est pas une guenille à vendre,
Jetée au tas, pendue au clou chez un fripier.
Quand un peuple se laisse au piège estropier,
Le droit sacré, toujours à soi-même fidèle,
Dans chaque citoyen trouve une citadelle;
On s’illustre en bravant un lâche conquérant,
Et le moindre du peuple en devient le plus grand.
Donc, trouvez du bonheur, ô plates créatures,
À vivre dans la fange et dans les pourritures,
Adorez ce fumier sous ce dais de brocart,
L’honnête homme recule et s’accoude à l’écart.
Dans la chute d’autrui je ne veux pas descendre.
L’honneur n’abdique point. Nul n’a droit de me prendre
Ma liberté, mon bien, mon ciel bleu, mon amour.
Tout l’univers aveugle est sans droit sur le jour.
Fût-on cent millions d’esclaves, je suis libre.
Ainsi parle Caton. Sur la Seine ou le Tibre,
Personne n’est tombé tant qu’un seul est debout.
Le vieux sang des aïeux qui s’indigne et qui bout,
La vertu, la fierté, la justice, l’histoire,
Toute une nation avec toute sa gloire
Vit dans le dernier front qui ne veut pas plier.
Pour soutenir le temple il suffit d’un pilier;
Un français, c’est la France; un romain contient Rome,
Et ce qui brise un peuple avorte aux pieds d’un homme.
4 mai 1853. Jersey.

Querelles du sérail

Ciel! après tes splendeurs, qui rayonnaient naguères,
Liberté sainte; après toutes ces grandes guerres,
Tourbillon inouï;
Après ce Marengo qui brille sur la carte,
Et qui ferait lâcher le premier Bonaparte
À Tacite ébloui;

Après ces messidors, ces prairials, ces frimaires,
Et tant de préjugés, d’hydres et de chimères,
Terrassés à jamais;
Après le sceptre en cendre et la Bastille en poudre,
Le trône en flamme; après tous ces grands coups de foudre
Sur tous ces grands sommets:

Après tous ces géants, après tous ces colosses,
S’acharnant malgré Dieu, comme d’ardents molosses,
Quand Dieu disait: va-t’en!
Après ton océan, République française,
Où nos pères ont vu passer Quatrevingt-treize
Comme Léviathan;

Après Danton, Saint-Just et Mirabeau, ces hommes,
Ces titans, aujourd’hui cette France où nous sommes
Contemple l’embryon,
L’infiniment petit, monstrueux et féroce,
Et, dans la goutte d’eau, les guerres du volvoce
Contre le vibrion!
Honte! France, aujourd’hui, voici ta grande affaire:
Savoir si c’est Maupas ou Morny qu’on préfère,
Là-haut, dans le palais;
Tous deux ont sauvé l’ordre et sauvé les familles;
Lequel l’emportera? l’un a pour lui les filles,
Et l’autre, les valets.
Bruxelles, janvier 1852

Orientale

Lorsque Abd-el-Kader dans sa geôle
Vit entrer l’homme aux yeux étroits
Que l’histoire appelle - ce drôle, -
Et Troplong - Napoléon trois; -

Qu’il vit venir, de sa croisée,
Suivi du troupeau qui le sert,
L’homme louche de l’Elysée,
Lui, l’homme fauve du désert;

Lui, le sultan né sous les palmes,
Le compagnon des lions roux,
Le hadji farouche aux yeux calmes,
L’émir pensif, féroce et doux;

Lui, sombre et fatal personnage
Qui, spectre pâle au blanc burnous,
Bondissait, ivre de carnage,
Puis tombait dans l’ombre à genoux;

Qui, de sa tente ouvrant les toiles,
Et priant au bord du chemin,
Tranquille, montrait aux étoiles
Ses mains teintes de sang humain;

Qui donnait à boire aux épées,
Et qui, rêveur mystérieux,
Assis sur des têtes coupées,
Contemplait la beauté des cieux;

Voyant ce regard fourbe et traître,
Ce front bas, de honte obscurci,
Lui, le beau soldat, le beau prêtre,
Il dit: Quel est cet homme-ci?

Devant ce vil masque à moustaches,
Il hésita; mais on lui dit:
“Regarde, émir, passer les haches!
Cet homme, c’est César bandit.

» Ecoute ces plaintes amères
Et cette clameur qui grandit.
Cet homme est maudit par les mères,
Par les femmes il est maudit;

» Il les fait veuves, Il les navre
Il prit la France et la tua,
Il ronge à présent son cadavre.”
Alors le hadji salua.

Mais au fond toutes ses pensées
Méprisaient le sanglant gredin
Le tigre aux narines froncées
Flairait ce loup avec dédain.
20 novembre. Jersey.

Un Bon Bourgeois dans sa maison

«Mais que je suis donc heureux d’être né en Chine! Je possède une maison pour m’abriter, j’ai de quoi manger et boire, j’ai toutes les commodités de l’existence, j’ai des habits, des bonnets et une multitude d’agréments; en vérité, la félicité la plus grande est mon partage!”

THIEN-CI-KHI, LETTRÉ CHINOIS.

Il est certains bourgeois, prêtres du dieu Boutique,
Plus voisins de Chrysès que de Caton d’Utique,
Mettant par-dessus tout la rente et le coupon,
Qui, voguant à la Bourse et tenant un harpon,
Honnêtes gens d’ailleurs, mais de la grosse espèce,
Acceptent Phalaris par amour pour leur caisse,
Et le taureau d’airain à cause du veau d’or.
Ils ont voté. Demain ils voteront encor.
Si quelque libre écrit entre leurs mains s’égare,
Les pieds sur les chenets et fumant son cigare,
Chacun de ces votants tout bas raisonne ainsi:
Ce livre est fort choquant. De quel droit celui-ci
Est-il généreux, ferme et fier, quand je suis lâche?
En attaquant monsieur Bonaparte, on me fâche.
Je pense comme lui que c’est un gueux; pourquoi
Le dit-il? Soit, d’accord, Bonaparte est sans foi
Ni loi; c’est un parjure, un brigand, un faussaire,
C’est vrai; sa politique est armée en corsaire
Il a banni jusqu’à des juges suppléants;
Il a coupé leur bourse aux princes d’Orléans
C’est le pire gredin qui soit sur cette terre;
Mais puisque j’ai voté pour lui, l’on doit se taire.
Ecrire contre lui, c’est me blâmer au fond;
C’est me dire: voilà comment les braves font
Et c’est une façon, à nous qui restons neutres,
De nous faire sentir que nous sommes des pleutres.
J’en conviens, nous avons une corde au poignet.
Que voulez-vous? la Bourse allait mal; on craignait

La république rouge, et même un peu la rose
Il fallait bien finir par faire quelque chose

On trouve ce coquin, on le fait empereur;
C’est tout simple. On voulait éviter la terreur,
Le spectre de monsieur Romieu, la jacquerie
On s’est réfugié dans cette escroquerie.
Or, quand on dit du mal de ce gouvernement,
Je me sens chatouillé désagréablement.
Qu’on fouaille avec raison cet homme, c’est possible
Mais c’est m’insinuer à moi, bourgeois paisible
Qui fis ce scélérat empereur ou consul,
Que j’ai dit oui par peur et vivat par calcul.
Je trouve impertinent, parbleu, qu’on me le dise.
M’étant enseveli dans cette couardise,
Il me déplaît qu’on soit intrépide aujourd’hui,
Et je tiens pour affront le courage d’autrui.”

Penseurs, quand vous marquez au front l’homme punique
Qui de la loi sanglante arracha la tunique,
Quand vous vengez le peuple à la gorge saisi,
Le serment et le droit, vous êtes, songez-y,
Entre Sbogar qui règne et Géronte qui vote;
Et votre plume ardente, anarchique, indévote,
Démagogique, impie, attente d’un côté
À ce crime; de l’autre, à cette lâcheté.
Novembre 1852. Jersey.

Splendeurs

I

À présent que c’est fait, dans l’avilissement
Arrangeons-nous chacun notre compartiment
Marchons d’un air auguste et fier; la honte est bue.
Que tout à composer cette cour contribue,
Tout, excepté l’honneur, tout, hormis les vertus.
Faites vivre, animez, envoyez vos foetus
Et vos nains monstrueux, bocaux d’anatomie
Donne ton crocodile et donne ta momie,
Vieille Égypte; donnez, tapis-francs, vos filous;
Shakespeare, ton Falstaff; noires forêts, vos loups;
Donne, ô bon Rabelais, ton Grandgousier qui mange;
Donne ton diable, Hoffmann; Veuillot, donne ton ange;
Scapin, apporte-nous Géronte dans ton sac;
Beaumarchais, prête-nous Bridoison; que Balzac
Donne Vautrin; Dumas, la Carconte; Voltaire,
Son Frélon que l’argent fait parler et fait taire;
Mabile, les beautés de ton jardin d’hiver;
Le Sage, cède-nous Gil Blas; que Gulliver
Donne tout Lilliput dont l’aigre est une mouche,
Et Scarron Bruscambille, et Callot Scaramouche.
Il nous faut un dévot dans ce tripot payen;
Molière, donne-nous Montalembert. C’est bien,
L’ombre à l’horreur s’accouple, et le mauvais au pire.
Tacite, nous avons de quoi faire l’empire;
Juvénal, nous avons de quoi faire un sénat.

II

Ô Ducos le gascon, ô Rouher l’auvergnat,
Et vous, juifs, Fould Shylock, Sibour Iscariote,
Toi Parieu, toi Bertrand, horreur du patriote,
Bauchart, bourreau douceâtre et proscripteur plaintif,

Baroche, dont le nom n'est plus qu'un vomitif,
Ô valets solennels, ô majestueux fourbes,
Travaillant votre échine à produire des courbes,
Bas, hautains, ravissant les Daumiers enchantés
Par vos convexités et vos concavités,
Convenez avec moi, vous tous qu'ici je nomme,
Que Dieu dans sa sagesse a fait exprès cet homme
Pour régner sur la France, ou bien sur Haïti.
Et vous autres, créés pour grossir son parti,
Philosophes gênés de cuissons à l'épaule,
Et vous, viveurs râpés, frais sortis de la geôle,
Saluez l'être unique et providentiel,
Ce gouvernant tombé d'une trappe du ciel,
Ce césar moustachu, gardé par cent guérites,
Qui sait apprécier les gens et les mérites,
Et qui, prince admirable et grand homme en effet,
Fait Poissy sénateur et Clichy sous-préfet.

III

Après quoi l'on ajuste au fait la théorie
«A bas les mots! à bas loi, liberté, patrie!
Plus on s'aplatira, plus ou prospérera.
Jetons au feu tribune et presse, et cætera.

Depuis quatrevingt-neuf les nations sont ivres.
Les faiseurs de discours et les faiseurs de livres
Perdent tout; le poëte est un fou dangereux;
Le progrès ment, le ciel est vide, l'art est creux,
Le monde est mort. Le peuple? un âne qui se cabre!
La force, c'est le droit. Courbons-nous. Gloire au sabre!
À bas les Washington! vivent les Attila!"
On a des gens d'esprit pour soutenir cela.

Oui, qu'ils viennent tous ceux qui n'ont ni cœur ni flamme,
Qui boitent de l'honneur et qui louchent de l'âme;
Oui, leur soleil se lève et leur messie est né.

C’est décrété, c’est fait, c’est dit, c’est canonné
La France est mitraillée, escroquée et sauvée.

Le hibou Trahison pond gaîment sa couvée.

IV

Et partout le néant prévaut; pour déchirer
Notre histoire, nos lois, nos droits, pour dévorer
L’avenir de nos fils et les os de nos pères,
Les bêtes de la nuit sortent de leurs repaires
Sophistes et soudards resserrent leur réseau
Les Radetzky flairant le gibet du museau,
Les Giulay, poil tigré, les Buol, face verte,
Les Haynau, les Bomba, rôdent, la gueule ouverte,
Autour du genre humain qui, pâle et garrotté,
Lutte pour la justice et pour la vérité;
Et de Paris à Pesth, du Tibre aux monts Carpathes,
Sur nos débris sanglants rampent ces mille-pattes.

V

Du lourd dictionnaire où Beauzée et Batteux
Ont versé les trésors de leur bon sens goutteux,
Il faut, grâce aux vainqueurs, refaire chaque lettre.
Ame de l’homme, ils ont trouvé moyen de mettre
Sur tes vieilles laideurs un tas de mots nouveaux,
Leurs noms. L’hypocrisie aux yeux bas et dévots
À nom Menjaud, et vend Jésus dans sa chapelle;
On a débaptisé la honte, elle s’appelle
Sibour; la trahison, Maupas; l’assassinat
Sous le nom de Magnan est membre du Sénat;

Quant à la lâcheté, c’est Hardouin qu’on la nomme;
Riancey, c’est le mensonge, il arrive de Rome
Et tient la vérité renfermée en son puits;
La platitude a nom Montlaville-Chapuis;

La prostitution, ingénue, est princesse;
La férocité, c’est Carrelet; la bassesse
Signe Rouher, avec Delangle pour greffier.
Ô muse, inscris ces noms. Veux-tu qualifier
La justice vénale, atroce, abjecte et fausse?
Commence à Partarieu pour finir par Lafosse.
J’appelle Saint-Arnaud, le meurtre dit: c’est moi.
Et, pour tout compléter par le deuil et l’effroi,
Le vieux calendrier remplace sur sa carte
La Saint-Barthélemy par la Saint-Bonaparte.
Quant au peuple, il admire et vote; on est suspect
D’en douter, et Paris écoute avec respect
Sibour et ses sermons, Trolong et ses troplongues.
Les deux Napoléon s’unissent en diphthongues,
Et Berger entrelace en un chiffre hardi
Le boulevard Montmartre entre Arcole et Lodi.
Spartacus agonise en un bagne fétide;
On chasse Thémistocle, on expulse Aristide,
On jette Daniel dans la fosse aux lions;
Et maintenant ouvrons le ventre aux millions!
Jersey. Novembre 1852.

Joyeuse vie

I

Bien! pillards, intrigants, fourbes, crétins, puissances!
Attablez-vous en hâte autour des jouissances!
Accourez! place à tous!
Maîtres, buvez, mangez, car la vie est rapide.
Tout ce peuple conquis, tout ce peuple stupide,
Tout ce peuple est à vous!
Vendez l’état! coupez les bois! coupez les bourses!
Videz les réservoirs et tarissez les sources!
Les temps sont arrivés.
Prenez le dernier sou! prenez, gais et faciles,
Aux travailleurs des champs, aux travailleurs des villes!
Prenez, riez, vivez!

Bombance! allez! c’est bien! vivez! faites ripaille!
La famille du pauvre expire sur la paille,
Sans porte ni volet.
Le père en frémissant va mendier dans l’ombre;
La mère n’ayant plus de pain, dénûment sombre,
L’enfant n’a plus de lait.

II

Millions! millions! châteaux! liste civile!
Un jour je descendis dans les caves de Lille
Je vis ce morne enfer.
Des fantômes sont là sous terre dans des chambres,
Blêmes, courbés, ployés; le rachis tord leurs membres
Dans son poignet de fer.
Sous ces voûtes on souffre, et l’air semble un toxique
L’aveugle en tâtonnant donne à boire au phtisique
L’eau coule à longs ruisseaux;
Presque enfant à vingt ans, déjà vieillard à trente,

Le vivant chaque jour sent la mort pénétrante
S’infiltrer dans ses os.
Jamais de feu; la pluie inonde la lucarne;
L’œil en ces souterrains où le malheur s’acharne
Sur vous, ô travailleurs,
Près du rouet qui tourne et du fil qu’on dévide,
Voit des larves errer dans la lueur livide
Du soupirail en pleurs.

Misère! l’homme songe en regardant la femme.
Le père, autour de lui sentant l’angoisse infâme
Etreindre la vertu,
Voit sa fille rentrer sinistre sous la porte,
Et n’ose, l’œil fixé sur le pain qu’elle apporte,
Lui dire: D’où viens-tu?

Là dort le désespoir sur son haillon sordide;
Là, l’avril de la vie, ailleurs tiède et splendide,
Ressemble au sombre hiver;
La vierge, rose au jour, dans l’ombre est violette;
Là, rampent dans l’horreur la maigreur du squelette,
La nudité du ver;

Là frissonnent, plus bas que les égouts des rues,
Familles de la vie et du jour disparues,
Des groupes grelottants;
Là, quand j’entrai, farouche, aux méduses pareille,
Une petite fille à figure vieille
Me dit: J’ai dix-huit ans!

Là, n’ayant pas de lit, la mère malheureuse
Met ses petits enfants dans un trou qu’elle creuse,
Tremblants comme l’oiseau;
Hélas! ces innocents aux regards de colombe
Trouvent en arrivant sur la terre une tombe
En place d’un berceau!

Caves de Lille! on meurt sous vos plafonds de pierre!
J’ai vu, vu de ces yeux pleurant sous ma paupière,
Râler l’aïeul flétri,
La fille aux yeux hagards de ses cheveux vêtue,
Et l’enfant spectre au sein de la mère statue!
Ô Dante Alighieri!

C’est de ces douleurs-là que sortent vos richesses,
Princes! ces dénûments nourrissent vos largesses,
Ô vainqueurs! conquérants!
Votre budget ruisselle et suinte à larges gouttes
Des murs de ces caveaux, des pierres de ces voûtes,
Du cœur de ces mourants.

Sous ce rouage affreux qu’on nomme tyrannie,
Sous cette vis que meut le fisc, hideux génie,
De l’aube jusqu’au soir,
Sans trêve, nuit et jour, dans le siècle où nous sommes
Ainsi que des raisins on écrase des hommes,
Et l’or sort du pressoir.

C’est de cette détresse et de ces agonies,
De cette ombre, où jamais, dans les âmes ternies,
Espoir, tu ne vibras,
C’est de ces bouges noirs pleins d’angoisses amères,
C’est de ce sombre amas de pères et de mères
Qui se tordent les bras,

Oui, c’est de ce monceau d’indigences terribles
Que les lourds millions, étincelants, horribles,
Semant l’or en chemin,
Rampant vers les palais et les apothéoses,
Sortent, monstres joyeux et couronnés de roses,
Et teints de sang humain!

III

Ô paradis! splendeurs! versez à boire aux maîtres!
L’orchestre rit, la fête empourpre les fenêtres,
La table éclate et luit;
L’ombre est là sous leurs pieds! les portes sont fermées
La prostitution des vierges affamées
Pleure dans cette nuit!

Vous tous qui partagez ces hideuses délices,
Soldats payés, tribuns vendus, juges complices,
Évêques effrontés,
La misère frémit sous ce Louvre où vous êtes!
C’est de fièvre et de faim et de mort que sont faites
Toutes vos voluptés!

À Saint-Cloud, effeuillant jasmins et marguerites,
Quand s’ébat sous les fleurs l’essaim des favorites,
Bras nus et gorge au vent,
Dans le festin qu’égaie un lustre à mille branches,
Chacune, en souriant, dans ses belles dents blanches
Mange un enfant vivant!
Mais qu’importe! riez! Se plaindra-t-on sans cesse?
Serait-on empereur, prélat, prince et princesse,
Pour ne pas s’amuser?
Ce peuple en larmes, triste, et que la faim déchire,
Doit être satisfait puisqu’il vous entend rire
Et qu’il vous voit danser!
Qu’importe! Allons, emplis ton coffre, emplis ta poche.
Chantez, le verre en main, Troplong, Sibour, Baroche!
Ce tableau nous manquait.
Regorgez, quand la faim tient le peuple en sa serre,
Et faites, au -dessus de l’immense misère,
Un immense banquet!

IV

Ils marchent sur toi, peuple! Ô barricade sombre,
Si haute hier, dressant dans les assauts sans nombre
Ton front de sang lavé,

Sous la roue emportée, étincelante et folle,
De leur coupé joyeux qui rayonne et qui vole,
Tu redeviens pavé!

À César ton argent, peuple; à toi la famine.
N’es-tu pas le chien vil qu’on bat et qui chemine
Derrière son seigneur?
À lui la pourpre; à toi la hotte et les guenilles.
Peuple, à lui la beauté de ces femmes, tes filles,
À toi leur déshonneur!

V

Ah! quelqu’un parlera. La muse, c’est l’histoire.
Quelqu’un élèvera la voix dans la nuit noire.
Riez, bourreaux bouffons!
Quelqu’un te vengera, pauvre France abattue,
Ma mère! et l’on verra la parole qui tue
Sortir des cieux profonds!

Ces gueux, pires brigands que ceux des vieilles races,
Rongeant le pauvre peuple avec leurs dents voraces,
Sans pitié, sans merci,
Vils, n’ayant pas de cœur, mais ayant deux visages,
Disent: — Bah! le poëte! il est dans les nuages! -
Soit. Le tonnerre aussi.
19 janvier 1853.

L’Empereur s’amuse

Pour les bannis opiniâtres,
La France est loin, la tombe est près.
Prince, préside aux jeux folâtres,
Chasse aux femmes dans les théâtres,
Chasse aux chevreuils dans les forêts
Rome te brûle le cinname,
Les rois te disent: mon cousin. -
Sonne aujourd’hui le glas, bourdon de Notre-Dame,
Et demain le tocsin!
Les us frappés sont les plus dignes.
Ou l’exil! ou l’Afrique en feu!
Prince, Compiègne est plein de cygnes,
Cours dans les bois, cours dans les vignes,
Vénus rayonne au plafond bleu;
La bacchante aux bras nus se pâme
Sous sa couronne de raisin. -
Sonne aujourd’hui le glas, bourdon de Notre-Dame,
Et demain le tocsin!

Les forçats bâtissent le phare,
Traînant leurs fers au bord des flots!
Hallali! hallali! fanfare!
Le cor sonne, le bois s’effare,
La lune argente les bouleaux;
À l’eau les chiens! le cerf qui branle
Se perd dans l’ombre du bassin. -
Sonne aujourd’hui le glas, bourdon de Notre-Dame,
Et demain le tocsin!

Le père est au bagne à Cayenne
Et les enfants meurent de faim.
Le loup verse à boire à l’hyène;
L’homme à la mitre citoyenne
Trinque en son ciboire d’or fin;

On voit luire les yeux de flamme
Des faunes dans l’antre voisin. -
Sonne aujourd’hui le glas, bourdon de Notre-Dame,
Et demain le tocsin!
Les morts, au boulevard Montmartre,
Rôdent, montrant leur plaie au cœur.
Pâtés de Strasbourg et de Chartre,
Sous la table, un tapis de martre
Les belles boivent au vainqueur,
Et leur sourire offre leur âme,
Et leur corset offre leur sein. -
Sonne aujourd’hui le glas, bourdon de Notre-Dame,
Et demain le tocsin!

Captifs, expirez dans les fièvres.
Vous allez donc vous reposer!
Dans le vieux saxe et le vieux sèvres
On soupe, on mange, et sur les lèvres
Éclôt le doux oiseau baiser;
Et, tout en riant, chaque femme
En laisse fuir un fol essaim. -
Sonne aujourd’hui le glas, bourdon de Notre-Dame,
Et demain le tocsin!

La Guyane, cachot fournaise,
Tue aujourd’hui comme jadis.
Couche-toi, joyeux et plein d’aise,
Au lit où coucha Louis seize,
Puis l’empereur, puis Charles dix;
Endors-toi, pendant qu’on t’acclame,
La tête sur leur traversin. -
Sonne aujourd’hui le glas, bourdon de Notre-Dame,
Et demain le tocsin!

Ô deuil! par un bandit féroce
L’avenir est mort poignardé!
C’est aujourd’hui la grande noce,

Le fiancé monte en carrosse;
C’est lui! César le bien gardé!
Peuples, chantez l’épithalame!
La France épouse l’assassin. -
Sonne aujourd’hui le glas, bourdon de Notre-Dame,
Et demain le tocsin!
25 janvier 1853.

Sentiers où l’herbe se balance

Sentiers où l’herbe se balance,
Vallons, coteaux, bois chevelus,
Pourquoi ce deuil et ce silence?
— Celui qui venait ne vient plus.

— Pourquoi personne à ta fenêtre,
Et pourquoi ton jardin sans fleurs,.
Ô maison? où donc est ton maître?
— Je ne sais pas, il est ailleurs.

— Chien, veille au logis. — Pourquoi faire?
La maison est vide à présent.
— Enfant, qui pleures-tu? — Mon père.
— Femme, qui pleures-tu? — L’absent.

— Où s’en est-il allé? — Dans l’ombre.
— Flots qui gémissez sur l’écueil,
D’où venez-vous? — Du bagne sombre.
— Et qu’apportez-vous? Un cercueil.
1er août 1853. Jersey.

Ô Robert, un conseil. Ayez l’air moins candide

Ô Robert, un conseil. Ayez l’air moins candide.
Soyons homme d’esprit. Le moment est splendide,
Je le sais; le quart d’heure est chatoyant, c’est vrai
Cette Californie est riche en minerai,
D’accord; mais cependant quand un préfet, un maire,
Un évêque adorant le fils de votre mère,
Quand un Suin, un Parieu, payé pour sa ferveur,
Vous parlant en plein nez, vous appelle sauveur,
Vous promet l’avenir, atteste Fould et Magne,
Et vous fait coudoyer César et Charlemagne,
Mon cher, vous accueillez ces propos obligeants
D’un air de bonne foi qui prête à rire aux gens.
Vous avez l’œil béat d’un bailli de province.
Par ces simplicités vous affligez, ô prince,
Napoléon, votre oncle, et moi, votre parrain.
Ne soyons pas Jocrisse ayant été Mandrin.
On vole un trône, on prend un peuple en une attrape,
Mais il est de bon goût d’en rire un peu sous cape
Et de cligner de l’œil du côté des malins.
Etre sa propre dupe! ah! fi donc! Verres pleins,
Poche pleine, et rions! La France rampe et s’offre;
Soyons un sage à qui Jupiter livre un coffre;
Dépêchons-nous, pillons, régnons vite. — Mais quoi!
Le pape nous bénit; czar, sultan, duc et roi
Sont nos cousins; fonder un empire est facile
Il est doux d’être chef d’une race! — Imbécile!
Te figures-tu donc que ceci durera?
Prends-tu pour du granit ce décor d’opéra?
Paris dompté! par toi! dans quelle apocalypse
Lit-on que le géant devant le nain s’éclipse?
Crois-tu donc qu’on va voir, gaîment, l’œil impudent,
Ta fortune cynique écraser sous sa dent
La révolution que nos pères ont faite,
Ainsi qu’une guenon qui croque une noisette?

Ote-toi de l’esprit ce rêve enchanteur. Crois
À Rose Tamisier faisant saigner la croix,
À l’âme de Baroche entrouvrant sa corolle,
Crois à l’honnêteté de Deutz, à ta parole,
C’est bien; mais ne crois pas à ton succès; il ment.
Rose Tamisier, Deutz, Baroche, ton serment,
C’est de l’or, j’en conviens; ton sceptre est de l’argile.
Dieu, qui t’a mis au coche, écrit sur toi: fragile.
29 mai 1853. Jersey.

“L’histoire a pour égout des temps comme les nôtres

L’histoire a pour égout des temps comme les nôtres,
Et c’est là que la table est mise pour vous autres.
C’est là, sur cette nappe où joyeux vous mangez,
Qu’on voit, — tandis qu’ailleurs, nus et de fers chargés,
Agonisent, sereins, calmes, le front sévère,
Socrate à l’agora, Jésus-Christ au calvaire,
Colomb dans son cachot, Jean Huss sur son bûcher,
Et que l’humanité pleure et n’ose approcher
Tous ces gibets où sont les justes et les sages, -
C’est là qu’on voit trôner dans la longueur des âges,
Parmi les vins, les luths, les viandes, les flambeaux,
Sur des coussins de pourpre oubliant les tombeaux,
Ouvrant et refermant leurs féroces mâchoires,
Ivres, heureux, affreux, la tête dans des gloires,

Tout le troupeau hideux des satrapes dorés;
C’est là qu’on entend rire et chanter, entourés
De femmes couronnant de fleurs leurs turpitudes,
Dans leur lasciveté prenant mille attitudes,
Laissant peuples et chiens en bas ronger les os,
Tous les hommes requins, tous les hommes pourceaux,
Les princes de hasard plus fangeux que les rues,
Les goinfres courtisans, les altesses ventrues,
Toute gloutonnerie et toute abjection,
Depuis Cambacérès jusqu’à Trimalcion.
4 février 1853.

À propos de la loi Faider

Ce qu’on appelle Charte ou Constitution,
C’est un antre qu’un peuple en révolution
Creuse dans le granit, abri sûr et fidèle.
Joyeux, le peuple enferme en cette citadelle
Ses conquêtes, ses droits, payés de tant d’efforts,
Ses progrès, son honneur; pour garder ces trésors,
Il installe en la haute et superbe tanière
La fauve liberté, secouant sa crinière.
L’oeuvre faite, il s’apaise, il reprend ses travaux,
Il retourne à son champ, fier de ses droits nouveaux,
Et tranquille, il s’endort sur des dates célèbres,
Sans songer aux larrons rôdant dans les ténèbres.
Un beau matin, le peuple en s’éveillant va voir
Sa Constitution, temple de son pouvoir;
Hélas! de l’antre auguste on a fait une niche.
Il y mit un lion, il y trouve un caniche.
10 décembre. Jersey.

Le Bord de la mer

HARMODIUS
La nuit vient. Vénus brille.

L’ÉPÉE
Harmodius, c’est l’heure!

LA BORNE DU CHEMIN
Le tyran va passer.

HARMODIUS
J’ai froid, rentrons.

UN TOMBEAU
Demeure.

HARMODIUS
Qu’es-tu?

LE TOMBEAU
Je suis la tombe. — Exécute, ou péris.

UN NAVIRE A L’HORIZON
Je suis la tombe aussi, j’emporte les proscrits.

L’ÉPÉE
Attendons le tyran.

HARMODIUS
J’ai froid. Quel vent!

LE VENT
Je passe.
Mon bruit est une voix. Je sème dans l’espace
Les cris des exilés, de misère expirants,

Qui sans pain, sans abri, sans amis, sans parents,
Meurent en regardant du côté de la Grèce.

VOIX DANS L’AIR
Némésis! Némésis! lève-toi, vengeresse!

L’ÉPÉE
C’est l’heure. Profitons de l’ombre qui descend.

LA TERRE
Je suis pleine de morts.

LA MER
Je suis rouge de sang.
Les fleuves m’ont porté des cadavres sans nombre.

LA TERRE
Les morts saignent pendant qu’on adore son ombre.
À chaque pas qu’il fait sous le clair firmament,
Je les sens s’agiter en moi confusément.

UN FORÇAT
Je suis forçat, voici la chaîne que je porte,
Hélas! pour n’avoir pas chassé loin de ma porte
Un proscrit qui fuyait, noble et pur citoyen.

L’ÉPÉE
Ne frappe pas au cœur, tu ne trouverais rien.

LA LOI
J’étais la loi, je suis un spectre. Il m’a tuée.

LA JUSTICE
De moi, prêtresse, il fait une prostituée.

LES OISEAUX
Il a retiré l’air des cieux, et nous fuyons.

LA LIBERTÉ
Je m’enfuis avec eux; — ô terre sans rayons,
Grèce, adieu!

UN VOLEUR
Ce tyran, nous l’aimons. Car ce maître
Que respecte le juge et qu’admire le prêtre,
Qu’on accueille partout de cris encourageants,
Est plus pareil à nous qu’à vous, honnêtes gens.

LE SERMENT
Dieux puissants! à jamais fermez toutes les bouches!
La confiance est morte au fond des cœurs farouches.
Homme, tu mens! Soleil, tu mens! Cieux, vous mentez!
Soufflez, vents de la nuit! emportez, emportez
L’honneur et la vertu, cette sombre chimère!

LA PATRIE
Mon fils, je suis aux fers! Mon fils, je suis ta mère!
Je tends les bras vers toi du fond de ma prison.

HARMODIUS
Quoi! le frapper, la nuit, rentrant dans sa maison!
Quoi! devant ce ciel noir, devant ces mers sans borne!
Le poignarder, devant ce gouffre obscur et morne,
En présence de l’ombre et de l’immensité!

LA CONSCIENCE
Tu peux tuer cet homme avec tranquillité.
Jersey, 25 octobre.

Non

Laissons le glaive à Rome et le stylet à Sparte.
Ne faisons pas saisir, trop pressés de punir,
Par le spectre Brutus le brigand Bonaparte.
Gardons ce misérable au sinistre avenir.
Vous serez satisfaits, je vous le certifie,
Bannis, qui de l’exil portez le triste faix,
Captifs, proscrits, martyrs qu’il foule et qu’il défie,
Vous tous qui frémissez, vous serez satisfaits.
Jamais au criminel son crime ne pardonne;
Mais gardez, croyez-moi, la vengeance au fourreau
Attendez; ayez foi dans les ordres que donne
Dieu, juge patient, au temps, tardif bourreau!
Laissons vivre le traître en sa honte insondable.
Ce sang humilierait même le vil couteau.
Laissons venir le temps, l’inconnu formidable
Qui tient le châtiment caché sous son manteau.
Qu’il soit le couronné parce qu’il est le pire;
Le maître des fronts plats et des cœurs abrutis
Que son sénat décerne à sa race l’empire,
S’il trouve une femelle et s’il a des petits
Qu’il règne par la messe et par la pertuisane;
Qu’on le fasse empereur dans son flagrant délit;
Que l’église en rampant, que cette courtisane
Se glisse dans son antre et couche dans son lit
Qu’il soit cher à Troplong, que Sibour le vénère,
Qu’il leur donne son pied tout sanglant à baiser,
Qu’il vive, ce césar! Louvel ou Lacenaire
Seraient pour le tuer forcés de se baisser.
Ne tuez pas cet homme, ô vous, songeurs sévères,
Rêveurs mystérieux, solitaires et forts,
Qui, pendant qu’on le fête et qu’il choque les verres,
Marchez, le poing crispé, dans l’herbe où sont les morts!
Avec l’aide d’en haut toujours nous triomphâmes.
L’exemple froid vaut mieux qu’un éclair de fureur.

Non, ne le tuez pas. Les piloris infâmes
Ont besoin d’être ornés parfois d’un empereur.
12 novembre. Jersey.

LIVRE IV: LA RELIGION EST GLORIFIEE

Sacer esto

Non, Liberté! non, Peuple, il ne faut pas qu’il meure!
Oh! certes, ce serait trop simple, en vérité,
Qu’après avoir brisé les lois, et sonné l’heure
Où la sainte pudeur au ciel a remonté;

Qu’après avoir gagné sa sanglante gageure,
Et vaincu par l’embûche et le glaive et le feu;
Qu’après son guet-apens, ses meurtres, son parjure,
Son faux serment, soufflet sur la face de Dieu;

Qu’après avoir traîné la France, au cœur frappée,
Et par les pieds liée, à son immonde char,
Cet infâme en fût quitte avec un coup d’épée
Au cou comme Pompée, au flanc comme César!

Non! il est l’assassin qui rôde dans les plaines;
Il a tué, sabré, mitraillé sans remords,
Il fit la maison vide, il fit les tombes pleines,
Il marche, il va, suivi par l’œil fixe des morts;

À cause de cet homme, empereur éphémère,
Le fils n’a plus de père et l’enfant plus d’espoir,
La veuve à genoux pleure et sanglote, et la mère
N’est plus qu’un spectre assis sous un long voile noir;

Pour filer ses habits royaux, sur les navettes
On met du fil trempé dans le sang qui coula;
Le boulevard Montmartre a fourni ses cuvettes,
Et l’on teint son manteau dans cette pourpre-là;

Il vous jette à Cayenne, à l’Afrique, aux sentines,
Martyrs, héros d’hier et forçats d’aujourd’hui!
Le couteau ruisselant des rouges guillotines
Laisse tomber le sang goutte à goutte sur lui;

Lorsque la trahison, sa complice livide,
Vient et frappe à sa porte, il fait signe d’ouvrir;
Il est le fratricide! Il est le parricide! -
Peuples, c’est pour cela qu’il ne doit pas mourir!

Gardons l’homme vivant. Oh! châtiment superbe!
Oh! S’il pouvait un jour passer par le chemin,
Nu, courbé, frissonnant, comme au vent tremble l’herbe.
Sous l’exécration de tout le genre humain!

Étreint par son passé tout rempli de ses crimes,
Comme par un carcan tout hérissé de clous,
Cherchant les lieux profonds, les forêts, les abîmes,
Pâle, horrible, effaré, reconnu par les loups;

Dans quelque bagne vil n’entendant que sa chaîne,
Seul, toujours seul, parlant en vain aux rochers sourds,
Voyant autour de lui le silence et la haine,
Des hommes nulle part et des spectres toujours;

Vieillissant, rejeté par la mort comme indigne,
Tremblant sous la nuit noire, affreux sous le ciel bleu… -
Peuples, écartez-vous! cet homme porte un signe:
Laissez passer Caïn! Il appartient à Dieu.
14 novembre, Jersey.

Ce que le poète se disait en 1848

Tu ne dois pas chercher le pouvoir, tu dois faire
Ton œuvre ailleurs; tu dois, esprit d’une autre sphère,
Devant l’occasion reculer chastement.
De la pensée en deuil doux et sévère amant,
Compris ou dédaigné des hommes, tu dois être
Pâtre pour les garder et pour les bénir prêtre.
Lorsque les citoyens, par la misère aigris,
Fils de la même France et du même Paris,
S’égorgent; quand, sinistre, et soudain apparue,
La morne barricade au coin de chaque rue
Monte et vomit la mort de partout à la fois,

Tu dois y courir seul et désarmé; tu dois
Dans cette guerre impie, abominable, infâme,
Présenter ta poitrine et répandre ton âme,
Parler, prier, sauver les faibles et les forts,
Sourire à la mitraille et pleurer sur les morts;
Puis remonter tranquille à ta place isolée,
Et là, défendre, au sein de l’ardente assemblée,
Et ceux qu’on veut proscrire et ceux qu’on croit juger,
Renverser l’échafaud, servir et protéger
L’ordre et la paix, qu’ébranle un parti téméraire,
Nos soldats trop aisés à tromper, et ton frère,
Le pauvre homme du peuple aux cabanons jeté,
Et les lois, et la triste et fière liberté;
Consoler dans ces jours d’anxiété funeste,
L’art divin qui frissonne et pleure, et pour le reste
Attendre le moment suprême et décisif.

Ton rôle est d’avertir et de rester pensif.
27 novembre 1848

Les Commissions mixtes

Ils sont assis dans l’ombre et disent: nous jugeons.
Ils peuplent d’innocents les geôles, les donjons,
Et les pontons, nefs abhorrées,
Qui flottent au soleil sombres comme le soir,
Tandis que le reflet des mers sur leur flanc noir
Frissonne en écailles dorées.
Pour avoir sous son chaume abrité des proscrits,
Ce vieillard est au bagne, et l’on entend ses cris.
À Cayenne, à Bône, aux galères,
Quiconque a combattu cet escroc du scrutin
Qui, traître, après avoir crocheté le destin,
Filouta les droits populaires!

Ils ont frappé l’ami des lois; ils ont flétri
La femme qui portait du pain à son mari,
Le fils qui défendait son père;
Le droit? on l’a banni; l’honneur? on l’exila.
Cette justice-là sort de ces juges-là
Comme des tombeaux la vipère.
7 mai. Jersey.

À des journalistes de robe courte

Parce que, jargonnant vêpres, jeûne et vigile,
Exploitant Dieu qui rêve au fond du firmament,
Vous avez, au milieu du divin évangile,
Ouvert boutique effrontément;

Parce que vous feriez prendre à Jésus la verge,
Cyniques brocanteurs sortis on ne sait d'où;
Parce que vous allez vendant la sainte vierge
Dix sous avec miracle, et sans miracle un sou;

Parce que vous contez d'effroyables sornettes
Qui font des temples saints trembler les vieux piliers;
Parce que votre style éblouit les lunettes
Des duègnes et des marguilliers;

Parce que la soutane est sous vos redingotes,
Parce que vous sentez la crasse et non l'œillet,
Parce que vous bâclez un journal de bigotes
Pensé par Escobar, écrit par Patouillet;

Parce qu'en balayant leurs portes, les concierges
Poussent dans le ruisseau ce pamphlet méprisé;
Parce que vous mêlez à la cire des cierges
Votre affreux suif vert-de-grisé;

Parce qu'à vous tout seuls vous faites une espèce
Parce qu'enfin, blanchis dehors et noirs dedans,
Criant mea culpa, battant la grosse caisse,
La boue au cœur, la larme à l'œil, le fifre aux dents,

Pour attirer les sots qui donnent tête-bêche
Dans tous les vils panneaux du mensonge immortel,
Vous avez adossé le tréteau de Bobèche
Aux saintes pierres de l'autel,

Vous vous croyez le droit, trempant dans l’eau bénite
Cette griffe qui sort de votre abject pourpoint,
De dire: Je suis saint, ange, vierge et jésuite,
J’insulte les passants et je ne me bats point!

Ô pieds plats! votre plume au fond de vos masures
Griffonne, va, vient, court, boit l’encre, rend du fiel,
Bave, égratigne et crache, et ses éclaboussures
Font des taches jusques au ciel!

Votre immonde journal est une charretée
De masques déguisés en prédicants camus,
Qui passent en prêchant la cohue ameutée
Et qui parlent argot entre deux oremus.

Vous insultez l’esprit, l’écrivain dans ses veilles,
Et le penseur rêvant sur les libres sommets;
Et quand on va chez vous pour chercher vos oreilles,
Vos oreilles n’y sont jamais.

Après avoir lancé l’affront et le mensonge,
Vous fuyez, vous courez, vous échappez aux yeux.
Chacun a ses instincts, et s’enfonce et se plonge,
Le hibou dans les trous et l’aigle dans les cieux!

Vous, où vous cachez-vous? dans quel hideux repaire?
Ô Dieu! l’ombre où l’on sent tous les crimes passer
S’y fait autour de vous plus noire, et la vipère
S’y glisse et vient vous y baiser.

Là vous pouvez, dragons qui rampez sous les presses,
Vous vautrer dans la fange où vous jettent vos goûts.
Le sort qui dans vos cœurs mit toutes les bassesses
Doit faire en vos taudis passer tous les égouts.

Bateleurs de l’autel, voilà quels sont vos rôles.

Et quand un galant homme à de tels compagnons
Fait cet immense honneur de leur dire: Mes drôles,
Je suis votre homme; dégaînons!

— Un duel! nous! des chrétiens! jamais! — Et ces crapules
Font des signes de croix et jurent par les saints.
Lâches gueux, leur terreur se déguise en scrupules,
Et ces empoisonneurs ont peur d’être assassins.

Bien, écoutez: la trique est là, fraîche coupée.
On vous fera cogner le pavé du menton;
Car sachez-le, coquins, on n’esquive l’épée
Que pour rencontrer le bâton.

Vous conquîtes la Seine et le Rhin et le Tage.
L’esprit humain rogné subit votre compas.
Sur les publicains juifs vous avez l’avantage,
Maudits! Judas est mort, Tartuffe ne meurt pas.

Iago n’est qu’un fat près de votre Basile.
La bible en vos greniers pourrit mangée aux vers.
Le jour où le mensonge aurait besoin d’asile,
Vos cœurs sont là, tout grands ouverts.

Vous insultez le juste abreuvé d’amertumes.
Tous les vices, quittant veste, cape et manteau,
Vont se masquer chez vous et trouvent des costumes.
On entre Lacenaire, on sort Contrafatto.

Les âmes sont pour vous des bourses et des banques.
Quiconque vous accueille a d’affreux repentirs.
Vous vous faites chasser, et par vos saltimbanques
Vous parodiez les martyrs.

L’église du bon Dieu n’est que votre buvette.
Vous offrez l’alliance à tous les inhumains.
On trouvera du sang au fond de la cuvette

Si jamais, par hasard, vous vous lavez les mains.

Vous seriez des bourreaux si vous n’étiez des cuistres.
Pour vous le glaive est saint et le supplice est beau.
Ô monstres! vous chantez dans vos hymnes sinistres
Le bûcher, votre seul flambeau!

Depuis dix-huit cents ans Jésus, le doux pontife,
Veut sortir du tombeau qui lentement se rompt,
Mais vous faites effort, ô valets de Caïphe,
Pour faire retomber la pierre sur son front!

Ô cafards! votre échine appelle l’étrivière.
Le sort juste et railleur fait chasser Loyola
De France par le fouet d’un pape, et de Bavière
Par la cravache de Lola.

Allez, continuez, tournez la manivelle
De votre impur journal, vils grimauds dépravés;
Avec vos ongles noirs grattez votre cervelle
Calomniez, hurlez, mordez, mentez, vivez!

Dieu prédestine aux dents des chevreaux les brins d’herbes
La mer aux coups de vent, les donjons aux boulets,
Aux rayons du soleil les parthénons superbes,
Vos faces aux larges soufflets.

Sus donc! cherchez les trous, les recoins, les cavernes!
Cachez-vous, plats vendeurs d’un fade orviétan,
Pitres dévots, marchands d’infâmes balivernes,
Vierges comme l’eunuque, anges comme Satan!

Ô saints du ciel! est-il, sous l’œil de Dieu qui règne,
Charlatans plus hideux et d’un plus lâche esprit,
Que ceux qui, sans frémir, accrochent leur enseigne
Aux clous saignants de Jésus-Christ!
Septembre 1850.

Quelqu’un

Donc un homme a vécu qui s’appelait Varron,
Un autre Paul-Emile, un autre Cicéron;
Ces hommes ont été grands, puissants, populaires,
Ont marché, précédés des faisceaux consulaires,
Ont été généraux, magistrats, orateurs;
Ces hommes ont parlé devant les sénateurs
Ils ont vu, dans la poudre et le bruit des armées,
Frissonnantes, passer les aigles enflammées;
La foule les suivait et leur battait des mains
Ils sont morts; on a fait à ces fameux romains
Des tombeaux dans le marbre, et d’autres dans l’histoire.
Leurs bustes, aujourd’hui, graves comme la gloire,
Dans l’ombre des palais ouvrant leurs vagues yeux,
Rêvent autour de nous, témoins mystérieux;
Ce qui n’empêche pas, nous, gens des autres âges,
Que, lorsque nous parlons de ces grands personnages,
Nous ne disions: tel jour Varron fut un butor,
Paul-Émile a mal fait, Cicéron eut grand tort,
Et lorsque nous traitons ainsi ces morts illustres,
Tu prétends, toi, maraud, goujat parmi les rustres,
Que je parle de toi qui lasses le dédain,
Sans dire hautement: cet homme est un gredin!
Tu veux que nous prenions des gants et des mitaines
Avec toi, qu’eût chassé Sparte aussi bien qu’Athènes!
Force gens t’ont connu jadis quand tu courais
Les brelans, les enfers, les trous, les cabarets,
Quand on voyait, le soir, tantôt dans l’ombre obscure,
Tantôt devant la porte entrouverte et peu sûre
D’un antre d’où sortait une rouge clarté,
Ton chef branlant couvert d’un feutre cahoté.
Tu t’es fait broder d’or par l’empereur bohème.
Ta vie est une farce et se guinde en poëme.
Et que m’importe à moi, penseur, juge, ouvrier,
Que décembre, étranglant dans ses poings février,

T’installe en un palais, toi qui souillais un bouge!
Allez aux tapis francs de Vanvre et de Montrouge,
Courez aux galetas, aux caves, aux taudis,
Les échos vous diront partout ce que je dis
 — Ce drôle était voleur avant d’être ministre! -
Ah! tu veux qu’on t’épargne, imbécile sinistre!
Ah! te voilà content, satisfait, souriant!
Sois tranquille. J’irai par la ville criant:
Citoyens! voyez-vous ce jésuite aux yeux jaunes?
Jadis, c’était Brutus. Il haïssait les trônes,
Il les aime aujourd’hui. Tous métiers lui sont bons
Il est pour le succès. Donc, à bas les Bourbons,
Mais vive l’empereur! à bas tribune et charte!
II déteste Chambord, mais il sert Bonaparte.
On l’a fait sénateur, ce qui le rend fougueux.
Si les choses étaient à leur place, ce gueux
Qui n’a pas, nous dit-il en déclamant son rôle,
Les fleurs de lys au cœur, les aurait sur l’épaule!
10 décembre. Jersey.

Écrit le 17 juillet 1851, en descendant de la tribune

En descendant de la tribune

Ces hommes qui mourront, foule abjecte et grossière,
Sont de la boue avant d’être de la poussière.
Oui, certe, ils passeront et mourront. Aujourd’hui
Leur vue à l’honnête homme inspire un mâle ennui.
Envieux, consumés de rages puériles,
D’autant plus furieux qu’ils se sentent stériles,
Ils mordent les talons de qui marche en avant.
Ils sont humiliés d’aboyer, ne pouvant
Jusqu’au rugissement hausser leur petitesse,
Ils courent, c’est à qui gagnera de vitesse,
La proie est là! — hurlant et jappant à la fois,
Lancés dans le sénat ainsi que dans un bois,
Tous confondus, traitant, magistrat, soldat, prêtre,
Meute autour du lion, chenil aux pieds du maître,
Ils sont à qui les veut, du premier au dernier,
Aujourd’hui Bonaparte et demain Changarnier!
Ils couvrent de leur bave honneur, droit, république,
La charte populaire et l’œuvre évangélique,
Le progrès, ferme espoir des peuples désolés
Ils sont odieux. — Bien. Continuez, allez!
Quand l’austère penseur qui, loin des multitudes,
Rêvait hier encore au fond des solitudes,
Apparaissant soudain dans sa tranquillité,
Vient au milieu de vous dire la vérité,
Défendre les vaincus, rassurer la patrie,
Eclatez! répandez cris, injures, furie,
Ruez-vous sur son nom comme sur un butin!
Vous n’obtiendrez de lui qu’un sourire hautain,
Et pas même un regard! — Car cette âme sereine,
Méprisant votre estime, estime votre haine.

Paris. 1851.

Un autre

Ce Zoïle cagot naquit d’une Javotte.
Le diable, — ce jour-là Dieu permit qu’il créât, -
D’un peu de Ravaillac et d’un de Nonotte
Composa ce gredin béat.

Tout jeune, il contemplait, sans gîte et sans valise,
Les sous-diacres coiffés d’un feutre en lampion
Vidocq le rencontra priant dans une église,
Et, l’ayant vu loucher, en fit un espion.

Alors ce va-nu-pieds songea dans sa mansarde,
Et se voyant sans cœur, sans style, sans esprit,
Imagina de mettre une feuille poissarde
Au service de Jésus-Christ.

Armé d’un goupillon, il entra dans la lice
Contre les jacobins, le siècle et le péché.
Il se donna le luxe, étant de la police,
D’être jésuite et saint par-dessus le marché.

Pour mille francs par mois livrant l’eucharistie,
Plus vil que les voleurs et que les assassins,
Il fut riche. Il portait un flair de sacristie
Dans le bouge des argousins.

Il prospère! — Il insulte, il prêche, il fait la roue;
S’il n’était pas saint homme, il eût été sapeur;
Comme s’il s’y lavait, il piaffe en pleine boue,
Et, voyant qu’on se sauve, il dit: comme ils ont peur!

Regardez, le voilà! — Son journal frénétique
Plaît aux dévots et semble écrit par des bandits.
Il fait des fausses clefs dans l’arrière-boutique
Pour la porte du paradis.

Des miracles du jour il colle les affiches.
Il rédige l’absurde en articles de foi.
Pharisien hideux, il trinque avec les riches
Et dit au pauvre: ami, viens jeûner avec moi.

Il ripaille à huis clos, en publie il sermonne,
Chante landerirette après alleluia,
Dit un pater, et prend le menton de Simone… -
Que j’en ai vu, de ces saints-là!

Qui vous expectoraient des psaumes après boire,
Vendaient, d’un air contrit, leur pieux bric-à-brac,
Et qui passaient, selon qu’ils changeaient d’auditoire,
Des strophes de Piron aux quatrains de Pibrac!

C’est ainsi qu’outrageant gloires, vertus, génies,
Charmant par tant d’horreurs quelques niais fougueux,
Il vit tranquillement dans les ignominies,
Simple jésuite et triple gueux.
Septembre 1850.

Déjà nommé

Malgré moi je reviens, et mes vers s'y résignent,
À cet homme qui fut si misérable, hélas!
Et dont Mathieu Molé, chez les morts qui s'indignent,
Parle à Boissy d'Anglas.

Ô loi sainte! Justice! où tout pouvoir s'étaie,
Gardienne de tout droit et de tout ordre humain!
Cet homme qui, vingt ans, pour recevoir sa paie,
T'avait tendu la main,

Quand il te vit sanglante et livrée à l'infâme,
Levant tes bras, meurtrie aux talons des soldats,
Tourna la tête et dit: Qu'est-ce que cette femme
Je ne la connais pas!

Les vieux partis avaient mis au fauteuil ce juste!
Ayant besoin d'un homme, on prit un mannequin.
Il eût fallu Caton sur cette chaise auguste
On y jucha Pasquin.

Opprobre! il dégradait à plaisir l'assemblée
Souple, insolent, semblable aux valets familiers,
Ses gros lazzis marchaient sur l'éloquence allée
Avec leurs gros souliers.

Quand on ne croit à rien on est prêt à tout faire.
Il eût reçu Cromwell ou Monk dans Temple-Bar.
Suprême abjection! riant avec Voltaire,
Votant pour Escobar!

Ne sachant que lécher à droite et mordre à gauche,
Aidant, à son insu, le crime; vil pantin,
Il entrouvrait la porte aux sbires en débaucbe
Qui vinrent un matin.

Si l’on avait voulu, pour sauver du déluge,
Certes, son traitement, sa place, son trésor,
Et sa loque d’hermine et son bonnet de juge
Au triple galon d’or,

Il eût été complice, il eût rempli sa tâche
Mais les chefs sur son nom passèrent le charbon
Ils n’ont pas daigné faire un traître avec ce lâche
Ils ont dit: à quoi bon?

Sous ce règne où l’on vend de la fange au pied cube,
Du moins cet homme a-t-il à jamais disparu,
Rustre exploiteur des rois, courtisan du Danube,
Hideux flatteur bourru!

Il s’offrit aux brigands après la loi tuée;
Et pour qu’il lâchât prise, aux yeux de tout Paris,
Il fallut qu’on lui dît: Vieille prostituée,
Vois donc tes cheveux gris!

Aujourd’hui méprisé, même de cette clique,
On voit pendre la honte à son nom infamant,
Et le dernier lambeau de la pudeur publique
À son dernier serment.

Si par hasard, la nuit, dans les carrefours mornes,
Fouillant du croc l’ordure où dort plus d’un secret,
Un chiffonnier trouvait cette âme au coin des bornes,
Il la dédaignerait!
Jersey. 25 décembre 1852.

Ceux qui vivent, ce sont ceux qui luttent; ce sont …

Ceux qui vivent, ce sont ceux qui luttent; ce sont
Ceux dont un dessein ferme emplit l’âme et le front,
Ceux qui d’un haut destin gravissent l’âpre cime,
Ceux qui marchent pensifs, épris d’un but sublime,
Ayant devant les yeux sans cesse, nuit et jour,
Ou quelque saint labeur ou quelque grand amour.
C’est le prophète saint prosterné devant l’arche,
C’est le travailleur, pâtre, ouvrier, patriarche,
Ceux dont le cœur est bon, ceux dont les jours sont pleins.
Ceux-là vivent, Seigneur! les autres, je les plains.
Car de son vague ennui le néant les enivre,
Car le plus lourd fardeau, c’est d’exister sans vivre.
Inutiles, épars, ils traînent ici-bas
Le sombre accablement d’être en ne pensant pas.
Ils s’appellent vulgus, plebs, la tourbe, la foule.
Ils sont ce qui murmure, applaudit, siffle, coule,
Bat des mains, foule aux pieds, bâille, dit oui, dit non,
N’a jamais de figure et n’a jamais de nom;
Troupeau qui va, revient, juge, absout, délibère,
Détruit, prêt à Marat comme prêt à Tibère,
Foule triste, joyeuse, habits dorés, bras nus,
Pêle-mêle, et poussée aux gouffres inconnus.
Ils sont les passants froids, sans but, sans nœud, sans âge;
Le bas du genre humain qui s’écroule en nuage;
Ceux qu’on ne connaît pas, ceux qu’on ne compte pas,
Ceux qui perdent les mots, les volontés, les pas.
L’ombre obscure autour d’eux se prolonge et recule;
Ils n’ont du plein midi qu’un lointain crépuscule,
Car, jetant au hasard les cris, les voix, le bruit,
Ils errent près du bord sinistre de la nuit.

Quoi! ne point aimer! suivre une morne carrière

Sans un songe en avant, sans un deuil en arrière!
Quoi! marcher devant soi sans savoir où l’on va!
Rire de Jupiter sans croire à Jéhova!
Regarder sans respect l’astre, la fleur, la femme!
Toujours vouloir le corps, ne jamais chercher l’âme!
Pour de vains résultats faire de vains efforts!
N’attendre rien d’en haut! ciel! oublier les morts!
Oh non, je ne suis point de ceux-là! grands, prospères,
Fiers, puissants, ou cachés dans d’immondes repaires,
Je les fuis, et je crains leurs sentiers détestés;
Et j’aimerais mieux être, ô fourmis des cités,
Tourbe, foule, hommes faux, cœurs morts, races déchues,
Un arbre dans les bois qu’une âme en vos cohues!
Paris, 31 décembre 1848. Minuit.

Aube

Un immense frisson émeut la plaine obscure.
C’est l’heure où Pythagore, Hésiode, Epicure,
Songeaient; c’est l’heure où, las d’avoir, toute la nuit,
Contemplé l’azur sombre et l’étoile qui luit,
Pleins d’horreur, s’endormaient les pâtres de Chaldée.
Là-bas, la chute d’eau, de mille plis ridée,
Brille, comme dans l’ombre un manteau de satin
Sur l’horizon lugubre apparaît le matin,
Face rose qui rit avec des dents de perles
Le bœuf rêve et mugit, les bouvreuils et les merles
Et les geais querelleurs sifflent, et dans les bois
On entend s’éveiller confusément les voix;
Les moutons hors de l’ombre, à travers les bourrées,
Font bondir au soleil leurs toisons éclairées;
Et la jeune dormeuse, entrouvrant son œil noir,
Fraîche, et ses coudes blancs sortis hors du peignoir,
Cherche de son pied nu sa pantoufle chinoise.

Louange à Dieu! toujours, après la nuit sournoise,
Agitant sur les monts la rose et le genêt,
La nature superbe et tranquille renaît;
L’aube éveille le nid à l’heure accoutumée,
Le chaume dresse au vent sa plume de fumée,
Le rayon, flèche d’or, perce l’âpre forêt;
Et plutôt qu’arrêter le soleil, on ferait
Sensibles à l’honneur et pour le bien fougueuses
Les âmes de Baroche et de Troplong, ces gueuses!
28 avril 1853. Jersey.

“Vicomte de Foucault, lorsque vous empoignâtes

Vicomte de Foucault, lorsque vous empoignâtes
L’éloquent Manuel de vos mains auvergnates,
Comme l’océan bout quand tressaille l’Etna,
Le peuple tout entier s’émut et frissonna;
On vit, sombre lueur, poindre mil huit cent trente
L’antique royauté, fière et récalcitrante,
Chancela sur son trône, et dans ce noir moment
On sentit commencer ce vaste écroulement;
Et ces rois, qu’on punit d’oser toucher un homme,
Etaient grands, et mêlés à notre histoire en somme,
Ils avaient derrière eux des siècles éblouis,
Henri quatre et Coutras, Damiette et saint-Louis.
Aujourd’hui, dans Paris, un prince de la pègre,
Un pied plat, copiant Faustin, singe d’un nègre,
Plus faux qu’Ali pacha, plus cruel que Rosas,
Fourre en prison la loi, met la gloire à Mazas,
Chasse l’honneur, le droit, les probités punies,
Orateurs, généraux, représentants, génies,
Les meilleurs serviteurs du siècle et de l’état,
Et c’est tout! et le peuple, après cet attentat,
Souffleté mille fois sur ces faces illustres,
Va voir de l’Elysée étinceler les lustres,
Ne sent rien sur sa joue, et contemple César!
Lui, souverain, il suit en esclave le char!
Il regarde danser dans le Louvre les maîtres,
Ces immondes faisant vis-à-vis à ces traîtres,
La fraude en grand habit, le meurtre en apparat,
Et le ventre Berger près du ventre Murat!
On dit: — vivons! adieu grandeur, gloire, espérance! -
Comme si, dans ce monde, un peuple appelé France,
Alors qu’il n’est plus libre, était encor vivant!
On boit, on mange, on dort, on achète et l’on vend,
Et l’on vote, en riant des doubles fonds de l’urne
Et pendant ce temps-là, ce gredin taciturne,

Ce chacal à sang froid, ce corse hollandais,
Etale, front d'airain, son crime sous le dais,
Gorge d'or et de vin sa bande scélérate,
S'accoude sur la nappe, et cuvant, noir pirate,
Son guet-apens français, son guet-apens romain,
Mâche son cure-dents taché de sang humain!
20 mai 1853. Jersey.

À quatre prisonniers

(Après leur condamnation)

Mes fils, soyez contents; l'honneur est où vous êtes.
Et vous, mes deux amis, la gloire, ô fiers poëtes,
Couronne votre nom par l'affront désigné;
Offrez aux juges vils, groupe abject et stupide,
Toi, ta douceur intrépide,
Toi, ton sourire indigné.

Dans cette salle, où Dieu voit la laideur des âmes,
Devant ces froids jurés, choisis pour être infâmes,
Ces douze hommes, muets, de leur honte chargés,
Ô justice, j'ai cru, justice auguste et sombre,
Voir autour de toi dans l'ombre
Douze sépulcres rangés.

Ils vous ont condamnés, que l'avenir les juge!
Toi, pour avoir crié: la France est le refuge
Des vaincus, des proscrits! — Je t'approuve, mon fils!
Toi, pour avoir, devant la hache qui s'obstine,
Insulté la guillotine,
Et vengé le crucifix!

Les temps sont durs; c'est bien. Le martyre console.
J'admire, ô Vérité, plus que toute auréole,
Plus que le nimbe ardent des saints en oraison,
Plus que les trônes d'or devant qui tout s'efface,
L'ombre que font sur ta face
Les barreaux d'une prison!

Quoi que le méchant fasse en sa bassesse noire,
L'outrage injuste et vil là-haut se change en gloire.
Quand Jésus commençait sa longue passion,
Le crachat qu'un bourreau lança sur son front blême

Fit au ciel à l’instant même
Une constellation!
Conciergerie, Paris. Novembre 1851.

On loge à la nuit

Aventurier conduit par le louche destin,
Pour y passer la nuit, jusqu’à demain matin,
Entre à l’auberge Louvre avec ta rosse Empire.

Molière te regarde et fait signe à Shakspeare;
L’un te prend pour Scapin, l’autre pour Richard trois.
Entre en jurant, et fais le signe de la croix.
L’antique hôtellerie est toute illuminée.
L’enseigne, par le temps salie et charbonnée,
Sur le vieux fleuve Seine, à deux pas du Pont-Neuf,
Crie et grince au balcon rouillé de Charles neuf;
On y déchiffre encor ces quelques lettres: — Sacre; -
Texte obscur et tronqué, reste du mot Massacre.

Un fourmillement sombre emplit ce noir logis.

Parmi les chants d’ivresse et les refrains mugis,
On rit, on boit, on mange, et le vin sort des outres.
Toute une boucherie est accrochée aux poutres.
Ces êtres triomphants ont fait quelque bon coup.
L’un crie: assommons tout! et l’autre: empochons tout!
L’autre agite une torche aux clartés aveuglantes.
Par places sur les murs on voit des mains sanglantes.
Les mets fument; la braise aux fourneaux empourprés
Flamboie; on voit aller et venir affairés,
Des taches à leurs mains, des taches à leurs chausses,
Les Rianceys marmitons, les Nisards gâte-sauces;
Et, — derrière la table où sont assis Fortoul,
Persil, Piétri, Carlier, Chapuys le capitoul,
Ducos et Magne au meurtre ajoutant leur paraphe,
Forey dont à Bondy l’on change l’orthographe,
Rouher et Radetzky, Haynau près de Drouyn, -
Le porc Sénat fouillant l’ordure du grouin.
Ces gueux ont commis plus de crimes qu’un évêque

N’en bénirait. Explore, analyse, dissèque,
Dans leur âme où de Dieu le germe est étouffé,
Tu ne trouveras rien. — Sus donc, entre coiffé
Comme Napoléon, botté comme Macaire.
Le général Bertrand te précède; tonnerre
De bravos. Cris de joie aux hurlements mêlés.
Les spectres qui gisaient dans l’ombre échevelés
Te regardent entrer et rouvrent leurs yeux mornes
Autour de toi s’émeut l’essaim des maritornes,
À beaucoup de jargon mêlant un peu d’argot;
La marquise Toinon, la duchesse Margot,
Houris au cœur de verre, aux regards d’escarboucles.
Maître, es-tu la régence? on poudrera ses boucles
Es-tu le directoire? on mettra des madras.
Fais, ô bel étranger, tout ce que tu voudras.
Ton nom est million, entre! — Autour de ces belles
Colombes de l’orgie, ayant toutes des ailes,
Folâtrent Suin, Mongis, Turgot et d’Aguesseau,
Et Saint-Arnaud qui vole autrement que l’oiseau.
Aux trois quarts gris déjà, Reibell le trabucaire
Prend Fould pour un curé dont Sibour est vicaire.

Regarde, tout est prêt pour te fêter, bandit.

L’immense cheminée au centre resplendit.
Ton aigle, une chouette, en blasonne le plâtre.
Le bœuf Peuple rôtit tout entier devant l’âtre
La lèchefrite chante en recevant le sang;
À côté sont assis, souriant et causant,
Magnan qui l’a tué, Troplong qui le fait cuire.
On entend cette chair pétiller et bruire,
Et sur son tablier de cuir, joyeux et las,
Le boucher Carrelet fourbit son coutelas.
La marmite budget pend à la crémaillère.
Viens, toi qu’aiment les juifs et que l’église éclaire,
Espoir des fils d’Ignace et des fils d’Abraham,
Qui t’en vas vers Toulon et qui t’en viens de Ham,

Viens, la journée est faite et c’est l’heure de paître.
Prends devant ce bon feu ce bon fauteuil, ô maître.
Tout ici te vénère et te proclame roi;
Viens; rayonne, assieds-toi, chauffe-toi, sèche-toi,
Sois bon prince, ô brigand! ô fils de la créole,
Dépouille ta grandeur, quitte ton auréole;
Ce qu’on appelle ainsi dans ce nid de félons,
C’est la boue et le sang collés à tes talons,
C’est la fange rouillant ton éperon sordide.
Les héros, les penseurs portent, groupe splendide,
Leur immortalité sur leur radieux front;
Toi, tu traînes ta gloire à tes pieds. Entre donc,
Ote ta renommée avec un tire-bottes.
Vois, les grands hommes nains et les gloires nabotes
T’entourent en chantant, ô Tom-Pouce Attila!
Ce bœuf rôtit pour toi; Maupas, ton nègre, est là;
Et, jappant dans sa niche au coin du feu, Baroche
Vient te lécher les pieds tout en tournant la broche.

Pendant que dans l’auberge ils trinquent à grand bruit,
Dehors, par un chemin qui se perd dans la nuit,
Hâtant son lourd cheval dont le pas se rapproche,
Muet, pensif, avec des ordres dans sa poche,
Sous ce ciel noir qui doit redevenir ciel bleu,
Arrive l’avenir, le gendarme de Dieu.
1er février.

LIVRE V: L’AUTORITÉ EST SACRÉE

Le Sacre

Sur l’air de Malbrouck

Dans l’affreux cimetière,
Paris tremble, ô douleur, ô misère!
Dans l’affreux cimetière
Frémit le nénuphar.

Castaing lève sa pierre,
Paris tremble, ô douleur, ô misère!
Castaing lève sa pierre
Dans l’herbe de Clamar,

Et crie et vocifère,
Paris tremble, ô douleur, ô misère!
Et crie et vocifère:
Je veux être césar!

Cartouche en son suaire,
Paris tremble, ô douleur, ô misère!
Cartouche en son suaire
S’écrie ensanglanté

— Je veux aller sur terre,
Paris tremble, ô douleur, ô misère!
Je veux aller sur terre
Pour être majesté!

Mingrat monte à sa chaire,
Paris tremble, ô douleur, ô misère!
Mingrat monte à sa chaire,
Et dit, sonnant le glas:

— Je veux, dans l’ombre où j’erre,
Paris tremble, ô douleur, ô misère!

Je veux, dans l’ombre où j’erre
Avec mon coutelas,

Etre appelé: mon frère,
Paris tremble, ô douleur, ô misère!
Etre appelé: mon frère,
Par le czar Nicolas!

Poulmann, dans l’ossuaire,
Paris tremble, ô douleur, ô misère!
Poulmann dans l’ossuaire
S’éveillant en fureur,

Dit à Mandrin: — Compère,
Paris tremble, ô douleur, ô misère!
Dit à Mandrin: — Compère,
Je veux être empereur!

— Je veux, dit Lacenaire,
Paris tremble, ô douleur, ô misère!
Je veux, dit Lacenaire,
Etre empereur et roi!

Et Soufflard déblatère,
Paris tremble, ô douleur, ô misère!
Et Soufflard déblatère,
Hurlant comme un beffroi:

— Au lieu de cette bière,
Paris tremble, ô douleur, ô misère!
Au lieu de cette bière,
Je veux le Louvre, moi

Ainsi, dans leur poussière,
Paris tremble, ô douleur, ô misère!
Ainsi, dans leur poussière,
Parlent les chenapans.

— Çà, dit Robert Macaire,
Paris tremble, ô douleur, ô misère!
— çà, dit Robert Macaire,
Pourquoi ces cris de paons?

Pourquoi cette colère?
Paris tremble, ô douleur, ô misère!
Pourquoi cette colère?
Ne sommes-nous pas rois?

Regardez, le saint-père,
Paris tremble, ô douleur, ô misère!
Regardez, le saint-père,
Portant sa grande croix,

Nous sacre tous ensemble,
Ô misère, ô douleur, Paris tremble!
Nous sacre tous ensemble
Dans Napoléon trois!
17 janvier.

Chanson

Un jour, Dieu sur sa table
Jouait avec le diable
Du genre humain haï.
Chacun tenait sa carte
L’un jouait Bonaparte,
Et l’autre Mastaï.

Un pauvre abbé bien mince!
Un méchant petit prince,
Polisson hasardeux!
Quel enjeu pitoyable!
Dieu fit tant que le diable
Les gagna tous les deux.

«Prends! cria Dieu le père,
Tu ne sauras qu’en faire!”
Le diable dit! « Erreur!”
Et, ricanant sous cape,
Il fit de l’un un pape,
De l’autre un empereur.
1er mars 1853. Jersey.

Le Manteau impérial

Oh! vous dont le travail est joie,
Vous qui n’avez pas d’autre proie
Que les parfums, souffles du ciel,
Vous qui fuyez quand vient décembre,
    Vous qui dérobez aux fleurs l’ambre
    Pour donner aux hommes le miel,

    Chastes buveuses de rosée,
    Qui, pareilles à l’épousée,
    Visitez le lys du coteau,
    Ô sœurs des corolles vermeilles,
    Filles de la lumière, abeilles,
    Envolez-vous de ce manteau!

    Ruez-vous sur l’homme, guerrières!
    Ô généreuses ouvrières,
    Vous le devoir, vous la vertu,
    Ailes d’or et flèches de flamme,
    Tourbillonnez sur cet infâme!
    Dites-lui: « Pour qui nous prends-tu?

    » Maudit! nous sommes les abeilles!
    Des chalets ombragés de treilles
    Notre ruche orne le fronton;
    Nous volons, dans l’azur écloses,
    Sur la bouche ouverte des roses
    Et sur les lèvres de Platon.

    » Ce qui sort de la fange y rentre.
    Va trouver Tibère en son antre,
    Et Charles neuf sur son balcon.
    Va! sur ta pourpre il faut qu’on mette,
    Non les abeilles de l’Hymette,
    Mais l’essaim noir de Montfaucon!”

Et percez-le toutes ensemble,
Faites honte au peuple qui tremble,
Aveuglez l'immonde trompeur,
Acharnez-vous sur lui, farouches,
Et qu'il soit chassé par les mouches
Puisque les hommes en ont peur!
Jersey. Juin 1853.

Tout s’en va

LA RAISON

Moi, je me sauve.

LE DROIT

Adieu! je m’en vais.

L’HONNEUR

Je m’exile.

ALCESTE

Je vais chez les hurons leur demander asile.

LA CHANSON

J’émigre. Je ne puis souffler mot, s’il vous plaît,
Dire un refrain sans être empoignée ait collet
Par les sergents de ville, affreux drôles livides.
UNE PLUME

Personne n’écrit plus; les encriers sont vides.
On dirait d’un pays mogol, russe ou persan.
Nous n’avons plus ici que faire; allons-nous-en,
Mes soeurs, je quitte l’homme et je retourne aux oies.

LA PITIÉ

Je pars. Vainqueurs sanglants, je vous laisse à vos joies.
Je vole vers Cayenne où j’entends de grands cris.

LA MARSEILLAISE

J’ouvre mon aile, et vais rejoindre les proscrits.

LA POÉSIE

Oh! je pars avec toi, pitié, puisque tu saignes!

L’AIGLE

Quel est ce perroquet qu’on met sur vos enseignes,
Français? de quel égout sort cette bête-là?
Aigle selon Cartouche et selon Loyola,
Il a du sang au bec, français; mais c’est le vôtre.
Je regagne les monts. Je ne vais qu’avec l’autre.
Les rois à ce félon peuvent dire: merci;
Moi, je ne connais pas ce Bonaparte-ci!
Sénateurs! courtisans! je rentre aux solitudes!
Vivez dans le cloaque et dans les turpitudes,
Soyez vils, vautrez-vous sous les cieux rayonnants!

LA FOUDRE

Je remonte avec l’aigle aux nuages tonnants.
L’heure ne peut tarder. Je vais attendre un ordre.
UNE LIME

Puisqu’il n’est plus permis qu’aux vipères de mordre,
Je pars, je vais couper les fers dans les pontons.

LES CHIENS

Nous sommes remplacés par les préfets; partons.

LA CONCORDE

Je m’éloigne. La haine est dans les cœurs sinistres.

LA PENSÉE

On n’échappe aux fripons que pour choir dans les cuistres.
Il semble que tout meure et que de grands ciseaux
Vont jusque dans les cieux couper l’aile aux oiseaux.
Toute clarté s’éteint sous cet homme funeste.
Ô France! je m’enfuis et je pleure.

LE MÉPRIS

Je reste.
Novembre 1852. Jersey.

Ô drapeau de Wagram! ô pays de Voltaire

Ô drapeau de Wagram! ô pays de Voltaire!
Puissance, liberté, vieil honneur militaire,
Principes, droits, pensée, ils font en ce moment
De toute cette gloire un vaste abaissement.
Toute leur confiance est dans leur petitesse.
Ils disent, se sentant d’une chétive espèce:
— Bah! nous ne pesons rien! régnons. — Les nobles cœurs!
Ils ne savent donc pas, ces pauvres nains vainqueurs,
Sautés sur le pavois du fond d’une caverne,
Que lorsque c’est un peuple illustre qu’on gouverne,
Un peuple en qui l’honneur résonne et retentit,
On est d’autant plus lourd que l’on est plus petit!
Est-ce qu’ils vont changer, est-ce là notre compte?
Ce pays de lumière en un pays de honte?
Il est dur de penser, c’est un souci profond,
Qu’ils froissent dans les cœurs, sans savoir ce qu’ils font,
Les instincts les plus fiers et les plus vénérables.
Ah! ces hommes maudits, ces hommes misérables
Éveilleront enfin quelque rébellion
À force de courber la tête du lion!
La bête est étendue à terre, et fatiguée
Elle sommeille, au fond de l’ombre reléguée;
Le mufle fauve et roux ne bouge pas, d’accord;
C’est vrai, la patte énorme et monstrueuse dort;
Mais on l’excite assez pour que la griffe sorte.
J’estime qu’ils ont tort de jouer de la sorte.
Octobre 1849.

“On est Tibère, on est Judas, on est Dracon

On est Tibère, on est Judas, on est Dracon;
Et l’on a Lambessa, n’ayant plus Montfaucon.
On forge pour le peuple une chaîne; on enferme,
On exile, on proscrit le penseur libre et ferme;
Tout succombe. On comprime élans, espoirs, regrets,
La liberté, le droit, l’avenir, le progrès,
Comme faisait Séjan, comme fit Louis onze,
Avec des lois de fer et des juges de bronze.
Puis, — c’est bien, — on s’endort, et le maître joyeux
Dit: l’homme n’a plus d’âme et le ciel n’a plus d’yeux.-
Ô rêve des tyrans! l’heure fuit, le temps marche,
Le grain croît dans la terre et l’eau coule sous l’arche.
Un jour vient où ces lois de silence et de mort
Se rompant tout à coup, comme, sous un effort,
Se rouvrent à grand bruit des portes mal fermées,
Emplissent la cité de torches enflammées.
17 janvier 1853.

Les Grands Corps de l’État

Ces hommes passeront comme un ver sur le sable.
Qu’est-ce que tu ferais de leur sang méprisable?
Le dégoût rend clément.
Retenons la colère âpre, ardente, électrique.
Peuple, si tu m’en crois, tu prendras une trique
Au jour du châtiment.

Ô de Soulouque-deux burlesque cantonade!
Ô ducs de Trou-Bonbon, marquis de Cassonade,
Souteneurs du larron,
Vous dont la poésie, ou sublime ou mordante,
Ne sait que faire, gueux, trop grotesques pour Dante,
Trop sanglants pour Scarron,

Ô jongleurs, noirs par l’âme et par la servitude,
Vous vous imaginez un lendemain trop rude,
Vous êtes trop tremblants,
Vous croyez qu’on en veut, dans l’exil où nous sommes,
À cette peau qui fait qu’on vous prend pour des hommes;
Calmez-vous, nègres blancs!

Cambyse, j’en conviens, eût eu ce cœur de roche
De faire asseoir Troplong sur la peau de Baroche
Au bout d’un temps peu long,
Il eût crié: Cet autre est pire. Qu’on l’étrangle!
Et, j’en conviens encore, eût fait asseoir Delangle
Sur la peau de Troplong.

Cambyse était stupide et digne d’être auguste;
Comme s’il suffisait pour qu’un être soit juste,
Sans vices, sans orgueil,
Pour qu’il ne soit pas traître à la loi, ni transfuge,
Que d’une peau de tigre ou d’une peau de juge
On lui fasse un fauteuil!

Toi, peuple, tu diras: — Ces hommes se ressemblent.
Voyons les mains. — Et tous trembleront comme tremblent
Les loups pris aux filets.
— Bon. Les uns ont du sang, qu’au bagne on les écroue,
À la chaîne! Mais ceux qui n’ont que de la boue,
Tu leur diras: — Valets!

La loi râlait, ayant en vain crié: main-forte!
Vous avez partagé les habits de la morte.
Par César achetés,
De tous nos droits livrés vous avez fait des ventes;
Toutes ses trahisons ont trouvé pour servantes
Toutes vos lâchetés!

Allez, fuyez, vivez! pourvu que, mauvais prêtre,
Mauvais juge, on vous voie en vos trous disparaître,
Rampant sur vos genoux,
Et qu’il ne reste rien, sous les cieux que Dieu dore,
Sous le splendide azur où se lève l’aurore,
Rien de pareil à vous!

Vivez, si vous pouvez! l’opprobre est votre asile.
Vous aurez à jamais, toi, cardinal Basile,
Toi, sénateur Crispin,
De quoi boire et manger dans vos fuites lointaines,
Si le mépris se boit comme l’eau des fontaines,
Si la honte est du pain! -

Peuple, alors nous prendrons au collet tous ces drôles,
Et tu les jetteras dehors par les épaules
À grands coups de bâton;
Et dans le Luxembourg, blancs sous les branches d’arbre,
Vous nous approuverez de vos têtes de marbre,
Ô Lycurgue, ô Caton!

Citoyens! le néant pour ces laquais se rouvre

Qu’importe, ô citoyens! l’abjection les couvre
De son manteau de plomb.
Qu’importe que, le soir, un passant solitaire,
Voyant un récureur d’égouts sortir de terre,
Dise: Tiens! c’est Troplong!

Qu’importe que Rouher sur le Pont-Neuf se carre,
Que Baroche et Delangle, en quittant leur simarre,
Prennent des tabliers,
Qu’ils s’offrent pour trois sous, oubliés quoique infâmes,
Et qu’ils aillent, après avoir sali leurs âmes,
Nettoyer vos souliers!
23 novembre. Jersey.

“Le Progrès calme et fort, et toujours innocent

Le Progrès calme et fort, et toujours innocent,
Ne sait pas ce que c’est que de verser le sang.
Il règne, conquérant désarmé; quoi qu’on fasse,
De la hache et du glaive il détourne sa face,
Car le doigt éternel écrit dans le ciel bleu
Que la terre est à l’homme et que l’homme est à Dieu;
Car la force invincible est la force impalpable. -
Peuple, jamais de sang! — Vertueux ou coupable,
Le sang qu’on a versé monte des mains au front.
Quand sur une mémoire, indélébile affront,
Il jaillit, plus d’espoir; cette fatale goutte
Finit par la couvrir et la dévorer toute;
Il n’est pas dans l’histoire une tache de sang
Qui sur les noirs bourreaux n’aille s’élargissant.
Sachons-le bien, la honte est la meilleure tombe.
Le même homme sur qui son crime enfin retombe
Sort sanglant du sépulcre et fangeux du mépris.
Le bagne dédaigneux sur les coquins flétris
Se ferme, et tout est dit; l’obscur tombeau se rouvre.
Qu’on le fasse profond et muré, qu’on le couvre
D’une dalle de marbre et d’un plafond massif,
Quand vous avez fini, le fantôme pensif
Lève du front la pierre et lentement se dresse.
Mettez sur ce tombeau toute une forteresse,
Tout un mont de granit, impénétrable et sourd,
Le fantôme est plus fort que le granit n’est lourd.
Il soulève ce mont comme une feuille morte.
Le voici, regardez, il sort; il faut qu’il sorte,
Il faut qu’il aille et marche et traîne son linceul
Il surgit devant vous dès que vous êtes seul;
Il dit: c’est moi; tout vent qui souffle vous l’apporte;
La nuit, vous l’entendez qui frappe à votre porte.
Les exterminateurs, avec ou sans le droit,
Je les hais, mais surtout je les plains. On les voit,

À travers l’âpre histoire où le vrai seul demeure,
Pour s’être délivrés de leurs rivaux d’une heure,
D’ennemis innocents, ou même criminels,
Fuir dans l’ombre entourés de spectres éternels.
25 mars 1853. Jersey.

Le Chant de ceux qui s’en vont sur mer

Air breton

Adieu, patrie!
L’onde est en furie.
Adieu, patrie!
Azur!

Adieu, maison, treille au fruit mûr,
Adieu, les fleurs d’or du vieux mur!

Adieu, patrie!
Ciel, forêt, prairie!
Adieu, patrie,
Azur!

Adieu, patrie!
L’onde est en furie.
Adieu, patrie,
Azur!

Adieu, fiancée au front pur,
Le ciel est noir, le vent est dur.

Adieu, patrie!
Lise, Anna, Marie!
Adieu, patrie,
Azur!

Adieu, patrie!
L’onde est cri furie.
Adieu, patrie,
Azur!

Notre œil, que voile un deuil futur,
Va du flot sombre au sort obscur!

Adieu, patrie!
Pour toi mon cœur prie.
Adieu, patrie,
 Azur!
Jersey. 31 juillet 1853.

À un qui veut se détacher

I

Maintenant il se dit: — L’empire est chancelant
La victoire est peu sûre. -
Il cherche à s’en aller, furtif et reculant.
Reste dans la masure!

Tu dis: — Le plafond croule. Ils vont, si l’on me voit,
Empêcher que je sorte. -
N’osant rester ni fuir, tu regardes le toit,
Tu regardes la porte;

Tu mets timidement la main sur le verrou.
Reste en leurs rangs funèbres!
Reste! la loi qu’ils ont enfouie en un trou
Est là dans les ténèbres.

Reste! elle est là, le flanc percé de leur couteau,
Gisante, et sur sa bière
Ils ont mis une dalle. Un pan de ton manteau
Est pris sous cette pierre!

Pendant qu’à l’Elysée en fête et plein d’encens
On chante, on déblatère,
Qu’on oublie et qu’on rit, toi tu pâlis; tu sens
Ce spectre sous la terre!

Tu ne t’en iras pas! quoi! quitter leur maison
Et fuir leur destinée!
Quoi! tu voudrais trahir jusqu’à la trahison,
Elle-même indignée!

Quoi! tu veux renier ce larron au front bas
Qui t’admire et t’honore!

Quoi! Judas pour Jésus, tu veux pour Barabbas
Etre Judas encore!

Quoi! n’as-tu pas tenu l’échelle à ces fripons,
En pleine connivence?
Le sac de ces voleurs ne fut-il pas, réponds,
Cousu par toi d’avance!

Les mensonges, la haine au dard froid et visqueux,
Habitent ce repaire;
Tu t’en vas! de quel droit? étant plus renard qu’eux,
Et plus qu’elle vipère!

II

Quand l’Italie en deuil dressa, du Tibre au Pô,
Son drapeau magnifique,
Quand ce grand peuple, après s’être couché troupeau,
Se leva république,

C’est toi, quand Rome aux fers jeta le cri d’espoir,
Toi qui brisas son aile,
Toi qui fis retomber l’affreux capuchon noir
Sur sa face éternelle!

C’est toi qui restauras Montrouge et Saint-Acheul,
Écoles dégradées,
Où l’on met à l’esprit frémissant un linceul,
Un bâillon aux idées.

C’est toi qui, pour progrès rêvant l’homme animal,
Livras l’enfant victime
Aux jésuites lascifs, sombres amants du mal,
En rut devant le crime!

Ô pauvres chers enfants qu’ont nourris de leur lait
Et qu’ont bercés nos femmes,
Ces blêmes oiseleurs ont pris dans leur filet

Toutes vos douces âmes!

Hélas! ce triste oiseau, sans plumes sur la chair,
Rongé de lèpre immonde,
Qui rampe et qui se meurt dans leur cage de fer,
C'est l'avenir du monde!

Si nous les laissons faire, on aura dans vingt ans,
Sous les cieux que Dieu dore,
Une France aux yeux ronds, aux regards clignotants,
Qui haïra l'aurore!

Ces noirs magiciens, ces jongleurs tortueux,
Dont la fraude est la règle,
Pour en faire sortir le hibou monstrueux,
Ont volé l'oeuf de l'aigle!

III

Donc, comme les baskirs, sur Paris étouffé,
Et comme les croates,
Créateurs du néant, vous avez triomphé
Dans vos haines béates;

Et vous êtes joyeux, vous, constructeurs savants
Des préjugés sans nombre,
Qui, pareils à la nuit, versez sur les vivants
Des urnes pleines d'ombre!

Vous courez saluer le nain Napoléon;
Vous dansez dans l'orgie.
Ce grand siècle est souillé; c'était le Panthéon,
Et c'est la tabagie.

Et vous dites: c'est bien! vous sacrez parmi nous
César, au nom de Rome,
L'assassin qui, la nuit, se met à deux genoux

Sur le ventre d’un homme.

Ah! malheureux! louez César qui fait trembler,
Adorez son étoile;
Vous oubliez le Dieu vivant qui peut rouler
Les cieux comme une toile!

Encore un peu de temps, et ceci tombera;
Dieu vengera sa cause!
Les villes chanteront, le lieu désert sera
Joyeux comme une rose!

Encore un peu de temps, et vous ne serez plus,
Et je viens vous le dire.
Vous êtes les maudits, nous sommes les élus.
Regardez-nous sourire!

Je le sais, moi qui vis au bord du gouffre amer
Sur les rocs centenaires,
Moi qui passe mes jours à contempler la mer
Pleine de sourds tonnerres!

IV

Toi, leur chef, sois leur chef! c’est là ton châtiment.
Sois l’homme des discordes!
Ces fourbes ont saisi le genre humain dormant
Et l’ont lié de cordes.

Ah! tu voulus défaire, épouvantable affront!
Les âmes que Dieu crée?
Eh bien, frissonne et pleure, atteint toi-même au front
Par ton œuvre exécrée!

À mesure que vient l’ignorance, et l’oubli,
Et l’erreur qu’elle amène,
À mesure qu’aux cieux décroît, soleil pâli,

L’intelligence humaine,

Et que son jour s’éteint, laissant l’homme méchant
Et plus froid que les marbres,
Votre honte, ô maudits, grandit comme au couchant
Grandit l’ombre des arbres!

V

Oui, reste leur apôtre! oui, tu l’as mérité.
C’est là ta peine énorme!
Regarde en frémissant dans la postérité!
Ta mémoire difforme.

On voit, louche rhéteur des vieux partis hurlants,
Qui mens et qui t’emportes,
Pendre à tes noirs discours, comme à des clous sanglants,
Toutes les grandes mortes,

La justice, la foi, bel ange souffleté
Par la goule papale,
La vérité, fermant les yeux, la liberté
Echevelée et pâle,

Et ces deux soeurs, hélas! nos mères toutes deux,
Rome, qu’en pleurs je nomme,
Et la France sur qui, raffinement hideux,
Coule le sang de Rome!

Homme fatal! l’histoire en ses enseignements
Te montrera dans l’ombre,
Comme on montre un gibet entouré d’ossements
Sur la colline sombre!
Jersey. 24 janvier 1853.

Pauline Roland

Elle ne connaissait ni l’orgueil ni la haine;
Elle aimait; elle était pauvre, simple et sereine;
Souvent le pain qui manque abrégeait son repas.
Elle avait trois enfants, ce qui n’empêchait pas
Qu’elle ne se sentît mère de ceux qui souffrent.
Les noirs évènements qui dans la nuit s’engouffrent,
Les flux et les reflux, les abîmes béants,
Les nains, sapant sans bruit l’ouvrage des géants,
Et tous nos malfaiteurs inconnus ou célèbres,
Ne l’épouvantaient point; derrière ces ténèbres,
Elle apercevait Dieu construisant l’avenir.
Elle sentait sa foi sans cesse rajeunir
De la liberté sainte elle attisait les flammes
Elle s’inquiétait des enfants et des femmes;
Elle disait, tendant la main aux travailleurs:
La vie est dure ici, mais sera bonne ailleurs.
Avançons! — Elle allait, portant de l’un à l’autre
L’espérance; c’était une espèce d’apôtre
Que Dieu, sur cette terre où nous gémissons tous,
Avait fait mère et femme afin qu’il fût plus doux;
L’esprit le plus farouche aimait sa voix sincère.
Tendre, elle visitait, sous leur toit de misère,
Tous ceux que la famine ou la douleur abat,
Les malades pensifs, gisant sur leur grabat,
La mansarde où languit l’indigence morose;
Quand, par hasard moins pauvre, elle avait quelque chose,
Elle le partageait à tous comme une sœur;
Quand elle n’avait rien, elle donnait son cœur.
Calme et grande, elle aimait comme le soleil brille.
Le genre humain pour elle était une famille
Comme ses trois enfants étaient l’humanité.
Elle criait: progrès! amour! fraternité!
Elle ouvrait aux souffrants des horizons sublimes.

Quand Pauline Roland eut commis tous ces crimes,
Le sauveur de l’église et de l’ordre la prit
Et la mit en prison. Tranquille, elle sourit,
Car l’éponge de fiel plaît à ces lèvres pures.
Cinq mois, elle subit le contact des souillures,
L’oubli, le rire affreux du vice, les bourreaux,
Et le pain noir qu’on jette à travers les barreaux,
Edifiant la geôle au mal habituée,
Enseignant la voleuse et la prostituée.
Ces cinq mois écoulés, un soldat, un bandit,
Dont le nom souillerait ces vers, vint et lui dit
— Soumettez-vous sur l’heure au règne qui commence,
Reniez votre foi; sinon, pas de clémence,
Lambessa! choisissez. — Elle dit: Lambessa.
Le lendemain la grille en frémissant grinça,
Et l’on vit arriver un fourgon cellulaire.
— Ah! voici Lambessa, dit-elle sans colère.
Elles étaient plusieurs qui souffraient pour le droit
Dans la même prison. Le fourgon trop étroit
Ne put les recevoir dans ses cloisons infâmes
Et l’on fit traverser tout Paris à ces femmes
Bras dessus bras dessous avec les argousins.
Ainsi que des voleurs et que des assassins,
Les sbires les frappaient de paroles bourrues.
S’il arrivait parfois que les passants des rues,
Surpris de voir mener ces femmes en troupeau,
S’approchaient et mettaient la main à leur chapeau,
L’argousin leur jetait des sourires obliques,
Et les passants fuyaient, disant: filles publiques!
Et Pauline Roland disait: courage, sœurs!
L’océan au bruit rauque, aux sombres épaisseurs,
Les emporta. Durant la rude traversée,
L’horizon était noir, la bise était glacée,
Sans l’ami qui soutient, sans la voix qui répond,
Elles tremblaient. La nuit, il pleuvait sur le pont
Pas de lit pour dormir, pas d’abri sous l’orage,

Et Pauline Roland criait: mes soeurs, courage!
Et les durs matelots pleuraient en les voyant.
On atteignit l'Afrique au rivage effrayant,
Les sables, les déserts qu'un ciel d'airain calcine,
Les rocs sans une source et sans une racine;
L'Afrique, lieu d'horreur pour les plus résolus,
Terre au visage étrange où l'on ne se sent plus
Regardé par les yeux de la douce patrie.
Et Pauline Roland, souriante et meurtrie,
Dit aux femmes en pleurs: courage, c'est ici.
Et quand elle était seule, elle pleurait aussi.
Ses trois enfants! loin d'elle! Oh! quelle angoisse amère!
Un jour, un des geôliers dit à la pauvre mère
Dans la casbah de Bône aux cachots étouffants:
Voulez-vous être libre et revoir vos enfants?
Demandez grâce au prince. — Et cette femme forte
Dit: — J'irai les revoir lorsque je serai morte.
Alors sur la martyre, humble cœur indompté,
On épuisa la haine et la férocité.
Bagnes d'Afrique! enfers qu'a sondés Ribeyrolles!
Oh! la pitié sanglote et manque de paroles.
Une femme, une mère, un esprit! ce fut là
Que malade, accablée et seule, on l'exila.
Le lit de camp, le froid et le chaud, la famine,
Le jour l'affreux soleil et la nuit la vermine,
Les verrous, le travail sans repos, les affronts,
Rien ne plia son âme; elle disait: — Souffrons.
Souffrons comme Jésus, souffrons comme Socrate. -
Captive, on la traîna sur cette terre ingrate;
Et, lasse, et quoiqu'un ciel torride l'écrasât,
On la faisait marcher à pied comme un forçat.
La fièvre la rongeait; sombre, pâle, amaigrie,
Le soir elle tombait sur la paille pourrie,
Et de la France aux fers murmurait le doux nom.
On jeta cette femme au fond d'un cabanon.
Le mal brisait sa vie et grandissait son âme.
Grave, elle répétait: « Il est bon qu'une femme,

Dans cette servitude et cette lâcheté,
Meure pour la justice et pour la liberté.”
Voyant qu’elle râlait, sachant qu’ils rendront compte,
Les bourreaux eurent peur, ne pouvant avoir honte
Et l’homme de décembre abrégea son exil.
«Puisque c’est pour mourir, qu’elle rentre!” dit-il.
Elle ne savait plus ce que l’on faisait d’elle.
L’agonie à Lyon la saisit. Sa prunelle,
Comme la nuit se fait quand baisse le flambeau,
Devint obscure et vague, et l’ombre du tombeau
Se leva lentement sur son visage blême.
Son fils, pour recueillir à cette heure suprême
Du moins son dernier souffle et son dernier regard,
Accourut. Pauvre mère! Il arriva trop tard.
Elle était morte; morte à force de souffrance,
Morte sans avoir su qu’elle voyait la France
Et le doux ciel natal aux rayons réchauffants
Morte dans le délire en criant: mes enfants!
On n’a pas même osé pleurer à ses obsèques;
Elle dort sous la terre. — Et maintenant, évêques,
Debout, la mitre au front, dans l’ombre du saint lieu,
Crachez vos Te Deum à la face de Dieu!
12 mars 1853. Jersey.

L’Expiation

I

Il neigeait. On était vaincu par sa conquête.
Pour la première fois l’aigle baissait la tête.
Sombres jours! l’empereur revenait lentement,
Laissant derrière lui brûler Moscou fumant.
Il neigeait. L’âpre hiver fondait en avalanche.
Après la plaine blanche une autre plaine blanche.
On ne connaissait plus les chefs ni le drapeau.
Hier la grande armée, et maintenant troupeau.
On ne distinguait plus les ailes ni le centre.
Il neigeait. Les blessés s’abritaient dans le ventre
Des chevaux morts; au seuil des bivouacs désolés
On voyait des clairons à leur poste gelés,
Restés debout, en selle et muets, blancs de givre,
Collant leur bouche en pierre aux trompettes de cuivre.
Boulets, mitraille, obus, mêlés aux flocons blancs,
Pleuvaient; les grenadiers, surpris d’être tremblants,
Marchaient pensifs, la glace à leur moustache grise.
Il neigeait, il neigeait toujours! La froide bise
Sifflait; sur le verglas, dans des lieux inconnus,
On n’avait pas de pain et l’on allait pieds nus.
Ce n’étaient plus des cœurs vivants, des gens de guerre
C’était un rêve errant dans la brume, un mystère,
Une procession d’ombres sous le ciel noir.
La solitude vaste, épouvantable à voir,
Partout apparaissait, muette vengeresse.
Le ciel faisait sans bruit avec la neige épaisse
Pour cette immense armée un immense linceul;
Et chacun se sentant mourir, on était seul.
— Sortira-t-on jamais de ce funeste empire?
Deux ennemis! le czar, le nord. Le nord est pire.
On jetait les canons pour brûler les affûts.
Qui se couchait, mourait. Groupe morne et confus,
Ils fuyaient; le désert dévorait le cortège.

On pouvait, à des plis qui soulevaient la neige,
Voir que des régiments s’étaient endormis là.
Ô chutes d’Annibal! lendemains d’Attila!
Fuyards, blessés, mourants, caissons, brancards, civières,
On s’écrasait aux ponts pour passer les rivières,
On s’endormait dix mille, on se réveillait cent.
Ney, que suivait naguère une armée, à présent
S’évadait, disputant sa montre à trois cosaques.
Toutes les nuits, qui vive! alerte! assauts! attaques!
Ces fantômes prenaient leur fusil, et sur eux
Ils voyaient se ruer, effrayants, ténébreux,
Avec des cris pareils aux voix des vautours chauves,
D’horribles escadrons, tourbillons d’hommes fauves.
Toute une armée ainsi dans la nuit se perdait.
L’empereur était là, debout, qui regardait.
Il était comme un arbre en proie à la cognée.
Sur ce géant, grandeur jusqu’alors épargnée,
Le malheur, bûcheron sinistre, était monté;
Et lui, chêne vivant, par la hache insulté,
Tressaillant sous le spectre aux lugubres revanches,
Il regardait tomber autour de lui ses branches.
Chefs, soldats, tous mouraient. Chacun avait son tour.
Tandis qu’environnant sa tente avec amour,
Voyant son ombre aller et venir sur la toile,
Ceux qui restaient, croyant toujours à son étoile,
Accusaient le destin de lèse-majesté,
Lui se sentit soudain dans l’âme épouvanté.
Stupéfait du désastre et ne sachant que croire,
L’empereur se tourna vers Dieu; l’homme de gloire
Trembla; Napoléon comprit qu’il expiait
Quelque chose peut-être, et, livide, inquiet,
Devant ses légions sur la neige semées:
« Est-ce le châtiment, dit-il, Dieu des armées?”
Alors il s’entendit appeler par son nom
Et quelqu’un qui parlait dans l’ombre lui dit: Non.

II

Waterloo! Waterloo! Waterloo! morne plaine!
Comme une onde qui bout dans une urne trop pleine,
Dans ton cirque de bois, de coteaux, de vallons,
La pâle mort mêlait les sombres bataillons.
D’un côté c’est l’Europe et de l’autre la France.
Choc sanglant! des héros Dieu trompait l’espérance
Tu désertais, victoire, et le sort était las.
Ô Waterloo! je pleure et je m’arrête, hélas!
Car ces derniers soldats de la dernière guerre
Furent grands; ils avaient vaincu toute la terre,
Chassé vingt rois, passé les Alpes et le Rhin,
Et leur âme chantait dans les clairons d’airain!

Le soir tombait; la lutte était ardente et noire.
Il avait l’offensive et presque la victoire;
Il tenait Wellington acculé sur un bois.
Sa lunette à la main, il observait parfois
Le centre du combat, point obscur où tressaille
La mêlée, effroyable et vivante broussaille,
Et parfois l’horizon, sombre comme la mer.
Soudain, joyeux, il dit: Grouchy! — C’était Blücher.
L’espoir changea de camp, le combat changea d’âme,
La mêlée en hurlant grandit comme une flamme.
La batterie anglaise écrasa nos carrés.
La plaine, où frissonnaient les drapeaux déchirés,

Ne fut plus, dans les cris des mourants qu’on égorge,
Qu’un gouffre flamboyant, rouge comme une forge;
Gouffre où les régiments comme des pans de murs
Tombaient, où se couchaient comme des épis mûrs
Les hauts tambours-majors aux panaches énormes,
Où l’on entrevoyait des blessures difformes!
Carnage affreux! moment fatal! L’homme inquiet
Sentit que la bataille entre ses mains pliait.
Derrière un mamelon la garde était massée.
La garde, espoir suprême et suprême pensée!

« Allons! faites donner la garde!” cria-t-il.
Et, lanciers, grenadiers aux guêtres de coutil,
Dragons que Rome eût pris pour des légionnaires,
Cuirassiers, canonniers qui traînaient des tonnerres,
Portant le noir colback ou le casque poli,
Tous, ceux de Friedland et ceux de Rivoli,
Comprenant qu’ils allaient mourir dans cette fête,
Saluèrent leur dieu, debout dans la tempête.
Leur bouche, d’un seul cri, dit: vive l’empereur!
Puis, à pas lents, musique en tête, sans fureur,
Tranquille, souriant à la mitraille anglaise,
La garde impériale entra dans la fournaise.
Hélas! Napoléon, sur sa garde penché,
Regardait, et, sitôt qu’ils avaient débouché
Sous les sombres canons crachant des jets de soufre,
Voyait, l’un après l’autre, en cet horrible gouffre,
Fondre ces régiments de granit et d’acier
Comme fond une cire au souffle d’un brasier.
Ils allaient, l’arme au bras, front haut, graves, stoïques.
Pas un ne recula. Dormez, morts héroïques!
Le reste de l’armée hésitait sur leurs corps
Et regardait mourir la garde. — C’est alors
Qu’élevant tout à coup sa voix désespérée,
La Déroute, géante à la face effarée
Qui, pâle, épouvantant les plus fiers bataillons,
Changeant subitement les drapeaux en haillons,
À de certains moments, spectre fait de fumées,
Se lève grandissante au milieu des armées,
La Déroute apparut au soldat qui s’émeut,
Et, se tordant les bras, cria: Sauve qui peut!
Sauve qui peut! — affront! horreur! — toutes les bouches
Criaient; à travers champs, fous, éperdus, farouches,
Comme si quelque souffle avait passé sur eux,
Parmi les lourds caissons et les fourgons poudreux,
Roulant dans les fossés, se cachant dans les seigles,
Jetant shakos, manteaux, fusils, jetant les aigles,
Sous les sabres prussiens, ces vétérans, ô deuil!

Tremblaient, hurlaient, pleuraient, couraient! — En un clin d'œil,
Comme s'envole au vent une paille enflammée,
S'évanouit ce bruit qui fut la grande armée,
Et cette plaine, hélas, où l'on rêve aujourd'hui,
Vit fuir ceux devant qui l'univers avait fui!
Quarante ans sont passés, et ce coin de la terre,
Waterloo, ce plateau funèbre et solitaire,
Ce champ sinistre où Dieu mêla tant de néants,
Tremble encor d'avoir vu la fuite des géants!

Napoléon les vit s'écouler comme un fleuve;
Hommes, chevaux, tambours, drapeaux; — et dans l'épreuve
Sentant confusément revenir son remords,
Levant les mains au ciel, il dit: « Mes soldats morts,
Moi vaincu! mon empire est brisé comme verre.
Est-ce le châtiment cette fois, Dieu sévère?"
Alors parmi les cris, les rumeurs, le canon,
Il entendit la voix qui lui répondait: Non!

III

Il croula. Dieu changea la chaîne de l'Europe.
Il est, au fond des mers que la brume enveloppe,
Un roc hideux, débris des antiques volcans.
Le Destin prit des clous, un marteau, des carcans,
Saisit, pâle et vivant, ce voleur du tonnerre,
Et, joyeux, s'en alla sur le pic centenaire
Le clouer, excitant par son rire moqueur
Le vautour Angleterre à lui ronger le cœur.

Évanouissement d'une splendeur immense!
Du soleil qui se lève à la nuit qui commence,
Toujours l'isolement, l'abandon, la prison,
Un soldat rouge au seuil, la mer à l'horizon,
Des rochers nus, des bois affreux, l'ennui, l'espace,
Des voiles s'enfuyant comme l'espoir qui passe,
Toujours le bruit des flots, toujours le bruit des vents!

Adieu, tente de pourpre aux panaches mouvants,
Adieu, le cheval blanc que César éperonne!
Plus de tambours battant aux champs, plus de couronne,
Plus de rois prosternés dans l’ombre avec terreur,
Plus de manteau traînant sur eux, plus d’empereur!
Napoléon était retombé Bonaparte.
Comme un romain blessé par la flèche du Parthe,
Saignant, morne, il songeait à Moscou qui brûla.
Un caporal anglais lui disait: halte-là!
Son fils aux mains des rois! sa femme aux bras d’un autre!
Plus vil que le pourceau qui dans l’égout se vautre,
Son sénat qui l’avait adoré l’insultait.
Au bord des mers, à l’heure où la bise se tait,
Sur les escarpements croulant en noirs décombres,
Il marchait, seul, rêveur, captif des vagues sombres.
Sur les monts, sur les flots, sur les cieux, triste et fier,
L’œil encore ébloui des batailles d’hier,
Il laissait sa pensée errer à l’aventure.
Grandeur, gloire, ô néant! calme de la nature!
Les aigles qui passaient ne le connaissaient pas.
Les rois, ses guichetiers, avaient pris un compas
Et l’avaient enfermé dans un cercle inflexible.
Il expirait. La mort de plus en plus visible
Se levait dans sa nuit et croissait à ses yeux
Comme le froid matin d’un jour mystérieux.
Son âme palpitait, déjà presque échappée.
Un jour enfin il mit sur son lit son épée,
Et se coucha près d’elle, et dit: «C’est aujourd’hui»
On jeta le manteau de Marengo sur lui.
Ses batailles du Nil, du Danube, du Tibre,
Se penchaient sur son front, il dit: « Me voici libre!
Je suis vainqueur! je vois mes aigles accourir!”
Et, comme il retournait sa tête pour mourir,
Il aperçut, un pied dans la maison déserte,
Hudson Lowe guettant par la porte entrouverte.
Alors, géant broyé sous le talon des rois,
Il cria: « La mesure est comble cette fois!

Seigneur! c’est maintenant fini! Dieu que j’implore,
Vous m’avez châtié!” La voix dit: Pas encore!

IV

Ô noirs événements, vous fuyez dans la nuit!
L’empereur mort tomba sur l’empire détruit.
Napoléon alla s’endormir sous le saule.
Et les peuples alors, de l’un à l’autre pôle,
Oubliant le tyran, s’éprirent du héros.
Les poëtes, marquant au front les rois bourreaux,
Consolèrent, pensifs, cette gloire abattue.
À la colonne veuve on rendit sa statue.
Quand on levait les yeux, on le voyait debout
Au-dessus de Paris, serein, dominant tout,
Seul, le jour dans l’azur et la nuit dans les astres.
Panthéons, on grava son nom sur vos pilastres!
On ne regarda plus qu’un seul côté des temps,
On ne se souvint plus que des jours éclatants
Cet homme étrange avait comme enivré l’histoire
La justice à l’œil froid disparut sous sa gloire;
On ne vit plus qu’Eylau, Ulm, Arcole, Austerlitz;
Comme dans les tombeaux des romains abolis,
On se mit à fouiller dans ces grandes années
Et vous applaudissiez, nations inclinées,
Chaque fois qu’on tirait de ce sol souverain
Ou le consul de marbre ou l’empereur d’airain!

V

Le nom grandit quand l’homme tombe;
Jamais rien de tel n’avait lui.
Calme, il écoutait dans sa tombe
La terre qui parlait de lui.

La terre disait: « La victoire
A suivi cet homme en tous lieux.

Jamais tu n’as vu, sombre histoire,
Un passant plus prodigieux!

“ Gloire au maître qui dort sous l’herbe!
Gloire à ce grand audacieux!
Nous l’avons vu gravir, superbe,
Les premiers échelons des cieux!

“ Il envoyait, âme acharnée,
Prenant Moscou, prenant Madrid,
Lutter contre la destinée
Tous les rêves de son esprit.

“ À chaque instant, rentrant en lice,
Cet homme aux gigantesques pas
Proposait quelque grand caprice
À Dieu, qui n’y consentait pas.

“ Il n’était presque plus un homme.
Il disait, grave et rayonnant,
En regardant fixement Rome
C’est moi qui règne maintenant!

“ Il voulait, héros et symbole,
Pontife et roi, phare et volcan,
Faire du Louvre un Capitole
Et de Saint-Cloud un Vatican.

“ César, il eût dit à Pompée:
«Sois fier d’être mon lieutenant!»
On voyait luire son épée
Au fond d’un nuage tonnant.

“ Il voulait, dans les frénésies
De ses vastes ambitions,
Faire devant ses fantaisies
Agenouiller les nations,

“ Ainsi qu’en une urne profonde,
Mêler races, langues, esprits,
Répandre Paris sur le monde,
Enfermer le monde en Paris!

“ Comme Cyrus dans Babylone,
Il voulait sous sa large main
Ne faire du monde qu’un trône
Et qu’un peuple du genre humain,

“ Et bâtir, malgré les huées,
Un tel empire sous son nom,
Que Jéhovah dans les nuées
Fût jaloux de Napoléon!”

VI

Enfin, mort triomphant, il vit sa délivrance,
Et l’océan rendit son cercueil à la France.
L’homme, depuis douze ans, sous le dôme doré
Reposait, par l’exil et par la mort sacré.
En paix! — Quand on passait près du monument sombre,
On se le figurait, couronne au front, dans l’ombre,
Dans son manteau semé d’abeilles d’or, muet,
Couché sous cette voûte où rien ne remuait,
Lui, l’homme qui trouvait la terre trop étroite,
Le sceptre en sa main gauche et l’épée en sa droite,
À ses pieds son grand aigle ouvrant l’œil à demi,
Et l’on disait: C’est là qu’est César endormi!
Laissant dans la clarté marcher l’immense ville,
Il dormait; il dormait confiant et tranquille.

VII

Une nuit, — c’est toujours la nuit dans le tombeau, —

Il s’éveilla. Luisant comme un hideux flambeau,
D’étranges visions emplissaient sa paupière;
Des rires éclataient sous son plafond de pierre;
Livide, il se dressa; la vision grandit;
Ô terreur! une voix qu’il reconnut, lui dit:

— Réveille-toi. Moscou, Waterloo, Sainte-Hélène,
L’exil, les rois geôliers, l’Angleterre hautaine
Sur ton lit accoudée à ton dernier moment,
Sire, cela n’est rien. Voici le châtiment:

La voix alors devint âpre, amère, stridente,
Comme le noir sarcasme et l’ironie ardente;
C’était le rire amer mordant un demi-dieu.

— Sire! on t’a retiré de ton Panthéon bleu!
Sire! on t’a descendu de ta haute colonne!
Regarde. Des brigands, dont l’essaim tourbillonne,
D’affreux bohémiens, des vainqueurs de charnier
Te tiennent dans leurs mains et t’ont fait prisonnier.
À ton orteil d’airain leur patte infâme touche.
Ils t’ont pris. Tu mourus, comme un astre se couche,
Napoléon le Grand, empereur; tu renais
Bonaparte, écuyer du cirque Beauharnais.
Te voilà dans leurs rangs, on t’a, l’on te harnache.
Ils t’appellent tout haut grand homme, entre eux, ganache.
Ils traînent, sur Paris qui les voit s’étaler,
Des sabres qu’au besoin ils sauraient avaler.
Aux passants attroupés devant leur habitacle,
Ils disent, entends-les: — Empire à grand spectacle!
Le pape est engagé dans la troupe; c’est bien,
Nous avons mieux; le czar en est mais ce n’est rien,
Le czar n’est qu’un sergent, le pape n’est qu’un bonze
Nous avons avec nous le bonhomme de bronze!
Nous sommes les neveux du grand Napoléon! —
Et Fould, Magnan, Rouher, Parieu caméléon,
Font rage. Ils vont montrant un sénat d’automates.

Ils ont pris de la paille au fond des casemates
Pour empailler ton aigle, ô vainqueur d’Iéna!
Il est là, mort, gisant, lui qui si haut plana,
Et du champ de bataille il tombe au champ de foire.
Sire, de ton vieux trône ils recousent la moire.
Ayant dévalisé la France au coin d’un bois,
Ils ont à leurs haillons du sang, comme tu vois,
Et dans son bénitier Sibour lave leur linge.
Toi, lion, tu les suis; leur maître, c’est le singe.
Ton nom leur sert de lit, Napoléon premier.
On voit sur Austerlitz un peu de leur fumier.
Ta gloire est un gros vin dont leur honte se grise.
Cartouche essaie et met ta redingote grise
On quête des liards dans le petit chapeau
Pour tapis sur la table ils ont mis ton drapeau.
À cette table immonde où le grec devient riche,
Avec le paysan on boit, on joue, on triche;
Tu te mêles, compère, à ce tripot hardi,
Et ta main qui tenait l’étendard de Lodi,
Cette main qui portait la foudre, ô Bonaparte,
Aide à piper les dés et fait sauter la carte.
Ils te forcent à boire avec eux, et Carlier
Pousse amicalement d’un coude familier
Votre majesté, sire, et Piétri dans son antre
Vous tutoie, et Maupas vous tape sur le ventre.
Faussaires, meurtriers, escrocs, forbans, voleurs,
Ils savent qu’ils auront, comme toi, des malheurs
Leur soif en attendant vide la coupe pleine
À ta santé; Poissy trinque avec Sainte-Hélène.
Regarde! bals, sabbats, fêtes matin et soir.
La foule au bruit qu’ils font se culbute pour voir;
Debout sur le tréteau qu’assiège une cohue
Qui rit, bâille, applaudit, tempête, siffle, hue,
Entouré de pasquins agitant leur grelot,
— Commencer par Homère et finir par Callot!
Épopée! épopée! oh! quel dernier chapitre! —
Entre Troplong paillasse et Chaix-d’Est-Ange pitre,

Devant cette baraque, abject et vil bazar
Où Mandrin mal lavé se déguise en César,
Riant, l'affreux bandit, dans sa moustache épaisse,
Toi, spectre impérial, tu bats la grosse caisse! —

L'horrible vision s'éteignit. L'empereur,
Désespéré, poussa dans l'ombre un cri d'horreur,
Baissant les yeux, dressant ses mains épouvantées.
Les Victoires de marbre à la porte sculptées,
Fantômes blancs debout hors du sépulcre obscur,
Se faisaient du doigt signe, et, s'appuyant au mur,
Écoutaient le titan pleurer dans les ténèbres.
Et lui, cria: « Démon aux visions funèbres,
Toi qui me suis partout, que jamais je ne vois,
Qui donc es-tu? — Je suis ton crime", dit la voix.
La tombe alors s'emplit d'une lumière étrange
Semblable à la clarté de Dieu quand il se venge
Pareils aux mots que vit resplendir Balthazar,
Deux mots dans l'ombre écrits flamboyaient sur César;
Bonaparte, tremblant comme un enfant sans mère,
Leva sa face pâle et lut: — DIX-HUIT BRUMAIRE!

25-30 novembre. Jersey.

LIVRE VI: LA STABILITE EST ASSUREE

Napoléon III

Donc c’est fait. Dût rugir de honte le canon,
Te voilà, nain immonde, accroupi sur ce nom!
Cette gloire est ton trou, ta bauge, ta demeure!
Toi qui n’as jamais pris la fortune qu’à l’heure,
Te voilà presque assis sur ce hautain sommet!
Sur le chapeau d’Essling tu plantes ton plumet;
Tu mets, petit Poucet, ces bottes de sept lieues;
Tu prends Napoléon dans les régions bleues;
Tu fais travailler l’oncle, et, perroquet ravi,
Grimper à ton perchoir l’aigle de Mondovi!
Thersite est le neveu d’Achille Péliade!
C’est pour toi qu’on a fait toute cette Iliade!
C’est pour toi qu’on livra ces combats inouïs!
C’est pour toi que Murat, aux russes éblouis,
Terrible, apparaissait, cravachant leur armée!
C’est pour toi qu’à travers la flamme et la fumée
Les grenadiers pensifs s’avançaient à pas lents!
C’est pour toi que mon père et mes oncles vaillants
Ont répandu leur sang dans ces guerres épiques!
Pour toi qu’ont fourmillé les sabres et les piques,
Que tout le continent trembla sous Attila,
Et que Londres frémit, et que Moscou brûla!
C’est pour toi, pour tes Deutz et pour tes Mascarilles,
Pour que tu puisses boire avec de belles filles,
Et, la nuit, t’attabler dans le Louvre à l’écart,
C’est pour monsieur Fialin et pour monsieur Mocquart,
Que Lannes d’un boulet eut la cuisse coupée,
Que le front des soldats, entrouvert par l’épée,
Saigna sous le shako, le casque et le colback,
Que Lasalle à Wagram, Duroc à Reichenbach,
Expirèrent frappés au milieu de leur route,
Que Caulaincourt tomba dans la grande redoute,
Et que la vieille garde est morte à Waterloo!
C’est pour toi qu’agitant le pin et le bouleau,

Le vent fait aujourd’hui, sous ses âpres haleines,
Blanchir tant d’ossements, hélas! dans tant de plaines!
Faquin! — Tu t’es soudé, chargé d’un vil butin,
Toi, l’homme du hasard, à l’homme du destin!
Tu fourres, impudent, ton front dans ses couronnes!
Nous entendons claquer dans tes mains fanfaronnes
Ce fouet prodigieux qui conduisait les rois
Et tranquille, attelant à ton numéro trois
Austerlitz, Marengo, Rivoli, Saint-Jean-d’Acre,
Aux chevaux du soleil tu fais traîner ton fiacre!
Jersey, 31 mai 1853.

Les Martyres

Les Martyres

Ces femmes, qu’on envoie aux lointaines bastilles,
Peuple, ce sont tes soeurs, tes mères et tes filles!
Ô peuple, leur forfait, c’est de t’avoir aimé!
Paris sanglant, courbé, sinistre, inanimé,
Voit ces horreurs et garde un silence farouche.

Celle-ci, qu’on amène un bâillon dans la bouche,
Cria (c’est là son crime): — à bas la trahison!
Ces femmes sont la foi, la vertu, la raison,
L’équité, la pudeur, la fierté, la justice.
Saint-Lazare — il faudra broyer cette bâtisse!
Il n’en restera pas pierre sur pierre un jour! —
Les reçoit, les dévore, et, quand revient leur tour,
S’ouvre, et les revomit par son horrible porte,
Et les jette au fourgon hideux qui les emporte.
Où vont-elles? L’oubli le sait, et le tombeau
Le raconte au cyprès et le dit au corbeau.

Une d’elles était une mère sacrée.
Le jour qu’on l’entraîna vers l’Afrique abhorrée,
Ses enfants étaient là qui voulaient l’embrasser;
On les chassa. La mère en deuil les vit chasser
Et dit: — partons! — Le peuple en larmes criait grâce.
La porte du fourgon étant étroite et basse,
Un argousin joyeux, raillant son embonpoint,
La fit entrer de force en la poussant du poing.

Elles s’en vont ainsi, malades, verrouillées,
Dans le noir chariot aux cellules souillées
Où le captif, sans air, sans jour, sans pleurs dans l’œil,
N’est plus qu’un mort vivant assis dans son cercueil.
Dans la route on entend leurs voix désespérées.

Le peuple hébété voit passer ces torturées.
À Toulon, le fourgon les quitte, le ponton
Les prend; sans vêtements, sans pain, sous le bâton,
Elles passent la mer, veuves, seules au monde,
Mangeant avec les doigts dans la gamelle immonde.
Bruxelles, juillet 1852.

Hymne des transportés

Prions! voici l’ombre sereine.
Vers toi, grand Dieu, nos yeux et nos bras sont levés.
Ceux qui t’offrent ici leurs larmes et leur chaîne
Sont les plus douloureux parmi les éprouvés.
Ils ont le plus d’honneur ayant le plus de peine.

Souffrons! le crime aura son tour.
Oiseaux qui passez, nos chaumières,
Vents qui passez, nos soeurs, nos mères
Sont là-bas, pleurant nuit et jour.!
Oiseaux, dites-leur nos misères!
Ô vents, portez-leur notre amour!

Nous t’envoyons notre pensée,
Dieu! nous te demandons d’oublier les proscrits,
Mais de rendre sa gloire à la France abaissée;
Et laisse-nous mourir, nous brisés et meurtris,
Nous que le jour brûlant livre à la nuit glacée!

Souffrons! le crime -

Comme un archer frappe une cible,
L’implacable soleil nous perce de ses traits
Après le dur labeur, le sommeil impossible;
Cette chauve-souris qui sort des noirs marais,
La fièvre, bat nos fronts de son aile invisible.

Souffrons! le crime -

On a soif, l’eau brûle la bouche
On a faim, du pain noir; travaillez, malheureux!
À chaque coup de pioche en ce désert farouche
La mort sort de la terre avec son rire affreux,
Prend l’homme dans ses bras, l’étreint et se recouche.

Souffrons! le crime -

Mais qu’importe! rien ne nous dompte;
Nous sommes torturés et nous sommes contents.
Nous remercions Dieu vers qui notre hymne monte
De nous avoir choisis pour souffrir dans ce temps
Où tous ceux qui n’ont pas la souffrance ont la honte.

Souffrons! le crime -

Vive la grande République!
Paix à l’immensité du soir mystérieux!
Paix aux morts endormis dans la tombe stoïque!
Paix au sombre océan qui mêle sous les cieux
La plainte de Cayenne au sanglot de l’Afrique!

Souffrons! le crime aura son tour.
Oiseaux qui passez, nos chaumières,
Vents qui passez, nos soeurs, nos mères
Sont là-bas, pleurant nuit et jour.
Oiseaux, dites-leur nos misères!
Ô vents, portez-leur notre amour!
23 juillet 1853. Jersey.

Chanson

Nous nous promenions parmi les décombres
À Rozel-Tower,
Et nous écoutions les paroles sombres
Que disait la mer.

L’énorme océan, — car nous entendîmes
Ses vagues chansons, —
Disait: « Paraissez, vérités sublimes
Et bleus horizons!

» Le monde captif, sans lois et sans règles,
Est aux oppresseurs
Volez dans les cieux, ailes des grands aigles,
Esprits des penseurs!

» Naissez, levez-vous sur les flots sonores,
Sur les flots vermeils,
Traites dans la nuit poindre vos aurores,
Peuples et soleils!

Vous, laissez passer la foudre et la brume,
Les vents et les cris,
Affrontez l’orage, affrontez l’écume,
Rochers et proscrits!
Jersey, 5 août 1853.

Éblouissements

Ô temps miraculeux! ô gaîtés homériques!
Ô rires de l’Europe et des deux Amériques!
Croûtes qui larmoyez! bons dieux mal accrochés
Qui saignez dans vos coins! madones qui louchez!
Phénomènes vivants! ô choses inouïes!
Candeurs! énormités au jour épanouies!
Le goudron déclaré fétide par le suif,
Judas flairant Shylock et criant: c’est un juif!
L’arsenic indigné dénonçant la morphine,
La hotte injuriant la borne, Messaline
Reprochant à Goton son regard effronté,
Et Dupin accusant Sauzet de lâcheté!

Oui, le vide-gousset flétrit le tire-laine,
Falstaff montre du doigt le ventre de Silène,
Lacenaire, pudique et de rougeur atteint,
Dit en baissant les yeux: J’ai vu passer Castaing!

Je contemple nos temps. J’en ai le droit, je pense.
Souffrir étant mon lot, rire est ma récompense.
Je ne sais pas comment cette pauvre Clio
Fera pour se tirer de cet imbroglio.
Ma rêverie au fond de ce règne pénètre,
Quand, ne pouvant dormir, la nuit, à ma fenêtre,
Je songe, et que là-bas, dans l’ombre, à travers l’eau,
Je vois briller le phare auprès de Saint-Malo.
Donc ce moment existe! il est! Stupeur risible!
On le voit; c’est réel, et ce n’est pas possible.
L’empire est là, refait par quelques sacripants.
Bonaparte le Grand dormait. Quel guet-apens!
Il dormait dans sa tombe, absous par la patrie.
Tout à coup des brigands firent une tuerie
Qui dura tout un jour et du soir au matin;
Napoléon le Nain en sortit. Le destin,

De l’expiation implacable ministre,
Dans tout ce sang versé trempa son doigt sinistre
Pour barbouiller, affront à la gloire en lambeau,
Cette caricature au mur de ce tombeau.

Ce monde-là prospère. Il prospère, vous dis-je!
Embonpoint de la honte! époque callipyge!
Il trône, ce cokney d’Eglinton et d’Epsom,
Qui, la main sur son cœur, dit: Je mens, ergo sum.
Les jours, les mois, les ans passent; ce flegmatique,
Ce somnambule obscur, brusquement frénétique,
Que Schœlcher a nommé le président Obus,
Règne, continuant ses crimes en abus.
Ô spectacle! en plein jour, il marche et se promène,
Cet être horrible, insulte à la figure humaine!
Il s’étale effroyable, ayant tout un troupeau
De Suins et de Fortouls qui vivent sur sa peau,
Montrant ses nudités, cynique, infâme, indigne,
Sans mettre à son Baroche une feuille de vigne!
Il rit de voir à terre et montre à Machiavel
Sa parole d’honneur qu’il a tuée en duel.
Il sème l’or; — venez! — et sa largesse éclate.
Magnan ouvre sa griffe et Troplong tend sa patte.
Tout va. Les sous-coquins aident le drôle en chef.
Tout est beau, tout est bon, et tout est juste; bref,
L’église le soutient, l’opéra le constate.
Il vola! Te Deum. Il égorgea! cantate.

Lois, mœurs, maître, valets, tout est à l’avenant.
C’est un bivouac de gueux, splendide et rayonnant.
Le mépris bat des mains, admire, et dit: courage!
C’est hideux. L’entouré ressemble à l’entourage.
Quelle collection! quel choix! quel Œil-de-boeuf!
L’un vient de Loyola, l’autre vient de Babeuf!
Jamais vénitiens, romains et bergamasques
N’ont sous plus de sifflets vu passer plus de masques.
La société va sans but, sans jour, sans droit,

Et l’envers de l’habit est devenu l’endroit.
L’immondice au sommet de l’état se déploie.
Les chiffonniers, la nuit, courbés, flairant leur proie,
Allongent leurs crochets du côté du sénat.
Voyez-moi ce coquin, normand, corse, auvergnat:
C’était fait pour vieillir bélître et mourir cuistre;
C’est premier président, c’est préfet, c’est ministre.
Ce truand catholique au temps jadis vivait
Maigre, chez Flicoteaux plutôt que chez Chevet;
Il habitait au fond d’un bouge à tabatière
Un lit fait et défait, hélas, par sa portière,
Et griffonnait dès l’aube, amer, affreux, souillé,
Exhalant dans son trou l’odeur d’un chien mouillé.
Il conseille l’état pour ving-cinq mille livres
Par an. Ce petit homme, étant teneur de livres
Dans la blonde Marseille, au pays du mistral,
Fit des faux. Le voici procureur général.
Celui-là, qui courait la foire avec un singe,
Est député; cet autre, ayant fort peu de linge,
Sur la pointe du pied entrait dans les logis
Où bâillait quelque armoire aux tiroirs élargis,
Et du bourgeois absent empruntait la tunique
Nul mortel n’a jamais, de façon plus cynique,
Assouvi le désir des chemises d’autrui;
Il était grinche hier, il est juge aujourd’hui.
Ceux-ci, quand il leur plaît, chapelains de la clique,
Au saint-père accroupi font pondre une encyclique;
Ce sont des gazetiers fort puissants en haut lieu,
Car ils sont les amis particuliers de Dieu

Sachez que ces béats, quand ils parlent du temple
Comme de leur maison, n’ont pas tort; par exemple,
J’ai toujours applaudi quand ils ont affecté
Avec les saints du ciel des airs d’intimité;
Veuillot, certe, aurait pu vivre avec Saint-Antoine.
Cet autre est général comme on serait chanoine,
Parce qu’il est très gras et qu’il a trois mentons.

Cet autre fut escroc. Cet autre eut vingt bâtons
Cassés sur lui. Cet autre, admirable canaille,
Quand la bise, en janvier, nous pince et nous tenaille,
D’une savate oblique écrasant les talons,
Pour se garer du froid mettait deux pantalons
Dont les trous par bonheur n’étaient pas l’un sur l’autre.
Aujourd’hui, sénateur, dans l’empire il se vautre.
Je regrette le temps que c’était dans l’égout.
Ce ventre a nom d’Hautpoul, ce nez a nom d’Argout.
Ce prêtre, c’est la honte à l’état de prodige.
Passons vite. L’histoire abrège, elle rédige
Royer d’un coup de fouet, Mongis d’un coup de pied,
Et fuit. Royer se frotte et Mongis se rassied;
Tout est dit. Que leur fait l’affront? l’opprobre engraissé.
Quant au maître qui hait les curieux, la presse,
La tribune, et ne veut pour son règne éclatant
Ni regards, ni témoins, il doit être content
Il a plus de succès encor qu’il n’en exige;
César, devant sa cour, son pouvoir, son quadrige,
Ses lois, ses serviteurs brodés et galonnés,
Veut qu’on ferme les veux: on se bouche le nez.
Prenez ce Beauharnais et prenez une loupe;
Penchez-vous, regardez l’homme et scrutez la troupe.
Vous n’y trouverez pas l’ombre d’un bon instinct.
bsp; C’est vil et c’est féroce. En eux l’homme est éteint
Et ce qui plonge l’âme en des stupeurs profondes,
C’est la perfection de ces gredins immondes.

À ce ramas se joint un tas d’affreux poussahs,
Un tas de Triboulets et de Sancho Panças.
Sous vingt gouvernements ils ont palpé des sommes.
Aucune indignité ne manque à ces bonshommes;
Rufins poussifs, Verrès goutteux, Séjans fourbus,
Selles à tout tyran, sénateurs omnibus.
On est l’ancien soudard, on est l’ancien bourgmestre;
On tua Louis seize, on vote avec de Maistre;
Ils ont eu leur fauteuil dans tous les Luxembourgs;

Ayant vu les Maurys, ils sont faits aux Sibours;
Ils sont gais, et, contant leurs antiques bamboches,
Branlent leurs vieux gazons sur leurs vieilles caboches.
Ayant été, du temps qu'ils avaient un cheveu,
Lâches sous l'oncle, ils sont abjects sous le neveu.
Gros mandarins chinois adorant le tartare,
Ils apportent leur cœur, leur vertu, leur catarrhe,
Et prosternent, cagneux, devant sa majesté
Leur bassesse avachie en imbécillité.

Cette bande s'embrasse et se livre à des joies.
Bon ménage touchant des vautours et des oies!

Noirs empereurs romains couchés dans les tombeaux,
Qui faisiez aux sénats discuter les turbots,
Toi, dernière Lagide, ô reine au cou de cygne,
Prêtre Alexandre six qui rêves dans ta vigne,
Despotes d'Allemagne éclos dans le Rœmer,
Nemrod qui hais le ciel, Xercès qui bats la mer,
Caïphe qui tressas la couronne d'épine,
Claude après Messaline épousant Agrippine,
Caïus qu'on fit césar, Commode qu'on fit dieu,
Iturbide, Rosas, Mazarin, Richelieu,
Moines qui chassez Dante et brisez Galilée,
Saint-office, conseil des dix, chambre étoilée,
Parlements tout noircis de décrets et d'olims,
Vous sultans, les Mourads, les Achmets, les Sélims,
Rois qu'on montre aux enfants dans tous les syllabaires,
Papes, ducs, empereurs, princes, tas de Tibères!
Bourreaux toujours sanglants, toujours divinisés,
Tyrans! enseignez-moi, si vous le connaissez,
Enseignez-moi le lieu, le point, la borne où cesse
La lâcheté publique et l'humaine bassesse!
Et l'archet frémissant fait bondir tout cela!
Bal à l'hôtel de ville, au Luxembourg gala.
Allons, juges, dansez la danse de l'épée!
Gambade, ô Dombidau, pour l'onomatopée!

Polkez, Fould et Maupas, avec votre écriteau,
Toi, Persil-Guillotine, au profil de couteau!
Ours que Boustrapa montre et qu'il tient par la sangle,
Valsez, Billault, Parieu, Drouyn, Lebœuf, Delangle!
Danse, Dupin! dansez, l'horrible et le bouffon!
Hyènes, loups, chacals, non prévus par Buffon,
Leroy, Forey, tueurs au fer rongé de rouilles,
Dansez! dansez, Berger, d'Hautpoul, Murat, citrouilles!

Et l'on râle en exil, à Cayenne, à Blidah!
Et sur le Duguesclin, et sur le Canada,
Des enfants de dix ans, brigands qu'on extermine,
Agonisent, brûlés de fièvre et de vermine!
Et les mères, pleurant sous l'homme triomphant,
Ne savent même pas où se meurt leur enfant!
Et Samson reparaît, et sort de ses retraites!
Et, le soir, on entend, sur d'horribles charrettes
Qui traversent la ville et qu'on suit à pas lents,
Quelque chose sauter dans des paniers sanglants!
Oh! laissez! laissez-moi m'enfuir sur le rivage!
Laissez-moi respirer l'odeur du flot sauvage!
Jersey rit, terre libre, au sein des sombres mers;
Les genêts sont en fleur, l'agneau paît les prés verts;
L'écume jette aux rocs ses blanches mousselines;
Par moments apparaît, au sommet des collines,
Livrant ses crins épars au vent âpre et joyeux,
Un cheval effaré qui hennit dans les cieux!
24 mai. Jersey.

À ceux qui dorment

Réveillez-vous, assez de honte!
Bravez boulets et biscayens.
Il est temps qu’enfin le flot monte.
Assez de honte, citoyens!
Troussez les manches de la blouse.
  Les hommes de quatrevingt-douze
  Affrontaient vingt rois combattants.
  Brisez vos fers, forcez vos geôles!
  Quoi! vous avez peur de ces drôles!
  Vos pères bravaient les titans!

  Levez-vous! foudroyez et la horde et le maître!
  Vous avez Dieu pour vous et contre vous le prêtre
  Dieu seul est souverain.
  Devant lui nul n’est fort et tous sont périssables.
  Il chasse comme un chien le grand tigre des sables
  Et le dragon marin;
  Rien qu’en soufflant dessus, comme un oiseau d’un arbre,
  Il peut faire envoler de leur temple de marbre
  Les idoles d’airain.

  Vous n’êtes pas armés? qu’importe!
  Prends ta fourche, prends ton marteau!
  Arrache le gond de ta porte,
  Emplis de pierres ton manteau!
  Et poussez le cri d’espérance!
  Redevenez la grande -France!
  Redevenez le grand Paris!
  Délivrez, frémissants de rage,
  Votre pays de l’esclavage,
  Votre mémoire du mépris!

  Quoi! faut-il vous citer les royalistes même?
  On était grand aux jours de la lutte suprême.

Alors, que voyait-on?
La bravoure, ajoutant à l’homme une coudée,
Etait dans les deux camps. N’est-il pas vrai, Vendée,
Ô dur pays breton?
Pour vaincre un bastion, pour rompre une muraille,
Pour prendre cent canons vomissant la mitraille.
Il suffit d’un bâton!

Si dans ce cloaque ou demeure,
Si cela dure encore un jour,
Si cela dure encore une heure,
Je brise clairon et tambour,
Je flétris ces pusillanimes,
Ô vieux peuple des jours sublimes,
Géants à qui nous les mêlions,
Je les laisse trembler leurs fièvres,
Et je déclare que ces lièvres
Ne sont pas vos fils, ô lions!
15 janvier 1853.

Luna

Ô France, quoique tu sommeilles,
Nous t’appelons, nous les proscrits!
Les ténèbres ont des oreilles,
Et les profondeurs ont des cris.

Le despotisme âpre et sans gloire
Sur les peuples découragés
Ferme la grille épaisse et noire
Des erreurs et des préjugés;

Il tient sous clef l’essaim fidèle
Des fermes penseurs, des héros,
Mais l’Idée avec un coup d’aile
Ecartera les durs barreaux,

Et, comme en l’an quatrevingt-onze,
Reprendra son vol souverain;
Car briser la cage de bronze,
C’est facile à l’oiseau d’airain.

L’obscurité couvre le monde,
Mais l’Idée illumine et luit;
De sa clarté blanche elle inonde
Les sombres azurs de la nuit.

Elle est le fanal solitaire,
Le rayon providentiel.
Elle est la lampe de la terre
Qui ne peut s’allumer qu’au ciel.

Elle apaise l’âme qui souffre,
Guide la vie, endort la mort;
Elle montre aux méchants le gouffre,
Elle montre aux justes le port.

En voyant dans la brume obscure
L’Idée, amour des tristes yeux,
Monter calme, sereine et pure,
Sur l’horizon mystérieux,

Les fanatismes et les haines
Rugissent devant chaque seuil,
Comme hurlent les chiens obscènes
Quand apparaît la lune en deuil.

Oh! contemplez l’Idée altière,
Nations! son front surhumain
A, dès à présent, la lumière
Qui vous éclairera demain!
31 mars. Jersey.

Aux femmes

Quand tout se fait petit, femmes, vous restez grandes.
En vain, aux murs sanglants accrochant des guirlandes,
Ils ont ouvert le bal et la danse; ô nos soeurs,
Devant ces scélérats transformés en valseurs
Vous haussez, — châtiment! — vos charmantes épaules.
Votre divin sourire extermine ces drôles.
En vain leur frac brodé scintille; en vain, brigands,
Pour vous plaire ils ont mis à leurs griffes des gants,
Et de leur vil tricorne ils ont doré les ganses;
Vous bafouez ces gants, ces fracs, ces élégances,
Cet empire tout neuf et déjà vermoulu.
Dieu vous a tout donné, femmes; il a voulu
Que les seuls alcyons tinssent tête à l'orage,
Et qu'étant la beauté, vous fussiez le courage.

Les femmes ici-bas et là-haut les aïeux,
Voilà ce qui nous reste!

Abjection! nos yeux
Plongent dans une nuit toujours plus épaissie.
Oui, le peuple français, oui, le peuple messie,
Oui, ce grand forgeron du droit universel
Dont, depuis soixante ans, l'enclume sous le ciel
Luit et sonne, dont l'âtre incessamment pétille,
Qui fit voler au vent les tours de la Bastille,
Qui broya, se dressant tout à coup souverain,
Mille ans de royauté sous son talon d'airain,
Ce peuple dont le souffle, ainsi que des fumées,
Faisait tourbillonner les rois et les armées,
Qui, lorsqu'il se fâchait, brisait sous son bâton
Le géant Robespierre et le titan Danton,
Oui, ce peuple invincible, oui, ce peuple superbe
Tremble aujourd'hui, pâlit, frissonne comme l'herbe,
Claque des dents, se cache et n'ose dire un mot

Devant Magnan, ce reître, et Troplong, ce grimaud!
Oui, nous voyons cela! Nous tenant dans leurs serres,
Mangeant les millions en face des misères,
Les Fortoul, les Rouher, êtres stupéfiants,
S’étalent; on se tait. Nos maîtres ruffians
À Cayenne, en un bagne, abîme d’agonie,
Accouplent l’héroïsme avec l’ignominie;

On se tait. Les pontons râlent; que dit-on? rien.
Des enfants sont forçats en Afrique; c’est bien.
Si vous pleurez, tenez votre larme secrète.
Le bourreau, noir faucheur, debout dans sa charrette,
Revient de la moisson avec son panier plein
Pas un souffle. Il est là, ce Tibère-Ezzelin
Qui se croit scorpion et n’est que scolopendre,
Fusillant, et jaloux de Haynau qui peut pendre;
Eclaboussé de sang, le prêtre l’applaudit;
Il est là, ce César chauve-souris qui dit
Aux rois: voyez mon sceptre; aux gueux: voyez mon
Ce vainqueur qui, béni, lavé, sacré, sublime, [crime
De deux pourpres vêtu, dans l’histoire s’assied
Le globe dans sa main, un boulet à son pied;
Il nous crache au visage, il règne! nul ne bouge.

Et c’est à votre front qu’on voit monter le rouge,
C’est vous qui vous levez et qui vous indignez,
Femmes; le sein gonflé, les yeux de pleurs baignés,
Vous huez le tyran, vous consolez les tombes,
Et le vautour frémit sous le bec des colombes!

Et moi, proscrit pensif, je vous dis: Gloire à vous!
Oh! oui, vous êtes bien le sexe fier et doux,
Ardent au dévouement, ardent à la souffrance,
Toujours prêt à la lutte, à Béthulie, en France,
Dont l’âme à la hauteur des héros s’élargit,
D’où se lève Judith, d’où Charlotte surgit!
Vous mêlez la bravoure à la mélancolie.

Vous êtes Porcia, vous êtes Cornélie,
Vous êtes Arria qui saigne et qui sourit;
Oui, vous avez toujours en vous ce même esprit
Qui relève et soutient les nations tombées,
Qui suscite la Juive et les sept Machabées,
Qui dans toi, Jeanne d’Arc, fait revivre Amadis,
Et qui, sur le chemin des tyrans interdits,
Pour les épouvanter dans leur gloire éphémère,
Met tantôt une vierge et tantôt une mère!

Si bien que, par moments, lorsqu’en nos visions
Nous voyons, secouant un glaive de rayons,
Dans les cieux apparaître une figure ailée,
Saint-Michel sous ses pieds foulant l’hydre écaillée,
Nous disons: c’est la Gloire et c’est la Liberté!
Et nous croyons, devant sa grâce et sa beauté, [nomme,
Quand nous cherchons le nom dont il faut qu’on le
Que l’archange est plutôt une femme qu’un homme!
Jersey. 30 mai 1853.

Au peuple

Il te ressemble; il est terrible et pacifique.
Il est sous l’infini le niveau magnifique;
Il a le mouvement, il a l’immensité.
Apaisé d’un rayon et d’un souffle agité,
Tantôt c’est l’harmonie et tantôt le cri rauque.
Les monstres sont à l’aise en sa profondeur glauque;
La trombe y germe; il a des gouffres inconnus
D’où ceux qui l’ont bravé ne sont pas revenus;
Sur son énormité le colosse chavire;
Gomme toi le despote il brise le navire;
Le fanal est sur lui comme l’esprit sur toi;
Il foudroie, il caresse, et Dieu seul sait pourquoi;
Sa vague, où l’on entend comme des chocs d’armures,
Emplit la sombre nuit de monstrueux murmures,
Et l’on sent que ce flot, comme toi, gouffre humain,
Ayant rugi ce soir, dévorera demain.
Son onde est une lame aussi bien que le glaive;
Il chante un hymne immense à Vénus qui se lève;
Sa rondeur formidable, azur universel,
Accepte en son miroir tous les astres du ciel;
Il a la force rude et la grâce superbe;
Il déracine un roc, il épargne un brin d’herbe;
Il jette comme toi l’écume aux fiers sommets,
O peuple; seulement, lui, ne trompe jamais
Quand, l’œil fixe, et debout sur sa grève sacrée,
Et pensif, on attend l’heure de sa marée.
Au bord de l’océan, juillet 1853.

Apportez vos chaudrons, sorcières de Shakespeare

Apportez vos chaudrons, sorcières de Shakespeare,
Sorcières de Macbeth, prenez-moi tout l’empire,
L’ancien et le nouveau; sur le même réchaud
Mettez le gros Berger et le comte Frochot,
Maupas avec Réal, Hullin sur Espinasse,
La Saint-Napoléon avec la Saint-Ignace,

Fould et Maret, Fouché gâté, Troplong pourri,
Retirez Austerlitz, ajoutez Satory,
Penchez-vous, crins épars, œil ardent, gorge nue,
Soufflez à pleins poumons le feu sous la cornue;
Regardez le petit se dégager du grand;
Faites évaporer Baroche et Talleyrand,
Le neveu qui descend pendant que l’oncle monte;
Que reste-t-il au fond de l’alambic? La honte.
Jersey. 26 mai 1853.

Le Parti du crime

«Amis et frères! en présence de ce gouvernement infâme, négation de toute morale, obstacle à tout progrès social, en présence de ce gouvernement meurtrier du peuple, assassin de la République et violateur des lois, de ce gouvernement né de la force et qui doit périr par la force, de ce gouvernement élevé par le crime et qui doit être terrassé par le droit, le français digne du nom de citoyen ne sait pas, ne veut pas savoir s'il y a quelque part des semblants de scrutin, des comédies de suffrage universel et des parodies d'appel à la nation; il ne s'informe pas s'il y a des hommes qui votent et des hommes qui font voter, s'il y a un troupeau qu'on appelle le sénat et qui délibère et un autre troupeau qu'on appelle le peuple et qui obéit; il ne s'informe pas si le pape va sacrer au maître-autel de Notre-Dame l'homme qui - n'en doutez pas, ceci est l'avenir inévitable - sera ferré au poteau par le bourreau; — en présence de M. Bonaparte et de son gouvernement, le citoyen digne de ce nom ne fait qu'une chose et n'a qu'une chose à faire: charger son fusil, et attendre l'heure.

" JERSEY, 31 OCTOBRE 1852."

Déclaration des proscrits républicains de Jersey, à propos de l'empire, publiée par le Moniteur, signée pour copie conforme:

VICTOR HUGO, FAURE, FOMBERTAUX.

«Nous flétrissons de l'énergie la plus vigoureuse de notre âme les ignobles et coupables manifestes du Parti du Crime."

(RIANCEY, JOURNAL L'UNION, 22 NOVEMBRE.)

"Le Parti du Crime relève la tête."

(TOUS LES JOURNAUX ÉLYSÉENS EN CHOEUR)

Ainsi ce gouvernant dont l'ongle est une griffe,
Ce masque impérial, Bonaparte apocryphe,
À coup sûr Beauharnais, peut-être Verhueil,
Qui, pour la mettre en croix, livra, sbire cruel,
Rome républicaine à Rome catholique,
Cet homme, l'assassin de la chose publique,
Ce parvenu, choisi par le destin sans yeux,

Ainsi, lui, ce glouton singeant l’ambitieux,
Cette altesse quelconque habile aux catastrophes,
Ce loup sur qui je lâche une meute de strophes,
Ainsi ce boucanier, ainsi ce chourineur
À fait d’un jour d’orgueil un jour de déshonneur,
Mis sur la gloire un crime et souillé la victoire
Il a volé, l’infâme, Austerlitz à l’histoire;
Brigand, dans ce trophée il a pris un poignard;
Il a broyé bourgeois, ouvrier, campagnard;
Il a fait de corps morts une horrible étagère
Derrière les barreaux de la cité Bergère;
Il s’est, le sabre en main, rué sur son serment;
Il a tué les lois et le gouvernement,
La justice, l’honneur, tout, jusqu’à l’espérance
Il a rougi de sang, de ton sang pur, ô France,
Tous nos fleuves, depuis la Seine jusqu’au Var;
Il a conquis le Louvre en méritant Clamar;
Et maintenant il règne, appuyant, ô patrie,
Son vil talon fangeux sur ta bouche meurtrie
Voilà ce qu’il a fait; je n’exagère rien;
Et quand, nous indignant de ce galérien,
Et de tous les escrocs de cette dictature,
Croyant rêver devant cette affreuse aventure,
Nous disons, de dégoût et d’horreur soulevés:
— Citoyens, marchons! Peuple, aux armes, aux pavés!
À bas ce sabre abject qui n’est pas même un glaive!
Que le jour reparaisse et que le droit se lève! —
C’est nous, proscrits frappés par ces coquins hardis,
Nous, les assassinés, qui sommes les bandits!
Nous qui voulons le meurtre et les guerres civiles!
Nous qui mettons la torche aux quatre coins des villes!
Donc, trôner par la mort, fouler aux pieds le droit
Etre fourbe, impudent, cynique, atroce, adroit;
Dire: je suis César, et n’être qu’un maroufle
Etouffer la pensée et la vie et le souffle;
Forcer quatre-vingt-neuf qui marche à reculer;
Supprimer lois, tribune et presse; museler

La grande nation comme une bête fauve;
Régner par la caserne et du fond d'une alcôve;
Restaurer les abus au profit des félons
Livrer ce pauvre peuple aux voraces Troplongs,
Sous prétexte qu'il fut, loin des temps où nous sommes,
Dévoré par les rois et par les gentilshommes
Faire manger aux chiens ce reste des lions;
Prendre gaîment pour soi palais et millions;
S'afficher tout crûment satrape, et, sans sourdines,
Mener joyeuse vie avec des gourgandines
Torturer des héros dans le bagne exécré;
Bannir quiconque est ferme et fier; vivre entouré
De grecs, comme à Byzance autrefois le despote
Etre le bras qui tue et la main qui tripote
Ceci, c'est la justice, ô peuple, et la vertu!
Et confesser le droit par le meurtre abattu
Dans l'exil, à travers l'encens et les fumées,
Dire en face aux tyrans, dire en face aux armées
— Violence, injustice et force sont vos noms
Vous êtes les soldats, vous êtes les canons;
La terre est sous vos pieds comme votre royaume
Vous êtes le colosse et nous sommes l'atome;
Eh bien! guerre! et luttons, c'est notre volonté,
Vous, pour l'oppression, nous, pour la liberté! —
Montrer les noirs pontons, montrer les catacombes,
Et s'écrier, debout sur la pierre des tombes.
— Français! craignez d'avoir un jour pour repentirs
Les pleurs des innocents et les os des martyrs!
Brise l'homme sépulcre, ô France! ressuscite!
Arrache de ton flanc ce Néron parasite!
Sors de terre sanglante et belle, et dresse-toi,
Dans une main le glaive et dans l'autre la loi! —
Jeter ce cri du fond de son âme proscrite,
Attaquer le forban, démasquer l'hypocrite
Parce que l'honneur parle et parce qu'il le faut,
C'est le crime, cela! — Tu l'entends, toi, là-haut!
Oui, voilà ce qu'on dit, mon Dieu, devant ta face!

Témoin toujours présent qu’aucune ombre n’efface,
Voilà ce qu’on étale à tes yeux éternels!

Quoi! le sang fume aux mains de tous ces criminels!
Quoi! les morts, vierge, enfant, vieillards et femmes grosses
Ont à peine eu le temps de pourrir dans leurs fosses!
Quoi! Paris saigne encor! quoi! devant tous les yeux,
Son faux serment est là qui plane dans les cieux!
Et voilà comme parle un tas d’êtres immondes
Ô noir bouillonnement des colères profondes!
Et maint vivant, gavé, triomphant et vermeil,
Reprend: « Ce bruit qu’on fait dérange mon sommeil.
Tout va bien. Les marchands triplent leurs clientèles,
Et nos femmes ne sont que fleurs et que dentelles!
— De quoi donc se plaint-on? crie un autre quidam;
En flânant sur l’asphalte et sur le macadam,
Je gagne tous les jours trois cents francs à la Bourse.
L’argent coule aujourd’hui comme l’eau d’une source;
Les ouvriers maçons ont trois livres dix sous,
C’est superbe; Paris est sens dessus dessous.
Il paraît qu’on a mis dehors les démagogues.
Tant mieux. Moi j’applaudis les bals et les églogues
Du prince qu’autrefois à tort je reniais.
Que m’importe qu’on ait chassé quelques niais?
Quant aux morts, ils sont morts. Paix à ces imbéciles!
Vivent les gens d’esprit! vivent ces temps faciles
Où l’on peut à son choix prendre pour nourricier
Le crédit mobilier ou le crédit foncier!
La république rouge aboie en ses cavernes,
C’est affreux! Liberté, droit, progrès, balivernes
Hier encor j’empochais une prime d’un franc;
Et moi, je sens fort peu, j’en conviens, je suis franc,
Les déclamations m’étant indifférentes,
La baisse de l’honneur dans la hausse des rentes.”

Ô langage hideux! on le tient, on l’entend!
Eh bien, sachez-le donc; repus au cœur content,

Que nous vous le disions bien une fois pour toutes,
Oui, nous, les vagabonds dispersés sur les routes,
Errant sans passe-port, sans nom et sans foyer,
Nous autres, les proscrits qu’on ne fait pas ployer,
Nous qui n’acceptons point qu’un peuple s’abrutisse,
Qui d’ailleurs ne voulons, tout en voulant justice,
D’aucune représaille et d’aucun échafaud,’
Nous, dis-je, les vaincus sur qui Mandrin prévaut,
Pour que la liberté revive, et que la honte
Meure, et qu’à tous les fronts l’honneur serein remonte,
Pour affranchir romains, lombards, germains, hongrois,
Pour faire rayonner, soleil de tous les droits,
La république mère au centre de l’Europe,
Pour réconcilier le palais et l’échoppe,
Pour faire refleurir la fleur Fraternité,
Pour fonder du travail le droit incontesté,
Pour tirer les martyrs de ces bagnes infâmes,
Pour rendre aux fils le père et les maris aux femmes,
Pour qu’enfin ce grand siècle et cette nation
Sortent du Bonaparte et de l’abjection,
Pour atteindre à ce but où notre âme s’élance,
Nous nous ceignons les reins dans l’ombre et le silence
Nous nous déclarons prêts, prêts, entendez-vous bien?
— Le sacrifice est tout, la souffrance n’est rien, —
Prêts, quand Dieu fera signe, à donner notre vie
Car, à voir ce qui vit, la mort nous fait envie,
Car nous sommes tous mal sous ce drôle effronté,
Vivant, nous sans patrie, et vous sans liberté!

Oui, sachez-le, vous tous que l’air libre importune
Et qui dans ce fumier plantez votre fortune,
Nous ne laisserons pas le peuple s’assoupir;
Oui, nous appellerons, jusqu’au dernier soupir,
Au secours de la France aux fers et presque éteinte,
Comme nos grands -aïeux, l’insurrection sainte
Nous convierons Dieu même à foudroyer ceci
Et c’est notre pensée et nous sommes ainsi,

Aimant mieux, dût le sort nous broyer sous sa roue,
Voir couler notre sang que croupir votre boue.
28 janvier.

On dit: — Soyez prudents. — Puis vient ce dithyrambe

On dit: — Soyez prudents. — Puis vient ce dithyrambe:
«… Qui veut frapper Néron
Rampe, et ne se fait pas précéder d'un ïambe
Soufflant dans un clairon.

» Souviens-toi d'Ettenheim et des pièges célèbres;
Attends le jour marqué.
Sois comme Chéréas qui vient dans les ténèbres,
Seul, muet et masqué.

» La prudence conduit au but qui sait la suivre.
Marche, d'ombre vêtu…"
C'est bien; je laisse à ceux qui veulent longtemps vivre
Cette lâche vertu.
2 août 1853. Jersey.

À Juvénal

I

Retournons à l’école, ô mon vieux Juvénal.
Homme d’ivoire et d’or, descends du tribunal
Où depuis deux mille ans tes vers superbes tonnent.
Il paraît, vois-tu bien, ces choses nous étonnent,
Mais c’est la vérité selon monsieur Riancey,
Que lorsqu’un peu de temps sur le sang a passé,
Après un an ou deux, c’est une découverte,
Quoi qu’en disent les morts avec leur bouche verte,
Le meurtre n’est plus meurtre et le vol n’est plus vol.
Monsieur Veuillot, qui tient d’Ignace et d’Auriol,
Nous l’affirme, quand l’heure a tourné sur l’horloge,
De notre entendement ceci fait peu l’éloge,
Pourvu qu’à Notre-Dame on brûle de l’encens
Et que l’abonné vienne aux journaux bien pensants,
Il paraît que, sortant de son hideux suaire,
Joyeux, en panthéon changeant son ossuaire,
Dans l’opération par monsieur Fould aidé,
Par les juges lavé, par les filles fardé,
Ô miracle! entouré de croyants et d’apôtres,
En dépit des rêveurs, en dépit de nous autres
Noirs poëtes bourrus qui n’y comprenons rien,
Le mal prend tout à coup la figure du bien.

II

Il est l’appui de l’ordre; il est bon catholique
Il signe hardiment - prospérité publique.
La trahison s’habille en général français
L’archevêque ébloui bénit le dieu Succès
C’était crime jeudi, mais c’est haut fait dimanche.
Du pourpoint Probité l’on retourne la manche.
Tout est dit. La vertu tombe dans l’arriéré.

L’honneur est un vieux fou dans sa cave muré.
Ô grand penseur de bronze, en nos dures cervelles
Faisons entrer un peu ces morales nouvelles,
Lorsque sur la Grand’Combe ou sur le blanc de zinc
On a revendu vingt ce qu’on a payé cinq,
Sache qu’un guet-apens par où nous triomphâmes
Est juste, honnête et bon. Tout au rebours des femmes,
Sache qu’en vieillissant le crime devient beau.
Il plane cygne après s’être envolé corbeau.
Oui, tout cadavre utile exhale une odeur d’ambre.
Que vient-on nous parler d’un crime de décembre
Quand nous sommes en juin! l’herbe a poussé dessus.
Toute la question, la voici: fils, tissus,
Cotons et sucres bruts prospèrent; le temps passe.
Le parjure difforme et la trahison basse
En avançant en âge ont la propriété
De perdre leur bassesse et leur difformité
Et l’assassinat louche et tout souillé de lange
Change son front de spectre en un visage d’ange.

III

Et comme en même temps, dans ce travail normal,
La vertu devient faute et le bien devient mal,
Apprends que, quand Saturne a soufflé sur leur rôle,
Néron est un sauveur et Spartacus un drôle.
La raison obstinée a beau faire du bruit;
La justice, ombre pâle, a beau, dans notre nuit,
Murmurer comme un souffle à toutes les oreilles;
On laisse dans leur coin bougonner ces deux vieilles.
Narcisse gazetier lapide Scévola.
Accoutumons nos yeux à ces lumières-là
Qui font qu’on aperçoit tout sous un nouvel angle,
Et qu’on voit Malesherbe en regardant Delangle.
Sachons dire: Lebœuf est grand, Persil est beau
Et laissons la pudeur au fond du lavabo.

IV

Le bon, le sûr, le vrai, c’est l’or dans notre caisse.
L’homme est extravagant qui, lorsque tout s’affaisse,
Proteste seul debout dans une nation,
Et porte à bras tendu son indignation.
Que diable! il faut pourtant vivre de l’air des rues,
Et ne pas s’entêter aux choses disparues.
Quoi! tout meurt ici-bas, l’aigle comme le ver,
Le charançon périt sous la neige l’hiver,
Quoi! le Pont-Neuf fléchit lorsque les eaux sont grosses,
Quoi! mon coude est troué, quoi! je perce mes chausses,
Quoi! mon feutre était neuf et s’est usé depuis,
Et la vérité, maître, aurait, dans son vieux puits,
Cette prétention rare d’être éternelle!
De ne pas se mouiller quand il pleut, d’être belle
À jamais, d’être reine en n’ayant pas le sou,
Et de ne pas mourir quand on lui tord le cou!
Allons donc! Citoyens, c’est au fait qu’il faut croire

V

Sur ce, les charlatans prêchent leur auditoire
D’idiots, de mouchards, de grecs, de philistins,
Et de gens pleins d’esprit détroussant les crétins
La Bourse rit; la hausse offre aux badauds ses prismes;
La douce hypocrisie éclate en aphorismes;
C’est bien, nous gagnons gros et nous sommes contents
Et ce sont, Juvénal, les maximes du temps.
Quelque sous-diacre, éclos dans je ne sais quel bouge,
Trouva ces vérités en balayant Montrouge,
Si bien qu’aujourd’hui fiers et rois des temps nouveaux,
Messieurs les aigrefins et messieurs les dévots
Déclarent, s’éclairant aux lueurs de leur cierge,
Jeanne d’Arc courtisane et Messaline vierge.
Voilà ce que curés, évêques, talapoins,

Au nom du Dieu vivant, démontrent en trois points,
Et ce que le filou qui fouille dans ma poche
Prouve par A plus B, par Argout plus Baroche.

VI

Maître! voilà-t-il pas de quoi nous indigner?
À quoi bon s’exclamer? à quoi bon trépigner?
Nous avons l’habitude, en songeurs que nous sommes,
De contempler les nains bien moins que les grands
Même toi satirique, et moi tribun amer, [hommes;
Nous regardons en haut, le bourgeois dit: en l’air;
C’est notre infirmité. Nous fuyons la rencontre
Des sots et des méchants. Quand le Dombidau montre
Son crâne et que le Fould avance son menton,
J’aime mieux Jacques Coeur, tu préfères Caton
La gloire des héros, des sages que Dieu crée,
Est notre vision éternelle et sacrée;
Eblouis, l’œil noyé des clartés de l’azur,
Nous passons notre vie à voir dans l’éther pur
Resplendir les géants, penseurs ou capitaines
Nous regardons, au bruit des fanfares lointaines,
Au-dessus de ce monde où l’ombre règne encor,
Mêlant dans les rayons leurs vagues poitrails d’or,
Une foule de chars voler dans les nuées.
Aussi l’essaim des gueux et des prostituées,
Quand il se heurte à nous, blesse nos yeux pensifs.

Soit. Mais réfléchissons. Soyons moins exclusifs.
Je hais les cœurs abjects, et toi, tu t’en défies;
Mais laissons-les en paix dans leurs philosophies.

VII

Et puis, même en dehors de tout ceci, vraiment,
Peut-on blâmer l’instinct et le tempérament?
Ne doit-on pas se faire aux natures des êtres?

La fange a ses amants et l’ordure a ses prêtres;
De la cité bourbier le vice est citoyen;
Où l’un se trouve mal, l’autre se trouve bien;
J’en atteste Minos et j’en fais juge Eaque,
Le paradis du porc, n’est-ce pas le cloaque?
Voyons, en quoi, réponds, génie âpre et subtil,
Cela nous touche-t-il et nous regarde-t-il,
Quand l’homme du serment dans le meurtre patauge,
Quand monsieur Beauharnais fait du pouvoir une auge,
Si quelque évêque arrive et chante alleluia,
Si Saint-Arnaud bénit la main qui le paya,
Si tel ou tel bourgeois le célèbre et le loue,
S’il est des estomacs qui digèrent la boue?
Quoi! quand la France tremble au vent des trahisons,
Stupéfaits et naïfs, nous nous ébahissons
Si Parieu vient manger des glands sous ce grand chêne!
Nous trouvons surprenant que l’eau coule à la Seine,
Nous trouvons merveilleux que Troplong soit Scapin,
Nous trouvons inouï que Dupin soit Dupin!

VIII

Un vieux penchant humain mène à la turpitude.
L’opprobre est un logis, un centre, une habitude,
Un toit, un oreiller, un lit tiède et charmant,
Un bon manteau bien ample où l’on est chaudement.
L’opprobre est le milieu respirable aux immondes.
Quoi! nous nous étonnons d’ouïr dans les deux mondes
Les dupes faisant chœur avec les chenapans,
Les gredins, les niais vanter ce guet-apens!
Mais ce sont là les lois de la mère nature.
C’est de l’antique instinct l’éternelle aventure.
Par le point qui séduit ses appétits flattés
Chaque bête se plaît aux monstruosités.
Quoi! ce crime est hideux! quoi! ce crime est stupide!
N’est-il plus d’animaux pour l’admirer? Le vide
S’est-il fait? N’est-il plus d’êtres vils et rampants?

N’est-il plus de chacals? n’est-il plus de serpents?
Quoi! les baudets ont-ils pris tout à coup des ailes,
Et se sont-ils enfuis aux voûtes éternelles?
De la création l’âne a-t-il disparu?
Quand Cyrus, Annibal, César, montaient à cru
Cet effrayant cheval qu’on appelle la gloire,
Quand, ailés, effarés de joie et de victoire,
Ils passaient flamboyants au fond des cieux vermeils,
Les aigles leur craient: vous êtes nos pareils!
Les aigles leur criaient: vous portez le tonnerre!
Aujourd’hui les hiboux acclament Lacenaire.
Eh bien! je trouve bon que cela soit ainsi.
J’applaudis les hiboux et je leur dis: merci.
La sottise se mêle à ce concert sinistre,
Tant mieux. Dans sa gazette, ô Juvénal, tel cuistre
Déclare, avec messieurs d’Arras et de Beauvais,
Mandrin très bon, et dit l’honnête homme mauvais,
Foule aux pieds les héros et vante les infâmes,
C’est tout simple; et, vraiment, nous serions bonnes âmes
De nous émerveiller lorsque nous entendons
Les Veuillots aux lauriers préférer les chardons!

IX

Donc laissons aboyer la conscience humaine
Comme un chien qui s’agite et qui tire sa chaîne.
Guerre aux justes proscrits! gloire aux coquins fêtés!
Et faisons bonne mine à ces réalités.
Acceptons cet empire unique et véritable.
Saluons sans broncher Trestaillon connétable,
Mingrat grand aumônier, Bosco grand électeur;
Et ne nous fâchons pas s’il advient qu’un rhéteur,
Un homme du sénat, un homme du conclave,
Un eunuque, un cagot, un sophiste, un esclave,
Esprit sauteur prenant la phrase pour tremplin,
Après avoir chanté César de grandeur plein,
Et ses perfections et ses mansuétudes,

Insulte les bannis jetés aux solitudes,
Ces brigands qu’a vaincus Tibère Amphitryon.
Vois-tu, c’est un talent de plus dans l’histrion;
C’est de l’art de flatter le plus exquis peut-être;
On chatouille moins bien Henri huit, le bon maître,
En louant Henri huit qu’en déchirant Morus.
Les dictateurs d’esprit, bourrés d’éloges crus,
Sont friands, dans leur gloire et dans leurs arrogances,
De ces raffinements et de ces élégances.
Poëte, c’est ainsi que les despotes sont.
Le pouvoir, les honneurs sont plus doux quand ils ont
Sur l’échafaud du juste une fenêtre ouverte.
Les exilés, pleurant près de la mer déserte,
Les sages torturés, les martyrs expirants
Sont l’assaisonnement du bonheur des tyrans.
Juvénal, Juvénal, mon vieux lion classique,
Notre vin de Champagne et ton vin de Massique,
Les festins, les palais, et le luxe effréné,
L’adhésion du prêtre et l’amour de Phryné,
Les triomphes, l’orgueil, les respects, les caresses,
Toutes les voluptés et toutes les ivresses
Dont s’abreuvait Séjan, dont se gorgeait Rufin,
Sont meilleures à boire, ont un goût bien plus fin,
Si l’on n’est pas un sot à cervelle exiguë,
Dans la coupe où Socrate hier but la ciguë!

5 février 1853.

Floréal

Au retour des beaux jours, dans ce vert floréal
Où meurent les Danton trahis par les Réal,
Quand l’étable s’agite au fond des métairies,
Quand l’eau vive au soleil se change en pierreries,
Quand la grisette assise, une aiguille à la main,
Soupire, et, de côté regardant le chemin,
Voudrait aller cueillir des fleurs au lieu de coudre,
Quand les nids font l’amour, quand le pommier se poudre
Pour le printemps ainsi qu’un marquis pour le bal,
Quand, par mai réveillés, Charles douze, Annibal,
Disent: c’est l’heure! et font vers les sanglants tumultes
Rouler, l’un les canons, l’autre les catapultes;
Moi, je crie: ô soleil! salut! parmi les fleurs
J’entends les gais pinsons et les merles siffleurs;
L’arbre chante; j’accours; ô printemps! on vit double
Gallus entraîne au bois Lycoris qui se trouble;
Tout rayonne; et le ciel, couvant l’homme enchanté,
N’est plus qu’un grand regard plein de sérénité!
Alors l’herbe m’invite et le pré me convie;
Alors j’absous le sort, je pardonne à la vie,
Et je dis: Pourquoi faire autre chose qu’aimer?
Je sens, comme au dehors, tout en moi s’animer,
Et je dis aux oiseaux: e Petits oiseaux, vous n’êtes
Que des chardonnerets et des bergeronnettes,
Vous ne me connaissez pas même, vous allez
Au hasard dans les champs, dans les bois, dans les blés,
Pêle-mêle, pluviers, grimpereaux, hochequeues,
Dressant vos huppes d’or, lissant vos plumes bleues
Vous êtes, quoique beaux, très bêtes; votre loi,
C’est d’errer; vous chantez en l’air sans savoir quoi
Eh bien, vous m’inondez d’émotions sacrées!
Et quand je vous entends sur les branches dorées,
Oiseaux, mon aile s’ouvre, et mon cœur rajeuni
Boit à l’amour sans fond et s’emplit d’infini!”

Et je me laisse aller aux longues rêveries.
Ô feuilles d'arbre! oubli! bœufs mugissants! prairies!
Mais dans ces moments-là, tu le sais, Juvénal,
Qu'il sorte par hasard de ma poche un journal,
Et que mon œil distrait, qui vers les cieux remonte,
Heurte l'un de ces noms qui veulent dire honte,
Alors toute l'horreur revient; dans les bois verts
Némésis m'apparaît et me montre à travers
Les rameaux et les fleurs sa gorge de furie.

C'est que tu veux tout l'homme, ô devoir! ô patrie!
C'est que lorsque ton flanc saigne, ô France, tu veux
Que l'angoisse nous tienne et dresse nos cheveux,
Que nous ne regardions plus autre chose au monde,
Et que notre œil, noyé dans la pitié profonde,
Cesse de voir les cieux pour ne voir que ton sang!

Et je me lève, et tout s'efface, et, frémissant,
Je n'ai plus sous les yeux qu'un peuple à la torture,
Crimes sans châtiment, griefs sans sépulture,
Les géants garrottés livrés aux avortons,
Femmes dans les cachots, enfants dans les pontons,
Bagnes, sénats, proscrits, cadavres, gémonies
Alors, foulant aux pieds toutes les fleurs ternies,
Je m'enfuis, et je dis à ce soleil si doux:
Je veux l'ombre! et je crie aux oiseaux: taisez-vous!

Et je pleure! et la strophe, éclose de ma bouche,
Bat mon front orageux de son aile farouche.

Ainsi pas de printemps! ainsi pas de ciel bleu!
Ô bandits, et toi, fils d'Hortense de Saint-Leu,
Soyez maudits, d'abord d'être ce que vous êtes,
Et puis soyez maudits d'obséder les poëtes!
Soyez maudits, Troplong, Fould, Magnan, Faustin deux,
De faire au penseur triste un cortège hideux,
De le suivre au désert, dans les champs, sous les ormes,

De mêler aux forêts vos figures difformes!
Soyez maudits, bourreaux qui lui masquez le jour,
D’emplir de haine un cœur qui déborde d’amour!
28 mai. Jersey.

Stella

Je m’étais endormi la nuit près de la grève.
Un vent frais m’éveilla, je sortis de mon rêve,
J’ouvris les yeux, je vis l’étoile du matin.
Elle resplendissait au fond du ciel lointain
Dans sa blancheur molle, infinie et charmante.
Aquilon s’enfuyait emportant la tourmente.
L’astre éclatant changeait la nuée en duvet.
C’était une clarté qui pensait, qui vivait
Elle apaisait l’écueil où la vague déferle
On croyait voir une âme à travers une perle.
Il faisait nuit encor, l’ombre régnait en vain,
Le ciel s’illuminait d’un sourire divin.
La lueur argentait le haut du mât qui penche;
Le navire était noir, mais la voile était blanche
Des goëlands debout sur un escarpement,
Attentifs, contemplaient l’étoile gravement
Comme un oiseau céleste et fait d’une étincelle
L’océan, qui ressemble au peuple, allait vers elle,
Et rugissant tout bas, la regardait briller,
Et semblait avoir peur de la faire envoler.
Un ineffable amour emplissait l’étendue.
L’herbe verte à mes pieds frissonnait éperdue,
Les oiseaux se parlaient dans les nids; une fleur
Qui s’éveillait me dit -. c’est l’étoile ma soeur.
Et pendant qu’à longs plis l’ombre levait son voile,
J’entendis une voix qui venait de l’étoile
Et qui disait: — Je suis l’astre qui vient d’abord.
Je suis celle qu’on croit dans la tombe et qui sort.
J’ai lui sur le Sina, j’ai lui sur le Taygète;
Je suis le caillou d’or et de feu que Dieu jette,
Comme avec une fronde, au front noir de la nuit.
Je suis ce qui renaît quand un monde est détruit.
Ô nations! je suis la poésie ardente.
J’ai brillé sur Moïse et j’ai brillé sur Dante.

Le lion océan est amoureux de moi.
J’arrive. Levez-vous, vertu, courage, foi!
Penseurs, esprits, montez sur la tour, sentinelles!
Paupières, ouvrez-vous, allumez-vous, prunelles,
Terre, émeus le sillon, vie, éveille le bruit,
Debout, vous qui dormez! — car celui qui me suit,
Car celui qui m’envoie en avant la première,
C’est l’ange Liberté, c’est le géant Lumière!
31 août. Jersey.

Les Trois Chevaux

Trois chevaux, qu’on avait attachés au même arbre,
Causaient.

L’un, coureur leste à la croupe de marbre,
Valait cent mille francs, était vainqueur d’Epsom,
Et, tout harnaché d’or, s’écriait: sum qui sum!
Cela parle latin, les bêtes. Des mains blanches
Cent fois de ce pur-sang avaient flatté les hanches,
Et souvent il avait, dans le turf ébloui,
Senti courir les cœurs des femmes après lui.
De là bien des succès à son propriétaire.
Le second quadrupède était un militaire,
Un dada formidable, une brute d’acier,
Un cheval que Racine eût appelé coursier.
Il se dressait, bridé, superbe, ivre de joie,
D’autant plus triomphant qu’il avait l’œil d’une oie.
Sur sa housse on lisait: Essling, Ulm, Iéna.
Il avait la fierté massive que l’on a
Lorsqu’on est orgueilleux de tout ce qu’on ignore;
Son caparaçon fauve était riche et sonore
Il piaffait, il semblait écouter le tambour.

Et le troisième était un cheval de labour.
Un bât de corde au cou, c’était là sa toilette.
Triste bête! on croyait voir marcher un squelette,
Ayant assez de peau sous la bise et le vent
Pour faire un peu l’effet d’un être encor vivant.

Le beau cheval de luxe, espèce de jocrisse,
Disait:

«Ici le pape, et là le baron Brisse;
Pour l’estomac Brébant, pour l’âme Loyola;
Etre béni, bien boire et bien manger, voilà

Ce que prêche mon maître; et moi, roi de la joute,
J’estime que mon maître a raison, et j’ajoute
Que les cocottes font l’ornement du derby.
Il faut au peuple un dieu par les prêtres fourbi,
À nous une écurie en acajou, la bible
Pour l’homme, et des journaux, morbleu, le moins possible.
Le Jockey-Club veut mieux que l’esprit Légion.
Pas de société sans la religion.
Si je n’étais cheval, je voudrais être moine.
— Moi, je voudrais manger parfois un peu d’avoine
Et de foin, soupira le cheval paysan.
Je travaille beaucoup, et je suis, jugez-en
Par ma côte saignante et mon échine maigre,
Presque aussi mal traité que l’homme appelé nègre.
Compter les coups de fouet que je reçois serait
Compter combien d’oiseaux chantent dans la forêt;
J’ai faim, j’ai soif, j’ai froid; je ne suis pas féroce,
Mais je suis malheureux.”

Ainsi parla la rosse.

Le cheval de bataille alors, plein de fureur,
Indigné, bien pensant, dit: — Vive l’empereur!

Applaudissement

Ô grande nation, vous avez à cette heure,
Tandis qu'en bas dans l'ombre on souffre, on râle, on pleure,
Un empire qui fait sonner ses étriers,
Les éblouissements des panaches guerriers,
Une cour où pourrait trôner le roi de Thune,
Une Bourse où l'on peut faire en huit jours fortune,
Des rosières jetant aux soldats leurs bouquets
Vous avez des abbés, des juges, des laquais,
Dansant sur des sacs d'or une danse macabre,
La banque à deux genoux qui harangue le sabre,
Des boulets qu'on empile au fond des arsenaux,
Un sénat, les sermons remplaçant les journaux,
Des maréchaux dorés sur toutes les coutures,
Un Paris qu'on refait tout à neuf, des voitures
À huit chevaux, entrant dans le Louvre à grand bruit,
Des fêtes tout le jour, des bals toute la nuit,
Des lampions, des jeux, des spectacles; en somme,
Tu t'es prostituée à ce misérable homme!

Tout ce que tu conquis est tombé de tes mains;
On dit les vieux français comme les vieux romains,
Et leur nom fait songer leurs fils rouges de honte;
Le monde aimait ta gloire et t'en demande compte,
Car il se réveillait au bruit de ton clairon.
Tu contemples d'un œil abruti ton Néron
Qu'entourent des Romieux déguisés en Sénèques;
Tu te complais à voir brailler ce tas d'évêques
Qui, pendant que César se vautre en son harem,
Entonnent leur Salvum fac imperatorem.
(Au fait, faquin devait se trouver dans la phrase.)
Ton âme est comme un chien sous le pied qui l'écrase
Ton fier quatrevingt-neuf reçoit des coups de fouet
D'un gueux qu'hier encor l'Europe bafouait.
Tes propres souvenirs, folle, tu les lapides.

La Marseillaise est morte à tes lèvres stupides.
Ton Champ de Mars subit ces vainqueurs répugnants,
Ces Maupas, ces Fortouls, ces Bertrands, ces Magnans,
Tous ces tueurs portant le tricorne en équerre,
Et Korte, et Carrelet, et Canrobert Macaire.
Tu n’es plus rien; c’est dit, c’est fait, c’est établi.
Tu ne sais même plus, dans ce lugubre oubli,
Quelle est la nation qui brisa la Bastille.
On te voit le dimanche aller à la Courtille,
Riant, sautant, buvant, sans un instinct moral,
Comme une drôlesse ivre au bras d’un caporal.
Des soufflets qu’il te donne on ne sait plus le nombre.
Et, tout en revenant sur ce boulevard sombre
Où le meurtre a rempli tant de noirs corbillards,
Où bourgeois et passants, femmes, enfants, vieillards,
Tombèrent effarés d’une attaque soudaine,
Tu chantes Turlurette et la Faridondaine!
C’est bien, descends encore et je m’en réjouis,
Car ceci nous promet des retours inouïs,
Car, France, c’est ta loi de ressaisir l’espace,
Car tu seras bien grande ayant été si basse!
L’avenir a besoin d’un gigantesque effort.
Va, traîne l’affreux char d’un satrape ivre-mort,
Toi qui de la victoire as conduit les quadriges.
J’applaudis. Te voilà condamnée aux prodiges.
Le monde, au jour marqué, te verra brusquement
Egaler la revanche à l’avilissement,
Ô Patrie, et sortir, changeant soudain de forme,
Par un immense éclat de cet opprobre énorme
Oui, nous verrons, ainsi va le progrès humain,
De ce vil aujourd’hui naître un fier lendemain,
Et tu rachèteras, ô prêtresse, ô guerrière,
Par cent pas en avant chaque pas en arrière!
Donc recule et descends! tombe, ceci me plaît!
Flatte le pied du maître et le pied du valet!
Plus bas! baise Troplong! plus bas! lèche Baroche
Descends, car le jour vient, descends, car l’heure approche,

Car tu vas t’élancer, ô grand peuple courbé,
Et, comme le jaguar dans un piège tombé,
Tu donnes pour mesure, en tes ardentes luttes,
À la hauteur des bonds la profondeur des chutes!

Oui, je me réjouis; oui, j’ai la foi; je sais
Qu’il faudra bien qu’enfin tu dises: c’est assez!
Tout passe à travers toi comme à travers le crible
Mais tu t’éveilleras bientôt, pâle et terrible,
Peuple, et tu deviendras superbe tout à coup.
De cet empire abject, bourbier, cloaque, égout,
Tu sortiras splendide, et ton aile profonde,
En secouant la fange, éblouira le monde!
Et les couronnes d’or fondront au front des rois,
Et le pape, arrachant sa tiare et sa croix,
Tremblant, se cachera comme un loup sous sa chaire,
Et la Thémis aux bras sanglants, cette bouchère,
S’enfuira vers la nuit, vieux monstre épouvanté,
Et tous les yeux humains s’empliront de clarté,
Et lors battra des mains de l’un à l’autre pôle,
Et tous les opprimés, redressant leur épaule,
Se sentiront vainqueurs, délivrés et vivants,
Rien qu’à te voir jeter ta honte aux quatre vents!
4-6 avril. Jersey.

LIVRE VII: LES SAUVEURS SE SAUVERONT

Sonnez, sonnez toujours, clairons de la pensée

Sonnez, sonnez toujours, clairons de la pensée.

Quand Josué rêveur, la tête aux cieux dressée,
Suivi des siens, marchait, et, prophète irrité,
Sonnait de la trompette autour de la cité,
Au premier tour qu'il fit, le roi se mit à rire;
Au second tour, riant toujours, il lui fit dire:
«Crois-tu donc renverser ma ville avec du vent?"
À la troisième fois l'arche allait en avant,
Puis les trompettes, puis toute l'armée en marche,
Et les petits enfants venaient cracher sur l'arche,
Et, soufflant dans leur trompe, imitaient le clairon;
Au quatrième tour, bravant les fils d'Aaron,
Entre les vieux créneaux tout brunis par la rouille,
Les femmes s'asseyaient en filant leur quenouille,
Et se moquaient, jetant des pierres aux hébreux;
À la cinquième fois, sur ces murs ténébreux,
Aveugles et boiteux vinrent, et leurs huées
Raillaient le noir clairon sonnant sous les nuées
À la sixième fois, sur sa tour de granit
Si haute qu'au sommet l'aigle faisait son nid,
Si dure que l'éclair l'eût en vain foudroyée,
Le roi revint, riant à gorge déployée,
Et cria: « Ces hébreux sont bons musiciens!"
Autour du roi joyeux riaient tous les anciens
Qui le soir sont assis au temple, et délibèrent.

À la septième fois, les murailles tombèrent.
19 mars 1853. Jersey.

La Reculade

I

Je disais: — Ces soldats ont la tête trop basse.
Il va leur ouvrir des chemins.
Le peuple aime la poudre, et quand le clairon passe
La France chante et bat des mains.
La guerre est une pourpre où le meurtre se drape;
Il va crier son: quos ego!
Un beau jour, de son crime, ainsi que d’une trappe,
Nous verrons sortir Marengo.
Il faut bien qu’il leur jette enfin un peu de gloire
Après tant de honte et d’horreur!
Que, vainqueur, il défile avec tout son prétoire
Devant Troplong le procureur;
Qu’il tâche de cacher son carcan à l’histoire,
Et qu’il fasse par le doreur
Ajuster sa sellette au vieux char de victoire
Où monta le grand empereur.
Il voudra devenir César, frapper, dissoudre
Les anciens états ébranlés,
Et, calme, à l’univers montrer, tenant la foudre,
La main qui fit des fausses clés.
Il fera du vieux monde éclater la machine;
Il voudra vaincre et surnager.
Hudson Lowe, Blücher, Wellington, Rostopschine,
Que de souvenirs à venger!
L’occasion abonde à l’époque où nous sommes.
Il saura saisir le moment.
On ne peut pas rester avec cinq cent mille hommes
Dans la fange éternellement.
Il ne peut les laisser courbés sous leur sentence
Il leur faut les hauts faits lointains
À la meute guerrière il faut une pitance
De lauriers et de bulletins.

Ces soldats, que Décembre orne comme une dartre,
Ne peuvent pas, chiens avilis,
Ronger à tout jamais le boulevard Montmartre,
Quand leurs pères ont Austerlitz! —

II

Eh bien non! je rêvais. Illusion détruite!
Gloire! songe, néant, vapeur!
Ô soldats! quel réveil! l’empire, c’est la fuite.
Soldats! l’empire, c’est la peur.
Ce Mandrin de la paix est plein d’instincts placides;
Ce Schinderhannes craint les coups.
Ô châtiment! pour lui vous fûtes parricides,
Soldats, il est poltron pour vous.
Votre gloire a péri sous ce hideux incube
Aux doigts de fange, au cœur d’airain.
Ah! frémissez! le czar marche sur le Danube,
Vous ne marchez pas sur le Rhin!

III

Ô nos pauvres enfants! soldats de notre France!
Ô triste armée à l’œil terni!
Adieu la tente! Adieu les camps! plus d’espérance!
Soldats! soldats! tout est fini!
N’espérez plus laver dans les combats le crime
Dont vous êtes éclaboussés.
Pour nous ce fut le piège et pour vous c’est l’abîme.
Cartouche règne; c’est assez.
Oui, Décembre à jamais vous tient, hordes trompées!
Oui, vous êtes ses vils troupeaux!
Oui, gardez sur vos mains, gardez sur vos épées,
Hélas! gardez sur vos drapeaux
Ces souillures qui font horreur à vos familles
Et qui font sourire Dracon,
Et que ne voudrait pas avoir sur ses guenilles
L’équarrisseur de Montfaucon!

Gardez le deuil, gardez le sang, gardez la boue!
Votre maître hait le danger,
Il vous fait reculer; gardez sur votre joue
L’âpre soufflet de l’étranger!
Ce nain à sa stature a rabaissé vos tailles.
Ce n’est qu’au vol qu’il est hardi.
Adieu la grande guerre et les grandes batailles!
Adieu Wagram! adieu Lodi!
Dans cette horrible glu votre aile est prisonnière.
Derrière un crime il faut marcher.
C’est fini. Désormais vous avez pour bannière
Le tablier de ce boucher!
Renoncez aux combats, au nom de Grande Armée,
Au vieil orgueil des trois couleurs;
Renoncez à l’immense et superbe fumée,
Aux femmes vous jetant des fleurs,
Al’encens, aux grands ares triomphaux que fréquentent
Les ombres des héros le soir;
Hélas! contentez-vous de ces prêtres qui chantent
Des Te Deum dans l’abattoir!
Vous ne conquerrez point la palme expiatoire,
La palme des exploits nouveaux,
Et vous ne verrez pas se dorer dans la gloire
La crinière de vos chevaux!

IV

Donc l’épopée échoue avant qu’elle commence!
Annibal a pris un calmant;
L’Europe admire, et mêle une huée immense
À cet immense avortement.
Donc ce neveu s’en va par la porte bâtarde!
Donc ce sabreur, ce pourfendeur,
Ce masque moustachu dont la bouche vantarde
S’ouvrait dans toute sa grandeur,
Ce césar qu’un valet tous les matins harnache
Pour s’en aller dans les combats,

Cet ogre galonné dont le hautain panache
Faisait oublier le front bas,
Ce tueur qui semblait l’homme que rien n’étonne,
Qui jouait, dans les hosanna,
Tout barbouillé du sang du ruisseau Tiquetonne,
La pantomime d’Iéna,
Ce héros que Dieu fit général des jésuites,
Ce vainqueur qui s’est dit absous,
Montre à Clio son nez meurtri de pommes cuites,
Son œil éborgné de gros sous!
Et notre armée, hélas! sa dupe et sa complice,
Baisse un front lugubre et puni,
Et voit sous les sifflets s’enfuir dans la coulisse
Cet écuyer de Franconi!
Cet histrion, qu’on cingle à grands coups de lanière,
À le crime pour seul talent;
Les Saint-Barthélemy vont mieux à sa manière
Qu’Aboukir et que Friedland.
Le cosaque stupide arrache à ce superbe
Sa redingote à brandebourgs;
L’âne russe a brouté ce Bonaparte en herbe.
Sonnez, clairons! battez, tambours!
Tranche-Montagne, ainsi que Basile, a la fièvre;
La colique empoigne Agramant;
Sur le crâne du loup les oreilles du lièvre
Se dressent lamentablement.
Le fier-à-bras tremblant se blottit dans son antre
Le grand sabre a peur de briller;
La fanfare bégaie et meurt; la flotte rentre
Au port, et l’aigle au poulailler.

V

Et tous ces capitans dont l’épaulette brille
Dans les Louvres et les châteaux
Disent: « Mangeons la France et le peuple en famille.
Sire, les boulets sont brutaux.”

Et Forey va criant: « Majesté, prenez garde.”
Reibell dit: « Morbleu, sacrebleu!
Tenons-nous coi. Le czar fait manœuvrer sa garde.
Ne jouons pas avec le feu.”
Espinasse reprend: « César, gardez la chambre.
Ces kalmoucks ne sont pas manchots.”
Coiffez-vous, dit Leroy, du laurier de décembre,
Prince, et tenez-vous les pieds chauds.”
Et Magnan dit: « Buvons et faisons l’amour, sire!”
Les rêves s’en vont à vau-l’eau.
Et dans sa sombre plaine, ô douleur, j’entends rire
Le noir lion de Waterloo!
Jersey. ler septembre 1853.

Le Chasseur noir

Qu’es-tu, passant? Le bois est sombre,
Les corbeaux volent en grand nombre,
Il va pleuvoir.
— Je suis celui qui va dans l’ombre,
Le Chasseur Noir!

Les feuilles des bois, du vent remuées,
Sifflent… on dirait
Qu’un sabbat nocturne emplit de huées
Toute la forêt;
Dans une clairière au sein des nuées
La lune apparaît.

— Chasse le daim, chasse la biche,
Cours dans les bois, cours dans la friche,
Voici le soir.
Chasse le czar, chasse l’Autriche,
Ô Chasseur Noir!

Les feuilles des bois -

Souffle en ton cor, boucle ta guêtre,
Chasse les cerfs qui viennent paître
Près du manoir.
Chasse le roi, chasse le prêtre,
Ô Chasseur Noir!

Les feuilles des bois -

Il tonne, il pleut, c’est le déluge.
Le renard fuit, pas de refuge
Et pas d’espoir!
Chasse l’espion, chasse le juge,
Ô Chasseur Noir!

Les feuilles des bois -

Tous les démons de saint-Antoine
Bondissent dans la folle avoine
Sans t’émouvoir;
Chasse l’abbé, chasse le moine,
Ô Chasseur Noir!

Les feuilles des bois -

Chasse les ours! ta meute jappe.
Que pas un sanglier n’échappe!
Fais ton devoir!
Chasse César, chasse le pape,
Ô Chasseur Noir!

Les feuilles des bois -

Le loup de ton sentier s’écarte.
Que ta meute à sa suite parte!
Cours! fais-le choir!
Chasse le brigand Bonaparte,
Ô Chasseur Noir!

Les feuilles des bois, du vent remuées,
Tombent… on dirait
Que le sabbat sombre aux rauques huées
À fui la forêt;
Le clair chant du coq perce les nuées;
Ciel! l’aube apparaît!

Tout reprend sa forme première.
Tu redeviens la France altière
Si belle à voir,
L’ange blanc vêtu de lumière,
Ô Chasseur Noir!

Les feuilles des bois, du vent remuées,
Tombent… on dirait
Que le sabbat sombre aux rauques huées
À fui la forêt;
Le clair chant du coq perce les nuées,
Ciel! l’aube apparaît!
Jersey, 22 octobre 1852

L’Égout de Rome

Voici le trou, voici l’échelle. Descendez.
Tandis qu’au corps de garde en face on joue aux dés
En riant sous le nez des matrones bourrues,
  Laissez le crieur rauque, assourdissant les rues,
  Proclamer le numide ou le dace aux abois,
  Et, groupés sous l’auvent des échoppes de bois,
  Les savetiers romains et les marchandes d’herbes
  De la Minerve étrusque échanger les proverbes;
  Descendez.
  Vous voilà dans un lieu monstrueux.
  Enfer d’ombre et de boue aux porches tortueux,
  Où les murs ont la lèpre, où, parmi les pustules,
  Glissent les scorpions mêlés aux tarentules.
  Morne abîme!

  Au-dessus de ce plafond fangeux,
  Dans les cieux, dans le cirque immense et plein de jeux,
  Sur les pavés sabins, dallages centenaires,
  Roulent les chars, les bruits, les vents et les tonnerres;
  Le peuple gronde ou rit dans le forum sacré;
  Le navire d’Ostie au port est amarré,
  L’arc triomphal rayonne, et sur la borne agraire
  Tettent, nus et divins, Rémus avec son frère
  Romulus, louveteaux de la louve d’airain;
  Non loin, le fleuve Tibre épand son flot serein,
  Et la vache au flanc roux y vient boire, et les buffles
  Laissent en fils d’argent l’eau tomber de leurs mufles.
  Le hideux souterrain s’étend dans tous les sens;
  Il ouvre par endroits sous les pieds des passants
  Ses soupiraux infects et flairés par les truies;
  Cette cave se change en fleuve au temps des pluies
  Vers midi, tout au bord du soupirail vermeil,
  Les durs barreaux de fer découpent le soleil,
  Et le mur apparaît semblable au dos des zèbres

Tout le reste est miasme, obscurité, ténèbres
Par places le pavé, comme chez les tueurs,
Paraît sanglant; la pierre a d’affreuses sueurs
Ici l’oubli, la peste et la nuit font leurs œuvres
Le rat heurte en courant la taupe; les couleuvres
Serpentent sur le mur comme de noirs éclairs;
Les tessons, les haillons, les piliers aux pieds verts,
Les reptiles laissant des traces de salives,
La toile d’araignée accrochée aux solives,
Des mares dans les coins, effroyables miroirs,
Où nagent on ne sait quels êtres lents et noirs,
Font un fourmillement horrible dans ces ombres.
La vieille hydre chaos rampe sous ces décombres.
On voit des animaux accroupis et mangeant;
La moisissure rose aux écailles d’argent
Fait sur l’obscur bourbier luire ses mosaïques
L’odeur du lieu mettrait en fuite des stoïques
Le sol partout se creuse en gouffres empestés
Et les chauves-souris volent de tous côtés
Comme au milieu des fleurs s’ébattent les colombes.
On croit, dans cette brume et dans ces catacombes,
Entendre bougonner la mégère Atropos;
Le pied sent dans la nuit le dos mou des crapauds;
L’eau pleure; par moments quelque escalier livide
Plonge lugubrement ses marches dans le vide.
Tout est fétide, informe, abject, terrible à voir.

Le charnier, le gibet, le ruisseau, le lavoir,
Les vieux parfums rancis dans les fioles persanes,
Le lavabo vidé des pâles courtisanes,
L’eau lustrale épandue aux pieds des dieux menteurs,
Le sang des confesseurs et des gladiateurs,
Les meurtres, les festins, les luxures hardies,
Le chaudron renversé des noires Canidies,
Ce que Trimalcion vomit sur le chemin,
Tous les vices de Rome, égout du genre humain,
Suintent, comme en un crible, à travers cette voûte,

Et l’immonde univers y filtre goutte à goutte.
Là-haut, on vit, on teint ses lèvres de carmin,
On a le lierre au front et la coupe à la main,
Le peuple sous les fleurs cache sa plaie impure
Et chante; et c’est ici que l’ulcère suppure.
Ceci, c’est le cloaque, effrayant, vil, glacé.
Et Rome tout entière avec tout son passé,
Joyeuse, souveraine, esclave, criminelle,
Dans ce marais sans fond croupit, fange éternelle.
C’est le noir rendez-vous de l’immense néant;
Toute ordure aboutit à ce gouffre béant;
La vieille au chef branlant qui gronde et qui soupire
Y vide son panier, et le monde l’empire.
L’horreur emplit cet antre, infâme vision.
Toute l’impureté de la création
Tombe et vient échouer sur cette sombre rive.
Au fond, on entrevoit, dans une ombre où n’arrive
Pas un reflet de jour, pas un souffle de vent,
Quelque chose d’affreux qui fut jadis vivant,
Des mâchoires, des yeux, des ventres, des entrailles,
Des carcasses qui font des taches aux murailles
On approche, et longtemps on reste l’œil fixé
Sur ce tas monstrueux, dans la bourbe enfoncé,
Jeté là par un trou redouté des ivrognes,
Sans pouvoir distinguer si ces mornes charognes
Ont une forme encor visible en leurs débris,
Et sont des chiens crevés ou des césars pourris.
30 avril. Jersey.

“C’était en juin, j’étais à Bruxelle; on me dit …

C’était en juin, j’étais à Bruxelle; on me dit:
Savez-vous ce que fait maintenant ce bandit?
Et l’on me raconta le meurtre juridique,
Charlet assassiné sur la place publique,
Cirasse, Cuisinier, tous ces infortunés
Que cet homme au supplice a lui-même traînés
Et qu’il a de ses mains liés sur la bascule.
Ô Sauveur, ô héros, vainqueur de crépuscule, César!
Dieu fait sortir de terre les moissons,
La vigne, l’eau courante abreuvant les buissons,
Les fruits vermeils, la rose où l’abeille butine,
Les chênes, les lauriers, et toi, la guillotine.

Prince qu’aucun de ceux qui lui donnent leurs voix
Ne voudrait rencontrer le soir au coin d’un bois!

J’avais le front brûlant; je sortis par la ville.
Tout m’y parut plein d’ombre et de guerre civile;
Les passants me semblaient des spectres effarés
Je m’enfuis dans les champs paisibles et dorés;
Ô contre-coups du crime au fond de l’âme humaine!
La nature ne put me calmer. L’air, la plaine,
Les fleurs, tout m’irritait; je frémissais devant
Ce monde où je sentais ce scélérat vivant.
Sans pouvoir m’apaiser je fis plus d’une lieue.
Le soir triste monta sous la coupole bleue.
Linceul frissonnant, l’ombre autour de moi s’accrut;
Tout à coup la nuit vint, et la lune apparut
Sanglante, et dans les cieux, de deuil enveloppée,
Je regardai rouler cette tête coupée.
20 mai 1853. Jersey.

Chanson

Sa grandeur éblouit l’histoire.
Quinze ans, il fut
Le dieu que traînait la victoire
Sur un affût;

L’Europe sous la loi guerrière
Se débattit. —
Toi, son singe, marche derrière,
Petit, petit.

Napoléon dans la bataille,
Grave et serein,
Guidait à travers la mitraille
L’aigle d’airain.
Il entra sur le pont d’Arcole,
Il en sortit. —
Voici de l’or, viens, pille et vole,
Petit, petit.

Berlin, Vienne, étaient ses maîtresses;
Il les forçait,
Leste, et prenant les forteresses
Par le corset.

Il triompha de cent bastilles
Qu’il investit. —
Voici pour toi, voici des filles,
Petit, petit.

Il passait les monts et les plaines,
Tenant en main
La palme, la foudre, et les rênes
Du genre humain;

Il était ivre de sa gloire
Qui retentit. —
Voici du sang, accours, viens boire,
Petit, petit.

Quand il tomba, lâchant le monde,
L'immense mer

Ouvrit à sa chute profonde
Son gouffre amer;
Il y plongea, sinistre archange,
Et s'engloutit. —
Toi, tu te noieras dans la fange,
Petit, petit.
Jersey. Septembre 1853.

Patria

(Musique de Beethoven)

Là-haut qui sourit?
Est-ce un esprit?
Est-ce une femme?
Quel front sombre et doux!
 Peuple, à genoux!
Est-ce notre âme
Qui vient à nous?

Cette figure en deuil
Paraît sur notre seuil,

Et notre antique orgueil
Sort du cercueil.
Ses fiers regards vainqueurs
Réveillent tous les cœurs,
Les nids dans les buissons,
 Et les chansons.

C’est l’ange du jour;
L’espoir, l’amour
Du cœur qui pense
Du monde enchanté
 C’est la clarté.
Son nom est France
Ou Vérité.

Bel ange, à ton miroir
Quand s’offre un vil pouvoir,
Tu viens, terrible à voir,
Sous le ciel noir.
Tu dis au monde: Allons!
Formez vos bataillons!

Et le monde ébloui
 Te répond: Oui.

C’est l’ange de nuit.
Rois, il vous suit,
Marquant d’avance

Le fatal moment
 Au firmament.
Son nom est France
Ou Châtiment.
Ainsi que nous voyons
En mai les alcyons,
Voguez, ô nations,
Dans ses rayons!
Son bras aux cieux dressé
Ferme le noir passé
Et les portes de fer
 Du sombre enfer.
C’est l’ange de Dieu.
Dans le ciel bleu
Son aile immense
Couvre avec fierté
 L’humanité.
Son nom est France
Ou Liberté!
Jersey, septembre 1853

La Caravane

I

Sur la terre, tantôt sable, tantôt savane,
L’un à l’autre liés en longue caravane,
Echangeant leur pensée en confuses rumeurs,
Emmenant avec eux les lois, les faits, les mœurs,
Les esprits, voyageurs éternels, sont en marche.
L’un porte le drapeau, les autres portent l’arche;
Ce saint voyage a nom Progrès. De temps en temps,
Ils s’arrêtent, rêveurs, attentifs, haletants,
Puis repartent. En route! ils s’appellent, ils s’aident,
Ils vont! Les horizons aux horizons succèdent,
Les plateaux aux plateaux, les sommets aux sommets.
On avance toujours, on n’arrive jamais.
À chaque étape un guide accourt à leur rencontre;
Quand Jean Huss disparaît, Luther pensif se montre
Luther s’en va, Voltaire alors prend le flambeau
Quand Voltaire s’arrête, arrive Mirabeau.
Ils sondent, pleins d’espoir, une terre inconnue
À chaque pas qu’on fait, la brume diminue;
Ils marchent, sans quitter des yeux un seul instant
Le terme du voyage et l’asile où l’on tend,
Point lumineux au fond d’une profonde plaine,
La Liberté sacrée, éclatante et lointaine,
La Paix dans le travail, l’universel Hymen,
L’Idéal, ce grand but, Mecque du genre humain.

Plus ils vont, plus la foi les pousse et les exalte.
Pourtant, à de certains moments, lorsqu’on fait halte,
Que la fatigue vient, qu’on voit le jour blêmir,
Et qu’on a tant marché qu’il faut enfin dormir,
C’est l’instant où le Mal, prenant toutes les formes,
Morne oiseau, vil reptile ou monstre aux bonds énormes,
Chimère, préjugé, mensonge ténébreux,

C’est l’heure où le Passé, qu’ils laissent derrière eux,
Voyant dans chacun d’eux une proie échappée,
Surprend la caravane assoupie et campée,
Et, sortant hors de l’ombre et du néant profond,
Tâche de ressaisir ces esprits qui s’en vont.

II

Le jour baisse; on atteint quelque colline chauve
Que l’âpre solitude entoure, immense et fauve,
Et dont pas même un arbre, une roche, un buisson
Ne coupe l’immobile et lugubre horizon;
Les tchaouchs, aux lueurs des premières étoiles,
Piquent des pieux en terre et déroulent les toiles;
En cercle autour du camp les feux sont allumés,
Il est nuit. Gloire à Dieu! voyageurs las, dormez.

Non, veillez! car autour de vous tout se réveille.
Ecoutez! écoutez! debout! prêtez l’oreille!
Voici qu’à la clarté du jour zodiacal,
L’épervier gris, le singe obscène, le chacal,
Les rats abjects et noirs, les belettes, les fouines,
Nocturnes visiteurs des tentes bédouines,
L’hyène au pas boiteux qui menace et qui fuit,
Le tigre au crâne plat où nul instinct ne luit,
Dont la férocité ressemble à de la joie,
Tous, les oiseaux de deuil et les bêtes de proie,
Vers le feu rayonnant poussant d’étranges voix,
De tous les points de l’ombre arrivent à la fois.
Dans la brume, pareils aux brigands qui maraudent,
Bandits de la nature, ils sont tous là qui rôdent.
Le foyer se reflète aux yeux des léopards.
Fourmillement terrible! on voit de toutes parts
Des prunelles de braise errer dans les ténèbres.
La solitude éclate en hurlements funèbres.
Des pierres, des fossés, des ravins tortueux,
De partout, sort un bruit farouche et monstrueux.

Car lorsqu’un pas humain pénètre dans ces plaines,
Toujours, à l’heure où l’ombre épanche ses haleines,
Où la création commence son concert,
Le peuple épouvantable et rauque du désert,
Horrible et bondissant sous les pâles nuées,
Accueille l’homme avec des cris et des huées.
Bruit lugubre! chaos des forts et des petits
Cherchant leur proie avec d’immondes appétits!
L’un glapit, l’autre rit, miaule, aboie, ou gronde.
Le voyageur invoque en son horreur profonde
Ou son saint musulman ou son patron chrétien.

Soudain tout fait silence et l’on n’entend plus rien.

Le tumulte effrayant cesse, râles et plaintes
Meurent comme des voix par l’agonie éteintes,
Comme si, par miracle et par enchantement,
Dieu même avait dans l’ombre emporté brusquement
Renards, singes, vautours, le tigre, la panthère,
Tous ces monstres hideux qui sont sur notre terre
Ce que sont les démons dans le monde inconnu.
Tout se tait.

Le désert est muet, vaste et nu.
L’œil ne voit sous les cieux que l’espace sans borne.

Tout à coup, au milieu de ce silence morne
Qui monte et qui s’accroît de moment en moment,
S’élève un formidable et long rugissement!

C’est le lion.

III

Il vient, il surgit où vous êtes,
Le roi sauvage et roux des profondeurs muettes!

Il vient de s’éveiller comme le soir tombait,
Non, comme le loup triste, à l’odeur du gibet,
Non, comme le jaguar, pour aller dans les havres
Flairer si la tempête a jeté des cadavres,
Non, comme le chacal furtif et hasardeux,
Pour déterrer la nuit les morts, spectres hideux,
Dans quelque champ qui vit la guerre et ses désastres;
Mais pour marcher dans l’ombre à la clarté des astres.
Car l’azur constellé plaît à son œil vermeil;
Car Dieu fait contempler par l’aigle le soleil,
Et fait par le lion regarder les étoiles.
Il vient, du crépuscule il traverse les voiles,
Il médite, il chemine à pas silencieux,
Tranquille et satisfait sous la splendeur des cieux;
Il aspire l’air pur qui manquait à son antre;
Sa queue à coups égaux revient battre son ventre,
Et, dans l’obscurité qui le sent approcher,
Rien ne le voit venir, rien ne l’entend marcher.
Les palmiers, frissonnant comme des touffes d’herbe,
Frémissent. C’est ainsi que, paisible et superbe,
Il arrive toujours par le même chemin,
Et qu’il venait hier, et qu’il viendra demain,
À cette heure où Vénus à l’occident décline.
Et quand il s’est trouvé proche de la colline,
Marquant ses larges pieds dans le sable mouvant,
Avant même que l’œil d’aucun être vivant
Eût pu, sous l’éternel et mystérieux dôme,
Voir poindre à l’horizon son vague et noir fantôme,
Avant que dans la plaine il se fût avancé,
Il se taisait; son souffle a seulement passé,
Et ce souffle a suffi, flottant à l’aventure,
Pour faire tressaillir la profonde nature,
Et pour faire soudain taire au plus fort du bruit
Toutes ces sombres voix qui hurlent dans la nuit.

IV

Ainsi, quand, de ton antre enfin poussant la pierre,

Et las du long sommeil qui pèse à ta paupière,
Ô peuple, ouvrant tes yeux d’où sort une clarté,
Tu te réveilleras dans ta tranquillité,
Le jour où nos pillards, où nos tyrans sans nombre
Comprendront que quelqu’un remue au fond de l’ombre,
Et que c’est toi qui viens, ô lion! ce jour-là,
Ce vil groupe où Falstaff s’accouple à Loyola,
Tous ces gueux devant qui la probité se cabre,
Les traîneurs de soutane et les traîneurs de sabre,
Le général Soufflard, le juge Barabbas,
Le jésuite au front jaune, à l’œil féroce et bas,
Disant son chapelet dont les grains sont des balles,
Les Mingrats bénissant les Héliogabales,
Les Veuillots qui naguère, errant sans feu ni lieu,
Avant de prendre en main la cause du bon Dieu,
Avant d’être des saints, traînaient dans les ribotes
Les haillons de leur style et les trous de leurs bottes,
L’archevêque, ouléma du Christ ou de Mahom,
Mâchant avec l’hostie un sanglant Te Deum,
Les Troplong, Les Rouher, violateurs de chartes,
Grecs qui tiennent les lois comme ils tiendraient les cartes,
Les beaux fils dont les mains sont rouges sous leurs gants.
Ces dévots, ces viveurs, ces bedeaux, ces brigands,
Depuis les hommes vils jusqu’aux hommes sinistres,
Tout ce tas monstrueux de gredins et de cuistres
Qui grincent, l’œil ardent, le mufle ensanglanté,
Autour de la raison et de la vérité,
Tous, du maître au goujat, du bandit au maroufle,
Pâles, rien qu’à sentir au loin passer ton souffle,
Feront silence, ô peuple! et tous disparaîtront
Subitement, l’éclair ne sera pas plus prompt,
Cachés, évanouis, perdus dans la nuit sombre,
Avant même qu’on ait entendu, dans cette ombre
Où les justes tremblants aux méchants sont mêlés,
Ta grande voix monter vers les cieux étoilés!
25 novembre 1852.

Cette nuit, il pleuvait, la marée était haute

Cette nuit, il pleuvait, la marée était haute,
Un brouillard lourd et gris couvrait toute la côte,
Les brisants aboyaient comme des chiens, le flot
Aux pleurs du ciel profond joignait son noir sanglot,
L'infini secouait et mêlait dans son urne
Les sombres tournoiements de l'abîme nocturne;
Les bouches de la nuit semblaient rugir dans l'air.

J'entendais le canon d'alarme sur la mer.
Des marins en détresse appelaient à leur aide.
Dans l'ombre où la rafale aux rafales succède,
Sans pilote, sans mât, sans ancre, sans abri,
Quelque vaisseau perdu jetait son dernier cri.
Je sortis. Une vieille, en passant effarée,
Me dit: « Il a péri; c'est un chasse-marée."
Je courus à la grève et ne vis qu'un linceul
De brouillard et de nuit, et l'horreur, et moi seul;
Et la vague, dressant sa tête sur l'abîme,
Comme pour éloigner un témoin de son crime,
Furieuse, se mit à hurler après moi.

Qu'es-tu donc, Dieu jaloux, Dieu d'épreuve et d'effroi,
Dieu des écroulements, des gouffres, des orages,
Que tu n'es pas content de tant de grands naufrages,
Qu'après tant de puissants et de forts engloutis,
Il te reste du temps encor pour les petits,
Que sur les moindres fronts ton bras laisse sa marque,
Et qu'après cette France, il te faut cette barque!
Jersey, 5 avril.

Ce serait une erreur de croire que ces choses

I

Ce serait une erreur de croire que ces choses
Finiront par des chants et des apothéoses;
Certe, il viendra, le rude et fatal châtiment;
Jamais l'arrêt d'en haut ne recule et ne ment,
Mais ces jours effrayants seront des jours sublimes.
Tu feras expier à ces hommes leurs crimes,
Ô peuple généreux, ô peuple frémissant,
Sans glaive, sans verser une goutte de sang,
Par la loi; sans pardon, sans fureur, sans tempête.
Non, que pas un cheveu ne tombe d'une tête;
Que l'on n'entende pas une bouche crier;
Que pas un scélérat ne trouve un meurtrier.
Les temps sont accomplis; la loi de mort est morte;
Du vieux charnier humain nous avons clos la porte.
Tous ces hommes vivront. — Peuple, pas même lui!

Nous le disions hier, nous venons aujourd'hui
Le redire, et demain nous le dirons encore,
Nous qui des temps futurs portons au front l'aurore,
Parce que nos esprits, peut-être pour jamais,
De l'adversité sombre habitent les sommets;
Nous les absents, allant où l'exil nous envoie;
Nous: proscrits, qui sentons, pleins d'une douce joie,
Dans le bras qui nous frappe une main nous bénir;
Nous, les germes du grand et splendide avenir
Que le Seigneur, penché sur la famille humaine,
Sema dans un sillon de misère et de peine.

II

Ils tremblent, ces coquins, sous leur nom accablant;
Ils ont peur pour leur tête infâme, ou font semblant;

Mais, marauds, ce serait déshonorer la Grève!
Des révolutions remuer le vieux glaive
Pour eux! y songent-ils? diffamer l'échafaud!
Mais, drôles, des martyrs qui marchaient le front haut,
Des justes, des héros, souriant à l'abîme,
Son morts sur cette planche et l'ont faite sublime!
Quoi! Charlotte Corday, quoi! madame Roland
Sous cette grande hache ont posé leur cou blanc,
Elles l'ont essuyée avec leur tresse blonde,
Et Magnan y viendrait faire sa tache immonde!
Où le lion gronda, grognerait le pourceau!
Pour Rouher, Fould et Suin, ces rebuts du ruisseau,
L'échafaud des Camille et des Vergniaud superbes!
Quoi, grand Dieu, pour Troplong la mort de Malesherbes!
Traiter le sieur Delangle ainsi qu'André Chénier!
Jeter ces têtes-là dans le même panier,
Et, dans ce dernier choc qui mêle et qui rapproche,
Faire frémir Danton du contact de Baroche!
Non, leur règne, où l'atroce au burlesque se joint,
Est une mascarade, et, ne l'oublions point,
Nous en avons pleuré, mais souvent nous en rimes.
Sous prétexte qu'il a commis beaucoup de crimes,
Et qu'il est assassin autant que charlatan,
Paillasse après Saint-Just, Robespierre et Titan,
Monterait cette échelle effrayante et sacrée!
Après avoir coupé le cou de Briarée,
Ce glaive couperait la tête d'Arlequin!
Non, non! maître Rouher, vous êtes un faquin,
Fould, vous êtes un fat, Suin, vous êtes un cuistre.
L'échafaud est le lieu du triomphe sinistre,
Le piédestal, dressé sur le noir cabanon,
Qui fait tomber la tête et fait surgir le nom,
C'est le faîte vermeil d'où le martyr s'envole,
C'est la hache impuissante à trancher l'auréole,
C'est le créneau sanglant, étrange et redouté,
Par où l'âme se penche et voit l'éternité.
Ce qu'il faut, ô justice, à ceux de cette espèce,

C’est le lourd bonnet vert, c’est la casaque épaisse,
C’est le poteau; c’est Brest, c’est Clairvaux, c’est Toulon
C’est le boulet roulant derrière leur talon,
Le fouet et le bâton, la chaîne, âpre compagne,
Et les sabots sonnant sur le pavé du bagne!
Qu’ils vivent accouplés et flétris! L’échafaud,
Sévère, n’en veut pas. Qu’ils vivent, il le faut,
L’un avec sa simarre et l’autre avec son cierge!
La mort devant ces gueux baisse ses yeux de vierge.

Quand l’eunuque régnait à côté du césar

Quand l’eunuque régnait à côté du césar,
Quand Tibère, et Caïus, et Néron, sous leur char
Foulaient Rome, plus morte, hélas! que Babylone,
Le poëte saisit ces bourreaux sur leur trône;
La muse entre deux vers, tout vivants, les scia.
Toi, faux prince, cousin du blême hortensia,
Hidalgo par ta femme, amiral par ta mère,
Tu règnes par décembre et tu vis sur brumaire,
Mais la muse t’a pris; et maintenant, c’est bien,
Tu tressailles aux mains du sombre historien.
Pourtant, quoique tremblant sous la verge lyrique,
Tu dis dans ton orgueil: — Je vais être historique. —
Non, coquin! le charnier des rois t’est interdit.
Non, tu n’entreras point dans l’histoire, bandit!
Haillon humain, hibou déplumé, bête morte,
Tu resteras dehors et cloué sur la porte.
1er août 1853. Jersey.

Paroles d’un conservateur à propos d’un perturbateur

Etait-ce un rêve? étais-je éveillé? jugez-en.
Un homme, — était-il grec, juif, chinois, turc, persan? —
Un membre du parti de l’ordre, véridique
Et grave, me disait: « Cette mort juridique
Frappant ce charlatan, anarchiste éhonté,
Est juste. Il faut que l’ordre et que l’autorité
Se défendent. Comment souffrir qu’on les discute?
D’ailleurs les lois sont là pour qu’on les exécute.
Il est des vérités éternelles qu’il faut
Faire prévaloir, fût-ce au prix de l’échafaud.
Ce novateur prêchait une philosophie.
Amour, progrès, mots creux, et dont je me défie.
Il raillait notre culte antique et vénéré.
Cet homme était de ceux qui n’ont rien de sacré,
Il ne respectait rien de tout ce qu’on respecte.
Pour leur inoculer sa doctrine suspecte,
Il allait ramassant dans les plus méchants lieux
Des bouviers, des pêcheurs, des drôles bilieux,
D’immondes va-nu-pieds n’ayant ni sou ni maille;
Il faisait son cénacle avec cette canaille.
Il ne s’adressait pas à l’homme intelligent,
Sage, honorable, ayant des rentes, de l’argent,
Du bien; il n’avait garde. Il égarait les masses
Avec des doigts levés en l’air et des grimaces,
Il prétendait guérir malades et blessés
Contrairement aux lois. Mais ce n’est pas assez.
L’imposteur, s’il vous plaît, tirait les morts des fosses.
Il prenait de faux noms et des qualités fausses,
Et se faisait passer pour ce qu’il n’était pas.
Il errait au hasard, disant: — Suivez mes pas, —
Tantôt dans la campagne et tantôt dans la ville.
N’est-ce pas exciter à la guerre civile,

Au mépris, à la haine entre les citoyens?
On voyait accourir vers lui d’affreux payens,
Couchant dans les fossés et dans les fours à plâtre,
L’un boiteux, l’autre sourd, l’autre un œil sous l’emplâtre
L’autre râclant sa plaie avec un vieux tesson.
L’honnête homme indigné rentrait dans sa maison
Quand ce jongleur passait avec cette séquelle.
Dans une fête, un jour, je ne sais plus laquelle,
Cet homme prit un fouet, et criant, déclamant,
Il se mit à chasser, mais fort brutalement,
Des marchands patentés, le fait est authentique,
Très braves gens tenant sur le parvis boutique,
Avec permission, ce qui, je crois, suffit,
Du clergé qui touchait sa part de leur profit.
Il traînait à sa suite une espèce de fille
Il allait, pérorant, ébranlant la famille,
Et la religion, et la société;
Il sapait la morale et la propriété;
Le peuple le suivait, laissant les champs en friches;
C’était fort dangereux. Il attaquait les riches,
Il flagornait le pauvre, affirmant qu’ici-bas
Les hommes sont égaux et frères, qu’il n’est pas
De grands ni de petits, d’esclaves ni de maîtres,
Que le fruit de la terre est à tous; quant aux prêtres,
Il les déchirait; bref, il blasphémait. Cela
Dans la rue. Il contait toutes ces horreurs-là
Aux premiers gueux venus, sans cape et sans semelles.
Il fallait en finir, les lois étaient formelles,
On l’a crucifié.”
Ce mot, dit d’un air doux,
Me frappa. Je lui dis: « Mais qui donc êtes-vous?”
Il répondit: « Vraiment, il fallait un exemple.
Je m’appelle Elizab, je suis scribe du temple.
— Et de qui parlez-vous?” demandai-je. Il reprit:
“Mais! de ce vagabond qu’on nomme Jésus-Christ.”
25 décembre 1852. Jersey.

Force des choses

Que devant les coquins l’honnête homme soupire;
Que l’histoire soit laide et plate; que l’empire
Boite avec Talleyrand ou louche avec Parieu;
Qu’un tour d’escroc bien fait ait nom grâce de Dieu;
Que le pape en massue ait changé sa houlette;
Qu’on voie au Champ de Mars piaffer sous l’épaulette
Le Meurtre général, le Vol aide de camp;
Que hors de l’Elysée un prince débusquant,
Qu’un flibustier quittant l’île de la Tortue,
Assassine, extermine, égorge, pille et tue;
Que les bonzes chrétiens, cognant sur leur tam-tam
Hurlent devant Soufflard: Attollite portam!
Que pour claqueurs le crime ait cent journaux infâmes,
Ceux qu’à la maison d’or, sur les genoux des femmes,
Griffonnent les Romieux, le verre en main, et ceux
Que saint-Ignace inspire à des gredins crasseux;
Qu’en ces vils tribunaux, où le regard se heurte
De Moreau de la Seine à Moreau de la Meurthe,
La justice ait reçu d’horribles horions;
Que, sur un lit de camp, par des centurions
La loi soit violée et râle à l’agonie;
Que cet être choisi, créé par Dieu génie,
L’homme, adore à genoux le loup fait empereur;
Qu’en un éclat de rire abrégé par l’horreur,
Tout ce que nous voyons aujourd’hui se résume;
Qu’Hautpoul vende son sabre et Cucheval sa plume;
Que tous les grands bandits, en petit copiés,
Revivent; qu’on emplisse un sénat de plats-pieds
Dont la servilité négresse et mamelouque
Eût révolté Mahmoud et lasserait Soulouque;
Que l’or soit le seul culte, et qu’en ce temps vénal,
Coffre-fort étant Dieu, Gousset soit cardinal;
Que la vieille Thémis ne soit plus qu’une gouine
Baisant Mandrin dans l’antre où Mongis baragouine;

Que Montalembert bave accoudé sur l’autel;
Que Veuillot sur Sibour crève sa poche au fiel;
Qu’on voie aux bals de cour s’étaler des guenipes
Qui le long des trottoirs traînaient hier leurs nippes,
Beautés de lansquenet avec un profil grec;
Que Haynau dans Brescia soit pire que Lautrec;
Que partout, des Sept-Tours aux colonnes d’Hercule,
Napoléon, le poing sur la hanche, recule,
Car l’aigle est vieux, Essling grisonne, Marengo
À la goutte, Austerlitz est pris d’un lombago;
Que le czar russe ait peur tout autant que le nôtre;
Que l’ours noir et l’ours blanc tremblent l’un devant l’autre;
Qu’avec son grand panache et sur son grand cheval
Rayonne Saint-Arnaud, ci-devant Florival,
Fort dans la pantomime et les combats à l’hache;
Que Sodome se montre et que Paris se cache;
Qu’Escobar et Houdin vendent le même onguent;
Que grâce à tous ces gueux qu’on touche avec le gant,
Tout dorés au dehors, au dedans noirs de lèpres,
Courant les bals, courant les jeux, allant à vêpres,
Grâce à ces bateleurs mêlés aux scélérats,
La Saint-Barthélemy s’achève en mardi gras;
Ô nature profonde et calme, que t’importe!
Nature, Isis voilée assise à notre porte,
Impénétrable aïeule aux regards attendris,
Vieille comme Cybèle et fraîche comme Iris,
Ce qu’on fait ici-bas s’en va devant ta face;
À ton rayonnement toute laideur s’efface;
Tu ne t’informes pas quel drôle ou quel tyran
Est fait premier chanoine à Saint-Jean-de-Latran;
Décembre, les soldats ivres, les lois faussées,
Les cadavres mêlés aux bouteilles cassées,
Ne te font rien; tu suis ton flux et ton reflux.
Quand l’homme des faubourgs s’endort et ne sait plus
Bourrer dans un fusil des balles de calibre;
Quand le peuple français n’est plus le peuple libre;
Quand mon esprit, fidèle au but qu’il se fixa,

Sur cette léthargie applique un vers moxa,
Toi, tu rêves; souvent du fond des geôles sombres,
Sort, comme d’un enfer, le murmure des ombres
Que Baroche et Rouher gardent sous les barreaux,
Car ce tas de laquais est un tas de bourreaux;
Etant les cœurs de boue, ils sont les cœurs de roche;
Ma strophe alors se dresse, et, pour cingler Baroche,
Se taille un fouet sanglant dans Rouher écorché;
Toi, tu ne t’émeus point; flot sans cesse épanché,
La vie indifférente emplit toujours tes urnes;
Tu laisses s’élever des attentats nocturnes,
Des crimes, des fureurs, de Rome mise en croix,
De Paris mis aux fers, des guets-apens des rois,
Des pièges, des serments, des toiles d’araignées,
L’orageuse clameur des âmes indignées;
Dans ce calme où toujours tu te réfugias,
Tu laisses le fumier croupir chez Augias,
Et renaître un passé dont nous nous affranchîmes,
Et le sang rajeunir les abus cacochymes,
La France en deuil jeter son suprême soupir,
Les prostitutions chanter, et se tapir
Les lâches dans leurs trous, la taupe en ses cachettes,
Et gronder les lions, et rugir les poëtes!
Ce n’est pas ton affaire à toi de t’irriter.
Tu verrais, sans frémir et sans te révolter,
Sur tes fleurs, sous tes pins, tes ifs et tes érables,
Errer le plus coquin de tous ces misérables.
Quand Troplong, le matin, ouvre un œil chassieux,
Vénus, splendeur sereine éblouissant les cieux,
Vénus, qui devrait fuir courroucée et hagarde,
N’a pas l’air de savoir que Troplong la regarde!
Tu laisserais cueillir une rose à Dupin!
Tandis que, de velours recouvrant le sapin,
L’escarpe couronné que l’Europe surveille,
Trône et guette, et qu’il a, lui parlant à l’oreille,
D’un côté Loyola, de l’autre Trestaillon,
Ton doigt au blé dans l’ombre entrouvre le sillon.

Pendant que l’horreur sort des sénats, des conclaves,
Que les États-Unis ont des marchés d’esclaves
Comme en eut Rome avant que Jésus-Christ passât,
Que l’américain libre à l’africain forçat
Met un bât, et qu’on vend des hommes pour des piastres,
Toi, tu gonfles la mer, tu fais lever les astres,
Tu courbes l’arc-en-ciel, tu remplis les buissons
D’essaims, l’air de parfums et les nids de chansons,
Tu fais dans le bois vert la toilette des roses,
Et tu fais concourir, loin des hommes moroses,
Pour des prix inconnus par les anges cueillis,
La candeur de la vierge et la blancheur du lys.
Et quand, tordant ses mains devant les turpitudes,
Le penseur douloureux fuit dans tes solitudes,
Tu lui dis: Viens! c’est moi! moi que rien ne corrompt!
Je t’aime! et tu répands dans l’ombre, sur son front
Où de l’artère ardente il sent battre les ondes,
L’âcre fraîcheur de l’herbe et des feuilles profondes!
Par moments, à te voir, parmi les trahisons,
Mener paisiblement tes mois et tes saisons,
À te voir impassible et froide, quoi qu’on fasse,
Pour qui ne creuse point plus bas que la surface,
Tu sembles bien glacée, et l’on s’étonne un peu.
Quand les proscrits, martyrs du peuple, élus de Dieu,
Stoïques, dans la mort se couchent sans se plaindre,
Tu n’as l’air de songer qu’à dorer et qu’à peindre
L’aile du scarabée errant sur leurs tombeaux.
Les rois font les gibets, toi, tu fais les corbeaux.
Tu mets le même ciel sur le juste et l’injuste.
Occupée à la mouche, à la pierre, à l’arbuste,
Aux mouvements confus du vil monde animal,
Tu parais ignorer le bien comme le mal;
Tu laisses l’homme en proie à sa misère aiguë.
Que t’importe Socrate! et tu fais la ciguë.
Tu créas le besoin, l’instinct et l’appétit;
Le fort mange le faible et le grand le petit,
L’ours déjeune du rat, l’autour de la colombe,

Qu’importe! allez, naissez, fourmillez pour la tombe,
Multitudes! vivez, tuez, faites l’amour,
Croissez! le pré verdit, la nuit succède au jour,
L’âne brait, le cheval hennit, le taureau beugle.
Ô figure terrible, on te croirait aveugle!
Le bon et le mauvais se mêlent sous tes pas.
Dans cet immense oubli, tu ne vois même pas
Ces deux géants lointains penchés sur ton abîme,
Satan, père du mal, Caïn, père du crime!
Erreur! erreur! erreur! ô géante aux cent yeux,
Tu fais un grand labeur, saint et mystérieux!
Oh! qu’un autre que moi te blasphème, ô nature
Tandis que notre chaîne étreint notre ceinture,
Et que l’obscurité s’étend de toutes parts,
Les principes cachés, les éléments épars,
Le fleuve, le volcan à la bouche écarlate,
Le gaz qui se condense et l’air qui se dilate,
Les fluides, l’éther, le germe sourd et lent,
Sont autant d’ouvriers dans l’ombre travaillant;
Ouvriers sans sommeil, sans fatigue, sans nombre.
Tu viens dans cette nuit, libératrice sombre!
Tout travaille, l’aimant, le bitume, le fer,
Le charbon; pour changer en éden notre enfer,
Les forces à ta voix sortent du fond des gouffres.

Tu murmures tout bas: — Race d’Adam qui souffres,
Hommes, forçats pensants au vieux monde attachés,
Chacune de mes lois vous délivre. Cherchez! —
Et chaque jour surgit une clarté nouvelle,
Et le penseur épie et le hasard révèle;
Toujours le vent sema, le calcul récolta.
Ici Fulton, ici Galvani, là Volta,
Sur tes secrets profonds que chaque instant nous livre,
Rêvent; l’homme ébloui déchiffre enfin ton livre.
D’heure en heure on découvre un peu plus d’horizon
Comme un coup de bélier au mur d’une prison,
Du genre humain qui fouille et qui creuse et qui sonde,

Chaque tâtonnement fait tressaillir le monde.
L’hymen des nations s’accomplit. Passions,
Intérêts, mœurs et lois, les révolutions
Par qui le cœur humain germe et change de formes,
Paris, Londres, New-York, les continents énormes,
Ont pour lien un fil qui tremble au fond des mers.
Une force inconnue, empruntée aux éclairs,
Mêle au courant des flots le courant des idées.
La science, gonflant ses ondes débordées,
Submerge trône et sceptre, idole et potentat.
Tout va, pense, se meut, s’accroît. L’aérostat
Passe, et du haut des cieux ensemence les hommes.
Chanaan apparaît; le voilà, nous y sommes!
L’amour succède aux pleurs et l’eau vive à la mort,
Et la bouche qui chante à la bouche qui mord.
La science, pareille aux antiques pontifes,
Attelle aux chars tonnants d’effrayants hippogriffes
Le feu souffle aux naseaux de la bête d’airain.
Le globe esclave cède à l’esprit souverain.
Partout où la terreur régnait, où marchait l’homme,
Triste et plus accablé que la bête de somme,
Traînant ses fers sanglants que l’erreur a forgés,
Partout où les carcans sortaient des préjugés,
Partout où les césars, posant le pied sur l’âme,
Etouffaient la clarté, la pensée et la flamme,
Partout où le mal sombre, étendant son réseau,
Faisait ramper le ver, tu fais naître l’oiseau!
Par degrés, lentement, on voit sous ton haleine
La liberté sortir de l’herbe de la plaine,
Des pierres du chemin, des branches des forêts,
Rayonner, convertir la science en décrets,
Du vieil univers mort briser la carapace,
Emplir le feu qui luit, l’eau qui bout, l’air qui passe,
Gronder dans le tonnerre, errer dans les torrents,
Vivre! et tu rends le monde impossible aux tyrans!
La matière, aujourd’hui vivante, jadis morte,
Hier écrasait l’homme et maintenant l’emporte.

Le bien germe à toute heure et la joie en tout lieu.
Oh! sois fière en ton cœur, toi qui, sous l’œil de Dieu,
Nous prodigues les dons que ton mystère épanche,
Toi qui regardes, comme une mère se penche
Pour voir naître l’enfant que son ventre a porté,
De ton flanc éternel sortir l’humanité!
Vie! idée! avenir bouillonnant dans les têtes!
Le progrès, reliant entre elles ses conquêtes,
Gagne un point après l’autre, et court contagieux.
De cet obscur amas de faits prodigieux
Qu’aucun regard n’embrasse et qu’aucun mot ne nomme,
Tu nais plus frissonnant que l’aigle, esprit de l’homme,
Refaisant mœurs, cités, codes, religion.
Le passé n’est que l’oeuf d’où tu sors, Légion!
Ô nature! c’est là ta genèse sublime.
Oh! l’éblouissement nous prend sur cette cime!
Le monde, réclamant l’essor que Dieu lui doit,
Vibre, et dès à présent, grave, attentif, le doigt
Sur la bouche, incliné sur les choses futures,
Sur la création et sur les créatures,
Une vague lueur dans son œil éclatant,
Le voyant, le savant, le philosophe entend
Dans l’avenir, déjà vivant sous ses prunelles,
La palpitation de ces millions d’ailes!
23 mai 1853. Jersey.

Chanson

À quoi ce proscrit pense-t-il
À son champ d’orge ou de laitue,
À sa charrue, à son outil,
À la grande France abattue.
Hélas! le souvenir le tue.
Pendant qu’on rente les Dupin
Le pauvre exilé souffre et prie.
— On ne peut pas vivre sans pain;
On ne peut pas non plus vivre sans la patrie.

L’ouvrier rêve l’atelier,
Et le laboureur sa chaumière,
Les pots de fleurs sur l’escalier,
Le feu brillant, la vitre claire,
Au fond le lit de la grand’mère.
Quatre gros glands de vieux crépin
En faisaient la coquetterie.
— On ne peut pas vivre sans pain
On ne peut pas non plus vivre sans la patrie. —

En mai volait la mouche à miel
On voyait courir dans les seigles
Les moineaux, partageux du ciel
Ils pillaient nos champs, ces espiègles,
Tout comme s’ils étaient des aigles.
Un château du temps de Pépin
Croulait près de la métairie.
— On ne peut pas vivre sans pain;
On ne peut pas non plus vivre sans la patrie. —

Avec sa lime ou son maillet
On soutenait enfants et femme
De l’aube au soir on travaillait
Et le travail égayait l’âme.

Ô saint travail! lumière et flamme!
De Watt, de Jacquart, de Papin,
La jeunesse ainsi fut nourrie.
— On ne peut pas vivre sans pain;
On ne peut pas non plus vivre sans la patrie. —

Les jours de fête, l’ouvrier
Laissait les soucis en fourrière
Chantant les chants de février,
Blouse au vent, casquette en arrière,
On s’en allait à la barrière.
On mangeait un douteux lapin
Et l’on buvait à la Hongrie.
— On ne peut pas vivre sans pain;
On ne peut pas non plus vivre sans la patrie. —

Les dimanches le paysan
Appelait Jeanne ou Jacqueline,
Et disait: « Femme, viens-nous-en,
Mets ta coiffe de mousseline!”
Et l’on dansait sur la colline.
Le sabot, et non l’escarpin,
Foulait gaîment l’herbe fleurie!
— On ne peut pas vivre sans pain;
On ne peut pas non plus vivre sans la patrie. —

Les exilés s’en vont pensifs.
Leur âme, hélas! n’est plus entière.
Ils regardent l’ombre des ifs
Sur les fosses du cimetière;
L’un songe à l’Allemagne altière,
L’autre au beau pays transalpin,
L’autre à sa Pologne chérie.
— On ne peut pas vivre sans pain;
On ne peut pas non plus vivre sans la patrie. —

Un proscrit, lassé de souffrir,

Mourait; calme, il fermait son livre;
Et je lui dis: « Pourquoi mourir?
Il me répondit: « Pourquoi vivre?”
Puis il reprit:
Je me délivre.
Adieu! je meurs. Néron-Scapin
Met aux fers la France flétrie…”
— On ne peut pas vivre sans pain;
On ne peut pas non plus vivre sans la patrie. —

«… Je meurs de ne plus voir les champs
Où je regardais l’aube naître,
De ne plus entendre les chants
Que j’entendais de ma fenêtre.
Mon âme est où je ne puis être.
Sous quatre planches de sapin,
Enterrez-moi dans la prairie.”
— On ne peut pas vivre sans pain;
On ne peut pas non plus vivre sans la patrie. —
13 avril 1853. Jersey.

“Il est des jours abjects où, séduits par la joie

Il est des jours abjects où, séduits par la joie
Sans honneur,
Les peuples au succès se livrent, triste proie
Du bonheur.

Alors des nations, que berce un fatal songe
Dans leur lit,
La vertu coule et tombe, ainsi que d’une éponge
L’eau jaillit.

Alors, devant le mal, le vice, la folle,
Les vivants
Imitent les saluts du vil roseau qui plie
Sous les vents.

Alors festins et jeux; rien de ce que dit l’âme
Ne s’entend;
On boit, on mange, on chante, on danse, on est infâme
Et content.

Le crime heureux, servi par d’immondes ministres,
Sous les cieux
Rit, et vous frissonnez, grands ossements sinistres
Des aïeux.

On vit honteux, les yeux troubles, le pas oblique,
Hébété
Tout à coup un clairon jette aux vents: République!
Liberté!

Et le monde, éveillé par cette âpre fanfare,
Est pareil
Aux ivrognes de nuit qu’en se levant effare
Le soleil.

Jersey, 1853.

Ultima verba

La conscience humaine est morte; dans l’orgie,
Sur elle il s’accroupit; ce cadavre lui plaît;
Par moments, gai, vainqueur, la prunelle rougie,
  Il se retourne et donne à la morte un soufflet.

La prostitution du juge est la ressource.
Les prêtres font frémir l’honnête homme éperdu;
Dans le champ du potier ils déterrent la bourse;
Sibour revend le Dieu que Judas a vendu.

Ils disent: — César règne, et le Dieu des armées
L’a fait son élu. Peuple, obéis, tu le dois! —
Pendant qu’ils vont chantant, tenant leurs mains fermées,
On voit le sequin d’or qui passe entre leurs doigts.

Oh! tant qu’on le verra trôner, ce gueux, ce prince,
Par le pape béni, monarque malandrin,
Dans une main le sceptre et dans l’autre la pince,
Charlemagne taillé par Satan dans Mandrin;

Tant qu’il se vautrera, broyant dans ses mâchoires
Le serment, la vertu, l’honneur religieux,
Ivre, affreux, vomissant sa honte sur nos gloires;
Tant qu’on verra cela sous le soleil des cieux;

Quand même grandirait l’abjection publique
À ce point d’adorer l’exécrable trompeur;
Quand même l’Angleterre et même l’Amérique
Diraient à l’exilé: — Va-t’en! nous avons peur!

Quand même nous serions comme la feuille morte;
Quand, pour plaire à César, on nous renîrait tous;
Quand le proscrit devrait s’enfuir de porte en porte,
Aux hommes déchiré comme un haillon aux clous;

Quand le désert, où Dieu contre l’homme proteste
Bannirait les bannis, chasserait les chassés;
Quand même, infâme aussi, lâche comme le reste,
Le tombeau jetterait dehors les trépassés;

Je ne fléchirai pas! Sans plainte dans la bouche,
Calme, le deuil au cœur, dédaignant le troupeau,
Je vous embrasserai dans mon exil farouche,
Patrie, ô mon autel! Liberté, mon drapeau!

Mes nobles compagnons, je garde votre culte
Bannis, la république est là qui nous unit.
J’attacherai la gloire à tout ce qu’on insulte
Je jetterai l’opprobre à tout ce qu’on bénit!

Je serai, sous le sac de cendre qui me couvre,
La voix qui dit: malheur! la bouche qui dit: non!
Tandis que tes valets te montreront ton Louvre,
Moi, je te montrerai, César, ton cabanon.

Devant les trahisons et les têtes courbées,
Je croiserai les bras, indigné, mais serein.
Sombre fidélité pour les choses tombées,
Sois ma force et ma joie et mon pilier d’airain!

Oui, tant qu’il sera là, qu’on cède ou qu’on persiste,
Ô France! France aimée et qu’on pleure toujours,
Je ne reverrai pas ta terre douce et triste,
Tombeau de mes aïeux et nid de mes amours!

Je ne reverrai pas ta rive qui nous tente,
France! hors le devoir, hélas! j’oublîrai tout.
Parmi les éprouvés je planterai ma tente.
Je resterai proscrit, voulant rester debout.

J’accepte l’âpre exil, n’eût-il ni fin ni terme,

Sans chercher à savoir et sans considérer
Si quelqu’un a plié qu’on aurait cru plus ferme,
Et si plusieurs s’en vont qui devraient demeurer.

Si l’on n’est plus que mille, eh bien, j’en suis! Si même
Ils ne sont plus que cent, je brave encor Sylla;
S’il en demeure dix, je serai le dixième;
Et s’il n’en reste qu’un, je serai celui-là!
2 décembre 1852. Jersey.

LUX

Temps futurs! vision sublime!
Les peuples sont hors de l’abîme.
Le désert morne est traversé.
Après les sables, la pelouse;
Et la terre est comme une épouse,
    Et l’homme est comme un fiancé!

    Dès à présent l’œil qui s’élève
    Voit distinctement ce beau rêve
    Qui sera le réel un jour;
    Car Dieu dénoûra toute chaîne,
    Car le passé s’appelle haine
    Et l’avenir se nomme amour!

    Dès à présent dans nos misères
    Germe l’hymen des peuples frères;
    Volant sur nos sombres rameaux,
    Comme un frelon que l’aube éveille,
    Le progrès, ténébreuse abeille,
    Fait du bonheur avec nos maux.

    Oh! voyez! la nuit se dissipe.
    Sur le monde qui s’émancipe,
    Oubliant Césars et Capets,
    Et sur les nations nubiles,
    S’ouvrent dans l’azur, immobiles,
    Les vastes ailes de la paix!

    Ô libre France enfin surgie!
    Ô robe blanche après l’orgie!
    Ô triomphe après les douleurs!
    Le travail bruit dans les forges,
    Le ciel rit, et les rouges-gorges
    Chantent dans l’aubépine en fleurs!

La rouille mord les hallebardes.
De vos canons, de vos bombardes
Il ne reste pas un morceau
Qui soit assez grand, capitaines,
Pour qu'on puisse prendre aux fontaines
De quoi faire boire un oiseau.

Les rancunes sont effacées;
Tous les cœurs, toutes les pensées,
Qu'anime le même dessein,
Ne font plus qu'un faisceau superbe;
Dieu prend pour lier cette gerbe
La vieille corde du tocsin.

Au fond des cieux un point scintille.
Regardez, il grandit, il brille,
Il approche, énorme et vermeil.
Ô République universelle,
Tu n'es encor que l'étincelle,
Demain tu seras le soleil!

II

Fêtes dans les cités, fêtes dans les campagnes!
Les cieux n'ont plus d'enfers, les lois n'ont plus de bagnes.
Où donc est l'échafaud? ce monstre a disparu.
Tout renaît. Le bonheur de chacun est accru
De la félicité des nations entières.
Plus de soldats l'épée au poing, plus de frontières,
Plus de fisc, plus de glaive ayant forme de croix.
L'Europe en rougissant dit: — Quoi! j'avais des rois!
Et l'Amérique dit. — Quoi! j'avais des esclaves!
Science, art, poésie, ont dissous les entraves
De tout le genre humain. Où sont les maux soufferts?
Les libres pieds de l'homme ont oublié les fers.
Tout l'univers n'est plus qu'une famille unie.

Le saint labeur de tous se fond en harmonie
Et la société, qui d’hymnes retentit,
Accueille avec transport l’effort du plus petit
L’ouvrage du plus humble au fond de sa chaumière
Emeut l’immense peuple heureux dans la lumière
Toute l’humanité dans sa splendide ampleur
Sent le don que lui fait le moindre travailleur;
Ainsi les verts sapins, vainqueurs des avalanches,
Les grands chênes, remplis de feuilles et de branches,
Les vieux cèdres touffus, plus durs que le granit,
Quand la fauvette en mai vient y faire son nid,
Tressaillent dans leur force et leur hauteur superbe,
Tout joyeux qu’un oiseau leur apporte un brin d’herbe.

Radieux avenir! essor universel!
Epanouissement de l’homme sous le ciel!

III

Ô proscrits, hommes de l’épreuve,
Mes compagnons vaillants et doux,
Bien des fois, assis près du fleuve,
J’ai chanté ce chant parmi vous;

Bien des fois, quand vous m’entendîtes,
Plusieurs m’ont dit: « Perds ton espoir.
Nous serions des races maudites,
Le ciel ne serait pas plus noir!

» Que veut dire cette inclémence?
Quoi! le juste a le châtiment!
La vertu s’étonne et commence
À regarder Dieu fixement.

» Dieu se dérobe et nous échappe.
Quoi donc! l’iniquité prévaut!

Le crime, voyant où Dieu frappe,
Rit d'un rire impie et dévot.

» Nous ne comprenons pas ses voies.
Comment ce Dieu des nations
Fera-t-il sortir tant de joies
De tant de désolations?

» Ses desseins nous semblent contraires
À l'espoir qui luit dans tes yeux…"
— Mais qui donc, ô proscrits, mes frères,
Comprend le grand mystérieux?

Qui donc a traversé l'espace,
La terre, l'eau, l'air et le feu,
Et l'étendue où l'esprit passe?
Qui donc peut dire: « J'ai vu Dieu!

» J'ai vu Jéhova! je le nomme!
Tout à l'heure il me réchauffait.
Je sais comment il a fait l'homme,
Comment il fait tout ce qu'il fait!

» J'ai vu cette main inconnue
Qui lâche en s'ouvrant l'âpre hiver,
Et les tonnerres dans la nue,
Et les tempêtes sur la mer,

» Tendre et ployer la nuit livide;
Mettre une âme dans l'embryon;
Appuyer dans l'ombre du vide
Le pôle du septentrion;

» Amener l'heure où tout arrive;
Faire au banquet du roi fêté
Entrer la mort, ce noir convive
Qui vient sans qu'on l'ait invité;

» Créer l’araignée et sa toile,
Peindre la fleur, mûrir le fruit,
Et, sans perdre une seule étoile,
Mener tous les astres la nuit;

» Arrêter la vague à la rive;
Parfumer de roses l’été;
Verser le temps comme une eau vive
Des urnes de l’éternité;

» D’un souffle, avec ses feux sans nombre,
Faire, dans toute sa hauteur,
Frissonner le firmament sombre
Comme la tente d’un pasteur;

» Attacher les globes aux sphères
Par mille invisibles liens…
Toutes ces choses sont très claires.
Je sais comment il fait! j’en viens!”

Qui peut dire cela? personne.
Nuit sur nos cœurs! nuit sur nos yeux!
L’homme est un vain clairon qui sonne.
Dieu seul parle aux axes des cieux.

IV

Ne doutons pas! croyons! La fin, c’est le mystère.
Attendons. Des Nérons comme de la panthère
Dieu sait briser la dent.
Dieu nous essaie, amis. Ayons foi, soyons cannes,
Et marchons. Ô désert! s’il fait croître des palmes,
C’est dans ton sable ardent!

Parce qu’il ne fait pas son œuvre tout de suite,

Qu’il livre Rome au prêtre et Jésus au jésuite,
Et les bons au méchant,
Nous désespérerions! de lui! du juste immense!
Non! non! lui seul connaît le nom de la -semence
Qui germe dans son champ.

Ne possède-t-il pas toute la certitude?
Dieu ne remplit-il pas ce monde, notre étude,
Du nadir au zénith?
Notre sagesse auprès de la sienne est démence.
Et n’est-ce pas à lui que la clarté commence,
Et que l’ombre finit?

Ne voit-il pas ramper les hydres sur leurs ventres?
Ne regarde-t-il pas jusqu’au fond de leurs antres
Atlas et Pélion?
Ne connaît-il pas l’heure où la cigogne émigre?
Sait-il pas ton entrée et ta sortie, ô tigre,
Et ton antre, ô lion?

Hirondelle, réponds, aigle à l’aile sonore,
Parle, avez-vous des nids que l’Eternel ignore?
Ô cerf, quand l’as-tu fui?
Renard, ne vois-tu pas ses yeux dans la broussaille?
Loup, quand tu sens la nuit une herbe qui tressaille,
Ne dis-tu pas: c’est lui!

Puisqu’il sait tout cela, puisqu’il peut toute chose,
Que ses doigts font jaillir les effets de la cause
Comme un noyau d’un fruit,
Puisqu’il peut mettre un ver dans les pommes de l’arbre,
Et faire disperser les colonnes de marbre
Par le vent de la nuit;

Puisqu’il bat l’océan pareil au bœuf qui beugle,
Puisqu’il est le voyant et que l’homme est l’aveugle,
Puisqu’il est le milieu,

Puisque son bras nous porte, et puisqu'à soir passage
La comète frissonne ainsi qu'en une cage
Tremble une étoupe en feu;

Puisque l'obscure nuit le connaît, puisque l'ombre
Le voit, quand il lui plaît, sauver la nef qui sombre,
Comment douterions-nous,
Nous qui, fermes et purs, fiers dans nos agonies,
Sommes debout devant toutes les tyrannies,
Pour lui seul à genoux!

D'ailleurs, pensons. Nos jours sont des jours d'amertume,
Mais quand nous étendons les bras dans cette brume,
Nous sentons une main;
Quand nous marchons, courbés, dans l'ombre du martyre,
Nous entendons quelqu'un derrière nous nous dire:
C'est ici le chemin.

Ô proscrits, l'avenir est aux peuples! Paix, gloire,
Liberté, reviendront sur des chars de victoire
Aux foudroyants essieux;
Ce crime qui triomphe est fumée et mensonge,
Voilà ce que je puis affirmer, moi qui songe
L'œil fixé sur les cieux!

Les césars sont plus fiers que les vagues marines,
Mais Dieu dit: « Je mettrai ma boucle en leurs narines,
Et dans leur bouche un mors,
Et je les traînerai, qu'on cède ou bien qu'on lutte,
Eux et leurs histrions et leurs joueurs de flûte,
Dans l'ombre où sont les morts."

Dieu dit; et le granit que foulait leur semelle
S'écroule, et les voilà disparus pêle-mêle
Dans leurs prospérités!
Aquilon! aquilon! qui viens battre nos portes,
Oh! dis-nous, si c'est toi, souffle, qui les emportes,

Où les as-tu jetés?

V

Bannis! bannis! bannis! c’est là la destinée.
Ce qu’apporté le flux sera dans la journée
Repris par le reflux.
Les jours mauvais fuiront sans qu’on sache leur nombre,
Et les peuples joyeux et se penchant sur l’ombre
Diront: Cela n’est plus!

Les temps heureux luiront, non pour la seule France,
Mais pour tous. On verra dans cette délivrance,
Funeste au seul passé,
Toute l’humanité chanter, de fleurs couverte,
Comme un maître qui rentre en sa maison déserte
Dont on l’avait chassé.

Les tyrans s’éteindront comme des météores.
Et, comme s’il naissait de la nuit deux aurores
Dans le même ciel bleu,
Nous vous verrous sortir de ce gouffre où nous sommes,
Mêlant vos deux rayons, fraternité des hommes,
Paternité de Dieu!

Oui, je vous le déclare, oui, je vous le répète,
Car le clairon redit ce que dit la trompette,
Tout sera paix et jour!
Liberté! plus de serf et plus de prolétaire!
Ô sourire d’en haut! ô du ciel pour la terre
Majestueux amour!

L’arbre saint du Progrès, autrefois chimérique,
Croîtra, couvrant l’Europe et couvrant l’Amérique,
Sur le passé détruit,
Et, laissant l’éther pur luire à travers ses branches,
Le jour, apparaîtra plein de colombes blanches,
Plein d’étoiles, la nuit.

Et nous qui serons morts, morts dans l’exil peut-être,
Martyrs saignants, pendant que les hommes, sans maître,
Vivront, plus fiers, plus beaux,
Sous ce grand arbre, amour des cieux qu’il avoisine,
Nous nous réveillerons pour baiser sa racine
Au fond de nos tombeaux!
16-20 décembre. Jersey.

LA FIN

(Jersey, 9 octobre 1853)
Comme j’allais fermer ces pages inflexibles,
Sur les trônes croulants, perdus par leur sauveur,
La guerre s’est dressée, et j’ai vu, moi rêveur,
Passer dans un éclair sa face aux cris terribles.

Et j’ai vu frissonner l’homme de grand chemin!
Cette foudre subite éblouit ses prunelles.
Il frémit, effaré, devant les Dardanelles,
Ô lâche! Et peut-être demain,

Grâce aux soldats nos fils, vaillants, quoique infidèles,
Demain sur ce front vil, sur cet abject cimier,
Comme un aigle parfois s’abat sur un fumier,
Quelque victoire aveugle ira poser ses ailes!

Malgré ta couardise, il faut combattre, allons!
Bats-toi, bandit! c’est dur; il le faut. Dieu t’opprime.
Toi qui, le front levé, te ruas dans le crime,
Marche à la gloire à reculons!

Quoi! même en se traînant comme un chien qui se couche,
Quoi! même en criant grâce, en demandant pardon,
Même en léchant les pieds des cosaques du Don,
On ne peut éviter Austerlitz? Non, Cartouche.

Nul moyen de sortir de la peau de César!
En guerre, faux lion! ta crinière l’exige.
Voici le Rhin, voici l’Elster, voici l’Adige,
Voici la fosse auprès du char!

La guerre, c’est la fin. Ô peuples, nous y sommes.
Pour t’entendre sonner, je monte sur ma tour,
Formidable angelus de ce grand point du jour,

Dernière heure des rois, première heure des hommes!

Droits, progrès, qu’on croyait éclipsés pour jamais, Liberté, qu’invoquaient nos voix exténuées, Vous surgissez! voici qu’à travers les nuées Reparaissent les grands sommets! Des révolutions nous revoyons les cimes. Vieux monde du passé, marche, allons! c’est la loi. L’ange au glaive de feu, debout derrière toi, Te met l’épée aux reins et te pousse aux abîmes!

LES CONTEMPLATIONS

This collection of poetry was published in 1856. It is composed of 158 poems collected in six books. Most of the poems were written between 1841 and 1855, but the oldest poems in this collection date from 1830. They contain themes of remembrance, love, joy, but also death, mourning and works that explore mystical faith.

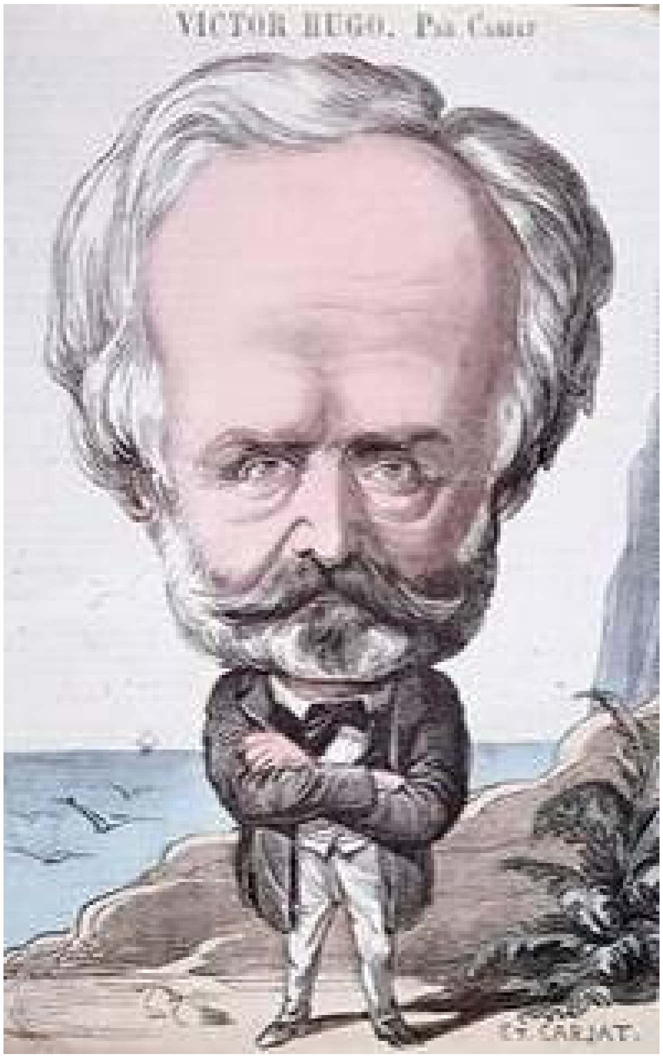
VICTOR HUGO, Par Carjat
ET. CARJAT.

A caricature of Hugo, 1856 – the time of publication

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15 FÉVRIER 1843
TROIS ANS APRÈS
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ELLE AVAIT PRIS CE PLI DANS SON AGE ENFANTIN
QUAND NOUS HABITIONS TOUS ENSEMBLE
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LE PONT
IBO
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CROIRE; MAIS PAS EN NOUS
PLEURS DANS LA NUIT
UN JOUR, LE MORNE ESPRIT, LE PROPHETE SUBLIME
CLAIRE
À LA FENÊTRE PENDANT LA NUIT
ÉCLAIRCIE
OH! PAR NOS VILS PLAISIRS, NOS APPETITS, NOS FANGES
CADAVER
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A CELLE QUI EST VOILÉE
HORROR
DOLOR
HELAS! TOUT EST SEPULCRE. ON EN SORT, ON Y TOMBE
VOYAGE DE NUIT
RELLIGIO
SPES
CE QUE C'EST QUE LA MORT
LES MAGES
EN FRAPPANT A UNE PORTE
NOMEN, NUMEN, LUMEN
CE QUE DIT LA BOUCHE D'OMBRE
A CELLE QUI EST RESTÉE EN FRANCE

Préface

Si un auteur pouvait avoir quelque droit d'influer sur la disposition d'esprit des lecteurs qui ouvrent son livre, l'auteur des *Contemplations* se bornerait à dire ceci: Ce livre doit être lu comme on lirait le livre d'un mort.

Vingt-cinq années sont dans ces deux volumes. *Grande mortalis ævi spatium*. L'auteur a laissé, pour ainsi dire, ce livre se faire en lui. La vie, en filtrant goutte à goutte à travers les événements et les souffrances, l'a déposé dans son coeur. Ceux qui s'y pencheront retrouveront leur propre image dans cette eau profonde et triste, qui s'est lentement amassée là, au fond d'une âme.

Qu'est-ce que les *Contemplations*? C'est ce qu'on pourrait appeler, si le mot n'avait quelque prétention, *les Mémoires d'une âme*.

Ce sont, en effet, toutes les impressions, tous les souvenirs, toutes les réalités, tous les fantômes vagues, riants ou funèbres, que peut contenir une conscience, revenus et rappelés, rayon à rayon, soupir à soupir, et mêlés dans la même nuée sombre. C'est l'existence humaine sortant de l'énigme du berceau et aboutissant à l'énigme du cercueil; c'est un esprit qui marche de lueur en lueur en laissant derrière lui la jeunesse, l'amour, l'illusion, le combat, le désespoir, et qui s'arrête éperdu «au bord de l'infini». Cela commence par un sourire, continue par un sanglot, et finit par un bruit du clairon de l'abîme.

Une destinée est écrite là jour à jour.

Est-ce donc la vie d'un homme? Oui, et la vie des autres hommes aussi. Nul de nous n'a l'honneur d'avoir une vie qui soit à lui. Ma vie est la vôtre, votre vie est la mienne, vous vivez ce que je vis; la destinée est une. Prenez donc ce miroir, et regardez-vous-y. On se plaint quelquefois des écrivains qui disent moi. Parlez-nous de nous, leur crie-t-on. Hélas! quand je vous parle de moi, je vous parle de vous. Comment ne le sentez-vous pas? Ah! insensé, qui crois que je ne suis pas toi!

Ce livre contient, nous le répétons, autant l'individualité du lecteur que celle de l'auteur. *Homo sum*. Traverser le tumulte, la rumeur, le rêve, la lutte, le plaisir, le travail, la douleur, le silence; se reposer dans le sacrifice, et, là, contempler Dieu; commencer à Foule et finir à Solitude, n'est-ce pas, les proportions individuelles réservées, l'histoire de tous?

On ne s’étonnera donc pas de voir, nuance à nuance, ces deux volumes s’assombrir pour arriver, cependant, à l’azur d’une vie meilleure. La joie, cette fleur rapide de la jeunesse, s’effeuille page à page dans le tome premier, qui est l’espérance, et disparaît dans le tome second, qui est le deuil. Quel deuil? Le vrai, l’unique: la mort; la perte des êtres chers.

Nous venons de le dire, c’est une âme qui se raconte dans ces deux volumes: *Autrefois, Aujourd’hui*. Un abîme les sépare, le tombeau.

V. H.

Guernesey, mars 1856.

Un jour je vis, debout au bord des flots mouvants,
Passer, gonflant ses voiles,
Un rapide navire enveloppé de vents,
De vagues et d’étoiles;
Et j’entendis, penché sur l’abîme des cieux
Que l’autre abîme touche,
Me parler à l’oreille une voix dont mes yeux
Ne voyaient pas la bouche:
«Poëte, tu fais bien! Poëte au triste front,
Tu rêves près des ondes,
Et tu tires des mers bien des choses qui sont
Sous les vagues profondes!
La mer, c’est le Seigneur, que, misère ou bonheur,
Tout destin montre et nomme;
Le vent, c’est le Seigneur; l’astre, c’est le Seigneur;
Le navire, c’est l’homme.»
Juin 1839.

LIVRE PREMIER: AURORE

I

À MA FILLE

O mon enfant, tu vois, je me soumets.
Fais comme moi: vis du monde éloignée;
Heureuse? non; triomphante? jamais.
— Résignée! —

Sois bonne et douce, et lève un front pieux.
Comme le jour dans les cieux met sa flamme,
Toi, mon enfant, dans l’azur de tes yeux
Mets ton âme!

Nul n’est heureux et nul n’est triomphant.
L’heure est pour tous une chose incomplète;
L’heure est une ombre, et notre vie, enfant,
En est faite.

Oui, de leur sort tous les hommes sont las.
Pour être heureux, à tous, — destin morose! —
Tout a manqué. Tout, c’est-à-dire, hélas!
Peu de chose.

Ce peu de chose est ce que, pour sa part,
Dans l’univers chacun cherche et désire:
Un mot, un nom, un peu d’or, un regard,
Un sourire!

La gaîté manque au grand roi sans amours;
La goutte d’eau manque au désert immense.
L’homme est un puits où le vide toujours
Recommence.

Vois ces penseurs que nous divinisons,
Vois ces héros dont les fronts nous dominent,
Noms dont toujours nos sombres horizons
S’illuminent!

Après avoir, comme fait un flambeau,
Ébloui tout de leurs rayons sans nombre,
Ils sont allés chercher dans le tombeau
Un peu d’ombre.

Le ciel, qui sait nos maux et nos douleurs,
Prend en pitié nos jours vains et sonores.
Chaque matin, il baigne de ses pleurs
Nos aurores.

Dieu nous éclaire, à chacun de nos pas,
Sur ce qu’il est et sur ce que nous sommes;
Une loi sort des choses d’ici-bas,
Et des hommes!

Cette loi sainte, il faut s’y conformer.
Et la voici, toute âme y peut atteindre:
Ne rien haïr, mon enfant; tout aimer,
Ou tout plaindre!

Paris, octobre 1842.

II

LE POËTE S’EN VA DANS LES CHAMPS; IL ADMIRE

Le poëte s’en va dans les champs; il admire,
Il adore, il écoute en lui-même une lyre;
Et, le voyant venir, les fleurs, toutes les fleurs,
Celles qui des rubis font pâlir les couleurs,

Celles qui des paons même éclipseraient les queues,
Les petites fleurs d’or, les petites fleurs bleues,
Prennent, pour l’accueillir agitant leurs bouquets,
De petits airs penchés ou de grands airs coquets,
Et, familièrement, car cela sied aux belles:
«Tiens! c’est notre amoureux qui passe!» disent-elles.
Et, pleins de jour et d’ombre et de confuses voix,
Les grands arbres profonds qui vivent dans les bois,
Tous ces vieillards, les ifs, les tilleuls, les érables,
Les saules tout ridés, les chênes vénérables,
L’orme au branchage noir, de mousse appesanti,
Comme les ulémas quand paraît le muphti,
Lui font de grands saluts et courbent jusqu’à terre
Leurs têtes de feuillée et leurs barbes de lierre,
Contemplent de son front la sereine lueur,
Et murmurent tout bas: C’est lui! c’est le rêveur!

Les Roches, juin 1831.

III

MES DEUX FILLES

Dans le frais clair-obscur du soir charmant qui tombe,
L’une pareille au cygne et l’autre à la colombe,
Belles, et toutes deux joyeuses, ô douceur!
Voyez, la grande soeur et la petite soeur
Sont assises au seuil du jardin, et sur elles
Un bouquet d’oeillets blancs aux longues tiges frêles,
Dans une urne de marbre agité par le vent,
Se penche, et les regarde, immobile et vivant,
Et frissonne dans l’ombre, et semble, au bord du vase,
Un vol de papillons arrêté dans l’extase.

La Terrasse, près Enghien, juin 1842.

IV

LE FIRMAMENT EST PLEIN DE LA VASTE CLARTE

Le firmament est plein de la vaste clarté;
Tout est joie, innocence, espoir, bonheur, bonté.
Le beau lac brille au fond du vallon qui le mure;
Le champ sera fécond, la vigne sera mûre;
Tout regorge de sève et de vie et de bruit,
De rameaux verts, d’azur frissonnant, d’eau qui luit,
Et de petits oiseaux qui se cherchent querelle.
Qu’a donc le papillon? qu’a donc la sauterelle?
La sauterelle a l’herbe, et le papillon l’air;
Et tous deux ont avril, qui rit dans le ciel clair.
Un refrain joyeux sort de la nature entière;
Chanson qui doucement monte et devient prière.
Le poussin court, l’enfant joue et danse, l’agneau
aute, et, laissant tomber goutte à goutte son eau,
Le vieux antre, attendri, pleure comme un visage;
Le vent lit à quelqu’un d’invisible un passage
Du poëme inouï de la création;
L’oiseau parle au parfum; la fleur parle au rayon;
Les pins sur les étangs dressent leur verte ombelle;
Les nids ont chaud; l’azur trouve la terre belle,
Onde et sphère, à la fois tous les climats flottants;
Ici l’automne, ici l’été; là le printemps.
O coteaux! ô sillons! souffles, soupirs, haleines!
L’hosanna des forêts, des fleuves et des plaines,
S’élève gravement vers Dieu, père du jour;
Et toutes les blancheurs sont des strophes d’amour;
Le cygne dit: Lumière! et le lys dit: Clémence!
Le ciel s’ouvre à ce chant comme une oreille immense.
Le soir vient; et le globe à son tour s’éblouit,
Devient un oeil énorme et regarde la nuit;
Il savoure, éperdu, l’immensité sacrée,
La contemplation du splendide empyrée,
Les nuages de crêpe et d’argent, le zénith,

Qui, formidable, brille et flamboie et bénit,
Les constellations, ces hydres étoilées,
Les effluves du sombre et du profond, mêlées
À vos effusions, astres de diamant,
Et toute l'ombre avec tout le rayonnement!
L'infini tout entier d'extase se soulève.
Et, pendant ce temps-là, Satan, l'envieux, rêve.

La Terrasse, avril 1840.

V

À ANDRÉ CHÉNIER

Oui, mon vers croit pouvoir, sans se mésallier,
Prendre à la prose un peu de son air familier.
André, c'est vrai, je ris quelquefois sur la lyre.
Voici pourquoi. Tout jeune encor, tâchant de lire
Dans le livre effrayant des forêts et des eaux,
J'habitais un parc sombre où jasaient des oiseaux,
Où des pleurs souriaient dans l'oeil bleu des pervenches;
Un jour que je songeais seul au milieu des branches,
Un bouvreuil qui faisait le feuilleton du bois
M'a dit: «Il faut marcher à terre quelquefois.
«La nature est un peu moqueuse autour des hommes;
O poëte, tes chants, ou ce qu'ainsi tu nommes,
Lui ressembleraient mieux si tu les dégonflais.
Les bois ont des soupirs, mais ils ont des sifflets.
L'azur luit, quand parfois la gaîté le déchire;
L'Olympe reste grand en éclatant de rire;
Ne crois pas que l'esprit du poëte descend
Lorsque entre deux grands vers un mot passe en dansant.
Ce n'est pas un pleureur que le vent en démence;
Le flot profond n'est pas un chanteur de romance;
Et la nature, au fond des siècles et des nuits,
Accouplant Rabelais à Dante plein d'ennuis,
Et l'Ugolin sinistre au Grandgousier difforme,

Près de l’immense deuil montre le rire énorme.»

Les Roches, juillet 1830.

VI

LA VIE AUX CHAMPS

Le soir, à la campagne, on sort, on se promène,
Le pauvre dans son champ, le riche en son domaine;
Moi, je vais devant moi; le poëte en tout lieu
Se sent chez lui, sentant qu’il est partout chez Dieu.
Je vais volontiers seul. Je médite ou j’écoute.
Pourtant, si quelqu’un veut m’accompagner en route,
J’accepte. Chacun a quelque chose en l’esprit;
Et tout homme est un livre où Dieu lui-même écrit.
Chaque fois qu’en mes mains un de ces livres tombe,
Volume où vit une âme et que scelle la tombe,
J’y lis.
Chaque soir donc, je m’en vais, j’ai congé,
Je sors. J’entre en passant chez des amis que j’ai.
On prend le frais, au fond du jardin, en famille.
Le serein mouille un peu les bancs sous la charmille;
N’importe: je m’assieds, et je ne sais pourquoi
Tous les petits enfants viennent autour de moi.
Dès que je suis assis, les voilà tous qui viennent.
C’est qu’ils savent que j’ai leurs goûts; ils se souviennent
Que j’aime comme eux l’air, les fleurs, les papillons
Et les bêtes qu’on voit courir dans les sillons.
Ils savent que je suis un homme qui les aime,
Un être auprès duquel on peut jouer, et même
Crier, faire du bruit, parler à haute voix;
Que je riais comme eux et plus qu’eux autrefois,
Et qu’aujourd’hui, sitôt qu’à leurs ébats j’assiste,
Je leur souris encor, bien que je sois plus triste;
Ils disent, doux amis, que je ne sais jamais

Me fâcher; qu'on s'amuse avec moi; que je fais
Des choses en carton, des dessins à la plume;
Que je raconte, à l'heure où la lampe s'allume,
Oh! des contes charmants qui vous font peur la nuit;
Et qu'enfin je suis doux, pas fier et fort instruit.
Aussi, dès qu'on m'a vu: «Le voilà!» tous accourent.
Ils quittent jeux, cerceaux et balles; ils m'entourent
Avec leurs beaux grands yeux d'enfants, sans peur, sans fiel,
Qui semblent toujours bleus, tant on y voit le ciel!

Les petits — quand on est petit, on est très-brave —
Grimpent sur mes genoux; les grands ont un air grave;
Ils m'apportent des nids de merles qu'ils ont pris,
Des albums, des crayons qui viennent de Paris;
On me consulte, on a cent choses à me dire,
On parle, on cause, on rit surtout; — j'aime le rire,
Non le rire ironique aux sarcasmes moqueurs,
Mais le doux rire honnête ouvrant bouches et coeurs,
Qui montre en même temps des âmes et des perles. —

J'admire les crayons, l'album, les nids de merles;
Et quelquefois on dit quand j'ai bien admiré:
«Il est du même avis que monsieur le curé.»
Puis, lorsqu'ils ont jasé tous ensemble à leur aise,
Ils font soudain, les grands s'appuyant à ma chaise,
Et les petits toujours groupés sur mes genoux,
Un silence, et cela veut dire: «Parle-nous.»

Je leur parle de tout. Mes discours en eux sèment
Ou l'idée ou le fait. Comme ils m'aiment, ils aiment
Tout ce que je leur dis. Je leur montre du doigt
Le ciel, Dieu qui s'y cache, et l'astre qu'on y voit.
Tout, jusqu'à leur regard, m'écoute. Je dis comme
Il faut penser, rêver, chercher. Dieu bénit l'homme,
Non pour avoir trouvé, mais pour avoir cherché.
Je dis: Donnez l'aumône au pauvre humble et penché;
Recevez doucement la leçon ou le blâme.

Donner et recevoir, c’est faire vivre l’âme!
Je leur conte la vie, et que, dans nos douleurs,
Il faut que la bonté soit au fond de nos pleurs,
Et que, dans nos bonheurs, et que, dans nos délires,
Il faut que la bonté soit au fond de nos rires;
Qu’être bon, c’est bien vivre, et que l’adversité
Peut tout chasser d’une âme, excepté la bonté;
Et qu’ainsi les méchants, dans leur haine profonde,
Ont tort d’accuser Dieu. Grand Dieu! nul homme au monde
N’a droit, en choisissant sa route, en y marchant,
De dire que c’est toi qui l’as rendu méchant;
Car le méchant, Seigneur, ne t’est pas nécessaire!

Je leur raconte aussi l’histoire; la misère
Du peuple juif, maudit qu’il faut enfin bénir;
La Grèce, rayonnant jusque dans l’avenir;
Rome; l’antique Égypte et ses plaines sans ombre,
Et tout ce qu’on y voit de sinistre et de sombre.
Lieux effrayants! tout meurt; le bruit humain finit.
Tous ces démons taillés dans des blocs de granit,
Olympe monstrueux des époques obscures,
Les Sphinx, les Anubis, les Ammons, les Mercures,
Sont assis au désert depuis quatre mille ans;
Autour d’eux le vent souffle, et les sables brûlants
Montent comme une mer d’où sort leur tête énorme;
La pierre mutilée a gardé quelque forme
De statue ou de spectre, et rappelle d’abord
Les plis que fait un drap sur la face d’un mort;
On y distingue encor le front, le nez, la bouche,
Les yeux, je ne sais quoi d’horrible et de farouche
Qui regarde et qui vit, masque vague et hideux.
Le voyageur de nuit, qui passe à côté d’eux,
S’épouvante, et croit voir, aux lueurs des étoiles,
Des géants enchaînés et muets sous des voiles.

La Terrasse, août 1840.

VII

RÉPONSE

À UN ACTE D’ACCUSATION

Donc, c’est moi qui suis l’ogre et le bouc émissaire.
Dans ce chaos du siècle où votre coeur se serre,
J’ai foulé le bon goût et l’ancien vers françois
Sous mes pieds, et, hideux, j’ai dit à l’ombre: «Sois!»
Et l’ombre fut. — Voilà votre réquisitoire.
Langue, tragédie, art, dogmes, conservatoire,
Toute cette clarté s’est éteinte, et je suis
Le responsable, et j’ai vidé l’urne des nuits.
De la chute de tout je suis la pioche inepte;
C’est votre point de vue. Eh bien, soit, je l’accepte;
C’est moi que votre prose en colère a choisi;
Vous me criez: Racca; moi, je vous dis: Merci!
Cette marche du temps, qui ne sort d’une église
Que pour entrer dans l’autre, et qui se civilise;
Ces grandes questions d’art et de liberté,
Voyons-les, j’y consens, par le moindre côté,
Et par le petit bout de la lorgnette. En somme,
J’en conviens, oui, je suis cet abominable homme;
Et, quoique, en vérité, je pense avoir commis,
D’autres crimes encor que vous avez omis,
Avoir un peu touché les questions obscures,
Avoir sondé les maux, avoir cherché les cures,
De la vieille ânerie insulté les vieux bâts,
Secoué le passé du haut jusques en bas,
Et saccagé le fond tout autant que la forme,
Je me borne à ceci: je suis ce monstre énorme,
Je suis le démagogue horrible et débordé.
Et le dévastateur du vieil A B C D;
Causons.
Quand je sortis du collège, du thème,

Des vers latins, farouche, espèce d’enfant blême
Et grave, au front penchant, aux membres appauvris;
Quand, tâchant de comprendre et dé juger, j’ouvris
Les yeux sur la nature et sur l’art, l’idiome,
Peuple et noblesse, était l’image du royaume;
La poésie était la monarchie; un mot
Était un duc et pair, ou n’était qu’un grimaud;
Les syllabes, pas plus que Paris et que Londre,
Ne se mêlaient; ainsi marchent sans se confondre
Piétons et cavaliers traversant le pont Neuf;
La langue était l’État avant quatre-vingt-neuf;
Les mots, bien ou mal nés, vivaient parqués en castes;
Les uns, nobles, hantant les Phèdres, les Jocastes,
Les Méropes, ayant le décorum pour loi,
Et montant à Versailles aux carrosses du roi;
Les autres, tas de gueux, drôles patibulaires,
Habitant les patois; quelques-uns aux galères
Dans l’argot; dévoués à tous les genres bas,
Déchirés en haillons dans les halles; sans bas,
Sans perruque; créés pour la prose et la farce;
Populace du style au fond de l’ombre éparse;
Vilains, rustres, croquants, que Vaugelas leur chef
Dans le bagne Lexique avait marqués d’une F;
N’exprimant que la vie abjecte et familière,
Vils, dégradés, flétris, bourgeois, bons pour Molière.
Racine regardait ces marauds de travers;
Si Corneille en trouvait un blotti dans son vers,
Il le gardait, trop grand pour dire: Qu’il s’en aille;
Et Voltaire criait: Corneille s’encanaille!
Le bonhomme Corneille, humble, se tenait coi.
Alors, brigand, je vins; je m’écriai: Pourquoi
Ceux-ci toujours devant, ceux-là toujours derrière?
Et sur l’Académie, aïeule et douairière,
Cachant sous ses jupons les tropes effarés,
Et sur les bataillons d’alexandrins carrés,
Je fis souffler un vent révolutionnaire.
Je mis un bonnet rouge au vieux dictionnaire.

Plus de mot sénateur! plus de mot roturier!
Je fis une tempête au fond de l’encrier,
Et je mêlai, parmi les ombres débordées,
Au peuple noir des mots l’essaim blanc des idées;
Et je dis: Pas de mot où l’idée au vol pur
Ne puisse se poser, tout humide d’azur!
Discours affreux! — Syllepse, hypallage, litote,
Frémirent; je montai sur la borne Aristote,
Et déclarai les mots égaux, libres, majeurs.
Tous les envahisseurs et tous les ravageurs,
Tous ces tigres, les Huns, les Scythes et les Daces,
N’étaient que des toutous auprès de mes audaces;
Je bondis hors du cercle et brisai le compas.
Je nommai le cochon par son nom; pourquoi pas?
Guichardin a nommé le Borgia! Tacite
Le Vitellius! Fauve, implacable, explicite,
J’ôtai du cou du chien stupéfait son collier
D’épithètes; dans l’herbe, à l’ombre du hallier,
Je fis fraterniser la vache et la génisse,
L’une étant Margoton et l’autre Bérénice.
Alors, l’ode, embrassant Rabelais, s’enivra;
Sur le sommet du Pinde on dansait Ça ira;
Les neuf muses, seins nus, chantaient la Carmagnole;
L’emphase frissonna dans sa fraise espagnole;
Jean, l’ânier, épousa la bergère Myrtil.
On entendit un roi dire: «Quelle heure est-il?»
Je massacrai l’albâtre, et la neige, et l’ivoire,
Je retirai le jais de la prunelle noire,
Et j’osai dire au bras: Sois blanc, tout simplement.
Je violai du vers le cadavre fumant;
J’y fis entrer le chiffre; ô terreur! Mithridate
Du siége de Cyzique eût pu citer la date.
Jours d’effroi! les Laïs devinrent des catins.
Force mots, par Restaut peignés tous les matins,
Et de Louis-Quatorze ayant gardé l’allure,
Portaient encor perruque; à cette chevelure
La Révolution, du haut de son beffroi,

Cria: «Transforme-toi! c’est l’heure. Remplis-toi
De l’âme de ces mots que tu tiens prisonnière!»
Et la perruque alors rugit, et fut crinière.
Liberté! c’est ainsi qu’en nos rébellions,
Avec des épagneuls nous fîmes des lions,
Et que, sous l’ouragan maudit que nous soufflâmes,
Toutes sortes de mots se couvrirent de flammes.
J’affichai sur Lhomond des proclamations.
On y lisait: «Il faut que nous en finissions!
Au panier les Bouhours, les Batteux, les Brossettes
À la pensée humaine ils ont mis les poucettes.
Aux armes, prose et vers! formez vos bataillons!
Voyez où l’on en est: la strophe a des bâillons!
«L’ode a les fers aux pieds, le drame est en cellule.
Sur le Racine mort le Campistron pullule!»
Boileau grinça des dents; je lui dis: Ci-devant,
Silence! et je criai dans la foudre et le vent:
Guerre à la rhétorique et paix à la syntaxe!
Et tout quatre-vingt-treize éclata. Sur leur axe,
On vit trembler l’athos, l’ithos et le pathos.
Les matassins, lâchant Pourceaugnac et Cathos,
Poursuivant Dumarsais dans leur hideux bastringue,
Des ondes du Permesse emplirent leur seringue.
La syllabe, enjambant la loi qui la tria,
Le substantif manant, le verbe paria,
Accoururent. On but l’horreur jusqu’à la lie.
On les vit déterrer le songe d’Athalie;
Ils jetèrent au vent les cendres du récit
De Théramène; et l’astre Institut s’obscurcit.
Oui, de l’ancien régime ils ont fait tables rases,
Et j’ai battu des mains, buveur du sang des phrases,
Quand j’ai vu par la strophe écumante et disant
Les choses dans un style énorme et rugissant,
L’Art poétique pris au collet dans la rue,
Et quand j’ai vu, parmi la foule qui se rue,
Pendre, par tous les mots que le bon goût proscrit,
La lettre aristocrate à la lanterne esprit.

Oui, je suis ce Danton! je suis ce Robespierre!
J’ai, contre le mot noble à la longue rapière,
Insurgé le vocable ignoble, son valet,
Et j’ai, sur Dangeau mort, égorgé Richelet.

Oui, c’est vrai, ce sont là quelques-uns de mes crimes.
J’ai pris et démoli la bastille des rimes.
J’ai fait plus: j’ai brisé tous les carcans de fer
Qui liaient le mot peuple, et tiré de l’enfer
Tous les vieux mots damnés, légions sépulcrales;
J’ai de la périphrase écrasé les spirales,
Et mêlé, confondu, nivelé sous le ciel
L’alphabet, sombre tour qui naquit de Babel;
Et je n’ignorais pas que la main courroucée
Qui délivre le mot, délivre la pensée.

L’unité, des efforts de l’homme est l’attribut.
Tout est la même flèche et frappe au même but.

Donc, j’en conviens, voilà, déduits en style honnête,
Plusieurs de mes forfaits, et j’apporte ma tête.
Vous devez être vieux, par conséquent, papa,
Pour la dixième fois j’en fais meâ culpâ.
Oui, si Beauzée est dieu, c’est vrai, je suis athée.
La langue était en ordre, auguste, époussetée,
Fleur-de-lys d’or, Tristan et Boileau, plafond bleu,
Les quarante fauteuils et le trône au milieu;
Je l’ai troublée, et j’ai, dans ce salon illustre,
Même un peu cassé tout; le mot propre, ce rustre,
N’était que caporal: je l’ai fait colonel;
J’ai fait un jacobin du pronom personnel;
Du participe, esclave à la tête blanchie,
Une hyène, et du verbe une hydre d’anarchie.
Vous tenez le *reum consitentem*. Tonnez!
J’ai dit à la narine: Eh mais! tu n’es qu’un nez!
J’ai dit au long fruit d’or: Mais tu n’es qu’une poire!
J’ai dit à Vaugelas: Tu n’es qu’une mâchoire!

J’ai dit aux mots: Soyez république! soyez
La fourmilière immense, et travaillez! Croyez,
Aimez, vivez! — J’ai mis tout en branle, et, morose,
J’ai jeté le vers noble aux chiens noirs de la prose.

Et, ce que je faisais, d’autres l’ont fait aussi;
Mieux que moi. Calliope, Euterpe au ton transi,
Polymnie, ont perdu leur gravité postiche.
Nous faisons basculer la balance hémistiche.
C’est vrai, maudissez-nous. Le vers, qui, sur son front
Jadis portait toujours douze plumes en rond,
Et sans cesse sautait sur la double raquette
Qu’on nomme prosodie et qu’on nomme étiquette,
Rompt désormais la règle et trompe le ciseau,
Et s’échappe, volant qui se change en oiseau,
De la cage césure, et fuit vers la ravine,
Et vole dans les cieux, alouette divine.

Tous les mots à présent planent dans la clarté.
Les écrivains ont mis la langue en liberté.
Et, grâce à ces bandits, grâce à ces terroristes,
Le vrai, chassant l’essaim des pédagogues tristes,
L’imagination, tapageuse aux cent voix,
Qui casse des carreaux dans l’esprit des bourgeois;
La poésie au front triple, qui rit, soupire
Et chante, raille et croit; que Plaute et que Shakspeare
Semaient, l’un sur la plebs, et l’autre sur le mob;
Qui verse aux nations la sagesse de Job
Et la raison d’Horace à travers sa démence;
Qu’enivre de l’azur la frénésie immense,
Et qui, folle sacrée aux regards éclatants,
Monte à l’éternité par les degrés du temps,
La muse reparaît, nous reprend, nous ramène,
Se remet à pleurer sur la misère humaine,
Frappe et console, va du zénith au nadir,
Et fait sur tous les fronts reluire et resplendir
Son vol, tourbillon, lyre, ouragan d’étincelles,

Et ses millions d’yeux sur ses millions d’ailes.

Le mouvement complète ainsi son action.
Grâce à toi, progrès saint, la Révolution
Vibre aujourd’hui dans l’air, dans la voix, dans le livre;
Dans le mot palpitant le lecteur la sent vivre;
Elle crie, elle chante, elle enseigne, elle rit,
Sa langue est déliée ainsi que son esprit.
Elle est dans le roman, parlant tout bas aux femmes.
Elle ouvre maintenant deux yeux où sont deux flammes,
L’un sur le citoyen, l’autre sur le penseur.
Elle prend par la main la Liberté, sa soeur,
Et la fait dans tout homme entrer par tous les pores.
Les préjugés, formés, comme les madrépores,
Du sombre entassement des abus sous les temps,
Se dissolvent au choc de tous les mots flottants,
Pleins de sa volonté, de son but, de son âme.
Elle est la prose, elle est le vers, elle est le drame;
Elle est l’expression, elle est le sentiment,
Lanterne dans la rue, étoile au firmament.
Elle entre aux profondeurs du langage insondable;
Elle souffle dans l’art, porte-voix formidable;
Et, c’est Dieu qui le veut, après avoir rempli
De ses fiertés le peuple, effacé le vieux pli
Des fronts, et relevé la foule dégradée,
Et s’être faite droit, elle se fait idée!

Paris, janvier 1834.

VIII

SUITE

Car le mot, qu’on le sache, est un être vivant.
La main du songeur vibre et tremble en l’écrivant;
La plume, qui d’une aile allongeait l’envergure,
Frémit sur le papier quand sort cette figure,

Le mot, le terme, type on ne sait d’où venu,
Face de l’invisible, aspect de l’inconnu;
Créé, par qui? forgé, par qui? jailli de l’ombre;
Montant et descendant dans notre tête sombre,
Trouvant toujours le sens comme l’eau le niveau;
Formule des lueurs flottantes du cerveau.

Oui, vous tous, comprenez que les mots sont des choses.
Ils roulent pêle-mêle au gouffre obscur des proses,
Ou font gronder le vers, orageuse forêt.
Du sphinx Esprit Humain le mot sait le secret.
Le mot veut, ne veut pas, accourt, fée ou bacchante,
S’offre, se donne ou fuit; devant Néron qui chante
Ou Charles-Neuf qui rime, il recule hagard;
Tel mot est un sourire, et tel autre un regard;
De quelque mot profond tout homme est le disciple;
Toute force ici-bas a le mot pour multiple;
Moulé sur le cerveau, vif ou lent, grave ou bref,
Le creux du crâne humain lui donne son relief;
La vieille empreinte y reste auprès de la nouvelle;
Ce qu’un mot ne sait pas, un autre le révèle;
Les mots heurtent le front comme l’eau le récif;
Ils fourmillent, ouvrant dans notre esprit pensif
Des griffes ou des mains, et quelques-uns des ailes;
Comme en un âtre noir errent des étincelles,
Rêveurs, tristes, joyeux, amers, sinistres, doux,
Sombre peuple, les mots vont et viennent en nous;
Les mots sont les passants mystérieux de l’âme.

Chacun d’eux porte une ombre ou secoue une flamme;
Chacun d’eux du cerveau garde une région;
Pourquoi? c’est que le mot s’appelle Légion;
C’est que chacun, selon l’éclair qui le traverse,
Dans le labeur commun fait une oeuvre diverse;
C’est que de ce troupeau de signes et de sons
Qu’écrivant ou parlant, devant nous nous chassons,
Naissent les cris, les chants, les soupirs, les harangues,

C’est que, présent partout, nain caché sous les langues,
Le mot tient sous ses pieds le globe et l’asservit;
Et, de même que l’homme est l’animal où vit
L’âme, clarté d’en haut par le corps possédée,
C’est que Dieu fait du mot la bête de l’idée.

Le mot fait vibrer tout au fond de nos esprits.
Il remue, en disant: Béatrix, Lycoris,
Dante au Campo-Santo, Virgile au Pausilippe.
De l’océan pensée il est le noir polype.
Quand un livre jaillit d’Eschyle ou de Manou,
Quand saint Jean à Patmos écrit sur son genou,
On voit parmi leurs vers pleins d’hydres et de stryges,
Des mots monstres ramper dans ces oeuvres prodiges.

O main de l’impalpable! ô pouvoir surprenant!
Mets un mot sur un homme, et l’homme frissonnant
Sèche et meurt, pénétré par la force profonde;
Attache un mot vengeur au flanc de tout un monde,
Et le monde, entraînant pavois, glaive, échafaud,
Ses lois, ses moeurs, ses dieux, s’écroule sous le mot.
Cette toute-puissance immense sort des bouches.
La terre est sous les mots comme un champ sous les mouches.

Le mot dévore, et rien ne résiste à sa dent.
À son haleine, l’âme et la lumière aidant,
L’obscure énormité lentement s’exfolie.
Il met sa force sombre en ceux que rien ne plie;
Caton a dans les reins cette syllabe: non.
Tous les grands obstinés, Brutus, Colomb, Zénon,
Ont ce mot flamboyant qui luit sous leur paupière:
Espérance! — Il entr’ouvre une bouche de pierre
Dans l’enclos formidable où les morts ont leur lit,
Et voilà que don Juan pétrifié pâlit!
Il fait le marbre spectre, il fait l’homme statue.
Il frappe, il blesse, il marque, il ressuscite, il tue;
Nemrod dit: «Guerre!» alors, du Gange à l’Illissus,

Le fer luit, le sang coule. «Aimez-vous!» dit Jésus.
Et ce mot à jamais brille et se réverbère
Dans le vaste univers, sur tous, sur toi, Tibère,
Dans les cieux, sur les fleurs, sur l’homme rajeuni,
Comme le flamboiement d’amour de l’infini!

Quand, aux jours où la terre entr’ouvrait sa corolle,
Le premier homme dit la première parole,
Le mot né de sa lèvre, et que tout entendit,
Rencontra dans les cieux la lumière, et lui dit:
«Ma soeur!

«Envole-toi! plane! sois éternelle!
Allume l’astre! emplis à jamais la prunelle!
Échauffe éthers, azurs, sphères, globes ardents!
Éclaire le dehors, j’éclaire le dedans.

«Tu vas être une vie, et je vais être l’autre.
Sois la langue de feu, ma soeur, je suis l’apôtre.
Surgis, effare l’ombre, éblouis l’horizon,
Sois l’aube; je te vaux, car je suis la raison;
À toi les yeux, à moi les fronts. O ma soeur blonde,
Sous le réseau Clarté tu vas saisir le monde;
Avec tes rayons d’or, tu vas lier entre eux
Les terres, les soleils, les fleurs, les flots vitreux,
Les champs, les cieux; et moi, je vais lier les bouches;
Et sur l’homme, emporté par mille essors farouches,
Tisser, avec des fils d’harmonie et de jour,
Pour prendre tous les coeurs, l’immense toile Amour.
J’existais avant l’âme, Adam n’est pas mon père.
J’étais même avant toi; tu n’aurais pu, lumière,
Sortir sans moi du gouffre où tout rampe enchaîné;
Mon nom est Fiat Lux, et je suis ton aîné!»

Oui, tout-puissant! tel est le mot. Fou qui s’en joue!
Quand l’erreur fait un noeud dans l’homme, il le dénoue.
Il est foudre dans l’ombre et ver dans le fruit mûr.

Il sort d’une trompette, il tremble sur un mur,
Et Balthazar chancelle, et Jéricho s’écroule.
Il s’incorpore au peuple, étant lui-même foule.
Il est vie, esprit, germe, ouragan, vertu, feu;
Car le mot, c’est le Verbe, et le Verbe, c’est Dieu.

Jersey, juin 1855.

IX

LE POËME EPLORE SE LAMENTE; LE DRAME

Le poëme éploré se lamente; le drame
Souffre, et par vingt acteurs répand à flots son âme;
Et la foule accoudée un moment s’attendrit,
Puis reprend: «Bah! l’auteur est un homme d’esprit,
Qui, sur de faux héros lançant de faux tonnerres,
Rit de nous voir pleurer leurs maux imaginaires.
«Ma femme, calme-toi; sèche tes yeux, ma soeur.»
La foule a tort: l’esprit c’est le coeur; le penseur
Souffre de sa pensée et se brûle à sa flamme.
Le poëte a saigné le sang qui sort du drame;
Tous ces êtres qu’il fait l’étreignent de leurs noeuds;
Il tremble en eux, il vit en eux, il meurt en eux;
Dans sa création le poëte tressaille;
Il est elle; elle est lui; quand dans l’ombre il travaille,
Il pleure, et s’arrachant les entrailles, les met
Dans son drame, et, sculpteur, seul sur son noir sommet
Pétrit sa propre chair dans l’argile sacrée;
Il y renaît sans cesse, et ce songeur qui crée
Othello d’une larme, Alceste d’un sanglot,
Avec eux pêle-mêle en ses oeuvres éclot.
Dans sa genèse immense et vraie, une et diverse,
Lui, le souffrant du mal éternel, il se verse,
Sans épuiser son flanc d’où sort une clarté.

Ce qui fait qu’il est dieu, c’est plus d’humanité.
Il est génie, étant, plus que les autres, homme.
Corneille est à Rouen, mais son âme est à Rome;
Son front des vieux Catons porte le mâle ennui.
Comme Shakspeare est pâle! avant Hamlet, c’est lui
Que le fantôme attend sur l’âpre plate-forme,
Pendant qu’à l’horizon surgit la lune énorme.
Du mal dont rêve Argan, Poquelin est mourant;
Il rit: oui, peuple, il râle! Avec Ulysse errant,
Homère éperdu fuit dans la brume marine.
Saint Jean frissonne: au fond de sa sombre poitrine,
L’Apocalypse horrible agite son tocsin.
Eschyle! Oreste marche et rugit dans ton sein,
Et c’est, ô noir poëte à la lèvre irritée,
Sur ton crâne géant qu’est cloué Prométhée.

Paris, janvier 1834.

X

A MADAME D. G. DE G.

Jadis je vous disais: — Vivez, régnez, Madame!
Le salon vous attend! le succès vous réclame!
Le bal éblouissant pâlit quand vous partez!
Soyez illustre et belle! aimez! riez! chantez!
Vous avez la splendeur des astres et des roses!
Votre regard charmant, où je lis tant de choses,
Commente vos discours légers et gracieux.
Ce que dit votre bouche étincelle en vos yeux.
Il semble, quand parfois un chagrin vous alarme,
Qu’ils versent une perle et non pas une larme.
Même quand vous rêvez, vous souriez encor.
Vivez, fêtée et fière, ô belle aux cheveux d’or!
Maintenant vous voilà pâle, grave, muette,
Morte, et transfigurée, et je vous dis: — Poëte!
Viens me chercher! Archange! être mystérieux!

Fais pour moi transparents et la terre et les cieux!
Révèle-moi, d'un mot de ta bouche profonde,
La grande énigme humaine et le secret du monde!
Confirme en mon esprit Descartes ou Spinosa!
Car tu sais le vrai nom de celui qui perça,
Pour que nous puissions voir sa lumière sans voiles,
Ces trous du noir plafond qu'on nomme les étoiles!
Car je te sens flotter sous mes rameaux penchants;
Car ta lyre invisible a de sublimes chants!
Car mon sombre océan, où l'esquif s'aventure,
T'épouvante et te plaît; car la sainte nature,
La nature éternelle, et les champs, et les bois,
Parlent à ta grande âme avec leur grande voix!

Paris, 1840. — Jersey, 1855.

XI

LISE

J'avais douze ans; elle en avait bien seize.
Elle était grande, et, moi, j'étais petit.
Pour lui parler le soir plus à mon aise,
Moi, j'attendais que sa mère sortit;
Puis je venais m'asseoir près de sa chaise
Pour lui parler le soir plus à mon aise.

Que de printemps passés avec leurs fleurs!
Que de feux morts, et que de tombes closes!
Se souvient-on qu'il fut jadis des coeurs?
Se souvient-on qu'il fut jadis des roses?
Elle m'aimait. Je l'aimais. Nous étions
Deux purs enfants, deux parfums, deux rayons.

Dieu l'avait faite ange, fée et princesse.
Comme elle était bien plus grande que moi,
Je lui faisais des questions sans cesse

Pour le plaisir de lui dire: Pourquoi?
Et, par moments, elle évitait, craintive,
Mon oeil rêveur qui la rendait pensive.

Puis j’étalais mon savoir enfantin,
Mes jeux, la balle et la toupie agile;
J’étais tout fier d’apprendre le latin;
Je lui montrais mon Phèdre et mon Virgile;
Je bravais tout; rien ne me faisait mal;
Je lui disais: Mon père est général.

Quoiqu’on soit femme, il faut parfois qu’on lise
Dans le latin, qu’on épèle en rêvant;
Pour lui traduire un verset, à l’église,
Je me penchais sur son livre souvent.
Un ange ouvrait sur nous son aile blanche
Quand nous étions à vêpres le dimanche.

Elle disait de moi: C’est un enfant!
Je l’appelais mademoiselle Lise;
Pour lui traduire un psaume, bien souvent,
Je me penchais sur son livre, à l’église;
Si bien qu’un jour, vous le vîtes, mon Dieu!
Sa joue en fleur toucha ma lèvre en feu.

Jeunes amours, si vite épanouies,
Vous êtes l’aube et le matin du coeur.
Charmez l’enfant, extases inouïes!
Et, quand le soir vient avec la douleur,
Charmez encor nos âmes éblouies,
Jeunes amours, si vite évanouies!

Mai 1843.

XII

VERE NOVO

Comme le matin rit sur les roses en pleurs!
Oh! les charmants petits amoureux qu'ont les fleurs!
Ce n'est dans les jasmins, ce n'est dans les pervenches
Qu'un éblouissement de folles ailes blanches
Qui vont, viennent, s'en vont, reviennent, se fermant,
Se rouvrant, dans un vaste et doux frémissement.
O printemps! quand on songe à toutes les missives
Qui des amants rêveurs vont aux belles pensives,
A ces coeurs confiés au papier, à ce tas
De lettres que le feutre écrit au taffetas,
Aux messages d'amour, d'ivresse et de délire
Qu'on reçoit en avril et qu'en mai l'on déchire,
On croit voir s'envoler, au gré du vent joyeux,
Dans les prés, dans les bois, sur les eaux, dans les cieux,
Et rôder en tous lieux, cherchant partout une âme,
Et courir à la fleur en sortant de la femme,
Les petits morceaux blancs, chassés en tourbillons
De tous les billets doux, devenus papillons.

Mai 1831.

XIII

A PROPOS D'HORACE

Marchands de grec! marchands de latin! cuistres! dogues!
Philistins! magisters! je vous hais, pédagogues!
Car, dans votre aplomb grave, infaillible, hébété,
Vous niez l'idéal, la grâce et la beauté!
Car vos textes, vos lois, vos règles sont fossiles!
Car, avec l'air profond, vous êtes imbéciles!
Car vous enseignez tout, et vous ignorez tout!
Car vous êtes mauvais et méchants! — Mon sang bout
Rien qu'à songer au temps où, rêveuse bourrique,
Grand diable de seize ans, j'étais en rhétorique!

Que d'ennuis! de fureurs! de bêtises! — gredins! —

Que de froids châtiments et que de chocs soudains!
«Dimanche en retenue et cinq cents vers d’Horace!»
Je regardais le monstre aux ongles noirs de crasse,
Et je balbutiais: «Monsieur... — Pas de raisons!
Vingt fois l’ode à Plancus et l’épître aux Pisons!»
Or, j’avais justement, ce jour-là, — douce idée.
Qui me faisait rêver d’Armide et d’Haydée, —
Un rendez-vous avec la fille du portier.
Grand Dieu! perdre un tel jour! le perdre tout entier!
Je devais, en parlant d’amour, extase pure!
En l’enivrant avec le ciel et la nature,
La mener, si le temps n’était pas trop mauvais
Manger de la galette aux buttes Saint-Gervais!
Rêve heureux! je voyais, dans ma colère bleue,
Tout cet Éden, congé, les lilas, la banlieue,
Et j’entendais, parmi le thym et le muguet,
Les vagues violons de la mère Saguet!
O douleur! furieux, je montais à ma chambre,
Fournaise au mois de juin, et glacière en décembre;
Et, là, je m’écriais:
 — Horace! ô bon garçon!
Qui vivais dans le calme et selon la raison,
Et qui t’allais poser, dans ta sagesse franche,
Sur tout, comme l’oiseau se pose sur la branche,
Sans peser, sans rester, ne demandant aux dieux
Que le temps de chanter ton chant libre et joyeux!
Tu marchais, écoutant le soir, sous les charmilles,
Les rires étouffés des folles jeunes filles,
Les doux chuchotements dans l’angle obscur du bois;
Tu courtisais ta belle esclave quelquefois,
Myrtale aux blonds cheveux, qui s’irrite et se cabre
Comme la mer creusant les golfes de Calabre,
Ou bien tu t’accoudais à table, buvant sec
Ton vin que tu mettais toi-même en un pot grec.
Pégase te soufflait des vers de sa narine;
Tu songeais; tu faisais des odes à Barine,
A Mécène, à Virgile, à ton champ de Tibur,

A Chloë, qui passait le long de ton vieux mur,
Portant sur son beau front l’amphore délicate.
La nuit, lorsque Phoebé devient la sombre Hécate,
Les halliers s’emplissaient pour toi de visions;
Tu voyais des lueurs, des formes, des rayons,
Cerbère se frotter, la queue entre les jambes,
A Bacchus, dieu des vins et père des ïambes;
Silène digérer dans sa grotte, pensif;
Et se glisser dans l’ombre, et s’enivrer, lascif,
Aux blanches nudités des nymphes peu vêtues,
Le faune aux pieds de chèvre, aux oreilles pointues!
Horace, quand grisé d’un petit vin sabin,
Tu surprenais Glycère ou Lycoris au bain,
Qui t’eût dit, ô Flaccus! quand tu peignais à Rome
Les jeunes chevaliers courant dans l’hippodrome,
Comme Molière a peint en France les marquis,
Que tu faisais ces vers charmants, profonds, exquis,
Pour servir, dans le siècle odieux où nous sommes,
D’instruments de torture à d’horribles bonshommes,
Mal peignés, mal vêtus, qui mâchent, lourds pédants,
Comme un singe une fleur, ton nom entre leurs dents!
Grimauds hideux qui n’ont, tant leur tête est vidée,
Jamais eu de maîtresse et jamais eu d’idée!

Puis j’ajoutais, farouche:
 — O cancres! qui mettez
Une soutane aux dieux de l’éther irrités,
Un béguin à Diane, et qui de vos tricornes
Coiffez sinistrement les olympiens mornes,
Eunuques, tourmenteurs, crétins, soyez maudits!
Car vous êtes les vieux, les noirs, les engourdis,
Car vous êtes l’hiver; car vous êtes, ô cruches!
L’ours qui va dans les bois cherchant un arbre à ruches,
L’ombre, le plomb, la mort, la tombe, le néant!
Nul ne vit près de vous dressé sur son séant;
Et vous pétrifiez d’une haleine sordide
Le jeune homme naïf, étincelant, splendide;

Et vous vous approchez de l’aurore, endormeurs!
A Pindare serein plein d’épiques rumeurs,
A Sophocle, à Térence, à Plaute, à l’ambroisie,
O traîtres, vous mêlez l’antique hypocrisie,
Vos ténèbres, vos moeurs, vos jougs, vos exeats,
Et l’assoupissement des noirs couvents béats;
Vos coups d’ongle rayant tous les sublimes livres,
Vos préjugés qui font vos yeux de brouillards ivres,
L’horreur de l’avenir, la haine du progrès;
Et vous faites, sans peur, sans pitié, sans regrets,
A la jeunesse, aux coeurs vierges, à l’espérance,
Boire dans votre nuit ce vieil opium rance!
O fermoirs de la bible humaine! sacristains
De l’art, de la science, et des maîtres lointains,
Et de la vérité que l’homme aux cieux épèle,
Vous changez ce grand temple en petite chapelle!
Guichetiers de l’esprit, faquins dont le goût sûr
Mène en laisse le beau; porte-clefs de l’azur,
Vous prenez Théocrite, Eschyle aux sacrés voiles,
Tibulle plein d’amour, Virgile plein d’étoiles;
Vous faites de l’enfer avec ces paradis!

Et, ma rage croissant, je reprenais:
— Maudits,
Ces monastères sourds! bouges! prisons haïes!
Oh! comme on fit jadis au pédant de Veïes,
Culotte bas, vieux tigre! Écoliers! écoliers!
Accourez par essaims, par bandes, par milliers,
Du gamin de Paris au groeculus de Rome,
Et coupez du bois vert, et fouaillez-moi cet homme!
Jeunes bouches, mordez le metteur de bâillons!
Le mannequin sur qui l’on drape des haillons
A tout autant d’esprit que ce cuistre en son antre,
Et tout autant de coeur; et l’un a dans le ventre
Du latin et du grec comme l’autre a du foin.
Ah! je prends Phyllodoce et Xantis à témoin
Que je suis amoureux de leurs claires tuniques;

Mais je hais l’affreux tas des vils pédants iniques!
Confier un enfant, je vous demande un peu,
A tous ces êtres noirs! autant mettre, morbleu!
La mouche en pension chez une tarentule!
Ces moines, expliquer Platon, lire Catulle,
Tacite racontant le grand Agricola,
Lucrèce! eux, déchiffrer Homère, ces gens-là!
Ces diacres! ces bedeaux dont le groin renifle!
Crânes d’où sort la nuit, pattes d’où sort la giffle,
Vieux dadais à l’air rogue, au sourcil triomphant,
Qui ne savent pas même épeler un enfant!
Ils ignorent comment l’âme naît et veut croître.
Cela vous a Laharpe et Nonotte pour cloître!
Ils en sont à l’A, B, C, D, du coeur humain;
Ils sont l’horrible Hier qui veut tuer Demain;
Ils offrent à l’aiglon leurs règles d’écrevisses.
Et puis ces noirs tessons ont une odeur de vices.
O vieux pots égueulés des soifs qu’on ne dit pas!
Le pluriel met une S à leurs meâs culpâs,
Les boucs mystérieux, en les voyant s’indignent,
Et, quand on dit: «Amour!» terre et cieux! ils se signent.
Leur vieux viscère mort insulte au coeur naissant.
Ils le prennent de haut avec l’adolescent,
Et ne tolèrent pas le jour entrant dans l’âme
Sous la forme pensée ou sous la forme femme.

Quand la muse apparaît, ces hurleurs de holà
Disent: «Qu’est-ce que c’est que cette folle-là?»
Et, devant ses beautés, de ses rayons accrues,
Ils reprennent: «Couleurs dures, nuances crues;
Vapeurs, illusions, rêves; et quel travers
Avez-vous de fourrer l’arc-en-ciel dans vos vers?»
Ils raillent les enfants, ils raillent les poëtes;
Ils font aux rossignols leurs gros yeux de chouettes:
L’enfant est l’ignorant, ils sont l’ignorantin;
Ils raturent l’esprit, la splendeur, le matin;
Ils sarclent l’idéal ainsi qu’un barbarisme,

Et ces culs de bouteille ont le dédain du prisme.

Ainsi l’on m’entendait dans ma geôle crier.

Le monologue avait le temps de varier.
Et je m’exaspérais, faisant la faute énorme,
Ayant raison au fond, d’avoir tort dans la forme.
Après l’abbé Tuet, je maudissais Bezout;
Car, outre les pensums où l’esprit se dissout,
J’étais alors en proie à la mathématique.
Temps sombre! enfant ému du frisson poétique,
Pauvre oiseau qui heurtais du crâne mes barreaux,
On me livrait tout vif aux chiffres, noirs bourreaux;
On me faisait de force ingurgiter l’algèbre;
On me liait au fond d’un Boisbertrand funèbre;
On me tordait, depuis les ailes jusqu’au bec.
Sur l’affreux chevalet des X et des Y;
Hélas! on me fourrait sous les os maxillaires
Le théorème orné de tous ses corollaires;
Et je me débattais, lugubre patient
Du diviseur prêtant main-forte au quotient.
De là mes cris.
.
Un jour, quand l’homme sera sage,
Lorsqu’on n’instruira plus les oiseaux par la cage,
Quand les sociétés difformes sentiront
Dans l’enfant mieux compris se redresser leur front,
Que, des libres essors ayant sondé les règles,
On connaîtra la loi de croissance des aigles,
Et que le plein midi rayonnera pour tous,
Savoir étant sublime, apprendre sera doux.
Alors, tout en laissant au sommet des études
Les grands livres latins et grecs, ces solitudes
Où l’éclair gronde, où luit la mer, où l’astre rit,
Et qu’emplissent les vents immenses de l’esprit,
C’est en les pénétrant d’explication tendre,
En les faisant aimer, qu’on les fera comprendre.

Homère emportera dans son vaste reflux
L’écolier ébloui; l’enfant ne sera plus
Une bête de somme attelée à Virgile;
Et l’on ne verra plus ce vif esprit agile
Devenir, sous le fouet d’un cuistre ou d’un abbé,
Le lourd cheval poussif du pensum embourbé.
Chaque village aura, dans un temple rustique,
Dans la lumière, au lieu du magister antique,
Trop noir pour que jamais le jour y pénétrât,
L’instituteur lucide et grave, magistrat
Du progrès, médecin de l’ignorance, et prêtre
De l’idée; et dans l’ombre on verra disparaître
L’éternel écolier et l’éternel pédant.
L’aube vient en chantant, et non pas en grondant.
Nos fils riront de nous dans cette blanche sphère;
Ils se demanderont ce que nous pouvions faire
Enseigner au moineau par le hibou hagard.
Alors, le jeune esprit et le jeune regard
Se lèveront avec une clarté sereine
Vers la science auguste, aimable et souveraine;
Alors, plus de grimoire obscur, fade, étouffant;
Le maître, doux apôtre incliné sur l’enfant,
Fera, lui versant Dieu, l’azur et l’harmonie,
Boire la petite âme à la coupe infinie.
Alors, tout sera vrai, lois, dogmes, droits, devoirs.
Tu laisseras passer dans tes jambages noirs
Une pure lueur, de jour en jour moins sombre,
O nature, alphabet des grandes lettres d’ombre!

Paris, mai 1831.

XIV

A GRANVILLE, EN 1836

Voie juin. Le moineau raille
Dans les champs les amoureux;

Le rossignol de muraille
Chante dans son nid pierreux.

Les herbes et les branchages,
Pleins de soupirs et d’abois,
Font de charmants rabâchages
Dans la profondeur des bois.

La grive et la tourterelle
Prolongent, dans les nids sourds,
La ravissante querelle
Des baisers et des amours.

Sous les treilles de la plaine,
Dans l’antre où verdit l’osier,
Virgile enivre Silène,
Et Rabelais Grandgousier.

O Virgile, verse à boire!
Verse à boire, ô Rabelais!
La forêt est une gloire;
La caverne est un palais!

Il n’est pas de lac ni d’île
Qui ne nous prenne au gluau,
Qui n’improvise une idylle,
Ou qui ne chante un duo.

Car l’amour chasse aux bocages,
Et l’amour pêche aux ruisseaux,
Car les belles sont les cages
Dont nos coeurs sont les oiseaux.

De la source, sa cuvette,
La fleur, faisant son miroir,
Dit: «Bonjour,» à la fauvette,
Et dit au hibou: «Bonsoir.»

Le toit espère la gerbe,
Pain d’abord et chaume après;
La croupe du boeuf dans l’herbe
Semble un mont dans les forêts.

L’étang rit à la macreuse,
Le pré rit au loriot,
Pendant que l’ornière creuse
Gronde le lourd chariot.

L’or fleurit en giroflée;
L’ancien zéphir fabuleux
Souffle avec sa joue enflée
Au fond des nuages bleus.

Jersey, sur l’onde docile,
Se drape d’un beau ciel pur,
Et prend des airs de Sicile
Dans un grand haillon d’azur

Partout l’églogue est écrite:
Même en la froide Albion,
L’air est plein de Théocrite,
Le vent sait par coeur Bion,

Et redit, mélancolique,
La chanson que fredonna
Moschus, grillon bucolique
De la cheminée Etna.

L’hiver tousse, vieux phthisique,
Et s’en va; la brume fond;
Les vagues font la musique
Des vers que les arbres font.

Toute la nature sombre

Verse un mystérieux jour;
L’âme qui rêve a plus d’ombre
Et la fleur a plus d’amour.

L’herbe éclate en pâquerettes;
Les parfums, qu’on croit muets,
Content les peines secrètes
Des liserons aux bleuets.

Les petites ailes blanches
Sur les eaux et les sillons
S’abattent en avalanches;
Il neige des papillons.

Et sur la mer, qui reflète
L’aube au sourire d’émail,
La bruyère violette
Met au vieux mont un camail;

Afin qu’il puisse, à l’abîme
Qu’il contient et qu’il bénit,
Dire sa messe sublime
Sous sa mitre de granit.

Granville, juin 1836.

XV

LA COCCINELLE

Elle me dit: «Quelque chose
Me tourmente.» Et j’aperçus
Son cou de neige, et, dessus,
Un petit insecte rose.

J’aurais dû, — mais, sage ou fou,
A seize ans, on est farouche, —

Voir le baiser sur sa bouche
Plus que l’insecte à son cou.

On eût dit un coquillage;
Dos rose et taché de noir.
Les fauvettes pour nous voir
Se penchaient dans le feuillage.

Sa bouche fraîche était là;
Je me courbai sur la belle,
Et je pris la coccinelle;
Mais le baiser s’envola.

«Fils, apprends comme on me nomme,»
Dit l’insecte du ciel bleu;
«Les bêtes sont au bon Dieu,
Mais la bêtise est à l’homme.»

Paris, mai 1830.

XVI

VERS 1820

Denise, ton mari, notre vieux pédagogue,
Se promène; il s’en va troubler la fraîche églogue
Du bel adolescent Avril dans la forêt;
Tout tremble et tout devient pédant, dès qu’il paraît:
L’âne bougonne un thème au boeuf son camarade;
Le vent fait sa tartine, et l’arbre sa tirade;
L’églantier verdissant, doux garçon qui grandit,
Déclame le récit de Théramène, et dit:
Son front large est armé de cornes menaçantes.

Denise, cependant, tu rêves et tu chantes,
A l’âge où l’innocence ouvre sa vague fleur;
Et, d’un oeil ignorant, sans joie et sans douleur,

Sans crainte et sans désir, tu vois, à l’heure où rentre
L’étudiant en classe et le docteur dans l’antre,
Venir à toi, montant ensemble l’escalier,
L’ennui, maître d’école, et l’amour, écolier.

XVII

A M. FROMENT MEURICE

Nous sommes frères: la fleur
Par deux arts peut être faite.
Le poëte est ciseleur;
Le ciseleur est poëte.

Poëtes ou ciseleurs,
Par nous l’esprit se révèle.
Nous rendons les bons meilleurs,
Tu rends la beauté plus belle.

Sur son bras ou sur son cou,
Tu fais de tes rêveries,
Statuaire du bijou,
Des palais de pierreries!

Ne dis pas: «Mon art n’est rien...»
Sors de la route tracée,
Ouvrier magicien,
Et mêle à l’or la pensée!

Tous les penseurs, sans chercher
Qui finit ou qui commence,
Sculptent le même rocher:
Ce rocher, c’est l’art immense.

Michel-Ange, grand vieillard,
En larges blocs qu’il nous jette,
Le fait jaillir au hasard;

Benvenuto nous l’émiette.

Et, devant l’art infini,
Dont jamais la loi ne change,
La miette de Cellini
Vaut le bloc de Michel-Ange.

Tout est grand; sombre ou vermeil,
Tout feu qui brille est une âme.
L’étoile vaut le soleil;
L’étincelle vaut la flamme.

Paris, octobre 1841.

XVIII

LES OISEAUX

Je rêvais dans un grand cimetière désert;
De mon âme et des morts j’écoutais le concert,
Parmi les fleurs de l’herbe et les croix de la tombe.
Dieu veut que ce qui naît sorte de ce qui tombe.
Et l’ombre m’emplissait.

Autour de moi, nombreux,
Gais, sans avoir souci de mon front ténébreux,
Dans ce champ, lit fatal de la sieste dernière,
Des moineaux francs faisaient l’école buissonnière.

C’était l’éternité que taquine l’instant.
Ils allaient et venaient, chantant, volant, sautant,
Égratignant la mort de leurs griffes pointues,
Lissant leur bec au nez lugubre des statues,
Becquetant les tombeaux, ces grains mystérieux.
Je pris ces tapageurs ailés au sérieux;
Je criai: — Paix aux morts! vous êtes des harpies.
— Nous sommes des moineaux, me dirent ces impies.

— Silence! allez-vous-en! repris-je, peu clément.
Ils s’enfuirent; j’étais le plus fort. Seulement,
Un d’eux resta derrière, et, pour toute musique,
Dressa la queue, et dit: — Quel est ce vieux classique?

Comme ils s’en allaient tous, furieux, maugréant,
Criant, et regardant de travers le géant,
Un houx noir qui songeait près d’une tombe, un sage,
M’arrêta brusquement par la manche au passage,
Et me dit: — Ces oiseaux sont dans leur fonction.
Laisse-les. Nous avons besoin de ce rayon.
Dieu les envoie. Ils font vivre le cimetière.
Homme, ils sont la gaîté de la nature entière;
Ils prennent son murmure au ruisseau, sa clarté
A l’astre, son sourire au matin enchanté;
Partout où rit un sage, ils lui prennent sa joie,
Et nous l’apportent; l’ombre en les voyant flamboie;
Ils emplissent leurs becs des cris des écoliers;
A travers l’homme et l’herbe, et l’onde, et les halliers,
Ils vont pillant la joie en l’univers immense.
Ils ont cette raison qui te semble démence.
Ils ont pitié de nous qui loin d’eux languissons;
Et, lorsqu’ils sont bien pleins de jeux et de chansons,
D’églogues, de baisers, de tous les commérages
Que les nids en avril font sous les verts ombrages,
Ils accourent, joyeux, charmants, légers, bruyants,
Nous jeter tout cela dans nos trous effrayants;
Et viennent, des palais, des bois, de la chaumière,
Vider dans notre nuit toute cette lumière!
Quand mai nous les ramène, ô songeur, nous disons:
«Les voilà!» tout s’émeut, pierres, tertres, gazons;
Le moindre arbrisseau parle, et l’herbe est en extase;
Le saule pleureur chante en achevant sa phrase;
Ils confessent les ifs, devenus babillards;
Ils jasent de la vie avec les corbillards;
Des linceuls trop pompeux ils décrochent l’agrafe;
Ils se moquent du marbre; ils savent l’orthographe;

Et, moi qui suis ici le vieux chardon boudeur,
Devant qui le mensonge étale sa laideur,
Et ne se gêne pas, me traitant comme un hôte,
Je trouve juste, ami, qu'en lisant à voix haute
L'épitaphe où le mort est toujours bon et beau,
Ils fassent éclater de rire le tombeau.

Paris, mai 1835.

XIX

VIEILLE CHANSON DU JEUNE TEMPS

Je ne songeais pas à Rose;
Rose au bois vint avec moi;
Nous parlions de quelque chose,
Mais je ne sais plus de quoi.

J'étais froid comme les marbres;
Je marchais à pas distraits;
Je parlais des fleurs, des arbres;
Son oeil semblait dire: «Après?»

La rosée offrait ses perles,
Les taillis ses parasols;
J'allais; j'écoutais les merles,
Et Rose les rossignols.

Moi, seize ans, et l'air morose;
Elle vingt; ses yeux brillaient.
Les rossignols chantaient Rose
Et les merles me sifflaient.

Rose, droite sur ses hanches,
Leva son beau bras tremblant
Pour prendre une mûre aux branches;
Je ne vis pas son bras blanc.

Une eau courait, fraîche et creuse
Sur les mousses de velours;
Et la nature amoureuse
Dormait dans les grands bois sourds.

Rose défit sa chaussure,
Et mit, d’un air ingénu,
Son petit pied dans l’eau pure;
Je ne vis pas son pied nu.

Je ne savais que lui dire;
Je la suivais dans le bois,
La voyant parfois sourire
Et soupirer quelquefois.

Je ne vis qu’elle était belle
Qu’en sortant des grands bois sourds.
«Soit; n’y pensons plus!» dit-elle.
Depuis, j’y pense toujours.

Paris, juin 1831.

XX

A UN POËTE AVEUGLE

Merci, poëte! — au seuil de mes lares pieux,
Comme un hôte divin, tu viens et te dévoiles;
Et l’auréole d’or de tes vers radieux
Brille autour de mon nom comme un cercle d’étoiles.

Chante! Milton chantait; chante! Homère a chanté.
Le poëte des sens perce la triste brume;
L’aveugle voit dans l’ombre un monde de clarté.
Quand l’oeil du corps s’éteint, l’oeil de l’esprit s’allume.

Paris, mai 1842

XXI

ELLE ETAIT DECHAUSSEE, ELLE ETAIT DECOIFFEE

Elle était déchaussée, elle était décoiffée,
Assise, les pieds nus, parmi les joncs penchants;
Moi qui passais par là, je crus voir une fée,
Et je lui dis: Veux-tu t’en venir dans les champs?

Elle me regarda de ce regard suprême
Qui reste à la beauté quand nous en triomphons,
Et je lui dis: Veux-tu, c’est le mois où l’on aime,
Veux-tu nous en aller sous les arbres profonds?

Elle essuya ses pieds à l’herbe de la rive;
Elle me regarda pour la seconde fois,
Et la belle folâtre alors devint pensive.
Oh! comme les oiseaux chantaient au fond des bois!

Comme l’eau caressait doucement le rivage!
Je vis venir à moi, dans les grands roseaux verts,
La belle fille heureuse, effarée et sauvage,
Ses cheveux dans ses yeux, et riant au travers.

Mont.-l’Am., juin 183...

XXII

LA FÊTE CHEZ THÉRÈSE

La chose fut exquise et fort bien ordonnée.
C’était au mois d’avril, et dans une journée
Si douce, qu’on eût dit qu’amour l’eût faite exprès.

Thérèse la duchesse à qui je donnerais,
Si j’étais roi, Paris, si j’étais Dieu, le monde,
Quand elle ne serait que Thérèse la blonde;
Cette belle Thérèse, aux yeux de diamant,
Nous avait conviés dans son jardin charmant.
On était peu nombreux. Le choix faisait la fête.
Nous étions tous ensemble et chacun tête à tête.
Des couples pas à pas erraient de tous côtés.
C’étaient les fiers seigneurs et les rares beautés,
Les Amyntas rêvant auprès des Léonores,
Les marquises riant avec les monsignores;
Et l’on voyait rôder dans les grands escaliers
Un nain qui dérobait leur bourse aux cavaliers.

A midi, le spectacle avec la mélodie.
Pourquoi jouer Plautus la nuit? La comédie
Est une belle fille, et rit mieux au grand jour.
Or, on avait bâti, comme un temple d’amour,
Près d’un bassin dans l’ombre habité par un cygne,
Un théâtre en treillage où grimpait une vigne.
Un cintre à claire-voie en anse de panier,
Cage verte où sifflait un bouvreuil prisonnier,
Couvrait toute la scène, et, sur leurs gorges blanches,
Les actrices sentaient errer l’ombre des branches.
On entendait au loin de magiques accords;
Et, tout en haut, sortant de la frise à mi-corps,
Pour attirer la foule aux lazzis qu’il répète,
Le blanc Pulcinella sonnait de la trompette.
Deux faunes soutenaient le manteau d’Arlequin;
Trivelin leur riait au nez comme un faquin.
Parmi les ornements sculptés dans le treillage,
Colombine dormait dans un gros coquillage,
Et, quand elle montrait son sein et ses bras nus,
On eût cru voir la conque, et l’on eût dit Vénus.
Le seigneur Pantalon, dans une niche, à droite,
Vendait des limons doux sur une table étroite,
Et criait par instants: «Seigneurs, l’homme est divin.

Dieu n’avait fait que l’eau, mais l’homme a fait le vin.»
Scaramouche en un coin harcelait de sa batte
Le tragique Alcantor, suivi du triste Arbate;
Crispin, vêtu de noir, jouait de l’éventail;
Perché, jambe pendante, au sommet du portail,
Carlino se penchait, écoutant les aubades,
Et son pied ébauchait de rêveuses gambades.

Le soleil tenait lieu de lustre; la saison
Avait brodé de fleurs un immense gazon,
Vert tapis déroulé sous maint groupe folâtre.
Rangés des deux côtés de l’agreste théâtre,
Les vrais arbres du parc, les sorbiers, les lilas,
Les ébéniers qu’avril charge de falbalas,
De leur sève embaumée exhalant les délices,
Semblaient se divertir à faire les coulisses,
Et, pour nous voir, ouvrant leurs fleurs comme des yeux.
Joignaient aux violons leur murmure joyeux;
Si bien qu’à ce concert gracieux et classique,
La nature mêlait un peu de sa musique.

Tout nous charmait, les bois, le jour serein, l’air pur,
Les femmes tout amour, et le ciel tout azur.
Pour la pièce, elle était fort bonne, quoique ancienne,
C’était, nonchalamment assis sur l’avant-scène,
Pierrot qui haranguait, dans un grave entretien,
Un singe timbalier à cheval sur un chien.

Rien de plus. C’était simple et beau. — Par intervalles,
Le singe faisait rage et cognait ses timbales;
Puis Pierrot répliquait. — Écoutait qui voulait.
L’un faisait apporter des glaces au valet;
L’autre, galant drapé d’une cape fantasque,
Parlait bas à sa dame en lui nouant son masque;
Trois marquis attablés chantaient une chanson;
Thérèse était assise à l’ombre d’un buisson:
Les roses pâlissaient à côté de sa joue,

Et, la voyant si belle, un paon faisait la roue.

Moi, j’écoutais, pensif, un profane couplet
Que fredonnait dans l’ombre un abbé violet.

La nuit vint, tout se tut; les flambeaux s’éteignirent;
Dans les bois assombris les sources se plaignirent.
Le rossignol, caché dans son nid ténébreux,
Chanta comme un poëte et comme un amoureux.
Chacun se dispersa sous les profonds feuillages;
Les folles en riant entraînèrent les sages;
L’amante s’en alla dans l’ombre avec l’amant;
Et, troublés comme on l’est en songe, vaguement,
Il sentaient par degrés se mêler à leur âme,
A leurs discours secrets, à leurs regards de flamme,
A leur coeur, à leurs sens, à leur molle raison,
Le clair de lune bleu qui baignait l’horizon.

Avril 18...

XXIII

L’ENFANCE

L’enfant chantait; la mère au lit exténuée,
Agonisait, beau front dans l’ombre se penchant;
La mort au-dessus d’elle errait dans la nuée;
Et j’écoutais ce râle, et j’entendais ce chant.

L’enfant avait cinq ans, et, près de la fenêtre,
Ses rires et ses jeux faisaient un charmant bruit;
Et la mère, à côté de ce pauvre doux être
Qui chantait tout le jour, toussait toute la nuit.

La mère alla dormir sous les dalles du cloître;
Et le petit enfant se remit à chanter... —
La douleur est un fruit: Dieu ne le fait pas croître

Sur la branche trop faible encor pour le porter.

Paris, janvier 1835.

XXIV

HEUREUX L’HOMME, OCCUPE DE L’ETERNEL DESTIN

Heureux l’homme, occupé de l’éternel destin,
Qui, tel qu’un voyageur qui part de grand matin,
Se réveille, l’esprit rempli de rêverie,
Et, dès l’aube du jour, se met à lire et prie!
A mesure qu’il lit, le jour vient lentement
Et se fait dans son âme ainsi qu’au firmament.
Il voit distinctement, à cette clarté blême,
Des choses dans sa chambre et d’autres en lui-même;
Tout dort dans la maison; il est seul, il le croit;
Et, cependant, fermant leur bouche de leur doigt,
Derrière lui, tandis que l’extase l’enivre,
Les anges souriants se penchent sur son livre.

Paris, septembre 1842.

XXV

UNITÉ

Par-dessus l’horizon aux collines brunies.
Le soleil, cette fleur des splendeurs infinies,
Se penchait sur la terre à l’heure du couchant;
Une humble marguerite, éclose au bord d’un champ,
Sur un mur gris, croulant parmi l’avoine folle,
Blanche épanouissait sa candide auréole;
Et la petite fleur, par-dessus le vieux mur,
Regardait fixement, dans l’éternel azur,

Le grand astre épanchant sa lumière immortelle.
«Et, moi, j’ai des rayons aussi!» lui disait-elle.

Granville, juillet 1836.

XXVI

QUELQUES MOTS A UN AUTRE

On y revient; il faut y revenir moi-même.
Ce qu’on attaque en moi, c’est mon temps, et je l’aime.
Certes, on me laisserait en paix, passant obscur,
Si je ne contenais, atome de l’azur,
Un peu du grand rayon dont notre époque est faite.

Hier le citoyen, aujourd’hui le poëte;
Le «romantique» après le «libéral». — Allons,
Soit; dans mes deux sentiers mordez mes deux talons.
Je suis le ténébreux par qui tout dégénère.
Sur mon autre côté lancez l’autre tonnerre.

Vous aussi, vous m’avez vu tout jeune, et voici
Que vous me dénoncez, bonhomme, vous aussi;
Me déchirant le plus allègrement du monde,
Par attendrissement pour mon enfance blonde.
Vous me criez: «Comment, Monsieur! qu’est-ce que c’est?
La stance va nu-pieds! le drame est sans corset!
La muse jette au vent sa robe d’innocence!
Et l’art crève la règle et dit: «C’est la croissance!»
Géronte littéraire aux aboiements plaintifs,
Vous vous ébahissez, en vers rétrospectifs,
Que ma voix trouble l’ordre, et que ce romantique
Vive, et que ce petit, à qui l’Art Poétique
Avec tant de bonté donna le pain et l’eau,
Devienne si pesant aux genoux de Boileau!
Vous regardez mes vers, pourvus d’ongles et d’ailes,
Refusant de marcher derrière les modèles,

Comme après les doyens marchent les petits clercs;
Vous en voyez sortir de sinistres éclairs;
Horreur! et vous voilà poussant des cris d'hyène
A travers les barreaux de la Quotidienne.

Vous épuisez sur moi tout votre calepin,
Et le père Bouhours et le père Rapin;
Et m'écrasant avec tous les noms qu'on vénère,
Vous lâchez le grand mot: Révolutionnaire.

Et, sur ce, les pédants en choeur disent: Amen!
On m'empoigne; on me fait passer mon examen;
La Sorbonne bredouille et l'école griffonne;
De vingt plumes jaillit la colère bouffonne:
«Que veulent ces affreux novateurs? ça, des vers?
Devant leurs livres noirs, la nuit, dans l'ombre ouverts,
Les lectrices ont peur au fond de leurs alcôves.
Le Pinde entend rugir leurs rimes bêtes fauves,
Et frémit. Par leur faute aujourd'hui tout est mort;
L'alexandrin saisit la césure, et la mord;
Comme le sanglier dans l'herbe et dans la sauge,
Au beau milieu du vers l'enjambement patauge;
Que va-t-on devenir? Richelet s'obscurcit.
Il faut à toute chose un magister dixit.
Revenons à la règle, et sortons de l'opprobre;
L'hippocrène est de l'eau; donc, le beau, c'est le sobre.
Les vrais sages ayant la raison pour lien,
Ont toujours consulté, sur l'art, Quintilien;
Sur l'algèbre, Leibnitz; sur la guerre, Végèce.»

Quand l'impuissance écrit, elle signe: Sagesse.

Je ne vois pas pourquoi je ne vous dirais point
Ce qu'à d'autres j'ai dit sans leur montrer le poing.
Eh bien, démasquons-nous! c'est vrai, notre âme est noire;
Sortons du domino nommé forme oratoire.
On nous a vus, poussant vers un autre horizon

La langue, avec la rime entraînant la raison,
Lancer au pas de charge, en batailles rangées,
Sur Laharpe éperdu, toutes ces insurgées.
Nous avons au vieux style attaché ce brûlot:
Liberté! Nous avons, dans le même complot,
Mis l’esprit, pauvre diable, et le mot, pauvre hère;
Nous avons déchiré le capuchon, la haire,
Le froc, dont on couvrait l’Idée aux yeux divins.
Tous ont fait rage en foule. Orateurs, écrivains,
Poëtes, nous avons, du doigt avançant l’heure,
Dit à la rhétorique: — Allons, fille majeure,
Lève les yeux! — et j’ai, chantant, luttant, bravant,
Tordu plus d’une grille au parloir du couvent;
J’ai, torche en main, ouvert les deux battants du drame;
Pirates, nous avons, à la voile, à la rame,
De la triple unité pris l’aride archipel;
Sur l’Hélicon tremblant j’ai battu le rappel.
Tout est perdu! le vers vague sans muselière!
A Racine effaré nous préférons Molière;
O pédants! à Ducis nous préférons Rotrou.
Lucrèce Borgia sort brusquement d’un trou,
Et mêle des poisons hideux à vos guimauves;
Le drame échevelé fait peur à vos fronts chauves;
C’est horrible! oui, brigand, jacobin, malandrin,
J’ai disloqué ce grand niais d’alexandrin;
Les mots de qualité, les syllabes marquises,
Vivaient ensemble au fond de leurs grottes exquises,
Faisant la bouche en coeur et ne parlant qu’entre eux,
J’ai dit aux mots d’en bas: Manchots, boiteux, goîtreux,
Redressez-vous! planez, et mêlez-vous, sans règles,
Dans la caverne immense et farouche des aigles!
J’ai déjà confessé ce tas de crimes-là;
Oui, je suis Papavoine, Érostrate, Attila:
Après?
Emportez-vous, et criez à la garde,
Brave homme! tempêtez! tonnez! je vous regarde.
Nos progrès prétendus vous semblent outrageants;

Vous détestez ce siècle où, quand il parle aux gens,
Le vers des trois saluts d'usage se dispense;
Temps sombre où, sans pudeur, on écrit comme on pense,
Où l'on est philosophe et poëte crûment,
Où de ton vin sincère, adorable, écumant,
O sévère idéal, tous les songeurs sont ivres.
Vous couvrez d'abat-jour, quand vous ouvrez nos livres,
Vos yeux, par la clarté du mot propre brûlés;
Vous exécrez nos vers francs et vrais, vous hurlez
De fureur en voyant nos strophes toutes nues.
Mais où donc est le temps des nymphes ingénues,
Qui couraient dans les bois, et dont la nudité
Dansait dans la lueur des vagues soirs d'été?
Sur l'aube nue et blanche, entr'ouvrant sa fenêtre,
Faut-il plisser la brume honnête et prude, et mettre
Une feuille de vigne à l'astre dans l'azur?
Le flot, conque d'amour, est-il d'un goût peu sûr?
O Virgile, Pindare, Orphée! est-ce qu'on gaze,
Comme une obscénité, les ailes de Pégase,
Qui semble, les ouvrant au haut du mont béni,
L'immense papillon du baiser infini?
Est-ce que le soleil splendide est un cynique?
La fleur a-t-elle tort d'écarter sa tunique?
Calliope, planant derrière un pan des cieux,
Fait donc mal de montrer à Dante soucieux
Ses seins éblouissants à travers les étoiles?
Vous êtes un ancien d'hier. Libre et sans voiles,
Le grand Olympe nu vous ferait dire: Fi!
Vous mettez une jupe au Cupidon bouffi;
Au clinquant, aux neuf soeurs en atours, au Parnasse
De Titon du Tillet, votre goût est tenace;
Les Ménades pour vous danseraient le cancan;
Apollon vous ferait l'effet d'un Mohican;
Vous prendriez Vénus pour une sauvagesse.

L'âge — c'est là souvent toute notre sagesse —
A beau vous bougonner tout bas: «Vous avez tort,

Vous vous ferez tousser si vous criez si fort;
Pour quelques nouveautés sauvages et fortuites,
Monsieur, ne troublez pas la paix de vos pituites.
Ces gens-ci vont leur train; qu'est-ce que ça vous fait?
Ils ne trouvent que cendre au feu qui vous chauffait.
Pourquoi déclarez-vous la guerre à leur tapage?
Ce siècle est libéral comme vous fûtes page.
Fermez bien vos volets, tirez bien vos rideaux,
Soufflez votre chandelle, et tournez-lui le dos!
Qu'est l'âme du vrai sage? Une sourde-muette.
Que vous importe, à vous, que tel ou tel poëte,
Comme l'oiseau des cieux, veuille avoir sa chanson;
Et que tel garnement du Pinde, nourrisson
Des Muses, au milieu d'un bruit de corybante,
Marmot sombre, ait mordu leur gorge un peu tombante?»

Vous n'en tenez nul compte, et vous n'écoutez rien.
Voltaire, en vain, grand homme et peu voltairien,
Vous murmure à l'oreille: «Ami, tu nous assommes!»
— Vous écumez! — partant de ceci: que nous, hommes
De ce temps d'anarchie et d'enfer, nous donnons
L'assaut au grand Louis juché sur vingt grands noms;
Vous dites qu'après tout nous perdons notre peine,
Que haute est l'escalade et courte notre haleine;
Que c'est dit, que jamais nous ne réussirons;
Que Batteux nous regarde avec ses gros yeux ronds,
Que Tancrède est de bronze et qu'Hamlet est de sable.
Vous déclarez Boileau perruque indéfrisable;
Et, coiffé de lauriers, d'un coup d'oeil de travers,
Vous indiquez le tas d'ordures de nos vers,
Fumier où la laideur de ce siècle se guinde
Au pauvre vieux bon goût, ce balayeur du Pinde;
Et même, allant plus loin, vaillant, vous nous criez:
«Je vais vous balayer moi-même!»

Balayez.

Paris, novembre 1834.

XXVII

OUI, JE SUIS LE REVEUR; JE SUIS LE CAMARADE

Oui, je suis le rêveur; je suis le camarade
Des petites fleurs d'or du mur qui se dégrade,
Et l'interlocuteur des arbres et du vent.
Tout cela me connaît, voyez-vous. J'ai souvent,
En mai, quand de parfums les branches sont gonflées,
Des conversations avec les giroflées;
Je reçois des conseils du lierre et du bleuet.
L'être mystérieux, que vous croyez muet,
Sur moi se penche, et vient avec ma plume écrire.
J'entends ce qu'entendit Rabelais; je vois rire
Et pleurer; et j'entends ce qu'Orphée entendit.
Ne vous étonnez pas de tout ce que me dit
La nature aux soupirs ineffables. Je cause
Avec toutes les voix de la métempsycose.
Avant de commencer le grand concert sacré,
Le moineau, le buisson, l'eau vive dans le pré,
La forêt, basse énorme, et l'aile et la corolle,
Tous ces doux instruments, m'adressent la parole;
Je suis l'habitué de l'orchestre divin;
Si je n'étais songeur, j'aurais été sylvain.
J'ai fini, grâce au calme en qui je me recueille,
A force de parler doucement à la feuille,
A la goutte de pluie, à la plume, au rayon,
Par descendre à ce point dans la création,
Cet abîme où frissonne un tremblement farouche,
Que je ne fais plus même envoler une mouche!
Le brin d'herbe, vibrant d'un éternel émoi,
S'apprivoise et devient familier avec moi,
Et, sans s'apercevoir que je suis là, les roses

Font avec les bourdons toutes sortes de choses;
Quelquefois, à travers les doux rameaux bénis,
J’avance largement ma face sur les nids,
Et le petit oiseau, mère inquiète et sainte,
N’a pas plus peur de moi que nous n’aurions de crainte,
Nous, si l’oeil du bon Dieu regardait dans nos trous;
Le lys prude me voit approcher sans courroux,
Quand il s’ouvre aux baisers du jour; la violette
La plus pudique fait devant moi sa toilette;
Je suis pour ces beautés l’ami discret et sûr
Et le frais papillon, libertin de l’azur,
Qui chiffonne gaîment une fleur demi-nue,
Si je viens à passer dans l’ombre, continue,
Et, si la fleur se veut cacher dans le gazon,
Il lui dit: «Es-tu bête! Il est de la maison.»

Les Roches, août 1835.

XXVIII

IL FAUT QUE LE POËTE, EPRIS D’OMBRE ET D’AZUR

Il faut que le poëte, épris d’ombre et d’azur,
Esprit doux et splendide, au rayonnement pur,
Qui marche devant tous, éclairant ceux qui doutent,
Chanteur mystérieux qu’en tressaillant écoutent
Les femmes, les songeurs, les sages, les amants,
Devienne formidable à de certains moments.
Parfois, lorsqu’on se met à rêver sur son livre,
Où tout berce, éblouit, calme, caresse, enivre,
Où l’âme, à chaque pas, trouve à faire son miel,
Où les coins les plus noirs ont des lueurs du ciel;
Au milieu de cette humble et haute poésie,
Dans cette paix sacrée où croît la fleur choisie,
Où l’on entend couler les sources et les pleurs,

Où les strophes, oiseaux peints de mille couleurs,
Volent chantant l’amour, l’espérance et la joie;
Il faut que, par instants, on frissonne, et qu’on voie
Tout à coup, sombre, grave et terrible au passant,
Un vers fauve sortir de l’ombre en rugissant!
Il faut que le poëte, aux semences fécondes,
Soit comme ces forêts vertes, fraîches, profondes,
Pleines de chants, amour du vent et du rayon,
Charmantes, où, soudain, l’on rencontre un lion.

Paris, mai 1842.

XXIX

HALTE EN MARCHANT

Une brume couvrait l’horizon; maintenant,
Voici le clair midi qui surgit rayonnant;
Le brouillard se dissout en perles sur les branches,
Et brille, diamant, au collier des pervenches.
Le vent souffle à travers les arbres, sur les toits
Du hameau noir cachant ses chaumes dans les bois;
Et l’on voit tressaillir, épars dans les ramées,
Le vague arrachement des tremblantes fumées;
Un ruisseau court dans l’herbe, entre deux hauts talus,
Sous l’agitation des saules chevelus;
Un orme, un hêtre, anciens du vallon, arbres frères
Qui se donnent la main des deux rives contraires,
Semblent, sous le ciel bleu, dire: A la bonne foi!
L’oiseau chante son chant plein d’amour et d’effroi,
Et du frémissement des feuilles et des ailes
L’étang luit sous le vol des vertes demoiselles.
Un bouge est là, montrant dans la sauge et le thym
Un vieux saint souriant parmi des brocs d’étain,
Avec tant de rayons et de fleurs sur la berge,
Que c’est peut-être un temple ou peut-être une auberge.
Que notre bouche ait soif, ou que ce soit le coeur,

Gloire au Dieu bon qui tend la coupe au voyageur!
Nous entrons. «Qu’avez-vous! — Des oeufs frais, de l’eau fraîche.»
On croit voir l’humble toit effondré d’une crèche.
A la source du pré, qu’abrite un vert rideau,
Une enfant blonde alla remplir sa jarre d’eau,
Joyeuse et soulevant son jupon de futaine.
Pendant qu’elle plongeait sa cruche à la fontaine,
L’eau semblait admirer, gazouillant doucement,
Cette belle petite aux yeux de firmament.
Et moi, près du grand lit drapé de vieilles serges,
Pensif, je regardais un Christ battu de verges.
Eh! qu’importe l’outrage aux martyrs éclatants,
Affront de tous les lieux, crachat de tous les temps,
Vaine clameur d’aveugle, éternelle huée
Où la foule toujours s’est follement ruée!

Plus tard, le vagabond flagellé devient Dieu.
Ce front noir et saignant semble fait de ciel bleu,
Et, dans l’ombre, éclairant palais, temple, masure,
Le crucifix blanchit et Jésus-Christ s’azure.
La foule un jour suivra vos pas; allez, saignez,
Souffrez, penseurs, des pleurs de vos bourreaux baignés!
Le deuil sacre les saints, les sages, les génies;
La tremblante auréole éclôt aux gémonies,
Et, sur ce vil marais, flotte, lueur du ciel,
Du cloaque de sang feu follet éternel.
Toujours au même but le même sort ramène:
Il est, au plus profond de notre histoire humaine,
Une sorte de gouffre, où viennent, tour à tour,
Tomber tous ceux qui sont de la vie et du jour,
Les bons, les purs, les grands, les divins, les célèbres,
Flambeaux échevelés au souffle des ténèbres;
Là se sont engloutis les Dantes disparus,
Socrate, Scipion, Milton, Thomas Morus,
Eschyle, ayant aux mains des palmes frissonnantes.
Nuit d’où l’on voit sortir leurs mémoires planantes!
Car ils ne sont complets qu’après qu’ils sont déchus.

De l’exil d’Aristide, au bûcher de Jean Huss,
Le genre humain pensif — c’est ainsi que nous sommes —
Rêve ébloui devant l’abîme des grands hommes.
Ils sont, telle est la loi des hauts destins penchant,
Tes semblables, soleil! leur gloire est leur couchant;
Et, fier Niagara dont le flot gronde et lutte,
Tes pareils: ce qu’ils ont de plus beau, c’est leur chute.

Un de ceux qui liaient Jésus-Christ au poteau,
Et qui, sur son dos nu, jetaient un vil manteau,
Arracha de ce front tranquille une poignée
De cheveux qu’inondait la sueur résignée,
Et dit: «Je vais montrer à Caïphe cela!»
Et, crispant son poing noir, cet homme s’en alla.
La nuit était venue et la rue était sombre;
L’homme marchait; soudain, il s’arrêta dans l’ombre,
Stupéfait, pâle, et comme en proie aux visions,
Frémissant! — Il avait dans la main des rayons.

Forêt de Compiègne, juin 1837.

LIVRE DEUXIÈME: L’AME EN FLEUR

I

PREMIER MAI

Tout conjugue le verbe aimer. Voici les roses.
Je ne suis pas en train de parler d’autres choses;
Premier mai! l’amour gai, triste, brûlant, jaloux,
Fait soupirer les bois, les nids, les fleurs, les loups;
L’arbre où j’ai, l’autre automne, écrit une devise,
La redit pour son compte, et croit qu’il l’improvise;
Les vieux antres pensifs, dont rit le geai moqueur,
Clignent leurs gros sourcils et font la bouche en coeur;
L’atmosphère, embaumée et tendre, semble pleine,
Des déclarations qu’au Printemps fait la plaine,
Et que l’herbe amoureuse adresse au ciel charmant.
A chaque pas du jour dans le bleu firmament,
La campagne éperdue, et toujours plus éprise,
Prodigue les senteurs, et, dans la tiède brise,
Envoie au renouveau ses baisers odorants;
Tous ses bouquets, azurs, carmins, pourpres, safrans,
Dont l’haleine s’envole en murmurant: Je t’aime!
Sur le ravin, l’étang, le pré, le sillon même,
Font des taches partout de toutes les couleurs;
Et, donnant les parfums, elle a gardé les fleurs;
Comme si ses soupirs et ses tendres missives
Au mois de mai, qui rit dans les branches lascives,
Et tous les billets doux de son amour bavard,
Avaient laissé leur trace aux pages du buvard!

Les oiseaux dans les bois, molles voix étouffées,
Chantent des triolets et des rondeaux aux fées;
Tout semble confier à l’ombre un doux secret;
Tout aime, et tout l’avoue à voix basse; on dirait
Qu’au nord, au sud brûlant, au couchant, à l’aurore,

La haie en fleur, le lierre et la source sonore,
Les monts, les champs, les lacs et les chênes mouvants
Répètent un quatrain fait par les quatre vents.

Saint-Germain, 1er mai 18...

II

MES VERS FUIRAIENT, DOUX ET FRELES

Mes vers fuiraient, doux et frêles,
Vers votre jardin si beau,
Si mes vers avaient des ailes,
Des ailes comme l'oiseau.

Ils voleraient, étincelles,
Vers votre foyer qui rit,
Si mes vers avaient des ailes,
Des ailes comme l'esprit.

Près de vous, purs et fidèles,
Ils accourraient nuit et jour,
Si mes vers avaient des ailes,
Des ailes comme l'amour.

Paris, mars 18...

III

LE ROUET D'OMPHALE

Il est dans l'atrium, le beau rouet d'ivoire.
La roue agile est blanche, et la quenouille est noire;
La quenouille est d'ébène incrusté de lapis.
Il est dans l'atrium sur un riche tapis.

Un ouvrier d'Égine a sculpté sur la plinthe

Europe, dont un dieu n’écoute pas la plainte.
Le taureau blanc l’emporte. Europe, sans espoir,
Crie, et baissant les yeux, s’épouvante de voir
L’Océan monstrueux qui baise ses pieds roses.

Des aiguilles, du fil, des boites demi-closes,
Les laines de Milet, peintes de pourpre et d’or,
Emplissent un panier près du rouet qui dort.

Cependant, odieux, effroyables, énormes,
Dans le fond du palais, vingt fantômes difformes,
Vingt monstres tout sanglants, qu’on ne voit qu’à demi,
Errent en foule autour du rouet endormi:
Le lion néméen, l’hydre affreuse de Lerne,
Cacus, le noir brigand de la noire caverne,
Le triple Géryon, et les typhons des eaux,
Qui, le soir, à grand bruit, soufflent dans les roseaux;
De la massue au front tous ont l’empreinte horrible;
Et tous, sans approcher, rôdant d’un air terrible
Sur le rouet, où pend un fil souple et lié,
Fixent de loin, dans l’ombre, un oeil humilié.

Juin 18...

IV

CHANSON

Si vous n’avez rien à me dire,
Pourquoi venir auprès de moi?
Pourquoi me faire ce sourire
Qui tournerait la tête au roi?
Si vous n’avez rien à me dire,
Pourquoi venir auprès de moi?

Si vous n’avez rien à m’apprendre,
Pourquoi me pressez-vous la main?

Sur le rêve angélique et tendre,
Auquel vous songez en chemin,
Si vous n'avez rien à m'apprendre,
Pourquoi me pressez-vous la main?

Si vous voulez que je m'en aille,
Pourquoi passez-vous par ici?
Lorsque je vous vois, je tressaille:
C'est ma joie et c'est mon souci.
Si vous voulez que je m'en aille,
Pourquoi passez-vous par ici?

Mai 18...

V

HIER AU SOIR

Hier, le vent du soir, dont le souffle caresse,
Nous apportait l'odeur des fleurs qui s'ouvrent tard;
La nuit tombait; l'oiseau dormait dans l'ombre épaisse.
Le printemps embaumait, moins que votre jeunesse;
Les astres rayonnaient, moins que votre regard.

Moi, je parlais tout bas. C'est l'heure solennelle
Où l'âme aime à chanter son hymne le plus doux.
Voyant la nuit si pure, et vous voyant si belle,
J'ai dit aux astres d'or: Versez le ciel sur elle!
Et j'ai dit à vos yeux: Versez l'amour sur nous!

Mai 18...

VI

LETTRE

Tu vois cela d'ici. Des ocres et des craies;

Plaines où les sillons croisent leurs mille raies,
Chaumes à fleur de terre et que masque un buisson;
Quelques meules de foin debout sur le gazon;
De vieux toits enfumant le paysage bistre;
Un fleuve qui n'est pas le Gange ou le Caystre,
Pauvre cours d'eau normand troublé de sels marins;
A droite, vers le nord, de bizarres terrains
Pleins d'angles qu'on dirait façonnés à la pelle;
Voilà les premiers plans; une ancienne chapelle
Y mêle son aiguille, et range à ses côtés
Quelques ormes tortus, aux profils irrités,
Qui semblent, fatigués du zéphyr qui s'en joue,
Faire une remontrance au vent qui les secoue.
Une grosse charrette, au coin de ma maison,
Se rouille; et, devant moi, j'ai le vaste horizon,
Dont la mer bleue emplit toutes les échancrures;
Des poules et des coqs, étalant leurs dorures,
Causent sous ma fenêtre, et les greniers des toits
Me jettent, par instants, des chansons en patois.
Dans mon allée habite un cordier patriarche,
Vieux qui fait bruyamment tourner sa roue, et marche
A reculons, son chanvre autour des reins tordu.
J'aime ces flots où court le grand vent éperdu;
Les champs à promener tout le jour me convient;
Les petits villageois, leur livre en main, m'envient,
Chez le maître d'école où je me suis logé,
Comme un grand écolier abusant d'un congé.
Le ciel rit, l'air est pur; tout le jour, chez mon hôte,
C'est un doux bruit d'enfants épelant à voix haute;
L'eau coule, un verdier passe; et, moi, je dis: Merci!
Merci, Dieu tout-puissant! — Ainsi je vis; ainsi,
Paisible, heure par heure, à petit bruit, j'épanche
Mes jours, tout en songeant à vous, ma beauté blanche!
J'écoute les enfants jaser, et, par moment,
Je vois en pleine mer, passer superbement,
Au-dessus des pignons du tranquille village,
Quelque navire ailé qui fait un long voyage,

Et fuit sur l’Océan, par tous les vents traqué,
Qui, naguère dormait au port, le long du quai,
Et que n’ont retenu, loin des vagues jalouses,
Ni les pleurs des parents, ni l’effroi des épouses,
Ni le sombre reflet des écueils dans les eaux,
Ni l’importunité des sinistres oiseaux.

Près le Tréport, juin 18...

VII

NOUS ALLIONS AU VERGER CUEILLIR DES BIGARREAUX

Nous allions au verger cueillir des bigarreaux.
Avec ses beaux bras blancs en marbre de Paros,
Elle montait dans l’arbre et courbait une branche;
Les feuilles frissonnaient au vent; sa gorge blanche,
O Virgile, ondoyait dans l’ombre et le soleil;
Ses petits doigts allaient chercher le fruit vermeil,
Semblable au feu qu’on voit dans le buisson qui flambe.
Je montais derrière elle; elle montrait sa jambe,
Et disait: «Taisez-vous!» à mes regards ardents;
Et chantait. Par moments, entre ses belles dents,
Pareille, aux chansons près, à Diane farouche,
Penchée, elle m’offrait la cerise à sa bouche;
Et ma bouche riait, et venait s’y poser.
Et laissait la cerise et prenait le baiser.

Triel, juillet 18...

VIII

TU PEUX, COMME IL TE PLAIT, ME FAIRE JEUNE OU VIEUX

Tu peux, comme il te plaît, me faire jeune ou vieux.
Comme le soleil fait serein ou pluvieux
L’azur dont il est l’âme et que sa clarté dore,
Tu peux m’emplir de brume ou m’inonder d’aurore.
Du haut de ta splendeur, si pure qu’en ses plis,
Tu sembles une femme enfermée en un lys,
Et qu’à d’autres moments, l’oeil qu’éblouit ton âme
Croit voir, en te voyant, un lys dans une femme.
Si tu m’as souri, Dieu! tout mon être bondit!
Si, Madame, au milieu de tous, vous m’avez dit,
A haute voix: «Bonjour, Monsieur», et bas: «Je t’aime!»
Si tu m’as caressé de ton regard suprême,
Je vis! je suis léger, je suis fier, je suis grand;
Ta prunelle m’éclaire en me transfigurant;
J’ai le reflet charmant des yeux dont tu m’accueilles;
Comme on sent dans un bois des ailes sous les feuilles,
On sent de la gaîté sous chacun de mes mots;
Je cours, je vais, je ris; plus d’ennuis, plus de maux;
Et je chante, et voilà sur mon front la jeunesse!
Mais que ton coeur injuste, un jour, me méconnaisse;
Qu’il me faille porter en moi, jusqu’à demain,
L’énigme de ta main retirée à ma main;
— Qu’ai-je fait? qu’avait-elle? Elle avait quelque chose.
Pourquoi, dans la rumeur du salon où l’on cause,
Personne n’entendant, me disait-elle *vous*? —
Si je ne sais quel froid dans ton regard si doux
A passé comme passe au ciel une nuée,
Je sens mon âme en moi toute diminuée;
Je m’en vais, courbé, las, sombre comme un aïeul;
Il semble que sur moi, secouant son linceul,
Se soit soudain penché le noir vieillard Décembre;
Comme un loup dans son trou, je rentre dans ma chambre;
Le chagrin — âge et deuil, hélas! ont le même air, —
Assombrit chaque trait de mon visage amer,
Et m’y creuse une ride avec sa main pesante.
Joyeux, j’ai vingt-cinq ans; triste, j’en ai soixante.

Paris, juin 18...

IX

EN ÉCOUTANT LES OISEAUX

Oh! quand donc aurez-vous fini, petits oiseaux,
De jaser au milieu des branches et des eaux,
Que nous nous expliquions et que je vous querelle?
Rouge-gorge, verdier, fauvette, tourterelle,
Oiseaux, je vous entends, je vous connais. Sachez
Que je ne suis pas dupe, ô doux ténors cachés,
De votre mélodie et de votre langage.
Celle que j'aime est loin et pense à moi; je gage,
O rossignol dont l'hymne, exquis et gracieux,
Donne un frémissement à l'astre dans les cieux,
Que ce que tu dis là, c'est le chant de son âme.
Vous guettez les soupirs de l'homme et de la femme,
Oiseaux; quand nous aimons et quand nous triomphons,
Quand notre être, tout bas, s'exhale en chants profonds,
Vous, attentifs, parmi les bois inaccessibles,
Vous saisissez au vol ces strophes invisibles,
Et vous les répétez tout haut, comme de vous;
Et vous mêlez, pour rendre encor l'hymne plus doux,
A la chanson des coeurs, le battement des ailes;
Si bien qu'on vous admire, écouteurs infidèles,
Et que le noir sapin murmure aux vieux tilleuls:
«Sont-ils charmants d'avoir trouvé cela tout seuls!»
Et que l'eau, palpitant sous le chant qui l'effleure,
Baise avec un sanglot le beau saule qui pleure;
Et que le dur tronc d'arbre a des airs attendris;
Et que l'épervier rêve, oubliant la perdrix;
Et que les loups s'en vont songer auprès des louves!
«Divin!» dit le hibou; le moineau dit: «Tu trouves?»
Amour, lorsqu'en nos coeurs tu te réfugias,
L'oiseau vint y puiser; ce sont ces plagiats,
Ces chants qu'un rossignol, belles, prend sur vos bouches,

Qui font que les grands bois courbent leurs fronts farouches,
Et que les lourds rochers, stupides et ravis,
Se penchent, les laissant piller le chènevis,
Et ne distinguent plus, dans leurs rêves étranges,
La langue des oiseaux de la langue des anges.

Caudebec, septembre 183...

X

MON BRAS PRESSAIT TA TAILLE FRELE

Mon bras pressait ta taille frêle
Et souple comme le roseau;
Ton sein palpitait comme l'aile
D'un jeune oiseau.

Longtemps muets, nous contemplâmes
Le ciel où s'éteignait le jour.
Que se passait-il dans nos âmes?
Amour! amour!

Comme un ange qui se dévoile,
Tu me regardais, dans ma nuit,
Avec ton beau regard d'étoile,
Qui m'éblouit.

Forêt de Fontainebleau, juillet 18...

XI

LES FEMMES SONT SUR LA TERRE

Les femmes sont sur la terre
Pour tout idéaliser;
L'univers est un mystère
Que commente leur baiser.

C’est l’amour qui, pour ceinture,
A l’onde et le firmament,
Et dont toute la nature,
N’est, au fond, que l’ornement.

Tout ce qui brille, offre à l’âme
Son parfum ou sa couleur;
Si Dieu n’avait fait la femme,
Il n’aurait pas fait la fleur.

A quoi bon vos étincelles,
Bleus saphirs, sans les yeux doux?
Les diamants, sans les belles,
Ne sont plus que des cailloux;

Et, dans les charmilles vertes,
Les roses dorment debout,
Et sont des bouches ouvertes
Pour ne rien dire du tout.

Tout objet qui charme ou rêve
Tient des femmes sa clarté;
La perle blanche, sans Ève,
Sans toi, ma fière beauté,

Ressemblant, tout enlaidie,
A mon amour qui te fuit,
N’est plus que la maladie
D’une bête dans la nuit.

Paris, avril 18...

XII

ÉGLOGUE

Nous errions, elle et moi, dans les monts de Sicile.
Elle est fière pour tous et pour moi seul docile.
Les cieux et nos pensers rayonnaient à la fois.
Oh! comme aux lieux déserts les coeurs sont peu farouches!
Que de fleurs aux buissons, que de baisers aux bouches,
Quand on est dans l'ombre des bois!

Pareils à deux oiseaux qui vont de cime en cime,
Nous parvînmes enfin tout au bord d'un abîme.
Elle osa s'approcher de ce sombre entonnoir;
Et, quoique mainte épine offensât ses mains blanches,
Nous tâchâmes, penchés et nous tenant aux branches,
D'en voir le fond lugubre et noir.

En ce même moment, un titan centenaire,
Qui venait d'y rouler sous vingt coups de tonnerre,
Se tordait dans ce gouffre où le jour n'ose entrer;
Et d'horribles vautours au bec impitoyable,
Attirés par le bruit de sa chute effroyable,
Commençaient à le dévorer.

Alors, elle me dit: «J'ai peur qu'on ne nous voie!
Cherchons un antre afin d'y cacher notre joie!
Vois ce pauvre géant! nous aurions notre tour!
Car les dieux envieux qui l'ont fait disparaître,
Et qui furent jaloux de sa grandeur, peut-être
Seraient jaloux de notre amour!»

Septembre 18...

XIII

VIENS! — UNE FLUTE INVISIBLE

Viens! — une flûte invisible
Soupire dans les vergers. —
La chanson la plus paisible

Est la chanson des bergers.

Le vent ride, sous l'yeuse,
Le sombre miroir des eaux. —
La chanson la plus joyeuse
Est la chanson des oiseaux.

Que nul soin ne te tourmente.
Aimons-nous! aimons toujours! —
La chanson la plus charmante
Est la chanson des amours.

Les Metz, août 18...

XIV

BILLET DU MATIN

Si les liens des coeurs ne sont pas des mensonges,
Oh! dites, vous devez avoir eu de doux songes,
Je n'ai fait que rêver de vous toute la nuit.
Et nous nous aimions tant! vous me disiez: «Tout fuit,
Tout s'éteint, tout s'en va; ta seule image reste.»
Nous devions être morts dans ce rêve céleste;
Il semblait que c'était déjà le paradis.
Oh! oui, nous étions morts, bien sûr; je vous le dis.
Nous avions tous les deux la forme de nos âmes.
Tout ce que, l'un de l'autre, ici-bas nous aimâmes
Composait notre corps de flamme et de rayons,
Et, naturellement, nous nous reconnaissions.
Il nous apparaissait des visages d'aurore
Qui nous disaient: «C'est moi!» la lumière sonore
Chantait; et nous étions des frissons et des voix.
Vous me disiez: «Écoute!» et je répondais: «Vois!»
Je disais: «Viens-nous-en dans les profondeurs sombres;
Vivons; c'est autrefois que nous étions des ombres.»
Et, mêlant nos appels et nos cris: «Viens! oh! viens!

Et moi, je me rappelle, et toi, tu te souviens.»
Éblouis, nous chantions: — C'est nous-mêmes qui sommes
Tout ce qui nous semblait, sur la terre des hommes,
Bon, juste, grand, sublime, ineffable et charmant;
Nous sommes le regard et le rayonnement;
Le sourire de l'aube et l'odeur de la rose,
C'est nous; l'astre est le nid où notre aile se pose;
Nous avons l'infini pour sphère et pour milieu,
L'éternité pour l'âge; et, notre amour, c'est Dieu.

Paris, juin 18...

XV

PAROLES DANS L'OMBRE

Elle disait: C'est vrai, j'ai tort de vouloir mieux;
Les heures sont ainsi très-doucement passées;
Vous êtes là; mes yeux ne quittent pas vos yeux,
Où je regarde aller et venir vos pensées.

Vous voir est un bonheur; je ne l'ai pas complet.
Sans doute, c'est encor bien charmant de la sorte!
Je veille, car je sais tout ce qui vous déplaît,
A ce que nul fâcheux ne vienne ouvrir la porte;

Je me fais bien petite, en mon coin, près de vous;
Vous êtes mon lion, je suis votre colombe;
J'entends de vos papiers le bruit paisible et doux;
Je ramasse parfois votre plume qui tombe;

Sans doute, je vous ai; sans doute, je vous voi.
La pensée est un vin dont les rêveurs sont ivres,
Je le sais; mais, pourtant, je veux qu'on songe à moi.
Quand vous êtes ainsi tout un soir dans vos livres,

Sans relever la tête et sans me dire un mot,

Une ombre reste au fond de mon coeur qui vous aime;
Et, pour que je vous voie entièrement, il faut
Me regarder un peu, de temps en temps, vous-même.

Paris, octobre 18...

XVI

L'HIRONDELLE AU PRINTEMPS CHERCHE LES VIEILLES TOURS

L'hirondelle au printemps cherche les vieilles tours,
Débris où n'est plus l'homme, où la vie est toujours;
La fauvette en avril cherche, ô ma bien-aimée,
La forêt sombre et fraîche et l'épaisse ramée,
La mousse, et, dans les noeuds des branches, les doux toits
Qu'en se superposant font les feuilles des bois.
Ainsi fait l'oiseau. Nous, nous cherchons, dans la ville,
Le coin désert, l'abri solitaire et tranquille,
Le seuil qui n'a pas d'yeux obliques et méchants,
La rue où les volets sont fermés; dans les champs,
Nous cherchons le sentier du pâtre et du poëte;
Dans les bois, la clairière inconnue et muette
Où le silence éteint les bruits lointains et sourds.
L'oiseau cache son nid, nous cachons nos amours.

Fontainebleau, juin 18...

XVII

SOUS LES ARBRES

Ils marchaient à côté l'un de l'autre; des danses
Troublaient le bois joyeux; ils marchaient, s'arrêtaient,
Parlaient, s'interrompaient, et, pendant les silences,
Leurs bouches se taisant, leurs âmes chuchotaient.

Ils songeaient; ces deux coeurs, que le mystère écoute,
Sur la création au sourire innocent
Penchés, et s'y versant dans l'ombre goutte à goutte,
Disaient à chaque fleur quelque chose en passant.

Elle sait tous les noms des fleurs qu'en sa corbeille
Mai nous rapporte avec la joie et les beaux jours;
Elle les lui nommait comme eût fait une abeille,
Puis elle reprenait: «Parlons de nos amours.

«Je suis en haut, je suis en bas,» lui disait-elle,
«Et je veille sur vous, d'en bas comme d'en haut.»
Il demandait comment chaque plante s'appelle,
Se faisant expliquer le printemps mot à mot.

O champs! il savourait ces fleurs et cette femme.
O bois! ô prés! nature où tout s'absorbe en un,
Le parfum de la fleur est votre petite âme,
Et l'âme de la femme est votre grand parfum!

La nuit tombait; au tronc d'un chêne, noir pilastre,
Il s'adossait pensif; elle disait: «Voyez
Ma prière toujours dans vos cieux comme un astre,
Et mon amour toujours comme un chien à tes pieds.»

Juin 18...

XVIII

JE SAIS BIEN QU'IL EST D'USAGE

Je sais bien qu'il est d'usage
D'aller en tous lieux criant
Que l'homme est d'autant plus sage
Qu'il rêve plus de néant;

D’applaudir la grandeur noire,
Les héros, le fer qui luit,
Et la guerre, cette gloire
Qu’on fait avec de la nuit;

D’admirer les coups d’épée,
Et la fortune, ce char
Dont une roue est Pompée,
Dont l’autre roue est César;

Et Pharsale et Trasimène,
Et tout ce que les Nérons
Font voler de cendre humaine
Dans le souffle des clairons!

Je sais que c’est la coutume
D’adorer ces nains géants
Qui, parce qu’ils sont écume,
Se supposent océans;

Et de croire à la poussière,
A la fanfare qui fuit,
Aux pyramides de pierre,
Aux avalanches de bruit.

Moi, je préfère, ô fontaines!
Moi, je préfère, ô ruisseaux!
Au Dieu des grands capitaines,
Le Dieu des petits oiseaux!

O mon doux ange, en ces ombres
Où, nous aimant, nous brillons,
Au Dieu des ouragans sombres
Qui poussent les bataillons,

Au Dieu des vastes armées,
Des canons au lourd essieu,

Des flammes et des fumées,
Je préfère le bon Dieu!

Le bon Dieu, qui veut qu'on aime,
Qui met au coeur de l'amant
Le premier vers du poëme,
Le dernier au firmament!

Qui songe à l'aile qui pousse,
Aux oeufs blancs, au nid troublé,
Si la caille a de la mousse,
Et si la grive a du blé;

Et qui fait, pour les Orphées,
Tenir, immense et subtil,
Tout le doux monde des fées
Dans le vert bourgeon d'avril!

Si bien, que cela s'envole
Et se disperse au printemps,
Et qu'une vague auréole
Sort de tous les nids chantants!

Vois-tu, quoique notre gloire
Brille en ce que nous créons,
Et dans notre grande histoire
Pleine de grands panthéons;

Quoique nous ayons des glaives,
Des temples, Chéops, Babel,
Des tours, des palais, des rêves,
Et des tombeaux jusqu'au ciel;

Il resterait peu de choses
A l'homme, qui vit un jour,
Si Dieu nous ôtait les roses,
Si Dieu nous ôtait l'amour!

Chelles, septembre 18...

XIX

N’ENVIONS RIEN

O femme, pensée aimante
Et coeur souffrant,
Vous trouvez la fleur charmante
Et l’oiseau grand;

Vous enviez la pelouse
Aux fleurs de miel;
Vous voulez que je jalouse
L’oiseau du ciel.

Vous dites, beauté superbe
Au front terni,
Regardant tour à tour l’herbe
Et l’infini:

«Leur existence est la bonne;
Là, tout est beau;
Là, sur la fleur qui rayonne.
Plane l’oiseau!

«Près de vous, aile bénie,
Lys enchanté,
Qu’est-ce, hélas! que le génie
Et la beauté?

«Fleur pure, alouette agile,
A vous le prix!
Toi, tu dépasses Virgile;
Toi, Lycoris!

«Quel vol profond dans l’air sombre!
Quels doux parfums! — »
Et des pleurs brillent sous l’ombre
De vos cils bruns.

Oui, contemplez l’hirondelle,
Les liserons;
Mais ne vous plaignez pas, belle,
Car nous mourrons!

Car nous irons dans la sphère
De l’éther pur;
La femme y sera lumière,
Et l’homme azur;

Et les roses sont moins belles
Que les houris;
Et les oiseaux ont moins d’ailes
Que les esprits!

Août 18...

XX

IL FAIT FROID

L’hiver blanchit le dur chemin.
Tes jours aux méchants sont en proie.
La bise mord ta douce main;
La haine souffle sur ta joie.

La neige emplit le noir sillon.
La lumière est diminuée... —
Ferme ta porte à l’aquilon!
Ferme ta vitre à la nuée!

Et puis laisse ton coeur ouvert!

Le coeur, c’est la sainte fenêtre.
Le soleil de brume est couvert;
Mais Dieu va rayonner peut-être!

Doute du bonheur, fruit mortel;
Doute de l’homme plein d’envie;
Doute du prêtre et de l’autel;
Mais crois à l’amour, ô ma vie!

Crois à l’amour, toujours entier,
Toujours brillant sous tous les voiles!
A l’amour, tison du foyer!
A l’amour rayon des étoiles!

Aime et ne désespère pas,
Dans ton âme où parfois je passe,
Où mes vers chuchotent tout bas,
Laisse chaque chose à sa place.

La fidélité sans ennui,
La paix des vertus élevées,
Et l’indulgence pour autrui,
Éponge des fautes lavées.

Dans ta pensée où tout est beau,
Que rien ne tombe ou ne recule.
Fais de ton amour ton flambeau.
On s’éclaire de ce qui brûle.

A ces démons d’inimitié,
Oppose ta douceur sereine,
Et reverse-leur en pitié
Tout ce qu’ils t’ont vomi de haine.

La haine, c’est l’hiver du coeur.
Plains-les! mais garde ton courage.
Garde ton sourire vainqueur;

Bel arc-en-ciel, sors de l’orage!

Garde ton amour éternel.
L’hiver, l’astre éteint-il sa flamme?
Dieu ne retire rien du ciel,
Ne retire rien de ton âme!

Décembre 18...

XXI

IL LUI DISAIT: «VOIS-TU, SI TOUS DEUX NOUS POUVIONS

Il lui disait: «Vois-tu, si tous deux nous pouvions,
L’âme pleine de foi, le coeur plein de rayons,
Ivres de douce extase et de mélancolie,
Rompre les mille noeuds dont la ville nous lie;
Si nous pouvions quitter ce Paris triste et fou,
Nous fuirions; nous irions quelque part, n’importe où,
Chercher loin des vains bruits, loin des haines jalouses,
Un coin où nous aurions des arbres, des pelouses;
«Une maison petite avec des fleurs, un peu
De solitude, un peu de silence, un ciel bleu,
La chanson d’un oiseau qui sur le toit se pose,
De l’ombre; — et quel besoin avons-nous d’autre chose?»

Juillet 18...

XXII

AIMONS TOUJOURS! AIMONS ENCORE!

Aimons toujours! aimons encore!
Quand l’amour s’en va, l’espoir fuit.
L’amour, c’est le cri de l’aurore,

L’amour, c’est l’hymne de la nuit.

Ce que le flot dit aux rivages,
Ce que le vent dit aux vieux monts,
Ce que l’astre dit aux nuages,
C’est le mot ineffable: Aimons!

L’amour fait songer, vivre et croire.
Il a, pour réchauffer le coeur,
Un rayon de plus que la gloire,
Et ce rayon, c’est le bonheur!

Aime! qu’on les loue ou les blâme,
Toujours les grands coeurs aimeront:
Joins cette jeunesse de l’âme
A la jeunesse de ton front!

Aime, afin de charmer tes heures!
Afin qu’on voie en tes beaux yeux
Des voluptés intérieures
Le sourire mystérieux!

Aimons-nous toujours davantage!
Unissons-nous mieux chaque jour.
Les arbres croissent en feuillage;
Que notre âme croisse en amour!

Soyons le miroir et l’image!
Soyons la fleur et le parfum!
Les amants, qui, seuls sous l’ombrage,
Se sentent deux et ne sont qu’un!

Les poëtes cherchent les belles.
La femme, ange aux chastes faveurs,
Aime à rafraîchir sous ses ailes
Ces grands fronts brûlants et rêveurs.

Venez à nous, beautés touchantes!
Viens à moi, toi, mon bien, ma loi!
Ange! viens à moi quand tu chantes,
Et, quand tu pleures, viens à moi!

Nous seuls comprenons vos extases;
Car notre esprit n’est point moqueur;
Car les poëtes sont les vases
Où les femmes versent leur coeur.

Moi qui ne cherche dans ce monde
Que la seule réalité,
Moi qui laisse fuir comme l’onde
Tout ce qui n’est que vanité,

Je préfère, aux biens dont s’enivre
L’orgueil du soldat ou du roi,
L’ombre que tu fais sur mon livre
Quand ton front se penche sur moi.

Toute ambition allumée
Dans notre esprit, brasier subtil,
Tombe en cendre ou vole en fumée,
Et l’on se dit: «Qu’en reste-t-il?»

Tout plaisir, fleur à peine éclose
Dans notre avril sombre et terni,
S’effeuille et meurt, lys, myrte ou rose,
Et l’on se dit: «C’est donc fini!»

L’amour seul reste. O noble femme,
Si tu veux, dans ce vil séjour,
Garder ta foi, garder ton âme,
Garder ton Dieu, garde l’amour!

Conserve en ton coeur, sans rien craindre,
Dusses-tu pleurer et souffrir,

La flamme qui ne peut s’éteindre
Et la fleur qui ne peut mourir!

Mai 18...

XXIII

APRÈS L’HIVER

Tout revit, ma bien-aimée!
Le ciel gris perd sa pâleur;
Quand la terre est embaumée,
Le coeur de l’homme est meilleur.

En haut, d’où l’amour ruisselle,
En bas, où meurt la douleur,
La même immense étincelle
Allume l’astre et la fleur.

L’hiver fuit, saison d’alarmes,
Noir avril mystérieux
Où l’âpre sève des larmes
Coule, et du coeur monte aux yeux.

O douce désuétude
De souffrir et de pleurer!
Veux-tu, dans la solitude,
Nous mettre à nous adorer?

La branche au soleil se dore
Et penche, pour l’abriter,
Ses boutons qui vont éclore
Sur l’oiseau qui va chanter.

L’aurore où nous nous aimâmes
Semble renaître à nos yeux;
Et mai sourit dans nos âmes

Comme il sourit dans les cieux.

On entend rire, on voit luire
Tous les êtres tour à tour,
La nuit, les astres bruire,
Et les abeilles, le jour.

Et partout nos regards lisent,
Et, dans l'herbe et dans les nids,
De petites voix nous disent:
«Les aimants sont les bénis!»

L'air enivre; tu reposes
A mon cou tes bras vainqueurs. —
Sur les rosiers que de roses!
Que de soupirs dans nos coeurs!

Comme l'aube, tu me charmes;
Ta bouche et tes yeux chéris
Ont, quand tu pleures, ses larmes,
Et ses perles quand tu ris.

La nature, soeur jumelle
D'Ève et d'Adam et du jour,
Nous aime, nous berce et mêle
Son mystère à notre amour.

Il suffit que tu paraisses
Pour que le ciel, t'adorant,
Te contemple; et, nos caresses,
Toute l'ombre nous les rend!

Clartés et parfums nous-mêmes,
Nous baignons nos coeurs heureux
Dans les effluves suprêmes
Des éléments amoureux.

Et, sans qu’un souci t’oppresse,
Sans que ce soit mon tourment,
J’ai l’étoile pour maîtresse;
Le soleil est ton amant;

Et nous donnons notre fièvre
Aux fleurs où nous appuyons
Nos bouches, et notre lèvre
Sent le baiser des rayons.

Juin 18...

XXIV

QUE LE SORT, QUEL QU’IL SOIT, VOUS TROUVE TOUJOURS GRANDE!

Que le sort, quel qu’il soit, vous trouve toujours grande!
Que demain soit doux comme hier!
Qu’en vous, ô ma beauté, jamais ne se répande
Le découragement amer,
Ni le fiel, ni l’ennui des coeurs qui se dénouent,
Ni cette cendre, hélas! que sur un front pâli,
Dans l’ombre, à petit bruit secouent
Les froides ailes de l’oubli!

Laissez, laissez brûler pour vous, ô vous que j’aime!
Mes chants dans mon âme allumés!
Vivez pour la nature, et le ciel, et moi-même!
Après avoir souffert, aimez!
Laissez entrer en vous, après nos deuils funèbres,
L’aube, fille des nuits, l’amour, fils des douleurs,
Tout ce qui luit dans les ténèbres,
Tout ce qui sourit dans les pleurs!

Octobre 18...

XXV

JE RESPIRE OU TU PALPITES

Je respire où tu palpites,
Tu sais; à quoi bon, hélas!
Rester là si tu me quittes,
Et vivre si tu t’en vas?

A quoi bon vivre, étant l’ombre
De cet ange qui s’enfuit!
A quoi bon, sous le ciel sombre,
N’être plus que de la nuit?

Je suis la fleur des murailles,
Dont avril est le seul bien.
Il suffit que tu t’en ailles
Pour qu’il ne reste plus rien.

Tu m’entoures d’auréoles;
Te voir est mon seul souci.
Il suffit que tu t’envoles
Pour que je m’envole aussi.

Si tu pars, mon front se penche;
Mon âme au ciel, son berceau,
Fuira, car dans ta main blanche
Tu tiens ce sauvage oiseau.

Que veux-tu que je devienne,
Si je n’entends plus ton pas?
Est-ce ta vie ou la mienne
Qui s’en va? Je ne sais pas.

Quand mon courage succombe,
J’en reprends dans ton coeur pur;

Je suis comme la colombe
Qui vient boire au lac d’azur.

L’amour fait comprendre à l’âme
L’univers, sombre et béni;
Et cette petite flamme
Seule éclaire l’infini.

Sans toi, toute la nature
N’est plus qu’un cachot fermé,
Où je vais à l’aventure,
Pâle et n’étant plus aimé.

Sans toi, tout s’effeuille et tombe;
L’ombre emplit mon noir sourcil;
Une fête est une tombe,
La patrie est un exil.

Je t’implore et te réclame;
Ne fuis pas loin de mes maux,
O fauvette de mon âme
Qui chantes dans mes rameaux!

De quoi puis-je avoir envie,
De quoi puis-je avoir effroi,
Que ferai-je de la vie,
Si tu n’es plus près de moi?

Tu portes dans la lumière,
Tu portes dans les buissons,
Sur une aile ma prière,
Et sur l’autre mes chansons.

Que dirai-je aux champs que voile
L’inconsolable douleur?
Que ferai-je de l’étoile?
Que ferai-je de la fleur?

Que dirai-je au bois morose
Qu'illuminait ta douceur?
Que répondrai-je à la rose
Disant: «Où donc est ma soeur?»

J'en mourrai; fuis, si tu l'oses.
A quoi bon, jours révolus!
Regarder toutes ces choses
Qu'elle ne regarde plus?

Que ferai-je de la lyre,
De la vertu, du destin?
Hélas! et, sans ton sourire,
Que ferai-je du matin?

Que ferai-je seul, farouche,
Sans toi, du jour et des cieux,
De mes baisers sans ta bouche,
Et de mes pleurs sans tes yeux!

Août 18...

XXVI

CRÉPUSCULE

L'étang mystérieux, suaire aux blanches moires,
Frissonne; au fond du bois, la clairière apparaît;
Les arbres sont profonds et les branches sont noires;
Avez-vous vu Vénus à travers la forêt?

Avez-vous vu Vénus au sommet des collines?
Vous qui passez dans l'ombre, êtes-vous des amants?
Les sentiers bruns sont pleins de blanches mousselines;
L'herbe s'éveille et parle aux sépulcres dormants.

Que dit-il, le brin d’herbe? et que répond la tombe?
Aimez, vous qui vivez! on a froid sous les ifs.
Lèvre, cherche la bouche! aimez-vous! la nuit tombe;
Soyez heureux pendant que nous sommes pensifs.

Dieu veut qu’on ait aimé. Vivez! faites envie,
O couples qui passez sous le vert coudrier.
Tout ce que dans la tombe, en sortant de la vie,
On emporta d’amour, on l’emploie à prier.

Les mortes d’aujourd’hui furent jadis les belles.
Le ver luisant dans l’ombre erre avec son flambeau.
Le vent fait tressaillir, au milieu des javelles,
Le brin d’herbe, et Dieu fait tressaillir le tombeau.

La forme d’un toit noir dessine une chaumière;
On entend dans les prés le pas lourd du faucheur;
L’étoile aux cieux, ainsi qu’une fleur de lumière,
Ouvre et fait rayonner sa splendide fraîcheur.

Aimez-vous! c’est le mois où les fraises sont mûres.
L’ange du soir rêveur, qui flotte dans les vents,
Mêle, en les emportant sur ses ailes obscures,
Les prières des morts aux baisers des vivants.

Chelles, août 18...

XXVII

LA NICHÉE SOUS LE PORTAIL

Oui, va prier à l’église,
Va; mais regarde en passant,
Sous la vieille voûte grise,
Ce petit nid innocent.

Aux grands temples où l’on prie,

Le martinet, frais et pur,
Suspend la maçonnerie
Qui contient le plus d’azur.

La couvée est dans la mousse
Du portail qui s’attendrit;
Elle sent la chaleur douce
Des ailes de Jésus-Christ.

L’église, où l’ombre flamboie,
Vibre, émue à ce doux bruit;
Les oiseaux sont pleins de joie,
La pierre est pleine de nuit.

Les saints, graves personnages
Sous les porches palpitants,
Aiment ces doux voisinages
Du baiser et du printemps.

Les vierges et les prophètes
Se penchent dans l’âpre tour,
Sur ces ruches d’oiseaux faites
Pour le divin miel amour.

L’oiseau se perche sur l’ange;
L’apôtre rit sous l’arceau.
«Bonjour, saint!» dit la mésange.
Le saint dit: «Bonjour, oiseau!»

Les cathédrales sont belles
Et hautes sous le ciel bleu;
Mais le nid des hirondelles
Est l’édifice de Dieu.

Lagny, juin 18...

XXVIII

UN SOIR QUE JE REGARDAIS LE CIEL

Elle me dit, un soir, en souriant:
— Ami, pourquoi contemplez-vous sans cesse
Le jour qui fuit, ou l’ombre qui s’abaisse,
Ou l’astre d’or qui monte à l’orient?
Que font vos yeux là-haut? je les réclame.
Quittez le ciel; regardez dans mon âme!

Dans ce ciel vaste, ombre où vous vous plaisez,
Où vos regards démesurés vont lire,
Qu’apprendrez-vous qui vaille mon sourire?
Qu’apprendras-tu qui vaille nos baisers?
Oh! de mon coeur lève les chastes voiles.
Si tu savais comme il est plein d’étoiles!

Que de soleils! vois-tu, quand nous aimons,
Tout est en nous un radieux spectacle.
Le dévouement, rayonnant sur l’obstacle,
Vaut bien Vénus qui brille sur les monts.
Le vaste azur n’est rien, je te l’atteste;
Le ciel que j’ai dans l’âme est plus céleste!

C’est beau de voir un astre s’allumer.
Le monde est plein de merveilleuses choses.
Douce est l’aurore, et douces sont les roses.
Rien n’est si doux que le charme d’aimer!
La clarté vraie et la meilleure flamme,
C’est le rayon qui va de l’âme à l’âme!

L’amour vaut mieux, au fond des antres frais,
Que ces soleils qu’on ignore et qu’on nomme.
Dieu mit, sachant ce qui convient à l’homme,
Le ciel bien loin et la femme tout près.
Il dit à ceux qui scrutent l’azur sombre:
«Vivez! aimez! le reste, c’est mon ombre!»

Aimons! c’est tout. Et Dieu le veut ainsi.
Laisse ton ciel que de froids rayons dorent!
Tu trouveras, dans deux yeux qui t’adorent,
Plus de beauté, plus de lumière aussi!
Aimer, c’est voir, sentir, rêver, comprendre.
L’esprit plus grand s’ajoute au coeur plus tendre.

Viens! bien-aimé! n’entends-tu pas toujours
Dans nos transports une harmonie étrange?
Autour de nous la nature se change
En une lyre et chante nos amours!
Viens! aimons-nous! errons sur la pelouse.
Ne songe plus au ciel! j’en suis jalouse! —

Ma bien-aimée ainsi tout bas parlait,
Avec son front posé sur sa main blanche,
Et l’oeil rêveur d’un ange qui se penche,
Et sa voix grave, et cet air qui me plaît;
Belle et tranquille, et de me voir charmée,
Ainsi tout bas parlait ma bien-aimée.

Nos coeurs battaient; l’extase m’étouffait;
Les fleurs du soir entr’ouvraient leurs corolles....
Qu’avez-vous fait, arbres, de nos paroles?
De nos soupirs, rochers, qu’avez-vous fait?
C’est un destin bien triste que le nôtre,
Puisqu’un tel jour s’envole comme un autre!

O souvenir! trésor dans l’ombre accru!
Sombre horizon des anciennes pensées!
Chère lueur des choses éclipsées!
Rayonnement du passé disparu!
Comme du seuil et du dehors d’un temple,
L’oeil de l’esprit en rêvant vous contemple!

Quand les beaux jours font place aux jours amers,
De tout bonheur il faut quitter l’idée;

Quand l’espérance est tout à fait vidée,
Laissons tomber la coupe au fond des mers.
L’oubli! l’oubli! c’est l’onde où tout se noie;
C’est la mer sombre où l’on jette sa joie.

Montf., septembre, 18... — Brux..., janvier 18...

LIVRE TROISIÈME: LES LUTTES ET LES RÊVES

I

ÉCRIT SUR UN EXEMPLAIRE DE LA DIVINA COMMEDIA

Un soir, dans le chemin je vis passer un homme
Vêtu d’un grand manteau comme un consul de Rome,
Et qui me semblait noir sur la clarté des cieux.
Ce passant s’arrêta, fixant sur moi ses yeux
Brillants, et si profonds, qu’ils en étaient sauvages,
Et me dit: «J’ai d’abord été, dans les vieux âges,
Une haute montagne emplissant l’horizon;
Puis, âme encore aveugle et brisant ma prison,
Je montai d’un degré dans l’échelle des êtres,
Je fus un chêne, et j’eus des autels et des prêtres,
Et je jetai des bruits étranges dans les airs;
Puis je fus un lion rêvant dans les déserts,
Parlant à la nuit sombre avec sa voix grondante;
Maintenant, je suis homme, et je m’appelle Dante.»

Juillet 1843.

II

MELANCHOLIA

Écoutez. Une femme au profil décharné,
Maigre, blême, portant un enfant étonné,
Est là qui se lamente au milieu de la rue.
La foule, pour l’entendre, autour d’elle se rue.
Elle accuse quelqu’un, une autre femme, ou bien
Son mari. Ses enfants ont faim. Elle n’a rien;

Pas d’argent; pas de pain; à peine un lit de paille.
L’homme est au cabaret pendant qu’elle travaille.
Elle pleure, et s’en va. Quand ce spectre a passé,
O penseurs, au milieu de ce groupe amassé,
Qui vient de voir le fond d’un coeur qui se déchire,
Qu’entendez-vous toujours? Un long éclat de rire.

Cette fille au doux front a cru peut-être, un jour,
Avoir droit au bonheur, à la joie, à l’amour.
Mais elle est seule, elle est sans parents, pauvre fille!
Seule! — n’importe! elle a du courage, une aiguille!
Elle travaille, et peut gagner dans son réduit,
En travaillant le jour, en travaillant la nuit,
Un peu de pain, un gîte, une jupe de toile.
Le soir, elle regarde en rêvant quelque étoile,
Et chante au bord du toit tant que dure l’été.
Mais l’hiver vient. Il fait bien froid, en vérité,
Dans ce logis mal clos tout en haut de la rampe;
Les jours sont courts, il faut allumer une lampe;
L’huile est chère, le bois est cher, le pain est cher.
O jeunesse! printemps! aube! en proie à l’hiver!
La faim passe bientôt sa griffe sous la porte,
Décroche un vieux manteau, saisit la montre, emporte
Les meubles, prend enfin quelque humble bague d’or;
Tout est vendu! L’enfant travaille et lutte encor;
Elle est honnête; mais elle a, quand elle veille,
La misère, démon, qui lui parle à l’oreille.
L’ouvrage manque, hélas! cela se voit souvent.
Que devenir? Un jour, ô jour sombre! elle vend
La pauvre croix d’honneur de son vieux père, et pleure;
Elle tousse, elle a froid. Il faut donc qu’elle meure!
A dix-sept ans! grand Dieu! mais que faire?... — Voilà
Ce qui fait qu’un matin la douce fille alla
Droit au gouffre, et qu’enfin, à présent, ce qui monte
A son front, ce n’est plus la pudeur, c’est la honte.
Hélas, et maintenant, deuil et pleurs éternels!
C’est fini. Les enfants, ces innocents cruels,

La suivent dans la rue avec des cris de joie.
Malheureuse! elle traîne une robe de soie,
Elle chante, elle rit... ah! pauvre âme aux abois!
Et le peuple sévère, avec sa grande voix,
Souffle qui courbe un homme et qui brise une femme,
Lui dit quand elle vient: «C’est toi? Va-t’en, infâme!»

Un homme s’est fait riche en vendant à faux poids;
La loi le fait juré. L’hiver, dans les temps froids,
Un pauvre a pris un pain pour nourrir sa famille.
Regardez cette salle où le peuple fourmille;
Ce riche y vient juger ce pauvre. Écoutez bien.
C’est juste, puisque l’un a tout et l’autre rien.
Ce juge, — ce marchand, — fâché de perdre une heure,
Jette un regard distrait sur cet homme qui pleure,
L’envoie au bagne, et part pour sa maison des champs.
Tous s’en vont en disant: «C’est bien!» bons et méchants,
Et rien ne reste là qu’un Christ pensif et pâle,
Levant les bras au ciel dans le fond de la salle.

Un homme de génie apparaît. Il est doux,
Il est fort, il est grand; il est utile à tous;
Comme l’aube au-dessus de l’océan qui roule,
Il dore d’un rayon tous les fronts de la foule;
Il luit; le jour qu’il jette est un jour éclatant;
Il apporte une idée au siècle qui l’attend;
Il fait son oeuvre; il veut des choses nécessaires,
Agrandir les esprits, amoindrir les misères;
Heureux, dans ses travaux dont les cieux sont témoins,
Si l’on pense un peu plus, si l’on souffre un peu moins!
Il vient. — Certes, on le va couronner! — On le hue!
Scribes, savants, rhéteurs, les salons, la cohue,
Ceux qui n’ignorent rien, ceux qui doutent de tout,
Ceux qui flattent le roi, ceux qui flattent l’égout,
Tous hurlent à la fois et font un bruit sinistre.
Si c’est un orateur ou si c’est un ministre,
On le siffle. Si c’est un poëte, il entend

Ce choeur: «Absurde! faux! monstrueux! révoltant!»
Lui, cependant, tandis qu’on bave sur sa palme,
Debout, les bras croisés, le front levé, l’oeil calme,
Il contemple, serein, l’idéal et le beau;
Il rêve; et, par moments, il secoue un flambeau
Qui, sous ses pieds, dans l’ombre, éblouissant la haine,
Éclaire tout à coup le fond de l’âme humaine;
Ou, ministre, il prodigue et ses nuits et ses jours;
Orateur, il entasse efforts, travaux, discours;
Il marche, il lutte! Hélas! l’injure ardente et triste,
A chaque pas qu’il fait, se transforme et persiste.
Nul abri. Ce serait un ennemi public,
Un monstre fabuleux, dragon ou basilic,
Qu’il serait moins traqué de toutes les manières,
Moins entouré de gens armés de grosses pierres,
Moins haï! — Pour eux tous et pour ceux qui viendront,
Il va semant la gloire, il recueille l’affront.
Le progrès est son but, le bien est sa boussole;
Pilote, sur l’avant du navire il s’isole;
Tout marin, pour dompter les vents et les courants,
Met tour à tour le cap sur des points différents,
Et, pour mieux arriver, dévie en apparence;
Il fait de même; aussi blâme et cris; l’ignorance
Sait tout, dénonce tout; il allait vers le nord,
Il avait tort; il va vers le sud, il a tort;
Si le temps devient noir, que de rage et de joie!
Cependant, sous le faix sa tête à la fin ploie,
L’âge vient, il couvait un mal profond et lent,
Il meurt. L’envie alors, ce démon vigilant,
Accourt, le reconnaît, lui ferme la paupière,
Prend soin de le clouer de ses mains dans la bière,
Se penche, écoute, épie en cette sombre nuit
S’il est vraiment bien mort, s’il ne fait pas de bruit,
S’il ne peut plus savoir de quel nom on le nomme

Où vont tous ces enfants dont pas un seul ne rit?
Ces doux êtres pensifs, que la lièvre maigrit?

Ces filles de huit ans qu’on voit cheminer seules?
Ils s’en vont travailler quinze heures sous des meules;
Ils vont, de l’aube au soir, faire éternellement
Dans la même prison le même mouvement.
Accroupis sous les dents d’une machine sombre,
Monstre hideux qui mâche on ne sait quoi dans l’ombre,
Innocents dans un bagne, anges dans un enfer,
Ils travaillent. Tout est d’airain, tout est de fer.
Jamais on ne s’arrête et jamais on ne joue.
Aussi quelle pâleur! la cendre est sur leur joue.
Il fait à peine jour, ils sont déjà bien las.
Ils ne comprennent rien à leur destin, hélas!
Ils semblent dire à Dieu: «Petits comme nous sommes,
Notre père, voyez ce que nous font les hommes!»
O servitude infâme imposée à l’enfant!
Rachitisme! travail dont le souffle étouffant
Défait ce qu’a fait Dieu: qui tue, oeuvre insensée,
La beauté sur les fronts, dans les coeurs la pensée,
Et qui ferait — c’est là son fruit le plus certain —
D’Apollon un bossu, de Voltaire un crétin!

Travail mauvais qui prend l’âge tendre en sa serre,
Qui produit la richesse en créant la misère,
Qui se sert d’un enfant ainsi que d’un outil!
Progrès dont on demande: «Où va-t-il? que veut-il?»
Qui brise la jeunesse en fleur! qui donne, en somme,
Une âme à la machine et la retire à l’homme!
Que ce travail, haï des mères, soit maudit!
Maudit comme le vice où l’on s’abâtardit,
Maudit comme l’opprobre et comme le blasphème!
O Dieu! qu’il soit maudit au nom du travail même,
Au nom du vrai travail, saint, fécond, généreux,
Qui fait le peuple libre et qui rend l’homme heureux!

Le pesant chariot porte une énorme pierre;
Le limonier, suant du mors à la croupière,
Tire, et le roulier fouette, et le pavé glissant

Monte, et le cheval triste a le poitrail en sang.
Il tire, traîne, geint, tire encore et s'arrête;
Le fouet noir tourbillonne au-dessus de sa tête;
C'est lundi; l'homme hier buvait aux Porcherons
Un vin plein de fureur, de cris et de jurons;
Oh! quelle est donc la loi formidable qui livre
L'être à l'être, et la bête effarée à l'homme ivre!
L'animal éperdu ne peut plus faire un pas;
Il sent l'ombre sur lui peser; il ne sait pas,
Sous le bloc qui l'écrase et le fouet qui l'assomme,
Ce que lui veut la pierre et ce que lui veut l'homme.
Et le roulier n'est plus qu'un orage de coups
Tombant sur ce forçat qui traîne des licous,
Qui souffre et ne connaît ni repos ni dimanche.
Si la corde se casse, il frappe avec le manche,
Et, si le fouet se casse, il frappe avec le pié;
Et le cheval, tremblant, hagard, estropié,
Baisse son cou lugubre et sa tête égarée;
On entend, sous les coups de la botte ferrée,
Sonner le ventre nu du pauvre être muet!
Il râle; tout à l'heure encore il remuait;
Mais il ne bouge plus, et sa force est finie;
Et les coups furieux pleuvent; son agonie
Tente un dernier effort; son pied fait un écart,
Il tombe, et le voilà brisé sous le brancard;
Et, dans l'ombre, pendant que son bourreau redouble,
Il regarde Quelqu'un de sa prunelle trouble;
Et l'on voit lentement s'éteindre, humble et terni,
Son oeil plein des stupeurs sombres de l'infini,
Où luit vaguement l'âme effrayante des choses.
Hélas!

Cet avocat plaide toutes les causes;
Il rit des généreux qui désirent savoir
Si blanc n'a pas raison avant de dire noir;
Calme, en sa conscience il met ce qu'il rencontre,
Ou le sac d'argent Pour, ou le sac d'argent Contre;

Le sac pèse pour lui ce que la cause vaut.
Embusqué, plume au poing, dans un journal dévot,
Comme un bandit tuerait, cet écrivain diffame.
La foule hait cet homme et proscrit cette femme;
Ils sont maudits. Quel est leur crime? Ils ont aimé.
L’opinion rampante accable l’opprimé,
Et, chatte aux pieds des forts, pour le faible est tigresse.
De l’inventeur mourant le parasite engraisse.
Le monde parle, assure, affirme, jure, ment,
Triche, et rit d’escroquer la dupe Dévouement.
Le puissant resplendit et du destin se joue;
Derrière lui, tandis qu’il marche et fait la roue,
Sa fiente épanouie engendre son flatteur.
Les nains sont dédaigneux de toute leur hauteur.
O hideux coin de rue où le chiffonnier morne
Va, tenant à la main sa lanterne de corne,
Vos tas d’ordures sont moins noirs que les vivants!
Qui, des vents ou des coeurs, est le plus sûr? Les vents.
Cet homme ne croit rien et fait semblant de croire;
Il a l’oeil clair, le front gracieux, l’âme noire;
Il se courbe; il sera votre maître demain.

Tu casses des cailloux, vieillard, sur le chemin;
Ton feutre humble et troué s’ouvre à l’air qui le mouille;
Sous la pluie et le temps ton crâne nu se rouille;
Le chaud est ton tyran, le froid est ton bourreau;
Ton vieux corps grelottant tremble sous ton sarrau;
Ta cahute, au niveau du fossé de la route,
Offre son toit de mousse à la chèvre qui broute;
Tu gagnes dans ton jour juste assez de pain noir
Pour manger le matin et pour jeûner le soir;
Et, fantôme suspect devant qui l’on recule,
Regardé de travers quand vient le crépuscule,
Pauvre au point d’alarmer les allants et venants,
Frère sombre et pensif des arbres frissonnants,
Tu laisses choir tes ans ainsi qu’eux leur feuillage;
Autrefois, homme alors dans la force de l’âge,

Quand tu vis que l'Europe implacable venait,
Et menaçait Paris et notre aube qui naît,
Et, mer d'hommes, roulait vers la France effarée,
Et le Russe et le Hun sur la terre sacrée
Se ruer, et le nord revomir Attila,
Tu te levas, tu pris ta fourche; en ces temps-là,
Tu fus, devant les rois qui tenaient la campagne,
Un des grands paysans de la grande Champagne.
C'est bien. Mais, vois, là-bas, le long du vert sillon,
Une calèche arrive, et, comme un tourbillon,
Dans la poudre du soir qu'à ton front tu secoues,
Mêle l'éclair du fouet au tonnerre des roues.
Un homme y dort. Vieillard, chapeau bas! Ce passant
Fit sa fortune à l'heure où tu versais ton sang;
Il jouait à la baisse, et montait à mesure
Que notre chute était plus profonde et plus sûre;
Il fallait un vautour à nos morts; il le fut;
Il fit, travailleur âpre et toujours à l'affût,
Suer à nos malheurs des châteaux et des rentes;
Moscou remplit ses prés de meules odorantes;
Pour lui, Leipsick payait des chiens et des valets,
Et la Bérésina charriait un palais;
Pour lui, pour que cet homme ait des fleurs, des charmilles,
Des parcs dans Paris même ouvrant leurs larges grilles,
Des jardins où l'on voit le cygne errer sur l'eau,
Un million joyeux sortit de Waterloo;
Si bien que du désastre il a fait sa victoire,
Et que, pour la manger, et la tordre, et la boire,
Ce Shaylock, avec le sabre de Blucher,
A coupé sur la France une livre de chair.
Or, de vous deux, c'est toi qu'on hait, lui qu'on vénère;
Vieillard, tu n'es qu'un gueux, et ce millionnaire,
C'est l'honnête homme. Allons, debout, et chapeau bas!

Les carrefours sont pleins de chocs et de combats.
Les multitudes vont et viennent dans les rues.
Foules! sillons creusés par ces mornes charrues:

Nuit, douleur, deuil! champ triste où souvent a germé
Un épi qui fait peur à ceux qui l’ont semé!
Vie et mort! onde où l’hydre à l’infini s’enlace!
Peuple océan jetant l’écume populace!
Là sont tous les chaos et toutes les grandeurs;
Là, fauve, avec ses maux, ses horreurs, ses laideurs,
Ses larves, désespoirs, haines, désirs, souffrances,
Qu’on distingue à travers de vagues transparences,
Ses rudes appétits, redoutables aimants,
Ses prostitutions, ses avilissements,
Et la fatalité de ses moeurs imperdables,
La misère épaissit ses couches formidables.
Les malheureux sont là, dans le malheur reclus.
L’indigence, flux noir, l’ignorance, reflux,
Montent, marée affreuse, et, parmi les décombres,
Roulent l’obscur filet des pénalités sombres.
Le besoin fuit le mal qui le tente et le suit,
Et l’homme cherche l’homme à tâtons; il fait nuit;
Les petits enfants nus tendent leurs mains funèbres;
Le crime, antre béant, s’ouvre dans ces ténèbres;
Le vent secoue et pousse, en ses froids tourbillons,
Les âmes en lambeaux dans les corps en haillons;
Pas de coeur où ne croisse une aveugle chimère.
Qui grince des dents? L’homme. Et qui pleure? La mère.
Qui sanglote? La vierge aux yeux hagards et doux.
Qui dit: «J’ai froid?» L’aïeule. Et qui dit: «J’ai faim?» Tous!
Et le fond est horreur, et la surface est joie.
Au-dessus de la faim, le festin qui flamboie,
Et sur le pâle amas des cris et des douleurs,
Les chansons et le rire et les chapeaux de fleurs!
Ceux-là sont les heureux. Ils n’ont qu’une pensée:
A quel néant jeter la journée insensée?
Chiens, voitures, chevaux! centre au reflet vermeil!
Poussière dont les grains semblent d’or au soleil!
Leur vie est aux plaisirs sans fin, sans but, sans trêve,
Et se passe à tâcher d’oublier dans un rêve
L’enfer au-dessous d’eux et le ciel au-dessus.

Quand on voile Lazare, on efface Jésus.
Ils ne regardent pas dans les ombres moroses.
Ils n’admettent que l’air tout parfumé de roses,
La volupté, l’orgueil, l’ivresse, et le laquais
Ce spectre galonné du pauvre, à leurs banquets.
Les fleurs couvrent les seins et débordent des vases.
Le bal, tout frissonnant de souffles et d’extases,
Rayonne, étourdissant ce qui s’évanouit;
Éden étrange fait de lumière et de nuit.
Les lustres aux plafonds laissent pendre leurs flammes,
Et semblent la racine ardente et pleine d’âmes
De quelque arbre céleste épanoui plus haut.
Noir paradis dansant sur l’immense cachot!
Ils savourent, ravis, l’éblouissement sombre
Des beautés, des splendeurs, des quadrilles sans nombre,
Des couples, des amours, des yeux bleus, des yeux noirs.
Les valses, visions, passent dans les miroirs.
Parfois, comme aux forêts la fuite des cavales,
Les galops effrénés courent; par intervalles,
Le bal reprend haleine; on s’interrompt, on fuit,
On erre, deux à deux, sous les arbres sans bruit;
Puis, folle, et rappelant les ombres éloignées;
La musique, jetant les notes à poignées,
Revient, et les regards s’allument, et l’archet,
Bondissant, ressaisit la foule qui marchait.
O délire! et d’encens et de bruit enivrées,
L’heure emporte en riant les rapides soirées,
Et les nuits et les jours, feuilles mortes des deux.
D’autres, toute la nuit, roulent les dés joyeux,
Ou bien, âpre, et mêlant les cartes qu’ils caressent,
Où des spectres riants ou sanglants apparaissent,
Leur soif de l’or, penchée autour d’un tapis vert,
Jusqu’à ce qu’au volet le jour bâille entr’ouvert,
Poursuit le pharaon, le lansquenet ou l’hombre,
Et, pendant qu’on gémit et qu’on frémit dans l’ombre,
Pendant que les greniers grelottent sous les toits,
Que les fleuves, passants pleins de lugubres voix,

Heurtent aux grands quais blancs les glaçons qu'ils charrient.
Tous ces hommes contents de vivre, boivent, rient,
Chantent; et, par moments, on voit, au-dessus d'eux,
Deux poteaux soutenant un triangle hideux,
Qui sortent lentement du noir pavé des villes... —

O forêts! bois profonds! solitudes! asiles!

Paris, juillet 1838.

III

SATURNE

I

Il est des jours de brume et de lumière vague,
Où l'homme, que la vie à chaque instant confond,
Étudiant la plante, ou l'étoile, ou la vague,
S'accoude au bord croulant du problème sans fond;

Où le songeur, pareil aux antiques augures,
Cherchant Dieu, que jadis plus d'un voyant surprit,
Médite en regardant fixement les figures
Qu'on a dans l'ombre de l'esprit;

Où, comme en s'éveillant on voit, en reflets sombres.
Des spectres du dehors errer sur le plafond,
Il sonde le destin, et contemple les ombres
Que nos rêves jetés parmi les choses font!

Des heures où, pourvu qu'on ait à sa fenêtre
Une montagne, un bois, l'océan qui dit tout,
Le jour prêt à mourir ou l'aube prête à naître,
En soi-même on voit tout à coup

Sur l'amour, sur les biens qui tous nous abandonnent,
Sur l'homme, masque vide et fantôme rieur,

Éclore des clartés effrayantes qui donnent
Des éblouissements à l’oeil intérieur;

De sorte qu’une fois que ces visions glissent
Devant notre paupière en ce vallon d’exil,
Elles n’en sortent plus et pour jamais emplissent
L’arcade sombre du sourcil!

II

Donc, puisque j’ai parlé de ces heures de doute
Où l’on trouve le calme et l’autre le remords,
Je ne cacherai pas au peuple qui m’écoute
Que je songe souvent à ce que font les morts;

Et que j’en suis venu — tant la nuit étoilée
A fatigué de fois mes regards et mes voeux,
Et tant une pensée inquiète est mêlée
Aux racines de mes cheveux! —

A croire qu’à la mort, continuant sa route,
L’âme, se souvenant de son humanité,
Envolée à jamais sous la céleste voûte,
A franchir l’infini passait l’éternité!

Et que les morts voyaient l’extase et la prière,
Nos deux rayons, pour eux grandir bien plus encore,
Et qu’ils étaient pareils à la mouche ouvrière,
Au vol rayonnant, aux pieds d’or,

Qui, visitant les fleurs pleines de chastes gouttes,
Semble une âme visible en ce monde réel,
Et, leur disant tout bas quelque mystère à toutes,
Leur laisse le parfum en leur prenant le miel!

Et qu’ainsi, faits vivants par le sépulcre même,
Nous irions tous un jour, dans l’espace vermeil,

Lire l’oeuvre infinie et l’éternel poëme,
Vers à vers, soleil à soleil!

Admirer tout système en ses formes fécondes,
Toute création dans sa variété,
Et, comparant à Dieu chaque face des mondes,
Avec l’âme de tout confronter leur beauté!

Et que chacun ferait ce voyage des âmes,
Pourvu qu’il ait souffert, pourvu qu’il ait pleuré.
Tous! hormis les méchants, dont les esprits infâmes
Sont comme un livre déchiré.

Ceux-là, Saturne, un globe horrible et solitaire,
Les prendra pour le temps où Dieu voudra punir,
Châtiés à la fois par le ciel et la terre,
Par l’aspiration et par le souvenir!

III

Saturne! sphère énorme! astre aux aspects funèbres!
Bagne du ciel! prison dont le soupirail luit!
Monde en proie à la brume, aux souffles, aux ténèbres!
Enfer fait d’hiver et de nuit!

Son atmosphère flotte en zones tortueuses.
Deux anneaux flamboyants, tournant avec fureur,
Font, dans son ciel d’airain, deux arches monstrueuses
D’où tombe une éternelle et profonde terreur.

Ainsi qu’une araignée au centre de sa toile,
Il tient sept lunes d’or qu’il lie à ses essieux;
Pour lui, notre soleil, qui n’est plus qu’une étoile,
Se perd, sinistre, au fond des cieux!

Les autres univers, l’entrevoyant dans l’ombre,
Se sont épouvantés de ce globe hideux.

Tremblants, ils l’ont peuplé de chimères sans nombre,
En le voyant errer formidable autour d’eux!

IV

Oh! ce serait vraiment un mystère sublime
Que ce ciel si profond, si lumineux, si beau,
Qui flamboie à nos yeux ouvert comme un abîme,
Fût l’intérieur du tombeau!

Que tout se révélât à nos paupières closes!
Que, morts, ces grands destins nous fussent réservés!...
Qu’en est-il de ce rêve et de bien d’autres choses?
Il est certain, Seigneur, que seul vous le savez.

V

Il est certain aussi que, jadis, sur la terre,
Le patriarche, ému d’un redoutable effroi,
Et les saints qui peuplaient la Thébaïde austère
Ont fait des songes comme moi;

Que, dans sa solitude auguste, le prophète
Voyait, pour son regard plein d’étranges rayons,
Par la même fêlure aux réalités faite,
S’ouvrir le monde obscur des pâles visions;

Et qu’à l’heure où le jour devant la nuit recule,
Ces sages que jamais l’homme, hélas! ne comprit,
Mêlaient, silencieux, au morne crépuscule
Le trouble de leur sombre esprit;

Tandis que l’eau sortait des sources cristallines,
Et que les grands lions, de moments en moments,
Vaguement apparus au sommet des collines,
Poussaient dans le désert de longs rugissements!

Avril 1839.

IV

ÉCRIT AU BAS D’UN CRUCIFIX

Vous qui pleurez, venez à ce Dieu, car il pleure.
Vous qui souffrez, venez à lui, car il guérit.
Vous qui tremblez, venez à lui, car il sourit.
Vous qui passez, venez à lui, car il demeure.

Mars 1842.

V

QUIA PULVIS ES

Ceux-ci partent, ceux-là demeurent.
Sous le sombre aquilon, dont les mille voix pleurent,
Poussière et genre humain, tout s’envole à la fois.
Hélas! le même vent souffle, en l’ombre où nous sommes,
Sur toutes les têtes des hommes,
Sur toutes les feuilles des bois.

Ceux qui restent à ceux qui passent
Disent: — Infortunés! déjà vos fronts s’effacent.
Quoi! vous n’entendrez plus la parole et le bruit!
Quoi! vous ne verrez plus ni le ciel ni les arbres!
Vous allez dormir sous les marbres!
Vous allez tomber dans la nuit! —

Ceux qui passent à ceux qui restent
Disent: — Vous n’avez rien à vous! vos pleurs l’attestent!
Pour vous, gloire et bonheur sont des mots décevants,
Dieu donne aux morts les biens réels, les vrais royaumes.
Vivants! vous êtes des fantômes;
C’est nous qui sommes les vivants! —

Février 1843

VI

LA SOURCE

Un lion habitait près d’une source; un aigle
Y venait boire aussi.
Or, deux héros, un jour, deux rois — souvent Dieu règle
La destinée ainsi —

Vinrent à cette source où des palmiers attirent
Le passant hasardeux,
Et, s’étant reconnus, ces hommes se battirent
Et tombèrent tous deux.

L’aigle, comme ils mouraient, vint planer sur leurs têtes,
Et leur dit, rayonnant:
— Vous trouviez l’univers trop petit, et vous n’êtes
Qu’une ombre maintenant!

O princes! et vos os, hier pleins de jeunesse,
Ne seront plus demain
Que des cailloux mêlés, sans qu’on les reconnaisse,
Aux pierres du chemin!

Insensés! à quoi bon cette guerre âpre et rude,
Ce duel, ce talion!... —
Je vis en paix, moi, l’aigle, en cette solitude
Avec lui, le lion.

Nous venons tous deux boire à la même fontaine,
Rois dans les mêmes lieux;
Je lui laisse le bois, la montagne et la plaine,
Et je garde les cieux.

Octobre 1846.

VII

LA STATUE

Quand l’empire romain tomba désespéré,
— Car, ô Rome, l’abîme où Carthage a sombré
Attendait que tu la suivisses! —
Quand, n’ayant rien en lui de grand qu’il n’eût brisé,
Ce monde agonisa, triste, ayant épuisé
Tous les Césars et tous les vices;

Quand il expira, vide et riche comme Tyr;
Tas d’esclaves ayant pour gloire de sentir
Le pied du maître sur leurs nuques;
Ivre de vin, de sang et d’or; continuant
Caton par Tigellin, l’astre par le néant,
Et les géants par les eunuques;

Ce fut un noir spectacle et dont on s’enfuyait.
Le pâle cénobite y songeait, inquiet,
Dans les antres visionnaires;
Et, pendant trois cents ans, dans l’ombre on entendit
Sur ce monde damné, sur ce festin maudit,
Un écroulement de tonnerres.

Et Luxure, Paresse, Envie, Orgie, Orgueil,
Avarice et Colère, au-dessus de ce deuil,
Planèrent avec des huées;
Et, comme des éclairs sous le plafond des soirs,
Les glaives monstrueux des sept archanges noirs
Flamboyèrent dans les nuées.

Juvénal, qui peignit ce gouffre universel,
Est statue aujourd’hui; la statue est de sel,
Seule sous le nocturne dôme;

Pas un arbre à ses pieds; pas d’herbe et de rameaux
Et dans son oeil sinistre on lit ces sombres mots:
Pour avoir regardé Sodôme.

Février 1843.

VIII

JE LISAIS. QUE LISAIS-JE?

Je lisais. Que lisais-je? Oh! le vieux livre austère,
Le poëme éternel! — La Bible? — Non, la terre.
Platon, tous les matins, quand revit le ciel bleu,
Lisait les vers d’Homère, et moi les fleurs de Dieu.
J’épèle les buissons, les brins d’herbe, les sources;
Et je n’ai pas besoin d’emporter dans mes courses
Mon livre sous mon bras, car je l’ai sous mes pieds.
Je m’en vais devant moi dans les lieux non frayés,
Et j’étudie à fond le texte, et je me penche,
Cherchant à déchiffrer la corolle et la branche.
Donc, courbé, — c’est ainsi qu’en marchant je traduis
La lumière en idée, en syllabes les bruits, —
J’étais en train de lire un champ, page fleurie.
Je fus interrompu dans cette rêverie;
Un doux martinet noir avec un ventre blanc
Me parlait; il disait: — O pauvre homme, tremblant
Entre le doute morne et la foi qui délivre,
Je t’approuve. Il est bon de lire dans ce livre.
Lis toujours, lis sans cesse, ô penseur agité,
Et que les champs profonds t’emplissent de clarté!
Il est sain de toujours feuilleter la nature,
Car c’est la grande lettre et la grande écriture;
Car la terre, cantique où nous nous abîmons,
A pour versets les bois et pour strophes les monts!
Lis. Il n’est rien dans tout ce que peut sonder l’homme
Qui, bien questionné par l’âme, ne se nomme.
Médite. Tout est plein de jour, même la nuit;

Et tout ce qui travaille, éclaire, aime ou détruit,
A des rayons: la roue au dur moyeu, l’étoile,
La fleur, et l’araignée au centre de sa toile.
Rends-toi compte de Dieu. Comprendre, c’est aimer.
Les plaines où le ciel aide l’herbe à germer,
L’eau, les prés, sont autant de phrases où le sage
Voit serpenter des sens qu’il saisit au passage.
Marche au vrai. Le réel, c’est le juste, vois-tu;
Et voir la vérité, c’est trouver la vertu.
Bien lire l’univers, c’est bien lire la vie.
Le monde est l’oeuvre où rien ne ment et ne dévie,
Et dont les mots sacrés répandent de l’encens.
L’homme injuste est celui qui fait des contre-sens.
Oui, la création tout entière, les choses,
Les êtres, les rapports, les éléments, les causes,
Rameaux dont le ciel clair perce le réseau noir,
L’arabesque des bois sur les cuivres du soir,
La bête, le rocher, l’épi d’or, l’aile peinte,
Tout cet ensemble obscur, végétation sainte,
Compose en se croisant ce chiffre énorme: DIEU.
L’éternel est écrit dans ce qui dure peu;
Toute l’immensité, sombre, bleue, étoilée,
Traverse l’humble fleur, du penseur contemplée;
On voit les champs, mais c’est de Dieu qu’on s’éblouit.
Le lys que tu comprends en toi s’épanouit;
Les roses que tu lis s’ajoutent à ton âme.
Les fleurs chastes, d’où sort une invisible flamme,
Sont les conseils que Dieu sème sur le chemin;
C’est l’âme qui les doit cueillir, et non la main.
Ainsi tu fais; aussi l’aube est sur ton front sombre;
Aussi tu deviens bon, juste et sage; et dans l’ombre
Tu reprends la candeur sublime du berceau. —
Je répondis: — Hélas! tu te trompes, oiseau.
Ma chair, faite de cendre, à chaque instant succombe;
Mon âme ne sera blanche que dans la tombe;
Car l’homme, quoi qu’il fasse, est aveugle ou méchant.
Et je continuai la lecture du champ.

Juillet 1833.

IX

JEUNE FILLE, LA GRACE EMPLIT TES DIX-SEPT ANS.

Jeune fille, la grâce emplit tes dix-sept ans.
Ton regard dit: Matin, et ton front dit: Printemps.
Il semble que ta main porte un lys invisible.
Don Juan te voit passer et murmure: «Impossible!»
Sois belle. Sois bénie, enfant, dans ta beauté.
La nature s'égaye à toute ta clarté;
Tu fais une lueur sous les arbres; la guêpe
Touche ta joue en fleur de son aile de crêpe;
La mouche à tes yeux vole ainsi qu'à des flambeaux.
Ton souffle est un encens qui monte au ciel. Lesbos
Et les marins d'Hydra, s'ils te voyaient sans voiles,
Te prendraient pour l'Aurore aux cheveux pleins d'étoiles.
Les êtres de l'azur froncent leur pur sourcil,
Quand l'homme, spectre obscur du mal et de l'exil,
Ose approcher ton âme, aux rayons fiancée.
Sois belle. Tu te sens par l'ombre caressée,
Un ange vient baiser ton pied quand il est nu,
Et c'est ce qui te fait ton sourire ingénu.

Février 1843.

X

AMOUR

Amour! «Loi,» dit Jésus. «Mystère,» dit Platon.
Sait-on quel fil nous lie au firmament? Sait-on
Ce que les mains de Dieu dans l'immensité sèment?
Est-on maître d'aimer? pourquoi deux êtres s'aiment,
Demande à l'eau qui court, demande à l'air qui fuit,

Au moucheron qui vole à la flamme la nuit,
Au rayon d’or qui veut baiser la grappe mûre!
Demande à ce qui chante, appelle, attend, murmure!
Demande aux nids profonds qu’avril met en émoi
Le coeur éperdu crie: Est-ce que je sais, moi?
Cette femme a passé: je suis fou. C’est l’histoire.
Ses cheveux étaient blonds, sa prunelle était noire;
En plein midi, joyeuse, une fleur au corset,
Illumination du jour, elle passait;
Elle allait, la charmante, et riait, la superbe;
Ses petits pieds semblaient chuchoter avec l’herbe;
Un oiseau bleu volait dans l’air, et me parla;
Et comment voulez-vous que j’échappe à cela?
Est-ce que je sais, moi? c’était au temps des roses;
Les arbres se disaient tout bas de douces choses;
Les ruisseaux l’ont voulu, les fleurs l’ont comploté.
J’aime! — O Rodin, Vouglans, Delancre! prévôté,
Bailliage, châtelet, grand’chambre, saint-office,
Demandez le secret de ce doux maléfice
Aux vents, au frais printemps chassant l’hiver hagard,
Au philtre qu’un regard boit dans l’autre regard,
Au sourire qui rêve, à la voix qui caresse,
A ce magicien, à cette charmeresse!
Demandez aux sentiers traîtres qui, dans les bois,
Vous font recommencer les mêmes pas cent fois,
A la branche de mai, cette Armide qui guette,
Et fait tourner sur nous en cercle sa baguette!
Demandez à la vie, à la nature, aux cieux,
Au vague enchantement des champs mystérieux!
Exorcisez le pré tentateur, l’antre, l’orme!
Faites, Cujas au poing, un bon procès en forme
Aux sources dont le coeur écoute les sanglots,
Au soupir éternel des forêts et des flots.
Dressez procès-verbal contre les pâquerettes
Qui laissent les bourdons froisser leurs collerettes;
Instrumentez; tonnez. Prouvez que deux amants
Livraient leur âme aux fleurs, aux bois, aux lacs dormants,

Et qu’ils ont fait un pacte avec la lune sombre,
Avec l’illusion, l’espérance aux yeux d’ombre,
Et l’extase chantant des hymnes inconnus,
Et qu’ils allaient tous deux, dès que brillait Vénus,
Sur l’herbe que la brise agite par bouffées,
Danser au bleu sabbat de ces nocturnes fées,
Éperdus, possédés d’un adorable ennui,
Elle n’étant plus elle et lui n’étant plus lui!
Quoi! nous sommes encore aux temps où la Tournelle,
Déclarant la magie impie et criminelle,
Lui dressait un bûcher par arrêt de la cour,
Et le dernier sorcier qu’on brûle, c’est l’Amour!

Juillet 1843.

XI

OU LES VIVANTS PENSIFS TRAVAILLENT TRISTEMENT

Où les vivants pensifs travaillent tristement,
Et qui donne à regret à cette race humaine
Un peu de pain pour tant de labeur et de peine;
Des hommes durs, éclos sur ces sillons ingrats;
Des cités d’où s’en vont, en se tordant les bras,
La charité, la paix, la foi, soeurs vénérables;
L’orgueil chez les puissants et chez les misérables;
La haine au coeur de tous; la mort, spectre sans yeux,
Frappant sur les meilleurs des coups mystérieux;
Sur tous les hauts sommets des brumes répandues;
Deux vierges, la justice et la pudeur, vendues;
Toutes les passions engendrant tous les maux;
Des forêts abritant des loups sous leurs rameaux;
Là le désert torride, ici les froids polaires;
Des océans émus de subites colères,
Pleins de mâts frissonnants qui sombrent dans la nuit;

Des continents couverts de fumée et de bruit,
Où, deux torches aux mains, rugit la guerre infâme,
Où toujours quelque part fume une ville en flamme,
Où se heurtent sanglants les peuples furieux; —

Et que tout cela fasse un astre dans les cieux!

Octobre 1840.

XII

EXPLICATION

La terre est au soleil ce que l’homme est à l’ange.
L’un est fait de splendeur; l’autre est pétri de fange.
Toute étoile est soleil; tout astre est paradis.
Autour des globes purs sont les mondes maudits;
Et dans l’ombre, où l’esprit voit mieux que la lunette,
Le soleil paradis traîne l’enfer planète.

L’ange habitant de l’astre est faillible; et, séduit,
Il peut devenir l’homme habitant de la nuit.
Voilà ce que le vent m’a dit sur la montagne.

Tout globe obscur gémit; toute terre est un bagne
Où la vie en pleurant, jusqu’au jour du réveil,
Vient écrouer l’esprit qui tombe du soleil.
Plus le globe est lointain, plus le bagne est terrible.
La mort est là, vannant les âmes dans un crible,
Qui juge, et, de la vie invisible témoin,
Rapporte l’ange à l’astre ou le jette plus loin.

O globes sans rayons et presque sans aurores!
Énorme Jupiter fouetté de météores,
Mars qui semble de loin la bouche d’un volcan,
O nocturne Uranus! ô Saturne au carcan!
Châtiments inconnus! rédemptions! mystères!

Deuils! ô lunes encor plus mortes que les terres!
Ils souffrent; ils sont noirs; et qui sait ce qu'ils font?
L'ombre entend par moments leur cri rauque et profond,
Comme on entend, le soir, la plainte des cigales.
Mondes spectres, tirant des chaînes inégales,
Ils vont, blêmes, pareils au rêve qui s'enfuit.
Rougis confusément d'un reflet dans la nuit,
Implorant un messie, espérant des apôtres,
Seuls, séparés, les uns en arrière des autres,
Tristes, échevelés par des souffles hagards,
Jetant à la clarté de farouches regards,
Ceux-ci, vagues, roulant dans les profondeurs mornes,
Ceux-là, presque engloutis dans l'infini sans bornes,
Ténébreux, frissonnants, froids, glacés, pluvieux,
Autour du paradis ils tournent envieux;
Et, du soleil, parmi les brumes et les ombres,
On voit passer au loin toutes ces faces sombres.

Novembre 1840.

XIII

LA CHOUETTE

Une chouette était sur la porte clouée;
Larve de l'ombre au toit des hommes échouée.
La nature, qui mêle une âme aux rameaux verts,
Qui remplit tout, et vit, à des degrés divers,
Dans la bête sauvage et la bête de somme,
Toujours en dialogue avec l'esprit de l'homme,
Lui donne à déchiffrer les animaux, qui sont
Ses signes, alphabet formidable et profond;
Et, sombre, ayant pour mots l'oiseau, le ver, l'insecte,
Parle deux langues: l'une, admirable et correcte,
L'autre, obscur bégaîment. L'éléphant aux pieds lourds,
Le lion, ce grand front de l'antre, l'aigle, l'ours,
Le taureau, le cheval, le tigre au bond superbe,

Sont le langage altier et splendide, le verbe;
Et la chauve-souris, le crapaud, le putois,
Le crabe, le hibou, le porc, sont le patois.
Or, j’étais là, pensif, bienveillant, presque tendre,
Épelant ce squelette, et tâchant de comprendre
Ce qu’entre les trois clous où son spectre pendait,
Aux vivants, aux souffrants, au boeuf triste, au baudet,
Disait, hélas! la pauvre et sinistre chouette,
Du côté noir de l’être informe silhouette.

Elle disait:
«Sur son front sombre
Comme la brume se répand!
Il remplit tout le fond de l’ombre.
Comme sa tête morte pend!
De ses yeux coulent ses pensées.
Ses pieds troués, ses mains percées

Bleuissent à l’air glacial.
Oh! comme il saigne dans le gouffre!
Lui qui faisait le bien, il souffre
Comme moi qui faisais le mal.

«Une lumière à son front tremble.»
Et la nuit dit au vent: «Soufflons
Sur cette flamme!» et, tous ensemble,
Les ténèbres, les aquilons,
La pluie et l’horreur, froides bouches,
Soufflent, hagards, hideux, farouches,
Et dans la tempête et le bruit
La clarté reparaît grandie... —
Tu peux éteindre un incendie,
Mais pas une auréole, ô nuit!

«Cette âme arriva sur la terre,
Qu’assombrit le soir incertain;
Elle entra dans l’obscur mystère

Que l’ombre appelle son destin;
Au mensonge, aux forfaits sans nombre,
A tout l’horrible essaim de l’ombre,
Elle livrait de saints combats;
Elle volait, et ses prunelles
Semblaient deux lueurs éternelles
Qui passaient dans la nuit d’en bas.

«Elle allait parmi les ténèbres,
Poursuivant, chassant, dévorant
Les vices, ces taupes funèbres,
Le crime, ce phalène errant;
Arrachant de leurs trous la haine,
L’orgueil, la fraude qui se traîne,
L’âpre envie, aspic du chemin,
Les vers de terre et les vipères,
Que la nuit cache dans les pierres
Et le mal dans le coeur humain!

«Elle cherchait ces infidèles,
L’Achab, le Nemrod, le Mathan,
Que, dans son temple et sous ses ailes,
Réchauffe le faux dieu Satan,
Les vendeurs cachés sous les porches,
Le brûleur allumant ses torches
Au même feu que l’encensoir;
Et, quand elle l’avait trouvée,
Toute la sinistre couvée
Se hérissait sous l’autel noir.

«Elle allait, délivrant les hommes
De leurs ennemis ténébreux;
Les hommes, noirs comme nous sommes,
Prirent l’esprit luttant pour eux;
Puis ils clouèrent, les infâmes,
L’âme qui défendait leurs âmes,
L’être dont l’oeil jetait du jour;

Et leur foule, dans sa démence,
Railla cette chouette immense
De la lumière et de l’amour!

«Race qui frappes et lapides,
Je te plains! hommes, je vous plains!
Hélas! je plains vos poings stupides,
D’affreux clous et de marteaux pleins!
Vous persécutez pêle-mêle
Le mal, le bien, la griffe et l’aile,
Chasseurs sans but, bourreaux sans yeux!
Vous clouez de vos mains mal sûres
Les hiboux au seuil des masures,
Et Christ sur la porte des cieux!»

Mai 1843.

XIV

A LA MÈRE DE L’ENFANT MORT

Oh! vous aurez trop dit au pauvre petit ange
Qu’il est d’autres anges là-haut,
Que rien ne souffre au ciel, que jamais rien n’y change,
Qu’il est doux d’y rentrer bientôt;

Que le ciel est un dôme aux merveilleux pilastres,
Une tente aux riches couleurs,
Un jardin bleu rempli de lys qui sont des astres,
Et d’étoiles qui sont des fleurs;

Que c’est un lieu joyeux plus qu’on ne saurait dire,
Où toujours, se laissant charmer,
On a les chérubins pour jouer et pour rire,
Et le bon Dieu pour nous aimer;

Qu’il est doux d’être un coeur qui brûle comme un cierge,

Et de vivre, en toute saison,
Près de l’enfant Jésus et de la sainte Vierge
Dans une si belle maison!

Et puis vous n’aurez pas assez dit, pauvre mère,
A ce fils si frêle et si doux,
Que vous étiez à lui dans cette vie amère,
Mais aussi qu’il était à vous;

Que, tant qu’on est petit, la mère sur nous veille,
Mais que plus tard on la défend;
Et qu’elle aura besoin, quand elle sera vieille,
D’un homme qui soit son enfant;

Vous n’aurez point assez dit à cette jeune âme
Que Dieu veut qu’on reste ici-bas,
La femme guidant l’homme et l’homme aidant la femme,
Pour les douleurs et les combats;

Si bien qu’un jour, ô deuil! irréparable perte!
Le doux être s’en est allé!... —
Hélas! vous avez donc laissé la cage ouverte,
Que votre oiseau s’est envolé!

Avril 1843.

XV

ÉPITAPHE

Il vivait, il jouait, riante créature.
Que te sert d’avoir pris cet enfant, ô nature?
N’as-tu pas les oiseaux peints de mille couleurs,
Les astres, les grands bois, le ciel bleu, l’onde amère?
Que te sert d’avoir pris cet enfant à sa mère,
Et de l’avoir caché sous des touffes de fleurs?

Pour cet enfant de plus tu n'es pas plus peuplée,
Tu n'es pas plus joyeuse, ô nature étoilée!
Et le coeur de la mère en proie à tant de soins,
Ce coeur où toute joie engendre une torture,
Cet abîme aussi grand que toi-même, ô nature,
Est vide et désolé pour cet enfant de moins!

Mai 1843.

XVI

LE MAITRE D'ÉTUDES

Ne le tourmentez pas, il souffre. Il est celui
Sur qui, jusqu'à ce jour, pas un rayon n'a lui;
Oh! ne confondez pas l'esclave avec le maître!
Et, quand vous le voyez dans vos rangs apparaître,
Humble et calme, et s'asseoir la tête dans ses mains,
Ayant peut-être en lui l'esprit des vieux Romains
Dont il vous dit les noms, dont il vous lit les livres,
Écoliers, frais enfants de joie et d'aurore ivres,
Ne le tourmentez pas! soyez doux, soyez bons.
Tous nous portons la vie et tous nous nous courbons
Mais, lui, c'est le flambeau qui la nuit se consomme;
L'ombre le tient captif, et ce pâle jeune homme,
Enfermé plus que vous, plus que vous enchaîné,
Votre frère, écoliers, et votre frère aîné,
Destin tronqué, matin noyé dans les ténèbres,
Ayant l'ennui sans fin devant ses yeux funèbres,
Indigent, chancelant, et cependant vainqueur,
Sans oiseaux dans son ciel, sans amours dans son coeur,
A l'heure du plein jour, attend que l'aube naisse.
Enfance, ayez pitié de la sombre jeunesse!

Apprenez à connaître, enfants qu'attend l'effort,
Les inégalités des âmes et du sort;
Respectez-le deux fois, dans le deuil qui le mine,

Puisque de deux sommets, enfant, il vous domine,
Puisqu’il est le plus pauvre et qu’il est le plus grand.
Songez que, triste, en butte au souci dévorant,
A travers ses douleurs, ce fils de la chaumière
Vous verse la raison, le savoir, la lumière,
Et qu’il vous donne l’or, et qu’il n’a pas de pain.
Oh! dans la longue salle aux tables de sapin,
Enfants, faites silence à la lueur des lampes!
Voyez, la morne angoisse a fait blêmir ses tempes:
Songez qu’il saigne, hélas! sous ses pauvres habits.
L’herbe que mord la dent cruelle des brebis,
C’est lui; vous riez, vous, et vous lui rongez l’âme.
Songez qu’il agonise, amer, sans air, sans flamme;
Que sa colère dit: Plaignez-moi; que ses pleurs
Ne peuvent pas couler devant vos yeux railleurs!
Aux heures du travail votre ennui le dévore,
Aux heures du plaisir vous le rongez encore;
Sa pensée, arrachée et froissée, est à vous,
Et, pareille au papier qu’on distribue à tous,
Page blanche d’abord, devient lentement noire.
Vous feuilletez son coeur, vous videz sa mémoire;
Vos mains, jetant chacune un bruit, un trouble, un mot,
Et raturant l’idée en lui dès qu’elle éclôt,
Toutes en même temps dans son esprit écrivent.
Si des rêves, parfois, jusqu’à son front arrivent,
Vous répandez votre encre à flots sur cet azur;
Vos plumes, tas d’oiseaux hideux au vol obscur,
De leurs mille becs noirs lui fouillent la cervelle.
Le nuage d’ennui passe et se renouvelle.
Dormir, il ne le peut; penser, il ne le peut.
Chaque enfant est un fil dont son coeur sent le noeud.
Oui, s’il veut songer, fuir, oublier, franchir l’ombre,
Laisser voler son âme aux chimères sans nombre,
Ces écoliers joueurs, vifs, légers, doux, aimants,
Pèsent sur lui, de l’aube au soir, à tous moments,
Et le font retomber des voûtes immortelles;
Et tous ces papillons sont le plomb de ses ailes.

Saint et grave martyr changeant de chevalet,
Crucifié par vous, bourreaux charmants, il est
Votre souffre-douleurs et votre souffre-joies;
Ses nuits sont vos hochets et ses jours sont vos proies,
Il porte sur son front votre essaim orageux;
Il a toujours vos bruits, vos rires et vos jeux,
Tourbillonnant sur lui comme une âpre tempête.
Hélas! il est le deuil dont vous êtes la fête;
Hélas! il est le cri dont vous êtes le chant.

Et, qui sait? sans rien dire, austère, et se cachant
De sa bonne action comme d’une mauvaise,
Ce pauvre être qui rêve accoudé sur sa chaise,
Mal nourri, mal vêtu, qu’un mendiant plaindrait,
Peut-être a des parents qu’il soutient en secret,
Et fait de ses labeurs, de sa faim, de ses veilles,
Des siècles dont sa voix vous traduit les merveilles,
Et de cette sueur qui coule sur sa chair,
Des rubans au printemps, un peu de feu l’hiver,
Pour quelque jeune soeur ou quelque vieille mère;
Changeant en goutte d’eau la sombre larme amère;
De sorte que, vivant à son ombre sans bruit,
Une colombe vient la boire dans la nuit!
Songez que pour cette oeuvre, enfants, il se dévoue,
Brûle ses yeux, meurtrit son coeur, tourne la roue,
Traîne la chaîne! hélas, pour lui, pour son destin,
Pour ses espoirs perdus à l’horizon lointain,
Pour ses voeux, pour son âme aux fers, pour sa prunelle,
Votre cage d’un jour est prison éternelle!
Songez que c’est sur lui que marchent tous vos pas!
Songez qu’il ne rit pas, songez qu’il ne vit pas!
L’avenir, cet avril plein de fleurs, vous convie;
Vous vous envolerez demain en pleine vie;
Vous sortirez de l’ombre, il restera. Pour lui,
Demain sera muet et sourd comme aujourd’hui;
Demain, même en juillet, sera toujours décembre,
Toujours l’étroit préau, toujours la pauvre chambre,

Toujours le ciel glacé, gris, blafard, pluvieux;
Et, quand vous serez grands, enfants, il sera vieux.
Et, si quelque heureux vent ne souffle et ne l'emporte,
Toujours il sera là, seul sous la sombre porte,
Gardant les beaux enfants sous ce mur redouté,
Ayant tout de leur peine et rien de leur gaîté.
Oh! que votre pensée aime, console, encense
Ce sublime forçat du bagne d'innocence!
Pesez ce qu'il prodigue avec ce qu'il reçoit.
Oh! qu'il se transfigure à vos yeux, et qu'il soit
Celui qui vous grandit, celui qui vous élève,
Qui donne à vos raisons les deux tranchants du glaive,
Art et science, afin qu'en marchant au tombeau,
Vous viviez pour le vrai, vous luttiez pour le beau!
Oh! qu'il vous soit sacré dans cette tâche auguste
De conduire à l'utile, au sage, au grand, au juste,
Vos âmes en tumulte à qui le ciel sourit!
Quand les coeurs sont troupeau, le berger est esprit.

Et, pendant qu'il est là, triste, et que dans la classe
Un chuchotement vague endort son âme lasse,
Oh! des poëtes purs entr'ouverts sur vos bancs,
Qu'il sorte, dans le bruit confus des soirs tombants,
Qu'il sorte de Platon, qu'il sorte d'Euripide,
Et de Virgile, cygne errant du vers limpide,
Et d'Eschyle, lion du drame monstrueux,
Et d'Horace et d'Homère à demi dans les cieux,
Qu'il sorte, pour sa tête aux saints travaux baissée,
Pour l'humble défricheur de la jeune pensée,
Qu'il sorte, pour ce front qui se penche et se fend
Sur ce sillon humain qu'on appelle l'enfant,
De tous ces livres pleins de hautes harmonies,
La bénédiction sereine des génies!

Juin 1842.

XVII

CHOSE VUE

UN JOUR DE PRINTEMPS

Entendant des sanglots, je poussai cette porte.

Les quatre enfants pleuraient et la mère était morte.
Tout dans ce lieu lugubre effrayait le regard.
Sur le grabat gisait le cadavre hagard;
C’était déjà la tombe et déjà le fantôme.
Pas de feu; le plafond laissait passer le chaume.

Les quatre enfants songeaient comme quatre vieillards.
On voyait, comme une aube à travers des brouillards,
Aux lèvres de la morte un sinistre sourire;
Et l’aîné, qui n’avait que six ans, semblait dire:
«Regardez donc cette ombre où le sort nous a mis!»

Un crime en cette chambre avait été commis.
Ce crime, le voici: — Sous le ciel qui rayonne,
Une femme est candide, intelligente, bonne;
Dieu, qui la suit d’en haut d’un regard attendri,
La fit pour être heureuse. Humble, elle a pour mari
Un ouvrier; tous deux, sans aigreur, sans envie,
Tirent d’un pas égal le licou de la vie.
Le choléra lui prend son mari; la voilà
Veuve avec la misère et quatre enfants qu’elle a.
Alors, elle se met au labeur comme un homme.
Elle est active, propre, attentive, économe;
Pas de drap à son lit, pas d’âtre à son foyer;
Elle ne se plaint pas, sert qui veut l’employer,
Ravaude de vieux bas, fait des nattes de paille,
Tricote, file, coud, passe les nuits, travaille
Pour nourrir ses enfants; elle est honnête enfin.

Oui, les buissons étaient remplis de rouges-gorges,
Les lourds marteaux sonnaient dans la lueur des forges,
Les masques abondaient dans les bals, et partout

Les baisers soulevaient la dentelle du loup;
Tout vivait; les marchands comptaient de grosses sommes:
On entendait rouler les chars, rire les hommes;
Les wagons ébranlaient les plaines; le steamer
Secouait son panache au-dessus de la mer;
Et, dans cette rumeur de joie et de lumière,
Cette femme étant seule au fond de sa chaumière,
La faim, goule effarée aux hurlements plaintifs,
Maigre et féroce, était entrée à pas furtifs,
Sans bruit, et l'avait prise à la gorge, et tuée.

La faim, c'est le regard de la prostituée,
C'est le bâton ferré du bandit, c'est la main
Du pâle enfant volant un pain sur le chemin,
C'est la fièvre du pauvre oublié, c'est le râle
Du grabat naufragé dans l'ombre sépulcrale.
O Dieu! la sève abonde, et, dans ses flancs troublés,
La terre est pleine d'herbe et de fruits et de blés,
Dès que l'arbre a fini, le sillon recommence;
Et, pendant que tout vit, ô Dieu, dans ta clémence,
Que la mouche connaît la feuille du sureau,
Pendant que l'étang donne à boire au passereau,
Pendant que le tombeau nourrit les vautours chauves,
Pendant que la nature, en ses profondeurs fauves,
Fait manger le chacal, l'once et le basilic.
L'homme expire! — Oh! la faim, c'est le crime public;
C'est l'immense assassin qui sort de nos ténèbres.

Dieu! pourquoi l'orphelin, dans ses langes funèbres,
Dit-il: «J'ai faim!» L'enfant, n'est-ce pas un oiseau?
Pourquoi le nid a-t-il ce qui manque au berceau?

Avril 1840.

XVIII

INTÉRIEUR

La querelle irritée, amère, à l'oeil ardent,
Vipère dont la haine empoisonne la dent,
Siffle et trouble le toit d'une pauvre demeure.
Les mots heurtent les mots. L'enfant s'effraie et pleure.
La femme et le mari laissent l'enfant crier.

— D'où viens-tu? — Qu'as-tu fait? — Oh! mauvais ouvrier!
Il vit dans la débauche et mourra sur la paille.
— Femme vaine et sans coeur qui jamais ne travaille!
— Tu sors du cabaret? — Quelque amant est venu?
— L'enfant pleure, l'enfant a faim, l'enfant est nu.
Pas de pain. — Elle a peur de salir ses mains blanches!
— Où cours-tu tous les jours? — Et toi, tous les dimanches?
— Va boire! — Va danser! — Il n'a ni feu ni lieu!
— Ta fille seulement ne sait pas prier Dieu!
— Et ta mère, bandit, c'est toi qui l'as tuée!
— Paix! — Silence, assassin! — Tais-toi, prostituée!

Un beau soleil couchant, empourprant le taudis,
Embrasait la fenêtre et le plafond, tandis
Que ce couple hideux, que rend deux fois infâme
La misère du coeur et la laideur de l'âme,
Étalait son ulcère et ses difformités
Sans honte, et sans pudeur montrait ses nudités.
Et leur vitre, où pendait un vieux haillon de toile,
Était, grâce au soleil, une éclatante étoile
Qui, dans ce même instant, vive et pure lueur,
Éblouissait au loin quelque passant rêveur!

Septembre 1841.

XIX

BARAQUES DE LA FOIRE

Lion! j'étais pensif, ô bête prisonnière,

Devant la majesté de ta grave crinière;
Du plafond de ta cage elle faisait un dais.
Nous songions tous les deux, et tu me regardais.
Ton regard était beau, lion. Nous autres hommes,
Le peu que nous faisons et le rien que nous sommes,
Emplit notre pensée, et dans nos regards vains
Brillent nos plans chétifs que nous croyons divins,
Nos voeux, nos passions que notre orgueil encense,
Et notre petitesse, ivre de sa puissance;
Et, bouffis d'ignorance ou gonflés de venin,
Notre prunelle éclate et dit: Je suis ce nain!
Nous avons dans nos yeux notre moi misérable.
Mais la bête qui vit sous le chêne et l'érable,
Qui paît le thym, ou fuit dans les halliers profonds,
Qui dans les champs, où nous, hommes, nous étouffons,
Respire, solitaire, avec l'astre et la rose,
L'être sauvage, obscur et tranquille qui cause
Avec la roche énorme et les petites fleurs,
Qui, parmi les vallons et les sources en pleurs,
Plonge son mufle roux aux herbes non foulées,
La brute qui rugit sous les nuits constellées,
Qui rêve et dont les pas fauves et familiers
De l'antre formidable ébranlent les piliers,
Et qui se sent à peine en ces profondeurs sombres,
A sous son fier sourcil les monts, les vastes ombres,
Les étoiles, les prés, le lac serein, les cieux,
Et le mystère obscur des bois silencieux,
Et porte en son oeil calme, où l'infini commence,
Le regard éternel de la nature immense.

Juin 1842.

XX

INSOMNIE

Quand une lueur pâle à l'orient se lève,

Quand la porte du jour, vague et pareille au rêve,
Commence à s'entr'ouvrir et blanchit l'horizon,
Comme l'espoir blanchit le seuil d'une prison,
Se réveiller, c'est bien, et travailler, c'est juste.
Quand le matin à Dieu chante son hymne auguste,
Le travail, saint tribut dû par l'homme mortel,
Est la strophe sacrée au pied du sombre autel;
Le soc murmure un psaume; et c'est un chant sublime
Qui, dès l'aurore, au fond des forêts, sur l'abîme,
Au bruit de la cognée, au choc des avirons,
Sort des durs matelots et des noirs bûcherons.

Mais, au milieu des nuits, s'éveiller! quel mystère!
Songer, sinistre et seul, quand tout dort sur la terre!
Quand pas un oeil vivant ne veille, pas un feu;
Quand les sept chevaux d'or du grand chariot bleu
Rentrent à l'écurie et descendent au pôle,
Se sentir dans son lit soudain toucher l'épaule
Par quelqu'un d'inconnu qui dit: Allons! c'est moi!
Travaillons! — La chair gronde et demande pourquoi.
— Je dors. Je suis très-las de la course dernière;
Ma paupière est encor du somme prisonnière;
Maître mystérieux, grâce! que me veux-tu?
Certes, il faut que tu sois un démon bien têtu
De venir m'éveiller toujours quand tout repose!
Aie un peu de raison. Il est encor nuit close;
Regarde, j'ouvre l'oeil puisque cela te plaît;
Pas la moindre lueur aux fentes du volet;
Va-t'en! je dors, j'ai chaud, je rêve à ma maîtresse.
Elle faisait flotter sur moi sa longue tresse,
D'où pleuvaient sur mon front des astres et des fleurs.
Va-t'en, tu reviendras demain, au jour, ailleurs.
Je te tourne le dos, je ne veux pas! décampe!
Ne pose pas ton doigt de braise sur ma tempe.
La biche illusion me mangeait dans le creux
De la main; tu l'as fait enfuir. J'étais heureux,
Je ronflais comme un boeuf; laisse-moi. C'est stupide.

Ciel! déjà ma pensée, inquiète et rapide,
Fil sans bout, se dévide et tourne à ton fuseau.
Tu m’apportes un vers, étrange et fauve oiseau
Que tu viens de saisir dans les pâles nuées.
Je n’en veux pas. Le vent, de ses tristes huées,
Emplit l’antre des cieux; les souffles, noirs dragons,
Passent en secouant ma porte sur ses gonds.
— Paix là! va-t’en, bourreau! quant au vers, je le lâche.
Je veux toute la nuit dormir comme un vieux lâche;
Voyons, ménage un peu ton pauvre compagnon.
Je suis las, je suis mort, laisse-moi dormir!

— Non!
Est-ce que je dors, moi? dit l’idée implacable.
Penseur, subis ta loi; forçat, tire ton câble.
Quoi! cette bête a goût au vil foin du sommeil!
L’orient est pour moi toujours clair et vermeil.
Que m’importe le corps! qu’il marche, souffre et meure!
Horrible esclave, allons, travaille! c’est mon heure.

Et l’ange étreint Jacob, et l’âme tient le corps;
Nul moyen de lutter; et tout revient alors,
Le drame commencé dont l’ébauche frissonne,
Ruy-Blas, Marion, Job, Sylva, son cor qui sonne,
Ou le roman pleurant avec des yeux humains,
Ou l’ode qui s’enfonce en deux profonds chemins,
Dans l’azur près d’Horace, et dans l’ombre avec Dante;
Il faut dans ces labeurs rentrer la tête ardente;
Dans ces grands horizons subitement rouverts,
Il faut de strophe en strophe, il faut de vers en vers,
S’en aller devant soi, pensif, ivre de l’ombre;
Il faut, rêveur nocturne en proie à l’esprit sombre,
Gravir le dur sentier de l’inspiration;
Poursuivre la lointaine et blanche vision,
Traverser, effaré, les clairières désertes,
Le champ plein de tombeaux, les eaux, les herbes vertes,
Et franchir la forêt, le torrent, le hallier,

Noir cheval galopant sous le noir cavalier.

1843, nuit.

XXI

ÉCRIT SUR LA PLINTHE D'UN BAS-RELIEF ANTIQUE

A MADEMOISELLE LOUISE B.

La musique est dans tout. Un hymne sort du monde.
Rumeur de la galère aux flancs lavés par l'onde,
Bruits des villes, pitié de la soeur pour la soeur,
Passion des amants jeunes et beaux, douceur
Des vieux époux usés ensemble par la vie,
Fanfare de la plaine émaillée et ravie,
Mots échangés le soir sur les seuils fraternels,
Sombre tressaillement des chênes éternels,
Vous êtes l'harmonie et la musique même!
Vous êtes les soupirs qui font le chant suprême!
Pour notre âme, les jours, la vie et les saisons,
Les songes de nos coeurs, les plis des horizons,
L'aube et ses pleurs, le soir et ses grands incendies,
Flottent dans un réseau de vagues mélodies;
Une voix dans les champs nous parle, une autre voix
Dit à l'homme autre chose et chante dans les bois.
Par moment, un troupeau bêle, une cloche tinte.
Quand par l'ombre, la nuit, la colline est atteinte,
De toutes parts on voit danser et resplendir,
Dans le ciel étoilé du zénith au nadir,
Dans la voix des oiseaux, dans le cri des cigales,
Le groupe éblouissant des notes inégales.
Toujours avec notre âme un doux bruit s'accoupla;
La nature nous dit: Chante! et c'est pour cela
Qu'un statuaire ancien sculpta sur cette pierre
Un pâtre sur sa flûte abaissant sa paupière.

Juin 1833.

XXII

LA CLARTE DU DEHORS NE DISTRAIT PAS MON AME.

La clarté du dehors ne distrait pas mon âme.
La plaine chante et rit comme une jeune femme;
Le nid palpite dans les houx;
Partout la gaîté luit dans les bouches ouvertes;
Mai, couché dans la mousse au fond des grottes vertes,
Fait aux amoureux les yeux doux.

Dans les champs de luzerne et dans les champs de fèves,
Les vagues papillons errent pareils aux rêves;
Le blé vert sort des sillons bruns;
Et les abeilles d’or courent à la pervenche,
Au thym, au liseron, qui tend son urne blanche
A ces buveuses de parfums.

La nue étale au ciel ses pourpres et ses cuivres;
Les arbres, tout gonflés de printemps, semblent ivres;
Les branches, dans leurs doux ébats,
Se jettent les oiseaux du bout de leurs raquettes;
Le bourdon galonné fait aux roses coquettes
Des propositions tout bas.

Moi, je laisse voler les senteurs et les baumes,
Je laisse chuchoter les fleurs, ces doux fantômes,
Et l’aube dire: Vous vivrez!
Je regarde en moi-même, et, seul, oubliant l’heure,
L’oeil plein des visions de l’ombre intérieure,
Je songe aux morts, ces délivrés!

Encore un peu de temps, encore, ô mer superbe,
Quelques reflux; j'aurai ma tombe aussi dans l'herbe,
Blanche au milieu du frais gazon,
A l'ombre de quelque arbre où le lierre s'attache;
On y lira: — Passant, cette pierre te cache
La ruine d'une prison.

Ingouville, mai 1843.

XXIII

LE REVENANT

Mères en deuil, vos cris là-haut sont entendus.
Dieu, qui tient dans sa main tous les oiseaux perdus,
Parfois au même nid rend la même colombe.
O mères! le berceau communique à la tombe.
L'éternité contient plus d'un divin secret.

La mère dont je vais vous parler demeurait
A Blois; je l'ai connue en un temps plus prospère;
Et sa maison touchait à celle de mon père.
Elle avait tous les biens que Dieu donne ou permet.
On l'avait mariée à l'homme qu'elle aimait.
Elle eut un fils; ce fut une ineffable joie.

Ce premier-né couchait dans un berceau de soie;
Sa mère l'allaitait; il faisait un doux bruit
A côté du chevet nuptial; et, la nuit,
La mère ouvrait son âme aux chimères sans nombre,
Pauvre mère, et ses yeux resplendissaient dans l'ombre,
Quand, sans souffle, sans voix, renonçant au sommeil,
Penchée, elle écoutait dormir l'enfant vermeil.
Dès l'aube, elle chantait, ravie et toute fière.

Elle se renversait sur sa chaise en arrière,
Son fichu laissant voir son sein gonflé de lait,

Et souriait au faible enfant, et l’appelait
Ange, trésor, amour; et mille folles choses.
Oh! comme elle baisait ces beaux petits pieds roses!
Comme elle leur parlait! l’enfant, charmant et nu,
Riait, et, par ses mains sous les bras soutenu,
Joyeux, de ses genoux montait jusqu’à sa bouche.

Tremblant comme le daim qu’une feuille effarouche,
Il grandit. Pour l’enfant, grandir, c’est chanceler.
Il se mit à marcher, il se mit à parler,
Il eut trois ans; doux âge, où déjà la parole,
Comme le jeune oiseau, bat de l’aile et s’envole.
Et la mère disait: «Mon fils!» et reprenait:
«Voyez comme il est grand! il apprend; il connaît
Ses lettres. C’est un diable! Il veut que je l’habille
En homme; il ne veut plus de ses robes de fille;
C’est déjà très-méchant, ces petits hommes-là!
C’est égal, il lit bien; il ira loin; il a
De l’esprit; je lui fais épeler l’Évangile.» —
Et ses yeux adoraient cette tête fragile,
Et, femme heureuse, et mère au regard triomphant,
Elle sentait son coeur battre dans son enfant.

Un jour, — nous avons tous de ces dates funèbres! —
Le croup, monstre hideux, épervier des ténèbres,
Sur la blanche maison brusquement s’abattit,
Horrible, et, se ruant sur le pauvre petit,
Le saisit à la gorge; ô noire maladie!
De l’air par qui l’on vit sinistre perfidie!
Qui n’a vu se débattre, hélas! ces doux enfants
Qu’étreint le croup féroce en ses doigts étouffants!
Ils luttent; l’ombre emplit lentement leurs yeux d’ange.
Et de leur bouche froide il sort un râle étrange,
Et si mystérieux, qu’il semble qu’on entend,
Dans leur poitrine, où meurt le souffle haletant,
L’affreux coq du tombeau chanter son aube obscure.
Tel qu’un fruit qui du givre a senti la piqûre,

L’enfant mourut. La mort entra comme un voleur
Et le prit. — Une mère, un père, la douleur,
Le noir cercueil, le front qui se heurte aux murailles,
Les lugubres sanglots qui sortent des entrailles,
Oh! la parole expire où commence le cri;
Silence aux mots humains!
La mère au coeur meurtri,
Pendant qu’à ses côtés pleurait le père sombre,
Resta trois mois sinistre, immobile dans l’ombre,
L’oeil fixe, murmurant on ne sait quoi d’obscur,
Et regardant toujours le même angle du mur.
Elle ne mangeait pas; sa vie était sa fièvre;
Elle ne répondait à personne; sa lèvre
Tremblait; on l’entendait, avec un morne effroi,
Qui disait à voix basse à quelqu’un: — Rends-le-moi!
Et le médecin dit au père: — Il faut distraire
Ce coeur triste, et donner à l’enfant mort un frère. —
Le temps passa; les jours, les semaines, les mois.

Elle se sentit mère une seconde fois.

Devant le berceau froid de son ange éphémère,
Se rappelant l’accent dont il disait: — Ma mère, —
Elle songeait, muette, assise sur son lit.
Le jour où, tout à coup, dans son flanc tressaillit
L’être inconnu promis à notre aube mortelle,
Elle pâlit. — Quel est cet étranger? dit-elle.
Puis elle cria, sombre et tombant à genoux:
— Non, non, je ne veux pas! non! tu serais jaloux!
O mon doux endormi, toi que la terre glace,
Tu dirais: «On m’oublie; un autre a pris ma place;
Ma mère l’aime, et rit; elle le trouve beau,
Elle l’embrasse, et, moi, je suis dans mon tombeau!»
Non, non! —

Ainsi pleurait cette douleur profonde.

Le jour vint; elle mit un autre enfant au monde,
Et le père joyeux cria: — C’est un garçon.
Mais le père était seul joyeux dans la maison;
La mère restait morne, et la pâle accouchée,
Sur l’ancien souvenir tout entière penchée,
Rêvait; on lui porta l’enfant sur un coussin;
Elle se laissa faire et lui donna le sein;
Et tout à coup, pendant que, farouche, accablée,
Pensant au fils nouveau moins qu’à l’âme envolée,
Hélas! et songeant moins aux langes qu’au linceul,
Elle disait: — Cet ange en son sépulcre est seul!

— O doux miracle! ô mère au bonheur revenue! —
Elle entendit, avec une voix bien connue,
Le nouveau-né parler dans l’ombre entre ses bras,
Et tout bas murmurer: — C’est moi. Ne le dis pas.

Août 1843.

XXIV

AUX ARBRES

Arbres de la forêt, vous connaissez mon âme!
Au gré des envieux la foule loue et blâme;
Vous me connaissez, vous! — vous m’avez vu souvent,
Seul dans vos profondeurs, regardant et rêvant.
Vous le savez, la pierre où court un scarabée,
Une humble goutte d’eau de fleur en fleur tombée.
Un nuage, un oiseau, m’occupent tout un jour.
La contemplation m’emplit le coeur d’amour.
Vous m’avez vu cent fois, dans la vallée obscure,
Avec ces mots que dit l’esprit à la nature,
Questionner tout bas vos rameaux palpitants,
Et du même regard poursuivre en même temps,
Pensif, le front baissé, l’oeil dans l’herbe profonde,
L’étude d’un atome et l’étude du monde.

Attentif à vos bruits qui parlent tous un peu,
Arbres, vous m'avez vu fuir l'homme et chercher Dieu!
Feuilles qui tressaillez à la pointe des branches,
Nids dont le vent au loin sème les plumes blanches,
Clairières, vallons verts, déserts sombres et doux,
Vous savez que je suis calme et pur comme vous.
Comme au ciel vos parfums, mon culte à Dieu s'élance,
Et je suis plein d'oubli comme vous de silence!
La haine sur mon nom répand en vain son fiel;
Toujours, — je vous atteste, ô bois aimés du ciel! —
J'ai chassé loin de moi toute pensée amère,
Et mon coeur est encor tel que le fit ma mère!

Arbres de ces grands bois qui frissonnez toujours,
Je vous aime, et vous, lierre au seuil des antres sourds,
Ravins où l'on entend filtrer les sources vives,
Buissons que les oiseaux pillent, joyeux convives!
Quand je suis parmi vous, arbres de ces grands bois,
Dans tout ce qui m'entoure et me cache à la fois,
Dans votre solitude où je rentre en moi-même,
Je sens quelqu'un de grand qui m'écoute et qui m'aime!

Aussi, taillis sacrés où Dieu même apparaît,
Arbres religieux, chênes, mousses, forêt,
Forêt! c'est dans votre ombre et dans votre mystère,
C'est sous votre branchage auguste et solitaire,
Que je veux abriter mon sépulcre ignoré,
Et que je veux dormir quand je m'endormirai.

Juin 1843.

XXV

L'ENFANT, VOYANT L'AÏEULE A FILER OCCUPEE,

L’enfant, voyant l’aïeule à filer occupée,
Veut faire une quenouille à sa grande poupée.
L’aïeule s’assoupit un peu; c’est le moment.
L’enfant vient par derrière et tire doucement
Un brin de la quenouille où le fuseau tournoie,
Puis s’enfuit triomphante, emportant avec joie
La belle laine d’or que le safran jaunit,
Autant qu’en pourrait prendre un oiseau pour son nid.

Cauteretz, août 1843.

XXVI

JOIES DU SOIR

Le soleil, dans les monts où sa clarté s’étale,
Ajuste à son arc d’or sa flèche horizontale;
Les hauts taillis sont pleins de biches et de faons;
Là rit dans les rochers, veinés comme des marbres,
Une chaumière heureuse; en haut, un bouquet d’arbres.
Au-dessous, un bouquet d’enfants.

C’est l’instant de songer aux choses redoutables.
On entend les buveurs danser autour des tables;
Tandis que, gais, joyeux, heurtant les escabeaux,
Ils mêlent aux refrains leurs amours peu farouches,
Les lettres des chansons qui sortent de leurs bouches
Vont écrire autour d’eux leurs noms sur leurs tombeaux.

Mourir! demandons-nous, à toute heure, en nous-même:
— Comment passerons-nous le passage suprême? —
Finir avec grandeur est un illustre effort.
Le moment est lugubre et l’âme est accablée;
Quel pas que la sortie! — Oh! l’affreuse vallée
Que l’embuscade de la mort!

Quel frisson dans les os de l’agonisant blême!

Autour de lui tout marche et vit, tout rit, tout aime;
La fleur luit, l’oiseau chante en son palais d’été,
Tandis que le mourant en qui décroît la flamme,
Frémit sous ce grand ciel, précipice de l’âme,
Abîme effrayant d’ombre et de tranquillité!

Souvent, me rappelant le front étrange et pâle
De tous ceux que j’ai vus à cette heure fatale,
Êtres qui ne sont plus, frères, amis, parents,
Aux instants où l’esprit à rêver se hasarde,
Souvent je me suis dit: Qu’est-ce donc qu’il regarde
Cet oeil effaré des mourants?

Que voit-il?... — O terreur! de ténébreuses routes,
Un chaos composé de spectres et de doutes,
La terre vision, le ver réalité,
Un jour oblique et noir qui, troublant l’âme errante,
Mêle au dernier rayon de la vie expirante
Ta première lueur, sinistre éternité!

On croit sentir dans l’ombre une horrible piqûre.
Tout ce qu’on fit s’en va comme une fête obscure,
Et tout ce qui riait devient peine ou remord.
Quel moment, même, hélas! pour l’âme la plus haute,
Quand le vrai tout à coup paraît, quand la vie ôte
Son masque, et dit: «Je suis la mort!»

Ah! si tu fais trembler même un coeur sans reproche,
Sépulcre! le méchant avec horreur t’approche.
Ton seuil profond lui semble une rougeur de feu;
Sur ton vide pour lui quand ta pierre se lève,
Il s’y penche; il y voit, ainsi que dans un rêve,
La face vague et sombre et l’oeil fixe de Dieu.

Biarritz, juillet 1843.

XXVII

J’AIME L’ARAIGNEE ET J’AIME L’ORTIE

J’aime l’araignée et j’aime l’ortie,
Parce qu’on les hait;
Et que rien n’exauce et que tout châtie
Leur morne souhait;

Parce qu’elles sont maudites, chétives,
Noirs êtres rampants;
Parce qu’elles sont les tristes captives
De leur guet-apens;

Parce qu’elles sont prises dans leur oeuvre;
O sort! fatals noeuds!
Parce que l’ortie est une couleuvre,
L’araignée un gueux;

Parce qu’elles ont l’ombre des abîmes,
Parce qu’on les fuit,
Parce qu’elles sont toutes deux victimes
De la sombre nuit.

Passants, faites grâce à la plante obscure,
Au pauvre animal.
Plaignez la laideur, plaignez la piqûre,
Oh! plaignez le mal!

Il n’est rien qui n’ait sa mélancolie;
Tout veut un baiser.
Dans leur fauve horreur, pour peu qu’on oublie
De les écraser,

Pour peu qu’on leur jette un oeil moins superbe,
Tout bas, loin du jour,
La vilaine bête et la mauvaise herbe
Murmurent: Amour!

Juillet 1842.

XXVIII

LE POËTE

Shakspeare songe; loin du Versailles éclatant,
Des buis taillés, des ifs peignés, où l'on entend
Gémir la tragédie éplorée et prolixe,
Il contemple la foule avec son regard fixe,
Et toute la forêt frissonne devant lui.
Pâle, il marche, au dedans de lui-même ébloui;
Il va, farouche, fauve, et, comme une crinière,
Secouant sur sa tête un haillon de lumière.
Son crâne transparent est plein d'âmes, de corps,
De rêves, dont on voit la lueur du dehors;
Le monde tout entier passe à travers son crible;
Il tient toute la vie en son poignet terrible;
Il fait sortir de l'homme un sanglot surhumain,
Dans ce génie étrange où l'on perd son chemin,
Comme dans une mer, notre esprit parfois sombre;
Nous sentons, frémissants, dans son théâtre sombre,
Passer sur nous le vent de sa bouche soufflant,
Et ses doigts nous ouvrir et nous fouiller le flanc.
Jamais il ne recule; il est géant, il dompte
Richard-Trois, léopard, Caliban, mastodonte;
L'idéal est le vin que verse ce Bacchus.
Les sujets monstrueux qu'il a pris et vaincus
Râlent autour de lui, splendides ou difformes;
Il étreint Lear, Brutus, Hamlet, êtres énormes,
Capulet, Montaigu, César, et, tour à tour,
Les stryges dans le bois, le spectre sur la tour;
Et, même après Eschyle, effarant Melpomène,
Sinistre, ayant aux mains des lambeaux d'âme humaine,
De la chair d'Othello, des restes de Macbeth,
Dans son oeuvre, du drame effrayant alphabet,
Il se repose; ainsi le noir lion des jongles

S’endort dans l’antre immense avec du sang aux ongles.

Paris, avril 1835.

XXIX

LA NATURE

La terre est de granit, les ruisseaux sont de marbre;
C’est l’hiver; nous avons bien froid. Veux-tu, bon arbre,
Être dans mon foyer la bûche de Noël?
— Bois, je viens de la terre, et, feu, je monte au ciel.
Frappe, bon bûcheron. Père, aïeul, homme, femme,
Chauffez au feu vos mains, chauffez à Dieu votre âme.
Aimez, vivez. — Veux-tu, bon arbre, être timon
De charrue? — Oui, je veux creuser le noir limon,
Et tirer l’épi d’or de la terre profonde.
Quand le soc a passé, la plaine devient blonde,
La paix aux doux yeux sort du sillon entr’ouvert,
Et l’aube en pleurs sourit. — Veux-tu, bel arbre vert,
Arbre du hallier sombre où le chevreuil s’échappe,
De la maison de l’homme être le pilier? — Frappe.
Je puis porter les toits, ayant porté les nids.
Ta demeure est sacrée, homme, et je la bénis;
Là, dans l’ombre et l’amour, pensif, tu te recueilles;
Et le bruit des enfants ressemble au bruit des feuilles.
— Veux-tu, dis-moi, bon arbre, être mât de vaisseau?
— Frappe, bon charpentier. Je veux bien être oiseau.
Le navire est pour moi, dans l’immense mystère,
Ce qu’est pour vous la tombe; il m’arrache à la terre,
Et, frissonnant, m’emporte à travers l’infini.
J’irai voir ces grands cieux d’où l’hiver est banni,
Et dont plus d’un essaim me parle en son passage.
Pas plus que le tombeau n’épouvante le sage,
Le profond Océan, d’obscurité vêtu,
Ne m’épouvante point: oui, frappe. — Arbre, veux-tu
Être gibet? — Silence, homme! va-t’en, cognée!

J’appartiens à la vie, à la vie indignée!
Va-t’en, bourreau! va-t’en, juge! fuyez, démons!
Je suis l’arbre des bois, je suis l’arbre des monts;
Je porte les fruits mûrs, j’abrite les pervenches;
Laissez-moi ma racine et laissez-moi mes branches!
Arrière! homme, tuez, ouvriers du trépas,
Soyez sanglants, mauvais, durs; mais ne venez pas,
Ne venez pas, traînant des cordes et des chaînes,
Vous chercher un complice au milieu des grands chênes!
Ne faites pas servir à vos crimes, vivants,
L’arbre mystérieux à qui parlent les vents!
Vos lois portent la nuit sur leurs ailes funèbres.
Je suis fils du soleil, soyez fils des ténèbres.
Allez-vous-en! laissez l’arbre dans ses déserts.
A vos plaisirs, aux jeux, aux festins, aux concerts,
Accouplez l’échafaud et le supplice; faites.
Soit. Vivez et tuez. Tuez, entre deux fêtes,
Le malheureux, chargé de fautes et de maux;
Moi, je ne mêle pas de spectre à mes rameaux!

Janvier 1843.

XXX

MAGNITUDO PARVI

I

Le jour mourait; j’étais près des mers, sur la grève.
Je tenais par la main ma fille, enfant qui rêve,
Jeune esprit qui se tait!
La terre, s’inclinant comme un vaisseau qui sombre,
En tournant dans l’espace allait plongeant dans l’ombre;
La pâle nuit montait.

La pâle nuit levait son front dans les nuées;
Les choses s’effaçaient, blêmes, diminuées,
Sans forme et sans couleur;

Quand il monte de l’ombre, il tombe de la cendre;
On sentait à la fois la tristesse descendre
Et monter la douleur.

Ceux dont les yeux pensifs contemplent la nature
Voyaient l’urne d’en haut, vague rondeur obscure,
Se pencher dans les cieux,
Et verser sur les monts, sur les campagnes blondes,
Et sur les flots confus pleins de rumeurs profondes,
Le soir silencieux!

Les nuages rampaient le long des promontoires;
Mon âme, où se mêlaient ces ombres et ces gloires,
Sentait confusément
De tout cet océan, de toute cette terre,
Sortir sous l’oeil de Dieu je ne sais quoi d’austère,
D’auguste et de charmant!

J’avais à mes côtés ma fille bien-aimée.
La nuit se répandait ainsi qu’une fumée.
Rêveur, ô Jéhovah,
Je regardais en moi, les paupières baissées,
Cette ombre qui se fait aussi dans nos pensées
Quant ton soleil s’en va!

Soudain l’enfant bénie, ange au regard de femme,
Dont je tenais la main et qui tenait mon âme,
Me parla, douce voix!
Et, me montrant l’eau sombre et la rive âpre et brune,
Et deux points lumineux qui tremblaient sur la dune:
— Père, dit-elle, vois!

Vois donc, là-bas, où l’ombre aux flancs des coteaux rampe,
Ces feux jumeaux briller comme une double lampe
Qui remuerait au vent!
Quels sont ces deux foyers qu’au loin la brume voile?
— L’un est un feu de pâtre et l’autre est une étoile;

Deux mondes, mon enfant!

II

Deux mondes! — l’un est dans l’espace,
Dans les ténèbres de l’azur,
Dans l’étendue où tout s’efface.
Radieux gouffre! abîme obscur!
Enfant, comme deux hirondelles,
Oh, si tous deux, âmes fidèles,
Nous pouvions fuir à tire-d’ailes.
Et plonger dans cette épaisseur
D’où la création découle,
Où flotte, vit, meurt, brille et roule
L’astre imperceptible à la foule,
Incommensurable au penseur;

Si nous pouvions franchir ces solitudes mornes;
Si nous pouvions passer les bleus septentrions,
Si nous pouvions atteindre au fond des cieux sans bornes
Jusqu’à ce qu’à la fin, éperdus, nous voyions,
Comme un navire en mer croît, monte et semble éclore,
Cette petite étoile, atome de phosphore,
Devenir par degrés un monstre de rayons;

S’il nous était donné de faire
Ce voyage démesuré,
Et de voler, de sphère en sphère,
A ce grand soleil ignoré;
Si, par un archange qui l’aime,
L’homme aveugle, frémissant, blême,
Dans les profondeurs du problème,
Vivant, pouvait être introduit;
Si nous pouvions fuir notre centre,
Et, forçant l’ombre où Dieu seul entre,
Aller voir de près dans leur antre
Ces énormités de la nuit;

Ce qui t’apparaîtrait te ferait trembler, ange!
Rien, pas de vision, pas de songe insensé,
Qui ne fût dépassé par ce spectacle étrange,
Monde informe, et d’un tel mystère composé,
Que son rayon fondrait nos chairs, cire vivante,
Et qu’il ne resterait de nous dans l’épouvante
Qu’un regard ébloui sous un front hérissé!

O contemplation splendide!
Oh! de pôles, d’axes, de feux,
De la matière et du fluide,
Balancement prodigieux!
D’aimant qui lutte, d’air qui vibre,
De force esclave et d’éther libre,
Vaste et magnifique équilibre!
Monde rêve! idéal réel!
Lueurs! tonnerres! jets de soufre!
Mystère qui chante et qui souffre!
Formule nouvelle du gouffre!
Mot nouveau du noir livre ciel!

Tu verrais! — un soleil, autour de lui des mondes,
Centres eux-mêmes, ayant des lunes autour d’eux;
Là, des fourmillements de sphères vagabondes;
Là, des globes jumeaux qui tournent deux à deux;
Au milieu, cette étoile, effrayante, agrandie;
D’un coin de l’infini formidable incendie,
Rayonnement sublime ou flamboiement hideux!

Regardons, puisque nous y sommes!
Figure-toi! figure-toi!
Plus rien des choses que tu nommes!
Un autre monde! une autre loi!
La terre a fui dans l’étendue;
Derrière nous elle est perdue!
Jour nouveau! nuit inattendue!

D’autres groupes d’astres au ciel!
Une nature qu’on ignore,
Qui, s’ils voyaient sa fauve aurore,
Ferait accourir Pythagore
Et reculer Ézéchiel!

Ce qu’on prend pour un mont est une hydre; ces arbres
Sont des bêtes; ces rocs hurlent avec fureur;
Le feu chante; le sang coule aux veines des marbres.
Ce monde est-il le vrai? le nôtre est-il l’erreur?
O possibles qui sont pour nous les impossibles!
Réverbérations des chimères visibles!
Le baiser de la vie ici nous fait horreur.

Et, si nous pouvions voir les hommes
Les ébauches, les embryons,
Qui sont là ce qu’ailleurs nous sommes,
Comme, eux et nous, nous frémirions
Rencontre inexprimable et sombre!
Nous nous regarderions dans l’ombre
De monstre à monstre, fils du nombre
Et du temps qui s’évanouit;
Et, si nos langages funèbres
Pouvaient échanger leurs algèbres,
Nous dirions: «Qu’êtes-vous, ténèbres?»
Ils diraient: «D’où venez-vous, nuit?»
•
Sont-ils aussi des coeurs, des cerveaux, des entrailles?
Cherchent-ils comme nous le mot jamais trouvé?
Ont-ils des Spinosa qui frappent aux murailles,
Des Lucrèce niant tout ce qu’on a rêvé,
Qui, du noir infini feuilletant les registres,
Ont écrit: Rien, au bas de ses pages sinistres;
Et, penchés sur l’abîme, ont dit: «L’oeil est crevé!»

Tous ces êtres, comme nous-même,
S’en vont en pâles tourbillons;

La création mêle et sème
Leur cendre à de nouveaux sillons;
Un vient, un autre le remplace,
Et passe sans laisser de trace;
Le souffle les crée et les chasse;
Le gouffre en proie aux quatre vents,
Comme la mer aux vastes lames,
Mêle éternellement ses flammes
A ce sombre écroulement d’âmes,
De fantômes et de vivants!

L’abîme semble fou sous l’ouragan de l’être.
Quelle tempête autour de l’astre radieux!
Tout ne doit que surgir, flotter et disparaître,
Jusqu’à ce que la nuit ferme à son tour ses yeux;
Car, un jour, il faudra que l’étoile aussi tombe,
L’étoile voit neiger les âmes dans la tombe,
L’âme verra neiger les astres dans les cieux!
•
Par instant, dans le vague espace,
Regarde, enfant! tu vas la voir!
Une brusque planète passe;
C’est d’abord au loin un point noir;
Plus prompte que la trombe folle,
Elle vient, court, approche, vole;
A peine a lui son auréole,
Que déjà, remplissant le ciel,
Sa rondeur farouche commence
A cacher le gouffre en démence,
Et semble ton couvercle immense,
O puits du vertige éternel!

C’est elle! éclair! voilà sa livide surface
Avec tous les frissons de ses océans verts!
Elle apparaît, s’en va, décroît, pâlit, s’efface,
Et rentre, atome obscur, aux cieux d’ombre couverts,
Et tout s’évanouit, vaste aspect, bruit sublime... —

Quel est ce projectile inouï de l’abîme?
O boulets monstrueux qui sont des univers!

Dans un éloignement nocturne,
Roule avec un râle effrayant
Quelque épouvantable Saturne
Tournant son anneau flamboyant;
La braise en pleut comme d’un crible;
Jean de Patmos, l’esprit terrible,
Vit en songe cet astre horrible
Et tomba presque évanoui:
Car, rêvant sa noire épopée,
Il crut, d’éclairs enveloppée,
Voir fuir une roue, échappée
Au sombre char d’Adonaï!

Et, par instants encor, — tout va-t-il se dissoudre? —
Parmi ces mondes, fauve, accourant à grand bruit,
Une comète aux crins de flamme, aux yeux de foudre,
Surgit, et les regarde, et, blême, approche et luit;
Puis s’évade en hurlant, pâle et surnaturelle,
Traînant sa chevelure éparse derrière elle,
Comme une Canidie affreuse qui s’enfuit.

Quelques-uns de ces globes meurent;
Dans le semoun et le mistral
Leurs mers sanglotent, leurs flots pleurent;
Leur flanc crache un brasier central.
Sphères par la neige engourdies,
Ils ont d’étranges maladies,
Pestes, déluges, incendies,
Tremblements profonds et fréquents;
Leur propre abîme les consume;
Leur haleine flamboie et fume;
On entend de loin dans leur brume
La toux lugubre des volcans.
.

Ils sont! ils vont! ceux-ci brillants, ceux-là difformes,
Tous portant des vivants et des créations!
Ils jettent dans l’azur des cônes d’ombre énormes,
Ténèbres qui des cieux traversent les rayons,
Où le regard, ainsi que des flambeaux farouches
L’un après l’autre éteints par d’invisibles bouches,
Voit plonger tour à tour les constellations!

Quel Zorobabel formidable,
Quel Dédale vertigineux,
Cieux! a bâti dans l’insondable
Tout ce noir chaos lumineux?
Soleils, astres aux larges queues,
Gouffres! ô millions de lieues!
Sombres architectures bleues!
Quel bras a fait, créé, produit
Ces tours d’or que nuls yeux ne comptent,
Ces firmaments qui se confrontent,
Ces Babels d’étoiles qui montent
Dans ces Babylones de nuit?

Qui, dans l’ombre vivante et l’aube sépulcrale,
Qui, dans l’horreur fatale et dans l’amour profond,
A tordu ta splendide et sinistre spirale,
Ciel, où les univers se font et se défont?
Un double précipice à la fois les réclame.
«Immensité!» dit l’être. «Éternité!» dit l’âme.
A jamais! le sans fin roule dans le sans fond.
•
L’inconnu, celui dont maint sage
Dans la brume obscure a douté,
L’immobile et muet visage,
Le voile de l’éternité,
A, pour montrer son ombre au crime,
Sa flamme au juste magnanime,
Jeté pêle-mêle à l’abîme
Tous ses masques, noirs ou vermeils;

Dans les éthers inaccessibles,
Ils flottent, cachés ou visibles;
Et ce sont ces masques terribles
Que nous appelons les soleils!
Et les peuples ont vu passer dans les ténèbres
Ces spectres de la nuit que nul ne pénétra;
Et flamines, santons, brahmanes, mages, guèbres,
Ont crié: Jupiter! Allah! Vishnou! Mithra!
Un jour, dans les lieux bas, sur les hauteurs suprêmes,
Tous ces masques hagards s'effaceront d'eux-mêmes;
Alors, la face immense et calme apparaîtra!

III

Enfant! l'autre de ces deux mondes,
C'est le coeur d'un homme! — parfois,
Comme une perle au fond des ondes,
Dieu cache une âme au fond des bois.

Dieu cache un homme sous les chênes;
Et le sacre en d'austères lieux
Avec le silence des plaines,
L'ombre des monts, l'azur des cieux!

O ma fille, avec son mystère
Le soir envahit pas à pas
L'esprit d'un prêtre involontaire,
Près de ce feu qui luit là-bas!

Cet homme, dans quelque ruine,
Avec la ronce et le lézard,
Vit sous la brume et la bruine,
Fruit tombé de l'arbre hasard!

Il est devenu presque fauve;
Son bâton est son seul appui.
En le voyant, l'homme se sauve;

La bête seule vient à lui.

Il est l’être crépusculaire.
On a peur de l’apercevoir;
Pâtre tant que le jour l’éclaire,
Fantôme dès que vient le soir.

La faneuse dans la clairière
Le voit quand il fait, par moment,
Comme une ombre hors de sa bière,
Un pas hors de l’isolement.

Son vêtement dans ces décombres,
C’est un sac de cendre et de deuil,
Linceul troué par les clous sombres
De la misère, ce cercueil.

Le pommier lui jette ses pommes;
Il vit dans l’ombre enseveli;
C’est un pauvre homme loin des hommes,
C’est un habitant de l’oubli;

C’est un indigent sous la bure,
Un vieux front de la pauvreté,
Un haillon dans une masure,
Un esprit dans l’immensité!
•
Dans la nature transparente,
C’est l’oeil des regards ingénus,
Un penseur à l’âme ignorante,
Un grave marcheur aux pieds nus!

Oui, c’est un coeur, une prunelle,
C’est un souffrant, c’est un songeur,
Sur qui la lueur éternelle
Fait trembler sa vague rougeur.

Il est là, l’âme aux cieux ravie,
Et près d’un branchage enflammé.
Pense, lui-même par la vie
Tison à demi consumé.

Il est calme en cette ombre épaisse;
Il aura bien toujours un peu
D’herbe pour que son bétail paisse,
De bois pour attiser son feu.

Nos luttes, nos chocs, nos désastres,
Il les ignore; il ne veut rien
Que, la nuit, le regard des astres,
Le jour, le regard de son chien.

Son troupeau gît sur l’herbe unie;
Il est là, lui, pasteur, ami,
Seul éveillé, comme un génie
A côté d’un peuple endormi.

Ses brebis, d’un rien remuées,
Ouvrant l’oeil près du feu qui luit,
Aperçoivent sous les nuées
Sa forme droite dans la nuit;

Et, bouc qui bêle, agneau qui danse,
Dorment dans les bois hasardeux
Sous ce grand spectre Providence
Qu’ils sentent debout auprès d’eux.
•
Le pâtre songe, solitaire,
Pauvre et nu, mangeant son pain bis;
Il ne connaît rien de la terre
Que ce que broute la brebis.

Pourtant, il sait que l’homme souffre;
Mais il sonde l’éther profond.

Toute solitude est un gouffre,
Toute solitude est un mont.

Dès qu’il est debout sur ce faîte,
Le ciel reprend cet étranger;
La Judée avait le prophète,
La Chaldée avait le berger.

Ils tâtaient le ciel l’un de l’autre;
Et, plus tard, sous le feu divin,
Du prophète naquit l’apôtre,
Du pâtre naquit le devin.

La foule raillait leur démence;
Et l’homme dut, aux jours passés,
A ces ignorants la science,
La sagesse à ces insensés.

La nuit voyait, témoin austère,
Se rencontrer sur les hauteurs,
Face à face dans le mystère,
Les prophètes et les pasteurs.

— Où marchez-vous, tremblants prophètes?
— Où courez-vous, pâtres troublés?
Ainsi parlaient ces sombres têtes,
Et l’ombre leur criait: Allez!

Aujourd’hui, l’on ne sait plus même
Qui monta le plus de degrés
Des Zoroastres au front blême
Ou des Abrahams effarés.

Et, quand nos yeux, qui les admirent,
Veulent mesurer leur chemin,
Et savoir quels sont ceux qui mirent
Le plus de jour dans l’oeil humain,

Du noir passé perçant les voiles,
Notre esprit flotte sans repos
Entre tous ces compteurs d’étoiles
Et tous ces compteurs de troupeaux.

Dans nos temps, où l’aube enfin dore
Les bords du terrestre ravin,
Le rêve humain s’approche encore
Plus près de l’idéal divin.
•
L’homme que la brume enveloppe,
Dans le ciel que Jésus ouvrit,
Comme à travers un télescope
Regarde à travers son esprit.

L’âme humaine, après le Calvaire,
A plus d’ampleur et de rayon;
Le grossissement de ce verre
Grandit encor la vision.

La solitude vénérable
Mène aujourd’hui l’homme sacré
Plus avant dans l’impénétrable,
Plus loin dans le démesuré.

Oui, si dans l’homme, que le nombre
Et le temps trompent tour à tour,
La foule dégorge de l’ombre,
La solitude fait le jour.

Le désert au ciel nous convie.
O seuil de l’azur! l’homme seul,
Vivant qui voit hors de la vie,
Lève d’avance son linceul.

Il parle aux voix que Dieu fit taire,

Mêlant sur son front pastoral
Aux lueurs troubles de la terre
Le serein rayon sépulcral.

Dans le désert, l’esprit qui pense
Subit par degrés sous les cieux
La dilatation immense
De l’infini mystérieux.

Il plonge au fond. Calme, il savoure
Le réel, le vrai, l’élément.
Toute la grandeur qui l’entoure
Le pénètre confusément.

Sans qu’il s’en doute, il va, se dompte,
Marche, et, grandissant en raison,
Croît comme l’herbe aux champs, et monte
Comme l’aurore à l’horizon.

Il voit, il adore, il s’effare;
Il entend le clairon du ciel,
Et l’universelle fanfare
Dans le silence universel.

Avec ses fleurs au pur calice,
Avec sa mer pleine de deuil,
Qui donne un baiser de complice
A l’âpre bouche de l’écueil,

Avec sa plaine, vaste bible,
Son mont noir, son brouillard fuyant,
Regards du visage, invisible,
Syllabes du mot flamboyant;

Avec sa paix, avec son trouble,
Son bois voilé, son rocher nu,
Avec son écho qui redouble

Toutes les voix de l’inconnu,

La solitude éclaire, enflamme,
Attire l’homme aux grands aimants,
Et lentement compose une âme
De tous les éblouissements!

L’homme en son sein palpite et vibre,
Ouvrant son aile, ouvrant ses yeux,
Étrange oiseau d’autant plus libre
Que le mystère le tient mieux.

Il sent croître en lui, d’heure en heure,
L’humble foi, l’amour recueilli,
Et la mémoire antérieure
Qui le remplit d’un vaste oubli.

Il a des soifs inassouvies;
Dans son passé vertigineux,
Il sent revivre d’autres vies;
De son âme il compte les noeuds.

Il cherche au fond des sombres dômes
Sous quelles formes il a lui;
Il entend ses propres fantômes
Qui lui parlent derrière lui.

Il sent que l’humaine aventure
N’est rien qu’une apparition;
Il se dit: — Chaque créature
Est toute la création. —

Il se dit: — Mourir, c’est connaître;
Nous cherchons l’issue à tâtons.
J’étais, je suis, et je dois être.
L’ombre est une échelle. Montons. —

Il se dit: — Le vrai, c’est le centre,
Le reste est apparence ou bruit.
Cherchons le lion, et non l’antre;
Allons où l’oeil fixe reluit. —

Il sent plus que l’homme en lui naître;
Il sent, jusque dans ses sommeils,
Lueur à lueur, dans son être,
L’infiltration des soleils.

Ils cessent d’être son problème;
Un astre est un voile. Il veut mieux;
Il reçoit de leur rayon même
Le regard qui va plus loin qu’eux.
•
Pendant que, nous, hommes des villes,
Nous croyons prendre un vaste essor
Lorsqu’entre en nos prunelles viles
Le spectre d’une étoile d’or;

Que, savants dont la vue est basse,
Nous nous ruons et nous brûlons
Dans le premier astre qui passe,
Comme aux lampes les papillons,

Et qu’oubliant le nécessaire,
Nous contentant de l’incomplet,
Croyant éclairés, ô misère!
Ceux qu’éclaire le feu follet,

Prenant pour l’être et pour l’essence
Les fantômes du ciel profond,
Voulant nous faire une science
Avec des formes qui s’en vont,

Ne comprenant, pour nous distraire
De la terre, où l’homme est damné,

Qu’un autre monde, sombre frère
De notre globe infortuné,

Comme l’oiseau né dans la cage,
Qui, s’il fuit, n’a qu’un vol étroit,
Ne sait pas trouver le bocage,
Et va d’un toit à l’autre toit;

Chercheurs que le néant captive,
Qui, dans l’ombre, avons en passant,
La curiosité chétive
Du ciron pour le ver luisant,

Poussière admirant la poussière,
Nous poursuivons obstinément,
Grains de cendre, un grain de lumière
En fuite dans le firmament!

Pendant que notre âme humble et lasse
S’arrête au seuil du ciel béni,
Et va becqueter dans l’espace
Une miette de l’infini,

Lui, ce berger, ce passant frêle,
Ce pauvre gardeur de bétail
Que la cathédrale éternelle
Abrite sous son noir portail,

Cet homme qui ne sait pas lire,
Cet hôte des arbres mouvants,
Qui ne connaît pas d’autre lyre
Que les grands bois et les grands vents,

Lui, dont l’âme semble étouffée,
Il s’envole, et, touchant le but,
Boit avec la coupe d’Orphée
A la source où Moïse but!

Lui, ce pâtre, en sa Thébaïde,
Cet ignorant, cet indigent,
Sans docteur, sans maître, sans guide,
Fouillant, scrutant, interrogeant

De sa roche où la paix séjourne,
Les cieux noirs, les bleus horizons,
Double ornière où sans cesse tourne
La roue énorme des saisons;

Seul, quand mai vide sa corbeille,
Quand octobre emplit son panier;
Seul, quand l'hiver à notre oreille
Vient siffler, gronder, et nier;

Quand sur notre terre, où se joue
Le blanc flocon flottant sans bruit,
La mort, spectre vierge, secoue,
Ses ailes pâles dans la nuit;

Quand, nous glaçant jusqu'aux vertèbres,
Nous jetant la neige en rêvant,
Ce sombre cygne des ténèbres
Laisse tomber sa plume au vent;

Quand la mer tourmente la barque;
Quand la plaine est là, ressemblant
A la morte dont un drap marque
L'obscur profil sinistre et blanc;

Seul sur cet âpre monticule,
A l'heure où, sous le ciel dormant,
Les Méduses du crépuscule
Montrent leur face vaguement;

Seul la nuit, quand dorment ses chèvres,

Quand la terre et l’immensité
Se referment comme deux lèvres
Après que le psaume est chanté;

Seul, quand renaît le jour sonore,
À l’heure où sur le mont lointain
Flamboie et frissonne l’aurore,
Crête rouge du coq matin;

Seul, toujours seul, l’été, l’automne;
Front sans remords et sans effroi
À qui le nuage qui tonne
Dit tout bas: Ce n’est pas pour toi!

Oubliant dans ces grandes choses
Les trous de ses pauvres habits,
Comparant la douceur des roses
À la douceur de la brebis,

Sondant l’être, la loi fatale;
L’amour, la mort, la fleur, le fruit;
Voyant l’auréole idéale
Sortir de toute cette nuit,

Il sent, faisant passer le monde
Par sa pensée à chaque instant,
Dans cette obscurité profonde
Son oeil devenir éclatant;

Et, dépassant la créature,
Montant toujours, toujours accru,
Il regarde tant la nature,
Que la nature a disparu!

Car, des effets allant aux causes,
L’oeil perce et franchit le miroir,
Enfant; et contempler les choses,

C’est finir par ne plus les voir.

La matière tombe détruite
Devant l’esprit aux yeux de lynx;
Voir, c’est rejeter; la poursuite
De l’énigme est l’oubli du sphynx.

Il ne voit plus le ver qui rampe,
La feuille morte émue au vent,
Le pré, la source où l’oiseau trempe
Son petit pied rose en buvant;

Ni l’araignée, hydre étoilée,
Au centre du mal se tenant,
Ni l’abeille, lumière ailée,
Ni la fleur, parfum rayonnant;

Ni l’arbre où sur l’écorce dure
L’amant grave un chiffre d’un jour,
Que les ans font croître à mesure
Qu’ils font décroître son amour.

Il ne voit plus la vigne mûre,
La ville, large toit fumant,
Ni la campagne, ce murmure,
Ni la mer, ce rugissement;

Ni l’aube dorant les prairies,
Ni le couchant aux longs rayons,
Ni tous ces tas de pierreries
Qu’on nomme constellations,

Que l’éther de son ombre couvre,
Et qu’entrevoit notre oeil terni
Quand la nuit curieuse entr’ouvre
Le sombre écrin de l’infini;

Il ne voit plus Saturne pâle,
Mars écarlate, Arcturus bleu,
Sirius, couronne d’opale,
Aldebaran, turban de feu;

Ni les mondes, esquifs sans voiles,
Ni, dans le grand ciel sans milieu,
Toute cette cendre d’étoiles;
Il voit l’astre unique; il voit Dieu!
•
Il le regarde, il le contemple;
Vision que rien n’interrompt!
Il devient tombe, il devient temple;
Le mystère flambe à son front.

Oeil serein dans l’ombre ondoyante,
Il a conquis, il a compris,
Il aime; il est l’âme voyante
Parmi nos ténébreux esprits.

Il marche, heureux et plein d’aurore,
De plain-pied avec l’élément;
Il croit, il accepte. Il ignore
Le doute, notre escarpement;

Le doute, qu’entourent les vides,
Bord que nul ne peut enjamber,
Où nous nous arrêtons stupides,
Disant: Avancer, c’est tomber!

Le doute, roche où nos pensées
Errent loin du pré qui fleurit,
Où vont et viennent, dispersées,
Toutes ces chèvres de l’esprit!

Quand Hobbes dit: «Quelle est la base?»
Quand Locke dit: «Quelle est la loi?»

Que font à sa splendide extase
Ces dialogues de l’effroi?

Qu’importe à cet anachorète
De la caverne Vérité,
L’homme qui dans l’homme s’arrête,
La nuit qui croit à sa clarté?

Que lui fait la philosophie,
Calcul, algèbre, orgueil puni,
Que sur les cimes pétrifie
L’effarement de l’infini!

Lueurs que couvre la fumée!
Sciences disant: Que sait-on?
Qui, de l’aveugle Ptolémée,
Montent au myope Newton!

Que lui font les choses bornées,
Grands, petits, couronnes, carcans?
L’ombre qui sort des cheminées
Vaut l’ombre qui sort des volcans.

Que lui font la larve et la cendre,
Et, dans les tourbillons mouvants,
Toutes les formes que peut prendre
L’obscur nuage des vivants?

Que lui fait l’assurance triste
Des créatures dans leurs nuits?
La terre s’écriant: J’existe!
Le soleil répliquant: Je suis!

Quand le spectre, dans le mystère,
S’affirme à l’apparition,
Qu’importe à cet oeil solitaire
Qui s’éblouit du seul rayon?

Que lui fait l’astre, autel et prêtre
De sa propre religion,
Qui dit: Rien hors de moi! — quand l’être
Se nomme Gouffre et Légion!

Que lui font, sur son sacré faîte,
Les démentis audacieux
Que donne aux soleils la comète,
Cette hérésiarque des cieux?

Que lui fait le temps, cette brume?
L’espace, cette illusion?
Que lui fait l’éternelle écume
De l’océan Création?

Il boit, hors de l’inabordable,
Du surhumain, du sidéral,
Les délices du formidable,
L’âpre ivresse de l’idéal;

Son être, dont rien ne surnage,
S’engloutit dans le gouffre bleu;
Il fait ce sublime naufrage;
Et, murmurant sans cesse: — Dieu, —

Parmi les feuillages farouches,
Il songe, l’âme et l’oeil là-haut,
À l’imbécillité des bouches
Qui prononcent un autre mot!
•
Il le voit, ce soleil unique,
Fécondant, travaillant, créant,
Par le rayon qu’il communique
Égalant l’atome au géant,

Semant de feux, de souffles, d’ondes,

Les tourbillons d’obscurité,
Emplissant d’étincelles mondes
L’épouvantable immensité,

Remuant, dans l’ombre et les brumes,
De sombres forces dans les cieux
Qui font comme des bruits d’enclumes
Sous des marteaux mystérieux,

Doux pour le nid du rouge-gorge,
Terrible aux satans qu’il détruit;
Et, comme aux lueurs d’une forge,
Un mur s’éclaire dans la nuit,

On distingue en l’ombre où nous sommes,
On reconnaît dans ce bas lieu,
À sa clarté parmi les hommes,
L’âme qui réverbère Dieu!

Et ce pâtre devient auguste;
Jusqu’à l’auréole monté,
Étant le sage, il est le juste;
O ma fille, cette clarté

Soeur du grand flambeau des génies,
Faite de tous les rayons purs
Et de toutes les harmonies
Qui flottent dans tous les azurs,

Plus belle dans une chaumière,
Éclairant hier par demain,
Cette éblouissante lumière,
Cette blancheur du coeur humain

S’appelle en ce monde, où l’honnête
Et le vrai des vents est battu,
Innocence avant la tempête,

Après la tempête vertu!
•
Voilà donc ce que fait la solitude à l’homme;
Elle lui montre Dieu, le dévoile et le nomme;
Sacre l’obscurité,
Pénètre de splendeur le pâtre qui s’y plonge,
Et, dans les profondeurs de son immense songe,
T’allume, ô vérité!

Elle emplit l’ignorant de la science énorme;
Ce que le cèdre voit, ce que devine l’orme,
Ce que le chêne sent,
Dieu, l’être, l’infini, l’éternité, l’abîme,
Dans l’ombre elle le mêle à la candeur sublime
D’un pâtre frémissant.

L’homme n’est qu’une lampe, elle en fait une étoile.
Et ce pâtre devient, sous son haillon de toile,
Un mage; et, par moments,
Aux fleurs, parfums du temple, aux arbres, noirs pilastres,
Apparaît couronné d’une tiare d’astres,
Vêtu de flamboiements!

Il ne se doute pas de cette grandeur sombre:
Assis près de son feu que la broussaille encombre,
Devant l’être béant,
Humble, il pense; et, chétif, sans orgueil, sans envie,
Il se courbe, et sent mieux, près du gouffre de vie,
Son gouffre de néant.

Quand il sort de son rêve, il revoit la nature.
Il parle à la nuée, errant à l’aventure,
Dans l’azur émigrant;
Il dit: «Que ton encens est chaste, ô clématite!»
Il dit au doux oiseau: «Que ton aile est petite,
Mais que ton vol est grand!»

Le soir, quand il voit l’homme aller vers les villages,
Glaneuses, bûcherons qui traînent des feuillages,
Et les pauvres chevaux
Que le laboureur bat et fouette avec colère,
Sans songer que le vent va le rendre à son frère
Le marin sur les flots;

Quand il voit les forçats passer, portant leur charge,
Les soldats, les pêcheurs pris par la nuit au large,
Et hâtant leur retour,
Il leur envoie à tous, du haut du mont nocturne,
La bénédiction qu’il a puisée à l’urne
De l’insondable amour!

Et, tandis qu’il est là, vivant sur sa colline,
Content, se prosternant dans tout ce qui s’incline,
Doux rêveur bienfaisant,
Emplissant le vallon, le champ, le toit de mousse,
Et l’herbe et le rocher de la majesté douce
De son coeur innocent,

S’il passe par hasard, près de sa paix féconde,
Un de ces grands esprits en butte aux flots du monde
Révolté devant eux,
Qui craignent à la fois, sur ces vagues funèbres,
La terre de granit et le ciel de ténèbres,
L’homme ingrat, Dieu douteux;

Peut-être, à son insu, que ce pasteur paisible,
Et dont l’obscurité rend la lueur visible,
Homme heureux sans effort,
Entrevu par cette âme en proie au choc de l’onde,
Va lui jeter soudain quelque clarté profonde
Qui lui montre le port!

Ainsi ce feu peut-être, aux flancs du rocher sombre,
Là-bas est aperçu par quelque nef qui sombre

Entre le ciel et l’eau;
Humble, il la guide au loin de son reflet rougeâtre,
Et du même rayon dont il réchauffe un pâtre,
Il sauve un grand vaisseau!

IV

Et je repris, montrant à l’enfant adorée
L’obscur feu du pasteur et l’étoile sacrée:

De ces deux feux, perçant le soir qui s’assombrit
L’un révèle un soleil, l’autre annonce un esprit,
C’est l’infini que notre oeil sonde;
Mesurons tout à Dieu, qui seul crée et conçoit!
C’est l’astre qui le prouve et l’esprit qui le voit;
Une âme est plus grande qu’un monde.

Enfant, ce feu de pâtre à une âme mêlé,
Et cet astre, splendeur du plafond constellé
Que l’éclair et la foudre gardent,
Ces deux phares du gouffre où l’être flotte et fuit,
Ces deux clartés du deuil, ces deux yeux de la nuit,
Dans l’immensité se regardent.

Ils se connaissent; l’astre envoie au feu des bois
Toute l’énormité de l’abîme à la fois,
Les baisers de l’azur superbe,
Et l’éblouissement des visions d’Endor;
Et le doux feu de pâtre envoie à l’astre d’or
Le frémissement du brin d’herbe.

Le feu de pâtre dit: — La mère pleure, hélas!
L’enfant a froid, le père a faim, l’aïeul est las;
Tout est noir; la montée est rude;
Le pas tremble, éclairé par un tremblant flambeau;
L’homme au berceau chancelle et trébuche au tombeau.
L’étoile répond: Certitude!

De chacun d’eux s’envole un rayon fraternel,
L’un plein d’humanité, l’autre rempli de ciel;
Dieu les prend, et joint leur lumière,
Et sa main, sous qui l’âme, aigle de flamme, éclôt,
Fait du rayon d’en bas et du rayon d’en haut
Les deux ailes de la prière.

Ingouville, août 1839.

LIVRE QUATRIÈME: PAUCA MEÆ

I

PURE INNOCENCE! VERTU SAINTE!

Pure Innocence! Vertu sainte!
O les deux sommets d’ici-bas!
Où croissent, sans ombre et sans crainte,
Les deux palmes des deux combats!

Palme du combat Ignorance!
Palme du combat Vérité!
L’âme, à travers sa transparence,
Voit trembler leur double clarté.

Innocence! Vertu! sublimes
Même pour l’oeil mort du méchant!
On voit dans l’azur ces deux cimes,
L’une au levant, l’autre au couchant.

Elles guident la nef qui sombre;
L’une est phare, et l’autre est flambeau;
L’une a le berceau dans son ombre,
L’autre en son ombre a le tombeau.

C’est sous la terre infortunée
Que commence, obscure à nos yeux,
La ligne de la destinée;
Elles l’achèvent dans les cieux.

Elles montrent, malgré les voiles
Et l’ombre du fatal milieu,
Nos âmes touchant les étoiles
Et la candeur mêlée au bleu.

Elles éclairent les problèmes;
Elles disent le lendemain;
Elles sont les blancheurs suprêmes
De tout le sombre gouffre humain.

L'archange effleure de son aile
Ce faîte où Jéhovah s'assied;
Et sur cette neige éternelle
On voit l'empreinte d'un seul pied.

Cette trace qui nous enseigne,
Ce pied blanc, ce pied fait de jour,
Ce pied rose, hélas! car il saigne,
Ce pied nu, c'est le tien, amour!

Janvier 1843.

15 FÉVRIER 1843

Aime celui qui t'aime, et sois heureuse en lui.
— Adieu! — sois son trésor, ô toi qui fus le nôtre!
Va, mon enfant béni, d'une famille à l'autre.
Emporte le bonheur et laisse-nous l'ennui!

Ici, l'on te retient; là-bas, on te désire.
Fille, épouse, ange, enfant, fais ton double devoir.
Donne-nous un regret, donne-leur un espoir,
Sors avec une larme! entre avec un sourire!

Dans l'église, 15 février 1843.

4 SEPTEMBRE 1843

III

TROIS ANS APRÈS

Il est temps que je me repose;
Je suis terrassé par le sort.
Ne me parlez pas d'autre chose
Que des ténèbres où l'on dort!

Que veut-on que je recommence?
Je ne demande désormais
À la création immense
Qu'un peu de silence et de paix!

Pourquoi m'appelez-vous encore?
J'ai fait ma tâche et mon devoir.
Qui travaillait avant l'aurore,
Peut s'en aller avant le soir.

À vingt ans, deuil et solitude!
Mes yeux, baissés vers le gazon,
Perdirent la douce habitude
De voir ma mère à la maison.

Elle nous quitta pour la tombe;
Et vous savez bien qu'aujourd'hui
Je cherche, en cette nuit qui tombe,
Un autre ange qui s'est enfui!

Vous savez que je désespère,
Que ma force en vain se défend,
Et que je souffre comme père,
Moi qui souffris tant comme enfant!

Mon oeuvre n'est pas terminée,
Dites-vous. Comme Adam banni,
Je regarde ma destinée,
Et je vois bien que j'ai fini.

L’humble enfant que Dieu m’a ravie
Rien qu’en m’aimant savait m’aider;
C’était le bonheur de ma vie
De voir ses yeux me regarder.

Si ce Dieu n’a pas voulu clore
L’oeuvre qu’il me fit commencer,
S’il veut que je travaille encore,
Il n’avait qu’à me la laisser!

Il n’avait qu’à me laisser vivre
Avec ma fille à mes côtés,
Dans cette extase où je m’enivre
De mystérieuses clartés!

Ces clartés, jour d’une autre sphère,
O Dieu jaloux, tu nous les vends!
Pourquoi m’as-tu pris la lumière
Que j’avais parmi les vivants?

As-tu donc pensé, fatal maître,
Qu’à force de te contempler,
Je ne voyais plus ce doux être,
Et qu’il pouvait bien s’en aller!

T’es-tu dit que l’homme, vaine ombre,
Hélas! perd son humanité
A trop voir cette splendeur sombre
Qu’on appelle la vérité?

Qu’on peut le frapper sans qu’il souffre,
Que son coeur est mort dans l’ennui,
Et qu’à force de voir le gouffre,
Il n’a plus qu’un abîme en lui?

Qu’il va, stoïque, où tu l’envoies,
Et que désormais, endurci,

N’ayant plus ici-bas de joies,
Il n’a plus de douleurs aussi?

As-tu pensé qu’une âme tendre
S’ouvre à toi pour se mieux fermer,
Et que ceux qui veulent comprendre
Finissent par ne plus aimer?

O Dieu! vraiment, as-tu pu croire
Que je préférais, sous les cieux,
L’effrayant rayon de ta gloire
Aux douces lueurs de ses yeux!

Si j’avais su tes lois moroses,
Et qu’au même esprit enchanté
Tu ne donnes point ces deux choses,
Le bonheur et la vérité,

Plutôt que de lever tes voiles,
Et de chercher, coeur triste et pur,
A te voir au fond des étoiles,
O Dieu sombre d’un monde obscur,

J’eusse aimé mieux, loin de ta face,
Suivre, heureux, un étroit chemin,
Et n’être qu’un homme qui passe
Tenant son enfant par la main!

Maintenant, je veux qu’on me laisse!
J’ai fini! le sort est vainqueur.
Que vient-on rallumer sans cesse
Dans l’ombre qui m’emplit le coeur?

Vous qui me parlez, vous me dites
Qu’il faut, rappelant ma raison,
Guider les foules décrépites
Vers les lueurs de l’horizon;

Qu’à l’heure où les peuples se lèvent
Tout penseur suit un but profond;
Qu’il se doit à tous ceux qui rêvent,
Qu’il se doit à tous ceux qui vont!

Qu’une âme, qu’un feu pur anime,
Doit hâter, avec sa clarté,
L’épanouissement sublime
De la future humanité;

Qu’il faut prendre part, coeurs fidèles,
Sans redouter les océans,
Aux fêtes des choses nouvelles,
Aux combats des esprits géants!

Vous voyez des pleurs sur ma joue,
Et vous m’abordez mécontents,
Comme par le bras on secoue
Un homme qui dort trop longtemps.

Mais songez à ce que vous faites!
Hélas! cet ange au front si beau,
Quand vous m’appelez à vos fêtes,
Peut-être a froid dans son tombeau.

Peut-être, livide et pâlie,
Dit-elle dans son lit étroit:
«Est-ce que mon père m’oublie
Et n’est plus là, que j’ai si froid?»

Quoi! lorsqu’à peine je résiste
Aux choses dont je me souviens,
Quand je suis brisé, las et triste,
Quand je l’entends qui me dit: «Viens!»

Quoi! vous voulez que je souhaite,

Moi, plié par un coup soudain,
La rumeur qui suit le poëte,
Le bruit que fait le paladin!

Vous voulez que j'aspire encore
Aux triomphes doux et dorés!
Que j'annonce aux dormeurs l'aurore!
Que je crie: «Allez! espérez!»

Vous voulez que, dans la mêlée,
Je rentre ardent parmi les forts,
Les yeux à la voûte étoilée... —
Oh! l'herbe épaisse où sont les morts!

Novembre 1846.

IV

OH! JE FUS COMME FOU DANS LE PREMIER MOMENT

Oh! je fus comme fou dans le premier moment,
Hélas! et je pleurai trois jours amèrement.
Vous tous à qui Dieu prit votre chère espérance,
Pères, mères, dont l'âme a souffert ma souffrance.
Tout ce que j'éprouvais, l'avez-vous éprouvé?
Je voulais me briser le front sur le pavé;
Puis je me révoltais, et, par moments, terrible,
Je fixais mes regards sur cette chose horrible,
Et je n'y croyais pas, et je m'écriais: Non!
— Est-ce que Dieu permet de ces malheurs sans nom
Qui font que dans le coeur le désespoir se lève? —
Il me semblait que tout n'était qu'un affreux rêve,
Qu'elle ne pouvait pas m'avoir ainsi quitté,
Que je l'entendais rire en la chambre à côté,
Que c'était impossible enfin qu'elle fût morte,

Et que j'allais la voir entrer par cette porte!

Oh! que de fois j'ai dit: Silence! elle a parlé!
Tenez! voici le bruit de sa main sur la clé!
Attendez! elle vient! laissez-moi, que j'écoute!
Car elle est quelque part dans la maison sans doute!

Jersey, Marine-Terrace, 4 septembre 1852.

V

ELLE AVAIT PRIS CE PLI DANS SON AGE ENFANTIN

Elle avait pris ce pli dans son âge enfantin
De venir dans ma chambre un peu chaque matin
Je l'attendais ainsi qu'un rayon qu'on espère;
Elle entrait et disait: «Bonjour, mon petit père;»
Prenait ma plume, ouvrait mes livres, s'asseyait
Sur mon lit, dérangeait mes papiers, et riait,
Puis soudain s'en allait comme un oiseau qui passe.
Alors, je reprenais, la tête un peu moins lasse,
Mon oeuvre interrompue, et, tout en écrivant,
Parmi mes manuscrits je rencontrais souvent
Quelque arabesque folle et qu'elle avait tracée,
Et mainte page blanche entre ses mains froissée
Où, je ne sais comment, venaient mes plus doux vers.
Elle aimait Dieu, les fleurs, les astres, les prés verts,
Et c'était un esprit avant d'être une femme.
Son regard reflétait la clarté de son âme.
Elle me consultait sur tout à tous moments.
Oh! que de soirs d'hiver radieux et charmants,
Passés à raisonner langue, histoire et grammaire,
Mes quatre enfants groupés sur mes genoux, leur mère
Tout près, quelques amis causant au coin du feu!
J'appelais cette vie être content de peu!

Et dire qu'elle est morte! hélas! que Dieu m'assiste!
Je n'étais jamais gai quand je la sentais triste;
J'étais morne au milieu du bal le plus joyeux
Si j'avais, en partant, vu quelque ombre en ses yeux.

Novembre 1846, jour des morts.

VI

QUAND NOUS HABITIONS TOUS ENSEMBLE

Quand nous habitions tous ensemble
Sur nos collines d'autrefois,
Où l'eau court, où le buisson tremble,
Dans la maison qui touche aux bois,

Elle avait dix ans, et moi trente;
J'étais pour elle l'univers.
Oh! comme l'herbe est odorante
Sous les arbres profonds et verts!

Elle faisait mon sort prospère,
Mon travail léger, mon ciel bleu.
Lorsqu'elle me disait: Mon père,
Tout mon coeur s'écriait: Mon Dieu!

A travers mes songes sans nombre,
J'écoutais son parler joyeux,
Et mon front s'éclairait dans l'ombre
A la lumière de ses yeux.

Elle avait l'air d'une princesse
Quand je la tenais par la main;
Elle cherchait des fleurs sans cesse
Et des pauvres dans le chemin.

Elle donnait comme on dérobe,

En se cachant aux yeux de tous.
Oh! la belle petite robe
Qu’elle avait, vous rappelez-vous?

Le soir, auprès de ma bougie,
Elle jasait à petit bruit,
Tandis qu’à la vitre rougie
Heurtaient les papillons de nuit.

Les anges se miraient en elle.
Que son bonjour était charmant!
Le ciel mettait dans sa prunelle
Ce regard qui jamais ne ment.

Oh! je l’avais, si jeune encore,
Vue apparaître en mon destin!
C’était l’enfant de mon aurore,
Et mon étoile du matin!

Quand la lune claire et sereine
Brillait aux cieux, dans ces beaux mois,
Comme nous allions dans la plaine!
Comme nous courions dans les bois!

Puis, vers la lumière isolée
Étoilant le logis obscur,
Nous revenions par la vallée
En tournant le coin du vieux mur;

Nous revenions, coeurs pleins de flamme,
En parlant des splendeurs du ciel.
Je composais cette jeune âme
Comme l’abeille fait son miel.

Doux ange aux candides pensées,
Elle était gaie en arrivant... —
Toutes ces choses sont passées

Comme l’ombre et comme le vent!

Villequier, 4 septembre 1844.

VII

ELLE ETAIT PALE, ET POURTANT ROSE,

Elle était pâle, et pourtant rose,
Petite avec de grands cheveux.
Elle disait souvent: Je n’ose,
Et ne disait jamais: Je veux.

Le soir, elle prenait ma Bible
Pour y faire épeler sa soeur,
Et, comme une lampe paisible,
Elle éclairait ce jeune coeur.

Sur le saint livre que j’admire,
Leurs yeux purs venaient se fixer;
Livre où l’une apprenait à lire,
Où l’autre apprenait à penser!

Sur l’enfant, qui n’eût pas lu seule,
Elle penchait son front charmant,
Et l’on aurait dit une aïeule
Tant elle parlait doucement!

Elle lui disait: «Sois bien sage!»
Sans jamais nommer le démon;
Leurs mains erraient de page en page
Sur Moïse et sur Salomon,

Sur Cyrus qui vint de la Perse,
Sur Moloch et Leviathan,
Sur l’enfer que Jésus traverse,
Sur l’éden où rampe Satan!

Moi, j’écoutais... — O joie immense
De voir la soeur près de la soeur!
Mes yeux s’enivraient en silence
De cette ineffable douceur.

Et dans la chambre humble et déserte
Où nous sentions, cachés tous trois,
Entrer par la fenêtre ouverte
Les souffles des nuits et des bois,

Tandis que, dans le texte auguste,
Leurs coeurs, lisant avec ferveur,
Puisaient le beau, le vrai, le juste,
Il me semblait, à moi, rêveur,

Entendre chanter des louanges
Autour de nous, comme au saint lieu,
Et voir sous les doigts de ces anges
Tressaillir le livre de Dieu!

Octobre 1846.

VIII

A QUI DONC SOMMES-NOUS? QUI NOUS A? QUI NOUS MENE?

A qui donc sommes-nous? Qui nous a? qui nous mène?
Vautour fatalité, tiens-tu la race humaine?
Oh! parlez, cieux vermeils,
L’âme sans fond tient-elle aux étoiles sans nombre?
Chaque rayon d’en haut est-il un fil de l’ombre
Liant l’homme aux soleils?

Est-ce qu’en nos esprits, que l’ombre a pour repaires,

Nous allons voir rentrer les songes de nos pères?
Destin, lugubre assaut!
O vivants, serions-nous l’objet d’une dispute?
L’un veut-il notre gloire, et l’autre notre chute?
Combien sont-ils là-haut?

Jadis, au fond du ciel, aux yeux du mage sombre,
Deux joueurs effrayants apparaissaient dans l’ombre.
Qui craindre? qui prier?
Les Manès frissonnants, les pâles Zoroastres
Voyaient deux grandes mains qui déplaçaient les astres
Sur le noir échiquier.

Songe horrible! le bien, le mal, de cette voûte
Pendent-ils sur nos fronts? Dieu, tire-moi du doute
O sphinx, dis-moi le mot!
Cet affreux rêve pèse à nos yeux qui sommeillent,
Noirs vivants! heureux ceux qui tout à coup s’éveillent
Et meurent en sursaut!

Villequier, 4 septembre 1845.

IX

O SOUVENIRS! PRINTEMPS! AURORE!

O souvenirs! printemps! aurore!
Doux rayon triste et réchauffant!
— Lorsqu’elle était petite encore,
Que sa soeur était tout enfant... —

Connaissez-vous sur la colline
Qui joint Montlignon à Saint-Leu,
Une terrasse qui s’incline
Entre un bois sombre et le ciel bleu?

C’est là que nous vivions. — Pénètre,

Mon coeur, dans ce passé charmant! —
Je l’entendais sous ma fenêtre
Jouer le matin doucement.

Elle courait dans la rosée,
Sans bruit, de peur de m’éveiller;
Moi, je n’ouvrais pas ma croisée,
De peur de la faire envoler.

Ses frères riaient... — Aube pure!
Tout chantait sous ces frais berceaux,
Ma famille avec la nature,
Mes enfants avec les oiseaux! —

Je toussais, on devenait brave;
Elle montait à petits pas,
Et me disait d’un air très-grave:
«J’ai laissé les enfants en bas.»

Qu’elle fût bien ou mal coiffée,
Que mon coeur fût triste ou joyeux,
Je l’admirais. C’était ma fée,
Et le doux astre de mes yeux!

Nous jouions toute la journée.
O jeux charmants! chers entretiens!
Le soir, comme elle était l’aînée,
Elle me disait: «Père, viens!

«Nous allons t’apporter ta chaise,
Conte-nous une histoire, dis!» —
Et je voyais rayonner d’aise
Tous ces regards du paradis.

Alors, prodiguant les carnages,
J’inventais un conte profond
Dont je trouvais les personnages

Parmi les ombres du plafond.

Toujours, ces quatre douces têtes
Riaient, comme à cet âge on rit,
De voir d’affreux géants très-bêtes
Vaincus par des nains pleins d’esprit.

J’étais l’Arioste et l’Homère
D’un poëme éclos d’un seul jet;
Pendant que je parlais, leur mère
Les regardait rire, et songeait.

Leur aïeul, qui lisait dans l’ombre,
Sur eux parfois levait les yeux,
Et, moi, par la fenêtre sombre
J’entrevoyais un coin des cieux!

Villequier, 4 septembre 1846.

X

PENDANT QUE LE MARIN, QUI CALCULE ET QUI DOUTE

Pendant que le marin, qui calcule et qui doute,
Demande son chemin aux constellations;
Pendant que le berger, l’oeil plein de visions,
Cherche au milieu des bois son étoile et sa route;
Pendant que l’astronome, inondé de rayons,

Pèse un globe à travers des millions de lieues,
Moi, je cherche autre chose en ce ciel vaste et pur.
Mais que ce saphir sombre est un abîme obscur!
On ne peut distinguer, la nuit, les robes bleues
Des anges frissonnants qui glissent dans l’azur.

Avril 1847.

XI

ON VIT, ON PARLE, ON A LE CIEL ET LES NUAGES

On vit, on parle, on a le ciel et les nuages
Sur la tête; on se plaît aux livres des vieux sages;
On lit Virgile et Dante; on va joyeusement
En voiture publique à quelque endroit charmant,
En riant aux éclats de l’auberge et du gîte;
Le regard d’une femme en passant vous agite;
On aime, on est aimé, bonheur qui manque aux rois!
On écoute le chant des oiseaux dans les bois
Le matin, on s’éveille, et toute une famille
Vous embrasse, une mère, une soeur, une fille!

On déjeune en lisant son journal. Tout le jour
On mêle à sa pensée espoir, travail, amour;
La vie arrive avec ses passions troublées;
On jette sa parole aux sombres assemblées;
Devant le but qu’on veut et le sort qui vous prend,
On se sent faible et fort, on est petit et grand;
On est flot dans la foule, âme dans la tempête;
Tout vient et passe; on est en deuil, on est en fête;
On arrive, on recule, on lutte avec effort... —
Puis, le vaste et profond silence de la mort!

11 juillet 1846, en revenant du cimetière.

XII

A QUOI SONGEAIENT

LES DEUX CAVALIERS DANS LA FORÊT

La nuit était fort noire et la forêt très-sombre.
Hermann à mes côtés me paraissait une ombre.
Nos chevaux galopaient. A la garde de Dieu!
Les nuages du ciel ressemblaient à des marbres.
Les étoiles volaient dans les branches des arbres
Comme un essaim d'oiseaux de feu.

Je suis plein de regrets. Brisé par la souffrance,
L'esprit profond d'Hermann est vide d'espérance.
Je suis plein de regrets. O mes amours, dormez!
Or, tout en traversant ces solitudes vertes,
Hermann me dit: «Je songe aux tombes entr'ouvertes;»
Et je lui dis: «Je pense aux tombeaux refermés.»

Lui regarde eu avant: je regarde en arrière,
Nos chevaux galopaient à travers la clairière;
Le vent nous apportait de lointains angelus;
dit: «Je songe à ceux que l'existence afflige,
A ceux qui sont, à ceux qui vivent. — Moi,» lui dis-je,
«Je pense à ceux qui ne sont plus!»

Les fontaines chantaient. Que disaient les fontaines?
Les chênes murmuraient. Que murmuraient les chênes?
Les buissons chuchotaient comme d'anciens amis.
Hermann me dit: «Jamais les vivants ne sommeillent.
En ce moment, des yeux pleurent, d'autres yeux veillent.»
Et je lui dis: «Hélas! d'autres sont endormis!»

Hermann reprit alors: «Le malheur, c'est la vie.
Les morts ne souffrent plus. Ils sont heureux! j'envie
Leur fosse où l'herbe pousse, où s'effeuillent les bois.
«Car la nuit les caresse avec ses douces flammes;
Car le ciel rayonnant calme toutes les âmes
Dans tous les tombeaux à la fois!»

Et je lui dis: «Tais-toi! respect au noir mystère!
Les morts gisent couchés sous nos pieds dans la terre.

Les morts, ce sont les coeurs qui t'aimaient autrefois
C'est ton ange expiré! c'est ton père et ta mère!
Ne les attristons point par l'ironie amère.
Comme à travers un rêve ils entendent nos voix.»

Octobre 1853.

XIII

VENI, VIDI, VIXI

J'ai bien assez vécu, puisque dans mes douleurs
Je marche, sans trouver de bras qui me secourent,
Puisque je ris à peine aux enfants qui m'entourent,
Puisque je ne suis plus réjoui par les fleurs;

Puisqu'au printemps, quand Dieu met la nature en fête,
J'assiste, esprit sans joie, à ce splendide amour;
Puisque je suis à l'heure où l'homme fuit le jour,
Hélas! et sent de tout la tristesse secrète;

Puisque l'espoir serein dans mon âme est vaincu;
Puisqu'en cette saison des parfums et des roses,
O ma fille! j'aspire à l'ombre où tu reposes,
Puisque mon coeur est mort, j'ai bien assez vécu.

Je n'ai pas refusé ma tâche sur la terre.
Mon sillon? Le voilà. Ma gerbe? La voici.
J'ai vécu souriant, toujours plus adouci,
Debout, mais incliné du côté du mystère.

J'ai fait ce que j'ai pu; j'ai servi, j'ai veillé,
Et j'ai vu bien souvent qu'on riait de ma peine.
Je me suis étonné d'être un objet de haine,
Ayant beaucoup souffert et beaucoup travaillé.

Dans ce bagne terrestre où ne s'ouvre aucune aile,

Sans me plaindre, saignant, et tombant sur les mains,
Morne, épuisé, raillé par les forçats humains,
J'ai porté mon chaînon de la chaîne éternelle.

Maintenant, mon regard ne s'ouvre qu'à demi;
Je ne me tourne plus même quand on me nomme;
Je suis plein de stupeur et d'ennui, comme un homme
Qui se lève avant l'aube et qui n'a pas dormi.

Je ne daigne plus même, en ma sombre paresse,
Répondre à l'envieux dont la bouche me nuit.
O Seigneur! ouvrez-moi les portes de la nuit
Afin que je m'en aille et que je disparaisse!

Avril 1848.

XIV

DEMAIN, DES L'AUBE, A L'HEURE OU BLANCHIT LA CAMPAGNE

Demain, dès l'aube, à l'heure où blanchit la campagne,
Je partirai. Vois-tu, je sais que tu m'attends.
J'irai par la forêt, j'irai par la montagne.
Je ne puis demeurer loin de toi plus longtemps.

Je marcherai les yeux fixés sur mes pensées,
Sans rien voir au dehors, sans entendre aucun bruit,
Seul, inconnu, le dos courbé, les mains croisées,
Triste, et le jour pour moi sera comme la nuit.

Je ne regarderai ni l'or du soir qui tombe,
Ni les voiles au loin descendant vers Harfleur,
Et, quand j'arriverai, je mettrai sur ta tombe
Un bouquet de houx vert et de bruyère en fleur.

3 Septembre 1847.

XV

A VILLEQUIER

Maintenant que Paris, ses pavés et ses marbres,
Et sa brume et ses toits sont bien loin de mes yeux;
Maintenant que je suis sous les branches des arbres,
Et que je puis songer à la beauté des cieux;

Maintenant que du deuil qui m'a fait l'âme obscure
Je sors, pâle et vainqueur,
Et que je sens la paix de la grande nature
Qui m'entre dans le coeur;

Maintenant que je puis, assis au bord des ondes,
Ému par ce superbe et tranquille horizon,
Examiner en moi les vérités profondes
Et regarder les fleurs qui sont dans le gazon;

Maintenant, ô mon Dieu! que j'ai ce calme sombre
De pouvoir désormais
Voir de mes yeux la pierre où je sais que dans l'ombre
Elle dort pour jamais;

Maintenant qu'attendri par ces divins spectacles,
Plaines, forêts, rochers, vallons, fleuve argenté,
Voyant ma petitesse et voyant vos miracles,
Je reprends ma raison devant l'immensité;

Je viens à vous, Seigneur, père auquel il faut croire;
Je vous porte, apaisé,
Les morceaux de ce coeur tout plein de votre gloire
Que vous avez brisé;

Je viens à vous, Seigneur! confessant que vous êtes

Bon, clément, indulgent et doux, ô Dieu vivant!
Je conviens que vous seul savez ce que vous faites,
Et que l’homme n’est rien qu’un jonc qui tremble au vent;

Je dis que le tombeau qui sur les morts se ferme
Ouvre le firmament;
Et que ce qu’ici-bas nous prenons pour le terme
Est le commencement;

Je conviens à genoux que vous seul, père auguste,
Possédez l’infini, le réel, l’absolu;
Je conviens qu’il est bon, je conviens qu’il est juste
Que mon coeur ait saigné, puisque Dieu l’a voulu!

Je ne résiste plus à tout ce qui m’arrive
Par votre volonté.
L’âme de deuils en deuils, l’homme de rive en rive,
Roule à l’éternité.

Nous ne voyons jamais qu’un seul côté des choses;
L’autre plonge en la nuit d’un mystère effrayant.
L’homme subit le joug sans connaître les causes.
Tout ce qu’il voit est court, inutile et fuyant.

Vous faites revenir toujours la solitude
Autour de tous ses pas.
Vous n’avez pas voulu qu’il eût la certitude
Ni la joie ici-bas!

Dès qu’il possède un bien, le sort le lui retire.
Rien ne lui fut donné, dans ses rapides jours,
Pour qu’il s’en puisse faire une demeure, et dire:
C’est ici ma maison, mon champ et mes amours!

Il doit voir peu de temps tout ce que ses yeux voient;
Il vieillit sans soutiens.
Puisque ces choses sont, c’est qu’il faut qu’elles soient;

J’en conviens, j’en conviens!

Le monde est sombre, ô Dieu! l’immuable harmonie
Se compose des pleurs aussi bien que des chants;
L’homme n’est qu’un atome en cette ombre infinie,
Nuit où montent les bons, où tombent les méchants.

Je sais que vous avez bien autre chose à faire
Que de nous plaindre tous,
Et qu’un enfant qui meurt, désespoir de sa mère,
Ne vous fait rien, à vous!

Je sais que le fruit tombe au vent qui le secoue;
Que l’oiseau perd sa plume et la fleur son parfum;
Que la création est une grande roue
Qui ne peut se mouvoir sans écraser quelqu’un;

Les mois, les jours, les flots des mers, les yeux qui pleurent,
Passent sous le ciel bleu;
Il faut que l’herbe pousse et que les enfants meurent;
Je le sais, ô mon Dieu!

Dans vos cieux, au delà de la sphère des nues,
Au fond de cet azur immobile et dormant,
Peut-être faites-vous des choses inconnues
Où la douleur de l’homme entre comme élément.

Peut-être est-il utile à vos desseins sans nombre
Que des êtres charmants
S’en aillent, emportés par le tourbillon sombre
Des noirs événements.

Nos destins ténébreux vont sous des lois immenses
Que rien ne déconcerte et que rien n’attendrit.
Vous ne pouvez avoir de subites démences
Qui dérangent le monde, ô Dieu, tranquille esprit!

Je vous supplie, ô Dieu! de regarder mon âme,
Et de considérer
Qu’humble comme un enfant et doux comme une femme
Je viens vous adorer!

Considérez encor que j’avais, dès l’aurore,
Travaillé, combattu, pensé, marché, lutté,
Expliquant la nature à l’homme qui l’ignore,
Éclairant toute chose avec votre clarté;

Que j’avais, affrontant la haine et la colère,
Fait ma tâche ici-bas,
Que je ne pouvais pas m’attendre à ce salaire,
Que je ne pouvais pas

Prévoir que, vous aussi, sur ma tête qui ploie,
Vous appesantiriez votre bras triomphant,
Et que, vous qui voyiez comme j’ai peu de joie,
Vous me reprendriez si vite mon enfant!

Qu’une âme ainsi frappée à se plaindre est sujette,
Que j’ai pu blasphémer,
Et vous jeter mes cris comme un enfant qui jette
Une pierre à la mer!

Considérez qu’on doute, ô mon Dieu! quand on souffre,
Que l’oeil qui pleure trop finit par s’aveugler.
Qu’un être que son deuil plonge au plus noir du gouffre,
Quand il ne vous voit plus, ne peut vous contempler,

Et qu’il ne se peut pas que l’homme, lorsqu’il sombre
Dans les afflictions,
Ait présente à l’esprit la sérénité sombre
Des constellations!

Aujourd’hui, moi qui fus faible comme une mère,
Je me courbe à vos pieds devant vos cieux ouverts.

Je me sens éclairé dans ma douleur amère
Par un meilleur regard jeté sur l'univers.

Seigneur, je reconnais que l'homme est en délire,
S'il ose murmurer;
Je cesse d'accuser, je cesse de maudire,
Mais laissez-moi pleurer!

Hélas! laissez les pleurs couler de ma paupière,
Puisque vous avez fait les hommes pour cela!
Laissez-moi me pencher sur cette froide pierre
Et dire à mon enfant: Sens-tu que je suis là?

Laissez-moi lui parler, incliné sur ses restes,
Le soir, quand tout se tait,
Comme si, dans sa nuit rouvrant ses yeux célestes,
Cet ange m'écoutait!

Hélas! vers le passé tournant un oeil d'envie,
Sans que rien ici-bas puisse m'en consoler,
Je regarde toujours ce moment de ma vie
Où je l'ai vue ouvrir son aile et s'envoler!

Je verrai cet instant jusqu'à ce que je meure,
L'instant, pleurs superflus!
Où je criai: L'enfant que j'avais tout à l'heure,
Quoi donc! je ne l'ai plus!

Ne vous irritez pas que je sois de la sorte,
O mon Dieu! cette plaie a si longtemps saigné!
L'angoisse dans mon âme est toujours la plus forte,
Et mon coeur est soumis, mais n'est pas résigné.

Ne vous irritez pas! fronts que le deuil réclame,
Mortels sujets aux pleurs,
Il nous est malaisé de retirer notre âme
De ces grandes douleurs.

Voyez-vous, nos enfants nous sont bien nécessaires,
Seigneur; quand on a vu dans sa vie, un matin,
Au milieu des ennuis, des peines, des misères,
Et de l’ombre que fait sur nous notre destin,

Apparaître un enfant, tête chère et sacrée,
Petit être joyeux,
Si beau, qu’on a cru voir s’ouvrir à son entrée
Une porte des cieux;

Quand on a vu, seize ans, de cet autre soi-même
Croître la grâce aimable et la douce raison,
Lorsqu’on a reconnu que cet enfant qu’on aime
Fait le jour dans notre âme et dans notre maison,

Que c’est la seule joie ici-bas qui persiste
De tout ce qu’on rêva,
Considérez que c’est une chose bien triste
De le voir qui s’en va!

Villequier, 4 septembre 1847.

XVI

MORS

Je vis cette faucheuse. Elle était dans son champ.
Elle allait à grands pas moissonnant et fauchant,
Noir squelette laissant passer le crépuscule.
Dans l’ombre où l’on dirait que tout tremble et recule,
L’homme suivait des yeux les lueurs de la faulx.
Et les triomphateurs sous les arcs triomphaux
Tombaient; elle changeait en désert Babylone,
Le trône en l’échafaud et l’échafaud en trône,
Les roses en fumier, les enfants en oiseaux,
L’or en cendre, et les yeux des mères en ruisseaux.

Et les femmes criaient: — Rends-nous ce petit être.
Pour le faire mourir, pourquoi l'avoir fait naître? —
Ce n'était qu'un sanglot sur terre, en haut, en bas;
Des mains aux doigts osseux sortaient des noirs grabats;
Un vent froid bruissait dans les linceuls sans nombre;
Les peuples éperdus semblaient sous la faulx sombre
Un troupeau frissonnant qui dans l'ombre s'enfuit;
Tout était sous ses pieds deuil, épouvante et nuit.
Derrière elle, le front baigné de douces flammes,
Un ange souriant portait la gerbe d'âmes.

Mars 1854.

XVII

CHARLES VACQUERIE

Il ne sera pas dit que ce jeune homme, ô deuil!
Se sera de ses mains ouvert l'affreux cercueil
Où séjourne l'ombre abhorrée,
Hélas! et qu'il aura lui-même dans la mort
De ses jours généreux, encor pleins jusqu'au bord,
Renversé la coupe dorée,

Et que sa mère, pâle et perdant la raison,
Aura vu rapporter au seuil de sa maison,
Sous un suaire aux plis funèbres,
Ce fils, naguère encor pareil au jour qui naît,
Maintenant blême et froid, tel que la mort venait
De le faire pour les ténèbres;

Il ne sera pas dit qu'il sera mort ainsi,
Qu'il aura, coeur profond et par l'amour saisi,
Donné sa vie à ma colombe,
Et qu'il l'aura suivie au lieu morne et voilé,
Sans que la voix du père à genoux ait parlé

À cette âme dans cette tombe!

En présence de tant d’amour et de vertu,
Il ne sera pas dit que je me serai tu,
Moi qu’attendent les maux sans nombre!
Que je n’aurai point mis sur sa bière un flambeau,
Et que je n’aurai pas devant son noir tombeau
Fait asseoir une strophe sombre!

N’ayant pu la sauver, il a voulu mourir.
Sois béni, toi qui, jeune, à l’âge où vient s’offrir
L’espérance joyeuse encore,
Pouvant rester, survivre, épuiser tes printemps,
Ayant devant les yeux l’azur de tes vingt ans
Et le sourire de l’aurore,

À tout ce que promet la jeunesse, aux plaisirs,
Aux nouvelles amours, aux oublieux désirs
Par qui toute peine est bannie,
À l’avenir, trésor des jours à peine éclos,
À la vie, au soleil, préféras sous les flots
L’étreinte de cette agonie!

Oh! quelle sombre joie à cet être charmant
De se voir embrassée au suprême moment,
Par ton doux désespoir fidèle!
La pauvre âme a souri dans l’angoisse, en sentant
À travers l’eau sinistre et l’effroyable instant
Que tu t’en venais avec elle!

Leurs âmes se parlaient sous les vagues rumeurs.
— Que fais-tu? disait-elle. — Et lui disait: — Tu meurs
Il faut bien aussi que je meure! —
Et, les bras enlacés, doux couple frissonnant,
Ils se sont en allés dans l’ombre; et maintenant,
On entend le fleuve qui pleure.

Puisque tu fus si grand, puisque tu fus si doux
Que de vouloir mourir, jeune homme, amant, époux,
Qu’à jamais l’aube en ta nuit brille!
Aie à jamais sur toi l’ombre de Dieu penché!
Sois béni sous la pierre où te voilà couché!
Dors, mon fils, auprès de ma fille!

Sois béni! que la brise et que l’oiseau des bois,
Passants mystérieux, de leur plus douce voix
Te parlent dans ta maison sombre!
Que la source te pleure avec sa goutte d’eau!
Que le frais liseron se glisse en ton tombeau
Comme une caresse de l’ombre!

Oh! s’immoler, sortir avec l’ange qui sort,
Suivre ce qu’on aima dans l’horreur de la mort,
Dans le sépulcre ou sur les claies,
Donner ses jours, son sang et ses illusions!... —
Jésus baise en pleurant ces saintes actions
Avec les lèvres de ses plaies.

Rien n’égale ici-bas, rien n’atteint sous les cieux
Ces héros, doucement saignants et radieux,
Amour, qui n’ont que toi pour règle;
Le génie à l’oeil fixe, au vaste élan vainqueur,
Lui-même est dépassé par ces essors du coeur;
L’ange vole plus haut que l’aigle.

Dors! — O mes douloureux et sombres bien-aimés!
Dormez le chaste hymen du sépulcre! dormez!
Dormez au bruit du flot qui gronde,
Tandis que l’homme souffre, et que le vent lointain
Chasse les noirs vivants à travers le destin,
Et les marins à travers l’onde!

Ou plutôt, car la mort n’est pas un lourd sommeil,
Envolez-vous tous deux dans l’abîme vermeil,

Dans les profonds gouffres de joie,
Où le juste qui meurt semble un soleil levant,
Où la mort au front pâle est comme un lys vivant,
Où l’ange frissonnant flamboie!

Fuyez, mes doux oiseaux! évadez-vous tous deux
Loin de notre nuit froide et loin du mal hideux!
Franchissez l’éther d’un coup d’aile!
Volez loin de ce monde, âpre hiver sans clarté,
Vers cette radieuse et bleue éternité,
Dont l’âme humaine est l’hirondelle!

O chers êtres absents, on ne vous verra plus
Marcher au vert penchant des coteaux chevelus,
Disant tout bas de douces choses!
Dans le mois des chansons, des nids et des lilas,
Vous n’irez plus semant des sourires, hélas!
Vous n’irez plus cueillant des roses!

On ne vous verra plus, dans ces sentiers joyeux,
Errer, et, comme si vous évitiez les yeux
De l’horizon vaste et superbe,
Chercher l’obscur asile et le taillis profond
Où passent des rayons qui tremblent et qui font
Des taches de soleil sur l’herbe!

Villequier, Caudebec, et tous ces frais vallons,
Ne vous entendront plus vous écrier: «Allons,
Le vent est bon, la Seine est belle!»
Comme ces lieux charmants vont être pleins d’ennui!
Les hardis goëlands ne diront plus: C’est lui!
Les fleurs ne diront plus: C’est elle!

Dieu, qui ferme la vie et rouvre l’idéal,
Fait flotter à jamais votre lit nuptial
Sous le grand dôme aux clairs pilastres;
En vous prenant la terre, il vous prit les douleurs;

Ce père souriant, pour les champs pleins de fleurs,
Vous donne les cieux remplis d’astres!

Allez des esprits purs accroître la tribu.
De cette coupe amère où vous n’avez pas bu,
Hélas! nous viderons le reste.
Pendant que nous pleurons, de sanglots abreuvés,
Vous, heureux, enivrés de vous-mêmes, vivez
Dans l’éblouissement céleste!

Vivez! aimez! ayez les bonheurs infinis.
Oh! les anges pensifs, bénissant et bénis,
Savent seuls, sous les sacrés voiles,
Ce qu’il entre d’extase, et d’ombre, et de ciel bleu,
Dans l’éternel baiser de deux âmes que Dieu
Tout à coup change en deux étoiles!

Jersey, 4 septembre 1852.

LIVRE CINQUIÈME: EN MARCHE

À AUG. V.

Et toi, son frère, sois le frère de mes fils.
Coeur fier, qui du destin relèves les défis,
Suis à côté de moi la voie inexorable.
Que ta mère au front gris soit ma soeur vénérable!
Ton frère dort couché dans le sépulcre noir;
Nous, dans la nuit du sort, dans l'ombre du devoir,
Marchons à la clarté qui sort de cette pierre.
Qu'il dorme, voyant l'aube à travers sa paupière!
Un jour, quand on lira nos temps mystérieux,
Les songeurs attendris promèneront leurs yeux
De toi, le dévouement, à lui, le sacrifice.
Nous habitons du sphinx le lugubre édifice;
Nous sommes, coeurs liés au morne piédestal,
Tous la fatale énigme et tous le mot fatal.
Ah! famille! ah! douleur! ô soeur! ô mère! ô veuve!
O sombres lieux, qu'emplit le murmure du fleuve!
Chaste tombe jumelle au pied du coteau vert!
Poëte, quand mon sort s'est brusquement ouvert,
Tu n'as pas reculé devant les noires portes,
Et, sans pâlir, avec le flambeau que tu portes,
Tes chants, ton avenir que l'absence interrompt,
Et le frémissement lumineux de ton front,
Trouvant la chute belle et le malheur propice,
Calme, tu t'es jeté dans le grand précipice!
Hélas! c'est par les deuils que nous nous enchaînons.
O frères, que vos noms soient mêlés à nos noms!
Dieu vous fait des rayons de toutes nos ténèbres.
Car vous êtes entrés sous nos voûtes funèbres;
Car vous avez été tous deux vaillants et doux;
Car vous avez tous deux, vous rapprochant de nous
À l'heure où vers nos fronts roulait le gouffre d'ombre,
Accepté notre sort dans ce qu'il a de sombre,

Et suivi, dédaignant l'abîme et le péril,
Lui, la fille au tombeau, toi, le père à l'exil!

Jersey, Marine-Terrace, 4 septembre 1852.

II

AU FILS D'UN POËTE

Enfant, laisse aux mers inquiètes
Le naufragé, tribun ou roi;
Laisse s'en aller les poëtes!
La poésie est près de toi.

Elle t'échauffe, elle t'inspire,
O cher enfant, doux alcyon,
Car ta mère en est le sourire,
Et ton père en est le rayon.

Les yeux en pleurs, tu me demandes
Où je vais, et pourquoi je pars.
Je n'en sais rien; les mers sont grandes;
L'exil s'ouvre de toutes parts.

Ce que Dieu nous donne, il nous l'ôte.
Adieu, patrie! adieu, Sion!
Le proscrit n'est pas même un hôte,
Enfant, c'est une vision.

Il entre, il s'assied, puis se lève,
Reprend son bâton et s'en va.
Sa vie erre de grève en grève
Sous le souffle de Jéhovah.

Il fuit sur les vagues profondes,
Sans repos, toujours en avant.
Qu'importe ce qu'en font les ondes!

Qu’importe ce qu’en fait le vent

Garde, enfant, dans ta jeune tête
Ce souvenir mystérieux,
Tu l’as vu dans une tempête
Passer comme l’éclair des deux.

Son âme aux chocs habituée
Traversait l’orage et le bruit.
D’où sortait-il? De la nuée.
Où s’enfonçait-il? Dans la nuit.

Paris, juillet 1838.

III

ÉCRIT EN 1846

«... Je vous ai vu enfant, monsieur, chez votre respectable mère, et nous sommes même un peu parents, je crois. J’ai applaudi à vos premières odes, *la Vendée, Louis XVII*... Dès 1827, dans votre ode dite *À la colonne*, vous désertiez les saines doctrines, vous abjuriez la légitimité; la faction libérale battait des mains à votre apostasie. J’en gémissais... Vous êtes aujourd’hui, monsieur, en démagogie pure, en plein jacobinisme. Votre discours d’anarchiste sur les affaires de Gallicie est plus digne du tréteau d’une Convention que de la tribune d’une chambre des pairs. Vous en êtes à la carmagnole... Vous vous perdez, je vous le dis. Quelle est donc votre ambition? Depuis ces beaux jours de votre adolescence monarchique, qu’avez-vous fait? où allez-vous?...»

(Le marquis du C. d’E... — *Lettre à Victor Hugo*, Paris, 1846.)

I

Marquis, je m’en souviens, vous veniez chez ma mère.
Vous me faisiez parfois réciter ma grammaire;
Vous m’apportiez toujours quelque bonbon exquis;
Et nous étions cousins quand on était marquis.
Vous étiez vieux, j’étais enfant; contre vos jambes
Vous me preniez, et puis, entre deux dithyrambes
En l’honneur de Coblentz et des rois, vous contiez
Quelque histoire de loups, de peuples châtiés,
D’ogres, de jacobins, authentique et formelle,
Que j’avalais avec vos bonbons, pêle-mêle,
Et que je dévorais de fort bon appétit
Quand j’étais royaliste et quand j’étais petit.

J’étais un doux enfant, le grain d’un honnête homme.
Quand, plein d’illusions, crédule, simple, en somme,
Droit et pur, mes deux yeux sur l’idéal ouverts,
Je bégayais, songeur naïf, mes premiers vers,
Marquis, vous leur trouviez un arrière-goût fauve,
Les Grâces vous ayant nourri dans leur alcôve;
Mais vous disiez: «Pas mal! bien! c’est quelqu’un qui naît!»
Et, souvenir sacré! ma mère rayonnait.

Je me rappelle encor de quel accent ma mère
Vous disait: «Bonjour.» Aube! avril! joie éphémère!
Où donc est ce sourire? où donc est cette voix?
Vous fuyez donc ainsi que les feuilles des bois,
O baisers d’une mère! aujourd’hui, mon front sombre,
Le même front, est là, pensif, avec de l’ombre,
Et les baisers de moins et les rides de plus!

Vous aviez de l’esprit, marquis. Flux et reflux,
Heur, malheur, vous avaient laissé l’âme assez nette;
Riche, pauvre, écuyer de Marie-Antoinette,
Émigré, vous aviez, dans ce temps incertain,

Bien supporté le chaud et le froid du destin.
Vous haïssiez Rousseau, mais vous aimiez Voltaire.
Pigault-Lebrun allait à votre goût austère,
Mais Diderot était digne du pilori.
Vous détestiez, c’est vrai, madame Dubarry,
Tout en divinisant Gabrielle d’Estrée.
Pas plus que Sévigné, la marquise lettrée,
Ne s’étonnait de voir, douce femme rêvant,
Blêmir au clair de lune et trembler dans le vent,
Aux arbres du chemin, parmi les feuilles jaunes,
Les paysans pendus par ce bon duc de Chaulnes,
Vous ne preniez souci des manants qu’on abat
Par la force, et du pauvre écrasé sous le bât.
Avant quatre-vingt-neuf, galant incendiaire,
Vous portiez votre épée en quart de civadière;
La poudre blanchissait votre dos de velours;
Vous marchiez sur le peuple à pas légers — et lourds.

Quoique les vieux abus n’eussent rien qui vous blesse,
Jeune, vous aviez eu, vous, toute la noblesse,
Montmorency, Choiseul, Noaille, esprits charmants,
Avec la royauté des querelles d’amants;
Brouilles, roucoulements; Bérénice avec Tite.
La Révolution vous plut toute petite;
Vous emboîtiez le pas derrière Talleyrand;
Le monstre vous sembla d’abord fort transparent,
Et vous l’aviez tenu sur les fonts de baptême.
Joyeux, vous aviez dit au nouveau-né: Je t’aime!
Ligue ou Fronde, remède au déficit, protêt,
Vous ne saviez pas trop au fond ce que c’était;
Mais vous battiez des mains gaîment, quand Lafayette
Fit à Léviathan sa première layette.
Plus tard, la peur vous prit quand surgit le flambeau.
Vous vîtes la beauté du tigre Mirabeau.
Vous nous disiez, le soir, près du feu qui pétille,
Paris de sa poitrine arrachant la Bastille,
Le faubourg Saint-Antoine accourant en sabots,

Et ce grand peuple, ainsi qu'un spectre des tombeaux,
Sortant, tout effaré, de son antique opprobre,
Et le vingt juin, le dix août, le six octobre,
Et vous nous récitiez les quatrains que Boufflers,
Mêlait en souriant à ces blêmes éclairs.

Car vous étiez de ceux qui, d'abord, ne comprirent
Ni le flot, ni la nuit, ni la France, et qui rirent;
Qui prenaient tout cela pour des jeux innocents;
Qui, dans l'amas plaintif des siècles rugissants
Et des hommes hagards, ne voyaient qu'une meute;
Qui, légers, à la foule, à la faim, à l'émeute,
Donnaient à deviner l'énigme du salon;
Et qui, quand le ciel noir s'emplissait d'aquilon,
Quand, accroupie au seuil du mystère insondable
La Révolution se dressait formidable,
Sceptiques, sans voir l'ongle et l'oeil fauve qui luit,
Distinguant mal sa face étrange dans la nuit,
Presque prêts à railler l'obscurité difforme,
Jouaient à la charade avec le sphinx énorme.

Vous nous disiez: «Quel deuil! les gueux, les mécontents,
Ont fait rage; on n'a pas su s'arrêter à temps.
Une transaction eût tout sauvé peut-être.
Ne peut-on être libre et le roi rester maître?
Le peuple conservant le trône eût été grand.»
Puis vous deveniez triste et morne; et, murmurant:
«Les plus sages n'ont pu sauver ce bon vieux trône.
Tout est mort; ces grands rois, ce Paris Babylone,
Montespan et Marly, Maintenon et Saint-Cyr!»
Vous pleuriez. — Et, grand Dieu! pouvaient-ils réussir,
Ces hommes qui voulaient, combinant vingt régimes
La loi qui nous froissa, l'abus dont nous rougîmes,
Vieux codes, vieilles moeurs, droit divin, nation,
Chausser de royauté la Révolution?
La patte du lion creva cette pantoufle!

II

Puis vous m'avez perdu de vue; un vent qui souffle
Disperse nos destins, nos jours, notre raison,
Nos coeurs, aux quatre coins du livide horizon;
Chaque homme dans sa nuit s'en va vers sa lumière.
La seconde âme en nous se greffe à la première;
Toujours la même tige avec une autre fleur.
J'ai connu le combat, le labeur, la douleur,
Les faux amis, ces noeuds qui deviennent couleuvres;
J'ai porté deuils sur deuils; j'ai mis oeuvres sur oeuvres;
Vous ayant oublié, je ne le cache pas,
Marquis; soudain j'entends dans ma maison un pas,
C'est le vôtre, et j'entends une voix, c'est la vôtre,
Qui m'appelle apostat, moi qui me crus apôtre!
Oui, c'est bien vous; ayant peur jusqu'à la fureur,
Fronsac vieux, le marquis happé par la Terreur,
Haranguant à mi-corps dans l'hydre qui l'avale.
L'âge ayant entre nous conservé l'intervalle
Oui fait que l'homme reste enfant pour le vieillard,
Ne me voyant d'ailleurs qu'à travers un brouillard,
Vous criez, l'oeil hagard et vous fâchant tout rouge:
«Ah çà! qu'est-ce que c'est que ce brigand? Il bouge!»
Et du poing, non du doigt, vous montrez vos aïeux;
Et vous me rappelez ma mère, furieux.
— Je vous baise, ô pieds froids de ma mère endormie! —
Et, vous exclamant: «Honte! anarchie! infamie!
Siècle effroyable où nul ne veut se tenir coi!»
Me demandant comment, me demandant pourquoi,
Remuant tous les morts qui gisent sous la pierre,
Citant Lambesc, Marat, Charette et Robespierre,
Vous me dites d'un ton qui n'a plus rien d'urbain:
«Ce gueux est libéral! ce monstre est jacobin!
Sa voix à des chansons de carrefour s'éraille.
Pourquoi regardes-tu par-dessus la muraille?
Où vas-tu? d'où viens-tu? qui te rend si hardi?
Depuis qu'on ne t'a vu, qu'as-tu fait?»

J’ai grandi.

Quoi! parce que je suis né dans un groupe d’hommes
Qui ne voyaient qu’enfers, Gomorrhes et Sodomes,
Hors des anciennes moeurs et des antiques fois;
Quoi! parce que ma mère, en Vendée autrefois,
Sauva dans un seul jour la vie à douze prêtres;
Parce qu’enfant sorti de l’ombre des ancêtres,
Je n’ai su tout d’abord que ce qu’ils m’ont appris,
Qu’oiseau dans le passé comme en un filet pris,
Avant de m’échapper à travers le bocage,
J’ai dû laisser pousser mes plumes dans ma cage;
Parce que j’ai pleuré, — j’en pleure encor, qui sait? —
Sur ce pauvre petit nommé Louis Dix-Sept;
Parce qu’adolescent, âme à faux jour guidée,
J’ai trop peu vu la France et trop vu la Vendée;
Parce que j’ai loué l’héroïsme breton,
Chouan et non Marceau, Stofflet et non Danton,
Que les grands paysans m’ont caché les grands hommes,
Et que j’ai fort mal lu, d’abord, l’ère où nous sommes,
Parce que j’ai vagi des chants de royauté,
Suis-je à toujours rivé dans l’imbécillité?
Dois-je crier: Arrière! à mon siècle; — à l’idée:
Non! — à la vérité: Va-t’en, dévergondée! —
L’arbre doit-il pour moi n’être qu’un goupillon?
Au sein de la nature, immense tourbillon,
Dois-je vivre, portant l’ignorance en écharpe,
Cloîtré dans Loriquet et muré dans Laharpe!
Dois-je exister sans être et regarder sans voir?
Et faut-il qu’à jamais pour moi, quand vient le soir,
Au lieu de s’étoiler le ciel se fleurdelise?

III

Car le roi masque Dieu même dans son église,
L’azur.

IV

Écoutez-moi. J’ai vécu; j’ai songé.
La vie en larmes m’a doucement corrigé.
Vous teniez mon berceau dans vos mains, et vous fîtes
Ma pensée et ma tête en vos rêves confites.
Hélas! j’étais la roue et vous étiez l’essieu.
Sur la vérité sainte, et la justice, et Dieu,
Sur toutes les clartés que la raison nous donne,
Par vous, par vos pareils, — et je vous le pardonne,
Marquis, — j’avais été tout de travers placé.
J’étais en porte-à-faux, je me suis redressé.
La pensée est le droit sévère de la vie.
Dieu prend par la main l’homme enfant, et le convie
A la classe qu’au fond des champs, au sein des bois,
Il fait dans l’ombre à tous les êtres à la fois.
J’ai pensé. J’ai rêvé près des flots, dans les herbes,
Et les premiers courroux de mes odes imberbes
Sont d’eux-mêmes en marchant tombés derrière moi.
La nature devient ma joie et mon effroi;
Oui, dans le même temps où vous faussiez ma lyre,
Marquis, je m’échappais et j’apprenais à lire
Dans cet hiéroglyphe énorme: l’univers.
Oui, j’allais feuilleter les champs tout grands ouverts;
Tout enfant, j’essayais d’épeler cette bible
Où se mêle, éperdu, le charmant au terrible:
Livre écrit dans l’azur, sur l’onde et le chemin,
Avec la fleur, le vent, l’étoile; et qu’en sa main
Tient la création au regard de statue;
Prodigieux poëme où la foudre accentue
La nuit, où l’océan souligne l’infini.
Aux champs, entre les bras du grand chêne béni,
J’étais plus fort, j’étais plus doux, j’étais plus libre;
Je me mettais avec le monde en équilibre;
Je tâchais de savoir, tremblant, pâle, ébloui,
Si c’est Non que dit l’ombre à l’astre qui dit Oui;

Je cherchais à saisir le sens des phrases sombres
Qu’écrivaient sous mes yeux les formes et les nombres;
J’ai vu partout grandeur, vie, amour, liberté;
Et j’ai dit: — Texte: Dieu; contre-sens: royauté. —

La nature est un drame avec des personnages:
J’y vivais: j’écoutais, comme des témoignages,
L’oiseau, le lys, l’eau vive et la nuit qui tombait.
Puis je me suis penché sur l’homme, autre alphabet.

Le mal m’est apparu, puissant, joyeux, robuste,
Triomphant; je n’avais qu’une soif: être juste;
Comme on arrête un gueux volant sur le chemin,
Justicier indigné, j’ai pris le coeur humain
Au collet, et j’ai dit: Pourquoi le fiel, l’envie,
La haine? Et j’ai vidé les poches de la vie.
Je n’ai trouvé dedans que deuil, misère, ennui.
J’ai vu le loup mangeant l’agneau, dire: Il m’a nui!
Le vrai boitant; l’erreur haute de cent coudées;
Tous les cailloux jetés à toutes les idées.
Hélas! j’ai vu la nuit reine, et, de fers chargés,
Christ, Socrate, Jean Huss, Colomb; les préjugés
Sont pareils aux buissons que dans la solitude
On brise pour passer: toute la multitude
Se redresse et vous mord pendant qu’on en courbe un.
Ah! malheur à l’apôtre et malheur au tribun!
On avait eu bien soin de me cacher l’histoire;
J’ai lu; j’ai comparé l’aube avec la nuit noire
Et les quatre-vingt-treize aux Saint-Barthélemy;
Car ce quatre-vingt-treize où vous avez frémi,
Qui dut être, et que rien ne peut plus faire éclore,
C’est la lueur de sang qui se mêle à l’aurore.
Les Révolutions, qui viennent tout venger,
Font un bien éternel dans leur mal passager.
Les Révolutions ne sont que la formule
De l’horreur qui, pendant vingt règnes s’accumule.
Quand la souffrance a pris de lugubres ampleurs;

Quand les maîtres longtemps ont fait, sur l’homme en pleurs
Tourner le Bas-Empire avec le Moyen Age,
Du midi dans le nord formidable engrenage;
Quand l’histoire n’est plus qu’un tas noir de tombeaux,
De Crécys, de Rosbachs, becquetés des corbeaux;
Quand le pied des méchants règne et courbe la tête
Du pauvre partageant dans l’auge avec la bête;
Lorsqu’on voit aux deux bouts de l’affreuse Babel
Louis Onze et Tristan, Louis Quinze et Lebel;
Quand le harem est prince et l’échafaud ministre;
Quand toute chair gémit; quand la lune sinistre
Trouve qu’assez longtemps l’herbe humaine a fléchi,
Et qu’assez d’ossements aux gibets ont blanchi;
Quand le sang de Jésus tombe en vain, goutte à goutte,
Depuis dix-huit cents ans, dans l’ombre qui l’écoute;
Quand l’ignorance a même aveuglé l’avenir;
Quand, ne pouvant plus rien saisir et rien tenir,
L’espérance n’est plus que le tronçon de l’homme;
Quand partout le supplice à la fois se consomme,
Quand la guerre est partout, quand la haine est partout,
Alors, subitement, un jour, debout, debout!
Les réclamations de l’ombre misérable,
La géante douleur, spectre incommensurable,
Sortent du gouffre; un cri s’étend sur les hauteurs;
Les mondes sociaux heurtent leurs équateurs;
Tout le bagne effrayant des parias se lève;
Et l’on entend sonner les fouets, les fers, le glaive,
Le meurtre, le sanglot, la faim, le hurlement,
Tout le bruit du passé, dans ce déchaînement!
Dieu dit au peuple: Va! l’ardent tocsin qui râle,
Secoue avec sa corde obscure et sépulcrale
L’église et son clocher, le Louvre et son beffroi;
Luther brise le pape et Mirabeau le roi!
Tout est dit. C’est ainsi que les vieux mondes croulent.
Oh! l’heure vient toujours! des flots sourds au loin roulent.
À travers les rumeurs, les cadavres, les deuils,
L’écume, et les sommets qui deviennent écueils,

Les siècles devant eux poussent, désespérées,
Les révolutions, monstrueuses marées,
Océans faits des pleurs de tout le genre humain.

V

Ce sont les rois qui font les gouffres; mais la main
Qui sema ne veut pas accepter la récolte,
Le fer dit que le sang qui jaillit, se révolte.

Voilà ce que m’apprit l’histoire. Oui, c’est cruel,
Ma raison a tué mon royalisme en duel.
Me voici jacobin. Que veut-on que j’y fasse?
Le revers du louis dont vous aimez la face,
M’a fait peur. En allant librement devant moi,
En marchant, je le sais, j’afflige votre foi,
Votre religion, votre cause éternelle,
Vos dogmes, vos aïeux, vos dieux, votre flanelle,
Et dans vos bons vieux os, faits d’immobilité,
Le rhumatisme antique appelé royauté.

Je n’y puis rien. Malgré menins et majordomes,
Je ne crois plus aux rois, propriétaires d’hommes;
N’y croyant plus, je fais mon devoir, je le dis.
Marc-Aurèle écrivait: «Je me trompai jadis;
Mais je ne laisse pas, allant au juste, au sage,
Mes erreurs d’autrefois me barrer le passage.»
Je ne suis qu’un atome et je fais comme lui;
Marquis, depuis vingt ans, je n’ai, comme aujourd’hui,
Qu’une idée en l’esprit: servir la cause humaine.
La vie est une cour d’assises; on amène
Les faibles à la barre accouplés aux pervers.
J’ai, dans le livre, avec le drame, en prose, en vers
Plaidé pour les petits et pour les misérables,
Suppliant les heureux et les inexorables;
J’ai réhabilité le bouffon, l’histrion,
Tous les damnés humains, Triboulet, Marion,

Le laquais, le forçat et la prostituée;
Et j'ai collé ma bouche à toute âme tuée,
Comme font les enfants, anges aux cheveux d'or,
Sur la mouche qui meurt, pour qu'elle vole encor.
Je me suis incliné sur tout ce qui chancelle,
Tendre, et j'ai demandé la grâce universelle;
Et, comme j'irritais beaucoup de gens ainsi,
Tandis qu'en bas peut-être on me disait: Merci,
J'ai recueilli souvent, passant dans les nuées,
L'applaudissement fauve et sombre des huées;
J'ai réclamé des droits pour la femme et l'enfant;
J'ai tâché d'éclairer l'homme en le réchauffant;
J'allais criant: Science! écriture! parole!
Je voulais résorber le bagne par l'école;
Les coupables pour moi n'étaient que des témoins.
Rêvant tous les progrès, je voyais luire moins
Que le front de Paris la tiare de Rome.
J'ai vu l'esprit humain libre, et le coeur de l'homme
Esclave; et j'ai voulu l'affranchir à son tour,
Et j'ai tâché de mettre en liberté l'amour.
Enfin, j'ai fait la guerre à la Grève homicide,
J'ai combattu la mort, comme l'antique Alcide;
Et me voilà; marchant toujours, ayant conquis,
Perdu, lutté, souffert. — Encore un mot, marquis,
Puisque nous sommes là causant entre deux portes.
On peut être appelé renégat de deux sortes:
En se faisant païen, en se faisant chrétien.
L'erreur est d'un aimable et galant entretien.
Qu'on la quitte, elle met les deux poings sur sa hanche.
La vérité, si douce aux bons, mais rude et franche,
Quand pour l'or, le pouvoir, la pourpre qu'on revêt,
On la trahit, devient le spectre du chevet.
L'une est la harengère, et l'autre est l'euménide.
Et ne nous fâchons point. Bonjour, Épiménide.

Le passé ne veut pas s'en aller. Il revient
Sans cesse sur ses pas, reveut, reprend, retient,

Use à tout ressaisir ses ongles noirs; fait rage;
Il gonfle son vieux flot, souffle son vieil orage,
Vomit sa vieille nuit, crie: À bas! crie: À mort!
Pleure, tonne, tempête, éclate, hurle, mord.
L’avenir souriant lui dit: Passe, bonhomme.

L’immense renégat d’Hier, marquis, se nomme
Demain; mai tourne bride et plante là l’hiver;
Qu’est-ce qu’un papillon? le déserteur du ver;
Falstaff se range? il est l’apostat des ribotes;
Mes pieds, ces renégats, quittent mes vieilles bottes;
Ah! le doux renégat des haines, c’est l’amour.
À l’heure où, débordant d’incendie et de jour,
Splendide, il s’évada de leurs cachots funèbres,
Le soleil frémissant renia les ténèbres.

O marquis peu semblable aux anciens barons loups,
O Français renégat du Celte, embrassons-nous.
Vous voyez bien, marquis, que vous aviez trop d’ire.

VI

Rien, au fond de mon coeur, puisqu’il faut le redire,
Non, rien n’a varié; je suis toujours celui
Qui va droit au devoir, dès que l’honnête a lui,
Qui, comme Job, frissonne aux vents, fragile arbuste,
Mais veut le bien, le vrai, le beau, le grand, le juste.
Je suis cet homme-là, je suis cet enfant-là.
Seulement, un matin, mon esprit s’envola,
Je vis l’espace large et pur qui nous réclame;
L’horizon a changé, marquis, mais non pas l’âme.
Rien au dedans de moi, mais tout autour de moi.
L’histoire m’apparut, et je compris la loi
Des générations, cherchant Dieu, portant l’arche,
Et montant l’escalier immense marche à marche.
Je restai le même oeil, voyant un autre ciel.
Est-ce ma faute, à moi, si l’azur éternel

Est plus grand et plus bleu qu'un plafond de Versailles?
Est-ce ma faute, à moi, mon Dieu, si tu tressailles
Dans mon coeur frémissant, à ce cri: Liberté!
L'oeil de cet homme a plus d'aurore et de clarté,
Tant pis! prenez-vous-en à l'aube solennelle.
C'est la faute au soleil et non à la prunelle.
Vous dites: Où vas-tu? Je l'ignore; et j'y vais.
Quand le chemin est droit, jamais il n'est mauvais.
J'ai devant moi le jour et j'ai la nuit derrière;
Et cela me suffit; je brise la barrière.
Je vois, et rien de plus; je crois, et rien de moins.
Mon avenir à moi n'est pas un de mes soins.
Les hommes du passé, les combattants de l'ombre,
M'assaillent; je tiens tête, et sans compter leur nombre,
À ce choc inégal et parfois hasardeux.
Mais Longwood et Goritz [1] m'en sont témoins tous deux,
Jamais je n'outrageai la proscription sainte.
Le malheur, c'est la nuit; dans cette auguste enceinte,
Les hommes et les cieux paraissent étoilés.
Les derniers rois l'ont su quand ils s'en sont allés.
Jamais je ne refuse, alors que le soir tombe,
Mes larmes à l'exil, mes genoux à la tombe;
J'ai toujours consolé qui s'est évanoui;
Et, dans leurs noirs cercueils, leur tête me dit oui.
Ma mère aussi le sait! et de plus, avec joie,
Elle sait les devoirs nouveaux que Dieu m'envoie;
Car, étant dans la fosse, elle aussi voit le vrai.
Oui, l'homme sur la terre est un ange à l'essai;
Aimons! servons! aidons! luttons! souffrons! Ma mère
Sait qu'à présent je vis hors de toute chimère;
Elle sait que mes yeux au progrès sont ouverts,
Que j'attends les périls, l'épreuve, les revers,
Que je suis toujours prêt, et que je hâte l'heure
De ce grand lendemain: l'humanité meilleure!
Qu'heureux, triste, applaudi, chassé, vaincu, vainqueur,
Rien de ce but profond ne distraira mon coeur,
Ma volonté, mes pas, mes cris, mes voeux, ma flamme!

O saint tombeau, tu vois dans le fond de mon âme!

Oh! jamais, quel que soit le sort, le deuil, l’affront,
La conscience en moi ne baissera le front;
Elle marche, sereine, indestructible et fière;
Car j’aperçois toujours, conseil lointain, lumière,
À travers mon destin, quel que soit le moment,
Quel que soit le désastre ou l’éblouissement,
Dans le bruit, dans le vent orageux qui m’emporte,
Dans l’aube, dans la nuit, l’oeil de ma mère morte!

Paris, juin 1846.

ÉCRIT EN 1855

J’ajoute un post-scriptum après neuf ans. J’écoute:
Êtes-vous toujours là? Vous êtes mort sans doute,
Marquis; mais d’où je suis on peut parler aux morts.
Ah! votre cercueil s’ouvre: — Où donc es-tu? — Dehors.
Comme vous. — Es-tu mort? — Presque. J’habite l’ombre;
Je suis sur un rocher qu’environne l’eau sombre,
Écueil rongé des flots, de ténèbres chargé,
Où s’assied, ruisselant, le blême naufragé.
— Eh bien, me dites-vous, après? — La solitude
Autour de moi toujours a la même attitude;
Je ne vois que l’abîme, et la mer, et les cieux,
Et les nuages noirs qui vont silencieux;
Mon toit, la nuit, frissonne, et l’ouragan le mêle
Aux souffles effrénés de l’onde et de la grêle;
Quelqu’un semble clouer un crêpe à l’horizon;
L’insulte bat de loin le seuil de ma maison;
Le roc croule sous moi dès que mon pied s’y pose;
Le vent semble avoir peur de m’approcher, et n’ose
Me dire qu’en baissant la voix et qu’à demi
L’adieu mystérieux que me jette un ami.
La rumeur des vivants s’éteint diminuée.

Tout ce que j’ai rêvé s’est envolé, nuée!
Sur mes jours devenus fantômes, pâle et seul,
Je regarde tomber l’infini, ce linceul. —
Et vous dites: — Après? — Sous un mont qui surplombe,
Près des flots, j’ai marqué la place de ma tombe;
Ici, le bruit du gouffre est tout ce qu’on entend;
Tout est horreur et nuit. — Après? — Je suis content.

Jersey, janvier 1855.

IV

La source tombait du rocher
Goutte à goutte à la mer affreuse.
L’Océan, fatal au nocher,
Lui dit: «Que me veux-tu, pleureuse?

«Je suis la tempête et l’effroi;
Je finis où le ciel commence.
Est-ce que j’ai besoin de toi,
Petite, moi qui suis l’immense?»

La source dit au gouffre amer:
«Je te donne, sans bruit ni gloire,
Ce qui te manque, ô vaste mer!
Une goutte d’eau qu’on peut boire.»

Avril 1854.

V

À MADEMOISELLE LOUISE B.

Ô vous l’âme profonde! ô vous la sainte lyre!
Vous souvient-il des temps d’extase et de délire,
Et des jeux triomphants,
Et du soir qui tombait des collines prochaines?
Vous souvient-il des jours? Vous souvient-il des chênes

Et des petits enfants?

Et vous rappelez-vous les amis et la table,
Et le rire éclatant du père respectable,
Et nos cris querelleurs,
Le pré, l’étang, la barque, et la lune, et la brise,
Et les chants qui sortaient de votre coeur, Louise,
En attendant les pleurs!

Le parc avait des fleurs et n’avait pas de marbres.
Oh! comme il était beau, le vieillard sous les arbres!
Je le voyais parfois
Dès l’aube sur un banc s’asseoir tenant un livre;
Je sentais, j’entendais l’ombre autour de lui vivre
Et chanter dans les bois!

Il lisait, puis dormait au baiser de l’aurore;
Et je le regardais dormir, plus calme encore
Que ce paisible lieu,
Avec son front serein d’où sortait une flamme,
Son livre ouvert devant le soleil, et son âme
Ouverte devant Dieu!

Et du fond de leur nid, sous l’orme et sous l’érable,
Les oiseaux admiraient sa tête vénérable,
Et, gais chanteurs tremblants,
Ils guettaient, s’approchaient, et souhaitaient dans l’ombre
D’avoir, pour augmenter la douceur du nid sombre,
Un de ses cheveux blancs!

Puis il se réveillait, s’en allait vers la grille,
S’arrêtait pour parler à ma petite fille,
Et ces temps sont passés!
Le vieillard et l’enfant jasaient de mille choses ...
Vous ne voyiez donc pas ces deux êtres, ô roses,
Que vous refleurissez!

Avez-vous bien le coeur, ô roses, de renaître
Dans le même bosquet, sous la même fenêtre?
Où sont-ils, ces fronts purs?
N’était-ce pas vos soeurs, ces deux âmes perdues
Qui vivaient, et se sont si vite confondues
Aux éternels azurs!

Est-ce que leur sourire, est-ce que leurs paroles,
Ô roses, n’allaient pas réjouir vos corolles
Dans l’air silencieux,
Et ne s’ajoutaient pas à vos chastes délices,
Et ne devenaient pas parfums dans vos calices,
Et rayons dans vos cieux?

Ingrates! vous n’avez ni regrets, ni mémoire.
Vous vous réjouissez dans toute votre gloire;
Vous n’avez point pâli.
Ah! je ne suis qu’un homme et qu’un roseau qui ploie
Mais je ne voudrais pas, quant à moi, d’une joie
Faite de tant d’oubli!

Oh! qu’est-ce que le sort a fait de tout ce rêve?
Où donc a-t-il jeté l’humble coeur qui s’élève,
Le foyer réchauffant,
Ô Louise, et la vierge, et le vieillard prospère,
Et tous ces voeux profonds, de moi pour votre père,
De vous pour mon enfant!

Où sont-ils, les amis de ce temps que j’adore?
Ceux qu’a pris l’ombre, et ceux qui ne sont pas encore
Tombés au flot sans bords;
Eux, les évanouis, qu’un autre ciel réclame,
Et vous, les demeurés, qui vivez dans mon âme,
Mais pas plus que les morts!

Quelquefois, je voyais, de la colline en face,
Mes quatre enfants jouer, tableau que rien n’efface!

Et j'entendais leurs chants;
Émumu, je contemplais ces aubes de moi-même
Qui se levaient là-bas dans la douceur suprême
Des vallons et des champs!

Ils couraient, s'appelaient dans les fleurs; et les femmes
Se mêlaient à leurs jeux comme de blanches âmes;
Et tu riais, Armand!
Et, dans l'hymen obscur qui sans fin se consomme,
La nature sentait que ce qui sort de l'homme
Est divin et charmant!

Où sont-ils? Mère, frère, à son tour chacun sombre.
Je saigne et vous saignez. Mêmes douleurs! même ombre!
Ô jours trop tôt décrus!
Ils vont se marier; faites venir un prêtre;
Qu'il revienne! ils sont morts. Et, le temps d'apparaître,
Les voilà disparus!

Nous vivons tous penchés sur un océan triste.
L'onde est sombre. Qui donc survit? qui donc existe?
Ce bruit sourd, c'est le glas.
Chaque flot est une âme; et tout fuit. Rien ne brille.
Un sanglot dit: Mon père! un sanglot dit: Ma fille!
Un sanglot dit: Hélas!

Marine-Terrace, juin 1855.

VI

À VOUS QUI ÊTES LÀ

Vous, qui l'avez suivi dans sa blême vallée,
Au bord de cette mer d'écueils noirs constellée,
Sous la pâle nuée éternelle qui sort
Des flots, de l'horizon, de l'orage et du sort;
Vous qui l'avez suivi dans cette Thébaïde,

Sur cette grève nue, aigre, isolée et vide,
Où l'on ne voit qu'espace âpre et silencieux,
Solitude sur terre et solitude aux cieux;
Vous qui l'avez suivi dans ce brouillard qu'épanche
Sur le roc, sur la vague et sur l'écume blanche,
La profonde tempête aux souffles inconnus,
Recevez, dans la nuit où vous êtes venus,
Ô chers êtres! coeurs vrais, lierres de ses décombres,
La bénédiction de tous ces déserts sombres!
Ces désolations vous aiment; ces horreurs,
Ces brisants, cette mer où les vents laboureurs
Tirent sans fin le soc monstrueux des nuages,
Ces houles revenant comme de grands rouages,
Vous aiment; ces exils sont joyeux de vous voir;
Recevez la caresse immense du lieu noir!
Ô forçats de l'amour! ô compagnons, compagnes,
Qui l'aidez à traîner son boulet dans ces bagnes,
Ô groupe indestructible et fidèle entre tous
D'âmes et de bons coeurs et d'esprits fiers et doux,
Mère, fille, et vous, fils, vous ami, vous encore,
Recevez le soupir du soir vague et sonore,
Recevez le sourire et les pleurs du matin,
Recevez la chanson des mers, l'adieu lointain
Du pauvre mât penché parmi les lames brunes!
Soyez les bienvenus pour l'âpre fleur des dunes,
Et pour l'aigle qui fuit les hommes importuns,
Âmes, et que les champs vous rendent vos parfums,
Et que, votre clarté, les astres vous la rendent!
Et qu'en vous admirant, les vastes flots demandent:
Qu'est-ce donc que ces coeurs qui n'ont pas de reflux!

Ô tendres survivants de tout ce qui n'est plus!
Rayonnements masquant la grande éclipse à l'âme!
Sourires éclairant, comme une douce flamme,
L'abîme qui se fait, hélas! dans le songeur!
Gaîtés saintes chassant le souvenir rongeur!
Quand le proscrit saignant se tourne, âme meurtrie

Vers l’horizon, et crie en pleurant: «La patrie!»
La famille, mensonge auguste, dit: «C’est moi!»

Oh! suivre hors du jour, suivre hors de la loi,
Hors du monde, au delà de la dernière porte,
L’être mystérieux qu’un vent fatal emporte,
C’est beau. C’est beau de suivre un exilé! le jour
Où ce banni sortit de France, plein d’amour
Et d’angoisse, au moment de quitter cette mère,
Il s’arrêta longtemps sur la limite amère;
Il voyait, de sa course à venir déjà las,
Que dans l’oeil des passants il n’était plus, hélas!
Qu’une ombre, et qu’il allait entrer au sourd royaume
Où l’homme qui s’en va flotte et devient fantôme;
Il disait aux ruisseaux: «Retiendrez-vous mon nom,
Ruisseaux?» Et les ruisseaux coulaient en disant: «Non.»
Il disait aux oiseaux de France: «Je vous quitte,
Doux oiseaux; je m’en vais aux lieux où l’on meurt vite,
Au noir pays d’exil où le ciel est étroit;
Vous viendrez, n’est-ce pas, vous nicher dans mon toit?»
Et les oiseaux fuyaient au fond des brumes grises.
Il disait aux forêts: «M’enverrez-vous vos brises?»
Les arbres lui faisaient des signes de refus.
Car le proscrit est seul; la foule aux pas confus
Ne comprend que plus tard, d’un rayon éclairée,
Cet habitant du gouffre et de l’ombre sacrée.

Marine-Terrace, janvier 1855.

VII

POUR L’ERREUR, ECLAIRER, C’EST APOSTASIER

Pour l’erreur, éclairer, c’est apostasier.
Aujourd’hui ne naît pas impunément d’hier.

L’aube sort de la nuit, qui la déclare ingrate.
Anitus criait: «Mort à l’apostat Socrate!»
Caïphe disait: «Mort au renégat Jésus!»
Courbant son front pendant que l’on crache dessus,
Galilée, apostat à la terre immobile,
Songe et la sent frémir sous son genou débile.
Destin! sinistre éclat de rire! En vérité,
J’admire, ô cieux profonds! que ç’ait toujours été
La volonté de Dieu qu’en ce monde où nous sommes
On donnât sa pensée et son labeur aux hommes,
Ses entrailles, ses jours et ses nuits, sa sueur,
Son sommeil, ce qu’on a dans les yeux de lueur,
Et son coeur et son âme, et tout ce qu’on en tire,
Sans reculer devant n’importe quel martyre,
Et qu’on se répandît, et qu’on se prodiguât,
Pour être au fond du gouffre appelé renégat!

Marine-Terrace, novembre 1854.

VIII

A JULES J.

Je dormais en effet, et tu me réveillas.
Je te criai: «Salut!» et tu me dis: «Hélas!»
Et cet instant fut doux, et nous nous embrassâmes;
Nous mêlâmes tes pleurs, mon sourire et nos âmes.

Ces temps sont déjà loin; où donc alors roulait
Ma vie? et ce destin sévère qui me plaît,
Qu’est-ce donc qu’il faisait de cette feuille morte
Que je suis, et qu’un vent pousse, et qu’un vent remporte?

J’habitais au milieu des hauts pignons flamands;
Tout le jour, dans l’azur, sur les vieux toits fumants,
Je regardais voler les grands nuages ivres;
Tandis que je songeais, le coude sur mes livres,

De moments en moments, ce noir passant ailé,
Le temps, ce sourd tonnerre à nos rumeurs mêlé,
D’où les heures s’en vont en sombres étincelles,
Ébranlait sur mon font le beffroi de Bruxelles.
Tout ce qui peut tenter un coeur ambitieux
Était là, devant moi, sur terre et dans les cieux;
Sous mes yeux, dans l’austère et gigantesque place,
J’avais les quatre points cardinaux de l’espace,
Qui font songer à l’aigle, à l’astre, au flot, au mont,
Et les quatre pavés de l’échafaud d’Egmont.

Aujourd’hui, dans une île, en butte aux eaux sans nombre,
Où l’on ne me voit plus, tant j’y suis couvert d’ombre,
Au milieu de la vaste aventure des flots,
Des rocs, des mers, brisant barques et matelots,
Debout, échevelé sur le cap ou le môle
Par le souffle qui sort de la bouche du pôle,
Parmi les chocs, les bruits, les naufrages profonds,
Morne histoire d’écueils, de gouffres, de typhons,
Dont le vent est la plume et la nuit le registre,
J’erre, et de l’horizon je suis la voix sinistre.

Et voilà qu’à travers ces brumes et ces eaux,
Tes volumes exquis m’arrivent, blancs oiseaux,
M’apportant le rameau qu’apportent les colombes
Aux arches, et le chant que le cygne offre aux tombes,
Et jetant à mes rocs tout l’éblouissement
De Paris glorieux et de Paris charmant!
Et je lis, et mon front s’éclaire, et je savoure
Ton style, ta gaîté, ta douleur, ta bravoure.
Merci, toi dont le coeur aima, sentit, comprit!
Merci, devin! merci, frère, poëte, esprit,
Qui viens chanter cet hymne à côté de ma vie!
Qui vois mon destin sombre et qui n’a pas d’envie!
Et qui, dans cette épreuve où je marche, portant
L’abandon à chaque heure et l’ombre à chaque instant,
M’as vu boire le fiel sans y mêler la haine!

Tu changes en blancheur la nuit de ma géhenne,
Et tu fais un autel de lumière inondé
Du tas de pierres noir dont on m'a lapidé.

Je ne suis rien; je viens et je m'en vais; mais gloire
À ceux qui n'ont pas peur des vaincus de l'histoire
Et des contagions du malheur toujours fui!
Gloire aux fermes penseurs inclinés sur celui
Que le sort, geôlier triste, au fond de l'exil pousse!
Ils ressemblent à l'aube, ils ont la force douce,
Ils sont grands; leur esprit parfois, avec un mot,
Dore en arc triomphal la voûte du cachot!

Le ciel s'est éclairci sur mon île sonore,
Et ton livre en venant a fait venir l'aurore;
Seul aux bois avec toi, je lis, et me souviens,
Et je songe, oubliant les monts diluviens,
L'onde, et l'aigle de mer qui plane sur mon aire;
Et, pendant que je lis, mon oeil visionnaire,
À qui tout apparaît comme dans un réveil,
Dans les ombres que font les feuilles au soleil,
Sur tes pages où rit l'idée, où vit la grâce,
Croit voir se dessiner le pur profil d'Horace,
Comme si, se mirant au livre où je te voi,
Ce doux songeur ravi lisait derrière moi!

Marine-Terrace, décembre 1854.

IX

LE MENDIANT

Un pauvre homme passait dans le givre et le vent.
Je cognai sur ma vitre; il s'arrêta devant
Ma porte, que j'ouvris d'une façon civile.
Les ânes revenaient du marché de la ville,
Portant les paysans accroupis sur leurs bâts.

C’était le vieux qui vit dans une niche au bas
De la montée, et rêve, attendant, solitaire,
Un rayon du ciel triste, un liard de la terre,
Tendant les mains pour l’homme et les joignant pour Dieu.
Je lui criai: «Venez vous réchauffer un peu.
«Comment vous nommez-vous?» Il me dit: «Je me nomme
Le pauvre.» Je lui pris la main: «Entrez, brave homme.»
Et je lui fis donner une jatte de lait.
Le vieillard grelottait de froid; il me parlait,
Et je lui répondais, pensif et sans l’entendre.
«Vos habits sont mouillés,» dis-je, «il faut les étendre
Devant la cheminée.» Il s’approcha du feu.
Son manteau, tout mangé des vers, et jadis bleu,
Étalé largement sur la chaude fournaise,
Piqué de mille trous par la lueur de braise,
Couvrait l’âtre, et semblait un ciel noir étoilé.
Et, pendant qu’il séchait ce haillon désolé
D’où ruisselait la pluie et l’eau des fondrières,
Je songeais que cet homme était plein de prières,
Et je regardais, sourd à ce que nous disions,
Sa bure où je voyais des constellations.

Décembre 1834.

X

AUX FEUILLANTINES

Mes deux frères et moi, nous étions tout enfants.
Notre mère disait: «Jouez, mais je défends
Qu’on marche dans les fleurs et qu’on monte aux échelles.»

Abel était l’aîné, j’étais le plus petit.
Nous mangions notre pain de si bon appétit,
Que les femmes riaient quand nous passions près d’elles.

Nous montions pour jouer au grenier du couvent.

Et, là, tout en jouant, nous regardions souvent,
Sur le haut d’une armoire, un livre inaccessible.

Nous grimpâmes un jour jusqu’à ce livre noir;
Je ne sais pas comment nous fîmes pour l’avoir,
Mais je me souviens bien que c’était une Bible.

Ce vieux livre sentait une odeur d’encensoir.
Nous allâmes ravis dans un coin nous asseoir;
Des estampes partout! quel bonheur! quel délire!

Nous l’ouvrîmes alors tout grand sur nos genoux,
Et, dès le premier mot, il nous parut si doux,
Qu’oubliant de jouer, nous nous mîmes à lire.

Nous lûmes tous les trois ainsi tout le matin,
Joseph, Ruth et Booz, le bon Samaritain,
Et, toujours plus charmés, le soir nous le relûmes,

Tels des enfants, s’ils ont pris un oiseau des cieux,
S’appellent en riant et s’étonnent, joyeux,
De sentir dans leur main la douceur de ses plumes.

Marine-Terrace, août 1855.

XI

PONTO

Je dis à mon chien noir: «Viens, Ponto, viens-nous-en!»
Et je vais dans les bois, mis comme un paysan;
Je vais dans les grands bois, lisant dans les vieux livres.
L’hiver, quand la ramée est un écrin de givres,
Ou l’été, quand tout rit, même l’aurore en pleurs,
Quand toute l’herbe n’est qu’un triomphe de fleurs,
Je prends Froissard, Montluc, Tacite, quelque histoire,
Et je marche, effaré des crimes de la gloire.

Hélas! l’horreur partout, même chez les meilleurs!
Toujours l’homme en sa nuit trahi par ses veilleurs!
Toutes les grandes mains, hélas! de sang rougies!
Alexandre ivre et fou, César perdu d’orgies,
Et, le poing sur Didier, le pied sur Vitikind,
Charlemagne souvent semblable à Charles-Quint;
Caton de chair humaine engraissant la murène;
Titus crucifiant Jérusalem; Turenne,
Héros, comme Bayard et comme Catinat,
À Nordlingue, bandit dans le Palatinat;
Le duel de Jarnac, le duel de Carrouge;
Louis Neuf tenaillant les langues d’un fer rouge;
Cromwell trompant Milton, Calvin brûlant Servet.
Que de spectres, ô gloire! autour de ton chevet!
Ô triste humanité, je fuis dans la nature!
Et, pendant que je dis: «Tout est leurre, imposture,
Mensonge, iniquité, mal de splendeur vêtu!»
Mon chien Ponto me suit. Le chien, c’est la vertu
Qui, ne pouvant se faire homme, s’est faite bête.
Et Ponto me regarde avec son oeil honnête.

Marine-Terrace, mars 1855.

XII

DOLOROSÆ

Mère, voilà douze ans que notre fille est morte;
Et depuis, moi le père et vous la femme forte,
Nous n’avons pas été, Dieu le sait, un seul jour
Sans parfumer son nom de prière et d’amour.
Nous avons pris la sombre et charmante habitude
De voir son ombre vivre en notre solitude,
De la sentir passer et de l’entendre errer,
Et nous sommes restés à genoux à pleurer.
Nous avons persisté dans cette douleur douce,
Et nous vivons penchés sur ce cher nid de mousse

Emporté dans l’orage avec les deux oiseaux.
Mère, nous n’avons pas plié, quoique roseaux,
Ni perdu la bonté vis-à-vis l’un de l’autre,
Ni demandé la fin de mon deuil et du vôtre
À cette lâcheté qu’on appelle l’oubli.
Oui, depuis ce jour triste où pour nous ont pâli
Les cieux, les champs, les fleurs, l’étoile, l’aube pure,
Et toutes les splendeurs de la sombre nature,
Avec les trois enfants qui nous restent, trésor
De courage et d’amour que Dieu nous laisse encor,
Nous avons essuyé des fortunes diverses,
Ce qu’on nomme malheur, adversité, traverses,
Sans trembler, sans fléchir, sans haïr les écueils,
Donnant aux deuils du coeur, à l’absence, aux cercueils,
Aux souffrances dont saigne ou l’âme ou la famille,
Aux êtres chers enfuis ou morts, à notre fille,
Aux vieux parents repris par un monde meilleur,
Nos pleurs, et le sourire à toute autre douleur.

Marine-Terrace, août 1855.

XIII

PAROLES SUR LA DUNE

Maintenant que mon temps décroît comme un flambeau,
Que mes tâches sont terminées;
Maintenant que voici que je touche au tombeau
Par les deuils et par les années,

Et qu’au fond de ce ciel que mon essor rêva,
Je vois fuir, vers l’ombre entraînées,
Comme le tourbillon du passé qui s’en va,
Tant de belles heures sonnées;

Maintenant que je dis: — Un jour, nous triomphons;
Le lendemain, tout est mensonge! —

Je suis triste, et je marche au bord des flots profonds,
Courbé comme celui qui songe.

Je regarde, au-dessus du mont et du vallon,
Et des mers sans fin remuées,
S’envoler sous le bec du vautour aquilon,
Toute la toison des nuées;

J’entends le vent dans l’air, la mer sur le récif,
L’homme liant la gerbe mûre;
J’écoute, et je confronte en mon esprit pensif
Ce qui parle à ce qui murmure;

Et je reste parfois couché sans me lever
Sur l’herbe rare de la dune.
Jusqu’à l’heure où l’on voit apparaître et rêver
Les yeux sinistres de la lune.

Elle monte, elle jette un long rayon dormant
À l’espace, au mystère, au gouffre;
Et nous nous regardons tous les deux fixement
Elle qui brille et moi qui souffre.

Où donc s’en sont allés mes jours évanouis?
Est-il quelqu’un qui me connaisse?
Ai-je encor quelque chose en mes yeux éblouis,
De la clarté de ma jeunesse?

Tout s’est-il envolé? Je suis seul, je suis las;
J’appelle sans qu’on me réponde;
Ô vents! ô flots! ne suis-je aussi qu’un souffle, hélas!
Hélas! ne suis-je aussi qu’une onde?

Ne verrai-je plus rien de tout ce que j’aimais?
Au dedans de moi le soir tombe.
Ô terre, dont la brume efface les sommets,
Suis-je le spectre, et toi la tombe?

Ai-je donc vidé tout, vie, amour, joie, espoir?
J’attends, je demande, j’implore;
Je penche tour à tour mes urnes pour avoir
De chacune une goutte encore!

Comme le souvenir est voisin du remord!
Comme à pleurer tout nous ramène!
Et que je te sens froide en te touchant, ô mort,
Noir verrou de la porte humaine!

Et je pense, écoutant gémir le vent amer,
Et l’onde aux plis infranchissables;
L’été rit, et l’on voit sur le bord de la mer
Fleurir le chardon bleu des sables.

5 août 1854, anniversaire de mon arrivée à Jersey.

XIV

CLAIRE P.

Quel âge hier? Vingt ans. Et quel âge aujourd’hui?
L’éternité. Ce front pendant une heure a lui.
Elle avait les doux chants et les grâces superbes;
Elle semblait porter de radieuses gerbes;
Rien qu’à la voir passer, on lui disait: Merci!
Qu’est-ce donc que la vie, hélas! pour mettre ainsi
Les êtres les plus purs et les meilleurs en fuite?
Et, moi, je l’avais vue encor toute petite.
Elle me disait vous, et je lui disais tu.
Sou accent ineffable avait cette vertu
De faire en mon esprit, douces voix éloignées,
Chanter le vague choeur de mes jeunes années.
Il n’a brillé qu’un jour, ce beau front ingénu.
Elle était fiancée à l’hymen inconnu.
À qui mariez-vous, mon Dieu, toutes ces vierges?

Un vague et pur reflet de la lueur des cierges
Flottait dans son regard céleste et rayonnant;
Elle était grande et blanche et gaie; et, maintenant,
Allez à Saint-Mandé, cherchez dans le champ sombre,
Vous trouverez le lit de sa noce avec l’ombre;
Vous trouverez la tombe où gît ce lys vermeil;
Et c’est là que tu fais ton éternel sommeil,
Toi qui, dans ta beauté naïve et recueillie,
Mêlais à la madone auguste d’Italie
La Flamande qui rit à travers les houblons,
Douce Claire aux yeux noirs avec des cheveux blonds.

Elle s’en est allée avant d’être une femme;
N’étant qu’un ange encor; le ciel a pris son âme
Pour la rendre en rayons à nos regards en pleurs,
Et l’herbe, sa beauté, pour nous la rendre en fleurs.

Les êtres étoilés que nous nommons archanges
La bercent dans leurs bras au milieu des louanges;
Et, parmi les clartés, les lyres, les chansons,
D’en haut elle sourit à nous qui gémissons.
Elle sourit, et dit aux anges sous leurs voiles:
Est-ce qu’il est permis de cueillir des étoiles?
Et chante, et, se voyant elle-même flambeau,
Murmure dans l’azur: Comme le ciel est beau!
Mais cela ne fait rien à sa mère qui pleure;
La mère ne veut pas que son doux enfant meure
Et s’en aille, laissant ses fleurs sur le gazon,
Hélas! et le silence au seuil de la maison!

Son père, le sculpteur, s’écriait: — Qu’elle est belle!
Je ferai sa statue aussi charmante qu’elle.
C’est pour elle qu’avril fleurit les verts sentiers.
Je la contemplerai pendant des mois entiers
Et je ferai venir du marbre de Carrare.
Ce bloc prendra sa forme éblouissante et rare;
Elle restera chaste et candide à côté.

On dira: «Le sculpteur a deux filles: Beauté
Et Pudeur; Ombre et Jour; la Vierge et la Déesse;
Quel est cet ouvrier de Rome ou de la Grèce
Qui, trouvant dans son art des secrets inconnus,
En copiant Marie, a su faire Vénus?»

Le marbre restera dans la montagne blanche,
Hélas! car c'est à l'heure où tout rit, que tout penche;
Car nos mains gardent mal tout ce qui nous est cher;
Car celle qu'on croyait d'azur était de chair;
Et celui qui taillait le marbre était de verre;
Et voilà que le vent a soufflé, Dieu sévère,
Sur la vierge au front pur, sur le maître au bras fort;
Et que la fille est morte, et que le père est mort!
Claire, tu dors. Ta mère, assise sur ta fosse,
Dit: — Le parfum des fleurs est faux, l'aurore est fausse,
L'oiseau qui chante au bois ment, et le cygne ment,
L'étoile n'est pas vraie au fond du firmament,
Le ciel n'est pas le ciel et là-haut rien ne brille,
Puisque, lorsque je crie à ma fille: «Ma fille,
Je suis là. Lève-toi!» quelqu'un le lui défend;
Et que je ne puis pas réveiller mon enfant! —

Juin 1854.

XV

À ALEXANDRE D.

(Réponse à la dédicace de son drame LA CONSCIENCE)
Merci du bord des mers à celui qui se tourne
Vers la rive où le deuil, tranquille et noir, séjourne,
Qui défait de sa tête, où le rayon descend,
La couronne, et la jette au spectre de l'absent,
Et qui, dans le triomphe et la rumeur, dédie
Son drame à l'immobile et pâle tragédie!

Je n’ai pas oublié le quai d’Anvers, ami,
Ni le groupe vaillant, toujours plus raffermi,
D’amis chers, de fronts purs, ni toi, ni cette foule.
Le canot du steamer soulevé par la houle
Vint me prendre, et ce fut un long embrassement.
Je montai sur l’avant du paquebot fumant,
La roue ouvrit la vague, et nous nous appelâmes:
— Adieu! — Puis, dans les vents, dans les flots, dans les larmes.
Toi debout sur le quai, moi debout sur le pont,
Vibrant comme deux luths dont la voix se répond,
Aussi longtemps qu’on put se voir, nous regardâmes
L’un vers l’autre, faisant comme un échange d’âmes;
Et le vaisseau fuyait, et la terre décrut;
L’horizon entre nous monta, tout disparut;
Une brume couvrit l’onde incommensurable;
Tu rentras dans ton oeuvre éclatante, innombrable,
Multiple, éblouissante, heureuse, où le jour luit:
Et, moi, dans l’unité sinistre de la nuit.

Marine-Terrace, décembre 1854.

XVI

LUEUR AU COUCHANT

Lorsque j’étais en France, et que le peuple en fête
Répandait dans Paris sa grande joie honnête,
Si c’était un des jours glorieux et vainqueurs
Où les fiers souvenirs, désaltérant les coeurs,
S’offrent à notre soif comme de larges coupes,
J’allais errer tout seul parmi les riants groupes,
Ne parlant à personne et pourtant calme et doux,
Trouvant ainsi moyen d’être un et d’être tous,
Et d’accorder en moi, pour une double étude,
L’amour du peuple avec mon goût de solitude.
Rêveur, j’étais heureux; muet, j’étais présent.
Parfois je m’asseyais un livre en main, lisant

Virgile, Horace, Eschyle, ou bien Dante, leur frère;
Puis je m'interrompais, et, me laissant distraire
Des poëtes par toi, poésie, et content,
Je savourais l'azur, le soleil éclatant,
Paris, les seuils sacrés, et la Seine qui coule,
Et cette auguste paix qui sortait de la foule.
Dès lors pourtant des voix murmuraient: Anankè.
Je passais; et partout, sur le pont, sur le quai,
Et jusque dans les champs, étincelait le rire,
Haillon d'or que la joie en bondissant déchire.
Le Panthéon brillait comme une vision.
La gaîté d'une altière et libre nation
Dansait sous le ciel bleu dans les places publiques;
Un rayon qui semblait venir des temps bibliques
Illuminait Paris calme et patriarcal;
Ce lion dont l'oeil met en fuite le chacal,
Le peuple des faubourgs se promenait tranquille.
Le soir, je revenais; et dans toute la ville,
Les passants, éclatant en strophes, en refrains,
Ayant leurs doux instincts de liberté pour freins,
Du Louvre au Champ-de-Mars, de Chaillot à la Grève,
Fourmillaient; et, pendant que mon esprit, qui rêve
Dans la sereine nuit des penseurs étoilés,
Et dresse ses rameaux à leurs lueurs mêlés,
S'ouvrait à tous ces cris charmants comme l'aurore,
À toute cette ivresse innocente et sonore,
Paisibles, se penchant, noirs et tout semés d'yeux
Sous le ciel constellé, sur le peuple joyeux,
Les grands arbres pensifs des vieux Champs-Élysées,
Pleins d'astres, consentaient à s'emplir de fusées.
Et j'allais, et mon coeur chantait; et les enfants
Embarrassaient mes pas de leurs jeux triomphants,
Où s'épanouissaient les mères de famille;
Le frère avec la soeur, le père avec la fille,
Causaient; je contemplais tous ces hauts monuments
Qui semblent au songeur rayonnants ou fumants,
Et qui font de Paris la deuxième des Romes;

J’entendais près de moi rire les jeunes hommes
Et les graves vieillards dire: «Je me souviens.»
Ô patrie! ô concorde entre les citoyens!

Marine Terrace, juillet 1855.

XVII

MUGITUSQUE BOUM

Mugissement des boeufs, au temps du doux Virgile,
Comme aujourd’hui, le soir, quand fuit la nuit agile,
Ou, le matin, quand l’aube aux champs extasiés
Verse à flots la rosée et le jour, vous disiez:
«Mûrissez, blés mouvants! prés, emplissez-vous d’herbes!
Que la terre, agitant son panache de gerbes,
Chante dans l’onde d’or d’une riche moisson!
Vis, bête; vis, caillou; vis, homme; vis, buisson;
À l’heure où le soleil se couche, où l’herbe est pleine
Des grands fantômes noirs des arbres de la plaine
Jusqu’aux lointains coteaux rampant et grandissant,
Quand le brun laboureur des collines descend
Et retourne à son toit d’où sort une fumée,
Que la soif de revoir sa femme bien-aimée
Et l’enfant qu’en ses bras hier il réchauffait,
Que ce désir, croissant à chaque pas qu’il fait,
Imite dans son coeur l’allongement de l’ombre!
Êtres! choses! vivez! sans peur, sans deuil, sans nombre
Que tout s’épanouisse en sourire vermeil!
Que l’homme ait le repos et le boeuf le sommeil!
Vivez! croissez! semez le grain à l’aventure!
Qu’on sente frissonner dans toute la nature,
Sous la feuille des nids, au seuil blanc des maisons,
Dans l’obscur tremblement des profonds horizons,
Un vaste emportement d’aimer, dans l’herbe verte,
Dans l’antre, dans l’étang, dans la clairière ouverte,
D’aimer sans fin, d’aimer toujours, d’aimer encor,

Sous la sérénité des sombres astres d’or!
Faites tressaillir l’air, le flot, l’aile, la bouche,
Ô palpitations du grand amour farouche!
Qu’on sente le baiser de l’être illimité!
Et, paix, vertu, bonheur, espérance, bonté,
Ô fruits divins, tombez des branches éternelles!»

Ainsi vous parliez, voix, grandes voix solennelles;
Et Virgile écoutait comme j’écoute, et l’eau
Voyait passer le cygne auguste, et le bouleau
Le vent, et le rocher l’écume, et le ciel sombre
L’homme... Ô nature! abîme! immensité de l’ombre!

Marine-Terrace, juillet 1855.

XVIII

APPARITION

Je vis un ange blanc qui passait sur ma tête;
Son vol éblouissant apaisait la tempête,
Et faisait taire au loin la mer pleine de bruit.
— Qu’est-ce que tu viens faire, ange, dans cette nuit?
Lui dis-je. Il répondit: — Je viens prendre ton âme.
Et j’eus peur, car je vis que c’était une femme;
Et je lui dis, tremblant et lui tendant les bras:
— Que me restera-t-il? car tu t’envoleras.
Il ne répondit pas; le ciel que l’ombre assiége
S’éteignait... — Si tu prends mon âme, m’écriai-je,
Où l’emporteras-tu? montre-moi dans quel lieu.
Il se taisait toujours. — Ô passant du ciel bleu,
Es-tu la mort? lui dis-je, ou bien es-tu la vie?
Et la nuit augmentait sur mon âme ravie,
Et l’ange devint noir, et dit: — Je suis l’amour.
Mais son front sombre était plus charmant que le jour,
Et je voyais, dans l’ombre où brillaient ses prunelles,
Les astres à travers les plumes de ses ailes.

Jersey, septembre 1855.

XIX

AU POËTE QUI M’ENVOIE UNE PLUME D’AIGLE

Oui, c’est une heure solennelle!
Mon esprit en ce jour serein
Croit qu’un peu de gloire éternelle
Se mêle au bruit contemporain,

Puisque, dans mon humble retraite,
Je ramasse, sans me courber,
Ce qu’y laisse choir le poëte,
Ce que l’aigle y laisse tomber!

Puisque sur ma tête fidèle
Ils ont jeté, couple vainqueur,
L’un, une plume de son aile,
L’autre, une strophe de son coeur!

Oh! soyez donc les bienvenues,
Plume! strophe! envoi glorieux!
Vous avez erré dans les nues,
Vous avez plané dans les cieux!

11 décembre.

XX

CÉRIGO

I

Tout homme qui vieillit est ce roc solitaire
Et triste, Cérigo, qui fut jadis Cythère,
Cythère aux nids charmants, Cythère aux myrtes verts,
La conque de Cypris sacrée au sein des mers.
La vie auguste, goutte à goutte, heure par heure,
S’épand sur ce qui passe et sur ce qui demeure;
Là-bas, la Grèce brille agonisante, et l’oeil
S’emplit en la voyant de lumière et de deuil:
La terre luit; la nue est de l’encens qui fume;
Des vols d’oiseaux de mer se mêlent à l’écume;
L’azur frissonne; l’eau palpite; et les rumeurs
Sortent des vents, des flots, des barques, des rameurs;
Au loin court quelque voile hellène ou candiote.
Cythère est là, lugubre, épuisée, idiote,
Tête de mort du rêve amour, et crâne nu
Du plaisir, ce chanteur masqué, spectre inconnu.
C’est toi? qu’as-tu donc fait de ta blanche tunique?
Cache ta gorge impure et ta laideur cynique,
O sirène ridée et dont l’hymne s’est tu!
Où donc êtes-vous, âme? étoile, où donc es-tu
L’île qu’on adorait de Lemnos à Lépante,
Où se tordait d’amour la chimère rampante,
Où la brise baisait les arbres frémissants,
Où l’ombre disait: J’aime! où l’herbe avait des sens,
Qu’en a-t-on fait? où donc sont-ils, où donc sont-elles,
Eux, les olympiens, elles, les immortelles?
Où donc est Mars? où donc Éros? où donc Psyché?
Où donc le doux oiseau bonheur, effarouché?
Qu’en as-tu fait, rocher, et qu’as-tu fait des roses?
Qu’as-tu fait des chansons dans les soupirs écloses,
Des danses, des gazons, des bois mélodieux,
De l’ombre que faisait le passage des dieux?
Plus d’autels; ô passé! splendeurs évanouies!
Plus de vierges au seuil des antres éblouies;
Plus d’abeilles buvant la rosée et le thym.
Mais toujours le ciel bleu. C’est-à-dire, ô destin!
Sur l’homme, jeune ou vieux, harmonie ou souffrance,

Toujours la même mort et la même espérance.
Cérigo, qu’as-tu fait de Cythère? Nuit! deuil!
L’éden s’est éclipsé, laissant à nu l’écueil.
O naufragée, hélas! c’est donc là que tu tombes!
Les hiboux même ont peur de l’île des colombes.
Île, ô toi qu’on cherchait! ô toi que nous fuyons,
O spectre des baisers, masure des rayons,
Tu t’appelles oubli! tu meurs, sombre captive!
Et, tandis qu’abritant quelque yole furtive,
Ton cap, où rayonnaient les temples fabuleux,
Voit passer à son ombre et sur les grands flots bleus
Le pirate qui guette ou le pêcheur d’éponges
Qui rôde, à l’horizon Vénus fuit dans les songes.

II

Vénus! que parles-tu de Vénus? elle est là.
Lève les yeux. Le jour où Dieu la dévoila
Pour la première fois dans l’aube universelle,
Elle ne brillait pas plus qu’elle n’étincelle.
Si tu veux voir l’étoile, homme, lève les yeux.
L’île des mers s’éteint, mais non l’île des cieux;
Les astres sont vivants et ne sont pas des choses
Qui s’effeuillent, un soir d’été, comme les roses.
Oui, meurs, plaisir, mais vis, amour! ô vision,
Flambeau, nid de l’azur dont l’ange est l’alcyon,
Beauté de l’âme humaine et de l’âme divine,
Amour, l’adolescent dans l’ombre te devine,
O splendeur! et tu fais le vieillard lumineux.
Chacun de tes rayons tient un homme en ses noeuds.
Oh! vivez et brillez dans la brume qui tremble,
Hymens mystérieux, coeurs vieillissant ensemble,
Malheurs de l’un par l’autre avec joie adoptés,
Dévouement, sacrifice, austères voluptés,
Car vous êtes l’amour, la lueur éternelle!
L’astre sacré que voit l’âme, sainte prunelle,
Le phare de toute heure, et, sur l’horizon noir,

L’étoile du matin et l’étoile du soir!
Ce monde inférieur, où tout rampe et s’altère,
A ce qui disparaît et s’efface, Cythère,
Le jardin qui se change en rocher aux flancs nus;
La terre a Cérigo; mais le ciel a Vénus.

Juin 1855.

XXI

A PAUL M.

Auteur du drame PARIS

Tu graves au fronton sévère de ton oeuvre
Un nom proscrit que mord en sifflant la couleuvre;
Au malheur, dont le flanc saigne et dont l’oeil sourit,
A la proscription, et non pas au proscrit,
— Car le proscrit n’est rien que de l’ombre, moins noire
Que l’autre ombre qu’on nomme éclat, bonheur, victoire; —
A l’exil pâle et nu, cloué sur des débris,
Tu donnes ton grand drame où vit le grand Paris,
Cette cité de feu, de nuit, d’airain, de verre,
Et tu fais saluer par Rome le Calvaire.
Sois loué, doux penseur, toi qui prends dans ta main
Le passé, l’avenir, tout le progrès humain,
La lumière, l’histoire, et la ville, et la France,
Tous les dictâmes saints qui calment la souffrance,
Raison, justice, espoir, vertu, foi, vérité,
Le parfum poésie et le vin liberté,
Et qui sur le vaincu, coeur meurtri, noir fantôme,
Te penches, et répands l’idéal comme un baume!
Paul, il me semble, grâce à ce fier souvenir
Dont tu viens nous bercer, nous sacrer, nous bénir,
Que dans ma plaie, où dort la douleur, ô poëte!
Je sens de la charpie avec un drapeau faite.

Marine-Terrace, août 1855.

XXII

J E PAYAI LE PECHEUR QUI PASSA SON CHEMIN

Je payai le pêcheur qui passa son chemin,
Et je pris cette bête horrible dans ma main;
C'était un être obscur comme l'onde en apporte,
Qui, plus grand, serait hydre, et, plus petit, cloporte;
Sans forme comme l'ombre, et, comme Dieu, sans nom.
Il ouvrait une bouche affreuse, un noir moignon
Sortait de son écaille; il tâchait de me mordre;
Dieu, dans l'immensité formidable de l'ordre,
Donne une place sombre à ces spectres hideux;
Il tâchait de me mordre, et nous luttions tous deux;
Ses dents cherchaient mes doigts qu'effrayait leur approche;
L'homme qui me l'avait vendu tourna la roche;
Comme il disparaissait, le crabe me mordit;
Je lui dis: «Vis! et sois béni, pauvre maudit!»
Et je le rejetai dans la vague profonde,
Afin qu'il allât dire à l'océan qui gronde,
Et qui sert au soleil de vase baptismal,
Que l'homme rend le bien au monstre pour le mal.

Jersey, grève d'Azette, juillet 1855.

XXIII

PASTEURS ET TROUPEAUX

A MADAME LOUISE C.
Le vallon où je vais tous les jours est charmant;
Serein, abandonné, seul sous le firmament,
Plein de ronces en fleurs; c'est un sourire triste.
Il vous fait oublier que quelque chose existe,

Et, sans le bruit des champs remplis de travailleurs.
On ne saurait plus là si quelqu'un vit ailleurs.
Là, l'ombre fait l'amour; l'idylle naturelle
Rit; le bouvreuil avec le verdier s'y querelle,
Et la fauvette y met de travers son bonnet;
C'est tantôt l'aubépine et tantôt le genêt;
De noirs granits bourrus, puis des mousses riantes;
Car Dieu fait un poëme avec des variantes;
Comme le vieil Homère, il rabâche parfois,
Mais c'est avec les fleurs, les monts, l'onde et les bois!
Une petite mare est là, ridant sa face,
Prenant des airs de flot pour la fourmi qui passe,
Ironie étalée au milieu du gazon,
Qu'ignore l'océan grondant à l'horizon.
J'y rencontre parfois sur la roche hideuse
Un doux être; quinze ans, yeux bleus, pieds nus, gardeuse
De chèvres, habitant, au fond d'un ravin noir,
Un vieux chaume croulant qui s'étoile le soir;
Ses soeurs sont au logis et filent leur quenouille;
Elle essuie aux roseaux ses pieds que l'étang mouille;
Chèvres, brebis, béliers, paissent; quand, sombre esprit,
J'apparais, le pauvre ange a peur, et me sourit;
Et moi, je la salue, elle étant l'innocence.
Ses agneaux, dans le pré plein de fleurs qui l'encense,
Bondissent, et chacun, au soleil s'empourprant,
Laisse aux buissons, à qui la bise le reprend,
Un peu de sa toison, comme un flocon d'écume.
Je passe; enfant, troupeau, s'effacent dans la brume;
Le crépuscule étend sur les longs sillons gris
Ses ailes de fantôme et de chauve-souris;
J'entends encore au loin dans la plaine ouvrière
Chanter derrière moi la douce chevrière,
Et, là-bas, devant moi, le vieux gardien pensif
De l'écume, du flot, de l'algue, du récif,
Et des vagues sans trêve et sans fin remuées,
Le pâtre promontoire au chapeau de nuées,
S'accoude et rêve au bruit de tous les infinis,

Et dans l’ascension des nuages bénis,
Regarde se lever la lune triomphale,
Pendant que l’ombre tremble, et que l’âpre rafale
Disperse à tous les vents avec son souffle amer
La laine des moulons sinistres de la mer.

Jersey, Gronville, avril 1855.

XXIV

J’AI CUEILLI CETTE FLEUR POUR TOI SUR LA COLLINE

J’ai cueilli cette fleur pour toi sur la colline.
Dans l’âpre escarpement qui sur le flot s’incline,
Que l’aigle connaît seul et peut seul approcher,
Paisible, elle croissait aux fentes du rocher.
L’ombre baignait les flancs du morne promontoire
Je voyais, comme on dresse au lieu d’une victoire
Un grand arc de triomphe éclatant et vermeil,
A l’endroit où s’était englouti le soleil,
La sombre nuit bâtir un porche de nuées.
Des voiles s’enfuyaient, au loin diminuées
Quelques toits, s’éclairant au fond d’un entonnoir,
Semblaient craindre de luire et de se laisser voir.
J’ai cueilli cette fleur pour toi, ma bien-aimée.
Elle est pâle et n’a pas de corolle embaumée.
Sa racine n’a pris sur la crête des monts
Que l’amère senteur des glauques goëmons;
Moi, j’ai dit: «Pauvre fleur, du haut de cette cime,
Tu devais t’en aller dans cet immense abîme
Où l’algue et le nuage et les voiles s’en vont.
Va mourir sur un coeur, abîme plus profond.
Fane-toi sur ce sein en qui palpite un monde.
Le ciel, qui te créa pour t’effeuiller dans l’onde,
Te fit pour l’océan, je te donne à l’amour.»

Le vent mêlait les flots; il ne restait du jour
Qu'une vague lueur, lentement effacée.
Oh! comme j'étais triste au fond de ma pensée
Tandis que je songeais, et que le gouffre noir
M'entrait dans l'âme avec tous les frissons du soir!

Ile de Serk, août 1855.

XXV

O STROPHE DU POËTE, AUTREFOIS, DANS LES FLEURS

O strophe du poëte, autrefois, dans les fleurs,
Jetant mille baisers à leurs mille couleurs,
Tu jouais, et d'avril tu pillais la corbeille,
Papillon pour la rose et pour la ruche abeille,
Tu semais de l'amour et tu faisais du miel;
Ton âme bleue était presque mêlée au ciel;
Ta robe était d'azur et ton oeil de lumière;
Tu criais aux chansons, tes soeurs: «Venez chaumière,
Hameau, ruisseau, forêt, tout chante. L'aube a lui!»
Et, douce, tu courais et tu riais. Mais lui,
Le sévère habitant de la blême caverne
Qu'en haut le jour blanchit, qu'en bas rougit l'Averne,
Le poëte qu'ont fait avant l'heure vieillard
La douleur dans la vie et le drame dans l'art,
Lui, le chercheur du gouffre obscur, le chasseur d'ombres,
Il a levé la tête un jour hors des décombres,
Et t'a saisie au vol dans l'herbe et dans les blés,
Et, malgré tes effrois et tes cris redoublés,
Toute en pleurs, il t'a prise à l'idylle joyeuse;
Il t'a ravie aux champs, à la source, à l'yeuse,
Aux amours dans les bois près des nids palpitants;
Et maintenant, captive et reine en même temps,
Prisonnière au plus noir de son âme profonde,

Parmi les visions qui flottent comme l’onde,
Sous son crâne à la fois céleste et souterrain,
Assise, et t’accoudant sur un trône d’airain,
Voyant dans ta mémoire, ainsi qu’une ombre vaine,
Fuir l’éblouissement du jour et de la plaine,
Par le maître gardée, et calme et sans espoir,
Tandis que, près de toi, les drames, groupe noir,
Des sombres passions feuillettent le registre,
Tu rêves dans sa nuit, Proserpine sinistre.

Jersey, novembre 1854.

XXVI

LES MALHEUREUX

A MES ENFANTS

Puisque déjà l’épreuve aux luttes vous convie,
O mes enfants! parlons un peu de cette vie.
Je me souviens qu’un jour, marchant dans un bois noir
Où des ravins creusaient un farouche entonnoir,
Dans un de ces endroits où sous l’herbe et la ronce
Le chemin disparaît et le ruisseau s’enfonce,
Je vis, parmi les grès, les houx, les sauvageons,
Fumer un toit bâti de chaumes et de joncs.

La fumée avait peine à monter dans les branches;
Les fenêtres étaient les crevasses des planches;
On eût dit que les rocs cachaient avec ennui
Ce logis tremblant, triste, humble; et que c’était lui
Que les petits oiseaux, sous le hêtre et l’érable,
Plaignaient, tant il était chétif et misérable!
Pensif, dans les buissons j’en cherchais le sentier.
Comme je regardais ce chaume, un muletier
Passa, chantant, fouettant quelques bêtes de somme.
«Qui donc demeure là?» demandai-je à cet homme.
L’homme, tout en chantant, me dit: «Un malheureux.»

J’allai vers la masure au fond du ravin creux;
Un arbre, de sa branche où brillait une goutte,
Sembla se faire un doigt pour m’en montrer la route,
Et le vent m’en ouvrit la porte; et j’y trouvai
Un vieux, vêtu de bure, assis sur un pavé.
Ce vieillard, près d’un âtre où séchaient quelques toiles,
Dans ce bouge aux passants ouvert, comme aux étoiles,
Vivait, seul jour et nuit, sans clôture, sans chien,
Sans clef; la pauvreté garde ceux qui n’ont rien.

J’entrai; le vieux soupait d’un peu d’eau, d’une pomme;
Sans pain; et je me mis à plaindre ce pauvre homme.
— Comment pouvait-il vivre ainsi? Qu’il était dur
De n’avoir même pas un volet à son mur;
L’hiver doit être affreux dans ce lieu solitaire;
Et pas même un grabat! il couchait donc à terre?
Là, sur ce tas de paille, et dans ce coin étroit!
Vous devez être mal, vous devez avoir froid,
Bon père, et c’est un sort bien triste que le vôtre!

« — Fils,» dit-il doucement, «allez en plaindre un autre.
Je suis dans ces grands bois et sous le ciel vermeil,
Et je n’ai pas de lit, fils, mais j’ai le sommeil.
Quand l’aube luit pour moi, quand je regarde vivre
Toute cette forêt dont la senteur m’enivre,
Ces sources et ces fleurs, je n’ai pas de raison
De me plaindre, je suis le fils de la maison.
Je n’ai point fait de mal. Calme, avec l’indigence
Et les haillons, je vis en bonne intelligence,
Et je fais bon ménage avec Dieu mon voisin.
Je le sens près de moi dans le nid, dans l’essaim,
Dans les arbres profonds où parle une voix douce,
Dans l’azur où la vie à chaque instant nous pousse,
Et dans cette ombre vaste et sainte où je suis né.
Je ne demande à Dieu rien de trop, car je n’ai
Pas grande ambition, et, pourvu que j’atteigne

Jusqu’à la branche où pend la mûre ou la châtaigne,
Il est content de moi, je suis content de lui.
Je suis heureux.»
J’étais jadis, comme aujourd’hui,
Le passant qui regarde en bas, l’homme des songes.
Mes enfants, à travers les brumes, les mensonges,
Les lueurs des tombeaux, les spectres des chevets,
Les apparences d’ombre et de clarté, je vais
Méditant, et toujours un instinct me ramène
A connaître le fond de la souffrance humaine.
L’abîme des douleurs m’attire. D’autres sont
Les sondeurs frémissants de l’océan profond;
Ils fouillent, vent des cieux, l’onde que tu balaies;
Ils plongent dans les mers; je plonge dans les plaies.
Leur gouffre est effrayant, mais pas plus que le mien.
Je descends plus bas qu’eux, ne leur enviant rien,
Sachant qu’à tout chercheur Dieu garde une largesse,
Content s’ils ont la perle et si j’ai la sagesse.

Or, il semble, à qui voit tout ce gouffre en rêvant,
Que les justes, parmi la nuée et le vent,
Sont un vol frissonnant d’aigles et de colombes.
.
J’ai souvent, à genoux que je suis sur les tombes,
La grande vision du sort; et par moment
Le destin m’apparaît, ainsi qu’un firmament
Où l’on verrait, au lieu des étoiles, des âmes.
Tout ce qu’on nomme angoisse, adversité, les flammes,
Les brasiers, les billots, bien souvent tout cela
Dans mon noir crépuscule, enfants, étincela.
J’ai vu, dans cette obscure et morne transparence,
Passer l’homme de Rome et l’homme de Florence,
Caton au manteau blanc, et Dante au fier sourcil,
L’un ayant le poignard au flanc, l’autre l’exil;
Caton était joyeux et Dante était tranquille.
J’ai vu Jeanne au poteau qu’on brûlait dans la ville,
Et j’ai dit: Jeanne d’Arc, ton noir bûcher fumant

A moins de flamboiement que de rayonnement.
J’ai vu Campanella songer dans la torture,
Et faire à sa pensée une âpre nourriture
Des chevalets, des crocs, des pinces, des réchauds
Et de l’horreur qui flotte au plafond des cachots.
J’ai vu Thomas Morus, Lavoisier, Loiserolle,
Jane Gray, bouche ouverte ainsi qu’une corolle,
Toi, Charlotte Corday, vous, madame Roland,
Camille Desmoulins, saignant et contemplant,
Robespierre à l’oeil froid, Danton aux cris superbes;
J’ai vu Jean qui parlait au désert, Malesherbes,
Egmont, André Chénier, rêveur des purs sommets,
Et mes yeux resteront éblouis à jamais
Du sourire serein de ces têtes coupées.
Coligny, sous l’éclair farouche des épées,
Resplendissait devant mon regard éperdu.
Livide et radieux, Socrate m’a tendu
Sa coupe en me disant: — As-tu soif? bois la vie.
Huss, me voyant pleurer, m’a dit: — Est-ce d’envie?
Et Thraséas, s’ouvrant les veines dans son bain,
Chantait: — Rome est le fruit du vieux rameau sabin;
Le soleil est le fruit de ces branches funèbres
Que la nuit sur nous croise et qu’on nomme ténèbres,
Et la joie est le fruit du grand arbre douleur. —
Colomb, l’envahisseur des vagues, l’oiseleur
Du sombre aigle Amérique, et l’homme que Dieu mène,
Celui qui donne un monde et reçoit une chaîne,
Colomb aux fers criait: — Tout est bien. En avant!
Saint-Just sanglant m’a dit: — Je suis libre et vivant.
Phocion m’a jeté, mourant, cette parole:
— Je crois, et je rends grâce aux Dieux! — Savonarole,
Comme je m’approchais du brasier d’où sa main
Sortait, brûlée et noire et montrant le chemin,
M’a dit, en faisant signe aux flammes de se taire:
— Ne crains pas de mourir. Qu’est-ce que cette terre?
Est-ce ton corps qui fait ta joie et qui t’est cher?
La véritable vie est où n’est plus la chair.

Ne crains pas de mourir. Créature plaintive,
Ne sens-tu pas en toi comme une aile captive?
Sous ton crâne, caveau muré, ne sens-tu pas
Comme un ange enfermé qui sanglote tout bas?
Qui meurt, grandit. Le corps, époux impur de l’âme,
Plein des vils appétits d’où naît le vice infâme,
Pesant, fétide, abject, malade à tous moments,
Branlant sur sa charpente affreuse d’ossements,
Gonflé d’humeurs, couvert d’une peau qui se ride,
Souffrant le froid, le chaud, la faim, la soif aride,
Traîne un ventre hideux, s’assouvit, mange et dort.
Mais il vieillit enfin, et, lorsque vient la mort,
L’âme, vers la lumière éclatante et dorée,
S’envole, de ce monstre horrible délivrée. —

Une nuit que j’avais, devant mes yeux obscurs,
Un fantôme de ville et des spectres de murs,
J’ai, comme au fond d’un rêve où rien n’a plus de forme,
Entendu, près des tours d’un temple au dôme énorme,
Une voix qui sortait de dessous un monceau
De blocs noirs d’où le sang coulait en long ruisseau;
Cette voix murmurait des chants et des prières.
C’était le lapidé qui bénissait les pierres;
Étienne le martyr, qui disait: — O mon front,
Rayonne! Désormais les hommes s’aimeront;
Jésus règne. O mon Dieu, récompensez les hommes!
Ce sont eux qui nous font les élus que nous sommes.
Joie! amour! pierre à pierre, ô Dieu, je vous le dis,
Mes frères m’ont jeté le seuil du paradis!
•
Elle était là debout, la mère douloureuse.
L’obscurité farouche, aveugle, sourde, affreuse,
Pleurait de toutes parts autour du Golgotha.
Christ, le jour devint noir quand on vous en ôta,
Et votre dernier souffle emporta la lumière.
Elle était là debout près du gibet, la mère!
Et je me dis: Voilà la douleur! et je vins.

— Qu’avez-vous donc, lui dis-je, entre vos doigts divins?
Alors, aux pieds du fils saignant du coup de lance,
Elle leva sa droite et l’ouvrit en silence,
Et je vis dans sa main l’étoile du matin.

Quoi! ce deuil-là, Seigneur, n’est pas même certain!
Et la mère, qui râle au bas de la croix sombre,
Est consolée, ayant les soleils dans son ombre,
Et, tandis que ses yeux hagards pleurent du sang,
Elle sent une joie immense en se disant:
— Mon fils est Dieu! mon fils sauve la vie au monde! —
Et pourtant où trouver plus d’épouvante immonde,
Plus d’effroi, plus d’angoisse et plus de désespoir
Que dans ce temps lugubre où le genre humain noir,
Frissonnant du banquet autant que du martyre,
Entend pleurer Marie et Trimalcion rire!
•
Mais la foule s’écrie: — Oui, sans doute, c’est beau,
Le martyre, la mort, quand c’est un grand tombeau!
Quand on est un Socrate, un Jean Huss, un Messie!
Quand on s’appelle vie, avenir, prophétie!
Quand l’encensoir s’allume au feu qui vous brûla,
Quand les siècles, les temps et les peuples sont là
Qui vous dressent, parmi leurs brumes et leurs voiles,
Un cénotaphe énorme au milieu des étoiles,
Si bien que la nuit semble être le drap du deuil,
Et que les astres sont les cierges du cercueil!
Le billot tenterait même le plus timide
Si sa bière dormait sous une pyramide.
Quand on marche à la mort, recueillant en chemin
La bénédiction de tout le genre humain,
Quand des groupes en pleurs baisent vos traces fières,
Quand on s’entend crier par les murs, par les pierres,
Et jusque par les gonds du seuil de sa prison:
«Tu vas de ta mémoire éclairer l’horizon;
Fantôme éblouissant, tu vas dorer l’histoire,
Et, vêtu de ta mort comme d’une victoire,

T’asseoir au fronton bleu des hommes immortels!»
Lorsque les échafauds ont des aspects d’autels,
Qu’on se sent admiré du bourreau qui vous tue.
Que le cadavre va se relever statue,
Mourant plein de clarté, d’aube, de firmament,
D’éclat, d’honneur, de gloire, on meurt facilement!
L’homme est si vaniteux, qu’il rit à la torture
Quand c’est une royale et tragique aventure,
Quand c’est une tenaille immense qui le mord.
Quand les durs instruments d’agonie et de mort
Sortent de quelque forge inouïe et géante,
Notre orgueil, oubliant la blessure béante,
Se console des clous en voyant le marteau.
Avoir une montagne auguste pour poteau,
Être battu des flots ou battu des nuées,
Entendre l’univers plein de vagues huées
Murmurer: — Regardez ce colosse! les noeuds,
Les fers et les carcans le font plus lumineux!
C’est le vaincu Rayon, le damné Météore!
Il a volé la foudre et dérobé l’aurore! —
Être un supplicié du gouffre illimité,
Être un titan cloué sur une énormité,
Cela plaît. On veut bien des maux qui sont sublimes;
Et l’on se dit: Souffrons, mais souffrons sur les cimes!

Eh bien, non! — Le sublime est en bas. Le grand choix,
C’est de choisir l’affront. De même que parfois
La pourpre est déshonneur, souvent la fange est lustre.
La boue imméritée atteignant l’âme illustre,
L’opprobre, ce cachot d’où l’auréole sort,
Le cul de basse-fosse où nous jette le sort,
Le fond noir de l’épreuve où le malheur nous traîne,
Sont le comble éclatant de la grandeur sereine.
Et, quand, dans le supplice où nous devons lutter,
Le lâche destin va jusqu’à nous insulter,
Quand sur nous il entasse outrage, rire, blâme,
Et tant de contre-sens entre le sort et l’âme

Que notre vie arrive à la difformité,
La laideur de l’épreuve en devient la beauté.
C’est Samson à Gaza, c’est Épictète à Rome;
L’abjection du sort fait la gloire de l’homme.
Plus de brume ne fait que couvrir plus d’azur.
Ce que l’homme ici-bas peut avoir de plus pur,
De plus beau, de plus noble en ce monde où l’on pleure,
C’est chute, abaissement, misère extérieure,
Acceptés pour garder la grandeur du dedans.
Oui, tous les chiens de l’ombre, autour de vous grondants,
Le blâme ingrat, la haine aux fureurs coutumière,
Oui, tomber dans la nuit quand c’est pour la lumière,
Faire horreur, n’être plus qu’un ulcère, indigner
L’homme heureux, et qu’on raille en vous voyant saigner,
Et qu’on marche sur vous, qu’on vous crache au visage,
Quand c’est pour la vertu, pour le vrai, pour le sage,
Pour le bien, pour l’honneur, il n’est rien de plus doux.
Quelle splendeur qu’un juste abandonné de tous,
N’ayant plus qu’un haillon dans le mal qui le mine,
Et jetant aux dédains, au deuil, à la vermine,
A sa plaie, aux douleurs, de tranquilles défis!
Même quand Prométhée est là, Job, tu suffis
Pour faire le fumier plus haut que le Caucase.

Le juste, méprisé comme un ver qu’on écrase,
M’éblouit d’autant plus que nous le blasphémons.
Ce que les froids bourreaux à faces de démons
Mêlent avec leur main monstrueuse et servile
A l’exécution pour la rendre plus vile,
Grandit le patient au regard de l’esprit.
O croix! les deux voleurs sont deux rayons du Christ!
•
Ainsi, tous les souffrants m’ont apparu splendides,
Satisfaits, radieux, doux, souverains, candides,
Heureux, la plaie au sein, la joie au coeur; les uns
Jetés dans la fournaise et devenant parfums,
Ceux-là jetés aux nuits et devenant aurores;

Les croyants, dévorés dans les cirques sonores,
Râlaient un chant, aux pieds des bêtes étouffés;
Les penseurs souriaient aux noirs autodafés,
Aux glaives, aux carcans, aux chemises de soufre;
Et je me suis alors écrié: Qui donc souffre?
Pour qui donc, si le sort, ô Dieu, n’est pas moqueur,
Toute cette pitié que tu m’as mise au coeur?
Qu’en dois-je faire? à qui faut-il que je la garde?
Où sont les malheureux? — et Dieu m’a dit: — Regarde.

•

Et j’ai vu des palais, des fêtes, des festins,
Des femmes qui mêlaient leurs blancheurs aux satins,
Des murs hautains ayant des jaspes pour écorces,
Des serpents d’or roulés dans des colonnes torses,
Avec de vastes dais pendant aux grands plafonds;
Et j’entendais chanter: — Jouissons! triomphons! —
Et les lyres, les luths, les clairons dont le cuivre
A l’air de se dissoudre en fanfare et de vivre,
Et l’orgue, devant qui l’ombre écoute et se tait,
Tout un orchestre énorme et monstrueux chantait;
Et ce triomphe était rempli d’hommes superbes
Qui riaient et portaient toute la terre en gerbes,
Et dont les fronts dorés, brillants, audacieux,
Fiers, semblaient s’achever en astres dans les cieux.
Et, pendant qu’autour d’eux des voix criaient: — Victoire
A jamais! à jamais force, puissance et gloire!
Et fête dans la ville! et joie à la maison! —
Je voyais, au-dessus du livide horizon,
Trembler le glaive immense et sombre de l’archange.

Ils s’épanouissaient dans une aurore étrange,
Ils vivaient dans l’orgueil comme dans leur cité,
Et semblaient ne sentir que leur félicité.
Et Dieu les a tous pris alors l’un après l’autre,
Le puissant, le repu, l’assouvi qui se vautre,
Le czar dans son Kremlin, l’iman au bord du Nil,
Comme on prend les petits d’un chien dans un chenil,

Et, comme il fait le jour sous les vagues marines,
M’ouvrant avec ses mains ces profondes poitrines,
Et, fouillant de son doigt de rayons pénétré
Leurs entrailles, leur foie et leurs reins, m’a montré
Des hydres qui rongeaient le dedans de ces âmes.

Et j’ai vu tressaillir ces hommes et ces femmes;
Leur visage riant comme un masque est tombé,
Et leur pensée, un monstre effroyable et courbé,
Une naine hagarde, inquiète, bourrue,
Assise sous leur crâne affreux, m’est apparue.
Alors, tremblant, sentant chanceler mes genoux,
Je leur ai demandé: «Mais qui donc êtes-vous?»
Et ces êtres n’ayant presque plus face d’homme
M’ont dit: «Nous sommes ceux qui font le mal; et comme
C’est nous qui le faisons, c’est nous qui le souffrons!»
•
Oh! le nuage vain des pleurs et des affronts
S’envole, et la douleur passe en criant: Espère!
Vous me l’avez fait voir et toucher, ô vous, Père,
Juge, vous le grand juste et vous le grand clément!
Le rire du succès et du triomphe ment;
Un invisible doigt caressant se promène
Sous chacun des chaînons de la misère humaine;
L’adversité soutient ceux qu’elle fait lutter;
L’indigence est un bien pour qui sait la goûter;
L’harmonie éternelle autour du pauvre vibre
Et le berce; l’esclave, étant une âme, est libre,
Et le mendiant dit: Je suis riche, ayant Dieu.
L’innocence aux tourments jette ce cri: C’est peu.
La difformité rit dans Ésope, et la fièvre
Dans Scarron; l’agonie ouvre aux hymnes sa lèvre;
Quand je dis: «La douleur est-elle un mal?» Zénon
Se dresse devant moi paisible, et me dit: «Non.»
Oh! le martyre est joie et transport, le supplice
Est volupté, les feux du bûcher sont délice,
La souffrance est plaisir, la torture est bonheur;

Il n’est qu’un malheureux: c’est le méchant, Seigneur.
•
Aux premiers jours du monde, alors que la nuée,
Surprise, contemplait chaque chose créée,
Alors que sur le globe, où le mal avait crû,
Flottait une lueur de l’Éden disparu,
Quand tout encor semblait être rempli d’aurore,
Quand sur l’arbre du temps les ans venaient d’éclore,
Sur la terre, où la chair avec l’esprit se fond,
Il se faisait le soir un silence profond,
Et le désert, les bois, l’onde aux vastes rivages,
Et les herbes des champs, et les bêtes sauvages,
Émus, et les rochers, ces ténébreux cachots,
Voyaient, d’un antre obscur couvert d’arbres si hauts
Que nos chênes auprès sembleraient des arbustes,
Sortir deux grands vieillards, nus, sinistres, augustes.
C’étaient Ève aux cheveux blanchis, et son mari,
Le pâle Adam, pensif, par le travail meurtri,
Ayant la vision de Dieu sous sa paupière.
Ils venaient tous les deux s’asseoir sur une pierre,
En présence des monts fauves et soucieux,
Et de l’éternité formidable des cieux.
Leur oeil triste rendait la nature farouche,
Et là, sans qu’il sortit un souffle de leur bouche,
Les mains sur leurs genoux et se tournant le dos,
Accablés comme ceux qui portent des fardeaux,
Sans autre mouvement de vie extérieure
Que de baisser plus bas la tête d’heure en heure,
Dans une stupeur morne et fatale absorbés,
Froids, livides, hagards, ils regardaient, courbés
Sous l’être illimité sans figure et sans nombre,
L’un, décroître le jour, et l’autre, grandir l’ombre;
Et, tandis que montaient les constellations,
Et que la première onde aux premiers alcyons
Donnait sous l’infini le long baiser nocturne,
Et qu’ainsi que des fleurs tombant à flots d’une urne
Les astres fourmillants emplissaient le ciel noir,

Ils songeaient, et, rêveurs, sans entendre, sans voir,
Sourds aux rumeurs des mers d’où l’ouragan s’élance,
Toute la nuit, dans l’ombre, ils pleuraient en silence;
Ils pleuraient tous les deux, aïeux du genre humain,
Le père sur Abel, la mère sur Caïn.

Marine-Terrace, septembre 1855.

LIVRE SIXIÈME: AU BORD DE L'INFINI

I

LE PONT

J'avais devant les yeux les ténèbres. L'abîme
Qui n'a pas de rivage et qui n'a pas de cime,
Était là, morne, immense; et rien n'y remuait.
Je me sentais perdu dans l'infini muet.
Au fond, à travers l'ombre, impénétrable voile,
On apercevait Dieu comme une sombre étoile.
Je m'écriai: — Mon âme, ô mon âme! il faudrait,
Pour traverser ce gouffre où nul bord n'apparaît,
Et pour qu'en cette nuit jusqu'à ton Dieu tu marches,
Bâtir un pont géant sur des millions d'arches.
Qui le pourra jamais! Personne! ô deuil! effroi!
Pleure! — Un fantôme blanc se dressa devant moi
Pendant que je jetais sur l'ombre un oeil d'alarme,
Et ce fantôme avait la forme d'une larme;
C'était un front de vierge avec des mains d'enfant;
Il ressemblait au lys que la blancheur défend;
Ses mains en se joignant faisaient de la lumière.
Il me montra l'abîme où va toute poussière,
Si profond, que jamais un écho n'y répond;
Et me dit: — Si tu veux je bâtirai le pont.
Vers ce pâle inconnu je levai ma paupière.
— Quel est ton nom? lui dis-je. Il me dit: — La prière.

Jersey, décembre 1852.

II

IBO

Dites, pourquoi, dans l'insondable

Au mur d’airain,
Dans l’obscurité formidable
Du ciel serein,

Pourquoi, dans ce grand sanctuaire
Sourd et béni,
Pourquoi, sous l’immense suaire
De l’infini,

Enfouir vos lois éternelles
Et vos clartés?
Vous savez bien que j’ai des ailes,
O vérités!

Pourquoi vous cachez-vous dans l’ombre
Qui nous confond?
Pourquoi fuyez-vous l’homme sombre
Au vol profond?

Que le mal détruise ou bâtisse,
Rampe ou soit roi,
Tu sais bien que j’irai, Justice,
J’irai vers toi!

Beauté sainte, Idéal qui germes
Chez les souffrants,
Toi par qui les esprits sont fermes
Et les coeurs grands,

Vous le savez, vous que j’adore,
Amour, Raison,
Qui vous levez comme l’aurore
Sur l’horizon,

Foi, ceinte d’un cercle d’étoiles,
Droit, bien de tous,
J’irai, Liberté qui te voiles,

J’irai vers vous!

Vous avez beau, sans fin, sans borne
Lueurs de Dieu,
Habiter la profondeur morne
Du gouffre bleu,

Ame à l’abîme habituée
Dès le berceau,
Je n’ai pas peur de la nuée;
Je suis oiseau.

Je suis oiseau comme cet être
Qu’Amos rêvait,
Que saint Marc voyait apparaître
A son chevet,

Qui mêlait sur sa tête fière,
Dans les rayons,
L’aile de l’aigle à la crinière
Des grands lions.

J’ai des ailes. J’aspire au faîte;
Mon vol est sûr;
J’ai des ailes pour la tempête
Et pour l’azur.

Je gravis les marches sans nombre.
Je veux savoir;
Quand la science serait sombre
Comme le soir!

Vous savez bien que l’âme affronte
Ce noir degré,
Et que, si haut qu’il faut qu’on monte,
J’y monterai!

Vous savez bien que l’âme est forte
Et ne craint rien
Quand le souffle de Dieu l’emporte!
Vous savez bien

Que j’irai jusqu’aux bleus pilastres,
Et que mon pas,
Sur l’échelle qui monte aux astres,
Ne tremble pas!

L’homme en cette époque agitée,
Sombre océan,
Doit faire comme Prométhée
Et comme Adam.

Il doit ravir au ciel austère
L’éternel feu;
Conquérir son propre mystère,
Et voler Dieu.

L’homme a besoin, dans sa chaumière,
Des vents battu,
D’une loi qui soit sa lumière
Et sa vertu.

Toujours ignorance et misère!
L’homme en vain fuit,
Le sort le tient; toujours la serre!
Toujours la nuit!

Il faut que le peuple s’arrache
Au dur décret,
Et qu’enfin ce grand martyr sache
Le grand secret!

Déjà l’amour, dans l’ère obscure
Qui va finir,

Dessine la vague figure
De l’avenir.

Les lois de nos destins sur terre,
Dieu les écrit;
Et, si ces lois sont le mystère,
Je suis l’esprit.

Je suis celui que rien n’arrête
Celui qui va,
Celui dont l’âme est toujours prête
A Jéhovah;

Je suis le poëte farouche,
L’homme devoir,
Le souffle des douleurs, la bouche
Du clairon noir;

Le rêveur qui sur ses registres
Met les vivants,
Qui mêle des strophes sinistres
Aux quatre vents;

Le songeur ailé, l’âpre athlète
Au bras nerveux,
Et je traînerais la comète
Par les cheveux.

Donc, les lois de notre problème,
Je les aurai;
J’irai vers elles, penseur blême,
Mage effaré!

Pourquoi cacher ces lois profondes?
Rien n’est muré.
Dans vos flammes et dans vos ondes
Je passerai;

J’irai lire la grande bible;
J’entrerai nu
Jusqu’au tabernacle terrible
De l’inconnu,

Jusqu’au seuil de l’ombre et du vide,
Gouffres ouverts
Que garde la meute livide
Des noirs éclairs,

Jusqu’aux portes visionnaires
Du ciel sacré;
Et, si vous aboyez, tonnerres,
Je rugirai.

Au dolmen de Rozel, janvier 1853.

III

UN SPECTRE M’ATTENDAIT DANS UN GRAND ANGLE D’OMBRE

Un spectre m’attendait dans un grand angle d’ombre,
Et m’a dit:
— Le muet habite dans le sombre.
L’infini rêve, avec un visage irrité.
L’homme parle et dispute avec l’obscurité,
Et la larme de l’oeil rit du bruit de la bouche.
Tout ce qui vous emporte est rapide et farouche.
Sais-tu pourquoi tu vis? sais-tu pourquoi tu meurs?
Les vivants orageux passent dans les rumeurs,
Chiffres tumultueux, flots de l’océan Nombre,
Vous n’avez rien à vous qu’un souffle dans de l’ombre;
L’homme est à peine né, qu’il est déjà passé,
Et c’est avoir fini que d’avoir commencé.

Derrière le mur blanc, parmi les herbes vertes,
La fosse obscure attend l’homme, lèvres ouvertes.
La mort est le baiser de la bouche tombeau.
Tâche de faire un peu de bien, coupe un lambeau
D’une bonne action dans cette nuit qui gronde;
Ce sera ton linceul dans la terre profonde.
Beaucoup s’en sont allés qui ne reviendront plus
Qu’à l’heure de l’immense et lugubre reflux;
Alors, on entendra des cris. Tâche de vivre;
Crois. Tant que l’homme vit, Dieu pensif lit son livre.
L’homme meurt quand Dieu fait au coin du livre un pli.
L’espace sait, regarde, écoute. Il est rempli
D’oreilles sous la tombe, et d’yeux dans les ténèbres.
Les morts ne marchant plus, dressent leurs pieds funèbres;
Les feuilles sèches vont et roulent sous les cieux.
Ne sens-tu pas souffler le vent mystérieux?

Au dolmen de Rozel, avril 1853.

IV

ÉCOUTEZ. JE SUIS JEAN. J’AI VU DES CHOSES SOMBRES

J’ai vu l’ombre infinie où se perdent les nombres,
J’ai vu les visions que les réprouvés font,
Les engloutissements de l’abîme sans fond;
J’ai vu le ciel, l’éther, le chaos et l’espace.
Vivants! puisque j’en viens, je sais ce qui s’y passe;
Je vous affirme à tous, écoutez bien ma voix,
J’affirme même à ceux qui vivent dans les bois,
Que le Seigneur, le Dieu des esprits, des prophètes,
Voit ce que vous pensez et sait ce que vous faites.
C’est bien. Continuez, grands, petits, jeunes, vieux!
Que l’avare soit tout à l’or, que l’envieux
Rampe et morde en rampant, que le glouton dévore,

Que celui qui faisait le mal, le fasse encore,
Que celui qui fut lâche et vil, le soit toujours!
Voyant vos passions, vos fureurs, vos amours,
J’ai dit à Dieu: «Seigneur, jugez où nous en sommes.
Considérez la terre et regardez les hommes.
Ils brisent tous les noeuds qui devaient les unir.»
Et Dieu m’a répondu: «Certes, je vais venir!»

Serk, juillet 1853.

V

CROIRE; MAIS PAS EN NOUS

Parce qu’on a porté du pain, du linge blanc,
A quelque humble logis sous les combles tremblant
Comme le nid parmi les feuilles inquiètes;
Parce qu’on a jeté ses restes et ses miettes
Au petit enfant maigre, au vieillard pâlissant,
Au pauvre qui contient l’éternel tout-puissant;
Parce qu’on a laissé Dieu manger sous sa table,
On se croit vertueux, on se croit charitable!
On dit: «Je suis parfait! louez-moi; me voilà!»
Et, tout en blâmant Dieu de ceci, de cela,
De ce qu’il pleut, du mal dont on le dit la cause,
Du chaud, du froid, on fait sa propre apothéose.
Le riche qui, gorgé, repu, fier, paresseux,
Laisse un peu d’or rouler de son palais sur ceux
Que le noir janvier glace et que la faim harcèle,
Ce riche-là, qui brille et donne une parcelle
De ce qu’il a de trop à qui n’a pas assez,
Et qui, pour quelques sous du pauvre ramassés,
S’admire et ferme l’oeil sur sa propre misère,
S’il a le superflu, n’a pas le nécessaire:
La justice; et le loup rit dans l’ombre en marchant
De voir qu’il se croit bon pour n’être pas méchant.
Nous bons! nous fraternels! ô fange et pourriture!

Mais tournez donc vos yeux vers la mère nature!
Que sommes-nous, coeurs froids où l’égoïsme bout,
Auprès de la bonté suprême éparse en tout?
Toutes nos actions ne valent pas la rose.
Dès que nous avons fait par hasard quelque chose,
Nous nous vantons, hélas! vains souffles qui fuyons!
Dieu donne l’aube au ciel sans compter les rayons,
Et la rosée aux fleurs sans mesurer les gouttes;
Nous sommes le néant; nos vertus tiendraient toutes
Dans le creux de la pierre où vient boire l’oiseau.
L’homme est l’orgueil du cèdre emplissant le roseau.
Le meilleur n’est pas bon, vraiment, tant l’homme est frêle;
Et tant notre fumée à nos vertus se mêle!
Le bienfait par nos mains pompeusement jeté
S’évapore aussitôt dans notre vanité;
Même en le prodiguant aux pauvres d’un air tendre,
Nous avons tant d’orgueil que notre or devient cendre;
Le bien que nous faisons est spectre comme nous.
L’Incréé, seul vivant, seul terrible et seul doux,
Qui juge, aime, pardonne, engendre, construit, fonde,
Voit nos hauteurs avec une pitié profonde.
Ah! rapides passants! ne comptons pas sur nous,
Comptons sur lui. Pensons et vivons à genoux;
Tâchons d’être sagesse, humilité, lumière;
Ne faisons point un pas qui n’aille à la prière;
Car nos perfections rayonneront bien peu
Après la mort, devant l’étoile et le ciel bleu.
Dieu seul peut nous sauver. C’est un rêve de croire
Que nos lueurs d’en bas sont là-haut de la gloire;
Si lumineux qu’il ait paru dans notre horreur,
Si doux qu’il ait été pour nos coeurs pleins d’erreur,
Quoi qu’il ait fait, celui que sur la terre on nomme
Juste, excellent, pur, sage et grand, là-haut est l’homme,
C’est-à-dire la nuit en présence du jour;
Son amour semble haine auprès du grand amour;
Et toutes ses splendeurs, poussant des cris funèbres,
Disent en voyant Dieu: Nous sommes les ténèbres!

Dieu, c’est le seul azur dont le monde ait besoin.
L’abîme en en parlant prend l’atome à témoin.
Dieu seul est grand! c’est là le psaume du brin d’herbe;
Dieu seul est vrai! c’est là l’hymne du flot superbe;
Dieu seul est bon! c’est là le murmure des vents;
Ah! ne vous faites pas d’illusions, vivants!
Et d’où sortez-vous donc, pour croire que vous êtes
Meilleurs que Dieu, qui met les astres sur vos têtes,
Et qui vous éblouit, à l’heure du réveil,
De ce prodigieux sourire, le soleil!

Marine-Terrace, décembre 1854.

VI

PLEURS DANS LA NUIT

I

Je suis l’être incliné qui jette ce qu’il pense;
Qui demande à la nuit le secret du silence;
Dont la brume emplit l’oeil;
Dans une ombre sans fond mes paroles descendent,
Et les choses sur qui tombent mes strophes rendent
Le son creux du cercueil.

Mon esprit, qui du doute a senti la piqûre,
Habite, âpre songeur, la rêverie obscure
Aux flots plombés et bleus,
Lac hideux où l’horreur tord ses bras, pâle nymphe,
Et qui fait boire une eau morte comme la lymphe
Aux rochers scrofuleux.

Le Doute, fils bâtard de l’aïeule Sagesse,
Crie: — A quoi bon? — devant l’éternelle largesse,
Nous fait tout oublier,
S’offre à nous, morne abri, dans nos marches sans nombre,

Nous dit: — Es-tu las? Viens! — et l’homme dort à l’ombre
De ce mancenilier.

L’effet pleure et sans cesse interroge la cause.
La création semble attendre quelque chose.
L’homme à l’homme est obscur.
Où donc commence l’âme? où donc finit la vie?
Nous voudrions, c’est là notre incurable envie,
Voir par-dessus le mur.

Nous rampons, oiseaux pris sous le filet de l’être;
Libres et prisonniers, l’immuable pénètre
Toutes nos volontés;
Captifs sous le réseau des choses nécessaires,
Nous sentons se lier des fils à nos misères
Dans les immensités.

II

Nous sommes au cachot; la porte est inflexible;
Mais, dans une main sombre, inconnue, invisible,
Qui passe par moment,
A travers l’ombre, espoir des âmes sérieuses,
On entend le trousseau des clefs mystérieuses
Sonner confusément.

La vision de l’être emplit les yeux de l’homme.
Un mariage obscur sans cesse se consomme
De l’ombre avec le jour;
Ce monde, est-ce un éden tombé dans la géhenne?
Nous avons dans le coeur des ténèbres de haine
Et des clartés d’amour.

La création n’a qu’une prunelle trouble.
L’être éternellement montre sa face double,
Mal et bien, glace et feu;
L’homme sent à la fois, âme pure et chair sombre,

La morsure du ver de terre au fond de l’ombre
Et le baiser de Dieu.

Mais à de certains jours, l’âme est comme une veuve.
Nous entendons gémir les vivants dans l’épreuve.
Nous doutons, nous tremblons,
Pendant que l’aube épand ses lumières sacrées
Et que mai sur nos seuils mêle les fleurs dorées
Avec les enfants blonds.

Qu’importe la lumière, et l’aurore, et les astres,
Fleurs des chapiteaux bleus, diamants des pilastres
Du profond firmament,
Et mai qui nous caresse, et l’enfant qui nous charme,
Si tout n’est qu’un soupir, si tout n’est qu’une larme,
Si tout n’est qu’un moment!

III

Le sort nous use au jour, triste meule qui tourne.
L’homme inquiet et vain croit marcher, il séjourne;
Il expire en créant.
Nous avons la seconde et nous rêvons l’année;
Et la dimension de notre destinée,
C’est poussière et néant.

L’abîme, où les soleils sont les égaux des mouches,
Nous tient; nous n’entendons que des sanglots farouches
Ou des rires moqueurs;
Vers la cible d’en haut qui dans l’azur s’élève,
Nous lançons nos projets, nos voeux, l’espoir, le rêve,
Ces flèches de nos coeurs.

Nous voulons durer, vivre, être éternels. O cendre!
Où donc est la fourmi qu’on appelle Alexandre?
Où donc le ver César?
En tombant sur nos fronts, la minute nous tue.

Nous passons, noir essaim, foule de deuil vêtue,
Comme le bruit d’un char.

Nous montons à l’assaut du temps comme une armée.
Sur nos groupes confus que voile la fumée
Des jours évanouis,
L’énorme éternité luit, splendide et stagnante;
Le cadran, bouclier de l’heure rayonnante.
Nous terrasse éblouis!

IV

A l’instant où l’on dit: Vivons! tout se déchire.
Les pleurs subitement descendent sur le rire.
Tête nue! à genoux!
Tes fils sont morts, mon père est mort, leur mère est morte.
O deuil! qui passe là? C’est un cercueil qu’on porte.
A qui le portez-vous?

Ils le portent à l’ombre, au silence, à la terre;
Ils le portent au calme obscur, à l’aube austère,
A la brume sans bords,
Au mystère qui tord ses anneaux sous des voiles,
Au serpent inconnu qui lèche les étoiles
Et qui baise les morts!

V

Ils le portent aux vers, au néant, à Peut-Être!
Car la plupart d’entre eux n’ont point vu le jour naître;
Sceptiques et bornés,
La négation morne et la matière hostile,
Flambeaux d’aveuglement, troublent l’âme inutile
De ces infortunés.

Pour eux le ciel ment, l’homme est un songe et croit vivre;
Ils ont beau feuilleter page à page le livre,

Ils ne comprennent pas;
Ils vivent en hochant la tête, et, dans le vide,
L’écheveau ténébreux que le doute dévide
Se mêle sous leurs pas.

Pour eux l’âme naufrage avec le corps qui sombre.
Leur rêve a les yeux creux et regarde de l’ombre;
Rien est le mot du sort;
Et chacun d’eux, riant de la voûte étoilée,
Porte en son coeur, au lieu de l’espérance ailée,
Une tête de mort.

Sourds à l’hymne des bois, au sombre cri de l’orgue,
Chacun d’eux est un champ plein de cendre, une morgue
Où pendent des lambeaux,
Un cimetière où l’oeil des frémissants poëtes
Voit planer l’ironie et toutes ses chouettes,
L’ombre et tous ses corbeaux.

Quand l’astre et le roseau leur disent: Il faut croire;
Ils disent au jonc vert, à l’astre en sa nuit noire:
Vous êtes insensés!
Quand l’arbre leur murmure à l’oreille: Il existe;
Ces fous répondent: Non! et, si le chêne insiste,
Ils lui disent: Assez!

Quelle nuit! le semeur nié par la semence!
L’univers n’est pour eux qu’une vaste démence,
Sans but et sans milieu;
Leur âme, en agitant l’immensité profonde,
N’y sent même pas l’être, et dans le grelot monde
N’entend pas sonner Dieu!

VI

Le corbillard franchit le seuil du cimetière.
Le gai matin, qui rit à la nature entière,

Resplendit sur ce deuil;
Tout être a son mystère où l’on sent l’âme éclore,
Et l’offre à l’infini; l’astre apporte l’aurore,
Et l’homme le cercueil.

Le dedans de la fosse apparaît, triste crèche.
Des pierres par endroits percent la terre fraîche;
Et l’on entend le glas;
Elles semblent s’ouvrir ainsi que des paupières,
Et le papillon blanc dit: «Qu’ont donc fait ces pierres?»
Et la fleur dit: «Hélas!»

VII

Est-ce que par hasard ces pierres sont punies,
Dieu vivant, pour subir de telles agonies?
Ah! ce que nous souffrons
N’est rien... — Plus bas que l’arbre en proie aux froides bises,
Sous cette forme horrible, est-ce que les Cambyses,
Est-ce que les Nérons,

Après avoir tenu les peuples dans leur serre,
Et crucifié l’homme au noir gibet misère,
Mis le monde en lambeaux,
Souillé l’âme, et changé, sous le vent des désastres,
L’univers en charnier, et fait monter aux astres
La vapeur des tombeaux,

Après avoir passé joyeux dans la victoire,
Dans l’orgueil, et partout imprimé sur l’histoire
Leurs ongles furieux,
Et, monstres qu’entrevoit l’homme en ses léthargies.
Après avoir sur terre été des effigies
Du mal mystérieux,

Après avoir peuplé les prisons élargies,
Et versé tant de meurtre aux vastes mers rougies,

Tant de morts, glaive au flanc,
Tant d’ombre, et de carnage, et d’horreurs inconnues,
Que le soleil, le soir, hésitait dans les nues
Devant ce bain sanglant!

Après avoir mordu le troupeau que Dieu mène,
Et tourné tour à tour de la torture humaine
L’atroce cabestan,
Et régné sous la pourpre et sous le laticlave,
Et plié six mille ans Adam, le vieil esclave,
Sous le vieux roi Satan,

Est-ce que le chasseur Nemrod, Sforce le pâtre,
Est-ce que Messaline, est-ce que Cléopâtre,
Caligula, Macrin,
Et les Achabs, par qui renaissaient les Sodomes,
Et Phalaris, qui fit du hurlement des hommes
La clameur de l’airain,

Est-ce que Charles Neuf, Constantin, Louis Onze,
Vitellius, la fange, et Busiris, le bronze,
Les Cyrus dévorants,
Les Égystes montrés du doigt par les Électres,
Seraient dans cette nuit, d’hommes devenus spectres,
Et pierres de tyrans?

Est-ce que ces cailloux, tout pénétrés de crimes,
Dans l’horreur étouffés, scellés dans les abîmes,
Enviant l’ossement,
Sans air, sans mouvement, sans jour, sans yeux, sans bouche,
Entre l’herbe sinistre et le cercueil farouche,
Vivraient affreusement?

Est-ce que ce seraient des âmes condamnées,
Des maudits qui, pendant des millions d’années,
Seuls avec le remords,
Au lieu de voir, des yeux de l’astre solitaire,

Sortir les rayons d’or, verraient les vers de terre
Sortir des yeux des morts?

Homme et roche, exister, noir dans l’ombre vivante!
Songer, pétrifié dans sa propre épouvante!
Rêver l’éternité!
Dévorer ses fureurs, confusément rugies!
Être pris, ouragan de crimes et d’orgies,
Dans l’immobilité!

Punition! problème obscur! questions sombres!
Quoi! ce caillou dirait: — J’ai mis Thèbe en décombres!
J’ai vu Suze à genoux!
J’étais Bélus à Tyr! j’étais Sylla dans Rome! —
Noire captivité des vieux démons de l’homme!
O pierres, qu’êtes-vous?

Qu’a fait ce bloc, béant dans la fosse insalubre?
Glacé du froid profond de la terre lugubre,
Informe et châtié,
Aveugle, même aux feux que la nuit réverbère,
Il pense et se souvient... — Quoi! ce n’est que Tibère!
Seigneur, ayez pitié!

Ce dur silex noyé dans la terre, âpre, fruste,
Couvert d’ombre, pendant que le ciel s’ouvre au juste
Qui s’y réfugia,
Jaloux du chien qui jappe et de l’âne qui passe,
Songe et dit: Je suis là! — Dieu vivant, faites grâce!
Ce n’est que Borgia!

O Dieu bon, penchez-vous sur tous ces misérables!
Sauvez ces submergés, aimez ces exécrables!
Ouvrez les soupiraux.
Au nom des innocents, Dieu, pardonnez aux crimes.
Père, fermez l’enfer. Juge, au nom des victimes,
Grâce pour les bourreaux!

De toutes parts s’élève un cri: Miséricorde!
Les peuples nus, liés, fouettés à coups de corde,
Lugubres travailleurs,
Voyant leur maître en proie aux châtiments sublimes,
Ont pitié du despote, et, saignant de ses crimes,
Pleurent de ses douleurs;

Les pâles nations regardent dans le gouffre,
Et ces grands suppliants, pour le tyran qui souffre,
T’implorent, Dieu jaloux;
L’esclave mis en croix, l’opprimé sur la claie,
Plaint le satrape au fond de l’abîme, et la plaie
Dit: Grâce pour les clous!

Dieu serein, regardez d’un regard salutaire
Ces reclus ténébreux qu’emprisonne la terre
Pleine d’obscurs verrous,
Ces forçats dont le bagne est le dedans des pierres,
Et levez, à la voix des justes en prières,
Ces effrayants écrous.

Père, prenez pitié du monstre et de la roche.
De tous les condamnés que le pardon s’approche!
Jadis, roi des combats,
Ces bandits sur la terre ont fait une tempête;
Étant montés plus haut dans l’horreur que la bête,
Ils sont tombés plus bas.

Grâce pour eux! démence, espoir, pardon, refuge,
Au jonc qui fut un prince, au ver qui fut un juge!
Le méchant, c’est le fou.
Dieu, rouvrez au maudit! Dieu, relevez l’infâme!
Rendez à tous l’azur. Donnez au tigre une âme,
Des ailes au caillou!

Mystère! obsession de tout esprit qui pense!

Échelle de la peine et de la récompense!
Nuit qui monte en clarté!
Sourire épanoui sur la torture amère!
Vision du sépulcre! êtes-vous la chimère,
Ou la réalité?

VIII

La fosse, plaie au flanc de la terre, est ouverte,
Et, béante, elle fait frissonner l’herbe verte
Et le buisson jauni;
Elle est là, froide, calme, étroite, inanimée,
Et l’âme en voit sortir, ainsi qu’une fumée,
L’ombre de l’infini.

Et les oiseaux de l’air, qui, planant sur les cimes,
Volant sous tous les cieux, comparent les abîmes
Dans les courses qu’ils font,
Songent au noir Vésuve, à l’Océan superbe,
Et disent, en voyant cette fosse dans l’herbe:
Voici le plus profond!

IX

L’âme est partie, on rend le corps à la nature.
La vie a disparu sous cette créature;
Mort, où sont tes appuis?
Le voilà hors du temps, de l’espace et du nombre.
On le descend avec une corde dans l’ombre
Comme un seau dans un puits.

Que voulez-vous puiser dans ce puits formidable?
Et pourquoi jetez-vous la sonde à l’insondable?
Qu’y voulez-vous puiser?
Est-ce l’adieu lointain et doux de ceux qu’on aime?
Est-ce un regard? hélas! est-ce un soupir suprême?
Est-ce un dernier baiser?

Qu’y voulez-vous puiser, vivants, essaim frivole?
Est-ce un frémissement du vide où tout s’envole,
Un bruit, une clarté,
Une lettre du mot que Dieu seul peut écrire?
Est-ce, pour le mêler à vos éclats de rire,
Un peu d’éternité?

Dans ce gouffre où la larve entr’ouvre son oeil terne,
Dans cette épouvantable et livide citerne,
Abîme de douleurs,
Dans ce cratère obscur des muettes demeures,
Que voulez-vous puiser, ô passants de peu d’heures,
Hommes de peu de pleurs?

Est-ce le secret sombre? est-ce la froide goutte
Qui, larme du néant, suinte de l’âpre voûte
Sans aube et sans flambeau?
Est-ce quelque lueur effarée et hagarde?
Est-ce le cri jeté par tout ce qui regarde
Derrière le tombeau?

Vous ne puiserez rien. Les morts tombent. La fosse
Les voit descendre, avec leur âme juste ou fausse,
Leur nom, leurs pas, leur bruit.
Un jour, quand souffleront les célestes haleines,
Dieu seul remontera toutes ces urnes pleines
De l’éternelle nuit.

X

Et la terre, agitant la ronce à sa surface,
Dit: — L’homme est mort; c’est bien; que veut-on que j’en fasse?
Pourquoi me le rend-on?
Terre! fais-en des fleurs! des lys que l’aube arrose!
De cette bouche aux dents béantes, fais la rose
Entr’ouvrant son bouton!

Fais ruisseler ce sang dans tes sources d’eaux vives,
Et fais-le boire aux boeufs mugissants, tes convives;
Prends ces chairs en haillons;
Fais de ces seins bleuis sortir des violettes,
Et couvre de ces yeux que t’offrent les squelettes
L’aile des papillons.

Fais avec tous ces morts une joyeuse vie.
Fais-en le fier torrent qui gronde et qui dévie,
La mousse aux frais tapis!
Fais-en des rocs, des joncs, des fruits, des vignes mûres,
Des brises, des parfums, des bois pleins de murmures,
Des sillons pleins d’épis!

Fais-en des buissons verts, fais-en de grandes herbes!
Et qu’en ton sein profond d’où se lèvent les gerbes,
A travers leur sommeil,
Les effroyables morts sans souffle et sans paroles
Se sentent frissonner dans toutes ces corolles
Qui tremblent au soleil!

XI

La terre, sur la bière où le mort pâle écoute,
Tombe, et le nid gazouille, et, là-bas, sur la route
Siffle le paysan;
Et ces fils, ces amis que le regret amène,
N’attendent même pas que la fosse soit pleine
Pour dire: Allons-nous-en!

Le fossoyeur, payé par ces douleurs hâtées,
Jette sur le cercueil la terre à pelletées.
Toi qui, dans ton linceul,
Rêvais le deuil sans fin, cette blanche colombe,
Avec cet homme allant et venant sur ta tombe,
O mort, te voilà seul!

Commencement de l’âpre et morne solitude!
Tu ne changeras plus de lit ni d’attitude;
L’heure aux pas solennels
Ne sonne plus pour toi; l’ombre te fait terrible;
L’immobile suaire a sur ta forme horrible
Mis ses plis éternels.

Et puis le fossoyeur s’en va boire la fosse.
Il vient de voir des dents que la terre déchausse,
Il rit, il mange, il mord;
Et prend, en murmurant des chansons hébétées,
Un verre dans ses mains à chaque instant heurtées
Aux choses de la mort.

Le soir vient; l’horizon s’emplit d’inquiétude;
L’herbe tremble et bruit comme une multitude;
Le fleuve blanc reluit;
Le paysage obscur prend les veines des marbres;
Ces hydres que, le jour, on appelle des arbres,
Se tordent dans la nuit.

Le mort est seul. Il sent la nuit qui le dévore.
Quand naît le doux matin, tout l’azur de l’aurore,
Tous ses rayons si beaux,
Tout l’amour des oiseaux et leurs chansons sans nombre,
Vont aux berceaux dorés; et, la nuit, toute l’ombre
Aboutit aux tombeaux.

Il entend des soupirs dans les fosses voisines,
Il sent la chevelure affreuse des racines
Entrer dans son cercueil;
Il est l’être vaincu dont s’empare la chose;
Il sent un doigt obscur, sous sa paupière close,
Lui retirer son oeil.

Il a froid; car le soir, qui mêle à son haleine

Les ténèbres, l’horreur, le spectre et le phalène,
Glace ces durs grabats;
Le cadavre, lié de bandelettes blanches,
Grelotte, et dans sa bière entend les quatre planches
Qui lui parlent tout bas.

L’une dit: — Je fermais ton coffre-fort. — Et l’autre
Dit: — J’ai servi de porte au toit qui fut le nôtre. —
L’autre dit: — Aux beaux jours,
La table où rit l’ivresse et que le vin encombre,
C’était moi. — L’autre dit: — J’étais le chevet sombre
Du lit de tes amours.

Allez, vivants! riez, chantez; le jour flamboie.
Laissez derrière vous, derrière votre joie
Sans nuage et sans pli,
Derrière la fanfare et le bal qui s’élance,
Tous ces morts qu’enfouit dans la fosse silence
Le fossoyeur oubli!

XII

Tous y viendront.

XIII

Assez! et levez-vous de table.
Chacun prend à son tour la route redoutable;
Chacun sort en tremblant;
Chantez, riez; soyez heureux, soyez célèbres;
Chacun de vous sera bientôt dans les ténèbres
Le spectre au regard blanc.

La foule vous admire et l’azur vous éclaire;
Vous êtes riche, grand, glorieux, populaire,
Puissant, fier, encensé;
Vos licteurs devant vous, graves, portent la hache;

Et vous vous en irez sans que personne sache
Où vous avez passé.

Jeunes filles, hélas! qui donc croit à l’aurore?
Votre lèvre pâlit pendant qu’on danse encore
Dans le bal enchanté;
Dans les lustres blêmis on voit grandir le cierge;
La mort met sur vos fronts ce grand voile de vierge
Qu’on nomme éternité.

Le conquérant, debout dans une aube enflammée,
Penche, et voit s’en aller son épée en fumée;
L’amante avec l’amant
Passe; le berceau prend une voix sépulcrale;
L’enfant rose devient larve horrible, et le râle
Sort du vagissement.

Ce qu’ils disaient hier, le savent-ils eux-mêmes?
Des chimères, des voeux, des cris, de vains problèmes!
O néant inouï!
Rien ne reste; ils ont tout oublié dans la fuite
Des choses que Dieu pousse et qui courent si vite
Que l’homme est ébloui!

O promesses! espoirs! cherchez-les dans l’espace.
La bouche qui promet est un oiseau qui passe.
Fou qui s’y confierait!
Les promesses s’en vont où va le vent des plaines,
Où vont les flots, où vont les obscures haleines
Du soir dans la forêt!

Songe à la profondeur du néant où nous sommes.
Quand tu seras couché sous la terre où les hommes
S’enfoncent pas à pas,
Tes enfants, épuisant les jours que Dieu leur compte,
Seront dans la lumière ou seront dans la honte;
Tu ne le sauras pas!

Ce que vous rêvez tombe avec ce que vous faites.
Voyez ces grands palais; voyez ces chars de fêtes
Aux tournoyants essieux;
Voyez ces longs fusils qui suivent le rivage;
Voyez ces chevaux, noirs comme un héron sauvage
Qui vole sous les cieux,

Tout cela passera comme une voix chantante.
Pyramide, à tes pieds tu regardes la tente,
Sous l’éclatant zénith;
Tu l’entends frissonner au vent comme une voile,
Chéops, et tu te sens, en la voyant de toile,
Fière d’être en granit;

Et toi, tente, tu dis: Gloire à la pyramide!
Mais, un jour, hennissant comme un cheval numide,
L’ouragan libyen
Soufflera sur ce sable où sont les tentes frêles,
Et Chéops roulera pêle-mêle avec elles
En s’écriant: Eh bien!

Tu périras, malgré ton enceinte murée,
Et tu ne seras plus, ville, ô ville sacrée,
Qu’un triste amas fumant,
Et ceux qui t’ont servie et ceux qui t’ont aimée
Frapperont leur poitrine en voyant la fumée
De ton embrasement.

Ils diront: — O douleur! ô deuil! guerre civile!
Quelle ville a jamais égalé cette ville?
Ses tours montaient dans l’air;
Elle riait aux chants de ses prostituées;
Elle faisait courir ainsi que des nuées
Ses vaisseaux sur la mer.

Ville! où sont tes docteurs qui t’enseignaient à lire?

Tes dompteurs de lions qui jouaient de la lyre,
Tes lutteurs jamais las?
Ville! est-ce qu’un voleur, la nuit, t’a dérobée?
Où donc est Babylone? Hélas! elle est tombée!
Elle est tombée, hélas!

On n’entend plus chez toi le bruit que fait la meule.
Pas un marteau n’y frappe un clou. Te voilà seule.
Ville, où sont tes bouffons?
Nul passant désormais ne montera tes rampes;
Et l’on ne verra plus la lumière des lampes
Luire sous tes plafonds.

Brillez pour disparaître et montez pour descendre.
Le grain de sable dit dans l’ombre au grain de cendre:
Il faut tout engloutir.
Où donc est Thèbes? dit Babylone pensive.
Thèbes demande: Où donc est Ninive? et Ninive
S’écrie: Où donc est Tyr?

En laissant fuir les mots de sa langue prolixe,
L’homme s’agite et va, suivi par un oeil fixe;
Dieu n’ignore aucun toit;
Tous les jours d’ici-bas ont des aubes funèbres;
Malheur à ceux qui font le mal dans les ténèbres;
En disant: Qui nous voit?

Tous tombent; l’un au bout d’une course insensée,
L’autre à son premier pas; l’homme sur sa pensée,
La mère sur son nid;
Et le porteur de sceptre et le joueur de flûte
S’en vont; et rien ne dure; et le père qui lutte
Suit l’aïeul qui bénit.

Les races vont au but qu’ici-bas tout révèle.
Quand l’ancienne commence à pâlir, la nouvelle
A déjà le même air;

Dans l’éternité, gouffre où se vide la tombe,
L’homme coule sans fin, sombre fleuve qui tombe
Dans une sombre mer.

Tout escalier, que l’ombre ou la splendeur le couvre,
Descend au tombeau calme, et toute porte s’ouvre
Sur le dernier moment;
Votre sépulcre emplit la maison où vous êtes;
Et tout plafond, croisant ses poutres sur nos têtes,
Est fait d’écroulement.

Veillez! veillez! Songez à ceux que vous perdîtes;
Parlez moins haut, prenez garde à ce que vous dites,
Contemplez à genoux;
L’aigle trépas du bout de l’aile nous effleure;
Et toute notre vie, en fuite heure par heure,
S’en va derrière nous.

O coups soudains! départs vertigineux! mystère!
Combien qui ne croyaient parler que pour la terre,
Front haut, coeur fier, bras fort,
Tout à coup, comme un mur subitement s’écroule,
Au milieu d’une phrase adressée à la foule,
Sont entrés dans la mort,

Et, sous l’immensité qui n’est qu’un oeil sublime,
Ont pâli, stupéfaits de voir, dans cet abîme
D’astres et de ciel bleu,
Où le masqué se montre, où l’inconnu se nomme,
Que le mot qu’ils avaient commencé devant l’homme
S’achevait devant Dieu!

Un spectre au seuil de tout tient le doigt sur sa bouche.
Les morts partent. La nuit de sa verge les touche.
Ils vont, l’antre est profond,
Nus, et se dissipant, et l’on ne voit rien luire.
Où donc sont-ils allés? On n’a rien à vous dire.

Ceux qui s’en vont, s’en vont.

Sur quoi donc marchent-ils? sur l’énigme, sur l’ombre,
Sur l’être. Ils font un pas: comme la nef qui sombre,
Leur blancheur disparaît;
Et l’on n’entend plus rien dans l’ombre inaccessible,
Que le bruit sourd que fait dans le gouffre invisible
L’invisible forêt.

L’infini, route noire et de brume remplie,
Et qui joint l’âme à Dieu, monte, fuit, multiplie
Ses cintres tortueux,
Et s’efface... — et l’horreur effare nos pupilles
Quand nous entrevoyons les arches et les piles
De ce pont monstrueux.

O sort! obscurité! nuée! on rêve, on souffre,
Les êtres, dispersés à tous les vents du gouffre,
Ne savent ce qu’ils font.
Les vivants sont hagards. Les morts sont dans leurs couches.
Pendant que nous songeons, des pleurs, gouttes farouches,
Tombent du noir plafond.

XIV

On brave l’immuable; et l’un se réfugie
Dans l’assoupissement, et l’autre dans l’orgie.
Cet autre va criant:
— A bas vertu, devoir et foi! l’homme est un ventre! —
Dans ce lugubre esprit, comme un tigre en son antre,
Habite le néant.

Écoutez-le: — Jouir est tout. L’heure est rapide.
Le sacrifice est fou, le martyre est stupide;
Vivre est l’essentiel.
L’immensité ricane et la tombe grimace.
La vie est un caillou que le sage ramasse

Pour lapider le ciel. —

Il souffle, forçat noir, sa vermine sur l'ange.
Il est content, il est hideux; il boit, il mange;
Il rit, la lèvre en feu,
Tous les rires que peut inventer la démence;
Il dit tout ce que peut dire en sa haine immense
Le ver de terre à Dieu.

Il dit: Non! à celui sous qui tremble le pôle.
Soudain l'ange muet met la main sur l'épaule
Du railleur effronté;
La mort derrière lui surgit pendant qu'il chante;
Dieu remplit tout à coup cette bouche crachante
Avec l'éternité.

XV

Qu'est-ce que tu feras de tant d'herbes fauchées,
O vent? que feras-tu des pailles desséchées
Et de l'arbre abattu?
Que feras-tu de ceux qui s'en vont avant l'heure,
Et de celui qui rit et de celui qui pleure,
O vent, qu'en feras-tu?

Que feras-tu des coeurs! que feras-tu des âmes?
Nous aimâmes, hélas! nous crûmes, nous pensâmes:
Un moment nous brillons;
Puis, sur les panthéons ou sur les ossuaires,
Nous frissonnons, ceux-ci drapeaux, ceux-là suaires,
Tous, lambeaux et haillons!

Et ton souffle nous tient, nous arrache et nous ronge!
Et nous étions la vie, et nous sommes le songe!
Et voilà que tout fuit!
Et nous ne savons plus qui nous pousse et nous mène,
Et nous questionnons en vain notre âme pleine

De tonnerre et de nuit!

O vent, que feras-tu de ces tourbillons d’êtres,
Hommes, femmes, vieillards, enfants, esclaves, maîtres,
Souffrant, priant, aimant,
Doutant, peut-être cendre et peut-être semence,
Qui roulent, frémissants et pâles, vers l’immense
Évanouissement!

XVI

L’arbre Éternité vit sans faîte et sans racines.
Ses branches sont partout, proches du ver, voisines
Du grand astre doré;
L’espace voit sans fin croître la branche Nombre,
Et la branche Destin, végétation sombre,
Emplit l’homme effaré.

Nous la sentons ramper et grandir sous nos crânes,
Lier Deutz à Judas, Nemrod à Schinderhannes
Tordre ses mille noeuds,
Et, passants pénétrés de fibres éternelles,
Tremblants, nous la voyons croiser dans nos prunelles
Ses fils vertigineux.

Et nous apercevons, dans le plus noir de l’arbre,
Les Hobbes contemplant avec des yeux de marbre,
Les Kant aux larges fronts;
Leur cognée à la main, le pied sur les problèmes,
Immobiles; la mort a fait des spectres blêmes
De tous ces bûcherons.

Ils sont là, stupéfaits et chacun sur sa branche.
L’un se redresse, et l’autre, épouvanté, se penche.
L’un voulut, l’autre osa,
Tous se sont arrêtés en voyant le mystère.
Zénon rêve tourné vers Pyrrhon, et Voltaire

Regarde Spinosa.

Qu’avez-vous donc trouvé, dites, chercheurs sublimes?
Quels nids avez-vous vus, noirs comme des abîmes,
Sur ces rameaux noueux?
Cachaient-ils des essaims d’ailes sombres ou blanches?
Dites, avez-vous fait envoler de ces branches
Quelque aigle monstrueux?

De quelqu’un qui se tait nous sommes les ministres;
Le noir réseau du sort trouble nos yeux sinistres;
Le vent nous courbe tous;
L’ombre des mêmes nuits mêle toutes les têtes.
Qui donc sait le secret? le savez-vous, tempêtes?
Gouffres, en parlez-vous?

Le problème muet gonfle la mer sonore,
Et, sans cesse oscillant, va du soir à l’aurore
Et de la taupe au lynx;
L’énigme aux yeux profonds nous regarde obstinée;
Dans l’ombre nous voyons sur notre destinée
Les deux griffes du sphynx.

Le mot, c’est Dieu. Ce mot luit dans les âmes veuves,
Il tremble dans la flamme; onde, il coule en tes fleuves,
Homme, il coule en ton sang;
Les constellations le disent au silence;
Et le volcan, mortier de l’infini, le lance
Aux astres en passant.

Ne doutons pas. Croyons. Emplissons l’étendue
De notre confiance, humble, ailée, éperdue.
Soyons l’immense Oui.
Que notre cécité ne soit pas un obstacle;
A la création donnons ce grand spectacle
D’un aveugle ébloui.

Car, je vous le redis, votre oreille étant dure,
Non est un précipice. O vivants! rien ne dure;
La chair est aux corbeaux;
La vie autour de vous croule comme un vieux cloître;
Et l'herbe est formidable, et l'on y voit moins croître
De fleurs que de tombeaux.

Tout, dès que nous doutons, devient triste et farouche.
Quand il veut, spectre gai, le sarcasme à la bouche
Et l'ombre dans les yeux,
Rire avec l'infini, pauvre âme aventurière,
L'homme frissonnant voit les arbres en prière
Et les monts sérieux;

Le chêne ému fait signe au cèdre qui contemple;
Le rocher rêveur semble un prêtre dans le temple
Pleurant un déshonneur;
L'araignée, immobile au centre de ses toiles,
Médite; et le lion, songeant sous les étoiles,
Rugit: Pardon, Seigneur!

Jersey, cimetière de Saint-Jean, avril 1854.

VII

UN JOUR, LE MORNE ESPRIT, LE PROPHETE SUBLIME

Un jour, le morne esprit, le prophète sublime
Qui rêvait à Patmos,
Et lisait, frémissant, sur le mur de l'abîme
De si lugubres mots,

Dit à son aigle: «O monstre! il faut que tu m'emportes.
Je veux voir Jéhovah.»
L'aigle obéit. Des cieux ils franchirent les portes;

Enfin, Jean arriva;

Il vit l'endroit sans nom dont nul archange n'ose
Traverser le milieu,
Et ce lieu redoutable était plein d'ombre, à cause
De la grandeur de Dieu.

Jersey, septembre 1855.

VIII

CLAIRE

Quoi donc! la vôtre aussi! la vôtre suit la mienne!
O mère au coeur profond, mère, vous avez beau
Laisser la porte ouverte afin qu'elle revienne,
Cette pierre là-bas dans l'herbe est un tombeau!

La mienne disparut dans les flots qui se mêlent;
Alors, ce fut ton tour, Claire, et tu t'envolas.
Est-ce donc que là-haut dans l'ombre elles s'appellent,
Qu'elles s'en vont ainsi l'une après l'autre, hélas?

Enfant qui rayonnais, qui chassais la tristesse,
Que ta mère jadis berçait de sa chanson,
Qui d'abord la charmas avec ta petitesse
Et plus tard lui remplis de clarté l'horizon,

Voilà donc que tu dors sous cette pierre grise!
Voilà que tu n'es plus, ayant à peine été!
L'astre attire le lys, et te voilà reprise,
O vierge, par l'azur, cette virginité!

Te voilà remontée au firmament sublime,
Échappée aux grands cieux comme la grive aux bois,
Et, flamme, aile, hymne, odeur, replongée à l'abîme
Des rayons, des amours, des parfums et des voix!

Nous ne t’entendrons plus rire en notre nuit noire.
Nous voyons seulement, comme pour nous bénir,
Errer dans notre ciel et dans notre mémoire
Ta figure, nuage, et ton nom, souvenir!

Pressentais-tu déjà ton sombre épithalame?
Marchant sur notre monde à pas silencieux,
De tous les idéals tu composais ton âme,
Comme si tu faisais un bouquet pour les cieux!

En te voyant si calme et toute lumineuse,
Les coeurs les plus saignants ne haïssaient plus rien.
Tu passais parmi nous comme Ruth la glaneuse,
Et, comme Ruth l’épi, tu ramassais le bien.

La nature, ô front pur, versait sur toi sa grâce,
L’aurore sa candeur, et les champs leur bonté;
Et nous retrouvions, nous sur qui la douleur passe,
Toute cette douceur dans toute ta beauté!

Chaste, elle paraissait ne pas être autre chose
Que la forme qui sort des deux éblouissants,
Et de tous les rosiers elle semblait la rose,
Et de tous les amours elle semblait l’encens.

Ceux qui n’ont pas connu cette charmante fille
Ne peuvent pas savoir ce qu’était ce regard
Transparent comme l’eau qui s’égaye et qui brille
Quand l’étoile surgit sur l’océan hagard.

Elle était simple, franche, humble, naïve et bonne;
Chantant à demi-voix son chant d’illusion,
Ayant je ne sais quoi dans toute sa personne
De vague et de lointain comme la vision.

On sentait qu’elle avait peu de temps sur la terre,

Qu’elle n’apparaissait que pour s’évanouir,
Et qu’elle acceptait peu sa vie involontaire;
Et la tombe semblait par moments l’éblouir.

Elle a passé dans l’ombre où l’homme se résigne;
Le vent sombre soufflait; elle a passé sans bruit,
Belle, candide, ainsi qu’une plume de cygne
Qui reste blanche, même en traversant la nuit!

Elle s’en est allée à l’aube qui se lève,
Lueur dans le matin, vertu dans le ciel bleu,
Bouche qui n’a connu que le baiser du rêve,
Âme qui n’a dormi que dans le lit de Dieu!

Nous voici maintenant en proie aux deuils sans bornes,
Mère, à genoux tous deux sur des cercueils sacrés,
Regardant à jamais dans les ténèbres mornes
La disparition des êtres adorés!

Croire qu’ils resteraient! quel songe! Dieu les presse.
Même quand leurs bras blancs sont autour de nos cous,
Un vent du ciel profond fait frissonner sans cesse
Ces fantômes charmants que nous croyons à nous.

Ils sont là, près de nous, jouant sur notre route;
Ils ne dédaignent pas notre soleil obscur,
Et derrière eux, et sans que leur candeur s’en doute,
Leurs ailes font parfois de l’ombre sur le mur.

Ils viennent sous nos toits; avec nous ils demeurent;
Nous leur disons: Ma fille! ou: Mon fils! ils sont doux,
Riants, joyeux, nous font une caresse, et meurent. —
O mère, ce sont là les anges, voyez-vous!

C’est une volonté du sort, pour nous sévère
Qu’ils rentrent vite au ciel resté pour eux ouvert;
Et qu’avant d’avoir mis leur lèvre à notre verre,

Avant d'avoir rien fait et d'avoir rien souffert,

Ils partent radieux; et qu'ignorant l'envie,
L'erreur, l'orgueil, le mal, la haine, la douleur,
Tous ces êtres bénis s'envolent de la vie
A l'âge où la prunelle innocente est en fleur!

Nous qui sommes démons ou qui sommes apôtres,
Nous devons travailler, attendre, préparer;
Pensifs, nous expions pour nous-même ou pour d'autres;
Notre chair doit saigner, nos yeux doivent pleurer.

Eux, ils sont l'air qui fuit, l'oiseau qui ne se pose
Qu'un instant, le soupir qui vole, avril vermeil
Qui brille et passe; ils sont le parfum de la rose
Qui va rejoindre, aux cieux le rayon du soleil!

Ils ont ce grand dégoût mystérieux de l'âme
Pour notre chair coupable et pour notre destin;
Ils ont, êtres rêveurs qu'un autre azur réclame,
Je ne sais quelle soif de mourir le matin!

Ils sont l'étoile d'or se couchant dans l'aurore,
Mourant pour nous, naissant pour l'autre firmament;
Car la mort, quand un astre en son sein vient éclore,
Continue, au delà, l'épanouissement!

Oui, mère, ce sont là les élus du mystère,
Les envoyés divins, les ailés, les vainqueurs,
A qui Dieu n'a permis que d'effleurer la terre
Pour faire un peu de joie à quelques pauvres coeurs.

Comme l'ange à Jacob, comme Jésus à Pierre,
Ils viennent jusqu'à nous qui loin d'eux étouffons,
Beaux, purs, et chacun d'eux portant sous sa paupière
La sereine clarté des paradis profonds.

Puis, quand ils ont, pieux, baisé toutes les plaies,
Pansé notre douleur, azuré nos raisons,
Et fait luire un moment l'aube à travers nos claies,
Et chanté la chanson du ciel dans nos maisons,

Ils retournent là-haut parler à Dieu des hommes,
Et, pour lui faire voir quel est notre chemin,
Tout ce que nous souffrons et tout ce que nous sommes,
S'en vont avec un peu de terre dans la main.

Ils s'en vont; c'est tantôt l'éclair qui les emporte,
Tantôt un mal plus fort que nos soins superflus.
Alors, nous, pâles, froids, l'oeil fixé sur la porte,
Nous ne savons plus rien, sinon qu'ils ne sont plus.

Nous disons: — A quoi bon l'âtre sans étincelles?
A quoi bon la maison où ne sont plus leurs pas?
A quoi bon la ramée où ne sont plus les ailes:
Qui donc attendons-nous s'ils ne reviendront pas? —

Ils sont partis, pareils au bruit qui sort des lyres.
Et nous restons là, seuls, près du gouffre où tout fuit,
Tristes; et la lueur de leurs charmants sourires
Parfois nous apparaît vaguement dans la nuit.

Car ils sont revenus, et c'est là le mystère;
Nous entendons quelqu'un flotter, un souffle errer,
Des robes effleurer notre seuil solitaire,
Et cela fait alors que nous pouvons pleurer.

Nous sentons frissonner leurs cheveux dans notre ombre;
Nous sentons, lorsqu'ayant la lassitude en nous,
Nous nous levons après quelque prière sombre,
Leurs blanches mains toucher doucement nos genoux.

Ils nous disent tout bas de leur voix la plus tendre:
«Mon père! encore un peu! ma mère! encore un jour!

M’entends-tu? Je suis là, je reste pour t’attendre
Sur l’échelon d’en bas de l’échelle d’amour.

«Je t’attends pour pouvoir nous en aller ensemble.
Cette vie est amère, et tu vas en sortir.
Pauvre coeur, ne crains rien, Dieu vit! la mort rassemble.
Tu redeviendras ange ayant été martyr.»

Oh! quand donc viendrez-vous? vous retrouver, c’est naître.
Quand verrons-nous, ainsi qu’un idéal flambeau,
La douce étoile mort, rayonnante, apparaître
A ce noir horizon qu’on nomme le tombeau?

Quand nous en irons-nous où vous êtes, colombes!
Où sont les enfants morts et les printemps enfuis,
Et tous les chers amours dont nous sommes les tombes,
Et toutes les clartés dont nous sommes les nuits?

Vers ce grand ciel clément où sont tous les dictames,
Les aimés, les absents, les êtres purs et doux,
Les baisers des esprits et les regards des âmes,
Quand nous en irons-nous? quand nous en irons-nous?

Quand nous en irons-nous où sont l’aube et la foudre?
Quand verrons-nous, déjà libres, hommes encor,
Notre chair ténébreuse en rayons se dissoudre,
Et nos pieds faits de nuit éclore en ailes d’or?

Quand nous enfuirons-nous dans la joie infinie
Où les hymnes vivants sont des anges voilés,
Où l’on voit, à travers l’azur de l’harmonie,
La strophe bleue errer sur les luths étoilés?

Quand viendrez-vous chercher notre humble coeur qui sombre,
Quand nous reprendrez-vous à ce monde charnel,
Pour nous bercer ensemble aux profondeurs de l’ombre,
Sous l’éblouissement du regard éternel?

Décembre 1846.

IX

À LA FENÊTRE PENDANT LA NUIT

I

Les étoiles, points d’or, percent les branches noires;
Le flot huileux et lourd décompose ses moires
Sur l’océan blêmi;
Les nuages ont l’air d’oiseaux prenant la fuite;
Par moments le vent parle, et dit des mots sans suite,
Comme un homme endormi.

Tout s’en va. La nature est l’urne mal fermée.
La tempête est écume et la flamme est fumée.
Rien n’est hors du moment,
L’homme n’a rien qu’il prenne, et qu’il tienne, et qu’il garde.
Il tombe heure par heure, et, ruine, il regarde
Le monde, écroulement.

L’astre est-il le point fixe en ce mouvant problème?
Ce ciel que nous voyons fut-il toujours le même?
Le sera-t-il toujours?
L’homme a-t-il sur son front des clartés éternelles?
Et verra-t-il toujours les mêmes sentinelles
Monter aux mêmes tours?

II

Nuits, serez-vous pour nous toujours ce que vous êtes?
Pour toute vision, aurons-nous sur nos têtes
Toujours les mêmes cieux?
Dis, larve Aldebaran, réponds, spectre Saturne,
Ne verrons-nous jamais sur le masque nocturne
S’ouvrir de nouveaux yeux?

Ne verrons-nous jamais briller de nouveaux astres?
Et des cintres nouveaux, et de nouveaux pilastres
Luire à notre oeil mortel,
Dans cette cathédrale aux formidables porches
Dont le septentrion éclaire avec sept torches,
L’effrayant maître-autel?

A-t-il cessé, le vent qui fit naître ces roses,
Sirius, Orion, toi, Vénus, qui reposes
Notre oeil dans le péril?
Ne verrons-nous jamais sous ces grandes haleines
D’autres fleurs de lumière éclore dans les plaines
De l’éternel avril?

Savons-nous où le monde en est de son mystère?
Qui nous dit, à nous, joncs du marais, vers de terre
Dont la bave reluit,
A nous qui n’avons pas nous-mêmes notre preuve,
Que Dieu ne va pas mettre une tiare neuve
Sur le front de la nuit?

III

Dieu n’a-t-il plus de flamme à ses lèvres profondes?
N’en fait-il plus jaillir des tourbillons de mondes?
Parlez, Nord et Midi!
N’emplit-il plus de lui sa création sainte?
Et ne souffle-t-il plus que d’une bouche éteinte
Sur l’être refroidi?

Quand les comètes vont et viennent, formidables,
Apportant la lueur des gouffres insondables,
A nos fronts soucieux,
Brûlant, volant, peut-être âmes, peut-être mondes,
Savons-nous ce que font toutes ces vagabondes
Qui courent dans nos cieux?

Qui donc a vu la source et connaît l’origine?
Qui donc, ayant sondé l’abîme, s’imagine
En être mage et roi?
Ah! fantômes humains, courbés sous les désastres!
Qui donc a dit: — C’est bien, Éternel. Assez d’astres.
N’en fais plus. Calme-toi! —

L’effet séditieux limiterait la cause?
Quelle bouche ici-bas peut dire à quelque chose:
Tu n’iras pas plus loin?
Sous l’élargissement sans fin, la borne plie;
La création vit, croît et se multiplie;
L’homme n’est qu’un témoin.

L’homme n’est qu’un témoin frémissant d’épouvante.
Les firmaments sont pleins de la sève vivante
Comme les animaux.
L’arbre prodigieux croise, agrandit, transforme,
Et mêle aux cieux profonds, comme une gerbe énorme,
Ses ténébreux rameaux.

Car la création est devant, Dieu derrière.
L’homme, du côté noir de l’obscure barrière,
Vit, rôdeur curieux;
Il suffit que son front se lève pour qu’il voie
A travers la sinistre et morne claire-voie
Cet oeil mystérieux.

IV

Donc ne nous disons pas: — Nous avons nos étoiles. —
Des flottes de soleils peut-être à pleines voiles
Viennent en ce moment;
Peut-être que demain le Créateur terrible,
Refaisant notre nuit, va contre un autre crible
Changer le firmament.

Qui sait? que savons-nous? sur notre horizon sombre,
Que la création impénétrable encombre
De ses taillis sacrés,
Muraille obscure où vient battre le flot de l'être,
Peut-être allons-nous voir brusquement apparaître
Des astres effarés;

Des astres éperdus arrivant des abîmes,
Venant des profondeurs ou descendant des cimes,
Et, sous nos noirs arceaux,
Entrant en foule, épars, ardents, pareils au rêve,
Comme dans un grand vent s'abat sur une grève
Une troupe d'oiseaux;

Surgissant, clairs flambeaux, feux purs, rouges fournaises,
Aigrettes de rubis ou tourbillons de braises,
Sur nos bords, sur nos monts,
Et nous pétrifiant de leurs aspects étranges,
Car dans le gouffre énorme il est des mondes anges
Et des soleils démons!

Peut-être en ce moment, du fond des nuits funèbres,
Montant vers nous, gonflant ses vagues de ténèbres
Et ses flots de rayons,
Le muet Infini, sombre mer ignorée,
Roule vers notre ciel une grande marée
De constellations!

Marine-Terrace, avril 1854.

X

ÉCLAIRCIE

L'Océan resplendit sous sa vaste nuée.
L'onde, de son combat sans fin exténuée,

S’assoupit, et, laissant l’écueil se reposer,
Fait de toute la rive un immense baiser.
On dirait qu’en tous lieux, en même temps, la vie
Dissout le mal, le deuil, l’hiver, la nuit, l’envie,
Et que le mort couché dit au vivant debout:
Aime! et qu’une âme obscure, épanouie en tout,
Avance doucement sa bouche vers nos lèvres.
L’être, éteignant dans l’ombre et l’extase ses fièvres,
Ouvrant ses flancs, ses seins, ses yeux, ses coeurs épars,
Dans ses pores profonds reçoit de toutes parts
La pénétration de la sève sacrée.
La grande paix d’en haut vient comme une marée.
Le brin d’herbe palpite aux fentes du pavé;
Et l’âme a chaud. On sent que le nid est couvé.
L’infini semble plein d’un frisson de feuillée.
On croit être à cette heure où la terre éveillée
Entend le bruit que fait l’ouverture du jour,
Le premier pas du vent, du travail, de l’amour,
De l’homme, et le verrou de la porte sonore,
Et le hennissement du blanc cheval aurore.
Le moineau d’un coup d’aile, ainsi qu’un fol esprit,
Vient taquiner le flot monstrueux qui sourit;
L’air joue avec la mouche et l’écume avec l’aigle;
Le grave laboureur fait ses sillons et règle
La page où s’écrira le poëme des blés;
Des pêcheurs sont là-bas sous un pampre attablés;
L’horizon semble un rêve éblouissant où nage
L’écaille de la mer, la plume du nuage,
Car l’Océan est hydre et le nuage oiseau.
Une lueur, rayon vague, part du berceau
Qu’une femme balance au seuil d’une chaumière,
Dore les champs, les fleurs, l’onde et devient lumière
En touchant un tombeau qui dort près du clocher.
Le jour plonge au plus noir du gouffre, et va chercher
L’ombre, et la baise au front sous l’eau sombre et hagarde.
Tout est doux, calme, heureux, apaisé; Dieu regarde.

Marine-Terrace, juillet 1855.

XI

OH! PAR NOS VILS PLAISIRS, NOS APPETITS, NOS FANGES

Oh! par nos vils plaisirs, nos appétits, nos fanges,
Que de fois nous devons vous attrister, archanges!
C’est vraiment une chose amère de songer
Qu’en ce monde où l’esprit n’est qu’un morne étranger
Où la volupté rit, jeune, et si décrépite!
Où dans les lits profonds l’aile d’en bas palpite,
Quand, pâmé, dans un nimbe ou bien dans un éclair,
On tend sa bouche ardente aux coupes de la chair,
A l’heure ou l’on s’enivre aux lèvres d’une femme,
De ce qu’on croit l’amour, de ce qu’on prend pour l’âme,
Sang du coeur, vin des sens âcre et délicieux,
On fait rougir là-haut quelque passant des cieux!

Juin 1855.

XII
AUX ANGES QUI NOUS VOIENT
— Passant, qu’es-tu? je te connais.
Mais, étant spectre, ombre et nuage,
Tu n’as plus de sexe ni d’âge.
— Je suis ta mère, et je venais!

— Et toi dont l’aile hésite et brille,
Dont l’oeil est noyé de douceur,
Qu’es-tu, passant? — Je suis ta soeur
— Et toi, qu’es-tu? — Je suis ta fille.

— Et toi, qu’es-tu, passant? — Je suis
Celle à qui tu disais: «Je t’aime!»

— Et toi? — Je suis ton âme même. —
Oh! cachez-moi, profondes nuits!

Juin 1855.

XIII

CADAVER

O mort! heure splendide! ô rayons mortuaires!
Avez-vous quelquefois soulevé des suaires?
Et, pendant qu'on pleurait, et qu'au chevet du lit,
Frères, amis, enfants, la mère qui pâlit,
Éperdus, sanglotaient dans le deuil qui les navre,
Avez-vous regardé sourire le cadavre?
Tout à l'heure il râlait, se tordait, étouffait;
Maintenant il rayonne. Abîme! qui donc fait
Cette lueur qu'a l'homme en entrant dans les ombres?
Qu'est-ce que le sépulcre? et d'où vient, penseurs sombres,
Cette sérénité formidable des morts?
C'est que le secret s'ouvre et que l'être est dehors;
C'est que l'âme — qui voit, puis brille, puis flamboie, —
Rit, et que le corps même a sa terrible joie.
La chair se dit: — Je vais être terre, et germer,
Et fleurir comme sève, et, comme fleur, aimer!
Je vais me rajeunir dans la jeunesse énorme
Du buisson, de l'eau vive, et du chêne, et de l'orme,
Et me répandre aux lacs, aux flots, aux monts, aux prés,
Aux rochers, aux splendeurs des grands couchants pour prés,
Aux ravins, aux halliers, aux brises de la nue,
Aux murmures profonds de la vie inconnue!
Je vais être oiseau, vent, cri des eaux, bruit des cieux,
Et palpitation du tout prodigieux! —
Tous ces atomes las, dont l'homme était le maître,
Sont joyeux d'être mis en liberté dans l'être,
De vivre, et de rentrer au gouffre qui leur plaît.
L'haleine, que la fièvre aigrissait et brûlait,

Va devenir parfum, et la voix harmonie;
Le sang va retourner à la veine infinie,
Et couler, ruisseau clair, aux champs où le boeuf roux
Mugit le soir avec l'herbe jusqu'aux genoux;
Les os ont déjà pris la majesté des marbres;
La chevelure sent le grand frisson des arbres,
Et songe aux cerfs errants, au lierre, aux nids chantants
Qui vont l'emplir du souffle adoré du printemps.
Et voyez le regard, qu'une ombre étrange voile,
Et qui, mystérieux, semble un lever d'étoile!

Oui, Dieu le veut, la mort, c'est l'ineffable chant
De l'âme et de la bête à la fin se lâchant;
C'est une double issue ouverte à l'être double.
Dieu disperse, à cette heure inexprimable et trouble,
Le corps dans l'univers et l'âme dans l'amour.
Une espèce d'azur que dore un vague jour,
L'air de l'éternité, puissant, calme, salubre,
Frémit et resplendit sous le linceul lugubre;
Et des plis du drap noir tombent tous nos ennuis.
La mort est bleue. O mort! ô paix! l'ombre des nuits,
Le roseau des étangs, le roc du monticule,
L'épanouissement sombre du crépuscule,
Le vent, souffle farouche ou providentiel,
L'air, la terre, le feu, l'eau, tout, même le ciel,
Se mêle à cette chair qui devient solennelle.
Un commencement d'astre éclôt dans la prunelle.

Au cimetière, août 1855.

XIV

Ô GOUFFRE! L'AME PLONGE ET RAPPORTE LE DOUTE

Ô gouffre! l'âme plonge et rapporte le doute.

Nous entendons sur nous les heures, goutte à goutte,
Tomber comme l’eau sur les plombs;
L’homme est brumeux, le monde est noir, le ciel est sombre;
Les formes de la nuit vont et viennent dans l’ombre;
Et nous, pâles, nous contemplons.

Nous contemplons l’obscur, l’inconnu, l’invisible.
Nous sondons le réel, l’idéal, le possible,
L’être, spectre toujours présent.
Nous regardons trembler l’ombre indéterminée.
Nous sommes accoudés sur notre destinée,
L’oeil fixe et l’esprit frémissant.

Nous épions des bruits dans ces vides funèbres;
Nous écoutons le souffle, errant dans les ténèbres,
Dont frissonne l’obscurité;
Et, par moment, perdus dans les nuits insondables,
Nous voyons s’éclairer de lueurs formidables
La vitre de l’éternité.

Marine-Terrace, septembre 1853.

XV

A CELLE QUI EST VOILÉE

Tu me parles du fond d’un rêve
Comme une âme parle aux vivants.
Comme l’écume de la grève,
Ta robe flotte dans les vents.

Je suis l’algue des flots sans nombre,
Le captif du destin vainqueur;
Je suis celui que toute l’ombre
Couvre sans éteindre son coeur.

Mon esprit ressemble à cette île,

Et mon sort à cet océan;
Et je suis l'habitant tranquille
De la foudre et de l'ouragan.

Je suis le proscrit qui se voile,
Qui songe, et chante loin du bruit,
Avec la chouette et l'étoile,
La sombre chanson de la nuit.

Toi, n'es-tu pas, comme moi-même,
Flambeau dans ce monde âpre et vif,
Ame, c'est-à-dire problème,
Et femme, c'est-à-dire exil?

Sors du nuage, ombre charmante.
O fantôme, laisse-toi voir!
Sois un phare dans ma tourmente,
Sois un regard dans mon ciel noir!

Cherche-moi parmi les mouettes!
Dresse un rayon sur mon récif,
Et, dans mes profondeurs muettes,
La blancheur de l'ange pensif!

Sois l'aile qui passe et se mêle
Aux grandes vagues en courroux.
Oh! viens! tu dois être bien belle,
Car ton chant lointain est bien doux;

Car la nuit engendre l'aurore;
C'est peut-être une loi des cieux
Que mon noir destin fasse éclore
Ton sourire mystérieux!

Dans ce ténébreux monde où j'erre,
Nous devons nous apercevoir,
Toi, toute faite de lumière,

Moi, tout composé de devoir!

Tu me dis de loin que tu m’aimes,
Et que, la nuit, à l’horizon,
Tu viens voir sur les grèves blêmes
Le spectre blanc de ma maison.

Là, méditant sous le grand dôme,
Près du flot sans trêve agité,
Surprise de trouver l’atome
Ressemblant à l’immensité,

Tu compares, sans me connaître,
L’onde à l’homme, l’ombre au banni,
Ma lampe étoilant ma fenêtre
A l’astre étoilant l’infini!

Parfois, comme au fond d’une tombe,
Je te sens sur mon front fatal,
Bouche de l’inconnu d’où tombe
Le pur baiser de l’Idéal.

A ton souffle, vers Dieu poussées,
Je sens en moi, douce frayeur,
Frissonner toutes mes pensées,
Feuilles de l’arbre intérieur.

Mais tu ne veux pas qu’on te voie;
Tu viens et tu fuis tour à tour;
Tu ne veux pas te nommer joie,
Ayant dit: Je m’appelle amour.

Oh, fais un pas de plus! viens, entre,
Si nul devoir ne le défend;
Viens voir mon âme dans son antre,
L’esprit lion, le coeur enfant;

Viens voir le désert où j’habite,
Seul sous mon plafond effrayant;
Sois l’ange chez le cénobite,
Sois la clarté chez le voyant.

Change en perles dans mes décombres
Toutes mes gouttes de sueur!
Viens poser sur mes oeuvres sombres
Ton doigt d’où sort une lueur!

Du bord des sinistres ravines
Du rêve et de la vision,
J’entrevois les choses divines... —
Complète l’apparition!

Viens voir le songeur qui s’enflamme
A mesure qu’il se détruit,
Et de jour en jour dans son âme
A plus de mort et moins de nuit!

Viens! viens dans ma brume hagarde,
Où naît la foi, d’où l’esprit sort,
Où confusément je regarde
Les formes obscures du sort.

Tout s’éclaire aux lueurs funèbres;
Dieu, pour le penseur attristé,
Ouvre toujours dans les ténèbres
De brusques gouffres de clarté.

Avant d’être sur cette terre,
Je sens que jadis j’ai plané;
J’étais l’archange solitaire,
Et mon malheur, c’est d’être né.

Sur mon âme, qui fut colombe,
Viens, toi qui des cieux as le sceau.

Quelquefois une plume tombe
Sur le cadavre d'un oiseau.

Oui, mon malheur irréparable,
C'est de pendre aux deux éléments,
C'est d'avoir en moi, misérable,
De la fange et des firmaments!

Hélas! hélas! c'est d'être un homme;
C'est de songer que j'étais beau,
D'ignorer comment je me nomme,
D'être un ciel et d'être un tombeau!

C'est d'être un forçat qui promène
Son vil labeur sous le ciel bleu;
C'est de porter la hotte humaine
Où j'avais vos ailes, mon Dieu!

C'est de traîner de la matière;
C'est d'être plein, moi, fils du jour,
De la terre du cimetière,
Même quand je m'écrie: Amour!

Marine-Terrace, janvier 1854.

XVI

HORROR

I

Esprit mystérieux qui, le doigt sur ta bouche,
Passes... ne t'en va pas! parle à l'homme farouche
Ivre d'ombre et d'immensité,
Parle-moi, toi, front blanc, qui dans ma nuit te penches;
Réponds-moi, toi qui luis et marches sous les branches,
Comme un souffle de la clarté!

Est-ce toi que chez moi minuit parfois apporte?
Est-ce toi qui heurtais l'autre nuit à ma porte,
Pendant que je ne dormais pas?
C'est donc vers moi que vient lentement ta lumière?
La pierre de mon seuil peut-être est la première
Des sombres marches du trépas.

Peut-être qu'à ma porte ouvrant sur l'ombre immense,
L'invisible escalier des ténèbres commence;
Peut-être, ô pâles échappés,
Quand vous montez du fond de l'horreur sépulcrale,
O morts, quand vous sortez de la froide spirale,
Est-ce chez moi que vous frappez!

Car la maison d'exil, mêlée aux catacombes,
Est adossée au mur de la ville des tombes.
Le proscrit est celui qui sort;
Il flotte submergé comme la nef qui sombre;
Le jour le voit à peine et dit: Quelle est cette ombre?
Et la nuit dit: Quel est ce mort?

Sois la bienvenue, ombre! ô ma soeur! ô figure
Qui me fais signe alors que sur l'énigme obscure
Je me penche, sinistre et seul;
Et qui viens, m'effrayant de ta lueur sublime,
Essuyer sur mon front la sueur de l'abîme
Avec un pan de ton linceul!

II

Oh! que le gouffre est noir et que l'oeil est débile!
Nous avons devant nous le silence immobile.
Qui sommes-nous? où sommes-nous?
Faut-il jouir? faut-il pleurer? Ceux qu'on rencontre
Passent. Quelle est la loi? La prière nous montre
L'écorchure de ses genoux.

D’où viens-tu? — Je ne sais. — Où vas-tu? — Je l’ignore.
L’homme ainsi parle à l’homme et l’onde au flot sonore.
Tout va, tout vient, tout ment, tout fuit.
Parfois nous devenons pâles, hommes et femmes,
Comme si nous sentions se fermer sur nos âmes
La main de la géante nuit.

Nous voyons fuir la flèche et l’ombre est sur la cible.
L’homme est lancé. Par qui? vers qui? Dans l’invisible.
L’arc ténébreux siffle dans l’air.
En voyant ceux qu’on aime en nos bras se dissoudre,
Nous demandons si c’est pour la mort, coup de foudre,
Qu’est faite, hélas! la vie éclair!

Nous demandons, vivants douteux qu’un linceul couvre,
Si le profond tombeau qui devant nous s’entr’ouvre,
Abîme, espoir, asile, écueil,
N’est pas le firmament plein d’étoiles sans nombre,
Et si tous les clous d’or qu’on voit au ciel dans l’ombre
Ne sont pas les clous du cercueil?

Nous sommes là; nos dents tressaillent, nos vertèbres
Frémissent; on dirait parfois que les ténèbres,
O terreur! sont pleines de pas.
Qu’est-ce que l’ouragan, nuit? — C’est quelqu’un qui passe.
Nous entendons souffler les chevaux de l’espace
Traînant le char qu’on ne voit pas.

L’ombre semble absorbée en une idée unique.
L’eau sanglote; à l’esprit la forêt communique
Un tremblement contagieux;
Et tout semble éclairé, dans la brume où tout penche,
Du reflet que ferait la grande pierre blanche
D’un sépulcre prodigieux.

III

La chose est pour la chose ici-bas un problème.
L’être pour l’être est sphinx. L’aube au jour paraît blême
L’éclair est noir pour le rayon.
Dans la création vague et crépusculaire,
Les objets effarés qu’un jour sinistre éclaire
Sont l’un pour l’autre vision.

La cendre ne sait pas ce que pense le marbre;
L’écueil écoute en vain le flot; la branche d’arbre
Ne sait pas ce que dit le vent.
Qui punit-on ici? Passez sans vous connaître!
Est-ce toi le coupable, enfant qui viens de naître?
O mort, est-ce toi le vivant?

Nous avons dans l’esprit des sommets, nos idées,
Nos rêves, nos vertus, d’escarpements bordées,
Et nos espoirs construits si tôt;
Nous tâchons d’appliquer à ces cimes étranges
L’âpre échelle de feu par où montent les anges;
Job est en bas, Christ est en haut.

Nous aimons. A quoi bon? Nous souffrons. Pour quoi faire?
Je préfère mourir et m’en aller. Préfère.
Allez, choisissez vos chemins.
L’être effrayant se tait au fond du ciel nocturne,
Et regarde tomber de la bouche de l’urne
Le flot livide des humains.

Nous pensons. Après? Rampe, esprit! garde tes chaînes.
Quand vous vous promenez le soir parmi les chênes
Et les rochers aux vagues yeux,
Ne sentez-vous pas l’ombre où vos regards se plongent
Reculer? Savez-vous seulement à quoi songent
Tous ces muets mystérieux?

Nous jugeons. Nous dressons l’échafaud. L’homme tue
Et meurt. Le genre humain, foule d’erreur vêtue,

Condamne, extermine, détruit,
Puis s'en va. Le poteau du gibet, ô démence!
O deuil! est le bâton de cet aveugle immense
Marchant dans cette immense nuit.

Crime! enfer! quel zénith effrayant que le nôtre,
Où les douze Césars toujours l'un après l'autre
Reviennent, noirs soleils errants!
L'homme, au-dessus de lui, du fond des maux sans borne,
Voit éternellement tourner dans son ciel morne
Ce zodiaque de tyrans.

IV

Depuis quatre mille ans que, courbé sous la haine,
Perçant sa tombe avec les débris de sa chaîne,
Fouillant le bas, creusant le haut,
Il cherche à s'évader à travers la nature,
L'esprit forçat n'a pas encor fait d'ouverture
A la voûte du ciel cachot.

Oui, le penseur en vain, dans ses essors funèbres,
Heurte son âme d'ombre au plafond de ténèbres;
Il tombe, il meurt; son temps est court;
Et nous n'entendons rien, dans la nuit qu'il nous lègue
Que ce que dit tout bas la création bègue
A l'oreille du tombeau sourd.

Nous sommes les passants, les foules et les races.
Nous sentons, frissonnants, des souffles sur nos faces.
Nous sommes le gouffre agité;
Nous sommes ce que l'air chasse au vent de son aile;
Nous sommes les flocons de la neige éternelle
Dans l'éternelle obscurité.

Pour qui luis-tu, Vénus? Où roules-tu, Saturne?
Ils vont: rien ne répond dans l'éther taciturne.

L’homme grelotte, seul et nu.
L’étendue aux flots noirs déborde, d’horreur pleine;
L’énigme a peur du mot; l’infini semble à peine
Pouvoir contenir l’inconnu.

Toujours la nuit! jamais l’azur! jamais l’aurore!
Nous marchons. Nous n’avons point fait un pas encore!
Nous rêvons ce qu’Adam rêva;
La création flotte et fuit, des vents battue;
Nous distinguons dans l’ombre une immense statue
Et nous lui disons: Jéhovah!

Marine-Terrace, nuit du 30 mars 1854.

XVII

DOLOR

Création! figure en deuil! Isis austère!
Peut-être l’homme est-il son trouble et son mystère?
Peut-être qu’elle nous craint tous,
Et qu’à l’heure où, ployés sous notre loi mortelle,
Hagards et stupéfaits, nous tremblons devant elle,
Elle frissonne devant nous!

Ne riez point. Souffrez gravement. Soyons dignes,
Corbeaux, hiboux, vautours, de redevenir cygnes!
Courbons-nous sous l’obscure loi.
Ne jetons pas le doute aux flots comme une sonde.
Marchons sans savoir où, parlons sans qu’on réponde,
Et pleurons sans savoir pourquoi.

Homme, n’exige pas qu’on rompe le silence;
Dis-toi: Je suis puni. Baisse la tête et pense.
C’est assez de ce que tu vois.
Une parole peut sortir du puits farouche;
Ne la demande pas. Si l’abîme est la bouche,

Ô Dieu, qu’est-ce donc que la voix?

Ne nous irritons pas. Il n’est pas bon de faire,
Vers la clarté qui luit au centre de la sphère,
A travers les cieux transparents,
Voler l’affront, les cris, le rire et la satire,
Et que le chandelier à sept branches attire
Tous ces noirs phalènes errants.

Nais, grandis, rêve, souffre, aime, vis, vieillis, tombe.
L’explication sainte et calme est dans la tombe.
O vivants, ne blasphémons point.
Qu’importe à l’Incréé, qui, soulevant ses voiles,
Nous offre le grand ciel, les mondes, les étoiles,
Qu’une ombre lui montre le poing?

Nous figurons-nous donc qu’à l’heure où tout le prie,
Pendant qu’il crée et vit, pendant qu’il approprie
A chaque astre une humanité,
Nous pouvons de nos cris troubler sa plénitude,
Cracher notre néant jusqu’en sa solitude,
Et lui gâter l’éternité?

Être! quand dans l’éther tu dessinas les formes,
Partout où tu traças les orbites énormes
Des univers qui n’étaient pas,
Des soleils ont jailli, fleurs de flamme, et sans nombre,
Des trous qu’au firmament, en s’y posant dans l’ombre,
Fit la pointe de ton compas!

Qui sommes-nous? La nuit, la mort, l’oubli, personne.
Il est. Cette splendeur suffit pour qu’on frissonne.
C’est lui l’amour, c’est lui le feu.
Quand les fleurs en avril éclatent pêle-mêle,
C’est lui. C’est lui qui gonfle, ainsi qu’une mamelle,
La rondeur de l’océan bleu.

Le penseur cherche l’homme et trouve de la cendre.
Il trouve l’orgueil froid, le mal, l’amour à vendre,
L’erreur, le sac d’or effronté,
La haine et son couteau, l’envie et son suaire,
En mettant au hasard la main dans l’ossuaire
Que nous nommons humanité.

Parce que nous souffrons, noirs et sans rien connaître,
Stupide, l’homme dit: — Je ne veux pas de l’Être!
Je souffre; donc, l’Être n’est pas! —
Tu n’admires que toi, vil passant, dans ce monde!
Tu prends pour de l’argent, ô ver, ta bave immonde
Marquant la place où tu rampas!

Notre nuit veut rayer ce jour qui nous éclaire;
Nous crispons sur ce nom nos doigts pleins de colère;
Rage d’enfant qui coûte cher!
Et nous nous figurons, race imbécile et dure,
Que nous avons un peu de Dieu dans notre ordure
Entre notre ongle et notre chair!

Nier l’Être! à quoi bon? L’ironie âpre et noire
Peut-elle se pencher sur le gouffre et le boire,
Comme elle boit son propre fiel?
Quand notre orgueil le tait, notre douleur le nomme.
Le sarcasme peut-il, en crevant l’oeil à l’homme,
Crever les étoiles au ciel?

Ah! quand nous le frappons, c’est pour nous qu’est la plaie.
Pensons, croyons. Voit-on l’océan qui bégaie,
Mordre avec rage son bâillon?
Adorons-le dans l’astre, et la fleur, et la femme.
O vivants, la pensée est la pourpre de l’âme;
Le blasphème en est le haillon.

Ne raillons pas. Nos coeurs sont les pavés du temple.
Il nous regarde, lui que l’infini contemple.

Insensé qui nie et qui mord!
Dans un rire imprudent, ne faisons pas, fils d’Ève,
Apparaître nos dents devant son oeil qui rêve,
Comme elles seront dans la mort.

La femme nue, ayant les hanches découvertes,
Chair qui tente l’esprit, rit sous les feuilles vertes;
N’allons pas rire à son côté.
Ne chantons pas: — Jouir est tout. Le ciel est vide. —
La nuit a peur, vous dis-je! elle devient livide
En contemplant l’immensité.

O douleur! clef des deux, l’ironie est fumée.
L’expiation rouvre une porte fermée;
Les souffrances sont des faveurs.
Regardons, au-dessus des multitudes folles,
Monter vers les gibets et vers les auréoles
Les grands sacrifiés rêveurs.

Monter, c’est s’immoler. Toute cime est sévère.
L’Olympe lentement se transforme en Calvaire;
Partout le martyre est écrit;
Une immense croix gît dans notre nuit profonde;
Et nous voyons saigner aux quatre coins du monde
Les quatre clous de Jésus-Christ.

Ah! vivants, vous doutez! ah! vous riez, squelettes!
Lorsque l’aube apparaît, ceinte de bandelettes
D’or, d’émeraude et de carmin,
Vous huez, vous prenez, larves que le jour dore,
Pour la jeter au front céleste de l’aurore,
De la cendre dans votre main.

Vous criez: — Tout est mal. L’aigle vaut le reptile;
Tout ce que nous voyons n’est qu’une ombre inutile.
La vie au néant nous vomit.
Rien avant, rien après. Le sage doute et raille. —

Et, pendant ce temps-là, le brin d’herbe tressaille,
L’aube pleure, et le vent gémit.

Chaque fois qu’ici-bas l’homme, en proie aux désastres,
Rit, blasphème, et secoue, en regardant les astres,
Le sarcasme, ce vil lambeau,
Les morts se dressent froids au fond du caveau sombre,
Et de leur doigt de spectre écrivent — DIEU — dans l’ombre,
Sous la pierre de leur tombeau.

Marine-Terrace, 31 mars 1854.

XVIII

HELAS! TOUT EST SEPULCRE. ON EN SORT, ON Y TOMBE

Hélas! tout est sépulcre. On en sort, on y tombe:
La nuit est la muraille immense de la tombe.
Les astres, dont luit la clarté,
Orion, Sirius, Mars, Jupiter, Mercure,
Sont les cailloux qu’on voit dans ta tranchée obscure,
O sombre fosse Éternité!

Une nuit, un esprit me parla dans un rêve,
Et me dit: — Je suis aigle en un ciel où se lève
Un soleil qui t’est inconnu.
J’ai voulu soulever un coin du vaste voile;
J’ai voulu voir de près ton ciel et ton étoile;
Et c’est pourquoi je suis venu;

Et, quand j’ai traversé les cieux grands et terribles,
Quand j’ai vu le monceau des ténèbres horribles
Et l’abîme énorme où l’oeil fuit,
Je me suis demandé si cette ombre où l’on souffre
Pourrait jamais combler ce puits, et si ce gouffre

Pourrait contenir cette nuit!

Et, moi, l’aigle lointain, épouvanté, j’arrive.
Et je crie, et je viens m’abattre sur ta rive,
Près de toi, songeur sans flambeau.
Connais-tu ces frissons, cette horreur, ce vertige,
Toi, l’autre aigle de l’autre azur? — Je suis, lui dis-je,
L’autre ver de l’autre tombeau.

Au dolmen de la Corbière, juin 1855.

XIX

VOYAGE DE NUIT

On conteste, on dispute, on proclame, on ignore.
Chaque religion est une tour sonore;
Ce qu’un prêtre édifie, un prêtre le détruit;
Chaque temple, tirant sa corde dans la nuit,
Fait, dans l’obscurité sinistre et solennelle,
Rendre un son différent à la cloche éternelle.
Nul ne connaît le fond, nul ne voit le sommet.
Tout l’équipage humain semble en démence; on met
Un aveugle en vigie, un manchot à la barre;
A peine a-t-on passé du sauvage au barbare,
A peine a-t-on franchi le plus noir de l’horreur,
A peine a-t-on, parmi le vertige et l’erreur,
Dans ce brouillard où l’homme attend, songe et soupire,
Sans sortir du mauvais, fait un pas hors du pire,
Que le vieux temps revient et nous mord les talons,
Et nous crie: Arrêtez! Socrate dit: Allons!
Jésus-Christ dit: Plus loin! et le sage et l’apôtre
S’en vont se demander dans le ciel l’un à l’autre
Quel goût a la ciguë et quel goût a le fiel.
Par moments, voyant l’homme ingrat, fourbe et cruel,
Satan lui prend la main sous le linceul de l’ombre.
Nous appelons science un tâtonnement sombre.

L’abîme, autour de nous, lugubre tremblement,
S’ouvre et se ferme; et l’oeil s’effraie également
De ce qui s’engloutit et de ce qui surnage.
Sans cesse le progrès, roue au double engrenage,
Fait marcher quelque chose en écrasant quelqu’un.
Le mal peut être joie, et le poison parfum.
Le crime avec la loi, morne et mélancolique,
Lutte; le poignard parle, et l’échafaud réplique.
Nous entendons, sans voir la source ni la fin,
Derrière notre nuit, derrière notre faim,
Rire l’ombre Ignorance et la larve Misère.
Le lys a-t-il raison? et l’astre est-il sincère?
Je dis oui, tu dis non. Ténèbres et rayons
Affirment à la fois. Doute, Adam! nous voyons
De la nuit dans l’enfant, de la nuit dans la femme;
Et sur notre avenir nous querellons notre âme;
Et, brûlé, puis glacé, chaos, semoun, frimas,
L’homme de l’infini traverse les climats.
Tout est brume; le vent souffle avec des huées,
Et de nos passions arrache des nuées;
Rousseau dit: L’homme monte; et de Maistre: Il descend!
Mais, ô Dieu! le navire énorme et frémissant,
Le monstrueux vaisseau sans agrès et sans voiles,
Qui flotte, globe noir, dans la mer des étoiles,
Et qui porte nos maux, fourmillement humain,
Va, marche, vogue et roule, et connaît son chemin;
Le ciel sombre, où parfois la blancheur semble éclore,
A l’effrayant roulis mêle un frisson d’aurore,
De moment en moment le sort est moins obscur,
Et l’on sent bien qu’on est emporté vers l’azur.

Marine-Terrace, octobre 1855.

XX

RELLIGIO

L’ombre venait; le soir tombait, calme et terrible.
Hermann me dit: — Quelle est ta foi, quelle est ta bible?
Parle. Es-tu ton propre géant?
Si tes vers ne sont pas de vains flocons d’écume,
Si ta strophe n’est pas un tison noir qui fume
Sur le tas de cendre Néant,

Si tu n’es pas une âme en l’abîme engloutie,
Quel est donc ton ciboire et ton eucharistie?
Quelle est donc la source où tu bois?
Je me taisais; il dit: — Songeur qui civilises,
Pourquoi ne vas-tu pas prier dans les églises? —
Nous marchions tous deux dans les bois.

Et je lui dis: — Je prie. — Hermann dit: — Dans quel temple?
Quel est le célébrant que ton âme contemple,
Et l’autel qu’elle réfléchit?
Devant quel confesseur la fais-tu comparaître?
— L’église, c’est l’azur, lui dis-je; et quant au prêtre... —
En ce moment le ciel blanchit.

La lune à l’horizon montait, hostie énorme;
Tout avait le frisson, le pin, le cèdre et l’orme,
Le loup, et l’aigle, et l’alcyon;
Lui montrant l’astre d’or sur la terre obscurcie,
Je lui dis: — Courbe-toi. Dieu lui-même officie,
Et voici l’élévation.

Marine-Terrace, octobre 1855.

XXI

SPES

De partout, de l’abîme où n’est pas Jéhovah,
Jusqu’au zénith, plafond où l’espérance va
Se casser l’aile et d’où redescend la prière,

En bas, en haut, au fond, en avant, en arrière,
L’énorme obscurité qu’agitent tous les vents,
Enveloppe, linceul, les morts et les vivants,
Et sur le monstrueux, sur l’impur, sur l’horrible,
Laisse tomber les pans de son rideau terrible;
Si l’on parle à la brume effrayante qui fuit,
L’immensité dit: Mort! L’éternité dit: Nuit!

L’âme, sans lire un mot, feuillette un noir registre;
L’univers tout entier est un géant sinistre;
L’aveugle est d’autant plus affreux qu’il est plus grand;
Tout semble le chevet d’un immense mourant;
Tout est l’ombre; pareille au reflet d’une lampe,
Au fond, une lueur imperceptible rampe;
C’est à peine un coin blanc, pas même une rougeur.
Un seul homme debout, qu’ils nomment le songeur,
Regarde la clarté du haut de la colline;
Et tout, hormis le coq à la voix sibylline,
Raille et nie; et, passant confus, marcheurs nombreux,
Toute la foule éclate en rires ténébreux
Quand ce vivant, qui n’a d’autre signe lui-même
Parmi tous ces fronts noirs que d’être le front blême,
Dit en montrant ce point vague et lointain qui luit:
Cette blancheur est plus que toute cette nuit!

Janvier 1856.

XXII

CE QUE C’EST QUE LA MORT

Ne dites pas: mourir; dites: naître. Croyez.
On voit ce que je vois et ce que vous voyez;
On est l’homme mauvais que je suis, que vous êtes;
On se rue aux plaisirs, aux tourbillons, aux fêtes;
On tâche d’oublier le bas, la fin, l’écueil,
La sombre égalité du mal et du cercueil;

Quoique le plus petit vaille le plus prospère;
Car tous les hommes sont les fils du même père;
Ils sont la même larme et sortent du même oeil.
On vit, usant ses jours à se remplir d’orgueil;
On marche, on court, on rêve, on souffre, on penche, on tombe,
On monte. Quelle est donc cette aube? C’est la tombe.
Où suis-je? Dans la mort. Viens! Un vent inconnu
Vous jette au seuil des cieux. On tremble; on se voit nu,
Impur, hideux, noué des mille noeuds funèbres
De ses torts, de ses maux honteux, de ses ténèbres;
Et soudain on entend quelqu’un dans l’infini
Qui chante, et par quelqu’un on sent qu’on est béni,
Sans voir la main d’où tombe à notre âme méchante
L’amour, et sans savoir quelle est la voix qui chante.
On arrive homme, deuil, glaçon, neige; on se sent
Fondre et vivre; et, d’extase et d’azur s’emplissant,
Tout notre être frémit de la défaite étrange
Du monstre qui devient dans la lumière un ange.

Au dolmen de la tour Blanche, jour des Morts, novembre 1854.

XXIII

LES MAGES

I

Pourquoi donc faites-vous des prêtres
Quand vous en avez parmi vous?
Les esprits conducteurs des êtres
Portent un signe sombre et doux.
Nous naissons tous ce que nous sommes.
Nous naissons tous ce que nous sommes.
Dieu de ses mains sacre des hommes
Dans les ténèbres des berceaux;
Son effrayant doigt invisible
Écrit sous leur crâne la bible

Des arbres, des monts et des eaux.

Ces hommes, ce sont les poëtes;
Ceux dont l’aile monte et descend;
Toutes les bouches inquiètes
Qu’ouvre le verbe frémissant;
Les Virgiles, les Isaïes;
Toutes les âmes envahies
Par les grandes brumes du sort;
Tous ceux en qui Dieu se concentre;
Tous les yeux où la lumière entre,
Tous les fronts d’où le rayon sort.

Ce sont ceux qu’attend Dieu propice
Sur les Horebs et les Thabors;
Ceux que l’horrible précipice
Retient blêmissants à ses bords;
Ceux qui sentent la pierre vivre;
Ceux que Pan formidable enivre;
Ceux qui sont tout pensifs devant
Les nuages, ces solitudes
Où passent en mille attitudes
Les groupes sonores du vent.

Ce sont les sévères artistes
Que l’aube attire à ses blancheurs,
Les savants, les inventeurs tristes,
Les puiseurs d’ombre, les chercheurs,
Qui ramassent dans les ténèbres
Les faits, les chiffres, les algèbres,
Le nombre où tout est contenu,
Le doute où nos calculs succombent,
Et tous les morceaux noirs qui tombent
Du grand fronton de l’inconnu!

Ce sont les têtes fécondées
Vers qui monte et croît pas à pas

L’océan confus des idées,
Flux que la foule ne voit pas,
Mer de tous les infinis pleine,
Que Dieu suit, que la nuit amène.
Qui remplit l’homme de clarté,
Jette aux rochers l’écume amère,
Et lave les pieds nus d’Homère
Avec un flot d’éternité!

Le poëte s’adosse à l’arche.
David chante et voit Dieu de près;
Hésiode médite et marche,
Grand prêtre fauve des forêts,
Moïse, immense créature,
Étend ses mains sur la nature;
Manès parle au gouffre puni,
Écouté des astres sans nombre... —
Génie! ô tiare de l’ombre!
Pontificat de l’infini!

L’un à Patmos, l’autre à Tyane;
D’autres criant: Demain! demain!
D’autres qui sonnent la diane
Dans les sommeils du genre humain;
L’un fatal, l’autre qui pardonne;
Eschyle en qui frémit Dodone,
Milton, songeur de Whitehall,
Toi, vieux Shakspeare, âme éternelle;
Ô figures dont la prunelle
Est la vitre de l’idéal!

Avec sa spirale sublime,
Archimède sur son sommet
Rouvrirait le puits de l’abîme
Si jamais Dieu le refermait;
Euclide a les lois sous sa garde;
Kopernic éperdu regarde,

Dans les grands cieux aux mers pareils,
Gouffre où voguent des nefs sans proues,
Tourner toutes ces sombres roues
Dont les moyeux sont des soleils.

Les Thalès puis les Pythagores;
Et l’homme, parmi ses erreurs,
Comme dans l’herbe les fulgores,
Voit passer ces grands éclaireurs.
Aristophane rit des sages;
Lucrèce, pour franchir les âges,
Crée un poëme dont l’oeil luit,
Et donne à ce monstre sonore
Toutes les ailes de l’aurore,
Toutes les griffes de la nuit.

Rites profonds de la nature!
Quelques-uns de ces inspirés
Acceptent l’étrange aventure
Des monts noirs et des bois sacrés;
Ils vont aux Thébaïdes sombres,
Et, là, blêmes dans les décombres,
Ils courbent le tigre fuyant,
L’hyène rampant sur le ventre,
L’océan, la montagne et l’antre,
Sous leur sacerdoce effrayant!

Tes cheveux sont gris sur l’abîme,
Jérôme, ô vieillard du désert!
Élie, un pâle esprit t’anime,
Un ange épouvanté te sert.
Amos, aux lieux inaccessibles,
Des sombres clairons invisibles
Ton oreille entend les accords;
Ton âme, sur qui Dieu surplombe,
Est déjà toute dans la tombe,
Et tu vis absent de ton corps.

Tu gourmandes l’âme échappée,
Saint Paul, ô lutteur redouté,
Immense apôtre de l’épée,
Grand vaincu de l’éternité!
Tu luis, tu frappes, tu réprouves;
Et tu chasses du doigt ces louves,
Cythérée, Isis, Astarté;
Tu veux punir et non absoudre,
Géant, et tu vois dans la foudre
Plus de glaive que de clarté.

Orphée est courbé sur le monde;
L’éblouissant est ébloui;
La création est profonde
Et monstrueuse autour de lui;
Les rochers, ces rudes hercules,
Combattent dans les crépuscules
L’ouragan, sinistre inconnu;
La mer en pleurs dans la mêlée
Tremble, et la vague échevelée
Se cramponne à leur torse nu.

Baruch au juste dans la peine
Dit: — Frère! vos os sont meurtris;
Votre vertu dans nos murs traîne
La chaîne affreuse du mépris;
Mais comptez sur la délivrance,
Mettez en Dieu votre espérance,
Et de cette nuit du destin,
Demain, si vous avez su croire,
Vous vous lèverez plein de gloire,
Comme l’étoile du matin! —

L’âme des Pindares se hausse
A la hauteur des Pélions;
Daniel chante dans la fosse

Et fait sortir Dieu des lions.
Tacite sculpte l’infamie;
Perse, Archiloque et Jérémie
Ont le même éclair dans les yeux;
Car le crime à sa suite attire
Les âpres chiens de la satire
Et le grand tonnerre des cieux.

Et voilà les prêtres du rire,
Scarron, noué dans les douleurs,
Ésope, que le fouet déchire,
Cervante aux fers, Molière en pleurs!
Le désespoir et l’espérance!
Entre Démocrite et Térence,
Rabelais, que nul ne comprit;
Il berce Adam pour qu’il s’endorme,
Et son éclat de rire énorme
Est un des gouffres de l’esprit!

Et Plaute, à qui parlent les chèvres,
Arioste chantant Médor,
Catulle, Horace, dont les lèvres
Font venir les abeilles d’or;
Comme le double Dioscure,
Anacréon près d’Épicure,
Bion, tout pénétré de jour,
Moschus, sur qui l’Etna flamboie,
Voilà les prêtres de la joie!
Voilà les prêtres de l’amour!

Gluck et Beethoven sont à l’aise
Sous l’ange où Jacob se débat;
Mozart sourit, et Pergolèse
Murmure ce grand mot: Stabat!
Le noir cerveau de Piranèse
Est une béante fournaise
Où se mêlent l’arche et le ciel,

L’escalier, la tour, la colonne;
Où croît, monte, s’enfle et bouillonne
L’incommensurable Babel!

L’envie à leur ombre ricane.
Ces demi-dieux signent leur nom,
Bramante sur la Vaticane,
Phidias sur le Parthénon;
Sur Jésus dans sa crèche blanche,
L’altier Buonarotti se penche
Comme un mage et comme un aïeul,
Et dans tes mains, ô Michel-Ange,
L’enfant devient spectre, et le lange
Est plus sombre que le linceul!

Chacun d’eux écrit un chapitre
Du rituel universel;
Les uns sculptent le saint pupitre,
Les autres dorent le missel;
Chacun fait son verset du psaume;
Lysippe, debout sur l’Ithome,
Fait sa strophe en marbre serein,
Rembrandt à l’ardente paupière,
En toile, Primatice en pierre,
Job en fumier, Dante en airain.

Et toutes ces strophes ensemble
Chantent l’être et montent à Dieu;
L’une adore et luit, l’autre tremble;
Toutes sont les griffons de feu;
Toutes sont le cri des abîmes,
L’appel d’en bas, la voix des cimes,
Le frisson de notre lambeau,
L’hymne instinctif ou volontaire,
L’explication du mystère
Et l’ouverture du tombeau!

A nous qui ne vivons qu'une heure,
Elles font voir les profondeurs,
Et la misère intérieure,
Ciel, à côté de vos grandeurs!
L'homme, esprit captif, les écoute,
Pendant qu'en son cerveau le doute,
Bête aveugle aux lueurs d'en haut,
Pour y prendre l'âme indignée,
Suspend sa toile d'araignée
Au crâne, plafond du cachot.

Elles consolent, aiment, pleurent,
Et, mariant l'idée aux sens,
Ceux qui restent à ceux qui meurent,
Les grains de cendre aux grains d'encens,
Mêlant le sable aux pyramides,
Rendent en même temps humides,
Rappelant à l'un que tout fuit,
A l'autre sa splendeur première,
L'oeil de l'astre dans la lumière,
Et l'oeil du monstre dans la nuit!

II

Oui, c'est un prêtre que Socrate!
Oui, c'est un prêtre que Caton!
Quand Juvénal fuit Rome ingrate,
Nul sceptre ne vaut son bâton;
Ce sont des prêtres, les Tyrtées,
Les Solons aux lois respectées,
Les Platons et les Raphaëls!
Fronts d'inspirés, d'esprits, d'arbitres!
Plus resplendissants que les mitres
Dans l'auréole des Noëls!

Vous voyez, fils de la nature,
Apparaître à votre flambeau

Des faces de lumière pure,
Larves du vrai, spectres du beau;
Le mystère, en Grèce, en Chaldée,
Penseurs, grave à vos fronts l’idée
Et l’hiéroglyphe à vos murs;
Et les Indes et les Égyptes
Dans les ténèbres de vos cryptes
S’enfoncent en porches obscurs!

Quand les cigognes du Caystre
S’envolent aux souffles des soirs;
Quand la lune apparaît sinistre
Derrière les grands dômes noirs;
Quand la trombe aux vagues s’appuie;
Quand l’orage, l’horreur, la pluie,
Que tordent les bises d’hiver,
Répandent avec des huées
Toutes les larmes des nuées
Sur tous les sanglots de la mer;

Quand dans les tombeaux les vents jouent
Avec les os des rois défunts;
Quand les hautes herbes secouent
Leur chevelure de parfums;
Quand sur nos deuils et sur nos fêtes
Toutes les cloches des tempêtes
Sonnent au suprême beffroi;
Quand l’aube étale ses opales,
C’est pour ces contemplateurs pâles
Penchés dans l’éternel effroi!

Ils savent ce que le soir calme
Pense des morts qui vont partir;
Et ce que préfère la palme,
Du conquérant ou du martyr;
Ils entendent ce que murmure
La voile, la gerbe, l’armure,

Ce que dit, dans le mois joyeux
Des longs jours et des fleurs écloses,
La petite bouche des roses
A l’oreille immense des cieux.

Les vents, les flots, les cris sauvages,
L’azur, l’horreur du bois jauni,
Sont les formidables breuvages
De ces altérés d’infini;
Ils ajoutent, rêveurs austères,
A leur âme tous les mystères,
Toute la matière à leurs sens;
Ils s’enivrent de l’étendue;
L’ombre est une coupe tendue
Où boivent ces sombres passants.

Comme ils regardent, ces messies!
Oh! comme ils songent effarés!
Dans les ténèbres épaissies
Quels spectateurs démesurés!
Oh! que de têtes stupéfaites!
Poëtes, apôtres, prophètes,
Méditant, parlant, écrivant,
Sous des suaires, sous des voiles,
Les plis des robes pleins d’étoiles,
Les barbes au gouffre du vent!

III

Savent-ils ce qu’ils font eux-même,
Ces acteurs du drame profond?
Savent-ils leur propre problème?
Ils sont. Savent-ils ce qu’ils sont?
Ils sortent du grand vestiaire
Où, pour s’habiller de matière,
Parfois l’ange même est venu.
Graves, tristes, joyeux, fantasques,

Ne sont-ils pas les sombres masques
De quelque prodige inconnu?

La joie ou la douleur les farde;
Ils projettent confusément,
Plus loin que la terre blafarde,
Leurs ombres sur le firmament;
Leurs gestes étonnent l’abîme;
Pendant qu’aux hommes, tourbe infime,
Ils parlent le langage humain,
Dans des profondeurs qu’on ignore,
Ils font surgir l’ombre ou l’aurore,
Chaque fois qu’ils lèvent la main.

Ils ont leur rôle; ils ont leur forme;
Ils vont, vêtus d’humanité,
Jouant la comédie énorme
De l’homme et de l’éternité;
Ils tiennent la torche ou la coupe;
Nous tremblerions si dans leur groupe,
Nous, troupeau, nous pénétrions!
Les astres d’or et la nuit sombre
Se font des questions dans l’ombre
Sur ces splendides histrions.

IV

Ah! ce qu’ils font est l’oeuvre auguste.
Ces histrions sont les héros!
Ils sont le vrai, le saint, le juste,
Apparaissant à nos barreaux.
Nous sentons, dans la nuit mortelle,
La cage en même temps que l’aile;
Ils nous font espérer un peu;
Ils sont lumière et nourriture;
Ils donnent aux coeurs la pâture,
Ils émiettent aux âmes Dieu!

Devant notre race asservie
Le ciel se tait, et rien n’en sort.
Est-ce le rideau de la vie?
Est-ce le voile de la mort?
Ténèbres! l’âme en vain s’élance,
L’Inconnu garde le silence,
Et l’homme, qui se sent banni,
Ne sait s’il redoute ou s’il aime
Cette lividité suprême
De l’énigme et de l’infini.

Eux, ils parlent à ce mystère!
Ils interrogent l’éternel,
Ils appellent le solitaire,
Ils montent, ils frappent au ciel,
Disent: Es-tu là? dans la tombe,
Volent, pareils à la colombe
Offrant le rameau qu’elle tient,
Et leur voix est grave, humble ou tendre,
Et par moments on croit entendre
Le pas sourd de quelqu’un qui vient.

V

Nous vivons, debout à l’entrée
De la mort, gouffre illimité,
Nus, tremblants, la chair pénétrée
Du frisson de l’énormité;
Nos morts sont dans cette marée;
Nous entendons, foule égarée
Dont le vent souffle le flambeau,
Sans voir de voiles ni de rames,
Le bruit que font ces vagues d’âmes
Sous la falaise du tombeau.

Nous regardons la noire écume,

L’aspect hideux, le fond bruni;
Nous regardons la nuit, la brume,
L’onde du sépulcre infini;
Comme un oiseau de mer effleure
La haute rive où gronde et pleure
L’océan plein de Jéhovah,
De temps en temps, blanc et sublime
Par-dessus le mur de l’abîme
Un ange paraît et s’en va.

Quelquefois une plume tombe
De l’aile où l’ange se berçait;
Retourne-t-elle dans la tombe?
Que devient-elle? On ne le sait.
Se mêle-t-elle à notre fange?
Et qu’a donc crié cet archange?
A-t-il dit non? a-t-il dit oui?
Et la foule cherche, accourue,
En bas la plume disparue,
En haut l’archange évanoui!

Puis, après qu’ont fui comme un rêve
Bien des coeurs morts, bien des yeux clos,
Après qu’on a vu sur la grève
Passer des flots, des flots, des flots,
Dans quelque grotte fatidique,
Sous un doigt de feu qui l’indique,
On trouve un homme surhumain
Traçant des lettres enflammées
Sur un livre plein de fumées,
La plume de l’ange à la main!

Il songe, il calcule, il soupire,
Son poing puissant sous son menton;
Et l’homme dit: Je suis Shakspeare.
Et l’homme dit: Je suis Newton.
L’homme dit: Je suis Ptolémée;

Et dans sa grande main fermée
Il tient le globe de la nuit.
L’homme dit: Je suis Zoroastre;
Et son sourcil abrite un astre,
Et sous son crâne un ciel bleuit!

VI

Oui, grâce aux penseurs, à ces sages,
A ces fous qui disent: Je vois!
Les ténèbres sont des visages,
Le silence s’emplit de voix!
L’homme, comme âme, en Dieu palpite,
Et, comme être, se précipite
Dans le progrès audacieux;
Le muet renonce à se taire;
Tout luit; la noirceur de la terre
S’éclaire à la blancheur des cieux.

Ils tirent de la créature
Dieu par l’esprit et le scalpel;
Le grand caché de la nature
Vient hors de l’antre à leur appel;
A leur voix, l’ombre symbolique
Parle, le mystère s’explique,
La nuit est pleine d’yeux de lynx;
Sortant, de force, le problème
Ouvre les ténèbres lui-même,
Et l’énigme éventre le sphinx.

Oui, grâce à ces hommes suprêmes,
Grâce à ces poëtes vainqueurs,
Construisant des autels poëmes
Et prenant pour pierres les coeurs,
Comme un fleuve d’âme commune,
Du blanc pilône à l’âpre rune,
Du brahme au flamine romain,

De l’hiérophante au druide,
Une sorte de Dieu fluide
Coule aux veines du genre humain.

VII

Le noir cromlech, épars dans l’herbe,
Est sur le mont silencieux;
L’archipel est sur l’eau superbe;
Les pléiades sont dans les cieux;
O mont! ô mer! voûte sereine!
L’herbe, la mouette, l’âme humaine,
Que l’hiver désole ou poursuit,
Interrogent, sombres proscrites,
Ces trois phrases dans l’ombre écrites
Sur les trois pages de la nuit.

— O vieux cromlech de la Bretagne,
Qu’on évite comme un récif,
Qu’écris-tu donc sur la montagne?
— Nuit! répond le cromlech pensif.
— Archipel où la vague fume,
Quel mot jettes-tu dans la brume?
— Mort! dit la roche à l’alcyon.
— Pléiades qui percez nos voiles,
Qu’est-ce que disent vos étoiles?
— Dieu! dit la constellation.

C’est, ô noirs témoins de l’espace,
Dans trois langues le même mot!
Tout ce qui s’obscurcit, vit, passe,
S’effeuille et meurt, tombe là-haut.
Nous faisons tous la même course.
Être abîme, c’est être source.
Le crêpe de la nuit en deuil,
La pierre de la tombe obscure,
Le rayon de l’étoile pure

Sont les paupières du même oeil!

L’unité reste, l’aspect change;
Pour becqueter le fruit vermeil,
Les oiseaux volent à l’orange
Et les comètes au soleil;
Tout est l’atome et tout est l’astre;
La paille porte, humble pilastre,
L’épi d’où naissent les cités;
La fauvette à la tête blonde
Dans la goutte d’eau boit un monde... —
Immensités! immensités!

Seul, la nuit, sur sa plate-forme,
Herschell poursuit l’être central
A travers la lentille énorme,
Cristallin de l’oeil sidéral;
Il voit en haut Dieu dans les mondes
Tandis que, des hydres profondes
Scrutant les monstrueux combats,
Le microscope formidable,
Plein de l’horreur de l’insondable,
Regarde l’infini d’en bas!

VIII

Dieu, triple feu, triple harmonie,
Amour, puissance, volonté,
Prunelle énorme d’insomnie,
De flamboiement et de bonté,
Vu dans toute l’épaisseur noire,
Montrant ses trois faces de gloire
A l’âme, à l’être, au firmament,
Effarant les yeux et les bouches,
Emplit les profondeurs farouches
D’un immense éblouissement.

Tous ces mages, l’un qui réclame,
L’autre qui voulut ou couva,
Ont un rayon qui de leur âme
Va jusqu’à l’oeil de Jéhovah;
Sur leur trône leur esprit songe;
Une lueur qui d’en haut plonge,
Qui descend du ciel sur les monts
Et de Dieu sur l’homme qui souffre,
Rattache au triangle du gouffre
L’escarboucle des Salomons.

IX

Ils parlent à la solitude,
Et la solitude comprend;
Ils parlent à la multitude,
Et font écumer ce torrent;
Ils font vibrer les édifices;
Ils inspirent les sacrifices
Et les inébranlables fois;
Sombres, ils ont en eux, pour muse,
La palpitation confuse
De tous les êtres à la fois.

Comment naît un peuple? Mystère!
A de certains moments, tout bruit
A disparu; toute la terre
Semble une plaine de la nuit;
Toute lueur s’est éclipsée;
Pas de verbe, pas de pensée,
Rien dans l’ombre et rien dans le ciel,
Pas un oeil n’ouvre ses paupières... —
Le désert blême est plein de pierres,
Ézéchiel! Ézéchiel!

Mais un vent sort des cieux sans bornes,
Grondant comme les grandes eaux,

Et souffle sur ces pierres mornes,
Et de ces pierres fait des os;
Ces os frémissent, tas sonore;
Et le vent souffle, et souffle encore
Sur ce triste amas agité,
Et de ces os il fait des hommes,
Et nous nous levons et nous sommes,
Et ce vent, c’est la liberté!

Ainsi s’accomplit la genèse
Du grand rien d’où naît le grand tout.
Dieu pensif dit: Je suis bien aise
Que ce qui gisait soit debout.
Le néant dit: J’étais souffrance;
La douleur dit: Je suis la France!
O formidable vision!
Ainsi tombe le noir suaire;
Le désert devient ossuaire,
Et l’ossuaire nation.

X

Tout est la mort, l’horreur, la guerre;
L’homme par l’ombre est éclipsé;
L’Ouragan par toute la terre
Court comme un enfant insensé.
Il brise à l’hiver les feuillages,
L’éclair aux cimes, l’onde aux plages,
A la tempête le rayon;
Car c’est l’ouragan qui gouverne
Toute cette étrange caverne
Que nous nommons Création.

L’ouragan, qui broie et torture,
S’alimente, monstre croissant,
De tout ce que l’âpre nature
A d’horrible et de menaçant;

La lave en feu le désaltère;
Il va de Quito, blanc cratère
Qu’entoure un éternel glaçon,
Jusqu’à l’Hékla, mont, gouffre et geôle,
Bout de la mamelle du pôle
Que tette ce noir nourrisson!

L’ouragan est la force aveugle,
L’agitateur du grand linceul;
Il rugit, hurle, siffle, beugle,
Étant toute l’hydre à lui seul;
Il flétrit ce qui veut éclore;
Il dit au printemps, à l’aurore,
A la paix, à l’amour: Va-t’en!
Il est rage et foudre; il se nomme
Barbarie et crime pour l’homme,
Nuit pour les cieux, pour Dieu Satan.

C’est le souffle de la matière,
De toute la nature craint;
L’Esprit, ouragan de lumière,
Le poursuit, le saisit, l’étreint;
L’Esprit terrasse, abat, dissipe
Le principe par le principe;
Il combat, en criant: Allons!
Les chaos par les harmonies,
Les éléments par les génies,
Par les aigles les aquilons!

Ils sont là, hauts de cent coudées,
Christ en tête, Homère au milieu,
Tous les combattants des idées,
Tous les gladiateurs de Dieu;
Chaque fois qu’agitant le glaive,
Une forme du mal se lève
Comme un forçat dans son préau,
Dieu, dans leur phalange complète,

Désigne quelque grand athlète
De la stature du fléau.

Surgis, Volta! dompte en ton aire
Les Fluides, noir phlégéton!
Viens, Franklin! voici le Tonnerre.
Le Flot gronde; parais, Fulton!
Rousseau! prends corps à corps la Haine.
L’Esclavage agite sa chaîne;
O Voltaire! aide au paria!
La Grève rit, Tyburn flamboie,
L’affreux chien Montfaucon aboie,
On meurt... — Debout, Beccaria!

Il n’est rien que l’homme ne tente.
La foudre craint cet oiseleur.
Dans la blessure palpitante
Il dit: Silence! à la douleur.
Sa vergue peut-être est une aile;
Partout où parvient sa prunelle,
L’âme emporte ses pieds de plomb;
L’étoile, dans sa solitude,
Regarde avec inquiétude
Blanchir la voile de Colomb.

Près de la science l’art flotte,
Les yeux sur le double horizon;
La poésie est un pilote;
Orphée accompagne Jason.
Un jour, une barque perdue
Vit à la fois dans l’étendue
Un oiseau dans l’air spacieux,
Un rameau dans l’eau solitaire;
Alors, Gama cria: La terre!
Et Camoëns cria: Les cieux!

Ainsi s’entassent les conquêtes.

Les songeurs sont les inventeurs.
Parlez, dites ce que vous êtes,
Forces, ondes, aimants, moteurs!
Tout est stupéfait dans l’abîme,
L’ombre, de nous voir sur la cime,
Les monstres, qu’on les ait bravés
Dans les cavernes étonnées,
Les perles, d’être devinées,
Et les mondes d’être trouvés!

Dans l’ombre immense du Caucase,
Depuis des siècles, en rêvant,
Conduit par les hommes d’extase,
Le genre humain marche en avant;
Il marche sur la terre; il passe,
Il va, dans la nuit, dans l’espace,
Dans l’infini, dans le borné,
Dans l’azur, dans l’onde irritée,
A la lueur de Prométhée,
Le libérateur enchaîné!

XI

Oh! vous êtes les seuls pontifes,
Penseurs, lutteurs des grands espoirs,
Dompteurs des fauves hippogriffes,
Cavaliers des pégases noirs!
Ames devant Dieu toutes nues,
Voyant des choses inconnues,
Vous savez la religion!
Quand votre esprit veut fuir dans l’ombre,
La nuée aux croupes sans nombre
Lui dit: Me voici, Légion!

Et, quand vous sortez du problème,
Célébrateurs, révélateurs!
Quand, rentrant dans la foule blême,

Vous redescendez des hauteurs,
Hommes que le jour divin gagne,
Ayant mêlé sur la montagne
Où montent vos chants et nos voeux,
Votre front au front de l’aurore,
O géants! vous avez encore
De ses rayons dans les cheveux!

Allez tous à la découverte!
Entrez au nuage grondant!
Et rapportez à l’herbe verte,
Et rapportez au sable ardent,
Rapportez, quel que soit l’abîme,
A l’Enfer, que Satan opprime,
Au Tartare, où saigne Ixion,
Aux coeurs bons, à l’âme méchante
À tout ce qui rit, mord ou chante,
La grande bénédiction!

Oh! tous à la fois, aigles, âmes,
Esprits, oiseaux, essors, raisons,
Pour prendre en vos serres les flammes,
Pour connaître les horizons,
A travers l’ombre et les tempêtes,
Ayant au-dessus de vos têtes
Mondes et soleils, au-dessous
Inde, Égypte, Grèce et Judée,
De la montagne et de l’idée,
Envolez-vous! envolez-vous!

N’est-ce pas que c’est ineffable
De se sentir immensité,
D’éclairer ce qu’on croyait fable
A ce qu’on trouve vérité,
De voir le fond du grand cratère,
De sentir en soi du mystère
Entrer tout le frisson obscur,

D’aller aux astres, étincelle,
Et de se dire: Je suis l’aile!
Et de se dire: J’ai l’azur!

Allez, prêtres! allez, génies!
Cherchez la note humaine, allez,
Dans les suprêmes symphonies
Des grands abîmes étoilés!
En attendant l’heure dorée,
L’extase de la mort sacrée,
Loin de nous, troupeaux soucieux,
Loin des lois que nous établîmes,
Allez goûter, vivants sublimes,
L’évanouissement des cieux!

Janvier 1856.

XXIV

EN FRAPPANT A UNE PORTE

J’ai perdu mon père et ma mère,
Mon premier né, bien jeune, hélas!
Et pour moi la nature entière
Sonne le glas.

Je dormais entre mes deux frères;
Enfants, nous étions trois oiseaux;
Hélas! le sort change en deux bières
Leurs deux berceaux.

Je t’ai perdue, ô fille chère,
Toi qui remplis, ô mon orgueil,
Tout mon destin de la lumière
De ton cercueil!

J’ai su monter, j’ai su descendre.

J’ai vu l’aube et l’ombre en mes cieux.
J’ai connu la pourpre, et la cendre
Qui me va mieux.

J’ai connu les ardeurs profondes,
J’ai connu les sombres amours;
J’ai vu fuir les ailes; les ondes,
Les vents, les jours.

J’ai sur ma tête des orfraies;
J’ai sur tous mes travaux l’affront,
Aux pieds la poudre, au coeur des plaies,
L’épine au front.

J’ai des pleurs à mon oeil qui pense,
Des trous à ma robe en lambeau;
Je n’ai rien à la conscience;
Ouvre, tombeau.

Marine-Terrace, 4 septembre 1855.

XXV

NOMEN, NUMEN, LUMEN

Quand il eut terminé, quand les soleils épars,
Éblouis, du chaos montant de toutes parts,
Se furent tous rangés à leur place profonde,
Il sentit le besoin de se nommer au monde;
Et l’être formidable et serein se leva;
Il se dressa sur l’ombre et cria: JÉHOVAH!
Et dans l’immensité ces sept lettres tombèrent;
Et ce sont, dans les cieux que nos yeux réverbèrent,
Au-dessus de nos fronts tremblants sous leur rayon,
Les sept astres géants du noir septentrion.

Minuit, au dolmen du Faldouet, mars 1855.

XXVI

CE QUE DIT LA BOUCHE D’OMBRE

L’homme en songeant descend au gouffre universel.
J’errais près du dolmen qui domine Rozel,
A l’endroit où le cap se prolonge en presqu’île.
Le spectre m’attendait; l’être sombre et tranquille
Me prit par les cheveux dans sa main qui grandit,
M’emporta sur le haut du rocher, et me dit:
.
Sache que tout connaît sa loi, son but, sa route;
Que, de l’astre au ciron, l’immensité s’écoute;
Que tout a conscience en la création;
Et l’oreille pourrait avoir sa vision,
Car les choses et l’être ont un grand dialogue.
Tout parle; l’air qui passe et l’alcyon qui vogue,
Le brin d’herbe, la fleur, le germe, l’élément.
T’imaginais-tu donc l’univers autrement?
Crois-tu que Dieu, par qui la forme sort du nombre,
Aurait fait à jamais sonner la forêt sombre,
L’orage, le torrent roulant de noirs limons,
Le rocher dans les flots, la bête dans les monts,
La mouche, le buisson, la ronce où croît la mûre,
Et qu’il n’aurait rien mis dans l’éternel murmure?
Crois-tu que l’eau du fleuve et les arbres des bois,
S’ils n’avaient rien à dire, élèveraient la voix?
Prends-tu le vent des mers pour un joueur de flûte?
Crois-tu que l’océan, qui se gonfle et qui lutte,
Serait content d’ouvrir sa gueule jour et nuit
Pour souffler dans le vide une vapeur de bruit,
Et qu’il voudrait rugir, sous l’ouragan qui vole,
Si son rugissement n’était une parole?
Crois-tu que le tombeau, d’herbe et de nuit vêtu,
Ne soit rien qu’un silence? et te figures-tu
Que la création profonde, qui compose

Sa rumeur des frissons du lys et de la rose,
De la foudre, des flots, des souffles du ciel bleu,
Ne sait ce qu’elle dit quand elle parle à Dieu?
Crois-tu qu’elle ne soit qu’une langue épaissie?
Crois-tu que la nature énorme balbutie,
Et que Dieu se serait, dans son immensité,
Donné pour tout plaisir, pendant l’éternité,
D’entendre bégayer une sourde-muette?
Non, l’abîme est un prêtre et l’ombre est un poëte;
Non, tout est une voix et tout est un parfum;
Tout dit dans l’infini quelque chose à quelqu’un;
Une pensée emplit le tumulte superbe.
Dieu n’a pas fait un bruit sans y mêler le Verbe.
Tout, comme toi, gémit ou chante comme moi;
Tout parle. Et maintenant, homme, sais-tu pourquoi
Tout parle? Écoute bien. C’est que vents, ondes, flamme
Arbres, roseaux, rochers, tout vit!
Tout est plein d’âmes.

Mais comment! Oh! voilà le mystère inouï.
Puisque tu ne t’es pas en route évanoui,
Causons.

Dieu n’a créé que l’être impondérable.
Il le fit radieux, beau, candide, adorable,
Mais imparfait; sans quoi, sur la même hauteur,
La créature étant égale au créateur,
Cette perfection, dans l’infini perdue,
Se serait avec Dieu mêlée et confondue,
Et la création, à force de clarté,
En lui serait rentrée et n’aurait pas été.
La création sainte où rêve le prophète,
Pour être, ô profondeur! devait être imparfaite.

Donc, Dieu fit l’univers, l’univers fit le mal.

L’être créé, paré du rayon baptismal,

En des temps dont nous seuls conservons la mémoire,
Planait dans la splendeur sur des ailes de gloire;
Tout était chant, encens, flamme, éblouissement;
L’être errait, aile d’or, dans un rayon charmant,
Et de tous les parfums tour à tour était l’hôte;
Tout nageait, tout volait.

Or, la première faute
Fut le premier poids.

Dieu sentit une douleur.
Le poids prit une forme, et, comme l’oiseleur
Fuit emportant l’oiseau qui frissonne et qui lutte,
Il tomba, traînant l’ange éperdu dans sa chute.
Le mal était fait. Puis tout alla s’aggravant;
Et l’éther devint l’air, et l’air devint le vent;
L’ange devint l’esprit, et l’esprit devint l’homme.
L’âme tomba, des maux multipliant la somme,
Dans la brute, dans l’arbre, et même, au-dessous d’eux,
Dans le caillou pensif, cet aveugle hideux.
Êtres vils qu’à regret les anges énumèrent!
Et de tous ces amas des globes se formèrent,
Et derrière ces blocs naquit la sombre nuit.
Le mal, c’est la matière. Arbre noir, fatal fruit.
•
Ne réfléchis-tu pas lorsque tu vois ton ombre?
Cette forme de toi, rampante, horrible, sombre,
Qui liée à tes pas comme un spectre vivant,
Va tantôt en arrière et tantôt en avant,
Qui se mêle à la nuit, sa grande soeur funeste,
Et qui contre le jour, noire et dure, proteste,
D’où vient-elle? De toi, de ta chair, du limon
Dont l’esprit se revêt en devenant démon;
De ce corps qui, créé par ta faute première,
Ayant rejeté Dieu, résiste à la lumière;
De ta matière, hélas! de ton iniquité.
Cette ombre dit: — Je suis l’être d’infirmité;

Je suis tombé déjà; je puis tomber encore. —
L’ange laisse passer à travers lui l’aurore;
Nul simulacre obscur ne suit l’être aromal;
Homme, tout ce qui fait de l’ombre a fait le mal.
•
Maintenant, c’est ici le rocher fatidique,
Et je vais t’expliquer tout ce que je t’indique;
Je vais t’emplir les yeux de nuit et de lueurs.
Prépare-toi, front triste, aux funèbres sueurs.
Le vent d’en haut sur moi passe, et, ce qu’il m’arrache,
Je te le jette; prends, et vois.
Et, d’abord, sache
Que le monde où tu vis est un monde effrayant
Devant qui le songeur, sous l’infini ployant,
Lève les bras au ciel et recule terrible.
Ton soleil est lugubre et ta terre est horrible.
Vous habitez le seuil du monde châtiment.
Mais vous n’êtes pas hors de Dieu complétement;
Dieu, soleil dans l’azur, dans la cendre étincelle,
N’est hors de rien, étant la fin universelle;
L’éclair est son regard, autant que le rayon;
Et tout, même le mal, est la création,
Car le dedans du masque est encor la figure.

— O sombre aile invisible à l’immense envergure
Esprit! esprit! esprit! m’écriai-je éperdu.
Le spectre poursuivit sans m’avoir entendu:
•
Faisons un pas de plus dans ces choses profondes.

Homme, tu veux, tu fais, tu construis et tu fondes,
Et tu dis: — Je suis seul, car je suis le penseur.
L’univers n’a que moi dans sa morne épaisseur.
En deçà, c’est la nuit; au-delà, c’est le rêve.
L’idéal est un oeil que la science crève.
C’est moi qui suis la fin et qui suis le sommet. —
Voyons; observes-tu le boeuf qui se soumet?

Écoutes-tu le bruit de ton pas sur les marbres?
Interroges-tu l’onde? et, quand tu vois des arbres,
Parles-tu quelquefois à ces religieux?
Comme sur le versant d’un mont prodigieux,
Vaste mêlée aux bruits confus, du fond de l’ombre,
Tu vois monter à toi la création sombre.
Le rocher est plus loin, l’animal est plus près.
Comme le faîte altier et vivant, tu parais!
Mais, dis, crois-tu que l’être illogique nous trompe?
L’échelle que tu vois, crois-tu qu’elle se rompe?
Crois-tu, toi dont les sens d’en haut sont éclairés,
Que la création qui, lente et par degrés,
S’élève à la lumière, et, dans sa marche entière,
Fait de plus de clarté luire moins de matière
Et mêle plus d’instincts au monstre décroissant,
Crois-tu que cette vie énorme, remplissant
De souffles le feuillage et de lueurs la tête,
Qui va du roc à l’arbre et de l’arbre à la bête,
Et de la pierre à toi monte insensiblement,
S’arrête sur l’abîme à l’homme, escarpement?
Non, elle continue, invincible, admirable,
Entre dans l’invisible et dans l’impondérable,
Y disparaît pour toi, chair vile, emplit l’azur
D’un monde éblouissant, miroir du monde obscur,
D’êtres voisins de l’homme et d’autres qui s’éloignent,
D’esprits purs, de voyants dont les splendeurs témoignent
D’anges faits de rayons comme l’homme d’instincts;
Elle plonge à travers les deux jamais atteints,
Sublime ascension d’échelles étoilées,
Des démons enchaînés monte aux âmes ailées,
Fait toucher le front sombre au radieux orteil,
Rattache l’astre esprit à l’archange soleil,
Relie, en traversant des millions de lieues,
Les groupes constellés et les légions bleues,
Peuple le haut, le bas, les bords et le milieu,
Et dans les profondeurs s’évanouit en Dieu!

Cette échelle apparaît vaguement dans la vie
Et dans la mort. Toujours les justes l’ont gravie:
Jacob en la voyant, et Caton sans la voir.
Ses échelons sont deuil, sagesse, exil, devoir.

Et cette échelle vient de plus loin que la terre.
Sache qu’elle commence aux mondes du mystère,
Aux mondes des terreurs et des perditions;
Et qu’elle vient, parmi les pâles visions,
Du précipice où sont les larves et les crimes,
Où la création, effrayant les abîmes,
Se prolonge dans l’ombre en spectre indéfini.
Car, au-dessous du globe où vit l’homme banni,
Hommes, plus bas que vous, dans le nadir livide,
Dans cette plénitude horrible qu’on croit vide,
Le mal, qui par la chair, hélas! vous asservit,
Dégorge une vapeur monstrueuse qui vit!
Là, sombre et s’engloutit, dans des flots de désastres,
L’hydre Univers tordant son corps écaillé d’astres;
Là, tout flotte et s’en va dans un naufrage obscur;
Dans ce gouffre sans bord, sans soupirail, sans mur,
De tout ce qui vécut pleut sans cesse la cendre;
Et l’on voit tout au fond, quand l’oeil ose y descendre,
Au delà de la vie, et du souffle et du bruit,
Un affreux soleil noir d’où rayonne la nuit!
•
Donc, la matière pend à l’idéal, et tire
L’esprit vers l’animal, l’ange vers le satyre,
Le sommet vers le bas, l’amour vers l’appétit.
Avec le grand qui croule elle fait le petit.

Comment de tant d’azur tant de terreur s’engendre,
Comment le jour fait l’ombre et le feu pur la cendre,
Comment la cécité peut naître du voyant,
Comment le ténébreux descend du flamboyant,
Comment du monstre esprit naît le monstre matière,
Un jour, dans le tombeau, sinistre vestiaire,

Tu le sauras; la tombe est faite pour savoir;
Tu verras; aujourd’hui, tu ne peux qu’entrevoir;
Mais, puisque Dieu permet que ma voix t’avertisse,
Je te parle.
Et, d’abord, qu’est-ce que la justice?
Qui la rend? qui la fait? où? quand? à quel moment?
Qui donc pèse la faute? et qui le châtiment?
•
L’être créé se meut dans la lumière immense.

Libre, il sait où le bien cesse, où le mal commence;
Il a ses actions pour juges.
Il suffit
Qu’il soit méchant ou bon; tout est dit. Ce qu’on fit,
Crime, est notre geôlier, ou, vertu, nous délivre.
L’être ouvre à son insu de lui-même le livre;
Sa conscience calme y marque avec le doigt
Ce que l’ombre lui garde ou ce que Dieu lui doit.
On agit, et l’on gagne ou l’on perd à mesure;
On peut être étincelle ou bien éclaboussure;
Lumière ou fange, archange au vol d’aigle ou bandit;
L’échelle vaste est là. Comme je te l’ai dit,
Par des zones sans fin la vie universelle
Monte, et par des degrés innombrables ruisselle,
Depuis l’infâme nuit jusqu’au charmant azur.
L’être en la traversant devient mauvais ou pur.
En haut plane la joie; en bas l’horreur se traîne.
Selon que l’âme, aimante, humble, bonne, sereine,
Aspire à la lumière et tend vers l’idéal,
Ou s’alourdit, immonde, au poids croissant du mal,
Dans la vie infinie on monte et l’on s’élance,
Ou l’on tombe; et tout être est sa propre balance.

Dieu ne nous juge point. Vivant tous à la fois,
Nous pesons, et chacun descend selon son poids.
•
Hommes! nous n’approchons que les paupières closes,

De ces immensités d’en bas.
Viens, si tu l’oses!
Regarde dans ce puits morne et vertigineux,
De la création compte les sombres noeuds,
Viens, vois, sonde:
Au-dessous de l’homme qui contemple,
Qui peut être un cloaque ou qui peut être un temple,
Être en qui l’instinct vit dans la raison dissous,
Est l’animal courbé vers la terre; au-dessous
De la brute est la plante inerte, sans paupière
Et sans cris; au-dessous de la plante est la pierre;

Au-dessous de la pierre est le chaos sans nom.

Avançons dans cette ombre et sois mon compagnon.
•
Toute faute qu’on fait est un cachot qu’on s’ouvre
Les mauvais, ignorant quel mystère les couvre,
Les êtres de fureur, de sang, de trahison,
Avec leurs actions bâtissent leur prison;
Tout bandit, quand la mort vient lui toucher l’épaule
Et l’éveille, hagard, se retrouve en la geôle
Que lui fit son forfait derrière lui rampant;
Tibère en un rocher, Séjan dans un serpent.

L’homme marche sans voir ce qu’il fait dans l’abîme.
L’assassin pâlirait s’il voyait sa victime;
C’est lui. L’oppresseur vil, le tyran sombre et fou,
En frappant sans pitié sur tous, forge le clou
Qui le clouera dans l’ombre au fond de la matière.

Les tombeaux sont les trous du crible cimetière,
D’où tombe, graine obscure en un ténébreux champ,

L’effrayant tourbillon des âmes.
•
Tout méchant

Fait naître en expirant le monstre de sa vie,
Qui le saisit. L’horreur par l’horreur est suivie.
Nemrod gronde enfermé dans la montagne à pic;
Quand Dalila descend dans la tombe, un aspic
Sort des plis du linceul, emportant l’âme fausse;
Phryné meurt, un crapaud saute hors de la fosse;
Ce scorpion au fond d’une pierre dormant,
C’est Clytemnestre aux bras d’Égysthe son amant;
Du tombeau d’Anitus il sort une ciguë;
Le houx sombre et l’ortie à la piqûre aiguë
Pleurent quand l’aquilon les fouette, et l’aquilon
Leur dit: Tais-toi, Zoïle! et souffre, Ganelon!
Dieu livre, choc affreux dont la plaine au loin gronde,
Au cheval Brunehaut le pavé Frédégonde;
La pince qui rougit dans le brasier hideux
Est faite du duc d’Albe et de Philippe Deux;
Farinace est le croc des noires boucheries;
L’orfraie au fond de l’ombre a les yeux de Jeffryes;
Tristan est au secret dans le bois d’un gibet.
Quand tombent dans la mort tous ces brigands, Macbeth,
Ezzelin, Richard Trois, Carrier, Ludovic Sforce,
La matière leur met la chemise de force.
Oh! comme en son bonheur, qui masque un sombre arrêt,
Messaline ou l’horrible Isabeau frémirait
Si, dans ses actions du sépulcre voisines,
Cette femme sentait qu’il lui vient des racines,
Et qu’ayant été monstre, elle deviendra fleur!
A chacun son forfait! à chacun sa douleur!
Claude est l’algue que l’eau traîne de havre en havre;
Xercès est excrément, Charles Neuf est cadavre;
Hérode, c’est l’osier des berceaux vagissants;
L’âme du noir Judas, depuis dix-huit cents ans,
Se disperse et renaît dans les crachats des hommes;
Et le vent qui jadis soufflait sur les Sodomes
Mêle, dans l’âtre abject et sous le vil chaudron,
La fumée Érostrate à la flamme Néron.
.

Et tout, bête, arbre et roche, étant vivant sur terre,
Tout est monstre, excepté l’homme, esprit solitaire.

L’âme que sa noirceur chasse du firmament
Descend dans les degrés divers du châtiment
Selon que plus ou moins d’obscurité la gagne.
L’homme en est la prison, la bête en est le bagne,
L’arbre en est le cachot, la pierre en est l’enfer.
Le ciel d’en haut, le seul qui soit splendide et clair,
La suit des yeux dans l’ombre, et, lui jetant l’aurore,
Tâche, en la regardant, de l’attirer encore.
O chute! dans la bête, à travers les barreaux
De l’instinct, obstruant de pâles soupiraux,
Ayant encor la voix, l’essor et la prunelle,
L’âme entrevoit de loin la lueur éternelle;
Dans l’arbre elle frissonne, et, sans jour et sans yeux,
Sent encor dans le vent quelque chose des cieux;
Dans la pierre elle rampe, immobile, muette,
Ne voyant même plus l’obscure silhouette
Du monde qui s’éclipse et qui s’évanouit,
Et face à face avec son crime dans la nuit,
L’âme en ces trois cachots traîne sa faute noire.
Comme elle en a la forme, elle en a la mémoire;
Elle sait ce qu’elle est; et, tombant sans appuis,
Voit la clarté décroître à la paroi du puits;
Elle assiste à sa chute; et, dur caillou qui roule,
Pense: Je suis Octave; et, vil chardon qu’on foule,
Crie au talon: Je suis Attila le géant;
Et, ver de terre au fond du charnier, et rongeant
Un crâne infect et noir, dit: Je suis Cléopâtre.
Et, hibou, malgré l’aube, ours, en bravant le pâtre,
Elle accomplit la loi qui l’enchaîne d’en haut;
Pierre, elle écrase; épine, elle pique; il le faut.
Le monstre est enfermé dans son horreur vivante.
Il aurait beau vouloir dépouiller l’épouvante;
Il faut qu’il reste horrible et reste châtié;
O mystère! le tigre a peut-être pitié!

Le tigre sur son dos, qui peut-être eut une aile,
A l’ombre des barreaux de la cage éternelle;
Un invisible fil lie aux noirs échafauds
Le noir corbeau dont l’aile est en forme de faulx;
L’âme louve ne peut s’empêcher d’être louve,
Car le monstre est tenu, sous le ciel qui l’éprouve,
Dans l’expiation par la fatalité.
Jadis, sans la comprendre et d’un oeil hébété,
L’Inde a presque entrevu cette métempsychose.
La ronce devient griffe, et la feuille de rose
Devient langue de chat, et, dans l’ombre et les cris,
Horrible, lèche et boit le sang de la souris;
Qui donc connaît le monstre appelé mandragore?
Qui sait ce que, le soir, éclaire le fulgore,
Être en qui la laideur devient une clarté?
Ce qui se passe en l’ombre où croît la fleur d’été
Efface la terreur des antiques avernes.
Étages effrayants! cavernes sur cavernes.
Ruche obscure du mal, du crime et du remord!

Donc, une bête va, vient, rugit, hurle, mord;
Un arbre est là, dressant ses branches hérissées,
Une dalle s’effondre au milieu des chaussées
Que la charrette écrase et que l’hiver détruit,
Et, sous ces épaisseurs de matière et de nuit,
Arbre, bête, pavé, poids que rien ne soulève,
Dans cette profondeur terrible, une âme rêve!
Que fait-elle? Elle songe à Dieu!
•
Fatalité!
Echéance! retour! revers! autre côté!
O loi! pendant qu’assis à table, joyeux groupes,
Les pervers, les puissants, vidant toutes les coupes,
Oubliant qu’aujourd’hui par demain est guetté,
Étalent leur mâchoire en leur folle gaîté,
Voilà ce qu’en sa nuit muette et colossale,
Montrant comme eux ses dents tout au fond de la salle,

Leur réserve la mort, ce sinistre rieur!

Nous avons, nous, voyants du ciel supérieur,
Le spectacle inouï de vos régions basses.
O songeur, fallait-il qu'en ces nuits tu tombasses!
Nous écoutons le cri de l'immense malheur.
Au-dessus d'un rocher, d'un loup ou d'une fleur,
Parfois nous apparaît l'âme à mi-corps sortie,
Pauvre ombre en pleurs qui lutte, hélas! presque engloutie;
Le loup la tient, le roc étreint ses pieds qu'il tord,
Et la fleur implacable et féroce la mord.
Nous entendons le bruit du rayon que Dieu lance,
La voix de ce que l'homme appelle le silence,
Et vos soupirs profonds, cailloux désespérés!
Nous voyons la pâleur de tous les fronts murés.
A travers la matière, affreux caveau sans portes,
L'ange est pour nous visible avec ses ailes mortes.
Nous assistons aux deuils, au blasphème, aux regrets,
Aux fureurs; et, la nuit, nous voyons les forêts,
D'où cherchent à s'enfuir les larves enfermées,
S'écheveler dans l'ombre en lugubres fumées.
Partout, partout, partout! dans les flots, dans les bois,
Dans l'herbe en fleurs, dans l'or qui sert de sceptre aux rois,
Dans le jonc dont Hermès se fait une baguette,
Partout le châtiment contemple, observe ou guette,
Sourd aux questions, triste, affreux, pensif, hagard;
Et tout est l'oeil d'où sort ce terrible regard.

O châtiment! dédale aux spirales funèbres!
Construction d'en bas qui cherche les ténèbres,
Plonge au-dessous du monde et descend dans la nuit,
Et, Babel renversée, au fond de l'ombre fuit!

L'homme qui plane et rampe, être crépusculaire,
En est le milieu.
•
L'homme est clémence et colère;

Fond vil du puits, plateau radieux de la tour;
Degré d’en haut pour l’ombre, et d’en bas pour le jour.
L’ange y descend, la bête après la mort y monte;
Pour la bête, il est gloire, et, pour l’ange, il est honte;
Dieu mêle en votre race, hommes infortunés,
Les demi-dieux punis aux monstres pardonnés.

De là vient que, parfois, — mystère que Dieu mène! —
On entend d’une bouche en apparence humaine
Sortir des mots pareils à des rugissements,
Et que, dans d’autres lieux et dans d’autres moments,
On croit voir sur un front s’ouvrir des ailes d’anges.

Roi forçat, l’homme, esprit, pense, et, matière, mange.
L’âme en lui ne se peut dresser sur son séant.
L’homme, comme la brute abreuvé de néant,
Vide toutes les nuits le verre noir du somme.
La chaîne de l’enfer, liée au pied de l’homme,
Ramène chaque jour vers le cloaque impur
La beauté, le génie, envolés dans l’azur,
Mêle la peste au souffle idéal des poitrines,
Et traîne, avec Socrate, Aspasie aux latrines.
•
Par un côté pourtant l’homme est illimité.
Le monstre a le carcan, l’homme a la liberté.
Songeur, retiens ceci: l’homme est un équilibre.
L’homme est une prison où l’âme reste libre.
L’âme, dans l’homme, agit, fait le bien, fait le mal,
Remonte vers l’esprit, retombe à l’animal;
Et, pour que, dans son vol vers les cieux, rien ne lie
Sa conscience ailée et de Dieu seul remplie,
Dieu, quand une âme éclôt dans l’homme au bien poussé,
Casse en son souvenir le fil de son passé;
De là vient que la nuit en sait plus que l’aurore.
Le monstre se connaît lorsque l’homme s’ignore.
Le monstre est la souffrance, et l’homme est l’action.
L’homme est l’unique point de la création

Où, pour demeurer libre en se faisant meilleure,
L’âme doive oublier sa vie antérieure.
Mystère! au seuil de tout l’esprit rêve ébloui.
•
L’homme ne voit pas Dieu, mais peut aller à lui,
En suivant la clarté du bien, toujours présente;
Le monstre, arbre, rocher ou bête rugissante,
Voit Dieu, c’est là sa peine, et reste enchaîné loin.

L’homme a l’amour pour aile, et pour joug le besoin.
L’ombre est sur ce qu’il voit par lui-même semée;
La nuit sort de son oeil ainsi qu’une fumée;
Homme, tu ne sais rien; tu marches, pâlissant!
Parfois le voile obscur qui te couvre, ô passant!
S’envole et flotte au vent soufflant d’une autre sphère,
Gonfle un moment ses plis jusque dans la lumière,
Puis retombe sur toi, spectre, et redevient noir.
Tes sages, tes penseurs ont essayé de voir;
Qu’ont-ils vu? qu’ont-ils fait? qu’ont-ils dit, ces fils d’Ève?
Rien.
Homme! autour de toi la création rêve.
Mille êtres inconnus t’entourent dans ton mur.
Tu vas, tu viens, tu dors sous leur regard obscur,
Et tu ne les sens pas vivre autour de ta vie:
Toute une légion d’âmes t’est asservie;
Pendant qu’elle te plaint, tu la foules aux pieds.
Tous tes pas vers le jour sont par l’ombre épiés.
Ce que tu nommes chose, objet, nature morte,
Sait, pense, écoute, entend. Le verrou de ta porte
Voit arriver ta faute et voudrait se fermer.
Ta vitre connaît l’aube, et dit: Voir! croire! aimer!
Les rideaux de ton lit frissonnent de tes songes.
Dans les mauvais desseins quand, rêveur, tu te plonges,
La cendre dit au fond de l’âtre sépulcral:
Regarde-moi; je suis ce qui reste du mal.
Hélas! l’homme imprudent trahit, torture, opprime.
La bête en son enfer voit les deux bouts du crime;

Un loup pourrait donner des conseils à Néron.
Homme! homme! aigle aveuglé, moindre qu’un moucheron!
Pendant que dans ton Louvre ou bien dans ta chaumière,
Tu vis, sans même avoir épelé la première
Des constellations, sombre alphabet qui luit
Et tremble sur la page immense de la nuit,
Pendant que tu maudis et pendant que tu nies,
Pendant que tu dis: Non! aux astres; aux génies:
Non! à l’idéal: Non! à la vertu: Pourquoi?
Pendant que tu te tiens en dehors de la loi,
Copiant les dédains inquiets ou robustes
De ces sages qu’on voit rêver dans les vieux bustes,
Et que tu dis: Que sais-je? amer, froid, mécréant,
Prostituant ta bouche au rire du néant,
A travers le taillis de la nature énorme,
Flairant l’éternité de son museau difforme,
Là, dans l’ombre, à tes pieds, homme, ton chien voit Dieu.

Ah! je t’entends. Tu dis: — Quel deuil! la bête est peu,
L’homme n’est rien. O loi misérable! ombre! abîme! —
.
O songeur! cette loi misérable et sublime.
Il faut donc tout redire à ton esprit chétif!
A la fatalité, loi du monstre captif,
Succède le devoir, fatalité de l’homme.
Ainsi de toutes parts l’épreuve se consomme,
Dans le monstre passif, dans l’homme intelligent,
La nécessité morne en devoir se changeant,
Et l’âme, remontant à sa beauté première,
Va de l’ombre fatale à la libre lumière.
Or, je te le redis, pour se transfigurer,
Et pour se racheter, l’homme doit ignorer.
Il doit être aveuglé par toutes les poussières.
Sans quoi, comme l’enfant guidé par des lisières,
L’homme vivrait, marchant droit à la vision.
Douter est sa puissance et sa punition.
Il voit la rose, et nie; il voit l’aurore, et doute;

Où serait le mérite à retrouver sa route,
Si l’homme, voyant clair, roi de sa volonté,
Avait la certitude, ayant la liberté?
Non. Il faut qu’il hésite en la vaste nature,
Qu’il traverse du choix l’effrayante aventure,
Et qu’il compare au vice agitant son miroir,
Au crime, aux voluptés, l’oeil en pleurs du devoir;
Il faut qu’il doute! Hier croyant, demain impie;
Il court du mal au bien; il scrute, sonde, épie,
Va, revient, et, tremblant, agenouillé, debout,
Les bras étendus, triste, il cherche Dieu partout;
Il tâte l’infini jusqu’à ce qu’il l’y sente;
Alors, son âme ailée éclate frémissante;
L’ange éblouissant luit dans l’homme transparent.
Le doute le fait libre, et la liberté, grand.
La captivité sait; la liberté suppose,
Creuse, saisit l’effet, le compare à la cause,
Croit vouloir le bien-être et veut le firmament;
Et, cherchant le caillou, trouve le diamant.
C’est ainsi que du ciel l’âme à pas lents s’empare.

Dans le monstre, elle expie; en l’homme, elle répare.
.
Oui, ton fauve univers est le forçat de Dieu.
Les constellations, sombres lettres de feu,
Sont les marques du bagne à l’épaule du monde.
Dans votre région tant d’épouvante abonde,
Que, pour l’homme, marqué lui-même du fer chaud,
Quand il lève les yeux vers les astres, là-haut,
Le cancer resplendit, le scorpion flamboie,
Et dans l’immensité le chien sinistre aboie!
Ces soleils inconnus se groupent sur son front
Comme l’effroi, le deuil, la menace et l’affront;
De toutes parts s’étend l’ombre incommensurable;
En bas l’obscur, l’impur, le mauvais, l’exécrable,
Le pire, tas hideux, fourmillent; tout au fond,
Ils échangent entre eux dans l’ombre ce qu’ils font;

Typhon donne l’horreur, Satan donne le crime;
Lugubre intimité du mal et de l’abîme!
Amours de l’âme monstre et du monstre univers!
Baiser triste! et l’informe engendré du pervers,
La matière, le bloc, la fange, la géhenne,
L’écume, le chaos, l’hiver, nés de la haine,
Les faces de beauté qu’habitent des démons,
Tous les êtres maudits, mêlés aux vils limons,
Pris par la plante fauve et la bête féroce,
Le grincement de dents, la peur, le rire atroce,
L’orgueil, que l’infini courbe sous son niveau,
Rampent, noirs prisonniers, dans la nuit, noir caveau.
La porte, affreuse et faite avec de l’ombre, est lourde;
Par moments, on entend, dans la profondeur sourde,
Les efforts que les monts, les flots, les ouragans,
Les volcans, les forêts, les animaux brigands,
Et tous les monstres font pour soulever le pêne;
Et sur cet amas d’ombre, et de crime, et de peine,
Ce grand ciel formidable est le scellé de Dieu.

Voilà pourquoi, songeur dont la mort est le voeu,
Tant d’angoisse est empreinte au front des cénobites!

Je viens de te montrer le gouffre. Tu l’habites.
•
Les mondes, dans la nuit que vous nommez l’azur,
Par les brèches que fait la mort blême à leur mur,
Se jettent en fuyant l’un à l’autre des âmes.

Dans votre globe où sont tant de geôles infâmes,
Vous avez des méchants de tous les univers,
Condamnés qui, venus des cieux les plus divers,
Rêvent dans vos rochers, ou dans vos arbres ploient;
Tellement stupéfaits de ce monde qu’ils voient,
Qu’eussent-ils la parole, ils ne pourraient parler.
On en sent quelques-uns frissonner et trembler.
De là les songes vains du bronze et de l’augure.

Donc, représente-toi cette sombre figure:
Ce gouffre, c’est l’égout du mal universel.
Ici vient aboutir de tous les points du ciel
La chute des punis, ténébreuse traînée.
Dans cette profondeur, morne, âpre, infortunée,
De chaque globe il tombe un flot vertigineux
D’âmes, d’esprits malsains et d’êtres vénéneux,
Flot que l’éternité voit sans fin se répandre.
Chaque étoile au front d’or qui brille, laisse pendre
Sa chevelure d’ombre en ce puits effrayant.
Ame immortelle, vois, et frémis en voyant:
Voilà le précipice exécrable où tu sombres.

·

Oh! qui que vous soyez, qui passez dans ces ombres,
Versez votre pitié sur ces douleurs sans fond!
Dans ce gouffre, où l’abîme en l’abîme se fond,
Se tordent les forfaits, transformés en supplices,
L’effroi, le deuil, le mal, les ténèbres complices,
Les pleurs sous la toison, le soupir expiré
Dans la fleur, et le cri dans la pierre muré!
Oh! qui que vous soyez, pleurez sur ces misères!
Pour Dieu seul, qui sait tout, elles sont nécessaires;
Mais vous pouvez pleurer sur l’énorme cachot
Sans déranger le sombre équilibre d’en haut!
Hélas! hélas! hélas! tout est vivant! tout pense!
La mémoire est la peine, étant la récompense.
Oh! comme ici l’on souffre et comme on se souvient!
Torture de l’esprit que la matière tient!
La brute et le granit, quel chevalet pour l’âme!
Ce mulet fut sultan, ce cloporte était femme.
L’arbre est un exilé, la roche est un proscrit.
Est-ce que, quelque part, par hasard, quelqu’un rit
Quand ces réalités sont là, remplissant l’ombre?
La ruine, la mort, l’ossement, le décombre,
Sont vivants. Un remords songe dans un débris.
Pour l’oeil profond qui voit, les antres sont des cris.

Hélas! le cygne est noir, le lys songe à ses crimes;
La perle est nuit; la neige est la fange des cimes;
Le même gouffre, horrible et fauve, et sans abri,
S’ouvre dans la chouette et dans le colibri;
La mouche, âme, s’envole et se brûle à la flamme;
Et la flamme, esprit, brûle avec angoisse une âme;
L’horreur fait frissonner les plumes de l’oiseau;
Tout est douleur.
Les fleurs souffrent sous le ciseau
Et se ferment ainsi que des paupières closes:
Toutes les femmes sont teintes du sang des roses;
La vierge au bal, qui danse, ange aux fraîches couleurs,
Et qui porte en sa main une touffe de fleurs,
Respire en souriant un bouquet d’agonies.
Pleurez sur les laideurs et les ignominies,
Pleurez sur l’araignée immonde, sur le ver,
Sur la limace au dos mouillé comme l’hiver,
Sur le vil puceron qu’on voit aux feuilles pendre,
Sur le crabe hideux, sur l’affreux scolopendre,
Sur l’effrayant crapaud, pauvre monstre aux doux yeux,
Qui regarde toujours le ciel mystérieux!
Plaignez l’oiseau de crime et la bête de proie.
Ce que Domitien, César, fit avec joie,
Tigre, il le continue avec horreur. Verrès,
Qui fut loup sous la pourpre, est loup dans les forêts;
Il descend, réveillé, l’autre côté du rêve:
Son rire, au fond des bois, en hurlement s’achève;
Pleurez sur ce qui hurle et pleurez sur Verrès.
Sur ces tombeaux vivants, marqués d’obscurs arrêts,
Penchez-vous attendri! versez votre prière!
La pitié fait sortir des rayons de la pierre.
Plaignez le louveteau, plaignez le lionceau.
La matière, affreux bloc, n’est que le lourd monceau
Des effets monstrueux, sortis des sombres causes.
Ayez pitié! voyez des âmes dans les choses.
Hélas! le cabanon subit aussi l’écrou;
Plaignez le prisonnier, mais plaignez le verrou;

Plaignez la chaîne au fond des bagnes insalubres;
La hache et le billot sont deux êtres lugubres;
La hache souffre autant que le corps, le billot
Souffre autant que la tête; ô mystères d’en haut!
Ils se livrent une âpre et hideuse bataille;
Il ébrèche la hache et la hache l’entaille;
Ils se disent tout bas l’un à l’autre: Assassin!
Et la hache maudit les hommes, sombre essaim,
Quand, le soir, sur le dos du bourreau, son ministre,
Elle revient dans l’ombre, et luit, miroir sinistre,
Ruisselante de sang et reflétant les cieux;
Et, la nuit, dans l’état morne et silencieux,
Le cadavre au cou rouge, effrayant, glacé, blême,
Seul, sait ce que lui dit le billot, tronc lui-même.
Oh! que la terre est froide et que les rocs sont durs!
Quelle muette horreur dans les halliers obscurs!
Les pleurs noirs de la nuit sur la colombe blanche
Tombent; le vent met nue et torture la branche;
Quel monologue affreux dans l’arbre aux rameaux verts!
Quel frisson dans l’herbe! Oh! quels yeux fixes ouverts
Dans les cailloux profonds, oubliettes des âmes!
C’est une âme que l’eau scie en ses froides lames;
C’est une âme que fait ruisseler le pressoir.
Ténèbres! l’univers est hagard. Chaque soir,
Le noir horizon monte et la nuit noire tombe;
Tous deux, à l’occident, d’un mouvement de tombe;
Ils vont se rapprochant, et, dans le firmament,
O terreur! sur le jour, écrasé lentement,
La tenaille de l’ombre effroyable se ferme.
Oh! les berceaux font peur. Un bagne est dans un germe.
Ayez pitié, vous tous et qui que vous soyez!
Les hideux châtiments, l’un sur l’autre broyés,
Roulent, submergeant tout, excepté les mémoires.

Parfois on voit passer dans ces profondeurs noires
Comme un rayon lointain de l’éternel amour;
Alors, l’hyène Atrée et le chacal Timour,

Et l’épine Caïphe et le roseau Pilate,
Le volcan Alaric à la gueule écarlate,
L’ours Henri Huit, pour qui Morus en vain pria,
Le sanglier Selim et le porc Borgia,
Poussent des cris vers l’Être adorable; et les bêtes
Qui portèrent jadis des mitres sur leurs têtes,
Les grains de sable rois, les brins d’herbe empereurs,
Tous les hideux orgueils et toutes les fureurs,
Se brisent; la douceur saisit le plus farouche;
Le chat lèche l’oiseau, l’oiseau baise la mouche;
Le vautour dit dans l’ombre au passereau: Pardon!
Une caresse sort du houx et du chardon;
Tous les rugissements se fondent en prières;
On entend s’accuser de leurs forfaits les pierres;
Tous ces sombres cachots qu’on appelle les fleurs
Tressaillent; le rocher se met à fondre en pleurs.
Des bras se lèvent hors de la tombe dormante;
Le vent gémit, la nuit se plaint, l’eau se lamente,
Et sous l’oeil attendri qui regarde d’en haut,
Tout l’abîme n’est plus qu’un immense sanglot.
•
Espérez! espérez! espérez, misérables!
Pas de deuil infini, pas de maux incurables,
Pas d’enfer éternel!
Les douleurs vont à Dieu, comme la flèche aux cibles;
Les bonnes actions sont les gonds invisibles
De la porte du ciel.

Le deuil est la vertu, le remords est le pôle
Des monstres garrottés dont le gouffre est la geôle;
Quand, devant Jéhovah,
Un vivant reste pur dans les ombres charnelles,
La mort, ange attendri, rapporte ses deux ailes
A l’homme qui s’en va

Les enfers se refont édens; c’est là leur tâche.
Tout globe est un oiseau que le mal tient et lâche.

Vivants, je vous le dis,
Les vertus, parmi vous, font ce labeur auguste
D’augmenter sur vos fronts le ciel; quiconque est juste
Travaille au paradis.

L’heure approche. Espérez. Rallumez l’âme éteinte!
Aimez-vous! aimez-vous, car c’est la chaleur sainte,
C’est le feu du vrai jour.
Le sombre univers, froid, glacé, pesant, réclame
La sublimation de l’être par la flamme,
De l’homme par l’amour!

Déjà, dans l’océan d’ombre que Dieu domine,
L’archipel ténébreux des bagnes s’illumine;
Dieu, c’est le grand aimant;
Et les globes, ouvrant leur sinistre prunelle,
Vers les immensités de l’aurore éternelle
Se tournent lentement!

Oh! comme vont chanter toutes les harmonies,
Comme rayonneront dans les sphères bénies
Les faces de clarté,
Comme les firmaments se fondront en délires,
Comme tressailleront toutes les grandes lyres
De la sérénité,

Quand, du monstre matière ouvrant toutes les serres,
Faisant évanouir en splendeurs les misères,
Changeant l’absinthe en miel,
Inondant de beauté la nuit diminuée,
Ainsi que le soleil tire à lui la nuée
Et l’emplit d’arcs-en-ciel,

Dieu, de son regard fixe attirant les ténèbres,
Voyant vers lui, du fond des cloaques funèbres
Où le mal le pria,
Monter l’énormité, bégayant des louanges,

Fera rentrer, parmi les univers archanges,
L’univers paria!

On verra palpiter les fanges éclairées;
Et briller les laideurs les plus désespérées
Au faîte le plus haut,
L’araignée éclatante au seuil des bleus pilastres,
Luire, et se redresser, portant des épis d’astres,
La paille du cachot!

La clarté montera dans tout comme une sève;
On verra rayonner au front du boeuf qui rêve
Le céleste croissant;
Le charnier chantera dans l’horreur qui l’encombre,
Et sur tous les fumiers apparaîtra dans l’ombre
Un Job resplendissant!

O disparition de l’antique anathème!
La profondeur disant à la hauteur: Je t’aime!
O retour du banni!
Quel éblouissement au fond des cieux sublimes!
Quel surcroît de clarté que l’ombre des abîmes
S’écriant: Sois béni!

On verra le troupeau des hydres formidables
Sortir, monter du fond des brumes insondables
Et se transfigurer;
Des étoiles éclore aux trous noirs de leurs crânes,
Dieu juste! et, par degrés devenant diaphanes,
Les monstres s’azurer!

Ils viendront, sans pouvoir ni parler ni répondre,
Éperdus! on verra des auréoles fondre
Les cornes de leur front;
Ils tiendront dans leur griffe, au milieu des cieux calmes,
Des rayons frissonnants semblables à des palmes;
Les gueules baiseront!

Ils viendront! ils viendront, tremblants, brisés d’extase,
Chacun d’eux débordant de sanglots comme un vase
Mais pourtant sans effroi;
On leur tendra les bras de la haute demeure,
Et Jésus, se penchant sur Bélial qui pleure,
Lui dira: C’est donc toi!

Et vers Dieu par la main il conduira ce frère!
Et, quand ils seront près des degrés de lumière
Par nous seuls aperçus,
Tous deux seront si beaux, que Dieu dont l’oeil flamboie
Ne pourra distinguer, père ébloui de joie,
Bélial de Jésus!

Tout sera dit. Le mal expirera, les larmes
Tariront; plus de fers, plus de deuils, plus d’alarmes;
L’affreux gouffre inclément
Cessera d’être sourd, et bégaiera: Qu’entends-je?
Les douleurs finiront dans toute l’ombre: un ange
Criera: Commencement!

Jersey, 1855.

FIN

A CELLE QUI EST RESTÉE EN FRANCE

Mets-toi sur ton séant, lève tes yeux, dérange
Ce drap glacé qui fait des plis sur ton front d’ange,
Ouvre tes mains, et prends ce livre: il est à toi.

Ce livre où vit mon âme, espoir, deuil, rêve, effroi
Ce livre qui contient le spectre de ma vie,
Mes angoisses, mon aube, hélas! de pleurs suivie
L’ombre et son ouragan, la rose et son pistil,

Ce livre azuré, triste, orageux, d’où sort-il?
D’où sort le blême éclair qui déchire la brume?
Depuis quatre ans, j’habite un tourbillon d’écume;
Ce livre en a jailli. Dieu dictait, j’écrivais;
Car je suis paille au vent: Va! dit l’esprit. Je vais.
Et, quand j’eus terminé ces pages, quand ce livre
Se mit à palpiter, à respirer, à vivre,
Une église des champs que le lierre verdit,
Dont la tour sonne l’heure à mon néant, m’a dit:
Ton cantique est fini; donne-le-moi, poëte.
Je le réclame, a dit la forêt inquiète;
Et le doux pré fleuri m’a dit: Donne-le-moi.
La mer, en le voyant frémir, m’a dit: Pourquoi
Ne pas me le jeter, puisque c’est une voile!
C’est à moi qu’appartient cet hymne, a dit l’étoile.
Donne-le-nous, songeur, ont crié les grands vents.
Et les oiseaux m’ont dit: Vas-tu pas aux vivants
Offrir ce livre, éclos si loin de leurs querelles?
Laisse-nous l’emporter dans nos nids sur nos ailes!
Mais le vent n’aura point mon livre, ô cieux profonds!
Ni la sauvage mer, livrée aux noirs typhons,
Ouvrant et refermant ses flots, âpres embûches;
Ni la verte forêt qu’emplit un bruit de ruches,
Ni l’église où le temps fait tourner son compas;
Le pré ne l’aura pas, l’astre ne l’aura pas,
L’oiseau ne l’aura pas, qu’il soit aigle ou colombe,
Les nids ne l’auront pas; je le donne à la tombe.

II

Autrefois, quand septembre en larmes revenait,
Je partais, je quittais tout ce qui me connaît,
Je m’évadais; Paris s’effaçait; rien, personne!
J’allais, je n’étais plus qu’une ombre qui frissonne,
Je fuyais, seul, sans voir, sans penser, sans parler,
Sachant bien que j’irais où je devais aller;
Hélas! je n’aurais pu même dire: Je souffre!

Et, comme subissant l’attraction d’un gouffre,
Que le chemin fût beau, pluvieux, froid, mauvais,
J’ignorais, je marchais devant moi, j’arrivais.
O souvenirs! ô forme horrible des collines!
Et, pendant que la mère et la soeur, orphelines,
Pleuraient dans la maison, je cherchais le lieu noir
Avec l’avidité morne du désespoir;
Puis j’allais au champ triste à côté de l’église;
Tète nue, à pas lents, les cheveux dans la bise,
L’oeil aux cieux, j’approchais; l’accablement soutient
Les arbres murmuraient: C’est le père qui vient!
Les ronces écartaient leurs branches desséchées;
Je marchais à travers les humbles croix penchées,
Disant je ne sais quels doux et funèbres mots;
Et je m’agenouillais au milieu des rameaux
Sur la pierre qu’on voit blanche dans la verdure.
Pourquoi donc dormais-tu d’une façon si dure,
Que tu n’entendais pas lorsque je t’appelais?

Et les pêcheurs passaient en traînant leurs filets,
Et disaient: Qu’est-ce donc que cet homme qui songe?
Et le jour, et le soir, et l’ombre qui s’allonge,
Et Vénus, qui pour moi jadis étincela,
Tout avait disparu que j’étais encor là.
J’étais là, suppliant celui qui nous exauce;
J’adorais, je laissais tomber sur cette fosse,
Hélas! où j’avais vu s’évanouir mes cieux,
Tout mon coeur goutte à goutte en pleurs silencieux;
J’effeuillais de la sauge et de la clématite;
Je me la rappelais quand elle était petite,
Quand elle m’apportait des lys et des jasmins,
Ou quand elle prenait ma plume dans ses mains,
Gaie, et riant d’avoir de l’encre à ses doigts roses;
Je respirais les fleurs sur cette cendre écloses,
Je fixais mon regard sur ces froids gazons verts,
Et par moments, ô Dieu, je voyais, à travers
La pierre du tombeau, comme une lueur d’âme!

Oui, jadis, quand cette heure en deuil qui me réclame
Tintait dans le ciel triste et dans mon coeur saignant,
Rien ne me retenait, et j'allais; maintenant,
Hélas!... — O fleuve! ô bois! vallons dont je fus l'hôte,
Elle sait, n'est-ce pas? que ce n'est pas ma faute
Si, depuis ces quatre ans, pauvre coeur sans flambeau,
Je ne suis pas allé prier sur son tombeau!

III

Ainsi, ce noir chemin que je faisais, ce marbre
Que je contemplais, pâle, adossé contre un arbre,
Ce tombeau sur lequel mes pieds pouvaient marcher,
La nuit, que je voyais lentement approcher,
Ces ifs, ce crépuscule avec ce cimetière,
Ces sanglots, qui du moins tombaient sur cette pierre,
O mon Dieu, tout cela, c'était donc du bonheur!

Dis, qu'as-tu fait pendant tout ce temps-là? — Seigneur,
Qu'a-t-elle fait? — Vois-tu la vie en vos demeures?
A quelle horloge d'ombre as-tu compté les heures?
As-tu sans bruit parfois poussé l'autre endormi?
Et t'es-tu, m'attendant, réveillée à demi?
T'es-tu, pâle, accoudée à l'obscure fenêtre
De l'infini, cherchant dans l'ombre à reconnaître
Un passant, à travers le noir cercueil mal joint,
Attentive, écoutant si tu n'entendais point
Quelqu'un marcher vers toi dans l'éternité sombre?
Et t'es-tu recouchée ainsi qu'un mât qui sombre,
En disant: Qu'est-ce donc? mon père ne vient pas!
Avez-vous tous les deux parlé de moi tout bas?

Que de fois j'ai choisi, tout mouillés de rosée,
Des lys dans mon jardin, des lys dans ma pensée!
Que de fois j'ai cueilli de l'aubépine en fleur!
Que de fois j'ai, là-bas, cherché la tour d'Harfleur,

Murmurant: C’est demain que je pars! et, stupide,
Je calculais le vent et la voile rapide,
Puis ma main s’ouvrait triste, et je disais: Tout fuit!
Et le bouquet tombait, sinistre, dans la nuit!
Oh! que de fois, sentant qu’elle devait m’attendre,
J’ai pris ce que j’avais dans le coeur de plus tendre
Pour en charger quelqu’un qui passerait par là!

Lazare ouvrit les yeux quand Jésus l’appela;
Quand je lui parle, hélas! pourquoi les ferme-t-elle?
Où serait donc le mal quand de l’ombre mortelle
L’amour violerait deux fois le noir secret,
Et quand, ce qu’un dieu fit, un père le ferait?

IV

Que ce livre, du moins, obscur message, arrive,
Murmure, à ce silence, et, flot, à cette rive!
Qu’il y tombe, sanglot, soupir, larme d’amour!
Qu’il entre en ce sépulcre où sont entrés un jour
Le baiser, la jeunesse, et l’aube, et la rosée,
Et le rire adoré de la fraîche épousée,
Et la joie, et mon coeur, qui n’est pas ressorti!
Qu’il soit le cri d’espoir qui n’a jamais menti,
Le chant du deuil, la voix du pâle adieu qui pleure,
Le rêve dont on sent l’aile qui nous effleure!
Qu’elle dise: Quelqu’un est là; j’entends du bruit!
Qu’il soit comme le pas de mon âme en sa nuit!

Ce livre, légion tournoyante et sans nombre
D’oiseaux blancs dans l’aurore et d’oiseaux noirs dans l’ombre,
Ce vol de souvenirs fuyant à l’horizon,
Cet essaim que je lâche au seuil de ma prison,
Je vous le confie, air, souffles, nuée, espace!
Que ce fauve océan qui me parle à voix basse,
Lui soit clément, l’épargne et le laisse passer!
Et que le vent ait soin de n’en rien disperser,

Et jusqu’au froid caveau fidèlement apporte
Ce don mystérieux de l’absent à la morte!

O Dieu! puisqu’en effet, dans ces sombres feuillets,
Dans ces strophes qu’au fond de vos cieux je cueillais,
Dans ces chants murmurés comme un épithalame
Pendant que vous tourniez les pages de mon âme,
Puisque j’ai, dans ce livre, enregistré mes jours,
Mes maux, mes deuils, mes cris dans les problèmes sourds,
Mes amours, mes travaux, ma vie heure par heure;
Puisque vous ne voulez pas encor que je meure,
Et qu’il faut bien pourtant que j’aille lui parler;
Puisque je sens le vent de l’infini souffler
Sur ce livre qu’emplit l’orage et le mystère;
Puisque j’ai versé là toutes vos ombres, terres,
Humanité, douleur, dont je suis le passant;
Puisque de mon esprit, de mon coeur, de mon sang,
J’ai fait l’âcre parfum de ces versets funèbres,
Va-t’en, livre, à l’azur, à travers les ténèbres!
Fuis vers la brume où tout à pas lents est conduit!
Oui, qu’il vole à la fosse, à la tombe, à la nuit,
Comme une feuille d’arbre ou comme une âme d’homme!
Qu’il roule au gouffre où va tout ce que la voix nomme!
Qu’il tombe au plus profond du sépulcre hagard,
A côté d’elle, ô mort! et que, là, le regard,
Près de l’ange qui dort, lumineux et sublime,
Le voie épanoui, sombre fleur de l’abîme!

V

O doux commencements d’azur qui me trompiez!
O bonheurs! je vous ai durement expiés;
J’ai le droit aujourd’hui d’être, quand la nuit tombe,
Un de ceux qui se font écouter de la tombe,
Et qui font, en parlant aux morts blêmes et seuls,
Remuer lentement les plis noirs des linceuls,
Et dont la parole, âpre ou tendre, émeut les pierres,

Les grains dans les sillons, les ombres dans les bières,
La vague et la nuée, et devient une voix
De la nature, ainsi que la rumeur des bois.
Car voilà, n’est-ce pas, tombeaux? bien des années,
Que je marche au milieu des croix infortunées,
Échevelé parmi les ifs et les cyprès,
L’âme au bord de la nuit, et m’approchant tout près;
Et que je vais, courbé sur le cercueil austère,
Questionnant le plomb, les clous, le ver de terre
Qui pour moi sort des yeux de la tête de mort,
Le squelette qui rit, le squelette qui mord,
Les mains aux doigts noueux, les crânes, les poussières,
Et les os des genoux qui savent des prières!

Hélas! j’ai fouillé tout. J’ai voulu voir le fond,
Pourquoi le mal en nous avec le bien se fond,
J’ai voulu le savoir. J’ai dit: Que faut-il croire?
J’ai creusé la lumière, et l’aurore, et la gloire,
L’enfant joyeux, la vierge et sa chaste frayeur,
Et l’amour, et la vie, et l’âme, — fossoyeur.

Qu’ai-je appris? J’ai, pensif, tout saisi sans rien prendre;
J’ai vu beaucoup de nuit et fait beaucoup de cendre.
Qui sommes nous? que veut dire ce mot: Toujours?
J’ai tout enseveli, songes, espoirs, amours,
Dans la fosse que j’ai creusée en ma poitrine.
Qui donc a la science? où donc est la doctrine?
Oh! que ne suis-je encor le rêveur d’autrefois,
Qui s’égarait dans l’herbe, et les prés, et les bois,
Qui marchait souriant, le soir, quand le ciel brille,
Tenant la main petite et blanche de sa fille,
Et qui, joyeux, laissant luire le firmament,
Laissant l’enfant parler, se sentait lentement
Emplir de cet azur et de cette innocence!

Entre Dieu qui flamboie et l’ange qui l’encense,
J’ai vécu, j’ai lutté, sans crainte, sans remord.

Puis ma porte soudain s’ouvrit devant la mort,
Cette visite brusque et terrible de l’ombre.
Tu passes en laissant le vide et le décombre,
O spectre! tu saisis mon ange et tu frappas.
Un tombeau fut dès lors le but de tous mes pas.

VI

Je ne puis plus reprendre aujourd’hui dans la plaine
Mon sentier d’autrefois qui descend vers la Seine;
Je ne puis plus aller où j’allais; je ne puis,
Pareil à la laveuse assise au bord du puits,
Que m’accouder au mur de l’éternel abîme;
Paris m’est éclipsé par l’énorme Solime;
La haute Notre-Dame à présent, qui me luit,
C’est l’ombre ayant deux tours, le silence et la nuit,
Et laissant des clartés trouer ses fatals voiles;
Et je vois sur mon front un panthéon d’étoiles;
Si j’appelle Rouen, Villequier, Caudebec,
Toute l’ombre me crie: Horeb, Cédron, Balbeck!
Et, si je pars, m’arrête à la première lieue,
Et me dit: Tourne-toi vers l’immensité bleue!
Et me dit: Les chemins où tu marchais sont clos.
Penche-toi sur les nuits, sur les vents, sur les flots!
A quoi penses-tu donc? que fais-tu, solitaire?
Crois-tu donc sous tes pieds avoir encor la terre?
Où vas-tu de la sorte et machinalement?
O songeur! penche-toi sur l’être et l’élément!
Écoute la rumeur des âmes dans les ondes!
Contemple, s’il te faut de la cendre, les mondes;
Cherche au moins la poussière immense, si tu veux
Mêler de la poussière à tes sombres cheveux,
Et regarde, en dehors de ton propre martyre,
Le grand néant, si c’est le néant qui t’attire!
Sois tout à ces soleils où tu remonteras!
Laisse là ton vil coin de terre. Tends les bras,
O proscrit de l’azur, vers les astres patries!

Revois-y refleurir tes aurores flétries;
Deviens le grand oeil fixe ouvert sur le grand tout.
Penche-toi sur l’énigme où l’être se dissout,
Sur tout ce qui naît, vit, marche, s’éteint, succombe,
Sur tout le genre humain et sur toute la tombe!

Mais mon coeur toujours saigne et du même côté.
C’est en vain que les cieux, les nuits, l’éternité,
Veulent distraire une âme et calmer un atome.
Tout l’éblouissement des lumières du dôme
M’ôte-t-il une larme? Ah! l’étendue a beau
Me parler, me montrer l’universel tombeau,
Les soirs sereins, les bois rêveurs, la lune amie;
J’écoute, et je reviens à la douce endormie.

VII

Des fleurs! oh! si j’avais des fleurs! si je pouvais
Aller semer des lys sur ces deux froids chevets!
Si je pouvais couvrir de fleurs mon ange pâle!
Les fleurs sont l’or, l’azur, l’émeraude, l’opale!
Le cercueil au milieu des fleurs veut se coucher;
Les fleurs aiment la mort, et Dieu les fait toucher
Par leur racine aux os, par leur parfum aux âmes!
Puisque je ne le puis, aux lieux que nous aimâmes,
Puisque Dieu ne veut pas nous laisser revenir,
Puisqu’il nous fait lâcher ce qu’on croyait tenir,
Puisque le froid destin, dans ma geôle profonde,
Sur la première porte en scelle une seconde,
Et, sur le père triste et sur l’enfant qui dort,
Ferme l’exil après avoir fermé la mort,
Puisqu’il est impossible à présent que je jette
Même un brin de bruyère à sa fosse muette,
C’est bien le moins qu’elle ait mon âme, n’est-ce pas?
O vent noir dont j’entends sur mon plafond le pas!
Tempête, hiver, qui bats ma vitre de ta grêle!
Mers, nuits! et je l’ai mise en ce livre pour elle!

Prends ce livre; et dis-toi: Ceci vient du vivant
Que nous avons laissé derrière nous, rêvant.
Prends. Et quoique de loin, reconnais ma voix, âme!
Oh! ta cendre est le lit de mon reste de flamme;
Ta tombe est mon espoir, ma charité, ma foi;
Ton linceul toujours flotte entre la vie et moi.
Prends ce livre, et fais-en sortir un divin psaume!
Qu'entre tes vagues mains il devienne fantôme!
Qu'il blanchisse, pareil à l'aube qui pâlit,
A mesure que l'oeil de mon ange le lit,
Et qu'il s'évanouisse, et flotte, et disparaisse,
Ainsi qu'un âtre obscur qu'un souffle errant caresse,
Ainsi qu'une lueur qu'on voit passer le soir,
Ainsi qu'un tourbillon de feu de l'encensoir,
Et que, sous ton regard éblouissant et sombre,
Chaque page s'en aille en étoiles dans l'ombre!

VIII

Oh! quoi que nous fassions et quoi que nous disions,
Soit que notre âme plane au vent des visions,
Soit qu'elle se cramponne à l'argile natale,
Toujours nous arrivons à ta grotte fatale,
Gethsémani, qu'éclaire une vague lueur!
O rocher de l'étrange et funèbre sueur!
Cave où l'esprit combat le destin! ouverture
Sur les profonds effrois de la sombre nature!
Antre d'où le lion sort rêveur, en voyant
Quelqu'un de plus sinistre et de plus effrayant,
La douleur, entrer, pâle, amère, échevelée!
O chute! asile! ô seuil de la trouble vallée
D'où nous apercevons nos ans fuyants et courts,
Nos propres pas marqués dans la fange des jours,
L'échelle où le mal pèse et monte, spectre louche,
L'âpre frémissement de la palme farouche,
Les degrés noirs tirant en bas les blancs degrés,

Et les frissons aux fronts des anges effarés!

Toujours nous arrivons à cette solitude,
Et, là, nous nous taisons, sentant la plénitude!

Paix à l’Ombre! Dormez! dormez! dormez! dormez!
Êtres, groupes confus lentement transformés!
Dormez, les champs! dormez, les fleurs! dormez les tombes!
Toits, murs, seuils des maisons, pierres des catacombes,
Feuilles au fond des bois, plumes au fond des nids,
Dormez! dormez, brins d’herbe, et dormez, infinis!
Calmez-vous, forêt, chêne, érable, frêne, yeuse!
Silence sur la grande horreur religieuse,
Sur l’Océan qui lutte et qui ronge son mors,
Et sur l’apaisement insondable des morts!
Paix à l’obscurité muette et redoutée!
Paix au doute effrayant, à l’immense ombre athée,
A toi, nature, cercle et centre, âme et milieu,
Fourmillement de tout, solitude de Dieu!
O générations aux brumeuses haleines,
Reposez-vous! pas noirs qui marchez dans les plaines!
Dormez, vous qui saignez; dormez, vous qui pleurez!
Douleurs, douleurs, douleurs, fermez vos yeux sacrés!
Tout est religion et rien n’est imposture.
Que sur toute existence et toute créature,
Vivant du souffle humain ou du souffle animal,
Debout au seuil du bien, croulante au bord du mal,
Tendre ou farouche, immonde ou splendide, humble ou grande,
La vaste paix des cieux de toutes parts descende!
Que les enfers dormants rêvent les paradis!
Assoupissez-vous, flots, mers, vents, âmes, tandis
Qu’assis sur la montagne en présence de l’Être,
Précipice où l’on voit pêle-mêle apparaître
Les créations, l’astre et l’homme, les essieux
De ces chars de soleils que nous nommons les cieux,
Les globes, fruits vermeils des divines ramées,
Les comètes d’argent dans un champ noir semées,

Larmes blanches du drap mortuaire des nuits,
Les chaos, les hivers, ces lugubres ennuis,
Pâle, ivre d’ignorance, ébloui de ténèbres,
Voyant dans l’infini s’écrire des algèbres,
Le contemplateur, triste et meurtri, mais serein,
Mesure le problème aux murailles d’airain,
Cherche à distinguer l’aube à travers les prodiges,
Se penche, frémissant, au puits des grands vertiges,
Suit de l’oeil des blancheurs qui passent, alcyons,
Et regarde, pensif, s’étoiler de rayons,
De clartés, de lueurs, vaguement enflammées,
Le gouffre monstrueux plein d’énormes fumées.

Guernesey, 2 novembre 1855, jour des morts.

LA LÉGENDE DES SIÈCLES: PREMIERE SERIE

This collection of poems was conceived as a grand epic, intended to portray the history and evolution of humanity. Written between 1855 and 1876, during Hugo's exile in Guernsey, the poems were published in three series: in 1859, in 1877, and in 1883. Due to a monumental poetic achievement unparalleled in French poetry, these works are now considered by many to be the only 'true' French epic.

Hugo at Jersey, 1852

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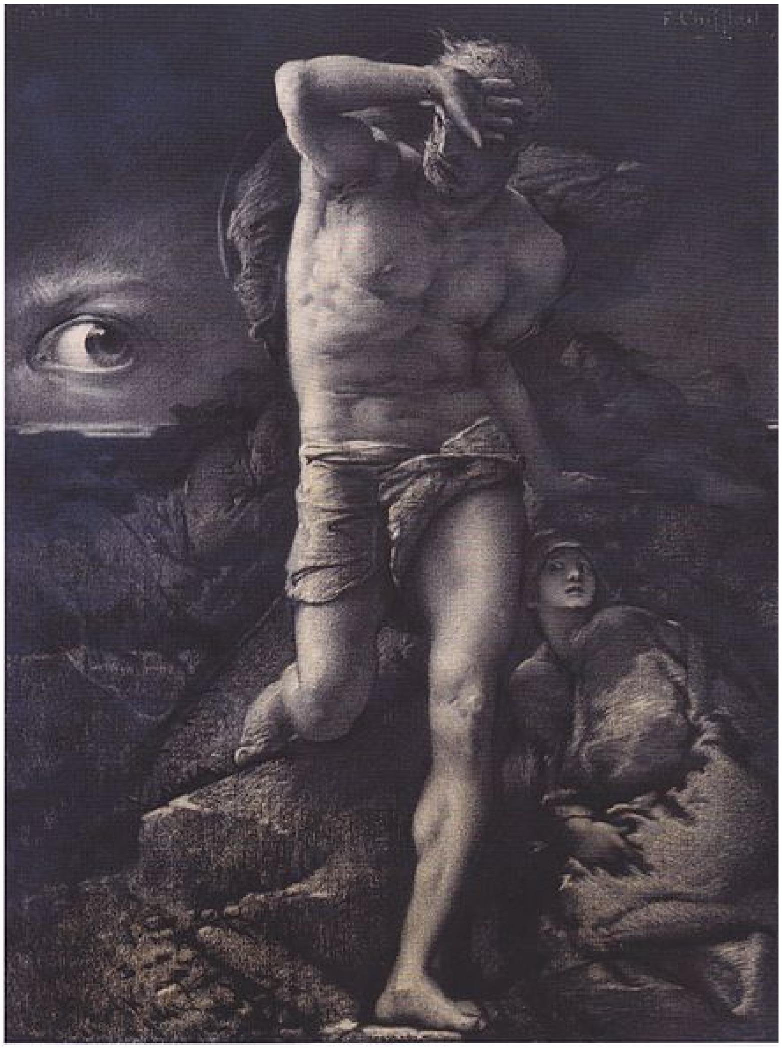

La Conscience, illustration de François Chifflart

PREMIER SERIES

DEDICACE

À
LA FRANCE
Livre, qu’un vent t’emporte
En France où je suis né!
L’arbre déraciné
Donne sa feuille morte.

V. H.

PREFACE

Les personnes qui voudront bien jeter un coup d’œil sur ce livre ne s’en feraient pas une idée précise, si elles y voyaient autre chose qu’un commencement.

Ce livre est-il donc un fragment? Non. Il existe à part. Il a, comme on le verra, son exposition, son milieu et sa fin.

Mais, en même temps, il est, pour ainsi dire, la première page d’un autre livre.

Un commencement peut-il être un tout? Sans doute. Un péristyle est un édifice.

L’arbre, commencement de la forêt, est un tout. Il appartient à la vie isolée, par la racine, et à la vie en commun, par la sève. À lui seul, il ne prouve que l’arbre, mais il annonce la forêt.

Ce livre, s’il n’y avait pas quelque affectation dans des comparaisons de cette nature, aurait, lui aussi, ce double caractère. Il existe solitairement et forme un tout; il existe solidairement et fait partie d’un ensemble.

Cet ensemble, que sera-t-il?

Exprimer l’humanité dans une espèce d’œuvre cyclique; la peindre successivement et simultanément sous tous ses aspects, histoire, fable, philosophie, religion, science, lesquels se résument en un seul et immense mouvement d’ascension vers la lumière; faire apparaître, dans une sorte de miroir sombre et clair — que l’interruption naturelle des travaux terrestres brisera probablement avant qu’il ait la dimension rêvée par l’auteur — cette grande figure une et multiple, lugubre et rayonnante, fatale et sacrée, l’Homme; voilà de quelle pensée, de quelle ambition, si l’on veut, est sortie la Légende des Siècles.

Les deux volumes qu’on va lire n’en contiennent que la première partie, la première série, comme dit le titre.

Les poëmes qui composent ces deux volumes ne sont donc autre chose que des empreintes successives du profil humain, de date en date, depuis Ève, mère des hommes, jusqu’à la Révolution, mère des peuples; empreintes prises, tantôt sur la barbarie, tantôt sur la civilisation, presque toujours sur le vif de l’histoire; empreintes moulées sur le masque des siècles.

Quand d’autres volumes se seront joints à ceux-ci, de façon à rendre l’œuvre un peu moins incomplète, cette série d’empreintes, vaguement disposées dans un certain ordre chronologique, pourra former une sorte de galerie de la médaille humaine.

Pour le poëte comme pour l’historien, pour l’archéologue comme pour le philosophe, chaque siècle est un changement de physionomie de l’humanité. On trouvera dans ces deux volumes, qui, nous le répétons, seront continués et complétés, le reflet de quelques-uns de ces changements de physionomie.

On y trouvera quelque chose du passé, quelque chose du présent (XIII. Maintenant), et comme un vague mirage de l’avenir. Du reste, ces poëmes, divers par le sujet, mais inspirés par la même pensée, n’ont entre eux d’autre nœud qu’un fil, ce fil qui s’atténue quelquefois au point de devenir invisible, mais qui ne casse jamais, le grand fil mystérieux du labyrinthe humain, le Progrès.

Comme dans une mosaïque, chaque pierre a sa couleur et sa forme propre; l’ensemble donne une figure. La figure de ce livre, on l’a dit plus haut, c’est l’homme.

Ces deux volumes d’ailleurs, qu’on veuille bien ne pas l’oublier, sont à l’ouvrage dont ils font partie, et qui sera mis au jour plus tard, ce que serait à une symphonie l’ouverture. Ils n’en peuvent donner l’idée exacte et complète, mais ils contiennent une lueur de l’œuvre entière.

Le poëme que l’auteur a dans l’esprit, n’est ici qu’entr’ouvert.

Quant à ces deux volumes pris en eux-mêmes, l’auteur n’a qu’un mot à en dire: le genre humain, considéré comme un grand individu collectif accomplissant d’époque en époque une série d’actes sur la terre, a deux aspects: l’aspect historique et l’aspect légendaire. Le second n’est pas moins vrai que le premier; le premier n’est pas moins conjectural que le second.

Qu’on ne conclue pas de cette dernière ligne — disons-le en passant — qu’il puisse entrer dans la pensée de l’auteur d’amoindrir la haute valeur de l’enseignement historique. Pas une gloire, parmi les splendeurs du génie humain, ne dépasse celle du grand historien philosophe. L’auteur, seulement, sans diminuer la portée de l’histoire, veut constater la portée de la légende. Hérodote fait l’histoire, Homère fait la légende.

C’est l’aspect légendaire qui prévaut dans ces deux volumes et qui en colore les poëmes. Ces poëmes se passent l’un à l’autre le flambeau de la tradition humaine. Quasi cursores. C'est ce flambeau, dont la flamme est le vrai, qui fait l'unité de ce livre. Tous ces poëmes, ceux du moins qui résument le passé, sont de la réalité historique condensée ou de la réalité historique devinée. La fiction parfois, la falsification jamais; aucun grossissement de lignes; fidélité absolue à la couleur des temps et à l'esprit des civilisations diverses. Pour citer des exemples, la décadence romaine (tome 1er page 49) n'a pas un détail qui ne soit rigoureusement exact; la barbarie mahométane ressort de Cantemir, à travers l'enthousiasme de l'historiographe turc, telle qu'elle est exposée dans les premières pages de Zim-Zizimi et de Sultan Mourad.

Du reste, les personnes auxquelles l'étude du passé est familière, reconnaîtront, l'auteur n'en doute pas, l'accent réel et sincère de tout ce livre. Un de ces poëmes (Première rencontre du Christ avec le tombeau) est tiré, l'auteur pourrait dire traduit, de l'Évangile. Deux autres (le Mariage de Roland, Aymerillot) sont des feuillets détachés de la colossale épopée du moyen âge (Charlemagne, emperor à la barbe florie). Ces deux poëmes jaillissent directement des livres de geste de la chevalerie. C'est de l'histoire écoutée aux portes de la légende.

Quant au mode de formation de plusieurs des autres poëmes dans la pensée de l'auteur, on pourra s'en faire une idée en lisant les quelques lignes placées en note à la page 126 du tome II, lignes d'où est sortie la pièce intitulée: les Raisons du Momotombo. L'auteur en convient, un rudiment imperceptible, perdu dans la chronique ou dans la tradition, à peine visible à l'œil nu, lui a souvent suffi. Il n'est pas défendu au poëte et au philosophe d'essayer sur les faits sociaux ce que le naturaliste essaye sur les faits zoologiques: la reconstruction du monstre d'après l'empreinte de l'ongle ou l'alvéole de la dent.

Ici lacune, là étude complaisante et approfondie d'un détail, tel est l'inconvénient de toute publication fractionnée. Ces défauts de proportion peuvent n'être qu'apparents. Le lecteur trouvera certainement juste d'attendre, pour les apprécier définitivement, que la Légende des Siècles ait paru en entier. Les usurpations, par exemple, jouent un tel rôle dans la construction des royautés au moyen âge, et mêlent tant de crimes à la complication des investitures, que l'auteur a cru devoir les présenter sous leurs trois principaux aspects dans les trois drames: le Petit Roi de Galice, Eviradnus, la Confiance du marquis Fabrice. Ce qui peut sembler aujourd'hui un développement excessif s'ajustera plus tard à l'ensemble.

Les tableaux riants sont rares dans ce livre; cela tient à ce qu’ils ne sont pas fréquents dans l’histoire.

Comme on le verra, l’auteur, en racontant le genre humain, ne l’isole pas de son entourage terrestre. Il mêle quelquefois à l’homme, il heurte à l’âme humaine, afin de lui faire rendre son véritable son, ces êtres différents de l’homme que nous nommons bêtes, choses, nature morte, et qui remplissent on ne sait quelles fonctions fatales dans l’équilibre vertigineux de la création.

Tel est ce livre. L’auteur l’offre au public sans rien se dissimuler de sa profonde insuffisance. C’est une tentative vers l’idéal. Rien de plus.

Ce dernier mot a besoin peut-être d’être expliqué.

Plus tard, nous le croyons, lorsque plusieurs autres parties de ce livre auront été publiées, on apercevra le lien qui, dans la conception de l’auteur, rattache la Légende des Siècles à deux autres poëmes, presque terminés à cette heure, et qui en sont, l’un le dénoûment, l’autre le couronnement: la Fin de Satan, et Dieu.

L’auteur, du reste, pour compléter ce qu’il a dit plus haut, ne voit aucune difficulté à faire entrevoir dès à présent qu’il a esquissé dans la solitude une sorte de poëme d’une certaine étendue où se réverbère le problème unique, l’Être, sous sa triple face: l’Humanité, le Mal, l’Infini; le progressif, le relatif, l’absolu; en ce qu’on pourrait appeler trois chants, la Légende des Siècles, la Fin de Satan, Dieu.

Il publie aujourd’hui un premier carton de cette esquisse. Les autres suivront.

Nul ne peut répondre d’achever ce qu’il a commencé, pas une minute de continuation certaine n’est assurée à l’œuvre ébauchée; la solution de continuité, hélas! c’est tout l’homme; mais il est permis, même au plus faible, d’avoir une bonne intention et de la dire.

Or, l’intention de ce livre est bonne.

L’épanouissement du genre humain de siècle en siècle, l’homme montant des ténèbres à l’idéal, la transfiguration paradisiaque de l’enfer terrestre, l’éclosion lente et suprême de la liberté, droit pour cette vie, responsabilité pour l’autre; une espèce d’hymne religieux à mille strophes, ayant dans ses entrailles une foi profonde et sur son sommet une haute prière; le drame de la création éclairé par le visage du créateur, voilà ce que sera, terminé, ce poëme dans son ensemble; si Dieu, maître des existences humaines, y consent.

Hauteville House. — Septembre 1859.

I. Le Sacre de la femme

D’Ève à Jésus

I

L’aurore apparaissait; quelle aurore? Un abîme
D’éblouissement, vaste, insondable, sublime;
Une ardente lueur de paix et de bonté.
    C’était aux premiers temps du globe; et la clarté
    Brillait sereine au front du ciel inaccessible,
    Étant tout ce que Dieu peut avoir de visible;
    Tout s’illuminait, l’ombre et le brouillard obscur;
    Des avalanches d’or s’écroulaient dans l’azur;
    Le jour en flamme, au fond de la terre ravie,
    Embrasait les lointains splendides de la vie;
    Les horizons pleins d’ombre et de rocs chevelus,
    Et d’arbres effrayants que l’homme ne voit plus,
    Luisaient comme le songe et comme le vertige,
    Dans une profondeur d’éclair et de prodige;
    L’Éden pudique et nu s’éveillait mollement;
    Les oiseaux gazouillaient un hymne si charmant,
    Si frais, si gracieux, si suave et si tendre,
    Que les anges distraits se penchaient pour l’entendre;
    Le seul rugissement du tigre était plus doux;
    Les halliers où l’agneau paissait avec les loups,
    Les mers où l’hydre aimait l’alcyon, et les plaines
    Où les ours et les daims confondaient leurs haleines,
    Hésitaient, dans le chœur des concerts infinis,
    Entre le cri de l’antre et la chanson des nids.
    La prière semblait à la clarté mêlée;
    Et sur cette nature encore immaculée
    Qui du verbe éternel avait gardé l’accent,
    Sur ce monde céleste, angélique, innocent,
    Le matin, murmurant une sainte parole,
    Souriait, et l’aurore était une auréole.

Tout avait la figure intègre du bonheur;
Pas de bouche d’où vînt un souffle empoisonneur;
Pas un être qui n’eût sa majesté première;
Tout ce que l’infini peut jeter de lumière
Éclatait pêle-mêle à la fois dans les airs;
Le vent jouait avec cette gerbe d’éclairs
Dans le tourbillon libre et fuyant des nuées;
L’enfer balbutiait quelques vagues huées
Qui s’évanouissaient dans le grand cri joyeux
Des eaux, des monts, des bois, de la terre et des cieux!
Les vents et les rayons semaient de tels délires
Que les forêts vibraient comme de grandes lyres;
De l’ombre à la clarté, de la base au sommet,
Une fraternité vénérable germait;
L’astre était sans orgueil et le ver sans envie;
On s’adorait d’un bout à l’autre de la vie;
Une harmonie égale à la clarté, versant
Une extase divine au globe adolescent,
Semblait sortir du cœur mystérieux du monde;
L’herbe en était émue, et le nuage, et l’onde,
Et même le rocher qui songe et qui se tait;
L’arbre, tout pénétré de lumière, chantait;
Chaque fleur, échangeant son souffle et sa pensée
Avec le ciel serein d’où tombe la rosée,
Recevait une perle et donnait un parfum;
L’Être resplendissait, Un dans Tout, Tout dans Un;
Le paradis brillait sous les sombres ramures
De la vie ivre d’ombre et pleine de murmures,
Et la lumière était faite de vérité;
Et tout avait la grâce, ayant la pureté;
Tout était flamme, hymen, bonheur, douceur, clémence,
Tant ces immenses jours avaient une aube immense!

II

Ineffable lever du premier rayon d’or!
Du jour éclairant tout sans rien savoir encor!

Ô Matin des matins! amour! joie effrénée
De commencer le temps, l’heure, le mois, l’année!
Ouverture du monde! instant prodigieux!
La nuit se dissolvait dans les énormes cieux
Où rien ne tremble, où rien ne pleure, où rien ne souffre;
Autant que le chaos la lumière était gouffre;
Dieu se manifestait dans sa calme grandeur,
Certitude pour l’âme et pour les yeux splendeur;
De faîte en faîte, au ciel et sur terre, et dans toutes
Les épaisseurs de l’être aux innombrables voûtes,
On voyait l’évidence adorable éclater;
Le monde s’ébauchait; tout semblait méditer;
Les types primitifs, offrant dans leur mélange
Presque la brute informe et rude et presque l’ange,
Surgissaient, orageux, gigantesques, touffus;
On sentait tressaillir sous leurs groupes confus
La terre, inépuisable et suprême matrice;
La création sainte, à son tour créatrice,
Modelait vaguement des aspects merveilleux,
Faisait sortir l’essaim des êtres fabuleux
Tantôt des bois, tantôt des mers, tantôt des nues,
Et proposait à Dieu des formes inconnues
Que le temps, moissonneur pensif, plus tard changea;
On sentait sourdre, et vivre, et végéter déjà
Tous les arbres futurs, pins, érables, yeuses,
Dans des verdissements de feuilles monstrueuses;
Une sorte de vie excessive gonflait
La mamelle du monde au mystérieux lait;
Tout semblait presque hors de la mesure éclore;
Comme si la nature, en étant proche encore,
Eût pris, pour ses essais sur la terre et les eaux,
Une difformité splendide au noir chaos.

Les divins paradis, pleins d’une étrange sève,
Semblent au fond des temps reluire dans le rêve,
Et, pour nos yeux obscurs, sans idéal, sans foi,

Leur extase aujourd’hui serait presque l’effroi;
Mais qu’importe à l’abîme, à l’âme universelle
Qui dépense un soleil au lieu d’une étincelle,
Et qui, pour y pouvoir poser l’ange azuré,
Fait croître jusqu’aux cieux l’Éden démesuré!

Jours inouïs! le bien, le beau, le vrai, le juste,
Coulaient dans le torrent, frissonnaient dans l’arbuste;
L’aquilon louait Dieu de sagesse vêtu;
L’arbre était bon; la fleur était une vertu;
C’est trop peu d’être blanc, le lis était candide;
Rien n’avait de souillure et rien n’avait de ride;
Jours purs! rien ne saignait sous l’ongle et sous la dent;
La bête heureuse était l’innocence rôdant;
Le mal n’avait encor rien mis de son mystère
Dans le serpent, dans l’aigle altier, dans la panthère;
Le précipice ouvert dans l’animal sacré
N’avait pas d’ombre, étant jusqu’au fond éclairé;
La montagne était jeune et la vague était vierge;
Le globe, hors des mers dont le flot le submerge,
Sortait beau, magnifique, aimant, fier, triomphant,
Et rien n’était petit quoique tout fût enfant;
La terre avait, parmi ses hymnes d’innocence,
Un étourdissement de sève et de croissance;
L’instinct fécond faisait rêver l’instinct vivant;
Et, répandu partout, sur les eaux, dans le vent,
L’amour épars flottait comme un parfum s’exhale;
La nature riait, naïve et colossale;
L’espace vagissait ainsi qu’un nouveau-né.
L’aube était le regard du soleil étonné.

III

Or, ce jour-là, c’était le plus beau qu’eût encore
Versé sur l’univers la radieuse aurore;
Le même séraphique et saint frémissement
Unissait l’algue à l’onde et l’être à l’élément;
L’éther plus pur luisait dans les cieux plus sublimes;
Les souffles abondaient plus profonds sur les cimes;
Les feuillages avaient de plus doux mouvements;
Et les rayons tombaient caressants et charmants
Sur un frais vallon vert, où, débordant d’extase,
Adorant ce grand ciel que la lumière embrase,
Heureux d’être, joyeux d’aimer, ivres de voir,
Dans l’ombre, au bord d’un lac, vertigineux miroir,
Étaient assis, les pieds effleurés par la lame,
Le premier homme auprès de la première femme.

L’époux priait, ayant l’épouse à son côté.

IV

Ève offrait au ciel bleu la sainte nudité;
Ève blonde admirait l’aube, sa sœur vermeille.

Chair de la femme! argile idéale! ô merveille!
Ô pénétration sublime de l’esprit
Dans le limon que l’Être ineffable pétrit!
Matière où l’âme brille à travers son suaire!
Boue où l’on voit les doigts du divin statuaire!
Fange auguste appelant le baiser et le cœur,
Si sainte, qu’on ne sait, tant l’amour est vainqueur,
Tant l’âme est vers ce lit mystérieux poussée,
Si cette volupté n’est pas une pensée,
Et qu’on ne peut, à l’heure où les sens sont en feu,
Étreindre la beauté sans croire embrasser Dieu!

Ève laissait errer ses yeux sur la nature.

Et, sous les verts palmiers à la haute stature,
Autour d’Ève, au-dessus de sa tête, l’œillet
Semblait songer, le bleu lotus se recueillait,
Le frais myosotis se souvenait; les roses
Cherchaient ses pieds avec leurs lèvres demi-closes;
Un souffle fraternel sortait du lys vermeil;
Comme si ce doux être eût été leur pareil,
Comme si de ces fleurs, ayant toutes une âme,
La plus belle s’était épanouie en femme.

V

Pourtant, jusqu’à ce jour, c’était Adam, l’élu
Qui dans le ciel sacré le premier avait lu,
C’était le Marié tranquille et fort, que l’ombre
Et la lumière, et l’aube, et les astres sans nombre,
Et les bêtes des bois, et les fleurs du ravin
Suivaient ou vénéraient comme l’aîné divin,
Comme le front ayant la lueur la plus haute;
Et, quand tous deux, la main dans la main, côte à côte,
Erraient dans la clarté de l’Éden radieux,
La nature sans fond, sous ses millions d’yeux,
À travers les rochers, les rameaux, l’onde et l’herbe,
Couvait, avec amour pour le couple superbe,
Avec plus de respect pour l’homme, être complet,
Ève qui regardait, Adam qui contemplait.

Mais, ce jour-là, ces yeux innombrables qu’entr’ouvre
L’infini sous les plis du voile qui le couvre,
S’attachaient sur l’épouse et non pas sur l’époux,
Comme si, dans ce jour religieux et doux,

Béni parmi les jours et parmi les aurores,
Aux nids ailés perdus sous les branches sonores,
Au nuage, aux ruisseaux, aux frissonnants essaims,
Aux bêtes, aux cailloux, à tous ces êtres saints
Que de mots ténébreux la terre aujourd’hui nomme,
La femme eût apparu plus auguste que l’homme!

VI

Pourquoi ce choix? pourquoi cet attendrissement
Immense du profond et divin firmament?
Pourquoi tout l’univers penché sur une tête?
Pourquoi l’aube donnant à la femme une fête?
Pourquoi ces chants? Pourquoi ces palpitations
Des flots dans plus de joie et dans plus de rayons?
Pourquoi partout l’ivresse et la hâte d’éclore,
Et les antres heureux de s’ouvrir à l’aurore,
Et plus d’encens sur terre et plus de flamme aux cieux?

Le beau couple innocent songeait silencieux.

VII

Cependant la tendresse inexprimable et douce
De l’astre, du vallon, du lac, du brin de mousse,
Tressaillait plus profonde à chaque instant autour
D’Ève, que saluait du haut des cieux le jour;
Le regard qui sortait des choses et des êtres,
Des flots bénis, des bois sacrés, des arbres prêtres,
Se fixait, plus pensif de moment en moment,
Sur cette femme au front vénérable et charmant;
Un long rayon d’amour lui venait des abîmes,
De l’ombre, de l’azur, des profondeurs, des cimes,
De la fleur, de l’oiseau chantant, du roc muet.
Et, pâle, Ève sentit que son flanc remuait.

La Conscience

Lorsque avec ses enfants vêtus de peaux de bêtes,
Échevelé, livide au milieu des tempêtes,
Caïn se fut enfui de devant Jéhovah,
Comme le soir tombait, l’homme sombre arriva
Au bas d’une montagne en une grande plaine;
Sa femme fatiguée et ses fils hors d’haleine
Lui dirent: « Couchons-nous sur la terre, et dormons.”
Caïn, ne dormant pas, songeait au pied des monts.
Ayant levé la tête, au fond des cieux funèbres,
Il vit un œil, tout grand ouvert dans les ténèbres,
Et qui le regardait dans l’ombre fixement.
«Je suis trop près,” dit-il avec un tremblement.
Il réveilla ses fils dormant, sa femme lasse,
Et se remit à fuir sinistre dans l’espace.
Il marcha trente jours, il marcha trente nuits.
Il allait, muet, pâle et frémissant aux bruits,
Furtif, sans regarder derrière lui, sans trêve,
Sans repos, sans sommeil; il atteignit la grève
Des mers dans le pays qui fut depuis Assur.
«Arrêtons-nous, dit-il, car cet asile est sûr.
Restons-y. Nous avons du monde atteint les bornes.”
Et, comme il s’asseyait, il vit dans les cieux mornes
L’œil à la même place au fond de l’horizon.
Alors il tressaillit en proie au noir frisson.
«Cachez-moi!” cria-t-il; et, le doigt sur la bouche,
Tous ses fils regardaient trembler l’aïeul farouche.
Caïn dit à Jabel, père de ceux qui vont
Sous des tentes de poil dans le désert profond:
«Étends de ce côté la toile de la tente.”
Et l’on développa la muraille flottante;
Et, quand on l’eut fixée avec des poids de plomb,
«Vous ne voyez plus rien?” dit Tsilla, l’enfant blond,
La fille de ses fils, douce comme l’aurore;
Et Caïn répondit: « Je vois cet œil encore!”
Jubal, père de ceux qui passent dans les bourgs

Soufflant dans des clairons et frappant des tambours,
Cria: « Je saurai bien construire une barrière.”
Il fit un mur de bronze et mit Caïn derrière.
Et Caïn dit: « Cet œil me regarde toujours!”
Hénoch dit: « Il faut faire une enceinte de tours
Si terrible, que rien ne puisse approcher d’elle.
Bâtissons une ville avec sa citadelle,
Bâtissons une ville, et nous la fermerons.”
Alors Tubalcaïn, père des forgerons,
Construisit une ville énorme et surhumaine.
Pendant qu’il travaillait, ses frères, dans la plaine,
Chassaient les fils d’Énos et les enfants de Seth;
Et l’on crevait les yeux à quiconque passait;
Et, le soir, on lançait des flèches aux étoiles.
Le granit remplaça la tente aux murs de toiles,
On lia chaque bloc avec des nœuds de fer,
Et la ville semblait une ville d’enfer;
L’ombre des tours faisait la nuit dans les campagnes;
Ils donnèrent aux murs l’épaisseur des montagnes;
Sur la porte on grava: « Défense à Dieu d’entrer.”
Quand ils eurent fini de clore et de murer,
On mit l’aïeul au centre en une tour de pierre;
Et lui restait lugubre et hagard. « Ô mon père!
L’œil a-t-il disparu?” dit en tremblant Tsilla.
Et Caïn répondit: « Non, il est toujours là.”
Alors il dit: « Je veux habiter sous la terre
Comme dans son sépulcre un homme solitaire;
Rien ne me verra plus, je ne verrai plus rien.”
On fit donc une fosse, et Caïn dit: « C’est bien!”
Puis il descendit seul sous cette voûte sombre;
Quand il se fut assis sur sa chaise dans l’ombre
Et qu’on eut sur son front fermé le souterrain,
L’œil était dans la tombe et regardait Caïn.

Puissance égale bonté

Au commencement, Dieu vit un jour dans l’espace

Iblis venir à lui; Dieu dit: « Veux-tu ta grâce?
— Non, dit le Mal. — Alors que me demandes-tu?
— Dieu, répondit Iblis de ténèbres vêtu,
Joutons à qui créera la chose la plus belle.”
L’Être dit: « J’y consens. — Voici, dit le Rebelle:
Moi, je prendrai ton œuvre et la transformerai.
Toi, tu féconderas ce que je t’offrirai;
Et chacun de nous deux soufflera son génie
Sur la chose par l’autre apportée et fournie.
— Soit. Que te faut-il? Prends, dit l’Être avec dédain.
— La tête du cheval et les cornes du daim.
— Prends.” Le monstre hésitant que la brume enveloppe
Reprit: « J’aimerais mieux celle de l’antilope.
— Va, prends.” Iblis entra dans son antre et forgea.
Puis il dressa le front. « Est-ce fini déjà?
— Non. — Te faut-il encor quelque chose? dit l’Être.
— Les yeux de l’éléphant, le cou du taureau, maître.
— Prends. — Je demande, en outre, ajouta le Rampant,
Le ventre du cancer, les anneaux du serpent,
Les cuisses du chameau, les pattes de l’autruche.
— Prends.” Ainsi qu’on entend l’abeille dans la ruche,
On entendait aller et venir dans l’enfer
Le démon remuant des enclumes de fer.
Nul regard ne pouvait voir à travers la nue
Ce qu’il faisait au fond de la cave inconnue.
Tout à coup, se tournant vers l’Être, Iblis hurla:
«Donne-moi la couleur de l’or.” Dieu dit: « Prends-la.”
Et, grondant et râlant comme un bœuf qu’on égorge,
Le démon se remit à battre dans sa forge;
Il frappait du ciseau, du pilon, du maillet,
Et toute la caverne horrible tressaillait;
Les éclairs des marteaux faisaient une tempête;
Ses yeux ardents semblaient deux braises dans sa tête;
Il rugissait; le feu lui sortait des naseaux,
Avec un bruit pareil au bruit des grandes eaux
Dans la saison livide où la cigogne émigre.
Dieu dit: « Que te faut-il encor? — Le bond du tigre.

— Prends. — C’est bien, dit Iblis debout dans son volcan.
— Viens m’aider à souffler,” dit-il à l’ouragan.
L’âtre flambait; Iblis, suant à grosses gouttes,
Se courbait, se tordait, et, sous les sombres voûtes,
On ne distinguait rien qu’une sombre rougeur
Empourprant le profil du monstrueux forgeur.
Et l’ouragan l’aidait, étant démon lui-même.
L’Être, parlant du haut du firmament suprême,
Dit: « Que veux-tu de plus?” Et le grand paria,
Levant sa tête énorme et triste, lui cria:
«Le poitrail du lion et les ailes de l’aigle.”
Et Dieu jeta, du fond des éléments qu’il règle,
À l’ouvrier d’orgueil et de rébellion
L’aile de l’aigle avec le poitrail du lion.
Et le démon reprit son œuvre sous les voiles.
«Quelle hydre fait-il donc?” demandaient les étoiles.
Et le monde attendait, grave, inquiet, béant,
Le colosse qu’allait enfanter ce géant;
Soudain, on entendit dans la nuit sépulcrale
Comme un dernier effort jetant un dernier râle;
L’Etna, fauve atelier du forgeron maudit,
Flamboya; le plafond de l’enfer se fendit,
Et, dans une clarté blême et surnaturelle,
On vit des mains d’Iblis jaillir la sauterelle.
Et l’infirme effrayant, l’être ailé, mais boiteux,
Vit sa création et n’en fut pas honteux,
L’avortement étant l’habitude de l’ombre.
Il sortit à mi-corps de l’éternel décombre,
Et, croisant ses deux bras, arrogant, ricanant,
Cria dans l’infini: « Maître, à toi maintenant!”
Et ce fourbe, qui tend à Dieu même une embûche,
Reprit: « Tu m’as donné l’éléphant et l’autruche,
Et l’or pour dorer tout; et ce qu’ont de plus beau
Le chameau, le cheval, le lion, le taureau,
Le tigre et l’antilope, et l’aigle et la couleuvre;
C’est mon tour de fournir la matière à ton œuvre;
Voici tout ce que j’ai. Je te le donne. Prends.”

Dieu, pour qui les méchants mêmes sont transparents,
Tendit sa grande main de lumière baignée
Vers l’ombre, et le démon lui donna l’araignée.

Et Dieu prit l’araignée et la mit au milieu
Du gouffre qui n’était pas encor le ciel bleu;
Et l’Esprit regarda la bête; sa prunelle,
Formidable, versait la lueur éternelle;
Le monstre, si petit qu’il semblait un point noir,
Grossit alors, et fut soudain énorme à voir;
Et Dieu le regardait de son regard tranquille;
Une aube étrange erra sur cette forme vile;
L’affreux ventre devint un globe lumineux;
Et les pattes, changeant en sphères d’or leurs nœuds,
S’allongèrent dans l’ombre en grands rayons de flamme;
Iblis leva les yeux, et tout à coup l’infâme,
Ébloui, se courba sous l’abîme vermeil;
Car Dieu, de l’araignée, avait fait le soleil.

Les Lions

Les lions dans la fosse étaient sans nourriture.
Captifs, ils rugissaient vers la grande nature
Qui prend soin de la brute au fond des antres sourds.
Les lions n’avaient pas mangé depuis trois jours.
Ils se plaignaient de l’homme, et, pleins de sombres haines,
À travers leur plafond de barreaux et de chaînes,
Regardaient du couchant la sanglante rougeur;
Leur voix grave effrayait au loin le voyageur
Marchant à l’horizon dans les collines bleues.

Tristes, ils se battaient le ventre de leurs queues;
Et les murs du caveau tremblaient, tant leurs yeux roux
À leur gueule affamée ajoutaient de courroux!

La fosse était profonde; et, pour cacher leur fuite,
Og et ses vastes fils l’avaient jadis construite;

Ces enfants de la terre avaient creusé pour eux
Ce palais colossal dans le roc ténébreux;
Leurs têtes en ayant crevé la large voûte,
La lumière y tombait et s’y répandait toute,
Et ce cachot de nuit pour dôme avait l’azur.
Nabuchodonosor, qui régnait dans Assur,
En avait fait couvrir d’un dallage le centre;
Et ce roi fauve avait trouvé bon que cet antre,
Qui jadis vit les Chams et les Deucalions,
Bâti par les géants, servît pour les lions.

Ils étaient quatre, et tous affreux. Une litière
D’ossements tapissait le vaste bestiaire;
Les rochers étageaient leur ombre au-dessus d’eux;
Ils marchaient, écrasant sur le pavé hideux
Des carcasses de bête et des squelettes d’homme.

Le premier arrivait du désert de Sodome;
Jadis, quand il avait sa fauve liberté,
Il habitait le Sin, tout à l’extrémité
Du silence terrible et de la solitude;
Malheur à qui tombait sous sa patte au poil rude!
Et c’était un lion des sables.

Le second
Sortait de la forêt de l’Euphrate fécond;
Naguère, en le voyant vers le fleuve descendre,
Tout tremblait; on avait eu du mal à le prendre,
Car il avait fallu les meutes de deux rois;
Il grondait; et c’était une bête des bois.

Et le troisième était un lion des montagnes.
Jadis il avait l’ombre et l’horreur pour compagnes;
Dans ce temps-là, parfois, vers les ravins bourbeux
Se ruaient des galops de moutons et de bœufs;
Tous fuyaient, le pasteur, le guerrier et le prêtre;
Et l’on voyait sa face effroyable apparaître.

Le quatrième, monstre épouvantable et fier,
Était un grand lion des plages de la mer.
Il rôdait près des flots avant son esclavage.
Gur, cité forte, était alors sur le rivage;
Ses toits fumaient; son port abritait un amas
De navires mêlant confusément leurs mâts;
Le paysan portant son gomor plein de manne
S’y rendait; le prophète y venait sur son âne;
Ce peuple était joyeux comme un oiseau lâché;
Gur avait une place avec un grand marché,
Et l’Abyssin venait y vendre des ivoires;
L’Amorrhéen, de l’ambre et des chemises noires;
Ceux d’Ascalon, du beurre, et ceux d’Aser, du blé.
Du vol de ses vaisseaux l’abîme était troublé.
Or, ce lion était gêné par cette ville;
Il trouvait, quand le soir il songeait immobile,
Qu’elle avait trop de peuple et faisait trop de bruit.
Gur était très-farouche et très-haute; la nuit,
Trois lourds barreaux fermaient l’entrée inabordable;
Entre chaque créneau se dressait, formidable,
Une corne de buffle ou de rhinocéros;
Le mur était solide et droit comme un héros;
Et l’Océan roulait à vagues débordées
Dans le fossé, profond de soixante coudées.
Au lieu de dogues noirs jappant dans le chenil,
Deux dragons monstrueux pris dans les joncs du Nil
Et dressés par un mage à la garde servile,
Veillaient des deux côtés de la porte de ville.
Or, le lion s’était une nuit avancé,
Avait franchi d’un bond le colossal fossé,
Et broyé, furieux, entre ses dents barbares,
La porte de la ville avec ses triples barres,
Et, sans même les voir, mêlé les deux dragons
Au vaste écrasement des verrous et des gonds;
Et, quand il s’en était retourné vers la grève,
De la ville et du peuple il ne restait qu’un rêve,

Et, pour loger le tigre et nicher les vautours,
Quelques larves de murs sous des spectres de tours.

Celui-là se tenait accroupi sur le ventre.
Il ne rugissait pas, il bâillait; dans cet antre
Où l’homme misérable avait le pied sur lui,
Il dédaignait la faim, ne sentant que l’ennui.

Les trois autres allaient et venaient; leur prunelle,
Si quelque oiseau battait leurs barreaux de son aile,
Le suivait; et leur faim bondissait, et leur dent
Mâchait l’ombre à travers leur cri rauque et grondant.

Soudain, dans l’angle obscur de la lugubre étable,
La grille s’entr’ouvrit; sur le seuil redoutable,
Un homme que poussaient d’horribles bras tremblants,
Apparut; il était vêtu de linceuls blancs;
La grille referma ses deux battants funèbres;
L’homme avec les lions resta dans les ténèbres.
Les monstres, hérissant leur crinière, écumant,
Se ruèrent sur lui, poussant ce hurlement
Effroyable, où rugit la haine et le ravage
Et toute la nature irritée et sauvage
Avec son épouvante et ses rébellions;
Et l’homme dit: « La paix soit avec vous, lions!”
L’homme dressa la main; les lions s’arrêtèrent.

Les loups qui font la guerre aux morts et les déterrent,
Les ours au crâne plat, les chacals convulsifs
Qui pendant le naufrage errent sur les récifs,
Sont féroces; l’hyène infâme est implacable;
Le tigre attend sa proie et d’un seul bond l’accable;
Mais le puissant lion, qui fait de larges pas,
Parfois lève sa griffe et ne la baisse pas,
Étant le grand rêveur solitaire de l’ombre.

Et les lions, groupés dans l’immense décombre,

Se mirent à parler entre eux, délibérant;
On eût dit des vieillards réglant un différend
Au froncement pensif de leurs moustaches blanches.
Un arbre mort pendait, tordant sur eux ses branches.

Et, grave, le lion des sables dit: « Lions,
Quand cet homme est entré, j'ai cru voir les rayons
De midi dans la plaine où l'ardent semoun passe,
Et j'ai senti le souffle énorme de l'espace;
Cet homme vient à nous de la part du désert.”

Le lion des bois dit: « Autrefois, le concert
Du figuier, du palmier, du cèdre et de l'yeuse,
Emplissait jour et nuit ma caverne joyeuse;
Même à l'heure où l'on sent que le monde se tait,
Le grand feuillage vert autour de moi chantait.
Quand cet homme a parlé, sa voix m'a semblé douce
Comme le bruit qui sort des nids d'ombre et de mousse;
Cet homme vient à nous de la part des forêts.”

Et celui qui s'était approché le plus près,
Le lion noir des monts dit: « Cet homme ressemble
Au Caucase, où jamais une roche ne tremble;
Il a la majesté de l'Atlas; j'ai cru voir,
Quand son bras s'est levé, le Liban se mouvoir
Et se dresser, jetant l'ombre immense aux campagnes;
Cet homme vient à nous de la part des montagnes.”

Le lion qui, jadis, au bord des flots rôdant,
Rugissait aussi haut que l'Océan grondant,
Parla le quatrième, et dit: « Fils, j'ai coutume,
En voyant la grandeur, d'oublier l'amertume,
Et c'est pourquoi j'étais le voisin de la mer.
J'y regardais — laissant les vagues écumer —
Apparaître la lune et le soleil éclore,
Et le sombre infini sourire dans l'aurore;
Et j'ai pris, ô lions, dans cette intimité,

L’habitude du gouffre et de l’éternité;
Or, sans savoir le nom dont la terre le nomme,
J’ai vu luire le ciel dans les yeux de cet homme;
Cet homme au front serein vient de la part de Dieu.”

Quand la nuit eut noirci le grand firmament bleu,
Le gardien voulut voir la fosse, et cet esclave,
Collant sa face pâle aux grilles de la cave,
Dans la profondeur vague aperçut Daniel
Qui se tenait debout et regardait le ciel,
Et songeait, attentif aux étoiles sans nombre,
Pendant que les lions léchaient ses pieds dans l’ombre.

Le Temple

Moïse pour l’autel cherchait un statuaire;
Dieu dit: « Il en faut deux;” et dans le sanctuaire
Conduisit Oliab avec Béliséel.
L’un sculptait l’idéal et l’autre le réel.

Booz endormi

Booz s’était couché de fatigue accablé;
Il avait tout le jour travaillé dans son aire;
Puis avait fait son lit à sa place ordinaire;
Booz dormait auprès des boisseaux pleins de blé.

Ce vieillard possédait des champs de blés et d’orge;
Il était, quoique riche, à la justice enclin;
Il n’avait pas de fange en l’eau de son moulin;
Il n’avait pas d’enfer dans le feu de sa forge.

Sa barbe était d’argent comme un ruisseau d’avril.
Sa gerbe n’était point avare ni haineuse;
Quand il voyait passer quelque pauvre glaneuse;
«Laissez tomber exprès des épis,” disait-il.

Cet homme marchait pur loin des sentiers obliques,
Vêtu de probité candide et de lin blanc;
Et, toujours du côté des pauvres ruisselant,
Ses sacs de grains semblaient des fontaines publiques.

Booz était bon maître et fidèle parent;
Il était généreux, quoiqu’il fût économe;
Les femmes regardaient Booz plus qu’un jeune homme,
Car le jeune homme est beau, mais le vieillard est grand.

Le vieillard, qui revient vers la source première,
Entre aux jours éternels et sort des jours changeants;
Et l’on voit de la flamme aux yeux des jeunes gens.
Mais dans l’œil du vieillard on voit de la lumière.

*

Donc, Booz dans la nuit dormait parmi les siens.
Près des meules, qu’on eût prises pour des décombres,
Les moissonneurs couchés faisaient des groupes sombres;
Et ceci se passait dans des temps très-anciens.

Les tribus d’Israël avaient pour chef un juge;
La terre, où l’homme errait sous la tente, inquiet
Des empreintes de pieds de géants qu’il voyait,
Était encor mouillée et molle du déluge.

*

Comme dormait Jacob, comme dormait Judith,
Booz, les yeux fermés, gisait sous la feuillée;
Or, la porte du ciel s’étant entre-bâillée
Au-dessus de sa tête, un songe en descendit.

Et ce songe était tel, que Booz vit un chêne

Qui, sorti de son ventre, allait jusqu’au ciel bleu;
Une race y montait comme une longue chaîne;
Un roi chantait en bas, en haut mourait un Dieu.

Et Booz murmurait avec la voix de l’âme
«Comment se pourrait-il que de moi ceci vînt?
Le chiffre de mes ans a passé quatre-vingt.
Et je n’ai pas de fils, et je n’ai plus de femme.

“ Voilà longtemps que celle avec qui j’ai dormi,
Ô Seigneur! a quitté ma couche pour la vôtre;
Et nous sommes encor tout mêlés l’un à l’autre,
Elle à demi vivante et moi mort à demi.

“ Une race naîtrait de moi! Comment le croire?
Comment se pourrait-il que j’eusse des enfants?
Quand on est jeune, on a des matins triomphants;
Le jour sort de la nuit comme d’une victoire;

“ Mais, vieux, on tremble ainsi qu’à l’hiver le bouleau;
Je suis veuf, je suis seul, et sur moi le soir tombe.
Et je courbe, ô mon Dieu! mon âme vers la tombe,
Comme un bœuf ayant soif penche son front vers l’eau.”

Ainsi parlait Booz dans le rêve et l’extase.
Tournant vers Dieu ses yeux par le sommeil noyés;
Le cèdre ne sent pas une rose à sa base,
Et lui ne sentait pas une femme à ses pieds.

*

Pendant qu’il sommeillait, Ruth, une moabite,
S’était couchée aux pieds de Booz, le sein nu,
Espérant on ne sait quel rayon inconnu,
Quand viendrait du réveil la lumière subite.

Booz ne savait point qu’une femme était là.
Et Ruth ne savait point ce que Dieu voulait d’elle.
Un frais parfum sortait des touffes d’asphodèle;
Les souffles de la nuit flottaient sur Galgala.

L’ombre était nuptiale, auguste et solennelle;
Les anges y volaient sans doute obscurément.
Car on voyait passer dans la nuit, par moment,
Quelque chose de bleu qui paraissait une aile.

La respiration de Booz qui dormait,
Se mêlait au bruit sourd des ruisseaux sur la mousse.
On était dans le mois où la nature est douce,
Les collines ayant des lys sur leur sommet.

Ruth songeait et Booz dormait; l’herbe était noire;
Les grelots des troupeaux palpitaient vaguement;
Une immense bonté tombait du firmament;
C’était l’heure tranquille où les lions vont boire.

Tout reposait dans Ur et dans Jérimadeth;
Les astres émaillaient le ciel profond et sombre;
Le croissant fin et clair parmi ces fleurs de l’ombre
Brillait à l’occident, et Ruth se demandait,

Immobile, ouvrant l’œil à moitié sous ses voiles,
Quel dieu, quel moissonneur de l’éternel été,
Avait, en s’en allant, négligemment jeté
Cette faucille d’or dans le champ des étoiles.

Dieu invisible au philosophe

Le philosophe allait sur son âne; prophète,
Prunelle devant l’ombre horrible stupéfaite,
Il allait, il pensait.

Devin des nations,
Il vendait aux païens des malédictions,
Sans savoir si des mains dans les ténèbres blêmes
S’ouvraient pour recevoir ses vagues anathèmes.
Il venait de Phétor; il allait chez Balac,
Fils des Gomorrhéens qui dorment sous le lac,
Mage d’Assur et roi du peuple moabite.
Il avait quitté l’ombre où l’épouvante habite,
Et le hideux abri des chênes chevelus
Que l’ouragan secoue en ses larges reflux.
Morne, il laissait marcher au hasard sa monture,
Son esprit cheminant dans une autre aventure;
Il se demandait: « Tout est-il vide? et le fond
N’est-il que de l’abîme où des spectres s’en vont?
L’ombre prodigieuse est-elle une personne?
Le flot qui murmure, est-ce une voix qui raisonne?
Depuis quatre-vingts ans, je vis dans un réduit,
Regardant la sueur des antres de la nuit,
Écoutant les sanglots de l’air dans les nuées.
Le gouffre est-il vivant? Larves exténuées,
Qu’est-ce que nous cherchons? Je sais l’assyrien,
L’arabe, le persan, l’hébreu; je ne sais rien.
De quel profond néant sommes-nous les ministres?…»
Ainsi, pâle, il songeait sous les branches sinistres,
Les cheveux hérissés par les souffles des bois.
L’âne s’arrêta court et lui dit: « Je le vois.”

Première rencontre du Christ avec le tombeau

En ce temps-là, Jésus était dans la Judée;
Il avait délivré la femme possédée,
Rendu l’ouïe aux sourds et guéri les lépreux;
Les prêtres l’épiaient et parlaient bas entre eux.
Comme il s’en retournait vers la ville bénie,
Lazare, homme de bien, mourut à Béthanie.
Marthe et Marie étaient ses sœurs; Marie, un jour,
Pour laver les pieds nus du maître plein d’amour,

Avait été chercher son parfum le plus rare.
Or, Jésus aimait Marthe et Marie et Lazare.
Quelqu’un lui dit: « Lazare est mort.”

Le lendemain,
Comme le peuple était venu sur son chemin,
Il expliquait la loi, les livres, les symboles,
Et, comme Élie et Job, parlait par paraboles.
Il disait: « Qui me suit, aux anges est pareil.
Quand un homme a marché tout le jour au soleil
Dans un chemin sans puits et sans hôtellerie,
S’il ne croit pas, quand vient le soir, il pleure, il crie,
Il est las: sur la terre il tombe haletant;
S’il croit en moi, qu’il prie, il peut au même instant
Continuer sa route avec des forces triples.”
Puis il s’interrompit, et dit à ses disciples:
«Lazare, notre ami, dort; je vais l’éveiller.”
Eux dirent: « Nous irons, maître, où tu veux aller.”
Or, de Jérusalem, où Salomon mit l’arche,
Pour gagner Béthanie, il faut trois jours de marche.
Jésus partit. Durant cette route souvent,
Tandis qu’il marchait seul et pensif en avant,
Son vêtement parut blanc comme la lumière.

Quand Jésus arriva, Marthe vint la première,
Et, tombant à ses pieds, s’écria tout d’abord:
«Si nous t’avions eu, maître, il ne serait pas mort.”
Puis reprit en pleurant: « Mais il a rendu l’âme.
Tu viens trop tard.” Jésus lui dit: « Qu’en sais-tu, femme?
Le moissonneur est seul maître de la moisson.”

Marie était restée assise à la maison.

Marthe lui cria: « Viens, le maître te réclame.”
Elle vint. Jésus dit: « Pourquoi pleures-tu, femme?”
Et Marie à genoux lui dit: « Toi seul es fort.
Si nous t’avions eu, maître, il ne serait pas mort.”

Jésus reprit: « Je suis la lumière et la vie.
Heureux celui qui voit ma trace et l’a suivie!
Qui croit en moi vivra, fût-il mort et gisant.”
Et Thomas, appelé Didyme, était présent.

Et le seigneur, dont Jean et Pierre suivaient l’ombre,
Dit aux Juifs accourus pour le voir en grand nombre:
«Où donc l’avez-vous mis?” Ils répondirent: « Vois.”
Lui montrant de la main, dans un champ, près d’un bois,
À côté d’un torrent qui dans les pierres coule,
Un sépulcre.

Et Jésus pleura.

Sur quoi, la foule
Se prit à s’écrier: « Voyez comme il l’aimait!
Lui qui chasse, dit-on, Satan, et le soumet,
Eût-il, s’il était Dieu, comme on nous le rapporte,
Laissé mourir quelqu’un qu’il aimait de la sorte?”

Or, Marthe conduisit au sépulcre Jésus.
Il vint. On avait mis une pierre dessus.
«Je crois en vous, dit Marthe, ainsi que Jean et Pierre;
Mais voilà quatre jours qu’il est sous cette pierre.”

Et Jésus dit: « Tais-toi, femme, car c’est le lieu
Où tu vas, si tu crois, voir la gloire de Dieu.”
Puis il reprit: « Il faut que cette pierre tombe.”
La pierre ôtée, on vit le dedans de la tombe.

Jésus leva les yeux au ciel et marcha seul
Vers cette ombre où le mort gisait dans son linceul,
Pareil au sac d’argent qu’enfouit un avare.
Et, se penchant, il dit à haute voix: « Lazare!”

Alors le mort sortit du sépulcre; ses pieds
Des bandes du linceul étaient encor liés;

Il se dressa debout le long de la muraille;
Jésus dit: « Déliez cet homme, et qu’il s’en aille.”
Ceux qui virent cela crurent en Jésus-Christ.

Or, les prêtres, selon qu’au livre il est écrit,
S’assemblèrent, troublés, chez le préteur de Rome;
Sachant que Christ avait ressuscité cet homme,
Et que tous avaient vu le sépulcre s’ouvrir,
Ils dirent: « Il est temps de le faire mourir.”

II. Décadence de Rome

Au lion d’Androclès

La ville ressemblait à l’univers. C’était
Cette heure où l’on dirait que toute âme se tait,
Que tout astre s’éclipse et que le monde change.
Rome avait étendu sa pourpre sur la fange.
Où l’aigle avait plané, rampait le scorpion.
Trimalcion foulait les os de Scipion.
Rome buvait, gaie, ivre et la face rougie;
Et l’odeur du tombeau sortait de cette orgie.
L’amour et le bonheur, tout était effrayant.
Lesbie, en se faisant coiffer, heureuse, ayant
Son Tibulle à ses pieds qui chantait leurs tendresses,
Si l’esclave persane arrangeait mal ses tresses,
Lui piquait les seins nus de son épingle d’or.
Le mal à travers l’homme avait pris son essor;
Toutes les passions sortaient de leurs orbites.
Les fils aux vieux parents faisaient des morts subites.
Les rhéteurs disputaient les tyrans aux bouffons.
La boue et l’or régnaient. Dans les cachots profonds,
Les bourreaux s’accouplaient à des martyres mortes.
Rome horrible chantait. Parfois, devant ses portes,
Quelque Crassus, vainqueur d’esclaves et de rois,
Plantait le grand chemin de vaincus mis en croix,
Et, quand Catulle, amant que notre extase écoute,
Errait avec Délie, aux deux bords de la route,
Six mille arbres humains saignaient sur leurs amours.
La gloire avait hanté Rome dans les grands jours;
Toute honte à présent était la bienvenue.
Messaline en riant se mettait toute nue,
Et sur le lit public, lascive, se couchait.
Épaphrodite avait un homme pour hochet
Et brisait en jouant les membres d’Épictète.
Femme grosse, vieillard débile, enfant qui tette,

Captifs, gladiateurs, chrétiens, étaient jetés
Aux bêtes, et, tremblants, blêmes, ensanglantés,
Fuyaient, et l’agonie effarée et vivante
Se tordait dans le cirque, abîme d’épouvante.
Pendant que l’ours grondait, et que les éléphants,
Effroyables, marchaient sur les petits enfants,
La vestale songeait dans sa chaise de marbre.
Par moments, le trépas, comme le fruit d’un arbre,
Tombait du front pensif de la pâle beauté;
Le même éclair de meurtre et de férocité
Passait de l’œil du tigre au regard de la vierge.
Le monde était le bois, l’empire était l’auberge.
De noirs passants trouvaient le trône en leur chemin,
Entraient, donnaient un coup de dent au genre humain,
Puis s’en allaient. Néron venait après Tibère.
César foulait aux pieds le Hun, le Goth, l’Ibère;
Et l’empereur, pareil aux fleurs qui durent peu,
Le soir était charogne à moins qu’il ne fût dieu.
Le porc Vitellius roulait aux gémonies.
Escalier des grandeurs et des ignominies,
Bagne effrayant des morts, pilori des néants,
Saignant, fumant, infect, ce charnier de géants
Semblait fait pour pourrir le squelette du monde.
Des torturés râlaient sur cette rampe immonde,
Juifs sans langue, poltrons sans poings, larrons sans yeux;
Ainsi que dans le cirque atroce et furieux
L’agonie était là, hurlant sur chaque marche.
Le noir gouffre cloaque au fond ouvrait son arche
Où croulait Rome entière; et, dans l’immense égout,
Quand le ciel juste avait foudroyé coup sur coup,
Parfois deux empereurs, chiffres du fatal nombre,
Se rencontraient, vivants encore, et, dans cette ombre,
Où les chiens sur leurs os venaient mâcher leur chair,
Le César d’aujourd’hui heurtait celui d’hier.
Le crime sombre était l’amant du vice infâme.
Au lieu de cette race en qui Dieu mit sa flamme,
Au lieu d’Ève et d’Adam, si beaux, si purs tous deux,

Une hydre se traînait dans l’univers hideux;
L’homme était une tête et la femme était l’autre.
Rome était la truie énorme qui se vautre.
La créature humaine, importune au ciel bleu,
Faisait une ombre affreuse à la cloison de Dieu;
Elle n’avait plus rien de sa forme première;
Son œil semblait vouloir foudroyer la lumière,
Et l’on voyait, c’était la veille d’Attila,
Tout ce qu’on avait eu de sacré jusque-là
Palpiter sous son ongle; et pendre à ses mâchoires
D’un côté les vertus et de l’autre les gloires.
Les hommes rugissaient quand ils croyaient parler.
L’âme du genre humain songeait à s’en aller;
Mais, avant de quitter à jamais notre monde,
Tremblante, elle hésitait sous la voûte profonde,
Et cherchait une bête où se réfugier.
On entendait la tombe appeler et crier.
Au fond, la pâle Mort riait sinistre et chauve.
Ce fut alors que toi, né dans le désert fauve,
Où le soleil est seul avec Dieu, toi, songeur
De l’antre que le soir emplit de sa rougeur,
Tu vins dans la cité toute pleine de crimes;
Tu frissonnas devant tant d’ombre et tant d’abîmes;
Ton œil fit, sur ce monde horrible et châtié,
Flamboyer tout à coup l’amour et la pitié,
Pensif, tu secouas ta crinière sur Rome,
Et, l’homme étant le monstre, ô lion, tu fus l’homme.

III. L’Islam

L’An neuf de l’Hégire

Comme s’il pressentait que son heure était proche,
Grave, il ne faisait plus à personne un reproche;
Il marchait en rendant aux passants leur salut;
On le voyait vieillir chaque jour, quoiqu’il eût
À peine vingt poils blancs à sa barbe encor noire;
Il s’arrêtait parfois pour voir les chameaux boire,
Se souvenant du temps qu’il était chamelier.

Il songeait longuement devant le saint pilier;
Par moments, il faisait mettre une femme nue
Et la regardait, puis il contemplait la nue,
Et disait: « La beauté sur terre, au ciel le jour.”

Il semblait avoir vu l’Éden, l’âge d’amour,
Les temps antérieurs, l’ère immémoriale.
Il avait le front haut, la joue impériale,
Le sourcil chauve, l’œil profond et diligent,
Le cou pareil au col d’une amphore d’argent,
L’air d’un Noé qui sait le secret du déluge.
Si des hommes venaient le consulter, ce juge
Laissant l’un affirmer, l’autre rire et nier,
Écoutait en silence et parlait le dernier.
Sa bouche était toujours en train d’une prière;
Il mangeait peu, serrant sur son ventre une pierre;
Il s’occupait lui-même à traire ses brebis;
Il s’asseyait à terre et cousait ses habits.

Il jeûnait plus longtemps qu’autrui les jours de jeûne,
Quoiqu’il perdît sa force et qu’il ne fût plus jeune.

À soixante-trois ans, une fièvre le prit.
Il relut le Koran de sa main même écrit,

Puis il remit au fils de Séid la bannière,
En lui disant: « Je touche à mon aube dernière,
Il n’est pas d’autre Dieu que Dieu. Combats pour lui.”
Et son œil, voilé d’ombre, avait ce morne ennui
D’un vieux aigle forcé d’abandonner son aire.
Il vint à la mosquée à son heure ordinaire,
Appuyé sur Ali, le peuple le suivant;
Et l’étendard sacré se déployait au vent.
Là, pâle, il s’écria, se tournant vers la foule:
«Peuple, le jour s’éteint, l’homme passe et s’écoule;
La poussière et la nuit, c’est nous. Dieu seul est grand.
Peuple, je suis l’aveugle et je suis l’ignorant.
Sans Dieu je serais vil plus que la bête immonde.”
Un scheik lui dit:« Ô chef des vrais croyants! le monde,
Sitôt qu’il t’entendit, en ta parole crut;
Le jour où tu naquis une étoile apparut,
Et trois tours du palais de Chosroès tombèrent.”
Lui, reprit: « Sur ma mort les anges délibèrent;
L’heure arrive. Écoutez. Si j’ai de l’un de vous
Mal parlé, qu’il se lève, ô peuple, et devant tous
Qu’il m’insulte et m’outrage avant que je m’échappe;
Si j’ai frappé quelqu’un, que celui-là me frappe.”
Et, tranquille, il tendit aux passants son bâton.
Une vieille, tondant la laine d’un mouton,
Assise sur un seuil, lui cria: « Dieu t’assiste!”

Il semblait regarder quelque vision triste,
Et songeait; tout à coup, pensif, il dit: « Voilà,
Vous tous: je suis un mot dans la bouche d’Allah;
Je suis cendre comme homme et feu comme prophète.
J’ai complété d’Issa la lumière imparfaite.
Je suis la force, enfants; Jésus fut la douceur.
Le soleil a toujours l’aube pour précurseur.
Jésus m’a précédé, mais il n’est pas la Cause.
Il est né d’une vierge aspirant une rose.
Moi, comme être vivant, retenez bien ceci,
Je ne suis qu’un limon par les vices noirci;

J’ai de tous les péchés subi l’approche étrange;
Ma chair a plus d’affront qu’un chemin n’a de fange,
Et mon corps par le mal est tout déshonoré;
Ô vous tous, je serai bien vite dévoré
Si dans l’obscurité du cercueil solitaire
Chaque faute de l’homme engendre un ver de terre.
Fils, le damné renaît au fond du froid caveau,
Pour être par les vers dévoré de nouveau;
Toujours sa chair revit, jusqu’à ce que la peine,
Finie, ouvre à son vol l’immensité sereine.
Fils, je suis le champ vil des sublimes combats,
Tantôt l’homme d’en haut, tantôt l’homme d’en bas,
Et le mal dans ma bouche avec le bien alterne
Comme dans le désert le sable et la citerne;
Ce qui n’empêche pas que je n’aie, ô croyants!
Tenu tête dans l’ombre aux anges effrayants
Qui voudraient replonger l’homme dans les ténèbres;
J’ai parfois dans mes poings tordu leurs bras funèbres;
Souvent, comme Jacob, j’ai la nuit, pas à pas,
Lutté contre quelqu’un que je ne voyais pas;
Mais les hommes surtout ont fait saigner ma vie;
Ils ont jeté sur moi leur haine et leur envie,
Et, comme je sentais en moi la vérité,
Je les ai combattus, mais sans être irrité;
Et, pendant le combat, je criais: « Laissez faire!
» Je suis seul, nu, sanglant, blessé; je le préfère.
» Qu’ils frappent sur moi tous! que tout leur soit permis!
» Quand même, se ruant sur moi, mes ennemis
» Auraient, pour m’attaquer dans cette voie étroite,
» Le soleil à leur gauche et la lune à leur droite,
» Ils ne me feraient point reculer!” C’est ainsi
Qu’après avoir lutté quarante ans, me voici
Arrivé sur le bord de la tombe profonde,
Et j’ai devant moi Dieu, derrière moi le monde.
Quant à vous qui m’avez dans l’épreuve suivi,
Comme les Grecs Hermès et les Hébreux Lévi,
Vous avez bien souffert, mais vous verrez l’aurore.

Après la froide nuit, vous verrez l'aube éclore;
Peuple, n'en doutez pas; celui qui prodigua
Les lions aux ravins du Jebel-Kronnega,
Les perles à la mer et les astres à l'ombre,
Peut bien donner un peu de joie à l'homme sombre."

Il ajouta: « Croyez, veillez; courbez le front.
Ceux qui ne sont ni bons ni mauvais resteront
Sur le mur qui sépare Éden d'avec l'abîme,
Étant trop noirs pour Dieu, mais trop blancs pour le crime;
Presque personne n'est assez pur de péchés
Pour ne pas mériter un châtiment; tâchez,
En priant, que vos corps touchent partout la terre;
L'enfer ne brûlera dans son fatal mystère
Que ce qui n'aura point touché la cendre, et Dieu
À qui baise la terre obscure, ouvre un ciel bleu;
Soyez hospitaliers; soyez saints; soyez justes;
Là-haut sont les fruits purs dans les arbres augustes,
Les chevaux sellés d'or, et, pour fuir aux sept cieux,
Les chars vivants ayant des foudres pour essieux;
Chaque houri, sereine, incorruptible, heureuse,
Habite un pavillon fait d'une perle creuse;
Le Gehennam attend les réprouvés; malheur!
Ils auront des souliers de feu dont la chaleur
Fera bouillir leur tête ainsi qu'une chaudière.
La face des élus sera charmante et fière."

Il s'arrêta, donnant audience à l'esprit.
Puis, poursuivant sa marche à pas lents, il reprit:
«Ô vivants! je répète à tous que voici l'heure
Où je vais me cacher dans une autre demeure;
Donc, hâtez-vous. Il faut, le moment est venu,
Que je sois dénoncé par ceux qui m'ont connu,
Et que, si j'ai des torts, on me crache au visage."

La foule s'écartait muette à son passage.
Il se lava la barbe au puits d'Aboulféia.

Un homme réclama trois drachmes, qu’il paya,
Disant: « Mieux vaut payer ici que dans la tombe.”
L’œil du peuple était doux comme un œil de colombe
En regardant cet homme auguste, son appui;
Tous pleuraient; quand, plus tard, il fut rentré chez lui,
Beaucoup restèrent là sans fermer la paupière,
Et passèrent la nuit couchés sur une pierre.
Le lendemain matin, voyant l’aube arriver:
«Aboubèkre, dit-il, je ne puis me lever,
Tu vas prendre le livre et faire la prière.”
Et sa femme Aïscha se tenait en arrière;
Il écoutait pendant qu’Aboubèkre lisait,
Et souvent à voix basse achevait le verset;
Et l’on pleurait pendant qu’il priait de la sorte.
Et l’ange de la mort vers le soir à la porte
Apparut, demandant qu’on lui permît d’entrer.
«Qu’il entre.” On vit alors son regard s’éclairer
De la même clarté qu’au jour de sa naissance;
Et l’ange lui dit: « Dieu désire ta présence.
— Bien,” dit-il. Un frisson sur ses tempes courut,
Un souffle ouvrit sa lèvre, et Mahomet mourut.

Mahomet

Le divin Mahomet enfourchait tour à tour
Son mulet Daïdol et son âne Yafour;
Car le sage lui-même a, selon l’occurrence,
Son jour d’entêtement et son jour d’ignorance.

Le Cèdre

Omer, scheik de l’Islam et de la loi nouvelle
Que Mahomet ajoute à ce qu’Issa révèle,
Marchant, puis s’arrêtant, et sur son long bâton,
Par moments, comme un pâtre, appuyant son menton,

Errait près de Djeddah la sainte, sur la grève
De la mer Rouge, où Dieu luit comme au fond d'un rêve,
Dans le désert jadis noir de l'ombre des cieux,
Où Moïse voilé passait mystérieux.
Tout en marchant ainsi, plein d'une grave idée,
Par-dessus le désert, l'Égypte et la Judée,
À Pathmos, au penchant d'un mont, chauve sommet,
Il vit Jean qui, couché sur le sable, dormait.

Car saint Jean n'est pas mort, l'effrayant solitaire;
Dieu le tient en réserve; il reste sur la terre
Ainsi qu'Énoch le Juste, et, comme il est écrit,
Ainsi qu'Élie, afin de vaincre l'Antéchrist.

Jean dormait; ces regards étaient fermés qui virent
Les océans du songe où les astres chavirent;
L'obscur sommeil couvrait cet œil illuminé,
Le seul chez les vivants auquel il fut donné
De regarder, par l'âpre ouverture du gouffre,
Les anges noirs vêtus de cuirasses de soufre,
Et de voir les Babels pencher, et les Sions
Tomber, et s'écrouler les blêmes visions,
Et les religions rire prostituées,
Et des noms de blasphème errer dans les nuées.

Jean dormait, et sa tête était nue au soleil.

Omer, le puissant prêtre, aux prophètes pareil,
Aperçut, tout auprès de la mer Rouge, à l'ombre
D'un santon, un vieux cèdre au grand feuillage sombre
Croissant dans un rocher qui bordait le chemin;
Scheik Omer étendit à l'horizon sa main
Vers le nord habité par les aigles rapaces,
Et, montrant au vieux cèdre, au delà des espaces,
La mer Égée, et Jean endormi dans Pathmos,
Il poussa du doigt l'arbre et prononça ces mots:

«Va, cèdre! va couvrir de ton ombre cet homme.”

Le blanc spectre de sel qui regarde Sodome
N’est pas plus immobile au bord du lac amer
Que ne le fut le cèdre à qui parlait Omer;
Plus rétif que l’onagre à la voix de son maître,
L’arbre n’agita pas une branche.

Le prêtre
Dit: « Va donc!” et frappa l’arbre de son bâton.

Le cèdre, enraciné sous le mur du santon,
N’eut pas même un frisson et demeura paisible.

Le scheik alors tourna ses yeux vers l’invisible,
Fit trois pas, puis, ouvrant sa droite et la levant:
«Va! cria-t-il, va, cèdre, au nom du Dieu vivant!

— Que n’as-tu prononcé ce nom plus tôt?” dit l’arbre.
Et, frissonnant, brisant le dur rocher de marbre,
Dressant ses bras ainsi qu’un vaisseau ses agrès,
Fendant la vieille terre aïeule des forêts,
Le grand cèdre, arrachant aux profondes crevasses
Son tronc et sa racine et ses ongles vivaces,
S’envola comme un sombre et formidable oiseau.
Il passa le mont Gour posé comme un boisseau
Sur la rouge lueur des forgerons d’Érèbe;
Laissa derrière lui Gophna, Jéricho, Thèbe,
L’Égypte aux dieux sans nombre, informe panthéon,
Le Nil, fleuve d’Éden, qu’Adam nommait Gehon,
Le champ de Galgala plein de couteaux de pierre,
Ur, d’où vint Abraham, Bethsad, où naquit Pierre,
Et, quittant le désert d’où sortent les fléaux,
Traversa Chanaan d’Arphac à Borcéos;
Là, retrouvant la mer, vaste, obscure, sublime,
Il plongea dans la nue énorme de l’abîme,
Et, franchissant les flots, sombre gouffre ennemi,

Vint s’abattre à Pathmos près de Jean endormi.

Jean, s’étant réveillé, vit l’arbre, et le prophète
Songea, surpris d’avoir de l’ombre sur sa tête;
Puis il dit, redoutable en sa sérénité:
«Arbre, que fais-tu là? Pourquoi t’es-tu hâté
De sourdre, de germer, de grandir dans une heure?
Pourquoi donner de l’ombre au roc où je demeure?
L’ordre éternel n’a point de ces rapidités;
Jéhovah, dont les yeux s’ouvrent de tous côtés,
Veut que l’œuvre soit lente, et que l’arbre se fonde
Sur un pied fort, scellé dans l’argile profonde;
Pendant qu’un arbre naît, bien des hommes mourront;
La pluie est sa servante, et, par le bois du tronc,
La racine aux rameaux frissonnants distribue
L’eau qui se change en séve aussitôt qu’elle est bue.
Dieu le nourrit de terre, et, l’en rassasiant,
Veut que l’arbre soit dur, solide et patient,
Pour qu’il brave, à travers sa rude carapace,
Les coups de fouet du vent tumultueux qui passe,
Pour qu’il porte le temps comme l’âne son bât,
Et qu’on puisse compter, quand la hache l’abat,
Les ans de sa durée aux anneaux de sa séve;
Un cèdre n’est pas fait pour croître comme un rêve;
Ce que l’heure a construit, l’instant peut le briser.”
Le cèdre répondit: « Jean, pourquoi m’accuser?
Jean, si je suis ici, c’est par l’ordre d’un homme.”
Et Jean, fauve songeur qu’en frémissant on nomme,
Reprit: « Quel est cet homme à qui tout se soumet?”
L’arbre dit: « C’est Omer, prêtre de Mahomet.
J’étais près de Djeddah depuis des ans sans nombre;
Il m’a dit de venir te couvrir de mon ombre.”
Alors Jean, oublié par Dieu chez les vivants,
Se tourna vers le sud et cria dans les vents
Par-dessus le rivage austère de son île:
«Nouveaux venus, laissez la nature tranquille.”

IV. Le Cycle héroïque chrétien

Le Parricide

n jour, Kanut, à l’heure où l’assoupissement
Ferme partout les yeux sous l’obscur firmament,
Ayant pour seul témoin la nuit, l’aveugle immense,
Vit son père Swéno, vieillard presque en démence,
Qui dormait, sans un garde à ses pieds, sans un chien;
Il le tua, disant: « Lui-même n’en sait rien.”
Puis il fut un grand roi.

Toujours vainqueur, sa vie
Par la prospérité fidèle fut suivie;
Il fut plus triomphant que la gerbe des blés;
Quand il passait devant les vieillards assemblés,
Sa présence éclairait ces sévères visages;
Par la chaîne des mœurs pures et des lois sages
À son cher Danemark natal il enchaîna
Vingt îles, Fionie, Arnhout, Folster, Mona;
Il bâtit un grand trône en pierres féodales;
Il vainquit les Saxons, les Pictes, les Vandales,
Le Celte, et le Borusse, et le Slave aux abois,
Et les peuples hagards qui hurlent dans les bois;
Il abolit l’horreur idolâtre, et la rune,
Et le menhir féroce où le soir, à la brune,
Le chat sauvage vient frotter son dos hideux;
Il disait en parlant du grand César: « Nous deux;”
Une lueur sortait de son cimier polaire;
Les monstres expiraient partout sous sa colère;
Il fut, pendant vingt ans qu’on l’entendit marcher,
Le cavalier superbe et le puissant archer;
L’hydre morte, il mettait le pied sur la portée;
Sa vie, en même temps bénie et redoutée,
Dans la bouche du peuple était un fier récit;
Rien que dans un hiver, ce chasseur détruisit

Trois dragons en Écosse, et deux rois en Scanie;
Il fut héros, il fut géant, il fut génie;
Le sort de tout un monde au sien semblait lié;
Quant à son parricide, il l’avait oublié.
Il mourut. On le mit dans un cercueil de pierre;
Et l’évêque d’Aarhus vint dire une prière,
Et chanter sur sa tombe un hymne, déclarant
Que Kanut était saint, que Kanut était grand,
Qu’un céleste parfum sortait de sa mémoire,
Et qu’ils le voyaient, eux, les prêtres, dans la gloire,
Assis comme un prophète à la droite de Dieu.

Le soir vint; l’orgue en deuil se tut dans le saint lieu;
Et les prêtres, quittant la haute cathédrale,
Laissèrent le roi mort dans la paix sépulcrale.
Alors il se leva, rouvrit ses yeux obscurs,
Prit son glaive, et sortit de la tombe, les murs
Et les portes étant brumes pour les fantômes;
Il traversa la mer qui reflète les dômes
Et les tours d’Altona, d’Aarhus et d’Elseneur;
L’ombre écoutait les pas de ce sombre seigneur;
Mais il marchait sans bruit étant lui-même un songe;
Il alla droit au mont Savo que le temps ronge,
Et Kanut s’approcha de ce farouche aïeul,
Et lui dit: « Laisse-moi, pour m’en faire un linceul,
Ô Montagne Savo que la tourmente assiége,
Me couper un morceau de ton manteau de neige.”
Le mont le reconnut et n’osa refuser.
Kanut prit son épée impossible à briser,
Et sur le mont, tremblant devant ce belluaire,
Il coupa de la neige et s’en fit un suaire;
Puis il cria: « Vieux mont, la mort éclaire peu;
De quel côté faut-il aller pour trouver Dieu?”
Le mont au flanc difforme, aux gorges obstruées,
Noir, triste dans le vol éternel des nuées,
Lui dit: « Je ne sais pas, spectre; je suis ici.”
Kanut quitta le mont par les glaces saisi;

Et, le front haut, tout blanc dans son linceul de neige,
Il entra, par delà l’Islande et la Norvége,
Seul dans le grand silence et dans la grande nuit;
Derrière lui le monde obscur s’évanouit;
Il se trouva, lui, spectre, âme, roi sans royaume,
Nu, face à face avec l’immensité fantôme;
Il vit l’infini, porche horrible et reculant
Où l’éclair, quand il entre, expire triste et lent,
L’ombre, hydre dont les nuits sont les pâles vertèbres,
L’informe se mouvant dans le noir; les Ténèbres;
Là, pas d’astre; et pourtant on ne sait quel regard
Tombe de ce chaos immobile et hagard;
Pour tout bruit, le frisson lugubre que fait l’onde
De l’obscurité, sourde, effarée et profonde;
Il avança disant: « C’est la tombe; au delà
C’est Dieu.” Quand il eut fait trois pas, il appela;
Mais la nuit est muette ainsi que l’ossuaire,
Et rien ne répondit: sous son blême suaire
Kanut continua d’avancer; la blancheur
Du linceul rassurait le sépulcral marcheur;
Il allait; tout à coup, sur son livide voile
Il vit poindre et grandir comme une noire étoile;
L’étoile s’élargit lentement, et Kanut,
La tâtant de sa main de spectre, reconnut
Qu’une goutte de sang était sur lui tombée;
Sa tête, que la peur n’avait jamais courbée,
Se redressa; terrible, il regarda la nuit,
Et ne vit rien; l’espace était noir; pas un bruit;
«En avant!” dit Kanut levant sa tête fière;
Une seconde tache auprès de la première
Tomba, puis s’élargit; et le chef cimbrien
Regarda l’ombre épaisse et vague, et ne vit rien;
Comme un limier à suivre une piste s’attache,
Morne, il reprit sa route; une troisième tache
Tomba sur le linceul. Il n’avait jamais fui;
Kanut pourtant cessa de marcher devant lui,
Et tourna du côté du bras qui tient le glaive;

Une goutte de sang, comme à travers un rêve,
Tomba sur le suaire et lui rougit la main;
Pour la seconde fois il changea de chemin,
Comme en lisant on tourne un feuillet d'un registre,
Et se mit à marcher vers la gauche sinistre;
Une goutte de sang tomba sur le linceul;
Et Kanut recula, frémissant d'être seul,
Et voulut regagner sa couche mortuaire;
Une goutte de sang tomba sur le suaire;
Alors il s'arrêta livide, et ce guerrier,
Blême, baissa la tête et tâcha de prier;
Une goutte de sang tomba sur lui. Farouche,
La prière effrayée expirant dans sa bouche,
Il se remit en marche; et, lugubre, hésitant,
Hideux, ce spectre blanc passait; et, par instant,
Une goutte de sang se détachait de l'ombre,
Implacable, et tombait sur cette blancheur sombre.
Il voyait, plus tremblant qu'au vent le peuplier,
Ces taches s'élargir et se multiplier;
Une autre, une autre, une autre, une autre, ô cieux funèbres!
Leur passage rayait vaguement les ténèbres;
Ces gouttes, dans les plis du linceul, finissant
Par se mêler, faisaient des nuages de sang;
Il marchait, il marchait; de l'insondable voûte
Le sang continuait à pleuvoir goutte à goutte,
Toujours, sans fin, sans bruit, et comme s'il tombait
De ces pieds noirs qu'on voit la nuit pendre au gibet;
Hélas! qui donc pleurait ces larmes formidables?
L'infini. Vers les cieux, pour le juste abordables,
Dans l'océan de nuit sans flux et sans reflux,
Kanut s'avançait, pâle et ne regardant plus;
Enfin, marchant toujours comme en une fumée,
Il arriva devant une porte fermée
Sous laquelle passait un jour mystérieux;
Alors sur son linceul il abaissa les yeux;
C'était l'endroit sacré, c'était l'endroit terrible;
On ne sait quel rayon de Dieu semble visible;

De derrière la porte on entend l'hosanna.

Le linceul était rouge et Kanut frissonna.

Et c'est pourquoi Kanut, fuyant devant l'aurore
Et reculant, n'a pas osé paraître encore
Devant le juge au front duquel le soleil luit;
C'est pourquoi ce roi sombre est resté dans la nuit,
Et, sans pouvoir rentrer dans sa blancheur première,
Sentant, à chaque pas qu'il fait vers la lumière,
Une goutte de sang sur sa tête pleuvoir,
Rôde éternellement sous l'énorme ciel noir.

Le Mariage de Roland

Ils se battent — combat terrible! — corps à corps.
Voilà déjà longtemps que leurs chevaux sont morts;
Ils sont là seuls tous deux dans une île du Rhône,
Le fleuve à grand bruit roule un flot rapide et jaune,
Le vent trempe en sifflant les brins d'herbe dans l'eau.
L'archange saint Michel attaquant Apollo
Ne ferait pas un choc plus étrange et plus sombre;
Déjà, bien avant l'aube, ils combattaient dans l'ombre.
Qui, cette nuit, eût vu s'habiller ces barons,
Avant que la visière eût dérobé leurs fronts,
Eût vu deux pages blonds, roses comme des filles.
Hier, c'étaient deux enfants riant à leurs familles,
Beaux, charmants; — aujourd'hui, sur ce fatal terrain,
C'est le duel effrayant de deux spectres d'airain,
Deux fantômes auxquels le démon prête une âme,
Deux masques dont les trous laissent voir de la flamme.
Ils luttent, noirs, muets, furieux, acharnés.
Les bateliers pensifs qui les ont amenés,
Ont raison d'avoir peur et de fuir dans la plaine,
Et d'oser, de bien loin, les épier à peine,
Car de ces deux enfants, qu'on regarde en tremblant,

L’un s’appelle Olivier et l’autre a nom Roland.

Et, depuis qu’ils sont là, sombres, ardents, farouches,
Un mot n’est pas encor sorti de ces deux bouches.

Olivier, sieur de Vienne et comte souverain,
A pour père Gérard et pour aïeul Garin.
Il fut pour ce combat habillé par son père.
Sur sa targe est sculpté Bacchus faisant la guerre
Aux Normands, Rollon ivre et Rouen consterné,
Et le dieu souriant par des tigres traîné
Chassant, buveur de vin, tous ces buveurs de cidre.
Son casque est enfoui sous les ailes d’une hydre;
Il porte le haubert que portait Salomon;
Son estoc resplendit comme l’œil d’un démon;
Il y grava son nom afin qu’on s’en souvienne;
Au moment du départ, l’archevêque de Vienne
A béni son cimier de prince féodal.

Roland a son habit de fer, et Durandal.

Ils luttent de si près avec de sourds murmures,
Que leur souffle âpre et chaud s’empreint sur leurs armures;
Le pied presse le pied; l’île à leurs noirs assauts
Tressaille au loin; l’acier mord le fer; des morceaux
De heaume et de haubert, sans que pas un s’émeuve,
Sautent à chaque instant dans l’herbe et dans le fleuve.
Leurs brassards sont rayés de longs filets de sang
Qui coule de leur crâne et dans leurs yeux descend.
Soudain, sire Olivier, qu’un coup affreux démasque,
Voit tomber à la fois son épée et son casque.
Main vide et tête nue, et Roland l’œil en feu!
L’enfant songe à son père et se tourne vers Dieu.
Durandal sur son front brille. Plus d’espérance!
«Çà, dit Roland, je suis neveu du roi de France,
Je dois me comporter en franc neveu de roi.
Quand j’ai mon ennemi désarmé devant moi,

Je m’arrête. Va donc chercher une autre épée,
Et tâche, cette fois, qu’elle soit bien trempée.
Tu feras apporter à boire en même temps,
Car j’ai soif.

— Fils, merci, dit Olivier.

— J’attends,

Dit Roland, hâte-toi.”

Sire Olivier appelle
Un batelier caché derrière une chapelle.

«Cours à la ville, et dis à mon père qu’il faut
Une autre épée à l’un de nous, et qu’il fait chaud.”

Cependant les héros, assis dans les broussailles,
S’aident à délacer leurs capuchons de mailles,
Se lavent le visage et causent un moment.
Le batelier revient; il a fait promptement;
L’homme a vu le vieux comte; il rapporte une épée
Et du vin, de ce vin qu’aimait le grand Pompée
Et que Tournon récolte au flanc de son vieux mont.
L’épée est cette illustre et fière Closamont
Que d’autres quelquefois appellent Haute-Claire.
L’homme a fui. Les héros achèvent sans colère
Ce qu’ils disaient; le ciel rayonne au-dessus d’eux;
Olivier verse à boire à Roland; puis tous deux
Marchent droit l’un vers l’autre, et le duel recommence.
Voilà que par degrés de sa sombre démence
Le combat les enivre; il leur revient au cœur
Ce je ne sais quel dieu qui veut qu’on soit vainqueur,
Et qui, s’exaspérant aux armures frappées,
Mêle l’éclair des yeux aux lueurs des épées.

Ils combattent, versant à flots leur sang vermeil.

Le jour entier se passe ainsi. Mais le soleil
Baisse vers l’horizon. La nuit vient.

«Camarade,
Dit Roland, je ne sais, mais je me sens malade.
Je ne me soutiens plus, et je voudrais un peu
De repos.

— Je prétends, avec l’aide de Dieu,
Dit le bel Olivier, le sourire à la lèvre,
Vous vaincre par l’épée et non point par la fièvre.
Dormez sur l’herbe verte, et cette nuit, Roland,
Je vous éventerai de mon panache blanc.
Couchez-vous, et dormez.

— Vassal, ton âme est neuve,
Dit Roland. Je riais, je faisais une épreuve.
Sans m’arrêter et sans me reposer, je puis
Combattre quatre jours encore, et quatre nuits.”

Le duel reprend. La mort plane, le sang ruisselle.
Durandal heurte et suit Closamont; l’étincelle
Jaillit de toutes parts sous leurs coups répétés.
L’ombre autour d’eux s’emplit de sinistres clartés.
Ils frappent; le brouillard du fleuve monte et fume;
Le voyageur s’effraye et croit voir dans la brume
D’étranges bûcherons qui travaillent la nuit.

Le jour naît, le combat continue à grand bruit;
La pâle nuit revient, ils combattent; l’aurore
Reparaît dans les cieux, ils combattent encore.

Nul repos. Seulement, vers le troisième soir,
Sous un arbre, en causant, ils sont allés s’asseoir;
Puis ont recommencé.

Le vieux Gérard dans Vienne

Attend depuis trois jours que son enfant revienne.
Il envoie un devin regarder sur les tours;
Le devin dit: « Seigneur, ils combattent toujours.”

Quatre jours sont passés, et l’île et le rivage
Tremblent sous ce fracas monstrueux et sauvage.
Ils vont, viennent, jamais fuyant, jamais lassés,
Froissent le glaive au glaive et sautent les fossés,
Et passent, au milieu des ronces remuées,
Comme deux tourbillons et comme deux nuées.
Ô chocs affreux! terreur! tumulte étincelant!
Mais, enfin, Olivier saisit au corps Roland
Qui de son propre sang en combattant s’abreuve,
Et jette d’un revers Durandal dans le fleuve.

«C’est mon tour maintenant, et je vais envoyer
Chercher un autre estoc pour vous, dit Olivier.
Le sabre du géant Sinnagog est à Vienne.
C’est, après Durandal, le seul qui vous convienne.
Mon père le lui prit alors qu’il le défit.
Acceptez-le.”

Roland sourit. « Il me suffit
De ce bâton.” Il dit, et déracine un chêne.

Sire Olivier arrache un orme dans la plaine
Et jette son épée, et Roland, plein d’ennui,
L’attaque. Il n’aimait pas qu’on vînt faire après lui
Les générosités qu’il avait déjà faites.

Plus d’épée en leurs mains, plus de casque à leurs têtes,
Ils luttent maintenant, sourds, effarés, béants,
À grands coups de troncs d’arbre, ainsi que des géants.

Pour la cinquième fois, voici que la nuit tombe.
Tout à coup, Olivier, aigle aux yeux de colombe,
S’arrête, et dit:

«Roland, nous n’en finirons point.
Tant qu’il nous restera quelque tronçon au poing,
Nous lutterons ainsi que lions et panthères.
Ne vaudrait-il pas mieux que nous devinssions frères?
Écoute, j’ai ma sœur, la belle Aude au bras blanc,
Épouse-la.

— Pardieu! je veux bien, dit Roland.
Et maintenant buvons, car l’affaire était chaude.”

C’est ainsi que Roland épousa la belle Aude.

Aymerillot

Charlemagne, empereur à la barbe fleurie,
Revient d’Espagne; il a le cœur triste, il s’écrie:
«Roncevaux! Roncevaux! ô traître Ganelon!”
Car son neveu Roland est mort dans ce vallon
Avec les douze pairs et toute son armée.
Le laboureur des monts qui vit sous la ramée
Est rentré chez lui, grave et calme, avec son chien;
Il a baisé sa femme au front, et dit: « C’est bien.”
Il a lavé sa trompe et son arc aux fontaines;
Et les os des héros blanchissent dans les plaines.

Le bon roi Charle est plein de douleur et d’ennui;
Son cheval syrien est triste comme lui.
Il pleure; l’empereur pleure de la souffrance
D’avoir perdu ses preux, ses douze pairs de France,
Ses meilleurs chevaliers qui n’étaient jamais las,
Et son neveu Roland, et la bataille, hélas!
Et surtout de songer, lui, vainqueur des Espagnes,
Qu’on fera des chansons dans toutes ces montagnes
Sur ses guerriers tombés devant des paysans,
Et qu’on en parlera plus de quatre cents ans!

Cependant, il chemine; au bout de trois journées
Il arrive au sommet des hautes Pyrénées.
Là, dans l’espace immense il regarde en rêvant;
Et sur une montagne, au loin, et bien avant
Dans les terres, il voit une ville très forte,
Ceinte de murs avec deux tours à chaque porte.
Elle offre à qui la voit ainsi dans le lointain
Trente maîtresses tours avec des toits d’étain
Et des mâchicoulis de forme sarrasine
Encor tout ruisselants de poix et de résine.
Au centre est un donjon si beau, qu’en vérité,
On ne le peindrait pas dans tout un jour d’été.
Ses créneaux sont scellés de plomb; chaque embrasure
Cache un archer dont l’œil toujours guette et mesure;
Ses gargouilles font peur; à son faîte vermeil
Rayonne un diamant gros comme le soleil,
Qu’on ne peut regarder fixement de trois lieues.

Sur la gauche est la mer aux grandes ondes bleues
Qui, jusqu’à cette ville, apporte ses dromons.

Charle, en voyant ces tours, tressaille sur les monts.

«Mon sage conseiller, Naymes, duc de Bavière,
Quelle est cette cité près de cette rivière?
Qui la tient la peut dire unique sous les cieux.
Or, je suis triste, et c’est le cas d’être joyeux.
Oui, dussé-je rester quatorze ans dans ces plaines,
Ô gens de guerre, archers, compagnons, capitaines,
Mes enfants! mes lions! saint Denis m’est témoin
Que j’aurai cette ville avant d’aller plus loin!”

Le vieux Naymes frissonne à ce qu’il vient d’entendre.

«Alors, achetez-la, car nul ne peut la prendre.
Elle a pour se défendre, outre ses béarnais,
Vingt mille turcs ayant chacun double harnais.

Quant à nous, autrefois, c’est vrai, nous triomphâmes;
Mais, aujourd’hui, vos preux ne valent pas des femmes,
Ils sont tous harassés et du gîte envieux,
Et je suis le moins las, moi qui suis le plus vieux.
Sire, je parle franc et je ne farde guère.
D’ailleurs, nous n’avons point de machines de guerre;
Les chevaux sont rendus, les gens rassasiés;
Je trouve qu’il est temps que vous vous reposiez,
Et je dis qu’il faut être aussi fou que vous l’êtes
Pour attaquer ces tours avec des arbalètes.”

L’empereur répondit au duc avec bonté:
«Duc, tu ne m’as pas dit le nom de la cité?

— On peut bien oublier quelque chose à mon âge.
Mais, sire, ayez pitié de votre baronnage;
Nous voulons nos foyers, nos logis, nos amours.
C’est ne jouir jamais que conquérir toujours.
Nous venons d’attaquer bien des provinces, sire.
Et nous en avons pris de quoi doubler l’empire.
Ces assiégés riraient de vous du haut des tours.
Ils ont, pour recevoir sûrement des secours
Si quelque insensé vient heurter leurs citadelles,
Trois souterrains creusés par les turcs infidèles,
Et qui vont, le premier, dans le val de Bastan,
Le second, à Bordeaux, le dernier, chez Satan.”

L’empereur, souriant, reprit d’un air tranquille:
«Duc, tu ne m’as pas dit le nom de cette ville?

— C’est Narbonne.

— Narbonne est belle, dit le roi,
Et je l’aurai; je n’ai jamais vu, sur ma foi,
Ces belles filles-là sans leur rire au passage,
Et me piquer un peu les doigts à leur corsage.”

Alors, voyant passer un comte de haut lieu,
Et qu'on appelait Dreus de Montdidier: « Pardieu!
Comte, ce bon duc Nayme expire de vieillesse!
Mais vous, ami, prenez Narbonne, et je vous laisse
Tout le pays d'ici jusques à Montpellier;
Car vous êtes le fils d'un gentil chevalier;
Votre oncle, que j'estime, était abbé de Chelles;
Vous même êtes vaillant; donc, beau sire, aux échelles!
L'assaut!

— Sire empereur, répondit Montdidier,
Je ne suis désormais bon qu'à congédier;
J'ai trop porté haubert, maillot, casque et salade;
J'ai besoin de mon lit, car je suis fort malade;
J'ai la fièvre; un ulcère aux jambes m'est venu;
Et voilà plus d'un an que je n'ai couché nu.
Gardez tout ce pays, car je n'en ai que faire."

L'empereur ne montra ni trouble ni colère.
Il chercha du regard Hugo de Cotentin.
Ce seigneur était brave et comte palatin.

«Hugues, dit-il, je suis aise de vous apprendre
Que Narbonne est à vous; vous n'avez qu'à la prendre."

Hugo de Cotentin salua l'empereur.

«Sire, c'est un manant heureux qu'un laboureur!
Le drôle gratte un peu la terre brune ou rouge,
Et, quand sa tâche est faite, il rentre dans son bouge.
Moi, j'ai vaincu Tryphon, Thessalus, Gaïffer;
Par le chaud, par le froid, je suis vêtu de fer;
Au point du jour, j'entends le clairon pour antienne;
Je n'ai plus à ma selle une boucle qui tienne;
Voilà longtemps que j'ai pour unique destin
De m'endormir fort tard pour m'éveiller matin,
De recevoir des coups pour vous et pour les vôtres.

Je suis très-fatigué. Donnez Narbonne à d’autres.”

Le roi laissa tomber sa tête sur son sein.
Chacun songeait, poussant du coude son voisin.
Pourtant Charle, appelant Richer de Normandie:
«Vous êtes grand seigneur et de race hardie,
Duc; ne voudrez-vous pas prendre Narbonne un peu?

— Empereur, je suis duc par la grâce de Dieu.
Ces aventures-là vont aux gens de fortune.
Quand on a ma duché, roi Charle, on n’en veut qu’une.”

L’empereur se tourna vers le comte de Gand:

«Tu mis jadis à bas Maugiron le brigand.
Le jour où tu naquis sur la plage marine,
L’audace avec le souffle entra dans ta poitrine:
Bavon, ta mère était de fort bonne maison;
Jamais on ne t’a fait choir que par trahison;
Ton âme après la chute était encor meilleure.
Je me rappellerai jusqu’à ma dernière heure
L’air joyeux qui parut dans ton œil hasardeux,
Un jour que nous étions en marche seuls tous deux,
Et que nous entendions dans les plaines voisines
Le cliquetis confus des lances sarrasines.
Le péril fut toujours de toi bien accueilli,
Comte; eh bien, prends Narbonne, et je t’en fais bailli.

— Sire, dit le Gantois, je voudrais être en Flandre.
J’ai faim, mes gens ont faim; nous venons d’entreprendre
Une guerre à travers un pays endiablé;
Nous y mangions, au lieu de farine de blé,
Des rats et des souris, et, pour toutes ribotes,
Nous avons dévoré beaucoup de vieilles bottes.
Et puis votre soleil d’Espagne m’a hâlé
Tellement, que je suis tout noir et tout brûlé;
Et, quand je reviendrai de ce ciel insalubre

Dans ma ville de Gand avec ce front lugubre,
Ma femme, qui déjà peut-être a quelque amant,
Me prendra pour un maure et non pour un flamand!
J’ai hâte d’aller voir là-bas ce qui se passe.
Quand vous me donneriez, pour prendre cette place,
Tout l’or de Salomon et tout l’or de Pépin,
Non! je m’en vais en Flandre, où l’on mange du pain.

— Ces bons flamands, dit Charle, il faut que cela mange!”

Il reprit:

«Ça, je suis stupide. Il est étrange
Que je cherche un preneur de ville, ayant ici
Mon vieil oiseau de proie, Eustache de Nancy.
Eustache, à moi! Tu vois, cette Narbonne est rude;
Elle a trente châteaux, trois fossés, et l’air prude;
À chaque porte un camp, et, pardieu! j’oubliais,
Là-bas, six grosses tours en pierre de liais.
Ces douves-là nous font parfois si grise mine
Qu’il faut recommencer à l’heure où l’on termine,
Et que, la ville prise, on échoue au donjon.
Mais qu’importe! es-tu pas le grand aigle?

— Un pigeon,
Un moineau, dit Eustache, un pinson dans la haie!
Roi, je me sauve au nid. Mes gens veulent leur paye;
Or, je n’ai pas le sou; sur ce, pas un garçon
Qui me fasse crédit d’un coup d’estramaçon;
Leurs yeux me donneront à peine une étincelle
Par sequin qu’ils verront sortir de l’escarcelle.
Tas de gueux! Quant à moi, je suis très-ennuyé;
Mon vieux poing tout sanglant n’est jamais essuyé;
Je suis moulu. Car, sire, on s’échine à la guerre;
On arrive à haïr ce qu’on aimait naguère,
Le danger qu’on voyait tout rose, on le voit noir;
On s’use, on se disloque, on finit par avoir

La goutte aux reins, l’entorse aux pieds, aux mains l’ampoule,
Si bien, qu’étant parti vautour, on revient poule.
Je désire un bonnet de nuit. Foin du cimier!
J’ai tant de gloire, ô roi, que j’aspire au fumier.”

Le bon cheval du roi frappait du pied la terre
Comme s’il comprenait; sur le mont solitaire
Les nuages passaient. Gérard de Roussillon
Était à quelques pas avec son bataillon;
Charlemagne en riant vint à lui.

«Vaillant homme,
Vous êtes dur et fort comme un Romain de Rome;
Vous empoignez le pieu sans regarder aux clous;
Gentilhomme de bien, cette ville est à vous!”

Gérard de Roussillon regarda d’un air sombre
Son vieux gilet de fer rouillé, le petit nombre
De ses soldats marchant tristement devant eux,
Sa bannière trouée et son cheval boiteux.

«Tu rêves, dit le roi, comme un clerc en Sorbonne.
Faut-il donc tant songer pour accepter Narbonne?

— Roi, dit Gérard, merci, j’ai des terres ailleurs.”

Voilà comme parlaient tous ces fiers batailleurs
Pendant que les torrents mugissaient sous les chênes.

L’empereur fit le tour de tous ses capitaines;
Il appela les plus hardis, les plus fougueux,
Eudes, roi de Bourgogne, Albert de Périgueux,
Samo, que la légende aujourd’hui divinise,
Garin, qui, se trouvant un beau jour à Venise,
Emporta sur son dos le lion de Saint-Marc,
Ernaut de Beauléande, Ogier de Danemark,
Roger enfin, grande âme au péril toujours prête.

Ils refusèrent tous.

Alors, levant la tête,
Se dressant tout debout sur ses grands étriers,
Tirant sa large épée aux éclairs meurtriers,
Avec un âpre accent plein de sourdes huées,
Pâle, effrayant, pareil à l’aigle des nuées,
Terrassant du regard son camp épouvanté,
L’invincible empereur s’écria: « Lâcheté!
Ô comtes palatins tombés dans ces vallées,
Ô géants qu’on voyait debout dans les mêlées,
Devant qui Satan même aurait crié merci,
Olivier et Roland, que n’êtes-vous ici!
Si vous étiez vivants, vous prendriez Narbonne,
Paladins! vous, du moins, votre épée était bonne,
Votre cœur était haut, vous ne marchandiez pas!
Vous alliez en avant sans compter tous vos pas!
Ô compagnons couchés dans la tombe profonde,
Si vous étiez vivants, nous prendrions le monde!
Grand Dieu! que voulez-vous que je fasse à présent?
Mes yeux cherchent en vain un brave au cœur puissant,
Et vont, tout effrayés de nos immenses tâches,
De ceux-là qui sont morts à ceux-ci qui sont lâches!
Je ne sais point comment on porte des affronts!
Je les jette à mes pieds, je n’en veux pas! — Barons,
Vous qui m’avez suivi jusqu’à cette montagne,
Normands, Lorrains, marquis des marches d’Allemagne,
Poitevins, Bourguignons, gens du pays Pisan,
Bretons, Picards, Flamands, Français, allez-vous-en!
Guerriers, allez-vous-en d’auprès de ma personne,
Des camps où l’on entend mon noir clairon qui sonne,
Rentrez dans vos logis, allez-vous-en chez vous,
Allez-vous-en d’ici, car je vous chasse tous!
Je ne veux plus de vous! Retournez chez vos femmes!
Allez vivre cachés, prudents, contents, infâmes!
C’est ainsi qu’on arrive à l’âge d’un aïeul.

Pour moi, j’assiégerai Narbonne à moi tout seul.
Je reste ici, rempli de joie et d’espérance!
Et, quand vous serez tous dans notre douce France,
Ô vainqueurs des Saxons et des Aragonais!
Quand vous vous chaufferez les pieds à vos chenets,
Tournant le dos aux jours de guerres et d’alarmes,
Si l’on vous dit, songeant à tous vos grands faits d’armes
Qui remplirent longtemps la terre de terreur:
«Mais où donc avez-vous quitté votre empereur?”
Vous répondrez, baissant les yeux vers la muraille:
«Nous nous sommes enfuis le jour d’une bataille,
» Si vite et si tremblants et d’un pas si pressé
» Que nous ne savons plus où nous l’avons laissé!”
Ainsi Charles de France appelé Charlemagne,
Exarque de Ravenne, empereur d’Allemagne,
Parlait dans la montagne avec sa grande voix;
Et les pâtres lointains, épars au fond des bois,
Croyaient en l’entendant que c’était le tonnerre.

Les barons consternés fixaient leurs yeux à terre.
Soudain, comme chacun demeurait interdit,
Un jeune homme bien fait sortit des rangs, et dit:

«Que monsieur saint Denis garde le roi de France!”

L’empereur fut surpris de ce ton d’assurance.

Il regarda celui qui s’avançait, et vit,
Comme le roi Saül lorsque apparut David,
Une espèce d’enfant au teint rose, aux mains blanches,
Que d’abord les soudards dont l’estoc bat les hanches
Prirent pour une fille habillée en garçon,
Doux, frêle, confiant, serein, sans écusson
Et sans panache, ayant, sous ses habits de serge,
L’air grave d’un gendarme et l’air froid d’une vierge.

«Toi, que veux-tu, dit Charle, et qu’est-ce qui t’émeut?

— Je viens vous demander ce dont pas un ne veut:
L’honneur d’être, ô mon roi, si Dieu ne m’abandonne,
L’homme dont on dira: « C’est lui qui prit Narbonne.”

L’enfant parlait ainsi d’un air de loyauté,
Regardant tout le monde avec simplicité.

Le Gantois, dont le front se relevait très vite,
Se mit à rire et dit aux reîtres de sa suite:
«Hé! c’est Aymerillot, le petit compagnon!

— Aymerillot, reprit le roi, dis-nous ton nom.

— Aymery. Je suis pauvre autant qu’un pauvre moine;
J’ai vingt ans, je n’ai point de paille et point d’avoine,
Je sais lire en latin, et je suis bachelier.
Voilà tout, sire. Il plut au sort de m’oublier
Lorsqu’il distribua les fiefs héréditaires.
Deux liards couvriraient fort bien toutes mes terres,
Mais tout le grand ciel bleu n’emplirait pas mon cœur.
J’entrerai dans Narbonne et je serai vainqueur.
Après, je châtierai les railleurs, s’il en reste.”

Charles, plus rayonnant que l’archange céleste,
S’écria:

«Tu seras, pour ce propos hautain,
Aymery de Narbonne et comte palatin,
Et l’on te parlera d’une façon civile.
Va, fils!”

Le lendemain Aymery prit la ville.

Bivar

Bivar était, au fond d’un bois sombre, un manoir
Carré, flanqué de tours, fort vieux, et d’aspect noir.
La cour était petite et la porte était laide
Quand le scheik Jabias, depuis roi de Tolède,
Vint visiter le Cid au retour de Cintra.
Dans l’étroit patio le prince maure entra;
Un homme, qui tenait à la main une étrille,
Pansait une jument attachée à la grille;
Cet homme, dont le scheik ne voyait que le dos,
Venait de déposer à terre des fardeaux,
Un sac d’avoine, une auge, un harnais, une selle;
La bannière arborée au donjon était celle
De don Diègue, ce père étant encor vivant;
L’homme, sans voir le scheik, frottant, brossant, lavant,
Travaillait, tête nue et bras nus, et sa veste
Était d’un cuir farouche et d’une mode agreste;
Le scheik, sans ébaucher même un buenos dias,
Dit: « Manant, je viens voir le seigneur Ruy Diaz,
Le grand campéador des Castilles.” Et l’homme,
Se retournant, lui dit: « C’est moi.

— Quoi! vous qu’on nomme
Le héros, le vaillant, le seigneur des pavois,
S’écria Jabias, c’est vous qu’ainsi je vois!
Quoi! c’est vous qui n’avez qu’à vous mettre en campagne
Et qu’à dire: « Partons!” pour donner à l’Espagne,
D’Avis à Gibraltar, d’Algarve à Cadafal,
Ô grand Cid, le frisson du clairon triomphal,
Et pour faire accourir au-dessus de vos tentes,
Ailes au vent, l’essaim des victoires chantantes!
Lorsque je vous ai vu, seigneur, moi prisonnier,
Vous vainqueur, au palais du roi, l’été dernier,
Vous aviez l’air royal du conquérant de l’Èbre;
Vous teniez à la main la Tizona célèbre;
Votre magnificence emplissait cette cour,
Comme il sied quand on est celui d’où vient le jour;
Cid, vous étiez vraiment un Bivar très-superbe;

On eût dans un brasier cueilli des touffes d’herbe,
Seigneur, plus aisément, certes, qu’on n’eût trouvé
Quelqu’un qui devant vous prît le haut du pavé;
Plus d’un richomme avait pour orgueil d’être membre
De votre servidumbre et de votre antichambre;
Le Cid dans sa grandeur allait, venait, parlait,
La faisant boire à tous, comme aux enfants le lait;
D’altiers ducs, tout enflés de faste et de tempête,
Qui, depuis qu’ils avaient le chapeau sur la tête,
D’aucun homme vivant ne s’étaient souciés,
Se levaient, sans savoir pourquoi, quand vous passiez;
Vous vous faisiez servir par tous les gentilshommes;
Le Cid comme une altesse avait ses majordomes;
Lerme était votre archer; Gusman, votre frondeur;
Vos habits étaient faits avec de la splendeur;
Vous si bon, vous aviez la pompe de l’armure;
Votre miel semblait or comme l’orange mûre.
Sans cesse autour de vous vingt coureurs étaient prêts.
Nul n’était au-dessus du Cid, et nul auprès.
Personne, eût-il été de la royale estrade,
Prince, infant, n’eût osé vous dire: Camarade!
Vous éclatiez, avec des rayons jusqu’aux cieux,
Dans une préséance éblouissante aux yeux;
Vous marchiez entouré d’un ordre de bataille;
Aucun sommet n’était trop haut pour votre taille,
Et vous étiez un fils d’une telle fierté
Que les aigles volaient tous de votre côté.
Vous regardiez ainsi que néants et fumées
Tout ce qui n’était pas commandement d’armées,
Et vous ne consentiez qu’au nom de général;
Cid était le baron suprême et magistral;
Vous dominiez tout, grand, sans chef, sans joug, sans digue,
Absolu, lance au poing, panache au front.”

Rodrigue
Répondit: « Je n’étais alors que chez le roi.”

Et le scheik s’écria: « Mais, Cid, aujourd’hui, quoi,
Que s’est-il donc passé? quel est cet équipage?
J’arrive, et je vous trouve en veste, comme un page,
Dehors, bras nus, nu-tête, et si petit garçon
Que vous avez en main l’auge et le caveçon!
Et faisant ce qu’il sied aux écuyers de faire!

— Scheik, dit le Cid, je suis maintenant chez mon père.”

Le Jour des rois

I

L’aube sur les grands monts se leva frémissante
Le six janvier de l’an du Christ huit cent soixante,
Comme si dans les cieux cette clarté savait
Pourquoi l’homme de fer et d’acier se revêt
Et quelle ombre il prépare aux livides journées.

Une blême blancheur baigne les Pyrénées;
Le louche point du jour de la morne saison,
Par places, dans le large et confus horizon,
Brille, aiguise un clocher, ébauche un monticule;
Et la plaine est obscure, et dans le crépuscule
L’Egba, l’Arga, le Cil, tous ces cours d’eau rampants,
Font des fourmillements d’éclairs et de serpents;
Le bourg Chagres est là près de sa forteresse.

II

Le mendiant du pont de Crassus, où se dresse
L’autel d’Hercule offert aux Jeux Aragonaux,
Est, comme à l’ordinaire, entre deux noirs créneaux,
Venu s’asseoir, tranquille et muet, dès l’aurore.
La larve qui n’est plus ou qui n’est pas encore
Ressemble à ce vieillard, spectre aux funèbres yeux,

Grelottant dans l’horreur d’un haillon monstrueux;
C’est le squelette ayant faim et soif dans la tombe.
Dans ce siècle où sur tous l’esclavage surplombe,
Où tout être, perdu dans la nuit, quel qu’il soit,
Même le plus petit, même le plus étroit,
Offre toujours assez de place pour un maître,
Où c’est un tort de vivre, où c’est un crime d’être,
Ce pauvre homme est chétif au point qu’il est absous;
Il habite le coin du néant, au-dessous
Du dernier échelon de la souffrance humaine,
Si bas, que les heureux ne prennent pas la peine
D’ajouter sa misère à leur joyeux orgueil,
Ni les infortunés d’y confronter leur deuil;
Penché sur le tombeau plein de l’ombre mortelle,
Il est comme un cheval attendant qu’on dételle;
Abject au point que l’homme et la femme, les pas,
Les bruits, l’enterrement, la noce, les trépas,
Les fêtes, sans l’atteindre, autour de lui s’écoulent;
Et le bien et le mal, sans le voir, sur lui roulent;
Tout au plus raille-t-on ce gueux sur son fumier;
Tout le tumulte humain, soldats au fier cimier,
Moines tondus, l’amour, le meurtre, la bataille,
Ignore cette cendre ou rit de cette paille;
Qu’est-il? Rien, ver de terre, ombre; et même l’ennui
N’a pas le temps de perdre un coup de pied sur lui.
Il rampe entre la chose et la bête de somme;
Tibère, sans marcher dessus, verrait cet homme,
Cet être obscur, infect, pétrifié, dormant,
Ne valant pas l’effort de son écrasement;
Celui qui le voit, dit: « C’est l’idiot!” et passe;
Son regard fixe semble effaré par l’espace;
Infirme, il ne pourrait manier des outils;
C’est un de ces vivants lugubres, engloutis
Dans cette extrémité de l’ombre où se termine
La maladie en lèpre et l’ordure en vermine.
C’est à lui que les maux en bas sont limités;
Du rendez-vous des deuils et des calamités

Sa loque, au vent flottante, est l’effroyable enseigne;
Sous ses ongles crispés sa peau s’empourpre et saigne;
Il regarde, voit-il? il écoute, entend-il?
Si cet être aperçoit l’homme, c’est de profil,
Nul visage n’étant tourné vers ses ténèbres;
La famine et la fièvre ont ployé ses vertèbres;
On voudrait balayer son ombre du pavé;
Au passant qui lui donne, il bégaye un Ave;
Sa parole ébauchée en murmure s’achève;
Et si, dans sa stupeur et du fond de son rêve,
Parfois à quelque chose, ici bas, il répond,
C’est à ce que dit l’eau sous les arches du pont.

Sa maigreur est hideuse aux trous de sa guenille.
Et le seul point par où ce fantôme chenille
Touche aux hommes courbés le soir et le matin,
C’est, à l’aube, au couchant, sa prière en latin,
Dans l’ombre, d’une voix lente psalmodiée.

III

Flamme au septentrion. C’est Vich incendiée.
Don Pancho s’est rué sur Vich au point du jour,
Pancho, roi d’Oloron, commande au carrefour
Des trois pertuis profonds qui vont d’Espagne en France;
Voulant piller, il a donné la préférence
À Vich, qui fait commerce avec Tarbe et Cahors;
Pancho, fauve au dedans, est difforme au dehors;
Il est camard, son nez étant sans cartilages,
Et si méchant, qu’on dit que les gens des villages
Ramassent du poil d’ours où cet homme a passé.
Il a brisé la porte, enjambé le fossé,
Est entré dans l’église, et sous les sombres porches
S’est dressé, rouge spectre, ayant aux poings deux torches;
Et maintenant, maisons, tours, palais spacieux,
Toute la ville monte en lueur dans les cieux.

Flamboiement au midi. C’est Girone qui brûle.
Le roi Blas a jadis eu d’Inez la matrulle,
Deux bâtards, ce qui fait qu’à cette heure l’on a
Gil, roi de Luz, avec Jean, duc de Cardona;
L’un règne à Roncevaux et l’autre au col d’Andorre.
Quiconque voit des dieux dans les loups, les adore.
Ils ont, la veille au soir, quitté leurs deux donjons,
Ensemble, avec leur bande, en disant: « Partageons!”
N’étant pas trop de deux pour ce qu’ils ont à faire.
En route, le plus jeune a crié: « Bah! mon frère,
Rions; et renonçons à la chose, veux-tu?
Revenons sur nos pas; je ne suis point têtu,
Si tu veux t’en ôter, c’est dit, je me retire.
— Ma règle, a dit l’aîné, c’est de ne jamais rire
Ni reculer, ayant derrière moi l’enfer.”
Et c’est ainsi qu’ils ont, ces deux princes de fer,
Après avoir rompu le mur qui la couronne,
Brûlé la belle ville heureuse de Girone;
Et fait noir l’horizon que le Seigneur fait bleu.

Rougeur à l’orient. C’est Lumbier en feu.
Ariscat l’est venu piller pour se distraire.
Ariscat est le roi d’Aguas; ce téméraire,
Car, en basque, Ariscat veut dire le Hardi,
À son donjon debout près du pic du Midi,
Comme s’il s’égalait à la montagne immense.
Il brûle Lumbier comme on brûla Numance;
L’histoire est quelquefois l’infidèle espion:
Elle oublie Ariscat et vante Scipion;
N’importe! le roi basque est invincible, infâme,
Superbe, comme un autre, et fait sa grande flamme;
Cette ville n’est plus qu’un bûcher; il est fier;
Et le tas de tisons d’Ariscat, Lumbier,
Vaut bien Tyr, le monceau de braises d’Alexandre.

Fumée à l’occident. C’est Teruel en cendre.

Le roi du mont Jaxa, Gesufal le Cruel,
Pour son baiser terrible a choisi Teruel;
Il vient d’en approcher ses deux lèvres funèbres,
Et Teruel se tord dans un flot de ténèbres.
Le fort que sur un pic Gesufal éleva
Est si haut, que du faîte on voit tout l’Alava,
Tout l’Èbre, les deux mers, et le merveilleux golfe
Où tombe Phaéton et d’où s’envole Astolphe.
Gesufal est ce roi, gai comme les démons,
Qui disait aux pays gisant au pied des monts,
Sol inquiet, tremblant comme une solfatare:
«Je suis ménétrier; je mets à ma guitare
La corde des gibets dressés sur le chemin;
Dansez, peuples! j’ai deux royaumes dans ma main;
Aragon et Léon sont mes deux castagnettes.”
C’est lui qui dit encor: « Je fais les places nettes.”
Et Teruel, hier une ville, aujourd’hui
Est de l’ombre. Ô désastre! ô peuple sans appui!
Des tourbillons de nuit et d’étincelles passent,
Les façades au fond des fournaises s’effacent,
L’enfant cherche la femme et la femme l’enfant,
Un râle horrible sort du foyer étouffant;
Les flammèches au vent semblent d’affreux moustiques;
On voit dans le brasier le comptoir des boutiques
Où le marchand vendait la veille, et les tiroirs
Sont là béants, montrant de l’or dans leurs coins noirs.
Le feu poursuit la foule et sur les toits s’allonge;
On crie, on tombe, on fuit, tant la vie est un songe!

IV

Qu’est-ce que ce torrent de rois? Pourquoi ce choix,
Quatre villes? Pourquoi toutes quatre à la fois?
Sont-ce des châtiments, ou n’est-ce qu’un carnage?
Pas de choix. Le hasard, ou bien le voisinage,
Voilà tout; le butin pour but et pour raison;
Quant aux quatre cités brûlant à l’horizon,

Regardez: vous verrez bien d’autres rougeurs sombres.
Toute la perspective est un tas de décombres.
La montagne a jeté sur la plaine ses rois,
Rien de plus. Quant au fait, le voici: Navarrois,
Basques, Aragonais, Catalans, ont des terres;
Pourquoi? Pour enrichir les princes. Monastères
Et seigneurs sont le but du paysan. Le droit
Est l’envers du pouvoir dont la force est l’endroit;
Depuis que le puissant sur le faible se rue,
Entre l’homme d’épée et l’homme de charrue,
Il existe une loi dont l’article premier
C’est que l’un est le maître et l’autre le fermier;
Les enfants sont manants, les femmes sont servantes.
À quoi bon discuter? Sans cessions ni ventes,
La maison appartient au fort, source des lois,
Et le bourg est à qui peut pendre le bourgeois;
Toute chose est à l’homme armé; les cimeterres
Font les meilleurs contrats et sont les bons notaires;
Qui peut prendre doit prendre; et le tabellion
Qui sait le mieux signer un bail, c’est le lion.

Cela posé, qu’ont fait ces peuples? Leur délire
Fut triste. L’autre mois, les rois leur ont fait dire
D’alimenter les monts d’où l’eau vers eux descend,
Et d’y mener vingt bœufs et vingt moutons sur cent,
Plus, une fanéga d’orge et de blé par homme.
La plaine est ouvrière et partant économe;
Les pays plats se sont humblement excusés,
Criant grâce, alléguant qu’ils n’ont de rien assez,
Que maigre est l’Aragon et pauvre la Navarre.
Peuple pauvre, les rois prononcent peuple avare;
De là, frémissement et colère là-haut.
Ordre aux arrière-bans d’accourir au plus tôt;
Et Gesufal, celui d’où tombent les sentences,
A fait venir devant un monceau de potences
Les alcades des champs et les anciens des bourgs,
Affirmant qu’il irait, au son de ses tambours,

Pardieu! chercher leurs bœufs chez eux sous des arcades
Faites de pieds d’anciens et de jambes d’alcades.
Le refus persistant, les rois sont descendus.

V

Et c’est pourquoi, s’étant par message entendus,
En bons cousins, étant convenus en famille
De sortir à la fois, vers l’heure où l’aube brille,
Chacun de sa montagne et chacun de sa tour,
Ils vont fêtant le jour des rois, car c’est leur jour,
Par un grand brûlement de villes dans la plaine.

Déroute; enfants, vieillards, bœufs, moutons; clameur vaine,
Trompettes, cris de guerre: exterminons! frappons!
Chariots s’accrochant aux passages des ponts;
Les champs hagards sont pleins de sombres débandades;
La même flamme court sur les cinq Mérindades;
Olite tend les bras à Tudela qui fuit
Vers la pâle Estrella sur qui le brandon luit;
Et Sanguesa frémit, et toutes quatre ensemble
Appellent au secours Pampelune qui tremble.
Comme on sait tous les noms de ces rois, Gilimer,
Torismondo, Garci, grand-maître de la mer,
Harizetta, Wermond, Barbo, l’homme égrégore,
Juan, prince de Héas, Guy, comte de Bigorre,
Blas-el-Matador, Gil, Francavel, Favilla,
Et qu’enfin, c’est un flot terrible qui vient là,
Devant toutes ces mains dans tant d’horreurs trempées,
On n’a pas songé même à courir aux épées;
On sent qu’en cet essaim que la rage assembla,
Chaque monstre est un grain de cendre d’Attila,
Qu’ils sont fléaux, qu’ils ont en eux l’esprit de guerre;
Qu’ouverts comme Oyarzun, fermés comme Figuère,
Tous les bourgs sont égaux devant l’effrayant vol
De ces chauves-souris du noir ciel espagnol,
Et que tours et créneaux croulent comme des rêves

Au tourbillonnement farouche de leurs glaives;
Nul ne résiste; on meurt. Tas d’hommes poursuivis!
Pas une ville n’a dressé son pont-levis,
Croyant fléchir les rois écumants de victoire
Par l’acceptation tremblante de leur gloire.
On se cache, on s’enfuit, chacun avec les siens.
Ils ont vers Gesufal envoyé leurs anciens,
Pieds nus, la corde au cou, criant miséricorde;
Fidèle à sa promesse, il a serré la corde.

On n’a pas même à Reuss, ô fureur de ces rois!
Épargné le couvent des Filles de la Croix;
Comme on force un fermoir pour feuilleter un livre,
Ils en ont fait briser la porte au soldat ivre.
Hélas! Christ abritait sous un mur élevé
Ces anges où Marie est lisible, où l’Ave
Est écrit, mot divin, sur des pages fidèles,
Vierges pures ayant la Vierge sainte en elles,
Reliure d’ivoire à l’exemplaire d’or!
La grille ouverte, ils ont franchi le corridor;
Les nonnes frémissaient au fond du sanctuaire;
En vain le couvent sombre agitait son suaire,
En vain grondait au seuil le vieux foudre romain,
En vain l’abbesse, blanche, en deuil, la crosse en main,
Sinistre, protégeait son tremblant troupeau d’âmes;
Devant des mécréants, des saintes sont des femmes;
L’homme parfois à Dieu jette d’affreux défis;
L’autel, l’horreur du lieu, le sanglant crucifix,
Le cloître avec sa nuit, l’abbesse avec sa crosse,
Tout s’est évanoui dans un rire féroce.
Et ceci fut l’exploit de Blas-el-Matador.

Partout on voit l’alcade et le corrégidor
Pendus, leurs noms au dos, à la potence vile,
L’un, devant son hameau, l’autre devant sa ville.

Tous les bourgs ont tendu leurs gorges au couteau.

Chagres, comme le reste, est mort sur son coteau.
Ô deuil! ce fut pendant une journée entière,
Entre les parapets de l’étroit pont de pierre
Que bâtit là Crassus, lieutenant de César,
Comme l’écrasement d’un peuple sous un char.
Ils voulaient s’évader, les manants misérables;
Mais les pointes d’épée, âpres, inexorables,
Comme des becs de flamme, accouraient derrière eux;
Les bras levés, les cris, les pleurs, étaient affreux;
On n’avait jamais vu peut-être une contrée
D’un tel rayonnement de meurtre pénétrée;
Le pont, d’un bout à l’autre, était un cliquetis;
Les soldats arrachaient aux mères leurs petits;
Et l’on voyait tomber morts et vivants dans l’Èbre,
Pêle-mêle, et pour tous, hélas! ce pont funèbre
Qui sortait de la ville, entrait dans le tombeau.

VI

Le couchant empourpra le mont Tibidabo;
Le soir vint; tirant l’âne obstiné qui recule,
Le soldat se remit en route au crépuscule,
Heure trouble assortie au cri du chat-huant;
Lourds de butin, le long des chemins saluant
Les images des saints que les passants vénèrent,
Vainqueurs, sanglants, joyeux, les rois s’en retournèrent
Chacun avec ses gens, chacun vers son état;
Et, reflet du couchant, ou bien de l’attentat,
La chaîne des vieux monts, funeste et vaste bouge,
Apparaissait, dans l’ombre horrible, toute rouge;
On eût dit que, tandis qu’en bas on triomphait,
Quelque archange vengeur de la plaine avait fait
Remonter tout ce sang au front de la montagne.
Chaque bande, à travers la brumeuse campagne,
Dans des directions diverses s’enfonça;
Ceux-là vers Roncevaux, ceux-ci vers Tolosa;

Et les pillards tâtaient leurs sacs, de peur que l’ombre
N’en fît tomber l’enflure ou décroître le nombre,
La crainte du voleur étant d’être volé.
Meurtre du laboureur et pillage du blé,
La journée était bonne, et les files de lances
Serpentaient dans les champs pleins de sombres silences;
Les montagnards disaient: « Quel beau coup de filet!”
Après avoir tué la plaine qui râlait,
Ils rentraient dans leurs monts, comme une flotte au havre,
Et, riant et chantant, s’éloignaient du cadavre.
On vit leurs dos confus reluire quelque temps,
Et leurs rangs se grouper sous les drapeaux flottants
Ainsi que des chaînons ténébreux se resserrent,
Puis ces farouches voix dans la nuit s’effacèrent.

VII

Le pont de Crassus, morne et tout mouillé de sang,
Resta désert.
Alors, tragique et se dressant,
Le mendiant, tendant ses deux mains décharnées,
Montra sa souquenille immonde aux Pyrénées,
Et cria dans l’abîme et dans l’immensité:
«Confrontez-vous. Sentez votre fraternité,
Ô mont superbe, ô loque infâme! neige, boue!
Comparez, sous le vent des cieux qui les secoue,
Toi, tes nuages noirs, toi, tes haillons hideux,
Ô guenille, ô montagne; et cachez toutes deux,
Pendant que les vivants se traînent sur leurs ventres,
Toi, les poux dans tes trous, toi, les rois dans tes antres!”

V. Les Chevaliers errants

La terre a vu jadis

La terre a vu jadis errer des paladins;
Ils flamboyaient ainsi que des éclairs soudains,
Puis s’évanouissaient, laissant sur les visages
La crainte, et la lueur de leurs brusques passages;
Ils étaient, dans des temps d’oppression, de deuil,
De honte, où l’infamie étalait son orgueil,
Les spectres de l’honneur, du droit, de la justice;
Ils foudroyaient le crime, ils souffletaient le vice;
On voyait le vol fuir, l’imposture hésiter,
Blêmir la trahison, et se déconcerter
Toute puissance injuste, inhumaine, usurpée,
Devant ces magistrats sinistres de l’épée;
Malheur à qui faisait le mal! Un de ces bras
Sortait de l’ombre avec ce cri: « Tu périras!”
Contre le genre humain et devant la nature,
De l’équité suprême ils tentaient l’aventure;
Prêts à toute besogne, à toute heure, en tout lieu,
Farouches, ils étaient les chevaliers de Dieu.

Ils erraient dans la nuit ainsi que des lumières.

Leur seigneurie était tutrice des chaumières;
Ils étaient justes, bons, lugubres, ténébreux;
Quoique gardé par eux, quoique vengé par eux,
Le peuple en leur présence avait l’inquiétude
De la foule devant la pâle solitude;
Car on a peur de ceux qui marchent en songeant,
Pendant que l’aquilon, du haut des cieux plongeant,
Rugit, et que la pluie épand à flots son urne
Sur leur tête entrevue au fond du bois nocturne.

Ils passaient effrayants, muets, masqués de fer.

Quelques-uns ressemblaient à des larves d’enfer;
Leurs cimiers se dressaient difformes sur leurs heaumes,
On ne savait jamais d’où sortaient ces fantômes;
On disait: « Qui sont-ils? d’où viennent-ils? Ils sont
Ceux qui punissent, ceux qui jugent, ceux qui vont.”
Tragiques, ils avaient l’attitude du rêve.

Ô les noirs chevaucheurs! ô les marcheurs sans trêve!
Partout où reluisait l’acier de leur corset,
Partout où l’un d’eux, calme et grave, apparaissait
Posant sa lance au coin ténébreux de la salle,
Partout où surgissait leur ombre colossale,
On sentait la terreur des pays inconnus;
Celui-ci vient du Rhin; celui-là du Cydnus;
Derrière eux cheminait la Mort, squelette chauve;
Il semblait qu’aux naseaux de leur cavale fauve
On entendît la mer ou la forêt gronder;
Et c’est aux quatre vents qu’il fallait demander
Si ce passant était roi d’Albe ou de Bretagne;
S’il sortait de la plaine ou bien de la montagne,
S’il avait triomphé du maure, ou du chenil
Des peuples monstrueux qui hurlent près du Nil;
Quelle ville son bras avait prise ou sauvée;
De quel monstre il avait écrasé la couvée.

Les noms de quelques-uns jusqu’à nous sont venus;
Ils s’appelaient Bernard, Lahire, Éviradnus;
Ils avaient vu l’Afrique; ils éveillaient l’idée
D’on ne sait quelle guerre effroyable en Judée,
Rois dans l’Inde, ils étaient en Europe barons;
Et les aigles, les cris des combats, les clairons,
Les batailles, les rois, les dieux, les épopées,
Tourbillonnaient dans l’ombre au vent de leurs épées;
Qui les voyait passer à l’angle de son mur
Pensait à ces cités d’or, de brume et d’azur,
Qui font l’effet d’un songe à la foule effarée:

Tyr, Héliopolis, Solyme, Césarée.
Ils surgissaient du sud ou du septentrion,
Portant sur leur écu l’hydre ou l’alérion,
Couverts des noirs oiseaux du taillis héraldique,
Marchant seuls au sentier que le devoir indique,
Ajoutant au bruit sourd de leur pas solennel
La vague obscurité d’un voyage éternel,
Ayant franchi les flots, les monts, les bois horribles,
Ils venaient de si loin, qu’ils en étaient terribles;
Et ces grands chevaliers mêlaient à leurs blasons
Toute l’immensité des sombres horizons.

Le Petit Roi de Galice

I

Le ravin d’Ernula

Ils sont là tous les dix, les infants d’Asturie.
La même affaire unit dans la même prairie
Les cinq de Santillane aux cinq d’Oviedo.
C’est midi; les mulets, très las, ont besoin d’eau,
L’âne a soif, le cheval souffle et baisse un œil terne,
Et la troupe a fait halte auprès d’une citerne;
Tout à l’heure on ira plus loin, bannière au vent;
Ils atteindront le fond de l’Asturie avant
Que la nuit ait couvert la sierra de ses ombres;
Ils suivent le chemin qu’à travers ces monts sombres
Un torrent, maintenant à sec, jadis creusa,
Comme s’il voulait joindre Espos à Tolosa;
Un prêtre est avec eux qui lit son bréviaire.

Entre eux et Compostelle ils ont mis la rivière.

Ils sont près d’Ernula, bois où le pin verdit,
Où Pélage est si grand, que le chevrier dit:
«Les Arabes faisaient la nuit sur la patrie.
— Combien sont-ils? criaient les peuples d’Asturie.
Pélage en sa main prit la forêt d’Ernula,
Alluma cette torche, et, tant qu’elle brûla,
Il put voir et compter, du haut de la montagne,
Les maures ténébreux jusqu’au fond de l’Espagne.”

II

Leurs Altesses

L’endroit est désolé, les gens sont triomphants.

C’est un groupe tragique et fier que ces infants,
Précédés d’un clairon qu’à distance accompagne
Une bande des gueux les plus noirs de l’Espagne;
Sur le front des soldats, férocement vêtus,
La montera de fer courbe ses crocs pointus,
Et Mauregat n’a point d’estafiers plus sauvages,
Et le forban Dragut n’a pas sur les rivages
Écumé de forçats pires, et Gaïffer
N’a pas, dans le troupeau qui le suit, plus d’enfer;
Les casques sont d’acier et les cœurs sont de bronze;
Quant aux infants, ce sont dix noms sanglants: Alonze,
Don Santos Pacheco le Hardi, Froïla,
Qui, si l’on veut Satan, peut dire: Me voilà!
Ponce, qui tient la mer d’Irun à Biscarosse,
Rostabat le Géant, Materne le Féroce,
Blas, Ramon, Jorge et Ruy le Subtil, leur aîné,
Blond, le moins violent et le plus acharné.

Le mont, complice et noir, s’ouvre en gorges désertes.

Ils sont frères; c’est bien; sont-ils amis? Non, certes.
Ces Caïns pour lien ont la perte d’autrui.
Blas, du reste, est l’ami de Materne, et don Ruy
De Ramon, comme Atrée est l’ami de Thyeste.

III

Nuño

Les chefs parlent entre eux, les soldats font la sieste.

Les chevaux sont parqués à part, et sont gardés
Par dix hommes, riant, causant, jouant aux dés,
Qui sont dix intendants, ayant titres de maîtres,
Armés d’épieux, avec des poignards à leurs guêtres.
Le sentier a l’air traître et l’arbre a l’air méchant;
Et la chèvre qui broute au flanc du mont penchant,
Entre les grès lépreux trouve à peine une câpre,
Tant la ravine est fauve et tant la roche est âpre;
De distance en distance, on voit des puits bourbeux
Où finit le sillon des chariots à bœufs;
Hors un peu d’herbe autour des puits, tout est aride;
Tout du grand midi sombre a l’implacable ride;
Les arbres sont gercés, les granits sont fendus.
L’air rare et brûlant manque aux oiseaux éperdus.
On distingue des tours sur l’épine dorsale
D’un mont lointain qui semble une ourse colossale;
Quand, où Dieu met le roc, l’homme bâtit le fort,
Quand à la solitude il ajoute la mort,
Quand de l’inaccessible il fait l’inexpugnable,
C’est triste. Dans des plis d’ocre rouge et de sable,
Les hauts sentiers des cols, vagues linéaments,

S’arrêtent court, brusqués par les escarpements.
Vers le nord, le troupeau des nuages qui passe,
Poursuivi par le vent, chien hurlant de l’espace,
S’enfuit, à tous les pics laissant de sa toison.
Le Corcova remplit le fond de l’horizon.

On entend dans les pins que l’âge use et mutile
Lutter le rocher hydre et le torrent reptile;
Près du petit pré vert pour la halte choisi,
Un précipice obscur, sans pitié, sans merci,
Aveugle, ouvre son flanc, plein d’une pâle brume
Où l’Ybaïchalval, épouvantable, écume.
De vrais brigands n’auraient pas mieux trouvé l’endroit.
Le col de la vallée est tortueux, étroit,
Rude, et si hérissé de broussaille et d’ortie,
Qu’un seul homme en pourrait défendre la sortie.

De quoi sont-ils joyeux? D’un exploit. Cette nuit,
Se glissant dans la ville avec leurs gens, sans bruit,
Avant l’heure où commence à poindre l’aube grise,
Ils ont dans Compostelle enlevé par surprise
Le pauvre petit roi de Galice, Nuño.
Les loups sont là, pesant dans leur griffe l’agneau.
En cercle près du puits, dans le champ d’herbe verte,
Cette collection de monstres se concerte.

Le jeune roi captif a quinze ans; ses voleurs
Sont ses oncles; de là son effroi; pas de pleurs;
Il se tait; il comprend le but qui les rassemble;
Il bâille, et par moments ferme les yeux, et tremble.
Son front triste est meurtri d’un coup de gantelet.
En partant, on l’avait lié sur un mulet;
Grave et sombre, il a dit: « Cette corde me blesse.”
On l’a fait délier, dédaignant sa faiblesse.
Mais ses oncles hagards fixent leurs yeux sur lui.
L’orphelin sent le vide horrible et sans appui.
À sa mort, espérant dompter les vents contraires,

Le feu roi don Garci fit venir ses dix frères,
Supplia leur honneur, leur sang, leur cœur, leur foi,
Et leur recommanda ce faible enfant, leur roi.
On discute, en baissant la voix avec mystère,
Trois avis: le cloîtrer au prochain monastère,
L’aller vendre à Juzaph, prince des sarrasins,
Le jeter simplement dans un des puits voisins.

IV

La conversation des infants

«La vie est un affront alors qu’on nous la laisse,
Dit Pacheco; Qu’il vive, et meure de vieillesse!
Tué, c’était le roi; vivant, c’est un bâtard.
Qu’il vive! au couvent!

— Mais s’il reparaît plus tard?

Dit Jorge.

— Oui, s’il revient? Dit Materno l’Hyène.

— S’il revient? disent Ponce et Ramon.

— Qu’il revienne!

Réplique Pacheco. Frères, si maintenant
Nous le laissons vivant, nous le faisons manant.
Je lui dirais: « Choisis: la mort, ou bien le cloître.”
Si, pouvant disparaître, il aime mieux décroître,
Je vous l’enferme au fond d’un moutier vermoulu,
Et je lui dis: C’est bon. C’est toi qui l’as voulu.
Un roi qu’on avilit tombe; on le destitue

Bien quand on le méprise et mal quand on le tue.
Nuño mort, c’est un spectre; il reviendrait. Mais, bah!
Ayant plié le jour où mon bras le courba,
Mais s’étant laissé tondre, ayant eu la paresse
De vivre, que m’importe après qu’il reparaisse!
Je dirais: « Le feu roi hantait les filles; bien;
» A-t-il eu quelque part ce fils? Je n’en sais rien;
» Mais depuis quand, bâtard et lâche, est-on des nôtres?
» Toute la différence entre un rustre et nous autres,
» C’est que, si l’affront vient à notre choix s’offrir,
» Le rustre voudra vivre et le prince mourir;
» Or, ce drôle a vécu.” Les manants ont envie
De devenir caducs, et tiennent à la vie;
Ils sont bourgeois, marchands, bâtards, vont aux sermons,
Et meurent vieux; mais nous, les princes, nous aimons
Une jeunesse courte et gaie à la fin sanglante;
Nous sommes les guerriers; nous trouvons la mort lente,
Et nous lui crions: « Viens!” et nous accélérons
Son pas lugubre avec le bruit de nos clairons.
Le peuple nous connaît, et le sait bien; il chasse
Quiconque prouve mal sa couronne et sa race,
Quiconque porte mal sa peau de roi. Jamais
Un roi n’est ressorti d’un cloître; et je promets
De donner aux bouviers qui sont dans la prairie
Tous mes états d’Algarve et tous ceux d’Asturie,
Si quelqu’un, n’importe où, dans les pays de mer
Ou de terre, en Espagne, en France, dans l’enfer,
Me montre un capuchon d’où sort une couronne.
Le froc est un linceul que la nuit environne.
Après que vous avez blémi dans un couvent,
On ne veut plus de vous; un moine, est-ce un vivant?
On ne vous trouve plus la mine assez féroce.
«Moine, reprends ta robe! Abbé, reprends ta crosse!
» Va-t’en!” Voilà le cri qu’on vous jette. Laissons
Vivre l’enfant.”

Don Ruy, le chef des trahisons,

Froid, se parle à lui-même et dit:

«Cette mesure
Aurait ceci de bon qu’elle serait très sûre.

— Laquelle?” dit Ramon.

Mais Ruy, sans se hâter:

«Je ne sais rien de mieux, dit-il, pour compléter
Les choses de l’état et de la politique,
Et les actes prudents qu’on fait et qu’on pratique,
Et qui ne doivent pas du vulgaire être sus,
Qu’un puits profond, avec une pierre dessus.”

Cela se dit pendant que les gueux, pêle-mêle,
Boivent l’ombre et le rêve à l’obscure mamelle
Du sommeil ténébreux et muet; et, pendant
Que l’enfant songe, assis sous le soleil ardent.
Le prêtre mange, avec les prières d’usage.

V

Les soldats continuent de dormir et les infants de causer

Une faute: on n’a point fait garder le passage.
Ô don Ruy le Subtil, à quoi donc pensez-vous?
Mais don Ruy répondrait: « J’ai la ronce et le houx,
Et chaque pan de roche est une sentinelle;
La fauve solitude est l’amie éternelle

Des larrons, des voleurs et des hommes de nuit;
Ce pays ténébreux comme un antre est construit.
Et nous avons ici notre aire inabordable;
C’est un vieux recéleur que ce mont formidable;
Sinistre, il nous accepte, et, quoi que nous fassions,
Il cache dans ses trous toutes nos actions;
Et que pouvons-nous donc craindre dans ces provinces,
Étant bandits aux champs et dans les villes princes?”

Le débat sur le roi continue. « Il faudrait,
Dit l’infant Ruy, trouver quelque couvent discret,
Quelque in-pace bien calme où cet enfant vieillisse;
Soit. Mais il vaudrait mieux abréger le supplice,
Et s’en débarrasser dans l’Ybaïchalval.
Prenez vite un parti, vite! Ensuite à cheval!
Dépêchons.”

Et, voyant que l’infant don Materne
Jette une pierre, et puis une autre, à la citerne,
Et qu’il suit du regard les cercles qu’elles font,
L’infant Ruy s’interrompt, dit: « Pas assez profond.
J’ai regardé.” Puis, calme, il reprend:

«Une affaire
Perd sa première forme alors qu’on la diffère;
Un point est décidé dès qu’il est éclairci.
Nous sommes tous d’accord en bons frères ici,
L’enfant nous gêne. Il faut que de la vie il sorte;
Le cloître n’est qu’un seuil, la tombe est une porte .
Choisissez. Mais que tout soit fait avant demain.”

VI

Quelqu’un

Alerte! un cavalier passe dans le chemin.
C’est l’heure où les soldats, aux yeux lourds, aux fronts blêmes,
La sieste finissant, se réveillent d’eux-mêmes.
Le cavalier qui passe est habillé de fer;
Il vient par le sentier du côté de la mer;
Il entre dans le val, il franchit la chaussée;
Calme, il approche. Il a la visière baissée;
Il est seul; son cheval est blanc.

Bon chevalier,
Qu’est-ce que vous venez faire dans ce hallier?
Bon passant, quel hasard funeste vous amène
Parmi ces rois ayant de la figure humaine
Tout ce que les démons peuvent en copier?
Quelle abeille êtes-vous pour entrer au guêpier?
Quel archange êtes-vous pour entrer dans l’abîme?

Les princes, occupés de bien faire leur crime,
Virent, hautains d’abord, sans trop se soucier,
Passer cet inconnu sous son voile d’acier;
Lui-même, il paraissait, traversant la clairière,
Regarder vaguement leur bande aventurière;
Comme si ses poumons trouvaient l’air étouffant,
Il se hâtait; soudain il aperçut l’enfant;
Alors il marcha droit vers eux, mit pied à terre,
Et, grave, il dit:

«Je sens une odeur de panthère,
Comme si je passais dans les monts de Tunis,
Je vous trouve en ce lieu trop d’hommes réunis;
Fait-on le mal ici par hasard? Je soupçonne
Volontiers les endroits où ne passe personne.
Qu’est-ce que cet enfant? Et que faites-vous là?”

Un rire, si bruyant qu’un vautour s’envola,
Fut du fier Pacheco la première réponse;
Puis il cria:

«Pardieu, mes frères! Jorge, Ponce,
Ruy, Rostabat, Alonze, avez-vous entendu?
Les arbres du ravin demandent un pendu;
Qu’ils prennent patience, ils l’auront tout à l’heure;
Je veux d’abord répondre à l’homme. Que je meure
Si je lui cèle rien de ce qu’il veut savoir!
Devant moi d’ordinaire, et dès que l’on croit voir
Quelque chose qui semble aux manants mon panache,
Vite, on clôt les volets des maisons, on se cache,
On se bouche l’oreille et l’on ferme les yeux;
Je suis content d’avoir enfin un curieux.
Il ne sera pas dit que quelqu’un sur la terre,
Princes, m’aura vu faire une chose et la taire,
Et que, questionné, j’aurai balbutié.
Le hardi qui fait peur, muet, ferait pitié.
Ma main s’ouvre toujours, montrant ce qu’elle sème.
J’étalerais mon âme à Dieu, vînt-il lui-même
M’interroger du haut des cieux, moi, Pacheco,
Ayant pour voix la foudre et l’enfer pour écho.
Çà, qui que tu sois, homme, écoute, misérable.
Nous choisirons après ton chêne ou ton érable,
Selon qu’il peut te plaire, en ce bois d’Ernula,
Pendre à ces branches-ci plutôt qu’à celles-là.
Écoute: ces seigneurs à mines téméraires,
Et moi, le Pacheco, nous sommes les dix frères;
Nous sommes les infants d’Asturie; et ceci,
C’est Nuño, fils de feu notre frère Garci,
Roi de Galice, ayant pour ville Compostelle;
Nous, ses oncles, avons sur lui droit de tutelle;
Nous l’allons verrouiller dans un couvent. Pourquoi?
C’est qu’il est si petit, qu’il est à peine roi;
Et que ce peuple-ci veut de fortes épées;
Tant de haines autour du maître sont groupées
Qu’il faut que le seigneur ait la barbe au menton;
Donc, nous avons ôté du trône l’avorton,
Et nous l’allons offrir au bon Dieu. Sur mon âme,

Cela vous a la peau plus blanche qu’une femme!
Mes frères, n’est-ce pas? C’est mou, c’est grelottant;
On ignore s’il voit, on ne sait s’il entend;
Un roi, ça! rien qu’à voir ce petit, on s’ennuie.
Moi, du moins, j’ai dans l’œil des flammes, et la pluie,
Le soleil et le vent, ces farouches tanneurs,
M’ont fait le cuir robuste et ferme, messeigneurs!
Ah! pardieu, s’il est beau d’être prince, c’est rude:
Avoir du combattant l’éternelle attitude,
Vivre casqué, suer l’été, geler l’hiver,
Être le ver affreux d’une larve de fer,
Coucher dans le harnais, boire à la calebasse,
Le soir être si las qu’on va la tête basse,
Se tordre un linge aux pieds, les souliers vous manquant,
Guerroyer tout le jour, la nuit garder le camp,
Marcher à jeun, marcher vaincu, marcher malade,
Sentir suinter le sang par quelque estafilade,
Manger des oignons crus et dormir par hasard,
Voilà. Vissez-moi donc le heaume et le brassard
Sur ce fœtus, à qui bientôt on verra croître
Par derrière une mitre et par devant un goître!
À la bonne heure, moi! je suis le compagnon
Des coups d’épée, et j’ai la Colère pour nom,
Et les poils de mon bras font peur aux bêtes fauves.
Ce nain vivra tondu parmi les vieillards chauves;
Il se pourrait aussi, pour le bien de l’état,
Si l’on trouvait un puits très-creux, qu’on l’y jetât;
Moi, je l’aimerais mieux moine en quelque cachette,
Servant la messe au prêtre avec une clochette.
Pour nous, chacun de nous étant prince et géant,
Nous gardons sceptre et lance, et rien n’est mieux séant
Qu’aux enfants la chapelle et la bataille aux hommes.
Il a précisément dix comtés, et nous sommes
Dix princes; est-il rien de plus juste? À présent,
N’est-ce pas, tu comprends cette affaire, passant?
Elle est simple, et l’on peut n’en pas faire mystère;
Et le jour ne va pas s’éclipser, et la terre

Ne va pas refuser aux hommes le maïs,
Parce que dix seigneurs partagent un pays,
Et parce qu’un enfant rentre dans la poussière.”

Le chevalier leva lentement sa visière:
«Je m’appelle Roland, pair de France,” dit-il.

VII

Don Ruy le Subtil

Alors l’aîné prudent, le chef, Ruy le Subtil,
Sourit:

«Sire Roland, ma pente naturelle
Étant de ne chercher à personne querelle,
Je vous salue, et dis: Soyez le bienvenu!
Je vous fais remarquer que ce pays est nu,
Rude, escarpé, désert, brutal, et que nous sommes
Dix infants bien armés avec dix majordomes,
Ayant derrière nous cent coquins fort méchants;
Et que, s’il nous plaisait, nous pourrions dans ces champs
Laisser de la charogne en pâture aux volées
De corbeaux que le soir chasse dans les vallées;
Vous êtes dans un vrai coupe-gorge; voyez:
Pas un toit, pas un mur, des sentiers non frayés,
Personne; aucun secours possible; et les cascades
Couvrent le cri des gens tombés aux embuscades.
On ne voyage guère en ce val effrayant.
Les songe-creux, qui vont aux chimères bayant,
Trouvent les âpretés de ces ravins fort belles;
Mais ces chemins pierreux aux passants sont rebelles,
Ces pics repoussent l’homme, ils ont des coins hagards
Hantés par des vivants aimant peu les regards,
Et, quand une vallée est à ce point rocheuse,

Elle peut devenir aux curieux fâcheuse.
Bon Roland, votre nom est venu jusqu'à nous,
Nous sommes des seigneurs bien faisants et très-doux,
Nous ne voudrions pas vous faire de la peine,
Allez-vous-en. Parfois la montagne est malsaine.
Retournez sur vos pas, ne soyez point trop lent,
Retournez.

— Décidez mon cheval, dit Roland;
Car il a l'habitude étrange et ridicule
De ne pas m'obéir quand je veux qu'il recule."

Les infants un moment se parlèrent tout bas.
Et Ruy dit à Roland:

«Tant d'illustres combats
Font luire votre gloire, ô grand soldat sincère,
Que nous vous aimons mieux compagnon qu'adversaire.
Seigneur, tout invincible et tout Roland qu'on est,
Quand il faut, pied à pied, dans l'herbe et le genêt,
Lutter seul, et, n'ayant que deux bras, tenir tête
À cent vingt durs garçons, c'est une sombre fête;
C'est un combat d'un sang généreux empourpré,
Et qui pourrait finir, sur le sinistre pré,
Par les os d'un héros réjouissant les aigles.
Entendons-nous plutôt. Les états ont leurs règles;
Et vous êtes tombé dans un arrangement
De famille, inutile à conter longuement;
Seigneur, Nuño n'est pas possible; je m'explique:
L'enfantillage nuit à la chose publique;
Mettre sur un tel front la couronne, l'effroi,
La guerre, n'est-ce pas stupide? Un marmot roi!
Allons donc! en ce cas, si le contre-sens règne,
Si l'absurde fait loi, qu'on me donne une duègne,
Et dites aux brebis de rugir, ordonnez
Aux biches d'emboucher les clairons forcenés;
En même temps, soyez conséquent, qu'on affuble

L’ours des monts et le loup des bois d’une chasuble,
Et qu’aux pattes du tigre on plante un goupillon.
Seigneur, pour être un sage, on n’est pas un félon;
Et les choses qu’ici je vous dis sont certaines
Pour les docteurs autant que pour les capitaines.
J’arrive au fait; soyons amis. Nous voulons tous
Faire éclater l’estime où nous sommes de vous;
Voici: Leso n’est pas une bourgade vile,
La ville d’Oyarzun est une belle ville,
Toutes deux sont à vous. Si, pesant nos raisons,
Vous nous prêtez main-forte en ce que nous faisons,
Nous vous donnons les gens, les bois, les métairies.
Donc vous voilà seigneur de ces deux seigneuries;
Il ne nous reste plus qu’à nous tendre la main.
Nous avons de la cire, un prêtre, un parchemin,
Et, pour que Votre Grâce en tout point soit contente,
Nous allons vous signer ici votre patente;
C’est dit.

— Avez-vous fait ce rêve?” dit Roland.

Et, présentant au roi son beau destrier blanc:

«Tiens, roi! pars au galop, hâte-toi, cours, regagne
Ta ville, et saute au fleuve et passe la montagne,
Va!”

L’enfant-roi bondit en selle éperdument,
Et le voilà qui fuit sous le clair firmament,
À travers monts et vaux, pâle, à bride abattue.

«Çà, le premier qui monte à cheval, je le tue.”
Dit Roland.

Les infants se regardaient entre eux,
Stupéfaits.

VIII

Pacheco, Froïla, Rostabat

Et Roland:

« Il serait désastreux
Qu’un de vous poursuivît cette proie échappée;
Je ferais deux morceaux de lui d’un coup d’épée,
Comme le Duero coupe Léon en deux.”

Et, pendant qu’il parlait, à son bras hasardeux
La grande Durandal brillait toute joyeuse.
Roland s’adosse au tronc robuste d’une yeuse,
Criant: « Défiez-vous de l’épée. Elle mord.

— Quand tu serais femelle ayant pour nom la Mort,
J’irai! J’égorgerai Nuño dans la campagne!”
Dit Pacheco, sautant sur son genêt d’Espagne.

Roland monte au rocher qui barre le chemin.

L’infant pique des deux, une dague à la main,
Une autre entre les dents, prête à la repartie;
Qui donc l’empêcherait de franchir la sortie?
Ses poignets sont crispés d’avance du plaisir
D’atteindre le fuyard et de le ressaisir,
Et de sentir trembler sous l’ongle inexorable
Toute la pauvre chair de l’enfant misérable.
Il vient, et sur Roland il jette un long lacet;
Roland, surpris, recule, et Pacheco passait…
Mais le grand paladin se roidit, et l’assomme
D’un coup prodigieux qui fendit en deux l’homme
Et tua le cheval, et si surnaturel

Qu’il creva le chanfrein et troua le girel.

«Qu’est-ce que j’avais dit?” fit Roland.

«Qu’on soit sage,
Reprit-il; renoncez à forcer le passage.
Si l’un de vous, bravant Durandal à mon poing,
A le cerveau heurté de folie à ce point,
Je lui ferai descendre au talon sa fêlure;
Voyez.”

Don Froïla, caressant l’encolure
De son large cheval au mufle de taureau,
Crie: « Allons!

— Pas un pas de plus, caballero!”
Dit Roland.

Et l’infant répond d’un coup de lance;
Roland, atteint, chancelle, et Froïla s’élance;
Mais Durandal se dresse, et jette Froïla
Sur Pacheco, dont l’âme en ce moment hurla.
Froïla tombe, étreint par l’angoisse dernière;
Son casque, dont l’épée a brisé la charnière,
S’ouvre, et montre sa bouche où l’écume apparaît.
Bave épaisse et sanglante! Ainsi, dans la forêt,
La sève, en mai, gonflant les aubépines blanches,
S’enfle et sort en salive à la pointe des branches.

«Vengeance! mort! rugit Rostabat le Géant,
Nous sommes cent contre un. Tuons ce mécréant!

— Infants! cria Roland, la chose est difficile;
Car Roland n’est pas un. J’arrive de Sicile,
D’Arabie et d’Égypte, et tout ce que je sais,
C’est que des peuples noirs devant moi sont passés;
Je crois avoir plané dans le ciel solitaire;

Il m’a semblé parfois que je quittais la terre
Et l’homme, et que le dos monstrueux des griffons
M’emportait au milieu des nuages profonds;
Mais, n’importe, j’arrive, et votre audace est rare,
Et j’en ris. Prenez garde à vous, car je déclare,
Infants, que j’ai toujours senti Dieu près de moi.
Vous êtes cent contre un! Pardieu! le bel effroi!
Fils, cent maravédis valent-ils une piastre?
Cent lampions sont-ils plus farouches qu’un astre?
Combien de poux faut-il pour manger un lion?
Vous êtes peu nombreux pour la rébellion
Et pour l’encombrement du chemin, quand je passe.
Arrière!”

Rostabat le Géant, tête basse,
Crachant les grognements rauques d’un sanglier,
Lourd colosse, fondit sur le bon chevalier,
Avec le bruit d’un mur énorme qui s’écroule;
Près de lui, s’avançant comme une sombre foule,
Les sept autres infants, avec leurs intendants,
Marchent, et derrière eux viennent, grinçant des dents,
Les cent coupe-jarrets à faces renégates,
Coiffés de monteras et chaussés d’alpargates,
Demi-cercle féroce, agile, étincelant;
Et tous font converger leurs piques sur Roland.

L’infant, monstre de cœur, est monstre de stature;
Le rocher de Roland lui vient à la ceinture;
Leurs fronts sont de niveau dans ces puissants combats,
Le preux étant en haut et le géant en bas.

Rostabat prend pour fronde, ayant Roland pour cible,
Un noir grappin qui semble une araignée horrible,
Masse affreuse oscillant au bout d’un long anneau;
Il lance sur Roland cet arrache-créneau;
Roland l’esquive, et dit au géant: « Bête brute!”
Le grappin égratigne un rocher dans sa chute,

Et le géant bondit, deux haches aux deux poings.

Le colosse et le preux, terribles, se sont joints.

«Ô Durandal, ayant coupé Dol en Bretagne,
Tu peux bien me trancher encor cette montagne,”
Dit Roland, assenant l’estoc sur Rostabat.

Comme sur ses deux pieds de devant l’ours s’abat,
Après s’être dressé pour étreindre le pâtre,
Ainsi Rostabat tombe; et sur son cou d’albâtre
Laïs nue avait moins d’escarboucles luisant
Que ces fauves rochers n’ont de flaques de sang.
Il tombe; la bruyère écrasée est remplie
De cette monstrueuse et vaste panoplie;
Relevée en tombant, sa chemise d’acier
Laisse nu son poitrail de prince carnassier,
Cadavre au ventre horrible, aux hideuses mamelles,
Et l’on voit le dessous de ses noires semelles.

Les sept princes vivants regardent les trois morts.

Et, pendant ce temps-là, lâchant rênes et mors,
Le pauvre enfant sauvé fuyait vers Compostelle.

Durandal brille et fait refluer devant elle
Les assaillants, poussant des souffles d’aquilon;
Toujours droit sur le roc qui ferme le vallon,
Roland crie au troupeau qui sur lui se resserre:

«Du renfort vous serait peut-être nécessaire.
Envoyez-en chercher. À quoi bon se presser?
J’attendrai jusqu’au soir avant de commencer.

— Il raille! Tous sur lui! dit Jorge, et pêle-mêle!
Nous sommes vautours; l’aigle est notre sœur jumelle;
Fils, courage! et ce soir, pour son souper sanglant,

Chacun de nous aura son morceau de Roland.

IX

Durandal travaille

Laveuses qui, dès l’heure où l’orient se dore,
Chantez, battant du linge aux fontaines d’Andorre,
Et qui faites blanchir des toiles sous le ciel,
Chevriers qui roulez sur le Jaïzquivel
Dans les nuages gris votre hutte isolée,
Muletiers qui poussez de vallée en vallée
Vos mules sur les ponts que César éleva,
Sait-on ce que là-bas le vieux mont Corcova
Regarde par-dessus l’épaule des collines?

Le mont regarde un choc hideux de javelines,
Un noir buisson vivant de piques, hérissé,
Comme au pied d’une tour que ceindrait un fossé,
Autour d’un homme, tête altière, âpre, escarpée,
Que protège le cercle immense d’une épée.
Tous d’un côté; de l’autre, un seul; tragique duel!
Lutte énorme! combat de l’Hydre et de Michel!

Qui pourrait dire, au fond des cieux pleins de huées,
Ce que fait le tonnerre au milieu des nuées,
Et ce que fait Roland entouré d’ennemis?
Larges coups, flots de sang par des bouches vomis,
Faces se renversant en arrière livides,
Casques brisés roulant comme des cruches vides,
Flot d’assaillants toujours repoussés, blessés, morts,
Cris de rage; ô carnage! ô terreur! corps à corps
D’un homme contre un tas de gueux épouvantable!
Comme un usurier met son or sur une table,

Le meurtre sur les morts jette les morts, et rit.
Durandal flamboyant semble un sinistre esprit;
Elle va, vient, remonte et tombe, se relève,
S’abat, et fait la fête effrayante du glaive:
Sous son éclair, les bras, les cœurs, les yeux, les fronts,
Tremblent, et les hardis, nivelés aux poltrons,
Se courbent; et l’épée éclatante et fidèle
Donne des coups d’estoc qui semblent des coups d’aile;
Et sur le héros, tous ensemble, le truand,
Le prince, furieux, s’acharnent, se ruant,
Frappant, parant, jappant, hurlant, criant: Main-forte!
Roland est-il blessé? Peut-être. Mais qu’importe?
Il lutte. La blessure est l’altière faveur
Que fait la guerre au brave illustre, au preux sauveur,
Et la chair de Roland, mieux que l’acier trempée,
Ne craint pas ce baiser farouche de l’épée.
Mais, cette fois, ce sont des armes de goujats,
Lassos plombés, couteaux catalans, navajas,
Qui frappent le héros, sur qui cette famille
De monstres se reploie et se tord et fourmille;
Le héros sous son pied sent onduler leurs nœuds
Comme les gonflements d’un dragon épineux;
Son armure est partout bosselée et fêlée;
Et Roland par moments songe dans la mêlée:
«Pense-t-il à donner à boire à mon cheval?”

Un ruisseau de pourpre erre et fume dans le val,
Et sur l’herbe partout des gouttes de sang pleuvent;
Cette clairière aride et que jamais n’abreuvent
Les urnes de la pluie et les vastes seaux d’eau
Que l’hiver jette au front des monts d’Urbistondo,
S’ouvre, et toute brûlée et toute crevassée,
Consent joyeusement à l’horrible rosée;
Fauve, elle dit: « C’est bon. J’ai moins chaud maintenant.”
Des satyres, couchés sur le dos, égrenant
Des grappes de raisin au-dessus de leur tête,
Des ægipans aux yeux de dieux, aux pieds de bête,

Joutant avec le vieux Silène, s’essoufflant
À se vider quelque outre énorme dans le flanc,
Tetant la nymphe Ivresse en leur riante envie,
N’ont pas la volupté de la soif assouvie
Plus que ce redoutable et terrible ravin.
La terre boit le sang mieux qu’un faune le vin.

Un assaut est suivi d’un autre assaut. À peine
Roland a-t-il broyé quelque gueux qui le gêne,
Que voilà de nouveau qu’on lui mord le talon.
Noir fracas! la forêt, la lande, le vallon,
Les cols profonds, les pics que l’ouragan insulte,
N’entendent plus le bruit du vent dans ce tumulte;
Un vaste cliquetis sort de ce sombre effort;
Tout l’écho retentit. Qu’est-ce donc que la mort
Forge dans la montagne et fait dans cette brume,
Ayant ce vil ramas de bandits pour enclume,
Durandal pour marteau, Roland pour forgeron?

X

Le crucifix

Et, là-bas, sans qu’il fût besoin de l’éperon,
Le cheval galopait toujours à perdre haleine;
Il passait la rivière, il franchissait la plaine,
Il volait; par moments, frémissant et ravi,
L’enfant se retournait, tremblant d’être suivi,
Et de voir, des hauteurs du monstrueux repaire,
Descendre quelque frère horrible de son père.

Comme le soir tombait, Compostelle apparut.
Le cheval traversa le pont de granit brut
Dont saint Jacque a posé les premières assises.

Les bons clochers sortaient des brumes indécises;
Et l’orphelin revit son paradis natal.

Près du pont se dressait, sur un haut piédestal,
Un Christ en pierre ayant à ses pieds la madone;
Un blanc cierge éclairait sa face qui pardonne,
Plus douce à l’heure où l’ombre au fond des cieux grandit.
Et l’enfant arrêta son cheval, descendit,
S’agenouilla, joignit les mains devant le cierge,
Et dit:

«Ô mon bon Dieu, ma bonne sainte Vierge,
J’étais perdu; j’étais le ver sous le pavé;
Mes oncles me tenaient; mais vous m’avez sauvé;
Vous m’avez envoyé ce paladin de France,
Seigneur; et vous m’avez montré la différence
Entre les hommes bons et les hommes méchants.
J’avais peut-être en moi bien des mauvais penchants,
J’eusse plus tard peut-être été moi-même infâme,
Mais, en sauvant la vie, ô Dieu, vous sauvez l’âme;
Vous m’êtes apparu dans cet homme, Seigneur;
J’ai vu le jour, j’ai vu la foi, j’ai vu l’honneur,
Et j’ai compris qu’il faut qu’un prince compatisse
Au malheur, c’est-à-dire, ô Père! à la justice.
Ô madame Marie! ô Jésus! à genoux
Devant le crucifix où vous saignez pour nous,
Je jure de garder ce souvenir, et d’être
Doux au faible, loyal au bon, terrible au traître,
Et juste et secourable à jamais, écolier
De ce qu’a fait pour moi ce vaillant chevalier.
Et j’en prends à témoin vos saintes auréoles.”

Le cheval de Roland entendit ces paroles,
Leva la tête, et dit à l’enfant: « C’est bien, roi.”

L’orphelin remonta sur le blanc palefroi,
Et rentra dans sa ville au son joyeux des cloches.

XI

Ce qu’a fait Ruy le Subtil

Et dans le même instant, entre les larges roches,
À travers les sapins d’Ernula, frémissant
De ce défi superbe et sombre, un contre cent,
On pouvait voir encor, sous la nuit étoilée,
Le groupe formidable au fond de la vallée.
Le combat finissait; tous ces monts radieux
Ou lugubres, jadis hantés des demi-dieux,
S’éveillaient, étonnés, dans le blanc crépuscule,
Et, regardant Roland, se souvenaient d’Hercule.
Plus d’infants: neuf étaient tombés; un avait fui;
C’était Ruy le Subtil; mais la bande sans lui
Avait continué, car rien n’irrite comme
La honte et la fureur de combattre un seul homme;
Durandal, à tuer ces coquins s’ébréchant,
Avait jonché de morts la terre, et fait ce champ
Plus vermeil qu’un nuage où le soleil se couche;
Elle s’était rompue en ce labeur farouche;
Ce qui n’empêchait pas Roland de s’avancer;
Les bandits, le croyant prêt à recommencer,
Tremblants comme des bœufs qu’on ramène à l’étable
À chaque mouvement de son bras redoutable,
Reculaient, lui montrant de loin leurs coutelas;
Et, pas à pas, Roland, sanglant, terrible, las,
Les chassait devant lui parmi les fondrières;
Et, n’ayant plus d’épée, il leur jetait des pierres .

Éviradnus

I

Départ de l’aventurier pour l’aventure

Qu’est-ce que Sigismond et Ladislas ont dit?
Je ne sais si la roche ou l’arbre l’entendit;
Mais, quand ils ont tout bas parlé dans la broussaille,
L’arbre a fait un long bruit de taillis qui tressaille,
Comme si quelque bête en passant l’eût troublé,
Et l’ombre du rocher ténébreux a semblé
Plus noire, et l’on dirait qu’un morceau de cette ombre
A pris forme et s’en est allé dans le bois sombre,
Et maintenant on voit comme un spectre marchant
Là-bas dans la clarté sinistre du couchant.

Ce n’est pas une bête en son gîte éveillée,
Ce n’est pas un fantôme éclos sous la feuillée,
Ce n’est pas un morceau de l’ombre du rocher
Qu’on voit là-bas au fond des clairières marcher;
C’est un vivant qui n’est ni stryge ni lémure;
Celui qui marche là, couvert d’une âpre armure,
C’est le grand chevalier d’Alsace, Éviradnus.

Ces hommes qui parlaient, il les a reconnus;
Comme il se reposait dans le hallier, ces bouches
Ont passé, murmurant des paroles farouches,
Et jusqu’à son oreille un mot est arrivé;
Et c’est pourquoi ce juste et ce preux s’est levé.

Il connaît ce pays qu’il parcourut naguère.

Il rejoint l’écuyer Gasclin, page de guerre,
Qui l’attend dans l’auberge, au plus profond du val,
Où tout à l’heure il vient de laisser son cheval
Pour qu’en hâte on lui donne à boire, et qu’on le ferre.
Il dit au forgeron: « Faites vite. Une affaire

M’appelle.” Il monte en selle et part.

II

Éviradnus

Éviradnus,
Vieux, commence à sentir le poids des ans chenus;
Mais c’est toujours celui qu’entre tous on renomme,
Le preux que nul n’a vu de son sang économe;
Chasseur du crime, il est nuit et jour à l’affût;
De sa vie il n’a fait d’action qui ne fût
Sainte, blanche et loyale, et la grande pucelle,
L’épée, en sa main pure et sans tache, étincelle.
C’est le Samson chrétien qui, survenant à point,
N’ayant pour enfoncer la porte que son poing,
Entra, pour la sauver, dans Sickingen en flamme;
Qui, s’indignant de voir honorer un infâme,
Fit, sous son dur talon, un tas d’arceaux rompus
Du monument bâti pour l’affreux duc Lupus,
Arracha la statue, et porta la colonne
Du munster de Strasbourg au pont de Wasselonne,
Et là, fier, la jeta dans les étangs profonds;
on vante Éviradnus d’Altorf à Chaux-de-Fonds;
Quand il songe et s’accoude, on dirait Charlemagne;
Rôdant, tout hérissé, du bois à la montagne,
Velu, fauve, il a l’air d’un loup qui serait bon;
Il a sept pieds de haut comme Jean de Bourbon;
Tout entier au devoir qu’en sa pensée il couve,
Il ne se plaint de rien, mais seulement il trouve
Que les hommes sont bas et que les lits sont courts;
Il écoute partout si l’on crie au secours;
Quand les rois courbent trop le peuple, il le redresse
Avec une intrépide et superbe tendresse;

Il défendit Alix comme Diègue Urraca;
Il est le fort ami du faible; il attaqua
Dans leurs antres les rois du Rhin, et dans leurs bauges
Les barons effrayants et difformes des Vosges;
De tout peuple orphelin il se faisait l'aïeul;
Il mit en liberté les villes; il vint seul
De Hugo Tête-d'Aigle affronter la caverne;
Bon, terrible, il brisa le carcan de Saverne,
La ceinture de fer de Schelestadt, l'anneau
De Colmar, et la chaîne au pied de Haguenau.
Tel fut Éviradnus. Dans l'horrible balance
Où les princes jetaient le dol, la violence,
L'iniquité, l'horreur, le mal, le sang, le feu,
Sa grande épée était le contre-poids de Dieu.
Il est toujours en marche, attendu qu'on moleste
Bien des infortunés sous la voûte céleste,
Et qu'on voit dans la nuit bien des mains supplier;
Sa lance n'aime pas moisir au râtelier;
Sa hache de bataille aisément se décroche;
Malheur à l'action mauvaise qui s'approche
Trop près d'Éviradnus, le champion d'acier!
La mort tombe de lui comme l'eau du glacier.
Il est héros; il a pour cousine la race
Des Amadis de France et des Pyrrhus de Thrace;
Il rit des ans. Cet homme à qui le monde entier
N'eût pas fait dire grâce! et demander quartier,
Ira-t-il pas crier au temps: Miséricorde!
Il s'est, comme Baudoin, ceint les reins d'une corde;
Tout vieux qu'il est, il est de la grande tribu;
Le moins fier des oiseaux n'est pas l'aigle barbu.

Qu'importe l'âge! il lutte. Il vient de Palestine,
Il n'est point las. Les ans s'acharnent; il s'obstine.

III

Dans la forêt

Quelqu'un qui s'y serait perdu ce soir, verrait
Quelque chose d'étrange au fond de la forêt;
C'est une grande salle éclairée et déserte.
Où? Dans l'ancien manoir de Corbus.

L'herbe verte,
Le lierre, le chiendent, l'églantier sauvageon,
Font, depuis trois cents ans, l'assaut de ce donjon;
Le burg, sous cette abjecte et rampante escalade,
Meurt, comme sous la lèpre un sanglier malade;
Il tombe; les fossés s'emplissent des créneaux;
La ronce, ce serpent, tord sur lui ses anneaux;
Le moineau franc, sans même entendre ses murmures,
Sur ses vieux pierriers morts vient becqueter les mûres;
L'épine sur son deuil prospère insolemment;
Mais, l'hiver, il se venge; alors, le burg dormant
S'éveille, et, quand il pleut pendant des nuits entières,
Quand l'eau glisse des toits et s'engouffre aux gouttières,
Il rend grâce à l'ondée, aux vents, et, content d'eux,
Profite, pour cracher sur le lierre hideux,
Des bouches de granit de ses quatre gargouilles.

Le burg est aux lichens comme le glaive aux rouilles;
Hélas! et Corbus, triste, agonise. Pourtant
L'hiver lui plaît; l'hiver, sauvage combattant,
Il se refait, avec les convulsions sombres
Des nuages hagards croulant sur ses décombres,
Avec l'éclair qui frappe et fuit comme un larron,
Avec les souffles noirs qui sonnent du clairon,
Une sorte de vie effrayante, à sa taille;
La tempête est la sœur fauve de la bataille;
Et le puissant donjon, féroce, échevelé,
Dit: Me voilà! sitôt que la bise a sifflé;
Il rit quand l'équinoxe irrité le querelle
Sinistrement, avec son haleine de grêle;

Il est joyeux, ce burg, soldat encor debout,
Quand, jappant comme un chien poursuivi par un loup,
Novembre, dans la brume errant de roche en roche,
Répond au hurlement de Janvier qui s’approche.
Le donjon crie: « En guerre! ô tourmente, es-tu là?”
Il craint peu l’ouragan, lui qui vit Attila.
Oh! les lugubres nuits! Combat dans la bruine!
La nuée attaquant, farouche, la ruine!
Un ruissellement vaste, affreux, torrentiel,
Descend des profondeurs furieuses du ciel;
Le burg brave la nue; on entend les gorgones
Aboyer aux huit coins de ses tours octogones;
Tous les monstres sculptés sur l’édifice épars,
Grondent, et les lions de pierre des remparts
Mordent la brume, l’air et l’onde, et les tarasques
Battent de l’aile au souffle horrible des bourrasques;
L’âpre averse en fuyant vomit sur les griffons;
Et, sous la pluie entrant par les trous des plafonds,
Les guivres, les dragons, les méduses, les drées,
Grincent des dents au fond des chambres effondrées;
Le château de granit, pareil aux preux de fer,
Lutte toute la nuit, résiste tout l’hiver;
En vain le ciel s’essouffle, en vain Janvier se rue;
En vain tous les passants de cette sombre rue
Qu’on nomme l’infini, l’ombre et l’immensité,
Le tourbillon, d’un fouet invisible hâté,
Le tonnerre, la trombe où le typhon se dresse,
S’acharnent sur la fière et haute forteresse;
L’orage la secoue en vain comme un fruit mûr;
Les vents perdent leur peine à guerroyer ce mur,
Le Fôhn bruyant s’y lasse, et sur cette cuirasse
L’Aquilon s’époumonne et l’Autan se harasse,
Et tous ces noirs chevaux de l’air sortent fourbus
De leur bataille avec le donjon de Corbus.

Aussi, malgré la ronce et le chardon et l’herbe,
Le vieux burg est resté triomphal et superbe;

Il est comme un pontife au cœur du bois profond;
Sa tour lui met trois rangs de créneaux sur le front;
Le soir, sa silhouette immense se découpe;
Il a pour trône un roc, haute et sublime croupe;
Et, par les quatre coins, sud, nord, couchant, levant,
Quatre monts, Crobius, Bléda, géants du vent,
Aptar où croît le pin, Toxis que verdit l’orme,
Soutiennent au-dessus de sa tiare énorme
Les nuages, ce dais livide de la nuit.

Le pâtre a peur, et croit que cette tour le suit;
Les superstitions ont fait Corbus terrible;
On dit que l’Archer Noir a pris ce burg pour cible,
Et que sa cave est l’antre où dort le Grand Dormant;
Car les gens des hameaux tremblent facilement;
Les légendes toujours mêlent quelque fantôme
À l’obscure vapeur qui sort des toits de chaume,
L’âtre enfante le rêve, et l’on voit ondoyer
L’effroi dans la fumée errante du foyer.

Aussi, le paysan rend grâce à sa roture
Qui le dispense, lui, d’audace et d’aventure,
Et lui permet de fuir ce burg de la forêt
Qu’un preux, par point d’honneur belliqueux, chercherait.

Corbus voit rarement au loin passer un homme.
Seulement, tous les quinze ou vingt ans, l’économe
Et l’huissier du palais, avec des cuisiniers
Portant tout un festin dans de larges paniers,
Viennent, font des apprêts mystérieux, et partent;
Et, le soir, à travers les branches qui s’écartent,
On voit de la lumière au fond du burg noirci;
Et nul n’ose approcher. Et pourquoi? Le voici:

IV

La coutume de Lusace

C’est l’usage, à la mort d’un marquis de Lusace,
Que l’héritier du trône, en qui revit la race,
Avant de revêtir les royaux attributs,
Aille, une nuit, souper dans la tour de Corbus;
C’est de ce noir souper qu’il sort prince et margrave;
La marquise n’est bonne et le marquis n’est brave
Que s’ils ont respiré les funèbres parfums
Des siècles dans ce nid des vieux maîtres défunts;
Les marquis de Lusace ont une haute tige,
Et leur source est profonde à donner le vertige;
Ils ont pour père Antée, ancêtre d’Attila;
De ce vaincu d’Alcide une race coula;
C’est la race, autrefois païenne, puis chrétienne,
De Lechus, de Platon, d’Othon, d’Ursus, d’Étienne,
Et de tous ces seigneurs des rocs et des forêts
Bordant l’Europe au nord, flot d’abord, digue après.
Corbus est double: il est burg au bois, ville en plaine;
Du temps où l’on montait sur la tour châtelaine,
On voyait, au delà des pins et des rochers,
Sa ville perçant l’ombre au loin de ses clochers;
Cette ville a des murs; pourtant, ce n’est pas d’elle
Que relève l’antique et noble citadelle;
Fière, elle s’appartient; quelquefois un château
Est l’égal d’une ville; en Toscane, Prato,
Barletta dans la Pouille, et Crême en Lombardie,
Valent une cité, même forte et hardie;
Corbus est de ce rang. Sur ses rudes parois
Ce burg a le reflet de tous les anciens rois;
Tous leurs avénements, toutes leurs funérailles,
Ont, chantant ou pleurant, traversé ses murailles;
Tous s’y sont mariés, la plupart y sont nés;
C’est là que flamboyaient ces barons couronnés;
Corbus est le berceau de la royauté scythe.

Or, le nouveau marquis doit faire une visite
À l’histoire qui va continuer. La loi
Veut qu’il soit seul pendant la nuit qui le fait roi.
Au seuil de la forêt, un clerc lui donne à boire
Un vin mystérieux versé dans un ciboire,
Qui doit, le soir venu, l’endormir jusqu’au jour;
Puis on le laisse, il part et monte dans la tour;
Il trouve dans la salle une table dressée;
Il soupe et dort; et l’ombre envoie à sa pensée
Tous les spectres des rois depuis le duc Bela;
Nul n’oserait entrer au burg cette nuit-là;
Le lendemain, on vient en foule, on le délivre;
Et, plein des visions du sommeil, encore ivre
De tous ses grands aïeux qui lui sont apparus,
On le mène à l’église où dort Borivorus;
L’évêque lui bénit la bouche et la paupière,
Et met dans ses deux mains les deux haches de pierre
Dont Attila frappait, juste comme la mort,
D’un bras sur le Midi, de l’autre sur le Nord.

Ce jour-là, sur les tours de la ville, on arbore
Le menaçant drapeau du marquis Swantibore
Qui lia dans les bois et fit manger aux loups
Sa femme et le taureau dont il était jaloux.

Même quand l’héritier du trône est une femme,
Le souper de la tour de Corbus la réclame;
C’est la loi; seulement, la pauvre femme a peur.

V

La marquise Mahaud

La nièce du dernier marquis, Jean le Frappeur,
Mahaud est aujourd’hui marquise de Lusace.
Dame, elle a la couronne, et, femme, elle a la grâce;
Une reine n’est pas reine sans la beauté.
C’est peu que le royaume, il faut la royauté.
Dieu dans son harmonie également emploie
Le cèdre qui résiste et le roseau qui ploie,
Et, certes, il est bon qu’une femme parfois
Ait dans sa main les mœurs, les esprits et les lois,
Succède au maître altier, sourie au peuple, et mène,
En lui parlant tout bas, la sombre troupe humaine;
Mais la douce Mahaud, dans ces temps de malheur,
Tient trop le sceptre, hélas! comme on tient une fleur;
Elle est gaie, étourdie, imprudente et peureuse.
Toute une Europe obscure autour d’elle se creuse;
Et, quoiqu’elle ait vingt ans, on a beau la prier,
Elle n’a pas encor voulu se marier.
Il est temps cependant qu’un bras viril l’appuie;
Comme l’arc-en-ciel rit entre l’ombre et la pluie,
Comme la biche joue entre le tigre et l’ours,
Elle a, la pauvre belle aux purs et chastes jours,
Deux noirs voisins qui font une noire besogne:
L’empereur d’Allemagne et le roi de Pologne.

VI

Les deux voisins

Toute la différence entre ce sombre roi
Et ce sombre empereur, sans foi, sans Dieu, sans loi,
C’est que l’un est la griffe et que l’autre est la serre;
Tous deux vont à la messe et disent leur rosaire;
Ils n’en passent pas moins pour avoir fait tous deux

Dans l’enfer un traité d’alliance hideux;
On va même jusqu’à chuchoter à voix basse,
Dans la foule où la peur d’en haut tombe et s’amasse,
L’affreux texte d’un pacte entre eux et le pouvoir
Qui s’agite sous l’homme au fond du monde noir;
Quoique l’un soit la haine et l’autre la vengeance,
Ils vivent côte à côte en bonne intelligence;
Tous les peuples qu’on voit saigner à l’horizon
Sortent de leur tenaille et sont de leur façon;
Leurs deux figures sont lugubrement grandies
Par de rouges reflets de sacs et d’incendies;
D’ailleurs, comme David, suivant l’usage ancien,
L’un est poëte, et l’autre est bon musicien;
Et les déclarant dieux, la renommée allie
Leurs noms dans les sonnets qui viennent d’Italie.
L’antique hiérarchie a l’air mise en oubli;
Car, suivant le vieil ordre en Europe établi,
L’empereur d’Allemagne est duc, le roi de France
Marquis; les autres rois ont peu de différence;
Ils sont barons autour de Rome, leur pilier,
Et le roi de Pologne est simple chevalier;
Mais dans ce siècle on voit l’exception unique
Du roi sarmate égal au césar germanique.
Chacun s’est fait sa part; l’allemand n’a qu’un soin,
Il prend tous les pays de terre ferme au loin;
Le polonais, ayant le rivage baltique,
Veut des ports; il a pris toute la mer celtique;
Sur tous les flots du nord il pousse ses dromons;
L’Islande voit passer ses navires démons;
L’allemand brûle Anvers et conquiert les deux Prusses,
Le polonais secourt Spotocus, duc des Russes,
Comme un plus grand boucher en aide un plus petit;
Le roi prend, l’empereur pille, usurpe, investit;
L’empereur fait la guerre à l’ordre teutonique,
Le roi sur le Jutland pose son pied cynique;
Mais, qu’ils brisent le faible ou qu’ils trompent le fort,
Quoi qu’ils fassent, ils ont pour loi d’être d’accord;

Des geysers du pôle aux cités transalpines,
Leurs ongles monstrueux, crispés sur des rapines,
Égratignent le pâle et triste continent.
Et tout leur réussit. Chacun d’eux, rayonnant,
Mène à fin tous ses plans lâches ou téméraires,
Et règne; et, sous Satan paternel, ils sont frères;
Ils s’aiment; l’un est fourbe et l’autre est déloyal;
Ils sont les deux bandits du grand chemin royal.
Ô les noirs conquérants! et quelle œuvre éphémère!
L’ambition, branlant ses têtes de chimère,
Sous leur crâne brumeux, fétide et sans clarté,
Nourrit la pourriture et la stérilité;
Ce qu’ils font est néant et cendre; une hydre allaite,
Dans leur âme nocturne et profonde, un squelette.
Le polonais sournois, l’allemand hasardeux,
Remarquent qu’à cette heure une femme est près d’eux;
Tous deux guettent Mahaud. Et naguère, avec rage,
De sa bouche qu’empourpre une lueur d’orage
Et d’où sortent des mots pleins d’ombre ou teints de sang,
L’empereur a jeté cet éclair menaçant:
«L’empire est las d’avoir au dos cette besace
Qu’on appelle la haute et la basse Lusace,
Et dont la pesanteur, qui nous met sur les dents,
S’accroît, quand, par hasard, une femme est dedans.”
Le polonais se tait, épie et patiente.

Ce sont deux grands dangers; mais cette insouciante
Sourit, gazouille et danse, aime les doux propos,
Se fait bénir du pauvre et réduit les impôts;
Elle est vive, coquette, aimable et bijoutière;
Elle est femme toujours; dans sa couronne altière,
Elle choisit la perle, elle a peur du fleuron;
Car le fleuron tranchant, c’est l’homme et le baron.
Elle a des tribunaux d’amour qu’elle préside;
Aux copistes d’Homère elle paye un subside;
Elle a tout récemment accueilli dans sa cour
Deux hommes, un luthier avec un troubadour,

Dont on ignore tout, le nom, le rang, la race,
Mais qui, conteurs charmants, le soir, sur la terrasse,
À l’heure où les vitraux aux brises sont ouverts,
Lui font de la musique et lui disent des vers.
Or, en juin, la Lusace, en août, les Moraves,
Font la fête du trône et sacrent leurs margraves;
C’est aujourd’hui le jour du burg mystérieux;
Mahaud viendra ce soir souper chez ses aïeux.

Qu’est-ce que tout cela fait à l’herbe des plaines,
Aux oiseaux, à la fleur, au nuage, aux fontaines?
Qu’est-ce que tout cela fait aux arbres des bois?
Que le peuple ait des jougs et que l’homme ait des rois,
L’eau coule, le vent passe et murmure: Qu’importe!

VII

La salle à manger

La salle est gigantesque; elle n’a qu’une porte;
Le mur fuit dans la brume et semble illimité;
En face de la porte, à l’autre extrémité,
Brille, étrange et splendide, une table adossée
Au fond de ce livide et froid rez-de-chaussée;
La salle a pour plafond les charpentes du toit;
Cette table n’attend qu’un convive; on n’y voit
Qu’un fauteuil sous un dais qui pend aux poutres noires;
Les anciens temps ont peint sur le mur leurs histoires:
Le fier combat du roi des Vendes Thassilo,
Contre Nemrod sur terre et Neptune sur l’eau,
Le fleuve Rhin trahi par la rivière Meuse,
Et, groupes blêmissants sur la paroi brumeuse,
Odin, le loup Fenris et le serpent Asgar;

Et toute la lumière éclairant ce hangar,
Qui semble d’un dragon avoir été l’étable,
Vient d’un flambeau sinistre allumé sur la table;
C’est le grand chandelier aux sept branches de fer
Que l’archange Attila rapporta de l’enfer
Après qu’il eût vaincu le Mammon, et sept âmes
Furent du noir flambeau les sept premières flammes.
Toute la salle semble un grand linéament
D’abîme, modelé dans l’ombre vaguement;
Au fond, la table éclate avec la brusquerie
De la clarté heurtant des blocs d’orfévrerie;
De beaux faisans tués par les traîtres faucons,
Des viandes froides, force aiguières et flacons,
Chargent la table où s’offre une opulente agape;
Les plats, bordés de fleurs, sont en vermeil; la nappe
Vient de Frise, pays célèbre par ses draps;
Et, pour les fruits, brugnons, fraises, pommes, cédrats,
Les pâtres de la Murg ont sculpté les sébiles;
Ces orfévres du bois sont des rustres habiles
Qui font sur une écuelle ondoyer des jardins
Et des monts où l’on voit fuir des chasses aux daims.
Sur une vasque d’or aux anses florentines,
Des actéons cornus et chaussés de bottines
Luttent, l’épée au poing, contre des lévriers;
Des branches de glaïeuls et de genévriers,
Des roses, des bouquets d’anis, une jonchée
De sauge tout en fleur nouvellement fauchée,
Couvrent d’un frais parfum de printemps répandu
Un tapis d’Ispahan sous la table étendu.
Dehors, c’est la ruine et c’est la solitude.
On entend, dans sa rauque et vaste inquiétude,
Passer sur le hallier, par l’été rajeuni,
Le vent, onde de l’ombre et flot de l’infini.
On a remis partout des vitres aux verrières
Qu’ébranle la rafale arrivant des clairières;
L’étrange, dans ce lieu ténébreux et rêvant,
Ce serait que celui qu’on attend fût vivant;

Aux lueurs du sept-bras, qui fait flamboyer presque
Les vagues yeux épars sur la lugubre fresque,
On voit le long des murs, par place, un escabeau,
Quelque long coffre obscur à meubler le tombeau,
Et des buffets, chargés de cuivre et de faïence;
Et la porte, effrayante et sombre confiance,
Est formidablement ouverte sur la nuit.

Rien ne parle en ce lieu, d’où tout homme s’enfuit.
La terreur, dans les coins accroupie, attend l’hôte.
Cette salle à manger de titans est si haute,
Qu’en égarant, de poutre en poutre, son regard
Aux étages confus de ce plafond hagard,
On est presque étonné de n’y pas voir d’étoiles.
L’araignée est géante en ces hideuses toiles
Flottant là-haut, parmi les madriers profonds
Que mordent aux deux bouts les gueules des griffons.
La lumière a l’air noire et la salle a l’air morte.
La nuit retient son souffle. On dirait que la porte
A peur de remuer tout haut ses deux battants.

VIII

Ce qu’on y voit encore

Mais ce que cette salle, antre obscur des vieux temps,
A de plus sépulcral et de plus redoutable,
Ce n’est pas le flambeau, ni le dais, ni la table;
C’est, le long de deux rangs d’arches et de piliers,
Deux files de chevaux avec leurs chevaliers.

Chacun à son pilier s’adosse et tient sa lance;
L’arme droite, ils se font vis-à-vis en silence;

Les chanfreins sont lacés; les harnais sont bouclés;
Les chatons des cuissards sont barrés de leurs clés;
Les trousseaux de poignards sur l’arçon se répandent;
Jusqu’aux pieds des chevaux les caparaçons pendent;
Les cuirs sont agrafés; les ardillons d’airain
Attachent l’éperon, serrent le gorgerin;
La grande épée à mains brille au croc de la selle;
La hache est sur le dos, la dague est sous l’aisselle;
Les genouillères ont leur boutoir meurtrier;
Les mains pressent la bride, et les pieds l’étrier;
Ils sont prêts; chaque heaume est masqué de son crible;
Tous se taisent; pas un ne bouge; c’est terrible.

Les chevaux monstrueux ont la corne au frontail.
Si Satan est berger, c’est là son noir bétail.
Pour en voir de pareils dans l’ombre, il faut qu’on dorme;
Ils sont comme engloutis sous la housse difforme;
Les cavaliers sont froids, calmes, graves, armés,
Effroyables; les poings lugubrement fermés;
Si l’enfer tout à coup ouvrait ces mains fantômes,
On verrait quelque lettre affreuse dans leurs paumes.
De la brume du lieu leur stature s’accroît.
Autour d’eux l’ombre a peur et les piliers ont froid.
Ô nuit, qu’est-ce que c’est que ces guerriers livides?

Chevaux et chevaliers sont des armures vides,
Mais debout. Ils ont tous encor le geste fier,
L’air fauve, et, quoique étant de l’ombre, ils sont du fer.
Sont-ce des larves? Non; et sont-ce des statues?
Non. C’est de la chimère et de l’horreur, vêtues
D’airain, et, des bas-fonds de ce monde puni,
Faisant une menace obscure à l’infini;
Devant cette impassible et morne chevauchée,
L’âme tremble et se sent des spectres approchée,
Comme si l’on voyait la halte des marcheurs
Mystérieux que l’aube efface en ses blancheurs.
Si quelqu’un, à cette heure, osait franchir la porte,

À voir se regarder ces masques de la sorte,
Il croirait que la mort, à de certains moments,
Rhabillant l’homme, ouvrant les sépulcres dormants,
Ordonne, hors du temps, de l’espace et du nombre,
Des confrontations de fantômes dans l’ombre.

Les linceuls ne sont pas plus noirs que ces armets;
Les tombeaux, quoique sourds et voilés pour jamais,
Ne sont pas plus glacés que ces brassards; les bières
N’ont pas leurs ais hideux mieux joints que ces jambières;
Le casque semble un crâne, et, de squammes couverts,
Les doigts des gantelets luisent comme des vers;
Ces robes de combat ont des plis de suaires;
Ces pieds pétrifiés siéraient aux ossuaires;
Ces piques ont des bois lourds et vertigineux
Où des têtes de mort s’ébauchent dans les nœuds.
Ils sont tous arrogants sur la selle, et leurs bustes
Achèvent les poitrails des destriers robustes;
Les mailles sur leurs flancs croisent leurs durs tricots;
Le mortier des marquis près des tortils ducaux
Rayonne, et sur l’écu, le casque et la rondache,
La perle triple alterne avec les feuilles d’ache;
La chemise de guerre et le manteau de roi
Sont si larges, qu’ils vont du maître au palefroi;
Les plus anciens harnais remontent jusqu’à Rome;
L’armure du cheval sous l’armure de l’homme
Vit d’une vie horrible, et guerrier et coursier
Ne font qu’une seule hydre aux écailles d’acier.

L’histoire est là; ce sont toutes les panoplies
Par qui furent jadis tant d’œuvres accomplies;
Chacune, avec son timbre en forme de delta,
Semble la vision du chef qui la porta;
Là sont les ducs sanglants et les marquis sauvages
Qui portaient pour pennons au milieu des ravages
Des saints dorés et peints sur des peaux de poissons.
Voici Geth, qui criait aux Slaves: « Avançons!”

Mundiaque, Ottocar, Platon, Ladislas Cunne,
Welf, dont l’écu portait: « Ma peur se nomme Aucune.”
Zultan, Nazamystus, Othon le Chassieux;
Depuis Spignus jusqu’à Spartibor-aux-trois-yeux,
toute la dynastie effrayante d’Antée
Semble là sur le bord des siècles arrêtée.
Que font-ils là, debout et droits? Qu’attendent-ils?
L’aveuglement remplit l’armet aux durs sourcils.
L’arbre est là sans la séve et le héros sans l’âme;
Où l’on voit des yeux d’ombre on vit des yeux de flamme;
La visière aux trous ronds sert de masque au néant;
Le vide s’est fait spectre et rien s’est fait géant;
Et chacun de ces hauts cavaliers est l’écorce
De l’orgueil, du défi, du meurtre et de la force;
Le sépulcre glacé les tient; la rouille mord
Ces grands casques, épris d’aventure et de mort,
Que baisait leur maîtresse auguste, la bannière;
Pas un brassard ne peut remuer sa charnière;
Les voilà tous muets, eux qui rugissaient tous,
Et, grondant et grinçant, rendaient les clairons fous;
Le heaume affreux n’a plus de cri dans ses gencives;
Ces armures, jadis fauves et convulsives,
Ces hauberts, autrefois pleins d’un souffle irrité,
Sont venus s’échouer dans l’immobilité,
Regarder devant eux l’ombre qui se prolonge,
Et prendre dans la nuit la figure du songe.

Ces deux files, qui vont depuis le morne seuil
Jusqu’au fond où l’on voit la table et le fauteuil,
Laissent entre leurs fronts une ruelle étroite;
Les marquis sont à gauche et les ducs sont à droite;
Jusqu’au jour où le toit que Spignus crénela,
Chargé d’ans, croulera sur leur tête, ils sont là,
Inégaux, face à face, et pareils, côte à côte.
En dehors des deux rangs, en avant, tête haute,
Comme pour commander le funèbre escadron
Qu’éveillera le bruit du suprême clairon,

Les vieux sculpteurs ont mis un cavalier de pierre,
Charlemagne, ce roi qui de toute la terre
Fit une table ronde à douze chevaliers.

Les cimiers surprenants, tragiques, singuliers,
Cauchemars entrevus dans le sommeil sans bornes,
Sirènes aux seins nus, mélusines, licornes,
Farouches bois de cerfs, aspics, alérions,
Sur la rigidité des pâles morions,
Semblent une forêt de monstres qui végète;
L’un penche en avant, l’autre en arrière se jette;
Tous ces êtres, dragons, cerbères orageux,
Que le bronze et le rêve ont créés dans leurs jeux,
Lions volants, serpents ailés, guivres palmées,
Faits pour l’effarement des livides armées,
Espèces de démons composés de terreur,
Qui, sur le heaume altier des barons en fureur,
Hurlaient, accompagnant la bannière géante,
Sur les cimiers glacés songent, gueule béante,
Comme s’ils s’ennuyaient, trouvant les siècles longs;
Et, regrettant les morts saignant sous les talons,
Les trompettes, la poudre immense, la bataille,
Le carnage, on dirait que l’Épouvante bâille.
Le métal fait reluire, en reflets durs et froids,
Sa grande larme au mufle obscur des palefrois;
De ces spectres pensifs l’odeur des temps s’exhale;
Leur ombre est formidable au plafond de la salle;
Aux lueurs du flambeau frissonnant, au-dessus
Des blêmes cavaliers vaguement aperçus,
Elle remue et croît dans les ténébreux faîtes;
Et la double rangée horrible de ces têtes
Fait, dans l’énormité des vieux combles fuyants,
De grands nuages noirs aux profils effrayants.

Et tout est fixe, et pas un coursier ne se cabre
Dans cette légion de la guerre macabre;
Oh! ces hommes masqués sur ces chevaux voilés,

Chose affreuse!

À la brume éternelle mêlés,
Ayant chez les vivants fini leur tâche austère,
Muets, ils sont tournés du côté du mystère;
Ces sphinx ont l’air, au seuil du gouffre où rien ne luit,
De regarder l’énigme en face dans la nuit,
Comme si, prêts à faire, entre les bleus pilastres,
Sous leurs sabots d’acier étinceler les astres,
Voulant pour cirque l’ombre, ils provoquaient d’en bas,
Pour on ne sait quels fiers et funèbres combats,
Dans le champ sombre où n’ose aborder la pensée,
La sinistre visière au fond des cieux baissée.

IX

Bruit que fait le plancher

C’est là qu’Éviradnus entre; Gasclin le suit.

Le mur d’enceinte étant presque partout détruit,
Cette porte, ancien seuil des marquis patriarches,
Qu’au-dessus de la cour exhaussent quelques marches,
Domine l’horizon, et toute la forêt
Autour de son perron comme un gouffre apparaît.
L’épaisseur du vieux roc de Corbus est propice
À cacher plus d’un sourd et sanglant précipice;
Tout le burg, et la salle elle-même, dit-on,
Sont bâtis sur des puits faits par le duc Platon;
Le plancher sonne; on sent au-dessous des abîmes.

«Page, dit ce chercheur d’aventures sublimes,
Viens. Tu vois mieux que moi, qui n’ai plus de bons yeux,
Car la lumière est femme et se refuse aux vieux;

Bah! voit toujours assez qui regarde en arrière.
On découvre d’ici la route et la clairière;
Garçon, vois-tu là-bas venir quelqu’un?” Gasclin
Se penche hors du seuil; la lune est dans son plein,
D’une blanche lueur la clairière est baignée.
«Une femme à cheval. Elle est accompagnée.
— De qui?” Gasclin répond: « Seigneur, j’entends les voix
De deux hommes parlant et riant, et je vois
Trois ombres de chevaux qui passent sur la route.
— Bien, dit Éviradnus. Ce sont eux. Page, écoute:
Tu vas partir d’ici. Prends un autre chemin.
Va-t’en, sans être vu. Tu reviendras demain
Avec nos deux chevaux, frais, en bon équipage,
Au point du jour. C’est dit. Laisse-moi seul.” Le page
Regardant son bon maître avec des yeux de fils,
Dit: « Si je demeurais? Ils sont deux. — Je suffis.
Va.”

X

Éviradnus immobile

Le héros est seul sous ces grands murs sévères.
Il s’approche un moment de la table où les verres
Et les hanaps, dorés et peints, petits et grands,
Sont étagés, divers pour les vins différents;
Il a soif; les flacons tentent sa lèvre avide;
Mais la goutte qui reste au fond d’un verre vide
Trahirait que quelqu’un dans la salle est vivant;
Il va droit aux chevaux. Il s’arrête devant
Celui qui le plus près de la table étincelle,
Il prend le cavalier et l’arrache à la selle;
La panoplie en vain lui jette un pâle éclair,

Il saisit corps à corps le fantôme de fer,
Et l’emporte au plus noir de la salle; et, pliée
Dans la cendre et la nuit, l’armure humiliée
Reste adossée au mur comme un héros vaincu;
Éviradnus lui prend sa lance et son écu,
Monte en selle à sa place, et le voilà statue.

Pareil aux autres, froid, la visière abattue,
On n’entend pas un souffle à sa lèvre échapper,
Et le tombeau pourrait lui-même s’y tromper.

Tout est silencieux dans la salle terrible.

XI

Un peu de musique

Écoutez! — Comme un nid qui murmure invisible,
Un bruit confus s’approche, et des rires, des voix,
Des pas, sortent du fond vertigineux des bois.

Et voici qu’à travers la grande forêt brune
Qu’emplit la rêverie immense de la lune,
On entend frissonner et vibrer mollement,
Communiquant aux bois son doux frémissement,
La guitare des monts d’Inspruck, reconnaissable
Au grelot de son manche où sonne un grain de sable;
Il s’y mêle la voix d’un homme, et ce frisson
Prend un sens et devient une vague chanson:

«Si tu veux , faisons un rêve:
Montons sur deux palefrois;
Tu m’emmènes, je t’enlève.
L’oiseau chante dans les bois.

» Je suis ton maître et ta proie;
Partons, c’est la fin du jour;
Mon cheval sera la joie,
Ton cheval sera l’amour.

» Nous ferons toucher leurs têtes;
Les voyages sont aisés;
Nous donnerons à ces bêtes
Une avoine de baisers.

» Viens! nos doux chevaux mensonges
Frappent du pied tous les deux,
Le mien au fond de mes songes,
Et le tien au fond des cieux.

» Un bagage est nécessaire;
Nous emporterons nos vœux,
Nos bonheurs, notre misère,
Et la fleur de tes cheveux.

» Viens, le soir brunit les chênes;
Le moineau rit; ce moqueur
Entend le doux bruit des chaînes
Que tu m’as mises au cœur.
» Ce ne sera point ma faute
Si les forêts et les monts,
En nous voyant côte à côte,
Ne murmurent pas: « Aimons!”

» Viens, sois tendre, je suis ivre.
Ô les verts taillis mouillés!
Ton souffle te fera suivre
Des papillons réveillés.

» L’envieux oiseau nocturne,
Triste, ouvrira son œil rond;

Les nymphes, penchant leur urne,
Dans les grottes souriront;

» Et diront: « Sommes-nous folles!
» C’est Léandre avec Héro;
» En écoutant leurs paroles
» Nous laissons tomber notre eau.”

» Allons-nous-en par l’Autriche!
Nous aurons l’aube à nos fronts;
Je serai grand, et toi riche,
Puisque nous nous aimerons.
» Allons-nous-en par la terre,
Sur nos deux chevaux charmants,
Dans l’azur, dans le mystère,
Dans les éblouissements!

» Nous entrerons à l’auberge,
Et nous paîrons l’hôtelier
De ton sourire de vierge,
De mon bonjour d’écolier.

» Tu seras dame, et moi comte;
Viens, mon cœur s’épanouit;
Viens, nous conterons ce conte
Aux étoiles de la nuit.”

La mélodie encor quelques instants se traîne
Sous les arbres bleuis par la lune sereine,
Puis tremble, puis expire, et la voix qui chantait
S’éteint comme un oiseau se pose; tout se tait.

XII

Le grand Joss et le petit Zéno

Soudain, au seuil lugubre apparaissent trois têtes
Joyeuses, et d’où sort une lueur de fêtes;
Deux hommes, une femme en robe de drap d’or.
L’un des hommes paraît trente ans; l’autre est encor
Plus jeune, et, sur son dos, il porte en bandoulière
La guitare où s’enlace une branche de lierre;
Il est grand et blond; l’autre est petit, pâle et brun;
Ces hommes, qu’on dirait faits d’ombre et de parfum,
Sont beaux, mais le démon dans leur beauté grimace;
Avril a de ces fleurs où rampe une limace.

«Mon grand Joss, mon petit Zéno, venez ici.
Voyez. C’est effrayant.”

Celle qui parle ainsi
C’est madame Mahaud; le clair de lune semble
Caresser sa beauté qui rayonne et qui tremble,
Comme si ce doux être était de ceux que l’air
Crée, apporte et remporte en un céleste éclair.

«Passer ici la nuit! Certe, un trône s’achète!
Si vous n’étiez venus m’escorter en cachette,
Dit-elle, je serais vraiment morte de peur.”

La lune éclaire auprès du seuil, dans la vapeur,
Un des grands chevaliers adossés aux murailles.

«Comme je vous vendrais à l’encan ces ferrailles!
Dit Zéno; je ferais, si j’étais le marquis,
De ce tas de vieux clous sortir des vins exquis,
Des galas, des tournois, des bouffons et des femmes.”

Et, frappant cet airain d’où sort le bruit des âmes,
Cette armure où l’on voit frémir le gantelet,
Calme et riant, il donne au sépulcre un soufflet.

«Laissez donc mes aïeux, dit Mahaud, qui murmure.
Vous êtes trop petit pour toucher cette armure.”
Zéno pâlit. Mais Joss: « Ça, des aïeux! J’en ris.
Tous ces bonshommes noirs sont des nids de souris.
Pardieu! pendant qu’ils ont l’air terrible, et qu’ils songent,
Écoutez, on entend le bruit des dents qui rongent.
Et dire qu’en effet autrefois tout cela
S’appelait Ottocar, Othon, Platon, Bela!
Hélas! la fin n’est pas plaisante, et déconcerte.
Soyez donc ducs et rois! je ne voudrais pas, certe,
Avoir été colosse, avoir été héros,
Madame, avoir empli de morts des tombereaux,
Pour que, sous ma farouche et fière bourguignotte,
Moi, prince et spectre, un rat paisible me grignote!

— C’est que ce n’est point là votre état, dit Mahaud.
Chantez, soit; mais ici ne parlez pas trop haut.

— Bien dit, reprend Zéno. C’est un lieu de prodiges.
Et, quant à moi, je vois des serpentes, des stryges,
Tout un fourmillement de monstres, s’ébaucher
Dans la brume qui sort des fentes du plancher.”

Mahaud frémit.

«Ce vin que l’abbé m’a fait boire,
Va bientôt m’endormir d’une façon très-noire;
Jurez-moi de rester près de moi.

— J’en réponds,”
Dit Joss; et Zéno dit: « Je le jure. Soupons.”

XIII

Ils soupent

Et, riant et chantant, ils s’en vont vers la table.

«Je fais Joss chambellan et Zéno connétable.”
Dit Mahaud. Et tous trois causent, joyeux et beaux,
Elle sur le fauteuil, eux sur des escabeaux;
Joss mange, Zéno boit, Mahaud rêve. La feuille
N’a pas de bruit distinct qu’on note et qu’on recueille,
Ainsi va le babil sans forme et sans lien;
Joss par moment fredonne un chant tyrolien,
Et fait rire ou pleurer la guitare; les contes
Se mêlent aux gaîtés fraîches, vives et promptes.
Mahaud dit: « Savez-vous que vous êtes heureux?
— Nous sommes bien portants, jeunes, fous, amoureux;
C’est vrai. — De plus, tu sais le latin comme un prêtre,
Et Joss chante fort bien. — Oui, nous avons un maître
Qui nous donne cela par-dessus le marché.
— Quel est son nom? — Pour nous Satan, pour vous Péché;
Dit Zéno, caressant jusqu’en sa raillerie.
— Ne riez pas ainsi, je ne veux pas qu’on rie.
Paix, Zéno! Parle-moi, toi, Joss, mon chambellan.
— Madame, Viridis, comtesse de Milan,
Fut superbe; Diane éblouissait le pâtre;
Aspasie, Isabeau de Saxe, Cléopâtre,
Sont des noms devant qui la louange se tait;
Rhodope fut divine; Érylésis était
Si belle, que Vénus, jalouse de sa gorge,
La traîna toute nue en la céleste forge
Et la fit sur l’enclume écraser par Vulcain;
Eh bien, autant l’étoile éclipse le sequin,
Autant le temple éclipse un monceau de décombres,
Autant vous effacez toutes ces belles ombres!
Ces coquettes qui font des mines dans l’azur.
Les elfes, les péris, ont le front jeune et pur
Moins que vous, et pourtant le vent et ses bouffées
Les ont galamment d’ombre et de rayons coiffées.

— Flatteur, tu chantes bien,” dit Mahaud. Joss reprend:
«Si j’étais, sous le ciel splendide et transparent,
Ange, fille ou démon, s’il fallait que j’apprisse
La grâce, la gaîté, le rire et le caprice,
Altesse, je viendrais à l’école chez vous.
Vous êtes une fée aux yeux divins et doux,
Ayant pour un vil sceptre échangé sa baguette.”
Mahaud songe: « On dirait que ton regard me guette,
Tais-toi. Voyons, de vous tout ce que je connais,
C’est que Joss est Bohême et Zéno Polonais,
Mais vous êtes charmants; et pauvres; oui, vous l’êtes;
Moi, je suis riche; eh bien, demandez-moi, poëtes,
Tout ce que vous voudrez. — Tout? Je vous prends au mot,
Répond Joss. Un baiser. — Un baiser! dit Mahaud
Surprise en ce chanteur d’une telle pensée;
Savez-vous qui je suis?” Et fière et courroucée,
Elle rougit. Mais Joss n’est pas intimidé:
«Si je ne le savais, aurais-je demandé
Une faveur qu’il faut qu’on obtienne, ou qu’on prenne?
Il n’est don que de roi ni baiser que de reine.
— Reine!” Et Mahaud sourit.

XIV

Après souper

Cependant, par degrés,
Le narcotique éteint ses yeux d’ombre enivrés;
Zéno l’observe, un doigt sur la bouche; elle penche
La tête, et, souriant, s’endort, sereine et blanche.
Zéno lui prend la main qui retombe.

«Elle dort!

Dit Zéno; maintenant, vite, tirons au sort.
D’abord à qui l’état? Ensuite, à qui la fille?”

Dans ces deux profils d’homme un œil de tigre brille.

«Frère, dit Joss, parlons politique à présent.
La Mahaud dort et fait quelque rêve innocent;
Nos griffes sont dessus. Nous avons cette folle.
L’ami de dessous terre est sûr et tient parole;
Le hasard, grâce à lui, ne nous a rien ôté
De ce que nous avons construit et comploté;
Tout nous a réussi. Pas de puissance humaine
Qui nous puisse arracher la femme et le domaine.
Concluons. Guerroyer, se chamailler pour rien,
Pour un oui, pour un non, pour un dogme arien
Dont le pape sournois rira dans la coulisse,
Pour quelque fille ayant une peau fraîche et lisse,
Des yeux bleus et des mains blanches comme le lait;
C’était bon dans le temps où l’on se querellait
Pour la croix byzantine ou pour la croix latine,
Et quand Pépin tenait un synode à Leptine,
Et quand Rodolphe et Jean, comme deux hommes soûls,
Glaive au poing, s’arrachaient leur Agnès de deux sous;
Aujourd’hui, tout est mieux et les mœurs sont plus douces;
Frère, on ne se met plus ainsi la guerre aux trousses,
Et l’on sait en amis régler un différend;
As-tu des dés?

— J’en ai.

— Celui qui gagne prend
Le marquisat; celui qui perd a la marquise.

— Bien.

— J’entends du bruit.

— Non, dit Zéno, c’est la bise
Qui souffle bêtement, et qu’on prend pour quelqu’un.
As-tu peur?

— Je n’ai peur de rien, que d’être à jeun,
Répond Joss, et sur moi que les gouffres s’écroulent!

— Finissons. Que le sort décide.”

Les dés roulent.

«Quatre.”

Joss prend les dés.
«Six. Je gagne tout net.
J’ai trouvé la Lusace au fond de ce cornet.
Dès demain, j’entre en danse avec tout mon orchestre.
Taxes partout. Payez. La corde ou le séquestre.
Des trompettes d’airain seront mes galoubets.
Les impôts, cela pousse en plantant des gibets.”

Zéno dit: « J’ai la fille. Eh bien, je le préfère.

— Elle est belle, dit Joss.

— Pardieu!

— Qu’en vas-tu faire?

— Un cadavre.”

Et Zéno reprend:

«En vérité,
La créature m’a tout à l’heure insulté.
Petit! voilà le mot qu’a dit cette femelle.
Si l’enfer m’eût crié, béant sous ma semelle,

Dans la sombre minute où je tenais les dés:
«Fils, les hasards ne sont pas encor décidés;
» Je t’offre le gros lot: la Lusace aux sept villes;
» Je t’offre dix pays de blés, de vins et d’huiles,
» À ton choix, ayant tous leur peuple diligent;
» Je t’offre la Bohême et ses mines d’argent,
» Ce pays le plus haut du monde, ce grand antre
» D’où plus d’un fleuve sort, où pas un ruisseau n’entre;
» Je t’offre le Tyrol aux monts d’azur remplis,
» Et je t’offre la France avec les fleurs de lys;
» Qu’est-ce que tu choisis?” J’aurais dit: « La vengeance.”
Et j’aurais dit: « Enfer, plutôt que cette France,
» Et que cette Bohême, et ce Tyrol si beau,
» Mets à mes ordres l’ombre et les vers du tombeau!”
Mon frère, cette femme, absurdement marquise
D’une marche terrible où tout le Nord se brise,
Et qui, dans tous les cas, est pour nous un danger,
Ayant été stupide au point de m’outrager,
Il convient qu’elle meure; et puis, s’il faut tout dire,
Je l’aime; et la lueur que de mon cœur je tire,
Je la tire du tien: tu l’aimes aussi, toi.
Frère, en faisant ici, chacun dans notre emploi,
Les bohêmes, pour mettre à fin cette équipée,
Nous sommes devenus, près de cette poupée,
Niais, toi comme un page, et moi comme un barbon,
Et, de galants pour rire, amoureux pour de bon;
Oui, nous sommes tous deux épris de cette femme;
Or, frère, elle serait entre nous une flamme;
Tôt ou tard, et, malgré le bien que je te veux,
Elle nous mènerait à nous prendre aux cheveux;
Vois-tu, nous finirions par rompre notre pacte.
Nous l’aimons. Tuons-la.

— Ta logique est exacte,
Dit Joss rêveur; mais quoi, du sang ici?”

Zéno

Pousse un coin de tapis, tâte, prend un anneau,
Le tire, et le plancher se soulève; un abîme
S’ouvre; il en sort de l’ombre ayant l’odeur du crime;
Joss marche vers la trappe, et, les yeux dans les yeux,
Zéno muet la montre à Joss silencieux;
Joss se penche, approuvant de la tête le gouffre.

XV

Les oubliettes

S’il sortait de ce puits une lueur de soufre,
On dirait une bouche obscure de l’enfer.
La trappe est large assez pour qu’en un brusque éclair
L’homme étonné qu’on pousse y tombe à la renverse;
On distingue les dents sinistres d’une herse,
Et, plus bas, le regard flotte dans de la nuit;
Le sang sur les parois fait un rougeâtre enduit;
L’Épouvante est au fond de ce puits toute nue;
On sent qu’il pourrit là de l’histoire inconnue;
Et que ce vieux sépulcre, oublié maintenant,
Cuve du meurtre, est plein de larves se traînant,
D’ombres tâtant le mur et de spectres reptiles.

«Nos aïeux ont parfois fait des choses utiles,”
Dit Joss. Et Zéno dit: « Je connais le château;
Ce que le mont Corbus cache sous son manteau,
Nous le savons, l’orfraie et moi; cette bâtisse
Est vieille; on y rendait autrefois la justice.

— Es-tu sûr que Mahaud ne se réveille point?

— Son œil est clos ainsi que je ferme mon poing;

Elle dort d’une sorte âpre et surnaturelle,
L’obscure volonté du philtre étant sur elle.

— Elle s’éveillera demain au point du jour?

— Dans l’ombre.

— Et que va dire ici toute la cour
Quand, au lieu d’une femme, ils trouveront deux hommes?

— Tous se prosterneront en sachant qui nous sommes.

— Où va cette oubliette?

— Aux torrents, aux corbeaux,
Au néant. Finissons.”

Ces hommes, jeunes, beaux,
Charmants, sont à présent difformes, tant s’efface
Sous la noirceur du cœur le rayon de la face,
Tant l’homme est transparent à l’enfer qui l’emplit.
Ils s’approchent: Mahaud dort comme dans un lit.

«Allons!”

Joss la saisit sous les bras, et dépose
Un baiser monstrueux sur cette bouche rose;
Zéno, penché devant le grand fauteuil massif,
Prend ses pieds endormis et charmants; et, lascif,
Lève la robe d’or jusqu’à la jarretière.

Le puits, comme une fosse au fond d’un cimetière,
Est là béant.

XVI

Ce qu’ils font devient plus difficile à faire

Portant Mahaud, qui dort toujours,
Ils marchent lents, courbés, en silence, à pas sourds,
Zéno tourné vers l’ombre et Joss vers la lumière;
La salle aux yeux de Joss apparaît tout entière;
Tout à coup il s’arrête, et Zéno dit: « Eh bien?”
Mais Joss est effrayant; pâle, il ne répond rien
Et fait signe à Zéno, qui regarde en arrière… —
Tous deux semblent changés en deux spectres de pierre;
Car tous deux peuvent voir, là, sous un cintre obscur,
Un des grands chevaliers rangés le long du mur
Qui se lève et descend de cheval; ce fantôme,
Tranquille sous le masque horrible de son heaume,
Vient vers eux, et son pas fait trembler le plancher:
On croit entendre un dieu de l’abîme marcher;
Entre eux et l’oubliette, il vient barrer l’espace,
Et dit, le glaive haut et la visière basse,
D’une voix sépulcrale et lente comme un glas:
«Arrête, Sigismond! Arrête, Ladislas!”
Tous deux laissent tomber la marquise, de sorte
Qu’elle gît à leurs pieds et paraît une morte.

La voix de fer parlant sous le grillage noir
Reprend, pendant que Joss blêmit, lugubre à voir,
Et que Zéno chancelle ainsi qu’un mât qui sombre:

«Hommes qui m’écoutez, il est un pacte sombre
Dont tout l’univers parle et que vous connaissez;
Le voici: « Moi, Satan, dieu des cieux éclipsés,
» Roi des jours ténébreux, prince des vents contraires,
» Je contracte alliance avec mes deux bons frères,
» L’empereur Sigismond et le roi Ladislas;
» Sans jamais m’absenter ni dire: Je suis las,
» Je les protégerai dans toute conjoncture;

» De plus, je cède, en libre et pleine investiture,
» Étant seigneur de l’onde et souverain du mont,
» La mer à Ladislas, la terre à Sigismond,
» À la condition que, si je le réclame,
» Le roi m’offre sa tête et l’empereur son âme.”

— Serait-ce lui? dit Joss. Spectre aux yeux fulgurants,
Es-tu Satan?

— Je suis plus et moins. Je ne prends
Que vos têtes, ô rois des crimes et des trames,
Laissant sous l’ongle noir se débattre vos âmes.”

Ils se regardent, fous, brisés, courbant le front,
Et Zéno dit à Joss: « Hein! qu’est-ce que c’est donc?”

Joss bégaye: « Oui, la nuit nous tient. Pas de refuge.
De quelle part viens-tu? Qu’es-tu, spectre?

— Le juge.

— Grâce!”

La voix reprend:

«Dieu conduit par la main
Le vengeur en travers de votre affreux chemin;
L’heure où vous existiez est une heure sonnée;
Rien ne peut plus bouger dans votre destinée;
L’idée inébranlable et calme est dans le joint.
Oui, je vous regardais. Vous ne vous doutiez point
Que vous aviez sur vous l’œil fixe de la peine;
Et que quelqu’un savait dans cette ombre malsaine
Que Joss fût kayser et que Zéno fût roi.
Vous venez de parler tout à l’heure, pourquoi?
Tout est dit. Vos forfaits sont sur vous, incurables,
N’espérez rien. Je suis l’abîme, ô misérables!

Ah! Ladislas est roi, Sigismond est césar;
Dieu n’est bon qu’à servir de roue à votre char;
Toi, tu tiens la Pologne avec ses villes fortes;
Toi, Milan t’a fait duc, Rome empereur, tu portes
La couronne de fer et la couronne d’or;
Toi, tu descends d’Hercule, et toi, de Spartibor;
Vos deux tiares sont les deux lueurs du monde;
Tous les monts de la terre et tous les flots de l’onde
Ont, altiers ou tremblants, vos deux ombres sur eux;
Vous êtes les jumeaux du grand vertige heureux;
Vous avez la puissance et vous avez la gloire;
Mais, sous ce ciel de pourpre et sous ce dais de moire,
Sous cette inaccessible et haute dignité,
Sous cet arc de triomphe au cintre illimité,
Sous ce royal pouvoir, couvert de sacrés voiles,
Sous ces couronnes, tas de perles et d’étoiles,
Sous tous ces grands exploits, prompts, terribles, fougueux,
Sigismond est un monstre et Ladislas un gueux!
Ô dégradation du sceptre et de l’épée!
Noire main de justice aux cloaques trempée!
Devant l’hydre, le seuil du temple ouvre ses gonds,
Et le trône est un siége aux croupes des dragons!
Siècle infâme! ô grand ciel étoilé, que de honte!
Tout rampe; pas un front où le rouge ne monte;
C’est égal, on se tait, et nul ne fait un pas.
Ô peuple, million et million de bras,
Toi, que tous ces rois-là mangent et déshonorent,
Toi, que Leurs Majestés les vermines dévorent,
Est-ce que tu n’as pas des ongles, vil troupeau,
Pour ces démangeaisons d’empereurs sur ta peau!
Du reste, en voilà deux de pris; deux âmes telles
Que l’enfer même rêve étonné devant elles!
Sigismond, Ladislas, vous étiez triomphants,
Splendides, inouïs, prospères, étouffants;
Le temps d’être punis arrive; à la bonne heure.
Ah! le vautour larmoie et le caïman pleure.
J’en ris. Je trouve bon qu’à de certains instants,

Les princes, les heureux, les forts, les éclatants,
Les vainqueurs, les puissants, tous les bandits suprêmes,
À leurs fronts cerclés d'or, chargés de diadèmes,
Sentent l'âpre sueur de Josaphat monter.
Il est doux de voir ceux qui hurlaient, sangloter.
La peur après le crime; après l'affreux, l'immonde.
C'est bien. Dieu tout-puissant! quoi, des maîtres du monde,
C'est ce que, dans la cendre et sous mes pieds, j'ai là!
Quoi, ceci règne! Quoi, c'est un césar, cela!
En vérité, j'ai honte, et mon vieux cœur se serre
De les voir se courber plus qu'il n'est nécessaire.
Finissons. Ce qui vient de se passer ici,
Princes, veut un linceul promptement épaissi;
Ces mêmes dés hideux qui virent le Calvaire,
Ont roulé, dans mon ombre indignée et sévère,
Sur une femme, après avoir roulé sur Dieu.
Vous avez joué là, rois, un lugubre jeu.
Mais, soit. Je ne vais pas perdre à de la morale
Ce moment que remplit la brume sépulcrale.
Vous ne voyez plus clair dans vos propres chemins,
Et vos doigts ne sont plus assez des doigts humains
Pour qu'ils puissent tâter vos actions funèbres;
À quoi bon présenter le miroir aux ténèbres?
À quoi bon vous parler de ce que vous faisiez?
Boire de l'ombre, étant de nuit rassasiés,
C'est ce que vous avez l'habitude de faire,
Rois, au point de ne plus sentir dans votre verre
L'odeur des attentats et le goût des forfaits.
Je vous dis seulement que ce vil portefaix,
Votre siècle, commence à trouver vos altesses
Lourdes d'iniquités et de scélératesses;
Il est las, c'est pourquoi je vous jette au monceau
D'ordures que des ans emporte le ruisseau!
Ces jeunes gens penchés sur cette jeune fille,
J'ai vu cela! Dieu bon, sont-ils de la famille
Des vivants, respirant sous ton clair horizon?
Sont-ce des hommes? Non. Rien qu'à voir la façon

Dont votre lèvre touche aux vierges endormies,
Princes, on sent en vous des goules, des lamies,
D’affreux êtres sortis des cercueils soulevés.
Je vous rends à la nuit. Tout ce que vous avez
De la face de l’homme est un mensonge infâme;
Vous avez quelque bête effroyable au lieu d’âme;
Sigismond l’assassin, Ladislas le forban,
Vous êtes des damnés en rupture de ban;
Donc lâchez les vivants et lâchez les empires!
Hors du trône, tyrans! à la tombe, vampires!
Chiens du tombeau, voici le sépulcre. Rentrez.”

Et son doigt est tourné vers le gouffre.

Atterrés,
Ils s’agenouillent.

«Oh! dit Sigismond, fantôme,
Ne nous emmène pas dans ton morne royaume!
Nous t’obéirons. Dis, qu’exiges-tu de nous?
Grâce!”

Et le roi dit: « Vois, nous sommes à genoux,
Spectre!”

Une vieille femme a la voix moins débile.

La figure qui tient l’épée est immobile,
Et se tait, comme si cet être souverain
Tenait conseil en lui sous son linceul d’airain;
Tout à coup, élevant sa voix grave et hautaine:

«Princes, votre façon d’être lâches me gêne.
Je suis homme et non spectre. Allons, debout! mon bras
Est le bras d’un vivant; il ne me convient pas
De faire une autre peur que celle où j’ai coutume.
Je suis Éviradnus.”

XVII

La massue

Comme sort de la brume
Un sévère sapin, vieilli dans l’Appenzell,
À l’heure où le matin au souffle universel
Passe, des bois profonds balayant la lisière,
Le preux ouvre son casque, et hors de la visière
Sa longue barbe blanche et tranquille apparaît.

Sigismond s’est dressé comme un dogue en arrêt;
Ladislas bondit, hurle, ébauche une huée,
Grince des dents et rit, et, comme la nuée
Résume en un éclair le gouffre pluvieux,
Toute sa rage éclate en ce cri: C’est un vieux!
Le grand chevalier dit, regardant l’un et l’autre:
«Rois, un vieux de mon temps vaut deux jeunes du vôtre.
Je vous défie à mort, laissant à votre choix
D’attaquer l’un sans l’autre ou tous deux à la fois;
Prenez au tas quelque arme ici qui vous convienne;
Vous êtes sans cuirasse et je quitte la mienne;
Car le châtiment doit lui-même être correct.”

Éviradnus n’a plus que sa veste d’Utrecht.

Pendant que, grave et froid, il déboucle sa chape,
Ladislas, furtif, prend un couteau sur la nappe,
Se déchausse, et, rapide et bras levé, pieds nus,
Il se glisse en rampant derrière Éviradnus;
Mais Éviradnus sent qu’on l’attaque en arrière,
Se tourne, empoigne et tord la lame meurtrière,

Et sa main colossale étreint comme un étau
Le cou de Ladislas, qui lâche le couteau:
Dans l’œil du nain royal on voit la mort paraître.

«Je devrais te couper les quatre membres, traître,
Et te laisser ramper sur tes moignons sanglants.
Tiens, dit Éviradnus, meurs vite!”

Et sur ses flancs
Le roi s’affaise, et, blême et l’œil hors de l’orbite,
Sans un cri, tant la mort formidable est subite,
Il expire.

L’un meurt, mais l’autre s’est dressé.
Le preux, en délaçant sa cuirasse, a posé
Sur un banc son épée, et Sigismond l’a prise.

Le jeune homme effrayant rit de la barbe grise;
L’épée au poing, joyeux, assassin rayonnant,
Croisant les bras, il crie: « À mon tour maintenant!”
Et les noirs chevaliers, juges de cette lice,
Peuvent voir, à deux pas du fatal précipice,
Près de Mahaud, qui semble un corps inanimé,
Éviradnus sans arme et Sigismond armé.
Le gouffre attend. Il faut que l’un des deux y tombe.

«Voyons un peu sur qui va se fermer la tombe,
Dit Sigismond. C’est toi le mort! c’est toi le chien!”

Le moment est funèbre; Éviradnus sent bien
Qu’avant qu’il ait choisi dans quelque armure un glaive,
Il aura dans les reins la pointe qui se lève;
Que faire? Tout à coup sur Ladislas gisant
Son œil tombe; il sourit terrible, et, se baissant
De l’air d’un lion pris qui trouve son issue:
«Hé! dit-il, je n’ai pas besoin d’autre massue!”
Et, prenant aux talons le cadavre du roi,

Il marche à l’empereur, qui chancelle d’effroi;
Il brandit le roi mort comme une arme, il en joue,
Il tient dans ses deux poings les deux pieds, et secoue
Au-dessus de sa tête, en murmurant: Tout beau!
Cette espèce de fronde horrible du tombeau,
Dont le corps est la corde et la tête la pierre.
Le cadavre éperdu se renverse en arrière,
Et les bras disloqués font des gestes hideux.

Lui, crie: « Arrangez-vous, princes, entre vous deux.
Si l’enfer s’éteignait, dans l’ombre universelle,
On le rallumerait, certe, avec l’étincelle
Qu’on peut tirer d’un roi heurtant un empereur.”

Sigismond, sous ce mort qui plane, ivre d’horreur,
Recule, sans la voir, vers la lugubre trappe;
Soudain le mort s’abat et le cadavre frappe… —
Éviradnus est seul. Et l’on entend le bruit
De deux spectres tombant ensemble dans la nuit.
Le preux se courbe au seuil du puits, son œil y plonge,
Et, calme, il dit tout bas, comme parlant en songe:
«C’est bien! disparaissez, le tigre et le chacal!”

XVIII

Le jour reparaît

Il reporte Mahaud sur le fauteuil ducal,
Et, de peur qu’au réveil elle ne s’inquiète,
Il referme sans bruit l’infernale oubliette;
Puis remet tout en ordre autour de lui, disant:

«La chose n’a pas fait une goutte de sang;
C’est mieux.”

Mais, tout à coup, la cloche au loin éclate;
Les monts gris sont bordés d’un long fil écarlate;
Et voici que, portant des branches de genêt,
Le peuple vient chercher sa dame; l’aube naît.
Les hameaux sont en branle, on accourt, et, vermeille,
Mahaud, en même temps que l’aurore, s’éveille;
Elle pense rêver, et croit que le brouillard
A pris ces jeunes gens pour en faire un vieillard,
Et les cherche des yeux, les regrettant peut-être;
Éviradnus salue, et le vieux vaillant maître,
S’approchant d’elle avec un doux sourire ami:
«Madame, lui dit-il, avez-vous bien dormi?”

VI. Les Trônes d’Orient

Zim-Zizimi

Zim-Zizimi, soudan d’Égypte, commandeur
Des croyants, padischah qui dépasse en grandeur
Le césar d’Allemagne et le sultan d’Asie,
Maître que la splendeur énorme rassasie,
Songe: c’est le moment de son festin du soir;
Toute la table fume ainsi qu’un encensoir;
Le banquet est dressé dans la plus haute crypte
D’un grand palais bâti par les vieux rois d’Égypte;
Les plafonds sont dorés et les piliers sont peints;
Les buffets sont chargés de viandes et de pains,
Et de tout ce que peut rêver la faim humaine;
Un roi mange en un jour plus qu’en une semaine
Le peuple d’Ispahan, de Byzance et de Tyr;
Et c’est l’art des valets que de faire aboutir
La mamelle du monde à la bouche d’un homme;
Tous les mets qu’on choisit, tous les vins qu’on renomme,
Sont là, car le sultan Zizimi boit du vin;
Il rit du livre austère et du texte divin
Que le derviche triste, humble et pâle, vénère;
L’homme sobre est souvent cruel, et, d’ordinaire,
L’économe de vin est prodigue de sang;
Mais Zim est à la fois ivrogne et malfaisant.

Ce qui n’empêche pas qu’il ne soit plein de gloire.
Il règne; il a soumis la vieille Afrique noire;
Il règne par le sang, la guerre et l’échafaud;
Il tient l’Asie ainsi qu’il tient l’Afrique; il faut
Que celui qui veut fuir son empire, s’exile
Au nord, en Thrace, au sud, jusqu’au fleuve Baxile;
Toujours vainqueur, fatal, fauve, il a pour vassaux
Les batailles, les camps, les clairons, les assauts;
L’aigle en l’apercevant crie et fuit dans les roches.

Les rajahs de Mysore et d’Agra sont ses proches,
Ainsi qu’Omar qui dit: « Grâce à moi, Dieu vaincra.”
Son oncle est Hayraddin, sultan de Bassora,
Les grands cheiks du désert sont tous de sa famille,
Le roi d’Oude est son frère, et l’épée est sa fille.

Il a dompté Bagdad, Trébizonde, et Mossul,
Que conquit le premier Duilius, ce consul
Qui marchait précédé de flûtes tibicines;
Il a soumis Gophna, les forêts abyssines,
L’Arabie, où l’aurore a d’immenses rougeurs,
Et l’Hedjaz, où, le soir, les tremblants voyageurs,
De la nuit autour d’eux sentant rôder les bêtes,
Allument de grands feux, tiennent leurs armes prêtes,
Et se brûlent un doigt pour ne pas s’endormir;
Mascate et son imam, la Mecque et son émir,
Le Liban, le Caucase et l’Atlas font partie
De l’ombre de son trône, ainsi que la Scythie,
Et l’eau de Nagaïn et le sable d’Ophir,
Et le Sahara fauve, où l’oiseau vert asfir,
Vient becqueter la mouche aux pieds des dromadaires;
Pareils à des vautours forcés de changer d’aires,
Devant lui, vingt sultans, reculant hérissés,
Se sont dans la fournaise africaine enfoncés;
Quand il étend son sceptre, il touche aux âpres zones
Où luit la nudité des fières amazones;
En Grèce, il fait lutter chrétiens contre chrétiens,
Les chiens contre les porcs, les porcs contre les chiens;
Tout le craint; et sa tête est de loin saluée
Par le lama debout dans la sainte nuée,
Et son nom fait pâlir parmi les Kassburdars
Le sophi devant qui flottent sept étendards;
Il règne; et le morceau qu’il coupe de la terre
S’agrandit chaque jour sous son noir cimeterre;
Il foule les cités, les achète, les vend,
Les dévore; à qui sont les hommes, Dieu vivant?
À lui, comme la paille est au bœuf dans l’étable.

*

Cependant, il s’ennuie. Il est seul à sa table,
Le trône ne pouvant avoir de conviés;
Grandeur, bonheur, les biens par la foule enviés,
L’alcôve où l’on s’endort, le sceptre où l’on s’appuie,
Il a tout; c’est pourquoi ce tout-puissant s’ennuie;
Ivre, il est triste.

Il vient d’épuiser les plaisirs;
Il a donné son pied à baiser aux vizirs;
Sa musique a joué les fanfares connues;
Des femmes ont dansé devant lui toutes nues;
Il s’est fait adorer par un tas prosterné
De cheiks et d’ulémas décrépits, étonné
Que la barbe fût blanche alors que l’âme est vile;
Il s’est fait amener, des prisons de la ville,
Deux voleurs qui se sont traînés à ses genoux,
Criant grâce, implorant l’homme maître de tous,
Agitant à leurs poings de pesantes ferrailles,
Et, curieux de voir s’échapper leurs entrailles,
Il leur a lentement lui-même ouvert le flanc;
Puis il a renvoyé ses esclaves, bâillant.

Zim regarde, en sa molle et hautaine attitude,
Cherchant à qui parler dans cette solitude.
*

Le trône où Zizimi s’accoude est soutenu
Par dix sphinx au front ceint de roses, au flanc nu;
Tous sont en marbre blanc; tous tiennent une lyre;
L’énigme dans leurs yeux semble presque sourire;
Chacun d’eux porte un mot sur sa tête sculpté,
Et ces dix mots sont: Gloire, Amour, Jeu, Volupté,
Santé, Bonheur, Beauté, Grandeur, Victoire, Joie.

Et le sultan s’écrie:

«Ô sphinx dont l’œil flamboie,
Je suis le Conquérant; mon nom est établi
Dans l’azur des cieux, hors de l’ombre et de l’oubli;
Et mon bras porte un tas de foudres qu’il secoue;
Mes exploits fulgurants passent comme une roue;
Je vis; je ne suis pas ce qu’on nomme un mortel;
Mon trône vieillissant se transforme en autel;
Quand le moment viendra que je quitte la terre,
Étant le jour, j’irai rentrer dans la lumière;
Dieu dira: « Du sultan je veux me rapprocher.”
L’aube prendra son astre et viendra me chercher.
L’homme m’adore avec des faces d’épouvante;
L’Orgueil est mon valet, la Gloire est ma servante;
Elle se tient debout quand Zizimi s’assied;
Je dédaigne et je hais les hommes; et mon pied
Sent le mou de la fange en marchant sur leurs nuques.
À défaut des humains, tous muets, tous eunuques,
Tenez-moi compagnie, ô sphinx qui m’entourez
Avec vos noms joyeux sur vos têtes dorées,
Désennuyez le roi redoutable qui tonne;
Qua ma splendeur en vous autour de moi rayonne;
Chantez-moi votre chant de gloire et de bonheur;
Ô trône triomphal dont je suis le seigneur,
Parle-moi! Parlez-moi, sphinx couronnés de roses!”

Alors les sphinx, avec la voix qui sort des choses,
Parlèrent: tels ces bruits qu’on entend en dormant.

*

LE PREMIER SPHINX

La reine Nitocris, près du clair firmament,
Habite le tombeau de la haute terrasse;
Elle est seule, elle est triste; elle songe à sa race,
À tous ces rois, terreur des Grecs et des Hébreux,
Durs, sanglants, et sortis de son flanc ténébreux;
Au milieu de l’azur son sépulcre est farouche;
Les oiseaux tombent morts quand leur aile le touche;
Et la reine est muette et les nuages font
Sur son royal silence un bruit sombre et profond.
Selon l’antique loi, nul vivant, s’il ne porte
Sur sa tête un corps mort, ne peut franchir la porte
Du tombeau, plein d’enfer et d’horreur pénétré.
La reine ouvre les yeux la nuit; le ciel sacré
Apparaît à la morte à travers les pilastres;
Son oeil sinistre et fixe importune les astres;
Et jusqu’à l’aube, autour de os de Nitocris,
Un flot de spectres passe avec de vagues cris.

LE DEUXIÈME SPHINX

Si grands que soient les rois, les pharaons, les mages
Qu’entoure une nuée éternelle d’hommages,
Personne n’est plus haut que Téglath-Phalasar.
Comme Dieu même, à qui l’étoile sert de char,
Il a son temple avec un prophète pour prêtre;
Ses yeux semblent de pourpre, étant les yeux du maître;
Tout tremble; et, sous son joug redouté, le héros
Tient les peuples courbés ainsi que des taureaux;
Pour les villes d’Assur que son pas met en cendre,
Il est ce que sera pour l’Asie Alexandre,
Il est ce que sera pour l’Europe Attila;
Il triomphe, il rayonne; et, pendant ce temps-là,

Sans savoir qu’à ses pieds toute la terre tombe,
Pour le mur qui sera la cloison de sa tombe,
Des potiers font sécher de la brique au soleil.

LE TROISIÈME SPHINX

Nemrod était un maître aux archanges pareil;
Son nom est sur Babel, la sublime masure;
Son sceptre altier couvrait l’espace qu’on mesure
De la mer du couchant à la mer du levant;
Baal le fit terrible à tout être vivant
Depuis le ciel sacré jusqu’à l’enfer immonde,
Ayant rempli ses mains de l’empire du monde.
Si l’on eût dit: « Nemrod mourra,” qui l’aurait cru?
Il vivait; maintenant cet homme a disparu.
Le désert est profond et le vent est sonore.

LE QUATRIÈME SPHINX

Chrem fut roi; sa statue était d’or; on ignore
La date de la fonte et le nom du fondeur;
Et nul ne pourrait dire à quelle profondeur
Ni dans quel sombre puits, ce pharaon sévère
Flotte, plongé dans l’huile, en son cercueil de verre.
Les rois triomphent, beaux, fiers, joyeux, courroucés,
Puissants, victorieux; alors Dieu dit: « Assez!”

Le temps, spectre debout sur tout ce qui s’écroule,
Tient et par moments tourne un sablier où coule
Une poudre qu’il a prise dans les tombeaux
Et ramassée aux plis des linceuls en lambeaux,
Et la cendre des morts mesure aux vivants l’heure.

Rois, le sablier tremble et la clepsydre pleure;
Pourquoi? le savez-vous, rois? C’est que chacun d’eux
Voit au delà de vous, ô princes hasardeux,
Le dedans du sépulcre et de la catacombe,
Et la forme que prend le trône dans la tombe.

LE CINQUIÈME SPHINX

Les quatre conquérants de l’Asie étaient grands;
Leurs colères roulaient ainsi que des torrents;
Quand ils marchaient, la terre oscillait sur son axe;
Thuras tenait le Phase, Ochus avait L’Araxe,
Gour la Perse, et le roi fatal, Phul-Bélézys,
Sur l’Inde monstrueuse et triste était assis;
Quand Cyrus les lia tous quatre à son quadrige,
L’Euphrate eut peur; Ninive, en voyant ce prodige,
Disait: « Quel est ce char étrange et radieux
Que traîne un formidable attelage de dieux?”
Ainsi parlait le peuple, ainsi parlait l’armée;
Tout s’est évanoui, puisque tout est fumée.

LE SIXIÈME SPHINX

Cambyse ne fait plus un mouvement; il dort;
Il dort sans même voir qu’il pourrit; il est mort.
Tant que vivent les rois, la foule est à plat ventre;
On les contemple, on trouve admirable leur antre;
Mais, sitôt qu’ils sont morts, ils deviennent hideux,
Et n’ont plus que les vers pour ramper autour d’eux.
Oh! de Troie à Memphis, et d’Ecbatane à Tarse,
La grande catastrophe éternelle est éparse
Avec Pyrrhus le grand, avec Psamméticus!

Les rois vainqueurs sont morts plus que les rois vaincus;
Car la mort rit, et fait, quand sur l’homme elle monte,
Plus de nuit sur la gloire, hélas! que sur la honte.

LE SEPTIÈME SPHINX

La tombe où l’on a mis Bélus croule au désert;
Ruine, elle a perdu son mur de granit vert,
Et sa coupole, sœur du ciel, splendide et ronde;
Le pâtre y vient choisir des pierres pour sa fronde;
Celui qui, le soir, passe en ce lugubre champ
Entend le bruit que fait le chacal en mâchant;
L’ombre en ce lieu s’amasse et la nuit est là toute;
Le voyageur, tâtant de son bâtant la voûte,
Crie en vain: « Est-ce ici qu’était le dieu Bélus?”
Le sépulcre est si vieux qu’il ne s’en souvient plus.

LE HUITIÈME SPHINX

Aménophis, Ephrée et Cherbron sont funèbres;
Rhamsès est devenu tout noir dans les ténèbres;
Les satrapes s’en vont dans l’ombre, ils s’en vont tous;
L’ombre n’a pas besoin de clefs ni de verrous,
L’ombre est forte. La mort est la grande geôlière;
Elle manie un dieu d’une main familière,
Et l’enferme; les rois sont ses noirs prisonniers;
Elle tient les premiers, elle tient les derniers;
Dans une gaîne étroite elle a roidi leurs membres;
Elle les a couchés dans de lugubres chambres
Entre des murs bâtis de cailloux et de chaux;
Et, pour qu’ils restent seuls dans ces blêmes cachots,
Méditant sur leurs sceptre et sur leur aventure,
Elle a pris de la terre et bouché l’ouverture.

LE NEUVIÈME SPHINX

Passants, quelqu’un veut-il voir Cléopâtre au lit?
Venez; l’alcôve est morne, une brume l’emplit;
Cléopâtre est couchée à jamais; cette femme
Fut l’éblouissement de l’Asie et la flamme
Que tout le genre humain avait dans le regard;
Quand elle disparut, le monde fut hagard;
Ses dents étaient de perle et sa bouche était d’ambre;
Les rois mouraient d’amour en entrant dans sa chambre;
Pour elle Ephractæus soumit l’Atlas, Sapor
Vint d’Osymandias saisir le cercle d’or,
Mamylos conquit Suse et Tentyris détruite,
Et Palmyre, et pour elle Antoine prit la fuite;
Entre elle et l’univers qui s’offraient à la fois
Il hésita, lâchant le monde de son choix.
Cléopâtre égalait les Junons éternelles;
Une chaîne sortait de ses vagues prunelles;
Ô tremblant cœur humain, si jamais tu vibras,
C’est dans l’étreinte altière et douce de ses bras;
Son nom seul enivrait; Strophus n’osait l’écrire;
La terre s’éclairait de son divin sourire,
À force de lumière et d’amour, effrayant;
Son corps semblait mêlé d’azur; en la voyant,
Vénus, le soir, rentrait jalouse sous la nue;
Cléopâtre embaumait l’Égypte; toute nue,
Elle brûlait les yeux ainsi que le soleil;
Les roses enviaient l’ongle de son orteil;
Ô vivants, allez voir sa tombe souveraine;
Fière, elle était déesse et daignait être reine;
L’amour prenait pour arc sa lèvre aux coins moqueurs;
Sa beauté rendait fous les fronts, les sens, les cœurs,
Et plus que les lions rugissants était forte;
Mais bouchez-vous le nez si vous passez la porte.

LE DIXIÈME SPHINX

Que fait Sennachérib, roi plus grand que le sort?
Le roi Sennachérib fait ceci qu'il est mort.
Que fait Gad? Il est mort. Que fait Sardanapale?
Il est mort.

*

Le sultan écoutait, morne et pâle.
«Voilà de sombres voix, dit-il; et je ferai
Dès demain jeter bas ce palais effaré
Où le démon répond quand on s'adresse aux anges.”

Il menaça du poing les sphinx aux yeux étranges.

*

Et son regard tomba sur la coupe où brillait
Le vin semé de sauge et de feuilles d'œillet.

«Ah! toi, tu sais calmer ma tête fatiguée;
Viens, ma coupe, dit-il. Ris, parle-moi, sois gaie.
Chasse de mon esprit ces nuages hideux.
Moi, le pouvoir, et toi, le vin, causons tous deux.”

La coupe étincelante, embaumée et fleurie,
Lui dit:

«Phur, roi soleil, avait Alexandrie;

Il levait au-dessus de la mer son cimier;
Il tirait de son temple orageux, le premier
D’Afrique après Carthage et du monde après Rome,
Des soldats plus nombreux que les rêves que l’homme
Voit dans la transparence obscure du sommeil;
Mais à quoi bon avoir été l’homme soleil?
Puisqu’on est le néant, que sert d’être le maître?
Que sert d’être calife ou mage? À quoi bon être
Un de ces pharaons, ébauches de sultans,
Qui, dans la profondeur ténébreuse des temps,
Jettent la lueur vague et sombre de leurs mitres?
À quoi bon être Arsès, Darius, Armamithres,
Cyaxare, Séthos, Dardanus, Dercylas,
Xercès, Nabonassar, Asar-addon, hélas!
On a des légions qu’à la guerre on exerce;
On est Antiochus, Chosroès, Artaxerce,
Sésostris, Annibal, Astyage, Sylla,
Achille, Omar, César, on meurt, sachez cela.
Ils étaient dans le bruit, ils sont dans le silence.
Vivants, quand le trépas sur un de vous s’élance,
Tout homme, quel qu’il soit, meurt tremblant; mais le roi
Du haut de plus d’orgueil tombe dans plus d’effroi;
Cet esprit plus noir trouve un juge plus farouche;
Pendant que l’âme fuit, le cadavre se couche,
Et se sent sous la terre opprimer et chercher
Par la griffe de l’arbre et le poids du rocher;
L’orfraie à son côté se tapit défiante;
Qu’est-ce qu’un sultan mort? Les taupes font leur fiente
Dans de la cendre à qui l’empire fut donné,
Et dans des ossements qui jadis ont régné;
Et les tombeaux des rois sont des trous à panthère.”

Zim, furieux, brisa la coupe contre terre.

*

Pour éclairer la salle, on avait apporté
Au centre de la table un flambeau d'or sculpté
À Sumatra, pays des orfèvres célèbres;
Cette lampe splendide étoilait les ténèbres.

Zim lui parla:

«Voilà de la lumière au moins!
Les sphinx sont de la nuit les funèbres témoins;
La coupe, étant toujours ivre, est à peu près folle;
Mais, toi, flambeau, tu vis dans ta claire auréole;
Tu jettes aux banquets un regard souriant;
Ô lampe, où tu parais tu fais un orient;
Quand tu parles, ta voix doit être un chant d'aurore;
Dis-moi quelque chanson divine que j'ignore,
Parle-moi, ravis-moi, lampe du paradis!
Que la coupe et les sphinx monstrueux soient maudits;
Car les sphinx ont l'œil faux, la coupe a le vin traître."

Et la lampe parla sur cet ordre du maître:

«Après avoir eu Tyr, Babylone, Ilion,
Et pris Delphe à Thésée et l'Athos au lion,
Conquis Thèbe, et soumis le Gange tributaire,
Ninus le fratricide est perdu sous la terre;
Il est muré, selon le rite assyrien,
Dans un trou formidable où l'on ne voit plus rien.
Où? Qui le sait? Les puits sont noirs, la terre est creuse.
L'homme est devenu spectre. À travers l'ombre affreuse,
Si le regard de ceux qui sont vivants pouvait
Percer jusqu'au lit triste au lugubre chevet
Où gît ce roi, jadis éclair dans la tempête,
On verrait, à côté de ce qui fut sa tête,
Un vase de grès rouge, un doigt de marbre blanc;
Adam le trouverait à Caïn ressemblant.
La vipère frémit quand elle s'aventure

Jusqu’à cette effrayante et sombre pourriture;
Il est gisant; il dort; peut-être qu’il attend.

Par moments, la Mort vient dans sa tombe, apportant
Une cruche et du pain qu’elle dépose à terre;
Elle pousse du pied le dormeur solitaire,
Et lui dit: « Me voici, Ninus. Réveille-toi.
Je t’apporte à manger. Tu dois avoir faim, roi.
Prends. — Je n’ai plus de mains, répond le roi farouche.
— Allons, mange.” Et Ninus dit: « Je n’ai plus de bouche.”
Et la Mort, lui montrant le pain, dit: « Fils des dieux,
Vois ce pain.” Et Ninus répond: « Je n’ai plus d’yeux.”

*

Zim se dressa terrible, et, sur les dalles sombres
Que le festin couvrait de ses joyeux décombres,
Jeta la lampe d’or sculptée à Sumatra.
La lampe s’éteignit.

Alors la Nuit entra;
Et Zim se trouva seul avec elle; la salle,
Comme en une fumée obscure et colossale,
S’effaça; Zim tremblait, sans gardes, sans soutiens:
La Nuit lui prit la main dans l’ombre, et lui dit: Viens.

1453
Les Turcs, devant Constantinople,
Virent un géant chevalier
À l’écu d’or et de sinople,
Suivi d’un lion familier.

Mahomet Deux, sous les murailles,
Lui cria: « Qu’es-tu? — Le géant
Dit: « Je m’appelle Funérailles,

Et toi, tu t’appelles Néant.

Sultan Mourad

I

Mourad, fils du sultan Bajazet, fut un homme
Glorieux, plus qu’aucun des Tibères de Rome;
Dans son sérail veillaient des lions accroupis,
Et Mourad en couvrit de meurtres les tapis;
On y voyait blanchir des os entre les dalles;
Un long fleuve de sang de dessous ses sandales
Sortait, et s’épandait sur la terre, inondant
L’Orient, et fumant dans l’ombre à l’Occident;
Il fit un tel carnage avec son cimeterre
Que son cheval semblait au monde une panthère;
Sous lui Smyrne et Tunis, qui regretta ses beys,
Furent comme des corps qui pendent aux gibets;
Il fut sublime; il prit, mêlant la force aux ruses,
Le Caucase aux Kirghis et le Liban aux Druses;
Il fit, après l’assaut, pendre les magistrats
D’Éphèse, rouer vifs les prêtres de Patras;
Grâce à Mourad, suivi des victoires rampantes,
Le vautour essuyait son bec fauve aux charpentes
Du temple de Thésée encor pleine de clous;
Grâce à lui, l’on voyait dans Athènes des loups,
Et la ronce couvrait de sa verte tunique
Tous ces vieux pans de murs écroulés, Salonique,
Corinthe, Argos, Varna, Tyr, Didymotichos,
Où l’on n’entendait plus parler que les échos;
Mourad fut saint; il fit étrangler ses huit frères;
Comme les deux derniers, petits, cherchaient leurs mères
Et s’enfuyaient, avant de les faire mourir,
Tout autour de la chambre il les laissa courir;
Mourad, parmi la foule invitée à ses fêtes,
Passait, le cangiar à la main, et les têtes

S’envolaient de son sabre ainsi que des oiseaux;
Mourad, qui ruina Delphe, Ancyre et Naxos,
Comme on cueille un fruit mûr, tuait une province;
Il anéantissait le peuple avec le prince,
Les temples et les dieux, les rois et les donjons;
L’eau n’a pas plus d’essaims d’insectes dans ses joncs
Qu’il n’avait de rois morts et de spectres épiques
Volant autour de lui dans les forêts de piques;
Mourad, fils étoilé des sultans triomphants,
Ouvrit, l’un après l’autre et vivants, douze enfants
Pour trouver dans leur ventre une pomme volée;
Mourad fut magnanime; il détruisit Élée,
Mégare et Famagouste avec l’aide d’Allah;
Il effaça de terre Agrigente; il brûla
Fiume et Rhode, voulant avoir des femmes blanches;
Il fit scier son oncle Achmet entre deux planches,
De cèdre, afin de faire honneur à ce vieillard;
Mourad fut sage et fort; son père mourut tard,
Mourad l’aida; ce père avait laissé vingt femmes,
Filles d’Europe ayant dans leurs regards des âmes,
Ou filles de Tiflis au sein blanc, au teint clair;
Sultan Mourad jeta ces femmes à la mer
Dans des sacs convulsifs que la houle profonde
Emporta, se tordant confusément sous l’onde;
Mourad les fit noyer toutes; ce fut sa loi;
Et, quand quelque santon lui demandait pourquoi,
Il donnait pour raison: « C’est qu’elles étaient grosses.”
D’Aden et d’Erzeroum il fit de larges fosses,
Un charnier de Modon vaincue, et trois amas
De cadavres d’Alep, de Brousse et de Damas;
Un jour, tirant de l’arc, il prit son fils pour cible,
Et le tua; Mourad sultan fut invincible:
Vlad, boyard de Tarvis, appelé Belzébuth,
Refuse de payer au sultan le tribut,
Prend l’ambassade turque et la fait périr toute
Sur trente pals, plantés aux deux bords d’une route;
Mourad accourt, brûlant moissons, granges, greniers;

Bat le boyard, lui fait vingt mille prisonniers,
Puis, autour de l’immense et noir champ de bataille,
Bâtit un large mur tout en pierre de taille,
Et fait dans les créneaux, pleins d’affreux cris plaintifs,
Maçonner et murer les vingt mille captifs,
Laissant des trous par où l’on voit leurs yeux dans l’ombre;
Et part, après avoir écrit sur le mur sombre:
«Mourad, tailleur de pierre, à Vlad, planteur de pieux.”
Mourad était croyant, Mourad était pieux;
Il brûla cent couvents de chrétiens en Eubée,
Où par hasard sa foudre était un jour tombée;
Mourad fut quarante ans l’éclatant meurtrier
Sabrant le monde, ayant Dieu sous son étrier;
Il eut le Rhamseïon et le Généralife;
Il fut le padischah, l’empereur, le calife,
Et les prêtres disaient: « Allah! Mourad est grand.”

II

Législateur horrible et pire conquérant,
N’ayant autour de lui que des troupeaux infâmes,
De la foule, de l’homme en poussière, des âmes
D’où des langues sortaient pour lui lécher les pieds,
Loué pour ses forfaits toujours inexpiés,
Flatté par ses vaincus et baisé par ses proies,
Il vivait dans l’encens, dans l’orgueil, dans les joies,
Avec l’immense ennui du méchant adoré.

Il était le faucheur, la terre était le pré.

III

Un jour, comme il passait à pied dans une rue
À Bagdad, tête auguste au vil peuple apparue,
À l’heure où les maisons, les arbres et les blés
Jettent sur les chemins de soleil accablés
Leur frange d’ombre au bord d’un tapis de lumière,
Il vit, à quelques pas du seuil d’une chaumière,
Gisant à terre, un porc fétide qu’un boucher
Venait de saigner vif avant de l’écorcher;
Cette bête râlait devant cette masure;
Son cou s’ouvrait, béant d’une affreuse blessure;
Le soleil de midi brûlait l’agonisant;
Dans la plaie implacable et sombre dont le sang
Faisait un lac fumant à la porte du bouge,
Chacun de ses rayons entrait comme un fer rouge;
Comme s’ils accouraient à l’appel du soleil,
Cent moustiques suçaient la plaie au bord vermeil;
Comme autour de leur nid voltigent les colombes,
Ils allaient et venaient, parasites des tombes,
Les pattes dans le sang, l’aile dans le rayon;
Car la mort, l’agonie et la corruption,
Son ici-bas le seul mystérieux désastre
Où la mouche travaille en même temps que l’astre;
Le porc ne pouvait faire un mouvement, livré
Au féroce soleil, des mouches dévoré;
On voyait tressaillir l’effroyable coupure;
Tous les passants fuyaient loin de la bête impure;
Qui donc eût pitié de ce malheur hideux?
Le porc et le sultan étaient seuls tous les deux;
L’un torturé, mourant, maudit, infect, immonde;
L’autre empereur, puissant, vainqueur, maître du monde,
Triomphant aussi haut que l’homme peut monter,
Comme si le destin eût voulu confronter
Les deux extrémités sinistres des ténèbres.
Le porc, dont un frisson agitait les vertèbres,
Râlait, triste, épuisé, morne; et le padischah
De cet être difforme et sanglant s’approcha,

Comme on s’arrête au bord d’un gouffre qui se creuse;
Mourad pencha son front vers la bête lépreuse,
Puis la poussa du pied dans l’ombre du chemin,
Et de ce même geste énorme et surhumain
Dont il chassait les rois, Mourad chassa les mouches.
Le porc mourant rouvrit ses paupières farouches,
Regarda d’un regard ineffable, un moment,
L’homme qui l’assistait dans son accablement;
Puis son oeil se perdit dans l’immense mystère;
Il expira.

IV

Le jour où ceci sur la terre
S’accomplissait, voici ce que voyait le ciel:

C’était l’endroit calme, apaisé, solennel,
Où luit l’astre idéal sous l’idéal nuage,
Au delà de la vie, et de l’heure, et de l’âge,
Hors de ce qu’on appelle espace, et des contours
Des songes qu’ici-bas nous nommons nuits et jours;
Lieu d’évidence où l’âme enfin peut voir les causes,
Où, voyant le revers inattendu des choses,
On comprend, et l’on dit: « C’est bien!” l’autre côté
De la chimère sombre étant la vérité;
Lieu blanc, chaste, où le mal s’évanouit et sombre.
L’étoile en cet azur semble une goutte d’ombre.

Ce qui rayonne là, ce n’est pas un vain jour
Qui naît et meurt, riant et pleurant tour à tour,
Jaillissant, puis rentrant dans la noirceur première;
Et, comme notre aurore, un sanglot de lumière;
C’est un grand jour divin, regardé dans les cieux
Par les soleils, comme est le nôtre par les yeux;

Jour pur, expliquant tout, quoiqu'il soit le problème;
Jour qui terrifierait, s'il n'était l'espoir même,
De toute l'étendue éclairant l'épaisseur,
Foudre par l'épouvante, aube par la douceur.
Là, toutes les beautés tonnent épanouies;
Là frissonnent en paix les lueurs inouïes;
Là, les ressuscités ouvrent leur œil béni
Au resplendissement de l'éclair infini;
Là, les vastes rayons passent comme des ondes.

C'était sur le sommet du Sinaï des mondes;
C'était là.

Le nuage auguste, par moments,
Se fendait, et jetait des éblouissements.
Toute la profondeur entourait cette cime.

On distinguait, avec un tremblement sublime,
Quelqu'un d'inexprimable au fond de la clarté.

Et tout frémissait, tout, l'aube et l'obscurité,
Les anges, les soleils, et les êtres suprêmes,
Devant un vague front couvert de diadèmes.
Dieu méditait.

Celui qui crée et qui sourit,
Celui qu'en bégayant nous appelons Esprit,
Bonté, Force, Équité, Perfection, Sagesse,
Regarde devant lui, toujours, sans fin, sans cesse,
Fuir les siècles ainsi que des mouches d'été.
Car il est éternel avec tranquillité.

Et dans l'ombre hurlait tout un gouffre: la terre.

En bas, sous une brume épaisse, cette sphère
Rampait, monde lugubre où les pâles humains
Passaient et s'écroulaient et se tordaient les mains;

On apercevait l’Inde et le Nil, des mêlées
D’exterminations et de villes brûlées,
Et des champs ravagés et des clairons soufflant,
Et l’Europe livide ayant un glaive au flanc;
Des vapeurs de tombeau, des lueurs de repaire;
Cinq frères tout sanglants; l’oncle, le fils, le père;
Des hommes dans des murs, vivants, quoique pourris;
Des têtes voletant, mornes chauves-souris,
Autour d’un sabre nu, fécond en funérailles;
Des enfants éventrés soutenant leurs entrailles;
Et de larges bûchers fumaient, et des tronçons
D’êtres sciés en deux rampaient dans les tisons;
Et le vaste étouffeur des plaintes et des râles,
L’Océan, échouait dans les nuages pâles
D’affreux sacs noirs faisant des gestes effrayants;
Et ce chaos de fronts hagards, de pas fuyants,
D’yeux en pleurs, d’ossements, de larves, de décombres,
Ce brumeux tourbillon de spectres, et ces ombres
Secouant des linceuls, et tous ces morts, saignant
Au loin, d’un continent à l’autre continent,
Pendant aux pals, cloués aux croix, nus sur les claies,
Criaient, montrant leurs fers, leur sang, leurs maux, leurs plaies:

«C’est Mourad! c’est Mourad! justice, ô Dieu vivant!”

À ce cri, qu’apportait de toutes parts le vent,
Les tonnerres jetaient des grondements étranges,
Des flamboiements passaient sur les faces des anges,
Les grilles de l’enfer s’empourpraient, le courroux
En faisait remuer d’eux-mêmes les verrous,
Et l’on voyait sortir de l’abîme insondable
Un sinistre main qui s’ouvrait formidable;
«Justice!” répétait l’ombre; et le châtiment
Au fond de l’infini se dressait lentement.
Soudain, du plus profond des nuits, sur la nuée,
Une bête difforme, affreuse, exténuée,
Un être abject et sombre, un pourceau, s’éleva,

Ouvrant un œil sanglant qui cherchait Jéhovah;
La nuée apporta le porc dans la lumière,
À l’endroit même où luit l’unique sanctuaire,
Le saint des saints, jamais décru, jamais accru;
Et le porc murmura: « Grâce! il m’a secouru.”
Le pourceau misérable et Dieu se regardèrent.

Alors, selon des lois que hâtent ou modèrent
Les volontés de l’Être effrayant qui construit
Dans les ténèbres l’aube et dans le jour la nuit,
On vit, dans le brouillard où rien n’a plus de forme,
Vaguement apparaître une balance énorme;
Cette balance vint d’elle-même, à travers
Tous les enfers béants, tous les cieux entr’ouverts,
Se placer sous la foule immense des victimes;
Au-dessus du silence horrible des abîmes,
Sous l’œil du seul vivant, du seul vrai, du seul grand,
Terrible, elle oscillait, et portait, s’éclairant
D’un jour mystérieux plus profond que le nôtre,
Dans un plateau le monde et le pourceau dans l’autre.

Du côté du pourceau la balance pencha.

V

Mourad, le haut calife et l’altier padischah,
En sortant de la rue où les gens de la ville
L’avaient pu voir toucher à cette bête vile,
Fut le soir même pris d’une fièvre, et mourut.

Le tombeau des soudans, bâti de jaspe brut,
Couvert d’orfèvrerie, auguste, et dont l’entrée
Semble l’intérieur d’une bête éventrée
Qui serait tout en or et tout en diamants,

Ce monument, superbe entre les monuments,
Qui hérisse, au-dessus d’un mur de briques sèches,
Son faîte plein de tours comme un carquois de flèches,
Ce turbé que Bagdad montre encore aujourd’hui,
Reçut le sultan mort et se ferma sur lui.

Quand il fut là, gisant et couché sous la pierre,
Mourad ouvrit les yeux et vit une lumière;
Sans qu’on pût distinguer l’astre ni le flambeau,
Un éblouissement remplissait son tombeau;
Une aube s’y levait, prodigieuse et douce;
Et sa prunelle éteinte eut l’étrange secousse
D’une porte de jour qui s’ouvre dans la nuit;
Il aperçut l’échelle immense qui conduit
Les actions de l’homme à l’œil qui voit les âmes;
Et les clartés étaient des roses et des flammes;
Et Mourad entendit une voix qui disait:

«Mourad, neveu d’Achmet et fils de Bajazet,
Tu semblais à jamais perdu; ton âme infime
N’était plus qu’un ulcère et ton destin qu’un crime;
Tu sombrais parmi ceux que le mal submergea;
Déjà Satan était visible en toi; déjà,
Sans t’en douter, promis aux tourbillons funèbres
Des spectres sous la voûte infâme des ténèbres,
Tu portais sur ton dos les ailes de la nuit;
De ton pas sépulcral l’enfer guettait le bruit;
Autour de toi montait, par ton crime attirée,
L’obscurité du gouffre ainsi qu’une marée;
Tu penchais sur l’abîme où l’homme est châtié;
Mais tu viens d’avoir, monstre, un éclair de pitié;
Une lueur suprême et désintéressée
A, comme à ton insu, traversé ta pensée,
Et je t’ai fait mourir dans ton bon mouvement;
Il suffit, pour sauver même l’homme inclément,
Même le plus sanglant des bourreaux et des maîtres,
Du moindre des bienfaits sur le dernier des êtres;

Un seul instant d’amour rouvre l’Éden fermé;
Un pourceau secouru pèse un monde opprimé;
Viens! le ciel s’offre, avec ses étoiles sans nombre.
En frémissant de joie, à l’évadé de l’ombre!
Viens! tu fus bon un jour, sois à jamais heureux.
Entre, transfiguré! tes crimes ténébreux,
Ô roi, derrière toi s’effacent dans les gloires;
Tourne la tête, et vois blanchir tes ailes noires.”

VII. L’Italie – Ratbert

LES CONSEILLERS PROBES ET LIBRES

Ratbert, fils de Rodolphe et petit-fils de Charles,
Qui se dit empereur et qui n’est que roi d’Arles,
Vêtu de son habit de patrice romain,
Et la lance du grand saint Maurice à la main,
Est assis au milieu de la place d’Ancône.
Sa couronne est l’armet de Didier, et son trône
Est le fauteuil de fer de Henri l’Oiseleur.
Sont présents cent barons et chevaliers, la fleur
Du grand arbre héraldique et généalogique
Que ce sol noir nourrit de sa sève tragique.
Spinola, qui prit Suze et qui la ruina,
Jean de Carrara, Pons, Sixte Malaspina
Au lieu de pique ayant la longue épine noire;
Ugo, qui fit noyer ses sœurs dans leur baignoire,
Regardent dans leurs rangs entrer avec dédain
Guy, sieur de Pardiac et de l’Ile-en-Jourdain;
Guy, parmi tous ces gens de lustre et de naissance,
N’ayant encor pour lui que le sac de Vicence,
Et, du reste, n’étant qu’un batteur de pavé.
D’origine quelconque et de sang peu prouvé.
L’exarque Sapaudus que le saint-siége envoie,
Sénèque, marquis d’Ast; Bos, comte de Savoie;
Le tyran de Massa, le sombre Albert Cibo
Que le marbre aujourd’hui fait blanc sur son tombeau;
Ranuce, caporal de la ville d’Anduze;
Foulque, ayant pour cimier la tête de Méduse;
Marc, ayant pour devise: Imperium fit jus;
Entourent Afranus, évêque de Fréjus.
Là sont Farnèse, Ursin, Cosme à l’âme avilie;
Puis les quatre marquis souverains d’Italie;
L’archevêque d’Urbin, Jean, bâtard de Rodez,
Alonze de Silva, ce duc dont les cadets

Sont rois, ayant conquis l’Algarve portugaise,
Et Visconti, seigneur de Milan, et Borghèse,
Et l’homme, entre tous faux, glissant, habile, ingrat,
Avellan, duc de Tyr et sieur de Montferrat;
Près d’eux Prendiparte, capitaine de Sienne;
Pic, fils d’un astrologue et d’une égyptienne;
Alde Aldobrandini; Guiscard, sieur de Beaujeu,
Et le gonfalonier du saint-siége et de Dieu,
Gandolfe, à qui, plus tard, le pape Urbain fit faire
Une statue équestre en l’église Saint-Pierre,
Complimentent Martin de la Scala, le roi
De Vérone, et le roi de Tarente, Geoffroy;
À quelques pas se tient Falco, comte d’Athène,
Fils du vieux Muzzufer, le rude capitaine
Dont les clairons semblaient des bouches d’aquilon;
De plus, deux petits rois, Agrippin et Gilon.

Tous jeunes, beaux, heureux, pleins de joie et farouches.

Les seigneurs vont aux rois ainsi qu’au miel les mouches.
Tous sont venus, des burgs, des châteaux, des manoirs;
Et la place autour d’eux est déserte; et cent noirs,
Tous nus, et cent piquiers aux armures persanes
En barrent chaque rue avec leurs pertuisanes.
Geoffroy, Martin, Gilon, l’enfant Agrippin Trois,
Sont assis sous le dais près du maître, étant rois.

Dans ce réseau de chefs qui couvrait l’Italie,
Je passe Théodat, prince de Trente; Élie,
Despote d’Avenzo, qu’a réclamé l’oubli;
Ce borgne Ordelafo, le bourreau de Forli;
Lascaris, que sa tante Alberte fit eunuque;
Othobon, sieur d’Assise, et Tibalt, sieur de Lucque;
C’est que, bien que mêlant aux autres leurs drapeaux,
Ceux-là ne comptaient point parmi les principaux;
Dans un filet on voit les fils moins que les câbles;
Je nomme seulement les monstres remarquables.

Derrière eux, sur la pierre auguste d’un portail,
Est sculpté Satan, roi, forçat, épouvantail,
L’effrayant ramasseur de haillons de l’abîme,
Ayant sa hotte au dos, pleine d’âmes, son crime
Sur son aile qui ploie, et son croc noir qui luit
Dans son poing formidable, et, dans ses yeux, la nuit.

Pour qui voudrait peser les droits que donne au maître
La pureté du sang dont le ciel l’a fait naître,
Ratbert est fils d’Agnès, comtesse d’Elseneur;
Or, c’est la même gloire et c’est le même honneur
D’être enfanté d’Agnès que né de Messaline.

Malaspina, portant l’épine javeline,
Redoutable marquis à l’œil fauve et dévot,
Est à droite du roi, comme comte et prévôt.

C’est un de ces grands jours où les bannières sortent.
Dix chevaliers de l’ordre Au Droit Désir apportent
Le Nœud d’Or, précédés d’Énéas, leur massier,
Et d’un héraut de guerre en soutane d’acier.

Le roi brille, entouré d’une splendeur d’épées.
Plusieurs femmes sont là, près du trône groupées;
Élise d’Antioche, Ana, Cubitosa,
Fille d’Azon, qu’Albert de Mantoue épousa;
La plus belle, Matha, sœur du prince de Cumes,
Est blonde; et, l’éventant d’un éventail de plumes,
Sa naine, par moments, lui découvre les seins;
Couchée et comme lasse au milieu des coussins,
Elle enivre le roi d’attitudes lascives;
Son rire jeune et fou laisse voir ses gencives;
Elle a ce vêtement ouvert sur le côté,
Qui, plus tard, fut au Louvre effrontément porté
Par Bonne de Berry, fille de Jean de France.

Dans Ancône, est-ce deuil, terreur, indifférence?
Tout se tait; les maisons, les bouges, les palais,
Ont bouché leur lucarne ou fermé leurs volets;
Le cadran qui dit l’heure a l’air triste et funeste.

Le soleil luit aux cieux comme dans une peste;
Que l’homme soit foulé par les rois ou saisi
Par les fléaux, l’azur n’en a point de souci;
Le soleil, qui n’a pas d’ombre et de lueurs fausses,
Rit devant les tyrans comme il rit sur les fosses.

Ratbert vient d’inventer, en se frappant le front,
Un piège où ceux qu’il veut détruire tomberont;
Il en parle tout bas aux princes, qui sourient.
La prière — le peuple aime que les rois prient —
Est faite par Tibère, évêque de Verceil.

Tous étant réunis, on va tenir conseil.

Les deux huissiers de l’Ordre, Anchise avec Trophime,
Invitent le plus grand comme le plus infime
À parler, l’empereur voulant que les avis,
Mauvais, soient entendus, et, justes, soient suivis;
Puis il est répété par les huissiers, Anchise
Et Trophime, qu’il faut avec pleine franchise
Sur la guerre entreprise offrir son sentiment;
Que chacun doit parler à son tour librement;
Que c’est jour de chapitre et jour de conscience;
Et que, dans ces jours-là, les rois ont patience,
Vu que, devant le Christ, Thomas Didyme a pu
Parler insolemment sans être interrompu.
Et puisse l’empereur vivre longues années!

On voit devant Ratbert trois haches destinées,
La première, au quartier de bœuf rouge et fumant
Qu’un grand brasier joyeux cuit à son flamboiement,
La deuxième, au tonneau de vin que sur la table

A placé l’échanson aidé du connétable,
La troisième, à celui dont l’avis déplaira.

Un se lève. On se tait. C’est Jean de Carrara.

«Ta politique est sage et ta guerre est adroite,
Noble empereur, et Dieu te tient dans sa main droite.
Qui te conteste est traître et qui te brave est fou.
Je suis ton homme lige, et, toujours, n’importe où,
Je te suivrai, mon maître, et j’aimerai ta chaîne,
Et je la porterai.
— Celle-ci, capitaine,
Dit Ratbert, lui jetant au cou son collier d’or.
De plus, j’ai Perpignan, je t’en fais régidor.”

L’archevêque d’Urbin salue, il examine
Le plan de guerre, sac des communes, famine,
Les moyens souterrains, les rapports d’espions.
«Sire, vous êtes grand comme les Scipions;
En vous voyant, le flanc de l’Église tressaille.

— Archevêque, pardieu! dit Ratbert, je te baille
Un sou par muid de vin qu’on boit à Besançon.”

Cibo, qui parle avec un accent brabançon,
S’en excuse, ayant fait à Louvain ses études,
Et dit:
«Sire, les gens à fières attitudes
Sont des félons; pieds nus et la chaîne aux poignets,
Qu’on les fouette. Ô mon roi! par votre mère Agnès,
Vous êtes empereur; vous avez les trois villes,
Arles, Rome de Gaule et la mère des Milles,
Bordeaux en Aquitaine et les îles de Ré,
Naple, où le mont Vésuve est fort considéré.
Qui vous résiste essaye une lutte inutile;
Noble, qu’on le dégrade, et, serf, qu’on le mutile;
Vous affronter est crime, orgueil, lâche fureur;

Quiconque ne dit pas: Ratbert est l’empereur,
Doit mourir; nous avons des potences, j’espère.
Quant à moi, je voudrais, fût-ce mon propre père,
S’il osait blasphémer César que Dieu conduit,
Voir les corbeaux percher sur ses côtes la nuit,
Et la lune passer à travers son squelette.”

Ratbert dit: « Bon marquis, je te donne Spolète.”

C’est à Malaspina de parler. Un vieillard
Se troublerait devant ce jeune homme; il sait l’art
D’évoquer le démon, la stryge, l’égrégore;
Il teint sa dague avec du suc de mandragore;
Il sait des palefrois empoisonner le mors;
Dans une guerre, il a rempli de serpents morts
Les citernes de l’eau qu’on boit dans les Abruzzes;
Il dit: « La guerre est sainte!” Il rend compte des ruses,
À voix basse, et finit à voix haute en priant:
«Fais régner l’empereur du nord à l’orient!
Mon Dieu, c’est par sa bouche auguste que tu parles.

— Je te fais capischol de mon chapitre d’Arles,”
Dit Ratbert.
Afranus se lève le dernier.
Cet évêque est pieux, charitable, aumônier;
Quoique jeune, il voulait se faire anachorète;
Il est grand casuiste et très-savant; il traite
Les biens du monde en homme austère et détaché;
Jadis, il a traduit en vers latins Psyché;
Comme il est humble, il a les reins ceints d’une corde.

Il invoque l’esprit divin; puis il aborde
Les questions: — Ratbert, par stratagème, a mis
Son drapeau sur les murs d’Ancône; c’est permis;
Ancône étant peu sage; et la ruse est licite
Lorsqu’elle a glorieuse et pleine réussite,
Et qu’au bonheur public on la voit aboutir;

Et ce n’est pas tromper, et ce n’est pas mentir
Que mettre à la raison les discordes civiles;
Les prétextes sont bons pour entrer dans les villes. —
Il ajoute: « La ruse, ou ce qu’on nomme ainsi,
Fait de la guerre, en somme, un art plus adouci;
Moins de coups, moins de bruit; la victoire plus sûre.
J’admire notre prince, et, quand je le mesure
Aux anciens Alarics, aux antiques Cyrus
Passant leur vie en chocs violents et bourrus,
Je l’estime plus grand, faisant la différence
D’Ennius à Virgile et de Plaute à Térence.
Je donne mon avis, sire, timidement;
Je suis d’Église, et n’ai que l’humble entendement
D’un pauvre clerc, mieux fait pour chanter des cantiques
Que pour parler devant de si grands politiques;
Mais, beau sire, on ne peut voir que son horizon,
Et raisonner qu’avec ce qu’on a de raison;
Je suis prêtre, et la messe est ma seule lecture;
Je suis très-ignorant; chacun a sa monture
Qu’il monte avec audace ou bien avec effroi;
Il faut pour l’empereur le puissant palefroi
Bardé de fer, nourri d’orge blanche et d’épeautre,
Le dragon pour l’archange et l’âne pour l’apôtre.
Je poursuis, et je dis qu’il est bon que le droit
Soit, pour le roi, très-large, et, pour le peuple, étroit;
Le peuple étant bétail et le roi, berger. Sire,
L’empereur ne veut rien sans que Dieu le désire.
Donc, faites! Vous pouvez, sans avertissements,
Guerroyer les chrétiens comme les ottomans;
Les ottomans étant hors de la loi vulgaire,
On peut les attaquer sans déclarer la guerre;
C’est si juste et si vrai, que, pour premiers effets,
Vos flottes, sire, ont pris dix galères de Fez;
Quant aux chrétiens, du jour qu’ils sont vos adversaires,
Ils sont de fait païens, sire, et de droit corsaires.
Il serait malheureux qu’un scrupule arrêtât
Sa majesté, quand c’est pour le bien de l’État.

Chaque affaire a sa loi; chaque chose a son heure.
La fille du marquis de Final est mineure;
Peut-on la détrôner? En même temps, peut-on
Conserver, à la sœur de l'empereur, Menton?
Sans doute. Les pays ont des mœurs différentes.
Pourvu que de l'Église on maintienne les rentes,
On le peut. Les vieux temps, qui n'ont plus d'avocats,
Agissaient autrement; mais je fais peu de cas
De ces temps-là; c'étaient des temps de république.
L'empereur, c'est la règle; et, bref, la loi salique,
Très-mauvaise à Menton, est très-bonne à Final.

— Évêque, dit le roi, tu seras cardinal."

Pendant que le conseil se tenait de la sorte,
Et qu'ils parlaient ainsi dans cette ville morte,
Et que le maître avait sous ses pieds ces prélats,
Ces femmes, ces barons en habits de galas,
Et l'Italie au loin comme une solitude,
Quelques seigneurs, ainsi qu'ils en ont l'habitude,
Regardant derrière eux d'un regard inquiet,
Virent que le Satan de pierre souriait.

II

LA DÉFIANCE D'ONFROY

Parmi les noirs déserts et les mornes silences,
Ratbert, pour l'escorter n'ayant que quelques lances,
Et le marquis Sénèque et l'évêque Afranus,
Traverse, presque seul, des pays inconnus;
Mais il sait qu'il est fort de l'effroi qu'il inspire,
Et que l'empereur porte avec lui tout l'empire.
Un soir, Ratbert s'arrête aux portes de Carpi;

Sur ce seuil formidable un dogue est accroupi;
Ce dogue, c’est Onfroy, le baron de la ville;
Calme et fier, sous la dent d’une herse incivile,
Onfroy s’adosse aux murs qui bravaient Attila;
Les femmes, les enfants et les soldats sont là;
Et voici ce que dit le vieux podesta sombre
Qui parle haut, ayant son peuple dans son ombre:

«Roi, nous te saluons sans plier les genoux.
Nous avons une chose à te dire. Quand nous,
Gens de guerre et barons qui tenions la province,
Nous avons bien voulu de toi pour notre prince,
Quand nous t’avons donné ce peuple et cet état,
Sire, ce n’était point pour qu’on les maltraitât.
Jadis nous étions forts. Quand tu nous fis des offres,
Nous étions très-puissants; de l’argent plein nos coffres;
Et nous avions battu tes plus braves soldats;
Nous étions tes vainqueurs. Roi, tu ne marchandas
Aucun engagement, sire, aucune promesse;
On traita; tu juras par ta mère et la messe;
Nous alors, las d’avoir de l’acier sur la peau,
Comptant que tu serais bon berger du troupeau,
Et qu’on abolirait les taxes et les dîmes,
Nous vînmes te prêter hommage, et nous pendîmes
Nos casques, nos hauberts et nos piques aux clous.
Roi, nous voulons des chiens qui ne soient pas des loups.
Tes gens se sont conduits d’une telle manière
Qu’aujourd’hui toute ville, altesse, est prisonnière
De la peur que ta suite et tes soldats lui font,
Et que pas un fossé ne semble assez profond.
Vois, on se garde. Ici, dans les villes voisines,
On ne lève jamais qu’un pieu des sarrasines
Pour ne laisser passer qu’un seul homme à la fois;
À cause des brigands et de vous autres rois.
Roi, nous te remontrons que ta bande à toute heure
Dévalise ce peuple, entre dans sa demeure,
Y met tout en tumulte et sens dessus dessous,

Puis s’en va, lui volant ses misérables sous;
Cette horde en ton nom incessamment réclame
Le bien des pauvres gens qui nous fait saigner l’âme,
Et puisque, nous présents avec nos compagnons,
On le prend sous nos yeux, c’est nous qui le donnons;
Oui, c’est nous qui, trouvant qu’il vous manque des filles,
Des meutes, des chevaux, des reîtres, des bastilles,
Lorsque vous guerroyez et lorsque vous chassez,
Et qu’ayant trop de tout, vous n’avez point assez,
Avons la bonté rare et touchante de faire
Des charités, à vous, les heureux de la terre
Qui dormez dans la plume et buvez dans l’or fin,
Avez tous les liards de tous les meurt-de-faim!
Or, il nous reste encore, il faut que tu le saches,
Assez de vieux pierriers, assez de vieilles haches,
Assez de vieux engins au fond de nos greniers,
Sire, pour ne pas être à ce point aumôniers,
Et pour ne faire point, comme dans ton Autriche,
Avec l’argent du pauvre une largesse au riche.
Nous pouvons, en creusant, retrouver aujourd’hui
Nos estocs sous la rouille et nos cœurs sous l’ennui;
Nous pouvons décrocher, de nos mains indignées,
Nos bannières parmi les toiles d’araignées,
Et les faire flotter au vent, si nous voulons.

Sire, en outre, tu mets l’opprobre à nos talons.
Nous savons bien pourquoi tu combles de richesses
Nos filles et nos sœurs dont tu fais des duchesses,
Étoiles d’infamie au front de nos maisons.
Roi, nous n’acceptons pas sur nos durs écussons
Des constellations faites avec des taches;
La honte est mal mêlée à l’ombre des panaches;
Le soldat a le pied si maladroit, seigneur,
Qu’il ne peut sans boiter traîner le déshonneur.
Nos filles sont nous-même; au fond de nos tours noires,
Leur beauté chaste est sœur de nos anciennes gloires;
C’est pourquoi nous trouvons qu’on fait mal à propos

Les rideaux de ton lit avec nos vieux drapeaux.
Tes juges sont des gueux; bailliage ou cour plénière.
On trouve, et ce sera ma parole dernière,
Dans nos champs, où l’honneur antique est au rabais,
Pas assez de chemins, sire, et trop de gibets.
Ce luxe n’est pas bon. Nos pins et nos érables
Voyaient jadis, parmi leurs ombres vénérables,
Les bûcherons et non les bourreaux pénétrer;
Nos grands chênes n’ont point l’habitude d’entrer
Dans l’exécution des lois et des sentences,
Et n’aiment pas donner tant de bois aux potences.

Nous avons le cœur gros, et nous sommes, ô roi,
Tout près de secouer la corde du beffroi;
Ton altesse nous gêne et nous n’y tenons guère.
Roi, ce n’est pas pour voir nos compagnons de guerre
Accrochés à la fourche et devenus hideux,
Qui, morts, échevelés, quand nous passons près d’eux,
Semblent nous regarder et nous faire un reproche;
Ce n’est pas pour subir ton burg sur notre roche,
Plein de danses, de chants et de festins joyeux;
Ce n’est pas pour avoir ces pitiés sous les yeux
Que nous venons ici, courbant nos vieilles âmes,
Te saluer, menant à nos côtés nos femmes;
Ce n’est pas pour cela que nous humilions
Dans elles les agneaux et dans nous les lions.
Et, pour rachat du mal que tu fais, quand tu donnes
Des rentes aux moutiers, des terres aux madones,
Quand, plus chamarré d’or que le soleil du soir,
Tu vas baiser l’autel, adorer l’ostensoir,
Prier, ou quand tu fais quelque autre simagrée,
Ne te figure pas que ceci nous agrée.
Engraisser des abbés ou doter des couvents,
Cela fait-il que ceux qui sont morts soient vivants?
Roi, nous ne le pensons en aucune manière.
Roi, le chariot verse à trop creuser l’ornière;
L’appétit des rois donne aux peuples appétit;

Si tu ne changes pas d’allure, on t’avertit,
Prends garde. Et c’est cela que je voulais te dire.

— Bien parlé! dit Ratbert avec un doux sourire;”
Et, penché vers l’oreille obscure d’Afranus:
«Nous sommes peu nombreux et follement venus;
Cet homme est fort.
— Très-fort, dit le marquis Sénèque.
— Laissez-moi l’inviter à souper,” dit l’évêque.

Et c’est pourquoi l’on voit maintenant à Carpi
Un grand baron de marbre en l’église assoupi;
C’est le tombeau d’Onfroy, ce héros d’un autre âge,
Avec son épitaphe exaltant son courage,
Sa vertu, son fier cœur plus haut que les destins,
Faite par Afranus, évêque, en vers latins.

III

LA CONFIANCE DU MARQUIS FABRICE

I

Isora de Final. — Fabrice d’Albenga.

Tout au bord de la mer de Gênes, sur un mont
Qui jadis vit passer les Francs de Pharamond,
Un enfant, un aïeul, seuls dans la citadelle
De Final sur qui veille une garde fidèle,
Vivent, bien entourés de murs et de ravins;
Et l’enfant a cinq ans et l’aïeul quatre-vingts.

L’enfant est Isora de Final, héritière
Du fief dont Witikind a tracé la frontière;
L’orpheline n’a plus près d’elle que l’aïeul.
L’abandon sur Final a jeté son linceul;

L’herbe, dont, par endroits, les dalles sont couvertes,
Aux fentes des pavés fait des fenêtres vertes;
Sur la route oubliée on n’entend plus un pas;
Car le père et la mère, hélas! ne s’en vont pas
Sans que la vie autour des enfants s’assombrisse.

L’aïeul est le marquis d’Albenga, ce Fabrice
Qui fut bon; cher au pâtre, aimé du laboureur,
Il fut, pour guerroyer le pape ou l’empereur,
Commandeur de la mer et général des villes;
Gênes le fit abbé du peuple, et, des mains viles
Ayant livré l’état aux rois, il combattit.
Tout homme auprès de lui jadis semblait petit;
L’antique Sparte était sur son visage empreinte;
La loyauté mettait sa cordiale étreinte
Dans la main de cet homme à bien faire obstiné.
Comme il était bâtard d’Othon, dit le Non-Né
Parce qu’on le tira, vers l’an douze cent trente,
Du ventre de sa mère Honorate expirante,
Les rois faisaient dédain de ce fils belliqueux;
Fabrice s’en vengeait en étant plus grand qu’eux.
À vingt ans, il était blond et beau; ce jeune homme
Avait l’air d’un tribun militaire de Rome;
Comme pour exprimer les détours du destin
Dont le héros triomphe, un graveur florentin
Avait sur son écu sculpté le labyrinthe;
Les femmes l’admiraient, se montrant avec crainte
La tête de lion qu’il avait dans le dos.
Il a vu les plus fiers, Requesens et Chandos,
Et Robert, avoué d’Arras, sieur de Béthune,
Fuir devant son épée et devant sa fortune;
Les princes pâlissaient de l’entendre gronder;
Un jour, il a forcé le pape à demander
Une fuite rapide aux galères de Gênes;
C’était un grand briseur de lances et de chaînes,
Guerroyant volontiers, mais surtout délivrant;
Il a par tous été proclamé le plus grand

D’un siècle fort auquel succède un siècle traître;
Il a toujours frémi quand des bouches de prêtre
Dans les sombres clairons de la guerre ont soufflé;
Et souvent de saint Pierre il a tordu la clé
Dans la vieille serrure horrible de l’Église.
Sa bannière cherchait la bourrasque et la bise;
Plus d’un monstre a grincé des dents sous son talon;
Son bras se roidissait chaque fois qu’un félon
Déformait quelque état populaire en royaume;
Allant, venant dans l’ombre ainsi qu’un grand fantôme,
Fier, levant dans la nuit son cimier flamboyant,
Homme auguste au dedans, ferme au dehors, ayant
En lui toute la gloire et toute la patrie,
Belle âme invulnérable et cependant meurtrie,
Sauvant les lois, gardant les murs, vengeant les droits,
Et sonnant dans la nuit sous tous les coups des rois,
Cinquante ans, ce soldat, dont la tête enfin plie,
Fut l’armure de fer de la vieille Italie;
Et ce noir siècle, à qui tout rayon semble ôté,
Garde quelque lueur encore de son côté.

II

Le défaut de la cuirasse.

Maintenant il est vieux; son donjon, c’est son cloître;
Il tombe, et, déclinant, sent dans son âme croître
La confiance honnête et calme des grands cœurs;
Le brave ne croit pas au lâche, les vainqueurs
Sont forts, et le héros est ignorant du fourbe.
Ce qu’osent les tyrans, ce qu’accepte la tourbe,
Il ne le sait; il est hors de ce siècle vil;
N’en étant vu qu’à peine, à peine le voit-il;
N’ayant jamais de ruse, il n’eut jamais de crainte;
Son défaut fut toujours la crédulité sainte,
Et, quand il fut vaincu, ce fut par loyauté;
Plus de péril lui fait plus de sécurité.

Comme dans un exil il vit seul dans sa gloire;
Oublié; l’ancien peuple a gardé sa mémoire,
Mais le nouveau le perd dans l’ombre, et ce vieillard
Qui fut astre, s’éteint dans un morne brouillard.

Dans sa brume, où les feux du couchant se dispersent,
Il a cette mer vaste et ce grand ciel qui versent
Sur le bonheur la joie et sur le deuil l’ennui.

Tout est derrière lui maintenant; tout a fui;
L’ombre d’un siècle entier devant ses pas s’allonge;
Il semble des yeux suivre on ne sait quel grand songe:
Parfois, il marche et va sans entendre et sans voir.
Vieillir, sombre déclin! l’homme est triste le soir;
Il sent l’accablement de l’œuvre finissante.
On dirait par instants que son âme s’absente,
Et va savoir là-haut s’il est temps de partir.

Il n’a pas un remords et pas un repentir;
Après quatre-vingts ans son âme est toute blanche;
Parfois, à ce soldat qui s’accoude et se penche,
Quelque vieux mur, croulant lui-même, offre un appui;
Grave, il pense, et tous ceux qui sont auprès de lui
L’aiment; il faut aimer pour jeter sa racine
Dans un isolement et dans une ruine;
Et la feuille de lierre a la forme d’un cœur.

III

Aïeul maternel.

Ce vieillard, c’est un chêne adorant une fleur.
À présent un enfant est toute sa famille.
Il la regarde, il rêve; il dit: « C’est une fille,
Tant mieux!” Étant aïeul du côté maternel.
La vie en ce donjon a le pas solennel;
L’heure passe et revient ramenant l’habitude.

Ignorant le soupçon, la peur, l’inquiétude,
Tous les matins, il boucle à ses flancs refroidis
Son épée, aujourd’hui rouillée, et qui jadis
Avait la pesanteur de la chose publique;
Quand, parfois, du fourreau, vénérable relique,
Il arrache la lame illustre avec effort,
Calme, il y croit toujours sentir peser le sort.
Tout homme ici-bas porte en sa main une chose
Où, du bien et du mal, de l’effet, de la cause,
Du genre humain, de Dieu, du gouffre, il sent le poids;
Le juge au front morose a son livre des lois,
Le roi son sceptre d’or, le fossoyeur sa pelle.

Tous les soirs, il conduit l’enfant à la chapelle;
L’enfant prie et regarde avec ses yeux si beaux,
Gaie, et questionnant l’aïeul sur les tombeaux;
Et Fabrice a dans l’œil une humide étincelle.
La main qui tremble aidant la marche qui chancelle,
Ils vont sous les portails et le long des piliers
Peuplés de séraphins mêlés aux chevaliers;
Chaque statue, émue à leur pas doux et sombre,
Vibre, et toutes ont l’air de saluer dans l’ombre,
Les héros le vieillard, et les anges l’enfant.

Parfois Isoretta, que sa grâce défend,
S’échappe dès l’aurore et s’en va jouer seule
Dans quelque grande tour qui lui semble une aïeule,
Et qui mêle, croulante au milieu des buissons,
La légende romane aux souvenirs saxons.
Pauvre être qui contient toute une fière race,
Elle trouble, en passant, le bouc, vieillard vorace,
Dans les fentes des murs broutant le câprier;
Pendant que derrière elle on voit l’aïeul prier,
— Car il ne tarde pas à venir la rejoindre,
Et cherche son enfant dès qu’il voit l’aube poindre, —
Elle court, va, revient, met sa robe en haillons,

Erre de tombe en tombe et suit des papillons,
Ou s’assied, l’air pensif, sur quelque âpre architrave;
Et la tour semble heureuse et l’enfant paraît grave;
La ruine et l’enfance ont de secrets accords,
Car le temps sombre y met ce qui reste des morts.

IV

Un seul homme sait où est caché le trésor.

Dans ce siècle où tout peuple a son chef qui le broie,
Parmi les rois vautours et les princes de proie,
Certe, on n’en trouverait pas un qui méprisât
Final, donjon splendide et riche marquisat;
Tous les ans, les alleux, les rentes, les censives,
Surchargent vingt mulets de sacoches massives;
La grande tour surveille au milieu du ciel bleu,
Le sud, le nord, l’ouest et l’est, et saint Mathieu,
Saint Marc, saint Luc, saint Jean, les quatre évangélistes,
Sont sculptés et dorés sur les quatre balistes;
La montagne a pour garde, en outre, deux châteaux,
Soldats de pierre ayant du fer sous leurs manteaux.
Le trésor, quand du coffre on détache les boucles,
Semble à qui l’entrevoit un rêve d’escarboucles;
Ce trésor est muré dans un caveau discret
Dont le marquis régnant garde seul le secret,
Et qui fut autrefois le puits d’une cachette;
Fabrice maintenant connaît seul la cachette;
Le fils de Witikind vieilli dans les combats,
Othon, scella jadis dans les chambres d’en bas
Vingt caissons dont le fer verrouille les façades,
Et qu’Anselme, plus tard, fit remplir de cruzades
Pour que, dans l’avenir, jamais on n’en manquât;
Le casque du marquis est en or de ducat;
On a sculpté deux rois persans, Narse et Tigrane,
Dans la visière aux trous grillés de filigrane,

Et sur le haut cimier, taillé d'un seul onyx,
Un brasier de rubis brûle l'oiseau Phénix;
Et le seul diamant du sceptre pèse une once.

V

Le corbeau.

Un matin, les portiers sonnent du cor. Un nonce
Se présente; il apporte, assisté d'un coureur,
Une lettre du roi qu'on nomme l'empereur;
Ratbert écrit qu'avant de partir pour Tarente,
Il viendra visiter Isora, sa parente
Pour lui baiser le front et pour lui faire honneur.

Le nonce, s'inclinant, dit au marquis: « Seigneur,
Sa majesté ne fait de visites qu'aux reines."

Au message émané de ses mains très-sereines
L'empereur joint un don splendide et triomphant;
C'est un grand chariot plein de jouets d'enfant;
Isora bat des mains avec des cris de joie.

Le nonce, retournant vers celui qui l'envoie,
Prend congé de l'enfant, et, comme procureur
Du très-victorieux et très-noble empereur,
Fait le salut qu'on fait aux têtes souveraines.

«Qu'il soit le bienvenu! Bas le pont! bas les chaînes!
Dit le marquis; sonnez, la trompe et l'olifant!"
Et, fier de voir qu'on traite en reine son enfant,
La joie a rayonné sur sa face loyale.

Or, comme il relisait la lettre impériale,
Un corbeau qui passait fit de l'ombre dessus.
«Les oiseaux noirs guidaient Judas cherchant Jésus;

Sire, vois ce corbeau,” dit une sentinelle.
Et, regardant l’oiseau planer sur la tournelle:
«Bah! dit l’aïeul, j’étais pas plus haut que cela,
Compagnon, que déjà ce corbeau que voilà,
Dans la plus fière tour de toute la contrée
Avait bâti son nid, dont on voyait l’entrée;
Je le connais; le soir, volant dans la vapeur,
Il criait; tous tremblaient; mais, loin d’en avoir peur,
Moi petit, je l’aimais, ce corbeau centenaire
Étant un vieux voisin de l’astre et du tonnerre.”

VI

Le père et la mère.

Les marquis de Final ont leur royal tombeau
Dans une cave où luit, jour et nuit, un flambeau;
Le soir, l’homme qui met de l’huile dans les lampes
À son heure ordinaire en descendit les rampes;
Là, mangé par les vers dans l’ombre de la mort,
Chaque marquis auprès de sa marquise dort,
Sans voir cette clarté qu’un vieil esclave apporte.
À l’endroit même où pend la lampe, sous la porte,
Était le monument des deux derniers défunts;
Pour raviver la flamme et brûler des parfums,
Le serf s’en approcha; sur la funèbre table,
Sculpté très-ressemblant, le couple lamentable
Dont Isora, sa dame, était l’unique enfant,
Apparaissait; tous deux, dans cet air étouffant,
Silencieux, couchés côte à côte, statues
Aux mains jointes, d’habits seigneuriaux vêtues,
L’homme avec son lion, la femme avec son chien.
Il vit que le flambeau nocturne brûlait bien;
Puis, courbé, regarda, des pleurs dans la paupière,
Ce père de granit, cette mère de pierre;
Alors il recula, pâle; car il crut voir
Que ces deux fronts, tournés vers la voûte au fond noir,

S’étaient subitement assombris sur leur couche,
Elle ayant l’air plus triste et lui l’air plus farouche.

VII

Joie au château.

Une file de longs et pesants chariots
Qui précède ou qui suit les camps impériaux,
Marche là-bas avec des éclats de trompette
Et des cris que l’écho des montagnes répète;
Un gros de lances brille à l’horizon lointain.

La cloche de Final tinte, et c’est ce matin
Que du noble empereur on attend la visite.

On arrache des tours la ronce parasite;
On blanchit à la chaux en hâte les grands murs;
On range dans la cour des plateaux de fruits mûrs,
Des grenades venant des vieux monts Alpujarres,
Le vin dans les barils et l’huile dans les jarres;
L’herbe et la sauge en fleur jonchent tout l’escalier;
Dans la cuisine un feu rôtit un sanglier;
On voit fumer les peaux des bêtes qu’on écorche;
Et tout rit; et l’on a tendu sous le grand porche
Une tapisserie où Blanche d’Est, jadis,
A brodé trois héros, Macchabée, Amadis,
Achille; et le fanal de Rhode, et le quadrige
D’Aétius, vainqueur du peuple latobrige;
Et, dans trois médaillons marqués d’un chiffre en or,
Trois poëtes, Platon, Plaute et Scaeva Memor.
Ce tapis autrefois ornait la grande chambre;
Au dire des vieillards, l’effrayant roi sicambre,
Witikind, l’avait fait clouer en cet endroit
De peur que dans leur lit ses enfants n’eussent froid.

VIII

La toilette d’Isora.

Cris, chansons; et voilà ces vieilles tours vivantes.
La chambre d’Isora se remplit de servantes;
Pour faire un digne accueil au roi d’Arle, on revêt
L’enfant de ses habits de fête; à son chevet,
L’aïeul, dans un fauteuil d’orme incrusté d’érable,
S’assied, songeant aux jours passés, et, vénérable,
Il contemple Isora: front joyeux, cheveux d’or,
Comme les chérubins peints dans le corridor,
Regard d’enfant Jésus que porte la madone,
Joue ignorante où dort le seul baiser qui donne
Aux lèvres la fraîcheur, tous les autres étant
Des flammes, même, hélas! quand le cœur est content.
Isore est sur le lit assise, jambes nues;
Son œil bleu rêve avec des lueurs ingénues;
L’aïeul rit, doux reflet de l’aube sur le soir!
Et le sein de l’enfant, demi-nu, laisse voir
Ce bouton rose, germe auguste des mamelles;
Et ses beaux petits bras ont des mouvements d’ailes.
Le vétéran lui prend les mains, les réchauffant;
Et, dans tout ce qu’il dit aux femmes, à l’enfant,
Sans ordre, en en laissant deviner davantage,
Espèce de murmure enfantin du grand âge,
Il semble qu’on entend parler toutes les voix
De la vie, heur, malheur, à présent, autrefois,
Deuil, espoir, souvenir, rire et pleurs, joie et peine;
Ainsi tous les oiseaux chantent dans le grand chêne.

«Fais-toi belle; un seigneur va venir; il est bon;
C’est l’empereur; un roi; ce n’est pas un barbon
Comme nous; il est jeune; il est roi d’Arle, en France;
Vois-tu, tu lui feras ta belle révérence,
Et tu n’oublieras pas de dire: monseigneur.

Vois tous les beaux cadeaux qu’il nous fait! Quel bonheur!
Tous nos bons paysans viendront, parce qu’on t’aime;
Et tu leur jetteras des sequins d’or, toi-même,
De façon que cela tombe dans leur bonnet.”

Et le marquis, parlant aux femmes, leur prenait
Les vêtements des mains:
«Laissez, que je l’habille!
Oh! quand sa mère était toute petite fille,
Et que j’étais déjà barbe grise, elle avait
Coutume de venir dès l’aube à mon chevet;
Parfois, elle voulait m’attacher mon épée,
Et, de la dureté d’une boucle occupée,
Ou se piquant les doigts aux clous du ceinturon,
Elle riait. C’était le temps où mon clairon
Sonnait superbement à travers l’Italie.
Ma fille est maintenant sous terre, et nous oublie.
D’où vient qu’elle a quitté sa tâche, ô dure loi!
Et qu’elle dort déjà quand je veille encor, moi?
La fille qui grandit sans la mère, chancelle.
Oh! c’est triste, et je hais la mort. Pourquoi prend-elle
Cette jeune épousée et non mes pas tremblants?
Pourquoi ces cheveux noirs et non mes cheveux blancs?”

Et, pleurant, il offrait à l’enfant des dragées.

«Les choses ne sont pas ainsi bien arrangées;
Celui qui fait le choix se trompe; il serait mieux
Que l’enfant eût la mère et la tombe le vieux.
Mais de la mère au moins il sied qu’on se souvienne;
Et, puisqu’elle a ma place, hélas! je prends la sienne.

Vois donc le beau soleil et les fleurs dans les prés!
C’est par un jour pareil, les Grecs étant rentrés
Dans Smyrne, le plus grand de leurs ports maritimes,
Que, le bailli de Rhode et moi, nous les battîmes.
Mais regarde-moi donc tous ces beaux jouets-là!

Vois ce reître, on dirait un archer d’Attila.
Mais c’est qu’il est vêtu de soie et non de serge!
Et le chapeau d’argent de cette sainte Vierge!
Et ce bonhomme en or! Ce n’est pas très-hideux.
Mais comme nous allons jouer demain tous deux!
Si ta mère était là, qu’elle serait contente!
Ah! quand on est enfant, ce qui plaît, ce qui tente,
C’est un hochet qui sonne un moment dans la main,
Peu de chose le soir et rien le lendemain;
Plus tard, on a le goût des soldats véritables,
Des palefrois battant du pied dans les étables,
Des drapeaux, des buccins jetant de longs éclats,
Des camps, et c’est toujours la même chose, hélas!
Sinon qu’alors on a du sang à ses chimères.
Tout est vain. C’est égal, je plains les pauvres mères
Qui laissent leurs enfants derrière elles ainsi.”

Ainsi parlait l’aïeul, l’œil de pleurs obscurci,
Souriant cependant, car telle est l’ombre humaine.
Tout à l’ajustement de son ange de reine,
Il habillait l’enfant, et, tandis qu’à genoux
Les servantes chaussaient ces pieds charmants et doux,
Et, les parfumant d’ambre, en lavaient la poussière,
Il nouait gauchement la petite brassière,
Ayant plus d’habitude aux chemises d’acier.

IX

Joie hors du château.

Le soir vient, le soleil descend dans son brasier;
Et voilà qu’au penchant des mers, sur les collines,
Partout, les milans roux, les chouettes félines,
L’autour glouton, l’orfraie horrible dont l’œil luit
Avec du sang, le jour, qui devient feu, la nuit,
Tous les tristes oiseaux mangeurs de chair humaine,

Fils de ces vieux vautours, nés de l'aigle romaine,
Que la louve d'airain aux cirques appela,
Qui suivaient Marius et connaissaient Sylla,
S'assemblent; et les uns, laissant un crâne chauve,
Les autres, aux gibets essuyant leur bec fauve,
D'autres, d'un mât rompu quittant les noirs agrès,
D'autres, prenant leur vol du mur des lazarets,
Tous, joyeux et criant, en tumulte et sans nombre,
Ils se montrent Final, la grande cime sombre
Qu'Othon, fils d'Aleram le Saxon, crénela,
Et se disent entre eux: Un empereur est là!

X

Suite de la joie.

Cloche; acclamations; gémissements; fanfares;
Feux de joie; et les tours semblent toutes des phares,
Tant on a, pour fêter ce jour grand à jamais,
De brasiers frissonnants encombré leurs sommets!
La table colossale en plein air est dressée;
Ce qu'on a sous les yeux répugne à la pensée
Et fait peur; c'est la joie effrayante du mal;
C'est plus que le démon, c'est moins que l'animal;
C'est la cour du donjon tout entière rougie
D'une prodigieuse et ténébreuse orgie;
C'est Final, mais Final vaincu, tombé, flétri;
C'est un chant dans lequel semble se tordre un cri;
Un gouffre où les lueurs de l'enfer sont voisines
Du rayonnement calme et joyeux des cuisines;
Le triomphe de l'ombre, obscène, effronté, cru;
Le souper de Satan dans un rêve apparu.

À l'angle de la cour, ainsi qu'un témoin sombre,
Un squelette de tour, formidable décombre,
Sur son faîte vermeil d'où s'enfuit le corbeau,
Dresse et secoue aux vents, brûlant comme un flambeau,

Tout le branchage et tout le feuillage d’un orme;
Valet géant portant un chandelier énorme.

Le drapeau de l’empire, arboré sur ce bruit,
Gonfle son aile immense au souffle de la nuit.

Tout un cortége étrange est là; femmes et prêtres;
Prélats parmi les ducs, moines parmi les reîtres;
Les crosses et les croix d’évêques, au milieu
Des piques et des dards, mêlent aux meurtres Dieu,
Les mitres figurant de plus gros fers de lance.
Un tourbillon d’horreur, de nuit, de violence,
Semble emplir tous ces cœurs; que disent-ils entre eux,
Ces hommes? En voyant ces convives affreux,
On doute si l’aspect humain est véritable;
Un sein charmant se dresse au-dessus de la table,
On redoute au-dessous quelque corps tortueux;
C’est un de ces banquets du monde monstrueux
Qui règne et vit depuis les Héliogabales;
Le luth lascif s’accouple aux féroces cymbales;
Le cynique baiser cherche à se prodiguer;
Il semble qu’on pourrait à peine distinguer
De ces hommes les loups, les chiennes de ces femmes;
À travers l’ombre, on voit toutes les soifs infâmes,
Le désir, l’instinct vil, l’ivresse aux cris hagards,
Flamboyer dans l’étoile horrible des regards.

Quelque chose de rouge entre les dalles fume;
Mais, si tiède que soit cette douteuse écume,
Assez de barils sont éventrés et crevés
Pour que ce soit du vin qui court sur les pavés.

Est-ce une vaste noce? est-ce un deuil morne et triste?
On ne sait pas à quel dénoûment on assiste,
Si c’est quelque affreux monde à la terre étranger;
Si l’on voit des vivants ou des larves manger;
Et si ce qui dans l’ombre indistincte surnage

Est la fin d’un festin ou la fin d’un carnage.

Par moments le tambour, le cistre, le clairon,
Font ces rages de bruit qui rendaient fou Néron.
Ce tumulte rugit, chante, boit, mange, râle.
Sur un trône est assis Ratbert, content et pâle.

C’est, parmi le butin, les chants, les arcs de fleurs,
Dans un antre de rois un Louvre de voleurs.

Presque nue au milieu des montagnes de roses,
Comme les déités dans les apothéoses,
Altière, recevant vaguement les saluts,
Marquant avec ses doigts la mesure des luths,
Ayant dans le gala les langueurs de l’alcôve,
Près du maître sourit Matha, la blonde fauve;
Et sous la table, heureux, du genou la pressant,
Le roi cherche son pied dans les mares de sang.

Les grands brasiers, ouvrant leur gouffre d’étincelles,
Font resplendir les ors d’un chaos de vaisselles;
On ébrèche aux moutons, aux lièvres montagnards,
Aux faisans, les couteaux tout à l’heure poignards;
Sixte Malaspina, derrière le roi, songe;
Toute lèvre se rue à l’ivresse et s’y plonge;
On achève un mourant en perçant un tonneau;
L’œil croit, parmi les os de chevreuil et d’agneau,
Aux tremblantes clartés que les flambeaux prolongent,
Voir des profils humains dans ce que les chiens rongent;
Des chanteurs grecs, portant des images d’étain
Sur leurs chapes, selon l’usage byzantin,
Chantent Ratbert, césar, roi, vainqueur, dieu, génie;
On entend sous les bancs des soupirs d’agonie;
Une odeur de tuerie et de cadavres frais
Se mêle au vague encens brûlant dans les coffrets
Et les boîtes d’argent sur des trépieds de nacre;
Les pages, les valets, encor chauds du massacre,

Servent dans le banquet leur empereur, ravi
Et sombre, après l’avoir dans le meurtre servi;
Sur le bord des plats d’or on voit des mains sanglantes;
Ratbert s’accoude avec des poses indolentes;
Au-dessus du festin, dans le ciel blanc du soir,
De partout, des hanaps, du buffet, du dressoir,
Des plateaux où les paons ouvrent leurs larges queues,
Des écuelles où brûle un philtre aux lueurs bleues,
Des verres, d’hypocras et de vin écumants,
Des bouches des buveurs, des bouches des amants,
S’élève une vapeur, gaie, ardente, enflammée,
Et les âmes des morts sont dans cette fumée.

XI

Toutes les faims satisfaites.

C’est que les noirs oiseaux de l’ombre ont eu raison,
C’est que l’orfraie a bien flairé la trahison,
C’est qu’un fourbe a surpris le vaillant sans défense,
C’est qu’on vient d’écraser la vieillesse et l’enfance.
En vain quelques soldats fidèles ont voulu
Résister à l’abri d’un créneau vermoulu;
Tous sont morts; et de sang les dalles sont trempées;
Et la hache, l’estoc, les masses, les épées,
N’ont fait grâce à pas un, sur l’ordre que donna
Le roi d’Arle au prévôt Sixte Malaspina.
Et, quant aux plus mutins, c’est ainsi que les nomme
L’aventurier royal fait empereur par Rome,
Trente sur les crochets et douze sur le pal
Expirent au-dessus du porche principal.

Tandis qu’en joyeux chants les vainqueurs se répandent,
Auprès de ces poteaux et de ces croix où pendent
Ceux que Malaspina vient de supplicier,
Corbeaux, hiboux, milans, tout l’essaim carnassier,

Venus des monts, des bois, des cavernes, des havres,
S’abattent par volée et font sur les cadavres
Un banquet, moins hideux que celui d’à côté.

Ah! le vautour est triste à voir, en vérité,
Déchiquetant sa proie et planant; on s’effraie
Du cri de la fauvette aux griffes de l’orfraie;
L’épervier est affreux rongeant des os brisés;
Pourtant, par l’ombre immense on les sent excusés,
L’impénétrable faim est la loi de la terre,
Et le ciel, qui connaît la grande énigme austère,
La nuit, qui sert de fond au guet mystérieux
Du hibou promenant la rondeur de ses yeux
Ainsi qu’à l’araignée ouvrant ses pâles toiles,
Met à ce festin sombre une nappe d’étoiles;
Mais l’être intelligent, le fils d’Adam, l’élu
Qui doit trouver le bien après l’avoir voulu,
L’homme, exterminant l’homme et riant, épouvante
Même au fond de la nuit, l’immensité vivante,
Et, que le ciel soit noir ou que le ciel soit bleu,
Caïn tuant Abel est la stupeur de Dieu.

XII

Que c’est Fabrice qui est un traître.

Un homme qu’un piquet de lansquenets escorte,
Qui tient une bannière inclinée, et qui porte
Une jacque de vair taillée en éventail,
Un héraut, fait ce cri devant le grand portail:

«Au nom de l’empereur clément et plein de gloire,
— Dieu le protège! — peuple! il est pour tous notoire
Que le traître marquis Fabrice d’Albenga
Jadis avec les gens des villes se ligua,
Et qu’il a maintes fois guerroyé le saint-siége;
C’est pourquoi l’empereur très-clément — Dieu protége

L’empereur! — le citant à son haut tribunal,
A pris possession de l’état de Final.”

L’homme ajoute, dressant sa bannière penchée:
«Qui me contredira soit sa tête tranchée,
Et ses biens confisqués à l’empereur. J’ai dit.”

XIII

Silence.

Tout à coup on se tait; ce silence grandit,
Et l’on dirait qu’au choc brusque d’un vent qui tombe,
Cet enfer a repris sa figure de tombe;
Ce pandémonium, ivre d’ombre et d’orgueil,
S’éteint; c’est qu’un vieillard a paru sur le seuil;
Un prisonnier, un juge, un fantôme; l’ancêtre!

C’est Fabrice.
On l’amène à la merci du maître.
Ses blêmes cheveux blancs couronnent sa pâleur;
Il a les bras liés au dos comme un voleur;
Et, pareil au milan qui suit des yeux sa proie,
Derrière le captif, marche, sans qu’il le voie,
Un homme qui tient haute une épée à deux mains.

Matha, fixant sur lui ses beaux yeux inhumains,
Rit sans savoir pourquoi, rire étant son caprice.
Dix valets de la lance environnent Fabrice.
Le roi dit: « Le trésor est caché dans un lieu
Qu’ici tu connais seul; et je jure par Dieu
Que, si tu dis l’endroit, marquis, ta vie est sauve.”

Fabrice lentement lève sa tête chauve
Et se tait.
Le roi dit: « Es-tu sourd, compagnon?”

Un reître avec le doigt fait signe au roi que non.
« — Marquis, parle! ou sinon, vrai comme je me nomme
Empereur des Romains, roi d'Arle et gentilhomme,
Lion, tu vas japper ainsi qu'un épagneul.
Ici, bourreaux! — Réponds, le trésor?"
Et l'aïeul
Semble, droit et glacé parmi les fers de lance,
Avoir déjà pris place en l'éternel silence.

Le roi dit: « Préparez les coins et les crampons.
Pour la troisième fois, parleras-tu? Réponds."

Fabrice, sans qu'un mot d'entre ses lèvres sorte,
Regarde le roi d'Arle et d'une telle sorte,
Avec un si superbe éclair, qu'il l'interdit;
Et Ratbert, furieux sous ce regard, bondit
Et crie, en s'arrachant le poil de la moustache:
«Je te trouve idiot et mal en point, et sache
Que les jouets d'enfant étaient pour toi, vieillard!
Çà, rends-moi ce trésor, fruit de tes vols, pillard!
Et ne m'irrite pas, ou ce sera ta faute,
Et je vais envoyer sur ta tour la plus haute
Ta tête au bout d'un pieu se taire dans la nuit.
Mais l'aïeul semble d'ombre et de pierre construit;
On dirait qu'il ne sait pas même qu'on lui parle.

«Le brodequin! à toi, bourreau!" dit le roi d'Arle.

Le bourreau vient, la foule effarée écoutait.

On entend l'os crier, mais la bouche se tait.

Toujours prêt à frapper le prisonnier en traître,
Le coupe-tête jette un coup d'œil à son maître.

«Attends que je te fasse un signe," dit Ratbert.
Et, reprenant:

«Voyons, toi chevalier haubert,
Mais cadet, toi marquis, mais bâtard, si tu donnes
Ces quelques diamants de plus à mes couronnes,
Si tu veux me livrer ce trésor, je te fais
Prince, et j’ai dans mes ports dix galères de Fez
Dont je te fais présent avec cinq cents esclaves.”

Le vieillard semble sourd et muet.
«Tu me braves!
Eh bien! tu vas pleurer,” dit le fauve empereur.

XIV

Ratbert rend l’enfant à l’aïeul.

Et voici qu’on entend comme un souffle d’horreur
Frémir, même en cette ombre et même en cette horde.
Une civière passe, il y pend une corde;
Un linceul la recouvre; on la pose à l’écart;
On voit deux pieds d’enfant qui sortent du brancard.
Fabrice, comme au vent se renverse un grand arbre,
Tremble, et l’homme de chair sous cet homme de marbre
Reparaît; et Ratbert fait lever le drap noir.

C’est elle! Isora! pâle, inexprimable à voir,
Étranglée, et sa main crispée, et cela navre,
Tient encore un hochet; pauvre petit cadavre!

L’aïeul tressaille avec la force d’un géant;
Formidable, il arrache au brodequin béant
Son pied dont le bourreau vient de briser le pouce;
Les bras toujours liés, de l’épaule il repousse
Tout ce tas de démons, et va jusqu’à l’enfant,
Et sur ses deux genoux tombe, et son cœur se fend.
Il crie en se roulant sur la petite morte:

«Tuée! ils l’ont tuée! et la place était forte,

Le pont avait sa chaîne et la herse ses poids,
On avait des fourneaux pour le soufre et la poix,
On pouvait mordre avec ses dents le roc farouche,
Se défendre, hurler, lutter, s’emplir la bouche
De feu, de plomb fondu, d’huile, et les leur cracher
À la figure avec les éclats du rocher!
Non! on a dit: « Entrez!” et, par la porte ouverte,
Ils sont entrés! la vie à la mort s’est offerte!
On a livré la place, on n’a point combattu!
Voilà la chose; elle est toute simple; ils n’ont eu
Affaire qu’à ce vieux misérable imbécile!
Égorger un enfant, ce n’est pas difficile.
Tout à l’heure, j’étais tranquille, ayant peu vu
Qu’on tuât des enfants, et je disais: « Pourvu
«Qu’Isora vive, eh bien! après cela, qu’importe!”
Mais l’enfant! Ô mon Dieu! c’est donc vrai qu’elle est morte!
Penser que nous étions là tous deux hier encor!
Elle allait et venait dans un gai rayon d’or;
Cela jouait toujours, pauvre mouche éphémère!
C’était la petite âme errante de sa mère!
Le soir, elle posait son doux front sur mon sein,
Et dormait… — Ah! brigand! assassin! assassin!”

Il se dressait, et tout tremblait dans le repaire,
Tant c’était la douleur d’un lion et d’un père,
Le deuil, l’horreur, et tant ce sanglot rugissait!
«Et moi qui, ce matin, lui nouais son corset!
Je disais: « Fais-toi belle, enfant!” Je parais l’ange
Pour le spectre! — Oh! ris donc là-bas, femme de fange!
Riez tous! Idiot, en effet, moi qui crois
Qu’on peut se confier aux paroles des rois
Et qu’un hôte n’est pas une bête féroce!
Le roi, les chevaliers, l’évêque avec sa crosse,
Ils sont venus, j’ai dit: « Entrez;” c’étaient des loups!
Est-ce qu’ils ont marché sur elle avec des clous
Qu’elle est toute meurtrie? Est-ce qu’ils l’ont battue?
Et voilà maintenant nos filles qu’on nous tue

Pour voler un vieux casque en vieil or de ducat!
Je voudrais que quelqu’un d’honnête m’expliquât
Cet événement-ci, voilà ma fille morte!
Dire qu’un empereur vient avec une escorte,
Et que des gens nommés Farnèse, Spinola,
Malaspina, Cibo, font de ces choses-là,
Et qu’on se met à cent, à mille, avec ce prêtre,
Ces femmes, pour venir prendre un enfant en traître,
Et que l’enfant est là, mort, et que c’est un jeu;
C’est à se demander s’il est encore un Dieu,
Et si, demain, après de si lâches désastres,
Quelqu’un osera faire encor lever les astres!
M’avoir assassiné ce petit être-là!
Mais c’est affreux d’avoir à se mettre cela
Dans la tête, que c’est fini, qu’ils l’ont tuée,
Qu’elle est morte! — Oh! ce fils de la prostituée,
Ce Ratbert, comme il m’a hideusement trompé!
Ô Dieu! de quel démon est cet homme échappé?
Vraiment! est-ce donc trop espérer que de croire
Qu’on ne va point, par ruse et par trahison noire,
Massacrer des enfants, broyer des orphelins,
Des anges, de clarté céleste encor tout pleins!
Mais c’est qu’elle est là morte, immobile, insensible!
Je n’aurais jamais cru que cela fût possible.
Il faut être le fils de cette infâme Agnès!
Rois! j’avais tort jadis quand je vous épargnais,
Quand, pouvant vous briser au front le diadème,
Je vous lâchais, j’étais un scélérat moi-même,
J’étais un meurtrier d’avoir pitié de vous!
Oui, j’aurais dû vous tordre entre mes serres, tous!
Est-ce qu’il est permis d’aller dans les abîmes
Reculer la limite effroyable des crimes,
De voler, oui, ce sont des vols, de faire un tas
D’abominations, de maux et d’attentats,
De tuer des enfants et de tuer des femmes,
Sous prétexte qu’on fut, parmi les oriflammes
Et les clairons, sacré devant le monde entier

Par Urbain Quatre, pape et fils d’un savetier!
Que voulez-vous qu’on fasse à de tels misérables!
Avoir mis son doigt noir sur ces yeux adorables!
Ce chef d’œuvre du Dieu vivant, l’avoir détruit!
Quelle mamelle d’ombre et d’horreur et de nuit,
Dieu juste, a donc été de ce monstre nourrice?
Un tel homme suffit pour qu’un siècle pourrisse.
Plus de bien ni de mal, plus de droit, plus de lois.
Est-ce que le tonnerre est absent quelquefois?
Est-ce qu’il n’est pas temps que la foudre se prouve,
Cieux profonds, en broyant ce chien, fils de la louve?
Oh! sois maudit, maudit, maudit, et sois maudit,
Ratbert, empereur, roi, césar, escroc, bandit!
Ô grand vainqueur d’enfants de cinq ans! maudits soient
Les pas que font tes pieds, les jours que tes yeux voient,
Et la gueuse qui t’offre en riant son sein nu,
Et ta mère publique, et ton père inconnu!
Terre et cieux! c’est pourtant bien le moins qu’un doux être
Qui joue à notre porte et sous notre fenêtre,
Qui ne fait rien que rire et courir dans les fleurs,
Et qu’emplir de soleil nos pauvres yeux en pleurs,
Ait le droit de jouir de l’aube qui l’enivre,
Puisque les empereurs laissent les forçats vivre,
Et puisque Dieu, témoin des deuils et des horreurs,
Laisse sous le ciel noir vivre les empereurs!”

XV

Les deux têtes.

Ratbert, en ce moment, distrait jusqu’à sourire,
Écoutait Afranus à voix basse lui dire:
«Majesté, le caveau du trésor est trouvé.”

L’aïeul pleurait.

«Un chien, au coin des murs crevé,
Est un être enviable auprès de moi. Va, pille,
Vole, égorge, empereur! Ô ma petite fille,
Parle-moi! Rendez-moi mon doux ange, ô mon Dieu!
Elle ne va donc pas me regarder un peu?
Mon enfant! tous les jours nous allions dans les lierres.
Tu disais: « Vois les fleurs,” et moi: « Prends garde aux pierres.”
Et je la regardais, et je crois qu’un rocher
Se fût attendri rien qu’en la voyant marcher.
Hélas! avoir eu foi dans ce monstrueux drôle!
Mets ta tête adorée auprès de mon épaule.
Est-ce que tu m’en veux? C’est moi qui suis là! Dis,
Tu n’ouvriras donc plus tes yeux du paradis!
Je n’entendrai donc plus ta voix, pauvre petite!
Tout ce qui me tenait aux entrailles me quitte;
Et ce sera mon sort, à moi, le vieux vainqueur,
Qu’à deux reprises Dieu m’ait arraché le cœur,
Et qu’il ait retiré de ma poitrine amère
L’enfant, après m’avoir ôté du flanc la mère!
Mon Dieu, pourquoi m’avoir pris cet être si doux?
Je n’étais pourtant pas révolté contre vous,
Et je consentais presque à ne plus avoir qu’elle.
Morte! et moi, je suis là, stupide, qui l’appelle!
Oh! si je n’avais pas les bras liés, je crois
Que je réchaufferais ses pauvres membres froids;
Comme ils l’ont fait souffrir! La corde l’a coupée.
Elle saigne.”
Ratbert, blême et la main crispée,
Le voyant à genoux sur son ange dormant,
Dit: « Porte-glaive, il est ainsi commodément.”
Le porte-glaive fit, n’étant qu’un misérable,
Tomber sur l’enfant mort la tête vénérable.

Et voici ce qu’on vit dans ce même instant-là:
La tête de Ratbert sur le pavé roula,
Hideuse, comme si le même coup d’épée,
Frappant deux fois, l’avait de l’autre coupée.

L’horreur fut inouïe; et, tous se retournant,
Sur le grand fauteuil d’or du trône rayonnant
Aperçurent le corps de l’empereur sans tête,
Et son cou d’où sortait, dans un bruit de tempête,
Un flot rouge, un sanglot de pourpre, éclaboussant
Les convives, le trône et la table, de sang.

Alors, dans la clarté d’abîme et de vertige
Qui marque le passage énorme d’un prodige,
Des deux têtes on vit l’une, celle du roi,
Entrer sous terre et fuir dans le gouffre d’effroi
Dont l’expiation formidable est la règle,
Et l’autre s’envoler avec des ailes d’aigle.

XVI

Après justice faite.

L’ombre couvre à présent Ratbert, l’homme de nuit.
Nos pères — c’est ainsi qu’un nom s’évanouit —
Défendaient d’en parler, et du mur de l’histoire
Les ans ont effacé cette vision noire.

Le glaive qui frappa ne fut point aperçu;
D’où vint ce sombre coup, personne ne l’a su;
Seulement, ce soir-là, bêchant pour se distraire,
Héraclius le Chauve, abbé de Joug-Dieu, frère
D’Acceptus, archevêque et primat de Lyon,
Étant aux champs avec le diacre Pollion,
Vit, dans les profondeurs par les vents remuées,
Un archange essuyer son épée aux nuées.

VIII. Seizième siècle - Renaissance – Paganisme

Le Satyre

Prologue

le satyre

Un satyre habitait l’Olympe, retiré
Dans le grand bois sauvage au pied du mont sacré;
Il vivait là, chassant, rêvant, parmi les branches;
Nuit et jour, poursuivant les vagues formes blanches.
Il tenait à l’affût les douze ou quinze sens
Qu’un faune peut braquer sur les plaisirs passants.
Qu’était-ce que ce faune? On l’ignorait; et Flore
Ne le connaissait point, ni Vesper, ni l’Aurore
Qui sait tout, surprenant le regard du réveil;
On avait beau parler à l’églantier vermeil,
Interroger le nid, questionner le souffle,
Personne ne savait le nom de ce maroufle.
Les sorciers dénombraient presque tous les sylvains;
Les aegipans étant fameux comme les vins,
En voyant la colline on nommait le satyre;
On connaissait Stulcas, faune de Pallantyre,
Gès, qui, le soir, riait sur le Ménale assis,
Bos, l’aegipan de Crète; on entendait Chrysis,
Sylvain du Ptyx que l’homme appelle Janicule,
Qui jouait de la flûte au fond du crépuscule;
Anthrops, faune du Pinde, était cité partout;
Celui-ci, nulle part; les uns le disaient loup;
D’autres le disaient dieu, prétendant s’y connaître;
Mais, en tout cas, qu’il fût tout ce qu’il pouvait être,
C’était un garnement de dieu fort mal famé.

Tout craignait ce sylvain à toute heure allumé;
La bacchante elle-même en tremblait; les napées

S’allaient blottir aux trous des roches escarpées;
Écho barricadait son antre trop peu sûr;
Pour ce songeur velu, fait de fange et d’azur,
L’andryade en sa grotte était dans une alcôve;
De la forêt profonde il était l’amant fauve;
Sournois, pour se jeter sur elle, il profitait
Du moment où la nymphe, à l’heure où tout se tait,
Éclatante, apparaît dans le miroir des sources;
Il arrêtait Lycère et Chloé dans leurs courses:
Il guettait, dans les lacs qu’ombrage le bouleau,
La naïade qu’on voit radieuse sous l’eau
Comme une étoile ayant la forme d’une femme;
Son œil lascif errait la nuit comme une flamme;
Il pillait les appas splendides de l’été;
Il adorait la fleur, cette naïveté;
Il couvait d’une tendre et vaste convoitise
Le muguet, le troëne embaumé, le cytise,
Et ne s’endormit pas même avec le pavot;
Ce libertin était à la rose dévot;
Il était fort infâme au mois de mai; cet être
Traitait, regardant tout comme par la fenêtre,
Flore de mijaurée et Zéphir de marmot;
Si l’eau murmurait: « J’aime!” il la prenait au mot,
Et saisissait l’Ondée en fuite sous les herbes;
Ivre de leurs parfums, vautré parmi leurs gerbes,
Il faisait une telle orgie avec les lys,
Les myrtes, les sorbiers de ses baisers pâlis,
Et de telles amours, que, témoin du désordre,
Le chardon, ce jaloux, s’efforçait de le mordre;
Il s’était si crûment dans les excès plongé
Qu’il était dénoncé par la caille et le geai;
Son bras, toujours tendu vers quelque blonde tresse,
Traversait l’ombre; après les mois de sécheresse,
Les rivières, qui n’ont qu’un voile de vapeur,
Allant remplir leur urne à la pluie, avaient peur
De rencontrer sa face effrontée et cornue;
Un jour, se croyant seule et s’étant mise nue

Pour se baigner au flot d’un ruisseau clair, Psyché
L’aperçut tout à coup dans les feuilles caché,
Et s’enfuit, et s’alla plaindre dans l’empyrée;
Il avait l’innocence impudique de Rhée;
Son caprice, à la fois divin et bestial,
Montait jusqu’au rocher sacré de l’idéal,
Car partout où l’oiseau vole, la chèvre y grimpe;
Ce faune débraillait la forêt de l’Olympe;
Et, de plus, il était voleur, l’aventurier.

Hercule l’alla prendre au fond de son terrier,
Et l’amena devant Jupiter par l’oreille.

I

le bleu

Quand le satyre fut sur la cime vermeille,
Quand il vit l’escalier céleste commençant,
On eût dit qu’il tremblait, tant c’était ravissant!
Et que, rictus ouvert au vent, tête éblouie
À la fois par les yeux, l’odorat et l’ouïe,
Faune ayant de la terre encore à ses sabots,
Il frissonnait devant les cieux sereins et beaux;
Quoique à peine fût-il au seuil de la caverne
De rayons et d’éclairs que Jupiter gouverne,
Il contemplait l’azur, des pléiades voisin;
Béant, il regardait passer, comme un essaim
De molles nudités sans fin continuées,
Toutes ces déités que nous nommons nuées.
C’était l’heure où sortaient les chevaux du soleil.
Le ciel, tout frémissant du glorieux réveil,
Ouvrait les deux battants de sa porte sonore;
Blancs, ils apparaissaient formidables d’aurore;
Derrière eux, comme un orbe effrayant, couvert d’yeux,
Éclatait la rondeur du grand char radieux;

On distinguait le bras du dieu qui les dirige;
Aquilon achevait d’atteler le quadrige;
Les quatre ardents chevaux dressaient leur poitrail d’or;
Faisant leurs premiers pas, ils se cabraient encor
Entre la zone obscure et la zone enflammée;
De leurs crins, d’où semblait sortir une fumée
De perles, de saphyrs, d’onyx, de diamants,
Dispersée et fuyante au fond des éléments,
Les trois premiers, l’œil fier, la narine embrasée,
Secouaient dans le jour des gouttes de rosée;
Le dernier secouait des astres dans la nuit.

Le ciel, le jour qui monte et qui s’épanouit,
La terre qui s’efface et l’ombre qui se dore,
Ces hauteurs, ces splendeurs, ces chevaux de l’aurore
Dont le hennissement provoque l’infini,
Tout cet ensemble auguste, heureux, calme, béni,
Puissant, pur, rayonnait; un coin était farouche;
Là brillaient, près de l’antre où Gorgone se couche,
Les armes de chacun des grands dieux que l’autan
Gardait sévère, assis sur des os de titan;
Là reposait la Force avec la Violence;
On voyait, chauds encor, fumer les fers de lance;
On voyait des lambeaux de chair aux coutelas
De Bellone, de Mars, d’Hécate et de Pallas,
Des cheveux au trident et du sang à la foudre.

Si le grain pouvait voir la meule prête à moudre,
Si la ronce du bouc apercevait la dent,
Ils auraient l’air pensif du sylvain, regardant
Les armures des dieux dans le bleu vestiaire;
Il entra dans le ciel; car le grand bestiaire
Tenait sa large oreille et ne le lâchait pas;
Le bon faune crevait l’azur à chaque pas;
Il boitait, tout gêné de sa fange première;
Son pied fourchu faisait des trous dans la lumière,
La monstruosité brutale du sylvain

Étant lourde et hideuse au nuage divin.
Il avançait, ayant devant lui le grand voile
Sous lequel le matin glisse sa fraîche étoile;
Soudain il se courba sous un flot de clarté,
Et, le rideau s’étant tout à coup écarté,
Dans leur immense joie il vit les dieux terribles.

Ces êtres surprenants et forts, ces invisibles,
Ces inconnus profonds de l’abîme, étaient là.
Sur douze trônes d’or que Vulcain cisela,
À la table où jamais on ne se rassasie,
Ils buvaient le nectar et mangeaient l’ambroisie.
Vénus était devant et Jupiter au fond.
Cypris, sur la blancheur d’une écume qui fond,
Reposait mollement, nue et surnaturelle,
Ceinte du flamboiement des yeux fixés sur elle,
Et, par moments, avec l’encens, les cœurs, les vœux,
Toute la mer semblait flotter dans ses cheveux.
Jupiter aux trois yeux songeait, un pied sur l’aigle;
Son sceptre était un arbre ayant pour fleur la règle;
On voyait dans ses yeux le monde commencé;
Et dans l’un le présent, dans l’autre le passé;
Dans le troisième errait l’avenir comme un songe;
Il ressemblait au gouffre où le soleil se plonge;
Des femmes, Danaé, Latone, Sémélé,
Flottaient dans son regard; sous son sourcil voilé,
Sa volonté parlait à sa toute-puissance;
La nécessité morne était sa réticence;
Il assignait les sorts; et ses réflexions
Étaient gloire aux Cadmus et roue aux Ixions;
Sa rêverie, où l’ombre affreuse venait faire
Des taches de noirceur sur un fond de lumière,
Était comme la peau du léopard tigré;
Selon qu’ils s’écartaient ou s’approchaient, au gré
De ses décisions clémentes ou funèbres,
Son pouce et son index faisaient dans les ténèbres
S’ouvrir ou se fermer les ciseaux d’Atropos;

La radieuse paix naissait de son repos,
Et la guerre sortait du pli de sa narine;
Il méditait, avec Thémis dans sa poitrine,
Calme, et si patient que les sœurs d’Arachné,
Entre le froid conseil de Minerve émané,
Et l’ordre redoutable attendu par Mercure,
Filaient leur toile au fond de sa pensée obscure.

Derrière Jupiter rayonnait Cupidon,
L’enfant cruel, sans pleurs, sans remords, sans pardon,
Qui, le jour qu’il naquit, riait, se sentant d’âge
À commencer, du haut des cieux, son brigandage.

L’univers apaisé, content, mélodieux,
Faisait une musique autour des vastes dieux;
Partout où le regard tombait, c’était splendide;
Toute l’immensité n’avait pas une ride;
Le ciel réverbérait autour d’eux leur beauté;
Le monde les louait pour l’avoir bien dompté;
La bête aimait leurs arcs, l’homme adorait leurs piques;
Ils savouraient, ainsi que des fruits magnifiques,
Leurs attentats bénis, heureux, inexpiés;
Les haines devenaient des lyres sous leurs pieds,
Et même la clameur du triste lac Stymphale,
Partie horrible et rauque, arrivait triomphale.

Au-dessus de l’Olympe éclatant, au delà
Du nouveau ciel qui naît et du vieux qui croula,
Plus loin que les chaos, prodigieux décombres,
Tournait la roue énorme aux douze cages sombres,
Le Zodiaque, ayant autour de ses essieux
Douze spectres tordant leur chaîne dans les cieux;
Ouverture du puits de l’infini sans borne;
Cercle horrible où le chien fuit près du capricorne;
Orbe inouï, mêlant dans l’azur nébuleux
Aux lions constellés les sagittaires bleus.

Jadis, longtemps avant que la lyre thébaine
Ajoutât des clous d'or à sa conque d'ébène,
Ces êtres merveilleux que le Destin conduit,
Étaient tout noirs, ayant pour mère l'âpre Nuit;
Lorsque le Jour parut, il leur livra bataille;
Lutte affreuse! il vainquit; l'Ombre encore en tressaille;
De sorte que, percés des flèches d'Apollon,
Tous ces monstres, partout, de la tête au talon,
En souvenir du sombre et lumineux désastre,
Ont maintenant la plaie incurable d'un astre.

Hercule, de ce poing qui peut fendre l'Ossa,
Lâchant subitement le captif, le poussa
Sur le grand pavé bleu de la céleste zone.
«Va," dit-il. Et l'on vit apparaître le faune,
Hérissé, noir, hideux, et cependant serein,
Pareil au bouc velu qu'à Smyrne le marin,
En souvenir des prés, peint sur les blanches voiles;
L'éclat de rire fou monta jusqu'aux étoiles,
Si joyeux, qu'un géant enchaîné sous le mont
Leva la tête et dit: « Quel crime font-ils donc?"
Jupiter, le premier, rit; l'orageux Neptune
Se dérida, changeant la mer et la fortune;
Une Heure qui passait avec son sablier
S'arrêta, laissant l'homme et la terre oublier;
La gaîté fut, devant ces narines camuses,
Si forte, qu'elle osa même aller jusqu'aux Muses;
Vénus tourna son front, dont l'aube se voila,
Et dit: « Qu'est-ce que c'est que cette bête-là?"
Et Diane chercha sur son dos une flèche;
L'urne du Potamos étonné resta sèche;
La colombe ferma ses doux yeux, et le paon
De sa roue arrogante insulta l'aegipan;
Les déesses riaient toutes comme des femmes;
Le faune, haletant parmi ces grandes dames,
Cornu, boiteux, difforme, alla droit à Vénus;
L'homme-chèvre ébloui regarda ces pieds nus;

Alors on se pâma; Mars embrassa Minerve,
Mercure prit la taille à Bellone avec verve,
La meute de Diane aboya sur l’Œta;
Le tonnerre n’y put tenir, il éclata;
Les immortels penchés parlaient aux immortelles;
Vulcain dansait; Pluton disait des choses telles
Que Momus en était presque déconcerté;
Pour que la reine pût se tordre en liberté,
Hébé cachait Junon derrière son épaule;
Et l’Hiver se tenait les côtes sur le pôle.

Ainsi les dieux riaient du pauvre paysan.

Et lui, disait tout bas à Vénus: « Viens-nous-en.”
Nulle voix ne peut rendre et nulle langue écrire
Le bruit divin que fit la tempête du rire.
Hercule dit: « Voilà le drôle en question.
— Faune, dit Jupiter, le grand amphictyon,
Tu mériterais bien qu’on te changeât en marbre,
En flot, ou qu’on te mît au cachot dans un arbre;
Pourtant je te fais grâce, ayant ri. Je te rends
À ton antre, à ton lac, à tes bois murmurants;
Mais, pour continuer le rire qui te sauve,
Gueux, tu vas nous chanter ton chant de bête fauve.
L’Olympe écoute. Allons, chante.
Le chèvre-pieds
Dit: « Mes pauvres pipeaux sont tout estropiés;
Hercule ne prend pas bien garde lorsqu’il entre;
Il a marché dessus en traversant mon antre.
Or, chanter sans pipeaux, c’est fort contrariant.”

Mercure lui prêta sa flûte en souriant.

L’humble ægipan, figure à l’ombre habituée,
Alla s’asseoir rêveur derrière une nuée
Comme si, moins voisin des rois, il était mieux;
Et se mit à chanter un chant mystérieux.

L’aigle, qui, seul, n’avait pas ri, dressa la tête.

Il chanta, calme et triste.
Alors sur le Taygète,
Sur le Mysis, au pied de l’Olympe divin,
Partout, on vit, au fond du bois et du ravin,
Les bêtes qui passaient leur tête entre les branches;
La biche à l’œil profond se dressa sur ses hanches,
Et les loups firent signe aux tigres d’écouter;
On vit, selon le rhythme étrange, s’agiter
Le haut des arbres, cèdre, ormeau, pins qui murmurent,
Et les sinistres fronts des grands chênes s’émurent.

Le faune énigmatique, aux Grâces odieux,
Ne semblait plus savoir qu’il était chez les dieux.

II

le noir

Le satyre chanta la terre monstrueuse.

L’eau perfide sur mer, dans les champs tortueuse,
Sembla dans son prélude errer comme à travers
Les sables, les graviers, l’herbe et les roseaux verts;
Puis il dit l’Océan, typhon couvert de baves,
Puis la Terre lugubre avec toutes ses caves,
Son dessous effrayant, ses trous, ses entonnoirs,
Où l’ombre se fait onde, où vont des fleuves noirs,
Où le volcan, noyé sous d’affreux lacs, regrette
La montagne, son casque, et le feu, son aigrette,
Où l’on distingue, au fond des gouffres inouïs,
Les vieux enfers éteints des dieux évanouis.
Il dit la séve; il dit la vaste plénitude
De la nuit, du silence et de la solitude,
Le froncement pensif du sourcil des rochers;

Sorte de mer ayant les oiseaux pour nochers,
Pour algue le buisson, la mousse pour éponge,
La végétation aux mille têtes songe;
Les arbres pleins de vent ne sont pas oublieux;
Dans la vallée, au bord des lacs, sur les hauts lieux,
Ils gardent la figure antique de la terre;
Le chêne est entre tous profond, fidèle, austère;
Il protége et défend le coin du bois ami
Où le gland l'engendra, s'entr'ouvrant à demi,
Où son ombrage attire et fait rêver le pâtre.
Pour arracher de là ce vieil opiniâtre,
Que d'efforts, que de peine au rude bûcheron!
Le sylvain raconta Dodone et Cithéron,
Et tout ce qu'aux bas-fonds d'Hémus, sur l'Érymanthe
Sur l'Hymète, l'autan tumultueux tourmente;
Avril avec Tellus pris en flagrant délit,
Les fleuves recevant les sources dans leur lit,
La grenade montrant sa chair sous sa tunique,
Le rut religieux du grand cèdre cynique,
Et, dans l'âcre épaisseur des branchages flottants,
La palpitation sauvage du printemps.
«Tout l'abîme est sous l'arbre énorme comme une urne.
» La terre sous la plante ouvre son puits nocturne
» Plein de feuilles, de fleurs et de l'amas mouvant
» Des rameaux que, plus tard, soulèvera le vent,
» Et dit: — Vivez! Prenez. C'est à vous. Prends, brin d'herbe!
» Prends, sapin! — La forêt surgit; l'arbre superbe
» Fouille le globe avec une hydre sous ses pieds;
» La racine effrayante aux longs cous repliés,
» Aux mille becs béants dans la profondeur noire,
» Descend, plonge, atteint l'ombre et tâche de la boire,
» Et, bue, au gré de l'air, du lieu, de la saison,
» L'offre au ciel en encens ou la crache en poison,
» Selon que la racine, embaumée ou malsaine,
» Sort, parfum, de l'amour, ou, venin, de la haine.
» De là, pour les héros, les grâces et les dieux,
» L'œillet, le laurier — rose et le lys radieux,

» Et pour l’homme qui pense et qui voit, la ciguë.

» Mais qu’importe à la terre! Au chaos contiguë,
» Elle fait son travail d’accouchement sans fin.
» Elle a pour nourrisson l’universelle faim.
» C’est vers son sein qu’en bas les racines s’allongent.
» Les arbres sont autant de mâchoires qui rongent
» Les éléments, épars dans l’air souple et vivant;
» Ils dévorent la pluie, ils dévorent le vent;
» Tout leur est bon, la nuit, la mort; la pourriture
» Voit la rose et lui va porter sa nourriture;
» L’herbe vorace broute au fond des bois touffus;
» À toute heure, on entend le craquement confus
» Des choses sous la dent des plantes; on voit paître
» Au loin, de toutes parts, l’immensité champêtre;
» L’arbre transforme tout dans son puissant progrès;
» Il faut du sable, il faut de l’argile et du grès;
» Il en faut au lentisque, il en faut à l’yeuse,
» Il en faut à la ronce, et la terre joyeuse
» Regarde la forêt formidable manger.”

Le satyre semblait dans l’abîme songer;
Il peignit l’arbre vu du côté des racines,
Le combat souterrain des plantes assassines,
L’antre que le feu voit, qu’ignore le rayon,
Le revers ténébreux de la création,
Comment filtre la source et flambe le cratère;
Il avait l’air de suivre un esprit sous la terre;
Il semblait épeler un magique alphabet;
On eût dit que sa chaîne invisible tombait;
Il brillait; on voyait s’échapper de sa bouche
Son rêve avec un bruit d’ailes vague et farouche:
«Les forêts sont le lieu lugubre; la terreur,
» Noire, y résiste même au matin, ce doreur;
» Les arbres tiennent l’ombre enchaînée à leurs tiges;
» Derrière le réseau ténébreux des vertiges,
» L’aube est pâle, et l’on voit se tordre les serpents

» Des branches sur l’aurore horribles et rampants;
» Là, tout tremble; au-dessus de la ronce hagarde,
» Le mont, ce grand témoin, se soulève et regarde;
» La nuit, les hauts sommets, noyés dans la vapeur,
» Les antres froids, ouvrant la bouche avec stupeur,
» Les blocs, ces durs profils, les rochers, ces visages
» Avec qui l’ombre voit dialoguer les sages,
» Guettent le grand secret, muets, le cou tendu;
» L’œil des montagnes s’ouvre et contemple éperdu;
» On voit s’aventurer dans les profondeurs fauves
» La curiosité de ces noirs géants chauves;
» Ils scrutent le vrai ciel, de l’Olympe inconnu;
» Ils tâchent de saisir quelque chose de nu:
» Ils sondent l’étendue auguste, chaste, austère,
» Irritée, et, parfois, surprenant le mystère,
» Aperçoivent la Cause au pur rayonnement,
» Et l’Énigme sacrée, au loin, sans vêtement,
» Montrant sa forme blanche au fond de l’insondable.
» Ô nature terrible! ô lien formidable
» Du bois qui pousse avec l’idéal contemplé!
» Bain de la déité dans le gouffre étoilé!
» Farouche nudité de la Diane sombre
» Qui, de loin regardée et vue à travers l’ombre,
» Fait croître au fond des rocs les arbres monstrueux!
» Ô forêt!”
Le sylvain avait fermé les yeux;
La flûte que, parmi des mouvements de fièvre,
Il prenait et quittait, importunait sa lèvre;
Le faune la jeta sur le sacré sommet;
Sa paupière était close, on eût dit qu’il dormait,
Mais ses cils roux laissaient passer de la lumière;

Il poursuivit:
«Salut, Chaos! gloire à la Terre!
» Le chaos est un dieu; son geste est l’élément;
» Et lui seul a ce nom sacré: Commencement.
» C’est lui qui, bien avant la naissance de l’heure,

» Surprit l’aube endormie au fond de sa demeure,
» Avant le premier jour et le premier moment;
» C’est lui qui, formidable, appuya doucement
» La gueule de la nuit aux lèvres de l’aurore;
» Et c’est de ce baiser qu’on vit l’étoile éclore.
» Le chaos est l’époux lascif de l’infini.
» Avant le Verbe, il a rugi, sifflé, henni;
» Les animaux, aînés de tout, sont les ébauches
» De sa fécondité comme de ses débauches.
» Fussiez-vous dieux, songez en voyant l’animal!
» Car il n’est pas le jour, mais il n’est pas le mal.
» Toute la force obscure et vague de la terre
» Est dans la brute, larve auguste et solitaire;
» La sibylle au front gris le sait, et les devins
» Le savent, ces rôdeurs des sauvages ravins;
» Et c’est là ce qui fait que la Thessalienne
» Prend des touffes de poil aux cuisses de l’hyène,
» Et qu’Orphée écoutait, hagard, presque jaloux,
» Le chant sombre qui sort du hurlement des loups.”

« — Marsyas!” murmura Vulcain, l’envieux louche.
Apollon attentif mit le doigt sur sa bouche.
Le faune ouvrit les yeux, et peut-être entendit;
Calme, il prit son genou dans ses deux mains, et dit:

«Et maintenant, ô dieux! écoutez ce mot: L’âme!
» Sous l’arbre qui bruit, près du monstre qui brame,
» Quelqu’un parle. C’est l’Âme. Elle sort du chaos.
» Sans elle, pas de vents, le miasme; pas de flots,
» L’étang; l’âme, en sortant du chaos, le dissipe;
» Car il n’est que l’ébauche, et l’âme est le principe.
» L’Être est d’abord moitié brute et moitié forêt;
» Mais l’Air veut devenir l’Esprit, l’homme apparaît.
» L’homme? qu’est-ce que c’est que ce sphinx? Il commence
» En sagesse, ô mystère! et finit en démence.
» Ô ciel qu’il a quitté, rends-lui son âge d’or!”

Le faune, interrompant son orageux essor,
Ouvrit d’abord un doigt, puis deux, puis un troisième,
Comme quelqu’un qui compte en même temps qu’il sème,
Et cria, sur le haut Olympe vénéré:

«Ô dieux, l’arbre est sacré, l’animal est sacré,
» L’homme est sacré; respect à la terre profonde!
» La terre où l’homme crée, invente, bâtit, fonde,
» Géant possible, encor caché dans l’embryon,
» La terre où l’animal erre autour du rayon,
» La terre où l’arbre ému prononce des oracles,
» Dans l’obscur infini, tout rempli de miracles,
» Est le prodige, ô dieux, le plus proche de vous.
» C’est le globe inconnu qui vous emporte tous,
» Vous les éblouissants, la grande bande altière,
» Qui dans des coupes d’or buvez de la lumière,
» Vous qu’une aube précède et qu’une flamme suit,
» Vous les dieux, à travers la formidable nuit!”

La sueur ruisselait sur le front du satyre,
Comme l’eau du filet que des mers on retire;
Ses cheveux s’agitaient comme au vent libyen.

Phœbus lui dit: « Veux-tu la lyre?
— Je veux bien,”
Dit le faune; et, tranquille, il prit la grande lyre.

Alors il se dressa debout dans le délire
Des rêves, des frissons, des aurores, des cieux,
Avec deux profondeurs splendides dans les yeux.

«Il est beau!” murmura Vénus épouvantée.
Et Vulcain, s’approchant d’Hercule, dit: « Antée.”
Hercule repoussa du coude ce boiteux.

III

le sombre

Il ne les voyait pas, quoiqu’il fût devant eux.

Il chanta l’Homme. Il dit cette aventure sombre;
L’homme, le chiffre élu, tête auguste du nombre,
Effacé par sa faute, et, désastreux reflux,
Retombé dans la nuit de ce qu’on ne voit plus;
Il dit les premiers temps, le bonheur, l’Atlantide;
Comment le parfum pur devint miasme fétide,
Comment l’hymne expira sous le clair firmament,
Comment la liberté devint joug, et comment
Le silence se fit sur la terre domptée;
Il ne prononça pas le nom de Prométhée,
Mais il avait dans l’œil l’éclair du feu volé;
Il dit l’humanité mise sous le scellé;
Il dit tous les forfaits et toutes les misères,
Depuis les rois peu bons jusqu’aux dieux peu sincères.
Tristes hommes! ils ont vu le ciel se fermer.
En vain, pieux, ils ont commencé par s’aimer;
En vain, frères, ils ont tué la Haine infâme,
Le monstre à l’aigle onglée, aux sept gueules de flamme;
Hélas! comme Cadmus, ils ont bravé le sort;
Ils ont semé les dents de la bête; il en sort
Des spectres tournoyant comme la feuille morte,
Qui combattent, l’épée à la main, et qu’emporte
L’évanouissement du vent mystérieux.
Ces spectres sont les rois; ces spectres sont les dieux.
Ils renaissent sans fin, ils reviennent sans cesse;
L’antique égalité devient sous eux bassesse;
Dracon donne la main à Busiris; la Mort
Se fait code, et se met aux ordres du plus fort,
Et le dernier soupir libre et divin s’exhale
Sous la difformité de la loi colossale:
L’homme se tait, ployé sous cet entassement;
Il se venge; il devient pervers; il vole, il ment;

L’âme inconnue et sombre a des vices d’esclave;
Puisqu’on lui met un mont sur elle, elle en sort lave;
Elle brûle et ravage au lieu de féconder.
Et dans le chant du faune on entendait gronder
Tout l’essaim des fléaux furieux qui se lève.
Il dit la guerre; il dit la trompette et le glaive;
La mêlée en feu, l’homme égorgé sans remord,
La gloire, et dans la joie affreuse de la mort
Les plis voluptueux des bannières flottantes;
L’aube naît; les soldats s’éveillent sous les tentes;
La nuit, même en plein jour, les suit, planant sur eux;
L’armée en marche ondule au fond des chemins creux;
La baliste en roulant s’enfonce dans les boues;
L’attelage fumant tire, et l’on pousse aux roues;
Cris des chefs, pas confus; les moyeux des charrois
Balafrent les talus des ravins trop étroits.
On se rencontre, ô choc hideux! les deux armées
Se heurtent, de la même épouvante enflammées,
Car la rage guerrière est un gouffre d’effroi.
Ô vaste effarement! chaque bande a son roi.
Perce, épée! ô cognée, abats! massue, assomme!
Cheval, foule aux pieds l’homme, et l’homme, et l’homme et l’homme!
Hommes, tuez, traînez les chars, roulez les tours;
Maintenant, pourrissez, et voici les vautours!
Des guerres sans fin naît le glaive héréditaire;
L’homme fuit dans les trous, au fond des bois, sous terre;
Et, soulevant le bloc qui ferme son rocher,
Écoute s’il entend les rois là-haut marcher;
Il se hérisse; l’ombre aux animaux le mêle;
Il déchoit; plus de femme, il n’a qu’une femelle;
Plus d’enfants, des petits; l’amour qui le séduit
Est fils de l’Indigence et de l’Air de la nuit;
Tous ses instincts sacrés à la fange aboutissent;
Les rois, après l’avoir fait taire, l’abrutissent,
Si bien que le bâillon est maintenant un mors.
Et sans l’homme pourtant les horizons sont morts;
Qu’est la création sans cette initiale?

Seul sur la terre il a la lueur faciale;
Seul il parle; et sans lui tout est décapité.
Et l’on vit poindre aux yeux du faune la clarté
De deux larmes coulant comme à travers la flamme.
Il montra tout le gouffre acharné contre l’âme;
Les ténèbres croisant leurs funestes rameaux,
Et la forêt du sort et la meute des maux.
Les hommes se cachant, les dieux suivant leurs pistes.
Et, pendant qu’il chantait toutes ces strophes tristes,
Le grand souffle vivant, ce transfigurateur,
Lui mettait sous les pieds la céleste hauteur;
En cercle autour de lui se taisaient les Borées;
Et, comme par un fil invisible tirées,
Les brutes, loups, renards, ours, lions chevelus,
Panthères, s’approchaient de lui de plus en plus;
Quelques-unes étaient si près des dieux venues,
Pas à pas, qu’on voyait leurs gueules dans les nues.
Les dieux ne riaient plus; tous ces victorieux,
Tous ces rois, commençaient à prendre au sérieux
Cette espèce d’esprit qui sortait d’une bête.

Il reprit:
«Donc, les dieux et les rois sur le faîte,
» L’homme en bas; pour valets aux tyrans, les fléaux.
» L’homme ébauché ne sort qu’à demi du chaos,
» Et jusqu’à la ceinture il plonge dans la brute;
» Tout le trahit; parfois, il renonce à la lutte.
» Où donc est l’espérance? Elle a lâchement fui.
» Toutes les surdités s’entendent contre lui;
» Le sol l’alourdit, l’air l’enfièvre, l’eau l’isole;
» Autour de lui la mer sinistre se désole;
» Grâce au hideux complot de tous ces guet-apens,
» Les flammes, les éclairs, sont contre lui serpents;
» Ainsi que le héros l’aquilon le soufflette;
» La peste aide le glaive, et l’élément complète
» Le despote, et la nuit s’ajoute au conquérant;
» Ainsi la Chose vient mordre aussi l’homme, et prend

» Assez d’âme pour être une force, complice
» De son impénétrable et nocturne supplice;
» Et la Matière, hélas! devient Fatalité.
» Pourtant qu’on prenne garde à ce déshérité!
» Dans l’ombre, une heure est là qui s’approche, et frissonne,
» Qui sera la terrible et qui sera la bonne,
» Qui viendra te sauver, homme, car tu l’attends,
» Et changer la figure implacable du temps!
» Qui connaît le destin? qui sonda le peut-être?
» Oui, l’heure énorme vient, qui fera tout renaître,
» Vaincra tout, changera le granit en aimant,
» Fera pencher l’épaule au morne escarpement,
» Et rendra l’impossible aux hommes praticable.
» Avec ce qui l’opprime, avec ce qui l’accable,
» Le genre humain se va forger son point d’appui;
» Je regarde le gland qu’on appelle Aujourd’hui,
» J’y vois le chêne; un feu vit sous la cendre éteinte.
» Misérable homme, fait pour la révolte sainte,
» Ramperas-tu toujours parce que tu rampas?
» Qui sait si quelque jour on ne te verra pas,
» Fier, suprême, atteler les forces de l’abîme,
» Et, dérobant l’éclair à l’inconnu sublime,
» Lier ce char d’un autre à des chevaux à toi?
» Oui, peut-être on verra l’homme devenir loi,
» Terrasser l’élément sous lui, saisir et tordre
» Cette anarchie au point d’en faire jaillir l’ordre,
» Le saint ordre de paix, d’amour et d’unité,
» Dompter tout ce qui l’a jadis persécuté,
» Se construire à lui-même une étrange monture
» Avec toute la vie et toute la nature,
» Seller la croupe en feu des souffles de l’enfer,
» Et mettre un frein de flamme à la gueule du fer!
» On le verra, vannant la braise dans son crible,
» Maître et palefrenier d’une bête terrible,
» Criant à toute chose: « Obéis, germe, nais!”
» Ajustant sur le bronze et l’acier un harnais
» Fait de tous les secrets que l’étude procure,

» Prenant aux mains du vent la grande bride obscure,
» Passer dans la lueur ainsi que les démons,
» Et traverser les bois, les fleuves et les monts,
» Beau, tenant une torche aux astres allumée,
» Sur une hydre d'airain, de foudre et de fumée!
» On l'entendra courir dans l'ombre avec le bruit
» De l'aurore enfonçant les portes de la nuit!
» Qui sait si quelque jour, grandissant d'âge en âge,
» Il ne jettera pas son dragon à la nage,
» Et ne franchira pas les mers, la flamme au front!
» Qui sait si, quelque jour, brisant l'antique affront,
» Il ne lui dira pas: « Envole-toi, matière!"
» S'il ne franchira point la tonnante frontière,
» S'il n'arrachera pas de son corps brusquement
» La pesanteur, peau vile, immonde vêtement
» Que la fange hideuse à la pensée inflige,
» De sorte qu'on verra tout à coup, ô prodige,
» Ce ver de terre ouvrir ses ailes dans les cieux!
» Oh! lève-toi, sois grand, homme! va, factieux!
» Homme, un orbite d'astre est un anneau de chaîne,
» Mais cette chaîne-là, c'est la chaîne sereine,
» C'est la chaîne d'azur, c'est la chaîne du ciel;
» Celle-là, tu t'y dois rattacher, ô mortel,
» Afin — car un esprit se meut comme une sphère, —
» De faire aussi ton cercle autour de la lumière!
» Entre dans le grand chœur! va, franchis ce degré,
» Quitte le joug infâme et prends le joug sacré!
» Deviens l'Humanité, triple, homme, enfant et femme!
» Transfigure-toi! va! sois de plus en plus l'âme!
» Esclave, grain d'un roi, démon, larve d'un dieu,
» Prends le rayon, saisis l'aube, usurpe le feu;
» Torse ailé, front divin, monte au jour, monte au trône,
» Et dans la sombre nuit jette les pieds du faune!"

IV

l’étoilé

Le satyre un moment s’arrêta, respirant
Comme un homme levant son front hors d’un torrent;
Un autre être semblait sous sa face apparaître;
Les dieux s’étaient tournés, inquiets, vers le maître,
Et, pensifs, regardaient Jupiter stupéfait.

Il reprit:
«Sous le poids hideux qui l’étouffait,
» Le réel renaîtra, dompteur du mal immonde.
» Dieux, vous ne savez pas ce que c’est que le monde;
» Dieux, vous avez vaincu, vous n’avez pas compris.
» Vous avez au-dessus de vous d’autres esprits,
» Qui, dans le feu, la nue, et l’onde et la bruine,
» Songent en attendant votre immense ruine.
» Mais qu’est-ce que cela me fait à moi qui suis
» La prunelle effarée au fond des vastes nuits!
» Dieux, il est d’autres sphinx que le vieux sphinx de Thèbe.
» Sachez ceci, tyrans de l’homme et de l’Érèbe,
» Dieux qui versez le sang, dieux dont on voit le fond:
» Nous nous sommes tous faits bandits sur ce grand mont
» Où la terre et le ciel semblent en équilibre,
» Mais vous pour être rois et moi pour être libre.
» Pendant que vous semez haine, fraude et trépas,
» Et que vous enjambez tout le crime en trois pas,
» Moi, je songe. Je suis l’œil fixe des cavernes.
» Je vois. Olympes bleus et ténébreux Avernes,
» Temples, charniers, forêts, cités, aigle, alcyon,
» Sont devant mon regard la même vision;
» Les dieux, les fléaux, ceux d’à présent, ceux d’ensuite,
» Traversent ma lueur et sont la même fuite.
» Je suis témoin que tout disparaît. Quelqu’un est.
» Mais celui-là, jamais l’homme ne le connaît.
» L’humanité suppose, ébauche, essaye, approche;
» Elle façonne un marbre, elle taille une roche,
» Et fait une statue, et dit: Ce sera lui.

» L’homme reste devant cette pierre ébloui;
» Et tous les à-peu-près, quels qu’ils soient, ont des prêtres.
» Soyez les Immortels, faites! broyez les êtres,
» Achevez ce vain tas de vivants palpitants,
» Régnez; quand vous aurez, encore un peu de temps,
» Ensanglanté le ciel que la lumière azure,
» Quand vous aurez, vainqueurs, comblé votre mesure,
» C’est bien, tout sera dit, vous serez remplacés
» Par ce noir dieu final que l’homme appelle Assez!
» Car Delphe et Pise sont comme des chars qui roulent,
» Et les choses qu’on crut éternelles s’écroulent
» Avant qu’on ait le temps de compter jusqu’à vingt.”

Tout en parlant ainsi, le satyre devint
Démesuré; plus grand d’abord que Polyphème,
Puis plus grand que Typhon qui hurle et qui blasphème,
Et qui heurte ses poings ainsi que des marteaux,
Puis plus grand que Titan, puis plus grand que l’Athos;
L’espace immense entra dans cette forme noire;
Et, comme le marin voit croître un promontoire,
Les dieux dressés voyaient grandir l’être effrayant;
Sur son front blêmissait un étrange orient;
Sa chevelure était une forêt; des ondes,
Fleuves, lacs, ruisselaient de ses hanches profondes;
Ses deux cornes semblaient le Caucase et l’Atlas;
Les foudres l’entouraient avec de sourds éclats;
Sur ses flancs palpitaient des prés et des campagnes,
Et ses difformités s’étaient faites montagnes;
Les animaux qu’avaient attirés ses accords,
Daims et tigres, montaient tout le long de son corps;
Des avrils tout en fleurs verdoyaient sur ses membres;
Le pli de son aisselle abritait des décembres;
Et des peuples errants demandaient leur chemin,
Perdus au carrefour des cinq doigts de sa main;
Des aigles tournoyaient dans sa bouche béante;
La lyre, devenue en le touchant géante,
Chantait, pleurait, grondait, tonnait, jetait des cris;

Les ouragans étaient dans les sept cordes pris
Comme des moucherons dans de lugubres toiles;
Sa poitrine terrible était pleine d’étoiles.

Il cria:
«L’avenir, tel que les cieux le font,
» C’est l’élargissement dans l’infini sans fond,
» C’est l’esprit pénétrant de toutes parts la chose!
» On mutile l’effet en limitant la cause;
» Monde, tout le mal vient de la forme des dieux.
» On fait du ténébreux avec le radieux;
» Pourquoi mettre au-dessus de l’Être, des fantômes?
» Les clartés, les éthers ne sont pas des royaumes.
» Place au fourmillement éternel des cieux noirs,
» Des cieux bleus, des midis, des aurores, des soirs!
» Place à l’atome saint qui brûle ou qui ruisselle!
» Place au rayonnement de l’âme universelle!
» Un roi c’est de la guerre, un dieu c’est de la nuit.
» Liberté, vie et foi, sur le dogme détruit!
» Partout une lumière et partout un génie!
» Amour! tout s’entendra, tout étant l’harmonie!
» L’azur du ciel sera l’apaisement des loups.
» Place à Tout! Je suis Pan; Jupiter! à genoux.”

IX. La Rose de l’Infante

LA ROSE DE L’INFANTE

Elle est toute petite; une duègne la garde.
Elle tient à la main une rose et regarde.
Quoi? que regarde-t-elle? Elle ne sait pas. L’eau,
Un bassin qu’assombrit le pin et le bouleau;
Ce qu’elle a devant elle; un cygne aux ailes blanches,
Le bercement des flots sous la chanson des branches,
Et le profond jardin rayonnant et fleuri;
Tout ce bel ange a l’air dans la neige pétri.
On voit un grand palais comme au fond d’une gloire,
Un parc, de clairs viviers où les biches vont boire,
Et des paons étoilés sous les bois chevelus.
L’innocence est sur elle une blancheur de plus;
Toutes ses grâces font comme un faisceau qui tremble.
Autour de cette enfant l’herbe est splendide et semble
Pleine de vrais rubis et de diamants fins;
Un jet de saphirs sort des bouches des dauphins.
Elle se tient au bord de l’eau; sa fleur l’occupe;
Sa basquine est en point de Gênes; sur sa jupe
Une arabesque, errant dans les plis du satin,
Suit les mille détours d’un fil d’or florentin.
La rose épanouie et toute grande ouverte,
Sortant du frais bouton comme d’une urne verte,
Charge la petitesse exquise de sa main;
Quand l’enfant, allongeant ses lèvres de carmin,
Fronce, en la respirant, sa riante narine,
La magnifique fleur, royale et purpurine,
Cache plus qu’à demi ce visage charmant,
Si bien que l’œil hésite, et qu’on ne sait comment
Distinguer de la fleur ce bel enfant qui joue,
Et si l’on voit la rose ou si l’on voit la joue.

Ses yeux bleus sont plus beaux sous son pur sourcil brun.
En elle tout est joie, enchantement, parfum;
Quel doux regard, l’azur! et quel doux nom, Marie!
Tout est rayon; son œil éclaire et son nom prie.
Pourtant, devant la vie et sous le firmament,
Pauvre être! elle se sent très-grande vaguement;
Elle assiste au printemps, à la lumière, à l’ombre,
Au grand soleil couchant horizontal et sombre,
À la magnificence éclatante du soir,
Aux ruisseaux murmurants qu’on entend sans les voir,
Aux champs, à la nature éternelle et sereine,
Avec la gravité d’une petite reine;
Elle n’a jamais vu l’homme que se courbant;
Un jour, elle sera duchesse de Brabant;
Elle gouvernera la Flandre ou la Sardaigne.
Elle est l’infante, elle a cinq ans, elle dédaigne.
Car les enfants des rois sont ainsi; leurs fronts blancs
Portent un cercle d’ombre, et leurs pas chancelants
Sont des commencements de règne. Elle respire
Sa fleur en attendant qu’on lui cueille un empire;
Et son regard, déjà royal, dit: C’est à moi.
Il sort d’elle un amour mêlé d’un vague effroi.
Si quelqu’un, la voyant si tremblante et si frêle,
Fût-ce pour la sauver, mettait la main sur elle,
Avant qu’il eût pu faire un pas ou dire un mot,
Il aurait sur le front l’ombre de l’échafaud.

La douce enfant sourit, ne faisant autre chose
Que de vivre et d’avoir dans la main une rose,
Et d’être là devant le ciel, parmi les fleurs.

Le jour s’éteint; les nids chuchotent, querelleurs;
Les pourpres du couchant sont dans les branches d’arbre;
La rougeur monte au front des déesses de marbre
Qui semblent palpiter sentant venir la nuit;
Et tout ce qui planait redescend; plus de bruit,
Plus de flamme; le soir mystérieux recueille

Le soleil sous la vague et l’oiseau sous la feuille.

Pendant que l’enfant rit, cette fleur à la main,
Dans le vaste palais catholique romain
Dont chaque ogive semble au soleil une mitre,
Quelqu’un de formidable est derrière la vitre;
On voit d’en bas une ombre, au fond d’une vapeur,
De fenêtre en fenêtre errer, et l’on a peur;
Cette ombre au même endroit, comme en un cimetière,
Parfois est immobile une journée entière;
C’est un être effrayant qui semble ne rien voir;
Il rôde d’une chambre à l’autre, pâle et noir;
Il colle aux vitraux blancs son front lugubre, et songe;
Spectre blême! Son ombre aux feux du soir s’allonge;
Son pas funèbre est lent comme un glas de beffroi;
Et c’est la Mort, à moins que ce ne soit le Roi.

C’est lui; l’homme en qui vit et tremble le royaume.
Si quelqu’un pouvait voir dans l’œil de ce fantôme
Debout en ce moment l’épaule contre un mur,
Ce qu’on apercevrait dans cet abîme obscur,
Ce n’est pas l’humble enfant, le jardin, l’eau moirée
Reflétant le ciel d’or d’une claire soirée,
Les bosquets, les oiseaux se becquetant entre eux,
Non: au fond de cet œil comme l’onde vitreux,
Sous ce fatal sourcil qui dérobe à la sonde
Cette prunelle autant que l’océan profonde,
Ce qu’on distinguerait, c’est, mirage mouvant,
Tout un vol de vaisseaux en fuite dans le vent,
Et, dans l’écume, au pli des vagues, sous l’étoile,
L’immense tremblement d’une flotte à la voile,
Et, là-bas, sous la brume, une île, un blanc rocher,
Écoutant sur les flots ces tonnerres marcher.

Telle est la vision qui, dans l’heure où nous sommes,
Emplit le froid cerveau de ce maître des hommes,
Et qui fait qu’il ne peut rien voir autour de lui.

L’armada, formidable et flottant point d’appui
Du levier dont il va soulever tout un monde,
Traverse en ce moment l’obscurité de l’onde;
Le roi dans son esprit la suit des yeux, vainqueur,
Et son tragique ennui n’a plus d’autre lueur.

Philippe Deux était une chose terrible.
Iblis dans le Koran et Caïn dans la Bible
Sont à peine aussi noirs qu’en son Escurial
Ce royal spectre, fils du spectre impérial.
Philippe Deux était le Mal tenant le glaive.
Il occupait le haut du monde comme un rêve.
Il vivait: nul n’osait le regarder; l’effroi
Faisait une lumière étrange autour du roi;
On tremblait rien qu’à voir passer ses majordomes;
Tant il se confondait, aux yeux troublés des hommes,
Avec l’abîme, avec les astres du ciel bleu!
Tant semblait grande à tous son approche de Dieu!
Sa volonté fatale, enfoncée, obstinée,
Était comme un crampon mis sur la destinée;
Il tenait l’Amérique et l’Inde, il s’appuyait
Sur l’Afrique, il régnait sur l’Europe, inquiet
Seulement du côté de la sombre Angleterre;
Sa bouche était silence et son âme mystère;
Son trône était de piége et de fraude construit;
Il avait pour soutien la force de la nuit;
L’ombre était le cheval de sa statue équestre.
Toujours vêtu de noir, ce Tout-Puissant terrestre
Avait l’air d’être en deuil de ce qu’il existait;
Il ressemblait au sphinx qui digère et se tait;
Immuable; étant tout, il n’avait rien à dire.
Nul n’avait vu ce roi sourire; le sourire
N’étant pas plus possible à ces lèvres de fer
Que l’aurore à la grille obscure de l’enfer.
S’il secouait parfois sa torpeur de couleuvre,
C’était pour assister le bourreau dans son œuvre,
Et sa prunelle avait pour clarté le reflet

Des bûchers sur lesquels par moments il soufflait.
Il était redoutable à la pensée, à l’homme,
À la vie, au progrès, au droit, dévot à Rome;
C’était Satan régnant au nom de Jésus-Christ;
Les choses qui sortaient de son nocturne esprit
Semblaient un glissement sinistre de vipères.
L’Escurial, Burgos, Aranjuez, ses repaires,
Jamais n’illuminaient leurs livides plafonds;
Pas de festins, jamais de cour, pas de bouffons;
Les trahisons pour jeu, l’autodafé pour fête.
Les rois troublés avaient au-dessus de leur tête
Ses projets dans la nuit obscurément ouverts;
Sa rêverie était un poids sur l’univers;
Il pouvait et voulait tout vaincre et tout dissoudre;
Sa prière faisait le bruit sourd d’une foudre;
De grands éclairs sortaient de ses songes profonds.
Ceux auxquels il pensait disaient: Nous étouffons.
Et les peuples, d’un bout à l’autre de l’empire,
Tremblaient, sentant sur eux ces deux yeux fixes luire.

Charles fut le vautour, Philippe est le hibou.

Morne en son noir pourpoint, la toison d’or au cou,
On dirait du destin la froide sentinelle;
Son immobilité commande; sa prunelle
Luit comme un soupirail de caverne; son doigt
Semble, ébauchant un geste obscur que nul ne voit,
Donner un ordre à l’ombre et vaguement l’écrire.
Chose inouïe! il vient de grincer un sourire.
Un sourire insondable, impénétrable, amer.
C’est que la vision de son armée en mer
Grandit de plus en plus dans sa sombre pensée;
C’est qu’il la voit voguer par son dessein poussée,
Comme s’il était là, planant sous le zénith;
Tout est bien; l’océan docile s’aplanit;
L’armada lui fait peur comme au déluge l’arche;
La flotte se déploie en bon ordre de marche,

Et, les vaisseaux gardant les espaces fixés,
Échiquier de tillacs, de ponts, de mâts dressés,
Ondule sur les eaux comme une immense claie.
Ces vaisseaux sont sacrés; les flots leur font la haie;
Les courants, pour aider ces nefs à débarquer,
Ont leur besogne à faire et n’y sauraient manquer;
Autour d’elles la vague avec amour déferle,
L’écueil se change en port, l’écume tombe en perle.
Voici chaque galère avec son gastadour;
Voici ceux de l’Escaut, voilà ceux de l’Adour;
Les cent mestres de camp et les deux connétables;
L’Allemagne a donné ses ourques redoutables,
Naples ses brigantins, Cadiz ses galions,
Lisbonne ses marins, car il faut des lions.
Et Philippe se penche, et, qu’importe l’espace!
Non-seulement il voit, mais il entend. On passe,
On court, on va. Voici le cri des porte-voix,
Le pas des matelots courant sur les pavois,
Les moços, l’amiral appuyé sur son page,
Les tambours, les sifflets des maîtres d’équipage,
Les signaux pour la mer, l’appel pour les combats,
Le fracas sépulcral et noir du branle-bas.
Sont-ce des cormorans? sont-ce des citadelles?
Les voiles font un vaste et sourd battement d’ailes;
L’eau gronde, et tout ce groupe énorme vogue, et fuit,
Et s’enfle et roule avec un prodigieux bruit.
Et le lugubre roi sourit de voir groupées
Sur quatre cents vaisseaux quatre-vingt mille épées.
Ô rictus du vampire assouvissant sa faim!
Cette pâle Angleterre, il la tient donc enfin!
Qui pourrait la sauver? Le feu va prendre aux poudres.
Philippe dans sa droite a la gerbe des foudres;
Qui pourrait délier ce faisceau dans son poing?
N’est-il pas le seigneur qu’on ne contredit point?
N’est-il pas l’héritier de César? le Philippe
Dont l’ombre immense va du Gange au Pausilippe?
Tout n’est-il pas fini quand il a dit: Je veux!

N’est-ce pas lui qui tient la victoire aux cheveux?
N’est-ce pas lui qui lance en avant cette flotte,
Ces vaisseaux effrayants dont il est le pilote
Et que la mer charrie ainsi qu’elle le doit?
Ne fait-il pas mouvoir avec son petit doigt
Tous ces dragons ailés et noirs, essaim sans nombre?
N’est-il pas lui, le roi? n’est-il pas l’homme sombre
À qui ce tourbillon de monstres obéit?

Quand Béit-Cifresil, fils d’Abdallah-Béit,
Eut creusé le grand puits de la mosquée, au Caire,
Il y grava: « Le ciel est à Dieu; j’ai la terre.”
Et, comme tout se tient, se mêle et se confond,
Tous les tyrans n’étant qu’un seul despote au fond,
Ce que dit ce sultan jadis, ce roi le pense.
Cependant, sur le bord du bassin, en silence,
L’infante tient toujours sa rose gravement,
Et, doux ange aux yeux bleus, la baise par moment.
Soudain un souffle d’air, une de ces haleines
Que le soir frémissant jette à travers les plaines,
Tumultueux zéphyr effleurant l’horizon,
Trouble l’eau, fait frémir les joncs, met un frisson
Dans les lointains massifs de myrte et d’asphodèle,
Vient jusqu’au bel enfant tranquille, et, d’un coup d’aile,
Rapide, et secouant même l’arbre voisin,
Effeuille brusquement la fleur dans le bassin;
Et l’infante n’a plus dans la main qu’une épine.
Elle se penche, et voit sur l’eau cette ruine;
Elle ne comprend pas; qu’est-ce donc? Elle a peur;
Et la voilà qui cherche au ciel avec stupeur
Cette brise qui n’a pas craint de lui déplaire.
Que faire? Le bassin semble plein de colère;
Lui, si clair tout à l’heure, il est noir maintenant;
Il a des vagues; c’est une mer bouillonnant;
Toute la pauvre rose est éparse sur l’onde;
Ses cent feuilles, que noie et roule l’eau profonde,
Tournoyant, naufrageant, s’en vont de tous côtés

Sur mille petits flots par la brise irrités;
On croit voir dans un gouffre une flotte qui sombre.
« — Madame, dit la duègne avec sa face d’ombre
À la petite fille étonnée et rêvant,
Tout sur terre appartient aux princes, hors le vent.”

X. L'Inquisition

LES RAISONS DU MOMOTOMBO

Trouvant les tremblements de terre trop fréquents,
Les rois d'Espagne ont fait baptiser les volcans
Du royaume qu'ils ont en-dessous de la sphère;
Les volcans n'ont rien dit et se sont laissé faire,
Et le Momotombo lui seul n'a pas voulu.
Plus d'un prêtre en surplis, par le saint-père élu,
Portant le sacrement que l'Église administre,
L'œil au ciel, a monté la montagne sinistre;
Beaucoup y sont allés, pas un n'est revenu.

Ô vieux Momotombo, colosse chauve et nu,
Qui songe près des mers, et fais de ton cratère
Une tiare d'ombre et de flamme à la terre,
Pourquoi, lorsqu'à ton seuil terrible nous frappons,
Ne veux-tu pas du Dieu qu'on t'apporte? Réponds.

La montagne interrompt son crachement de lave,
Et le Momotombo répond d'une voix grave:

«Je n'aimais pas beaucoup le dieu qu'on a chassé.
Cet avare cachait de l'or dans un fossé;
Il mangeait de la chair humaine; ses mâchoires
Étaient de pourriture et de sang toutes noires.
Son antre était un porche au farouche carreau,
Temple sépulcre orné d'un pontife bourreau;
Des squelettes riaient sous ses pieds; les écuelles
Où cet être buvait le meurtre étaient cruelles;
Sourd, difforme, il avait des serpents au poignet;
Toujours entre ses dents un cadavre saignait;
Ce spectre noircissait le firmament sublime.
J'en grondais quelquefois au fond de mon abîme.

Aussi, quand sont venus, fiers sur les flots tremblants,
Et du côté d’où vient le jour, des hommes blancs,
Je les ai bien reçus, trouvant que c’était sage.
— L’âme a certainement la couleur du visage,
Disais-je; l’homme blanc, c’est comme le ciel bleu;
Et le dieu de ceux-ci doit être un très-bon dieu.
On ne le verra point de meurtre se repaître. —
J’étais content; j’avais horreur de l’ancien prêtre;
Mais, quand j’ai vu comment travaille le nouveau,
Quand j’ai vu flamboyer, ciel juste! à mon niveau!
Cette torche lugubre, âpre, jamais éteinte,
Sombre, que vous nommez l’Inquisition sainte,
Quand j’ai pu voir comment Torquemada s’y prend
Pour dissiper la nuit du sauvage ignorant,
Comment il civilise, et de quelle manière
Le saint office enseigne et fait de la lumière,
Quand j’ai vu dans Lima d’affreux géants d’osier,
Pleins d’enfants, pétiller sur un large brasier,
Et le feu dévorer la vie, et les fumées
Se tordre sur les seins des femmes allumées,
Quand je me suis senti parfois presque étouffé
Par l’âcre odeur qui sort de votre autodafé,
Moi qui ne brûlais rien que l’ombre en ma fournaise,
J’ai pensé que j’avais eu tort d’être bien aise;
J’ai regardé de près le dieu de l’étranger,
Et j’ai dit: — Ce n’est pas la peine de changer.”

XI. La Chanson des Aventuriers de la Mer

LA CHANSON DES AVENTURIERS DE LA MER

En partant du golfe d'Otrante,
Nous étions trente;
Mais, en arrivant à Cadiz,
Nous étions dix.

Tom Robin, matelot de Douvre,
Au Phare nous abandonna
Pour aller voir si l'on découvre
Satan, que l'archange enchaîna,
Quand un baîllement noir entr'ouvre
La gueule rouge de l'Etna.
En partant du golfe d'Otrante,
Nous étions trente;
Mais, en arrivant à Cadiz,
Nous étions dix.

En Calabre, une Tarentaise
Rendit fou Spitafangama;
À Gaëte, Ascagne fut aise
De rencontrer Michellema;
L'amour ouvrit la parenthèse,
Le mariage la ferma.

En partant du golfe d'Otrante,
Nous étions trente;
Mais, en arrivant à Cadiz,
Nous étions dix.

À Naple, Ébid, de Macédoine,
Fut pendu; c'était un faquin.
À Capri, l'on nous prit Antoine:
Aux galères pour un sequin!

À Malte, Ofani se fit moine
Et Gobbo se fit arlequin.
En partant du golfe d'Otrante,
Nous étions trente;
Mais, en arrivant à Cadiz,
Nous étions dix.

Autre perte: André, de Pavie,
Pris par les Turcs à Lipari,
Entra, sans en avoir envie,
Au sérail, et, sous cet abri,
Devint vertueux pour la vie,
Ayant été fort amoindri.

En partant du golfe d'Otrante,
Nous étions trente;
Mais, en arrivant à Cadiz,
Nous étions dix.

Puis, trois de nous, que rien ne gêne,
Ni loi, ni Dieu, ni souverain,
Allèrent, pour le prince Eugène
Aussi bien que pour Mazarin,
Aider Fuentes à prendre Gêne
Et d'Harcourt à prendre Turin.
En partant du golfe d'Otrante,
Nous étions trente;
Mais, en arrivant à Cadiz,
Nous étions dix.

Vers Livourne nous rencontrâmes
Les vingt voiles de Spinola.
Quel beau combat! Quatorze prames
Et six galères étaient là;
Mais, bah! rien qu'au bruit de nos rames
Toute la flotte s'envola!

En partant du golfe d’Otrante,
Nous étions trente;
Mais, en arrivant à Cadiz,
Nous étions dix.

À Notre-Dame-de-la-Garde,
Nous eûmes un charmant tableau;
Lucca Diavolo par mégarde
Prit sa femme à Pier’Angelo;
Sur ce, l’ange se mit en garde
Et jeta le diable dans l’eau.
En partant du golfe d’Otrante,
Nous étions trente;
Mais, en arrivant à Cadiz,
Nous étions dix.

À Palma, pour suivre Pescaire,
Huit nous quittèrent tour à tour;
Mais cela ne nous troubla guère;
On ne s’arrêta pas un jour.
Devant Alger on fit la guerre,
À Gibraltar on fit l’amour.

En partant du golfe d’Otrante,
Nous étions trente;
Mais, en arrivant à Cadiz,
Nous étions dix.

À nous dix, nous prîmes la ville;
— Et le roi lui-même! — Après quoi,
Maîtres du port, maîtres de l’île,
Ne sachant qu’en faire, ma foi,
D’une manière très-civile,
Nous rendîmes la ville au roi.
En partant du golfe d’Otrante,
Nous étions trente;
Mais, en arrivant à Cadiz,

Nous étions dix.

On fit ducs et grands de Castille
Mes neuf compagnons de bonheur,
Qui s’en allèrent à Séville
Épouser des dames d’honneur.
Le roi me dit: « Veux-tu ma fille?”
Et je lui dis: « Merci, seigneur!

En partant du golfe d’Otrante,
Nous étions trente;
Mais, en arrivant à Cadiz,
Nous étions dix.

» J’ai, là-bas, où des flots sans nombre
» Mugissent dans les nuits d’hiver,
» Ma belle farouche à l’œil sombre,
» Au sourire charmant et fier,
» Qui, tous les soirs, chantant dans l’ombre,
» Vient m’attendre au bord de la mer.
En partant du golfe d’Otrante,
Nous étions trente;
Mais, en arrivant à Cadiz,
Nous étions dix.

» J’ai ma Faënzette à Fiesone.
» C’est là que mon cœur est resté.
» Le vent fraîchit, la mer frissonne,
» Je m’en retourne, en vérité!
» Ô roi! ta fille a la couronne,
» Mais Faënzette a la beauté!”

En partant du golfe d’Otrante,
Nous étions trente;
Mais, en arrivant à Cadiz,
Nous étions dix.

XII. Dix-septième siècle - Les Mercenaires

LE RÉGIMENT DU BARON MADRUCE

(garde impériale suisse)

I

Lorsque le régiment des hallebardiers passe,
L’aigle à deux têtes, l’aigle à la griffe rapace,
L’aigle d’Autriche dit:
Voilà le régiment
De mes hallebardiers qui va superbement.
Leurs plumets font venir les filles aux fenêtres;
Ils marchent droits, tendant la pointe de leurs guêtres;
Leur pas est si correct, sans tarder ni courir,
Qu’on croit voir des ciseaux se fermer et s’ouvrir.
Et la belle musique, ardente et militaire!
Leur clairon fait sortir une rumeur de terre.
Tout cet éclat de rire orgueilleux et vainqueur
Que le soldat muet refoule dans son cœur,
Étouffé dans les rangs, s’échappe et se délivre
Sous le chapeau chinois aux clochettes de cuivre;
Le tambour roule avec un faste oriental,
Et vibre, tout tremblant de plaques de métal;
Si bien qu’on croit entendre en sa voix claire et gaie
Sonner allègrement les sequins de la paie;
La fanfare s’envole en bruyant falbala.
Quels bons autrichiens que ces étrangers-là!
Gloire aux hallebardiers! Ils n’ont point de scrupule
Contre la populace et contre la crapule,
Corrigeant dans les gueux mal vêtus la fureur
De venir regarder de trop près l’empereur;
Autour des archiducs leur pertuisane veille,
Et souvent d’une fête elle revient vermeille,
Ayant fait en passant quelques trous dans la chair

Du bas peuple en haillons qui trouve le pain cher;
Ils ont un air fâché qui tient la foule en bride;
Le grand soleil leur creuse aux sourcils une ride;
Ce régiment est beau sous les armes, rêvant
À la terreur qui suit son drapeau dans le vent;
Il a, comme un palais, ses tours et sa façade;
Tous sont hardis et forts, du fifre à l’anspessade;
Gloire aux hallebardiers splendides! ces piquiers
Sont une rude pièce aux royaux échiquiers;
On sent que ces gaillards sortent des avalanches
Qui des cols du Malpas roulent jusqu’à Sallenches;
En guerre, au feu, ce sont des tigres pour l’élan;
À Schœnbrunn, chacun d’eux a l’air d’un chambellan;
Auprès de leur cocarde ils piquent une rose;
Et tous, en même temps, graves, ont quelque chose
De froid, de sépulcral, d’altier, de solennel,
Le grand baron Madruce étant leur colonel!
Leur hallebarde est longue et s’ajoute à leur taille;
Quand ce dur régiment est dans une bataille,
— Lâchât-on contre lui les mamelouks du Nil, —
La meute des plus fiers escadrons, le chenil
Des bataillons les plus hideux, les plus épiques,
Regarde en reculant ce sanglier de piques.
Ils sont silencieux comme un nuage noir;
Ils laissent seulement, par instants, entrevoir
Une lueur tragique aux multitudes viles;
Parfois, leur humeur change, ils entrent dans les villes,
Ivres et gais, frappant leurs marmites de fer,
Et font devant le seuil des maisons un bruit fier,
Heureux, vainqueurs, sanglants, chantant à pleine bouche
La noce de la joie et du sabre farouche;
Ils ont nommé, tuant, mourant pour de l’argent,
Trépas, leur capitaine, et Danger, leur sergent;
Ils traînent dans leurs rangs, avec gloire et furie,
Comme un trophée utile à mettre en batterie,
Six canons qu’a pleurés monsieur de Brandebourg;
Comme ils vous font japper cela contre un faubourg!

Comme ils en ont craché naguère la volée
Sur Comorn, la Hongrie étant démuselée!
Et comme ils ont troué de boulets le manteau
De Vérone, livrée au feu par Colalto!
Les déclarations de guerre les font rire;
Ils signent ce qu'il plaît à l'empereur d'écrire;
Sous les puissants édits, sous les rescrits altiers,
Au bas des hauts décrets, ils mettent volontiers
Ce grand paraphe obscur qu'on nomme la mêlée;
Leur bannière à longs plis, toute bariolée,
Est une glorieuse et fait claquer son fouet;
Wallstein, comme une foudre au poing, les secouait;
Leur mode est d'envoyer la bombe en ambassade;
Ils sont pour l'ennemi de mine si maussade
Que s'ils allaient un jour, sur la terre ou la mer,
Guerroyer quelque prince allié de l'enfer,
Rien qu'en apercevant leurs profils sous le feutre,
Satan se sentirait le goût de rester neutre.
Aussi, lourde est la solde et riche est le loyer.
Quand on veut des héros, il faut les bien payer.
On n'a point vu, depuis Boleslas Lèvre-Torte,
Une bande de gens de bataille plus forte
Et des alignements d'estafiers plus hagards;
Max en fait cas, Tilly pour eux a des égards,
Fritz les aime; en voyant ces moustaches féroces,
Les femmes de la cour ont peur dans leurs carrosses,
Et disent: « Qu'ils sont beaux!" Leurs os sont de granit;
L'électeur de Mayence en passant les bénit,
Et l'abbé de Fulda leur rit dans sa simarre;
Leur habit est d'un drap cramoisi, que chamarre
Un galon triomphal, auguste, étincelant;
Ils ont deux frocs de guerre, un jaune et l'autre blanc;
Sur le jaune, l'or brille et largement éclate;
Quand ils portent le blanc sur la veste écarlate,
Car la pompe des cours aime ce train changeant,
On leur voit sur le corps ruisseler tant d'argent
Que ces fils des glaciers semblent couverts de givre.

Une troupe d’enfants s’extasie à les suivre.
Ils gardent à Schœnbrunn le secret corridor.
Sur l’épaule, en brocart brodé de pourpre et d’or,
Ils ont, quoique plus d’un soit hérétique en somme,
Le blason de l’empire et le blason de Rome;
Mais leur cœur huguenot sans courroux le subit,
Et, quand l’âge ou la guerre ont usé leur habit,
Et qu’il faut au Prater devant des rois paraître,
Chacun d’eux, devenu bon tailleur de bon reître,
S’accroupit, prend l’aiguille, et remet en état
L’écusson orthodoxe à son dos apostat.
Ce sont de braves gens. Jamais ils ne vacillent.
En longs buissons mouvants leurs hallebardes brillent.
À Prague, à Parme, à Pesth, devant Mariendal,
Ils soutiennent le vaste empereur féodal;
La révolte autour d’eux se brise, échoue et sombre;
Ils ont le flamboiement, l’ordre et l’épaisseur sombre;
Le vertige me prend moi-même dans les airs
En regardant marcher cette forêt d’éclairs.

II

Lorsque le régiment des hallebardiers passe,
L’aigle montagnard, l’aigle orageux de l’espace,
Qui parle au précipice et que le gouffre entend,
Et qui plane au-dessus des trônes, emportant
Dans le ciel, son pays, la liberté, sa proie;
Le sublime témoin du soleil qui flamboie,
L’aigle des Alpes, roi du pic et du hallier,
Dresse la tête au bruit de ce pas régulier,
Et crie, et jusqu’au ciel sa voix hautaine monte:

Ô chute! ignominie! inexprimable honte!
Ces marcheurs alignés, ces êtres qui vont là
En pompe impériale, en housse de gala,
Ce sont de libres fils de ma libre montagne!
Ah! les bassets en laisse et les forçats au bagne
Sont grands, sont purs, sont fiers, sont beaux et glorieux

Près de ceux-ci, qui, nés dans les lieux sérieux
Où comme des roseaux les hauts mélèzes ploient,
Fils des rochers sacrés et terribles, emploient
La fermeté du pied dans les cols périlleux,
Le mystérieux sang des mères aux yeux bleus,
L'audace dont l'autan nous emplit les narines,
Le divin gonflement de l'air dans les poitrines,
La grâce des ravins couronnés de bouquets,
Et la force des monts, à se faire laquais!
La contrée affranchie et joyeuse, matrice
De l'idée indomptable, âpre et libératrice,
La patrie au flanc rude, aux bons pics arrogants,
Qui portait les héros mêlés aux ouragans,
Douce, délivrant l'homme et délivrant la bête,
Sauvage, ayant le bruit des chutes d'eau pour fête
Et la sereine horreur des antres pour palais,
La terre qui nous montre au milieu des chalets
Le fier archer d'Altorf tenant son arbalète,
Et, titan, au-dessus du lac qui le reflète,
Enjambant les grands monts comme des escaliers,
La voilà maintenant nourrice de geôliers,
Et l'on voit pendre ensemble à ses sombres mamelles
La honte avec la gloire, ainsi que deux jumelles!
L'aigle à deux fronts, marqué de son double soufflet,
À cette heure à travers nos pâtres boit son lait!

Quoi! la trompe d'Uri sonnant de roche en roche,
La couronne de fer qu'un montagnard décroche,
Les baillis jetés bas, le Föhn soufflant dix mois,
Ces pentes de granit où saute le chamois
Et qui firent glisser Charles le Téméraire,
Le Mont-Blanc qui ne dit qu'à l'Himalaya: Frère!
Ces sommets, éclatants comme d'énormes lys;
Quoi! le Pilate, quoi! le Rigi! Titlis,
Ce triangle hideux de géants noirs, qui cerne
Et qui garde le lac tragique de Lucerne;
Quoi! la vaste gaîté des nuages, des fleurs,

Des eaux, des ouragans puissants et querelleurs;
Quoi! l’honneur, quoi! l’épieu de Sempach, la cognée
De Morat bondissant hors des bois indignée,
La faux de Morgarten, la fourche de Granson;
La rudesse du roc, la fierté du buisson;
Ces cris, ces feux de paille allumés sur les faîtes;
Quoi! sur l’affreux faisceau des lances stupéfaites
L’immense éventrement de Winkelried joyeux;
Quoi! les filles d’Albis, anges aux chastes yeux,
Les grandes mers de glace et leurs ondes muettes,
Les porches d’ombre où fuit le vol des gypaëtes,
Quoi! l’homme affranchi, quoi! ces serments, cette foi,
Le bâton paysan brisant le glaive roi,
Quoi! dans l’altier sursaut de la vengeance austère,
Comme la vieille France a chassé l’Angleterre,
L’Helvétie en fureur chassant l’Autrichien,
Et l’empereur, cet ours, et l’archiduc, ce chien,
T’ayant pour Jeanne d’Arc, ô Jungfrau formidable;
Quoi! toute cette histoire auguste, inabordable,
Escarpée, au front haut, au chant libre, à l’œil clair,
Blanche comme la neige, âpre comme l’hiver,
Et du farouche vent des cimes enivrée,
Terre et cieux! Aboutit à la Suisse en livrée!

Est-ce que le Mont-Blanc ne va pas se lever?
Ah! ceci va plus loin qu’on ne pourrait rêver!
Plus loin qu’on ne pourrait calomnier! Oui, certes,
L’indépendance, errant dans nos gorges désertes,
Franche et vraie, et riant sous le ciel pluvieux,
A des ennemis; certe, elle a des envieux;
Ces menteurs ont construit bien des choses contre elle;
Chaque jour, leur amère et lugubre querelle
Imagine une boue à lui jeter au front,
Et cherche quelque forme horrible de l’affront;
Ils ont contre sa vieille et vénérable gloire
Tout fait, tout publié, tout dit, tout semblé croire,
Ils ont tout supposé, tout vomi, tout bavé,

Mais cela cependant, ils ne l’ont pas trouvé;
Non, il n’en est pas un qui, dans sa rage, invente
La liberté s’offrant aux rois comme servante!

Qu’est-ce que nous allons devenir maintenant?
Devant ce résultat lugubre et surprenant,
Qu’est-ce qu’on va penser de nous, chênes, mélèzes,
Lacs qui vous insurgez sous les rudes falaises,
Granits qui des géants semblez le dur talon?
Qu’est-ce qu’on va penser de toi, fauve aquilon?
Qu’est-ce qu’on va penser de votre miel, abeilles?
Comme vous aurez honte, ô douces fleurs vermeilles,
Œillets, jasmins, d’avoir connu ces hommes-ci!
Puisque l’opprobre riche est par vos cœurs choisi,
Puisque c’est vous qu’on voit vêtus de l’or des princes,
Superbement hideux et gardeurs de provinces,
Pâtres, soyez maudits. Oh! vous étiez si beaux,
Honnêtes, en haillons, et libres, en sabots!

Auriez-vous donc besoin de faste? Est-ce la pompe
Des parades, des cours, des galas qui vous trompe?
Mais alors, regardez. Est-ce que mes vallons
N’ont pas les torrents blancs d’écume pour galons?
Mai brode à mes rochers la passementerie
Des perles de rosée et des fleurs de prairie;
Mes vieux monts pour dorure ont le soleil levant;
Et chacun d’eux, brumeux, branle un panache au vent
D’où sort le roulement sinistre des tonnerres;
S’il vous faut, au milieu des forêts centenaires,
Une livrée, à vous les voisins du ciel bleu,
Pourquoi celle des rois, ayant celle de Dieu?
Ah! vous raccommodez vos habits! vos aiguilles,
Sœurs des sabres vendus, indigneraient des filles!
Ah! vous raccommodez vos habits! Venez voir,
Quand la saison commence à venter, à pleuvoir,
Comment l’altier Pelvoux, vieillard à tête blanche,
Sait, tout déguenillé de grêle et d’avalanche,

Mettre à ses cieux troués une pièce d'azur,
Et, croisant les genoux dans quelque gouffre obscur,
Tranquille, se servir de l'éclair pour recoudre
Sa robe de nuée et son manteau de foudre!

Sur la terre où tout jette un miasme empoisonneur,
Où même cet instinct qu'on appelle l'honneur
De pente en pente au fond de la bassesse glisse,
Il n'est qu'un peuple libre, un montagnard, la Suisse;
Tous les autres, ramant l'ombre des deux côtés,
Sont les galériens des blêmes royautés;
Or, les rois ont eu l'art de mettre en équilibre
Les pauvres peuples serfs avec le peuple libre,
Et font garder, afin que l'ordre soit complet,
Les esclaves, forçats, par le libre, valet.

Et dire que la Suisse eut jadis l'envergure
D'un peuple qui se lève et qui se transfigure!
Ô vils marchands d'eux-même! immonde abaissement!
Leur enfance a reçu ce haut enseignement
Qu'un peuple s'affranchit, c'est-à-dire se crée,
Par la révolte sainte et l'émeute sacrée,
Qu'il faut rompre ses fers, vaincre, et que le lion
Superbe, pour crinière a la rébellion;
C'est leur dogme. À cette heure, ils ont dans leur service
De punir dans autrui leur vertu comme un vice;
Ils le font. Les voici prêtant main-forte aux rois
Contre un Sempach lombard, contre un Morat hongrois!
Si bien que maintenant, c'est fini. Nous en sommes
À cette indignité qu'en tout pays les hommes
Entendent l'Helvétie, en des coins ténébreux,
Chuchoter, proposant à leurs maîtres contre eux
Ses archers, d'autant plus lâches qu'ils sont plus braves,
Fille publique auprès des nations esclaves;
Et que le despotisme, habile à tout plier,
Met au monde un carcan, à la Suisse un collier!

Donc, César vous admet dans ses royaux repaires;
César daigne oublier que vous avez pour pères
Tous nos vieux héros, purs comme le firmament;
Même un peu de pardon se mêle à son paiement;
L'iniquité, le dol, le mal, la tyrannie,
Vous font grâce, et, riant, vous laissent l'ironie
De leur porte à défendre, et d'un tambour honteux
Et d'un clairon abject à sonner devant eux!
Hélas! n'eût-on pas cru ces monts invulnérables!

Oh! comme vous voilà fourvoyés, misérables!
D'où venez-vous? De Pesth. Et qu'avez-vous fait là?
L'aigle à deux fronts, sur qui Guillaume Tell souffla,
Suivait vos bataillons de son regard oblique;
Trois ans d'atrocité sur la place publique,
Trois ans de coups de hache et de barres de fer,
Les billots, les bûchers, les fourches, tout l'enfer,
Les supplices hurlant dans la brume hagarde,
C'est là ce que l'Autriche a mis sous votre garde.
Devant vous, on tuait le juste et l'innocent,
Les coudes des bourreaux étaient rouges de sang,
Les glaives s'ébréchaient sur les nuques, la corde
Coupait d'un hoquet noir le cri: Miséricorde!
On prodiguait au bois en feu plus de vivants
Qu'il n'en pouvait brûler, même aidé par les vents,
On mêlait le héros dans la flamme à l'apôtre,
L'un n'était pas fini que l'on commençait l'autre,
Les têtes des plus saints et des plus vénérés
Pourrissaient au soleil au bout des pieux ferrés,
On marquait d'un fer chaud le sein fumant des femmes,
On rouait des vieillards, et vous êtes infâmes.
Voilà ce que je dis, moi, l'aigle pour de bon.
Le fourbe Gaïnas et le louche Bourbon
N'ont trahi que des rois dans leur noirceur profonde,
Mais vous, vous trahissez la liberté du monde;
Votre fanfare sort du charnier, vos tambours
Sont pleins du cri des morts dénonçant les Habsbourgs;

Et, lorsque vous croyez chanter dans la trompette,
Ce chant joyeux, la tombe en sanglot le répète.
Forçant Mantoue, à Pesth aidant le coutelas,
Buquoy, Mozellani, Londorone, Galas,
Sont vos chefs; vous avez, reîtres, fait une espèce
De hauts faits et d’exploits dont la fange est épaisse;
À Bergame, à Pavie, à Crême, à Guastalla,
Vous témoins, vous présents, vous mettant le holà,
À la sainte Italie on lisait sa sentence;
On promenait de rue en rue une potence,
Et, vous, vous escortiez la charrette; et ceci
Ne vous quittera plus, et sans fin ni merci
Ce souvenir vous suit, étant de la nuit noire;
Ô malheureux! vos noms traverseront l’histoire
À jamais balafrés par l’ombre qui tombait
Sur vos drapeaux des bras difformes du gibet.

Deuil sans fond! c’est l’honneur de leur pays qu’ils tuent;
En se prostituant, c’est moi qu’ils prostituent;
Nos vieux pins ont fourni leurs piques dont l’acier
Apporte dans l’égout le reflet du glacier;
Ils traînent avec eux la Suisse, quoi qu’on dise;
Et les pâles aïeux sont dans leur bâtardise;
Nos héros sont mêlés à leurs rangs, Nos grands noms
Sont de leurs lâchetés parents et compagnons,
De sorte que, dans l’ombre où César supplicie
Le Salzbourg, la Hongrie aux fers, la Dalmatie,
Quand Fritz jette au bûcher le Tyrol prisonnier,
Quand Jean lie au poteau l’Alsace, quand Reynier
Bat de verges Crémone échevelée et nue,
Quand Rodolphe après Jean et Reynier continue,
Quand Mathias livre Ancône au sabre du hulan,
Quand Albrecht Dent-de-Fer exécute Milan,
Autour des nations qui râlent sur la claie,
Furst, et Guillaume Tell, et Melchthal font la haie!

Est-ce qu’ils oseront rentrer sur nos hauteurs,

Ces anciens laboureurs et ces anciens pasteurs
Que l’Autriche aujourd’hui caserne dans ses bouges?
Est-ce qu’ils reviendront avec leurs habits rouges,
Portant sur leur front morne et dans leur œil fatal
La domesticité monstrueuse du mal?
S’ils osent revenir, si, pour faveur dernière,
L’Autriche leur permet d’emporter sa bannière,
S’ils rentrent dans nos monts avec cet étendard
Dont l’ombre fait d’un homme et d’un pâtre un soudard,
Oh! quelle auge de porcs, quelle cuve de fange,
Quelle étable inouïe, épouvantable, étrange,
Femmes, essuierez-vous avec ce drapeau-là?
Jamais dans plus de nuit un peuple ne croula.
Désespoir! désespoir de voir mes Alpes sombres
Honteuses, projeter leurs gigantesques ombres
Jusque dans l’antichambre infâme des tyrans!
Cieux profonds, purs azurs sacrés et fulgurants,
Laissez-moi m’en aller dans vos gouffres sublimes!
Que je perde de vue, au fond des clairs abîmes,
La terre, et l’homme, acteur féroce ou vil témoin!
Ô sombre immensité, laisse-moi fuir si loin
Que je voie, à travers tes prodigieux voiles,
Décroître le soleil et grandir les étoiles!
*

Aigle, ne t’en va pas; reste aux Alpes uni,
Et reprends confiance, au seuil de l’infini,
Aigle, dans la candeur des neiges éternelles;
Ne t’en va pas; et laisse en tes glauques prunelles
Les foudres apaisés redevenir rayons;
Penchons-nous, moins amers, sur ce que nous voyons;
La faute est sur les temps et n’est pas sur les hommes.

Un flamboiement sinistre emporte les Sodomes,
Tout est dit. Mais la Suisse au-dessus de l’affront
Gardera l’auréole altière de son front;
Car c’est la roche avec de la bonté pétrie,

C’est la grande montagne et la grande patrie,
C’est la terre sereine assise près du ciel;
C’est elle qui, gardant pour les pâtres le miel,
Fit connaître l’abeille aux rois par les piqûres;
C’est elle qui, parmi les nations obscures,
La première alluma sa lampe dans la nuit;
Le cri de délivrance est fait avec son bruit;
Le mot Liberté semble une voix naturelle
De ses prés sous l’azur, de ses lacs sous la grêle,
Et tout dans ses monts, l’air, la terre, l’eau, le feu,
Le dit avec l’accent dont le prononce Dieu!
Au-dessus des palais de tous les rois ensemble,
La pauvre vieille Suisse, où le rameau seul tremble,
Tranquille, élèvera toujours sur l’horizon
Les pignons effrayants de sa haute maison.
Rien ne ternit ces pics que la tempête lave,
Volcans de neige ayant la lumière pour lave,
Qui versent sur l’Europe un long ruissellement
De courage, de foi, d’honneur, de dévouement,
Et semblent sur la terre une chaîne d’exemples;
Toujours ces monts auront des figures de temples.
Qu’est-ce qu’un peu de fange humaine jaillissant
Vers ces sublimités d’où la clarté descend?
Ces pics sont la ruine énorme des vieux âges
Où les hommes vivaient bons, aimants, simples, sages;
Débris du chaste éden par la paix habité,
Ils sont beaux; de l’aurore et de la vérité
Ils sont la colossale et splendide masure;
Où tombe le flocon que fait l’éclaboussure?
Qu’importe un jour de deuil quand, sous l’œil éternel,
Ce que noircit la terre est blanchi par le ciel?

L’homme s’est vendu. Soit. A-t-on dans le louange
Compris le lac, le bois, la ronce, le nuage?
La nature revient, germe, fleurit, dissout,
Féconde, croît, décroît, rit, passe, efface tout.
La Suisse est toujours là, libre. Prend-on au piége

Le précipice, l’ombre et la bise et la neige?
Signe-t-on des marchés dans lesquels il soit dit
Que l’Orteler s’enrôle et devient un bandit?
Quel poing cyclopéen, dites, ô roches noires,
Pourra briser la Dent de Morcle en vos mâchoires?
Quel assembleur de bœufs pourra forger un joug
Qui du pic de Glaris aille au piton de Zoug?
C’est naturellement que les monts sont fidèles
Et purs, ayant la forme âpre des citadelles,
Ayant reçu de Dieu des créneaux où, le soir,
L’homme peut, d’embrasure en embrasure, voir
Étinceler le fer de lance des étoiles.
Est-il une araignée, aigle, qui dans ses toiles
Puisse prendre la trombe et la rafale et toi?
Quel chef recrutera le Salève? à quel roi
Le Mythen dira-t-il: « Sire, je vais descendre!”
Qu’après avoir dompté l’Athos, quelque Alexandre,
Sorte de héros monstre aux cornes de taureau,
Aille donc relever sa robe à la Jungfrau!
Comme la vierge, ayant l’ouragan sur l’épaule,
Crachera l’avalanche à la face du drôle!

Aigle, ne maudis pas, au nom des clairs torrents,
Les tristes hommes, fous, aveugles, ignorants.
Puis, est-ce pour jamais qu’on embauche les hommes?
Non, non. Les Alpes sont plus fortes que les Romes;
Le pays tire à lui l’humble pâtre pleurant;
Et, si César l’a pris, le Mont-Blanc le reprend.

Non, rien n’est mort ici. Tout grandit, et s’en vante.
L’Helvétie est sacrée et la Suisse est vivante;
Ces monts sont des héros et des religieux;
Cette nappe de neige aux plis prodigieux
D’où jaillit, lorsqu’en mai la tiède brise ondoie,
Toute une floraison folle d’air et de joie,
Et d’où sortent des lacs et des flots murmurants,
N’est le linceul de rien, excepté des tyrans.

Gloire aux monts! leur front brille et la nuit se dissipe.
C’est plus que le matin qui luit; c’est un principe!
Ces mystérieux jours blanchissant les hauteurs,
Qu’on prend pour des rayons, sont des libérateurs;
Toujours aux fiers sommets ces aubes sont données:
Aux Alpes Stauffacher, Pélage aux Pyrénées!

La Suisse dans l’histoire aura le dernier mot
Puisqu’elle est deux fois grande, étant pauvre, et là-haut;
Puisqu’elle a sa montagne et qu’elle a sa cabane.
La houlette de Schwitz qu’une vierge enrubanne,
Fière, et, quand il le faut, se hérissant de clous,
Chasse les rois ainsi qu’elle chasse les loups.
Gloire au chaste pays que le Léman arrose!
À l’ombre de Melchthal, à l’ombre du Mont-Rose,
La Suisse trait sa vache et vit paisiblement.
Sa blanche liberté s’adosse au firmament.

Le soleil, quand il vient dorer une chaumière,
Fait que le toit de paille est un toit de lumière;
Telle est la Suisse, ayant l’honneur dans ses prés verts,
Et de son indigence éclairant l’univers.
Tant que les nations garderont leurs frontières,
La Suisse éclatera parmi les plus altières;
Quand les peuples riront et s’embrasseront tous,
La Suisse sera douce au milieu des plus doux.

Suisse! à l’heure où l’Europe enfin marchera seule,
Tu verras accourir vers toi, sévère aïeule,
La jeune Humanité sous son chapeau de fleurs;
Tes hommes bons seront chers aux hommes meilleurs;
Les fléaux disparus, faux dieu, faux roi, faux prêtre,
Laisseront le front blanc de la paix apparaître;
Et les peuples viendront en foule te bénir,
Quand la guerre mourra, quand, devant l’avenir,
On verra, dans l’horreur des tourbillons funèbres,
Se hâter pêle-mêle au milieu des ténèbres,

Comme d’affreux oiseaux heurtant leurs ailerons,
Une fuite effrénée et noire de clairons!

En attendant, la Suisse a dit au monde: Espère!
Elle a de la vieille hydre effrayé le repaire;
Ce qu’elle a fait jadis, pour les siècles est fait;
La façon dont la Suisse à Sempach triomphait
Reste la grande audace et la grande manière
D’attaquer une bête au fond de sa tanière.
Tous ses nuages, blancs ou noirs, sont des drapeaux.
L’exemple, c’est le fait dans sa gloire, au repos,
Qui charge lentement les cœurs et recommence;
Melchthal, grave et penché sur le monde, ensemence.

Un jour, à Bâle, Albrecht, l’empereur triomphant,
Vit une jeune mère auprès d’un jeune enfant;
La mère était charmante; elle semblait encore,
Comme l’enfant, sortie à peine de l’aurore;
L’empereur écouta de près leurs doux ébats,
Et la mère disait à son enfant tout bas:
«Fils, quand tu seras grand, meurs pour la bonne cause!”
Oh! rien ne flétrira cette feuille de rose!
Toujours le despotisme en sentira le pli.
Toujours les mains prêtant le serment du Grutli
Apparaîtront en rêve au peuple en léthargie;
Toujours les oppresseurs auront, dans leur orgie,
Sur la lividité de leur face l’effroi
Du tocsin qu’Unterwald cache dans son beffroi.
Tant que les nations au joug seront nouées,
Tant que l’aigle à deux becs sera dans les nuées,
Tant que dans le brouillard des montagnes l’éclair
Ébauchera le spectre insolent de Gessler,
On verra Tell songer dans quelque coin terrible;
Et les iniquités, la violence horrible,
La fraude, le pouvoir du vainqueur meurtrier,
Cibles noires, craindront cet arbalétrier.
Assis à leur souper, car c’est leur crépuscule,

Et le jour qui pour nous monte, pour eux recule,
Les satrapes seront éblouissants à voir,
Raillant la conscience, insultant le devoir,
Mangeant dans les plats d’or et les coupes d’opales,
Joyeux; mais par instants ils deviendront tout pâles,
Feront taire l’orchestre, et, la sueur au front,
Penchés, se parlant bas, tremblants, regarderont
S’il n’est pas quelque part, là, derrière la table,
Calme, et serrant l’écrou de son arc redoutable.
Pourtant il se pourra qu’à de certains moments,
Dans les satiétés et les enivrements,
Ils se disent: « Les yeux n’ont plus rien de sévère;
Guillaume Tell est mort.” Ils rempliront leur verre,
Et le monde comme eux oubliera. Tout à coup,
À travers les fléaux et les crimes debout,
Et l’ombre, et l’esclavage, et les hontes sans nombre,
On entendra siffler la grande flèche sombre.

Oui, c’est là la foi sainte, et, quand nous étouffons,
Dieu nous fait respirer par ces pensers profonds.
Au-dessus des tyrans l’histoire est abondante
En spectres que du doigt Tacite montre à Dante;
Tous ces fantômes sont la liberté planant,
Et toujours prête à dire aux hommes: « Maintenant!”
Et, depuis Padrona Kalil aux jambes nues
Jusqu’à Franklin ôtant le tonnerre des nues,
Depuis Léonidas jusqu’à Kosciuzko,
Le cri des uns du cri des autres est l’écho.
Oui, sur vos actions, de tant de deuil mêlées,
Multipliez les plis des pourpres étoilées,
Ayez pour vous l’oracle, et Delphe avec Endor,
Maîtres; riez, le front coiffé du laurier d’or,
Aux pieds de la fortune infâme et colossale;
Tout à coup Botzaris entrera dans la salle,
Byron se dressera, le poëte héros,
Tzavellas, indigné du succès des bourreaux,
Soufflettera le groupe effaré des victoires;

Et l’on verra surgir au-dessus de vos gloires
L’effrayant avoyer Gundoldingen, cassant
Sur César le sapin des Alpes teint de sang!

XIII. Maintenant

Après la bataille

Mon père, ce héros au sourire si doux,
Suivi d’un seul housard qu’il aimait entre tous
Pour sa grande bravoure et pour sa haute taille,
Parcourait à cheval, le soir d’une bataille,
Le champ couvert de morts sur qui tombait la nuit.
Il lui sembla dans l’ombre entendre un faible bruit.
C’était un Espagnol de l’armée en déroute
Qui se traînait sanglant sur le bord de la route,
Râlant, brisé, livide, et mort plus qu’à moitié,
Et qui disait: « À boire! à boire par pitié!”
Mon père, ému, tendit à son housard fidèle
Une gourde de rhum qui pendait à sa selle,
Et dit: « Tiens, donne à boire à ce pauvre blessé.”
Tout à coup, au moment où le housard baissé
Se penchait vers lui, l’homme, une espèce de Maure,
Saisit un pistolet qu’il étreignait encore,
Et vise au front mon père en criant: « Caramba!”
Le coup passa si près, que le chapeau tomba
Et que le cheval fit un écart en arrière.
«Donne-lui tout de même à boire,” dit mon père.

e Crapaud

Que savons-nous? Qui donc connaît le fond des choses?
Le couchant rayonnait dans les nuages roses;
C’était la fin d’un jour d’orage, et l’occident
Changeait l’ondée en flamme en son brasier ardent;
Près d’une ornière, au bord d’une flaque de pluie,
Un crapaud regardait le ciel, bête éblouie;
Grave, il songeait; l’horreur contemplait la splendeur.
(Oh! pourquoi la souffrance et pourquoi la laideur?
Hélas! le bas-empire est couvert d’Augustules,

Les césars de forfaits, les crapauds de pustules,
Comme le pré de fleurs et le ciel de soleils.)
Les feuilles s'empourpraient dans les arbres vermeils;
L'eau miroitait, mêlée à l'herbe, dans l'ornière:
Le soir se déployait ainsi qu'une bannière;
L'oiseau baissait la voix dans le jour affaibli;
Tout s'apaisait, dans l'air, sur l'onde; et, plein d'oubli,
Le crapaud, sans effroi, sans honte, sans colère,
Doux, regardait la grande auréole solaire;
Peut-être le maudit se sentait-il béni;
Pas de bête qui n'ait un reflet d'infini;
Pas de prunelle abjecte et vile que ne touche
L'éclair d'en-haut, parfois tendre et parfois farouche;
Pas de monstre chétif, louche, impur, chassieux,
Qui n'ait l'immensité des astres dans les yeux.
Un homme qui passait vit la hideuse bête,
Et, frémissant, lui mit son talon sur la tête;
C'était un prêtre ayant un livre qu'il lisait;
Puis une femme, avec une fleur au corset,
Vint et lui creva l'œil du bout de son ombrelle;
Et le prêtre était vieux, et la femme était belle;
Vinrent quatre écoliers, sereins comme le ciel.
— J'étais enfant, j'étais petit, j'étais cruel; —
Tout homme sur la terre, où l'âme erre asservie,
Peut commencer ainsi le récit de sa vie.
On a le jeu, l'ivresse et l'aube dans les yeux,
On a sa mère, on est des écoliers joyeux,

De petits hommes gais, respirant l'atmosphère
À pleins poumons, aimés, libres, contents, que faire
Sinon de torturer quelque être malheureux?
Le crapaud se traînait au fond du chemin creux.
C'était l'heure où des champs les profondeurs s'azurent;
Fauve, il cherchait la nuit; les enfants l'aperçurent
Et crièrent: « Tuons ce vilain animal,
Et, puisqu'il est si laid, faisons-lui bien du mal!"
Et chacun d'eux, riant, — l'enfant rit quand il tue, —

Se mit à le piquer d’une branche pointue
Élargissant le trou de l’œil crevé, blessant
Les blessures, ravis, applaudis du passant;
Car les passants riaient; et l’ombre sépulcrale
Couvrait ce noir martyr qui n’a pas même un râle,
Et le sang, sang affreux, de toutes parts coulait
Sur ce pauvre être ayant pour crime d’être laid;
Il fuyait; il avait une patte arrachée;
Un enfant le frappait d’une pelle ébréchée;
Et chaque coup faisait écumer ce proscrit
Qui, même quand le jour sur sa tête sourit,
Même sous le grand ciel, rampe au fond d’une cave;
Et les enfants disaient: « Est-il méchant! il bave!”
Son front saignait, son œil pendait; dans le genêt
Et la ronce, effroyable à voir, il cheminait;
On eût dit qu’il sortait de quelque affreuse serre;
Oh! la sombre action! empirer la misère!
Ajouter de l’horreur à la difformité!
Disloqué, de cailloux en cailloux cahoté,
Il respirait toujours; sans abri, sans asile,
Il rampait; on eût dit que la mort difficile
Le trouvait si hideux qu’elle le refusait;
Les enfants le voulaient saisir dans un lacet,
Mais il leur échappa, glissant le long des haies;
L’ornière était béante, il y traîna ses plaies
Et s’y plongea, sanglant, brisé, le crâne ouvert,
Sentant quelque fraîcheur dans ce cloaque vert,
Lavant la cruauté de l’homme en cette boue;
Et les enfants, avec le printemps sur la joue,
Blonds, charmants, ne s’étaient jamais tant divertis;
Tous parlaient à la fois, et les grands aux petits
Criaient: « Viens voir! dis donc, Adolphe, dis donc, Pierre,
Allons pour l’achever prendre une grosse pierre!”
Tous ensemble, sur l’être au hasard exécré,
Ils fixaient leurs regards, et le désespéré
Regardait s’incliner sur lui ces fronts horribles.
— Hélas! ayons des buts, mais n’ayons pas de cibles;

Quand nous visons un point de l’horizon humain,
Ayons la vie, et non la mort, dans notre main. —
Tous les yeux poursuivaient le crapaud dans la vase;
C’était de la fureur et c’était de l’extase;
Un des enfants revint, apportant un pavé,
Pesant, mais pour le mal aisément soulevé,
Et dit: « Nous allons voir comment cela va faire.”
Or, en ce même instant, juste à ce point de terre,
Le hasard amenait un chariot très-lourd
Traîné par un vieux âne écloppé, maigre et sourd;
Cet âne harassé, boiteux et lamentable,
Après un jour de marche approchait de l’étable;
Il roulait la charrette et portait un panier;
Chaque pas qu’il faisait semblait l’avant-dernier;
Cette bête marchait, battue, exténuée;
Les coups l’enveloppaient ainsi qu’une nuée;
Il avait dans ses yeux voilés d’une vapeur
Cette stupidité qui peut-être est stupeur,
Et l’ornière était creuse, et si pleine de boue
Et d’un versant si dur, que chaque tour de roue
Était comme un lugubre et rauque arrachement;
Et l’âne allait geignant et l’ânier blasphémant;
La route descendait et poussait la bourrique;
L’âne songeait, passif, sous le fouet, sous la trique,
Dans une profondeur où l’homme ne va pas.

Les enfants, entendant cette roue et ce pas,
Se tournèrent bruyants et virent la charrette:
«Ne mets pas le pavé sur le crapaud. Arrête!
Crièrent-ils. Vois-tu, la voiture descend
Et va passer dessus, c’est bien plus amusant.”

Tous regardaient.
Soudain, avançant dans l’ornière
Où le monstre attendait sa torture dernière,
L’âne vit le crapaud, et, triste, — hélas! penché
Sur un plus triste, — lourd, rompu, morne, écorché,

Il sembla le flairer avec sa tête basse;
Ce forçat, ce damné, ce patient, fit grâce;
Il rassembla sa force éteinte, et, roidissant
Sa chaîne et son licou sur ses muscles en sang,
Résistant à l’ânier qui lui criait: Avance!
Maîtrisant du fardeau l’affreuse connivence,
Avec sa lassitude acceptant le combat,
Tirant le chariot et soulevant le bât,
Hagard, il détourna la roue inexorable,
Laissant derrière lui vivre ce misérable;
Puis, sous un coup de fouet, il reprit son chemin.
Alors, lâchant la pierre échappée à sa main,
Un des enfants-celui qui conte cette histoire —
Sous la voûte infinie à la fois bleue et noire,
Entendit une voix qui lui disait: Sois bon!

Bonté de l’idiot! diamant du charbon!
Sainte énigme! lumière auguste des ténèbres!
Les célestes n’ont rien de plus que les funèbres
Si les funèbres, groupe aveugle et châtié,
Songent, et, n’ayant pas la joie, ont la pitié.
Ô spectacle sacré! l’ombre secourant l’ombre,
L’âme obscure venant en aide à l’âme sombre,
Le stupide, attendri, sur l’affreux se penchant;
Le damné bon faisant rêver l’élu méchant!
L’animal avançant lorsque l’homme recule!
Dans la sérénité du pâle crépuscule,
La brute par moments pense et sent qu’elle est sœur
De la mystérieuse et profonde douceur;
Il suffit qu’un éclair de grâce brille en elle
Pour qu’elle soit égale à l’étoile éternelle;
Le baudet qui, rentrant le soir, surchargé, las,
Mourant, sentant saigner ses pauvres sabots plats,
Fait quelques pas de plus, s’écarte et se dérange
Pour ne pas écraser un crapaud dans la fange,
Cet âne abject, souillé, meurtri sous le bâton,
Est plus saint que Socrate et plus grand que Platon.

Tu cherches, philosophe? Ô penseur, tu médites?
Veux-tu trouver le vrai sous nos brumes maudites?
Crois, pleure, abîme-toi dans l'insondable amour!
Quiconque est bon voit clair dans l'obscur carrefour;
Quiconque est bon habite un coin du ciel. Ô sage,
La bonté qui du monde éclaire le visage,
La bonté, ce regard du matin ingénu,
La bonté, pur rayon qui chauffe l'Inconnu,
Instinct qui dans la nuit et dans la souffrance aime,
Est le trait d'union ineffable et suprême
Qui joint, dans l'ombre, hélas! si lugubre souvent,
Le grand ignorant, l'âne, à Dieu le grand savant.

Les Pauvres gens

I

Il est nuit. La cabane est pauvre, mais bien close.
Le logis est plein d'ombre, et l'on sent quelque chose
Qui rayonne à travers ce crépuscule obscur.
Des filets de pêcheur sont accrochés au mur.
Au fond, dans l'encoignure où quelque humble vaisselle
Aux planches d'un bahut vaguement étincelle,
On distingue un grand lit aux longs rideaux tombants.
Tout près, un matelas s'étend sur de vieux bancs,
Et cinq petits enfants, nid d'âmes, y sommeillent.
La haute cheminée où quelques flammes veillent
Rougit le plafond sombre, et, le front sur le lit,
Une femme à genoux prie, et songe, et pâlit.
C'est la mère. Elle est seule. Et dehors, blanc d'écume,
Au ciel, aux vents, aux rocs, à la nuit, à la brume,
Le sinistre Océan jette son noir sanglot.

II

L'homme est en mer. Depuis l'enfance matelot,
Il livre au hasard sombre une rude bataille.

Pluie ou bourrasque, il faut qu’il sorte, il faut qu’il aille,
Car les petits enfants ont faim. Il part le soir
Quand l’eau profonde monte aux marches du musoir.
Il gouverne à lui seul sa barque à quatre voiles.
La femme est au logis, cousant les vieilles toiles,
Remmaillant les filets, préparant l’hameçon,
Surveillant l’âtre où bout la soupe de poisson,
Puis priant Dieu sitôt que les cinq enfants dorment.
Lui, seul, battu des flots qui toujours se reforment,
Il s’en va dans l’abîme et s’en va dans la nuit.
Dur labeur! tout est noir, tout est froid; rien ne luit.
Dans les brisants, parmi les lames en démence,
L’endroit bon à la pêche, et, sur la mer immense,
Le lieu mobile, obscur, capricieux, changeant,
Où se plaît le poisson aux nageoires d’argent,
Ce n’est qu’un point; c’est grand deux fois comme la chambre.
Or, la nuit, dans l’ondée et la brume, en décembre,
Pour rencontrer ce point sur le désert mouvant,
Comme il faut calculer la marée et le vent!
Comme il faut combiner sûrement les manœuvres!
Les flots le long du bord glissent, vertes couleuvres;
Le gouffre roule et tord ses plis démesurés
Et fait râler d’horreur les agrès effarés.
Lui, songe à sa Jeannie au sein des mers glacées,
Et Jeannie en pleurant l’appelle; et leurs pensées
Se croisent dans la nuit, divins oiseaux du cœur.

III

Elle prie, et la mauve au cri rauque et moqueur
L’importune, et, parmi les écueils en décombres,
L’Océan l’épouvante, et toutes sortes d’ombres
Passent dans son esprit: la mer, les matelots
Emportés à travers la colère des flots.
Et dans sa gaîne, ainsi que le sang dans l’artère,
La froide horloge bat, jetant dans le mystère,

Goutte à goutte, le temps, saisons, printemps, hivers;
Et chaque battement, dans l’énorme univers,
Ouvre aux âmes, essaims d’autours et de colombes,
D’un côté les berceaux et de l’autre les tombes.

Elle songe, elle rêve, — et tant de pauvreté!
Ses petits vont pieds nus l’hiver comme l’été.
Pas de pain de froment. On mange du pain d’orge.
— Ô Dieu! le vent rugit comme un soufflet de forge,
La côte fait le bruit d’une enclume, on croit voir
Les constellations fuir dans l’ouragan noir
Comme les tourbillons d’étincelles de l’âtre.
C’est l’heure où, gai danseur, minuit rit et folâtre
Sous le loup de satin qu’illuminent ses yeux,
Et c’est l’heure où minuit, brigand mystérieux,
Voilé d’ombre et de pluie et le front dans la bise,
Prend un pauvre marin frissonnant et le brise
Aux rochers monstrueux apparus brusquement. —
Horreur! l’homme, dont l’onde éteint le hurlement,
Sent fondre et s’enfoncer le bâtiment qui plonge;
Il sent s’ouvrir sous lui l’ombre et l’abîme, et songe
Au vieil anneau de fer du quai plein de soleil!

Ces mornes visions troublent son cœur, pareil
À la nuit. Elle tremble et pleure.
IV

Ô pauvres femmes
De pêcheurs! c’est affreux de se dire: « Mes âmes,
Père, amant, frères, fils, tout ce que j’ai de cher,
C’est là, dans ce chaos! — mon cœur, mon sang, ma chair!”
Ciel! être en proie aux flots, c’est être en proie aux bêtes.
Oh! songer que l’eau joue avec toutes ces têtes,
Depuis le mousse enfant jusqu’au mari patron,
Et que le vent hagard, soufflant dans son clairon,
Dénoue au-dessus d’eux sa longue et folle tresse,
Et que peut-être ils sont à cette heure en détresse,

Et qu’on ne sait jamais au juste ce qu’ils font,
Et que, pour tenir tête à cette mer sans fond,
À tous ces gouffres d’ombre où ne luit nulle étoile,
Ils n’ont qu’un bout de planche avec un bout de toile!
Souci lugubre! on court à travers les galets,
Le flot monte, on lui parle, on crie: « Oh! rends-nous-les!”
Mais, hélas! que veut-on que dise à la pensée
Toujours sombre, la mer toujours bouleversée!

Jeannie est bien plus triste encor. Son homme est seul!
Seul dans cette âpre nuit! seul sous ce noir linceul!
Pas d’aide. Ses enfants sont trop petits. — Ô mère!
Tu dis: « S’ils étaient grands! — leur père est seul!” Chimère!
Plus tard, quand ils seront près du père, et partis,
Tu diras en pleurant: « Oh! s’ils étaient petits!”

V

Elle prend sa lanterne et sa cape. — C’est l’heure
D’aller voir s’il revient, si la mer est meilleure,
S’il fait jour, si la flamme est au mât du signal.
Allons! — Et la voilà qui part. L’air matinal
Ne souffle pas encor. Rien. Pas de ligne blanche
Dans l’espace où le flot des ténèbres s’épanche.
Il pleut. Rien n’est plus noir que la pluie au matin;
On dirait que le jour tremble et doute, incertain,
Et qu’ainsi que l’enfant, l’aube pleure de naître.
Elle va. L’on ne voit luire aucune fenêtre.

Tout à coup, à ses yeux qui cherchent le chemin,
Avec je ne sais quoi de lugubre et d’humain
Une sombre masure apparaît décrépite;
Ni lumière, ni feu; la porte au vent palpite;
Sur les murs vermoulus branle un toit hasardeux;
La bise sur ce toit tord des chaumes hideux,
Jaunes, sales, pareils aux grosses eaux d’un fleuve.

«Tiens, je ne pensais plus à cette pauvre veuve,
Dit-elle; mon mari, l’autre jour, la trouva
Malade et seule; il faut voir comment elle va.”

Elle frappe à la porte, elle écoute; personne
Ne répond. Et Jeannie au vent de mer frissonne.
«Malade! et ses enfants! comme c’est mal nourri!
Elle n’en a que deux, mais elle est sans mari.”
Puis, elle frappe encore. « Hé! voisine!” elle appelle.
Et la maison se tait toujours. « Ah! Dieu! dit-elle,
Comme elle dort, qu’il faut l’appeler si longtemps!”
La porte, cette fois, comme si, par instants,
Les objets étaient pris d’une pitié suprême,
Morne, tourna dans l’ombre et s’ouvrit d’elle-même.

VI

Elle entra. Sa lanterne éclaira le dedans
Du noir logis muet au bord des flots grondants.
L’eau tombait du plafond comme des trous d’un crible.

Au fond était couchée une forme terrible;
Une femme immobile et renversée, ayant
Les pieds nus, le regard obscur, l’air effrayant;
Un cadavre; — autrefois, mère joyeuse et forte; —
Le spectre échevelé de la misère morte;
Ce qui reste du pauvre après un long combat.
Elle laissait, parmi la paille du grabat,
Son bras livide et froid et sa main déjà verte
Pendre, et l’horreur sortait de cette bouche ouverte
D’où l’âme en s’enfuyant, sinistre, avait jeté
Ce grand cri de la mort qu’entend l’éternité!

Près du lit où gisait la mère de famille,
Deux tout petits enfants, le garçon et la fille,
Dans le même berceau souriaient endormis.

La mère, se sentant mourir, leur avait mis
Sa mante sur les pieds et sur le corps sa robe,
Afin que, dans cette ombre où la mort nous dérobe,
Ils ne sentissent plus la tiédeur qui décroît,
Et pour qu’ils eussent chaud pendant qu’elle aurait froid.

VII

Comme ils dorment tous deux dans le berceau qui tremble!
Leur haleine est paisible et leur front calme. Il semble
Que rien n’éveillerait ces orphelins dormant,
Pas même le clairon du dernier jugement;
Car, étant innocents, ils n’ont pas peur du juge.

Et la pluie au dehors gronde comme un déluge.
Du vieux toit crevassé, d’où la rafale sort,
Une goutte parfois tombe sur ce front mort,
Glisse sur cette joue et devient une larme.
La vague sonne ainsi qu’une cloche d’alarme.
La morte écoute l’ombre avec stupidité.
Car le corps, quand l’esprit radieux l’a quitté,
A l’air de chercher l’âme et de rappeler l’ange;
Il semble qu’on entend ce dialogue étrange
Entre la bouche pâle et l’œil triste et hagard:
«Qu’as-tu fait de ton souffle? — Et toi, de ton regard?”

Hélas! aimez, vivez, cueillez les primevères,
Dansez, riez, brûlez vos cœurs, videz vos verres.
Comme au sombre Océan arrive tout ruisseau,
Le sort donne pour but au festin, au berceau,
Aux mères adorant l’enfance épanouie,
Aux baisers de la chair dont l’âme est éblouie,
Aux chansons, au sourire, à l’amour frais et beau,
Le refroidissement lugubre du tombeau!

VIII

Qu’est-ce donc que Jeannie a fait chez cette morte?
Sous sa cape aux longs plis qu’est-ce donc qu’elle emporte?
Qu’est-ce donc que Jeannie emporte en s’en allant?
Pourquoi son cœur bat-il? Pourquoi son pas tremblant
Se hâte-t-il ainsi? D’où vient qu’en la ruelle
Elle court, sans oser regarder derrière elle?
Qu’est-ce donc qu’elle cache avec un air troublé
Dans l’ombre, sur son lit? Qu’a-t-elle donc volé?

IX

Quand elle fut rentrée au logis, la falaise
Blanchissait; près du lit elle prit une chaise
Et s’assit toute pâle; on eût dit qu’elle avait
Un remords, et son front tomba sur le chevet,
Et, par instants, à mots entrecoupés, sa bouche
Parlait, pendant qu’au loin grondait la mer farouche.

« — Mon pauvre homme! Ah! mon Dieu! que va-t-il dire? Il a
Déjà tant de souci! Qu’est-ce que j’ai fait là?
Cinq enfants sur les bras! ce père qui travaille!
Il n’avait pas assez de peine; il faut que j’aille
Lui donner celle-là de plus. — C’est lui? — Non. Rien.
— J’ai mal fait. — S’il me bat, je dirai: Tu fais bien.
— Est-ce lui? — Non. — Tant mieux. — La porte bouge comme
Si l’on entrait. — Mais non. — Voilà-t-il pas, pauvre homme,
Que j’ai peur de le voir rentrer, moi, maintenant!”
Puis elle demeura pensive et frissonnant,
S’enfonçant par degrés dans son angoisse intime,
Perdue en son souci comme dans un abîme,
N’entendant même plus les bruits extérieurs,
Les cormorans qui vont comme de noirs crieurs,
Et l’onde et la marée et le vent en colère.

La porte tout à coup s’ouvrit, bruyante et claire,
Et fit dans la cabane entrer un rayon blanc,

Et le pêcheur, traînant son filet ruisselant,
Joyeux, parut au seuil, et dit: « C’est la marine.”

X

«C’est toi!” cria Jeannie, et, contre sa poitrine,
Elle prit son mari comme on prend un amant,
Et lui baisa sa veste avec emportement,
Tandis que le marin disait: « Me voici, femme!”
Et montrait sur son front qu’éclairait l’âtre en flamme
Son cœur bon et content que Jeannie éclairait.
«Je suis volé, dit-il; la mer, c’est la forêt.
— Quel temps a-t-il fait? — Dur. — Et la pêche? — Mauvaise.
Mais, vois-tu, je t’embrasse, et me voilà bien aise.
Je n’ai rien pris du tout. J’ai troué mon filet.
Le diable était caché dans le vent qui soufflait.
Quelle nuit! Un moment, dans tout ce tintamarre,
J’ai cru que le bateau se couchait, et l’amarre
A cassé. Qu’as-tu fait, toi, pendant ce temps-là?”
Jeannie eut un frisson dans l’ombre et se troubla.
« — Moi? dit-elle. Ah! mon Dieu! rien, comme à l’ordinaire.
J’ai cousu. J’écoutais la mer comme un tonnerre,
J’avais peur. — Oui, l’hiver est dur, mais c’est égal.”
Alors, tremblante ainsi que ceux qui font le mal,
Elle dit: « À propos, notre voisine est morte.
C’est hier qu’elle a dû mourir, enfin, n’importe,
Dans la soirée, après que vous fûtes partis.
Elle laisse ses deux enfants, qui sont petits.
L’un s’appelle Guillaume et l’autre Madeleine;
L’un qui ne marche pas, l’autre qui parle à peine.
La pauvre bonne femme était dans le besoin.”

L’homme prit un air grave, et, jetant dans un coin
Son bonnet de forçat mouillé par la tempête:
— Diable! diable! dit-il en se grattant la tête,
Nous avions cinq enfants, cela va faire sept.

Déjà, dans la saison mauvaise, on se passait
De souper quelquefois. Comment allons-nous faire?
Bah! tant pis! ce n’est pas ma faute. C’est l’affaire
Du bon Dieu. Ce sont là des accidents profonds.
Pourquoi donc a-t-il pris leur mère à ces chiffons?
C’est gros comme le poing. Ces choses-là sont rudes.
Il faut pour les comprendre avoir fait ses études.
Si petits! on ne peut leur dire: Travaillez.
Femme, va les chercher. S’ils se sont réveillés,
Ils doivent avoir peur tout seuls avec la morte.
C’est la mère, vois-tu, qui frappe à notre porte;
Ouvrons aux deux enfants. Nous les mêlerons tous.
Cela nous grimpera le soir sur les genoux.
Ils vivront, ils seront frère et sœur des cinq autres.
Quand il verra qu’il faut nourrir avec les nôtres
Cette petite fille et ce petit garçon,
Le bon Dieu nous fera prendre plus de poisson.
Moi, je boirai de l’eau, je ferai double tâche.
C’est dit. Va les chercher. Mais qu’as-tu? Ça te fâche?
D’ordinaire, tu cours plus vite que cela.

— Tiens, dit-elle en ouvrant les rideaux, les voilà!

Paroles dans l’épreuve

Les hommes d’aujourd’hui qui sont nés quand naissait
Ce siècle, et quand son aile effrayante poussait,
Ou qui, quatre-vingt-neuf dorant leur blonde enfance,
Ont vu la rude attaque et la fière défense,
Et pour musique ont eu les noirs canons béants,
Et pour jeux de grimper aux genoux des géants;
Ces enfants qui jadis, traînant des cimeterres,
Ont vu partir, chantant, les pâles volontaires,
Et connu des vivants à qui Danton parlait,
Ces hommes ont sucé l’audace avec le lait.
La Révolution, leur tendant sa mamelle,
Leur fit boire une vie où la tombe se mêle,

Et, stoïque, leur mit dans les veines un sang
Qui, lorsqu'il faut sortir et couler, y consent.
Ils tiennent de l'austère et tragique nourrice
L'amour de la blessure et de la cicatrice,
Et, pour trembler, pour fuir, pour suivre qui fuirait,
L'impossibilité de plier le jarret.
Ils pensent que faiblir est chose abominable,
Que l'homme est au devoir, et qu'il est convenable
Que ceux à qui Dieu fit l'honneur de les choisir
Pour vivre dans un temps de risque et de désir,
Marchent, et, courant droit au but qui les réclame,
Désapprennent les pas en arrière à leur âme.
Ils veulent le progrès durement acheté,
Ne tiennent en réserve aucune lâcheté,
Jettent aux profondeurs leurs jours, leur cœur, leur joie,
Ne se rétractent point parce qu'un gouffre aboie,
Vont toujours en avant et toujours devant eux;
Ils ne sont pas prudents de peur d'être honteux;
Et disent que le pont où l'on se précipite,
Hardi pour l'abordage, est lâche pour la fuite.
Soi-même se scruter d'un regard inclément,
Être abnégation, martyre, dévouement,
Bouclier pour le faible et pour le destin cible,
Aller, ne se garder aucun retour possible,
Ne jamais se servir pour s'évader d'en haut,
Pour fuir, de ce qui sert pour monter à l'assaut,
Telle est la loi; la loi du devoir, du Calvaire,
Qui sourit aux vaillants avec son front sévère.
Peuple, homme, esprit humain, avance à pas altiers!
Parmi tous les écueils et dans tous les sentiers,
Dans la société, dans l'art, dans la morale,
Partout où resplendit la lueur aurorale,
Sans jamais t'arrêter, sans hésiter jamais,
Des fanges aux clartés, des gouffres aux sommets,
Va! la création, cette usine, ce temple,
Cette marche en avant de tout, donne l'exemple!
L'heure est un marcheur calme et providentiel;

Les fleuves vont aux mers, les oiseaux vont au ciel;
L'arbre ne rentre pas dans la terre profonde
Parce que le vent souffle et que l'orage gronde;
Homme, va! reculer, c'est devant le ciel bleu
La grande trahison que tu peux faire à Dieu.
Nous donc, fils de ce siècle aux vastes entreprises,
Nous qu'emplit le frisson des formidables brises,
Et dont l'ouragan sombre agite les cheveux,
Poussés vers l'idéal par nos maux, par nos vœux,
Nous désirons qu'on ait présent à la mémoire
Que nos pères étaient des conquérants de gloire,
Des chercheurs d'horizons, des gagneurs d'avenir;
Des amants du péril que savait retenir
Aux âcres voluptés de ses baisers farouches
La grande mort, posant son rire sur leurs bouches;
Qu'ils étaient les soldats qui n'ont pas déserté,
Les hôtes rugissants de l'antre liberté,
Les titans, les lutteurs aux gigantesques tailles,
Les fauves promeneurs rôdant dans les batailles!
Nous sommes les petits de ces grands lions-là.
Leur trace sur leurs pas toujours nous appela;
Nous courons; la souffrance est par nous saluée;
Nous voyons devant nous là-bas, dans la nuée,
L'âpre avenir à pic, lointain, redouté, doux;
Nous nous sentons perdus pour nous, gagné pour tous;
Nous arrivons au bord du passage terrible;
Le précipice est là, sourd, obscur, morne, horrible;
L'épreuve à l'autre bord nous attend; nous allons,
Nous ne regardons pas derrière nos talons;
Pâles, nous atteignons l'escarpement sublime;
Et nous poussons du pied la planche dans l'abîme.

XIV. Vingtième siècle

PLEINE MER

*

L’abîme; on ne sait quoi de terrible qui gronde;
Le vent; l’obscurité vaste comme le monde;
Partout les flots; partout où l’œil peut s’enfoncer,
La rafale qu’on voit aller, venir, passer;
L’onde, linceul; le ciel, ouverture de tombe;
Les ténèbres sans l’arche et l’eau sans la colombe;
Les nuages ayant l’aspect d’une forêt.
Un esprit qui viendrait planer là, ne pourrait
Dire, entre l’eau sans fond et l’espace sans borne,
Lequel est le plus sombre, et si cette horreur morne,
Faite de cécité, de stupeur et de bruit,
Vient de l’immense mer ou de l’immense nuit.

L’œil distingue, au milieu du gouffre où l’air sanglote,
Quelque chose d’informe et de hideux qui flotte,
Un grand cachalot mort à carcasse de fer,
On ne sait quel cadavre à vau-l’eau dans la mer;
Œuf de titan dont l’homme aurait fait un navire.
Cela vogue, cela nage, cela chavire;
Cela fut un vaisseau; l’écume aux blancs amas
Cache et montre à grand bruit les tronçons de sept mâts;
Le colosse, échoué sur le ventre, fuit, plonge,
S’engloutit, reparaît, se meut comme le songe;
Chaos d’agrès rompus, de poutres, de haubans;
Le grand mât vaincu semble un spectre aux bras tombants;
L’onde passe à travers ce débris; l’eau s’engage
Et déferle en hurlant le long du bastingage,
Et tourmente des bouts de corde à des crampons
Dans le ruissellement formidable des ponts;
La houle éperdument furieuse saccage

Aux deux flancs du vaisseau les cintres d’une cage
Où jadis une roue effrayante a tourné;
Personne; le néant, froid, muet, étonné;
D’affreux canons rouillés tendent leurs cous funestes;
L’entre-pont a des trous où se dressent les restes
De cinq tubes pareils à des clairons géants,
Pleins jadis d’une foudre, et qui, tordus, béants,
Ployés, éteints, n’ont plus, sur l’eau qui les balance,
Qu’un noir vomissement de nuit et de silence;
Le flux et le reflux, comme avec un rabot,
Dénude à chaque coup l’étrave et l’étambot,
Et dans la lame on voit se débattre l’échine
D’une mystérieuse et difforme machine.
Cette masse sous l’eau rôde, fantôme obscur.
Des putréfactions fermentent, à coup sûr,
Dans ce vaisseau perdu sous les vagues sans nombre;
Dessus, des tourbillons d’oiseaux de mer; dans l’ombre,
Dessous, des millions de poissons carnassiers.
Tout à l’entour, les flots, ces liquides aciers,
Mêlent leurs tournoiements monstrueux et livides.
Des espaces déserts sous des espaces vides.
Ô triste mer! sépulcre où tout semble vivant!
Ces deux athlètes faits de furie et de vent,
Le tangage qui bave et le roulis qui fume,
Luttant sur ce radeau funèbre dans la brume,
Sans trêve, à chaque instant arrachent quelque éclat
De la quille ou du pont dans leur noir pugilat;
Par moments, au zénith un nuage se troue,
Un peu de jour lugubre en tombe, et, sur la proue,
Une lueur, qui tremble au souffle de l’autan,
Blême, éclaire à demi ce mot: Léviathan.
Puis l’apparition se perd dans l’eau profonde;
Tout fuit.
Léviathan; c’est là tout le vieux monde,
Âpre et démesuré dans sa fauve laideur;
Léviathan, c’est là tout le passé: grandeur,
Horreur.

*

Le dernier siècle a vu sur la Tamise
Croître un monstre à qui l’eau sans bornes fut promise,
Et qui longtemps, Babel des mers, eut Londre entier
Levant les yeux dans l’ombre au pied de son chantier.
Effroyable, à sept mâts mêlant cinq cheminées
Qui hennissaient au choc des vagues effrénées,
Emportant, dans le bruit des aquilons sifflants,
Dix mille hommes, fourmis éparses dans ses flancs,
Ce Titan se rua, joyeux, dans la tempête;
Du dôme de Saint-Paul son mât passait le faîte;
Le sombre esprit humain, debout sur son tillac,
Stupéfiait la mer qui n’était plus qu’un lac;
Le vieillard Océan, qu’effarouche la sonde,
Inquiet, à travers le verre de son onde,
Regardait le vaisseau de l’homme grossissant;
Ce vaisseau fut sur l’onde un terrible passant;
Les vagues frémissaient de l’avoir sur leurs croupes;
Ses sabords mugissaient; en guise de chaloupes,
Deux navires pendaient à ses portemanteaux;
Son armure était faite avec tous les métaux;
Un prodigieux câble ourlait sa grande voile;
Quand il marchait, fumant, grondant, couvert de toile,
Il jetait un tel râle à l’air épouvanté
Que toute l’eau tremblait, et que l’immensité
Comptait parmi ses bruits ce grand frisson sonore;
La nuit, il passait rouge ainsi qu’un météore;
Sa voilure, où l’oreille entendait le débat
Des souffles, subissant ce gréement comme un bât,
Ses hunes, ses grelins, ses palans, ses amures,
Étaient une prison de vents et de murmures;
Son ancre avait le poids d’une tour; ses parois
Voulaient les flots, trouvant tous les ports trop étroits;
Son ombre humiliait au loin toutes les proues;
Un télégraphe était son porte-voix; ses roues

Forgeaient la sombre mer comme deux grands marteaux;
Les flots se le passaient comme des piédestaux
Où, calme, ondulerait un triomphal colosse;
L’abîme s’abrégeait sous sa lourdeur véloce;
Pas de lointain pays qui pour lui ne fût près;
Madère apercevait ses mâts; trois jours après,
L’Hékla l’entrevoyait dans la lueur polaire.
La bataille montait sur lui dans sa colère.
La guerre était sacrée et sainte en ces temps-là;
Rien n’égalait Nemrod si ce n’est Attila;
Et les hommes, depuis les premiers jours du monde,
Sentant peser sur eux la misère inféconde,
Les pestes, les fléaux lugubres et railleurs,
Cherchant quelque moyen d’amoindrir leurs douleurs,
Pour établir entre eux de justes équilibres,
Pour être plus heureux, meilleurs, plus grands, plus libres,
Plus dignes du ciel pur qui les daigne éclairer,
Avaient imaginé de s’entre-dévorer.
Ce sinistre vaisseau les aidait dans leur œuvre.
Lourd comme le dragon, prompt comme la couleuvre,
Il couvrait l’Océan de ses ailes de feu;
La terre s’effrayait quand sur l’horizon bleu
Rampait l’allongement hideux de sa fumée,
Car c’était une ville et c’était une armée;
Ses pavois fourmillaient de mortiers et d’affûts,
Et d’un hérissement de bataillons confus;
Ses grappins menaçaient; et, pour les abordages,
On voyait sur ses ponts des rouleaux de cordages
Monstrueux qui semblaient des boas endormis;
Invincible, en ces temps de frères ennemis,
Seul, de toute une flotte il affrontait l’émeute,
Ainsi qu’un éléphant au milieu d’une meute;
La bordée à ses pieds fumait comme un encens,
Ses flancs engloutissaient les boulets impuissants,
Il allait broyant tout dans l’obscure mêlée,
Et, quand, épouvantable, il lâchait sa volée,
On voyait flamboyer son colossal beaupré,

Par deux mille canons brusquement empourpré.
Il méprisait l’autan, le flux, l’éclair, la brume.
À son avant tournait, dans un chaos d’écume,
Une espèce de vrille à trouer l’infini;
Le Malström s’apaisait sous sa quille aplani.
Sa vie intérieure était un incendie;
Flamme au gré du pilote apaisée ou grandie;
Dans l’antre d’où sortait un vaste mouvement,
Au fond d’une fournaise on voyait vaguement
Des êtres ténébreux marcher dans des nuées
D’étincelles, parmi les braises remuées;
Et pour âme il avait dans sa cale un enfer.
Il voguait, roi du gouffre, et ses vergues de fer
Ressemblaient, sous le ciel redoutable et sublime,
À des sceptres posés en travers de l’abîme;
Ainsi qu’on voit l’Etna l’on voyait ce steamer;
Il était la montagne errante de la mer;
Mais les heures, les jours, les mois, les ans, ces ondes,
Ont passé; l’Océan, vaste, entre les deux mondes,
A rugi, de brouillard et d’orage obscurci;
La mer a ses écueils cachés, le temps aussi;
Et maintenant, parmi les profondeurs farouches,
Sous les vautours, qui sont de l’abîme les mouches,
Sous le nuage, au gré des souffles, dans l’oubli
De l’infini, dont l’ombre affreuse est le repli,
Sans que jamais le vent autour d’elle s’endorme,
Au milieu des flots noirs roule l’épave énorme!

*

L’ancien monde, l’ensemble étrange et surprenant
De faits sociaux, morts et pourris maintenant,
D’où sortit ce navire aujourd’hui sous l’écume,
L’ancien monde, aussi, lui, plongé dans l’amertume,
Avait tous les fléaux pour vents et pour typhons.
Construction d’airain aux étages profonds,
Sur qui le mal, flot vil, crachait sa bave infâme,

Plein de fumée, et mû par une hydre de flamme,
La Haine, il ressemblait à ce sombre vaisseau.

Le mal l’avait marqué de son funèbre sceau.

Ce monde, enveloppé d’une brume éternelle,
Était fatal; l’Espoir avait plié son aile;
Pas d’unité; divorce et joug; diversité
De langue, de raison, de code, de cité;
Nul lien, nul faisceau; le progrès solitaire,
Comme un serpent coupé, se tordait sur la terre,
Sans pouvoir réunir les tronçons de l’effort;
L’esclavage, parquant les peuples pour la mort,
Les enfermait au fond d’un cirque de frontières
Où les gardaient la Guerre et la Nuit, bestiaires;
L’Adam slave luttait contre l’Adam germain;
Un genre humain en France, un autre genre humain
En Amérique, un autre à Londre, un autre à Rome;
L’homme au delà d’un pont ne connaissait plus l’homme;
Les vivants, d’ignorance et de vice chargés,
Se traînaient; en travers de tout, les préjugés;
Les superstitions étaient d’âpres enceintes
Terribles d’autant plus qu’elles étaient plus saintes;
Quel créneau soupçonneux et noir qu’un Alcoran!
Un texte avait le glaive au poing comme un tyran;
La loi d’un peuple était chez l’autre peuple un crime;
Lire était un fossé, croire était un abîme;
Les rois étaient des tours; les dieux étaient des murs;
Nul moyen de franchir tant d’obstacles obscurs;
Sitôt qu’on voulait croître, on rencontrait la barre
D’une mode sauvage ou d’un dogme barbare;
Et, quant à l’avenir, défense d’aller là.

*

Le vent de l’infini sur ce monde souffla.
Il a sombré. Du fond des cieux inaccessibles,

Les vivants de l'éther, les êtres invisibles
Confusément épars sous l'obscur firmament,
À cette heure, pensifs, regardent fixement
Sa disparition dans la nuit redoutable.
Qu'est-ce que le simoun a fait du grain de sable?
Cela fut. C'est passé! cela n'est plus ici.

*

Ce monde est mort. Mais quoi! l'homme est-il mort aussi?
Cette forme de lui disparaissant, l'a-t-elle
Lui-même remporté dans l'énigme éternelle?
L'Océan est désert. Pas une voile au loin.
Ce n'est plus que du flot que le flot est témoin.
Pas un esquif vivant sur l'onde où la mouette
Voit du Léviathan rôder la silhouette.
Est-ce que l'homme, ainsi qu'un feuillage jauni,
S'en est allé dans l'ombre? est-ce que c'est fini?
Seul le flux et reflux va, vient, passe et repasse.
Et l'œil, pour retrouver l'homme absent de l'espace,
Regarde en vain là-bas. Rien.
Regardez là-haut.

II

PLEINE CIEL

*

Loin dans les profondeurs, hors des nuits, hors du flot,
Dans un écartement de nuages, qui laisse
Voir au-dessus des mers la céleste allégresse,
Un point vague et confus apparaît; dans le vent,
Dans l'espace, ce point se meut; il est vivant;
Il va, descend, remonte; il fait ce qu'il veut faire;
Il approche, il prend forme, il vient; c'est une sphère;

C’est un inexprimable et surprenant vaisseau,
Globe comme le monde et comme l’aigle oiseau;
C’est un navire en marche. Où? Dans l’éther sublime!

Rêve! on croit voir planer un morceau d’une cime;
Le haut d’une montagne a, sous l’orbe étoilé,
Pris des ailes et s’est tout à coup envolé?
Quelque heure immense étant dans les destins sonnée,
La nue errante s’est en vaisseau façonnée?
La Fable apparaît-elle à nos yeux décevants?
L’antique Éole a-t-il jeté son outre aux vents?
De sorte qu’en ce gouffre où les orages naissent,
Les vents, subitement domptés, la reconnaissent!
Est-ce l’aimant qui s’est fait aider par l’éclair
Pour bâtir un esquif céleste avec de l’air?
Du haut des clairs azurs vient-il une visite?
Est-ce un transfiguré qui part et ressuscite,
Qui monte, délivré de la terre, emporté
Sur un char volant fait d’extase et de clarté,
Et se rapproche un peu par instant, pour qu’on voie,
Du fond du monde noir, la fuite de sa joie?

Ce n’est pas un morceau d’une cime; ce n’est
Ni l’outre où tout le vent de la Fable tenait;
Ni le jeu de l’éclair; ce n’est pas un fantôme
Venu des profondeurs aurorales du dôme;
Ni le rayonnement d’un ange qui s’en va,
Hors de quelque tombeau béant, vers Jéhovah.
Ni rien de ce qu’en songe ou dans la fièvre on nomme.
Qu’est-ce que ce navire impossible? C’est l’homme.

C’est la grande révolte obéissante à Dieu!
La sainte fausse clef du fatal gouffre bleu!
C’est Isis qui déchire éperdument son voile!
C’est du métal, du bois, du chanvre et de la toile,
C’est de la pesanteur délivrée, et volant;
C’est la force alliée à l’homme étincelant,

Fière, arrachant l’argile à sa chaîne éternelle,
C’est la matière, heureuse, altière, ayant en elle
De l’ouragan humain, et planant à travers
L’immense étonnement des cieux enfin ouverts.

Audace humaine! effort du captif! sainte rage!
Effraction enfin plus forte que la cage!
Que faut-il à cet être, atome au large front,
Pour vaincre ce qui n’a ni fin, ni bord, ni fond,
Pour dompter le vent, trombe, et l’écume, avalanche?
Dans le ciel une toile et sur mer une planche.

*

Jadis des quatre vents la fureur triomphait;
De ces quatre chevaux échappés l’homme a fait
L’attelage de son quadrige;
Génie, il les tient tous dans sa main, fier cocher
Du char aérien que l’éther voit marcher;
Miracle, il gouverne un prodige.

Char merveilleux! son nom est Délivrance. Il court.
Près de lui le ramier est lent, le flocon lourd;
Le daim, l’épervier, la panthère,
Sont encor là, qu’au loin son ombre a déjà fui;
Et la locomotive est reptile, et, sous lui,
L’hydre de flamme est ver de terre.

Une musique, un chant, sort de son tourbillon.
Ses cordages vibrants et remplis d’aquilon
Semblent, dans le vide où tout sombre,
Une lyre à travers laquelle par moment
Passe quelque âme en fuite au fond du firmament
Et mêlée aux souffles de l’ombre.

Car l’air, c’est l’hymne épars; l’air, parmi les récifs

Des nuages roulant en groupes convulsifs,
Jette mille voix étouffées;
Les fluides, l’azur, l’effluve, l’élément,
Sont toute une harmonie où flottent vaguement
On ne sait quels sombres Orphées.

Superbe, il plane, avec un hymne en ses agrès;
Et l’on croit voir passer la strophe du progrès.
Il est la nef, il est le phare!
L’homme enfin prend son sceptre et jette son bâton.
Et l’on voit s’envoler le calcul de Newton
Monté sur l’ode de Pindare.

Le char haletant plonge et s’enfonce dans l’air,
Dans l’éblouissement impénétrable et clair,
Dans l’éther sans tache et sans ride;
Il se perd sous le bleu des cieux démesurés;
Les esprits de l’azur contemplent effarés
Cet engloutissement splendide.

Il passe, il n’est plus là; qu’est-il donc devenu?
Il est dans l’invisible, il est dans l’inconnu;
Il baigne l’homme dans le songe,
Dans le fait, dans le vrai profond, dans la clarté,
Dans l’océan d’en haut plein d’une vérité
Dont le prêtre a fait un mensonge.

Le jour se lève, il va; le jour s’évanouit,
Il va; fait pour le jour, il accepte la nuit.
Voici l’heure des feux sans nombre;
L’heure où, vu du nadir, ce globe semble, ayant
Son large cône obscur sous lui se déployant,
Une énorme comète d’ombre.

La brume redoutable emplit au loin les airs.
Ainsi qu’au crépuscule on voit, le long des mers,
Le pêcheur, vague comme un rêve,

Traînant, dernier effort d’un long jour de sueurs,
Sa nasse où les poissons font de pâles lueurs,
Aller et venir sur la grève,

La Nuit tire du fond des gouffres inconnus
Son filet où luit Mars, où rayonne Vénus,
Et, pendant que les heures sonnent,
Ce filet grandit, monte, emplit le ciel des soirs,
Et dans ses mailles d’ombre et dans ses réseaux noirs
Les constellations frissonnent.

L’aéroscaphe suit son chemin; il n’a peur
Ni des piéges du soir, ni de l’âcre vapeur.
Ni du ciel morne où rien ne bouge,
Où les éclairs, luttant au fond de l’ombre entre eux,
Ouvrent subitement dans le nuage affreux
Des cavernes de cuivre rouge.

Il invente une route obscure dans les nuits;
Le silence hideux de ces lieux inouïs
N’arrête point ce globe en marche;
Il passe, portant l’homme et l’univers en lui;
Paix! gloire! et, comme l’eau jadis, l’air aujourd’hui
Au-dessus de ses flots voit l’arche.

Le saint navire court par le vent emporté
Avec la certitude et la rapidité
Du javelot cherchant la cible;
Rien n’en tombe, et pourtant il chemine en semant;
Sa rondeur, qu’on distingue en haut confusément,
Semble un ventre d’oiseau terrible.

Il vogue; les brouillards sous lui flottent dissous;
Ses pilotes penchés regardent, au-dessous
Des nuages où l’ancre traîne,
Si, dans l’ombre, où la terre avec l’air se confond,
Le sommet du Mont-Blanc ou quelque autre bas-fond

Ne vient pas heurter sa carène.

*

La vie est sur le pont du navire éclatant.
Le rayon l’envoya, la lumière l’attend.
L’homme y fourmille, l’homme invincible y flamboie;
Point d’armes; un fier bruit de puissance et de joie;
Le cri vertigineux de l’exploration!
Il court, ombre, clarté, chimère, vision!
Regardez-le pendant qu’il passe, il va si vite!

Comme autour d’un soleil un système gravite,
Une sphère de cuivre énorme fait marcher
Quatre globes où pend un immense plancher;
Elle respire et fuit dans les vents qui la bercent;
Un large et blanc hunier horizontal, que percent
Des trappes, se fermant, s’ouvrant au gré du frein,
Fait un grand diaphragme à ce poumon d’airain;
Il s’impose à la nue ainsi qu’à l’onde un liége;
La toile d’araignée humaine, un vaste piége
De cordes et de nœuds, un enchevêtrement
De soupapes que meut un câble où court l’aimant,
Une embûche de treuils, de cabestans, de moufles,
Prend au passage et fait travailler tous les souffles;
L’esquif plane, encombré d’hommes et de ballots,
Parmi les arc-en-ciel, les azurs, les halos,
Et sa course, écheveau qui sans fin se dévide,
A pour point d’appui l’air et pour moteur le vide;
Sous le plancher s’étage un chaos régulier
De ponts flottants que lie un tremblant escalier;
Ce navire est un Louvre errant avec son faste;
Un fil le porte; il fuit, léger, fier, et si vaste,
Si colossal, au vent du grand abîme clair,
Que le Léviathan, rampant dans l’âpre mer,
A l’air de sa chaloupe aux ténèbres tombée,

Et semble, sous le vol d’un aigle, un scarabée
Se tordant dans le flot qui l’emporte, tandis
Que l’immense oiseau plane au fond d’un paradis.

Si l’on pouvait rouvrir les yeux que le ver ronge,
Oh! ce vaisseau, construit par le chiffre et le songe,
Éblouirait Shakspeare et ravirait Euler!
Il voyage, Délos gigantesque de l’air,
Et rien ne le repousse et rien ne le refuse;
Et l’on entend parler sa grande voix confuse.

Par moments la tempête accourt, le ciel pâlit,
L’autan bouleversant les flots de l’air, emplit
L’espace d’une écume affreuse de nuages;
Mais qu’importe à l’esquif de la mer sans rivages!
Seulement, sur son aile il se dresse en marchant;
Il devient formidable à l’abîme méchant,
Et dompte en frémissant la trombe qui se creuse.
On le dirait conduit dans l’horreur ténébreuse
Par l’âme des Leibnitz, des Fultons, des Képlers;
Et l’on croit voir, parmi le chaos plein d’éclairs,
De détonations, d’ombre et de jets de soufre,
Le sombre emportement d’un monde dans un gouffre.

*

Qu’importe le moment! qu’importe la saison!
La brume peut cacher dans le blême horizon
Les Saturnes et les Mercures;
La bise, conduisant la pluie aux crins épars,
Dans les nuages lourds grondant de toutes parts,
Peut tordre des hydres obscures;

Qu’importe! il va. Tout souffle est bon; simoun, mistral!
La terre a disparu dans le puits sidéral.
Il entre au mystère nocturne;

Au-dessus de la grêle et de l’ouragan fou,
Laissant le globe en bas dans l’ombre, on ne sait où,
Sous le renversement de l’urne.

Intrépide, il bondit sur les ondes du vent;
Il se rue, aile ouverte et la proue en avant,
Il monte, il monte, il monte encore,
Au delà de la zone où tout s’évanouit,
Comme s’il s’en allait dans la profonde nuit
À la poursuite de l’aurore!

Calme, il monte où jamais nuage n’est monté;
Il plane à la hauteur de la sérénité,
Devant la vision des sphères;
Elles sont là, faisant le mystère éclatant,
Chacune feu d’un gouffre, et toutes constatant
Les énigmes par les lumières.

Andromède étincelle, Orion resplendit;
L’essaim prodigieux des Pléiades grandit;
Sirius ouvre son cratère;
Arcturus, oiseau d’or, scintille dans son nid;
Le Scorpion hideux fait cabrer au zénith
Le poitrail bleu du Sagittaire.

L’aéroscaphe voit, comme en face de lui,
Là-haut, Aldébaran par Céphée ébloui,
Persée escarboucle des cimes,
Le chariot polaire aux flamboyants essieux,
Et, plus loin, la lueur lactée, ô sombres cieux,
La fourmilière des abîmes!

Vers l’apparition terrible des soleils,
Il monte; dans l’horreur des espaces vermeils,
Il s’oriente, ouvrant ses voiles;
On croirait, dans l’éther où de loin on l’entend,
Que ce vaisseau puissant et superbe, en chantant,

Part pour une de ces étoiles!

Tant cette nef, rompant tous les terrestres nœuds,
Volante, et franchissant le ciel vertigineux,
Rêve des blêmes Zoroastres,
Comme effrénée au souffle insensé de la nuit,
Se jette, plonge, enfonce et tombe et roule et fuit
Dans le précipice des astres!

*

Où donc s’arrêtera l’homme séditieux?
L’espace voit, d’un œil par moment soucieux,
L’empreinte du talon de l’homme dans les nues;
Il tient l’extrémité des choses inconnues;
Il épouse l’abîme à son argile uni;
Le voilà maintenant marcheur de l’infini.
Où s’arrêtera-t-il, le puissant réfractaire?
Jusqu’à quelle distance ira-t-il de la terre?
Jusqu’à quelle distance ira-t-il du destin?
L’âpre Fatalité se perd dans le lointain;
Toute l’antique histoire affreuse et déformée
Sur l’horizon nouveau fuit comme une fumée.
Les temps sont venus. L’homme a pris possession
De l’air, comme du flot la grêbe et l’alcyon.
Devant nos rêves fiers, devant nos utopies
Ayant des yeux croyants et des ailes impies,
Devant tous nos efforts pensifs et haletants,
L’obscurité sans fond fermait ses deux battants;
Le vrai champ enfin s’offre aux puissantes algèbres;
L’homme vainqueur, tirant le verrou des ténèbres,
Dédaigne l’Océan, le vieil infini mort.
La porte noire cède et s’entre-bâille. Il sort!

Ô profondeurs! faut-il encor l’appeler l’homme?

L’homme est d’abord monté sur la bête de somme;
Puis sur le chariot que portent des essieux;
Puis sur la frêle barque au mât ambitieux;
Puis, quand il a fallu vaincre l’écueil, la lame,
L’onde et l’ouragan, l’homme est monté sur la flamme;
À présent l’immortel aspire à l’éternel;
Il montait sur la mer, il monte sur le ciel.

L’homme force le sphinx à lui tenir la lampe.
Jeune, il jette le sac du vieil Adam qui rampe,
Et part, et risque aux cieux, qu’éclaire son flambeau,
Un pas semblable à ceux qu’on fait dans le tombeau;
Et peut-être voici qu’enfin la traversée
Effrayante, d’un astre à l’autre, est commencée!

*

Stupeur! Se pourrait-il que l’homme s’élançât?
Ô nuit! se pourrait-il que l’homme, ancien forçat,
Que l’esprit humain, vieux reptile,
Devint ange, et, brisant le carcan qui le mord,
Fût soudain de plain-pied avec les cieux? La mort
Va donc devenir inutile!

Oh! franchir l’éther! songe épouvantable et beau!
Doubler le promontoire énorme du tombeau!
Qui sait? Toute aile est magnanime:
L’homme est ailé. Peut-être, ô merveilleux retour!
Un Christophe Colomb de l’ombre, quelque jour,
Un Gama du cap de l’abîme,

Un Jason de l’azur, depuis longtemps parti,
De la terre oublié, par le ciel englouti,
Tout à coup, sur l’humaine rive
Reparaîtra, monté sur cet alérion,
Et montrant Sirius, Allioth, Orion,

Tout pâle, dira: J’en arrive!

Ciel! ainsi, comme on voit aux voûtes des celliers
Les noirceurs qu’en rôdant tracent les chandeliers,
On pourrait, sous les bleus pilastres,
Deviner qu’un enfant de la terre a passé,
À ce que le flambeau de l’homme aurait laissé
De fumée au plafond des astres!

*

Pas si loin! pas si haut! redescendons. Restons
L’homme, restons Adam; mais non l’homme à tâtons,
Mais non l’Adam tombé! Tout autre rêve altère
L’espèce d’idéal qui convient à la terre.
Contentons-nous du mot: meilleur! écrit partout.
Oui, l’aube s’est levée.
Oh! ce fut tout à coup
Comme une éruption de folie et de joie,
Quand, après six mille ans dans la fatale voie,
Défaite brusquement par l’invisible main,
La pesanteur, liée au pied du genre humain,
Se brisa, cette chaîne était toutes les chaînes!
Tout s’envola dans l’homme, et les fureurs, les haines,
Les chimères, la force évanouie enfin,
L’ignorance et l’erreur, la misère et la faim,
Le droit divin des rois, les faux dieux juifs ou guèbres,
Le mensonge, le dol, les brumes, les ténèbres,
Tombèrent dans la poudre avec l’antique sort,
Comme le vêtement du bagne dont on sort.

Et c’est ainsi que l’ère annoncée est venue,
Cette ère qu’à travers les temps, épaisse nue,
Thalès apercevait au loin devant ses yeux;
Et Platon, lorsque, ému, des sphères dans les cieux
Il écoutait les chants et contemplait les danses.

Les êtres inconnus et bons, les providences
Présentes dans l’azur où l’œil ne les voit pas,
Les anges qui de l’homme observent tous les pas,
Leur tâche sainte étant de diriger les âmes,
Et d’attiser, avec toutes les belles flammes,
La conscience au fond des cerveaux ténébreux,
Ces amis des vivants, toujours penchés sur eux,
Ont cessé de frémir, et d’être, en la tourmente
Et dans les sombres nuits, la voix qui se lamente.
Voici qu’on voit bleuir l’idéal Sion.
Ils n’ont plus l’œil fixé sur l’apparition
Du vainqueur, du soldat, du fauve chasseur d’hommes.
Les vagues flamboiements épars sur les Sodomes,
Précurseurs du grand feu dévorant, les lueurs
Que jette le sourcil tragique des tueurs,
Les guerres, s’arrachant avec leur griffe immonde
Les frontières, haillon difforme du vieux monde,
Les battements de cœur des mères aux abois,
L’embuscade ou le vol guettant au fond des bois,
Le cri de la chouette et de la sentinelle,
Les fléaux, ne sont plus leur alarme éternelle.
Le deuil n’est plus mêlé dans tout ce qu’on entend;
Leur oreille n’est plus tendue à chaque instant
Vers le gémissement indigné de la tombe;
La moisson rit aux champs où râlait l’hécatombe;
L’azur ne les voit plus pleurer les nouveau-nés,
Dans tous les innocents pressentir des damnés,
Et la pitié n’est plus leur unique attitude;
Ils ne regardent plus la morne servitude
Tresser sa maille obscure à l’osier des berceaux.
L’homme aux fers, pénétré du frisson des roseaux,
Est remplacé par l’homme attendri, fort et calme;
La fonction du sceptre est faite par la palme;
Voici qu’enfin, ô gloire! exaucés dans leur vœu,
Ces êtres, dieux pour nous, créatures pour Dieu,
Sont heureux, l’homme est bon, et sont fiers, l’homme est juste;

Les esprits purs, essaim de l’empyrée lumineux,
Ne sentent plus saigner l’amour qu’ils ont en eux;
Une clarté paraît dans leur beau regard sombre;
Et l’archange commence à sourire dans l’ombre.

*

Où va-t-il, ce navire? Il va, de jour vêtu,
À l’avenir divin et pur, à la vertu,
À la science qu’on voit luire,
À la mort des fléaux, à l’oubli généreux,
À l’abondance, au calme, au rire, à l’homme heureux;
Il va, ce glorieux navire,

Au droit, à la raison, à la fraternité,
À la religieuse et sainte vérité
Sans impostures et sans voiles,
À l’amour, sur les cœurs serrant son doux lien,
Au juste, au grand, au bon, au beau… — Vous voyez bien
Qu’en effet il monte aux étoiles!

Il porte l’homme à l’homme et l’esprit à l’esprit.
Il civilise, ô gloire! Il ruine, il flétrit
Tout l’affreux passé qui s’effare,
Il abolit la loi de fer, la loi de sang,
Les glaives, les carcans, l’esclavage, en passant
Dans les cieux comme une fanfare.

Il ramène au vrai ceux que le faux repoussa;
Il fait briller la foi dans l’œil de Spinosa
Et l’espoir sur le front de Hobbe;
Il plane, rassurant, réchauffant, épanchant
Sur ce qui fut lugubre et ce qui fut méchant
Toute la clémence de l’aube.

Les vieux champs de bataille étaient là dans la nuit;
Il passe, et maintenant voilà le jour qui luit

Sur ces grands charniers de l’histoire
Où les siècles, penchant leur œil triste et profond,
Venaient regarder l’ombre effroyable que font
Les deux ailes de la victoire.

Derrière lui, César redevient homme; Éden
S’élargit sur l’Érèbe, épanoui soudain;
Les ronces de lys sont couvertes;
Tout revient, tout renaît; ce que la mort courbait
Refleurit dans la vie, et le bois du gibet
Jette, effrayé, des branches vertes.

Le nuage, l’aurore aux candides fraîcheurs,
L’aile de la colombe, et toutes les blancheurs,
Composent là-haut sa magie;
Derrière lui, pendant qu’il fuit vers la clarté,
Dans l’antique noirceur de la Fatalité
Des lueurs de l’enfer rougie,

Dans ce brumeux chaos qui fut le monde ancien,
Où l’Allah turc s’accoude au sphinx égyptien,
Dans la séculaire géhenne,
Dans la Gomorrhe infâme où flambe un lac fumant,
Dans la forêt du mal qu’éclairent vaguement
Les deux yeux fixes de la Haine,

Tombent, sèchent, ainsi que des feuillages morts,
Et s’en vont la douleur, le péché, le remords,
La perversité lamentable,
Tout l’ancien joug, de rêve et de crime forgé,
Nemrod, Aaron, la guerre avec le préjugé,
La boucherie avec l’étable!

Tous les spoliateurs et tous les corrupteurs
S’en vont; et les faux jours sur les fausses hauteurs;
Et le taureau d’airain qui beugle,
La hache, le billot, le bûcher dévorant,

Et le docteur versant l’erreur à l’ignorant,
Vil bâton qui trompait l’aveugle!

Et tous ceux qui faisaient, au lieu de repentirs,
Un rire au prince avec les larmes des martyrs,
Et tous ces flatteurs des épées
Qui louaient le sultan, le maître universel,
Et, pour assaisonner l’hymne, prenaient du sel
Dans le sac aux têtes coupées!

Les pestes, les forfaits, les cimiers fulgurants,
S’effacent, et la route où marchaient les tyrans,
Bélial roi, Dagon ministre,
Et l’épine, et la haie horrible du chemin
Où l’homme, du vieux monde et du vieux vice humain,
Entend bêler le bouc sinistre.

On voit luire partout les esprits sidéraux;
On voit la fin du monstre et la fin du héros,
Et de l’athée et de l’augure,
La fin du conquérant, la fin du paria;
Et l’on voit lentement sortir Beccaria
De Dracon qui se transfigure.

On voit l’agneau sortir du dragon fabuleux,
La vierge de l’opprobre, et Marie aux yeux bleus
De la Vénus prostituée;
Le blasphème devient le psaume ardent et pur,
L’hymne prend, pour s’en faire autant d’ailes d’azur,
Tous les haillons de la huée.

Tout est sauvé! la fleur, le printemps aromal,
L’éclosion du bien, l’écroulement du mal,
Fêtent dans sa course enchantée
Ce beau globe éclaireur, ce grand char curieux,
Qu’Empédocle, du fond des gouffres, suit des yeux,
Et, du haut des monts, Prométhée!

Le jour s’est fait dans l’antre où l’horreur s’accroupit.
En expirant, l’antique univers décrépit,
Larve à la prunelle ternie,
Gisant, et regardant le ciel noir s’étoiler,
A laissé cette sphère heureuse s’envoler
Des lèvres de son agonie.

*

Oh! ce navire fait le voyage sacré!
C’est l’ascension bleue à son premier degré;
Hors de l’antique et vil décombre,
Hors de la pesanteur, c’est l’avenir fondé;
C’est le destin de l’homme à la fin évadé,
Qui lève l’ancre et sort de l’ombre!

Ce navire là-haut conclut le grand hymen.
Il mêle presque à Dieu l’âme du genre humain.
Il voit l’insondable, il y touche;
Il est le vaste élan du progrès vers le ciel;
Il est l’entrée altière et sainte du réel
Dans l’antique idéal farouche.

Oh! chacun de ses pas conquiert l’illimité!
Il est la joie; il est la paix; l’humanité
A trouvé son organe immense;
Il vogue, usurpateur sacré, vainqueur béni,
Reculant chaque jour plus loin dans l’infini
Le point sombre où l’homme commence.

Il laboure l’abîme; il ouvre ces sillons
Où croissaient l’ouragan, l’hiver, les tourbillons,
Les sifflements et les huées;
Grâce à lui, la concorde est la gerbe des cieux;
Il va, fécondateur du ciel mystérieux,

Charrue auguste des nuées.

Il fait germer la vie humaine dans ces champs
Où Dieu n’avait encor semé que des couchants
Et moissonné que des aurores;
Il entend, sous son vol qui fend les airs sereins,
Croître et frémir partout les peuples souverains,
Ces immenses épis sonores!

Nef magique et suprême! elle a, rien qu’en marchant,
Changé le cri terrestre en pur et joyeux chant,
Rajeuni les races flétries,
Établi l’ordre vrai, montré le chemin sûr,
Dieu juste! et fait entrer dans l’homme tant d’azur
Qu’elle a supprimé les patries!

Faisant à l’homme avec le ciel une cité,
Une pensée avec toute l’immensité,
Elle abolit les vieilles règles,
Elle abaisse les monts, elle annule les tours;
Splendide, elle introduit les peuples, marcheurs lourds,
Dans la communion des aigles.

Elle a cette divine et chaste fonction
De composer là-haut l’unique nation,
À la fois dernière et première,
De promener l’essor dans le rayonnement,
Et de faire planer, ivre de firmament,
La liberté dans la lumière.

XV. Hors des temps

LA TROMPETTE DU JUGEMENT

*

Je vis dans la nuée un clairon monstrueux.

Et ce clairon semblait, au seuil profond des cieux,
Calme, attendre le souffle immense de l’archange.

Ce qui jamais ne meurt, ce qui jamais ne change,
L’entourait. À travers un frisson, on sentait
Que ce buccin fatal, qui rêve et qui se tait,
Quelque part, dans l’endroit où l’on crée, où l’on sème,
Avait été forgé par quelqu’un de suprême
Avec de l’équité condensée en airain.
Il était là, lugubre, effroyable, serein.
Il gisait sur la brume insondable qui tremble,
Hors du monde, au delà de tout ce qui ressemble
À la forme de quoi que ce soit.
Il vivait.

Il semblait un réveil songeant près d’un chevet.

Oh! quelle nuit! là, rien n’a de contour ni d’âge;
Et le nuage est spectre, et le spectre est nuage.

*

Et c’était le clairon de l’abîme.
Une voix
Un jour en sortira qu’on entendra sept fois.
En attendant, glacé, mais écoutant, il pense;
Couvant le châtiment, couvant la récompense;

Et toute l’épouvante éparse au ciel est sœur
De cet impénétrable et morne avertisseur.

Je le considérais dans les vapeurs funèbres
Comme on verrait se taire un coq dans les ténèbres.
Pas un murmure autour du clairon souverain.
Et la terre sentait le froid de son airain,
Quoique, là, d’aucun monde on ne vît les frontières.

Et l’immobilité de tous les cimetières,
Et le sommeil de tous les tombeaux, et la paix
De tous les morts couchés dans la fosse, étaient faits
Du silence inouï qu’il avait dans la bouche;
Ce lourd silence était pour l’affreux mort farouche
L’impossibilité de faire faire un pli
Au suaire cousu sur son front par l’oubli.
Ce silence tenait en suspens l’anathème.
On comprenait que tant que ce clairon suprême
Se tairait, le sépulcre, obscur, roidi, béant,
Garderait l’attitude horrible du néant,
Que la momie aurait toujours sa bandelette,
Que l’homme irait tombant du cadavre au squelette,
Et que ce fier banquet radieux, ce festin
Que les vivants gloutons appellent le destin,
Toute la joie errante en tourbillons de fêtes,
Toutes les passions de la chair satisfaites,
Gloire, orgueil, les héros ivres, les tyrans soûls,
Continueraient d’avoir pour but et pour dessous
La pourriture, orgie offerte aux vers convives;
Mais qu’à l’heure où soudain, dans l’espace sans rives,
Cette trompette vaste et sombre sonnerait,
On verrait, comme un tas d’oiseaux d’une forêt,
Toutes les âmes, cygne, aigle, éperviers, colombes,
Frémissantes, sortir du tremblement des tombes,
Et tous les spectres faire un bruit de grandes eaux,
Et se dresser, et prendre à la hâte leurs os,
Tandis qu’au fond, au fond du gouffre, au fond du rêve,

Blanchissant l’absolu, comme un jour qui se lève,
Le front mystérieux du juge apparaîtrait!

*

Ce clairon avait l’air de savoir le secret.

On sentait que le râle énorme de ce cuivre
Serait tel qu’il ferait bondir, vibrer, revivre
L’ombre, le plomb, le marbre, et qu’à ce fatal glas,
Toutes les surdités voleraient en éclats;
Que l’oubli sombre, avec sa perte de mémoire,
Se lèverait au son de la trompette noire;
Que dans cette clameur étrange, en même temps
Qu’on entendrait frémir tous les cieux palpitants,
On entendrait crier toutes les consciences;
Que le sceptique au fond de ses insouciances,
Que le voluptueux, l’athée et le douteur,
Et le maître tombé de toute sa hauteur,
Sentiraient ce fracas traverser leurs vertèbres;
Que ce déchirement céleste des ténèbres
Ferait dresser quiconque est soumis à l’arrêt;
Que qui n’entendit pas le remords, l’entendrait;
Et qu’il réveillerait, comme un choc à la porte,
L’oreille la plus dure et l’âme la plus morte,
Même ceux qui, livrés au rire, aux vains combats,
Aux vils plaisirs, n’ont point tenu compte ici-bas
Des avertissements de l’ombre et du mystère,
Même ceux que n’a point réveillés sur la terre
Le tonnerre, ce coup de cloche de la nuit!

Oh! dans l’esprit de l’homme où tout vacille et fuit,
Où le verbe n’a pas un mot qui ne bégaie,
Où l’aurore apparaît, hélas! comme une plaie,
Dans cet esprit, tremblant dès qu’il ose augurer,
Oh! comment concevoir, comment se figurer
Cette vibration communiquée aux tombes,

Cette sommation aux blêmes catacombes,
Du ciel ouvrant sa porte et du gouffre ayant faim,
Le prodigieux bruit de Dieu disant: Enfin!

Oui, c’est vrai, — c’est du moins jusque-là que l’œil plonge, —
C’est l’avenir, — du moins tel qu’on le voit en songe, —
Quand le monde atteindra son but, quand les instants,
Les jours, les mois, les ans, auront rempli le temps,
Quand tombera du ciel l’heure immense et nocturne,
Cette goutte qui doit faire déborder l’urne,
Alors, dans le silence horrible, un rayon blanc,
Long, pâle, glissera, formidable et tremblant,
Sur ces haltes de nuit qu’on nomme cimetières,
Les tentes frémiront, quoiqu’elles soient de pierres,
Dans tous ces sombres camps endormis; et, sortant
Tout à coup de la brume où l’univers l’attend,
Ce clairon, au-dessus des êtres et des choses,
Au-dessus des forfaits et des apothéoses,
Des ombres et des os, des esprits et des corps,
Sonnera la diane effrayante des morts.

Ô lever en sursaut des larves pêle-mêle!
Oh! la Nuit réveillant la Mort, sa sœur jumelle!
Pensif, je regardais l’incorruptible airain.

*

Les volontés sans loi, les passions sans frein,
Toutes les actions de tous les êtres, haines,
Amours, vertus, fureurs, hymnes, cris, plaisirs, peines,
Avaient laissé, dans l’ombre où rien ne remuait,
Leur pâle empreinte autour de ce bronze muet;
Une obscure Babel y tordait sa spirale.

Sa dimension vague, ineffable, spectrale,
Sortant de l’éternel, entrait dans l’absolu.
Pour pouvoir mesurer ce tube, il eût fallu

Prendre la toise au fond du rêve, et la coudée
Dans la profondeur trouble et sombre de l’idée;
Un de ses bouts touchait le bien, l’autre le mal;
Et sa longueur allait de l’homme à l’animal,
Quoiqu’on ne vît point là d’animal et point d’homme;
Couché sur terre, il eût joint Éden à Sodome.

Son embouchure, gouffre où plongeait mon regard,
Cercle de l’Inconnu ténébreux et hagard,
Pleine de cette horreur que le mystère exhale,
M’apparaissait ainsi qu’une offre colossale
D’entrer dans l’ombre où Dieu même est évanoui.
Cette gueule, avec l’air d’un redoutable ennui,
Morne, s’élargissait sur l’homme et la nature;
Et cette épouvantable et muette ouverture
Semblait le bâillement noir de l’éternité.

*

Au fond de l’immanent et de l’illimité,
Parfois, dans les lointains sans nom de l’Invisible,
Quelque chose tremblait de vaguement terrible,
Et brillait et passait, inexprimable éclair.
Toutes les profondeurs des mondes avaient l’air
De méditer, dans l’ombre où l’ombre se répète,
L’heure où l’on entendrait de cette âpre trompette
Un appel aussi long que l’infini, jaillir.
L’immuable semblait d’avance en tressaillir.

Des porches de l’abîme, antres hideux, cavernes
Que nous nommons enfers, puits, gehennams, avernes,
Bouches d’obscurité qui ne prononcent rien,
Du vide, où ne flottait nul souffle aérien,
Du silence où l’haleine osait à peine éclore,
Ceci se dégageait pour l’âme: Pas encore.

Par instants, dans ce lieu triste comme le soir,

Comme on entend le bruit de quelqu’un qui vient voir,
On entendait le pas boiteux de la justice;
Puis cela s’effaçait. Des vermines, le vice,
Le crime, s’approchaient, et, fourmillement noir,
Fuyaient. Le clairon sombre ouvrait son entonnoir.
Un groupe d’ouragans dormait dans ce cratère.
Comme cet organum des gouffres doit se taire
Jusqu’au jour monstrueux où nous écarterons
Les clous de notre bière au-dessus de nos fronts,
Nul bras ne le touchait dans l’invisible sphère;
Chaque race avait fait sa couche de poussière
Dans l’orbe sépulcral de son évasement;
Sur cette poudre l’œil lisait confusément
Ce mot: Riez, écrit par le doigt d’Épicure;
Et l’on voyait, au fond de la rondeur obscure,
La toile d’araignée horrible de Satan.

Des astres qui passaient murmuraient: « Souviens-t-en!
Prie!” et la nuit portait cette parole à l’ombre.

Et je ne sentais plus ni le temps ni le nombre.

*

Une sinistre main sortait de l’infini.

Vers la trompette, effroi de tout crime impuni,
Qui doit faire à la mort un jour lever la tête,
Elle pendait énorme, ouverte, et comme prête
À saisir ce clairon qui se tait dans la nuit,
Et qu’emplit le sommeil formidable du bruit.
La main, dans la nuée et hors de l’Invisible,
S’allongeait. À quel être était-elle? Impossible
De le dire, en ce morne et brumeux firmament.
L’œil dans l’obscurité ne voyait clairement
Que les cinq doigts béants de cette main terrible;

Tant l’être, quel qu’il fût, debout dans l’ombre horrible,
— Sans doute quelque archange ou quelque séraphin
Immobile, attendant le signe de la fin, —
Plongeait profondément, sous les ténébreux voiles,
Du pied dans les enfers, du front dans les étoiles!

LES CHANSONS DES RUES ET DES BOIS

TABLE DES MATIERES

Préface

Le Cheval

LIVRE PREMIER. JEUNESSE

FLORÉAL
LES COMPLICATIONS DE L'IDÉAL
POUR JEANNE SEULE
POUR D'AUTRES
SILHOUETTES DU TEMPS JADIS
L'ÉTERNEL PETIT ROMAN

LIVRE SECOND. SAGESSE

AMA, CREDE
OISEAUX ET ENFANTS
LIBERTÉ, ÉGALITÉ, FRATERNITÉ
NIVÔSE

Préface

À un certain moment de la vie, si occupé qu'on soit de l'avenir, la pente à regarder en arrière est irrésistible. Notre adolescence, cette morte charmante, nous apparaît, et veut qu'on pense à elle. C'est d'ailleurs une sérieuse et mélancolique leçon que la mise en présence de deux âges dans le même homme, de l'âge qui commence et de l'âge qui s'achève; l'un espère dans la vie, l'autre dans la mort.

Il n'est pas inutile de confronter le point de départ avec le point d'arrivée, le frais tumulte du matin avec l'apaisement du soir, et l'illusion avec la conclusion.

Le cœur de l'homme a un recto sur lequel est écrit Jeunesse, et un verso sur lequel est écrit Sagesse. C'est ce recto et ce verso qu'on trouvera dans ce livre.

La réalité est dans ce livre, modifiée par tout ce qui dans l'homme va au-delà du réel. Ce livre est écrit beaucoup avec le rêve, un peu avec le souvenir.

Rêver est permis aux vaincus; se souvenir est permis aux solitaires.

Hauteville-House, octobre 1865.

Le Cheval

Je l’avais saisi par la bride;
Je tirais, les poings dans les nœuds,
Ayant dans les sourcils la ride
De cet effort vertigineux.

C’était le grand cheval de gloire,
Né de la mer comme Astarté,
A qui l’aurore donne à boire
Dans les urnes de la clarté;

L’alérion aux bonds sublimes,
Qui se cabre, immense, indompté,
Plein du hennissement des cimes,
Dans la bleue immortalité.

Tout génie, élevant sa coupe,
Dressant sa torche, au fond des cieux,
Superbe, a passé sur la croupe
De ce monstre mystérieux.

Les poëtes et les prophètes,
O terre, tu les reconnais
Aux brûlures que leur ont faites
Les étoiles de son harnais.

Il souffle l’ode, l’épopée,
Le drame, les puissants effrois,
Hors des fourreaux les coups d’épée,
Les forfaits hors du cœur des rois.

Père de la source sereine,
Il fait du rocher ténébreux
Jaillir pour les grecs Hippocrène,
Et Raphidium pour les hébreux.

Il traverse l’Apocalypse;
Pâle, il a la mort sur son dos.
Sa grande aile brumeuse éclipse
La lune devant Ténédos.

Le cri d’Amos, l’humeur d’Achille
Gonfle sa narine et lui sied;
La mesure du vers d’Eschyle,
C’est le battement de son pied.

Sur le fruit mort il penche l’arbre,
Les mères sur l’enfant tombé;
Lugubre, il fait Rachel de marbre,
Il fait de pierre Niobé.

Quand il part, l’idée est sa cible;
Quand il se dresse, crins au vent,
L’ouverture de l’impossible
Luit sous ses deux pieds de devant.

Il défie Eclair à la course;
Il a le Pinde, il aime Endor;
Fauve, il pourrait relayer l’Ourse
Qui traîne le Chariot d’or.

Il plonge au noir zénith; il joue
Avec tout ce qu’on peut oser;
Le zodiaque, énorme roue,
A failli parfois l’écraser.

Dieu fit le gouffre à son usage.
Il lui faut les cieux non frayés,
L’essor fou, l’ombre, et le paysage
Au-dessus de pics foudroyés.

Dans les vastes brumes funèbres

Il vole, il plane; il a l’amour
De se ruer dans les ténèbres
Jusqu’à ce qu’il trouve le jour.

Sa prunelle sauvage et forte
Fixe sur l’homme, atome nu,
L’effrayant regard qu’on rapporte
De ces courses dans l’inconnu.

Il n’est docile, il n’est propice
Qu’à celui qui, la lyre en main,
Le pousse dans le précipice,
Au-delà de l’esprit humain.

Son écurie, où vit la fée,
Veut un divin palefrenier;
Le premier s’appelait Orphée,
Et le dernier, André Chénier.

Il domine notre âme entière;
Ezéchiel sous le palmier
L’attend, et c’est dans sa litière
Que Job prend son tas de fumier.

Malheur à celui qu’il étonne
Ou qui veut jouer avec lui!
Il ressemble au couchant d’automne
Dans son inexorable ennui.

Plus d’un sur son dos se déforme;
Il hait le joug et le collier;
Sa fonction est d’être énorme
Sans s’occuper du cavalier.

Sans patience et sans clémence,
Il laisse, en son vol effréné,
Derrière sa ruade immense

Malebranche désarçonné.

Son flanc ruisselant d'étincelles
Porte le reste du lien
Qu'ont tâché de lui mettre aux ailes
Despréaux et Quintilien.

Pensif, j'entraînais loin des crimes,
Des dieux, des rois, de la douleur,
Ce sombre cheval des abîmes
Vers le pré de l'idylle en fleur.

Je le tirais vers la prairie
Où l'aube, qui vient s'y poser,
Fait naître l'éplogue attendrie
Entre le rire et le baiser.

C'est là que croît, dans la ravine
Où fuit Plaute, ou Racan se plaît,
L'épigramme, cette aubépine,
Et ce trèfle, le triolet.

C'est là que l'abbé Chaulieu prêche,
Et que verdit sous les buissons
Toute cette herbe tendre et fraîche
Ou Segrais cueille ses chansons.

Le cheval luttait; ses prunelles,
Comme le glaive et l'yatagan,
Brillaient; il secouait ses ailes
Avec des souffles d'ouragan.

Il voulait retourner au gouffre;
Il reculait, prodigieux,
Ayant dans ses naseaux le soufre
Et l'âme du monde en ses yeux.

Il hennissait vers l’invisible;
Il appelait l’ombre au secours;
A ses appels le ciel terrible
Remuait des tonnerres sourds.

Les bacchantes heurtaient leurs sistres,
Les sphinx ouvraient leurs yeux profonds;
On voyait, à leurs doigts sinistres,
S’allonger l’ongle des griffons.

Les constellations en flamme
Frissonnaient à son cri vivant
Comme dans la main d’une femme
Une lampe se courbe au vent.

Chaque fois que son aile sombre
Battait le vaste azur terni,
Tous les groupes d’astres de l’ombre
S’effarouchaient dans l’infini.

Moi, sans quitter la plate-longe,
Sans le lâcher, je lui montrais
Le pré charmant, couleur de songe,
Où le vers rit sous l’antre frais.

Je lui montrais le champ, l’ombrage,
Les gazons par juin attiédis;
Je lui montrais le pâturage
Que nous appelons paradis.

— Que fais-tu là? me dit Virgile.
Et je répondis, tout couvert
De l’écume du monstre agile:
— Maître, je mets Pégase au vert.

o 31 juillet 1859

LIVRE PREMIER. JEUNESSE

I

FLORÉAL

I
Ordre du jour de Floréal

Victoire, amis! je dépêche
En hâte et de grand matin
Une strophe toute fraîche
Pour crier le bulletin.

J'embouche sur la montagne
La trompette aux longs éclats;
Sachez que le printemps gagne
La bataille des lilas.

Jeanne met dans sa pantoufle
Son pied qui n'est plus frileux;
Et voici qu'un vaste souffle
Emplit les abîmes bleus.

L'oiseau chante, l'agneau broute;
Mai, poussant des cris railleurs,
Crible l'hiver en déroute
D'une mitraille de fleurs.

II

Orphée, aux bois du Caÿstre,
Écoutait, quand l'astre luit,
Le rire obscur et sinistre
Des inconnus dans la nuit.

Phtas, la sibylle thébaine,
Voyait près de Phygalé
Danser des formes d’ébène
Sur l’horizon étoilé.

Eschyle errait à la brune
En Sicile, et s’enivrait
Des flûtes du clair de lune
Qu’on entend dans la forêt.

Pline, oubliant toutes choses
Pour les nymphes de Milet,
Épiait leurs jambes roses
Quand leur robe s’envolait.

Plaute, rôdant à Viterbe
Dans les vergers radieux,
Ramassait parfois dans l’herbe
Des fruits mordus par les dieux.

Versaille est un lieu sublime
Où le faune, un pied dans l’eau,
Offre à Molière la rime,
Étonnement de Boileau.

Le vieux Dante, à qui les âmes
Montraient leur sombre miroir,
Voyait s’évader des femmes
Entre les branches le soir.

André Chénier sous les saules
Avait l’éblouissement
De ces fuyantes épaules
Dont Virgile fut l’amant.

Shakspeare, aux aguets derrière
Le chêne aux rameaux dormants,

Entendait dans la clairière
De vagues trépignements.

Ô feuillage, tu m’attires;
Un dieu t’habite; et je crois
Que la danse des satyres
Tourne encore au fond des bois.

III
YYXH

Psyché dans ma chambre est entrée,
Et j’ai dit à ce papillon:
—” Nomme-moi la chose sacrée.
“ Est-ce l’ombre? est-ce le rayon?

“ Est-ce la musique des lyres?
“ Est-ce le parfum de la fleur?
“ Quel est entre tous les délires
“ Celui qui fait l’homme meilleur?

“ Quel est l’encens? quelle est la flamme?
“ Et l’organe de l’avatar,
“ Et pour les souffrants le dictame,
“ Et pour les heureux le nectar?

“ Enseigne-moi ce qui fait vivre,
“ Ce qui fait que l’oeil brille et voit!
“ Enseigne-moi l’endroit du livre
“ Où Dieu pensif pose son doigt.

“ Qu’est-ce qu’en sortant de l’Érèbe
“ Dante a trouvé de plus complet?
“ Quel est le mot des sphinx de Thèbe
“ Et des ramiers du Paraclet?

“ Quelle est la chose, humble et superbe,

“ Faite de matière et d’éther,
“ Où Dieu met le plus de son verbe
“ Et l’homme le plus de sa chair?

“ Quel est le pont que l’esprit montre,
“ La route de la fange au ciel,
“ Où Vénus Astarté rencontre
“ À mi-chemin Ithuriel?

“ Quelle est la clef splendide et sombre,
“ Comme aux élus chère aux maudits,
“ Avec laquelle on ferme l’ombre
“ Et l’on ouvre le paradis?

“ Qu’est-ce qu’Orphée et Zoroastre,
“ Et Christ que Jean vint suppléer,
“ En mêlant la rose avec l’astre,
“ Auraient voulu pouvoir créer?

“ Puisque tu viens d’en haut, déesse,
“ Ange, peut-être le sais-tu?
“ Ô Psyché! quelle est la sagesse?
“ Ô Psyché! quelle est la vertu?

“ Qu’est-ce que, pour l’homme et la terre,
“ L’infini sombre a fait de mieux?
“ Quel est le chef-d’oeuvre du père?
“ Quel est le grand éclair des cieux?

Posant sur mon front, sous la nue,
Ses ailes qu’on ne peut briser,
Entre lesquelles elle est nue,
Psyché m’a dit: C’est le baiser.

IV
Le poète bat aux champs

I

Aux champs, compagnons et compagnes!
Fils, j’élève à la dignité
De géorgiques les campagnes
Quelconques où flambe l’été!

Flamber, c’est là toute l’histoire
Du coeur, des sens, de la saison,
Et de la pauvre mouche noire
Que nous appelons la raison.

Je te fais molosse, ô mon dogue!
L’acanthe manque? j’ai le thym.
Je nomme Vaugirard églogue;
J’installe Amyntas à Pantin.

La nature est indifférente
Aux nuances que nous créons
Entre Gros-Guillaume et Dorante;
Tout pampre a ses Anacréons.

L’idylle volontiers patoise.
Et je ne vois point que l’oiseau
Préfère Haliarte à Pontoise
Et Coronée à Palaiseau.

Les plus beaux noms de la Sicile
Et de la Grèce ne font pas
Que l’âne au fouet soit plus docile,
Que l’amour fuie à moins grands pas.

Les fleurs sont à Sèvre aussi fraîches
Que sur l’Hybla, cher au sylvain;
Montreuil mérite avec ses pêches
La garde du dragon divin.

Marton nue est Phyllis sans voiles;

Fils, le soir n'est pas plus vermeil,
Sous son chapeau d'ombre et d'étoiles,
À Banduse qu'à Montfermeil.

Bercy pourrait griser sept Sages;
Les Auteuils sont fils des Tempés;
Si l'Ida sombre a ses nuages,
La guinguette a des canapés.

Rien n'est haut ni bas; les fontaines
Lavent la pourpre et le sayon;
L'aube d'Ivry, l'aube d'Athènes,
Sont faites du même rayon.

J'ai déjà dit parfois ces choses,
Et toujours je les redirai;
Car du fond de toutes les proses
Peut s'élancer le vers sacré.

Si Babet a la gorge ronde,
Babet égale Pholoé.
Comme Chypre la Beauce est blonde.
Larifla descend d'Évohé.

Toinon, se baignant sur la grève,
A plus de cheveux sur le dos
Que la Callyrhoé qui rêve
Dans le grand temple d'Abydos.

Çà, que le bourgeois fraternise
Avec les satyres cornus!
Amis, le corset de Denise
Vaut la ceinture de Vénus.

II
Donc, fuyons Paris! plus de gêne!
Bergers, plantons là Tortoni!

Allons boire à la coupe pleine
Du printemps, ivre d’infini.

Allons fêter les fleurs exquises,
Partons! Quittons, joyeux et fous,
Pour les dryades, les marquises,
Et pour les faunes, les voyous!

Plus de bouquins, point de gazettes!
Je hais cette submersion.
Nous irons cueillir des noisettes
Dans l’été, fraîche vision.

La banlieue, amis, peut suffire.
La fleur, que Paris souille, y naît.
Flore y vivait avec Zéphyre
Avant de vivre avec Brunet.

Aux champs, les vers deviennent strophes.
À Paris l’étang, c’est l’égout.
Je sais qu’il est des philosophes
Criant très haut: “ Lutèce est tout!

“ Les champs ne valent pas la ville!”
Fils, toujours le bon sens hurla
Quand Voltaire à Damilaville
Dit ces calembredaines-là.

III

Aux champs, la nuit est vénérable,
Le jour rit d’un rire enfantin;
Le soir berce l’orme et l’érable,
Le soir est beau; mais le matin,

Le matin, c’est la grande fête;
C’est l’auréole où la nuit fond,
Où le diplomate a l’air bête,

Où le bouvier a l’air profond.

La fleur d’or du pré d’azur sombre,
L’astre, brille au ciel clair encor;
En bas, le bleuet luit dans l’ombre,
Étoile bleue en un champ d’or.

L’oiseau court, les taureaux mugissent;
Les feuillages sont enchantés;
Les cercles du vent s’élargissent
Dans l’ascension des clartés.

L’air frémit; l’onde est plus sonore;
Toute âme entrouvre son secret;
L’univers croit, quand vient l’aurore,
Que sa conscience apparaît.

IV

Quittons Paris et ses casernes.
Plongeons-nous, car les ans sont courts,
Jusqu’aux genoux dans les luzernes
Et jusqu’au coeur dans les amours.

Joignons les baisers aux spondées;
Souvenons-nous que le hautbois
Donnait à Platon des idées
Voluptueuses, dans les bois.

Vanve a d’indulgentes prairies;
Ville-d’Avray ferme les yeux
Sur les douces gamineries
Des cupidons mystérieux.

Là, les Jeux, les Ris et les Farces
Poursuivent, sous les bois flottants,
Les chimères de joie éparses
Dans la lumière du printemps.

L’onde à Triel est bucolique;
Asnière a des flux et reflux
Où vogue l’adorable clique
De tous ces petites dieux joufflus.

Le sel attique et l’eau de Seine
Se mêlent admirablement.
Il n’est qu’une chose malsaine,
Jeanne, c’est d’être sans amant.

Que notre ivresse se signale!
Allons où Pan nous conduira.
Ressuscitons la bacchanale,
Cette aïeule de l’opéra.

Laissons, et même envoyons paître
Les boeufs, les chèvres, les brebis,
La raison, le garde champêtre!
Fils, avril chante, crions bis!

Qu’à Gif, grâce à nous, le notaire
Et le marguillier soient émus,
Fils, et qu’on entende à Nanterre
Les vagues flûtes de l’Hémus!

Acclimatons Faune à Vincenne,
Sans pourtant prendre pour conseil
L’immense Aristophane obscène,
Effronté comme le soleil.

Rions du maire, ou de l’édile;
Et mordons, en gens convaincus,
Dans cette pomme de l’idylle
Où l’on voit les dents de Moschus.

V

Interruption à une lecture de Platon

Je lisais Platon. - J’ouvris
La porte de ma retraite,
Et j’aperçus Lycoris,
C’est-à-dire Turlurette.

Je n’avais pas dit encor
Un seul mot à cette belle.
Sous un vague plafond d’or
Mes rêves battaient de l’aile.

La belle, en jupon gris-clair,
Montait l’escalier sonore;
Ses frais yeux bleus avaient l’air
De revenir de l’aurore.

Elle chantait un couplet
D’une chanson de la rue
Qui dans sa bouche semblait
Une lumière apparue.

Son front éclipsa Platon.
Ô front céleste et frivole!
Un ruban sous son menton
Rattachait son auréole.

Elle avait l’accent qui plaît,
Un foulard pour cachemire,
Dans sa main son pot au lait,
Des flammes dans son sourire.

Et je lui dis (le Phédon
Donne tant de hardiesse!):
Mademoiselle, pardon,
Ne seriez-vous pas déesse?

VI

Quand les guignes furent mangées,
Elle s’écria tout à coup:
J’aimerais bien mieux des dragées.
Est-il ennuyeux, ton Saint-Cloud!

On a grand-soif; au lieu de boire,
On mange des cerises; voi,
C’est joli, j’ai la bouche noire
Et j’ai les doigts bleus; laisse-moi. -

Elle disait cent autres choses,
Et sa douce main me battait.
Ô mois de juin! rayons et roses!
L’azur chante et l’ombre se tait.

J’essuyai, sans trop lui déplaire,
Tout en la laissant m’accuser,
Avec des fleurs sa main colère,
Et sa bouche avec un baiser.

VII
Genio libri

Ô toi qui dans mon âme vibres,
Ô mon cher esprit familier,
Les espaces sont clairs et libres;
J’y consens, défais ton collier,

Mêle les dieux, confonds les styles,
Accouple au poean les agnus;
Fais dans les grands cloîtres hostiles
Danser les nymphes aux seins nus.

Sois de France, sois de Corinthe,
Réveille au bruit de ton clairon

Pégase fourbu qu’on éreinte
Au vieux coche de Campistron.

Tresse l’acanthe et la liane;
Grise l’augure avec l’abbé;
Que David contemple Diane,
Qu’Actéon guette Bethsabé.

Du nez de Minerve indignée
Au crâne chauve de saint Paul
Suspends la toile d’araignée
Qui prendra les rimes au vol.

Fais rire Marion courbée
Sur les oegipans ahuris.
Cours, saute, emmène Alphésibée
Souper au Café de Paris.

Sois gai, hardi, glouton, vorace;
Flâne, aime; sois assez coquin
Pour rencontrer parfois Horace
Et toujours éviter Berquin.

Peins le nu d’après l’Homme antique,
Païen et biblique à la fois,
Constate la pose plastique
D’Ève ou de Rhée au fond des bois.

Des amours observe la mue.
Défais ce que les pédants font,
Et, penché sur l’étang, remue
L’art poétique jusqu’au fond.

Trouble La Harpe, ce coq d’Inde,
Et Boileau, dans leurs sanhédrins;
Saccage tout; jonche le Pinde
De césures d’alexandrins.

Prends l’abeille pour soeur jumelle;
Aie, ô rôdeur du frais vallon,
Un alvéole à miel, comme elle,
Et, comme elle, un brave aiguillon.

Plante là toute rhétorique,
Mais au vieux bon sens fais écho;
Monte en croupe sur la bourrique,
Si l’ânier s’appelle Sancho.

Qu’Argenteuil soit ton Pausilippe.
Sois un peu diable, et point démon,
Joue, et pour Fanfan la Tulipe
Quitte Ajax fils de Télamon.

Invente une églogue lyrique
Prenant terre au bois de Meudon,
Où le vers danse une pyrrhique
Qui dégénère en rigodon.

Si Loque, Coche, Graille et Chiffe
Dans Versailles viennent à toi,
Présente galamment la griffe
À ces quatre filles de roi.

Si Junon s’offre, fais ta tâche;
Fête Aspasie, admets Ninon;
Si Goton vient, sois assez lâche
Pour rire et ne pas dire: Non.

Sois le chérubin et l’éphèbe.
Que ton chant libre et disant tout
Vole, et de la lyre de Thèbe
Aille au mirliton de Saint-Cloud.

Qu’en ton livre, comme au bocage,

On entende un hymne, et jamais
Un bruit d’ailes dans une cage!
Rien des bas-fonds, tout des sommets!

Fais ce que tu voudras, qu’importe!
Pourvu que le vrai soit content;
Pourvu que l’alouette sorte
Parfois de ta strophe en chantant;

Pourvu que Paris où tu soupes
N’ôte rien à ton naturel;
Que les déesses dans tes groupes
Gardent une lueur du ciel;

Pourvu que la luzerne pousse
Dans ton idylle, et que Vénus
Y trouve une épaisseur de mousse
Suffisante pour ses pieds nus;

Pourvu que Grimod la Reynière
Signale à Brillat-Savarin
Une senteur de cressonnière
Mêlée à ton hymne serein;

Pourvu qu’en ton poème tremble
L’azur réel des claires eaux;
Pourvu que le brin d’herbe semble
Bon au nid des petits oiseaux;

Pourvu que Psyché soit baisée
Par ton souffle aux cieux réchauffé;
Pourvu qu’on sente la rosée
Dans ton vers qui boit du café.

II

LES COMPLICATIONS DE L’IDÉAL

I

Paulo minora canamus

À un ami

C’est vrai, pour un instant je laisse
Tous nos grands problèmes profonds;
Je menais des monstres en laisse,
J’errais sur le char des griffons.

J’en descends; je mets pied à terre;
Plus tard, demain, je pousserai
Plus loin encor dans le mystère
Les strophes au vol effaré.

Mais l’aigle aujourd’hui me distance;
(Sois tranquille, aigle, on t’atteindra)
Ma strophe n’est plus qu’une stance;
Meudon remplace Denderah.

Je suis avec l’onde et le cygne,
Dans les jasmins, dans floréal,
Dans juin, dans le blé, dans la vigne,
Dans le grand sourire idéal.

Je sors de l’énigme et du songe.
La mort, le joug, le noir, le bleu,
L’échelle des êtres qui plonge
Dans ce gouffre qu’on nomme Dieu;

Les vastes profondeurs funèbres,
L’abîme infinitésimal,
La sombre enquête des ténèbres,
Le procès que je fais au mal;

Mes études sur tout le bagne,
Sur les Juifs, sur les Esclavons;

Mes visions sur la montagne;
J’interromps tout cela; vivons.

J’ajourne cette oeuvre insondable;
J’ajourne Méduse et Satan;
Et je dis au sphinx formidable:
Je parle à la rose, va-t’en.

Ami, cet entracte te fâche.
Qu’y faire? les bois sont dorés;
Je mets sur l’affiche: Relâche;
Je vais rire un peu dans les prés.

Je m’en vais causer dans la loge
D’avril, ce portier de l’été.
Exiges-tu que j’interroge
Le bleuet sur l’éternité?

Faut-il qu’à l’abeille en ses courses,
Au lys, au papillon qui fuit,
À la transparence des sources,
Je montre le front de la nuit?

Faut-il, effarouchant les ormes,
Les tilleuls, les joncs, les roseaux,
Pencher les problèmes énormes
Sur le nid des petits oiseaux?

Mêler l’abîme à la broussaille?
Mêler le doute à l’aube en pleurs?
Quoi donc! ne veux-tu pas que j’aille
Faire la grosse voix aux fleurs?

Sur l’effrayante silhouette
Des choses que l’homme entrevoit,
Vais-je interpeller l’alouette
Perchée aux tuiles de mon toit?

Ne serai-je pas à cent lieues
Du bon sens, le jour où j'irai
Faire expliquer aux hochequeues
Le latin du Dies Irae?

Quand, de mon grenier, je me penche
Sur la laveuse qu'on entend,
Joyeuse, dans l'écume blanche
Plonger ses coudes en chantant,

Veux-tu que, contre cette sphère
De l'infini sinistre et nu
Où saint Jean frémissant vient faire
Des questions à l'Inconnu,

Contre le globe âpre et sans grèves,
Sans bornes, presque sans espoir,
Où la vague foudre des rêves
Se prolonge dans le ciel noir.

Contre l'astre et son auréole,
Contre l'immense que-sait-on,
Je heurte la bulle qui vole
Hors du baquet de Jeanneton?

II

Réalité

La nature est partout la même,
À Gonesse comme au Japon.
Mathieu Dombasle est Triptolème;
Une chlamyde est un jupon.

Lavallière dans son carrosse,
Pour Louis ou pour Mars épris,
Était tout juste aussi féroce

Qu’en son coquillage Cypris.

Ô fils et frères, ô poètes,
Quand la chose est, dites le mot.
Soyez de purs esprits, et faites.
Rien n’est bas quand l’âme est en haut.

Un hoquet à Silène échappe
Parmi les roses de Poestum.
Quand Horace étale Priape,
Shakspeare peut risquer Bottom.

La vérité n’a pas de bornes.
Grâce au grand Pan, dieu bestial,
Fils, le réel montre ses cornes
Sur le front bleu de l’idéal.

III
En sortant du collège

Première lettre

Puisque nous avons seize ans,
Vivons, mon vieux camarade,
Et cessons d’être innocents;
Car c’est là le premier grade.

Vivre c’est aimer. Apprends
Que, dans l’ombre où nos coeurs rêvent,
J’ai vu deux yeux bleus, si grands
Que tous les astres s’y lèvent.

Connais-tu tous ces bonheurs?
Faire des songes féroces,
Envier les grands seigneurs
Qui roulent dans des carrosses,

Avoir la fièvre, enrager,
Être un coeur saignant qui s’ouvre,
Souhaiter être un berger
Ayant pour cahute un Louvre,

Sentir en mangeant son pain
Comme en ruminant son rêve,
L’amertume du pépin
De la sombre pomme d’Ève;

Être amoureux, être fou,
Être un ange égal aux oies,
Être un forçat sous l’écrou;
Eh bien, j’ai toutes ces joies!

Cet être mystérieux
Qu’on appelle une grisette
M’est tombé du haut des cieux.
Je souffre. J’ai la recette.

Je sais l’art d’aimer; j’y suis
Habile et fort au point d’être
Stupide, et toutes les nuits
Accoudé sur ma fenêtre.

Deuxième lettre

Elle habite en soupirant
La mansarde mitoyenne.
Parfois sa porte, en s’ouvrant,
Pousse le coude à la mienne.

Elle est fière; parlons bas.
C’est une forme azurée
Qui, pour ravauder des bas,
Arrive de l’empyrée.

J’y songe quand le jour naît,
J’y rêve quand le jour baisse.
Change en casque son bonnet,
Tu croirais voir la Sagesse.

Sa cuirasse est un madras;
Elle sort avec la ruse
D’avoir une vieille au bras
Qui lui tient lieu de Méduse.

On est sens dessus dessous
Rien qu’à voir la mine altière
Dont elle prend pour deux sous
De persil chez la fruitière.

Son beau regard transparent
Est grave sans airs moroses.
On se la figure errant
Dans un bois de lauriers-roses.

Pourtant, comme nous voyons
Que parfois de ces Palmyres
Il peut tomber des rayons,
Des baisers et des sourires;

Un drôle, un étudiant,
Rôde sous ces chastes voiles;
Je hais fort ce mendiant
Qui tend sa main aux étoiles.

Je ne sors plus de mon trou.
L’autre jour, étant en verve,
Elle m’appela: Hibou.
Je lui répondis: Minerve.

IV

Paupertas

Être riche n’est pas l’affaire;
Toute l’affaire est de charmer;
Du palais du grenier diffère
En ce qu’on y sait mieux aimer.

L’aube au seuil, un grabat dans l’angle;
Un éden peut être un taudis;
Le craquement du lit de sangle
Est un des bruits du paradis.

Moins de gros sous, c’est moins de rides.
L’or de moins, c’est le doute ôté.
Jamais l’amour, ô cieux splendides!
Ne s’éraille à la pauvreté.

À quoi bon vos trésors mensonges
Et toutes vos piastres en tas,
Puisque le plafond bleu des songes
S’ajuste à tous les galetas!

Croit-on qu’au Louvre on se débraille
Comme dans mon bouge vainqueur,
Et que l’éclat de la muraille
S’ajoute aux délices du coeur?

La terre, que gonfle la sève,
Est un lieu saint, mystérieux,
Sublime, où la nudité d’Ève
Éclipse tout, hormis les cieux.

L’opulence est vaine, et s’oublie
Dès que l’idéal apparaît,
Et quand l’âme est d’extase emplie
Comme de souffles la forêt.

Horace est pauvre avec Lydie;

Les amours ne sont point accrus
Par le marbre de Numidie
Qui pave les bains de Scaurus.

L’amour est la fleur des prairies.
Ô Virgile, on peut être Églé
Sans traîner dans les Tuileries
Des flots de velours épinglé.

Femmes, nos vers qui vous défendent,
Point avares et point pédants,
Pour vous chanter, ne vous demandent
Pas d’autres perles que vos dents.

Femmes, ni Chénier ni Properce
N’ajoutent la condition
D’une alcôve tendue en perse
À vos yeux, d’où sort le rayon.

Une Madelon bien coiffée,
Blanche et limpide, et riant frais,
Sera pour Perrault une fée,
Une dryade pour Segrais.

Suzon qui, tresses dénouées,
Chante en peignant ses longs cheveux,
Fait envoler dans les nuées
Tous nos songes et tous nos voeux.

Margot, c’est Glycère en cornette;
Ô chimères qui me troublez,
Le jupon de serge d’Annette
Flotte en vos azurs étoilés.

Que m’importe, dans l’ombre obscure,
L’habit qu’on revêt le matin,
Et que la robe soit de bure

Lorsque la femme est de satin!

Le sage a son coeur pour richesse.
Il voit, tranquille accapareur,
Sans trop de respect la duchesse,
La grisette sans trop d’horreur.

L’amour veut que sans crainte on lise
Les lettres de son alphabet;
Si la première est Arthémise,
Certes, la seconde est Babet.

Les pauvres filles sont des anges
Qui n’ont pas plus d’argent parfois
Que les grives et les mésanges
Et les fauvettes dans les bois.

Je ne rêve, en mon amourette,
Pas plus d’argent, ô vieux Paris,
Sur la gaieté de Turlurette
Que sur l’aile de la perdrix.

Est-ce qu’on argente la grâce?
Est-ce qu’on dore la beauté?
Je crois, quand l’humble Alizon passe,
Voir la lumière de l’été.

V
Ô Hyménée!

Pancrace entre au lit de Lucinde;
Et l’heureux hymen est bâclé
Quand un maire a mis le coq d’Inde
Avec la fauvette sous clé.

Un docteur tout noir d’encre passe
Avec Cyllanire à son bras;

Un bouc mène au bal une grâce;
L’aurore épouse le fatras.

C’est la vieille histoire éternelle;
Faune et Flore; on pourrait, hélas,
Presque dire: À quoi bon la belle? -
Si la bête n’existait pas.

Dans un vase une clématite,
Qui tremble, et dont l’avril est court!
Je trouve la fleur bien petite,
Et je trouve le pot bien lourd.

Que Philistine est adorable,
Et que Philistin est hideux!
L’épaule blanche à l’affreux râble
S’appuie, en murmurant: Nous deux!

Le capricieux des ténèbres,
Cupidon compose, ô destin!
De toutes ces choses funèbres
Son éclat de rire enfantin.

Fatal amour! Charmant, morose,
Taquin, il prend le mal au mot;
D’autant plus sombre qu’il est rose,
D’autant plus dieu qu’il est marmot!

VI
Hilaritas

Chantez; l’ardent refrain flamboie;
Jurez même, noble ou vilain!
Le chant est un verre de joie
Dont le juron est le trop-plein.

L’homme est heureux sous la tonnelle

Quand il a bien empaqueté
Son rhumatisme de flanelle
Et sa sagesse de gaieté.

Le rire est notre meilleure aile;
Il nous soutient quand nous tombons.
Le philosophe indulgent mêle
Les hommes gais aux hommes bons.

Un mot gai suffit pour abattre.
Ton fier courroux, ô grand Caton,
L'histoire amnistie Henri quatre
Protégé par Jarnicoton.

Soyons joyeux, Dieu le désire.
La joie aux hommes attendris
Montre ses dents, et semble dire:
Moi qui pourrais mordre, je ris.

VII

Meudon

Pourquoi pas montés sur des ânes?
Pourquoi pas au bois de Meudon?
Les sévères sont les profanes;
Ici tout est joie et pardon.

Rien n'est tel que cette ombre verte,
Et que ce calme un peu moqueur,
Pour aller à la découverte
Tout au fond de son propre coeur.

On chante. L'été nous procure
Un bois pour nous perdre. Ô buissons!
L'amour met dans la mousse obscure
La fin de toutes les chansons.

Paris foule ces violettes;
Breda, terre où Ninon déchut,
Y répand ces vives toilettes
À qui l'on dirait presque: Chut!

Prenez garde à ce lieu fantasque!
Ève à Meudon achèvera
Le rire ébauché sous le masque
Avec le diable à l'Opéra.

Le démon dans ces bois repose;
Non le grand vieux Satan fourchu;
Mais ce petit Belzébuth rose
Qu'Agnès cache dans son fichu.

On entre plein de chaste flamme,
L'oeil au ciel, le coeur dilaté;
On est ici conduit par l'âme,
Mais par le faune on est guetté.

La source, c'est la nymphe nue;
L'ombre au doigt vous passe un anneau;
Et le liseron insinue
Ce que conseille le moineau.

Tout chante; et pas de fausses notes.
L'hymne est tendre; et l'esprit de corps
Des fauvettes et des linottes
Éclate en ces profonds accords.

Ici l'aveu que l'âme couve
Échappe aux coeurs les plus discrets;
La clef des champs qu'à terre on trouve
Ouvre le tiroir aux secrets.

Ici l'on sent, dans l'harmonie,
Tout ce que le grand Pan caché

Peut mêler de vague ironie
Au bois sombre où rêve Psyché.

Les belles deviennent jolies;
Les cupidons viennent et vont;
Les roses disent des folies
Et les chardonnerets en font.

La vaste genèse est tournée
Vers son but: renaître à jamais.
Tout vibre; on sent de l’hyménée
Et de l’amour sur les sommets.

Tout veut que tout vive et revive,
Et que les coeurs et que les nids,
L’aube et l’azur, l’onde et la rive,
Et l’âme et Dieu, soient infinis.

Il faut aimer. Et sous l’yeuse,
On sent, dans les beaux soirs d’été,
La profondeur mystérieuse
De cette immense volonté.

Cachant son feu sous sa main rose,
La vestale ici n’entendrait
Que le sarcasme grandiose
De l’aurore et de la forêt.

Le printemps est une revanche.
Ce bois sait à quel point les thyms,
Les joncs, les saules, la pervenche,
Et l’églantier, sont libertins.

La branche cède, l’herbe plie;
L’oiseau rit du prix Montyon;
Toute la nature est remplie
De rappels à la question.

Le hallier sauvage est bien aise
Sous l’oeil serein de Jéhovah,
Quand un papillon déniaise
Une violette, et s’en va.

Je me souviens qu’en mon bas âge,
Ayant à peine dix-sept ans,
Ma candeur un jour fit usage
De tous ces vieux rameaux flottants.

J’employai, rôdant avec celle
Qu’admiraient mes regards heureux,
Toute cette ombre où l’on chancelle,
À me rendre plus amoureux.

Nous fîmes des canapés d’herbes;
Nous nous grisâmes de lilas;
Nous palpitions, joyeux, superbes,
Éblouis, innocents, hélas!

Penchés sur tout, nous respirâmes
L’arbre, le pré, la fleur, Vénus;
Ivres, nous remplissions nos âmes
De tous les souffles inconnus.

Nos baisers devenaient étranges,
De sorte que, sous ces berceaux,
Après avoir été deux anges,
Nous n’étions plus que deux oiseaux.

C’était l’heure où le nid se couche,
Où dans le soir tout se confond;
Une grande lune farouche
Rougissait dans le bois profond.

L’enfant, douce comme une fête,

Qui m’avait en chantant suivi,
Commençait, pâle et stupéfaite,
À trembler de mon oeil ravi;

Son sein soulevait la dentelle...
Homère! ô brouillard de l’Ida:
Marions-nous! s’écria-t-elle,
Et la belle fille gronda:

Cherche un prêtre, et sans plus attendre,
Qu’il nous marie avec deux mots.
Puis elle reprit, sans entendre
Le chuchotement des rameaux,

Sans remarquer dans ce mystère
Le profil des buissons railleurs:
Mais où donc est le presbytère?
Quel est le prêtre de ces fleurs?

Un vieux chêne était là; sa tige
Eût orné le seuil d’un palais.
Le curé de Meudon? Lui dis-je.
L’arbre me dit: C’est Rabelais.

VII

Bas à l’oreille du lecteur

Dans l’amoureux, qu’Éros grise,
L’imbécile est ébauché;
La ponte d’une bêtise
Suit le rêve d’un péché.

Crains les belles. On se laisse
Vaincre aisément par Lola.
Dieu compose de faiblesse
Ces toutes-puissances-là.

C’est en jouant que la femme,
C’est en jouant que l’enfant,
Prennent doucement notre âme.
Le faible est le triomphant.

La vertu, de sa main blanche
Et de son beau fil doré,
Recoud sans cesse la manche
Par où Joseph fut tiré.

IX
Senior est junior

I
Comme de la source on dévie!
Qu’un petit-fils ressemble peu!
Tacite devient Soulavie.
Hercle se change en Palsembleu.

La lyre a fait les mandolines;
Minos a procréé Séguier;
La première des crinolines
Fut une feuille de figuier.

L’amour pour nous n’est présentable
Qu’ivre, coiffé de son bandeau,
Sa petite bedaine à table;
L’antique amour fut buveur d’eau.

La Bible, en ses épithalames,
Bénit l’eau du puits large et rond.
L’homme ancien ne comprend les femmes
Qu’avec des cruches sur le front.

Agar revient de la fontaine,
Sephora revient du torrent,
Sans chanter tonton mirontaine,

Le front sage, et l’oeil ignorant.

La citerne est l’entremetteuse
Du grave mariage hébreu.
Le diable l’emplit et la creuse;
Dieu dans cette eau met le ciel bleu.

Beaux jours. Cantique des cantiques!
Oh! les charmants siècles naïfs!
Comme ils sont jeunes, ces antiques!
Les Baruchs étaient les Baïfs.

C’est le temps du temple aux cent marches,
Et de Ninive, et des sommets
Où les anges aux patriarches
Offraient, pensifs, d’étranges mets.

Ézéchiel en parle encore;
Le ciel s’inquiétait de Job;
On entendait Dieu dès l’aurore
Dire: As-tu déjeuné, Jacob?

II

Paix et sourire à ces temps calmes!
Les nourrices montraient leurs seins;
Et l’arbre produisait des palmes,
Et l’homme produisait des saints.

Nous sommes loin de ces amphores
Ayant pour anses deux bras blancs,
Et de ces coeurs, mêlés d’aurores,
Allant l’un vers l’autre à pas lents.

L’antique passion s’apaise.
Nous sommes un autre âge d’or.
Aimer, c’est vieux. Rosine pèse
Bartholo, puis compte Lindor.

Moins simples, nous sommes plus sages.
Nos amours sont une forêt
Où, vague, au fond des paysages,
La Banque de France apparaît.

III

Rhodope, la reine d’Égypte,
Allait voir Amos dans son trou,
Respects du dôme pour la crypte,
Visite de l’astre au hibou,

Et la pharaonne superbe
Était contente chez Amos
Si la roche offrait un peu d’herbe
Aux longues lèvres des chameaux.

Elle l’adorait satisfaite,
Sans demander d’autre faveur,
Pendant que le morne prophète
Bougonnait dans un coin, rêveur.

Amestris, la Ninon de Thèbe,
Avait à son char deux griffons;
Elle était semblable à l’Érèbe
À cause de ses yeux profonds.

Pour qu’avec un tendre sourire
Elle vînt jusqu’à son chenil,
Le mage Oxus à l’hétaïre
Offrait un rat sacré du Nil.

Un antre traversé de poutres
Avec des clous pour accrocher
Des peaux saignantes et des outres,
Telle était la chambre à coucher.

Près de Sarah, Jod le psalmiste
Dormait là sur le vert genêt,
Chargeant quelque hyène alarmiste
D'aboyer si quelqu'un venait.

Phur, pontife des Cinq Sodomes,
Fut un devin parlant aux vents,
Un voyant parmi les fantômes,
Un borgne parmi les vivants;

Pour un lotus bleu, don inepte,
La blonde Starnabuzaï
Le recevait, comme on accepte
Un abbé qui n'est point haï.

Ségor, bonze à la peau brûlée,
Nu dans les bois, lascif, bourru,
Maigre, invitait Penthésilée
À grignoter un oignon cru.

Chramnès, prêtre au temple d'Électre,
Demeurant, en de noirs pays,
Dans un sépulcre avec un spectre,
Conviait à souper Thaïs.

Thaïs venait, et cette belle,
Coupe en main, le roc pour chevet,
Ayant le prêtre à côté d'elle
Et le spectre en face, buvait.

Dans ce passé crépusculaire,
Les femmes se laissaient charmer
Par les gousses d'ail et l'eau claire
Dont se composait l'Art d'Aimer.

IV

Nos phyllyres, nos Gloriantes,

Nos Lydés aux cheveux flottants
Ont fait beaucoup de variantes
À ce programme des vieux temps.

Aujourd’hui monsignor Nonotte
N’entre chez Blanche au coeur d’acier
Qu’après avoir payé la note
Qu’elle peut avoir chez l’huissier.

Aujourd’hui le roi de Bavière
N’est admis chez doña Carmen
Que s’il apporte une rivière,
De fort belle eau, dans chaque main.

Les belles que sous son feuillage
Retient Bade aux flots non bourbeux,
Ne vont point dans ce vieux village
Pour voir des chariots à boeufs.

Sans argent, Bernis en personne,
Balbutiant son quos ego,
Tremble au moment où sa main sonne
À la porte de Camargo.

D’Ems à Cythère, quel fou rire
Si Hafiz, fumant son chibouck,
Prétendait griser Sylvanire
Avec du vin de peau de bouc!

V
Le coeur ne fait plus de bêtises.
Avoir des chèques est plus doux
Que d’aller sous les frais cytises
Verdir dans l’herbe ses genoux.

Le soir mettre sous clef des piastres
Cause à l’âme un plus tendre émoi

Qu’une rencontre sous les astres
Disant à voix basse: Est-ce toi?

Rien n’enchante plus une amante
Et n’échauffe mieux un coeur froid
Qu’une pile d’or qui s’augmente
Pendant que la pudeur décroît.

Les amours actuels abondent
En combinaisons d’échiquiers.
Doit, Avoir. Nos bergères tondent
Moins de moutons que de banquiers.

Le coeur est le compteur suprême.
La femme enfin a deviné
L’effrayant pouvoir de Barême
Ayant le torse de Phryné.

Tout en chantant Schubert et Webre,
Elle en vient à réaliser
L’application de l’algèbre
À l’amour, à l’âme, au baiser.

Berthe a l’air vierge; on la vénère;
Dans l’azur du rêve elle a lu
Que parfois un millionnaire,
Lourd, vient se prendre à cette glu.

Pour soulager un peu les riches
De leur argent, pesant amas,
Il sied que Paris ait les biches
Et Londres les anonymas.

VI
À tant l’heure l’éventail joue.
C’est plus cher si l’oeil est plus vif.
À Daphnis présentant sa joue

Chloé présente son tarif.

Pasithée, Anna, Circélyre,
Lise au front mollement courbé,
Palmyre en pleurs, Berthe en délire,
S'amourachent par A + B.

Leurs instincts ne sont point volages.
Les mains ouvertes, en rêvant,
Toutes contemplent des feuillages
De bank-notes, tremblant au vent.

On a ces belles, on les dompte,
On est des jeunes gens altiers,
Vivons! et l'on sort d'Amathonte
Par le corridor des dettiers.

Dans tel et tel théâtre bouffe,
La musique vive et sans art
Des écus et des sous étouffe
Les cavatines de Mozart.

Les chanteuses sont ainsi faites
Qu'on est parfois, sous le rideau,
Dévalisé par les fauvettes,
Dans la forêt de Calzado.

VII
Sue un rouble par chaque pore,
Sinon, porte ton coeur plutôt
Au tigre noir de Singapore
Qu'à Flora, qu'embaume Botot.

Femme de cire, Catherine
Glacée, et douce à tout venant,
S'offre, et d'un buste de vitrine
Elle a le sourire tournant.

Oh! ces marchandes de jeunesse!
Stella vend ses soupirs ardents,
Luz vend son rire de faunesse
Cassant des noix avec ses dents.

Rose est pensive; Alba la brune
Est l’asphodèle de Sion;
Glycéris semble au clair de lune
La blancheur dans la vision;

Regardez, c’est Paula, c’est Laure,
C’est Phoebé; dix-huit ans, vingt ans;
Voyez; les jeunes sont l’aurore
Et les vieilles sont le printemps.

Leur sein attend, frais comme un songe,
Effleuré par leurs cheveux blonds,
Que Samuel Bernard y plonge
Son poing brutal plein de doublons.

Au-dessus du juif qui prospère,
Par le plafond ouvert, descend
Le petit Cupidon, grand-père
De tous les baisers d’à présent.

VII

La nuit, la femme tend sa toile.
Tous ses chiffres sont en arrêt,
Non pour dépister une étoile,
Mais pour découvrir Turcaret.

C’est la sombre calculatrice;
Elle a la ruse du dragon;
Elle est fée; et c’est en Jocrisse
Qu’elle transfigure Harpagon.

Elle compose ses trophées
De vins bus, de brelans carrés,
Et de bouteilles décoiffées,
Et de financiers dédorés.

Et puis, tout change et tourne en elle;
L’aile de Cupidon connaît
Ses sens, son coeur, sa tête, et l’aile
Des moulins connaît son bonnet.

Sa vie est un bruyant poème;
On songe, on rit, point de souci,
Et les verres sont de Bohême,
Et les buveurs en sont aussi.

Ce monstre adorable et terrible
Ne dis pas Toujours, mais Encor!
Et, rempli de nos coeurs, son crible
Ne laisse passer que notre or.

Hélas! pourquoi ces laideurs basses
S’imprimant toutes à la fois,
Dieu profond! sur ces jeunes grâces
Faites pour chanter dans les bois!

IX

Buvez! riez! - moi je m’obstine
Aux songes de l’amour ancien;
Je sens en moi l’âme enfantine
D’Homère, vieux musicien.

Je vis aux champs; j’aime et je rêve;
Je suis bucolique et berger;
Je dédie aux dents blanches d’Ève
Tous les pommiers de mon verger.

Je m’appelle Amyntas, Mnasyle,

Qui vous voudrez; je dis: Croyons.
Pensons, aimons! et je m’exile
Dans les parfums et les rayons.

À peine en l’idylle décente
Entend-on le bruit d’un baiser.
La prairie est une innocente
Qu’il ne faut point scandaliser.

Tout en soupirant comme Horace,
Je vois ramper dans le champ noir,
Avec des reflets de cuirasse,
Les grands socs qu’on traîne le soir.

J’habite avec l’arbre et la plante;
Je ne suis jamais fatigué
De regarder la marche lente
Des vaches qui passent le gué.

J’entends, debout sur quelque cime,
Le chant qu’un nid sous un buisson
Mêle au blêmissement sublime
D’un lever d’astre à l’horizon.

Je suis l’auditeur solitaire;
Et j’écoute en moi, hors de moi,
Le Je ne sais qui du mystère
Murmurant le Je ne sais quoi.

J’aime l’aube ardente et rougie,
Le midi, les cieux éblouis,
La flamme, et j’ai la nostalgie
Du soleil, mon ancien pays.

Le matin, toute la nature
Vocalise, fredonne, rit,
Je songe. L’aurore est si pure,

Et les oiseaux ont tant d’esprit!

Tout chante, geai, pinson, linotte,
Bouvreuil, alouette au zénith,
Et la source ajoute sa note,
Et le vent parle, et Dieu bénit.

J’aime toute cette musique,
Ces refrains, jamais importuns,
Et le bon vieux plain-chant classique
Des chênes aux capuchons bruns.

Je vous mets au défi de faire
Une plus charmante chanson
Que l’eau vive où Jeanne et Néère
Trempent leurs pieds dans le cresson.

III

POUR JEANNE SEULE

I

Je ne me mets pas en peine
Du clocher ni du beffroi;
Je ne sais rien de la reine,
Et je ne sais rien du roi;

J’ignore, je le confesse,
Si le seigneur est hautain,
Si le curé dit la messe
En grec ou bien en latin;

S’il faut qu’on pleure ou qu’on danse,
Si les nids jasent entr’eux;
Mais sais-tu ce que je pense?
C’est que je suis amoureux.

Sais-tu, Jeanne, à quoi je rêve?
C’est au mouvement d’oiseau
De ton pied blanc qui se lève
Quand tu passes le ruisseau.

Et sais-tu ce qui me gêne?
C’est qu’à travers l’horizon,
Jeanne, une invisible chaîne
Me tire vers ta maison.

Et sais-tu ce qui m’ennuie?
C’est l’air charmant et vainqueur,
Jeanne, dont tu fais la pluie
Et le beau temps dans mon coeur.

Et sais-tu ce qui m’occupe,
Jeanne? c’est que j’aime mieux
La moindre fleur de ta jupe
Que tous les astres des cieux.

II

Jeanne chante; elle se penche
Et s’envole; elle me plaît;
Et, comme de branche en branche,
Va de couplet en couplet.

De quoi donc me parlait-elle?
Avec sa fleur au corset,
Et l’aube dans sa prunelle,
Qu’est-ce donc qu’elle disait?

Parlait-elle de la gloire,
Des camps, du ciel, du drapeau,
Ou de ce qu’il faut de moire
Au bavolet d’un chapeau?

Son intention fut-elle
De troubler l’esprit voilé
Que Dieu dans ma chair mortelle
Et frémissante a mêlé?

Je ne sais. J’écoute encore.
Était-ce psaume ou chanson?
Les fauvettes de l’aurore
Donnent le même frisson.

J’étais comme une fête;
J’essayais un vague essor;
J’eusse voulu sur ma tête
Mettre une couronne d’or,

Et voir sa beauté sans voiles,
Et joindre à mes jours ses jours,
Et prendre au ciel les étoiles,
Et qu’on vînt à mon secours!

J’étais ivre d’une femme;
Mal charmant qui fait mourir.
Hélas! je me sentais l’âme
Touchée et prête à s’ouvrir;

Car pour qu’un cerveau se fêle
Et s’échappe en songes vains,
Il suffit du bout de l’aile
D’un ces oiseaux divins.

III

Duel en juin

À un ami

Jeanne a laissé de son jarret

Tomber un joli ruban rose
Qu’en vers on diviniserait,
Qu’on baise simplement en prose.

Comme femme elle met des bas,
Comme ange elle a droit à des ailes;
Résultat: demain je me bats.
Les jours sont longs, les nuits sont belles,

On fait les foins, et ce barbon,
L’usage, roi de l’équipée,
Veut qu’on prenne un pré qui sent bon
Pour se donner des coups d’épée.

Pendant qu’aux lueurs du matin
La lame à la lame est croisée,
Dans l’herbe humide et dans le thym,
Les grives boivent la rosée.

Tu sais ce marquis insolent?
Il ordonne, il rit. Jamais ivre
Et toujours gris; c’est son talent.
Il faut ou le fuir, ou le suivre.

Qui le fuit a l’air d’un poltron,
Qui le suit est un imbécile.
Il est jeune, gai, fanfaron,
Leste, vif, pétulant, fossile.

Il hait Voltaire; il se croit né
Pas tout à fait comme les autres;
Il sert la messe, il sert Phryné;
Il mêle Gnide aux patenôtres.

Le ruban perdu, ce muguet
L’a trouvé; quelle bonne fête!
Il s’en est vanté chez Saguet;

Moi, je passais par là, tout bête;

J’analysais, précisément
Dans cet instant-là, les bastilles,
Les trônes, Dieu, le firmament,
Et les rubans des jeunes filles;

Et j’entendis un quolibet;
Comme il s’en donnait, le coq d’Inde!
Car on insulte dans Babet
Ce qu’on adore dans Florinde.

Le marquis agitait en l’air
Un fil, un chiffon, quelque chose
Qui parfois semblait un éclair
Et parfois semblait une rose.

Tout de suite je reconnus
Ce diminutif admirable
De la ceinture de Vénus.
J’aime, donc je suis misérable;

Mon pouls dans mes tempes battait;
Et le marquis riait de Jeanne!
Le soir la campagne se tait,
Le vent dort, le nuage flâne;

Mais le poète a le frisson,
Il se sent extraordinaire,
Il va, couvant une chanson
Dans laquelle roule un tonnerre.

Je me dis: - Cyrus dégaina
Pour reprendre une bandelette
De la reine Abaïdorna
Que ronge aujourd’hui la belette.

Serais-je moins brave et moins beau
Que Cyrus, roi d’Ur et de Sarde?
Cette reine dans son tombeau
Vaut-elle Jeanne en sa mansarde? -

Faire le siège d’un ruban!
Quelle oeuvre! il faut un art farouche;
Et ce n’est pas trop d’un Vauban
Complété par un Scaramouche.

Le marquis barrait le chemin.
Prompt comme Joubert sur l’Adige,
J’arrachai l’objet de sa main.
Monsieur! cria-t-il. Soit, lui dis-je.

Il se dressa tout en courroux,
Et moi, je pris ma mine altière.
Je suis marquis, dit-il, et vous?
Chevalier de la Jarretière.

Soyez deux. - J’aurai mon témoin.
Je vous tue, et je vous tiens quitte.
Où ça? Là, dans ces tas de foin.
Vous en déjeunerez ensuite.

C’est pourquoi demain, réveillés,
Les faunes, au bruit des rapières,
Derrière les buissons mouillés,
Ouvriront leurs vagues paupières.

IV

La nature est pleine d’amour,
Jeanne, autour de nos humbles joies;
Et les fleurs semblent tour à tour
Se dresser pour que tu les voies.

Vive Angélique! à bas Orgon!
L’hiver, qu’insultent nos huées,
Recule, et son profil bougon
Va s’effaçant dans les nuées.

La sérénité de nos coeurs,
Où chantent les bonheurs sans nombre,
Complète, en ces doux mois vainqueurs,
L’évanouissement de l’ombre.

Juin couvre de fleurs les sommets,
Et dit partout les mêmes choses;
Mais est-ce qu’on se plaint jamais
De la prolixité des roses?

L’hirondelle, sur ton front pur,
Vient si près de tes yeux fidèles
Qu’on pourrait compter dans l’azur
Toutes les plumes de ses ailes.

Ta grâce est un rayon charmant;
Ta jeunesse, enfantine encore,
Éclaire le bleu firmament,
Et renvoie au ciel de l’aurore.

De sa ressemblance avec toi
Le lys pur sourit dans sa gloire;
Ton âme est une urne de foi
Où la colombe voudrait boire.

V

Ami, j’ai quitté vos fêtes.
Mon esprit, à demi-voix,
Hors de tout ce que vous faites,
Est appelé par les bois.

J’irai, loin des murs de marbre,
Tant que je pourrai marcher,
Fraterniser avec l’arbre,
La fauvette et le rocher.

Je fuirai loin de la ville
Tant que Dieu clément et doux
Voudra me mettre un peu d’huile
Entre les os des genoux.

Ne va pas croire du reste
Que, bucolique et hautain,
J’exige, pour être agreste,
Le vieux champ grec ou latin;

Ne crois pas que ma pensée,
Vierge au soupir étouffé,
Ne sachant où prendre Alcée,
Se rabatte sur d’Urfé;

Ne crois pas que je demande
L’Hémus où Virgile erra.
Dans de la terre normande
Mon églogue poussera.

Pour mon vers, que l’air secoue,
Les pommiers sont suffisants;
Et mes bergers, je l’avoue,
Ami, sont des paysans.

Mon idylle est ainsi faite;
Franche, elle n’a pas besoin
D’avoir dans miel l’Hymète
Et l’Arcadie en son foin.

Elle chante, et se contente,
Sur l’herbe où je viens m’asseoir,

De l’haleine haletante
Du boeuf qui rentre le soir.

Elle n’est point misérable
Et ne pense pas déchoir
Parce qu’Alain, sous l’érable,
Ôte à Toinon son mouchoir.

Elle honore Théocrite;
Mais ne se fâche pas trop
Que la fleur soit Marguerite
Et que l’oiseau soit Pierrot.

J’aime les murs pleins de fentes
D’où sortent les liserons,
Et les mouches triomphantes
Qui soufflent dans leurs clairons.

J’aime l’église et ses tombes,
L’invalide et son bâton;
J’aime, autant que les colombes
Qui jadis venaient, dit-on,

Conter leurs métempsycoses
À Terpandre dans Lesbos,
Les petites filles roses
Sortant du prêche en sabots.

J’aime autant Sedaine et Jeanne
Qu’Orphée et Pratérynnis.
Le blé pousse, l’oiseau plane,
Et les cieux sont infinis.

VI
À Jeanne

Ces lieux sont purs; tu les complètes.

Ce bois, loin des sentiers battus,
Semble avoir fait des violettes,
Jeanne, avec toutes tes vertus.

L’aurore ressemble à ton âge;
Jeanne, il existe sous les cieux
On ne sait quel doux voisinage
Des bons coeurs avec les beaux lieux.

Tout ce vallon est une fête
Qui t’offre son humble bonheur;
C’est un nimbe autour de ta tête;
C’est un éden en ton honneur.

Tout ce qui t’approche désire
Se faire regarder par toi,
Sachant que ta chanson, ton rire,
Et ton front, sont de bonne foi.

Ô Jeanne, ta douceur est telle
Qu’en errant dans ces bois bénis,
Elle fait dresser devant elle
Les petites têtes des nids.

VII
Les étoiles filantes

I
À qui donc le grand ciel sombre
Jette-t-il ses astres d’or?
Pluie éclatante de l’ombre,
Ils tombent... - Encor! encor!

Encor! - lueurs éloignées,
Feux purs, pâles orients,
Ils scintillent... - ô poignées
De diamant effrayants!

C’est de la splendeur qui rôde,
Ce sont des points univers,
La foudre dans l’émeraude!
Des bleuets dans des éclairs!

Réalités et chimères
Traversant nos soirs d’été!
Escarboucles éphémères
De l’obscure éternité!

De quelle main sortent-elles?
Cieux, à qui donc jette-t-on
Ces tourbillons d’étincelles?
Est-ce à l’âme de Platon?

Est-ce à l’esprit de Virgile?
Est-ce aux monts? est-ce au flot vert?
Est-ce à l’immense évangile
Que Jésus-Christ tient ouvert?

Est-ce à la tiare énorme
De quelque Moïse enfant
Dont l’âme a déjà la forme
Du firmament triomphant?

Ces feux-là vont-ils aux prières?
À qui l’Inconnu profond
Ajoute-t-il ces lumières,
Vagues flammes de son front?

Est-ce, dans l’azur superbe,
Aux religions que Dieu,
Pour accentuer son verbe,
Jette ces langues de feu?

Est-ce au-dessus de la Bible

Que flamboie, éclate et luit
L’éparpillement terrible
Du sombre écrin de la nuit?

Nos questions en vain pressent
Le ciel, fatal ou béni.
Qui peut dire à qui s’adressent
Ces envois de l’infini?

Qu’est-ce que c’est que ces chutes
D’éclairs au ciel arrachés?
Mystère! Sont-ce des luttes?
Sont-ce des hymens? Cherchez.

Sont-ce les anges du soufre?
Voyons-nous quelque essaim bleu
D’argyraspides du gouffre
Fuir sur des chevaux de feu?

Est-ce le Dieu des désastres,
Le Sabaoth irrité,
Qui lapide avec des astres
Quelque soleil révolté?

II

Mais qu’importe! l’herbe est verte,
Et c’est l’été! Ne pensons,
Jeanne qu’à l’ombre entrouverte,
Qu’aux parfums et qu’aux chansons.

La grande saison joyeuse
Nous offre les prés, les eaux,
Les cressons mouillés, l’yeuse,
Et l’exemple des oiseaux.

L’été, vainqueur des tempêtes,
Doreur des cieux essuyés,

Met des rayons sur nos têtes
Et des fraises sous nos pieds.

Été sacré! l’air soupire.
Dieu, qui veut tout apaiser,
Fait le jour pour le sourire
Et la nuit pour le baiser.

L’étang frémit sous les aulnes;
La plaine est un gouffre d’or
Où court, dans les grands blés jaunes,
Le frisson de messidor.

C’est l’instant qu’il faut qu’on aime,
Et qu’on le dise aux forêts,
Et qu’on ait pour but suprême
La mousse des antres frais!

À quoi bon songer aux choses
Qui se passent dans les cieux?
Viens, donnons notre âme aux roses;
C’est ce qui l’emplit le mieux.

Viens, laissons là tous ces rêves,
Puisque nous sommes aux mois
Où les charmilles, les grèves,
Et les coeurs, sont pleins de voix!

L’amant entraîne l’amante,
Enhardi dans son dessein
Par la trahison charmante
Du fichu montrant le sein.

Ton pied sous ta robe passe,
Jeanne, et j’aime mieux le voir,
Que d’écouter dans l’espace
Les sombres strophes du soir.

Il ne faut pas craindre, ô belle,
De montrer aux prés fleuris
Qu’on est jeune, peu rebelle,
Blanche, et qu’on vient de Paris!

La campagne est caressante
Au frais amour ébloui;
L’arbre est gai pourvu qu’il sente
Que Jeanne va dire oui.

Aimons-nous! et que les sphères
Fassent ce qu’elles voudront!
Il est nuit; dans les clairières
Les chansons dansent en rond;

L’ode court dans les rosées;
Tout chante; et dans les torrents
Les idylles déchaussées
Baignent leurs pieds transparents;

La bacchanale de l’ombre
Se célèbre vaguement
Sous les feuillages sans nombre
Pénétrés de firmament;

Les lutins, les hirondelles,
Entrevus, évanouis,
Font un ravissant bruit d’ailes
Dans le bleue horreur des nuits;

La fauvette et la sirène
Chantent des chants alternés
Dans l’immense ombre sereine
Qui dit aux âmes: Venez!

Car les solitudes aiment

Ces caresses, ces frissons,
Et, le soir, les rameaux sèment
Les sylphes sur les gazons;

L’elfe tombe des lianes
Avec des fleurs plein les mains;
On voit de pâles dianes
Dans la lueur des chemins;

L’ondin baise les nymphées;
Le hallier rit quand il sent
Les courbures que les fées
Font aux brins d’herbe en passant.

Viens; les rossignols t’écoutent;
Et l’éden n’est pas détruit
Par deux amants qui s’ajoutent
À ces noces de la nuit.

Viens, qu’en son nid qui verdoie,
Le moineau bohémien
Soit jaloux de voir ma joie,
Et ton coeur si près du mien!

Charmons l’arbre et sa ramure
Du tendre accompagnement
Que nous faisons au murmure
Des feuilles, en nous aimant.

À la face des mystères,
Crions que nous nous aimons!
Les grands chênes solitaires
Y consentent sur les monts.

Ô Jeanne, c’est pour ces fêtes,
Pour ces gaietés, pour ces chants,
Pour ces amours, que sont faites

Toutes les grâces des champs!

Ne tremble pas, quoiqu’un songe
Emplisse mes yeux ardents.
Ne crains d’eux aucun mensonge
Puisque mon âme est dedans.

Reste chaste sans panique.
Sois charmante avec grandeur.
L’épaisseur de la tunique,
Jeanne, rend l’amour boudeur.

Pas de terreur, pas de transe;
Le ciel diaphane absout
Du péché de transparence
La gaze du canezout.

La nature est attendrie;
Il faut vivre! Il faut errer
Dans la douce effronterie
De rire et de s’adorer.

Viens, aime, oublions le monde,
Mêlons l’âme à l’âme, et vois
Monter la lune profonde
Entre les branches des bois!

III

Les deux amants, sous la nue,
Songent, charmants et vermeils... -
L’immensité continue
Ses semailles de soleils.

À travers le ciel sonore,
Tandis que, du haut des nuits,
Pleuvent, poussière d’aurore,
Les astres épanouis,

Tant de feux tombants qui perce
Le zénith vaste et bruni,
Braise énorme que disperse
L’encensoir de l’infini;

En bas, parmi la rosée,
Étalant l’arum, l’oeillet,
La pervenche, la pensée,
Le lys, lueur de juillet,

De brume à demi noyée,
Au centre de la forêt,
La prairie est déployée,
Et frissonne, et l’on dirait

Que la terre, sous les voiles
Des grands bois mouillés de pleurs,
Pour recevoir les étoiles
Tend son tablier de fleurs.

IV

POUR D’AUTRES

I

Mon vers, s’il faut te le redire,
On veut te griser dans les bois.
Les faunes ont caché ta lyre
Et mis à sa place un hautbois.

Va donc. La fête est commencée;
L’oiseau mange en herbe le blé;
L’abeille est ivre de rosée;
Mai rit, dans les fleurs attablé.

Emmène tes deux camarades,
L’esprit gaulois, l’esprit latin;
Ne crois pas que tu te dégrades
Dans la lavande et dans le thym.

Sans être effronté, sois agile;
Entre gaiement dans le vallon;
Presse un peu le pas de Virgile,
Retiens par la manche Villon.

Tu devras boire à coupe pleine,
Et de ce soin Pan a chargé
La Jeanneton de La Fontaine
Qu’Horace appelait Lalagé.

On t’attend. La fleur est penchée
Dans les antres diluviens;
Et Silène, à chaque bouchée,
S’interrompt pour voir si tu viens.

II
Jour de fête

Aux environs de Paris

Midi chauffe et sèche la mousse;
Les champs sont pleins de tambourins;
On voit dans une lueur douce
Des groupes vagues et sereins.

Là-bas, à l’horizon, poudroie
Le vieux donjon de saint Louis;
Le soleil dans toute sa joie
Accable les champs éblouis.

L’air brûlant fait, sous ses haleines
Sans murmures et sans échos,

Luire en la fournaise des plaines
La braise des coquelicots.

Les brebis paissent inégales;
Le jour est splendide et dormant;
Presque pas d’ombre; les cigales
Chantent sous le bleu flamboiement.

Voilà les avoines rentrées.
Trêve au travail. Amis, du vin!
De larges tonnes éventrées
Sort l’éclat de rire divin.

Le buveur chancelle à la table
Qui boite fraternellement.
L’ivrogne se sent véritable;
Il oublie, ô clair firmament,

Tout, la ligne droite, la gêne,
La loi, le gendarme, l’effroi,
L’ordre; et l’échalas de Surène
Raille le poteau de l’octroi.

L’âne broute, vieux philosophe;
L’oreille est longue; l’âne en rit,
Peu troublé d’un excès d’étoffe,
Et content si le pré fleurit.

Les enfants courent par volée.
Clichy montre, honneur aux anciens!
Sa grande muraille étoilée
Par la mitraille des Prussiens.

La charrette roule et cahote;
Paris élève au loin sa voix,
Noir chiffonnier qui dans sa hotte
Porte le sombre tas des rois.

On voit au loin les cheminées
Et les dômes d’azur voilés;
Des filles passent, couronnées
De joie et de fleurs, dans les blés.

III
La bataille commença.
Comment? Par un doux sourire.
Elle me dit: Comme ça,
Vous ne voulez pas m’écrire?

 Un billet doux? Non, des vers.
 Je n’en fais point, répondis-je. -
Ainsi parfois de travers
Le dialogue voltige.

Après le sourire vint
Un regard, oh! qu’elle est fière!
Moi, candidat quinze-vingt,
Je me dis: Elle est rosière.

Et je me mis à songer
À cent vertus, rehaussées
Par mes mauvaises pensées
D’adolescent en danger.

Je me taisais, cela passe
Pour puissance et profondeur.
Son sourire était la grâce.
Et son regard la pudeur.

Ce regard et ce sourire
M’entraient dans l’âme. Soudain,
Elle chanta. Comment dire
Ce murmure de l’Éden.

Cette voix grave, touchante,
Tendre, aux soupirs nuancés!...
Quoi! m’écriai-je, méchante,
Vous achevez les blessés!

IV
Lisbeth

Le jour, d’un bonhomme sage
J’ai l’auguste escarpement;
Je me conforme à l’usage
D’être abruti doctement,

Je me scrute et me dissèque,
Je me compare au poncif
De l’homme que fit Senèque
Sur sa table d’or massif.

Je chasse la joie agile.
Je profite du matin
Pour regarder dans Virgile
Un paysage en latin.

Je lis Lactance, Ildefonse,
Saint Ambroise, comme il sied
Et Juste Lipse, où j’enfonce
Souvent, jusqu’à perdre pied.

Je me dis: Vis dans les sages.
Toujours l’honnête homme ouvrit
La fenêtre des vieux âges
Pour aérer son esprit.

Et je m’en vais sur la cime
Dont Platon sait le chemin.
Je me dis: Soyons sublime!
Mais je redeviens humain.

Et mon âme est confondue,
Et mon orgueil est dissous,
Par une alcôve tendue
D'un papier de quatre sous,

Et l'amour, ce doux maroufle,
Est le maître en ma maison,
Tous les soirs, quand Lisbeth souffle
Sa chandelle et ma raison.

V

Chelles

J'aime Chelle et ses cressonnières,
Et le doux tic-tac des moulins
Et des coeurs, autour des meunières;
Quant aux blancs meuniers, je les plains.

Les meunières aussi sont blanches;
C'est pourquoi je vais là souvent
Mêler ma rêverie aux branches
Des aulnes qui tremblent au vent.

J'ai l'air d'un pèlerin; les filles
Me parlent, gardant leur troupeau;
Je ris, j'ai parfois des coquilles
Avec des fleurs, sur mon chapeau.

Quand j'arrive avec mon caniche,
Chelles, bourg dévot et coquet,
Croit voir passer, fuyant leur niche,
Saint Roch, et son chien saint Roquet.

Ces effets de ma silhouette
M'occupent peu; je vais marchant,
Tâchant de prendre à l'alouette

Une ou deux strophes de son chant.

J’admire les papillons frêles
Dans les ronces du vieux castel;
Je ne touche point à leurs ailes.
Un papillon est un pastel.

Je suis un fou qui semble un sage.
J’emplis, assis dans le printemps,
Du grand trouble du paysage
Mes yeux vaguement éclatants.

Ô belle meunière de Chelles,
Le songeur te guette effaré
Quand tu montes à tes échelles,
Sûre de ton bas bien tiré.

VI
Dizain de femmes

Une de plus que les muses;
Elles sont dix. On croirait,
Quand leurs jeunes voix confuses
Bruissent dans la forêt,

Entendre, sous les caresses
Des grands vieux chênes boudeurs,
Un brouhaha de déesses
Passant dans les profondeurs.

Elles sont dix châtelaines
De tout le pays voisin.
La ruche vers leurs haleines
Envoie en chantant l’essaim.

Elles sont dix belles folles,
Démons dont je suis cagot;

Obtenant des auréoles
Et méritant le fagot.

Que de coeurs cela dérobe,
Même à nous autres manants!
Chacune étale à sa robe
Quatre volants frissonnants,

Et court par les bois, sylphide
Toute parée, en dépit
De la griffe qui, perfide,
Dans les ronces se tapit.

Oh! ces anges de la terre!
Pensifs, nous les décoiffons;
Nous adorons le mystère
De la robe aux plis profonds.

Jadis Vénus sur la grève
N’avait pas l’attrait taquin
Du jupon qui se soulève
Pour montrer le brodequin.

Les antiques Arthémises
Avaient des fronts élégants,
Mais n’étaient pas si bien mises
Et ne portaient point de gants.

La gaze ressemble au rêve;
Le satin, au pli glacé,
Brille, et sa toilette achève
Ce que l’oeil a commencé.

La marquise en sa calèche
Plaît, même au butor narquois;
Car la grâce est une flèche
Dont la mode est le carquois.

L’homme, sot par étiquette,
Se tient droit sur son ergot;
Mais Dieu créa la coquette
Dès qu’il eut fait le nigaud.

Oh! toutes ces jeunes femmes,
Ces yeux où flambe midi,
Ces fleurs, ces chiffons, ces âmes,
Quelle forêt de Bondy!

Non, rien ne nous dévalise
Comme un minois habillé,
Et comme une Cydalise
Où Chapron a travaillé!

Les jupes sont meurtrières.
La femme est un canevas
Que, dans l’ombre, aux couturières
Proposent les Jéhovahs.

Cette aiguille qui l’arrange
D’une certaine façon
Lui donne la force étrange
D’un rayon dans un frisson.

Un ruban est une embûche,
Une guimpe est un péril;
Et, dans l’Éden, où trébuche
La nature à son avril,

Satan - que le diable enlève! -
N’eût pas risqué son pied-bot
Si Dieu sur les cheveux d’Ève
Eût mis un chapeau d’Herbaut.

Toutes les dix, sous les voûtes,

Des grands arbres, vont chantant;
On est amoureux de toutes;
On est farouche et content.

On les compare, on hésite
Entre ces robes qui font
La lueur d’une visite
Arrivant du ciel profond.

Oh! pour plaire à cette moire,
À ce gros de Tours flambé,
On se rêve plein de gloire,
On voudrait être un abbé.

On sort du hallier champêtre,
La tête basse, à pas lents,
Le coeur pris, dans ce bois traître,
Par les quarante volants.

VII

Choses écrites à Créteil

Sachez qu’hier, de ma lucarne,
J’ai vu, j’ai couvert de clins d’yeux
Une fille qui dans la Marne
Lavait des torchons radieux.

Près d’un vieux pont, dans les saulées,
Elle lavait, allait, venait;
L’aube et la brise étaient mêlées
À la grâce de son bonnet.

Je la voyais de loin. Sa mante
L’entourait de plis palpitants.
Aux folles broussailles qu’augmente
L’intempérance du printemps,

Aux buissons que le vent soulève,
Que juin et mai, frais barbouilleurs,
Foulant la cuve de la sève,
Couvrent d’une écume de fleurs,

Aux sureaux pleins de mouches sombres,
Aux genêts du bord, tous divers
Aux joncs échevelant leurs ombres
Dans la lumière des flots verts,

Elle accrochait des loques blanches,
Je ne sais quels haillons charmants
Qui me jetaient, parmi les branches,
De profonds éblouissements.

Ces nippes, dans l’aube dorée,
Semblaient, sous l’aulne et le bouleau,
Les blancs cygnes de Cythérée
Battant de l’aile au bord de l’eau.

Des cupidons, fraîche couvée,
Me montraient son pied fait au tour;
Sa jupe semblait relevée
Par le petit doigt de l’amour.

On voyait, je vous le déclare,
Un peu plus haut que le genou.
Sous un pampre un vieux faune hilare
Murmurait tout bas: Casse-cou!

Je quittai ma chambre d’auberge,
En souriant comme un bandit;
Et je descendis sur la berge
Qu’une herbe, glissante, verdit.

Je pris un air incendiaire
Je m’adossai contre un pilier,

Et je lui dis: - “ Ô lavandière!
(Blanchisseuse étant familier)

“ L’oiseau gazouille, l’agneau bêle,
“ Gloire à ce rivage écarté!
“ Lavandière, vous êtes belle.
“ Votre rire est de la clarté.

“ Je suis capable de faiblesses.
“ Ô lavandière, quel beau jour!
“ Les fauvettes sont des drôlesses
“ Qui chantent des chansons d’amour.

“ Voilà six mille ans que les roses
“ Conseillent, en se prodiguant,
“ L’amour aux coeurs les plus moroses.
“ Avril est un vieil intrigant.

“ Les rois sont ceux qu’adorent celles
“ Qui sont charmantes comme vous;
“ La Marne est pleine d’étincelles;
“ Femme, le ciel immense est doux.

“ Ô laveuse à la taille mince
“ Qui vous aime est dans un palais.
“ Si vous vouliez, je serais prince;
“ Je serais dieu, si tu voulais. -”

La blanchisseuse, gaie et tendre,
Sourit, et, dans le hameau noir,
Sa mère au loin cessa d’entendre
Le bruit vertueux du battoir.

Les vieillards grondent et reprochent,
Mais, ô jeunesse! il faut oser.
Deux sourires qui se rapprochent
Finissent par faire un baiser.

Je m’arrête. L’idylle est douce,
Mais ne veut pas, je vous le dis,
Qu’au delà du baiser on pousse
La peinture du paradis.

VIII
Le lendemain

Un vase, flanqué d’un masque,
En faïence de Courtrai,
Vieille floraison fantasque
Où j’ai mis un rosier vrai,

Sur ma fenêtre grimace,
Et, quoiqu’il soit assez laid,
Ce matin, du toit d’en face,
Un merle ami lui parlait.

Le merle, oiseau leste et braque,
Bavard jamais enrhumé,
Est pitre dans la baraque
Toute en fleurs, du mois de mai.

Il contait au pot aux roses
Un effronté boniment,
Car il faut de grosses choses
Pour faire rire un Flamand.

Sur une patte, et l’air farce,
Et comme on vide un panier,
Il jetait sa verve éparse
De son toit à mon grenier.

Gare au mauvais goût des merles!
J’omets ses propos hardis;
Son bec semait peu de perles;

Et moi, rêveur, je me dis:

La minute est opportune;
Je suis à m’éprendre enclin;
Puisque j’ai cette fortune
De rencontrer un malin,

Il faut que je le consulte
Sur ma conquête d’hier.
Et je cria: Merle adulte,
Sais-tu pourquoi je suis fier?

Il dit, gardant sa posture,
Semblable au diable boiteux:
C’est pour la même aventure
Dont Gros-Guillaume est honteux.

IX

Fuis l’éden des anges déchus;
Ami, prends garde aux belles filles;
Redoute à Paris les fichus,
Redoute à Madrid les mantilles.

Tremble pour tes ailes, oiseau,
Et pour tes fils, marionnette.
Crains un peu l’oeil de Calypso,
Et crains beaucoup l’oeil de Jeannette.

Quand leur tendresse a commencé,
Notre servitude est prochaine.
Veux-tu savoir leur A B C?
Ami, c’est Amour, Baiser, Chaîne.

Le soleil dore une prison,
Un rosier parfume une geôle,
Et c’est là, vois-tu, la façon

Dont une fille nous enjôle.

Pris, on a sa pensée au vent
Et dans l’âme une sombre lyre,
Et bien souvent on pleure avant
Qu’on ait eu le temps de sourire.

Viens dans les prés, le gai printemps
Fait frissonner les vastes chênes,
L’herbe rit, les bois sont contents,
Chantons! Oh, les claires fontaines!

X

L’enfant avril est le frère
De l’enfant amour; tous deux
Travaillent en sens contraire
À notre coeur hasardeux.

L’enfant amour nous rend traîtres,
L’enfant avril nous rend fous.
Ce sont deux petits prêtres
Du supplice immense et doux.

La mousse des prés exhale
Avril, qui chante drinn drinn,
Et met une succursale
De Cythère à Gretna-Green.

Avril, dont la fraîche embûche
A nos vices pour claqueurs,
De ses petits doigts épluche
Nos scrupules dans nos coeurs.

Cependant, il est immense;
Cet enfant est un géant;
Il se mêle à la démence

Qu’a l’Éternel en le créant.

Lorsqu’il faut que tout rayonne,
Et que tout paie un tribut,
Avril se proportionne
À l’énormité du but.

La rosée est son mystère;
Travail profond! sa lueur
Au front sacré de la terre
Fait perler cette sueur.

XI

Post-scriptum des rêves

C’était du temps que j’étais jeune;
Je maigrissais; rien ne maigrit
Comme cette espèce de jeûne
Qu’on appelle nourrir l’esprit.

J’étais devenu vieux, timide,
Et jaune comme un parchemin,
À l’ombre de la pyramide
Des bouquins de l’esprit humain.

Tous ces tomes que l’âge rogne
Couvraient ma planche et ma cloison.
J’étais parfois comme un ivrogne
Tant je m’emplissais de raison.

Cent bibles encombraient ma table;
Cent systèmes étaient dedans;
On eût, par le plus véritable,
Pu se faire arracher les dents.

Un jour que je lisais Jamblique,
Callinique, Augustin, Plotin,

Un nain tout noir à mine oblique
Parut et me dit en latin:

“ Ne va pas plus loin. Jette l’ancre,
“ Fils, contemple en moi ton ancien,
“ Je m’appelle Bouteille-à-l’encre;
“ Je suis métaphysicien.

“ Ton front fait du tort à ton ventre.
“ Je viens te dire le fin mot
“ De tous ces livres où l’on entre
“ Jocrisse et d’où l’on sort grimaud.

“ Amuse-toi. Sois jeune, et digne
“ De l’aurore et des fleurs. Isis
“ Ne donnait pas d’autre consigne
“ Aux sages que l’ombre a moisis.

“ Un verre de vin sans litharge
“ Vaut mieux, quand l’homme le boit pur,
“ Que tous ces tomes dont la charge
“ Ennuie énormément ton mur.

“ Une bamboche à la Chaumière,
“ D’où l’on éloigne avec soin l’eau,
“ Contient cent fois plus de lumière
“ Que Longin traduit par Boileau.

“ Hermès avec sa bandelette
“ Occupe ton coeur grave et noir;
“ Bacon est le livre où s’allaite
“ Ton esprit, marmot du savoir.

“ Si Ninette, la giletière,
“ Veut la bandelette d’Hermès
“ Pour s’en faire une jarretière,
“ Donne-la-lui sans dire mais.

“ Si Fanchette ou Landerirette
“ Prend dans ton Bacon radieux
“ Du papier pour sa cigarette,
“ Fils des muses, rends grâce aux dieux.

“ Veille, étude, ennui, patience,
“ Travail, cela brûle les yeux;
“ L’unique but de la science
“ C’est d’être immensément joyeux.

“ Le vrai savant cherche et combine
“ Jusqu’à ce que de son bouquin
“ Il jaillisse une Colombine
“ Qui l’accepte pour Arlequin.

“ Maxime: N’être point morose,
“ N’être pas bête, tout goûter,
“ Dédier son nez à la rose,
“ Sa bouche à la femme, et chanter.

“ Les anciens vivaient de la sorte;
“ Mais vous êtes dupes, vous tous,
“ De la fausse barbe que porte
“ Le profil grec de ces vieux fous.

“ Fils, tous ces austères visages
“ Sur les plaisirs étaient penchés.
“ L’homme ayant inventé sept sages,
“ Le bon Dieu créa sept péchés.

“ Ô docteurs, comme vous rampâtes!
“ Campaspe est nue en son grenier
“ Sur Aristote à quatre pattes;
“ L’esprit a l’amour pour ânier.

“ Grâce à l’amour, Socrate est chauve.

“ L’amour d’Homère est le bâton.
“ Phryné rentrait dans son alcôve
“ En donnant le bras à Platon.

“ Salomon, repu de mollesses,
“ Étudiant les tourtereaux,
“ Avait juste autant de drôlesses
“ Que Léonidas de héros.

“ Sénèque, aujourd’hui sur un socle,
“ Prenait Chloé sous le menton.
“ Fils, la sagesse est un binocle
“ Braqué sur Minerve et Goton.

“ Les nymphes n’étaient pas des ourses,
“ Horace n’était pas un loup;
“ Lise aujourd’hui se baigne aux sources,
“ Et Tibur s’appelle Saint-Cloud.

“ Les arguments dont je te crible
“ Te sauveront, toi-même aidant,
“ De la stupidité terrible,
“ Robe de pierre du pédant.

“ Guette autour de toi si quelque être
“ Ne sourit pas innocemment;
“ Un chant dénonce une fenêtre,
“ Un pot de fleurs cherche un amant.

“ La grisette n’est point difforme,
“ On donne aux noirs soucis congé
“ Pour peu que le soir on s’endorme
“ Sur un oreiller partagé.

“ Aime. C’est ma dernière botte.
“ Et je mêle à mes bons avis
“ Cette fillette qui jabote

“ Dans la mansarde vis-à-vis.”

Or je n’écoutai point ce drôle,
Et je le chassai. Seulement,
Aujourd’hui que sur mon épaule
Mon front penche, pâle et clément,

Aujourd’hui que mon oeil plus blême
Voit la griffe du sphinx à nu,
Et constate au fond du problème
Plus d’infini, plus d’inconnu,

Aujourd’hui que, hors des ivresses,
Près des mers qui vont m’abîmer,
Je regarde sur les sagesses
Les religions écumer,

Aujourd’hui que mon esprit sombre
Voit sur les dogmes, flot changeant,
L’épaisseur croissante de l’ombre,
Ô ciel bleu, je suis indulgent

Quand j’entends, dans le vague espace
Où toujours ma pensée erra,
Une belle fille qui passe
En chantant traderidera.

V

SILHOUETTES DU TEMPS JADIS

I

Le chêne du parc détruit

I

Ne me plains pas, me dit l’arbre,
Autrefois, autour de moi,

C’est vrai, tout était de marbre,
Le palais comme le roi.

Je voyais la splendeur fière
Des frontons pleins de Césars,
Et de grands chevaux de pierre
Qui se cabraient sous des chars.

J’apercevais des Hercules,
Des Hébés et des Psychés,
Dans les vagues crépuscules
Que font les rameaux penchés.

Je voyais jouer la reine;
J’entendais les hallalis;
Comme grand seigneur et chêne,
J’étais de tous les Marlys.

Je voyais l’alcôve auguste
Où le dauphin s’accomplit,
Leurs majestés jusqu’au buste,
Lauzun caché sous le lit.

J’ai vu les nobles broussailles;
J’étais du royal jardin;
J’ai vu Lachaise à Versailles
Comme Satan dans Éden.

Une grille verrouillée,
Duègne de fer, me gardait;
Car la campagne est souillée
Par le boeuf et le baudet,

L’agriculture est abjecte,
L’herbe est vile, et vous saurez
Qu’un arbre qui se respecte
Tient à distance les prés.

Ainsi parlait sous mes voûtes
Le bon goût, sobre et direct,
J’étais loin des grandes routes
Où va le peuple, incorrect.

Le goût fermait ma clôture;
Car c’est pour lui l’A B C
Que, dans l’art et la nature,
Tout soit derrière un fossé.

II
J’ai vu les coeurs peu rebelles,
Les grands guerriers tourtereaux,
Ce qu’on appelait les belles,
Ce qu’on nommait les héros.

Ces passants et ces passantes
Éveillaient mon grondement.
Mes branches sont plus cassantes
Qu’on ne croit communément.

Ces belles, qu’on loue en masse,
Erraient dans les verts préaux
Sous la railleuse grimace
De Tallemant des Réaux.

Le héros, grand sous le prisme,
Était prudent et boudeur,
Et mettait son héroïsme
À la chaîne en sa grandeur.

Dans la guerre meurtrière,
Le prince avait le talent
D’être tiré par-derrière
Par quelque Boileau tremblant.

La raison d’État est grave;
Il s’y faisait, par moment,
De crainte d’être trop brave,
Attacher solidement.

III
J’ai vu comment, d’une patte,
En ce siècle sans pareil,
On épouse un cul-de-jatte,
Et de l’autre, le soleil.

J’ai vu comment grince et rôde,
Loin des pages polissons,
L’auteur valet qui maraude
Des rimes dans les buissons.

Ces poètes à rhingraves
Étaient hautains et hideux;
C’étaient des Triboulets graves;
Ils chantaient; et chacun d’eux,

Pourvu d’un honnête lucre,
De sa splendeur émaillait
Le Parnasse en pain de sucre
Fait par Titon du Tillet.

Ces êtres, tordant la bouche,
Jetant leurs voix en éclats,
Prenaient un air très farouche
Pour faire des vers très plats.

Dans Marly qui les tolère,
Ils marchaient hagards, nerveux,
Les poings crispés, l’oeil colère,
Leur phrase dans leurs cheveux.

À Lavallière boiteuse

Ils donnaient Chypre et Paphos;
Et leur phrase était menteuse,
Et leurs cheveux étaient faux.

IV
Toujours, même en un désastre,
Les yeux étaient éblouis,
Le grand Louis, c’était l’astre;
Dieu, c’était le grand Louis.

Bossuet était fort pleutre,
Racine inclinait son vers;
Corneille seul, sous son feutre,
Regardait Dieu de travers.

Votre race est ainsi faite;
Et le monde est à son gré
Pourvu qu’elle ait sur sa tête
Un olympe en bois doré.

La Fontaine offrait ses fables;
Et, soudain, autour de lui,
Les courtisans, presque affables,
Les ducs au sinistre ennui,

Les Bâvilles, les Fréneuses,
Les Tavannes teints de sang,
Les altesses vénéneuses,
L’affreux chandelier glissant,

Les Louvois nés pour proscrire,
Les vils Chamillards rampants,
Gais, tournaient leur noir sourire
Vers ce charmeur de serpents.

V
Dans le parc froid et superbe,

Rien de vivant ne venait;
On comptait les brins d’une herbe
Comme les mots d’un sonnet.

Plus de danse, plus de ronce;
Comme tout diminuait!
Le Nôtre fit le quinconce
Et Lulli le menuet.

Les ifs, que l’équerre hébète,
Semblaient porter des rabats;
La fleur faisait la courbette,
L’arbre mettait chapeau bas.

Pour saluer dans les plaines
Le Phébus sacré dans Reims,
On donnait aux pauvres chênes
Des formes d’alexandrins.

La forêt, tout écourtée,
Avait l’air d’un bois piteux
Qui pousse sous la dictée
De monsieur l’abbé Batteux.

VI

Les rois criaient: Qu’on fracasse,
Et qu’on pille! Et l’on pillait.
À leurs pieds la Dédicace,
Muse en carte, souriait.

Cette muse préalable,
Habile à brûler l’encens
Même le moins vraisemblable,
Tirait la manche aux passants,

En gardant le seuil d’ivoire
Du dieu du sacré vallon,

Vendait pour deux sous de gloire
À la porte d'Apollon.

On traquait les calvinistes.
Moi, parmi tous ces fléaux,
J'avais dans mes branches tristes
Le peigne de Despréaux.

J'ai vu ce siècle notoire
Où la Maintenon sourit,
Si blanche qu'on la peut croire
Femelle du Saint-Esprit.

Quelle féroce colombe!
J'ai vu frémir d'Aubigné
Quand sur son nom, dans sa tombe,
L'édit de Nante a saigné.

Tout s'offrait au roi: les armes,
Les amours, les coeurs, les corps;
La femme vendait ses charmes,
Le magistrat ses remords.

La cour, peinte par Brantôme,
Reparaît pour Saint-Simon.
Derrière le roi fantôme
Rit le confesseur démon.

VII

Tout ce temps-là m'importune.
Des fadeurs, ou des venins.
La grandeur de leur fortune
Rapetisse encor ces nains.

On a le faux sur la nuque;
Il règne bon gré mal gré;
Après un siècle en perruque

Arrive un siècle poudré.

La poudre à flots tourbillonne
Sur le bon peuple sans pain.
Voici qu’à Scapiglione
Succède Perlinpinpin.

L’art se poudre; c’est la mode.
Voltaire, au fond peu loyal,
Offre à Louis quinze une ode
Coiffée à l’oiseau royal.

La monarchie est bouffonne;
La pensée a des bâillons;
Au-dessus de tout, plafonne
Un règne en trois cotillons.

Un beau jour s’ouvre une trappe;
Tout meurt; le sol a cédé.
Comme un voleur qui s’échappe,
Ce monde s’est évadé.

Ces rois, ce bruit, cette fête,
Tout cela s’est effacé
Pendant qu’autour de ma tête
Quelques mouches ont passé.

VIII

Moi je suis content; je rentre
Dans l’ombre du Dieu jaloux;
Je n’ai plus la cour, j’ai l’antre:
J’avais des rois, j’ai des loups.

Je redeviens le vrai chêne.
Je croîs sous les chauds midis;
Quatre-vingt-neuf se déchaîne
Dans mes rameaux enhardis.

Trianon vieux sent le rance.
Je renais au grand concert;
Et j’appelle délivrance
Ce que vous nommez désert.

La reine eut l’épaule haute,
Le grand dauphin fut pied-bot;
J’aime mieux Gros-Jean qui saute
Librement dans son sabot.

Je préfère aux Léonores
Qu’introduisaient les Dangeaux,
Les bons gros baisers sonores
De mes paysans rougeauds.

Je préfère les grands souffles,
Les bois, les champs, fauve abri,
L’horreur sacrée, aux pantoufles
De madame Dubarry.

Je suis hors des esclavages;
Je dis à la honte: Assez!
J’aime mieux les fleurs sauvages
Que les gens apprivoisés.

Les hommes sont des ruines;
Je préfère, ô beau printemps,
Tes fiertés pleines d’épines
À ces déshonneurs contents.

J’ai perdu le Roquelaure
Jasant avec la Boufflers;
Mais je vois plus d’aube éclore
Dans les grands abîmes clairs.

J’ai perdu monsieur le nonce,

Et le monde officiel,
Et d’Antin; mais je m’enfonce
Toujours plus avant au ciel.

Décloîtré, je fraternise
Avec les rustres souvent.
Je vois donner par Denise
Ce que Célimène vend.

Plus de fossé; rien n’empêche,
À mes pieds, sur mon gazon,
Que Suzon morde à sa pêche,
Et Mathurin à Suzon.

Solitaire, j’ai mes joies.
J’assiste, témoin vivant,
Dans les sombres claires-voies,
Aux aventures du vent.

Parfois dans les primevères
Court quelque enfant de quinze ans;
Mes vieilles ombres sévères
Aiment ces yeux innocents.

Rien ne pare un paysage,
Sous l’éternel firmament,
Comme une fille humble et sage
Qui soupire obscurément.

La fille aux fleurs de la berge
Parle dans sa belle humeur,
Et j’entends ce que la vierge
Dit dans l’ombre à la primeur.

J’assiste au germe, à la sève,
Aux nids où s’ouvrent des yeux,
À tout cet immense rêve

De l’hymen mystérieux.

J’assiste aux couples sans nombre,
Au viol, dans le ravin,
De la grande pudeur sombre
Par le grand amour divin.

J’assiste aux fuites rapides
De tous ces baisers charmants.
L’onde a des coeurs dans ses rides;
Les souffles sont des amants.

Cette allégresse est sacrée,
Et la nature la veut.
On croit finir, et l’on crée.
On est libre, et c’est le noeud.

J’ai pour jardinier la pluie,
L’ouragan pour émondeur;
Je suis grand sous Dieu; j’essuie
Ma cime à la profondeur.

L’hiver froid est sans rosée;
Mais, quand vient avril vermeil,
Je sens la molle pesée
Du printemps sur mon sommeil.

Je la sens mieux, étant libre.
J’ai ma part d’immensité.
La rentrée en équilibre,
Ami, c’est la liberté.

Je suis, sous le ciel qui brille,
Pour la reprise des droits
De la forêt sur la grille,
Et des peuples sur les rois.

Dieu, pour que l’Éden repousse,
Frais, tendre, un peu sauvageon,
Presse doucement du pouce
Ce globe, énorme bourgeon.

Plus de roi. Dieu me pénètre.
Car il faut, retiens cela,
Pour qu’on sente le vrai maître,
Que le faux ne soit plus là.

Il met, lui, l’unique père,
L’Éternel toujours nouveau,
Avec ce seul mot: Espère,
Toute l’ombre de niveau.

Plus de caste. Un ver me touche,
L’hysope aime mon orteil.
Je suis l’égal de la mouche,
Étant l’égal du soleil.

Adieu le feu d’artifice
Et l’illumination.
J’en ai fait le sacrifice.
Je cherche ailleurs le rayon.

D’augustes apothéoses,
Me cachant les cieux jadis,
Remplaçaient, dans des feux roses,
Jéhovah par Amadis.

On emplissait la clairière
De ces lueurs qui, soudain,
Font sur les pieds de derrière
Dresser dans l’ombre le daim.

La vaste voûte sereine
N’avait plus rien qu’on pût voir,

Car la girandole gêne
L'étoile dans l'arbre noir.

Il sort des feux de Bengale
Une clarté dans les bois,
Fière, et qui n'est point l'égale
De l'âtre des villageois.

Nous étions, chêne, orme et tremble,
Traités en pays conquis
Où se débraillent ensemble
Les pétards et les marquis.

La forêt, comme agrandie
Par les feux et les zéphirs,
Avait l'air d'un incendie
De rubis et de saphirs.

On offrait au prince, au maître,
Beau, fier, entouré d'archers,
Ces lumières, soeurs peut-être
De la torche des bûchers.

Cent mille verroteries
Jetaient, flambant à l'air vif,
Dans le ciel des pierreries
Et sur la terre du suif.

Une gloire verte et bleue,
Qu'assaisonnait quelque effroi,
Faisait là-haut une queue
De paon en l'honneur du roi.

Aujourd'hui, - c'est un autre âge,
Et les flambeaux sont changeants, -
Je n'ai plus d'autre éclairage
Que le ciel des pauvres gens.

Je reçois dans ma feuillée,
Sombre, aux mille trous vermeils,
La grande nuit étoilée,
Populace de soleils.

Des planètes inconnues
Poussent sur mon dôme obscur,
Et je tiens pour bien venues
Ces coureuses de l’azur.

Je n’ai plus les pots de soufre
D’où sortaient les visions;
Je me contente du gouffre
Et des constellations.

Je déroge, et la nature,
Foule de rayons et d’yeux,
M’attire dans sa roture,
Pêle-mêle avec les cieux.

Cependant tout ce qui reste,
Dans l’herbe où court le vanneau
Et que broute l’âne agreste,
Du royal siècle a giorno;

Tout ce qui reste des gerbes,
De Jupin, de Sémélé,
Des dieux, des gloires superbes,
Un peu de carton brûlé;

Dans les ronces paysannes,
Au milieu des vers luisants,
Les chandelles courtisanes,
Et les lustres courtisans;

Les vieilles splendeurs brisées,

Les ifs, nobles espions,
Leurs altesses les fusées,
Messeigneurs les lampions;

Tout ce beau monde me raille,
Éteint, orgueilleux et noir;
J’en ris, et je m’encanaille
Avec les astres le soir.

II

Écrit en 1827

I

Je suis triste quand je vois l’homme.
Le vrai décroît dans les esprits.
L’ombre qui jadis noya Rome
Commence à submerger Paris.

Les rois sournois, de peur des crises,
Donnent au peuple un calmant.
Ils font des boîtes à surprises
Qu’ils appellent charte et serment.

Hélas! nos anges sont des vampires;
Notre albâtre vaut le charbon;
Et nos meilleurs seraient les pires
D’un temps qui ne serait pas bon.

Le juste ment, le sage intrigue;
Notre douceur, triste semblant,
N’est que la peur de la fatigue
Qu’on aurait d’être violent.

Notre austérité frelatée
N’admet ni Hampden ni Brutus;
Le syllogisme de l’athée
Est à l’aise dans nos vertus.

Sur l’honneur mort la honte flotte.
On voit, prompt à prendre le pli,
Se recomposer en ilote
Le Spartiate démoli.

Le ciel blêmit; les fronts végètent;
Le pain du travailleur est noir;
Et des prêtres insulteurs jettent
De la fange avec l’encensoir.

C’est à peine, ô sombres années!
Si les yeux de l’homme obscurcis,
L’aube et la raison condamnées,
Obtiennent de l’ombre un sursis.

Le passé règne; il nous menace;
Le trône est son premier sujet;
Âpre, il remet sa dent tenace
Sur l’esprit humain qu’il rongeait.

Le prince est bonhomme; la rue
Est pourtant sanglante. Bravo!
Dit Dracon. - La royauté grue
Monte sur le roi soliveau.

Les actions sont des cloaques,
Les consciences des égouts;
L’un vendrait la France aux cosaques,
L’autre vendrait l’âme aux hiboux.

La religion sombre emploie
Pour le sang, la guerre et le fer,
Les textes du ciel qu’elle ploie
Au sens monstrueux de l’enfer.

La renommée aux vents répète

Des noms impurs soir et matin,
Et l’on peut voir à sa trompette
De la salive d’Arétin.

La fortune, reine enivrée,
De ce vieux Paris, notre aïeul,
Lui met une telle livrée
Qu’on préférerait le linceul.

La victoire est une drôlesse;
Cette vivandière au flanc nu
Rit de se voir mener en laisse
Par le premier goujat venu.

Point de Condés, des La Feuillades;
Mars et Vénus dans leur clapier;
Je n’admire point les oeillades
De cette fille à ce troupier.

Partout l’or sur la pourriture,
L’idéal en proie aux moqueurs,
Un abaissement de stature
D’accord avec la nuit des coeurs.

II
Mais tourne le dos, ma pensée!
Viens; les bois sont d’aube empourprés;
Sois de la fête; la rosée
T’a promise à la fleur des prés.

Quitte Paris pour la feuillée.
Une haleine heureuse est dans l’air;
La vaste joie est réveillée;
Quelqu’un rit dans le grand ciel clair.

Viens sous l’arbre aux voix étouffées,
Viens dans les taillis pleins d’amour

Où la nuit vont danser les fées
Et les paysannes le jour.

Viens, on t’attend dans la nature.
Les martinets sont revenus;
L’eau veut te conter l’aventure
Des bas ôtés et des pieds nus.

C’est la grande orgie ingénue
Des nids, des ruisseaux, des forêts,
Des rochers, des fleurs de la nue;
La rose a dit que tu viendrais.

Quitte Paris. La plaine est verte;
Le ciel, cherché des yeux en pleurs,
Au bord de sa fenêtre ouverte
Met avril, ce vase de fleurs.

L’aube a voulu, l’aube superbe,
Que pour toi le champ s’animât.
L’insecte est au bout du brin d’herbe
Comme un matelot au grand mât.

Que t’importe Fouché de Nantes
Et le prince de Bénévent!
Les belles mouches bourdonnantes
Emplissent l’azur et le vent.

Je ne comprends plus tes murmures
Et je me déclare content
Puisque voilà les fraises mûres
Et que l’iris sort de l’étang.

III

Fuyons avec celle que j’aime.
Paris trouble l’amour. Fuyons.
Perdons-nous dans l’oubli suprême

Des feuillages et des rayons.

Les bois sont sacrés; sur leurs cimes
Resplendit le joyeux été;
Et les forêts sont des abîmes
D’allégresse et de liberté.

Toujours les coeurs les plus moroses
Et les cerveaux les plus boudeurs
Ont vu le bon côté des choses
S’éclairer dans les profondeurs.

Tout reluit; le matin rougeoie;
L’eau brille; on court dans le ravin;
La gaieté monte sur la joie
Comme la mousse sur le vin.

La tendresse sort des corolles;
Le rosier a l’air d’un amant.
Comme on éclate en choses folles,
Et comme on parle innocemment!

Ô fraîcheur du rire! ombre pure!
Mystérieux apaisement!
Dans l’immense lueur obscure
On s’emplit d’éblouissement.

Adieu les vains soucis funèbres!
On ne se souvient que du beau.
Si toute la vie est ténèbres,
Toute la nature est flambeau.

Qu’ailleurs la bassesse soit grande,
Que l’homme soit vil et bourbeux,
J’en souris, pourvu que j’entende
Une clochette au cou des boeufs.

Il est bien certain que les source,
Les arbres pleins de doux ébats,
Les champs, sont les seules ressources
Que l’âme humaine ait ici-bas.

Ô solitude, tu m’accueilles
Et tu m’instruis sous le ciel bleu;
Un petit oiseau sous les feuilles,
Chantant, suffit à prouver Dieu.

VI

L’ÉTERNEL PETIT ROMAN

I

Le doigt de la femme

Dieu prit sa plus molle argile
Et son plus pur kaolin,
Et fit un bijou fragile,
Mystérieux et câlin.

Il fit le doigt de la femme,
Chef-d’oeuvre auguste et charmant,
Ce doigt fait pour toucher l’âme
Et montrer le firmament.

Il mit dans ce doigt le reste
De la lueur qu’il venait
D’employer au front céleste
De l’heure où l’aurore naît.

Il y mit l’ombre du voile,
Le tremblement du berceau,
Quelque chose de l’étoile,
Quelque chose de l’oiseau.

Le Père qui nous engendre
Fit ce doigt mêlé d’azur,
Très fort pour qu’il restât tendre,
Très blanc pour qu’il restât pur,

Et très doux, afin qu’en somme
Jamais le mal n’en sortît,
Et qu’il pût sembler à l’homme
Le doigt de Dieu, plus petit.

Il en orna la main d’Ève,
Cette frêle et chaste main
Qui se pose comme un rêve
Sur le front du genre humain.

Cette humble main ignorante,
Guide de l’homme incertain,
Qu’on voit trembler, transparente,
Sur la lampe du destin.

Oh! dans ton apothéose,
Femme, ange aux regards baissés,
La beauté, c’est peu de chose,
La grâce n’est pas assez;

Il faut aimer. Tout soupire,
L’oncle, la fleur, l’alcyon;
La grâce n’est qu’un sourire,
La beauté n’est qu’un rayon;

Dieu, qui veut qu’Ève se dresse
Sur notre rude chemin
Fit pour l’amour la caresse,
Pour la caresse la main.

Dieu, lorsque ce doigt qu’on aime
Sur l’argile fut conquis,

S’applaudit, car le suprême
Est fier de créer l’exquis.

Ayant fait ce doigt sublime,
Dieu dit aux anges: Voilà!
Puis s’endormit dans l’abîme;
Le diable alors s’éveilla.

Dans l’ombre où Dieu se repose,
Il vint, noir sur l’orient,
Et tout au bout du doigt rose
Mit un ongle en souriant.

II

Fuite en Sologne

Au poète Mérante

I

Ami, viens me rejoindre.
Les bois sont innocents.
Il est bon de voir poindre
L’aube des paysans.

Paris, morne et farouche,
Pousse des hurlements
Et se tord sous la douche
Des noirs événements.

Il revient, loi sinistre,
Étrange état normal!
À l’ennui par le cuistre
Et par le monstre au mal.

II

J’ai fui; viens. C’est dans l’ombre
Que nous nous réchauffons.

J’habite un pays sombre
Plein de rêves profonds.

Les récits de grand-mère
Et les signes de croix
Ont mis une chimère
Charmante dans les bois.

Ici, sous chaque porte,
S’assied le fabliau,
Nain du foyer qui porte
Perruque in-folio.

L’elfe dans les nymphées
Fait tourner ses fuseaux;
Ici l’on a des fées
Comme ailleurs des oiseaux.

Le conte, aimé des chaumes,
Trouve au bord des chemins,
Parfois, un nid de gnomes
Qu’il prend dans ses deux mains.

Les follets sont des drôles
Pétris d’ombre et d’azur
Qui font au creux des saules
Un flamboiement obscur.

Le faune aux doigts d’écorce
Rapproche par moments
Sous la table au pied torse
Les genoux des amants.

Le soir un lutin cogne
Aux plafonds des manoirs;
Les étangs de Sologne
Sont de pâles miroirs.

Les nénuphars des berges
Me regardent la nuit;
Les fleurs semblent des vierges;
L’âme des choses luit.

III

Cette bruyère est douce;
Ici le ciel est bleu,
L’homme vit, le blé pousse
Dans la bonté de Dieu.

J’habite sous les chênes
Frémissants et calmants;
L’air est tiède, et les plaines
Sont des rayonnements.

Je me suis fait un gîte
D’arbres, sourds à nos pas;
Ce que le vent agite,
L’homme ne l’émeut pas.

Le matin, je sommeille
Confusément encor.
L’aube arrive vermeille
Dans une gloire d’or.

Ami, dit la ramée,
Il fait jour maintenant. -
Une mouche enfermée
M’éveille en bourdonnant.

IV

Viens, loin des catastrophes,
Mêler sous nos berceaux
Le frisson de tes strophes
Au tremblement des eaux.

Viens, l’étang solitaire
Est un poème aussi.
Les lacs ont le mystère,
Nos coeurs ont le souci.

Tout comme l’hirondelle,
La stance quelquefois
Aime à mouiller son aile
Dans la mare des bois.

C’est, la tête inondée
Des pleurs de la forêt,
Que souvent le spondée
À Virgile apparaît.

C’est des sources, des îles,
Du hêtre et du glaïeul
Que sort ce tas d’idylles
Dont Tityre est l’aïeul.

Segrais, chez Pan son hôte,
Fit un livre serein
Où la grenouille saute
Du sonnet au quatrain.

Pendant qu’en sa nacelle
Racan chantait Babet,
Du bec de la sarcelle
Une rime tombait.

Moi, ce serait ma joie
D’errer dans la fraîcheur
D’une églogue où l’on voie
Fuir le martin-pêcheur.

L’ode même, superbe,

Jamais ne renia
Toute cette grande herbe
Où rit Titania.

Ami, l’étang révèle
Et mêle, brin à brin,
Une flore nouvelle
Au vieil alexandrin.

Le style se retrempe
Lorsque nous le plongeons
Dans cette eau sombre où rampe
Un esprit sous les joncs.

Viens, pour peu que tu veuilles
Voir croître ton vers
La sphaigne aux larges feuilles
Et les grands roseaux verts.

III

Gare!

On a peur, tant elle est belle!
Fût-on don Juan ou Caton.
On la redoute rebelle;
Tendre, que deviendrait-on?

Elle est joyeuse et céleste!
Elle vient de ce Brésil
Si doré qu’il fait du reste
De l’univers un exil.

À quatorze ans épousée,
Et veuve au bout de dix mois.
Elle a toute la rosée
De l’aurore au fond des bois.

Elle est vierge; à peine née.
Son mari fut un vieillard;
Dieu brisa cet hyménée
De Trop tôt avec Trop tard.

Apprenez qu'elle se nomme
Doña Rosita Rosa;
Dieu, la destinant à l'homme,
Aux anges la refusa.

Elle est ignorante et libre,
Et sa candeur la défend.
Elle a tout, accent qui vibre,
Chanson triste et rire enfant,

Tout, le caquet, le silence,
Ces petits pieds familiers
Créés pour l'invraisemblance
Des romans et des souliers,

Et cet air des jeunes Èves
Qu'on nommait jadis fripon,
Et le tourbillon des rêves
Dans les plis de son jupon.

Cet être qui nous attire,
Agnès cousine d'Hébé,
Enivrerait un satyre,
Et griserait un abbé.

Devant tant de beautés pures,
Devant tant de frais rayons,
La chair fait des conjectures
Et l'âme des visions.

Au temps présent l'eau saline,
La blanche écume des mers

S’appelle la mousseline;
On voit Vénus à travers.

Le réel fait notre extase;
Et nous serions plus épris
De voir Ninon sous la gaze
Que sous la vague Cypris.

Nous préférons la dentelle
Au flot diaphane et frais;
Vénus n’est qu’une immortelle;
Une femme, c’est plus près.

Celle-ci, vers nous conduite
Comme un ange retrouvé,
Semble à tous les coeurs la suite
De leur songe inachevé.

L’âme admire, enchantée
Par tout ce qu’a de charmant
La rêverie ajoutée
Au vague éblouissement.

Quel danger! on la devine.
Un nimbe à ce front vermeil!
Belle, on la rêve divine,
Fleur, on la rêve soleil.

Elle est lumière, elle est onde,
On la contemple. On la croit
Reine et fée, et mer profonde
Pour les perles qu’on y voit.

Gare, Arthur! gare, Clitandre!
Malheur à qui se mettait
À regarder d’un air tendre
Ce mystérieux attrait!

L’amour, où glissent les âmes,
Est un précipice; on a
Le vertige au bord des femmes
Comme au penchant de l’Etna.

On rit d’abord. Quel doux rire!
Un jour, dans ce jeu charmant,
On s’aperçoit qu’on respire
Un peu moins facilement.

Ces feux-là troublent la tête.
L’imprudent qui s’y chauffait
S’éveille à moitié poète
Et stupide tout à fait.

Plus de joie. On est la chose
Des tourments et des amours.
Quoique le tyran soit rose,
L’esclavage est noir toujours.

On est jaloux; travail rude!
On n’est plus libre et vivant,
Et l’on a l’inquiétude
D’une feuille dans le vent.

On la suit, pauvre jeune homme!
Sous prétexte qu’il faut bien
Qu’un astre ait un astronome
Et qu’une femme ait un chien.

On se pose en loup fidèle;
On est bête, on s’en aigrit,
Tandis qu’un autre, auprès d’elle,
Aimant moins, a plus d’esprit.

Même aux bals et dans les fêtes,

On souffre, fût-on vainqueur;
Et voilà comment sont faites
Les aventures du coeur.

Cette adolescente est sombre
À cause de ses quinze ans
Et de tout ce qu’on voit d’ombre
Dans ses beaux yeux innocents.

On donnerait un empire
Pour tous ces chastes appas;
Elle est terrible; et le pire,
C’est qu’elle n’y pense pas.

IV

À Doña Rosita Rosa

I

Ce petit bonhomme bleu
Qu’un souffle apporte et remporte,
Qui, dès que tu dors un peu,
Gratte de l’ongle à ta porte,

C’est mon rêve. Plein d’effroi,
Jusqu’à ton seuil il se glisse.
Il voudrait entrer chez toi
En qualité de caprice.

Si tu désires avoir
Un caprice aimable, leste,
Et prenant un air céleste
Sous les étoiles du soir,

Mon rêve, ô belle des belles,
Te convient; arrangeons-nous.
Il a ton nom sur ses ailes.
Et mon nom sur ses genoux.

Il est doux, gai, point morose,
Tendre, frais, d’azur baigné.
Quant à son ongle, il est rose,
Et j’en suis égratigné.

II

Prends-le donc à ton service.
C’est un pauvre rêve fou;
Mais pauvreté n’est pas vice.
Nul coeur ne ferme au verrou;

Ton coeur, pas plus que mon âme,
N’est clos et barricadé.
Ouvre donc, ouvrez, madame,
À mon doux songe évadé.

Les heures pour moi sont lentes,
Car je souffre éperdument;
Il vient sur ton front charmant
Poser ses ailes tremblantes.

T’obéir sera son voeu;
Il dorlotera ton âme;
Il fera chez toi du feu,
Et, s’il le peut, de la flamme.

Il fera ce qui te plaît;
Prompt à voir tes désirs naître;
Belle, il sera ton valet,
Jusqu’à ce qu’il soit ton maître.

V

À Rosita

Tu ne veux pas aimer, méchante?
Le printemps est triste, vois;

Entends-tu ce que l'oiseau chante
Dans la sombre douceur des bois?

Sans l'amour rien ne reste d'Ève;
L'amour, c'est la seule beauté;
Le ciel, bleu quand l'astre s'y lève,
Est tout noir, le soleil ôté.

Tu deviendras laide toi-même
Si tu n'as pas plus de raison.
L'oiseau chante qu'il faut qu'on aime,
Et ne sait pas d'autre chanson.

VI
C'est parce qu'elle se taisait

Son silence fut mon vainqueur;
C'est ce qui m'a fait épris d'elle.
D'abord je n'avais dans le coeur
Rien qu'un obscur battement d'aile.

Nous allions en voiture au bois,
Seuls tous les soirs, et loin du monde;
Je lui parlais, et d'autres voix
Chantaient dans la forêt profonde.

Son oeil était mystérieux.
Il contient, cet oeil de colombe,
Le même infini que les cieux,
La même aurore que la tombe.

Elle ne disait rien du tout,
Pensive au fond de la calèche.
Un jour je sentis tout à coup
Trembler dans mon âme une flèche.

L'Amour, c'est le je ne sais quoi.

Une femme habile à se taire
Est la caverne où se tient coi
Ce méchant petit sagittaire.

VII
À la belle impérieuse

L'amour, panique
De la raison,
Se communique
Par le frisson.

Laissez-moi dire,
N'accordez rien.
Si je soupire,
Chantez, c'est bien.

Si je demeure,
Triste, à vos pieds,
Et si je pleure,
C'est bien, riez.

Un homme semble
Souvent trompeur.
Mais si je tremble,
Belle, ayez peur.

VIII
Sommation irrespectueuse

Rire étant si jolie,
C'est mal. Ô trahison
D'inspirer la folie,
En gardant la raison!

Rire étant si charmante!
C'est coupable, à côté

Des rêves qu’on augmente
Par son trop de beauté.

Une chose peut-être
Qui va vous étonner,
C’est qu’à votre fenêtre
Le vent vient frissonner,

Qu’avril commence à luire,
Que la mer s’aplanit,
Et que cela veut dire:
Fauvette, fais ton nid.

Belle aux chansons naïves,
J’admets peu qu’on ait droit
Aux prunelles très vives,
Ayant le coeur très froid.

Quand on est si bien faite,
On devrait se cacher.
Un amant qu’on rejette,
À quoi bon l’ébaucher?

On se lasse, ô coquette,
D’être toujours tremblant,
Vous êtes la raquette,
Et je suis le volant.

Le coq battant de l’aile,
Maître en son pachalick,
Nous prévient qu’une belle
Est un danger public.

Il a raison. J’estime
Qu’en leur gloire isolés,
Deux beaux yeux sont un crime,
Allumez, mais brûlez.

Pourquoi ce vain manège?
L’eau qu’échauffe le jour,
La fleur perçant la neige,
Le loup hurlant d’amour,

L’astre que nos yeux guettent,
Sont l’eau, la fleur, le loup,
Et l’étoile, et n’y mettent
Pas de façons du tout.

Aimer est si facile
Que, sans coeur, tout est dit,
L’homme est un imbécile,
La femme est un bandit.

L’oeillade est une dette.
L’insolvabilité,
Volontaire, complète
Ce monstre, la beauté.

Craindre ceux qu’on captive!
Nous fuir et nous lier!
Être la sensitive
Et le mancenillier!

C’est trop. Aimez, madame.
Quoi donc! quoi! mon souhait
Où j’ai tout mis, mon âme
Et mes rêves, me hait!

L’amour nous vise. Certe,
Notre effroi peut crier,
Mais rien ne déconcerte
Cet arbalétrier.

Sachez donc, ô rebelle,

Que souvent, trop vainqueur,
Le regard d’une belle
Ricoche sur son coeur.

Vous pouvez être sûre
Qu’un jour vous vous ferez
Vous-même une blessure
Que vous adorerez.

Vous comprendrez l’extase
Voisine du péché,
Et que l’âme est un vase
Toujours un peu penché.

Vous saurez, attendrie,
Le charme de l’instant
Terrible, où l’on s’écrie:
Ah! vous m’en direz tant!

Vous saurez, vous qu’on gâte,
Le destin tel qu’il est,
Les pleurs, l’ombre, et la hâte
De cacher un billet.

Oui, - pourquoi tant remettre? -
Vous sentirez, qui sait?
La douceur d’une lettre
Que tiédit le corset.

Vous riez! Votre joie
À Tout préfère Rien.
En vain l’aube rougeoie,
En vain l’air chante. Eh bien,

Je ris aussi! Tout passe.
Ô muse, allons-nous-en.
J’aperçois l’humble grâce

D’un toit de paysan;

L’arbre, libre volière,
Est plein d’heureuses voix;
Dans les pousses du lierre
Le chevreau fait son choix;

Et, jouant sous les treilles,
Un petit villageois
A pour pendant d’oreilles
Deux cerises des bois.

IX
Fêtes de village en plein air

Le bal champêtre est sous la tente.
On prend en vain des airs moqueurs;
Toute une musique flottante
Passe des oreilles aux coeurs.

On entre, on fait cette débauche
De voir danser en plein midi
Près d’une Madelon point gauche
Un Gros-Pierre point engourdi.

On regarde les marrons frire;
La bière mousse, et les plateaux
Offrent aux dents pleines de rire
Des mosaïques de gâteaux.

Le soir on va dîner sur l’herbe;
On est gai, content, berger, roi,
Et, sans savoir comment, superbe,
Et tendre, sans savoir pourquoi.

Feuilles vertes et nappes blanches;
Le couchant met le bois en feu;

La joie ouvre ses ailes franches:
Comme le ciel immense est bleu!

X
Confiance

À Mérante

Ami, tu me dis: - “ Joie extrême!
“ Donc, ce matin, comblant ton voeu,
“ Rougissante, elle a dit: Je t’aime!
“ Devant l’aube, cet autre aveu.

“ Ta victoire, tu la dévoiles.
“ On t’aime, ô Léandre, ô Saint-Preux,
“ Et te voilà dans les étoiles,
“ Sans parachute, malheureux!”

Et tu souris. Mais que m’importe!
Ton sourire est un envieux.
Sois gai; moi, ma tristesse est morte.
Rire c’est bien, aimer c’est mieux.

Tu me croyais plus fort en thème,
N’est-ce pas? tu te figurais
Que je te dirais: Elle m’aime,
Défions-nous, et buvons frais.

Point. J’ai des manières étranges;
On fait mon bonheur, j’y consens;
Je vois là-haut passer des anges
Et je me mêle à ces passants.

Je suis ingénu comme Homère,
Quand cet aveugle aux chants bénis
Adorait la mouche éphémère
Qui sort des joncs de l’Hypanis.

J’ai la foi. Mon esprit facile
Dès le premier jour constata
Dans la Sologne une Sicile,
Une Aréthuse en Rosita.

Je ne vois point dans une femme
Un filou, par l’ombre enhardi.
Je ne crois pas qu’on prenne une âme
Comme on vole un maravedi.

La supposer fausse, et plâtrée,
Non, justes dieux! je suis épris.
Je ne commence point l’entrée
Au paradis, par le mépris.

Je lui donne un coeur sans lui dire:
Rends-moi la monnaie! - Et je crois
À sa pudeur, à mon délire,
Au bleu du ciel, aux fleurs des bois.

J’entre en des sphères idéales
Sans fredonner le vieux pont-neuf
De Villon aux piliers des Halles
Et de Fronsac à l’Oeil-de-Boeuf.

Je m’enivre des harmonies
Qui, de l’azur, à chaque pas,
M’arrivent, claires, infinies,
Joyeuses, et je ne crois pas

Que l’amour trompe nos attentes,
Qu’un bien-aimé soit un martyr,
Et que toutes ces voix chantantes
Descendent du ciel pour mentir.

Je suis rempli d’une musique;

Je ne sens point, dans mes halliers,
La désillusion classique
Des vieillards et des écoliers.

J’écoute en moi l’hymne suprême
De mille instruments triomphaux
Qui tous répètent qu’elle m’aime,
Et dont pas un ne chante faux.

Oui, je t’adore! oui, tu m’adores!
C’est à ces mots-là que sont dus
Tous ces vagues clairons sonores
Dans un bruit de songe entendus.

Et, dans les grands bois qui m’entourent,
Je vois danser, d’un air vainqueur,
Les cupidons, gamins qui courent
Dans la fanfare du coeur.

XI

Le nid

C’est l’abbé qui fait l’église;
C’est le roi qui fait la tour;
Qui fait l’hiver? C’est la bise.
Qui fait le nid? C’est l’amour.

Les églises sont sublimes,
La tour monte aux cieux,
L’hiver pour trône a les cimes;
Mais le nid chante et vaut mieux.

Le nid, que l’aube visite,
Ne voit ni deuils, ni combats;
Le nid est la réussite
La meilleur d’ici-bas.

Là, pas d’or et point de marbre;
De la mousse, un coin étroit;
C’est un grenier dans un arbre,
C’est un bouquet sur un toit.

Ce n’est point chose facile,
Lorsque Charybde et Scylla
Veulent mordre la Sicile,
Que de mettre le holà;

Quand l’Hékla brûle sa suie,
Quand flambe l’Etna grognon,
Le fumiste qui l’essuie
Est un rude compagnon;

L’orage est grand dans son antre;
Le nuage, hydre des airs,
Est splendide quand son ventre
Laisse tomber des éclairs;

Un cri fier et redoutable,
De hautes rébellions
Sortent de la fauve étable
Des tigres et des lions;

Certes, c’est une oeuvre ardue
D’allumer le jour levant,
D’ouvrir assez l’étendue
Pour ne pas casser le vent,

Et de donner à la houle
Un si gigantesque élan
Que, d’un seul bond, elle roule
De Behring à Magellan.

Emplir de fureur les bêtes
Et le tonnerre de bruit;

Gonfler le cou des tempêtes
Des sifflements de la nuit;

Tirer, quand la giboulée
Fouette le matin vermeil,
De l’écurie étoilée
L’attelage au soleil;

Gaver de vins vendémiaire,
D’épis messidor; pourvoir
Aux dépenses de lumière
Que fait l’astre chaque soir;

Peupler l’ombre; avoir la force,
À travers la terre et l’air,
D’enfler tous les ans l’écorce,
D’enfler tous les jours la mer;

Ce sont les travaux suprêmes
Des dieux, ouvriers géants
Mirant leurs bleus diadèmes
Dans les glauques océans;

Ce sont les tâches immenses
Des êtres régnant sur nous,
Tantôt des grandes clémences,
Tantôt des vastes courroux;

C’est du miracle et du rêve;
Hier, aujourd’hui, demain,
Ces choses font, depuis Ève,
L’éblouissement humain.

Mais entre tous les prodiges
Qu’entassent dieux et démons,
Ouvrant l’abîme aux vertiges,
Heurtant les foudres aux monts,

C’est l’effort le plus superbe,
C’est le travail le plus beau,
De faire tordre un brin d’herbe
Au bec d’un petit oiseau.

En vain rampe la couleuvre;
L’amour arrange et bénit
Deux ailes sur la même oeuvre,
Deux coeurs dans le même nid.

Ce nid où l’amour se pose,
Voilà le but du ciel bleu;
Et pour la plus douce chose
Il faut le plus puissant dieu.

XII
À propos de doña Rosa

À Mérante

Au printemps, quand les nuits sont claires,
Quand on voit, vagues tourbillons,
Voler sur les fronts les chimères
Et dans les fleurs les papillons,

Pendant la floraison des fèves,
Quand l’amant devient l’amoureux,
Quand les hommes, en proie aux rêves,
Ont toutes ces mouches sur eux,

J’estime qu’il est digne et sage
De ne point prendre un air vainqueur,
Et d’accepter ce doux passge
De la saison sur notre coeur.

À quoi bon résister aux femmes,

Qui ne résistent pas du tout?
Toutes les roses sont en flammes;
Une guimpe est de mauvais goût.

Trop heureux ceux à qui les belles
Font la violence d’aimer!
À quoi sert-il d’avoir des ailes,
Sinon pour les laisser plumer?

Ô Mérante, il n’est tien qui vaille
Ces purs attraits, tendres tyrans,
Un sourire qui dit: Bataille!
Un soupir qui dit: Je me rends!

Et je donnerais la Castille
Et ses plaines en amadou
Pour deux yeux sous une mantille,
Fiers, et venant on ne sait d’où.

XIII

Les bonnes intentions de Rosa

Ce bonhomme avait les yeux mornes
Et, sur son front, chargé d’ennui,
L’incorrection de deux cornes
Tout à fait visibles chez lui.

Ses vagues prunelles bourrues
Reflétaient dans leur blême éclair
Le sombre dédale des rues
De la grande ville d’enfer.

Son pied fourchu crevait ses chausses;
Hors du gouffre il prenait le frais;
Ses dents, certes, n’étaient point fausses,
Mais ses regards n’étaient pas vrais.

Il venait sur terre, vorace.
Dans ses mains, aux ongles de fer,
Il tenait un permis de chasse
Signé Dieu, plus bas Lucifer.

C’était Belzébuth, très bon diable.
Je le reconnus sur-le-champ.
Sa grimace irrémédiable
Lui donnait l’air d’un dieu méchant.

Un même destin, qui nous pèse,
Semble tous deux nous châtier,
Car dans l’amour je suis à l’aise
Comme lui dans un bénitier.

L’amour, - jaloux, ne vous déplaise, -
Est un doux gazon d’oasis
Fort ressemblant à de la braise
Sur laquelle on serait assis.

Une femme! l’exquise chose!
Je redeviens un écolier;
Je décline Rosa la rose;
Je suis amoureux à lier.

Or le diable est une rencontre;
Et j’en suis toujours réjoui.
De tous les Pour il est le Contre;
Il est le Non de tous les Oui.

Le diable est diseur de proverbes.
Il songeait. Son pied mal botté
Écrasait dans les hautes herbes
La forêt de fleurs de l’été.

L’un près de l’autre nous passâmes.
— Çà, pensai-je, il est du métier. -

Le diable se connaît en femmes,
En qualité de bijoutier.

Je m’approchai de son altesse,
Le chapeau bas; ce carnassier,
Calme, me fit la politesse
D’un sourire hostile et princier.

Je lui dis: Que pensez-vous d’elle?
Contez-moi ce que vous savez.
 Son désir de t’être fidèle,
Dit-il, est un de mes pavés.

XIV
Rosa fâchée

Une querelle. Pourquoi?
Mon Dieu! parce qu’on s’adore.
À peine s’est-on dit Toi
Que Vous se hâte d’éclore.

Le coeur tire sur son noeud;
L’azur fuit; l’âme est diverse.
L’amour est un ciel, qui pleut
Sur les amoureux à verse.

De même, quand, sans effroi,
Dans la forêt que juin dore,
On va rôder, sur la foi
Des promesses de l’aurore,

On peut être pris le soir,
Car le beau temps souvent triche,
Par un gros nuage noir
Qui n’était pas sur l’affiche.

XV

Dans les ruines d’une abbaye

Seuls, tous deux, ravis, chantants!
Comme on s’aime!
Comme on cueille le printemps
Que Dieu sème!

Quels rires étincelants
Dans ces ombres,
Pleines jadis de fronts blancs,
De coeurs sombres!

On est tout frais mariés.
On s’envoie
Les charmants cris variés
De la joie.

Purs ébats mêlés au vent
Qui frissonne!
Gaietés que le noir couvent
Assaisonne!

On effeuille des jasmins
Sur la pierre
Où l’abbesse joint les mains
En prière.

Les tombeaux, de croix marqués,
Font partie
De ces jeux, un peu piqués
Par l’ortie.

On se cherche, on se poursuit,
On sent croître
Ton aube, amour, dans la nuit
Du vieux cloître.

On s’en va se becquetant,
On s’adore,
On s’embrasse à chaque instant,
Puis encore,

Sous les piliers, les arceaux,
Et les marbres.
C’est l’histoire des oiseaux
Dans les arbres.

XVI

Les trop heureux

Quand avec celle qu’on enlève,
Joyeux, on s’est enfui si loin,
Si haut, qu’au-dessus de son rêve
On n’a plus que Dieu, doux témoin;

Quand, sous un dais de fleurs sans nombre,
On a fait tomber sa beauté
Dans quelque précipice d’ombre,
De silence et de volupté;

Quand, au fond du hallier farouche,
Dans une nuit pleine de jour,
Une bouche sur une bouche
Baise ce mot divin: amour!

Quand l’homme contemple la femme,
Quand l’amante adore l’amant,
Quand, vaincus, ils n’ont plus dans l’âme
Qu’un muet éblouissement,

Ce profond bonheur solitaire,
C’est le ciel que nous essayons.
Il irrite presque la terre
Résistante à trop de rayons.

Ce bonheur rend les fleurs jalouses
Et les grands chênes envieux,
Et fait qu’au milieu des pelouses
Le lys trouve le rosier vieux;

Ce bonheur est si beau qu’il semble
Trop grand, même aux êtres ailés;
Et la libellule qui tremble,
La graine aux pistils étoilés,

Et l’étamine, âme inconnue
Qui de la plante monte au ciel,
Le vent errant de nue en nue,
L’abeille errant de miel en miel,

L’oiseau, que les hivers désolent,
Le frais papillon rajeuni,
Toutes les choses qui s’envolent,
En murmurant dans l’infini.

XVII
À un visiteur parisien

Domremy, 182...

Moi, que je sois royaliste!
C’est à peu près comme si
Le ciel devait rester triste
Quand l’aube a dit: Me voici!

Un roi, c’est un homme équestre,
Personnage à numéro,
En marge duquel de Maistre
Écrit: Roi, lisez: Bourreau.

Je n’y crois plus. Est-ce un crime

Que d’avoir, par ma cloison,
Vu ce point du jour sublime,
Le lever de la raison!

J’étais jadis à l’école
Chez ce pédant, le Passé;
J’ai rompu cette bricole;
J’épelle un autre A B C.

Mon livre, ô fils de Lutèce,
C’est la nature, alphabet
Où le lys n’est point altesse,
Où l’arbre n’est point gibet.

Maintenant, je te l’avoue,
Je ne crois qu’au droit divin
Du coeur, de l’enfant qui joue,
Du franc rire et du bon vin.

Puisque tu me fais visite
Sous mon chaume, à Domremy,
À toi le Grec, moi le Scythe,
J’ouvre mon âme à demi...

Pas tout à fait. - La feuillée
Doit voiler le carrefour,
Et la porte entrebâillée
Convient au timide amour.

J’aime, en ces bois que j’habite,
L’aurore; et j’ai dans mon trou
Pour pareil, lé cénobite,
Pour contraire, le hibou.

Une femme me fascine;
Comme Properce, j’entends
Une flûte tibicine

Dans les branches du printemps.

J’ai pour jeu la poésie;
J’ai pour torture un minois,
Vieux style, et la jalousie,
Ce casse-tête chinois.

Je suis fou d’une charmeuse,
De Paris venue ici,
Dont les saules de la Meuse
Sont tous amoureux aussi.

Je l’ai suivie en Sologne,
Je la suis à Vaucouleurs.
Mon coeur rit, ma raison grogne,
Et me voilà dans les fleurs.

Je l’ai nommée Euryanthe.
J’en perds l’âme et l’appétit.
Circonstance atténuante:
Elle a le pied très petit.

Plains-moi. Telle est ma blessure.
Cela dit, amusons-nous.
Oublions tout, la censure,
Rome, et l’abbé Frayssinous.

Cours les bals, danse aux kermesses.
Les filles ont de la foi;
Fais-toi tenir les promesses
Qu’elles m’ont faites à moi.

Ris, savoure, aime, déguste,
Et, libres, narguons un peu
Le roi, ce faux nez auguste
Que le prêtre met à Dieu.

XVIII
Dénonciation de l’esprit des bois

J’ai vu ton ami, j’ai vu ton amie;
Mérante et Rosa; vous n’étiez point trois.
Fils, ils ont produit une épidémie
De baisers parmi les nids de mon bois.

Ils étaient contents, le diable m’emporte!
Tu n’étais point là. Je les regardais.
Jadis on trompait Jupin de la sorte;
Car parfois un dieu peut être un dadais.

Moi je suis très laid, j’ai l’épaule haute,
Mais, bah! Quand je peux, je ris de bon coeur.
Chacun a sa part; on plane, je saute;
Vous êtes les beaux, je suis le moqueur.

Quand le ciel charmant se mire à la source,
Quand les autres ont l’âme et le baiser,
Faire la grimace est une ressource.
N’étant pas heureux, il faut s’amuser.

Je dois t’avertir qu’un bois souvent couvre
Des détails, piquant pour Brantôme et Grimm,
Que les yeux sont faits pour qu’on les entrouvre,
Fils, et qu’une absence est un intérim.

Un coeur parfois trompe et se désabonne.
Qui veille a raison. Dieu, ce grand Bréguet,
Fit la confiance, et, la trouvant bonne,
L’améliora par un peu de guet.

Tu serais marmotte ou l’un des Quarante
Que tu ne pourrais dormir mieux que ça
Pendant que Rosa sourit à Mérante,
Pendant que Mérante embrasse Rosa.

XIX
Réponse à l’esprit des bois

Nain qui me railles,
Gnome aperçu
Dans les broussailles,
Ailé, bossu;

Face moisie,
Sur toi, boudeur,
La poésie
Tourne en laideur.

Magot de l’Inde,
Dieu d’Abydos,
Ce mont, le Pinde,
Est sur ton dos.

Ton nom est Fable.
Ton boniment
Quelquefois hâble
Et toujours ment.

Ta verve est faite
De ton limon,
Et le poète
Sort du démon.

Monstre apocryphe,
Trouble-raisons,
On sent ta griffe
Dans ces buissons.

Tu me dénonces
Un rendez-vous,
Ô fils des ronces,

Frère des houx,

Et ta voix grêle
Vient accuser
D’un sourire, elle,
Lui, d’un baiser.

Quel vilain rôle!
Je n’en crois rien,
Vieux petit drôle
Aérien.

Reprends ta danse,
Spectre badin;
Reçois quittance
De mon dédain.

Où j’enveloppe
Tous tes aïeux
Depuis Ésope
Jusqu’à Mayeux.

XX
Lettre

J’ai mal dormi. C’est votre faute.
J’ai rêvé que, sur des sommets,
Nous nous promenions côte à côte,
Et vous chantiez, et tu m’aimais.

Mes dix-neuf ans étaient la fête
Qu’en frissonnant je vous offrais;
Vous étiez belle et j’étais bête
Au fond des bois sombres et frais.

Je m’abandonnais aux ivresse;
Au-dessus de mon front vivant

Je voyais fuir les molles tresses
De l’aube, du rêve et du vent.

J’étais ébloui, beau, superbe;
Je voyais des jardins de feu,
Des nids dans l’air, des fleurs dans l’herbe,
Et dans un immense éclair, Dieu.

Mon sang murmurait dans mes tempes
Une chanson que j’entendais;
Les planètes étaient mes lampes;
J’étais archange sous un dais.

Car la jeunesse est admirable,
La joie emplit nos seins hardis;
Et la femme est le divin diable
Qui taquine ce paradis.

Elle tient un fruit qu’elle achève
Et qu’elle mord, ange et tyran;
Ce qu’on nomme la pomme d’Ève,
Tristes cieux! c’est le coeur d’Adam.

J’ai toute la nuit eu la fièvre.
Je vous adorais en dormant;
Le mot amour sur votre lèvre
Faisait un vague flamboiement.

Pareille à la vague où l’oeil plonge,
Votre gorge m’apparaissait
Dans une nudité de songe,
Avec une étoile au corset.

Je voyais vos jupes de soie,
Votre beauté, votre blancheur;
J’ai jusqu’à l’aube été la proie
De ce rêve mauvais coucheur.

Vous aviez cet air qui m’enchante;
Vous me quittiez, vous me preniez;
Vous changiez d’amours, plus méchante
Que les tigres calomniés.

Nos âmes se sont dénouées,
Et moi, de souffrir j’étais las;
Je me mourais dans des nuées
Où je t’entendais rire, hélas!

Je me réveille, et ma ressource
C’est de ne plus penser à vous,
Madame, et de fermer la source
Des songes sinistres et doux.

Maintenant, calmé, je regarde,
Pour oublier d’être jaloux,
Un tableau qui dans ma mansarde
Suspend Venise à quatre clous.

C’est un cadre ancien qu’illumine,
Sous de grands arbres, jadis verts,
Un soleil d’assez bonne mine
Quoique un peu mangé par les vers.

Le paysage est plein d’amantes,
Et du vieux sourire effacé
De toutes les femmes charmantes
Et cruelles du temps passé.

Sans les éteindre, les années
Ont couvert de molles pâleurs
Les robes vaguement traînées
Dans de la lumière et des fleurs.

Un bateau passe. Il porte un groupe

Où chante un prélat violet;
L’ombre des branches se découpe
Sur le plafond du tendelet.

À terre, un pâtre, aimé des muses,
Qui n’a que la peau sur les os,
Regarde des choses confuses
Dans le profond ciel, plein d’oiseaux.

XXI
L’oubli

Autrefois inséparables,
Et maintenant séparés.
Gaie, elle court dans les prés,
La belle aux chants adorables;

La belle aux chants adorés,
Elle court dans la prairie;
Les bois pleins de rêverie
De ses yeux sont éclairés.

Apparition exquise!
Elle marche en soupirant,
Avec cet air conquérant
Qu’on a quand on est conquise.

La Toilette, cet esprit,
Cette déesse grisette,
Qu’adore en chantant Lisette,
À qui Minerve sourit,

Pour la faire encore plus belle
Que ne l’avait faite Dieu,
Pour que le vague oiseau bleu
Sur son front batte de l’aile,

A sur cet ange câlin
Épuisé toute sa flore,
Les lys, les roses, l’aurore,
Et la maison Gagelin.

Soubrette divine et leste,
La Toilette au doigt tremblant
A mis un frais chapeau blanc
Sur ce flamboiement céleste.

Regardez-la maintenant.
Que cette belle est superbe!
Le coeur humain comme l’herbe
Autour d’elle est frissonnant.

Oh! la fière conquérante!
Le grand oeil mystérieux!
Prévost craint pour Desgrieux,
Molière a peur pour Dorante.

Elle a l’air, dans la clarté
Dont elle est toute trempée,
D’une étincelle échappée
À l’idéale beauté.

Ô grâce surnaturelle!
Il suffit, pour qu’on soit fou,
Qu’elle ait un ruban au cou,
Qu’elle ait un chiffon sur elle.

Ce chiffon charmant soudain
Aux rayons du jour ressemble,
Et ce ruban sacré semble
Avoir fleuri dans l’Éden.

Elle serait bien fâchée
Qu’on ne vît pas dans ses yeux

Que de la coupe des cieux
Sa lèvre s’est approchée,

Qu’elle veut vaincre et charmer,
Et que c’est là sa manière,
Et qu’elle est la prisonnière
Du doux caprice d’aimer.

Elle sourit, et, joyeuse,
Parle à son nouvel amant
Avec le chuchotement
D’une abeille dans l’yeuse.

Prends mon âme et mes vingt ans.
Je n’aime que toi! dit-elle. -
Ô fille d’Ève éternelle,
Ô femme aux cheveux flottants,

Ton roman sans fin s’allonge;
Pendant qu’aux plaisirs tu cours,
Et que, te croyant toujours
Au commencement du songe,

Tu dis en baissant la voix:
Pour la première fois, j’aime! -
L’amour, ce moqueur suprême,
Rit, et compte sur ses doigts.

Et, sans troubler l’aventure
De la belle aux cheveux d’or,
Sur ce coeur, si neuf encor,
L’amour fait une rature.

Et l’ancien amant? Pâli,
Brisé, sans doute à cette heure
Il se désespère et pleure... -
Écoutez cet hallali.

Passez les monts et les plaines;
La curée est dans les bois;
Les chiens mêlent leurs abois,
Les fleurs mêlent leurs haleines;

Les voyez-vous? Le voilà.
Il est le centre. Il flamboie.
Il luit. Jamais plus de joie
Dans plus d’orgueil ne brilla.

Il brille au milieu des femmes,
Tous les yeux lui disant oui,
Comme un astre épanoui
Dans un triomphe de flammes.

Il cherche en face de lui
Un sourire peu sévère,
Il chante, il lève son verre,
Éblouissant, ébloui.

Tandis que ces gaietés franches
Tourbillonnent à sa voix,
Elle, celle d’autrefois,
Là-bas, bien loin, sous les branches,

Dans les taillis hasardeux,
Aime, adore, se recueille,
Et, près de l’autre, elle effeuille
Une marguerite à deux.

Fatal coeur, comme tu changes!
Lui sans elle, elle sans lui!
Et sur leurs fronts sans ennui
Ils ont la clarté des anges.

Le séraphin à l’oeil pur

Les verrait avec envie,
Tant à leur âme ravie
Se mêle un profond azur!

Sur ces deux bouches il semble
Que le ciel met son frisson;
Sur l’une erre la chanson,
Sur l’autre le baiser tremble.

Ces êtres s’aimaient jadis;
Mais qui viendrait le leur dire
Ferait éclater de rire
Ces bouches du paradis.

Les baisers de l’autre année,
Où sont-ils? Quoi! nul remord!
Non! Tout cet avril est mort,
Toute cette aube est fanée.

Bah! le baiser, le serment,
Rien de tout cela n’existe.
Le myosotis, tout triste,
Y perdrait son allemand.

Elle! à travers ses longs voiles,
Que son regard est charmant!
Lui! comme il jette gaiement
Sa chanson dans les étoiles!

Qu’elle est belle! Qu’il est beau! -
Le morne oubli prend dans l’ombre,
Par degrés, l’épaisseur sombre
De la pierre du tombeau.

LIVRE SECOND. SAGESSE

I

AMA, CREDE

I

De la femme au ciel

L'âme a des étapes profondes.
On se laisse d'abord charmer,
Puis convaincre. Ce sont deux mondes.
Comprendre est au-delà d'aimer.

Aimer, comprendre: c'est le faîte.
Le Coeur, cet oiseau du vallon,
Sur le premier degré s'arrête;
L'Esprit vole à l'autre échelon.

À l'amant succède l'archange;
Le baiser, puis le firmament;
Le point d'obscurité se change
En un point de rayonnement.

Mets de l'amour sur cette terre
Dans les vains brins d'herbe flottants.
Cette herbe devient, ô mystère!
Le nid sombre au fond du printemps.

Ajoute, en écartant son voile,
De la lumière au nid béni.
Et le nid deviendra l'étoile
Dans la forêt de l'infini.

II

L'église

I
J’errais. Que de charmantes choses!
Il avait plu; j’étais crotté;
Mais puisque j’ai vu tant de roses,
Je dois dire la vérité.

J’arrivai tout près d’une église,
De la verte église au bon Dieu,
Où qui voyage sans valise
Écoute chanter l’oiseau bleu.

C’était l’église en fleurs, bâtie
Sans pierre, au fond du bois mouvant,
Par l’aubépine et par l’ortie
Avec des feuilles et du vent.

Le porche était fait de deux branches,
D’une broussaille et d’un buisson;
La voussure, toute en pervenches,
Était signée: Avril, maçon.

Dans cette vive architecture,
Ravissante aux yeux attendris,
On sentait l’art de la nature;
On comprenait que la perdrix,

Que l’alouette et que la grive
Avaient donné de bons avis
Sur la courbure de l’ogive,
Et que Dieu les avait suivis.

Une haute rose trémière
Dressait sur le toit de chardons
Ses cloches pleines de lumière
Où carillonnaient les bourdons.

Cette flèche gardait l’entrée;
Derrière on voyait s’ébaucher
Une digitale pourprée,
Le clocheton près du clocher.

Seul sous une pierre, un cloporte
Songeait, comme Jean à Pathmos;
Un lys s’ouvrait près de la porte
Et tenait les fonts baptismaux.

Au centre où la mousse s’amasse,
L’autel, un caillou, rayonnait,
Lamé d’argent par la limace
Et brodé d’or par le genêt.

Un escalier de fleurs ouvertes,
Tordu dans le style saxon,
Copiait ses spirales vertes
Sur le dos d’un colimaçon.

Un cytise en pleine révolte,
Troublant l’ordre, étouffant l’écho,
Encombrait toute l’archivolte
D’un grand falbala rococo.

En regardant par la croisée,
Ô joie! on sentait là quelqu’un.
L’eau bénite était en rosée,
Et l’encens était en parfum.

Les rayons à leur arrivée,
Et les gais zéphirs querelleurs,
Allaient de travée en travée
Baiser le front penché des fleurs.

Toute la nef, d’aube baignée,
Palpitait d’extase et d’émoi.

Ami, me dit une araignée,
La grande rosace est de moi.

II
Tout était d’accord dans les plaines,
Tout était d’accord dans les bois
Avec la douceur des haleines,
Avec le mystère des voix.

Tout aimait; tout faisait la paire.
L’arbre à la fleur disait: Nini;
Le mouton disait: Notre Père,
Que votre sainfoin soit béni!

Les abeilles dans l’anémone
Mendiaient, essaim diligent;
Le printemps leur faisait l’aumône
Dans une corbeille d’argent.

Et l’on mariait dans l’église,
Sous le myrte et le haricot,
Un oeillet nommé Cydalise
Avec un chou nommé Jacquot.

Un bon vieux pommier solitaire
Semait ses fleurs, tout triomphant,
Et j’aimais, dans ce frais mystère,
Cette gaieté de vieil enfant.

Au lutrin chantaient, couple allègre,
Pour des auditeurs point ingrats,
Le cricri, ce poète maigre,
Et l’ortolan, ce chantre gras.

Un vif pierrot, de tige en tige,
Sautait là, comme en son jardin;
Je suivais des yeux la voltige

Qu’exécutait ce baladin,

Ainsi qu’aux temps où Notre-Dame,
Pour célébrer n’importe qui,
Faisait sur ses tours, comme une âme,
Envoler madame Saqui.

Un beau papillon dans sa chape
Officiait superbement.
Une rose riait sous cape
Avec un frelon son amant.

Et, du fond des molles cellules,
Les jardinières, les fourmis,
Les frémissantes libellules,
Les demoiselles, chastes miss,

Les mouches aux ailes de crêpes
Admiraient près de sa Phryné
Ce frelon, officier des guêpes,
Coiffé d’un képi galonné.

Cachés par une primevère,
Une caille, un merle siffleur,
Buvaient tous deux au même verre
Dans une belladone en fleur.

Pensif, j’observais en silence,
Car un coeur n’a jamais aimé
Sans remarquer la ressemblance
De l’amour et du mois de mai.

III
Les clochettes sonnaient la messe.
Tout ce petit temple béni
Faisait à l’âme une promesse
Que garantissait l’infini.

J’entendais, en strophes discrètes,
Monter, sous un frais corridor,
Le Te Deum des pâquerettes,
Et l’hosanna des boutons d’or.

Les mille feuilles que l’air froisse
Formaient le mur tremblant et doux.
Et je reconnus ma paroisse;
Et j’y vis mon rêve à genoux.

J’y vis près de l’autel, derrière
Les résédas et les jasmins,
Les songes faisant leur prière,
L’espérance joignant les mains.

J’y vis mes bonheurs éphémères,
Les blancs spectres de mes beaux jours,
Parmi les oiseaux mes chimères,
Parmi les roses mes amours.

IV

Un grand houx, de forme incivile,
Du haut de sa fauve beauté,
Regardait mon habit de ville;
Il était fleuri, moi crotté;

J’étais crotté jusqu’à l’échine.
Le houx ressemblait au chardon
Que fait brouter l’ânier de Chine
À son âne de céladon.

Un bon crapaud faisait la lippe
Près d’un champignon malfaisant.
La chaire était une tulipe
Qu’illuminait un ver luisant.

Au seuil priait cette grisette
À l’air doucement fanfaron,
Qu’à Paris on nomme Lisette,
Qu’aux champs on nomme Liseron.

Un grimpereau, cherchant à boire,
Vit un arum, parmi le thym,
Qui dans sa feuille, blanc ciboire,
Cachait la perle du matin;

Son bec, dans cette vasque ronde,
Prit la goutte d’eau qui brilla;
La plus belle feuille du monde
Ne peut donner que ce qu’elle a.

Les chenilles peuplaient les ombres;
L’enfant de choeur Coquelicot
Regardait ces fileuses sombres
Faire dans un coin leur tricot.

Les joncs, que coudoyait sans morgue
La violette, humble prélat,
Attendaient, pour jouer de l’orgue,
Qu’un bouc ou qu’un moine bêlât.

Au fond s’ouvrait une chapelle
Qu’on évitait avec horreur;
C’est là qu’habite avec sa pelle
Le noir scarabée enterreur.

Mon pas troubla l’église fée;
Je m’aperçus qu’on m’écoutait.
L’églantine dit: C’est Orphée.
La ronce dit: C’est Colletet.

III
Saison des semailles. Le soir

C’est le moment crépusculaire.
J’admire, assis sous un portail,
Ce reste de jour dont s’éclaire
La dernière heure du travail.

Dans les terres, de nuit baignées,
Je contemple, ému, les haillons
D’un vieillard qui jette à poignées
La moisson future aux sillons.

Sa haute silhouette noire
Domine les profonds labours.
On sent à quel point il doit croire
À la fuite utile des jours.

Il marche dans la plaine immense,
Va, vient, lance la graine au loin,
Rouvre sa main, et recommence,
Et je médite, obscur témoin,

Pendant que, déployant ses voiles,
L’ombre, où se mêle une rumeur,
Semble élargir jusqu’aux étoiles
Le geste auguste du semeur.

II

OISEAUX ET ENFANTS

I

Oh! les charmants oiseaux joyeux!
Comme ils maraudent! comme ils pillent!
Où va ce tas de petits gueux
Que tous les souffles éparpillent?

Ils s’en vont au clair firmament;
Leur voix raille, leur bec lutine;
Ils font rire éternellement
La grande nature enfantine.

Ils vont aux bois, ils vont aux champs,
À nos toits remplis de mensonges,
Avec des cris, avec des chants,
Passant, fuyant, pareils aux songes.

Comme ils sont près du Dieu vivant
Et de l’aurore fraîche et douce,
Ces gais bohémiens du vent
N’amassent rien qu’un peu de mousse.

Toute la terre est sous leurs yeux;
Dieu met, pour ces purs êtres frêles,
Un triomphe mystérieux
Dans la légèreté des ailes.

Atteignent-ils les astres? Non.
Mais ils montent jusqu’aux nuages.
Vers le rêveur, leur compagnon,
Ils vont, familiers et sauvages.

La grâce est tout leur mouvement,
La volupté toute leur vie;
Pendant qu’ils volent vaguement
La feuillée immense est ravie.

L’oiseau va moins haut que Psyché.
C’est l’ivresse dans la nuée.
Vénus semble l’avoir lâché
De sa ceinture dénouée.

Il habite le demi-jour;

Le plaisir est sa loi secrète.
C’est du temple que sort l’amour,
C’est du nid que vient l’amourette.

L’oiseau s’enfuit dans l’infini
Et s’y perd comme un son de lyre.
Avec sa queue il dit nenni
Comme Jeanne avec son sourire.

Que lui faut-il? un réséda,
Un myrte, un ombre, une cachette.
Esprit, tu voudrais Velléda;
Oiseau, tu chercherais Fanchette.

Colibri, comme Ithuriel,
Appartient à la zone bleue.
L’ange est de la cité du ciel;
Les oiseaux sont de la banlieue.

II

Une alcôve au soleil levant

L’humble chambre a l’air de sourire;
Un bouquet orne un vieux bahut;
Cet intérieur ferait dire
Aux prêtres: Paix! aux femmes: Chut!

Au fond une alcôve se creuse.
Personne. On n’entre ni ne sort.
Surveillance mystérieuse!
L’aube regarde: un enfant dort.

Une petite en ce coin sombre
Était là dans un berceau blanc,
Ayant je ne sais quoi dans l’ombre
De confiant et de tremblant.

Elle étreignait dans sa main calme
Un grelot d’argent qui penchait;
L’innocence au ciel tient la palme
Et sur la terre le hochet.

Comme elle sommeille! Elle ignore
Le bien, le mal, le cœur, les sens,
Son rêve est un sentier d’aurore
Dont les anges sont les passants.

Son bras, par instants, sans secousse,
Se déplace, charmant et pur;
Sa respiration est douce
Comme une mouche dans l’azur.

Le regard de l’aube la couvre;
Rien n’est auguste et triomphant
Comme cet œil de Dieu qui s’ouvre
Sur les yeux fermés de l’enfant.

III

Comédie dans les feuilles

Au fond du parc qui se délabre,
Vieux, désert, mais encor charmant
Quand la lune, obscur candélabre,
S’allume en son écroulement,

Un moineau-franc, que rien ne gêne,
A son grenier, tout grand ouvert,
Au cinquième étage d’un chêne
Qu’avril vient de repeindre en vert.

Un saule pleureur se hasarde
À gémir sur le doux gazon,
À quelques pas de la mansarde
Où ricane ce polisson.

Ce saule ruisselant se penche;
Un petit lac est à ses pieds,
Où tous ses rameaux, branche à branche,
Sont correctement copiés.

Tout en visitant sa coquine
Dans le nid par l’aube doré,
L’oiseau rit du saule, et taquine
Ce bon vieux lakiste éploré.

Il crie à toutes les oiselles
Qu’il voit dans les feuilles sautant:
 Venez donc voir, mesdemoiselles!
Ce saule a pleuré cet étang.

Il s’abat dans son tintamarre
Sur le lac qu’il ose insulter:
 Est-elle bête cette mare!
Elle ne sait que répéter.

Ô mare, tu n’es qu’une ornière.
Tu rabâches ton saule. Allons,
Change donc un peu de manière.
Ces vieux rameaux-là sont très longs.

Ta géorgique n’est pas drôle.
Sous prétexte qu’on est miroir,
Nous faire le matin un saule
Pour nous le refaire le soir!

C’est classique, cela m’assomme.
Je préférerais qu’on se tût.
Çà, ton bon saule est un bonhomme;
Les saules sont de l’institut.

Je vois d’ici bâiller la truite.

Mare, c’est triste, et je t’en veux
D’être échevelée à la suite
D’un vieux qui n’a plus de cheveux.

Invente-nous donc quelque chose!
Calque, mais avec abandon.
Je suis fille, fais une rose,
Je suis âne, fais un chardon.

Aie une idée, un iris jaune,
Un bleu nénuphar triomphant!
Sapristi! Il est temps qu’un faune
Fasse à ta naïade un enfant. -

Puis il s’adresse à la linotte:
 Vois-tu, ce saule, en ce beau lieu,
A pour état de prendre en note
Le diable à côté du bon Dieu.

De là son deuil. Il est possible
Que tout soit mal, ô ma catin;
L’oiseau sert à l’homme de cible,
L’homme sert de cible au destin;

Mais moi, j’aime mieux, sans envie,
Errer de bosquet en bosquet,
Corbleu, que de passer ma vie
À remplir de pleurs un baquet! -

Le saule à la morne posture,
Noir comme le bois des gibets,
Se tait, et la mère nature
Sourit dans l’ombre aux quolibets

Que jette, à travers les vieux marbres,
Les quinconces, les buis, les eaux,
À cet Héraclite des arbres

Ce Démocrite des oiseaux.

IV

Les enfants lisent, troupe blonde;
Ils épellent, je les entends;
Et le maître d'école gronde
Dans la lumière du printemps.

J'aperçois l'école entrouverte;
Et je rôde au bord des marais;
Toute la grande saison verte
Frissonne au loin dans les forêts.

Tout rit, tout chante; c'est la fête
De l'infini que nous voyons;
La beauté des fleurs semble faite
Avec la candeur des rayons.

J'épelle aussi moi; je me penche
Sur l'immense livre joyeux;
Ô champs, quel vers que la pervenche!
Quelle strophe que l'aigle, ô cieux!

Mais, mystère! Rien n'est sans tache.
Rien! - Qui peut dire par quels noeuds
La végétation rattache
Le lys chaste au chardon hargneux?

Tandis que là-bas siffle un merle,
La sarcelle, des roseaux plats,
Sort, ayant au bec une perle;
Cette perle agonise, hélas!

C'est le poisson qui, tout à l'heure,
Poursuivait l'aragne, courant
Sur sa bleue et vague demeure,

Sinistre monde transparent.

Un coup de fusil dans la haie,
Abois d’un chien; c’est le chasseur.
Et, pensif, je sens une plaie
Parmi toute cette douceur.

Et, sous l’herbe pressant la fange,
Triste passant de ce beau lieu,
Je songe au mal, énigme étrange,
Faute d’orthographe de Dieu.

III

LIBERTÉ, ÉGALITÉ, FRATERNITÉ

I

Depuis six mille ans la guerre
Plaît aux peuples querelleurs,
Et Dieu perd son temps à faire
Les étoiles et les fleurs.

Les conseils du ciel immense,
Du lys pur, du nid doré,
N’ôtent aucune démence
Du coeur de l’homme effaré.

Les carnages, les victoires,
Voilà notre grand amour;
Et les multitudes noires
Ont pour grelot le tambour.

La gloire, sous ses chimères
Et sous ses chars triomphants,
Met toutes les pauvres mères
Et tous les petits enfants.

Notre bonheur est farouche;
C’est de dire: Allons! mourons!
Et c’est d’avoir à la bouche
La salive des clairons.

L’acier luit, les bivouacs fument;
Pâles, nous nous déchaînons;
Les sombres âmes s’allument
Aux lumières des canons.

Et cela pour des altesses
Qui, vous à peine enterrés,
Se feront des politesses
Pendant que vous pourrirez,

Et que, dans le champ funeste,
Les chacals et les oiseaux,
Hideux, iront voir s’il reste
De la chair après vos os!

Aucun peuple ne tolère
Qu’un autre vive à côté;
Et l’on souffle la colère
Dans notre imbécillité.

C’est un Russe! Égorge, assomme.
Un Croate! Feu roulant.
C’est juste. Pourquoi cet homme
Avait-il un habit blanc?

Celui-ci, je le supprime
Et m’en vais, le coeur serein,
Puisqu’il a commis le crime
De naître à droite du Rhin.

Rosbach! Waterloo! Vengeance!
L’homme, ivre d’un affreux bruit,

N’a plus d’autre intelligence
Que le massacre et la nuit.

On pourrait boire aux fontaines,
Prier dans l’ombre à genoux,
Aimer, songer sous les chênes;
Tuer son frère est plus doux.

On se hache, on se harponne,
On court par monts et par vaux;
L’épouvante se cramponne
Du poing aux crins des chevaux.

Et l’aube est là sur la plaine!
Oh! j’admire, en vérité,
Qu’on puisse avoir de la haine
Quand l’alouette a chanté.

II

Le vrai dans le vin

Jean Sévère était fort ivre.
Ô barrière! ô lieu divin
Où Surène nous délivre
Avec l’azur de son vin!

Un faune habitant d’un antre,
Sous les pampres de l’été,
Aurait approuvé son ventre
Et vénéré sa gaieté.

Il était beau de l’entendre.
On voit, quand cet homme rit,
Chacun des convives tendre
Comme un verre son esprit.

À travers les mille choses

Qu’on dit parmi les chansons,
Tandis qu’errent sous les roses
Les filles et les garçons,

On parla d’une bataille;
Deux peuples, russe et prussien,
Sont hachés par la mitraille;
Les deux rois se portent bien.

Chacun de ces deux bons princes
(De là tous leurs différends)
Trouve ses États trop minces
Et ceux du voisin trop grands.

Les peuples, eux, sont candides;
Tout se termine à leur gré
Par un dôme d’Invalides
Plein d’infirmes et doré.

Les rois font pour la victoire
Un hospice, où le guerrier
Ira boiter dans la gloire,
Borgne, et coiffé d’un laurier.

Nous admirions; mais, farouche,
En nous voyant tous béats,
Jean Sévère ouvrit la bouche
Et dit ces alinéas:

“ Le pauvre genre humain pleure,
“ Nos pas sont tremblants et courts,
“ Je suis très ivre, et c’est l’heure
“ De faire un sage discours.

“ Le penseur joint sous la treille
“ La logique à la boisson;
“ Le sage, après la bouteille,

“ Doit déboucher la raison.

“ Faire, au lieu des deux armées,
“ Battre les deux généraux,
“ Diminuerait les fumées
“ Et grandirait les héros.

“ Que me sert le dithyrambe
“ Qu’on va chantant devant eux,
“ Et que Dieu m’ait fait ingambe
“ Si les rois me font boiteux?

“ Ils ne me connaissent guère
“ S’ils pensent qu’il me suffit
“ D’avoir les coups de la guerre
“ Quand ils en ont le profit.

“ Foin des beaux portails de marbre
“ De la Flèche et de Saint-Cyr!
“ Lorsqu’avril fait pousser l’arbre,
“ Je n’éprouve aucun plaisir,

“ En voyant la branche, où flambe
“ L’aurore qui m’éveilla,
“ À dire: “ C’est une jambe
“ Peut-être qui me vient là!”

“ L’invalide altier se traîne,
“ Du poids d’un bras déchargé;
“ Mais moi je n’ai nulle haine
“ Pour tous les membres que j’ai.

“ Recevoir des coups de sabre,
“ Choir sous les pieds furieux
“ D’un escadron qui se cabre,
“ C’est charmant; boire vaut mieux.

“ Plutôt gambader sur l’herbe
“ Que d’être criblé de plomb!
“ Le nez coupé, c’est superbe;
“ J’aime autant mon nez trop long.

“ Décoré par mon monarque,
“ Je m’en reviens, ébloui,
“ Mais bancal, et je remarque
“ Qu’il a ses deux pattes, lui.

“ Manchot, fier, l’hymen m’attire;
“ Je vois celle qui me plaît
“ En lorgner d’autres et dire:
“ Je l’aimerais mieux complet.”

“ Fils, c’est vrai, je ne savoure
“ Qu’en douteur voltairien
“ Cet effet de ma bravoure
“ De n’être plus bon à rien.

“ La jambe de bois est noire;
“ La guerre est un dur sentier;
“ Quant à ce qu’on nomme gloire,
“ La gloire, c’est d’être entier.

“ L’infirme adosse son râble,
“ En trébuchant, aux piliers;
“ C’est une chose admirable,
“ Fils, que d’user deux souliers.

“ Fils, j’aimerais que mon prince,
“ En qui je mets mon orgueil,
“ Pût gagner une province
“ Sans me faire perdre un oeil.

“ Un discours de cette espèce
“ Sortant de mon hiatus,

“ Prouve que la langue épaisse
“ Ne fait pas l’esprit obtus.”

Ainsi parla Jean Sévère,
Ayant dans son coeur sans fiel
La justice, et dans son verre
Un vin bleu comme le ciel.

L’ivresse mit dans sa tête
Ce bon sens qu’il nous versa.
Quelquefois Silène prête
Son âne à Sancho Pança.

III

Célébration du 14 Juillet

Dans la forêt

Qu’il est joyeux aujourd’hui
Le chêne aux rameaux sans nombre,
Mystérieux point d’appui
De toute la forêt sombre!

Comme quand nous triomphons,
Il frémit, l’arbre civique;
Il répand à plis profonds
Sa grande ombre magnifique.

D’où lui vient cette gaieté?
D’où vient qu’il vibre et se dresse,
Et semble faire à l’été
Une plus fière caresse?

C’est le quatorze juillet.
À pareil jour, sur la terre
La liberté s’éveillait
Et riait dans le tonnerre.

Peuple, à pareil jour râlait
Le passé, ce noir pirate;
Paris prenait au collet
La Bastille scélérate.

À pareil jour, un décret
Chassait la nuit de la France,
Et l’infini s’éclairait
Du côté de l’espérance.

Tous les ans, à pareil jour,
Le chêne au Dieu qui nous crée
Envoie un frisson d’amour,
Et rit à l’aube sacrée.

Il se souvient, tout joyeux,
Comme on lui prenait ses branches!
L’âme humaine dans les cieux,
Fière, ouvrait ses ailes blanches.

Car le vieux chêne est gaulois:
Il hait la nuit et le cloître;
Il ne sait pas d’autres lois
Que d’être grand et de croître.

Il est grec, il est romain;
Sa cime monte, âpre et noire,
Au-dessus du genre humain
Dans une lueur de gloire.

Sa feuille, chère aux soldats,
Va, sans peur et sans reproche,
Du front d’Epaminondas
À l’uniforme de Hoche.

Il est le vieillard des bois;

Il a, richesse de l’âge,
Dans sa racine Autrefois,
Et Demain dans son feuillage.

Les rayons, les vents, les eaux,
Tremblent dans toutes ses fibres;
Comme il a besoin d’oiseaux,
Il aime les peuples libres.

C’est son jour. Il est content.
C’est l’immense anniversaire.
Paris était haletant.
La lumière était sincère.

Au loin roulait le tambour... -
Jour béni! jour populaire,
Où l’on vit un chant d’amour
Sortir d’un cri de colère!

Il tressaille, aux vents bercé,
Colosse où dans l’ombre austère
L’avenir et le passé
Mêlent leur double mystère.

Les éclipses, s’il en est,
Ce vieux naïf les ignore.
Il sait que tout ce qui naît,
L’oeuf muet, le vent sonore,

Le nid rempli de bonheur,
La fleur sortant des décombres,
Est la parole d’honneur
Que Dieu donne aux vivants sombres.

Il sait, calme et souriant,
Sérénité formidable!
Qu’un peuple est un orient,

Et que l’astre est imperdable.

Il me salue en passant,
L’arbre auguste et centenaire;
Et dans le bois innocent
Qui chante et que je vénère,

Étalant mille couleurs,
Autour du chêne superbe
Toutes les petites fleurs
Font leur toilette dans l’herbe.

L’aurore aux pavots dormants
Verse sa coupe enchantée;
Le lys met ses diamants;
La rose est décolletée.

Aux chenilles de velours
Le jasmin tend ses aiguières;
L’arum conte ses amours,
Et la garance ses guerres.

Le moineau-franc, gai, taquin,
Dans le houx qui se pavoise,
D’un refrain républicain
Orne sa chanson grivoise.

L’ajonc rit près du chemin;
Tous les buissons des ravines
Ont leur bouquet à la main;
L’air est plein de voix divines.

Et ce doux monde charmant,
Heureux sous le ciel prospère,
Épanoui, dit gaiement:
C’est la fête du grand-père.

IV
Souvenir des vieilles guerres

Pour la France et la république,
En Navarre nous nous battions.
Là parfois la balle est oblique;
Tous les rocs sont des bastions.

Notre chef, une barbe grise,
Le capitaine, était tombé,
Ayant reçu près d’une église
Le coup de fusil d’un abbé.

La blessure parut malsaine.
C’était un vieux et fier garçon,
En France, à Marine-sur-Seine,
On peut voir encor sa maison.

On emporta le capitaine
Dont on sentait plier les os;
On l’assit près d’une fontaine
D’où s’envolèrent les oiseaux.

Nous lui criâmes: Guerre! fête!
Forçons le camp! prenons le fort! -
Mais il laissa pencher sa tête,
Et nous vîmes qu’il était mort.

L’aide-major avec sa trousse
N’y put rien faire et s’en alla;
Nous ramassâmes de la mousse;
De grands vieux chênes étaient là.

On fit au mort une jonchée
De fleurs et de branches de houx;
Sa bouche n’était point fâchée,
Son oeil intrépide était doux.

L’abbé fut pris. Qu’on nous l’amène!
Qu’il meure! - On forma le carré;
Mais on vit que le capitaine
Voulait faire grâce au curé.

On chassa du pied le jésuite;
Et le mort semblait dire: Assez!
Quoiqu’il dût regretter la suite
De nos grands combats commencés.

Il avait sans doute à Marine
Quelques bons vieux amours tremblants;
Nous trouvâmes sur sa poitrine
Une boucle de cheveux blancs.

Une fosse lui fut creusée
À la baïonnette, en priant;
Puis on laissa sous la rosée
Dormir ce brave souriant.

Le bataillon reprit sa marche,
À la brune, entre chien et loup;
Nous marchions. Les ponts n’ont qu’une arche.
Des pâtres au loin sont debout.

La montagne est assez maussade;
La nuit est froide et le jour chaud;
Et l’on rencontre l’embrassade
Des grands ours de huit pieds de haut.

L’homme en ces monts naît trabucaire;
Prendre et pendre est tout l’alphabet;
Et tout se règle avec l’équerre
Que font les deux bras du gibet.

On est bandit en paix, en guerre

On s’appelle guerillero.
Le peuple au roi laisse tout faire;
Cet ânier mène ce taureau.

Dans les ravins, dans les rigoles
Que creusent les eaux et les ans,
De longues files d’espingoles
Rampaient comme des vers luisants.

Nous tenions tous nos armes prêtes
À cause des pièges du soir;
Le croissant brillait sur nos têtes.
Et nous, pensifs, nous croyions voir,

Tout en cheminant dans la plaine
Vers Pampelune et Teruel
Le hausse-col du capitaine
Qui reparaissait dans le ciel.

V

L’ascension humaine

Tandis qu’au loin des nuées,
Qui semblent des paradis,
Dans le bleu sont remuées,
Je t’écoute, et tu me dis:

“ Quelle idée as-tu de l’homme,
“ De croire qu’il aide Dieu?
“ L’homme est-il donc l’économe
“ De l’eau, de l’air et du feu?

“ Est-ce que, dans son armoire,
“ Tu l’aurais vu de tes yeux
“ Serrer les rouleaux de moire
“ Que l’aube déploie aux cieux?

“ Est-ce lui qui gonfle et ride
“ La vague, et lui dit: Assez!
“ Est-ce lui qui tient la bride
“ Des éléments hérissés?

“ Sait-il le secret de l’herbe?
“ Parle-t-il au nid vivant?
“ Met-il sa note superbe
“ Dans le noir clairon du vent?

“ La marée âpre et sonore
“ Craint-elle son éperon?
“ Connaît-il le météore?
“ Comprend-il le moucheron?

“ L’homme aider Dieu! lui, ce songe,
“ Ce spectre en fuite et tremblant!
“ Est-ce grâce à son éponge
“ Que le cygne reste blanc?

“ Le fait veut, l’homme acquiesce.
“ Je ne vois pas que sa main
“ Découpe à l’emporte-pièce
“ Les pétales du jasmin.

“ Donne-t-il l’odeur aux sauges,
“ Parce qu’il sait faire un trou
“ Pour mêler le grès des Vosges
“ Au salpêtre du Pérou?

“ Règle-t-il l’onde et la brise,
“ Parce qu’il disséquera
“ De l’argile qu’il a prise
“ Près de Rio-Madera?

“ Ôte Dieu; puis imagine,
“ Essaie, invente; épaissis

“ L’idéal subtil d’Égine
“ Par les dogmes d’Éleusis;

“ Soude Orphée à Lamettrie;
“ Joins, pour ne pas être à court,
“ L’école d’Alexandrie
“ À l’école d’Edimbourg;

“ Va du conclave au concile,
“ D’Anaximandre à Destutt;
“ Dans quelque cuve fossile
“ Exprime tout l’institut;

“ Démaillote la momie;
“ Presse Œdipe et Montyon;
“ Mets en pleine académie
“ Le sphinx à la question;

“ Fouille le doute et la grâce;
“ Amalgame en ton guano
“ À la Sybaris d’Horace
“ Les Chartreux de saint Bruno;

“ Combine Genève et Rome;
“ Fais mettre par ton fermier
“ Toutes les vertus de l’homme
“ Dans une fosse à fumier;

“ Travaille avec patience
“ En puisant au monde entier;
“ Prends pour pilon la science
“ Et l’abîme pour mortier;

“ Va, forge! je te défie
“ De faire de ton savoir
“ Et de ta philosophie
“ Sortir un grain de blé noir!

“ Dieu, de sa droite, étreint, fauche,
“ Sème, et tout est rajeuni;
“ L’homme n’est qu’une main gauche
“ Tâtonnant dans l’infini.

“ Aux heures mystérieuses,
“ Quand l’eau se change en miroir,
“ Rôdes-tu sous les yeuses,
“ L’esprit plongé dans le soir?

“ Te dis-tu: Qu’est-ce que l’homme? -
“ Sonde, ami, sa nullité;
“ Cherche, de quel chiffre, en somme,
“ Il accroît l’éternité!

“ L’homme est vain. Pourquoi, poète,
“ Ne pas le voir tel qu’il est,
“ Dans le sépulcre squelette,
“ Et sur la terre valet!

“ L’homme est nu, stérile, blême,
“ Plus frêle qu’un passereau;
“ C’est le puits du néant même
“ Qui s’ouvre dans ce zéro.

“ Va, Dieu crée et développe
“ Un lion très réussi,
“ Un bélier, une antilope,
“ Sans le concours de Poissy.

“ Il fait l’aile de la mouche
“ Du doigt dont il façonna
“ L’immense taureau farouche
“ De la Sierra Morena;

“ Et dans l’herbe et la rosée

“ Sa génisse au fier sabot
“ Règne, et n’est point éclipsée
“ Par la vache Sarlabot.

“ Oui, la graine dans l’espace
“ Vole à travers le brouillard,
“ Et de toi le vent se passe,
“ Semoir Jacquet-Robillard!

“ Ce laboureur, la tempête,
“ N’a pas, dans les gouffres noirs,
“ Besoin que Grignon lui prête
“ Sa charrue à trois versoirs.

“ Germinal, dans l’atmosphère,
“ Soufflant sur les prés fleuris,
“ Sait encor mieux son affaire
“ Qu’un maraîcher de Paris.

“ Quand Dieu veut teindre de flamme
“ Le scarabée ou la fleur,
“ Je ne vois point qu’il réclame
“ La lampe de l’émailleur.

“ L’homme peut se croire prêtre,
“ L’homme peut se dire roi,
“ Je lui laisse son peut-être,
“ Mais je doute, quant à moi,

“ Que Dieu, qui met mon image
“ Au lac où je prends mon bain,
“ Fasse faire l’étamage
“ Des étangs, à Saint-Gobain.

“ Quand Dieu pose sur l’eau sombre
“ L’arc-en-ciel comme un siphon,
“ Quand au tourbillon plein d’ombre

“ Il attelle le typhon,

“ Quand il maintient d’âge en âge
“ L’hiver, l’été, mai vermeil,
“ Janvier triste, et l’engrenage
“ De l’astre autour du soleil,

“ Quand les zodiaques roulent,
“ Amarrés solidement,
“ Sans que jamais elles croulent,
“ Aux poutres du firmament,

“ Quand tournent, rentrent et sortent
“ Ces effrayants cabestans
“ Dont les extrémités portent
“ Le ciel, les saisons, le temps;

“ Pour combiner ces rouages
“ Précis comme l’absolu,
“ Pour que l’urne des nuages
“ Bascule au moment voulu,

“ Pour que la planète passe,
“ Tel jour, au point indiqué,
“ Pour que la mer ne s’amasse
“ Que jusqu’à l’ourlet du quai,

“ Pour que jamais la comète
“ Ne rencontre un univers,
“ Pour que l’essaim sur l’Hymète
“ Trouve en juin les lys ouverts,

“ Pour que jamais, quand approche
“ L’heure obscure où l’azur luit,
“ Une étoile ne s’accroche
“ À quelque angle de la nuit,

“ Pour que jamais les effluves
“ Les forces, le gaz, l’aimant,
“ Ne manquent aux vastes cuves
“ De l’éternel mouvement,

“ Pour régler ce jeu sublime,
“ Cet équilibre béni,
“ Ces balancements d’abîme,
“ Ces écluses d’infini,

“ Pour que, courbée ou grandie,
“ L’oeuvre marche sans un pli,
“ Je crois peu qu’il étudie
“ La machine de Marly!”

Ton ironie est amère,
Mais elle se trompe, ami.
Dieu compte avec l’éphémère,
Et s’appuie à la fourmi.

Dieu n’a rien fait d’inutile.
La terre, hymne où rien n’est vain,
Chante, et l’homme est le dactyle
De l’hexamètre divin.

L’homme et Dieu sont parallèles:
Dieu créant, l’homme inventant.
Dieu donne à l’homme ses ailes.
L’éternité fait l’instant.

L’homme est son auxiliaire
Pour le bien et la vertu.
L’arbre est Dieu, l’homme est le lierre;
Dieu de l’homme s’est vêtu.

Dieu s’en sert, donc il s’en aide.
L’astre apparaît dans l’éclair;

Zeus est dans Archimède,
Et Jéhovah dans Képler.

Jusqu’à ce que l’homme meure,
Il va toujours en avant.
Sa pensée a pour demeure
L’immense idéal vivant.

Dans tout génie il s’incarne;
Le monde est sous son orteil;
Et s’il n’a qu’une lucarne,
Il y pose le soleil.

Aux terreurs inabordable,
Coupant tous les fatals noeuds,
L’homme marche formidable,
Tranquille et vertigineux.

De limon il se fait lave,
Et colosse d’embryon;
Epictète était esclave,
Molière était histrion,

Ésope était saltimbanque,
Qu’importe! - il n’est arrêté
Que lorsque le pied lui manque
Au bord de l’éternité.

L’homme n’est pas autre chose
Que le prête-nom de Dieu.
Quoi qu’il fasse, il sent la cause
Impénétrable, au milieu.

Phidias cisèle Athènes;
Michel-Ange est surhumain;
Cyrus, Rhamsès, capitaines,
Ont une flamme à la main;

Euclide trouve le mètre,
Le rythme sort d’Amphion;
Jésus-Christ vient tout soumettre,
Même le glaive, au rayon;

Brutus fait la délivrance;
Platon fait la liberté;
Jeanne d’Arc sacre la France
Avec sa virginité;

Dans le bloc des erreurs noires
Voltaire ses coins;
Luther brise les mâchoires
De Rome entre ses deux poings;

Dante ouvre l’ombre et l’anime;
Colomb fend l’océan bleu... -
C’est Dieu sous un pseudonyme,
C’est Dieu masqué, mais c’est Dieu.

L’homme est le fanal du monde.
Ce puissant esprit banni
Jette une lueur profonde
Jusqu’au seuil de l’infini.

Cent carrefours se partagent
Ce chercheur sans point d’appui;
Tous les problèmes étagent
Leurs sombres voûtes sur lui.

Il dissipe les ténèbres;
Il montre dans le lointain
Les promontoires funèbres
De l’abîme et du destin.

Il fait voir les vagues marches

Du sépulcre, et sa clarté
Blanchit les premières arches
Du pont de l’éternité.

Sous l’effrayante caverne
Il rayonne, et l’horreur fuit.
Quelqu’un tient cette lanterne;
Mais elle t’éclaire, ô nuit!

Le progrès est en litige
Entre l’homme et Jéhovah;
La greffe ajoute à la tige;
Dieu cacha, l’homme trouva.

De quelque nom qu’on la nomme,
La science au vaste voeu
Occupe le pied de l’homme
À faire les pas de Dieu.

La mer tient l’homme et l’isole,
Et l’égare loin du port;
Par le doigt de la boussole
Il se fait montrer le nord.

Dans sa morne casemate,
Penn rend ce damné meilleur;
Jenner dit: Va-t’en, stigmate!
Jackson dit: Va-t’en, douleur!

Dieu fait l’épi, nous la gerbe;
Il est grand, l’homme est fécond;
Dieu créa le premier verbe
Et Gutenberg le second.

La pesanteur, la distance,
Contre l’homme aux luttes prêt,
Prononcent une sentence;

Montgolfier casse l’arrêt.

Tous les anciens maux tenaces,
Hurlant sous le ciel profond,
Ne sont plus que des menaces
De fantômes qui s’en vont.

Le tonnerre au bruit difforme
Gronde... - on raille sans péril
La marionnette énorme
Que Franklin tient par un fil.

Nemrod était une bête
Chassant aux hommes, parmi
La démence et la tempête
De l’ancien monde ennemi.

Dracon était un cerbère
Qui grince encor sous le ciel
Avec trois têtes: Tibère,
Caïphe et Machiavel.

Nemrod s’appelait la Force,
Dracon s’appelait la Loi;
On les sentait sous l’écorce
Du vieux prêtre et du vieux roi.

Tous deux sont morts. Plus de haines!
Oh! ce fut un puissant bruit
Quand se rompirent les chaînes
Qui liaient l’homme à la nuit!

L’homme est l’appareil austère
Du progrès mystérieux;
Dieu fait par l’homme sur terre
Ce qu’il fait par l’ange aux cieux.

Dieu sur tous les êtres pose
Son reflet prodigieux,
Créant le bien par la chose,
Créant par l’homme le mieux.

La nature était terrible,
Sans pitié, presque sans jour;
L’homme la vanne en son crible,
Et n’y laisse que l’amour.

Toutes sortes de lois sombres
Semblaient sortir du destin;
Le mal heurtait aux décombres
Le pied de l’homme incertain.

Pendant qu’à travers l’espace
Elle roule en hésitant;
Un flot de ténèbres passe
Sur la terre à chaque instant;

Mais des foyers y flamboient,
Tout s’éclaircit, on le sent,
Et déjà les anges voient
Ce noir globe blanchissant.

Sous l’urne des jours sans nombre
Depuis qu’il suit son chemin,
La décroissance de l’ombre
Vient des yeux du genre humain.

L’autel n’ose plus proscrire;
La misère est morte enfin;
Pain à tous! on voit sourire
Les sombres dents de la faim.

L’erreur tombe; on l’évacue;
Les dogmes sont muselés;

La guerre est une vaincue;
Joie aux fleurs et paix aux blés!

L'ignorance est terrassée;
Ce monstre, à demi dormant,
Avait la nuit pour pensée
Et pour voix le bégaiement.

Oui, voici qu'enfin recule
L'affreux groupe des fléaux!
L'homme est l'invincible hercule,
Le balayeur du chaos.

Sa massue est la justice,
Sa colère est la bonté.
Le ciel s'appuie au solstice
Et l'homme à sa volonté.

Il veut. Tout cède et tout plie.
Il construit quand il détruit;
Et sa science est remplie
Des lumières de la nuit.

Il enchaîne les désastres,
Il tord la rébellion,
Il est sublime; et les astres
Sont sur sa peau de lion.

VI
Le grand siècle

Ce siècle a la forme
D'un monstrueux char.
Sa croissance énorme
Sous un nain césar,

Son air de prodige,

Sa gloire qui ment,
Mêlent le vertige
À l’écrasement.

Louvois pour ministre,
Scarron pour griffon,
C’est un chant sinistre
Sur un air bouffon.

Sur sa double roue
Le grand char descend;
L’une est dans la boue,
L’autre est dans le sang.

La Mort au carrosse
Attelle, - où va-t-il? -
Lavrillière atroce,
Roquelaure vil.

Comme un geai dans l’arbre,
Le roi s’y tient fier;
Son coeur est de marbre,
Son ventre est de chair.

On a, pour sa nuque
Et son front vermeil,
Fait une perruque
Avec le soleil.

Il règne et végète,
Effrayant zéro
Sur qui se projette
L’ombre du bourreau.

Ce trône est la tombe;
Et sur le pavé
Quelque chose en tombe

Qu’on n’a point lavé.

VII
Égalité

Dans un grand jardin en cinq actes,
Conforme aux préceptes du goût,
Où les branches étaient exactes,
Où les fleurs se tenaient debout,

Quelques clématites sauvages
Poussaient, pauvres bourgeons pensifs,
Parmi les nobles esclavages
Des buis, des myrtes et des ifs.

Tout près, croissait, sur la terrasse
Pleine de dieux bien copiés,
Un rosier de si grande race
Qu’il avait du marbre à ses pieds.

La rose sur les clématites
Fixait ce regard un peu sec
Que Rachel jette à ces petites
Qui font le choeur du drame grec.

Ces fleurs, tremblantes et pendantes,
Dont Zéphyre tenait le fil,
Avaient des airs de confidentes
Autour de la reine d’avril.

La haie, où s’ouvraient leurs calices
Et d’où sortaient ces humbles fleurs,
Écoutait du bord des coulisses
Le rire des bouvreuils siffleurs.

Parmi les brises murmurantes
Elle n’osait lever le front;

Cette mère de figurantes
Était un peu honteuse au fond.

Et je m’écriai: Fleurs éparses
Près de la rose en ce beau lieu,
Non, vous n’êtes pas les comparses
Du grand théâtre du bon Dieu.

Tout est de Dieu l’oeuvre visible.
La rose, en ce drame fécond,
Dit le premier vers, c’est possible,
Mais le bleuet dit le second.

Les esprits vrais, que l’aube arrose,
Ne donnent point dans ce travers
Que les campagnes sont en prose
Et que les jardins sont en vers.

Avril dans les ronces se vautre,
Le faux art que l’ennui couva
Lâche le critique Lenôtre
Sur le poète Jéhovah.

Mais cela ne fait pas grand-chose
À l’immense sérénité,
Au ciel, au calme grandiose
Du philosophe et de l’été.

Qu’importe! croissez, fleurs vermeilles!
Soeurs, couvrez la terre aux flancs bruns,
L’hésitation des abeilles
Dit l’égalité des parfums.

Croissez, plantes, tiges sans nombre!
Du verbe vous êtes les mots.
Les immenses frissons de l’ombre
Ont besoin de tous vos rameaux.

Laissez, broussailles étoilées,
Bougonner le vieux goût boudeur;
Croissez, et sentez-vous mêlées
À l’inexprimable grandeur!

Rien n’est haut et rien n’est infime.
Une goutte d’eau pèse un ciel;
Et le mont Blanc n’a pas de cime
Sous le pouce de l’Éternel.

Toute fleur est un premier rôle;
Un ver peut être une clarté;
L’homme et l’astre ont le même pôle;
L’infini, c’est l’égalité.

L’incommensurable harmonie,
Si tout n’avait pas sa beauté,
Serait insultée et punie
Dans tout être déshérité.

Dieu, dont les cieux sont les pilastres,
Dans son grand regard jamais las
Confond l’éternité des astres
Avec la saison des lilas.

Les prés, où chantent les cigales,
Et l’Ombre ont le même cadran.
Ô fleurs, vous êtes les égales
Du formidable Aldébaran.

L’intervalle n’est qu’apparence.
Ô bouton d’or tremblant d’émoi,
Dieu ne fait pas de différence
Entre le zodiaque et toi.

L’être insondable est sans frontière.

Il est juste, étant l’unité.
La création tout entière
Attendrit sa paternité.

Dieu, qui fit le souffle et la roche,
Oeil de feu qui voit nos combats,
Oreille d’ombre qui s’approche
De tous les murmures d’en bas,

Dieu, le père qui mit dans les fêtes
Dans les éthers, dans les sillons,
Qui fit pour l’azur les comètes
Et pour l’herbe les papillons,

Et qui veut qu’une âme accompagne
Les êtres de son flanc sortis,
Que l’éclair vole à la montagne
Et la mouche au myosotis,

Dieu, parmi les mondes en fuite,
Sourit, dans les gouffres du jour,
Quand une fleur toute petite
Lui conte son premier amour.

VIII
La méridienne du lion

Le lion dort, seul sous sa voûte.
Il dort de ce puissant sommeil
De la sieste, auquel s’ajoute,
Comme un poids sombre, le soleil.

Les déserts, qui de loin écoutent,
Respirent; le maître est rentré.
Car les solitudes redoutent
Ce promeneur démesuré.

Son souffle soulève son ventre;
Son oeil de brume est submergé,
Il dort sur le pavé de l’antre,
Formidablement allongé.

La paix est sur son grand visage,
Et l’oubli même, car il dort.
Il a l’altier sourcil du sage
Et l’ongle tranquille du fort.

Midi sèche l’eau des citernes;
Rien du sommeil ne le distrait;
Sa gueule ressemble aux cavernes,
Et sa crinière à la forêt.

Il entrevoit des monts difformes,
Des Ossas et des Pélions,
À travers les songes énormes
Que peuvent faire les lions.

Tout se tait sur la roche plate
Où ses pas tout à l’heure erraient.
S’il remuait sa grosse patte,
Que de mouches s’envoleraient!

IV

NIVÔSE

I

Va-t’en, me dit la bise.
C’est mon tour de chanter. -
Et, tremblante, surprise,
N’osant pas résister,

Fort décontenancée

Devant un Quos ego,
Ma chanson est chassée
Par cette virago.

Pluie. On me congédie
Partout, sur tous les tons.
Fin de la comédie.
Hirondelles, partons.

Grêle et vent. La ramée
Tord ses bras rabougris;
Là-bas fuit la fumée,
Blanche sur le ciel gris.

Une pâle dorure
Jaunit les coteaux froids.
Le trou de ma serrure
Me souffle sur les doigts.

II
Pendant une maladie

On dit que je suis fort malade,
Ami; j'ai déjà l'oeil terni;
Je sens la sinistre accolade
Du squelette de l'infini.

Sitôt levé, je me recouche;
Et je suis comme si j'avais
De la terre au fond de la bouche;
Je trouve le souffle mauvais.

Comme une voile entrant au havre,
Je frissonne; mes pas sont lents,
J'ai froid; la forme du cadavre,
Morne, apparaît sous mes draps blancs.

Mes mains sont en vain réchauffées;
Ma chair comme la neige fond;
Je sens sur mon front des bouffées
De quelque chose de profond.

Est-ce le vent de l’ombre obscure?
Ce vent qui sur Jésus passa!
Est-ce le grand Rien d’Épicure,
Ou le grand Tout de Spinosa?

Les médecins s’en vont moroses;
On parle bas autour de moi,
Et tout penche, et même les choses
Ont l’attitude de l’effroi.

Perdu! voilà ce qu’on murmure.
Tout mon corps vacille, et je sens
Se déclouer la sombre armure
De ma raison et de mes sens.

Je vois l’immense instant suprême
Dans les ténèbres arriver.
L’astre pâle au fond du ciel blême
Dessine son vague lever.

L’heure réelle, ou décevante,
Dresse son front mystérieux.
Ne crois pas que je m’épouvante;
J’ai toujours été curieux.

Mon âme se change en prunelle;
Ma raison sonde Dieu voilé;
Je tâte la porte éternelle,
Et j’essaie à la nuit ma clé.

C’est Dieu que le fossoyeur creuse;
Mourir, c’est l’heure de savoir;

Je dis à la mort: Vieille ouvreuse,
Je viens voir le spectacle noir.

III

À un ami

Sur l’effrayante falaise,
Mur par la vague entrouvert,
Roc sombre où fleurit à l’aise
Un charmant petit pré vert,

Ami, puisque tu me laisses
Ta maison loin des vivants
Entre ces deux allégresses,
Les grands flots et les grands vents,

Salut! merci! les fortunes
Sont fragiles, et nos temps,
Comme l’algue sous les dunes,
Sont dans l’abîme, et flottants.

Nos âmes sont des nuées
Qu’un vent pousse, âpre ou béni,
Et qui volent, dénouées,
Du côté de l’infini.

L’énorme bourrasque humaine,
Dont l’étoile est la raison,
Prend, quitte, emporte et ramène
L’espérance à l’horizon.

Cette grande onde inquiète
Dont notre siècle est meurtri
Écume et gronde, et me jette
Parfois mon nom dans un cri.

La haine sur moi s’arrête.

Ma pensée est dans ce bruit
Comme un oiseau de tempête
Parmi les oiseaux de nuit.

Pendant qu'ici je cultive
Ton champ comme tu le veux,
Dans maint journal l'invective
Grince et me prend aux cheveux.

La diatribe m'écharpe;
Je suis âne ou scélérat;
Je suis Pradon pour Laharpe,
Et pour de Maistre Marat.

Qu'importe! les coeurs sont ivres.
Les temps qui viennent feront
Ce qu'ils pourront de mes livres
Et de moi ce qu'ils voudront.

J'ai pour joie et pour merveille
De voir, dans ton pré d'Honfleur,
Trembler au poids d'une abeille
Un brin de lavande en fleur.

IV
Clôture

À mon ami ****

I
La sainte chapelle

Tu sais? tu connais ma chapelle,
C'est la maison des passereaux.
L'abeille aux offices m'appelle
En bourdonnant dans les sureaux.

Là, mon coeur prend sa nourriture.
Dans ma stalle je vais m’asseoir.
Oh! quel bénitier, la nature!
Quel cierge, l’étoile du soir!

Là, je vais prier; je m’enivre
De l’idéal dans le réel;
La fleur, c’est l’âme; et je sens vivre,
À travers la terre, le ciel.

Et la rosée est mon baptême.
Et le vrai m’apparaît! je crois.
Je dis: viens! à celle que j’aime.
Elle, moi, Dieu, nous sommes trois.

(Car j’ai dans des bribes latines
Lu que Dieu veut le nombre impair.)
Je vais chez l’aurore à matines,
Je vais à vêpres chez Vesper.

La religion naturelle
M’ouvre son livre où Job lisait,
Où luit l’astre, où la sauterelle
Saute de verset en verset.

C’est le seul temple. Tout l’anime.
Je veux Christ; un rayon descend;
Et si je demande un minime,
L’infusoire me dit: Présent.

La lumière est la sainte hostie;
Le lévite est le lys vermeil;
Là, resplendit l’eucharistie
Qu’on appelle aussi le soleil.

La bouche de la primevère
S’ouvre, et reçoit le saint rayon;

Je regarde la rose faire
Sa première communion.

II

Amour de l’eau

Je récite mon bréviaire
Dans les champs, et j’ai pour souffleur
Tantôt le jonc sur la rivière,
Tantôt la mouche dans la fleur.

Le poète aux torrents se plonge;
Il aime un roc des vents battu;
Ce qui coule ressemble au songe,
Et ce qui lave à la vertu.

Pas de ruisseau qui, sur sa rive
Où l’air jase, où germinal rit,
N’attire un bouvreuil, une grive,
Un merle, un poète, un esprit.

Le poète, assis sous l’yeuse,
Dans les fleurs, comme en un sérail,
Aime l’eau, cette paresseuse
Qui fait un si profond travail.

Que ce soit l’Erdre ou la Durance,
Pourvu que le flot soit flâneur,
Il se donne la transparence
D’une rivière pour bonheur.

Elle erre; on dirait qu’elle écoute;
Recevant de tout un tribut,
Oubliant comme lui sa route,
Et, comme lui, sachant son but.

Et sur sa berge il mène en laisse

Ode, roman, ou fabliau.
George Sand a la Gargilesse
Comme Horace avait l’Anio.

III

Le poète est un riche

Nous avons des bonnes fortunes
Avec le bleuet dans les blés;
Les halliers pleins de pâles lunes
Sont nos appartement meublés.

Nous y trouvons sous la ramée,
Où chante un pinson, gai marmot,
De l’eau, du vent, de la fumée,
Tout le nécessaire, en un mot.

Nous ne produirions rien qui vaille
Sans l’ormeau, le frêne et le houx;
L’air nous aide; et l’oiseau travaille
À nos poèmes avec nous.

Le pluvier, le geai, la colombe,
Nous accueillent dans le buisson,
Et plus d’un brin de mousse tombe
De leur nid dans notre chanson.

Nous habitons chez les pervenches
Des chambres de fleurs, à crédit;
Quand la fougère a, sous les branches,
Une idée, elle nous la dit.

L’autan, l’azur, le rameau frêle,
Nous conseillent sur les hauteurs,
Et jamais on n’a de querelle
Avec ces collaborateurs.

Nous trouvons dans les eaux courantes
Maint hémistiche, et les lacs verts,
Les prés généreux, font des rentes
De rimes à nos pauvres vers.

Mon patrimoine est la chimère,
Sillon riche, ayant pour engrais
Les vérités, d’où vient Homère,
Et les songes, d’où sort Segrais.

Le poète est propriétaire
Des rayons, des parfums, des voix;
C’est à ce songeur solitaire
Qu’appartient l’écho dans les bois.

Il est, dans le bleu, dans le rose,
Millionnaire, étant joyeux;
L’illusion étant la chose
Que l’homme possède le mieux.

C’est pour lui qu’un ver luisant rampe;
C’est pour lui que, sous le bouleau,
Le cheval de halage trempe
Par moments sa corde dans l’eau.

Sous la futaie où l’herbe est haute,
Il est le maître du logis
Autant que l’écureuil qui saute
Dans les pins par l’aube rougis.

Avec ses stances, il achète
Au bon Dieu le nuage noir,
L’astre, et le bruit de la clochette
Mêlée aux feuillages le soir.

Il achète le feu de forge,
L’écume des écueils grondants,

Le cou gonflé du rouge-gorge
Et les hymnes qui sont dedans.

Il achète le vent qui râle,
Les lichens du cloître détruit,
Et l’effraction sépulcrale
Du vitrail par l’oiseau de nuit,

Et l’espace où les souffles errent,
Et, quand hurlent les chiens méchants,
L’effroi des moutons qui se serrent
L’un contre l’autre dans les champs.

Il achète la roue obscure
Du char des songes dans l’horreur
Du ciel sombre, où rit Épicure
Et dont Horace est le doreur.

Il achète les rocs incultes,
Le mont chauve, et la quantité
D’infini qui sort des tumultes
D’un vaste branchage agité.

Il achète tous ces murmures,
Tout ce rêve, et, dans les taillis,
L’écrasement des fraises mûres
Sous les pieds nus d’Amaryllis.

Il achète un cri d’alouette,
Les diamants de l’arrosoir,
L’herbe, l’ombre et la silhouette
Des danses autour du pressoir.

Jadis la naïade à Boccace
Vendait le reflet d’un étang,
Glaïeuls, roseaux, héron, bécasse,
Pour un sonnet, payé comptant.

Le poète est une hirondelle
Qui sort des eaux, que l’air attend,
Qui laisse parfois de son aile
Tomber des larmes en chantant.

L’or du genêt, l’or de la gerbe,
Sont à lui; le monde est son champ;
Il est le possesseur superbe
De tous les haillons du couchant.

Le soir, quand luit la brume informe,
Quand les brises dans les clartés
Balancent une pourpre énorme
De nuages déchiquetés,

Quand les heures font leur descente
Dans la nue où le jour passa,
Il voit la strophe éblouissante
Pendre à ce Décroche-moi-ça.

Maïa pour lui n’est pas défunte;
Dans son vers, de pluie imbibé,
Il met la prairie; il emprunte
Souvent de l’argent à Phoebé.

Pour lui le vieux saule se creuse.
Il a tout, aimer, croire et voir.
Dans son âme mystérieuse
Il agite un vague encensoir.

IV

Notre ancienne dispute

Te souviens-tu qu’en l’âge tendre
Où tu n’étais qu’un citadin,
Tu me raillais toujours de prendre

La nature pour mon jardin?

Un jour, tu t’armas d’un air rogue,
Et moi d’accents très convaincus,
Et nous eûmes ce dialogue,
Alterné, comme dans Moschus:

TOI
“ Si tu fais ce qu’on te conseille,
“ Tu n’iras point dans ce vallon
“ Affronter l’aigreur de l’oseille
“ Et l’épigramme du frelon.

MOI
“ J’irai.

TOI
La nature est morose
“ Souvent, pour l’homme fourvoyé.
“ Si l’on est baisé par la rose,
“ Par l’épine on est tutoyé.

MOI
“ Soit.

TOI
Paris à l’homme est propice.
“ Perlet joue au Gymnase, vois,
“ Ravignan prêche à Saint-Sulpice.

MOI
“ Et la fauvette chante aux bois.

TOI
“ Que viens-tu faire dans ces plaines?
“ On ne te connaît pas ici.
“ Les bêtes parfois sont vilaines,

“ L’herbe est parfois mauvaise; ainsi

“ Crois-moi, n’en franchis point la porte.
“ On n’y sait pas ton nom.

MOI
Pardon!
“ Vadius l’a dit au cloporte,
“ Trissotin l’a dit au chardon.

TOI
“ Reste dans la ville où nous sommes,
“ Car les champs ne sont meilleurs.

MOI
“ J’ai des ennemis chez les hommes,
“ Je n’en ai point parmi les fleurs.”

V

Ce jour-là, trouvaille de l’église

Et ce même jour, jour insigne,
Je trouvai ce temple humble et grand
Dont Fénelon serait le cygne
Et Voltaire le moineau-franc.

Un moine, assis dans les coulisses,
Aux papillons, grands et petits,
Tâchait de vendre des calices
Que l’églantier donnait gratis.

Là, point d’orangers en livrée;
Point de grenadiers alignés;
Là, point d’ifs allant en soirée,
Pas de buis, par Boileau peignés.

Pas de lauriers dans des guérites;

Mais, parmi les prés et les blés,
Les paysannes marguerites
Avec leurs bonnets étoilés.

Temple où les fronts se rassérènent,
Où se dissolvent les douleurs,
Où toutes les vérités prennent
La forme de toutes les fleurs!

C’est là qu’avril oppose au diable,
Au pape, aux enfers, aux satans,
Cet alléluia formidable,
L’éclat de rire du printemps.

Oh! la vraie église divine!
Au fond de tout il faisait jour.
Une rose me dit: Devine.
Et je lui répondis: Amour.

VI
L’hiver

L’autre mois pourtant, je dois dire
Que nous ne fûmes point reçus;
L’église avait cessé de rire;
Un brouillard sombre était dessus;

Plus d’oiseaux, plus de scarabées;
Et par des bourbiers, noirs fossés,
Par toutes les feuilles tombées,
Par tous les rameaux hérissés,

Par l’eau qui détrempait l’argile,
Nous trouvâmes barricadé
Ce temple qu’eût aimé Virgile
Et que n’eût point haï Vadé.

On était au premier novembre.
Un hibou, comme nous passions,
Nous cria du fond de sa chambre:
Fermé pour réparations.

AU CHEVAL

I

Monstre, à présent reprends ton vol.
Approche, que je te déboucle.
Je te lâche, ôte ton licol,
Rallume en tes yeux l’escarboucle.

Quitte ces fleurs, quitte ce pré.
Monstre, Tempé n’est point Capoue.
Sur l’océan d’aube empourpré,
Parfois l’ouragan calmé joue.

Je t’ai quelque temps tenu là.
Fuis! - Devant toi les étendues,
Que ton pied souvent viola,
Tremblent, et s’ouvrent, éperdues.

Redeviens ton maître, va-t’en!
Cabre-toi, piaffe, redéploie
Tes farouches ailes, titan,
Avec la fureur de la joie.

Retourne aux pâles profondeurs.
Sois indomptable, recommence
Vers l’idéal, loin des laideurs,
Loin des hommes, la fuite immense.

Cheval, devance l’aquilon,
Toi, la raison et la folie,
L’échappé du bois d’Apollon,

Le dételé du char d’Élie.

Vole au-dessus de nos combats,
De nos succès, de nos désastres,
Et qu’on aperçoive d’en bas
Ta forme sombre sous les astres.

II

Mais il n’est plus d’astre aux sommets!
Hélas, la brume sur les faîtes
Rend plus lugubre que jamais
L’échevèlement des prophètes.

Toi, brave tout! qu’au ciel terni
Ton caprice énorme voltige;
Quadrupède de l’infini,
Plane, aventurier du vertige.

Fuis dans l’azur, noir ou vermeil.
Monstre, au galop, ventre aux nuages!
Tu ne connais ni le sommeil,
Ni le sépulcre, nos péages.

Sois plein d’un implacable amour.
Il est nuit. Qu’importe. Nuit noire.
Tant mieux, on y fera le jour.
Pars, tremblant d’un frisson de gloire!

Sans frein, sans trêve, sans flambeau,
Cherchant les cieux hors de l’étable,
Vers le vrai, le juste et le beau,
Reprends ta course épouvantable.

III

Reprends ta course sans pitié,

Si terrible et si débordée
Que Néron se sent châtié
Rien que pour l’avoir regardée.

Va réveiller Démogorgon.
Sois l’espérance et l’effroi, venge,
Rassure et console, dragon
Par une aile, et par l’autre, archange.

Verse ton souffle auguste et chaud
Jusque sur les plus humbles têtes.
Porte des reproches là-haut,
Égal aux dieux, frère des bêtes.

Fuis, cours! sois le monstre du bien,
Le cheval démon qui délivre!
Rebelle au despote, au lien,
De toutes les vérités ivre!

Quand vient le déclin d’un tyran,
Quand vient l’instant des lois meilleures,
Qu’au ciel sombre, éternel cadran,
Ton pied frappe ces grandes heures,

Donne à tout ce qui rampe en bas,
Au barde qui vent Calliope,
Au peuple voulant Barabbas,
À la religion myope,

Donne à quiconque ignore ou nuit,
Aux fausses gloires, aux faux zèles,
Aux multitudes dans la nuit,
L’éblouissement de tes ailes.

IV

Va! pour vaincre et pour transformer,

Pour que l’homme se transfigure,
Qu’il te suffise de fermer
Et de rouvrir ton envergure.

Sois la bonté, sois le dédain;
Qu’un incompréhensible Éole
Fasse parfois sortir soudain
Des foudres de ton auréole.

Ton poitrail resplendit, on croit
Que l’aube, aux tresses dénouées,
Le dore, et sur ta croupe on voit
Toutes les ombres des nuées.

Jette au peuple un hennissement,
À l’échafaud une ruade;
Fais une brèche au firmament
Pour l’esprit humain s’évade.

Soutiens le penseur, qui dément
L’autel, l’augure et la sibylle,
Et n’a pas d’autre adossement
Que la conscience immobile.

Plains les martyrs maintenant,
Attendris ton regard sévère,
Et contemple, tout en planant,
Leur âpre montée au calvaire.

V

Cours sans repos, pense aux donjons,
Pense aux murs hauts de cent coudées,
Franchis, sans brouter les bourgeons,
La forêt vierge des idées.

Ne t’attarde pas, même au beau.

S’il est traître ou froid, qu’il t’indigne.
La nuit ne fait que le corbeau,
La neige ne fait que le cygne,

Le soleil seul fait l’aigle. Va!
Le soleil au mal est hostile.
Quand l’oeuf noir du chaos creva,
Il en sortit, beau, mais utile.

Immortel, protège l’instant.
L’homme a besoin de toi, te dis-je.
Précipite-toi, haletant,
À la poursuite du prodige.

Le prodige, c’est l’avenir;
C’est la vie idéalisée,
Le ciel renonçant à punir,
L’univers fleur et Dieu rosée.

Plonge dans l’inconnu sans fond!
Cours, passe à travers les trouées!
Et, du vent que dans le ciel font
Tes vastes plumes secouées,

Tâche de renverser les tours,
Les geôles, les temples athées,
Et d’effaroucher les vautours
Tournoyant sur les Prométhées.

Vole, altier, rapide, insensé,
Droit à la cible aux cieux fixée,
Comme si je t’avais lancé,
Flèche, de l’arc de ma pensée.

VI

Pourtant sur ton dos garde-moi;

Car tous mes songes font partie
De ta crinière, et je voi
Rien sur terre après ta sortie.

Je veux de telles unions
Avec toi, cheval météore,
Que, nous mêlant, nous parvenions
À ne plus être qu’un centaure.

Retourne aux problèmes profonds.
Brise Ananké, ce lourd couvercle
Sous qui, tristes, nous étouffons;
Franchis la sphère, sors du cercle!

Quand, l’oeil plein de vagues effrois,
Tu viens regarder l’invisible,
Avide et tremblant à la fois
D’entrer dans ce silence horrible,

La Nuit grince lugubrement;
Le Mal, qu’aucuns rayons n’éclairent,
Fait en arrière un mouvement
Devant tes naseaux qui le flairent;

La Mort, qu’importune un témoin,
S’étonne, et rentre aux ossuaires;
On entrevoit partout au loin
La fuite obscure des suaires.

Tu ne peux, étant âme et foi,
Apparaître à l’horizon sombre
Sans qu’il se fasse autour de toi
Un recul de spectres dans l’ombre.

VII

Tout se tait dans l’affreux lointain
Vers qui l’homme effaré s’avance;

L’oubli, la tombe, le destin,
Et la nuit, sont de connivence.

Dans le gouffre, piège muet,
D’où pas un conseil ne s’élance,
Déjoue, ô toi; grand inquiet,
La méchanceté du silence.

Tes pieds volants, tes yeux de lynx
Peuvent sonder tous les peut-êtres;
Toi seul peux faire peur aux sphynx,
Et leur dire: Ah çà, parlez, traîtres!

D’en haut, jette à l’homme indécis
Tous les mots des énigmes louches.
Déchire la robe d’Isis.
Fais retirer les doigts des bouches.

Connaître, c’est là notre faim.
Toi, notre esprit, presse et réclame.
Que la matière avoue enfin,
Mise à la question par l’âme.

Et qu’on sache à quoi s’en tenir
Sur la quantité de souffrance
Dont il faut payer l’avenir,
Dût pleurer un peu l’espérance!

VIII

Sois le trouble-fête du mal.
Force le dessous à paraître.
Tire du sultan l’animal,
Du Dieu le nain, l’homme du prêtre.

Lutte. Aiguillon contre aiguillon!
La haine attaque, guette, veille;

Elle est le sinistre frelon,
Mais n’es-tu pas la grande abeille!

Extermine l’obstacle épais,
L’antagonisme, la barrière.
Mets au service de la paix
La vérité, cette guerrière.

L’inquisition souriant
Rêve le glaive aidant la crosse;
Pour qu’elle s’éveille en criant,
Mords jusqu’au sang l’erreur féroce.

IX

Si le passé se reconstruit
Dans toute son horreur première,
Si l’abîme fait de la nuit,
Ô cheval, fais de la lumière.

Tu n’as pas pour rien quatre fers.
Galope sur l’ombre insondable;
Qu’un rejaillissement d’éclairs
Sois ton annonce formidable.

Traverse tout, enfers, tombeaux,
Précipices, néants, mensonges,
Et qu’on entende tes sabots
Sonner sur le plafond des songes.

Comme sur l’enclume un forgeur,
Sur les brumes universelles,
Abats-toi, fauve voyageur,
Ô puissant faiseur d’étincelles!

Sers les hommes en les fuyant.
Au-dessus de leurs fronts funèbres,

Si le zénith reste effrayant,
Si le ciel s’obstine aux ténèbres,

Si l’espace est une forêt,
S’il fait nuit comme dans les Bibles,
Si pas un rayon ne paraît,
Toi, de tes quatre pieds terribles,

Faisant subitement tout voir,
Malgré l’ombre, malgré les voiles,
Envoie à ce fatal ciel noir
Une éclaboussure d’étoiles.

LA VOIX DE GUERNESEY

TABLE DES MATIERES

Ces jeunes gens, ces fils
O sinistre vieillard
Une chaîne au héros!
Votre Garibaldi...
Qu’il aille donc!
Ah! race italienne
Le crime est consommé.
O peuple, noir dormeur

I.

Ces jeunes gens, ces fils

Ces jeunes gens, ces fils de Brutus, de Camille,
De Thraséas combien étaient-ils? quatre mille.
Combien sont morts? six cents. Six cents! comptez, voyez.
Une dispersion de membres foudroyés,
Des bras rompus, des yeux troués et noirs, des ventres
Où fouillent en hurlant les loups sortis des antres,
De la chair mitraillée au milieu des buissons,
C’est là tout ce qui reste, après les trahisons,
Après le piège, après les guet-apens infâmes,
Hélas, de ces grands cœurs et de ces grandes âmes!
Voyez. On les a tous fauchés d’un coup de faulx.
Leur crime? ils voulaient Rome et ses arcs triomphaux;
Ils défendaient l’honneur et le droit, ces chimères.
Venez, reconnaissez vos enfants, venez, mères!
Car pour qui l’allaita, l’homme est toujours l’enfant.
Tenez; ce front hagard, qu’une balle ouvre et fend,
C’est humble tête blonde où jadis, pauvre femme,
Tu voyais rayonner l’aurore et poindre l’âme;
Ces lèvres, dont l’écume a souillé le gazon,
O nourrice, après toi bégayaient ta chanson;
Cette main froide, auprès de ces paupières closes,
A fait jaillir ton lait sous ses petits doigts roses;
Voici le premier-né; voici le dernier-né.
O d’espérance éteinte amas infortuné!
Pleurs profonds! ils vivaient; ils réclamaient leur Tibre;
Etre jeune n’est pas complet sans être libre;
Ils voulaient voir leur aigle immense s’envoler;
Ils voulaient affranchir, réparer, consoler;
Chacun portait en soi, pieuse idolâtrie,
Le total des affronts soufferts par la patrie;
Ils savaient tout compter, tout, hors les ennemis;
Beaux, vaillants, jeunes, morts! Adieux, nos doux amis,
Les heures de lumière et d’amour sont passées,

Vous n’effeuillerez plus avec vos fiancées
L’humble étoile des prés qui rayonne et fleurit...
Que de sang sur ce prêtre, ô pâle Jésus-Christ!

Pontife élu que l’ange a touché de sa palme,
A qui Dieu commanda de tenir, doux et calme,
Son évangile ouvert sur le monde orphelin,
O frère universel à la robe de lin,
A demi dans la chaire, à demi dans la tombe,
Serviteur de l’agneau, gardien de la colombe,
Qui des cieux dans ta main portes le lys tremblant,
Homme près de ta fin, car ton front est tout blanc
Et le vent du sépulcre en tes cheveux se joue,
Vicaire de celui qui tendait l’autre joue,
A cette heure, ô semeur des pardons infinis,
Ce qui plaît à ton cœur et ce que tu bénis
Sur notre sombre terre où l’âme humaine lutte,
C’est un fusil tuant douze hommes par minute!

Jules deux reparaît sous ma mitre de fer.
La papauté féroce avoue enfin l’enfer.

Certes, l’outil du meurtre a bien rempli sa tâche;
Ces rois! leur foudre est traitre et leur tonnerre est lâche.
Avoir été trop grands, Français, c’est importun:
Jadis un contre dix, aujourd’hui dix contre un.
France, on te déshonore, on te traîne, on te lie,
Et l’on te force à mettre au bagne l’Italie.
Voilà ce qu’on te fait, colosse en proie aux mains!
Un ruisseau fumant coule au flanc des Apennins.

II.

O sinistre vieillard

O sinistre vieillard, te voilà responsable

Du vautour déterrant un crâne dans le sable,
Et du croassement lugubre des corbeaux!
Emplissez désormais ses visions, tombeaux,
Paysages hideux où rôdent les belettes,
Silhouettes d'oiseaux perchés sur des squelettes!
S'il dort, apparais-lui, champ de bataille noir!

Les canons sont tout chauds; ils ont fait leur devoir;
La mitraille invoquée a tenu sa promesse;
C'est fait. Les morts sont morts. Maintenant dis ta messe.
Prends dans tes doigts l'hostie en t'essuyant un peu,
Car il ne faudrait pas mettre du sang à Dieu!

Du reste tout est bien. La France n'est pas fière;
Le roi de Prusse a ri; le denier de Saint-Pierre
Prospère, et l'Irlandais donne son dernier sou;
Le peuple cède et met en terre le genou;
De peur qu'on ne le fauche; il plie, étant de l'herbe;
On reprend Frosinone et l'on rentre à Viterbe;
Le czar a commandé son service divin;
Partout où quelque mort blêmit dans un ravin,
Le rat joyeux le ronge en tremblant qu'il ne bouge;
Ici la terre est noire; ici la plaine est rouge;
Garibaldi n'est plus qu'un vain nom immortel;
Comme Léonidas, comme Guillaume Tell;
Le pape, à la Sixtine, au Gésu, chez les Carmes,
Met tous ses diamants; tendre; il répand des larmes
De joie; il est très doux; il parle du succès
De ses armes; du sang versé, des bons Français,
Des quantités de plomb que la bombarde jette,
Modestement, les yeux baissés, comme un poète
Se fait un peu prier pour réciter ses vers.
De convois de blessés les chemins sont couverts.

Partout rit la victoire.

Utilité des traîtres.

Dans les perles, la soie et l’or, parmi tes reîtres
Qu’hier, du doigts, aux champs de meurtre, tu guidais,
Pape, assis, sur ton trône et siégeant, sous ton dais,
Coiffé de ta tiare aux trois couronnes, prêtre,
Tu verras quelque jour au Vatican peut-être
Entrer un homme triste et de haillons vêtu,
Un pauvre, un inconnu. Tu lui diras: — Qu’es-tu,
Passant? que me veux-tu? sors-tu de quelque geôle?
Pourquoi voit-on ces brins de laine à ton épaule?
— Une brebis était tout à l’heure dessus,
Répondra-t-il. Je viens de loin. Je suis Jésus.

III.

Une chaîne au héros!

Une chaîne au héros! une corde à l’apôtre!
John Brown, Garibaldi, passez l’un après l’autre.
Quel est ce prisonnier? c’est le libérateur.
Sur la terre, en tous lieux, du pôle à l’équateur;
L’iniquité prévaut, règne, triomphe, et mène
De force aux lâchetés la conscience humaine.
O prodiges de honte! étranges impudeurs!
On accepte un soufflet par des ambassadeurs.
On jette aux fers celui qui nous a fait l’aumône.
— Tu sais, je t’ai blâmé de lui donner ce trône!—

On était gentilhomme, on devient alguazil.
Débiteur d’un royaume, on paie avec l’exil.
Pourquoi pas? on est vil. C’est qu’on en reçoit l’ordre.
Rampons. Lécher le maître est plus sûr que le mordre.
D’ailleurs tout est logique. Où sont les contresens?
La gloire a le cachot, mais le crime a l’encens;
De quoi vous plaignez-vous? l’infâme étant l’auguste,
Le vrai doit être faux, et la balance est juste.

On dit au soldat: frappe! il doit frapper. La mort
Est la servante sombre aux ordres du plus fort.
Et puis, l'aigle peut bien venir en aide au cygne!
Mitrailler est le dogme et croire est la consigne.
Qu'est pour nous le soldat? du fer sur un valet.
Le pape veut avoir son Sadowa; qu'il l'ait.
Quoi donc? en viendra-t-on dans le siècle où nous sommes,
A mettre en question le vieux droit qu'ont les hommes
D'obéir à leur prince et de s'entretuer?
Au prétendu progrès pourquoi s'évertuer
Quand l'humble populace est surtout coutumière?
La masse a plus de calme ayant moins de lumière.
Tous les grands intérêts des peuples, l'échafaud,
La guerre, le budget, l'ignorance qu'il faut,
Courent moins de dangers et sont en équilibre
Sur l'homme garrotté mieux que sur l'homme libre.
L'homme libre se meut et cause un tremblement.
Un Garibaldi peut tout rompre à tout moment;
Il entraîne après lui la foule, qui déserte
Et passe à l'idéal. C'est grave. On comprend, certe,
Que la société, sur qui veillent les cours,
Doit trembler et frémir et crier au secours,
Tant qu'un héros n'est pas mis hors d'état de nuire.

Le phare aux yeux de l'ombre est coupable de luire.

IV.

Votre Garibaldi...

Votre Garibaldi n'a pas trouvé le joint.
Ça, le but de tout homme ici-bas n'est-il point
De tâcher d'être dupe aussi peu que possible?
Jouir est bon. La vie est un tir à la cible.
Le scrupule en haillons grelotte; je le plains.
Rien n'a plus de vertu que les coffres-forts pleins.

Il est de l’intérêt de tous qu’on ait des princes
Qui fassent refluer leur or dans les provinces;
C’est pour cela qu’un roi doit être riche; avoir
Une liste civile énorme est son devoir;
Le pape, qu’on voudrait confiner dans les astres,
Est un roi comme un autre. Il a besoin de piastres,
Que diable! l’opulence est le droit du saint lieu;
Il faut dorer le pape afin de prouver Dieu;
N’avoir pas une pierre où reposer sa tête
Est bon pour Jésus-Christ. La loque est déshonnête.
Voyons la question par le côté moral.
Le but du colonel est d’être général,
Le but du maréchal est d’être connétable!
Avant tout, mon paiement. Mettons cartes sur table.
Un renégat a tort tant qu’il n’est pas muchir;
Alors il a raison. S’arrondir, s’enrichir,
Tout est là. Regardez, nous prenons les Hanovres.
Et quant à ces bandits qui veulent rester pauvres,
Ils sont les ennemis publics. Sus! hors la loi!
Ils donnent le mauvais exemple. Coffrez-moi
Ce gueux, qui, dictateur, n’a rien mis dans sa poche.

On se heurte, au battant lorsqu’on touche à la cloche,
Et lorsqu’on touche au prêtre on se heurte au soudard.
Morbleu, la papauté n’est pas un objet d’art!
Par le sabre-en Espagne, en Prusse par la schlague,
Par la censure en France, on modère, on élague
L’excès de rêverie et de tendance au droit,
Le peuple est pour le, prince un soulier fort étroit;
L’élargir en l’usant aux marches militaires
Est utile: Un pontife, en ses sermons austères
Sait rattacher au ciel nos lois, qu’on nomme abus,
Et le knout en latin s’appelle Syllabus.
L’ordre est tout. Le fusil Chassepot est suave.
Le progrès est béni; dans quoi? dans le zouave;
Les boulets sont bénis dans leurs coups; le chacal
Est béni dans sa faim, s’il est pontifical.

Nous trouvons excellent, quant à nous, que le pape
Rie au nez de ce siècle inepte, écrase, frappe;
Et, du moment qu'on veut lui prendre son argent,
Se fasse carrément recruteur et sergent,
Pousse à la guerre, et crie: à mort quiconque est libre!
Qu'il recommande au prône, un obus de calibre,
Qu'il dise, en achevant sa prière; Égorgez!
Envoie aux combattants force fourgons chargés;
De la poudre, du plomb, du fer, et ravitaille
L'extermination sur les champs de bataille!

V.

Qu'il aille donc!

Qu'il aille donc! qu'il aille, emportant son mandat,
Ce chevalier errant des peuples, ce soldat,
Ce paladin, ce preux de l'idéal! qu'il parte.
Nous, les proscrits d'Athène, à ce proscrit de Sparte,
Ouvrons nos seuils; qu'il soit notre hôte maintenant;
Qu'en notre maison sombre il entre rayonnant.
Oui, viens, chacun de nous, frère à l'âme meurtrie,
Veut avec son exil te faire une patrie!
Viens, assieds-toi chez ceux qui n'ont plus de foyer.
Viens, toi qu'on a pu vaincre et qu'on n'a pu ployer!
Nous chercherons quel est le nom de l'espérance;
Nous dirons: Italie! et tu répondras: France!
Et nous regarderons, car le soir fait rêver,
En attendant les droits, les astres se lever.

L'amour du genre humain se double d'une haine
Égale au poids du joug, au froid noir de la chaîne,
Aux mensonges du prêtre, aux cruautés du roi.
Nous sommes rugissants et terribles. Pourquoi?
Parce que nous aimons. Toutes ces humbles têtes,
Nous voulons les voir croître et nous sommes des bêtes

Dans l’antre, et nous avons les peuples pour petits.
Jetés au même écueil, mais non pas engloutis,
Frère, nous nous dirons tous les deux notre histoire;
Tu me raconteras Palerme et ta victoire,
Je te dirai Paris, sa chute, et nos sanglots,
Et nous lirons ensemble Homère au bord des flots.
Puis, tu continueras ta marche âpre et hardie.

Et, là-bas, la lueur deviendra l’incendie.

VI.

Ah! race italienne

Ah! race italienne, il était ton appui!
Ah! vous auriez eu Rome, ô peuples, grâce à lui,
Grâce au bras du guerrier, grâce au cœur du prophète.
D’abord il l’eût donnée, ensuite il l’eût refaite.

Oui, calme, ayant en lui de la grandeur assez
Pour s’ajouter sans trouble aux héros trépassés,
Il eût reforgé Rome; il eût mêlé l’exemple
Du vieux sépulcre avec l’exemple du vieux temple,
Il eût mêlé Turin; Pise, Albe, Velletri,
Le Capitole avec le Vésuve, et pétri
L’âme de Juvénal avec l’âme du Dante;
Il eût trempé d’airain la fibre indépendante;
Il vous eût des titans montré les fiers chemins.
Pleurez, Italiens! il vous eût faits Romains.

VII.

Le crime est consommé.

Le crime est consommé. Qui l’a commis? ce pape?
Non. Ce roi? non. Le glaive à leur bras faible échappe.
Qui donc et le coupable alors? Lui. L’homme obscur,
Celui qui s’embusqua derrière notre mur;
Le fils du Sinon grec et du Judas biblique;
Celui qui, souriant, guetta la république,
Son serment sur le front, son poignard à la main.

Il est parmi vous, rois, ô groupe à peine humain,
Un homme que l’éclair de temps en temps regarde.
Ce condamné, qui triple ‘autour de lui sa garde,
Perd sa peine. Son tour approche. Quand? bientôt.
C’est pourquoi l’on entend un grondement là haut.
L’ombre est sur vos palais, ô rois. La nuit l’apporte.
Tel que l’exécuteur frappant à votre porte,
Le tonnerre demande à parler à quelqu’un.

Et cependant l’odeur des morts, affreux parfum
Qui se mêle à l’encens, des Tedeums superbes,
Monte du fond des bois, du fond des prés pleins d’herbes,
Des steppes, des marais, des vallons, en tous lieux!
Au fatal boulevard de Paris oublieux,
Au Mexique, en Pologne, en Crète où la nuit tombe,
En Italie, on sent un miasme de tombe,
Comme si, sur ce globe et sous le firmament,
Étant dans sa saison d’épanouissement,
Vaste mancenillier de la terre en démence,
Le carnage vermeil ouvrait sa fleur immense.
Partout des égorgés! des massacrés partout!
Le cadavre est à terre et l’idée est debout.
Ils gisent étendus dans les plaines farouches.
L’appel aux armes flotte au dessus de leurs bouches.
On les dirait semés. Ils le sont. Le sillon
Se nomme Liberté. — La mort est l’aquilon,
Et les morts glorieux sont la graine sublime
Qu’elle disperse au loin sur l’avenir, abîme.
Germez, héros! et vous, cadavres, pourrissez.

Fais ton œuvre, ô mystère! épars, nus, hérissés,
Béants, montrant au ciel leurs bras coupés qui pendent,
Tous ces exterminés, immobiles attendent.

Et tandis que les rois, joyeux et désastreux,
Font une fête auguste et triomphale entre eux,
Tandis que leur Olympe abonde, au fond des nues,
En fanfare, en festins, en joie, en gorges nues,
Rit, chante, et, sur nos fronts, montre aux hommes contents
Une fraternité de czars et de sultans,
De son côté, là-bas, au désert, sous la bisé,
Dans l’ombre avec la mort le vautour fraternise;
Les bêtes du sépulcre ont leur vil rendez-vous;
Le freux, la louche orfraie, et le pygargue roux,
L’âpre autour, les milans, féroces hirondelles,
Volent droit aux charniers, et tous, à tire d’ailes,
Se hâtent vers les morts, et ces rauques oiseaux
S’abattent, l’un mordant la chair, l’autre les os,
Et, criant, s’appelant, le feu sous les paupières,
Viennent boire le sang qui coule entre les pierres.

VIII.

O peuple, noir dormeur

O peuple, noir dormeur, quand t’éveilleras-tu?
Rester couché sied mal à qui fut abattu.
Tu dors, avec ton sang sur les mains, et, stigmate
Que t’a laissé l’abjecte et dure casemate,
La marque d’une corde autour de tes poignets.
Qu’as-tu fait de ton âme, ô toi qui t’indignais!
L’empire est une cave, et toutes les espèces
De nuit te tiennent pris sous leurs brumes épaisses.
Tu dors, oubliant tout, ta grandeur, son complot,
La liberté, le droit, ces lumières d’en haut;

Tu fermes les yeux, lourd, gisant sous d’affreux voiles,
Sans souci de l’affront que tu fais aux étoiles!
Allons, remue. Allons, mets-toi sur ton séant.
Qu’on voie enfin bouger le torse du géant.
La longueur du sommeil devient ignominie.
Es-tu las? es-tu sourd? es-tu mort? Je le nie.
N’as-tu pas conscience en ton accablement
Que l’opprobre s’accroît de moment en moment?
N’entends-tu pas qu’on marche au dessus de ta tête?
Ce sont les rois. Ils font le mal. Ils sont en fête.
Tu dors sur ce fumier, toi qui fus citoyen!
Te voilà devenu bête de somme. Eh bien,
L’âne se lève, et brait; le bœuf se dresse et beugle.
Cherche donc dans la nuit puisqu’on t’a fait aveugle!
O toi qui fus si grand, debout! car il est tard.
Dans cette obscurité l’on peut mettre au hasard
La main sur de la honte ou bien sur de la gloire;
Étends le bras le long de la muraille noire;
L’inattendu dans l’ombre ici peut se cacher;
Tu parviendras peut-être à trouver, à toucher,
A saisir une épée entre tes poings funèbres,
Dans le tâtonnement farouche des ténèbres!

L’ANNEE TERRIBLE

This collection of poems was first published in 1872. It concerns the year 1870, when France was at war against Prussia and a civil war in Paris erupted.

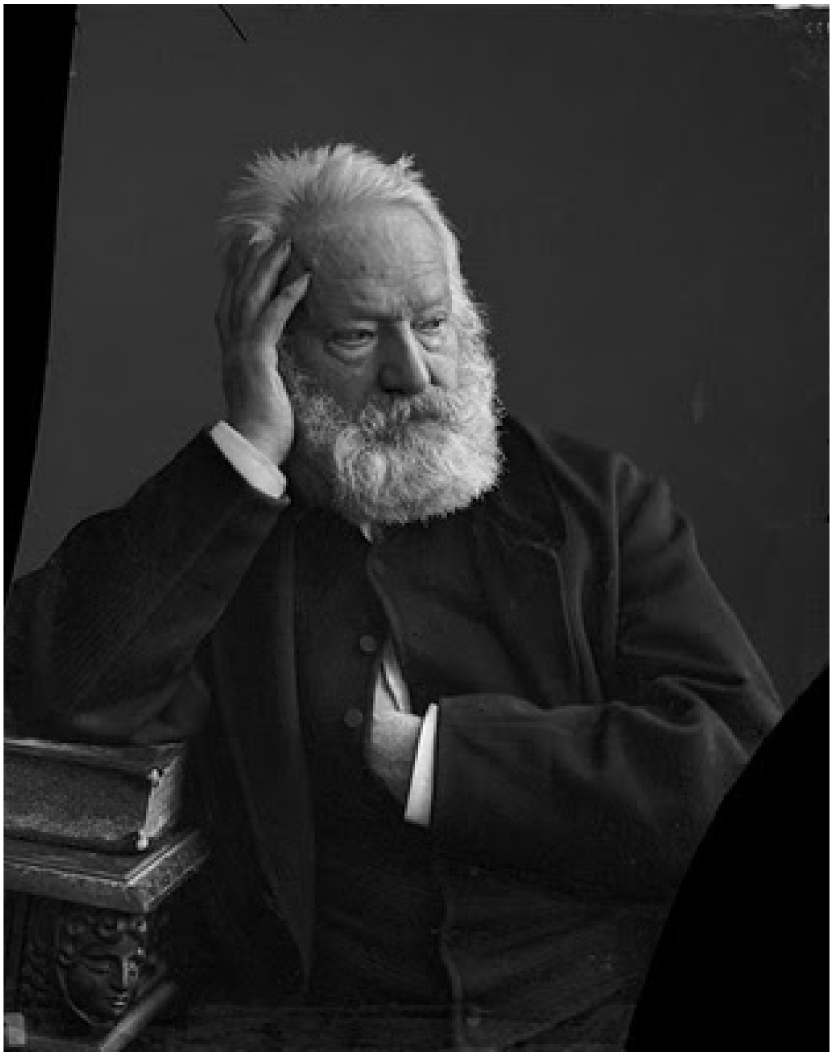

Hugo, 1882

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JUIN
JUILLET

PROLOGUE: L’ANNEE TERRIBLE

LES 7 500 000 OUI

(PUBLIÉ EN MAI 1870)

Quant à flatter la foule, ô mon esprit, non pas!

Ah! le peuple est en haut, mais la foule est en bas.
La foule, c’est l’ébauche à côté du décombre;
C’est le chiffre, ce grain de poussière du nombre;
C’est le vague profil des ombres dans la nuit;
La foule passe, crie, appelle, pleure, fuit;
Versons sur ses douleurs la pitié fraternelle.
Mais quand elle se lève, ayant la force en elle,
On doit à la grandeur de la foule, au péril,
Au saint triomphe, au droit, un langage viril;
Puisqu’elle est la maîtresse, il sied qu’on lui rappelle
Les lois d’en haut que l’âme au fond des cieux épelle,
Les principes sacrés, absolus, rayonnants;
On ne baise ses pieds que nus, froids et saignants.
Ce n’est point pour ramper qu’on rêve aux solitudes.
La foule et le songeur ont des rencontres rudes;
C’était avec un front où la colère bout
Qu’Ezéchiel criait aux ossements: Debout!
Moïse était sévère en rapportant les tables;
Dante grondait. L’esprit des penseurs redoutables,
Grave, orageux, pareil au mystérieux vent
Soufflant du ciel profond dans le désert mouvant
Où Thèbes s’engloutit comme un vaisseau qui sombre,
Ce fauve esprit, chargé des balaiements de l’ombre,
A, certes, autre chose à faire que d’aller
Caresser, dans la nuit trop lente à s’étoiler,
Ce grand monstre de pierre accroupi qui médite,
Ayant en lui l’énigme adorable ou maudite;
L’ouragan n’est pas tendre aux colosses émus;

Ce n’est pas d’encensoirs que le sphinx est camus.
La vérité, voilà le grand encens austère
Qu’on doit à cette masse où palpite un mystère,
Et qui porte en son sein qu’un ventre appesantit
Le droit juste mêlé de l’injuste appétit.

O genre humain! lumière et nuit! chaos des âmes.

La multitude peut jeter d’augustes flammes.
Mais qu’un vent souffle, on voit descendre tout à coup
Du haut de l’horreur vierge au plus bas de l’égout
La foule, cette grande et fatale orpheline;
Et cette Jeanne d’Arc se change en Messaline.
Ah! quand Gracchus se dresse aux rostres foudroyants,
Quand Cynégire mord les navires fuyants,
Quand avec les Trois-Cents, hommes faits ou pupilles,
Léonidas s’en va tomber aux Thermopyles,
Quand Botzaris surgit, quand Schwitz confédéré
Brise l’Autriche avec son dur bâton ferré,
Quand l’altier Winkelried, ouvrant ses bras épiques,
Meurt dans l’embrassement formidable des piques,
Quand Washington combat, quand Bolivar paraît,
Quand Pélage rugit au fond de sa forêt,
Quand Manin, réveillant les tombes, galvanise
Ce vieux dormeur d’airain, le lion de Venise,
Quand le grand paysan chasse à coups de sabot
Lautrec de Lombardie et de France Talbot,
Quand Garibaldi, rude au vil prêtre hypocrite,
Montre un héros d’Homère aux monts de Théocrite,
Et fait subitement flamboyer à coté
De l’Etna ton cratère, ô sainte Liberté!
Quand la Convention impassible tient tête
A trente rois, mêlés dans 1a même tempête,
Quand, liguée et terrible et rapportant 1a nuit,
Toute l’Europe accourt, gronde et s’évanouit,
Comme aux pieds de la digue une vague écumeuse,
Devant les grenadiers pensifs de Sambre-et-Meuse,

C’est le peuple; salut, ô peuple souverain!
Mais quand le lazzarone ou le transteverin
De quelque Sixte-Quint baise à genoux la crosse,
Quand la cohue inepte, insensée et féroce,
Etouffe sous ses flots, d’un vent sauvage émus,
L’honneur dans Coligny, la raison dans Ramus,
Quand un poing monstrueux, de l’ombre où l’horreur flotte,
Sort, tenant aux cheveux la tête de Charlotte
Pâle du coup de hache et rouge du soufflet,
C’est la foule; et ceci me heurte et me déplaît;
C’est l’élément aveugle et et confus; c’est le nombre;
C’est la sombre faiblesse et c’est la force sombre.
Et que de cette tourbe il nous vienne demain
L’ordre de recevoir un maître de sa main,
De souffler sur notre âme et d’entrer dans la honte,
Est-ce que vous croyez que nous en tiendrons compte?
Certes, nous vénérons Sparte, Athènes, Paris,
Et tous les grands forums d’où partent les grands cris;
Mais nous plaçons plus haut la conscience auguste.
Un monde, s’il a tort, ne pèse pas un juste;
Tout un océan fou bat en vain un grand coeur.
O multitude, obscure et facile au vainqueur,
Dans l’instinct bestial trop souvent tu te vautres,
Et nous te résistons! Nous ne voulons, nous autres,
Ayant Danton pour père et Hampden pour aïeul,
Pas plus du tyran Tous que du despote Un Seul.

Voici le peuple: il meurt, combattant magnifique,
Pour le progrès; voici la foule: elle en trafique;
Elle mange son droit d’aînesse en ce plat vil
Que Rome essuie et lave avec Ainsi-soit-il!
Voici le peuple: il prend la Bastille, il déplace
Toute l’ombre en marchant; voici la populace:
Elle attend au passage Aristide, Jésus,
Zénon, Bruno, Colomb, Jeanne, et crache dessus.
Voici le peuple avec son épouse, l’idée;
Voici la populace avec son accordée,

La guillotine. Eh bien, je choisis l’idéal.
Voici le peuple: il change avril en Floréal,
Il se fait république, il règne et délibère.
Voilà la populace: elle accepte Tibère.
Je veux la république et je chasse César.

L’attelage ne peut amnistier le char.

Le droit est au-dessus de Tous; nul vent contraire
Ne le renverse; et Tous ne peuvent rien distraire
Ni rien aliéner de l’avenir commun.
Le peuple souverain de lui-même, et chacun
Son propre roi; c’est là le droit. Rien ne l’entame.
Quoi! l’homme que voici, qui passe, aurait mon âme!
Honte! il pourrait demain, par un vote hébété,
Prendre, prostituer, vendre ma liberté!
Jamais. La foule un jour peut couvrir le principe;
Mais le flot redescend, l’écume se dissipe,
La vague en s’en allant laisse le droit à nu.
Qui donc s’est figuré que le premier venu
Avait droit sur mon droit! qu’il fallait que je prisse
Sa bassesse pour joug, pour règle son caprice!
Que j’entrasse au cachot s’il entre au cabanon!
Que je fusse forcé de me faire chaînon
Parce qu’il plaît à tous de se changer en chaîne!
Que le pli du roseau devînt la loi du chêne!

Ah! le premier venu, bourgeois ou paysan,
L’un égoïste et l’autre aveugle, parlons-en!
Les révolutions, durables, quoi qu’il fasse,
Ont pour cet inconnu qui jette à leur surface
Tantôt de l’infamie et tantôt de l’honneur,
Le dédain qu’a le mur pour le badigeonneur.
Voyez-le, ce passant de Carthage ou d’Athènes
Ou de Rome, pareil à l’eau qui des fontaines
Tombe aux pavés, s’en va dans le ruisseau fatal,
Et devient boue après avoir été cristal.

Cet homme étonne, après tant de jours beaux et rudes,
Par son indifférence au fond des turpitudes
Ceux mêmes qu’ont d’abord éblouis ses vertus;
Il est Falstaff après avoir été Brutus;
Il entre dans l’orgie en sortant de la gloire;
Allez lui demander s’il sait sa propre histoire,
Ce qu’était Washington ou ce qu’a fait Barra,
Son coeur mort ne bat plus aux noms qu’il adora.
Naguère il restaurait les vieux cultes, les bustes
De ses héros tombés, de ses aïeux robustes,
Phocion expiré, Lycurgue enseveli,
Riego mort et voyez maintenant quel oubli!
Il fut pur, et s’en lave; il fut saint, et l’ignore;
Il ne s’aperçoit pas même qu’il déshonore
Par l’oeuvre d’aujourd’hui son ouvrage d’hier;
Il devient lâche et vil, lui qu’on a vu si fier;
Et, sans que rien en lui se révolte et proteste,
Barbouille une taverne immonde avec le reste
De la chaux dont il vient de blanchir un tombeau.
Son piédestal souillé se change en escabeau;
L’honneur lui semble lourd, rouillé, gothique; il raille
Cette armure sévère, et dit: Vieille ferraille!
Jadis des fiers combats il a joué le jeu;
Duperie. Il fut grand, et s’en méprise un peu.
Il est sa propre insulte et sa propre ironie.
Il est si bien esclave à présent qu’il renie,
Indigné, son passé, perdu dans la vapeur;
Et quant à sa bravoure ancienne, il en a peur.

Mais quoi, reproche-t-on à la mer qui s’écroule
L’onde, et ses millions de têtes à la foule?
Que sert de chicaner ses erreurs, son chemin,
Ses retours en arrière, à ce nuage humain,
A ce grand tourbillon des vivants, incapable,
Hélas! d’être innocent comme d’être coupable?
A quoi bon? Quoique vague, obscur, sans point d’appui,
Il est utile; et, tout en flottant devant lui,

Il a pour fonction, à Paris comme à Londre,
De faire le progrès, et d'autres d'en répondre;
La république anglaise expire, se dissout,
Tombe, et laisse Milton derrière elle debout;
La foule a disparu, mais le penseur demeure;
C'est assez pour que tout germe et que rien ne meure.
Dans les chutes du droit rien n'est désespéré.
Qu'importe le méchant heureux, fier, vénéré?
Tu fais des lâchetés, ciel profond; tu succombes
Rome; la liberté va vivre aux catacombes;
Les dieux sont au vainqueur, Caton reste aux vaincus.
Kosciusko surgit des os de Galgacus.
On interrompt Jean Huss; soit; Luther continue.
La lumière est toujours par quelque bras tenue;
On mourra, s'il le faut, pour prouver qu'on a foi;
Et volontairement, simplement, sans effroi,
Des justes sortiront de la foule asservie,
Iront droit au sépulcre et quitteront la vie,
Ayant plus de dégoût des hommes que des vers.
Oh! ces grands Régulus, de tant d'oubli couverts,
Arria, Porcia, ces héros qui sont femmes,
Tous ces courages purs, toutes ces fermes âmes,
Cursius, Adam Lux, Thraséas calme et fort,
Ce puissant Condorcet, ce stoïque Chamfort,
Comme ils ont chastement quitté la terre indigne!
Ainsi fuit la colombe, ainsi plane le cygne,
Ainsi l'aigle s'en va du marais des serpents.
Léguant l'exemple à tous, aux méchants, aux rampants,
A l'égoïsme, au crime, aux lâches coeurs pleins d'ombre,
Ils se sont endormis dans le grand sommeil sombre;
Ils ont fermé les yeux ne voulant plus rien voir;
Ces martyrs généreux ont sacré le devoir,
Puis se sont étendus sur la funèbre couche;
Leur mort à la vertu donne un baiser farouche.

O caresse sublime et sainte du tombeau
Au grand, au pur, au bon, à l'idéal, au beau!

En présence de ceux qui disent: Rien n’est juste!
Devant tout ce qui trouble et nuit, devant Locuste,
Devant Pallas, devant Carrier, devant Sanchez,
Devant les appétits sur le néant penchés,
Les sophistes niant, les coeurs faux, les fronts vides,
Quelle affirmation que ces grands suicides!
Ah! quand tout paraît mort dans le monde vivant,
Quand on ne sait s’il faut avancer plus avant,
Quand pas un cri du fond des masses ne s’élance,
Quand l’univers n’est plus qu’un doute et qu’un silence,
Celui qui dans l’enceinte où sont les noirs fossés
Ira chercher quelqu’un de ces purs trépassés
Et qui se collera l’oreille contre terre,
Et qui demandera: Faut-il croire, ombre austère?
Faut-il marcher, héros sous la cendre enfoui?
Entendra ce tombeau dire à voix haute: Oui.

*

Oh! qu’est-ce donc qui tombe autour de nous dans l’ombre?
Que de flocons de neige! En savez-vous le nombre?
Comptez les millions et puis les millions!
Nuit noire! on voit rentrer au gîte les lions;
On dirait que la vie éternelle recule;
La neige fait, niveau hideux du crépuscule,
On ne sait quel sinistre abaissement des monts;
Nous nous sentons mourir si nous nous endormons;
Cela couvre les champs, cela couvre les villes;
Cela blanchit l’égout masquant ses bouches viles;
La lugubre avalanche emplit le ciel terni;
Sombre épaisseur de glace! Est-ce que c’est fini?
On ne distingue plus son chemin; tout est piège.
Soit.

Que restera-t-il de toute cette neige,
Voile froid de la terre au suaire pareil,
Demain, une heure après le lever du soleil?

J’entreprends de conter l’année épouvantable,
Et voilà que j’hésite, accoudé sur ma table.
Faut-il aller plus loin? dois-je continuer?
France! ô deuil! voir un astre aux cieux diminuer!
Je sens l’ascension lugubre de la honte.
Morne angoisse! un fléau descend, un autre monte.
N’importe. Poursuivons. L’histoire en a besoin.
Ce siècle est à la barre et je suis son témoin.

AOÛT 1870

SEDAN

I

Toulon, c'est peu; Sedan, c'est mieux.

L'homme tragique,
Saisi par le destin qui n'est que la logique,
Captif de son forfait, livré les yeux bandés
Aux noirs événements qui le jouaient aux dés,
Vint s'échouer, rêveur, dans l'opprobre insondable.
Le grand regard d'en haut lointain et formidable
Qui ne quitte jamais le crime, était sur lui;
Dieu poussa ce tyran, larve et spectre aujourd'hui,
Dans on ne sait quelle ombre où l'histoire frissonne,
Et qu'il n'avait encore ouverte pour personne;
Là, comme au fond d'un puits sinistre, il le perdit.
Le juge dépassa ce qu'on avait prédit.

Il advint que cet homme un jour songea: - Je règne.
Oui. Mais on me méprise, il faut que l'on me craigne
J'entends être à mon tour maître du monde, moi.
Terre, je vaux mon oncle, et j'ai droit à l'effroi.
Je n'ai pas d'Austerlitz, soit, mais j'ai mon Brumaire.
Il a Machiavel tout en ayant Homère,
Et les tient attentifs tous deux à ce qu'il fait;
Machiavel à moi me suffit. Galifet
M'appartient, j'eus Morny, j'ai Rouher et Devienne.
Je n'ai pas encor pris Madrid, Lisbonne, Vienne,
Naples, Dantzick, Munich, Dresde, je les prendrai.
J'humilierai sur mer la croix de Saint-André,
Et j'aurai cette vieille Albion pour sujette.
Un voleur qui n'est pas le roi des rois, végète.
Je serai grand. J'aurai pour valets, moi forban,

Mastaï sous sa mitre, Abdul sous son turban,
Le czar sous sa peau d'ours et son bonnet de martre;
Puisque j'ai foudroyé le boulevard Montmartre,
Je puis vaincre la Prusse; il est aussi malin
D'assiéger Tortoni que d'assiéger Berlin;
Quand on a pris la Banque on peut prendre Mayence.
Pétersbourg et Stamboul sont deux chiens de fayence;
Pie et Galantuomo sont à couteaux tirés;
Comme deux boucs livrant bataille dans les prés,
L'Angleterre et l'Irlande à grand bruit se querellent;
D'Espagne sur Cuba les coups de fusil grêlent;
Joseph, pseudo-César, Wilhelm, piètre Attila,
S'empoignent aux cheveux; je mettrai le holà;
Et moi, l'homme éculé d'autrefois, l'ancien pitre,
Je serai, par-dessus tous les sceptres, l'arbitre;
Et j'aurai cette gloire, à peu près sans débats,
D'être le Tout-Puissant et le Très-Haut d'en bas.
De faux Napoléon passer vrai Charlemagne,
C'est beau. Que faut-il donc pour cela? prier Magne
D'avancer quelque argent à Leboeuf, et choisir,
Comme Haroun escorté le soir par son vizir,
L'heure obscure où l'on dort, où la rue est déserte,
Et brusquement tenter l'aventure; on peut, certe,
Passer le Rhin ayant passé le Rubicon.
Piétri me jettera des fleurs de son balcon.
Magnan est mort, Frossard le vaut; Saint-Arnaud manque,
J'ai Bazaine. Bismarck me semble un saltimbanque;
Je crois être aussi bon comédien que lui.
Jusqu'ici j'ai dompté le hasard ébloui;
J'en ai fait mon complice, et la fraude est ma femme.
J'ai vaincu, quoique lâche, et brillé, quoique infâme.
En avant! j'ai Paris, donc j'ai le genre humain.
Tout me sourit, pourquoi m'arrêter en chemin?
Il ne me reste plus à gagner que le quine.
Continuons, la chance étant une coquine.
L'univers m'appartient, je le veux, il me plaît;
Ce noir globe étoffé tient sous mon gobelet.

J’escamotai la France, escamotons l’Europe.
Décembre est mon manteau, l’ombre est mon enveloppe;
Les aigles sont partis, je n’ai que les faucons;
Mais n’importe! Il fait nuit. J’en profite. Attaquons.

Or il faisait grand jour. Jour sur Londres, sur Rome,
Sus Vienne, et tous ouvraient les yeux, hormis cet homme;
Et Berlin souriait et le guettait sans bruit
Comme il était aveugle il crut qu’il faisait nuit.
Tous voyaient la lumière et seul il voyait l’ombre.

Hélas! sans calculer le temps, le lieu, le nombre,
A tâtons, se fiant au vide, sans appui,
Ayant pour sûreté ses ténèbres à lui,
Ce suicide prit nos fiers soldats, l’armée
De France devant qui marchait la renommée,
Et sans canons, sans pain, sans chefs, sans généraux,
Il conduisit au fond du gouffre les héros.
Tranquille, il les mena lui-même dans le piège.

— Où vas-tu? dit la tombe. Il répondit: Que sais-je?

II

Que Pline aille au Vésuve, Empédocle à l’Etna,
C’est que dans le cratère une aube rayonna,
Et ces grands curieux ont raison; qu’un brahmine
Se fasse à Benarès manger par la vermine,
C’est pour le paradis et cela se comprend;
Qu’à travers Lipari de laves s’empourprant,
Un pêcheur de corail vogue en sa coraline,
Frêle planche que lèche et mord la mer féline,
Des caps de Corse aux rocs orageux de Corfou;
Que Socrate soit sage et que Jésus soit fou,
L’un étant raisonnable et l’autre étant sublime;
Que le prophète noir crie autour de Solime
Jusqu’à ce qu’on le tue à coups de javelots;

Que Green se livre aux airs et Lapeyrouse aux flots,
Qu’Alexandre aille en Perse ou Trajan chez les Daces,
Tous savent ce qu’ils font; ils veulent: leurs audaces
Ont un but; mais jamais les siècles, le passé,
L’histoire n’avaient vu ce spectacle insensé,
Ce vertige, ce rêve, un homme qui lui-même,
Descendant d’un sommet triomphal et suprême,
Tirant le fil obscur par où la mort descend,
Prend la peine d’ouvrir sa fosse, et, se plaçant
Sous l’effrayant couteau qu’un mystère environne,
Coupe sa tête afin d’affermir sa couronne!

III

Quand la comète tombe au puits des nuits, du moins
A-t-elle en s’éteignant les soleils pour témoins;
Satan précipité demeure grandiose,
Son écrasement garde un air d’apothéose;
Et sur un fier destin, farouche vision,
La haute catastrophe est un dernier rayon.
Bonaparte jadis était tombé; son crime,
Immense, n’avait pas déshonoré l’abîme;
Dieu l’avait rejeté, mais sur ce grand rejet
Quelque chose de vaste et d’altier surnageait;
Le côté de clarté cachait le côté d’ombre;
De sorte que la gloire aimait cet homme sombre,
Et que la conscience humaine avait un fond
De doute sur le mal que les colosses font.

Il est mauvais qu’on mette un crime dans un temple,
Et Dieu vit qu’il fallait recommencer l’exemple.

Lorsqu’un titan larron a gravi les sommets,
Tout voleur l’y veut suivre; or il faut désormais
Que Sbrigani ne puisse imiter Prométhée;
Il est temps que la terre apprenne épouvantée
A quel point le petit peut dépasser le grand,

Comment un ruisseau vil est pire qu’un torrent,
Et de quelles stupeurs la main du sort est pleine,
Même après Waterloo, même après Sainte-Hélène!
Dieu veut des astres noirs empêcher le lever.
Comme il était utile et juste d’achever
Brumaire et ce Décembre encor couvert de voiles
Par une éclaboussure allant jusqu’aux étoiles
Et jusqu’aux souvenirs énormes d’autrefois,
Comme il faut au plateau jeter le dernier poids,
Celui qui pèse tout voulut montrer au monde,
Après la grande fin, l’écroulement immonde,
Pour que le genre humain reçût une leçon,
Pour qu’il eût le mépris ayant eu le frisson,
Pour qu’après l’épopée on eût la parodie,
Et pour que nous vissions ce qu’une tragédie
Peut contenir d’horreur, de cendre et de néant
Quand c’est un nain qui fait la chute d’un géant.

Cet homme étant le crime, il était nécessaire
Que tout le misérable eût toute la misère,
Et qu’il eût à jamais le deuil pour piédestal;
Il fallait que la fin de cet escroc fatal
Par qui le guet-apens jusqu’à l’empire monte
Fût telle que la boue elle-même en eût honte,
Et que César, flairé des chiens avec dégoût,
Donnât, en y tombant, la nausée à l’égout.

IV

Azincourt est riant. Désormais Ramillies,
Trafalgar, plaisent presque à nos mélancolies;
Poitiers n’est plus le deuil, Blenheim n’est plus l’affront,
Crécy n’est plus le champ où l’on baisse le front,
Le noir Rosbach nous fait l’effet d’une victoire.
France, voici le lieu hideux de ton histoire,
Sedan. Ce nom funèbre, où tout vient s’éclipser,
Crache-le, pour ne plus jamais le prononcer.

V

Plaine! affreux rendez-vous! Ils y sont, nous y sommes.

Deux vivantes forêts, faites de têtes d’hommes,
De bras, de pieds, de voix, de glaives, de fureur,
Marchent l’une sur l’autre et se mêlent. Horreur!
Cris! Est-ce le canon? sont-ce des catapultes?
Le sépulcre sur terre a parfois des tumultes,
Nous appelons cela hauts faits, exploits; tout fuit,
Tout s’écroule, et le ver dresse la tête au bruit.
Des condamnations sont par les rois jetées
Et sont par l’homme, hélas! sur l’homme exécutées;
Avoir tué son frère est le laurier qu’on a.
Après Pharsale, après Hastings, après Iéna,
Tout est chez l’un triomphe et chez l’autre décombre.
O Guerre! le hasard passe sur un char d’ombre
Par d’effrayants chevaux invisibles traîné.

La lutte était farouche. Un carnage effréné
Donnait aux combattants des prunelles de braise;
Le fusil Chassepot bravait le fusil Dreyse;
A l’horizon hurlaient des méduses, grinçant
Dans un obscur nuage éclaboussé de sang,
Couleuvrines d’acier, bombardes, mitrailleuses;
Les corbeaux se montraient de loin ces travailleuses;
Tout festin est charnier, tout massacre est banquet.
La rage emplissait l’ombre, et se communiquait,
Comme si la nature entrait dans la bataille,
De l’homme qui frémit à l’arbre qui tressaille;
Le champ fatal semblait lui-même forcené.
L’un était repoussé, l’autre était ramené;
Là c’était l’Allemagne et là c’était la France.
Tous avaient de mourir la tragique espérance
Ou le hideux bonheur de tuer, et pas un
Que le sang n’enivrât de son âcre parfum,

Pas un qui lâchât pied, car l’heure était suprême.
Cette graine qu’un bras épouvantable sème,
La mitraille, pleuvait sur le champ ténébreux;
Et les blessés râlaient, et l’on marchait sur eux
Et les canons grondants soufflaient sur la mêlée
Une fumée immense aux vents échevelée.
On sentait le devoir, l’honneur, le dévouement,
Et la patrie, au fond de l’âpre acharnement.
Soudain, dans cette brume, au milieu du tonnerre,
Dans l’ombre énorme où rit la mort visionnaire,
Dans le chaos des chocs épiques, dans l’enfer
Du cuivre et de l’airain heurtés contre le fer,
Et de ce qui renverse écrasant ce qui tombe,
Dans le rugissement de la fauve hécatombe,
Parmi les durs clairons chantant leur sombre chant,
Tandis que nos soldats luttaient, fiers et tâchant
D’égaler leurs aïeux que les peuples vénèrent,
Tout à coup, les drapeaux hagards en frissonnèrent,
Tandis que, du destin subissant le décret,
Tout saignait, combattait, résistait ou mourait,
On entendit ce cri monstrueux: Je veux vivre!

Le canon stupéfait se tut, la mêlée ivre
S’interrompit... - le mot de l’abîme était dit.

Et l’aigle noir ouvrant ses griffes attendit.

VI

Alors la Gaule, alors la France, alors la gloire,
Alors Brennus, l’audace, et Clovis, la victoire,
Alors le vieux titan celtique aux cheveux longs,
Alors le groupe altier des batailles, Châlons,
Tolbiac la farouche, Asezzo la cruelle,
Bovines, Marignan, Beaugé, Mons-en-Puelle,
Tours, Ravenne, Agnadel sur son haut palefroi,
Fornoue, Ivry, Coutras, Cérisolles, Rocroy,

Denain et Fontenoy, toutes ces immortelles
Mêlant l’éclair du front au flamboiement des ailes,
Jemmape, Hohenlinden, Lodi, Wagram, Eylau,
Les hommes du dernier carré de Waterloo,
Et tous ces chefs de guerre, Héristal, Charlemagne,
Charles-Martel, Turenne, effroi de l’Allemagne,
Condé, Villars, fameux par un si fier succès,
Cet Achille, Kléber, ce Scipion, Desaix,
Napoléon, plus grand que César et Pompée,
Par la main d’un bandit rendirent leur épée.

SEPTEMBRE

I

CHOIX ENTRE LES DEUX NATIONS

A L’ALLEMAGNE

Aucune nation n’est plus grande que toi;
Jadis, toute la terre étant un lieu d’effroi,
Parmi les peuples forts tu fus le peuple juste.
Une tiare d’ombre est sur ton front auguste;
Et pourtant comme l’Inde, aux aspects fabuleux,
Tu brilles; ô pays des hommes aux yeux bleus,
Clarté hautaine au fond ténébreux de l’Europe,
Une gloire âpre, informe, immense, t’enveloppe;
Ton phare est allumé sur le mont des Géants;
Comme l’aigle de mer qui change d’océans,
Tu passas tour à tour d’une grandeur à l’autre;
Huss le sage a suivi Crescentius l’apôtre;
Barberousse chez toi n’empêche pas Schiller;
L’empereur, ce sommet, craint l’esprit, cet éclair.
Non, rien ici-bas, rien ne t’éclipse, Allemagne.
Ton Vitikind tient tête à notre Charlemagne,
Et Charlemagne même est un peu ton soldat.
Il semblait par moments qu’un astre te guidât;
Et les peuples t’ont vue, ô guerrière féconde,
Rebelle au double joug qui pèse sur le monde,
Dresser, portant l’aurore entre tes poings de fer,
Contre César Hermann, contre Pierre Luther.
Longtemps, comme le chêne offrant ses bras au lierre,
Du vieux droit des vaincus tu fus la chevalière;
Comme on mêle l’argent et le plomb dans l’airain,
Tu sus fondre en un peuple unique et souverain
Vingt peuplades, le Hun, le Dace, le Sicambre;
Le Rhin te donne l’or et la Baltique l’ambre;

La musique est ton souffle; âme, harmonie, encens,
Elle fait alterner dans tes hymnes puissants
Le cri de l'aigle avec le chant de l'alouette;
On croit voir sur tes burgs croulants la silhouette
De l'hydre et du guerrier vaguement aperçus
Dans la montagne, avec le tonnerre au-dessus;
Rien n'est frais et charmant comme tes plaines vertes;
Les brèches de la brume aux rayons sont ouvertes,
Le hameau dort, groupé sous l'aile du manoir,
Et la vierge, accoudée aux citernes le soir,
Blonde, a la ressemblance adorable des anges.
Comme un temple exhaussé sur des piliers étranges
L'Allemagne est debout sur vingt siècles hideux,
Et sa splendeur qui sort de leurs ombres, vient d'eux.
Elle a plus de héros que l'Athos n'a de cimes.
La Teutonie, au seuil des nuages sublimes
Où l'étoile est mêlée à la foudre, apparaît;
Ses piques dans la nuit sont comme une forêt;
Au-dessus de sa tête un clairon de victoire
S'allonge, et sa légende égale son histoire;
Dans la Thuringe, où Thor tient sa lance en arrêt,
Ganna, la druidesse échevelée, errait;
Sous les fleuves, dont l'eau roulait de vagues flammes,
Les sirènes chantaient, monstres aux seins de femmes,
Et le Harz que hantait Velléda, le Taunus
Où Spillyre essuyait dans l'herbe ses pieds nus,
Ont encor toute l'âpre et divine tristesse
Que laisse dans les bois profonds la prophétesse;
La nuit, la Forêt-Noire est un sinistre éden;
Le clair de lune, aux bords du Neckar, fait soudain
Sonores et vivants les arbres pleins de fées.
O Teutons, vos tombeaux ont des airs de trophées;
Vos aïeux n'ont semé que de grands ossements;
Vos lauriers sont partout; soyez fiers, Allemands.
Le seul pied des titans chausse votre sandale.
Tatouage éclatant, la gloire féodale
Dore vos morions, blasonne vos écus;

Comme Rome Coclès vous avez Galgacus,
Vous avez Beethoven comme la Grèce Homère;
L'Allemagne est puissante et superbe.

A LA FRANCE

Ô ma mère!

II

A PRINCE PRINCE ET DEMI

L'empereur fait la guerre au roi.

Nous nous disions:
— Les guerres sont le seuil des révolutions. -
Nous pensions: - C'est la guerre. Oui, mais la guerre grande.
L'enfer veut un laurier; la mort veut une offrande;
Ces deux rois ont juré d'éteindre le soleil;
Le sang du globe va couler, vaste et vermeil,
Et les hommes seront fauchés comme des herbes;
Et les vainqueurs seront infâmes, mais superbes. -
Et nous qui voulons l'homme en paix, nous qui donnons
La terre à la charrue et non pas aux canons,
Tristes, mais fiers pourtant, nous disions: « France et Prusse!
Qu'importe ce Batave attaquant ce Borusse!
Laissons faire les rois; ensuite Dieu viendra."
Et nous rêvions le choc de Vishnou contre Indra,
Un avatar couvé par une apocalypse,
Le flamboiement trouant de toutes parts l'éclipse,
Nous rêvions les combats énormes de la nuit;
Nous rêvions ces chaos de colère et de bruit
Où l'ouragan s'attaque à l'océan, où l'ange,
Etreint par le géant, lutte, et fait un mélange
Du sang céleste avec le sang noir du titan;
Nous rêvions Apollon contre Léviathan;
Nous nous imaginions l'ombre en pleine démence;
Nous heurtions, dans l'horreur d'une querelle immense,

Rosbach contre Iéna, Rome contre Alaric,
Le grand Napoléon et le grand Frédéric;
Nous croyions voir vers nous, en hâte, à tire-d'aile,
Les victoires voler comme des hirondelles
Et, comme l'oiseau court à son nid, aller droit
A la France, au progrès, à la justice, au droit;
Nous croyions assister au choc fatal des trônes,
A la sinistre mort des vieilles Babylones,
Au continent broyé, tué, ressuscité
Dans une éclosion d'aube et de liberté,
Et voir peut-être, après de monstrueux désastres,
Naître un monde à travers des écroulements d'astres!

Ainsi nous songions. - Soit, disions-nous, ce sera
Comme Arbelle, Actium, Trasimène et Zara,
Affreux, mais grandiose. Un gouffre avec sa pente,
Et l'univers tout près du bord, comme à Lépante,
Comme à Tolbiac, comme à Tyr, comme à Poitiers.
La Colère, la Force et la Nuit, noirs portiers,
Vont ouvrir devant nous la tombe toute grande.
Il faudra que le Sud ou le Nord y descende;
Il faudra qu'une race ou l'autre tombe au fond
De l'abîme où les rois et les dieux se défont.
Et pensifs, croyant voir venir vers nous la gloire,
Les chocs comme en ont vu les hommes de la Loire,
Wagram tonnant, Leipsick magnifique et hideux,
Cyrus, Sennachérib, César, Frédéric Deux,
Nemrod, nous frémissions de ces sombres approches... -

Tout à coup nous sentons une main dans nos poches.

*

Il s'agit de ceci: Nous prendre notre argent.

Certe, on se disait bien: Bonaparte indigent
Fut un escroc, et doit avoir pour espérance

De voler l’Allemagne ayant volé la France;
Il filouta le trône; il est vil, fourbe et laid;
C’est vrai; mais nous faisions ce rêve qu’il allait
Rencontrer un vieux roi, fier de sa vieille race,
Ayant Dieu pour couronne et l’honneur pour cuirasse,
Et trouver devant lui, comme au temps des Dunois,
Un de ces paladins des antiques tournois
Dont on voit vaguement se modeler l’armure
Dans les nuages pleins d’aurore et de murmure.
O chute! illusion! changement de décor!
C’est le coup de sifflet et non le son du cor.
La nuit. Un hallier fauve où des sabres fourmillent.
Des canons de fusils entre les branches brillent;
Cris dans l’ombre. Surprise, embuscade. Arrêtez!
Tout s’éclaire; et le bois offre de tous côtés
Sa claire-voie où brille une lumière rouge.
Sus! on casse la tête à tous si quelqu’un bouge.
La face contre terre et personne debout!
Et maintenant donnez votre argent - donnez tout.
Qu’il vous plaise ou non d’être à genoux dans la boue,
Qu’importe! et l’on vous fouille, et l’on vous couche en joue.
Nous sommes dix contre un, tous armés jusqu’aux dents.
Et si vous résistez, vous êtes imprudents.
Obéissez! Ces voix semblent sortir d’un antre.
Que faire? on tend sa bourse, on se met à plat ventre,
Et pendant que, le front par terre, on se soumet,
On songe à ces pays que jadis on nommait
La Pologne, Francfort, la Hesse, le Hanovre.
C’est fait! relevez-vous! on se retrouve pauvre
En pleine Forêt-Noire, et nous reconnaissons,
Nous point initiés aux fauves trahisons,
Nous ignorants dans l’art de régner, nous profanes,
Que Cartouche faisait la guerre à Schinderhannes.

III

DIGNES L’UN DE L’AUTRE

Donc regardez: Ici le jocrisse du crime;
Là, follement servi par tous ceux qu'il opprime,
L'ogre du droit divin, dévot, correct, moral,
Né pour être empereur et resté caporal.
Ici c'est le Bohême et là c'est le Sicambre.
Le coupe-gorge lutte avec le deux-décembre.
Le lièvre d'un côté, de l'autre le chacal.
Le ravin d'Ollioule et la maison Bancal
Semblent avoir fourni certains rois; les Calabres
N'ont rien de plus affreux que ces traîneurs de sabres;
Pillage, extorsion, c'est leur guerre; un tel art
Charmerait Poulailler, mais troublerait Folard.
C'est l'arrestation nocturne d'un carrosse.

Oui, Bonaparte est vil, mais Guillaume est atroce,
Et rien n'est imbécile, hélas, comme le gant
Que ce filou naïf jette à ce noir brigand.
L'un attaque avec rien; l'autre accepte l'approche
Et tire brusquement la foudre de sa poche;
Ce tonnerre était doux et traître, et se cachait.
Leur empereur avait le nôtre pour hochet.
Il riait: Viens, petit! Le petit vient, trébuche,
Et son piège le fait tomber dans une embûche.
Carnage, tas de morts, deuil, horreur, trahison,
Tumulte infâme autour du sinistre horizon;
Et le penseur, devant ces attentats sans nombre,
Est pris d'on ne sait quel éblouissement sombre.
Que de crimes, ciel juste! Oh! l'affreux dénoûment!
O France! un coup de vent dissipe en un moment
Cette ombre de césar et cette ombre d'armée.

Guerre où l'un est la flamme et l'autre la fumée.

IV

PARIS BLOQUE

O ville, tu feras agenouiller l’histoire.
Saigner est ta beauté, mourir est ta victoire.
Mais non, tu ne meurs pas. Ton sang coule, mais ceux
Qui voyaient César rire en tes bras paresseux,
S’étonnent: tu franchis la flamme expiatoire,
Dans l’admiration des peuples, dans la gloire,
Tu retrouves, Paris, bien plus que tu ne perds.
Ceux qui t’assiègent, ville en deuil, tu les conquiers.
La prospérité basse et fausse est la mort lente;
Tu tombais folle et gaie, et tu grandis sanglante.
Tu sors, toi qu’endormit l’empire empoisonneur,
Du rapetissement de ce hideux bonheur.
Tu t’éveilles déesse et chasses le satyre.
Tu redeviens guerrière en devenant martyre;
Et dans l’honneur, le beau, le vrai, les grandes moeurs,
Tu renais d’un côté quand de l’autre tu meurs.

V

A PETITE JEANNE

Vous eûtes donc hier un an, ma bien-aimée.
Contente, vous jasez, comme, sous la ramée,
Au fond du nid plus tiède ouvrant de vagues yeux,
Les oiseaux nouveau-nés gazouillent, tout joyeux
De sentir qu’il commence à leur pousser des plumes.
Jeanne, ta bouche est rose; et dans les gros vo1umes
Dont les images font ta joie, et que je dois,
Pour te plaire, laisser chiffonner par tes doigts
On trouve de beaux vers, mais pas un qui te vaille
Quand tout ton petit corps en me voyant tressaille;
Les plus fameux auteurs n’ont rien écrit de mieux
Que la pensée éclose à demi dans tes yeux,
Et que ta rêverie obscure, éparse, étrange,
Regardant l’homme avec l’ignorance de l’ange.
Jeanne, Dieu n’est pas loin puisque vous êtes là.

Ah! vous avez un an, c’est un âge cela!
Vous êtes par moments grave, quoique ravie;
Vous êtes à l’instant céleste de la vie
Où l’homme n’a pas d’ombre, où dans ses bras ouverts,
Quand il tient ses parents, l’enfant tient l’univers;
Votre jeune âme vit, songe, rit, pleure, espère
D’Alice votre mère à Charles votre père;
Tout l’horizon que peut contenir votre esprit
Va d’elle qui vous berce à lui qui vous sourit;
Ces deux êtres pour vous à cette heure première
Sont toute la caresse et toute la lumière;
Eux deux, eux seuls, ô Jeanne; et c’est juste; et je suis,
Et j’existe, humble aïeul, parce que je vous suis;
Et vous venez, et moi je m’en vais; et j’adore,
N’ayant droit qu’à la nuit, votre droit à l’aurore.
Votre blond frère George et vous, vous suffisez
A mon âme, et je vois vos jeux, et c’est assez;
Et je ne veux, après mes épreuves sans nombre,
Qu’un tombeau sur lequel se découpera l’ombre
De vos berceaux dorés par le soleil levant.

Ah! nouvelle venue innocente, et rêvant,
Vous avez pris pour naître une heure singulière;
Vous êtes, Jeanne, avec les terreurs familière;
Vous souriez devant tout un monde aux abois;
Vous faites votre bruit d’abeille dans les bois,
O Jeanne, et vous mêlez votre charmant murmure
Au grand Paris faisant sonner sa grande armure.
Ah! quand je vous entends, Jeanne, et quand je vous vois
Chanter, et, me parlant avec votre humble voix,
Tendre vos douces mains au-dessus de nos têtes,
Il me semble que l’ombre où grondent les tempêtes
Tremble et s’éloigne avec des rugissements sourds,
Et que Dieu fait donner à la ville aux cent tours
Désemparée ainsi qu’un navire qui sombre,
Aux énormes canons gardant le rempart sombre,

A l’univers qui penche et que Paris défend,
Sa bénédiction par un petit enfant.

Paris, 30 septembre 1870.

OCTOBRE

I

J’étais le vieux rôdeur sauvage de la mer,
Une espèce de spectre au bord du gouffre amer;
J’avais dans l’âpre hiver, dans le vent, dans le givre,
Dans l’orage, l’écume et l’ombre, émit un livre,
Dont l’ouragan, noir souffle aux ordres du banni,
Tournait chaque feuillet quand je l’avais fini;
Je n’avais rien en moi que l’honneur imperdable;
Je suis venu, j’ai vu la cité formidable;
Elle avait faim, j’ai mis mon livre sous sa dent;
Et j’ai dit à ce peuple altier, farouche, ardent,
A ce peuple indigné, sans peur, sans joug, sans règle,
J’ai dit à ce Paris, comme le klephte à l’aigle:
Mange mon coeur, ton aile en croîtra d’un empan.

Quand le Christ expira, quand mourut le grand Pan,
Jean et Luc en Judée et dans l’Inde Epicure
Entendirent un cri d’inquiétude obscure;
La terre tressaillit quand l’Olympe tomba;
D’Ophir à Chanaan et d’Assur à Saba,
Comme un socle en ployant fait ployer la colonne,
Tout l’Orient pencha quand croula Babylone;
La même horreur sacrée est dans l’homme aujourd’hui,
Et l’édifice sent fléchir le point d’appui;
Tous tremblent pour Paris qu’étreint une main vile;
On tuerait l’Univers si l’on tuait la Ville;
C’est plus qu’un peuple, c’est le monde que les rois
Tâchent de clouer, morne et sanglant, sur la croix;
Le supplice effrayant du genre humain commence.
Donc luttons. Plus que Troie et Tyr, plus que Numance,
Paris assiégé doit l’exemple. Soyons grands.
Affrontons les bandits conduits par les tyrans.
Les Huns reviennent comme au temps de Frédégaire;

Laissons rouler vers nous les machines de guerre;
Faisons front, tenons tête; acceptons, seuls, trahis,
Sanglants, le dur travail de sauver ce pays.
Tomber, mais sans avoir tremblé, c’est la victoire.
Etre la rêverie immense de l’histoire,
Faire que tout chercheur du vrai, du grand, du beau,
Met le doigt sur sa bouche en voyant un tombeau,
C’est aussi bien l’honneur d’un peuple que d’un homme,
Et Caton est trop grand s’il est plus grand que Rome;
Rome doit l’égaler, Rome doit l’imiter;
Donc Rome doit combattre et Paris doit lutter.
Notre labeur finit par être notre gerbe.
Combats, ô mon Paris! aie, ô peuple superbe,
Criblé de flèches, mais sans tache à ton écu,
L’illustre acharnement de n’être pas vaincu.

II

Et voilà donc les jours tragiques revenus!
On dirait, à voir tant de signes inconnus,
Que pour les nations commence une autre hégire.

Pâle Alighieri, toi, frère de Cynégire,
O sévères témoins, ô justiciers égaux,
Penchés, l’un sur Florence et l’autre sur Argos,
Vous qui fîtes, esprits sur qui l’aigle se pose,
Ces livres redoutés où l’on sent quelque chose
De ce qui gronde et luit derrière l’horizon,
Vous que le genre humain lit avec un frisson,
Songeurs qui pouvez dire en vos tombeaux: nous sommes,
Dieux par le tremblement mystérieux des hommes!
Dante, Eschyle, écoutez et regardez.
Ces rois
Sous leur large couronne ont des fronts trop étroits.
Vous les dédaigneriez. Ils n’ont pas la stature
De ceux que votre vers formidable torture,
Ni du chef argien, ni du baron pisan;

Mais ils sont monstrueux pourtant, convenez-en.
Des premiers rois venus ils ont l’aspect vulgaire;
Mais ils viennent avec des légions de guerre.
Ils poussent sur Paris les sept peuples saxons.
Hideux, casqués, dorés, tatoués de blasons,
Il faut que chacun d’eux de meurtre se repaisse;
Chacun de ces rois prend pour emblème une espèce
De bête fauve et fait luire à son morion
La chimère d’un rude et morne alérion,
Ou quelque impur dragon agitant sa crinière;
Et le grand chef arbore à sa haute bannière,
Teinte des deux reflets du tombeau tour à tour,
Un aigle étrange, blanc la nuit et noir le jour.
Avec eux, à grand bruit, et sous toutes les formes,
Krupps, bombardes, canons, mitrailleuses énormes,
Ils traînent sous ce mur qu’ils nomment ennemi
Le bronze, ce muet, cet esclave endormi,
Qui, tout à coup hurlant lorsqu’on le démusèle,
Est pris d’on ne sait quel épouvantable zèle
Et se met à détruire une ville, sans frein,
Sans trêve, avec la joie horrible de l’airain,
Comme s’il se vengeait, sur ces tours abattues,
D’être employé par l’homme à d’infâmes statues;
Et comme s’il disait: Peuple, contemple en moi
Le monstre avec lequel tu fais ensuite un roi!
Tout tremble, et les sept chefs dans la haine s’unissent.

Ils sont là, menaçant Paris. Ils le punissent.
De quoi? D’être la France et d’être l’univers,
De briller au-dessus des gouffres entr’ouverts,
D’être un bras de géant tenant une poignée
De rayons, dont l’Europe est à jamais baignée;
Ils punissent Paris d’être la liberté;
Ils punissent Paris d’être cette cité
Où Danton gronde, où luit Molière, où rit Voltaire;
Ils punissent Paris d’être âme de la terre,
D’être ce qui devient de plus en plus vivant,

Le grand flambeau profond que n'éteint aucun vent,
L'idée en feu perçant ce nuage, le nombre,
Le croissant du progrès clair au fond du ciel sombre;
Ils punissent Paris de dénoncer l'erreur,
D'être l'avertisseur et d'être l'éclaireur,
De montrer sous leur gloire affreuse un cimetière,
D'abolir l'échafaud, le trône, la frontière,
La borne, le combat, l'obstacle, le fossé,
Et d'être l'avenir quand ils sont le passé.

Et ce n'est pas leur faute; ils sont les forces noires.
Ils suivent dans la nuit toutes les sombres gloires,
Caïn, Nemrod, Rhamsés, Cyrus, Gengis, Timour.
Ils combattent le droit, la lumière, l'amour.
Ils voudraient être grands et ne sont que difformes.
Terre, ils ne veulent pas qu'heureuse, tu t'endormes
Dans les bras de la paix sacrée, et dans l'hymen
De la clarté divine avec l'esprit humain.
Ils condamnent le frère à dévorer le frère,
Le peuple à massacrer le peuple, et leur misère
C'est d'être tout-puissants et que tous leurs instincts
Allumés pour l'enfer, soient pour le ciel éteints.
Rois hideux! On verra, certe, avant que leur âme
Renonce à la tuerie, au glaive, au meurtre infâme,
Aux clairons, au cheval de guerre qui hennit,
L'oiseau ne plus savoir le chemin de son nid,
Le tigre épris du cygne, et l'abeille oublieuse
De sa ruche sauvage au creux noir de l'yeuse.

III

Sept. Le chiffre du mal. Le nombre où Dieu ramène,
Comme en un vil cachot, toute la faute humaine.
Sept princes. Wurtemberg et Mecklembourg, Nassau,
Saxe, Bade, Bavière et Prusse, affreux réseau.
Ils dressent dans la nuit leurs tentes sépulcrales.
Les cercles de l'enfer sont là, mornes spirales;

Haine, hiver, guerre, deuil, peste, famine, ennui.
Paris a les sept noeuds des ténèbres sur lui.
Paris devant son mur a sept chefs comme Thèbe.

Spectacle inouï! l’astre assiégé par l’Erèbe.

La nuit donne l’assaut à la lumière. Un cri
Sort de l’astre en détresse, et le néant a ri.
La cécité combat le jour; la morne envie
Attaque le cratère auguste de la vie,
Le grand foyer central, l’astre aux astres uni.
Tous les yeux inconnus ouverts dans l’infini
S’étonnent; qu’est-ce donc? Quoi! la clarté se voile!
Un long frisson d’horreur court d’étoile en étoile.
Sauve ton oeuvre, ô Dieu, toi qui d’un souffle émeus
L’ombre où Léviathan tord ses bras venimeux!
C’en est fait. La bataille infâme est commencée.

Comme un phare jadis gardait la porte Scée,
Un flamboiement jaillit de l’astre, avertissant
Le ciel que l’enfer monte et que la nuit descend.
Le gouffre est comme un mur énorme de fumée
Où fourmille on ne sait quelle farouche armée;
Nuage monstrueux où luisent des airains;
Et les bruits infernaux et les bruits souterrains
Se mêlent, et, hurlant au fond de la géhenne,
Les tonnerres ont l’air de bêtes à la chaîne.
Une marée informe où grondent les typhons
Arrive, croît et roule avec des cris profonds,
Et ce chaos s’acharne à tuer cette sphère.
Lui frappe avec la flamme, elle avec la lumière;
Et l’abîme a l’éclair et l’astre a le rayon.
L’obscurité, flot, brume, ouragan, tourbillon,
Tombant sur l’astre, encor, toujours, encore, encore,
Cherche à se verser toute en ce puits de l’aurore.
Qui l’emportera? Crainte, espoir! Frémissements!
La splendide rondeur de l’astre, par moments,

Sous d’affreux gonflements de ténèbres s’efface,
Et, comme vaguement tremble et flotte une face,
De plus en plus sinistre et pâle, il disparaît.
Est-ce que d’une étoile on prononce l’arrêt?
Qui donc le peut? Qui donc a droit d’ôter au monde
Cette lueur sacrée et cette âme profonde?
L’enfer semble une gueule effroyable qui mord.
Et l’on ne voit plus l’astre. Est-ce donc qu’il est mort?

Tout à coup un rayon sort par une trouée.
Une crinière en feu, par les vents secouée,
Apparaît... - Le voilà!

C’est lui. Vivant, aimant,
Il condamne la Nuit à l’éblouissement,
Et, soudain reparu dans sa beauté première,
La couvre d’une écume immense de lumière.

Le chaos est-il donc vaincu? Non. La noirceur
Redouble, et le reflux du gouffre envahisseur
Revient, et l’on dirait que Dieu se décourage.

De nouveau, dans l’horreur, dans la nuit, dans l’orage,
On cherche l’astre. Où donc est-il? Quel guet-apens!
Et rien ne continue, et tout est en suspens;
La création sent qu’elle est témoin d’un crime;
Et l’univers regarde avec stupeur l’abîme
Qui, sans relâche, au fond du firmament vermeil,
Jette un vomissement d’ombre sur le soleil.

NOVEMBRE

I

DU HAUT DE LA MURAILLE DE PARIS

A LA NUIT TOMBANTE

L’Occident était blanc, l’orient était noir;
Comme si quelque bras sorti des ossuaires
Dressait un catafalque aux colonnes du soir,
Et sur le firmament déployait deux suaires.

Et la nuit se fermait ainsi qu’une prison.
L’oiseau mêlait sa plainte au frisson de la plante.
J’allais. Quand je levai mes yeux vers l’horizon,
Le couchant n’était plus qu’une lame sanglante.

Cela faisait penser à quelque grand duel
D’un monstre contre un dieu, tous deux de même taille;
Et l’on eût dit l’épée effrayante du ciel
Rouge et tombée à terre après une bataille.

II

PARIS DIFFAME A BERLIN

Pour la sinistre nuit l’aurore est un scandale;
Et l’Athénien semble un affront au Vandale.
Paris, en même temps qu’on t’arnaque, on voudrait
Donner au guet-apens le faux air d’un arrêt;
Le cuistre aide le reître; ils font cette gageure,
Déshonorer la ville héroïque; et l’injure
Pleut, mêlée à l’obus, dans le bombardement;
Ici le soudard tue et là le rhéteur ment;
On te dénonce au nom des moeurs, au nom du culte;

C’est afin de pouvoir t’égorger qu’on t’insulte,
La calomnie ayant pour but l’assassinat.
O ville, dont le peuple est grand comme un sénat,
Combats, tire l’épée, ô cité de lumière
Qui fondes l’atelier, qui défends la chaumière,
Va, laisse, ô fier chef-lieu des hommes tous égaux,
Hurler autour de toi l’affreux tas des bigots,
Noirs sauveurs de l’autel et du trône, hypocrites
Par qui dans tous les temps les clartés sont proscrites,
Qui gardent tous les dieux contre tous les esprits,
Et dont nous entendons dans l’histoire les cris,
A Rome, à Thèbe, à Delphe, à Memphis, à Mycènes,
Pareils aux aboiements lointains des chiens obscènes.

III

A TOUS CES PRINCES

Rois teutons, vous avez mal copié vos pères.
Ils se précipitaient hors de leurs grands repaires,
Le glaive au poing, tâchant d’avoir ceci pour eux
D’être les plus vaillants et non les plus nombreux.
Vous, vous faites la guerre autrement.

On se glisse
Sans bruit, dans l’ombre, avec le hasard pour complice,
Jusque dans le pays d’à côté, doucement,
Un peu comme un larron, presque comme un amant;
Baissant la voix, courbant le front, cachant sa lampe,
On se fait invisible au fond des bois, on rampe;
Puis brusquement, criant vivat, hourrah, haro,
On tire un million de sabres du fourreau,
On se rue, et l’on frappe et d’estoc et de taille
Sur le voisin, lequel a, dans cette bataille,
Rien pour armée avec zéro pour général.
Vos aïeux, que Luther berçait de son choral,
N’eussent point accepté de vaincre de la sorte;

Car la soif conquérante était en eux moins forte
Que la pudeur guerrière, et tous avaient au coeur
Le désir d’être grand plus que d’être vainqueur.
Vous, princes, vous semez, de Sedan à Versailles,
Dans votre route obscure à travers les broussailles,
Toutes sortes d’exploits louches et singuliers
Dont se fût indignée au temps des chevaliers
La magnanimité farouche de l’épée.

Rois, la guerre n’est pas digne de l’épopée
Lorsqu’elle est espionne et traître, et qu’elle met
Une cocarde au vol, à la fraude un plumet!
Guillaume est empereur, Bismarck est trabucaire;
Charlemagne à sa droite assoit Robert-Macaire;
On livre aux mameloucks, aux pandours, aux strélitz,
Aux reîtres, aux hulans, la France d’Austerlitz;
On en fait son butin, sa proie et sa prébende.
Où fut la grande armée on est l’énorme bande.

*

Ivres, ils vont au gouffre obscur qui les attend.
Ainsi l’ours, à vau-l’eau sur le glacier flottant,
Ne sent pas sous lui fondre et crouler la banquise.

Soit, princes. Vautrez-vous sur la France conquise.
De l’Alsace aux abois, de la Lorraine en sang,
De Metz qu’on vous vendit, de Strasbourg frémissant
Dont vous n’éteindrez pas la tragique auréole,
Vous aurez ce qu’on a des femmes qu’on viole,
La nudité, le lit, et la haine à jamais.

Oui, le corps souillé, froid, sinistre désormais,
Quand on les prend de force en des étreintes viles,
C’est tout ce qu’on obtient des vierges et des villes.

Moissonnez les vivants comme un champ de blé mûr,

Cernez Paris, jetez la flamme à ce grand mur,
Tuez à Châteaudun, tuez à Gravelotte,
O rois, désespérez la mère qui sanglote,
Poussez l’effrayant cri de l’ombre: Exterminons!
Secouez vos drapeaux et roulez vos canons;
A ce bruit triomphal il manque quelque chose.
La porte de rayons dans les cieux reste close;
Et sur la terre en deuil pas un laurier ne sent
La sève lui venir de tous ces flots de sang.
Là-haut au loin, le groupe altier des Renommées,
Immobile, indigné, les ailes refermées,
Tourne le dos, se tait, refuse de rien voir,
Et l’on distingue, au fond de ce firmament noir,
Le morne abaissement de leurs trompettes sombres.

Dire que pas un nom ne sort de ces décombres!
O gloire, ces héros comment s’appellent-ils?
Quoi! ces triomphateurs hautains, sanglants, subtils,
Quoi! ces envahisseurs que tant de rage anime
Ne peuvent même pas sortir de l’anonyme,
Et ce comble d’affront sur nous s’appesantit
Que la victoire est grande et le vainqueur petit!

IV

BANCROFT

Qu’est-ce que cela fait à cette grande France?
Son tragique dédain va jusqu’à l’ignorance.
Elle existe, et ne sait ce que dit d’elle un tas
D’inconnus, chez les rois ou dans les galetas;
Soyez un va-nu-pieds ou soyez un ministre,
Vous n’avez point du mal la majesté sinistre;
Vous bourdonnez en vain sur son éternité.
Vous l’insultez. Qui donc avez-vous insulté?
Elle n’aperçoit pas dans ses deuils ou ses fêtes
L’espèce d’ombre obscure et vague que vous êtes;

Tâchez d’être quelqu’un, Tibère, Gengiskan,
Soyez l’homme fléau, soyez l’homme volcan,
On examinera si vous valez la peine
Qu’on vous méprise; ayez quelque titre à la haine,
Et l’on verra. Sinon, allez-vous-en. Un nain
Peut à sa petitesse ajouter son venin
Sans cesser d’être un nain, et qu’importe l’atome?
Qu’importe l’affront vil qui tombe de cet homme?
Qu’importent les néants qui passent et s’en vont?
Sans faire remuer la tête énorme, au fond
Du désert où l’on voit rôder le lynx féroce,
Le stercoraire peut prendre avec le colosse
Immobile à jamais sous le ciel étoilé,
Des familiarités d’oiseau vite envolé.

V

EN VOYANT FLOTTER SUR LA SEINE DES CADAVRES PRUSSIENS

Oui, vous êtes venus et vous voilà couchés;
Vous voilà caressés, portés, baisés, penchés,
Sur le souple oreiller de l’eau molle et profonde;
Vous voilà dans les draps froids et mouillés de l’onde;
C’est bien vous, fils du Nord, nus sur le flot dormant!
Vous fermez vos yeux bleus dans ce doux bercement.
Vous aviez dit: « - Allons chez la prostituée.
Babylone, aux baisers du monde habituée,
Est là-bas; elle abonde en rires, en chansons;
C’est là que nous aurons du plaisir; ô Saxons,
O Germains, vers le Sud tournons notre oeil oblique,
Vite! en France! Paris, cette ville publique,
Qui pour les étrangers se farde et s’embellit,
Nous ouvrira ses bras...” - Et la Seine son lit.

VI

Prêcher la guerre après avoir plaidé la paix!
Sagesse, dit le sage, eh quoi, tu me trompais!
O sagesse, où sont donc les paroles clémentes?
Se peut-il qu'on t'aveugle ou que tu te démentes?
Et la fraternité, qu'en fais-tu? te voilà
Exterminant Caïn, foudroyant Attila!
— Homme, je ne t'ai pas trompé, dit la sagesse.
Tout commence en refus et finit en largesse;
L'hiver mène au printemps et la haine à l'amour.
On croit travailler contre et l'on travaille pour.
En se superposant sans mesure et sans nombre,
Les vérités parfois font un tel amas d'ombre
Que l'homme est inquiet devant leur profondeur;
La Providence est noire à force de grandeur;
Ainsi la nuit sinistre et sainte fait ses voiles
De ténèbres avec des épaisseurs d'étoiles.

VII

Je ne sais si je vais sembler étrange à ceux
Qui pensent que devant le sort trouble et chanceux,
Devant Sedan, devant le flamboiement du glaive,
Il faut brûler un cierge à Sainte-Geneviève,
Qu'on serait sûr d'avoir le secours le plus vrai
En redorant à neuf Notre-Dame d'Auray,
Et qu'on arrête court l'obus, le plomb qui tonne,
Et la mitraille, avec une oraison bretonne;
Je paraîtrai sauvage et fort mal élevé
Aux gens qui dans des coins chuchotent des Ave
Pendant que le sang coule à flots de notre veine,
Et qui contre un canon braquent une neuvaine;
Mais je dis qu'il est temps d'agir et de songer
A la levée en masse, à l'abîme, au danger
Qui, lorsqu'autour de nous son cercle se resserre,
A ce mérite, étant hideux, d'être sincère,
D'être franchement fauve et sombre, et de t'offrir,
France, une occasion sublime de mourir;

J’affirme que le camp monstrueux des barbares,
Que les ours de leur cage ayant brisé les barres,
Approchent, que d’horreur les peuples sont émus,
Que nous ne sommes plus au temps des oremus,
Que les hordes sont là, que Paris est leur cible,
Et que nous devons tous pousser un cri terrible!
Aux armes, citoyens! aux fourches, paysans!
Jette là ton psautier pour les agonisants,
Général, et faisons en hâte une trouée!
La Marseillaise n’est pas encore enrouée,
Le cheval que montait Kléber n’est pas fourbu.
Tout le vin de l’audace immense n’est pas bu,
Et Danton nous en laisse assez au fond du verre
Pour donner à la Prusse une chasse sévère,
Et pour épouvanter le vieux monde aux abois
De la réception que nous faisons aux rois!
Dussions-nous succomber d’ailleurs, la mort est grande.
Quand un trop bon chrétien dans la cité commande,
Quand je crois qu’on a peur, quand je vois qu’on attend,
Qu’est-ce que vous voulez, je ne suis pas content.
Ce chef vers son curé tourne un oeil trop humide;
Je le vois soldat brave et général timide;
Comme le vieil Entelle et le vieux d’Aubigné,
J’ai des frémissements, je frissonne indigné;
Nous sommes dans Paris, volcan, fournaise d’âmes,
Près de deux millions d’hommes, d’enfants, de femmes,
Pas un n’entend céder, pas une; et nous voulons
La colère plus prompte et les discours moins longs;
Et je l’irais demain dire à l’hôtel de ville
Si je ne sentais poindre une guerre civile,
O patrie accablée, et si je ne craignais
D’ajouter cette corde affreuse à tes poignets,
Et de te voir traînée autour du mur en flamme,
Dans la fange et le sang, derrière un char infâme,
D’abord par tes vainqueurs, ensuite par tes fils!
Ces fiers Parisiens bravent tous les défis;
Ils acceptent le froid, la faim, rien ne les dompte,

Ne trouvant d'impossible à porter que la honte;
On mange du pain noir n'ayant plus de pain bis;
Soit; mais se laisser prendre ainsi que des brebis,
Ce n'est pas leur humeur, et tous veulent qu'on sorte,
Et nous voulons nous-mêmes enfoncer notre porte,
Et, s'il le faut, le front levé vers l'orient,
Nous mettre en liberté dans la tombe, en criant:
Concorde! en attestant l'avenir, l'espérance,
L'aurore; et c'est ainsi qu'agonise la France!

C'est pourquoi je déclare en cette extrémité
Que l'homme a pour bien faire un coeur illimité,
Qu'il faut copier Sparte et Rome notre aïeule,
Et qu'un peuple est borné par sa lâcheté seule;
J'écarte le mauvais exemple, ce lépreux;
A cette heure il nous faut mieux que les anciens preux
Qui souvent s'attardaient trop longtemps aux chapelles;
Je dis qu'à ton secours, France, tu nous appelles;
Qu'un courage qui chante au lutrin est bâtard,
Qu'il sied de tout risquer, et qu'il est déjà tard!
C'est mon avis, devant les trompettes farouches,
Devant les ouragans gonflant leurs noires bouches,
Devant le Nord féroce attaquant le Midi,
Que nous avons besoin de quelqu'un de hardi;
Et que, lorsqu'il s'agit de chasser les Vandales,
De refouler le flot des bandes féodales,
De délivrer l'Europe en délivrant Paris,
Et d'en finir avec ceux qui nous ont surpris,
Avec tant d'épouvante, avec tant de misère,
Il nous faut une épée et non pas un rosaire.

VIII

Qu'on ne s'y trompe pas, je n'ai jamais caché
Que j'étais sur l'énigme éternelle penché;
Je sais qu'être à demi plongé dans l'équilibre
De la terre et des cieux, nous fait l'âme plus libre;

Je sais qu'en s'appuyant sur l'inconnu, l'on sent
Quelque chose d'immense et de bon qui descend,
Et qu'on voit le néant des rois, et qu'on résiste
Et qu'on lutte et qu'on marche avec un coeur moins triste;
Je sais qu'il est d'altiers prophètes qu'un danger
Tente, et que l'habitude auguste de songer,
De méditer, d'aimer, de croire, et d'être en somme
A genoux devant Dieu, met debout devant l'homme;
Certes, je suis courbé sous l'infini profond.
Mais le ciel ne fait pas ce que les hommes font;
Chacun a son devoir et chacun a sa tâche;
Je sais aussi cela. Quand le destin est lâche,
C'est à nous de lui faire obstacle rudement,
Sans aller déranger l'éclair du firmament,
Et j'attends, pour le vaincre, un moins grand phénomène
Du tonnerre divin que de la foudre humaine.

IX

A L'EVEQUE QUI M'APPELLE ATHEE

Athée? entendons-nous, prêtre, une fois pour toutes.
M'espionner, guetter mon âme, être aux écoutes,
Regarder par le trou de la serrure au fond
De mon esprit, chercher jusqu'où mes doutes vont,
Questionner l'enfer, consulter son registre
De police, à travers son soupirail sinistre,
Pour voir ce que je nie ou bien ce que je croi,
Ne prends pas cette peine inutile. Ma foi
Est simple, et je la dis. J'aime la clarté franche:

S'il s'agit d'un bonhomme à longue barbe blanche,
D'une espèce de pape ou d'empereur, assis
Sur un trône qu'on nomme au théâtre un châssis,
Dans la nuée, ayant un oiseau sur sa tête,
Au droite un archange, à sa gauche un prophète,
Entre ses bras son fils pâle et percé de clous,

Un et triple, écoutant des harpes, Dieu jaloux,
Dieu vengeur, que Garasse enregistre, qu'annote
L'abbé Pluche en Sorbonne et qu'approuve Nonotte;
S'il s'agit de ce Dieu que constate Trublet,
Dieu foulant aux pieds ceux que Moïse accablait,
Sacrant tous les bandits royaux dans leurs repaires,
Punissant les enfants pour la faute des pères,
Arrêtant le soleil à l'heure où le soir riait,
Au risque de casser le grand ressort tout net,
Dieu mauvais géographe et mauvais astronome,
Contrefaçon immense et petite de l'homme,
En colère, et faisant la moue au genre humain,
Comme un Père Duchêne un grand sabre à la main;
Dieu qui volontiers damne et rarement pardonne,
Qui sur un passe-droit consulte une madone,
Dieu qui dans son ciel bleu se donne le devoir
D'imiter nos défauts et le luxe d'avoir
Des fléaux, comme on a des chiens; qui trouble l'ordre,
Lâche sur nous Nemrod et Cyrus, nous fait mordre
Par Cambyse, et nous jette aux jambes Attila,
Prêtre, oui, je suis athée à ce vieux bon Dieu-là.

Mais s'il s'agit de l'être absolu qui condense
Là-haut tout l'idéal dans toute l'évidence,
Par qui, manifestant l'unité de la loi,
L'univers peut, ainsi que l'homme, dire: Moi;
De l'être dont je sens l'âme au fond de mon âme,
De l'être qui me parle à voix basse, et réclame
Sans cesse pour le vrai contre le faux, parmi
Les instincts dont le flot nous submerge à demi;
S'il s'agit du témoin dont ma pensée obscure
A parfois la caresse et parfois la piqûre
Selon qu'en moi, montant au bien, tombant au mal,
Je sens l'esprit grandir ou croître l'animal;
S'il s'agit du prodige immanent qu'on sent vivre
Plus que nous ne vivons, et dont notre âme est ivre
Toutes les fois qu'elle est sublime, et qu'elle va,

Où s’envola Socrate, où Jésus arriva,
Pour le juste, le vrai, le beau, droit au martyre,
Toutes les fois qu’au gouffre un grand devoir l’attire,
Toutes les fois qu’elle est dans l’orage alcyon,
Toutes les fois qu’elle a l’auguste ambition
D’aller, à travers l’ombre infâme qu’elle abhorre
Et de l’autre côté des nuits, trouver l’aurore;
O prêtre, s’il s’agit de ce quelqu’un profond
Que les religions ne font ni ne défont,
Que nous devinons bon et que nous sentons sage,
Qui n’a pas de contour, qui n’a pas de visage,
Et pas de fils, ayant plus de paternité
Et plus d’amour que n’a de lumière l’été;
S’il s’agit de ce vaste inconnu que ne nomme,
N’explique et ne commente aucun Deutéronome,
Qu’aucun Calmet ne peut lire en aucun Esdras,
Que l’enfant dans sa crèche et les morts dans leurs draps,
Distinguent vaguement d’en bas comme une cime,
Très-Haut qui n’est mangeable en aucun pain azime,
Qui parce que deux coeurs s’aiment, n’est point fâché,
Et qui voit la nature où tu vois le péché;
S’il s’agit de ce Tout vertigineux des êtres
Qui parle par là voix des éléments, sans prêtres,
Sans bibles, point charnel et point officiel,
Qui pour livre a l’abîme et pour temple le ciel,
Loi, Vie, Ame, invisible à force d’être énorme,
Impalpable à ce point qu’en dehors de la forme
Des choses que dissipe un souffle aérien,
On l’aperçoit dans tout sans le saisir dans rien;
S’il s’agit du suprême Immuable, solstice
De la raison, du droit, du bien, de la justice,
En équilibre avec l’infini, maintenant,
Autrefois, aujourd’hui, demain, toujours, donnant
Aux soleils la durée, aux coeurs la patience,
Qui, clarté hors de nous, est en nous conscience;
Si c’est de ce Dieu-là qu’il s’agit, de celui
Qui toujours dans l’aurore et dans la tombe a lui,

Etant ce qui commence et ce qui recommence;
S’il s’agit du principe éternel, simple, immense,
Qui pense puisqu’il est, qui de tout est le lieu,
Et que, faute d’un nom plus grand, j’appelle Dieu,
Alors tout change, alors nos esprits se retournent,
Le tien vers la nuit, gouffre et cloaque où séjournent
Les rires, les néants, sinistre vision,
Et le mien vers le jour, sainte affirmation,
Hymne, éblouissement de mon âme enchantée;
Et c’est moi le croyant, prêtre, et c’est toi l’athée.

X

A L’ENFANT MALADE PENDANT LE SIEGE

Si vous continuez d’être ainsi toute pâle
Dans notre air étouffant,
Si je vous vois entrer dans mon ombre fatale,
Moi vieillard, vous enfant;

Si je vois de nos jours se confondre la chaîne,
Moi qui sur mes genoux
Vous contemple, et qui veux la mort pour moi prochaine,
Et lointaine pour vous;

Si vos mains sont toujours diaphanes et frêles,
Si, dans votre berceau,
Tremblante, vous avez l’air d’attendre des ailes
Comme un petit oiseau;

Si vous ne semblez pas prendre sur notre terre
Racine pour longtemps,
Si vous laissez errer, Jeanne, en notre mystère
Vos doux yeux mécontents;

Si je ne vous vois pas gaie et rose et très forte,
Si, triste, vous rêvez,

Si vous ne fermez pas derrière vous la porte
Par où vous arrivez;

Si je ne vous vois pas comme une belle femme
Marcher, vous bien porter,
Rire, et si vous semblez être une petite âme
Qui ne veut pas rester,

Je croirai qu’en ce monde où le suaire au lange
Parfois peut confiner,
Vous venez pour partir, et que vous êtes l’ange
Chargé de m’emmener.

DÉCEMBRE

I

Ah! c’est un rêve! non! nous n’y consentons point.
Dresse-toi, la colère au coeur, l’épée au poing,
France! prends ton bâton, prends ta fourche, ramasse
Les pierres du chemin, debout, levée en masse!
France! qu’est-ce que c’est que cette guerre-là?
Nous refusons Mandrin, Dieu nous doit Attila.
Toujours, quand il lui plaît d’abattre un grand empire,
Un noble peuple, en qui le genre humain respire,
Rome ou Thèbes, le sort respectueux se sert
De quelque monstre auguste et fauve du désert.
Pourquoi donc cet affront? c’est trop. Tu t’y résignes,
Toi, France? non, jamais. Certes, nous étions dignes
D’être dévorés, peuple, et nous sommes mangés!
C’est trop de s’être dit: - Nous serons égorgés
Comme Athène et Memphis, comme Troie et Solime,
Grandement, dans l’éclair d’une lutte sublime! -
Et de se sentir mordre, en bas, obscurément,
Dans l’ombre, et d’être en proie à ce fourmillement,
Les pillages, les vols, les pestes, les famines!
D’espérer les lions, et d’avoir les vermines!

II

Vision sombre! un peuple en assassine un autre.

Et la même origine, ô Saxons, est la nôtre!
Et nous sommes sortis du même flanc profond!
La Germanie avec la Gaule se confond
Dans cette antique Europe où s’ébauche l’histoire.
Croître ensemble, ce fut longtemps notre victoire;
Les deux peuples s’aidaient, couple heureux, triomphant,
Tendre, et Caïn petit aimait Abel enfant.

Nous étions le grand peuple égal au peuple Scythe;
Et c’est de vous, Germains, et de nous, que Tacite
Disait: - Leur âme est fière. Un dieu fort les soutient.
Chez eux la femme pleure et l’homme se souvient. -
Si Rome osait risquer ses aigles dans nos landes,
Les Celtes entendaient l’appel guerrier des Vendes,
On battait le préteur, on chassait le consul,
Et Teutatès venait au secours d’Irmensul;
On se donnait l’appui glorieux et fidèle
Tantôt d’un coup d’épée et tantôt d’un coup d’aile;
Le même autel de pierre, étrange et plein de voix,
Faisait agenouiller sur l’herbe, au fond des bais,
Les Teutons de Cologne et les Bretons de Nante;
Et quand la Walkyrie, ailée et frissonnante,
Traversait l’ombre, Hermann chez vous, chez nous Brennus
Voyaient la même étoile entre ses deux seins nus.

Allemands, regardez au-dessus de vos têtes,
Dans le grand ciel, tandis qu’acharnés aux conquêtes,
Vous, Germains, vous venez poignarder les Gaulois,
Tandis que vous foulez aux pieds toutes les lois,
Plus souillés que grandis par des victoires traîtres,
Vous verrez vos aïeux saluer nos ancêtres.

III

LE MESSAGE DE GRANT

Ainsi, peuple aux efforts prodigieux enclin,
Ainsi, terre de Penn, de Fulton, de Franklin,
Vivante aube d’un monde, ô grande république,
C’est en ton nom qu’on fait vers l’ombre un pas oblique!
Trahison! par Berlin vouloir Paris détruit!
Au nom de la lumière encourager la nuit!
Quoi! de la liberté faire une renégate!
Est-ce donc pour cela que vint sur sa frégate
Lafayette donnant la main à Rochambeau?

Quand l’obscurité monte, éteindre le flambeau!
Quoi! dire: - Rien n’est vrai que la force. Le glaive,
C’est l’éblouissement suprême qui se lève.
Courbez-vous, le travail de vingt siècles a tort.
Le progrès, serpent vil, dans la fange se tord;
Et le peuple idéal, c’est le peuple égoïste.
Rien de définitif et d’absolu n’existe;
Le maître est tout; il est justice et vérité.
Et tout s’évanouit, droit, devoir, liberté,
L’avenir qui nous luit, la raison qui nous mène,
La sagesse divine et la sagesse humaine,
Dogme et livre, et Voltaire aussi bien que Jésus,
Puisqu’un reître allemand met sa botte dessus! -

Toi dont le gibet jette au monde qui commence,
Comme au monde qui va finir, une ombre immense,
John Brown, toi qui donnas aux peuples la leçon
D’un autre Golgotha sur un autre horizon,
Spectre, défais le noeud de ton cou, viens, ô juste,
Viens et fouette cet homme avec ta corde auguste!
C’est grâce à lui qu’un jour l’histoire en deuil dira:
— La France secourut l’Amérique, et tira
L’épée, et prodigua tout pour sa délivrance,
Et, peuples, l’Amérique a poignardé la France! -
Que le sauvage, fait pour guetter et ramper,
Que le huron, orné de couteaux à scalper,
Contemplent ce grand chef sanglant, le roi de Prusse,
Certes, que le Peau-Rouge admire le Borusse,
C’est tout simple; il le voit aux brigandages prêt,
Fauve, atroce, et ce bois comprend cette forêt;
Mais que l’homme incarnant le droit devant l’Europe,
L’homme que de rayons Colombie enveloppe,
L’homme en qui tout un monde héroïque est vivant,
Que cet homme se jette à plat ventre devant
L’affreux sceptre de fer des vieux âges funèbres,
Qu’il te donne, à Paris, le soufflet des ténèbres,
Qu’il livre sa patrie auguste à l’empereur,

Qu’il la mêle aux tyrans, aux meurtres, à l’horreur,
Qu’en ce triomphe horrible et sombre il la submerge,
Que dans ce lit d’opprobre il couche cette vierge,
Qu’il montre à l’univers, sur un immonde char,
L’Amérique baisant le talon de César,
Oh! cela fait trembler toutes les grandes tombes!
Cela remue, au fond des pâles catacombes,
Les os des fiers vainqueurs et des puissants vaincus!
Kosciusko frémissant réveille Spartacus;
Et Madison se dresse et Jefferson se lève;
Jackson met ses deux mains devant ce hideux rêve;
Déshonneur! crie Adams; et Lincoln étonné
Saigne, et c’est aujourd’hui qu’il est assassiné.

Indigne-toi, grand peuple. O nation suprême,
Tu sais de quel coeur tendre et filial je t’aime.
Amérique, je pleure. Oh! douloureux affront!
Elle n’avait encor qu’une auréole au front.
Son drapeau sidéral éblouissait l’histoire.
Washington, au galop de son cheval de gloire,
Avait éclaboussé d’étincelles les plis
De l’étendard, témoin des devoirs accomplis,
Et, pour que de toute ombre il dissipe les voiles,
L’avait superbement ensemencé d’étoiles.
Cette bannière illustre est obscurcie, hélas!
Je pleure... - Ah! sois maudit, malheureux qui mêlas
Sur le fier pavillon qu’un vent des cieux secoue
Aux gouttes de lumière une tache de boue!

IV

AU CANON LE V. H.

Ecoute-moi, ton tour viendra d’être écouté.
O canon, ô tonnerre, ô guerrier redouté,
Dragon plein de colère et d’ombre, dont la bouche
Mêle aux rugissements une flamme farouche,

Pesant colosse auquel s'amalgame l'éclair,
Toi qui disperseras l'aveugle mort dans l'air,
Je te bénis. Tu vas défendre cette ville.
O canon, sois muet dans la guerre civile,
Mais veille du côté de l'étranger. Hier
Tu sortis de la forge épouvantable et fier;
Les femmes te suivaient. Qu'il est beau! disaient-elles.
Car les Cimbres sont là. Leurs victoires sont telles
Qu'il en sort de la honte, et Paris fait de loin
Signe aux princes qu'il prend les peuples à témoin.
La lutte nous attend; viens, ô mon fils étrange,
Doublons-nous l'un par l'autre, et faisons un échange,
Et mets, ô noir vengeur, combattant souverain,
Ton bronze dans mon coeur, mon âme en ton airain.

O canon, tu seras bientôt sur la muraille.
Avec ton caisson plein de boîtes à mitraille,
Sautant sur le pavé, traîné par huit chevaux,
Au milieu d'une foule éclatant en bravos,
Tu t'en iras, parmi les croulantes masures,
Prendre ta place altière aux grandes embrasures
Où Paris indigné se dresse, sabre au poing.
Là ne t'endors jamais et ne t'apaise point.
Et, puisque je suis l'homme essayant sur la terre
Toutes les guérisons par l'indulgence austère,
Puisque je suis parmi les vivants en rumeur,
Au forum ou du haut de l'exil, le semeur
De la paix à travers l'immense guerre humaine,
Puisque vers le grand but où Dieu clément nous mène,
J'ai, triste ou souriant, toujours le doigt levé,
Puisque j'ai, moi, songeur par les deuils éprouvé,
L'amour pour évangile et l'union pour bible,
Toi qui portes mon nom, ô monstre, sois terrible!
Car l'amour devient haine en présence du mal;
Car l'homme esprit ne peut subir l'homme animal,
Et la France ne peut subir la barbarie;
Car l'idéal sublime est la grande patrie;

Et jamais le devoir ne fut plus évident
De faire obstacle au flot sauvage débordant,
Et de mettre Paris, l’Europe qu’il transforme,
Les peuples, sous l’abri d’une défense énorme;
Car si ce roi teuton n’était pas châtié,
Tout ce que l’homme appelle espoir, progrès, pitié,
Fraternité, fuirait de la terre sans joie;
Car César est le tigre et le peuple est la proie,
Et qui combat la France attaque l’avenir;
Car il faut élever, lorsqu’on entend hennir
Le cheval d’Attila dans l’ombre formidable,
Autour de l’âme humaine un mur inabordable,
Et Rome, pour sauver l’univers du néant,
Doit être une déesse, et Paris un géant!

C’est pourquoi des canons que la lyre a fait naître,
Que la strophe azurée enfanta, doivent être
Braqués, gueule béante, au-dessus du fossé;
C’est pourquoi le penseur frémissant est forcé
D’employer la lumière à des choses sinistres;
Devant les rois, devant le mal et ses ministres,
Devant ce grand besoin du monde, être sauvé,
Il sait qu’il doit combattre après avoir rêvé;
Il sait qu’il faut lutter, frapper, vaincre, dissoudre,
Et d’un rayon d’aurore il fait un coup de foudre.

V

PROUESSES BORUSSES

La conquête avouant sa soeur l’escroquerie,
C’est un progrès. En vain la conscience crie,
Par l’exploitation on complète l’exploit.
A l’or du voisin riche un voisin pauvre a droit.
Au dos de la victoire on met une besace;
En attendant qu’on ait la Lorraine et l’Alsace,
On décroche une montre au clou d’un horloger;

On veut dans une gloire immense se plonger,
Mais briser une glace est une sotte affaire,
Il vaut mieux l’emporter; à coup sûr on préfère
L’honneur à tout, mais l’homme a besoin de tabac,
On en vole. A travers Reichshoffen et Forbach,
A travers cette guerre où l’on eut cette chance
D’un Napoléon nain livrant la grande France,
Dans ces champs où manquaient Marceau, Hoche et Condé,
A travers Metz vendue et Strasbourg bombardé,
Parmi les cris, les morts tombés sous les mitrailles,
Montrant l’un sa cervelle et l’autre ses entrailles,
Les drapeaux avançant ou fuyant, les galops
Des escadrons pareils aux mers roulant leurs flots,
Au milieu de ce vaste et sinistre engrenage,
Conquérant pingre, on pense à son petit ménage;
On médite, ajoutant Shylock à Galgacus,
De meubler son amante aux dépens des vaincus;
On a pour idéal d’offrir une pendule
A quelque nymphe blonde au pied du mont Adule;
Bellone échevelée et farouche descend
Du nuage d’où sort l’éclair, d’où pleut le sang,
Et s’emploie à clouer des caisses d’emballage;
On rançonne un pays village par village;
On est terrible, mais fripon; on est des loups,
Des tigres et des ours qui seraient des filous.
On renverse un empire et l’on coupe une bourse.
César, droit sur son char, dit: Payez-moi ma course.
On massacre un pays, le sang est encor frais;
Puis on arrive avec le total de ses frais;
On tarife le meurtre, on cote la famine:
— Voilà bientôt six mois que je vous extermine;
C’est tant. Je ne saurais vous égorger à moins. -
Et l’on étonne au fond des cieux ces fiers témoins,
Les aïeux, les héros, pâles dans les nuages,
Par des hauts faits auxquels s’attachent des péages;
On s’inquiète peu de ces fantômes-là;
Avec cinq milliards on rentre au Walhalla.

Pirates, d’une banque on a fait l’abordage.
On copie en rapine, en fraude, en brigandage,
Les Bédouins à l’oeil louche et les Baskirs camards;
Et Schinderhannes met le faux nez du dieu Mars.
On a pour chefs des rois escarpes, et ces princes
Ont des ministres comme un larron a des pinces;
On foule sous ses pieds le scrupule aux abois;
En somme, on dévalise un peuple au coin d’un bois.
On détrousse, on dépouille, on grinche, on rafle, on pille.

Peut-être est-il plus beau d’avoir pris la Bastille.

VI

LES FORTS

Ils sont les chiens de garde énormes de Paris.
Comme nous pouvons être à chaque instant surpris,
Comme une horde est là, comme l’embûche vile
Parfois rampe jusqu’à l’enceinte de la ville,
Ils sont dix-neuf épars sur les monts, qui, le soir,
Inquiets, menaçants, guettent l’espace noir,
Et, s’entr’avertissant dès que la nuit commence,
Tendent leur cou de bronze autour du mur immense.
Ils restent éveillés quand nous nous endormons,
Et font tousser la foudre en leurs rauques poumons.
Les collines parfois, brusquement étoilées,
Jettent dans la nuit sombre un éclair aux vallées;
Le crépuscule lourd s’abat sur nous, masquant
Dans son silence un piège et dans sa paix un camp;
Mais en vain l’ennemi serpente et nous enlace;
Ils tiennent en respect toute une populace
De canons monstrueux, rôdant à l’horizon.
Paris bivouac, Paris tombeau, Paris prison,
Debout dans l’univers devenu solitude,
Fait sentinelle, et, pris enfin de lassitude,
S’assoupit; tout se tait, hommes, femmes, enfants,

Les sanglots, les éclats de rire triomphants,
Les pas, les chars, le quai, le carrefour, la grève,
Les mille toits d'où sort le murmure du rêve,
L'espoir qui dit je crois, la faim qui dit je meurs;
Tout fait silence; ô foule! indistinctes rumeurs!
Sommeil de tout un monde! ô songes insondables!
On dort, on oublie... - Eux, ils sont là, formidables.

Tout à coup on se dresse en sursaut; haletant,
On prête l'oreille, on se penche... - on entend
Comme le hurlement profond d'une montagne.
Toute la ville écoute et toute la campagne
Se réveille; et voilà qu'au premier grondement
Répond un second cri, sourd, farouche, inclément,
Et dans l'obscurité d'autres fracas s'écroulent,
Et d'échos en échos cent voix terribles roulent.
Ce sont eux. C'est qu'au fond des espaces confus,
Ils ont vu se grouper de sinistres affûts,
C'est qu'ils ont des canons surpris la silhouette;
C'est que, dans quelque bois d'où s'enfuit la chouette,
Ils viennent d'entrevoir, là-bas, au bord d'un champ,
Le fourmillement noir des bataillons marchant;
C'est que dans les halliers des yeux traîtres flamboient.

Comme c'est beau ces forts qui dans cette ombre aboient!

VII

A LA FRANCE

Personne pour toi. Tous sont d'accord. Celui-ci,
Nommé Gladstone, dit à tes bourreaux: merci!
Cet autre, nommé Grant, te conspue, et cet autre,
Nommé Bancroft, t'outrage; ici c'est un apôtre,
Là c'est un soldat, là c'est un juge, un tribun,
Un prêtre, l'un du Nord, l'autre du Sud; pas un
Que ton sang, à grands flots versé, ne satisfasse;

Pas un qui sur ta croix ne te crache à la face.
Hélas! qu'as-tu donc fait aux nations? Tu vins
Vers celles qui pleuraient, avec ces mots divins:
Joie et Paix! - Tu criais: - Espérance! Allégresse!
Sois puissante, Amérique, et toi sois libre, ô Grèce!
L'Italie était grande; elle doit l'être encor.
Je le veux! - Tu donnas à celle-ci ton or,
A celle-là ton sang, à toutes la lumière.
Tu défendis le droit des hommes, coutumière
De tous les dévoûments et de tous les devoirs.
Comme le boeuf revient repu des abreuvoirs,
Les hommes sont rentrés pas à pas à l'étable,
Rassasiés de toi, grande soeur redoutable,
De toi qui protégeas, de toi qui combattis.
Ah! se montrer ingrats, c'est se prouver petits.
N'importe! pas un d'eux ne te connaît. Leur foule
T'a huée, à cette heure où ta grandeur s'écroule,
Riant de chaque coup de marteau qui tombait
Sur toi, nue et sanglante et clouée au gibet.
Leur pitié plaint tes fils que la fortune amère
Condamne à la rougeur de t'avouer pour mère.
Tu ne peux pas mourir, c'est le regret qu'on a.
Tu penches dans la nuit ton front qui rayonna;
L'aigle de l'ombre est là qui te mange le foie;
C'est à qui reniera la vaincue; et la joie
Des rois pillant, pareils aux bandits des Adrets,
Charme l'Europe et plaît au monde... - Ah! je voudrais,
Je voudrais n'être pas Français pour pouvoir dire
Que je te choisis, France, et que, dans ton martyre,
Je te proclame, toi que ronge le vautour,
Ma patrie et ma gloire et mon unique amour!

VIII

NOS MORTS

Ils gisent dans le champ terrible et solitaire.

Leur sang fait une mare affreuse sur la terre;
Les vautours monstrueux fouillent leur ventre ouvert;
Leurs corps farouches, froids, épars sur le pré vert,
Effroyables, tordus, noirs, ont toutes les formes
Que le tonnerre donne aux foudroyés énormes;
Leur crâne est à la pierre aveugle ressemblant;
La neige les modèle avec son linceul blanc;
On dirait que leur main lugubre, âpre et crispée,
Tâche encor de chasser quelqu'un à coups d'épée;
Ils n'ont pas de parole, ils n'ont pas de regard;
Sur l'immobilité de leur sommeil hagard
Les nuits passent; ils ont plus de chocs et de plaies
Que les suppliciés promenés sur des claies;
Sous eux rampent le ver, la lame et la fourmi;
Ils s'enfoncent déjà dans la terre à demi
Comme dans l'eau profonde un navire qui sombre;
Leurs pâles os, couverts de pourriture et d'ombre,
Sont comme ceux auxquels Ézéchiel parlait;
On voit partout sur eux l'affreux coup du boulet,
La balafre du sabre et le trou de la lance;
Le vaste vent glacé souffle sur ce silence;
Ils sont nus et sanglants sous le ciel pluvieux.

O morts pour mon pays, je suis votre envieux.

IX

A QUI LA VICTOIRE DEFINITIVE?

Sachez-le, puisqu'il faut, Teutons, qu'on vous l'apprenne,
Non, vous ne prendrez pas l'Alsace et la Lorraine,
Et c'est nous qui prendrons l'Allemagne. Ecoutez:
Franchir notre frontière, entrer dans nos cités,
Voir chez nous les esprits marcher, lire nos livres,
Respirer l'air profond dont nos penseurs sont ivres,
C'est rendre à son insu son épée au progrès;
C'est boire à notre coupe, accepter nos regrets,

Nos deuils, nos maux féconds, nos voeux, nos espérances;
C’est pleurer nos pleurs; c’est envier nos souffrances;
C’est vouloir ce grand vent, la révolution;
C’est comprendre, ô Germains! ce que sait l’alcyon,
Que l’orage farouche est pour l’onde une fête,
Et que nous allons droit au but dans la tempête,
En lui laissant briser nos mâts et nos agrès.

Les rois donnent aux champs les peuples pour engrais,
Et ce meurtre s’appelle ensuite la victoire;
Ils jettent Austerlitz ou Rosbach à l’histoire,
Et disent: c’est fini. - Laissons le temps passer.
Ce qui vient de finir, ô rois, va commencer.
Oui, les peuples sont morts, mais le peuple va naître,
A travers les rois l’aube invincible pénètre;
L’aube c’est la Justice et c’est la Liberté.
Le conquérant se sent conquis. Dompteur dompté,
Il s’étonne; en son coeur plein d’une vague honte
Une construction mystérieuse monte;
Belluaire imbécile entré chez un esprit,
Il est la bête. Il voit l’idéal qui sourit,
Il tremble, et n’ayant pu le tuer, il l’adore.
Le glacier fond devant le rayon qui le dore.
Un jour, comme en chantant Linus lui remuait
Sa montagne, Titan, roi du granit muet,
Cria: ne bouge pas, roche glacée et lourde!
La roche répondit: crois-tu que je sois sourde?
Ainsi la masse écoute et songe; ainsi s’émeut,
Quand mai des rameaux noirs vient desserrer le noeud,
Quand la sève entre et court dans les branches nouvelles,
L’arbre qu’emplissait l’ombre et qu’empliront les ailes.
L’homme a d’informes blocs dans l’esprit, préjugés,
Vice, erreur, dogmes faux d’égoïsme rongés;
Mais que devant lui passe une voix, un exemple,
Toutes ces pierres vont faire en son âme un temple.
Homme! Thèbe éternelle en proie aux Amphions!

Ah! délivrez-vous donc, nous vous en défions,
Allemands, de Pascal, de Danton, de Voltaire!
Teutons, délivrez-vous de l’effrayant mystère
Du progrès qui se fait sa part à tout moment,
De la création maîtresse obscurément,
Du vrai démuselant l’ignorance sauvage,
Et du jour qui réduit toute âme en esclavage!
Esclavage superbe! obéissance au droit
Par qui l’erreur s’écroule et la raison s’accroît!
Délivrez-vous des monts qui vous offrent leur cime.
Délivrez-vous de l’aile inconnue et sublime
Que vous ne voyez pas et que vous avez tous!
Délivrez-vous du vent que nous soufflons sur vous!
Délivrez-vous du monde ignoré qui commence,
Du devoir, du printemps et de l’espace immense!
Délivrez-vous de l’eau, de la terre, de l’air,
Et de notre Corneille et de votre Schiller,
De vos poumons voulant respirer, des prunelles
Qui vous montrent là-haut les clartés éternelles,
De la vérité, vraie à toute heure, en tout lieu,
D’aujourd’hui, de demain... - Délivrez-vous de Dieu!
Ah! vous êtes en France, Allemands! prenez garde!
Ah! barbarie! ah! foule imprudente et hagarde,
Vous accourez avec des glaives! ah! vos camps,
Tels que l’ardent limon vomi par les volcans,
Roulent jusqu’à Paris hors de votre cratère!
Ah! vous venez chez nous nous prendre un peu de terre!
Eh bien, nous vous prendrons tout votre coeur!

Demain,
Demain, le but français étant le but humain,
Vous y courrez. Oui, vous, grande nation noire,
Vous irez à l’émeute, à la lutte, à la gloire,
A l’épreuve, aux grands chocs, aux sublimes malheurs,
Aux révolutions, comme l’abeille aux fleurs!
Hélas! vous tuez ceux par qui vous devez vivre.
Qu’importe la fanfare enflant ses voix de cuivre,

Ces guerres, ces fracas furieux, ces blocus!
Vous semblez nos vainqueurs, vous êtes nos vaincus.
Comme l’océan filtre au fond des madrépores,
Notre pensée en vous entre par tous les pores;
Demain vous maudirez ce que nous détestons;
Et vous ne pourrez pas vous en aller, Teutons,
Sans avoir fait ici provision de haine
Contre Pierre et César, contre l’omble et la chaîne;
Car nos regards de deuil, de colère et d’effroi,
Passent par-dessus vous, peuple, et frappent le roi!
Vous qui fûtes longtemps la pauvre tourbe aveugle
Gémissant au hasard comme le taureau beugle,
Vous puiserez chez nous l’altière volonté
D’exister, et d’avoir au front une clarté;
Et le ferme dessein n’aura rien de vulgaire
Que vous emporterez dans votre sac de guerre;
Ce sera l’âpre ardeur de faire comme nous,
Et d’être tous égaux et d’être libres tous;
Allemands, ce sera l’intention formelle
De foudroyer ce tas de trônes pêle-mêle,
De tendre aux nations la main, et de n’avoir
Pour maître que le droit, pour chef que le devoir;
Afin que l’univers sache, s’il le demande,
Que l’Allemagne est forte et que la France est grande;
Que le Germain candide est enfin triomphant,
Et qu’il est l’homme peuple et non le peuple enfant!

Vos hordes aux yeux bleus se mettront à nous suivre
Avec la joie étrange et superbe de vivre,
Et le contentement profond de n’avoir plus
D’enclumes pour forger des glaives superflus.
Le plus poignant motif que sur terre on rencontre
D’être pour la raison, c’est d’avoir été contre;
On sert le droit avec d’autant plus de vertu
Qu’on a le repentir de l’avoir combattu.
L’Allemagne, de tant de meurtres inondée,
Sera la prisonnière auguste de l’idée;

Car on est d’autant plus captif qu’on fut vainqueur;
Elle ne pourra pas rendre à la nuit son coeur;
L’Allemand ne pourra s’évader de son âme
Dont nous aurons changé la lumière et la flamme,
Et se reconnaîtra Français, en frémissant
De baiser nos pieds, lui qui buvait notre sang!

Non, vous ne prendrez pas la Lorraine et l’Alsace,
Et, je vous le redis, Allemands, quoi qu’on fasse,
C’est vous qui serez pris par la France. Comment?
Comme le fer est pris dans l’ombre par l’aimant;
Comme la vaste nuit est prise par l’aurore;
Comme avec ses rochers, où dort l’écho sonore,
Ses cavernes, ses trous de bêtes, ses halliers,
Et son horreur sacrée et ses loups familiers,
Et toute sa feuillée informe qui chancelle,
Le bois lugubre est pris par la claire étincelle.
Quand nos éclairs auront traversé vos massifs;
Quand vous aurez subi, puis savouré, pensifs,
Cet air de France où l’âme est d’autant plus à l’aise
Qu’elle y sent vaguement flotter la Marseillaise;
Quand vous aurez assez donné vos biens, vos droits,
Votre honneur, vos enfants, à dévorer aux rois;
Quand vous verrez César envahir vos provinces;
Quand vous aurez pesé de deux façons vos princes,
Quand vous vous serez dit: ces maîtres des humains
Sont lourds à notre épaule et légers dans nos mains;
Quand, tout ceci passé, vous verrez les entailles
Qu’auront faites sur nous et sur vous les batailles;
Quand ces charbons ardents dont en France les plis
Des drapeaux, des linceuls, des âmes, sont remplis,
Auront ensemencé vos profondeurs funèbres,
Quand ils auront creusé lentement vos ténèbres,
Quand ils auront en vous couvé le temps voulu,
Un jour, soudain, devant l’affreux sceptre absolu,
Devant les rois, devant les antiques Sodomes
Devant le mal, devant le joug, vous, forêt d’hommes,

Vous aurez la colère énorme qui prend feu;
Vous vous ouvrirez, gouffre, à l’ouragan de Dieu;
Gloire au Nord! ce sera l’aurore boréale
Des peuples, éclairant une Europe idéale!
Vous crierez: - Quoi! des rois! quoi donc! un empereur!
Quel éblouissement, l’Allemagne en fureur!
Va, peuple! O vision! combustion sinistre
De tout le noir passé, prêtre, autel, roi, ministre,
Dans un brasier de foi, de vie et de raison,
Faisant une lueur immense à l’horizon!
Frères, vous nous rendrez notre flamme agrandie.
Nous sommes le flambeau, vous serez l’incendie.

JANVIER 1871

I

1er JANVIER

Enfant, on vous dira plus tard que le grand-père
Vous adorait; qu'il fit de son mieux sur la terre,
Qu'il eut fort peu de joie et beaucoup d'envieux,
Qu'au temps où vous étiez petits il était vieux,
Qu'il n'avait pas de mots bourrus ni d'airs moroses,
Et qu'il vous a quittés dans la saison des roses;
Qu'il est mort, que c'était un bonhomme clément;
Que, dans l'hiver fameux du grand bombardement,
Il traversait Paris tragique et plein d'épées,
Pour vous porter des tas de jouets, des poupées,
Et des pantins faisant mille gestes bouffons;
Et vous serez pensifs sous les arbres profonds.

II

LETTRE A UNE FEMME (PAR BALLON MONTE, 10 JANVIER)

Paris terrible et gai combat. Bonjour, madame.
On est un peuple, on est un monde, on est une âme.
Chacun se donne à tous et nul ne songe à soi.
Nous sommes sans soleil, sans appui, sans effroi.
Tout ira bien pourvu que jamais on ne dorme.
Schmitz fait des bulletins plats sur la guerre énorme;
C'est Eschyle traduit par le père Brumoy.
J'ai payé quinze francs quatre oeufs frais, non pour moi,
Mais pour mon petit George et ma petite Jeanne.
Nous mangeons du cheval, du rat, de l'ours, de l'âne.
Paris est si bien pris, cerné, muré, noué,
Gardé, que notre ventre est l'arche de Noé;
Dans nos flancs toute bête, honnête ou mal famée,

Pénètre, et chien et chat, le mammon, le pygmée,
Tout entre, et la souris rencontre l’éléphant.
Plus d’arbres; on les coupe, on les scie on les fend;
Paris sur ses chenets met les Champs-Elysées.
On a l’onglée aux doigts et le givre aux croisées.
Plus de feu pour sécher le linge des lavoirs,
Et l’on ne change plus de chemise. Les soirs
Un grand murmure sombre abonde au coin des rues,
C’est la foule; tantôt ce sont des voix bourrues,
Tantôt des chants, parfois de belliqueux appels.
La Seine lentement traîne des archipels
De glaçons hésitants, lourds, où la canonnière
Court, laissant derrière elle une écumante ornière.
On vit de rien, on vit de tout, on est content.
Sur nos tables sans nappe, où la faim nous attend,
Une pomme de terre arrachée à sa crypte
Est reine, et les oignons sont dieux comme en Egypte.
Nous manquons de charbon, mais notre pain est noir.
Plus de gaz; Paris dort sous un large éteignoir;
A six heures du soir, ténèbres. Des tempêtes
De bombes font un bruit monstrueux sur nos têtes.
D’un bel éclat d’obus j’ai fait mon encrier.
Paris assassiné ne daigne pas crier.
Les bourgeois sont de garde autour de la muraille;
Ces pères, ces maris, ces frères qu’on mitraille,
Coiffés de leurs képis, roulés dans leurs cabans,
Guettent, ayant pour lit la planche de leurs bancs.
Soit. Moltke nous canonne et Bismarck nous affame.
Paris est un héros, Paris est une femme;
Il sait être vaillant et charmant; ses yeux vont,
Souriants et pensifs, dans le grand ciel profond,
Du pigeon qui revient au ballon qui s’envole.
C’est beau; le formidable est sorti du frivole.
Moi, je suis là, joyeux de ne voir rien plier.
Je dis à tous d’aimer, de lutter, d’oublier,
De n’avoir d’ennemi que l’ennemi; je crie:
Je ne sais plus mon nom, je m’appelle Patrie!

Quant aux femmes, soyez très fière, en ce moment
Où tout penche, elles sont sublimes simplement.
Ce qui fit la beauté des Romaines antiques [
Praestabat castas humilis fortunas Latinas,
Casulae, somnique breves, et vellere tusco
Vexatae duraeque manus, et proximus urbis
Annibal, et stantes Collina in turre mariti.
JUVÉNAL.
] ,
C’étaient leurs humbles toits, leurs vertus domestiques,
Leurs doigts que l’âpre laine avait faits noirs et durs,
Leurs courts sommeils, leur calme, Annibal près des murs,
Et leurs maris debout sur la porte Colline.
Ces temps sont revenus. La géante féline,
La Prusse tient Paris, et, tigresse, elle mord
Ce grand coeur palpitant du monde à moitié mort.
Eh bien, dans ce Paris, sous l’étreinte inhumaine,
L’homme n’est que Français, et la femme est Romaine.
Elles acceptent tout, les femmes de Paris,
Leur âtre éteint, leurs pieds par le verglas meurtris,
Au seuil noir des bouchers les attentes nocturnes,
La neige et l’ouragan vidant leurs froides urnes,
La famine, l’horreur, le combat, sans rien voir
Que la grande pairie et que le grand devoir;
Et Juvénal au fond de l’ombre est content d’elles.
Le bombardement fait gronder nos citadelles.
Dès l’aube, le tambour parle au clairon lointain;
La diane réveille, au vent frais du matin,
La grande ville pâle et dans l’ombre apparue;
Une vague fanfare erre de rue en rue.
On fraternise, on rêve un succès; nous offrons
Nos coeurs à l’espérance, à la foudre nos fronts.
La ville par la gloire et le malheur élue
Voit arriver les jours terribles et salue.
Eh bien, on aura froid! eh bien, on aura faim!
Qu’est cela? C’est la nuit. Et que sera la fin?
L’aurore. Nous souffrons, mais avec certitude.

La Prusse est le cachot et Paris est Latude.
Courage! on refera l'effort des jours anciens.
Paris avant un mois chassera les Prussiens.
Ensuite nous comptons, mes deux fils et moi, vivre
Aux champs, auprès de vous, qui voulez bien nous suivre,
Madame, et nous irons en mars vous en prier
Si nous ne sommes pas tués en février.

III

BETISE DE LA GUERRE

Ouvrière sans yeux, Pénélope imbécile,
Berceuse du chaos où le néant oscille,
Guerre, ô guerre occupée au choc des escadrons,
Toute pleine du bruit furieux des clairons,
O buveuse de sang, qui, farouche, flétrie,
Hideuse, entraîne l'homme en cette ivrognerie,
Nuée où le destin se déforme, où Dieu fuit,
Où flotte une clarté plus noire que la nuit,
Folle immense, de vent et de foudres armée,
A quoi sers-tu, géante, à quoi sers-tu, fumée,
Si tes écroulements reconstruisent le mal,
Si pour le bestial tu chasses l'animal,
Si tu ne sais, dans l'ombre où ton hasard se vautre,
Défaire un empereur que pour en faire un autre?

IV

Non, non, non! Quoi! ce roi de Prusse suffirait!
Quoi! Paris, ce lieu saint, cette cité forêt,
Cette habitation énorme des idées
Vers qui par des lueurs les âmes sont guidées,
Ce tumulte enseignant la science aux savants,
Ce grand lever d'aurore au milieu des vivants,
Paris, sa volonté, sa loi, son phénomène,
Sa consigne donnée à l'avant-garde humaine,

Son Louvre qu’a puni sa Grève, son beffroi
D’où sort tant d’espérance et d’où sort tant d’effroi,
Ses toits, ses murs, ses tours, son étrange équilibre
De Notre-Dame esclave et du Panthéon libre;
Quoi! cet infini, quoi! ce gouffre, cet amas,
Ce navire idéal aux invisibles mâts,
Paris, et sa moisson qu’il fauche et qu’il émonde,
Sa croissance mêlée à la grandeur du monde,
Ses révolutions, son exemple, et le bruit
Du prodige qu’au fond de sa forge il construit,
Quoi! ce qu’il fonde, invente, ébauche, essaie, et crée,
Quoi! l’avenir couvé sous son aile sacrée,
Tout s’évanouirait dans un coup de canon!
Quoi! ton rêve, ô Paris, serait un rêve! non.

Paris est du progrès toute la réussite.
Qu’importe que le nord roule son noir Cocyte,
Et qu’un flot de passants le submerge aujourd’hui,
Les siècles sont pour lui si l’heure est contre lui.
Il ne périra pas.

Quand la tempête gronde,
Mes amis, je me sens une foi plus profonde;
Je sens dans l’ouragan le devoir rayonner,
Et l’affirmation du vrai s’enraciner.
Car le péril croissant n’est pour l’âme autre chose
Qu’une raison de croître en courage, et la cause
S’embellit, et le droit s’affermit, en souffrant,
Et l’on semble plus juste alors qu’on est plus grand.
Il m’est fort malaisé, quant à moi, de comprendre
Qu’un lutteur puisse avoir un motif de se rendre;
Je n’ai jamais connu l’art de désespérer;
Il faut pour reculer, pour trembler, pour pleurer,
Pour être lâche, et faire avec l’honneur divorce,
Se donner une peine au-dessus de ma force.

V

SOMMATION

Laissez-la donc aller cette France immortelle!
Ne la conduisez pas! Et quel besoin a-t-elle
De vous, soldat vaillant, mais enclin à charger
Les saints du ciel du soin d’écarter le danger?
Pour Paris dont on voit flamboyer la couronne
A travers le nuage impur qui l’environne,
Pour ce monde en péril, pour ce peuple en courroux,
Vous êtes trop pieux, trop patient, trop doux;
Et ce sont des vertus dont nous n’avons que faire.
Vous croyez-vous de force à remorquer la sphère
Qui, superbe, impossible à garder en prison,
Sort de l’ombre au-dessus du sinistre horizon?
Laissez la France, énorme étoile échevelée,
Des ouragans hideux dissiper la mêlée,
Et combattre, et, splendeur irritée, astre épars,
Géante, tenir tête aux rois de toutes parts,
Vider son carquois d’or sur tous ces Schinderhannes,
Secouer sa crinière ardente, et dans leurs crânes,
Dans leurs casques d’airain, dans leurs fronts, dans leurs yeux
Dans leurs coeurs, enfoncer ses rayons furieux!

Vous ne comprenez pas cette haine sacrée.
L’heure est sombre; il s’agit de sauver l’empyrée
Qu’une nuée immonde et triste vient ternir,
De dégager le bleu lointain de l’avenir,
Et de faire une guerre implacable à l’abîme.
Vous voyez en tremblant Paris être sublime;
Et vous craignez, esprit myope et limité,
Cette démagogie immense de clarté.
Ah! laissez cette France, espèce d’incendie
Dont la flamme indomptable est par les vents grandie,
Rugir, cribler d’éclairs la brume qui s’enfuit,
Et faire repentir les princes de la nuit
D’être venus jeter sur le volcan solaire

Leur fange, et d'avoir mis la lumière en colère!
L'aube, pour ces rois vils, difformes, teints de sang,
Devient épouvantable en s'épanouissant;
Laissez s'épanouir là-haut cette déesse!
Ne gênez pas, vous fait pour qu'on vous mène en laisse
La grande nation qui ne veut pas de frein.
Laissez la Marseillaise ivre de son refrain
Se ruer éperdue à travers les batailles.
La lumière est un glaive; elle fait des entailles
Dans le nuage ainsi qu'un bélier dans la tour;
Laissez donc s'accomplir la revanche du jour!
Vous l'entravez lieu de l'aider. Dans l'outrage,
Un grand peuple doit être admirable avec rage.
Quand l'obscurité fauve et perfide a couvert
La plaine, et fait un champ sépulcral du pré vert,
Du bois un ennemi, du fleuve un précipice,
Quand elle a protégé de sa noirceur propice
Toutes les trahisons des renards et des loups,
Quand tous les êtres bas, visqueux, abjects, jaloux,
L'affreux lynx, le chacal boiteux, l'hyène obscène,
L'aspic lâche, ont pu, grâce à la brume malsaine,
Sortir, rôder, glisser, ramper, boire du sang,
Le matin vient ainsi qu'un vengeur, et l'on sent
De l'indignation dans le jour qui se lève.
Guillaume, ce spectre, et la Prusse, ce rêve,
Quand la meute des rois voraces, quand l'essaim
De tous les noirs oiseaux qu'anime un vil dessein
Et que l'instinct féroce aux carnages attire,
Quand la guerre, à la fois larron, hydre et satyre,
Quand les fléaux, que l'ombre inexorable suit,
Envahissent l'azur des peuples, font la nuit,
Ne vous en mêlez pas, vous soldat cher au prêtre;
Laissez la France au seuil des gouffres apparaître,
Se dresser, empourprer les cimes, resplendir,
Et, dardant en tous sens, du zénith au nadir,
Son éblouissement qui sauve et qui dévore,
Terrible, délivrer le ciel à coups d'aurore!

VI

UNE BOMBE AUX FEUILLANTINES

Qu'es-tu? quoi, tu descends de là-haut, misérable!
Quoi! toi, le plomb, le feu, la mort, l'inexorable,
Reptile de la guerre au sillon tortueux,
Quoi! toi, l'assassinat cynique et monstrueux
Que les princes du fond des nuits jettent aux hommes,
Toi, crime, toi, ruine et deuil, toi qui te nommes
Haine, effroi, guet-apens, carnage, horreur, courroux,
C'est à travers l'azur que tu t'abats sur nous!
Chute affreuse de fer, éclosion infâme,
Fleur de bronze éclatée en pétales de flamme,
O vile foudre humaine, ô toi par qui sont grands
Les bandits, et par qui sont divins les tyrans,
Servante des forfaits royaux, prostituée,
Par quel prodige as-tu jailli de la nuée?
Quelle usurpation sinistre de l'éclair!
Comment viens-tu du ciel, toi qui sors de l'enfer!

L'homme que tout à l'heure effleura ta morsure,
S'était assis pensif au coin d'une masure.
Ses yeux cherchaient dans l'ombre un rêve qui brilla;
Il songeait; il avait, tout petit, joué là;
Le passé devant lui, plein de voix enfantines,
Apparaissait; c'est là qu'étaient les Feuillantines;
Ton tonnerre idiot foudroie un paradis.
Oh! que c'était charmant! comme on riait jadis!
Vieillir, c'est regarder une clarté décrue.
Un jardin verdissait où passe cette rue.
L'obus achève, hélas, ce qu'a fait le pavé.
Ici les passereaux pillaient le sénevé,
Et les petits oiseaux se cherchaient des querelles;
Les lueurs de ce bois étaient surnaturelles;
Que d'arbres! quel air pur dans les rameaux tremblants!

On fut la tête blonde, on a des cheveux blancs;
On fut une espérance et l'on est un fantôme.
Oh! comme on était jeune à l'ombre du vieux dôme!
Maintenant on est vieux comme lui. Le voilà.
Ce passant rêve. Ici son âme s'envola
Chantante, et c'est ici qu'à ses vagues prunelles
Apparurent des fleurs qui semblaient éternelles.
Ici la vie était de la lumière; ici
Marchait, sous le feuillage en avril épaissi,
Sa mère qu'il tenait par un pan de sa robe.
Souvenirs! comme tout brusquement se dérobe!
L'aube ouvrant sa corolle à ses regards a lui
Dans ce ciel où flamboie en ce moment sur lui
L'épanouissement effroyable des bombes.
O l'ineffable aurore où volaient des colombes!
Cet homme, que voici lugubre, était joyeux.
Mille éblouissements émerveillaient ses yeux.
Printemps! en ce jardin abondaient les pervenches,
Les roses, et des tas de pâquerettes blanches
Qui toutes semblaient rire au soleil se chauffant,
Et lui-même était fleur, puisqu'il était enfant.

VII

LE PIGEON

Sur terre un gouffre d'ombre énorme où rien ne luit,
Comme si l'on avait versé là de la nuit,
Et qui semble un lac noir; dans le ciel un point sombre.

Lac étrange. Des flots, non, mais des toits sans nombre;
Des ponts comme à Memphis, des tours comme à Sion;
Des têtes, des regards, des voix; ô vision!
Cette stagnation de ténèbres murmure,
Et ce lac est vivant, une enceinte le mure,
Et sur lui de l'abîme on croit voir l'affreux sceau.

Le lac sombre est la ville, et le point noir l’oiseau;
Le vague alérion vole au peuple fantôme;
Et l’un vient au secours de l’autre. C’est l’atome
Qui vient dans l’ombre en aide au colosse.

L’oiseau
Ignare, et, doux lutteur, à travers ce réseau
De nuée et de vent qui flotte dans l’espace,
Il vole, il a son but, il veut, il cherche, il passe,
Reconnaissant d’en haut fleuves, arbres, buissons,
Par-dessus la rondeur des blêmes horizons.
Il songe à sa femelle, à sa douce couvée,
Au nid, à sa maison, pas encor retrouvée,
Au roucoulement tendre, au mois de mai charmant;
Il vole; et cependant, au fond du firmament,
Il traîne à son insu toute notre ombre humaine;
Et tandis que l’instinct vers son toit le ramène
Et que sa petite âme est toute à ses amours,
Sous sa plume humble et frêle il a les noirs tambours,
Les clairons, la mitraille éclatant par volées,
La France et l’Allemagne éperdument mêlées,
La bataille, l’assaut, les vaincus, les vainqueurs,
Et le chuchotement mystérieux des coeurs,
Et le vaste avenir qui, fatal, enveloppe
Dans le sort de Paris le destin de l’Europe.

Oh! qu’est-ce que c’est donc que l’Inconnu qui fait
Croître un germe malgré le roc qui l’étouffait;
Qui, tenant, maniant, mêlant les vents, les ondes,
Les tonnerres, la mer où se perdent les sondes,
Pour faire ce qui vit prenant ce qui n’est plus,
Maître des infinis, a tous les superflus,
Et qui, puisqu’il permet la faute, la misère,
Le mal, semble parfois manquer du nécessaire;
Qui pour une hirondelle édifie un donjon,
Qui pour créer un lys, ou gonfler un bourgeon,
Ou pousser une feuille à travers les écorces,

Prodigue l’océan mystérieux des forces;
Qui n’a l’air de savoir que faire de l’amas
Des neiges, et de l’urne obscure des frimas
Toujours prête à noyer les cieux; qui parfois semble,
Laissant dépendre tout d’un point d’appui qui tremble,
D’un roseau, d’un hasard, d’un souffle aérien,
S’épuiser en efforts prodigieux pour rien;
Qui se sert d’un titan moins bien que d’un pygmée;
Qui dépense en colère inutile, en fumée,
Tous ces géants, Vésuve, Etna, Chimborazo,
Et fait porter un monde à l’aile d’un oiseau!

VIII

LA SORTIE

L’aube froide blêmit, vaguement apparue.
Une foule défile en ordre dans la rue;
Je la suis, entraîné par ce grand bruit vivant
Que font les pas humains quand ils vont en avant.
Ce sont des citoyens partant pour la bataille.
Purs soldats! Dans les rangs, plus petit par la taille,
Mais égal par le coeur, l’enfant avec fierté
Tient par la main son père, et la femme à côté
Marche avec le fusil du mari sur l’épaule.
C’est la tradition des femmes de la Gaule
D’aider l’homme à porter l’armure, et d’être là,
Soit qu’on nargue César, soit qu’on brave Attila,
Que va-t-il se passer? L’enfant rit, et la femme
Ne pleure pas. Paris subit la guerre infâme;
Et les Parisiens sont d’accord sur ceci
Que par la honte seule un peuple est obscurci,
Que les aïeux seront contents, quoi qu’il arrive,
Et que Paris mourra pour que la France vive.
Nous garderons l’honneur; le reste, nous l’offrons.
Et l’on marche. Les yeux sont indignés, les fronts
Sont pâles; on y lit: Foi, Courage, Famine.

Et la troupe à travers les carrefours chemine,
Tête haute, élevant son drapeau, saint haillon;
La famille est toujours mêlée au bataillon;
On ne se quittera que là-bas aux barrières.
Ces hommes attendris et ces femmes guerrières
Chantent; du genre humain Paris défend les droits.
Une ambulance passe, et l'on songe à ces rois
Dont le caprice fait ruisseler des rivières
De sang sur le pavé derrière les civières.
L'heure de la sortie approche; les tambours
Battent la marche en foule au fond des vieux faubourgs;
Tous se hâtent; malheur à toi qui nous assièges!
Ils ne redoutent pas les pièges, car les pièges
Que trouvent les vaillants en allant devant eux
Font le vaincu superbe et le vainqueur honteux.
Ils arrivent aux murs, ils rejoignent l'armée.
Tout à coup le vent chasse un flocon de fumée;
Halte! C'est le premier coup de canon. Allons!
Un long frémissement court dans les bataillons,
Le moment est venu, les portes sont ouvertes,
Sonnez, clairons! Voici là-bas les plaines vertes,
Les bois où rampe au loin l'invisible ennemi,
Et le traître horizon, immobile, endormi,
Tranquille, et plein pourtant de foudres et de flammes.
On entend des voix dire: Adieu! - Nos fusils, femmes
Et les femmes, le front serein, le coeur brisé,
Leur rendent leur fusil après l'avoir baisé.

IX

DANS LE CIRQUE

Le lion du midi voit venir l'ours polaire.
L'ours court droit au lion, grince, et plein de colère,
L'attaque plus grondant que l'autan nubien.
Et le lion lui dit: Imbécile! c'est bien.
Nous sommes dans le cirque, et tu me fais la guerre.

Pourquoi? Vois-tu là-bas cet homme au front vulgaire?
C’est un nommé Néron, empereur des Romains.
Tu combats pour lui. Saigne, il rit, il bat des mains.
Nous ne nous gênions pas dans la grande nature,
Frère, et le ciel sur nous fait la même ouverture,
Et tu ne vois pas moins d’astres que je n’en vois.
Que nous veut donc ce maître assis sur un pavois?
Il est content; et nous, nous mourons par son ordre;
Et c’est à lui de rire et c’est à nous de mordre.
Il nous fait massacrer l’un par l’autre; et, pendant,
Frère, que mon coup d’ongle attend ton coup de dent,
Il est là sur son trône et nous regarde faire.
Nos tourments sont ses jeux; il est d’une autre sphère.
Frère, quand nous versons à ruisseaux notre sang,
Il appelle cela de la pourpre. Innocent,
Niais, viens m’attaquer. Soit. Mes griffes sont prêtes;
Mais je pense et je dis que nous sommes des bêtes
De nous entretuer avec tant de fureur,
Et que nous ferions mieux de manger l’empereur.

X

APRES LES VICTOIRES DE BAPAUME, DE DIJON ET DE VILLERSEXEL

Côté des hommes. Soit. C’est le meilleur côté;
Je le veux bien. Pourtant naguère j’ai noté,
Pour les mettre à profit, les choses fort honnêtes
Que le lion disait à l’ours; côté des bêtes.
C’est à peu prés ceci:

— L’ours! il est peu moral
De venir, dans l’espoir de passer caporal,
M’attaquer, moi qui suis ton frère ayant des ongles.
L’ours! tu vis dans la neige et je vis dans les jongles;
Tu viens du nord, je suis du midi. Ce Néron
N’est rien qu’un nom hideux soufflé dans un clairon.

Il a pris un morceau de l’Europe quelconque;
Cent héraults, appliquant leurs bouches à leur conque,
Précédent ce tueur qui vainquit par hasard;
César fut crocodile et Néron est lézard;
L’un est le grand, et l’autre est le petit. Mon frère,
Méprisons ces gens-là. Nous battre! pourquoi faire?
J’affirme qu’il serait beaucoup plus à propos
D’aller droit à Néron, et, malgré ses troupeaux
De garde éthiopienne et de garde sicambre,
D’en empoigner chacun tranquillement un membre.
Déshabiller Néron de sa peau de César
Me plairait; envoyer ma ruade à son char
Me tente; il sied parfois qu’une griffe efficace
Fouille une majesté jusque dans la carcasse,
Et nous verrions peut-être en vidant ce vainqueur,
Toi, qu’il est sans cervelle, et moi, qu’il est sans coeur.
Mordre son maître est doux; je pense que nos gueules,
Si la mode en venait, ne resteraient pas seules.
Tout ce tas d’animaux battus, rampant, grondant,
Paierait les coups de fouet avec des coups de dent.
Ce serait beau. La terre est pour nous assez ample;
Aimons-nous. Mon avis, puisqu’il s’agit d’exemple,
Est d’en donner un bon et non pas un mauvais.
Quant à ce tyran-ci, j’ai faim, et j’y rêvais.
Est-il César? est-il Néron? que nous importe!
Quelque tache qu’il ait, quelque laurier qu’il porte,
Frère, il n’éveille en moi que le même appétit;
Je le dévore grand, je le mange petit.

L’ours n’ayant pas compris ces paroles d’un sage,
Le grand lion clément lui griffa le visage
Et l’éborgna; si bien que l’ours, devant témoins,
Eut la honte de plus avec un oeil de moins.

XI

ENTRE DEUX BOMBARDEMENTS

Dès votre premier cri, Jeanne, vous excitiez
Nos admirations autant que nos pitiés;
Vous naissiez; vous aviez cette toute-puissance,
La grâce; vous étiez la crèche qu’on encense,
L’humble marmot divin qui n’a point encor d’yeux,
Et qu’une étoile vient chercher du haut des cieux;
Puis vous eûtes six jours, vous eûtes six semaines,
Puis six mois, lueur frêle en nos ombres humaines.
Jeanne, vous avancez en âge cependant;
Vous avez des cheveux, vous avez une dent,
Et vous voilà déjà presque un grand personnage.
En vous à peine un peu du nouveau-né surnage,
Vous voulez être à terre; il vous faut le péril,
La marche, et le maillot vous semble puéril;
Votre frère plus vieux chante la Marseillaise;
Il a deux ans; et vous, vous grimpez sur ma chaise,
Ou, fière, vous rampez derrière un paravent;
Vous voulez un jouet savant, même vivant;
Avec un jeune chat vous êtes en ménage;
La croissance vous tient dans son souple engrenage
Et remplace l’enfant qui vagit par l’enfant
Qui jase, et l’humble cri par le cri triomphant;
L’ange qui mange rit de l’ange à la mamelle;
Vous vous transfigurez sans cesse, et le temps mêle
A la Jeanne d’hier la Jeanne d’aujourd’hui.
A chaque pas qu’il fait, l’enfant derrière lui
Laisse plusieurs petits fantômes de lui-même.

On se souvient de tous, on les pleure, on les aime,
Et ce seraient des morts s’il n’était vivant, lui.
Déjà plus d’une étoile en ce doux astre a lui.
Il semble qu’en cet être enchanté, pour nous plaire,
Chaque âge tour à tour donne son exemplaire;
C’est un soleil levant que ce petit destin!
Car le sort est masqué de rayons le matin;
Et les blancheurs de l’aube, aimable et chaste fête,

Viennent l’une après l’autre entourer cette tête
Et lui faire on ne sait quel pur couronnement.
On dirait que la vie, avec un soin charmant,
Essaie à ce jésus toutes les auréoles,
Se préparant ainsi par les caresses molles,
Les roses, les baisers, le rire frais et prompt,
A lui mettre plus tard les épines au front.

XII

Mais, encore une fois, qui donc à ce pauvre homme
A livré ce Paris qui contient Sparte et Rome?
Où donc a-t-on été chercher ce guide-là?
Qui donc à nos destins terribles le mêla?
Ainsi, lorsqu’il s’agit de s’évader du gouffre,
De sortir du chaos qui menace et qui souffre,
De dissiper la nuit, de monter au-dessus
Des nuages profonds dans l’abîme aperçus,
Et de verser l’aurore aux vagues infinies,
Nous ne nous fions plus à ces quatre génies,
Audace, Humanité, Volonté, Liberté,
Qui traînent dans les cieux le char de la clarté,
Et que tu fais bondir sous ta main familière,
France; on prend pour meneur et pour auxiliaire
On ne sait quel pauvre être obscurément conduit,
Lent et fidèle, ayant derrière lui la nuit,
Dont le suprême instinct serait d’être immobile,
Et qui, tâtant l’espace et tendant sa sébile,
Sans tactique, sans but, sans colère, sans art,
Attend de l’inconnu l’aumône d’un hasard!
C’est le moment de mettre en fuite l’ombre noire
Et d’ouvrir cette porte altière, la victoire;
On ne se croirait pas guidé, gardé, ni sûr
De pouvoir s’enfoncer fièrement dans l’azur,
Et d’échapper aux chocs, aux fureurs, aux huées,
Aux coups de fronde, aux vents, à travers les nuées,
Et d’éviter l’écueil, la chute, le récif,

Si cet humble petit marcheur, morne et poussif,
Rêveur comme la taupe, utile comme l’âne,
Ne complétait l’énorme attelage qui plane!
Quoi! dans l’heure où la France est en péril, ayant
Pour tirer hors des flots le quadrige effrayant,
Les quatre esprits géants qui brisent tous les voiles,
Monstres dont la crinière est mêlée aux étoiles
Et que suit, essoufflé, l’essaim des aquilons,
Nous disons: Ce n’est pas assez! et nous voulons
Un renfort, et, voyant le précipice immense,
Voyant l’ombre qu’il faut franchir, notre démence,
Devant le noir nadir et le zénith vermeil,
Ajoute un chien d’aveugle aux chevaux du soleil!

XIII

CAPITULATION

Ainsi les nations les plus grandes chavirent!
C’est à l’avortement que tes travaux servirent,
O peuple! et tu dis: Quoi! pour cela nous restions
Debout toute la nuit sur les hauts bastions!
C’est pour cela qu’on fut brave, altier, invincible,
Et que, la Prusse étant la flèche, on fut la cible;
C’est pour cela qu’on fut héros, qu’on fut martyr;
C’est pour cela qu’on a combattu plus que Tyr,
Plus que Sagonte, plus que Byzance et Corinthe;
C’est pour cela qu’on a cinq mois subi l’étreinte
De ces Teutons furtifs, noirs, ayant dans les yeux
La sinistre stupeur des bois mystérieux!
C’est pour cela qu’on a lutté, creusé des mines,
Rompu des ponts, bravé la peste et les famines,
Fait des fossés, planté des pieux, bâti des forts,
France, et qu’on a rempli de la gerbe des morts
Le tombeau, cette grange obscure des batailles!
C’est pour cela qu’on a vécu sous les mitrailles!
Cieux profonds! après tant d’épreuves, après tant

D’efforts du grand Paris, sanglant, broyé, content,
Après l’auguste espoir, après l’immense attente
De la cité superbe à vaincre haletante,
Qui semblait, se ruant sur les canons d’airain,
Ronger son mur ainsi que le cheval son frein;
Quand la vertu croissait dans les douleurs accrues,
Quand les petits enfants, bombardés dans les rues,
Ramassaient en riant obus et biscayens,
Quand pas un n’a faibli parmi les citoyens,
Quand on était là, prêts à sortir, trois cent mille,
Ce tas de gens de guerre a rendu cette ville!
Avec ton dévoûment, ta fureur, ta fierté,
Et ton courage, ils ont fait de la lâcheté,
O peuple, et ce sera le frisson de l’histoire
De voir à tant de honte aboutir tant de gloire!

Paris, 27 janvier.

FÉVRIER

I

AVANT LA CONCLUSION DU TRAITE

Si nous terminions cette guerre
Comme la Prusse le voudrait,
La France serait comme un verre
Sur la table d'un cabaret;

On le vide, puis on le brise.
Notre fier pays disparaît.
O deuil! il est ce qu'on méprise,
Lui qui fut ce qu'on admirait.

Noir lendemain! l'effroi pour règle;
Toute lie est bue à son tour;
Et le vautour vient après l'aigle,
Et l'orfraie après le vautour;

Deux provinces écartelées;
Strasbourg en croix, Metz au cachot;
Sedan, déserteur des mêlées,
Marquant la France d'un fer chaud;

Partout, dans toute âme captive,
Le goût abject d'un vil bonheur
Remplace l'orgueil; on cultive
La croissance du déshonneur;

Notre antique splendeur flétrie;
L'opprobre sur nos grands combats;
L'étonnement de la patrie
Point accoutumée aux fronts bas;

L’ennemi dans nos citadelles,
Sur nos tours l’ombre d’Attila,
De sorte que les hirondelles
Disent: la France n’est plus là!

La bouche pleine de Bazaine,
La Renommée au vol brisé
Salit de sa bave malsaine
Son vieux clairon vertdegrisé;

Si l’on se bat, c’est contre un frère;
On ne sait plus ton nom, Bayard!
On est un assassin pour faire
Oublier qu’on fut un fuyard;

Une âpre nuit sur les fronts monte;
Nulle âme n’ose s’envoler;
Le ciel constate notre honte
Par le refus de s’étoiler;

Froid sombre! on voit, à plis funèbres,
Entre les peuples se fermer
Une profondeur de ténèbres
Telle qu’on ne peut plus s’aimer;

Entre France et Prusse on s’abhorre;
Tout ce troupeau d’hommes nous hait;
Et notre éclipse est leur aurore,
Et notre tombe est leur souhait;

Naufrage! Adieu les grandes tâches!
Tout est trompé; tout est trompeur;
On dit de nos drapeaux: Ces lâches!
Et de nos canons: Ils ont peur!

Plus de fierté; plus d’espérance;
Sur l’histoire un suaire épais... -

Dieu, ne fais pas tomber la France
Dans l'abîme de cette paix!

Bordeaux, 14 février.

II

AUX REVEURS DE MONARCHIE

Je suis en république, et pour roi j'ai moi-même.
Sachez qu'on ne met point aux voix ce droit suprême;
Ecoutez bien, messieurs, et tenez pour certain
Qu'on n'escamote pas la France un beau matin.
Nous, enfants de Paris, cousins des Grecs d'Athènes,
Nous raillons et frappons. Nous avons dans les veines
Non du sang de fellahs ni du sang d'esclavons,
Mais un bon sang gaulois et français. Nous avons
Pour pères les grognards et les Francs pour ancêtres:
Retenez bien ceci que nous sommes les maîtres.
La Liberté jamais en vain ne nous parla.
Souvenez-vous aussi que nos mains que voilà,
Ayant brisé des rois, peuvent briser des cuistres.
Bien. Faites-vous préfets, ambassadeurs, ministres,
Et dites-vous les uns aux autres grand merci.
O faquins, gorgez-vous. N'ayez d'autre souci,
Dans ces royaux logis dont vous faites vos antres,
Que d'aplatir vos coeurs et d'arrondir vos ventres;
Emplissez-vous d'orgueil, de vanité, d'argent,
Bien. Allez. Nous aurons un mépris indulgent,
Nous nous détournerons et vous laisserons faire;
L'homme ne peut hâter l'heure que Dieu diffère.
Soit. Mais n'attentez pas au droit du peuple entier.
Le droit au fond des coeurs, libre, indomptable, altier
Vit, guette tous vos pas, vous juge, vous défie,
Et vous attend. J'affirme et je vous certifie
Que vous seriez hardis d'y toucher seulement
Rien que pour essayer et pour voir un moment!

Rois, larrons! vous avez des poches assez grandes
Pour y mettre tout l'or du pays, les offrandes
Des pauvres, le budget, tous nos millions, mais
Pour y mettre nos droits et notre honneur, jamais!
Jamais vous n'y mettrez la grande République.
D'un côté tout un peuple; et de l'autre une clique!
Qu'est votre droit divin devant le droit humain?
Nous votons aujourd'hui, nous voterons demain.
Le souverain, c'est nous; nous voulons, tous ensemble,
Régner comme il nous plaît, choisir qui bon nous semble,
Nommer qui nous convient dans notre bulletin.
Gare à qui met la griffe aux boites du scrutin!
Gare à ceux d'entre vous qui fausseraient le vote!
Nous leur ferions danser une telle gavotte,
Avec des violons si bien faits tout exprès,
Qu'ils en seraient encor pâles dix ans après!

III

PHILOSOPHIE DES SACRES ET COURONNEMENTS

Cet homme est laid, cet homme est vieux, cet homme est bête.
Qu'est-ce que vous mettez sur cette pauvre tête?
Une couronne? Non, deux couronnes. Non, trois.
Celle des empereurs avec celle des rois,
Le laurier de César, la croix de Charlemagne,
Et puis un peu de France et beaucoup d'Allemagne.
Sous cet amas jadis Charles Quint vacilla.
La paix du monde tient à ce que tout cela
Sur ce vieux front tremblant demeure en équilibre.
Ce bonhomme vraiment serait plus heureux libre,
Et sans lui nous serions plus à notre aise aussi.
S'il a mal digéré, le ciel est obscurci;
Son moindre borborygme est une âpre secousse;
On chancelle s'il crache, on s'écroule s'il tousse;
Son ignorance fait sur la terre un brouillard.

Pourquoi ne pas laisser tranquille ce vieillard?
S’il n’avait ni soldats, ni ducs, ni connétables,
Nous le recevrions volontiers à nos tables;
Nos verres, sous le pampre, au soleil, en plein vent,
Choqueraient le tien, sire, et tu serais vivant.
Non, l’on t’empaille idole, et l’on te pétrifie
Sous un lourd casque à pointe, et, comme on se défie
Du roi d’en haut jaloux des rois d’en bas, on met,
Sire, un paratonnerre en cuivre à ton sommet;
Et ton peuple est si fier qu’il t’adore; on t’affuble
D’un manteau comme on passe au pape une chasuble,
Et te voilà tyran, et nous t’avons sur nous,
Le goût de l’homme étant de se mettre à genoux.
Tu portes désormais l’Etna comme Encelade,
Et comme Atlas le monde. O maître, sois malade,
Infirme, catarrheux, vieux tant que tu voudras,
Claque des dents avec la fièvre entre deux draps,
Qu’importe? l’univers n’en est pas moins ta chose.
L’Europe est un effet dont tu seras la cause.
Rayonne. A ta cheville aucun héros ne va.
Bossuet jettera sous tes pieds Jehovah;
Tu seras proclamé Très-Haut en pleine chaire.
Un roi, fût-il un nain, fût-il un pauvre hère,
Hydropique, goitreux, perclus, tortu, fourbu,
Moins ferme sur ses pieds qu’un reître ayant trop bu,
Eût-il morve et farcin, rachis, goutte et gravelle,
Fût-il maigre d’esprit et petit de cervelle,
N’eût-il pas beaucoup plus de caboche qu’un rat,
Fût-il, sous la splendeur du cordon d’apparat,
Dans l’ombre enguirlandé d’un engin herniaire,
Reste auguste et puissant jusqu’à l’heure dernière
Et jusqu’au soubresaut de son hoquet final;
Tous, l’homme de l’autel, l’homme du tribunal,
Prosternent devant lui leur grave platitude;
Il a l’effarement de la décrépitude,
C’est toujours César; même en ruine et mourant,
La majesté s’obstine et le couvre, il est grand;

Et la pourpre est sur lui, sainte, splendide, austère,
Quand du sceptre et du trône il passe aux vers de terre;
Agonisant, il règne; on le voit s'assoupir,
On craint presque un tonnerre en son dernier soupir;
La foule aux reins courbés le place en un tel temple
Qu'elle tremble, et d'en bas l'admire et le contemple
Quand misérable il entre au sépulcre béant,
Et le croit encor dieu qu'il est déjà néant.

IV

A CEUX QUI REPARLENT DE FRATERNITE

Quand nous serons vainqueurs, nous verrons. Montrons-leur,
Jusque-là, le dédain qui sied à la douleur.
L'oeil âprement baissé convient à la défaite.
Libre, on était apôtre, esclave, on est prophète;
Nous sommes garrottés! Plus de nations soeurs!
Et je prédis l'abîme à nos envahisseurs.
C'est la fierté de ceux qu'on a mis à la chaîne
De n'avoir désormais d'autre abri que la haine.
Aimer les Allemands? Cela viendra, le jour
Où par droit de victoire on aura droit d'amour.
La déclaration de paix n'est jamais hanche
De ceux qui, terrassés, n'ont pas pris leur revanche;
Attendons notre tour de barrer le chemin.
Mettons-les sous nos pieds, puis tendons-leur la main.
Je ne puis que saigner tant que la France pleure.
Ne me parlez donc pas de concorde à cette heure;
Une fraternité bégayée à demi
Et trop tôt, fait hausser l'épaule à l'ennemi;
Et l'offre de donner aux rancunes relâche
Qui demain sera digne, aujourd'hui serait lâche.

V

LOI DE FORMATION DU PROGRES

Une dernière guerre! hélas, il la faut! oui.

Quoi! le deuil triomphant, le meurtre épanoui,
Sont les conditions de nos progrès! Mystère!
Quel est donc ce travail étrange de la terre?
Quelle est donc cette loi du développement
De l’homme par l’enfer, la peine et le tourment?
Pour quelque but final dont notre humble prunelle
N’aperçoit même pas la lueur éternelle,
L’être des profondeurs a-t-il donc décrété,
Dans les azurs sans fond de la sublimité,
Que l’homme ne doit point faire un pas qui n’enseigne
De quel pied il chancelle et de quel flanc il saigne,
Que la douleur est l’or dont se paie ici-bas
Le bonheur acheté par tant d’âpres combats;
Que toute Rome doit commencer par un antre;
Que tout enfantement doit déchirer le ventre;
Qu’en ce monde l’idée aussi bien que la chair
Doit saigner, et, touchée en naissant par le fer,
Doit avoir, pour le deuil comme pour l’espérance,
Son mystérieux sceau de vie et de souffrance
Dans cette cicatrice auguste, le nombril;
Que l’oeuf de l’avenir, pour éclore en avril,
Doit être déposé dans une chose morte;
Qu’il faut que le bien naisse et que l’épi mûr sorte
De cette plaie en fleur qu’on nomme le sillon,
Que le cri jaillit mieux en mordant le bâillon;
Que l’homme doit atteindre à des édens suprêmes,
Dont la porte déjà, dans l’ombre des problèmes,
Apparaît radieuse à ses yeux enflammés,
Mais que les deux battants en resteront fermés,
Malgré le saint, le christ, le prophète et l’apôtre,
Si Satan n’ouvre l’un, si Caïn n’ouvre l’autre?

O contradictions terribles! d’un côté
On voit la loi de paix, de vie et de bonté

Par-dessus l’infini dans les prodiges luire;
Et de l’autre on écoute une voix triste dire:
— Penseurs, réformateurs, porte-flambeaux, esprits,
Lutteurs, vous atteindrez l’idéal! à quel prix?
Au prix du sang, des fers, du deuil, des hécatombes.
La route du progrès, c’est le chemin des tombes. -
Voyez: le genre humain, à cette heure opprimé
Par les forces sans yeux dont ce globe est formé,
Doit vaincre la matière, et, c’est là le problème,
L’enchaîner, pour se mettre en liberté lui-même.
L’homme prend la nature énorme corps à corps;
Mais comme elle résiste! elle abat les plus forts.
Derrière l’inconnu la nuit se barricade;
Le monde entier n’est plus qu’une vaste embuscade;
Tout est piège; le sphinx, avant d’être dompté,
Empreint son ongle au flanc de l’homme épouvanté;
Par moments il sourit et fait des offres traîtres;
Les savants, les songeurs, ceux qui sont les seuls prêtres,
Cèdent à ces appels funèbres et moqueurs;
L’énigme invite, embrasse et brise ses vainqueurs;
Les éléments, du moins ce qu’ainsi l’erreur nomme,
Ont des attractions redoutables sur l’homme;
La terre au flanc profond tente Empédocle, et l’eau
Tente Jason, Diaz, Gama, Marco Polo,
Et Colomb que dirige au fond des flots sonores
Le doigt du cavalier sinistre des Açores;
Le feu tente Fulton, l’air tente Montgolfier;
L’homme fait pour tout vaincre ose tout défier.
Maintenant regardez les cadavres. La somme
De tous les combattants que le progrès consomme
Etonne le sépulcre et fait rêver la mort.
Combien d’infortunés noyés dans leur effort
Pour atteindre à des bords nouveaux et fécondables!
Les découvertes sont des filles formidables
Qui dans leur lit tragique étouffent leurs amants.
O loi! tous les tombeaux contiennent des aimants;
Les grands coeurs ont l’amour lugubre du martyre,

Et le rayonnement du précipice attire.

Ceux-ci sacrifiant, ceux-là sacrifiés.

Cette croissance humaine où vous vous confiez
Sur nos difformités se développe et monte.
Destin terrifiant! tout sert, même la honte;
La prostitution a sa fécondité;
Le crime a son emploi dans la fatalité;
Etant corruption, un germe y peut éclore.
Ceci qu’on aime naît de ceci qu’on déplore.
Ce qu’on voit clairement, c’est qu’on souffre. Pourquoi?
On entre dans le mieux avec des cris d’effroi;
On sort presque à regret du pire où l’on séjourne.
Le genre humain gravit un escalier qui tourne
Et plonge dans la nuit pour rentrer dans le jour;
On perd le bien de vue et le mal tour à tour;
Le meurtre est bon; la mort sauve; la loi morale
Se courbe et disparaît dans l’obscure spirale.
A de certains moments, à Tyr comme à Sion,
Ce qu’on prend pour le crime est la punition;
Punition utile et féconde, où surnage
On ne sait quelle vie éclose du carnage.
Les dalles de l’histoire, avec leurs affreux tas
De trahisons, de vols, d’ordures, d’attentats,
Avec leur effroyable encombrement de boue
Où de tous les Césars on voit passer la roue,
Avec leurs Tigellins, avec leurs Borgias,
Ne seraient que l’étable infâme d’Augias,
La latrine et l’égout du sort, sans le lavage
De sang que par instants Dieu fait sur ce pavage.
C’est dans le sang que Rome et Venise ont fleuri.
Du sang! et l’on entend dans l’histoire ce cri:
— Une aile sort du ver et l’un engendre l’autre.
L’âge qui plane est fils du siècle qui se vautre. -
Le monde reverdit dans le deuil, dans l’horreur;
Champ sombre dont Nemrod est le dur laboureur!

Toute fleur est d’abord fumier, et la nature
Commence par manger sa propre pourriture;
La raison n’a raison qu’après avoir eu tort;
Pour avancer d’un pas le genre humain se tord;
Chaque évolution qu’il fait dans la tourmente
Semble une apocalypse où quelqu’un se lamente.
Ouvrage lumineux, ténébreux ouvrier.

Sitôt que le char marche il se met à crier.
L’esclavage est un pas sur l’anthropophagie;
La guillotine, affreuse et de meurtres rougie,
Est un pas sur le croc, le pal et le bûcher;
La guerre est un berger tout autant qu’un boucher;
Cyrus crie: en avant! tous les grands chefs d’armées,
Trouant le genre humain de routes enflammées,
Ont une tache d’aube au front, noirs éclaireurs;
Ils refoulent la nuit, les brouillards, les erreurs,
L’ombre, et le conquérant est le missionnaire
Terrible du rayon qui contient le tonnerre.
Sésostris vivifie en tuant, Gengiskan
Est la lave féconde et sombre du volcan,
Alexandre ensemence, Attila fertilise.
Ce monde que l’effort douloureux civilise,
Cette création où l’aube pleure et luit,
Où rien n’éclôt qu’après avoir été détruit,
Où les accouplements résultent des divorces,
Où Dieu semble englouti sous le chaos des forces,
Où le bourgeon jaillit du noeud qui l’étouffait,
C’est du mal qui travaille et du bien qui se fait.

Mais quelle ombre! quels flots de fumée et d’écume!
Quelles illusions d’optique en cette brume!
Est-ce un libérateur, ce tigre qui bondit?
Ce chef, est-ce un héros ou bien est-ce un bandit?
Devinez. Qui le sait? dans ces profondeurs faites
De crime et de vertu, de meurtres et de fêtes,

Trompé par ce qu’on voit et par ce qu’on entend,
Comment retrouver l’astre en tant d’horreur flottant?

De là vient qu’autrefois tout semblait vain et trouble;
Tout semblait de la nuit qui monte et qui redouble;
Le vaste écroulement des faits tumultueux,
Les combats, les assauts traîtres et tortueux,
Les Carthages, les Tyrs, les Byzances, les Romes,
Les catastrophes, chute épouvantable d’hommes,
Avaient l’air d’un tourment stérile, et, se suivant
Comme la grêle suit les colères du vent
Et comme la chaleur succède à la froidure,
Semblaient ne dégager qu’une loi: Rien ne dure.
Les nations, courbant la tête, n’avaient plus
D’autre philosophie en ces flux et reflux
Que la rapidité des chars passant sur elles;
Nul ne voyait le but de ces vaines querelles;
Et Flaccus s’écriait: - Puisque tout fuit, aimons,
Vivons, et regardons tomber l’ombre des monts;
Riez, chantez, cueillez des grappes dans les treilles
Pour les pendre, ô Lydé, derrière vos oreilles;
Ce peu de chose est tout. Par Bacchus, sur le poids
Des héros, des glandeurs, de la gloire et des rois,
Je questionnerai Caron, le passeur d’ombres! -

Depuis on a compris. Les foules et les nombres
Ont perdu leur aspect de chaos par degrés,
Laissant vaguement voir quelques points éclairés.

Quoi! la guerre, le choc alternatif et rude
Des batailles tombant sur l’âpre multitude,
Sur le choc triste et brut des fauves nations,
Quoi! ces frémissements et ces commotions
Que donne au droit qui naît, au peuple qui se lève,
La rencontre sonore et féroce du glaive,
Ce vaste tourbillon d’étincelles qui sort
Des combats, des héros s’entre-heurtant, du sort,

Ce tumulte insensé des camps et des tueries,
Quoi! le piétinement de ces cavaleries,
Les escadrons couvrant d'éclairs les régiments,
Quoi! ces coups de canon battant ces murs fumants,
Ces coups d'épieux, ces coups d'estocs, ces coups de piques,
Le retentissement des cuirasses épiques,
Ces victoires broyant les hommes, cet enfer,
Quoi! les sabres sonnant sur les casques de fer,
L'épouvante, les cris des mourants qu'on égorge...
— C'est le bruit des marteaux du progrès dans la forge.
— Hélas

En même temps, l'infini, qui connaît
L'endroit où chaque cause aboutit, et qui n'est
Qu'une incommensurable et haute conscience,
Faite d'immensité, de paix, de patience,
Laisse, sachant le but, choisissant le moyen,
Souvent, hélas! le mal se faire avec du bien;
Telle est la profondeur de l'ordre; obscur, suprême,
Tranquille, et s'affirmant par ses démentis même.
C'est ainsi qu'un bandit de Marc-Auréle est né;
C'est ainsi que, hideux, devant l'homme étonné,
Le ciel y consentant, avec le Christ auguste,
Avec la loi d'un saint, avec la mort d'un juste,
Avec ces mots si doux: - Nourris quiconque a faim.
— Aime autrui comme toi. - Ne fais pas au prochain
Ce que tu ne veux pas qu'à toi-même on te fasse. -
Avec cette morale où tout est vie et grâce,
Avec ces dogmes pris au plus serein des cieux,
Loyola construisit son piège monstrueux;
Sombre araignée à qui Dieu, pour tisser sa toile,
Donnait des fils d'aurore et des rayons d'étoile.

Et même, en regardant plus haut, quel est celui
Qui s'écriera: - Je suis l'astre, et j'ai toujours lui;
Je n'ai jamais failli, jamais péché; j'ignore
Les coups du tentateur à ma vitre sonore;

Je suis sans faute. - Est-il un juste audacieux
Qui s’ose affirmer pur devant l’azur des cieux?
L’homme a beau faire, il faut qu’il cède à sa nature;
Une femme l’émeut, dénouant sa ceinture,
Il boit, il mange, il dort, il a froid, il a chaud;
Parfois la plus grande âme et le coeur le plus haut
Succombe aux appétits d’en bas; et l’esprit quête
Les satisfactions immondes de la bête,
Regarde à la fenêtre obscène, et va, les soirs,
Rôder de honte en honte au seuil des bouges noirs.
— Oui, c’est la porte abjecte, et cependant j’y passe,
Dit Caton à voix haute et Jean-Jacque à voix basse.
La Syrienne chante à Virgile évohé;
Socrate aime Aspasie, Horace suit Chloé;
Tout homme est le sujet de la chair misérable;
Le corps est condamné, le sang est incurable;
Pas un sage n’a pu se dire, en vérité,
Guéri de la nature et de l’humanité.
Mal, bien, tel est le triste et difforme mélange.
Le bien est un linceul en même temps qu’un lange;
Si le mal est sépulcre, il est aussi berceau;
Ils naissent l’un de l’autre, et la vie est leur sceau.
Les philosophes pleins de crainte ou d’espérance
Songent et n’ont entre eux pas d’autre différence,
En révélant l’éden, et même en le prouvant,
Que le voir en arrière ou le voir en avant.
Les sages du passé disent: - L’homme recule;
Il sort de la lumière, il entre au crépuscule,
L’homme est parti de tout pour naufrager dans rien.
Ils disent: bien et mal. Nous disons: mal et bien.

Mal et bien, est-ce là le mot? le chiffre unique?
Le dogme? est-ce d’Isis la dernière tunique?
Mal et bien, est-ce là toute la loi? - La loi!
Qui la connaît? Quelqu’un parmi nous, hors de soi
Comme en soi, sous l’amas de farts, d’époques, d’âges,
A-t-il percé ce gouffre et fait ces grands sondages?

Quelqu’un démêle-t-il le germe originel?
Quelqu’un voit-il le point extrême du tunnel?
Quelqu’un voit-il la base et voit-il la toiture?
Avons-nous seulement pénétré la nature?
Qu’est-ce que la lumière et qu’est-ce que l’aimant?
Qu’est le cerveau? de quoi se fait le mouvement?
D’où vient que la chaleur manque aux rayons de lune?
O nuit, qu’est-ce qu’une âme? un astre en est-il une?
Le parfum est-il l’âme errante du pistil?
Une fleur souffre-t-elle? un rocher pense-t-il?
Qu’est-ce que l’Onde? Etnas, Cotopaxis, Vésuves,
D’où vient le flamboiement de vos énormes cuves?
Où donc est la poulie et la corde et le seau
Qui pendent dans ton puits, ô noir Chimborazo?
Vivants! distinguons-nous une chose d’un être?
Qu’est-ce que mourir? dis, mortel! qu’est-ce que naître?
Vous demandez d’un fait: Est-ce toute la loi?
Voyons, qui que tu sois, toi qui parles, dis-moi,
Qu’es-tu? Tu veux sonder l’abîme? Es-tu de force
A scruter le travail des sèves sous l’écorce;
A guetter, dans la nuit des filons souterrains,
L’hymen de l’eau terrestre avec les flots marins
Et la formation des métaux; à poursuivre
Dans leurs antres le plomb, le mercure et le cuivre,
Si bien que tu pourrais dire: Voici comment
L’or se fait dans la terre et l’aube au firmament!
Le peux-tu? parle. Non. Eh bien, sois économe
D’axiomes sur Dieu, de sentences sur l’homme,
Et ne prononce pas d’arrêts dans l’infini.
Et qui donc ici-bas, qui, maudit ou béni,
Peut de quoi que ce soit, farce, âme, esprit, matière,
Dire: - Ce que j’ai là, c’est la loi tout entière;
Ceci, c’est Dieu, complet, avec tous ses rayons;
Mettez-le-moi bien vite en vos collections,
Et tirez le verrou de peur qu’il ne s’échappe. -
Savant dans son usine ou prêtre sous sa chape,
Qui donc nous montrera le sort des deux côtés?

Qui se promènera dans les éternités,
Comme dans les jardins de Versailles Lenôtre?
Qui donc mesurera l'ombre d'un bout à l'autre,
Et la vie et la tombe, espaces inouïs
Où le monceau des jours meurt sous l'amas des nuits,
Où de vagues éclairs dans les ténèbres glissent,
Où les extrémités des lois s'évanouissent!

Que cette obscure loi du progrès dans le deuil,
Du succès dans la chute et du port dans l'écueil,
Soit vraie ou fausse, absurde et folle, ou démontrée;
Que, dragon, de l'éden elle garde l'entrée,
Ou ne soit qu'un mirage informe, le certain
C'est que, devant l'énigme et devant le destin,
Les plus fermes parfois s'étonnent et fléchissent.
A peine dans la nuit quelques cimes blanchissent
Que la brume a déjà repris d'autres sommets;
De grands monts, qui semblaient lumineux à jamais,
Qu'on croyait délivrés de l'abîme, s'y dressent,
Mais noirs, et, lentement effacés, disparaissent.
Toutes les vérités se montrent un moment,
Puis se voilent; le verbe avorte en bégaiement;
Le jour, si c'est du jour que cette clarté sombre,
N'a l'air de se lever que pour regarder l'ombre;
On ne voit plus le phare; on ne sait que penser;
Vient-on de reculer, ou vient-on d'avancer?
Oh! dans l'ascension humaine, que la marche
Est lente, et comme on sent la pesanteur de l'arche!
Comme ceux qui de tous portent les intérêts
Ont l'épaule meurtrie aux angles du progrès!
Comme tout se défait et retombe à mesure!
Pas de principe acquis; pas de conquête sûre;
A l'instant où l'on croit l'édifice achevé,
Il s'écroule, écrasant celui qui l'a rêvé;
Le plus grand siècle peut avoir son heure immonde;
Parfois sur tous les points du globe un fléau gronde,
Et l'homme semble pris d'un accès de fureur.

L’européen, ce frère aîné, joute d’honneur
Avec le caraïbe, avec le malabare;
L’anglais civilisé passe l’indou barbare;
O pugilat hideux de Londre et de Delhy!
Le but humain s’éclipse en un infâme oubli.
Il est nuit du Danube au Nil, du Gange à l’Ebre.
Fête au nord; c’est la mort du midi qu’on célèbre.
Europe, dit Berlin, ris, la France n’est plus!
O genre humain, malgré tant d’âges révolus,
Ta vieille loi de haine est toujours la plus forte;
L’évangile est toujours la grande clarté morte,
Le jour fuit, la paix saigne, et l’amour est proscrit,
Et l’on n’a pas encor décloué Jésus-Christ.

MARS

I

N’importe, ayons foi! Tout s’agite,
Comme au fond d’un songe effrayant,
Tout marche et court, et l’homme quitte
L’ancien rivage âpre et fuyant.
On va de la nuit à l’aurore,
Du noir sépulcre au nid sonore,
Et des hydres aux alcyons.
Les téméraires sont les sages.
Ils sondent ces profonds passages
Qu’on nomme Révolutions.

Prophètes maigris par les jeûnes,
O poètes au fier clairon,
Tous, les anciens comme les jeunes,
Isaïe autant que Byron,
Vous indiquez le but suprême
Au genre humain, toujours le même
Et toujours nouveau sous le ciel;
Vous jetez dans le vent qui vole
La même éternelle parole
Au même passant éternel.

Votre voix tragique et superbe
Plonge en bas et remonte en haut;
Vous demandez à Dieu le verbe
Et vous donnez au sphinx le mot.
Tout l’itinéraire de l’homme,
Quittant Sion, dépassant Rome,
Au prêtre qui chancelle ou fuit
Semble une descente d’abîme;
On entend votre bruit sublime,
Avertissement dans la nuit.

Vous tintez le glas pour le traître
Et pour le brave le tocsin;
On voit paraître et disparaître
Vos hymnes, orageux essaim;
Vos vers sibyllins vont et viennent;
Dans son dur voyage ils soutiennent
Le peuple, immense pèlerin;
Vos chants, vos songes, vos pensées,
Semblent des urnes renversées
D'où tombent des rythmes d'airain.

Bientôt le jour sur son quadrige
De l'ombre ouvrira les rideaux;
Vers l'aurore tout se dirige,
Même ceux qui tournent le dos;
L'un y marche et l'autre y recule;
L'avenir dans ce crépuscule
Dresse sa tour étrange à voir,
Tour obscure, mais étoilée;
Vos strophes à toute volée
Sonnent dans ce grand clocher noir.

II

LA LUTTE

Hélas! c'est l'ignorance en colère. Il faut plaindre
Ceux que le grand rayon du vrai ne peut atteindre.,
D'ailleurs, qu'importe, ami! l'honneur est avec nous.
Oui, plains ces insulteurs acceptant à genoux
L'horrible paix qui prend la France en sa tenaille!
Que leur ingratitude imbécile s'en aille
Devant l'histoire, avec ton dédain et le mien.
Ils traiteraient Jésus comme un bohémien;
Saint Paul leur semblerait un hideux démocrate;
Ils diraient: Quel affreux jongleur que ce Socrate.

Leur oeil myope a peur de l'aube. Ils sont ainsi.
Est-ce leur faute? Non. A Naple, à Rome, ici,
Toujours, partout, il est tout simple que des êtres
Te jalousent soldats et te maudissent prêtres,
Etant, les uns vaincus, les autres démasqués.
Les glaçons que j'ai vus cet hiver, de nos quais,
Pêle-mêle passer, nous jetant un froid sombre,
Mais fuyant et fondant rapidement dans l'ombre,
N'étaient pas plus haineux et n'étaient pas plus vains.
Toi qui jadis, pareil aux combattants divins,
Venais seul, sans armée et délivrais des villes,
Laisse hurler sur toi le flot des clameurs viles.
Qu'est-ce que cela fait? Viens, donnons-nous la main.
Et moi le vieux Français, toi l'antique Romain,
Sortons. C'est un lieu triste où l'on est mal à l'aise
Et regagnons chacun notre haute falaise
Où si l'on est tué, du moins c'est par la mer;
Allons chercher l'insulte auguste de l'éclair,
La fureur jamais basse et la grande amertume,
Le vrai gouffre, et quittons la bave pour l'écume.

III

LE DEUIL

Charle! Charle! ô mon fils! quoi donc! tu m'as quitté
Ah! tout fuit! rien ne dure!
Tu t'es évanoui dans la grande clarté
Qui pour nous est obscure.

Charles, mon couchant voit périr ton orient.
Comme nous nous aimâmes!
L'homme, hélas! crée, et rêve, et lie en souriant
Son âme à d'autre âmes;

Il dit: C'est éternel! et poursuit son chemin;
Il se met à descendre,

Vit, souffre, et tout à coup dans le creux de sa main
N'a plus que de la cendre.

Hier j'étais proscrit. Vingt ans, des mers captif,
J'errai, l'âme meurtrie;
Le sort nous frappe, et seul il connaît le motif.
Dieu m'ôta la patrie.

Aujourd'hui je n'ai plus de tout ce que j'avais
Qu'un fils et qu'une fille;
Me voilà presque seul dans cette ombre où je vais;
Dieu m'ôte la famille.

Oh! demeurez, vous deux qui me restez! nos nids
Tombent, mais votre mère
Vous bénit dans la mort sombre, et je vous bénis,
Moi, dans la vie amère.

Oui, pour modèle ayant le martyr de Sion,
J'achèverai ma lutte,
Et je continuerai la rude ascension
Qui ressemble à la chute.

Suivre la vérité me suffit; sans rien voir
Que le grand but sublime,
Je marche, en deuil, mais fier; derrière le devoir
Je vais droit à l'abîme.

IV

L'ENTERREMENT

Le tambour bat aux champs et le drapeau s'incline.
De la Bastille au pied de la morne colline
Où les siècles passés près du siècle vivant
Dorment sous les cyprès peu troublés par le vent,
Le peuple a l'arme au bras; le peuple est triste; il pense;

Et ses grands bataillons font la haie en silence.

Le fils mort et le père aspirant au tombeau
Passent, l’un hier encor vaillant, robuste et beau,
L’autre vieux et cachant les pleurs de son visage;
Et chaque légion les salue au passage.

O peuple! ô majesté de l’immense douceur!
Paris, cité soleil, vous que l’envahisseur
N’a pu vaincre, et qu’il a de tant de sang rougie,
Vous qu’un jour on verra, dans la royale orgie,
Surgir, l’éclair au front, comme le commandeur,
O ville, vous avez ce comble de grandeur
De faire attention à la douleur d’un homme.
Trouver dans Sparte une âme et voir un coeur dans Rome,
Rien n’est plus admirable; et Paris a dompté
L’univers par la force où l’on sent la bonté.
Ce peuple est un héros et ce peuple est un juste.
Il fait bien plus que vaincre, il aime.

O ville auguste,
Ce jour-là tout tremblait, les révolutions
Grondaient, et dans leur brume, à travers des rayons,
Tu voyais devant toi se rouvrir l’ombre affreuse
Qui par moments devant les grands peuples se creuse;
Et l’homme qui suivait le cercueil de son fils
T’admirait, toi qui, prête à tous les fiers défis,
Infortunée, as fait l’humanité prospère;
Sombre, il se sentait fils en même temps que père,
Père en pensant à lui, fils en pensant à toi.

Que ce jeune lutteur illustre et plein de foi,
Disparu dans le lieu profond qui nous réclame,
O peuple, ait à jamais près de lui ta grande âme!
Tu la lui donnas, peuple, en ce suprême adieu.
Que dans la liberté superbe du ciel bleu,
Il assiste, à présent qu’il tient l’arme inconnue,

Aux luttes du devoir et qu'il les continue.
Le droit n'est pas le droit seulement ici-bas;
Les morts sont des vivants mêlés à nos combats,
Ayant tantôt le bien, tantôt le mal pour cibles;
Parfois on sent passer leurs flèches invisibles.
Nous les croyons absents, ils sont présents; on sort
De la terre, des jours, des pleurs, mais non du sort;
C'est un prolongement sublime que la tombe.
On y monte étonné d'avoir cru qu'on y tombe.
Comme dans plus d'azur l'hirondelle émigrant,
On entre plus heureux dans un devoir plus grand;
On voit l'utile avec le juste parallèle;
Et l'on a de moins l'ombre et l'on a de plus l'aile.
O mon fils béni, sers la France, du milieu
De ce gouffre d'amour que nous appelons Dieu;
Ce n'est pas pour dormir qu'on meurt, non, c'est pour faire
De plus haut ce que fait en bas notre humble sphère;
C'est pour le faire mieux, c'est pour le faire bien.
Nous n'avons que le but, le ciel a le moyen.
La mort est un passage où pour grandir tout change;
Qui fut sur terre athlète est dans l'abîme archange;
Sur terre on est borné, sur terre on est banni;
Mais là-haut nous croissons sans gêner l'infini;
L'âme y peut déployer sa subite envergure;
C'est en perdant son corps qu'on reprend sa figure.
Va donc, mon fils! va donc, esprit! deviens flambeau.
Rayonne. Entre en planant dans l'immense tombeau!
Sers la France. Car Dieu met en elle un mystère,
Car tu sais maintenant ce qu'ignore la terre,
Car la vérité brille où l'éternité luit,
Car tu vois la lumière et nous voyons la nuit.

Paris, 18 mars.

V

Coup sur coup. Deuil sur deuil. Ah! l'épreuve redouble.

Soit. Cet homme pensif l’acceptera sans trouble.
Certe, il est bon qu’ainsi soient traités quelques-uns.
Quand d’âpres combattants, mages, soldats, tribuns,
Apôtres, ont donné leur vie aux choses justes,
Ils demeurent debout dans leurs douleurs robustes.
Tu le sais, Guernesey, tu le sais, Caprera.

Sa conscience est fixe et rien n’y bougera.
Car, quel que soit le vent qui souffle sur leur flamme,
Les principes profonds ne tremblent pas dans l’âme;
Car c’est dans l’infini que leur feu calme luit;
Car l’ouragan sinistre acharné sur la nuit
Peut secouer là-haut l’ombre et ses sombres toiles,
Sans faire dans leurs plis remuer les étoiles.

AVRIL

I

LES PRECURSEURS

Sur l’être et sur la créature,
Dans tous les temps l’homme incliné
A toujours dit à la nature:
O gouffre! Pourquoi suis-je né?
Parfois croyants, parfois athées,
Nous ajoutons aux Prométhées
Les Euclides et les Keplers;
Nos doutes, nuages funèbres,
Montent au ciel pleins de ténèbres,
Et redescendent pleins d’éclairs.

O fronts où flambent les idées!
Au bord du gouffre, au fond des cieux,
Que de figures accoudées!
Que de regards mystérieux!
O les prunelles étoilées
Des Miltons et des Galilées!
Sombres Dantes au front bruni,
Vos talons sont dignes des astres!
Vos esprits, ô noirs Zoroastres,
Sont les chevaux de l’infini.

Oser monter, oser descendre,
Tout est là. Chercher, oser voir!
Car Jason s’appelle entreprendre
Et Gama s’appelle vouloir.
Quand le chercheur hésite encore,
L’oeil sur la nuit, l’oeil sur l’aurore,
Reculant devant le secret
Tremblant devant l’hiéroglyphe,

La volonté, brusque hippogriffe,
Dans son crépuscule apparaît!

C’est sur ce coursier formidable,
Quand le Génie humain voulut,
Qu’il aborda l’inabordable,
Seul avec sa torche et son luth.
Lorsqu’il partit, âme élancée,
L’astre Amour, le soleil Pensée,
Rayonnaient dans l’azur béant
Où la nuit tend ses sombres toiles,
Et Dieu donna ces deux étoiles
Pour éperons à ce géant.

Les grands coeurs en qui Dieu se crée
Ont, tandis qu’autour d’eux tout fuit,
La curiosité sacrée
Du précipice et de la nuit.
Toute découverte est un gouffre.
Mourir, qu’importe! on plonge, on souffre;
Vivre inutile, c’est trop long.
De l’insensé naît le sublime;
Et derrière lui dans l’abîme
Empédocle attire Colomb.

Mers qu’on sonde! cieux qu’on révèle!
Chacun de ces chercheurs de Dieu
Prend un infini sur ton aile,
Fulton le vert, Herschell le Bleu;
Magellan part, Fourier s’envole;
La foule ironique et frivole
Ignore ce qu’ils ont rêvé,
Les voit sombrer dans l’étendue,
Et dit: C’est une âme perdue.
Foule! c’est un monde trouvé!

II

LA MERE QUI DEFEND SON PETIT

Au milieu des forêts, asiles des chouettes,
Où chuchotent tout bas les feuilles inquiètes,
Dans les halliers, que semble emplir un noir dessein,
Pour le doux nouveau-né qui frissonne à son sein,
Pour le tragique enfant qu’elle emporte effarée,
Dès qu’elle voit la nuit croître, sombre marée,
Dès que les loups obscurs poussent leurs longs abois,
Oh! le sauvage amour de la femme des bois!

Tel est Paris. La ville où l’Europe se mêle,
Avec le droit, la gloire et l’art, triple mamelle,
Allaite cet enfant céleste, l’Avenir.
On entend les chevaux de l’aurore hennir
Autour de ce berceau sublime. Elle, la mère
De la réalité qui commence en chimère,
La nourrice du songe auguste des penseurs,
La ville dont Athène et Rome sont les soeurs,
Dans le printemps qui rit, sous le ciel qui rougeoie,
Elle est l’amour, elle est la vie, elle est la joie.
L’air est pur, le jour luit, le firmament est bleu.
Elle berce en chantant le puissant petit dieu.
Quelle fête! elle montre aux hommes, fière, gaie,
Ce rêve qui sera le monde et qui bégaie,
Ce tremblant embryon du nouveau genre humain,
Ce géant, nain encor, qui s’appelle Demain,
Et pour qui le sillon des temps futurs se creuse;
Sur son front calme et tendre et sur sa bouche heureuse
Et dans son oeil serein qui ne croit pas au mal,
Elle a ce radieux sourire, l’idéal.
On sent qu’elle est la ville où l’espérance habite;
Elle aime, elle bénit; mais si, noirceur subite,
L’éclipse vient, et donne aux peuples le frisson,
Si quelque vague monstre erre sur l’horizon,
Si tout ce qui serpente, écume, rampe et louche,

Vient menacer l'enfant divin, elle est farouche;
Alors elle se dresse, alors elle a des cris
Terribles, et devient le furieux Paris;
Elle gronde et rugit, sinistrement vivante,
Et celle qui charmait l'univers, l'épouvante.

III

Temps affreux! ma pensée est, dans ce morne espace
Où l'imprévu surgit, où l'inattendu passe,
Une plaine livrée à tous les pas errants.
Les faits l'un après l'autre arrivent, noirs et grands.
J'écris ce livre, jour par jour, sous la dictée
De l'heure qui se dresse et fuit épouvantée;
Les semaines de l'An Terrible sont autant
D'hydres que l'enfer crée et que le gouffre attend;
L'événement s'en va, roulant des yeux de flamme,
Après avoir posé sa griffe sur mon âme,
Laissant à mon vers triste, âpre, meurtri, froissé,
Cette trace qu'on voit quand un monstre a passé.
Ceux qui regarderaient mon esprit dans cette ombre,
Le trouveraient couvert des empreintes sans nombre
De tous ces jours d'horreur, de colère et d'ennui,
Comme si des lions avaient marché sur lui.

IV

UN CRI

Quand finira ceci? Quoi! ne sentent-ils pas
Que ce grand pays croule à chacun de leurs pas!
Châtier qui? Paris? Paris veut être libre.
Ici le monde, et là Paris; c'est l'équilibre.
Et Paris est l'abîme où couve l'avenir.
Pas plus que l'Océan on ne peut le punir,
Car dans sa profondeur et sous sa transparence
On voit l'immense Europe ayant pour coeur la France.

Combattants! combattants! qu’est-ce que vous voulez?
Vous êtes comme un feu qui dévore les blés,
Et vous tuez l’honneur, la raison, l’espérance!
Quoi! d’un côté la France et de l’autre la France!
Arrêtez! c’est le deuil qui sort de vos succès.
Chaque coup de canon de Français à Français
Jette, - car l’attentat à sa source remonte, -
Devant lui le trépas, derrière lui la honte.
Verser, mêler, après septembre et février,
Le sang du paysan, le sang de l’ouvrier,
Sans plus s’en soucier que de l’eau des fontaines!
Les Latins contre Rome et les Grecs contre Athènes!
Qui donc a décrété ce sombre égorgement?
Si quelque prêtre dit que Dieu le veut, il ment!
Mais quel vent souffle donc? Quoi! pas d’instants lucides!
Se retrouver héros pour être fratricides!
Horreur!

Mais voyez donc, dans le ciel, sur vos fronts,
Flotter l’abaissement, l’opprobre, les affronts!
Mais voyez donc là-haut ce drapeau d’ossuaire,
Noir comme le linceul, blanc comme le suaire!
Pour votre propre chute ayez donc un coup d’oeil:
C’est le drapeau de Prusse et le drapeau du deuil!
Ce haillon, insolent, il vous a sous sa garde.
Vous ne le voyez pas; lui, sombre, il vous regarde;
Il est comme l’Egypte comme au-dessus des Hébreux,
Lourd, sinistre, et sa gloire est d’être ténébreux.
Il est chez vous. Il règne. Ah! la guerre civile,
Triste après Austerlitz, après Sedan est vile!

Aventure hideuse! ils se sont décidés
A jouer la patrie et l’avenir aux dés!
Insensés! n’est-il pas de choses plus instantes
Que d’épaissir autour de ce rempart vos tentes?
Recommencer la guerre ayant encore au flanc,
O Paris, ô lion blessé, l’épieu sanglant!

Quoi! se faire une plaie avant de guérir l'autre!
Mais ce pays meurtri de vos coups, c'est le vôtre!
Cette mère qui saigne est votre mère! Et puis,
Les misères, la femme et l'enfant sans appuis,
Le travailleur sans pain, tout l'amas des problèmes
Est là terrible, et vous, acharnés sur vous-mêmes,
Vous venez, toi rhéteur, toi soldat, toi tribun,
Les envenimer tous sans en résoudre aucun!

Vous recreusez le gouffre au lieu d'y mettre un phare!
Des deux côtés la même exécrable fanfare,
Le même cri: Mort! Guerre! - A qui? réponds, Caïn!
Qu'est-ce que ces soldats une épée à la main,
Courbés devant la Prusse, altiers contre la France?
Gardez donc votre sang pour votre délivrance!
Quoi! pas de remords! quoi! le désespoir complet!
Mais qui donc sont-ils ceux à qui la honte plaît?
O cieux profonds! opprobre aux hommes, quels qu'ils soient,
Qui sur ce pavois d'ombre et de meurtre s'assoient,
Qui du malheur public se font un piédestal,
Qui soufflent, acharnés à ce duel fatal,
Sur le peuple indigné, sur le reître servile,
Et sur les deux tisons de la guerre civile;
Qui remettent la ville éternelle en prison,
Rebâtissent le mur de haine à l'horizon,
Méditent on ne sait quelle victoire infâme,
Les droits brisés, la France assassinant son âme,
Paris mort, l'astre éteint, et qui n'ont pas frémi
Devant l'éclat de rire affreux de l'ennemi!

V

PAS DE REPRESAILLES

Je ne fais point fléchir les mots auxquels je crois;
Raison, progrès, honneur, loyauté, devoirs, droits.
On ne va point au vrai par une route oblique.

Sois juste; c’est ainsi qu’on sert la république;
Le devoir envers elle est l’équité pour tous;
Pas de colère; et nul n’est juste s’il n’est doux.
La Révolution est une souveraine;
Le peuple est un lutteur prodigieux qui traîne
Le passé vers le gouffre et l’y pousse du pied;
Soit. Mais je ne connais, dans l’ombre qui me sied,
Pas d’autre majesté que toi, ma conscience.
J’ai la foi. Ma candeur sort de l’expérience.
Ceux que j’ai terrassés, je ne les brise pas.
Mon cercle c’est mon droit, leur droit est mon compas;
Qu’entre mes ennemis et moi tout s’équilibre;
Si je les vois liés, je ne me sens pas libre;
A demander pardon j’userais mes genoux
Si je versais sur eux ce qu’ils jetaient sur nous.
Jamais je ne dirai: - « Citoyens, le principe
Qui se dresse pour nous contre nous se dissipe;
Honorons la droiture en la congédiant;
La probité s’accouple avec l’expédient.” -
Je n’irai point cueillir, tant je craindrais les suites,
Ma logique à la lèvre impure des jésuites;
Jamais je ne dirai: - « Voilons la vérité!”
Jamais je ne dirai: - « Ce traître a mérité,
Parce qu’il fut pervers, que, moi, je sois inique;
Je succède à sa lèpre; il me la communique;
Et je fais, devenant le même homme que lui,
De son forfait d’hier ma vertu d’aujourd’hui.
Il était mon tyran, il sera ma victime.”
Le talion n’est pas un reflux légitime.
Ce que j’étais hier, je veux l’être demain.
Je ne pourrais pas prendre un crime dans ma main
En me disant: - Ce crime était leur projectile;
Je le trouvais infâme et je le trouve utile;
Je m’en sers, et je frappe, ayant été frappé. -
Non, l’espoir de me voir petit sera trompé.
Quoi! je serais sophiste ayant été prophète!
Mon triomphe ne peut renier ma défaite;

J’entends rester le même, ayant beaucoup vécu,
Et qu’en moi le vainqueur soit fidèle au vaincu.
Non, je n’ai pas besoin, Dieu, que tu m’avertisses;
Pas plus que deux soleils je ne vois deux justices;
Nos ennemis tombés sont là; leur liberté
Et la nôtre, ô vainqueurs, c’est la même clarté.
En éteignant leurs droits nous éteignons nos astres.
Je veux, si je ne puis après tant de désastres
Faire de bien, du moins ne pas faire de mal.

La chimère est aux rois, le peuple a l’idéal.

Quoi! bannir celui-ci, jeter l’autre aux bastilles!
Jamais! Quoi! déclarer que les prisons, les grilles,
Les barreaux, les geôliers et l’exil ténébreux,
Ayant été mauvais pour nous, sont bons pour eux?
Non, je n’ôterai, moi, la patrie à personne;
Un reste d’ouragan dans mes cheveux frissonne,
On comprendra qu’ancien banni, je ne veux pas
Faire en dehors du juste et de l’honnête un pas;
J’ai payé de vingt ans d’exil ce droit austère
D’opposer aux fureurs un refus solitaire
Et de fermer mon âme aux aveugles courroux;
Si je vois les cachots sinistres, les verroux,
Les chaînes menacer mon ennemi, je l’aime,
Et je donne un asile à mon proscripteur même;
Ce qui fait qu’il est bon d’avoir été proscrit.
Je sauverais Judas si j’étais Jésus-Christ.

Je ne prendrai jamais ma part d’une vengeance.
Trop de punition pousse à trop d’indulgence,
Et je m’attendrirais sur Caïn torturé.
Non, je n’opprime pas! jamais je ne tuerai!
Jamais, ô Liberté, devant ce que je brise,
On ne te verra faire un signe de surprise.
Peuple, pour te servir, en ce siècle fatal,
Je veux bien renoncer à tout, au sol natal,

A ma maison d'enfance, à mon nid, à mes tombes,
A ce bleu ciel de France où volent des colombes,
A Paris, champ sublime où j'étais moissonneur,
A la patrie, au toit paternel, au bonheur;
Mais j'entends rester pur, sans tache et sans puissance.
Je n'abdiquerai pas mon droit à l'innocence.

VI

TALION

Quoi! parce que Vinoy, parce que Billioray
Sont dans le faux, il sied que tout soit hors du vrai!
Il faut tuer Duval puisqu'on tua Lecomte!
A ce raisonnement vous trouvez votre compte,
Et cet autre argument vous parait sans rival:
Il faut tuer Bonjean puisqu'on tua Duval!
On méprisait l'affreux talion; on l'estime.
Vil chez Moise, il est chez Rigault légitime.
On voue au meurtre un culte; on laisse de côté
Ce qu'on glorifiait si haut, loi, liberté;
On prêche un nouveau dogme, on se fait néophyte
De tous les attentats hideux dont on profite.
Talion! pour le peuple ici, là pour le roi.
Vous arrêtez Chaudey, j'emprisonne Lockroy.
Ah! vous êtes inepte, eh bien, je suis stupide.
Ah! vous niez le droit, eh bien, je le lapide!

Quoi! parce que Ferré, parce que Galifet
Versent le sang, je dois, moi, commettre un forfait!
On brûle un pont, je brûle une bibliothèque.
On tue un colonel, je tue un archevêque;
On tue un archevêque, eh bien, moi, je tuerai
N'importe qui, le plus de gens que je pourrai.
Quoi! parce qu'un gredin fait fusiller un homme,
J'en fais arquebuser trois cents, et ce qu'on nomme
Meurtre chez lui sera bonne action chez moi!

Dent pour dent. Par l’horreur je réplique à l’effroi.
Vous frappez la patrie, eh bien, moi, je l’achève!
Ah! vous lui faites, vous, l’effet d’un mauvais rêve,
Eh bien, moi, je lui vais donner le cauchemar.
Vous êtes Erostrate, eh bien, je suis Omar!

O joute monstrueuse? effroyables escrimes!
Avec des malfaiteurs se battre à coups de crimes!
Ils ont sabré, frappons! ils ont volé, pillons!
Semons leur infamie en nos propres sillons.
Quoi! notre oeuvre et la leur germeront pêle-mêle!
Ensemble à la même auge, à la même gamelle,
Abjects, nous mangerons le même opprobre, tous!
O ciel! et l’on verra sortir d’eux et de nous
Une épaisseur de honte horrible sur la France!
Nos attentats auront assez de transparence
Pour qu’on voie au travers nos principes déçus,
La clémence dessous, l’assassinat dessus!
Nous, copier ces gueux, faire un échafaudage
De notre banditisme avec leur brigandage,
De sorte que l’histoire un jour dise: Ombre et mort!
Qui donc avait raison et qui donc avait tort?
Sur notre propre droit verser tant de mensonge
Et tant d’iniquité que tout n’est plus qu’un songe!
Les principes, qui sont dans l’âme des sommets,
S’effacent, et comment fera-t-on désormais
Pour parler de progrès, d’équité, de justice?
Leur naufrage suffit pour que tout s’engloutisse.
Témérités sans nom! le bien au mal mêlé!
On voit couler, du haut de l’azur étoilé,
Un sang céleste après ces lâches hardiesses.
Blesser les vérités, c’est blesser les déesses.

VII

Le penseur est lugubre au fond des solitudes.
Ce n’est plus l’esprit calme aux graves attitudes;

Les éclairs indignés dans sa prunelle ont lui;
Il n’est plus libre, il a de la colère en lui;
Il est le prisonnier sinistre de la haine.
Lui, ce frère apaisant l’homme dans sa géhenne,
Lui, dont la vie en flots d’amour se répandit,
Lui le consolateur, le voilà qui maudit!
Lui qui croyait n’avoir jamais d’autre souffrance
Que tout le genre humain, il souffre dans la France;
Il reconnaît qu’il est sur terre un coin sacré,
La patrie, et cher, même au coeur démesuré,
Et que l’âme du sage est quelquefois amère,
Et qu’il redevient fils s’il voit saigner sa mère.

Certe, il ne sera pas toujours désespéré.
Un jour dans son regard reviendront par degré
Les augustes rayons de l’aube après l’éclipse;
On verra, certe, après l’infâme apoca1ypse,
Reparaître sur lui lentement les blancheurs
Que Dieu fait dans la nuit poindre au front des chercheurs,
Et que de loin envoie à l’homme, au gouffre, au bagne,
Le grand astre caché derrière la montagne,
Oui, la paix renaîtra. Les peuples s’aimeront.

En attendant, il gronde et médite. L’affront
Est une majesté de plus pour ce génie.
Il a des flamboiements de fureur infinie;
Fauve, il menace. Arrière, union, joie, amour!
On doit la paix au cygne et la guerre au vautour.
Est-ce qu’on ne voit pas qu’il pleure sa patrie?

Il jette aux vents sa strophe irritée et meurtrie;
Par moments il regarde au loin, l’oeil plein d’ennui;
On dirait qu’il fait fuir des monstres devant lui
Avec une secousse énorme de crinière;
Il semble un spectre errant qui n’a plus de tanière;
Son pied heurte inquiet le sol traître et peu sûr.

Deuil! la nuit sans étoile et le ciel sans azur;
L'Europe aux fers; au lieu de la France, une morte.
La lumière est vaincue et le néant l'emporte;
L'avenir se dédit, la gloire se dément;
Plus d'honneur, plus de foi, plus rien; l'abaissement,
L'oubli, l'opprobre, un flot de lâcheté qui monte.

Il sent l'âpre aiguillon de toute cette honte;
L'allure du blessé redoutable lui sied.
Ce lion boite ayant cette épine à son pied.

VIII

Oh! qui que vous soyez, qui voulez être maîtres,
Je vous plains. Vils, méchants, féroces, lâches, traîtres,
Vous périrez par ceux que vous croyez tenir.
Le présent est l'enclume où se fait l'avenir.
L'araignée est plus tard prise en ses propres toiles.
Aux noirs événements si vous ôtiez leurs voiles,
Vous reconnaîtriez, tremblants, nus, mis en croix,
Dans ces bourreaux masqués vos fautes d'autrefois;
Derrière lui le meurtre, ivresse, succès, gloire,
Laisse un vomissement qu'un jour il faudra boire;
En étouffant en vous l'horreur, l'inimitié,
La rage, c'est de vous que vous auriez pitié;
Les dépenses de sang innocent sont des dettes;
La trace de l'effort violent que vous faites
Pour être à jamais rois et dieux solidement,
Vous la retrouverez dans votre écroulement;
Votre fureur revient sur vous, et vous châtie;
La foudre qui sur vous tombe, est de vous sortie;
Si bien que le sort donne à la même action
Deux noms, crime d'abord, plus tard punition.

IX

Pendant que la mer gronde et que les vagues roulent,

Et que sur l’horizon les tumultes s’écroulent,
Ce veilleur, le poète, est monté sur sa tour.

Ce qu’il veut, c’est qu’enfin la concorde ait son tour.

Jadis, dans les temps noirs comme ceux où nous sommes,
Le poète pensif ne se mêlait aux hommes
Que pour les désarmer et leur verser son coeur;
Il aimait le vaincu sans haïr le vainqueur;
Il suppliait l’armée, il suppliait la ville;
Aux vivants aveuglés par la guerre civile
Il montrait la clarté du vrai, du grand, du beau,
Etant plus qu’eux tourné du côté du tombeau;
Et cet homme, au milieu d’un monde inexorable,
Etait le messager de la paix vénérable.
Il criait: N’a-t-on point assez souffert, hélas!
Ne serons-nous pas bons à force d’être las?
C’était la fonction de cette voix qui passe
De demander à tous, pour tous, Paix! Pitié! Grâce!
Les devoirs sont encor les mêmes aujourd’hui.
Le poète, humble jonc, a son coeur pour appui.
Il veut que l’homme vive, il veut que l’homme crée.
Le ciel, cette demeure inconnue et sacrée,
Prouve par sa beauté l’éternelle douceur;
La poésie au front lumineux est la soeur
De la clémence, étant la soeur de l’harmonie;
Elle affirme le vrai que la colère nie,
Et le vrai c’est l’espoir, le vrai c’est la bonté;
Le grand rayon de l’art c’est la fraternité.
A quoi bon aggraver notre sort par la haine?
Oh! si l’homme pouvait écouter la géhenne,
Si l’on savait la langue obscure des enfers, -
De cette profondeur pleine du bruit des fers,
De ce chaos hurlant d’affreuses destinées,
De tous ces pauvres coeurs, de ces bouches damnées,
De ces pleurs, de ces maux sans fin, de ces courroux,
On entendrait sortir ce chant sombre: Aimons-nous!

L’ouragan, l’océan, la tempête, l’abîme,
Et le peuple, ont pour loi l’apaisement sublime,
Et, quand l’heure est venue enfin de s’épouser,
Le gouffre éperdu donne à la terre un baiser!
Car rien n’est forcené, terrible, effréné, libre,
Convulsif, effaré, fou, que pour l’équilibre;
Car il faut que tout cède aux branches du compas;
Car l’indignation des flots ne dure pas,
L’écume est furieuse et n’est pas éternelle;
Le plus fauve aquilon demande à ployer l’aile;
Toute nuit mène à l’aube, et le soleil est sûr;
Tout orage finit par ce pardon, l’azur.

MAI

I

LES DEUX TROPHEES

Peuple, ce siècle a vu tes travaux surhumains.
Il t’a vu repétrir l’Europe dans tes mains.
Tu montras le néant du sceptre et des couronnes
Car ta façon de faire et défaire des trônes;
A chacun de tes pas tout croissait d’un degré;
Tu marchais; tu faisais sur le globe effaré
Un ensemencement formidable d’idées;
Tes légions étaient les vagues débordées
Du progrès s’élevant de sommets en sommets;
La Révolution te guidait; tu semais
Danton en Allemagne et Voltaire en Espagne;
Ta gloire, ô peuple, avait l’aurore pour compagne,
Et le jour se levait partout où tu passais;
Comme on a dit les Grecs on disait les Français;
Tu détruisais le mal, l’enfer, l’erreur, le vice,
Ici le moyen âge et là le saint-office;
Superbe, tu luttais contre tout ce qui nuit;
Ta clarté grandissante engloutissait la nuit;
Toute la terre était à tes rayons mêlée;
Tandis que tu montais dans ta voie étoilée,
Les hommes t’admiraient, même dans tes revers;
Parfois tu t’envolais planant; et l’univers,
Vingt ans, du Tage à l’Elbe et du Nil à l’Adige,
Fut la face éblouie, et tu fus le prodige;
Et tout disparaissait, - Histoire, souviens-t’en, -
Même le chef géant, sous le peuple titan.

De là deux monuments élevés à ta gloire,
Le pilier de puissance et l’arche de victoire,
Qui tous deux sont toi-même, ô peuple souverain,

L’un étant de granit et l’autre étant d’airain.

Penser qu’on fut vainqueur autrefois est utile.
Oh! ces deux monuments, que craint l’Europe hostile,
Comme on va les garder, et comme nuit et jour
On va veiller sur eux avec un sombre amour!
Ah! c’est presque un vengeur qu’un témoin d’un autre âge!
Nous les attesterons tous deux, nous qu’on outrage;
Nous puiserons en eux l’ardeur de châtier.
Sur ce hautain métal et sur ce marbre altier,
Oh! comme on cherchera d’un oeil mélancolique
Tous ces fiers vétérans, fils de la République.
Car l’heure de la chute est l’heure de l’orgueil;
Car la défaite augmente, aux yeux du peuple en deuil,
Le resplendissement farouche des trophées;
Les âmes de leur feu se sentent réchauffées;
La vision des grands est salubre aux petits.
Nous éterniserons ces monuments, bâtis
Par les morts dont survit l’oeuvre extraordinaire;
Ces morts puissants jadis passaient dans le tonnerre,
Et de leur marche encore on entend les éclats;
Et les pâles vivants d’à présent sont, hélas!
Moins qu’eux dans la lumière et plus qu’eux dans la tombe.

Ecoutez, c’est la pioche! écoutez, c’est la bombe!
Qui donc fait bombarder? qui donc fait démolir?
Vous?

*

Le penseur frémit, pareil au vieux roi Lear
Qui parle à la tempête et lui fait des reproches.
Quels signes effrayants! d’affreux jours sont-ils proches?
Est-ce que l’avenir peut être assassiné?
Est-ce qu’un siècle meurt quand l’autre n’est pas né?
Vertige! de qui donc Paris est-il la proie?
Un pouvoir le mutile, un autre le foudroie.

Ainsi deux ouragans luttent au Sahara.
C’est à qui frappera, c’est à qui détruira.
Peuple, ces deux chaos ont tort; je blâme ensemble
Le firmament qui tonne et la terre qui tremble.

*

Soit. De ces deux pouvoirs, dont la colère croît,
L’un a pour lui la loi, l’autre a pour lui le droit;
Versaille a la paroisse et Paris la commune;
Mais sur eux, au-dessus de tous, la France est une;
Et d’ailleurs, quand il faut l’un sur l’autre pleurer,
Est-ce bien le moment de s’entre-dévorer,
Et l’heure choisie pour la lutte est-elle bien choisie?
O fratricide! Ici toute la frénésie
Des canons, des mortiers, des mitrailles; et là
Le vandalisme; ici Charybde, et là Scylla.
Peuple, ils sont deux. Broyant tes splendeurs étouffées,
Chacun ôte à ta gloire un de tes deux trophées;
Nous vivons dans des temps sinistres et nouveaux,
Et de ces deux pouvoirs étrangement rivaux
Par qui le marteau frappe et l’obus tourbillonne,
L’un prend l’Arc de Triomphe et l’autre la Colonne!

*

Mais c’est la France! Quoi, Français, nous renversons
Ce qui reste debout sur les noirs horizons!
La grande France est là! Qu’importe Bonaparte!
Est-ce qu’on voit un roi quand on regarde Sparte?
Otez Napoléon, le peuple reparaît.
Abattez l’arbre, mais respectez la forêt.
Tous ces grands combattants, tournant sur ces spirales,
Peuplant les champs, les tours, les barques amirales,
Franchissant murs et ponts, fossés, fleuves, marais,
C’est la France montant à l’assaut du progrès.
Justice! ôtez de là César, mettez-y Rome.

Qu’on voie cette cime un peuple et non un homme;
Condensez en statue au sommet du pilier
Cette foule en qui vit ce Paris chevalier,
Vengeur des droits, vainqueur du mensonge féroce!
Que le fourmillement aboutisse au colosse!
Faites cette statue en un si pur métal
Qu’on n’y sente plus rien d’obscur ni de fatal;
Incarnez-y la foule, incarnez-y l’élite;
Et que ce géant Peuple, et que ce grand stylite
Du lointain idéal éclaire le chemin,
Et qu’il ait au front l’astre et l’épée à la main!

Respect à nos soldats, rien n’égalait leurs tailles;
La Révolution gronde en leurs cent batailles;
La Marseillaise, effroi du vieux monde obscurci,
S’est faite pierre là, s’est faite bronze ici;
De ces deux monuments sort un cri: Délivrance!

*

Quoi! de nos propres mains nous achevons la France!
Quoi! c’est nous qui faisons cela! nous nous jetons
Sur ce double trophée envié des Teutons,
Torche et massue aux poings, tous à la fois, en foule!
C’est sous nos propres coups que notre gloire croule!
Nous la brisons, d’en haut, d’en bas, de près, de loin,
Toujours, partout, avec la Prusse pour témoin!
Ils sont là, ceux à qui fut livrée et vendue
Ton invincible épée, ô patrie éperdue!
Ils sont là ceux par qui tomba l’homme de Ham!
C’est devant Reichshoffen qu’on efface Wagram!
Marengo raturé, c’est Waterloo qui reste.
La page altière meurt sous la page funeste;
Ce qui souille survit à ce qui rayonna;
Et pour garder Forbach on supprime Iéna!
Mac-Mahon fait de loin pleuvoir une rafale
De feu, de fer, de plomb sur l’arche triomphale.

Honte! un drapeau tudesque étend sur nous ses plis,
Et regarde Sedan souffleter Austerlitz!
Où sont les Charentons, France? où sont les Bicêtres?
Est-ce qu'ils ne vont pas se lever, les ancêtres,
Ces dompteurs de Brunswick, de Cobourg, de Bouillé,
Terribles, secouant leur vieux sabre rouillé,
Cherchant au ciel la grande aurore évanouie!
Est-ce que ce n'est pas une chose inouïe
Qu'ils soient violemment de l'histoire chassés,
Eux qui se prodiguaient sans jamais dire: Assez!
Eux qui tinrent le pape et les rois, l'ombre noire
Et le passé, captifs et cernés dans leur gloire,
Eux qui de l'ancien monde avaient fait le blocus,
Eux les pères vainqueurs, par nous les fils vaincus!

Hélas! ce dernier coup après tant de misères,
Et la paix incurable où saignent deux ulcères,
Et tous ces vains combats, Avron, Bourget, l'Haÿ!
Après Strasbourg brûlée, après Paris trahi!
La France n'est donc pas encore assez tuée?

Si la Prusse, à l'orgueil sauvage habituée,
Voyant ses noirs drapeaux enflés par l'aquilon,
Si la Prusse, tenant Paris sous son talon,
Nous eût crié: - Je veux que vos gloires s'enfuient.
Français, vous avez là deux restes qui m'ennuient,
Ce pilastre d'airain, cet arc de pierre; il faut
M'en délivrer; ici, dressez un échafaud,
Là, braquez des canons; ce soin sera le vôtre.
Vous démolirez l'un, vous mitraillerez l'autre.
Je l'ordonne. - O fureur! comme on eût dit: Souffrons!
Luttons! c'est trop! ceci passe tous les affronts!
Plutôt mourir cent fois! nos morts seront nos fêtes!
Comme on eût dit: Jamais! Jamais! -

Et vous le faites!

II

Les siècles sont au peuple; eux, ils ont le moment,
Ils en usent. O lutte étrange! Acharnement!
Chacun à grand bruit coupe une branche de l’arbre.
Là, des éclats d’airain, là, des éclats de marbre;
La colonne romaine ainsi que l’arc français
Tombent. Que dirait-on de toi si tu faisais
Envoler ton lion de Saint-Marc, ô Venise!
L’histoire est balafrée et la gloire agonise.
Quoi qu’on puisse penser de la France d’hier,
De cette rude armée et de ce peuple fier,
Et de ce que ce siècle à son troisième lustre
Avait rêvé, tenté, voulu, c’était illustre.
Pourquoi l’effacement? qu’a-t-on créé d’ailleurs
Pour les déshérités et pour les travailleurs?
A-t-on fermé le bagne? A-t-on ouvert l’école?
On détruit Marengo, Lodi, Wagram, Arcole;
A-t-on du moins fondé le droit universel?
Le pauvre a-t-il le toit, le feu, le pain, le sel?
A-t-on mis l’atelier, a-t-on mis la chaumière
Sous une immense loi de vie et de lumière?
A-t-on déshonoré la guerre en renonçant
A l’effusion folle et sinistre du sang?
A-t-on refait le code à l’image du juste?
A-t-on bâti l’autel de la clémence auguste?
A-t-on édifié le temple où la clarté
Se condense en raison et devient liberté?
A-t-on doté l’enfant et délivré la femme?
A-t-on planté dans l’homme, au plus profond de l’âme,
L’arbre du vrai, croissant de l’erreur qui décroît?
Offre-t-on au progrès, toujours trop à l’étroit,
Quelque élargissement d’horizon et de route?
Non; des ruines; rien. Soit. Quant à moi, je doute
Qu’on soit quitte pour dire au peuple murmurant:
Ce qu’on fait est petit, mais ce qu’on brise est grand.

III

PARIS INCENDIE

Mais où donc ira-t-on dans l’horreur? et jusqu’où?
Une voix basse dit: Pourquoi pas? et Moscou?

Ah! ce meurtre effrayant est un meurtre imbécile!
Supprimer l’Agora, le Forum, le Poecile,
La cité qui résume Athènes, Rome et Tyr,
Faire de tout un peuple un immense martyr,
Changer le jour en nuit, changer l’Europe en Chine,
Parce qu’il fut un ours appelé Rostopschine!
Il faut brûler Paris, puisqu’on brûla Moscou!
Parce que la Russie adora son licou,
Parce qu’elle voulut, broyant sa ville en cendre,
Chasser Napoléon pour garder Alexandre,
Parce que cela plut au czar en son divan,
Parce que, l’oeil fixé sur la croix d’or d’Yvan,
Un barbare a sauvé son pays par un crime,
Il faut jeter la France étoilée à l’abîme!
Mais vous par qui les droits du peuple sont trahis,
Vous commettez le crime et perdez le pays!
Ce Rostopschine est grand de la grandeur sauvage;
La stature qui peut rester à l’esclavage,
Il l’a toute, et cet homme, une torche à la main,
Rentre dans sa patrie et sort du genre humain;
C’est le vieux Scythe noir, c’est l’antique Gépide;
Il est féroce, il est sublime, il est stupide;
On sait ce qu’il a fait, on ne sait s’il comprit;
Il serait un héros s’il était un esprit.
Les siècles sur leur cime ont quatre sombres flammes;
L’une où brille altier, vil, roi des gloires infâmes,
Le meurtrier d’Ephèse embouchant son clairon,
L’autre où se dresse Omar, l’autre où chante Néron;
Rostopschine est comme eux flamboyant dans l’histoire;
De ces quatre lueurs la sienne est la moins noire.

Mais vous, qui venez-vous copier?

Vous pencher
Sur Paris! allumer un cinquième bûcher!
Quoi! l’on verrait Paris comme la neige fondre!
Quoi! vous vous méprenez à ce point de confondre
La ville qui nuisait et la ville qui sert!
Moscou fut la Babel sinistre du désert,
L’antre où la raison boite, où la vérité louche,
Citadelle du moine et du boyard, farouche
Au point que nul progrès ne put habiter là,
Nid d’éperviers d’où Pierre, un vautour, s’envola.
Moscou c’était l’Asie et Paris c’est l’Europe.
Quoi! du même linceul inepte on enveloppe
Et dans la même tombe on veut faire tenir
Moscou, le passé triste, et Paris, l’avenir!
Moscou de moins, qu’importe? ôtez Paris, quelle ombre!
La boussole est perdue et le navire sombre;
Le progrès stupéfait ne sait plus son chemin.
Si vous crevez cet oeil énorme au genre humain,
Ce cyclope est aveugle, et, hors des faits possibles,
Il marche en tâtonnant avec des cris terribles;
Du côté de la pente il va dans l’inconnu.

*

Sans Paris, l’avenir naîtra reptile et nu.
Paris donne un manteau de lumière aux idées.
Les erreurs, s’il les a seulement regardées,
Tremblent subitement et s’écroulent, ayant
En elles le rayon de cet oeil foudroyant.
Comme au-dessous du temple on retrouve la crypte,
Et comme sous la Grèce on retrouve l’Egypte,
Et sous l’Egypte l’Inde, et sous l’Inde la nuit,
Sous Paris, par les temps et les races construit,
On retrouve, en creusant, toute la vieille histoire.
L’homme a gagné Paris ainsi qu’une victoire.

Le lui prendre à présent, c’est lui rendre son bât,
C’est frustrer son labeur, c’est voler son combat.
A quoi bon avoir tant lutté si tout s’effondre!
Thèbe, Ellorah, Memphis, Carthage, aujourd’hui Londre,
Tous les peuples, qu’unit un vénérable hymen,
De la raison humaine et du devoir humain
Ont créé l’alphabet, et Paris fait le livre.
Paris règne. Paris, en existant, délivre.
Par cela seul qu’il est, le monde est rassuré.

Un vaisseau comme un sceptre étendant son beaupré
Est son emblème; il fait la grande traversée,
Il part de l’ignorance et monte à la pensée.
Il sait l’itinéraire; il voit le but; il va
Plus loin qu’on ne voulut, plus haut qu’on ne rêva,
Mais toujours il arrive: il cherche, il crée, il fonde,
Et ce que Paris trouve est trouvé pour le monde.
Une évolution du globe tout entier
Veut Paris pour pivot et le prend pour chantier,
Et n’est universelle enfin qu’étant française;
Londre a Charles premier, Paris a Louis seize;
Londre a tué le roi, Paris la royauté;
Ici le coup de hache à l’homme est limité,
Là c’est la monarchie énorme et décrépite,
C’est le passé, la nuit, l’enfer, qu’il décapite.
Un mot que dit Paris est un ambassadeur;
Paris sème des lois dans toute profondeur.
Sans cesse, à travers l’ombre et la brume malsaine,
Il sort de cette forge, il sort de cette cène
Une flamme qui parle; il remplit le ciel bleu
De l’éternel départ de ses langues de feu.
On voit à chaque instant une troupe de rêves
Sublimes, qui, portant des flambeaux ou des glaives,
S’échappe de Paris et va dans l’univers;
Dante vient à Paris faire son premier vers;
Là Montesquieu construit les lois, Pascal les règles;
C’est de Paris que prend son vol l’essaim des aigles.

Paris veut que tout monte au suprême degré;
Il dresse l’idéal sur le démesuré;
A l’appui du progrès, à l’appui des idées,
Il donne des raisons hautes de cent coudées;
Pour cime et pour refuge il a la majesté
Des principes remplis d’une altière clarté;
Le fier sommet du vrai, voilà son acropole;
Il extrait Mirabeau du siècle de Walpole;
Ce Paris qui pour tous fit toujours ce qu’il put
Est parfois Sybaris et jamais Lilliput,
Par la méchanceté naît où la hauteur cesse;
Avec la petitesse on fait de la bassesse,
Et Paris n’est jamais petit; il est géant
Jusque dans sa poussière et jusqu’en son néant;
Le fond de ses fureurs est bon; jamais la haine
Ne trouble sa colère auguste et ne la gène;
Le coeur s’attendrit mieux lorsque l’esprit comprend,
Et l’on n’est le meilleur qu’en étant le plus grand.
De là la dignité de Paris, sa logique
Souffrant pour l’homme avec une douceur tragique,
Et la fraternité qui gronde en son courroux.
Les tyrans dans leurs camps, les hiboux dans leurs trous,
Le craignent, car voulant la paix, il veut l’aurore.
A la tendance humaine, obscure et vague encore,
Il creuse un lit, il fixe un but, il donne un sens;
Du juste et de l’injuste il connaît les versants;
Et du côté de l’aube il l’aide à se répandre.
Certains problèmes sont des fruits d’or pleins de cendre,
Le fond de l’un est Tout, le fond de l’autre est Rien;
On peut trouver le mal en cherchant trop le bien;
Paris le sait; Paris choisit ce qui doit vivre.
Le droit parfois devient un vin dont on s’enivre;
Ayant tout éveillé Paris peut tout calmer;
Sa grande loi Combattre a pour principe Aimer;
Paris admet l’agape et non la saturnale,
Et c’est lui qui, soudain, de l’énigme infernale

Souffle le mot céleste au sphinx déconcerté.

Où le sphinx dit: Chaos, Paris dit: Liberté!

Lieu d'éclosion! centre éclatant et sonore
Où tous les avenirs trouvent toute l'aurore!
O rendez-vous sacré de tous les lendemains!
Point d'intersection des vastes pas humains!
Paris, ville, esprit, voix! tu parles, tu rédiges,
Tu décrètes, tu veux! chez toi tous les prodiges
Viennent se rencontrer comme en leur carrefour.
Du paria de l'Inde au nègre du Darfour,
Tout sent un tremblement si ton pavé remue.
Paris, l'esprit humain dans ton nid fait sa mue;
Langue nouvelle, droits nouveaux, nouvelles lois,
Etre français après avoir été gaulois,
Il te doit tous ces grands changements de plumages.
Non, qui que vous soyez, non, quels que soient vos mages,
Vos docteurs, vos guerriers, vos chefs, quelle que soit
Votre splendeur qu'au fond de l'ombre on aperçoit,
O cités, fussiez-vous de phares constellées,
Quels que soient vos palais, vos tours, vos propylées,
Vos clartés, vos rumeurs, votre fourmillement,
Le genre humain gravite autour de cet aimant,
Paris, l'abolisseur des vieilles moeurs serviles,
Et vous ne pourrez pas le remplacer, ô villes,
Et, lui mort, consoler l'univers orphelin,
Non, non, pas même toi, Londres, ni toi, Berlin,
Ni toi, Vienne, ni toi, Madrid, ni toi, Byzance,
Si vous n'avez ainsi que lui cette puissance,
La joie, et cette force étrange, la bonté;
Si, comme ce Paris charmant et redouté,
Vous n'avez cet éclair, l'amour, et si vous n'êtes
Océan aux ruisseaux et soleil aux planètes.

Car le genre humain veut que sa ville ait au front
L'auréole et dans l'oeil le rire vif et prompt,

Qu’elle soit grande, gaie, héroïque et jalouse,
Et reste sa maîtresse en étant son épouse.

Et dire que cette oeuvre auguste, que mille ans
Et mille ans ont bâtie, industrieux et lents,
Que la cité héros, que la ville prophète,
Dire, ô cieux éternels! que la merveille faite
Par vingt siècles pensifs, patients et profonds,
Qui créèrent la flamme où nous nous réchauffons
Et mirent cette ville au centre de la sphère,
Une heure folle aurait suffi pour la défaire!

*

Sombre année. Epopée en trois livres hideux.
Les hommes n’ont rien vu de tel au-dessus d’eux.
Attila. Puis Caïn. Maintenant Erostrate.
O torche misérable, abjecte, aveugle, ingrate!
Quoi! disperser la ville unique à tous les vents!
Ce Paris qui remplit de son coeur les vivants,
Et fait planer qui rampe et penser qui végète!
Jeter au feu Paris comme le pâtre y jette,
En le poussant du pied, un rameau de sapin!
Quoi! tout sacrifier! quoi! le grenier du pain!
Quoi! la Bibliothèque, arche où l’aube se lève,
Insondable A B C de l’idéal, où rêve
Accoudé, le progrès, ce lecteur éternel,
Porte éclatante ouverte au bout du noir tunnel,
Grange où l’esprit de l’homme a mis sa gerbe immense!

Pour qui travaillez-vous? où va votre démence?
Deux faces ici-bas se regardent, le jour
Et la nuit, l’âpre Haine et le puissant Amour,
Deux principes, le bien et le mal, se soufflettent,
Et deux villes, qui sont deux mystères, reflètent,
Ce choc de deux éclairs devant nos yeux émus,
Et Rome est Arimane et Paris est Ormus.

Rome est le maître-autel où les vieux dogmes fument
Au sommet de Paris à flots de pourpre écument
En pleine éruption toutes les vérités,
La justice, jetant des rayons irrités,
La liberté, le droit, ces grandes clartés vierges.
En face de la Rome où vacillent les cierges,
Des révolutions Paris est le volcan.
Ici l’Hôtel-de-Ville et là le Vatican.
C’est au profit de l’un qu’on supprimerait l’autre.
Rome hait la raison dont Paris est l’apôtre.
O malheureux! voyez où l’on vous entraîna.
Devant le lampion vous éteignez l’Etna!
Il ne resterait plus que cette lueur vile.
Le Vatican prospère où meurt l’Hôtel-de-Ville.
Deuil! folie! immoler l’âme au suaire noir,
La parole au bâillon, l’étoile à l’éteignoir,
La vérité qui sauve au mensonge qui frappe,
Et le Paris du peuple à la Rome du pape!

*

Le genre humain peut-il être décapité?

Vous imaginez-vous cette haute cité
Qui fut des nations la parole, l’ouïe,
La vision, la vie et l’âme, évanouie!
Vous représentez-vous les peuples la cherchant?
On ne voit plus sa lampe, on n’entend plus son chant.
C’était notre théâtre et notre sanctuaire;
Elle était sur le globe ainsi qu’un statuaire
Sculptant l’homme futur à grands coups de maillet;
L’univers espérait quand elle travaillait;
Elle était l’éternelle, elle était l’immortelle;
Qu’est-il donc arrivé d’horrible? où donc est-elle?
Vous les figurez-vous s’arrêtant tout à coup?
Quel est ce pan de mur dans les ronces debout?
Le Panthéon; ce bronze épars, c’est la colonne;

Ce marais où l’essaim des corbeaux tourbillonne,
C’est la Bastille; un coin farouche où tout se tait,
Où rien ne luit, c’est là que Notre-Dame était;
La limace et le ver souillent de leurs morsures
Les pierres, ossements augustes des masures;
Pas un toit n’est resté de toutes ces maisons
Qui du progrès humain reflétaient les saisons;
Pas une de ces tours, silhouettes superbes;
Plus de ponts, plus de quais; des étangs sous des herbes,
Un fleuve extravasé dans l’ombre, devenu
Informe, et s’en allant dans un bois inconnu;
Le vague bruit de l’eau que le vent triste emporte.
Et voyez-vous l’effet que ferait cette morte!

*

Mais qui donc a jeté ce tison? Quelle main,
Osant avec le jour tuer le lendemain,
A tenté ce forfait, ce rêve, ce mystère
D’abolir la ville astre, âme de notre terre,
Centre en qui respirait tout ce qu’on étouffait?
Non, ce n’est pas toi, peuple, et tu ne l’as pas fait.
Non, vous les égarés, vous n’êtes pas coupables!
Le vénéneux essaim des causes impalpables,
Les vieux faits devenus invisibles vous ont
Troublé l’âme, et leur aile a battu votre front;
Vous vous êtes sentis enivrés d’ombre obscure;
Le taon vous poursuivait de son âcre piqûre,
Une rouge lueur flottait devant vos yeux,
Et vous avez été le taureau furieux.

J’accuse la Misère, et je traîne à la barre
Cet aveugle, ce sourd, ce bandit, ce barbare,
Le Passé; je dénonce, ô royauté, chaos,
Tes vieilles lois d’où sont sortis les vieux fléaux!
Elles pèsent sur nous, dans le siècle où nous sommes,
Du poids de l’ignorance effrayante des hommes;

Elles nous changent tous en frères ennemis;
Elles seules ont fait le mal; elles ont mis
La torche inepte aux mains des souffrants implacables.
Elles forgent les noeuds d’airain, les affreux câbles,
Les dogmes, les erreurs, dont on veut tout lier,
Rapetissent l’école et ferment l’atelier;
Leur palais a ce gui misérable, l’échoppe;
Elles font le jour louche et le regard myope;
Courbent les volontés sous le joug étouffant;
Vendent à la chaumière un peu d’air, à l’enfant
L’alphabet du mensonge, à tous la clarté fausse;
Creusent mal le sillon et creusent bien la fosse;
Ne savent ce que c’est qu’enseigner, qu’apaiser;
Ont de l’or pour payer à Judas son baiser,
N’en ont point pour payer à Colomb son voyage;
N’ont point, depuis les temps de Cyrus, d’Astyage,
De Cécrops, de Moïse et de Deucalion,
Fait un pas hors du lâche et sanglant talion;
Livrent le faible aux forts, refusent l’âme aux femmes,
Sont imbéciles, sont féroces, sont infâmes!
Je dénonce les faux pontifes, les faux dieux,
Ceux qui n’ont pas d’amours et ceux qui n’ont pas d’yeux
Non, je n’accuse rien du présent, ni personne;
Non, le cri que je pousse et le glas que je sonne,
C’est contre le passé, fantôme encor debout
Dans les lois, dans les moeurs, dans les haines, dans tout.
J’accuse, ô nos aïeux, car l’heure est solennelle,
Votre société, la vieille criminelle!
La scélérate a fait tout ce que nous voyons;
C’est elle qui sur l’âme et sur tous les rayons
Et sur tous les essors posa ses mains immondes,
Elle qui l’un par l’autre éclipsa les deux mondes,
La raison par la foi, la foi par la raison;
Elle qui mit au haut des lois une prison;
Elle qui, fourvoyant les hommes, même en France,
Créa la cécité qu’on appelle ignorance,
Leur ferma la science, et, marâtre pour eux,

Laissant noirs les esprits, fit les coeurs ténébreux!
Je l’accuse, et je veux qu’elle soit condamnée.
Elle vient d’enfanter cette effroyable année.
Elle égare parfois jusqu’à d’affreux souhaits
Toi-même, ô peuple immense et puissant qui la hais!
Le boeuf meurtri se dresse et frappe à coups de corne.
Elle a créé la foule inconsciente et morne,
Elle a tout opprimé, tout froissé, tout plié,
Tout blessé; la rancune est un glaive oublié,
Mais qu’on retrouve; hélas! la haine est une dette.
Cette société que les vieux temps ont faite,
Depuis deux mille ans règne, usurpe notre bien,
Notre droit, et prend tout même à ceux qui n’ont rien;
Elle fait dévorer le peuple aux parasites;
La guerre et l’échafaud, voilà ses réussites;
Elle n’a rien laissé que l’instinct animal
Au sauvage embusqué dans la forêt du mal;
Elle répond de tout ce que peut faire l’homme;
La bête fauve sort de la bête de somme,
L’esclave sous le fouet se révolte, et, battu,
Fuit dans l’ombre, et demande à l’enfer: Me veux-tu?
Etonnez-vous après, ô semeurs de tempêtes,
Que ce souffre-douleur soit votre trouble-fêtes,
El qu’il vous donne tort à tous sur tous les points;
Qu’il soit hagard, fatal, sombre, et que ses deux poings
Reviennent tout à coup, sur notre tragédie
Secouer, l’un le meurtre, et l’autre l’incendie!
J’accuse le passé, vous dis-je! il a tout fait.
Quand il abrutissait le peuple, il triomphait.
Il a Dieu pour fantôme et Satan pour ministre.
Hélas! il a créé l’indigence sinistre
Qui saigne et qui se venge au hasard, sans savoir,
Et qui devient la haine, étant le désespoir!

Qui que vous soyez, vous que je sers et que j’aime,
Souffrants que dans le mal la main du crime sème,
Et que j’ai toujours plaints, avertis, défendus

O vous les accablés, ô vous les éperdus,
Nos frères, repoussez celui qui vous exploite!
Suivez l'esprit qui plane et non l'esprit qui boite;
Montez vers l'avenir, montez vers les clartés:
Mais ne vous laissez plus entraîner! résistez!
Résistez, quel que soit le nom dont il se nomme,
A quiconque vous donne un conseil contre l'homme;
Résistez aux douleurs, résistez à la faim.
Si vous saviez combien on fut près de la fin!

*

Oh! l'applaudissement des spectres est terrible!
Peuple, sur ta cité, comme aux temps de la Bible,
Quand l'incendie aux crins de flamme se leva,
Quand, ainsi que Ninive en proie à Jehovah,
Lutèce agonisa, maison de la lumière;
Quand le Louvre prit feu comme un toit de chaumière,
Avec mil huit cent trente, avec quatre-vingt-neuf!
Quand la Seine coula rouge sous le pont Neuf;
Quand le Palais, école où la justice épelle,
Soudain se détachant de la Sainte-Chapelle,
Tomba comme un haillon qu'une femme découd;
Quand la destruction empourpra tout à coup
Le haut temple où Voltaire et Jean-Jacques dormirent,
Et tout ce vaste amas que les peuples admirent,
Dômes, arcs triomphaux, cirques, frontons, pavois,
D'où partent des clartés et d'où sortent des voix,
Quand on crut un moment voir la cité de gloire,
D'espérance et d'azur changée en ville noire,
Et Paris en fumée affreuse dissipé;
Ce flamboiement lugubre, ainsi que dans Tempé
Avril vient doucement agiter les colombes,
Réveilla dans l'horreur sépulcrale les tombes;
Et l'horizon s'emplit de fantômes criant:
O trépassés, venez voir mourir l'Orient!
Les méduses riaient avec leurs dents funèbres;

Le ciel eut peur, la joie infâme des ténèbres
Eclata, l’ombre vint insulter le flambeau;
Torquemada sortit du gouffre et dit: C’est beau.
Cisneros dit: Voilà le grand bûcher de l’Homme!
Sanchez grinça: L’abîme est fait. Regarde, ô Rome!
Tout ce qu’on nomme droit, principes absolus,
République, raison et liberté, n’est plus!
Tous les bourreaux, depuis Néron jusqu’à Zoïle,
Contents, vinrent jeter un tison dans la ville,
Et Borgia donna sa bénédiction.
Czars, sultans, Escobar, Rufin, Trimalcion,
Tous les conservateurs de l’antique souffrance,
Admirèrent, disant: C’est fini. Plus de France!
Ce qui s’achève ainsi ne recommence point.
A Danton interdit Brunswick montra le poing;
On entendit mugir le veau d’or dans l’étable;
Dans cette heure où le ciel devint épouvantable,
Le groupe monstrueux de tous les hommes noirs,
Sombre, et pour espérance ayant nos désespoirs,
Voyant sur toi, Paris, la mort ouvrir son aile,
Eut l’éblouissement de la nuit éternelle.

IV

Est-il jour? Est-il nuit? horreur crépusculaire!
Toute l’ombre est livrée à l’immense colère.
Coups de foudre, bruits sourds. Pâles, nous écoutons.
Le supplice imbécile et noir frappe à tâtons.
Rien de divin ne luit. Rien d’humain ne surnage.
Le hasard formidable erre dans le carnage,
Et mitraille un troupeau de vaincus, sans savoir
S’ils croyaient faire un crime ou remplir un devoir.
L’ombre engloutit Babel jusqu’aux plus hauts étages.
Des bandits ont tué soixante-quatre otages,
On réplique en tuant six mille prisonniers.
On pleure les premiers, on raille les derniers.
Le vent qui souffle a presque éteint cette veilleuse,

La conscience. O nuit! brume! heure périlleuse!
Les exterminateurs semblent doux, leur fureur
Plaît, et celui qui dit: Pardonnez! fait horreur.
Ici l'armée et là le peuple; c'est la France
Qui saigne; et l'ignorance égorge l'ignorance.
Le droit tombe. Excepté Caïn, rien n'est debout.
Une sorte de crime épars flotte sur tout.
L'innocent paraît noir tant cette ombre le couvre.
L'un a brûlé le Louvre. Hein? Qu'est-ce que le Louvre?
Il ne le savait pas. L'autre, horribles exploits,
Fusille devant lui, stupide. Où sont les lois?
Les ténèbres avec leurs sombres soeurs, les flammes,
Ont pris Paris, ont pris les coeurs, ont pris les âmes.
Je tue et ne vois pas. Je meurs et ne sais rien.
Tous mêlés, l'enfant blond, l'affreux galérien,
Pères, fils, jeunes, vieux, le démon avec l'ange,
L'homme de la pensée et l'homme de la fange,
Dans on ne sait quel gouffre expirent à la fois.
Dans l'effrayant brasier sait-on de quelles voix
Se compose le cri du boeuf d'airain qui beugle?

La mort sourde, ô terreur, fauche la foule aveugle.

V

UNE NUIT A BRUXELLES

Aux petits incidents il faut s'habituer.
Hier on est venu chez moi pour me tuer.
Mon tort dans ce pays c'est de croire aux asiles.
On ne sait quel ramas de pauvres imbéciles
S'est rué la nuit sur ma maison.
Les arbres de la place en eurent le frisson,
Mais pas un habitant ne bougea. L'escalade
Fut longue, ardente, horrible, et Jeanne était malade.
Je conviens que j'avais pour elle un peu d'effroi.
Mes deux petits-enfants, quatre femmes et moi,

C’était la garnison de cette forteresse.
Rien ne vint secourir la maison en détresse.
La police fut sourde ayant affaire ailleurs.
Un dur caillou tranchant effleura Jeanne en pleurs.
Attaque de chauffeurs en pleine Forêt-Noire.
Ils criaient: Une échelle! une poutre! victoire!
Fracas où se perdaient nos appels sans écho.
Deux hommes apportaient du quartier Pachéco
Une poutre enlevée à quelque échafaudage.
Le jour naissant gênait la bande. L’abordage
Cessait, puis reprenait. Ils hurlaient haletants.
La poutre par bonheur n’arriva pas à temps.
«Assassin! - C’était moi. - Nous voulons que tu meures!
Brigand! Bandit!” Ceci dura deux bonnes heures.
George avait calmé Jeanne en lui prenant la main.
Noir tumulte. Les voix n’avaient plus rien d’humain;
Pensif, je rassurais les femmes en prières,
Et ma fenêtre était trouée à coups de pierres.
Il manquait là des cris de vive l’empereur!
La porte résista battue avec fureur.
Cinquante hommes armés montrèrent ce courage.
Et mon nom revenait dans des clameurs de rage:
A la lanterne! à mort! qu’il meure! il nous le faut!
Par moments, méditant quelque nouvel assaut,
Tout ce tas furieux semblait reprendre haleine;
Court répit; un silence obscur et plein de haine
Se faisait au milieu de ce sombre viol;
Et j’entendais au loin chanter un rossignol.

Bruxelles, 29 mai.

VI

EXPULSE DE BELGIQUE

«- Il est enjoint au sieur Hugo de par le roi
De quitter le royaume.” - Et je m’en vais. Pourquoi?

Pourquoi? mais c’est tout simple, amis. Je suis un homme
Qui, lorsque l’on dit: Tue! hésite à dire: Assomme!
Quand la foule entraînée, hélas! suit le torrent,
Je me permets d’avoir un avis différent;
Le talion me fâche, et mon humeur bizarre
Préfère l’ange au tigre et John Brown à Pizarre;
Je blâme sans pudeur les massacres en grand;
Je ne bois pas de sang; l’ordre, à l’état flagrant,
Exterminant, hurlant, bavant, tâchant de mordre,
Me semble, à moi songeur, fort semblable au désordre;
J’assiste sans plaisir à ce hideux tournoi:
Cissey contre Duval, Rigault contre Vinoy.
Je hais qu’on joute à qui sera le plus féroce;
Qu’un gueux aille pieds nus ou qu’il roule carrosse,
Qu’il soit prince ou goujat, j’ai le très méchant goût
De tout jeter, goujat et prince, au même égout;
Mon mépris est égal pour la scélératesse
Qu’on tutoie et pour celle à qui l’on dit altesse;
Je crois, s’il faut choisir, que je préfère encor
Le crime teint de boue au crime brodé d’or;
J’excuse l’ignorant; je ne crains pas de dire
Que la misère explique un accès de délire,
Qu’il ne faut pas pousser les gens au désespoir,
Que, si des dictateurs font un forfait bien noir,
L’homme du peuple en est juste aussi responsable
Que peut l’être d’un coup de vent le grain de sable;
Le sable, arraché, pris et poussé par le vent,
Entre dans le simoun affreux, semble vivant,
Brûle et tue, et devient l’atome de l’abîme;
Il fait la catastrophe et le vent fait le crime;
Le vent c’est le despote. En ces obscurs combats,
S’il faut frapper, frappez en haut, et non en bas.
Si Rigault fut chacal, on a tort d’être hyène.
Quoi! jeter un faubourg de Paris à Cayenne!
Quoi! tous ces égarés, en faire des forçats!
Non! je hais l’Ile-aux-Pins et j’exècre Mazas.
Johannard est cruel et Serisier infâme.

Soit. Mais comprenez-vous quelle nuit a dans l’âme
Le travailleur sans pain l’été, sans feu l’hiver,
Qui voit son nouveau-né pâlir, nu comme un ver,
Qui lutte et souffre avec la faim pour récompense,
Qui ne sait rien, sinon qu’on l’opprime, et qui pense
Que détruire un palais, c’est détruire un tyran?
Que de douleurs! combien de chômages par an!
Songez-y, ne peut-il perdre enfin patience?

Le croirait-on? j’écoute en moi la conscience!
Quand j’entends crier: mort! frappez! sabrez! je vais
Jusqu’à trouver qu’un meurtre au hasard est mauvais;
Je m’étonne qu’on puisse, à l’époque où nous sommes,
Dans Paris, aller prendre une dizaine d’hommes,
Dire: Ils sont à peu près du quartier qui brûla,
Mitrailler à la hâte en masse tout cela,
Et les jeter vivants ou morts dans la chaux vive;
Je recule devant une fosse plaintive;
Ils sont là, je le sais, l’un sur l’autre engloutis,
Le mâle et la femelle, hélas! et les petits!
Coupables, ignorants, innocents, pêle-mêle;
Autour du noir charnier mon âme bat de l’aile.
Si des râles d’enfants m’appellent dans ce trou,
Je voudrais de la mort tirer le froid verrou;
J’ai par des voix sortant de terre l’âme émue;
Je n’aime pas sentir sous mes pieds qu’on remue,
Et je ne me suis pas encore habitué
A marcher sur les cris d’un homme mal tué;
C’est pourquoi, moi vaincu, moi proscrit imbécile,
J’offre aux vaincus l’abri, j’offre aux proscrits l’asile,
Je l’offre à tous. A tous! Je suis étrange au point
De voir tomber les gens sans leur montrer le poing;
Je suis de ce parti dangereux qui fait grâce;
Et demain j’ouvrirai ma porte, car tout passe,
A ceux qui sont vainqueurs quand ils seront vaincus;
Je suis pour Cicéron et je suis pour Gracchus;
Il suffit pour me faire indulgent, doux et sombre,

Que je voie une main suppliante dans l’ombre;
Faible, à ceux qui sont forts j’ose jeter le gant.
Je crie: Ayez pitié! Donc je suis un brigand.

Dehors ce monstre! il est chez nous! Il a l’audace
De se croire chez lui! d’habiter cette place,
Ce quartier, ce logis, de payer les impôts,
Et de penser qu’il peut y dormir en repos!
Mais s’il reste, l’Etat court des périls, en somme.
Il faut bien vite mettre à la porte cet homme!

Je suis un scélérat. C’est une trahison,
Quand tout le monde est fou, d’invoquer la raison.
Je suis un malfaiteur. Faut-il qu’on vous le prouve?
Comment! si je voyais dans les dents de la louve
Un agneau, je voudrais l’en arracher! Comment!
Je crois au droit d’asile, au peuple, au Dieu clément!
Le clergé s’épouvante et le sénat frissonne.
Horreur! quoi! j’ai pour loi de n’égorger personne!
Quoi! cet homme n’est pas aux vengeances fougueux!
Il n’a point de colère et de haine, ce gueux!
Oui, l’accusation, je le confesse, est vraie.
Je voudrais dans le blé ne sarcler que l’ivraie;
Je préfère à la foudre un rayon dans le ciel;
Pour moi la plaie est mal guérie avec du fiel,
Et la fraternité c’est la grande justice.
C’est à qui détruira; j’aime mieux qu’on bâtisse.
Pour moi la charité vaut toutes les vertus;
Ceux que puissants on blesse, on les panse abattus;
La pitié dans l’abîme où l’on souffre m’entraîne,
Et j’ai cette servante adorable pour reine;
Je tâche de comprendre afin de pardonner;
Je veux qu’on examine avant d’exterminer;
Un feu de peloton pour résoudre un problème
Me déplaît. Fusiller un petit garçon blême,
A quoi bon? Je voudrais qu’à l’école on l’admît,
Hélas! et qu’il vécût! - Là-dessus on frémit.

Ces opinions-là jamais ne se tolèrent!
«Et, pour comble d’effroi, les animaux parlèrent [Delille, Géorgiques: Pecudesque locutae]”
Un monsieur Ribeaucourt m’appelle individu.

Autre preuve. Une nuit, vers mon toit éperdu,
Une horde, poussant des hurlements infâmes,
Accourt, et deux enfants tout petits, quatre femmes,
Sous les pierres, les cris de mort, l’horreur, l’effroi,
Se réveillent... - Qui donc est le bandit? C’est moi.
Certes!

Le jour d’après, devant mon seuil éparse,
Une foule en gants blancs vient rire de la farce,
En criant: - C’est trop peu! Qu’on rase la maison!
Qu’on y mette le feu! - Cette foule a raison.
Il faut tuer celui qui ne veut pas qu’on tue;
C’est juste. Le bon ordre exige une battue
Contre cet assassin plus noir qu’il n’en a l’air;
Et puisqu’on veut brûler ma maison, il est clair
Que j’ai brûlé le Louvre; et je suis l’étincelle
Qui dévore Paris en restant à Bruxelle.
Honneur à Mouravief et gloire à Galifet!
On me lapide et l’on m’exile. C’est bien fait.

O beauté de l’aurore! ô majesté de l’astre!
Gibelin contre Guelfe, Yorck contre Lancastre,
Capulet, Montaigu, qu’importe! que me font
Leurs cris, puisque voilà le firmament profond!
Ame, on a de la place aux voûtes éternelles.
Le sol manque à nos pieds, non l’azur à nos ailes.
Le despote est partout sur terre, atroce et laid,
Maître par un profit et par l’autre valet;
Mais l’aube est pure, l’air est bon, l’abîme est libre;
L’immense équité sort de l’immense équilibre;
Evadons-nous là-haut! et vivons! Le songeur
Se plonge, ô ciel sublime, en ta chaste rougeur;

Dans ta pudeur sacrée, Ombre, il se réfugie.
Dieu créa le banquet dont l'homme a fait l'orgie.
Le penseur hait la fête affreuse des tyrans.
Il voit Dieu calme au fond des gouffres transparents,
Et, saignant, pâle, après les épreuves sans nombre,
Se sent le bienvenu dans la profondeur sombre.
Il va. Sa conscience est là, rien ne dément
Cette boussole ayant l'idéal pour aimant;
Plus de frontière, plus d'obstacle, plus de borne;
Il plane. En vain sur lui la Fatalité morne
Tend son filet sinistre où dans les hideux fils
Se croisent les douleurs, les haines, les exils,
Il ne se plaint pas. Fier devant la tourbe immonde,
Il rit puisque le ciel s'offre à qui perd le monde,
Puisqu'il a pour abri cette hospitalité;
Et puisqu'il peut, ô joie! ô gouffre! ô liberté!
Domptant le sort, bravant le mal, perçant les voiles,
Par les hommes chassé, s'enfuir dans les étoiles!

JUIN

I

Un jour je vis le sang couler de toutes parts;
Un immense massacre était dans l'ombre épars;
Et l'on tuait. Pourquoi? Pour tuer. O misère!
Voyant cela, je crus qu'il était nécessaire
  Que quelqu'un élevât la voix, et je parlai.
  Je dis que Montrevel et Bâville et Harlay
  N'étaient point de ce siècle, et qu'en des jours de trouble
  Par la noirceur de tous l'obscurité redouble;
  J'affirmai qu'il est bon d'examiner un peu
  Avant de dire En joue et de commander Feu!
  Car épargner les fous, même les téméraires,
  A ceux qu'on a vaincus montrer qu'on est leurs frères,
  Est juste et sage; il faut s'entendre, il faut s'unir;
  Je rappelai qu'un Dieu nous voit, que l'avenir,
  Sombre lorsqu'on se hait, s'éclaire quand on s'aime,
  Et que le malheur croît pour celui qui le sème;
  Je déclarai qu'on peut tout calmer par degrés;
  Que des assassinats ne sont point réparés
  Par un crime nouveau que sur l'autre on enfonce;
  Qu'on ne fait pas au meurtre une bonne réponse
  En mitraillant des tas de femmes et d'enfants;
  Que changer en bourreaux des soldats triomphants,
  C'est leur faire une gloire où la honte surnage;
  Et, pensif, je me mis en travers du carnage.
  Triste, n'approuvant pas la grandeur du linceul,
  Estimant que la peine est au coupable seul,
  Pensant qu'il ne faut point, hélas! jeter le crime
  De quelques-uns sur tous, et punir par l'abîme
  Paris, un peuple, un monde, au hasard châtié,
  Je dis: Faites justice, oui, mais ayez pitié!
  Alors je fus l'objet de la haine publique.
  L'église m'a lancé l'anathème biblique,

Les rois l’expulsion, les passants des cailloux;
Quiconque a de la boue en a jeté; les loups,
Les chiens, ont aboyé derrière moi; la foule
M’a hué presque autant qu’un tyran qui s’écroule;
On m’a montré le poing dans la rue; et j’ai dû
Voir plus d’un vieil ami m’éviter éperdu.
Les tueurs souriants et les viveurs féroces,
Ceux qui d’un tombereau font suivre leurs carrosses,
Les danseurs d’autrefois, égorgeurs d’à présent,
Ceux qui boivent du vin de Champagne et du sang,
Ceux qui sont élégants tout en étant farouches,
Les Haynau, les Tavanne, ayant d’étranges mouches,
Noires, que le charnier connaît, sur leur bâton,
Les improvisateurs des feux de peloton,
Le juge Lynch, le roi Bomba, Mingrat le prétre,
M’ont crié: Meurtrier! et Judas m’a dit: Traître!

II

Quoi! rester fraternel, c’est être chimérique!
Rêver l’Europe libre autant que l’Amérique,
Réclamer l’équité, l’examen, la raison,
C’est faire du nuage et du vent sa maison!
Voir un triomphe vaste et dur, ne pas s’y joindre,
Empêcher qu’il soit pire et tâcher qu’il soit moindre,
Quoi! ne point accabler les malheureux, offrir
L’homme à l’homme, et l’asile à ceux qui vont mourir,
Ne pas prendre le faible et l’aveugle pour cible,
Pardonner, c’est vouloir habiter l’impossible!
Dire qu’on doit la loi juste, le droit commun
Même aux brigands, même aux bandits, c’est en être un!
N’importe! il faut lutter. L’heure sombre est venue.
Quant à ton âge, eh bien, sois vieux, et continue,
Vétéran. Tu seras renié de nouveau.
Les plus cléments auront pitié de ton cerveau.
Tu seras le maudit qu’on raille ou qu’on foudroie,
Tu seras insulté, hué, traqué, la proie

Des calomniateurs au crime toujours prêts,
Tu seras lapidé, proscrit. Eh bien, après?

III

Par une sérénade on fête ma clémence.
A mort! est le refrain de la douce romance.
Les journaux prêtres font un vacarme effrayant.
— Cet homme ose défendre un ennemi fuyant!
Quelle audace! il nous croit honnêtes! il nous brave! -
Les maîtres ont la rage et les valets la bave.
Meute de sacristains, meute de hobereaux.
L'encensoir furieux me casse mes carreaux;
De tous les goupillons, de toutes les prières,
L'eau bénite sur moi tombe en grêle de pierres;
On m'exorcise tant qu'on m'assassine un peu.
Bref je suis expulsé par la grâce de Dieu.
— Va-t'en! - tous les pavés pleuvent, et tous les styles.
Je suis presque ébloui de tant de projectiles.
Au-dessus de mon nom on sonne le tocsin.
— Brigand! incendiaire! assassin! assassin! -
Et nous restons, après cette bataille insigne,
Eux, blancs comme un corbeau, moi, noir comme le cygne.

IV

Je n'ai pas de palais épiscopal en ville,
Je n'ai pas de prébende et de liste civile,
Nul temple n'offre un trône à mon humilité,
Nul suisse en colonel ne brille à mon côté,
Je ne me montre pas aux gros yeux des ganaches
Sous un dais, à ses coins ayant quatre panaches;
La France, même au fond de l'abîme, est pour moi
Le grand peuple en travail d'où sort la grande loi;
Je hais qu'on la bâillonne ou qu'on la fleurdelyse;
Je ne demande pas aux passants dans l'église
Tant pour voir le bon Dieu s'il est peint par Van-Dyck;

Je n’ai ni marguillier, ni bedeau, ni syndic,
Ni custode, ni clerc, ni diacre, ni vicaire;
Je ne garde aucun saint dans aucun reliquaire;
Je n’ai pas de miracle en bouteille sous clé;
Mon vêtement n’est pas de diamants bouclé;
Je ne suis pas payé quand je fais ma prière;
Je suis fort mal en cour; aucune douairière
Ne m’admire quêtant des sous dans un plat rond,
La chape d’or au cou, la mitre d’or au front;
Je ne fais point baiser ma main aux bonnes femmes;
Je vénère le ciel, mais sans le vendre aux âmes;
On ne m’appelle pas monseigneur; je me plais
Dans les champs, et mes bas ne sont pas violets;
Les fautes que je fais sont des fautes sincères;
L’hypocrisie et moi sommes deux adversaires;
Je crois ce que je dis, je fais ce que je crois;
Je mets près de Socrate aux fers Jésus en croix;
Lorsqu’un homme est traqué comme une bête fauve,
Fût-il mon ennemi, si je peux, je le sauve;
Je méprise Basile et dédaigne Scapin;
Je donne à l’enfant pauvre un morceau de mon pain;
J’ai lutté pour le vrai, pour le bon, pour l’honnête,
Et j’ai subi vingt ans l’exil dans la tempête;
Je recommencerai demain, si Dieu le veut;
Ma conscience dit: - Marche! - rien ne m’émeut,
J’obéis, et je vais, malgré les vents contraires,
Et je fais mon devoir; et c’est pourquoi, mes frères,
Au dire du journal de l’évêque de Gand,
Si je n’étais un fou, je serais un brigand.

V

EN QUITTANT BRUXELLES

Ah! ce n’est pas aisé, suivre la voie étroite,
Donner tort à la foule et rester l’âme droite,
Protéger l’éternelle équité qu’on meurtrit.

Quand le proscrit l’essaie, on redonne au proscrit
Toute la quantité d’exil dont on dispose.

Pourtant n’exile point qui veut. C’est une chose
Inexprimable, affreuse et sainte que l’exil.
Chercher son toit dans l’ombre et dire: Où donc est-il?
Songer, vieux, dans les deuils et les mélancolies,
Aux fleurs qu’avec des mains d’enfant on a cueillies,
A tel noir coin de rue autrefois plein d’attrait
A cause d’un regard furtif qu’on rencontrait;
Se rappeler les temps, les anciennes aurores,
Et dans les champs plus verts les oiseaux plus sonores;
Ne plus trouver au ciel la couleur qu’il avait;
Penser aux morts; hélas! ne plus voir leur chevet,
Hélas! ne pouvoir plus leur parler dans la tombe;
C’est là l’exil.

L’exil, c’est la goutte qui tombe,
Et perce lentement et lâchement punit
Un coeur que le devoir avait fait de granit;
C’est la peine infligée à l’innocent, au juste,
Et dont ce condamné, sous Tarquin, sous Auguste,
Sous Bonaparte, rois et césars teints de sang,
Meurt, parce qu’il est juste et qu’il est innocent.
Un exil, c’est un lieu d’ombre et de nostalgie;
On ne sait quelle brume en silence élargie,
Que tout, un chant qui passe, un bois sombre, un récif,
Un souffle, un bruit, fait croître autour d’un front pensif.
Oh! la patrie existe! Elle seule est terrible.
Elle seule nous tient par un fil invisible;
Elle seule apparaît charmante à qui la perd;
Elle seule en fuyant fait le monde désert;
Elle seule à ses champs, hélas! restés les nôtres,
A ses arbres qui n’ont point la forme des autres,
A sa rive, à son ciel, ramène tous nos pas.
L’étranger peut bannir, mais il n’exile pas.

VI

A MADAME PAUL MEURICE

Ce que j'ai fait est bien. J'en suis puni. C'est juste.
Vous qui, dans l'affreux siège et dans l'épreuve auguste,
Fûtes vaillante, calme et charmante, bravant
Cette guerre hideuse et ce noir coup de vent,
Belle âme que le ciel fit soeur d'une âme haute,
Femme du penseur fier et doux, dont j'étais l'hôte,
Vous qui saviez donner appui, porter secours,
Aider, lutter, souffrir, et sourire toujours,
Vous voyez ce qui m'est arrivé. Peu de chose.
Vous m'avez vu rentrer dans une apothéose,
Vous me voyez chassé par l'exécration.
En moins d'un an. C'est court. Rome, Athène et Sion
Faisaient ainsi. Paris a les mêmes droits qu'elles.
D'autres villes peut-être ont moins de nerfs. Lesquelles?
Il n'en est pas. Prenons le destin comme il est.
Epargner Montaigu, c'est blesser Capulet.
Or Capulet étant le plus fort, en abuse.
Je suis un malfaiteur et je suis une buse.
Soit. On m'insulte, moi qu'hier on acclamait.
C'est pour me jeter bas qu'on m'a mis au sommet.
Ce genre de triomphe, n'est-ce pas? vaut bien l'autre.
J'en atteste, madame, un coeur comme le vôtre,
Et vous tous, dont l'esprit n'est jamais obscurci,
Vieux proscrits, n'est-ce pas que je vous plais ainsi?
J'ai défendu le peuple et combattu le prêtre.
N'est-ce pas que l'abîme est beau, qu'il est bon d'être
Maudit avec Barbès, avec Garibaldi,
Et que vous m'aimez mieux lapidé qu'applaudi?

VII

Je n'ai point de colère et cela vous étonne.
Votre tonnerre tousse et vous croyez qu'il tonne;

Grondants, vous essoufflez sur moi votre aquilon:
Votre petit éclair me pique le talon;
Je n’ai pas l’air de voir la peine qu’il se donne;
Vous sentez quelque chose en moi qui vous pardonne,
Cela vous froisse. Au fait, on est trop châtié
De vouloir faire mal et de faire pitié.
Quoi! s’unir contre un homme, en tenter l’escalade,
Et n’avoir même pas l’honneur d’une ruade!
Ne pas recevoir même un soufflet! c’est blessant.
Le proscrit parfois tombe et jamais ne descend;
Il laisse autour de lui grincer la haine infâme;
Ce n’est pas pour cela qu’il dérange son âme,
Donc soyez furieux. Serai-je irrité? Non.
Je doute que j’en vienne à savoir votre nom.
Les vieux bannis pensifs sont une race inculte;
Avant de nous fâcher parce qu’on nous insulte,
C’est notre usage à nous qui sommes exigeants
De regarder un peu la stature des gens.

VIII

A QUI LA FAUTE?

Tu viens d’incendier la Bibliothèque?

Oui.
J’ai mis le feu là.

— Mais c’est un crime inouï!
Crime commis par toi contre toi-même, infâme!
Mais tu viens de tuer le rayon de ton âme!
C’est ton propre flambeau que tu viens de souffler!
Ce que ta rage impie et folle ose brûler,
C’est ton bien, ton trésor, ta dot, ton héritage!
Le livre, hostile au maître, est à ton avantage.
Le livre a toujours pris fait et cause pour toi.
Une bibliothèque est un acte de foi

Des générations ténébreuses encore
Qui rendent dans la nuit témoignage à l’aurore.
Quoi! dans ce vénérable amas des vérités,
Dans ces chefs-d’oeuvre pleins de foudre et de clartés,
Dans ce tombeau des temps devenu répertoire,
Dans les siècles, dans l’homme antique, dans l’histoire,
Dans le passé, leçon qu’épelle l’avenir,
Dans ce qui commença pour ne jamais finir,
Dans les poètes! quoi, dans ce gouffre des bibles,
Dans le divin monceau des Eschyles terribles,
Des Homères, des Jobs, debout sur l’horizon,
Dans Molière, Voltaire et Kant, dans la raison,
Tu jettes, misérable, une torche enflammée!
De tout l’esprit humain tu fais de la fumée!
As-tu donc oublié que ton libérateur,
C’est le livre? Le livre est là sur la hauteur;
Il luit; parce qu’il brille et qu’il les illumine,
Il détruit l’échafaud, la guerre, la famine
Il parle, plus d’esclave et plus de paria.
Ouvre un livre. Platon, Milton, Beccaria.
Lis ces prophètes, Dante, ou Shakespeare, ou Corneille
L’âme immense qu’ils ont en eux, en toi s’éveille;
Ebloui, tu te sens le même homme qu’eux tous;
Tu deviens en lisant grave, pensif et doux;
Tu sens dans ton esprit tous ces grands hommes croître,
Ils t’enseignent ainsi que l’aube éclaire un cloître
A mesure qu’il plonge en ton coeur plus avant,
Leur chaud rayon t’apaise et te fait plus vivant;
Ton âme interrogée est prête à leur répondre;
Tu te reconnais bon, puis meilleur; tu sens fondre,
Comme la neige au feu, ton orgueil, tes fureurs,
Le mal, les préjugés, les rois, les empereurs!
Car la science en l’homme arrive la première.
Puis vient la liberté. Toute cette lumière,
C’est à toi, comprends donc, et c’est toi qui l’éteins!
Les buts rêvés par toi sont par le livre atteints.
Le livre en ta pensée entre, il défait en elle

Les liens que l’erreur à la vérité mêle,
Car toute conscience est un noeud gordien.
Il est ton médecin, ton guide, ton gardien.
Ta haine, il la guérit; ta démence, il te l’ôte.
Voilà ce que tu perds, hélas, et par ta faute!
Le livre est ta richesse à toi! c’est le savoir,
Le droit, la vérité, la vertu, le devoir,
Le progrès, la raison dissipant tout délire.
Et tu détruis cela, toi!

— Je ne sais pas lire.

IX

La prisonnière passe, elle est blessée. Elle a
On ne sait quel aveu sur le front. La voilà!
On l’insulte! Elle a l’air des bêtes à la chaîne.
On la voit à travers un nuage de haine.
Qu’a-t-elle fait? Cherchez dans l’ombre et dans les cris,
Cherchez dans la fumée affreuse de Paris.
Personne ne le sait. Le sait-elle elle-même?
Ce qui pour l’homme est crime est pour l’esprit problème.
La faim, quelque conseil ténébreux, un bandit
Si monstrueux qu’on l’aime et qu’on fait ce qu’il dit,
C’est assez pour qu’un être obscur se dénature.
Ce noir plan incliné qu’on nomme l’aventure,
La pente des instincts fauves, le fatal vent
Du malheur en courroux profond se dépravant,
Cette sombre forêt que la guerre civile
Toujours révèle au fond de toute grande ville,
Dire: d’autres ont tout, et moi qu’est-ce que j’ai?
Songer, être en haillons, et n’avoir pas mangé,
Tout le mal sort de là. Pas de pain sur la table;
Il ne faut rien de plus pour être épouvantable.
Elle passe au milieu des foules sans pitié.
Quand on a triomphé, quand on a châtié,
Qu’a-t-on devant les yeux? la victoire aveuglante.

Tout Versailles est en fête. Elle se tait sanglante.
Le passant rit, l'essaim des enfants la poursuit
De tous les cris que peut jeter l'aube à la nuit.
L'amer silence écume aux deux coins de sa bouche;
Rien ne fait tressaillir sa surdité farouche;
Elle a l'air de trouver le soleil ennuyeux;
Une sorte d'effroi féroce est dans ses yeux.
Des femmes cependant, hors des vertes allées,
Douces têtes, des fleurs du printemps étoilées,
Charmantes, laissant pendre au bras de quelque amant
Leur main exquise et blanche où brille un diamant,
Accourent. Oh! l'infâme! on la tient! quelle joie!
Et du manche sculpté d'une ombrelle de soie,
Frais et riants bourreaux du noir monstre inclément,
Elles fouillent sa plaie avec rage et gaiement.
Je plains la misérable; elles, je les réprouve.
Les chiennes font horreur venant mordre la louve.

X

Une femme m'a dit ceci: - J'ai pris la fuite.
Ma fille que j'avais au sein, toute petite,
Criait, et j'avais peur qu'on n'entendît sa voix.
Figurez-vous, c'était un enfant de deux mois;
Elle n'avait pas plus de force qu'une mouche.
Mes baisers essayaient de lui fermer la bouche,
Elle criait toujours; hélas! elle râlait.
Elle voulait téter, je n'avais plus de lait.
Toute une nuit s'était de la sorte écoulée.
Je me cachais derrière une porte d'allée,
Je pleurais, je voyais les chassepots briller.
On cherchait mon mari qu'on voulût fusiller.
Tout à coup, le matin, sous cette horrible porte,
L'enfant ne cria plus. Monsieur, elle était morte.
Je la touchai; monsieur, elle était froide. Alors,
Cela m'était égal qu'on me tuât; dehors,
Au hasard, j'emportai ma fille, j'étais folle,

J’ai couru, des passants m’adressaient la parole,
Mais je me suis enfuie, et, je ne sais plus où,
J’ai creusé de mes mains dans la campagne un trou,
Au pied d’un arbre, au coin d’un enclos solitaire;
Et j’ai couché mon ange endormi dans la terre;
L’enfant qu’on allaita, c’est dur de l’enterrer.

Et le père était là qui se mit à pleurer.

XI

Sur une barricade, au milieu des pavés
Souillés d’un sang coupable et d’un sang pur lavés,
Un enfant de douze ans est pris avec des hommes.
— Es-tu de ceux-là, toi! - L’enfant dit: Nous en sommes.
— C’est bon, dit l’officier, on va te fusiller.
Attends ton tour. - L’enfant voit des éclairs briller,
Et tous ses compagnons tomber sous la muraille.
Il dit à l’officier: Permettez-vous que j’aille
Rapporter cette montre à ma mère chez nous?
— Tu veux t’enfuir? - Je vais revenir. - Ces voyous
Ont peur! Où loges-tu? - Là, près de la fontaine.
Et je vais revenir, monsieur le capitaine.
— Va-t’en, drôle! - L’enfant s’en va. - Piège grossier!
Et les soldats riaient avec leur officier,
Et les mourants mêlaient à ce rire leur râle
Mais le rire cessa, car soudain l’enfant pâle,
Brusquement reparu, fier comme Viala,
Vint s’adosser au mur et leur dit: Me voilà.

La mort stupide eut honte, et l’officier fit grâce.

Enfant, je ne sais point, dans l’ouragan qui passse
Et confond tout, le bien, le mal, héros, bandits,
Ce qui dans ce combat te poussait, mais je dis
Que ton âme ignorante est une âme sublime.
Bon et brave, tu fais, dans le fond de l’abîme,

Deux pas, l’un vers ta mère et l’autre vers la mort;
L’enfant a la candeur et l’homme a le remord,
Et tu ne réponds point de ce qu’on te fit faire;
Mais l’enfant est superbe et vaillant qui préfère
A la fuite, à la vie, à l’aube, aux jeux permis,
Au printemps, le mur sombre où sont morts ses amis.
La gloire au front te baise, ô toi si jeune encore!
Doux ami, dans la Grèce antique, Stésichore
T’eût chargé de défendre une porte d’Argos;
Cinégyre t’eût dit: Nous sommes deux égaux!
Et tu serais admis au rang des purs éphèbes
Par Tyrtée à Messène et par Eschyle à Thèbes.
On graverait ton nom sur des disques d’airain;
Et tu serais de ceux qui, sous le ciel serein,
S’ils passent près du puits ombragé par le saule,
Font que la jeune fille ayant sur son épaule
L’urne où s’abreuveront les buffles haletants,
Pensive, se retourne et regarde longtemps.

XII

LES FUSILLES

Guerre qui veut Tacite et qui repousse Homère!
La victoire s’achève en massacre sommaire.
Ceux qui sont satisfaits sont furieux; j’entends
Dire: - Il faut en finir avec les mécontents. -
Alceste est aujourd’hui fusillé par Philinte.
Faites.

Partout la mort. Eh bien, pas une plainte.
O blé que le destin fauche avant qu’il soit mûr!
O peuple!

On les amène au pied de l’affreux mur.
C’est bien. Ils ont été battus du vent contraire.
L’homme dit au soldat qui l’ajuste: Adieu, frère.

La femme dit: - Mon homme est tué. C’est assez.
Je ne sais s’il eut tort ou raison, mais je sais
Que nous avons traîné le malheur côte à côte;
Il fut mon compagnon de chaîne; si l’on m’ôte
Cet homme, je n’ai plus besoin de vivre. Ainsi
Puisqu’il est mort, il faut que je meure. Merci. -
Et dans les carrefours les cadavres s’entassent.
Dans un noir peloton vingt jeunes filles passent;
Elles chantent; leur grâce et leur calme innocent
Inquiètent la foule effarée; un passant
Tremble. - Où donc allez-vous? dit-il à la plus belle.
Parlez. - Je crois qu’on va nous fusiller, dit-elle.
Un bruit lugubre emplit la caserne Lobau;
C’est le tonnerre ouvrant et fermant le tombeau.
Là des tas d’hommes sont mitraillés; nul ne pleure;
Il semble que leur mort à peine les effleure,
Qu’ils ont hâte de fuir un monde âpre, incomplet,
Triste, et que cette mise en liberté leur plaît.
Nul ne bronche. On adosse à la même muraille
Le petit-fils avec l’aïeul, et l’aïeul raille,
Et l’enfant blond et frais s’écrie en riant: Feu!

Ce rire, ce dédain tragique, est un aveu.
Gouffre de glace! énigme où se perd le prophète!
Donc ils ne tiennent pas à la vie; elle est faite
De façon qu’il leur est égal de s’en aller.
C’est en plein mois de mai; tout veut vivre et mêler
Son instinct ou son âme à la douceur des choses;
Ces filles-là devraient aller cueillir des roses;
L’enfant devrait jouer dans un rayon vermeil;
L’hiver de ce vieillard devrait fondre au soleil;
Ces âmes devraient être ainsi que des corbeilles
S’emplissant de parfums, de murmures d’abeilles,
De chants d’oiseaux, de fleurs, d’extase, de printemps!
Tous devraient être d’aube et d’amour palpitants.
Eh bien, dans ce beau mois de lumière et d’ivresse,
O terreur! c’est la mort qui brusquement se dresse,

La grande aveugle, l’ombre implacable et sans yeux;
Oh! comme ils vont trembler et crier sous les cieux,
Sangloter, appeler à leur aide la ville,
La nation qui hait l’Euménide civile,
Toute la France, nous, nous tous qui détestons
Le meurtre pêle-mêle et la guerre à tâtons!
Comme ils vont, l’oeil en pleurs, bras tordus, mains crispées
Supplier les canons, les fusils, les épées,
Se cramponner aux murs, s’attacher aux passants,
Et fuir, et refuser la tombe, frémissants;
Et hurler: On nous tue! au secours! grâce! grâce!
Non. Ils sont étrangers à tout ce qui se passe;
Ils regardent la mort qui vient les emmener.
Soit. Ils ne lui font pas l’honneur de s’étonner.
Ils avaient dès longtemps ce spectre en leur pensée.
Leur fosse dans leur coeur était toute creusée.
Viens, mort!

Etre avec nous, cela les étouffait.
Ils partent. Qu’est-ce donc que nous leur avions fait?
O révélation! Qu’est-ce donc que nous sommes
Pour qu’ils laissent ainsi derrière eux tous les hommes,
Sans un cri, sans daigner pleurer, sans un regret?
Nous pleurons, nous. Leur coeur au supplice était prêt.
Que leur font nos pitiés tardives? Oh! quelle ombre!
Que fûmes-nous pour eux avant cette heure sombre?
Avons-nous protégé ces femmes? Avons-nous
Pris ces enfants tremblants et nus sur nos genoux?
L’un sait-il travailler et l’autre sait-il lire?
L’ignorance finit par être le délire;
Les avons-nous instruits, aimés, guidés enfin,
Et n’ont-ils pas eu froid? et n’ont-ils pas eu faim?
C’est pour cela qu’ils ont brûlé vos Tuileries.
Je le déclare au nom de ces âmes meurtries,
Moi, l’homme exempt des deuils de parade et d’emprunt,
Qu’un enfant mort émeut plus qu’un palais défunt
C’est pour cela qu’ils sont les mourants formidables,

Qu'ils ne se plaignent pas, qu'ils restent insondables,
Souriants, menaçants, indifférents, altiers,
Et qu'ils se laissent presque égorger volontiers.
Méditons. Ces damnés, qu'aujourd'hui l'on foudroie,
N'ont pas de désespoir n'ayant pas eu de joie.
Le sort de tous se lie à leur sort. Il le faut.
Frères, bonheur en bas, sinon malheur en haut!
Hélas! faisons aimer la vie aux misérables.
Sinon, pas d'équilibre. Ordre vrai, lois durables,
Fortes moeurs, paix charmante et virile pourtant,
Tout, vous trouverez tout dans le pauvre content.
La nuit est une énigme ayant pour mot l'étoile.
Cherchons. Le fond du coeur des souffrants se dévoile.
Le sphinx, resté masqué, montre sa nudité.
Ténébreux d'un côté, clair de l'autre côté,
Le noir problème entr'ouvre à demi la fenêtre
Par où le flamboiement de l'abîme pénètre.
Songeons, puisque sur eux le suaire est jeté,
Et comprenons. Je dis que la société
N'est point à l'aise ayant sur elle ces fantômes;
Que leur rire est terrible entre tous les symptômes,
Et qu'il faut trembler, tant qu'on n'aura pu guérir
Cette facilité sinistre de mourir.

XIII

A CEUX QU'ON FOULE AUX PIEDS

Oh! je suis avec vous! j'ai cette sombre joie.
Ceux qu'on accable, ceux qu'on frappe et qu'on foudroie
M'attirent; je me sens leur frère; je défends
Terrassés ceux que j'ai combattus triomphants;
Je veux, car ce qui fait la nuit sur tous m'éclaire,
Oublier leur injure, oublier leur colère,
Et de quels noms de haine ils m'appelaient entre eux.
Je n'ai plus d'ennemis quand ils sont malheureux.
Mais surtout c'est le peuple, attendant son salaire,

Le peuple, qui parfois devient impopulaire,
C’est lui, famille triste, hommes, femmes, enfants,
Droit, avenir, travaux, douleurs, que je défends;
Je défends l’égaré, le faible, et cette foule
Qui, n’ayant jamais eu de point d’appui, s’écroule
Et tombe folle au fond des noirs événements;
Etant les ignorants, ils sont les incléments;
Hélas! combien de temps faudra-t-il vous redire
A vous tous, que c’était à vous de les conduire,
Qu’il fallait leur donner leur part de la cité,
Que votre aveuglement produit leur cécité;
D’une tutelle avare on recueille les suites,
Et le mal qu’ils vous font, c’est vous qui le leur fîtes.
Vous ne les avez pas guidés, pris par la main,
Et renseignés sur l’ombre et sur le vrai chemin;
Vous les avez laissés en proie au labyrinthe.
Ils sont votre épouvante et vous êtes leur crainte;
C’est qu’ils n’ont pas senti votre fraternité.
Ils errent; l’instinct bon se nourrit de clarté;
Ils n’ont rien dont leur âme obscure se repaisse;
Ils cherchent des lueurs dans la nuit, plus épaisse
Et plus morne là-haut que les branches des bois;
Pas un phare. A tâtons, en détresse, aux abois,
Comment peut-il penser celui qui ne peut vivre?
En tournant dans un cercle horrible, on devient ivre;
La misère, âpre roue, étourdit Ixion.
Et c’est pourquoi j’ai pris la résolution
De demander pour tous le pain et la lumière.

Ce n’est pas le canon du noir vendémiaire,
Ni les boulets de juin, ni les bombes de mai,
Qui font la haine éteinte et l’ulcère fermé.
Moi, pour aider le peuple à résoudre un problème,
Je me penche vers lui. Commencement: je l’aime.
Le reste vient après. Oui, je suis avec vous,
J’ai l’obstination farouche d’être doux,
O vaincus, et je dis: Non, pas de représailles!

O mon vieux coeur pensif, jamais tu ne tressailles
Mieux que sur l’homme en pleurs, et toujours tu vibras
Pour des mères ayant leurs enfants dans les bras.

Quand je pense qu’on a tué des femmes grosses,
Qu’on a vu le matin des mains sortir des fosses,
O pitié! quand le pense à ceux qui vont partir!
Ne disons pas: Je fus proscrit, je fus martyr.
Ne parlons pas de nous devant ces deuils terribles;
De toutes les douleurs ils traversent les cribles;
Ils sont vannés au vent qui les emporte, et vont
Dans on ne sait quelle ombre au fond du ciel profond.
Où? qui le sait? leurs bras vers nous en vain se dressent.
Oh! ces pontons sur qui j’ai pleuré reparaissent,
Avec leurs entreponts où l’on expire, ayant
Sur soi l’énormité du navire fuyant!
On ne peut se lever debout; le plancher tremble;
On mange avec les doigts au baquet tous ensemble,
On boit l’un après l’autre au bidon, on a chaud,
On a froid, l’ouragan tourmente le cachot,
L’eau gronde, et l’on ne voit, parmi ces bruits funèbres,
Qu’un canon allongeant son cou dans les ténèbres.
Je retombe en ce deuil qui jadis m’étouffait.
Personne n’est méchant, et que de mal on fait!

Combien d’êtres humains frissonnent à cette heure,
Sur la mer qui sanglote et sous le ciel qui pleure,
Devant l’escarpement hideux de l’inconnu!
Etre jeté là, triste, inquiet, tremblant, nu,
Chiffre quelconque au fond d’une foule livide,
Dans la brume, l’orage et les flots, dans le vide,
Pêle-mêle et tout seul, sans espoir, sans secours,
Ayant au coeur le fil brisé de ses amours!
Dire: - « Où suis-je? On s’en va. Tout pâlit, tout se creuse,
Tout meurt. Qu’est-ce que c’est que cette fuite affreuse?
La terre disparaît, le monde disparaît.
Toute l’immensité devient une forêt.

Je suis de la nuée et de la cendre. On passe.
Personne ne va plus penser à moi. L’espace!
Le gouffre! Où sont-ils ceux près de qui je dormais!” -
Se sentir oublié dans la nuit pour jamais!
Devenir pour soi-même une espèce de songe!
Oh! combien d’innocents, sous quelque vil mensonge
Et sous le châtiment féroce, stupéfaits!
— Quoi! disent-ils, ce ciel où je me réchauffais,
Je ne le verrai plus! on me prend la patrie!
Rendez-moi mon foyer, mon champ, mon industrie,
Ma femme, mes enfants! rendez-moi la clarté!
Qu’ai-je donc fait pour être ainsi précipité
Dans la tempête infâme et dans l’écume amère,
Et pour n’avoir plus droit à la France ma mère! -

Quoi! lorsqu’il s’agirait de sonder, ô vainqueurs,
L’obscur puits social béant au fond des coeurs,
D’étudier le mal, de trouver le remède,
De chercher quelque part le levier d’Archimède,
Lorsqu’il faudrait forger la clef des temps nouveaux;
Après tant de combats, après tant de travaux,
Et tant de fiers essais et tant d’efforts célèbres,
Quoi! pour solution, faire dans les ténèbres,
Nous, guides et docteurs, nous les frères aînés,
Naufrager un chaos d’hommes infortunés!
Décréter qu’on mettra dehors, qui? le mystère!
Que désormais l’énigme a l’ordre de se taire,
Et que le sphinx fera pénitence à genoux!
Quels vieillards sommes-nous! quels enfants sommes-nous!
Quel rêve, hommes d’Etat! quel songe, ô philosophes!
Quoi! pour que les griefs, pour que les catastrophes,
Les problèmes, l’angoisse et les convulsions
S’en aillent, suffit-il que nous les expulsions?
Rentrer chez soi, crier: - Français, je suis ministre
Et tout est bien! - tandis qu’à l’horizon sinistre,
Sous des nuages lourds, hagards, couleur de sang,
Chargé de spectres, noir, dans les flots décroissant,

Avec l’enfer pour aube et la mort pour pilote,
On ne sait quel radeau de la Méduse flotte!
Quoi! les destins sont clos, disparus, accomplis,
Avec ce que la vague emporte dans ses plis!
Ouvrir à deux battants la porte de l’abîme,
Y pousser au hasard l’innocence et le crime,
Tout, le mal et le bien, confusément puni,
Refermer l’océan et dire: c’est fini!
Etre des hommes froids qui jamais ne s’émoussent,
Qui n’attendrissent point leur justice, et qui poussent
L’impartialité jusqu’à tout châtier!
Pour le guérir, couper le membre tout entier!
Quoi! pour expédient prendre la mer profonde!
Au lieu d’être ceux-là par qui l’ordre se fonde,
Jeter au gouffre en tas les faits, les questions,
Les deuils que nous pleurions et que nous attestions,
La vérité, l’erreur, les hommes téméraires,
Les femmes qui suivaient leurs maris ou leurs frères,
L’enfant qui remua follement le pavé,
Et faire signe aux vents, et croire tout sauvé
Parce que sur nos maux, nos pleurs, nos inclémences,
On a fait travailler ces balayeurs immenses!

Eh bien, que voulez-vous que je vous dise, moi!
Vous avez tort. J’entends les cris, je vois l’effroi,
L’horreur, le sang, la mer, les fosses, les mitrailles,
Je blâme. Est-ce ma faute enfin? j’ai des entrailles.
Eternel Dieu! c’est donc au mal que nous allons?
Ah! pourquoi déchaîner de si durs aquilons
Sur tant d’aveuglements et sur tant d’indigences?
Je frémis.

Sans compter que toutes ces vengeances,
C’est l’avenir qu’on rend d’avance furieux!
Travailler pour le pire en faisant pour le mieux,
Finir tout de façon qu’un jour tout recommence,
Nous appelons sagesse, hélas! cette démence.

Flux, reflux. La souffrance et la haine sont soeurs.
Les opprimés refont plus tard des oppresseurs.

Oh! dussé-je, coupable aussi moi d'innocence,
Reprendre l'habitude austère de l'absence,
Dût se refermer l'âpre et morne isolement,
Dussent les cieux, que l'aube a blanchis un moment,
Redevenir sur moi dans l'ombre inexorables,
Que du moins un ami vous reste, ô misérables!
Que du moins il vous reste une voix! que du moins
Vous nous ayez, la nuit et moi, pour vos témoins?
Le droit meurt, l'espoir tombe, et la prudence est folle.
Il ne sera pas dit que pas une parole
N'a, devant cette éclipse affreuse, protesté.
Je suis le compagnon de la calamité.
Je veux être, - je prends cette part, la meilleure, -
Celui qui n'a jamais fait le mal, et qui pleure;
L'homme des accablés et des abandonnés.
Volontairement j'entre en votre enfer, damnés.
Vos chefs vous égaraient, je l'ai dit à l'histoire;
Certes, je n'aurais pas été de la victoire,
Mais je suis de la chute; et je viens, grave et seul,
Non vers votre drapeau, mais vers votre linceul.
Je m'ouvre votre tombe.

Et maintenant, huées,
Toi calomnie et toi haine, prostituées,
O sarcasmes payés, mensonges gratuits,
Qu'à Voltaire ont lancés Nonotte et Maupertuis,
Poings montrés qui jadis chassiez Rousseau de Bienne,
Cris plus noirs que les vents de l'ombre libyenne,
Plus vils que le fouet sombre aux lanières de cuir,
Qui forciez le cercueil de Molière à s'enfuir,
Ironie idiote, anathèmes farouches,
O reste de salive encor blanchâtre aux bouches
Qui crachèrent au front du pâle Jésus-Christ,
Pierre éternellement jetée à tout proscrit,

Acharnez-vous! Soyez les bien venus, outrages.
C’est pour vous obtenir, injures, fureurs, rages,
Que nous, les combattants du peuple, nous souffrons,
La gloire la plus haute étant faite d’affronts.

XIV

A VIANDEN

Il songe. Il s’est assis rêveur sous un érable.
Entend-il murmurer la forêt vénérable?
Regarde-t-il les fleurs? regarde-t-il les cieux?
Il songe. La nature au front mystérieux
Fait tout ce qu’elle peut pour apaiser les hommes;
Du coteau plein de vigne au verger plein de pommes
Les mouches viennent, vont, reviennent; les oiseaux
Jettent leur petite ombre errante sur les eaux;
Le moulin prend la source et l’arrête au passage;
L’étang est un miroir où le frais paysage
Se renverse et se change en vague vision;
Tout dans la profondeur fait une fonction;
Pas d’atome qui n’ait sa tâche; tout s’agite;
Le grain dans le sillon, la bête dans son gîte,
Ont un but; la matière obéit à l’aimant;
L’immense herbe infinie est un fourmillement;
Partout le mouvement sans relâche et sans trêve,
Dans ce qui pousse, croît, monte, descend, se lève,
Dans le nid, dans le chien harcelant les troupeaux,
Dans l’astre; et la surface est le vaste repos;
En dessous tout s’efforce, en dessus tout sommeille;
On dirait que l’obscure immensité vermeille
Qui balance la mer pour bercer l’alcyon,
Et que nous appelons Vie et Création,
Charmante, fait semblant de dormir, et caresse
L’universel travail avec de la paresse.
Quel éblouissement pour l’oeil contemplateur!
De partout, du vallon, du pré, de la hauteur,

Du bois qui s’épaissit et du ciel qui rougeoie,
Sort cette ombre, la paix, et ce rayon, la joie.
Et maintenant, tandis qu’à travers les ravins,
Une petite fille avec des yeux divins
Et de lestes pieds nus dignes de Praxitèle,
Chasse à coups de sarment sa chèvre devant elle,
Voici ce qui remue en l’âme du banni:

— Hélas! tout n’est pas dit et tout n’est pas fini
Parce qu’on a creusé dans la rue une fosse,
Parce qu’un chef désigne un mur où l’on adosse
De pauvres gens devant les feux de pelotons,
Parce qu’on exécute au hasard, à tâtons,
Sans choix, sous la mitraille et sous la fusillade,
Pères, mères, le fou, le brigand, le malade,
Et qu’on fait consumer en hâte par la chaux
Des corps d’hommes sanglants et d’enfants encor chauds!

XV

Toujours le même fait se répète; il le faut.
Le trône abject s’adosse à l’illustre échafaud;
L’aigle semble inutile et ridicule aux grues;
On traîne Coligny par les pieds dans les rues;
Dante est fou; Rome met à la porte Caton;
Et Rohan bat Voltaire à grands coups de bâton.
Soyez celui qui lutte, aime, console, pense,
Pardonne, et qui pour tous souffre, et pour récompense
Ayez la haine, l’onde amère, le reflux,
L’ombre, et ne demandez aux hommes rien de plus.
Toutes ces choses-là sont les vérités vraies
Depuis que la lumière indigne les orfraies,
Depuis Socrate, Eschyle, Épictète et Zénon,
Depuis qu’au Oui des cieux la terre répond Non,
Depuis que Sparte en deuil fait rire les Sodomes,
Depuis, - voilà bientôt deux mille ans, - que les hommes
Ont vu, sur un gibet et sur un piédestal,

Deux couronnes paraître au même instant fatal;
Chacune représente un côté de notre âme;
L’une est de laurier d’or, l’autre d’épine infâme;
Elles sont sur deux fronts dont rien ne les ôta.
L’une brille à Caprée et l’autre au Golgotha.

XVI

Je ne veux condamner personne, ô sombre histoire.
Le vainqueur est toujours traîné par sa victoire
Au-delà de son but et de sa volonté;
Guerre civile! ô deuil! le vainqueur emporté
Perd pied dans son triomphe et sombre en cette eau noire
Qu’on appelle succès n’osant l’appeler gloire.
C’est pourquoi tous, martyrs et bourreaux, je les plains.
Hélas! malheur à ceux qui font des orphelins!
Malheur! malheur! malheur à ceux qui font des veuves!
Malheur quand le carnage affreux rougit les fleuves,
Et quand, souillant leur lit d’un flot torrentiel,
Le sang de l’homme coule où coule l’eau du ciel!
Devant un homme mort un double effroi me navre.
J’ai pitié du tueur autant que du cadavre.
Le mort tient le vivant dans sa rigide main.
Le meurtrier prendra n’importe quel chemin,
Il peut chasser ce mort, et le chasser encore,
L’enfouir dans la nuit, le noyer dans l’aurore,
Le jeter à la mer, le perdre, et, plein d’ennui,
Mettre une épaisseur d’ombre entre son crime et lui;
Toujours il reverra ce spectre insubmersible.

*

De l’arc tendu là-haut nous sommes tous la cible;
Sa flèche tour à tour nous vise; le vainqueur
L’a dans l’esprit avant de l’avoir dans le coeur;
Il craint l’événement dont il est le ministre;
Il sent dans le lointain sourdre une heure sinistre;

Il sent que lui non plus, même en hâtant le pas,
A sa propre victoire il n’échappera pas.
Un jour, à son tour, pris par le piège des choses,
Tremblant du résultat dont il construit les causes,
Il fuira, demandant un asile, un appui,
Un abri. « Non! diront ses amis d’aujourd’hui,
Non! Va-t’en! - C’est pourquoi je tiens ma porte ouverte.”

*

Le penseur en songeant fait une découverte:
Personne n’est coupable.

Un si noir dénoûment
Laisse au fond de son gouffre entrevoir l’élément.
Le futur siècle gronde et s’enfle en d’âpres cuves
Comme la lave écume aux bouches des vésuves.
Qui donc dans ce chaos travaillait? Je ne sais.
Des foudres ont rugi, des aigles ont passé;
Tout ce que nous voyons s’est fait entre les serres
Des fléaux inconnus, hideux et nécessaires;
Ils se sont rués comme une troupe d’oiseaux;
Le sang profond du coeur, la moelle des os,
Tout l’homme a tressailli dans l’homme, à la venue
Du sombre essaim des faits nouveaux fendant la nue;
Et dans l’inattendu s’abattant sur nos fronts
Nous avons reconnu le mal dont nous souffrons;
Alors les appétits des foules redoutables
Se sont mis à mugir au fond de leurs étables,
Et nous avons senti que l’appétit enfin
A tort s’il est l’envie et droit s’il est la faim.
La lumière un moment s’est toute évanouie.
Qu’est-ce que c’était donc que cette heure inouïe?
Là des chocs furieux, là des venins subtils.
Pourquoi ces vents ont-ils soufflé? d’où viennent-ils?
Pourquoi ces becs de flamme écrasant ces couvées?
Pourquoi ces profondeurs brusquement soulevées?

On a fait des forfaits dont on est innocent.
Les révolutions parfois versent le sang,
Et, quand leur volonté de vaincre se déchaîne,
Leur formidable amour ressemble à de la haine.
Maintenons, maintenons les principes sacrés;
Mais quand par l'aquilon les coeurs sont égarés,
Quand ils soufflent sur nous comme sur de la cendre,
Au fond du noir problème il faut savoir descendre;
L'homme subit, le gouffre agit; les ouragans
Sont les seuls scélérats et sont les seuls brigands.
Envoyez la tempête et la trombe à Cayenne!
Non, notre âme n'est pas tout à coup une hyène,
Non, nous ne sommes pas brusquement des bandits;
Non, je n'accuse point l'homme faible, et je dis
Que la fureur du vent fatal qui nous emmène
Peut t'arracher ton ancre, ô conscience humaine!
L'homme qu'hier la mer sauvage secouait,
Répond-il de ce flot dont il fut le jouet?
Peut-il être à la fois le vautour et la proie?
Bien qu'ayant confiance en ce qui nous foudroie,
Bien que pour l'inconnu je me sente clément,
Je le dis, l'accusé pour moi, c'est l'élément.
L'élément, dur moteur que rien ne déconcerte.

*

Mais faut-il donc trembler devant l'avenir? Certe,
Il faut songer. Trembler, non pas. Sachez ceci:
Ce rideau du destin par l'énigme épaissi,
Cet océan difforme où flotte l'âme humaine,
La vaste obscurité de tout le phénomène,
Ce monde en mal d'enfant ébauchant le chaos,
Ces idéals ayant des profils de fléaux,
Ces émeutes manquant toujours la délivrance,
Toute cette épouvante, oui, c'est de l'espérance.
Le matin glacial consterne l'horizon;
Parfois le jour commence avec un tel frisson

Que le soleil levant semble une attaque obscure.
La branche offre la fleur au prix de la piqûre.
Par un sentier d'angoisse aux bleus sommets j'irai.
La vie ouvrant de farce un ventre déchiré,
A pour commencement une auguste souffrance.

L'onde de l'inconnu n'a qu'une transparence
Livide, où la clarté ne vient que par degrés;
Ce qu'elle montre flotte en plis démesurés.
La dilatation de la forme et du nombre
Etonne, et c'est hideux d'apercevoir dans l'ombre
Aujourd'hui ce qui doit n'être vu que demain.
Demain semble infernal tant il est surhumain.
Ce qui n'est pas encor germe en d'obscurs repaires;
Demain qui charmera les fils, fait peur aux pères,
L'azur est sous la nuit dont nous nous effrayons,
Et cet oeuf ténébreux est rempli de rayons.
Cette larve lugubre aura plus tard des ailes.
Spectre visible au fond des ombres éternelles,
Demain dans Aujourd'hui semble un embryon noir,
Rampant en attendant qu'il plane, étrange à voir,
Informe, aveugle, affreux; plus tard l'aube le change.
L'avenir est un monstre avant d'être un archange.

XVII

Il y avait dans les esprits une véritable exagération de la valeur, des facultés, de l'importance de la garde nationale... Mon Dieu, vous avez vu le képi de M. Victor Hugo qui symbolisait cette situation.
(Le Général Trochu à l'Assemblée Nationale, - 14 juin 1871.)

Participe passé du verbe Tropchoir, homme
De toutes les vertus sans nombre dont la somme
Est zéro, soldat brave, honnête, pieux, nul,
Bon canon, mais ayant un peu trop de recul,
Preux et chrétien, tenant cette double promesse,

Capable de servir ton pays et la messe,
Vois, je te rends justice; eh bien, que me veux-tu?
Tu fais sur moi, d’un style obtus, quoique pointu,
Un retour offensif qu’eût mérité la Prusse.
Dans ce siège allemand et dans cet hiver russe,
Je n’étais, j’en conviens, qu’un vieillard désarmé,
Heureux d’être en Paris avec tous enfermé,
Profitant quelquefois d’une nuit de mitraille
Et d’ombre, pour monter sur la grande muraille,
Pouvant dire Présent, mais non pas Combattant,
Bon à rien; je n’ai pas capitulé pourtant.
Tes lauriers dans ta main se changent en orties.
Quoi donc, c’est contre moi que tu fais des sorties!
Nous t’en trouvions avare en ce siège mauvais.
Eh bien, nous avions tort; tu me les réservais.
Toi qui n’as point franchi la Marne et sa presqu’île,
Tu m’attaques. Pourquoi? je te laissais tranquille.
D’où vient que ma coiffure en drap bleu te déplaît?
Qu’est-ce que mon képi fait à ton chapelet?

Quoi! tu n’es pas content! cinq longs mois nous subîmes
Le froid, la faim, l’approche obscure des abîmes,
Sans te gêner, unis, confiants, frémissants?
Si tu te crois un grand général, j’y consens;
Mais quand il faut courir au gouffre, aller au large,
Pousser toute une armée au feu, sonner la charge,
J’aime mieux un petit tambour comme Barra.
Songe à Garibaldi qui vint de Caprera,
Songe à Kléber au Caire, à Manin dans Venise,
Et calme-toi. Paris formidable agonise
Parce que tu manquas, non de coeur, mais de foi.
L’amère histoire un jour dira ceci de toi:
La France, grâce à lui, ne battit que d’une aile.
Dans ces grands jours, pendant l’angoisse solennelle,
Ce fier pays, saignant, blessé, jamais déchu,
Marcha par Gambetta, mais boita par Trochu.

XVIII

LES INNOCENTS

Mais les enfants sont là. Le murmure qui sort
De ces âmes en fleur est-il compris du sort?
L’enfant va devant lui gaiement; mais la prière,
Quand il rit, parle-t-elle à quelqu’un en arrière?
Le frais chuchotement du doux être enfantin
Attendrit-il l’oreille obscure du destin?
Oh! que d’ombre! Tous deux chantent, fragiles têtes
Où flotte la lueur d’on ne sait quelles fêtes,
Et que dore un reflet d’un paradis lointain!
Les enfants ont des coeurs faits comme le matin
Ils ont une innocence étonnée et joyeuse;
Et pas plus que l’oiseau gazouillant sous l’yeuse,
Pas plus que l’astre éclos sur les noirs horizons,
Ils ne sont inquiets de ce que nous faisons,
Ayant pour toute affaire et pour toute aventure
L’épanouissement de la grande nature;
Ils ne demandent rien à Dieu que son soleil;
Ils sont contents pourvu qu’un beau rayon vermeil
Chauffe les petits doigts de leur main diaphane
Et que le ciel soit bleu, cela suffit à Jeanne.

JUILLET

I

LES DEUX VOIX

LA VOIX SAGE

Toute la politique est un expédient.
Que fais-tu? Quoi! tu vas, niant, répudiant,
Blâmant toute action en dehors des principes.
Prends garde. En efforts vains et nuls tu te dissipes.
C’est moi qui guide l’homme errant dans la forêt.
J’ai pour nom la Raison, pour prénom l’Intérêt,
Et je suis la Sagesse. Ami, je parle, écoute.
Caton qui m’a bravée a su ce qu’il en coûte.
O poëte, chercheur du mieux, tu perds le bien.
Il t’échappe. Tu fais échouer Tout sur Rien.
Laisse donc succomber les choses qui succombent!
Ta pente est de toujours aller vers ceux qui tombent,
Ce qui fait que jamais tu ne seras vainqueur.
N’a pas assez d’esprit qui montre trop de coeur.
La vérité trop vraie est presque le mensonge.
En cherchant l’idéal, on rencontre le songe,
Si l’on plonge au-delà de l’exacte épaisseur;
Et l’on devient rêveur pour être trop penseur.
Le sage ne veut pas être injuste, mais, ferme,
Craint d’être aussi trop juste, et cherche un moyen terme;
Premier écueil, le faux; deuxième écueil, le vrai.
Le droit brut, pris en bloc, n’est que le minerai;
La loi, c’est l’or. Du droit il faut savoir l’extraire.
Quelquefois on a l’air de faire le contraire
De ce qu’on devrait faire, et c’est là le grand art.
Tu n’arrives jamais, et moi j’arrive tard;
Mieux vaut arriver tard que pas du tout. En somme,
Tu fais de l’homme un dieu, de dieu je fais un homme;

Voilà la différence entre nous. Réfléchis.
Tu braves le chaos, moi je crains le gâchis.
Es-tu sûr de finir par tirer de ton gouffre
Autre chose qu'un être imbécile qui souffre?
Crois-tu refaire à neuf l'homme et tripler ses sens?
Prends-moi donc tels qu'ils sont les vivants, ces passants!
Foin du déclamateur qui s'essouffle et qui beugle!
Trop de lumière autant que trop de nuit, aveugle.
On n'ouvre qu'à demi le volet, s'il le faut.
On n'aime pas la guerre et l'on hait l'échafaud
En théorie; eh bien, on s'en sert en pratique.
Mon cher, il faut au temple adosser la boutique;
Je sais qu'on a chassé les vendeurs du saint lieu,
Mais le tort de Jésus est d'être un peu trop dieu.
Il me faudrait de fiers garants pour que je crusse
Qu'il eût payé les cinq milliards à la Prusse.
Le sage se modère en tout. Calme en mon coin,
Je blâme l'infini, mon cher, qui va trop loin;
Sur la création, beaucoup trop large sphère,
Les bons esprits ont bien des critiques à faire;
L'excès est le défaut de ce monde, entre nous;
Le soleil est superbe et le printemps est doux,
L'un a trop de rayons et l'autre a trop de roses;
C'est l'inconvénient de ces sortes de choses,
Et Dieu n'est pas exempt d'exagération.
L'imiter, c'est tomber dans la perfection,
Grand danger; tout va mieux sur un patron moins ample,
Et Dieu ne donne pas toujours le bon exemple.
A quoi sert d'être à pic? Jésus passe le but
En n'examinant point l'offre de Belzébuth;
Je ne dis pas qu'il dût accepter; mais c'est bête
Que Dieu soit impoli quand le diable est honnête.
Il eût mieux valu dire: On verra, mon ami.
Le sage ne fait pas le fier. Une fourmi
Travaille plus avec sa routine ordinaire
Et son bon sens, qu'avec son vacarme un tonnerre.
L'homme est l'homme; il n'est pas méchant, il n'est pas bon.

Blanc comme neige, point; noir comme le charbon,
Non. Blanc et noir, mêlé, tigré, douteux, sceptique.
Tout homme médiocre est homme politique.
Cherchons, non la grandeur, mais la proportion.
Agir comme Aristide et comme Phocion,
Etre héroïque, épique et beau, mauvaise affaire.
Le sage au Parthénon en ruine préfère
La hutte confortable et chaude du castor.
Je fréquente Rothschild et fuis Adamastor.
Le titan d’aujourd’hui c’est le millionnaire.
L’homme d’Etat ne veut rien d’excessif; vénère
Le vote universel, mais travaille au scrutin;
Il supprime l’esclave et garde le pantin;
Il conserve le fil tout en brisant la chaîne.
Les hommes sont petits, leur conscience est naine;
L’homme d’Etat leur prend mesure avant d’oser;
Il s’ôte une vertu qui peut les dépasser;
Il les étonne, mais sans foudre et sans vertiges;
A leur dimension il leur fait des prodiges.
Ami, le médiocre est un très bon endroit,
Ni beau, ni laid, ni haut, ni bas, ni chaud, ni froid;
Moi, la raison, j’y fais mon lit, j’y mets ma table,
Et j’y vis, le sublime étant inhabitable.
Qui donc prend pour logis la cime du Mont-Blanc?
Le sage est médiocre et souple, ou fait semblant.
Vois, tu t’es fait jeter des pierres à Bruxelles.
Les journaux à sonnette agitent leurs crécelles;
La gazette des fonds secrets de l’empereur
Dit des choses sur toi qu’on lit avec horreur,
Que tu comptes les mots d’un télégramme, et même
Qu’on boit de mauvais vin chez toi, qu’on fait carême
A ta table, et que B. n’ira plus dîner là;
Et caetera. Tu t’es attiré tout cela.
Monsieur Veuillot t’appelle avec esprit citrouille;
A compter tes forfaits la mémoire s’embrouille:
Ivrognerie et vol, képi sans numéro,
Avarice. Tu vis sous clameur de haro.

C’est ta faute. Pourquoi n’es-tu pas raisonnable?
Renonce à tenir tête au mal. Sois convenable.
Tenir tête au mal, certe, est bon; mais être seul
Est mauvais. Tu n’es pas barbon, vieillard, aïeul,
Pour avancer alors que ton siècle recule;
Combattre en cheveux blancs et seul, est ridicule;
Un vaillant qui devient prudent grandit encor;
Nestor jeune est Ajax, Ajax vieux est Nestor;
Sois de ton âge; enseigne aux peuples la sagesse.
La Vérité trop nue est une sauvagesse;
Rudoyer le succès est l’acte d’un butor;
Tout vainqueur a raison, tout ce qui brille est or;
Aquilon est le dieu, Girouette est le culte.
Bonaparte est tombé, c’est pourquoi je l’insulte.
Est-ce ma faute, à moi, si le sort se dément?
Je ne sors pas de là; réussissez. Comment!
Aujourd’hui, l’on est tous, d’une façon oblique,
D’accord; c’est à cela que sert la République;
On sauve, en supprimant quiconque est ennemi,
A grands coups de canon, et de compte à demi,
L’ordre et la monarchie encor presque inédite;
Tu refuses d’entrer dans cette commandite!
C’est absurde. On s’indigne, on a raison. D’ailleurs
Jeunes, vieux, grands, petits, les pires, les meilleurs,
Ont tous la même loi, se rendre à l’évidence.
Toujours un peu de droit dans le fait se condense;
Le mal contient un peu de bien, qu’il faut chercher.
Si Torquemada règne, on se chauffe au bûcher.
La Politique est l’art de faire avec la fange,
Le fiel, l’abaissement qu’en modestie on change,
La bassesse des grands, l’insolence des nains,
Les fautes, les erreurs, les crimes, les venins,
Le oui, le non, le blanc, le noir, Genève et Rome,
Un breuvage que puisse avaler l’honnête homme.
Les principes n’ont pas grand’chose à faire là.
Ils rayonnent; c’est bien; Morus les contempla;
Saluons-les; tout astre a droit à ce péage;

Et couvrons-les parfois de quelque bon nuage.
Ils sont là-haut, pourquoi s’en servir ici-bas?
Laissons-les dans leur sphère; et nous, pour nos débats
Où se dépense en vain tant de force avortée,
Prenons une clarté mieux à notre portée:
L’expédient. Turgot a tort; vive Terray!
Je cherche le réel, toi tu cherches le vrai.
On vit par le réel, par le vrai l’on se brise;
Le réel craint le vrai. Reconnais ta méprise.
Le devoir, c’est l’emploi des faits. Tu l’as mal lu.
Au lieu du relatif, tu choisis l’absolu.
Un homme qui, voulant y voir clair pour descendre
Dans la cave, ou fouiller dans quelque tas de cendre,
Ou pour trouver, la nuit, dans les bois, son chemin,
Enfoncerait au fond du ciel sombre sa main,
Et prendrait une étoile en guise de chandelle,
C’est toi.

LA VOIX HAUTE

N’écoute pas. Reste une âme fidèle.
Un coeur, pas plus qu’un ciel, ne peut être obscurci.
Je suis la conscience, une vierge; et ceci
C’est la raison d’Etat, une fille publique.
Elle embrouille le vrai par le faux qu’elle explique.
Elle est la soeur bâtarde et louche du bon sens.
J’admets que la clarté basse ait des partisans;
Qu’on la trouve excellente et qu’elle soit utile
Pour éviter un choc, parer un projectile,
Marcher à peu près droit dans les carrefours noirs,
Et pour s’orienter dans les petits devoirs;
Les publicains en font leur lampe en leurs échoppes
Elle a pour elle, et c’est tout simple, les myopes,
Les habiles, les fins, les prudents, les discrets,
Ceux qui ne peuvent voir les choses que de près,
Ceux qui d’une araignée examinent les toiles;
Mais il faut bien quelqu’un qui soit pour les étoiles!

Il faut quelqu’un qui soit pour la fraternité,
La clémence, l’honneur, le droit, la liberté,
Et pour la vérité, resplendissement sombre!
Les constellations sont sublimes dans l’ombre,
Elles reluisent, fleurs de l’éternel été;
Mais elles ont besoin, dans leur sérénité,
Que l’univers guidé leur rende témoignage,
Et que, renouvelé sur terre d’âge en âge,
Un homme, rassurant ses frères condamnés,
Crie à travers la nuit: Astres, vous rayonnez!
Car rien ne serait plus effrayant que le crime,
La vertu, le rayon, l’ombre, égaux dans l’abîme;
Rien n’accuserait Dieu plus que de la clarté
Perdue, éparse au fond des cieux sans volonté;
Et rien ne prouverait là-haut plus de démence
Que l’inutilité de la lumière immense.
C’est pourquoi la justice est bonne, et l’astre est bon.
Dans vingt pays affreux, Soudan, Darfour, Gabon,
L’homme fut pris, lié, traîné, vendu de force,
Jusqu’au lever d’un astre appelé Wilberforce.
Etre juste, au hasard, dût-on être martyr,
Et laisser hors de soi la justice sortir,
C’est le rayonnement véritable de l’homme.
En quelque lieu qu’un acte inique se consomme,
Quel que soit le moment où le mal se construit,
Il faut qu’une voix parle, il faut que dans la nuit
On voie une lueur tout à coup apparaître.
Au ciel ce dieu, le Vrai, sur la terre ce prêtre,
Le Juste. Ce sont là les deux besoins. Il faut
Contredire le vent et résister au flot.
L’équité monte et plane et n’a pas d’autre règle.
Qui donc prend pour logis le haut du mont Blanc? l’aigle.

II

FLUX ET REFLUX

Il tombe. Est-ce fini? Non, cela recommence.
On se passe de peuple à peuple la démence;
Ce que la France fit, le Teuton le refait.
Sur l'enclume, où Forbach naguère triomphait,
L'Allemagne, ouvrier géant dont l'esprit flotte,
Forge un tyran avec les tronçons d'un despote.
Est-ce donc qu'on ne peut sortir de l'empereur?
César traître est chassé par César en fureur;
Je tiens peu, si l'un vient, à ce que l'autre parte,
Si l'an gagne Guillaume en perdant Bonaparte,
Et si, prenant son vol à l'heure où l'autre fuit,
L'oiseau de proie arrive après l'oiseau de nuit.
Deuil! honte! Est-ce fini? Non, cela recommence.
La tempête reprend avec plus d'inclémence;
Et les événements deviennent monstrueux.
Lequel des deux serpents est le plus tortueux?
Lequel des deux dragons fait la plus fauve entrée?
Et lequel est Thyeste? et lequel est Atrée?
L'invasion s'en va, le fratricide suit.
La victoire devant la conscience fuit
Et se cache, de peur que le ciel ne la voie.
L'énigme qu'il faudrait sonder, on la foudroie;
Mais que voulez-vous donc, sages pareils aux fous,
Que l'avenir devienne et qu'il fasse de vous,
Si vous ne lui montrez que haine, et si vous n'êtes
Bons qu'à le recevoir à coups de bayonnettes?
L'utopie est livrée au juge martial.
La faim, la pauvreté, l'obscur loup social
Mordant avec le pain la main qui le présente,
L'ignorance féroce, idiote, innocente,
Les misérables noirs, sinistrement moqueurs,
Et la nuit des esprits d'où naît la nuit des coeurs,
Tout est là devant nous, douleurs, familles blêmes;
Et nous avons recours, contre tous ces problèmes,
Au sombre apaisement que sait faire la mort.
Mais ces hommes qu'on tue ont tué; c'est le sort
Qui leur rend coup pour coup, et, sanglants, les supprime...

Est-ce qu’on remédie au crime par le crime?
Est-ce que l’assassin doit être assassiné?
Vers l’auguste idéal, d’aurore illuminé,
Vers le bonheur, la vie en fleurs, l’éden candide,
Qu’on nous mène, et nous prenons pour guide
Méduse, glaive au poing, l’oeil en feu, le sein nu!
Hélas, le cimetière est un puits inconnu;
Ce qu’on y jette tombe en des cavités sombres;
Ce sont des ossements qu’on ajoute aux décombres;
Morne ensemencement d’où la mort renaîtra.
Des questions où nul encor ne pénétra
Pressent de tous côtés notre lugubre sphère;
Et je ne pense pas qu’on se tire d’affaire
Par l’élargissement tragique du tombeau.

*

Le pauvre a le haillon, le riche a le lambeau,
Rien d’entier pour personne; et sur tous l’ombre infâme.
L’amour dans aucun coeur, l’azur dans aucune âme;
Hélas! partout frisson, colère, enfer, cachot;
Mais c’est si ténébreux que cela vient d’en haut.
L’esprit, sous ce nuage où tout semble se taire,
Sent l’incubation énorme d’un mystère.
Le fatal travail noir blanchira par degré.
Ce que nous rencontrons, c’est l’obstacle ignoré.
Les récifs montrent l’un après l’autre leurs têtes,
Car les événements ont leur cap des Tempêtes.
Derrière est la clarté. Ces flux et ces reflux,
Ces recommencements, ces combats, sont voulus.
Au-dessus de la haine immense, quelqu’un aime.
Ayons foi. Ce n’est pas sans quelque but suprême
Que sans cesse, en ce gouffre où rêvent les sondeurs,
Un prodigieux vent soufflant des profondeurs,
A travers l’âpre nuit, pousse, emporte et ramène
Sur tout l’écueil divin toute la mer humaine.

III

L'AVENIR

Polynice, Etéocle, Abel, Caïn! ô frères!
Vieille querelle humaine! échafauds! lois agraires!
Batailles! ô drapeaux, ô linceuls! noirs lambeaux!
Ouverture hâtive et sombre des tombeaux!
Dieu puissant! quand la mort sera-t-elle tuée?
O sainte paix!

La guerre est la prostituée;
Elle est la concubine infâme du hasard.
Attila sans génie et Tamerlan sans art
Sont ses amants; elle a pour eux des préférences;
Elle traîne au charnier toutes nos espérances,
Egorge nos printemps, foule aux pieds nos souhaits,
Et comme elle est la haine, ô ciel bleu, je la hais!
J'espère en toi, marcheur qui viens dans les ténèbres,
Avenir!

Nos travaux sont d'étranges algèbres;
Le labyrinthe vague et triste où nous rôdons
Est plein d'effrois subits, de pièges, d'abandons;
Mais toujours dans la main le fil obscur nous reste.
Malgré le noir duel d'Atrée et de Thyeste,
Malgré Léviathan combattant Béhémoth,
J'aime et je crois. L'énigme enfin dira son mot.
L'ombre n'est pas sur l'homme à jamais acharnée.
Non! Non! l'humanité n'a point pour destinée
D'être assise immobile au seuil froid des tombeaux,
Comme Jérôme, morne et blême, dans Ombos,
Ou comme dans Argos la douloureuse Electre.

Un jour, moi qui ne crains l'approche d'aucun spectre,
J'allai voir le lion de Waterloo. Je vins
Jusqu'à la sombre plaine à travers les ravins;

C’était l’heure où le jour chasse le crépuscule;
J’arrivai; je marchai droit au noir monticule.
Indigné, j’y montai; car la gloire du sang,
Du glaive et de la mort me laisse frémissant.
Le lion se dressait sur la plaine muette;
Je regardais d’en bas sa haute silhouette;
Son immobilité défiait l’infini;
On sentait que ce fauve, au fond des cieux banni,
Relégué dans l’azur, fier de sa solitude,
Portait un souvenir affreux sans lassitude;
Farouche, il était là, ce témoin de l’affront.
Je montais, et son ombre augmentait sur mon front.
Et tout en gravissant vers l’âpre plate-forme,
Je disais: Il attend que la terre s’endorme;
Mais il est implacable; et, la nuit, par moment
Ce bronze doit jeter un sourd rugissement;
Et les hommes, fuyant ce champ visionnaire,
Doutent si c’est le monstre ou si c’est le tonnerre.
J’arrivai jusqu’à lui, pas à pas m’approchant...

J’attendais une foudre et j’entendis un chant.

Une humble voix sortait de cette bouche énorme.
Dans cette espèce d’antre effroyable et difforme
Un rouge-gorge était venu faire son nid;
Le doux passant ailé que le printemps bénit,
Sans peur de la mâchoire affreusement levée,
Entre ces dents d’airain avait mis sa couvée;
Et l’oiseau gazouillait dans le lion pensif.
Le mont tragique était debout comme un récif
Dans la plaine jadis de tant de sang vermeille;
Et comme je songeais, pâle et prêtant l’oreille,
Je sentis un esprit profond me visiter,
Et, peuples, je compris que j’entendais chanter
L’espoir dans ce qui fut le désespoir naguère,
Et la paix dans la gueule horrible de la guerre.

IV

LES CRUCIFIES

La foule tient pour vrai ce qu'invente la haine.
Sur tout grand homme un ver, le mensonge, se traîne.
Tout front ceint de rayons est d'épines mordu;
A la lèvre d'un dieu le fiel atroce est dû;
Tout astre a pour manteau les ténèbres infâmes.
Ecoutez. Phidias était marchand de femmes,
Socrate avait un vice auquel son nom resta,
Horace ami des boucs faisait frémir Vesta,
Caton jetait un nègre esclave à la lamproie,
Michel-Ange, amoureux de l'or, homme de proie,
Vivait sous le bâton des papes, lui Romain,
Et leur tendait le dos en leur tendant la main;
Dans l'oeil de Dante errant la cupidité brille;
Molière était un peu le mari de sa fille;
Voltaire était avare et Diderot vénal;
Devant le genre humain, orageux tribunal,
Pas un homme qu'on n'ait puni de son génie;
Pas un qu'on n'ait cloué sur une calomnie;
Pas un, des temps anciens comme de maintenant,
Qui sur le Golgotha de la gloire saignant,
Une auréole au front, ne pende à la croix vile;
Et les uns ont Caïphe et les autres Zoïle.

V

FALKENFELS

Falkenfels, qu'on distingue au loin dans la bruine,
Est le burg démoli d'un vieux comte en ruine.
Je voulus voir le burg et l'homme. Je montai
La montagne, à travers le bois, un jour d'été.
On rencontre à mi-côte, en un ravin tombée,
Une vieille chapelle où court le scarabée;

Nul curé n’y venant prier, elle croula;
Car tous sont appauvris dans ce dur pays-là,
Hélas, c’est en haillons qu’on danse à la kermesse,
Et personne n’a plus de quoi payer la messe.
Or, pas d’argent, voilà ce que le prêtre craint;
Une niche indigente effarouche le saint,
Il déserte; au moment d’entrer, le dieu renâcle
Sur le seuil dédoré du pauvre tabernacle;
C’est pourquoi la chapelle est morte. Je laissai
Ce cadavre d’église au fond du noir fossé,
Et je continuai ma route vers la cime.
J’arrivai. Je parvins au burg fauve et sublime.
Même en plein jour, une ombre effrayante est dessus.
Sur la brèche qui sert de porte, j’aperçus
Au pied des larges tours qu’un haut blason surmonte,
Un grand vieux paysan pensif, c’était le comte.

Cet homme était assis; au bruit que fit mon pas,
Grave, il tourna la tête et ne se leva pas.
Il avait près de lui son fils, un enfant rose.
Saluer un vaincu, c’est déjà quelque chose,
Je saluai ce comte aboli. Je lui dis:
— Vous voilà pauvre, vous qui fûtes grand jadis.
Comte, je viens à vous d’une façon civile.
Donnez-moi votre fils pour qu’il vienne à la ville.
Redevenir sauvage est bon pour le vieillard
Et mauvais pour l’enfant; l’aube craint le brouillard;
La rose meurt dans l’ombre où se plaît la chouette.
Certe, avoir sur le front l’altière silhouette
De ces tours qu’aujourd’hui garde la ronce en fleur,
C’est beau; mais habiter dans son siècle est meilleur.
Votre fils s’éteindrait dans ces brumes, vous dis-je.
Le monstre est dans nos temps à côté du prodige;
Mais le prodige est sûr de vaincre. Donnez-nous,
O sombre aïeul, l’enfant charmant, farouche et doux,
Pour qu’il aille à Paris comme on allait à Rome,
Pour que, ne pouvant plus être comte, il soit homme,

Et pour qu'à son beau nom il ajoute un beau sort.
Il faut laisser entrer les autres quand on sort;
L'aigle laisse envoler l'aiglon; et que l'arbuste
Ne soit pas étouffé par le chêne, c'est juste.

Le sinistre vieillard sourit superbement,
Et me dit: - La ruine aime l'isolement.
Si je fus grand jadis, il me sied de m'en taire.
Les gens sont curieux de voir un homme à terre.
Vous m'avez vu, c'est bien. Pas de mots superflus.
Je ne connais personne et je n'existe plus.
Allez-vous-en.

— Mais quoi! dis-je, cette jeune aile
N'est pas faite, ô vieillard, pour la nuit éternelle.
L'enfant sans avenir laisse au père un remord.

Il répondit: - J'entends dire, moi qui suis mort,
De vous autres vivants, des choses misérables;
Que chez vous le triomphe est aux inexorables,
Que les hommes en sont encore au talion,
Qu'ils trouvent le renard plus grand que le lion,
Que leur vérité louche et que leur raison boite,
Et qu'on fusille à gauche et qu'on mitraille à droite,
Et qu'au milieu du sang, de l'horreur et des cris,
C'est un forfait d'offrir un asile aux proscrits.
Est-ce vrai? je le crains. Est-ce faux? je l'espère.
Mais laissez-moi, je suis honnête en mon repaire.
Mon fils boira la même eau pure que je bois.
Vous m'offrez la cité, je préfère les bois;
Car je trouve, voyant les hommes que vous êtes,
Plus de coeur aux rochers, moins de bêtise aux bêtes.

VI

LES INSULTEURS

Pourvu que son branchage, au-dessus du marais,
Verdisse, et soit le dôme énorme des forêts,
Qu'importe au chêne l'eau hideuse où ses pieds trempent!
Les insectes affreux de la poussière rampent
Sous le bloc immobile aux broussailles mêlé;
Mais au géant de marbre, auguste et mutilé,
Au sphinx de granit, rose et sinistre, qu'importe
Ce que de lui, sous lui, peut penser le cloporte!
Dans la nuit où frémit le palmier convulsif,
Le colosse, les mains sur ses genoux, pensif,
Calme, attend le moment de parler à l'aurore;
Si la limace bave à sa base, il l'ignore;
Ce dieu n'a jamais su qu'un crapaud remuait;
Pendant qu'un ver sur lui glisse, il garde, muet,
Son mystère effrayant de sonorité sombre;
Et le fourmillement des millepieds sans nombre
N'ôte pas à Memnon, subitement vermeil,
La formidable voix qui répond au soleil.

VII

LE PROCES A LA REVOLUTION

Lorsque vous traduisez, juges, à votre barre,
La Révolution, qui fut dure et barbare
Et féroce à ce point de chasser les hiboux;
Qui, sans respect, fakirs, derviches, marabouts,
Molesta tous les gens d'église, et mit en fuite,
Rien qu'en les regardant, le prêtre et le jésuite,
La colère vous prend.

Oui, c'est vrai, désormais
L'homme-roi, l'homme-dieu, fantômes des sommets,
S'effacent, revenants guerriers, goules papales;
Un vent mystérieux souffle sur ces fronts pâles;
Et vous, le tribunal, vous êtes indignés.
Quel deuil! les noirs buissons de larmes sont baignés;

Les fêtes de la nuit vorace sont finies;
Le monde ténébreux râle; que d'agonies!
Il fait jour, c'est affreux! et la chauve-souris
Est aveugle, et la fouine erre en poussant des cris;
Le ver perd sa splendeur; hélas, le renard pleure;
Les bêtes qui le soir allaient chasser, à l'heure
Où le petit oiseau s'endort, sont aux abois;
La désolation des loups remplit les bois;
Les spectres opprimés ne savent plus que faire;
Si cela continue, et si cette lumière
Persiste à consterner l'orfraie et le corbeau,
Le vampire mourra de faim dans le tombeau;
Le rayon sans pitié prend l'ombre et la dévore... -

O juges, vous jugez les crimes de l'aurore.

VIII

A HENRI V

J'étais adolescent quand vous étiez enfant;
J'ai sur votre berceau fragile et triomphant
Chanté mon chant d'aurore; et le vent de l'abîme
Depuis nous a jetés chacun sur une cime,
Car le malheur, lieu sombre où le sort nous admet,
Etant battu de coups de foudre, est un sommet.
Le gouffre est entre nous comme entre les deux pôles.
Vous avez le manteau de roi sur les épaules
Et dans la main le sceptre, éblouissant jadis;
Moi j'ai des cheveux blancs au front, et je vous dis:
C'est bien. L'homme est viril et fort qui se décide
A changer sa fin triste en un fier suicide;
Qui sait tout abdiquer, hormis son vieil honneur;
Qui cherche l'ombre ainsi qu'Hamlet dans Elseneur,
Et qui, se sentant grand surtout comme fantôme,
Ne vend pas son drapeau même au prix d'un royaume.
Le lys ne peut cesser d'être blanc. Il est bon,

Certes, de demeurer Capet, étant Bourbon;
Vous avez raison d’être honnête homme. L’histoire
Est une région de chute et de victoire
Où plus d’un vient ramper, où plus d’un vient sombrer.
Mieux vaut en bien sortir, prince, qu’y mal entrer.

IX

LES PAMPHLETAIRES D’EGLISE

Ils nous apportent Dieu dans une diatribe.
Ils sont le prêtre, ils sont le reître, ils sont le scribe.
Regardez écumer leur prose de bedeau.
Chacun d’eux mêle un cri d’orfraie à son credo,
Souligne avec l’estoc sa prière, et ponctue
Ses oremus avec une balle qui tue.
Voyez, leur chair est faible et leur esprit est prompt.
Ils jettent au hasard et devant eux l’affront
Comme le goupillon jette de l’eau bénite.
La faulx sombre à leur gré ne va pas assez vite;
On les entend crier au bourreau: Fainéant!
La mort leur semble avoir besoin d’un suppléant.
Ne pourrait-on trouver quelqu’un qui ressuscite
Besme et fasse sortir Laffemas du Cocyte?
Où donc est Trestaillon, instrumentum regni?
Où sont les bons chrétiens qui hachaient Coligny?
Puisque décidément quatre-vingt-neuf abuse
Rendez-nous le roi Charle avec son arquebuse,
Et Montrevel, le fauve et rude compagnon.
Où sont les portefaix utiles d’Avignon
Qui traînaient Brune mort le long du quai du Rhône?
Où sont ces grands bouchers de l’autel et du trône,
Dont le front au soleil des Cévennes suait,
Que conduisait Bâville et qu’aimait Bossuet?
Certe, on fait ce qu’on peut avec les mitrailleuses,
Mais le bourgeois incline aux douceurs périlleuses,
Il en arrive presque à blâmer Galifet,

Le sang finit par faire aux crétins de l’effet,
Et l’attendrissement a gagné ce bipède.
Quel besoin on aurait d’un président d’Oppède!
Comme un Laubardemont serait le bienvenu!
L’arc-en-ciel de la paix, c’est un grand sabre nu.
Sans le glaive, après tout le meilleur somnifère,
Nulle société ne se tire d’affaire,
Et c’est un dogme auquel on doit s’habituer
Que, lorsqu’on sauve, il faut commencer par tuer.

Donc on est écrivain comme on est trabucaire!
On se fait lieutenant de l’empereur, vicaire
Du pape, et le fondé de pouvoirs de la mort!
On est celui qui ment, déchire, aboie et mord!
Ils viennent, louches, vils, dévots, frapper à terre
Rochefort, l’archer fier, le puissant sagittaire
Dont la flèche est au flanc de l’empire abattu.
Tu déterres Flourens, chacal! qu’en feras-tu?
Ils outragent leurs pleurs, les veuvages, les tombes,
Blanchissent les corbeaux, noircissent les colombes,
Lapident un berceau que protège un linceul,
Blessent Dieu dans le peuple et l’enfant dans l’aïeul,
Les pères dans les fils, les hommes dans les femmes,
Et pensent qu’ils sont forts parce qu’ils sont infâmes!

*

Nous les voyons s’ébattre au-dessus de Paris
Comme un troupeau d’oiseaux jetant au vent des cris,
Ou comme ce bon vieux télégraphe de Chappe
Faisant un geste obscur dont le sens nous échappe;
Mais nous apercevons distinctement leur but.
L’opprobre que la France et que l’Europe but,
Ils veulent, meurtriers, nous le faire reboire.
Rome infaillible emploie à cela son ciboire.
Le sanglant droit divin, l’effrayant bon plaisir,
Le vice pour sultan, le crime pour visir,

Eux ayant le festin, le pauvre ayant les miettes,
L’espoir mort, la rentrée affreuse aux oubliettes,
Voilà leur rêve. Il faut pour vaincre jeter bas
Ce Christ, le peuple, et mettre au pavois Barabbas,
Il faut faire de tous et de tout table rase,
Il faut, si quelque front se dresse, qu’on l’écrase,
Il faut que le premier devienne le dernier,
Il faut jeter Voltaire et Jean-Jacque au panier!
Si Caton souffle un mot, qu’à la barre on le cite.
Et qu’on traîne devant monsieur Gaveau, Tacite!
Il s’agit du passé qu’on veut galvaniser;
Il faut tant diffamer, insulter, dénoncer,
Mentir, calomnier, baver, hurler et mordre,
Que le bon goût renaisse à côté du bon ordre!

*

Et quel rire! ô ciel noir! railler la France en deuil!
Ils lui font de la honte avec son vieil orgueil.
Ils l’accusent d’avoir mis en liberté l’homme,
D’avoir fait Sparte avec les débris de Sodome,
D’avoir au front du peuple essuyé la sueur,
D’être le grand orage et la grande lueur,
D’être sur l’horizon la haute silhouette,
De s’être réveillée au cri de l’alouette
Et d’avoir réparti la tâche aux travailleurs;
De dire à qui voit Dieu dans Rome: il est ailleurs;
De confronter le dogme avec la conscience;
D’avoir on ne sait quelle auguste impatience;
D’épier la blancheur que sur nos horizons
Doivent faire en s’ouvrant les portes des prisons;
De nous avoir crié: Marchez! quand nous agîmes
Contre tous les vieux jougs et tous les vieux régimes,
Et de tenir là-haut la balance, et d’avoir
Dans un plateau le droit, dans l’autre le devoir.
Ils lui reprochent, quoi? la fin des servitudes,
La chute du mur noir troué par les Latudes,

Le fanal allumé dans l’ombre où nous passions,
Le lever successif des constellations,
Tous ces astres parus au ciel l’un après l’autre,
Molière, ce moqueur pensif comme un apôtre,
Pascal et Diderot, Danton et Mirabeau;
Ses fautes sont le Vrai, le Bien, le Grand, le Beau;
Son crime, c’est cette oeuvre étoilée et profonde,
La Révolution, par qui renaît le monde,
Cette création deuxième qui refait
L’homme après Christ, après Cécrops, après Japhet.
Là-dessus ces gredins font le procès en règle
A la patrie, à l’ange immense aux ailes d’aigle;
Elle est vaincue, elle est sanglante; on crie: A bas
Sa gloire! à bas ses voeux, ses travaux, ses combats!
Le coupable de tous les désastres, c’est elle!
Et ces pieds ténébreux marchent sur l’immortelle;
Elle est perverse, absurde et folle! et chacun d’eux
Sur ce malheur sacré crache un rire hideux.
Or sachez-le, vous tous, toi vil bouffon, toi cuistre,
Mal parler de sa mère est un effort sinistre,
C’est un crime essayé qui fait frémir le ciel,
O monstres, c’est payer son lait avec du fiel,
C’est gangrener sa plaie, envenimer ses fièvres,
Et c’est le parricide, enfin, du bout des lèvres!

Mais quand donc ceux qui font le mal seront-ils las?
Une minute peut blesser un siècle, hélas!
Je plains ces hommes d’être attendus par l’histoire.

Comme elle frémira la grande muse noire,
Et comme elle sera stupéfaite de voir
Qu’on cloue au pilori ceux qui font leur devoir,
Que le peuple est toujours pâture, proie et cible,
Que la tuerie en masse est encore possible,
Et qu’en ce siècle, après Locke et Voltaire, ont pu
Reparaître, dans l’air tout à coup corrompu,
Les Fréron, les Sanchez, les Montluc, les Tavannes,

Plus nombreux que les fleurs dans l'herbe des savanes!

Peuple, tu resteras géant malgré ces nains.
France, un jour sur le Rhin et sur les Apennins,
Ayant sous le sourcil l'éclair de Prométhée,
Tu te redresseras, grande ressuscitée!
Tu surgiras; ton front jettera les frayeurs,
L'épouvante et l'aurore à tes noirs fossoyeurs;
Tu crieras: Liberté! Paix! Clémence! Espérance!
Eschyle dans Athène et Dante dans Florence
S'accouderont au bord du tombeau, réveillés,
Et te regardant, fiers, joyeux, les yeux mouillés,
Croiront voir l'un la Grèce et l'autre l'Italie.
Tu diras: Me voici! j'apaise et je délie!
Tous les hommes sont l'Homme! un seul peuple! un seul Dieu!
Ah! par toute la terre, ô patrie, en tout lieu,
Des mains se dresseront vers toi; nulle couleuvre,
Nulle hydre, nul démon ne peut empêcher l'oeuvre;
Nous n'avons pas encor fini d'être Français;
Le monde attend la suite et veut d'autres essais;
Nous entendrons encor des ruptures de chaînes,
Et nous verrons encor frissonner les grands chênes!

X

O Charles, je te sens près de moi. Doux martyr,
Sous terre où l'homme tombe,
Je te cherche, et je vois l'aube pâle sortir
Des fentes de ta tombe.

Les morts, dans le berceau, si voisin du cercueil,
Charmants, se représentent;
Et pendant qu'à genoux je pleure, sur mon seuil
Deux petits enfants chantent.

Georges, Jeanne, chantez! Georges, Jeanne, ignorez!
Reflétez votre père,

Assombris par son ombre indistincte, et dorés
Par sa vague lumière.

Hélas! que saurait-on si l'on ne savait point
Que la mort est vivante!
Un paradis, où l'ange à l'étoile se joint,
Rit dans cette épouvante.

Ce paradis sur terre apparaît dans l'enfant.
Orphelins, Dieu vous reste.
Dieu, contre le nuage où je souffre, défend
Votre lueur céleste.

Soyez joyeux pendant que je suis accablé.
A chacun son partage.
J'ai vécu presque un siècle, enfants; l'homme est troublé
Par de l'ombre à cet âge.

Est-on sûr d'avoir fait, ne fût-ce qu'à demi,
Le bien qu'on pouvait faire?
A-t-on dompté la haine, et de son ennemi
A-t-on été le frère?

Même celui qui fit de son mieux a mal fait.
Le remords suit nos fêtes.
Je sais que, si mon coeur quelquefois triomphait,
Ce fut dans mes défaites.

En me voyant vaincu je me sentais grandi.
La douleur nous rassure.
Car à faire saigner je ne suis pas hardi;
J'aime mieux ma blessure.

Et, loi triste! grandir, c'est voir grandir ses maux.
Mon faite est une cible.
Plus j'ai de branches, plus j'ai de vastes rameaux,
Plus j'ai d'ombre terrible.

De là mon deuil tandis que vous êtes charmants.
Vous êtes l’ouverture
De l’âme en fleur mêlée aux éblouissements
De l’immense nature.

George est l’arbuste éclos dans mon lugubre champ;
Jeanne dans sa corolle
Cache un esprit tremblant à nos bruits et tâchant
De prendre la parole.

Laissez en vous, enfants qu’attendent les malheurs,
Humbles plantes vermeilles,
Bégayer vos instincts, murmure dans les fleurs,
Bourdonnement d’abeilles.

Un jour vous apprendrez que tout s’éclipse, hélas!
Et que la foudre gronde
Dès qu’on veut soulager le peuple, immense Atlas,
Sombre porteur du monde.

Vous saurez que, le sort étant sous le hasard,
L’homme, ignorant auguste,
Doit vivre de façon qu’à son rêve plus tard
La vérité s’ajuste.

Moi-même un jour, après la mort, je connaîtrai
Mon destin que j’ignore,
Et je me pencherai sur vous, tout pénétré
De mystère et d’aurore.

Je saurai le secret de l’exil, du linceul
Jeté sur votre enfance,
Et pourquoi la justice et la douceur d’un seul
Semble à tous une offense.

Je comprendrai pourquoi, tandis que vous chantiez,

Dans mes branches funèbres,
Moi qui pour tous les maux veux toutes les pitiés,
J'avais tant de ténèbres.

Je saurai pourquoi l'ombre implacable est sur moi,
Pourquoi tant d'hécatombes,
Pourquoi l'hiver sans fin m'enveloppe, pourquoi
Je m'accrois sur des tombes;

Pourquoi tant de combats, de larmes, de regrets,
Et tant de tristes choses;
Et pourquoi Dieu voulut que je fusse un cyprès
Quand vous étiez des roses.

XI

I

De tout ceci, du gouffre obscur, du fatal sort,
Des haines, des fureurs, des tombes, ce qui sort,
C'est de la clarté, peuple, et de la certitude.
Progrès! Fraternité! Foi! que la solitude
L'affirme, et que la foule y consente à grands cris;
Que le hameau joyeux le dise au grand Paris,
Et que le Louvre ému le dise à la chaumière!
La dernière heure est claire autant que la première
Fut sombre; et l'on entend distinctement au fond
Du ciel noir la rumeur que les naissances font.
On distingue en cette ombre un bruissement d'ailes.

Et moi, dans ces feuillets farouches et fidèles,
Dans ces pages de deuil, de bataille et d'effroi,
Si la clameur d'angoisse éclata malgré moi,
Si l'ai laissé tomber le mot de la souffrance,
Une négation quelconque d'espérance,
J'efface ce sanglot obscur qui se perdit;
Ce mot, je le rature et je ne l'ai pas dit.

Moi, le navigateur serein qui ne redoute
Aucun choc dans les flots profonds, j’aurais un doute!
J’admettrais qu’une main hideuse pût tenir
Le verrou du passé fermé sur l’avenir!
Quoi! le crime prendrait au collet la justice,
L’ombre étoufferait l’astre allant vers le solstice,
Les rois à coups de fouet chasseraient devant eux
La conscience aveugle et le progrès boiteux;
L’esprit humain, le droit, l’honneur, Jésus, Voltaire,
La vertu, la raison, n’auraient plus qu’à se taire,
La vérité mettrait sur ses lèvres son doigt,
Ce siècle s’en irait sans payer ce qu’il doit,
Le monde pencherait comme un vaisseau qui sombre,
On verrait lentement se consommer dans l’ombre,
A jamais, on ne sait sous quelles épaisseurs,
L’évanouissement sinistre des penseurs!
Non, et tu resteras, ô France, la première!
Et comment pourrait-on égorger la lumière?
Le soleil ne pourrait, rongé par un vautour,
S’il répandait son sang, répandre que du jour;
Quoi! blesser le soleil! tout l’enfer, s’il l’essaie,
Fera sortir des flots d’aurore de sa plaie.
Ainsi, France, du coup de lance à ton côté
Les rois tremblants verront jaillir la liberté.

II

Est-ce un écroulement? non. C’est une genèse.

Que t’importe, ô Paris, ville de la fournaise,
Puits de flamme, un brouillard qui passe, et dans ton flanc
Sur son gonflement sombre un vent de plus soufflant?
Que t’importe un combat de plus dans l’âpre joute?
Que t’importe un soufflet de forge qui s’ajoute
A tous les aquilons tourmentant ton brasier?
O fier volcan, qui donc peut te rassasier

D’explosions, de bruits, d’orage, de tonnerre,
De secousses faisant trembler toute la terre,
De métaux à mêler, d’âmes à mettre au feu!
Est-ce que tu t’éteins sous l’haleine de Dieu?
Non. Ton feu se rallume et ta houle profonde
Bouillonne, ô fusion formidable d’un monde.
Paris, comme à la mer Dieu seul te dit: Assez.
Ta rude fonction, vous deux la connaissez.
Souvent l’homme, penché sur ton foyer sonore,
Prend pour reflet d’enfer une rougeur d’aurore.
Tu sais ce que tu dois construire ou transformer.
Qui t’irrite ne peut que te faire écumer.
Toute pierre jetée au gouffre où tu ruisselles
T’arrache un crachement énorme d’étincelles.
Les rois viennent frapper sur toi. Comme le fer
Battu des marteaux jette aux cyclopes l’éclair,
Tu réponds à leurs coups en les couvrant d’étoiles.

O destin! déchirure admirable des toiles
Que tisse l’araignée et des pièges que tend
La noirceur sépulcrale au matin éclatant!
Ah! le piège est abject, la toile est misérable,
Et rien n’arrêtera l’avenir vénérable.

III

Ville, ton sort est beau! ta passion te met,
Ville, au milieu du genre humain, sur un sommet.
Personne ne pourra t’approcher sans entendre
Sortir de ton supplice auguste une voix tendre,
Car tu souffres pour tous et tu saignes pour tous.
Les peuples devant toi feront cercle à genoux.
Le nimbe de l’Etna ne craignait pas Eole,
Et nul vent n’éteindra ta farouche auréole;
Car ta lumière illustre et terrible, brûlant
Tout ce qui n’est pas vie, honneur, travail, talent,
Devoir, droit, guérison, baume, parfum, dictame,

Est pour l’avenir pourpre et pour le passé flamme;
Car dans ta clarté, triste et pure, braise et fleur,
L’immense amour se mêle à l’immense douleur.
Grâce à toi, l’homme croit, le progrès naît viable.
O ville, que ton sort tragique est enviable!
Ah! ta mort laisserait l’univers orphelin.
Un astre est dans ta plaie; et Carthage ou Berlin
Achèterait au prix de toutes ses rapines
Et de tous ses bonheurs ta couronne d’épines.
Jamais enclume autant que toi n’étincela.
Ville, tu fonderas l’Europe. Ah! d’ici là
Que de tourments! Paris, ce que ta gloire attire,
La dette qu’on te vient payer, c’est le martyre.
Accepte. Va, c’est grand. Sois le peuple héros.
Laisse après les tyrans arriver les bourreaux,
Après le mal subis le pire, et reste calme.
Ton épée en ta main devient lentement palme.
Fais ce qu’ont fait les Grecs, les Romains, les Hébreux.
Emplis de ta splendeur le moule ténébreux.
Les peuples t’auront vue, ô cité magnanime,
Après avoir été la lueur de l’abîme,
Après avoir lutté comme c’est le devoir,
Après avoir été cratère, après avoir
Fait bouillonner, forum, cirque, creuset, vésuve,
Toute la liberté du monde dans ta cuve,
Après avoir chassé la Prusse, affreux géant,
Te dressant tout à coup hors du gouffre béant,
En bronze, déité d’éternité vêtue,
Flamboyer lave, et puis te refroidir statue!

IV

Les hommes du passé se figurent qu’ils sont.
Ils s’imaginent vivre; et le travail qu’ils font,
Le glissement visqueux de leurs replis sans nombre,
Leur allée et venue à plat ventre dans l’ombre,
N’est qu’un fourmillement de vers de terre heureux.

Le couvercle muet du sépulcre est sur eux.
Mais, Paris, rien de toi n'est mort, ville sacrée.
Ton agonie enfante et ta défaite crée.
Rien ne t'est refusé; ce que tu veux sera.
Le jour où tu naquis, l'impossible expira.
Je l'affirme et l'affirme, et ma voix sans relâche
Le redit au parjure, au fourbe, au traître, au lâche,
Grande blessée, ô reine, ô déesse, tu vis.
Ceux qui de tes douleurs devraient être assouvis,
T'insultent; mais tu vis, Paris! dans ton artère,
D'où le sang de tout l'homme et de toute la terre
Coule sans s'arrêter, hélas, mais sans finir,
On sent battre le pouls profond de l'avenir.
On sent dans ton sein, mère en travail, ville émue,
Ce foetus, l'univers inconnu, qui remue.
Qu'importe les rieurs sinistres! Tout est bien.
Sans doute c'est lugubre; on cherche, on ne voit rien,
Il fait nuit, l'horizon semble être une clôture.
On craint pour toi, cité de l'Europe future.
Quelle ruine, hélas! quel aspect de cercueil!
Et quelle ressemblance avec l'éternel deuil!
Le plus ferme frissonne; on pleure, on tremble, on doute;
Mais si, penché sur toi, du dehors on écoute,
En cette ombre murée où ne luit nul flambeau,
En cette obscurité de gouffre et de tombeau,
On entend vaguement le chant d'une âme immense.
C'est quelque chose d'âpre et de grand qui commence.
C'est le siècle nouveau qui de la brume sort.

Tous nos pas ici-bas sont nocturnes, d'accord.
Hommes du passé, certe, il est vrai que la vie,
Malgré notre labeur et malgré notre envie,
Est terrestre et ne peut être divine avant
Que l'homme aille au grand ciel trouver le grand vivant.
La mort sera toujours la haute délivrance.
Le ciel a le bonheur, la terre a l'espérance
Rien de plus; mais l'espoir croissant, mais les regrets

S’effaçant, mais notre oeil s’ouvrant, c’est le progrès.
Tel atome est un astre; il luit. Nous voyons poindre
Le bien-être plus grand dans la misère moindre;
Et vous, vous savourez la morne obscurité.
Vous aimez la noirceur jusqu’à la cécité;
Et votre rêve affreux serait d’aveugler l’âme.
Le suaire est pour nous piqué de trous de flamme;
Qu’importe le zénith sombre si nous voyons
Des constellations se lever, des rayons
Resplendir, des soleils faire un échange auguste,
Là le vrai, là le beau, là le grand, là le juste,
Partout la vie avec mille auréoles d’or!
Vous, vous contemplez l’ombre, et l’ombre, et l’ombre encor,
Soit. C’est bien. Vous voyez, pris sous de triples voiles,
Les ténèbres, et nous, nous voyons les étoiles.
Nous cherchons ce qui sert. Vous cherchez ce qui nuit.
Chacun a sa façon de regarder la nuit.

XII

Terre et cieux! si le mal régnait, si tout n’était
Qu’un dur labeur, suivi d’un infâme protêt,
Si le passé devait revenir, si l’eau noire,
Vomie, était rendue à l’homme pour la boire,
Si la nuit pouvait faire un affront à l’azur,
Si rien n’était fidèle et si rien n’était sûr,
Dieu devrait se cacher de honte, la nature
Ne serait qu’une lâche et lugubre imposture,
Les constellations resplendiraient en vain!
Que l’empyrée abrite un scélérat divin,
Que derrière le voile étoilé de l’abîme
Il se cache quelqu’un qui prémédite un crime,
Que l’homme donnant tout, ses jours, ses pleurs, son sang,
Soit l’auguste jouet d’un lâche Tout-Puissant,
Que l’avenir soit fait de méchanceté noire,
C’est ce que pour ma part je refuse de croire.
Non, ce ne serait pas la peine que les vents

Remuassent le flot orageux des vivants,
Que le matin sortît des mers, semant des pluies
De diamants aux fleurs vaguement éblouies,
Et que l’oiseau chantât, et que le monde fût,
Si le destin n’était qu’un chasseur à l’affût,
Si tout l’effort de l’homme enfantait la chimère,
Si l’ombre était sa fille et la cendre sa mère,
S’il ramait nuit et jour, voulant, saignant, créant,
Pour une épouvantable arrivée au néant!
Non, je ne consens pas à cette banqueroute.
Zéro somme de tout! Rien au bout de la route!
Non, l’Infini n’est point capable de cela.
Quoi, pour berceau Charybde et pour tombeau Scylla?
Non, Paris, grand lutteur, France, grande vedette,
En faisant ton devoir, tu fais à Dieu sa dette.
Debout! combats!

Je sais que Dieu semble incertain
Vu par la claire-voie affreuse du destin.
Ce Dieu, je le redis, a souvent dans les âges
Subi le hochement de tête des vieux sages,
Je sais que l’Inconnu ne répond à l’appel
Ni du calcul morose et lourd, ni du scalpel;
Soit. Mais j’ai foi. La foi, c’est la lumière haute.
Ma conscience en moi, c’est Dieu que j’ai pour hôte.
Je puis, par un faux cercle, avec un faux compas,
Le mettre hors du ciel; mais hors de moi, non pas.
Il est mon gouvernail dans l’écume où je vogue.
Si j’écoute mon coeur, j’entends un dialogue.
Nous sommes deux au fond de mon esprit, lui, moi.
Il est mon seul espoir et mon unique effroi.
Si par hasard je rêve une faute que j’aime,
Un profond grondement s’élève dans moi-même;
Je dis: Qui donc est là? l’on me parle? Pourquoi?
Et mon âme en tremblant me dit: C’est Dieu. Tais-toi.

*

Quoi! nier le progrès terrestre auquel adhère
Le vaste mouvement du monde solidaire?
Non, non! s’il arrivait que ce Dieu me trompât,
Et qu’il mit l’espérance en moi comme un appât
Pour m’attirer au piège, et me prendre, humble atome,
Entre le présent, songe, et l’avenir, fantôme;
S’il n’avait d’autre but qu’une dérision;
Moi l’oeil sincère et lui la fausse vision,
S’il me leurrait de quelque exécrable mirage;
S’il offrait la boussole et donnait le naufrage;
Si par ma conscience il faussait ma raison;
Moi qui ne suis qu’un peu d’ombre sur l’horizon,
Moi, néant, je serais son accusateur sombre;
Je prendrais à témoin les firmaments sans nombre,
J’aurais tout l’infini contre ce Dieu, je croi
Que les gouffres prendraient fait et cause pour moi;
Contre ce malfaiteur j’attesterais les astres;
Je lui rejetterais nos maux et nos désastres;
J’aurais tout l’Océan pour m’en laver les mains;
Il ferait mes erreurs, ayant fait mes chemins;
Je serais l’innocent, il serait le coupable.
Cet être inaccessible, invisible, impalpable,
J’irais, je le verrais, et je le saisirais
Dans les cieux, comme on prend un loup dans les forêts,
Et terrible, indigné, calme, extraordinaire,
Je le dénoncerais à son propre tonnerre!

Oh! si le mal devait demeurer seul debout,
Si le mensonge immense était le fond de tout,
Tout se révolterait! Oh! ce n’est plus un temple
Qu’aurait sous les yeux l’homme en ce ciel qu’il contemple,
Dans la création pleine d’un vil secret,
Ce n’est plus un pilier de gloire qu’on verrait;
Ce serait un poteau de bagne et de misère.
A ce poteau serait adossé le faussaire,
A qui tout jetterait l’opprobre, et que d’en bas

Insulteraient nos deuils, nos haillons, nos grabats,
Notre faim, notre soif, nos vices et nos crimes;
Vers lui se tourneraient nos bourreaux ses victimes,
Et la guerre et la haine, et les yeux du savoir
Crevés, et le moignon sanglant du désespoir;
Des champs, des bois, des monts, des fleurs empoisonnées,
Du chaos furieux et fou des destinées,
De tout ce qui parait, disparaît, reparaît,
Une accusation lugubre sortirait;
Le réel suinterait par d'affreuses fêlures;
Les comètes viendraient tordre leurs chevelures;
L'air dirait: Il me livre aux souffles pluvieux!
Le ver dirait à l'astre: Il est ton envieux,
Et, pour t'humilier, il nous fait tous deux luire!
L'écueil dirait: C'est lui qui m'ordonne de nuire!
La mer dirait: Mon fiel, c'est lui. J'en fais l'aveu!
Et l'univers serait le pilori de Dieu!

*

Ah! la réalité, c'est un paiement sublime,
Je suis le créancier tranquille de l'abîme;
Mon oeil ouvert d'avance attend les grands réveils.
Non, je ne doute pas du gouffre des soleils!
Moi croire vide l'ombre où je vois l'astre éclore!
Quoi, le grand azur noir, quoi, le puits de l'aurore
Serait sans loyauté, promettrait sans tenir!
Non, d'où sort le matin sortira l'avenir.
La nature s'engage envers la destinée;
L'aube est une parole éternelle donnée.
Les ténèbres là-haut éclipsent les rayons;
C'est dans la nuit qu'errants et pensifs, nous croyons;
Le ciel est trouble, obscur, mystérieux; qu'importe!
Rien de juste ne frappe en vain à cette porte.
La plainte est un vain cri, le mal est un mot creux;
J'ai rempli mon devoir, c'est bien, je souffre heureux,
Car toute la justice est en moi, grain de sable.

Quand on fait ce qu’on peut on rend Dieu responsable,
Et je vais devant moi, sachant que rien ne ment,
Sûr de l’honnêteté du profond firmament!
Et je crie: Espérez! à quiconque aime et pense;
Et j’affirme que l’Etre inconnu qui dépense,
Sans compter, les splendeurs, les fleurs, les univers,
Et, comme s’il vidait des sacs toujours ouverts,
Les astres, les saisons, les vents, et qui prodigue
Aux monts perçant la nue, aux mers rongeant la digue,
Sans relâche, l’azur, l’éclair, le jour, le ciel;
Que celui qui répand un flot torrentiel
De lumière, de vie et d’amour dans l’espace,
J’affirme que celui qui ne meurt ni ne passe,
Qui fit le monde, un livre où le prêtre a mal lu,
Qui donne la beauté pour forme à l’absolu,
Réel malgré le doute et vrai malgré la fable,
L’éternel, l’infini, Dieu, n’est pas insolvable!

Épilogue

DANS L’OMBRE

LE VIEUX MONDE

O flot, c’est bien. Descends maintenant. Il le faut.
Jamais ton flux encor n’était monté si haut.
Mais pourquoi donc es-tu si sombre et si farouche?
Pourquoi ton gouffre a-t-il un cri comme une bouche?
Pourquoi cette pluie âpre, et cette ombre, et ces bruits,
Et ce vent noir soufflant dans le clairon des nuits?
Ta vague monte avec la rumeur d’un prodige!
C’est ici ta limite. Arrête-toi, te dis-je.
Les vieilles lois, les vieux obstacles, les vieux freins,
Ignorance, misère et néant, souterrains
Où meurt le fol espoir, bagnes profonds de l’âme,
L’ancienne autorité de l’homme sur la femme,
Le grand banquet, muré pour les déshérités,

Les superstitions et les fatalités,
N’y touche pas, va-t’en! ce sont les choses saintes.
Redescends, et tais-toi! j’ai construit ces enceintes
Autour du genre humain et j’ai bâti ces tours.
Mais tu rugis toujours! mais tu montes toujours!
Tout s’en va pêle-mêle à ton choc frénétique.
Voici le vieux missel, voici le code antique.
L’échafaud dans un pli de ta vague a passé.
Ne touche pas au roi! ciel! il est renversé.
Et ces hommes sacrés! je les vois disparaître.
Arrête! c’est le juge. Arrête! c’est le prêtre.
Dieu t’a dit: Ne va pas plus loin, ô flot amer!
Mais quoi! tu m’engloutis! au secours, Dieu! la mer
Désobéit! la mer envahit mon refuge!

LE FLOT

Tu me crois la marée et je suis le déluge.

L'ART D'ETRE GRAND-PERE

First published in 1877, this poetry collection details Hugo's endeavours as a grandparent. After the death of his daughter-in-law and his son Charles, Hugo supported his two grandchildren George and Jeanne Hugo. He wrote several poems depicting the innocence related to his grandchildren, whom he raised with tender care.

Hugo with Georges and Jeanne, his grandchildren

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I

A GUERNESEY

I

L’EXILÉ SATISFAIT

Solitude! silence! oh! le désert me tente.
L’âme s’apaise là, sévèrement contente;
Là d’on ne sait quelle ombre on se sent l’éclaireur.
Je vais dans les forêts chercher la vague horreur;
La sauvage épaisseur des branches me procure
Une sorte de joie et d’épouvante obscure;
Et j’y trouve un oubli presque égal au tombeau.
Mais je ne m’éteins pas; on peut rester flambeau
Dans l’ombre, et, sous le ciel, sous la crypte sacrée,
Seul, frissonner au vent profond de l’empyrée.
Rien n’est diminué dans l’homme pour avoir
Jeté la sonde au fond ténébreux du devoir.
Qui voit de haut, voit bien; qui voit de loin, voit juste.
La conscience sait qu’une croissance auguste
Est possible pour elle, et va sur les hauts lieux
Rayonner et grandir, loin du monde oublieux.
Donc je vais au désert, mais sans quitter le monde.

Parce qu’un songeur vient, dans la forêt profonde
Ou sur l’escarpement des falaises, s’asseoir
Tranquille et méditant l’immensité du soir,
Il ne s’isole point de la terre où nous sommes.
Ne sentez-vous donc pas qu’ayant vu beaucoup d’hommes
On a besoin de fuir sous les arbres épais,
Et que toutes les soifs de vérité, de paix,
D’équité, de raison et de lumière, augmentent
Au fond d’une âme, après tant de choses qui mentent?

Mes frères ont toujours tout mon coeur, et, lointain

Mais présent, je regarde et juge le destin;
Je tiens, pour compléter l'âme humaine ébauchée,
L'urne de la pitié sur les peuples penchée,
Je la vide sans cesse et je l'emplis toujours.
Mais je prends pour abri l'ombre des grands bois sourds.

Oh! j'ai vu de si près les foules misérables,

Les cris, les chocs, l'affront aux têtes vénérables,
Tant de lâches grandis par les troubles civils,
Des juges qu'on eût dû juger, des prêtres vils
Servant et souillant Dieu, prêchant pour, prouvant contre,
J'ai tant vu la laideur que notre beauté montre,
Dans notre bien le mal, dans notre vrai le faux,
Et le néant passant sous nos arcs triomphaux,
J'ai tant vu ce qui mord, ce qui fuit, ce qui ploie
Que, vieux, faible et vaincu, j'ai désormais pour joie
De rêver immobile en quelque sombre lieu;
Là, saignant, je médite; et, lors même qu'un dieu
M'offrirait pour rentrer dans les villes la gloire,
La jeunesse, l'amour, la force, la victoire,
Je trouve bon d'avoir un trou dans les forêts,
Car je ne sais pas trop si je consentirais.

II

Qu'est-ce que cette terre? Une tempête d'âmes.
Dans cette ombre, où, nochers errants, nous n'abordâmes
Jamais qu'à des écueils, les prenant pour des ports;
Dans l'orage des cris, des désirs, des transports,
Des amours, des douleurs, des veux, tas de nuées;
Dans les fuyants baisers de ces prostituées
Que nous nommons fortune, ambition, succès;
Devant Job qui, souffrant, dit: Qu'est-ce que je sais?
Et Pascal qui, tremblant, dit: Qu'est-ce que je pense?
Dans cette monstrueuse et féroce dépense
De papes, de césars, de rois, que fait Satan;

En présence du sort tournant son cabestan
Par qui toujours — de là l'effroi des philosophes —
Sortent des mêmes flots les mêmes catastrophes;
Dans ce néant qui mord, dans ce chaos qui ment,
Ce que l'homme finit par voir distinctement,
C'est, par-dessus nos deuils, nos chutes, nos descentes,
La souveraineté des choses innocentes.
Étant donnés le coeur humain, l'esprit humain,
Notre hier ténébreux, notre obscur lendemain,
Toutes les guerres, tous les chocs, toutes les haines,
Notre progrès coupé d'un traînement de chaînes,
Partout quelque remords, même chez les meilleurs,
Et par les vents soufflant du fond des cieux en pleurs
La foule des vivants sans fin bouleversée,
Certe, il est salutaire et bon pour la pensée,
Sous l'entre-croisement de tant de noirs rameaux,
De contempler parfois, à travers tous nos maux
Qui sont entre le ciel et nous comme des voiles,
Une profonde paix toute faite d'étoiles;
C'est à cela que Dieu songeait quand il a mis
Les poètes auprès des berceaux endormis.

III

JEANNE FAIT SON ENTRÉE

Jeanne parle; elle dit des choses qu'elle ignore;
Elle envoie à la mer qui gronde, au bois sonore,
A la nuée, aux fleurs, aux nids, au firmament,
A l'immense nature un doux gazouillement,
Tout un discours, profond peut-être, qu'elle achève
Par un sourire où flotte une âme, où tremble un rêve,
Murmure indistinct, vague, obscur, confus, brouillé,
Dieu, le bon vieux grand-père, écoute émerveillé.

IV

VICTOR, SED VICTUS

Je suis, dans notre temps de chocs et de fureurs,
Belluaire, et j’ai fait la guerre aux empereurs;
J’ai combattu la foule immonde des Sodomes,
Des millions de flots et des millions d’hommes
Ont rugi contre moi sans me faire céder;
Tout le gouffre est venu m’attaquer et gronder,
Et j’ai livré bataille aux vagues écumantes,
Et sous l’énorme assaut de l’ombre et des tourmentes
Je n’ai pas plus courbé la tête qu’un écueil;
Je ne suis pas de ceux qu’effraie un ciel en deuil,
Et qui, n’osant sonder les styx et les avernes,
Tremblent devant la bouche obscure des cavernes;
Quand les tyrans lançaient sur nous, du haut des airs,
Leur noir tonnerre ayant des crimes pour éclairs,
J’ai jeté mon vers sombre à ces passants sinistres;
J’ai traîné tous les rois avec tous leurs ministres,
Tous les faux dieux avec tous les principes faux,
Tous les trônes liés à tous les échafauds,
L’erreur, le glaive infâme et le sceptre sublime,
J’ai traîné tout cela pêle-mêle à l’abîme;
J’ai devant les césars, les princes, les géants
De la force debout sur l’amas des néants,
Devant tous ceux que l’homme adore, exècre, encense,
Devant les Jupiters de la toute-puissance,
Été quarante ans fier, indompté, triomphant;
Et me voilà vaincu par un petit enfant.

V

L’AUTRE

Viens, mon George. Ah! les fils de nos fils nous enchantent,
Ce sont de jeunes voix matinales qui chantent.
Ils sont dans nos logis lugubres le retour
Des roses, du printemps, de la vie et du jour!

Leur rire nous attire une larme aux paupières
Et de notre vieux seuil fait tressaillir les pierres;
De la tombe entr’ouverte et des ans lourds et froids
Leur regard radieux dissipe les effrois;
Ils ramènent notre âme aux premières années;
Ils font rouvrir en nous toutes nos fleurs fanées;
Nous nous retrouvons doux, naïfs, heureux de rien;
Le coeur serein s’emplit d’un vague aérien;
En les voyant on croit se voir soi-même éclore;
Oui, devenir aïeul, c’est rentrer dans l’aurore.
Le vieillard gai se mêle aux marmots triomphants.
Nous nous rapetissons dans les petits enfants.
Et, calmés, nous voyons s’envoler dans les branches
Notre âme sombre avec toutes ces âmes blanches.

VI

GEORGES ET JEANNE

Moi qu’un petit enfant rend tout à fait stupide,
J’en ai deux; George et Jeanne; et je prends l’un pour guide
Et l’autre pour lumière, et j’accours à leur voix,
Vu que George a deux ans et que Jeanne a dix mois.
Leurs essais d’exister sont divinement gauches;
On croit, dans leur parole où tremblent des ébauches,
Voir un reste de ciel qui se dissipe et fuit;
Et moi qui suis le soir, et moi qui suis la nuit,
Moi dont le destin pâle et froid se décolore,
J’ai l’attendrissement de dire: Ils sont l’aurore.
Leur dialogue obscur m’ouvre des horizons;
Ils s’entendent entr’eux, se donnent leurs raisons.
Jugez comme cela disperse mes pensées.
En moi, désirs, projets, les choses insensées,
Les choses sages, tout, à leur tendre lueur,
Tombe, et je ne suis plus qu’un bonhomme rêveur.
Je ne sens plus la trouble et secrète secousse
Du mal qui nous attire et du sort qui nous pousse.

Les enfants chancelants sont nos meilleurs appuis.
Je les regarde, et puis je les écoute, et puis
Je suis bon, et mon coeur s’apaise en leur présence;
J’accepte les conseils sacrés de l’innocence,
Je fus toute ma vie ainsi; je n’ai jamais
Rien connu, dans les deuils comme sur les sommets,
De plus doux que l’oubli qui nous envahit l’âme
Devant les êtres purs d’où monte une humble flamme;
Je contemple, en nos temps souvent noirs et ternis,
Ce point du jour qui sort des berceaux et des nids.

Le soir je vais les voir dormir. Sur leurs fronts calmes.
Je distingue ébloui l’ombre que font les palmes
Et comme une clarté d’étoile à son lever,
Et je me dis: À quoi peuvent-ils donc rêver?
Georges songe aux gâteaux, aux beaux jouets étranges,
Au chien, au coq, au chat; et Jeanne pense aux anges.
Puis, au réveil, leurs yeux s’ouvrent, pleins de rayons.

Ils arrivent, hélas! à l’heure où nous fuyons.

Ils jasent. Parlent-ils? Oui, comme la fleur parle
A la source des bois; comme leur père Charle,
Enfant, parlait jadis à leur tante Dédé;
Comme je vous parlais, de soleil inondé,
Ô mes frères, au temps où mon père, jeune homme,
Nous regardait jouer dans la caserne, à Rome,
A cheval sur sa grande épée, et tout petits.
Jeanne qui dans les yeux a le myosotis,
Et qui, pour saisir l’ombre entr’ouvrant ses doigts frêles,
N’a presque pas de bras ayant encor des ailes,
Jeanne harangue, avec des chants où flotte un mot,
Georges beau comme un dieu qui serait un marmot.
Ce n’est pas la parole, ô ciel bleu, c’est le verbe;
C’est la langue infinie, innocente et superbe
Que soupirent les vents, les forêts et les flots;
Les pilotes Jason, Palinure et Typhlos

Entendaient la sirène avec cette voix douce
Murmurer l’hymne obscur que l’eau profonde émousse;
C’est la musique éparse au fond du mois de mai
Qui fait que l’un dit: J’aime, et l’autre, hélas: J’aimai;
C’est le langage vague et lumineux des êtres
Nouveau-nés, que la vie attire à ses fenêtres,
Et qui, devant avril, éperdus, hésitants,
Bourdonnent à la vitre immense du printemps.
Ces mots mystérieux que Jeanne dit à George,
C’est l’idylle du cygne avec le rouge-gorge,
Ce sont les questions que les abeilles font,
Et que le lys naïf pose au moineau profond;
C’est ce dessous divin de la vaste harmonie,
Le chuchotement, l’ombre ineffable et bénie
Jasant, balbutiant des bruits de vision,
Et peut-être donnant une explication;
Car les petits enfants étaient hier encore
Dans le ciel, et savaient ce que la terre ignore.
Ô Jeanne! Georges! voix dont j’ai le coeur saisi!
Si les astres chantaient, ils bégaieraient ainsi.
Leur front tourné vers nous nous éclaire et nous dore.
Oh! d’où venez-vous donc, inconnus qu’on adore?
Jeanne a l’air étonné; Georges a les yeux hardis.
Ils trébuchent, encore ivres du paradis.

VII

Parfois, je me sens pris d’horreur pour cette terre;
Mon vers semble la bouche ouverte d’un cratère;
J’ai le farouche émoi
Que donne l’ouragan monstrueux au grand arbre;
Mon coeur prend feu; je sens tout ce que j’ai de marbre
Devenir lave en moi;

Quoi! rien de vrai! le scribe a pour appui le reître;
Toutes les robes, juge et vierge, femme et prêtre,
Mentent ou mentiront;

Le dogme boit du sang, l'autel bénit le crime;
Toutes les vérités, groupe triste et sublime,
Ont la rougeur au front;

La sinistre lueur des rois est sur nos têtes;
Le temple est plein d'enfer; la clarté de nos fêtes
Obscurcit le ciel bleu;
L'âme a le penchement d'un navire qui sombre;
Et les religions, à tâtons, ont dans l'ombre
Pris le démon pour Dieu!

Oh! qui me donnera des paroles terribles?
Oh! je déchirerai ces chartes et ces bibles,
Ces codes, ces korans!
Je pousserai le cri profond des catastrophes;
Et je vous saisirai, sophistes, dans mes strophes,
Dans mes ongles, tyrans.

Ainsi, frémissant, pâle, indigné, je bouillonne;
On ne sait quel essaim d'aigles noirs tourbillonne
Dans mon ciel embrasé;
Deuil! guerre! une euménide en mon âme est éclose!
Quoi! le mal est partout! Je regarde une rose
Et je suis apaisé.

VIII

LÆTITIA RERUM

Tout est pris d'un frisson subit.
L'hiver s'enfuit et se dérobe.
L'année ôte son vieil habit;
La terre met sa belle robe.

Tout est nouveau, tout est debout;
L'adolescence est dans les plaines;
La beauté du diable, partout,

Rayonne et se mire aux fontaines.

L’arbre est coquet; parmi les fleurs
C’est à qui sera la plus belle;
Toutes étalent leurs couleurs,
Et les plus laides ont du zèle.

Le bouquet jaillit du rocher;
L’air baise les feuilles légères;
Juin rit de voir s’endimancher
Le petit peuple des fougères.

C’est une fête en vérité,
Fête où vient le chardon, ce rustre;
Dans le grand palais de l’été
Les astres allument le lustre.

On fait les foins. Bientôt les blés.
Le faucheur dort sous la cépée;
Et tous les souffles sont mêlés
D’une senteur d’herbe coupée.

Qui chante là? Le rossignol.
Les chrysalides sont parties.
Le ver de terre a pris son vol
Et jeté le froc aux orties;

L’aragne sur l’eau fait des ronds;
Ô ciel bleu! l’ombre est sous la treille;
Le jonc tremble, et les moucherons
Viennent vous parler à l’oreille;

On voit rôder l’abeille à jeun,
La guêpe court, le frelon guette;
A tous ces buveurs de parfum
Le printemps ouvre sa guinguette.

Le bourdon, aux excès enclin
Entre en chiffonnant sa chemise;
Un oeillet est un verre plein
Un lys est une nappe mise.

La mouche boit le vermillon
Et l’or dans les fleurs demi-closes,
Et l’ivrogne est le papillon,
Et les cabarets sont les roses.

De joie et d’extase on s’emplit,
L’ivresse, c’est la délivrance;
Sur aucune fleur on ne lit:
Société de tempérance.

Le faste providentiel
Partout brille, éclate et s’épanche
Et l’unique livre, le ciel,
Est par l’aube doré sur tranche.

Enfants, dans vos yeux éclatants
Je crois voir l’empyrée éclore;
Vous riez comme le printemps
Et vous pleurez comme l’aurore.

IX

Je prendrai par la main les deux petits enfants;
J’aime les bois où sont les chevreuils et les faons,
Où les cerfs tachetés suivent les biches blanches
Et se dressent dans l’ombre effrayés par les branches;
Car les fauves sont pleins d’une telle vapeur
Que le frais tremblement des feuilles leur fait peur.
Les arbres ont cela de profond qu’ils vous montrent
Que l’éden seul est vrai, que les coeurs s’y rencontrent,
Et que, hors les amours et les nids, tout est vain;
Théocrite souvent dans le hallier divin

Crut entendre marcher doucement la ménade.
C’est là que je ferai ma lente promenade
Avec les deux marmots. J’entendrai tour à tour
Ce que Georges conseille à Jeanne, doux amour,
Et ce que Jeanne enseigne à George. En patriarche
Que mènent les enfants, je réglerai ma marche
Sur le temps que prendront leurs jeux et leurs repas,
Et sur la petitesse aimable de leurs pas.
Ils cueilleront des fleurs, ils mangeront des mûres.
Ô vaste apaisement des forêts! ô murmures!
Avril vient calmer tout, venant tout embaumer.
Je n’ai point d’autre affaire ici-bas que d’aimer.

X

PRINTEMPS

Tout rayonne, tout luit, tout aime, tout est doux;
Les oiseaux semblent d’air et de lumière fous;
L’âme dans l’infini croit voir un grand sourire.
À quoi bon exiler, rois? à quoi bon proscrire?
Proscrivez-vous l’été? m’exilez-vous des fleurs?
Pouvez-vous empêcher les souffles, les chaleurs,
Les clartés, d’être là, sans joug, sans fin, sans nombre,
Et de me faire fête, à moi banni, dans l’ombre?
Pouvez-vous m’amoindrir les grands flots haletants,
L’océan, la joyeuse écume, le printemps
Jetant les parfums comme un prodigue en démence,
Et m’ôter un rayon de ce soleil immense?
Non. Et je vous pardonne. Allez, trônez, vivez,
Et tâchez d’être rois longtemps, si vous pouvez.
Moi, pendant ce temps-là, je maraude, et je cueille,
Comme vous un empire, un brin de chèvrefeuille,
Et je l’emporte, ayant pour conquête une fleur.
Quand, au-dessus de moi, dans l’arbre, un querelleur,
Un mâle, cherche noise à sa douce femelle,
Ce n’est pas mon affaire et pourtant je m’en mêle,

Je dis: Paix là, messieurs les oiseaux, dans les bois!
Je les réconcilie avec ma grosse voix;
Un peu de peur qu'on fait aux amants les rapproche.
Je n'ai point de ruisseau, de torrent, ni de roche;
Mon gazon est étroit, et, tout près de la mer,
Mon bassin n'est pas grand, mais il n'est pas amer.
Ce coin de terre est humble et me plaît; car l'espace
Est sur ma tête, et l'astre y brille, et l'aigle y passe,
Et le vaste Borée y plane éperdument.
Ce parterre modeste et ce haut firmament
Sont à moi; ces bouquets, ces feuillages, cette herbe
M'aiment, et je sens croître en moi l'oubli superbe.
Je voudrais bien savoir comment je m'y prendrais
Pour me souvenir, moi l'hôte de ces forêts
Qu'il est quelqu'un, là-bas, au loin, sur cette terre,
Qui s'amuse à proscrire, et règne, et fait la guerre,
Puisque je suis là seul devant l'immensité,
Et puisqu'ayant sur moi le profond ciel d'été
Où le vent souffle avec la douceur d'une lyre,
J'entends dans le jardin les petits enfants rire.

XI

FENÊTRES OUVERTES

LE MATIN. — EN DORMANT

J'entends des voix. Lueurs à travers ma paupière.
Une cloche est en branle à l'église Saint-Pierre .
Cris des baigneurs. Plus près! plus loin! non, par ici!
Non, par là! Les oiseaux gazouillent, Jeanne aussi.
Georges l'appelle. Chant des coqs. Une truelle
Racle un toit. Des chevaux passent dans la ruelle.
Grincement d'une faulx qui coupe le gazon.
Chocs. Rumeurs. Des couvreurs marchent sur la maison.
Bruits du port. Sifflement des machines chauffées.
Musique militaire arrivant par bouffées.

Brouhaha sur le quai. Voix françaises. Merci.
Bonjour. Adieu. Sans doute il est tard, car voici
Que vient tout près de moi chanter mon rouge-gorge.
Vacarme de marteaux lointains dans une forge.
L’eau clapote. On entend haleter un steamer.
Une mouche entre. Souffle immense de la mer.

XII

UN MANQUE

Pourquoi donc s’en est-il allé, le doux amour?
Ils viennent un moment nous faire un peu de jour,
Puis partent. Ces enfants, que nous croyons les nôtres,
Sont à quelqu’un qui n’est pas nous. Mais les deux autres,
Tu ne les vois donc pas, vieillard? Oui, je les vois,
Tous les deux. Ils sont deux, ils pourraient être trois.
Voici l’heure d’aller se promener dans l’ombre
Des grands bois, pleins d’oiseaux dont Dieu seul sait le nombre
Et qui s’envoleront aussi dans l’inconnu.
Il a son chapeau blanc, elle montre un pied nu,
Tous deux sont côte à côte; on marche à l’aventure,
Et le ciel brille, et moi je pousse la voiture.
Toute la plaine en fleur a l’air d’un paradis;
Le lézard court au pied des vieux saules, tandis
Qu’au bout des branches vient chanter le rouge-gorge.
Mademoiselle Jeanne a quinze mois, et George
En a trente; il la garde; il est l’homme complet;
Des filles comme ça font son bonheur; il est
Dans l’admiration de ces jolis doigts roses,
Leur compare, en disant toutes sortes de choses,
Ses grosses mains à lui qui vont avoir trois ans,
Et rit; il montre Jeanne en route aux paysans.
Ah dame! il marche, lui; cette mioche se traîne;
Et Jeanne rit de voir Georges rire; une reine
Sur un trône, c’est là Jeanne dans son panier;
Elle est belle; et le chêne en parle au marronnier,

Et l’orme la salue et la montre à l’érable,
Tant sous le ciel profond l’enfance est vénérable.
George a le sentiment de sa grandeur; il rit
Mais il protège, et Jeanne a foi dans son esprit;
Georges surveille avec un air assez farouche
Cette enfant qui parfois met un doigt dans sa bouche;
Les sentiers sont confus et nous nous embrouillons.
Comme tout le bois sombre est plein de papillons,
Courons, dit Georges. Il veut descendre. Jeanne est gaie.
Avec eux je chancelle, avec eux je bégaie.
Oh! l’adorable joie, et comme ils sont charmants!
Quel hymne auguste au fond de leurs gazouillements!
Jeanne voudrait avoir tous les oiseaux qui passent;
Georges vide un pantin dont les ressorts se cassent,
Et médite; et tous deux jasent; leurs cris joyeux
Semblent faire partout dans l’ombre ouvrir des yeux;
Georges, tout en mangeant des nèfles et des pommes,
M’apporte son jouet; moi qui connais les hommes
Mieux que Georges, et qui sait les secrets du destin,
Je raccommode avec un fil son vieux pantin.
Mon Georges, ne va pas dans l’herbe; elle est trempée.
Et le vent berce l’arbre, et Jeanne sa poupée.
On sent Dieu dans ce bois pensif dont la douceur
Se mêle à la gaîté du frère et de la soeur;
Nous obéissons, Jeanne et moi, Georges commande;
La nourrice leur chante une chanson normande,
De celles qu’on entend le soir sur les chemins,
Et Georges bat du pied, et Jeanne bat des mains.
Et je m’épanouis à leurs divins vacarmes,
Je ris; mais vous voyez sous mon rire mes larmes,
Vieux arbres, n’est-ce pas? et vous n’avez pas cru
Que j’oublierai jamais le petit disparu.

II

JEANNE ENDORMIE. — I

LA SIESTE

Elle fait au milieu du jour son petit somme;
Car l’enfant a besoin du rêve plus que l’homme,
Cette terre est si laide alors qu’on vient du ciel!
L’enfant cherche à revoir Chérubin, Ariel,
Ses camarades, Puck, Titania, les fées,
Et ses mains quand il dort sont par Dieu réchauffées.
Oh! comme nous serions surpris si nous voyions,
Au fond de ce sommeil sacré, plein de rayons,
Ces paradis ouverts dans l’ombre, et ces passages
D’étoiles qui font signe aux enfants d’être sages,
Ces apparitions, ces éblouissements!
Donc, à l’heure où les feux du soleil sont calmants,
Quand toute la nature écoute et se recueille,
Vers midi, quand les nids se taisent, quand la feuille
La plus tremblante oublie un instant de frémir,
Jeanne a cette habitude aimable de dormir;
Et la mère un moment respire et se repose,
Car on se lasse, même à servir une rose.
Ses beaux petits pieds nus dont le pas est peu sûr
Dorment; et son berceau, qu’entoure un vague azur
Ainsi qu’une auréole entoure une immortelle,
Semble un nuage fait avec de la dentelle;
On croit, en la voyant dans ce frais berceau-là,
Voir une lueur rose au fond d’un falbala;
On la contemple, on rit, on sent fuir la tristesse,
Et c’est un astre, ayant de plus la petitesse;
L’ombre, amoureuse d’elle, a l’air de l’adorer;
Le vent retient son souffle et n’ose respirer.
Soudain, dans l’humble et chaste alcôve maternelle,
Versant tout le matin qu’elle a dans sa prunelle,
Elle ouvre la paupière, étend un bras charmant,

Agite un pied, puis l’autre, et, si divinement
Que des fronts dans l’azur se penchent pour l’entendre,
Elle gazouille... — Alors, de sa voix la plus tendre,
Couvrant des yeux l’enfant que Dieu fait rayonner,
Cherchant le plus doux nom qu’elle puisse donner
À sa joie, à son ange en fleur, à sa chimère:
— Te voilà réveillée, horreur! lui dit sa mère.

III

LA LUNE

I

Jeanne songeait, sur l’herbe assise, grave et rose;
Je m’approchai: — Dis-moi si tu veux quelque chose,
Jeanne? — car j’obéis à ces charmants amours,
Je les guette, et je cherche à comprendre toujours
Tout ce qui peut passer par ces divines têtes.
Jeanne m’a répondu: — Je voudrais voir des bêtes.
Alors je lui montrai dans l’herbe une fourmi.
— Vois! Mais Jeanne ne fut contente qu’à demi.
— Non, les bêtes, c’est gros, me dit-elle.

Leur rêve,
C’est le grand. L’Océan les attire à sa grève,
Les berçant de son chant rauque, et les captivant
Par l’ombre, et par la fuite effrayante du vent;
Ils aiment l’épouvante, il leur faut le prodige.
— Je n’ai pas d’éléphant sous la main, répondis-je.
Veux-tu quelque autre chose? ô Jeanne, on te le doit!
Parle. — Alors Jeanne au ciel leva son petit doigt.
— Ça, dit-elle. — C’était l’heure où le soir commence.
Je vis à l’horizon surgir la lune immense.

II

CHOSES DU SOIR

Le brouillard est froid, la bruyère est grise;
Les troupeaux de boeufs vont aux abreuvoirs;
La lune, sortant des nuages noirs,
Semble une clarté qui vient par surprise.

Je ne sais plus quand, je ne sais plus où, Maître Yvon soufflait dans son biniou.

Le voyageur marche et la lande est brune;
Une ombre est derrière, une ombre est devant;
Blancheur au couchant, lueur au levant;
Ici crépuscule, et là clair de lune.

Je ne sais plus quand, je ne sais plus où,
Maître Yvon soufflait dans son biniou.

La sorcière assise allonge sa lippe;
L’araignée accroche au toit son filet;
Le lutin reluit dans le feu follet
Comme un pistil d’or dans une tulipe.

Je ne sais plus quand, je ne sais plus où,
Maître Yvon soufflait dans son biniou.

On voit sur la mer des chasse-marées;
Le naufrage guette un mât frissonnant;
Le vent dit: demain! l’eau dit: maintenant!
Les voix qu’on entend sont désespérées.

Je ne sais plus quand, je ne sais plus où,
Maître Yvon soufflait dans son biniou.

Le coche qui va d’Avranche à Fougère
Fait claquer son fouet comme un vif éclair;
Voici le moment où flottent dans l’air
Tous ces bruits confus que l’ombre exagère.

Je ne sais plus quand, je ne sais plus où,
Maître Yvon soufflait dans son biniou.

Dans les bois profonds brillent des flambées;
Un vieux cimetière est sur un sommet;
Où Dieu trouve-t-il tout ce noir qu’il met

Dans les coeurs brisés et les nuits tombées?

Je ne sais plus quand, je ne sais plus où,
Maître Yvon soufflait dans son biniou.

Des flaques d’argent tremblent sur les sables;
L’orfraie est au bord des talus crayeux;
Le pâtre, à travers le vent, suit des yeux
Le vol monstrueux et vague des diables.

Je ne sais plus quand, je ne sais plus où,
Maître Yvon soufflait dans son biniou.

Un panache gris sort des cheminées;
Le bûcheron passe avec son fardeau;
On entend, parmi le bruit des cours d’eau,
Des frémissements de branches traînées.

Je ne sais plus quand, je ne sais plus où,
Maître Yvon soufflait dans son biniou.

La faim fait rêver les grands loups moroses;
La rivière court, le nuage fuit;
Derrière la vitre où la lampe luit,
Les petits enfants ont des têtes roses.

Je ne sais plus quand, je ne sais plus où,
Maître Yvon soufflait dans son biniou.

III

Ah! vous voulez la lune? Où? dans le fond du puits?
Non; dans le ciel. Eh bien, essayons. Je ne puis.
Et c’est ainsi toujours. Chers petits, il vous passe
Par l’esprit de vouloir la lune, et dans l’espace
J’étends mes mains, tâchant de prendre au vol Phoebé.
L’adorable hasard d’être aïeul est tombé

Sur ma tête, et m’a fait une douce fêlure.
Je sens en vous voyant que le sort put m’exclure
Du bonheur, sans m’avoir tout à fait abattu.
Mais causons. Voyez-vous, vois-tu, Georges, vois-tu,
Jeanne? Dieu nous connaît, et sait ce qu’ose faire
Un aïeul, car il est lui-même un peu grand-père;
Le bon Dieu, qui toujours contre nous se défend,
Craint ceci: le vieillard qui veut plaire à l’enfant;
Il sait que c’est ma loi qui sort de votre bouche,
Et que j’obéirais; il ne veut pas qu’on touche
Aux étoiles, et c’est pour en être bien sûr
Qu’il les accroche aux clous les plus hauts de l’azur.

IV

— Oh! comme ils sont goulus! dit la mère parfois.
Il faut leur donner tout, les cerises des bois,
Les pommes du verger, les gâteaux de la table;
S’ils entendent la voix des vaches dans l’étable
Du lait! vite! et leurs cris sont comme une forêt
De Bondy quand un sac de bonbons apparaît.
Les voilà maintenant qui réclament la lune!

Pourquoi pas? Le néant des géants m’importune;
Moi j’admire, ébloui, la grandeur des petits.
Ah! l’âme des enfants a de forts appétits,
Certes, et je suis pensif devant cette gourmande
Qui voit un univers dans l’ombre, et le demande.
La lune! Pourquoi pas? vous dis-je. Eh bien, après?
Pardieu! si je l’avais, je la leur donnerais.

C’est vrai, sans trop savoir ce qu’ils en pourraient faire,
Oui, je leur donnerais, lune, ta sombre sphère,
Ton ciel, d’où Swedenborg n’est jamais revenu,
Ton énigme, ton puits sans fond, ton inconnu!
Oui, je leur donnerais, en disant: Soyez sages!
Ton masque obscur qui fait le guet dans les nuages,

Tes cratères tordus par de noirs aquilons,
Tes solitudes d’ombre et d’oubli, tes vallons,
Peut-être heureux, peut-être affreux, édens ou bagnes,
Lune, et la vision de tes pâles montagnes.
Oui, je crois qu’après tout, des enfants à genoux
Sauraient mieux se servir de la lune que nous;
Ils y mettraient leurs voeux, leur espoir, leur prière;
Ils laisseraient mener par cette aventurière
Leurs petits coeurs pensifs vers le grand Dieu profond.
La nuit, quand l’enfant dort, quand ses rêves s’en vont,
Certes, ils vont plus loin et plus haut que les nôtres.
Je crois aux enfants comme on croyait aux apôtres;
Et quand je vois ces chers petits êtres sans fiel
Et sans peur, désirer quelque chose du ciel,
Je le leur donnerais, si je l’avais. La sphère
Que l’enfant veut, doit être à lui, s’il la préfère.
D’ailleurs, n’avez-vous rien au delà de vos droits?
Oh! je voudrais bien voir, par exemple, les rois
S’étonner que des nains puissent avoir un monde!
Oui, je vous donnerais, anges à tête blonde,
Si je pouvais, à vous qui régnez par l’amour,
Ces univers baignés d’un mystérieux jour,
Conduits par des esprits que l’ombre a pour ministres,
Et l’énorme rondeur des planètes sinistres.
Pourquoi pas? Je me fie à vous, car je vous vois,
Et jamais vous n’avez fait de mal. Oui, parfois,
En songeant à quel point c’est grand, l’âme innocente,
Quand ma pensée au fond de l’infini s’absente,
Je me dis, dans l’extase et dans l’effroi sacré,
Que peut-être, là-haut, il est, dans l’Ignoré,
Un dieu supérieur aux dieux que nous rêvâmes,
Capable de donner des astres à des âmes.

IV

LE POÈME: DU JARDIN DES PLANTES

I

Le comte de Buffon fut bonhomme, il créa
Ce jardin imité d’Évandre et de Rhéa
Et plein d’ours plus savants que ceux de la Sorbonne,
Afin que Jeanne y puisse aller avec sa bonne;
Buffon avait prévu Jeanne, et je lui sais gré
De s’être dit qu’un jour Paris un peu tigré,
Complétant ses bourgeois par une variante,
La bête, enchanterait cette âme souriante;
Les enfants ont des yeux si profonds, que parfois
Ils cherchent vaguement la vision des bois;
Et Buffon paternel, c’est ainsi qu’il rachète
Sa phrase sur laquelle a traîné sa manchette,
Pour les marmots, de qui les anges sont jaloux,
A fait ce paradis suave, orné de loups.

J’approuve ce Buffon. Les enfants, purs visages,
Regardent l’invisible, et songent, et les sages
Tâchent toujours de plaire à quelqu’un de rêveur.

L’été dans ce jardin montre de la ferveur;
C’est un éden où juin rayonne, où les fleurs luisent,
Où l’ours bougonne, et Jeanne et Georges m’y conduisent.
C’est du vaste univers un raccourci complet.
Je vais dans ce jardin parce que cela plaît
À Jeanne, et que je suis contre elle sans défense.
J’y vais étudier deux gouffres, Dieu, l’enfance,
Le tremblant nouveau-né, le créateur flagrant,
L’infiniment charmant et l’infiniment grand,
La même chose au fond; car c’est la même flamme
Qui sort de l’astre immense et de la petite âme.

Je contemple, au milieu des arbres de Buffon,
Le bison trop bourru, le babouin trop bouffon,
Des bosses, des laideurs, des formes peu choisies,
Et j’apprends à passer à Dieu ses fantaisies.
Dieu, n’en déplaise au prêtre, au bonze, au caloyer,
Est capable de tout, lui qui fait balayer
Le bon goût, ce ruisseau, par Nisard, ce concierge,
Livre au singe excessif la forêt, cette vierge,
Et permet à Dupin de ressembler aux chiens.
(Pauvres chiens!) — Selon l’Inde et les manichéens,
Dieu doublé du démon expliquerait l’énigme;
Le paradis ayant l’enfer pour borborygme,
La Providence un peu servante d’Anankè,
L’infini mal rempli par l’univers manqué,
Le mal faisant toujours au bien quelque rature,
Telle serait la loi de l’aveugle nature;
De là les contresens de la création.
Dieu, certe, a des écarts d’imagination;
Il ne sait pas garder la mesure; il abuse
De son esprit jusqu’à faire l’oie et la buse;
Il ignore, auteur fauve et sans frein ni cordeau,
Ce point juste où Laharpe arrête Colardeau;
Il se croit tout permis. Malheur à qui l’imite!
Il n’a pas de frontière, il n’a pas de limite;
Et fait pousser l’ivraie au beau milieu du blé,
Sous prétexte qu’il est l’immense et l’étoilé;
Il a d’affreux vautours qui nous tombent des nues;
Il nous impose un tas d’inventions cornues,
Le bouc, l’auroch, l’isard et le colimaçon;
Il blesse le bon sens, il choque la raison;
Il nous raille; il nous fait avaler la couleuvre!
Au moment où, contents, examinant son oeuvre,
Rendant pleine justice à tant de qualités,
Nous admirons l’oeil d’or des tigres tachetés,
Le cygne, l’antilope à la prunelle bleue,
La constellation qu’un paon a dans sa queue,
D’une cage insensée il tire le verrou,

Et voilà qu’il nous jette au nez le kangourou!
Dieu défait et refait, ride, éborgne, essorille,
Exagère le nègre, hélas, jusqu’au gorille,
Fait des taupes et fait des lynx, se contredit,
Mêle dans les halliers l’histrion au bandit,
Le mandrille au jaguar, le perroquet à l’aigle,
Lie à la parodie insolente et sans règle
L’épopée, et les laisse errer toutes les deux
Sous l’âpre clair-obscur des branchages hideux;
Si bien qu’on ne sait plus s’il faut trembler ou rire,
Et qu’on croit voir rôder, dans l’ombre que déchire
Tantôt le rayon d’or, tantôt l’éclair d’acier,
Un spectre qui parfois avorte en grimacier.
Moi, je n’exige pas que Dieu toujours s’observe,
Il faut bien tolérer quelques excès de verve
Chez un si grand poète, et ne point se fâcher
Si celui qui nuance une fleur de pêcher
Et courbe l’arc-en-ciel sur l’Océan qu’il dompte,
Après un colibri nous donne un mastodonte!
C’est son humeur à lui d’être de mauvais goût,
D’ajouter l’hydre au gouffre et le ver à l’égout,
D’avoir en toute chose une stature étrange,
Et d’être un Rabelais d’où sort un Michel-Ange.
C’est Dieu; moi je l’accepte.

Et quant aux nouveau-nés,
De même. Les enfants ne nous sont pas donnés
Pour avoir en naissant les façons du grand monde;
Les petits en maillot, chez qui la sève abonde,
Poussent l’impolitesse assez loin quelquefois;
J’en conviens. Et parmi les cris, les pas, les voix,
Les ours et leurs cornacs, les marmots et leurs mères,
Dans ces réalités semblables aux chimères,
Ébahi par le monstre et le mioche, assourdi
Comme par la rumeur d’une ruche à midi,
Sentant qu’à force d’être aïeul on est apôtre,
Questionné par l’un, escaladé par l’autre,

Pardonnant aux bambins le bruit, la fiente aux nids,
Et le rugissement aux bêtes, je finis
Par ne plus être, au fond du grand jardin sonore,
Qu'un bonhomme attendri par l'enfance et l'aurore,
Aimant ce double feu, s'y plaisant, s'y chauffant,
Et pas moins indulgent pour Dieu que pour l'enfant.

II

Les bêtes, cela parle; et Dupont de Nemours
Les comprend, chants et cris, gaîté, colère, amours.
C'est dans Perrault un fait, dans Homère un prodige;
Phèdre prend leur parole au vol et la rédige;
La Fontaine, dans l'herbe épaisse et le genêt
Rôdait, guettant, rêvant, et les espionnait;
Ésope, ce songeur bossu comme le Pinde,
Les entendait en Grèce, et Pilpaï dans l'Inde;
Les clairs étangs le soir offraient leurs noirs jargons
A monsieur Florian, officier de dragons;
Et l'âpre Ézéchiel, l'affreux prophète chauve,
Homme fauve, écoutait parler la bête fauve.
Les animaux naïfs dialoguent entr'eux.
Et toujours, que ce soit le hibou ténébreux,
L'ours qu'on entend gronder, l'âne qu'on entend braire,
Ou l'oie apostrophant le dindon, son grand frère,
Ou la guêpe insultant l'abeille sur l'Hybla,
Leur bêtise à l'esprit de l'homme ressembla.

CE QUE DIT LE PUBLIC

CINQ ANS
Les lions, c'est des loups.

SIX ANS

C'est très méchant, les bêtes.

CINQ ANS
Oui.

SIX ANS
Les petits oiseaux ce sont des malhonnêtes;
Ils sont des sales.

CINQ ANS
Oui.

SIX ANS, regardant les serpents.
Les serpents...

CINQ ANS, les examinant.
C’est en peau.

SIX ANS
Prends garde au singe; il va te prendre ton chapeau.

CINQ ANS, regardant le tigre.
Encore un loup!

SIX ANS
Viens voir l’ours avant qu’on le couche.

CINQ ANS, regardant l’ours.
Joli!

SIX ANS
Ça grimpe.

CINQ ANS, regardant l’éléphant.
Il a des cornes dans la bouche.

SIX ANS
Moi, j’aime l’éléphant, c’est gros.

SEPT ANS, survenant et les arrachant à la contemplation de l’éléphant.
Allons! venez!
Vous voyez bien qu’il va vous battre avec son nez.

IV

À GEORGES

Mon doux Georges, viens voir une ménagerie
Quelconque, chez Buffon, au cirque, n’importe où;
Sans sortir de Lutèce allons en Assyrie,
Et sans quitter Paris partons pour Tombouctou.

Viens voir les léopards de Tyr, les gypaètes,
L’ours grondant, le boa formidable sans bruit,
Le zèbre, le chacal, l’once, et ces deux poètes,
L’aigle ivre de soleil, le vautour plein de nuit.

Viens contempler le lynx sagace, l’amphisbène
À qui Job comparait son faux ami Sepher,
Et l’obscur tigre noir, dont le masque d’ébène
A deux trous flamboyants par où l’on voit l’enfer.

Voir de près l’oiseau fauve et le frisson des ailes,
C’est charmant; nous aurons, sous de très sûrs abris,
Le spectacle des loups, des jaguars, des gazelles,
Et l’éblouissement divin des colibris.

Sortons du bruit humain. Viens au jardin des plantes.
Penchons-nous, à travers l’ombre où nous étouffons
Sur les douleurs d’en bas, vaguement appelantes,
Et sur les pas confus des inconnus profonds.

L’animal, c’est de l’ombre errant dans les ténèbres;
On ne sait s’il écoute, on ne sait s’il entend;
Il a des cris hagards, il a des yeux funèbres;

Une affirmation sublime en sort pourtant.

Nous qui régnons, combien de choses inutiles
Nous disons, sans savoir le mal que nous faisons!
Quand la vérité vient, nous lui sommes hostiles,
Et contre la raison nous avons des raisons.

Corbière à la tribune et Frayssinous en chaire
Sont fort inférieurs à la bête des bois;
L’âme dans la forêt songe et se laisse faire;
Je doute dans un temple, et sur un mont je crois.

Dieu par les voix de l’ombre obscurément se nomme;
Nul Quirinal ne vaut le fauve Pélion;
Il est bon, quand on vient d’entendre parler l’homme,
D’aller entendre un peu rugir le grand lion.

V

ENCORE DIEU, MAIS AVEC DES RESTRICTIONS

Quel beau lieu! Là le cèdre avec l’orme chuchote,
L’âne est Iyrique et semble avoir vu Don Quichotte,
Le tigre en cage a l’air d’un roi dans son palais,
Les pachydermes sont effroyablement laids;
Et puis c’est littéraire, on rêve à des idylles
De Viennet en voyant bâiller les crocodiles.
Là, pendant qu’au babouin la singesse se vend,
Pendant que le baudet contemple le savant,
Et que le vautour fait au hibou bon visage,
Certes, c’est un emploi du temps digne d’un sage
De s’en aller songer dans cette ombre, parmi
Ces arbres pleins de nids, où tout semble endormi
Et veille, où le refus consent, où l’amour lutte,
Et d’écouter le vent, ce doux joueur de flûte.

Apprenons, laissons faire, aimons, les cieux sont grands;
Et devenons savants, et restons ignorants.
Soyons sous l’infini des auditeurs honnêtes;
Rien n’est muet ni sourd; voyons le plus de bêtes
Que nous pouvons; tirons partie de leurs lec,ons.
Parce qu’autour de nous tout rêve, nous pensons.
L’ignorance est un peu semblable à la prière;
L’homme est grand par devant et petit par derrière;
C’est, d’Euclide à Newton, de Job à Réaumur,
Un indiscret qui veut voir par-dessus le mur,
Et la nature, au fond très moqueuse, paraphe
Notre science avec le cou de la girafe.
Tâchez de voir, c’est bien. Épiez. Notre esprit
Pousse notre science à guetter; Dieu sourit,
Vieux malin.

Je l’ai dit, Dieu prête à la critique.
Il n’est pas sobre. Il est débordant, frénétique,
Inconvenant; ici le nain, là le géant,
Tout à la fois; énorme; il manque de néant.
Il abuse du gouffre, il abuse du prisme.
Tout, c’est trop. Son soleil va jusqu’au gongorisme;
Lumière outrée. Oui, Dieu vraiment est inégal;
Ici la Sibérie, et là le Sénégal;
Et partout l’antithèse I il faut qu’on s’y résigne;
S’il fait noir le corbeau, c’est qu’il fit blanc le cygne;
Aujourd’hui Dieu nous gèle, hier il nous chauffait.
Comme à l’académie on lui dirait son fait!
Que nous veut la comète? À quoi sert le bolide?
Quand on est un pédant sérieux et solide,
Plus on est ébloui, moins on est satisfait;
La férule à Batteux, le sabre à Galifet
Ne tolèrent pas Dieu sans quelque impatience;
Dieu trouble l’ordre; il met sur les dents la science;
À peine a-t-on fini qu’il faut recommencer;
Il semble que l’on sent dans la main vous glisser
On ne sait quel serpent tout écaillé d’aurore.
Dès que vous avez dit: assez! il dit: encore!

Ce démagogue donne au pauvre autant de fleurs
Qu’au riche; il ne sait pas se borner; ses couleurs,
Ses rayons, ses éclairs, c’est plus qu’on ne souhaite.
Ah! tout cela fait mal aux yeux! dit la chouette.
Et la chouette, c’est la sagesse.

Il est sûr
Que Dieu taille à son gré le monde en plein azur;
Il mêle l’ironie à son tonnerre épique;
Si l’on plane il foudroie et si l’on broute il pique.
(Je ne m’étonne pas que Planche eût l’air piqué.)
Le vent, voix sans raison, sorte de bruit manqué,
Sans jamais s’expliquer et sans jamais conclure,
Rabâche, et l’océan n’est pas exempt d’enflure.

Quant à moi, je serais, j’en fais ici l’aveu,
Curieux de savoir ce que diraient de Dieu,
Du monde qu’il régit, du ciel qu’il exagère,
De l’infini, sinistre et confuse étagère,
De tout ce que ce Dieu prodigue, des amas
D’étoiles de tout genre et de tous les formats,
De sa facon d’emplir d’astres le télescope,
Nonotte et Baculard dans le café Procope.

VI

À JEANNE

Je ne te cache pas que j’aime aussi les bêtes;
Cela t’amuse. et moi cela m’instruit; je sens
Que ce n’est pas pour rien qu’en oes farouches têtes
Dieu met le clair-obscur des grands bois frémissants.

Je suis le curieux qui, né pour croire et plaindre,
Sonde, en voyant l’aspic sous des roses rampant,
Les sombres lois qui font que la femme doit craindre
Le démon, quand la fleur n’a pas peur du serpent.

Pendant que nous donnons des ordres à la terre,
Rois copiant le singe et par lui copiés,
Doutant s’il est notre oeuvre ou s’il est notre pére,
Tout en bas, dans l’horreur fatale, sous nos pieds,

On ne sait quel noir monde étonné nous regarde
Et songe, et sous un joug, trop souvent odieux,
Nous courbons l’humble monstre et la brute hagarde
Qui, nous voyant démons, nous prennent pour des dieux.

Oh! que d’étranges lois! quel tragique mélange!
Voit-on le dernier fait, sait-on le dernier mot,
Quel spectre peut sortir de Vénus, et quel ange
Peut naître dans le ventre affreux de Béhémoth?

Transfiguration! mystère! gouffre et cime!
L’âme rejettera le corps, sombre haillon;
La créature abjecte un jour sera sublime,
L’être qu’on hait chenille on l’aime papillon.

VII

Tous les bas âges sont épars sous ces grands arbres.

Certes, l’alignement des vases et des marbres,
Ce parterre au cordeau, ce cèdre résigné,
Ce chêne que monsieur Despréaux eut signé,
Ces barreaux noirs croisés sur la fleur odorante,
Font honneur à Buffon qui fut l’un des Quarante
Et mêla, de façon à combler tous nos voeux,
Le peigne de Lenôtre aux effrayants cheveux
De Pan, dieu des halliers, des rochers et des plaines;
Cela n’empêche pas les roses d’être pleines
De parfums, de désirs, d’amour et de clarté;
Cela n’empêche pas l’été d’être l’été;
Cela n’ôte à la vie aucune confiance;
Cela n’empêche pas l’aurore en conscience
D’apparaitre au zénith qui semble s’élargir,
Les enfants de jouer, les monstres de rugir.

Un bon effroi joyeux emplit ces douces têtes.
Écoutez-moi ces cris charmants. — Viens voir les bêtes!
Ils courent. Quelle extase! On s’arrête devant
Des cages où l’on voit des oiseaux bleus rêvant
Comme s’ils attendaient le mois où l’on émigre.
— Regarde ce gros chat. — Ce gros chat c’est le tigre.
Les grands font aux petits vénérer les guenons,
Les pythons, les chacals, et nomment par leurs noms
Les vieux ours qui, dit-on, poussent l’humeur maligne
Jusqu’à manger parfois des soldats de la ligne.

Spectacle monstrueux! Les gueules, les regards
De dragon, lueur fauve au fond des bois hagards,
Les écailles, les dards, la griffe qui s’allonge,
Une apparition d’abîme, l’affreux songe
Réel que l’oeil troublé des prophètes amers
Voit sous la transparence effroyable des mers
Et qui se traîne épars dans l’horreur inouïe,
L’énorme bâillement du gouffre qui s’ennuie,
Les mâchoires de l’hydre ouvertes tristement,
On ne sait quel chaos blême, obscur, inclément,

Un essai d’exister, une ébauche de vie
D’où sort le bégaiement furieux de l’envie.
C’est cela l’animal; et c’est ce que l’enfant
Regarde, admire et craint, vaguement triomphant;
C’est de la nuit qu’il vient contempler, lui l’aurore.
Ce noir fourmillement mugit, hurle, dévore;
On est un chérubin rose, frêle et tremblant;
On va voir celui-ci que l’hiver fait tout blanc,
Cet autre dont l’oeil jette un éclair du tropique;
Tout cela gronde, hait, menace, siffle, pique,
Mord; mais par sa nourrice on se sent protéger;
Comme c’est amusant d’avoir peur sans danger!
Ce que l’homme contemple, il croit qu’il le découvre.
Voir un roi dans son antre, un tigre dans son Louvre,
Cela plaît à l’enfance. — Il est joliment laid!
Viens voir! — Étrange instinct! Grâce à qui l’horreur plaît!
On vient chercher surtout ceux qu’il faut qu’on évite.
— Par ici! — Non, par là! — Tiens, regarde! — Viens vite!
— Jette-leur ton gâteau. — Pas tout. — Jette toujours.
— Moi, j’aime bien les loups. — Moi, j’aime mieux les ours.
Et les fronts sont riants, et le soleil les dore,
Et ceux qui, nés d’hier, ne parlent pas encore
Pendant ces brouhahas sous les branchages verts,
Sont là, mystérieux, les yeux tout grands ouverts,
Et méditent.

Afrique aux plis infranchissables,
Ô gouffre d’horizons sinistres, mer des sables,
Sahara, Dahomey, lac Nagain, Darfour,
Toi, l’Amérique, et toi, l’Inde, âpre carrefour
Où Zoroastre fait la rencontre d’Homère,
Paysages de lune où rôde la chimère,
Où l’orang-outang marche un bâton à la main,
Où la nature est folle et n’a plus rien d’humain,
Jungles par les sommeils de la fièvre rêvées,
Plaines où brusquement on voit des arrivées
De fleuves tout à coup grossis et déchaînés,

Où l’on entend rugir les lions étonnés
Que l’eau montante enferme en des îles subites,
Déserts dont les gavials sont les noirs cénobites,
Où le boa, sans souffle et sans tressaillement,
Semble un tronc d’arbre à terre et dort affreusement,
Terre des baobabs, des bambous, des lianes,
Songez que nous avons des Georges et des Jeannes,
Créez des monstres; lacs, forêts, avec vos monts
Vos noirceurs et vos bruits, composez des mammons;
Abîmes, condensez en eux toutes vos gloires,
Donnez-leur vos rochers pour dents et pour mâchoires,
Pour voix votre ouragan, pour regard votre horreur;
Donnez-leur des aspects de pape et d’empereur,
Et faites, par-dessus les halliers, leur étable
Et leur palais, bondir leur joie épouvantable.
Certes, le casoar est un bon sénateur,
L’oie a l’air d’un évêque et plaît par sa hauteur,
Dieu quand il fit le singe a rêvé Scaramouche,
Le colibri m’enchante et j’aime l’oiseau-mouche;
Mais ce que de ta verve, ô nature, j’attends
Ce sont les Béhémoths et les Léviathans.
Le nouveau-né qui sort de l’ombre et du mystère
Ne serait pas content de ne rien voir sur terre;
Un immense besoin d’étonnement, voilà
Toute l’enfance, et c’est en songeant à cela
Que j’applaudis, nature, aux géants que tu formes;
L’oeil bleu des innocents veut des bêtes énormes;
Travaillez, dieux affreux! Soyez illimités
Et féconds, nous tenons à vos difformités
Autant qu’à vos parfums, autant qu’à vos dictames,
Ô déserts, attendu que les hippopotames,
Que les rhinocéros et que les éléphants
Sont évidemment faits pour les petits enfants.

VIII

C’est une émotion étrange pour mon âme

De voir l’enfant, encor dans les bras de la femme,
Fleur ignorant l’hiver, ange ignorant Satan,
Secouant un hochet devant Léviathan,
Approcher doucement la nature terrible.
Les beaux séraphins bleus qui passent dans la bible,
Envolés d’on ne sait quel ciel mystérieux,
N’ont pas une plus pure aurore dans les yeux
Et n’ont pas sur le front une plus sainte flamme
Que l’enfant innocent riant au monstre infâme.
Ciel noir! Quel vaste cri que le rugissement!
Quand la bête, âme aveugle et visage écumant,
Lance au loin, n’importe où, dans l’étendue hostile
Sa voix lugubre, ainsi qu’un sombre projectile,
C’est tout le gouffre affreux des forces sans clarté
Qui hurle; c’est l’obscène et sauvage Astarté,
C’est la nature abjecte et maudite qui gronde;
C’est Némée, et Stymphale, et l’Afrique profonde
C’est le féroce Atlas, c’est l’Athos plus hanté
Par les foudres qu’un lac par les mouches d’été;
C’est Lerne, Pélion, Ossa, c’est Érymanthe,
C’est Calydon funeste et noir, qui se lamente.

*

L’enfant regarde l’ombre où sont les lions roux.
La bête grince; à qui s’adresse ce courroux?
L’enfant jase; sait-on qui les enfants appellent?
Les deux voix, la tragique et la douce se mêlent
L’enfant est l’espérance et la bête est la faim;
Et tous deux sont l’attente; il gazouille sans fin
Et chante, et l’animal écume sans relâche;
Ils ont chacun en eux un mystère qui tâche
De dire ce qu’il sait et d’avoir ce qu’il veut
Leur langue est prise et cherche à dénouer le noeud.
Se parlent-ils? Chacun fait son essai, l’un triste
L’autre charmant; l’enfant joyeusement existe;
Quoique devant lui l’Être effrayant soit debout

Il a sa mère, il a sa nourrice, il a tout;
Il rit.

*

De quelle nuit sortent ces deux ébauches?
L’une sort de l’azur; l’autre de ces débauches,
De ces accouplements du nain et du géant,
De ce hideux baiser de l’abîme au néant
Qu’un nomme le chaos.

Oui, cette cave immonde,
Dont le soupirail blême apparaît sous le monde,
Le chaos, ces chocs noirs, ces danses d’ouragans,
Les éléments gâtés et devenus brigands
Et changés en fléaux dans le cloaque immense,
Le rut universel épousant la démence,
La fécondation de Tout produisant Rien,
Cet engloutissement du vrai, du beau, du bien,
Qu’Orphée appelle Hadès, qu’Homère appelle Érèbe,
Et qui rend fixe l’oeil fatal des sphinx de Thèbe,
C’est cela, c’est la folle et mauvaise action
Qu’en faisant le chaos fit la création,
C’est l’attaque de l’ombre au soleil vénérable,
C’est la convulsion du gouffre misérable
Essayant d’opposer l’informe à l’idéal,
C’est Tisiphone offrant son ventre à Bélial,
C’est cet ensemble obscur de forces échappées
Où les éclairs font rage et tirent leurs épées,
Où périrent Janus, l’âge d’or et Rhéa,
Qui, si nous en croyons les mages, procréa
L’animal; et la bête affreuse fut rugie
Et vomie au milieu des nuits par cette orgie.

C’est de là que nous vient le monstre inquiétant.

L’enfant, lui, pur songeur rassurant et content,

Est l’autre énigme; il sort de l’obscurité bleue.
Tous les petits oiseaux, mésange, hochequeue,
Fauvette, passereau, bavards aux fraîches voix,
Sont ses frères, tandis que ces marmots des bois
Sentent pousser leur aile, il sent croître son âme
Des azurs embaumés de myrrhe et de cinname,
Des entre-croisements de fleurs et de rayons,
Ces éblouissements sacrés que nous voyons
Dans nos profonds sommeils quand nous sommes des justes,
Un pêle-mêle obscur de branchages augustes
Dont les anges au vol divin sont les oiseaux,
Une lueur pareille au clair reflet des eaux
Quand, le soir, dans l’étang les arbres se renversent,
Des lys vivants, un ciel qui rit, des chants qui bercent,
Voilà ce que l’enfant, rose, a derrière lui.
Il s’éveille ici-bas, vaguement ébloui;
Il vient de voir l’éden et Dieu; rien ne l’effraie,
Il ne croit pas au mal; ni le loup, ni l’orfraie,
Ni le tigre, démon taché, ni ce trompeur,
Le renard, ne le font trembler; il n’a pas peur,
Il chante; et quoi de plus touchant pour la pensée
Que cette confiance au paradis, poussée
Jusqu’à venir tout près sourire au sombre enfer!
Quel ange que l’enfant! Tout, le mal, sombre mer,
Les hydres qu’en leurs flots roulent les vils avernes,
Les griffes, ces forêts, les gueules, ces cavernes,
Les cris, les hurlements, les râles, les abois,
Les rauques visions, la fauve horreur des bois,
Tout, Satan, et sa morne et féroce puissance,
S’évanouit au fond du bleu de l’innocence!
C’est beau. Voir Caliban et rester Ariel!
Avoir dans son humble âme un si merveilleux ciel
Que l’apparition indignée et sauvage
Des êtres de la nuit n’y fasse aucun ravage,
Et se sentir si plein de lumière et si doux
Que leur souffle n’éteigne aucune étoile en vous!

*

Et je rêve. Et je crois entendre un dialogue
Entre la tragédie effroyable et l'églogue;
D'un côté l'épouvante, et de l'autre l'amour;
Dans l'une ni dans l'autre il ne fait encor jour;
L'enfant semble vouloir expliquer quelque chose;
La bête gronde, et, monstre incliné sur la rose,
Écoute... — Et qui pourrait comprendre, ô firmament,
Ce que le bégaiement dit au rugissement?

Quel que soit le secret, tout se dresse et médite,
La fleur bénie ainsi que l'épine maudite;
Tout devient attentif; tout tressaille; un frisson
Agite l'air, le flot, la branche, le buisson,
Et dans les clairs-obscurs et dans les crépuscules,
Dans cette ombre où jadis combattaient les Hercules,
Où les Bellérophons s'envolaient, où planait
L'immense Amos criant: Un nouveau monde naît!
On sent on ne sait quelle émotion sacrée,
Et c'est, pour la nature où l'éternel Dieu crée,
C'est pour tout le mystère un attendrissement
Comme si l'on voyait l'aube au rayon calmant
S'ébaucher par-dessus d'informes promontoires,
Quand l'âme blanche vient parler aux âmes noires.

IX

La face de la bête est terrible; on y sent
L'Ignoré, l'éternel problème éblouissant
Et ténébreux, que l'homme appelle la Nature;
On a devant soi l'ombre informe, l'aventure
Et le joug, l'esclavage et la rébellion,
Quand on voit le visage effrayant du lion;
Le monstre orageux, rauque, effréné, n'est pas libre,
Ô stupeur! et quel est cet étrange équilibre
Composé de splendeur et d'horreur, l'univers,

Où règne un Jéhovah dont Satan est l’envers;
Où les astres, essaim lumineux et livide,
Semblent pris dans un bagne, et fuyant dans le vide,
Et jetés au hasard comme on jette les dés,
Et toujours à la chaîne et toujours évadés?
Quelle est cette merveille effroyable et divine
Où, dans l’éden qu’on voit, c’est l’enfer qu’on devine,
Où s’éclipse, ô terreur, espoirs évanouis,
L’infini des soleils sous l’infini des nuits,
Où, dans la brute, Dieu disparaît et s’efface?
Quand ils ont devant eux le monstre face à face,
Les mages, les songeurs vertigineux des bois,
Les prophètes blêmis à qui parlent des voix,
Sentent on ne sait quoi d’énorme dans la bête;
Pour eux l’amer rictus de cette obscure tête,
C’est l’abîme, inquiet d’être trop regardé,
C’est l’éternel secret qui veut être gardé
Et qui ne laisse pas entrer dans ses mystères
La curiosité des pâles solitaires;
Et ces hommes, à qui l’ombre fait des aveux,
Sentent qu’ici le sphinx s’irrite, et leurs cheveux
Se dressent, et leur sang dans leurs veines se fige
Devant le froncement de sourcil du prodige.

X

Toutes sortes d’enfants, blonds, lumineux, vermeils,
Dont le bleu paradis visite les sommeils
Quand leurs yeux sont fermés la nuit dans les alcôves,
Sont là, groupés devant la cage aux bêtes fauves;
Ils regardent.

Ils ont sous les yeux l’élément,
Le gouffre, le serpent tordu comme un tourment,
L’affreux dragon, l’onagre inepte, la panthère,
Le chacal abhorré des spectres, qu’il déterre,
Le gorille, fantôme et tigre, et ces bandits,

Les loups, et les grands lynx qui tutoyaient jadis
Les prophètes sacrés accoudés sur des bibles;
Et, pendant que ce tas de prisonniers terribles
Gronde, l’un vil forçat, l’autre arrogant proscrit,
Que fait le groupe rose et charmant? Il sourit.

L’abîme est là qui gronde et les enfants sourient.

Ils admirent. Les voix épouvantables crient
Tandis que cet essaim de fronts pleins de rayons,
Presque ailé, nous émeut comme si nous voyions
L’aube s’épanouir dans une géorgique,
Tandis que ces enfants chantent, un bruit tragique
Va, chargé de colère et de rébellions
Du cachot des vautours au bagne des lions.

Et le sourire frais des enfants continue.

Devant cette douceur suprême, humble, ingénue,
Obstinée, on s’étonne, et l’esprit stupéfait
Songe, comme aux vieux temps d’Orphée et de Japhet,
Et l’on se sent glisser dans la spirale obscure
Du vertige, où tombaient Job, Thalès, Épicure,
Où l’on cherche à tâtons quelqu’un, ténébreux puits
Où l’âme dit: Réponds! où Dieu dit: Je ne puis!

Oh! si la conjecture antique était fondée,
Si le rêve inquiet des mages de Chaldée,
L’hypothèse qu’Hermès et Pythagore font,
Si ce songe farouche était le vrai profond;
La bête parmi nous, si c’était là Tantale!
Si la réalité redoutable et fatale
C’était ceci: les loups, les boas, les mammons
Masques sombres, cachant d’invisibles démons!
Oh! ces êtres affreux dont l’ombre est le repaire,
Ces crânes aplatis de tigre et de vipère,
Ces vils fronts écrasés par le talon divin,

L’ours, rêveur noir, le singe, effroyable sylvain,
Ces rictus convulsifs, ces faces insensées,
Ces stupides instincts menaçant nos pensées,
Ceux-ci pleins de l’horreur nocturne des forêts,
Ceux-là, fuyants aspects, flottants, confus, secrets,
Sur qui la mer répand ses moires et ses nacres,
Ces larves, ces passants des bois, ces simulacres,
Ces vivants dans la tombe animale engloutis,
Ces fantômes ayant pour loi les appétits,
Ciel bleu! s’il était vrai que c’est là ce qu’on nomme
Les damnés, expiant d’anciens crimes chez l’homme,
Qui, sortis d’une vie antérieure, ayant
Dans les yeux la terreur d’un passé foudroyant,
Viennent, balbutiant d’épouvante et de haine,
Dire au milieu de nous les mots de la géhenne,
Et qui tâchent en vain d’exprimer leur tourment
A notre verbe avec le sourd rugissement;
Tas de forçats qui grince et gronde, aboie et beugle;
Muets hurlants qu’éclaire un flamboiement aveugle;
Oh! s’ils étaient là. nus sous le destin de fer,
Méditant vaguement sur l’éternel enfer;
Si ces mornes vaincus de la nature immense
Se croyaient à jamais bannis de la clémence;
S’ils voyaient les soleils s’éteindre par degrés,
Et s’ils n’étaient plus rien que des désespérés;
Oh! dans l’accablement sans fond, quand tout se brise,
Quand tout s’en va, refuse et fuit, quelle surprise,
Pour ces êtres méchants et tremblants à la fois,
D’entendre tout à coup venir ces jeunes voix!
Quelqu’un est là! Qui donc? On parle! ô noir problème!
Une blancheur paraît sur la muraille blême
Où chancelle l’obscure et morne vision.
Le léviathan voit accourir l’alcyon!
Quoi! le déluge voit arriver la colombe!
La clarté des berceaux filtre à travers la tombe
Et pénètre d’un jour clément les condamnés!
Les spectres ne sont point haïs des nouveau-nés!

Quoi! l'araignée immense ouvre ses sombres toiles!
Quel rayon qu'un regard d'enfant, saintes étoiles!
Mais puisqu'on peut entrer, on peut donc s'en aller!
Tout n'est donc pas fini! L'azur vient nous parler!
Le ciel est plus céleste en ces douces prunelles!
C'est quand Dieu, pour venir des voûtes éternelles
Jusqu'à la terre, triste et funeste milieu,
Passe à travers l'enfant qu'il est tout à fait Dieu!
Quoi! le plafond difforme aurait une fenêtre!
On verrait l'impossible espérance renaître!
Quoi! l'on pourrait ne plus mordre, ne plus grincer!
Nous représentons-nous ce qui peut se passer
Dans les craintifs cerveaux des bêtes formidables?
De la lumière au bas des gouffres insondables!
Une intervention de visages divins!
La torsion du mal dans les brûlants ravins
De l'enfer misérable est soudain apaisée
Par d'innocents regards purs comme la rosée!
Quoi! l'on voit des yeux luire et l'on entend des pas!
Est-ce que nous savons s'ils ne se mettent pas,
Ces monstres, à songer, sitôt la nuit venue,
S'appelant, stupéfaits de cette aube inconnue
Qui se lève sur l'âpre et sévère horizon?
Du pardon vénérable ils ont le saint frisson;
Il leur semble sentir que les chaînes les quittent;
Les échevèlements des crinières méditent;
L'enfer, cette ruine, est moins trouble et moins noir;
Et l'oeil presque attendri de ces captifs croit voir
Dans un pur demi-jour qu'un ciel lointain azure
Grandir l'ombre d'un temple au seuil de la masure.
Quoi! l'enfer finirait! l'ombre entendrait raison!
Ô clémence! ô lueur dans l'énorme prison!
On ne sait quelle attente émeut ces coeurs étranges.

Quelle promesse au fond du sourire des anges!

V

JEANNE ENDORMIE. — II

Elle dort; ses beaux yeux se rouvriront demain;
Et mon doigt qu'elle tient dans l'ombre emplit sa main;
Moi, je lis, ayant soin que rien ne la réveille,
Des journaux pieux; tous m'insultent; l'un conseille
De mettre à Charenton quiconque lit mes vers;
L'autre voue au bûcher mes ouvrages pervers;
L'autre, dont une larme humecte les paupières,
Invite les passants à me jeter des pierres;
Mes écrits sont un tas lugubre et vénéneux
Où tous les noirs dragons du mal tordent leurs noeuds;
L'autre croit à l'enfer et m'en déclare apôtre;
L'un m'appelle Antechrist, l'autre Satan, et l'autre
Craindrait de me trouver le soir au coin d'un bois;
L'un me tend la ciguë et l'autre me dit: Bois!
J'ai démoli le Louvre et tué les otages;
Je fais rêver au peuple on ne sait quels partages;
Paris en flamme envoie à mon front sa rougeur;
Je suis incendiaire, assassin, égorgeur,
Avare, et j'eusse été moins sombre et moins sinistre
Si l'empereur m'avait voulu faire ministre;
Je suis l'empoisonneur public, le meurtrier;
Ainsi viennent en foule autour de moi crier
Toutes ces voix jetant l'affront, sans fin, sans trêve;
Cependant l'enfant dort, et, comme si son rêve
Me disait: — Sois tranquille, ô père, et sois clément! —
Je sens sa main presser la mienne doucement.

VI

GRAND AGE ET BAS AGE MÊLÉS

I

Mon âme est faite ainsi que jamais ni l'idée,
Ni l'homme, quels qu'ils soient, ne l'ont intimidée;
Toujours mon coeur, qui n'a ni bible ni koran,
Dédaigna le sophiste et brava le tyran;
Je suis sans épouvante étant sans convoitise;
La peur ne m'éteint pas et l'honneur seul m'attise;
J'ai l'ankylose altière et lourde du rocher;
Il est fort malaisé de me faire marcher
Par désir en avant ou par crainte en arrière;
Je résiste à la force et cède à la prière,
Mais les biens d'ici-bas font sur moi peu d'effet;
Et je déclare, amis, que je suis satisfait,
Que mon ambition suprême est assouvie,
Que je me reconnais payé dans cette vie,
Et que les dieux cléments ont comblé tous mes veux.
Tant que sur cette terre, où vraiment je ne veux
Ni socle olympien, ni colonne trajane,
On ne m'ôtera pas le sourire de Jeanne.

II

CHANT SUR LE BERCEAU

Je veille. Ne crains rien. J'attends que tu t'endormes.
Les anges sur ton front viendront poser leurs bouches.
Je ne veux pas sur toi d'un rêve ayant des formes
Farouches;

Je veux qu'en te voyant là, ta main dans la mienne,
Le vent change son bruit d'orage en bruit de lyre.
Et que sur ton sommeil la sinistre nuit vienne

Sourire.

Le poète est penché sur les berceaux qui tremblent;
Il leur parle, il leur dit tout bas de tendres choses,
Il est leur amoureux, et ses chansons ressemblent
Aux roses.

Il est plus pur qu’avril embaumant la pelouse
Et que mai dont l’oiseau vient piller la corbeille;
Sa voix est un frisson d’âme, à rendre jalouse
L’abeille;

Il adore ces nids de soie et de dentelles;
Son coeur a des gaîtés dans la fraîche demeure
Qui font rire aux éclats avec des douceurs telles
Qu’on pleure;

Il est le bon semeur des fraîches allégresses;
Il rit. Mais si les rois et leurs valets sans nombre
Viennent, s’il voit briller des prunelles tigresses
Dans l’ombre,

S’il voit du Vatican, de Berlin ou de Vienne
Sortir un guet-apens, une horde, une bible,
Il se dresse, il n’en faut pas plus pour qu’il devienne
Terrible.

S’il voit ce basilic, Rome, ou cette araignée,
Ignace, ou ce vautour, Bismarck, faire leur crime,
Il gronde, il sent monter dans sa strophe indignée
L’abîme.

C’est dit. Plus de chansons. L’avenir qu’il réclame,
Les peuples et leur droit, les rois et leur bravade,
Sont comme un tourbillon de tempête où cette âme
S’évade.

Il accourt. Reviens, France, à ta fierté première!
Délivrance! Et l'on voit cet homme qui se lève
Ayant Dieu dans le coeur et dans l'oeil la lumière
Du glaive.

Et sa pensée, errante alors comme les proues
Dans l'onde et les drapeaux dans les noires mêlées,
Est un immense char d'aurore avec des roues
Ailées.

III

LA CICATRICE

Une croûte assez laide est sur la cicatrice.
Jeanne l'arrache, et saigne, et c'est là son caprice;
Elle arrive, montrant son doigt presque en lambeau.
— J'ai, me dit-elle, ôté la peau de mon bobo. —
Je la gronde, elle pleure, et, la voyant en larmes,
Je deviens plat. — Faisons la paix, je rends les armes,
Jeanne, à condition que tu me souriras. —
Alors la douce enfant s'est jetée en mes bras,
Et m'a dit, de son air indulgent et suprême:
— Je ne me ferai plus de mal, puisque je t'aime. —
Et nous voilà contents, en ce tendre abandon,
Elle de ma clémence et moi de son pardon.

IV

UNE TAPE

la petite main sort une grosse tape.
— Grand-père, grondez-la! Quoi! c'est vous qu'elle frappe!
Vous semblez avec plus d'amour la regarder!
Grondez donc! — L'aïeul dit: — Je ne puis plus gronder!
Que voulez-vous? Je n'ai gardé que le sourire.
Quand on a vu Judas trahir, Néron proscrire,

Satan vaincre, et régner les fourbes ténébreux,
Et quand on a vidé son coeur profond sur eux;
Quand on a dépensé la sinistre colère;
Quand, devant les forfaits que l'église tolère,
Que la chaire salue et que le prêtre admet,
On a rugi, debout sur quelque âpre sommet;
Quand sur l'invasion monstrueuse du parthe,
Quand sur les noirs serments vomis par Bonaparte,
Quand sur l'assassinat des lois et des vertus,
Sur Paris sans Barbès, sur Rome sans Brutus,
Sur le tyran qui flotte et sur l'état qui sombre,
Triste, on a fait planer l'immense strophe sombre;
Quand on a remué le plafond du cachot;
Lorsqu'on a fait sortir tout le bruit de là-haut,
Les imprécations, les éclairs, les huées
De la caverne affreuse et sainte des nuées;
Lorsqu'on a, dans des jours semblables à des nuits,
Roulé toutes les voix du gouffre, les ennuis
Et les cris, et les pleurs pour la France trahie,
Et l'ombre, et Juvénal, augmenté d'Isaïe,
Et des écroulements d'iambes furieux
Ainsi que des rochers de haine dans les cieux;
Quand on a châtié jusqu'aux morts dans leurs tombes;
Lorsqu'on a puni l'aigle à cause des colombes,
Et souffleté Nemrod, César, Napoléon,
Qu'on a questionné même le Panthéon,
Et fait trembler parfois cette haute bâtisse;
Quand on a fait sur terre et sous terre justice,
Et qu'on a nettoyé de miasmes l'horizon,
Dame! on rentre un peu las, c'est vrai, dans sa maison;
On ne se fâche pas des mouches familières;
Les légers coups de bec qui sortent des volières,
Le doux rire moqueur des nids mélodieux,
Tous ces petits démons et tous ces petits dieux
Qu'on appelle marmots et bambins, vous enchantent;
Même quand on les sent vous mordre, on croit qu'ils chantent.
Le pardon, quel repos! Soyez Dante et Caton

Pour les puissants, mais non pour les petits. Va-t-on
Faire la grosse voix contre ce frais murmure?
Va-t-on pour les moineaux endosser son armure?
Bah! contre de l'aurore est-ce qu'on se défend?
Le tonnerre chez lui doit être bon enfant.

V

Ma Jeanne, dont je suis doucement insensé,
Étant femme, se sent reine; tout l'A B C
Des femmes, c'est d'avoir des bras blancs, d'être belles,
De courber d'un regard les fronts les plus rebelles,
De savoir avec rien, des bouquets, des chiffons,
Un sourire, éblouir les coeurs les plus profonds,
D'être, à côté de l'homme ingrat, triste et morose,
Douces plus que l'azur, roses plus que la rose;
Jeanne le sait; elle a trois ans, c'est l'âge mûr;
Rien ne lui manque; elle est la fleur de mon vieux mur,
Ma contemplation, mon parfum, mon ivresse;
Ma strophe, qui près d'elle a l'air d'une pauvresse,
L'implore, et reçoit d'elle un rayon; et l'enfant
Sait déjà se parer d'un chapeau triomphant,
De beaux souliers vermeils, d'une robe étonnante;
Elle a des mouvements de mouche frissonnante;
Elle est femme, montrant ses rubans bleus ou verts,
Et sa fraîche toilette, et son âme au travers;
Elle est de droit céleste et par devoir jolie;
Et son commencement de règne est ma folie.

VI

Jeanne était au pain sec dans le cabinet noir,
Pour un crime quelconque, et, manquant au devoir,
J'allai voir la proscrite en pleine forfaiture,
Et lui glissai dans l'ombre un pot de confiture
Contraire aux lois. Tous ceux sur qui, dans ma cité,
Repose le salut de la société

S’indignèrent, et Jeanne a dit d’une voix douce:
— Je ne toucherai plus mon nez avec mon pouce;
Je ne me ferai plus griffer par le minet.
Mais on s’est recrié: — Cette enfant vous connaît;
Elle sait à quel point vous êtes faible et lâche.
Elle vous voit toujours rire quand on se fâche.
Pas de gouvernement possible. A chaque instant
L’ordre est troublé par vous; le pouvoir se détend;
Plus de règle. L’enfant n’a plus rien qui l’arrête.
Vous démolissez tout. — Et j’ai baissé la tête,
Et j’ai dit: — Je n’ai rien à répondre à cela,
J’ai tort. Oui, c’est avec ces indulgences-là
Qu’on a toujours conduit les peuples à leur perte.
Qu’on me mette au pain sec. — Vous le méritez, certe,
On vous y mettra. — Jeanne alors, dans son coin noir,
M’a dit tout bas, levant ses yeux si beaux à voir,
Pleins de l’autorité des douces créatures:
— Eh bien’ moi, je t’irai porter des confitures.

VII

CHANSON: POUR FAIRE DANSER EN ROND

LES PETITS ENFANTS

Grand bal sous le tamarin.
On danse et l’on tambourine.
Tout bas parlent, sans chagrin,
Mathurin à Mathurine,
Mathurine à Mathurin.

C’est le soir, quel joyeux train!
Chantons à pleine poitrine
Au bal plutôt qu’au lutrin.
Mathurin a Mathurine,
Mathurine a Mathurin.

Découpé comme au burin,
L’arbre, au bord de l’eau marine,
Est noir sur le ciel serein.
Mathurin a Mathurine,
Mathurine a Mathurin.

Dans le bois rôde Isengrin.
Le magister endoctrine
Un moineau pillant le grain.
Mathurin a Mathurine,
Mathurine a Mathurin.

Broutant l’herbe brin à brin,
Le lièvre a dans la narine
L’appétit du romarin,
Mathurin a Mathurine,
Mathurine a Mathurin.

Sous l’ormeau le pèlerin
Demande à la pèlerine

Un baiser pour un quatrain.
Mathurin a Mathurine,
Mathurine a Mathurin.

Derrière un pli de terrain,
Nous entendons la clarine
Du cheval d’un voiturin.
Mathurin a Mathurine,
Mathurine a Mathurin.

VIII

LE POT CASSÉ

Ô ciel! toute la Chine est par terre en morceaux!
Ce vase pâle et doux comme un reflet des eaux,
Couverts d’oiseaux, de fleurs, de fruits, et des mensonges
De ce vague idéal qui sort du bleu des songes,
De ce vase unique, étrange, impossible, engourdi,
Gardant sur lui le clair de lune en plein midi,
Qui paraissait vivant, où luisait une flamme,
Qui semblait presque un monstre et semblait presque une âme,
Mariette, en faisant la chambre, l’a poussé
Du coude par mégarde, et le voilà brisé!
Beau vase! Sa rondeur était de rêves pleine,
Des boeufs d’or y broutaient des prés de porcelaine.
Je l’aimais, je l’avais acheté sur les quais,
Et parfois aux marmots pensifs je l’expliquais.
Voici l’Yak; voici le singe quadrumane;
Ceci c’est un docteur peut-être, ou bien un âne;
Il dit la messe, à moins qu’il ne dise hi-han;
Ça c’est un mandarin qu’on nomme aussi kohan;
Il faut qu’il soit savant, puisqu’il a ce gros ventre.
Attention, ceci, c’est le tigre en son antre,
Le hibou dans son trou, le roi dans son palais,
Le diable en son enfer; voyez comme ils sont laids!
Les monstres, c’est charmant, et les enfants le sentent.
Des merveilles qui sont des bêtes les enchantent.
Donc, je tenais beaucoup à ce vase. Il est mort.
J’arrivai furieux, terrible, et tout d’abord:
— Qui donc a fait cela? criai-je. Sombre entrée!
Jeanne alors, remarquant Mariette effarée,
Et voyant ma colère et voyant son effroi,
M’a regardé d’un air d’ange, et m’a dit: — C’est moi.

IX

Et Jeanne à Mariette a dit: — Je savais bien
Qu'en répondant c'est moi, papa ne dirait rien.
Je n'ai pas peur de lui puisqu'il est mon grand-père.
Vois-tu, papa n'a pas le temps d'être en colère,
Il n'est jamais beaucoup fâché, parce qu'il faut
Qu'il regarde les fleurs, et quand il fait bien chaud
Il nous dit: N'allez pas au grand soleil nu-tête,
Et ne vous laissez pas piquer par une bête,
Courez, ne tirez pas le chien par son collier,
Prenez garde aux faux pas dans le grand escalier,
Et ne vous cognez pas contre les coins des marbres.
Jouez. Et puis après il s'en va dans les arbres.

X

Tout pardonner, c'est trop; tout donner, c'est beaucoup!
Eh bien, je donne tout et je pardonne tout
Aux petits; et votre oeil sévère me contemple.
Toute cette clémence est de mauvais exemple.
Faire de l'amnistie en chambre est périlleux.
Absoudre des forfaits commis par des yeux bleus
Et par des doigts vermeils et purs, c'est effroyable.
Si cela devenait contagieux, que diable!
Il faut un peu songer à la société.
La férocité sied à la paternité;
Le sceptre doit avoir la trique pour compagne;
L'idéal, c'est un Louvre appuyé sur un bagne;
Le bien doit être fait par une main de fer.
Quoi! si vous étiez Dieu, vous n'auriez pas d'enfer?
Presque pas. Vous croyez que je serais bien aise
De voir mes enfants cuire au fond d'une fournaise?
Eh bien! non. Ma foi non! J'en fais mea-culpa;
Plutôt que Sabaoth je serais Grand-papa.
Plus de religion alors? Comme vous dites.
Plus de société? Retour aux troglodytes,
Aux sauvages, aux gens vêtus de peaux de loups?
Non, retour au vrai Dieu, distinct du Dieu jaloux,

Retour à la sublime innocence première,
Retour à la raison, retour à la lumière!
Alors, vous êtes fou, grand-père. J'y consens.
Tenez, messieurs les forts et messieurs les puissants,
Défiez-vous de moi, je manque de vengeance.
Qui suis-je? Le premier venu, plein d'indulgence,
Préférant la jeune aube à l'hiver pluvieux,
Homme ayant fait des lois, mais repentant et vieux,
Qui blâme quelquefois, mais qui jamais ne damne,
Autorité foulée aux petits pieds de Jeanne,
Pas sûr de tout savoir, en doutant même un peu,
Toujours tenté d'offrir aux gens sans feu ni lieu
Un coin du toit, un coin du foyer, moins sévère
Aux péchés qu'on honnit qu'aux forfaits qu'on révère,
Capable d'avouer les êtres sans aveu.
Ah! ne m'élevez pas au grade de bon Dieu!
Voyez-vous, je ferais toutes sortes de choses
Bizarres; je rirais; j'aurais pitié des roses,
Des femmes, des vaincus, des faibles, des tremblants;
Mes rayons seraient doux comme des cheveux blancs;
J'aurais un arrosoir assez vaste pour faire
Naître des millions de fleurs dans toute sphère,
Partout, et pour éteindre au loin le triste enfer:
Lorsque je donnerais un ordre, il serait clair;
Je cacherais le cerf aux chiens flairant sa piste;
Qu'un tyran pût jamais se nommer mon copiste,
Je ne le voudrais pas; je dirais: Joie à tous!
Mes miracles seraient ceci: — Les hommes doux. —
Jamais de guerre. — Aucun fléau. — Pas de déluge .
— Un croyant dans le prêtre, un juste dans le juge. -
Je serais bien coiffé de brouillard, étant Dieu,
C'est convenable; mais je me fâcherais peu,
Et je ne mettrais point de travers mon nuage
Pour un petit enfant qui ne serait pas sage;
Quand j'offrirais le ciel à vous, fils de Japhet,
On verrait que je sais comment le ciel est fait;
Je n'annoncerais point que les nocturnes toiles

Laisseraient pêle-mêle un jour choir les étoiles,
Parce que j’aurais peur, si je vous disais ça,
De voir Newton pousser le coude à Spinosa;
Je ferais à Veuillot le tour épouvantable
D’inviter Jésus-Christ et Voltaire à ma table.
Et de faire verser mon meilleur vin, hélas,
Par l’ami de Lazare à l’ami de Calas;
J’aurais dans mon éden, jardin à large porte,
Un doux water-closet mystérieux, de sorte
Qu’on puisse au paradis mettre le Syllabus;
Je dirais aux rois: Rois, vous êtes des abus,
Disparaissez J’irais, clignant de la paupière,
Rendre aux pauvres leurs sous sans le dire à Saint-Pierre,
Et, sournois, je ferais des trous à son panier
Sous l’énorme tas d’or qu’il nomme son denier;
Je dirais à l’abbé Dupanloup: Moins de zèle!
Vous voulez à la Vierge ajouter la Pucelle,
C’est cumuler, monsieur l’évêque; apaisez-vous.
Un Jéhovah trouvant que le peuple à genoux
Ne vaut pas l’homme droit et debout, tête haute,
Ce serait moi. J’aurais un pardon pour la faute,
Mais je dirais: Tâchez de rester innocents.
Et je demanderais aux prêtres, non l’encens,
Mais la vertu. J’aurais de la raison. En somme,
Si j’étais le bon Dieu, je serais un bon homme.

VII

L’IMMACULÉE CONCEPTION

L’IMMACULÉE CONCEPTION

Ô Vierge sainte, conçue sans péché!
(Prière chrétienne.)

L’enfant partout. Ceci se passe aux Tuileries.
Plusieurs Georges, plusieurs Jeannes, plusieurs Maries;

Un qui tette un qui dort; dans l’arbre un rossignol;
Un grand déjà rêveur qui voudrait voir Guignol;
Une fille essayant ses dents dans une pomme;
Toute la matinée adorable de l’homme;
L’aube et polichinelle; on court, on jase, on rit;
On parle à sa poupée, elle a beaucoup d’esprit;
On mange des gâteaux et l’on saute à la corde.
On me demande un sou pour un pauvre; j’accorde
Un franc; merci, grand-père! et l’on retourne au jeu,
Et l’on grimpe, et l’on danse, et l’on chante. Ô ciel bleu!
C’est toi le cheval. Bien. Tu traînes la charrette,
Moi je suis le cocher. A gauche; à droite; arrête.
Jouons aux quatre coins. Non; à colin-maillard.
Leur clarté sur son banc réchauffe le vieillard.
Les bouches des petits sont de murmures pleines,
Ils sont vermeils, ils ont plus de fraîches haleines
Que n’en ont les rosiers de mai dans les ravins,
Et l’aurore frissonne en leurs cheveux divins.
Tout cela c’est charmant. — Tout cela c’est horrible!
C’est le péché!

Lisez nos missels, notre bible,
L’abbé Pluche, saint Paul, par Trublet annoté,
Veuillot, tout ce qui fait sur terre autorité.
Une conception seule est immaculée;
Tous les berceaux sont noirs, hors la crèche étoilée;
Ce grand lit de l’abîme, hyménée, est taché.
Où l’homme dit Amour! le ciel répond Péché!
Tout est souillure, et qui le nie est un athée.
Toute femme est la honte, une seule exceptée.

Ainsi ce tas d’enfants est un tas de forfaits!
Oiseau qui fais ton nid, c’est le mal que tu fais.
Ainsi l’ombre sourit d’une façon maligne
Sur la douce couvée. Ainsi le bon Dieu cligne
Des yeux avec le diable et dit: Prends-moi cela!
Et c’est mon crime, ô ciel, l’innocent que voilà!

Ainsi ce tourbillon de lumière et de joie,
L’enfance, ainsi l’essaim d’âmes que nous envoie
L’amour mystérieux qu’avril épanouit,
Ces constellations d’anges dans notre nuit,
Ainsi la bouche rose, ainsi la tête blonde,
Ainsi cette prunelle aussi claire que l’onde,
Ainsi ces petits pieds courant dans le gazon,
Cette cohue aimable emplissant l’horizon
Et dont le grand soleil qui rit semble être l’hôte,
C’est le fourmillement monstrueux de la faute!
Péché! Péché! Le mal est dans les nouveau-nés.
Oh! quel sinistre affront! Prêtres infortunés!

Au milieu de la vaste aurore ils sont funèbres;
Derrière eux vient la chute informe des ténèbres.
Dans les plis de leur dogme ils ont la sombre nuit.
Le couple a tort, le fruit est vil, le germe nuit.
De l’enfant qui la souille une mère est suivie.
Ils sont les justiciers de ce crime, la vie.
Malheur! pas un hymen, non, pas même le leur,
Pas même leur autel n’est pur. Malheur! malheur!
Ô femmes, sur vos fronts ils mettent d’affreux doutes.
Le couronnement d’une est l’outrage de toutes.
Démence! ce sont eux les désobéissants.
On ne sait quel crachat se mêle à leur encens.
Ô la profonde insulte! ils jettent l’anathème
Sur l’oeil qui dit: je vois! sur le coeur qui dit: j’aime!
Sur l’âme en fête et l’arbre en fleur et l’aube en feu,
Et sur l’immense joie éternelle de Dieu
Criant: Je suis le père! et sans borne et sans voile
Semant l’enfant sur terre et dans le ciel l’étoile!

VIII

LES GRIFFONNAGES DE L’ÉCOLIER

LES GRIFFONNAGES DE L’ÉCOLIER

Charle a fait des dessins sur son livre de classe.
Le thème est fatigant au point, qu'étant très lasse,
La plume de l'enfant n'a pu se reposer
Qu'en faisant ce travail énorme: improviser
Dans un livre, partout, en haut, en bas, des fresques,
Comme on en voit aux murs des alhambras moresques,
Des taches d'encre, ayant des aspects d'animaux,
Qui dévorent la phrase et qui rongent les mots,
Et, le texte mangé, viennent mordre les marges.
Le nez du maître flotte au milieu de ces charges.
Troublant le clair-obscur du vieux latin toscan,
Dans la grande satire où Rome est au carcan,
Sur César, sur Brutus. sur les hautes mémoires,
Charle a tranquillement dispersé ses grimoires.
Ce chevreau, le caprice, a grimpé sur les vers.
Le livre, c'est l'endroit; l'écolier, c'est l'envers.
Sa gaîté s'est mêlée, espiègle, aux stigmates
Du vengeur qui voulait s'enfuir chez les Sarmates.
Les barbouillages sont étranges, profonds, drus.
Les monstres! Les voilà perchés, l'un sur Codrus,
L'autre sur Néron. L'autre égratigne un dactyle.
Un pâté fait son nid dans les branches du style.
Un âne, qui ressemble à monsieur Nisard, brait,
Et s'achève en hibou dans l'obscure forêt;
L'encrier sur lui coule, et, la tête inondée
De cette pluie, il tient dans sa patte un spondée.
Partout la main du rêve a tracé le dessin;
Et c'est ainsi qu'au gré de l'écolier, l'essaim
Des griffonnages, horde hostile aux belles-lettres,
S'est envolé parmi les sombres hexamètres.
Jeu! songe! on ne sait quoi d'enfantin, s'enlaçant
Au poème, lui donne un ineffable accent,
Commente le chef-d'oeuvre, et l'on sent l'harmonie
D'une naïveté complétant un génie.
C'est un géant ayant sur l'épaule un marmot.
Charle invente une fleur qu'il fait sortir d'un mot,

Ou lâche un farfadet ailé dans la broussaille
Du rythme effarouché qui s’écarte et tressaille.
Un rond couvre une page. Est-ce un dôme? est-ce un oeuf?
Une belette en sort qui peut-être est un boeuf.
Le gribouillage règne, et sur chaque vers pose
Les végétations de la métamorphose.
Charle a sur ce latin fait pousser un hallier.
Grâce à lui, ce vieux texte est un lieu singulier
Où le hasard, l’ennui, le lazzi, la rature
Dressent au second plan leur vague architecture.
Son encre a fait la nuit sur le livre étoilé.
Et pourtant, par instants, ce noir réseau brouillé,
A travers ses rameaux, ses porches, ses pilastres,
Laisse passer l’idée et laisse voir les astres.

C’est de cette façon que Charle a travaillé
Au dur chef-d’oeuvre antique, et qu’au bronze rouillé
Il a plaqué le lierre, et dérangé la masse
Du masque énorme avec une folle grimace.
Il s’est bien amusé. Quel bonheur d’écolier!
Traiter un fier génie en monstre familier!
Être avec ce lion comme avec un caniche!
Aux pédants, groupe triste et laid, faire une niche!
Rendre agréable aux yeux, réjouissant, malin,
Un livre estampillé par monsieur Delalain!
Gai, bondir à pieds joints par-dessus un poème!
Charle est très satisfait de son oeuvre, et lui-même
— L’oiseau voit le miroir et ne voit pas la glu —
Il s’admire.

Un guetteur survient, homme absolu.
Dans son oeil terne luit le pensum insalubre,
Sa lèvre aux coins baissés porte en son pli lugubre
Le rudiment, la loi, le refus des congés,
Et l’auguste fureur des textes outragés.
L’enfance veut des fleurs; on lui donne la roche.
Hélas! c’est le censeur du collège. Il approche,

Jette au livre un regard funeste, et dit, hautain:
— Fort bien. Vous copierez mille vers ce matin
Pour manque de respect à vos livres d’étude. —
Et ce geôlier s’en va, laissant là ce Latude.
Or c’est précisément la récréation.
Être à neuf ans Tantale, Encelade, Ixion!
Voir autrui jouer! Être un banni, qu’on excepte!
Tourner du châtiment la manivelle inepte!
Soupirer sous l’ennui, devant les cieux ouverts,
Et sous cette montagne affreuse, mille vers!
Charles sanglote, et dit: — Ne pas jouer aux barres!
Copier du latin! Je suis chez les barbares. —
C’est midi; le moment où sur l’herbe on s’assied,
L’heure sainte où l’on doit sauter à cloche-pied;
L’air est chaud, les taillis sont verts, et la fauvette
S’y débarbouille, ayant la source pour cuvette;
La cigale est là-bas qui chante dans le blé.
L’enfant a droit aux champs. Charles songe accablé
Devant le livre, hélas, tout noirci par ses crimes.
Il croit confusément ouïr gronder les rimes
D’un Boileau, qui s’entr’ouvre et bâille à ses côtés;
Tous ces bouquins lui font l’effet d’être irrités.
Aucun remords pourtant. Il a la tête haute.
Ne sentant pas de honte, il ne voit pas de faute.
— Suis-je donc en prison? Suis-je donc le vassal
De Noël, lâchement aggravé par Chapsal?
Qu’est-ce donc que j’ai fait? — Triste, il voit passer l’heure
De la joie. Il est seul. Tout l’abandonne. Il pleure.
Il regarde, éperdu, sa feuille de papier.
Mille vers! Copier! Copier! Copier!
Copier! Ô pédant, c’est là ce que tu tires
Du bois où l’on entend la flûte des satyres,
Tyran dont le sourcil, sitôt qu’on te répond,
Se fronce comme l’onde aux arches d’un vieux pont!
L’enfance a dès longtemps inventé dans sa rage
La charrue à trois socs pour ce dur labourage.
— Allons! dit-il, trichons les pions déloyaux!

Et, farouche, il saisit sa plume à trois tuyaux.
Soudain du livre immense une ombre, une âme, un homme
Sort, et dit: — Nois, pour ton sequin, blanc ou jaune,
Vil sou que tu crois précieux,
Dieu t'offre une étoile des cieux
Dans la main tendue à l'aumône.

IV

A PROPOS DE LA LOI DITE LIBERTÉ DE L'ENSEIGNEMENT

Prêtres, vous complotez de nous sauver, à l'aide
Des ténèbres, qui sont en effet le remède
Contre l'astre et le jour;
Vous faites l'homme libre au moyen d'une chaîne;
Vous avez découvert cette vertu, la haine,
Le crime étant l'amour.

Vous êtes l'innombrable attaquant le sublime;
L'esprit humain, colosse, a pour tête la cime
Des hautes vérités;
Fatalement ce front qui se dresse dans l'ombre
Attire à sa clarté le fourmillement sombre
Des dogmes irrités.

En vain le grand lion rugit, gronde, extermine;
L'insecte vil s'acharne; et toujours la vermine
Fit tout ce qu'elle put;
Nous méprisons l'immonde essaim qui tourbillonne;
Nous vous laissons bruire, et contre Babylone
Insurger Lilliput.

Pas plus qu'on ne verrait sous l'assaut des cloportes
Et l'effort des cirons tomber Thèbe aux cent portes
Et Ninive aux cent tours,
Pas plus qu'on ne verrait se dissiper le Pinde,

Ou l’Olympe, ou l’immense Himalaya de l’Inde
Sous un vol de vautour,

On ne verra crouler sous vos battements d’ailes
Voltaire et Diderot, ces fermes citadelles,
Platon qu’Horace aimait,
Et ce vieux Dante ouvert, au fond des cieux qu’il dore,
Sur le noir passé, comme une porte d’aurore
Sur un sombre sommet.

Ce rocher, ce granit, ce mont, la pyramide,
Debout dans l’ouragan sur le sable numide,
Hanté par les esprits,
S’aperçoit-il qu’il est, lui l’âpre hiéroglyphe,
Insulté par la fiente ou rayé par la griffe
De la chauve-souris?

Non, l’avenir ne peut mourir de vos morsures.
Les flèches du matin sont divines et sûres;
Nous vaincrons, nous voyons!
Erreurs, le vrai vous tue; ô nuit, le jour te vise;
Et nous ne craignons pas que jamais l’aube épuise
Son carquois de rayons.

Donc, soyez dédaignés sous la voûte éternelle.
L’idéal n’aura pas moins d’aube en sa prunelle
Parce que vous vivrez.
La réalité rit et pardonne au mensonge.
Quant à moi, je serai satisfait, moi qui songe
Devant les cieux sacrés,

Tant que Jeanne sera mon guide sur la terre,
Tant que Dieu permettra que j’aie, ô pur mystère!
En mon âpre chemin,
Ces deux bonheurs où tient tout l’idéal possible,
Dans l’âme un astre immense, et dans ma main paisible
Une petite main.

V

LES ENFANTS PAUVRES

Prenez garde à ce petit être;
Il est bien grand, il contient Dieu.
Les enfants sont, avant de naître,
Des lumières dans le ciel bleu.

Dieu nous les offre en sa largesse;
Ils viennent; Dieu nous en fait don;
Dans leur rire il met sa sagesse
Et dans leur baiser son pardon.

Leur douce clarté nous effleure.
Hélas, le bonheur est leur droit.
S’ils ont faim, le paradis pleure.
Et le ciel tremble, s’ils ont froid.

La misère de l’innocence
Accuse l’homme vicieux.
L’homme tient l’ange en sa puissance.
Oh! quel tonnerre au fond des cieux,

Quand Dieu, cherchant ces êtres frêles
Que dans l’ombre où nous sommeillons
Il nous envoie avec des ailes,
Les retrouve avec des haillons!

VI

AUX CHAMPS

Je me penche attendri sur les bois et les eaux,
Rêveur, grand-père aussi des fleurs et des oiseaux;
J’empêche les enfants de maltraiter les roses;

Je dis: N’effarez point la plante et l’animal;
Riez sans faire peur, jouez sans faire mal.
Jeanne et Georges, fronts purs, prunelles éblouies,
Rayonnent au milieu des fleurs épanouies;
J’erre, sans le troubler, dans tout ce paradis;
Je les entends chanter, je songe, et je me dis
Qu’ils sont inattentifs, dans leurs charmants tapages,
Au bruit sombre que font en se tournant les pages
Du mystérieux livre où le sort est écrit,
Et qu’ils sont loin du prêtre et près de Jésus-Christ.

VII

ENCORE L’IMMACULÉE CONCEPTION

Attendez. Je regarde une petite fille.
Je ne la connais pas; mais cela chante et brille;
C’est du rire, du ciel, du jour, de la beauté,
Et je ne puis passer froidement à côté.
Elle n’a pas trois ans. C’est l’aube qu’on rencontre.
Peut-être elle devrait cacher ce qu’elle montre,
Mais elle n’en sait rien, et d’ailleurs c’est charmant.
Cela, certes, ressemble au divin firmament
Plus que la face auguste et jaune d’un évêque.
Le babil des marmots est ma bibliothèque;
J’ouvre chacun des mots qu’ils disent, comme on prend
Un livre, et j’y découvre un sens profond et grand,
Sévère quelquefois. Donc j’écoute cet ange;
Et ce gazouillement me rassure, me venge,
M’aide à rire du mal qu’on veut me faire, éteint
Ma colère, et vraiment m’empêche d’être atteint
Par l’ombre du hideux sombrero de Basile.
Cette enfant est un coeur, une fête, un asile,
Et Dieu met dans son souffle et Dieu mêle à sa voix
Toutes les fleurs des champs, tous les oiseaux des bois;
Ma Jeanne, qui pourrait être sa soeur jumelle,
Traînait, l’été dernier, un chariot comme elle,

L’emplissait, le vidait, riait d’un rire fou,
Courait. Tous les enfants ont le même joujou;
Tous les hommes aussi. C’est bien, va, sois ravie,
Et traîne ta charrette, en attendant la vie.

Louange à Dieu! Toujours un enfant m’apaisa.
Doux être! voyez-moi les mains que ça vous a!
Allons, remettez donc vos bas, mademoiselle.
Elle est pieds nus, elle est barbouillée, elle est belle;
Sa charrette est cassée, et, comme nous, ma foi,
Elle se fait un char avec n’importe quoi.
Tout est char de triomphe à l’enfant comme à l’homme.
L’enfant aussi veut être un peu bête de somme
Comme nous; il se fouette, il s’impose une loi;
Il traîne son hochet comme nous notre roi;
Seulement l’enfant brille où le peuple se vautre.
Bon, voici maintenant qu’on en amène une autre;
Une d’un an, sa soeur sans doute; un grand chapeau,
Une petite tête, et des yeux! une peau!
Un sourire! oh! qu’elle est tremblante et délicate!
Chef-d’oeuvre, montrez-moi votre petite patte.
Elle allonge le pied et chante... c’est divin.
Quand je songe, et Veuillot n’a pu le dire en vain,
Qu’elles ont toutes deux la tache originelle!
La Chute est leur vrai nom. Chacune porte en elle
L’affreux venin d’Adam (bon style Patouillet);
Elles sont, sous le ciel qu’Eve jadis souillait,
D’horribles péchés, faits d’une façon charmante;
La beauté qui s’ajoute à la faute l’augmente;
Leur grâce est un remords de plus pour le pécheur,
Et leur mère apparaît, noire de leur blancheur;
Ces enfants que l’aube aime et que la fleur encense,
C’est la honte portant ce masque, l’innocence;
Dans ces yeux purs, Trablet l’affirme en son sermon,
Brille l’incognito sinistre du démon;
C’est le mal, c’est l’enfer, cela sort des abîmes!
Soit. Laissez-moi donner des gâteaux à ces crimes.

VIII

MARIÉE ET MÈRE

Voir la Jeanne de Jeanne! oh! ce serait mon rêve!
Il est dans l’ombre sainte un ciel vierge où se lève
Pour on ne sait quels yeux on ne sait quel soleil;
Les âmes à venir sont là; l’azur vermeil
Les berce, et Dieu les garde, en attendant la vie;
Car, pour l’âme aux destins ignorés asservie,
Il est deux horizons d’attente, sans combats,
L’un avant, l’autre après le passage ici-bas;
Le berceau cache l’un, la tombe cache l’autre.
Je pense à cette sphère inconnue à la nôtre
Où, comme un pâle essaim confusément joyeux,
Des flots d’âmes en foule ouvrent leurs vagues yeux;
Puis, je regarde Jeanne, ange que Dieu pénètre,
Et les petits garçons jouant sous ma fenêtre,
Toute cette gaîté de l’âge sans douleur,
Tous ces amours dans l’oeuf, tous ces époux en fleur;
Et je médite; et Jeanne entre, sort, court, appelle,
Traîne son petit char, tient sa petite pelle,
Fouille dans mes papiers, creuse dans le gazon,
Saute et jase, et remplit de clarté la maison;
Son rire est le rayon, ses pleurs sont la rosée.
Et dans vingt ans d’ici je jette ma pensée,
Et de ce qui sera je me fais le témoin,
Comme on jette une pierre avec la fronde au loin.

Une aurore n’est pas faite pour rester seule.

Mon âme de cette âme enfantine est l’aïeule,
Et dans son jeune sort mon coeur pensif descend.

Un jour, un frais matin quelconque, éblouissant,
Épousera cette aube encor pleine d’étoiles;

Et quelque âme, à cette heure errante sous les voiles
Où l’on sent l’avenir en Dieu se reposer,
Profitera pour naître ici-bas d’un baiser
Que se donneront l’une à l’autre ces aurores.
Ô tendre oiseau des bois qui dans ton nid pérores,
Voix éparse au milieu des arbres palpitants
Qui chantes la chanson sonore du printemps
Ô mésange, ô fauvette, ô tourterelle blanche,
Sorte de rêve ailé fuyant de branche en branche,
Doux murmure envolé dans les champs embaumés,
Je t’écoute et je suis plein de songes. Aimez,
Vous qui vivrez! Hymen! chaste hymen! O nature!
Jeanne aura devant elle alors son aventure,
L’être en qui notre sort s’accroît et s’interrompt;
Elle sera la mère au jeune et grave front;
La gardienne d’une aube à qui la vie est due,
Épouse responsable et nourrice éperdue,
La tendre âme sévère, et ce sera son tour
De se pencher, avec un inquiet amour,
Sur le frêle berceau, céleste et diaphane;
Ma Jeanne, ô rêve! azur! contemplera sa Jeanne;
Elle l’empêchera de pleurer, de crier,
Et lui joindra les mains, et la fera prier,
Et sentira sa vie à ce souffle mêlée.
Elle redoutera pour elle une gelée,
Le vent, tout, rien. O fleur fragile du pêcher!
Et, quand le doux petit ange pourra marcher,
Elle le mènera jouer aux Tuileries;
Beaucoup d’enfants courront sous les branches fleuries,
Mêlant l’avril de l’homme au grand avril de Dieu;
D’autres femmes, gaîment, sous le même ciel bleu,
Seront là comme Jeanne, heureuses, réjouies
Par cette éclosion d’âmes épanouies;
Et, sur cette jeunesse inclinant leur beau front,
Toutes ces mères, soeurs devant Dieu, souriront
Dans l’éblouissement de ces roses sans nombre.

Moi je ne serai plus qu’un oeil profond dans l’ombre.

IX

Que voulez-vous? L’enfant me tient en sa puissance;
Je finis par ne plus aimer que l’innocence;
Tous les hommes sont cuivre et plomb, l’enfance est or.
J’adore Astyanax et je gourmande Hector.
Es-tu sûr d’avoir fait ton devoir envers Troie?
Mon ciel est un azur, qui, par instants, foudroie.
Bonté, fureur, c’est là mon flux et mon reflux,
Et je ne suis borné d’aucun côté, pas plus
Quand ma bouche sourit que lorsque ma voix gronde;
Je me sens plein d’une âme étoilée et profonde;
Mon coeur est sans frontière, et je n’ai pas d’endroit
Où finisse l’amour des petits, et le droit
Des faibles, et l’appui qu’on doit aux misérables;
Si c’est un mal, il faut me mettre aux Incurables.
Je ne vois pas qu’allant du ciel au genre humain,
Un rayon de soleil s’arrête à mi-chemin;
La modération du vrai m’est inconnue;
Je veux le rire franc, je veux l’étoile nue.
Je suis vieux, vous passez, et moi, triste ou content,
J’ai la paternité du siècle sur l’instant.
Trouvez-moi quelque chose, et quoi que ce puisse être
D’extrême, appartenant à mon emploi d’ancêtre,
Blâme aux uns ou secours aux autres, je le fais.
Un jour, je fus parmi les vainqueurs, j’étouffais;
Je sentais à quel point vaincre est impitoyable;
Je pris la fuite. Un roc, une plage de sable
M’accueillirent. La Mort vint me parler. “ Proscrit,
Me dit-elle, salut! “ Et quelqu’un me sourit,
Quelqu’un de grand qui rêve en moi, ma conscience.
Et j’aimai les enfants, ne voyant que l’enfance,
Ô ciel mystérieux, qui valût mieux que moi.
L’enfant, c’est de l’amour et de la bonne foi.
Le seul être qui soit dans cette sombre vie

Petit avec grandeur puisqu'il l'est sans envie,
C'est l'enfant.

C'est pourquoi j'aime ces passereaux.

*

Pourtant, ces myrmidons je les rêve héros.
France, j'attends qu'ils soient au devoir saisissables.
Dès que nos fils sont grands, je les sens responsables;
Je cesse de sourire; et je me dis qu'il faut
Livrer une bataille immense à l'échafaud,
Au trône, au sceptre, au glaive, aux Louvres, aux repaires.
Je suis tendre aux petits, mais rude pour les pères.
C'est ma façon d'aimer les hommes faits; je veux
Qu'on pense à la patrie, empoignée aux cheveux
Et par les pieds traînée autour du camp vandale;
Lorsqu'à Rome, à Berlin, la bête féodale
Renaît et rouvre, affront pour le soleil levant,
Deux gueules qui d'ailleurs s'entremordent souvent,
Je m'indigne. Je sens, ô suprême souffrance,
La diminution tragique de la France,
Et j'accuse quiconque a la barbe au menton;
Quoi! ce grand imbécile a l'âge de Danton!
Quoi! ce drôle est Jocrisse et pourrait être Hoche!
Alors l'aube à mes yeux surgit comme un reproche,
Tout s'éclipse, et je suis de la tombe envieux.
Morne, je me souviens de ce qu'ont fait les vieux;
Je songe à l'océan assiégeant les falaises,
Au vaste écroulement qui suit les Marseillaises,
Aux portes de la nuit, aux Hydres, aux dragons,
A tout ce que ces preux ont jeté hors des gonds!
Je les revois mêlant aux éclairs leur bannière;
Je songe à la joyeuse et farouche manière
Dont ils tordaient l'Europe entre leurs poings d'airain;
Oh! ces soldats du Nil, de l'Argonne et du Rhin,
Ces lutteurs, ces vengeurs, je veux qu'on les imite!

Je vous le dis, je suis un aïeul sans limite;
Après l'ange je veux l'archange au firmament;
Moi grand-père indulgent, mais ancêtre inclément,
Aussi doux d'un côté que sévère de l'autre,
J'aime la gloire énorme et je veux qu'on s'y vautre
Quand cette gloire est sainte et sauve mon pays!
Dans les Herculanums et dans les Pompéïs
Je ne veux pas qu'on puisse un jour compter nos villes;
Je ne vois pas pourquoi les âmes seraient viles;
Je ne vois pas pourquoi l'on n'égalerait pas
Dans l'audace, l'effort, l'espoir, dans le trépas,
Les hommes d'Iéna, d'Ulm et des Pyramides;
Les vaillants ont-ils donc engendré les timides?
Non, vous avez du sang aux veines, jeunes gens!
Nos aïeux ont été des héros outrageants
Pour le vieux monde infâme; il reste de la place
Dans l'avenir; soyez peuple et non populace;
Soyez comme eux géants! Je n'ai pas de raisons
Pour ne point souhaiter les mêmes horizons,
Les mêmes nations en chantant délivrées,
Le même arrachement des fers et des livrées,
Et la même grandeur sans tache et sans remords
À nos enfants vivants qu'à nos ancêtres morts!

XVI

DEUX CHANSONS

I

CHANSON DE GRAND-PÈRE

Dansez, les petites filles,
Toutes en rond.
En vous voyant si gentilles,
Les bois riront.

Dansez, les petites reines,
Toutes en rond.
Les amoureux sous les frênes
S’embrasseront.

Dansez, les petites belles,
Toutes en rond.
Les bouquins dans les écoles
Bougonneront.

Dansez, les petites belles,
Toutes en rond.
Les oiseaux avec leurs ailes
Applaudiront.

Dansez, les petites fées,
Toutes en rond.
Dansez, de bleuets coiffées,
L’aurore au front.

Dansez, les petites femmes,
Toutes en rond.
Les messieurs diront aux dames
Ce qu’ils voudront.

II

CHANSON D’ANCÊTRE

Parlons de nos aïeux sous la verte feuillée.
Parlons de nos pères, fils! — Ils ont rompu leurs fers,
Et vaincu; leur armure est aujourd’hui rouillée.
Comme il tombe de l’eau d’une éponge mouillée,
De leur âme dans l’ombre il tombait des éclairs,
Comme si dans la foudre on les avait trempées.
Frappez, écoliers,

Avec les épées
Sur les boucliers.

Ils craignaient le vin sombre et les pâles ménades;
Ils étaient indignés, ces vieux fils de Brennus,
De voir les rois passer fiers sous les colonnades,
Les cortèges des rois étant des promenades
De prêtres, de soldats, de femmes aux seins nus,
D’hymnes et d’encensoirs, et de têtes coupées.
Frappez, écoliers,
Avec les épées
Sur les boucliers.

Ils ont voulu, couvé, créé la délivrance;
Ils étaient les titans, nous sommes les fourmis;
Ils savaient que la Gaule enfanterait la France;
Quand on a la hauteur, on a la confiance;
Les montagnes, à qui le rayon est promis,
Songent, et ne sont point par l’aurore trompées.
Frappez, écoliers,
Avec les épées
Sur les boucliers.

Quand une ligue était par les princes construite,
Ils grondaient, et, pour peu que la chose en valût
La peine, et que leur chef leur criât: Tout de suite!
Ils accouraient; alors les rois prenaient la fuite
En hâte, et les chansons d’un vil joueur de luth
Ne sont pas dans les airs plus vite dissipées.
Frappez, écoliers,
Avec les épées
Sur les boucliers.

Lutteurs du gouffre, ils ont découronné le crime,
Brisé les autels noirs, détruit les dieux brigands;
C’est pourquoi, moi vieillard, penché sur leur abîme,
Je les déclare grands, car rien n’est plus sublime

Que l’océan avec ses profonds ouragans,
Si ce n’est l’homme avec ses sombres épopées.
Frappez, écoliers,
Avec les épées
Sur les boucliers.

Hélas! sur leur flambeau, nous leurs fils, nous soufflâmes.
Fiers aïeux! ils disaient au faux prêtre: Va-t’en!
Du bûcher misérable ils éteignaient les flammes,
Et c’est par leur secours que plusieurs grandes âmes,
Mises injustement au bagne par Satan,
Tu le sais, Dieu! se sont de l’enfer échappées.
Frappez, écoliers,
Avec les épées
Sur les boucliers.

Levez vos fronts; voyez oe pur sommet, la gloire,
Ils étaient là; voyez cette cime, l’honneur,
Ils étaient là; voyez ce hautain promontoire,
La liberté; mourir libres fut leur victoire;
Il faudra, car l’orgie est un lâche bonheur,
Se remettre à gravir ces pentes escarpées.
Frappez, chevaliers,
Avec les épées
Sur les boucliers.

XVII

JEANNE ENDORMIE. — IV

L’oiseau chante; je suis au fond des rêveries.

Rose, elle est là qui dort sous les branches fleuries,
Dans son berceau tremblant comme un nid d’alcyon,
Douce, les yeux fermés, sans faire attention
Au glissement de l’ombre et du soleil sur elle.
Elle est toute petite, elle est surnaturelle.

Ô suprême beauté de l’enfant innocent!
Moi je pense, elle rêve; et sur son front descend
Un entrelacement de visions sereines;
Des femmes de l’azur qu’on prendrait pour des reines,
Des anges, des lions ayant des airs benins,
De pauvres bons géants protégés par des nains,
Des triomphes de fleurs dans les bois, des trophées
D’arbres célestes, pleins de la lueur des fées,
Un nuage où l’éden apparaît à demi,
Voilà ce qui s’abat sur l’enfant endormi.
Le berceau des enfants est le palais des songes;
Dieu se met à leur faire un tas de doux mensonges;
De là leur frais sourire et leur profonde paix.
Plus d’un dira plus tard: Bon Dieu, tu me trompais.

Mais le bon Dieu répond dans la profondeur sombre:
— Non. Ton rêve est le ciel. Je t’en ai donné l’ombre.
Mais ce ciel, tu l’auras. Attends l’autre berceau;
La tombe. —
Ainsi je songe. Ô printemps! Chante, oiseau!

XVIII

QUE LES PETITS LIRONT QUAND ILS SERONT GRANDS

I

PATRIE

Ô France, ton malheur m’indigne et m’est sacré.
Je l’ai dit, et jamais je ne me lasserai
De le redire, et c’est le grand cri de mon âme,
Quiconque fait du mal à ma mère est infâme.
En quelque lieu qu’il soit caché, tous mes souhaits
Le menacent; sur terre ou là-haut, je le hais.
César, je le flétris; destin, je le secoue.

Je questionne l’ombre et je fouille la boue;
L’empereur, ce brigand, le hasard, ce bandit,
Eveillent ma colère; et ma strophe maudit
Avec des pleurs sanglants, avec des cris funèbres,
Le sort, ce mauvais drôle errant dans les ténèbres;
Je rappelle la nuit, le gouffre, le ciel noir,
Et les événements farouches, au devoir.
Je n’admets pas qu’il soit permis aux sombres causes
Qui mêlent aux droits vrais l’aveuglement des choses
De faire rebrousser chemin à la raison;
Je dénonce un revers qui vient par trahison;
Quand la gloire et l’honneur tombent dans une embûche,
J’affirme que c’est Dieu lui-même qui trébuche;
J’interpelle les faits tortueux et rampants,
La victoire, l’hiver, l’ombre et ses guet-apens;
Je dis à ces passants quelconques de l’abîme
Que je les vois, qu’ils sont en train de faire un crime,
Que nous ne sommes point des femmes à genoux,
Que nous réfléchissons, qu’ils prennent garde à nous,
Que ce n’est pas ainsi qu’on doit traiter la France,
Et que, même tombée au fond de la souffrance,
Même dans le sépulcre, elle a l’étoile au front.
Je voudrais bien savoir ce qu’ils me répondront.
Je suis un curieux, et je gênerai, certe,
Le destin qu’un regard sévère déconcerte,
Car on est responsable au ciel plus qu’on ne croit.
Quand le progrès devient boiteux, quand Dieu décroît
En apparence, ayant sur lui la nuit barbare,
Quand l’homme est un esquif dont Satan prend la barre,
Il est certain que l’âme humaine est au cachot,
Et qu’on a dérangé quelque chose là-haut.
C’est pourquoi je demande à l’ombre la parole.
Je ne suis pas de ceux dont la fierté s’envole,
Et qui, pour avoir vu régner des ruffians
Et des gueux, cessent d’être à leur droit confiants;
Je lave ma sandale et je poursuis ma route;
Personne n’a jamais vu mon âme en déroute;

Je ne me trouble point parce qu'en ses reflux
Le vil destin sur nous jette un Rosbach de plus;
La défaite me fait songer à la victoire;
J'ai l'obstination de l'altière mémoire;
Notre linceul toujours eut la vie en ses plis;
Quand je lis Waterloo, je prononce Austerlitz.
Le deuil donne un peu plus de hauteur à ma tête.
Mais ce n'est pas assez, je veux qu'on soit honnête
Là-haut, et je veux voir ce que les destins font
Chez eux, dans la forêt du mystère profond,
Car ce qu'ils font chez eux, c'est chez nous qu'on le souffre.
Je prétends regarder face à face le gouffre.
Je sais que l'ombre doit rendre compte aux esprits.
Je désire savoir pourquoi l'on nous a pris
Nos villes, notre armée, et notre force utile;
Et pourquoi l'on filoute et pourquoi l'on mutile
L'immense peuple aimant d'où sortent les clartés;
Je veux savoir le fond de nos calamités,
Voir le dedans du sort misérable, et connaître
Ces recoins où trop peu de lumière pénètre;
Pourquoi l'assassinat du Midi par le Nord,
Pourquoi Paris vivant vaincu par Berlin mort,
Pourquoi le bagne à l'ange et le trône au squelette;
Ô France, je prétends mettre sur la sellette
La guerre, les combats, nos affronts, nos malheurs,
Et je ferai vider leur poche à ces voleurs,
Car juger le hasard, c'est le droit du prophète.
J'affirme que la loi morale n'est pas faite
Pour qu'on souffle dessus là-haut, dans la hauteur,
Et qu'un événement peut être un malfaiteur.
J'avertis l'inconnu que je perds patience;
Et c'est là la grandeur de notre conscience
Que, seule et triste, ayant pour appui le berceau,
L'innocence, le droit des faibles, le roseau,
Elle est terrible; elle a, par ce seul mot: Justice,
Entrée au ciel; et, si la comète au solstice
S'égare, elle pourrait lui montrer son chemin;

Elle requiert Dieu même au nom du genre humain;
Elle est la vérité, blanche, pâle, immortelle;
Pas une force n’est la force devant elle;
Les lois qu’on ne voit pas penchent de son côté;
Oui, c’est là la puissance et c’est là la beauté
De notre conscience, — écoute ceci, prêtre, —
Qu’elle ne comprend pas qu’un attentat puisse être
Par quelqu’un qui serait juste, prémédité;
Oui, sans armes, n’ayant que cette nudité,
Le vrai, quand un éclair tombe mal sur la terre,
Quand un des coups obscurs qui sortent du mystère
Frappe à tâtons, et met les peuples en danger,
S’il lui plaisait d’aller là-haut l’interroger
Au milieu de cette ombre énorme qu’on vénère,
Tranquille, elle ferait bégayer le tonnerre.

II

PERSÉVÉRANCE

N’importe. Allons au but, continuons. Les choses,
Quand l’homme tient la clef, ne sont pas longtemps closes.
Peut-être qu’elle-même, ouvrant ses pâles yeux,
La nuit, lasse du mal, ne demande pas mieux
Que de trouver celui qui saura la convaincre.
Le devoir de l’obstacle est de se laisser vaincre.

L’obscurité nous craint et recule en grondant
Regardons les penseurs de l’âge précédent,
Ces héros, ces géants qu’une même âme anime,
Détachés par la mort de leur travail sublime,
Passer, les pieds poudreux et le front étoilé;
Saluons la sueur du relais dételé;
Et marchons. Nous aussi, nous avons notre étape.
Le pied de l’avenir sur notre pavé frappe;
En route! Poursuivons le chemin commencé;
Augmentons l’épaisseur de l’ombre du passé;

Laissons derrière nous, et le plus loin possible,
Toute l’antique horreur de moins en moins visible.
Déjà le précurseur dans ces brumes brilla;
Platon vint jusqu’ici, Luther a monté là;
Voyez, de grands rayons marquent de grands passages;
L’ombre est pleine partout du flamboiement des sages;
Voici l’endroit profond où Pascal s’est penché.
Criant: gouffre! Jean-Jacque où je marche a marché;
C’est là que, s’envolant lui-même aux cieux, Voltaire,
Se sentant devenir sublime, a perdu terre,
Disant: Je vois! ainsi qu’un prophète ébloui.
Luttons, comme eux; luttons, le front épanoui;
Marchons! un pas qu’on fait, c’est un champ révèle;
Déchiffrons dans les temps nouveaux la loi nouvelle;
Le coeur n’est jamais sourd, l’esprit n’est jamais las,
Et la route est ouverte aux fiers apostolats.

Ô tous! vivez, marchez, croyez! soyez tranquilles.
— Mais quoi! le râle sourd des discordes civiles,
Ces siècles de douleurs, de pleurs, d’adversités,
Hélas! tous ces souffrants, tous ces déshérités,
Tous ces proscrits, le deuil, la haine universelle,
Tout ce qui dans le fond des âmes s’amoncelle,
Cela ne va-t-il pas éclater tout à coup?
La colère est partout, la fureur est partout;
Les cieux sont noirs; voyez, regardez; il éclaire! —
Qu’est-ce que la fureur? qu’importe la colère?
La vengeance sera surprise de son fruit;
Dieu nous transforme; il a pour tâche en notre nuit
L’auguste avortement de la foudre en aurore.

Dieu prend dans notre coeur la haine et la dévore;
Il se jette sur nous des profondeurs du jour,
Et nous arrache tout de l’âme, hors l’amour;
Avec ce bec d’acier, la conscience, il plonge
Jusqu’à notre pensée et jusqu’à notre songe,
Fouille notre poitrine et, quoi que nous fassions,

Jusqu’aux vils intestins qu’on nomme passions;
Il pille nos instincts mauvais, il nous dépouille
De ce qui nous tourmente et de ce qui nous souille;
Et, quand il nous a faits pareils au ciel béni,
Bons et purs, il s’envole, et rentre à l’infini;
Et, lorsqu’il a passé sur nous, l’âme plus grande
Sent qu’elle ne hait plus, et rend grâce, et demande:
Qui donc m’a prise ainsi dans ses serres de feu?
Et croit que c’est un aigle, et comprend que c’est Dieu.

III

PROGRÈS

En avant, grande marche humaine!
Peuple, change de région.
Ô larve, deviens phénomène;
Ô troupeau, deviens légion.
Cours, aigle, où tu vois l’aube éclore.
L’acceptation de l’aurore
N’est interdite qu’aux hiboux.
Dans le soleil Dieu se devine;
Le rayon a l’âme divine
Et l’âme humaine à ses deux bouts.

Il vient de l’une et vole à l’autre;
Il est pensée, étant clarté;
En haut archange, en bas apôtre,
En haut flamme, en bas liberté.
Il crée Horace ainsi que Dante,
Dore la rose au vent pendante,
Et le chaos où nous voguons;
De la même émeraude il touche
L’humble plume de l’oiseau-mouche
Et l’âpre écaille des dragons[48].
Prenez les routes lumineuses,
Prenez les chemins étoilés.

Esprits semeurs, âmes glaneuses,
Allez, allez, allez, allez!
Esclaves d'hier, tristes hommes,
Hors des bagnes, hors des sodomes,
Marchez, soyez vaillants, montez;
Ayez pour triomphe la gloire
Où vous entrez, ô foule noire,
Et l'opprobre dont vous sortez!

Homme, franchis les mers. Secoue
Dans l'écume tout le passé;
Allume en étoupe à ta proue
Le chanvre du gibet brisé.
Gravis les montagnes. Écrase
Tous les vieux monstres dans la vase;
Ressemble aux anciens Apollons;
Quand l'épée est juste, elle est pure;
Va donc! car l'homme a pour parure
Le sang de l'hydre à ses talons.

IV

FRATERNITÉ

Je rêve l'équité, la vérité profonde,
L'amour qui veut, l'espoir qui luit, la foi qui fonde,
Et le peuple éclairé plutôt que châtié.
Je rêve la douceur, la bonté, la pitié,
Et le vaste pardon. De là ma solitude.

*

La vieille barbarie humaine a l'habitude
De s'absoudre, et de croire, hélas, que ce qu'on veut,
Prêtre ou juge, on a droit de le faire, et qu'on peut
Ôter sa conscience en mettant une robe.
Elle prend l'équité céleste, elle y dérobe

Ce qui la gêne, y met ce qui lui plaît; biffant
Tout ce qu'on doit au faible, à la femme, à l'enfant,
Elle change le chiffre, elle change la somme,
Et du droit selon Dieu fait la loi selon l'homme.
De là les hommes-dieux, de là les rois-soleils;
De là sur les pavés tant de ruisseaux vermeils;
De là les Laffemas, les Vouglans, les Bâvilles;
De là l'effroi des champs et la terreur des villes,
Les lapidations, les deuils, les cruautés,
Et le front sérieux des sages insultés.

*

Jésus paraît; qui donc s'écrie: Il faut qu'il meure!
C'est le prêtre. Ô douleur! À jamais, à demeure,
Et quoi que nous disions, et quoi que nous songions,
Les euménides sont dans les religions;
Mégère est catholique; Alecton est chrétienne;
Clotho, nonne sanglante, accompagnait l'antienne
D'Arbuez, et l'on entend dans l'église sa voix;
Ces bacchantes du meurtre encourageaient Louvois;
Et les monts étaient pleins du cri de ces ménades
Quand Bossuet poussait Boufflers aux dragonnades.

*

Ne vous figurez pas, si Dieu lui-même accourt,
Que l'antique fureur de l'homme reste court,
Et recule devant la lumière céleste.
Au plus pur vent d'en haut elle mêle sa peste,
Elle mêle sa rage aux plus doux chants d'amour,
S'enfuit avec la nuit, mais rentre avec le jour.
Le progrès le plus vrai, le plus beau, le plus sage,
Le plus juste, subit son monstrueux passage.
L'aube ne peut chasser l'affreux spectre importun.
Cromwell frappe un tyran, Charles; il en reste un,
Cromwell. L'atroce meurt, l'atrocité subsiste.

Le bon sens, souriant et sévère exorciste,
Attaque ce vampire et n’en a pas raison.
Comme une sombre aïeule habitant la maison,
La barbarie a fait de nos coeurs ses repaires,
Et tient les fils après avoir tenu les pères.
L’idéal un jour naît sur l’ancien continent,
Tout un peuple ébloui se lève rayonnant,
Le quatorze juillet jette au vent les bastilles,
Les révolutions, ô Liberté, tes filles,
Se dressent sur les monts et sur les océans,
Et gagnent la bataille énorme des géants,
Toute la terre assiste à la fuite inouïe
Du passé, néant, nuit, larve, ombre évanouie!
L’inepte barbarie attente à ce laurier,
Et perd Torquemada, mais retrouve Carrier.
Elle se trouble peu de toute cette aurore.
La vaste ruche humaine, éveillée et sonore,
S’envole dans l’azur, travaille aux jours meilleurs,
Chante, et fait tous les miels avec toutes les fleurs;
La vieille âme du vieux Caïn, l’antique Haine
Est là, voit notre éden et songe à sa géhenne,
Ne veut pas s’interrompre et ne veut pas finir,
Rattache au vil passé l’éclatant avenir,
Et remplace, s’il manque un chaînon à sa chaîne,
Le père Letellier par le Père Duchêne;
De sorte que Satan peut, avec les maudits,
Rire de notre essai manqué de paradis.
Eh bien, moi, je dis: Non! tu n’es pas en démence,
Mon coeur, pour vouloir l’homme indulgent, bon, immense;
Pour crier: Sois clément! sois clément! sois clément!
Et parce que ta voix n’a pas d’autre enrouement!

*

Tu n’es pas furieux parce que tu souhaites
Plus d’aube au cygne et moins de nuit pour les chouettes;
Parce que tu gémis sur tous les opprimés;

Non, ce n’est pas un fou celui qui dit: Aimez!
Non, ce n’est pas errer et rêver que de croire
Que l’homme ne naît point avec une âme noire,
Que le bon est latent dans le pire, et qu’au fond
Peu de fautes vraiment sont de ceux qui les font.
L’homme est au mal ce qu’est à l’air le baromètre;
Il marque les degrés du froid, sans rien omettre,
Mais sans rien ajouter, et, s’il monte ou descend,
Hélas! la faute en est au vent, ce noir passant.
L’homme est le vain drapeau d’un sinistre édifice;
Tout souffle qui frémit, flotte, serpente, glisse
Et passe, il le subit, et le pardon est dû
À ce haillon vivant dans les cieux éperdu.
Hommes, pardonnez-vous. Ô mes frères, vous êtes
Dans le vent, dans le gouffre obscur, dans les tempêtes;
Pardonnez-vous. Les coeurs saignent, les ans sont courts;
Ah! donnez-vous les uns aux autres ce secours!
Oui, même quand j’ai fait le mal, quand je trébuche
Et tombe, l’ombre étant la cause de l’embûche,
La nuit faisant l’erreur, l’hiver faisant le froid,
Être absous, pardonné, plaint, aimé, c’est mon droit.

Un jour, je vis passer une femme inconnue.
Cette femme semblait descendre de la nue;
Elle avait sur le dos des ailes, et du miel
Sur sa bouche entr’ouverte, et dans ses yeux le ciel.
À des voyageurs las, à des errants sans nombre,
Elle montrait du doigt une route dans l’ombre,
Et semblait dire: On peut se tromper de chemin.
Son regard faisait grâce à tout le genre humain;
Elle était radieuse et douce; et, derrière elle,
Des monstres attendris venaient, baisant son aile,
Des lions graciés, des tigres repentants,
Nemrod sauvé, Néron en pleurs; et par instants
À force d’être bonne elle paraissait folle.
Et, tombant à genoux, sans dire une parole,
Je l’adorai, croyant deviner qui c’était.

Mais elle, — devant l’ange en vain l’homme se tait, —
Vit ma pensée, et dit: Faut-il qu’on t’avertisse?
Tu me crois la pitié; fils, je suis la justice.

V

L’ÂME À LA POURSUITE DU VRAI

I

Je m’en irai dans les chars sombres
Du songe et de la vision;
Dans la blême cité des ombres
Je passerai comme un rayon;
J’entendrai leurs vagues huées;
Je semblerai dans les nuées
Le grand échevelé de l’air;
J’aurai sous mes pieds le vertige,
Et dans les yeux plus de prodige
Que le météore et l’éclair.

Je rentrerai dans ma demeure,
Dans le noir monde illimité.
Jetant à l’éternité l’heure
Et la terre à l’immensité,
Repoussant du pied nos misères,
Je prendrai le vrai dans mes serres
Et je me transfigurerai,
Et l’on ne verra plus qu’à peine
Un reste de lueur humaine
Trembler sous mon sourcil sacré.

Car je ne serai plus un homme;
Je serai l’esprit ébloui
À qui le sépulcre se nomme,
À qui l’énigme répond: Oui.
L’ombre aura beau se faire horrible;

Je m’épanouirai terrible,
Comme Élie à Gethsémani,
Comme le vieux Thalès de Grèce,
Dans la formidable allégresse
De l’abîme et de l’infini.

Je questionnerai le gouffre
Sur le secret universel,
Et le volcan, l’urne de soufre,
Et l’océan, l’urne de sel;
Tout ce que les profondeurs savent,
Tout ce que les tourmentes lavent,
Je sonderai tout; et j’irai
Jusqu’à ce que, dans les ténèbres,
Je heurte mes ailes funèbres
À quelqu’un de démesuré.

Parfois m’envolant jusqu’au faîte,
Parfois tombant de tout mon poids,
J’entendrai crier sur ma tête
Tous les cris de l’ombre à la fois,
Tous les noirs oiseaux de l’abîme,
L’orage, la foudre sublime,
L’âpre aquilon séditieux,
Tous les effrois qui, pêle-mêle,
Tourbillonnent, battant de l’aile,
Dans le précipice des cieux.

La Nuit pâle, immense fantôme
Dans l’espace insondable épars,
Du haut du redoutable dôme,
Se penchera de toutes parts;
Je la verrai lugubre et vaine,
Telle que la vit Antisthène
Qui demandait aux vents: Pourquoi?
Telle que la vit Épicure,
Avec des plis de robe obscure

Flottant dans l’ombre autour de moi.

— Homme! la démence t’emporte,
Dira le nuage irrité.
— Prends-tu la nuit pour une porte?
Murmurera l’obscurité.
L’espace dira: — Qui t’égare?
Passeras-tu, barde, où Pindare
Et David ne sont point passés?
— C’est ici, criera la tempête,
Qu’Hésiode a dit: Je m’arrête!
Qu’Ézéchiel a dit: Assez!

Mais tous les efforts des ténèbres
Sur mon essor s’épuiseront
Sans faire fléchir mes vertèbres
Et sans faire pâlir mon front;
Au sphinx, au prodige, au problème,
J’apparaîtrai, monstre moi-même,
Être pour deux destins construit,
Ayant, dans la céleste sphère,
Trop de l’homme pour la lumière,
Et trop de l’ange pour la nuit.

II

L’ombre dit au poète: — Imite
Ceux que retient l’effroi divin;
N’enfreins pas l’étrange limite
Que nul n’a violée en vain;
Ne franchis pas l’obscure grève
Où la nuit, la tombe et le rêve
Mêlent leurs souffles inouïs,
Où l’abîme sans fond, sans forme,
Rapporte dans sa houle énorme
Les prophètes évanouis.

Tous les essais que tu peux faire
Sont inutiles et perdus.
Prends un culte; choisis; préfère;
Tes voeux ne sont pas entendus;
Jamais le mystère ne s’ouvre;
La tranquille immensité couvre
Celui qui devant Dieu s’enfuit
Et celui qui vers Dieu s’élance
D’une égalité de silence
Et d’une égalité de nuit.

Va sur l’Olympe où Stésichore,
Cherchant Jupiter, le trouva;
Va sur l’Horeb qui fume encore
Du passage de Jéhovah;
Ô songeur, ce sont là des cimes,
De grands buts, des courses sublimes...
On en revient désespéré,
Honteux, au fond de l’ombre noire,
D’avoir abdiqué jusqu’à croire!
Indigné d’avoir adoré!

L’Olympien est de la brume;
Le Sinaïque est de la nuit.
Nulle part l’astre ne s’allume,
Nulle part l’ombre ne bleuit.
Que l’homme vive et s’en contente;
Qu’il reste l’homme; qu’il ne tente
Ni l’obscurité, ni l’éther;
Sa flamme à la fange est unie,
L’homme est pour le ciel un génie,
Mais l’homme est pour la terre un ver.

L’homme a Dante, Shakspeare, Homère;
Ses arts sont un trépied fumant;
Mais prétend-il de sa chimère
Illuminer le firmament?

C’est toujours quelque ancienne idée
De l’Élide ou de la Chaldée
Que l’âge nouveau rajeunit.
Parce que tu luis dans ta sphère,
Esprit humain, crois-tu donc faire
De la flamme jusqu’au Zénith!

Après Socrate et le Portique,
Sans t’en douter, tu mets le feu
À la même chimère antique
Dont l’Inde ou Rome ont fait un dieu;
Comme cet Éson de la fable,
Tu retrempes dans l’ineffable,
Dans l’absolu, dans l’infini,
Quelque Ammon d’Égypte ou de Grèce,
Ce qu’avant toi maudit Lucrèce,
Ce qu’avant toi Job a béni.

Tu prends quelque être imaginaire,
Vieux songe de l’humanité,
Et tu lui donnes le tonnerre,
L’auréole, l’éternité.
Tu le fais, tu le renouvelles;
Puis, tremblant, tu te le révèles,
Et tu frémis en le créant;
Et, lui prêtant vie, abondance,
Sagesse, bonté, providence,
Tu te chauffes à ce néant!

Sous quelque mythe qu’il s’enferme,
Songeur, il n’est point de Baal
Qui ne contienne en lui le germe
D’un éblouissant idéal;
De même qu’il n’est pas d’épine,
Pas d’arbre mort dans la ruine.
Pas d’impur chardon dans l’égout,
Qui, si l’étincelle le touche,

Ne puisse, dans l’âtre farouche,
Faire une aurore tout à coup!

Vois dans les forêts la broussaille,
Culture abjecte du hasard;
Déguenillée, elle tressaille
Au glissement froid du lézard;
Jette un charbon, ce houx sordide
Va s’épanouir plus splendide
Que la tunique d’or des rois;
L’éclair sort de la ronce infâme;
Toutes les pourpres de la flamme
Dorment dans ce haillon des bois.

Comme un enfant qui s’émerveille
De tirer, à travers son jeu,
Une splendeur gaie et vermeille
Du vil sarment qu’il jette au feu,
Tu concentres toute la flamme
De ce que peut rêver ton âme
Sur le premier venu des dieux,
Puis tu t’étonnes, ô poussière,
De voir sortir une lumière
De cet Irmensul monstrueux.

À la vague étincelle obscure
Que tu tires d’un Dieu pervers,
Tu crois raviver la nature,
Tu crois réchauffer l’univers;
Ô nain, ton orgueil s’imagine
Avoir retrouvé l’origine,
Que tous vont s’aimer désormais,
Qu’on va vaincre les nuits immondes,
Et tu dis: La lueur des mondes
Va flamboyer sur les sommets!

Tu crois voir une aube agrandie

S’élargir sous le firmament
Parce que ton rêve incendie
Un Dieu, qui rayonne un moment.
Non. Tout est froid. L’horreur t’enlace.
Tout est l’affreux temple de glace,
Morne à Delphes, sombre à Béthel.
Tu fais à peine, esprit frivole,
En brûlant le bois de l’idole,
Tiédir la pierre de l’autel.

III

Je laisse ces paroles sombres
Passer sur moi sans m’émouvoir
Comme on laisse dans les décombres
Frissonner les branches le soir;
J’irai, moi le curieux triste;
J’ai la volonté qui persiste;
L’énigme traître a beau gronder;
Je serai, dans les brumes louches,
Dans les crépuscules farouches,
La face qui vient regarder.

Vie et mort! ô gouffre! Est-ce un piège
La fleur qui s’ouvre et se flétrit,
L’atome qui se désagrège,
Le néant qui se repétrit?
Quoi! rien ne marche! rien n’avance!
Pas de moi! Pas de survivance!
Pas de lien! Pas d’avenir!
C’est pour rien, ô tombes ouvertes,
Qu’on entend vers les découvertes
Les chevaux du rêve hennir!

Est-ce que la nature enferme
Pour des avortements bâtards
L’élément, l’atome, le germe,

Dans le cercle des avatars?
Que serait donc ce monde immense,
S’il n’avait pas la conscience
Pour lumière et pour attribut?
Épouvantable échelle noire
De renaissances sans mémoire
Dans une ascension sans but!

La larve du spectre suivie,
Ce serait tout! Quoi donc! ô sort,
J’aurais un devoir dans la vie
Sans avoir un droit dans la mort!
Depuis la pierre jusqu’à l’ange,
Qu’est-ce alors que ce vain mélange
D’êtres dans l’obscur tourbillon?
L’aube est-elle sincère ou fausse?
Naître, est-ce vivre? En quoi la fosse
Diffère-t-elle du sillon?

— Mange le pain, je mange l’homme,
Dit Tibère. A-t-il donc raison?
Satan la femme, Ève la pomme,
Est-ce donc la même moisson?
Nemrod souffle comme la bise;
Gengis le sabre au poing, Cambyse
Avec un flot d’hommes démons,
Tue, extermine, écrase, opprime,
Et ne commet pas plus de crime
Qu’un roc roulant du haut des monts!

Oh non! la vie au noir registre,
Parmi le genre humain troublé,
Passe, inexplicable et sinistre,
Ainsi qu’un espion voilé;
Grands et petits, les fous, les sages,
S’en vont, nommés dans les messages
Qu’elle jette au ciel triste ou bleu;

Malheur aux méchants! et la tombe
Est la bouche de bronze où tombe
Tout ce qu'elle dénonce à Dieu.

— Mais ce Dieu même, je le nie;
Car il aurait, ô vain croyant,
Créé sa propre calomnie
En créant ce monde effrayant. —
Ainsi parle, calme et funèbre,
Le doute appuyé sur l'algèbre;
Et moi qui sens frémir mes os,
Allant des langes aux suaires,
Je regarde les ossuaires
Et je regarde les berceaux.

Mort et vie! énigmes austères!
Dessous est la réalité.
C'est là que les Kants, les Voltaires,
Les Euclides ont hésité.
Eh bien! j'irai, moi qui contemple,
Jusqu'à ce que, perçant le temple,
Et le dogme, ce double mur,
Mon esprit découvre et dévoile
Derrière Jupiter l'étoile,
Derrière Jéhovah l'azur!

Car il faut qu'enfin on rencontre
L'indestructible vérité,
Et qu'un front de splendeur se montre
Sous ces masques d'obscurité;
La nuit tâche, en sa noire envie,
D'étouffer le germe de vie,
De toute-puissance et de jour,
Mais moi, le croyant de l'aurore,
Je forcerai bien Dieu d'éclore
À force de joie et d'amour!

Est-ce que vous croyez que l’ombre
A quelque chose à refuser
Au dompteur du temps et du nombre,
À celui qui veut tout oser,
Au poète qu’emporte l’âme,
Qui combat dans leur culte infâme
Les payens comme les hébreux,
Et qui, la tête la première,
Plonge, éperdu, dans la lumière,
À travers leur dieu téne crains rien, mon enfant. Je me nomme
Juvénal. Je suis bon. Je ne fais peur qu’aux grands. —
Charles lève ses yeux pleins de pleurs transparents,
Et dit: — Je n’ai pas peur. — L’homme, pareil aux marbres,
Reprend, tandis qu’au loin on entend sous les arbres
Jouer les écoliers, gais et de bonne foi:
— Enfant, je fus jadis exilé comme toi,
Pour avoir comme toi barbouillé des figures.
Comme toi les pédants, j’ai fâché les augures.
Élève de Jauffret que jalouse Massin,
Voyons ton livre. — Il dit, et regarde un dessin
Qui n’a pas trop de queue et pas beaucoup de tête.
— Qu’est-ce que c’est que ça! — Monsieur, c’est une bête.
— Ah! tu mets dans mes vers des bêtes! Après tout,
Pourquoi pas? puisque Dieu, qui dans l’ombre est debout,
En met dans les grands bois et dans les mers sacrées.
Il tourne une autre page, et se penche: — Tu crées.
Qu’est ceci? Ca m’a l’air fort beau, quoique tortu.
— Monsieur, c’est un bonhomme. — Un bonhomme, dis-tu?
Eh bien, il en manquait justement un. Mon livre
Est rempli de méchants. Voir un bonhomme vivre
Parmi tous ces gens-là me plaît. Césars bouffis,
Rangez-vous! ce bonhomme est dieu. Merci, mon fils. —
Et, d’un doigt souverain, le voilà qui feuillette
Nisard, l’âne, le nez du maître, la belette
Qui peut-être est un boeuf, les dragons, les griffons,
Les pâtés d’encre ailés, mêlés aux vers profonds,
Toute cette gaîté sur son courroux éparse,

Et Juvénal s’écrie ébloui: — C’est très farce!

Ainsi, la grande soeur et la petite soeur,
Ces deux âmes, sont là, jasant; et le censeur,
Obscur comme minuit et froid comme décembre, serait
bien étonné, s’il entrait dans la chambre,
De voir sous le plafond du collège étouffant,
Le vieux poète rire avec le doux enfant.

IX

LES FREDAINES DU GRAND-PÈRE ENFANT

(1811)

PEPITA

Comme elle avait la résille,
D’abord la rime hésita.
Ce devait être Inésille... —
Mais non, c’était Pepita.

Seize ans. Belle et grande fille... —
(Ici la rime insista:
Rimeur, c’était Inésille.
Rime, c’était Pepita.)

Pepita... — Je me rappelle!
Oh! le doux passé vainqueur,
Tout le passé, pêle-mêle
Revient à flots dans mon coeur;

Mer, ton flux roule et rapporte
Les varechs et les galets.
Mon père avait une escorte;
Nous habitions un palais;

Dans cette Espagne que j’aime,
Au point du jour, au printemps,

Quand je n’existais pas même,
Pepita — j’avais huit ans —

Me disait: — Fils, je me nomme
Pepa; mon père est marquis. —
Moi, je me croyais un homme,

Étant en pays conquis.

Dans sa résille de soie
Pepa mettait des doublons;
De la flamme et de la joie
Sortaient de ses cheveux blonds.

Tout cela, jupe de moire,
Veste de toréador,
Velours bleu, dentelle noire,
Dansait dans un rayon d’or.

Et c’était presque une femme
Que Pepita mes amours.
L’indolente avait mon âme
Sous son coude de velours.

Je palpitais dans sa chambre
Comme un nid près du faucon,
Elle avait un collier d’ambre,
Un rosier sur son balcon.

Tous les jours un vieux qui pleure
Venait demander un sou;
Un dragon à la même heure
Arrivait je ne sais d’où.

Il piaffait sous la croisée,
Tandis que le vieux râlait
De sa vieille voix brisée:
La charité, s’il vous plaît!

Et la belle au collier jaune,
Se penchant sur son rosier,
Faisait au pauvre l’aumône
Pour la faire à l’officier.

L’un plus fier, l’autre moins sombre,
Ils partaient, le vieux hagard
Emportant un sou dans l’ombre,
Et le dragon un regard.

J’étais près de la fenêtre,
Tremblant, trop petit pour voir,
Amoureux sans m’y connaître,
Et bête sans le savoir.

Elle disait avec charme:
Marions-nous! choisissant
Pour amoureux le gendarme
Et pour mari l’innocent.

Je disais quelque sottise;
Pepa répondait: Plus bas!
M’éteignant comme on attise;
Et, pendant ces doux ébats,

Les soldats buvaient des pintes
Et jouaient au domino
Dans les grandes chambres peintes
Du palais Masserano.

X

ENFANTS, OISEAUX ET FLEURS

I

J’aime un groupe d’enfants qui rit et qui s’assemble;
J’ai remarqué qu’ils sont presque tous blonds, il semble
Qu’un doux soleil levant leur dore les cheveux.
Lorsque Roland, rempli de projets et de voeux,
Était petit, après l’escrime et les parades,
Il jouait dans les champs avec ses camarades
Raymond le paresseux et Jean de Pau; tous trois
Joyeux; un moine un jour, passant avec sa croix,
Leur demanda, c’était l’abbé de la contrée:
— Quelle est la chose, enfants, qui vous plaît déchirée?
— La chair d’un boeuf saignant, répondit Jean de Pau.
— Un livre, dit Raymond. — Roland dit: Un drapeau.

II

Je suis des bois l’hôte fidèle,
Le jardinier des sauvageons.
Quand l’automne vient, l’hirondelle
Me dit tout bas: Déménageons.

Après frimaire, après nivôse,
Je vais voir si les bourgeons frais
N’ont pas besoin de quelque chose
Et si rien ne manque aux forêts.

Je dis aux ronces: Croissez, vierges!
Je dis: Embaume! au serpolet;
Je dis aux fleurs bordant les berges:
Faites avec soin votre ourlet.

Je surveille, entr’ouvrant la porte,

Le vent soufflant sur la hauteur;
Car tromper sur ce qu'il apporte
C'est l'usage de ce menteur.

Je viens dès l'aube, en diligence,
Voir si rien ne fait dévier
Toutes les mesures d'urgence
Que prend avril contre janvier.

Tout finit, mais tout recommence,
Je m'intéresse au procédé
De rajeunissement immense,
Vainement par l'ombre éludé.

J'aime la broussaille mouvante,
Le lierre, le lichen vermeil,
Toutes les coiffures qu'invente
Pour les ruines le soleil.

Quand mai fleuri met des panaches
Aux sombres donjons mécontents,
Je crie à ces vieilles ganaches:
Laissez donc faire le printemps!

III

DANS LE JARDIN

Jeanne et Georges sont là. Le noir ciel orageux
Devient rose, et répand l'aurore sur leurs jeux;
Ô beaux jours! Le printemps auprès de moi s'empresse;
Tout verdit; la forêt est une enchanteresse;
L'horizon change, ainsi qu'un décor d'opéra;
Appelez ce doux mois du nom qu'il vous plaira,
C'est mai, c'est floréal; c'est l'hyménée auguste
De la chose tremblante et de la chose juste,
Du nid et de l'azur, du brin d'herbe et du ciel;

C’est l’heure où tout se sent vaguement éternel;
C’est l’éblouissement, c’est l’espoir, c’est l’ivresse;
La plante est une femme, et mon vers la caresse;
C’est, grâce aux frais glaïeuls, grâce aux purs liserons,
La vengeance que nous poètes nous tirons
De cet affreux janvier, si laid; c’est la revanche
Qu’avril contre l’hiver prend avec la pervenche;
Courage, avril! Courage, ô mois de mai! Ciel bleu,
Réchauffe, resplendis, sois beau! Bravo, bon Dieu!
Ah! jamais la saison ne nous fait banqueroute.
L’aube passe en semant des roses sur sa route.
Flamme! ombre! tout est plein de ténèbres et d’yeux;
Tout est mystérieux et tout est radieux;
Qu’est-ce que l’alcyon cherche dans les tempêtes?
L’amour; l’antre et le nid ayant les mêmes fêtes,
Je ne vois pas pourquoi l’homme serait honteux
De ce que les lions pensifs ont devant eux,
De l’amour, de l’hymen sacré, de toi, nature!
Tout cachot aboutit à la même ouverture,
La vie; et toute chaîne, à travers nos douleurs,
Commence par l’airain et finit par les fleurs.
C’est pourquoi nous avons d’abord la haine infâme,
La guerre, les tourments, les fléaux, puis la femme,
La nuit n’ayant pour but que d’amener le jour.
Dieu n’a fait l’univers que pour faire l’amour.
Toujours, comme un poète aime, comme les sages
N’ont pas deux vérités et n’ont pas deux visages,
J’ai laissé la beauté, fier et suprême attrait,
Vaincre, et faire de moi tout ce qu’elle voudrait;
Je n’ai pas plus caché devant la femme nue
Mes transports, que devant l’étoile sous la nue
Et devant la blancheur du cygne sur les eaux.
Car dans l’azur sans fond les plus profonds oiseaux
Chantent le même chant, et ce chant, c’est la vie.
Sois puissant, je te plains; sois aimé, je t’envie.

IV

LE TROUBLE-FÊTE

Les belles filles sont en fuite
Et ne savent où se cacher.
Brune et blonde, grande et petite,
Elles dansaient près du clocher;

Une chantait, pour la cadence;
Les garçons aux fraîches couleurs
Accouraient au bruit de la danse,
Mettant à leurs chapeaux des fleurs;

En revenant de la fontaine,
Elles dansaient près du clocher.
J’aime Toinon, disait le chêne;
Moi, Suzon, disait le rocher.

Mais l’homme noir du clocher sombre
Leur a crié: — Laides! fuyez! —
Et son souffle brusque a dans l’ombre
Éparpillé ces petits pieds.

Toute la danse s’est enfuie,
Les yeux noirs avec les yeux bleus,
Comme s’envole sous la pluie
Une troupe d’oiseaux frileux.

Et cette déroute a fait taire
Les grands arbres tout soucieux,
Car les filles dansant sur terre
Font chanter les nids dans les cieux.

— Qu’a donc l’homme noir? disent-elles. —
Plus de chants; car le noir témoin
A fait bien loin enfuir les belles,
Et les chansons encor plus loin.

Qu’a donc l’homme noir? — Je l’ignore,
Répond le moineau, gai bandit;
Elles pleurent comme l’aurore.
Mais un myosotis leur dit:

— Je vais vous expliquer ces choses.
Vous n’avez point pour lui d’appas;
Les papillons aiment les roses,
Les hiboux ne les aiment pas.

V

ORA, AMA

Le long des berges court la perdrix au pied leste.

Comme pour l’entraîner dans leur danse céleste,
Les nuages ont pris la lune au milieu d’eux.
Petit Georges, veux-tu? nous allons tous les deux
Nous en aller jouer là-bas sous le vieux saule.

La nuit tombe; on se baigne; et, la faulx sur l’épaule,
Le faucheur rentre au gîte, essuyant sa sueur.
Le crépuscule jette une vague lueur
Sur des formes qu’on voit rire dans la rivière.

Monsieur le curé passe et ferme son bréviaire;
Il est trop tard pour lire, et ce reste de jour
Conseille la prière à qui n’a plus l’amour.
Aimer, prier, c’est l’aube et c’est le soir de l’âme.

Et c’est la même chose au fond; aimer la femme,
C’est prier Dieu; pour elle on s’agenouille aussi.
Un jour tu seras homme et tu liras ceci.
En attendant, tes yeux sont grands, et je te parle,

Mon Georges, comme si je parlais à mon Charle.
Quand l’aile rose meurt, l’aile bleue a son tour.
La prière a la même audace que l’amour,
Et l’amour a le même effroi que la prière.

Il fait presque grand jour encor dans la clairière.
L’angélus sonne au fond de l’horizon bruni.
Ô ciel sublime! sombre édifice infini!
Muraille inexprimable, obscure et rayonnante!

Oh! comment pénétrer dans la maison tonnante?
Le jeune homme est pensif, le vieillard est troublé,
Et devant l’inconnu, vaguement étoilé,
Le soir tremblant ressemble à l’aube frissonnante.

La prière est la porte et l’amour est la clé.

VI

LA MISE EN LIBERTÉ

Après ce rude hiver, un seul oiseau restait
Dans la cage où jadis tout un monde chantait.
Le vide s’était fait dans la grande volière.
Une douce mésange, autrefois familière,
Était là seule avec ses souvenirs d’oiseau.
N’être jamais sans grain, sans biscuit et sans eau,
Voir entrer quelquefois dans sa cage une mouche,
C’était tout son bonheur. Elle en était farouche.
Rien, pas même un serin, et pas même un pierrot.
La cage, c’est beaucoup; mais le désert, c’est trop.
Triste oiseau! dormir seul, et, quand l’aube s’allume,
Être seul à fouiller de son bec sous sa plume!
Le pauvre petit être était redevenu
Sauvage, à faire ainsi tourner ce perchoir nu.
Il semblait par moments s’être donné la tâche
De grimper d’un bâton à l’autre sans relâche;

Son vol paraissait fou; puis soudain le reclus
Se taisait, et, caché, morne, ne bougeait plus.
À voir son gonflement lugubre, sa prunelle,
Et sa tête ployée en plein jour sous son aile,
On devinait son deuil, son veuvage, et l’ennui
Du joyeux chant de tous dans l’ombre évanoui.
Ce matin j’ai poussé la porte de la cage.
J’y suis entré.

Deux mâts, une grotte, un bocage,
Meublent cette prison où frissonne un jet d’eau;
Et l’hiver on la couvre avec un grand rideau.

Le pauvre oiseau, voyant entrer ce géant sombre,
A pris la fuite en haut, puis en bas, cherchant l’ombre,
Dans une anxiété d’inexprimable horreur;
L’effroi du faible est plein d’impuissante fureur;
Il voletait devant ma main épouvantable.
Je suis, pour le saisir, monté sur une table.
Alors, terrifié, vaincu, jetant des cris,
Il est allé tomber dans un coin; je l’ai pris.
Contre le monstre immense, hélas, que peut l’atome?
À quoi bon résister quand l’énorme fantôme
Vous tient, captif hagard, fragile et désarmé?
Il était dans mes doigts inerte, l’oeil fermé,
Le bec ouvert, laissant pendre son cou débile,
L’aile morte, muet, sans regard, immobile,
Et je sentais bondir son petit coeur tremblant.

Avril est de l’aurore un frère ressemblant;
Il est éblouissant ainsi qu’elle est vermeille.
Il a l’air de quelqu’un qui rit et qui s’éveille.
Or, nous sommes au mois d’avril, et mon gazon,
Mon jardin, les jardins d’à côté, l’horizon,
Tout, du ciel à la terre, est plein de cette joie
Qui dans la fleur embaume et dans l’astre flamboie:
Les ajoncs sont en fête, et dorent les ravins

Où les abeilles font des murmures divins;
Penché sur les cressons, le myosotis goûte
À la source, tombant dans les fleurs goutte à goutte;
Le brin d’herbe est heureux; l’âcre hiver se dissout;
La nature parait contente d’avoir tout,
Parfums, chansons, rayons, et d’être hospitalière.
L’espace aime.

Je suis sorti de la volière,
Tenant toujours l’oiseau; je me suis approché
Du vieux balcon de bois par le lierre caché;
Ô renouveau! Soleil! tout palpite, tout vibre,
Tout rayonne; et j’ai dit, ouvrant la main: Sois libre!

L’oiseau s’est évadé dans les rameaux flottants,
Et dans l’immensité splendide du printemps;
Et j’ai vu s’en aller au loin la petite âme
Dans cette clarté rose où se mêle une flamme,
Dans l’air profond, parmi les arbres infinis,
Volant au vague appel des amours et des nids,
Planant éperdument vers d’autres ailes blanches,
Ne sachant quel palais choisir, courant aux branches,
Aux fleurs, aux flots, aux bois fraîchement reverdis,
Avec l’effarement d’entrer au paradis.

Alors, dans la lumière et dans la transparence,
Regardant cette faite et cette délivrance,
Et ce pauvre être, ainsi disparu dans le port,
Pensif, je me suis dit: Je viens d’être la mort.

XI

JEANNE LAPIDÉE

BRUXELLES. — NUIT DU 27 MAI

Je regardai.

Je vis, tout près de la croisée,
Celui par qui la pierre avait été lancée;
Il était jeune; encor presque un enfant, déjà
Un meurtrier.

Jeune homme, un dieu te protégea,
Car tu pouvais tuer cette pauvre petite!
Comme les sentiments humains s'écroulent vite
Dans les coeurs gouvernés par le prêtre qui ment,
Et comme un imbécile est féroce aisément!
Loyola sait changer Jocrisse en Schinderhanne,
Car un tigre est toujours possible dans un âne.
Mais Dieu n'a pas permis, sombre enfant, que ta main
Fit cet assassinat catholique et romain;
Le coup a manqué. Va, triste spectre éphémère,
Deviens de l'ombre. Fuis! Moi, je songe à ta mère.

Ô femme, ne sois pas maudite! Je reçois
Du ciel juste un rayon clément. Qui que tu sois,
Mère, hélas! quel que soit ton enfant, sois bénie!
N'en sois pas responsable et n'en sois pas punie!
Je lui pardonne au nom de mon ange innocent!
Lui-même il fut jadis l'être humble en qui descend
L'immense paradis, sans pleurs, sans deuils, sans voiles,
Avec tout son sourire et toutes ses étoiles.
Quand il naquit, de joie et d'amour tu vibras.
Il dormait sur ton sein comme Jeanne en mes bras;
Il était de ton toit le mystérieux hôte;
C'était un ange alors, et ce n'est pas ta faute,

Ni la sienne, s’il est un bandit maintenant.
Le prêtre, infortuné lui-même, et frissonnant,
À qui nous confions la croissance future,
Imposteur, a rempli cette âme d’imposture;
L’aveugle a dans ce coeur vidé l’aveuglement.
À ce lugubre élève, à ce maître inclément
Je pardonne; le mal a des pièges sans nombre;
Je les plains; et j’implore au-dessus de nous l’ombre.
Pauvre mère, ton fils ne sait pas ce qu’il fait.
Quand Dieu germait en lui, le prêtre l’étouffait.
Aujourd’hui le voilà dans cette Forêt-noire,
Le dogme! Ignace ordonne; il est prêt à tout boire,
Le faux, le vrai, le bien, le mal, l’erreur, le sang!
Tout! Frappe! il obéit. Assassine! il consent.
Hélas! comment veut-on que je lui sois sévère?
Le sommet qui fait grâce au gouffre est le Calvaire.
Mornes bourreaux, à nous martyrs vous vous fiez;
Et nous, les lapidés et les crucifiés,
Nous absolvons le vil caillou, le clou stupide;
Nous pardonnons. C’est juste. Ah! ton fils me lapide,
Mère, et je te bénis. Et je fais mon devoir.
Un jour tu mourras, femme, et puisses-tu le voir
Se frapper la poitrine, à genoux sur ta fosse!
Puisse-t-il voir s’éteindre en lui la clarté fausse,
Et sentir dans son coeur s’allumer le vrai feu,
Et croire moins au prêtre et croire plus à Dieu!

XII

JEANNE ENDORMIE. — III

Jeanne dort; elle laisse, ô pauvre ange banni,
Sa douce petite âme aller dans l'infini;
Ainsi le passereau fuit dans la cerisaie;
Elle regarde ailleurs que sur terre, elle essaie,
Hélas, avant de boire à nos coupes de fiel,
De renouer un peu dans l'ombre avec le ciel.
Apaisement sacré! ses cheveux, son haleine,
Son teint, plus transparent qu'une aile de phalène,
Ses gestes indistincts, son calme, c'est exquis.
Le vieux grand-père, esclave heureux, pays conquis,
La contemple.

Cet être est ici-bas le moindre
Et le plus grand; on voit sur cette bouche poindre
Un rire vague et pur qui vient on ne sait d'où;
Comme elle est belle! Elle a des plis de graisse au cou;
On la respire ainsi qu'un parfum d'asphodèle;
Une poupée aux yeux étonnés est près d'elle,
Et l'enfant par moments la presse sur son coeur.
Figurez-vous cet ange obscur, tremblant, vainqueur,
L'espérance étoilée autour de ce visage,
Ce pied nu, ce sommeil d'une grâce en bas âge.
Oh! quel profond sourire, et compris de lui seul,
Elle rapportera de l'ombre à son aïeul!
Car l'âme de l'enfant, pas encor dédorée,
Semble être une lueur du lointain empyrée,
Et l'attendrissement des vieillards, c'est de voir
Que le matin veut bien se mêler à leur soir.

Ne la réveillez pas. Cela dort, une rose.
Jeanne au fond du sommeil médite et se compose
Je ne sais quoi de plus céleste que le ciel.
De lys en lys, de rêve en rêve, on fait son miel,

Et l’âme de l’enfant travaille, humble et vermeille,
Dans les songes ainsi que dans les fleurs l’abeille.

XIII

L’ÉPOPÉE DU LION

L’ÉPOPÉE DU LION

I

LE PALADIN

Un lion avait pris un enfant dans sa gueule,
Et, sans lui faire mal, dans la forêt, aïeule
Des sources et des nids, il l’avait emporté.
Il l’avait, comme on cueille une fleur en été,
Saisi sans trop savoir pourquoi, n’ayant pas même
Mordu dedans, mépris fier ou pardon suprême;
Les lions sont ainsi, sombres et généreux.
Le pauvre petit prince était fort malheureux;
Dans l’antre, qu’emplissait la grande voix bourrue,
Blotti, tremblant, nourri d’herbe et de viande crue.
Il vivait, presque mort et d’horreur hébété.
C’était un frais garçon, fils du roi d’à côté;
Tout jeune, ayant dix ans, âge tendre où l’oeil brille;
Et le roi n’avait plus qu’une petite fille
Nouvelle-née, ayant deux ans à peine; aussi
Le roi qui vieillissait n’avait-il qu’un souci,
Son héritier en proie au monstre; et la province
Qui craignait le lion plus encor que le prince
Était fort effarée.

Un héros qui passait
Dans le pays fit halte, et dit: Qu’est-ce que c’est?
On lui dit l’aventure; il s’en alla vers l’antre.

*

Un creux où le soleil lui-même est pâle, et n’entre

Qu’avec précaution, c’était l’antre où vivait
L’énorme bête, ayant le rocher pour chevet.

Le bois avait, dans l’ombre et sur un marécage,
Plus de rameaux que n’a de barreaux une cage;
Cette forêt était digne de ce consul;
Un menhir s’y dressait en l’honneur d’Irmensul;
La forêt ressemblait aux halliers de Bretagne;
Elle avait pour limite une rude montagne,
Un de ces durs sommets où l’horizon finit;
Et la caverne était taillée en plein granit,
Avec un entourage orageux de grands chênes;
Les antres, aux cités rendant haines pour haines,
Contiennent on ne sait quel sombre talion.
Les chênes murmuraient: Respectez le lion!

*

Le héros pénétra dans ce palais sauvage;
L’antre avait ce grand air de meurtre et de ravage
Qui sied à la maison des puissants, de l’effroi,
De l’ombre, et l’on sentait qu’on était chez un roi;
Des ossements à terre indiquaient que le maître
Ne se laissait manquer de rien; une fenêtre
Faite par quelque coup de tonnerre au plafond
L’éclairait; une brume où la lueur se fond,
Qui semble aurore à l’aigle et nuit à la chouette,
C’est toute la clarté qu’un conquérant souhaite;
Du reste c’était haut et fier; on comprenait
Que l’être altier couchait sur un lit de genêt
Et n’avait pas besoin de rideaux de guipure,
Et qu’il buvait du sang, mais aussi de l’eau pure,
Simplement, sans valet, sans coupe et sans hanap.
Le chevalier était armé de pied en cap.
Il entra.

*

Tout de suite il vit dans la tanière
Un des plus grands seigneurs couronnés de crinière
Qu’on pût voir, et c’était la bête; elle pensait;
Et son regard était profond, car nul ne sait
Si les monstres des bois n’en sont pas les pontifes;
Et ce lion était un maître aux larges griffes,
Sinistre, point facile à décontenancer.
Le héros approcha, mais sans trop avancer.
Son pas était sonore, et sa plume était rouge.
Il ne fit remuer rien dans l’auguste bouge.
La bête était plongée en ses réflexions.
Thésée entrant au gouffre où sont les Ixions
Et les Sisyphes nus et les flots de l’Averne,
Vit à peu près la même implacable caverne.
Le paladin, à qui le devoir disait: va!
Tira l’épée. Alors le lion souleva
Sa tête doucement d’une façon terrible.

Et le chevalier dit: — Salut, ô bête terrible!
Tu caches dans les trous de ton antre un enfant;
J’ai beau fouiller des yeux ton repaire étouffant,
Je ne l’aperçois pas. Or, je viens le reprendre.
Nous serons bons amis si tu veux me le rendre;
Sinon, je suis lion aussi, moi, tu mourras;
Et le père étreindra son enfant dans ses bras,
Pendant qu’ici ton sang fumera, tiède encore;
Et c’est ce que verra demain la blonde aurore.

Et le lion pensif lui dit: — Je ne crois pas.

*

Sur quoi le chevalier farouche fit un pas,
Brandit sa grande épée, et dit: Prends garde, sire!
On vit le lion, chose effrayante, sourire.
Ne faites pas sourire un lion. Le duel

S’engagea, comme il sied entre géants, cruel,
Tel que ceux qui de l’Inde ensanglantent les jungles.
L’homme allongea son glaive et la bête ses ongles;
On se prit corps à corps, et le monstre écumant
Se mit à manier l’homme effroyablement;
L’un était le vaillant et l’autre le vorace;
Le lion étreignit la chair sous la cuirasse,
Et, fauve, et sous sa griffe ardente pétrissant
Ce fer et cet acier, il fit jaillir le sang
Du sombre écrasement de toute cette armure,
Comme un enfant rougit ses doigts dans une mûre;
Et puis l’un après l’autre il ôta les morceaux
Du casque et des brassards, et mit à nu les os.
Et le grand chevalier n’était plus qu’une espèce
De boue et de limon sous la cuirasse épaisse;
Et le lion mangea le héros. Puis il mit
Sa tête sur le roc sinistre et s’endormit.

II

L’ERMITE

Alors vint un ermite.

Il s’avança vers l’antre;
Grave et tremblant, sa croix au poing, sa corde au ventre,
Il entra. Le héros tout rongé gisait là
Informe, et le lion, se réveillant, bâilla.
Le monstre ouvrit les yeux, entendit une haleine,
Et, voyant une corde autour d’un froc de laine,
Un grand capuchon noir, un homme là dedans,
Acheva de bâiller, montrant toutes ses dents;
Puis, auguste, et parlant comme une porte grince,
Il dit: — Que veux-tu, toi? — Mon roi. — Quel roi? — Mon prince.
— Qui? — L’enfant. — C’est cela que tu nommes un roi!
L’ermite salua le lion. — Roi, pourquoi
As-tu pris cet enfant? — Parce que je m’ennuie.

Il me tient compagnie ici les jours de pluie.
— Rends-le-moi. — Non. Je l'ai. — Qu'en veux-tu faire enfin?
Le veux-tu donc manger? — Dame! si j'avais faim!
— Songe au père, à son deuil, à sa douleur amère.
— Les hommes m'ont tué la lionne, ma mère.
— Le père est roi, seigneur, comme toi. — Pas autant.
S'il parle, c'est un homme, et moi, quand on m'entend,
C'est le lion. — S'il perd ce fils... — Il a sa fille.
— Une fille, c'est peu pour un roi. — Ma famille
A moi, c'est l'âpre roche et la fauve forêt,
Et l'éclair qui parfois sur ma tête apparaît;
Je m'en contente. — Sois clément pour une altesse.
— La clémence n'est pas; tout est de la tristesse.
— Veux-tu le paradis? Je t'offre le blanc-seing
Du bon Dieu. — Va-t'en, vieil imbécile de saint!

L'ermite s'en alla.

LA CHASSE ET LA NUIT

Le lion solitaire,
Plein de l'immense oubli qu'ont les monstres sur terre,
Se rendormit, laissant l'intègre nuit venir.
La lune parut, fit un spectre du menhir,
De l'étang un linceul, du sentier un mensonge,
Et du noir paysage inexprimable un songe;
Et rien ne bougea plus dans la grotte, et, pendant
Que les astres sacrés marchaient vers l'occident
Et que l'herbe abritait la taupe et la cigale,
La respiration du grand lion, égale
Et calme, rassurait les bêtes dans les bois.

Tout à coup des clameurs, des cors et des abois.
Un de ces bruits de meute et d'hommes et de cuivres,
Qui font que brusquement les forêts semblent ivres,
Et que la nymphe écoute en tremblant dans son lit,
La rumeur d'une chasse épouvantable emplit

Toute cette ombre, lac, montagne, bois, prairie,
Et troubla cette vaste et fauve rêverie.
Le hallier s'empourpra de tous les sombres jeux
D'une lueur mêlée à des cris orageux.
On entendait hurler les chiens chercheurs de proies;
Et des ombres couraient parmi les claires-voies.
Cette altière rumeur d'avance triomphait.
On eût dit une armée; et c'était en effet
Des soldats envoyés par le roi, par le père,
Pour délivrer le prince et forcer le repaire,
Et rapporter la peau sanglante du lion.
De quel côté de l'ombre est la rébellion,
Du côté de la bête ou du côté de l'homme?
Dieu seul le sait; tout est le chiffre, il est la somme.

Les soldats avaient fait un repas copieux,
Étaient en bon état, armés d'arcs et d'épieux,
En grand nombre, et conduits par un fier capitaine.
Quelques-uns revenaient d'une guerre lointaine,
Et tous étaient des gens éprouvés et vaillants.
Le lion entendait tous ces bruits malveillants,
Car il avait ouvert sa tragique paupière;
Mais sa tête restait paisible sur la pierre,
Et seulement sa queue énorme remuait.

*

Au dehors, tout autour du grand antre muet,
Hurlait le brouhaha de la foule indignée;
Comme un essaim bourdonne autour d'une araignée,
Comme une ruche autour d'un ours pris au lacet,
Toute la légion des chasseurs frémissait;
Elle s'était rangée en ordre de bataille.
On savait que le monstre était de haute taille,
Qu'il mangeait un héros comme un singe une noix,
Qu'il était plus hautain qu'un tigre n'est sournois,
Que son regard faisait baisser les yeux à l'aigle;

Aussi lui faisait-on l’honneur d’un siège en règle.
La troupe à coups de hache abattait les fourrés;
Les soldats avançaient l’un sur l’autre serrés,
Et les arbres tendaient sur la corde les flèches.
On fit silence, afin que sur les feuilles sèches
On entendît les pas du lion, s’il venait.
Et les chiens, qui selon le moment où l’on est
Savent se taire, allaient devant eux, gueule ouverte,
Mais sans bruit. Les flambeaux dans la bruyère verte
Rôdaient, et leur lumière allongée en avant
Éclairait ce chaos d’arbres tremblant au vent;
C’est ainsi qu’une chasse habile se gouverne.
On voyait à travers les branches la caverne,
Sorte de masse informe au fond du bois épais,
Béante, mais muette, ayant un air de paix
Et de rêve, et semblant ignorer cette armée.
D’un âtre où le feu couve il sort de la fumée,
D’une ville assiégée on entend le beffroi;
Ici rien de pareil; avec un vague effroi,
Tous observaient, le poing sur l’arc ou sur la pique,
Cette tranquillité sombre de l’antre épique;
Les dogues chuchotaient entre eux je ne sais quoi;
De l’horreur qui dans l’ombre obscure se tient coi,
C’est plus inquiétant qu’un fracas de tempête.
Cependant on était venu pour cette bête,
On avançait, les yeux fixés sur la forêt,
Et non sans redouter ce que l’on désirait;
Les éclaireurs guettaient, élevant leur lanterne;
On regardait le seuil béant de la caverne;
Les arbres frissonnaient, silencieux témoins;
On marchait en bon ordre, on était mille au moins...
Tout à coup apparut la face formidable.

*

On vit le lion.
Tout devint inabordable

Sur-le-champ, et les bois parurent agrandis;
Ce fut un tremblement parmi les plus hardis;
Mais, fût-ce en frémissant, de vaillants archers tirent,
Et sur le grand lion les flèches s'abattirent,
Un tourbillon de dards le cribla. Le lion,
Pas plus que sous l'orage Ossa ni Pélion
Ne s'émeuvent, fronça son poil, et grave, austère,
Secoua la plupart des flèches sur la terre;
D'autres, sur qui ces dards se seraient enfoncés,
Auraient certes trouvé qu'il en restait assez,
Ou se seraient enfuis; le sang rayait sa croupe;
Mais il n'y prit point garde, et regarda la troupe;
Et ces hommes, troublés d'être en un pareil lieu,
Doutaient s'il était monstre ou bien s'il était dieu.
Les chiens muets cherchaient l'abri des fers de lance.
Alors le fier lion poussa, dans ce silence,
A travers les grands bois et les marais dormants,
Un de ces monstrueux et noirs rugissements
Qui sont plus effrayants que tout ce qu'on vénère,
Et qui font qu'à demi réveillé, le tonnerre
Dit dans le ciel profond: Qui donc tonne là-bas?

Tout fut fini. La fuite emporte les combats
Comme le vent la brume, et toute cette armée,
Dissoute, aux quatre coins de l'horizon semée,
S'évanouit devant l'horrible grondement.
Tous, chefs, soldats, ce fut l'affaire d'un moment,
Croyant être en des lieux surhumains où se forme
On ne sait quel courroux de la nature énorme,
Disparurent, tremblants, rampants, perdus, cachés.
Et le monstre cria: — Monts et forêts, sachez
Qu'un lion libre est plus que mille hommes esclaves.

*

Les bêtes ont le cri comme un volcan les laves;
Et cette éruption qui monte au firmament

D’ordinaire suffit à leur apaisement;
Les lions sont sereins plus que les dieux peut-être;
Jadis, quand l’éclatant Olympe était le maître,
Les Hercules disaient: — Si nous étranglions
A la fin, une fois pour toutes, les lions?
Et les lions disaient: — Faisons grâce aux Hercules.

Pourtant ce lion-ci, fils des noirs crépuscules,
Resta sinistre, obscur, sombre; il était de ceux
Qui sont à se calmer rétifs et paresseux,
Et sa colère était d’une espèce farouche.
La bête veut dormir quand le soleil se couche;
Il lui déplaît d’avoir affaire aux chiens rampants;
Ce lion venait d’être en butte aux guet-apens;
On venait d’insulter la forêt magnanime;
Il monta sur le mont, se dressa sur la cime,
Et reprit la parole, et, comme le semeur
Jette sa graine au loin, prolongea sa clameur
De façon que le roi l’entendit dans sa ville:

— Roi! tu m’as attaqué d’une manière vile!
Je n’ai point jusqu’ici fait mal à ton garçon;
Mais, roi, je t’avertis, par-dessus l’horizon
Que j’entrerai demain dans ta ville à l’aurore,
Que je t’apporterai l’enfant vivant encore,
Que j’invite à me voir entrer tous tes valets,
Et que je mangerai ton fils dans ton palais.

La nuit passa, laissant les ruisseaux fuir sous l’herbe
Et la nuée errer au fond du ciel superbe.

Le lendemain on vit dans la ville ceci:

L’aurore; le désert; des gens criant merci,
Fuyant, faces d’effroi bien vite disparues;
Et le vaste lion qui marchait dans les rues.

IV

L’AURORE

Le blême peuple était dans les caves épars.
A quoi bon résister? Pas un homme aux remparts;
Les portes de la ville étaient grandes ouvertes.
Ces bêtes à demi divines sont couvertes
D’une telle épouvante et d’un doute si noir,
Leur antre est un si morne et si puissant manoir,
Qu’il est décidément presque impie et peu sage,
Quand il leur plaît d’errer, d’être sur leur passage.
Vers le palais chargé d’un dôme d’or massif
Le lion à pas lents s’acheminait pensif,
Encor tout hérissé des flèches dédaignées;
Une écorce de chêne a des coups de cognées,
Mais l’arbre n’en meurt pas; et, sans voir un archer,
Grave, il continuait d’aller et de marcher;
Et le peuple tremblait, laissant la bête seule.
Le lion avançait, tranquille, et dans sa gueule
Effroyable il avait l’enfant évanoui.

Un petit prince est-il un petit homme? Oui.
Et la sainte pitié pleurait dans les ténèbres.
Le doux captif, livide entre ces crocs funèbres,
Était des deux côtés de la gueule pendant,
Pâle, mais n’avait pas encore un coup de dent;
Et, cette proie étant un bâillon dans sa bouche,
Le lion ne pouvait rugir, ennui farouche
Pour un monstre, et son calme était très furieux;
Son silence augmentait la flamme de ses yeux;
Aucun arc ne brillait dans aucune embrasure;
Peut-être craignait-on qu’une flèche peu sûre,
Tremblante, mal lancée au monstre triomphant,
Ne manquât le lion et ne tuât l’enfant.

*

Comme il l’avait promis par-dessus la montagne,
Le monstre, méprisant la ville comme un bagne,
Alla droit au palais, las de voir tout trembler,
Espérant trouver là quelqu’un à qui parler,
La porte ouverte, ainsi qu’au vent le jonc frissonne,
Vacillait. Il entra dans le palais. Personne.

Tout en pleurant son fils, le roi s’était enfui
Et caché comme tous, voulant vivre aussi lui,
S’estimant au bonheur des peuples nécessaire.
Une bête féroce est un être sincère
Et n’aime point la peur; le lion se sentit
Honteux d’être si grand, l’homme étant si petit;
Il se dit, dans la nuit qu’un lion a pour âme:
— C’est bien, je mangerai le fils. Quel père infâme! —
Terrible, après la cour prenant le corridor,
Il se mit à rôder sous les hauts plafonds d’or;
Il vit le trône, et rien dedans; des chambres vertes,
Jaunes, rouges, aux seuils vides, toutes désertes;
Le monstre allait de salle en salle, pas à pas,
Affreux, cherchant un lieu commode à son repas;
Il avait faim. Soudain l’effrayant marcheur fauve
S’arrêta.

*

Près du parc en fleur, dans une alcôve,
Un pauvre être, oublié dans la fuite, bercé
Par l’immense humble rêve à l’enfance versé,
Inondé de soleil à travers la charmille,
Se réveillait. C’était une petite fille;
L’autre enfant du roi. Seule et nue, elle chantait.
Car l’enfant chante même alors que tout se tait.

Une ineffable voix, plus tendre qu’une lyre,
Une petite bouche avec un grand sourire,

Un ange dans un tas de joujoux, un berceau,
Crèche pour un Jésus ou nid pour un oiseau,
Deux profonds yeux bleus, pleins de clartés inconnues,
Col nu, pieds nus, bras nus, ventre nu, jambes nues,
Une brassière blanche allant jusqu’au nombril.
Un astre dans l’azur, un rayon en avril,
Un lys du ciel daignant sur cette terre éclore,
Telle était cette enfant plus douce que l’aurore;
Et le lion venait d’apercevoir cela.

Il entra dans la chambre, et le plancher trembla.

Par-dessus les jouets qui couvraient une table,
Le lion avança sa tête épouvantable,
Sombre en sa majesté de monstre et d’empereur,
Et sa proie en sa gueule augmentait son horreur.
L’enfant le vit, l’enfant cria: — Frère! mon frère!
Ah! mon frère! — et debout, rose dans la lumière
Qui la divinisait et qui la réchauffait,
Regarda ce géant des bois, dont l’oeil eût fait
Reculer les Typhons et fuir les Briarées.
Qui sait ce qui se passe en ces têtes sacrées?
Elle se dressa droite au bord du lit étroit,
Et menaça le monstre avec son petit doigt.
Alors, près du berceau de soie et de dentelle,
Le grand lion posa son frère devant elle,
Comme eût fait une mère en abaissant les bras,
Et lui dit: — Le voici. Là! ne te fâche pas!

XIV

À DES ÂMES ENVOLÉES

Ces âmes que tu rappelles,
Mon coeur, ne reviennent pas.
Pourquoi donc s’obstinent-elles,
Hélas! à rester là-bas?

Dans les sphères éclatantes,
Dans l’azur et les rayons,
Sont-elles donc plus contentes
Qu’avec nous qui les aimions?

Nous avions sous les tonnelles
Une maison près Saint-Leu.
Comme les fleurs étaient belles!
Comme le ciel était bleu!

Parmi les feuilles tombées,
Nous courions au bois vermeil;
Nous cherchions des scarabées
Sur les vieux murs au soleil;

On riait de ce bon rire
Qu’Éden jadis entendit,
Ayant toujours à se dire
Ce qu’on s’était déjà dit;

Je contais la Mère l’Oie;
On était heureux, Dieu sait!
On poussait des cris de joie
Pour un oiseau qui passait.

XV

LAUS PUERO

I

LES ENFANTS GÂTÉS

En me voyant si peu redoutable aux enfants,
Et si rêveur devant les marmots triomphants,
Les hommes sérieux froncent leurs sourcils mornes.
Un grand-père échappé passant toutes les bornes,
C’est moi. Triste, infini dans la paternité,
Je ne suis rien qu’un bon vieux sourire entêté.
Ces chers petits! Je suis grand-père sans mesure;
Je suis l’ancêtre aimant ces nains que l’aube azure,
Et regardant parfois la lune avec ennui,
Et la voulant pour eux, et même un peu pour lui;
Pas raisonnable enfin. C’est terrible. Je règne
Mal, et je ne veux pas que mon peuple me craigne;
Or, mon peuple, c’est Jeanne et George; et moi, barbon,
Aïeul sans frein, ayant cette rage, être bon,
Je leur fais enjamber toutes les lois, et j’ose
Pousser aux attentats leur république rose;
La popularité malsaine me séduit;
Certe, on passe au vieillard, qu’attend la froide nuit,
Son amour pour la grâce et le rire et l’aurore;
Mais des petits, qui n’ont pas fait de crime encore,
Je vous demande un peu si le grand-père doit
Etre anarchique, au point de leur montrer du doigt,
Comme pouvant dans l’ombre avoir des aventures,
L’auguste armoire où sont les pots de confitures!
Oui, j’ai pour eux, parfois, — ménagères, pleurez! —
Consommé le viol de ces vases sacrés.
Je suis affreux. Pour eux je grimpe sur des chaises!
Si je vois dans un coin une assiette de fraises
Réservée au dessert de nous autres, je dis:

— Ô chers petits oiseaux goulus du paradis,
C’est à vous! Voyez-vous, en bas, sous la fenêtre,
Ces enfants pauvres, l’un vient à peine de naître,
Ils ont faim. Faites-les monter, et partagez. —

Jetons le masque. Eh bien! je tiens pour préjugés,
Oui, je tiens pour erreurs stupides les maximes
Qui veulent interdire aux grands aigles les cimes,
L’amour aux seins d’albâtre et la joie aux enfants.
Je nous trouve ennuyeux, assommants, étouffants.
Je ris quand nous enflons notre colère d’homme
Pour empêcher l’enfant de cueillir une pomme,
Et quand nous permettons un faux serment aux rois.
Défends moins tes pommiers et défends mieux tes droits,
Paysan. Quand l’opprobre est une mer qui monte,
Quand je vois le bourgeois voter oui pour sa honte;
Quand Scapin est évêque et Basile banquier;
Quand, ainsi qu’on remue un pion sur l’échiquier,
Un aventurier pose un forfait sur la France,
Et le joue, impassible et sombre, avec la chance
D’être forçat s’il perd et s’il gagne empereur;
Quand on le laisse faire, et qu’on voit sans fureur
Régner la trahison abrutie en orgie,
Alors dans les berceaux moi je me réfugie,
Je m’enfuis dans la douce aurore, et j’aime mieux
Cet essaim d’innocents, petits démons joyeux
Faisant tout ce qui peut leur passer par la tête,
Que la foule acceptant le crime en pleine fête
Et tout ce bas-empire infâme dans Paris;
Et les enfants gâtés que les pères pourris.

II

LE SYLLABUS

Tout en mangeant d’un air effaré vos oranges,
Vous semblez aujourd’hui, mes tremblants petits anges,

Me redouter un peu;
Pourquoi? c’est ma bonté qu’il faut toujours attendre,
Jeanne, et c’est le devoir de l’aïeul d’être tendre
Et du ciel d’être bleu.

N’ayez pas peur. C’est vrai, j’ai l’air fâché, je gronde,
Non contre vous. Hélas, enfants, dans ce vil monde,
Le prêtre hait et ment;
Et, voyez-vous, j’entends jusqu’en nos verts asiles
Un sombre brouhaha de choses imbéciles
Qui passe en ce moment.

Les prêtres font de l’ombre. Ah! je veux m’y soustraire.
La plaine resplendit; viens, Jeanne, avec ton frère,
Viens, George, avec ta soeur;
Un rayon sort du lac, l’aube est dans la chaumière;
Ce qui monte de tout vers Dieu, c’est la lumière;
Et d’eux, c’est la noirceur.

J’aime une petitesse et je déteste l’autre;
Je hais leur bégaiement et j’adore le vôtre;
Enfants, quand vous parlez,
Je me penche, écoutant ce que dit l’âme pure,
Et je crois entrevoir une vague ouverture
Des grands cieux étoilés.

Car vous étiez hier, ô doux parleurs étranges,
Les interlocuteurs des astres et des anges;
En vous rien n’est mauvais;
Vous m’apportez, à moi sur qui gronde la nue,
On ne sait quel rayon de l’aurore inconnue;
Vous en venez, j’y vais.

Ce que vous dites sort du firmament austère;
Quelque chose de plus que l’homme et que la terre
Est dans vos jeunes yeux;
Et votre voix où rien n’insulte, où rien ne blâme,

Où rien ne mord, s'ajoute au vaste épithalame
Des bois mystérieux.

Ce doux balbutiement me plaît, je le préfère;
Car j'y sens l'idéal; j'ai l'air de ne rien faire
Dans les fauves forêts.
Et pourtant Dieu sait bien que tout le jour j'écoute
L'eau tomber d'un plafond de rochers goutte à goutte
Au fond des antres frais.

Ce qu'on appelle mort et ce qu'on nomme vie
Parle la même langue à l'âme inassouvie;
En bas nous étouffons;
Mais rêver, c'est planer dans les apothéoses,
C'est comprendre; et les nids disent les mêmes choses
Que les tombeaux profonds.

Les prêtres vont criant: Anathème! anathème!
Mais la nature dit de toutes parts: Je t'aime!
Venez, enfants; le jour
Est partout, et partout on voit la joie éclore;
Et l'infini n'a pas plus d'azur et d'aurore
Que l'âme n'a d'amour.

J'ai fait la grosse voix contre ces noirs pygmées;
Mais ne me craignez pas; les fleurs sont embaumées,
Les bois sont triomphants;
Le printemps est la fête immense, et nous en sommes;
Venez, j'ai quelquefois fait peur aux petits hommes,
Non aux petits enfants.

III

ENVELOPPE D'UNE PIÈCE DE MONNAIE DANS UNE QUÊTE FAITE PAR JEANNE

Mes amis, qui veut de la joie?

Moi, toi, vous. Eh bien, donnons tous.
Donnons aux pauvres à genoux;
Le soir, de peur qu'on ne nous voie.

Le pauvre, en pleurs sur le chemin,
Nu sur son grabat misérable,
Affamé, tremblant, incurable,
Est l'essayeur du coeur humain.

Qui le repousse en est plus morne;
Qui l'assiste s'en va content.
Ce vieux homme humble et grelottant,
Ce spectre du coin de la borne,

Cet infirme aux pas alourdis,
Peut faire, en notre âme troublée,
Descendre la joie étoilée
Des profondeurs du paradis.

Êtes-vous sombre? Oui, vous l'êtes;
Eh bien, donnez; donnez encor.
Riche, en échange d'un peu d'or
Ou d'un peu d'argent que tu jettes,

Indifférent, parfois moqueur,
A l'indigent dans sa chaumière,
Dieu te donne de la lumière
Dont tu peux te remplir le coeur!

Vébreux!

LA LÉGENDE DES SIÈCLES: NOUVELLE SERIE

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NOUVELLE SÉRIE

LA VISION

D’OÙ EST SORTI CE LIVRE

J’eus un rêve : le mur des siècles m’apparut.

C’était de la chair vive avec du granit brut,
Une immobilité faite d’inquiétude,
Un édifice ayant un bruit de multitude,
Des trous noirs étoilés par de farouches yeux,
Des évolutions de groupes monstrueux,
De vastes bas-reliefs, des fresques colossales;
Parfois le mur s’ouvrait et laissait voir des salles,
Des antres où siégeaient des heureux, des puissants,
Des vainqueurs abrutis de crime, ivres d’encens,
Des intérieurs d’or, de jaspe et de porphyre;
Et ce mur frissonnait comme un arbre au zéphire;

Tous les siècles, le front ceint de tours ou d’épis,
Étaient là, mornes sphinx sur l’énigme accroupis;
Chaque assise avait l’air vaguement animée;
Cela montait dans l’ombre; on eût dit une armée
Pétrifiée avec le chef qui la conduit
Au moment qu’elle osait escalader la Nuit;
Ce bloc flottait ainsi qu’un nuage qui roule;
C’était une muraille et c’était une foule;
Le marbre avait le sceptre et le glaive au poignet,
La poussière pleurait et l’argile saignait,
Les pierres qui tombaient avaient la forme humaine.
Tout l’homme, avec le souffle inconnu qui le mène,
Ève ondoyante, Adam flottant, un et divers,
Palpitaient sur ce mur, et l’être, et l’univers,
Et le destin, fil noir que la tombe dévide.
Parfois l’éclair faisait sur la paroi livide
Luire des millions de faces tout à coup.
Je voyais là ce Rien que nous appelons Tout;
Les rois, les dieux, la gloire et la loi, les passages
Des générations à vau-l’eau dans les âges;

Et devant mon regard se prolongeaient sans fin
Les fléaux, les douleurs, l’ignorance, la faim,
La superstition, la science, l’histoire,
Comme à perte de vue une façade noire.

Et ce mur, composé de tout ce qui croula,
Se dressait, escarpé, triste, informe. Où cela?
Je ne sais. Dans un lieu quelconque des ténèbres.
*

Il n’est pas de brouillards, comme il n’est point d’algèbres,
Qui résistent, au fond des nombres ou des cieux,
À la fixité calme et profonde des yeux;
Je regardais ce mur d’abord confus et vague,
Où la forme semblait flotter comme une vague,
Où tout semblait vapeur, vertige, illusion;
Et, sous mon œil pensif, l’étrange vision
Devenait moins brumeuse et plus claire, à mesure
Que ma prunelle était moins troublée et plus sûre.
*

Chaos d’êtres, montant du gouffre au firmament!
Tous les monstres, chacun dans son compartiment;
Le siècle ingrat, le siècle affreux, le siècle immonde;

Brume et réalité! nuée et mappemonde!
Ce rêve était l’histoire ouverte à deux battants;
Tous les peuples ayant pour gradins tous les temps;
Tous les temples ayant tous les songes pour marches;
Ici les paladins et là les patriarches;
Dodone chuchotant tout bas avec Membré;
Et Thèbe, et Raphidim, et son rocher sacré
Où, sur les juifs luttant pour la terre promise,
Aaron et Hur levaient les deux mains de Moïse;
Le char de feu d’Amos parmi les ouragans;

Tous ces hommes, moitié princes, moitié brigands,
Transformés par la fable avec grâce ou colère,
Noyés dans les rayons du récit populaire,
Archanges, demi-dieux, chasseurs d’hommes, héros
Des Eddas, des Védas et des Romanceros;
Ceux dont la volonté se dresse fer de lance;
Ceux devant qui la terre et l’ombre font silence;
Saül, David; et Delphe, et la cave d’Endor
Dont on mouche la lampe avec des ciseaux d’or;
Nemrod parmi les morts; Booz parmi les gerbes;
Des Tibères divins, constellés, grands, superbes,
Étalant à Caprée, au forum, dans les camps,
Des colliers que Tacite arrangeait en carcans;
La chaîne d’or du trône aboutissant au bagne.
Ce vaste mur avait des versants de montagne.
Ô nuit! Rien ne manquait à l’apparition.

Tout s’y trouvait, matière, esprit, fange et rayon;
Toutes les villes, Thèbe, Athènes, des étages
De Romes sur des tas de Tyrs et de Carthages;
Tous les fleuves, l’Escaut, le Rhin, le Nil, l’Aar,
Le Rubicon disant à quiconque est césar :
— Si vous êtes encor citoyens, vous ne l’êtes
Que jusqu’ici. — Les monts se dressaient, noirs squelettes,
Et sur ces monts erraient les nuages hideux,
Ces fantômes traînant la lune au milieu d’eux.
La muraille semblait par le vent remuée;
C’étaient des croisements de flamme et de nuée,
Des jeux mystérieux de clartés, des renvois
D’ombre d’un siècle à l’autre et du sceptre aux pavois,
Où l’Inde finissait par être l’Allemagne,
Où Salomon avait pour reflet Charlemagne;
Tout le prodige humain, noir, vague, illimité;
La liberté brisant l’immuabilité;
L’Horeb aux flancs brûlés, le Pinde aux pentes vertes;
Hicétas précédant Newton, les découvertes

Secouant leurs flambeaux jusqu’au fond de la mer,
Jason sur le dromon, Fulton sur le steamer;
La Marseillaise, Eschyle, et l’ange après le spectre;
Capanée est debout sur la porte d’Électre,
Bonaparte est debout sur le pont de Lodi;
Christ expire non loin de Néron applaudi.
Voilà l’affreux chemin du trône, ce pavage
De meurtre, de fureur, de guerre, d’esclavage;
L’homme-troupeau! cela hurle, cela commet
Des crimes sur un morne et ténébreux sommet,
Cela frappe, cela blasphème, cela souffre,
Hélas! et j’entendais sous mes pieds, dans le gouffre,
Sangloter la misère aux gémissements sourds,
Sombre bouche incurable et qui se plaint toujours.
Et sur la vision lugubre, et sur moi-même
Que j’y voyais ainsi qu’au fond d’un miroir blême,
La vie immense ouvrait ses difformes rameaux;

Je contemplais les fers, les voluptés, les maux,
La mort, les avatars et les métempsycoses,
Et dans l’obscur taillis des êtres et des choses
Je regardais rôder, noir, riant, l’œil en feu,
Satan, ce braconnier de la forêt de Dieu.
*

Quel titan avait peint cette chose inouïe?
Sur la paroi sans fond de l’ombre épanouie
Qui donc avait sculpté ce rêve où j’étouffais?
Quel bras avait construit avec tous les forfaits,
Tous les deuils, tous les pleurs, toutes les épouvantes,
Ce vaste enchaînement de ténèbres vivantes?
Ce rêve, et j’en tremblais, c’était une action
Ténébreuse entre l’homme et la création;
Des clameurs jaillissaient de dessous les pilastres;
Des bras sortant du mur montraient le poing aux astres;
La chair était Gomorrhe et l’âme était Sion;
Songe énorme! c’était la confrontation

De ce que nous étions avec ce que nous sommes;

Les bêtes s’y mêlaient, de droit divin, aux hommes,
Comme dans un enfer ou dans un paradis;
Les crimes y rampaient, de leur ombre grandis;
Et même les laideurs n’étaient pas malséantes
À la tragique horreur de ces fresques géantes.
Et je revoyais là le vieux temps oublié.
Je le sondais. Le mal au bien était lié
Ainsi que la vertèbre est jointe à la vertèbre.

Cette muraille, bloc d’obscurité funèbre,
Montait dans l’infini vers un brumeux matin.
Blanchissant par degrés sur l’horizon lointain,
Cette vision sombre, abrégé noir du monde,
Allait s’évanouir dans une aube profonde,
Et, commencée en nuit, finissait en lueur.

Le jour triste y semblait une pâle sueur;
Et cette silhouette informe était voilée
D’un vague tournoiement de fumée étoilée.
*

Tandis que je songeais, l’œil fixé sur ce mur

Semé d’âmes, couvert d’un mouvement obscur
Et des gestes hagards d’un peuple de fantômes,
Une rumeur se fit sous les ténébreux dômes,
J’entendis deux fracas profonds, venant du ciel
En sens contraire au fond du silence éternel;
Le firmament que nul ne peut ouvrir ni clore
Eut l’air de s’écarter.
*

Du côté de l’aurore,
L’esprit de l’Orestie, avec un fauve bruit,
Passait; en même temps, du côté de la nuit,

Noir génie effaré fuyant dans une éclipse,
Formidable, venait l'immense Apocalypse;
Et leur double tonnerre à travers la vapeur,
À ma droite, à ma gauche, approchait, et j'eus peur
Comme si j'étais pris entre deux chars de l'ombre.

Ils passèrent. Ce fut un ébranlement sombre.
Et le premier esprit cria : Fatalité!
Le second cria : Dieu! L'obscure éternité
Répéta ces deux cris dans ses échos funèbres.

Ce passage effrayant remua les ténèbres;

Au bruit qu'ils firent, tout chancela; la paroi
Pleine d'ombres, frémit; tout s'y mêla; le roi
Mit la main à son casque et l'idole à sa mitre;
Toute la vision trembla comme une vitre,
Et se rompit, tombant dans la nuit en morceaux;
Et quand les deux esprits, comme deux grands oiseaux,
Eurent fui, dans la brume étrange de l'idée,
La pâle vision reparut lézardée,
Comme un temple en ruine aux gigantesques fûts,
Laissant voir de l'abîme entre ses pans confus.
*

Lorsque je la revis, après que les deux anges
L'eurent brisée au choc de leurs ailes étranges,
Ce n'était plus ce mur prodigieux, complet,
Où le destin avec l'infini s'accouplait,
Où tous les temps groupés se rattachaient au nôtre,
Où les siècles pouvaient s'interroger l'un l'autre
Sans que pas un fît faute et manquât à l'appel;
Au lieu d'un continent, c'était un archipel;
Au lieu d'un univers, c'était un cimetière;
Par places se dressait quelque lugubre pierre,

Quelque pilier debout, ne soutenant plus rien;

Tous les siècles tronqués gisaient; plus de lien;
Chaque époque pendait démantelée; aucune
N’était sans déchirure et n’était sans lacune;
Et partout croupissaient sur le passé détruit
Des stagnations d’ombre et des flaques de nuit.
Ce n’était plus, parmi les brouillards où l’œil plonge,
Que le débris difforme et chancelant d’un songe,
Ayant le vague aspect d’un pont intermittent
Qui tombe arche par arche et que le gouffre attend,
Et de toute une flotte en détresse qui sombre;
Ressemblant à la phrase interrompue et sombre
Que l’ouragan, ce bègue errant sur les sommets,
Recommence toujours sans l’achever jamais.

Seulement l’avenir continuait d’éclore
Sur ces vestiges noirs qu’un pâle orient dore,
Et se levait avec un air d’astre, au milieu
D’un nuage où, sans voir de foudre, on sentait Dieu.

*

De l’empreinte profonde et grave qu’a laissée

Ce chaos de la vie à ma sombre pensée,
De cette vision du mouvant genre humain,
Ce livre, où près d’hier on entrevoit demain,
Est sorti, reflétant de poëme en poëme
Toute cette clarté vertigineuse et blême;
Pendant que mon cerveau douloureux le couvait,
La légende est parfois venue à mon chevet,
Mystérieuse sœur de l’histoire sinistre;
Et toutes deux ont mis leur doigt sur ce registre.

Et qu’est-ce maintenant que ce livre, traduit
Du passé, du tombeau, du gouffre et de la nuit?
C’est la tradition tombée à la secousse
Des révolutions que Dieu déchaîne et pousse;
Ce qui demeure après que la terre a tremblé;

Décombre où l’avenir, vague aurore, est mêlé;
C’est la construction des hommes, la masure
Des siècles, qu’emplit l’ombre et que l’idée azure,
L’affreux charnier-palais en ruine, habité
Par la mort et bâti par la fatalité,
Où se posent pourtant parfois, quand elles l’osent,
De la façon dont l’aile et le rayon se posent,
La liberté, lumière, et l’espérance, oiseau;
C’est l’incommensurable et tragique monceau,
Où glissent, dans la brèche horrible, les vipères

Et les dragons, avant de rentrer aux repaires,
Et la nuée avant de remonter au ciel;
Ce livre, c’est le reste effrayant de Babel;
C’est la lugubre Tour des Choses, l’édifice
Du bien, du mal, des pleurs, du deuil, du sacrifice,
Fier jadis, dominant les lointains horizons,
Aujourd’hui n’ayant plus que de hideux tronçons,
Épars, couchés, perdus dans l’obscure vallée;
C’est l’épopée humaine, âpre, immense, — Écroulée.

I

LA TERRE

LA TERRE

HYMNE

Elle est la terre, elle est la plaine, elle est le champ.
Elle est chère à tous ceux qui sèment en marchant;
Elle offre un lit de mousse au pâtre;
Frileuse, elle se chauffe au soleil éternel,
Rit, et fait cercle avec les planètes du ciel
Comme des sœurs autour de l’âtre.

Elle aime le rayon propice aux blés mouvants,

Et l’assainissement formidable des vents,
Et les souffles, qui sont des lyres,
Et l’éclair, front vivant qui, lorsqu’il brille et fuit,
Tout ensemble épouvante et rassure la Nuit
À force d’effrayants sourires.

Gloire à la terre! Gloire à l’aube où Dieu paraît!
Au fourmillement d’yeux ouverts dans la forêt,
Aux fleurs, aux nids que le jour dore!
Gloire au blanchissement nocturne des sommets!
Gloire au ciel bleu qui peut, sans s’épuiser jamais,
Faire des dépenses d’aurore!

La terre aime ce ciel tranquille, égal pour tous,
Dont la sérénité ne dépend pas de nous,
Et qui mêle à nos vils désastres,
À nos deuils, aux éclats de rires effrontés,
À nos méchancetés, à nos rapidités,
La douceur profonde des astres.

La terre est calme auprès de l’océan grondeur;

La terre est belle; elle a la divine pudeur
De se cacher sous les feuillages;
Le printemps son amant vient en mai la baiser;

Elle envoie au tonnerre altier pour l’apaiser
La fumée humble des villages.

Ne frappe pas, tonnerre. Ils sont petits, ceux-ci.
La terre est bonne; elle est grave et sévère aussi;
Les roses sont pures comme elle;
Quiconque pense, espère et travaille lui plaît;
Et l’innocence offerte à tout homme est son lait,
Et la justice est sa mamelle.

La terre cache l’or et montre les moissons;
Elle met dans le flanc des fuyantes saisons
Le germe des saisons prochaines,
Dans l’azur les oiseaux qui chuchotent : aimons!
Et les sources au fond de l’ombre, et sur les monts
L’immense tremblement des chênes.

L’harmonie est son œuvre auguste sous les cieux;

Elle ordonne aux roseaux de saluer, joyeux
Et satisfaits, l’arbre superbe;
Car l’équilibre, c’est le bas aimant le haut;
Pour que le cèdre altier soit dans son droit, il faut
Le consentement du brin d’herbe.

Elle égalise tout dans la fosse; et confond
Avec les bouviers morts la poussière que font
Les Césars et les Alexandres;
Elle envoie au ciel l’âme et garde l’animal;
Elle ignore, en son vaste effacement du mal,
La différence de deux cendres.

Elle paie à chacun sa dette, au jour la nuit,

À la nuit le jour, l’herbe aux rocs, aux fleurs le fruit;
Elle nourrit ce qu’elle crée,
Et l’arbre est confiant quand l’homme est incertain;
Ô confrontation qui fait honte au destin,
Ô grande nature sacrée!

Elle fut le berceau d’Adam et de Japhet,
Et puis elle est leur tombe; et c’est elle qui fait

Dans Tyr qu’aujourd’hui l’on ignore,
Dans Sparte et Rome en deuil, dans Memphis abattu,
Dans tous les lieux où l’homme a parlé, puis s’est tu,
Chanter la cigale sonore.

Pourquoi? Pour consoler les sépulcres dormants.
Pourquoi? Parce qu’il faut faire aux écroulements
Succéder les apothéoses,
Aux voix qui disent Non les voix qui disent Oui,
Aux disparitions de l’homme évanoui
Le chant mystérieux des choses.

La terre a pour amis les moissonneurs; le soir,
Elle voudrait chasser du vaste horizon noir
L’âpre essaim des corbeaux voraces,
À l’heure où le bœuf las dit : Rentrons maintenant;
Quand les bruns laboureurs s’en reviennent traînant
Les socs pareils à des cuirasses.

Elle enfante sans fin les fleurs qui durent peu;
Les fleurs ne font jamais de reproches à Dieu;
Des chastes lys, des vignes mûres,
Des myrtes frissonnant au vent, jamais un cri

Ne monte vers le ciel vénérable, attendri
Par l’innocence des murmures.

Elle ouvre un livre obscur sous les rameaux épais;

Elle fait son possible; et prodigue la paix
Au rocher, à l’arbre, à la plante,
Pour nous éclairer, nous, fils de Cham et d’Hermès,
Qui sommes condamnés à ne lire jamais
Qu’à de la lumière tremblante.

Son but, c’est la naissance et ce n’est pas la mort;
C’est la bouche qui parle et non la dent qui mord;
Quand la guerre infâme se rue
Creusant dans l’homme un vil sillon de sang baigné,
Farouche, elle détourne un regard indigné
De cette sinistre charrue.

Meurtrie, elle demande aux hommes : À quoi sert

Le ravage? Quel fruit produira le désert?
Pourquoi tuer la plaine verte?
Elle ne trouve pas utiles les méchants,
Et pleure la beauté virginale des champs
Déshonorés en pure perte.

La terre fut jadis Cérès, Alma Cérès,
Mère aux yeux bleus des blés, des prés et des forêts;
Et je l’entends qui dit encore :
Fils, je suis Démèter, la déesse des dieux;
Et vous me bâtirez un temple radieux
Sur la colline Callichore.

II

SUPRÉMATIE

SUPRÉMATIE

Lorsque les trois grands dieux eurent dans un cachot
Mis les démons, chassé les monstres de là-haut,
Ôté sa griffe à l’hydre, au noir dragon son aile,
Et sur ce tas hurlant fermé l’ombre éternelle,
Laissant grincer l’enfer, ce sépulcre vivant,
Ils vinrent tous les trois, Vâyou, le dieu du Vent,
Agni, dieu de la Flamme, Indra, dieu de l’Espace,
S’asseoir sur le zénith, qu’aucun mont ne dépasse,
Et se dirent, ayant dans le ciel radieux
Chacun un astre au front : Nous sommes les seuls dieux!

Tout à coup devant eux surgit dans l’ombre obscure

Une lumière ayant les yeux d’une figure.

Ce que cette lumière était, rien ne saurait
Le dire, et, comme brille au fond d’une forêt
Un long rayon de lune en une route étroite,
Elle resplendissait, se tenant toute droite.
Ainsi se dresse un phare au sommet d’un récif.
C’était un flamboiement immobile, pensif,
Debout.
Et les trois dieux s’étonnèrent.
Ils dirent :

Qu’est ceci?
Tout se tut et les cieux attendirent.

— Dieu Vâyou, dit Agni, dieu Vâyou, dit Indra,
Parle à cette lumière. Elle te répondra.
Crois-tu que tu pourrais savoir ce qu’elle est?
— Certes,

Dit Vâyou. Je le puis.
Les profondeurs désertes
Songeaient; tout fuyait, l’aigle ainsi que l’alcyon.

Alors Vâyou marcha droit à la vision.
— Qu’es-tu? cria Vâyou, le dieu fort et suprême.
Et l’apparition lui dit : — Qu’es-tu toi-même?

Et Vâyou dit : — Je suis Vâyou, le dieu du Vent.
— Et qu’est-ce que tu peux?
— Je peux, en me levant,
Tout déplacer, chasser les flots, courber les chênes,
Arracher tous les gonds, rompre toutes les chaînes,
Et si je le voulais, d’un souffle, moi Vâyou,
Plus aisément qu’au fleuve on ne jette un caillou
Ou que d’une araignée on ne crève les toiles,
J’emporterais la terre à travers les étoiles.

L’apparition prit un brin de paille et dit :
— Emporte ceci.
Puis, avant qu’il répondît,
Elle posa devant le dieu le brin de paille.

Alors, avec des yeux d’orage et de bataille,
Le dieu Vâyou se mit à grandir jusqu’au ciel,
Il troua l’effrayant plafond torrentiel,
Il ne fut plus qu’un monstre ayant partout des bouches,
Pâle, il démusela les ouragans farouches
Et mit en liberté l’âpre meute des airs;
On entendit mugir le semoun des déserts
Et l’aquilon qui peut, par-dessus les épaules
Des montagnes, pousser l’océan jusqu’aux pôles;
Vâyou, géant des vents, immense, au-dessus d’eux
Plana, gronda, frémit et rugit, et, hideux,
Remua les profonds tonnerres de l’abîme;

Tout l’univers trembla de la base à la cime

Comme un toit où quelqu’un d’affreux marche à grands pas.

Le brin de paille aux pieds du dieu ne bougea pas.

Le dieu s’en retourna.
— Dieu du vent, notre frère,
Parle, as-tu pu savoir ce qu’est cette lumière?

Et Vâyou répondit aux deux autres dieux : — Non.

Agni, dit Indra; frère Agni, mon compagnon,
Dit Vâyou, pourrais-tu le savoir, toi?
— Sans doute,
Dit Agni.
Le dieu rouge, Agni, que l’eau redoute,
Et devant qui médite à genoux le Bouddha,
Alla vers la clarté sereine et demanda :
— Qu’es-tu, clarté?
— Qu’es-tu toi-même? lui dit-elle.
— Le dieu du Feu.
— Quelle est ta puissance?
— Elle est telle
Que, si je veux, je puis brûler le ciel noirci,

Les mondes, les soleils, et tout.
— Brûle ceci,
Dit la clarté, montrant au dieu le brin de paille.

Alors, comme un bélier défonce une muraille,
Agni, frappant du pied, fit jaillir de partout
La flamme formidable, et, fauve, ardent, debout,
Crachant des jets de lave entre ses dents de braise,
Fit sur l’humble fétu crouler une fournaise;
Un soufflement de forge emplit le firmament;
Et le jour s’éclipsa dans un vomissement
D’étincelles, mêlé de tant de nuit et d’ombre
Qu’une moitié du ciel en resta longtemps sombre;

Ainsi bout le Vésuve, ainsi flambe l’Hékla;
Lorsqu’enfin la vapeur énorme s’envola,
Quand le dieu rouge Agni, dont l’incendie est l’âme,
Eut éteint ce tumulte effroyable de flamme
Où grondait on ne sait quel monstrueux soufflet,
Il vit le brin de paille à ses pieds, qui semblait
N’avoir pas même été touché par la fumée.

Le dieu s’en revint.
— Dieu du feu, force enflammée,
Quelle est cette lumière enfin? Sais-tu son nom?
Dirent les autres dieux.
Agni répondit : Non.

— Indra, dit Vâyou; frère Indra, dit Agni, sage!
Roi! dieu! qui, sans passer, de tout vois le passage,
Peux-tu savoir, ô toi dont rien ne se perdra,

Ce qu’est cette clarté qui nous regarde?
Indra
Répondit : — Oui.
Toujours droite, la clarté pure
Brillait, et le dieu vint lui parler.
— Ô figure,
Qu’es-tu? dit Indra, d’ombre et d’étoiles vêtu.
Et l’apparition dit : — Toi-même, qu’es-tu?
Indra lui dit : — Je suis Indra, dieu de l’Espace.
— Et quel est ton pouvoir, dieu?
— Sur sa carapace
La divine tortue, aux yeux toujours ouverts,

Porte l’éléphant blanc qui porte l’univers.
Autour de l’univers est l’infini. Ce gouffre
Contient tout ce qui vit, naît, meurt, existe, souffre,
Règne, passe ou demeure, au sommet, au milieu,
En haut, en bas, et c’est l’espace, et j’en suis dieu.
Sous moi la vie obscure ouvre tous ses registres;

Je suis le grand voyant des profondeurs sinistres;
Ni dans les bleus édens, ni dans l’enfer hagard,
Rien ne m’échappe, et rien n’est hors de mon regard;
Si quelque être pour moi cessait d’être visible,
C’est lui qui serait dieu, pas nous; c’est impossible.
Étant l’énormité, je vois l’immensité;
Je vois toute la nuit et toute la clarté;
Je vois le dernier lieu, je vois le dernier nombre,
Et ma prunelle atteint l’extrémité de l’ombre;
Je suis le regardeur infini. Dans ma main
J’ai tout, le temps, l’esprit, hier, aujourd’hui, demain.
Je vois les trous de taupe et les gouffres d’aurore,
Tout! et, là même où rien n’est plus, je vois encore.
Depuis l’azur sans borne où les cieux sur les cieux
Tournent comme un rouage aux flamboyants essieux,
Jusqu’au néant des morts auquel le ver travaille,
Je sais tout! Je vois tout!
 — Vois-tu ce brin de paille?
Dit l’étrange clarté d’où sortait une voix.
Indra baissa la tête et cria : — Je le vois.
Lumière, je te dis que j’embrasse tout l’être;

Toi-même, entends-tu bien, tu ne peux disparaître
De mon regard, jamais éclipsé ni décru!

À peine eut-il parlé qu’elle avait disparu.

III

ENTRE GÉANTS ET DIEUX

LE GÉANT, AUX DIEUX

LE GÉANT.

Un mot. Si par hasard il vous venait l'idée
Que cette herbe où je dors, de rosée inondée,
Est faite pour subir n'importe quel pied nu,
Et que ma solitude est au premier venu,
Si vous pensiez entrer dans l'ombre où je séjourne
Sans que ma grosse tête au fond des bois se tourne,
Si vous vous figuriez que je vous laisserais
Tout déranger, percer des trous dans mes forêts,
Ployer mes vieux sapins et casser mes grands chênes,
Mettre à la liberté de mes torrents des chaînes,
Chasser l'aigle, et marcher sur mes petites fleurs;
Que vous pourriez venir faire les enjôleurs
Chez les nymphes des bois qui ne sont que des sottes,
Que vous pourriez le soir amener dans mes grottes
La Vénus avec qui tous vous vous mariez,
Que je n'ai pas des yeux pour voir, que vous pourriez

Vous vautrer sur mes joncs où les dragons des antres
Laissent en s'en allant la trace de leurs ventres,
Que vous pourriez salir la pauvre source en pleurs,
Que je vous laisserais, ainsi que des voleurs,
Aller, venir, rôder dans la grande nature;
Si vous imaginiez cette étrange aventure
Qu'ici je vous verrais rire, semer l'effroi,
Faire l'amour, vous mettre à votre aise chez moi,
Sans des soulèvements énormes de montagnes,
Et sans vous traiter, vous, princes, et vos compagnes,
Comme les ours qu'au fond des halliers je poursuis,
Vous me croiriez plus bête encor que je ne suis!
JUPITER.

Calme-toi.
VÉNUS.

Nous avons dans l’Olympe des chambres,
Bonhomme.
LE GÉANT.

Oui, je sais bien, parce que j’ai des membres
Vastes, et que les doigts robustes de mes pieds
Semblent sur l’affreux tronc des saules copiés,
Parce que mes talons sont tout noirs de poussière,
Parce que je suis fait de la pâte grossière

Dont est faite la terre auguste et dont sont faits
Les grands monts, ces muets et sacrés portefaix,
Vu que des plus vieux rocs j’ai passé les vieillesses,
Et que je n’ai pas moi toutes vos gentillesses,
Étant une montagne à forme humaine, au fond
Du gouffre, où l’ombre avec les pierres me confond,
Vu que j’ai l’air d’un bloc, d’une tour, d’un décombre,
Et que je fus taillé dans l’énormité sombre,
Je passe pour stupide. On rit de moi, vraiment,
Et l’on croit qu’on peut tout me faire impunément.
Soit. Essayez. Tâtez mon humeur endurante.
Combien de dards avait le serpent Stryx? Quarante.
Combien de pieds avait l’hydre Phluse? Trois cents.
J’ai broyé Stryx et Phluse entre mes poings puissants.
Osez donc! Ah! je sens la colère hagarde
Battre de l’aile autour de mon front. Prenez garde!
Laissez-moi dans mon trou plein d’ombre et de parfums.
Que les olympiens ne soient pas importuns,
Car il se pourrait bien qu’on vît de quelle sorte
On les chasse, et comment, pour leur fermer sa porte,
Un ténébreux s’y prend avec les radieux,
Si vous venez ici m’ennuyer, tas de dieux!

LES TEMPS PANIQUES

*

Les dieux ont dit entre eux : — Nous sommes la matière,
Les dieux. Nous habitons l’insondable frontière
Au delà de laquelle il n’est rien; nous tenons
L’univers par le mal qui règne sous nos noms,
Par la guerre, euménide éparse, par l’orgie
Chantante, dans la joie et le meurtre élargie,
Par Cupidon l’immense enfant, par Astarté,
Larve pleine de nuit d’où sort une clarté.
L’ouragan tourne autour de nos faces sereines;
Les saisons sont des chars dont nous tenons les rênes,
Nous régnons, nous mettons à la tempête un mors,
Et nous sommes au fond de la pâleur des morts.
L’Olympe est à jamais la cime de la vie;
Chronos est prisonnier; Géo tremble asservie;

Nous sommes tout. Nos coups de foudre sont fumants.
Jouissons. Sous nos pieds un pavé d’ossements,
C’est la terre; un plafond de néant sur nos têtes,
C’est le ciel; nous avons les temples et les fêtes;
L’ombre que nous faisons met le monde à genoux.
Les premiers-nés du gouffre étaient plus grands que nous;
Nous leur avons jeté l’Othryx et le Caucase;
À cette heure, un amas de roches les écrase;
Poursuivons, achevons notre œuvre, et consommons
La lapidation des géants par les monts!
*

Les dieux ont triomphé. Leur victoire est tombée
Sur Enna, sur Larisse et Pylos, sur l’Eubée;
L’horizon est partout difforme maintenant;
Pas un mont qui ne soit blessé; l’Atlas saignant
Est noir sous l’assemblage horrible des nuées;
Chalcis que les hiboux emplissent de huées,

La Thrace où l’on adore un vieux glaive rouillé,
L’Hémonie où l’éclair féroce a travaillé,
Sont de mornes déserts que la ruine encombre.
Une peau de satyre écorché pend dans l’ombre,
Car la lyre a puni la flûte au fond des bois.
La source aux pleurs profonds sanglote à demi-voix;
Où sont les jours d’Évandre et les temps de Saturne?
On s’aimait. On se craint. L’univers est nocturne;
L’azur hait le matin, inutile doreur;
L’ombre auguste et hideuse est pleine de terreur;
On entend des soupirs étouffés dans les marbres;
Des simulacres sont visibles sous les arbres,
Et des spectres sont là, signe d’un vaste ennui.
Les bois naguère étaient confiants, aujourd’hui
Ils ont peur, et l’on sent que leur tremblement songe
Aux autans, rauque essaim qui serpente et s’allonge

Et qui souvent remplit de trahisons l’éther;
Car l’orage est l’esclave obscur de Jupiter.
Les cavernes des fils d’Inachus sont vacantes;
Le grand Orphée est mort tué par les bacchantes;
Seuls les dieux sont debout, formidables vivants,
Et la terre subit la sombre horreur des vents.

Thèbe adore en tremblant la foudre triomphale;
Et trois fleuves, le Styx, l’Alphée et le Stymphale,
Se sont enfuis sous terre et n’ont plus reparu.
Aquilon passe avec un grondement bourru;
On ne sait ce qu’Eurus complote avec Borée;

Faune se cache ainsi qu’une bête effarée;
Plus de titans; Mercure éclipse Hypérion;
Zéphire chante et danse ainsi qu’un histrion;
Quant aux Cyclopes, fils puînés, ils sont lâches;
Ils servent; ils ont fait leur paix; les viles tâches
Conviennent aux cœurs bas; Vulcain, le dieu cagneux,

Les emploie à sa forge, a confiance en eux,
Les gouverne, et, difforme et boiteux, distribue
L’ouvrage à ces géants par qui la honte est bue;
Brontès fait des trépieds qui parlent, Pyracmon
Fait des spectres d’airain où remue un démon;
On ne résiste plus aux dieux, même en Sicile;

Polyphème amoureux n’est plus qu’un imbécile,
Et Galatée en rit avec Acis.
Les champs
N’ont presque plus de fleurs, tant les dieux sont méchants;
Les dieux semblent avoir cueilli toutes les roses.
Ils font la guerre à Pan, à l’être, au gouffre, aux choses;
Ils ont mis de la nuit jusque dans l’œil du lynx;
Ils ont pris l’ombre, ils ont fait avouer les sphinx,
Ils ont échoué l’hydre, éteint les ignivomes,
Et du sinistre enfer augmenté les fantômes,
Et, bouleversant tout, ondes, souffles, typhons,
Ils ont déconcerté les prodiges profonds.
La terre en proie aux dieux fut le champ de bataille;
Ils ont frappé les fronts qui dépassaient leur taille,
Et détruit sans pitié, sans gloire, sans pudeur,
Hélas! quiconque avait pour crime la grandeur.

Les lacs sont indignés des monts qu’ils réfléchissent,
Car les monts ont trahi; sur un faîte où blanchissent

Des os d’enfants percés par les flèches du ciel,
Cime aride et pareille aux lieux semés de sel,
La pierre qui jadis fut Niobé médite;
La vaste Afrique semble exilée et maudite;
Le Nil cache éperdu sa source à tous les yeux,
De peur de voir briser son urne par les dieux;
On sent partout la fin, la borne, la limite;
L’étang, clair sous l’amas des branchages, imite
L’œil tragique et brillant du fiévreux qui mourra;
L’effroi tient Delphe en Grèce et dans l’Inde Ellorah;

Phœbus Sminthée usurpe aux cieux le char solaire;

Que de honte! Et l’on peut juger de la colère
De Démèter, l’aïeule auguste de Cérès,
Par l’échevèlement farouche des forêts.
La terre avait une âme et les dieux l’ont tuée.
Hélas! dit le torrent. Hélas! dit la nuée.
Les vagues voix du soir murmurent : Oublions!
L’absence des géants attriste les lions.

LE TITAN

I

SUR L’OLYMPE

Une montagne emplit tout l’horizon des hommes;
L’Olympe. Pas de ciel. Telle est l’ombre où nous sommes.
L’orgueil, la volupté féroce aux chants lascifs,
La guerre secouant des éclairs convulsifs,
La splendide Vénus, nue, effrayante, obscure,
Le meurtre appelé Mars, le vol nommé Mercure,
L’inceste souriant, ivre, au sinistre hymen,
Le parricide ayant le tonnerre à la main,

Pluton livide avec l’enfer pour auréole,
L’immense fou Neptune en proie au vague Éole,
L’orageux Jupiter, Diane à l’œil peu sûr,
Des fronts de météore entrevus dans l’azur,
Habitent ce sommet; et tout ce que l’augure,
Le flamine, imagine, invente, se figure,
Et vénère à Corinthe, à Syène, à Paphos,
Tout le vrai des autels qui dans la tombe est faux,
L’oppression, la soif du sang, l’âpre carnage,
L’impudeur qui survit à la guerre et surnage,
L’extermination des enfants de Japhet,

Toute la quantité de crime et de forfait
Que de noms révérés la religion nomme,

Et que peut dans la nuit d’un temple adorer l’homme,
Sur ce faîte fatal que l’aube éclaire en vain,
Rayonne, et tout le mal possible est là, divin.

Jadis la terre était heureuse; elle était libre.
Et, donnant l’équité pour base à l’équilibre,
Elle avait ses grands fils, les géants; ses petits,
Les hommes; et tremblants, cachés, honteux, blottis
Dans les antres, n’osant nuire à la créature,
Les fléaux avaient peur de la sainte nature;
L’étang était sans peste et la mer sans autans;
Tout était beauté, fête, amour, blancheur, printemps;
L’églogue souriait dans la forêt; les tombes
S’entr’ouvraient pour laisser s’envoler des colombes;
L’arbre était sous le vent comme un luth sous l’archet;
L’ourse allaitait l’agneau que le lion léchait;
L’homme avait tous les biens que la candeur procure;
On ne connaissait pas Plutus, ni ce Mercure
Qui plus tard fit Sidon et Tharsis, et sculpta
Le caducée aux murs impurs de Sarepta;
On ignorait ces mots, corrompre, acheter, vendre.

On donnait. Jours sacrés! jours de Rhée et d’Évandre!
L’homme était fleur; l’aurore était sur les berceaux.
Hélas! au lait coulant dans les champs par ruisseaux
A succédé le vin d’où sortent les orgies;
Les hommes maintenant ont des tables rougies;
Le lait les faisait bons et le vin les rend fous;
Atrée est ivre auprès de Thyeste en courroux;
Les Centaures, prenant les femmes sur leurs croupes,
Frappent l’homme, et l’horreur tragique est dans les coupes.
Ô beaux jours passés! terre amante, ciel époux!
Oh! que le tremblement des branches était doux!
Les cyclopes jouaient de la flûte dans l’ombre.

La terre est aujourd’hui comme un radeau qui sombre.
Les dieux, ces parvenus, règnent, et, seuls debout,
Composent leur grandeur de la chute de tout.
Leur banquet resplendit sur la terre et l’affame.
Ils dévorent l’amour, l’âme, la chair, la femme,
Le bien, le mal, le faux, le vrai, l’immensité.
Ils sont hideux au fond de la sérénité.
Quels festins! Comme ils sont contents! Comme ils s’entourent
De vertiges, de feux, d’ombre! Comme ils savourent
La gloire d’être grands, d’être dieux, d’être seuls!
Comme ils raillent les vieux géants dans leurs linceuls!
Toutes les vérités premières sont tuées.

Les heures, qui ne sont que des prostituées,
Viennent chanter chez eux, montrant de vils appas,
Leur offrant l’avenir sacré, qu’elles n’ont pas.
Hébé leur verse à boire et leur soif dit : Encore!
Trois danseuses, Thalie, Aglaé, Terpsychore,
Sont là, belles, croisant leurs pas mélodieux.
Qu’il est doux d’avoir fait le mal qui vous fait dieux!
Vaincre! être situés aux lieux inabordables!
Torturer et jouir! Ils vivent formidables
Dans l’éblouissement des Grâces aux seins nus.
Ils sont les radieux, ils sont les inconnus.
Ils ont détruit Craos, Nephtis, Antée, Otase;

Être horribles et beaux, c’est une double extase;
Comme ils sont adorés! Comme ils sont odieux!
Ils perdent la raison à force d’être dieux;
Car la férocité, c’est la vraie allégresse,
Et Bacchus fait traîner par des tigres l’ivresse.
Ils inspirent Dodone, éléphantine, Endor.
Chacun d’eux à la main tient une coupe d’or
Pure à mouler dessus un sein de jeune fille.
Sur son trépied en Crète, à Cumes sous sa grille,

La sibylle leur livre à travers ses barreaux
Le secret de la foudre en ses vers fulguraux,
Car cette louve sait le fatal fond des choses;
Toute la terre tremble à leurs métamorphoses;
La forêt, où le jour pâle pénètre peu,
Quand elle voit un monstre a peur de voir un dieu.
Quelle joie ils se font avec l'univers triste!
Comme ils sont convaincus que rien hors d'eux n'existe!
Comme ils se sentent forts, immortels, éternels!
Quelle tranquillité d'être les criminels,
Les tyrans, les bourreaux, les dogmes, les idoles!

D'emplir d'ombre et d'horreur les pythonisses folles,
Les ménades d'amour, les sages de stupeur!
D'avoir partout pour soi l'autel noir de la peur!
D'avoir l'antre, l'écho, le lieu visionnaire,
Tous les fracas depuis l'Etna jusqu'au tonnerre,
Toutes les tours depuis Pharos jusqu'à Babel!
D'être, sous tous les noms possibles, Dagon, Bel,
Jovis, Horus, Moloch et Teutatès, les maîtres!
D'avoir à soi la nuit, le vent, les bois, les prêtres!
De posséder le monde entier, Éphèse et Tyr,
Thulé, Thèbe, et les flots dont on ne peut sortir,
Et d'avoir, au delà des colonnes d'Hercule,
Toute l'obscurité qui menace et recule!
Quelle toute-puissance! effarer le lion,
Dompter l'aigle, poser Ossa sur Pélion,

Avoir, du cap d'Asie aux pics Acrocéraunes,
Toute la mer pour peuple et tous les monts pour trônes,
Avoir le sable et l'onde, et l'herbe et le granit,
Et la brume ignorée où le monde finit!
En bas, le tremblement des flèches dans les cibles,
Le passage orageux des meutes invisibles,
Le roulement des chars, le pas des légions,
Le bruit lugubre fait par les religions,
D'étranges voix sortant d'une sombre ouverture,

L’obscur rugissement de l’immense nature,
Réalisent, au pied de l’Olympe inclément,
On ne sait quel sinistre anéantissement;
Et la terre, où la vie indistincte végète,
Sous ce groupe idéal et monstrueux qui jette
Les fléaux, à la fois moissonneur et semeur,
N’est rien qu’une nuée où flotte une rumeur.
Par moments le nuage autour du mont s’entr’ouvre;
Alors on aperçoit sur ces êtres, que couvre
Un divin flamboiement brusquement éclairci,
Des rejaillissements de rayons, comme si
L’on avait écrasé sur eux de la lumière;
Puis le hautain sommet rentre en son ombre altière
Et l’on ne voit plus rien que les sanglants autels;
Seulement on entend rire les immortels.

Et les hommes? Que font les hommes? Ils frissonnent.
Les clairons dans les camps et dans les temples sonnent,
L’encens et les bûchers fument, et le destin
Du fond de l’ombre immense écrase tout, lointain;
Et les blêmes vivants passent, larves, pygmées;
Ils regardent l’Olympe à travers les fumées,
Et se taisent, sachant que le sort est sur eux,
D’autant plus éblouis qu’ils sont plus ténébreux;
Leur seule volonté c’est de ne pas comprendre;
Ils acceptent tout, vie et tombeau, flamme et cendre,
Tout ce que font les rois, tout ce que les dieux font,
Tant le frémissement des âmes est profond!

II

SOUS L’OLYMPE

Cependant un des fils de la terre farouche,
Un titan, l’ombre au front et l’écume à la bouche,
Phtos le géant, l’aîné des colosses vaincus,

Tandis qu’en haut les dieux, enivrés par Bacchus,

Mêlent leur joie autour de la royale table,
Rêve sous l’épaisseur du mont épouvantable.
Les maîtres, sous l’Olympe, ont, dans un souterrain
Jeté Phtos, l’ont lié d’une corde d’airain,
Puis ils l’ont laissé là, car la victoire heureuse
Oublie et chante; et Phtos médite; il sonde, il creuse,
Il fouille le passé, l’avenir, le néant.
Oh! quand on est vaincu, c’est dur d’être géant!
Un nain n’a pas la honte ayant la petitesse.
Seuls, les cœurs de titans ont la grande tristesse;
Le volcan morne sent qu’il s’éteint par degrés,
Et la défaite est lourde aux fronts démesurés.

Ce vaincu saigne et songe, étonné.
Quelle chute!
Les dieux ont commencé la tragique dispute,
Et la terre est leur proie. Ô deuil! Il mord son poing.
Comment respire-t-il? Il ne respire point.
Son corps vaste est blessé partout comme une cible.
Le câble que Vulcain fit en bronze flexible
Le serre, et son cou râle, étreint d’un nœud d’airain.
Phtos médite, et ce grand furieux est serein;
Il méprise, indigné, les fers, les clous, les gênes.

III

CE QUE LES GÉANTS SONT DEVENUS

Il songe au fier passé des puissants terrigènes,
Maintenant dispersés dans vingt charniers divers,
Vastes membres d’un monstre auguste, l’univers;
Toute la terre était dans ces hommes énormes;
À cette heure, mêlés aux montagnes sans formes,
Ils gisent, accablés par le destin hideux,
Plus morts que le sarment qu’un pâtre casse en deux.
Où sont-ils? sous des rocs abjects, cariatides
Des Ténares ardents, des Cocytes fétides;

Encelade a sur lui l’infâme Etna fumant;

C’est son bagne; et l’on voit de l’âpre entassement
Sortir son pied qui semble un morceau de montagne;
Thor est sous l’écueil noir qui sera la Bretagne;
Sur Anax, le géant de Tyrinthe, Arachné
File sa toile, tant il est bien enchaîné;
Pluton, après avoir mis Kothos dans l’érèbe,
A cloué ses cent mains aux cent portes de Thèbe;
Mopse est évanoui sous l’Athos, c’est Hermès

Qui l’enferme; on ne peut espérer que jamais
Dans ces caves du monde aucun souffle ranime
Rhœtus, Porphyrion, Mégatlas, Evonyme;
Couché de tout son long sous le haut mont Liban,
Titlis souffre, et, saisi par Notus, vil forban,
Scrops flotte sous Délos, l’île errante et funeste;
Dronte est muré sous Delphe et Mimas sous Prœneste;

Cœbès, Géreste, Andès, Béor, Cédalion,
Jax, qui dormait le jour ainsi que le lion,
Tous ces êtres plus grands que des monts, sont esclaves,
Les uns sous des glaciers, les autres sous des laves,
Dans on ne sait quel lâche enfer fastidieux;

Et Prométhée! Hélas! quels bandits que ces dieux!
Personne au fond ne sait le crime de Tantale;
Pour avoir entrevu la baigneuse fatale,
Actéon fuit dans l’ombre; et qu’a fait Adonis?
Que de héros brisés! Que d’innocents punis!
Phtos repasse en son cœur l’affreux sort de ses frères;
Star dans Lesbos subit l’affront des stercoraires;
Cerbère garde Ephlops, par mille éclairs frappé,
Sur qui rampe en enfer la chenille Campé;

C’est sur Mégarios que le mont Ida pèse;
Darse endure le choc des flots que rien n’apaise;

Rham est si bien captif du Styx fuligineux
Qu’il n’en a pas encor pu desserrer les nœuds;
Atlas porte le monde, et l’on entend le pôle
Craquer quand le géant lassé change d’épaule;
Lié sous le volcan Liparis, noir récif,
Typhée est au milieu de la flamme, pensif.
Tous ces titans, Stellos, Talémon, Ecmonide,

Gès dont l’œil bleu faisait reculer l’euménide,
Ont succombé, percés des flèches de l’éther,
Sous le guet-apens brusque et vil de Jupiter.
Les géants qui gardaient l’âge d’or, dont la taille
Rassurait la nature, ont perdu la bataille,
Et les colosses sont remplacés par les dieux.
La terre n’a plus d’âme et le ciel n’a plus d’yeux;
Tout est mort. Seuls ces rois épouvantables vivent.
Les stupides saisons comme des chiens les suivent,
L’ordre éternel les semble approuver en marchant;
Dans l’Olympe, où le cri du monde arrive chant,
Où l’étourdissement conseille l’inclémence,
On rit. Tant de victoire a droit à la démence.
Et ces dieux ont raison. Phtos écume. — Oui, dit-il,
Ils ont raison. Eau, flamme, éléments, air subtil,
Vous ne vous êtes pas défendus. Votre orage

N’a pas eu dans la lutte affreuse assez de rage;
Vous vous êtes laissés museler lâchement.
Le mal triomphe! — Et Phtos frémit. Écroulement!
Tous les géants sont pris et garrottés. Que faire?
Il songe.

IV

L’EFFORT

Quoi! L’eau court, le cheval se déferre,
L’humble oiseau brise l’œuf à coups de bec, le vent
Prend la fuite, malgré l’éclair le poursuivant,

Le loup s’en va, bravant le pâtre et le molosse,
Le rat ronge sa cage, et lui, titan, colosse,
Lui dont le cœur a plus de lave qu’un volcan,
Lui Phtos, il resterait dans cette ombre, au carcan!
Ô fureur! Non. Il tord ses os, tend ses vertèbres,
Se débat. Lequel est le plus dur, ô ténèbres!
De la chair d’un titan ou de l’airain des dieux?
Tout à coup, sous l’effort... — ô matin radieux,
Quand tu remplis d’aurore et d’amour le grand chêne,
Ton chant n’est pas plus doux que le bruit d’une chaîne
Qui se casse et qui met une âme en liberté! —

Le carcan s’est fendu, les nœuds ont éclaté!
Le roc sent remuer l’être extraordinaire;
Ah! dit Phtos, et sa joie est semblable au tonnerre;
Le voilà libre!
Non, la montagne est sur lui.
Les fers sont les anneaux de ce serpent, l’ennui;
Ils sont rompus; mais quoi! Tout ce granit l’arrête;
Que faire avec ce mont difforme sur sa tête?
Qu’importe une montagne à qui brisa ses fers!
Certe, il fuira. Dût-il déranger les enfers,
Certe, il s’évadera dans la profondeur sombre!
Qu’importe le possible et les chaos sans nombre,
Le précipice en bas, l’escarpement en haut!
Fauve, il dépave avec ses ongles son cachot.
Il arrache une pierre, une autre, une autre encore;
Oh! quelle étrange nuit sous l’univers sonore!
Un trou s’offre, lugubre, il y plonge, et, rampant

Dans un vide où l’effroi du tombeau se répand,
Il voit sous lui de l’ombre et de l’horreur. Il entre.
Il est dans on ne sait quel intérieur d’antre;
Il avance, il serpente, il fend les blocs mal joints;
Il disloque la roche entre ses vastes poings;
Les enchevêtrements de racines vivaces,
Les fuites d’eau mouillant de livides crevasses,

Il franchit tout; des reins, des coudes, des talons,
Il pousse devant lui l’abîme et dit : Allons!
Et le voilà perdu sous des amas funèbres,
Remuant les granits, les miasmes, les ténèbres,
Et tout le noir dessous de l’Olympe éclatant.
Par moments il s’arrête, il écoute, il entend
Sur sa tête les dieux rire, et pleurer la terre.
Bruit tragique.
À plat ventre, ainsi que la panthère,

Il s’aventure; il voit ce qui n’a pas de nom.
Il n’est plus prisonnier; s’est-il échappé? Non.
Où fuir, puisqu’ils ont tout? Rage! ô pensée amère!
Il rentre au flanc sacré de la terre sa mère;
Stagnation. Noirceur. Tombe. Blocs étouffants.
Et dire que les dieux sont là-haut triomphants!
Et que la terre est tout, et qu’ils ont pris la terre!
L’ombre même lui semble hostile et réfractaire.
Mourir, il ne le peut; mais renaître, qui sait?
Il va. L’obscurité sans fond, qu’est-ce que c’est?
Il fouille le néant et le néant résiste.
Parfois un flamboiement, plus noir que la nuit triste,
Derrière une cloison de fournaise apparaît.
Le titan continue. Il se tient en arrêt,
Guette, sape, reprend, creuse, invente sa route,

Et fuit, sans que le mont qu’il a sur lui s’en doute,
Les olympes n’ayant conscience de rien.

V

LE DEDANS DE LA TERRE

Pas un rayon de jour; nul souffle aérien;
Des fentes dans la nuit; il rampe. Après des caves
Où gronde un gonflement de soufres et de laves,
Il traverse des eaux hideuses; mais que font
L’onde et la flamme et l’ombre à qui cherche le fond,

Le dénouement, la fin, la liberté, l’issue?
Son crâne est son levier, sa main est sa massue;
Plongeur de l’Ignoré, crispant ses bras noueux,
Il écarte des tas d’obstacles monstrueux,
Il perce du chaos les pâles casemates;
Il est couvert de sang, de fange, de stigmates;
Comme, ainsi formidable, il plairait à Vénus!
La pierre âpre et cruelle écorche ses flancs nus,
Et sur son corps, criblé par l’éclair sanguinaire,
Rouvre la cicatrice énorme du tonnerre.

Glissement colossal sous l’amoncellement
De la nuit, du granit affreux, de l’élément!

L’eau le glace, le feu le mord, l’ombre l’accable;
Mais l’évasion fière, indignée, implacable,
L’entraîne; et que peut-il craindre, étant foudroyé?
Il va. Râlant, grinçant, luttant, saignant, ployé,
Il se fraie un chemin tortueux, tourne, tombe,
S’enfonce, et l’on dirait un ver trouant la tombe;
Il tend l’oreille au bruit qui va s’affaiblissant,
S’enivre de la chute et du gouffre, et descend.
Il entend rire, tant la voix des dieux est forte.
Il troue, il perce, il fuit... — Le puits que de la sorte
Il creuse est effroyable et sombre, et maintenant
Ce n’est plus seulement l’Olympe rayonnant
Que ce fuyard terrible a sur lui, c’est la terre.
Tout à coup le bruit cesse.
Et tout ce qu’il faut taire,
Il l’aperçoit. La fin de l’être et de l’espoir,
L’inhospitalité sinistre du fond noir,
Le cloaque où plus tard crouleront les Sodomes,
Le dessous ténébreux des pas de tous les hommes,
Le silence gardant le secret. Arrêtez!
Plus loin n’existe pas. L’ombre de tous côtés!

Ce gouffre est devant lui. L’abject, le froid, l’horrible,

L’évanouissement misérable et terrible,
L’espèce de brouillard que ferait le Léthé,
Cette chose sans nom, l’univers avorté,
Un vide monstrueux où de l’effroi surnage,
L’impossibilité de tourner une page,
Le suprême feuillet faisant le dernier pli!
C’est cela qu’on verrait si l’on voyait l’oubli.
Plus bas que les effets et plus bas que les causes,
La clôture à laquelle aboutissent les choses,
Il la touche, et dans l’ombre, inutile éclaireur,
Il est à l’endroit morne où Tout n’est plus. Terreur.
C’est fini. Le titan regarde l’invisible.

Se rendre sans avoir épuisé le possible,
Les colosses n’ont point cette coutume-là;
Les géants qu’un amas d’infortune accabla
Luttent encore; ils ont un fier reste de rage;

La résistance étant ressemblante à l’outrage
Plaît aux puissants vaincus; l’aigle mord ses barreaux;
Faire au sort violence est l’humeur des héros,
Et ce désespoir-là seul est grand et sublime
Qui donne un dernier coup de talon à l’abîme.
Phtos, comme s’il voulait, de ses deux bras ouverts,
Arracher le dernier morceau de l’univers,
Se baisse, étreint un bloc et l’écarte...

VI

LA DÉCOUVERTE DU TITAN

Ô vertige!
Ô gouffres! l’effrayant soupirail d’un prodige
Apparaît; l’aube fait irruption; le jour,
Là, dehors, un rayon d’allégresse et d’amour,
Formidable, aussi pur que l’aurore première,
Entre dans l’ombre, et Phtos, devant cette lumière,
Brusque aveu d’on ne sait quel profond firmament,

Recule, épouvanté par l’éblouissement.

Le soupirail est large et la brèche est béante.
Phtos y passe son bras, puis sa tête géante;
Il regarde.

*

Il croyait, quand sur lui tout croula,
Voir l’abîme; eh bien non! L’abîme, le voilà.
Phtos est à la fenêtre immense du mystère.
Il voit l’autre côté monstrueux de la terre;
L’inconnu, ce qu’aucun regard ne vit jamais;
Des profondeurs qui sont en même temps sommets,
Un tas d’astres derrière un gouffre d’empyrées,
Un océan roulant aux plis de ses marées
Des flux et des reflux de constellations;
Il voit les vérités qui sont les visions;
Des flots d’azur, des flots de nuit, des flots d’aurore,
Quelque chose qui semble une croix météore,
Des étoiles après des étoiles, des feux
Après des feux, des cieux, des cieux, des cieux, des cieux!
Le géant croyait tout fini; tout recommence!
Ce qu’aucune sagesse et pas une démence,
Pas un être sauvé, pas un être puni
Ne rêverait, l’abîme absolu, l’infini,
Il le voit. C’est vivant, et son œil y pénètre.

Cela ne peut mourir et cela n’a pu naître,
Cela ne peut s’accroître ou décroître en clarté,

Toute cette lumière étant l’éternité.
Phtos a le tremblement effrayant qui devine.
Plus d’astres qu’il n’éclôt de fleurs dans la ravine,
Plus de soleils qu’il n’est de fourmis, plus de cieux
Et de mondes à voir que les hommes n’ont d’yeux!
Ces blancheurs sont des lacs de rayons; ces nuées

Sont des créations sans fin continuées;

Là plus de rives, plus de bords, plus d'horizons.
Dans l'étendue, où rien ne marque les saisons,
Où luisent les azurs, où les chaos sanglotent,
Des millions d'enfers et de paradis flottent,
Éclairant de leurs feux, lugubres ou charmants,
D'autres humanités sous d'autres firmaments.
Où cela cesse-t-il? Cela n'a pas de terme.
Quel styx étreint ce ciel? Aucun. Quel mur l'enferme?
Aucun. Globes, soleils, lunes, sphères. Forêt.
L'impossible à travers l'évident transparaît.
C'est le point fait soleil, c'est l'astre fait atôme;
Tant de réalité que tout devient fantôme;
Tout un univers spectre apparu brusquement.
Un globe est une bulle; un siècle est un moment;
Mondes sur mondes; l'un par l'autre ils se limitent.
Des sphères restent là, fixes; d'autres imitent
L'évanouissement des passants inconnus,
Et s'en vont. Portant tout et par rien soutenus,
Des foules d'univers s'entrecroisent sans nombre;
Point de Calpé pour l'aube et d'Abyla pour l'ombre;
Des astres errants vont, viennent, portent secours;
Ténèbres, clartés, gouffre. Et puis après? Toujours.
Phtos voit l'énigme; il voit le fond, il voit la cime.

Il sent en lui la joie obscure de l'abîme;
Il subit, accablé de soleils et de cieux,
L'inexprimable horreur des lieux prodigieux.
Il regarde, éperdu, le vrai, ce précipice.
Évidence sans borne, ou fatale, ou propice!
Ô stupeur! Il finit par distinguer, au fond
De ce gouffre où le jour avec la nuit se fond,
À travers l'épaisseur d'une brume éternelle,
Dans on ne sait quelle ombre énorme, une prunelle!
*

Cependant sur le haut de l’Olympe on riait;
Les Immortels, sereins sur le monde inquiet,
Resplendissaient, debout dans un brouillard de gloire;
Tout à coup, une étrange et haute forme noire
Surgit en face d’eux, et Vénus dit : Quelqu’un!
C’était Phtos. Comme un feu hors du vase à parfum,
Ou comme un flamboiement au-dessus du cratère,
Le colosse, en rampant dans l’ombre et sous la terre,
S’était fait libre, était sorti de sa prison,
Et maintenant montait, sinistre, à l’horizon.
Il avait traversé tout le dessous du monde.
Il avait dans les yeux l’éternité profonde.
Il se fit un silence inouï; l’on sentit
Que ce spectre était grand, car tout devint petit;
L’aigle ouvrit son œil fauve où l’âpre éclair palpite,

Et sembla regarder du côté de la fuite;
L’Olympe fut noirci par l’ombre du géant;
Jupiter se dressa, pâle, sur son séant;
Le dur Vulcain cessa de battre son enclume
Qui sonna si souvent, dans sa forge qui fume,
Sur les fers des vaincus lorsqu’il les écrouait;
Afin qu’on n’entendît pas même leur rouet
Les trois Grâces d’en haut firent signe aux trois Parques;
Alors le titan, grave, altier, portant les marques
Des tonnerres sur lui tant de fois essayés,
Ayant l’immense aspect des sommets foudroyés
Et la difformité sublime des décombres,
Regarda fixement les Olympiens sombres
Stupéfaits sur leur cime au fond de l’éther bleu,
Et leur cria, terrible : Ô dieux, il est un Dieu!

IV

LA VILLE DISPARUE

LA VILLE DISPARUE

Peuple, l’eau n’est jamais sans rien faire. Mille ans
Avant Adam, qui semble un spectre en cheveux blancs,
Notre aïeul, c’est du moins ainsi que tu le nommes,
Quand les géants étaient encor mêlés aux hommes,
Dans des temps dont jamais personne ne parla,

Une ville bâtie en briques était là
Où sont ces flots qu’agite un aquilon immense
Et cette ville était un lieu plein de démence
Que parfois menaçait de loin un blême éclair.
On voyait une plaine où l’on voit une mer;
Alors c’étaient des chars qui passaient, non des barques;
Les ouragans ont pris la place des monarques;
Car pour faire un désert, Dieu, maître des vivants,
Commence par les rois et finit par les vents.
Ce peuple, voix, rumeurs, fourmillement de têtes,
Troupeau d’âmes, ému par les deuils et les fêtes,
Faisait le bruit que fait dans l’orage l’essaim,
Point inquiet d’avoir l’Océan pour voisin.

Donc cette ville avait des rois; ces rois superbes
Avaient sous eux les fronts comme un faucheur les herbes.
Étaient-ils méchants? Non. Ils étaient rois. Un roi
C’est un homme trop grand que trouble un vague effroi,
Qui, faisant plus de mal pour avoir plus de joie,
Chez les bêtes de somme est la bête de proie;
Mais ce n’est pas sa faute, et le sage est clément.
Un roi serait meilleur s’il naissait autrement;
L’homme est homme toujours; les crimes du despote
Sont faits par sa puissance, ombre où son âme flotte,
Par la pourpre qu’il traîne et dont on le revêt,
Et l’esclave serait tyran s’il le pouvait.

Donc cette ville était toute bâtie en briques.
On y voyait des tours, des bazars, des fabriques,
Des arcs, des palais pleins de luths mélodieux,
Et des monstres d’airain qu’on appelait les dieux.
Cette ville était gaie et barbare; ses places
Faisaient par leurs gibets rire les populaces;
On y chantait des chœurs pleins d’oubli, l’homme étant
L’ombre qui jette un souffle et qui dure un instant;
De claires eaux luisaient au fond des avenues;
Et les reines du roi se baignaient toutes nues
Dans les parcs où rôdaient des paons étoilés d’yeux;
Les marteaux, au dormeur nonchalant odieux,
Sonnaient, de l’aube au soir, sur les noires enclumes;

Les vautours se posaient, fouillant du bec leurs plumes,
Sur les temples, sans peur d’être chassés, sachant
Que l’idole féroce aime l’oiseau méchant;
Le tigre est bien venu près de l’hydre; et les aigles
Sentent qu’ils n’ont jamais enfreint aucunes règles,
Quand le sang coule auprès des autels radieux,
En venant partager le meurtre avec les dieux.
L’autel du temple était d’or pur, que rien ne souille,
Le toit était en cèdre et, de peur de la rouille,
Au lieu de clous avait des chevilles de bois.
Jour et nuit les clairons, les cistres, les hautbois,
De crainte que le Dieu farouche ne s’endorme,
Chantaient dans l’ombre. Ainsi vivait la ville énorme.
Les femmes y venaient pour s’y prostituer.
Mais un jour l’Océan se mit à remuer;
Doucement, sans courroux, du côté de la ville
Il rongea les rochers et les dunes, tranquille,
Sans tumulte, sans chocs, sans efforts haletants,
Comme un grave ouvrier qui sait qu’il a le temps;
Et lentement, ainsi qu’un mineur solitaire,
L’eau jamais immobile avançait sous la terre;
C’est en vain que sur l’herbe un guetteur assidu

Eût collé son oreille, il n’eût rien entendu;

L’eau creusait sans rumeur comme sans violence,
Et la ville faisait son bruit sur ce silence.
Si bien qu’un soir, à l’heure où tout semble frémir,
À l’heure où, se levant comme un sinistre émir,
Sirius apparaît, et sur l’horizon sombre
Donne un signal de marche aux étoiles sans nombre,
Les nuages qu’un vent l’un à l’autre rejoint
Et pousse, seuls oiseaux qui ne dormissent point,
La lune, le front blanc des monts, les pâles astres,
Virent soudain, maisons, dômes, arceaux, pilastres,
Toute la ville, ainsi qu’un rêve, en un instant,
Peuple, armée, et le roi qui buvait en chantant
Et qui n’eut pas le temps de se lever de table,
Crouler dans on ne sait quelle ombre épouvantable;
Et pendant qu’à la fois, de la base au sommet,
Ce chaos de palais et de tours s’abîmait,
On entendit monter un murmure farouche,
Et l’on vit brusquement s’ouvrir comme une bouche
Un trou d’où jaillissait un jet d’écume amer,
Gouffre où la ville entrait et d’où sortait la mer.
Et tout s’évanouit; rien ne resta que l’onde.

Maintenant on ne voit au loin que l’eau profonde
Par les vents remuée et seule sous les cieux.
Tel est l’ébranlement des flots mystérieux.

V

APRÈS LES DIEUX, LES ROIS

I

DE MESA À ATTILA

INSCRIPTION

(Neuf cents ans avant J.-C.)

C’est moi qui suis le roi, Mesa, fils de Chémos,
J’ai coupé la forêt de pins aux noirs rameaux,
Et j’ai bâti Baal-Méon, ville d’Afrique.
J’ai fait le mur de bois, j’ai fait le mur de brique;
Et j’ai dit : que chaque homme, à peine de prison,
Se creuse une citerne auprès de sa maison;
Car en hiver on a deux mois de grandes pluies;
Afin que les brebis, les chèvres et les truies
Puissent paître dehors au temps des maïs mûrs,

Je réserve aux troupeaux un champ fermé de murs.
C’est moi qui fis la porte et qui fis la tourelle.
Astarté règne, et j’ai fait la guerre pour elle;
Le dieu Chémos, mon père et son mari, m’aida
Quand je chassai de Gad Omri, roi de Juda.
J’ai construit Aroër, une ville très-forte;
J’ai bâti la tourelle et j’ai bâti la porte.
Les peuples me louaient parce que j’étais bon;
J’étais roi de l’armée immense de Dibon

Qui boit en chantant l’ombre et la mort, et qui mêle
Le sang fumant de l’aigle au lait de la chamelle;
Je marchais, étant juge et prince, à la clarté
De Chémos, de Dagon, de Bel et d’Astarté;
Et ce sont là les quatre étoiles qui sont reines.

J’ai creusé d’Ur à Tyr des routes souterraines.

Chémos m’a dit : « Reprends Nebo sur Israël. »
Et je n’ai jamais fait que ce que veut le ciel.
Maintenant dans ce puits je ferme la paupière.
Sachez que vous devez adorer cette pierre
Et brûler du bétel devant ce grand tombeau;
Car j’ai tué tous ceux qui vivaient dans Nebo,
J’ai nourri les corbeaux qui volent dans les nues,
J’ai fait vendre au marché les femmes toutes nues,
J’ai chargé de butin quatre cents éléphants,
J’ai cloué sur des croix tous les petits enfants,
Ma droite a balayé toutes ces races viles
Dans l’ombre, et j’ai rendu leurs anciens noms aux villes.

CASSANDRE

Argos. La cour du palais.

CASSANDRE SUR UN CHAR. CLYTEMNESTRE
LE CHŒUR

LE CHŒUR.

Elle est fille de roi. — Mais sa ville est en cendre.
Elle a droit à ce char et n’en veut pas descendre.
Depuis qu’on l’a saisie elle n’a point parlé.
Le marbre de Syrta, la neige de Thulé
N’ont pas plus de froideur que cette âpre captive.
Elle est à l’avenir formidable attentive.
Elle est pleine d’un dieu redoutable et muet;
Le sinistre Apollon d’Ombos, qui remuait
Dodone avec le souffle et Thèbe avec la lyre,

Mêle une clarté sombre à son morne délire.
Elle a la vision des choses qui seront;

Un reflet de vengeance est déjà sur son front;
Elle est princesse, elle est pythie, elle est prêtresse,
Elle est esclave. Étrange et lugubre détresse!
Elle vient sur un char, étant fille de roi.
Le peuple qui regarde aller, pâles d'effroi,
Les prisonniers pieds nus qu'on chasse à coups de lance,
Et qui rit de leurs cris, a peur de son silence.
(Le char s'arrête.)
CLYTEMNESTRE.

Femme, à pied. Tu n'es pas ici dans ton pays.
LE CHŒUR.

Allons, descends du char, c'est la reine, obéis.
CLYTEMNESTRE.

Crois-tu que j'ai le temps de t'attendre à la porte?
Hâte-toi. Car bientôt il faut que le roi sorte.
Peut-être entends-tu mal notre langue d'ici?
Si ce que je te dis ne se dit pas ainsi
Au pays dont tu viens et dont tu te sépares,
Parle en signes alors, fais comme les barbares.
LE CHŒUR.

Si l'on parlait sa langue, on saurait son secret.
On sent en la voyant ce qu'on éprouverait
Si l'on venait de prendre une bête farouche.
CLYTEMNESTRE.

Je ne lui parle plus. L'horreur ferme sa bouche.

Triste, elle songe à Troie, au ciel jadis serein.
Elle ne prendra pas l'habitude du frein
Sans le couvrir longtemps d'une sanglante écume.
(Clytemnestre sort.)
LE CHŒUR.

Cède au destin. Crois-moi. Je suis sans amertume.
Descends du char. Reçois la chaîne à ton talon.
CASSANDRE.

Dieux! Grands dieux! Terre et ciel! Apollon! Apollon!
APOLLON LOXIAS, dans l’ombre.

Je suis là. Tu vivras, afin que ton œil voie
Le flamboiement d’Argos plein des cendres de Troie.

LES TROIS CENTS

...
HÉRODOTE, Polymnie.
I

L’ASIE

L’Asie est monstrueuse et fauve; elle regarde
Toute la terre avec une face hagarde,
Et la terre lui plaît, car partout il fait nuit;
L’Asie, où la hauteur des rois s’épanouit,
À ce contentement que l’univers est sombre;
Ici la Cimmérie, au-delà la Northumbre,

Au delà l’âpre hiver, l’horreur, les glaciers nus,
Et les monts ignorés sous les cieux inconnus;
Après l’inhabitable on voit l’infranchissable;
La neige fait au Nord ce qu’au Sud fait le sable;
Le pâle genre humain se perd dans la vapeur;
Le Caucase est hideux, les Dofrines font peur;
Au loin râle, en des mers d’où l’hirondelle émigre,
Thulé sous son volcan comme un daim sous un tigre.
Au pôle, où du corbeau l’orfraie entend l’appel,
Les cent têtes d’Orcus font un blême archipel,

Et, pareils au chaos, les océans funèbres
Roulent cette nuit, l’eau, sous ces flots, les ténèbres;
L’Asie en ce sépulcre a la couronne au front;
Nulle part son pouvoir sacré ne s’interrompt;
Elle règne sur tous les peuples qu’on dénombre;
Et tout ce qui n’est point à l’Asie est à l’ombre,
À la nuit, au désert, au sauvage aquilon;
Toutes les nations rampent sous son talon
Ou grelottent au Nord, sous la bise et la pluie;
Mais la Grèce est un point lumineux qui l’ennuie;
Il se pourrait qu’un jour cette clarté perçât,
Et rendît l’espérance à l’univers forçat;
L’Asie obscure et vaste en frémit sous son voile;
Et l’énorme noirceur cherche à tuer l’étoile.

II

LE DÉNOMBREMENT

On se mettait en route à l’heure où le jour naît.

Le bagage marchait le premier, puis venait
Le gros des nations, foule au hasard semée,
Qui faisait à peu près la moitié de l’armée.
Dire leurs noms, leurs cris, leurs chants, leurs pas, leur bruit,
Serait vouloir compter les souffles de la nuit;
Les peuples n’ont pas tous les mêmes mœurs; les Scythes,

Qui font à l’Occident de sanglantes visites,
Vont tout nus; le Macron, qui du Scythe est rival,
A pour casque une peau de tête de cheval
Dont il a sur le front les deux oreilles droites;
Ceux de Paphlagonie ont des bottes étroites
De peau tigrée, avec des clous sous les talons,
Et leurs arcs sont très-courts et leurs dards sont très-longs;
Les Daces, dont les rois ont pour palais un bouge,

Ont la moitié du corps peinte en blanc, l’autre en rouge,
Le Sogde emmène en guerre un singe, Béhémos,
Devant lequel l’augure inquiet dit des mots
Ténébreux, et pareils aux couleuvres sinistres;
On voit passer parmi les tambours et les cistres
Les deux sortes de fils du vieil Éthiopus,
Ceux-ci les cheveux plats, ceux-là les fronts crépus;
Les Bars au turban vert viennent des deux Chaldées;

Les piques des guerriers de Thrace ont dix coudées;
Ces peuples ont chez eux un oracle de Mars;
Comment énumérer les Sospires camards,

Les Lygiens, pour bain cherchant les immondices,
Les Saces, les Micois, les Parthes, les Dadyces,
Ceux de la mer Persique au front ceint de varechs,
Et ceux d’Assur armés presque comme les Grecs,

Artée et Sydamnès, rois du pays des fièvres,
Et les noirs Caspiens, vêtus de peaux de chèvres,
Et dont les javelots sont brûlés par le bout.

Comme dans la chaudière une eau se gonfle et bout,
Cette troupe s’enflait en avançant, de sorte
Qu’on eût dit qu’elle avait l’Afrique pour escorte,
Et l’Asie, et tout l’âpre et féroce Orient.
C’étaient les Nims, qui vont à la guerre en criant,
Les Sardes, conquérants de Sardaigne et de Corse,

Les Mosques tatoués sous leur bonnet d’écorce,
Les Gètes, et, hideux, pressant leurs rangs épais,
Les Bactriens, conduits par le mage Hystapès.
Les Tybarènes, fils des races disparues,
Avaient des boucliers couverts de peaux de grues;
Les Lybs, nègres des bois, marchaient au son des cors;

Leur habit était ceint par le milieu du corps,
Et chacun de ces noirs, outre les cimeterres,
Avait deux épieux, bons à la chasse aux panthères;
Ils habitaient jadis sur le fleuve Strymon.
Les Abrodes avaient l’air fauve du démon,
Et l’arc de bois de palme et la hache de pierre;
Les Gandars se teignaient de safran la paupière;

Les Syriens portaient des cuirasses de bois;
On entendait au loin la flûte et le hautbois
Des montagnards d’Abysse et le cri des Numides
Amenant, du pays où sont les Pyramides,
Des chevaux près desquels l’éclair est paresseux;
Ceux de Lydie étaient coiffés de cuivre, et ceux
D’Hyrcanie acceptaient pour chef de leur colonne
Megapane, qui fut prince de Babylone;
Puis s’avançaient les blonds Miliens, studieux
De ne point offenser les démons ni les dieux;
Puis ceux d’Ophir, enfants des mers mystérieuses;

Puis ceux du fleuve Phta, qu’ombragent les yeuses,
Cours d’eau qui, hors des monts où l’asphodèle croît,
Sort par un défilé long et sinistre, étroit
Au point qu’il n’y pourrait passer une charrette;
Puis les Gours, nés dans l’ombre où l’univers s’arrête;
Les satrapes du Gange avaient des brodequins
Jusqu’à mi-jambe, ainsi que les chefs africains.
Leur prince était Arthane, homme de renommée,

Fils d’Artha, que le roi Cambyse avait aimée
Au point de lui bâtir un temple en jade vert.
Puis venait un essaim de coureurs du désert,
Les Sagastes, ayant pour toute arme une corde.
La légion marchait à côté de la horde,
L’homme nu coudoyait l’homme cuirassé d’or.
Une captive en deuil, la sibylle d’Endor,
S’indignait, murmurant de lugubres syllabes;

Les chevaux ayant peur des chameaux, les Arabes
Se tenaient à distance et venaient les derniers;
Après eux cheminaient, encombrés des paniers
Où brillait le butin rapporté des ravages,
Cent chars d'osier traînés par des ânes sauvages.

L'attroupement formé de cette façon-là
Par tous ceux que la Perse en ses rangs appela,
Épais comme une neige au souffle de la bise,
Commandé par vingt chefs monstrueux, Mégabise,
Hermamythre, Masange, Acrise, Artaphernas,
Et poussé par les rois aux grands assassinats,
Cet énorme tumulte humain, semblable aux rêves,
Cet amas bigarré d'archers, de porte-glaives,
Et de cavaliers droits sur les lourds étriers,
Défilait, et ce tas de marcheurs meurtriers

Passait pendant sept jours et sept nuits dans les plaines,
Troupeau de combattants aux farouches haleines,
Vaste et terrible, noir comme le Phlégéton,
Et qu'on faisait marcher à grands coups de bâton.
Et ce nuage était de deux millions d'hommes.

III

LA GARDE

Ninive, Sybaris, Chypre, et les cinq Sodomes

Ayant fourni beaucoup de ces soldats, la loi
Ne les admettait point dans la garde du roi.
L'armée est une foule; elle chante, elle hue;
Mais la garde, jamais mêlée à la cohue,
Muette, comme on est muet près des autels,
Marchait seule; et d'abord venaient les Immortels,
Semblables aux lions secouant leurs crinières;
Rien n'était comparable au frisson des bannières

Ouvrant et refermant leurs plis pleins de dragons;
Tout le sérail du roi suivait dans des fourgons;

Puis marchaient, plus pressés que l’herbe des collines,
Les eunuques, armés de longues javelines;
Puis les bourreaux, masqués, traînant les appareils
De torture et d’angoisse, à des griffes pareils,
Et la cuve où l’on fait bouillir l’huile et le nitre.
Le Perse a la tiare et le Mède a la mitre;
Les Dix mille, persans, mèdes, tous couronnés,
S’avançaient, fiers, ainsi que des frères aînés,
Et ces soldats mitrés étaient sous la conduite
D’Alphès, qui savait tous les chemins, hors la fuite;
Et devant eux couraient, libres et sans liens,

Ces grands chevaux sacrés qu’on nomme Nyséens.
Puis, commandés chacun par un roi satellite,
Venaient trente escadrons de cavaliers d’élite,
Tous la pique baissée à cause du roi, tous
Vêtus d’or sous des peaux de zèbres ou de loups;
Ces hommes étaient beaux comme l’aube sereine;
Puis des prêtres portaient le pétrin où la reine
Faisait cuire le pain sans orge et sans levain;
Huit chevaux blancs tiraient le chariot divin
De Jupiter, devant lequel le clairon sonne
Et dont le cocher marche à pied, vu que personne
N’a le droit de monter au char de Jupiter.

Les constellations qu’au fond du sombre éther
On entrevoit ainsi qu’en un bois les dryades,
Tous ces profonds flambeaux du ciel, ces myriades
De clartés, Arcturus, Céphée, et l’alcyon
De la mer étoilée et noire, Procyon,
Pollux qui vient vers nous, Castor qui s’en éloigne,
Cet amas de soleils qui pour les dieux témoigne,
N’a pas plus de splendeur et de fourmillement
Que cette armée en marche autour du roi dormant;

Car le roi sommeillait sur son char formidable.

IV

LE ROI

Il était là, superbe, obscur, inabordable;
Par moments, il bâillait, disant : quelle heure est-il?
Artabane son oncle, homme auguste et subtil,
Répondait : Fils des dieux, roi des trois Ecbatanes,
Où les fleuves sacrés coulent sous les platanes,
Il n’est pas nuit encor, le soleil est ardent,
Ô roi, reposez-vous, dormez, et cependant,
Je vais vous dénombrer votre armée inconnue
De vous-même et pareille aux aigles dans la nue.
Dormez. Alors, tandis qu’il nommait les drapeaux
Du monde entier, le roi rentrait dans son repos,
Et se rendormait, sombre; et le grand char d’ébène
Avait, sur son timon de structure thébaine,
Pour cocher un seigneur nommé Patyramphus.

Deux mille bataillons, mêlant leurs pas confus,
Mille éléphants portant chacun sa tour énorme,
Suivaient, et d’un croissant l’armée avait la forme;
L’archer suprême était Mardonius, bâtard;
L’armée était nombreuse à ce point que, plus tard,
Elle but en un jour tout le fleuve Scamandre;
Les villes derrière elle étaient des tas de cendre;
Tout saignait et brûlait quand elle avait passé.
On enjamba l’Indus comme on saute un fossé.
Artabane ordonnait tout ce qu’un chef décide;

Pour le reste on prenait les conseils d’Hermécyde,
Homme considéré des peuples du Levant.

L’armée partit ainsi de Lydie, observant

Le même ordre jusqu'au Caÿce, et, de ce fleuve,
Gagna la vieille Thèbe après la Thèbe neuve,
Et traversa le sable immense où la guida
Par-dessus l'horizon le haut du mont Ida.
Puis on vit l'Ararat, cîme où s'arrêta l'Arche.
Les gens de pied faisaient dans cette rude marche
Dix stades chaque jour et les cavaliers vingt.

Quand l'armée eut passé le fleuve Halys, on vint

En Phrygie, et l'on vit les sources du Méandre;
C'est là qu'Apollon prit la peine de suspendre
Dans Célène, à trois clous, au poteau du marché,
La peau de Marsyas, le satyre écorché.
On gagna Colossos, chère à Minerve Aptère,
Où le fleuve Lycus se cache sous la terre,
Puis Cydre où fut Crésus, le maître universel,
Puis Anane, et l'étang d'où l'on tire le sel;
Puis on vit Canos, mont plus affreux que l'Érèbe,
Mais sans en approcher; et l'on prit Callathèbe
Où des chiens de Diane on entend les abois,
Ville où l'homme est pareil à l'abeille des bois

Et fait du miel avec de la fleur de bruyère.
Le jour d'après on vint à Sardes, ville altière
D'où l'on fit dire aux Grecs d'attendre avec effroi,
Et de tout tenir prêt pour le souper du roi.
Puis on coupa l'Athos que la foudre fréquente;
Et, des eaux de Sanos jusqu'à la mer d'Acanthe,
On fit un long canal évasé par le haut;
Enfin, sur une plage où souffle ce vent chaud
Qui vient d'Afrique, terre ignorée et maudite,
On fit près d'Abydos, entre Seste et Médyte,
Un vaste pont porté par de puissants donjons,

Et Tyr fournit la corde et l'Égypte les joncs.
Ce pont pouvait donner passage à des armées.

Mais une nuit, ainsi que montent des fumées,
Un nuage farouche arriva, d'où sortit
Le semoun, près duquel l'ouragan est petit;
Ce vent sur ces travaux poussa les flots humides,
Rompit arches, piliers, tabliers, pyramides,
Et heurtant l'Hellespont contre le Pont-Euxin,
Fauve, il détruisit tout, comme on chasse un essaim;
Et la mer fut fatale. Alors le roi sublime

Cria : — Tu n'es qu'un gouffre, et je t'insulte, abîme!
Moi je suis le sommet. Lâche mer, souviens-t'en. —
Et donna trois cents coups de fouet à l'Océan.

Et chacun de ces coups de fouet toucha Neptune.

Alors ce dieu, qu'adore et que sert la Fortune,
Mouvante comme lui, créa Léonidas,
Et de ces trois cents coups il fit trois cents soldats,
Gardiens des monts, gardiens des lois, gardiens des villes,
Et Xercès les trouva debout aux Thermopyles.

LE DÉTROIT DE L'EURIPE

Il faisait nuit; le ciel sinistre était sublime;
La terre offrait sa brume et la mer son abîme.
Voici la question qui se posait devant
Des hommes secoués par l'onde et par le vent :
Faut-il fuir le détroit d'Euripe? Y faut-il faire

Un front terrible à ceux que le destin préfère,
Et qui sont les affreux conquérants sans pitié?
Ils ont une moitié, veulent l'autre moitié,
Et ne s'arrêteront qu'ayant toute la terre.
Demeurer, ou partir? Choix grave. Angoisse austère.
Les chefs délibéraient sur un grand vaisseau noir;
Bien que ce ne soit pas la coutume d'avoir

Des colloques la nuit entre les capitaines,
La guerre ayant déjà des chances incertaines,
Et l'ombre ne pouvant dans les camps soucieux,
Qu'ajouter à la nuit des cœurs la nuit des cieux,
Bien que l'heure lugubre où le prêtre médite
Soit aux discussions des soldats interdite,
On était en conseil, vu l'urgence. Il fallait
Savoir si l'on peut prendre une hydre en un filet,
Et la Perse en un piège, et forcer les passages
De l'Euripe malgré l'abîme et les présages.
Les hommes ont l'énigme éternelle autour d'eux.
Devait-on accepter un combat hasardeux?
Les nefs étaient à l'ancre autour du grand navire.
Les mâts se balançaient sur le flot qui chavire,
L'aquilon remuait l'eau que rien ne corrompt;
Et sur la poupe altière où veillaient, casque au front,
Les archers de Platée, hommes de haute taille,

Thémistocle, debout en habit de bataille,
Cherchant à distinguer dans l'ombre des lueurs,
Parlait aux commandants de la flotte, rêveurs.

— Eurybiade, à qui Pallas confie Athène,
Noble Adymanthe, fils d'Ocyre, capitaine

De Corinthe, et vous tous, princes et chefs, sachez
Que les dieux sont sur nous à cette heure penchés;
Tandis que ce conseil hésite, attend, varie,
Je vois poindre une larme aux yeux de la patrie;
La Grèce en deuil chancelle et cherche un point d'appui.
Rois, je sais que tout ment, demain trompe aujourd'hui,
Le jour est louche, l'air est fuyant, l'onde est lâche;
Le sort est une main qui nous tient, puis nous lâche;
J'estime peu la vague instable; mais je dis
Qu'un gouffre est moins souvent sous des pieds plus hardis
Et qu'il faut traiter l'eau comme on traite la vie,
Avec force et dédain; et, n'ayant d'autre envie

Que la bataille, ô grecs, je la voudrais tenter!
Il est temps que les cœurs renoncent à douter,
Et tout sera perdu, peuple, si tu n'opposes
La fermeté de l'homme aux trahisons des choses.
Nous sommes de fort près par Némésis suivis,
Tout penche, et c'est pourquoi je vous dis mon avis.
Restons dans ce détroit. Ce qui me détermine,
C'est de sauver Mégare, Égine et Salamine,
Et je trouve prudent en même temps que fier

De protéger la terre en défendant la mer.
L'immense roi venu des ténèbres profondes
Est sur le tremblement redoutable des ondes,
Qu'il y reste, et luttons corps à corps. Rois, je veux
Prendre aux talons celui qui nous prend aux cheveux,
Et frapper cet Achille à l'endroit vulnérable.
Que l'augure, appuyé sur son sceptre d'érable,
Interroge le foie et le cœur des moutons,
Et tende dans la nuit ses deux mains à tâtons,
C'est son affaire; moi soldat, j'ai pour augure
Le Glaive, et c'est par lui que je me transfigure.
Combattre, c'est démence? Ah! soyons insensés!
Je sais bien que ce prince est effrayant, je sais
Que du vaisseau qu'il monte un démon tient la barre;
Ces Mèdes sont hideux, et leur flotte barbare
Fait fuir éperdûment la flottante Délos;
Ils ont bouleversé la mer, troublé ses flots,
Et dispersé si loin devant eux les écumes
Que l'eau de l'Hellespont va se briser à Cumes;
Je sais cela. Je sais aussi qu'on peut mourir.

UN PRÊTRE.

Ce n'est point pour l'Hadès, trop pressé de s'ouvrir,
Que la nature, source et principe des choses,
Tend sa triple mamelle à tant de bouches roses;
Elle n'a point pour but le monstrueux tombeau;

Elle hait l’affreux Mars soufflant sur son flambeau;
Tendre, elle donne, au seuil des jours pleins de chimères,
Pour berceuse aux enfants l’espérance des mères,
Et le glaive farouche est par elle abhorré
Quand elle fait jaillir des seins le lait sacré.
THÉMISTOCLE.

Prêtre, je sais cela. Mais la patrie existe.
Pour les vaincus, la lutte est un grand bonheur triste

Qu’il faut faire durer le plus longtemps qu’on peut.
Tâchons de faire au fil des Parques un tel nœud
Que leur fatal rouet déconcerté s’arrête.
Ici nous couvrons tout, de l’Eubée à la Crète;
C’est donc ici qu’il faut frapper ce roi, contraint
De confier sa flotte au détroit qui l’étreint;
Nous sommes peu nombreux, mais profitons de l’ombre;
La grande audace peut cacher le petit nombre,
Et d’ailleurs à la mort nous irons radieux.
Montrons nos cœurs vaillants à ce grand ciel plein d’yeux.
Si l’abîme est obscur, les étoiles sont claires;
Les heures noires sont de bonnes conseillères,
Ô rois, et je reçois volontiers de la nuit
L’avis sombre qui fait que l’ennemi s’enfuit.
Par le tombeau béant je me laisse convaincre;
Consentir à mourir c’est consentir à vaincre;
La tombe est la maison du pâle sphinx guerrier
Qui promet un cyprès et qui donne un laurier;
Elle se ferme au brave osant heurter sa porte;
Car, devant un héros, la mort est la moins forte.
C’est pourquoi ceux qui sont imprudents ont raison.
Les deux mille vaisseaux qu’on voit à l’horizon
Ne me font pas peur. J’ai nos quatre cents galères,
L’onde, l’ombre, l’écueil, le vent, et nos colères.
Il est temps que les dieux nous aident, et d’ailleurs
Nous serons pires, nous, s’ils ne sont pas meilleurs.

Nous les ferons rougir de nous trahir. Le sage,
C’est le hardi. Vaincu, moi, je crache au visage
Du destin; et, vainqueur, et mon pays sauvé,
J’entre au temple et je baise à genoux le pavé.
Combattons. —
Comme s’ils entendaient ces paroles

Les vaisseaux secouaient aux vents leurs banderolles;
Deux jours après, à l’heure où l’aube se leva,
Les chevaux du soleil dirent : Xercès s’en va!

LA CHANSON DE SOPHOCLE

À SALAMINE

Me voilà, je suis un éphèbe,
Mes seize ans sont d’azur baignés;
Guerre, déesse de l’érèbe,
Sombre guerre aux cris indignés,

Je viens à toi, la nuit est noire!
Puisque Xercès est le plus fort,
Prends-moi pour la lutte et la gloire
Et pour la tombe; mais d’abord

Toi dont le glaive est le ministre,
Toi que l’éclair suit dans les cieux,
Choisis-moi de ta main sinistre
Une belle fille aux doux yeux,

Qui ne sache pas autre chose
Que rire d’un rire ingénu,
Qui soit divine, ayant la rose
Aux deux pointes de son sein nu,

Et ne soit pas plus importune

À l’homme plein du noir destin

Que ne l’est au profond Neptune
La vive étoile du matin.

Donne-la-moi, que je la presse
Vite sur mon cœur enflammé,
Je veux bien mourir, ô déesse,
Mais pas avant d’avoir aimé.

LES BANNIS

Cynthée, Athénien proscrit, disait ceci :
Un jour, moi Cynthœus et Méphialte aussi,
Tous deux exilés, lui de Sparte, moi d’Athènes,
Nous suivions le sentier que voici dans les plaines,
Car on nous a bannis au désert de Thryos.
Un bruit pareil au bruit de mille chariots,
Un fracas comme en peut faire un million d’hommes,
S’éleva tout à coup dans la plaine où nous sommes;
Alors pour écouter nous nous sommes assis;
Et ce grand bruit venait du côté d’éleusis;
Or Éleusis était alors abandonnée,

Et tout était désert de Thèbe à Mantinée
À cause du ravage horrible des Persans.
Les champs sans laboureurs, les routes sans passants,
Attristaient le regard depuis plus d’une année.
Nous étions là, la face à l’orient tournée,
Et l’étrange rumeur sur nos têtes passait;
Et Méphialte alors me dit : Qu’est-ce que c’est?
— Je l’ignore, lui dis-je. Il reprit : C’est l’Attique
Qui se soulève, ou bien c’est l’Iacchus mystique
Qui parle bruyamment dans le ciel à quelqu’un.
— Ami, ce que l’exil a de plus importun,
Repris-je, c’est qu’on est en proie à la chimère.

Et cependant le bruit cessa. — Fils de ta mère,
Me dit-il, je suis sûr qu'on parle en ce ciel bleu,
Et c'est la voix d'un peuple ou c'est la voix d'un dieu.
Maintenant comprends-tu ce que cela veut dire?
— Non. — Ni moi. Cependant je sens comme une lyre
Qui dans mon cœur s'éveille et chante, et qui répond,
Sereine, à ce fracas orageux et profond.
— Et moi, dis-je, j'entends de même une harmonie
Dans mon âme, et pourtant la rumeur est finie.
Alors Méphialtès s'écria : — Crois et vois.

Nous avons tous les deux entendu cette voix;
Elle n'a point passé pour rien sur notre tête;
Elle nous donne avis que la revanche est prête;
Qu'aux champs où, jeune, au tir de l'arc je m'exerçais
Des enfants ont grandi qui chasseront Xercès!
Cette voix a l'accent farouche du prodige.
Si c'est le cri d'un peuple, il est pour nous, te dis-je;
Si c'est un cri des dieux, il est contre ceux-là
Par qui le sol sacré de l'Olympe trembla.
Xercès souille la Grèce auguste. Il faut qu'il parte! —
Et moi banni d'Athène et lui banni de Sparte,
Nous disions; lui : — Que Sparte, invincible à jamais,
Soit comme un lever d'astre au-dessus des sommets! —
Et moi : — Qu'Athènes vive et soit du ciel chérie! —
Et nous étions ainsi pensifs pour la patrie.

AIDE OFFERTE À MAJORIEN

PRÉTENDANT À L'EMPIRE

Germanie. Forêt. Crépuscule. Camp. Majorien à un créneau.
Une immense horde humaine emplissant l'horizon.

UN HOMME DE LA HORDE.
Majorien, tu veux de l'aide. On t'en apporte.

MAJORIEN.
Qui donc est là?
L’HOMME.
La mer des hommes bat ta porte.
MAJORIEN.
Peuple, quel est ton chef?
L’HOMME.
Le chef s’appelle Tous.

MAJORIEN.
As-tu des tyrans?
L’HOMME
Deux. Faim et soif.
MAJORIEN.
Qu’êtes-vous?
L’HOMME.
Nous sommes les marcheurs de la foudre et de l’ombre.
MAJORIEN.
Votre pays?
L’HOMME
La nuit.
MAJORIEN.
Votre nom?
L’HOMME.
Les sans nombre.
MAJORIEN.
Ce sont vos chariots qu’on voit partout là-bas?
L’HOMME.
Quelques-uns seulement de nos chars de combats.
Ce que tu vois ici n’est que notre avant-garde.
Dieu seul peut nous voir tous quand sur terre il regarde.
MAJORIEN.
Qu’est-ce que vous savez faire en ce monde?

L’HOMME.
Errer.
MAJORIEN.

Vous qui cernez mon camp, peut-on vous dénombrer?
L’HOMME.
Oui.
MAJORIEN.
Pour passer ici devant l’aigle romaine,
Combien vous faudra-t-il de temps?
L’HOMME.
Une semaine.
MAJORIEN.
Qu’est-ce que vous voulez?
L’HOMME.
Nous nous offrons à toi.
Car avec du néant nous pouvons faire un roi.
MAJORIEN.
César vous a vaincus.
L’HOMME.
Qui, César?
MAJORIEN.
Nul ne doute
Que Dentatus n’ait mis vos hordes en déroute.

L’HOMME.
Va-t’en le demander aux os de Dentatus.
MAJORIEN.
Spryx vous dompta.
L’HOMME.
Je ris.
MAJORIEN.
Cimber vous a battus.
L’HOMME.
Nous n’avons de battu que le fer de nos casques.
MAJORIEN
Qui donc vous a chassés jusqu’ici?
L’HOMME.
Les bourrasques,
Les tempêtes, la pluie et la grêle, le vent,

L’éclair, l’immensité; personne de vivant.
Nul n’est plus grand que nous sur la terre où nous sommes.
Nous fuyons devant Dieu, mais non devant les hommes.
Nous voulons notre part des tièdes horizons.
Si tu nous la promets, nous t’aidons. Finissons.
Veux-tu de nous? La paix. N’en veux-tu pas? La guerre.
MAJORIEN.
Me redoutez-vous?
L’HOMME.
Non.
MAJORIEN.
Me connaissez-vous?
L’HOMME.
Guère.
MAJORIEN.
Que suis-je pour vous?
L’HOMME.
Rien. Un homme. Le romain.
MAJORIEN.
Mais où donc allez-vous?
L’HOMME.
La terre est le chemin,
Le but est l’infini, nous allons à la vie.
Là-bas une lueur immense nous convie.
Nous nous arrêterons lorsque nous serons là.

MAJORIEN.
Quel est ton nom à toi qui parles?
L’HOMME.
Attila.

V

APRÈS LES DIEUX, LES ROIS

II

DE RAMIRE À COSME DE MÉDICIS

L’HYDRE

Quand le fils de Sancha, femme du duc Geoffroy,
Gil, ce grand chevalier nommé l’Homme qui passe,
Parvint, la lance haute et la visière basse,
Aux confins du pays dont Ramire était roi,
Il vit l’hydre. Elle était effroyable et superbe;
Et, couchée au soleil, elle rêvait dans l’herbe.
Le chevalier tira l’épée et dit : C’est moi.
Et l’hydre, déroulant ses torsions farouches,
Et se dressant, parla par une de ses bouches,
Et dit : — Pour qui viens-tu, fils de dona Sancha?
Est-ce pour moi, réponds, ou pour le roi Ramire?
— C’est pour le monstre. — Alors c’est pour le roi, beau sire.
Et l’hydre, reployant ses nœuds, se recoucha.

LE ROMANCERO DU CID

I

L’ENTRÉE DU ROI.

Vous ne m’allez qu’à la hanche;
Quoique altier et hasardeux,
Vous êtes petit, roi Sanche;
Mais le Cid est grand pour deux.

Quand chez moi je vous accueille

Dans ma tour et dans mon fort,
Vous tremblez comme la feuille,
Roi Sanche, et vous avez tort.

Sire, ma herse est fidèle;
Sire, mon seuil est pieux;
Et ma bonne citadelle
Rit à l’aurore des cieux.

Ma tour n’est qu’un tas de pierre,
Roi, mais j’en suis le seigneur;
Elle porte son vieux lierre
Comme moi mon vieil honneur.

Mes hirondelles sont douces;
Mes bois ont un pur parfum;
Mes nids n’ont pas dans leurs mousses
Un cheveu pris à quelqu’un.

Tout passant, roi de Castille,
More ou juif, rabbin, émir,
Peut entrer dans ma bastille
Tranquillement, et dormir.

Je suis le Cid calme et sombre
Qui n’achète ni ne vend,
Et je n’ai sur moi que l’ombre
De la main du Dieu vivant.

Cependant je vous admire,
Vous m’avez fait triste et nu,
Et vous venez chez moi, sire;
Roi, soyez le mal venu.

II

SOUVENIR DE CHIMÈNE.

Si le mont faisait reproche
À l’air froid, aigre et jaloux,
C’est moi qui serais la roche,
Et le vent ce serait vous.

Roi, j’en connais qui trahissent,
Mais je suis le vieux soumis;

Tous vos amis me haïssent,
Moi je hais vos ennemis.

Et dans mon dédain je mêle
Tous vos favoris, ô roi;
L’épaisseur de ma semelle
Me suffit entre eux et moi.

Roi, quand j’épousai ma femme,
J’eus à me plaindre de vous;
Pourtant je n’ai rien dans l’âme,
Dieu fut grand, le ciel fut doux,

L’évêque avait sa barette;
On marchait sur des tapis;
Chimène eut sa gorgerette
Pleine de fleurs et d’épis.

J’avais un habit de moire
Sous l’acier de mon corset.

Je ne garde en ma mémoire
Que le soleil qu’il faisait.

Entrez en paix dans ma ville.
On vous parlerait pourtant
D’une façon plus civile
Si l’on était plus content.
III

LE ROI JALOUX.

Parce que, Léon, la Manche,
L’Èbre, on vous a tout donné,
Et qu’on était grand, don Sanche,
Avant que vous fussiez né,

Est-ce une raison pour être
Vil envers moi qui suis vieux?
Roi, c’est trop d’être le maître
Et d’être aussi l’envieux.

Nous, fils de race guerrière,
Seigneur, nous vous en voulons
Pour vos rires par derrière
Qui nous mordent les talons.

Est-ce qu’à votre service
Le Cid s’est estropié
Au point d’avoir quelque vice
Dans le poignet ou le pié,

Qu’il s’entend, sans frein ni règle,
Moquer par vos gens à vous?
Ne suis-je plus qu’un vieux aigle
À réjouir les hiboux?

Roi, qu’on mette, avec sa chape,
Sa mître et son palefroi,
Dans une balance un pape
Portant sur son dos un roi;

Ils pèseront dans leur gloire
Moins que moi, Campeador,
Quand le roi serait d’ivoire,
Quand le pape serait d’or!

IV

LE ROI INGRAT.

Je vous préviens qu'on me fâche,
Moi qui n'ai rien que ma foi,

Lorsqu'étant homme, on est lâche,
Et qu'on est traître, étant roi.

Je sens vos ruses sans nombre;
Oui, je sens tes trahisons.
Moi pour le bien, toi pour l'ombre,
Dans la nuit nous nous croisons.

Je te sers, et je m'en vante;
Tu me hais et tu me crains;
Et mon cheval t'épouvante
Quand il jette au vent ses crins.

Tu te fais, tristes refuges,
Adorer soir et matin
En castillan par tes juges,
Par tes prêtres en latin.

Roi, si deux et deux font quatre,
Un fourbe est un mécréant.
Quant à moi, je veux rabattre
Plus d'un propos malséant.

Quand don Sanche est dans sa ville,
Il me parle avec hauteur;
Je suis un bien vieux pupille
Pour un si jeune tuteur.

Je ne veux pas qu'on me manque.
Quand tu me fais défier

Par ton clerc à Salamanque,
À Jaen par ton greffier;

Quand, derrière tes murailles
Où tu chasses aux moineaux,

Roi, je t’entends qui me railles,
Moi, l’arracheur de créneaux,

Je pourrais y mettre un terme;
Je t’enverrais, roi des Goths,
D’une chiquenaude à Lerme
Ou d’un soufflet à Burgos.

V

LE ROI DÉFIANT.

Quand je songe en ma tanière
Mordant ma barbe et rêvant,
Regardant dans ma bannière
Les déchirures du vent,

Ton effroi sur moi se penche.
Tremblant, par tes alguazils
Tu te fais garder, roi Sanche,
Contre mes sombres exils.

Moi, je m’en ris. Peu m’importe
Ô roi, quand un vil gardien

Couche en travers de ta porte,
Qu’il soit homme ou qu’il soit chien!

Tu dis à ton économe,
À tes pages blancs ou verts :
— « À quoi pense ce bonhomme
« Qui regarde de travers?

« À quoi donc est-ce qu’il songe?
« Va-t-il rompre son lien?
« J’ai peur. Quel est l’os qu’il ronge?
« Est-ce son nom ou le mien?

« Qu’est-ce donc qu’il prémédite?
« S’il n’est traître, il en a l’air.
« Dans sa montagne maudite
« Ce baron-là n’est pas clair.

« À quoi pense ce convive
« Des loups et des bûcherons?
« J’ai peur. Est-ce qu’il ravive
« La fraîcheur des vieux affronts?

« Le laisser libre est peu sage;
« Le Cid est mal muselé. » —
Roi, c’est moi qui suis ma cage
Et c’est moi qui suis ma clé.

C’est moi qui ferme mon antre;
Mes rocs sont mes seuls trésors;

Et c’est moi qui me dis : rentre!
Et c’est moi qui me dis : sors!

Soit que je vienne ou que j’aille,
Je tire seul mon verrou.
Ah! Tu trouves que je bâille
Trop librement dans mon trou!

Tu voudrais dans ma vieillesse,
Comme un dogue dans ta cour,
M’avoir, moi, le Cid, en laisse,
Et me tenir dans ma tour,

Et me tenir dans mes lierres,
Gardé comme les brigands... —
Va mettre des muselières
Aux gueules des ouragans!

VI

LE ROI ABJECT.

Roi que gêne la cuirasse,
Roi qui m’as si mal payé,

Tu fais douter de ta race;
Et, dans sa tombe ennuyé,

Ton vieux père, âme loyale,
Dit : — Quelque bohémien
A dans la crèche royale
Mis son fils au lieu du mien! —

Roi, ma meilleure cuisine
C’est du pain noir, le sais-tu,
Avec quelque âpre racine,
Le soir quand on s’est battu.

M’as-tu nourri sous ta tente,
Et suis-je ton écolier?
M’as-tu donné ma patente
De comte et de chevalier?

Roi, je vis dans la bataille.
Si tu veux, comparons-nous.
Pour ne point passer ta taille,
Je vais me mettre à genoux.

Pendant que tu fais tes pâques
Et que tu dis ton credo,
Je prends les tours de Saint-Jacques

Et les monts d’Oviédo.

Je ne m’en fais pas accroire.
Toi-même tu reconnais
Que j’ai la peau toute noire
D’avoir porté le harnais.

Seigneur, tu fis une faute
Quand tu me congédias;
C’est mal de chasser un hôte,
Fou de chasser Ruy Diaz.

Roi, c’est moi qui te protége.
On craint le son de mon cor.
On croit voir dans ton cortége
Un peu de mon ombre encor.

Partout, dans les abbayes,
Dans les forts baissant leurs ponts,
Tes volontés obéies
Font du mal, dont je réponds.

Roi par moi; sans moi, poupée!
Le respect qu’on a pour toi,
La longueur de mon épée
En est la mesure, ô roi!

Ce pays ne connaît guère,
Du Tage à l’Almonacid,
D’autre musique de guerre
Que le vieux clairon du Cid.

Mon nom prend toute l’Espagne,
Toute la mer à témoin;
Ma fanfare de montagne
Vient de haut et s’entend loin.

Mon pas fait du bruit sur terre,
Et je passe mon chemin
Dans la rumeur militaire
D’un triomphateur romain.

Et tout tremble, Irun, Coïmbre,
Santander, Almodovar,

Sitôt qu’on entend le timbre
Des cymbales de Bivar.

VII

LE ROI FOURBE.

Certe, il tient moins de noblesse
Et de bonté, vois-tu bien,
Roi, dans ton collier d’Altesse,
Que dans le collier d’un chien!

Ta foi royale est fragile.
Elle affirme, jure et fuit.
Roi, tu mets sur l’évangile
Une main pleine de nuit.

Avec toi tout est précaire,
Surtout quand tu t’es signé
Devant quelque reliquaire
Où le saint tremble indigné.

À tes traités, verbiage,
Je préférerais souvent

Les promesses du nuage
Et la parole du vent.

La parole qu’un roi fausse
Derrière les gens trahis,

N’est plus que la sombre fosse
De la pudeur d’un pays.

Moi, je tiens pour périls graves,
Et je dois le déclarer,
Ce qu’en arrière des braves
Les traîtres peuvent jurer.

Roi, vous l’avouerez, j’espère,
Mieux vaut avoir au talon
Le venin d’une vipère
Que le serment d’un félon.

Je suis dans ma seigneurie,
Parlant haut, quoique vassal.
Après cela, je vous prie
De ne pas le prendre mal.

VIII

LE ROI VOLEUR.

Roi, fallait-il que tu vinsses
Pour nous écraser d’impôts?
Nous vivons dans nos provinces,
Pauvres sous nos vieux drapeaux.

Nous bravons tes cavalcades.
Sommes-nous donc des vilains
Pour engraisser des alcades
Et nourrir des chapelains?

Quant à payer, roi bravache,
Jamais! Et j’en fais serment.
Ma ville est-elle une vache
Pour la traire effrontément?

Je vais continuer, sire,

Et te parler du passé,
Puisqu’il est bon de tout dire
Et puisque j’ai commencé.

Roi, tu m’as pris mes villages,
Roi, tu m’as pris mes vassaux;
Tu m’as pris mes grands feuillages
Où j’écoutais les oiseaux;

Roi, tu m’as pris mon domaine,
Mon champ, de saules bordé;
Tu m’allais prendre Chimène,
Roi, mais je t’ai regardé.

Si les rois étaient pendables,
Je t’aurais offert déjà
Dans mes ongles formidables
Au gibet d’Albavieja.

D’ombre en vain tu t’environnes;
Ma colère un jour pensa
Prendre l’or de tes couronnes
Pour ferrer Babieça.

Je suis plein de rêves sombres,
Ayant, vieux suspect vainqueur,
Toute ma gloire en décombres
Dans le plus noir de mon cœur.

IX

LE ROI SOUDARD.

Quand vous entrez en campagne,
Louche orfraie au fatal vol,
On ferait honte à l’Espagne
De vous nommer espagnol.

Sire, on se bat dans les plaines,
Sire, on se bat dans les monts;
Les campagnes semblent pleines
D’archanges et de démons.

On se bat dans les provinces;
Et ce choc de boucliers
Va de vous les petits princes
À nous les grands chevaliers.

Les rocs ont des citadelles
Et les villes ont des tours
Où volent à tire d’ailes
Les aigles et les vautours.

La guerre est le cri du reitre,
Du vaillant et du maraud,
Un jeu d’en bas, et peut-être
Un jugement de là-haut;

La guerre, cette aventure
Sur qui plane le corbeau,
Se résout en nourriture
Pour les bêtes du tombeau;

Le chacal se désaltère
À tous ces sanglants hasards;
Et c’est pour les vers de terre
Que travaillent les césars;

Les camps sont de belles choses;
Mais l’homme loyal ne croit

Qu’à la justice des causes
Et qu’à la bonté du droit.

Car la guerre est folle et rude.

Pour la faire honnêtement
Il faut une certitude
Prise dans le firmament.

Je remarque en mes tristesses
Que la gloire aux durs sentiers
Ne connaît pas les altesses
Et s’en passe volontiers.

Un soldat vêtu de serge
Est parfois son favori;
Et l’épée est une vierge
Qui veut choisir son mari.

Roi, les guerres que vous faites
Sont les guerres d’un félon
Qui souffle dans des trompettes
Avec un bruit d’aquilon;

Qui, ne risquant son panache
Qu’à demi dans les brouillards,
S’il voit des hommes se cache,
Et vient s’il voit des vieillards;

Qui, se croyant Alexandre,
Ne laisse dans les maisons
Que des os dans de la cendre
Et du sang sur des tisons;

Et qui, riant sous les portes,
Vous montre, quand vous entrez,
Sur des tas de femmes mortes
Des tas d’enfants éventrés.

X

LE ROI COUARD.

Roi, dans tes courses damnées,
Avec tes soldats nouveaux,
Ne va pas aux Pyrénées,
Ne va pas à Roncevaux.

Ces roches sont des aïeules;
Les mères des océans.
Elles se défendraient seules;
Car ces monts sont des géants.

Une forte race d’hommes,
Pleins de l’âpreté du lieu,
Vit là loin de vos sodomes
Avec les chênes de Dieu.

Y passer est téméraire.
Nul encor n’a deviné
Si le chêne est le grand frère
Ou bien si l’homme est l’aîné.

Ce peuple est là, loin du monde,
Libre hier, libre demain.
Sur ces hommes l’éclair gronde;
Leur chien leur lèche la main.

Hercule y vint. Tout recule
Dans ces monts où fuit l’isard.
Roi, César après Hercule,
Charlemagne après César,

Ont crié miséricorde
Devant ces pâtres jaloux
Chaussés de souliers de corde
Et vêtus de peaux de loups.

Dieu, caché sous leur feuillage,
Prit ce noir pays vaillant

Pour faire naître Pélage,
Pour faire mourir Roland.

Si jamais, dans ces repaires,
Risquant tes hautains défis,
Tu venais voir si les pères
Vivent encor dans les fils,

Eusses-tu vingt mille piques,
Eusses-tu, roi fanfaron,

Tes bannières, tes musiques,
Tout ton bruit de moucheron,

Pour que tu t’en ailles vite,
Fussent-ils un contre cent,
Et pour qu’on te voie en fuite,
De mont en mont bondissant,

Comme on voit des rocs descendre
Les torrents en février,
Il te suffirait d’entendre
La trompe d’un chevrier.

XI

LE ROI MOQUEUR.

Quand, barbe grise, je parle
Du saint pays montagnard,
Et du grand empereur Charle
Et du grand bâtard Bernard,

Et d’Hercule et de Pélage,
Roi Sanche, tu me crois fou;
Tu prends ces fiertés de l’âge
Pour la rouille d’un vieux clou.

Mais ton vain rire farouche,
Roi, n’est pas une raison

Qui puisse fermer la bouche
À quelqu’un dans ma maison;

C’est pourquoi je continue,
Te saluant du drapeau,
Et te parlant tête nue
Quand tu gardes ton chapeau.

XII

LE ROI MÉCHANT.

J’ai, dans Albe et dans Girone,
Vu l’honnête homme flétri,
Et des gens dignes d’un trône
Qu’on liait au pilori;

J’ai vu, c’est mon amertume,
Tes bourreaux abattre, ô roi,
Des fronts qu’on avait coutume
De saluer plus que toi.

Rois, Dieu fait croître où nous sommes,
Dans ce monde de péchés,
Une herbe de têtes d’hommes,
Et c’est vous qui la fauchez.

Ah! nos maîtres, quand vous n’êtes,
Avec vos vils compagnons,
Occupés que de sornettes,
Nous pleurons et nous saignons.

Roi, cela fendrait des pierres
Et toucherait des voleurs
Que de si fermes paupières

Versent de si sombres pleurs!

Sous toi l’Espagne est mal sûre
Et tremble, et finit par voir,
Roi, que ta main lui mesure
Trop d’aunes de crêpe noir.

J’ai reconnu, car vous êtes
Le sinistre et l’inhumain,
Des amis dans des squelettes
Qui pendaient sur le chemin.

J’ai, dans les forêts prochaines,
Vu le travail des bourreaux,
Et la tristesse des chênes
Pliant au poids des héros.

J’ai vu râler sous des porches
De vieux corps désespérés.
Roi, de lances et de torches
Ces pays sont effarés.

J’ai vu des ducs et des comtes
S’agenouiller au billot.
Tu ne nous dois pas de comptes,
Cœur trop bas et front trop haut!

Roi, le sang qu’un roi pygmée
Verse à flots par ses valets
Fait une sombre fumée
Sur les dalles des palais.

Ô roi des noires sentences,
Un vol de corbeaux te suit,
Tant les chaînes des potences
Dans ton règne font de bruit!

Vous avez fouetté des femmes
Dans Vich et dans Alcala,
Ce sont des choses infâmes
Que vous avez faites là!

Tu n’es qu’un méchant, en somme.
Mais je te sers, c’est la loi;
La difformité de l’homme
N’étant pas comptée au roi.

XIII

LE CID FIDÈLE.

Princes, on voit souvent croître
Des gueux entre les pavés
Qui font de vous dans un cloître
Des moines aux yeux crevés.

Je ne suis pas de ces traîtres;
Je suis muré dans ma foi,
Les grands spectres des ancêtres
Sont toujours autour de moi,

Comme on a, dans les campagnes
Où rit la verte saison,
Une chaîne de montagnes
Qui ferme l’âpre horizon.

Il n’est pas de cœurs obliques
Voués aux vils intérêts
Dans nos vieilles républiques
De torrents et de forêts.

Le traître est pire qu’un more;
De son souffle il craint le bruit;
Il met un masque d’aurore

Sur un visage de nuit;

Rouge aujourd'hui comme braise,
Noir hier comme charbon.

Roi, moi je respire à l'aise;
Et quand je parle, c'est bon.

Roi, je suis un homme probe
De l'antique probité.
Chimène recoud ma robe,
Mais non pas ma loyauté.

Je sonne à l'ancienne mode
La cloche de mon beffroi.
Je trouve même incommode
D'avoir des fourbes chez moi.

Sous cette fange, avarice,
Vol, débauche, trahison,
Je ne veux pas qu'on pourrisse
Le plancher de ma maison.

Reconnais à mes paroles
Le Cid aimé des meilleurs

À qui les pâtres d'Eroles
Donnent des chapeaux de fleurs.

XIV

LE CID HONNÊTE.

Donc, sois tranquille, roi Sanche.
Tu n'as rien à craindre ici.
La vieille âme est toute blanche
Dans le vieux soldat noirci.

Grondant, je te sers encore.
Dieu m’a donné pour emploi,
Sire, de courber le more
Et de redresser le roi.

Étant durs pour vous, nous sommes
Doux pour le peuple aux abois,
Nous autres les gentilshommes
Des bruyères et des bois.

Personne sur nous ne marche.
Il suffit de oui, de non,
Pour rompre à nos ponts une arche,
À notre chaîne un chaînon.

Loin de vos palais infâmes
Pleins de gens aux vils discours,

La fierté pousse en nos âmes
Comme l’herbe dans nos cours.

Les vieillards ont des licences,
Seigneur, et ce sont nos mœurs
De rudoyer les puissances
Dans nos mauvaises humeurs.

Le Cid est, suivant l’usage
Droit, sévère et raisonneur.
Peut-être n’est-ce point sage;
Mais c’est honnête, seigneur.

Pour avoir ce qu’il désire,
Le flatteur baise ton pied.
Nous disons ce qu’il faut, sire,
Et nous faisons ce qui sied.

Nous vivons aux solitudes

Où tout croît dans les sentiers
Excepté les habitudes
Des valets et des portiers.

Nous fauchons nos foins, nos seigles,
Et nos blés aux flancs des monts;

Nous entendons des cris d’aigles
Et nous nous y conformons.

Nous savons ce que vous faites,
Sire, et, loin de son lever,
De ses gibets, de ses fêtes,
Le prince nous sent rêver.

Nous avons l’absence fière;
Et sommes peu courtisans,
Ayant sur nous la poussière
Des batailles et des ans.

Et c’est pourquoi je te parle
Comme parlait, grave et seul,
À ton aïeul Boson d’Arle
Gil de Bivar mon aïeul.

D’où nait ton inquiétude?
D’où vient que ton œil me suit
Épiant mon attitude
Comme un nuage de nuit?

Craindrais-tu que je te prisse
Un matin dans mon manteau?
Et que j’eusse le caprice
D’une ville ou d’un château?

Roi, la chose qui m’importe
C’est de vivre exempt de fiel;

Non de glisser sous ma porte
Ma main jusqu’à Penafiel.

Roi, le Cid que l’âge gagne
S’aime mieux, en vérité,
Montagnard dans sa montagne
Que roi dans ta royauté.

Roi, le Cid qu’on amadoue,
Mais que nul n’intimida,
Ne t’a pas donné Cordoue
Pour te prendre Lérida.

Qu’ai-je besoin de Tortose,
De tes tours d’Alcacébé,

Et de ta chambre mieux close
Que la chambre d’un abbé,

Et des filles de la reine,
Et des plis de brocart d’or
De ta robe souveraine
Que porte un corrégidor,

Et de tes palais de marbre?
Moi qui n’ai qu’à me pencher
Pour prendre une mûre à l’arbre
Et de l’eau dans le rocher!

XV

LE ROI EST LE ROI.

Roi, vous vous croyez moins prince
Et vous jurez par l’enfer
Dans cette montagne où grince
Ma vieille herse de fer;

D’effroi votre âme est frappée;
Vous vous défiez, trompeur;
Traître et poltron, mon épée
Vous fait honte et vous fait peur.

Vous me faites garder, sire;
Vous me faites épier

Par tous vos barons de cire
Dans leurs donjons de papier;

Derrière vos capitaines
Vous tremblez en m’approchant;
Comme l’eau sort des fontaines,
Le soupçon sort du méchant;

Votre altesse scélérate
N’aurait pas d’autre façon
Quand je serais un pirate,
Le spectre de l’horizon!

Vous consultez des sorcières
Pour que je meure bientôt;
Vous cherchez dans mes poussières
De quoi faire un échafaud;

Vous rêvez quelque équipée;
Vous dites bas au bourreau
Que, lorsqu’un homme est épée,
Le sépulcre est le fourreau;

Votre habileté subtile
Me guette à tous les instants;
Eh bien! c’est peine inutile
Et vous perdez votre temps;

Vos précautions sont vaines;

Pourquoi? je le dis à tous :
C’est que le sang de mes veines
N’est pas à moi, mais à vous.

Quoique vous soyez un prince
Vil, on ne peut le nier,
Le premier de la province,
De la vertu le dernier;

Quoique à ta vue on se sauve,
Seigneur; quoique vous ayez
Des allures de loup fauve
Dans des chemins non frayés;

Quoiqu’on ait pour récompense
La haine de vos bandits;
Et malgré ce que je pense,
Et malgré ce que je dis,

Roi, devant vous je me courbe,
Raillé par votre bouffon;
Le loyal devant le fourbe,
L’acier devant le chiffon;

Devant vous, fuyard, s’efface
Le Cid, l’homme sans effroi.
Que voulez-vous que j’y fasse
Puisque vous êtes le roi!

XVI

LE CID EST LE CID.

Don Sanche, une source coule
À l’ombre de mes donjons;
Comme le Cid dans la foule
Elle est pure dans les joncs.

Je n’ai pas d’autre vignoble;
Buvez-y; je vous absous.
Autant que vous je suis noble
Et chevalier plus que vous.

Les savants, ces prêcheurs mornes,
Sire, ont souvent pour refrains
Qu’un trône même a des bornes
Et qu’un roi même a des freins;

De quelque nom qu’il se nomme,
Nul n’est roi sous le ciel bleu
Plus qu’il n’est permis à l’homme
Et qu’il ne convient à Dieu;

Mais pour marquer la limite
Il faudrait étudier;
Il faudrait être un ermite
Ou bien un contrebandier.

Moi, ce n’est pas mon affaire;
Je ne veux rien vous ôter;

Étant le Cid, je préfère
Obéir à disputer.

Accablez nos sombres têtes
De désespoir et d’ennuis,
Roi, restez ce que vous êtes;
Je reste ce que je suis.

J’ai toujours, seul dans ma sphère,
Souffert qu’on me dénigrât.
Je n’ai pas de compte à faire
Avec le roi, mon ingrat.

Je t’ai, depuis que j’existe,
Donné Jaen, Balbastro,
Et Valence, et la mer triste
Qui fait le bruit d’un taureau,

Et Zamora, rude tâche,
Huesca, Jaca, Teruel,

Et Murcie où tu fus lâche,
Et Vich où tu fus cruel,

Et Lerme et ses sycomores,
Et Tarragone et ses tours,
Et tous les ans des rois mores,
Et le grand Cid tous les jours!

Nos deux noms iront ensemble
Jusqu’à nos derniers neveux.
Souviens-t-en, si bon te semble;
N’y songe plus, si tu veux.

Je baisse mes yeux, j’en ôte
Tout regard audacieux;

Entrez sans peur, roi mon hôte;
Car il n’est qu’un astre aux cieux!

Cet astre de la nuit noire,
Roi, ce n’est pas le bonheur,
Ni l’amour, ni la victoire,
Ni la force; c’est l’honneur.

Et moi qui sur mon armure
Ramasse mes blancs cheveux,
Moi sur qui le soir murmure,
Moi qui vais mourir, je veux

Que, le jour où sous son voile
Chimène prendra le deuil,
On allume à cette étoile
Le cierge de mon cercueil.
*

Ainsi le Cid, qui harangue
Sans peur ni rébellion,
Lèche son maître, et sa langue
Est rude, étant d’un lion.

LE ROI DE PERSE

Le roi de Perse habite, inquiet, redouté,
En hiver Ispahan et Tiflis en été;
Son jardin, paradis où la rose fourmille,
Est plein d’hommes armés, de peur de sa famille;
Ce qui fait que parfois il va dehors songer.
Un matin, dans la plaine il rencontre un berger
Vieux, ayant près de lui son fils, un beau jeune homme.
— Comment te nommes-tu? dit le roi. — Je me nomme
Karam, dit le vieillard, interrompant un chant
Qu’il chantait au milieu des chèvres, en marchant;
J’habite un toit de jonc sous la roche penchante,
Et j’ai mon fils que j’aime, et c’est pourquoi je chante,
Comme autrefois Hafiz, comme à présent Sadi,

Et comme la cigale à l’heure de midi. —
Et le jeune homme alors, figure humble et touchante,
Baise la main du pâtre harmonieux qui chante
Comme à présent Sadi, comme autrefois Hafiz.
— Il t’aime, dit le roi, pourtant il est ton fils.

LES DEUX MENDIANTS

LA TAXE AU SAINT-EMPIRE. — LA DÎME AU SAINT-SIÉGE

L’un s’appelle César, l’autre se nomme Pierre.
Celui-là fait le guet, celui-ci la prière;
Tous deux sont embusqués au détour du chemin,
Ont au poing l’escopette, et la sébile en main,

Vident les sacs d’argent, partagent les maraudes,
Et l’on règne, et l’on fait payer les émeraudes
Des tiares à ceux qui n’ont pas de souliers.
Les dogmes et les lois sont de profonds halliers
Où des tas de vieux droits divins mêlent leurs branches;
Qui mendie en cette ombre a ses allures franches;
Nul n’échappe. Arrêtez! il faut payer, de gré
Ou de force, en passant dans le noir bois sacré.
Les peuples, que l’infâme ignorance ravage,
Ont au front la sueur de l’antique esclavage.
Christ, c’est pour eux qu’au pied de ta croix, tu prias!

Ils sont les travailleurs; ils sont les parias;
Ils sont les patients qu’on traîne sur des claies.
Certes, rien ne leur manque; ils ont beaucoup de plaies,
Beaucoup d’infirmités qu’ils ne peuvent guérir,
Beaucoup de maux, beaucoup de petits à nourrir;
C’est à ces riches-là que demandent l’aumône
Ce meurt-de-faim, l’autel, et ce pauvre, le trône.

MONTFAUCON

I

POUR LES OISEAUX.

À l’heure où le soleil descend tiède et pâli,
Seul à seul, près du bois de Saint-Jean-d’Angely,

L’archevêque Bertrand parlait au roi Philippe :

— Roi, le trône et l’autel sont le même principe;
Défendons-nous ensemble; il faut de tous côtés

Du front du peuple obscur chasser les nouveautés.
Sauver l’Église, ô roi, c’est vous sauver vous-même.
L’État devient plus fort par la terreur qu’il sème,
Et par le tremblement du peuple s’affermit;
Toujours, quand elle eut peur, la foule se soumit.
Il n’est qu’un droit : régner. Le nécessaire est juste.
Les quatre grands baillis du roi Philippe-Auguste,
Toutes les vieilles lois, c’est trop peu désormais;
Pour arrêter le mal, sur de hautains sommets,
Il faut la permanence étrange de l’exemple;
Sire, les schismes vont à l’attaque du temple;
Le peuple semble las d’être sur les genoux;
La révolte est sur vous, l’hérésie est sur nous;
D’où viennent ces essaims tumultueux d’idées?
Des profondeurs que nul prophète n’a sondées,
Peut-être de la nuit, ou peut-être du ciel.
Parlons bas. Écoutez, roi providentiel.
Rien n’est plus effrayant que ces sombres descentes

D’instincts nouveaux parmi les foules frémissantes;
Ces chimères d’en haut s’abattant tout à coup
Volent, courent, s’en vont, reviennent, sont partout,
Ouvrent les yeux fermés, fouillent les têtes pleines,
Se mêlent aux esprits, se mêlent aux haleines,
Blessent les dogmes saints dans l’ombre, et, fatal jeu,
Frappent l’homme endormi de mille becs de feu;
Elles tentent, troublant le mystère où nous sommes,
Un travail inconnu sur le cerveau des hommes,
Leur ôtant quelque chose et leur donnant aussi;
Quoi? c’est là votre perte et c’est là mon souci.
Que font-elles? du jour, du mal? Qu’apportent-elles?
Un souffle, un bruit, le vent qui tombe de leurs ailes;

Je l’ignore; ici Dieu m’échappe; mais je sai
Qu’il ne nous reste rien quand elles ont passé.

Le roi Philippe écoute, et l’archevêque songe,
Et vers la papauté son bras pensif s’allonge.

— Chassez les nouveautés, roi Philippe.
En marchant,
Tous deux rêveurs, ils sont arrivés près d’un champ
Qu’emplit de son frisson toute une moisson mûre;
Au-dessus des épis jetant un long murmure,
Sous de hauts échalas plantés parmi les blés,
Flottent, mouillés de pluie et de soleil brûlés,
À des cordes que l’air pousse, éloigne et ramène,
De hideux sacs de paille ayant la forme humaine;
Nœuds de débris sans nom, lambeaux fous, balançant
On ne sait quel aspect farouche et menaçant;
Les oiseaux, les moineaux que le blé d’or invite,
L’alouette criant aux autres : Vite! vite!
Accourent vers le champ plein d’épis; mais, au vent,
Chaque haillon devient lugubrement vivant,
Et tout l’essaim chantant s’effraie et se dissipe.

— Quel est donc le moyen de régner? dit Philippe.

Comme le roi parlait, l’archevêque pieux
Vit ce champ, hérissé de poteaux et de pieux
Où pendaient, à des fils tremblant quand l’air s’agite,
Des larves qui mettaient tous les oiseaux en fuite.

Et, le montrant au roi, Bertrand dit : Le voici.

II

POUR LES IDÉES.

Et c’est pourquoi, dans l’air par la brume obscurci,
Depuis ces temps de deuil, d’angoisse et de souffrance,

Au-dessus de la foule, au-dessus de la France,
Comme sur Babylone on distingue Babel,
On voit, dans le Paris de Philippe-le-Bel,

On ne sait quel difforme et funèbre édifice.
Tas de poutres hideux où le jour rampe et glisse,
Lourd enchevêtrement de poteaux, de crampons,
Et d’arcs-boutants pareils aux piles des vieux ponts.
Terrible, il apparaît sur la colline infâme.
Les autres monuments, où Paris met son âme,
Colléges, hôpitaux, tours, palais radieux,
Sont les docteurs, les saints, les héros et les dieux;
Lui, misérable, il est le monstre. Fauve, il traîne
Sur sa pente d’où sort une horreur souterraine,
Son funeste escalier qui dans la mort finit;
Tout ce que le ciment, la brique, le granit,
Le fer, peuvent avoir de la bête féroce,
Il l’a; ses piliers bruts, runes d’un dogme atroce,

Semblent des Irmensuls livides, et ses blocs
Dans l’obscurité vague ébauchent des Molochs;
Baal pour le construire a donné ses solives
Où flottaient des anneaux que secouaient les dives,
Saturne ses crochets, Teutatès ses menhirs;
Tous les cultes sanglants ont là leurs souvenirs;
Si le lierre ou le houx dans ses dalles végète,
Si quelque ronce y croît, la feuille horrible jette
Une ombre onglée et noire, affreux stigmate obscur,
Qui ressemble aux cinq doigts du bourreau sur le mur.

Vil bâtiment des temps fatals fatal complice!
Il est la colonnade immonde du supplice,
L’échafaud que le Louvre a pour couronnement,
La caresse au tombeau, l’insulte au firmament;
Et cette abominable et fétide bâtisse
Devant le ciel sacré se nomme la Justice,
Et ce n’est pas la moindre horreur du monument

De s’appeler l’autel en étant l’excrément.
Morne, il confine moins aux Paris qu’aux Sodomes.
Spectre de pierre ayant au front des spectres d’hommes,
Inexorable plus que l’airain et l’acier,
Il est, il vit, farouche et sans se soucier
Que le monde à ses pieds souffre, existe ou périsse,
Et contre on ne sait quoi dans l’ombre il se hérisse;
À de certains moments ce charnier qui se tait
Frissonne, et comme si, triste, il se lamentait,
Mêle une clameur sourde aux vents, et continue

En râle obscur le bruit des souffles dans la nue;
Là grince le rouet sinistre du cordier.
Du cadavre au squelette on peut étudier
Le progrès que les morts font dans la pourriture;
Chaque poteau chargé d’un corps sans sépulture
Marque une date abjecte, et chaque madrier
Semble le signe affreux d’un noir calendrier.

La nuit il semble croître, et dans le crépuscule
Il a l’air d’avancer sur Paris qui recule.

Rien de plus ténébreux n’a jamais été mis
Sur ce tas imbécile et triste de fourmis
Que la hautaine histoire appelle populace.
Ô pâle humanité, quand donc seras-tu lasse?

Lugubre vision! au-dessus d’un mur blanc

Quelque chose d’informe et qui paraît tremblant
Se dresse; chaos morne et ténébreux; broussaille
De silence, d’horreur et de nuit qui tressaille;
On ne voit le nuage, et l’ombre aux vagues yeux,
Et le blêmissement formidable des cieux,
Et la brume qui flotte, et l’astre qui flamboie,
Qu’à travers une vaste et large claire-voie
De poutres, dont chacune est un sanglant barreau;

On dirait que Satan, l’infâme ange bourreau,
Dont la rage et la joie et la haine, acharnées,
Exécutent Adam depuis six mille années,
Sur ces fauves piliers a posé de sa main
La grande claie où fut traîné le genre humain.
C’est, dans l’obscurité lugubrement émue,
De la terreur, bâtie en pierre, et qui remue;

C’est délabré, croulant, lépreux, désespéré;
Les poteaux ont pour toit le vide; le degré
Aboutit à l’échelle et l’échelle aux ténèbres;
Le crépuscule passe à travers des vertèbres
Et montre dans la nuit des pieds aux doigts ouverts;
Entre les vieux piliers, de moisissure verts,
Blêmes quand les rayons de lune s’y répandent,
Là-haut, des larves vont et viennent, des morts pendent,
Et la fouine a rongé leur crâne et leur fémur,
Et leur ventre effrayant se fend comme un fruit mûr;
Si la mort connaissait les trépassés, si l’homme
Valait que le tombeau sût comment il se nomme,
Si l’on comptait les grains du hideux chapelet,
On dirait : — Celui-ci, c’est Tryphon, qui voulait

Fêter le jour de Pâques autrement qu’Irénée;
Ceux-là sont des routiers, engeance forcenée,

Gueux qui contre le sceptre ont croisé le bâton;
Cet autre, c’est Glanus, traducteur de Platon;
Celui-ci, que des lois frappa la prévoyance,
Osa propager l’art du sorcier de Mayence,
Et jeter à la foule un Virgile imprimé;
C’est Pierre Albin; l’oubli sur lui s’est refermé;
Cet autre est un voleur, cet autre est un poëte.
Derrière leur tragique et noire silhouette,
L’azur luit, le soir vient, l’aube blanchit le ciel;
Le vent, s’il entre là, sort pestilentiel;
Chacun d’eux sous le croc du sépulcre tournoie;

Et tous, que juin les brûle ou que janvier les noie,
S'entreheurtent, fameux, chétifs, obscurs, marquants,
Et sont la même nuit dans les mêmes carcans;
Le craquement farouche et massif des traverses
Accompagne leurs chocs sous les âpres averses,
Et, comble de terreur, on croirait par instant
Que le cadavre, au gré des brises s'agitant,
Avec son front sans yeux et ses dents sans gencives,
Rit dans la torsion des chaînes convulsives;
L'exécrable charnier, sous ses barres de fer,
Regardant du côté de Rome et de l'enfer,

Dans l'étrange épaisseur des brumes infinies
Semble chercher au loin ses sœurs les gémonies,
Et demander au gouffre où nul astre n'a lui
Si Josaphat sera plus sinistre que lui;
Et toujours, au-dessus des clochers et des dômes,
Le vent lugubre joue avec tous ces fantômes,
Hier, demain, le jour, la nuit, l'été, l'hiver;
Et ces morts sans repos, où fourmille le ver
Plus que l'abeille d'or dans le creux des yeuses,
Cette agitation d'ombres mystérieuses,
L'affreux balancement de ces spectres hagards,
Ces crânes sans cheveux, ces sourcils sans regards,
Ce grelottement sourd de ferrailles funèbres,
Chassent dans la nuée, à travers les ténèbres,
Les purs esprits de l'aube et de l'azur, venus
Pour s'abattre au milieu des vivants inconnus,
Pour faire leur moisson sublime dans la foule,
Dire au peuple le mot du siècle qui s'écoule,
Et leur jeter une âme et leur apporter Dieu;
Et l'on voit, reprenant leur vol vers le ciel bleu,
La sainte vérité, la pensée immortelle,
L'amour, la liberté, le droit, heurtant de l'aile
Le Louvre et son beffroi, l'église et son portail,
Fuir, blancs oiseaux, devant le sombre épouvantail.

LES REÎTRES

CHANSON BARBARE

Sonnez, clairons,
Sonnez, cymbales!
On entendra siffler les balles;
L’ennemi vient, nous le battrons;
Les déroutes sont des cavales
Qui s’envolent quand nous soufflons;
Nous jouerons aux dés sur les dalles;
Sonnez, rixdales,
Sonnez, doublons!

Sonnez, cymbales,
Sonnez, clairons!
On entendra siffler les balles;
Nous sommes les durs forgerons
Des victoires impériales;
Personne n’a vu nos talons;
Nous jouerons aux dés sur les dalles;
Sonnez, doublons,
Sonnez, rixdales!
Sonnez, clairons,
Sonnez, cymbales!
On entendra siffler les balles;
Sitôt qu’en guerre nous entrons
Les rois ennemis font leurs malles,
Et commandent leurs postillons;
Nous jouerons aux dés sur les dalles;
Sonnez, rixdales,
Sonnez, doublons!
Sonnez, cymbales,
Sonnez, clairons!
On entendra siffler les balles;
Sur les villes nous tomberons;

Toutes femmes nous sont égales,
Que leurs cheveux soient bruns ou blonds;
Nous jouerons aux dés sur les dalles;
Sonnez, doublons,
Sonnez, rixdales!

Sonnez, clairons,
Sonnez, cymbales!
On entendra siffler les balles;
Du vin! Du faro! Nous boirons!
Dieu, pour nos bandes triomphales
Fit les vignes et les houblons;
Nous jouerons aux dés sur les dalles;
Sonnez, rixdales,
Sonnez, doublons!
Sonnez, cymbales,
Sonnez, clairons!
On entendra siffler les balles;
Quelquefois, ivres, nous irons
À travers foudres et rafales,
En zigzag, point à reculons.
Nous jouerons aux dés sur les dalles;
Sonnez, doublons,
Sonnez, rixdales!
Sonnez, clairons,
Sonnez, cymbales!
On entendra siffler les balles;
Nous pillons, mais nous conquérons;
La guerre a parfois les mains sales,
Mais la victoire a les bras longs;
Nous jouerons aux dés sur les dalles;
Sonnez, rixdales,
Sonnez, doublons!

Sonnez, rixdales,
Sonnez, doublons!
Nous jouerons aux dés sur les dalles;

Rois, nous sommes les aquilons;
Vos couronnes sont nos vassales;
Et nous rirons quand nous mourrons.
On entendra siffler les balles;
Sonnez, clairons,
Sonnez, cymbales!

LE COMTE FÉLIBIEN

Attendu qu'il faut mettre à la raison la ville,
Qu'il faut tout écraser dans la guerre civile
Et vaincre les forfaits à force d'attentats,
Cosme vient d'égorger, pêle-mêle, des tas
De misérables, vieux, jeunes, toute une foule,

Dans Sienne où la fierté des grands siècles s'écroule.
Tous les murs sont criblés de biscayens de fer.
Le massacre est fini; mais un reste d'enfer
Est sur la ville, en proie aux cohortes lombardes.
La fumée encor flotte aux gueules des bombardes;
Et l'horreur du combat, des chocs et des assauts
Est visible partout, dans les rouges ruisseaux,
Et dans l'effarement des morts, faces farouches;
On dirait que les cris sont encor dans les bouches,
On dirait que la foudre est encor dans les yeux,
Tant les cadavres sont vivants et furieux.
Cependant les marchands ont rouvert leurs boutiques.
Des gens quelconques vont et viennent; domestiques,
Patrons, clercs, artisans, chacun a son souci;
Chacun a son regard qui dit : — C'est bien ainsi.
Finissons-en. Silence! un nouveau maître arrive. —

L'indifférence aux morts qu'on a, pourvu qu'on vive,
L'acceptation froide et calme des affronts,
Cette lâcheté-là se lit sur tous les fronts.
— Pourquoi ces vanupieds sortaient-ils de leurs sphères?

Ils sont morts. C’est bien fait. Nous avons nos affaires.
Les rois qui sont un peu tyrans sont presque dieux.
Nous serons muselés et rudoyés; tant mieux.
Enterrons. Oublions. Et parlons d’autre chose. —
Ainsi le vieux troupeau bourgeois raisonne et glose.
Et tous sont apaisés, et beaucoup sont contents.

Seul, un homme, — on dirait qu’il a près de cent ans
Et qu’il n’en a pas vingt, et qu’un astre est son âme,
À voir son front de neige, à voir ses yeux de flamme, —
Cet homme, moins semblable aux vivants qu’aux aïeux,

Rôde, et, quand il s’arrête, il n’a plus dans les yeux
Qu’un vague reste obscur de lueurs disparues,
Tant il songe et médite! et les passants des rues,
Voyant ce noir rêveur qui vient on ne sait d’où,
Disent : C’est un génie; et d’autres : C’est un fou.
L’un crie : Alighieri! c’est lui! c’est l’homme-fée
Qui revient des enfers comme en revint Orphée;
Orphée a vu Pluton et Dante a vu Satan,
Il arrive de chez les morts; Dante, va-t’en!
L’autre dit : Ce n’est pas Dante, c’est Jérémie.
La plainte a presque peur d’avoir été gémie,
Et se cache devant le vainqueur irrité;
Mais cet homme est un tel spectre dans la cité
Qu’il semble effrayant même à la horde ennemie;
Et pourtant ce n’est point Dante ni Jérémie;

C’est simplement le vieux comte Félibien
Qui ne croit que le vrai, qui ne veut que le bien,
Et par qui fut fondé le collége de Sienne;
Il porte haut la tête étant une âme ancienne,
Et fait trembler; cet homme affronte les vainqueurs;
Mais, dans l’écroulement des esprits et des cœurs,
On le hait; le meilleur semble aux lâches le pire,
Et celui qui n’a pas d’épouvante en inspire.

Qu’importe à ce passant? Dans ce vil guet-apens,
Les uns étant gisants et les autres rampants,
Les uns étant la tombe et les autres la foule,
Il est le seul debout; il songe; le sang coule,
Le sang fume, le sang est partout; sombre, il va.

Tout à coup au détour de la Via Corva,
Il aperçoit dans l’ombre une femme inconnue;
Une morte étendue à terre toute nue,
Corps terrible aux regards de tous prostitué
Et dont le ventre ouvert montre un enfant tué.

Alors il crie : — Ô ciel! un enfant! guerre affreuse!
Où donc s’arrêtera le gouffre qui se creuse?
Massacrer l’inconnu, l’enfant encor lointain!
Supprimer la promesse obscure du destin!
Mais on poussera donc l’horreur jusqu’au prodige!
Mais vous êtes hideux et stupides, vous dis-je!
Mais c’est abominable, ô ciel! ciel éclatant!
Et les bêtes des bois n’en feraient pas autant!
Qu’on ait tort et raison des deux côtés, qu’on fasse

Au fond le mal, croyant bien faire à la surface,
Vous êtes des niais broyant des ignorants,
Cette justice-là, c’est bien, je vous la rends;
Je vous hais et vous plains. Mais, quoi! quand l’empyrée
Attend du nouveau-né l’éclosion sacrée,
Quoi! ces soldats, ces rois, sans savoir ce qu’ils font,
Touchent avec leur main sanglante au ciel profond!
Ils interrompent l’ombre ébauchant son ouvrage!
Ils veulent en finir d’un coup, et dans leur rage
D’avoir bien fait justice, et d’avoir bien vaincu,
Ils vont jusqu’à tuer ce qui n’a pas vécu!
Mais, bandits, laissez donc au moins venir l’aurore!
Brutes, vous châtiez ce qui n’est pas encore!
La femme que voilà morte sur le pavé,
Qui cachait dans son sein l’enfant inachevé,

L’avenir, l’écheveau des jours impénétrables,
Était de droit divin parmi vous, misérables;
Car la maternité, c’est la grande action.
Sachez qu’on doit avoir la même émotion
Devant Ève portant les races inconnues
Que devant l’astre immense entrevu dans les nues;

Sachez-le, meurtriers! les respects sont pareils
Pour la femme et le ciel, l’abîme des soleils
Étant continué par le ventre des mères.
Rois, le vrai c’est l’enfant; vous êtes des chimères.
Ah! maudits! Mais voyons, réfléchissez un peu.
Crime inouï! l’enfant arrive en un milieu
Ignoré, parmi nous, il sort des sphères vierges;
Il quitte les soleils remplacés par vos cierges;
Sa mère qui le sent remuer, s’attendrit;
Il n’est pas encor l’homme, il est déjà l’esprit,
Il cherche à deviner sa nouvelle patrie,
Et dans le bercement de cette rêverie
Où tout l’azur divin est vaguement mêlé,
Voilà que, brusque, affreux, de mitraille étoilé,
L’assassinat, au fond de ce flanc qu’on vénère,
Entre avec le fracas infâme du tonnerre,
Et se rue et s’abat, monstrueux ennemi,
Sur le pauvre doux être, ange encor endormi!
Qu’est-ce que ce réveil sans nom, et cette tombe

Ouverte par l’orfraie horrible à la colombe!
Ah! prêtres, qu’a domptés César, vous qu’à leurs plis
Toutes les actions des grands ont assouplis,
Vous qui leur amenez chez eux cette servante,
La prière, et mettez le Te Deum en vente,
Vous qui montrez devant les rois le Tout-Puissant
Agenouillé, lavant les pavés teints de sang,
Vous qui pourtant parfois, fronts chauves, barbes grises,
Avez des tremblements dans vos mornes églises
Et sentez que la tombe est peut-être un cachot,

Prêtres, que pensez-vous qui se passe là-haut,

Dans l’abîme du vrai sans fond, dans le mystère,
Dans le sombre équilibre ignoré, quand la terre
Sinistre, renvoyant l’innocence au ciel bleu,
Jette une petite âme épouvantée à Dieu!

VI

ENTRE LIONS ET ROIS

QUELQU’UN MET LE HOLÀ

Les grands lions ont dit aux rois épouvantables :
Vous couchez dans des lits, vous buvez à des tables,
Nous couchons sur la pierre et buvons aux ruisseaux;
Vous faites en marchant le bruit des grandes eaux,
Ô rois, tant vous avez autour de vous d’armées.
Vos femelles, au bain, pour être parfumées,
Se laissent par l’eunuque infâme manier;
Les nôtres ont l’odeur féroce du charnier,
Et, comme leur caresse est féconde en blessures,
Nous leur rendons parfois leurs baisers en morsures,

Mais elles ont la fauve et sombre chasteté.
La nuit perfide a beau regarder de côté,
Elle a peur devant nous, et la terreur la gagne
Quand nous questionnons sur l’ombre la montagne;
Vous, elle vous méprise, et nous, elle nous craint.
Rois, vous croyez avoir le monde, humble et contraint;
Mais c’est nous qui l’avons. La forêt nous encense.
Rois, nous sommes la faim, la soif, et la puissance;
Pour manger les agneaux et pour manger les loups
Nos mâchoires font plus de besogne que vous;
Vous disparaîtriez, ô princes, que nos gueules
Sauraient bien dévorer les hommes toutes seules;
Chacun de nous au fond de sa caverne est roi;
Et nous tenons ce sceptre en nos pattes, l’effroi.
Rois, l’échevèlement que notre tête épaisse

Secoue en sa colère est de la même espèce
Que l’avalanche énorme et le torrent des monts.
Rois, vous régnez un peu parce que nous dormons;
Nos femmes font téter leurs petits sous leurs ventres,
Mais lorsqu’il nous plaira de sortir de nos antres,

Vous verrez. Le seigneur des forêts vous vaut tous.
Sachez que nous n’avons rien au-dessus de nous.
Ô rois, dans notre voix nous avons le tonnerre.
Le seigneur des forêts n’est pas un mercenaire
Qu’on leurre et qu’on désarme avec un sac d’argent;
Et nous nous coucherons sur vous en vous rongeant,
Comme vous vous couchez, maîtres, sur vos provinces.
C’est vous les faux bandits et c’est nous les vrais princes.
Vous, et vos légions, vous, et vos escadrons,

Quand nous y penserons et quand nous le voudrons,
Ô princes, nous ferons de cela des squelettes.
Lâches, vous frissonnez devant des amulettes;
Mais nous, les seuls puissants, nous maîtres des sommets,
Nous rugissons toujours et ne prions jamais;
Car nous ne craignons rien. Puisqu’on nous a faits bêtes,
N’importe qui peut bien exister sur nos têtes
Sans que nous le sachions et que nous y songions.
Vous les rois, le ciel noir, plein de religions,
Vous voit, mains jointes, vils, prosternés dans la poudre;
Mais, tout rempli qu’il est de tempête et de foudre,
De rayons et d’éclairs, il ne sait pas si nous
Qui sommes les lions, nous avons des genoux.

Ainsi les fiers lions parlaient aux rois farouches.
Ce verbe monstrueux rugissait dans leurs bouches,
Et les bois demandaient aux monts : Qu’est-ce que c’est?

Soudain on entendit une voix qui disait :

Vous êtes les lions, moi je suis Dieu. Crinières,
Ne vous hérissez pas, je vous tiens prisonnières.
Toutes vos griffes sont, devant mon doigt levé,
Ce qu’est sous une meule un grain de sénevé;
Je tolère les rois comme je vous tolère;
La grande patience et la grande colère,
C’est moi. J’ai mes desseins. Brutes et rois, tyrans,

Tremblez, eux les mangeurs et vous les dévorants;
Sachez que je suis là. J’abaisse et j’humilie;
Je tiens, je tords, je courbe, et je lie et délie
La vague adriatique et le vent syrien;

Je suis celui qui prouve à tous qu’ils ne sont rien;
Je suis toute l’aurore et je suis toute l’ombre;
Je suis celui qui sème au hasard et sans nombre,
Et qui, lorsqu’il lui plaît, donne des millions
D’astres aux firmaments et de poux aux lions.

VII

LE CID EXILÉ

LE CID EXILÉ

I

Le Cid est exilé. Qui se souvient du Cid?
Le roi veut qu’on l’oublie; et Reuss, Almonacid,
Graos, tous ses exploits, ressemblent à des songes;
Les rois maures chassés ou pris sont des mensonges;

Et quant à ces combats puissants qu’il a livrés,
Pancorbo, la bataille illustre de Givrez
Qui semble une volée effrayante d’épées,
Coca, dont il dompta les roches escarpées,
Gor où le Cid pleurait de voir le jour finir,
C’est offenser le roi que de s’en souvenir.
Même il est malséant de parler de Chimène.

Un homme étant allé visiter un domaine
Dans les pays qui sont entre l’Èbre et le Cil,

Du côté que le Cid habite en son exil,
A passé par hasard devant son écurie;
Le duc Juan, dont cet homme est serf en Asturie,
Bon courtisan, l’a fait à son retour punir
Pour avoir entendu Babieça hennir.

Donc, chacun l’a pour dit, n’est pas sujet fidèle
Qui parle de Tortose et de la citadelle
Où le glorieux Cid arbora son drapeau;
Dire ces mots : Baxa, Médina del Campo,
Vergara, Salinas, Mondragon-les-Tours-Noires,

Avec l’intention de nommer des victoires,
Ce n’est point d’un loyal Espagnol; qu’autrefois

Un homme ait fait lâcher au comte Odet de Foix
Les infantes d’Irun, Payenne et Manteline;
Que cet homme ait sauvé la Castille orpheline;
Qu’il ait dans la bataille été le grand cimier;
Que les Maures, foulés par lui comme un fumier,
L’admirent, et, vaincus, donnent son nom célèbre

Au ruisseau Cidacos qui se jette dans l’Èbre;
Qu’il ait rempli du bruit de ses fiers pas vainqueurs
Astorga, Zamora, l’Aragon, tous les cœurs;
Qu’il ait traqué, malgré les gouffres et les piéges,
L’horrible Abdulmalic dans la sierra des Neiges,
En janvier, sans vouloir attendre le dégel;
Qu’il ait osé défendre aux notaires d’Urgel
De dater leurs contrats de l’an du roi de France;
Que cet homme ait pour tous été la délivrance,
Allant, marchant, courant, volant de tous côtés,
Effarant l’ennemi dans ces rapidités;
Qu’on l’ait vu sous Lorca, figure surhumaine,

Et devant Balbastro, dans la même semaine;
Qu’il ait, sur la tremblante échelle des hasards,
Calme, donné l’assaut à tous les alcazars,
Toujours ferme, et toujours, à Tuy comme à Valence,
Fier dans le tourbillon sombre des coups de lance,
C’est possible; mais l’ombre est sur cet homme-là;
Silence. Est-ce après tout grand’chose que cela?
Le pont Matamoros peut vous montrer ses brèches,
Mais s’il parle du Cid vainqueur, bravant les flèches,
On fera démolir le pont Matamoros!
Le roi ne veut pas plus qu’on nomme le héros
Que le pape ne veut qu’on nomme la comète;
Il n’est pas démontré que l’aigle se permette
De faire encor son nid dans ce mont Muradal
Qui fit de Tizona la sœur de Durandal.

II

Du reste, comme il faut des héros pour la guerre,
Le roi cassant le Cid, a trouvé bon d’en faire :
Il en a fait. L’Espagne a des hommes nouveaux.
Alvar Rambla, le duc Nuno Saz y Calvos,
Don Gil, voilà les noms dont la foule s’effare;
Ils sont dans la lumière, ils sont dans la fanfare;
Leur moindre geste s’enfle au niveau des exploits;
Et, dans leur antichambre, on entend quelquefois
Les pages, d’une voix féminine et hautaine,
Dire : — Ah oui-da, le Cid! C’était un capitaine
D’alors. Vit-il encor, ce Campéador-là?

Le Cid n’existe plus auprès d’Alvar Rambla;
Gil, plus grand que le Cid, dans son ombre le cache;
Nuno Saz engloutit le Cid sous son panache;

Sur Achille tombé les myrmidons ont crû;
Et du siècle du Cid le Cid a disparu.

L’exil, est-ce l’oubli vraiment? une mémoire
Qu’un prince étouffe, est-elle éteinte pour la gloire?
Est-ce à jamais qu’Alvar, Nuno, Gil, nains heureux,
Éclipsent le grand Cid exilé derrière eux?

Quand le voyageur sort d’Oyarzun, il s’étonne,
Il regarde, il ne voit, sous le noir ciel qui tonne,
Que le mont d’Oyarzun, médiocre et pelé :
— Mais ce Pic du Midi dont on m’avait parlé,
Où donc est-il? Ce Pic, le plus haut des Espagnes,
N’existe point. S’il m’est caché par ces montagnes,
Il n’est pas grand. Un peu d’ombre l’anéantit. —
Cela dit, il s’en va, point fâché, lui petit,
Que ce mont qu’on disait si haut ne soit qu’un rêve.
Il marche, la nuit vient, puis l’aurore se lève,
Le voyageur repart, son bâton à la main,

Et songe, et va disant tout le long du chemin :
— Bah! s’il existe un Pic du Midi, que je meure!
La montagne Oyarzun est belle, à la bonne heure! —
Laissant derrière lui hameaux, clochers et tours,
Villes et bois, il marche un jour, deux jours, trois jours;
— Le genre humain dirait trois siècles; — il s’enfonce
Dans la lande à travers la bruyère et la ronce;
Enfin, par hasard, las, inattentif, distrait,
Il se tourne, et voici qu’à ses yeux reparaît,
Comme un songe revient confus à la pensée,
La plaine dont il sort et qu’il a traversée,
L’église et la forêt, le puits et le gazon;
Soudain, presque tremblant, là-bas, sur l’horizon
Que le soir teint de pourpre et le matin d’opale,
Dans un éloignement mystérieux et pâle,
Au-delà de la ville et du fleuve, au-dessus
D’un tas de petits monts sous la brume aperçus
Où se perd Oyarzun avec sa butte informe,
Il voit dans la nuée une figure énorme;
Un mont blême et terrible emplit le fond des cieux;
Un pignon de l’abîme, un bloc prodigieux
Se dresse, aux lieux profonds mêlant les lieux sublimes,
Sombre apparition de gouffres et de cîmes,
Il est là; le regard croit sous son porche obscur
Voir le nœud monstrueux de l’ombre et de l’azur,
Et son faîte est un toit sans brouillard et sans voile,
Où ne peut se poser d’autre oiseau que l’étoile;

C’est le Pic du Midi.
L’histoire voit le Cid.
III

Grande nouvelle. Émoi dans tout Valladolid.
Quoi? Qu’est-ce donc? Le roi se dément! Le roi cède!
Alphonse a pour maîtresse une fille assez laide,
Et qui, par cela même, on ne sait pas pourquoi,
Fait tout ce qu’elle veut de la raison du roi,

Au point qu’elle en pourrait tirer des choses sages;
Cette fille a-t-elle eu quelques mauvais présages?
Ou bien le roi du peuple entend-il la rumeur?
Est-il las des héros qu’il a faits par humeur?
Finit-il par trouver cette gloire trop plate?
Craint-il que tout à coup une guerre n’éclate
Qui soit vraiment méchante et veuille un vrai héros?

Le certain, c’est qu’après le combat de taureaux
Son Altesse un dimanche a dit dans la chapelle :
— Ruy Diaz de Bivar revient. Je le rappelle.
Je le veux. — Ils sont là plus d’un esprit subtil;
Pourtant pas un n’a dit : mais le Cid voudra-t-il?
N’importe, il plaît au roi de revoir ce visage.

Pour éblouir le Cid, il charge du message
Un roi, l’homme entre tous vénéré dans sa cour,
Son vassal, son parent, le roi d’Acqs-en-Adour,
Santos-le-Roux, qu’on nomme aussi le Magnanime,
Parce qu’étant tuteur d’Atton, comte de Nîme,
Il le fit moine, et prit sa place, et confisqua
Ses biens pour les donner au couvent de Huesca.
IV

Ce sont de braves cœurs que les gens de la plaine;
Ils chantent dans les blés un chant bizarre et fou;

Et quant à leurs habits faits de cuir et de laine,
Boire les use au coude et prier, au genou.

Étant fils du sang basque, ils ont cet avantage
Sur les froids Espagnols murés dans leurs maisons,
Qu’ils préfèrent à l’eau, fût-elle prise au Tage,
Le vin mystérieux d’où sortent les chansons.

Ils sont hospitaliers, prodigues, bons dans l’âme;
L’homme dit aux passants; Entrez, les bienvenus!

Pour un petit enfant qu’elle allaite, la femme
Montre superbement deux seins de marbre nus.

Lorsque l’homme est aux champs, la femme reste seule;
N’importe, entrez! passants, le lard est sur l’étal,
Mangez! Et l’enfant joue, et dans un coin l’aïeule
Raccommode un vieux cistre aux cordes de métal.

Quelques-uns sont bergers dans les grands terrains vagues,
Champs que les bataillons ont légués aux troupeaux,
Mer de plaines ayant les collines pour vagues,
Où César a laissé l’ombre de ses drapeaux.

Là passent des bœufs roux qui sonnent de la cloche,
Avertissant l’oiseau de leur captivité;
L’homme y féconde un sol plus âpre que la roche,
Et de cette misère extrait de la fierté.

L’égyptienne y rôde, et suspend en guirlandes
Sur sa robe en lambeaux les bleuets du sillon;

La fleur s’offre aux gypsis errantes dans ces landes,
Car, fille du fumier, elle est sœur du haillon.

Là, tout est rude; août flamboie et janvier gèle;
Le zingaro regarde, en venant boire aux puits,
Les ronds mouillés que font les seaux sur la margelle,
Tout cercle étant la forme effrayante des nuits.

Là, dans les grès hideux, l’ermite fait sa grotte.
Lieux tristes! Le boucher y vient trois fois par an;
Le grelot des moutons y semble la marotte
Dont l’animal, fou sombre, amuse Dieu tyran.

Peu d’herbe; les brebis paissent exténuées;
Le pâtre a tout l’hiver sur son toit de roseaux
Le bouleversement farouche des nuées

Quand les hydres de pluie ouvrent leurs noirs naseaux.

Ces hommes sont vaillants. Âmes de candeur pleines,
Leur regard est souvent fauve, jamais moqueur;
Rien ne gêne le souffle immense dans les plaines;
La liberté du vent leur passe dans le cœur.

Leurs filles qui s'en vont laver aux cressonnières,
Plongent leur jambe rose au courant des ruisseaux;
On ne sait, en entrant dans leurs maisons tanières,
Si l'on voit des enfants ou bien des lionceaux.

Voisins du bon proscrit, ils labourent, ils sèment,
À l'ombre de la tour du preux Campéador;
Contents de leur ciel bleu, pauvres, libres, ils aiment
Le Cid plus que le roi, le soleil plus que l'or.

Ils récoltent au bas des monts, comme en Provence,
Du vin qu'ils font vieillir dans des outres de peau;
Le fisc, quand il leur fait payer leur redevance,
Leur fait l'effet du roi qui leur tend son chapeau.

Les rayons du grand Cid sur leurs toits se répandent;
Il est l'auguste ami du chaume et du grabat;
Car avec les héros les laboureurs s'entendent;
L'épée a sa moisson, le soc a son combat.

La charrue est de fer comme les pertuisanes;
Les victoires, sortant du champ et du hallier,
Parlent aux campagnards étant des paysannes,
Et font le peuple avec la gloire familier.

Ils content que parfois ce grand Cid les arrête,
Les fait entrer chez lui, les nomme par leur nom,
Et que, lorsqu'à l'étable ils attachent leur bête,
Babieça n'est pas hautaine pour l'ânon.

Le barbier du hameau le plus proche raconte
Que parfois chez lui vient le Cid paisible et franc,
Et, vrai! qu’il s’assied là sur l’escabeau, ce comte
Et ce preux qui serait, pour un trône, trop grand.

Le barbier rase bien le héros, quoiqu’il tremble;
Puis, une loque est là pour tous ceux qui viendront;
Le Cid prend ce haillon, torchon du peuple, et semble
Essuyer le regard des princes sur son front.

Comment serait-il fier puisqu’il a tant de gloire?
Les filles dans leur cœur aiment cet Amadis;
La main blanche souvent jalouse la main noire
Qui serre ce poing fort, plein de foudres jadis.

Ils se disent, causant, quand les nuits sont tombées,
Que cet homme si doux, dans des temps plus hardis,
Fut terrible, et, géant, faisait des enjambées
Des tours de Pampelune aux clochers de Cadix.

Il n’est pas un d’entre eux qui ne soit prêt à suivre
Partout ce Ruy Diaz comme un céleste esprit,
En mer, sur terre, au bruit des trompettes de cuivre,
Malgré le groupe blond des enfants qui sourit.

Tels sont ces laboureurs. Pour défendre l’Espagne,
Ces rustres au besoin font plus que des infants;
Ils ont des chariots criant dans la campagne,
Et sont trop dédaigneux pour être triomphants.

Ils cultivent les blés où chantent les cigales;
Pélage à lui jadis les voyait accourir,
Et jamais ne trouva leurs âmes inégales
Au danger, quel qu’il fût, quand il fallait mourir.

V

Ruy Diaz de Bivar est leur plus belle gerbe.

Dans un beau train de guerre et de chevaux fougueux,
Don Santos traversa leurs villages, superbe,
Avec le bruit d’un roi qui passe chez des gueux.

On ne le suivit point comme on fait dans les villes;
Nul ne le harangua, ces hommes aux pieds nus
Ayant la nuque dure aux saluts inutiles
Et se dérangeant peu pour des rois inconnus.

— Je suis l’ami du roi, disait-il avec gloire;
Et nul ne s’inclinait que le corrégidor;
Le lendemain, ayant grand soif et voulant boire,
Il dit : Je suis l’ami du Cid Campéador.

Don Santos traversa la plaine vaste et rude,
Et l’on voyait au fond la tour du fier banni;
C’est là qu’était le Cid. Le ciel, la solitude,
Et l’ombre, environnaient sa grandeur d’infini.

Quand Santos arriva, Ruy, qui sortait de table,
Était dans l’écurie avec Babieça;
Et Santos apparut sur le seuil de l’étable;
Ruy ne recula point, et le roi s’avança.

La jument, grasse alors comme un cheval de moine,
Regardait son seigneur d’un regard presque humain;
Et le bon Cid, prenant dans l’auge un peu d’avoine,
La lui faisait manger dans le creux de sa main.

VI

Le roi Santos parla de sa voix la plus haute :
— « Cid, je viens vous chercher. Nous vous honorons tous.
« Vous avez une épine au talon, je vous l’ôte.
« Voici pourquoi le roi n’est pas content de vous :

« Votre allure est chez lui si fière et si guerrière,
« Que, tout roi qu’est le roi, son Altesse a souvent

« L’air de vous annoncer quand vous marchez derrière,
« Et de vous suivre, ô Cid, quand vous marchez devant.

« Vous regardez fort mal toute la servidumbre.
« Cid, vous êtes Bivar, c’est un noble blason;
« Mais le roi n’aime pas que quelqu’un fasse une ombre
« Plus grande que la sienne au mur de sa maison.

« Don Ruy, chacun se plaint : — Le Cid est dans la nue;
« Du sceptre à son épée il déplace l’effroi;
« Ce sujet-là se tient trop droit; il diminue
« L’utile tremblement qu’on doit avoir du roi. —

« Vous n’êtes qu’à peu près le serviteur d’Alphonse;
« Quand le roi brise Arcos, vous sauvez Ordonez;
« Vous retirez l’épée avant qu’elle s’enfonce;
« Le roi dit : Frappe! Alors, vous Cid, vous pardonnez.

« Qui s’arrête en chemin sert à demi son maître;
« Jamais d’un vain scrupule un preux ne se troubla;

« La moitié d’un ami, c’est la moitié d’un traître;
« Et ce n’est pas pour vous, Cid, que je dis cela.

« Enfin, et j’y reviens, vous êtes trop superbe;
« Le roi jeta sur vous l’exil comme un rideau;
« Rayon d’astre, soyez moins lourd pour lui, brin d’herbe;
« Ce qui d’abord est gloire à la fin est fardeau.

« Vous êtes au-dessus de tous, et cela gêne;
« Quiconque veut briller vous sent comme un affront,
« Tant Valence, Graos, Givrez et Carthagène
« Font d’éblouissement autour de votre front.

« Tel mot, qui par moments tombe de vous, fatigue
« Son Altesse à la cour, à la ville, au Prado;

« Le creusement n’est pas moins importun, Rodrigue,
« De la goutte d’orgueil que de la goutte d’eau.

« Je ne dis pas ceci pour vous, Cid redoutable.
« Vous êtes sans orgueil, étant de bonne foi;
« Si j’étais empereur, vous seriez connétable;
« Mais seulement tâchez de faire cas du roi.

« Quand vous lui rapportez, vainqueur, quelque province,
« Le roi trouve, et ceci de nous tous est compris,
« Que jamais un vassal n’a salué son prince,
« Cid, avec un respect plus semblable au mépris.

« Votre bouche en parlant sourit avec tristesse;
« On sent que le roi peut avoir Burgos, Madrid,
« Tuy, Badajoz, Léon, soit; mais que Son Altesse
« N’aura jamais le coin de la lèvre du Cid.

« Le vassal n’a pas droit de dédain sur le maître.
« On vous tire d’exil; mais, Cid, écoutez-moi,
« Il faut dorénavant qu’il vous convienne d’être
« Aussi grand devant Dieu, moins haut devant le roi.

« Pour apaiser l’humeur du roi, fort légitime,
« Il suffit désormais que le roi, comme il sied,
« Sente qu’en lui parlant vous avez de l’estime. »
Babieça frappait sa litière du pied,

Les chiens tiraient leur chaîne et grondaient à la porte,
Et le Cid répondit au roi Santos-le-Roux :
— Sire, il faudrait d’abord que vous fissiez en sorte
Que j’eusse de l’estime en vous parlant à vous.

VIII

WELF

CASTELLAN D’OSBOR

WELF.
CYADMIS.
HUG.
OTHON.
SYLVESTRE.
UNE PETITE FILLE, mendiante.
L’HUISSIER DE L’EMPIRE.
PAYSANS, BOURGEOIS, ÉTUDIANTS
DE L’UNIVERSITÉ CARLOVINGIENNE,
SOLDATS.
Devant le précipice d’Osbor.

WELF

CASTELLAN D’OSBOR

Le rebord d’un précipice.

Au delà du précipice, qui est très-étroit, se profile une haute tour crénelée

sans fenêtres. Des meurtrières çà et là. Le pont-levis dressé cache la porte.

Le précipice sert de fossé à cette tour.

Derrière la tour monte, à perte de vue, la montagne couverte de sapins. On

ne voit pas le ciel.

SCÈNE PREMIÈRE

L’HUISSIER DE L’EMPIRE, un groupe de GENS
DU PEUPLE.

L’huissier de l’empire, en dalmatique d’argent semée d’aigles noirs, entre, précédé des quatre massiers de la Diète. Il est suivi d’un groupe de paysans et de bourgeois.

Il se tourne vers la tour, où l’on ne voit personne.

L’HUISSIER.

Je fais sommation, moi l’huissier de l’empire,

À toi, baron, rebelle à la Diète de Spire.
Rends-toi, sors. Comparais.

UN BOURGEOIS, survenant, aux autres.

A-t-il répondu?

UN PAYSAN.

Non.

L’HUISSIER.

J’ai dit.

Il passe, et disparaît avec les quatre massiers.

LE BOURGEOIS, montrant la tour.

Quel fier dédain! Quel rude compagnon!

UN ÉTUDIANT de l’Université carlovingienne.

Compagnon de personne.

LE PAYSAN.

Oui, pas un ne l’égale.

L’ÉTUDIANT.

Parfois aux champs fauchés il reste une cigale;
Ainsi cet homme libre est demeuré debout.

LE BOURGEOIS.

Oui, ce mont excepté, l’esclavage est partout.

L’ÉTUDIANT.

Welf, à lui seul, tient tête aux princes d’Allemagne.

UN VIEILLARD.

Il ne veut pas qu’on passe à travers sa montagne,
Il est le protecteur d’un pays inconnu.
Qui troublerait ces monts serait le mal venu.
Il est père des bois. Sa tour fait sentinelle.
Il défend le sapin, l’if, la neige éternelle,

La route avec ses fleurs, la biche avec ses faons,
Et les petits oiseaux sont ses petits enfants.
Il guette. Son regard a des éclairs funèbres
Pour quiconque oserait attaquer ces ténèbres.
On voit la silhouette âpre du chevalier
Dans l’entrecroisement des branches du hallier.
Une sérénité nocturne l’environne.
Son casque n’a jamais salué de couronne.
Il se tient là, barrant le chemin, rassurant
La forêt, le ravin, le rocher, le torrent,
Et garde vierge, aux yeux de toute la contrée,
L’ombre où cette montagne auguste donne entrée.

LE BOURGEOIS.
Il est seul dans sa tour?
LE VIEILLARD.
Il n’a pas un archer.
LE PAYSAN à un autre paysan, montrant la tour.
Tiens! entre les créneaux on peut le voir marcher.
L’ÉTUDIANT.
Tant qu’il vit, la patrie aux fers n’est pas éteinte.
LE VIEILLARD.
Il n’a jamais voulu se marier, de crainte
D’introduire en son antre une timidité.
L’ÉTUDIANT.
Ici l’on rampe.
LE VIEILLARD.
Il est seul de l’autre côté.
LE BOURGEOIS.
On dit qu’il vit là, fauve et noir, sans chefs, sans règles,
Qu’il se fait apporter à manger par les aigles,
Et qu’il n’a jamais ri.

LE VIEILLARD.
Deuil fièrement porté!
Il est veuf.
LE BOURGEOIS.

Veuf de qui?
LE VIEILLARD.
Veuf de la liberté.
L'ÉTUDIANT.
Puissant vieillard!
LE VIEILLARD.
Il est inaccessible; il garde
Son fossé, tient dressé son pont-levis, regarde
Par les trous de sa herse, et n'a jamais d'ennui,
Sentant le mont immense en paix derrière lui.
LE BOURGEOIS, regardant à ses pieds.
Le précipice est sombre.
L'ÉTUDIANT, regardant au-dessus de sa tête.
Et la muraille est haute.
LE BOURGEOIS.
Mais s'il repousse un maître, admettrait-il un hôte?
LE VIEILLARD.
Un pauvre, oui.

L'ÉTUDIANT.
Jamais roi dans sa coupe ne but.
LE VIEILLARD.
Il vit sans rendre hommage et sans payer tribut.
LE BOURGEOIS.
Qu'il est heureux! Hélas, les impôts nous obèrent.
LE VIEILLARD.
Mais cela va finir. Les princes délibèrent.
Montrant le revers de la montagne opposée au précipice.
Ils sont là.
LE BOURGEOIS.
Qui donc?
LE VIEILLARD.
Qui? Notre duc Cyadmis,
Le roi d'Arle, et les deux formidables amis
Qui ne se quittent pas, l'un maudit, l'autre frappe,
Othon Trois, empereur, et Sylvestre Deux, pape.

L’ÉTUDIANT.
Qu’importe! Le rocher est fort, Welf est viril.
Welf ignore la peur, mais connaît le péril.
LE BOURGEOIS.
Aussi marche-t-il droit sur lui.
L’ÉTUDIANT.
Pas plus qu’Hercule
Il ne tremble, et pas plus qu’Achille il ne recule.
LE BOURGEOIS.
Robuste, il songe, au bord de l’abîme béant.
L’ÉTUDIANT.
Une douceur d’étoile, et le bras d’un géant!
LE VIEILLARD.
Oui. Mais les rois sont las de voir debout dans l’ombre
Le grand ermite armé de la montagne sombre.
Il se penche et leur désigne du doigt un point qu’on ne voit pas.

Vous voyez bien d’ici cette cabane, au flanc
Du ravin, à l’abri de l’aquilon sifflant?
C’est là que les rois sont assemblés.
LE BOURGEOIS.
Combien?
LE PAYSAN.
Quatre.
LE VIEILLARD.
Ce burg les gêne. Ils sont résolus à l’abattre.
C’est dit. Pour vaincre ils ont leurs troupes et leurs gens
Et le dépit amer, force des assiégeants.
LE PAYSAN.
Le castellan va-t-il enfin livrer passage,
Baisser le pont, céder aux rois?

LE BOURGEOIS.
Oui, s’il est sage.
L’ÉTUDIANT.
Non, s’il est grand.
LE VIEILLARD.

Il est sage et grand.
L’ÉTUDIANT, montrant la tour.
La maison
Tiendra ferme, ayant Welf tout seul pour garnison;
Le vieux songeur n’est pas d’humeur accommodante.
Il mettra des chaudrons sur de la braise ardente,
Et saura leur payer, va, ce qui leur est dû
De poix bouillante, d’huile en feu, de plomb fondu!
LE PAYSAN.
Certes!
L’ÉTUDIANT.
Et l’on verra si leur peau s’accoutume
Au ruissellement large et fumant du bitume.
On voit une fumée sortir du haut de la tour.
LE VIEILLARD.
Tenez, précisément! Il allume son feu.
Voyez-vous la fumée!

L’ÉTUDIANT.
Il va jouer son jeu,
Faire sa fête, offrir la bataille.
LE BOURGEOIS.
Posture
D’un héros!
LE PAYSAN.
Je veux voir la fin de l’aventure.
LE BOURGEOIS.
Nous, en voyant venir des princes, nous fuyons
Devant ce flamboiement de sinistres rayons;
Welf les brave.
Montrant le burg.
C’est beau, cette porte fermée.
L’ÉTUDIANT.
D’un côté ce bonhomme, et de l’autre une armée!
LE VIEILLARD.
À lui seul il est grand comme une nation.
D’ordinaire, tout est dans la proportion,

Et le petit est grand près du moindre, et l’arbuste,

Si vous le comparez au brin d’herbe, est robuste.
Mais Welf dépasse tout. C’est un dieu.
On entend une fanfare de trompettes.
LE BOURGEOIS.
Les clairons!
Silence! Où sont nos trous dans les rochers? Rentrons.

Tous se dispersent de divers côtés. Entre une troupe de valets de la lance avec de longues piques. En tête les clairons.
Puis un gendarme portant un pennon de guerre.
Derrière le pennon, paraît un homme à cheval entièrement couvert d’une chemise de fer à capuchon, et ayant sur le capuchon une couronne ducale.
Les soldats s’arrêtent, le pennon s’arrête, l’homme à cheval s’arrête, et se tourne vers la tour. Les clairons se taisent.
L’homme à cheval tire son épée.
La tour continue de fumer.

SCÈNE DEUXIÈME

CYADMIS, LA TOUR, puis HUG, puis OTHON,
puis SYLVESTRE.

CYADMIS, parlant à la tour.
Personne n’a le droit de prendre un coin de terre
Au prince armé par Dieu d’un titre héréditaire.
S’isoler, c’est trahir. Welf, castellan d’Osbor,

Toi qu’on doit comme un ours traquer au bruit du cor,
Je te provoque au bruit du clairon, comme un homme;
Mais d’abord je te parle en ami. Je te somme
D’être un garçon prudent, docile aux bons avis.
Chevalier, haut la herse et bas le pont-levis.
Je veux entrer. Je veux passer. Cette montagne
N’est pas comme la Crète et comme la Bretagne,

Une île, et ce fossé n’est pas la mer. Baron,
Viens, je te chausserai moi-même l’éperon;
Je t’admets dans ma troupe, à vaincre habituée;
Tu seras capitaine, avec une nuée
De trompettes courant et sonnant devant toi.
Descends, ouvre ta porte, et causons. Par ma foi,
Tu n’es pas fait pour vivre entre quatre murailles.
Ami, nous gagnerons ensemble des batailles.
C’est beau d’avoir l’épée au poing, d’être le bras
De la victoire, et d’être un soldat! Tu verras
Comme c’est un bonheur de partir pour la guerre,
Et comme avec orgueil, quittant tout soin vulgaire,
Rois et vassaux, soldats et chefs, nous nous offrons

Un vaste gonflement des drapeaux sur nos fronts!
Quelle joie et quels cris lorsqu’on force une ville!
On se vautre à travers la populace vile!
La femme qu’on fait veuve, on lui prend un baiser.
Tu n’es pas encor d’âge à ne point t’amuser.
En échange d’un burg sur un rocher, je t’offre
Une tente de soie et de l’or à plein coffre,
Et l’altière rumeur des camps et des clairons.
Nous irons conquérir le monde, et nous aurons
Des filles et du vin, et tu feras ripaille
Au lieu de coucher seul dans ton trou sur la paille.
Lève ta herse, accepte, et soyons bons amis.
Ouvre-moi, je tiendrai tout ce que j’ai promis.
Sinon, prends garde à toi. J’ai l’habitude d’être
Patient à l’affront comme au feu le salpêtre.
J’aurai bien vite fait d’écraser ton donjon.
Cueillir un burg ainsi qu’on sarcle un sauvageon,
Et coucher une tour tout de son long dans l’herbe,
Ce sont mes jeux. Sais-tu, de ton château superbe
Ce qui restera, dis, lorsque j’aurai passé?
Une baraque informe au fond d’un noir fossé.
Et de ta haute tour de guerre? Une masure

Bonne aux moineaux cachant leurs nids dans l’embrasure.
Et du sauvage aspect de tes créneaux altiers?
Un tas de pierres, plein de houx et d’églantiers,
Où les femmes viendront faire sécher leur linge.
Je suis Cyadmis, duc et marquis de Thuringe.
Ouvre-moi.

Silence dans la tour.
Paraît un étendard portant à la hampe une couronne de roi.
Entre, derrière un groupe de trompettes, un homme à cheval vêtu de drap d’or,
ayant une couronne royale sur la tête. Il a un sceptre à la main. À sa
suite, marche une compagnie d’arbalétriers bourguignons couronnés de
fleurs; ils ont de grandes arbalètes, des boucliers faits d’une peau de bœuf
et hauts comme un homme, et les pieds nus dans des chaussures de corde.
Tous s’arrêtent.
Le duc et sa troupe se rangent.
L’homme à couronne royale fait face à la tour. La fanfare cesse.
HUG, parlant à la tour.
Je suis roi d’Arle aux verts coteaux,
Et j’ai pour fiefs Orange et Saint-Paul-Trois-Châteaux;
À quiconque me brave on sait ce qu’il en coûte,
Et je m’appelle Hug, fils de Boron. Écoute,

Homme de ces monts, toi qui fais de l’ombre ici.
Je ne te vois pas, maître obscur du burg noirci;
Mais derrière ton mur, tu songes; je te parle.
Tu n’es pas sans avoir entendu parler d’Arle,
Dont l’aïeul est Priam, car sur nos monts chenus,
Avant les Phocéens, les Troyens sont venus;
Arle est fille de Troie et mère de Grenoble,
Isidore la nomme une ville très-noble,
Et Théodoric, comte et roi des goths, l’aima.
Les Français ne l’auront jamais. Gênes, Palma,
Mayorque, Rhode et Tyr sont mes ports tributaires,

J’ai le Rhône, et l’Autriche est une de mes terres.

Arle est riche; à la Diète elle achète des voix;
Les califes lui font de précieux envois;
Elle reçoit par mer les dons de ces hautesses,
Les odeurs d’Arabie, et les délicatesses
De l’Asie, et telle est la beauté de ses tours
Qu’elles attirent l’aigle et chassent les vautours.
Mon sceptre est salué par cent vassaux, tous princes.
J’ai le Rhin aux sept monts, la Gaule aux sept provinces.
T’attaquer, toi vieillard, j’en serais bien fâché.
Donne-nous ta montagne, et je t’offre un duché.
Je t’offre en ma Bourgogne autant de bonne terre
Qu’on en voit de mauvaise en ce mont solitaire.
Accepte, car nos champs donnent beaucoup de blé.
Le trouvère Ericus d’Auxerre en a parlé.

Arles t’attend. Je t’offre en ma ville latine
Un palais où, vieillards à la voix enfantine,
Les poëtes viendront, hôtes mélodieux,
Te chanter, comme au temps qu’on croyait aux faux dieux.
Tu seras un seigneur dans mon pompeux cortége,
Et tu présideras des cours d’amour. La neige,
La bise, le brouillard, les ouragans hurlants,
Font une sombre fête à tes fiers cheveux blancs,
Car cet âpre sommet a, sous le vent sonore,
Plus d’hiver que d’été, plus de nuit que d’aurore.

Viens te chauffer, vieillard. Je t’offre le midi.
Tu cueilleras la rose et le lys d’Engaddi.
Accepte. On trouve ainsi moyen de plaire aux femmes;
Car il est gracieux de s’approcher des dames
En souriant avec des bouquets dans les mains.
L’aloès, le palmier, les œillets, les jasmins
Emplissent nos jardins d’encens et d’allégresse,
Et l’ancien dieu Printemps, qu’on adorait en Grèce,
N’avait pas plus de fleurs quand il les rassembla

Toutes, pour les offrir aux abeilles d’Hybla.
Lève la herse, abats le pont, ouvre la porte,
Accepte ce que moi, roi d’Arles, je t’apporte.

Silence dans la tour.
La fumée s’épaissit et devient rougeâtre.
Le roi se range près du duc.
Fanfare.
Paraît une bannière de drap d’or, portant un grand aigle de sable,
éployé. Des sonneurs de trompes et des batteurs de cymbales la précèdent.
Derrière la bannière, entre un homme à cheval, vêtu de pourpre, ayant
dans la main un globe, et sur la tête la couronne impériale.
Il est suivi d’une poutre à tête de bélier de bronze, portée par des Croates
nus, hauts de six pieds. Le Bélier est flanqué de montagnards tyroliens
en jaquettes bariolées, armés de frondes.

Tout ce cortège s’arrête et fait face à la tour. Les trompes et les cymbales
se taisent.
OTHON, tourné vers la tour.
Othon, empereur, parle à Welf, baron bandit,
Et le bandit se cache, et l’empereur lui dit :
Vassal, ouvre ton burg. Je viens te faire grâce.
Welf, quand c’est l’empereur d’Allemagne qui passe,
La clémence au doux front marche à côté de lui.
Mais l’homme absous, c’est peu; je veux l’homme Ébloui.
Quand l’empereur pardonne, il donne une province.
Le duc te fait soldat, le roi duc, et moi prince.
Chacun de nous, suivant sa taille, te grandit.
Je puis, si je le veux, te mettre en interdit;
J’aime mieux t’attirer, moi centre, dans ma sphère,
Te couvrir de splendeur et d’aurore, et te faire
Roi près de l’empereur, astre près du soleil.
Ton pennon couronné sera presque pareil
À ma bannière, alors qu’on tremble, et que la terre
Se courbe et cherche à fuir sous mon cri militaire,
Et qu’on voit s’envoler dans l’orage en avant

L’hydre noire au bec d’aigle ouvrant son aile au vent!
Welf, obéis. Je suis celui qui tient le globe.
J’ai la guerre et la paix dans les plis de ma robe.
Je t’offre la Hongrie, un royaume. Veux-tu?

Silence dans la tour.

Fanfare.

L’empereur se range près du roi et du duc.

Paraît une grande croix d’or à trois branches. Derrière le porte-croix, qui est habillé de violet, vient, sur une mule blanche, un vieillard vêtu de blanc, qui a la tiare en tête. Il est seul, sans gardes. Le porte-croix s’arrête.

La fanfare se tait. Le vieillard parle à la tour.

SYLVESTRE.

Moi, j’ai les clefs. La force est moins que la vertu.
Deux mains jointes font plus d’ouvrage sur la terre
Que tout le roulement des machines de guerre.
César est grand; mais Christ, à la douceur enclin,
Près de l’homme de pourpre a mis l’homme de lin.
Je suis le Père. En moi la lumière se lève,
Et ce que l’empereur commence, je l’achève;
Il absout pour la terre, et j’absous pour le ciel.
Le grand César ne peut rien donner d’éternel.
Il t’offre une couronne, et moi je t’offre une âme;

La tienne. En t’isolant, comme en un schisme infâme,
Triste excommunié, tu l’as perdue, hélas!
Je te la rends. Frémis, vieillard, tu reculas
Vers Satan, et tu fis outrage au ciel propice
Quand tu mis entre nous et toi ce précipice.
Fils, veux-tu regagner ta part du paradis,
Rentrer chez les élus, fuir de chez les maudits?
Cède à moi qui suis pape, héritier des apôtres.

Un homme paraît entre deux créneaux au haut de la tour. Il est tout habillé de fer. Sa barbe blanche passe sous sa visière baissée. Il se

découpe en noir sur le fond de neige de la montagne.
La nuit commence à tomber.

SCÈNE TROISIÈME

LES MÊMES, WELF.

WELF, du haut de la tour.

Que me veut-on? Passez votre chemin, vous autres.
Je hais ton glaive, ô duc. Je hais ton sceptre, ô roi.
César, je hais ton globe impérial. Et toi,
Pape, je ne crois pas à tes clefs. Qu’ouvrent-elles?
Des enfers. Tu mens, pape, et tes fureurs sont telles
Que Rome est le cachot du Christ, je te le dis.
Et pour voir en toi l’homme ouvrant le paradis,
Le Père, j’attendrai, pape, que tu détèles
Tous ces hideux chevaux, Guerre aux rages mortelles,
Haine, Anathème, Orgueil, Vengeance à l’œil de feu.

Monstres par qui tu fais traîner le char de Dieu!
Les chevriers, qu’on voit rôdant de cime en cime,
Sont de meilleurs pasteurs que vous, prêtres; j’estime
Plus que vos crosses d’or d’archevêque ou d’abbé,
Leur bâton d’olivier sauvage au bout courbé.
Bénis soient leurs troupeaux paissant dans les cytises!
Oui, les femmes font faire aux hommes des sottises,
Roi d’Arles; mais j’ai, moi, c’est pourquoi je suis fort,
Pour épouse ma tour, pour amante la mort.
En guise de clairon l’ouragan m’accompagne.
Que peux-tu donc m’offrir qui vaille ma montagne,
César, roi des Romains et des Bohémiens?
Quand tu me donnerais ton aigle! J’ai les miens.
Que venez-vous chercher? Qu’est-ce qui vous amène?
Rois, je suis dans ces bois la seule face humaine.
La terre sait vos noms et les mêle à ses pleurs.
Vous êtes des preneurs de villes, des voleurs
De nations, les chefs de l’éternel pillage.
Que voulez-vous de moi? Je n’ai pas un village.

Vous êtes ici-bas les semeurs de l’effroi.
Le genre humain subit le duc, souffre le roi;
Tu l’opprimes, César; Saint-Père, tu le pilles.

Vos lansquenets font rage, et violent les filles
Qui plongent leurs bras blancs dans le van plein de blé;
Il semble, tant par vous l’univers est troublé,
Que l’air manque aux humains et la rosée aux plantes;
Sur la sainte charrue on voit vos mains sanglantes.
Rien n’ose croître, et rien n’ose aimer. Moi je suis
Un spectre en liberté songeant au fond des nuits.
Vous êtes des héros faisant des faits célèbres.
Est-ce que j’ai besoin de vous dans mes ténèbres?
Je n’ai rien. Pas un homme auprès de moi ne vit.
On trouve dans ces monts l’air que rien n’asservit,
Le ravin, le rocher, des ronces, des cavernes,
Des lacs tristes, pareils aux antiques Avernes,
Le bois noir, le vieux mur par les hiboux choisi,
Le nuage, et c’est tout. Qui vous attire ici?
Pourquoi venir? C’est donc pour me prendre de l’ombre?
Moi, baron dans ma tour, larve dans un décombre,
Je garde ce désert terrible, et j’en ai soin.
L’immense liberté du tonnerre a besoin

De gouffres, de sommets, d’espace, de nuées
Sans cesse par le vent de l’ombre remuées,
D’azur sombre, et de rien qui ressemble à des rois,
Si ce n’est pour tomber sur leur tête. Je crois
En Dieu. Prêtre, entends-tu? Quoi, ce bois où nous sommes
Tente les rois! Les rois n’ont pas assez des hommes!
Mais contentez-vous donc, compagnons couronnés,
De ce tas de vivants que vous exterminez!
Je possède ce mont, et ce mont me possède,
Il m’abrite, et sur lui je veille. Ainsi l’on s’aide.
Moi, je suis l’âme, et vous, vous êtes les démons.
Je descends des géants qui, marchant sur les monts,
Et les pressant du pied, faisaient jaillir des marbres

Les sources au-dessus desquelles sont les arbres.
Puisqu'autour du sommet superbe, tout s'éteint,
Puisque la bête brute, en son auguste instinct,
Proteste, alors que l'homme à plat ventre se couche,

Ah! puisque rien n'est libre à moins d'être farouche,
De mes noirs sangliers, de mes ours, de mes loups,
Vous n'approcherez pas, princes; j'en suis jaloux.
Messeigneurs, savez-vous pourquoi? C'est que ces bêtes
Ces êtres lourds et durs, ces monstres, sont honnêtes.
Ils n'ont pas de Séjan, ils n'ont pas de Rufin;
Leur cruauté n'est pas le crime; c'est la faim.
Vous, rois, dans vos festins, au bruit sacré des lyres,
Gais, couronnés de fleurs, échangeant des sourires,
Pour usurper un trône, ou même sans raison,
Vous vous versez les uns aux autres du poison;
Vos poignards emmanchés de perles font des choses
Horribles, et, parmi les lauriers et les roses,
Teints de sang, vous restez éblouissants toujours;
Moi, je choisis les loups, et j'aime mieux les ours;
Et je préfère, rois qu'un vil cortége encense,
À vos crimes riants leur féroce innocence.
Allez-vous-en. — Fuyez. Quoi! ne sentez-vous pas
Tout un hérissement fauve autour de vos pas!
Vous bravez donc, puissants aveugles, le murmure
Qui répond dans l'abîme au bruit de mon armure,
L'amour qu'a pour moi l'ombre, et l'appui que j'aurais
Dans la virginité des profondes forêts.
J'ai sous ma garde un coin de paradis sauvage,
Un mont farouche et doux. Ici point de ravage
Montrant que l'homme fut heureux dans ces beaux lieux;

Point de honte montrant qu'il y fut orgueilleux.
L'onde est libre, le vent est pur, la foudre est juste.
Rois, que venez-vous faire en ce désert auguste?
Le gouffre est noir sans vous, sans vous le ciel est bleu.
N'usurpez pas ce mont; je le conserve à Dieu.

Rois, l’honneur exista jadis. J’en suis le reste.
C’est bien. Partez. S’il est un bruit que je déteste,
C’est le bourdonnement inutile des voix.
Il disparaît.
CYADMIS.
Il nous brave!
HUG.
Couvrons nos soldats de pavois.
Traînons une baliste. Apportons les échelles.
À l’assaut!
OTHON.
À l’assaut!
SYLVESTRE, montrant le précipice.
Si vous n’avez pas d’ailes,
Vous ne franchirez pas cet abîme. Vos ponts
Ne pourront au roc vif enfoncer leurs crampons.
Les torrents dans ce trou tombent. Et votre armée,
Comme eux, en y croulant, y deviendra fumée.

CYADMIS, regardant.
C’est vrai, le précipice est sans fond.
HUG, se penchant.
Quel fossé!
OTHON, regardant et reculant.
On ne peut passer là que par le pont baissé.
CYADMIS, touchant le rocher.
Auprès de ce granit le marbre serait tendre.
OTHON, à Sylvestre.
Que nous conseille donc Ta Sainteté?
SYLVESTRE.
D’attendre.
La nuit vient. Et le temps qui s’écoule est pour nous.
Cachez dans le ravin des gardes à genoux.
Faites le guet.

Tous s’en vont. Il ne reste que des pointes de piques presque indistinctes dans un pli du ravin.

Il commence à neiger.
Crépuscule. Noirceur croissante de la tour et de la montagne. Un enfant paraît dans un coude du rocher. C'est une petite fille, pieds nus, en haillons; une mendiante.
Elle vient du côté opposé à celui par où les rois sont sortis.
Elle se traîne dans la neige qui s'épaissit.
Elle regarde autour d'elle avec inquiétude, et monte péniblement la pente qui mène au bord du précipice.
Profond silence. Les pointes des piques restent immobiles.

SCÈNE QUATRIÈME

UNE MENDIANTE, ENFANT.

LA MENDIANTE.
J'ai froid. Comme il fait noir! Personne.
Du bruit? Je crois que c'est une cloche qui sonne.
Non, c'est le vent.
Apercevant la tour.
Un mur! On dirait un beffroi.
Frissonnant.

Il me semble que j'ai des bêtes près de moi.
Jésus!
Avançant.
Ah! le chemin finit ici. Pourrai-je
Aller plus loin?
Regardant dans le précipice.
Ceci, c'est un trou.
Grelottant.
Comme il neige!
Pourtant je crois bien voir en face une maison.
Non, c'est noir.
Songeant.
Est-ce vrai qu'on vous met en prison
Parce que vous allez dans les champs toute seule?
Mon Dieu, j'ai peur! Et puis les loups ouvrent la gueule

Et marchent dans les bois avec les revenants.

Où suis-je? Cette route est pleine de tournants.
J’ai perdu mon chemin. Ce n’est plus que des pierres.
Si j’essayais un peu de dire mes prières?
Regardant le burg.

Est-ce une maison? Non. C’est du rocher que j’ai
Pris pour un mur. Je meurs! Ah! je n’ai pas mangé.
J’ai les pieds écorchés par les cailloux. Ma mère!
WELF, paraissant entre les créneaux.
Qui m’appelle?
SCÈNE CINQUIÈME

LA MENDIANTE, WELF.

WELF, tournant une lanterne sourde vers le précipice.
Quelqu’un est là?
LA MENDIANTE.
De la lumière!
WELF, regardant.
On dirait un enfant. Qu’es-tu? fille ou garçon?
LA MENDIANTE.
Monseigneur, je voudrais entrer dans la maison.
WELF.
D’où viens-tu?

LA MENDIANTE.
Je n’ai pas de pays sur la terre.
WELF.
Où vas-tu?
LA MENDIANTE.
Je ne sais.
WELF.
Où sont tes père et mère?
LA MENDIANTE.
Je n’en ai pas. Je sais que les autres en ont.

Voilà tout.
WELF.
En venant du côté de ce mont,
N’as-tu pas rencontré des gens armés?
LA MENDIANTE.
Personne.
WELF.
Comme ils ont pris la fuite! Ainsi le daim frissonne
Devant l’ours.
LA MENDIANTE.
Je suis fille, et j’ai dix ans; je vais
Devant moi, je mendie, et le temps est mauvais,
Je voudrais me chauffer devant la cheminée,
Et je n’ai pas mangé de toute la journée.
WELF.
Entre, enfant. Viens souper, et viens, sous l’œil de Dieu,

Dormir sur un bon lit à côté d’un bon feu.
La montagne est l’aïeule et je suis le grand-père.
Le burg sera ton nid comme il est mon repaire.
Le brasier, qui devait chasser les bataillons,
Va faire mieux encore et sécher tes haillons;
Au lieu de voir, devant sa flamme, tout l’empire
Reculer effrayé, je te verrai sourire.
Dieu soit béni! je n’ai pas fait mon feu pour rien.
Cela commençait mal et cela finit bien.
Ah! tu t’en allais donc sans savoir où, perdue,
Ne voyant que du noir dans toute l’étendue!
Il ne sera pas dit, ma fille, qu’à ton cri,
Le vieux roc foudroyé ne s’est pas attendri.
Dans la grande montagne entre, pauvre petite;
Et sois chez toi. Je vais baisser le pont.

Il disparaît. La lumière descend de meurtrière en meurtrière. Le pont commence
à s’abaisser. On voit la lumière entre les barreaux de la herse. La
herse se lève, le pont se baisse et rejoint le bord du précipice.

Welf, la lanterne à la main, traverse le pont et vient à l’enfant.
Viens.

L’enfant prend la main de Welf.
Mouvement dans les piques. Clameurs dans le ravin. Des soldats sortent d’une embuscade, et se précipitent sur Welf. Cyadmis est à leur tête.

SCÈNE SIXIÈME

LES MÊMES, CYADMIS, SOLDATS,
puis les GENS DU PEUPLE.

CYADMIS, l’épée nue.
Vite!
Tous sur lui!

Welf est saisi. Il se débat. On le garrotte. Le pont est occupé. Le burg est envahi. La forteresse s’emplit de soldats portant des torches. Cyadmis regarde avec triomphe Welf enchaîné et silencieux.
Welf est pris!
LA MENDIANTE, joignant les mains devant Welf.
Monseigneur! ...
LES SOLDATS.
Nous l’avons!
CYADMIS.
Le sauvage est pris! Gloire aux drapeaux esclavons!
Accourent les bourgeois et les paysans du commencement.
Ils se groupent autour de Welf prisonnier.
LE BOURGEOIS.
Tiens, il s’est laissé prendre. Imbécile!
LE PAYSAN.
Une grive
Prise au miroir.
LE BOURGEOIS.
Tant mieux.

LE VIEILLARD.

Oui. Vive le duc!
L’ÉTUDIANT.
Vive
Le roi!
LE BOURGEOIS.
Vive le pape!
LE PAYSAN.
Et vive l’empereur!
LE VIEILLARD, regardant Welf garrotté.
Je le croyais plus grand qu’un autre.
LE BOURGEOIS.
Quelle erreur!
Il est petit.
LE PAYSAN, au bourgeois.
Il n’est pas plus grand que vous n’êtes.
LE BOURGEOIS.
Quelle idée avait-il de défendre les bêtes?
Les hommes, passe encor.

LE VIEILLARD.
Tout au plus.
L’ÉTUDIANT.
C’est un fou.
LE VIEILLARD.
S’amuser à monter la garde au bord d’un trou!
C’est ridicule.
LE BOURGEOIS.
Il est même laid. À tout prendre,
Je le vaux. À bas Welf!
LE PAYSAN.
Moi, j’irai le voir pendre.
LE BOURGEOIS.
Je ne donnerais pas de sa peau deux écus.
Huées et ricanements autour de Welf.
WELF.
Tant le rire est aisé derrière les vaincus!

LE POËTE, À WELF

Tu fus grand, c’est pourquoi l’on t’outrage. Sois triste,
Et pardonne. La foule ingrate et vaine existe,
Elle livre quiconque est par le sort livré,
Et raille d’autant plus qu’elle a plus admiré.
Que ton souvenir reste à la sombre vallée,
Qu’on entende pleurer la source inconsolée,
Que l’humble oiseau t’appelle et te mêle à son chant,
Et que le grand œil bleu des biches te cherchant
Se mouille, et soit rempli de lueurs effarées.
Si la mer prononçait des noms dans ses marées,
Ô vieillard, ce serait des noms comme le tien.
Tu fus l’ami, l’appui, le tuteur, le soutien
En haut, de l’arbre immense, en bas, du frêle arbuste;

Un jour les voyageurs sur ton rocher robuste
Monteront, et, penchés, tâcheront de te voir,
Vaincu superbe, au fond du précipice noir,
Et leurs yeux chercheront ton fantôme sublime
Sous l’entrecroisement des branches dans l’abîme.

IX

AVERTISSEMENTS

ET

CHÂTIMENTS

LE TRAVAIL DES CAPTIFS

Dieu dit au roi : Je suis ton Dieu. Je veux un temple.

C’est ainsi, dans l’azur où l’astre le contemple,
Que Dieu parla; du moins le prêtre l’entendit.
Et le roi vint trouver les captifs, et leur dit :
— En est-il un de vous qui sache faire un temple?
— Non, dirent-ils. — J’en vais tuer cent pour l’exemple,
Dit le roi. Dieu demande un temple en son courroux.
Ce que Dieu veut du roi, le roi le veut de vous.
C’est juste. —
C’est pourquoi l’on fit mourir cent hommes.

Alors un des captifs cria : — Sire, nous sommes
Convaincus. Faites-nous, roi, dans les environs,
Donner une montagne, et nous la creuserons.
— Une caverne? dit le roi. — Roi qui gouvernes,
Dieu ne refuse point d’entrer dans les cavernes,
Dit l’homme, et ce n’est pas une rébellion
Que faire un temple à Dieu de l’antre du lion.
— Faites, dit le roi.
L’homme eut donc une montagne;

Et les captifs, traînant les chaînes de leur bagne,
Se mirent à creuser ce mont, nommé Galgal;
Et l’homme était leur chef, bien qu’il fût leur égal,
Mais dans la servitude, ombre où rien ne pénètre,
On a pour chef l’esclave à qui parle le maître.

Ils creusèrent le mont Galgal profondément.
Quand ils eurent fini, l’homme dit : — Roi clément,
Vos prisonniers ont fait ce que le ciel désire;
Mais ce temple est à vous avant d’être à Dieu, sire;

Que votre Éternité daigne venir le voir.
— J’y consens, répondit le roi. — Notre devoir,
Reprit l’humble captif prosterné sur les dalles,
Est d’adorer la cendre où marchent vos sandales;
Quand vous plaît-il de voir notre œuvre? — Sur-le-champ.
Alors le maître et l’homme, à ses pieds se couchant,
Furent mis sous un dais sur une plate-forme;
Un puits était bouché par une pierre énorme,
La pierre fut levée, un câble hasardeux
Soutint les quatre coins du trône, et tous les deux

Descendirent au fond du puits, unique entrée
De la montagne à coups de pioches éventrée.
Quand ils furent en bas, le prince s’étonna.
— C’est de cette façon qu’on entre dans l’Etna,
C’est ainsi qu’on pénètre au trou de la Sibylle,
C’est ainsi qu’on aborde à l’Hadès immobile,
Mais ce n’est pas ainsi qu’on arrive au saint lieu.
— Qu’on monte ou qu’on descende, on va toujours à Dieu,
Dit l’architecte ayant comme un forçat la marque;
Ô roi, soyez ici le bienvenu, monarque
Qui parmi les plus grands et parmi les premiers
Rayonnez, comme un cèdre au milieu des palmiers
Règne, et comme Pathmos brille entre les Sporades.
— Qu’est ce bruit? dit le roi. — Ce sont mes camarades
Qui laissent retomber le couvercle du puits.
— Mais nous ne pourrons plus sortir. — Rois, vos appuis
Sont les astres, ô prince, et votre cimeterre
Fait reculer la foudre, et vous êtes sur terre
Le soleil comme au ciel le soleil est le roi.
Que peut craindre ici-bas Votre Hautesse? — Quoi!
Plus d’issue! — Ô grand roi, roi sublime, qu’importe!
Vous êtes l’homme à qui Dieu même ouvre la porte.
Alors le roi cria : — Plus de jour, plus de bruit,
Tout est noir, je ne vois plus rien. Pourquoi la nuit
Est-elle dans ce temple ainsi qu’en une cave?
Pourquoi? — Parce que c’est ta tombe, dit l’esclave.

HOMO DUPLEX

Un jour, le duc Berthold, neveu du comte Hugo,
Marquis du Rhin, seigneur de Fribourg en Brisgau,
Traversait en chassant la forêt de Thuringe.
Il vit sous un grand arbre un ange auprès d'un singe.
Ces deux êtres, pareils à deux lutteurs grondants,
Se regardaient l'un l'autre avec des yeux ardents;
Le singe ouvrait sa griffe et l'ange ouvrait son aile.
Et l'ange dit : — Berthold de Zœhringen, qu'appelle
Dans la verte forêt le bruit joyeux des cors,
Tu vois ici ton âme à côté de ton corps.
Écoute : moi je suis ton esprit, lui ta bête.
Chacun de tes péchés lui fait lever la tête;
Chaque bonne action que tu fais me grandit.
Tant que tu vis, je lutte et j'étreins ce bandit;
À ta mort tout finit dans l'ombre ou dans l'aurore.
Car c'est moi qui t'enlève ou lui qui te dévore.

VERSET DU KORAN

La terre tremblera d'un profond tremblement,
Et les hommes diront : Qu'a-t-elle? En ce moment,
Sortant de l'ombre en foule ainsi que des couleuvres,
Pâles, les morts viendront pour regarder leurs œuvres.
Ceux qui firent le mal le poids d'une fourmi
Le verront, et pour eux Dieu sera moins ami;
Ceux qui firent le bien ce que pèse une mouche

Le verront, et Satan leur sera moins farouche.

L'AIGLE DU CASQUE

Ô sinistres forêts, vous avez vu ces ombres
Passer, l’une après l’autre, et, parmi vos décombres,
Vos ruines, vos lacs, vos ravins, vos halliers,
Vous avez vu courir ces deux noirs chevaliers;
Vous avez vu l’immense et farouche aventure;
Les nuages, qui sont errants dans la nature,
Ont eu cette épouvante énorme au-dessous d’eux;
La victoire fut sourde et l’exploit fut hideux;
Et l’herbe et la broussaille et les fleurs et les plantes
Et les branches en sont encor toutes tremblantes.
L’arbre en parle au rocher, l’antre en parle au menhir;
Le vieux mont Lothian semble se souvenir;

Et la fauvette en cause avec la tourterelle.
Et maintenant, disons ce que fut la querelle
Entre cet homme fauve et ce tragique enfant.
*

Le fond, nul ne le sait. L’obscur passé défend
Contre le souvenir des hommes l’origine
Des rixes de Ninive et des guerres d’Égine,
Et montre seulement la mort des combattants
Après l’échange amer des rires insultants;
Ainsi les anciens chefs d’Écosse et de Northumbre
Ne sont guère pour nous que du vent et de l’ombre;

Ils furent orageux, ils furent ténébreux,
C’est tout; ces sombres lords se dévoraient entr’eux;
L’homme vient volontiers vers l’homme à coups d’épée
Bruce hait Baliol comme César Pompée;
Pourquoi? Nous l’ignorons. Passez, souffles du ciel.
Dieu seul connaît la nuit.
Le comte Strathaël,
Roi d’Angus, pair d’Écosse, est presque centenaire;
Le gypaëte cache un petit dans son aire,
Et ce lord a le fils de son fils près de lui;
Toute sa race ainsi qu’un blême éclair a lui

Et s’est éteinte; il est ce qui reste d’un monde;
Mais Dieu près du front chauve a mis la tête blonde,
L’aïeul a l’orphelin. Jacque a six ans. Le lord

Un soir l’appelle, et dit : — Je sens venir la mort.
Dans dix ans, tu seras chevalier. Fils, écoute.
Et, le prenant à part sous une sombre voûte,
Il parla bas longtemps à l’enfant adoré,
Et quand il eut fini l’enfant lui dit : — J’irai.
Et l’aïeul s’écria : — Pourtant il est sévère
En sortant du berceau de monter au calvaire,
Et seize ans est un âge où, certe, on aurait droit
De repousser du pied le seuil du tombeau froid,
D’ignorer la rancune obscure des familles,
Et de s’en aller rire avec les belles filles!
L’aïeul mourut.
*

Le temps fuit. Dix ans ont passé.
*

Tiphaine est dans sa tour que protége un fossé,
Debout, les bras croisés, sur la haute muraille.
Voilà longtemps qu’il n’a tué quelqu’un, il bâille.

Dix ans, cela suffit pour que les chênes verts
Soient d’une obscurité plus épaisse couverts;
Dix ans, cela suffit pour qu’un enfant grandisse.

En dix ans, certe, Orphée oublierait Eurydice,
Admète son épouse et Thisbé son amant,
Mais pas un chevalier n’oublierait un serment.

C’est le soir; et Tiphaine est oisif. Les mélèzes
Font au loin un bruit vague au penchant des falaises.

Ce Tiphaine est le lord sauvage des forêts;

Pas un loup n'oserait l'approcher de trop près;
Il s'est fait un royaume avec une montagne;
On le craint en Écosse, en Northumbre, en Bretagne;
On ne l'attaque pas, tant il est toujours seul;
Être dans le désert, c'est vivre en un linceul.
Il fait peur. Est-il prince? est-il né sous le chaume?
On ne sait; un bandit qui serait un fantôme,
C'est Tiphaine; et les vents et les lacs et les bois
Semblent ne prononcer son nom qu'à demi-voix;
Pourtant ce n'est qu'un homme; il bâille.
Lord Tiphaine
A mis autour de lui l'effroi comme une chaîne;
Mais il en sent le poids; tout s'enfuit devant lui;
Mais l'orgueil est la forme altière de l'ennui.
N'ayant personne à vaincre, il ne sait plus que faire.
Soudain il voit venir l'écuyer qu'il préfère,
Bernard, un bon archer qui sait lire, et Bernard
Dit : — Milord, préparez la hache et le poignard.
Un seigneur vous écrit. — Quel est ce seigneur? — Sire,

C'est Jacques, lord d'Angus. — Soit. Qu'est-ce qu'il désire?
— Vous tuer. — Réponds-lui que c'est bien.
Peu de temps
Suffit pour rapprocher deux hautains combattants
Et pour dire à la mort qu'elle se tienne prête,
L'éclair n'entendrait pas Dieu lui criant : Arrête!
Arriver, c'est la loi du sort.
Il s'écoula
Une semaine. Puis, de Lorne à Knapdala,
Douze sonneurs de cor en dalmatiques rouges
Firent savoir à tous, aux manants dans leurs bouges,
Au prêtre en son église, au baron dans sa tour,
Que deux lords entendaient se rencontrer tel jour,
Que saint Gildas serait patron de la rencontre,
Et qu'Angus étant pour, Tiphaine serait contre;
Car l'usage est d'avoir un saint pour les soldats,
En Irlande Patrick, en Écosse Gildas;

C’est pour ou contre un saint que tout combat se livre;
Avec la liberté de fuir et de poursuivre,
D’être ferme ou tremblant, magnanime ou couard,
Cruel comme Beauclerc, ou bon comme Édouard.
*

L’endroit pour le champ-clos fut choisi très-farouche.
Le dur hiver, qui change en pierre l’eau qu’il touche,
Ne laissait pousser là sous la pluie et le vent
Que des sapins cassés l’un par l’autre souvent,
Les arbres n’étant pas plus calmes que les hommes;
Tout sur terre est en proie, ainsi que nous le sommes,
Au souffle, à la tempête, au funeste aquilon.

Une corde est nouée aux sapins d’un vallon;
Elle marque une enceinte, une clairière ouverte
Sur des champs où la Tweed coule dans l’herbe verte,
Lente et molle rivière aux roseaux murmurants.
Un pêle-mêle obscur d’arbres et de torrents,
D’ombre et d’écroulement, de vie et de ravage,
Entoure affreusement la clairière sauvage.
On en sort du côté de la plaine. Et de là
Viennent les paysans que le cor appela.

La lice est pavoisée, et sur les banderolles
On lit de fiers conseils et de graves paroles :
« — Brave qui n’est pas bon n’est brave qu’à demi. »
« — Soyez hospitalier, même à votre ennemi;
« Le chêne au bûcheron ne refuse pas l’ombre. »

Les pauvres gens des bois accourent en grand nombre;
Plusieurs sont encor peints comme étaient leurs aïeux,
Des cercles d’un bleu sombre agrandissent leurs yeux,
Sur leur tête attentive, étonnée et muette,

Les uns ont le héron, les autres la chouette,

Et l’on peut distinguer aux plumes du bonnet
Les Scots d’Abernethy des Pictes de Menheit;
Ils ont l’habit de cuir des antiques provinces;
Ils viennent contempler le combat de deux princes,
Mais restent à distance et regardent de loin,
Car ils ont peur; le peuple est un pâle témoin.

Si l’on ne voyait pas au ciel le tatouage
De l’azur, du rayon, de l’ombre et du nuage,
On n’apercevrait rien qu’un paysage noir;
L’œil dans un clair-obscur inquiétant à voir
S’enfonce, et la bruyère est morne, et dans la brume
On devine, au-delà des mers, l’Hékla qui fume
Ainsi qu’un soupirail d’enfer à l’horizon.
Le juge du camp, fils d’une altière maison,
Lord Kaine, est assisté de deux crieurs d’épée;
L’estrade est de peaux d’ours et de rennes drapée;
Et quatre exorciseurs redoutés du sabbat
Font la police, ainsi qu’il sied dans un combat.

Un prêtre dit la messe, et l’on chante une prose.
*

Fanfares. C’est Angus.
Un cheval d’un blanc rose
Porte un garçon doré, vermeil, sonnant du cor,
Qui semble presque femme et qu’on sent vierge encor;
Doux être confiant comme une fleur précoce.
Il a la jambe nue à la mode d’Écosse;
Plus habillé de soie et de lin que d’acier,
Il vient, gaîment suivi d’un bouffon grimacier;
Il regarde, il écoute, il rayonne, il ignore;
Et l’on croit voir l’entrée aimable de l’aurore.
On sent que, dans le monde étrange où nous passons,

Ce nouveau venu, plein de joie et de chansons,
Tel que l’oiseau qui sort de l’œuf et se délivre,

A le mystérieux contentement de vivre;
Pas d’être éblouissant qui ne soit ébloui,
Il rit. Ses témoins sont du même âge que lui;
Tous chantent, légers, fiers, laissant flotter les brides;
C’est Mar, Argyle, Athol, Rothsay, roi des Hébrides,
David, roi de Stirling, Jean, comte de Glascow;
Ils ont des colliers d’or ou de roses au cou;
Ainsi se presse, au fond des halliers, sous les aulnes,
Derrière un petit dieu l’essaim des jeunes faunes.
Hurrah! Cueillir des fleurs ou bien donner leur sang,
Que leur importe? Autour du comte adolescent,
Page et roi, dont Hébé serait la sœur jumelle,
Un vacarme charmant de panaches se mêle.
Ô jeunes gens, déjà risqués, à peine éclos!
Son cortége le suit jusqu’au seuil du champ-clos.
Puis on le quitte. Il faut qu’il soit seul; et personne
Ne peut plus l’assister dès que le clairon sonne;

Quoi qu’il advienne, il est en proie au dur destin.
On lit sur son écu, pur comme le matin,
La devise des rois d’Angus : Christ et lumière.
La jeunesse toujours arrive la première;
Il approche, joyeux, fragile, triomphant,
Plume au front; et le peuple applaudit cet enfant.
Et le vent profond souffle à travers les campagnes.

Tout à coup on entend la trompe des montagnes,
Chant des bois plus obscur que le glas du beffroi;
Et brusquement on sent de l’ombre autour de soi;
Bien qu’on soit sous le ciel, on se croit dans un antre.
Un homme vient du fond de la forêt. Il entre.
C’est Tiphaine.
C’est lui.
Hautain, dans le champ-clos,
Refoulant les témoins comme une hydre les flots,

Il pénètre. Il est droit sous l’armure saxonne.

Son cheval, qui connaît ce cavalier, frissonne.
Ce cheval noir et blanc marche sans se courber;
Il semble que le ciel sombre ait laissé tomber
Des nuages mêlés de lueurs sur sa croupe.
Tiphaine est seul; aucune escorte, aucune troupe;
Il tient sa lance; il a la chemise de fer,
La hache comme Oreste, et, comme Gaïfer,
Le poignard; sa visière est basse; elle le masque;
Grave, il avance, avec un aigle sur son casque.
Un mot sur sa rondache est écrit : Bellua.

Quand il vint, tout trembla, mais nul ne salua.
*

Les motifs du combat étaient sérieux, certes;
Mais ni le pâtre errant dans les landes désertes,

Ni l'ermite adorant dans sa grotte Jésus,
Personne sous le ciel ne les a jamais sus;
Et le juge du camp les ignorait lui-même.

Les deux lords, comme il sied à ce moment suprême,
Se parlèrent de loin.
— Bonjour, roi. — Bonjour, roi.
— Je viens te demander raison. Tu sais pourquoi?
— Que t'importe?
Et tous deux mirent la lance haute.
Le juge du camp dit : — Chacun de vous est l'hôte
Du sépulcre, et ne peut en sortir maintenant
Que si Dieu le permet au fond du ciel tonnant.
Puis il reprit, selon la coutume écossaise :
— Milord, quel âge as-tu? — Quarante ans. — Et toi? — Seize.
— C'est trop jeune, cria la foule. — Combattez,
Dit le juge. Et l'on fit le champ des deux côtés.

Être de même taille et de même équipage,
Combattre homme contre homme ou page contre page,

S’adosser à la tombe en face d’un égal,
Être Ajax contre Mars, Fergus contre Fingal,
C’est bien, et cela plaît à la romance épique;
Mais là le brin de paille, et là la lourde pique,

Ici le vaste Hercule, ici le doux Hylas,
Polyphème devant Acis, c’est triste, hélas!
Le péril de l’enfant fait songer à la mère;
Tous les Astyanax attendrissent Homère,
Et la lyre héroïque hésite à publier
Le combat du chevreuil contre le sanglier.

L’huissier fit le signal. Allez!
*

Tous deux partirent.
Ainsi deux éclairs vont l’un vers l’autre et s’attirent.

L’enfant aborda l’homme et fit bien son devoir;
Mais l’homme n’eut pas l’air de s’en apercevoir.
Tiphaine s’arrêta, muet, le laissant faire;
Ainsi, prête à crouler, l’avalanche diffère;

Ainsi l’enclume semble insensible au marteau;
Il était là, le poing fermé comme un étau,
Démon par le regard et sphinx par le silence;
Et l’enfant en était à sa troisième lance
Que Tiphaine n’avait pas encor riposté;
Sur cet homme de fer et de fatalité
Qui paraissait rêver au centre d’une toile,
Pas plus ému d’un choc que d’un souffle une étoile,
L’enfant frappait, piquait, taillait, recommençait,
Tantôt sur le cimier, tantôt sur le corset;
Et l’on eût dit la mouche attaquant l’araignée.
Sa face de sueur était toute baignée.
Tiphaine, tel qu’un roc, immobile et debout,
Méditait, et l’enfant s’essoufflait. Tout à coup

Tiphaine dit : Allons! Il leva sa visière,
Fit un rugissement de bête carnassière,

Et sur le jeune comte Angus il s'abattit
D'un tel air infernal que le pauvre petit
Tourna bride, jeta sa lance, et prit la fuite.

Alors commença l'âpre et sauvage poursuite,
Et vous ne lirez plus ceci qu'en frémissant.
*

Tremblant, piquant des deux, du côté qui descend,
Devant lui, n'importe où, dans la profondeur fauve,
Les bras au ciel, l'enfant épouvanté se sauve.
Son cheval l'aime et fait de son mieux. La forêt
L'accepte et l'enveloppe, et l'enfant disparaît.
Tous se sont écartés pour lui livrer passage.
En le risquant ainsi son aïeul fut-il sage?
Nul ne le sait; le sort est de mystères plein;
Mais la panique existe et le triste orphelin
Ne peut plus que s'enfuir devant la destinée.
Ah! pauvre douce tête au gouffre abandonnée!
Il s'échappe, il s'esquive, il s'enfonce à travers

Les hasards de la fuite obscurément ouverts,
Hagard, à perdre haleine, et sans choisir sa route;
Une clairière s'offre, il s'arrête, il écoute,
Le voilà seul; peut-être un dieu l'a-t-il conduit?
Tout à coup il entend dans les branches du bruit... —

Ainsi dans le sommeil notre âme d'effroi pleine
Parfois s'évade et sent derrière elle l'haleine
De quelque noir cheval de l'ombre et de la nuit;
On s'aperçoit qu'au fond du rêve on vous poursuit.
Angus tourne la tête, il regarde en arrière;
Tiphaine monstrueux bondit dans la clairière.
Ô terreur! et l'enfant, blême, égaré, sans voix,

Court et voudrait se fondre avec l’ombre des bois.
L’un fuit, l’autre poursuit. Acharnement lugubre!
Rien, ni le roc debout, ni l’étang insalubre,
Ni le houx épineux, ni le torrent profond,
Rien n’arrête leur course; ils vont, ils vont, ils vont!

Ainsi le tourbillon suit la feuille arrachée.
D’abord dans un ravin, tortueuse tranchée,
Ils serpentent, parfois se touchant presque; puis,
N’ayant plus que la fuite et l’effroi pour appuis,
Rapide, agile et fils d’une race écuyère,
L’enfant glisse, et, sautant par-dessus la bruyère,
Se perd dans le hallier comme dans une mer.
Ainsi courrait avril poursuivi par l’hiver.
Comme deux ouragans l’un après l’autre ils passent.
Les pierres sous leurs pas roulent, les branches cassent,
L’écureuil effrayé sort des buissons tordus.
Oh! comment mettre ici dans des vers éperdus
Les bonds prodigieux de cette chasse affreuse,
Le coteau qui surgit, le vallon qui se creuse,
Les précipices, l’antre obscur, l’escarpement,
Les deux sombres chevaux, le vainqueur écumant,
L’enfant pâle, et l’horreur des forêts formidables?

Il n’est pas pour l’effroi de lieux inabordables,
Et rien n’a jamais fait reculer la fureur;
Comme le cerf, le tigre est un ardent coureur;
Ils vont!
On n’entend plus, même au loin, les haleines
Du peuple bourdonnant qui s’en retourne aux plaines.
Le vaincu, le vainqueur courent tragiquement.
*

Le bois, calme et désert sous le bleu firmament,
Remuait mollement ses branchages superbes;
Les nids chantaient, les eaux murmuraient dans les herbes;
On voyait tout briller, tout aimer, tout fleurir.

Grâce! criait l’enfant, je ne veux pas mourir!

Mais son cheval se lasse et Tiphaine s’approche.

Tout à coup, d’un réduit creusé dans une roche,
Un vieillard au front blanc sort, et, levant les bras,
Dit : De tes actions un jour tu répondras;
Qui que tu sois, prends garde à la haine; elle enivre;
Celui qui va mourir pour celui qui doit vivre
T’implore. Ô chevalier, épargne cet enfant!

Tiphaine furieux d’un coup de hache fend
L’âpre rocher qui sert à ce vieillard d’asile,
Et dit : Tu vas le faire échapper, imbécile!
Et, sinistre, il remet son cheval au galop.

Quelle que soit la course et la hâte du flot,
Le vent lointain finit toujours par le rejoindre;
Angus entend venir Tiphaine, et le voit poindre
Parmi des profondeurs d’arbres, à l’horizon.

Un couvent d’où s’élève une vague oraison
Apparaît; on entend une cloche qui tinte;
Et des rayons du soir la haute église atteinte
S’ouvre, et l’on voit sortir du portail à pas lents
Une procession d’ombres en voiles blancs;
Ce sont des sœurs ayant à leur tête l’abbesse,
Et leur chant grave monte au ciel où le jour baisse;

Elles ont vu s’enfuir l’enfant désespéré;
Alors leur voix profonde a dit miserere;
L’abbesse les amène; elle dresse sa crosse
Entre l’adolescent frêle et l’homme féroce;
On porte devant elle un grand crucifix noir;
Toutes ces vierges, sœurs qu’enchaîne un saint devoir,
Pleurent sur le vainqueur comme sur la victime,
Et viennent opposer au passage d’un crime

Le Christ immense ouvrant ses bras au genre humain.
Tiphaine arrive sombre et la hache à la main,
Et crie à ce troupeau murmurant grâce! grâce!
— Colombes, ôtez-vous de là; le vautour passe!

La nuit vient, et toujours, tremblant, pleurant, fuyant,
L’enfant effaré court devant l’homme effrayant.
C’est l’heure où l’horizon semble un rêve, et recule.
Clair de lune, halliers, bruyères, crépuscule.
La poursuite s’acharne, et, plus qu’auparavant
Forcenée, à travers les arbres et le vent,

Fait peur à l’ombre même, et donne le vertige
Aux sapins sur les monts, aux roses sur leur tige.
L’enfant sans armes, l’homme avec son couperet,
Courent dans la noirceur des bois, et l’on dirait
Que dans la forêt spectre ils deviennent fantômes.

Une femme, d’un groupe obscur de toits de chaumes,
Sort, et ne peut parler, les larmes l’étouffant;
C’est une mère, elle a dans les bras son enfant,
Et c’est une nourrice, elle a le sein nu. — Grâce!
Dit-elle, en bégayant; et dans le vaste espace
Angus s’enfuit. — Jamais! dit Tiphaine inhumain.
Mais la femme à genoux lui barre le chemin.
— Arrête! sois clément, afin que Dieu t’exauce!
Grâce! Au nom du berceau, n’ouvre pas une fosse!
Sois vainqueur, c’est assez; ne sois pas assassin.
Fais grâce. Cet enfant que j’ai là sur mon sein

T’implore pour l’enfant que cherche ton épée.
Entends-moi; laisse fuir cette proie échappée.
Ah! tu ne tueras point, et tu m’écouteras,
Chevalier, puisque j’ai l’aurore dans mes bras.
Songe à ta mère. Eh bien, je suis mère comme elle.
Homme, respecte en moi la femme. — À bas, femelle!
Dit Tiphaine, et du pied il frappe ce sein nu.

Ce fut dans on ne sait quel ravin inconnu
Que Tiphaine atteignit le pauvre enfant farouche;
L’enfant pris n’eut pas même un râle dans la bouche;
Il tomba de cheval, et morne, épuisé, las,
Il dressa ses deux mains suppliantes, hélas!
Sa mère morte était dans le fond de la tombe,
Et regardait.
Tiphaine accourt, s’élance, tombe
Sur l’enfant, comme un loup dans les cirques romains,
Et d’un revers de hache il abat ces deux mains
Qui dans l’ombre élevaient vers les cieux la prière;

Puis, par ses blonds cheveux dans une fondrière
Il le traîne.
Et riant de fureur, haletant,
Il tua l’orphelin et dit : Je suis content!
Ainsi rit dans son antre infâme la tarasque.
*

Alors l’aigle d’airain qu’il avait sur son casque,
Et qui, calme, immobile et sombre, l’observait,
Cria : Cieux étoilés, montagnes que revêt
L’innocente blancheur des neiges vénérables,
Ô fleuves, ô forêts, cèdres, sapins, érables,
Je vous prends à témoin que cet homme est méchant!
Et cela dit, ainsi qu’un piocheur fouille un champ,
Comme avec sa cognée un pâtre brise un chêne,
Il se mit à frapper à coups de bec Tiphaine;
Il lui creva les yeux; il lui broya les dents;
Il lui pétrit le crâne en ses ongles ardents
Sous l’armet d’où le sang sortait comme d’un crible,
Le jeta mort à terre, et s’envola terrible.

X

LES SEPT

MERVEILLES DU MONDE

LES SEPT

MERVEILLES DU MONDE

*

Des voix parlaient; pour qui? Pour l'espace sans bornes,
Pour le recueillement des solitudes mornes,
Pour l'oreille, partout éparse, du désert;
Nulle part, dans la plaine où le regard se perd,
On ne voyait marcher la foule aux bruits sans nombre,
Mais on sentait que l'homme écoutait dans cette ombre.
Qui donc parlait? C'étaient des monuments pensifs,
Debout sur l'onde humaine ainsi que des récifs,
Calmes, et chacun d'eux semblait un personnage
Vivant, et se rendant lui-même témoignage.
Nulle rumeur n'osait à ces voix se mêler,
Et le vent se taisait pour les laisser parler,
Et le flot apaisait ses mystérieux râles.
Un soleil vague au loin dorait les frontons pâles.
Les astres commençaient à se faire entrevoir
Dans l'assombrissement religieux du soir.

I

LE TEMPLE D'ÉPHÈSE

Et l'une de ces voix, c'était la voix d'un temple,
Disait :
— Admirez-moi! Qui que tu sois, contemple;
Qui que tu sois, regarde et médite, et reçois
À genoux mon rayon sacré, qui que tu sois;
Car l'idéal est fait d'une étoile, et rayonne;
Et je suis l'idéal. Troie, Argos, Sicyone,

Ne sont rien près d’éphèse, et l’envieront toujours,
Ô peuple, éphèse ayant mon ombre sur ses tours.
Éphèse heureuse dit : « Si j’étais Delphe ou Thèbe,

« On verrait flamboyer sur mes dômes l’érèbe,
« Mes oracles feraient les hommes soucieux;
« Si j’étais Cos, j’irais forgeant les durs essieux;
« Si j’étais Tentyris, sombre ville du rêve,

« Mes pâtres, fronts sacrés en qui le ciel se lève,
« Regarderaient, à l’heure où naît le jour riant,
« Les constellations, penchant sur l’Orient,
« Verser dans l’infini leurs chariots pleins d’astres;
« Si j’étais Bactria, j’aurais des Zoroastres;
« Si j’étais Olympie en Élide, mes jeux
« Montreraient une palme aux lutteurs courageux,
« Les devins combattraient chez moi les astronomes,
« Et mes courses, rendant les dieux jaloux des hommes,
« Essouffleraient le vent à suivre Corœbus; —

« Mais à quoi bon chercher tant d’inutiles buts,
« Ayant, que l’aube éclate ou que le soir décline,
« Ce temple ionien debout sur ma colline,
« Et pouvant faire dire à la terre : c’est beau! »
Et ma ville a raison. Ainsi qu’un escabeau
Devant un trône, ainsi devant moi disparaissent
Les Parthénons fameux que les rayons caressent;
Ils sont l’effort, je suis le miracle.
À celui
Qui ne m’a jamais vu, le jour n’a jamais lui.
Ma tranquille blancheur fait venir les colombes;
Le monde entier me fête, et couvre d’hécatombes,

Et de rois inclinés, et de mages pensifs,
Mes grands perrons de jaspe aux clous d’argent massifs.
L’homme élève vers moi ses mains universelles.
Les éphèbes, portant de sonores crécelles,

Dansent sur mes parvis, jeunes fronts inégaux;
Sous ma porte est la pierre où Deuxippe d’Argos
S’asseyait, et d’Orphée expliquait les passages;
Mon vestibule sert de promenade aux sages,
Parlant, causant, avec des gestes familiers,
Tour à tour blancs et noirs dans l’ombre des piliers.

Corinthe en me voyant pleure, et l’art ionique
Me revêt de sa pure et sereine tunique.

Le mont porte en triomphe à son sommet hautain
L’épanouissement glorieux du matin,
Mais ma beauté n’est point par la sienne éclipsée,
Car le soleil n’est pas plus grand que la pensée;
Ce que j’étais hier, je le serai demain;
Je vis, j’ai sur mon front, siècles, l’esprit humain,
Et le génie, et l’art, ces égaux de l’aurore.

La pierre est dans la terre; âpre et froide, elle ignore;
Le granit est la brute informe de la nuit,
L’albâtre ne sait pas que l’aube existe et luit,
Le porphyre est aveugle et le marbre est stupide;
Mais que Ctésiphon passe, ou Dédale, ou Chrespide,

Qu’il fixe ses yeux pleins d’un divin flamboiement
Sur le sol où les rocs dorment profondément,
Tout s’éveille; un frisson fait remuer la pierre;
Lourd, ouvrant on ne sait quelle trouble paupière,
Le granit cherche à voir son maître, le rocher
Sent la statue en lui frémir et s’ébaucher,
Le marbre obscur s’émeut dans la nuit infinie
Sous la parenté sombre et sainte du génie,
Et l’albâtre enfoui ne veut plus être noir;
Le sol tressaille, il sent là-haut l’homme vouloir;
Et voilà que, sous l’œil de ce passant qui crée,
Des sourdes profondeurs de la terre sacrée,
Tout à coup, étageant ses murs, ses escaliers,

Sa façade et ses rangs d’arches et de piliers,
Fier, blanchissant, cherchant le ciel avec sa cime,
Monte et sort lentement l’édifice sublime,
Composé de la terre et de l’homme, unissant
Ce que dans sa racine a le chêne puissant
Et ce que rêve Euclide aidé de Praxitèle,
Mêlant l’éternel bloc à l’idée immortelle!

Mon frontispice appuie au calme entablement
Ses deux plans lumineux inclinés mollement,
Si doux qu’ils semblent faits pour coucher des déesses;

Parfois, comme un sein nu sous l’or des blondes tresses,
Je me cache parmi les nuages d’azur;
Trois sculpteurs sur ma frise, un volsque, Albus d’Anxur,
Un mède, Ajax de Suze, un grec, Phtos de Mégare,
Ont ciselé les monts où la meute s’égare,
Et la pudeur sauvage, et les dieux de la paix,
Des Triptolèmes nus parmi les blés épais,
Et des Cérès foulant sous leurs pieds des Bellones;
Cent-vingt-sept rois ont fait mes cent vingt-sept colonnes;
Je suis l’art radieux, saint, jamais abattu;
Ma symétrie auguste est sœur de la vertu;

Mon resplendissement couvre toute la Grèce;
Le rocher qui me porte est rempli d’allégresse,
Et la ville à mes pieds adore avec ferveur;
Sparte a reçu sa loi de Lycurgue rêveur,
Mantinée a reçu sa loi de Nicodore,
Athènes, qu’un reflet de divinité dore,
De Solon, grand pasteur des hommes convaincus,
La Crète de Minos, Locres de Séleucus,
Moi, le temple, je suis législateur d’Éphèse;
Le peuple en me voyant comprend l’ordre et s’apaise;
Mes degrés sont les mots d’un code, mon fronton
Pense comme Thalès, parle comme Platon,

Mon portique serein, pour l’âme qui sait lire,
A la vibration pensive d’une lyre,
Mon péristyle semble un précepte des cieux;
Toute loi vraie étant un rhythme harmonieux,
Nul homme ne me voit sans qu’un dieu l’avertisse;
Mon austère équilibre enseigne la justice;
Je suis la vérité bâtie en marbre blanc;
Le beau, c’est, ô mortels, le vrai plus ressemblant;
Venez donc à moi, foule, et, sur mes saintes marches,
Mêlez vos cœurs, jetez vos lois, posez vos arches;
Hommes, devenez tous frères en admirant;

Réconciliez-vous devant le pur, le grand,
Le chaste, le divin, le saint, l’impérissable;
Car, ainsi que l’eau coule et comme fuit le sable,
Les ans passent, mais moi je demeure; je suis
Le blanc palais de l’aube et l’autel noir des nuits;
Quand l’aurore apparaît, je ris, doux édifice;
Le soir, l’horreur m’emplit; un sombre sacrifice
Semble en mes profondeurs muettes s’apprêter;
De derrière mon faîte, on voit la nuit monter
Ainsi qu’une fumée avec mille étincelles.
Tous les oiseaux de l’air m’effleurent de leurs ailes,
Hirondelles, faisans, cigognes au long cou;
Mon fronton n’a pas plus la crainte du hibou
Que Calliope n’a la crainte de Minerve.
Tous ceux que Sybaris voluptueuse énerve
N’ont qu’à franchir mon seuil d’austérité vêtu
Pour renaître, étonnés, à la forte vertu;
Sous ma crypte en entend chuchoter la sibylle;

Parfois, troublé soudain dans sa brume immobile,
Le plafond, où des mots de l’ombre sont écrits,
Tremble à l’explosion tragique de ses cris;
Sur ma paroi secrète et terrible, l’augure
Du souriant Olympe entrevoit la figure,
Et voit des mouvements confus et radieux

De visages qui sont les visages des dieux;
De vagues aboiements sous ma voûte se mêlent;
Et des voix de passants invisibles s’appellent;
Et le prêtre, épiant mon redoutable mur,
Croit par moments qu’au fond du sanctuaire obscur,
Assise près d’un chien qui sous ses pieds se couche,
La grande chasseresse, éclatante et farouche,
Songe, ayant dans les yeux la lueur des forêts.
Ô temps, je te défie. Est-ce que tu pourrais
Quelque chose sur moi, l’édifice suprême?
Un siècle sur un siècle accroît mon diadème;
J’entends autour de moi les peuples s’écrier :
Tu nous fais admirer et tu nous fais prier;
Nos fils t’adoreront comme nous t’adorâmes,
Chef-d’œuvre pour les yeux et temple pour les Âmes!

II

LES JARDINS DE BABYLONE

Une deuxième voix s’éleva; celle-ci,
Dans l’azur par degrés mollement obscurci,
Parlait non loin d’un fleuve à la farouche plage,
Et cette voix semblait le bruit d’un grand feuillage :

— Gloire à Sémiramis la fatale! Elle mit
Sur ses palais nos fleurs sans nombre où l’air frémit.
Gloire! en l’épouvantant elle éclaira la terre;
Son lit fut formidable et son cœur solitaire;
Et la mort avait peur d’elle en la mariant.
La lumière se fit spectre dans l’Orient,
Et fut Sémiramis. Et nous, les arbres sombres

Qui, tandis que les toits s’écroulent en décombres,
Grandissons, rajeunis sans cesse et reverdis,
Nous que sa main posa sur ce sommet jadis,
Nous saluons au fond des nuits cette géante;

Notre verdure semble une ruche béante
Où viennent s’engouffrer les mille oiseaux du ciel;
Nos bleus lotus penchés sont des urnes de miel;
Nos halliers, tout chargés de fleurs rouges et blanches,
Composent, en mêlant confusément leurs branches,
En inondant de gomme et d’ambre leurs sarments,
Tant d’embûches, d’appeaux et de pièges charmants,
Et de filets tressés avec les rameaux frêles,
Que le printemps s’est pris dans cette glu les ailes,
Et rit dans notre cage et ne peut plus partir.
Nos rosiers ont l’air peints de la pourpre de Tyr;
Nos murs prodigieux ont cent portes de cuivre;
Avril s’est fait titan pour nous et nous enivre
D’âcres parfums qui font végéter le caillou,
Vivre l’herbe, et qui font penser l’animal fou,

Et qui, quand l’homme vient errer sous nos pilastres,
Font soudain flamboyer ses yeux comme des astres;
Les autres arbres, fils du silence hideux,
Ont la terre muette et sourde au-dessous d’eux;
Nous, transplantés dans l’air, plus haut que Babylone
Pleine d’un peuple épais qui roule et tourbillonne,
Et de pas, et de chars par des buffles traînés,
Nous vivons au niveau du nuage, étonnés
D’entendre murmurer des voix sous nos racines;
Le voyageur qui vient des campagnes voisines
Croit que la grande reine au bras fort, à l’œil sûr,
A volé dans l’éden ces forêts de l’azur.
Le rayon de midi dans nos fraîcheurs s’émousse;
La lune s’assoupit dans nos chambres de mousse;
Les paons ouvrent leur queue éblouissante au fond
Des antres que nos fleurs et nos feuillages font;
Plus d’une nymphe y songe, et dans nos perspectives
Parfois se laissent voir des nudités furtives;
La ville, nous ayant sur sa tête, va, vient,
Se parle et se répond, querelle, s’entretient,
Travaille, achète, vend, forge, allume ses lampes;

Le vent, sur nos plateaux et sur nos longues rampes,

Mêle l’horizon vague et les murs et les toits
Et les tours au frisson vertigineux des bois,
Et nos blancs escaliers, nos porches, nos arcades
Flottent dans le nuage écumant des cascades;
Sous nos abris sacrés, nul bruit ne les troublant,
Vivent le martinet, l’ibis, le héron blanc
Qui porte sur le front deux longues plumes noires;
L’air ride nos bassins, inquiètes baignoires
Où viennent s’apaiser les pâles voluptés;
Des bœufs à face humaine, à nos portes sculptés,
Témoignent que Belus est le seul roi du monde;
À de certains endroits notre ombre est si profonde
Que la nuit en montant aux cieux n’y change rien;
Nous avons vu grandir le trône assyrien;
Nos troncs, contemporains des anciens jours de l’homme,
Ont vu le premier arbre et la première pomme,
Et, vieux, ils sont puissants, et leurs antiques fûts
Ont des rameaux si durs, si noueux, si touffus,

Et d’un balancement si noir, que le zéphyre
Épuisé s’y fatigue et ne peut leur suffire;
Et leur vaste branchage est fait d’un tel granit
Qu’il faudrait l’ouragan pour y bercer un nid.

Gloire à Sémiramis qui posa nos terrasses
Sur des murs que vient battre en vain le flot des races
Et sur des ponts dont l’arche est au-dessus du temps!
Cette reine parfois, sous nos rameaux flottants,
Venait rire entre deux écroulements d’empires;
Elle abattait au loin les rois moindres ou pires,
Puis s’en allait ayant l’homme jusqu’aux genoux,
Et venait respirer contente parmi nous;
Gaie, elle se couchait sur des peaux de panthère;
Quels lieux, quels champs, quels murs, quels palais sur la terre,
Hors nous, ont entendu rire Sémiramis?

Nous, les arbres hautains, nous étions ses amis;
Nos taillis ont été les parvis et les salles

Où s'épanouissaient ses fêtes colossales;
C'est dans nos bras, que n'a jamais touchés la faulx,
Que cette reine a fait ses songes triomphaux;
Nos parfums ont parfois conseillé des supplices;
De ses enivrements nos fleurs furent complices;
Nos sentiers n'ont gardé qu'une trace, son pas.
Fils de Sémiramis, nous ne périrons pas;
Ce qu'assembla sa main, qui pourrait le disjoindre?
Nous regardons le siècle après le siècle poindre;
Nous regardons passer les peuples tour à tour;
Nous sommes à jamais, et jusqu'au dernier jour,
Jusqu'à ce que l'aurore au front des cieux s'endorme,
Les jardins monstrueux pleins de sa joie énorme.

III

LE MAUSOLÉE

Une troisième voix dit :
— Sésostris est grand;

Cadmus est sur la terre un homme fulgurant;
Comme Typhon cent bras, Cyrus a cent batailles;
Ochus, portant sa hache aux profondes entailles,
Du Taurus fièrement garde l'âpre ravin;
Hécube est sainte; Achille est terrible et divin;
Il semble, après Thésée, Astyage, Alexandre,
Que l'homme trop grandi ne peut plus que descendre;
La calme majesté revêt Belochus trois;
Xercès, de Salamine assiégeant les détroits,
Ressemble à l'aquilon des mers; Penthésilée
A sur son dos la peau d'une bête étoilée,
Et, superbe, apparaît tendant son arc courbé;
Didon, Sémiramis, Thalestris, Niobé,
Resplendissent parmi les profondeurs sereines;

Mais entre tous ces rois, entre toutes ces reines,
Reines au sceptre d’or qu’admire un peuple heureux,
Rois vainqueurs ou bénis, se disputant entr’eux
Ces fiers surnoms, le grand, le beau, le fort, le juste,
Artémise est sublime et Mausole est auguste.

Je suis le monument du cœur démesuré;

La mort n’est plus la mort sous mon dôme azuré;
Elle est splendide, elle est prospère, elle est vivante;
Elle a tant de porphyre et d’or qu’elle s’en vante;
Je suis le deuil triomphe et le tombeau palais;
Oh! tant qu’on chantera ce chant : — Oublions-les,
Vivons, soyons heureux! — aux morts gisant sous terre;
Tant que les voluptés riront près du mystère;
Tant qu’on noiera ses deuils dans les vins décevants,
Moi l’édifice sombre et superbe, ô vivants,
Je jetterai mon ombre à vos joyeux visages;
Jusqu’à la fin des ans, jusqu’au terme des âges,
Jusqu’à ce que le temps, las, demande à s’asseoir,
Mes cippes, mes piliers, mes arcs, l’aube et le soir
Découpant sur le ciel mes frontons taciturnes
Où des colosses noirs rêvent, portant des urnes,
Mon bronze glorieux et mon marbre sacré
Diront : Mausole est mort, Artémise a pleuré.

Les siècles, vénérable et triomphante épreuve,
À jamais en passant verront la grande veuve
Assise sur mon seuil, fantôme saint et doux;

Elle attend le moment d’aller, près de l’époux,
Se coucher dans le lit de la noce éternelle;
Elle pare son front d’ache et de fraxinelle,
Et se parfume afin de plaire à son mari;
Elle tient un miroir qui n’a jamais souri,
Et se met des anneaux aux doigts, et sous ses voiles
Peigne ses longs cheveux d’où tombent des étoiles.

IV

LE JUPITER OLYMPIEN

Quand cette voix se tut, à Pise, près de là,
Du haut d’une acropole une autre voix parla :
— Je suis l’Olympien, je suis le Musagète;

Tout ce qui vit, respire, aime, pense et végète,
Végète, pense, vit, aime et respire en moi;
L’encens monte à mes pieds mêlé d’un vague effroi;
L’angle de mon sourcil touche à l’axe du monde;
La tempête me parle avant de troubler l’onde;
Je dure sans vieillir, j’existe sans souffrir;
Je ne sais qu’une chose impossible, mourir.
J’ai sur mon front, que l’ombre en reculant adore,
La bandelette bleue et rose de l’aurore.
Ô mortels effrénés, emportés, hagards, fous,
L’urne des jours me lave en vous noircissant tous;
À mesure qu’au fond des nuits et sous la voûte
Du temps d’où l’instant suinte et tombe goutte à goutte,
Les siècles, partant l’un après l’autre, s’en vont,
Ainsi que des oiseaux volant sous un plafond,
Hébé plus fraîche rit en mes hautes demeures;
Ma jeunesse renaît sous le baiser des heures;
J’empêche, en abaissant mon sceptre lentement
Vers le trou monstrueux plein du triple aboîment,

Cerbère de saisir les astres dans sa gueule;
La chaîne du destin immuable peut seule
Meurtrir ma main égale à tout l’effort des dieux;
Mon temple offre son mur au nid mélodieux;
Et c’est du vol de l’aigle et du vol de la foudre,
C’est du cri de l’enfer tremblant de se dissoudre,
C’est du choc convulsif des groupes des typhons,
C’est du rassemblement des nuages profonds,
Que le vieux Phidias d’Athènes, statuaire,

Composa, dans l’horreur sainte du sanctuaire,
L’immense apaisement de ma sérénité.
Quand, dans le saint pœan par les mondes chanté,
L’harmonie amoindrie avorte ou dégénère,
Je rends le rhythme aux cieux par un coup de tonnerre;
Mon crâne plein d’échos, plein de lueurs, plein d’yeux,
Est l’antre éblouissant du grand Pan radieux;
En me voyant on croit entendre le murmure

De la ville habitée et de la moisson mûre,
Le bruit du gouffre au chant de l’azur réuni,
L’onde sur l’océan, le vent dans l’infini,
Et le frémissement des deux ailes du cygne;
On sent qu’il suffirait à Jupiter d’un signe
Pour mêler sur le front des hommes le chaos;
Que seul je mets la bride aux bouches des fléaux,
Que l’abîme est mon hydre, et que je pourrais faire
Heurter le pôle au pôle et l’étoile à la sphère,
Et rouler à flots noirs les nuits sur les clartés,
Et s’entre-regarder les dieux épouvantés,
Plus aisément qu’un pâtre au flanc hâlé ne jette
Une pierre aux chevreaux broutant sur le Taygète.

V

LE PHARE

Les nuages erraient dans les souffles des airs,
Et la cinquième voix monta du bord des mers :

— Sostrate Gnidien regardait les étoiles.
De la tente des cieux dorant les larges toiles,
Elles resplendissaient dans le nocturne azur;
Leur rayonnement calme emplissait l’éther pur
Où le soir le grand char du soleil roule et sombre;
Elles croisaient, au fond des clairs plafonds de l’ombre
Où le jour met sa pourpre et la nuit ses airains,
Leurs chœurs harmonieux et leurs groupes sereins;

Le sinistre océan grondait au-dessous d’elles;
L’onde à coups de nageoire et les vents à coups d’ailes
Luttaient, et l’âpre houle et le rude aquilon
S’attaquaient dans un blême et fauve tourbillon;
Éole fou prenait aux cheveux Neptune ivre;
Et c’était la pitié du songeur que de suivre
Les pauvres nautoniers de son œil soucieux;
Partout piége et naufrage; il tombait de ces cieux
Sur l’esquif et la barque et les fortes trirèmes
Une foule d’instants terribles ou suprêmes;
Et pas une clarté pour dire : Ici le port!
Le gouffre, redoublant de tourmente et d’effort,
Vomissait sur les nefs, d’horreur exténuées,
Toute son épouvante et toutes ses nuées;
Et les brusques écueils surgissaient; et comment
S’enfuir dans ce farouche et noir déchirement?
Et les marins perdus se courbaient sous l’orage;

La mort leur laissait voir, comme un dernier mirage,
La terre s’éclipsant derrière les agrès,
Les maisons, les foyers pleins de tant de regrets,
Des fantômes d’enfants à genoux, et des rêves
De femmes se tordant les bras le long des grèves;
On entendait crier de lamentables voix :
— Adieu, terre! patrie, adieu! collines, bois,
Village où je suis né, vallée où nous vécûmes! ... —
Et tout s’engloutissait dans de vastes écumes,
Tout mourait; puis le calme, ainsi que le jour naît,
Presque coupable et presque infâme, revenait;
Le ciel, l’onde, achevaient en concert leur mêlée;
L’hydre verte laissait luire l’hydre étoilée;
L’océan se mettait, plein de morts, teint de sang,
À gazouiller ainsi qu’un enfant innocent;

Cependant l’algue allait et venait dans les chambres
Des navires roulant au fond de l’eau leurs membres;
Les bâtiments noyés rampaient au plus profond

Des flots qui savent seuls dans l’ombre ce qu’ils font.
Tristes esquifs partis, croyant aux providences!
Et les sphères menaient dans le ciel bleu leurs danses;
Et, n’ayant pu montrer ni le port ni l’écueil,
Ni préserver la nef de devenir cercueil,
Les constellations, jetant leur lueur pâle
Jusqu’au lit ténébreux de la grande eau fatale,
Et sous l’onde, et parmi les effrayants roseaux,
Dessinant la figure obscure des vaisseaux,
Poupes et mâts, débris des sapins et des ormes,
Éclairaient vaguement ces squelettes difformes,
Et faisaient sous l’écume, au fond du gouffre amer,
Rire aux dépens des dieux les monstres de la mer.
Les morts flottaient sous l’eau qui jamais ne s’arrête,
Et par moments, levant hors de l’onde la tête,
Ils semblaient adresser, dans leurs vagues réveils,
Une question sombre et terrible aux soleils.

C’est alors que, des flots dorant les sombres cimes,
Voulant sauver l’honneur des Jupiters sublimes,
Voulant montrer l’asile aux matelots, rêvant
Dans son Alexandrie, à l’épreuve du vent,
La haute majesté d’un phare inébranlable
À la solidité des montagnes semblable,
Présent jusqu’à la fin des siècles sur la mer,
Avec du jaspe, avec du marbre, avec du fer,
Avec les durs granits taillés en tétraèdres,
Avec le roc des monts, avec le bois des cèdres,
Et le feu qu’un titan a presque osé créer,
Sostrate Gnidien me fit, pour suppléer,
Sur les eaux, dans les nuits fécondes en désastres,
À l’inutilité magnifique des astres.

VI

LE COLOSSE DE RHODES

Et ceci dans l’espace était à peine dit
Qu’une voix du côté de Rhodes s’entendit :

— Mon nom, Lux; ma hauteur, soixante-dix coudées;
Ma fonction, veiller sur les mers débordées;
Le vrai phare, c’est moi.
Rhode est sous mon orteil.
Devant la fixité de mes yeux sans sommeil,
L’hiver blanchit les monts où le milan séjourne,
Le zodiaque vaste et formidable tourne,
L’homme vit, l’océan roule, les matelots
Débarquent sur les quais les sacs et les ballots,
Le jour luit, l’ouragan s’endort ou s’exaspère,
Et, gardien de l’eau bleue en son brumeux repaire,

Sentinelle que nul ne viendra relever,
Je regarde la nuit venir, l’aube arriver,
La voile fuir, le flot hurler comme un molosse,
Avec la rêverie immense du colosse.

Ô tristes mers, l’airain c’est l’immobilité;
L’airain, ô large gouffre à jamais agité,
C’est la victoire; il sort de la forge géante;
Il a Vulcain pour père, ou Lysippe, ou Cléanthe,
Ou Phidias; il sort, fier, vivant; après quoi,
Il monte au piédestal comme à son trône un roi,
Et s’empare du temps et de la solitude;
Et l’airain, c’est le calme, ô vaste inquiétude.

Lui l’immuable, il fut à son heure orageux;
Dans tes fixes écueils, dans tes rapides jeux,
Tu ne lui montres rien, ô mer, qu’il ne connaisse;
Il t’égale en durée, il t’égale en jeunesse;
Il a rongé la cuve ainsi que toi les ports;
Étant le bronze, il est rocher comme tes bords,
Et flot comme ton onde, ayant été la lave.
Il est du piédestal le triomphal esclave,

Et le piédestal morne et soumis est son chien.

Le ciel auteur de tout, du mal comme du bien,
Amalgame, construit, veut, rejette, préfère,
Et seul crée, et seul fait ce que l’homme croit faire;
Le ciel, — sans demander si c’est à l’immortel
Ou si c’est au tyran qu’on élève un autel,
Sans s’informer à qui la foule prostitue
Ou consacre l’airain, le marbre, la statue, —
Anime l’ouvrier, fondeur ou forgeron,
Et sur le moule obscur, béant comme un clairon,
Où l’artiste sculpta Cécrops ou Polyphonte,
Penche et fait basculer les chaudières de fonte;
Eh bien, ce ciel sacré, pur, jamais endormi,
Qui donne au combattant le cheval pour ami,
Au laboureur le bœuf ruminant dans l’étable,
Ô mer, c’est lui qui veut que, saint et respectable,
Le bronze soit formé d’or, de cuivre et d’étain;
Comme un sage, envoyé pour vaincre le destin,
Étant la souveraine et grande conscience,
Est composé de foi, d’honneur, de patience;
L’un affronte les ans, et l’autre les bourreaux;
Et le ciel fait l’airain comme il fait le héros.

C’est ainsi que je fus créé comme un athlète;
Aujourd’hui ta colère énorme me complète,

Ô mer, et je suis grand sur mon socle divin
De toute ta grandeur rongeant mes pieds en vain;
Nu, fort, le front plongé dans un gouffre de brume,
Enveloppé de bruit et de grêle et d’écume
Et de nuits et de vents qui se heurtent entr’eux,
Je dresse mes deux bras vers l’éther ténébreux,
Comme si j’appelais à mon aide l’aurore;
Mais il se tromperait s’il croit que je l’implore,
Le matin passager et court du jour changeant;
Le soleil large et chaud et la lune d’argent

Pour mon sourcil profond ne sont que des fantômes;
L’étincelle des cieux, l’étincelle des chaumes,
Étoile ou paille, sont pour moi de la lueur;
La goutte de l’orage est ma seule sueur;
Je ne suis jamais las; et, sans que je me courbe,
Vainqueur, je sens frémir sous moi l’abîme fourbe.
Parfois l’aigle, évadé du désert nubien,

Au-dessus de mon front plane, et me dit : C’est bien.
Stable, plus que le gouffre éternel mais mobile,
Plus que les peuples, plus que l’astre, plus que l’île,
Je regarde errer l’eau, l’ombre, l’homme, et Délos;
J’ai sous mes yeux l’amas mystérieux des flots,
Image des humains, des songes et des nombres;
Le vaisseau convulsif passe entre mes pieds sombres;
Le mât frissonnant bat ma cuisse ou mon genou;
Et l’on voit s’engouffrer, fuyant l’aquilon fou,
Sous l’arc prodigieux de mes jambes ouvertes,
La flotte qui revient du fond des ondes vertes.
Ma droite élève au loin sur ma tête un flambeau;
La tempête, vautour, le naufrage, corbeau,
Viennent autour de moi s’abattre, et mon visage
Les effraie, et devient sévère à leur passage;
Le salut me connaît, moi le grand chandelier,
Ainsi que le chameau connaît le chamelier,
Le char Automédon et l’esquif Palinure;
De même que la scie agrandit la rainure,
La proue en me voyant fend l’eau plus fièrement;
Comme une fille craint son redoutable amant,

La mer au sein lascif, cette prostituée,
A peur de m’apporter quelque barque tuée;
Et le flot, dont le pli roule un pauvre nocher,
En s’approchant de moi, tâche de le cacher;
Je suis le dieu cherché par tout ce qui chancelle
Sur le frémissement de l’onde universelle;
Le naufragé m’invoque en embrassant l’écueil;

La nuit je suis cyclope, et le phare est mon œil;
Rouge comme la peau d’un taureau qu’on écorche,
La ville semble un rêve aux lueurs de ma torche;
Pour les marins perdus, c’est l’aurore qui point;

Et je règne; et le gouffre inquiet ne sait point
S’il doit japper de joie ou rugir de colère
Quand, jusqu’aux profondeurs les plus mornes, j’éclaire
L’immense tremblement de l’horizon confus.

Tais-toi, mer! Je serai toujours ce que je fus.
Car il ne se peut pas qu’en ma sombre aventure
J’aie à combattre rien dans toute la nature
De plus fort que ton flot terrible dont je ris;
Car il ne se peut pas, ô gouffre aux tristes cris,
Qu’après avoir fondu les briques des fournaises,
Après s’être roulé sur la pourpre des braises,
Après avoir lassé les soufflets haletants,
Mon fauve airain soit tendre aux morsures du temps;
Que moi qui brave, roi des vagues éblouies,
Le ruissellement vaste et farouche des pluies,
Moi qui l’été, l’hiver, me dresse sans savoir
Si la bourrasque est dure et si l’orage est noir,

Qui vois l’éclair à peine, ayant pour ordinaire
D’émousser sur ma peau de bronze le tonnerre,
Je sois vaincu, détruit, aboli, ruiné,
Par l’heure, égratignure au sein blanc de Phryné;
Que jamais rien m’ébranle, et que, parce qu’il passe
Des astres au zénith, des zéphyrs dans l’espace,
Mes muscles, enviés par le granit souvent,
Se déforment ainsi qu’une nuée au vent;
Et qu’une vaine année arrivant acharnée,
Et rapide, et prodigue, après une autre année,
Une saison venant après une saison,
Janvier remplaçant mai dans le vague horizon,
En soufflant sur les nids et sur les fleurs, dissipe

L’ouvrage de Charès, élève de Lysippe.

Je suis là pour jamais; lève les yeux et vois
Sur ton front le colosse, ô mer aux rudes voix!
Que m’importe! rugis, tonne, éclabousse, gronde,
Je suis enraciné dans le crâne du monde,
Comme le mont Ossa, comme le mont Athos;
Et la seule statue ayant deux piédestaux,
C’est moi; je brave Hadès et je vaincrai Saturne;
On m’a nommé Soleil, mais le bronze est nocturne;
Vulcain forgea de l’ombre et fit l’airain; j’ai beau

Jeter sur l’océan le frisson d’un flambeau,
J’ai beau porter au poing une flamme qui guide
L’homme, battu des mers, dans cette nuit liquide,
Autour de moi, sur l’île et sur l’eau, clair miroir,
L’aube a beau resplendir, je suis le géant noir;
J’ai la durée obscure et lourde des ténèbres;
Je sens l’énigme en moi liée à mes vertèbres,
Et Pan mystérieux met sa force en mes reins;
Je vis; les ténébreux sont aussi les sereins;
Puissant, je suis tranquille; et la terre âpre ou blonde,
Le bouleversement tumultueux de l’onde,
Les races succédant aux races, les tribus
Et les peuples changeant de lois, de mœurs, de buts,
La transformation lente des destinées,
La déroute effarée et sombre des années,
Tous les êtres du globe ou du bleu firmament,
Entrant, sortant, flottant, surgissant, s’abîmant,
Sur mon front, qui domine et la vague et la plage,
Sont de la vision, mais ne sont pas de l’âge;
Les siècles sont pour moi, colosse, des instants;
Et, tant qu’il coulera des jours des mains du temps,
Tant que poussera l’herbe et tant que vivra l’homme,
Tant que les chars pesants et les bêtes de somme
Marcheront sur la plaine, usant les durs pavés,

Mes deux pieds écartés et mes deux bras levés,
Devant la mer qui vient, s'enfle, approche et recule,
Devant l'astre, devant le pâle crépuscule,
Sembleront au passant vers ces rochers venu
Le grand X de la nuit debout dans l'inconnu.

VII

LES PYRAMIDES

Et, comme dans un chœur les strophes s'accélèrent,
Toutes ces voix dans l'ombre obscure se mêlèrent.

Les jardins de Bélus répétèrent : — Les jours
Nous versent les rayons, les parfums, les amours;
Le printemps immortel, c'est nous, nous seuls; nous sommes
La joie épanouie en roses sur les hommes. —
Le mausolée altier dit : — Je suis la douleur;
Je suis le marbre, auguste en sa sainte pâleur;
Cieux! je suis le grand trône et le grand mausolée;
Contemplez-moi. Je pleure une larme étoilée.
— La sagesse, c'est moi, dit le phare marin;
— Je suis la force, dit le colosse d'airain;
Et l'olympien dit : — Moi, je suis la puissance.
Et le temple d'Éphèse, autel que l'âme encense,
Fronton qu'adore l'art, dit : — Je suis la beauté.
— Et moi, cria Chéops, je suis l'éternité.

Et je vis, à travers le crépuscule humide,
Apparaître la haute et sombre pyramide.

Superposant au fond des espaces béants
Les mille angles confus de ses degrés géants,
Elle se dressait, blême et terrible, étagée
De plus de plis brumeux que l'âpre mer Égée,
Et sur ses flots, jamais par le vent secoués,

Avait au lieu d'esquifs les siècles échoués.

Elle était là, montagne humaine; et sa stature,
Monstrueuse, donnait du trouble à la nature;
Son vaste cône d’ombre éclipsait l’horizon;
Les troupeaux des vapeurs lui laissaient leur toison;
Le désert sous sa base était comme une table;
Elle montait aux cieux, escalier redoutable
D’on ne sait quelle entrée étrange de la nuit;
Son bloc fatal semblait de ténèbres construit;
Derrière elle, au milieu des palmiers et des sables,
On en voyait surgir deux autres, formidables;
Mais, comme les coteaux devant le Pélion,
Comme les lionceaux à côté du lion,
Elles restaient en bas, et ces deux pyramides
Semblaient près de Chéops petites et timides;
Au-dessus de Chéops planaient, allant, venant,
Jetant parfois de l’ombre à tout un continent,
Des aigles effrayants ayant la forme humaine;
Et des foules sans nom éparses dans la plaine,
Dans de vagues cités dont on voyait les tours,
S’écriaient, chaque fois qu’un de ces noirs vautours
Passait, hérissé, fauve et sanglant, dans la bise :
— Voilà Cyrus! Voilà Rhamsès! Voilà Cambyse! —
Et ces spectres ailés secouaient dans les airs

Des lambeaux flamboyants de lumière et d’éclairs,
Comme si, dans les cieux, faisant à Dieu la guerre,
Ils avaient arraché des haillons au tonnerre.
Chéops les regardait passer sans s’émouvoir.
Un brouillard la cachait tout en la laissant voir;
L’obscure histoire était sur ses marches gravée;
Les sphinx dans ses caveaux déposaient leur couvée;
Les ans fuyaient, les vents soufflaient; le monument
Méditait, immobile et triste, et, par moment,
Toute l’humanité, comme une fourmilière,
Satrape au sceptre d’or, prêtre au thyrse de lierre,
Rois, peuples, légions, combats, trônes croulants,
Était subitement visible sur ses flancs

Dans quelque déchirure immense des nuées.
Tout flottait sur sa base en ombres dénouées;
Et Chéops répéta : — Je suis l’éternité.

Ainsi parlent, le soir, dans la molle clarté,
Ces monuments, les sept étonnements de l’homme.

La nuit vient, et s’étend d’Elinunte à Sodome,
Ouvrant son aile où vont s’endormir tour à tour
L’onde avec son rocher, la ville avec sa tour;
Elle élargit sa brume où le silence pèse;
Les voix et les rumeurs expirent; tout s’apaise,
Tout bruit s’éteint, à Rhode, en Élide, au Delta,
Tout cesse.
Alors le ver du sépulcre chanta :
*

Je suis le ver. Je suis fange et cendre. Ô ténèbres,
Je règne. Monuments, entassements célèbres,

Panthéons, Rhamséïons,
Façades de l’immense orgueil humain, si fières,
Que l’homme devant vous doute s’il voit des pierres
Ou s’il voit des rayons,

Sanctuaires chargés d’astres et d’empyrées,
Splendides profondeurs de colonnes dorées,
Vaste enceinte d’Assur,
Mur où Nemrod cloua l’hippanthrope Phœanthe,
Et dont la ronde tour, sous les oiseaux béante,
Leur semble un puits obscur,

Terrasses de Theglath, avec vos avenues
Augustes par deux rangs de sphinx aux gorges nues,

Cirque d’Anthrops-le-Noir
Si beau que, résistant à l’heure qui s’arrête,

Les chevaux du soleil, cabrés, baissent la tête
Pour tâcher de te voir!

Jardins, frontons ailés aux larges envergures,
Portiques, piédestaux qui portez des figures
Au geste souverain,
Et qui, du haut des caps que votre masse encombre,
Ajoutez à la mer vaste et sinistre l’ombre
Des déesses d’airain,

Acropole où l’on vient des confins de la terre,

Tour du Bœuf, où Jason, raillant le Sagittaire,
Vint sonner du buccin,
Qui fais aux voyageurs, vains comme les abeilles
Et vivants par leurs yeux avides de merveilles,
Braver le Pont-Euxin,

Ô temple Acrocéraune, ô pilier d’Érythrée,
Fiers de votre archipel, car c’est la mer sacrée,
La mer où luit Pylos,
Ses vagues ont noyé la horde massagète,
Et, comme le vent vient de la montagne, il jette
Des plumes d’aigle aux flots,

Chéops bâtie avec un art épouvantable,
Si terrible qu’à l’heure où, couché dans l’étable,
Le chien n’ose gronder,
Sirius, devant qui toute étoile s’efface,
Est forcé de tourner vers toi sa sombre face
Et de te regarder!

Édifices! montez, et montez davantage.

Superposez l’étage et l’étage à l’étage,
Et le dôme aux cités;
Montez; sous votre base écrasez les campagnes;

Plus haut que les forêts, plus haut que les montagnes,
Montez, montez, montez!

Soyez comme Babel, âpre, indignée, austère,
Cette tour qui voudrait échapper à la terre,
Et qui dans les cieux fuit.
Montez. À l’archivolte ajoutez l’architrave.
Encor! encor! Mettez le palais sur la cave,
Le néant sur la nuit!

Montez dans le nuage, étant de la fumée!
Montez, toi sur l’Égypte, et toi sur l’Idumée,
Toi, sur le mont Caspé!
Pleurez avec le deuil, chantez avec la noce.

Va noircir le zénith, flamme que le colosse
Tient dans son poing crispé.

Ne vous arrêtez pas. Montez! montez encore!
Moi je rampe, et j’attends. Du couchant, de l’aurore,
Et du sud et du nord,
Tout vient à moi, le fait, l’être, la chose triste,
La chose heureuse; et seul je vis, et seul j’existe,
Puisque je suis la mort.

La ruine est promise à tout ce qui s’élève.
Vous ne faites, palais qui croissez comme un rêve,
Frontons au dur ciment,
Que mettre un peu plus haut mon tas de nourriture,
Et que rendre plus grand, par plus d’architecture,
Le sombre écroulement.

XI

L’ÉPOPÉE DU VER

L’ÉPOPÉE DU VER

*

Au fond de la poussière inévitable, un être
Rampe, et souffle un miasme ignoré qui pénètre
L’homme de toutes parts,
Qui noircit l’aube, éteint le feu, sèche la tige,
Et qui suffit pour faire avorter le prodige
Dans la nature épars.

Le monde est sur cet être et l’a dans sa racine,
Et cet être, c’est moi. Je suis. Tout m’avoisine.
Dieu me paie un tribut.
Vivez. Rien ne fléchit le ver incorruptible.
Hommes, tendez vos arcs; quelle que soit la cible,
C’est moi qui suis le but.

Ô vivants, je l’avoue, on voit des hommes rire.
Plus d’une barque vogue avec un bruit de lyre;

On est prince et seigneur;
Le lit nuptial brille, on s’aime, on se le jure,
L’enfant naît, les époux sont beaux; — j’ai pour dorure
Ce qu’on nomme bonheur.

Je mords Socrate, Eschyle, Homère, après l’envie.
Je mords l’aigle. Le bout visible de la vie
Est à tous et partout,
Et quand au mois de mai le rouge-gorge chante,
Ce qui fait que Satan rit dans l’ombre méchante,
C’est que j’ai l’autre bout.

Je suis l’Inconnu noir qui, plus bas que la bête,

Remplit tout ce qui marche au-dessus de sa tête
D’angoisse et de terreur;
La preuve d’Alecton pareille à Cléopâtre,
De la pourpre identique au haillon, et du pâtre
Égal à l’empereur.

Je suis l’extinction du flambeau, toujours prête.
Il suffit qu’un tyran pense à moi dans la fête
Où les rois sont assis,
Pour que sa volupté, sa gaîté, sa débauche,
Devienne on ne sait quoi de lugubre où s’ébauche
La pâle Némésis.

Je ne me laisse point oublier des satrapes;
La nuit, lascifs, leur main touche à toutes les grappes

Du plaisir hasardeux,
Et, pendant que leurs sens dans l’extase frémissent,
Des apparitions de méduses blêmissent
La voûte au-dessus d’eux.

Je suis le créancier. L’échéance m’est due.
J’ai, comme l’araignée, une toile tendue.
Tout l’univers, c’est peu.
Le fil imperceptible et noir que je dévide
Ferait l’aurore veuve et l’immensité vide
S’il allait jusqu’à Dieu.

J’attends. L’obscurité sinistre me rend compte.
Le capitaine armé de son sceptre, l’archonte,
Le grave amphictyon,
L’augure, le poëte étoilé, le prophète,
Tristes, songent à moi, cette vie étant faite
De disparition.

Le visir sous son dais, le marchand sur son âne,
Familles et tribus, les seigneurs d’Ecbatane

Et les chefs de l’Indus
Passent, et seul je sais dans quelle ombre est conduite
Cette prodigieuse et misérable fuite
Des vivants éperdus.

Brillez, cieux. Vis, nature. Ô printemps, fais des roses.
Rayonnez, papillons, dans les métamorphoses.
Que le matin est pur!
Et comme les chansons des oiseaux sont charmantes,
Au-dessus des amants, au-dessus des amantes,
Dans le profond azur!
*

Quand, sous terre rampant, j’entre dans Babylone,
Dans Tyr qui porte Ammon sur son double pylone,
Dans Suze où l’aube luit,
Lorsqu’entendant chanter les hommes, je me glisse,
Invisible, caché, muet, dans leur délice,
Leur triomphe et leur bruit,

Quoique l’épaisseur vaste et pesante me couvre,
Quoique la profondeur, qui jamais ne s’entr’ouvre,

Morne et sans mouvement,
Me cache à tous les yeux dans son horreur tranquille,
Tout, quel que soit le lieu, quelle que soit la ville,
Quel que soit le moment,

Tout, Vesta comme Églé, Zénon comme Épicure,
A le tressaillement de ma présence obscure;
On a froid, on a peur;
L’un frémit dans son faste et l’autre dans ses crimes,
Et l’on sent dans l’orgueil démesuré des cimes
Une vague stupeur;

Et le Vatican tremble avec le Capitole,
Et le roi sur le trône, et sur l’autel l’idole,

Et Moloch et Sylla
Frissonnent, et le mage épouvanté contemple,
Sitôt que le palais a dit tout bas au temple :
Le ver de terre est là!

*

Je suis le niveleur des frontons et des dômes;
Le dernier lit où vont se coucher les Sodomes
Est arrangé par moi;
Je suis fourmillement et je suis solitude;
Je suis sous le blasphème et sous la certitude,
Et derrière Pourquoi.

Nul dogme n'oserait affronter ma réponse.
Laïs pour moi se frotte avec la pierre ponce.

Je fais parler Pyrrhon,
La guerre crie, enrôle, ameute, hurle, vole,
Et je suis dans sa bouche alors que cette folle
Souffle dans son clairon.

Je suis l'intérieur du prêtre en robe blanche,
Je bave dans cette âme où la vérité penche;
Quand il parle, je mens.
Le destin, labyrinthe, aboutit à ma fosse.
Je suis dans l'espérance et dans la femme grosse,
Et, rois, dans vos serments.

Quel sommeil effrayant, la vie! En proie, en butte
À des combinaisons de triomphe ou de chute,
Passifs, engourdis, sourds,
Les hommes, occupés d'objets qui se transforment,
Sont hagards, et devraient s'apercevoir qu'ils dorment,
Puisqu'ils rêvent toujours!

J'ai pour l'ambitieux les sept couleurs du prisme.
C'est moi que le tyran trouve en son despotisme

Après qu’il l’a vomi.
Je l’éveille, sitôt sa colère rugie.
Qu’est la méchanceté? C’est de la léthargie;
Dieu dans l’âme endormi.
*

Hommes, riez. La chute adhère à l’apogée.
L’écume manquerait à la mer submergée,

L’éclat au diamant,
La neige à l’Athos, l’ombre aux loups, avant qu’on voie
Manquer la confiance et l’audace et la joie
À votre aveuglement.

L’éventrement des monts de jaspe et de porphyre
À bâtir vos palais peut à peine suffire,
Larves sans lendemain!
Vous avez trop d’autels. Vos sociétés folles
Meurent presque toujours par un excès d’idoles
Chargeant l’esprit humain.

Qu’est la religion? L’abîme et ses fumées.
Les simulacres noirs flottant sous les ramées
Des bois insidieux,
La contemplation de l’ombre, les passages
De la nue au-dessus du front pensif des sages,
Ont créé tous vos dieux.

Vos prêtres insensés chargent Satan lui-même
D’un dogme et d’un devoir, lui le monstre suprême,
Lui la rébellion!
Ils en font leur bourreau, leur morne auxiliaire,
Sans même s’informer si cette muselière
Convient à ce lion!

Pour aller jusqu’à Dieu dans l’infini, les cultes,
Les religions, l’Inde et ses livres occultes

Par Hermès copiés,
Offrent leurs points d’appui, leurs rites, leurs prières,
Leurs dogmes, comme un gué montre à fleur d’eau des pierres
Où l’on pose ses pieds.

Songes vains! Les Védas trompent leurs clientèles,
Car les religions sont des choses mortelles
Qu’emporte un vent d’hiver;
Hommes, comme sur vous sur elles je me traîne;
Et, pour ronger l’autel, Dieu n’a pas pris la peine
De faire un autre ver.
*

Je suis dans l’enfant mort, dans l’amante quittée,
Dans le veuvage prompt à rire, dans l’athée,
Dans tous les noirs oublis.
Toutes les voluptés sont pour moi fraternelles.
C’est moi que le fakir voit sortir des prunelles
Du vague spectre Iblis.

Mon œil guette à travers les fêlures des urnes.

Je vois vers les gibets voler les becs nocturnes
Quêtant un noir lambeau.
Je suis le roi muré. J’habite le décombre.
La mort me regardait quand d’une goutte d’ombre
Elle fit le corbeau.

Je suis. Vous n’êtes pas, feu des yeux, sang des veines,
Parfum des fleurs, granit des tours, ô fiertés vaines!
Tout d’avance est pleuré.
On m’extermine en vain, je renais sous ma voûte;
Le pied qui m’écrasa peut poursuivre sa route,
Je le dévorerai.

J’atteins tout ce qui vole et court. L’argiraspide
Ne peut me fuir, eût-il un cheval plus rapide

Que l’oiseau de Vénus;
Je ne suis pas plus loin des chars qui s’accélèrent
Que du cachot massif où des lueurs éclairent
De sombres torses nus.

*

Un peuple s’enfle et meurt comme un flot sur la grève.
Dès que l’homme a construit une cité, le glaive
Vient et la démolit;
Ce qui résiste au fer croule dans les délices;
Pour te tuer, ô Rome, Octave a les supplices,
Messaline a son lit.

Tout ici-bas perd pied, se renverse, trébuche,
Et partout l’homme tombe, étant sa propre embûche;
Partout l’humanité
Se lève dans l’orgueil et dans l’orgueil se couche;
Et le manteau de poil du prophète farouche
Est plein de vanité.

Puisque ce sombre orgueil s’accroît toujours et monte,
Puisque Tibère est Dieu, puisque Rome sans honte
Lui chante un vil pœan,
Puisque l’austérité des Burrhus se croit vierge,
Puisqu’il est des Xercès qui prennent une verge
Et fouettent l’Océan,

Il faut bien que le ver soit là pour l’équilibre.
Ce que le Nil, l’Euphrate et le Gange et le Tibre
Roulent avec leur eau,
C’est le reflet d’un tas de villes inouïes
Faites de marbre et d’or, plus vite évanouies
Que la fleur du sureau.

Fétide, abject, je rends les majestés pensives.
Je mords la bouche, et quand j’ai rongé les gencives,

Je dévore les dents.
Oh! ce serait vraiment dans la nature entière
Trop de faste, de bruit, d’emphase et de lumière,
Si je n’étais dedans!

Le néant et l’orgueil sont de la même espèce.
Je les distingue peu lorsque je les dépèce.
J’erre éternellement
Dans une obscurité d’horreur et d’anathème,
Redoutable brouillard dont Satan n’est lui-même
Qu’un épaississement.
*

Tout me sert. Glaive et soc, et sagesse et délire.
De tout temps la trompette a combattu la lyre;
C’est le double éperon,
C’est la double fanfare aux forces infinies;
Le prodige jaillit de ce choc d’harmonies;
Luttez, lyre et clairon.

Lyre, enfante la paix. Clairon, produis la guerre.
Mettez en mouvement cette tourbe vulgaire
Des camps et des cités;
Luttez; poussez les uns aux batailles altières,

Les autres aux moissons, et tous aux cimetières;
Lyre et clairon, chantez!

Chantez! le marbre entend. La pierre n’est pas sourde,
Les tours sentent frémir leur dalle la plus lourde,
Le bloc est remué,
Le créneau cède au chant qui passe par bouffée,
Et le mur tressaillant qui naît devant Orphée,
Meurt devant Josué.
*

Tout périt. C’est pour moi, dernière créature,

Que travaille l’effort de toute la nature.
Le lys prêt à fleurir,

La mésange au printemps qui dans son nid repose,
Et qui sent l’œuf, cassé par un petit bec rose,
Sous elle s’entr’ouvrir,

Les Moïses emplis d’une puissance telle
Que le peuple, écoutant leur parole immortelle
Au pied du mont fumant,
Leur trouve une lueur de plus en plus étrange,
Tremble, et croit derrière eux voir deux ailes d’archange
Grandir confusément,

Les passants, le despote aveugle et sans limites,
Les rois sages avec leurs trois cents sulamites,
Les pâles inconnus,
L’usurier froid, l’archer habile aux escarmouches,
Les cultes et les dieux plus nombreux que les mouches
Dans les joncs du Cydnus,

Tout m’appartient. À moi symboles, mœurs, images!
À moi ce monde affreux de bourreaux et de mages
Qui passe, groupe noir,

Sur qui l’ombre commence à tomber, que Dieu marque,
Qu’un vent pousse, et qui semble une farouche barque
De pirates le soir.

À moi la courtisane! À moi le cénobite!
Dieu me fait Sésostris afin que je l’habite.
En arrière, en avant,
À moi tout! À toute heure, et qu’on entre ou qu’on sorte!
Ma morsure, qui va finir à Phryné morte,
Commence à Job vivant.

À moi le condamné dans sa lugubre loge!

Il regarde effaré les pas que fait l’horloge;
Et, quoiqu’en son ennui

La Mort soit invisible à ses fixes prunelles,
À d’obscurs battements il sent d’horribles ailes
Qui s’approchent de lui.

Rhode est fière, Chéops est grande, éphèse est rare.
Le Mausolée est beau, le Dieu tonne, le Phare
Sauve les mâts penchés,
Babylone suspend dans l’air les fleurs vermeilles,
Et c’est pour moi que l’homme a créé sept merveilles,
Et Satan sept péchés.

À moi la vierge en fleur qui rit et se dérobe,
Fuit, passe les ruisseaux, et relève sa robe
Dans les prés ingénus!
À moi les cris, les chants, la gaîté qui redouble!
À moi l’adolescent qui regarde avec trouble
La blancheur des pieds nus!

Rois, je me roule en cercle et je suis la couronne;
Buveurs, je suis la soif; murs, je suis la colonne;
Docteurs, je suis la loi;
Multipliez les jeux et les épithalames,
Les soldats sur vos tours, dans vos sérails les femmes;
Faites, j’en ai l’emploi.

Sage ici-bas celui qui pense à moi sans cesse!
Celui qui pense à moi vit calme et sans bassesse;
Juste, il craint le remord;
Sous son toit frêle il songe aux maisons insondables;

Il voit de la lumière aux deux trous formidables
De la tête de mort.

Votre prospérité n’est que ma patience.

Hommes, la volonté, la raison, la science,
Tentent; seul j'accomplis.
Toute chose qu'on donne est à moi seul donnée.
Il n'est pas de fortune et pas de destinée
Qui ne m'ait dans ses plis.

Le héros qui, dictant des ordres à l'histoire,
Croit laisser sur sa tombe un nuage de gloire,
N'est sûr que de moi seul.
C'est à cause de moi que l'homme désespère.
Je regarde le fils naître, et j'attends le père
En dévorant l'aïeul.

Je suis l'être final. Je suis dans tout. Je ronge
Le dessous de la joie, et quel que soit le songe
Que les poëtes font,
J'en suis, et l'hippogriffe ailé me porte en croupe;
Quand Horace en riant te fait boire à sa coupe,
Chloé, je suis au fond.

La dénudation absolue et complète,
C'est moi. J'ôte la force aux muscles de l'athlète;
Je creuse la beauté;
Je détruis l'apparence et les métamorphoses;
C'est moi qui maintiens nue, au fond du puits des choses,
L'auguste vérité.

Où donc les conquérants vont-ils? mes yeux les suivent.
À qui sont-ils? à moi. L'heure vient; ils m'arrivent,
Découronnés, pâlis,
Et tous je les dépouille, et tous je les mutile,
Depuis Cyrus vainqueur de Tyr jusqu'à Bathylle
Vainqueur d'Amaryllis.

Le semeur me prodigue au champ qu'il ensemence.
Tout en achevant l'être expiré, je commence
L'être encor jeune et beau.

Ce que Fausta, troublée en sa pensée aride,
Voit dans le miroir pâle où s'ébauche une ride,
C'est un peu de tombeau.

Toute ivresse m'aura dans sa dernière goutte;
Et sur le trône il n'est rien à quoi je ne goûte.
Les Trajans, les Nérons
Sont à moi, honte et gloire, et la fange est épaisse

Et l'or est rayonnant pour que je m'en repaisse.
Tout marche; j'interromps.

J'habite Ombos, j'habite Élis, j'habite Rome.
J'allonge mes anneaux dans la grandeur de l'homme;
J'ai l'empire et l'exil;
C'est moi que les puissants et les forts représentent;
En ébranlant les cieux, les Jupiters me sentent
Ramper dans leur sourcil.

Je prends l'homme, ébauche humble et tremblante qui pleure,
Le nerf qui souffre, l'œil qu'en vain le jour effleure,
Le crâne où dort l'esprit,
Le cœur d'où sort le sang ainsi qu'une couleuvre,
La chair, l'amour, la vie, et j'en fais un chef-d'œuvre,
Le squelette qui rit.
*

L'eau n'a qu'un bruit; l'azur n'a que son coup de foudre;
Le juge n'a qu'un mot, punir, ou bien absoudre;
L'arbre n'a que son fruit;
L'ouragan se fatigue à de vaines huées,
Et n'a qu'une épaisseur quelconque de nuées;
Moi, j'ai l'énorme nuit.

L'Etna n'est qu'un charbon que creuse un peu de soufre;
L'erreur de l'Océan, c'est de se croire un gouffre;
Je dirai : C'est profond

Quand vous me trouverez un précipice, un piége,
Où l’univers sera comme un flocon de neige
Qui décroît et qui fond.

Quoique l’enfer soit triste, et quoique la géhenne,
Sans pitié, redoutable aux hommes pleins de haine,
Ouverte au-dessous d’eux,
Soit étrange et farouche, et quoiqu’elle ait en elle
Les immenses cheveux de la flamme éternelle,
Qu’agite un vent hideux,

Le néant est plus morne encor, la cendre est pire
Que la braise, et le lieu muet où tout expire
Est plus noir que l’enfer;
Le flamboiement est pourpre et la fournaise montre;
Moi je bave et j’éteins. L’hydre est une rencontre
Moins sombre que le ver.

Je suis l’unique effroi. L’Afrique et ses rivages
Pleins du barrissement des éléphants sauvages,
Magog, Thor, Adrasté,

Sont vains auprès de moi. Tout n’est qu’une surface
Qui sert à me couvrir. Mon nom est Fin. J’efface
La possibilité.

J’abolis aujourd’hui, demain, hier. Je dépouille
Les âmes de leurs corps ainsi que d’une rouille;
Et je fais à jamais
De tout ce que je tiens disparaître le nombre
Et l’espace et le temps, par la quantité d’ombre
Et d’horreur que j’y mets.
*

Amant désespéré, tu frappes à ma porte,
Redemandant ton bien et ta maîtresse morte,
Et la chair de ta chair,

Celle dont chaque nuit tu dénouais les tresses,

Plus fier, plus éperdu, plus ivre en ses caresses
Que l’aigle au vent de mer.

Tu dis : « — Je la veux! Terre et cieux, je la réclame!
Le jour où je la vis, je crus voir une flamme.
Viens, dit-elle. Je vins.
Sa jeune taille était plus souple que l’acanthe;
Elle errait éblouie, idéale bacchante,
Sous des pampres divins.

« Son cœur fut si profond que j’y perdis mon âme.
Je l’aimais! quand le soir, les yeux de cette femme
Au front pur, au sein nu,
Me regardaient, pensifs, clairs, à travers ses boucles,
Je croyais voir briller les vagues escarboucles
D’un abîme inconnu.

« C’est elle qui prenait ma tête en ses mains blanches!
Elle qui me chantait des chansons sous les branches,

Des chansons dans les bois,
Si douces qu’on voyait sur l’eau rêver le cygne,
Et que les dieux là-haut se faisaient entr’eux signe
D’écouter cette voix!

« Elle est morte au milieu d’une nuit de délices...
Elle était le printemps, ouvrant de frais calices;
Elle était l’Orient;
Gaie, elle ressemblait à tout ce qu’on désire;
L’esquif, entrant dès l’aube au golfe de Nisyre,
N’est pas plus souriant.

« Elle était la plus belle et la plus douce chose!

Son âme était le lys, son corps était la rose;

Son chant chassait les pleurs;
Nue, elle était Déesse, et, Vierge sous ses voiles;
Elle avait le parfum que n’ont pas les étoiles,
L’éclair qui manque aux fleurs.

« Elle était la lumière et la grâce; je l’aime!
Je la veux! ô transports! ô volupté suprême!
Ô regrets déchirants! ... » —
Voilà huit jours qu’elle est dans mon ombre farouche;
Si tu veux lui donner un baiser sur la bouche,
Prends-la, je te la rends!

Reprends ce corps, reprends ce sein, reprends ces lèvres;
Cherches-y ton plaisir, ton extase, tes fièvres;
Je la rends à tes vœux;
Viens, tu peux, pour ta joie et tes jeux et tes fautes,
La reprendre, pourvu seulement que tu m’ôtes
De ses sombres cheveux.

Nous rions, l’ombre et moi, de tout ce qui vous navre,
Nous avons, nous aussi, notre fleur, le cadavre;

La femme au front charmant,
Blanche, embaumant l’alcôve et parfumant la table,
Se transforme en ma nuit... — Viens voir quel formidable
Épanouissement!

Cette rose du fond du tombeau, viens la prendre,
Je te la rends. Reprends, jeune homme, dans ma cendre,
Dans mon fatal sillon,
Cette fleur où ma bave épouvantable brille,
Et qui, pâle, a le ver du cercueil pour chenille,
L’âme pour papillon.

Elle est morte, — Et c’est là ta poignante pensée, —
Au moment le plus doux d’une nuit insensée;
Eh bien, tu n’es plus seul,

Reprends-la; ce lit froid vaut bien ton lit frivole;
Entre; et toi qui riais de la chemise folle,
Viens braver le linceul.

Elle t’attend, levant son crâne où l’œil se creuse,

T’offrant sa main verdie et sa hanche terreuse,
Son flanc, mon noir séjour...
Viens, couvrant de baisers son vague rire horrible,
Dans ce commencement d’éternité terrible
Finir ta nuit d’amour!
*

Ô vie universelle, où donc est ton dictame?
Qu’est-ce que ton baiser? Un lèchement de flamme.
Le cœur humain veut tout,
Prend tout, l’or, le plaisir, le ciel bleu, l’herbe verte...
Et dans l’éternité sinistrement ouverte
Se vide tout à coup.

La vie est une joie où le meurtre fourmille,
Et la création se dévore en famille.
Baal dévore Pan.
L’arbre, s’il le pouvait, épuiserait la sève;
Léviathan, bâillant dans les ténèbres, rêve
D’engloutir l’Océan;

L’onagre est au boa qui glisse et l’enveloppe;
Le lynx tacheté saute et saisit l’antilope;
La rouille use le fer;

La mort du grand lion est la fête des mouches;
On voit sous l’eau s’ouvrir confusément les bouches
Des bêtes de la mer;

Le crocodile affreux, dont le Nil cache l’antre,
Et qui laisse aux roseaux la marque de son ventre,

A peur de l’ichneumon;
L’hirondelle devant le gypaète émigre;
Le colibri, sitôt qu’il a faim, devient tigre;
L’oiseau-mouche est démon.

Le volcan, c’est le feu chez lui, tyran et maître,
Mâchant les durs rochers, féroce et parfois traître,
Tel qu’un sombre empereur,
Essuyant la fumée à sa bouche rougie,
Et son cratère enflé de lave est une orgie
De flammes en fureur;

La louve est sur l’agneau comme l’agneau sur l’herbe;
Le pâle genre humain n’est qu’une grande gerbe
De peuples pour les rois;
Avril donne aux fleurs l’ambre et la rosée aux plantes
Pour l’assouvissement des abeilles volantes
Dans la lueur des bois;

De toutes parts on broute, on veut vivre, on dévore,
L’ours dans la neige horrible et l’oiseau dans l’aurore;
C’est l’ivresse et la loi.
Le monde est un festin. Je mange les convives.

L’océan a des bords, ma faim n’a pas de rives;
Et le gouffre, c’est moi.

Vautour, qu’apportes-tu? — Les morts de la mêlée,
Les morts des camps, les morts de la ville brûlée,
Et le chef rayonnant. —
C’est bien, donne le sang, vautour; donne la cendre,
Donne les légions, c’est bien; donne Alexandre,
C’est bien. Toi maintenant!

Le miracle hideux, le prodige sublime,
C’est que l’atome soit en même temps l’abîme;
Tout d’en haut m’est jeté;

Je suis d’autant plus grand que je suis plus immonde;
Et l’amoindrissement formidable du monde
Fait mon énormité.
*

Fouillez la mort. Fouillez l’écroulement terrible.
Que trouvez-vous? L’insecte. Et, quoique ayant la bible,
Quoique ayant le koran,
Je ne suis rien qu’un ver. Ô vivants, c’est peut-être
Parce que je suis fait des croyances du prêtre,
Des splendeurs du tyran,

C’est parce qu’en ma nuit j’ai mangé vos victoires,
C’est parce que je suis composé de vos gloires
Dont l’éclat retentit,
De toutes vos fiertés, de toutes vos durées,
De toutes vos grandeurs, tour à tour dévorées,
Que je reste petit.

Qu’est-ce que l’univers? Qu’est-ce que le mystère?
Une table sans fin servie au ver de terre;
Le nain partout béant;
Un engloutissement du géant par l’atome,
Tout lentement rongé par Rien; et le fantôme
Créé par le néant.
*

L’épouvante m’adore, et, ver, j’ai des pontifes.
Mon spectre prend une aile et mon aile a des griffes.
Vil, infect, chassieux,
Chétif, je me dilate en une immense forme,
Je plane, et par moments, chauve-souris énorme,
J’enveloppe les cieux.
*

Dieu qui m’avez fait ver, je vous ferai fumée.
Si je ne puis toucher votre essence innommée,

Je puis ronger du moins
L’amour dans l’homme, et l’astre au fond du ciel livide,
Dieu jaloux, et, faisant autour de vous le vide,
Vous ôter vos témoins.

Parce que l’astre luit, l’homme aurait tort de croire
Que le ver du tombeau n’atteint pas cette gloire;
Hors moi, rien n’est réel;
Le ver est sous l’azur comme il est sous le marbre;
Je mords, en même temps que la pomme sur l’arbre,
L’étoile dans le ciel.

L’astre à ronger là-haut n’est pas plus difficile
Que la grappe pendante aux pampres de Sicile;

J’abrége les rayons;
L’éternité n’est point aux splendeurs complaisante;
La mouche, la fourmi, tout meurt, et rien n’exempte
Les constellations.

Il faut, dans l’océan d’en haut, que le navire
Fait d’étoiles s’entr’ouvre à la fin, et chavire;
Saturne au large anneau
Chancelle, et Sirius subit ma sombre attaque,
Comme l’humble bateau qui va du port d’Ithaque
Au port de Calymno.

Il est dans le ciel noir des mondes plus malades
Que la barque au radoub sur un quai des Cyclades;
L’abîme est un tyran;
Arcturus dans l’éther cherche en vain une digue;
La navigation de l’infini fatigue
Le vaste Aldebaran.

Les lunes sont, au fond de l’azur, des cadavres;
On voit des globes morts dans les célestes havres
Là-haut se dérober;

La comète est un monde éventré dans les ombres
Qui se traîne, laissant de ses entrailles sombres
Sa lumière tomber.

Regardez l’abbadir et voyez le bolide;
L’un tombe, et l’autre meurt; le ciel n’est pas solide;
L’ombre a d’affreux recoins;
Le point du jour blanchit les fentes de l’espace,
Et semble la lueur d’une lampe qui passe
Entre des ais mal joints.

Le monde, avec ses feux, ses chants, ses harmonies,
N’est qu’une éclosion immense d’agonies
Sous le bleu firmament,
Un pêle-mêle obscur de souffles et de râles,
Et de choses de nuit, vaguement sépulcrales,
Qui flottent un moment.

Dieu subit ma présence; il en est incurable.
Toute forme créée, ô nuit, est peu durable.
Ô nuit, tout est pour nous;
Tout m’appartient, tout vient à moi, gloire guerrière,
Force, puissance et joie, et même la prière,
Puisque j’ai ses genoux.

La démolition, voilà mon diamètre.
Le zodiaque ardent, que Rhamsès a beau mettre
Sur son sanglant écu,
Craint le ver du sépulcre, et l’aube est ma sujette;

L’escarboucle est ma proie, et le soleil me jette
Des regards de vaincu.

L’univers magnifique et lugubre a deux cimes.
Ô vivants, à ses deux extrémités sublimes,
Qui sont aurore et nuit,
La création triste, aux entrailles profondes,

Porte deux Tout-puissants, le Dieu qui fait les mondes,
Le ver qui les détruit.

XII

LE POËTE AU VER DE TERRE

LE POËTE AU VER DE TERRE

Non, tu n’as pas tout, monstre! et tu ne prends point l’âme.
Cette fleur n’a jamais subi ta bave infâme.
Tu peux détruire un monde et non souiller Caton.
Tu fais dire à Pyrrhon farouche : Que sait-on?
Et c’est tout. Au-dessus de ton hideux carnage
Le prodigieux cœur du prophète surnage;
Son char est fait d’éclairs; tu n’en mords pas l’essieu,
Tu te vantes. Tu n’es que l’envieux de Dieu.
Tu n’es que la fureur de l’impuissance noire.
L’envie est dans le fruit, le ver est dans la gloire.
Soit. Vivons et pensons, nous qui sommes l’Esprit.
Toi, rampe. Sois l’atome effrayant qui flétrit
Et qui ronge, et qui fait que tout ment sur la terre,
Mets cette tromperie au fond du grand mystère,
Le néant, sois le nain qui croit être le roi,
Serpente dans la vie auguste, glisse-toi,
Pour la faire avorter, dans la promesse immense;
Ton lâche effort finit où le réel commence,
Et le juste, le vrai, la vertu, la raison,
L’esprit pur, le cœur droit, bravent ta trahison.

Tu n’es que le mangeur de l’abjecte matière.
La vie incorruptible est hors de ta frontière;
Les âmes vont s’aimer au-dessus de la mort;
Tu n’y peux rien. Tu n’es que la haine qui mord.
Rien tâchant d’être Tout, c’est toi. Ta sombre sphère
C’est la négation, et tu n’es bon qu’à faire
Frissonner les penseurs qui sondent le ciel bleu
Indignés, puisqu’un ver s’ose égaler à Dieu,
Puisque l’ombre atteint l’astre, et puisqu’une loi vile
Sur l’Homère éternel met l’éternel Zoïle.

XIII

CLARTÉ D’ÂMES

CLARTÉ D’ÂMES

Sait-on si ce n’est pas de la clarté qui sort

Du cerveau des songeurs sacrés, creusant le sort,

La vie et l’inconnu, travailleurs de l’abîme?
Voici ce que j’ai vu dans une nuit sublime :

Cette nuit-là pas une étoile ne brillait;
C’était au mois d’Eglad que nous nommons juillet;
Et sous l’azur noir, face immense du mystère,
Dans tous les lieux déserts qui sont sur cette terre,
Forêts, plages, ravins, caps où rien ne fleurit,
Les solitaires, ceux qui vivent par l’esprit,
Sondant l’éternité, l’âme, le temps, le nombre,
Effarés et sereins, étaient épars dans l’ombre;
L’un en Europe; l’autre en Inde, où, dans les bois
Cachant ses jeunes faons, la gazelle aux abois
Attend pour s’endormir que le lion s’endorme;
Un autre dans l’horreur de l’Afrique difforme.
Tous ces hommes avaient l’idéal pour objet;
Et chacun d’eux était dans son antre et songeait.

Ces prophètes étaient frères sans se connaître;
Pas un d’eux ne savait, isolé dans son être
Et sa pensée ainsi qu’un roi dans sonÉtat,
Que quelqu’un de semblable à lui-même existât;
Ils veillaient, et chacun se croyait seul au monde;
Aucun lien entre eux que l’énigme profonde
Et la recherche obscure et terrible de Dieu.
Ils pensaient; l’infini sans borne et sans milieu
Pesait sur eux; pas un qui de la solitude
N’eût la mystérieuse et sinistre attitude;

Pourtant ils étaient doux ces hommes effrayants.

Sphar était attentif aux nuages fuyants;
Stélus laissait, du fond des mers, du bord des grèves,
Du haut des cieux, venir à lui les vastes rêves;
Pythagore disait : Dieu! fais ce que tu dois!
Thur regardait l'abîme et comptait sur ses doigts;

Sadoch rêvait l'éden, ayant pour lit des pierres;
Zès, qui n'ouvrait jamais qu'à demi les paupières,
Contemplait cette chose implacable, la nuit;
Sadoch guettait l'autre être insondable, le bruit;
Sostrate étudiait, dans l'eau qu'un souffle mène,
Dans la fumée et l'air, la destinée humaine;
Lycurgue, formidable et pâle, méditait;
Eschyle était semblable au rocher qui se tait,
Et tournait vers l'Etna fumant son grand front chauve;

Isaïe, habitant d'un sépulcre, esprit fauve,
Adressait la parole à ceux qui ne sont plus;
Comme Isaïe, un sage, un fou, Phégorbélus
Parlait dans la nuée aux faces invisibles,
Et disait, feuilletant on ne sait quelles bibles :
— Je parle, et ne sais pas si je suis écouté;
Les spectres plus nombreux que les mouches d'été
M'entourent, et sur moi se précipite et tombe
La légion de ceux qui rêvent dans la tombe;
On me hait dans le monde étrange de la mort;
Je sens parfois, la nuit, un rêve qui me mord,
Et les êtres de l'ombre, essaim, foule inconnue,
M'attaquent quand je dors; pourtant je continue,
Et je cherche à savoir le grand secret caché
Qu'Ève devina presque et qu'entrevit Psyché. —
Orobanchus, gardien de l'autel des Trois Grâces,

Maudissait vaguement les casques, les cuirasses
Et les glaives, semeurs tragiques du trépas,

Et, sombre, murmurait : — Mortels, n’oubliez pas
Qu’Aglaé dans sa main tient un bouton de rose. —
Chacun recommandait à l’ombre quelque chose
De faible, le haillon, le chaume, le grabat;
Phtès, les damnés sur qui trop de haine s’abat,
Hermanès, l’humble toit du lépreux sans défense,
Gyr le droit, et Lysis la vénérable enfance.
Tous voulaient secourir l’homme, et le protéger
Contre ce monstre obscur, l’innombrable danger;
Tous calculaient le mal à fuir, le bien à faire.
La terre est sous les yeux du destin; cette sphère
Semble être par quelqu’un confiée aux penseurs.

La nuit était immense, et dans ses épaisseurs

Tout sommeillait, les bois, les monts, les mers, les sables;
Eux, ils ne dormaient point, étant les responsables.
Les heures s’écoulaient, la nuit passait; mais rien,
Ni la faim, ni la soif, ni le vent syrien
Qui va des mers d’Adram jusqu’au Tibre de Rome,
Ne troublait ces esprits, souffrant des maux de l’homme;
Ils avaient la révolte en eux, l’altier frisson
Que donne, à qui se sent des ailes, la prison;
Chacun tâchait de rompre un anneau de la chaîne;
Plus d’imposture! plus de guerre! plus de haine!
Il sortait de chacun de ces séditieux
Une sommation qui s’en allait aux cieux.
La vérité faisait, claire, auguste, insensée,
De chacun de ces fronts jaillir une pensée,
La justice, la paix, l’enfer amnistié.
Ces cerveaux lumineux dégageaient la pitié,
La bonté, le pardon aux vivants éphémères,

L’espérance, la joie et l’amour, des chimères,
Des rêves comme en font les astres, s’ils en font;
Cela se répandait sous le zénith profond;
Tous ces hommes étaient plongés dans les ténèbres;

Seuls et noirs, combinant les rhythmes, les algèbres,
Le chiffre avec le chant, le passé, le présent,
Ajoutant quelque chose à l’homme, agrandissant
La prunelle, l’esprit, la parole, l’ouïe,
Ils songeaient; et l’aurore apparut, éblouie.

XIV

LES CHUTES

FLEUVES ET POËTES

LES CHUTES

FLEUVES ET POËTES

Le grand Niagara s’écroule, le Rhin tombe;
L’abîme monstrueux tâche d’être une tombe,
Il hait le géant fleuve, et dit : j’engloutirai.
Et le fleuve, pareil au lion attiré
Dans l’antre inattendu d’une hydre aux mille têtes,
Lutte avec tous ses cris et toutes ses tempêtes.
Quoi! la nature immense est donc un lieu peu sûr!
Il se cabre, il résiste au précipice obscur,
Bave et bouillonne, et blanc et noir comme le marbre,
Se cramponne aux rochers, se retient aux troncs d’arbre,
Penche, et comme frappé de malédiction,
Roule, ainsi que tournait l’éternel Ixion.
Tordu, brisé, vaincu, Dieu même étant complice,
Le fleuve échevelé subit son dur supplice.

Le gouffre veut sa mort; mais l’effort des fléaux
Pour faire le néant, ne fait que le chaos;
L’affreux puits de l’enfer ouvre ses flancs funèbres,
Et rugit. Quel travail pour créer les ténèbres!
Il est l’envie, il est la rage, il est la nuit;
Et la destruction, voilà ce qu’il construit.
Pareil à la fumée au faîte du Vésuve,
Un nuage sinistre est sur l’énorme cuve,
Et cache le tourment du grand fleuve trahi.
Lui, le fécondateur, d’où vient qu’il est haï?
Qu’est-ce donc qu’il a fait aux bois, au mont sublime,
Aux prés verts, pour que tous le livrent à l’abîme?
Sa force, sa splendeur, sa beauté, sa bonté,
Croulent. Quel guet-apens et quelle lâcheté!
L’eau s’enfle comme l’outre où grondent les Borées,

Et l’horreur se disperse en voix désespérées;
Tout est chute, naufrage, engloutissement, nuit,
Et l’on dirait qu’un rire infâme est dans ce bruit;
Rien n’est épargné, rien ne vit, rien ne surnage;
Le fleuve se débat dans l’atroce engrenage,
Tombe, agonise, et jette au lointain firmament
Une longue rumeur d’évanouissement.

Tout à coup, au-dessus de ce chaos qui souffre,
Apparaît, composé de tout ce que le gouffre
A de hideux, d’hostile et de torrentiel,
Un éblouissement auguste, l’arc-en-ciel;
Le piége est vil, la roche est traître, l’onde est noire,
Et tu sors de cette ombre épouvantable, ô gloire!

XV

LE CYCLE PYRÉNÉEN

GAÏFFER-JORGE

DUC D’AQUITAINE

Au bas d’une muraille on ouvre une tranchée.
Les travailleurs, bras nus et la tête penchée,
Vont et viennent, fouillant dans l’obscur entonnoir;
Sous la pioche, pareille au bec d’un oiseau noir,
Le rocher sonne, ainsi que le fer dans la forge;
Dur labeur. Gaïffer, qu’on appelle aussi Jorge,
Fait creuser un fossé large et profond autour
De son donjon, palais de roi, nid de vautour,
Forteresse où ce duc, voisin de la tempête,
Habite, avec le cri des aigles sur sa tête;
On éventre le mont, on défonce le champ;
— Creusez! creusez! dit-il aux terrassiers, piochant
De l’aube jusqu’à l’heure où le soleil se couche,
Je veux faire à ma tour un fossé si farouche
Qu’un homme ait le vertige en regardant au fond. —

On creuse, et le travail que les ouvriers font
Trace au pied des hauts murs un tortueux cratère;
Il descend chaque jour plus avant dans la terre;
Un terrassier parfois dit : — Seigneur, est-ce assez?
Et Gaïffer répond : — Creusez toujours, creusez.
Je veux savoir sur quoi ma demeure est bâtie.

Qu’est-ce que Gaïffer? La fauve dynastie
Qu’installa, sous un dais fait d’une peau de bœuf,
Le patrice Constance en quatre-cent-dix-neuf,
Reçut de Rome en fief la troisième Aquitaine.
Aujourd’hui Gaïffer en est le capitaine.
De Bayonne à Cahors son pouvoir est subi;
Les huit peuples qui sont à l’orient d’Alby,

Les quatorze qui sont entre Loire et Garonne,
Sont comme les fleurons de sa fière couronne;
Auch lui paie un tribut; du Tursan au Marsan
Il reçoit un mouton de chaque paysan;
Le Roc-Ferrat, ce mont où l’on trouve l’opale,
Saint-Sever sur l’Adour, Aire l’épiscopale,
Sont à lui; son état touche aux deux océans;

Le roi de France entend jusque dans Orléans
Le bruit de son épée aiguisée et fourbie
Aux montagnes d’Irun et de Fontarabie;
Gaïffer a sa cour plénière de barons;
La foule, autour de lui, se tait et les clairons
Font un sinistre éclat de triomphe et de fête;
Au point du jour, sa tour, dont l’aube teint le faîte,
Noire en bas et vermeille en haut, semble un tison
Qu’un bras mystérieux lève sur l’horizon;
Gaïffer-Jorge est prince, archer et chasseur d’hommes;
On le trouve très-grand parmi ses majordomes,
Ses baillis font sonner sa gloire, et ses prévôts
Sont plus qu’à Dieu le père à Gaïffer dévots.
Seulement, il a pris, pour élargir sa terre,
Aux infants d’Oloron leur ville héréditaire;

Mais ces infants étaient de mauvaise santé,
Et si jeunes que c’est à peine, en vérité,
S’ils ont su qu’on changeait leur couronne en tonsure;
De plus son amitié n’est pas toujours très-sûre;
Il a, pour cent francs d’or, livré son maître Aymon
Au noir Miramolin, Hécuba-le-démon;
Aymon, ce chevalier dont tout parlait naguère,
Avait instruit le duc Gaïffer dans la guerre,
Aymon était un fier et bon campéador,
Mais Gaïffer était sans le sou, cent francs d’or
Font cent mille tomans, et son trésor étique

Avait besoin d’un coup de grande politique;
Par la vente d’Aymon il a réalisé
De quoi pouvoir donner un tournoi, l’an passé,
Et bien vivre, et jeter l’argent par la fenêtre;
La grandeur veut le faste, il ne convient pas d’être
À la fois duc superbe et prince malaisé;
Enfin on dit qu’un soir il a, chasseur rusé,
Conduit, tout en riant, au fond d’une clairière,
Son frère Astolphe, et l’a poignardé par derrière;
Mais ils étaient jumeaux, Astolphe un jour pouvait
Prétendre au rang ducal dont Jorge se revêt,
Et pour la paix publique on peut tuer son frère.

Étançonner le sable, ôter l’argile, extraire

La brèche et le silex, et murer le talus,
C’est rude. Après les huit premiers jours révolus :
— Sire, ce fossé passe en profondeur moyenne
Tous ceux de Catalogne et tous ceux de Guyenne,
Dit le maître ouvrier, vieillard aux blancs cheveux.
— Creusez! répond le duc. Je vous l’ai dit. Je veux
Voir ce que j’ai sous moi dans la terre profonde. —
Huit jours encore on creuse, on sape, on fouille, on sonde;
Tout à coup on déterre une pierre, et, plus bas,
Un cadavre, et le nom sur le roc : Barabbas.
— Creusez, dit Jorge. — On creuse. Au bout d’une semaine
Une autre pierre avec une autre forme humaine
Perce l’ombre, affreux spectre au fond d’un trou hideux;
Et ce cadavre était le plus sombre des deux;
Une corde à son cou rampait; une poignée
De drachmes d’or sortait de sa main décharnée;
Sur la pierre on lisait : Judas. — Creusez toujours!
Allez! creusez! cria le duc du haut des tours. —
Et le bruit du maçon que le maçon appelle
Recommença; la pioche et la hotte et la pelle
Plongèrent plus avant qu’aucun mineur ne va.
Après huit autres jours de travail, on trouva

Soudain, dans la nuit blême où rien n’a plus de forme,
Un squelette terrible, et sur son crâne énorme

Quatre lettres de feu traçaient ce mot : Caïn.
Les pâles fossoyeurs frémirent, et leur main
Laissa rouler l’outil dans l’obscurité vide;
Mais le duc apparaît, noir sur le ciel livide :
— Continuez, dit-il, penché sur le fossé,
Allez! — On obéit; et l’un d’eux s’est baissé,
Morne esclave, il reprend le pic pesant et frappe;
Et la roche sonna comme une chausse-trappe,
Au second coup la terre obscure retentit;
Du trou que fit la pioche une lueur sortit,
Lueur qui vint au front heurter la tour superbe,
Et fit, sur le talus, flamboyer les brins d’herbe
Comme un fourmillement de vipères de feu;
On la sentait venir de quelque horrible lieu;
Tout le donjon parut sanglant comme un mystère;
— Allez! dit Jorge. — Alors on entendit sous terre
Une lugubre voix qui disait : — Gaïffer,
Ne creuse point plus bas, tu trouverais l’enfer.

MASFERRER

I

NEUVIÈME SIÈCLE. — PYRÉNÉES.

C’est un funeste siècle et c’est un dur pays.
Oh! que d’Herculanums et que de Pompéis
Enfouis dans la cendre épaisse de l’histoire!
D’horribles rois sont là; la montagne en est noire.

Assistés au besoin par ceux du mont Ventoux,

Ceux-ci basques, ceux-là catalans, méchants tous,

Ils ont de leurs donjons couvert la chaîne entière;
Du pertuis de Biscaye au pas de l’Argentière,
La guerre gronde, ouvrant ses gueules de dragon
Sur toute la Navarre et sur tout l’Aragon;
Tout tremble; pas un coin de ravine où ne grince
La mâchoire d’un tigre ou la fureur d’un prince;
Ils sont maîtres des cols et maîtres des sommets.
Ces pays garderont leurs traces à jamais;
La tyrannie avec le fer du glaive creuse
Sur la terre sa forme et sa figure affreuse,
Là ses dents, là son pied monstrueux, là son poing;

Linéaments hideux qu’on n’effacera point,
Tant avec son épée impérieuse et dure
Chaque despote en fait profonde la gravure!
Or jamais ces vieux pics pleins de tours, exhaussés
De forts ayant le gouffre et la nuit pour fossés,
N’ont paru plus mauvais et plus haineux aux hommes
Que dans le siècle étrange et funèbre où nous sommes;
Ils se dressent, chaos de blocs démesurés;
Leur cime, par delà les vallons et les prés,
Guette, gêne et menace, à vingt ou trente lieues,
Les villes dont au loin on voit les flèches bleues;
De quelque chef de bande implacable et trompeur
Chacun d’eux est l’abri redouté; leur vapeur
Semble empoisonner l’air d’un miasme insalubre;
Ils sont la vision colossale et lugubre;
La neige et l’ombre font, dans leurs creux entonnoirs,

Des pans de linceuls blancs et des plis de draps noirs;
L’eau des torrents, éparse et de lueurs frappée,
Ressemble aux longs cheveux d’une tête coupée;
Dans la brume on dirait que leurs escarpements
Sont d’une boucherie encor tiède fumants;
Tous ces géants ont l’air de faire dans la nue
Quelque exécution sombre qui continue;
L’air frémit; le glacier peut-être en larmes fond;

Fatals, calmes, muets, et debout dans le fond
De la place publique effrayante des plaines,
Sur leurs vagues plateaux, sur leurs croupes hautaines,

Ils ont tous le carré hideux des castillos,
Comme des échafauds qui portent des billots.

II

TERREUR DES PLAINES

Certes, c’est ténébreux; et, devant deux provinces,
Devant deux gras pays, un tel réseau de princes
N’attache pas pour rien des mailles et des nœuds
Et des fils aux pitons des pics vertigineux;
C’est dans un but qu’armés et tenant deux rivages,
D’affreux chefs, hérissés de couronnes sauvages,
Barrant l’isthme espagnol de l’une à l’autre mer,
Aux pointes des granits, dans le vent, dans l’éclair,

Sur la montagne d’ombre et d’aurore baignée,
Accrochent cette toile énorme d’araignée.

Comme en Grèce jadis les chefs thessaliens,
Ils tiennent tout, la terre et l’homme, en leurs liens;
Pas une triste ville au loin qui ne frissonne;
Vaillante, on la saccage, et lâche, on la rançonne;
Pour dernier mot le meurtre; ils battent sans remord
Monnaie à l’effigie infâme de la mort;
Ils chassent devant eux les blêmes populaces,
Ils sont les grands marcheurs de nuit, rasant les places,
Brisant les tours, du mal et du crime ouvriers,
Et de la chèvre humaine effrayants chevriers.
Être le centre où vient le butin, où ruisselle
Un torrent de bijoux, de piastres, de vaisselle;
Se faire d’un pays une proie, arrachant
Les blés au canton riche et l’or au bourg marchand,

C’est beau; voilà leur gloire. Et c’est leur fait, en outre,
Quand de quelque chaumière on voit fumer la poutre,
Ou quand, vers l’aube, on trouve un pauvre homme dagué,
Nu, sanglant, dans le creux d’un bois, au bord d’un gué;
Le vol des routes suit le pillage des villes;
Car la chose féroce amène aux choses viles.

L’été, la bande met à profit la douceur
De la saison, voyant dans l’aurore une sœur,
Prenant les plus longs jours pour sa sanglante escrime,
Et donnant à l’azur un rôle dans le crime;
Juin radieux consent à la complicité;
C’est l’instant d’appliquer l’échelle à la cité;
C’est le moment de battre une muraille en brèche;
L’air est tiède, la nuit vient tard, la terre est sèche,
La mousse pour dormir fait le roc moins rugueux;
Comme le tas de fleurs cache le tas de gueux!
Le bruit des pas s’efface au bruit de la cascade;
La feuille traître accueille et couvre l’embuscade,
L’églantier, pour le piége épaissi tout exprès,
Semble ami du sépulcre autant que le cyprès;
Aussi, jusqu’à l’hiver, — quoique janvier lui-même

Parfois aux attentats prête sa clarté blême, —
Ce ne sont que combats, assauts et coups de main.

Dès que l’hiver décline, et quand le pont romain,
Le sentier, le ravin que les brises caressent,
Sous la neige qui fond vaguement reparaissent,
Quand la route est possible à des pas hasardeux,
Tous ces aventuriers s’assemblent chez l’un d’eux,
Noirs, terribles, autour d’un âtre où flambe un chêne,
Ils construisent leurs plans pour la saison prochaine;
Ils conviennent d’aller à trois, à quatre, à dix,
Font quelques mouvements d’ours encore engourdis,
Et préparent les vols, les meurtres, les descentes;
Tandis que les oiseaux, sous les feuilles naissantes,

Joyeux, sentant venir les souffles infinis,
Commencent à choisir des mousses pour leurs nids.

À quoi bon ta splendeur, ô sereine nature,
Ô printemps refaisant tous les ans l'ouverture

Du mystérieux temple où la lumière éclot?
À quoi bon le torrent, le lac, le vent, le flot?
À quoi bon le soleil, et les doux mois propices
Semant à pleines mains les fleurs aux précipices,
Les sources et les prés et les oiseaux divins?
À quoi bon la beauté charmante des ravins?
La fierté du sapin, la grâce de l'érable,
Ciel juste! à quoi bon? l'homme étant un misérable,
Et mettant, lui qui rampe et qui dure si peu,
Le masque de l'enfer sur la face de Dieu!
Hélas, hélas, ces monts font peur! leurs fondrières
D'un bastion géant semblent les meurtrières;
Du crime qui médite ils ont la ride au front.
Malheur au peuple, hélas, lorsque l'ombre du mont
Tombe sur les forêts ombre de forteresse!

III

LES HAUTES TERRES

N'importe, loin des forts dont l'aspect seul oppresse,
Quand on peut s'enfoncer entre deux pans de rocs,

Et, comme l'ours, l'isard et les puissants aurochs,
Entrer dans l'âpreté des hautes solitudes,
Le monde primitif reprend ses attitudes,
Et, l'homme étant absent, dans l'arbre et le rocher
On croit voir les profils d'infini s'ébaucher.
Tout est sauvage, inculte, âpre, rauque; on retrouve
La montagne, meilleure avec son air de louve
Qu'avec l'air scélérat et pensif qu'elle prend
Quand elle prête au mal son gouffre et son torrent,

S’associe aux fureurs que la guerre combine,
Et devient des forfaits de l’homme concubine.
Grands asiles! le gave erre à plis écumants;
La sapinière pend dans les escarpements;
Les églises n’ont pas d’obscurité qui vaille
Ce mystère où le temps, dur bûcheron, travaille;

Le pied humain n’entrant point là, ce charpentier
Est à l’aise, et choisit dans le taillis entier;
On entend l’eau qui roule, et la chute éloignée
Des mélèzes qu’abat l’invisible cognée.
L’homme est de trop; souillé, triste, il est importun
À la fleur, à l’azur, au rayon, au parfum;
C’est dans les monts, ceux-ci glaciers, ceux-là fournaises,
Qu’est le grand sanctuaire effrayant des genèses;
On sent que nul vivant ne doit voir à l’œil nu,
Et de près, la façon dont s’y prend l’Inconnu,
Et comment l’être fait de l’atome la chose;
La nuée entre l’ombre et l’homme s’interpose;

Si l’on prête l’oreille on entend le tourment
Des tempêtes, des rocs, des feux, de l’élément,
La clameur du prodige en gésine, derrière
Le brouillard, redoutable et tremblante barrière;
L’éclair à chaque instant déchire ce rideau.
L’air gronde. Et l’on ne voit pas une goutte d’eau
Qui dans ces lieux profonds et rudes s’assoupisse,
Ayant, après l’orage, affaire au précipice;
Selon le plus ou moins de paresse du vent,
Les nuages tardifs s’en vont comme en rêvant,
Ou prennent le galop ainsi que des cavales;
Tout bourdonne, frémit, rugit; par intervalles

Un aigle, dans le bruit des écumes, des cieux,
Des vents, des bois, des flots, passe silencieux.

L’aigle est le magnanime et sombre solitaire;

Il laisse les vautours s'entendre sur la terre,
Les chouettes en cercle autour des morts s'asseoir,
Les corbeaux se parler dans les plaines le soir;
Il se loge tout seul, et songe dans son aire,
S'approchant le plus près possible du tonnerre,
Dédaigneux des complots et des rassemblements.
Il plane immense et libre au seuil des firmaments,
Dans les azurs, parmi les profondes nuées,
Et ne fait rien à deux que ses petits. Huées

De l'abîme, fracas des rocs, cris des torrents,
Hurlements convulsifs des grands arbres souffrants,
Chocs d'avalanches, l'aigle ignore ces murmures.

Donc, au printemps, réveil des rois; trahisons mûres;
On parle, on va, l'on vient; les guet-apens sont prêts;
Et les villes en bas, tremblantes, loin et près,
Pansant leur vieille plaie, arrangeant leur décombre,
Écoutent tous ces pas des cyclopes de l'ombre.
Éternelle terreur du faible et du petit!
Qu'est-ce qu'ils font là-haut, ces rois? On se blottit,
On regarde quel point de l'horizon s'allume,
On entend le bruit sourd d'on ne sait quelle enclume,
On guette ce qui vient, surgit, monte ou descend;
Chaque ville en son coin se cache, frémissant
Des flammèches que l'air et la nuée apportent
Dans ce jaillissement d'étincelles qui sortent
Du rude atelier, plein des souffles de l'autan,
Où l'on forge le sceptre énorme de Satan.

IV

MASFERRER

Or dans ce même temps, du Llobregat à l'Èbre,
Du Tage au Cil, un nom, Masferrer, est célèbre;
C'est un homme des rocs et des bois, qui vit seul;

Il prend l’ombre des monts tragiques pour linceul;
Avant d’être avec l’arbre, il était avec l’homme;
Comme un loup refusant d’être bête de somme,
Fauve, il s’est du milieu des vivants évadé,
Au hasard, comme sort du noir cornet le dé;
Et maintenant il est dans la montagne immense;
Sa zone est le désert redoutable; où commence
La semelle des ours marquant dans les chemins
Des espèces de pas horribles presque humains,
Il est chez lui. Cet être a fui dès son jeune âge.
De l’énormité sombre il est le personnage;
Il rit, ayant l’azur; ses dents au lieu de pain
Cassent l’amande huileuse et rance du sapin;
La montagne, acceptant cet homme sur les cimes,
Trouve son vaste bond ressemblant aux abîmes,
Sa voix, comme les bois et comme les torrents,
Sonore, et de l’éclair ses yeux peu différents;
De sorte que ces monts et que cette nature
Se sentent augmentés presque de sa stature.

Il va du col au dôme et du pic au vallon.
Le glissement n’est pas connu de son talon;
Sa marche n’est jamais plus altière et plus sûre
Qu’au bord vertigineux de quelque âpre fissure;
Il franchit tout, distance, avalanches, hasards,
Tempêtes, précédé d’une fuite d’isards;

Hier, il côtoyait Irun; aujourd’hui l’aube
Le voit se refléter dans le vert lac de Gaube,
Chassant, pêchant, perçant de flèches les hérons,
Ou voguant, à défaut de barque et d’avirons,
Sur un tronc de sapin qui flotte et qu’il manœuvre
Avec le mouvement souple de la couleuvre.
Il entre, apparaît, sort, sans qu’on sache par où.
S’il veut un pont, il ploie un arbre sur le trou;
La façon dont il va le long d’une corniche

Fait peur même à l’oiseau qui sur les rocs se niche.
A-t-il apprivoisé la rude hostilité
Du vent, du pic, du flot à jamais irrité,
Et des neiges soufflant en livides bouffées?
Oui. Car la sombre pierre oscillante des fées
Le salue; il vit calme et formidable, ayant

Avec la ronce et l’ombre et l’éclair flamboyant
Et la trombe et l’hiver de farouches concordes.
Armé d’un arc, vêtu de peaux, chaussé de cordes,
Au-dessus des lieux bas et pestilentiels,
Il court dans la nuée et dans les arc-en-ciels.

Il passe sa journée à l’affût, l’arbalète
Tendue à la cigogne, au gerfaut, à l’alète,
Suit l’isard, ou, pensif, s’accoude aux parapets
Des gouffres sur les lacs et les halliers épais,
Et songe dans les rocs que le lierre tapisse,
Tandis que cet enfer qu’on nomme précipice,
Faisant vociférer l’eau dans le gave amer,
Dans la forêt la terre et dans l’ouragan l’air,
Emploie à blasphémer trois langues différentes.
Avec leurs rameaux d’or et leurs fleurs amarantes,
La lande et la bruyère au reflet velouté
Lui brodent des tapis gigantesques l’été.
Pour la terre, il s’éloigne, et, pour l’astre, il s’approche.

Il avait commencé par bâtir sur la roche,
À la mode des rois construisant des donjons,
Un bouge qu’il avait couvert d’un toit de joncs,
Ayant l’escarpement pour joie et pour défense;

Car l’abîme l’enivre, et depuis son enfance
Qu’il erre plein d’extase et de sublime ennui,
Il cherche on ne sait quoi de grand qui soit à lui
Dans ces immensités favorables à l’aigle.
L’ouragan emporta sa cabane. — Espiègle!

Dit l’homme, en regardant son vieux toit chassieux
S’en aller à travers les foudres dans les cieux.

À cette heure, parmi les crevasses bourrues
Pleines du tournoiement des milans et des grues,
Un repaire, ébauchant une ogive au milieu

D’une haute paroi toute de marbre bleu,
Souterrain pour le loup, aérien pour l’aigle,
Est son gîte; le houx, l’épi barbu du seigle,
L’ortie et le chiendent encombrent l’antre obscur,
Sorte de trou hideux dans un monstrueux mur;
Au-dessus du repaire, au haut du mur de marbre,
Se tord et se hérisse une hydre de troncs d’arbre;
Cette espèce de bête immobile lui sert
À retrouver sa route en ce morne désert;
On aperçoit du fond des solitudes vertes
Ce nœud de cous dressés et de gueules ouvertes,
Penché sur l’ombre, ayant pour rage et pour tourment
De ne pouvoir jeter au gouffre un aboiement.
L’antre est comme enfoui dans les ronces grimpantes;
Parfois, au loin, le pied leur manquant sur les pentes,
Dans l’entonnoir sans fond des précipices sourds,
Comme des gouttes d’encre on voit tomber les ours;
Le ravin est si noir que le vent peut à peine
Jeter quelque vain râle et quelque vague haleine
Dans ce mont, muselière au sinistre aquilon.

Un titan enterré dont on voit le talon,

Ce dur talon fendu d’une affreuse manière,
Voilà l’antre. À côté de la haute tanière,
Un gave insensé gronde et bave et croule à flots
Dans le gouffre, parmi les pins et les bouleaux;
L’antre au bord du torrent s’ouvre sur l’étendue;
La chute est au-dessous. Quand la neige fondue
Et la pluie ont grossi les cours d’eau, le torrent

Monte jusqu'à la grotte, enflé, hurlant, courant,
Terrible, avec un bruit d'horreur et de ravage,
Et familièrement entre chez ce sauvage;
Et lui, laissant frémir les grands arbres pliés,
Profite de l'écume et s'y lave les pieds.

Dans un grossissement de brume et de fumée,
Entouré d'un nuage obscur de renommée,
Quoique invisible au fond de ses rocs, mais debout
Dans son fantôme allant, venant, dominant tout,
Cet homme s'aperçoit de très loin en Espagne.

Chacun des rois a pris sa part de la montagne.
Fervehan a Lordos, Bermudo Cauteretz;

Sanche a le Canigo, pic chargé de forêts
Que blanchit du matin la clarté baptismale;
Padres a la Prexa, Juan tient le Vignemale;
Sforon est roi d'Urgel, Blas est roi d'Obité;
La part de Masferrer s'appelle Liberté.
Pas un plus grand que lui sur ces monts ne se pose.

Qu'est-ce que ce géant? C'est un voleur. La chose
Est simple; tout colosse a toujours deux côtés;
Et les difformités et les sublimités
Habitent la montagne ainsi que des voisines.
Le prodige et le monstre ont les mêmes racines.
Monstre, jusqu'où? Jamais de pas vils et rampants;
Jamais de trahisons, jamais de guet-apens;
Masferrer attaquait tout seul des groupes d'hommes;
Au pâle rustre allant vendre au marché ses pommes,

Il disait : Va! c'est bien! Il laissait volontiers
Aux pauvres gens, tremblant la nuit dans les sentiers,
Leur âne, leur cochon, leur orge, leur avoine;
Mais il se gênait moins avec le sac du moine;
Il n'écrasait pas tout dans ce qu'on nomme droit;

Si quelqu’un avait faim, si quelqu’un avait froid,
Ce n’était pas son nom qui sortait de la plainte;
La malédiction, cette voix fauve et sainte,
Ne le poursuivait point dans son farouche exil;
Aux actions des rois il fronçait le sourcil.
Un jour, devant un fait lugubre et sanguinaire,
— Ces hommes sont méchants, et plus qu’à l’ordinaire,
Cria-t-il. A-t-il donc neigé rouge aujourd’hui? —
Les rois déshonoraient la montagne; mais lui
N’importunait pas trop l’ombre du grand Pélage.
Voilà ce que disaient de lui dans le village

Les pâtres de Héas et de l’Aquatonta.
Du reste confiant et terrible. Il lutta
Tout un jour contre un ours entré dans sa tanière;
L’ours, l’ayant habitée à la saison dernière,
La voulait; vers le soir l’ours fatigué râla.
— Soit, nous continuerons demain matin. Dors là,
Dit l’homme. Il ajouta : — Fais un pas! je t’assomme!
Puis s’endormit. Au jour, l’ours, sans réveiller l’homme
Et se souciant peu de la suite, partit.

V

LE CASTILLO

Noir ravin. Hors un coin vivant où retentit
Dans la forêt le son des buccins et des sistres,
Tout est désert. Halliers, bruit de feuilles sinistres,
Tristesse, immensité; c’est un de ces lieux-là
Où se trouvait Caïn lorsque Dieu l’appela.
Le Caïn qui se cache en cette ombre est de pierre,
C’est un donjon. Des gueux à la longue rapière
Le gardent; des soudards sur ses tours font le guet.

Il date du temps rude où Rollon naviguait.
À quelque heure du jour qu’on le voie, il effraie;
Quelque couleur qu’il prenne, il convient à l’orfraie;

S’il est noir, c’est la nuit; s’il est blanc, c’est l’hiver.
L’archer fourmille là comme au cercueil le ver.

Dans la tour, une salle aux murailles très-hautes.
Avec ses grands arceaux qui sont comme des côtes,
Cette salle, où pétille un brasier frémissant,
Écarlate de flamme, a l’air rouge de sang.
Ouvrez Léviathan, ce sera là son ventre.

Cette salle est un lieu de rendez-vous.
Au centre,
Autour d’un tréteau vaste où fument tous les mets,
Perdrix, pluviers, chevreuils tués sur les sommets,
Mouton d’Anjou, pourceau d’Ardenne ou de Belgique,

Des hommes radieux font un groupe tragique;
Ces hommes sont assis, parlant, buvant, mangeant,
Sur des chaires d’ivoire aux pinacles d’argent,
Ou sur des fronts de bœuf entre les larges cornes;
Leur rire monstreux et fou n’a pas de bornes;
Leur splendeur est féroce, et l’on voit sortir d’eux
Une sorte de lustre implacable et hideux;
Le nœud de perles sert d’agrafe aux peaux de bêtes;
Ils sont comme éblouis de guerre et de tempêtes;
Tous, le jeune homme blond et le vieillard barbu,
Causent, chantent, beaucoup de vin chaud étant bu,
De la fin du repas la nappe ayant les rides;
Chasseurs vertigineux ou bûcherons splendides,
Chacun a sa cognée et chacun a son cor;
L’âtre fait flamboyer leurs torses couverts d’or;
La flamme empourpre, autour de la table fournaise,
Ces hommes écaillés de lumière et de braise,
Étranges, triomphants, gais, funèbres, vermeils;
D’un ciel qui serait tombe ils seraient les soleils.

Ce sont les rois.

Ce sont les princes de l’embûche
Gigantesque où le Nord de l’Espagne trébuche,
Les seigneurs du glacier, du pic et du torrent,
Les vastes charpentiers de l’abattage en grand,
Les dieux, les noirs souffleurs des trompes titaniques
D’où sortent les terreurs, les fuites, les paniques.

Germes du maître altier que l’avenir construit,
Semences du grand trône encor couvert de nuit,
Grains de ce qui sera plus tard le roi d’Espagne,
Ils sont là. C’est Pancho que la crainte accompagne,
Genialis, Sforon qu’Urgel a pour fardeau,
Gildebrand, Égina, Pervehan, Bermudo,
Juan, Blas-le-Captieux, Sanche-le-Fratricide;

Le vieux tigre, Vasco Tête-Blanche, préside.
Près de lui, deux géants : Padres et Tarifet;
L’armure de ceux-ci, dans les récits qu’on fait,
Avec le plomb bouillant de l’enfer est soudée,
Et les clous des brassards sont longs d’une coudée.
Au bas bout de la table est Gil, prince de Gor,
En huque rouge avec la chapeline d’or.

Cependant le haillon sur leur pourpre se fronce;
Ce sont des majestés qui marchent dans la ronce;
La montagne est là toute avec son fauve effroi;
Ils sont déguenillés et couronnés; tel roi

Qui commence en fleurons finit en alpargates.

Vases, meubles, émaux, onyx, rubis, agates,
Argenterie, écrins étincelants, rouleaux
D’étoffes, se mêlant l’un à l’autre à longs flots,
Tout ce qu’on peut voler, tout ce dont on trafique,
Fait dans un coin un bloc lugubre et magnifique;
Rien n’y manque; ballots apportés là d’hier,
Joyaux de femme avec quelque lambeau de chair,

Lourds coffres, sacs d’argent; tout ce tas de décombres
Qu’on appelle le tas de butin.
Dans les ombres
Marche et se meut l’armée horrible des sierras;
Secouant des tambours, courant, levant les bras,

Des femmes, qu’effarouche une sombre allégresse,
Avec des regards d’ange et des bonds de tigresse,
Tâchant de faire choir les piastres de leur main
À force de seins nus, de fard et de carmin,
Dansent autour des rois, car ils sont les Mécènes
De la jupe effarée et des groupes obscènes.
Parmi ces femmes, deux, l’une grande aux crins blonds,
L’autre petite avec des colliers de doublons,
Toutes deux gitanas au flanc couleur de brique,
Mêlent une âpre lutte au bolero lubrique;
La petite, ployant ses reins, tordant son corps,
Rit et raille la grande, et la géante alors

Se penche sur la naine avec gloire et furie,
Comme une Pyrénée insulte une Asturie.

La cheminée, où sont creusés d’étroits grabats,
Remplit un pan de mur du haut jusques en bas;
On voit sur le fronton Saint George, et sur la plaque,
Le combat d’un satyre avec un brucolaque.

Autour de ces rois luit le pillage flagrant.
Le deuil, les campagnards par milliers émigrant,
La plaine qui frémit, l’horizon qui rougeoie,
Les pueblos dévastés et morts, voilà leur joie.
C’est de ces noirs seigneurs que la misère sort.
Peut-être ce pays serait prospère et fort
Si l’on pouvait ôter à l’Espagne l’épine
Qu’elle porte au talon et qu’on nomme rapine.

De ce dont ils sont fiers plus d’un serait honteux;

Ils sont grands sur un fond d’opprobre; devant eux
Des parfums allumés fument; cet encens pue.

Du reste, arceaux géants, colonnade trapue;

Des viandes à des crocs comme dans un charnier;
La même joie allant du premier au dernier;
Plus de cris que le soir au fond des marécages;
D’affreux chiens-loups gardant des captifs dans des cages;
Dans un angle un gibet; partout le choc brutal
Du palais riche, heureux, joyeux, contre l’étal.

Les murs ont par endroits des trous où s’enracine
Un poing de fer portant un cierge de résine.

Vaguement écouté par Blas et Gildebrand,
Un pâtre, près du seuil, sur le sistre vibrant,
Chante des montagnards la féroce romance;
Et des trois madriers brûlant dans l’âtre immense
Il sort tout un dragon de flamme, ayant pour frein
Une chaîne liée à deux chenets d’airain.

VI

UNE ÉLECTION

Cependant les voilà qui causent d’une affaire.
Si grands qu’ils soient, la mort entre en leur haute sphère;
Guy, roi d’Oloron, veuf et sans enfants, est mort.
À qui le mont? à qui la ville? à qui le fort?
Question. La querelle éclaterait. Mais Sanche :

— Paix là! l’heure est mauvaise et notre pouvoir penche;
Les villes contre nous font pacte avec les bourgs;
Les hommes des hameaux, des vignes, des labours,
S’arment pour nous combattre, et la ligue est certaine
Du comte de Castille et du duc d’Aquitaine.

Est-ce en un tel moment qu’autour de nous groupés,
Princes, nos ennemis vont nous voir occupés
À nous mordre en rongeant un os dans la montagne?
Par Jésus! les démons sont d’accord dans leur bagne;

Va-t-on se quereller entre rois dans les cieux?

— La dispute est un mal, dit Blas-le-Captieux,
Qui la cherche est félon, qui l’accepte imbécile;
Mais comment s’accorder?
Sanche dit :
— C’est facile.

— Qui donc ferais-tu roi d’Oloron?
— Masferrer.

Ce nom sur tous les fronts passa comme un éclair.

— Mes frères, reprit Sanche, il faut songer aux guerres;
(Sanche, étant fratricide, aimait ce mot : mes frères.)
Et, pardieu, mon avis, le voici : notre cor
S’entendrait de plus loin et ferait mieux encor,
Et la rumeur qui sort de nous dans la campagne
Et la nuée, irait plus au fond de l’Espagne,
Si Masferrer était élu roi d’Oloron,
Et si, subitement, dans notre altier clairon
Ce voleur engouffrait son souffle formidable.

— Mais n’habite-t-il pas un antre inabordable?

— Puisqu’il l’aborde, lui?
— C’est juste.
— Nous voulons,
Dit Sanche, tout glacer sous nos rudes talons,

Et jeter bas ce peuple et cette ligue infime.
Il nous faut de la chute; eh bien, prenons l’abîme!

Il nous faut de la glace; eh bien, prenons l’hiver!

— Soit, cria Fervehan, nommons roi Masferrer.

— J’y consens, dit Sforon, la bête est d’envergure.

— Ce serait un roi, certe, et de haute figure,
Ajouta Bermudo.
— Le sanglier me plaît,
Dit Juan.
— Mais comme roi, seigneurs, est-il complet?
Dit Blas. On passe mal d’une bauge à la tente.

— Qu’est-ce donc que tu veux de plus? Je m’en contente,
Hurla Gil. Je le prends avec ses marcassins,
S’il en a. Ce serait, j’en jure par les saints,
Quelque chose de grand, d’altier, de salutaire,
Et d’égal à l’effet que ferait sur la terre,
En s’y dressant soudain, l’ombre de Totila,
Si l’on voyait un sceptre entre ces pattes-là!

Le vieux Vasco dressa sous le dais de sa chaire
Son front blanc éclairé d’une blême torchère :

— Il nous faut du renfort. Puisque nous en gagnons
En étant de ce gueux quelconque compagnons,

Amen, l’homme me va. J’accepte l’épousaille.
Mais, princes, qui l’ira chercher dans sa broussaille?

— Deux d’entre nous.
— C’est dit.
Et le sort désigna
Le roi Genialis et le duc Agina.

VII

LES DEUX PORTE-SCEPTRE

Un torrent effréné roule entre deux falaises;
À droite est l’antre; à gauche, au milieu des mélèzes,
Un dur sentier fait face au terrier du bandit,
Mince corniche au flanc du roc; l’eau qui bondit,
L’affreux souffle sortant du gouffre, la colère
D’un trou prodigieux et perpendiculaire,

Séparent le sentier de l’antre. Pas de pont.
Rien. La chute où l’écho tumultueux répond.
Les antres, là, sont sûrs; les abîmes les gardent;
Les deux escarpements ténébreux se regardent;
À peine, en haut, voit-on un frêle jour qui point.
La fente épouvantable est étroite à ce point
Qu’on pourrait du sentier parler à la caverne;
On cause ainsi d’un mur à l’autre de l’Averne.

Un sentier, mais jamais de passants.
Dans ces monts,
Le sol n’est que granits, herbes, glaces, limons;
Le cheval y fléchit, la mule s’y déferre;
Tout ce que les deux rois envoyés purent faire,
Ce fut de pénétrer jusqu’au rude sentier.
Parvenus au tournant, où l’antre tout entier,
Comme ces noirs tombeaux que les chacals déterrent,
Lugubre, apparaissait, les deux rois s’arrêtèrent.
Le bandit, que les rois apercevaient dedans,
Raccommodait son arc, coupait avec ses dents
Les nœuds, de peur qu’un fil sur le bois ne se torde,
Songeait, et par moments crachait un bout de corde.
L’eau du gave semblait à la hâte s’enfuir.

L’homme avait à ses pieds un vieux carquois de cuir
Plein de ces dards qui font de loin trembler la cible.
On voyait dans un coin sa femelle terrible.
Une pierre servait à ce voleur de banc.

Alors, haussant la voix, car le gave en tombant
Faisait le bruit d'un buffle échappé de l'étable,
L'un des deux rois cria dans l'antre redoutable :

— Salut, homme, au milieu des gouffres! Devant toi
Tu vois Agina, duc, et Genialis, roi;
Nous sommes envoyés par Vasco Tête-Blanche,
Fervehan, Gildebrand, don Blas, don Juan, don Sanche,
Gil, Bermudo, Sforon, et je te dis ceci
De la part de ceux-là qui sont des rois aussi :
On te donne Oloron, ville dans la montagne,
Sois l'un de nous; sois roi; viens; le sceptre se gagne,

Tu l'as gagné. Nous rois, nous venons te chercher.
Un fils comme toi peut, du haut de son rocher,
Entrer parmi les rois de plain-pied, sans démence;
C'est à ta liberté que le trône commence.
Règne sur Oloron et sur vingt bourgs encor.
Tu mettras sur ta tête une tiare d'or,
Et ce qu'on nomme vol se nommera conquête;
Car rien n'est crime et tout est vertu, sur le faîte;
Et ceux qui t'appelaient bandit, t'adoreront.
Viens, règne. Nous avons des couronnes au front,
Des draps d'or et d'argent à dix onces la vare,
Des châteaux, des pays, l'Aragon, la Navarre,
Des femmes, des banquets, le monde à nos genoux;
Prends ta part. Tout cela t'appartient comme à nous.
Entre dans le palais et sors de la tanière,
Remplace le nuage, ami, par la lumière;

Quitte ta nuit, ton roc, ton haillon, ton torrent,
Viens; et sois comme nous un roi superbe et grand,
N'ayant rien à ses pieds qui ne soit une fête.
Viens.
Sans lever les yeux et sans tourner la tête,
Le bandit, sur son arc gardant toujours la main,
Leur fit signe du doigt de passer leur chemin.

LA PATERNITÉ

Le père a souffleté le fils.
Tous deux sont grands.
Don Ascagne est le fils. Nager dans les torrents,
Dompter l’ours, être un comte âpre et dur comme un rustre,
Ce furent là les mœurs de son enfance illustre;
Il étonnait les monts où l’éclair retentit
Par la grandeur des pas qu’il faisait tout petit;
Il risquait, par-dessus maint gouffre redoutable,
Des sauts de chevrier, de l’air d’un connétable;
Il n’avait pas vingt ans qu’il avait déjà pris
Tout le pays qui va d’Irun à Lojariz,

Et Tormez, et Sangra, cité des sycomores,
Et détruit sur les bords du Zaban cinq rois maures.
Le père est Jayme; il est plus formidable encor;
Tell eût voulu léguer son arc, Roland son cor,
Hercule sa massue à ce comte superbe.
Ce que le titan chauve est à l’archange imberbe,
Don Jayme l’est à don Ascagne; il a blanchi;
Il neige sur un mont qu’on n’a jamais franchi,
Et l’âge atteint le front que nul roi n’a pu vaincre.
La mer parfois s’arrête et se laisse convaincre
Par la dune ou l’écueil, et s’abaisse et décroît,
Mais Jayme n’a jamais reculé dans son droit

Et toujours il a fait son devoir d’être libre;
Ses vieux monts qu’envieraient les collines du Tibre
Sur l’horizon brumeux de loin sont aperçus,
Et sa tour sur les monts, et son âme au-dessus.
Jayme a chassé Kernoch, pirate de Bretagne.
Il verrait Annibal attaquer sa montagne
Qu’il dirait : me voilà! rien ne le surprenant.
Il habite un pays sauvage et frissonnant;

L’orage est éternel sur son château farouche;
Les vents dont un courroux difforme emplit la bouche
Y soufflent et s’y font une âpre guerre entr’eux,

Et sur ses tours la pluie en longs fils ténébreux
Tombe comme à travers les mille trous d’un crible;
Jayme parfois se montre aux ouragans, terrible;
Il se dresse entre deux nuages entr’ouverts,
Il regarde la foudre et l’autan de travers,
Et fronce un tel sourcil que l’ombre est inquiète;
Le pâtre voit d’en bas sa haute silhouette

Et croit que ce seigneur des monts et des torrents
Met le holà parmi ces noirs belligérants.
Sa tour est indulgente au lierre parasite.
On a recours à lui quand la victoire hésite,
Il la décide, ayant une altière façon
De pousser l’ennemi derrière l’horizon;
Il ne permet aucun pillage sur ses terres;
Il est de ceux qui sont au clergé réfractaires;
Il est le grand rebelle et le grand justicier;
Il a la franchise âpre et claire de l’acier;
Ce n’est pas un voleur, il ne veut pas qu’on dise
Qu’un noble a droit de prendre aux juifs leur marchandise;
Il jure rarement, donne de bons avis,
Craint les femmes, dort vite, et les lourds ponts-levis
Sont tremblants quand il bat leur chaîne à coups de hache;
Il est sans peur, il est sans feinte, il est sans tache,

Croit en Dieu, ne ment pas, ne fuit pas, ne hait pas;
Les défis qu’on lui jette ont pour lui des appas;
Il songe à ses neveux, il songe à ses ancêtres;
Quant aux rois, que l’enfer attend, car ils sont traîtres,
Il les plaint quelquefois et ne les craint jamais;
Quand la loyauté parle, il dit : Je me soumets;
Étant baron des monts, il est roi de la plaine;
La ville de la soie et celle de la laine,

Grenade et Ségovie, ont confiance en lui.
Cette gloire hautaine et scrupuleuse a lui
Soixante ans, sans coûter une larme à l’Espagne.
Chaque fois qu’il annonce une entrée en campagne,
Chaque fois que ses feux, piquant l’horizon noir,
Clairs dans l’ombre, ont couru de monts en monts le soir,
Appels mystérieux flamboyant sur les cimes,
Les tragiques vautours et les cygnes sublimes
Accourent, voulant voir, quand Jayme a combattu,
Les vautours son exploit, les cygnes sa vertu;
Car il est bon.
Le fils n’est pas un chef vulgaire;
Mais le père a souvent pardonné dans la guerre,

Ce qui fait que le père est le plus grand des deux.

Ils tiennent Reuss, le mont Cantabre dépend d’eux,
Ils habitent la case Arcol, tour féodale
Faite par don Maldras qui fut un roi vandale,
Sur un sommet jadis hanté par un dragon;
L’èbre est leur fleuve; au temps des guerres d’Aragon,
Ils ont bravé le roi de France Louis onze.

Ascagne est fils de Jayme et Jayme est fils d’Alonze.
Qu’est-ce qu’Alonze? Un mort; larve, ombre dans les vents,

Fantôme, mais plus grand que ceux qui sont vivants.

Il a fait dans son temps des choses inconnues,
Et superbes; parfois sa face dans les nues
Apparaît; c’est de lui que parlent les vieillards;
On l’aperçoit qui rêve au fond des noirs brouillards.
Sa statue est au bas de la tour, dans la crypte,
Assise sur sa tombe ainsi qu’un dieu d’Égypte,
Toute en airain, énorme, et touchant au plafond;
Car les sépulcres sont ce que les morts les font,
Grands si le mort est grand; si bien que don Alonze

Est spectre dans la brume et géant dans le bronze.

Voilà quinze cents ans que le monde est chrétien;
Les fières mœurs s’en vont; jadis le mal, le bien,
Le bon, le beau vivaient dans la chevalerie;
L’épée avait fini par être une patrie;
On était chevalier comme on est citoyen;
Atteindre un juste but par un juste moyen,
Être clément au faible, aux puissants incommode,
Vaincre, mais rester pur, c’était la vieille mode;
Jayme fut de son siècle, Ascagne est de son temps.
Les générations mêlent leurs pas flottants;

Hélas, souvent un père, en qui brûle une flamme,
Dans son fils qui grandit voit décroître son âme.
Jadis la guerre, ayant pour loi l’honneur grondeur
Et la foi sainte, était terrible avec pudeur;
Les paladins étaient à leurs vieux noms fidèles;
Les aigles avaient moins de griffes et plus d’ailes;
On n’est plus à présent les hommes d’autrefois;
On ne voit plus les preux se ruer aux exploits
Comme des tourbillons d’âmes impétueuses;
On a pour s’attaquer des façons tortueuses
Et sûres, dont le Cid, certes, n’eût pas voulu,
Et que dédaignerait le lion chevelu;
Jadis les courts assauts, maintenant les longs siéges;
Et tout s’achève, après les ruses et les piéges,

Par le sac des cités en flammes sous les cieux,
Et, comme on est moins brave, on est plus furieux;
Ce qui fait qu’aujourd’hui les victoires sont noires.
Ascagne a désiré franchir des territoires
D’Alraz, ville qui doit aux Arabes son nom;
Il a voulu passer, mais la ville a dit non;
Don Ascagne a trouvé la réponse incivile,
Et, lance au poing, il a violé cette ville,
Lui chevalier, risquant sa part de paradis,

Laissant faire aux soldats des choses de bandits;
Ils ont enfreint les lois de guerre aragonaises;
Des enfants ont été jetés dans les fournaises;

Les noirs effondrements mêlés aux tourbillons
Ont dévoré la ville, on a crié : Pillons!
Et ce meurtre a duré trois jours; puis don Ascagne,
Vainqueur, a ramené ses gens dans la montagne
Sanglants, riants, joyeux et comptant des profits,
Et c'est pourquoi le père a souffleté le fils.

Alors le fils a dit : — Je m'en vais. L'ombre est faite
Pour les fuites sans fond, et la forêt muette
Est une issue obscure où tout s'évanouit.
L'insulte est une fronde et nous jette à la nuit.
J'ai droit à la colère à mon âge. L'offense,
Tombant du père au fils, est la fin de l'enfance.
Nul ne répond du gouffre, et qui s'en va, va loin.
L'affront du père, ô bois, je vous prends à témoin,
Suffit pour faire entrer le fils en rêverie.
Quoi! pour avoir senti gronder ma seigneurie
Dans mon âme, devant des manants, pour avoir
Ramené comme il sied des vassaux au devoir,
Pour quelques vils bourgeois brûlés dans leurs masures,
Comte, vous m'avez fait la pire des blessures,
Et l'outrage est venu, seigneur, de vous à moi;
Et j'ai connu la honte et j'ai connu l'effroi;
La honte de l'avoir et l'effroi de le rendre;
Et jusqu'à ce moment nul ne m'eût fait comprendre
Que je pusse rougir ou trembler. Donc, adieu.
Le désert me convient, et l'âpreté du lieu,

Quand la bête des bois devient haute et géante,
N'est point à ses grands pas farouches malséante;
La croissance rend grave et sauvage l'oiseau;
Et l'habitude d'être esclave ou lionceau
Se perd quand on devient lion ou gentilhomme;

L’aiglon qui grandit parle au soleil et se nomme
Et lui dit je suis aigle, et, libre et révolté,
N’a plus besoin de père ayant l’immensité.
D’ailleurs qu’est-ce que c’est qu’un père? La fenêtre
Que la vie ouvre à l’âme et qu’on appelle naître
Est sombre, et quant à moi je n’ai point pardonné
À mon père le jour funeste où je suis né.
Si je vis, c’est sa faute, et je n’en suis pas cause.
Enfin, en admettant qu’on doive quelque chose
À l’homme qui nous mit dans ce monde mauvais,
Il m’a délié, soit, c’est fini, je m’en vais.
Il n’est pas de devoir qu’un outrage n’efface;
J’ai désormais la nuit sinistre sur la face;
Il ne me convient plus d’être fils de quelqu’un.
Je me sens fauve, et voir son père est importun.
Je veux être altier, fier, libre, et je ne l’espère
Que hors de toi, donjon, que hors de vous, mon père.

Je vais dans la sierra que battent les éclairs;
Leur cime me ressemble; un souffle est dans les airs,
Il m’enlève. Je pars. Toute lumière est morte,
Le désert s’ouvre; et l’homme est bienvenu qui porte
Chez des monts foudroyés un souvenir d’affront. —

Et, cela dit, le fils s’en alla.
L’homme est prompt;
Et nos rapidités, voix, colères, querelles,
Vont au hasard, laissant de l’ombre derrière elles.
Ce père aimait ce fils.
Du haut de sa maison,
Morne, et les yeux fixés sur le pâle horizon,
Il regarda celui qui partait disparaître;
Puis, quand son fils se fut effacé, le vieux maître
Descendit dans la crypte où son père dormait.
Le crépuscule froid qu’un soupirail admet
Éclairait cette cave, et la voûte était haute.
Dans le profond sépulcre il entra comme un hôte.

Au fond était assis le grand comte d’airain;
Et dans l’obscurité du blême souterrain,
Brume livide où l’œil par degrés s’habitue,
Flottait le rêve épars autour d’une statue.

Le colosse posait ses mains sur ses genoux.
Il avait ce regard effrayant des yeux doux
Qui peuvent foudroyer quand leur bonté se lasse.
Le vague bruit vivant qui sur la terre passe,
Chocs, rumeurs, chants d’oiseaux, cris humains, pas perdus,

Voix et vents, n’étaient point dans cette ombre entendus,
Et l’on eût dit que rien de ce que l’homme écoute,
Chante, invoque ou poursuit, n’osait sous cette voûte
Pénétrer, tant la tombe est un lieu qui se tait,
Et tant le chevalier de bronze méditait.
Trois degrés, que n’avait touchés nulle sandale,
Exhaussaient la statue au-dessus de la dalle;
Don Jayme les monta. Pensif, il contempla
Quelque temps la figure auguste assise là,
Puis il s’agenouilla comme devant son juge;
Puis il sentit, vaincu, comme dans un déluge
Une montagne sent l’ascension des flots,
Se rompre en son vieux cœur la digue des sanglots,
Il cria :
— Père! ah Dieu! tu n’es plus sur la terre,
Je ne t’ai plus! Comment peut-on quitter son père!
Comme on est différent de son fils, ô douleur!
Mon père! ô toi le plus terrible, le meilleur,
Je viens à toi. Je suis dans ta sombre chapelle,
Je tombe à tes genoux, m’entends-tu? Je t’appelle.
Tu dois me voir, le bronze ayant d’étranges yeux.
Ah! j’ai vécu; je suis un homme glorieux,
Un soldat, un vainqueur; mes trompettes altières
Ont passé bien des fois par-dessus des frontières;
Je marche sur les rois et sur les généraux;
Mais je baise tes pieds. Le rêve du héros

C’est d’être grand partout et petit chez son père.
Le père c’est le toit béni, l’abri prospère,
Une lumière d’astre à travers les cyprès,
C’est l’honneur, c’est l’orgueil, c’est Dieu qu’on sent tout près.
Hélas! le père absent c’est le fils misérable.
Ô toi, l’habitant vrai de la tour vénérable,
Géant de la montagne et sire du manoir,
Superbement assis devant le grand ciel noir,
Occupé du lever de l’aurore éternelle,
Comte, baisse un moment ta tranquille prunelle
Jusqu’aux vivants, passants confus, roseaux tremblants,
Et regarde à tes pieds cet homme en cheveux blancs,
Abandonné tout près du sépulcre, qui pleure,
Et qui va désormais songer dans sa demeure,
Tandis que les tombeaux seront silencieux
Et que le vent profond soufflera dans les cieux.
Mon fils sort de chez moi comme un loup d’un repaire.
Mais est-ce qu’on peut être offensé par son père?
Ni le père, ni Dieu n’offensent; châtier
C’est aimer; l’Océan superbe reste entier
Quel que soit l’ouragan que les gouffres lui jettent,
Et les sérénités éternelles n’admettent
Ni d’affront paternel, ni d’outrage divin.
Eh quoi, ce mot sacré, la source, serait vain!
Ne suis-je pas la branche et n’es-tu pas la tige?
Je t’aime. Un père mort, c’est, glorieux prodige,
De l’ombre par laquelle on se sent soutenir.
La beauté de l’enfance est de ne pas finir.
Au-dessus de tout homme, et quoi qu’on puisse faire,
Quelqu’un est toujours Dieu, quelqu’un est toujours père.

Nous sommes regardés, dans l’âpre nuit du sort,
Par des yeux qui se sont étoilés dans la mort.
Que n’es-tu là, debout! Comme tu serais maître,
Seigneur, guide, gardien, juge! Oh! je voudrais être
Ton esclave, t’offrir mon cœur, courber mon front,

Et te sentir vivant, fût-ce par un affront!
Les avertissements des pères sont farouches
Mais bons, et, quel que soit l’éclair dont tu me touches,
Tout ce qui vient d’en haut par l’âme est accepté,
Et le coup de tonnerre est un coup de clarté.
Avoir son père, ô joie! Ô géant d’un autre âge,
Gronde, soufflète-moi, frappe-moi, sois l’outrage,
Sois la foudre, mais sois mon père! Sois présent
À ma vie, à l’emploi que je fais de ton sang,
À tous mes pas, à tous mes songes! Que m’importe
De n’être que le chien couché devant ta porte,
Ô mon seigneur, pourvu que je te sente là!
Ah! c’est vrai, soixante ans la montagne trembla
Sous mes pas, et j’ai pris et secoué les princes
Nombreux et noirs, sous qui râlaient trente provinces,
Gil, Vermond, Araül, Barruza, Gaïffer,
J’ai tordu dans mes poings tous ces barreaux de fer;

J’ai fait tomber du mur les toiles d’araignées,
Les prêtres; j’ai mon lot de batailles gagnées
Comme un autre; pourtant frappe-moi si j’ai tort!
Oui, mon épée est fière et mon donjon est fort,
J’ai protégé beaucoup de villes orphelines,
J’ai dans mon ombre un tas de tyrans en ruines,
Je semble presque un roi tant je suis triomphant;
Et je suis un vieillard, mais je suis ton enfant!

Ainsi parlait don Jayme en ces caveaux funèbres
À son père de bronze assis dans les ténèbres,
Fantôme plein de l’âme immense des aïeux;
Et pendant qu’il parlait Jayme fermait les yeux;
Sa tête était posée, humble, et comme abattue,
Sur les puissants genoux de la haute statue;
Et cet homme, fameux par tant d’altiers défis
Et tant de beaux combats, pleurait; l’amour d’un fils
Est sans fond, la douleur d’un père est insondable;
Il pleurait.

Tout à coup, — rien n’est plus formidable

Que l’immobilité faisant un mouvement,
Le farouche sépulcre est vivant par moment,
Et le profond sanglot de l’homme le secoue, —
Le vieux héros sentit un frisson sur sa joue
Que dans l’ombre, d’un geste auguste et souverain,
Caressait doucement la grande main d’airain.

XVI

LA COMÈTE

1759

LA COMÈTE

Il avait dit : — Tel jour cet astre reviendra. —

Quelle huée! Ayez pour Vishnou, pour Indra,
Pour Brahma, pour Odin ou pour Baal un culte;
Affirmez par le fer, par le feu, par l'insulte,
L'idole informe et vague au fond des bleus éthers,
Et tous les Jéhovahs et tous les Jupiters
Échoués dans notre âme obscure sur la grève
De Dieu, gouffre où le vrai flotte et devient le rêve;
Sur les Saint-Baboleyns et sur les Saint-Andrés

Soyez absurde et sombre autant que vous voudrez;
Dites que vous avez vu, parmi les mouettes
Et les aigles, passer dans l'air des silhouettes
De maisons qu'en leurs bras tenaient des chérubins;
Dites que pour avoir aperçu dans leurs bains
Des déesses, rondeurs célestes, gorges blanches,
On est cerf à jamais errant parmi les branches;
Croyez à tout, aux djinns, aux faunes, aux démons
Apportant Dieu tremblant et pâle sur les monts;
Soyez bonze au Tonquin, mage dans les Chaldées;
Croyez que les Lédas sont d'en haut fécondées
Et que les cygnes font aux vierges des enfants;
Donnez l'Égypte aux bœufs et l'Inde aux éléphants;
Affirmez l'oignon dieu, Vénus, Ève, et leur pomme;
Et le soleil cloué sur place par un homme

Pour offrir un plus long carnage à des soldats;

Inventez des Korans, des Talmuds, des Védas,
Soyez un imposteur, un charlatan, un fourbe,
C’est bien. Mais n’allez pas calculer une courbe,
Compléter le savoir par l’intuition,
Et, quand on ne sait quel flamboyant alcyon
Passe, astre formidable, à travers les étoiles,
N’allez pas mesurer le trou qu’il fait aux toiles
Du grand plafond céleste, et rechercher l’emploi
Qu’il a dans ce chaos d’où sort la vaste loi;
Laissez errer là-haut la torche funéraire;
Ne questionnez point sur son itinéraire
Ce fantôme, de nuit et de clarté vêtu;
Ne lui demandez pas : Où vas-tu? D’où viens-tu?

Ne faites pas, ainsi que l’essaim sur l’Hymète,
Rôder le chiffre en foule autour de la comète;
Ne soyez pas penseur, ne soyez pas savant,
Car vous seriez un fou. Docte, obstiné, rêvant,
Ne faites pas lutter l’espace avec le nombre;
Laissez ses yeux de flamme à ce masque de l’ombre;
Ne fixez pas sur eux vos yeux; et ce manteau
De lueur où s’abrite un sombre incognito,
Ne le soulevez pas, car votre main savante
Y trouverait la vie et non pas l’épouvante,
Et l’homme ne veut point qu’on touche à sa terreur;
Il y tient; le calcul l’irrite; sa fureur
Contre quiconque chercher à l’éclairer, commence
Au point où la raison ressemble à la démence;
Alors il a beau jeu. Car imagine-t-on
Rien qui semble ici-bas mieux fait pour Charenton
Qu’un ascète perdu dans des recherches sombres
Après le chiffre, après le rêve, après des ombres,
Guetteur pâle, appliquant des verres grossissants

Aux faits connus, aux faits possibles, au bon sens,
Regardant le ciel spectre au fond du télescope,
Chez les astres voyant, chez les hommes myope!

Quoi de plus ressemblant aux insensés que ceux
Qui, voyant les secrets d’en haut venir vers eux,
Marchent à leur rencontre et donnent aux algèbres
L’ordre de prendre un peu de lumière aux ténèbres,
Et, sondant l’infini, mer qui veut se voiler,
Disent à la science impassible d’aller
Voir de près telle ou telle étoile voyageuse,
Et de ne revenir, ruisselante plongeuse,

De l’abîme qu’avec cette perle, le vrai!
D’ailleurs ce diamant, cet or, ce minerai,
Le réel, quel mineur le trouve? Qui donc creuse
Et fouille assez avant dans la nature affreuse
Pour pouvoir affirmer quoi que que ce soit? Hormis
L’autel connu, les jougs sacrés, les dieux permis,
Et le temple doré que la foule contemple,
Et l’espèce de ciel qui s’adapte à ce temple,
Rien n’est certain. Est-il rien de plus surprenant
Qu’un rêveur qui demande au mystère tonnant,
À ces bleus firmaments où se croisent les sphères,
De lui conter à lui curieux leurs affaires,
Et qui veut avec l’ombre et le gouffre profond
Entrer en pourparlers pour savoir ce qu’ils font,
Quel jour un astre sort, quel jour un soleil rentre,
Et qui, pour éclairer l’immensité de l’antre

Où la Pléïade avec Sirius se confond,
Allume sa chandelle et dit : J’ai vu le fond!
Un pygmée à ce point peut-il être imbécile?
Oui, Cardan de Pavie, Hicétas de Sicile
Furent extravagants, mais parmi les songeurs
Qui veillent, épiant les nocturnes rougeurs,
En est-il un, parmi les pires, qui promette
Le retour de ce monstre éperdu, la comète?
La comète est un monde incendié qui court,
Furieux, au delà du firmament trop court;
Elle a la ressemblance affreuse de l’épée;

Est-ce qu’on ne voit pas que c’est une échappée?
Peut-être est-ce un enfer dans le ciel envolé.
Ah! vous ouvrez sa porte! Ah! vous avez sa clé!
Comme du haut d’un pont on voit l’eau fuir sous l’arche,
Vous voyez son voyage et vous suivez sa marche;
Vous distinguez de loin sa sinistre maison;
Ah! vous savez au juste et de quelle façon
Elle s’évade et prend la fuite dans l’abîme!
Ce qu’ignorait Jésus, ce que le Kéroubime
Ne sait pas, ce que Dieu connaît, vous le voyez!
Les yeux d’une lumière invisible noyés,
Pensif, vous souhaitez déjà la bienvenue
Dans notre gouffre d’ombre à l’immense inconnue!
Vous savez le total quand Dieu jette les dés!
Quoi! cet astre est votre astre, et vous lui défendez
De s’attarder, d’errer dans quelque route ancienne,
Et de perdre son temps, et votre heure est la sienne!
Ah! vous savez le rhythme énorme de la nuit!
Il faut que ce volcan échevelé qui fuit,
Que cette hydre, terreur du Cancer et de l’Ourse,
Se souvienne de vous au milieu de sa course
Et tel jour soit exacte à votre rendez-vous!
Quoi! pour avoir, ainsi qu’à l’épouse l’époux,

Donné vos nuits à l’âpre algèbre, quoi! pour être
Attentif au zénith comme au dogme le prêtre,
Quoi! pour avoir pâli sur les nombres hagards
Qui d’Hermès et d’Euclide ont troublé les regards,
Vous voilà le seigneur des profondes contrées!
Vous avez dans la cage horrible vos entrées!
Vous pouvez, grâce au chiffre escorté de zéros,
Prendre aux cheveux l’étoile à travers les barreaux!
Vous connaissez les mœurs des fauves météores,
Vous datez les déclins, vous réglez les aurores,
Vous montez l’escalier des firmaments vermeils,
Vous allez et venez dans la fosse aux soleils!

Quoi! vous tenez le ciel comme Orphée une lyre!
En vertu des bouquins qu'on peut sur les quais lire

Qui sur les parapets s'étalent tout l'été
Feuilletés par le vent sans curiosité,
Vous atome, âme aveugle à tâtons élargie,
De par Bezout, de par l'X et l'Y grec, magie
Dont l'informe grimoire emplit votre grenier,
Vous nain, vous avez fait l'Infini prisonnier!
Votre altière hypothèse à vos calculs l'attelle!
Vous savez tout! Le temps que met l'aube immortelle
À traverser l'azur d'un bout à l'autre bout,
Ce qui, dans les chaos, couve, fermente et bout,
Le bouvier, le lion, le chien, les dioscures,
La possibilité des rencontres obscures,
L'empyrée en tous sens par mille feux rayé,
Les cercles que peut faire un satan ennuyé
En crachant dans le puits de l'abîme, les ondes

Du divin tourbillon qui tourmente les mondes
Et les secoue ainsi que le vent le sapin,
Vous avez tout noté sur votre calepin!
Vous êtes le devin d'en haut, le cicerone

Du pâle Aldebaran inquiet sur son trône!
Vous êtes le montreur d'Allioth, d'Arcturus,
D'Orion, des lointains univers apparus,
Et de tous les passants de la forêt des astres!
Vous en savez plus long que les grands Zoroastres
Et qu'Esdras qui hantait les chênes de Membré;
Vous êtes le cornac du prodige effaré;
La comète est à vous; vous êtes son pontife;
Et vous avez lié votre fil à la griffe
De cet épouvantable oiseau mystérieux,
Et vous l'allez tirer à vous du fond des cieux!
Londre, offre ton Bedlam! Paris, ouvre Bicêtre!

Tout cela s’écroula sur Halley.
Votre ancêtre,
Ô rêveurs! c’est le noir Prométhée, et vos cœurs,

Mordus comme le sien par les vautours moqueurs,
Saignent, et vous avez au pied la même chaîne;
L’homme a pour les chercheurs un Caucase de haine;
Empédocle est toujours brûlé par son volcan;
Tous les songeurs, marqués au front, mis au carcan,
Râlent sur l’éternel pilori des génies
Et des fous. Ce Halley, certes, qu’aux gémonies
Rome eût traîné, qu’Athène au cloaque eût poussé,
Était impie, à moins qu’il ne fût insensé!
Jamais homme ici-bas ne s’était vu proscrire
Par un si formidable et sombre éclat de rire;
Tout l’accabla, les gens légers, les sérieux,
Et les grands gestes noirs des prêtres furieux.
Quoi! cet homme saurait ce que la Bible ignore!
La vaste raillerie est un dôme sonore
Au-dessus d’une tête, et ce sinistre mur
Parle et de mille échos emplit un crâne obscur.
C’est ainsi que le rire, infâme et froid visage,
Parvient à faire un fou de ce qui fut un sage.

Halley morne s’alla cacher on ne sait où.
Avait-il été sage et fut-il vraiment fou?
On ne sait. Le certain c’est qu’il courba la tête
Sous le sarcasme, atroce et joyeuse tempête,
Et qu’il baissa les yeux qu’il avait trop levés.
Les petits enfants nus courant sur les pavés
Le suivaient, et la foule en tumulte accourue
Riait, quand il passait le soir dans quelque rue,
Et l’on disait : C’est lui! chacun voulant punir
L’homme qui voit de loin une étoile venir.
C’est lui! le fou! Les cris allaient jusqu’aux nuées;
Et le pauvre homme errait triste sous les huées.
Il mourut.

L’ombre est vaste et l’on n’en parla plus.
L’homme que tout le monde insulte est un reclus,
On l’évite vivant et mort on le rature.
Ce noir vaincu rentra dans la sombre nature;
Il fut ce qui s’en va le soir sous l’horizon;

On le mit dans un coin quelconque d’un gazon
À côté d’une église obscure, vraie ou fausse;
Et la blême ironie autour de cette fosse
Voleta quelque temps, étant chauve-souris;
Un mort donne fort peu de joie aux beaux esprits;
Un cercueil bafoué ne vaut pas qu’on s’en vante;
Ce qui plaît, c’est de voir saigner la chair vivante;
Contre ce qui n’est plus pourquoi s’évertuer,
Et, quand un homme est mort, à quoi bon le tuer?
Que sert d’assassiner de l’ombre et de la cendre?
Donc chez les vers de terre on le laissa descendre;
La haine s’éteignit comme toute rumeur;
On finit par laisser tranquille ce dormeur,
Et tu t’en emparas, profonde pourriture;
Ce jouet des vivants tomba dans l’ouverture
De l’inconnu, silence, ombre où s’épanouit
La grande paix sinistre éparse dans la nuit;
Et l’herbe, ce linceul, l’oubli, ce crépuscule,
Eurent vite effacé ce tombeau ridicule.
L’oubli, c’est la fin morne; on oublia le nom,
L’homme, tout; ce rêveur digne du cabanon,
Ces calculs poursuivant dans leur vagabondage
Des astres qui n’ont point d’orbite et n’ont point d’âge,

Ces soleils à travers les chiffres aperçus;
Et la ronce se mit à pousser là-dessus.

Un nom, c’est un haillon que les hommes lacèrent,
Et cela se disperse au vent.
Trente ans passèrent.
On vivait. Que faisait la foule? Est-ce qu’on sait?

Et depuis bien longtemps personne ne pensait
Au pauvre vieux rêveur enseveli sous l’herbe.
Soudain, un soir, on vit la nuit noire et superbe,
À l’heure où sous le grand suaire tout se tait,
Blêmir confusément, puis blanchir, et c’était

Dans l’année annoncée et prédite, et la cime
Des monts eut un reflet étrange de l’abîme
Comme lorsqu’un flambeau rôde derrière un mur,
Et la blancheur devint lumière, et dans l’azur
La clarté devint poupre, et l’on vit poindre, éclore,
Et croître on ne sait quelle inexprimable aurore
Qui se mit à monter dans le haut firmament
Par degrés et sans hâte et formidablement;
Les herbes des lieux noirs que les vivants vénèrent
Et sous lesquelles sont les tombeaux, frissonnèrent;
Et soudain, comme un spectre entre en une maison,
Apparut, par-dessus le farouche horizon,
Une flamme emplissant des millions de lieues,
Monstrueuse lueur des immensités bleues,
Splendide au fond du ciel brusquement éclairci;
Et l’astre effrayant dit aux hommes : « Me voici! »

XVII

CHANGEMENT D’HORIZON

CHANGEMENT D’HORIZON

Homère était jadis le poëte; la guerre
Était la loi; vieillir était d’un cœur vulgaire;
La hâte des vivants et leur unique effort
Était l’embrassement tragique de la mort.
Ce que les dieux pouvaient donner de mieux à l’homme,
C’était un grand linceul libérateur de Rome,
Ou quelque saint tombeau pour Sparte et pour ses lois;
L’adolescent hagard se ruait aux exploits;
C’était à qui ferait plus vite l’ouverture
Du sépulcre, et courrait cette altière aventure.
La mort avec la gloire, ô sublime présent!
Ulysse devinait Achille frémissant;
Une fille fendait du haut en bas sa robe,
Et tous criaient : Voilà le chef qu’on nous dérobe!

Et la virginité sauvage de Scyros
Était le masque auguste et fatal des héros;
L’homme était pour l’épée un fiancé fidèle;
La muse avait toujours un vautour auprès d’elle;
Féroce, elle menait aux champs ce déterreur.
Elle était la chanteuse énorme de l’horreur,
La géante du mal, la déesse tigresse,
Le grand nuage noir de l’azur de la Grèce.
Elle poussait aux cieux des cris désespérés.
Elle disait : Tuez! tuez! tuez! mourez!
Des chevaux monstrueux elle mordait les croupes,
Et, les cheveux au vent, s’effarait sur les groupes
Des hommes dieux étreints par les héros titans;
Elle mettait l’enfer dans l’œil des combattants,
L’éclair dans le fourreau d’Ajax, et des courroies

Dans les pieds des Hectors traînés autour des Troies;
Pendant que les soldats touchés du dard sifflant,
Pâles, tombaient, avec un ruisseau rouge au flanc,

Que les crânes s’ouvraient comme de sombres urnes,
Que les lances trouaient son voile aux plis nocturnes,
Que les serpents montaient le long de son bras blanc,
Que la mêlée entrait dans l’Olympe en hurlant,
Elle chantait, terrible et tranquille, et sa bouche
Fauve, bavait du sang dans le clairon farouche!
Et les casques, les tours, les tentes, les blessés,
Les noirs fourmillements de morts dans les fossés,
Les tourbillons de chars et de drapeaux, les piques
Et les glaives, volaient dans ses souffles épiques!
La muse est aujourd’hui la Paix, ayant les reins
Sans cuirasse et le front sous les épis sereins;
Le poëte à la mort dit : Meurs, guerre, ombre, envie! —
Et chasse doucement les hommes vers la vie;
Et l’on voit de ses vers, goutte à goutte, des pleurs
Tomber sur les enfants, les femmes et les fleurs,
Et des astres jaillir de ses strophes volantes;
Et son chant fait pousser des bourgeons verts aux plantes;
Et ses rêves sont faits d’aurore, et, dans l’amour,
Sa bouche chante et rit, toute pleine de jour.
*

En vain, montrant le poing dans tes mornes bravades,
Tu menaces encor, noir passé; tu t’évades!
C’est fini. Les vivants savent que désormais,
S’ils le veulent, les plans hideux que tu formais

Crouleront, qu’il fait jour, que la guerre est impie,
Et qu’il faut s’entr’aider, car toujours l’homme expie
Ses propres lâchetés, ses propres trahisons;
Ce que nous serons sort de ce que nous faisons.
Moi, proscrit, je travaille à l’éclosion sainte
Des temps où l’homme aura plus d’espoir que de crainte

Et contemplera l’aube, afin de s’ôter mieux
L’enfer du cœur, ayant le ciel devant les yeux.

XVIII

LE GROUPE DES IDYLLES

LE GROUPE DES IDYLLES

I

ORPHÉE

J’atteste Tanaïs, le noir fleuve aux six urnes,
Et Zeus qui fait traîner sur les grands chars nocturnes
Rhéa par des taureaux et Nyx par des chevaux,
Et les anciens géants et les hommes nouveaux,
Pluton qui nous dévore, Uranus qui nous crée,
Que j’adore une femme et qu’elle m’est sacrée.
Le monstre aux cheveux bleus, Poséidon, m’entend;

Qu’il m’exauce. Je suis l’âme humaine chantant,
Et j’aime. L’ombre immense est pleine de nuées,
La large pluie abonde aux feuilles remuées,
Borée émeut les bois, Zéphyr émeut les blés,
Ainsi nos cœurs profonds sont par l’amour troublés.
J’aimerai cette femme appelée Eurydice,
Toujours, partout! Sinon que le ciel me maudisse,
Et maudisse la fleur naissante et l’épi mur!
Ne tracez pas de mots magiques sur le mur.

II

SALOMON

Je suis le roi qu’emplit la puissance sinistre;
Je fais bâtir le temple et raser les cités;
Hiram mon architecte et Charos mon ministre
Rêvent à mes côtés;

L’un étant ma truelle et l’autre étant mon glaive,
Je les laisse songer et ce qu’ils font est bien;
Mon souffle monte au ciel plus haut que ne s’élève

L’ouragan libyen;

Dieu même en est parfois remué. Fils d’un crime,

J’ai la sagesse énorme et sombre; et le démon
Prendrait, entre le ciel suprême et son abîme,
Pour juge Salomon.

C’est moi qui fais trembler et c’est moi qui fais croire;
Conquérant on m’admire, et, pontife, on me suit;
Roi, j’accable ici-bas les hommes par la gloire,
Et, prêtre, par la nuit;

J’ai vu la vision des festins et des coupes
Et le doigt écrivant Mané Thécel Pharès,
Et la guerre, les chars, les clairons, et les croupes
Des chevaux effarés;

Je suis grand; je ressemble à l’idole morose;
Je suis mystérieux comme un jardin fermé;
Pourtant, quoique je sois plus puissant que la rose
N’est belle au mois de mai,

On peut me retirer mon sceptre d’or qui brille,

Et mon trône, et l’archer qui veille sur ma tour,
Mais on n’ôtera pas, ô douce jeune fille,
De mon âme l’amour;

On n’en ôtera pas l’amour, ô vierge blonde
Qui comme une lueur te mires dans les eaux,
Pas plus qu’on n’ôtera de la forêt profonde
La chanson des oiseaux.

III

ARCHILOQUE

Le pilote connaît la figure secrète
Du fond de la mer sombre entre Zante et la Crète,
Le sage médecin connaît le mal qu’on a,
Le luthier, par la muse instruit, sait qu’Athana
A fait la flûte droite et Pan la flûte oblique;
Moi, je ne sais qu’aimer. Tout ce qu’un mage explique
En regardant un astre à travers des cyprès,
Dans les bois d’Éleusis la nuit, n’est rien auprès
De ce que je devine en regardant Stellyre.
Stellyre est belle. Ayez pitié de mon délire,
Dieux immortels! je suis en proie à sa beauté.
Sans elle je serais l’Archiloque irrité,

Mais elle m’attendrit. Muses, Stellyre est douce.
Pour que l’agneau la broute il faut que l’herbe pousse
Et que l’adolescent croisse pour être aimé.
Par l’immense Vénus le monde est parfumé;
L’amour fait pardonner à l’Olympe la foudre;
L’océan en créant Cypris voulut s’absoudre,
Et l’homme adore, au bord du gouffre horrible et vain,
La tempête achevée en sourire divin.
Stellyre a la gaîté du nid chantant dans l’arbre.
Moi qui suis de Paros, je me connais en marbre,
Elle est blanche; et pourtant femme comme Aglaura
Et Glycère; et, rêveur, je sais qu’elle mourra.
Tout finit par finir, hélas, même les roses!
Quoique Stellyre, ô dieux, ressemble aux fleurs écloses
À l’aurore, en avril, dans les joncs des étangs,
Faites, dieux immortels, qu’elle vive longtemps,
Car il sort de cette âme une clarté sereine;
Je la veux pour esclave, et je la veux pour reine;
Je suis un cœur dompté par elle, et qui consent;
Et ma haine est changée en amour. Ô passant,

Sache que la chanson que voici fut écrite
Quand Hipparque chassa d’Athène Onomacrite
Parce qu’il parlait bas à des dieux infernaux

Pour faire submerger l’archipel de Lemnos.

IV

ARISTOPHANE

Les jeunes filles vont et viennent sous les saules;
Leur chevelure cache et montre leurs épaules;
L’amphore sur leur front ne les empêche pas,
Quand Ménalque apparaît, de ralentir leur pas,
Et de dire : Salut, Ménalque! et la feuillée,
Par le rire moqueur des oiseaux réveillée,
Assiste à la rencontre ardente des amants;
Tant de baisers sont pris sous les rameaux charmants

Que l’amphore au logis arrive à moitié vide.
L’aïeule, inattentive au fil qu’elle dévide,
Gronde : Qu’as-tu donc fait, qui donc t’a pris la main,
Que l’eau s’est répandue ainsi sur le chemin?
La jeune fille dit : Je ne sais pas; et songe.
À l’heure où dans les champs l’ombre des monts s’allonge,
Le soir, quand on entend des bruits de chars lointains,
Il est bon de songer aux orageux destins
Et de se préparer aux choses de la vie;
C’est par le peu qu’il sait, par le peu qu’il envie,
Que l’homme est sage. Aimons. Le printemps est divin;
Nous nous sentons troublés par les fleurs du ravin,
Par l’indulgent avril, par les nids peu moroses,
Par l’offre de la mousse et le parfum des roses,
Et par l’obscurité des sentiers dans les bois.
Les femmes au logis rentrent, mêlant leurs voix,
Et plus d’une à causer sous les portes s’attarde.

Femme, qui parles mal de ton mari, prends garde,
Car ton petit enfant te regarde étonné.
Muses, vénérons Pan, de lierre couronné.

V

ASCLÉPIADE

Vous qui marchez, tournant vos têtes inquiètes,
Songez-y, le dieu Pan sait toujours où vous êtes.
Amants, si vous avez des raisons pour ne pas
Laisser voir quelle est l’ombre où se perdent vos pas,
Vous êtes mal cachés dans ce bois, prenez garde;
La tremblante forêt songe, écoute et regarde;

À tout ce hallier noir vous donnez le frisson;
Craignez que vos baisers ne troublent le buisson,
Craignez le tremblement confus des branches d’arbre;
La nature est une âme, elle n’est pas de marbre;
L’obscur souffle inconnu qui dans ce demi-jour
Passe et que vous prenez pour le vent, c’est l’amour;
Et vous êtes la goutte et le monde est le vase.
Amants, votre soupir fait déborder l’extase;
Au-dessus de vos fronts les rameaux frémissants
Mêlent leurs bruits, leurs voix, leurs parfums, leur encens;
L’émotion au bois profond se communique,
Et la fauve dryade agite sa tunique.

VI

THÉOCRITE

Ô belle, crains l’Amour, le plus petit des dieux,
Et le plus grand; il est fatal et radieux;
Sa pensée est farouche et sa parole est douce;
On le trouve parfois accroupi dans la mousse,
Terrible et souriant, jouant avec les fleurs;
Il ne croit pas un mot de ce qu’il dit; les pleurs
Et les cris sont mêlés à son bonheur tragique;
Maïa fit la prairie, il fait la géorgique;
L’Amour en tout temps pleure, et triomphe en tout lieu;

La femme est confiante aux baisers de ce dieu,
Car ils ne piquent pas, sa lèvre étant imberbe,

— Tu vas mouiller ta robe à cette heure dans l’herbe,
Lyda, pourquoi vas-tu dans les champs si matin?
Lyda répond : — Je cède au ténébreux destin,
J’aime, et je vais guetter Damœtas au passage,
Et je l’attends encor le soir, étant peu sage,
Quand il fait presque nuit dans l’orme et le bouleau,
Quand la nymphe aux yeux verts danse au milieu de l’eau.
— Lyda, fuis Damœtas! — Je l’adore et je tremble.
Je ne puis lui donner toutes les fleurs ensemble,
Car l’une vient l’automne et l’autre vient l’été;
Mais je l’aime. — Lyda, Lyda, crains Astarté.
Cache ton cœur en proie à la sombre chimère.
Il ne faut raconter ses amours qu’à sa mère
À l’heure matinale où le croissant pâlit,
Quand elle se réveille en riant dans son lit.

VII

BION

Allons-nous-en rêveurs dans la forêt lascive.
L’amour est une mer dont la femme est la rive,
Les saintes lois d’en haut font à ses pieds vainqueurs
Mourir le grand baiser des gouffres et des cœurs.
Viens, la forêt s’ajoute à l’âme, et Cythérée
Devient fauve et terrible en cette horreur sacrée;
Viens, nous nous confierons aux bois insidieux,
Et nous nous aimerons à la façon des dieux;
Il faut que l’empyrée aux voluptés se mêle,
Et l’aigle, la colombe étant sa sœur jumelle,
S’envole volontiers du côté des amants.
Les cœurs sont le miroir obscur des firmaments;

Toutes nos passions reflètent les étoiles.

Par le déchirement magnifique des voiles
La nature constate et prouve l’unité;
Le rayon c’est l’amour, l’astre c’est la beauté.
Hyménée! Hyménée! allons sous les grands chênes.
Ô belle, je te tiens, parce que tu m’enchaînes,
Et tu m’as tellement dans tes nœuds enchantés
Lié, saisi, que j’ai toutes les libertés;
Je les prends; tu ne peux t’en plaindre, en étant cause.
Si le zéphyr te fâche, alors ne sois plus rose.

VIII

MOSCHUS

Ô nymphes, baignez-vous à la source des bois.
Le hallier, bien qu’il soit rempli de sombres voix,
Quoiqu’il ait des rochers où l’aigle fait son aire,
N’est jamais envahi par l’ombre qui s’accroît
Au point d’être sinistre et de n’avoir plus droit
À la nudité de Néère.

Néère est belle, douce et pure, et transparaît
Blanche, à travers l’horreur de la noire forêt;
Un essaim rôde et parle aux fleurs de la vallée,
Un écho dialogue avec l’écho voisin,
Qu’est-ce que dit l’écho? qu’est-ce que dit l’essaim?
Qu’étant nue, elle est étoilée!

Car l’éblouissement des astres est sur toi
Quand tu te baignes, chaste, avec ce vague effroi

Que toujours la beauté mêle à sa hardiesse,
Sous l’arbre où l’œil du faune ardent te cherchera.
Tu sais bien que montrer la femme, ô Néèra,
C’est aussi montrer la déesse.

Moi, quoique par les rois l’homme soit assombri,

Je construis au-dessus de ma tête un abri
Avec des branches d’orme et des branches d’yeuse;
J’aime les prés, les bois, le vent jamais captif,
Néère et Phyllodoce, et je suis attentif
À l’idylle mélodieuse.

Parce que, dans cette ombre où parfois nous dormons,
De lointains coups de foudre errent de monts en monts,
Parce que tout est plein d’éclairs visionnaires,
Parce que le ciel gronde, est-il donc en marchant
Défendu de rêver, et d’écouter le chant
D’une flûte entre deux tonnerres?

IX

VIRGILE

Déesses, ouvrez-moi l’Hélicon maintenant.
Ô bergers, le hallier sauvage est surprenant;
On y distingue au loin de confuses descentes
D’hommes ailés, mêlés à des nymphes dansantes;

Des clartés en chantant passent, et je les suis.
Les bois me laissent faire et savent qui je suis.
Ô pasteurs, j’ai Mantoue et j’aurai Parthénope;
Comme le taureau-dieu pressé du pied d’Europe,
Mon vers, tout parfumé de roses et de lys,
A l’empreinte du frais talon d’Amaryllis;
Les filles aux yeux bleus courent dans mes églogues;
Bacchus avec ses lynx, Diane avec ses dogues,
Errent, sans déranger une branche, à travers
Mes poëmes, et Faune est dans mes antres verts.

Quel qu’il soit, et fût-il consul, fût-il édile,
Le passant ne pourra rencontrer mon idylle
Sans trouble, et, tout à coup, voyant devant ses pas
Une pomme rouler et fuir, ne saura pas

Si dans votre épaisseur sacrée elle est jetée,
Forêts, pour Atalante, ou bien par Galatée.
Mes vers seront si purs qu'après les avoir lus
Lycoris ne pourra que sourire à Gallus.
La forêt où je chante est charmante et superbe;

Je veux qu'un divin songe y soit couché dans l'herbe,
Et que l'homme et la femme, ayant mon âme entre eux,
S'ils entrent dans l'églogue en sortent amoureux.

X

CATULLE

Que faire au mois d'avril à moins de s'adorer?
Viens, nous allons songer, viens, nous allons errer.
Laissons Plaute à Chloé prouver qu'il la désire
Par un triple collier de corail de Corcyre;
Laissons Psellas charmer Fuscus par ses grands yeux,
Et par l'âpre douceur d'un chant mystérieux;
Laissons César dompter la fortune changeante,
Mettre un mors à l'équestre et sauvage Agrigente,
Au Numide, à l'Ibère, au Scythe hasardeux;
Ayons le doux souci d'être seuls tous les deux.

Nous avons à nous l'air, le ciel, l'ombre, l'espace.
Nous ferons arrêter le muletier qui passe,
Nous boirons dans son outre un peu de vin sabin;
Et le soir, quand la lune, éclairant dans leur bain
La faune et la naïade indistincte, se lève,
Nous chercherons un lit pour finir notre rêve,
Une mousse cachée au fond du hallier noir.
Ô belle, rien n'existe ici-bas que l'espoir,
Rien n'est sûr que l'hymen, rien n'est vrai que la joie;
L'amour est le vautour et nos cœurs sont la proie.
Quand, ainsi qu'y monta jadis la nymphe Hellé,
Une femme apparaît sur l'Olympe étoilé,

Les dieux donnent de tels baisers à ses épaules,
Qu'une lueur subite éclaire les deux pôles,
Et la terre comprend qu'en ce ciel redouté
L'humanité s'accouple à la divinité.
Aimons. Allons aux bois où chantent les fauvettes.

Il faut vivre et sourire, il faut que tu revêtes
Cette robe d'azur qu'on nomme le bonheur.
L'Amour est un divin et tendre empoisonneur.
Laissons ce charmant traître approcher de nos bouches
Sa coupe où nous boirons les extases farouches
Et le sombre nectar des baisers éperdus.
Les cœurs sont insensés et les cieux leur sont dus;
Car la démence auguste et profonde des âmes
Met dans l'homme une étoile, et quand nous nous aimâmes
Nous nous sentîmes pleins de rayons infinis,
Et tu devins Vénus et je fus Adonis.
Le tremblement sacré des branches dans l'aurore
Conseille aux cœurs d'aimer, conseille aux nids d'éclore.
Il faut craindre et vouloir, chercher les prés fleuris
Et rêver, et s'enfuir, mais afin d'être pris.
Adorons-nous. Ainsi je médite et je chante.
Je songe à ta pudeur souveraine et touchante,
Je regarde attendri l'antre où tu me cédas;
Pendant que, fatiguée à suivre nos soldats,
La Victoire, au-dessus de nous, dans la nuée,
Rattache sa sandale, un instant dénouée.

XI

LONGUS

Chloé nue éblouit la forêt doucement;
Elle rit, l'innocence étant un vêtement;
Elle est nue, et s'y plaît; elle est belle, et l'ignore.
Elle ressemble à tous les songes qu'on adore;
Le lys blanc la regarde et n'a point l'air fâché;

La nuit croit voir Vénus, l’aube croit voir Psyché.
Le printemps est un tendre et farouche mystère;
On sent flotter dans l’air la faute involontaire
Qui se pose, au doux bruit du vent et du ruisseau,
Dans les âmes ainsi que dans les bois l’oiseau.
Sève! hymen! le printemps vient, et prend la nature
Par surprise, et, divin, apporte l’aventure
De l’amour aux forêts, aux fleurs, aux cœurs. Aimez.

Dans la source apparaît la nymphe aux doigts palmés,
Dans l’arbre la dryade et dans l’homme le faune;
Le baiser envolé fait aux bouches l’aumône.

XII

DANTE

Thalès n’était pas loin de croire que le vent
Et l’onde avaient créé les femmes; et, devant
Phellas, fille des champs, bien qu’il fût de la ville,
Ménandre n’était point parfaitement tranquille;
Moschus ne savait pas au juste ce que c’est
Que la femme, et tremblait quand Glycère passait;
Anaxagore, ayant l’inconnu pour étude,
Regardait une vierge avec inquiétude;
Virgile méditait sur Lycoris; Platon

Dénonçait à Paphos l’odeur du Phlégéton;
Plaute évitait Lydé; c’est que ces anciens hommes
Redoutaient vaguement la planète où nous sommes;
Agd et Tellus étaient des femelles pour eux;
Ils craignaient le travail perfide et ténébreux
Des parfums, des rayons, des souffles et des sèves.
Les femmes après tout sont peut-être des rêves;
Quelle âme ont-elles? Nul ne peut savoir quel dieu
Ou quel démon sourit dans la nuit d’un œil bleu;
Nul ne sait, dans la vie immense enchevêtrée,

Si l’antre où rêve Pan, l’herbe où se couche Astrée,
Si la roche au profil pensif, si le zéphyr,
Si toute une forêt acharnée à trahir,
À force d’horreur, d’ombre, et d’aube, et de jeunesse,
Ne peut transfigurer en femme une faunesse;
Dans tout ils croyaient voir quelque spectre caché
Poindre, et Démogorgon s’ajoutait à Psyché.

Ces sages d’autrefois se tenaient sur leurs gardes.
La possibilité des méduses hagardes
Surgissant tout à coup les rendait attentifs;
De la sombre nature ils se sentaient captifs;
Perse reconnaissait dans Églé, la bouffonne
Qui se barbouille avec des mûres, Tisiphone;
Et plusieurs s’attendaient à voir subitement
Transparaître Erynnis sous le masque charmant
De la naïve Aglaure ou d’Iphis la rieuse;
Tant la terre pour eux était mystérieuse.

XIII

PÉTRARQUE

Elle n’est plus ici; cependant je la vois
La nuit au fond des cieux, le jour au fond des bois!
Qu’est-ce que l’œil de chair auprès de l’œil de l’âme?
On est triste; on n’a pas près de soi cette femme,
On est dans l’ombre; eh bien, cette ombre aide à la voir,
Car l’étoile apparaît surtout dans le ciel noir.
Je vois ma mère morte, et je te vois absente,

Ô Laure! Où donc es-tu? là-bas, éblouissante.
Je t’aime, je te vois. Sois là, ne sois pas là,
Je te vois. Tout n’est rien, si tout n’est pas cela,
Aimer. Aimer suffit; pas d’autre stratagème
Pour être égal aux dieux que ce mot charmant : J’aime.
L’amour nous fait des dons au-dessus de nos sens,

Laure, et le plus divin, c’est de nous voir absents;
C’est de t’avoir, après que tu t’es exilée;
C’est de revoir partout ta lumière envolée!
Je demande : Es-tu là, doux être évanoui?
La prunelle dit : Non, mais l’âme répond : Oui.

XIV

RONSARD

C’est fort juste, tu veux commander en cédant;
Viens, ne crains rien; je suis éperdu, mais prudent;
Suis-moi; c’est le talent d’un amant point rebelle
De conduire au milieu des forêts une belle,
D’être ardent et discret, et d’étouffer sa voix
Dans le chuchotement mystérieux des bois.
Aimons-nous au-dessous du murmure des feuilles;
Viens, je veux qu’en ce lieu voilé tu te recueilles,
Et qu’il reste au gazon par ta langueur choisi
Je ne sais quel parfum de ton passage ici;
Laissons des souvenirs à cette solitude.
Si tu prends quelque molle et sereine attitude,
Si nous nous querellons, si nous faisons la paix,
Et si tu me souris sous les arbres épais,

Ce lieu sera sacré pour les nymphes obscures;
Et le soir, quand luiront les divins Dioscures,
Ces sauvages halliers sentiront ton baiser
Flotter sur eux dans l’ombre et les apprivoiser;
Les arbres entendront des appels plus fidèles,
De petits cœurs battront sous de petites ailes,
Et les oiseaux croiront que c’est toi qui bénis
Leurs amours, et la fête adorable des nids.
C’est pourquoi, belle, il faut qu’en ce vallon tu rêves.
Et je rends grâce à Dieu, car il fit plusieurs Èves,
Une aux longs cheveux d’or, une autre au sein bruni,
Une gaie, une tendre, et quand il eut fini

Ce Dieu, qui crée au fond toujours les mêmes choses,

Avec ce qui restait des femmes, fit les roses.

XV

SHAKESPEARE

Ô doux être, fidèle et cependant ailé,
Ange et femme, est-il vrai que tu t’en sois allé?
Pour l’âme, la lueur inexprimable reste;
L’âme ne perd jamais de vue un front céleste;
Et quiconque est aimé devient céleste. Hélas,
L’absence est dure, mais le cœur noir, l’esprit las
Sont consolés par l’âme, invincible voyante.
L’éclair est passager, la nuée est fuyante,
Mais l’être aimé ne peut s’éclipser. Je te vois,
Je sens presque ta main, j’entends presque ta voix.
Oui, loin de toi je vis comme on vit dans un songe;
Ce que je touche est larve, apparence, mensonge;

J’aperçois ton sourire à travers l’infini;
Et, sans savoir pourquoi, disant : Suis-je puni?
Je pleure vaguement si loin de moi tu souffres.
La nature ignorée et sainte a de ces gouffres
Où le visionnaire est voisin du réel;
Ainsi la lune est presque un spectre dans le ciel;
Ainsi tout dans les bois en fantôme s’achève;
Ainsi c’est presque au fond d’un abîme et d’un rêve
Qu’un rossignol est triste et qu’un merle est rieur.

Quel mystère insondé que l’œil intérieur!
Quelle insomnie auguste en nous! Quelle prunelle
Ouverte sur le bien et le mal, éternelle!
À quelle profondeur voit cet œil inconnu!
Comme devant l’esprit toute l’ombre est à nu!
L’œil de chair bien souvent pour l’erreur se décide.

La cécité pensive est quelquefois lucide;
Quoi donc! est-ce qu’on a besoin des yeux pour voir

L’héroïsme, l’honneur, la vertu, le devoir,
La réalité sainte et même la chimère?
Qui donc passe en clarté le grand aveugle Homère?

XVI

RACAN

Si toutes les choses qu’on rêve
Pouvaient se changer en amours,
Ma voix, qui dans l’ombre s’élève,
Osant toujours, tremblant toujours,

Qui, dans l’hymne qu’elle module,
Mêle Astrée, Eros, Gabriel,
Les dieux et les anges, crédule
Aux douces puissances du ciel,

Pareille aux nids qui, sous les voiles
De la nuit et des bois touffus,
Échangent avec les étoiles
Un grand dialogue confus,

Sous la sereine et sombre voûte
Sans murs, sans portes et sans clés,
Mon humble voix prendrait la route
Que prennent les cœurs envolés,

Et vous arriverait, touchante,
À travers les airs et les eaux,
Si toutes les chansons qu’on chante,
Pouvaient se changer en oiseaux.

XVII

SEGRAIS

Ô fraîche vision des jupes de futaine
Qui se troussent gaîment autour de la fontaine!
Ô belles aux bras blancs follement amoureux!
J’ai vu passer Aminthe au fond du chemin creux;
Elle a seize ans, et tant d’aurore sur sa tête
Qu’elle semble marcher au milieu d’une fête;
Elle est dans la prairie, elle est dans les forêts
La plus belle, et n’a pas l’air de le faire exprès;
C’est plus qu’une déesse et c’est plus qu’une fée,
C’est la bergère; c’est une fille coiffée
D’iris et de glaïeuls avec de grands yeux bleus;
Elle court dans les champs comme aux temps fabuleux
Couraient Leontium, Phyllodoce et Glycère;
Elle a la majesté du sourire sincère;
Quand elle parle on croit entendre, ô bois profond,

Un rossignol chanter au-dessus de son front;
Elle est pure, sereine, aimable, épanouie;
Et j’en ai la prunelle à jamais éblouie;
Comme Faune la suit d’un regard enflammé!
Comme on sent que les nids, l’amour, le mois de mai,
Guettent dans le hallier ces douces âmes neuves!
Dans des prés où ne coule aucun des divins fleuves
Qu’on appelle Céphise, Eurotas ou Cydnus,
Elle trouve moyen d’avoir de beaux pieds nus;
Cette fille d’Auteuil semble née à Mégare!
Parfois dans des sentiers pleins d’ombre elle s’égare;
Oh! comme les oiseaux chuchotaient l’autre soir!
Pas plus que le raisin ne résiste au pressoir,
Pas plus que le roseau n’est au zéphyr rebelle,
Nul cœur pouvant aimer n’élude cette belle.
Comme la biche accourt et fuit à notre voix
Elle est apprivoisée et sauvage à la fois;
Elle est toute innocente et n’a pas de contrainte;

Elle donne un baiser confiant et sans crainte
À quiconque est naïf comme un petit enfant;
Contre les beaux parleurs, fière, elle se défend;
Et c’est pourquoi je fais semblant d’être stupide;
Telle est la profondeur des amoureux. Et Gnide,
Amathonte et Paphos ne sont rien à côté
Du vallon où parfois passe cette beauté.
Muses, je chante, et j’ai près de moi Stésichore,
Plaute, Horace et Ronsard, d’autres bergers encore,
J’aime, et je suis Segrais qu’on nomme aussi Tircis;
Nous sommes sous un hêtre avec Virgile assis,
Et cette chanson s’est de ma flûte envolée,
Pendant que mes troupeaux paissent dans la vallée,
Et que du haut des cieux l’astre éclaire et conduit
La descente sacrée et sombre de la nuit.

XVIII

VOLTAIRE

Dans la religion voir une bucolique;
Être assez huguenot pour être catholique,
Aimer Clorinde assez pour caresser Suzon;
Suivre un peu la sagesse et beaucoup la raison,
Planter là ses amis, mais ne pas les proscrire,
Croire aux dogmes tout juste assez pour en sourire,
Être homme comme un diable, abbé comme Chaulieu,

Ne rien exagérer, pas même le bon Dieu,
Baiser le saint chausson qu’offre à la gent dévote
Le pape, et préférer le pied nu de Javotte,
Tels sont les vrais instincts d’un sage en bon état.
Force tentations, et jamais d’attentat;
Avoir on ne sait quoi d’aimable dans la faute;
Ressembler à ce bon petit chevreau qui saute
Joyeux, libre, et qui broute, et boit aux étangs verts,
Si content qu’il en met l’oreille de travers;

Donner son cœur au ciel si Goton vous le laisse,
Commettre des péchés pour aller à confesse,
Car les péchés sont gais, et font avec douceur
Aux frais du confessé vivre le confesseur;
Pas trop de passion, pas trop d'apostasie,
C'est le bon sens. Suivez cette route choisie
Et sûre. C'est ainsi qu'on vieillit sans effroi;
Et c'est ainsi qu'on a de l'esprit, fût-on roi,
Et qu'on est Henri quatre, et qu'on a ses entrées
À la grand'messe, et chez Gabrielle d'Estrées.

XIX

CHAULIEU

Ayez de la faiblesse, ô femmes; c'est charmant
D'être faibles, et l'ombre est dans le firmament
Pour prouver le besoin que parfois ont de voiles
Même la blanche aurore et même les étoiles.
Les fleurs ne savent pas ce que va faire avril,
Elles ont peur; de quoi? D'un charme, ou d'un péril?
D'un péril et d'un charme. Eh bien, toi qui te mêles
Aux fleurs, et qui les vois trembler, tremble comme elles,
Mais pas plus. Oui, tremblez, belles; mais, croyez-moi,
Sur la frayeur des fleurs copiez votre émoi.
Voyez comme elles sont promptement rassurées.
Les roses sont autant de molles Cythérées,

Point méchantes; l'épine est la sœur du parfum.
Le ciel n'est point pour l'homme un témoin importun.
Aimons. On y consent au fond des empyrées.
Après avoir aimé les âmes sont sacrées.
L'heure où nous brillons touche à l'heure où nous tombons,
Brillez, tombez. Jadis les sages étaient bons;
Ils conseillaient la gloire aux héros, et la chute
Aux belles. L'herbe douce après la douce lutte
Devient un trône; Horace y fait asseoir Chloé.

Ainsi qu’un vieux trumeau dépeint et décloué

L’idylle aujourd’hui pend au grand plafond céleste;
Restaurons-la : suivons Galatée au pied leste;
Et je serai Virgile, et vous serez Églé,
Ô belle au frais fichu vainement épinglé!
Nous sommes des bergers, Gnide est notre village.
Attention! je vais commencer le pillage
Des appas, et l’on va courir dans les sillons;
Et vous ne ferez pas la chasse aux papillons,
Belle, les papillons étant de bon exemple.
Ô cieux profonds, l’amour est dieu, le bois est temple,
Et cette jeune fille à l’œil un peu moqueur
Est ma victorieuse et je suis son vainqueur!

XX

DIDEROT

Les philosophes sont d’avis que la nature
Se passe d’eux, ne tient qu’à sa propre droiture,
Ne consulte que l’ordre auguste, et que les lois
Sont les mêmes au fond des cieux, au fond des bois.
Vivre, aimer, tout est là. Le reste est ignorance;
Et la création est une transparence;
L’univers laisse voir toujours le même sceau,
L’amour, dans le soleil ainsi que dans l’oiseau;
Nos sens sont des conseils; des voix sont dans les choses;
Ces voix disent : Beautés, faites comme les roses;
Faites comme les nids, amants. Avril vainqueur
Sourit, laissez le ciel vous entrer dans le cœur.
Théocrite, ô ma belle, était tendre et facile;
Ces bons ménétriers de Grèce et de Sicile

Chantaient juste, et leur vers reste aimable et charmeur
Même quand la saison est de mauvaise humeur;
Ils étaient un peu fous comme tous les vrais sages;

Ils baisaient les pieds nus, guettaient les purs visages,
N’avaient point de sophas et point de canapés,
Et couchaient sur des lits de pampres frais coupés;
Ils se hâtaient d’aimer, car la vie est rapide;
La dernière heure éclôt dans la première ride;
Hélas, la pâle mort pousse d’un pied égal
Votre beauté, madame, et notre madrigal.
Vivons. Moi, j’ai l’amour pour devoir, et personne
N’a droit de s’informer, belles, si je frissonne
Parce que j’entrevois dans l’ombre un sein charmant;
Je prends ma part du vaste épanouissement;
Le plus sage en ce monde immense est le plus ivre.

Femme, écoute ton cœur, ne lis pas d’autre livre;
Ce qu’ont fait les aïeux les enfants le refont,
Et l’amour est toujours la même idylle au fond;
L’églogue en souriant se copie; elle calque
Margot sur Phyllodoce et Gros-Jean sur Ménalque.
Comme souffle le vent, comme luit le rayon,
Sois belle, aime! La vie est une fonction,
Et cette fonction par tout être est remplie
Sans qu’aucun instinct mente et qu’aucune loi plie;
Les accomplissements sont au-dessus de nous;
Le lys est pur, le ciel est bleu, l’amour est doux
Sans la permission de l’homme; nul système
N’empêche Églé de dire à Tityre : Je t’aime!
La Sorbonne n’a rien à voir dans tout cela;
Madame de Genlis peut faire Paméla

Sans gêner les oiseaux des bois; et les mésanges,
Les pinsons, les moineaux, bêtes qui sont des anges,
Ne s’inquiètent point d’Arnauld ni de Pascal;
Et, quand des profondeurs du ciel zodiacal,
Vers l’aurore, à travers d’invisibles pilastres,
Il redescend, avec son attelage d’astres,
Là-haut, dans l’infini, l’énorme chariot
Sait peu ce que Voltaire écrit à Thiriot.

XXI

BEAUMARCHAIS

Allez-vous-en aux bois, les belles paysannes!
Par-dessus les moulins, dont nous sommes les ânes,
Jetez tous vos bonnets, et mêlez à nos cœurs
Vos caprices, joyeux, charmants, tendres, moqueurs;
C’est dimanche. On entend jaser la cornemuse;
Le vent à chiffonner les fougères s’amuse;
Fête aux champs. Il s’agit de ne pas s’ennuyer.
Les oiseaux, qui n’ont point à payer de loyer,
Changent d’alcôve autant de fois que bon leur semble;
Tout frémit; ce n’est pas pour rien que le bois tremble;

Les fourches des rameaux sur les faunes cornus
Tressaillent; copions les oiseaux ingénus;
Ah! les petits pillards et comme ils font leurs orges!
Regardons s’entr’ouvrir les mouchoirs sur les gorges;
Errons, comme Daphnis et Chloé frémissants;
Nous n’aurons pas toujours le temps d’être innocents;
Soyons-le; jouissons du hêtre, du cytise,
Des mousses, du gazon; faisons cette bêtise,
L’amour, et livrons-nous naïvement à Dieu.
Puisque les prés sont verts, puisque le ciel est bleu,
Aimons. Par les grands mots l’idylle est engourdie;
N’ayons pas l’air de gens jouant la tragédie;
Disons tout ce qui peut nous passer par l’esprit;
Allons sous la charmille où l’églantier fleurit,
Dans l’ombre où sont les grands chuchotements des chênes.
Les douces libertés avec les douces chaînes,
Et beaucoup de réel dans un peu d’idéal,
Voilà ce que conseille en riant floréal.

L’enfant amour conduit ce vieux monde aux lisières;
Adorons les rosiers et même les rosières.

Oublions les sermons du pédant inhumain;
Que tout soit gaîté, joie, éclat de rire, hymen;
Et toi, viens avec moi, ma fraîche bien-aimée;
Qu’on entende chanter les nids sous la ramée,
L’alouette dans l’air, les coqs au poulailler,
Et que ton fichu seul ait le droit de bâiller.

XXII

ANDRÉ CHÉNIER

Ô belle, le charmant scandale des oiseaux
Dans les arbres, les fleurs, les prés et les roseaux,
Les rayons rencontrant les aigles dans les nues,
L’orageuse gaîté des néréides nues
Se jetant de l’écume et dansant dans les flots,
Blancheurs qui font rêver au loin les matelots,

Ces ébats glorieux des déesses mouillées
Prenant pour lit les mers comme toi les feuillées,
Tout ce qui joue, éclate et luit sur l’horizon
N’a pas plus de splendeur que ta fière chanson.
Ton chant ajouterait de la joie aux dieux mêmes.
Tu te dresses superbe. En même temps tu m’aimes;
Et tu viens te rasseoir sur mes genoux. Psyché
Par moments comme toi prenait un air fâché,
Puis se jetait au cou du jeune dieu, son maître.
Est-ce qu’on peut bouder l’amour? Aimer, c’est naître;
Aimer, c’est savourer, aux bras d’un être cher,

La quantité de ciel que Dieu mit dans la chair;
C’est être un ange avec la gloire d’être un homme.
Oh! ne refuse rien. Ne sois pas économe.
Aimons! Ces instants-là sont les seuls bons et sûrs.
Ô volupté mêlée aux éternels azurs!
Extase! ô volonté de là-haut! Je soupire,
Tu songes. Ton cœur bat près du mien. Laissons dire

Les oiseaux, et laissons les ruisseaux murmurer.
Ce sont des envieux. Belle, il faut s’adorer.
Il faut aller se perdre au fond des bois farouches.
Le ciel étoilé veut la rencontre des bouches;
Une lionne cherche un lion sur les monts.
Chante! il faut chanter. Aime! il faut aimer. Aimons.

Pendant que tu souris, pendant que mon délire
Abuse de ce doux consentement du rire,
Pendant que d’un baiser complice tu m’absous,
La vaste nuit funèbre est au-dessous de nous,
Et les morts, dans l’Hadès plein d’effrayants décombres,
Regardent se lever, sur l’horizon des ombres,
Les astres ténébreux de l’Érèbe qui font
Trembler leurs feux sanglants dans l’eau du Styx profond.

L’IDYLLE DU VIEILLARD

LA VOIX D’UN ENFANT D’UN AN

Que dit-il? Croyez-vous qu’il parle? J’en suis sûr.
Mais à qui parle-t-il? À quelqu’un dans l’azur;
À ce que nous nommons les esprits; à l’espace,
Au doux battement d’aile invisible qui passe,
À l’ombre, au vent, peut-être au petit frère mort.
L’enfant apporte un peu de ce ciel dont il sort;
Il ignore, il arrive; homme, tu le recueilles.
Il a le tremblement des herbes et des feuilles.
La jaserie avant le langage est la fleur
Qui précède le fruit, moins beau qu’elle, et meilleur,
Si c’est être meilleur qu’être plus nécessaire.
L’enfant candide, au seuil de l’humaine misère,

Regarde cet étrange et redoutable lieu,
Ne comprend pas, s’étonne, et, n’y voyant pas Dieu,
Balbutie, humble voix confiante et touchante;

Ce qui pleure finit par être ce qui chante;
Ses premiers mots ont peur comme ses premiers pas.
Puis il espère.
Au ciel où notre œil n’atteint pas
Il est on ne sait quel nuage de figures
Que les enfants, jadis vénérés des augures,
Aperçoivent d’en bas et qui les fait parler.
Ce petit voit peut-être un œil étinceler;
Il l’interroge; il voit, dans de claires nuées,

Des faces resplendir sans fin diminuées,
Et, fantômes réels qui pour nous seraient vains,
Le regarder, avec des sourires divins;
L’obscurité sereine étend sur lui ses branches;
Il rit, car de l’enfant les ténèbres sont blanches.
C’est là, dans l’ombre, au fond des éblouissements,
Qu’il dialogue avec des inconnus charmants;
L’enfant fait la demande et l’ange la réponse;
Le babil puéril dans le ciel bleu s’enfonce,
Puis s’en revient, avec les hésitations
Du moineau qui verrait planer les alcyons.
Nous appelons cela bégaiement; c’est l’abîme
Où, comme un être ailé qui va de cime en cime,
La parole, mêlée à l’éden, au matin,
Essayant de saisir là-haut un mot lointain,
Le prend, le lâche, cherche et trouve, et s’inquiète.
Dans ce que dit l’enfant le ciel profond s’émiette.

Quand l’enfant jase avec l’ombre qui le bénit,
La fauvette, attentive, au rebord de son nid
Se dresse, et ses petits passent, pensifs et frêles,
Leurs têtes à travers les plumes de ses ailes;
La mère semble dire à sa couvée : Entends,
Et tâche de parler aussi bien. — Le printemps,
L’aurore, le jour bleu du paradis paisible,
Les rayons, flèches d’or dont la terre est la cible,
Se fondent, en un rhythme obscur, dans l’humble chant

De l’âme chancelante et du cœur trébuchant.
Trébucher, chanceler, bégayer, c’est le charme
De cet âge où le rire éclôt dans une larme.
Ô divin clair-obscur du langage enfantin!
L’enfant semble pouvoir désarmer le destin;
L’enfant sans le savoir enseigne la nature;
Et cette bouche rose est l’auguste ouverture
D’où tombe, ô majesté de l’être faible et nu!
Sur le gouffre ignoré le logos inconnu.
L’innocence au milieu de nous, quelle largesse!

Quel don du ciel! Qui sait les conseils de sagesse,
Les éclairs de bonté, qui sait la foi, l’amour,
Que versent, à travers leur tremblant demi-jour,
Dans la querelle amère et sinistre où nous sommes,
Les âmes des enfants sur les âmes des hommes?
Le voit-on jusqu’au fond ce langage, où l’on sent
Passer tout ce qui fait tressaillir l’innocent?
Non. Les hommes émus écoutent ces mêlées
De syllabes dans l’aube adorable envolées,
Idiome où le ciel laisse un reste d’accent,
Mais ne comprennent pas, et s’en vont en disant :
— Ce n’est rien; c’est un souffle, une haleine, un murmure;
Le mot n’est pas complet quand l’âme n’est pas mûre. —
Qu’en savez-vous? Ce cri, ce chant qui sort d’un nid,
C’est l’homme qui commence et l’ange qui finit.
Vénérez-le. Le bruit mélodieux, la gamme

Dénouée et flottante où l’enfance amalgame
Le parfum de sa lèvre et l’azur de ses yeux,
Ressemble, ô vent du ciel, aux mots mystérieux
Que, pour exprimer l’ombre ou le jour, tu proposes
À la grande âme obscure éparse dans les choses.
L’être qui vient d’éclore en ce monde où tout ment,
Dit comme il peut son triste et doux étonnement.
Pour l’animal perdu dans l’énigme profonde,
Tout vient de l’homme. L’homme ébauche dans ce monde

Une explication du mystère, et par lui
Au fond du noir problème un peu de jour a lui.
Oui, le gazouillement, musique molle et vague,
Brouillard de mots divins confus comme la vague,
Chant dont les nouveaux-nés ont le charmant secret,
Et qui de la maison passe dans la forêt,
Est tout un verbe, toute une langue, un échange

De l’aube avec l’étoile et de l’âme avec l’ange,
Idiome de nids, truchement des berceaux,
Pris aux petits enfants par les petits oiseaux.

XIX

TOUT LE PASSÉ

ET

TOUT L’AVENIR

I

L’être mystérieux qui me parle à ses heures
Disait :
*

— Vivants! l’orgueil habite vos demeures.
Il fait nuit dans votre cité!
Le ciel s’étonne, ô foule en vices consumée,
Qu’il sorte de la paille en feu tant de fumée,
De l’homme tant de vanité!

Tu regardes les cieux de travers, triste race!
Tu ne te trouves pas sous l’azur à ta place.
Tu te plains, homme, ombre, roseau!
Balbutiant : Peut-être, et bégayant : Que sais-je?
Tu reproches le soir à l’aube, au lys la neige,
Et ton sépulcre à ton berceau!

Tu reproches à Dieu l’œuvre incommensurable.
Tu frémis de traîner sur ton dos misérable
Tes vieux forfaits mal expiés,
D’être pris dans ton ciel comme en un marécage,
Et de sentir, ainsi qu’un écureuil en cage,
Tourner ta prison sous tes pieds!

Homme, si tu pouvais, tu tenterais l’espace.
Ce globe, si ta force égalait ton audace,
S’évaderait sous ton orteil,
Et la création irait à l’aventure
Si ton souffle pouvait, ô folle créature,
Casser l’amarre du soleil!

Car rien n’est à ton gré; tout te met mal à l’aise.

Ce coin du ciel est donc fait de plomb, qu’il te pèse!
Oh! tu voudrais rompre le sceau!
Comme tu frapperais dans tes mains, ombre frêle,
Pour la faire envoler de sa branche éternelle,
Si la terre était un oiseau!

Hautain, dédaignant tout, que ta nef vogue ou sombre,
Tu voudrais t’en aller dans le désert de l’ombre,
Fuir, comme fuyaient les Hébreux.

Tu dis : Rien de nouveau! tu dis avec colère :
Toujours la même aurore! et l’étoile polaire
T’ennuie, ô pauvre œil ténébreux.

Tu t’irrites d’être homme, oubli, poussière, atome;
D’ignorer quel épi tu portes, ô vil chaume!
D’être une algue dans le reflux;
De trembler comme un cerf que suit une lionne,
Et d’être, sous le ciel qui reste et qui rayonne,
Celui qui passe et qui n’est plus;

Et de ne pouvoir pas faire avec tes menaces,
Avec tes doigts crispés et tes ongles tenaces,
Ta sagesse et ta passion,
Tes faux temples, tes faux soleils, tes faux tonnerres,
Tes meurtres, tes fureurs, tes crimes et tes guerres,
Un pli dans la création!
*

Ces myopes, jugeant le monde à leur optique,
Disent : — « Tout est manqué, la mer épileptique
« Bave sur les écueils grondants;
« La nuit fait le hibou si le jour fait le cygne,
« La mort, chienne de l’ombre, à qui Satan fait signe,
« Tient l’âme humaine entre ses dents.

« Que nous veut la planète? et le globe? et la sphère?

« Un monde est un néant. Dieu ne savait que faire,
« Et bâillait, seul dans son réduit,
« Quand, semant au hasard son œuvre et ses paroles,
« Il jeta dans les cieux toutes ces outres folles,
« Ivres de vent, pleines de bruit.

« Qu'est-ce qu'un Dieu masqué dans l'incompréhensible?
« Pourquoi le bien voilé? Pourquoi le mal visible?
« Pourquoi tant de brume autour d'eux?
« Pourquoi tant de fléaux sur la terre indignée?
« Et pourquoi voyons-nous ces toiles d'araignée
« Dans le crépuscule hideux?

« Pourquoi le dur taureau qui frappe à coups de corne?
« Pourquoi l'impur typhus sorti du marais morne
« Où jadis l'hydre s'embourbait?
« Christ voyait; à quoi bon aveugler Pythagore?
« Le lys est beau; pourquoi créer la mandragore
« Des gouttes de sang du gibet?

« L'azur est radieux; mais pourquoi le nuage?
« L'amour rit; mais pourquoi la douleur, ce péage?
« Pourquoi Caïn auprès d'Abel?
« Pourquoi livrer l'esprit de l'homme au trouble immense,
« Et faire tournoyer l'alphabet en démence
« Dans la spirale de Babel?

« Pourquoi la pourriture et pourquoi les décombres?
« Pourquoi le mille-pieds traînant ses pattes sombres?
« Pourquoi la ronce qui nous hait?
« Pourquoi l'épine au seuil des bois, comme une lance?
« Pourquoi la mort? Pourquoi l'espace, ce silence?
« Pourquoi l'univers, ce muet?

« On comprend le printemps, l'aube, le nid, la rose;
« Mais pourquoi les glaçons? Pourquoi le houx morose?
« Pourquoi l'autour, ce criminel?

« Pourquoi cette ombre froide où le jour se termine?
« Pourquoi la bête fauve, et pourquoi la vermine? »
— Pourquoi vous? répond l’Éternel.
*

Ainsi parlent ces fous malheureux. Pour ces hommes
Qui ne t’épèlent pas, mystère en qui nous sommes,
Et qui regardent sans les voir

Les rites transparents qu’en ta nuit tu célèbres,
Dieu, c’est une figure au milieu des ténèbres,
C’est l’horreur difforme au front noir,

C’est on ne sait quel spectre accroupi dans son antre,
Monstre dont on voit moins la face que le ventre,
Blême au seuil des gouffres ouverts,
Idiot éternel que l’immensité porte,
Et qui rêve, ayant l’ombre en sa prunelle morte,
Au cou ce goître, l’univers.
*

Ah! tu trouves tout mal! trop d’ombre et de misères!
D’autres mondes mieux faits te semblent nécessaires.
L’astre naît de brouillard terni;
On peut se servir mieux du germe et du mystère! —
Parle. Dieu formidable attend, ô ver de terre,
Tes commandes dans l’infini.

Ah! le travail te pèse et la douleur t’étonne!

Ah! décembre après juin te semble monotone!
Ah! pourrir répugne à ta chair!
Ah! tu n’es pas content de ce cercle où l’on erre!
Bien. Fais la guerre à Dieu. Canonne le tonnerre;
Croise l’épée avec l’éclair.

Ah! tu portes en toi, reptile, un exemplaire

D’idéal qu’il eût dû copier pour te plaire!
Tu compares, homme de peu,
Moucheron que prendrait l’araignée en ses toiles,
Ce que ton front contient au ciel rempli d’étoiles,
Ce dedans du crâne de Dieu!

Montre ta force. Allons, règne. Que l’étendue
Sous ton vaste regard se prosterne éperdue;
Prouve aux astres leur cécité;
Déplace les milieux, les axes et les centres;
Fouille l’onde et l’éther; poursuis dans tous ses antres
La monstrueuse immensité!

Questionne, surprends, scrute, découvre, arrache!
Harponne au fond des mers le typhon qui s’y cache;
Trouve ce que nul n’a trouvé;

Sois le Tout-Puissant; fais des pêches inouïes;
Sonde et plonge; et reviens, traînant par les ouïes
L’hydre Océan sur le pavé!
*

Ah! tu dis : — Dieu n’est pas, puisque le mal existe.

Je chasse Jéhova parce que je suis triste. —
Bien. Dresse-toi sur ton séant;
Étouffe en toi l’amour et l’espoir; raille et blâme;
Ferme ton volet sourd; allume dans ton âme
Le hideux réchaud du néant!

Mars, Jupiter, Saturne, ô planètes profondes,
Vous du moins, vous croyez! Le jour où tous les mondes
Épars dans le gouffre vermeil,
Retirant l’air céleste à leur voûte obscurcie,
Nieraient à la fois Dieu, cette sombre asphyxie
Irait éteindre le soleil!

Oh! la création est une apothéose.
Le mont, l’arbre, l’oiseau, le lion et la rose
Disent dans l’ombre : Sois béni!
L’immense azur écoute, et leurs hymmes l’enchantent;
Et l’océan farouche et l’âpre ouragan chantent
Chacun leur strophe à l’infini.

L’homme seul nie et crie : — À bas! tout est mensonge,
Rien n’existe. Le ciel est creux. L’être est un songe.
Pillons les jours comme un butin! —
Dieu tranquille et lointain, dore, à travers la brume,
Toute cette colère et toute cette écume
Brisée à ce roc, le destin.
*

Donc tu fais de toi l’axe et le sommet des êtres!
Ton ventre est ton autel et tes sens sont tes prêtres;
Vivre est le but que tu poursuis.
Tu prétends que le ciel redoutable te craigne.
Tu dis aux mers : Je veux! tu dis au vent : Je règne!
Tu dis aux étoiles : Je suis!

Ta chair s’adore et met à la torture l’âme.
Toi! toi seul! t’assouvir, voilà ton culte infâme;
Tes plaisirs sont des cruautés;

Tu fais le mal au bord du mystère sublime;
Tu viens t’accouder là; dans le puits de l’abîme
Tu craches tes iniquités.

Rien ne rassasierait ta folie incurable.
Tu voudrais exprimer dans le broc misérable
Où tu bois, homme plein d’ennuis,

Dans ton verre où les vins immondes se répandent,
Les constellations, grappes d’astres qui pendent
À la treille immense des nuits.

Car ton bâillement croit avoir, ô créature,
Droit de vie et de mort sur toute la nature;
Jéhova n’est pas excepté.
Oh! comme frémirait d’orgueil ton âme noire,
Bandit, si tu pouvais condenser, prendre et boire
Le monde en une volupté!

Hélas! pour en extraire une goutte d’ivresse,
Tu tordrais l’univers, l’aube qui te caresse,
La femme, l’enfant à l’œil bleu,
Content, sans hésiter à la savourer toute,
Et sans t’inquiéter si cette sombre goutte
Est une larme devant Dieu!

Dieu n’est pas! Et d’ailleurs, quand, faisant ton entrée,

Beau, fier, devant la rampe assez mal éclairée,
Tu viens éblouir tes pareils,
Toi, premier rôle, roi du drame où tu te plonges,
Toi, l’acteur du destin, veut-on pas que tu songes
À cet allumeur de soleils?

S’il existe — Il faudrait d’abord que je le visse —
Dis-tu, c’est bon, qu’il soit! et fasse son service! —
Ah! l’homme en qui rien n’éteindra
La folle volonté de sonder l’insondable,
Mériterait qu’on mît son orgueil formidable
Sous ta douche, ô Niagara!

Nains! Dieu vous met sa marque afin qu’on vous réclame.

Croyez-vous que la mort, qui n’accepte que l’âme,
Et qui pèse tout dans sa main,
Si son incorruptible et sinistre prunelle
N’y reconnaissait pas l’effigie éternelle,
Recevrait le liard humain?

*

Dieu n’est pas! ce seul mot serait une torture.
Vous n’avez donc jamais regardé la nature?

Heureux le sage, humble roseau,
Qui songe, et qui, pensif, voit bondir l’avalanche
De montagne en montagne, et qui, de branche en branche
Voit sauter le petit oiseau!

Vous n’avez donc jamais erré dans les ravines?
Vous n’avez donc jamais, parmi les fleurs divines,
Respiré la brise en marchant,
Et jamais écouté, dans les fermes lointaines,
Mugir les bœufs rêveurs quand rampent dans les plaines
Les longues ombres du couchant?

Vous n’avez donc jamais contemplé l’invisible?
Jamais vu l’idéal, et gravi du possible
Le sommet désert, triste et grand?
Hélas! vous n’avez donc jamais, sous le ciel calme,
Vu luire l’auréole et frissonner la palme
Et sourire un martyr mourant?

Vous n’avez donc jamais vu dans votre pensée
L’étendue, où s’en vont, d’une course insensée,
Les ténèbres, fuyant le jour?
Jamais vu l’infini qui rit à la chaumière,
Que le soleil ne peut emplir de sa lumière,
Mais que l’âme remplit d’amour?

Dis, tu n’as donc jamais attaché ta prunelle
Sur la profondeur morne, obscure et solennelle,
À l’heure où le croissant reluit,
Où l’on voit s’arrondir sur les mers remuées
Ce fer d’or qu’a laissé tomber dans les nuées
Le sombre cheval de la nuit?

*

D’autres sont les croyants, pires que les impies.
Toutes les passions dans leur âme accroupies
Leur disent tout bas : Jouissez!
De Jéhova qui tonne ils font leur économe;
Dieu n’est que le valet du coffre-fort de l’homme;
Hélas, hélas, ces insensés

De la religion ont fait leur sentinelle;
Cieux profonds! ils ont mis leur sac d’or sous son aile;
L’ange veille au lot du mortel;

Leur champ importe au monde, à l’astre, à l’aube austère;
Ils ont fait une borne à ce morceau de terre
Avec la pierre de l’autel.

Pour faire une clôture à leur haie, à leur ferme,
Pour servir de lien à la barre qui ferme
Leur verger, leur vigne ou leur pré,
Pour joindre les poteaux de leur porte en ruines,
Ils prennent, ô Jésus, la couronne d’épines
Qui fit saigner ton front sacré!

Leur visage rayonne et plaît; leur voix caresse;
Ils sont doux et charmants; la grâce enchanteresse
Mêle son miel à leur jargon;
Leur sourire est la fleur s’ouvrant sous les rosées;
Le dedans est horrible, et toutes leurs pensées
Ont la figure du dragon.

De leur humilité leur vanité se venge;
Ils disent : Que me font, si je vis et je mange,
La famine et le choléra!
Le faux poids dans leur droite, ils vendent, ils achètent;
Leur âme a des secrets que les démons cachètent
Et qu’un jour Dieu seul ouvrira.

La femme sous leurs pieds souffre, à peine vivante;
Autrefois leur esclave, aujourd’hui leur servante!
Ils la pèsent avec l’argent.
L’enfant rampe ignorant et nu; que leur importe!
De quel droit est-il né? Le marteau de leur porte
Glace la main de l’indigent.

Les maximes d’amour sur leur visage écrites
Mentent; ils sont méchants, avares, hypocrites,
Faux devant l’aurore qui naît;
Ils remettent aux fers ceux que Jésus délivre;
Puis, parce qu’à des jours indiqués sur un livre,
Pendant qu’une cloche sonnait,

Ils ont pris sous leur bras un recueil de cantiques,
Décroché leur enseigne et fermé leurs boutiques
Et dit un benedicite,
Et qu’ils ont regardé pendant une heure un prêtre,
Et crié du latin dans l’ombre, ils pensent être
Quittes avec l’immensité!

Ce grand Dieu se corrompt en vous, engeance folle!
Il entre dans votre âme idée, et sort idole;
Vous l’insultez dans vos korans;

Vous lui donnez vos yeux, vos vices, vos visages,
Vous le faites d’argile, hélas! comme vos sages,
Et d’airain comme vos tyrans!

Partout bûchers, trépieds, pagodes éphémères;
Temples monstres bâtis par des dogmes chimères;
Thor, Vishnou, Teutatès, Ammon,
Bel qui rugit, Dagon qui siffle, Apis qui beugle;
La synagogue sourde et la mosquée aveugle;
Noirs autels pleins d’un Dieu démon!

Les Parthénons font boire au juste la ciguë.
La cathédrale avec sa double tour aiguë,
Debout devant le jour qui fuit,
Ignore, et, sans savoir, affirme, absout, condamne;
Dieu voit avec pitié ces deux oreilles d’âne
Se dresser dans la vaste nuit.

Dieu! Dieu! Dieu! le rocher où la lame déferle
Compte sur lui; c’est lui qui règne; il fait la perle
Et l’étoile pour les sondeurs;
L’azur le voile; il met, pour que le tigre y dorme,
De la mousse dans l’antre; il parle, voix énorme,
À l’ombre dans les profondeurs.

Il règne, il songe; il fond les granits dans les soufres;
Il crée en même temps les soleils dans les gouffres
Et le liseron dans le pré;
Pour l’avoir un jour vu, la mer est encore ivre;
Les versants du Sina sont de son vaste livre
Le pupitre démesuré.

L’Océan calme, c’est le plat de son épée.
La montagne à sa voix s’enfuirait dissipée
Comme de l’eau dans le gazon;

Dans les éternités sans fin continuées
Ce Père habite; il fait des arches de nuées
Aux quatre coins de l’horizon.

Il pense, il règle, il mène, il pèse, il juge, il aime;
Et laisse les festins rire à Lucullus blême
Qui paît, hideux, chauve et jauni,
Et se gonfle de vin comme une poche pleine;
Ce qu’une outre peut dire au ventre de Silène
N’importe pas à l’infini.

Ce même Dieu qui fit d’avril une corbeille,

Qui fait l’oiseau chanteur pour les bois, et l’abeille
Pour l’herbe où l’aube étincela,
Donne au Pôle effrayant, sans jour, sans fleur, sans arbre,

Pour qu’il puisse parfois chauffer ses mains de marbre,
Ta cheminée, ô sombre Hékla!

Sous l’œil de cet esprit suprême et formidable,
L’eau monte en brume au front du pic inabordable
Et tombe en flots du haut des monts;
La créature éteinte est d’une autre suivie,
L’univers, où ce Dieu met la mort et la vie,
Respire par ces deux poumons.

Devant ce Dieu s’enfuit tout ce qui hait son œuvre,
La tempête, le mal, l’épervier, la couleuvre,
Le méchant qui ment et qui nuit,
La trombe, affreux bandit qui dans les flots se vautre,
L’hiver boiteux qui fait marcher l’un après l’autre
Son jour court et sa longue nuit.

Il fait lâcher la proie aux bêtes carnassières.
Les morts dans le sépulcre ont perdu leurs poussières;
Il rêve, et sait où sont leurs os.
En entendant passer son souffle dans l’espace,
Subitement l’enfer à la gueule rapace,
Les mondes hurlants du chaos,

Les univers punis dont la clameur s’élance,

Les bagnes monstrueux de l’ombre, font silence,
Et dans la nuit des noirs arrêts
Cessent de secouer les chaînes qui leur pèsent,
Comme le soir, au pas d’un voyageur, se taisent
Les grenouilles dans le marais.

Il tient une balance immense en équilibre;

Il met dans un plateau les cieux, la mer qui vibre,
Ceux qui sur le trône ont vécu,
Le monde et ses clartés, le mystère et ses voiles,
Et l’abîme jetant son écume d’étoiles;
Dans l’autre il met Caton vaincu,

Ce qu’il est? regardez au-dessus de vos têtes;
Voyez le ciel, le jour, la nuit! Ce que vous êtes?
Cherchez dans votre cendrier.
Son année est sans fin. Prosternez vos pensées.

Les constellations sont des mouches posées
Sur l’énorme calendrier.

Mais voyez-le donc, vous dont les chants sont des râles,
Vivants qui ne pouvez que mourir, ombres pâles,
Et qui ne savez qu’oublier!
L’Océan goutte à goutte en sa clepsydre pleure;
Tout Sahara, tombant grain à grain, marque l’heure
Dans son effrayant sablier.

Mêlez-le maintenant à vos anniversaires!
Allumez vos flambeaux, égrenez vos rosaires,
Sur vos lutrins soyez béants;
Ayez vos jours sacrés que plus de clarté dore;
Mettez, devant ce Dieu que couronne l’aurore,
Des tiares à vos néants!

La bête des bois rit quand les hommes, vain nombre,
Vont clouant leurs erreurs sur Dieu, leur nom sur l’ombre,
Leur date sur l’immensité,

Se font centre du monde, eux les passants rapides,
Et s’en viennent chanter leurs bouts de l’an stupides
À la muette éternité.
*

Hélas! l’ange Justice ouvre ses yeux sinistres.
Il écrit en rêvant des noms sur ses registres.
Ah! ces tristes vivants ont tort!
Devant Dieu, qui d’en haut à la paix les convie,
Et donne aux cœurs l’amour et verse aux fronts la vie,
Ils font la haine, ils font la mort!

Ils bravent l’océan plein de magnificence,
Où flottent le mystère et la toute-puissance;
Ils souillent le gouffre irrité;
Sans prendre garde au vent qui s’épuise en huées,
Ils lèvent leur bannière au milieu des nuées,
Ces drapeaux de l’immensité!

Ils ont pour dieux la force et la ruse aux yeux louches;
Ils font chanter des chants aux trompettes farouches
Dont nous, esprits, nous frissonnons,
Et rouler, balafrant la nature sacrée,
Sur les champs, sur les blés, sur les fleurs que Dieu crée
La roue horrible des canons.

Les générations meurent pour leur caprice.
Ils disent au tombeau : Prends l’homme et qu’il périsse!
Ô nains, pires que les géants!
Ils ouvrent cette nuit que nul rayon ne perce;
Ils y font brusquement tomber à la renverse
Les pâles cadavres béants!

Ils rougissent de sang l’onde et les herbes vertes;
Ils dressent au sommet des collines désertes
Le noir gibet silencieux

Qui reste tout le jour sans changer d’attitude,
Mais qui, dès que la nuit brunit la solitude,
Élève ses bras vers les cieux.

Nous sommes la justice auguste, immaculée!

Disent-ils, s’étalant dans leur chambre étoilée
Qu’entourent les spectres camards;
Et, pendant que la foule approuve et les admire,
Un long sanglot mêlé d’un long éclat de rire
Va des Montfaucons aux Clamarts!

Ces hommes insensés se vautrent dans la joie;
Ils ont des lits de pourpre et des manteaux de soie;
Ils vivent, d’ombre et d’or chargés;

Cette vie est pour eux un palais plein de fêtes;
Ils laissent derrière eux les choses qu’ils ont faites.
C’est bien, buvez; c’est bien, mangez;

Pendant qu’en haut la table éblouit les convives,
Et que les bouches sont comme des sources vives,
Que la chair fume avec l’encens,
Pendant que les archers gardent les avenues,
Que l’amour rit au spectre, et que les toutes nues
Chantent auprès des tout-puissants;

Pendant que le banquet, rayonnant comme un phare,
Mêle le choc du verre au son de la fanfare,
Et qu’ils s’enivrent dans la nuit,

Sans même, dans leur joie immonde et sépulcrale,
S’informer s’il n’est pas quelque obscure spirale
Sous la salle pleine de bruit,

Ô morts qui vous taisez au fond des catacombes,
L’expiation prend les pierres de vos tombes
Dans l’insondable profondeur,
Et de ces marbres froids qui dans l’ombre descendent
Fait un sombre escalier dont les marches attendent
Les lourds talons du commandeur!

II

Pensif, je répondis à l’archange nocturne :
*

— Sévère esprit, ta voix sanglote comme l’urne
Qui verse un flot noir et glacé.
Sur qui te penches-tu? Tes paroles s’adressent
Aux tristes nations d’hier qui disparaissent,
Aux pâles foules du passé.

Ton cri ressemble au chant des mornes Isaïes.
Le mystère autrefois, de ses brumes haïes,
Obstruait la terre et les cieux;
Et l’homme avait besoin que les prophètes blêmes
Lui parlassent du seuil de tous ces noirs problèmes
Ouvrant leurs porches monstrueux.

L’homme ignorait. Marchant loin du sentier qui sauve,
Il allait au hasard dans la nature fauve,
Comme le loup au fond des bois,
Sourd à ces alphabets, perdu dans ces algèbres;
Les prophètes alors, dans ces grandes ténèbres
Élevèrent leurs grandes voix.

Il fallait avertir l’homme au bord de l’abîme,
Tout ici-bas semblait lui conseiller le crime;
Temps rude où le mal triomphait!
La forêt, de l’embûche était le noir ministre.
L’arbre avait l’air d’un monstre, et le rocher sinistre
Avait la forme du forfait.

Ici gémissait Job, et là chantait Sodome.
L’homme à tous les fléaux, horrible, ajoutait l’homme;
La guerre infâme aidait la faim;

Comme on brûle une paille on allumait les villes;
Et l’on voyait Judas sortir des choses viles,

Et des choses sombres Caïn.

Les prophètes chassaient le mal; ces personnages
Rendaient au Dieu vivant d’augustes témoignages;
L’homme de ces temps inhumains,
Affreux, baignant de sang les champs, l’onde et les sables,
S’arrêtait, s’il voyait ces songeurs formidables,
Pâles et levant leurs deux mains.

Ils descendaient des monts, portant de sombres tables;
Ils mouraient en laissant les Talmuds redoutables
Ouverts sur l’aile des griffons,
Les farouches Védas, les Eddas, les Genèses,
Registres éclairés du reflet des fournaises,
Pages pleines de bruits profonds.

Ils épouvantaient l’homme et la terre méchante;
Et depuis cinq mille ans, pendant que l’aube chante
Et que la fleur verse l’encens,
Le genre humain qui passe et que le temps dénombre
Entend, dans la caverne effrayante de l’ombre,
Gronder ces livres rugissants.

Mais le passé s’en va. Regarde-nous; nous sommes
Un autre Adam, une autre Ève, de nouveaux hommes
Nous bénissons quand nous souffrons.
Hier vivait d’horreur, de deuil, de sang, de fange;
Hier était le monstre et Demain sera l’ange;
Le point du jour blanchit nos fronts.

Deux êtres sont en nous : l’un ailé, l’autre immonde;
L’un montant vers Dieu; l’autre ombre et tache du monde,
Se ruant dans d’infâmes lits;
Et, pendant que le corps, marchant sur des semelles,
Vil, abject, boit l’opprobre et la lie aux gamelles,
L’âme boit la rosée aux lys.

L’œuvre du genre humain, c’est de délivrer l’âme;
C’est de la dégager du triste épithalame
Que lui chante le corps impur;
C’est de la rendre, chaste, à la clarté première;
Car Dieu rêveur a fait l’âme pour la lumière
Comme il fit l’aile pour l’azur.

Nous ne sommes plus ceux qui riaient à la face
De l’ombre impénétrable où tout rentre et s’efface,

Qui faisaient le mal sans frayeur,
Qui jetaient au cercueil ce cri : Va-t’en! je nie!
Et mettaient le néant, le rire et l’ironie
Dans la pelle du fossoyeur.

Nous croyons en ce Dieu vivant; sa foi nous brûle;
Il inspire Brutus sur la chaise curule,
Guillaume Tell sous le sayon;
Nous allumons, courbés sous son vent qui nous pousse,
Notre liberté fière à sa majesté douce
Et notre foudre à son rayon.

Il fait germer le ver dans sa morne cellule,
Change la larve affreuse en vive libellule,
Transfigure, affranchit, construit,
Émeut les tours de pierre et les tentes de toiles,
Et crée et vit! c’est lui qui pénètre d’étoiles
Les ailes noires de la nuit.

Sa tiare splendide est une ruche immense,
Où, des roses soleils apportant la semence

Et de l’astre apportant le miel,
Essaim de flamme ayant les mondes pour Hymètes,
Mouches de l’infini, les abeilles comètes
Volent de tous les points du ciel.

Le Mal, le glaive au poing, voilé d'un voile d'ombre,
Nous guette; et la forêt que la broussaille encombre,
L'âpre rocher, le flot ingrat,
L'aident, complices noirs, contre la créature,
Et semblent par moments faire de la nature
L'antre où rêve ce scélérat.

Mais nous luttons, esprit! nous vaincrons. Dieu nous mène.
Il est le feu qui va devant l'armée humaine,
Le Dieu d'Ève et de Débora.
Un jour, bientôt, demain, tout changera de forme,
Et dans l'immensité, comme une fleur énorme,
L'univers s'épanouira!

Nous vaincrons l'élément! cette bête de somme
Se couchera dans l'ombre à plat ventre sous l'homme;
La matière aura beau hurler;

Nous ferons de ses cris sortir l'hymne de l'ordre;
Et nous remplacerons les dents qui veulent mordre
Par la langue qui sait parler.

Quand nous aurons fini le travail de la vigne,
Quand au Dieu qui fit l'aigle et l'air, l'onde et le cygne,
La tourmente et Léviathan,
Nous aurons rapporté toutes nos âmes anges,
Nous ferons du panier de ces saintes vendanges
La muselière de Satan.

Satan, c'est l'appétit, pourceau qui mord l'idée;
C'est l'ivresse, fond noir de la coupe vidée;
Satan, c'est l'orgueil sans genoux;
C'est l'égoïsme, heureux du sang où ses mains trempent;
C'est le ventre hideux, cette caverne où rampent
Tous les monstres qui sont en nous.

Satan, c'est la douleur, c'est l'erreur, c'est la borne,

C’est le froid ténébreux, c’est la pesanteur morne,
C’est la vis du sanglant pressoir;
C’est la force d’en bas liant tout de ses chaînes,
Qui fait dans le ravin, sous l’ombre des grands chênes,
Crier les chariots le soir.

Nous allons à l’amour, au bien, à l’harmonie.
Ô vivants qui flottez dans l’énigme infinie,
Un arbre, auguste à tous les yeux,
Conduit votre navire à travers l’âpre abîme;
Jésus ouvre ses bras sur la vergue sublime
De ce grand mât mystérieux.

Derrière nous décroît le mal, noire masure.
Bientôt nous toucherons au port, le flot s’azure.
L’homme qu’en vain le deuil poursuit,
Ne verra plus tomber dans l’ombre sur sa tête
L’effroi, l’hiver, l’horreur, l’ouragan, la tempête,
Ces vomissements de la nuit.

Nous chasserons la guerre et le meurtre à coups d’aile,
Et cette frémissante et candide hirondelle
Qui vole vers l’éternité,
L’espérance, adoptant notre maison amie,
Viendra faire son nid dans la gueule endormie
Du vieux monstre Fatalité.

Les peuples trouveront de nouveaux équilibres;
Oui, l’aube naît, demain les âmes seront libres;
Le jour est fait par le volcan;
L’homme illuminera l’ombre qui l’environne;
Et l’on verra, changeant l’esclavage en couronne,
Des fleurons sortir du carcan.

Et quand ces temps viendront, ô joie! ô cieux paisibles!
Les astres, aujourd’hui l’un pour l’autre terribles,
Se regarderont doucement;

Les globes s’aimeront comme l’homme et la femme;
Et le même rayon qui traversera l’âme
Traversera le firmament.

Les sphères vogueront avec le son des lyres.
Au lieu des mondes noirs pleins d’horribles délires,
Qui rugissent vils et maudits,
On entendra chanter sous le feuillage sombre
Les édens enivrés, et l’on verra dans l’ombre
Resplendir les bleus paradis.

Dieu voudra. Tout à coup on verra les discordes,
La hache et son billot, les gibets et leurs cordes,
L’impur serpent des cieux banni,
Le sang, le cri, la haine, et l’ordure, et la vase,
Se changer en amour et devenir extase
Sous un baiser de l’infini.

Dieu met, quand il lui plaît, sur l’orage et la haine,
Sur la foudre, forçat dont on entend la chaîne,
La sainte serrure des cieux,

Et, laissant écumer leurs voix exténuées,
Ferme avec l’arc-en-ciel courbé dans les nuées
Ce cadenas mystérieux.

Au fond du gouffre où sont ceux qui se font proscrire,
Des plus profonds enfers, stupéfaits de sourire,
L’amour ira baiser les gonds,
Comme un rayon de l’aube, à l’orient ouverte,
Va dans la profondeur de l’eau sinistre et verte
Jusqu’aux écailles des dragons.

Les globes se noueront par des nœuds invisibles;
Ils s’enverront l’amour comme la flèche aux cibles;
Tout sera vie, hymne et réveil;
Et comme des oiseaux vont d’une branche à l’autre,

Le Verbe immense ira, mystérieux apôtre,
D’un soleil à l’autre soleil.

Les mondes, qu’aujourd’hui le mal habite et creuse,
Échangeront leur joie à travers l’ombre heureuse
Et l’espace silencieux;
Nul être, âme ou soleil, ne sera solitaire;
L’avenir, c’est l’hymen des hommes sur la terre
Et des étoiles dans les cieux.

XX

XX

Un poëte est un monde enfermé dans un homme.
Plaute en son crâne obscur sentait fourmiller Rome;
Mélésigène, aveugle et voyant souverain
Dont la nuit obstinée attristait l’œil serein,

Avait en lui Calchas, Hector, Patrocle, Achille;
Prométhée enchaîné remuait dans Eschyle;
Rabelais porte un siècle; et c’est la vérité
Qu’en tout temps les penseurs couronnés de clarté,
Les Shakspeares féconds et les vastes Homères,
Tous les poëtes saints, semblables à des mères,
Ont senti dans leurs flancs des hommes tressaillir,
Tous, l’un le roi Priam et l’autre le roi Lear.
Leur fruit croît sous leur front comme au sein de la femme.
Ils vont rêver aux lieux déserts; ils ont dans l’âme
Un éternel azur qui rayonne et qui rit;
Ou bien ils sont troublés, et dans leur sombre esprit
Ils entendent rouler des chars pleins de tonnerres.

Ils marchent effarés, ces grands visionnaires.
Ils ne savent plus rien, tant ils vont devant eux,
Archiloque appuyé sur l’iambe boiteux,
Euripide écoutant Minos, Phèdre et l’inceste.
Molière voit venir à lui le morne Alceste,
Arnolphe avec Agnès, l’aube avec le hibou,
Et la sagesse en pleurs avec le rire fou.
Cervantes pâle et doux cause avec don Quichotte;
À l’oreille de Job Satan masqué chuchote;

Dante sonde l’abîme en sa pensée ouvert;
Horace voit danser les faunes à l’œil vert;
Et Marlow suit des yeux au fond des bois l’émeute

Du noir sabbat fuyant dans l’ombre avec sa meute.

Alors, de cette foule invisible entouré,
Pour la création le poëte est sacré.
L’herbe est pour lui plus molle et la grotte plus douce;
Pan fait plus de silence en marchant sur la mousse;
La nature, voyant son grand enfant distrait,
Veille sur lui; s’il est un piége en la forêt,
La ronce au coin du bois le tire par la manche
Et dit : Ne va pas là! Sous ses pieds la pervenche
Tressaille; dans le nid, dans le buisson mouvant,
Dans la feuille, une voix, vague et mêlée au vent,
Murmure : — C’est Shakspeare et Macbeth! — C’est Molière
Et don Juan! — C’est Dante et Béatrix! — Le lierre
S’écarte, et les halliers, pareils à des griffons,
Retirent leur épine, et les chênes profonds,
Muets, laissent passer sous l’ombre de leurs dômes
Ces grands esprits parlant avec ces grands fantômes.

XXI

LE TEMPS PRÉSENT

LA VÉRITÉ

La Vérité, lumière effrayée, astre en fuite,
Évitant on ne sait quelle obscure poursuite,
Après s’être montrée un instant, disparaît.
Ainsi qu’une clarté passe en une forêt,
Elle s’en est allée au loin dans l’étendue,
Et s’est dans l’infini mystérieux perdue,
Mêlée à l’ouragan, mêlée à la vapeur,
Sombre, et de leur côté les hommes ont eu peur.
Peur d’elle, comme elle a peur des hommes peut-être.
Son effacement laisse obscure la fenêtre
Ouverte dans notre âme et béante au milieu
De l’ombre où l’épaisseur du temple cache Dieu.

Maintenant il fait nuit, le mensonge est à l'aise.
Cependant, par moments, sur la noire falaise,
D'où l'on voit l'inconnu sans borne, et les roulis

Du firmament tordant les astres dans ses plis,
Sommet d'où l'on entend Dieu tourner son registre,
Et d'où l'on aperçoit le modelé sinistre
Des mondes ignorés, des vagues univers,
L'un pour l'autre effrayants parce qu'ils sont divers,
Faîte où les visions se confrontent entr'elles,
Où les réalités, pour nous surnaturelles,
Semblent avoir parfois la figure du mal,
Du haut de cette cime appelée Idéal,
Par instants un chercheur fait l'annonce sacrée,
Et dit : — La Vérité, qui guide, échauffe et crée,
Haute lueur par qui l'âme s'épanouit,
Vivants, va revenir bientôt dans votre nuit;
Attendez-la. Soyez prêts à la voir paraître. —
La terre alors se met à rire; alors le prêtre,

Alors le juge, alors le reître, alors le roi,
Quiconque vit d'erreur, d'imposture et d'effroi,
Dracon au nom des lois, Tibère au nom des hommes,
Caïphe au nom du ciel, tout ce que les Sodomes
Contiennent de plus sage et de plus vertueux,
Tous les cœurs nés, ainsi que l'hydre, tortueux,
Les frivoles, les purs, les doctes, les obscènes,
Tout le bourdonnement de ces mouches malsaines,
S'acharne; un homme est fou du moment qu'il est seul.
On rit d'abord; le rire a fait plus d'un linceul;
Puis on s'indigne : — Il faut qu'un tel forfait s'expie;
L'homme osant n'être pas aveugle, est un impie!
Quoi! celui-ci prétend qu'il voit de la clarté!
Il dit qu'il voit de loin venir la vérité!
Il sait l'heure, il connaît l'astre, il a l'insolence
D'être une voix chez nous qui sommes le silence,
D'être un flambeau chez nous qui sommes la noirceur!

Il vit là-haut! il est ce monstre, le penseur!
Quoi! sa prunelle est sainte, et serait la première
Qu'éblouirait l'auguste et lointaine lumière!
L'abîme est noir pour nous et pour lui serait bleu!

Si ce n'est pas un fou, ce serait donc un dieu!
À bas! — Et cris, fureur, sarcasme, affronts, supplices!
Les ignorants naïfs et les savants complices,
Tous, car c'est l'homme auquel on ne pardonne point,
Arrivent, et chacun avec sa pierre au poing.
Ah! tu viens annoncer la vérité! prédire
La fin de la bataille et la fin du délire,
La fin des guerres, plus d'échafaud, le grand jour,
Le plein midi, la paix, la liberté, l'amour!
Ah! tu vois tout cela d'avance! Plus d'envie,
L'homme buvant la joie aux sources de la vie,
Et la Fraternité, de ses larges rameaux
Laissant tomber les biens en foule et non les maux.
Pour avoir de tels yeux il faut être stupide!
À mort! Et chacun grince, et trépigne, et lapide;
Avec tout ce qu'on a sous la main, fouets, bâtons,
On frappe, on raille, on tue au hasard, à tâtons,
Tant les âmes ont peur de manquer de ténèbres,
Et tant les hommes sont facilement funèbres!
L'ennemi public meurt. Bien. Tout s'évanouit.
Nous allons donc avoir tranquillement la nuit!
La sainte cécité publique est rétablie.

On boit, on mange, on rampe, on chuchote, on oublie,
L'ordre n'est plus troublé par un noir songe-creux;
On est des loups contents et des ânes heureux;
Le bonze met son masque et le temple son voile;
Quant au rêveur marchant en avant de l'étoile,
Qui venait déranger Moïse et Mahomet,
On ne sait même plus comment il se nommait.
Et qu'annonçait-il donc? La vérité? Quel songe!
Au fond, la vérité, vivants, c'est un mensonge;

La vérité n’est pas. Fermons les yeux. Dormons.
Tout à coup, au milieu des psaumes, des sermons,
Des hymnes, des chansons, des cris, des ironies,
Quelque chose à travers les brumes infinies
Semble apparaître au seuil du ciel, et l’on croit voir
Un point confus blanchir au fond du gouffre noir,
Comme un aigle arrivant dont grandit l’envergure;

Et le point lumineux devient une figure,
Et la figure croît de moment en moment,
Et devient, ô terreur, un éblouissement!
C’est elle, c’est l’étoile inouïe et profonde,
La Vérité! c’est elle, âme errante du monde,
Avec son évidence où nul rayon ne ment,
Et son mystère aussi d’où sort un flamboiement;
Elle, de tous les yeux le seul que rien n’endorme,
Elle, la regardée et la voyante énorme,
C’est elle! Ô Vérité, c’est toi! Divinement,
Elle surgit; ainsi qu’un vaste apaisement
Son radieux lever s’épand dans l’ombre immense;
Menace pour les uns, pour les autres clémence,
Elle approche; elle éclaire, à Thèbes, dans Ombos,
Dans Rome, dans Paris, dans Londres, des tombeaux,
Une ciguë en Grèce, une croix en Judée,
Et dit : Terre, c’est moi. Qui donc m’a demandée?

Tout était vision sous les ténébreux dômes;
J’aperçus dans l’espace étoilé trois fantômes;
Les deux premiers très-loin et le dernier plus près.
Le premier spectre dit : — Mané Thécel Pharès.
Son doigt levé montrait l’obscurité maudite;
Il ressemblait au sphinx monstrueux qui médite
Dans Assur, accroupi parmi les dieux camards.
Le second murmura ce mot : — Ides de Mars.
Et le troisième esprit cria : — Quatre-vingt-treize.

Devant mes yeux erraient des lueurs de fournaise;
Et, par je ne sais quel étrange changement,
Chacun de ces trois mots, au fond du firmament,
Était une des trois syllabes redoutables
D'un autre mot, écrit par Aaron sur les tables,
Et que, longtemps avant que Jésus triomphât,
Les gouffres répétaient aux gouffres : — Josaphat.

JEAN CHOUAN

Les blancs fuyaient, les bleus mitraillaient la clairière.

Un coteau dominait cette plaine, et derrière
Le monticule nu, sans arbre et sans gazon,
Les farouches forêts emplissaient l'horizon.

En arrière du tertre, abri sûr, rempart sombre,
Les blancs se ralliaient, comptant leur petit nombre,
Et Jean Chouan parut, ses longs cheveux au vent.
— Ah! personne n'est mort, car le chef est vivant!
Dirent-ils. Jean Chouan écoutait la mitraille.
— Nous manque-t-il quelqu'un? — Non. — Alors qu'on s'en aille!

Fuyez tous! — Les enfants, les femmes aux abois
L'entouraient, effarés. — Fils, rentrons dans les bois!
Dispersons-nous! — Et tous, comme des hirondelles
S'évadent dans l'orage immense à tire-d'ailes,
Fuirent vers le hallier noyé dans la vapeur;
Ils couraient; les vaillants courent quand ils ont peur;
C'est un noir désarroi qu'une fuite où se mêle
Au vieillard chancelant l'enfant à la mamelle;
On craint d'être tué, d'être fait prisonnier!
Et Jean Chouan marchait à pas lents, le dernier,
Se retournant parfois et faisant sa prière.

Tout à coup on entend un cri dans la clairière,

Une femme parmi les balles apparaît.
Toute la bande était déjà dans la forêt,
Jean Chouan seul restait; il s’arrête, il regarde;
C’est une femme grosse, elle s’enfuit, hagarde

Et pâle, déchirant ses pieds nus aux buissons;
Elle est seule; elle crie : À moi, les bons garçons!
Jean Chouan rêveur dit : C’est Jeanne-Madeleine.
Elle est le point de mire au milieu de la plaine;
La mitraille sur elle avec rage s’abat.
Il eût fallu que Dieu lui-même se courbât
Et la prît par la main et la mît sous son aile,
Tant la mort formidable abondait autour d’elle;
Elle était perdue. — Ah! criait-elle, au secours!
Mais les bois sont tremblants et les fuyards sont sourds.
Et les balles pleuvaient sur la pauvre brigande.

Alors sur le coteau qui dominait la lande
Jean Chouan bondit, fier, tranquille, altier, viril,
Debout : — C’est moi qui suis Jean Chouan! cria-t-il.
Les bleus dirent : — C’est lui, le chef! Et cette tête,
Prenant toute la foudre et toute la tempête,

Fit changer à la mort de cible. — Sauve-toi!
Cria-t-il, sauve-toi, ma sœur! — Folle d’effroi,
Jeanne hâta le pas vers la forêt profonde.
Comme un pin sur la neige ou comme un mât sur l’onde,
Jean Chouan, qui semblait par la mort ébloui,
Se dressait, et les bleus ne voyaient plus que lui.
— Je resterai le temps qu’il faudra. Va, ma fille!
Va, tu seras encor joyeuse en ta famille,
Et tu mettras encor des fleurs à ton corset!
Criait-il. — C’était lui maintenant que visait
L’ardente fusillade, et sur sa haute taille
Qui semblait presque prête à gagner la bataille,
Les balles s’acharnaient, et son puissant dédain
Souriait; il levait son sabre nu... — Soudain

Par une balle, ainsi l’ours est frappé dans l’antre,
Il se sentit trouer de part en part le ventre;
Il resta droit et dit : — Soit. Ave Maria!
Puis, chancelant, tourné vers le bois, il cria :
— Mes amis! mes amis! Jeanne est-elle arrivée?
Des voix dans la forêt répondirent : — Sauvée!
Jean Chouan murmura : C’est bien! et tomba mort.

Paysans! paysans! hélas! vous aviez tort,
Mais votre souvenir n’amoindrit pas la France;
Vous fûtes grands dans l’âpre et sinistre ignorance;

Vous que vos rois, vos loups, vos prêtres, vos halliers
Faisaient bandits, souvent vous fûtes chevaliers;
À travers l’affreux joug et sous l’erreur infâme
Vous avez eu l’éclair mystérieux de l’âme;
Des rayons jaillissaient de votre aveuglement;
Salut! Moi le banni, je suis pour vous clément;
L’exil n’est pas sévère aux pauvres toits de chaumes;
Nous sommes des proscrits, vous êtes des fantômes;
Frères, nous avons tous combattu; nous voulions
L’avenir; vous vouliez le passé, noirs lions;
L’effort que nous faisions pour gravir sur la cime,
Hélas! vous l’avez fait pour rentrer dans l’abîme;
Nous avons tous lutté, diversement martyrs,
Tous sans ambitions et tous sans repentirs,
Nous pour fermer l’enfer, vous pour rouvrir la tombe;
Mais sur vos tristes fronts la blancheur d’en haut tombe,
La pitié fraternelle et sublime conduit
Les fils de la clarté vers les fils de la nuit,
Et je pleure en chantant cet hymne tendre et sombre,
Moi, soldat de l’aurore, à toi, héros de l’ombre.

LE CIMETIÈRE D’EYLAU

À mes frères aînés, écoliers éblouis,

Ce qui suit fut conté par mon oncle Louis,
Qui me disait à moi, de sa voix la plus tendre :
— Joue, enfant! — me jugeant trop petit pour comprendre.
J’écoutais cependant, et mon oncle disait :

— Une bataille, bah! savez-vous ce que c’est?
De la fumée. À l’aube on se lève, à la brune
On se couche; et je vais vous en raconter une.
Cette bataille-là se nomme Eylau; je crois
Que j’étais capitaine et que j’avais la croix;
Oui, j’étais capitaine. Après tout, à la guerre,
Un homme, c’est de l’ombre, et ça ne compte guère,
Et ce n’est pas de moi qu’il s’agit. Donc, Eylau
C’est un pays en Prusse; un bois, des champs, de l’eau,
De la glace, et partout l’hiver et la bruine.

Le régiment campa près d’un mur en ruine;
On voyait des tombeaux autour d’un vieux clocher.
Bénigssen ne savait qu’une chose, approcher
Et fuir; mais l’empereur dédaignait ce manége.
Et les plaines étaient toutes blanches de neige.
Napoléon passa, sa lorgnette à la main.
Les grenadiers disaient : Ce sera pour demain.
Des vieillards, des enfants pieds nus, des femmes grosses
Se sauvaient; je songeais; je regardais les fosses.
Le soir on fit les feux, et le colonel vint,
Il dit : — Hugo? — Présent. — Combien d’hommes? — Cent-vingt.
— Bien. Prenez avec vous la compagnie entière,
Et faites-vous tuer. — Où? — Dans le cimetière.
Et je lui répondis : — C’est en effet l’endroit.

J’avais ma gourde, il but et je bus; un vent froid
Soufflait. Il dit : — La mort n’est pas loin. Capitaine,
J’aime la vie, et vivre est la chose certaine,
Mais rien ne sait mourir comme les bons vivants.
Moi, je donne mon cœur, mais ma peau, je la vends.
Gloire aux belles! Trinquons. Votre poste est le pire. —

Car notre colonel avait le mot pour rire.
Il reprit : — Enjambez le mur et le fossé,
Et restez là; ce point est un peu menacé,
Ce cimetière étant la clef de la bataille.
Gardez-le. — Bien. — Ayez quelques bottes de paille.
— On n’en a point. — Dormez par terre. — On dormira.
— Votre tambour est-il brave? — Comme Barra.
— Bien. Qu’il batte la charge au hasard et dans l’ombre,
Il faut avoir le bruit quand on n’a pas le nombre.
Et je dis au gamin : — Entends-tu, gamin? — Oui,
Mon capitaine, dit l’enfant, presque enfoui

Sous le givre et la neige, et riant. — La bataille,
Reprit le colonel, sera toute à mitraille;
Moi, j’aime l’arme blanche, et je blâme l’abus
Qu’on fait des lâchetés féroces de l’obus;
Le sabre est un vaillant, la bombe une traîtresse;
Mais laissons l’empereur faire. Adieu, le temps presse.
Restez ici demain sans broncher. Au revoir.
Vous ne vous en irez qu’à six heures du soir. —
Le colonel partit. Je dis : — Par file à droite!
Et nous entrâmes tous dans une enceinte étroite;
De l’herbe, un mur autour, une église au milieu,
Et dans l’ombre, au-dessus des tombes, un bon Dieu.

Un cimetière sombre, avec de blanches lames,
Cela rappelle un peu la mer. Nous crénelâmes
Le mur, et je donnai le mot d’ordre, et je fis
Installer l’ambulance au pied du crucifix.
— Soupons, dis-je, et dormons. La neige cachait l’herbe;
Nos capotes étaient en loques; c’est superbe,
Si l’on veut, mais c’est dur quand le temps est mauvais.
Je pris pour oreiller une fosse; j’avais

Les pieds transis, ayant des bottes sans semelle;
Et bientôt, capitaine et soldats pêle-mêle,
Nous ne bougeâmes plus, endormis sur les morts.

Cela dort, les soldats; cela n’a ni remords,
Ni crainte, ni pitié, n’étant pas responsable;
Et, glacé par la neige ou brûlé par le sable,
Cela dort; et d’ailleurs, se battre rend joyeux.
Je leur criai : Bonsoir! et je fermai les yeux;
À la guerre on n’a pas le temps des pantomimes.
Le ciel était maussade, il neigeait, nous dormîmes.
Nous avions ramassé des outils de labour,
Et nous en avions fait un grand feu. Mon tambour
L’attisa, puis s’en vint près de moi faire un somme.
C’était un grand soldat, fils, que ce petit homme.
Le crucifix resta debout, comme un gibet.
Bref, le feu s’éteignit; et la neige tombait.
Combien fut-on de temps à dormir de la sorte?

Je veux, si je le sais, que le diable m’emporte!
Nous dormions bien. Dormir, c’est essayer la mort.
À la guerre c’est bon. J’eus froid, très-froid d’abord;
Puis je rêvai; je vis en rêve des squelettes
Et des spectres, avec de grosses épaulettes;
Par degrés, lentement, sans quitter mon chevet,
J’eus la sensation que le jour se levait,
Mes paupières sentaient de la clarté dans l’ombre;
Tout à coup, à travers mon sommeil, un bruit sombre
Me secoua, c’était au canon ressemblant;
Je m’éveillai; j’avais quelque chose de blanc
Sur les yeux; doucement, sans choc, sans violence,
La neige nous avait tous couverts en silence
D’un suaire, et j’y fis, en me dressant un trou;
Un boulet, qui nous vint je ne sais trop par où,
M’éveilla tout à fait; je lui dis : Passe au large!
Et je criai : — Tambour, debout! et bats la charge!

Cent-vingt têtes alors, ainsi qu’un archipel,
Sortirent de la neige; un sergent fit l’appel,
Et l’aube se montra, rouge, joyeuse et lente;
On eût cru voir sourire une bouche sanglante.

Je me mis à penser à ma mère; le vent

Semblait me parler bas; à la guerre souvent
Dans le lever du jour c'est la mort qui se lève.
Je songeais. Tout d'abord nous eûmes une trêve;
Les deux coups de canon n'étaient rien qu'un signal,
La musique parfois s'envole avant le bal
Et fait danser en l'air une ou deux notes vaines.
La nuit avait figé notre sang dans nos veines,
Mais sentir le combat venir, nous réchauffait.
L'armée allait sur nous s'appuyer en effet;
Nous étions les gardiens du centre, et la poignée
D'hommes sur qui la bombe, ainsi qu'une cognée,
Va s'acharner; et j'eusse aimé mieux être ailleurs.
Je mis mes gens le long du mur; en tirailleurs.
Et chacun se berçait de la chance peu sûre
D'un bon grade à travers une bonne blessure;
À la guerre on se fait tuer pour réussir.
Mon lieutenant, garçon qui sortait de Saint-Cyr,
Me cria : — Le matin est une aimable chose;
Quel rayon de soleil charmant! La neige est rose!
Capitaine, tout brille et rit! quel frais azur!
Comme ce paysage est blanc, paisible et pur!
— Cela va devenir terrible, répondis-je.
Et je songeais au Rhin, aux Alpes, à l'Adige,

À tous nos fiers combats sinistres d'autrefois.

Brusquement la bataille éclata. Six cents voix
Énormes, se jetant la flamme à pleines bouches,
S'insultèrent du haut des collines farouches,
Toute la plaine fut un abîme fumant,
Et mon tambour battait la charge éperdûment.
Aux canons se mêlait une fanfare altière,
Et les bombes pleuvaient sur notre cimetière,
Comme si l'on cherchait à tuer les tombeaux;
On voyait du clocher s'envoler les corbeaux;

Je me souviens qu’un coup d’obus troua la terre,
Et le mort apparut stupéfait dans sa bière,
Comme si le tapage humain le réveillait.
Puis un brouillard cacha le soleil. Le boulet
Et la bombe faisaient un bruit épouvantable.
Berthier, prince d’empire et vice-connétable,

Chargea sur notre droite un corps hanovrien
Avec trente escadrons, et l’on ne vit plus rien
Qu’une brume sans fond, de bombes étoilée;
Tant toute la bataille et toute la mêlée
Avaient dans le brouillard tragique disparu.
Un nuage tombé par terre, horrible, accru
Par des vomissements immenses de fumées,
Enfants, c’est là-dessous qu’étaient les deux armées;
La neige en cette nuit flottait comme un duvet,
Et l’on s’exterminait, ma foi, comme on pouvait.
On faisait de son mieux. Pensif, dans les décombres,
Je voyais mes soldats rôder comme des ombres;
Spectres le long du mur rangés en espalier;
Et ce champ me faisait un effet singulier,
Des cadavres dessous et dessus des fantômes.
Quelques hameaux flambaient; au loin brûlaient des chaumes.
Puis la brume où du Harz on entendait le cor
Trouva moyen de croître et d’épaissir encor,

Et nous ne vîmes plus que notre cimetière;
À midi nous avions notre mur pour frontière,
Comme par une main noire, dans de la nuit,
Nous nous sentîmes prendre, et tout s’évanouit.
Notre église semblait un rocher dans l’écume.
La mitraille voyait fort clair dans cette brume,
Nous tenait compagnie, écrasait le chevet
De l’église, et la croix de pierre, et nous prouvait
Que nous n’étions pas seuls dans cette plaine obscure.
Nous avions faim, mais pas de soupe; on se procure
Avec peine à manger dans un tel lieu. Voilà

Que la grêle de feu tout à coup redoubla.
La mitraille, c’est fort gênant; c’est de la pluie;
Seulement ce qui tombe et ce qui vous ennuie,
Ce sont des grains de flamme et non des gouttes d’eau.
Des gens à qui l’on met sur les yeux un bandeau,
C’était nous. Tout croulait sous les obus, le cloître,
L’église et le clocher, et je voyais décroître
Les ombres que j’avais autour de moi debout;
Une de temps en temps tombait. — On meurt beaucoup,
Dit un sergent pensif comme un loup dans un piége;
Puis il reprit, montrant les fosses sous la neige :
— Pourquoi nous donne-t-on ce champ déjà meublé? —
Nous luttions. C’est le sort des hommes et du blé
D’être fauchés sans voir la faulx. Un petit nombre
De fantômes rôdait encor dans la pénombre;
Mon gamin de tambour continuait son bruit;
Nous tirions par-dessus le mur presque détruit.

Mes enfants, vous avez un jardin; la mitraille
Était sur nous, gardiens de cette âpre muraille,
Comme vous sur les fleurs avec votre arrosoir.
— Vous ne vous en irez qu’à six heures du soir.
Je songeais, méditant tout bas cette consigne.
Des jets d’éclairs mêlés à des plumes de cygne,
Des flammèches rayant dans l’ombre les flocons,
C’est tout ce que nos yeux pouvaient voir. — Attaquons!
Me dit le sergent. — Qui? dis-je, on ne voit personne.
— Mais on entend. Les voix parlent; le clairon sonne.
Partons, sortons; la mort crache sur nous ici;
Nous sommes sous la bombe et l’obus. — Restons-y.
J’ajoutai : — C’est sur nous que tombe la bataille.
Nous sommes le pivot de l’action. — Je bâille,
Dit le sergent. — Le ciel, les champs, tout était noir;
Mais quoiqu’en pleine nuit, nous étions loin du soir,
Et je me répétais tout bas : Jusqu’à six heures.
— Morbleu! nous aurons peu d’occasions meilleures
Pour avancer! me dit mon lieutenant. Sur quoi,

Un boulet l’emporta. Je n’avais guère foi
Au succès; la victoire au fond n’est qu’une garce.
Une blême lueur, dans le brouillard éparse,
Éclairait vaguement le cimetière. Au loin
Rien de distinct, sinon que l’on avait besoin
De nous pour recevoir sur nos têtes les bombes.

L’empereur nous avait mis là, parmi ces tombes;
Mais, seuls, criblés d’obus et rendant coups pour coups,
Nous ne devinions pas ce qu’il faisait de nous.
Nous étions, au milieu de ce combat, la cible.
Tenir bon, et durer le plus longtemps possible,
Tâcher de n’être morts qu’à six heures du soir,
En attendant, tuer, c’était notre devoir.
Nous tirions au hasard, noirs de poudre, farouches;
Ne prenant que le temps de mordre les cartouches,
Nos soldats combattaient et tombaient sans parler.
— Sergent, dis-je, voit-on l’ennemi reculer?
— Non. — Que voyez-vous? — Rien. — Ni moi. — C’est le déluge,

Mais en feu. — Voyez-vous nos gens? — Non. Si j’en juge
Par le nombre de coups qu’à présent nous tirons,
Nous sommes bien quarante. — Un grognard à chevrons
Qui tiraillait pas loin de moi dit : — On est trente.
Tout était neige et nuit; la bise pénétrante
Soufflait, et, grelottants, nous regardions pleuvoir
Un gouffre de points blancs dans un abîme noir.
La bataille pourtant semblait devenir pire.
C’est qu’un royaume était mangé par un empire!
On devinait derrière un voile un choc affreux;
On eût dit des lions se dévorant entr’eux;
C’était comme un combat des géants de la fable;
On entendait le bruit des décharges, semblable
À des écroulements énormes; les faubourgs
De la ville d’Eylau prenaient feu; les tambours
Redoublaient leur musique horrible, et sous la nue
Six cents canons faisaient la basse continue;

On se massacrait; rien ne semblait décidé;
La France jouait là son plus grand coup de dé;
Le bon Dieu de là-haut était-il pour ou contre?
Quelle ombre! et je tirais de temps en temps ma montre.

Par intervalle un cri troublait ce champ muet,
Et l’on voyait un corps gisant qui remuait.
Nous étions fusillés l’un après l’autre, un râle
Immense remplissait cette ombre sépulcrale.
Les rois ont les soldats comme vous vos jouets.
Je levais mon épée, et je la secouais
Au-dessus de ma tête, et je criais : Courage!
J’étais sourd et j’étais ivre, tant avec rage
Les coups de foudre étaient par d’autres coups suivis;
Soudain mon bras pendit, mon bras droit, et je vis
Mon épée à mes pieds, qui m’était échappée;
J’avais un bras cassé; je ramassai l’épée
Avec l’autre, et la pris dans ma main gauche : — Amis!
Se faire aussi casser le bras gauche est permis!
Criai-je, et je me mis à rire, chose utile,
Car le soldat n’est point content qu’on le mutile,
Et voir le chef un peu blessé ne déplaît point.

Mais quelle heure était-il? Je n’avais plus qu’un poing,
Et j’en avais besoin pour lever mon épée;
Mon autre main battait mon flanc, de sang trempée,
Et je ne pouvais plus tirer ma montre. Enfin
Mon tambour s’arrêta : — Drôle, as-tu peur? — J’ai faim,
Me répondit l’enfant. En ce moment la plaine
Eut comme une secousse, et fut brusquement pleine
D’un cri qui jusqu’au ciel sinistre s’éleva.
Je me sentais faiblir; tout un homme s’en va
Par une plaie; un bras cassé, cela ruisselle;
Causer avec quelqu’un soutient quand on chancelle;
Mon sergent me parla; je dis au hasard : Oui,
Car je ne voulais pas tomber évanoui.
Soudain le feu cessa, la nuit sembla moins noire.

Et l’on criait : Victoire! et je criai : Victoire!
J’aperçus des clartés qui s’approchaient de nous.
Sanglant, sur une main et sur les deux genoux
Je me traînai; je dis : — Voyons où nous en sommes.
J’ajoutai : — Debout, tous! Et je comptai mes hommes.
— Présent! dit le sergent. — Présent! dit le gamin.
Je vis mon colonel venir, l’épée en main.
— Par qui donc la bataille a-t-elle été gagnée?
— Par vous, dit-il. — La neige était de sang baignée.
Il reprit : — C’est bien vous, Hugo? c’est votre voix?
— Oui. — Combien de vivants êtes-vous ici? — Trois.

1851

CHOIX ENTRE DEUX PASSANTS

Je vis la Mort, je vis la Honte; toutes deux
Marchaient au crépuscule au fond du bois hideux.

L’herbe informe était brune et d’un souffle agitée.

Et sur un cheval mort la Mort était montée;
La Honte cheminait sur un cheval pourri.

Des vagues oiseaux noirs on entendait le cri.

Et la Honte me dit : — Je m’appelle la Joie.
Je vais au bonheur. Viens. L’or, la pourpre, la soie,

Les festins, les palais, les prêtres, les bouffons,
Le rire triomphal sous les vastes plafonds,
Les richesses en hâte ouvrant leurs sacs de piastres,
Les parcs, éden nocturne aux grands arbres pleins d’astres,
Les femmes accourant avec une aube aux fronts,
La fanfare, à sa bouche appuyant les clairons,
Fière, et faisant sonner la gloire dans le cuivre,

Tout cela t’appartient; viens, tu n’as qu’à me suivre.

Et je lui répondis : — Ton cheval sent mauvais.

La Mort me dit : — Mon nom est Devoir; et je vais
Au sépulcre, à travers l’angoisse et le prodige.

— As-tu derrière toi de la place? lui dis-je.

Et depuis lors, tournés vers l’ombre où Dieu paraît,
Nous faisons route ensemble au fond de la forêt.

ÉCRIT EN EXIL

L’heureux n’est pas le vrai, le droit n’est pas le nombre;
Un vaincu toujours triste, un vainqueur toujours sombre,
Le sort n’a-t-il donc pas d’autre oscillation?
Toujours la même roue et le même Ixion!
Qui que vous soyez, Dieu vers qui tout me ramène,
Si le faible souffrait en vain, si l’âme humaine
N’était qu’un grain de cendre aux ouragans jeté,
Je serais mécontent de votre immensité;
Il faut, dans l’univers, fatal et pourtant libre,
Aux âmes l’équité comme aux cieux l’équilibre;
J’ai besoin de sentir de la justice au fond
Du gouffre où l’ombre avec la clarté se confond;
J’ai besoin du méchant mal à l’aise, et du crime

Retombant sur le monstre et non sur la victime;
Un Caïn triomphant importune mes yeux;
J’ai besoin, quand le mal est puissant et joyeux,
D’un certain grondement là-haut, et de l’entrée
Du tonnerre au-dessus de la tête d’Atrée.

LA COLÈRE DU BRONZE

*

Et voilà donc l'emploi que vous faites, vivants,
De moi l'airain, vous cendre éparse aux quatre vents!

Ainsi la certitude est morte! Ainsi la rue
Offre en exemple un fourbe à la foule accourue,
Et les passants diront du plus vil des bourreaux,
D'un voleur, d'un goujat : Ce doit être un héros!
La statue est un lâche abus de confiance!
Et l'on verra le peuple, ému, plein de croyance,
Ayant foi dans le bronze infaillible et serein,

Découvrir son grand front pour un faquin d'airain!

Vous allumez la braise et vous creusez le moule;
Mon bloc fumant se gonfle et tombe, s'enfle et croule;
Vous fouillez mon flot rouge avec des crocs de fer
Comme font des satans remuant un enfer;
Vous attisez avec le zinc incendiaire
Mon cratère où bascule et s'épand la chaudière,

Et tout mon dur métal devient une eau de feu,
Et j'écume, et je dis : Hommes, faites-moi dieu!
J'y consens. Et je brûle avec furie et joie.
Faites. Dans mon tourment mon triomphe flamboie.
Quiconque voit ma pourpre auguste est ébloui.
Le noir moule béant, sous la terre enfoui,
S'ouvre à moi comme un gouffre obscur au fond d'un antre,
Et ma voix sombre gronde et crie : Oui, c'est bien, j'entre,
Je serai Washington!... — Je sors, je suis Morny!

Ah! sous le ciel sacré, sous l'azur infini,
Soyez maudits! Rugir dans la fournaise ardente,
Moi le bronze! pour qui? Pour Gutenberg? Pour Dante?
Pour Thrasybule? Non. Pour Billault, pour Dupin!

J’attends Léonidas, on me jette Scapin.
Mais de quoi donc sont faits les hommes? C’est à croire
Que l’ordure est pour vous ressemblante à la gloire;
Que votre âme est troublée au point de ne plus voir;
Et que le bien, le mal, le crime, le devoir,
Bayard, Judas, Barbès le preux, Georgey l’impie,

Flottent confusément sous votre myopie!
Vous hissez sur un faîte abject le facies
De Fould, ou le profil abruti de Siéyès,
Et vous avez le goût de regarder sans cesse
En haut, bien au-dessus de vos fronts, la bassesse.
*

Savez-vous que je suis le métal souverain?
Que j’ai mis sur Corinthe un quadrige d’airain,
Et que mes dieux, mes rois, mes victoires ailées,
Font de l’ombre sur vous du haut des Propylées?
Savez-vous qu’autrefois j’étais sacré? J’avais
L’impossibilité d’être vil et mauvais;

Et c’est pourquoi, vivants, je valais mieux que l’homme;
Je connaissais Athène et j’ignorais Sodome.
Les Grecs disaient de moi : Le bronze est un héros.
J’étais Jupiter, Mars, Pallas, Diane, Éros;
On me voyait durer autant qu’un vers d’Eschyle;
Et j’étais pour les Grecs la chair du grand Achille.
Ces populaces, foule aux yeux pleins de clarté,
Honoraient ma noirceur et ma virginité;
Les portefaix de Sparte et les marchandes d’herbes
Ne me regardaient point sans devenir superbes,
Et j’étais à tel point l’âme de la cité
Que les petits enfants bégayaient : Liberté!

Aujourd’hui, sur un socle, en vos places publiques
Pour qui le ciel n’a plus que des rayons obliques,
Vous mettez la statue énorme d’un pasquin

Qui devient un colosse et reste un mannequin,
D’un chenapan, d’un gueux qui prend un air d’archonte
Et qui se drape avec orgueil dans de la honte.
C’est de l’opprobre altier et qui se tient debout.
On monte au Panthéon par le trou de l’égout.
Les voilà tous, Magnan, puis Delangle, Espinasse,

Puis Troplong, ce qui rampe avec ce qui menace,
Spectres hideux qu’entoure, en plein air, au soleil,
Le brouhaha des voix inutiles, pareil
À l’agitation du vent dans les branchages.
Et je suis le complice! Et les bardes, les sages,

Les vaillants, les martyrs à mourir acharnés,
Les grands hommes que j’ai tant de fois incarnés,
Ne m’ont pas défendu de cette ignominie
D’être pantin après avoir été génie!

Vous condamnez l’airain aux avilissements.
Comme vous, je trahis et, comme vous, je mens.
Je trahis la vertu, je trahis la durée;
Je trahis la colère, âpre muse azurée,
Qui rend et fait justice, et n’a pas d’autre soin;
Et devant Juvénal je suis un faux témoin.
Chute et deuil! Je trahis le lever de l’étoile,
Qui dans l’ombre, à travers la nuit, son chaste voile,
Cherchant à l’horizon des bronzes radieux,
Aperçoit des bandits au lieu de voir des dieux!

Ma fournaise m’indigne, à mal faire occupée.
Ceux qui vendent la loi, ceux qui vendent l’épée,
Brumaire avec Leclerc, Décembre avec Morny,
Un tas d’ingrédients, faux droits, sceptre impuni,

Le vieil autel, le vieux billot, la vieille chaîne,
Auxquels on a mêlé la conscience humaine,

Tout cela dans la cuve obscure flotte et fond.
Et la statue en sort, vile.
Le Dieu profond
Vous donne les héros, les penseurs, les prophètes,
Et le bronze, et voilà, vous, ce que vous en faites.
Vous donnez le cachot à Christophe Colomb,
À Dante l’exil triste et sa chape de plomb,

À Jésus le calvaire et sa risée ingrate,
À Morus l’échafaud, la ciguë à Socrate,
Le bûcher à Jean Huss, et le bronze aux valets.
*

Je sais bien qu’on dira : Passez, méprisez-les.
Ce sont des gredins.
Soit. Mais ce sont des statues.
Mais ces indignités sont de splendeur vêtues.
Mais on croit tellement le bronze honnête, et sûr
Du bon choix des héros qu’il dresse dans l’azur,
On est si convaincu que lorsque, sous les arbres,
Au milieu des enfants rieurs, parmi les marbres,
Sur les degrés d’un temple ou sur l’arche d’un pont,
Le bronze montre au peuple un homme, il en répond;
Mais tous ces malfaiteurs, mais tous ces misérables,
Devenus au passant stupide vénérables,
Ont si profondément, de leurs pieds de métal,
Pris racine au granit puissant du piédestal;

J’ai mis sur leur bassesse une si grande armure,
Qu’en vain l’âpre aquilon sur leurs têtes murmure!
Ils sont là, fermes, froids, rayonnants, ténébreux,
L’heure, goutte du siècle, en vain tombe sur eux;
Et vienne la tempête et vienne la nuée,
La foudre et son éclair, la trombe et sa huée,
Qu’importe! ils sont d’airain; et l’airain jamais vieux
Rit des coups d’ongles noirs de l’hiver pluvieux.
Novembre a beau venir après juillet; l’année,

Cette dent qui mord tout, les respecte, indignée!
L’ondée, en les rouillant, les conserve; leurs fronts
Se dressent immortels, plus fiers sous plus d’affronts;

Sur eux s’abattent neige, averse, givre, orage,
Et tout le tourbillon des bises, folle rage,
Et la grêle insultante et le soleil rongeur,
Et, sans qu’il leur en reste une ombre, une rougeur,
Tous les soufflets du temps, ils les ont sur la joue;
De sorte que le bronze éternise la boue.

Tel homme, à quelque crime effroyable rêvant,
Et qu’on flétrira mort, vous l’adorez vivant;
Vous le faites statue avant qu’il soit fantôme;
Vous ne distinguez pas le géant de l’atome,
Vous ne distinguez pas le faux vainqueur du vrai;
Un jour Tacite, un jour Salluste et Mézeray
Diront : Ce scélérat a trahi la patrie,
Et traîneront sa gloire abjecte à la voirie;
Vous l’avez déclaré sublime en attendant.
Moi sur qui vous mettez plus d’un masque impudent,
J’ai l’instinct qui vous manque, hélas! et dans le reître
Qui vous semble un héros, souvent je sens un traître.

Ah! fourmilière humaine! il vous importe peu
Qu’un immonde stylite offense le ciel bleu.
Faire de la statue une prostituée!
Votre prunelle, au jour de cave habituée,
N’a plus d’éclairs, sourit au mal, se plaît à voir
L’ombre que du plateau d’un socle blanc ou noir

Jette le courtisan, le fripon, le transfuge,
Et l’aboiement du chien semble la voix d’un juge.
Les seuls dogues grondants protestent vaguement.

L’histoire ne peut plus me croire. Un monument
La déconcerte, ayant pour auréole un crime.

Pourtant j’étais jadis l’avertisseur sublime;
Je suis l’apothéose ou bien le châtiment.
Mon immobilité vaut mon bouillonnement.
Ardent, je suis la lave, et froid, je suis le bronze.
*

Quoi! pas même un Néron! pas même un Louis onze!
J’eusse rougi du maître, on me livre au laquais!
Dans les noirs carrefours, dans les parcs, sur les quais,
Je suis Dave ou Frontin, et j’indigne Pétrone!
Quoi! pas même un opprobre avec une couronne!
Pas même une infamie ayant droit au laurier!
Oui, c’est Dupin, Dupin qu’on prend dans son terrier,
Et qu’on fait bronze! Il a son temple, il est au centre.
Mort, il se tient droit, lui qui vécut à plat ventre!
Et lui, c’est moi! L’airain moule, incarne et subit
Quiconque a retourné lestement son habit.

Oui, voyez, c’est bien lui, lourd fuyard, faux augure;
La honte le déforme, et je le transfigure!
Plus souillé qu’un haillon qu’on brocante au bazar,
J’en suis à regretter la face de César.
C’était du moins le monstre, à présent c’est le drôle.
Je ressuscite, ô lâche et misérable rôle,
Tel affreux gueux, qui n’est pas même un empereur!
Je me dresse, assombri, sous ce masque d’horreur,
Dans le forum, où nul, hélas! ne délibère.
Honteux d’être Séjan, je me voudrais Tibère.

Il fut du moins auguste en même temps que vil.
Si de face il fut singe, il fut dieu de profil.
L’histoire le revêt d’une honte immortelle;
Et son abjection sans bornes n’est pas telle
Qu’on se sente Troplong et Baroche au-dessous.

Oh! vous me sauverez de ce bagne, gros sous!
Vous me délivrerez. Le peuple sur la claie

Traînera la statue émiettée en monnaie,
Et je serai joyeux que Chodruc et Vadé

Me jettent aux ruisseaux, moi le bronze évadé.
Ô penseur, deviens peuple! Ô bronze, deviens cuivre!
Car c'est une façon superbe de revivre,
Et rien n'est plus sublime, et rien n'est plus charmant
Que de se disperser sur tous, à tout moment,
Que d'être l'obole humble et de bienfaits remplie,
Le denier qui va, vient, court et se multiplie,
Et qui, chétif, obscur, trivial, triomphant,
Donne au vieillard la vie et la joie à l'enfant.
On méprisait ce bronze, et ce cuivre on l'estime.
Plutôt qu'être Troplong mieux vaut être un centime,
Et lorsqu'il fut Dupin aux yeux de tout Paris,
L'airain s'en débarbouille avec du vert-de-gris.

Donc, j'attends. Quelque jour j'aurai cette revanche.
Déjà le pavé tremble et le piédestal penche,

Car tout a ses retours. Le reflux est de droit.
Jamais le genre humain ne reste au même endroit.
De la main du hasard l'homme parfois accepte
On ne sait quels élus de la fortune inepte;
Il en fait des dieux; quitte, et je l'aime ainsi mieux,
À faire des liards ensuite avec ces dieux!

FRANCE ET ÂME

Je m'étais figuré que lorsque cet Etna,
La Révolution, prit feu, s'ouvrit, tonna,
Rugit, fendit la terre, et cracha sur le monde
Sa lave alors terrible et maintenant féconde,
Que, lorsque, vierge altière et proclamant nos droits,
L'Idée offrit la guerre au groupe affreux des rois,
Lorsqu'apparut, hautaine, à travers les fumées,

Cette Diane, en laisse ayant quatorze armées,
Que lorsque Danton prit l’Europe corps à corps,
Que lorsqu’on entendit les meutes et les cors,
Quand la forêt laissa voir dans sa transparence

L’âpre chasse donnée aux tyrans par la France,
Moi, pensif, regardant Kléber et Mirabeau,
Jean-Jacques, ce tison, Voltaire, ce flambeau,
Je m’étais, je l’avoue, imaginé qu’en somme
L’écroulement des rois c’est le sacre de l’homme,
Que nous avions vaincu la matière et la mort,
Et que le résultat de cet illustre effort,
Le triomphe, l’orgueil, l’honneur, le phénomène,
C’était d’avoir grandi jusqu’aux cieux l’âme humaine;
C’était d’avoir montré dans l’aube qui sourit
L’homme beau par le glaive et plus beau par l’esprit;
C’était d’avoir prouvé que cet être qui change,
Sur son épaule d’homme a des ailes d’archange,
Qu’il peut s’épanouir demi-dieu tout à coup,
Et que, lorsqu’il lui plaît de se dresser debout,
Son immense rayon mystérieux éclaire
Toutes les profondeurs de haine et de colère
Et leur verse l’aurore et les emplit d’amour;
J’avais pensé que c’est pour accroître le jour,
Pour embraser le cœur, pour incendier l’âme,
Pour tirer de l’esprit humain toute sa flamme,
Que nos pères, Français plus grands que les Romains,
Avaient pris et tordu le passé dans leurs mains,
Et jeté dans le feu de la forge profonde
Ce combustible utile et hideux, le vieux monde;
Je m’étais dit que l’homme avait soif, avait faim
D’être une âme immortelle, et qu’il avait enfin

Su montrer et prouver sa divinité fière
Par l’agrandissement subit de la lumière
Et par la délivrance auguste des vivants;
J’ai dit que ni les rois, ni les flots, ni les vents,

Ne pouvaient désormais rien contre un tel prodige;
Qu’on avait pour cela passé le Rhin, l’Adige,
Le Nil, l’Èbre, et crié sur les monts : Liberté!
Oui, j’avais cru pouvoir dire qu’une clarté
Sortait de ce grand siècle, et que cette étincelle
Rattachait l’âme humaine à l’âme universelle,
Qu’ici-bas, où le sceptre est un triste hochet,
La solidarité des hommes ébauchait
La solidarité des mondes, composée
De toute la bonté, de toute la pensée,
Et de toute la vie éparse dans les cieux;
Oui, je croyais, les yeux fixés sur nos aïeux,
Que l’homme avait prouvé superbement son âme.

Aussi, lorsqu’à cette heure un Allemand proclame

Zéro, pour but final, et me dit : — Ô néant,
Salut! — j’en fais ici l’aveu, je suis béant;
Et quand un grave Anglais, correct, bien mis, beau linge,
Me dit : — Dieu t’a fait homme et moi je te fais singe;
Rends-toi digne à présent d’une telle faveur! —
Cette promotion me laisse un peu rêveur.

DÉNONCÉ À CELUI QUI CHASSA LES VENDEURS DU TEMPLE

La vieille en pleurs disait : — La misère en est cause,
Pour mon bon vieux défunt je n’aurai pas grand’chose,
Un seul cierge, un seul prêtre, et deux mots d’oraison
À la porte. On peut bien entrer dans la maison,
Avoir l’autel, avoir les saints, avoir les châsses,
Tout le clergé chantant des actions de grâces,
Des psaumes, des bedeaux, tout; mais il faut payer,
Hélas! et moi qui dois trois termes de loyer,
Je n’ai pas de quoi faire enterrer mon pauvre homme. —

Ainsi parlait la veuve, et je songeais à Rome.
Quoi! le riche et le pauvre ont des enterrements
Différents; l'un a droit aux embellissements,

L'autre pas; l'un descend chez les morts, l'autre y tombe,
Et l'un n'est pas l'égal de l'autre dans la tombe!

Quoi! Dieu n'est pas gratis! Quoi! prêtres, le Martyr,
Le Saint, l'Ange, ne veut de sa boîte sortir
Que pour de l'or; sinon vous refermez l'armoire
Sur le ciel, sur la Vierge et sa robe de moire,
Et sur l'enfant Jésus rose et couleur de chair!
Quoi! votre crucifix coûte plus ou moins cher,
Selon qu'il va devant ou qu'il marche derrière!
Prêtres, vous mesurez au cercueil la prière;
Longue, si le cadavre est grand; courte, s'il n'est
Qu'un méchant pauvre mort, — le prêtre s'y connaît, —
Cloué dans une bière étroite et misérable!
Prêtres, le hêtre aux champs, l'aulne, l'ormeau, l'érable,
Versent l'ombre pour rien; Mai ne dit pas aux prés :

Les fleurs, c'est tant. Voyez mon tarif. Vous paierez
Tant pour la violette et tant pour la lavande!
Ah! Dieu veut qu'on le donne et non pas qu'on le vende!
La mort fut toujours juste et toujours nivela;
Reconnaissez au moins cette égalité-là;
Respectez le cercueil sans mépriser la bière;
Faites le même accueil à la même poussière,
Sur le même silence ayez le même chant.
Quoi! je cherche un apôtre et je trouve un marchand!
C'est d'un comptoir que part l'escalier de la chaire.
Que diraient-ils de voir leurs psaumes à l'enchère,
Ces hommes qui songeaient, pâles, dans le désert?
Ah! ce De Profundis superfin qui ne sert
Qu'aux riches, et qu'on met en musique, et qu'on brode,
Que Jésus n'aurait pas et qu'obtiendrait Hérode,

Ô terreur! il n’en faut pas tant pour faire Dieu
Farouche, et pour changer en ciel noir le ciel bleu!
La prière vendue a l’accent du blasphème.

Hélas! c’est de la nuit que dans les cœurs on sème.
L’ombre, au-dessus de vous, mages qui brocantez,
Efface brusquement toutes les vérités.
Quoi! vous ne voyez pas l’éclipse formidable!
Vous qui savez combien l’abîme est insondable,
Vous vous faites vendeurs!
Prêtres, l’adossement
De l’échoppe suffit pour que le firmament
Épaississe au-dessus de l’église ses voiles;
La boutique retire au temple les étoiles.

LES ENTERREMENTS CIVILS

Oh! certes, je sais bien, moi souffrant et rêvant,
Que tout cet inconnu qui m’entoure est vivant,
Que le néant n’est pas, et que l’Ombre est une Âme;
La cendre ne parvient qu’à me prouver la flamme;
Faire voir clairement le ciel, l’éternel port,
La vie enfin, c’est là le succès de la mort;
Oh! certes, je voudrais qu’au ténébreux passage
Mon cercueil, esquif sombre, eût pour pilote un sage,
Un pontife, un apôtre, un auguste songeur,
Un mage, ayant au front l’attente, la rougeur
Et l’éblouissement de la profonde aurore;
Je voudrais qu’à la fosse où meurt le rien sonore,
Un sénateur du vrai, du réel, un magnat
Du sépulcre, un docteur du ciel, m’accompagnât;
Oui, je réclamerais cette sainte prière!
Devant la formidable et noire fondrière,

Oui, je trouverais bon que pour moi, loin du bruit,
Une voix s’élevât et parlât à la nuit!

Car c’est l’heure où se fend du haut en bas le voile;
C’est dans cette nuit-là que se lève l’étoile!
Je le voudrais! et rien ne me serait meilleur
Qu’une telle prière après un tel malheur,
Ma vie ayant été dure et funèbre, en somme.
Mais, ô Toi! dis, réponds, parle. Est-ce que cet homme
Qui sait mal, et qui fait exprès de mal savoir,
Qui pour un dogme obscur déserte un clair devoir,
Qui prêche le miracle et rit du phénomène,
Mal penché sur l’angoisse et sur l’énigme humaine,
Qui, d’un côté bassesse et de l’autre fureur,
Flétrit l’escroc forçat et l’adore empereur,

Qui dit au genre humain : Malheur, si tu raisonnes!
Qui damne et ment, qui met l’abîme en trois personnes,
Qui rêve un univers petit, sinistre et noir,
Fait de notre seul globe, et qui ne veut pas voir
Luire en tous tes soleils toutes tes évidences,
Qui crèverait cet œil, l’astre où tu te condenses,
S’il pouvait, et ferait la nuit sur l’horizon,
Qui tarife l’autel, l’antienne, l’oraison,
Qui, par devant superbe et vendu par derrière,
Offre au riche et refuse au pauvre sa prière,
Si le pauvre ne peut le payer assez cher;
Est-ce que ce vivant à regret, que la chair
Indigne, et qui jadis nia l’âme des femmes,

Qui préfère à l’hymen, aux purs épithalames,

Aux nids, ce suicide affreux, le célibat;
Qui voudrait qu’à son gré le firmament tombât,
Qui devant Josué soufflette Galilée,
Qui dresse un noir bûcher dans ton ombre étoilée,
Et tâche d’éclipser l’aube au sommet du mont,
Torquemada là-bas, chez nous Laubardemont;
Qui, dans l’Inde, en Espagne, au Mexique, aux Cévennes,

Saigna l’humanité gisante aux quatre veines,
Qui voit la guerre, et chante un Te Deum dessus,
Qui repaierait Judas et reclouerait Jésus,
Indulgent à qui règne et sévère à qui souffre,
Ayant sous lui l’erreur comme l’onde a le gouffre,
Sorte d’homme terrible où l’on peut naufrager;
Dis, est-ce que moi, pâle et flottant passager
Qui veux la clarté vraie et non la lueur fausse,
Je dois faire appeler cet homme sur ma fosse?
Est-ce que sur la tombe il est le bien venu?
Est-ce qu’il est celui qu’écoute l’Inconnu?
Est-ce que sa voix porte au delà de la terre?
Est-ce qu’il a le droit de parler au mystère?
Est-ce qu’il est ton prêtre? Est-ce qu’il sait ton nom?

Je vois Dieu dans les cieux faire signe que non.

LE PRISONNIER

Cet homme a pour prison l’ignominie immense.

On pouvait le tuer, mais on fut sans clémence,
Il vit.
Il est dans l’âpre et lugubre prison
Invisible, toujours debout sur l’horizon,
L’opprobre.
Cette tour a la hauteur du songe.
Sa crypte jusqu’aux lieux ignorés se prolonge,
Ses remparts ont de noirs créneaux vertigineux,
Si vains qu’on n’y pourrait pendre une corde à nœuds,
Si terribles que rien jamais ne vous procure

Une échelle appliquée à la muraille obscure.
Aucun trousseau de clefs n’ouvre ce qui n’est plus.
On est captif. Dans quoi? Dans de l’ombre. Et reclus;
Où? Dans son propre gouffre. On a sur soi le voile.

C’est fini. Deuil! Jamais on ne verra l’étoile
Ni l’azur apparaître au plafond sidéral.
Là, rien qui puisse rendre à l’affreux général
Cette virginité, la France point trahie.
Sa mémoire est déjà de lui-même haïe.
Pas d’enceinte à ce bagne épars dans tous les sens,
Qui va plus loin que tous les nuages passants,
Car l’élargissement du déshonneur imite
Un rayonnement d’astre et n’a point de limite.
Pour bâtir la prison qui jamais ne finit

La loi ne se sert pas d’airain ni de granit;
C’est la fange qu’on prend, la fange étant plus dure;
Cette bastille-là toujours vit, toujours dure,
Pleine d’un crépuscule au pâle hiver pareil,
Brume où manque l’honneur comme aux nuits le soleil,
Oubliette où l’aurore est éteinte, où médite
Ce qui reste d’une âme après qu’elle est maudite.

Ce misérable est seul dans cette ombre; son front
Est plié, car la honte est basse de plafond,
Tant l’informe cerveau du fourbe est peu lucide,
Tant est lourd à porter le poids du parricide.
Si cet homme eût voulu, la France triomphait.
Il porte au coup ce noir carcan : ce qu’il a fait.
De la déroute affreuse il fut le vil ministre.
Sa conscience nue, indignée et sinistre,
Est près de lui, disant : L’abject sort du félon,
Ganelon de Judas et toi de Ganelon.

Sois le désespéré. Dors si tu peux, je veille. —
Il entend cette voix sans cesse à son oreille.
Morne, il n’a même plus cet espoir, un danger.
Il faut qu’il reste, il faut qu’il vive, pour songer
Aux vieilles légions de France prisonnières,
Pour qu’il soit souffleté par toutes nos bannières
Frémissantes, la nuit, dans ses rêves hideux.

D’ailleurs nos aïeux morts n’auraient au milieu d’eux
Pas voulu de ce spectre, et leur grand souffle sombre
Certe, eût chassé d’abîme en abîme cette ombre,
Et fouetté, ramené, repris, poussé, traîné
Ce fuyard à la fuite à jamais condamné!
Car, grâce à lui, l’on peut cracher sur notre gloire,
Car c’est par toi, maudit, que nos preux, notre histoire,

Nos régiments, de tant de victoire étoilés,
Que Wagram, Austerlitz, Lodi, s’en sont allés
En prison, sous les yeux de l’Anglais et du Russe,
Le dos zébré du plat du sabre de la Prusse!
Inexprimable deuil!
Donc cet homme est muré
Au fond d’on ne sait quel mépris démesuré;
Le regard effrayant du genre humain l’entoure;
Il est la trahison comme Cid la bravoure.
Sa complice, la Peur, sa sœur, la Lâcheté,
Le gardent. Ce rebut vivant, ce rejeté,
Sous l’exécration de tous, sur lui vomie,
Râle, et ne peut pas plus sortir de l’infamie
Que l’écume ne peut sortir de l’Océan.
L’opprobre, ayant horreur de lui, dirait : Va-t’en,
Les anges justiciers, secouant sur cette âme
Leur glaive où la lumière, hélas, s’achève en flamme,
Crieraient : Sors d’ici! rentre au néant qui t’attend!
Qu’il ne pourrait; aucune ouverture n’étant
Possible, ô cieux profonds, hors d’une telle honte!
Cet homme est le Forçat! Qu’il descende ou qu’il monte,

Que trouve-t-il? En bas l’abjection; en haut
L’abjection. Son cœur est brûlé du fer chaud.
Le criminel, eût-il plus d’or qu’il n’en existe,
Ne corrompra jamais son crime, geôlier triste.
Deux verrous ont fermé sa porte pour jamais,
L’un qu’on nomme Strasbourg, l’autre qu’on nomme Metz.
Ah! cet infâme a mis le pied sur la patrie.

Quand une âme ici-bas est à ce point flétrie,
Lorsqu’on l’a vue au fond des forfaits se vautrer,
L’honneur libre et vivant n’y peut pas plus rentrer
Que l’abeille ne vient sur une rose morte.
Ah! le Spielberg est noir, la Bastille était forte,
Le Saint-Michel rempli de cages était haut,
Le vieux château Saint-Ange est un puissant cachot;
Mais aucun mur n’égale en épaisseur la honte.
Dieu tient ce prisonnier et lui demande compte.
Comment a-t-il changé notre armée en troupeau?

Qu’a-t-il fait des canons, des soldats, du drapeau,
Du clairon réveillant les camps, de l’espérance,
De nous tous, et combien a-t-il vendu la France?
Oh! quelle ombre de tels coupables ont sur eux!
Cave et forêt! rameaux croisés! murs douloureux!
Stigmate! abaissement! chute! dédains horribles!
Comment fuir de dessous ces branchages terribles?
Ô chiens, qu’avez-vous donc dans les dents? C’est son nom.
Il habite la faute, éternel cabanon,
Labyrinthe aux replis monstrueux et funèbres
Où les ténèbres sont derrière les ténèbres,
Geôle où l’on est captif tant qu’on est regardé.

Et qui donc maintenant dit qu’il s’est évadé?

APRÈS LES FOURCHES CAUDINES

Rome avait trop de gloire, ô dieux, vous la punîtes
Par le triomphe énorme et lâche des Samnites;
Et nous vîmes ce deuil, nous qui vivons encor.
Cela n’empêche pas l’aurore aux rayons d’or
D’éclore et d’apparaître au-dessus des collines.
Un champ de course est près des tombes Esquilines,
Et parfois, quand la foule y fourmille en tous sens,

J’y vais, l’œil vaguement fixé sur les passants.

Ce champ mène aux logis de guerre où les cohortes
Vont et viennent ainsi que dans les villes fortes;
Avril sourit, l’oiseau chante, et, dans le lointain,
Derrière les coteaux où reluit le matin,
Où les roses des bois entr’ouvrent leurs pétales,
On entend murmurer les trompettes fatales;
Et je médite, ému. J’étais aujourd’hui là.
Je ne sais pas pourquoi le soleil se voila;
Les nuages parfois dans le ciel se resserrent.
Tout à coup, à cheval et lance au poing, passèrent
Des vétérans aux fronts halés, aux larges mains.
Ils avaient l’ancien air des grands soldats romains;
Et les petits enfants accouraient pour les suivre;
Trois cavaliers, soufflant dans des buccins de cuivre,
Marchaient en tête, et comme, au front de l’escadron,
Chacun d’eux embouchait à son tour le clairon,

Sans couper la fanfare ils reprenaient haleine.
Ces gens de guerre étaient superbes dans la plaine;
Ils marchaient de leur pas antique et souverain.
Leurs boucliers portaient des méduses d’airain,
Et l’on voyait sur eux Gorgone et tous ses masques;
Ils défilaient, dressant les cimiers de leurs casques
Dignes d’être éclairés par des soleils levants,
Sous des crins de lion qui se tordaient aux vents.
Que ces hommes sont beaux! disaient les jeunes filles.
Tout souriait, les fleurs embaumaient les charmilles,
Le peuple était joyeux, le ciel était doré,
Et, songeant que c’étaient des vaincus, j’ai pleuré.

XXII

L’ÉLÉGIE DES FLÉAUX

LE POËTE
Tu ne l’as pourtant pas mérité, ma patrie!
LE CHŒUR
Oh! quel acharnement sur la grande meurtrie!
La bataille a passé, chaos sombre et tonnant.
Voici la vision des vagues maintenant.
Une meute de flots terribles, des montagnes

D’eau farouche, l’horreur dans les pâles campagnes,
Et l’apparition des torrents forcenés!
L’auguste France, en proie aux chocs désordonnés,
Semble un titan ayant de l’eau jusqu’aux épaules;
Et l’on voit une fuite immense vers les pôles
De la pluie et de l’ombre et des brouillards mouvants,
Sous la cavalerie effroyable des vents;
La mort accourt avec la rumeur d’une foule;
Tout un peuple, sous qui l’effondrement s’écroule,
Crie et se tord les bras, prêt à couler à fond;
Comme un flocon de neige un toit s’efface et fond;
Une rivière, hier dans les prés endormie,
Gronde, et subitement devient une ennemie;
Le fleuve brusque et noir surprend l’homme inquiet,
Et trahit les hameaux auxquels il souriait;
Tout tombe, égalité des chaumes et des marbres;
Les mourants sont par l’eau tordus autour des arbres;
Rien n’échappe, et la nuit monte. Profonds sanglots!
LE POËTE
Quoi! deux invasions! Après les rois, les flots!

LE CHŒUR
Deux inondations! L’onde après les vandales!
Ce n’était pas assez d’avoir eu les sandales
D’on ne sait quel césar tudesque sur nos fronts;
Ce n’était pas assez d’avoir, sous les affronts,

Vu nos drapeaux hagards frissonner dans nos villes;
Ce n’était pas assez, lorsque des hordes viles
Marchaient sur nous, souillant ce que nous adorons,
De nous être bouché l’oreille à leurs clairons;
Le deuil succède au deuil, le ravage au ravage;
L’onde fatale arrive après le roi sauvage;
Et voilà de nouveau sous un noir tourbillon
L’écrasement des blés, du verger, du sillon!
Ô désastres! ô chute! où sera le refuge
Si l’eau fait un tel gouffre et l’homme un tel déluge?
Jadis le sort frappa Rome et s’interrompit,
La laissant respirer; mais pour nous nul répit.
LE POËTE
Deux supplices. Le Nord, le Sud. L’un après l’autre.

LE CHŒUR
Hier nous avions sur nous la bête qui se vautre
Cyniquement, au gré des rois épanouis,
La guerre, et des troupeaux de canons inouïs
Nous jetant l’aboiement de l’abîme; la France
Subissait, sous un ciel d’où fuyait l’espérance,
Le bombardement lâche et tortueux, crachant
L’éclair, et foudroyant le toit, le mur, le champ,
La forêt, la cité, l’homme, l’enfant, la femme;
L’eau sombre aujourd’hui vient au secours de la flamme;
Elle vient achever ce fier pays blessé;
Les fléaux avaient hâte, ils ont recommencé;
Après l’embrasement, le torrent nous accable;
À présent ce n’est plus sous l’obus implacable,
C’est dans les flots qu’on voit les villes succomber.
Dures heures de nuit que le temps fait tomber
Goutte à goutte sur nous de sa morne clepsydre!
Hier c’était le dragon, et maintenant c’est l’hydre.

LE POËTE
Est-ce fini? Pensif, je dis au gouffre : Après?
LE CHŒUR

Ô France! mourras-tu? Non. Car, si tu mourais,
Le mal vivrait, l’effroi vivrait; cette fenêtre,
L’aube, se fermerait; on verrait la mort naître.
L’immense mort de tout. France, l’extinction
De Ninive, de Tyr, d’Athènes, de Sion,
Rome oubliant son nom, Thèbes perdant sa forme,
Ne seraient rien auprès de ton éclipse énorme.
Le passé monstrueux se dresserait debout.
Ce cadavre crierait : — J’existe. Éteignez tout.
Plus de flambeaux. Vivez, spectres. La France est morte! —

Alors, ô cieux profonds! l’ombre ouvrirait sa porte;
On verrait revenir toute l’antique horreur,
Les larves, l’ancien pape et l’ancien empereur,
Tous les forfaits sacrés, toutes les basses gloires,
Les sanglants constructeurs des religions noires,
Arbuez, l’âme terrible où se réfugia
L’affreux dogme sorti de l’antre à Borgia,
Bossuet bénissant Montrevel, les bastilles
Faisant comme des dents grincer leurs sombres grilles;

Ces masques, Loyola, de Maistre, dont l’œil luit,
Tomberaient, laissant voir ce visage, la nuit;
Alors reparaîtraient Cisneros, Farinace,
Louvois, Maupeou, la vieille autorité tenace
Sous qui rampe la foule aux confuses rumeurs;
Et ces lugubres lois, et ces lugubres mœurs
Qui livrent aux bûchers l’Italie et l’Espagne,
Jettent au cabanon Colomb, mettent au bagne
Des peuples tout entiers, juifs ou bohémiens,
Et qui font Louis-quinze assassin de Damiens.
LE POËTE
On reverrait ce Styx, le passé! mornes rives!

LE CHŒUR
Non, France. L’univers a besoin que tu vives.
Tu vivras. L’avenir mourrait sous ton linceul.

LE POËTE
France, France, sans toi le monde serait seul.
LE CHŒUR
Tu vivras.
Cependant il ne faut pas qu’on dorme.
On sent derrière soi rôder la mort difforme,
On dirait qu’ennuyé d’attendre les vivants,
Le naufrage hideux, blême et battu des vents,
Sort de la mort et vient chercher l’homme sur terre.
Une lave nouvelle ouvre un nouveau cratère.
LE POËTE
La France est prise en traître une seconde fois.
LE CHŒUR
L’eau perfide s’ajoute au guet-apens des rois.
D’où vient cette colère odieuse des fleuves?
L’eau devient un suaire et tout meurt. Que de veuves!
Que d’orphelins! Massacre inepte d’innocents!
L’horreur, du sombre amas des nuages pesants,

Pleut, comme si le ciel devenait haïssable;
La rose est sous la fange et l’épi sous le sable.
Le miasme impur flotte où flottait le parfum.
Cadavres qui passez, accusez-vous quelqu’un?
Ô berceau à vau-l’eau, que criez-vous dans l’ombre?
Est-ce qu’il se pourrait que les forces sans nombre
Dont le balancement remplit l’immensité,
Eussent on ne sait quelle étrange volonté?
Est-ce que quelque part la nature est maudite?
Est-ce qu’un tel malheur, ciel noir, se prémédite?
D’un astre qu’on ignore est-ce donc le lever?
Et les hommes tremblants se sont mis à rêver.
Les écumes au sud, dans le nord les fumées!
Tout broyé, fleurs et fruits, moissons, peuples, armées,
Sous les chars de la nuit dont l’éclair est l’essieu!
Ruine et mort. Qui donc fait tout cela?
LE PRÊTRE
C’est Dieu.

LE POËTE
Prêtre, que dis-tu là? Dieu serait le coupable!
LE CHŒUR
Quoi! de tant de forfaits ce Dieu serait capable!
Quoi! Dieu viendrait marcher sur nous comme un géant!

LE POËTE
Quoi! prêtres! ce chaos, ce hasard, ce néant
Promenant son niveau sur la foule innocente,
Ces désastres faisant ensemble leur descente,
Ce serait l'action de ce maître hagard!
Quoi! cet aveuglement, ce serait son regard!
Quoi! la Fatalité serait la Providence!
Quoi! dans cette noirceur c'est Dieu qui se condense!
C'est là votre façon d'adorer! Taisez-vous!

Cela fait frissonner, le blasphème à genoux!
Horreur! jusqu'à l'affront pousser l'idolâtrie!
Hélas! nous le savons, qu'en la fauve Syrie
On aille réveiller Baal, qu'on aille au Nil
Fouiller les dieux d'Égypte au fond de leur chenil,
Du Moloch de granit au Jupiter de bronze,
Qu'on rôde, interrogeant le flamine et le bonze,
Ceux de Dodone, ceux de Tyr, ceux de Membré,
Hélas! on trouvera Dieu toujours adoré,
Et l'on constatera toujours, dans tous les cultes,

Le même amour prouvé par les mêmes insultes!
Synagogue ou wigwam, syringe ou parthénon,
Pas un temple ne sait nommer Dieu par son nom;
Leur ignorance à voir l'invisible s'obstine.
Ô triste erreur. Védas, croix grecque, croix latine,
Koran, Talmud, tous font par Dieu même, a Deo ,
Commettre ce forfait qu'on appelle un fléau!
Ah! qui que vous soyez, vous qui, dans la mosquée,
Accouplant à l'erreur la vérité masquée,

Offrant tantôt de l’ombre et tantôt des rayons,
Vendez ce Dieu, sachez ceci, nous y croyons!
Et nous ne voulons pas qu’on l’outrage! ô misère!
Quoi, lui le paternel, quoi, lui le nécessaire,
Il serait sans raison, sans loi, sans cœur, sans yeux!
Il tomberait du ciel, stupide et furieux,
Comme un caillou roulant d’un mont, comme une pierre!
Et quand l’homme dirait en le voyant à terre :
Quel est ce projectile imbécile au milieu
De ce ravage atroce? il reconnaîtrait Dieu!
LE PRÊTRE
Courbez vos fronts. C’est juste et même salutaire;
Il faut bien que le ciel punisse enfin la terre.
Le châtiment descend des éternels sommets.
LE POËTE
Châtier! Punir! Quoi? nos crimes? Soit. J’admets

Qu’il se fait ici-bas bien des actions viles;
Il est des fronts souillés, il est des cœurs serviles;
L’homme est souvent hideux. Soit. Eh bien, supposons
L’impossible, entassons l’Ossa des trahisons
Sur l’abject Pélion des lâchetés; qu’on rêve,
Comme à perte de vue un flot sur une grève,
Toute la faute et tout le crime, et le frisson
De la honte emplissant le livide horizon;
Oui, supposons l’absurde, imposture ou démence,
Le culte de l’agneau produisant l’inclémence,
Un pontife quelconque, indou, juif ou romain,
Essayant d’arrêter Dieu dans l’esprit humain,
Et ne comprenant rien au foudroyant mystère
Qui fait surgir, après Torquemada, Voltaire;
Imaginons, quoi? Tout! Qu’on en vienne à bâtir
Dans ce Paris qui fut soldat, qui fut martyr,
Devant le Panthéon sublime, une pagode;
Qu’on mette Messaline et Tartuffe à la mode;
Qu’on fasse le mensonge évêque ou sénateur,

Si bien que la bassesse ait droit à la hauteur;
Supposons ce qu’on n’a jamais vu, la chimère :
Un faussaire escroquant l’empire; notre mère,
La France, violée et tombant tout en pleurs
Du bivouac des héros dans l’antre des voleurs;
Supposons que trahir devienne une devise;
Que le juge indigné d’un crime, se ravise
Et lui prête serment, puis, sur la loi monté,
Fasse de la justice une fidélité
À ce crime, toujours infâme, mais auguste;
Supposons que le vrai soit faux, le juste injuste,
Le scélérat sacré, l’honnête homme puni;
Et que le prêtre mente et devienne infini
Dans l’opprobre, à ce point de donner pour exemple
Le mal, et d’ébranler les colonnes du temple
Par de prodigieux Tedeums bénissant
La griffe impériale encor rouge de sang!

Tout ce que vous voudrez d’attentats, de folies;
Soit. Rêvez des horreurs sans mesure accomplies
Par n’importe quel roi, n’importe quel sénat!
Eh bien, je ne crois pas que cela me donnât
Le droit d’amonceler des gouffres de nuées,
D’appeler les autans poussant d’aigres huées
Au-dessus d’un logis paisible, et de noyer
L’humble nouveau-né, joie et rayon du foyer,
Qui dans son petit lit chante, rit, jase et cause
En tâchant de baiser le bout de son pied rose!

Non, je ne pense pas que tous ces forfaits-là,
Même en multipliant Judas par Attila,
Même en mêlant Bismarck et Bonaparte au crime,
Pourraient à quelque dieu que ce soit dans l’abîme
Donner, dans l’ombre affreuse où le jour s’engloutit,
Le droit de se ruer sur ce pauvre petit,
Et de faire, en versant sur lui l’ombre ou la flamme,
Rouler le doux berceau dans le sépulcre infâme!

LE CHŒUR
Ainsi ces deux fléaux ne sont point, l’un, l’erreur

De la science, et l’autre, un crime d’empereur,
Des coteaux mal boisés, des villes mal gardées;
Non, c’est le châtiment, de quoi? De nos idées,
Et des pas en avant que fait le genre humain!
LE POËTE
C’est pour venir jeter dans notre dur chemin
Cette explication sourde, bigote, athée,
Que tu te couronnais d’une mitre argentée,
Prêtre, et que d’un camail sacré tu t’empourprais!
La France est accablée, et Dieu l’a fait exprès!
LE PRÊTRE
Oui.
LE POËTE
Quoi! l’assassinat des villes et des plaines,
Quoi! la peste exhalant ses infectes haleines,
Quoi! le silence affreux mêlé d’un affreux bruit,
Quoi! toute cette trombe éparse dans la nuit,
Immense, noyant l’homme et la terre féconde,
Et délayant la mort pour engloutir un monde,
Quoi! ces horribles flots lâchement triomphants,
Quoi! ces vieux laboureurs, quoi! ces petits enfants,

Ces nouveau-nés cherchant des seins, trouvant des fosses,
Quoi! ces mères pleurant leurs fils, ces femmes grosses
Qui flottent, l’œil fermé, dans le gouffre écumant,
Et dont le ventre mort apparaît par moment
Sous le glissement noir de cette transparence,
Quoi! toute cette horreur, toute cette souffrance,
L’eau jetée au hasard comme on jette les dés,
Quoi! la brutalité des fleuves débordés,
Ce serait lui! ce Dieu ferait ces catastrophes!
Lui qu’adore le rêve obscur des philosophes,
Lui devant qui l’on sent tressaillir la forêt,
Lui, que l’uléma chante au haut du minaret

Et que l’évêque loue en élevant sa crosse,
Lui, ce père! il serait cette bête féroce!

Ah! si vous disiez vrai, myopes de l’autel,

Si ce prodigieux et sublime Immortel
Avait de tels accès, et s’il était possible
Qu’ainsi qu’un archer sombre il eût l’homme pour cible,
S’il pouvait être pris dans ce flagrant délit,
S’il chassait les torrents farouches de leur lit,
S’il tuait, fou lugubre, en croyant qu’il se venge,
Alors la Justice, âpre et formidable archange,
Se dresserait devant le pâle Créateur,
Questionnerait l’être immense avec hauteur,
Et le menacerait, elle, cette éternelle,
De fuir et d’emporter l’aurore sous son aile,
Et rien ne serait plus sinistre, ô gouffre bleu,
Que le balbutiement épouvanté de Dieu!

Non! non! non! Je vous plains. J’ai l’horreur infinie
De voir comment un dogme avorte en calomnie,
Mais je vous absous. L’ombre est dans vos tristes murs;
L’obscurité n’est pas la faute des obscurs.
Plus qu’ils ne le voudraient les prêtres sont funèbres;
Votre âme est la noyée informe des ténèbres
Et flotte évanouie au fond des préjugés.
Je vous plains. Mettez-vous à genoux, et songez.

LE CHŒUR
Et nous, les survivants, secourons ceux qui meurent.
Au-dessus des grands deuils les grands devoirs demeurent.
Donnons! donnons! Vidons le reste du sac d’or.
Les barbares n’ont pas tout pris. Donnons encor!
Les rois sont les plus forts et les cieux les tolèrent;
Mais qu’importe! faisons rougir ceux qui volèrent
Cette France, toujours prête à tout secourir.
Soyons le cœur profond que rien ne peut tarir;

La France a toujours eu la bonté pour génie;
Donnons, et penchons-nous sur la vaste agonie.
Donnons! La France, hélas! en est à ne plus voir
Que des bras suppliants dans un horizon noir;

Cette nuit qu'on nous fait, ce n'est pas notre crime,
Et nous la subissons. Soit. Le peuple est sublime
Qui n'éteint pas l'amour quand l'ombre emplit le ciel,
Et devient ténébreux mais reste fraternel.
Des misères sont là, nos âmes leur sont dues.
Ah! que des mains vers nous soient vainement tendues,
Cela ne se peut pas! Donnons! donnons! donnons!
Qu'au moins le désespoir nous ait pour compagnons;
Que pas un affamé ne demeure livide,
Et que pas une main ne se referme vide.
Donnons. Surtout gardons l'espoir. L'espoir est beau;
Nous sommes dans le deuil, mais non dans le tombeau.
LE POËTE
Nous sommes un pays désemparé qui flotte,
Sans boussole, sans mâts, sans ancre, sans pilote,
Sans guide, à la dérive, au gré du vent hautain,
Dans l'ondulation obscure du destin;
L'abîme, où nous roulons comme une sombre sphère,

Murmure, comme s'il cherchait ce qu'il va faire
De ce radeau chargé de pâles matelots;
Délibération orageuse des flots.
Mais, ô peuple, ayons foi. La vie est où nous sommes.
Je le redis, la France est un besoin des hommes;
Après sa chute comme avant qu'elle tombât,
L'immense cœur du monde en sa poitrine bat.
Nous vivons. Nous sentons plus que jamais notre âme.
Ah! ce que nous a fait le destin est infâme,
Et j'en suis indigné, moi qui songe la nuit!
Hélas! Strasbourg s'éclipse et Metz s'évanouit,
Faut-il donc renoncer au Rhin, notre frontière?
Non, nous ne voulons pas. Et la volonté fière,

Avec l’accroissement de nos ongles, suffit.
Ce que le sort fait mal toujours Dieu le défit;
Espérons. Il serait en effet bien étrange
Que le peuple qui va vers l’aurore et dérange
Le vieil ordre du mal rien qu’en se remuant,
Aigle, fût désormais captif du chat-huant,
Que le libérateur du monde fût esclave,
Et que ce vaste Etna vît se figer sa lave
Sous des bouches soufflant on ne sait quels venins,
Et que ce géant fût garrotté par des nains!

Il serait inouï que cette altière France
Par qui s’est envolé l’archange Délivrance,
Après avoir sonné les sublimes beffrois,
Et mis les nations hors du cachot des rois,
Et déployé pour tous les peuples sa bannière,
Fût de la liberté des autres prisonnière,
Et livrée aux geôliers par ceux dont elle a fait
La force, en ces grands jours où le droit triomphait!
Cela ne sera pas! Quelle que soit l’injure,
Quelque affreuse que semble être cette gageure
Du funeste Aujourd’hui contre le fier Demain,
Nous sommes les vivants profonds du droit humain;
Ayons foi. Ces fléaux et ces rois d’un autre âge
Passeront. Quels que soient l’affront, le deuil, l’outrage,
L’énigme et la noirceur apparente du sort,
On cesse de haïr la nuit quand l’aube en sort!
Et, France, tu vaincras, ô prêtresse, ô guerrière,
Tes tyrans par l’épée et Dieu par la prière!
Oui, prêtres, nous prions. Je crois, sachez-le bien.
Comme le vert palmier craint l’autan libyen,
Nous craignons pour nos fils votre enseignement triste;
Ah! vous ébranlez tout, prêtres. Mais Dieu résiste.
Nous l’avons dans nos cœurs, et pas déraciné.
Je veux mourir en lui, car en lui je suis né;

Et je sens dans mon âme où tout l’aime et le nomme

Que c’est du droit de Dieu qu’est fait le droit de l’homme.
LE CHŒUR
Une fois que le vrai s’est mis en marche, il va
Droit au but, et toujours l’avenir arriva.
LE POËTE
Esprit humain, nul vent ne te cassera l’aile.
Jamais rien ne pourra troubler le parallèle
Entre l’ordre céleste et l’humaine raison;
L’aurore frémirait derrière l’horizon
Des propositions que lui ferait l’abîme.
L’enchaînement sans fin suit une loi sublime;
Toute ombre est une fuite; et toujours le moment
Superbe, où blanchira le bas du firmament,
Vient quand il doit venir, et jamais la Chaldée
Ni l’Inde aux yeux rêveurs n’ont vu l’aube attardée;
Nul souffle au fond du ciel n’éteint l’éternel feu;
L’infini conscient que nous appelons Dieu
Soutient tout ce qui penche, entend tout ce qui pleure.
Aucun fléau ne peut demeurer passé l’heure;
Nulle calamité n’a droit de s’arrêter;
Dieu ne permettra pas à la nuit de rester.

Dieu ne laissera pas continuer le crime.
Croit-on que le soleil manquerait à la cime
Qui l’attend, lui le grand visage souriant?
Comprendrait-on l’étoile oubliant l’Orient?
Le devoir de l’obstacle est de se laisser vaincre.
Demain nous appartient; rien ne pourra convaincre
Le jour qu’il ne doit pas se lever du côté
Du droit, de la justice et de la vérité.
Dieu supprime le mal, les fléaux, les désastres
Par la fidélité formidable des astres.
LE CHŒUR
France, songe au devoir. Sois grande, c’est ta loi.
LE POËTE
Et fais de ta mémoire un redoutable emploi
En y gardant toujours les villes arrachées.

Enseignons à nos fils à creuser des tranchées,
À faire comme ont fait les vieux dont nous venons,
À charger des fusils, à rouler des canons,
À combattre, à mourir, et lisons-leur Homère.
Et tu nous souriras, quoique tu sois leur mère,
Car tu sais que des fils qui meurent fièrement

Sont l'orgueil de leur mère et son contentement.
France, ayons l'ennemi présent à la pensée,
Comme les grands Troyens qui, sur la porte Scée,
S'asseyaient et suivaient des yeux les assiégeants.
Ces rois heureux autour de nous sont outrageants;
Aimons les peuples, mais n'oublions pas les princes.
En même temps restons penchés sur ces provinces
Qui sanglotent, en proie aux fléaux jamais las.
Soyons amers et doux. La question, hélas!
Est toute dans ce mot sans fond : les misérables;
Ceux-ci sont monstrueux; ceux-là sont vénérables;
Réprimons ceux d'en haut; secourons ceux d'en bas;
Prodiguons l'aide immense en songeant aux combats.
Peuple, il est deux trésors, l'un clarté, l'autre flamme,
Qu'il ne faut pas laisser décroître dans notre âme,
Et qui sont de nos cœurs chacun une moitié,
C'est la sainte colère et la sainte pitié.

XXIII

LES PETITS

GUERRE CIVILE

La foule était tragique et terrible; on criait :
À mort! Autour d’un homme altier, point inquiet,
Grave, et qui paraissait lui-même inexorable,
Le peuple se pressait : À mort le misérable!
Et, lui, semblait trouver toute simple la mort.
La partie est perdue, on n’est pas le plus fort,
On meurt, soit. Au milieu de la foule accourue,
Les vainqueurs le traînaient de chez lui dans la rue
— À mort l’homme! — On l’avait saisi dans son logis;
Ses vêtements étaient de carnage rougis;
Cet homme était de ceux qui font l’aveugle guerre
Des rois contre le peuple, et ne distinguent guère
Scévola de Brutus, ni Barbès de Blanqui;

Il avait tout le jour tué n’importe qui;
Incapable de craindre, incapable d’absoudre,
Il marchait, laissant voir ses mains noires de poudre;
Une femme le prit au collet : — À genoux!
C’est un sergent de ville. Il a tiré sur nous!
— C’est vrai, dit l’homme. — À bas! À mort! qu’on le fusille!
Dit le peuple. — Ici! Non! Plus loin! À la Bastille!
À l’arsenal! Allons! Viens! Marche! — Où vous voudrez,
Dit le prisonnier. — Tous, hagards, les rangs serrés,
Chargèrent leurs fusils. — Mort au sergent de ville!
Tuons-le comme un loup! — Et l’homme dit, tranquille :
— C’est bien, je suis le loup, mais vous êtes les chiens.
— Il nous insulte! À mort! — Les pâles citoyens
Croisaient leurs poings crispés sur le captif farouche;
L’ombre était sur son front et le fiel dans sa bouche;

Cent voix criaient : — À mort! À bas! Plus d’empereur!
On voyait dans ses yeux un reste de fureur

Remuer vaguement comme une hydre échouée;
Il marchait, poursuivi par l'énorme huée,
Et, calme, il enjambait, plein d'un superbe ennui,
Des cadavres gisants, peut-être faits par lui.
Le peuple est effrayant lorsqu'il devient tempête;
L'homme sous plus d'affronts levait plus haut la tête;
Il était plus que pris; il était envahi.
Dieu! comme il haïssait! comme il était haï!
Comme il les eût, vainqueur, fusillés tous! — Qu'il meure!
Il nous criblait encor de balles tout à l'heure!
À bas cet espion, ce traître, ce maudit!
À mort! c'est un brigand! — Soudain on entendit
Une petite voix qui disait : — C'est mon père!

Et quelque chose fit l'effet d'une lumière.
Un enfant apparut. Un enfant de six ans;
Ses deux bras se dressaient suppliants, menaçants.
Tous criaient : — Fusillez le mouchard! Qu'on l'assomme!
Et l'enfant se jeta dans les jambes de l'homme,
Et dit, ayant au front le rayon baptismal :
— Père, je ne veux pas qu'on te fasse de mal!
Et cet enfant sortait de la même demeure.
Les clameurs grossissaient : — À bas l'homme! Qu'il meure!
À bas! finissons-en avec cet assassin!
Mort! — Au loin le canon répondait au tocsin.
Toute la rue était pleine d'hommes sinistres.
— À bas les rois! À bas les prêtres, les ministres,
Les mouchards! Tuons tout! c'est un tas de bandits!
Et l'enfant leur cria : — Mais puisque je vous dis
Que c'est mon père! — Il est joli, dit une femme,
Bel enfant! — On voyait dans ses yeux bleus une âme;
Il était tout en pleurs, pâle, point mal vêtu.
Une autre femme dit : — Petit, quel âge as-tu?
Et l'enfant répondit : — Ne tuez pas mon père!
Quelques regards pensifs étaient fixés à terre,
Les poings ne tenaient plus l'homme si durement.
Un des plus furieux, entre tous inclément,

Dit à l’enfant : — Va-t-en! — Où? — Chez toi. — Pourquoi faire?
— Chez ta mère. — Sa mère est morte, dit le père.
— Il n’a donc plus que vous? — Qu’est-ce que cela fait?
Dit le vaincu. Stoïque et calme, il réchauffait

Les deux petites mains dans sa rude poitrine,
Et disait à l’enfant : — Tu sais bien, Catherine?
— Notre voisine? — Oui. Va chez elle. — Avec toi?
— J’irai plus tard. — Sans toi je ne veux pas. — Pourquoi?
— Parce qu’on te ferait du mal. — Alors le père
Parla tout bas au chef de cette sombre guerre :
— Lâchez-moi le collet. Prenez-moi par la main,
Doucement. Je vais dire à l’enfant : À demain!
Vous me fusillerez au détour de la rue,
Ailleurs, où vous voudrez. — Et, d’une voix bourrue :
— Soit, dit le chef, lâchant le captif à moitié.
Le père dit : — Tu vois. C’est de bonne amitié.
Je me promène avec ces messieurs. Sois bien sage.
Rentre. — Et l’enfant tendit au père son visage,
Et s’en alla, content, rassuré, sans effroi.
— Nous sommes à notre aise à présent, tuez-moi,
Dit le père aux vainqueurs; où voulez-vous que j’aille? —
Alors, dans cette foule où grondait la bataille,
On entendit passer un immense frisson,
Et le peuple cria : Rentre dans ta maison!

PETIT PAUL

Sa mère en le mettant au monde s’en alla.
Sombre distraction du sort. Pourquoi cela?
Pourquoi tuer la mère en laissant l’enfant vivre?
Pourquoi par la marâtre, ô deuil! la faire suivre?
Car le père était jeune, il se remaria.
Un an, c’est bien petit pour être paria;
Et le bel enfant rose avait eu tort de naître.
Alors un vieux bonhomme accepta ce pauvre être;

C’était l’aïeul. Parfois ce qui n’est plus défend
Ce qui sera. L’aïeul prit dans ses bras l’enfant
Et devint mère. Chose étrange et naturelle.
Sauver ce qu’une morte a laissé derrière elle;

On est vieux, on n’est plus bon qu’à cela; tâcher
D’être le doux passant, celui que vont chercher,
D’instinct, les accablés et les souffrants sans nombre,
Et les petites mains qui se tendent dans l’ombre;
Il faut bien que quelqu’un soit là pour le devoir;
Il faut bien que quelqu’un soit bon sous le ciel noir,
De peur que la pitié dans les cœurs ne tarisse;
Il faut que quelqu’un mène à l’enfant sans nourrice
La chèvre aux fauves yeux qui rôde au flanc des monts;
Il faut quelqu’un de grand qui fasse dire : Aimons!
Qui couvre de douceur la vie impénétrable,
Qui soit vieux, qui soit jeune, et qui soit vénérable;
C’est pour cela que Dieu, ce maître du linceul,
Remplace quelquefois la mère par l’aïeul,
Et fait, jugeant l’hiver seul capable de flamme,
Dans l’âme d’un vieillard éclore un cœur de femme.

Donc l’humble petit Paul naquit, fut orphelin,
Eut son grand œil bleu d’ombre et de lumière plein,
Balbutia les mots de la langue ingénue,
Eut la fraîche impudeur de l’innocence nue,
Fut cet ange qu’est l’homme avant d’être complet;
Et l’aïeul, par les ans pâli, le contemplait
Comme on contemple un ciel qui lentement se dore.
Oh! comme ce couchant adorait cette aurore!

Le grand-père emporta l’enfant dans sa maison,
Aux champs, d’où l’on voyait un si vaste horizon
Qu’un petit enfant seul pouvait l’emplir. Les plaines
Étaient vertes, avec toutes sortes d’haleines
Qui sortaient des forêts et des eaux; la maison
Avait un grand jardin, et cette floraison,

Ces prés, tous ces parfums et toute cette vie
Caressèrent l’enfant; les fleurs n’ont pas d’envie.

Dans ce jardin croissaient le pommier, le pêcher,
La ronce; on écartait les branches pour marcher;
Des transparences d’eau frémissaient sous les saules;
On voyait des blancheurs qui semblaient des épaules,
Comme si quelque nymphe eût été là; les nids

Murmuraient l’hymne obscur de ceux qui sont bénis;
Les voix qu’on entendait étaient calmes et douces;
Les sources chuchotaient doucement dans les mousses;
À tout ce qui gazouille, à tout ce qui se tait,
Le remuement confus des feuilles s’ajoutait;
Le paradis, ce chant de la lumière gaie,
Que le ciel chante, en bas la terre le bégaie,
En été, quand l’azur rayonne, ô pur jardin!
Paul étant presque un ange, il fut presque un éden;
Et l’enfant fut aimé dans cette solitude,
Hélas! et c’est ainsi qu’il en prit l’habitude.

Un jardin, c’est fort beau, n’est-ce pas? Mettez-y
Un marmot; ajoutez un vieillard; c’est ainsi
Que Dieu fait. Combinant ce que le cœur souhaite
Avec ce que les yeux désirent, ce poëte
Complète, car au fond la nature c’est l’art,
Les roses par l’enfant, l’enfant par le vieillard.
L’enfant voisine avec les fleurs, c’est de son âge;
Et l’aïeul vient, sachant qu’il est du voisinage;
Et comme c’est exquis de rire au mois d’avril!
Un nouveau-né vermeil, et nu jusqu’au nombril,

Couché sur l’herbe en fleurs, c’est aimable, ô Virgile!
Hélas! c’est tellement divin que c’est fragile!
Paul est d’abord bien frêle et bien chétif. Qui sait?
Vivra-t-il? Un vent noir, lorsqu’il naquit, passait,
Souffle traître; et sait-on si cette bise amère

Ne viendra pas chercher l’enfant après la mère?
Il faut allaiter Paul; une chèvre y consent.
Paul est frère de lait du chevreau bondissant;
Puisque le chevreau saute, il sied que l’homme marche,
Et l’enfant veut marcher. Et l’aïeul patriarche
Dit : C’est juste. Marchons. Oh! les enfants, cela
Tremble, un meuble est Charybde, une pierre est Scylla,

Leur front penche, leur pied fléchit, leur genou ploie,
Mais ce frémissement n’ôte rien à leur joie.
Frémir n’empêche pas la branche de fleurir.
Un an, c’est l’âge fier; croître, c’est conquérir;
Paul fait son premier pas, il veut en faire d’autres.
(Mères, vous le voyez en regardant les vôtres.)
Frais spectacle! l’enfant est suivi par l’aïeul.
— Prends garde de tomber. C’est cela. Va tout seul.
Paul est brave, il se risque, hésite, appelle, espère,
Et tout à coup se met en route, et le grand-père
L’entoure de ses mains que les ans font trembler,
Et, chancelant lui-même, il l’aide à chanceler.
Et cela s’achevait par un éclat de rire.
Oh! pas plus qu’on ne peut peindre un astre, ou décrire
La forêt éblouie au soleil se chauffant,
Nul n’ira jusqu’au fond du rire d’un enfant;
C’est l’amour, l’innocence auguste, épanouie,
C’est la témérité de la grâce inouïe,
La gloire d’être pur, l’orgueil d’être debout,
La paix, on ne sait quoi d’ignorant qui sait tout.

Ce rire, c’est le ciel prouvé, c’est Dieu visible.

L’aïeul, grave figure à mettre en une bible,
Mage que sur l’Horeb Moïse eût tutoyé,
N’était rien qu’un bon vieux grand-père extasié;
Il ne résistait pas au charme, et, sans défense,
Honorait, consultait et vénérait l’enfance;
Il regardait le jour se faire en ce cerveau.

Paul avait chaque mois un bégaiement nouveau,

Effort de la pensée à travers la parole,
Sorte d’ascension lente du mot qui vole,
Puis tombe, et se relève avec un gai frisson,
Et ne peut être idée et s’achève en chanson.
Paul assemblait des sons, leur donnait la volée,
Scandait on ne sait quelle obscure strophe ailée,
Jasait, causait, glosait, sans se taire un instant,
Et la maison était ravie en l’écoutant.
Il chantait, tout riait, et la paix était faite;
On eût dit qu’il donnait le signal de la fête;
Et les arbres parlaient de cet enfant entr’eux;
Et Paul était heureux; c’est charmant d’être heureux!

Avec l’autorité profonde de la joie
Paul régnait; son grand-père était sa douce proie;
L’aïeul obéissait, comme il sied. — Père, attends.
Il attendait. Non. Viens. — Il venait. Le printemps
A sur le vieil hiver tous les droits du jeune âge.
Comme ils faisaient ensemble un bon petit ménage,
Ce petit-fils tyran, ce grand-père opprimé!

Comme janvier cherchait à plaire au mois de mai!
Comme, au milieu des nids chantant à leurs oreilles,
Erraient gaiement ces deux naïvetés pareilles
Dont l’une avait deux ans et l’autre quatrevingt!
Un jour l’un oublia, mais l’autre se souvint;
Ce fut l’enfant. La nuit pour eux n’était point noire.
L’aïeul faisait penser Paul, qui le faisait croire.
On eût dit qu’échangeant leur âme en ce beau lieu,
Chacun montrait à l’autre un des côtés de Dieu.
Ils mêlaient tout, le jour leurs jeux, la nuit leurs sommes.
Oh! quel céleste amour entre ces deux bonshommes!
Ils n’avaient qu’une chambre, ils ne se quittaient pas;
Le premier alphabet, comme le premier pas,
Quelles occasions divines de s’entendre!

Le grand-père n’avait pas d’accent assez tendre
Pour faire épeler l’ange attentif et charmé,
Et pour dire : Ô mon doux petit Paul bien-aimé!
Dialogues exquis! murmures ineffables!
Ainsi les oiseaux bleus gazouillent dans les fables.
— Prends garde, c’est de l’eau. Pas si loin. Pas si près.

Vois, Paul, tu t’es mouillé les pieds. — Pas fait exprès.
— Prends garde aux cailloux. — Oui, grand-père. — Va dans l’herbe.
Et le ciel était pur, pacifique et superbe,
Et le soleil était splendide et triomphant
Au-dessus du vieillard baisant au front l’enfant.

Le père, ailleurs, vivait avec son autre femme.
C’est en vain qu’une morte en sa tombe réclame,
Quand une nouvelle âme entre dans la maison.
De sa seconde femme il avait un garçon,
Et Paul n’en savait rien. Qu’importe! Heureux, prospère,
Gai, tranquille, il avait pour lui seul son grand-père!
Le reste existait-il?
Le grand-père mourut.

Quand Sem dit à Rachel, quand Booz dit à Ruth :
Pleurez, je vais mourir! Rachel et Ruth pleurèrent;
Mais le petit enfant ne sait pas; ses yeux errent,
Son front songe. L’aïeul, parfois, se sentant las,
Avait dit : — Paul! je vais mourir. Bientôt, hélas!
Tu ne le verras plus, ton pauvre vieux grand-père

Qui t’aimait. — Rien n’éteint cette douce lumière,
L’ignorance, et l’enfant, plein de joie et de chants,
Continuait de rire.
Une église des champs,
Pauvre comme les toits que son clocher protége,
S’ouvrit. Je me souviens que j’étais du cortége.
Le prêtre, murmurant une vague oraison,
Les amis, les parents, vinrent dans la maison

Chercher le doux aïeul pour l’aller mettre en terre;
La plaine fut riante autour de ce mystère;
On dirait que les fleurs aiment ces noirs convois;

De bonnes vieilles gens priaient, mêlant leurs voix;
On suivit un chemin, creux comme une tranchée;
Au bord de ce chemin, une vache couchée
Regardait les passants avec maternité;
Les paysans avaient leur bourgeron d’été;
Et le petit marchait derrière l’humble bière.
On porta le vieillard au prochain cimetière,
Enclos désert, muré d’un mur croulant, auprès
De l’église, âpre et nu, point orné de cyprès,
Ni de tombeaux hautains, ni d’inscriptions fausses;
On entrait dans ce champ plein de croix et de fosses,
Lieu sévère où la mort dort si Dieu le permet,
Par une grille en bois que la nuit on fermait;
Aux barreaux s’ajoutait le croisement d’un lierre;
Le petit enfant, chose obscure et singulière,
Considéra l’entrée avec attention.

Le sort pour les enfants est une vision;
Et la vie à leurs yeux apparaît comme un rêve.
Hélas! la nuit descend sur l’astre qui se lève.

Paul n’avait que trois ans.
— Vilain petit satan!

Méchant enfant! Le voir m’exaspère! Va-t-en!
Va-t-en! Je te battrais! Il est insupportable.
Je suis trop bonne encor de le souffrir à table.
Il m’a taché ma robe, il a bu tout le lait.
À la cave! Au pain sec! Et puis il est si laid! —
À qui donc parle-t-on? À Paul. — Pauvre doux être!
Hélas! après avoir vu l’aïeul disparaître,
Paul vit dans la maison entrer un inconnu,
C’était son père; puis une femme au sein nu,

Allaitant un enfant; l’enfant était son frère.

La femme l’abhorra sur-le-champ. Une mère
C’est le sphinx; c’est le cœur inexplorable et doux,
Blanc du côté sacré, noir du côté jaloux,
Tendre pour son enfant, dur pour celui d’une autre.
Souffrir, sachant pourquoi, martyr, prophète, apôtre,
C’est bien; mais un enfant, fantôme aux cheveux d’or,
Être déjà proscrit n’étant pas homme encor!

L’épine de la ronce après l’ombre du chêne!

Quel changement! l’amour remplacé par la haine!

Paul ne comprenait plus. Quand il rentrait le soir,
Sa chambre lui semblait quelque chose de noir;
Il pleura bien longtemps. Il pleura pour personne.
Il eut le sombre effroi du roseau qui frissonne.
Ses yeux en s’éveillant regardaient étonnés.
Ah! ces pauvres petits, pourquoi donc sont-ils nés?
La maison lui semblait sans jour et sans fenêtre,
Et l’aurore n’avait plus l’air de le connaître.
Quand il venait : — Va-t-en! Délivrez-moi de ça!
Criait la mère. Et Paul lentement s’enfonça
Dans de l’ombre. Ce fut comme un berceau qu’on noie.
L’enfant qui faisait tout joyeux, perdit la joie;
Sa détresse attristait les oiseaux et les fleurs;
Et le doux boute-en-train devint souffre-douleurs.
— Il m’ennuie! il est sale! il se traîne! il se vautre!
On lui prit ses joujoux pour les donner à l’autre.
Le père laissait faire, étant très-amoureux.

Après avoir été l’ange, être le lépreux!
La femme, en voyant Paul, disait : Qu’il disparaisse!

Et l’imprécation s’achevait en caresse.
Pas pour lui.

— Viens, toi! Viens, l’amour! viens, mon bonheur!
J’ai volé le plus beau de vos anges, Seigneur,
Et j’ai pris un morceau du ciel pour faire un lange.
Seigneur, il est l’enfant, mais il est resté l’ange.
Je tiens le paradis du bon Dieu dans mes bras.
Voyez comme il est beau! Je t’aime. Tu seras

Un homme. Il est déjà très-lourd. Mais c’est qu’il pèse
Presque autant qu’un garçon qui marcherait! Je baise
Tes pieds, et c’est de toi que me vient la clarté! —
Et Paul se souvenait, avec la quantité
De mémoire qu’auraient les agneaux et les roses,
Qu’il s’était entendu dire les mêmes choses.

Il prenait dans un coin, à terre, ses repas.
Il était devenu muet, ne parlait pas,
Ne pleurait plus. L’enfance est parfois sombre et forte.

Souvent il regardait lugubrement la porte.

Un soir on le chercha partout dans la maison;
On ne le trouva point; c’était l’hiver, saison
Qui nous hait, où la nuit est traître comme un piége;
Dehors des petits pas s’effaçaient dans la neige...

On retrouva l’enfant le lendemain matin.
On se souvint de cris perdus dans le lointain;
Quelqu’un même avait ri, croyant, dans les nuées,
Entendre, à travers l’ombre où flottent des huées,
On ne sait quelle voix du vent crier : Papa!
Papa! Tout le village, ému, s’en occupa,
Et l’on chercha; l’enfant était au cimetière.
Calme comme la nuit, blême comme la pierre,
Il était étendu devant l’entrée, et froid;

Comment avait-il pu jusqu’à ce triste endroit
Venir, seul dans la plaine où pas un feu ne brille?

Une de ses deux mains tenait encor la grille;
On voyait qu’il avait essayé de l’ouvrir.
Il sentait là quelqu’un pouvant le secourir;
Il avait appelé dans l’ombre solitaire,
Longtemps; puis il était tombé mort sur la terre,
À quelques pas du vieux grand-père, son ami.
N’ayant pu l’éveiller, il s’était endormi.

FONCTION DE L’ENFANT

Les hommes ont la force, et tout devant eux croule;
Ils sont le peuple, ils sont l’armée, ils sont la foule;
Ils ont aux yeux la flamme, ils ont au poing le fer;
Ils font les dieux; ils sont les dieux; ils sont l’enfer;
Ils sont l’ombre et la guerre; on les entend bruire,
Rugir et triompher; ils peuvent tout détruire,
Et, plus hauts et plus sourds que le sphinx nubien,
Fouler aux pieds le vrai, le faux, le mal, le bien,
Les uns au nom des droits, d’autres au nom des bibles;
Ils sont victorieux, formidables, terribles;
Mais les petits enfants viennent à leur secours.

L’enfant ne suit pas l’homme, ayant les pas trop courts,
Heureusement; il rit quand nous pleurons, il pleure
Quand nous rions; son aile en tremblant nous effleure,
Et rien qu’en nous touchant nous transforme, et, sans bruit,

Met du jour dans nos cœurs pleins d’orage et de nuit.
Notre hautaine voix n’est qu’un clairon superbe;
C’est dans la bouche rose et tendre qu’est le verbe;
Elle seule peut vaincre, avertir, consoler;
Dans l’enfant qui bégaie on entend Dieu parler;
L’enfant parfois défend son père, et, dans la ville
Frémissante de haine et de guerre civile,
Il le sauve; et le peuple, apaisé, rayonnant,
Dit : Lequel doit la vie à l’autre maintenant?

Il suffit quelquefois de ce doux petit être,
Plus brave qu’un soldat et plus pensif qu’un prêtre,
Pour rallumer soudain, sous son vol d’alcyon,
Dans une populace un cœur de nation,
Pour que la multitude aveugle ait des prunelles,
Pour qu’on voie accourir des sphères éternelles
La raison, la pitié, l’amour, la vérité,
Et pour que, sur les flots d’un noir peuple irrité,

La Justice, euménide effrayante et sans voile,
Se dresse, ayant au front le pardon, cette étoile!
Il arrive parfois, dans les temps convulsifs,
Quand tout un peuple écume et bat les durs récifs,
Qu’un enfant brusquement, dans cette haine amère,
Blond, pâle, accourt, surgit, voit son père ou sa mère,
Fait un pas, pousse un cri, tend les bras, et, soudain,
Vainqueurs pleins de courroux, vaincus pleins de dédain,
Hésitent, sont hagards, comprennent qu’ils se trompent,
Sentent une secousse obscure, et s’interrompent,
Les vainqueurs de tuer, les vaincus de mourir;
Cette fragilité, faite pour tout souffrir,
Vient nous protéger tous, eux, dans leur ombre noire,
Contre leur chute, et nous contre notre victoire;
Les hommes stupéfaits sont bons; l’enfant le veut.
Sainte intervention! Cette tête s’émeut
Au moindre vent, elle est frissonnante, elle tremble;

Cette joue est vermeille et délicate; il semble
Que des souffles d’avril elle attend le baiser,
Un papillon viendrait sur ce front se poser;
C’est charmant; tout à coup cela devient auguste
Et terrible; arrêtez! l’innocent, c’est le juste!
Éblouissement! l’ombre est vaincue; on dirait
Qu’au ciel une nuée entr’ouverte apparaît
Et jette sur la terre une lueur énorme;
Tout s’éclaire; le bien, le vrai, reprend sa forme;

Et les cœurs terrassés sentent subitement
Se calmer ce qui mord, se taire ce qui ment,
Et s’effacer la haine et la nuit se dissoudre.

On croit voir une fleur d’où sort un coup de foudre.

QUESTION SOCIALE

Ô détresses du faible! ô naufrage insondable!
Un jour j’ai vu passer un enfant formidable,
Une fille; elle avait cinq ans; elle marchait
Au hasard, elle était dans l’âge du hochet,
Du bonbon, des baisers, et n’avait pas de joie;
Elle avait l’air stupide et profond de la proie
Sous la griffe, et d’Atlas que le monde étouffait,
Et semblait dire à Dieu : Qu’est-ce que je t’ai fait?
Dieu. Non. Elle ignorait ce mot. Le penseur creuse,
L’enfant souffre. Elle était en haillons, pâle, affreuse,
Jolie, et destinée aux sinistres attraits;
Elle allait au milieu de nous, passants distraits,
Toute petite avec un grand regard farouche.

Le pli d’angoisse était aux deux coins de sa bouche;
Tout son être exprimait Rien, l’absence d’appui,
La faim, la soif, l’horreur, l’ombre, et l’immense ennui.
Quoi! l’éternel malheur pèse sur l’éphémère!

On entendait quelqu’un rire, c’était sa mère;
Cette femme, une fille au fond d’un cabaret,
N’avait pas même l’air de savoir qu’on errait
Dehors, là, dans la rue, en grelottant, sans gîte,
Sous le givre et la pluie, et qu’on était petite,
Et que ce pauvre enfant tragique était le sien.
Cette mère, pas plus qu’on ne remarque un chien,
N’apercevait cet être et sa sombre guenille.
Sorte de rose infâme ignorant sa chenille.

Elle-même jadis avait été cela.

Maintenant, Margoton changée en Paméla,
Elle offrait aux passants des faveurs mal venues,
Chantante; elles étaient toutes deux demi-nues,
L’une pour les affronts, l’autre pour les douleurs;
La mère, gaie, avait au front d’horribles fleurs;
Il arrivait parfois, vers le soir, à la brune,
Que la mère et l’enfant se rencontraient, et l’une
Regardait son passé, l’autre son avenir.

Voir l’une commencer et voir l’autre finir!
Ô misère!
L’enfant se taisait, grave, amère.

Cette femme, après tout, était-elle sa mère?
Oui. Non. Ceux qui mêlaient autour d’elles leurs pas
En parlaient au hasard et ne le savaient pas.
L’infortune est de l’ombre, et peut-être cet ange
N’avait-il même pas une mère de fange,
Hélas! et l’humble enfant, seul sous le firmament,
Marchait terrible avec un air d’étonnement.
Elle ne paraissait ni vivante ni morte.
— Mais qu’a donc cet enfant à songer de la sorte?
Disait-on autour d’elle. — Est-ce qu’on la connaît?
Non. Les gens lui donnaient du pain qu’elle prenait
Sans rien dire; elle allait devant elle, indignée.
Pour moi, rêveur, sa main tenait une poignée
D’invisibles éclairs montant de bas en haut;
Ses yeux, comme on regarde un plafond de cachot,
Regardaient le grand ciel où l’aube ne sait naître

Que pour s’éteindre, et tout l’ensemble de cet être
Était on ne sait quoi d’âpre, de bégayant,
Et d’obscur, d’où sortait un reproche effrayant;
La ville avec ses tours, ses temples et ses bouges,

Devant son front hagard et ses prunelles rouges
S’étalait, vision inutile, et jamais
Elle n’avait daigné remarquer ces sommets
Qu’on nomme Panthéon, Étoile, Notre-Dame;
On eût dit que sur terre elle n’avait plus d’âme,
Qu’elle ignorait nos voix, qu’elle était de la nuit
Ayant la forme humaine et marchant dans ce bruit;
Et rien n’était plus noir que ce petit fantôme.

La quantité d’enfer qui tient dans un atome
Étonne le penseur, et je considérais
Cette larve, pareille aux lueurs des forêts,

Blême, désespérée avant même de vivre,
Qui, sans pleurs et sans cris, d’ombre et de terreur ivre,
Rêvait et s’en allait, les pieds dans le ruisseau,
Némésis de cinq ans, Méduse du berceau.

XXIV

LÀ-HAUT

QUERELLE D’ASTRES

LÀ-HAUT

Un jour l’étoile vit la comète passer,
Rit, et, la regardant au gouffre s’enfoncer,
Cria : — La voyez-vous courir, la vagabonde?
Jadis, dans l’azur chaste où la sagesse abonde,
Elle était comme nous étoile vierge, ayant
Des paradis autour de son cœur flamboyant,
Et ses rayons, liant les sphères, freins et brides,
Faisaient tourner le vol des planètes splendides;
Rien n’égalait son nimbe auguste, et dans ses nœuds
Sa chevelure avait dix globes lumineux;
Elle était l’astre à qui tout un monde s’appuie.
Un jour, tout à coup, folle, ivre, elle s’est enfuie.

Un vertige l’a prise et l’a jetée au fond
Des chaos où Moloch avec Dieu se confond.
Quand elle en est sortie, elle était insensée;
Elle n’a plus voulu suivre que sa pensée,
Sa furie, un instinct fougueux, torrentiel,
Mauvais, car l’équilibre est la vertu du ciel.
Devant elle, au hasard, elle s’en est allée;
Elle s’est dans l’abîme immense échevelée;
Elle a dit : Je me donne au gouffre, à volonté!
Je suis l’infatigable; il est l’illimité.
Elle a voulu chercher, trouver, sonder, connaître,
Voir les mondes enfants, tâcher d’en faire naître,
Aller jusqu’en leur lit provoquer les soleils,
Examiner comment les enfers sont vermeils,
Voir Satan, visiter cet astre en sa tanière,
L’approcher, lui passer la main dans la crinière,
Et lui dire : Lion, je t’aime! Iblis, Mammon,
Prends-moi, je viens m’offrir, déesse, à toi démon!
Elle s’est faite, ainsi que l’air, fuyante et souple,

Elle a voulu goûter l’âcre extase du couple;
Et sans cesse épouser des univers nouveaux;

Elle a voulu toucher les croupes des chevaux
De la foudre, et, parmi les bruits visionnaires,
Rôder dans l’écurie énorme des tonnerres;
Elle a mis de l’éclair dans sa fauve clarté;
Elle a tout violé par curiosité;
Et l’on sent, en voyant ses flamboiements funèbres,
Que sa lumière s’est essuyée aux ténèbres.
Les soleils tour à tour l’ont. Elle a préféré
À la majesté fixe au haut du ciel sacré,
On ne sait quelle course, audacieuse, oblique,
Étrange, et maintenant elle est fille publique.

Et la comète dit à l’étoile : — Vesta,
Tu te trompes. Je suis Vénus. Quand Dieu resta,
Après que le noir couple humain eut pris la fuite,
Seul dans le paradis, Satan lui dit : Ensuite?
Et Dieu vit que l’amour est un besoin qu’on a,
Et que sans lui le monde a froid; il m’ordonna
D’aller incendier le gouffre où tout commence,
Et Dieu mit la sagesse où tu vois la démence.
Depuis ce jour-là, j’erre et je vais en tous lieux
Rappeler à l’hymen les mondes oublieux.
J’illumine Uranus, je réchauffe Saturne,
Et je remets du feu dans les astres; mon urne

Reverse un flot d’aurore aux fontaines du jour;
Je suis la folle auguste ayant au front l’amour;
Je suis par les soleils formidables baisée;
Si je rencontre en route une lune épuisée,
Je la rallume, et l’ombre a ce flambeau de plus;
L’océan étoilé me roule en ses reflux;
Sur tous les globes, nés au fond des étendues,
Il est de sombres mers que je gonfle éperdues;
J’éveille du chaos le rut démesuré;

Voici l’épouse en feu qui vient! l’astre effaré,
Regarde à son zénith, à travers la nuée,
L’impudeur de ma robe immense dénouée;

De mes accouplements l’espace est ébloui;
Dès qu’un gouffre me veut, j’accours et je dis : Oui!
Je passe d’Allioth à Sirius; ma bouche
Se colle au triple front d’Aldebaran farouche;
Et je me prostitue à l’infini, sachant
Que je suis la semence et que l’ombre est le champ;
De là des mondes; Dieu m’approuve quand j’ébauche
Une création que tu nommes débauche.
Celle qui lie entr’eux les univers, c’est moi;
Sans moi, l’isolement hideux serait la loi;
Étoiles, on verrait de monstrueux désastres;
L’infini subirait l’égoïsme des astres;
Partout la nuit, la mort et le deuil, augmentés
Par la farouche horreur de vos virginités.
J’empêche l’effrayant célibat de l’abîme.
Je suis du pouls divin le battement sublime;
Mon trajet, à la fois idéal et réel,
Marque l’artère énorme et profonde du ciel;
Vous êtes la lumière et moi je suis la flamme;
Dieu me fit de son cœur et vous fit de son âme;
Ô mes sœurs, nous versons toutes de la clarté,
Étant, vous l’harmonie, et moi la liberté.

XXV

LES MONTAGNES

DÉSINTÉRESSEMENT

Le Mont-Blanc que cent monts entourent de leur chaîne,
Comme dans les bouleaux le formidable chêne,
Comme Samson parmi les enfants d’Amalec,
Comme la grande pierre au centre du cromlech,
Apparaît au milieu des Alpes qu’il encombre;
Et les monts, froncement du globe, relief sombre
De la terre pétrie aux pieds de Jéhova,
Croûte qu’en se dressant quelque satan creva,
L’admirent, fiers sommets que la tempête arrose.
— Grand! dit le Mont-Géant. — Et beau! dit le Mont-Rose.

Et tous, Cervin, Combin, le Pilate fumant
Qui sonne tout entier comme un grand instrument,
Tant les troupeaux le soir l’emplissent de clarines,
Titlis soufflant l’orage au vent de ses narines,
Le Baken qui chassa Gessler, et le Rigi
Par qui plus d’ouragan sur le lac a rugi,
Pelvoux tout enivré de la senteur des sauges,
Cenis qui voit l’Isère, Albis qui voit les Vosges,
Morcle à la double dent, Dru noir comme un bourreau,

L’Orteler, et la Vierge immense, la Jungfrau
Qui ne livre son front qu’aux baisers des étoiles,
Schwitz tendant ses glaciers comme de blanches toiles,
Le haut Mythen, clocher de la cloche Aquilon,
Tous, du lac au chalet, de l’abîme au vallon,
Roulant la nue aux cieux et le bloc aux morènes,
Aiguilles, pics de neige et cimes souveraines,
Autour du puissant mont chantent, chœur monstrueux :
— C’est lui! le pâtre blanc des monts tumultueux!

Il nous protége tous et tous il nous dépasse;

Il est l’enchantement splendide de l’espace;
Ses rocs sont épopée et ses vallons roman;
Il mêle un argent sombre aux moires du Léman;
L’Océan aurait peur sous ses hautes falaises,
Et ses brins d’herbe sont plus fiers que nos mélèzes;
Il nous éclaire après que l’astre s’est couché;
Dans le brun crépuscule il apparaît penché,
Et l’on croit de Titan voir l’effrayante larve;
Il tresse le bleu Rhône aux cheveux d’or de l’Arve;
Sa cime, pour savoir lequel a plus d’amour
Et quel est le plus grand du regard ou du jour,
Confronte le soleil avec le gypaëte;
La nuit, quand il se dresse, énorme silhouette,
Croit voir un monde sombre éclore à l’horizon;
Il est superbe, il a la glace et le gazon;
L’archange à son sommet vient aiguiser son glaive;

Il a, comme son dogue, à ses pieds le Salève;
Il tisse, âpre fileur, les brouillards pluvieux;
Sa tiare surgit sur nos fronts envieux;
Ses pins sont les plus verts, sa neige est la plus blanche;
Il tient dans une main la colombe Avalanche
Et dans l’autre le vaste et fauve aigle Ouragan;
Il tire du fourreau, comme son yataghan,
La tourmente, et les lacs tremblent sous sa fumée;
Il plonge au bloc des nuits l’éclair, scie enflammée;

L’immensité le baise et le prend pour amant;
Une mer de cristal, d’azur, de diamant,
Crinière de glaçons digne du lion Pôle,
Tombe, effrayant manteau, de sa farouche épaule;
Ses précipices font reculer les chamois;
Sur son versant sublime il a les douze mois;
Il est plus haut, plus pur, plus grand que nous ne sommes;
Et nous l’insulterions si nous étions des hommes.

XXVI

LE TEMPLE

LE TEMPLE

Joie à la terre, et paix à celui qui contemple!
Écoutez, vous ferez sur la montagne un temple,
Et vous le bâtirez la nuit pour que jamais
On ne sache qui l’a placé sur ces sommets;
Vous le ferez, ainsi l’ordonne le prophète,
Du toit aux fondements et de la base au faîte,
Avec des blocs mis l’un sur l’autre simplement,

Et ce temple, construit de roche sans ciment,
Sera presque aussi haut que toute la montagne.
Les forêts qu’un murmure éternel accompagne,
L’Océan qui bondit ainsi que les troupeaux
Et n’a point de fatigue et n’a point de repos,
Les monts sans tache, blancs comme les cœurs sans vice,
C’est tout ce que verront du seuil de l’édifice
Les hommes qui viendront par cent chemins divers;
Car vous aurez compris qu’il faut que l’univers
Ait autour de ce temple une grave attitude.
Et vous l’aurez bâti dans une solitude,
Afin qu’il soit tranquille, et pour que l’horizon
Convienne à cette auguste et farouche maison.
Et les hommes, pasteurs, apôtres, patriarches,
Regarderont le temple, et monteront les marches,
Et sous la haute porte ils baisseront le front.
Quand ils seront entrés, voici ce qu’ils verront :

Au-dessous d’une voûte en granit, située
Si haut qu’il semblera qu’elle est dans la nuée,
Entre quatre grands murs nus et prodigieux,
Dans une ombre où partout on sentira des yeux,
Tout au fond d’une crypte obscure, une statue
Se dressera, d’un voile insondable vêtue,

Et de la tête aux pieds ce voile descendra;

Et, plus que sur Isis, et plus que sur Indra,
Plus que sur le Sina, plus que sur le Calvaire,
Les ténèbres seront sur ce spectre sévère,
Colosse par une âme inconnue habité;
Et l’on n’en verra rien que son énormité.
La figure sera haute de cent coudées,
Et d’un seul bloc; jamais les Indes, les Chaldées,
Et les sculpteurs d’Égypte ayant l’énigme en eux,
N’auront rien maçonné de plus vertigineux.
Nul ne pourra lever le voile aux plis de pierre.
Personne ne saura s’il est une paupière
Pouvant s’ouvrir, un œil pouvant verser des pleurs,
Sous ce masque, et s’il est quelqu’un sous les ampleurs
De ce suaire aux yeux humains inabordable;
Et tous contempleront l’Ignoré formidable.
Pourtant on sentira que ce spectre n’est pas
La haine, le glacier, le tombeau, le trépas;
Qu’il semble un spectre, étant sous le plus lourd des voiles,
Mais que ce noir linceul peut-être est plein d’étoiles;
On sentira qu’il aime, et que l’on est devant
Le seul être, le seul esprit, le seul vivant.
Grands, petits, faibles, forts, le géant et l’atome,
Sentiront l’univers présent dans ce fantôme;
D’une peur confiante envahis par degrés,

Ils seront effrayés et seront rassurés;
Le vieillard et l’enfant, l’ignorant et le mage,
Frémissants, comprendront qu’ils sont devant l’image
De la Réalité suprême, et qu’en ce lieu
Jéhova, Jupiter et Brahma pèsent peu;
Que là s’évanouit tout dogme et toute bible,
Et que rien n’est méchant, quoique tout soit terrible.

Oui, terrible, mais bon; formidable, mais doux.
Dans ce temple, payens, chrétiens, parsis, indous,

Tous ceux, fakir, santon, rabbin, flamine, bonze,
Qu’une religion tient dans sa main de bronze,
Sentiront cette main s’ouvrir et les lâcher.

Le ciel; de l’idéal pétri dans du rocher,
On ne sait quoi de tendre au fond de cette pierre,
Une forme de nuit debout sur la frontière
De l’inconnu, muette et rigide, et pourtant
D’accord avec le monde immense palpitant,
L’âme qui fait tout naître et sur qui tout se fonde,
Voilà ce que ce temple, en son ombre profonde,

Fera vaguement voir à ceux qui passeront.
Les autres temples, faits de ce qui se corrompt,
Bâtis avec l’erreur, la démence et la fable,
Faux et vains, et faisant bégayer l’ineffable,
Autels que la raison en montant submergea,
Se seront écroulés depuis longtemps déjà
Au vaste ébranlement du genre humain en marche;
Mais celui-ci, n’ayant point de koran, point d’arche,
Point de prêtres, aucun pontife, aucun menteur,
Entouré de l’abîme et seul sur la hauteur,
Demeurera debout sur la terre où nous sommes,
Et ne craindra pas plus le passage des hommes
Que l’étoile ne craint le vol des alcyons.

Il n’expliquera point au cœur les passions,
À l’esprit le problème, et la tombe à la vie;
Mais il fera germer chez tous l’ardente envie
De monter, de grandir, et de voir au delà.
Où? Plus loin. Le zénith que Thalès contempla,
Les constellations, ces effrayants fulgores,
Que regardaient errer les pâles Pythagores,
Les orbes de la vie obscure entre-croisés,
La science qui cherche et dit : Jamais assez!
Ne contesteront point ce temple, et, dans l’espace,
Par tout le gouffre et par toute l’ombre qui passe

Il sera vénéré, n’ayant point ici-bas
Aggravé par l’erreur nos douleurs, nos combats,
Nos deuils, et n’ayant point de reproche à se faire.

Sous l’âpre voûte ayant la rondeur d’une sphère,
La statue, impassible et voilée, aura l’air
De rêver, attentive aux forêts, à la mer,
Aux germes, à l’azur, aux nuages, aux astres;
Pas de frises aux toits; aux murs pas de pilastres;

Le granit nu qu’aucun ornement n’interrompt;
Et, rien ne remuant, les hommes trembleront;
Et les méchants seront mal à l’aise; et les justes,
Et les bons, et tous ceux dont les cœurs sont augustes,
Les sages, les penseurs, sentiront le plein jour
Sur leur âme, leur foi, leur espoir, leur amour,
Comme sous le regard d’une énorme prunelle.

Derrière la statue, une lampe éternelle
Brûlera, comme un feu dans l’antre aux visions,
Et, cachant le foyer, montrera les rayons
De façon à lui mettre une aurore autour d’elle,
Pour enseigner au peuple ému, grave et fidèle,
Que cette énigme est bien une divinité,
Et que si c’est la nuit c’est aussi la clarté.
Le colosse sera noir sur cette auréole;
Et nul souffle, nul vent d’orage, nul éole
Ne fera vaciller l’immobile lueur.
Les sages essuieront à leur front la sueur
Et sentiront l’horreur sacrée en leurs vertèbres,
Devant cette splendeur sortant de ces ténèbres,
Et comprendront que l’Être ignoré, mais certain,
Brille, étant le lever de l’éternel matin,
Et pourtant reste obscur, car aucune envergure,

Aucun esprit ne peut saisir cette figure;
Il est sans fin, sans fond, sans repos, sans sommeil.

Et pour être Mystère il n’est pas moins Soleil.

XXVII

À L’HOMME

À L’HOMME

*

Si tu vas devant toi pour aller devant toi,
C’est bien; l’homme se meut, et c’est là son emploi;
C’est en errant ainsi, c’est en jetant la sonde
Qu’Euler trouve une loi, que Colomb trouve un monde.
Mais, rêvant l’absolu, si c’est Dieu que tu veux
Prendre comme on prendrait un fuyard aux cheveux,
Si tu prétends aller jusqu’à la fin des choses,
Et là, debout devant cette cause des causes,
Uranus des païens, Sabaoth des chrétiens,
Dire : — Réalité terrible, je te tiens! —
Tu perds ta peine.

*

Ajuste, ô fils quelconque d’Ève,
N’importe quel calcul à n’importe quel rêve,
Ajoute à l’hypothèse une lunette, et mets
Des chiffres l’un sur l’autre, à couvrir les sommets
De l’Athos, du Mont-Blanc farouche, du Vésuve,
Monte sur le cratère ou plonge dans la cuve,
Fouille, creuse, escalade, envole-toi, descends,
Fais faire par Gambey des verres grossissants,
Guette, plane avec l’aigle ou rampe avec le crabe,
Crois tout, doute de tout, apprends l’hébreu, l’arabe,
Le chinois, sois indou, grec, bouddhiste, arien,
Va, tu ne saisiras l’extrémité de rien.
Poursuivre le réel, c’est chercher l’introuvable.
Le réel, ce fond vrai d’où sort toute la fable,

C’est la nature en fuite à jamais dans la nuit.

Le télescope au fond du ciel noir la poursuit,

Le microscope court dans l’abîme après elle;
Elle est inaccessible, imprenable, éternelle,
Et n’est pas moins énorme en dessous qu’en dessus.
Des aspects effrayants sont partout aperçus;
Le spectre vibrion vaut le soleil fantôme;
Un monde plus profond que l’astre, c’est l’atome;
Quand, sous l’œil des penseurs, l’infiniment petit
Sur l’infiniment grand se pose, il l’engloutit;
Puis l’infiniment grand remonte et le submerge.
Mère terrifiante et formidable vierge,
Multipliant son jour par son obscurité
Et sa maternité par sa virginité,
Chaste, obscène, et montrant aux mornes Pythagores
Son ventre ténébreux d’où sortent les aurores,
La nature fatale engendre éperdûment
Des chaos d’où jaillit cette loi, l’élément.
Elle est le haut, le bas, l’immense ombre, l’aïeule;
Toute sa foule étant elle-même, elle est seule;
Monde, elle est la nature; âme, on l’appelle Dieu.
Tout être, quel qu’il soit, du gouffre est le milieu;

Pas de sortie et pas d’entrée; aucune porte;
On est là. — C’est pourquoi le chercheur triste avorte;
C’est pourquoi le ciel juif succède au ciel romain;
C’est pourquoi ce songeur épars, le genre humain,
Entend à chaque instant vagir de nouveaux cultes;
C’est pourquoi l’homme, en proie à tant de noirs tumultes,
Rêve, et tâte l’espace, et veut un point d’appui,
Ayant peur de la nuit tragique autour de lui;
C’est pourquoi le messie est chassé par l’apôtre;
C’est pourquoi l’on a vu crouler, l’un après l’autre,
Ayant tous fait fléchir aux peuples le genou,
Brahma, Dagon, Baal, Odin, Allah, Vishnou.
L’idolâtrie échoue. Elle est, sur tout abîme,
Et dans tous les bas-fonds, le même essai sublime

Et la même chimère inutile, créant
Toujours le même Dieu pour le même néant.

*

Il est pourtant, ce Dieu. Mais sous son triple voile
La lunette avançant fait reculer l’étoile.
C’est une sainte loi que ce recul profond.
Les hommes en travail sont grands des pas qu’ils font;
Leur destination, c’est d’aller, portant l’arche;
Ce n’est pas de toucher le but, c’est d’être en marche;
Et cette marche, avec l’infini pour flambeau,
Sera continuée au delà du tombeau.
C’est le progrès. Jamais l’homme ne se repose,
Et l’on cherche une idole, et l’on trouve autre chose.
Cherchez l’Âme; elle échappe; allez, allez toujours!
*

Teutatès, Mahomet, Jésus, les antres sourds,
Les forêts, le druide et le mage, et ces folles
Augustes, qu’Apollon emplissait de paroles,
Et les temples du sang des génisses fumants,
N’arrivent qu’à des cris et qu’à des bégaiements.

L’à peu près, c’est la fin de toute idolâtrie.
La vérité ne sort que difforme et meurtrie
De l’effort d’engendrer, et quel que soit l’œil fier
Du fœtus d’aujourd’hui sur l’embryon d’hier,
Quelque mépris qu’Orphée inspire à Chrysostome,
Quel que soit le dédain du koran pour le psaume,
Et quoi que Jéhova tente après Jupiter,
Quoi que fasse Jean Huss accouchant de Luther,
Quoi qu’affirme l’autel, quoi que chante le prêtre,
Jamais le dernier mot, le grand mot, ne peut être
Dit dans cette ombre énorme où le ciel se défend,
Par la religion, toujours en mal d’enfant.

C’est parce que je roule en moi ces choses sombres,
C’est parce que je vois l’aube dans les décombres,
Sur les trônes le mal, sur les autels la nuit,
C’est parce que, sondant ce qui s’évanouit,
Bravant tout ce qui règne, aimant tout ce qui souffre,
J’interroge l’abîme, étant moi-même gouffre;
C’est parce que je suis parfois, mage inclément,
Sachant que la clarté trompe et que le bruit ment,
Tenté de reprocher aux cieux visionnaires

Leur crachement d’éclairs et leur toux de tonnerres;
C’est parce que mon cœur, qui cherche son chemin,
N’accepte le divin qu’autant qu’il est humain;
C’est à cause de tous ces songes formidables
Que je m’en vais, sinistre, aux lieux inabordables,
Au bord des mers, au haut des monts, au fond des bois.
Là, j’entends mieux crier l’âme humaine aux abois;
Là je suis pénétré plus avant par l’idée
Terrible, et cependant de rayons inondée.
Méditer, c’est le grand devoir mystérieux;
Les rêves dans nos cœurs s’ouvrent comme des yeux;
Je rêve et je médite; et c’est pourquoi j’habite,
Comme celui qui guette une lueur subite,
Le désert, et non pas les villes; c’est pourquoi,
Sauvage serviteur du droit contre la loi,
Laissant derrière moi les molles cités pleines
De femmes et de fleurs qui mêlent leurs haleines,
Et les palais remplis de rires, de festins,
De danses, de plaisirs, de feux jamais éteints,
Je fuis, et je préfère à toute cette fête
La rive du torrent farouche, où le prophète
Vient boire dans le creux de sa main en été,
Pendant que le lion boit de l’autre côté.

XXVIII

ABÎME

ABÎME

L’HOMME

Je suis l’esprit, vivant au sein des choses mortes.
Je sais forger les clefs quand on ferme les portes;
Je fais vers le désert reculer le lion;
Je m’appelle Bacchus, Noé, Deucalion;
Je m’appelle Shakspeare, Annibal, César, Dante;
Je suis le conquérant; je tiens l’épée ardente,
Et j’entre, épouvantant l’ombre que je poursuis,
Dans toutes les terreurs et dans toutes les nuits.
Je suis Platon je vois; je suis Newton, je trouve :
Du hibou je fais naître Athène, et de la louve
Rome; et l’aigle m’a dit : Toi, marche le premier!
J’ai Christ dans mon sépulcre et Job sur mon fumier;
Je vis! dans mes deux mains je porte en équilibre
L’âme et la chair; je suis l’homme enfin, maître et libre!

Je suis l’antique Adam! j’aime, je sais, je sens;
J’ai pris l’arbre de vie entre mes poings puissants;
Joyeux, je le secoue au-dessus de ma tête,
Et, comme si j’étais le vent de la tempête,
J’agite ses rameaux d’oranges d’or chargés,
Et je crie : — Accourez, peuples! prenez, mangez!
Et je fais sur leurs fronts tomber toutes les pommes;
Car, science, pour moi, pour mes fils, pour les hommes
Ta séve à flots descend des cieux pleins de bonté,
Car la Vie est ton fruit, racine Éternité!
Et tout germe, et tout croît, et, fournaise agrandie,
Comme en une forêt court le rouge incendie,
Le beau Progrès vermeil, l’œil sur l’azur fixé,
Marche, et tout en marchant dévore le passé.

Je veux, tout obéit, la matière inflexible
Cède; je suis égal presque au grand Invisible;
Coteaux, je fais le vin comme lui fait le miel;
Je lâche comme lui des globes dans le ciel.
Je me fais un palais de ce qui fut ma geôle;
J'attache un fil vivant d'un pôle à l'autre pôle;
Je fais voler l'esprit sur l'aile de l'éclair.
Je tends l'arc de Nemrod, le divin arc de fer,
Et la flèche qui siffle et la flèche qui vole
Et que j'envoie au bout du monde, est ma parole.
Je fais causer le Rhin, le Gange et l'Orégon
Comme trois voyageurs dans le même vagon.
La distance n'est plus. Du vieux géant Espace
J'ai fait un nain. Je vais, et, devant mon audace,
Les noirs titans jaloux lèvent leur front flétri;
Prométhée, au Caucase enchaîné, pousse un cri,
Tout étonné de voir Franklin voler la foudre;

Fulton, qu'un Jupiter eût mis jadis en poudre,
Monte Léviathan et traverse la mer;
Galvani, calme, étreint la mort au rire amer;
Volta prend dans ses mains le glaive de l'archange
Et le dissout; le monde à ma voix tremble et change;
Caïn meurt, l'avenir ressemble au jeune Abel;
Je reconquiers Éden et j'achève Babel.
Rien sans moi. La nature ébauche; je termine.
Terre, je suis ton roi.
LA TERRE

Tu n'es que ma vermine.
Le sommeil, lourd besoin, la fièvre, feu subtil,
Le ventre abject, la faim, la soif, l'estomac vil,
T'accablent, noir passant, d'infirmités sans nombre,
Et, vieux, tu n'es qu'un spectre, et, mort, tu n'es qu'une ombre.

Tu t'en vas dans la cendre, et moi je reste au jour;
J'ai toujours le printemps, l'aube, les fleurs, l'amour;

Je suis plus jeune après des millions d’années.
J’emplis d’instincts rêveurs les bêtes étonnées.
Du gland je tire un chêne et le fruit du pepin.
Je me verse, urne sombre, au brin d’herbe, au sapin,
Au cep d’où sort la grappe, aux blés qui font les gerbes.
Se tenant par la main, comme des sœurs superbes,
Sur ma face où s’épand l’ombre, où le rayon luit,
Les douze heures du jour, les douze heures de nuit
Dansent incessamment une ronde sacrée.
Je suis source et chaos; j’ensevelis, je crée.
Quand le matin naquit dans l’azur, j’étais là.
Vésuve est mon usine, et ma forge est l’Hékla;

Je rougis de l’Etna les hautes cheminées.
En remuant Cuzco, j’émeus les Pyrénées.
J’ai pour esclave un astre; alors que vient le soir
Sur un de mes côtés jetant un voile noir,
J’ai ma lampe : la lune au front humain m’éclaire;
Et si quelque assassin, dans un bois séculaire,
Vers l’ombre la plus sûre et le plus âpre lieu
S’enfuit, je le poursuis de ce masque de feu.
Je peuple l’air, la flamme et l’onde; et mon haleine
Fait, comme l’oiseau-mouche, éclore la baleine;
Comme je fais le ver, j’enfante les typhons.
Globe vivant, je suis vêtu des flots profonds,
Des forêts et des monts ainsi que d’une armure.
SATURNE

Qu’est-ce que cette voix chétive qui murmure?
Terre, à quoi bon tourner dans ton champ si borné,
Grain de sable, d’un grain de cendre accompagné?
Moi dans l’immense azur je trace un cercle énorme;

L’espace avec terreur voit ma beauté difforme;
Mon anneau, qui des nuits empourpre la pâleur,
Comme les boules d’or que croise le jongleur,
Lance, mêle et retient sept lunes colossales.

LE SOLEIL

Silence au fond des cieux, planètes, mes vassales!
Paix! Je suis le pasteur, vous êtes le bétail.
Comme deux chars de front passent sous un portail,
Dans mon moindre volcan Saturne avec la Terre
Entreraient sans toucher aux parois du cratère.
Chaos! je suis la loi. Fange! je suis le feu.
Contemplez-moi! Je suis la vie et le milieu,
Le Soleil, l’éternel orage de lumière.
SIRIUS

J’entends parler l’atome. Allons, Soleil, poussière,
Tais-toi! Tais-toi, fantôme, espèce de clarté!
Pâtres dont le troupeau fuit dans l’immensité,
Globes obscurs, je suis moins hautain que vous n’êtes.
Te voilà-t-il pas fier, ô gardeur de planètes,
Pour sept ou huit moutons que tu pais dans l’azur!
Moi, j’emporte en mon orbe auguste, vaste et pur,
Mille sphères de feu dont la moindre a cent lunes.
Le sais-tu seulement, larve qui m’importunes?
Que me sert de briller auprès de ce néant?
L’astre nain ne voit pas même l’astre géant.

ALDÉBARAN

Sirius dort; je vis! C’est à peine s’il bouge.
J’ai trois soleils, l’un blanc, l’autre vert, l’autre rouge;
Centre d’un tourbillon de mondes effrénés,
Ils tournent, d’une chaîne invisible enchaînés,
Si vite, qu’on croit voir passer une flamme ivre,
Et que la foudre a dit : Je renonce à les suivre!
ARCTURUS

Moi, j’ai quatre soleils tournants, quadruple enfer,
Et leurs quatre rayons ne font qu’un seul éclair.

LA COMÈTE

Place à l’oiseau comète, effroi des nuits profondes!
Je passe. Frissonnez! Chacun de vous, ô mondes,
Ô soleils! n’est pour moi qu’un grain de sénevé!

SEPTENTRION

Un bras mystérieux me tient toujours levé;
Je suis le chandelier à sept branches du pôle.
Comme des fantassins le glaive sur l’épaule,
Mes feux veillent au bord du vide où tout finit;
Les univers semés du nadir au zénith,
Sous tous les équateurs et sous tous les tropiques,
Disent entre eux : — On voit la pointe de leurs piques;
Ce sont les noirs gardiens du pôle monstrueux. —
L’éther ténébreux, plein de globes tortueux,
Ne sait pas qui je suis, et dans la nuit vermeille
Il me guette, pendant que moi, clarté, je veille.
Il me voit m’avancer, moi l’immense éclaireur,
Se dresse, et, frémissant, écoute avec horreur
S’il n’entend pas marcher mes chevaux invisibles.
Il me jette des noms sauvages et terribles,

Et voit en moi la bête errante dans les cieux.
Or nous sommes le nord, les lumières, les yeux,
Sept yeux vivants, ayant des soleils pour prunelles,
Les éternels flambeaux des ombres éternelles.
Je suis Septentrion qui sur vous apparaît.
Sirius avec tous ses globes ne serait
Pas même une étincelle en ma moindre fournaise.
Entre deux de mes feux cent mondes sont à l’aise.
J’habite sur la nuit les radieux sommets.
Les comètes de braise elles-mêmes jamais
N’oseraient éclairer des flammes de leurs queues
Le chariot roulant dans les profondeurs bleues.
Cet astre qui parlait je ne l’aperçois pas.

Les étoiles des cieux vont et viennent là-bas,
Traînant leurs sphères d'or et leurs lunes fidèles,
Et, si je me mettais en marche au milieu d'elles
Dans les champs de l'éther à ma splendeur soumis,
Ma roue écraserait tous ces soleils fourmis!
LE ZODIAQUE

Qu'est-ce donc que ta roue à côté de la mienne?

De quelque point du ciel que ta lumière vienne,
Elle se heurte à moi qui suis le cabestan
De l'abîme, et qui dis aux soleils : Toi, va-t-en!
Toi, reviens. C'est ton tour. Toi, sors. Je te renvoie!
Car je n'existe pas seulement pour qu'on voie
À jamais, dans l'azur farouche et flamboyant,
Le Taureau, le Bélier, et le Lion fuyant
Devant ce monstrueux chasseur, le Sagittaire,
Je plonge un seau profond dans le puits du mystère,
Et je suis le rouage énorme d'où descend
L'ordre invisible au fond du gouffre éblouissant.
Ciel sacré, si des yeux pouvaient avoir entrée
Dans ton prodige, et dans l'horreur démesurée,
Peut-être, en l'engrenage où je suis, verrait-on,
Comme l'Ixion noir d'un divin Phlégéton,
Quelque effrayant damné, quelque immense âme en peine,
Recommençant sans cesse une ascension vaine,

Et, pour l'astre qui vient quittant l'astre qui fuit,
Monter les échelons sinistres de la nuit!
LA VOIE LACTÉE

Millions, millions, et millions d'étoiles!
Je suis, dans l'ombre affreuse et sous les sacrés voiles,
La splendide forêt des constellations.
C'est moi qui suis l'amas des yeux et des rayons,
L'épaisseur inouïe et morne des lumières.
Encor tout débordant des effluves premières,

Mon éclatant abîme est votre source à tous.

Ô les astres d’en bas, je suis si loin de vous
Que mon vaste archipel de splendeurs immobiles,
Que mon tas de soleils n’est, pour vos yeux débiles,
Au fond du ciel, désert lugubre où meurt le bruit,
Qu’un peu de cendre rouge éparse dans la nuit!
Mais, ô globes rampants et lourds, quelle épouvante
Pour qui pénétrerait dans ma lueur vivante,
Pour qui verrait de près mon nuage vermeil!
Chaque point est un astre et chaque astre un soleil.
Autant d’astres, autant d’immensités étranges,
Diverses, s’approchant des démons ou des anges,
Dont les planètes font autant de nations;
Un groupe d’univers, en proie aux passions,
Tourne autour de chacun de mes soleils de flammes;
Dans chaque humanité sont des cœurs et des âmes,
Miroirs profonds ouverts à l’œil universel,

Dans chaque cœur l’amour, dans chaque âme le ciel!
Tout cela naît, meurt, croît, décroît, se multiplie.
La lumière en regorge et l’ombre en est remplie.
Dans le gouffre sous moi, de mon aube éblouis,
Globes, grains de lumière au loin épanouis,
Toi, zodiaque, vous, comètes éperdues,
Tremblants, vous traversez les blêmes étendues,
Et vos bruits sont pareils à de vagues clairons,
Et j’ai plus de soleils que vous de moucherons.
Mon immensité vit, radieuse et féconde.
J’ignore par moments si le reste du monde,
Errant dans quelque coin du morne firmament,
Ne s’évanouit pas dans mon rayonnement.
LES NÉBULEUSES

À qui parles-tu donc, flocon lointain qui passes?
À peine entendons-nous ta voix dans les espaces.
Nous ne te distinguons que comme un nimbe obscur

Au coin le plus perdu du plus nocturne azur.
Laisse-nous luire en paix, nous, blancheurs des ténèbres,

Mondes spectres éclos dans les chaos funèbres,
N’ayant ni pôle austral ni pôle boréal;
Nous, les réalités vivant dans l’idéal,
Les univers, d’où sort l’immense essaim des rêves,
Dispersés dans l’éther, cet océan sans grèves
Dont le flot à son bord n’est jamais revenu;
Nous les créations, îles de l’inconnu!
L’INFINI

L’être multiple vit dans mon unité sombre.
DIEU

Je n’aurais qu’à souffler, et tout serait de l’ombre.

LE PAPE

This poem was published in 1878, but had in fact been almost entirely written in 1874-1875. Infamous for its anticlericalism and criticism of the new third Republic, the poem attacks the rigid organisation of the Catholic Church and satirises Pope Pius IX because of his support for Napoleon III.

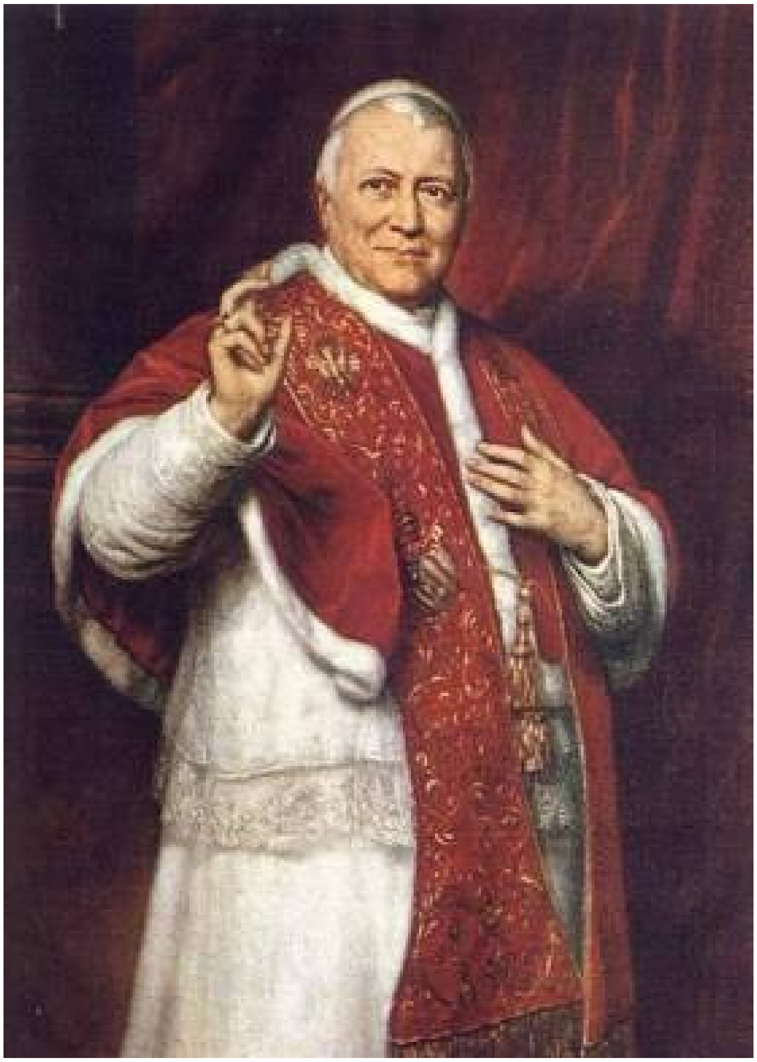

Pope Pius IX

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LE PAPE, dans son lit.

Ah! je m’endors! — Enfin!

Il s’endort.

PAROLES DANS LE CIEL ÉTOILÉ

O vivants, hommes, femmes,
Dormez. Apaise-toi, noir tumulte des âmes.
Oubli! trêve! ô méchants, reposez-vous. Assez!
Vous devez être las puisque vous haïssez.
Voici l’heure de paix que la terre réclame.
Le cœur divin envoie au cœur humain sa flamme.
La pensée a grandi car le rêve est venu.
Homme, ne te crois pas plongé dans l’inconnu;
Tu connais tout, sachant que tu dois être juste;
Le sort est l’antre noir, l’âme est la lampe auguste;
Dieu par la conscience inextinguible unit
L’innocence de l’homme aux blancheurs du zénith.
Va, ta tête est au ciel par un rayon liée.
La vie est une page obscurément pliée
Que l’homme en mourant lit et déchiffre en dormant.
Le sommeil est un sombre épanouissement.
Il est des voix, il est des pas, il est des ondes;
Tout se mêle : clameurs, rumeurs, vagues profondes,
Foules blêmes, troupeaux pensifs, essaims joyeux;
Tout marche au but divin sous les éternels yeux.
Responsabilité, pèse, voici ton heure,
Du haut des deux, et rends l’âme humaine-meilleure.
Les noirs vivants ont tous au pied le même anneau.
Sens, ô berger, le poids énorme de l’agneau.
Frêles puissants, tâchez que l’ombre vous tolère;
Le gouffre est irrité d’une bonne colère;
Le gouffre est menaçant, mais c’est contre le fort
L’atome avec raison compte, lorsqu’il s’endort,
Sur la protection terrible des abîmes.
Dormez, Vertus, dormez, souffrances, dormez, crimes,
Sous la sérénité du firmament vermeil.

Heureux l’homme qui sent à travers son sommeil

Que les étoiles sont sur la terre levées
Pour protéger le faible et l’humble et leurs couvées,
Qui tâche de comprendre en dormant, et qui sent
Qu’un immense conseil mystérieux descend!
Laissez passer sur vous les astres vénérables,
Et dormez. O vivants, princes, grands, misérables,
A cette heure au fantôme en son linceul pareils,
Ayez le tremblement du rêve en vos sommeils.
Que l’âme veille en vous!

*

LES ROIS ENTRENT

LES ROIS

Salut, Pape. Nous sommes
Les tout-puissants, les rois, les maîtres.

LE PAPE

Salut, hommes.

LES ROIS

Prêtre, nous sommes rois.

LE PAPE

Pourquoi?

LES ROIS

Rois à jamais.

LE PAPE

Et Dieu?

LES ROIS

Tu sais qu’il est sur terre des sommets.

LE PAPE

De la hauteur de Dieu je ne vois qu’une plaine.

LES ROIS

Nous sommes grands, vainqueurs, forts.

LE PAPE

Tout est l’ombre humaine.

LES ROIS

Nous sommes les élus.

LE PAPE

L’homme à l’homme est égal.

LES ROIS

Nous sommes ce que sont l’Horeb et le Galgal,
Ce qu’est le Sinaï par dessus les campagnes;
Nous sommes une chaîne auguste de montagnes;
Nous sommes l’horizon par Dieu même construit.

LE PAPE

Les monts ont au front l’aube et les rois ont la nuit.
Dieu n’a pas fait les rois.

LES ROIS

N’es-tu pas roi toi-même?

LE PAPE

Moi! régner! non!

LES ROIS

Alors, qu’est-ce que tu fais?

LE PAPE

J’aime.

*

LE PAPE SUR LE SEUIL DU VATICAN

Je parle à la Cité, je parle à l’Univers.

Écoutez, ô vivants de tant d’ombre couverts,
Qu’égara si longtemps l’imposture servile,
Le sceptre est vain, le trône est noir, la pourpre est vile.
Qui que vous soyez, fils du Père, écoutez tous.
Il n’est sous le grand ciel impénétrable et doux
Qu’une pourpre, l’amour; qu’un trône, l’innocence.
L’aube et l’obscure nuit sont dans l’homme en présence
Comme deux combattants prêts à s’entre-tuer;
Le prêtre est un pilote; il doit s’habituer
A la lumière afin que son âme soit blanche;
Tout veut croître au grand jour, l’homme, la fleur, la branche,
La pensée; il est temps que l’aurore ait raison;
Et Dieu ne nous a pas confié sa maison,
La justice, pour vivre en dehors d’elle, et faire
Grandir l’ombre et tourner à contre-sens la sphère.
Je suis comme vous tous, aveugle, ô mes amis!
J’ignore l’homme, Dieu, le monde; et l’on m’a mis
Trois couronnes au front, autant que d’ignorances.
Celui qu’on nomme un pape est vêtu d’apparences;
Mes frères les vivants me semblent mes valets;
Je ne sais pas pourquoi j’habite ce palais;
Je ne sais pas pourquoi je porte un diadème;
On m’appelle Seigneur des Seigneurs, Chef suprême,
Pontife souverain, Roi par le ciel choisi;
O peuples, écoutez, j’ai.découvert ceci.
Je suis un pauvre. Aussi je m’en vais. J’abandonne
Ce palais, espérant que cet or me pardonne,
Et que cette richesse et que tous ces trésors
Et que l’effrayant luxe usurpé dont je sors
Ne me maudiront pas d’avoir, vécu, fantôme,
Dans cette pourpre, moi qui suis fait pour le chaume!

La conscience humaine est ma sœur, et je vais
Lui parler; j’ai pour loi de haïr le mauvais
Sans haïr le méchant; je ne suis plus qu’un moine
Comme Basile, comme Honorât, comme Antoine;
Je ne chausserai plus la sandale où la croix
S’étonne du baiser parfois sanglant des rois.
Peuples, jadis Noé sortit rêveur de l’arche;
Je sors aussi. Je pars. Et je me mets en marche
Sur la terre, au hasard, sous le haut firmament,
Dans l’aube ou dans l’orage, ayant pour vêtement,
Si cela plaît au ciel, la pluie et la tempête,
Sans savoir où le soir je poserai ma tête,
N’ayant rien que l’instant, et les instants sont courts;
Je sais que l’homme souffre, et j’arrive au secours
De tout esprit qui flotte et de tout cœur qui sombre;
Je vais dans les déserts, dans les hameaux, dans l’ombre,
Dans les ronces, parmi les cailloux du ravin,
Errer comme Jésus, le va-nu-pieds divin.
Pour celui qui n’a rien, c’est s’emparer du monde,
Que de marcher parmi l’humanité profonde,
Que de créer des cœurs, que d’accroître la foi,
Et d’aller, en semant des âmes, devant soi!
Je prends la terre aux rois, je rends aux Romains Rome,
Et je rentre chez Dieu, c’est-à-dire chez l’Homme.
Laisse-moi passer, peuple. Adieu, Rome.

*

LE SYNODE D’ORIENT

LE PATRIARCHE D’ORIENT, tiare au front, en habits pontificaux; les évêques l’entourent; mitres et chapes d’or.

  Chantez,
Allégresse et louange! ô tribus, ô cités,
Chantez dans le vallon, chantez sur la montagne.
Sabaoth est l’époux, l’Église est sa compagne,
Peuple, je suis l’apôtre, et je bénis les cieux.

Entre un homme vêtu de bure noire, une croix de bois à la main.

L’HOMME

Bénir le ciel est bien, bénir l’enfer est mieux.

LE PATRIARCHE

L’enfer!

L’HOMME

          Oui, c’est-à-dire, ô prêtre, les misères.
Bénis cela. Bénis les pleurs, les cœurs sincères;
Mais flétris, où le bien contre le mal combat;
Bénis le dénûment, le haillon, lé grabat,
Le bagne, dont la chaîne épouvantable passe;
Bénis l’humble esprit sombré et la pauvre âme lasse;
Bénis tous ceux pour qui jamais tu ne prias;
Bénis les réprouvés, bénis les parias,
Et ce total des maux qui sur terre est la sommé
Des salaires. Bénis l’enfer.

LE PATRIARCHE

Quel est cet homme?

L’HOMME

Évêque d’Orient, l’évêque d’Occident
Te salue, et je suis ton frère. Sois prudent
Et sois pensif; car Dieu, sache-le, prêtre, existe.

LE PATRIARCHE

C’est vous, Père! vêtu d’un linceul!

LE PAPE

Je suis triste.

LE PATRIARCHE

Vous le premier sur terre!

LE PAPE

Hélas!

LE PATRIARCHE

Triste de quoi?

LE PAPE

De la douleur de tous et de ta joie à toi.

Il fait un pas et regarde fixement le Patriarche.

Prêtre, on souffre! et le luxe odieux t’environne!
Commence par jeter par terre ta couronne.
La couronne est gênante à l’auréole. Il faut
Choisir de l’or d’en bas ou du rayon d’en haut.
Sache, ô pasteur joyeux, que les peuples frissonnent;
Sache que le ciel pâle est plein d’heures qui sonnent
Le tocsin des berceaux, le glas des nouveau-nés.
Prends garde aux innocents dont tu fais des damnés.
Crains le mal qui flamboie et que toi-même attises
Avec tes vanités, avec tes convoitises.
Frère, ne soyons pas des prêtres désastreux.
N’imitons pas les rois qui se volent entr’eux
Les Alsaces, les Metz, les Strasbourg, les Hanovres.
Prêtre, à qui donc as-tu pris ta richesse? Aux pauvres.
Quand l’or s’enfle en ton sac, Dieu dans ton cœur décroît.
Apprends qu’on est sans pain et sache qu’on a froid;
Les jeunes filles vont rôdant le soir dans l’ombre.
Tes rochets, ta chasuble aux topazes sans nombre,
Ta robe où l’Orient doré s’épanouit,
Sont des spectres qui sont noirs et vivants la nuit,
Et qui prennent Jésus dans sa crèche, et le tuent.
Sache qu’au lit public les femmes s’habituent
Parce qu’il faut céder, se rendre, et vivre enfin,
Le riche ayant le vice et le pauvre la faim.
Que te sert d’empiler sur des planches d’armoire
Du velours, du damas, du satin, de la moire,
D’avoir des bonnets d’or et d’emplir des tiroirs
De chapes qu’on dirait couvertes de miroirs?
O pauvres que j’entends râler, forçats augustes,
Tous ces trésors, chez vous sacrés, chez nous injustes,
Ce diamant qui met à la mitre un éclair,
Cette émeraude où semble errer toute la mer,

Ce resplendissement sombre des pierreries,
C’est votre sang, le lait des mamelles taries,
C’est le grelottement des petits enfants nus!
C’est votre chute au fond des gouffres inconnus!
Le faste de ce prêtre, ô pauvres, représente
Ce que vous n’avez plus, votre vie innocente,
Le loyer du logis, le tison du foyer,
La dignité du cœur qui ne veut pas ployer,
Le travail qui s’accroît par l’épargne qui monte,
Votre joie, et l’honneur des femmes, et ta honte,
Prêtre! — Rends ces trésors aux pauvres! Rends-les tous!
Escarboucles chez eux, immondices chez nous!
Quoi! tandis que là-haut l’immense Éternel pense;
Tandis que sans fatigue et sans fin il dépense
La lumière, et maintient les soleils au complet,
Pour que tout marche et vive, et pour prouver qu’il est;
Tandis que dans cette ombre où court le météore,
Il nous regarde avec ses prunelles d’aurore;
Tandis qu’il met au monde énorme un tel ciment
Que rien ne s’est défait dans le bleu firmament
Le jour où dans le ciel que d’autres cieux pondèrent,
Les formidables vents démuselés grondèrent;
Tandis qu’il fait rôder plus d’astres dans les cieux,
Plus d’éclairs, plus de voix, plus de bruits, plus de feux,
Plus de prodiges, noirs ou sereins, sur les grèves,
Sur les monts, dans les bois, que l’homme n’a de rêves;
Tandis qu’il est. cet être inconcevable-là.
Nous prêtres, nous vieillards, drapés d’un falbala,
Plus chargés de bijoux que des filles publiques,
Tournant vers les faux biens nos extases obliques,
Tandis que lui, celui qui ne prend ni ne vend,
Lui le sombre Seigneur de la foudre, est vivant,
Nous, sous quelque portail d’église ou d’abbaye,
Nous offrons et montrons à la foule ébahie,
Sous la pourpre d’un dais et les plis d’un camail,
Un petit bon Dieu rose avec des yeux d’émail!
Un Jésus de carton! un Éternel de cire!

On le promène, on chante, on prêche, on le fait luire,
En marchant doucement.de crainte qu'un cahot,
En secouant l'autel, ne casse le Très-Haut!
Chaque temple a son saint qu'il rente et divinise.
Tandis que le monceau des hommes agonise
Et que la haine couve en d'âpres, cœurs grondants,
Tandis que la famine aux effroyables dents
Dévore l'atelier, le grenier, la chaumière,
Nous étalons, avec des effets de lumière,
Des bonshommes de bois au fond d'un corridor,
Brodés d'or, cousus d'or, chaussés d'or, coiffes d'or;
Nous avons des saints-Jeans et des saintes-Maries
Que nous emmaillotons dans des verroteries!
Nous dépensons Golconde à vêtir le néant.
Et, pendant ce temps-là, le vice est un géant.
Et le lupanar s'ouvre, affreux bagne des vierges!
Et je vous le répète, allumez tous vos cierges,
Faites le tour du temple en file, deux à deux,
Vous n'empêcherez pas que cela soit hideux!

Oui, pendant ce temps-là, parce qu'il faut qu'on mange,
Parce que votre luxe a pris son pain, un ange,
Une âme, une innocence entrera dans la nuit!
Pour vêtir de brocard l'idole qui reluit,
Les colombes. du ciel deviendront des orfraies!
Oui, des femmes de chair et d'os, des femmes vraies,
Honnêtes, fleurs d'amour et lys de chasteté,
Paîront de leur pudeur et de leur nudité,
De toutes leurs vertus mortes et dissipées,
Votre imbécillité d'habiller des poupées!
Entendez-vous cela! Comprenez-vous cela!
Trouvez-vous que je parle assez haut! Dieu parla
Jadis de cette sorte aux songeurs sur les cimes;
Et nous quand sur l'autel, pensifs, nous nous assîmes,
Prêtres, ce n'était pas pour être des démons.
O mes frères, aimons, aimons, aimons, aimons!

Prêtres, la croix de bois et la robe de bure,
Le front haut chez les rois, et pas d’autre courbure
Que le fléchissement des âmes devant Dieu!
Quoi! les rois sont la roue et vous êtes l’essieu!
Le peuple est sous vos pieds, parce qu’il est la base,
Et vous faites rouler sur lui ce qui l’écrase!

Sachez que vos grandeurs sont des chutes! Sachez
Que le fourmillement lugubre des péchés,
O noirs vendeurs du temple, emplit votre opulence
Et que Jésus, ayant au flanc le coup de lance,
S’est enfui, se voilant la face, n’ayant pu
Voir le peuple affamé sous le prêtre repu!
Ne pouvant voir cela, Christ a dû disparaître!
Il s’en va. Car pour lui les diamants du prêtre
Ont la même lueur que les yeux du chacal.
O froc de bure, ô saint haillon pontifical,
Sois ma splendeur. Je sens rentrer sous cette robe
L’âme que le manteau de pourpre nous dérobe;
Je revis. Du linceul le prêtre est bien vêtu.
Il devient sous la bure exemple, honneur, vertu,
Serviteur de qui souffre et juge de qui règne;
Comme il est faible, il faut que le tyran le craigne;
Car les faibles sont pleins de la force de Dieu.
Sa robe noire passe à toute heure, en tout lieu,
Parmi les deuils, les maux, les fléaux, les désastres,
Et quand il la secoue il en tombe des astres!
Il en tombe le vrai, le bien, le beau, le grand!
Prêtres, votre richesse est un crime flagrant!
Vos cœurs sont-ils méchants? Non, vos têtes sont dures.
Frères, j’avais aussi sur moi ce tas d’ordures,
Des perles, des onyx, des saphirs, des rubis.
Oui, j’en avais sur moi, partout, sur mes habits,
Sur mon âme; mais j’ai vidé cela bien vite
Chez les pauvres.

LE PATRIARCHE

Seigneur et docteur, grand lévite,
Pape sublime, évêque illustre et souverain,
Les tables de la loi sont un livre d’airain;
Nul n’y peut rien changer, pas même toi, mon père.

UN ÉVÊQUE

Il faut que l’homme souffre afin que Dieu prospère;
L’or du temple éblouit le pauvre utilement.
Il faut la perle au dogme et l’astre au firmament;
Il faut que les vivants, foules, essaims; mêlées,
Volent à la lueur des mitres constellées;
Cette clarté leur est nécessaire en leur nuit.
Le temple opulent sert et l’autel pauvre nuit.
Il sied que le pasteur comme un soleil se lève.

AUTRE ÉVÊQUE

Parlons des rois avec précaution; leur glaive
Jette à peu près la même ombre que notre croix;
Le temple a Dieu pour base et pour cime les rois;
Dieu croule si les rois tombent.

AUTRE ÉVÊQUE

La foule est faite
Pour le maître, qu’il soit soldat, juge ou prophète;
Le prêtre est le premier des maîtres; le second
C’est le roi.

AUTRE ÉVÊQUE

Le soc dur fait le sillon fécond;
Oui, déchirons! Ainsi l'on sème, ainsi l'on fonde;
Et l'épi sera beau si la plaie est profonde.

AUTRE ÉVÊQUE

Frère, Dieu n'a jamais voulu qu'on le comprît.

AUTRE ÉVÊQUE

Le royaume des cieux est aux pauvres d'esprit;
Donc peu d'écoles, point de science, un seul livre.

AUTRE ÉVÊQUE

Les peuples ont pour loi d'être en bas et de suivre;
Et leur ascension est faite quand vers nous.
Ils montent les degrés dès temples à genoux,

AUTRE ÉVÊQUE

La pensée en dehors du dogme est de l'ivraie.
C'est la justice juste et la vérité vraie
Que j'affirme. Anathème à l'homme révolté!

AUTRE ÉVÊQUE

Nous avons dans nos mains la terrible clarté.
Il faut que la lumière éclaire, ou qu'elle brûle.
Le prêtre est infidèle à son Dieu s'il recule
Et si, devant l'impie, il hésite à pencher

Le flambeau jusqu’au tas de paille du bûcher.

LE PATRIARCHE

Ce qu’on nomme aujourd’hui liberté, c’est l’abîme.
Et c’est là que dit l’effrayant Kéroubime
Debout sur le mur noir de l’infini. Croyez.
Soyez des cœurs tremblants, soyez des fronts ployés,
Obéissez. Le prince est un prêtre; le prêtre
Est un prince. Vouloir comprendre, vouloir être,
Vouloir penser, c’est faire obstacle à Dieu. Vivants
Qui sous l’énormité redoutable des vents
Résistez, vous avez des âmes insensées.
Dieu maudit vos efforts, vos travaux, vos pensées,
Et votre raison, sœur de l’antique péché,
Et votre vain progrès, sinistrement léché
Par la langue de feu qui sort du lac de soufre.
Voilà les vérités qui jaillirent du gouffre
Le jour où sur l’Horeb le tonnerre a brillé.

LE PAPE

Frères, figurez-vous, — je me suis réveillé!

LES ÉVÊQUES

Qu’entendez-vous par là?

LE PATRIARCHE

Qu’est-ce que tu médites?

LE PAPE

Je ne crois plus un mot de tout ce que vous dites!

LE PATRIARCHE

Quoi! vous seriez l'horrible et vivant démenti
De vos prédécesseurs glorieux?

LE PAPE

    J'ai senti
Un mécontentement inquiétant dans l'ombre.

LE PATRIARCHE

Le pilote aveuglé, c'est le vaisseau qui sombre.
Ne changez pas de route! O Père, n'allez pas
Du côté de la nuit, du côté du trépas!

LE PAPE

Je marche vers la vie.

LE PATRIARCHE

    Il faudra rendre compte.

LE PAPE

Certes!

LE PATRIARCHE

Songez au ciel. Vous en tombez.

LE PAPE

J’y monte.

LES ÉVÊQUES

O sombre cécité!

LE PAPE

Je vous dis que je vois.
J’étais sur un sommet doré, sur un pavois,
Dans l’encens, dans les chants et les épithalames.
J’ai senti tout à coup l’immense poids des âmes;
Et je suis descendu, sachant que je montais.
Le dogme n’a d’appuis, l’Église n’a d’étais
Que nos fragilités; tâchons qu’elles soient pures.
Oui, j’ai vu les douleurs, oui, j’ai vu les souillures,
J’ai vu le bien gisant, j’ai vu le mal debout,
Et j’ai songé. Ciel noir! les crimes sont partout,
Mais il n’est qu’un coupable, et c’est le responsable.
J’ai vu les maux nombreux plus que les grains de sable,
Les forfaits plus épais que les branches des bois,
L’infâme orgie en rut, l’innocence aux abois,
Et j’ai dit en moi-même, en voyant les deux mondes
Pleins de brocanteurs vils et de. vendeurs immondes :
Ce prêtre sur l’argent hideusement penché,
Ce juge qui chuchote à voix basse un marché,

Cette fille à l’œil fou, cette bohémienne,
Qu’est-ce qu’ils vendent là? Leur âme? Non, la mienne!
Alors j’ai pris la fuite, épouvanté, voulant
Être bon, m’arracher tous ces crimes du flanc,
Guider, sauver, guérir, supprimer les Sodomes,
Bénir, et rendre enfin Dieu respirable aux hommes!

LE PATRIARCHE

Vous avez un devoir, foudroyer.

LE PAPE

Avertir.

LE PATRIARCHE

Songez au Dieu vengeur.

LE PAPE

Je songe au Christ martyr.

LE PATRIARCHE

Roi...

LE PAPE

La chaire changée en trône est impudique.
Pauvre et nu, Jésus règne; et, roi, le prêtre abdique.

Prêtre, j’ai le roseau de Jésus à la main;
Roi, je n’ai plus qu’un sceptre; et pour le genre humain
Je ne suis plus qu’un prince obéissant aux princes,
Concédant, consentant, tremblant pour mes provinces,
Courtisan du plus fort, à céder toujours prêt;
Jamais la royauté du prêtre n’apparaît
Sans une transparence affreuse d’esclavage.
Je ne fais point partie, ô prêtres, du ravage,
Du supplice et du meurtre, et ne veux point m’asseoir
Parmi ces rois sur qui tombe l’éternel soir.
J’aime! je sens en moi la grande clarté vivre.

LES ÉVÊQUES

Guide-nous, mais suis-nous. Pour guider, il faut suivre.

LE PAPE

Jamais. Je suis sorti, plein d’horreur et d’effroi,
De toute votre nuit! Quoi! l’on eût dit de moi :
Terre, cet homme avait la garde d’une idée,
La plus haute que l’ombre ait jamais possédée,
Clarté sainte au-dessus du gouffre obscur des cœurs;
En dépit des vents noirs rapidement vainqueurs
Et vite évanouis, cet homme était le mage
Mystérieux, chargé du mutuel hommage
Que se doivent les cieux et les âmes, rapport
Et lien entre un mât frissonnant et le port,
Échange de lueur entre l’abîme et l’homme.
Quoi! parce que de vains simulacres qu’on nomme
Princes, maîtres, seigneurs, chefs, souverains, césars,
Parce que de faux dieux, composés de hasards,
Ou du hasard de vaincre ou du hasard de naître,
Parce que des puissants que le néant pénètre
Sont venus le trouver, lui le veilleur qui n’a

Ici-bas d’autre droit que de dire Hosanna
Et de montrer du doigt là-haut l’âme éternelle,
Lui qui doit, fils de l’aube, ému, vivant en elle,
Toujours songer, pleurant sur le mal châtié,
Au moyen de changer la lumière en pitié;
Quoi! parce que ces rois, quoi! parce que ces ombres,
Parce que ces faiseurs de cendre et de décombres
Sont venus à sa porte, et durs, fiers, belliqueux,
Ont dit : sois avec nous! — cet homme est avec eux!
Quoi! cet homme, le monde étant dans les ténèbres,
Offrait dans son bazar aux acheteurs funèbres,
O terreur! le rayon qui blanchissait le ciel!
Lui l’éclaireur suprême et providentiel,
IL bénissait l’affreuse éruption des laves!
Cet homme s’était fait marchand de ces esclaves,
La vérité, l’honneur, la justice et la loi,
Prenait le droit au peuple et le donnait au roi;
Priait pour ce qui tue et contre ce qui tombe!
Cet homme a fait lancer la foudre à la colombe!
Il a fait de Jésus le valet d’Attila!
Quoi! l’on eût dit de moi : Regardez; le voilà!
Il avait en dépôt notre âme, il l’a perdue!
L’aurore se levait, cet homme l’a vendue!
Il a prostitué l’étoile du matin!:
Non! non!

LE PATRIARCHE

Vous blasphémez, Pape!

LE PAPE

Prêtre hautain,
Sois humble! Autel doré, dédore-toi, rayonne!
Plaie au flanc du Christ, bouche auguste qu’on bâillonne

Ouvre tes lèvres, parle, et dis la vérité!
Rentre en ton patrimoine, homme déshérité.
Femmes, enfants, ayez des droits. Peuple, aie une âme.
A moi, prêtres! Prêchez le vrai que je proclame,
Soyez simples de cœur. Soyez, sous le ciel bleu,
Près des petits enfants pour être près de Dieu.
Plus le pontife est doux, plus le temple est sublime.

Tout s’évanouit et s’efface autour du pape.

Quoi! plus de prêtres! Quoi! plus de temple! — L’abîme.
Tout disparaît. Jadis Babel ainsi croula.
Me voilà seul! Plus rien que l’ombre.

UNE VOIX AU FOND DE L’INFINI

Je suis là.

*

UN GRENIER

L’hiver. Un grabat.
UN PAUVRE. Sa famille près de lui.

LE PAUVRE

Je ne crois pas en Dieu.

LE PAPE, entrant.

Tu dois avoir faim. Mange.

Il partage son pain et en donne la moitié au pauvre.

LE PAUVRE

Et mon enfant?

LE PAPE

Prends tout.

Il donne à l’enfant le reste de son pain.

L’ENFANT, mangeant.

C’est bon.

LE PAPE, au pauvre.

L’enfant, c’est l’ange.
Laisse-moi le bénir.

LE PAUVRE

Fais ce que tu voudras.

LE PAPE, vidant une bourse sur le grabat.

Tiens, voici de l’argent pour t’acheter des draps.

LE PAUVRE

Et du bois.

LE PAPE

Et de quoi vêtir l’enfant, la mère,
Et toi, mon frère. Hélas! cette vie est amère.
Je te procurerai du travail. Ces grands froids
Sont durs. Et maintenant parlons de Dieu.

LE PAUVRE

J’y crois.

*

LE PAPE AUX FOULES

A travers la douleur, l’angoisse, les alarmes,
Du fond des nuits, du fond des maux, du fond des larmes,
Venez à moi vous tous qui tremblez, qui souffrez,
Qui râlez, qui rampez, qui saignez, qui pleurez,
Les damnés, les vaincus, les gueux, les incurables,
Venez, venez, venez, venez, ô misérables!
Je suis à vous, je suis l’un de vous, et je sens
Dans mes os votre fièvre immense, agonisants!
Venez, déguenillés, réprouvés, multitude!
Je suis le serviteur de votre servitude,
Et de votre cachot je suis le prisonnier;
Le premier chez les rois, parmi vous.le dernier.
Votre part est la bonne, elle est la plus auguste;
Le riche a beau bien faire, être sage, être juste;
Quiconque a les pieds nus marche plus près de Dieu.
Le ciel noir montre plus d’astres que le ciel bleu.

Je vous aime, et n’ai pas d’autre raison pour être,
Fils, le prêtre du-juge et le juge du prêtre.
Je ne suis qu’un pauvre homme appartenant à tous.
O souffrants, aidez-moi. Je tâche d’être doux.
Venez, partageons tout,’ le froid, la faim, les jeûnes.
Je suis vieux chez les vieux et jeune avec les jeunes;
Je suis l’aïeul du père et l’enfant des petits;
J’ai tous les âges; fils, j’ai tous les appétits,
Toutes les volontés, toutes les convoitises;
Je suis, comme l’agneau qu’attirent les cytises,
Attiré par les deuils, les dénûments, les pleurs;
Je veux avoir ma part de toutes les douleurs;
J’ai droit à tous les maux qu’on souffre sur la terre;
Je suis l’universel étant le solitaire;
O pauvres, donnez-moi tout ce que vous avez,

Vos jours sans pain, vos toits sans feu, vos durs pavés,
Vos fumiers, vos grabats tremblants, vos meurtrissures,
Et le ciel étoile, plafond de vos masures.

O vous qui n'avez rien, donnez-moi tout. Venez,
Tous les malheureux! nus, sanglants, blessés, traînés
Par tous les désespoirs et sur toutes les claies;
Apportez-moi vos fiels, apportez-moi vos plaies,
Afin qu'à votre nuit je mêle un peu de jour,
Et que je fasse avec vos haines de l'amour.
Venez, haillons, sanglots, plaintes, colères, âmes!

Fils, le malheur et moi, partout où nous passâmes
Nous avons tous les deux, chacun à sa façon,
Prouvé, lui qu'il a tort, et moi qu'il a raison.
Il a tort, car on pleure, et raison, car on aime.
Le malheur a cela de tendre et de suprême
Qu'on aime d'autant plus que l'on a plus souffert;
Le malheur c'est le ciel obscurément offert.
Vous avez les douleurs et moi j'ai les dictâmes.
Je suis l'ambitieux qui veut prendre les âmes;
N'avoir rien secouru, c'est là la pauvreté;
On aura des besoins devant l'éternité;
Il serait imprudent, à l'heure où le soir tombe,
De s'offrir à celui qu'on trouve dans la tombe
Sans avoir fait d'épargne et rien mis de côté.
Souffrants, apportez-moi votre calamité.
Je suis l'aide, l'ami, l'appui. Venez, misères,
Lèpres, infirmités, indigences, ulcères,
Quiconque est hors l'espoir, quiconque est hors la loi.
La douleur m'appartient. J'appelle autour de moi
L'esprit troublé, le cœur saignant, l'âme qui sombre;
Et je veux, entouré des détresses sans nombre,
Qui naissent sur la terre à toute heure, en tout lieu,
Arriver avec tous les pauvres devant Dieu!
Venez, vous qu'on maudit! Venez, vous qu'on méprise!

Tous les misérables viennent autour de lui de tous côtés.

UN PASSANT

Qu’est-ce que tu fais là, vieillard?

LE PAPE

Je thésaurise.

*

L’INFAILLIBILITÉ

Ah! je suis l’Infaillible!

Ah! c’est moi qui vois clair!

Et Dieu?

Dieu ne sait pas ce que savait Kepler,
Ce que trouva Newton, ce qu’a vu Galilée;
Il est dépaysé sous la voûte étoilée;
Il a tous les défauts possibles; dur, cassant,
Jaloux, inexorable, irascible; il consent
A l’arrestation du soleil par un homme;
Il damne l’univers pour le vol d’une pomme;
Il foudroie au hasard, il châtie à côté;
Il tue en bloc; il met le diable en liberté;
Molière le ferait sermonner par Alceste;
Il extermine un bouge, il épargne l’inceste,
Détruit Sodome, et donne à Loth un exeat;
Il double d’un enfer son paradis béat;
Il ne sait ce qu’il fait, tant il est susceptible,
Et tâche de brûler notre âme incombustible
Dans un monstrueux lac de bitume et de poix.
Ah! vous avez voulu lui mettre un contre-poids!
Oui, vous avez voulu corriger, j’imagine,
Ce Dieu qui du chaos tire son origine,
Qui maudit, sans savoir pourquoi, le genre humain,
Et qui marche en tâtant du bâton le chemin;
Il a, certes, besoin d’un guide en sa nuit noire,
Et, grâce au compagnon qui l’aide, on aime à croire,
Malgré Pascal doutant et Voltaire niant,
Que Dieu peut-être aura moins d’inconvénient.
Donc son chien est le pape, et je comprends qu’en somme,

L’aveugle étant le dieu, le clairvoyant soit l’homme.

Dérision lugubre! Insulte au firmament!

Donc le pape jamais ne chancelle et ne ment;
Donc jamais une erreur ne tombe de sa bouche;
L’infaillibilité formidable et farouche
Luit dans son œil suprême...

O nuit! pardonne-leur!
Être un homme, un jouet quelconque du malheur,
Moins libre que le vent, plus frêle que la plante,
Le passant inquiet de la terre tremblante,
Une agitation qui frissonne et qui fuit,
Un peu d’ombre essayant de faire un peu de bruit,
Être cela! sentir derrière soi l’abîme
Et devant soi le gouffre, et se croire la cime!
Avoir l’affreux squelette en ce vil corps charnel,
Et dire à Dieu : Je suis ton égal. Éternel!
Je suis l’autorité, je suis la certitude,
Et mon isolement, Dieu, vaut ta solitude;
Le pape est avec toi le seul être debout
Sur cet immense Rien que l’homme appelle Tout;
Tout n’est rien devant moi comme devant toi, Maître.
Je sais la fin, je sais le but, je connais l’Être;
Je te tiens, ma clef t’ouvre, et je suis ton sondeur,
Dieu sombre, et jusqu’au fond je vois ta profondeur.
Dans l’obscur univers je suis le seul lucide;
Je ne puis me tromper; et ce que je décide
T’oblige; et quand j’ai dit : Voici la vérité!
Tout est dit. Quand je veux que tu sois irrité,
Quand j’ai dit la loi, l’ordre, et le point où commence
Ta colère, et l’endroit où finit ta clémence,
Tu dois courber ton front énorme dans les cieux!
Le grand char étoile tourne sur deux essieux,
Dieu, le Pape.

O soleils! astres! gouffres des êtres!
Que dites-vous du pape infaillible, et des prêtres,
Des conciles mettant le pied sur vos hauteurs,
Que dis-tu de ce tas de sinistres docteurs,
Ciel terrible, imposant leur néant au mystère,
Et tâchant d’ajouter à Dieu le ver de terre !

*

EN VOYANT PASSER DES BREBIS TONDUES

Les sombres vents du soir soufflent de tous côtés.
O brebis, ô troupeaux, ô peuples, grelottez.
Où donc est votre laine, ô marcheurs lamentables?
Allez loin de vos toits et loin de vos étables,
Sous le givre et la pluie, allez, allez, allez!
Où donc est votre laine, ô pauvres accablés,
Vous qui nourrissez tout, hélas! et qu’on affame?
Peuple, où donc sont tes droits? Homme, où donc est ton âme?
O laboureur, où donc est ta gerbe? O maçon,
Constructeur, bâtisseur, où donc est ta maison?
Où donc sont les esprits mis sous votre tutelle,
Docteurs? Et ta pudeur, ô femme, où donc est-elle?
Hélas! j’entends sonner les clairons triomphants;
Vierge, où sont tes amours? mère, où sont tes enfants?
Grelottez, ô bétail, dépouillé, pauvres êtres!
Votre laine n’est pas à vous, elle est aux maîtres,
Elle est à ceux pour qui’ le chien aboie, à ceux
Qui sont les rois, les forts, les grands, les paresseux!
A ceux qui pour servante ont votre destinée!

C’est à vous cependant que Dieu l’avait donnée,
Cette laine sacrée, et dans la profondeur
Dieu maudit les ciseaux lugubres du tondeur!
Ah! malheureux en proie aux heureux! Honte aux maîtres!
Où donc sont ces bergers qu’on appelle les prêtres?
Nul ne te défend, peuple, ô troupeau qui m’es cher,
Et l’on te prend ta laine en attendant ta chair.

La nuit vient.

Ils courent par moments; les coups inexorables
Pleuvent, et l’on croit voir, avec ces misérables,
La vérité, le droit, la raison, l’équité, ,

Tout ce qu’on a de juste au fond du cœur, fouetté!
Où donc la conduit-on, cette foule hagarde,
Tremblante sous le soir terrible? qui la garde?
Comme ils sont harcelés, effrayés, éperdus!
Où vont ces sombres pas par derrière mordus?
Ils courent... — on dirait le passage d’un songe.

La bise souffle et semble un serpent qui s’allonge.
Est-ce que le mystère est lui-même contre eux?
Pourquoi tant d’aquilons sur tant de malheureux?
S’il est des anges noirs volant dans ces ténèbres,
Je les implore! ô vents, grâce! ô plafonds funèbres,
Ayez pitié! l’on souffre. Ah! que d’infortunés!
Qui donc s’acharne ainsi sur les pauvres? Donnez
D’autres ordres, esprits de l’ombre, à la tempête!
Dans l’échevèlement sauvage du prophète
Le vent peut se jouer, car le prophète est fort;
Mais soufflant sur le faible en pleurs, le ciel a tort.
Oui, je te donne tort, ciel profond qui m’écoutes;
C’est trop d’ombre. Oh! pitié! Des deux côtés des routes
Tout est brume, erreur, doute; et le brouillard trompeur
Les glace et les aveugle; ils ont froid, ils ont peur.

L’obscurité redouble.

De qui ce vent farouche est-il donc le ministre?
Allez, disparaissez à l’horizon sinistre.
Passe, ô blême troupeau dans la brume décru.
Que deviennent-ils donc quand ils ont disparu?
Que deviennent-ils donc quand ils sont invisibles?
Ils tombent dans ce gouffre obscur : tous les possibles!
Ils s’en vont, ils s’en vont, ils s’en vont, nus, épars
Sur des pentes sans but croulant de toutes parts.
O pâle foule en fuite! ô noirs troupeaux en marche!
Perdus dans l’immense ombre où jadis flottait l’arche!
Nul deuil n’est comparable à l’affreux sort de ceux
Qui s’en vont ne laissant que du rêve après eux.

Le destin, composé d’énigmes nécessaires,
Hélas! met au delà de toutes les misères,
De tout ce qui gémit, saigne et s’évanouit,
Le morne effacement des errants dans la nuit!

*

PENSIF DEVANT LE DESTIN

Tout ce qui pense, vit, marche, respire, passe,
Va, vient, palpite, naît et meurt, demande grâce.
Il n'est pas sur la terre un homme qui n'ait fait
Une faute; et le sort des neveux de Japhet
C'est de souffrir; chacun verse une larme amère,
La mère sur l'enfant et l'enfant sur la mère.
Pourquoi tant de détresse et de calamité?
Pourquoi le grondement du gouffre illimité?
Pourquoi le côté noir du dogme et de la bible?
Parce que nous péchons. De là l'ombre terrible,
Et les religions toutes pleines d'enfers.
Tous les abîmes sont à notre marche offerts.
Terreur! dit Eleusis. Damnation! dit Rome.
De la bête de proie à la bête de somme,
Du soldat au forçat, du serf à l'empereur,.
Tout est vengeance, effroi, haine, morsure, horreur.
L'être créé n'a droit qu'à des destins funèbres;
La menace lui tend le poing dans les ténèbres.
Avance, c'est la nuit. Recule, c'est l'enfer.
Homme, il est Prométhée; ange, il est Lucifer.

*

ON CONSTRUIT UNE ÉGLISE

L’ARCHEVÊQUE

Hommes qui bâtissez une église, il importe
D’en faire magnifique et superbe la porte
Pour que la foule y puisse entrer facilement;
Employez-y le bronze et l’or, le diamant,
L’onyx, le saphir; rien n’est trop beau pour l’église;
Que la façade soit auguste, et qu’on y lise
Ce nom, Jéhovah, comme à travers des éclairs;
Que le clocher répande un hymne dans les airs
Et que son tremblement se communique aux âmes;
Et que le peuple sente, enfants, vieillards et femmes,
En regardant ce temple avec un saint frisson,
Qu’on a sur le seigneur mesuré la maison
Et la grandeur du lieu sur la grandeur de l’hôte;
Que la crypte soit vaste et que la nef soit haute;
Que l’homme entende là passer confusément
La faute et le pardon, divin chuchotement;
Que le saint-livre ouvert soit sur la sainte-table;
Que l’évêque ait son trône et Jésus son étable;
Que les, prêtres, par qui vos torts sont expiés,
Aient une natte épaisse et tiède sous leurs pieds;
Que l’âme croie, en l’ombre où flottent les saints-voiles,
Entrevoir une obscure éclosion d’étoiles
Comme au fond des forêts dans la vapeur des soirs;
Qu’on y sente osciller les vagues encensoirs;
Que l’autel, entouré d’un solennel murmure,
Ait la splendeur sinistre et sombre d’une armure,
Car le céleste esprit combat l’esprit charnel; .
Et nul ne doit sans crainte approcher l’Éternel;
Pas d’ornement grossier, pas de matières viles;
Quand Salomon disait aux bâtisseurs de villes :

— Bâtissez sur la roche et non sur le limon —
Hiram, maçon du temple, écoutait Salomon;
Donc obéissez-moi. Faites un fier mélange
Du Raphaël pudique et du grand Michel-Ange;
Peignez sur la muraille Adam qu'Ève tenta,
Moïse au Sinaï, Jésus au Golgotha,
Les Géants terrassés malgré leur haute taille,
Job, et l'effarement des chevaux de bataille;
Tout ce qui foudroya, tout ce qui rayonna,
Festin de Balthasar et noces de Cana,
Doit faire flamboyer et resplendir les fresques;
Mariez l'arc lombard aux ogives moresques;
Que la statue alterne avec les noirs tableaux;
Une église doit être un large espace, enclos
De bons murs, préservé des vents et des tempêtes;
Prêtres, emplissez-la de fleurs les jours de fêtes;
Tout ce qui vient du ciel, l'église le contient;
Un roi qui la voudrait orner comme il convient,
Épuiserait Golconde et n'y pourrait suffire;
Prodiguez-y l'airain, le jaspe et le porphyre
Que n'atteint pas la rouille et né mord pas le ver.

LE PAPE

Et mettez-y des lits pour les pauvres l'hiver.

*

EN VOYANT UNE NOURRICE

Mère, je te bénis. La nourrice est sacrée.
Après l’éternité la maternité crée;
Eve s’ajoute à Dieu pour compléter Japhet;
Et l’homme, composé d’âme et de chair, est fait
Du rayon de l’abîme et du lait de la femme.
L’ineffable empyrée est une vaste trame
De souffles, de beauté, de splendeur et d’amour.
Qu’est-ce que la nature? Un gouffre, un carrefour,
Une rencontre; et tout vient pêle-mêle éclore.
Ce que la femme donne à l’enfant, c’est l’aurore;
Il coule autant de jour d’un sein que d’un soleil;
D’une sombre mamelle au fond du ciel vermeil
Les étoiles sont l’une après l’autre tombées;
Les Pléiades en haut, en bas les Machabées,
Sont des groupes pareils; toute clarté descend
Et devient notre esprit et devient notre sang.
Et dans tous les berceaux l’infini recommence;
Et l’Éternel emploie à la même œuvre l’immense,
En ce monde où l’enfant sans l’astre est incomplet,
La goutte de lumière et la goutte de lait.
O bénédiction, sois à jamais sur l’homme!

Rêveur.

Et pourtant, ô vivants, quand je songe à Sodome,
A Carthage, à Moloch, à tous vos noirs exploits,
A tous les attentats faits par toutes vos lois,
Je frissonne. Dracon est pire que Tibère.
L’aréopage est l’antre où Satan délibère.
Vous avez eu raison d’aveugler la Thémis
Par qui tant de forfaits stupides sont commis,
Car souvent, en voyant le mal, la violence
L’emporter, elle aurait horreur de sa balance.

Il arrive parfois que les lois d’ici-bas,
Lois qui frappent Jésus et sauvent Barabbas,
Lois dont l’étrange glaive au hasard tranche et tombe,
Du cri d’un nouveau-né font l’appel de la tombe.
Oui, l’épouvante en est venue à ce degré.
Un jour, je m’en souviens, — quand j’étais égaré
Jusqu’à me croire roi, moi qui suis ton esclave,
O devoir! — sous les murs d’un cachot, froide cave,
J’ai vu, c’était à Rome, une femme attendant.
On l’avait condamnée au gibet, et pendant
Qu’on dressait la potence et qu’on creusait là fosse,
Cette femme avait dit au juge : Je suis grosse.
Et le juge avait dit : Soit. Alors, attendons.
— Oh! si je ne sentais le ciel plein de pardons,
Comme je frémirais pour l’homme et pour son âme! —
Qu’est-ce qu’on attendait? ceci : que cette femme
Donnât la vie, afin de lui donner la mort.
Ainsi les hommes font dans l’énigme du sort
Pénétrer leurs décrets sans que leur raison tremble!
La mort, la vie, étaient sur cette femme ensemble.
Leur lueur éclairait le cachot étouffant;
Horreur! à chaque pas de l’une vers l’enfant
L’autre faisait un pas vers la mère, et, dans l’ombre,
Vers elle, l’un riant et charmant, l’autre sombre,
Et chacun apportant la clef de la prison,
Deux fantômes venaient du fond de l’horizon.
Être en proie à la loi! Quel deuil! — Mon cœur se serre.
Ainsi le code humain peut finir, ô misère!
Par avoir la figure obscure d’un bandit!
Et l’enfant, si le ciel l’eût fait parler, eût dit :
Tu commences, ô loi, par me tuer ma mère.
O triste loi sans yeux, dans cette angoisse *amère,
La malheureuse a beau trembler, frémir, prier,
Tu charges son enfant d’être son meurtrier;
Son sang tient mon berceau, déjà sombre, encor vide,
Et de moi, l’innocent, tu fais un parricide.
Tu me fais faire un crime à moi qui ne suis pas.

Je nais, je tue. — Hélas! — La loi prend un compas,
Pèse l'urne du mal, la trouve peu remplie,
Mesure un crime, ajoute un meurtre, multiplie
Un attentat par l'autre, un forfait par un deuil,
Dans un affreux berceau fait éclore un cercueil,
Attend qu'un enfant naisse, ordonne qu'on bâtisse
Un tombeau sur sa tête, et dit : C'est la justice!
Elle veut, au milieu de ce saint univers,
Quand les cieux versent l'aube et sont tout grands ouverts,
Devant le jour sans fin, devant l'azur sans voiles,
Dans le fourmillement des fleurs et des étoiles,
Qu'une mère éperdue ait horreur du moment
Où son enfant naîtra sous le bleu firmament! —
J'ai vu cela. Si bien que cette misérable
Était là, regardait fuir l'heure inexorable,
Écoutait dans la nuit le glas dire : Il le faut!
Et sentait dans son sein remuer l'échafaud.

*

UN CHAMP DE BATAILLE

DEUX ARMÉES EN PRÉSENCE

LE PAPE

J’ai peur. Je sens ici comme une âme terrible.
L’homme est la flèche, ô cieux profonds, l’homme est la cible!
Mais quel est donc le bras qui tend cet arc affreux?
Pourquoi ces hommes-ci s’égorgent-ils entr’eux?
Quoi! peuple contre peuple! ô nations trompées!

(S’avançant entre les deux armées.)

De quel droit avez-vous les mains pleines d’épées?
Que faites-vous ici? Qu’est-ce que ces pavois?
Que veulent ces canons? Hommes que j’entrevois,
Dans l’assourdissement des trompettes farouches,
Plus forts que des lions et plus vains que des mouches,
Pour le plaisir de qui vous exterminez-vous?
Tous n’avez qu’un seul droit, c’est de vous aimer tous.
Dieu vous ordonne d’être ensemble sur la terre.
Dieu, sous sa douce loi, cache un devoir austère;
Comme à l’érable, au chêne, à l’orme, au peuplier,
Il vous a dit de croître et de multiplier.
Aimez-vous. Les palais doivent la paix aux chaumes.
O rois, des deux côtés vous voyez des royaumes,
Des fleuves, des cités, la terre à partager,
Des droits pareils aux loups cherchant à se manger,
Des trônes se gênant, les clairons, les chimères,
La gloire; et moi je vois dés deux côtés des mères.
Je vois des deux côtés des cœurs désespérés.
Je vois l’écrasement des sillons et des prés,
La lumière à des yeux pleins d’aurore ravie,
Le deuil, l’ombre, et la fuite affreuse de la vie.
Je vois les nations que la mort joue aux dés.

Mais qui donc êtes-vous, hommes qui m’entendez?
Quoi! vous êtes le nombre et vous êtes la force!
Vous êtes la racine et la tige et l’écorce,
Le feuillage et le fruit de l’arbre universel;
Le désert et le sable, et la mer et le sel
Sont à vous; vous avez toutes les étendues;
Si vous voulez planer, vos ailes éperdues,
Hommes, ont l’infini pour s’y précipiter;
Vous pouvez rayonner, adorer, enfanter;
Les astres et les vents vous donnent des exemples,
Les vents pour vos essors, les astres pour vos temples;
Vous êtes l’ouvrier qui tient tout dans sa main;
Vous êtes le géant de Dieu, le genre humain;
Et vous aboutissez à de vils chocs d’armées!
Et le titan se fait le forçat des pygmées!
Vous êtes cela, peuple, et vous faites ceci!
Mais alors l’impossible existe! Oui, c’est ainsi!
C’est parce que deux rois, deux spectres, deux vampires,
Parce que deux néants s’arrachent deux empires,
Parce que l’un, ce jeune, et l’autre, ce vieillard,
Semblent grands à travers on ne sait ruel .brouillard,
Étant, le jeune, un fou, le vieux, un imbécile,
C’est parce qu’un vain sceptre entre leurs mains oscille
A tous les tremblements du vice et de l’erreur,
C’est parce que ces deux atomes en fureur
S’insultent, qu’on entend, ô triste foule humaine,
O peuples, sans savoir pourquoi, dans cette plaine
Votre stupidité formidable rugir!
Vous êtes des pantins que des fils font agir;
On vous met dans la main une lame pointue,
Vous ne connaissez pas celui pour qui l’on tue,
Vous ne connaissez pas celui que vous tuerez.
Est-ce vous qui tuerez? est-ce vous qui mourrez?
Vous l’ignorez. Demain, la mort ouvrant son aile,
Vous entrerez dans l’ombre en foule, pêle-mêle,
Sans que vous puissiez dire au sépulcre pourquoi.
Oui, du moment que c’est décrété par un roi,

Par un czar, un porteur quelconque de couronne,
Sans rien comprendre au bruit menteur qui l’environne,
A tâtons, sans Savoir si l’on est un bandit,
On n’écoute plus rien; battez, tambours, c’est dit;
Vite, il faut qu’on se heurte, il faut qu’on se rencontre,
Qu’un aveugle soit pour parce qu’un sourd est contre!
Vous mourez pour vos rois. Eux, ils ne sont pas là.
Et vous avez quitté vos femmes pour cela!
Vous jeunes, vous nombreux et forts, malgré leurs larmes,
Vous vous êtes laissés pousser par des gendarmes
Aux casernes ainsi qu’un troupeau par des chiens!
En guerre! allez, Prussiens! allez, Autrichiens!
Ici la schlague, et là le knout. Lauriers, victoire.
A grands coups de bâton on vous mène à la gloire.
Vous donnez votre force inepte à vos bourreaux
Les rois, comme en avant du chiffre les zéros.
Marchez, frappez, tuez et mourez, bêtes brutes!
Et vos maîtres, pendant vos exécrables luttes,
Boivent, mangent, sont gais et hautains; et, contents,
Repus, ont autour d’eux leurs crimes bien portants;
Vous allez être un tas de cadavres dans l’herbe,
Laissant derrière vous, sous le soleil superbe
Et sous l’étonnement des cieux, de vieux parents,
Et dans des berceaux, plaints par les nids murmurants,
O douleur, des petits aux regards de colombe! —
Eh bien non! je me mets entre vous et la tombe.
Je ne veux pas! Tremblez, c’est moi. Je vous défends
De vous assassiner, monstres! — ô mes enfants! —
Jetez-vous dans les bras les uns des autres, frères!
Quoi! l’on verrait en vous, dans ces champs funéraires,
Léviathan revivre et renaître Python!
Hommes, Humanité! se représente-t-on
Les arbres des forêts qui se feraient la guerre,
Qui, soudain furieux, eux si calmes naguère,
Deviendraient des dragons mêlant leurs bras hideux,
Faisant tourbillonner la tempête autour d’eux.
Et jetant et broyant les fleurs, les plumes blanches,

Les nids, dans la bataille effroyable des branches!
Eh bien, sous l’affreux vent soufflant on ne sait d’où,
Vous êtes ce chaos prodigieux et fou!
Ah! vous vous enivrez d’une vanité noire!
Vous êtes des vaincus, ô rêveurs de victoire,
Vous êtes les vaincus des rois, et sur le dos
Vous portez leur grandeur, leur néant, ces fardeaux;
L’ombre des rois vous suit, vous tient, vous accompagne;
Vous êtes des traîneurs de boulet comme au bagne;
L’orgueil, leur garde-chiourme, est à votre côté;
Vous avez cette honte au pied, leur majesté!
Débarrassez-vous-en, brisez-moi cette chaîne!
Sortez des quatre murs sanglants de la géhenne,
Ignorance, colère, orgueil, mensonge, à bas!
Hommes, entendez-vous. Vivez. Plus de combats.
Non, la terre d’horreur ne sera pas noyée.
Vous êtes l’innocence imbécile employée
Aux forfaits, et les bras utiles devenus
Scélérats, et je suis celui qui vient pieds nus
Vous supplier, lions, tigres, d’être des hommes.
Il est temps de laisser cette terre ou nous sommes
Tranquille, et de permettre aux fleurs, aux blés épais,
Aux vignes, aux vergers bénis, de croître en paix;
Il est temps que l’azur brille sur autre chose
Que de la haine, et l’aube est souriante et rose
Pour que nous soyons doux comme elle. Obéissons
A la vie, à l’aurore, aux berceaux, aux moissons.
Ne sacrifions pas le monde à quelques hommes.
Soyez de votre sang vénérable économes.
Non, il ne se peut pas qu’un choc tumultueux
D’hommes ivres, pour plaire aux princes monstrueux,
Epouvante ces champs où Dieu met sa lumière.
Quoi! des mères seront en deuil dans leur chaumière,
Quoi! des bras se tordront sous les cieux étoiles!
Des morts, pâles, seront entrevus dans les blés
Et sous la transparence effrayante des fleuves;
Quoi! toutes les douleurs, les orphelins, les veuves,

‘Les vieillards, mêleront leurs lamentations... —
Ah! prenez garde àvous, rois! car vos actions
D’où sort on ne sait quelle ombre extraordinaire
Font écouter à Dieu les conseils du tonnerre!

*

LA GUERRE CIVILE

Autre champ de bataille. Rues et places publiques.

LE PAPE, apparaissant entre les combattants.

Commencez par moi. — Quoi! pauvres, déshérités,
Votre sort vous accable, et vous le complétez
Par de la haine, ayant trop peu de la souffrance!
Vous vous entr’égorgez, fils de la même France!
J’entends autour de vous cette mère crier.
Toi, paysan, tu veux tuer cet ouvrier!
Pourquoi? De quelque nom que ton travail se nomme,
Il le fait aussi, lui! vous êtes le même homme;
Vous semez, sur la terre où l’humanité croît,
Le grand germe sacré, toi l’épi, lui le droit;
Il travaille, et de plus il veut aimer son frère.
Nul rie doit à la tâche auguste se soustraire;
L’un est le moissonneur et l’autre l’émondeur.
Dieu, la clarté qui pense, est dans la profondeur;
Il est l’immense point lumineux de l’abîme;
Hommes, il resplendit, féconde, inspire, anime,
Et cette vénérable et sereine lueur
Veut faire sur vos fronts briller de la sueur;
Car le travail est saint, et c’est la loi sublime.
Quoi! ce n’est pas la bêche, ou l’équerre, ou la lime,
Que vous avez aux poings, c’est le glaive! Pourquoi?
Parce que l’ouvrier marche en avant de toi,
Paysan. Il se hâte et l’avenir l’invite.
L’un va trop lentement et l’autre va trop vite.
Peut-être. Dieu le sait. Mais est-ce une raison,
O peuple, pour emplir de spectres l’horizon,
Pour plonger dans l’horreur vos mains désormais viles,
Et faire sangloter le tocsin dans les villes?

Tout est la vie; et Dieu n’a pas construit de mur.
Ah! s’il est au-dessus de nous, dans cet azur
Où les réalités sont les axes des mondes,
S’il est des buts certains, s’il est des lois profondes,
Si l’aube en se levant dit vrai, si l’astre est pur,
Et si le ciel est pour la terre un ami sûr,
Si la vie est un fruit et non pas une proie,
L’homme a pour droit, devoir et fonction la joie,
Le travail et l’amour; et, quel que soit l’éclair
Qui pour un instant jette un orage dans l’air,
Il n’est pas de colère âpre, inhumaine, athée,
Terrible, qui ne doive être déconcertée
Par une mère ayant au sein son nourrisson.
Quoi! partout la fureur! Quoi! partout le frisson,
Le deuil, des bras sanglants et des fosses creusées!
Quoi! troubler le soleil glorieux, les rosées,
Les parfums, les clartés, le mois de mai si beau,
Les fleurs, par l’ouverture affreuse du tombeau!
Ah! fussiez-vous vainqueurs, qu’est-ce que la victoire?
Vous aurez le cœur froid, vous aurez l’âme noire.
A la fraternité rien ne peut suppléer.
Ah! réfléchissez. Dieu vous créa pour créer,
Pour aimer, pour avoir des enfants et des femmes,
Pour ajouter sans cesse à vos foyers des flammes,
Pour voir croître à vos pieds des fils nombreux et forts,
Pour faire des vivants; et vous faites des morts!
Vous qui passez, pourquoi haïr celui qui passe?
Accordez-vous les uns aux autres votre grâce,
Arrêtez! Arrêtez! Fraternité!

*

Tout fuit.
Mais l’apôtre se sait écouté par la nuit;
Et n’est-ce pas qu’il doit parler aux solitudes,

O Dieu, les profondeurs étant des multitudes?

(Il continue.)

*

IL PARLE DEVANT LUI DANS L’OMBRE

Vivez, marchez, pensez, espérez, aimez-vous.
Nul n’est seul ici-bas. Tout a besoin de tous.
Riche, épargne le pauvre, et toi, pauvre, pardonne
Au riche, car le sort prête et jamais né donne,
Et l’équilibre obscur se refait tôt ou tard.
Tout bien qui naît du mal des autres, est bâtard;
Et les prospérités ne sont jamais qu’obliques
Et menteuses, sortant des misères publiques;
L’arbre est malsain ayant un cadavre à son pied.
Rois, ayez peur du trône où votre orgueil s’assied,
Votre âme y devient spectre, et, maîtres des royaumes,
Hélas! sans le savoir vous êtes des fantômes;
S’appeler Romanoff, Habsbourg, Brunswick, Bourbon,
Empereur, majesté, roi, césar, à quoi bon?
Les Pharaons ont fait bâtir les Pyramides;
Et quand sous le soleil, sous les grands vents numides,
Fouettant leur peuple aux fers, durs comme les destins,
Ils eurent achevé ces monuments hautains,
Qu’ont-ils mis dans ces blocs prodigieux? leur cendre.
O rois, cela ne sert à rien d’être Alexandre,
Sésostris, ou Cyrus à qui le sort sourit,
Il vaut mieux être un pauvre appelé Jésus-Christ.
Le mal que nous faisons trop souvent nous encense;
Hélas, qui que tu sois, puissant, crains ta puissance,
Qui, de l’autre côté du tombeau, fait pitié.
On est flatté par où l’on sera châtié.
Vous qui faites trembler, tremblez. — Que tout s’apaise!
Quant à toi, travailleur sur qui le fardeau pèse,
Toi qui te sens lion et qu’on traite en fourmi,
Ne perds pas patience et sache attendre, ami! —
En venir aux mains? Non. Certes, ton droit suprême,
C’est de vivre, d’avoir du pain, d’exiger même
Plus de salaire et moins de peine, j’en conviens;

L’immensité te doit ta part des vastes biens,
Vie, harmonie, amour, joie, hyménée, aurore.
L’avenir n’est pas noir; c’est le matin qui dore
Et remplit de clarté rose les petits doigts
Du nouveau-né riant dans sa crèche, et tu dois
Vouloir cet avenir éblouissant et juste;
Tu dois, ferme, appuyé sur le travail robuste,
Réclamer le paiement de tes efforts, tu dois
Protéger ton foyer, et faire face aux lois
Si leur sagesse fausse à tes droits est contraire,
Et nourrir ton enfant, — mais sans tuer ton frère!
Sans blesser la patrie et meurtrir la cité!
L’idéal ne veut point mêler à sa clarté
Les Saint-Barthélemys et les Vendémiaires;
Les principes sereins sont de hautes lumières;
Dans la Terre Promise on ne met pas la mort;
L’espérance n’est pas faite pour le remord;
Peuple, sur le cloaque informe du carnage,
Quel que soit le tueur, sais-tu ce qui surnage?
C’est sa honte. — L’opprobre éternel du vainqueur,
La pâle liberté morte et l’épée au cœur,
Pour soi l’abjection, pour d’autres le martyre.
C’est là toute la gloire, ô peuples, qu’on retire
Des fauves actions faites aveuglément.
Hélas! sous le regard fixe du firmament,
Pas de tueurs; laissons les bourreaux dans leurs bouges.
Je hais une victoire ayant les ongles rouges;
Je n’aime pas qu’un droit ait des mains de boucher,
Et, quand il a vaincu, soit forcé de cacher
Les fentes des pavés des villes sous du sable.
Le paradis de Dieu deviendrait haïssable
S’il fallait qu’à travers un meurtre on l’espérât.
Quoi! le droit malfaiteur! le progrès scélérat!
Homme, crains la balance où tout destin s’achève.
Le mal qu’on fait est lourd plus que le bien qu’on rêve.
L’aurore est hors de l’ombre et les nuits vont finir;
Crains de mettre une tache au front de l’avenir;

La liberté n’a pas l’assassin pour ministre;
L’astre dont la sortie ouvre un gouffre est sinistre;
Le progrès n’a plus rien de providentiel
S’il ne peut, sans creuser l’enfer, monter au ciel;
Nul soleil n’a l’ampleur horrible de l’abîme;
Si grand que soit un droit, il est moins grand qu’un crime;
Jamais, non, même ayant la justice pour soi,
On ne peut la servir par le deuil et l’effroi;
La vérité qui tue, affreuse vengeresse,
A des yeux de démon sous un front de déesse;
Une étoile n’a pas droit de verser du sang;
L’aube est blanche; et le bien n’est le bien — qu’innocent.

*

MALÉDICTION ET BÉNÉDICTION

Les malédictions sont sur les multitudes,
Les tonnerres profonds hantent les solitudes,
Rien n’est laissé tranquille en ce sombre univers.
Les prêtres sont pareils à des gouffres ouverts;
Qui regarde dedans voit des choses affreuses.

Si tu planes, tout fuit; tout croule, si tu creuses.
O morne angoisse!

Hélas! l’anxiété partout.
Que de rêves tombés! Que de spectres debout!
L’homme, en proie à la nuit dont le prêtre est complice,
Peut-être a devant lui l’échelle d’un supplice
Quand, sentant des degrés dans l’ombre, il dit : Montons.
Le genre humain ignore, erre, marche à tâtons,
Souffre, et ne voit, s’il cherche une lueur propice,
Qu’un flamboiement farouche au fond d’un précipice.
Tout est-il donc fatal? Rien n’est-il donc clément?
La vie est une dette et la mort un paiement.
Satan règne; le mal fait loi; l’enfer, c’est l’ordre.

Et j’entendais gémir et je voyais se tordre,
Dans la brume que nul n’explore et ne connaît,
Les tristes nations sur qui tout s’acharnait,
Prêtres, juges, bourreaux, scribes, princes, ministres;
Les innombrables flots ne sont pas plus sinistres;
Le tragique Océan n’est pas plus torturé
Par les souffles confus du vent démesuré.
L’homme, en ces profonds cieux qu’il nomme noirs royaumes,
Regarde un effrayant penchement de fantômes,
Et tremblé. L’inconnu lui jette des clameurs.
Le matin lui dit : Pleure! et le soir lui dit : Meurs!
Dans l’Inde, tous les dieux taillés dans tous les marbres,

Les blêmes hommes nus vivants au creux des arbres,
En Grèce Bacchus ivre et traîné par des lynx,
Les molochs en Afrique, en Égypte les sphinx,
Le Baal monstrueux, le Jupiter inique,
Au Vatican le pâle et sanglant Dominique,
Tout menace. Partout les peuples sont maudits.
Les rois seuls, noirs élus, sont dans des paradis,
Joyeux, superposés aux supplices des hommes;
Les courtisans dorés sont les vils astronomes
Qui contemplent d'en bas les rois, ces faux soleils;
Et les rois sont contents de vivre; et leurs sommeils,
Leurs réveils, et leurs lits de pourpre, et leurs carrosses,
Leurs trônes, leurs palais, leurs festins, sont féroces.
La guerre en sort. Le prêtre est reptile au tyran.
Le Talmud n'est pas moins lâche que le Koran.
César vainqueur se fait du ciel une province.
Loyola, dur au peuple, est complaisant au prince.
Le fakir est atroce et le bonze est hideux;
Le crucifix est glaive au poing de Jules Deux;
Caïphe, âme où l'enfer profond se réverbère,
Interprète Moïse au profit de Tibère.
O deuil! Accablement du morne genre humain!
Pleurs et cris! Sang des pieds aux cailloux du chemin!
Noirceur du ciel empli par l'immense anathème!

La faute est dans Je hais! La faute est dans Je t'aime!
Tout est la chute. Hélas! que faire? Hommes damnés!
Responsables de vivre et punis d'être nés!
Je médite éperdu dans la nuit formidable.

Quel labeur que jeter la sonde à l'insondable!
Quel gouffre que l'azur qui devient de la nuit!
Terreur! tout apparaît et tout s'évanouit.
Le deuil reste.

Oh! disais-je, où donc est l'espérance?

Soudain il me sembla, comme, dans leur souffrance,
Pensif, je regardais les peuples douloureux,
Voir l’ombre d’une main bénissante sur eux;
Il me sembla sentir quelqu’un de secourable.
Et je vis un rayon sur l’homme misérable.
Et je levai mes yeux au ciel, et j’aperçus,
Là-haut, le grand passant mystérieux, Jésus.

*

EN VOYANT UN PETIT ENFANT

Il est le regard vierge, il est la bouche rose;
On ne sait avec quel ange invisible il cause.
N’avoir pas fait de mal, ô mystère profond!
Tout ce que les meilleurs font sur terre, ou défont,
Ne vaut pas le sourire ignorant et suprême
De l’enfant qui regarde et s’étonne et nous aime.

N’avoir pas une tache efface nos splendeurs.
Nous nous croyons le droit d’être altiers, durs, grondeurs,
Et lui qui ne se sait aucun droit sur la terre,
Les a tous. Sa fraîcheur pure nous désaltère;
Il calme notre fièvre, il desserre nos nœuds,
Il arrive des lieux obscurs et lumineux,
Des gouffres bleus, du fond des divins empyrées;
Ses beaux yeux sont noyés de lueurs azurées;
S’il parlait, des soleils il nous dirait les noms.
Dès qu’un enfant est là, nous nous examinons.
Pensifs, nous comparons nos âmes à la sienne;
Le plus juste est rêveur de quelque faute ancienne;
Il suffit, pour qu’on ait besoin d’être à genoux
Et pour que nous sentions de la noirceur en nous,
Que ce doux petit être inexprimable vive;
Et la création entière est attentive
Aux, reproches que fait, même à ce qui reluit,
Même au ciel, puisqu’il est par instants plein de nuit,
Même à la sainteté, triste quand on l’encense,
Cette blancheur sans ombre et sans fond, l’innocence.
De quel droit sommes-nous autour d’elle méchants?
Que nous a-t-elle fait? Nos cris couvrent ses chants.
Son aube à nos vents noirs mêle son pur zéphyre.
Est-ce que sa clarté ne devrait pas suffire
Pour nous rendre cléments et pour dompter nos cœurs?
Non, nous restons ingrats, amers, hautains, moqueurs,

Pleins d’orages, devant cette candeur sacrée.
L’âge d’or, l’heureux temps de Saturne et de Rhée,
Existe, c’est l’enfance; il est sur terre encor;
Et nos siècles de fer sur ce tendre âge d’or
N’en font pas moins leur bruit de glaives et de haines,
Et l’on entend partout le traînement des chaînes.

Vous êtes de la joie errante parmi nous,
Enfants! riez, jouez, croissez. Vos fronts sont doux,
Et la faiblesse y met sa tremblante couronne;
L’épanouissement d’avril vous environne;
Sans vous le jour est morne et le matin se tait;
Chantez. Quand le destin, comme s’il regrettait
De vous avoir dans l’ombre amenés, vous remmène,
Quand vous vous eh allez avant l’épreuve humaine,
Votre âme monte aux cieux dans le parfum des fleurs.
O chers petits enfants, quand, fuyant nos douleurs,
Vous faites dans l’azur serein votre rentrée,
Quand un nouveau-né meurt, on dirait que, navrée,
La terre prend le deuil des jours qui vous sont dus;
Et l’aurore est en pleurs quand vous êtes rendus
Par les roses vos sœurs à vos frères les anges.
Il est dans les linceuls une aile, et, dans les langes,
Il en est une aussi; c’est la même. Ouvrez-la,
Doux amis, sans pourtant nous quitter, pour cela.
Restez, notre prison par vous devient un temple.
Rayonnez, innocents, et donnez-nous l’exemple.
Croyez, priez, aimez, chantez. Soyez sans fiel.
Qu’est-ce que l’âme humaine, ô profond Dieu du ciel,
A fait de la candeur dont elle était vêtue?

*

UN ÉCHAFAUD

LE JUGE sur son siège. LE CONDAMNÉ lié de cordes.
LE BOURREAU, la hache à la main. Au fond la foule.

LE PAPE, regardant l'échafaud.
Je ne comprends pas.

LE JUGE

Prêtre, écoute : un homme tue
Un autre homme.

LE PAPE
Il commet un crime.

LE JUGE

C'est pourquoi
On le prend, on lui fait son procès, et la loi
Le tue. Est-ce clair?

LE PAPE

Oui. La loi commet un crime.

LE JUGE
Qui te donne le droit de nous juger?

LE PAPE

L’abîme.

LE JUGE

Prêtre, respect aux lois.

LE PAPE

Juge, respect à Dieu.
Cet univers visible est un immense aveu
D’ignorance devant l’univers invisible.

VOIX DANS LA FOULE

— Qu’il meure! — Il a tué! — Le talion! — La Bible!
— Le code! — Allons, bourreau, frappe. Va, compagnon!

LE PAPE, à l’assassin condamné.
Toi qui donnas la mort, sais-tu ce que c’est?

L’ASSASSIN

Non.

LE PAPE, au bourreau.

Toi qui va la donner, le sais-tu?

LE BOURREAU

Je l’ignore.

LE PAPE, au juge.

Et toi, sais-tu, devant ce ciel qu’emplit l’aurore,
Ce que c’est que la mort, juge?

LE JUGE

Je ne sais pas.

LE PAPE

O deuil!

LE JUGE
Qu’importe!

LE PAPE

Ainsi vous touchez au trépas,
Vous touchez à la hache, à la tombe, au peut-être!
Ainsi vous maniez la mort sans la connaître!
Vous êtes des méchants et des infortunés.
Dieu s’est réservé l’homme et vous le lui prenez.
Vous n’avez pas construit et vous osez détruire!
O vivants! vous n’avez d’autre droit que de dire
A cet homme qui seul sait ce qu’a fait son bras :
Es-tu coupable? vis, sachant que tu mourras.
O vivants, le ciel sent on ne sait quelle honte

Quand, vous regardant faire en votre ombre, il confronte
Le crime et l’échafaud, l’un de l’autre indignés.
Vous saignez du côté du crime, et vous saignez
Du côté de la loi, croyant faire équilibre
Au meurtrier fatal par le meurtrier libre,
Donnant pour contrepoids au bandit le bourreau.
Vous tirez, vous aussi, le trépas du fourreau!
Vous allez et venez dans l’obscur phénomène!
Dieu fait la mort divine et vous la mort humaine!
Sombre usurpation dont frémit le penseur.
Dieu vit; de l’infini vous percez l’épaisseur,
Peuple, et vous lui changez son coupable en victime.
Un homme monstre est là; vous l’imitez. Un crime
Est-il une raison d’un autre crime, hélas?
Faut-il, tristes vivants qui devez être las,
L’homme ayant fait le mal, que la loi continue?
De quel droit mettez-vous une âme toute nue,
Et faites-vous subir à cette nudité
L’effrayant face-à-face avec l’éternité?
Ce dépouillement brusque est interdit au juge.
De quel droit changez-vous en écueil le refuge?
L’homme est aveugle et Dieu par la main le conduit;
Dieu nous a mis à tous sur la face la nuit;
Il ne nous a point faits transparents; il nous couvre
D’un suaire de chair et d’ombre qui s’entr’ouvre
Quand il veut, au moment indiqué par lui seul;
Vivants, c’est à la mort que tombe le linceul;
Nous sommes jusque-là des inconnus; Dieu laisse
Aux âmes un instant pour rêver, la vieillesse,
Le droit à la fatigue et le droit au remords;
Malheur si nous faisons soudainement des morts!
Que l’obscur Dieu, toujours clément, toujours propice,
Étant le fond du gouffre, ouvre le précipice,
Il le peut, c’est en lui qu’on tombe, et, quel que soit
Le rejeté, c’est Dieu pensif qui le reçoit;
Mais, vivants, votre loi, qu’est-elle et que peut-elle?
Sur nous la forme humaine, en nous l’âme immortelle;

Nous sommes des noirceurs sous le ciel étoile.
Je m'ignore, je suis pour moi-même voilé,
Dieu seul sait qui je suis et comment je me nomme.
L'arrachement du masque est-il permis à l'homme?
De quel droit faites-vous cette surprise à Dieu?
Quoi! vous mettez la fin de la vie au milieu!
Vous ouvrez et fermez la fatale fenêtre!
A tâtons! Apprenez ceci : mourir c'est naître
Ailleurs. Quel noir travail, ô pâles travailleurs!
Comprenez-vous ce mot épouvantable, ailleurs?
Frémissez. Savez-vous le possible d'une âme?

(Montrant le condamné.)

Cet homme a fait le mal pour nourrir une femme
Et des enfants sans pain; mais vous, avez-vous faim?
Vous le tuez. Pourquoi? Trouvez-vous bon qu'enfin
Le crime et la justice aient la même figure?
O mort, sauvage oiseau, qui sait ton envergure?
Tes ailes couvriraient l'horizon de la mer.
La blanche touche au ciel et la noire à l'enfer.
Que savons-nous? Hélas! le prêtre craint la bible.
Notre âme glisse au bord sinistre du possible.
La conscience humaine habite un cabanon.
Ce que vous faites là, le comprenez-vous? Non.
Avez-vous jamais vu quelqu'un tomber dans l'ombre?
Vous représentez-vous l'immense chute sombre,
Le gouffre, l'infini plein d'un vague courroux,
Ce damné tombant là? Vous représentez-vous
L'ouverture des mains terribles dans l'abîme?
Horreur! l'homme interrompt le silence sublime,
Lui que Dieu mit sur terre afin qu'il attendît.
La justice d'en bas prend la parole et dit :
O justice d'en haut, c'est moi qui suis la vraie!
Fils, croyez un vieillard, nous sommes tous l'ivraie.
A peine aperçoit-on la faulx; quant à la main,
Cachée en ce lieu noir qu'on appelle Demain,

Nous ne la voyons pas. Elle frappe à son heure.
Tuer cet homme! ô ciel! il me fait peur. Je pleure.
Est-ce qu'il est à moi? Qu'est-il? Dieu seul le sait.
Tuer, sans pouvoir dire au juste ce que c'est,
L'homme au-dessus duquel le ciel profond diffère.
Avez-vous bien pesé ce que vous allez faire?
Vous figurez-vous, juge, et toi, peuple inclément,
L'aile étrange que peut déployer brusquement
L'être subit, sorti du viol de la tombe?
Vautour peut-être, hélas! mais peut-être colombe.
Vous dites-vous ceci : S'il était innocent?
Peut-être il monte alors qu'on pense qu'il descend.
Que devient votre arrêt devant Dieu? Les ténèbres
Peuvent faire à nos lois des réponses funèbres.
Soyons prudents devant ce que nous ignorons.
La terre est un point sombre avec des environs
Illimités de brume et d'espace farouche.
Tout l'infini frémit d'un atome qu'on touche.
N'est-il pas monstrueux de penser que la loi
Et l'homme, en cette lutte où l'on sent de l'effroi,
Mêlent des quantités inégales de crime?
Vous êtes regardés par dessus l'âpre cime;
Ne faites pas pleurer les invisibles yeux.
Vous avez des témoins attentifs dans les cieux;
Ne les indignez pas, ne leur faites pas dire :
L'homme tue au hasard. L'homme, en proie au délire,
A dans de l'inconnu jeté de l'ignoré.
Ah! c'est un attentat triste et démesuré
De jeter quelque chose à la noirceur muette,
Sans savoir où l'on jette et savoir ce' qu'on jette,
D'accroître la stupeur du gouffre avec ce bruit,
La hache, et d'envoyer de l'ombre à de la nuit!

*

PENSIF DEVANT LA NUIT

La prière contemple et la science observe.
Quand, dans le cloître noir de la sainte Minerve,
Galilée abjurait, vaincu, qu’abjurait-il?
Dieu. C’est Dieu qu’entrevoit de loin l’homme en exil.
Des épaisseurs de nuit profonde nous entourent.
Les mondes par des feux échangés se secourent;
Car, ciel sombre, on ne sait quels gouffres sont ouverts.
L’astre fait des envois de rayons, à travers
L’espace et l’étendue immense, à d’autres astres.
L’azur a ses combats; le ciel a ses désastres;
Parfois le mage, au fond des firmaments vermeils,
Distingue d’effrayants naufrages de soleils;
A voir l’effarement des pâles météores
On devine une étrange extinction d’aurores,
Quelque part, dans l’horreur du zénith ignoré.
Dieu seul sait l’étiage et connaît le degré
Jusqu’où doit croître ou fuir la marée inconnue.
L’univers n’est pas moins remué que la nue
Par un souffle; et ce souffle a lui-même sa loi.
Le savant dit : Comment? le penseur dit : Pourquoi?
La réponse d’en haut se perd dans les vertiges.
L’ombre est une descente obscure de prodiges.
Sans cesse l’inconnu passe devant nos yeux.

Mais, ombre, qu’est-il donc de stable sous les cieux?
La justice, dit l’ombre. Aucun vent ne l’emporte.
C’est pourquoi, nous pasteurs, nous devons faire en sorte
Que l’homme reste bon et sincère au milieu
De tous les changements d’équilibre de Dieu.

*

ENTRANT À JÉRUSALEM

Peuple, j’ai dit au Monde et j’ai dit à la Ville :
Plus de guerre étrangère et de guerre civile.
Plus d’échafaud. Devant le ciel bleu Liberté,
Égalité devant la mort, Fraternité
Devant le Père. Aimons. Force, aide la faiblesse.
Éclairez qui vous nuit; guérissez qui vous blesse.
Paix et pardon. Soyez cléments aux criminels.
Le droit des bons c’est d’être au méchant fraternels;
Le juste qui n’a pas d’amour sort du précepte;
Et le soleil n’est plus le soleil s’il excepte
Les tigres et les loups de son rayonnement.
J’ai montré dans le ciel le grand désarmement,
L’équilibre, la loi, l’azur, l’astre, l’aurore.
J’ai dit : Pitié! laissez le repentir éclore.
Juges, pensez; bourreaux, reculez; vis, Caïn.
A qui n’a plus hier ne prenez pas demain;
Laissez à tous le temps de racheter les fautes.
Soyez d’humbles songeurs, soyez des âmes hautes.
Riches, c’est en donnant qu’on s’enrichit; semez.
Pauvres, la pauvreté n’est point la haine; aimez.
Toute bonne pensée est une délivrance.
Si noir que soit le deuil, conservez l’espérance;
Car rien n’est plein, de nuit sans être plein de ciel.
La haine est un vent sombre et pestilentiel;
Aimez, aimez, aimez, aimez, — soyez des frères.
Et maintenant, ayant fait face aux téméraires,
Ayant lavé le fond du vase baptismal,
Ayant diminué sur la terre le mal,
Vieillard pensif qui n’ai d’autre force que d’être
Chez les peuples un pauvre et chez les rois un prêtre,
Compagnon des douleurs, des exils, des grabats,
Je viens près de celui qui fit voir ici-bas
Toute la quantité de Dieu qui tient dans l’homme;

Je prends Jérusalem et je vous laisse Rome,
Jérusalem étant le véritable lieu.
Hommes, je viens me mettre en prière chez Dieu.
Je ne me sens réel que sur ce mont sévère;
L’ombre est au Capitole et l’âme est au Calvaire;
Là-haut l’ange et le saint trouvent que j’ai raison,
Quittant César pour Christ, de changer de maison,
Et je monte, appuyé sur l’aigle et la colombe,
De ce bas-fond, le trône, à ce sommet, la tombe.
Je me fais serviteur du sépulcre, sentant
Près de moi le grand cœur de Jésus palpitant.
O rois, je hais la pourpre et j’aime le suaire;
Et j’habite la vie, ô rois! vous l’ossuaire.
Car la toute-puissance est un squelette noir.
L’homme tend une main au mal, l’autre à l’espoir;
Tantôt il court, tantôt il trébuche, et je mène
Et j’éclaire quiconque aide la marche humaine.
Allons en avant. L’ombre est morte; et déjà tous
Nous sentons la chaleur d’un avenir plus doux.
Nous nous sommes trouvés; longtemps nous nous cherchâmes.
J’ai marché dans la vaste obscurité des âmes;
Je vous ai dit : Je suis le jour. Pour vous je nais.
Et vous êtes venus, voyant que je venais.
O vivants, ouvriers de l’œuvre universelle,
Travaillez; que l’enclume éternelle étincelle;
Soyez purs, soyez doux, soyez frais, soyez bons.
Tous sur le grand travail sacré nous nous courbons.
Nous prêtres, nous prions. Puisse notre prière,
Sortie amour de nous, entrer en vous lumière!
Peuple, aimez. On devient lumineux en aimant.
Ce serait être injuste envers le firmament
Que de répondre aux feux d’en haut par nos ténèbres.
Que, l’azur étant pur, les âmes soient funèbres,
C’est mal; et l’Éternel a fait les vérités,
Les devoirs, les vertus, afin que leurs clartés
Illuminent le sombre intérieur des hommes;
Et pour que, dans le monde insondable où nous sommes,

Et devant l’infini plein d’invisibles yeux,
Les cœurs ne soient pas moins étoiles que les cieux.
Peuples, aimez-vous. Paix à tous.

LES HOMMES

Sois béni, père.

DIEU

Fils, sois béni.

Scène deuxième — Réveil

Le Vatican. — La chambre du pape. — Le matin.

LE PAPE, se réveillant.

Quel rêve affreux je viens de faire!

LA PITIE SUPREME

This long poem was published in February 1879, but in fact written in 1857-1858. It was part of the initial plan of the *Legend of Centuries*, intended to serve as the centre of the poem, but Hugo later changed his mind, removing it from the epic poem.

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I.

Les profondeurs étaient nocturnes et funèbres;
Un bruit farouche, obscur, fait avec des ténèbres,
Roulait dans l’infini qui sait le noir secret;
Ce bruit était pareil au cri que jetterait
Quelque âme immense et sombre à travers l’étendue,
Luttant contre l’abîme et volant éperdue;
Puis cela devenait un tumulte de voix;
Toute la nuit grondait et pleurait à la fois
Comme si l’horizon fauve et crépusculaire
N’était formé que d’ombre et plein que de colère;
Clameur rauque! il semblait qu’ensemble on entendît
L’orageuse rumeur d’une mer qui bondit
Et les voix d’un forum qui parle et délibère.
— Honte, anathème, enfer, deuil! Tibère! Tibère!
Tibère! — et d’autres noms, mêlés à celui-là,
Passaient : — Procuste! Achab! Denys! Caligula!
Sanche! Alonze! Clovis! Sennachérib! Cambyse!
Louis onze! malheur! mort! opprobre! — et la bise
Était comme une foule, et de ces noms proscrits
Chaque syllabe était faite de mille cris;
Et j’entendais : — Saül! Omar! Ivan! Clotaire! —
Et de tout l’océan et de toute la terre,
Des chaumes, des palais, des masures, des vents,
Des croix, des millions de lèvres des vivants,
Des mâchoires des morts grinçant leur affreux rire,
Des fumiers où croupit ce qui ne peut s’écrire,
Ces noms sortaient ainsi que d’horribles oiseaux;
Les squelettes n’avaient qu’à remuer leurs os
Pour en faire jaillir un de ces noms sinistres;
Et des larves de rois, des ombres de ministres,
Richelieu, Louis treize, Arcadius, Rufin,
Fuyaient; on entendait des voix dire : — J’ai faim!
J’ai froid! quand donc viendra le jour? la terre est noire!

C’était le grand sanglot tragique de l’histoire;
C’était l’éternel peuple, indigné, solennel,
Terrible, maudissant le tyran éternel.

*

O malédiction, d’où viens-tu, misérable?
La bouche d’où tu sors, c’est la plaie incurable,
C’est l’égout où le sang filtre en rouges caillots,
C’est l’entaille que font les haches aux billots,
C’est le tombeau béant, c’est la fosse entr’ouverte
D’on ne sait quelle haleine agitant l’herbe verte.
O malédiction, d’où viens-tu? De la nuit.

La dernière clarté sous toi s’évanouit;
Tu viens après le Crime, et répands sur le monde
Une autre obscurité qui n’est pas moins profonde,
Et la façon dont toi, le Deuil, tu le combats
Fait tomber la pensée et l’âme encor plus bas;
Et rien ne vit, et rien n’éclôt, et rien ne crée,
Et rien ne se console en ton horreur sacrée;
Ce n’est qu’avec l’éclair que tu veux éclairer;
Tu ne veux que punir, damner, désespérer,
Spectre, et tu fais servir à ces fatals usages
Les esprits, les rayons, les poètes, les sages,
Tout ce qui vient d’en haut, tout ce qui vient de Dieu;
Ta caverne, fermée au ciel clément et bleu,
N’admet qu’un flamboiement lugubre sous son porche;
Un astre dans ta main deviendrait une torche;
Si tu pouvais, du fond de ton puits sépulcral,
Prendre à Saturne en feu son cercle sidéral,
Hélas, tù n’en ferais que l’anneau d’une chaîne;
O malédiction, tu te nommes la Haine;
Tu ne tends pas les bras, non, tu montres les poings.

Et je restai rêveur. — Es-tu juste du moins?

La malédiction a répondu :
 — Je souffre.
Je juge. Le volcan, hagard, crache le soufre,
L’âpre océan l’écume, et l’homme la douleur.
Je suis ce qui déborde et tombe du malheur.
Je suis l’affliction terrestre qui réclame,
Et s’irrite et grandit jusqu’à devenir flamme;
Je suis le râle amer de ce globe fatal;
Je suis le hurlement du sombre piédestal;
Pourquoi m’insultes-tu, moi qui pleure? L’ulcère
N’a-t-il donc plus le droit de dénoncer la serre,
La dent et la tenaille? et, quelle est ton erreur!
C’est moi le deuil; c’est moi l’effroi; c’est moi l’horreur;
L’étoile flamboyante allongée en épée,
C’est moi; je suis l’immense et funèbre épopée
Qu’écrit au mur du crime une lugubre main.
Et quant à ma justice, ô ver de terre humain,
Je m’appelle Isaïe et je m’appelle Dante. —

Quel esprit ne plierait sous cette voix grondante?
Elle est la conscience; elle a raison; pourtant
Après qu’elle a parlé le cœur n’est pas content,
Et l’on entend, au fond de l’infini qui pense,
Comme un profond soupir d’une autre conscience;
Et le songeur frissonne et reste soucieux
Entre ce cri terrestre et ce soupir des cieux.
Oh! ces Dantes géants, ces vastes Isaïes!
Ils frappent les fronts vils et les têtes haïes;
Ils ont pour loi punir, trancher, supplicier;
Ils sont la probité sinistre de l’acier;
Nul homme n’est plus grand sous le ciel solitaire
Que ces archanges froids et tristes de la terre;
Ils sont les punisseurs; quand, jadis tout-puissant,
Songeant qu’il reste encor dans ses ongles du sang,
Un coupable franchit, tremblant, presque en prière,
La porte de la tombe, il les trouve derrière;
De tous les jours du crime ils ont le lendemain;

Une balance énorme oscille dans leur main;
La nuit a pour sommet leur formidable gloire;
Ils sont les juges d’ombre, ils sont l’équité noire;
Mais, gouffres! laissez-moi, quel que soit le chemin,
M’évader d’un coup d’aile étrange et surhumain,
Et m’enfuir, et chercher la justice étoilée!

II.

Regardez cet enfant de cinq ans; la feuillée
N’a pas d’oiseau plus pur, plus frais, plus ébloui;
La bénédiction semble sortir de lui;
Tout en lui dit : — Vivez! aimez-moi! je vous aime. —
Il est fait de candeur et de grâce suprême;
Quoiqu’il ignore tout, il a l’air d’un flambeau;
Trait d’union de l’aube à l’ombre, il est si beau
Et si doux qu’on dirait que l’église et la fable
Ont dû, pour composer cette tête ineffable,
Mêler l’enfant Jésus et l’enfant Cupidon;
Son regard ingénu fait l’effet d’un pardon;
Et l’homme le plus dur lui-même est sans défense
Devant cette adorable et radieuse enfance;
Il est colombe, il est agneau; ses cheveux d’or
Rayonnent; il caresse et chante; il est encor
Tout plein de la bonté divine; il en arrive;
C’est le nouveau venu de la céleste rive;
On dirait un petit archange éblouissant;
Il monte sur un trône; oh non! il y descend;
Pourtant on sent en lui la pauvre âme asservie,
La faiblesse profonde et sombre de la vie;
Si beau qu’il soit, c’est l’homme avec son frêle esprit;
C’est de l’infirmité charmante qui sourit;
Notre fragilité redoutable et frivole
Se mêle, ombre terrestre, à sa blanche auréole;
Son pas tremble, et son front ploie ainsi qu’un roseau;
Mais il n’en est pas moins l’innocent du berceau,
Et dans ses beaux yeux clairs où l’amour semble éclore
Il a du paradis toute l’immense aurore.

À présent regardez cet homme, Villeroy ;

Il vient, l’ange le voit approcher sans effroi,

Et cet homme, du haut du balcon de Versaille,
Lui montre au loin la foule énorme qui tressaille
Et s’agite et se meut, bonne et calme d’ailleurs,
Le grand fourmillement des hommes travailleurs,
Les pas, les fronts, les yeux, l’ouvrier aux bras rudes,
Les ondulations des vastes multitudes,
La ville aux mille bruits vivants, graves et doux,
Et dit à cet enfant : Tout ce peuple est à vous!

Vous avez ces enfants, ces hommes et ces femmes;
Vous possédez les corps, vous possédez, les âmes;
A vous leur toit, à vous leur or, à vous leur sang;
Le champ et la maison sont à vous; ce passant
Vous appartient; soufflez si vous voulez qu’il meure;
Toute vie est à vous, en tous lieux, à toute heure;
Ce vieillard au front chauve est une chose à vous;
Tous les hommes sont faits pour plier les genoux,
Vous seul êtes créé pour vivre tête haute;
Tous se trompent, vous seul ne faites pas de faute;
Dieu ne compte que vous, vous seul, au milieu d’eux;
Votre droit est le droit de Dieu même; et tous deux
Vous régnez, devant vous le monde doit se taire;
Dieu n’a pas le ciel plus que vous n’avez la terre;
Il est votre pensée et vous êtes son bras;
Il est roi de là-haut et vous Dieu d’ici-bas.
Tout ce peuple est à vous.
          Le pauvre enfant écoute.
Qui donc vient de parler? C’est le démon sans doute;
Non, c’est l’homme; fatal parce qu’il est rampant;
Le courtisan est fait du ventre du serpent.
Affreux souffle embaumé de la bouche pourrie!
Crime! ô le plus hideux des meurtres, flatterie!
O de tous les poisons le plus lâche, le miel!
Crever les yeux d’une âme à peine hors du ciel!
Submerger dans l’orgueil une raison qui flotte!
Dessécher un enfant, hélas! faire un despote!
Faire un prodigieux égoïste! un tyran

Arrêtant le progrès sur le divin cadran!
Faire un être effréné qui dira : — Je suis l’arche!
Je suis l’autel! — pour qui le genre humain en marche,
Le bien, le mal, les yeux en pleurs, l’homme vivant,
Ne seront que de l’ombre et du bruit et du vent!
Déchaîner un sinistre avenir dans le Louvre!
Abuser du moment où toute lèvre s’ouvre
Pour lui verser ce philtre exécrable et nouveau!
Dénaturer un cœur! forcener un cerveau!
Enivrer l’ignorance, enivrer l’innocence
Du formidable vin de la toute-puissance!
Mettre, avec un sourire abject et triomphant,
Tout un peuple, hochet, dans la main d’un enfant,
Et les laisser rouler l’un et l’autre aux abîmes!
Penseur! qui que tu sois, ce sont là deux victimes.
Plains ce peuple, mais plains l’enfant qu’on abrutit.
Mères! ayez pitié de ce pauvre petit!
Pendant qu’un assassin sur son âme se dresse,
Tuant en lui l’amour, la vertu, la tendresse,
Prenant ses bons instincts, traître, et les étouffant,
Il est là, doux et seul, et rien ne le défend.
Oh! l’éducation! quel bienfait, ou quel crime!
Frêle tête d’enfant qu’un idiot déprime!
Sombre adulation qui mêle et qui pétrit
L’infini, l’absolu, dans un chétif esprit!
Qui fait que désormais, la prenant à la lettre,
Un homme faible et né d’une femme va mettre
Son triste crâne étroit, fait pour durer si peu,
En équilibre avec le front même de Dieu,
Avec le profond ciel plein d’ombre et plein de joie,
Avec ce grand cerveau de l’abîme où flamboie
Le lever effrayant des constellations!

*

Et Louis quinze est fait.

*

O transformations!
Oui, c’est fini; l’enfant a bu la coupe sombre;
Sa débile raison s’évanouit et sombre;
— Tout ce peuple est à vous! — mot d’où Tibère sort!
Breuvage qui rendrait insensé le plus fort!
Noir nectar! cette mort de son âme, il y goûte;
Quelque chose de lui s’éteint sous chaque goutte;
Et le voilà qui va chanceler à jamais!
Il sera le passant ivre des hauts sommets.
— Tout ce peuple est à vous! — mot terrible! à mesure
Qu’il y songe, il en sent plus avant la morsure;
Une stupide joie avec un vaste ennui;
Quelqu’un qui n’est pas lui se développe en lui;
L’ignorance en son cœur filtre, marais immonde;
Que sert de lire un livre étant maître du monde?
Apprendre, étudier, travailler, à quoi bon
Puisqu’on est roi de France, impeccable, Bourbon?
Oh! songer que ce trône et ce sceptre et ce glaive
Aboutissent au vide, à la furie, au rêve,
Que cette clarté perd celui qu’elle conduit,
Et que cette splendeur énorme est de la nuit!

Donc la terre est à lui, les hommes et les femmes!
Toutes les passions l’allument de leurs flammes;
Sa volonté devient plus fauve à tout moment;
Il grandit; et l’on sent poindre lugubrement
L’ongle du tigre au bout des ailes de l’archange;
Il ne sait même pas qu’il déchoit et qu’il change;
Il s’ignore imbécile, il s’ignore méchant,
Tant dans la voie obscure, hélas, il va penchant!
Il vivra maintenant hors du vrai, dans un songe,
Ayant en lui, dans l’ombre où son rêve le plonge,
La chimère de plus, l’humanité de moins;
Plein d’opprobres devant tous les peuples témoins,
II, est cynique, il est infâme, il est horrible;

Il foule de l’azur la frontière impossible;
Il se suppose au ciel et l’enfer en lui croît;
Il dit : Tout m’est permis, et seul j’existe. Il croit
Avoir sous ses talons de la poussière d’astres;
S’il en tire un plaisir, qu’importe cent désastres!
Chaque jour il descend la honte d’un degré;
Il délire; il peut bien tourmenter à son gré
Le peuple, puisque Dieu tourmente la nuée;
Il prend la vierge et fait une prostituée;
Quoi! n’est-il pas le roi, le maître, le seigneur?
L’homme lui doit son sang, la femme son honneur;
Quoi qu’il fasse, il contient le droit et le mystère;
S’il lui plaît de manger de la fange, la terre,
Qui l’adorerait loup, l’adorera pourceau;
Chaque vice à son tour met sur son front le sceau;
Il fait de la puissance un effort inutile;
Il a sous lui son siècle en travail qu’il mutile;
Il tient le sceptre ainsi qu’un aveugle un bâton;
De toutes les grandeurs redoutable avorton,
Être sans nom, qui, frêle et misérable en somme,
Fait de cendre et promis aux vers, n’est plus un homme,
Ayant un idéal immonde pour milieu,
Échoué dans le monstre à mi-chemin du dieu.

III.

Maintenant, que chacun sonde son propre abîme.
Voyons, quiconque vit, faible, fort, grand, infime,
Riche, pauvre, l’heureux, celui qui va pieds nus,
Les passants de la rue et les premiers venus,
Celui qui perd sa vie et celui qui la gagne,
Nous tous, supposons-nous portés sur la montagne,
Supposons-nous l’enfant, l’ignorant, l’innocent,
Avec le genre humain sous nos regards gisant,
Et la terre à nos pieds, vertigineuse et grande,
Qu’on nous donne! — A présent, qu’une voix nous demande
A nous qui sommes là, béants, sans point d’appui :
— Est-il un seul de vous qui réponde de lui?
Est-il un seul de vous qui dise : Je suis l’être
Que n’éblouira point cette vaste fenêtre
Du pouvoir radieux, gigantesque et charmant;
L’âme supérieure à l’empoisonnement;
Je suis l’enfant plus sage et plus fort que l’ivresse,
Et je ne croirai point la voix qui me caresse;
La terre apparaîtra comme un banquet joyeux,
Le monde s’offrira, je fermerai les yeux;
On me tendra l’orgueil, la volupté, la gloire,
Et je refuserai, moi l’ignorant, d’y boire;
Moi qui ne saurai rien, je devinerai tout!
Est-il un seul de vous qui verra tout à coup,
Grâce aux hommes de ruse et de scélératesse,
S’ouvrir, sous sa faiblesse et sous sa petitesse,
Ce gouffre de splendeur, sans en devenir fou?
Devant le monde entier fléchissant le genou
Et la toute-puissance étoilée et terrible,
Est-il un seul de vous qui s’affirme infaillible? —
Qui donc, hors Jésus-Christ, osera dire : Moi!

Reculez, reculez devant ce gouffre : roi!

Devant ce noir sommet des vertiges : le trône!

O vivants, soyez bons, priez, faites l'aumône.
A qui l'aumône? A tous. Souvenez-vous qu'ici
La compassion sainte est une aumône aussi,
Et que la charité qui nourrit et désarme,
Tombe des mains obole et tombe du cœur larme!

IV.

Tyrannie! escalier qui dans le mal descend!
Obscur, vertigineux, fatal, croulant, glissant!
Toutes les marches vont décroissant de lumière;
Et malheur à qui met le pied sur la première!
C’est la spirale infâme et traître aboutissant
A l’ombre, et vous teignant les semelles de sang.
La conscience aveugle y mène l’âme sourde.
A chaque pas qu’on fait, la chair devient plus lourde;
L’animal sur l’esprit pèse de plus en plus,
Et l’on se sent du souffle universel exclus;
Aujourd’hui c’est la faute et demain c’est le crime;
On tuera demain ceux qu’aujourd’hui l’on opprime.

Et l’on descend ainsi que dans un rêve; et l’air
Est plein de visions; et, dans un blême éclair,
Tous les masques qui sont l’épouvante du monde,
Le lâche, le félon, le féroce, l’immonde,
Des profils effarés et des visages fous
Flottent...
— C’est toi, Caïn? Noirs Césars, est-ce vous?
L’odeur des encensoirs aux odeurs d’ossuaires
Se mêle, et, dans les plis des longs draps mortuaires,
Tous les spectres sont là, sous l’affreux firmament,
Montant et descendant ces degrés lentement;
Chaque âme de tyran, misérable, est leur antre;
Agrippine au flanc nu criant : Frappe le ventre!
Ninus, Sémiramis, Achab et Jézabel,
Molay jetant sa cendre à Philippe le Bel,
Agnès la réprouvée et l’excommuniée,
Berthe par la tenaille ardente maniée,
Stuart sans tête, Albrecht sans langue, et Médicis,
Avec la Messaline et l’Alexandre Six,
Rôdent lugubrement le long de cette rampe;

Lady Macbeth y cache avec ses doigts sa lampe;
Maude y tâte le corps de son père encor chaud;
Un effrayant cheval y traîne Brunehaut
Et lui fait rebondir la tête à chaque marche;
Et Cyrus, Josué, le sanglant patriarche,
Alaric, massacrant les peuples à genoux,
Passent en vous disant : Règne, et fais comme nous.
Chaque forfait vous parle et dit : Suis mon exemple.
On est dans un sépulcre, on se croit dans un temple.
Chaque marche, ô terreur! vivante sous vos pas,
Vous pousse affreusement vers la marche d'en bas :
— Descends, Charles! descends, Frédéric! descends, Pierre!
Deviens de plomb, deviens d'acier, deviens de pierre!
Le sang des bons après le sang des innocents!
Règne! plus bas! plus bas! descends! descends! descends! —

Se retenir? comment? Remonter? impossible!
Et l'on descend; le jour, de moins en moins visible,
S'éteint sur les degrés hideux; et pas d'amis,
Pas de remords, ou bien des remords endormis,
Pas d'astre, aucun appui, nul guide, les cieux vides,
Le gouffre; et l'on entend ronfler les Euménides.

V.

Hélas! je me suis pris la tête dans les mains;
J’ai contemplé la brume, éclairé les chemins,
J’ai songé; j’ai suivi de l’œil de la pensée
La grande caravane humaine dispersée
    Tantôt dans les bas-fonds, tantôt sur les sommets,
    Avec ses chameliers, avec ses Mahomets,
    Marchant sans but, sans ciel, sans soleil, sans patrie,
    Blême troupeau montrant son épaule meurtrie,
    Son dos sombre où l’on peut compter les nœuds du fouet;
    Tandis qu’au loin le vent ténébreux secouait
    Les barques sur la mer et sur les monts l’yeuse;
    Tandis que, du cadran parque mystérieuse,
    L’heure, coupant, dans l’air, sur la terre et les eaux,
    Toutes sortes de fils avec ces noirs ciseaux,
    Ouvrait et refermait l’angle des deux aiguilles;
    Tandis qu’ainsi qu’un homme est derrière des grilles,
    Le jour pâle attendait l’instant de remonter,
    Lugubre, j’ai passé des nuits à méditer,
    A regarder dans l’ombre informe ce qui rampe,
    Oubliant de moucher la mèche de ma lampe;
    Et, penché sur les fils orageux de Japhet,
    Grave et n’ayant qu’un but, la justice, j’ai fait
    Devant ma conscience austère comparaître
    L’homme qui fut le roi, l’homme qui fut le prêtre;
    J’ai passé la revue étrange des tyrans;
    Ces flamboyants voleurs appelés conquérants
    Ont répondu, pensifs, à l’interrogatoire.
    Les princes, les héros, les chefs, toute l’histoire,
    Ce Cambyse, le monstre idéal, qui mettait
    Un bâillon même au lâche immonde qui se tait,
    Les imans, les sultans, ces convulsionnaires
    Qui dans leur poing crispé tourmentent les tonnerres,
    Déchaînant au hasard là guerre et le chaos,

Noirs, ayant dans les yeux la stupeur des fléaux,
Este, Autriche, Valois, Plantagenet, Farnèse,
Et ces têtes de mort au regard de fournaise
Qui portent la couronne et qu'on nomme césars,
M'ont parlé; j'ai sondé les pâles Balthazars,
Les Amurats ayant les supplices pour fêtes,
Vlad qui faisait clouer les turbans sûr les têtes,
Les Alexandres fous s'égalant à l'Athos,
Les majestés de pourpre aux immenses manteaux,
Roderic, Ethelred, Timôur, Isaac l'Ange,
Ortogrul dans le meurtre et Claude dans la fange,
Christiern, Jean le Mauvais, Jean le Bon, Richard trois;
J'ai regardé de près cette foule de rois
Comme on verrait un choix d'instruments de torture;
Chaque monarque, avec sa tragique aventure,
Je l'ai considéré dans le creux de ma main;
Calme, j'ai fait de l'homme et du temps l'examen;
J'ai de chaque momie et de chaque squelette
Mesuré la hauteur, défait la bandelette;
Mon scalpel a mêlé dans sa dissection
Byzance avec Ducas, avec Joram Sion;
J'ai confessé les lois, lâches entremetteuses;
J'ai scruté les jours faux, les justices boiteuses,
L'impur flambeau des mœurs sur qui le vent soufflait,
Sur le front des tyrans j'en ai vu le reflet;
Je les ai confrontés et pris l'un après l'autre,
J'ai vu, j'ai comparé leur nature à la nôtre;
J'ai pesé les forfaits, j'ai dédoré les noms,
Et, frémissant, j'arrive à ceci-; Pardonnons!

*

Le philosophe amer, que lé fait implacable
Obsède, et que l'histoire inexorable accable,
Triste d'avoir toujours devant son œil pensif
Les mêmes flots brisés sur le même récif,
Indigné, devenu dur et farouche à force

De voir avec le droit la loi faire divorce,
Et triompher l'épée et la hache, et le mal
Retomber sur le front sacré de l'idéal,
Perd patience et dit :
« — La couronne est un crime;
« Toute la royauté n'est qu'un lugubre abîme;
« Le seul pouvoir d'un roi qui vient après un roi
« C'est de faire changer d'attitude à l'effroi;
« L'histoire est l'affreux puits du forfait solidaire;
« Au bois de l'échafaud le bois du trône adhère;
« Tout sceptre épouse un glaive, et la pourpre descend
« Sur les peuples en mare effroyable de sang.
« Le droit divin, miasme horrible! et l'on respire,
« En régnant, la fureur et l'ombre avec l'empire;
« C'est par un escalier de cadavres qu'on va
« A ces pavois sanglants que la force éleva;
« Leurs vrais degrés, ce sont les marches gémonies.
« Pour cinq ou six héros, pour deux ou trois génies,
« Que d'étranges bourreaux, que de fous, que de nains!
« Et combien de Nérons pour quelques Antonins!
« Un roi de tous les rois, quoi qu'il fasse, est la somme.
« L'antique despotisme est le tourment de l'homme;
« Depuis quatre mille ans, sous le grand ciel serein,
« L'humanité rugit dans ce taureau d'airain;
« Et l'imprécation ne choisit pas; et l'ombre
« Ne sent pas un rayon dans les douleurs sans nombre.
« Depuis quatre mille ans ce globe, aveugle enfer,
« Pleure et grince des dents sous les trônes de fer;
« Les rois sont des Plutons dont la terre est l'Érèbe.
« Sur ces durs chevalets, guerre, famine, glèbe,
« Le genre humain râlait dans le bagne fatal,
« Scié par deux bourreaux, l'ignorance et le mal;
« La mort, entre ses doigts qu'une flamme environne,
« Tournant l'horrible scie, en a fait la couronne.
« Est-il un roi sans deuil, sans trouble et sans remords?
« Hélas! en est-il un qui, s'il va chez les morts,
« Ne s'entende nommer tout bas dans l'ossuaire?

« Tout monarque est un pli de l’immense suaire.
« Les meilleurs font pleurer, saigner, souffrir, crier;
« Trajan est prescripteur, Titus est meurtrier;
« Ces despotes sont hors de la loi naturelle.
« Et qu’est-ce que pourrait bégayer Marc-Aurèle
« Entre Octave, l’ancêtre, et Commode, le fils?
« Tarquin tient Rome, Thèbe est sous Aménophis,
« Jean règne sur la neige et Rustem sur les sables,
« Tous se mêlent dans l’ombre, et tous sont responsables;
« On voit tous les mauvais sous les bons transparents.
« Nuit triste! le lion et le loup sont parents;
« On a le monde; on mange, on rit, on se tutoie
« Entre vautours, d’un bout à l’autre de la proie;
« Mahomet, appelant Hildebrand par son nom,
« Lui frappe sur l’épaule et lui dit : compagnon!
« Ah! du fauve océan toute goutte est amère.
« Le Kremlin voit, pendant qu’il tette encor sa mère
« Poindre un rictus d’hyène au petit Pierre enfant;
« Charles-Quint, qui dompta l’Europe en l’étouffant,
« Boa sombre, a pour fils le livide crotale;
« La vieillesse est funèbre et l’enfance est fatale;
« O mystère effrayant des rois infortunés!
« Démons quand ils sont morts, monstres dès qu’ils sont nés,
« Le genre humain les compte en comptant ses supplices,
« Et de tous leurs cercueils leurs berceaux sont complices.
« Quand le peuple au gibet s’agite agonisant,
« Pas un fil de la corde, hélas, n’est innocent;
« Quand le monde est aux fers dans l’affreuse géhenne,
« Tout chaînon a sa part du crime de la chaîne.
« Est-il de bons rois? Non, dit Épictète; non,
« Dit Platon; non, dit Jean à Pathmos; et Zénon
« Dit : Il est de bons rois comme de bonnes haches.
« Les abeilles, les lys, les soleils, sont des taches.
« Henri quatre, l’histoire un jour dira de toi :
« Il n’était pas méchant, non, mais il était roi.
« Ah! quand l’autodafé lamentable s’allume,
« Quand le noir patient prend feu, se tord et fume,

« Une flamme peut-elle, alors que le brasier
« Mord la victime et cherche à s’en rassasier,
« Quand le mourant frémit dans l’angoisse dernière,
« S’isolant du bûcher, crier : Je suis lumière!
« Non, pas un roi n’est bon, non, pas un roi n’est doux,
« Et tous sont dans chacun et chacun est dans tous.
« Peuple! au moins jette-leur la haine expiatoire!
« Tous ont au front la main sanglante de l’histoire.
« Anathème sur tous! »

Et c’est précisément
Cette fatalité qui fait mon tremblement.

Oh! je me sens parfois des pitiés insondables.
Je gémis sur les grands et sur les formidables,
Sur les démons grondants et sur les dieux tonnants;
Devant l’accablement des sombres continents,
Devant l’horreur, devant l’antre de nos annales
Difforme et pénétré de lueurs infernales,
C’est à vous que je songe et que je compatis,
Tristesse des tyrans sous la pourpre engloutis,
Souci mystérieux des.rois, mélancolie
Du tigre méditant sur sa morne folie.
Pesant la conscience, observant l’horizon,
Je me prends à douter que le juge ait raison
Et que l’historien tienne le vrai coupable.
Et du passé perdu dans la brume impalpable,
Du présent où moi-même autrefois j’étouffais,
De ce gibet, le droit, de ce charnier, les faits,
De cette vision : Louvre, Cirque, Hippodrome,
Empereurs dégradés de l’empire par Rome,
Pierre et César rompant leur monstrueux hymen,
Papes noirs étendant dans les ombres la main,
Rois excommuniés à chandelles éteintes,
Attentats, échafauds, viol des choses saintes,
Peuples trahis, vendus, livrés, prostitués,
Les Narcisses heureux, les Thraséas tués,

Le despote faisant toujours le personnage
Du crime, du poison, du poignard, du carnage,
De tout ce désespoir fauve et démesuré,
Hélas! j’entends sortir ce cri : miserere!

Oui, pardonnons. Dieu sait avec quel soin sévère,
Touchant ces fronts d’airain et ces crânes de verre,
Triste, j’examinais ce tas de tout-puissants;
J’étais là, respirant l’odeur du vieil encens,
Regardant sous le dieu, retournant la médaille;
Je dérangeais le ver qui dans les rois travaille,
Et mon esprit, perdu dans l’horreur, s’enivrait
Du noir musée avec Bossuet pour livret.

Eh bien, grâce!

VI.

Voyons, vous tous, que quelqu’un vienne
Avec moi, jusqu’à l’ombre antédiluvienne,
Jusqu’au loup primitif Nemrod; puis remontons
A nos siècles chrétiens et lettrés, à tâtons;
Évoquons tous les rois, citons à notre barre
Guy le Baveux, Mainfroy le Noir, Jean le Barbare,
Mathias le Sanguinaire et Pierre le Cruel}
Suivons dans les tombeaux quelque âpre Ezéchiel
Qui pour nous ressuscite Aureng-Zeb, et ranime
L’atroce Rhinomète et l’impur Copronyme;
Allons des Grecs aux Turcs, des émirs aux sophis,
Du schah tuant son père au czar tuant son fils;
Faisons lever, hagards, tous ces hommes de l’ombre,
Macbeth, prince d’Angus, Oswy, roi de Northumbre,
Le Valentinien dormant avec ses ours,
Boris dans son Kremlin, Achmet dans les Sept Tours,
Les Pharaons couchés dans les hiéroglyphes,
Les satrapes, les deys, les lamas, les califes,
Les dresseurs de gibets, les traîneurs de canons;
Faisons l’appel des scheiks et des soudans; prenons
Tous les règnes en bloc, en masse tout l’empire;
Interrogeons Eschyle et réveillons Shakspeare;
Aux poètes sacrés faisons des questions;
Que nous répondraient-ils si nous les attestions?
— Ces hommes n’étaient pas pires que d’autres hommes.

Ce qui fait les Césars, c’est l’air fatal des Romes;
Tant qu’Isis voilera la raison, les Memphis
Et les Thèbes auront les Pharaons pour fils;
C’est l’atmosphère étrange et terrible du trône
Qui fait Tudor à Londre et Phul à Babylone.
Nul n’est d’avance Achab, Domitien, Abbas;
Non, non, il ne naît point de démon ici-bas;

Personne n’est créé moitié chair, moitié marbre;
L’humanité n’a point de fruit noir à son arbre;
Non, celui qui fait tout et qui répond de tout
N’a pas mis un dragon, une hydre, un tigre, un loup
Dans cet enfant qui tient sa mère par la robe;
Tout homme naît bon, pur, généreux, juste, probe,
Tendre, et toute âme éclôt étoile aux mains de Dieu.

Si ce cœur est glacé, c’est qu’on éteint son feu;
Si cette aile est cassée et si cet esprit boite,
C’est qu’on l’a comprimé dans une cage étroite;
Si cet homme est affreux, c’est qu’on nous l’a jeté
Dans un moule de crime et de difformité.

L’ignorance, d’où vient le deuil, d’où sort le vice,
A sept mamelles d’ombre, et chacune est nourrice
D’une des sept laideurs du mal, monstre sans yeux;
Tout despote a sucé ce lait mystérieux;
Dès qu’il naît, on lui prend sa pensée, on l’efface;
C’est un petit enfant, que voulez-vous qu’il fasse
Contre ce précepteur effroyable, le mal?
Au delà de la vie et du destin normal
On lui fait un berceau terrible, où les chimères
Vont le bercer pendant qu’il dort, hideuses mères;
Son œil, cherchant le jour, s’ouvre pour ne pas voir;
On l’emmaillotte avec ce linceul, le pouvoir;
Les intérêts abjects, groupés autour du maître,
Lui retirent l’idée et l’air, l’empêchent d’être,
Et, lui cachant le saint, le pur, le grand, le beau,
L’enferment dans lui-même ainsi qu’en un tombeau.
Le premier idiot venu saisit et mène
Ce pauvre enfant roi hors de la raison humaine,
Et d’infimes laquais, en louant les défauts,
Dans cet œil qui fut vrai mettent un regard faux.

S’il suffit d’un duc d’Albe ou d’un Wolsey pour faire
A toutes les horreurs qu’un lâche cœur préfère

Tomber les Henri huit et les Philippe deux,
Qu’est-ce donc quand ils ont, hélas, à côté d’eux,
Au lieu du triste eunuque ou du valet inepte,
Un vaste esprit, faisant de leur faute un précepte,
Flattant leur instinct fauve ou leur impur souhait,
Alexandre Aristote et Louis Bossuet?

*

L’ignorance et la nuit sont les deux sœurs lugubres.
L’une a les cœurs malsains, les esprits insalubres,
Les cerveaux bas; et l’autre a la stagnation
Des ténèbres pesant sur la création.
L’ignorance a les Tyrs, les Babels, les Sodomes,
La guerre et les combats, sombres tempêtes d’hommes,
D’où sortent les Césars, les Habsbourgs, les Capets;
La nuit a le chaos des nuages épais,
Ces tourmentes sous qui l’étoile se dérobe,
Qui grondent, remuant tous les gouffres du globe
De la mer Caspienne au noir lac Michigan;
Et l’une a le despote, et l’autre a l’ouragan.
Elles n’ont pas de cœur, pas de regard, pas d’ailes;
Elles font de la mort; dès qu’avec l’une d’elles,
En présence du sort et du doute, il est seul,
L’homme tremble; elles sont toutes deux le linceul;
Et, soufflant les flambeaux, le guet-apens infâme
Que l’une fait au ciel, l’autre le fait à l’âme.

VII.

J’ai vu l’Inde; je plains le morne tchandâla;
Un homme fraternel jamais ne lui parla;
Sa soif ternit le fleuve; et devant son martyre
La cabane se ferme et la main se retire;
Il est le réprouvé de l’eau, du pain, du seuil;
On dirait que le feu, l’air et la terre en deuil
Le chassent, que le champ le hait, que la matière
Le repousse et se tient hors de lui tout entière;
Il est celui que nul n’abrite et ne reçoit.
Mais du moins, tel qu’il est, hélas, et, quel qu’il soit,
Il voit le jour de tous et son âme lui reste;
Et, quoiqu’on ait jeté sur sa tête funeste
La lèpre et son dégoût, la peste et son charbon,
Non, il n’est pas maudit, puisqu’il peut être bon.

Et maintenant voyez celui-ci. La justice
Resplendit; non pour lui. Que l’erreur l’abrutisse!
Il est roi. Le progrès, lumineux et vivant,
Pour tout le genre humain éclôt, soleil levant;
Lui, ne le verra pas. Chacun peut dans sa course
Boire à la vérité, la grande et chaste source;
Lui seul, sombre altéré, n’en approchera point.
Le mot qu’on dit, le pas qu’on fait, le jour qui point,
N’existent pas pour lui; son oreille est de pierre;
Pas un rayon réel n’avertit sa paupière;
Il semble que le sort n’ait pas d’autre intérêt
Que de le perdre ainsi qu’une horrible forêt;
On lui crée, en dehors de tous les autres hommes,
L’impossibilité d’être ce que nous sommes;
Sans guide en son désert, et n’ayant à choisir
Que du crime en cette ombre où rampe son désir,
Ame aux vils appétits du ventre coutumière,
Hors de toute science et de toute lumière,

Banni de la raison et de la vérité,
Dans la prodigieuse et folle obscurité
Qu’il rend en y passant plus lamentable encore,
Il erre, paria sinistre de l’aurore.

Et de ces deux damnés, dis, lequel plaindras-tu?
L’un est hors du bonheur, l’autre, de la vertu.
Quel est le plus fatal et le plus solitaire,
Dis, l’homme qui n’a pas sa part de pain sur terre,
Ou l’homme qui n’a pas sa part de vérité?

Ah! pleurons sur le roi, ce grand déshérité!

VIII.

Les maudits ont besoin de têtes inclinées
Sur eux, sur leur mystère et sur leurs destinées;
Un regard sans courroux leur semble une faveur;
Et qui se penchera si ce n’est le rêveur?
Qui leur prodiguera la bonté vénérable?
Qui donc ramassera le morceau misérable
Du czar doré jadis, du roi fleurdelysé?
Qui donc aura souci du vieux césar brisé?
Dans ce monde où l’histoire affreuse n’illumine
Que des fourmillements de tombe et de vermine,
Qui donc consolera? qui donc, si ce n’est lui,
Sera l’auguste Job des opprobres d’autrui?
Attendri sur l’effet par l’énigme des causes,
Ayant devant l’esprit l’obscurité des choses,
Il se couchera, grave, indulgent, attristé,
Sur ce vaste fumier qu’on nomme humanité,
Et, des abjections compagnon volontaire,
Voyant la tyrannie et le tyran à terre,
Pour racler cet ulcère il prendra ce tesson.
Oh! plaindre, c’est déjà comprendre. L’horizon
Montre à l’œil moins sévère une aube moins confuse;
La grande vérité sort de la grande excuse.
Retirez l’anathème, une lueur paraît.
Veilleur fiévreux, chercheur du suprême secret,
En vigie au plus haut de la noire mâture,
Le penseur, attentif à toute la nature,
Comparant l’élément et le destin, confond
Dans le même regard surhumain et profond
Les souffles, les hasards, le colosse, la mouche,
Le monstre qui s’éveille et l’astre qui se couche,
Le trajet d’un brouillard aux cieux, et le chemin
Qu’un nuage d’erreurs fait dans l’esprit humain;
Et les linéaments de l’Inconnu surgissent;

Et les princes hagards que les meurtres rougissent,
Avec les Genséric la nuit coïncidant,
Et le glaive et le sceptre, et la griffe et la dent,
Et le tigre et le maître, et l'horreur babélique,
Dans ces compassions immenses, tout s'explique.
Sitôt qu'on a cessé de maudire, le sort
Semble un chaos calmé d'où l'ordre auguste sort;
Les mystères, devant le songeur sans colère,
Sont le gouffre, mais sont le gouffre qui s'éclaire;
Ils n'ont plus de démence, et blanchissent, pareils
A des cieux noirs où vont se lever des soleils;
Et voilà tout à coup que dans l'ombre sacrée,
Calmes, pleines de Dieu, des lois font leur entrée.
On ne Ut pas le livre, on en épèle un mot;
Et l'on frissonne, tant on sent le bras d'en haut,
Tant l'homme est faible, et tant l'énormité divine
Paraît dans ce qu'on voit et dans ce qu'on devine!

On reconnaît qu'ils sont bien peu de chose, hélas!
Tous ces tristes Nérons conduits par les Pallas,
Pour qui Dieu n'est qu'un spectre et les hommes dès nombres.
Cette espèce de mont formé de règnes sombres,
Cet édifice affreux que chaque âge construit
Avec des attentats, de la gloire et du bruit,
Et qui, sanglant, rayé de suintements fétides,
Fait bloc avec les rois, mornes cariatides,
Ce chaos de faits lourds, tristes, hideux, navrants,
Qui charge la mémoire informe des tyrans,
Toutes ces actions sauvages et terribles
Qui donnent dans l'histoire aux Tibères horribles
Des aspects monstrueux de démons écrasés,
Ce tas des vieux forfaits, bronzes vertdegrisés,
Cet amas du granit le plus dur des abîmes,
Ce grand rocher du mal, alluvion des crimes,
Colossal piédestal de Némésis debout,
Large, énorme, une larme, ô Dieu bon, le dissout!

Car les pleurs sont sacrés; ils sortent, pur dictame,
Les pleurs humains, du cœur, les pleurs divins, de l’âme;
Dès que, s’examinant soi-même, on se résout
A chercher le côté pardonnable de tout,
Dès qu’on a rejeté l’amertume chagrine,
Le réel se dévoile, on sent dans sa poitrine
Un cœur nouveau qui s’ouvre et qui s’épanouit.

Un ange vit un jour les hommes dans la nuit;
Il leur cria du haut de la sereine sphère :
Attendez; je vous vais chercher de la lumière.
Il revint apportant dans sa main la pitié.

IX.

Tout se montre à demi. Voyons l’autre moitié.
C’est toujours une chose incertaine, incomplète,
Trouble, que nous faisons asseoir sur la sellette.
Quoi! faire le procès à cet homme? Essayons.

C’est bien. C’est le tyran.

Sous son front sans rayons
L’égoïsme a produit la morne insouciance;
Les deux flambeaux humains, science et conscience,
N’ont jamais un moment flamboyé dans sa main.
Sa conscience est là, morte, sur le chemin,
Les rhéteurs ont soufflé cette flamme éphémère;
On n’est pas sûr qu’il ait ouvert une grammaire.
Il frappe; il ne sait rien; comment l’avertit-on?
En vénérant le sceptre, en baisant le bâton.
Jamais d’objection, quoi qu’il fasse ou qu’il veuille.
Il parle; un peuple entier tremble comme la feuille;
Il a crié : Je règne! et tous ont dit : Régnez!
Il a marché sur tous, tous se sont prosternés;
Conseillé par un prêtre à l’oreille, il s’écrie :
— Je suis dieu. Comme un dieu qu’on m’adore et me prie! —
Les magistrats ont dit : Peuple! c’est le devoir.
Un jour, fou furieux, il a souhaité voir
Des gavials manger des hommes; les édiles
Ont fait faire un palais de marbre aux crocodiles.
Qu’est-ce que l’univers? un immense valet.
Le bien, le juste, ô roi, c’est tout ce qui vous plaît.
S’il veut verser du sang, le sang est une gloire,
Le sang est une pourpre; et s’il désire en boire,
On rendra grâce aux Dieux de la soif de Néron.
La guerre l’étourdit de son vaste clairon.
Caïphe, ayant au cœur Satan, Dieu sur la langue,

Le déclare clément et bon, et le harangue;
Tous les bruits qu'il entend font de la surdité;
La terre entière semble en sa stupidité
Comploter lâchement l'égarement d'un homme;
Sous le roi bête fauve on est bête de somme;
Le monde tend l'échine au bât, la tête aux coups;
Les Romes, les Paris, les Londres, les Moscous,
Bacon et sa raison, Virgile avec sa lyre,
Vont se rapetissant sous ce nain en délire;
On lui fait un instinct d'hyène; on le bâtit
Étroit comme pensée et grand comme appétit;
Qu'il s'élève une voix pour accuser cet homme,
Vingt tribunaux abjects frémiront, ce qu'on nomme
Justice châtiera l'auguste vérité;
L'ombre fera jeter au cachot la clarté;
Tous les bandeaux qu'un front peut porter, il les porte;
Les courtisans sont là qui veillent à sa porte,
Et les tâtent pour voir s'ils sont assez épais;
Il est féroce, obscène, abominable, en paix;
Il avait l'ignorance, on y joint la folie;
Il vole, tue, écrasé, extermine, spolie,
Dresse des échafauds, fait des parjures, ment,
Pillé, égorge, détruit, brûle, naïvement;
Son pouvoir est la grêle aveugle des déluges,
La trombe; — et maintenant, allez aux voix, les juges!

Tacite, qu'en dis-tu? Qu'en dis-tu, Juvénal?
Dieu lui-même est pensif au fond du tribunal;
Et le châtiment craint d'être injuste, et la foudre
Ne peut plus condamner et n'ose pas absoudre.

X.

Vous insistez? Eh bien, insistons. J’y consens.
Oui, don Pèdre égorgeant les infants innocents
Est méchant; oui, Bardas, oui, Léon le faussaire,
Valens, Justinien aveuglant Bélisaire,
Alexandre exposant Callisthène aux lions,
Sont affreux; les Phocas et les Pygmalions
Sont hideux jusqu’au rêve et jusqu’à la chimère;
Xercès sanglant battant de verges l’onde amère,
Constantin Caballin broyant sur les pavés
Aux pieds de son cheval des monceaux d’yeux crevés,
Sapor couvrant de sel une femme écorchée,
Épouvantent; Achab, tourmenteur de Michée,
Didier, Osman, Ratbert, Vitiza, Childebrand,
Les Comnènes, Michel Calafati montrant
Toute la cruauté que contient l’éphémère,
César tuant la loi, Néron tuant sa mère,
Font horreur; ils sont vils, ils sont abjects. Et nous?
Pourquoi ces sénateurs leur parlant à genoux?
Pourquoi ce prêtre athée et faux qui les encense?
Pourquoi les engloutir dans notre obéissance?
Pourquoi, pouvant souffler sur un joug vermoulu,
Le monde accepte-t-il le pouvoir absolu?
Pourquoi les plus nombreux sont-ils donc les plus lâches?
De quel droit, du devoir méconnaissant les tâches,
La terre maudit-elle, après l’avoir construit,
L’homme de cécité, de fureur et de nuit?
O peuple! consentir au tyran, c’est le faire.

*

Pénétrons plus avant dans cette morne sphère.
Questionnons le sphinx, l’énigme, l’inconnu.

Sait-on pourquoi l’on vient et d’où l’on est venu?
Le fœtus choisit-il son destin? Est-on maître
D’indiquer son endroit et son heure pour naître?
Ah! vous voulez qu’on soit responsable? De quoi?
D’être homme de tel siècle ou bien fils de tel roi?
D’être l’atome errant la nuit dans telle zone?
D’avoir été jeté tout petit sur un trône?
D’être sorti sultan du mystère infini?
Est-on donc accusable et sera-t-on puni
De la place où vous met l’obscure destinée,
Quand, semence de vie au vent abandonnée,
On éclôt sur la terre, humble esprit frémissant?
Qu’est-ce qu’il avait fait, ce pauvre être innocent,
Pour être le tyran, pour être une âme noire,
Pour être le damné sinistre de l’histoire,
Pour être un spectre en fuite au souffle des courroux,
Pour que tous les carcans et que tous les verrous,
Tous les gibets froissant leurs tragiques ferrailles,
Toutes les, visions d’ombre et de funérailles,
Tous les vols de corbeaux, tous les vols de vautours,
Passent autour de lui toujours, toujours, toujours!
Qu’est-ce qu’il avait fait pour être Périandre,
Busiris, Constantin, Charles neuf? pour entendre
Les gouffres à jamais aboyer après lui?

S’il eût vu ce destin funèbre, il aurait fui.
Est-ce qu’il n’avait pas aussi lui, dans ces limbes
Où l’être avant d’éclore erre parmi les nimbes
Et d’où l’âme en tremblant sur ce globe s’abat,
Droit à la mère blême et pauvre du grabat?
Avait-il mérité l’exception terrible?
O Dieu qui vannes l’homme aux trous noirs de ton crible
Et qui sèmes au vent ce grain prédestiné,
N’avait-il donc pas droit, ce triste nouveau-né,
Comme tous les enfants qui naissent pêle-mêle,
Au chaume, au galetas, aux souliers sans semelle,
Au haillon laissant voir la maigreur du genou,

Au liard du ruisseau qu’on fouille avec un clou?
N’avait-il donc pas droit à la sainte misère?
Le faire prince et monstre, était-ce nécessaire?
Louvres payés trop cher! ô Kremlins, Alhambras,
Couronne, orgueil du front, sceptre, splendeur du bras,
Marches du trône, éclat, pouvoir, lits de parade,
Fronts courbés, fauteuil d’or de la royale estrade,
Dais de pourpre à travers un nuage aperçu,
Comme il eût dit : jamais! jamais! s’il avait su
Tout ce que vous cachez d’ombre et de précipice.
L’enfant ramassé nu sur le seuil de l’hospice
Ignore ce velours, ignore ce sapin;
Il est béni! Râler sans toit, sans feu, sans pain,
Être le nourrisson à qui, pâle et flétrie,
L’âpre indigence tend sa gorge de furie,
Oh! plutôt qu’être infant, césaréwitch, dauphin,
Mendier, grelotter, avoir froid, avoir faim,
Être le chien humain d’un vil troupeau qui broute,
Garder les porcs, casser des pierres sur la route!
L’homme de l’arsenal qui traîne des fardeaux
Ayant comme un cheval des bricoles au dos,
Le chanteur de la rue à qui le souffle manque,
Le geindre gémissant la nuit, le saltimbanque
Attendant qu’on lui jette un sou dans son chapeau,
Le pêcheur qui toujours a de l’eau sur la peau,
Le nègre entortillant ses fers d’une guenille
Pour ne pas trop sentir le froid de la manille,
Les mineurs enfouis dans leur puits ténébreux,
Ceux-là sont les choisis, ceux-là sont les heureux!
Oh! je le crie, avant qu’il fût né, qu’on réponde,
Qu’est-ce qu’il avait fait, terre, astres, nuit profonde,
Ciel fatal, pour ne pas être un de ces élus!

Ou si décidément du jour il est exclus,
Si le destin lui tend quelque implacable embûche,
S’il faut que dans le crime et le mal il trébuche,
Eh bien! rôder aux bois, tuer dans la forêt,

Mais non pas dans l’histoire où le sang reparaît,
N’avoir pas d’Isaïe acharné sur son ombre,
Être du moins l’objet d’un peu de pitié sombre,
S’appeler le bandit et non pas le tyran!

Quoi! le cafre qui teint ses lèvres de safran,
Le huron manœuvrant sa pirogue d’écorce,
Vole, vous l’absolvez, penseurs! Le brigand corse,
Fauve et traitant le droit comme un pays conquis,
Silhouette sinistre, erre dans les makis,
Vous murmurez : pardon! Nul n’exige qu’un nègre
Ou qu’un malgache, étant stupide, soit intègre;
On les plaint; savent-ils ce que c’est que la loi?
Et vous ne plaignez pas ce sultan ou ce roi,
Cet autre nègre orné d’autres verroteries!
Le zingaro qui vit en dehors des patries
Vous émeut; le mougick à Cronstadt, le hammal
Au Fanar, vous plaidez pour eux s’ils font le mal;
Le loup suit son instinct en ravageant l’étable.
Quoi! vous allez chercher sur son banc lamentable
L’affreux galérien féroce et châtié,
Vous lui tâtez le crâne et vous criez : pitié!
Et vous ne sentez pas, dans ce vide où tout flotte,
Qu’un despote est un pauvre aussi bien qu’un ilote,
Que la pourpre n’est plus qu’un haillon dans la nuit,
Et qu’en cette ombre où l’homme est par l’instinct coriduit,
Où le mensonge s’offre, où le vrai se refuse,
A l’ignorance égale il faut l’égale excuse!

XI.

Croyez-vous donc, songeurs qui vous apitoyez
Sur l’affreux mendiant des ravins non frayés,
Sur le larron des bois, demi-nu, maigre et blême,
Que ce bandit n’est pas un despote lui-même?
Non, il est le tyran sauvage de minuit;
Il prend cette heure triste, avec elle il s’enfuit;
Il est le conquérant du sentier solitaire;
La forêt, qu’il viole en son sacré mystère,
Le regarde arriver comme Rome Attila.
Croyez-vous donc qu’il est sans flatteurs? Non, il a
Sa faim qui lui dit : Prends! sa soif qui lui dit : Tue!
La solitude, fauve et de branches vêtue,
Qui dit : Te voilà seul! voleur! te voilà roi!
Son lourd bâton ferré qui dit : Compte sur moi!
Il a ses muscles durs qui lui disent : Personne
Ne te vaut; le passant en te voyant frissonne;
Tu peux tuer un homme avec un coup de poing.
Il a sa haine au cœur qui dit : N’épargne point!
Et, troués et béants, ses vieux haillons farouches
Baisent son crime avec leurs misérables bouches,
Et, caressant sa main sanglante, et la léchant,
Lui parlent à voix basse et lui chantent ce chant :
— L’or est bon à piller, le sang est bon à boire;
Cherche l’or, cherche l’or, ô conscience noire!
Vois comme ton esprit la nuit étinceler;
Le meurtre ténébreux est fait pour s’étoiler
De sequins rayonnants, de doublons et de piastres;
C’est aux abîmes noirs qu’appartiennent les astres.

XII.

Aux lueurs du flambeau par ma main soutenu,
Tout le fourmillement ténébreux est venu;
Devant mon esprit calme et que l’équité mène,
J’ai donné rendez-vous à, la misère humaine,
A toute l’ignorance, à tout front déprimé,
A quiconque a pour âme un soupirail fermé;
J’ai plaint, les rassemblant sous ma prunelle sombre,
Tous ces demi-vivants, les infirmes sans nombre,
Tous ceux sur qui le deuil tire son lourd rideau,
Le mendiant sans yeux au front ceint d’un bandeau,
Le pauvre homme pied-bot tremblant sur la béquille,
Et je me suis senti, tous étant ma famille,
Tous ayant droit aux pleurs, leur unique trésor,
Une compassion plus douloureuse encor
Pour le boiteux du sceptre et l’aveugle à couronne.

La cécité sur tous pèse et les environne;
Ils sont tous du néant qui souffre; et puis, hélas,
Ces diadèmes d’or sur tous ces crânes plats!
Hélas, ne rien savoir, ne rien voir, et l’empire!
Être tout, n’étant rien; quelle indigence pire!
Quel plus dur dénûment, quel plus morne abandon,
Et quel accouplement plus digne de pardon
Que la toute ignorance et la toute puissance!
Quoi de plus désolé que cette affreuse absence
De la réalité, du vrai, de la raison,
Et du jour, englouti derrière l’horizon?
Entre les malheureux gravissant les calvaires,
Pour ceux-ci qui sont rois serons-nous plus sévères
Parce qu’ils sont plus sourds et plus noirs, et qu’ils ont
Plus d’horreur dans la main et d’ombre sur le front?

XIII.

Oh! je dis aujourd’hui comme toi, mon vieux Dante;
Mais triste et d’une voix moins fauve et moins stridente :
« — Si l’on ne comprend pas, je vais recommencer;
« Ce peuple est comme l’eau qu’on fend sans la creuser,
« Et je lui redirai cent fois la même chose! — »
Quel plaidoyer farouche et quelle rude cause!
La pitié tremble, ayant contre elle tout le cri
Et toute la douleur du genre humain meurtri.

*

O vous, les inconnus, l’irresponsable foule,
Vous sur qui la minute inconsciente coule,
Heureux d’être petits, et sentant quel secours
L’oubli donne aux vivants si confus et si courts,
Ne faisant point un pas qui ne soit effaçable,
N’ayant d’autre souci que d’être grains de sable,
Représentez-vous donc ce que c’est qu’un passant
Qui se croit Absolu, Très-Haut et Tout-Puissant!
Imaginez-vous donc ce que c’est qu’un despote!
Il rit stupidement au peuple qui sanglote;
Sa grandeur, lui venant du néant, l’amoindrit;
L’énormité du trône écrase son esprit;
Sous cet homme l’honneur périt, le droit s’absente.
La paix est un marais de honte croupissante;
Lois, justice, clergé, tout est corruption.
Pour gagner tes procès, es-tu Trimalcion?
Bien, paie. Es-tu Phryné? montre ta gorge aux juges.
On aspire aux tombeaux ainsi qu’à des refuges;
La guerre est un tumulte informe, un cliquetis
De passions, d’instincts sauvages, d’appétits;
Il va sans savoir où de bataille en bataille;
Il allume une ville ainsi qu’un tas de paille;

Et la campagne en feu que brûle ce tueur
Empourpre au loin les monts où rêve, à la lueur
De tous ces tourbillons de flamme et d'étincelles,
Le vautour se fouillant du bec sous les aisselles.
Puis la victoire un jour fuit et le brise, après
Qu'il a fait grandir l'ombre affreuse des cyprès.

*

Quoi! parce qu'un malheur sera fait de puissance,
D'autorité, d'orgueil sans borne, de licence,
De luxe, de bonheur, vous rie le plaindrez pas!
Quoi! parce qu'il verra d'en haut, et nous d'en bas;
Quoi! parce qu'il aura le haut bout de la table,
A gauche un chancelier, à droite un connétable,
Parce que ce malheur, ivre, se croira Dieu,
Parce que, formidable, il sera le milieu
De tout un monde étrange, encens, festins, armées,
Et, comme le bûcher, d'un gouffre de fumées,
Parce qu'il aura, triste, une tiare au front,
Tout ce respect fût-il plus fatal que l'affront,
Ce palais fût-il plus lamentable qu'un bouge,
Cet or rouge fût-il plus brûlant qu'un fer rouge,
Comme cela s'appelle un roi, comme c'est né
Fleurdelysé, béni, harangué, couronné,
Dans un berceau semé d'abeilles, à Versailles,
C'est bien, c'est le damné; vous serez sans entrailles!

*

Regardez-les, sont-ils assez épouvantés!
Les Transtamares sont l'un par l'autre guettés,
Et chacun d'eux, tremblant sans pouvoir s'en distraire,
Met la main au poignard sitôt qu'il voit son frère;
Alonze va changeant de,chambre chaque nuit;
Louis onze grelotte et maigrit; Henri huit
Fait fouiller tous les soirs son lit à coups d'épée;

Rustem est une brute à tuer occupée,
Lisant dans tous les yeux d’implacables desseins
Et dans tous les passants rêvant des assassins.

*

Ah! ces porte-fléaux fléchissent sous leur charge.
Plus le front est étroit, plus la couronne est large.
Hélas, que devenir avec ce genre humain
Dont on ne sait que faire et qu’on a dans la main?
Ah! le roi! des splendeurs ténébreux cénobite!
Vous vous éblouissez du palais qu’il habite,
De la fanfare auguste et fière qui le suit
Et lui fait sur la tête un triomphe de bruit,
Du cortège inouï qui devant ses pas s’ouvre;
Hélas, vous l’enviez pour son spectre de Louvre!
Vous le voyez d’en bas, superbe, impérial,
Puissant, dans un Rœmer, dans un Escurial,
Parmi des hommes d’or et des femmes de soie,
Dans un grand flamboiement qui semble de la joie,
Peuple, et vous l’admirez, sans vous apercevoir
Qu’éclatant au dehors, au dedans il est noir.
A de certains moments savez-vous ce qu’il souffre
Quant un vague réveil lui laisse voir son gouffre?
Vous l’enviez de loin, mais la surface ment.
La douleur est au fond de son rayonnement;
Vous sentez la chaleur, mais il sent la brûlure.

L’heure en frappant lui fait au crâne une fêlure.
Il porte le pouvoir comme un bœuf le licou.

*

Ayez-vous médité sur le tzar de Moscou?
Avez-vous médité sur l’empereur de Rome?
Chiffre obscur! zéro noir qui du monde est la somme!
Avez-vous médité sur l’horreur du sultan?

Une lueur de perle argenté son caftan;
Il voit un paradis de vagues avenues,
De bains lascifs, d’oiseaux, de fleurs, de femmes nues,
Par le vitrail qui s’ouvre au fond du corridor;
Il a sur son turban la lune aux cornes d’or,
L’astre qui fait l’éclipse et qui fait la démence;
Son pouvoir est un champ que la mort ensemence;
Il est comme au milieu d’une mer sous les cieux;
Dans les hideux pensers il est silencieux
Comme ces rocs que vont souiller les stercoraires;
En saisissant le sceptre il a tué ses frères;
Afin qu’il fût despote, afin qu’il fût vainqueur,
A cet homme lugubre on a coupé le cœur;
Son trône est un charnier, sa ville est un décombre;
Cent monstres blancs et noirs, gardant son palais sombre,
D’un maître épouvantable esclaves effrayants,
Le couvent jour et nuit de leurs yeux flamboyants,
Et se penchent, haïs de l’homme et de la femme,
Eunuques de la chair, sur l’eunuque de l’âme.

*

Je vous le dis, les cœurs tendres sont les cœurs grands;
Il est temps qu’on se mette à plaindre les tyrans.
La justice trop juste est sœur de la vengeance.
Pardonnons. Jetons, même aux démons, l’indulgence;
Oui, l’aumône, elle aussi, doit avoir sa grandeur.
N’imprimons le fer chaud sur aucune laideur;
De nos compassions n’exceptons aucun homme;
L’homme juste n’est pas de clémence économe,;
Un monstre est un infirme, et l’infirme a des droits.
L’ignorant, quel qu’il soit, qu’il marche au coin d’un bois,
L’envie au cœur, pieds nus, en haillons, triste rustre,
Ou qu’il ait là couronne en tête, brute illustre,
N’est rien qu’un pauvre aveugle, abject, perdu, tenté;
Oui, l’homme se défait où manque la clarté;
O sinistre unité du mal! analogie

Du fou que fait la faim au fou que fait l’orgie!
Ils ont ce noir lien, c’est qu’ils ne savent pas.
Dans leurs deux sphères d’ombre ils font les mêmes pas »
Ils sont le crépuscule et ne savent que nuire;
Ignorer, c’est haïr; ignorer, c’est détruire;
La brutalité vient, la férocité suit;
L’homme de proie, hélas, sort de l’homme de nuit;
Une prunelle horrible en ces ombres s’allume;
Le brigand, le tyran, c’est, dans la même brume,
Le même oiseau de nuit qui vole, atroce et fou;
Gengiskhan et Mandrin sont le même hibou;
La même obscurité dépravée et farouche
Fait en haut Louis quinze et fait en bas Cartouche.

Oui, je vous le répète, allez, interrogez,
Philosophes, les lois, les mœurs, les préjugés,
Les vieux siècles saignants, ces témoins unanimes;
Creusez, fouillez l’histoire, embaumement des crimes;
Ouvrez ce panthéon des-dynastes défunts
Que dom Calmet conserve avec ses vils parfums;
Scrutez les attentats, sondez les tragédies
Jetant aux grands palais des rougeurs d’incendies,
Que trouvez-vous? ceci. : tous ces grands malheureux,
Bandits broyant la terre ou s’égorgeant entr’eux,
De Constantin l’athée à Joas le lévite,
Du Darius de Perse au Dmitri moscovite,
De l’anglais Edouard au mède Barazas,
Qui, nés princes » sont rois, peuple, seraient forçats.
Qu’est-ce que Charles neuf? c’est Ravaillac. Alonze,
Sanche et Ramire sont des idiots de bronze.
Qu’est-ce que Henri trois? un imbécile. Ivan?
Un insensé. Mourad, le tigre du divan?
Un frénétique. Hélas! l’ignorance les couvre.
Pourquoi la plaindre au bagne et la maudire au Louvre?

XIV.

Et vous ne voulez pas que nous disions : assez!
Que nous tendions les mains pour tous ces insensés,
Que nous avions pitié de ces impitoyables!
Que nous demandions grâce aux destins immuables,
A Dieu, pour ceux qui n’ont point fait grâce, et qui sont
Tombés faibles et nus dans le pouvoir sans fond!
Et vous ne voulez pas que, pesant ces deux chaînes,
L’une qui tient le corps captif dans les géhennes,
L’autre qui fait de l’âme elle-même un caveau,
L’une étreignant le bras, et l’autre le cerveau,
Sentant nos yeux mouillés, notre cœur qui se serre,
Nous disions, inclinés sur l’énigme misère,
Et de tous les cachots comparant la noirceur :
L’opprimé le plus sombre, hélas, c’est l’oppresseur!

Si vous ne plaignez pas ces êtres sur qui pèse
Une fatalité morne et que rien n’apaise,
Ces haïs, ces maudits, qu’est-ce que vous plaindrez?
Refusez-vous le baume aux plus désespérés?
Avez-vous des pitiés décroissant à mesure
Qu’on voit la douleur croître et grandir la blessure?
Reculez-vous devant l’étrange extrémité
Où le malheur devient de la calamité?

*

Oh! soyons bons surtout pour les cruels. C’est triste
Que la bonté, si belle alors qu’elle persiste,
Vis-à-vis des méchants soit si prompte à l’oubli!
Le méchant, c’est le cœur d’amertume rempli.
Vous cherchez les souffrants; il est le véritable.
Oh! le cri de cette âme est le plus, lamentable.
Être le guérisseur, le bon samaritain

Des monstres, ces martyrs ténébreux du destin,
Leur panser leur puissance et leur laver leur crime,
Entre les devoirs saints c’est le devoir sublime.
Est-il donc impossible, ô Dieu, de secourir,
D’assoupir, de calmer, d’aider, de faire ouvrir
A la sainte pitié ses ailes toutes grandes?
Homme, on t’a fait le mal; ce qu’il faut que tu rendes,
C’est le bien; vis, réponds à la haine en aimant,
Et c’est là tout le dogme et tout le firmament.

Quoi! l’amour est fragile et la haine est durable!
Quelle est donc cette loi du deuil inexorable?
O ciel sombre! on a beau se révolter, vouloir
Briser cet anankè, rompre ce désespoir,
L’âpre loi reparaît toujours, sourde et glacée.
Va, philosophe, essaie, insurge la pensée,
La raison, la sagesse humaine, la clarté,
Contre la nuit, l’horreur et la fatalité,
Appelle en aide et mêle à ces saintes émeutes
Job, les Esséniens, Philon, les Thérapeutes,
Voltaire, Diderot, Vicô, Beccaria;
Toujours Satan revient avec le paria,
Toujours l’enfer vomit, comme une doublé lave,
Le démon dans le ciel, sur la terre l’esclave,
Le mal dans l’infini, le malheur ici-bas.
Plaindre Jésus, c’est bien; mais plaindre Barabbas,
C’est aussi la justice; et la grandeur éclate
A relever Caïphe, à consoler Pilate,
Et c’est là le sommet le plus haut des vertus
Que Socrate expirant soit bon pour Anitus.

Oui! les désolateurs, ceux-là sont les plus tristes.

Vous pleurez quand Sylla dresse ses mornes listes;
Vous plaignez les proscrits; mais vous ne savez pas
Tout ce qu’ils ont d’air pur, d’orgueil, de larges pas,
De respiration fière et de paix sublime,

Tout ce qu’ils ont d’azur au fond de leur abîme,
Et, jetés par les vents sur les écueils amers,
De ressemblance avec le libre flot des mers!
Vous ne vous doutez pas de ces immenses joies,
Subir les durs revers, suivre les âpres voies,
Être chassé, traqué, meurtri, persécuté,
Souffrir pour la justice et pour la vérité!
Vous plaignez les proscrits; occupez mieux vos larmes,
Plaignez le prescripteur. Soupçon, angoisse, alarmes,
Remords, voilà sa vie; il se redit les noms
Des bannis, des captifs plongés aux cabanons,
De ceux qu’il a jetés là-bas à l’agonie;
Le vent râle la nuit pendant son insomnie;
Pâle, il prête l’oreille; il écoute le cri
De Pathmos, de Syène ou de Sinnamari;
S’il dort, quel songe! il voit Tibère lui sourire,
Brutus rôder, Caton saigner, Tacite écrire;
Il a beau vivre, idole, au fond d’un tourbillon,
Mettre dans toute bouche ou l’hymne ou le bâillon;
Que dira l’avenir? Il se sent responsable
Des fièvres de l’exil, de la plage de sable,
Du marais, du soleil, et du zèle d’en bas,
Du geôlier harcelant ces fers et ces grabats,
Du valet tourmenteur qui crée, invente, innove,
Et le flatte en frappant la victime; Hudson Lowe
Pèse plus sur les rois que sur Napoléon.

*

Un jour le sacré temple humain, le Panthéon,
Jettera son éclipse auguste sur vos dômes,
Mornes villes du mal, Kremlins, Stambouls, Sodomes,
Et l’oubli couvrira de son brouillard glacé
La fourmilière étrange et noire du passé,
Pendant que l’avenir luira, fronton splendide.
Hélas, en attendant, l’homme, sans jour, sans guide,
Prend des précautions contre l’entraînement

De la fraternité, vertigineux aimant;
Il sent dans sa poitrine une chose suspecte,
Son cœur; l'homme, humble ou grand, large esprit, âme abjecte,
Tâtant le sort ainsi qu'on suit dans l'ombre un mur,
A peur de la pitié comme d'un puits obscur,
Et préfère la haine, et s'attache à la corde
Du mal pour ne pas choir dans la miséricorde.
Le pardon crie : Amour! Quel est cet inconnu?
Faire grâce épouvante, et ce mot ingénu,
Doux, clair, simple : — Aimez-vous, frères, les uns les autres! —
Est si profond qu'il n'est compris que des apôtres.

*

Jean Huss était lié sur la pile de bois;
Le feu partout sous lui pétillait à la fois;
Jean Huss vit s'approcher le bourreau de la ville,
La face monstrueuse, épouvantable et vile,
L'exécuteur, l'esclave infâme, atroce, fort,
Sanglant, maître de l'œuvre obscure de la mort,
L'affreux passant vers qui les vers lèvent la tête,
Le tueur qui jamais ne compte et ne s'arrête,
Le cheval aveuglé du cabestan des lois;
Toute la ville était sur les seuils, sur les toits,
Parlait et fourmillait et contemplait la fête;
Huss vit venir à-lui cet homme, cette bête,
Cet être misérable et bas que l'effroi suit,
Espèce de vivant terrible de la nuit;
Difforme sous le faix de l'horreur éternelle,
Ayant le flamboiement des bûchers pour prunelle,
Il était là, tordant sa bouche sous l'affront;
On voyait des reflets de spectres sur son front
Où se réverbéraient les supplices sans nombre;
Toute sa vie était sur son visage sombre,
L'isolement, le deuil, l'anathème, ce don
Du meurtre qu'on lui fait au-dessous du pardon,
La mort qui le nourrit du sang de sa mamelle,

Son Ut fait d’un morceau du gibet, sa femelle,
Ses enfants, plus maudits que les petits des loups,
Sa maison triste où vient regarder par les trous
L’essaim des écoliers qui s’enfuit dès qu’il bouge;
Ses poings, cicatrisés à toucher le fer rouge,
Se crispaient; les soldats le nommaient en crachant;
Il approchait, courbé, plié, souillé, méchant,
Honteux, de l’échafaud cariatide affreuse;
Il surveillait l’endroit où Pâtre ardent se creuse,
Il venait ajouter de l’huile et de la poix,
Il apportait, suant et geignant sous le poids,
Une charge de bois à l’horrible fournaise;
Sous l’œil haineux du peuple il remuait la braise,
Abject, las, réprouvé, blasphémé, blasphémant;
Et Jean Huss, par le feu léché lugubrement,
Leva les yeux au ciel et murmura : Pauvre homme!

XV.

J’ai tout pesé, j’ai vu le fond, j’ai fait la somme,
Et je n’ai pas distrait un chiffre du total;
J’ai mis le nécessaire en regard du fatal;
Je n’ai pas reculé devant le syllogisme;
La vérité dût-elle être mère du schisme,
J’ai voulu que le vrai jaillît et triomphât;
J’ai remué dix fois les os de Josaphat;
J’ai tâché, les heurtant, d’en tirer l’étincelle;
J’ai compulsé l’antique archive universelle;
Et l’énigme semblait toujours s’approfondir;
Et c’était le zénith et c’était le nadir;
Et les aspects changeaient de l’étoile au cloaque;
Du juge Samuel j’allais au juge Éaque;
J’ai comparé les deuils, confronté, discuté,
J’ai du dilemme humain touché l’extrémité;
La tâche était ardue, et mon âpre logique
Marchait, et de tout boire avait la soif tragique;
Quel accablement d’être à ceci parvenu
Qu’entre l’enfant vêtu de pourpre et l’enfant nu,
Entre les fiers palais dont tonne l’embrasure,
Dont le seuil triomphal rayonne, et la masure,
Entre l’ilote grec et le césar romain,
Entre le mendiant, fantôme du chemin,
Larve obscure, et le roi que la foule célèbre,
On ne sait qui choisir pour pleurer! — Nuit funèbre!

Quand donc tous les enfers s’évanouiront-ils?
Quand, ayant un rayon sous chacun de ses cils,
L’aube apparaîtra-t-elle, après tant d’affreux rêves?
Quand se lèvera-t-il, ce jour saint où les Grèves,
Les Tyburns monstrueux, les hideux Montfaucons
S’écrieront sous les cieux pleins d’astres : Abdiquons!
Dieu! quand luira l’aurore et le siècle, la vie,

La paix, la joie ouvrant le ciel qui nous convie,
La liberté splendide aux regards enivrés?
Oh! brisez tous les fers, Dieu vivant! délivrez
Le bourreau du supplice et le tyran du trône!

*

Partout, du Gange au Rhin, du Tibre à l’Amazone,
L’homme souffre, et l’esclave et le maître sont las;
Le joug lui-même crie, et tout le mal, hélas!
Vient de ce qu’au vrai jour on n’ouvre pas les âmes.
Frères, au désert noir trop longtemps nous errâmes,
Et, guidés au hasard, marchant sans voir, rampants,
Nous en avons subi les hideux guet-apens.
Tout le crime ici-bas est fait par l’ombre lâche.
Haïssons, poursuivons sans trêve, sans relâche,
Les ténèbres, mais non, frères, les ténébreux.
Frappés par eux, broyés par eux, pleurons sur eux.
Ah! si l’on eût tourné vers la clarté leur crâne,
S’ils eussent eu leur part de la céleste manne,
S’ils eussent vu le vrai, tous ces infortunés,
Seraient-ils les bourreaux, les monstres, les damnés?
Non, tout homme qui voit la lumière, l’adore.
Non, non! je plains Sélim, je plains Héliodore,
Je plains Caligula, Rhamsès, Achmet; je plains
Tous les Domitiens et tous les Ezzelins;
Je plains Vitellius et Mézence; j’excuse
Le fou de Trianon, le fou de Syracuse,
Les Gengis, les Thamas, dans l’éclair apparus,
Néron brisant Sénèque, Henri brisant Morus,
Cosme, Héliogabale, Omar, Philippe, Osée;
Et je dis à la Nuit : Répondez, accusée.

L'ÂNE

TABLE DES MATIERES

Colère de la bête
Coup d'oeil général
L'Âne patience entre dans le détail
La nuit autour de l'homme
Conduite de l'homme vis-à-vis des enfants
Conduite de l'homme vis-à-vis des génies
Conduite de l'homme vis-à-vis de la création
Conduite de l'homme vis-à-vis de la société
Conduite de l'homme vis-à-vis de lui-même
Réaction de la création sur l'homme
Tristesse finale
Tristesse du philosophe
Sécurité du penseur

— Mais tu brûles! Prends garde, esprit! Parmi les hommes,
Pour nous guider, ingrats ténébreux que nous sommes,
Ta flamme te dévore, et l’on peut mesurer
Combien de temps tu vas sur la terre durer.
La vie en notre nuit n’est pas inépuisable.
Quand nos mains plusieurs fois ont retourné le sable
Et remonté l’horloge, et que devant nos yeux
L’ombre et l’aurore ont pris possession des cieux
Tour à tour, et pendant un certain nombre d’heures,
Il faut finir. Prends garde, il faudra que tu meures.
Tu vas t’user trop vite et brûler nuit et jour!
Tu nous verses la paix, la clémence, l’amour,
La justice, le droit, la vérité sacrée,
Mais ta substance meurt pendant que ton feu crée.
Ne te consume pas! Ami, songe au tombeau! -
Calme, il répond: — Je fais mon devoir de flambeau.

Colère de la bête

Un âne descendait au galop la science.
— Quel est ton nom? dit Kant. — Mon nom est Patience,
Dit l'âne. Oui, c'est mon nom, et je l'ai mérité,
Car je viens de ce faîte où l'homme est seul monté
Et qu'il nomme savoir calcul, raison, doctrine.
Kant, porter le licou sanglé sur la poitrine;
Avoir dès son bas âge, âpre et morne combat,
L'os de l'échine usé par la boucle du bât;
Subir, de l'aube au soir, la secousse électrique
Du nerf de boeuf parfois relayé par la trique;
Être, tremblant de froid ou de chaud étouffant,
Happé par la mâtin, lapidé par l'enfant,
Tomber de l'un à l'autre, et traverser l'églogue
De la pierre alternant avec le bouledogue;
Vivre, d'un chargement effroyable bossu,
Les os trouant la peau, maigre, ayant tant reçu,
Le long de chaque côte et de chaque vertèbre,
De coups de fouet que d'âne on est devenu zèbre,
Tout cela, qui te semble assez rude, n'est rien,
Et le fouet est à peine un souffle éolien,
Et les cailloux sont doux, et la raclée est bonne
À côté de ceci : suivre un cours en Sorbonne;
Vivre courbé six mois, peut-être un temps plus long,
Sous une chaire en bois qu'habite un cuistre en plomb;
Dresser son appareil d'oreilles au passage
Des clartés du savant et des vertus du sage;
Épeler Vossius, Scaliger, Salian;
Écouter la façon dont l'homme fait hi-han!

À quoi sert Cracovie? à qui sert Salamanque?
Et Sorèze, lanterne où l'étincelle manque,
Et Cambridge, et Cologne, et Pavie? À quoi sert
De changer l'ignorance en bégaiement disert?
Pourquoi dans des taudis perpétuer des races

De bélîtres rongeant d’informes paperasses?
Que sert de dédier des classes, des cachots,
Et quatre grands murs nus qu’on blanchit à la chaux,
Et des rangs de gradins, de bancs et de pupitres,
À d’affreux charlatans flanqués d’horribles pitres?
Frivoles, quoique lourds, pesants, quoique subtils,
Quel sol labourent-ils? quel blé moissonnent-ils?
À quoi rêvait Sorbon quand il fonda ce cloître
Où l’on voit mourir l’aube et les ténèbres croître?
À quoi songeait Gerson en voulant qu’on dorât
D’un galon le bonnet carré du doctorat?
À quoi bon, jeunes gens qu’à ce bagne on condamne,
Devenir bachelier puisqu’on peut rester âne?

Moi l’ignorant pensif, vaguement traversé
De lueurs en tondant les herbes du fossé,
Qui serais Dieu, si j’eusse été connu d’Ovide,
Moi qui sais au besoin prendre en pitié le vide
Du philosophe altier pleurant ce qu’il détruit,
À travers le fatras, le tourbillon, le bruit,
J’ai sondé du savoir la vacuité morne;
J’ai vu le bout, j’ai vu le fond, j’ai vu la borne;
J’ai vu du genre humain l’effort vain et béant;
Je n’ai pas, dans cette ombre et le cas échéant,
Refusé les conseils de l’ineptie honnête
Au docte, moi le simple, à l’homme, moi la bête;
Kant, j’ai vu, mendiant des clartés à la nuit,
Devant l’énormité de l’énigme où tout luit,
Devant l’oeil invisible et la main impalpable,
La science marcher en zigzag, incapable
De porter l’infini, ce vin mystérieux,
Soûle et comme abrutie en présence des cieux;
L’âne survient, s’émeut, plaint cet état d’ivresse,
Jette un liard et dit : tiens! à cette pauvresse.

Kant, ne t’étonne point de ces échanges-là.
L’âne un jour rencontrant Ésope, lui parla;

La conversation fut au profit d’Ésope.
Quant à moi qu’à présent tant de brume enveloppe,
Je déclare que j’ai beaucoup baissé depuis
Qu’imprudent j’ai risqué ma tête en votre puits,
Et que je me suis fait condisciple de l’homme.
Tout en suivant ces cours dont la lourdeur assomme,
J’ai fait souvent à l’homme en son obscurité
L’aumône d’un éclair de ma stupidité;
Tandis que l’homme, ayant pour dogme et pour pratique
Qu’il faut qu’un âne libre, incorrect et rustique,
Monte à la dignité de classique baudet,
De son rayonnement ténébreux m’inondait.
Je sors exténué de cette rude école;
J’ai vu de près Boileau, j’aime mieux la bricole.

Mon nom est Patience, oui, Kant! ils ont voulu
Me faire à moi bétail innocent et goulu,
Tantôt avec Philon dans le grand songe antique,
Tantôt avec Bezout dans la mathématique,
Tantôt chez Caliban, tantôt chez Ariel,
Manger de l’idéal et brouter du réel;
Je n’ai pas résisté; j’ai, pauvre âne à la gêne,
Mangé de l’Euctémon, brouté du Diogène,
Après Flaccus, Pibrac, Vertot après Niebuhr,
Et j’ai revu Gonesse en sortant de Tibur.
Hier dans la phtisie et demain dans l’oedème,
J’ai tout accepté, Lulle, Érasme, Oenésidème,
Les pesants, les légers, les simples, les abstrus,
Les Pelletiers pas plus bêtes que les Patrus,
Fleury dans le sacré, Chompré dans le profane,
L’affreux père Goar juché sur Théophane,
Tout poète embelli de son commentateur,
Sanchez dans son égout, et toi sur ta hauteur.
Dur labeur! Veut-on pas que je me passionne
Pour les textes d’Élée ou ceux de Sicyone,
Que j’attache un grand prix à savoir s’il est bon
D’avoir lu Xenarchus pour comprendre Strabon,

Que je me mette en feu le cerveau pour les notes
Des Suards sur les Grimms, des Grimms sur les Nonottes,
Et qu'un âne de sens se laisse incendier
Par ce qu'à Lycosthène ajoute Duverdier?

Voilà longtemps que j'erre et que je me promène
Dans la chose appelée intelligence humaine;
J'allais je ne sais où suivant je ne sais qui;
J'ai pratiqué Glycas, Suidas, Tiraboschi,
Sosiclès, Torniel, Hodierna, Zonare;
J'ai fréquenté le docte en coudoyant l'ignare;
En présence du sort, du futur, du passé,
De l'énigme, du ciel, du gouffre, j'ai causé
Avec l'esprit humain flânant à sa fenêtre;
J'ai fouillé pas à pas ce dédale : connaître;
J'ai dans cette cité, plus noire que les fours
Hanté les culs-de-sac comme les carrefours;
Lu tous les écriteaux, flairé toutes les cibles;
J'ai pris tous les sentiers possibles, impossibles,
Le plat, le raboteux, le connu, l'inconnu;
Je suis allé cent fois et cent fois revenu
De la science exacte, entrepôt sombre où l'homme
Compte le monde ainsi qu'un avare une somme,
À la philosophie, église dont Platon
Est le clocher avec Maugras pour clocheton;
J'ai vu l'antre où l'on prie et l'antre où l'on dissèque;
Et vos collèges froids dont la bibliothèque,
Ainsi qu'une vapeur qui prend forme le soir,
À l'étage d'en haut se condense en dortoir.
J'ai tout appris : Coger, Psellus, les Théophiles,
Pouranas composant la terre de neuf îles,
Socion et Photin; que Sénèque était là
Quand saint Paul vint trouver Néron et lui parla;
Qu'Alirune enseigna Marcomir; que Marcobe
Sous Théodose était maître de garde-robe;
Que les Populicains à Sens furent vaincus;
Comment Manès d'abord s'appela Curbicus;

Que sur la langue Apis avait un scarabée;
Que Paschasin était évêque à Lilybée,
Et que Paschase, abbé de Corvey, fut traduit
Par le père Sirmond en seize cent dix-huit;
Qu’Ambroise est un coursier dont le dogme est la bride;
Que la clef de Cordus ouvre Dioscoride;
Que l’esprit saint planait sur les fameux combats
De saint Jérôme avec le rabbin Akibas;
Que l’absurde se croit; que l’horrible s’adore;
Qu’Ésoptius n’est pas moindre que Nimphidore;
Et comment Mahomet dans tous ses embarras
Consultait Sergius aidé de Batiras;
Qu’il n’existe qu’un siècle et qu’il n’est qu’une école;
Que Bzovius fut docte, et que le grand Nicole
Est si grand qu’il pourrait loger sous son manteau
Godeau, Chiffletius, Possevin et Petau.
J’ai tout ruminé, glose, analyse, critique.
J’ai vu Laïs au pnyx, Aspasie au portique,
Et jusques à Scarron dans son trou de Saint-Cyr;
J’ai fait ce stage affreux, n’ayant d’autre plaisir,
Au pied du mur humain pauvre bête acculée,
Que de manger parfois dans la main d’Apulée
Ou de parler avec Balaam dans un coin.
Pas un texte, ici, là, haut ou bas, près ou loin,
Pas de volume jaune et mangé par les mites,
Pas de lourd catalogue informe et sans limites,
Que mon esprit, voulant tout voir, ne feuilletât.
J’ai donc étudié beaucoup; le résultat?
Un peu d’allongement à mes oreilles tristes.

Et je me suis dit : — Âne, il faut que tu persistes.
J’ai pris, pour faire enfin le tour des cécités,
D’autres inscriptions à d’autres facultés,
Hébreu, sanscrit, pâkrit, grammaire générale,
Jurisprudence, droit, esthétique, morale,
Chimie... — Oh! comprends-tu, Kant, ce qu’il m’a fallu
De longanimité pour dire : — J’ai tout lu,

Tout appris, et je suis plus que jamais pécore;
Eh bien! je vais apprendre et je vais lire encore!

L’âne poursuivit : — Kant, j’ai donc recommencé,
Doublé ma rhétorique, élargi mon fossé;
J’ai remis mon oreille énorme en discipline;
J’ai recreusé Straton, Sosibe, Éraste, Pline,
Et Gérard de Crémone, et Trublet, ab ovo,
Et le grammairien Sostrate, et de nouveau,
La science m’a fait manger de la poussière.
Du noir chaudron qui bout devant cette sorcière
Je me suis fait le morne et lugubre écumeur.

Oh! cliquetis de mots, tohubohu, rumeur,
Champ de foire, Babel, chaos! auquel entendre?
Bossuet est féroce et Fénelon est tendre;
La concordantia du cardinal d’Ailly
Montre un dogme dans l’astre au fond des cieux cueilli;
Photius m’expliquait son fatras somnifère,
Catanes ses trois dés, Sacrobosco sa sphère;
Solon m’offrait ses lois, Bollandus ses romans;
Irénée insultait les quartodecimans;
Je voyais se poursuivre à coups de syllogismes,
Paz, armé pour la foi, Krantz, souteneur des schismes,
Et Melchior Adam et Barleycourt Hugo,
Vieux coqs de l’argument debout sur leur ergo.
Fouillons les chartriers, refouillons les glossaires;
Caracoran, cherchez Issedon; dans ses serres
Jove a cet écriteau : Vel hodie vel cras;
Et Tertullien sombre étrangle Carpocras.
Carpocras d’Irénée enviait la boutique;
Ce Carpocras était un si fier hérétique
Que toi-même, bon Kant, qui jamais n’exécras
Personne, tu devrais exécrer Carpocras.
Comment mettre d’accord Jousse, Antoine Studite,
L’homme de cour Sénèque et Jean le troglodyte,
Young, le pleureur des nuits, Wordsworth, l’esprit des lacs,

Thalès, Hevelius, Levera, Granallachs;
Les gais soupeurs, d’Holbach, Parny, Dorat-Cubière,
D’argens, avec Rancé qui prend pour lit sa bière;
Le dessus de velours, le dessous de sapin;
Ancelin et Cluvier, Polyte et Plancarpin;
Larcher contre Arouet et Cicchi contre Dante;
Et l’engeance grimaude et la race pédante;
Juste Lipse et Luther, Naigeon et Davila?
Knox me tirait par ci, Scot me tirait par là;
Luc prenait une oreille, Euler empoignait l’autre;
Hu! braillait le chiffreur. Dia! beuglait l’apôtre.
Oh! ma jeunesse en fleur qui courait dans les prés
Et les bois par l’aurore et la joie empourprés!
L’herbe verte! l’étable où l’on fait un doux somme!
Oh! les coups de bâton de mon ânier bonhomme!
Je ne pourrai jamais dire, ô splendeur des cieux,
Avec des mots assez crachés et furieux,
Comment ils ont changé la pensée en lanière
Et l’idée en férule, et de quelle manière
Ces malheureux m’ont fait, sous un monstrueux tas
D’Eusèbes, de Sophrons, de Blastus, d’Architas,
D’Ossa plus Pélion, d’Anthume plus Orose,
De petit ânon leste immense âne morose!
Livres! qui, compulsés, adorés, vermoulus,
Sans cesse envahissant l’homme de plus en plus,
De la table des temps épuisez les rallonges,
D’où sortent des lueurs, des visions, des songes,
Et des mains que les morts mettent sur les vivants,
Codes des sanhédrins, oracles des divans,
Textes graves, ardus, austères, difficiles,
Appendices fameux des siècles, codicilles
Du testament de l’homme à chaque âge récrit,
Dont le vélin fait peur quand le temps le flétrit,
Comme si l’on voyait vieillissante et ridée
La face vénérable et chaste de l’idée;
Vous qui faites, sous l’oeil du chercheur feuilletant,
Un bruit si solennel qu’il semble qu’on entend

Le grand chuchotement de l’Inconnu dans l’ombre,
Volumes sacro-saints que l’institut dénombre,
Qui jusqu’en Chine allez emplir de vos rayons
Ce collège appelé Forêt-de-Crayons,
Résidus de l’effort terrestre, où s’accumule
Le chiffre dont le sphinx compose la formule,
Des hommes lumineux prodigieux produit,
Oh! comme vous m’avez obscurci, moi la nuit!
Oh! comme vous m’avez embêté, moi la bête!

Quel délire m’a pris d’aller sur votre faîte
Brouter l’ortie humaine, hélas, et de tenter
Votre viol funèbre, et de vous convoiter,
Livres qui pour consigne avez cette sentence :
— Garder Isis; tenir les brutes à distance, —
Qui défendez, afin que tout reste normal,
Le passage sacré de l’homme à l’animal,
Ô phédons, ô talmuds, ô korans, dont les piles
Du sombre esprit humain gardent les Thermopyles!

Ô volumes, j’ai fait le grand noviciat;
Je suis plus lourd qu’Accurse et plus sain qu’Alciat;
Triste, j’ai digéré la docte baliverne;
J’ai, du matin au soir, en classe, dans l’Averne,
Fait des auteurs latins le patient blocus;
J’ai remué, suivant le conseil de Flaccus,
Les exemplaires grecs d’une patte nocturne;
Livres, vous semblez tous des fleuves penchant l’urne,
Mais ce qui sort de vous, c’est le dégorgement
De l’éternel brouillard sur les glaciers fumant;
L’esprit se perd en vous comme aux gouffres la sonde;
Vous êtes imposants! vous divisez le monde
En deux opinions principales : savoir
Si vos graves feuillets, votre blanc, votre noir,
Vos textes plus profonds que les flots sur les plages,
Vos luxes de science, et vos fiers étalages
De travail et d’étude, et vos grands apparats,

Sont créés pour les vers ou sont faits pour les rats.

Coup d’oeil général

L’orateur, fût-il âne, essoufflé se repose;
Patience reprit, ayant fait une pause :
Rhéteurs, quel mot divin faites-vous épeler?
Dites, qu’enseignez-vous? que venez-vous parler
D’idéal, de réel, et nous rompre la tête?
Votre réel à vous, c’est la chimère bête,
Ou c’est la loi féroce et dure; ici Baal,
Là Dracon; et l’erreur partout. Votre idéal
C’est quelque faux chef-d’oeuvre ou quelque vertu fausse,
C’est un roi qu’en rampant la flatterie exhausse,
Ou c’est un livre pâle ayant pour qualité
De s’ouvrir sans blesser les yeux de sa clarté;
Honneur au grand Louis! Gloire au tendre Racine!
Ah! l’idéal m’endort, le réel m’assassine,
Grâce! au diable! assez bu! Je prends congé. Bonsoir.
Quelle solution donne votre savoir
Sur ce qui nous étonne ou ce qui nous effraie?
Avez-vous seulement un peu de lueur vraie?
Non. Rien. Sur l’inconnu, l’absolu, le divin,
Sur l’incompréhensible et l’insondable, en vain
L’illuminé contemple et le myope scrute,
Qu’est-ce que vous savez de plus que moi la brute?
Hélas! je sens moi-même, étant votre écolier,
Hommes, ma tête au poids des questions plier;
J’ai sur mon cristallin naïf la taie humaine.
Le prêtre en sait-il plus que le catéchumène?
Le cardinal voit-il mieux que l’enfant de choeur?
L’ombre a la face grave et le profil moqueur;
Et l’ombre, tu le sais, ô Kant, c’est la science.
Sur le premier venu fais-en l’expérience.
Vois, cet homme a blêmi sur sa bible; voici
Qu’il est vieux; l’homme est chauve et le livre est moisi;
Les cheveux ont passé de l’homme sur le livre;
L’homme a voulu tout voir, tout savoir, tout poursuivre,

Tout avoir; secouer le linceul pli par pli;
Il s’est rassasié, repu, gavé, rempli;
Il sait toute la langue et toute la pensée,
Et la géométrie et la théodicée,
La légende crédule et le chiffre sournois;
Il sait l’assyrien, le persan, le chinois,
L’arabe, le gallois, le copte, le gépide,
Le tartare, le basque; eh bien, il est stupide.
Au fond de cette tête où s’accouple et se fond
Tout l’idéal avec tout le réel, au fond
De ce polytechnique et de ce polyglotte,
L’immensité du vide et du tombeau sanglote.
Oh! ces sophistes lourds, ces casuistes froids,
De la tourbe ahurie exploitant les effrois,
Tous ces fakirs, latins, grecs, sanscrits, hébraïques,
Tous ces gérontes noirs, tonsurés ou laïques,
Tous ces pharisiens de l’explication,
Ceux-ci venant de Rome et ceux-là de Sion;
Tous ayant leur koran, leur joug, leur évangile,
Leur bible de papier ou leur autel d’argile,
Jurant par Aristote ou par Thomas d’Aquin,
Pour trouver l’éternel furetant un bouquin;
Bègues, sourds; demandant à leur dictionnaire
Le mot, que l’aigle entend murmurer au tonnerre;
Pas un ne comprenant ce splendide credo
Qui s’étoile le soir aux plis du noir rideau,
Pas un ne se laissant aller, l’âme penchante,
À l’attendrissement du point du jour qui chante,
Comme je les ai vus disputer, s’acharner,
Affirmer, contester, et bruire, et vanner,
Les grecs chassant les juifs, les juifs damnant les guèbres,
De la semence d’ombre en un van de ténèbres!
Comme je les ai vus, dressés sur leur séant,
Hagards, les uns, docteurs de leur propre néant,
Ayant l’aveuglement funèbre pour disciple,
Rêvant dans l’empyrée un monstre double ou triple,
Regardant fuir, tandis qu’effarés nous songions,

L’ouragan des erreurs et des religions ,
Épier s’ils verraient passer dans la rafale
Ou le Janus bi-front ou l’Hermès tricéphale!
D’autres, logiciens, métaphysiciens,
Pédagogues, groupés sous les porches anciens,
Discuter l’évidence, et fouiller, rêveurs blêmes,
L’énigme à la lueur livide des systèmes,
Et, combinant les faits, les doutes, les raisons,
Rapprocher, pour souffler dessus, ces noirs tisons!
D’autres, théologaux, notaires de consultes,
Évêques secouant leur foudre au seuil des cultes,
Clercs, chanoines, bedeaux, prédicateurs, abbés,
Dans l’ornière d’un texte ou d’un rite embourbés,
De quelque oiseau mystique adorant l’envergure.
Étouffant par moment le rire de l’augure,
Agiter leurs longs bras et leur surplis jauni
Dans des chaires faisant ventre sur l’infini;
Et, clignant leurs yeux morts sous leurs crânes fossiles,
Assembler le nuage informe des conciles,
Dans Éphèse, dans Reims, dans Arles, dans Embrun,
Sur Dieu, l’être éclatant, l’être effrayant, l’être un!
Et courber leur front chauve, et se pencher encore,
Et chercher à tâtons l’éblouissante aurore,
Et crier : — Voyez-vous quelque chose? Est-ce là?
Qu’en pense Onufrius? qu’en dit Zabarella?
Où donc est l’être? Où donc est la cause première?
Cherchons bien! — Et pendant que l’énorme lumière,
Formidable emplissait le firmament vermeil,
Leur chandelle tâchait d’éclairer le soleil!
Homme, à d’autres instant, enivré de toi-même,
L’aveuglement croissant dans ta prunelle blême,
Tu dis : — C’est moi qui suis. Dieu n’est pas; l’homme est seul.
Est-ce au Gange, à la Mecque, à Thèbe, à Saint-Acheul,
Dans les cornes d’Ammon ou dans la Vénus d’Arle,
Qu’il faut aller chercher ce Dieu dont on nous parle?
Est-ce lui que l’enfant a dans son petit doigt?
Personne ne l’a vu, personne ne le voit,

Cet être où la ferveur des idiots s’attache.
Il est donc bien difforme et bien noir qu’il se cache?
L’homme est visible, lui! c’est lui le conquérant;
C’est lui le créateur! l’homme est beau, l’homme est grand;
L’argile vit sitôt que sa main l’a pétrie;
L’homme est puissant; qui donc créa l’imprimerie,
Et l’aiguille aimantée, et la poudre à canon,
Et la locomotive? Est-ce Jéhovah? non;
C’est l’homme. Qui dressa les splendides culées
Du pont du Gard, au vol des nuages mêlées?
Qui fit le Colisée, et qui le Parthénon?
Qui construisit Paris et Rome? Est-ce Dieu? non;
C’est l’homme. Pas de cime où l’homme roi ne monte.
Il sculpte le rocher, sucre le fruit, et dompte,
Malgré ses désespoirs, sa haine et ses abois,
La bête aux bonds hideux, larve horrible des bois;
Tout ce que l’homme touche, il l’anime ou le pare. —
Bien, crache sur le mur, et maintenant compare.
Le grand ciel étoilé, c’est le crachat de Dieu.
Nier est votre roue et croire est votre essieu.
Hommes, et vous tournez effroyablement vite.
Après l’enfant de choeur, le diacre et le lévite
Chantant alleluia, passe une légion
D’hérétiques criant l’hymne trisagion;
L’homme blanc devient noir de nuance en nuance;
Entre une conscience et une autre conscience
Le fil est court; Rancé coudoie Arnauld; Arnauld
Janséniste confine à Luther huguenot;
Et Luther huguenot touche à Rousseau déiste;
Et Rousseau n’est pas loin de Spinosa; c’est triste,
Ou c’est réjouissant, à ton choix; mais c’est vrai;
L’Horeb, ou Sans-Souci; le Thabor, ou Cirey,
Entre Orphée et Pyrrhon l’humanité trébuche;
Ô Kant, nous tomberions dans quelque obscure embûche,
Nous bêtes, s’il fallait que nous vous suivissions.
L’homme va du blasphème aux superstitions;
Il brave le réel, puis il adore l’ombre;

Il passe son poing vil à travers l’azur sombre,
Jette sa pierre infâme aux saintes régions,
Et croit réparer tout par ses religions,
Par un faux idéal taillé dans la matière,
Par on ne sait quel spectre imitant la lumière,
Par quelque idole vaine et folle qu’il met là,
Et qu’il nomme Zeus ou qu’il appelle Allah.
Il insulte le Dieu, le créateur, l’arbitre;
Puis, inepte et tremblant, raccommode la vitre
Des infinis avec une étoile en papier.
J’ai lu, cherché, creusé, jusqu’à m’estropier.
Ma pauvre intelligence est à peu près dissoute.
Ô qui que vous soyez qui passez sur la route,
Fouaillez-moi, rossez-moi; mais ne m’enseignez pas.
Gardez votre savoir sans but, dont je suis las,
Et ne m’en faites point tourner la manivelle.
Montez-moi sur le dos, mais non sur la cervelle.
Mon frère l’homme, il faut se faire une raison,
Nous sommes vous et nous dans la même prison;
La porte en est massive et la voûte en est dure;
Tu regardes parfois au trou de la serrure,
Et tu nommes cela Science; mais tu n’as
Pas de clef pour ouvrir le fatal cadenas.
J’ai fort compassion de toi, te l’avouerai-je?
Toi qu’une heure vieillit, et qu’une fièvre abrège,
Comment t’y prendrais-tu, dans ton abjection,
Pour feuilleter la vie et la création?
La pagination de l’infini t’échappe.
À chaque instant, lacune, embûche, chausse-trape,
Ratures, sens perdu, doute, feuillet manquant;
Partout la question triple : Comment? Où? Quand?
Qu’est-ce que le serpent? Que veut dire la pomme?
Deux natures parfois se compliquent, et font
Comme un chiffre où la brute avec Adam se fond;
Le singe reparaît sous l’homme palimpseste;
Viens-tu du fratricide et sors-tu de l’inceste,
Comme le dit Moïse? Ou n’es-tu que le fait

Résultant d’un chaos qu’un soleil échauffait,
Être double, être mixte en qui s’est condensée
La matière en instinct, la lumière en pensée,
Le seul marcheur debout, créature sommet
Que l’arbre accepte, auquel la pierre se soumet,
Et que la bête obscure, ayant pour verbe un râle,
Subit en protestant dans sa nuit sépulcrale?
Es-tu le patient dont nous sommes les clous?
As-tu derrière toi le Mal, le grand jaloux?
Contiens-tu quelque flamme auguste qui doit vivre?
Ou n’es-tu qu’une chair qu’un souffle épars enivre,
Qui fera quelques pas et sera de la nuit?
Es-tu le vain brouillard, d’un peu d’aurore enduit,
Qui, prêt à s’effacer, se déforme et chancelle?
As-tu dans toi l’étoile à l’état d’étincelle,
Et seras-tu demain aux séraphins pareil?
Réponds à tout cela, si tu peux. Ton sommeil,
En sais-tu le secret? Connais-tu la frontière
Où l’esprit ailé vient relayer la matière?
Comment le ver s’envole? et par quelle loi, dis,
Les enfers lentement sont promus paradis?
Que sais-tu du parfum? que sais-tu du tonnerre?
Peux-tu guérir l’abcès du volcan poitrinaire?
Qu’est-ce que tes savants t’apprennent? Turrien,
Qui te dira le nom du vent en syrien,
Sait-il son envergure et son itinéraire?
La mamelle de l’ombre est là; peux-tu la traire?
Abundius qui fut diacre d’Anicetus
Sait-il quel ouvrier peint en bleu le lotus?
Baloeus, Surius, Pitsoeus et Cédrène
Savent-ils pourquoi l’aube en larmes est sereine?
L’abbé Poulle ose-t-il en face regarder
L’énigme qu’on entend gémir, chanter, gronder?
As-tu lu dans Lactance ou bien dans Éleuthère
Quelle est la fonction du diamant sous terre?
Sais-tu par dom Poirier ou par monsieur Lejay
De quelle flamme l’oeil des condors est forgé,

Et maître Calepin dit-il dans son glossaire
Où se trempe l’acier dont est faite leur serre?
Saint Thomas connaît-il tous ces noirs Ixions
Qu’on nomme affinités, forces, attractions?
Nicole, qui sait tout, sait-il par quel organe
L’été tire à jamais à lui la salangane,
Et, vainqueur, fait passer la mer au passereau?
Homme, sais-tu comment l’eau nourrit le sureau?
Connais-tu l’hydre orage et le monstre tempête
Qui naît dans le jardin des cieux, dresse la tête,
Glisse et rampe à travers les nuages mouvants,
Et qui flaire la rose effrayante des vents?
Qu’as-tu trouvé? Devant l’évolution sainte
De la vie, admirable et divin labyrinthe,
Ta vue est myopie et ton âme est stupeur.
Vois, ce monde est d’abord un noyau de vapeur
Qui tourne comme un globe énorme de fumée;
Vaste, il bout au soleil qui luit, braise enflammée;
Il bout, puis s’attiédit et se condense, et l’eau
Tombe au centre du large et ténébreux halo;
Puis la terre, encor fange, au fond de l’eau s’amasse;
Sur cette vase on voit ramper une limace,
C’est l’hydre, c’est la vie; et la mer s’arrondit
Autour d’un point qui sort des eaux et qui verdit;
C’est l’île surgissant des profondeurs béantes;
Des vers titans parmi des fougères géantes
Fourmillent; et du bord des boueux archipels
Des colosses se font de monstrueux appels;
L’hippopotame sort de l’immense onde obscure,
Le serpent cherche un flanc où plonger sa piqûre,
De vaste millepieds se traînent, le kraken
Semble un rocher vivant sous l’algue et le lichen,
Et le poulpe, agitant sa touffe contractile,
Tâche d’étreindre au vol l’affreux ptérodactyle;
Puis des millions d’ans se passent; du roseau
Sort l’arbre, et l’air devient respirable à l’oiseau,
Et la chauve-souris décroît, et voici l’aigle,

Le vent fraîchit, le flot baisse, la mer se règle,
L'île soudée à l'île ébauche un continent,
Et l'homme apparaît nu, pensif et rayonnant;
C'est fini; l'aube émerge, et le recul immense
Des monstres, du chaos, des ténèbres, commence;
La tempête de l'être a cessé de souffle;
Et l'on entend des voix sur la terre parler;
Le typhon s'amoindrit et devient l'infusoire;
Et l'antique bataille, inextinguible et noire,
Du dragon et de l'hydre, avec son fauve bruit,
Fuit dans le microscope et se perd dans la nuit;
L'effrayant désormais plonge dans l'invisible;
L'infiniment petit s'ouvre, gouffre terrible;
L'épouvante s'éclipse après avoir régné;
L'horreur, devant Adam qui doit être épargné,
Pas à pas rétrograde et rentre inassouvie
Dans cet enfoncement sinistre de la vie;
L'azur prodigieux s'épanouit au ciel.
Et maintenant, savant, penseur officiel,
Rat du budget, souris d'une bibliothèque,
Académicien bon voisin de l'évêque,
Quel compte te rends-tu de tout cela, réponds?
Comment rattaches-tu les arches de ces ponts
Au grand centre de l'ombre? avec quelles besicles,
Docteur, regardes-tu les formidables cycles?
Tu t'enfermes, craintif, dans le roman sacré;
Mieux vaut mutiler Dieu que fâcher son curé;
Et Cuvier, traître au vrai, pour être pair de France,
Trouble des temps profonds la sombre transparence.
Pour augmenter la brume, hélas! les professeurs
Ajoutent doctement de l'encre aux épaisseurs,
Et l'institut nous montre avec un air de gloire
L'énigme plus opaque et la source plus noire.
Ô le bon vieux palais gardé par deux lions!
La science met là tous ses tabellions,
Et l'on se complimente et l'on se félicite;
Et moi l'âne, qui suis parmi vous en visite,

Je n’aurais jamais cru que l’homme triomphât
À ce point de son vide, et, si nul, fût si fat!
Avec Diafoirus Bridoison fraternise;
Le dindon introduit l’oie et la divinise;
Vrai! quand la comète entre au sanhédrin des cieux
Et des astres fixant sur sa splendeur leurs yeux,
Le grand soleil, auquel tout l’empyrée adhère,
Ne fait pas plus de fête à ce récipiendaire.
Pleure, homme! — Et que sais-tu de ton propre destin?
Dis? quoi de ton cerveau? quoi de ton intestin?
Quoi d’en haut? quoi d’en bas? depuis ton vieux déluge,
Dis, ce que c’est qu’un prêtre et ce que c’est qu’un juge,
Le sais-tu? te vois-tu serpenter, dévier,
Crouler? as-tu sondé la mort, trou de l’évier?
Même en considérant Dieu comme hors de cause,
Comme clair dans l’esprit et prouvé dans la chose,
Même en nous laissant, nous les brutes, de côté,
Comprendre ces mots, Sort, Sépulcre, Humanité;
Savoir la profondeur de ce puits où tu tombes,
Quelle espèce de jour passe aux fentes des tombes,
À quel commencement cette fin aboutit;
Savoir si l’homme, en qui l’éternel retentit,
Est ou n’est pas trompé par ses sombres envies
D’autres ascensions, d’autres sorts, d’autres vies;
Savoir s’il est épi dans le céleste blé;
Savoir si l’alchimiste inconnu, le Voilé,
Soude en ce creuset morne appelé sépulture
Le monde antérieur à sa sphère future;
Si vous fûtes jadis, si vous fûtes ailleurs
Plus beaux ou plus hideux, plus méchants ou meilleurs;
Si l’épreuve refait à l’âme une innocence;
Si l’homme sur la terre est en convalescence;
Si vous redeviendrez divins au jour marqué;
Si cette chair, limon sur votre être appliqué,
Argile à qui le temps avare se mesure,
N’est que le pansement d’une ancienne blessure;
Si quelqu’un finira par lever l’appareil;

Savoir si chaque étoile et si chaque soleil
Est une roue en flamme aux lumières changeantes
Dont les créations diverses sont les jantes
Et dont la vie immense et sainte est le moyeu;
Voir le fond du ciel noir et le fond du ciel bleu,
Homme, cela n’est pas possible, et j’en défie,
Christ, ta religion! Kant, ta philosophie!
Le gouffre répond-il à qui vient l’appeler?
Non. L’effort est perdu. Déchiffrer, épeler,
Apprendre, étudier, n’est qu’un pas en arrière.
L’esprit revient meurtri du choc de la barrière;
L’homme est après la marche un peu moins avancé;
Hélas! X Y Z en sait moins qu’A B C;
L’espérance a les yeux plus ouverts que l’algèbre;
J’ai toujours entendu, devant le seuil funèbre
Des problèmes obscurs qui mettent sur les dents
Les chercheurs, et qui font griffonner aux pédants
Tant d’affreux in-quarto, ruine du libraire,
L’ignorance hennir et la science braire.
Je viens de voir le blême édifice construit
Par l’homme et la chimère, avec l’ombre et le bruit,
La rumeur, la clameur, la surdité, la haine.
De quoi je sors? Je sors de la besogne vaine;
Je viens de travailler, Kant, à la vision.
J’ai vu faire à Zéro son évolution.
Sur la montagne informe où la brume séjourne,
Dans l’obscur aquilon la Tour des langues tourne
Sur quatre ailes : calcul, dogme, histoire, raison;
Les savants, gerbe à gerbe, y portent leur moisson;
Et, tombant, surgissant, passantes éternelles,
S’évitant, se cherchant, les quatre sombres ailes
Se poursuivent toujours sans s’atteindre jamais;
Elles portent en bas la lueur des sommets,
Et rapportent en haut le gouffre, et la folie
Des souffles les tourmente et les hâte et les plie.
L’intérieur est plein d’on ne sait quel brouillard;
Le râle du savoir s’y mêle au cri de l’art;

Ô machine farouche! on dirait que les meules
Sont vivantes, et vont et roulent toutes seules;
Et l'on entend gémir l'esprit humain broyé;
Tout l'édifice a l'air d'un monstre foudroyé;
On voit là s'agiter, geindre, monter, descendre,
Ces pâles nourrisseurs qui font du pain de cendre,
Arius, Condillac, Locke, Érasme, Augustin;
L'un verse là son Dieu, l'autre offre son destin;
On s'appelle, on s'entr'aide, on s'insulte, on se hèle;
On gravit, charge aux reins, la frémissante échelle;
Sous les pas des douteurs on voit trembler des ponts
Où le prêtre jadis cloua ses vains crampons;
L'erreur rôde, la foi chante, l'orgueil s'exalte,
Et l'on se presse, et point de trêve, et pas de halte;
Le crépuscule filtre aux poutres du plafond
Par les toiles qu'Ignace et Machiavel font;
Tous vont; celui-ci grimpe et celui-là se vautre;
Tous se parlent; pas un n'entend ce que dit l'autre;
L'aile adresse en fuyant à l'aile qu'elle suit
Un discours qui se perd dans un chaos de bruit;
Les meules, ébranlant la tour de leur tangage,
Échangent sous la roue on ne sait quel langage;
Les portes pleines d'ombre en tournant sur leurs gonds
Ont l'air de grommeler de monstrueux jargons;
L'oeuvre est étrange; on voit les engrenages moudre
Le bien, le mal, le faux, le vrai, l'aube, la foudre,
Le jour, la nuit, les Tyrs, les Thèbes, les Sions,
Et les réalités, et les illusions;
On vide sur l'amas des rouages horribles
D'effrayants sacs de mots qu'on appelle les bibles,
Les livres, les écrits, les textes, les védas;
Le diable est au grenier qui voit par un judas;
À mesure qu'aux trous des cribles, noire ou blanche,
La mouture en poussière aveuglante s'épanche,
La mort la jette aux vents, ironique meunier;
On entend cette poudre affirmer et nier,
Disputer, applaudir, et pousser des huées,

Et rire, en s’envolant dans les fauves nuées;
Et des bouches au loin s’ouvrant avidement
À ces atomes fous que la nuit va semant;
Et cette nourriture a l’odeur de la tombe;
Le faîte de la tour se lézarde et surplombe;
Et d’autres travailleurs montent d’autres fardeaux,
Chacun ayant son sac de songes sur le dos;
Et les quatre ailes vont dans l’ouragan qui passe,
Si vaste qu’en faisant un cercle dans l’espace,
La basse est dans l’enfer et la haute est au ciel.
Je viens de ce moulin formidable, Babel.

L’Âne patience entre dans le détail

L’âne à ce qu’il disait rêva dans le silence,
Comme on suit du regard une pierre qu’on lance,
Puis ajouta :
 — Serrons de près les questions.
Veux-tu que nous causions et que nous discutions?
Soit.
        Quoique le lecteur, à Sainte-Geneviève,
Trouve peu d’os à moelle et peu d’auteurs à sève;
Quoique, à l’Escurial, où Philippe pria,
Le plafond sépulcral de la Libraria,
Couvrant dossiers, cahiers, brochures, fascicules,
Ressemble à de la nuit noyant des crépuscules;
Quoique Oxford la savante ait, sous ses hauts châssis,
Moins de textes vivants que de centons moisis;
Quoique le maréchal vicomte de Turenne,
Caboche de soldat brutalement sereine,
Ait jugé, pataugeant dans les in-octavos,
La Rupertine bonne à loger ses chevaux;
Quoique l’Arsenal fasse, alors qu’on le secoue,
Tourner tant de néant sur son pupitre à roue;
Quoique, poussant des cris de triomphe, un essaim
De corbeaux, contemplant l’institut, son voisin,
Perche à la Mazarine, et que la Vaticane
Ait des angles si noirs que le diable y ricane,
Hommes, vous êtes fiers quand vous considérez
Vos bouquins reliés, catalogués, vitrés,
Avec vos rhéteurs dieux et vos pédants principes
Taillés en marbre jaune et juchés sur des cippes,
Et, j’en conviens, on a le vertige en voyant
Ce sombre alignement de livres, effrayant,
Inouï, se perdant sous les bahuts qui tremblent,
Ces vastes rendez-vous de volumes, qui semblent
Les légions du faux et du vrai s’avançant
En bon ordre, sous l’oeil trouble du temps présent,

Pour se livrer combat au fond des hypogées,
Et de l’esprit humain les batailles rangées;
Certes, j’admets que vous, les hommes, soyez vains
De cet entassement épique d’écrivains,
De tous ces papyrus et de toutes ces bibles;
C’est beau de voir Saumaise, agitant ses vieux cribles,
Tamiser ces monceaux d’esprit sur les pavés;
C’est beau d’avoir l’Exode avec des bois gravés
Par Alde de Venise ou Windelin de Spire;
Je conviens qu’on retient son souffle et qu’on respire
À peine quand on voit, dans vos doctes hangars,
Les tombes frissonner sous les piocheurs hagards;
C’est beau de pouvoir dire : Admirez les estampes;
Ici Virgile avec un laurier sur les tempes,
Là Chapelain avec plus de laurier encor;
Voici des manuscrits étalant sur fond d’or
Mainte arabesque pure, inextricable et nette
À rendre Goujon pâle et jaloux Biscornette;
Çà, c’est Newton; voyez quel beau Félibien!
Voici le grand, voici le vrai, voici le bien;
Barmne est là pour ses Lois, saint Thomas pour sa Somme,
Platon pour son Timée; et l’on comprend que l’homme
Fasse la roue avec tous ses livres au dos;
Mais, ô dignes humains pris sous tant de bandeaux,
Ce profond répertoire où la doctrine abonde,
Ce sombre cabinet de lecture du monde,
Tous ces textes, qui font le silence autour d’eux,
Depuis l’infortiat jusqu’à l’in-trente-deux,
Et d’où l’odeur des ans et des peuples s’exhale,
Cette bibliopole auguste et colossale
Qu’on voit, jetant au loin sa lueur aux cerveaux,
Flamboyer au-dessus de tous vos noirs travaux,
Comme la cheminée énorme de l’usine;
Toute cette raison que l’homme emmagasine,
Étageant grecs sur juifs, juifs sur égyptiens;
Que le temps sur le tas vient vider par hottées,
Ces Pascals, ces Longins, ces Jobs, ces Timothées,

Doux, sévères, touchants, mystérieux, railleurs,
Qu’est-ce si tout cela ne vous rend pas meilleurs?
Par mon échine illustre et semblable aux coulées
De laves du Gibel âpres et dentelées,
Par les traductions du vieux père Brumoy,
Par l’honneur que m’a fait Christ en montant sur moi
Comme si l’âne était un degré de Calvaire,
Je le jure devant l’aube et la primevère,
Devant la fleur, devant la source et le ravin,
Digne Kant, je suis prêt à proclamer divin,
Vénérable, excellent, et j’admire et j’accepte
L’enseignement duquel on sortirait inepte,
Ignare, aveugle, sourd, buse, idiot; mais bon.
Mais apprends par coeur Jove, Ughel et Casaubon,
Baronius, Ibas d’Edesse, Théétète;
Médie Boctoner à fond; romps-toi la tête
Au sens qu’Eunapius donne à tel ou tel mot;
Va de l’abbé Tudesche au cardinal Cramaud;
Nourris-toi de Bohier, vieille prose bourrue;
Dévore Ammirato, Walinge, Pellagrue;
Vide résolument jusqu’à la lie et bois
André Schott, Sylvius autrement dit Dubois,
Massillon qui pérore et Fléchier qui harangue,
Docte Kant, je consens à fourbir de ma langue
Tous ces volumes, ceux qui sont noirs d’encre, et ceux
Qui sont tachés de sang, et ceux qui sont crasseux,
Y compris les fermoirs, la basane et les cuivres,
Si tu te sens, après avoir lu tous ces livres,
D’humeur à me donner un coup de pied de moins.
Si l’on veut faire grâce, en leurs lugubres coins,
À tous ces vieux vélins jargonnant tous les styles,
Ce qu’on peut dire, ô Kant, c’est qu’ils sont inutiles.
Et, philosophe! au fait, comment tous ces monceaux
De tomes, gravement contemplés par les sots,
Pourraient-ils enfanter un résultat quelconque?
Un rien les dépareille ou les brouille ou les tronque.
Puis ils se font la guerre entre eux, je te l’ai dit.

Le volume savant hait le tome érudit;
Le littéraire gourme avec le politique;
On joute à qui sera le plus paralytique,
Le plus obscur, le plus diffus, le plus pesant,
Et du juste, du vrai, du beau, le plus absent;
C’est à qui se fera lourd, majestueux, vaste,
À qui sera poudreux avec le plus de faste;
Car tous ces livres sont des vivants ténébreux;
L’oeil qui les voit croit voir des grands-prêtres hébreux,
Et quand de leurs casiers le jour perce les fentes,
Ils ont sur leurs rayons des airs d’hiérophantes;
Ils sont l’autorité régnant dans son caveau,
L’esprit de l’homme avec reliure de veau;
Avoir force feuillets, notes, renvois, chapitres,
Faire pousser des cris terribles aux pupitres,
Être un livre de poids par-dessus tout, voilà
L’ambition, le but, la gloire; et pour cela
Le bénédictin creuse, édifie et laboure;
Le volume veut être imposant, il se bourre
De blanc, de noir, de faits, de vent, de vieux, de neuf,
Et la grenouille idée enfle le livre boeuf.
Dans l’olympe farouche et sinistre des livres,
Lieu polaire où l’on prend les vitres pour des givres;
Dans l’immense grenier du bouquiniste humain
Où l’étude et la nuit scellent leur triste hymen,
Depuis que l’homme écrit, que l’esprit se fourvoie,
Que la première plume a fui la première oie;
Dans ce dock du grimoire universel, tunnel
Et puits du griffonnage antique et solennel,
Où l’erreur sur l’erreur s’amoncelle, où s’entasse
La savantasserie avec le savantasse,
Gouffre où sans voir l’ennui, ce miasme, on le sent,
Où s’est faite, de siècle en siècle grossissant,
Comme un ulcère croît, comme grandit un chancre,
L’horrible alluvion du déluge de l’encre,
Dans ce dépôt qu’emplit le froid morne des ifs,
Il faut les voir rangés, ces testaments massifs,

Ces volumes titans dont un fort de la halle
Aurait peine à porter la lourdeur idéale,
Ces tomes à stature écrasante, ulémas
Des lutrins monstrueux et des puissants formats;
Ceux-ci bardés de cuir, ceux-là vêtus de moire,
Ils encombrent des temps la ténébreuse armoire;
D’autres ouvrages sont éphémères, charnels,
Réels, mortels, humains; eux sont les éternels;
La cendre, qui du livre est l’austère rosée,
Leur arrive à travers les astres tamisée;
Chacun d’eux est un fort, chacun d’eux est un mont,
Chacun d’eux est un culte; eux des livres, fi donc!
Ils sont des avestas, ils sont des lévitiques,
Chacun d’eux est le Livre; ils sont les hauts portiques
Et les larges piliers de la maison d’Isis;
Ils sont les chênes noirs, vénérables, moisis,
De la Dodone obscure et lugubre des âmes;
On en entend sortir des voix de vieilles femmes;
Et l’ombre qui descend de leurs rameaux touffus
Va du Philothéos jusqu’au Polymorphus;
Ils sont les dolmens lourds et branlants; les registres
Pétrifiés du monde aveugle et fou des cuistres;
Des espèces de blocs funèbres et bavards;
Eux des livres, fi donc! ils sont des boulevards;
Ils sont les élégants sacrés de la doctrine,
Les sphinx géants ayant l’oracle en leur narine,
Les colosses pensifs de la religion,
Ils sont des dieux. — Mais gare au diable Légion!
Gare à ce gamin sombre appelé petit livre!
Le format portatif est un monstre; il délivre,
Il proteste, il combat; c’est hideux, c’est criant;
Comme avec son épingle il crochète en riant
La serrure de fer d’une bible bastille!
Il a la clef des champs, ce brigand; il pétille,
Il éclate; il est clair, rapide, âpre, éloquent;
Il court, et met le feu partout. Oui, mon vieux Kant,
Poussière fulminante éparse sur les tables,

Les livres légers sont aux pesants redoutables;
Un frêle Capulet tue un gros Montaigu;
Un Diderot de poche, imprenable, exigu,
Invisible, détruit la montagne de tomes
Que font les Augustins mêlés aux Chrysostomes;
Que Laplace ait un jour sur sa calme hauteur
(Mais il ne l'aura point, car on est sénateur)
Le caprice de faire un almanach sauvage
Et sincère, à deux sous, et voyez le ravage!
L'almanach grimpe droit à l'azur, court, descend,
Monte, ôte à saint Michel son nimbe, va chassant
Saint Médard de son ciel, saint Pierre de sa loge,
Extermine Turnèbe, Arnobius, Euloge,
Moïse, Bossuet et l'abbé de Corbeil,
Et casse Josué, gendarme du soleil;
Et c'est fini, voilà la Légende dorée
Croulant sous l'ironique et splendide empyrée;
0Un tout petit Montaigne, adroit, glissant, rongeur,
Malgré leur profondeur et malgré leur largeur,
Va démolir Gennade et Thégan par la base;
Un leste Beaumarchais en quelques instants rase,
Avec leur clientèle honorable d'abus,
0Les de Maistre les plus caducs, les plus barbus;
Saint-Évremond accourt, moqueur, alerte, ingambe,
Et maintenant cherchez Symmachus, Alegambe,
Et le père Gretser et le père Poussin!
Paul-Louis colletant saint Luc, quel assassin!
Un essaim de pamphlets qui s'échappe dégrade,
Sur leur lit de justice ou leur lit de parade,
Sigonius, Prudence, Alde et le sieur Pithou;
D'où viennent-ils? j'ignore; — où vont-ils? Dieu sait où!
Mais ils mangent les saints jusqu'aux dernières plumes;
Sur les tomes debout ainsi que les enclumes
De la forge du deuil, de l'erreur et du vent,
Ils se répandent gais, cassant, rageant, bravant,
Des révolutions anarchique avant-garde;
Et l'on entend courir dans la brume hagarde

Le pas tumultueux de ces trotte-menu;
Et ce désordre est fait par ce peuple inconnu
Au nez du marguillier et sous l’oeil de l’édile;
Ainsi que l’ichneumon détruit le crocodile
Le doute in-dix-huit bat le dogme in-folio;
Malheur à l’alcoran qu’attaque un fabliau!
Un missel sur qui plane un couplet est malade;
Je plains l’infortiat qu’une puce escalade,
L’infortiat fût-il plein de rois et de dieux,
Si la puce, agitant son stylet radieux,
Saute, atome effrayant, la largeur de la terre
Et la hauteur d’un siècle, et se nomme Voltaire.
— Mais, dis-tu, ce baudet n’a pas le sens commun.
Il veut un résultat; n’en est-ce dont pas un?
Ce combat des penseurs est sublime. — À merveille.
Qu’en sort-il? Baal meurt, l’ours fuit devant l’abeille,
Soit. On lutte, on s’acharne, assaut, mêlée à mort!
Et la science pique et la sagesse mord;
Que reste-t-il au coeur, la bataille finie?
Hélas! la nudité d’une immense ironie;
Tous les profonds instincts glacés et grelottants;
Kant, ce n’est pas cela que de l’homme j’attends.
L’esprit triomphe. À bas le vieux dogme! on l’écrase,
Il tombe; le passé s’effondre; table rase;
Bien. Plus je suis vainqueur, plus je suis assombri .
Une négation est un sinistre abri;
Où mettrai-je mon âme? est-ce dans un décombre?
Je conviens que je dois à cette troupe sombre,
À ces démolisseurs de l’antique fatras,
Tout le logis qu’on peut avoir dans un plâtras.
La pioche, et pas de toit; la faux, et pas de gerbe.
Est-ce donc là le but de ton effort superbe,
Homme, architecte auguste, être prédestiné?
Satan fait avorter Adam, son puîné;
J’en gémis; l’homme manque à sa tâche divine.
Je cherche un édifice et je trouve une ruine.

La nuit autour de l’homme

J’ai des objections à l’homme, tu le vois.
Qu’il existe une loi, mêlée aux vagues lois
Que nous entrevoyons par nos pâles fenêtres,
Qui, dans l’échelle obscure et tremblante des êtres,
Place au-dessus de nous ce pleureur, ce rieur,
Qui fasse l’âne aux fils d’Adam inférieur,
Qui mette moins de verbe en plus de bouche, et rende
L’endettement plus court dans l’oreille plus grande,
C’est possible; après tout, ça regarde l’auteur;
Que l’homme ait ou n’ait pas le droit sur sa hauteur
D’être traité par nous d’une façon civile,
Et d’être salué roi par la longue file
D’animaux que Noé dans son arche classait,
Par le lion ayant dans sa griffe un placet,
Par le corbeau tenant dans son bec un hommage;
Qu’il dise : — Dieu n’a fait qu’Adam à son image; —
Peu m’importe; je parle à cette majesté
Crûment, je ne suis pas de bassesse frotté,
Je suis franc; ma parole est âpre, mais certaine,
Car je préfère, étant frère de La Fontaine,
Et quelque peu cousin d’Agrippa d’Aubigné,
Le réel, même rude, au faux, même peigné,
Les toisons de la brute aux perruques de l’homme;
Je ne fais pas ma cour, Kant, je suis économe
D’admirer sottement et lâchement le roi,
Et je trouve en Dangeau plus d’âne que dans moi.
Si l’homme est majesté, cette majesté boite.
Quand la mort a serré ce pantin dans sa boîte,
En sort-il un esprit qui s’envole? Psyché
Jaillit-elle à travers l’arlequin démanché?
Je n’en sais rien. Cherchez. Il fait nuit.
            Ce qui reste
Évident dans la brume adorable ou funeste,
C’est que c’est un vivant médiocre et mauvais.

Je deviendrais méchant, si je ne me sauvais,
Rien que pour avoir vu de près ce pauvre hère.
Je n’estime pas plus son grelot que sa haire,
Et son austérité que son relâchement;
Quand sa bouche dit vrai par hasard, son oeil ment;
Fumée, il s’évapore en toutes les emphases;
Son ventre et son cerveau n’ont point les mêmes phases.
La terre a son instinct, la lune a sa raison;
Entre l’air et son souffle il met une cloison;
Au lieu d’être le vaste esprit cosmopolite,
Il est toujours d’un lieu quelconque satellite,
Juif, grec, anglais dans l’Inde, au Brésil portugais;
Il rêve des édens et fait des paraguays ,
Il se tient hors du code ou hors de la nature;
Las, refroidi, blasé, s’il veut par aventure
Devenir vertueux, quels lugubres essais!
Il ne sait que passer de l’excès à l’excès,
De l’abus au défaut, de l’alcôve à la haine,
D’Ève au cloître, et que fuir don Juan dans Origène.
Voletant vaguement de la Trappe à Paphos,
Mouche heurtant de l’aile au soupirail du faux,
Bourdon de tous les dieux et de toutes les vitres,
Donnant pour moule aux fronts les casques et les mitres,
Forgeron d’imposture, ouvrier de fureurs,
Fabriquant au mensonge une armure d’erreurs,
Il n’est pas d’épithète outrageuse, honnie,
Vile, dont on ne puisse orner sa litanie.
Certe, on se tromperait de croire que l’azur,
Les sphères, les levers d’étoiles, l’éther pur,
Et le nimbe solaire et l’auréole astrale
Filtrent dans l’âme humaine en lumière morale.
Kant, c’est un malheur d’être une voûte à cachot,
Une cave fermée au ciel splendide et chaud,
Une maison de nuit. Hélas! l’homme en est une.
Il a cette mauvaise et fatale fortune
Que son obscurité résiste obstinément
Au lys, à la colombe, à l’aube, au firmament.

Rien, ni l'Etna qui semble en braise se dissoudre,
Ni le passage vaste et fuyant de la foudre,
Ni la lune, ébauchant quelque sacré contour,
Pas même l'évidence éclatante du jour,
Pas même le feu noir qui dévore Sodome,
Rien ne peut éclairer l'intérieur de l'homme.
Ô Kant, l'homme est drapé de rêves mal tissus.
Vêtu d'un haillon sombre, il porte par-dessus
Une pourpre d'orgueil prise aux fausses sagesses.
Il est fils des géants mariés aux singesses;
Il a plus de grimace encor que de grandeur;
Son profil de beauté d'un profil de laideur
Se double, et son sublime adhère au ridicule
De si près qu'on le croit fait pour le crépuscule.
Aussi quelle ombre en lui! quelle ombre autour de lui!
Il sent sous tous ses pas trembler le point d'appui,
Ce qu'il espère étant presque ce qu'il redoute;
Un flot de trouble passe après un flot de doute;
Tout se résout en gouffre, en chute, en tremblement
Sur on ne sait quel vague et blême escarpement,
En ouverture sombre, en cécité muette,
Tâtonnement au docte et vertige au poète;
Et toujours, au-dessus du lugubre horizon,
Et de votre savoir et de votre raison,
L'idole, le cromlech, l'autel, dressent leur cime
Que blanchit un rayon monstrueux de l'abîme.
Mais du moins faites-vous ce qu'il faudrait pour voir
Un peu plus de clarté dans votre cerveau noir?
Point. La routine au fond du néant vous isole.
Vous avez tout, parole, écriture, boussole,
Vapeur, imprimerie, et scalpel et compas;
Faites-vous donc du jour avec cela? Non pas.
Avez-vous des esprits, des plongeurs, des génies,
De grands cerveaux ouvrant des portes infinies,
Des puisatiers géants creusant au ciel des trous,
Des penseurs, des trouveurs? — Pardieu! — Qu'en faites-vous?

Conduite de l’homme vis-à-vis des enfants

Et l’âne s’écria : — Pauvres fous! Dieu vous livre
L’enfant, du paradis des anges encore ivre;
Vite, vous m’empoignez ce marmot radieux,
Ayant trop de clarté, trop d’oreilles, trop d’yeux,
Et vous me le fourrez dans un ténébreux cloître;
On lui colle un gros livre au menton comme un goître;
Et vingt noirs grimauds font dégringoler des cieux,
Ô douleur! ce charmant petit esprit joyeux;
On le tire, on le tord, on l’allonge, on le tanne,
Tantôt en uniforme, et tantôt en soutane;
Un beau jour Trissotin l’examine, un préfet
Le couronne; et c’est dit : un imbécile est fait.
Glycère et Jeanneton, ces deux filles célestes,
Qui courent dans Virgile et Ronsard, sont moins lestes,
Quand Sylvain les poursuit, le fauve jouvenceau,
À trousser leur jupon pour passer un ruisseau,
Un singe est moins agile à gober une pêche,
Les baleiniers, armant leurs pirogues de pêche,
Sont moins prompts à lancer leur barque au flot mouvant
Dès que d’un squale en marche ils entendent l’évent,
En frappant dans ses mains Bonaparte a moins vite
Chassé l’aigle tudesque et l’aigle moscovite
Qu’un pédant n’est rapide à défaire un esprit.
Oh! que de fois, depuis qu’hélas! on m’entreprit,
J’ai vu l’abrutisseur en chef, le grand pontife
Qui, lugubre, a le plus de crasse dans sa griffe,
Dans l’antre où se tenaient nos régents, nos dragons
Les plus chauves, les plus goutteux, les plus bougons,
Entrer, tenant par l’aile ou la patte sanglante
Une pauvre petite âme toute tremblante,
Et dire, en la jetant aux vieux : Plumez-moi ça!
Je me souviens des cris que plus d’une poussa
Pendant que son plumage auroral, son enfance,
Sa blancheur, sa candeur, sa gaîté sans défense,

Sous les vils ongles noirs d’un rustre aux yeux éteints,
Tombaient, duvet charmant, et que les sacristains
Heureux de voir l’oiseau tout nu dans leurs mains dures
Balayaient ces splendeurs des cieux au tas d’ordures!
L’aile pourtant n’est point arrachée au moignon;
Elle repousse grise et faite au cabanon;
L’enfant vit; nul ne peut dire : Cette âme est morte;
L’âme prend la couleur du verrou de la porte,
Voilà tout, et son œil clignote; et maintenant,
Avec un encrier au croupion, traînant
Bréviaires, gradus, glossaires, cent volumes,
Toute la cuistrerie engluée à tes plumes,
Vole donc, alouette, au fond du libre azur!
La sacristie, hélas! fait un deleatur
Du mystérieux D qui sert de majuscule
Au mot DIEU flamboyant dans notre crépuscule;
Elle éteint dans les fronts les rayons libéraux.
Vous mutilez des coeurs, ah, niais! ah, bourreaux!
Et vous raccourcissez des âmes! et vous êtes
Dans l’auguste forêt d’horribles ciseaux bêtes!
Vous tondez les instincts, vous rognez les cerveaux;
Sur le patron des vieux vous taillez les nouveaux;
De la création vous troublez l’équilibre;
Ignorant que tout être est fait pour croître libre,
Pour donner telle fleur et vivre en tel milieu,
Que toute âme a sa forme intime devant Dieu,
Et que toute nature a droit à sa broussaille,
Vous tronquez des talents, de même qu’à Versaille,
Ô brutes, vous changez en pains de sucre verts
Le cèdre et le cyprès, géants d’ombre couverts,
Sans même voir, parmi vos bronzes et vos marbres,
L’humiliation de tous ces pauvres arbres,
L’ennui de l’oranger fait pomme, et le chagrin
Des ifs taillés en cône autour du boulingrin.
Pédagogues! toujours c’est ainsi que vous faites.
Tout l’esprit humain doit se mouler sur vos têtes;
Pégase doit brouter dans votre basse-cour,

L’aile morte, et manger de votre foin. Le jour
Où, de votre perruque arrangeant les volutes,
Fiers, perchés sur Zoïle et Batteux, vous voulûtes
Définir le génie, expliquer la beauté,
Les mauvais estomacs ont dit : Sobriété;
Les myopes ont dit : Soyons ternes; la clique
Des précepteurs, geignant d’un air mélancolique,
A décrété : Le beau, c’est un mur droit et nu.
Donc Rubens est trop rouge et Puget trop charnu;
L’art est maigre; Vénus serait plus belle, étique.
Shakspeare, ce satan de votre art poétique,
Prodigue image, idée et vie à chaque pas;
La nature, imitant Shakspeare, ne voit pas
Sur une vieille pierre une place vacante
Sans la donner à l’herbe ou l’offrir à l’acanthe;
Le lierre énorme où l’art mystérieux se plaît
Emplit Heidelberg comme il emplit Hamlet;
Vous coupez cette ronce auguste qui soupire;
Vous tombez à grands coups de serpe sur Shakspeare,
Marauds, et vous frappez, jusqu’à n’en laisser rien,
Sur le grand chêne où flotte un hymne aérien.
À qui donc croyez-vous persuader, ô cuistres,
Que le beau, que le vrai vous ont pris pour ministres,
Et qu’Horace va dire : Hic lucidus ordo,
Parce que vous tirez des crétins au cordeau!
N’est-il pas odieux, ô Jean-Jacque, ô Molière,
Ô d’Aubigné, du droit puissant auxiliaire,
Qui disais en voyant un roi : Qu’est-ce que c’est?
Montaigne, mon bon Michel que son père faisait
Éveiller le matin au son de la musique,
Diderot qui raillais tout le vieil art phtisique,
Ô libre Hoffmann, planant dans les rêves fougueux,
N’est-il pas désolant, dites, de voir ces gueux,
Tatoués de latin, de grec, d’hébreu, ces cancres
Dont l’âme prend un bain dans la noirceur des encres,
Exécuter l’enfance en leurs blêmes couvents!
Ne sont-ils pas hideux, ces faux docteurs, savants

À donner au progrès une incurable entorse,
Commençant par l’ennui pour finir par la force,
Du bâillement allant volontiers au bâillon,
Logiques, de Boileau concluant Trestaillon,
Vantant Bonald, couvrant de béates exergues
Piet, Cornet d’Incourt et Clausel de Coussergues,
Tâchant d’éteindre au fond des bleus éthers!
N’est-il pas monstrueux de voir ces magisters,
Casernés dans l’horreur de leur Isis occulte,
Poser sur l’avenir qui s’envole en tumulte
Avec l’emportement d’Achille et de Roland,
Ayant dans l’oeil l’éclair de Vasco s’en allant
Ou de Jason partant pour la plage colchique,
Leur bâton de sergent instructeur monarchique,
Et crier aux esprits : À droite! alignement!
Écolâtres, au fond de votre enseignement
Est Rome, enfermant l’âme en sa funèbre enceinte;
Vous êtes les prévôts de la science sainte
D’où jaillissant Newton et Watt, les caporaux
De l’art divin qui vit vibrer Sienne et Paros;
Le vil marais vous charme et votre oeil le préfère;
Vous feriez un étang, si l’on vous laissait faire,
De l’océan tordant ses flots sur les galets;
En forgeant des pédants, vous créez des valets;
En faisant le front bas vous faites l’âme basse;
Qu’un de vos patients chuchote dans la classe,
Qu’il ose relever son museau d’écolier,
Et se gratter un peu le cou sous son collier,
Ô révolution! anarchie! il vous semble
Que l’alphabet lui-même entre vos pattes tremble,
Que l’F et que le B vont se prendre le bec,
Que l’O tourne sa roue aux cornes de l’Y,
Horreur! et qu’on va voir le point, bille fatale,
Tomber enfin sur l’I, ce bilboquet tantale!
Votre système est vain, votre empirisme est faux.
Ayez donc la charrue avant d’avoir la faux.
Çà, vous figurez-vous, parlons net, camarades,

Qu’on est un vrai docteur pour avoir pris ses grades,
Et qu’on sait quelque chose en sortant de chez vous?
Que la grande nature, aux bruits vastes et doux,
Belle, n’enseigne rien à l’esprit qu’elle élève;
Et qu’Adam, ébloui de l’éden, épris d’Ève,
Attendait, pour que Dieu tout à fait le créât,
Qu’Iblis lui fît passer le baccalauréat?
Non, la nature au fond pourrait suffire seule;
Elle sait tout, elle est nourrice, étant aïeule!

Conduite de l’homme vis-à-vis des génies

C’est en dehors des lois que vous faites, pédants,
Que plane l’harmonie aux grands hymnes grondants,
Et le papier réglé par une main classique
Est du papier réglé, mais n’est pas la musique.
Qu’on doit fourrer, vivants, les aigles, les griffons,
En cage dans les trous de vos dogmes profonds,
Que l’essor du penseur se mesure à vos mètres,
Qu’il doit vous consulter, vous les bedeaux des lettres,
Vous les abbés du goût, hurlant à l’unisson :
Nous sommes le savoir, nous sommes la raison!
Que vous avez, vous seuls, ces dons sacrés sur terre,
Et que chacun de vous en est propriétaire;
Que l’académie est, que la sorbonne vit;
Que l’antique sentier qu’à la file on suivit
Est la route sacrée, et qu’il faut faire en sorte
Qu’on n’y coure jamais, que jamais on n’en sorte;
Qu’on forge et qu’on bat le fer d’autant mieux qu’il est froid;
Que votre cloître est saint; que vous avez le droit
De mettre le génie et l’âme en retenue,
Que le cygne, nageant candide sous la nue,
Doit se faire montrer le blanc par un corbeau;
Que j’en saurai plus long, que je serai plus beau,
Moi l’âne, quand un gueux, flanqué d’une ou deux vieilles,
M’aura coupé la queue et rogné les oreilles,
Ah! pardieu, vous allez me faire accroire ça!
L’âne a du sens, ayant porté Sancho Pança.
Il reprit : — Parmi vous qu’un novateur s’obstine,
Qu’il baise mal le bas du dos de la routine,
Qu’il ne veuille pas boire où de tout temps ont bu
La coutume ridée et l’usage barbu,
Que son âme ose, horreur! n’être pas prisonnière,
Que, se sentant une aile, il méprise l’ornière,
Vous le damnez.
                    Jadis, un songeur l’entendait,

Les bêtes ont crié : Haro sur le baudet!
J’entends l’homme crier : Haro sur le génie!
Malheur à qui s’en va dans la sombre Uranie!
Dans la matière, encor, passe; on peut innover;
Il est permis d’aller, de chercher, de trouver
Quelque crapaud géant, quelque gros perce-oreille,
Quelque étrange fourmi, pas tout à fait pareille
À celles dont Linné a contemplé les oeufs,
Ou des squelettes frais et des fossiles neufs,
Des mammouths troublant l’ordre, et dans les grès, les schistes
Et les gneiss, des fémurs d’éléphants anarchistes;
La routine consent à ce qu’un cachalot,
Inédit, lève un peu trop son grouin hors du flot;
On peut faire, sans trop indigner les bélîtres,
Des révolutions dans les écailles d’huîtres;
L’immortelle ânerie, et j’en suis à regret,
Admet qu’on peut trouver un gui dans la forêt
Ou pêcher un mollusque avec un coup de sonde;
Quand on voit revenir après leur tour du monde
Le capitaine Cook, Magellan ou lord Ross
Rapportant des tapirs ou des rhinocéros,
Si bien que la science à leur aide complète
La confrontation de l’homme avec la bête,
Quelque raie éclairant l’énigme du dauphin,
Des os de mastodonte illuminant enfin
La grande question de l’ours, ou des carcasses
D’épiornis faisant progresser les bécasses,
Longs bravos; les savants formant leurs bataillons
Contemplent les herbiers et les échantillons,
Le mandarin admire, et le bourgeois dit : Qu’est-ce?
On fait queue au musée à voir ouvrir la caisse,
Les deux chambres, que chauffe un rapport érudit,
Accordent au jardin des plantes un crédit
Pour élargir l’endroit où l’on met la genèse;
Et l’institut — pendant que, tout frémissant d’aise,
Paris en foule court voir le tapir manger, —
Harangue au pont des Arts le fossile étranger.

Mais quand le penseur, vaste et noir missionnaire,
Arrive du pays du rêve et du tonnerre,
Et revient du mystère où planent les esprit,
Rapportant, aussi lui, ce qu’à l’ombre il a pris,
Farouche, et dans sa main, de rayons inondée,
Tenant le fait chimère ou bien le monstre idée,
Déployant la splendeur d’un progrès factieux,
Quelque nouveauté sainte ayant l’odeur des cieux
Qui va faire, profonde et pure découverte,
L’homme heureux, et l’envie, hélas, encor plus verte;
Offrant la douleur morte ou l’espace annulé;
Montrant des visions la formidable clé;
Malheur à ce trouveur et malheur à ce mage!
Que Gall ait du cerveau vu sur le front l’image,
Que dans quelque insondable abîme le même air
Qui soulevait Élie ait emporté Mesmer,
Malheur! Papin en France ou Galilée à Rome,
Quel que soit le prodige, hélas, quel que soit l’homme,
Quel que soit le bienfait, quel que soit l’ouvrier,
Qu’il se nomme Jackson, qu’il se nomme Fourier,
Malheur! huée, affronts, et clameurs triomphantes;
Tous se jettent sur lui; les uns, les sycophantes,
Au nom des livres saints, védas ou rituels;
Les autres, les douteurs, bourreaux spirituels,
Parfois railleurs profonds, comme Swift et Voltaire,
Au nom du vieux bon sens, bouche pleine de terre.
On vous l’assomme avec maint argument plombé,
Là, par Christ plus Moïse, ici, par A plus B.
Que veut ce songe creux? et de quelles cavernes
Sort-il pour nous conter de telles balivernes?
Avoir du temps passé jeté le vieux bâton,
Quel crime! S’appeler Gutenberg ou Fulton,
Quel cynisme! Aller seul! l’audace est fabuleuse!
Si c’est Flamel, Cardan, Saint-Simon ou Deleuze,
Pour en avoir raison l’éclat de rire est là;
Si c’est Jordan Bruno, si c’est Campanella
Qui le premier a dit : — Les soleils sont sans nombre, —

Qu’il se sauve; sinon, demain, le bûcher sombre
Lui mettra la fumée et la nuit dans les yeux,
Et l’affreux tourbillon des braises, envieux,
Châtiera ce rêveur du tourbillon des astres;
Harvey mourra moqué de tous les médicastres;
Kind raillera Képler, et tous les culs-de-plomb
Ferreront cet oiseau de l’océan, Colomb.
Vois, Socrate, par qui le genre humain se hausse,
Blêmit sinistrement dans une basse fosse;
Deux siècles avant l’heure où Vasco les verra,
Dante, oeil mystérieux que Dieu même éclaira,
Voit à travers la terre, énorme et sombre geôle,
Les quatre étoiles d’or qui sont à l’autre pôle;
Il le dit; on le chasse; et c’est ainsi toujours.
Dès qu’un flambeau paraît, l’homme crie : Au secours!
Qui l’éclaire ou le sert l’irrite; le génie
Est une infraction sévèrement punie;
Toujours vous proscrivez le grand homme fatal,
Sauf à lui dédier plus tard un piédestal;
Vos bienfaiteurs, penseurs et sages, ont beau dire :
— Cherchons et triomphons! l’infini nous attire;
Dans l’océan Progrès il n’est point de cap Non! —
L’homme réplique : exil, ciguë et cabanon;
Et l’histoire en est pleine, et tous ces Hérodotes
Content sous divers noms ces douces anecdotes.
J’ajoute : quelquefois le front des hauts songeurs
Se fend, l’idée ayant de trop grandes largeurs,
Et comme il est certain que la nature mêle
Toujours un peu d’ivresse au lait de sa mamelle,
Comme ils sont à la fois brumeux et radieux,
Ces hommes-là sont fous, dit la tourbe. Ils sont dieux!
L’excès de vérité n’éblouit-il pas l’âme,
Et n’a-t-on pas de grands aveuglements de flamme?
Hélas : en peut-il être autrement? Le réel,
L’idéal, le progrès, même venu du ciel,
Même apporté par Christ, même quand Dieu l’amène,
Passant par l’homme aura toujours la marque humaine.

Toujours l’idée aura pour nombril le défaut;
Toute innovation, même prise là-haut,
Par mille côtés vraie, est par un côté fausse;
Quel bonheur! la routine à ce détail s’adosse.
Après avoir plongé dans la sublimité,
Après avoir volé le gouffre illimité,
Dans l’humaine cohue obstinée à ses voiles
Malheur à qui revient! L’infini plein d’étoiles,
Sur la terre où le cuistre admire l’avorton,
N’a qu’un débarcadère appelé Charenton.
Oui, le crachat jaillit de cent bouches ouvertes
Sur tous les pâles Christs des saintes découvertes!
Oui, malheur au héros qui, la lunette en main,
Se dresse au lointain bord de l’horizon humain,
Guetteur mystérieux et vedette avancée!
Il est toujours tué; par qui? par la pensée.
Car dès que les docteurs ont vu, troupeau jaloux,
Poindre une idée, ils ont la tristesse des loups,
La foule n’aime point qu’un astre la dérange
Avec un flamboiement de clarté trop étrange,
Et la pensée humaine a peur des vastes cris
Du génie, et du vol des immenses esprits.
L’âne reprit : — Hélas, hommes! race chétive
Ayant plus de torpeur que d’initiative!
Hélas, génie humain! hélas, esprit humain!
Qui, s’il fonde aujourd’hui, démolira demain,
Double, ayant Oui pour aile et Non pour carapace;
Qui, sans savoir pourquoi, d’un pôle à l’autre passe,
Du plus noir du cloaque au plus bleu de l’éther,
De Dante à Loriquet, de la bouche au sphincter;
Qui semble jeune et fort, et tout à coup se ride;
Qui vole, plane, et boite, et, pour s’en faire un guide,
Va du condor à l’oie, et sur le faîte met
Tantôt Herder ou Dante, et tantôt dom Calmet;
Qui ferme l’oeil sitôt qu’un peu d’aube y pénètre;
Qui, dans le même temps, trouve le moyen d’être
Virgile et Moevius, ou Voltaire et Restif;

Qui, pour être céleste en restant positif,
Se bâcle on ne sait quel accoutrement lyrique
Fait de plume d’archange et de poil de bourrique!
Plein d’hésitation, d’anxiété, d’effroi,
Bégayant juste assez pour dire : Je suis roi,
Kant, pour se déjuger il est toujours en verve;
La contradiction est son fonds de réserve;
Ne sondez pas, devant ce frivole parleur,
Ces questions : tombeau, sort, mystère, douleur;
Il fuit de l’Inconnu la sinistre falaise,
Sur ces pentes à pic il se sent mal à l’aise,
Il hait ces mots profonds qui semblent infinis,
Il ferme sa croisée au brouillard où Leibniz,
Dante, Eschyle, Reuchlin, Pythagore, Épicure,
Voyaient du noir destin pendre la corde obscure;
Il tâche de sortir de dessous les grands cieux;
Mais il n’est hors de là qu’un badaud vicieux,
Mais il ne sait pas même être un Chrysale honnête.
Il rit du fil de l’ombre, étant marionnette.
Le lendemain, voilà la peur qui le reprend.
Fou, tour à tour d’orgie ou d’aube s’empourprant,
L’homme mériterait, soit dit en style honnête,
D’avoir, ainsi que moi, sur le haut de la tête
Deux conduits auditifs taillés en falbala!
L’homme consent au beau, — s’il est utile. Il a
Le goût du médiocre et s’arrête à mi-côte;
Il laisse en route ceux dont l’idée est trop haute;
Il ferait plus de cas de l’Hékla que revêt
La neige et d’où le feu jaillit, s’il y pouvait
Poser quelque marmite énorme d’invalides;
Au ver sacré qui file au fond des chrysalides
Il demande un bonnet bien tiède, bien soyeux
Bien épais, qu’il se puisse abattre sur les yeux;
Il préfère Montmartre au mont Blanc, Athalie
À Macbeth, et son fiacre au char tonnant d’Élie;
Entre Horace et Vadé, Vadé serait son choix.
Il se croit roi du globe, il en est le bourgeois.

Conduite de l’homme vis-à-vis de la création

L’homme, orgueil titanique et raison puérile!
Montre-moi ce que fait ce travailleur stérile,
Et montre-moi surtout ce qui reste de lui.
Depuis Ève, il s’est moins aidé qu’il ne s’est nui.
Dis, que vois-tu de beau, de grand, de bon, de tendre,
De sublime, aussi loin que ton oeil peut s’étendre
Dans la direction où marche ce boiteux?
N’est-il pas lamentable et n’est-il pas honteux
Que cet être, niant ce que font ses génies,
Accablant les Fulton et les Watt d’ironies,
Ayant un globe à lui, n’en sache pas l’emploi,
Qu’il en ignore encor le but, le fond, la loi,
Et qu’après six mille ans, infirme héréditaire,
L’homme ne sache pas se servir de la terre?
Explique-moi le chant que chante ce ténor.
Le temps qu’il perd, ainsi qu’un prodigue son or,
Échappe heure par heure à sa main engourdie;
Dans la création il met la parodie;
Il n’entend pas les cieux dire : Éclairons! aimons!
Lorsqu’il tente, il échoue; en présence des monts
Il fait la pyramide, il dresse l’obélisque;
Il est le blême époux de la vie, odalisque
Au sein gonflé de lait, aux lèvres de corail;
Sultan triste, il ne sait que faire du sérail;
Il voit auprès de lui passer, aidant ses vices,
Offrant à son néant d’inutiles services,
Le jour, eunuque blanc, la nuit, eunuque noir.
Il met Dieu dans un temple en forme d’éteignoir,
Ou croit lui faire honneur en brûlant une cire.
Il dit à Dieu : Seigneur; mais dit au diable : Sire.
Je te répète, ô Kant, que j’ai honte et mépris
Des superstitions où le pauvre homme est pris;
Car, même quand il croit, quand il accepte un culte,
Son culte calomnie et sa croyance insulte;

Il rêve un éternel méchant, pareil à lui.
Quand au monde créé, son incurable ennui,
Comprenant peu l’auteur, comprend encor moins l’oeuvre.
Dieu brille, l’homme siffle, écho de la couleuvre;
La nature n’est pas à son gré, tant s’en faut;
Le spectateur n’est point enchanté du spectacle;
Et tandis qu’au-dessus de son frêle habitacle,
L’épanouissement du gouffre resplendit,
Tandis que l’humble oiseau gazouille, ou que bondit
L’âpre ouragan ouvrant ses gueules de gorgone,
Tandis que le jour chante et rit, l’homme bougonne;
Dédaignant le réel d’après ses visions,
Cracheur de l’océan des constellations,
Faisant des ronds dans l’ombre accoudé sur la berge,
Voyageur murmurant de sa chambre d’auberge,
Il déclare ceci mauvais, cela manqué;
Bâille; à la loterie, il emploie anankè;
Se taille dans l’azur son ciel bête; chicane,
En présence des nuits sans fond, le grand arcane;
Proteste, et par moments s’irrite, et lestement
Blâme l’abîme et son fait au firmament.
Que vous soyez croyant, soumis à l’amulette,
Mouton que mène un prêtre avec une houlette,
Ou douteur, et de ceux sur qui d’Holbach prévaut,
Qu’importe! toi l’impie et ton voisin dévot,
Vous êtes faits au fond de la même faiblesse;
Le fait vous déconcerte et le réel vous blesse;
Ce qui vous excédait dans l’art vous choque aussi
Dans la nature, gouffre étrange, âpre, obscurci;
L’art était profond, noir, touffu; le monde est pire;
Vous ne traitez pas mieux Sabaoth que Shakspeare;
Et votre pauvre esprit, essayant Jéhovah,
Gronde et ne trouve point que cet être lui va.
Pan vous déborde; il est trop tendre, il est trop rude.
Votre philosophie est une vieille prude,
Votre bigoterie a ses pâles couleurs.
Vos encensoirs poussifs sont envieux des fleurs;

À votre sens, ce monde, auguste apothéose,
Ce faste du prodige épars sur toute chose,
Ces dépenses d'un Dieu créant, semant, aimant,
Qui fait un moucheron avec un diamant,
Et qui n'attache une aile au ver qu'avec des boucles
De perles, de saphirs, d'onyx et d'escarboucles,
Ces fulgores ayant de la splendeur en eux,
Ces prodigalités de regards lumineux
Qui font du ciel lui-même une effrayante queue
De paon ouvrant ses yeux dans l'énormité bleue,
Au fond c'est de l'emphase, et rien n'est importun
Comme l'immensité de l'aube et du parfum
Et le couchant de pourpre et l'étoile et la rose
Pour vos religions atteintes de chlorose;
Le grand hymen panique est fort dévergondé;
Des sueurs du plaisir mai ruisselle inondé;
Toute fleur en avril devient une cellule
Où la vie épousée et féconde pullule,
Et que protège à tort le ciel mystérieux;
À vous en croire, vous les jugeurs sérieux,
Quand ils vont secouant de leurs crinières folles
Tant de rosée à tant d'amoureuses corolles,
Les chevaux du matin ont pris le mors aux dents;
Et quand midi, le plus effréné des Jordaens,
Sur les mers, sur les monts, jusque dans votre oeil triste,
Jette son flamboiement d'astre et de coloriste,
Rit, ouvre la lumière énorme à deux battants,
Et met l'olympe en feu, vous n'êtes pas contents;
Cela n'est pas correct et cela n'est pas sobre;
Vous regardez juillet avec des yeux d'octobre;
Toute cette dorure, auréoles partout,
Clartés, braises, rayons, rubis, blesse le goût,
Et cette foudroyante et splendide largesse
Est la divinité, mais n'est pas la sagesse.
Bonshommes, vous jetez de l'encre à l'idéal;
Vous blâmez germinal, prairial, floréal;
Ces mois joyeux vous font l'effet de jeunes drôles;

Quand sur l’herbe, à travers le tremblement des saules,
Sur les eaux, les pistils, les fleurs et les sillons,
Volent tous ces baisers qu’on nomme papillons,
L’éternel vous paraît un peu vif pour son âge;
Le printemps n’est pas loin d’être un libertinage;
Le serpent sort lascif de l’étui de vieux cuir,
La violette s’offre en ayant l’air de fuir,
L’aube éclaire le monde avec trop d’énergie;
Chastes, vous détournez la tête de l’orgie;
Vous damnez la matière, indignés, affirmant
Que toute cette sève et que tout cet aimant,
Finiront par s’user à force de débauche;
Et Calvin crie : Ordure! et Pyrrhon crie : Ébauche!
Et Loyola tendant aux roses son mouchoir
Leur dit : Cachez ce sein que je ne saurais voir.
Ô Memphis! Delphe! Ombos! Mecque! Genève! Rome!
Hypothèses, erreurs, religions de l’homme,
Ignorance, folie et superstition
Dressant procès-verbal à la création!
Ô théologiens toisant Dieu! théosophes
De l’hymne sidéral châtrant les sombres strophes,
Reprochant ses excès au gouffre, gourmandant
Le trop obscur, le trop profond, le trop ardent,
Sondant, Orphée, Amos, la nue où vous plongeâtes!
Tribunal de boiteux, sénat de culs-de-jattes
Critiquant l’aigle altier dans l’étendue épars!
Tas d’aveugles criant à l’éclair : Rentre ou pars!
Conseil de jardiniers jugeant la forêt vierge!
Ô stupeur! Sirius contrôlé par le cierge!
Naigeon qui dit : Raca! Calmet qui crie : Amen!
Faisant à l’infini passer son examen!
Oui, te voilà, toi l’homme, et c’est là ta manière;
Le char d’Adonaï doit suivre ton ornière;
Et tu ne consens pas à l’univers, s’il est
Comme l’a fait la Cause et non comme il te plaît;
Il te froisse, il te gêne; et, prêtre ou philosophe,
Tu réprouves la forme et tu blâmes l’étoffe;

Tu ne l’acceptes pas s’il n’est contresigné
Par quelque apôtre d’ombre et de brume baigné;
Le firmament sera tel que tu le préfères,
Ou tu ratureras les globes et les sphères;
Tu les coupes selon ton patron de néant.
Citant à ton parquet l’inconnu, maugréant
Ici de ses laideurs, là de ses élégances,
Malmenant l’absolu pour ses extravagances,
Tu lui lis son arrêt d’un ton bref et succinct.
Si le pôle n’est point d’accord avec un saint,
Si quelque astre tient tête à la bible et se mêle
De démentir un texte où la lettre est formelle,
Le pôle est démagogue et l’astre est jacobin.
Quand un pape — je crois que ce fut un Urbain
Quelconque — condamnait, au nom de son messie,
Le soleil à tourner sous forme d’hérésie,
Qui dont eût contredit le prêtre épouvantail?
La cathédrale d’ombre ouvrait son grand portail,
Les deux battants grinçaient des gonds avec colère,
Rome mettait la main sur le spectre solaire,
L’église requérait le secours de l’état,
Afin que le soleil confus se retractât;
Devant la nuit stupide, infirme et misérable,
Le jour, pâle, venait faire amende honorable;
La vérité criait : Je mens! et Patouillet
Semonçait Galilée, et Dieu s’agenouillait.
L’immensité, sur toi sinistrement penchée,
Luit; la suprématie en fait une bouchée.
Ah! tu n’es vraiment pas embarrassé de Dieu.
Que tu jures par Locke ou bien par saint Matthieu,
Homme, athée en ta foi comme en ton ironie,
Tu crois qu’un ciel s’éteint dès qu’un prêtre le nie,
Imbécile! ou qu’après ton choc voltairien
Le monde est en poussière et qu’il n’en reste rien.
Quoi! tu veux dépecer le monde, toi l’atome!
Cette création vaste, étrange, ignivome,
Monstre du beau, torpille au contact foudroyant,

Dressant dans l’inconnu ses cent têtes, ayant
Pour écailles des mers, des soleils pour prunelles,
Ce polype inouï des vagues éternelles,
Cet immense dragon constellé, l’univers,
Tu le critiques, toi, le petit, le pervers,
Qui vis rongé de lèpre et meurs couvert de cendre,
Toi que le vice mord, toi dont la race engendre
Ce César qui broyait vingt peuples douloureux
Pour être appelé grand, et ce Poulmann affreux
Qui tuait un vieillard pour un verre de cidre!
Mangé par l’acarus, tu veux dévorer l’hydre!

Conduite de l’homme vis-à-vis de la société

L’âne un moment se tut, puis, sévère, dressa
Ses deux oreilles l’une après l’autre :
— Homme! — or çà
Reprit-il, si, penché sur l’obscure ouverture,
Tu n’as pas compris Dieu ni compris la nature,
Si tu n’as pas compris ce poème des jours,
Des nuits, des cieux, des voix profondes, des bruits sourds,
Drame dont tu te crois pourtant le personnage,
Te tires-tu du moins de ton propre ménage
Avec les faits posés directement sur toi,
Qui sont les uns ton joug et les autres ta loi;
Joug qu’il faut rejeter, loi qu’il faut reconnaître?
Ces problèmes : avoir ou n’avoir pas un maître,
Être de brume abjecte ou de clarté vêtu,
Vivre libre ou forçat, comment les résous-tu?
Quel est le droit du fils? quel est le droit du père?
De quelle quantité de passé doit-on faire
Le lest du temps présent? dans le vote des lois
Convient-il de donner à la tombe une voix?
L’homme doit-il avoir deux existences, l’une
Offerte à la famille et l’autre à la commune?
Qu’est-ce qu’une cité? qu’est-ce qu’un citoyen?
L’État est-il but, ou n’est-il qu’un moyen?
Grâce à ton effort gauche et bête pour extraire
Et tirer la clarté de l’erreur, son contraire,
Toutes ces questions fument sans éclairer;
Une épaisse vapeur en sort qui fait pleurer;
D’un brouillard qui grandit toujours environnées,
Obscures, elles sont comme des cheminées
De ténèbres d’où monte et se répand la nuit.
Pas un système vrai ne s’est encor produit;
C’est en vain qu’on s’ébat, c’est en vain qu’on arguë;
Et vingt siècles après le verre de ciguë,
Dix-huit cents ans après le cri du Golgotha,

L’homme est encore au point où Platon s’arrêta.
Ce que nous appelons : dérober son échine
Aux bons coups que l’ânier prémédite et machine,
Éviter le fossé, prendre le droit chemin,
Lisser son poil, garder du chardon pour demain,
Vous hommes, vous nommez cela la politique.
Mais là quelle ombre! erreur moderne, erreur antique!
Quel épaississement et quel redoublement
De tout ce qui se trompe et de tout ce qui ment!
Querelle sur l’idée et sur le fait; querelle
Sur la loi convenue et la loi naturelle;
Querelle sur le blanc, querelle sur le noir,
Et sur l’envers du droit qu’on nomme le devoir;
Systèmes sociaux qui se gourment, s’escriment,
Et ferraillent, les yeux bandés.
Les uns suppriment
Les siècles, jetés bas de leur trône lointain;
Ils construisent, mettant en ordre le destin
Comme un vaisseau réglé de la hune à la cale,
Une fraternité blafarde et monacale
Entre les froids vivants que rien ne lie entre eux;
Ce rêve fut déjà rêvé par les chartreux;
L’homme est ronce et végète; il est ver et fourmille;
Plus de nom paternel, plus de nom de famille;
Pas de tradition, pas de transmission;
L’être est isolement et disparition;
Ils réduisent, voyant l’idéal dans la chute,
L’homme à l’individu, le temps à la minute;
L’homme est un numéro dans l’infini, flottant
Hors de ce qui l’engendre et de ce qui l’attend,
Vain, fuyant, coudoyé par d’autres chiffres vagues;
L’humanité n’est plus qu’un tremblement de vagues;
Ayant vu les abus, ils disent : — Supprimons;
Puisque l’air est malsain, retranchons les poumons;
L’opprobre du passé doit emporter sa gloire; —
Ils rêvent une perte infâme de mémoire,
Un monde social sans pères, établi

Sur l’immensité morne et blême de l’oubli;
Ils combinent Lycurgue et le pacha du Caire;
L’homme enregistré naît et meurt sous une équerre;
Le pied doit s’emboîter dans le niveau, le pas
Doit avant de s’ouvrir consulter le compas;
De cette égalité dure et qui vit à peine,
La liberté s’en va, vieille républicaine,
Car elle est la rebelle et ne sait pas plier;
Chacun doit à son heure entrer à l’atelier,
Chacun a son cadran, chacun a sa banquette;
L’homme dans un casier avec son étiquette,
Délié de son père, ignorant son aïeul,
C’est là le dernier mot du progrès, — l’homme seul.
Ces fous mettraient un chiffre au blanc poitrail du cygne;
Géomètres, ils font un songe rectiligne;
Esprits qui n’ont jamais contre terre écouté
Le silence du gouffre et de l’éternité,
Jamais collé l’oreille au mur des catacombes,
Cœurs sourds au battement mystérieux des tombes,
Chassant les disparus, parquant les arrivants,
Ils abolissent, plaie effroyable aux vivants,
La solidarité sépulcrale des hommes.
— Mais l’homme est un total, les êtres sont des sommes;
Tout homme est composé de tout le genre humain;
Aujourd’hui meurt, tronqué d’hier et de demain; —
Ces vérités sont là; qu’importe! ils font le vide;
Ils coupent, dans l’espace insondable et livide;
Le fil sacré qui lie aux cercueils les berceaux;
Ils écrasent l’obscur tressaillement des os;
Ils ne comprennent point que dans la sépulture
La terre garde encore une pâle ouverture,
Que le trépassé voit, et que l’enseveli
Parfois à son linceul fait faire un vague pli
Afin d’apercevoir les hommes, et s’adosse
Pour écouter au mur ténébreux de la fosse;
Du fond d’on ne sait quelle existence on entend;
À ce que fait la vie on reste palpitant;

Ils ne comprennent pas que la sainte série
Des aïeux, à travers le sépulcre attendrie,
Suit tout des yeux, s'émeut à voir hors du tombeau
Courir de main en main le frissonnant flambeau,
Et que dans les enfants le père continue.
Chose sombre! fermer la paupière inconnue,
Éteindre ce regard d'en haut, et, sans remords,
Étouffer ce grand souffle obscur; tuer les morts!
Tournant le dos au coin du ciel que l'aube dore,
Ayant pour lampe un crâne où tremble le phosphore,
Objectant à tout fait nouveau leur surdité,
Engloutis dans la caste et dans l'hérédité,
Ceux-ci, pires encor, sont l'extrême contraire.
À force d'être fils on cesse d'être frère;
Le père par l'aïeul est lui-même éclipsé;
L'ancêtre seul existe; il se nomme Passé;
Il est l'immense chef vénérable et stupide;
Sa barbe est la sagesse et le beau c'est sa ride;
Il est mort; c'est pourquoi lui seul est proclamé
Vivant, et d'autant plus patent qu'il est fermé;
Il s'est pétrifié dans sa morne attitude,
Et son autorité c'est sa décrépitude;
Partout où l'on se hait il a son point d'appui;
Tout rentre en lui; tout est hiérarchie, ennui,
Fauteuil patriarcal, ordre antique, loi, gêne;
La famille alourdie a le poids d'une chaîne;
Le vieillard Autrefois gouverne, et Maintenant
Pourrit dans le marais du genre humain stagnant;
Les prêtres ténébreux de ce fatal système
Murmurent sur l'oiseau qui s'éveille : Anathème!
Malheur sur le matin! scandale sur l'amour!
Babel a vu nicher ces hiboux dans sa tour;
Ils sortent du talmud apportant dans leur griffe
Le dogme, le bandeau, le joug, l'hiéroglyphe;
Ils sont le fanatisme, ils sont le préjugé;
Durs, ils tiennent l'enfant dans les aïeux plongé;
Hélas, ils font lever la nuit sur tous les faîtes;

Jamais de novateurs, d’inventeurs, de prophètes;
Jamais de conquérants, toujours des héritiers;
Toujours les mêmes pas dans les mêmes sentiers;
Le squelette lui-même entre leurs mains s’encroûte;
Ils n’ont qu’un cri de marche : En arrière! une route,
La routine; un regard l’aveuglement; un Dieu,
Le grand fantôme d’ombre au fond du cachot bleu;
C’est peu de la statue, il leur faut la momie;
Ils reboivent l’horrible antiquité vomie;
Ces froids songeurs, penchés sur les âges défunts,
Ont les miasmes lourds des fosses pour parfums;
Ce qui fut les enivre et qui vit les navre;
Leur idéal a l’oeil sinistre du cadavre;
La nuit les aime; ils sont ses blêmes envoyés.
Tous les rayonnements de l’avenir noyés
Dans le grandissement de l’ombre des ancêtres;
Les fils des serfs rivés aux pieds des fils des maîtres;
L’éternel échafaud sur l’enfer éternel;
Autour d’Adam, chargé du crime originel,
Les vieux siècles hagards poussant des cris sauvages;
La perpétuité de tous les esclavages;
Pierre et César joignant leurs glaives effrayants;
L’autodafé chauffant la tiédeur des croyants;
Le moins d’enfants possible au seuil de la chaumière;
Torquemada pour flamme et Malthus pour lumière;
Il n’existe qu’un droit pour être, avoir été;
Le cimetière luit, c’est la seule clarté,
Et la tradition est l’unique atmosphère;
Ce que l’aïeul a fait, l’enfant doit le refaire;
Voilà leur songe : hiver, glace, plomb, marbre, orgueil,
Exagération lugubre du cercueil.
Derrière ces docteurs funèbres rien ne reste
Que le passé jetant sa figure funeste
Sur le réel, le jour, le travail, la moisson;
Tombe démesurée emplissant l’horizon.
Rien de sain, rien de fort; des larves dans la brume;
L’enfant pâle en naissant; pour verbe un testament;

Les cœurs morts; le nocturne et morne étouffement
Des jeunes nations par les anciens empires;
Les fils spectres râlant sous les pères vampires.
Ces deux systèmes vains sont hors de la raison
Et de la vérité, chacun à sa façon;
L’un a le froc, et l’autre a la manche mahoître;
L’un refait le donjon, l’autre refait le cloître;
Étranges en ceci que d’un point opposé
Ils viennent l’un et l’autre aboutir au Passé;
Et leur choc apparent est au fond la rencontre
Du rêve avec le dogme et Pour avec Contre.
L’homme flotte de l’un à l’autre, de cela
À ceci, de Babeuf il tombe en Loyola,
De Penn en Hildebrand et de Knox en de Maistre;
Sous ses deux poings fermés le Passé le séquestre,
Et la Théocratie, au regard de bûcher,
L’ayant pris une fois, ne veut plus le lâcher;
L’ombre empêche le jour et l’oeil de se rejoindre
Et jette la nuée au rayon qui veut poindre;
Quand viendra l’aube? Hélas! la mauvaise saison
Est longue pour le vrai, le droit et la raison;
Le soleil est si lent qu’on peut douter qu’il vienne;
L’horrible idolâtrie antédiluvienne,
Sombre, est le seul abri que l’homme ait sur le front;
L’esprit humain, captif sous ce hideux plafond,
Agonise depuis tout le temps qu’il hiverne
Dans cette épouvantable et béate caverne.
Pauvres hommes, par l’homme, hélas, suppliciés,
Vous vous y prenez mal, mais, quoi que vous fassiez,
Vous êtes à l’attache, et la courroie est forte;
Votre maigre science économique avorte;
Elle se nomme Faim, Désespoir, Buzançais;
L’effort est vain; après toutes sortes d’essais,
Le joug tient, la douleur persiste, le mal dure,
Vous ne détruisez pas la fatalité dure,
La loi de nuit, la loi de mort, la loi de sang.
Ah! le malheur appelle et l’homme dit : Présent.

Conduite de l’homme vis-à-vis de lui-même

Dieu, nature, cité; la loi, l’esprit, la lettre;
Mais à quel point de vue enfin faut-il se mettre
Pour trouver le bon sens de votre enseignement?
Je feuillette et relis tout l’homme vainement,
Je ne vois point par où son coeur s’améliore,
Je vois la nuit grandir si je vois l’astre éclore.
Voyons, regarde un peu, bonhomme impartial.
Nous avons contre nous notre angle facial,
Nous autres animaux; on est, de par son crâne,
Contraint d’être un chacal ou forcé d’être un âne;
L’instinct bas nous conduit par le bout du museau;
À quatre pattes, monstre! et nous portons le sceau
Du malheur, et l’infâme artère carotide
Est mère de l’ours fauve et du pourceau fétide;
La matière est fatale, au moins l’homme le dit;
La roche est antre afin que le loup soit bandit,
Le renard, c’est le vol; l’autour, c’est la rapine;
L’hyène a l’ongle ainsi que la ronce à l’épine;
Mais l’homme conscient et libre en son penchant,
L’homme, qui peut choisir, d’où vient qu’il est méchant?
De quel droit êtes-vous des tigres, vous les hommes?
Que nous nous comportions en brutes que nous sommes,
Soit; mais vous, les esprits créés pour la clarté?
Comment l’homme peut-il par une extrémité
Être Homère, et par l’autre être Héliogabale?
Et je ne parle pas ici du cannibale,
Du cafre, du huron sinistre et paresseux,
Je parle des penseurs, des artistes, de ceux
Qui savent ce que c’est qu’une bibliothèque,
De l’ami de Ronsard, de l’ami de Sénèque,
De Rome, de Paris, faîte auguste, sommet,
Trône, où Néron chantait, où Charles neuf rimait!
Vous êtes donc mauvais pour le plaisir de l’être!
C’est votre vanité qui partout vous pénètre,

Et qui vous fait, tirant l’homme vers l’animal,
Entrer facilement dans les pores du mal.
Vanité! tout chez vous est faux. L’or est du cuivre.
Chacun marche à côté du chemin qu’il croit suivre;
Le soldat se croit maître, il est esclave, hélas,
Et ce qu’il nomme épée est souvent coutelas,
Et ce qu’il nomme gloire est toujours servitude;
Le savant, qui d’Atlas imite l’attitude,
Ne sait pas; l’ignorant n’ignore pas; mettez
Deux autels côte à côte en vos noires cités,
Puis demandez à l’un des deux prêtres qui passe
Son avis sur le prêtre et le temple d’en face!
Le philosophe est grave, austère, froid, prudent,
Sublime, et de raison sévère débordant;
Il ne veut pas qu’on aille et qu’on vive à sa guise,
Mais dans la sainteté du devoir il aiguise
Et fourbit les mortels à toutes les vertus;
Ferme, il va redressant tous les instincts tortus;
Ce qu’il dit est superbe, il excelle au dressage
De l’homme sans défaut; mais lui-même est-il sage?
Non; et, législateur, il vit hors de la loi.
— Ô caillou, dit le fer, je coupe, grâce à toi,
Mais coupe donc toi-même un peu, je t’en défie. —
Qui vous met à nu trouve une maigreur bouffie,
Une difformité qui se masque et qui ment;
La vertu, si jamais vous l’épousiez vraiment,
Vous quitterait bientôt pour cause de sévices;
La fausse gloire germe et s’enfle sur vos vices,
Et cette fluxion n’est rien qu’un mal de plus.
L’homme dans son miroir se fait de grands saluts;
Le miroir les lui rend, mais dans son âme obscure
Il rit, et sait le fond de l’homme, étant mercure;
Pas d’orgueilleux qui n’ait honte secrètement;
Pas de prude qui n’ait en rêve quelque amant;
Ah! si l’on s’en allait, pour voir plus que son buste,
Par quelque soupirail regarder dans un juste,
Comme il vous fermerait son volet brusquement!

Votre âme aime la nuit comme son élément;
En public vous cherchez la louange et l’estime,
Mais vous n’hésitez pas dans votre for intime
À bâillonner et même à tuer le témoin,
Le scrupule caché qui tremble dans un coin;
Votre probité plie et promptement expire;
Le meilleur parmi vous est si proche du pire
Qu’entre eux, l’un étant saint et l’autre étant damné,
Ils n’ont pas l’épaisseur d’un cheveu de Phryné;
Évêque, on veut sa dîme, et, bailli, ses épices;
L’argent, le lit, la table, autant de précipices;
Le vin est un écueil, la femme est un récif;
La conscience, bas, à Salomon pensif
Disait plus de dix fois par jour : Vieille canaille!
L’expérience austère, ô Kant, est la trouvaille
Qu’on ramasse en sortant du vice; on se flétrit,
On se forme; chacun des sept péchés écrit
Une lettre du mot composite : Sagesse.
Votre philosophie admirable, au fond, qu’est-ce?
Rébellion, alors qu’il faudrait méditer;
Ou résignation, quand il faudrait lutter.
Et sur tous les sommets, trône, pavois, quadrige,
Oh! comme vous avez aisément le vertige!
Quoique dauphin ou roi, ce jeune homme est charmant.
Il est né généreux, secourable, clément;
Qu’un valet l’endoctrine, et c’est un mauvais prince.
Contre les courtisans votre rempart est mince!
Hélas, les hommes sont à ce point insensés
Que pour changer un d’eux en tyran, c’est assez
D’une bouche bavant une bave imbécile!
Ce chef-d’oeuvre hideux, un despote, est facile;
Quand Narcisse voulut un Néron, il le fit;
Pour faire un Louis treize un Luynes suffit;
Il ne faut pour cela qu’un peu de flatterie
Même par un crétin grossièrement pétrie;
Pour tenter l’âme humaine et la précipiter,
Dom Escobar n’a pas besoin d’argumenter,

Ni Satan d’allonger sa caressante serre;
Un corrupteur d’esprit n’est jamais nécessaire,
Et Jocrisse flatteur perdrait Socrate roi.
Et l’on me dit : Tu vas vénérer l’homme! — En quoi?
Mon vieux hi-han vaut bien ses quatre ou cinq diphtongues,
Et plus que ses vertus mes oreilles sont longues.
L’homme fait reculer l’heure sur le cadran,
Quitte la liberté pour reprendre un tyran,
Flatte un dieu, tue un loup, rampe et se met à rire.
Ô triste genre humain! Veut-on pas que j’admire
Tout ce que dans toi-même, homme, tu dénigrais,
Ton faux goût, ton faux jour, tes faux pas, ton progrès
Pourvu d’un appareil à reculer, tes songes,
Tes sens ayant leur borne ainsi que des éponges,
Et tes opinions, tombant, se relevant,
Murmurant, parodie imbécile du vent!
Je vois l’homme à peu près tel qu’il est, presque bête,
Presque génie, ayant son gouffre dans sa tête.
Tu te peuples d’erreurs et tu reste désert.
Ta science te fait tes jougs. À quoi te sert
Ce don libérateur et divin, la pensée?
Spartacus t’apparaît dans un thème au lycée,
Mais tu n’en conclus rien; je l’ai dit, et c’est vrai,
Fouillez Mariana, Tacite, Mézeray,
L’homme est servile au point que l’histoire en est lasse;
Depuis quatre mille ans et plus qu’il est en classe,
Et qu’on lui montre à lire avec un air profond,
Et que ses magisters, rentrés, repus, se font
Servir des bouillons chauds le soir par leurs phlipotes,
Il ne s’est pas encor délivré des despotes.
Ses docteurs vont disant pendant qu’il se débat;
Peuple! aime ton césar. Âne! adore ton bât.
Ces docteurs! quels marchands! leur morale sévère,
Cela va se fêler, prends garde, c’est du verre.
La rencontre d’un roi coudoyant leur destin
Fait à leur probité rendre un son argentin.
Ah! ces savants sans fond, ces hommes de logique,

Roidissant en plis secs leur simarre énergique,
Ces forts calculateurs, ces raisonneurs abstraits
De quelque idéal trouble adorant les attraits,
Chastes, prudes, glacés, rigides, implacables,
Ayant la majesté des cuistres impeccables,
Bonzes de la basoche ou du pays latin,
Qui marchent rengorgés dans leur menton hautain,
Et chez qui l’attitude escarpée est de mode,
Sois un tyran quelconque, un Phocas, un Commode,
Un Christiern, le premier Domitien venu,
Sois le diable d’enfer, fourchu, barbu, cornu,
C’est à vendre; et tu peux acheter, si tu verses
Rondement un total suffisant de sesterces,
Piastres, louis, dollars, rixdallers, species,
La raison de Cuvier et l’âme de Sieyès!
Et quelle flatterie effroyable que celle
Qui sort de ce monceau de honte universelle!
Traverse-moi d’un bout à l’autre ce récit
Du passé que le deuil du présent obscurcit,
Va de l’A jusqu’au Z, va dans l’affreuse crypte
Du czar de Moscovie au pharaon d’Égypte;
Pierre tue Alexis et Philippe Carlos;
Sésostris fait du monde un funèbre champ clos;
Timour court sur l’Asie ainsi qu’une avalanche;
Soliman, vieux et chauve, aïeul à la barbe blanche,
Appelle ses enfants et joue au milieu d’eux,
Et le soir il les fait étrangler; Sélim deux
Fait tirer le canon chaque fois qu’il est ivre;
Osman, s’il voit un tigre en cage, le délivre;
Irène, l’Isabeau du chaos byzantin,
Fait arracher les yeux à son fils Constantin
Dans la chambre où ce fils sortit de ses entrailles;
Charles sept dort pendant que La Hire et Saintrailles
Tiennent Talbot, Chandos et Bedfort en arrêt,
Et que Jeanne à travers la fournaise apparaît,
Toute nue, au poteau tordant ses bras sublimes;
Justinien, faiseur de codes et de crimes,

Amoncelle encor plus de forfaits que de lois;
Tudor fait un pendant monstrueux à Valois;
Louis quatorze, au nom du Christ qu’il dénature,
Couche la France aux fers sur le lit de torture;
Léon dix se parjure, Albrecht fait un serment
Faux, et François premier triche, et Charles Quint ment;
Eh bien! tous sont cléments, grands, glorieux, illustres!
Le moindre a son autel entouré de balustres;
Il n’est pas un d’entre eux qui ne soit le meilleur;
Quand ils meurent la terre est folle de douleur;
Celui-ci fut un dieu sur la machine ronde,
Cet autre fit pâlir la lumière du monde
Le jour où du milieu des vivants il sortit;
Ô honte! on trouvera toujours, grand ou petit,
Un homme pour verser ces pleurs de crocodile;
Ce sera Cantemir, si ce n’est Chalcondyle,
Si ce n’est Karamsin, ce sera Bossuet.
Je voudrais l’âne sourd ou bien l’homme muet.
Ô mon vieux Kant, la phrase est une grande fourbe,
On croit qu’elle se dresse alors qu’elle se courbe
Tant la coquine met de pompe à s’aplatir.
Certes, le menu peuple est un saignant martyr;
Certe, un champ de carnage est affreux; Tyr en cendre
Pour le plaisir d’un fou qui s’appelle Alexandre,
C’est dur; Rosbach, Fornoue et Pultawa fumants,
Et ces égorgements et ces éventrements,
C’est hideux; ces canons dont les fauves gueulées
Font accourir le soir les vautours par volées,
C’est noir; triste est la lutte et triste est le butin;
La bataille, ce jeu de bagues du destin,
Dont la roue oscillante a des hasards sans nombre,
Où le vainqueur, tournant sur son destrier sombre,
Rit et remporte au bout de sa lance un zéro,
C’est atroce et niais; Mars est un vieux bourreau;
Si devant tous les morts qui, sur toute la terre,
Dans la plaine difforme et pâle de la guerre
Sont tombés, glaive au poing, depuis quatre mille ans,

Si devant ces monceaux de squelettes sanglants
Le sépulcre fait défiler un cortège,
Où le brigand serait à côté du stratège,
Ô Kant, les os blanchis dans ces champs de malheur
Trouveraient le héros ressemblant au voleur,
Et les fémurs brisés, les tibias, les crânes,
Ne distingueraient point César de Schinderhannes;
Certes, les bons humains, quoique chargés de fers,
S’ils consultaient leurs coeurs ou simplement leurs nerfs,
Jetteraient les sabreurs bien vite à bas du trône,
Bellone recevrait une cartouche jaune,
Et l’on vivrait en paix dans les pauvres hameaux;
Mais les laquais lettrés, les rhéteurs, les grands mots,
Se mettent à genoux devant ces saturnales;
Suprême opprobre! avec ces maximes banales :
— Que la guerre est un fait divin; — qu’elle a ses lois;
— Qu’il faut juger à part les actions des rois; —
La phrase, cette altière et vile courtisane,
Dore le meurtre en grand, fourbit la pertuisane,
Protège les soudards contre le sens commun,
Persuade aux niais que tous sont faits pour un,
Prouve que la tuerie est glorieuse et bonne,
Déroute la logique et l’évidence, et donne
Un sauf-conduit au crime à travers la raison.
Toi l’homme, tu te mets vite au diapason;
C’est toi qu’on trahit, toi qu’on fraude, toi qu’on livre;
C’est ta chair qu’à César Shylock vend à la livre,
C’est ton sang dont Judas trafique, et c’est ta peau
Que Ganelon brocante, ô genre humain, troupeau!
Homme, la corde au cou le matin tu t’éveilles;
Mais quoi! par tes deux yeux et par mes deux oreilles,
C’est bien fait! et, j’en prends à témoin le ciel bleu,
Les traîtres ont raison, car tu leur fais beau jeu.
Tes vices, tout d’abord, voilà les premiers traîtres;
Ils te remettent pieds et poings liés aux maîtres;
Au devant du joug vil, brutal, dur, inhumain,
Ta corruption fait les trois quarts du chemin;

Doux au sergent de ville, aimable au garnisaire,
Lâche, entendant malice à ta propre misère,
Plat, tu clignes de l’oeil même avec tes bourreaux.
Tu vas léchant la patte énorme des héros;
Charles douze et Cortez t’enivrent; tu te pâmes
Devant Cambyse errant dans les villes en flammes;
Tu compares Cyrus et Clovis, mesurant
Ton admiration au sabre le plus grand;
C’était aux bords du Var, ils étaient cinq cent mille,
Marius les tua; que c’est beau! Paul-Émile,
Pompée, Othon, Sylla, quels fiers centurions!
Quels soldats! quels géants! et sur tes horions
Ta main inepte écrit : Victoires et Conquêtes.
Nous n’en sommes pas là, nous autres; pas si bêtes!
Et quant à moi, morbleu! j’aurais bien du chagrin,
Étant Aliboron, d’admirer Isengrin.
Les hommes, — c’est ainsi, Dieu, que vous les créâtes, —
Sont les seules souris devant le chat béates,
Heureuses de servir au matou de hochet;
L’homme est le seul mulot content de l’émouchet,
Le seul mouton bêlant des hymnes aux colères
Du tigre, et du lion contemplant les molaires,
Le seul poisson qui danse et sonne du grelot
Devant les triples rangs de dents du cachalot,
Le seul moineau, la seule alouette espiègle
Qui chante Te Deum dans la griffe de l’aigle.
Oui, c’est toujours, hélas, du côté des tueurs
Que ton enthousiasme a le plus de lueurs,
Et, stupide, tu dis : La bataille est gagnée!
Quand un boucher t’a fait une large saignée.
Mais voulusses-tu même, homme, te révolter,
Quelle conviction as-tu pour résister?
Une religion, voilà le grand remède;
L’âme est le point d’appui solide d’Archimède;
La barricade est haute et fière, et le beffroi
Est fort, quand les pavés et les cloches ont foi;
Pour vaincre, il fait avoir aux reins une croyance;

Le glaive flamboyant sort de la conscience;
Toi, jamais ton regard convaincu ne brilla;
C’est vrai, quand ta servante et tes enfants sont là,
Ou ta femme en un coin raccommodant tes nippes,
Tu parles d’or, on voit tes vertus, tes principes,
Et tes perfections que rien ne fait broncher,
Dans tes graves discours à la file marcher
Comme aux processions on voit passer des châsses;
Mais, dès que tu le peux, tu jettes tes échasses,
Tu descends plus gaîment que tu n’étais monté,
Et tu dis en soupant entre garçons : — Bonté,
C’est duperie; amour, combien dure l’ivresse?
Chasteté, j’aime mieux Margoton que Lucrèce;
Dévouement, c’est niais, synonyme de grand;
Vérité, c’est le pied trop court de Talleyrand;
Justice, instinct sacré vers qui l’âme s’élance,
C’est une grande femme avec une balance
Sculptée en marbre blanc par monsieur Cartellier;
Guerre, c’est la charrue avec un timbalier;
Rien n’est bon pour le blé comme un grand capitaine;
Un Wagram, un Rocroy, tombant sur une plaine,
Vaut le meilleur fumier; la gloire est un engrais. —
Tu railles ce vaincu qu’on nomme le Progrès
Quand tu le vois lié par les hommes de proie;
Et ce serait ta fête, et ce serait ta joie
Si tu pouvais, du fond de tes bouges obscurs,
Noircissant le ciel même et tous les rayons purs,
Toutes les vérités, toutes les certitudes,
Barbouiller la lumière avec tes turpitudes,
Et charbonner la face auguste du soleil.
Le flot tumultueux et souple est ton pareil;
Il te prend par moments, comme un vent court sur l’herbe,
Des frissons, des élans de colère superbe,
De liberté, d’essor vers le jour, vers le bleu,
Vers le vrai, vers le beau, vers l’avenir, vers Dieu;
Et tu passes ta vie ensuite à t’en dédire.
Rien est ton point d’appui, nihil ton point de mire;

Ta science est un bloc informe de gravats;
Conclusion : tu n’es qu’un drôle; et je m’en vas.
Hommes, vous rendriez sceptique même un âne!
Vous descendez sur nous en neige, et non en manne;
Vous refroidissez l’âme en ses tristes exils.
Dieu nous fit humbles, soit; vous, vous nous faites vils;
Poussière qu’on était, hélas : on devient boue.
L’homme par calcul chante ou pleure, blâme, loue,
Divinise, diffame, exagère, amoindrit.
Oui, la chauve-souris du doute en mon esprit
Ouvre hideusement sa livide membrane;
Je sens en flots de nuit bouillonner sous mon crâne
L’encre qui dans les yeux goutte à goutte tomba.
Ce monde est un brelan. Le droit, le devoir, bah!
Laissez-moi donc tranquille avec tous ces mots vides!
Les hommes ont leur carte à jouer. Fous, avides,
Plutôt mauvais que bons, orageux, ténébreux,
Ils ont la haine au coeur et se mangent entre eux,
Tout en braillant : Honneur, fraternité, patrie!
Les principes sont là pour faire galerie;
Et l’équité, le droit, la vertu, le devoir,
— S’ils existent pourtant, ce qu’il faudrait savoir, —
La probité, l’honneur, — ou ce qu’ainsi l’on nomme, —
Disent là-haut, raillant le pauvre effort de l’homme :
— Bien joué. Mal joué. Bravo, Machiavel!
Ah! crétin de Bayard! Malpole, very well! —
Ô genre humain, un rien t’enfle, et te rapetisse.
Ah! oui, pardieu! vertu, morale, honneur, justice!
Qu’un grand forfait triomphe, on lui baise l’orteil.
Ta conscience bâille et tombe de sommeil,
La lueur du vrai tremble en sa terne prunelle,
Je te plains si tu n’as que cette sentinelle.
L’homme est guidé du faux au vrai, du blanc au noir,
Par le mot intérêt qu’il prononce devoir.
Toute action humaine est signée : Égoïste.
Je me résume, ô Kant, l’homme est triste. Il n’existe
Qu’un mérite ici-bas, c’est d’être riche; il n’est

Qu’un esprit, et qui rend charmant le plus benêt,
C’est d’être riche; il n’est, et ce siècle l’affiche,
Qu’une beauté, toujours, partout, c’est d’être riche;
L’or ne connaît que l’or, et devant les lingots
Le vice et la vertu sont deux sombres égaux.
Voilà tout ce que sait la science.
        La vie
Fait quelques pas tremblants vers le bien, puis dévie.
L’homme est un psaume, soit; il est blasphème aussi;
Son âme est une lyre au son peu réussi
Où l’honnête a sa corde, où l’injuste a sa fibre;
Dans son pauvre esprit louche il tient en équilibre
Cauchon et Jeanne d’Arc, Socrate et Mélitus;
Il complète le bien d’où sortent ses vertus,
Hélas, avec le mal d’où sortent ses fétiches;
Ce vers faux a Satan et Dieu pour hémistiches.
Homme, entre nous et toi bien mince est la cloison,
Et l’aigle par devant et par derrière est oison.
Ta cervelle est de boue et ton coeur est de pierre.
Tes docteurs chats-huants détournent leur paupière
Au resplendissement du divin Hélios;
Ils éclipsent avec un mur d’in-folios
Le ciel mystérieux d’où viennent les grands souffles;
Qu’est-ce qu’ils font de toi, ces bonzes, ces maroufles,
Ces talapoins lettrés aux discours pluvieux?
Un vieux toujours enfant, un enfant toujours vieux.
Ton groupe sépulcral d’écolâtres ineptes
Prêche, érige les morts en dogmes, en préceptes,
T’assourdit d’un éloge infâme de la nuit,
Allume un suif et dit : C’est un astre qui luit!
Applaudit l’écrevisse et le crabe, et célèbre
Les reflux du présent dans le passé funèbre,
Si bien que tu ne sais, dans ton hébétement,
Si tu vois Demain poindre au bas du firmament
Ou d’Hier qui revient la noire silhouette,
Si c’est l’affreux hibou qui chante, ou l’alouette,
Et si le mouvement que tu fais en rêvant

Te ramène en arrière ou te pousse en avant.
Ta science te rend stupide, non sans peine.
Ô leurre! la clef fausse ouvre la porte vaine;
Ta pensée est une ombre où tu restes béant.
Oui, chez toi tout, hélas, arrive à du néant,
La chimère au calcul, le fait à l’hypothèse,
Ce qu’il faut qu’on proclame à ce qu’il faut qu’on taise,
Le silence à l’ennui, la parole au bâillon,
La pourpre d’Aspasie ou d’Auguste au haillon,
La vie au noir cercueil, la plume à l’écritoire,
Les chiffres au zéro, les lettres à la gloire,
Et le savant au prêtre et le prêtre au savant.
Qu’est-ce donc que tu mouds, réponds, moulin à vent?
Ta sagesse te fait castrat et te mutile.
L’homme, c’est l’impuissant fécondant l’inutile.

Réaction de la création sur l’homme

L’âne fit un silence, et, murmurant : — Voilà!
C’est ainsi. Je n’y puis que faire! — il grommela :
Se contredire un peu, Kant, c’est le droit des gloses;
Quand on veut tout peser, on rencontre des choses
Qui semblent l’opposé de ce qu’on avait dit;
Non aux basques de Oui toujours se suspendit,
Riant de la logique et narguant les méthodes;
Qui tourne autour d’un monde arrive aux antipodes;
Kant, je n’userai point de ce droit; seulement
Après t’avoir montré les hommes blasphémant,
Niant, méconnaissant et méprisant la Chose,
Cet océan où l’Être insondable repose,
Il faut bien te montrer la Chose enveloppant
Les hommes submergés dans Dieu qui se répand
Et qui sur eux se verse et qui se verse encore,
Tantôt en flots de nuit, tantôt en flots d’aurore;
Après t’avoir montré l’atome outrageant Tout,
Il faut bien te montrer la grande ombre debout.
Homme, ce monde est vaste, obscur, crépusculaire;
L’immuable l’habite et l’imprévu l’éclaire;
Ce monde est éclatant, clair, ténébreux, mêlé
De miracle orageux, de miracle étoilé;
Il est souffle, âme, esprit, lit, chaos, cimetière;
Dès qu’on veut essayer d’en trouver la frontière
Et de voir par-dessus la terrestre cloison,
À chaque pas que fait le marcheur, l’horizon
Se prolonge, toujours plus noir, toujours plus large;
Or, et je dis ceci, passant, à ta décharge,
Qu’es-tu dans cet ensemble avec ton code, avec
Ton koran turc, ton tsin chinois, ton phédron grec,
Avec tes lumignons que tu nommes lumières,
Avec tes passions basses et coutumières
De tous les faits malsains, équivoques, pervers?
Les blés sont d’or, les flots sont bleus, les bois sont verts,

L’être fourmille et luit dans les métempsycoses,
Juin sourit, couronné du prodige des roses,
L’univers resplendit, ivre et comme écumant
D’un vertige de vie et de rayonnement,
L’aurore chaque jour bâtit la galerie
Des heures dont le luxe à chaque pas varie,
Et le couchant construit au bout du corridor
Des montagnes de pourpre et des portiques d’or;
Tout déborde; une sève ardente et décuplante
Du rocher au rocher, de la plante à la plante,
Court, traverse la brute, et, sous le firmament,
Le grand amour s’accouple avec le grand aimant;
Toi l’homme, en tout cela tu sens ton indigence;
Tes besoins sont posés sur ton intelligence,
Et comme tu ne vois Dieu, soleil de l’esprit,
Qu’à travers cette chair qui sur toi se flétrit,
L’ombre de tes haillons se découpe en ton âme;
Ta difformité raille, attaque, hait, diffame;
L’homme au besoin, funèbre et lamentable jeu,
Fait de son ineptie une ironie à Dieu;
Il rit : — Hein, créateur, dit-il, sommes-nous bêtes! —
Tu te tiens à l’écart des cieux et de leurs fêtes;
Ton exiguïté te rend hargneux, boudeur,
Mauvais; car, la bonté n’étant rien que grandeur,
Toute méchanceté s’explique en petitesse.
Donc je te plains, sentant ta profonde tristesse.
Les faits autour de toi, graves et recueillis,
Vivent, et le mystère épaissit son taillis,
Et laisse à ton regard juste assez d’ouverture
Pour entrevoir leur vague et sévère stature.
Averti dans ton flegme et dans ta passion,
Sans cesse tu subis l’austère obsession
Des êtres te montrant Dieu sous leur transparence
Et l’espèce d’auguste et calme remontrance
Que te fait, selon l’heure et selon la saison,
Rien qu’en se déployant sur le vaste horizon,
La majesté profonde éparse en la nature;

Tu dis : La loi passée et présente et future,
C’est moi; je viens punir, damner, supplicier!
Tu te déclares juste et juge et justicier;
Tu mets ta toge et prends la plus fière attitude,
Tu fais de l’évidence et de la certitude,
Résolvant tout, flétrissant; au bagne celui-ci,
Au gibet celui-là; c’est bien, voici les astres!
Autour de tes bonheurs, autour de tes désastres,
Autour de tes serments à bras tendus prêtés,
Et de tes jugements et de tes vérités,
Les constellations colossales se lèvent;
Les dragons sidéraux s’accroupissent et rêvent
Sur toi, muets, fatals, sourds, et tu te sens nu
Sous la prunelle d’ombre et sous l’oeil inconnu;
Toutes ces hydres ont des soleils sur leurs croupes,
Et chacune est un monde, et chacun de ces groupes
S’offre à toi, triste Oedipe, et ces sphinx du cosmos
Ont leurs énigmes tous dont ils savent les mots;
La création vit, stable, auguste, sacrée,
Et fait en même temps dans le vague empyrée
Un bruit d’inquiétude et de fragilité;
Un long tressaillement glisse dans la clarté,
Un frisson dans la nuit court sous la voûte ignée;
Homme, au-dessus de toi, quoique la destinée
Semble avoir l’épaisseur du bronze par instant,
Ton oreille, écoutant les ténèbres, entend
Tous les frémissements d’une maison de verre.
Homme, pour t’empêcher d’oublier Dieu, pour faire
0Par moments se dresser en sursaut ton sommeil,
L’univers met sur toi, dans l’espace vermeil,
La nuit, ce va-et-vient mystérieux et sombre
De flambeaux descendant, montant, marchant dans l’ombre;
Ce voyage des feux dans l’océan d’en haut
0S’accomplit sur ton front, et, toi, dans ton cachot,
L’araignée homme, ayant ton égoïsme au centre
De ton oeuvre, et caché dans l’intérêt ton antre,
Inquiet malgré toi de la splendeur des cieux,

Tu regardes, pendant ton guet silencieux,
À travers les fils noirs de tes hideuses toiles,
Ces navigations sublimes des étoiles.
Tout en te disant chef de la création,
Tu la vois, elle est là, la grande vision,
Elle monte, elle passe, elle emplit l'étendue;
La chose incontestable, inexplicable, ardue,
T'environne, entr'ouvrant ses flamboyants secrets,
Pendant que des arrêts, des dogmes, des décrets
Sortent d'entre tes dents qui claquent d'épouvante;
Tu coupes, souverain, dans de la chair vivante,
Tu vas criant : Je suis très haut, je suis le roi!
Tu proclames qu'au gré de ton caprice à toi
Telle action sera mérite ou forfaiture,
Tu prends la plume et fais au droit une rature;
Voilà qu'une blancheur pénètre la forêt
Et que la lune pâle et sinistre apparaît;
Le spectre du réel traverse ta pensée;
La loi vraie, immuable et jamais effacée,
Passe appuyant sur toi son oeil fixe et pensif.
Sur tes deuils, sur ton rire obscur et convulsif,
Sur ta raison souvent folle, toujours hautaine,
Sur ton temple, qu'il soit de Solime ou d'Athène,
Sur tes religions, dieux, enfers, paradis,
Sur ce que tu bénis, sur ce que tu maudis,
Tu sens la pression du monde formidable;
Ton âme, atome d'ombre, et ta chair, grain de sable,
Ont sur elles les blocs, les abîmes, les noeuds,
Les énigmes du Tout lugubre et lumineux,
Et sentent, feuilletant vainement quelque bible,
Rouler sur leur néant l'immensité terrible.
Le zodiaque énorme, effrayant de clarté,
Éternel, tourne autour de ta brièveté.
Tu le vois, et tu dis, l'épiant de la terre :
— Qu'est-ce donc qu'il me veut, ce fauve sagittaire?
Qu'ai-je fait au loin qu'il me regarde ainsi? —
Et tu frémis. —

Hélas! rien n’est par toi saisi;
Tu ne tiens pas le temps, tu ne tiens pas l’espace;
Tous les faux biens, rêvés par ton instinct rapace,
S’en vont; derrière tous la tombe, âpre fossé,
Se creuse; et chacun d’eux, après t’avoir blessé,
Passe à travers les doigts de ton poignet tenace;
La minute elle-même en fuyant te menace
Et, mouche au dard vibrant, se débat dans ta main.
L’aile d’un scarabée et l’odeur d’un jasmin,
Si tu veux en sonder le fond, sont des abîmes.
Derrière toute cime on trouve d’autres cimes.
La présence invisible et sensible de Dieu,
L’influence de l’ombre, à toute heure, en tout lieu,
Certaine, incorruptible, inexprimable, occulte,
Dérange ton calcul, ton optique, ton culte,
Ta morale, tes lois, ton doute, et par instant
Te pousse dans le rêve autour de toi flottant,
Et te fait osciller et perdre l’équilibre;
Tu te sens garrotté tout aussi bien que libre;
Comment dire : La vie est cela; la vertu
Est cela; le malheur est ceci; — qu’en sais-tu?
Où sont tes poids? Comment peser des phénomènes
Dont les deux bouts s’en vont bien loin des mains humaines,
Perdus, l’un dans la nuit et l’autre dans le jour?
Avec quel diagraphe en prendre le contour
Et la dimension, n’ayant, dans ta masure,
Ni le mètre réel, ni l’exacte mesure?
Qu’est le bien? qu’est le mal? Tel fait est constaté;
Soit; il faut maintenant voir l’autre extrémité;
Où donc est-elle? Allez la chercher dans les sphères.
Toutes les questions sont d’obscures affaires
Que tu te fais avec les cieux illuminés;
Le grand Tout intervient, toujours, partout; prenez
L’existence la plus misérable, n’importe!
L’énigme de moi l’âne ou de toi le cloporte;
Qu’on la presse, on la voit subitement grandir
Et pendre du zénith ou monter du nadir.

Rien n’est indifférent au gouffre; le blasphème
Qu’on jette au firmament tombe dans le problème;
Qui sait si l’on n’a pas blessé quelque rayon?
Mettre un pied sur un ver est une question;
Ce ver ne tient-il pas à Dieu? La sauterelle
Qu’il écrase en marchant fait songer Marc-Aurèle;
Sur un moucheron mort Pascal est accoudé.
Quel est le point connu, clair, épuisé, vidé?
Que sais-tu? Que veux-tu décidément conclure?
L’ombre fouette ta face avec sa chevelure,
Et, t’effarant avec le ciel prodigieux,
T’aveugle en te jetant les soleils dans les yeux;
Il te suffit un soir, fusses-tu Prométhée,
Ou Timon l’androphobe ou Constantin l’athée,
De voir les globes d’or au fond des noirs azurs
Flamboyer, affirmant le fait dont ils sont sûrs,
Pour que, devant l’horreur constellée et sereine,
0Un éblouissement pontifical te prenne;
Alors tu sens en toi l’homme en prêtre finir;
Tu ne peux plus lever les mains que pour bénir;
Sous tes pieds chancelants tu sens vibrer la base,
Et tu t’évanouis dans la sinistre extase;
0Tu t’engloutis dans l’être ineffable, insondé;
Tu regardes rouler le monde comme un dé,
Et ta propre figure, ombre et nuit, t’importune,
Mêlée à cette vaste et fatale fortune;
Tu perds le sentiment et la proportion
De ton idée ainsi que de ton action,
Voyant de toutes parts, dans l’azur, dans les nues,
Monter autour de toi des lueurs inconnues;
Tu te penches, ému d’un frisson sépulcral,
Sur l’étrange et tragique horizon sidéral;
Tu tombes éperdu dans les mélancolies
Des éclipses, des nuits sans fond, des parhélies,
Des astres, des éthers et des espaces bleus;
Qu’es-tu, toi le terrestre, en ce tout merveilleux
Où gravitent les Mars, les Vénus, les Mercures?

Tu tressailles d’un flot d’impulsions obscures;
Tout se creuse sitôt que tu tâches de voir;
Le ciel est le puits clair, la tombe est le puits noir,
Mais la clarté de l’un, même aux yeux de l’apôtre,
N’a pas moins de terreur que la noirceur de l’autre;
Tu dis à ton évêque : Homme, où donc est Sion?
Tu fais sa crosse en point d’interrogation;
Tu charges la science infirme qui laboure,
D’instruire ton procès avec ce qui t’entoure;
Mais qui donc osera balbutier l’arrêt?
Informer, à quoi bon? juger, qui l’essaierait?
Tu ne connais de rien le dernier mot; tu poses
Des arguments aux faits, des dilemmes aux choses;
Mais comment décider? Tout est mêlé de tout;
La neige froide touche à la lave qui bout;
La composition du destin, quelle est-elle?
L’être est-il un hasard? l’homme est-il en tutelle?
Quel est le bon? quel est le mauvais? que doit-on
Ajouter à Dracon pour en faire Caton?
D’où vient qu’on se dévore et d’où vient qu’on se tue?
Est-ce qu’au papillon la fleur se prostitue?
Le fumier est-il saint et frère du parfum?
Tout vit-il? quelque chose, ô nuit, est-ce quelqu’un?
D’où vient qu’on naît? d’où vient qu’on meurt? d’où vient qu’on souffre?
Par l’haleine qui sort de la bouche du gouffre
Ton miroir de l’injuste et du juste est terni,
Et ta balance tremble au vent de l’infini.
Pour te tirer d’affaire étant si misérable,
Devant l’inaccessible et dans l’impénétrable,
Devant l’éblouissant et splendide secret,
Pour être quelque chose et compter, il faudrait
Être saint, être pur, intègre avec l’abîme,
Offrir à l’absolu l’attention sublime,
Et savoir distinguer la véritable voix;
Il faudrait s’écrier : J’aime, je veux, je crois!
Sur l’énigme en travers de ton destin posée
Ce ne serait pas trop de faire une pesée

Avec toute ta force et toute ta vertu;
Il ne faudrait pas être inepte, ingrat, têtu;
Recevoir du bedeau qui sur vos berceaux veille
Une éducation annulante et pareille
À celle qu’aux matous font les tondeurs du quai,
Être un esprit métis, être un lion manqué
Qu’un cuistre abâtardit, qu’un marguillier mâtine;
Hélas! il ne faudrait pas être la routine,
Sourde, engrenant, toujours avec le même ennui,
Aujourd’hui dans hier, demain dans aujourd’hui;
Il ne faudrait pas croire aux empiriques, vivre
Comme le chien, ayant pour grand talent de suivre;
Te repaître d’exploits, de combats, d’échafauds,
D’esclavages, de verbe obscur, de savoir faux;
T’en aller digérer bêtement dans ton gîte
Tout ce qu’un sacristain de force t’ingurgite;
Te plaire dans l’absurde et t’y dénaturer;
Opprimer l’homme utile, — éclatant, l’abhorrer;
Et le servir méchant, et l’admirer vulgaire;
Il ne faudrait pas faire à tes flambeaux la guerre,
Adorer tes bandeaux, tes jougs; haïr tes yeux;
Être l’adulateur en étant l’envieux;
Et, lâche, appartenir aux deux puissances viles,
Par un point aux Nérons et par l’autre aux Zoïles.
Ce monde est un brouillard, presque un rêve; et comment
Trouver la certitude en ce gouffre où tout ment?
Oui, Kant, après un long acharnement d’étude,
Quand vous avez enfin un peu de plénitude,
Un résultat quelconque à grands frais obtenu,
Vous vous sentez vider par quelqu’un d’inconnu.
Le mystère, l’énigme, aucune chose sûre,
Voilà ce qui vous boit la pensée, à mesure
Que la science y verse un élément nouveau;
Et vous vous retrouvez avec votre cerveau
Toujours à sec au fond des problèmes funèbres,
Comme si quelque ivrogne effrayant des ténèbres
Vidait ce verre sombre aussitôt qu’il s’emplit.

Ô vain travail! science, ignorance, conflit!
Noir spectacle! un chaos auquel l’aurore assiste!
L’effort toujours sans but, et l’homme toujours triste
De ce qu’est le sommet auquel il est monté,
Comparant sa chimère à la réalité,
Fou de ce qu’il rêvait, pâle de ce qu’il trouvait!

Tristesse finale

L’âne continua, car la nature approuve
Ce couple, âne parlant, philosophe écoutant :
Tu vois un être grave, imposant, important,
Un âne sérieux, complet, bon pour tout lire,
Un docteur, Kant, c’est vrai, je sais tout, c’est-à-dire
Je suis à la fois juif, parsi, turc, arien.
J’entends dans mon cerveau bourdonner en tumulte
Le blanc, le noir, amen, raca, la foi, l’insulte,
Genève, Rome, Alcuin d’où sort Calvin, oui, non,
Cujas en droit civil, Flandrin en droit canon,
L’histoire aux pieds des rois, cette prostituée,
L’abac et l’alphabet, et toute la nuée
Des érudits poussifs et des rhéteurs fourbus
Depuis Sabbathius jusqu’à Molaribus!
Le fait d’hier s’y heurte à la chronique ancienne,
Henri de Gand s’y croise avec Sixte de Sienne;
Et je ne comprends rien à tout ce morne bruit
Sinon qu’ayant cherché le jour, je vois la nuit.
Du reste il est certain que, dans cette ombre noire
Qui sort de l’encre horrible et qu’on nomme grimoire,
À travers ces bouquins où l’homme est si petit,
C’est à moi qu’au total la science aboutit,
Car, à ce blême jour dont la lueur avare
Joint le docteur d’Oxford au docteur de Navarre,
J’ai vu de toutes parts, sur les vieux parchemins,
L’ombre de mon profil tomber des fronts humains.
Adieu, sorbonnes, bancs, temples, autels, boutiques!
Adieu le grand dortoir des préjugés antiques
Côte à côte assoupis sur leurs brumeux chevets!
Scholastiques du vide, adieu! — Kant, si j’avais
Le loisir d’aspirer à quelque académie,
Je ferais, de toute ombre et de toute momie,
De tous les vils sentiers suivis par les moutons,
De tous les oeufs cassés, de tous les vieux bâtons

D’aveugles, grands, petits, inconnus et célèbres,
De tous les brouillards pris à toutes les ténèbres,
Et de tous les fumiers pris à tous les marais,
Une collection que j’intitulerais :
Exposé général de la science humaine.
L’âne, ayant un peu brait, termina :
       — Je m’emmène!
Ô Kant! je redescends, avide d’ignorer!
J’étouffe! oh! respirer! respirer! respirer!
Mon oeil est devenu trouble, nocturne et triste
Dans ces caves qu’emplit le jour séminariste.
J’ai des tiraillements d’estomac. Mais ce n’est
Ni des textes que prend Trigaud sous son bonnet,
Ni de tout ce chaos qu’un cuistre en sa mémoire
Fourre comme on emplit de loques une armoire,
Ce n’est point du fouillis, ce n’est point du fatras
Qui fit Siffret jadis si grand pour Carpentras,
Ce n’est point d’antiquaille et de pédagogie,
Ce n’est pas du savoir que dans sa docte orgie
Mange le jésuite ou le génovéfain,
C’est de vie et d’azur et d’aube que j’ai faim!
Je me sens sur la peau, de là ma pauvre mine,
Une démangeaison de savante vermine,
Grassi, de Galilée odieux puceron,
Garasse, ce moustique immonde de Charron,
Et Dasipodius, cet acarus d’Euclide.
Es-tu pour le fluide? es-tu pour le solide?
Tiens-tu pour l’idéal? tiens-tu pour le réel?
Acceptes-tu Moïse, Hermès ou Gabriel?
À quel Dieu remets-tu ton âme ou ta machine?
Est-ce au Brahma de l’Inde? est-ce au Tien de la Chine?
Es-tu pour Jupiter, pour Odin, pour Vichnou,
Pour Allah? Laissez-moi tranquille. Je suis fou.
Je m’évade à jamais de la science ingrate.
Il est temps que, rentrant dans le vrai, je me gratte
L’échine aux bons cailloux du vieux globe éternel.
Je vois le bout vivant du funèbre tunnel,

Et j’y cours. J’aperçois, à travers les fumées,
Là-bas, ô Kant, un pré plein d’herbes embaumées,
Tout brillant de l’écrin de l’aube répandu,
De la sauge, du thym par l’abeille mordu,
Des pois, tous les parfums que le printemps préfère,
Où ce que la sagesse aurait de mieux à faire
Serait de se vautrer les quatre fers en l’air.
Or, étant libre enfin, et ne voyant, mon cher,
Ici, pas d’autre ânier que toi le philosophe,
Pouvant finir mon chant de bête brute en strophe,
Je m’en vais, comme Jean au désert s’en alla,
Et je retourne heureux, rapide, et plantant là
L’hypothèse béate et le calcul morose,
Et les bibles en vers et les traités en prose,
Locke et Job, les missels ainsi que les phédons,
De l’idéal aux fleurs, du réel aux chardons.

Tristesse du philosophe

Et l’âne disparut, et Kant resta lugubre.
— Oui! dit-il, la science est encore insalubre;
L’esprit marche, baissant la tête et parlant bas;
Et cette surdité de la bête n’est pas
Si stupide en effet que d’abord elle semble.
Puisqu’aux mains du savoir le flambeau sacré tremble,
La protestation est juste.
Jusqu’au jour
Où la science aura pour but l’immense amour,
Où partout l’homme, aidant la nature asservie,
Fera de la lumière et fera de la vie,
Où les peuples verront les puissants écrivains,
Les songeurs, les penseurs, les poètes divins,
Tous les saints instructeurs, toutes les fières âmes,
Passer devant leurs yeux comme des vols de flammes;
Où l’on verra, devant le grand, le pur, le beau,
Fuir le dernier despote et le dernier fléau;
Jusqu’au jour de vertu, de candeur, d’espérance,
Où l’étude pourra s’appeler délivrance,
Où les livres plus clairs refléteront les cieux,
Où tout convergera vers ce point radieux :
— L’esprit humain meilleur, l’âme humaine plus haute,
La terre, éden sacré, digne d’Adam son hôte,
L’homme marchant vers Dieu sans trouble et sans effroi,
La douce liberté cherchant la douce loi,
La fin des attentats, la fin des catastrophes. —
Oui, jusqu’à ce jour-là, tant que les philosophes,
Prêtres du beau, d’autant plus vils qu’ils sont plus grands,
Seront les courtisans possibles des tyrans;
Tant qu’ils conseilleront César qui délibère;
Tant qu’Uranie ira s’attabler chez Tibère;
Tant que l’astronomie au vol sublime et prompt,
Et la métaphysique, et l’algèbre seront
Des servantes du crime et des filles publiques;

Tant que Dieu louchera dans leurs regards obliques;
Tant que la vérité, mère des droits humains,
Ô douleur! sortira difforme de leurs mains;
Tant qu’insultant le juste, abjects, creusant sa fosse,
Les scribes salueront la religion fausse,
Le faux pouvoir, Caïphe à qui Néron se joint;
Tant que l’intelligence, hélas, ne sera point
La grande propagande et la grande bravoure;
Tant qu’épris des faux biens que le méchant savoure,
Les froids penseurs prendront l’erreur pour minerai;
Tant qu’ils ne seront pas les Hercules du vrai,
Acceptant du progrès les gigantesques tâches;
Tant que les lumineux pourront être les lâches;
Tant que la science, ange à qui l’Être a parlé,
Infâme, baissera sur son front constellé
Ce capuchon sinistre et noir, l’hypocrisie;
Tant que de l’air des cours elle sera noircie;
Tant qu’on admirera ce Bacon effrayant,
Ce monstre fait d’azur et d’infamie, ayant
Le cloaque dans l’âme et dans les yeux l’étoile;
Tant qu’arrêtant l’esprit qui veut mettre à la voile,
D’abjects vendeurs pourront, sans être foudroyés,
Dire au seuil rayonnant des écoles : Payez!
Tant que le fisc tendra devant l’aube sa toile;
Tant qu’Isis lèvera pour de l’argent son voile,
Et pour qui n’a pas d’or, pour le pauvre fatal,
Le fermera, Phryné sombre de l’idéal,
Oui, quand même, ô ciel noir, seraient là réunies
Les pléiades des fronts radieux, des génies,
Des Homères aïeux et des Dantes leurs fils,
Oui, contre Athènes, Rome, et Genève, et Memphis,
Et Londre, et toi, Paris, et l’Inde et la Chaldée,
Contre tout le rayon, contre toute l’idée,
Contre les livres pleins de vérités dormant,
Contre l’enseignement, contre le firmament,
Et les esprit sans fin, et les astres sans nombre,
Les oreilles de l’âne auront raison dans l’ombre!

Sécurité du penseur

Ô Kant, l’âne est un âne et Kant n’est qu’un esprit.

Nul n’a jusqu’à présent, hors Socrate et le Christ,
Dans l’abîme où le fait infini se consomme,
Compris l’ascension ténébreuse de l’homme.
À force de songer son oeil s’est éclairci;
Plane plus haut encore, et tu sauras ceci :
Tout marche au but; tout sert; il ne faut pas maudire.
Le bleu sort de la brume et le mieux sort du pire;
Pas un nuage n’est au hasard répandu;
Pas un pli du rideau du temple n’est perdu;
L’éternelle splendeur lentement se dévoile.
Laisse passer l’éclipse et tu verras l’étoile!
Le tas des cécités, morne, informe, fatal,
A l’éblouissement pour faîte et pour total;
Le Verbe a pour racine obscure les algèbres;
Les pas mystérieux qu’on fait les ténèbres
Sont les frères des pas qu’on fera dans le jour;
L’essor peut commencer par l’aile du vautour
Et se continuer avec l’aile du cygne;
Du fond de l’idéal Dieu serein nous fait signe;
Et, même par le mal, par les fausses leçons,
Par l’horreur, par le deuil, ô Kant, nous avançons.
Querelle, petitesse, ignorance savante,
Tous ces degrés abjects dont ton oeil s’épouvante,
Sont les passages vils par où l’on va plus haut;
La lettre sombre, ô Kant, forme un splendide mot;
Sans l’étage d’en bas que serait l’édifice?
L’homme fait son progrès de ce qui fut son vice;
Le mal transfiguré par degrés fait le bien.
Ne désespère pas et ne condamne rien.
Pour gravir le sublime et l’incommensurable,
Il faut mettre ton pied dans ce trou misérable;
Un chaos est l’oeuf noir d’un ciel; toute beauté

Pour première enveloppe a la difformité;
L’ange a pour chrysalide une hydre; sache attendre;
Penche sur ces laideurs ton côté le plus tendre;
C’est par ces noirceurs-là que toi-même es monté.
Dieu ne veut pas que rien, même l’obscurité,
Même l’erreur qui semble ou funeste ou futile,
Que rien puisse, en criant : Quoi, j’étais inutile!
Dans le gouffre à jamais retomber éperdu;
Et le lien sacré du service rendu,
À travers l’ombre affreuse et la céleste sphère,
Joint l’échelon de nuit aux marches de lumière.

RELIGIONS ET RELIGION

TABLE DES MATIERES

I. Querelles
II. Philosophie
III. Rien
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V. Conclusion

I. Querelles

I. LE DIMANCHE

- Je n’ai pas entendu le facteur frapper. - Certe!
Votre porte aujourd’hui, monsieur, n’est pas ouverte.
- Ah bah! - Vous n’aurez pas aujourd’hui de journaux.
- Pourquoi?
Mary, qui vient d’éteindre ses fourneaux,
Est superbe; elle a mis sa grande coiffe blanche.

- Ni de lettres. - Pourquoi? - Parce que c’est dimanche.
- Eh bien? - On ne lit pas de lettres ce jour-là.
- Pourquoi? - Parce que Dieu fit le monde. Il parla
Et travailla pendant six jours. - Soit. Que m’importe?
- Le dimanche on ne peut frapper à votre porte.
- Mais pourquoi? - C’est le jour où Dieu s’est reposé.

Apprendre au maître, impie et français, l’A B C,
C’est beau; Mary triomphe, et ne se sent pas d’aise,
Étant bonne chrétienne et servante irlandaise.
On entend bourdonner la cloche dans la tour.

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Ainsi l’infini va jusqu’au septième jour!
Arrivé là, c’est dit; l’infini devient morne,
Reste court, et s’arrête épuisé; c’est sa borne.
Nous appelons cela le dimanche. Il est sûr
Qu’il faut pour faire un ciel bien des rouleaux d’azur,
Qu’un chêne à fabriquer n’est pas un mince arbuste,
Et qu’il faut une échelle étrangement robuste
Et que l’échafaudage ait été bien construit
Pour peindre l’aube à fresque au mur noir de la nuit.
Ainsi ce grand travail qu’on nomme la nature

Ne s’est point terminé sans quelque courbature!
Ainsi le Tout-Puissant a dit : Je n’en puis plus!
Et las, suant, soufflant, ankylosé, perclus,
Pris d’un vieux rhumatisme incurable à l’échiné,
Après avoir créé le monde, et la machine
Des astres pêle-mêle au fond des horizons,
La vie, et l’engrenage énorme des saisons,
La fleur, l’oiseau, la femme, et l’abîme, et la terre,
Dieu s’est laissé tomber dans son fauteuil Voltaire!

II. PREMIÈRE REFLEXION

Pas de religion qui ne blasphème un peu.
L’une en croquemitaine habille le bon Dieu;
Il fait son paradis du hurlement des âmes;
Sa cave à son plafond jette un reflet de flammes,
Il grince, et son bonheur est d’avoir un enfer
A remuer avec une fourche de fer.
L’autre à la main lui plante un grand sabre, et l’affuble
D’un uniforme, mal caché par sa chasuble;
Il a l’obus en bas et la foudre là-haut;
Il était Jehovah, le voilà Sabaoth;
On le fait tambour-maître et général d’armée;
Il va-t-en guerre. Étant riche en noir de fumée,
Belzébuth jusqu’à Dieu se glisse, et cet escroc
Lui charbonne en riant deux moustaches en croc;
Le Père-Éternel sent vaguement qu’on le berne,
Se laisse faire, met l’éclair dans sa giberne,
Se voit destitué par le pape, permet
Que la bataille accroche à sa mitre un plumet,
Ferme les yeux sur l’homme, être irrémédiable,
Et, n’étant plus bon Dieu, tâche d’être bon diable.

III. LE THÉOLOGIEN

O théologien, tu dis :
        - Rêveurs, penseurs,

En fouillant on ne sait sous quelles épaisseurs,
Vous avez découvert un Dieu sans fin, sans forme;
Vous niez qu’il se lasse et vous niez qu’il dorme;
Ce Dieu n’a pas d’histoire. Est-il juif, arien,
Grec, indou, parsi? Non. Il ne ressemble à rien,
Il n’a pas de légende arrangeable en cantique.
Raisonnons. Croyez-vous ce Dieu-là bien pratique?
Tu dis : - Un Dieu n’est pas ce que vous supposez.
Un Dieu, c’est une tour dont on fait les fossés.
C’est une silhouette au delà d’un abîme.
Ne point le voir est mal et trop le voir est crime.
L’autel, c’est lui. Jamais la foule n’admettrait
L’être pur, l’infini compliqué par l’abstrait.
Dieu, cela n’est pas, tant que ce n’est pas en pierre.
Il faut une maison pour mettre la prière.
Dieu doit aller, venir, entrer, passer, marcher.
Il a l’ange à sa porte, ainsi qu’un roi l’archer.
Homme, il me faut son pied imprimé sur mon sable.
Et ce pied, c’est le dogme. Un Dieu point saisissable,
Un Dieu sans catéchisme, un Dieu sans bible, un Dieu
Que saint Luc et saint Marc, saint Jean et saint Mathieu
Ne tiennent pas tout vif, et par les quatre membres,
Dont les vieilles n’ont pas le portrait dans leurs chambres,
Dont personne ne peut dire : - Il est ainsi fait,
Il venait voir Moïse, il parlait à Japhet,
Il a tué beaucoup de gens dans l’Idumée,
Il est un, il est trois, il aime la fumée,
Il ne veut pas qu’on touche à ses arbres fruitiers; -
Un Dieu qu’on chercherait pendant des mois entiers
Sans le voir flamboyer soudain dans les broussailles;
Un Dieu qui ne connaît ni Rome, ni Versailles,
Et qui ne comprendrait pas grandchose aux sermons,
Aux schémas, aux missels, où nous le renfermons;
Un Dieu qu’on n’apprend point par demande et réponse,
Dont on ne fourbit pas avec la pierre ponce
L’auréole, dorée au fond d’un cul-de-four
Dans une niche en plâtre au coin du carrefour;

Un Dieu comme cela ne vaut rien. Qu’il nous montre
Son Pentateuque avec le pour auprès du contre,
Ou son Toldos Jeschut, ou son Zend-Avesta,
Son Verbe que lut Job et qu’Esdras attesta,
Ses psaumes que chantaient les chevaliers de Malte,
Son Talmud! Mais quoi, rien! pas d’évangile! Halte!
Qu’est-ce que ce Dieu-là? C’est un Dieu sans papiers.
Un Dieu pour paysans, un Jésus pour troupiers,
Voilà ce qu’il nous faut. L’Homme-Dieu. Dogme ou fable,
Il nous le faut visible, il nous le faut mangeable.
Il faut qu’il ait un peu toutes nos passions.
Bons croyants, faisons-nous quelques concessions.
Prenez notre séné, je prends votre rhubarbe.

-

Tu dis : - On n’est pas Dieu sans une grande barbe.
Dieu doit être très vieux. Ça met l’homme à genoux.
Un gibet d’autrefois transfiguré par nous
Charme le peuple, et l’âme en aime le mystère;
La croix de saint André commande à l’Angleterre,
Le gril de saint Laurent produit l’Escuriàl. -

Tu dis : - L’homme n’a foi qu’à l’immémorial.
Une religion qui veut qu’on croie en elle
Doit être séculaire, antique, solennelle,
Appuyée au monceau des âges révolus. -

Tu dis : — Nous vénérons un culte d’autant plus
Que dans la profondeur de l’histoire il s’éloigne;
Toute l’autorité du temps passé témoigne :;
Croyons. Voilà mille ans, deux mille ans, trois mille ans
Que ce temple est sacré pour les hommes tremblants;
C’est ici que le temps vient effeuiller les races,
Et des peuples éteints mêle les sombres traces;
Il donne pour garants à ces croyances-là
Les générations dont l’âme s’envola.

Vieille religion, donc religion sainte.
De la tradition l’homme approche avec crainte.
C’est vrai, car c’est ancien; et nos pères l’ont cru.
Un autel par l’amas des siècles est accru.
Donc, c’est en vieillissant que les dogmes se prouvent;
Au fond du puits des jours les vérités se trouvent;
Il est bon pour un temple ou bien pour un koran
Que, sur les. bords du Tibre ou sous le ciel d’Iran,
Une procession d’ancêtres et de sages
Ait gravi ses degrés ou feuilleté ses pages;
Un dogme a le cadran des heures pour souci;
Tant qu’il n’a point de ride, il n’a pas réussi;
Il lui faut, et c’est là sa seule inquiétude,
Le rajeunissement de la décrépitude;
C’est par la vétusté qu’il plaît; Christ envieux
Regarde Teutatès caduc et Brahma vieux;
Le vrai n’est vrai, dans l’ombre où le temps nous dépouille,
Qu’à la condition d’être couvert de rouille.
Un dogme vermoulu fait bien dans le ciel bleu.
La patine du bronze est nécessaire à Dieu.
L’évidence a besoin, dans l’azur de l’idée,
D’être depuis longtemps des hommes regardée,
De beaucoup de croyants brûlant du même feu,
Et de beaucoup de terre au-dessous d’elle. Un dieu
N’est dieu qu’autant qu’il prend racine comme un arbre;
L’argile de la foi durcit et devient marbre;
Soyez un verbe, un rite, une religion,
Apportez-nous des saints groupés en légion
Et des anges coiffés d’étoiles à facettes,
Réglez l’esprit, le cœur, l’âme, ayez des recettes
Pour faire janvier chaud ou juillet pluvieux,
C’est bien; mais commencez d’abord par être vieux.
Si les autels ont droit d’être environnés d’âmes,
Si c’est le ciel qui parle en chaire aux bonnes femmes,
Si les cultes sont purs, solides, sûrs, certains,
Vrais, cela se mesure au nombre des matins
Qu’a vus le coq juché sur la tour du village;

Une religion qui sent lui venir l’âge
Triomphe à chaque siècle, et dit : Encor cent ans!
J’existe! - Et l’Eternel cherche à gagner du temps!

IV. AU THÉOLOGIEN

Soit que vous vous coiffiez de turbans en batiste,
Ou de mitres mêlant la perle à l’améthyste,
O prêtres, ô porteurs d’éphods et de rabats,
Étant donné le droit de sottise ici-bas,
Vous en usez avec une ardeur sans pareille.
Parce que le Très-Haut, faisant la sourde oreille,
A l’air de ne rien voir et de tout accepter,
Parce que Dieu se laisse à peu près insulter,
Et que ce patient des Tedeums ne raille,
Dans sa bonté, pas même un évêque qui braille,
Vous avez profité de son air bon enfant
Pour lui faire endosser l’absurde triomphant,
Là dans les sanhédrins et là dans les conciles,
Et pour bâcler beaucoup de livres imbéciles.
Prêtres, vous remuez aussi facilement
La malédiction, le mensonge inclément,
L’imposture et l’erreur dans vos pesants volumes
Que le petit oiseau fouille du bec ses plumes.

-

Où prends-tu, moine, abbé de visions imbu,
Ce Tout-Puissant myope et ce Très-Haut fourbu?
Prêtre, qu’est-ce que c’est que cet Orgon céleste,
Dieu podagre que dupe un démon jeune et leste?
Ah! docteur! quel beau jeu tu donnes, imprudent,
Aux rieurs, point fâchés d’,avoir Dieu sous la dent!
Écoute-les :
  - Fakir, talapoin, muphti, mage,
Brave homme, Dieu, dis-tu, t’a fait à son image.
Alors il est fort laid. J’y consens. Prêtre blanc,

Prêtre noir, qu’il vous soit à tous deux ressemblant,
C’est son affaire. Et moi je siffle. Que de choses
Mal faites dans le tas de ses métempsycoses!
Les diacres aux gros yeux m’ordonnent d’admirer;
Je ris. La cathédrale en vain pour m’attirer
Ouvre les deux battants de sa porte cochère;
Je laisse bougonner ces bonshommes en chaire.
Paix aux dévots béats! quant à moi, je me tiens
Le plus loin que je peux des orateurs chrétiens;
J’écris sur mon carnet : Fuir Nonotte; et je cloue
A mon chevet : Ne point aller à Bourdaloue.
Les raisonneurs bigots sont un de mes effrois.
J’abhorre ces forêts de piliers lourds et froids
D’où; tombent les frissons, les toux, les pleurésies;
Je ne m’expose point aux églises moisies;
Je n’irai point gagner quelques bonnes fraîcheurs
Pour le plaisir d’entendre aboyer vos prêcheurs,
Bavards à barbe ou clercs ras tondus, dont le geste
S’empêtre dans les plis d’une prose indigeste.
Prêtres de plomb, Laynez, Frayssinous, Bellarmin!
L’ennui pleut de leur phrase; et, son croc à la main,
Le chiffonnier qui met les âmes dans sa hotte,
Satan, s’il passe là d’aventure, chuchote :
— Quand plus tard, dans l’enfer vengeur, nous assommons
Tous ces lourds sermonneurs, c’est avec leurs sermons. -
Dieu. Le monde. Anier triste et mauvaise bourrique.
Ah! prêtres! s’il faut croire à votre rhétorique,
Dieu mène tout. Tant pis. L’univers disloqué,
Mal sorti du chaos, penche et se cogne au quai.
On distingue ses mâts sur le ciel d’un noir d’encre.
Il n’a plus sa boussole, il a perdu son ancre,
Et semble par moments faire eau de toutes parts..
Tout ce que l’homme croit, dans l’abîme est épars.
La foi nage, le droit flotte, le vrai tournoie;
On voit les bras levés de l’espoir qui se noie;
Qu’est-ce que votre Dieu fait pendant ce temps-là?
Rien. Je me trompe. Il fait Nemrod, Cham, Attila,

Gengiskhan, Tamerlan, Charles-Quint, Bonaparte;
Il brise Rome, il tue Athène, il détruit Sparte;
C’est grâce à lui qu’un roi dit : NOMINOR LEO;
S’il donne au monde un saint, vite, il lâche un fléau;
Il guide les Colombs, mais conduit les Pizarres;
Il est fantasque; il fait des actions bizarres
Dont Bossuet prendra note derrière lui.
Son éclipse survient dès que son aube a lui.
Cet astre est un aveugle. Il est contradictoire.
Ce monde est sa défaite autant que sa victoire.
Ce Très-Haut tourne et change. Il est hydre, il est Dieu.
D’une roue insensée il est le noir moyeu.
Il est tantôt Hasard et tantôt Providence.
Toute l’horreur humaine en ce Dieu se condense,
Et vous le façonnez si ressemblant à vous
Que, père, il est vengeur, et, maître, il est jaloux.
Il nous défend le lard tel jour de la semaine;
Et, si nous en mangeons, l’ange des morts nous mène
Au gouffre où tout est feu, braise, flamme et charbon,
Si bien qu’il a caché l’enfer dans un jambon.
Ce qu’il crée, il le fêle; et s’il met trop de sable,
Trop d’ombre ou trop de neige, il en est responsable.
Une peste nous vient de lui; quand un essieu
Casse, c’est Jehovah qui se détraque, et Dieu
Est sale quand la boue à mon talon s’attache;
Le mendiant, - pourquoi des mendiants? - le tache;
Tous les haillons du pauvre, à toute heure, en tout lieu,
L’accusent, et, souillés, infects, pendent à Dieu.
Dieu fait tout. Par-dessus le marché, cette droite
Terrible, formidable, immense, est maladroite.
Pour punir un village, il noie un continent.
Moi, je lui dis son fait, je suis impertinent,
Je le lorgne, je flâne et ris, je baguenaude,
Son nez majestueux reçoit ma chiquenaude;
Certe, il se fâche; il dit, furieux et rêvant :
- Où diable ai-je fourré ma foudre? - Mais avant
Que ce Géronte ait mis la main sur son tonnerre,

Moi, tranquille et marchant de mon pas ordinaire,
Je suis déjà bien loin. Il foudroie à côté.
De là votre éloquence et de là ma gaîté,
Bons prédicateurs. -

-

Certe, à cela que répondre?
La foi vient couver l’œuf qu’on a vu l’erreur pondre;
L’église sur l’enfant fait peser les aïeux,
Et met à l’ignorance un dogme sur les yeux.
Le prêtre apporte à l’homme une carte routière
Du ciel profond, avec péage à la frontière.
Fouille-toi, mort. On paie au pont du paradis.
Si tu n’as pas le sou, reste avec les maudits.
Un Dieu méchant qu’on loue, un Dieu bon qui menace,
Un Dieu signé Sanchez, Trublet, de Maistre, Ignace,
Luit dans l’ombre, entouré de vieillards clignotants,
Et c’est fini; voilà de la nuit pour longtemps.
O prêtres! ce Dieu-là, sous son dais à panache,
Est du monde idiot la suprême ganache;
Il a l’utilité des vieux épouvantails;
On le sculpte, aïeul sombre, au cintre des portails;
Il écoute, un peu sourd, la cloche sa voisine
Il fait joindre les mains aux passants, il fascine
Les bons moutons humains que mènent les bedeaux,
Et charme les rapins qui, le sac sur le dos
Et les guêtres aux pieds vont barbouillant des croûtes
Dans les pays, en juin, quand les arbres des routes
S’agitent et se font mille signes de loin,
Joyeux d’avoir peigné les charrettes de foin.

V. INVENTION

Vous avez inventé le diable. Il est très bête.
Il empoigne les gens par les pieds, par la tête,
Part, et croit avoir fait quelque chose de beau

En portant Jésus-Christ au mont Tibidabo
Il dit : Je t’offre ça, la terre. Sois docile. -
Il ne s’est même pas aperçu, l’imbécile,
Que celui qu’il a pris par les cheveux, c’est Dieu;
Et que Jésus, qui cache étrangement son jeu,
Pourrait lui dire : Affreux Jocrisse, pitre immonde,
Tu me donnes la terre à moi qui tiens le monde!
Peu de religions, rêvant sur Anankè,’
Savent faire un titan, et le diable est manqué.
Il est, à n’en parler ici que comme artiste,
Plat et vulgaire; il fait enrager Jean-Baptiste
Et tente saint Antoine avec fort peu d’esprit.
C’est le démon; tremblez. Non, c’est le diable; on rit.
Trop massif, il se traîne, ou, trop maigre, il s’efflanque.
Belphégor ne ferait pas vivre un saltimbanque;
Belzébuth promené de foire en foire, aurait
Moins de succès qu’un loup pris dans une forêt.
Quant à moi, si j’étais montreur de phénomènes,
Pour faire écarquiller les prunelles humaines,
J’aimerais mieux, plutôt que Sadoch, nain bougon,
Ou Moloch, vieux pantin en forme de dragon,
Ou Bélial soufflant le feu de sa narine,
Avoir un bon lapin savant qui tambourine.
Le gouffre étant donné, toute l’ombre et l’horreur
Amoncelée autour d’un géant éclaireur,
On est surpris du peu que votre fable en tire;
Vous n’avez rien trouvé de mieux que le satyre.
Le paganisme en lui chez vous est revenu.
Toujours le pied fourchu, toujours le front cornu.
Toujours la même ampoule au dos du même gnome.
Aveugle, plus, boiteux, c’est là tout le binôme.
Lucifer, Asmodée; un infirme, un serpent;
L’un ne voit pas Dieu; l’autre erre clopin-clopant.
La maison d’or, à Rome, a sur ses vieilles briques
Des fantômes qui font des gambades lubriques,
Des nains à grosse tête et d’affreux chèvrepieds;
L’enfer chrétien les a simplement copiés.

Vous avez baptisé le faune; et c’est le diable.
Le vaste mécontent qui tire sur le câble
De l’univers, et veut casser l’amarre, afin
Que tout rentre au chaos, et que le séraphin,
L’étoile, le ciel, l’homme, et Dieu lui-même, roulent
L’un sur l’autre à vau-l’eau pêle-mêle, et s’écroulent;
Le fourbe qui, pensif, sous Jehovah créant,
Construit la trahison immense du néant;
L’être noir, l’effrayante âme démesurée
Qui fait refluer l’ombre ainsi qu’une marée,
Le parodiste amer et terrible qui prend
L’homme, et qui fait petit tout ce que Dieu fit grand,
Ce monstre, ce méchant d’une si fière taille,
Qu’il attend le tonnerre et lui livre bataille,
Qu’il a pour plaie au front le mal universel,
Et que tout l’océan n’aurait pas trop de sel
Pour sa raillerie acre et son rire insondable,
Ce colosse enchaîné sous l’Etna formidable,
Se retrouve en vos mains pygmée, avec l’ennui
D’avoir la petitesse et la laideur sur lui;
Il était dans l’Érèbe énorme; il est au bagne;
Et se voit une bosse au lieu d’une montagne.
En somme, vous avez fort peu d’invention.
Vous refaites le cercle où tournait Ixion.
La nature a le singe et l’église a le diable;
Vive le singe! il est plus gai. Dans votre fable,
Le Capricorne, étoile, astre, tombe si bas
Qu’il n’est plus que le bouc immonde des sabbats;
L’enfer triste est doublé d’un paradis féroce;
Démons, damnés, maudits, sont dans la cuve atroce,
Leur tourment fait le ciel plus céleste, et le bain
Qui les cuit, rafraîchit là-haut le chérubin;
Mais le démon a beau rôtir, il est fort terne;
Et l’on ne comprend pas que dans cette citerne
Du flamboiement sans fond, avec un tel grief
Et tant de haine, Iblis ait si peu de relief.
La femelle d’Othryx, la pieuvre dont les pattes

Sans quitter l’Ararat s’accrochaient aux Carpathes,
Et qui, plongeant sous l’eau, faisait hausser les mers,
N’est plus qu’une nabote aux petits ongles verts,
Et le peuple, qu’au fond votre impuissance blesse,
Rit devant la titane avortée en diablesse;
Linus venant du ciel sur Pégase, au relai,
Trouve votre sorcière enfourchant son balai; :
La diablerie au moine apparaît, et pullule,
Espèce de vermine, au mur de la cellule;
Mais ces monstres sont vils, ces nains sont plus blafards
Que le lourd sphinx sortant la nuit des nénuphars
Et que l’impur crapaud caché sous les broussailles;
Et l’on dirait que ceux qui firent ces grisailles
Et tous ces à-peu-près et tous ces camaïeux,
N’ont ébauche Satan que pour créer Mayeux.

VI. LES MAINS LEVÉES AU CIEL

Ciel, laisse-moi tout dire! O ciel, source des êtres,
Tu vois mon âme; il faut que je parle à ces prêtres.

VII. CHEF-D’ŒUVRE

Vous prêtez au bon Dieu ce raisonnement-ci :
— J’ai, jadis, dans un lieu charmant et bien choisi
Mis la première femme avec le premier homme;
Ils ont mangé, malgré ma défense, une pomme;
C’est pourquoi je punis les hommes à jamais.
Je les fais malheureux sur terre, et leur promets
En enfer, où Satan dans la braise se vautre,
Un châtiment sans fin pour la faute d’un autre.
Leur âme tombe en flamme et leur corps en charbon.
Rien de plus juste. Mais, comme je suis très bon,
Cela m’afflige. Hélas! comment faire? Une idée!
Je vais leur envoyer mon fils dans la Judée;
Ils le tueront. Alors, - c’est pourquoi j’y consens, -
Ayant commis un crime, ils seront innocents.

Leur voyant ainsi faire une faute complète,
Je leur pardonnerai celle qu'ils n'ont pas faite;
Ils étaient vertueux, je les rends criminels;
Donc je puis leur rouvrir mes vieux bras paternels,
Et de cette façon cette race est sauvée,
Leur innocence étant par un forfait lavée. -

VIII. SUITES

L'homme étant la souris dont le diable est le chat,
On appelle ceci Rédemption, Rachat,
Salut du monde; et, Christ est mort, donc l'homme est libre;
Et tout est désormais fondé sur l'équilibre
D'un vol de pomme avec l'assassinat de Dieu;
Soit. Mais ne rions plus quand Thor, à coups d'épieu,
Cherche à tuer Matchi, le grand tigre invisible;
Ni quand l'archer Zuvoch prend l'astre Aleph pour cible;
Ne raillons plus Horus qui trompe Hermès l'expert;
Ni Sog qui joue aux dés la lune et qui la perd;
Ni la tortue ayant sur son écaille ronde
Huit grands éléphants blancs qui soutiennent le monde;
Ne raillons plus ces dieux étranges de Délos,
Ailés, palmés, sachant les noms de tous les flots,
Dont la nuit on voyait confusément les trônes
Luire aux pâles sommets des monts Acrocéraunes;
Et cessons de hausser les épaules devant
Les Hottentots prenant dans leurs poings noirs le vent,
Devant les Grecs faisant, dans un luncheon nocturne,
Manger ses petits-fils au grand-père Saturne;
Et ne bafouons plus le nègre et son tabou,
Ni ce temple meublé d'idoles en bambou
Où les sauvages vont avec les sauvagesses.

O religions, dieux, certitudes, sagesses!

IX. QUESTIONS

Qui que tu sois, qui vas devant toi, méditant
Des perquisitions dans ce ciel éclatant
Que l’homme de ses dieux au hasard ensemence,
Toi qui rêves, tu n’as de sûr que ta démence,
Toi qui montes, tu n’as de grand que ton orgueil.

D’abord, chercheur, qu’es-tu? Sur ce flamboyant seuil,
C’est là ce qu’il faut voir avant toute autre chose.

T’appelles-tu Pamphile, Euthyme, Eusèbe, Orose,
N’es-tu qu’un scoliaste, un clerc, un professeur,
D’un palimpseste obscur feuilletant l’épaisseur,
Citant Pierre, Thomas ou Paul, sois blême et triste,
Et ne demande rien au ciel, ô casuiste;
Fais en dehors de lui ton Dieu. Sois le rhéteur,
Et n’escalade pas l’inutile hauteur.
Si tu n’es que Lactance, homme, il doit te suffire
D’abattre Hiéroclès et d’écraser Porphyre;
Si tu n’es qu’un docteur d’un culte officiel,
Tu n’as rien à tirer du mystère et du ciel
Qui ne tourne au profit d’une thèse arbitraire,
Et tu ne pourras point, frêle esprit, en extraire
De meilleures raisons que celles que donna
Irénée à Blastus ou Justin à Zena.
C’est bien. Adore un texte, apprends, répète, imite,
Et fais-toi d’une lettre écrite ta limite.
Le ciel, ce précipice où tu plongerais mal,
N’enseigne rien à ceux que lie un joug fatal
Et qui ne veulent pas que le vrai les délivre.
Reste dans une ornière et rampe dans un livre.

Mais es-tu d’aventure un penseur libre, errant
Du côté de la nuit qui semble transparent,
N’ayant pas pris d’avance un parti sur l’abîme,
N’imposant aucun dogme à la brume sublime,
Ne poursuivant dans l’air, dans l’onde et dans le feu
Aucune forme humaine ou terrestre de Dieu;

Es-tu l’homme qui cherche et l’esprit qui s’envole?
Alors il te faut mieux qu’un maître, qu’une école,
Et qu’un missel, fardeau du lutrin vermoulu.
Il te faut le concret et l’abstrait, l’absolu,
L’infini sans cadrans, sans horloges, sans montres,
Sans compas, sans boussole, et les grandes rencontres
De la nuit où l’on sent passer les inconnus;
Il te faut les vents noirs, des profondeurs venus,
Qui dispersent dans l’ombre on ne sait quels messages.

Mais n’attends pas du gouffre où s’effacent les âges,
N’attends pas du grand tout, farouche, illimité,
Où flotte l’invisible, où, dans l’obscurité,
L’aile des tourbillons heurte l’aile des aigles,
Une explication de Dieu selon les règles,
Ni que, pour contenter ton pauvre esprit courbé,
L’être va te prouver l’être par A plus B.
Si tu veux que l’ensemble étoile te démontre
Un dogme, en débattant les raisons pour et contre,
Comme ferait Sanchez commentant Loyola,
La Nuit ne monte point dans cette chaire-là.
Ne confonds pas l’abîme avec un clerc; distingue
Entre Oxford et la nuit, entre l’aube et Gœttingue.
Les théologiens, les universités,
Les lourds in-folio doctement feuilletés,
Sont une chose, et l’ombre immense en est une autre.
De quelle vérité le gouffre est-il l’apôtre?
Tâche de le savoir; mais n’en espère point
Un cours de faculté suivi de point en point.
La lumière dévore et le collège broute;
L’enseignement d’en haut ne suit pas l’humble route
Par où passe en boitant l’enseignement d’en bas;
Le mystère a ses lois, la Sorbonne a ses bâts;
La science de l’Être, âpre, escarpée, ardue,
Aire idéale où fuit la pensée éperdue,
L’algèbre du grand Tout, le problème absolu,
Noir livre de la nuit où le rêve a seul lu,

Je ne te cache pas qu’il se peut qu’on l’apprenne
Dans la profondeur bleue, ineffable et sereine,
Ou dans la pâle horreur des brouillards infernaux,
Autrement qu’à Bologne au collège Albornoz.
Vois! c’est l’empyrée; aube, éther, sans bords, sans voiles,
Avec sa plénitude effroyable d’étoiles,
Étalant ses azurs au bleu jamais terni,
Espèces de cristaux vagues de l’infini.
Qu’est-ce que tu vas faire en ce cosmos sans terme,
Plus terrible s’il s’ouvre encor que s’il se ferme?
Comment ton frêle esprit se comportera-t-il
Dans ce sombre océan du grand et du subtil?
A qui parleras-tu dans ce milieu tragique?
Tout ton savoir humain, ta raison, ta logique,
Ne vont-ils pas se rompre en angles plus confus
Que les coudes du chêne au fond des bois touffus?
Dis, que vont devenir, homme, tes syllogismes
Quand ils rencontreront l’énormité des prismes?
Pourras-tu supporter l’immense brisement
De l’idéal, du vrai, du jour, du firmament?

Savoir fut de tout temps la démence des sages.
Osiris consultait l’abîme; des visages
Y viennent effarer les prophètes vaincus;
Mars inspirait Solon et Pallas Zaleucus;
Numa cherchait la nymphe en sa grotte enchantée;
Minos questionnait Zeus sur le Dictée;
Lycurgue allait à Delphe écouter Apollon.
Tout cela, c’est le gouffre; et l’obscur aquilon
Mêle au même brouillard tous ces pâles fantômes.
Tout cela, c’est la fuite immense des atomes;
C’est le doute.

Le doute, hélas! Sur cette mer,
Où tous les vents, le chaud, le froid, l’impur, l’amer,
Épuisent les fureurs de leurs rauques poitrines,
Apparaît l’archipel ténébreux des doctrines;

Sommets qui sont des ports s'ils ne sont des écueils.
Là se dressent Vesale entr'ouvrant des cercueils,
Socrate lumineux, Zenon dans un jour triste,
Pyrrhon vague, et si noir qu'on ne sait' s'il existe,
Les sept sages, pareils aux Cyclades, couverts
De nuages, de flots, de brumes et d'hivers,
Swift, Rabelais, Montaigne, Herder, Kant en détresse,
Hegel sombre, et, là-bas, cette cime, Lucrèce.

Les plus mornes, ce sont les rieurs. Avoir ri,
Ce n'est pas contre l'ombre étoilée un abri;
Cela ne construit pas un toit sur notre tête
Contre l'Être, sinistre et splendide tempête;
Cela n'empêche pas les monts d'être debout;
Cela ne fait pas taire un Vésuve qui bout,
Ni les clairons de l'ombre aux bouches des borées;
Cela n'empêche pas les mers démesurées
D'offrir on ne sait quels hommages écumants
A la pâle planète au fond des firmaments;
Rire, cela ne peut déconcerter la rose
Qui s'ouvre en juin, ayant pour devoir d'être éclose;
Fermer l'œil et crier : Je lie veux pas les voir!
Cela n'empêche pas les rayons de pleuvoir.
Riez. Soit. L'Inconnu derrière sa muraille
Ne s'inquiète pas de Lucien qui raille;
Ni les eaux, ni les champs, ni les fleurs, ni les blés,
Ni les forêts ne sont d'un sarcasme troublés;
L'invisible cocher des sept astres du pôle
Ne baisse pas le front, ne tourne pas l'épaule,
En poussant au zénith l'effrayant chariot,
Pour voir ce que Voltaire écrit à Thiriot.
Les rieurs sont-ils sûrs de leur rire? Leur style
Élide volontiers Dieu, syllabe inutile;
Du vieux surplis du prêtre ils chiffonnent l'empois;
Mais que veulent-ils? Faire aux croyants contrepoids.
Est-ce tout? A quoi bon? Quel choix dans la nuit noire!
Le hasard de nier ou le hasard de croire!

Que sert, dans cette énigme où l’homme est enfoui,
De balbutier Non parce qu’on bégaie Oui?

Donc, esprit, prends ton vol, si tu te sens des ailes.
Mais, homme, quel que soit l’éclair de tes prunelles,
N’espère pas, si haut que ton âme ait monté,
T’envoler au delà de ton humanité.
Va! mais, songes-y bien, nul ne sort de sa sphère.
L’Être en qui tout se fond, mais de qui tout diffère,
A fait les régions pour qu’on s’y renfermât;
Et l’oiseau le plus libre a pour cage un climat.

II. Philosophie

Homme, qu’est-ce que c’est que tes cérémonies
Misérables, devant les choses infinies?
A quoi bon tes poeans, tes chants, tes hosannas?
Pourquoi, n’ayant pas plus de jours que tu n’en as,
Prier au pied d’un tas d’autels contradictoires?
Quelle manie, atome en proie aux purgatoires,
As-tu d’interpeller les cieux? et quel besoin
De prendre l’invisible et l’obscur à témoin?
Crois-tu féconder l’Ombre en y semant des rites,
Des formules de nuit sur du brouillard transcrites?
T’imagines-tu donc, être aux songes bornés,
Que, lorsqu’avec tes yeux, tes oreilles, ton nez,
Tu bâtis un fétiche ayant ta ressemblance,
En t’adressant au vide insondable, au silence,
Au mystère, à l’horreur, tu les amèneras
A lui faire des pieds quand tu lui fais des bras?
Te figures-tu pas que le gouffre, où Socrate,
Les druides d’Armor, les mages de l’Euphrate,
Jean de Patmos, et Dante, et Thalès ont frémi,
Entrera pour sa part, et de compte à demi,
Dans la formation de quelque être inutile
Que la réalité de toutes parts mutile?
Quiconque, apôtre, augure, ou barde au large front,
Forge un Dieu de son mieux et l’offre au ciel profond,
N’aperçoit que la brume et la noirceur confuse
Du firmament sinistre et calme, qui refuse;
L’homme a beau présenter un Dieu, prémédité
Dans son aveuglement et dans sa surdité,
Que ce Dieu soit indou, païen, grec ou biblique,
L’ombre ne donne pas à l’homme la réplique;
Sans écho, sans qu’un signe ait paru dans l’éther,
L’Être a vu par Orphée enfanter Jupiter,
Allah par Mahomet, Jehovah par Moïse;
La négation triste est dans le vide assise;

Le prêtre par l'abîme est toujours éconduit;
L'immobilité grave et morne de la nuit
Suffit au Tout lugubre, et le gouffre n'invente
Aucune idole, ayant l'éternelle épouvante.

Ah! tu montes vers l'ombre avec un Dieu tout fait.
Que Dieu soit. Ton néant de grandeur le revêt;
Ta nuit lui pose au front l'aurore éblouissante;
Puis au-dessous de lui tu mets une descente
D'anges, d'êtres ayant l'azur pour point d'appui,
Décroissant jusqu'à toi, puis croissant jusqu'à lui.
Il te faut ta série allant du ciel à terre;
Tu veux d'un seul regard embrasser le mystère;
Voir le point d'arrivée et le point de départ;
Tu veux dire : voici la moitié, puis le quart;
Compter les échelons; tu rêves ce quadrille :
Dieu, puis l'archange, et l'homme en regard du mandrille;
Eh bien, non. Tout n'est qu'Un. Sache, ô sombre écolier,
Qu'on ne monte pas Dieu comme ton escalier;
Il est dans une ruche aussi bien que dans Rome;
Le ver n'est pas plus loin de l'infini que l'homme.

Nous autres les songeurs que dévorent la faim
Et la soif de connaître, et qui, sans peur, sans fin,
Creusons l'éternité formidable et candide,
Du côté noir, ainsi que du côté splendide
Où l'on voit tant de vie et de flamme abonder,
Nous avons beau guetter, contempler, regarder,
Observer, épier, jamais nous n'aperçûmes
Pas plus ce que tu crois que ce que tu présumes.
Connaître à fond Celui qui Vit, ses attributs,
Son essence, sa loi, son pouvoir, — de tels buts
Sont plus hauts que l'effort de l'homme qui trépasse.
Les invisibles sont. Ils emplissent l'espace,
Ils -peuplent la lumière, ils parlent dans les bruits;
Mais ne ressemblent point à ce que tu construis.

Renonce à fatiguer le réel de tes songes;
L’Ombre, en bas comme en haut, repousse tes mensonges;
Le tonnerre n’est pas l’ami ni l’ennemi
De ton Dieu que ne hait ni n’aime la fourmi;
Quand ta dévotion dresse un temple et s’y mute,
L’ouragan en ricane et l’abeille en murmure’;
Tu n’es pas moins raillé du nain que du géant;
Tes dragons sont d’airain, tes dieux sont de néant;
Tu peux les ciseler, mais non. les faire vivre;
L’oiseau craint le serpent et perche sur ta guivre;
Sculpte tes déités! dans leurs yeux de granit
Le vautour fait sa fiente et le crapaud son nid!

Toi-même tu rirais, si tu pouvais connaître
A quel point tu ne peux, homme, rien faire naître,
Rien construire en dehors des formes que tu vois;
A quel point tous tes arts, travaillant à la fois,
Tes peintres, tes sculpteurs, sont nuls pour rien produire
Hors du cercle où tu vois un jour pâle te luire;
Jusqu’où sont puérils tes rêves délirants;
Quelle est, pour inventer, l’enfance des plus grands;
Combien est infécond Rembrandt, et dans quel lange
Sont encor Phidias, Rubens et Michel-Ange!
La nature, l’aïeule aux mille sombres voix
Rugissantes parmi les antres et les bois,
La nourrice des loups, des ours et des panthères,
A des dessous profonds peuplés de noirs mystères
Qui te feraient pâlir si tu les pénétrais,
Et, dans l’énormité des eaux et des forêts,
Riche en monstres, n’a pas besoin de tes chimères.
Crois-tu pas qu’épousant tes songes éphémères,
Elle accepte ton hydre ou ta licorne, ayant
Son tigre, son lion au regard flamboyant,
Et son hippopotame horrible, et qu’elle abdique
Son grand aigle des monts pour ton aigle héraldique?
Ah! pauvre homme inutile et fou sous le ciel bleu,
Tu ne peux faire un monstre et tu veux faire un Dieu!

•

Et puis quand tu l’auras, fort bien, que tu lui fasses
Deux sexes comme à Fô, comme à Janus deux faces,
Que tu l’ornes d’un tas de titres et de noms,
Le voilà sur ses pieds, c’est Dieu, nous le tenons,
Où le mettre? En quel gouffre, homme? ou dans quelle sphère?
Perceras-tu, toi l’homme, un trou dans la lumière
Pour y loger ce Dieu que ton esprit forma
D’un peu de Jupiter et d’un peu de Brahma?
Ce Zeus, cet Allah, ce Pan, que tu fabriques
Avec tes passions féroces et lubriques,
Comment le mettras-tu dans les astres? Quel clou
Prendras-tu pour clouer au fond des cieux Vishnou?
Fusses-tu secondé d’Alcée et de Terpandre,
Dis, comment feras-tu pour fixer, pour suspendre,
Et pour faire tenir Erigone aux seins nus,
Érynnis, Astarté, Bellone, la Vénus,
Ces buveuses de sang et ces prostituées,
Dans la façade énorme et pâle des nuées?

•

Ah! noir vivant, tu veux un Dieu! Qu’en feras-tu?
Auras-tu moins d’orgueil, homme, et plus de vertu?
Embrasseras-tu l’homme? aimeras-tu ton frère?
Deviendras-tu flambeau? briseras-tu la guerre,
Ce vieux glaive éternel d’où dégoutte le sang?
Dis, jetteras-tu moins de pierres en passant
Aux penseurs, aux héros, aux martyrs, aux apôtres?
Laisseras-tu, devant l’affliction des autres,
Entrer la pitié blanche et douce dans ton cœur?
Seras-tu plus pensif, plus grave et moins moqueur,
Surtout pour les déchus et pour les incurables?
Seras-tu moins hautain devant les misérables,
Plus doux pour l’insensé qu’entraînent ses penchants,

Moins grand pour les petits et meilleur aux méchants?
Réponds, mêleras-tu, dis, un peu de tendresse,
O juste, à ta justice, ô sage, à ta sagesse?
Feras-tu grâce au monstre en pleurs, et seras-tu
Un Abel moins altier pour Caïn abattu?
Et, si tu n’es qu’un monstre et qu’un Caïn toi-même,
Viendras-tu t’effarer à la lueur suprême,
Et te prosterner, pâle, heureux, épouvanté,
Sous la prodigieuse et clémente clarté?
Un Dieu tient de la place, homme, dans une sphère.
Avant d’en vouloir un, il faut savoir qu’en faire.
Un Dieu, quand ce n’est pas un port, c’est un péril.
Ah! la plupart du temps, sénile et puéril,
Importunant les cieux, livide solitude,
Tu veux un Dieu, de peur d’en perdre l’habitude,.
Parce que du passé tu subis l’ascendant,
Tu veux un Dieu, pour rien, pour faire, en attendant
Que ton cadavre tombe au sépulcre et pourrisse,
Ce que ton père a fait, ce qu’a fait ta nourrice,
Par ennui, pour sentir sur ta tête un patron,
Pour avoir quelque chose à mettre en ton juron.

•

Enfin te rends-tu compte un peu du vaste rêve
Où ton destin commence, où ton destin s’achève,
Qu’on nomme l’univers, et qui flotte infini?
En vois-tu le côté fatal, blessé, puni?
Le lait coule, et le sang aussi; l’esprit s’effraie.
Sous la grande mamelle on voit la grande plaie.
Lucine pleure ayant devant elle Atropos.
Hélas! hélas! s’il est quelqu’un qui, sans repos,
Crée, engendre et produit, homme, il est quelque chose
Qui sans trêve détruit, dévore et décompose.
Ce fileur ne fait rien que pour ce déchireur.

Les êtres sont épars dans l’indicible horreur.

L’ombre en étouffe plus que le jour n’en anime.
La lumière s’épuise à traverser l’abîme;
Les rayons dans l’éther s’enfoncent éperdus;
L’obscurité, vers qui tous les bras sont tendus,
Livide, est toujours là qui fait la nuit, et creuse
Ce trou pour engloutir la clarté généreuse;
Quoi que fasse l’étoile et l’aube à l’horizon,
Tout n’est qu’une malsaine et nocturne prison;
Malgré le vaste effort de l’aurore, tout souffre;
Quelle épaisseur de nuit ne faut-il pas au gouffre
Pour amortir la flèche énorme du soleil?
Eh bien, vois! Mars est noir; Saturne est-il vermeil?
Les azurs sont brumeux, les planètes sont pâles.
Quant à ton globe à toi, des pleurs, des cris, des râles.
Ta sphère a-t-elle un Dieu? S’il existe, il dément
Sans cesse la beauté, l’astre, le firmament;
Que ce Dieu donne un chant aux oiseaux, qu’il revête
Le rossignol de joie et d’amour la fauvette,
Qu’importe s’il les fait guetter par l’épervier!
Soi-même s’abhorrer, soi-même s’envier,
Telle est l’obscure loi de l’être lamentable.
Ton affreux ciel mugit comme un bœuf dans l’étable;
Quant au genre humain, vois!
    Esclaves et bourreaux,
Vil tas de cendre ayant pour tisons les héros,
Paille éteinte d’un souffle et d’un souffle allumée,
Foule qu’on voit passer et dans de la fumée
Fuir après qu’on l’a vue un instant se mouvoir!
A peine en reste-t-il quelque chose de noir.
Ses chefs n’ont pas de but, ses dieux n’ont pas de norme;
Rien que pour les nommer, son histoire est difforme;
Les canons remplaçant les chars armés de faulx,
Des trônes, des bûchers, d’affreux arcs triomphaux,
Des profils de césars équestres sous des porches,
De toutes ces lueurs l’homme faisant des torches,
Un reflux d’ombre après un flux de liberté,
De la haine et du bruit, voilà l’humanité.

La vie est de la nuit, la mort seule est lucide;
La science aboutit à l’âme suicide;
Tout ment; et les esprits se blessent aux scalpels.
Les sens à la raison font d’obscènes appels;
Sur la chair croît le vice, infâme parasite;
Le mal tente l’esprit, l’esprit tremblant hésite.
La conscience est là pour régler ces débats?
Soit. Mais a-t-elle peur? pourquoi parler si bas?
Vois ton indignité, dont tu fais ta victoire.
Est-il, bien que le ciel ait aussi sa nuit noire,
Un coin du firmament, d’ombre ou d’azur baigné,
Qui ne jette sur l’homme un regard indigné?
Est-il une vertu que l’homme dans ses doutes
N’ait flétrie ou niée? Interroge-les toutes.
Demande au dévouement, au courage, à l’amour,
Ce qu’ils pensent de l’homme, âpre et vil tour à tour.
La justice en a peur quand elle voit sa toge.
Questionne sur lui la sagesse; interroge
La faiseuse d’ingrats, la mère au sein mordu,
La bonté. Le devoir est un flambeau perdu.
Qui grandit soudain penche, et qui naît périclite.
O vivants, Démocrite aussi bien qu’Héraclite,
Rabelais comme Job, Timon comme Pangloss,
Tout s’écroule en chimère ou se fond en sanglots.

Là, des pôles tombeaux, ici, des déserts mornes
Où rôdent le bubale et la vipère à cornes,
Où le soleil emplit de venin les buissons,
Où la lumière sert à faire des poisons.
Le soir, comme un mourant les horizons blêmissent;
Ce globe, couvert d’eaux et d’arbres qui frémissent,
Entrecoupe on ne sait quels cris et quels abois
Dans un balancement de vagues et de bois.
Tout menace et tout tremble; et la mer accoutume
La terre misérable à l’immense amertume.
Homme, ton univers a l’air d’être inquiet.
Devant qui? Tout s’enfuit. Le jour craint, la nuit hait.

L’être est un bloc confus de masques et de bouches
Mêlés lugubrement dans des effrois farouches;
Comme deux oiseaux noirs sans fin se poursuivant
L’éclair étreint la nuit dans la fuite du vent,
Et la nature entr’ouvre au fond de ces alarmes
Son œil mystérieux, noyé de sombres larmes.
L’être est morne, odieux à sonder, triste à voir.
De là les battements d’ailes du désespoir.

•

Tu dis : - Je vois le mal, et je veux le remède.
Je cherche le levier, et je suis Archimède. -

Le remède est ceci : Fais le bien. Le levier,
Le voici : Tout aimer et ne rien envier.
Homme, veux-tu trouver le vrai? cherche le juste.

•

Mais quant au dogme, neuf et jeune, ou vieux et fruste,
Quant aux saints fabliaux, quant aux religions
Inoculant l’erreur dans leurs contagions,
Semant les fictions, les terreurs, les présages,
Quant à tous ces docteurs, à ces essaims de sages
Qui vont l’un maudissant ce que l’autre a béni,
Qui, volant, bourdonnant, harcelant l’infini,
Feraient abriter Dieu sous une moustiquaire,
Quant au daïri roi, quant au pape vicaire,
Quant à tous ces korans que chaque âge inventa,
Edda, Veda, Talmud, King ou Zend-Avesta,
Ce n’est qu’une confuse et perverse mêlée;
En les étudiant, ô pauvre âme aveuglée,
Tu n’apprendras pas plus le réel qu’en cherchant
A composer, avec des insultes, un chant!

Et qu’importe, après tout, que l’homme prie ou croie;
Qu’avec son propre songe, inepte, il se foudroie;
Qu’il adore le Tout informe, ou l’esprit pur,
Une statue en bronze ou bien un pan d’azur;
Que l’homme au ciel s’égare ou qu’il se fanatise
Avec la fauve odeur des bûchers qu’il attise;
Que sa religion ait des pieds et des mains
Et des sens, et se livre aux appétits humains,
Ou soit vapeur, fumée, ombre; que dans l’église
Son Dieu se pétrifie ou se volatilise;
Que l’homme, impur, s’aveugle à suivre n’importe où
Tantôt l’abstraction, tantôt le manitou;
Que ce soit la chandelle ou l’astre qu’il contemple;
Qu’il adore une idée ou qu’il adore un temple;
Que, croyant voir des dieux, au fond des bois épais,
Il nomme Argès l’éclair, la foudre Stéropès;
Que, l’un couché dans l’or, l’autre nu sur des nattes,
Le nègre ait ses tabous et César ses pénates;
Que le flamme encense en chlamyde de lin
Le morne Olympien, le noir Capitolin;
Qu’on ait un Dieu hantant l’alcôve impériale,
Un pour le sénateur, un pour le curiale;
Que les dieux soient divers et mesurés aux rangs,
Pour l’esclave petits et pour le maître grands;
Qu’en l’honneur d’un Indra quelconque, le brahmine
Se laisse dévorer vivant par la vermine;
Qu’on se damne en carême â manger du jambon;
Que pour faire un saint Pierre un Jupiter soit bon,
Et que la foule, au fond des hautes basiliques,
Use un orteil païen de baisers catholiques,
Si bien qu’un vieux Très-Haut ressert et se revend,
Et qu’avec un dieu mort on bâcle un saint vivant;
Qu’ainsi qu’un terre-neuve attaque un boule-dogue,
La mosquée en fureur morde la synagogue;
Que Rome ait en dédain Moscou; que Borgia
Soit pour la Vierge et non pour la Panagia;
Que les frontons sacrés changent d’hiéroglyphe;

Que le blanc d’Hildebrand soit le noir de Caïphe;
Que l’homme à Mahomet donne un dôme écrasé,
A Notre-Dame un chœur fait en bois menuisé,
Au grand éléphant blanc un éventail de plumes;
Qu’il ait ses dieux brochés en plusieurs gros volumes;
Qu’il discute si c’est le Pinde, âpre coteau,
Qui vit l’hydre déesse, Amphitrite Céto,
Sortir de la mer bleue et triste, ou si l’Élide
La première aperçut l’effroyable annélide;
Qu’il donne Thèbe aux sphinx et Tyr aux belzébuths;
Qu’il appelle le jour Adonis ou Phébus;
Qu’il écoute de Pan les invisibles flûtes;
Qu’il bâtisse un cromlech avec des pierres brutes,
Ou fasse à Phidias sculpter le Parthénon;
Qu’il juche Dieu sur l’aigle ou bien sur un ânon;
Qu’il serve le Baal avec la Baaltide;
Qu’il soit évêque, et propre, ou derviche, et fétide,
Vil caloyer barbu, beau diacre tonsuré,
Très révérend ministre,,ou monsieur le curé;
Que la sottise autour du mensonge se groupe;
Que le meilleur orfèvre, avec sa bonne loupe,
Ne puisse distinguer les dieux vrais des dieux faux;
Que le rêve ait Endor, que la chair ait Paphos;
Qu’avant de croire en Dieu, le genre humain le crée;
Que sous la pression de la crainte sacrée,
Que, sous la pesanteur des vagues régions,
Les superstitions et les religions
Sortent de son esprit comme l’eau des éponges;
Que, sans savoir pourquoi, dans un noir tas de songes,
Il choisisse tel dogme ou tel autre; qu’en bloc,
Acceptant Irmensul, il rejette Moloch;
Qu’il adopte une idole infâme et s’en entiche,
Faisant le délicat pour quelque autre fétiche;
Que, sur Dieu, pour savoir s’il est de bonne humeur,
Il consulte le vent ou le flot en rumeur,
Ou la flamme, ou l’oiseau planant dans des tempêtes;
Qu’il nourrisse ce Dieu de la viande des bêtes,

De gâteaux sans levain ou de pain trois fois cuit,
Qu’est-ce que cela fait, homme, au puits de la nuit?
Qu’est-ce que cela fait au précipice énorme,
Où la vie en de l’ombre et du vent se transforme,
Où le songeur hagard n’aperçoit vaguement
Qu’un incommensurable et sombre écroulement,
Où le jour, blêmissant dans les vides sans bornes,
Meurt dans l’aveuglement des immensités mornes!

Invente, si tu veux, toi, ta doctrine aussi,
Et quand tu l’auras faite et construite, crois-y;
Combine, tu le peux, d’autres idolâtries.

Après ces tourbillons de croyances flétries,
Après ces larves, Bel, Ammon, Janus, Rhéa,
Osiris, Odin, Thor, que la guerre créa,
Ces enfers, ces édens, ces cieux, ces rêveries,
Et les houris donnant la main aux walkyries,
Homme, après le dieu bœuf, après le dieu dragon,
Après Chronos, après Magog, après Dagon,
Apportés, remportés par les nuits grandissantes,
Qu’importe à l’infini livide que tu sentes
Une religion de plus, flottant au bord
De tout ce que tu fais dans la brume du sort,
Promener sur ton front son souffle de fantôme,
Et, dans l’ombre sans forme, où tu rêves un dôme,
Dans le ciel, plus menteur et plus noir que la mer,
Un Dieu de plus passer sur le poil de ta chair!

•

Toute religion, homme, est un exemplaire
De l’impuissance ayant pour appui la colère.

Toute religion est un avortement
Du rêve humain devant l’être et le firmament;
Le dogme, quel qu’il soit, juif ou grec, rapetisse

A sa taille le vrai, l’idéal, la justice,
La lumière, l’azur, l’abîme, l’unité;
Il coupe l’absolu sur sa brièveté;
Tous les cultes ne sont, à Memphis comme à Rome,
Que des réductions de l’éternel sur l’homme,
Fragments d’indivisible, ombres de la clarté,
Masques de l’infini pris sur l’humanité.
Leur tonnerre est un bras qui lance un dard de soufre;
Leur cercle n’admet pas l’immensité; leur gouffre
Est comblé d’un Odin ou d’un Adonaï.

Eh bien, penseurs, niez Olympe et Sinaï;
Au lieu de ce vain ciel qui sur un mont s’appuie,
Et d’Éole trouant les outres’ de la pluie,
Et des quatre chevaux d’Apollon hennissant
De joie et de fureur vers la nuit qui descend;
Au lieu de ces palais de nuage et de flammes
Où flottent, transparents, des dieux hommes et femmes,
Où, les foudres au poing, rôdent tous ces fléaux
Que l’homme appelle Allah, Sabaoth, Fô, Théos;
Au lieu de l’éléphant pontifical qui groupe
sur sa tête les cieux et l’enfer sur sa croupe;
Au lieu de cette mer du désert ténébreux
Qui laisse fuir Moïse et passer les Hébreux
Entre ses flots ainsi qu’entre deux murs de verre;
Au lieu de cette lune étrange du Calvaire,
Toute rouge du sang que Jésus a sué;
Au lieu du faux soleil qu’arrête Josué,
Et de l’eau sur laquelle un Christ étoile marche,
Montrez aux bonzes noirs, gardant le temple et l’arche,
Quoi? la Réalité, ce prodige inouï,
La lumière, ce vaste aspect épanoui,
La mort créant la vie, et transformant la tombe
En crèche où fait son nid l’âme, cette colombe,
Le miracle des gaz, des forces, des aimants,
L’infini ténébreux, plein d’éblouissements,
L’ombre ayant des soleils plus que la mer n’a d’ondes,

La confrontation formidable des mondes,
L’étoile, astre central, et la terre tournant,
L’homme, atome perdu dans ce tout rayonnant,
Les comètes, les feux, les souffles, les bolides,
Les sphères tourbillons et les globes solides,
Les univers sans fin, splendides visions,
Et les créations et les créations;
Montrez les profondeurs saintes; montrez aux prêtres
Les abîmes de vie et les océans d’êtres,
Vous les verrez crier : Cela n’est pas! horreur!
Vous verrez se ruer les cultes eh fureur,
Païens, sur Hicétas, chrétiens, sur Galilée,
Et l’autel tressaillir sur la terre ébranlée,
Et les pâles docteurs frémir dans le saint lieu,
Et les religions reculer devant Dieu.

•

Fanatismes! terreurs! la fable est sur les hommes!
Sur tous ces yeux fermés faisant de sombres sommes!
Quel rêve! quel monceau d’olympes insensés!
Que d’effroi! que d’enfer!
   Assez, prêtres! assez!

La bacchante au flanc nu rit dans le bois infâme;
L’Indou qui saigne et pend aux crocs de fer, se pâme;
La mère, avec la chair de son enfant, nourrit
Le dieu-fournaise aux dents de feu, Baal-Bérith;
Ici, temple à la Nuit; là, temple à la Famine;
Le cheval de Piman de la Mecque chemine
Sur des hommes couchés à terre, qui lui font
Un fumier de leur âme, un pavé de leur front;
La Chine donne aux mœurs, aux arts, aux lois, aux codes
La forme monstrueuse et folle des pagodes.
Que d’hommes ont vécu sans jamais être nés!

Et ceux-ci, ces croyants épris et forcenés

Sur qui le sphinx romain pose ses larges griffes,
Que d’affreux hommes dieux, qu’ils appellent pontifes,
Courbent sous leur vil sceptre, infaillible, accepté,
Insolent pour l’azur et pour l’éternité,
Oh! les infortunés! est-il rien de plus triste
Que leur sinistre foi dans la Rome papiste!
Rome, charnier sous l’aigle, est, sous la croix, bazar.
Quel est le plus hideux de Pierre ou de César?
Rome a l’un après l’autre. Épouvantable liste!
Ce vampire c’est Jean, ce spectre c’est Caliste;
Boniface a des fils de ses nièces; Urbain
Fait saigner et mourir cinq prêtres dans leur bain;
Borgia dans Gomorrhe y serait une tache;
Grégoire tient la torche et Sixte tient la hache;
Félix est un désastre et Simplicius ment;
Cet Innocent brûlait les hommes, ce Clément
Les massacrait, ce Pie est un vendeur du temple;
Jule est l’épouvantail comme Christ est l’exemple;
Toutes les passions se tenant par la main,
Toute la turpitude et tout l’orgueil humain
Se donnent rendez-vous dans la ville éternelle;
Tout vient là, dol, parjure, impureté charnelle,
Tous les forfaits connus et tous les inconnus,
Tous les crimes masqués et tous les vices nus;
Rome appelle à son lit tous ces passants infâmes;
Rome, l’entremetteuse et la marchande d’âmes,
Rit, et se prostitue, une tiare au front;
Et, tandis que Brutus tressaille de l’affront
Et que Trajan frémit sur sa haute colonne,
Eux, ces fous, se livrant à cette Babylone,
Chantent, et, croyant voir la céleste Sion,
D’elle ils adorent tout, fraude, inquisition,
La luxure, l’horreur, le bûcher, le massacre,
Et les saints qu’elle fait et les rois qu’elle sacre,
Et, l’extase au cœur, fiers du joug, captifs, amants,
Ils respirent l’odeur de ses vomissements!

Et dire que la terre est tout entière en proie
Aux affirmations de ces prêtres sans joie,
Sans pitié, sans bonté, sans flambeau, sans raison,
Dont l’ombre, l’ombre, l’ombre et l’ombre est l’horizon!

III. Rien

Mais quelqu’un me vient-il en aide, ô nuit farouche?
J’écoutais, j’entendis. Ombre obscure! Une bouche
Parlait, et dégageait de la brume en parlant.

- « La croyance est une hydre et vous ronge le flanc.
Niez tout. O vivants, l’atome sort, puis rentre.
Pas de ciel, pas d’enfer. L’ombre éparse. Aucun centre.
Rien n’existe en deçà, rien n’existe au delà.
Tout meurt. Dormez. »

   Ainsi l’étrange voix parla.
O nuit! qu’est-ce que c’est que cet auxiliaire?
Mais écoutons. La voix poursuit.
     « O fourmilière,
O foule, ô genre humain! L’homme flotte, et c’est tout.
Cette apparence d’être est un moment debout;
Il palpite le temps d’être inique, funeste,
Méchant, obscène, aveugle; et qu’est-ce qu’il en reste?
La terre le reprend et dit : A-t-il été?
Et la terre elle-même est-elle? O cécité!
Ténèbres! Vous nommez ces feux follets des âmes?
C’est du néant. Passant, qu’est-ce que tu réclames?

« Homme, tu n’as à toi que l’heure où tu te meus,
Triste ou gai, sage ou fou, dans l’affreux tout brumeux!
Goutte d’eau, quand la mer s’ouvre, à quoi bon la lutte?
Prends ce que ton destin a de clair, la minute,
Avril quand il sourit, la fleur quand elle éclôt.
Laisse au gouffre éternel rouler l’éternel flot.
Vis, meurs.
   « Tu veux un Dieu, toi l’homme, afin d’en être
Si tu veux l’infini, c’est pour y reparaître.
Quoi! vivre avant la vie et vivre après la mort!

Traverser toute l’ombre immense avec ton sort!
Que ce cosmos, couvert du voile babélique,
De ton moi misérable à jamais se complique!
Que tout ce que régit l’inconcevable loi
Soit nécessairement un composé de toi!
Que tu n’en puisses point être absent! que tu fasses,
Toujours vivant, le fond de toutes ces surfaces!
Que jamais l’être humain, rayé, clos, aboli,
Ne s’appelle trépas et ne se nomme oubli!
Quoi! ce qu’a reçu l’homme, il ne doit pas le rendre!
Il est; donc il sera! Quoi, l’homme, cette cendre
Sur qui le vent de vie obscurément souffla,
Être quelqu’un! Quel rêve absurde fais-tu là!
Ce monde est-il? Qui sait? N’est-il pas? C’est possible.
Tout flotte. Le certain n’est pas dans le visible.
Mais toi, fourmi, ciron, grain de poussière, avoir
Une place quelconque en ce grand chaos noir!
Vain songe du néant dont ton orgueil est dupe!
Vas-tu croire qu’un Dieu ‘- s’il existe - s’occupe
De toi, larve! et qu’il veille et médite, agité
Par l’éphémère au fond dé son éternité!

« Matière ou pur esprit, bloc sourd ou dieu sublime,
Le monde, quel qu’il soit, c’est ce qui dans l’abîme
N’a pas dû commencer et ne doit pas finir.
Quelle prétention as-tu d’appartenir
A l’unité suprême et d’en faire partie,
Toi, fuite! toi monade en naissant engloutie,
Qui jettes sur le gouffre un regard insensé,
Et qui meurs quand le cri de ta vie est poussé!
« Ah! triste Adam, flocon qui fonds presque avant d’être,
Lugubre humanité, n’est-ce pas trop de naître?
N’est-ce pas trop d’avoir à vivre, en vérité,
O morne genre humain, bref, rapide, emporté!
Il ne te suffit pas, quoique ta fange souffre,
D’apparaître une fois dans la lueur du gouffre!
L’homme éternel, voilà ce que l’homme comprend.

Tu demandes au ciel, au grand ciel ignorant
Qui t’assourdit de foudre et t’aveugle d’étoiles,
Quel fil te noue, ô mouche, à ses énormes toiles,
Comment il tient à l’homme, et quel est ce lien?
Tu devrais te sentir pourtant tellement rien
Qu’avec ce vil néant que tu nommes ta sphère
Le ciel - en supposant qu’il soit - n’a rien à faire!
Tout ce qu’il peut cacher, couver ou contenir,
Est hors de toi, qui n’as qu’un soir pour avenir.
O le risible effort de rattacher ce dôme
De prodige, d’horreur et d’ombre à ton atome!
Quel besoin as-tu donc d’être de l’univers?
Chair promise au tombeau, contente-toi des vers!

« Et d’ailleurs, à quoi bon avoir un personnage
Dans ce mystérieux et fatal engrenage?
A quoi bon être un pli dans ces flux et reflux
Qui font effort pour être et déjà ne sont plus?
A quoi bon être un chiffre et compter dans la foule
Qui n’est que de l’écume ajoutée à la houle?
Regarde : tout est vain, fuyant, triste, inouï.
Avant d’être apparu, tout est évanoui.
Ces groupes de soleils, de globes, de planètes,
Moins funèbres peut-être ou plus noirs que vous n’êtes;
Ce zodiaque obscur qui jamais ne finit
De descendre au nadir, de monter au zénith;
Ces Jupiters, ces Mars, ces Vénus, ces Saturnes,
Qui semblent des édens ou des bagnes nocturnes,
Et qu’on rêve peuplés d’anges ou de démons
D’après l’ombre que font sur leur face les monts;
Ces visions de cieux que rougit ou que dore
Tantôt le soir sanglant, tantôt la fauve aurore;
Ces lunes dont on voit l’épouvantable flanc;
Ces blêmes tourbillons, ces abîmes roulant
Des apparitions de mondes dans leurs vagues;
Cette succession de créations vagues
Qu’on aperçoit au fond des gouffres entr’ouverts;

Cet enchevêtrement d’astres et d’univers
Dont la série immense et pâle se dévide
Dans le ciel, dit Platon; Pyrrhon dit : dans le vide;
Spectres qui n’ont entre eux rien de commun, sinon
Qu’un chaînon traîne et tire à lui l’autre chaînon;
Ces constellations confusément tournées
Par la roue invisible et sombre des années,
Et qui te feraient peur si nous pénétrions
Jusqu’aux profonds azurs de leurs septentrions;
Ces masques effrayants d’une vie inconnue
Qu’entrevoit le songeur au-delà de la nue;
Ces firmaments qu’on sonde et dont on n’est pas sûr;
L’aérolithe, errant en foule dans l’azur,
Plus nombreux que l’abeille au sommet de l’Hymète,
Le météore au vol furieux, la comète
Qui s’évade d’un ciel comme d’un cabanon,
Tous ces mondes ne sont que les formes, sans nom
De l’obscurité vaste et morne des espaces;
Et que gagneras-tu, toi, pauvre esprit qui passes,
Quand tu mêleras l’homme,’ et son trouble, et son bruit,
A ces nœuds de fumée ondoyant dans la nuit?
« Dieu n’est pas. Nie et dors. Tu n’es pas responsable.
Ris de l’inaccessible, étant l’insaisissable.
Sois humble, pas de ciel. Pas d’enfer, sois content.
Fais ce que tu voudras. Personne ne t’attend.
J’ai dit. - »

Soit. Plus d’enfer. -

Mais rien après la vie,
Rien avant; la lueur des ténèbres suivie;
Tout ramené pour l’homme à l’instinct animal;
Le bien n’ayant pas plus raison contre le mal
Que le tropique n’a raison contre le pôle;

De Sade, triomphant, raillant Vincent de Paule;
Tout réduit à l’atome inerte, inconscient,
Sourd, tantôt tourmenteur et tantôt patient;
Tout dans les appétits et dans les épigastres;
Par l’aube, par le jour, par la nuit, par les astres,
Par l’univers, sur l’homme ouvert et refermé,
Socrate démenti, Lacenaire affirmé;
Pour tout dogme : - « Il n’est point de vertus ni de vices;
« Sois tigre, si tu peux. Pourvu que tu jouisses,,
« Vis n’importe comment pour finir n’importe où; » -
Caligulà le sage, Aristide le fou; ‘;
Jésus-Christ et Judas désagrégés ensemble,
Puis remêlés à l’ombre éternelle qui tremble,
Sans que l’atome, au fond de l’être ou tout périt,
Sache s’il fut Judas ou s’il fut Jésus-Christ! -

Oui, c’est vrai, plus d’enfer, rêve hideux de Rome,
Plus d’affreux punisseur rôdant derrière l’homme.

Mais tout nivelant tout; je croyais, tu niais,
Qu’importe! l’honneur sot, le martyre niais;
Pas d’âme; pas de moi qui survive et qui dure;
L’infâme égalité de l’astre et de l’ordure;
La pourriture, ô deuil î reprenant tout Brutus;
C’est-à-dire pas plus d’astres que de vertus;
L’azur roulant, aux plis de ses ténébreux voiles,
Dans un spectre de ciel des fantômes d’étoiles! -

Oui, c’est vrai, plus de fourche au poing de Lucifer,
Plus d’éternel bûcher flamboyant, plus d’enfer.

Mais l’atome Attila, fatal, irresponsable,
Comme l’atome feu, comme l’atome sable,
Innocent, ne pouvant pas plus être accusé
Pour un peuple aboli, pour un monde écrasé
Que l’un d’éboulement et l’autre d’incendie;
Que Job racle sa plaie et qu’Homère mendie,

Trimalcion les vaut, faisant un bon repas;
Marc-Aurèle? A quoi bon? Tibère? Pourquoi pas?
Néron, Trajan, ce n'est qu'une forme qui flotte;
Ce que vous nommez czar, tyran, bourreau, despote,
Mange de l'homme ainsi que vous mangez du pain;
Après? Pour le grand tout, qui vous permet la faim,
Un grain de blé mûr pèse autant que Caton libre;
Tout rentre dans l'immense et tranquille équilibre
Dès que le pain est mort et l'homme digéré.
Demain le dévorant sera le dévoré;
L'atome qui fut aigle, éperdu, fuira l'aile
De l'atome qui fut colombe ou tourterelle;
Les transformations du gouffre écraseront,
Roi, ce qui fut ton pied sous ce qui fut mon front;
L'agneau devenu loup teindra de sang sa griffe,
Et ce sera le tour de Christ d'être Caïphe,
Sans même que ce soit revanche et châtiment,
Nul n'ayant conscience en dehors du moment,
Le fil étant rompu d'un avatar à l'autre.
Qu'appelez-vous faux, vrai, droit ou devoir? L'apôtre,
Le bourreau, le héros, le traître, tout est vain.

Oh! que rien ne soit plus bon, grand, sacré, divin;
Que tout soit le hasard, l'ébauche, le décombre,
L'éclosion du pou dans les cheveux de l'ombre;
Que la création, ivre d'obscurité,
Soit idiote, et n'ait à son extrémité
Rien qu'on puisse nommer amour, raison, justice;
Qu'après avoir vomi, lugubre, elle engloutisse;
Et n'ait pour résultat, en souffrant, en créant,
Que de donner un peu de vermine au néant;
Qu'il ne soit pas prouvé que cette terre, en somme,
Sent la démangeaison de la vie et de l'homme;
Qu'il ne soit nulle part d'idéal, ni de loi;
Que tout soit sans réponse et demande pourquoi;
Que l'être, en supposant que l'abîme livide
Ne nous recrache pas ce mot sinistre et vide,

Se résolve, au milieu d’un vain frisson qui fuit,
En un fourmillement aveugle dans la nuit;
Que le fond noir de tout rampe, et soit quelque chose
Qui ne sait pas, qui luit sans jour, qui va sans cause,
Un hideux bloc abstrait, pas même une prison,
Une espèce de mort énorme, sans raison
Pour entrer dans la nuit, pour sortir de la tombe,
Un vague tournoiement de poussière qui tombe... —
Quoi! lorsqu’on s’est aimé, pleurs et cris superflus36!
Ne jamais se revoir, jamais, jamais! ne plus
Se donner rendez-vous au delà de la vie!
Quoi! la petite tête éblouie et ravie, .
L’enfant qui souriait et qui s’en est allé,
Mères, c’est de la nuit! cela s’est envolé!
Quoi! toi que j’aime, toi qui me fais de l’aurore,
Femme par qui je sens en moi l’archange éclore,
Quoi! le néant rira quand, pâle, je dirai :
- Attends-moi, je te suis, je viens, être adoré!
Prépare-moi ma place en ton lit solitaire! -
Quoi! le seul lieu qu’on ait besoin d’aimer sur terre
Et de sentir vivant, le tombeau, serait mort!
En présence des cieux, quoi! l’espérance a tort!
Le deuil qui tord mon cœur en exprime un mensonge!
Pas d’avenir! un vide où l’œil égaré plonge!
Fosse en la profondeur, linceul sur la hauteur!
Pour mouvement la vie et la mort pour moteur!
La cécité, tournant sans but sur elle-même,
Engendre la lumière, imposture suprême;
L’être inutilement s’élève et se détruit;
Le monde croule au gré d’une haleine de nuit;
Le vent est l’enveloppe obscure de la brume;
Pour s’éteindre à jamais un instant on s’allume;
Tout est l’horrible roue, et Rien le cabestan!...
Rien!

Oh! reprends ce Rien, gouffre, et rends-nous Satan!

IV. Des voix

Et j’entendais des voix au milieu des nuées;
Un divin chant d’extase, un noir bruit de huées
Passait.

UNE VOIX

Le cheval doit être manichéen.
Arimane lui fait du mal, Ormus du bien;
Tout le jour, sous le fouet il est comme une cible,
Il sent derrière lui l’affreux maître invisible,
Le démon inconnu qui l’accable de coups;
Le soir, il voit un être empressé, bon et doux,
Qui lui donne à manger et qui lui donne à boire,
Met de la paille fraîche en sa litière noire,
Et tâche d’effacer le mal par le calmant,
Et le rude travail par le repos clément;
Quelqu’un le persécute, hélas! mais quelqu’un l’aime.
Et le cheval se dit : « Ils sont deux. » C’est le même.

AUTRE VOIX

L’instant de dénouer la chimère est venu;
La vie, inexprimable effort dans l’inconnu,
Est terminée, erreur, ou folie, ou bravade;
Et voici le moment fatal. L’âme s’évade,
L’homme expire. On a vu sur son logis tremblant
Planer l’ange Trépas, l’oiseau noir, l’oiseau blanc,
Corbeau pour les méchants et pour les bons colombe;
C’est fini. Maintenant, que devient dans la tombe
Le corps, ce compagnon auquel l’âme avait cru?
Attends un peu de temps. Cherche. Il a disparu.

Cherche. Il s’est dissipé. Cherche encor, fouille, creuse,
Et tâte avec la main sous cette voûte affreuse.
Que trouves-tu? Regarde. Est-ce cela? Oui. Non.
Qu’est-ce? Cela n’a plus de forme ni de nom;
C’est noir comme la nuit et vain comme la cendre;
C’est l’homme. Et si tu veux demain y redescendre,
Tu ne trouveras plus, dans ce hideux réduit,
Même ce peu de cendre et ce reste de nuit.

A peine est-il couché, débris dans les décombres,
Que les mille éléments, tous ces créanciers sombres,
Qui l’avaient pour un -temps à l’âme concédé,
Redemandent ce corps par les vers seuls gardé;
Et chacun - car la vie a la mort pour domaine -
Prend ce qui lui revient dans cette argile humaine.
Tout atome, dans l’eau, dans la terre ou dans l’air,
Est un Shylock qui veut sa part de cette chair.
O nature sans fond! gouffre avare et rapace!
Partout, en haut, en bas, dans la nuit, dans l’espace,
Tout réclame à la fois, tout s’ouvre en même temps,
La pierre, le buisson, le miasme des étangs,
La poussière, la fleur, le vent, la flamme ardente;
Et, dans la profondeur des ténèbres pendante,
La matière dont l’homme était formé s’épand,
Et se cache; et, glissant, coulant, tombant, rampant,
Se hâte de crouler dans tous ces précipices.
Et, soit qu’elle ait là-haut trouvé les cieux propices,
Grâce au bien qu’elle a fait, au beau qu’elle a pensé,
Soit qu’ayant mal vécu, traînant un vil passé,
Elle ait vu se fermer devant elle l’aurore,
L’âme, envolée au fond de la mort sombre, ignore
Cette fuite rapide et sinistre du corps.

AUTRE VOIX

J’entends les vivants rire; ils deviendront les morts.

AUTRE VOIX

Alors que feront-ils?

AUTRE VOIX

Rien.

AUTRE VOIX

Tout.

AUTRE VOIX

Passez, nuages.

AUTRE VOIX

Tous vos azurs sont faux.

AUTRE VOIX

Moins faux que vos orages.

AUTRE VOIX

Oui, je te le redis, homme, malheur à toi
Si dans quelque docteur ton ignorance a foi!
Malheur à ton esprit s’il dit comme tant d’autres :

- Je questionnerai les savants, ces apôtres,
Et j’interrogerai les penseurs, ces devins;
J’irai, j’approcherai les instructeurs divins,
Les poëtes dont l’aube éclaire les visages,
Les hommes lumineux du mystère, les sages,
Ces colonnes d’azur du temple de la nuit! -

Sache que nul n’enseigne et que nul ne conduit;
Nul n’est colonne et rien n’est temple; sache encore
Qu’Antisthène, Amphion, Pindare, Stésichore,
Terpandre et Callimaque ont des ailes de plomb;
Qu’Arouet, Kant, Hegel n’en savent pas plus long;
Et que le sphinx qui dit la parole certaine
N’est pas plus dans Ferney qu’il n’était dans Athène.

De tout temps les rêveurs ont fait dans le ciel bleu
Des fouilles du côté de ce qu’ils nomment Dieu;
Ils ont le doute au cœur ou la prière aux lèvres;
Ils ont construit, détruit, et, pour calmer leurs fièvres,
Tristes, ont appuyé leur tête au marbre froid.

Homme, tout ce que l’homme enseigne, pense, croit,
Tout ce qu’il grave, écrit, constate, affirme, sculpte,
De science publique ou de doctrine occulte,
Sur le papier, le bois, l’airain, sur les frontons
Des grands temples obscurs pleins d’âmes à tâtons;
Balaam sur l’Euphrate, Apulée à Madaure,
Tout ce qu’on imagine et tout ce qu’on adore,
Figulus enseignant Cicéron, Érechto
Dont Pompée à genoux lève le noir manteau,
Les prêtres, les rhéteurs drapés dans leurs chlamydes,
Les bibles, les talmuds sacrés, les pyramides,
Le difforme alphabet de pierre du galgal,
Les cylindres de Tyr, les runes de Fingal,
Les papyrus de Thèbe et d’Endor, qu’on adopte
Le texte égyptien ou la version copte,
Vos sages admirés, Épicure, Thalès,

Diogène, Apulée, Érasme, Rabelais,
Platon, que l'idéal laisse boire à son urne,
Kant, Leibnitz, tout cela n'est qu'un souffle nocturne.

Si tu le veux, fais-toi de l'audace un devoir;
Propose-toi ce but redoutable : savoir,
Cette façon splendide et suprême de naître.
Entre dans le nuage insondable; pénètre
Dans l'horreur des Horebs, des Brockens, des Thabors;
Va! mais commence, avant d'en tenter les abords,
Par laisser de côté la sagesse des hommes.

Le peu que nous savons tient au peu que nous sommes;
Écoute. L'homme à peine, avec ou sans appuis,
A creusé l'inconnu qu'il a comblé son puits;
Alors il cherche, alors il rencontre, il dévie,
Se croit mage, ou se fait prêtre.

Passe ta vie
A labourer l'écume et l'onde, n'arrivant
Que pour partir, parmi le tumulte et le vent;
Habite Terre-Neuve, ou Zante, ou Tombelaine;
Sois pêcheur de hareng, sois pêcheur de baleine;
Emplis ton brick solide ou ta barque sans ponts
De traînes, de filets, de dragues, de harpons;
Affronte des écueils les sinistres statures;
Sois forban; sois coureur de flots et d'aventures;
Quand même tu vivrais dix ans, vingt ans, cent ans,
Ayant sous toi le gouffre et sur toi les autans,
Lutteur du risque, et roi d'une planche qui flotte,
Fusses-tu le plus vieux et le plus noir pilote,
Jason sur le dromon, Fulton sur le steamer,
Tu ne connaîtras pas la formidable mer.

Ces choses sans limite où flottent des fumées
Résistant, et toujours béantes, sont fermées;
Le chercheur, tâtonnant dans ce fatal milieu,

Quand il serait Platon, ne connaîtra pas Dieu.

AUTRE VOIX

Prenez garde. Observez l’obscure parallèle.
Le pas s’appuie au pas, l’aile s’appuie à l’aile.
Quoiqu’on retrouve au fond de tout culte la nuit
De l’homme, par qui Dieu trop souvent est construit,
Quoiqu’un dogme, ô penseur, ne soit qu’une masure
En attendant la vie et la vérité pure,
Quoique l’humanité doive porter en soi
La sagesse sereine et non l’aveugle foi,
Quoiqu’une bible, livre à deux sens, atrophie
Et blesse trop souvent l’âme qu’on lui confie,
Quoique, presque toujours, effarant les esprits,
La religion soit une chauve-souris
Faite de vie et d’ombre, et dont l’aile a pour griffes
Les prêtres, les docteurs, les bonzes, les pontifes,
Il faut que l’homme croie à quelque chose; il faut
Qu’à côté de la chair qui le gouverne trop,
Le mystère lui parle et l’exhorte, et l’élève
Du sommeil où l’on dort au sommeil où l’on rêve.
Ah! l’être infortuné qui ne croit pas est nu
Sous le ciel redoutable et lourd, sous l’inconnu!
O vivants! il vous faut des prêtres, quels qu’il soient.
A travers les plus noirs les vérités flamboient;
Il tombe encore un peu de jour sur vos chevets,
Même des plus abjects, même des plus mauvais;
Mais pour verser plus tard sur l’humanité mûre
La parole d’amour que l’avenir murmure,
Le ciel, au-dessus d’eux, sur d’éclatants degrés
Met les voyants directs, les sages inspirés.
Car l’homme fait le prêtre et Dieu seul fait le mage.

Je préfère, ô songeur, le wigwam du sauvage
Où l’homme attend la femme, où du moins on est deux,

Au manitou qui fait, au fond des bois hideux,
Joindre les mains au nègre et les pattes au singe;
Au wigwam le cromlech, au cromlech la syringe;
Aux syringes du Nil le sombre temple hébreu;
Au temple, la mosquée avec son dôme bleu
Et son minaret blanc dans la tiède atmosphère;
Et comme il faut monter sans cesse, je préfère
L'église à la mosquée, à l'église l'azur.
L'homme, être mixte au front sublime, au pied impur,
Va toujours refaisant et transformant ses arches;
Chaque âge avance; on voit, sur chacune des marches
Du sombre esprit humain montant dans l'ombre à Dieu,
Un temple où de l'amour grandit le chaste feu;
Passant d'un ciel plus noir dans un air plus salubre,
De moins en moins cruel, de moins en moins lugubre;
Chaque temple nouveau, grec, juif, égyptien,
A sa base au niveau du faîte de l'ancien;
Sur celui qui s'élève un autre monte encore;
Et le plus haut fronton se dissout dans l'aurore.

AUTRE VOIX

O rêves! vision des vagues paradis!
Crois-tu que l'inconnu soit quelque chose, dis,
Dont ton cerveau chétif puisse se faire idée?
Créature par l'être absolu débordée,
Homme étonné d'un grain germant dans le sillon,
Ébloui d'une pourpre au dos d'un papillon,
Tremblant d'un choc d'écume ou d'un râle d'orfraie,
Déjà ce que tu vois te dépasse et t'effraie,
Pourrais-tu supporter ce que tu ne vois point?
Le gouffre où le réel aux chimères se joint,
L'aspect de l'insondable et de l'inaccessible,
Le côté ténébreux de l'univers terrible,
Flottant dans l'infini, dans la brume perdu,
Et dans on ne sait quoi d'horrible et d'éperdu?

Serais-tu comme Jean, l’homme hagard, capable
De regarder l’obscur, de tâter l’impalpable?
Pourrais-tu contempler avec tes yeux de chair
Les apparitions du rêve et de l’éclair,
Les éclipses, les blocs, les profondeurs, les rides,
Les agitations des surfaces livides,
La stagnation morte et malsaine des eaux,
Les glissements des vers monstrueux du chaos,
Les larves se montrant à demi, les sorties .
De têtes par la vase affreuse appesanties.
Les fléaux s’accouplant parmi les éléments,
L’horreur des suintements et des fourmillements,
Et les êtres sans nom, et les formes immondes,
Et les vagues tumeurs du cloaque des mondes?
Te représentes-tu l’indicible stupeur
De ce qui s’entrevoit dans l’ombre, et se fait peur;
Ici la marche lourde, ailleurs la fuite prompte;
Le double effroi d’en haut, d’en bas, qui se confronte;
Le vent fauve traînant le nuage en haillon;
Le météore ayant horreur du tourbillon?
Connais-tu les deux nuits : la morte et la vivante;
La vivante, engendrant le monstre, l’épouvante,
L’hydre, les dévorant sans fin et les créant;
La morte, c’est-à-dire un vide, le néant,
Une ouverture aveugle et par l’effroi formée,
De l’ombre qui n’est plus même de la fumée,
Le silence hideux et funèbre de Rien?

AUTRE VOIX

Quand on sent se mouvoir l’universel lien
Qui joint le plus petit des atomes à l’être
Le plus démesuré que le gouffre ait vu naître,
Et qui fait, dans l’abîme où rien n’est endormi,
Tressaillir Sirius au poids d’une fourmi,
Quand les germes confus dans les ombres profondes

S’agitent, détruisant et produisant des mondes,
Mêlés aux voix, aux sons, aux chants, aux cris, aux pas,
Faisant et défaisant, et ne le sachant pas,
Quand l’azur semble ému, bien au delà des nues,
Par une éclosion d’étoiles inconnues,
Lorsqu’en soi, stupéfait, on sent et l’on comprend
Quelque chose de fort fait par quelqu’un de grand,
Quand l’eau fuit, quand le sol tremble, quand l’air murmure,
Quand de la forêt sombre il sort un bruit d’armure,
Quand l’oiseau sur son nid, dans les bois frémissants,
Chante un chant dont lui-même il ignore le sens,
L’immensité du fait prodigieux dépasse
L’ombre, le jour, les yeux, les chocs, le temps, l’espace,
Elle est telle, et le point de départ est si loin
Que, tous étant agents, personne n’est témoin.

AUTRE VOIX

Querelles! bruits! rumeurs! cris! morsures! piqûres!
O passages du vent dans les branches obscures!

AUTRE VOIX

Dante écrit deux vers, puis il sort; et les deux vers
Se parlent. Le premier dit : - Les cieux sont ouverts!
Cieux! Je suis immortel. - Moi, je suis périssable,
Dit l’autre. - Je suis l’astre. - Et moi le grain de sable.
- Quoi! tu doutes étant fils d’un enfant du ciel!
- Je me sens mort. - Et moi, je me sens éternel. -
Quelqu’un rentre et relit ces vers, Dante lui-même;
Il garde le premier et barre le deuxième.
La rature est la haute et fatale cloison.
L’un meurt, et l’autre vit. Tous deux avaient raison.

V. Conclusion

As-tu vu méditer les ascètes terribles?
Ils ont tout rejeté, talmuds, korans et bibles.
Ils n’acceptent aucun des védas, comprenant
Que le vrai livre s’ouvre au fond du ciel tonnant,
Et que c’est dans l’azur plein d’astres que flamboie
Le texte éblouissant d’épouvante ou de joie.
Contemplant ce qui n’a ni bord, ni temps, ni lieu,
Absorbés dans la vue effrayante de Dieu,
Farouches, ils sont là, chacun seul dans l’espèce
D’horreur qu’il a choisie au bord de l’ombre épaisse,
Faisant vers l’inconnu toujours le même effort,
L’un dans un vieux tombeau dont il semble le mort,
L’autre, sinistre, assis dans un trou du tonnerre
Au tronc prodigieux d’un cèdre centenaire,
L’autre livide et nu dans un creux de rocher,
Muets, affreux, laissant les bêtes s’approcher,
Pas plus importunés sous leur fauve auréole
D’un tigre qui rugit que d’un oiseau qui vole,
Le désert les a vus à jamais s’accroupir.
Jamais un mouvement et jamais un soupir.
Ont-ils faim? ont-ils soif? Quand luit l’aube embrasée,
Ils ouvrent vaguement leur bouche à la rosée,
Et la rouvrent parfois quand vient le soir hagard.
Si la pensée était saisissable au regard,
On verrait le néant, l’éternité, le monde,
L’énigme plus lugubre encor quand on la sonde,
Tomber de leurs fronts noirs comme l’ombre des ifs;
Ils songent, ni vivants, ni morts, spectres pensifs,
Entre la mort trompée et la vie impossible;
L’été passe; l’hiver vide sur eux son crible;
Ils ne regardent rien que l’obscur firmament,
Et dans des profondeurs d’anéantissement
Ces êtres, abrutis par l’idéal, s’abîment.

Nul ne sait quels courants d’infini les raniment
A mesure que l’homme en eux s’évanouit.
L’ouragan monstrueux leur parlé dans la nuit
Comme le célébrant parle au catéchumène,
Et ces hideux esprits perdent la forme humaine.
L’aigle leur dit un mot à l’oreille en passant;
Ils font signe parfois à l’éclair qui descend;
Ils rêvent, fixes, noirs, guettant l’inaccessible,
L’œil plein de la lueur de l’étoile invisible.

•

Invisible! Ai-je dit invisible? Pourquoi?

•

Il est! Mais nul cri d’homme ou d’ange, nul effroi,
Nul amour, nulle bouche, humble, tendre ou superbe,
Ne peut balbutier distinctement ce verbe!
Il est! il est! il est! il est éperdument!
Tout, les feux, les clartés, les cieux, l’immense aimant,
Les jours, les nuits, tout est le chiffre; il est la somme.
Plénitude pour lui, c’est l’infini pour l’homme.
Faire un dogme, et l’y mettre! ô rêve! inventer Dieu!
Il est! Contentez-vous du monde, cet aveu!
Quoi! des religions, c’est ce que tu veux faire,
Toi, l’homme! ouvrir les yeux suffit; je le préfère.
Contente-toi de croire en Lui; contente-toi
De l’espérance avec sa grande aile, la foi;
Contente-toi de boire, altéré, ce dictame;
Contente-toi de dire : — Il est, puisque la femme
Berce l’enfant avec un chant mystérieux;
Il est, puisque l’esprit frissonne curieux;
Il est, puisque je vais le front haut; puisqu’un maître
Qui n’est pas lui, m’indigne, et n’a pas le droit d’être;
IÎ est, puisque César tremble devant Patmos;

Il est, puisque c’est lui que je sens sous ces mots :
Idéal, Absolu, Devoir, Raison, Science;
Il est, puisqu’à ma faute il faut sa patience,
Puisque l’âme me sert quand l’appétit me nuit,
Puisqu’il faut un grand jour sur ma profonde nuit! -
La pensée en montant vers lui devient géante.
Homme, contente-toi de cette soif béante;
Mais ne dirige pas vers Dieu ta faculté
D’inventer de la peur et de l’iniquité,
Tes catéchismes fous, tes korans, tes grammaires,
Et ton outil sinistre à forger des chimères.
Vis, et fais ta journée; aime et fais ton sommeil.
Vois au-dessus de toi le firmament vermeil;
Regarde en toi ce ciel profond qu’on nomme l’âme;
Dans ce gouffre, au zénith, resplendit une flamme.
Un centre de lumière inaccessible est là.
Hors de toi comme en toi cela brille et brilla;
C’est là-bas, tout au fond, en haut du précipice.
Cette clarté toujours jeune, toujours propice,
Jamais ne s’interrompt et ne pâlit jamais;
Elle sort des noirceurs, elle éclate aux sommets;
La haine est de la nuit, l’ombre est de la colère!
Elle fait cette chose inouïe, elle éclaire.
Tu ne l’éteindrais pas si tu la blasphémais;
Elle inspirait Orphée, elle échauffait Hermès;
Elle est le formidable et tranquille prodige;
L’oiseau l’a dans son nid, l’arbre l’a dans sa tige;
Tout la possède, et rien ne pourrait la saisir;
Elle s’offre immobile à l’éternel désir,
Et toujours se refuse et sans cesse se donne;
C’est l’évidence énorme et simple qui pardonne;
C’est l’inondation des rayons, s’épanchant
En astres dans un ciel, en roses dans un champ;
C’est, ici, là, partout, en haut, en bas, sans trêve,
Hier, aujourd’hui, demain, sur le fait, sur le rêve,
Sur le fourmillement des lueurs et des voix,
Sur tous les horizons de l’abîme à la fois,

Sur le firmament bleu, sur l’ombre inassouvie,
Sur l’être, le déluge immense de la vie!
C’est l’éblouissement auquel le regard croit.
De ce flamboiement naît le vrai, le bien, le droit;
Il luit mystérieux dans un tourbillon d’astres;
Les brumes, les noirceurs, les fléaux, les désastres
Fondent à sa chaleur démesurée, en tout
En sève, en joie, en gloire, en amour, se dissout;
S’il est des cœurs puissants, s’il est des âmes fermes,
Cela vient du torrent des souffles et des germes
Qui tombe à flots, jaillit, coule, et, de toutes parts,
Sort de ce feu vivant sur nos têtes épars.
Il est! il est! Regarde, âme. Il a son solstice,
La Conscience; il a son axe, la Justice;
Il a son équinoxe, et c’est l’Egalité;
Il a sa vaste aurore, et c’est la Liberté.
Son rayon dore en nous ce que l’âme imagine.
Il est! il est! il est! sans fin, sans origine,
Sans éclipse, sans nuit, sans repos, sans sommeil.

Renonce, ver de terre, à créer le soleil.

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LE JARDIN DE HAUTEVILLE HOUSE LE 1 4 JUILLET 1 8 7 0 , AUX PROSCRITS , I
LE JARDIN DE HAUTEVILLE HOUSE LE 1 4 JUILLET 1 8 7 0 , AUX PROSCRITS , II
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LE LIVRE ÉPIQUE

LES STATUES
LES CARIATIDES
L'Arrivée
SOIT. MAIS QUOI QUE CE SOIT QUI RESSEMBLE A LA HAINE

LE LIVRE SATIRIQUE

JE VIS LES QUATRE VENTS PASSER .

Je vis les quatre vents passer — ô vents, leur dis-je,
vents des cieux! Croyez-vous avoir seuls un quadrige?
Autans! Masques hagards, tumultueux démons,
croyez-vous pouvoir seuls aller des mers aux monts?
Croyez-vous seuls pouvoir quitter pour la montagne
les vagues que l’ écume éternelle accompagne,
fuir, puis, d’ un coup de tête effrayant, revenir
à l’ ombre où l’ on entend ces cavales hennir,
et vous en retourner soudain, brusques méduses,
aux cimes dans l’ aurore éclatante diffuses,
et de là crier Gloire! Aux quatre coins du ciel?
Ces allures d’ éclair, ce vol torrentiel,
l’ esprit humain les a comme vous, vents tragiques;
comme vous le printemps, il a ses géorgiques;
il est l’ âcre Archiloque et le Hamlet amer;
il gonfle l’ Iliade ainsi que vous la mer.
L’ homme peut de l’ abîme effarer la prunelle.
L’ âme a comme le ciel quatre souffles en elle;
l’ âme a ses pôles; l’ âme a ses points cardinaux.
Vents! Dragons qui sur nous tordez vos bleus anneaux,
et qui vous dispersez avec tant de furie
depuis le hurlement jusqu’ à la rêverie,
l’ esprit humain n’ est pas moins aquilon que vous.
Comme vous il est vie, amour, joie et courroux.
Ses srtophes ne sont pas plus vite exténuées
dans leur vol à travers l’ azur que vos nuées;
un vers court par-dessus les tours et les remparts
mieux que l’ errante bise aux longs cheveux épars;
et le poëte, ouvrant ses intègres registres,
ne met pas plus de temps que vous, ô vents sinistres,

pour essuyer sa bouche et changer de clairon.
Comme vous sur la peste, il souffle sur Néron;
il parle bas aux saints pensifs au fond des grottes;
il donne une attitude inquiète aux despotes;
la pensée est un aigle à quatre ailes, qui va
du gouffre où Noé flotte à l’ île où Jean rêva;
et chacun de ses grands ailerons, épopée,
Drame, Ode, Iambe ardent, coupe comme l’ épée.
Le génie a sur lui, dans sa guerre aux fléaux,
toute l’ éclaboussure affreuse du chaos,
écume, fange, sang, bave, et pas une tache.
Il est un et divers. L’ idéal se rattache
comme une croix immense aux quatre angles des cieux.
Le grand char de l’ Esprit roule sur quatre essieux.
Notre âme comme vous, ô vents, groupe sonore,
a son nord, son midi, son couchant, son aurore;
car c’ est par la clarté qu’ en ce monde âpre et beau
l’ homme finit, son aube étant dans le tombeau.
Le poëte est pasteur, juge, prophète, apôtre;
en quatre pas, il peut aller d’ un bout à l’ autre
de l’ art sublime, ainsi que vous de l’ horizon;
et comme vous, s’ il est terrible, il a raison;
sa sagesse et la vôtre ont un air de délire.
L’ ombre a tout l’ ouragan, l’ âme a toute la lyre.
H.. -H.. — 3 juin 1870.
1870, 06, 05
je vis Aldebaran dans les cieux. Je lui dis :
— ô toi qui luis! ô toi qui des clairs paradis
ou des hideux enfers portes la torche énorme,
toi seul connais ta loi, je ne vois que ta forme;
car d’ une énigme à l’ autre on ne peut traverser.
Tout est sphinx; quand on voit la comète passer
farouche, et sans qu’ aucun firmament l’ ose exclure,
sait-on ce qu’ elle essuie avec sa chevelure?
Dans cette mer de l’ être où tout sert, où tout nuit,
qu’ es-tu? Fanal peut-être au cap noir de la nuit,
peut-être feu de proue à l’ avant d’ un navire.

La vie autour de toi naît, meurt, flotte, chavire.
Astre! Quand l’ univers naquit, fauve et sacré,
tu ne fus pas le jet le moins démesuré
de ces convulsions terribles et de l’ onde
du chaos frémissant de devenir le monde.
Tu fais partie, ainsi que l’ hydre et l’ alcyon,
du rhythme monstrueux de la création;
tu complètes l’ horreur sidérale, et tu scelles,
comme une strophe ardente et faite d’ étincelles,
l’ immense hymne étoilé qu’ on appelle le ciel.
Pan, le grand Tout fatal ou providentiel,
t’ accepte stupéfait comme on accepte un rêve.
Aldebaran! Clarté de l’ insondable grève,
tu n’ es pas seulement, dans les gouffres vermeils,
un de ces inconnus que nous nommons soleils,
tu n’ as pas seulement, comme le kéroubime,
une face splendide et sombre sur l’ abîme,
ô spectre, ô vision, tu n’ es pas seulement
au fond du ciel sinistre un éblouissement;
ta merveille, c’ est d’ être une roue inouïe
de lumière, à jamais dans l’ ombre épanouie
une apparition d’ éternel tournoiement,
tour à tour perle, onyx, saphir et diamant.
Un effrayant éclair sur toi sans cesse rôde
et te fait de rubis devenir émeraude,
et jadis tu troublais le mage libyen,
monde sur qui se tord un arc-en-ciel! Eh bien,
tu n’ es pas seul à luire sans fin, sans voile!
L’ âme est comme toi, sphère, une quadruple étoile.
Ton prodige est en nous. Astre, nous te l’ offrons.
L’ antique poésie avec ses quatre fronts,
Orphée, Homère, Eschyle et Juvénal, t’ égale.
Quand le soir tombe, à l’ heure où chante la cigale,
ou quand l’ aube sourit aux oiseaux éperdus,
en tous lieux, sur l’ Arno, sur l’ Avon, sur l’ Indus,
la muse, qui connaît nos maux, en fait la somme,
et qui tient cette lampe en main, l’ esprit de l’ homme,

la muse est là, toujours, partout, et n’ est jamais,
même dans l’ hiver triste, absente des sommets.
Tour à tour Calliope, érato, Polymnie
et Némésis, elle est l’ éternelle harmonie
qui, sauvage et joyeuse, allant de l’ antre au nid,
commencée en idylle, en tonnerre finit.
Astre! Elle a son amour, son rire, sa colère,
et son deuil, comme toi ton tourbillon stellaire;
rayon, verbe, elle est douce aux hommes asservis,
donne aux passants, tyrans ou peuples, des avis,
chante pour les bons coeurs, luit pour les coeurs funèbres,
parle, et sur la clarté renseigne les ténèbres;
elle est l’ humanité debout, changée en voix.
Elle ôte les césars de dessus les pavois,
les découronne, et met à leur place l’ idée.
Elle est France, Italie, Hellénie et Chaldée.
Satire, elle flétrit; drame, elle aime; chanson
ou psaume, elle a du sort le lugubre frisson;
épopée, elle peut montrer aux rois tragiques
la tyrannie aveugle et toutes ses logiques,
l’ effrayante moisson des noirs semeurs du mal,
et le carrosse d’ or du sacre triomphal
dans l’ ombre accompagné par l’ invisible roue
d’ un tombereau hideux que le pavé secoue;
elle fait, sur ce globe où pleure Adam banni,
la même fonction que toi dans l’ infini;
et quoique, fixe et calme au fond du ciel immense,
tu ramènes au but la comète en démence
et remettes l’ étoile errante en son chemin,
tu n’ es pas lumineux plus que l’ esprit humain
qui montre Dieu, l’ enfer, les bonheurs, les désastres,
ô phare à feux tournants de l’ océan des astres!
H.. -H.. — 5 juin.

1855, 03, 12

LE SIECLE , IINDE IRAE .

tout frissonnant d’ amour, d’ extases, de splendeurs,
l’ hymne universel chante au fond des profondeurs
avec toutes les fleurs et toutes les étoiles;
il chante Dieu rêvant sous les flamboyants voiles;
il chante; il est superbe, éclatant, triomphant,
doux comme un nid d’ oiseau dans la main d’ un enfant;
il enivre l’ azur, il éblouit l’ espace;
il adore et bénit. Tout à coup Satan passe,
l’ être immonde qui cherche à tout prostituer,
et l’ hymne en le voyant se met à le huer.
Il le lapide avec sa joie interrompue;
ce qui bénissait mord; ce qui louait conspue;
le tonnerre indigné gronde dans l’ hosanna;
le pilori se dresse au sommet du Sina;
chaque strophe du chant de gloire et d’ harmonie
prend forme, se fait homme, est prophète, est génie,
et devient le bourreau splendide du méchant.
De là naît Isaïe, âme à double tranchant,
de là naissent les grands vengeurs, les rêveurs fauves,
les pâles Juvénals, terreur des Césars chauves,
et ce Dante effrayant devant qui tout s’ enfuit,
fait d’ une ombre qu’ on sent de marbre dans la nuit.
12 mars 1855.

1856, 06, 17

LE SIECLE , II

lorsque j’ étais encore un tout jeune homme pâle,
et que j’ allais entrer dans la lice fatale,
sombre arène où plus d’ un avant moi se perdit,
l’ âpre Muse aux regards mystérieux m’ a dit :
— tu pars; mais quand le Cid se mettait en campagne
pour son Dieu, pour son droit et pour sa chère Espagne,
il était bien armé; ce vaillant Cid avait
deux casques, deux estocs, sa lance de chevet,
deux boucliers; il faut des armes de rechange;
puis il tirait l’ épée et devenait archange.
As-tu ta dague au flanc? Voyons, soldat martyr,
quelle armure vas-tu choisir et revêtir?
Quels glaives va-t-on voir luire à ton bras robuste?
— j’ ai la haine du mal et j’ ai l’ amour du juste,
Muse; et je suis armé mieux que le paladin.
— et tes deux boucliers? — j’ ai mépris et dédain.
17 juin 1856.

1854, 02, 17

LE SIECLE , III

ô sainte horreur du mal! Devoir funèbre! ô haine!
Quand Virgile suspend la chèvre au blanc troëne;
quand Lucrèce revêt de feuilles l’ homme nu;
quand Ennius compare au satyre cornu
le bouc passant sa tête à travers la broussaille
qui fait qu’ Europe au bain se détourne et tressaille;
quand Moschus chante Enna; quand Horace gaîment
suit Canidie, et fait, sur le chaudron fumant
où l’ horreur de la lune et des tombeaux s’ infiltre,
éternuer Priape à l’ âcre odeur du philtre;
quand Plaute bat Davus ou raille Amphitryon,
le ciel bleu dans un coin brille et jette un rayon
sur la baigneuse émue ou la chèvre qui grimpe,
et l’ on entend au fond rire l’ immense Olympe.
Mais tout azur s’ éclipse où passent les vengeurs.
Les soupiraux d’ en bas teignent de leurs rougeurs
le mur sinistre auquel s’ adosse Jérémie.
Les punisseurs sont noirs. Leur pâle et grave amie,
la Mort, leur met la main sur l’ épaule, et leur dit :
— Esprit, ne laisse pas échapper ton bandit.
Car ce sont eux qui, seuls, justiciers des abîmes,
terrassent à jamais les monstres et les crimes;
car ils sont les géants des châtiments de Dieu;
car, sur des écriteaux d’ acier en mots de feu,
du tonnerre escortés, ces hommes formidables
transcrivent de là-haut les arrêts insondables;
car ils mettent Achab et Tibère au poteau;
car l’ un porte l’ éclair, l’ autre tient le marteau;
ils marchent, affichant des sentences que l’ homme
lit effaré, sur Tyr, sur Ninive, sur Rome,
et, sombres, à travers les siècles effrayés,
vont, et ces foudroyants traînent leurs foudroyés.

Isaïe, accoudé sur Babylone athée,

songe; Eschyle, vengeur et fils de Prométhée,
cloue au drame d’ airain le tyran Jupiter;
Shakspeare mène en laisse Henri huit; et Luther
fouette les Borgia mêlés aux Louis onze;
Tacite dans la nuit pose son pied de bronze
sur les douze dragons qu’ on appelle césars;
Daniel va, suivi des blêmes Balthazars;
Machiavel pensif garde la bête prince;
Milton veille au guichet du cachot, gouffre où grince
le pandaemonium de tous les satans rois;
Juvénal tire et traîne à travers les effrois
la stryge au double front que son vers a tuée,
qui gronde impératrice et rit prostituée;
et Dante tient le bout de la chaîne de fer
que Judas rêveur mord dans l’ ombre de l’ enfer.
17 février 1854.

1870, 04, 6

LE SIECLE , IV ECLIPSE .

la terre par moments doute; on ne comprend plus.
L’ homme a devant les yeux de la brume, un reflux,
on ne sait quoi de pâle et de crépusculaire;
on n’ a plus d’ allégresse, on n’ a plus de colère;
la disparition produit l’ effarement.
L’ oeil fauve du hibou regarde affreusement.
Toutes sortes d’ éclairs inexplicables brillent.
L’ autel penche, et les vers du sépulcre y fourmillent.
Tout se mêle; Irmensul ressemble à Jéhovah;
le sage stupéfait balbutie et s’ en va;
le mal semble identique au bien dans la pénombre;
on ne voit que le pied de l’ échelle du Nombre
et l’ on n’ ose monter vers l’ obscur infini.
Dodone vaguement parle à Gethsémani,
l’ Oeta fume non loin du Sinaï qui tonne;
on fouille, on rêve, on nie, on querelle, on s’ étonne;
des aveugles entr’ eux se montrent le chemin;
le divin ciel a tort devant l’ esprit humain;
le penseur est croyant, le savant est athée;
la conscience écoute, essaye, et, déroutée,
prend le faux pour le vrai dans ces tâtonnements.
Où l’ un voit des védas, l’ autre voit des romans.
Les choses qu’ on nommait vertus perdent leurs formes.
Les monstruosités font des ombres énormes
jusque sur l’ âme humaine et sur le firmament.
Plus d’ honneur, plus de foi, plus rien, plus de serment.
On voit encor la cime, on ne voit plus le phare.
Une lueur de torche empourpre la tiare.
On cherche à voir, on rôde, on va, le cou tendu.
L’ amour au fond des coeurs bat de l’ aile éperdu
comme s’ il n’ était plus en sûreté dans l’ homme.
La route est noire; on crie, on s’ appelle, on se nomme.

Qui donc est là? Parlez. On tâte son voisin.
La foule éparse flotte avec un bruit d’ essaim;
on se touche, on se voit, mais on n’ est plus ensemble.
Le mal est empereur, la nuit est reine. On tremble.
Un trône d’ ombre est là. Les misérables font
des groupes effrayants dans l’ abîme profond;
on croit voir des glaçons que les gouffres charrient;
tout est confus et blême; et les ténèbres rient.
Le fond du ciel est trouble, horrible et pluvieux;
et le petit enfant qui passe paraît vieux.
Il semble que la vie éternelle décroisse.
L’ âme alors est sinistre, et voit avec angoisse
ces occultations redoutables de Dieu.
Naît-on? Meurt-on? Quel est le temps? Quel est le lieu?
Les peuples sont hagards; ces brins d’ herbe frissonnent;
on entend des tocsins et des clairons qui sonnent;
le vent est lourd, l’ espace est froid, le globe est nu;
le démon souriant dit : je suis méconnu.
6 mai 1870.

1870, 04, 26

LE SIECLE , V

la satire à présent, chant où se mêle un cri,
bouche de fer d’ où sort un sanglot attendri,
n’ est plus ce qu’ elle était jadis dans notre enfance,
quand on nous conduisait, écoliers sans défense,
à la Sorbonne, endroit revêche et mauvais lieu,
et que, devant nous tous qui l’ écoutions fort peu,
dévidant sa leçon et filant sa quenouille,
le petit Andrieux, à face de grenouille,
mordait Shakspeare, Hamlet, Macbeth, Lear, Othello,
avec ses fausses dents prises au vieux Boileau.
La vie est, en ce siècle inquiet, devenue
pas à pas grave et morne, et la vérité nue
appelle la pensée à son secours depuis
qu’ on l’ a murée avec le mensonge en son puits.
Après Jean-Jacque, après Danton, le sort ramène
le lourd pas de la nuit sur la triste âme humaine;
Droit et Devoir sont là gisants, la plaie au flanc;
le lâche soleil rit au noir dragon sifflant;
l’ homme jette à la mer l’ honneur, vieille boussole;
en léchant le vainqueur le vaincu se console;
toute l’ histoire tient dans ce mot : réussir;
le succès est sultan et le meurtre est visir;
hélas, la vieille ivresse affreuse de la honte
reparaît dans les yeux et sur les fronts remonte,
trinque avec les tyrans, et le peuple fourbu
reboit ce sombre vin dont il a déjà bu.
C’ est pourquoi la satire est sévère. Elle ignore
cette grandeur des rois qui fit Boileau sonore,
et ne se souvient d’ eux que pour les souffleter.
L’ échafaud qu’ il faut pièce à pièce démonter,
l’ infâme loi de sang qui résiste aux ratures,
qui garde les billots en lâchant les tortures,

et dont il faut couper tous les ongles; l’ enfant
que l’ ignorance tient dans son poing étouffant
et qui doit, libre oiseau, dans l’ aube ouvrir ses ailes;
relever tour à tour ces sombres sentinelles,
le mal, le préjugé, l’ erreur, monstre romain,
qui gardent le cachot où dort l’ esprit humain;
la guerre et ses vautours, la peste avec ses mouches,
à chasser; les bâillons qu’ il faut ôter des bouches;
la parole à donner à toutes les douleurs;
l’ éclosion d’ un jour nouveau sur l’ homme en fleurs;
tel est le but, tel est le devoir, qui complique
sa colère, et la fait d’ utilité publique.
Pour enseigner à tous la vertu, l’ équité,
la raison, il suffit que la Réalité,
pure et sereine, monte à l’ horizon et fasse
évanouir l’ horreur des nuits devant sa face.
Honte, gloire, grandeurs, vices, beautés, défauts,
plaine et monts, sont mêlés tant qu’ il fait nuit; le faux
fait semblant d’ être honnête en l’ obscurité louche.
Qu’ est-ce que le rayon? Une pierre de touche.
La lumière de tout ici-bas fait l’ essai.
Le juste est sur la terre éclairé par le vrai;
le juste c’ est la cime et le vrai c’ est l’ aurore.
Donc Lumière, Raison, Vérité, plus encore,
Bonté dans le courroux et suprême Pitié,
le méchant pardonné, mais le mal châtié,
voilà ce qu’ aujourd’ hui, comme aux vieux temps de Rome,
la satire implacable et tendre doit à l’ homme.
Marquis ou médecins, une caste, un métier,
ce n’ est plus là son champ; il lui faut l’ homme entier.
Elle poursuit l’ infâme et non le ridicule.
Un petit Augias veut un petit Hercule,
et le bon Despréaux malin fit ce qu’ il put.
Elle n’ a plus affaire à l’ ancien Lilliput.
Elle vole, à travers l’ ombre et les catastrophes,
grande et pâle, au milieu d’ un ouragan de strophes;
elle crie à sa meute effrayante : — courons!

Quand un vil parvenu, marchant sur tous les fronts,
écrase un peuple avec des pieds jadis sans bottes.
Elle donne à ses chiens ailés tous les depotes,
tous les monstres, géants et nains, à dévorer.
Elle apparaît aux czars pour les désespérer.
On entend dans son vers craquer les os du tigre.
De même que l’ oiseau vers le printemps émigre,
elle s’ en va toujours du côté de l’ honneur.
L’ ange de Josaphat, le spectre d’ Elseneur
sont ses amis, et, sage, elle semble en démence,
tant sa clameur profonde emplit le ciel immense.
Il lui faut, pour gronder et planer largement,
tout le peuple sous elle, âpre, vaste, écumant;
ce n’ est que sur la mer que le vent est à l’ aise.
Quand Colomb part, elle est debout sur la falaise;
elle t’ aime, ô Barbès! Et suit d’ un long vivat
Fulton, Garibaldi, Byron, John Brown et Watt,
et toi Socrate, et toi Jésus, et toi Voltaire!
Elle fait, quand un mort glorieux est sous terre,
sortir un vert laurier de son tombeau dormant;
elle ne permet pas qu’ il pourrisse autrement.
Elle panse à genoux les vaincus vénérables,
bénit les maudits, baise au front les misérables,
lutte, et, sans daigner même un instant y songer,
se sent par des valets derrière elle juger;
car, sous les règnes vils et traîtres, c’ est un crime
de ne pas rire à l’ heure où râle la victime
et d’ aimer les captifs à travers leurs barreaux;
et qui pleure les morts offense les bourreaux.
Est-elle triste? Non, car elle est formidable.
Puisqu’ auprès des tombeaux les vainqueurs sont à table,
puisqu’ on est satisfait dans l’ opprobre, et qu’ on a
l’ impudeur d’ être lâche avec un hosanna,
puisqu’ on chante et qu’ on danse en dévorant les proies,
elle vient à la fête elle aussi. Dans ces joies,
dans ces contentements énormes, dans ces jeux
à force de triomphe et d’ ivresse orageux,

dans ces banquets mêlant Paphos, Clamart et Gnide,
elle apporte, sinistre, un rire d’ euménide.
Mais son immense effort, c’ est la vie. Elle veut
chasser la mort, bannir la nuit, rompre le noeud,
dût-elle rudoyer le titan populaire.
Comme elle a plus d’ amour, elle a plus de colère.
Quoi! L’ abdication serait un oreiller!
La conscience humaine est lente à s’ éveiller;
l’ honneur laisse son feu pâlir, tomber, descendre
sous l’ épaississement lugubre de la cendre.
Aussi la Némésis chantante qui bondit
et frappe, et devant qui Tibère est interdit,
la déesse du grand Juvénal, l’ âpre muse,
Hébé par la beauté, par la terreur Méduse,
qui sema dans la nuit ce que Dante y trouva,
et que Job croyait voir parler à Jéhovah,
se sent-elle encor plus de fureur magnanime
pour réveiller l’ oubli que pour punir le crime.
Elle approche du peuple et, guettant la rumeur,
penche l’ ïambe amer sur l’ immense dormeur;
la strophe alors frissonne en son tragique zèle,
et s’ empourpre en tâchant de tirer l’ étincelle
de toute cette morne et fatale langueur,
et le vers irrité devient une lueur.
Ainsi rougit dans l’ ombre une face farouche
qui vient sur un tison souffler à pleine bouche.
26 avril 1870.

1853, 11, 17

l’ habit râpé.
Vivent les bas de soie et les souliers vernis!
La chaise dépaillée.
Dieu dit aux bons fauteuils : fauteuils, je vous bénis!
Le poêle froid.
Comme un grand feu qui flambe et pétille en décembre
vous illumine l’ âme en empourprant la chambre!
Le verre plein d’ eau.
Ma foi, j’ aime le vin.
La soucoupe pleine de poussière.
Moi, j’ aime le café.
L’ écuelle de bois.
C’ est charmant de crier : garçon! Perdreau truffé,
Bordeaux retour de l’ Inde, et saumon sauce aux huîtres!
Le carreau cassé.
Une fenêtre est belle alors qu’ elle a des vitres.
Le gousset vide.
Que l’ usurier hideux, poussif, auquel tu dois,
agite un vieux billet de banque en ses vieux doigts,
fût-il gris comme un chantre et crasseux comme un diacre,
Vénus vient toute nue en sa conque de nacre.
Le lit de sangle.
Un édredon, c’ est doux.
L’ écritoire.
Arétin, plein d’ esprit,
vit content; sous ses pieds il a quand il écrit
un charmant tapis turc qui réchauffe sa prose.
Le trou de la serrure.
J’ estime une portière épaisse, et, verte ou rose,
laissant voir, dans les plis du satin ouaté,
un mandarin qui prend une tasse de thé.
Un papier timbré.

Verrès est riche et grand; devant lui nul ne bouge.
Le miroir fêlé.
Sur un frac brodé d’ or j’ aime un beau cordon rouge.
L’ escabeau boiteux.
Quel bonheur de courir à la croix de Berny
sur quelque ardent cheval plein d’ un souffle infini,
démon aux crins épars né des vents de l’ Ukraine!
La semelle percée.
Quelle joie! En hiver, rouler au Cours-la-Reine,
quand le soleil dissout les brouillards pluvieux,
dans un landau qui fait blêmir les envieux!
Le plafond troué.
Et, tandis qu’ au dehors siffle le vent féroce,
contempler, à travers les glaces du carrosse,
le ciel bleu, rayonnant d’ une douce clarté!
Le ciel bleu.
Paix! Comptez vous pour rien cette sérénité
de marcher le front haut, et de se dire : en somme,
je mange du pain noir, mais je suis honnête homme!
17 novembre 1853.

LE SIECLE , VII LE SOUTIEN DES EMPIRES .

Puisque ce monde existe, il sied qu’ on le tolère.
Sachons considérer les êtres sans colère.
Cet homme est le bourgeois du siècle où nous vivons.
Autrefois il vendait des suifs et des savons,
maintenant il est riche; il a prés, bois, vignobles.
Il déteste le peuple, il n’ aime pas les nobles;
étant fils d’ un portier, il trouve en ce temps-ci
inutile qu’ on soit fils des Montmorency.
Il est sévère. Il est vertueux. Il est membre,
ayant de bons tapis sous les pieds en décembre,
du grand parti de l’ ordre et des honnêtes gens.
Il hait les amoureux et les intelligents;
il fait un peu l’ aumône, il fait un peu l’ usure;
il dit du progrès saint, de la liberté pure,
du droit des nations : je ne veux pas de ça!
Il a ce gros bon sens du cher Sancho Pança
qui laisserait mourir à l’ hôpital Cervantes;
il admire Boileau, caresse les servantes,
et crie, après avoir chiffonné Jeanneton,
à l’ immoralité du roman feuilleton.
à la messe où sans faute il va chaque dimanche,
il porte sous son bras Jésus doré sur tranche,
la crèche, le calvaire et le Dies illa.
— non qu’ entre nous je croie à ces bêtises-là,
nous dit-il. — s’ il y va, cela tient à sa gloire,
c’ est que le peuple vil croira, le voyant croire,
c’ est qu’ il faut abrutir ces gens, car ils ont faim,
c’ est qu’ un bon Dieu quelconque est nécessaire enfin.
Là-dessus, rangez-vous, le suisse frappe, il entre,
il étale au banc d’ oeuvre un majestueux ventre,
fier de sentir qu’ il prend, dans sa dévotion,
le peuple en laisse et Dieu sous sa protection.

LE SIECLE , VIII ECRIT SUR LA PREMIERE PAGE D’ UN LIVRE DE JOSEPH DE MAISTRE .

Cathédrale monstre! Bâtie
contre le droit et le devoir!
Plan incliné. La sacristie,
glissante, devient l’ abattoir.
Ici les cierges, là les torches.
Dans ce temple, à deux fins construit,
on juxtapose les deux porches
de la lumière et de la nuit.
Fausse lumière et nuit réelle.
L’ ombre de Rome sur Paris.
Une aigle ayant au bout de l’ aile
des ongles de chauve-souris.
Une logique épouvantable
invente, ô peuple sans vengeurs,
un Reims étrange à double table
où sont assis tes deux mangeurs.
Les deux noirs êtres qui te rongent,
le magnifique et le hideux,
boivent ton sang ensemble, et songent,
avec leur prêtre à côté d’ eux.
Double chapelle, et double apôtre.
Bonald en l’ une, altier zéro,
couronne le prince, et, dans l’ autre,
de Maistre sacre le bourreau.
L’ horreur à l’ empire est mêlée.
On a sur le trône étalé
une pourpre coagulée
qui de l’ échafaud a coulé.
Un homme règne, un homme fauche;

soit. J’ ai toujours cru qu’ on verrait
se marier de la main gauche
l’ épée avec le couperet.

1851, 07

LE SIECLE , IX SE LAISSER CALOMNIER

quoi, frère, tu frémis parce qu’ on te déchire!
Tu ne connais donc pas la force du sourire!
Quand tu te vois honni, hué, sifflé, raillé,
par des faquins à l’ âme obscure, au nom souillé,
qui firent cent métiers et jouèrent cent rôles,
tu prends trop de souci des choses que ces drôles
disent de toi. Ton front s’ assombrit; tu t’ émeus
des sottises d’ un tas de cuistres venimeux.
Regarde-moi. — je suis seul, debout, sur la scène,
on m’ insulte, je ris de leur rage malsaine
et je vais! Car mon coeur dans cet âpre chemin
sent aujourd’ hui l’ honneur et la gloire demain.
Paris, juillet 1851.

1849, 08, 07

LE SIECLE , X A UN HOMME FINI .

tu savais bien qu’ un jour il faudroit choir enfin,
mais tu n’ imaginais ni Séjan, ni Rufin.
Tu te croyais de ceux que la haine publique
frappe furtivement d’ un coup de foudre oblique;
tu t’ étais figuré qu’ on te renverserait
sans te faire de mal, doucement, en secret,
avec précaution, sans bruit, à la nuit close,
et priant un ami de te dire la chose,
ainsi qu’ on pose à terre un vase précieux;
tu t’ étais fait d’ avance, au loin, sous de beaux cieux,
dans ton palais, plus fier que la villa Farnèse,
un lit voluptueux pour tomber à ton aise.
Point. C’ est en plein midi que le peuple a tonné.
L’ horizon était bleu, l’ éclair l’ a sillonné.
Le tonnerre, au grand jour, au milieu de la foule,
est tombé sur ton front comme un plafond qui croule,
et ceux qui t’ ont vu mettre en poudre en un moment
se sont épouvantés de cet écrasement.
Et les sages ont dit, te regardant par terre,
que les temps sont mauvais, que le pouvoir s’ altère
quand un gueux, un gredin, un faquin, un maraud,
fait pour ramper si bas, peut tomber de si haut.
6-7 août 1849.

LE SIECLE , XI A ...

Je me disais : — cet homme est-il un saltimbanque?
Ne faut-il pas le plaindre? Est-ce un sens qui lui manque?
Il ne comprend donc pas? Est-ce un aveugle-né?
Un bègue? Un sourd? D’ où vient que ce triste obstiné
méconnaît tout génie et toute gloire, et rampe,
tâchant d’ éteindre l’ astre et de souffler la lampe,
et déchire, dénigre, insulte, blesse, nuit,
et sur toute clarté va bavant de la nuit? —
maintenant je t’ ai vu de près, ô misérable;
j’ ai vu ton oeil, ton dos, ton échine, ton râble,
ton crâne plat, ton ventre odieux; et du doigt
Asmodée a levé le plafond de ton toit;
je t’ ai vu te traîner, ivre et triste; et, farouche,
arracher en jouant les ailes d’ une mouche.
J’ ai vu ton rire, hélas! Je n’ ai pas vu tes pleurs.
Je t’ ai vu haïr l’ aube, et marcher sur les fleurs,
et sans cesse écraser la vie à ton passage;
et battre les enfants, et cracher au visage
de cette fille à qui tu donnes quinze sous;
j’ ai vu tes vêtements dans l’ ordure dissous;
j’ ai vu ton coeur sans Dieu, ta chambre sans cuvette;
je t’ ai vu t’ irriter au chant d’ une fauvette,
toujours plisser le front, toujours crisper le poing;
et j’ ai compris pourquoi tu ne comprenais point.
20 mai.

LE SIECLE , XIIANIMA VILIS .

à force d’ insulter les vaillants et les justes,
à force de flatter les trahisons augustes,
à force d’ être abject et d’ ajuster des tas
de sophismes hideux aux plus noirs attentats,
cet homme espère atteindre aux grandeurs; il s’ essouffle
à passer scélérat, lui qui n’ est que maroufle.
Ce pédagogue aspire au grade de coquin.
Ce rhéteur, ver de terre et de lettres, pasquin
qui s’ acharne sur nous et dont toujours nous rîmes,
tâche d’ être promu complice des grands crimes.
Il raillait l’ art, et c’ est tout simple en vérité,
la laideur est aveugle et sourde à la beauté.
Mais être un idiot ne peut plus lui suffire,
il est jaloux du tigre à qui la peur dit : Sire!
Il veut être aussi lui sénateur des forêts;
il veut avoir, ainsi que Montluc ou Verrès,
sa caverne ou sa cage avec grilles et trappes
dans la ménagerie énorme des satrapes.
Ah çà, tu perds ton temps et ta peine, grimaud!
Aliboron n’ est pas aisément Béhémoth;
le burlesque n’ est pas facilement sinistre;
fusses-tu meurtrier, tu demeurerais cuistre.
Quand ces êtres sanglants qu’ il te plaît d’ envier,
Mammons que hait Tacite et qu’ admire Cuvier,
sont là, brigands et dieux, on n’ entre pas d’ emblée
dans leur épouvantable et royale assemblée.
Devenir historique! Impossible pour toi.
Sortir du mépris simple et compter dans l’ effroi,
toi, jamais! Ton front bas exclut ce noir panache.
Ton sort est d’ être, jeune, inepte; et, vieux, ganache.
Vers l’ avancement vrai tu n’ as point fait un pas;
tu te gonfles, crapaud, mais tu n’ augmentes pas;

si Myrmidon croissait, ce serait du désordre;
tu parviens à ramper sans parvenir à mordre.
La nature n’ a pas de force à dépenser
pour te faire grandir et te faire pousser.
Quoi donc! N’ est-elle point l’ impassible nature?
Parce que des têtards, nourris de pourriture,
souhaitent devenir dragons et caïmans,
elle consentirait à ces grossissements!
Le ver serait boa! L’ huître deviendrait l’ hydre!
Locuste empoisonnait le vin, et non le cidre;
l’ enfer fit Arétin terrible, et non Brusquet.
Un avorton ne peut qu’ avorter. Le roquet
s’ efforce d’ être loup, mais il s’ arrête en route.
Le ciel mystérieux fait des guépards sans doute,
de fiers lions bandits, pires que les démons,
des éléphants, des ours; mais il livre les monts,
les antres et les bois à leur majesté morne!
Mais il lui faut l’ espace et les sables sans borne
et l’ immense désert pour les démuseler!
Le chat qui veut rugir ne peut que miauler;
en vain il copierait le grand jaguar lyrique
errant sur la falaise au bord des mers d’ Afrique,
et la panthère horrible, et le lynx moucheté;
Dieu ne fait pas monter jusqu’ à la dignité
de crime, de furie et de scélératesse,
cette méchanceté faite de petitesse.
Les montagnes, pignons et murs de granit noir
d’ où tombent les torrents affreux, riraient de voir
ce preneur de souris rôder sur leur gouttière.
Un nain ne devient pas géant au vestiaire.
Pour être un dangereux et puissant animal,
il faut qu’ un grand rayon tombe sur vous; le mal
n’ arrive pas toujours à sa hideuse gloire.
Dieu tolère, c’ est vrai, la création noire,
mais d’ aussi plats que toi ne sont pas exaucés.
Tu ne parviendras pas, drôle, à t’ enfler assez
pour être un python vaste et sombre au fond des fanges;

tu n’ égaleras point ces reptiles étranges
dont l’ oeil aux soupiraux de l’ enfer est pareil.
Tu demeureras laid, faible et mou. Le soleil
dédaigne le lézard, candidat crocodile.
Sois un coeur monstrueux, mais reste une âme vile.

1854, 11, 22

donc, vieux passé plaintif, toujours tu reviendras
nous criant : — pourquoi donc est-on si loin? Ingrats!
Qu’ êtes-vous devenus? Dites, avec l’ abîme
quel pacte avez-vous fait? Quel attentat? Quel crime? —
nous questionnant, sombre et de rage écumant,
furieux. Nous avons marché, tout bonnement.
Qui marche t’ assassine, ô bon vieux passé blême.
Mais que veux-tu? Je suis de mon siècle, et je l’ aime!
Je te l’ ai déjà dit. Non, ce n’ est plus du tout
l’ époque où la nature était de mauvais goût,
où Bouhours, vieux jésuite, et Le Batteux, vieux cancre,
lunette au nez et plume au poing, barbouillaient d’ encre
le cygne au bec doré, le bois vert, le ciel bleu;
où l’ homme corrigeait le manuscrit de Dieu.
Non, ce n’ est plus le temps où Lenôtre à Versaille
raturait le buisson, la ronce, la broussaille;
siècle où l’ on ne voyait dans les champs éperdus
que des hommes poudrés sous des arbres tondus.
Tout est en liberté maintenant. Sur sa nuque
l’ arbre a plus de cheveux, l’ homme a moins de perruque.
La vieile idée est morte avec le vieux cerveau.
La révolution est un monde nouveau.
Notre oreille en changeant a changé la musique.
Lorsque Fernand Cortez arriva du Mexique,
il revint la main pleine, et, du jeune univers,
il rapporta de l’ or; nous rapportons des vers.
Nous rapportons des chants mystérieux. Nous sommes
d’ autres yeux, d’ autres fronts, d’ autres coeurs, d’ autres hommes.
Braves pédants, calmez votre bon vieux courroux.
Nous arrachons de l’ âme humaine les verrous.
Tous frères, et mêlés dans les monts, dans les plaines,
nous laissons librement s’ en aller nos haleines

à travers les grands bois et les bleus firmaments.
Nous avons démoli les vieux compartiments.
Non, nous ne sommes plus ni paysan, ni noble,
ni lourdaud dans son pré, ni rustre en son vignoble,
ni baron dans sa tour, ni reître à ses canons;
nous brisons cette écorce, et nous redevenons
l’ homme; l’ homme enfin hors des temps crépusculaires;
l’ homme égal à lui-même en tous ses exemplaires;
ni tyran, ni forçat, ni maître, ni valet;
l’ humanité se montre enfin telle qu’ elle est,
chaque matin plus libre et chaque soir plus sage;
et le vieux masque usé laisse voir le visage.
Avec ézéchiel nous mêlons Spinosa.
La nature nous prend, la nature nous a;
dans son antre profond, douce, elle nous attire;
elle en chasse pour nous son antique satyre,
et nous y montre un sphinx nouveau qui dit : pensez.
Pour nous les petits cris au fond des nids poussés,
sont augustes; pour nous toutes les monarchies
que vous saluez, vous, de vos têtes blanchies,
tous les fauteuils royaux aux dossiers empourprés,
sont peu de chose auprès d’ un liseron des prés.
Régner! Cela vaut-il rêver sous un vieux aulne?
Nous regardons passer Charles-Quint sur son trône,
Jules deux sous son dais, César dans les clairons,
et nous avons pitié lorsque nous comparons
à l’ aurore des cieux cette fausse dorure.
Lorsque nous contemplons, par une déchirure
des nuages, l’ oiseau volant dans sa fierté,
nous sentons frissonner notre aile, ô liberté!
En fait d’ or, à la cour nous préférons la gerbe.
La nature est pour nous l’ unique et sacré verbe,
et notre art poétique ignore Despréaux.
Nos rois très excellents, très puissants et très hauts,
c’ est le roc dans les flots, c’ est dans les bois le chêne.
Mai, qui brise l’ hiver, c’ est-à-dire la chaîne,
nous plaît. Le vrai nous tient. Je suis parfois tenté

de dire au mont Blanc : — Sire! Et : — votre majesté
à la vierge qui passe et porte, agreste et belle,
sa cruche sur son front et Dieu dans sa prunelle.
Pour nous, songeurs, bandits, romantiques, démons,
bonnets rouges, les flots grondants, l’ aigle, les monts,
la bise, quand le soir ouvre son noir portique,
la tempête effarant l’ onde apocalyptique,
dépassent en musique, en mystère, en effroi,
les quatre violons de la chambre du roi.
Chaque siècle, il s’ y faut résigner, suit sa route.
Les hommes d’ autrefois ont été grands sans doute;
nous ne nous tournons plus vers les mêmes clartés.
Jadis, frisure au front, ayant à ses côtés
un tas d’ abbés sans bure et de femmes sans guimpes,
parmi des princes dieux, sous des plafonds olympes,
prêt dans son justaucorps à poser pour Audran,
la dentelle au cou, grave, et l’ oeil sur un cadran,
dans le salon de Mars ou dans la galerie
d’ Apollon, submergé dans la grand’ seigneurie,
dans le flot des Rohan, des Sourdis, des Elbeuf,
et des fiers habits d’ or roulant vers l’ Oeil-de-boeuf,
le poëte, fût-il Corneille, ou toi, Molière,
— tandis qu’ en la chapelle ou bien dans la volière,
les chanteurs accordaient le théorbe et le luth,
et que Lulli tremblant s’ écriait : gare à l’ ut! —
attendait qu’ au milieu de la claire fanfare
et des fronts inclinés apparût, comme un phare,
le page, aux tonnelets de brocart d’ argent fin,
qui portait le bougeoir de monsieur le dauphin.
Aujourd’ hui, pour Versaille et pour salon d’ Hercule,
ayant l’ ombre et l’ airain du rouge crépuscule,
fauve, et peu coudoyé de Guiche ou de Brissac,
la face au vent, les poings dans un paletot sac,
seul, dans l’ immensité que l’ ouragan secoue,
il écoute le bruit que fait la sombre proue
de la terre, et pensif, sur le blême horizon,
à l’ heure où, dans l’ orchestre inquiet du buisson,

de l’ arbre et de la source, un frémissement passe,
où le chêne chuchote et prend sa contrebasse,
l’ eau sa flûte et le vent son stradivarius,
il regarde monter l’ effrayant Sirius.
Pour la muse en paniers, par Dorat réchauffée,
c’ est un orang-outang; pour les bois, c’ est Orphée.
La nature lui dit : mon fils. Ce malotru,
ô grand siècle! écrit mieux qu’ Ablancourt et Patru.
Est-il féroce? Non. Ce troglodyte affable
à l’ ormeau du chemin fait réciter sa fable;
il dit au doux chevreau : bien bêlé, mon enfant!
Quand la fleur, le matin, de perles se coiffant,
se mire aux flots, coquette et mijaurée exquise,
il passe et dit : bonjour, madame la marquise.
Et puis il souffre, il pleure, il est homme; le sort
en rayons douloureux de son front triste sort.
Car, ici-bas, si fort qu’ on soit, si peu qu’ on vaille,
tous, qui que nous soyons, le destin nous travaille
pour orner dans l’ azur la tiare de Dieu.
Le même bras nous fait passer au même feu;
et, sur l’ humanité, qu’ il use de sa lime,
essayant tous les coeurs à sa meule sublime,
scrutant tous les défauts de l’ homme transparent,
sombre ouvrier du ciel, noir orfèvre, tirant
du sage une étincelle et du juste une flamme,
se penche le malheur, lapidaire de l’ âme.
Oui, tel est le poëte aujourd’ hui. Grands, petits,
tous dans Pan effaré nous sommes engloutis.
Et ces secrets surpris, ces splendeurs contemplées,
ces pages de la nuit et du jour épelées,
ce qu’ affirme Newton, ce qu’ aperçoit Mesmer,
la grande liberté des souffles sur la mer,
la forêt qui craint Dieu dans l’ ombre et qui le nomme,
les eaux, les fleurs, les champs, font naître en nous un homme
mystérieux, semblable aux profondeurs qu’ il voit.
La nature aux songeurs montre les cieux du doigt.
Le cèdre au torse énorme, athlète des tempêtes,

sur le fauve Liban conseillait les prophètes,
et ce fut son exemple austère qui poussa
Nahum contre Ninive, Amos contre Gaza.
Les sphères en roulant nous jettent la justice.
Oui, l’ âme monte au bien comme l’ astre au solstice;
et le monde équilibre a fait l’ homme devoir.
Quand l’ âme voit mal Dieu, l’ aube le fait mieux voir.
La nuit, quand Aquilon sonne de la trompette,
ce qu’ il dit, notre coeur frémissant le répète.
Nous vivons libres, fiers, tressaillants, prosternés,
éblouis du grand Dieu formidable; et, tournés
vers tous les idéals et vers tous les possibles,
nous cueillons dans l’ azur les roses invisibles.
L’ ombre est notre palais. Nous sommes commensaux
de l’ abeille, du jonc nourri par les ruisseaux,
du papillon qui boit dans la fleur arrosée.
Nos âmes aux oiseaux disputent la rosée.
Laissant le passé mort dans les siècles défunts,
nous vivons de rayons, de soupirs, de parfums,
et nous nous abreuvons de l’ immense ambroisie
qu’ Homère appelle amour et Platon poésie.
Sous les branchages noirs du destin, nous errons,
purs et graves, avec les souffles sur nos fronts.
Notre adoration, notre autel, notre Louvre,
c’ est la vertu qui saigne ou le matin qui s’ ouvre;
les grands levers auxquels nous ne manquons jamais,
c’ est Vénus des monts noirs blanchissant les sommets;
c’ est le lys fleurissant, chaste, charmant, sévère;
c’ est Jésus se dressant, pâle, sur le Calvaire.
22 novembre 1854.

1859, 07, 24

LE SIECLE , XIVA UN ECRIVAIN .

prends garde à Marchangy. La prose poétique
est une ornière où geint le vieux Pégase étique.
Tout autant que le vers, certes, la prose a droit
à la juste cadence, au rhythme divin; soit;
pourvu que, sans singer le mètre, la cadence
s’ y cache et que le rhythme austère s’ y condense.
La prose en vain essaie un essor assommant.
Le vers s’ envole au ciel tout naturellement;
il monte; il est le vers; je ne sais quoi de frêle
et d’ éternel, qui chante et plane et bat de l’ aile;
il se mêle, farouche et l’ éclair dans les yeux,
à toutes ces lueurs du ciel mystérieux
que l’ aube frissonnante emporte dans ses voiles.
Quand même on la ferait danser jusqu’ aux étoiles,
la prose, c’ est toujours le sermo pedestris.
Tu crois être Ariel et tu n’ es que Vestris.
24 juillet 1859.

LE SIECLE , XVLE MONT - AUX - PENDUS . (JERSEY .)

Ils me disent : hier deux bricks se sont perdus
la nuit sur des bas-fonds près du Mont-aux-Pendus.
Et moi, levant le doigt vers la funèbre cime,
je leur dis : vous venez tuer devant l’ abîme.
Pourquoi voulez-vous donc qu’ il soit meilleur que vous?
Les flots sont insensés, mais les hommes sont fous.
Vous donnez le mauvais exemple aux mers sauvages;
vous leur montrez la mort debout sur vos rivages;
vous mettez un gibet sur la falaise; alors
ne vous étonnez point d’ avoir, près de vos ports,
épiant vos départs comme vos arrivées,
des roches sans pitié que l’ homme a dépravées.
4 décembre.

LE SIECLE , XVI LE BOUT DE L’ OREILLE .

J’ ai ri d’ abord. J’ étais dans mon champ plein de roses.
J’ errais. âme attentive au clair-obscur des choses,
je vois au fond de tout luire un vague flambeau.
C’ était le matin, l’ heure où le bois se fait beau,
où la nature semble une immense prunelle
éblouie, ayant Dieu presque visible en elle.
Pour faire fête à l’ aube, au bord des flots dormants,
les ronces se couvraient d’ un tas de diamants;
les brins d’ herbe coquets mettaient toutes leurs perles;
la mer chantait; les geais causaient avec les merles;
les papillons volaient du cytise au myrtil.
Entre un ami. — bonjour. Savez-vous? Me dit-il,
on vient de vous brûler sur la place publique.
— où ça? — dans un pays honnête et catholique.
— je le suppose. — peste! Ils vous ont pris vivant
dans un livre où l’ on voit le bagne et le couvent,
vous ont brûlé, vous diable et juif, avec esclandre,
ensuite ils ont au vent fait jeter votre cendre.
— il serait peu décent qu’ il en fût autrement.
Mais quand ça? — l’ autre jour. En Espagne. — vraiment.
— ils ont fait cuire au bout de leur grande pincette
Myriel, Jean Valjean, Marius et Cosette,
vos Misérables, vous, toute votre âme enfin.
Vos êtes un de ceux dont Escobar a faim.
Vous voilà quelque peu grillé comme Voltaire.
— donc j’ ai chaud en Espagne et froid en Angleterre.
Tel est mon sort. — la chose est dans tous les journaux.
Ah! Si vous n’ étiez pas chez ces bons huguenots!
L’ ennui, c’ est qu’ on ne peut jusqu’ ici vous poursuivre.
Ne pouvant rôtir l’ homme, on a flambé le livre.
— c’ est le moins. — vous voyez d’ ici tous les détails.
De gros bonshommes noirs devant de grands portails,
un feu, de quoi brûler une bibliothèque.
— un évêque m’ a fait cet honneur! — un évêque?

Morbleu! Pour vous damner ils se sont assemblés,
et ce n’ est pas un seul, c’ est tous. — vous me comblez. —
et nous rions. Et puis je rentre, et je médite.
Ils en sont là. Du temps de Vénus Aphrodite,
parfois, seule, écoutant on ne sait quelles voix,
la déesse errait nue et blanche au fond des bois;
elle marchait tranquille, et sa beauté sans voiles,
ses cheveux faits d’ écume et ses yeux faits d’ étoiles,
étaient dans la forêt comme une vision;
cependant, retenant leur respiration,
voyant au loin passer cette clarté, les faunes
s’ approchaient; l’ oegipan, le satyre aux yeux jaunes,
se glissaient en arrière ivres d’ un vil désir,
et brusquement tendaient le bras pour la saisir,
et le bois frissonnait, et la surnaturelle,
pâle, se retournait sentant leur main sur elle.
Ainsi, dans notre siècle aux mirages trompeurs,
la conscience humaine a d’ étranges stupeurs;
lumineuse, elle marche en notre crépuscule,
et tout à coup, devant le faune, elle recule.
Tartuffe est là, nouveau satan d’ un autre éden.
Nous constatons dans l’ ombre, à chaque instant, soudain,
le vague allongement de quelque griffe infâme
et l’ essai ténébreux de nous prendre notre âme.
L’ esprit humain se sent tâté par un bourreau.
Mais doucement. On jette au noir quemadero
ce qu’ on peut, mais plus tard on fera mieux peut-être,
et votre meurtrier est timide; il est prêtre.
Il vous demanderait presque permission.
Il allume un brasier, fait sa procession,
met des bûches au feu, du bitume au cilice,
soit; mais si gentiment qu’ après votre supplice
vous riez. Grillandus n’ est plus que Loyola.
Vous lui dites : ma foi, c’ est drôle. Touchez là.
Eh bien, riez. C’ est bon. Attendez, imbéciles!
Lui qui porte en ses yeux l’ âme des noirs Basiles,
il rit de vous voir rire. Il est Vichnou, Mithra,

Teutatès, et ce feu pour rire grandira.
Ah! Vous criez : bravo! Ta rage est ma servante.
Brûle mes livres. Bien, très bien! Pousse à la vente!
Et lui songe. Il se dit : — la chose a réussi.
Quand le livre est brûlé, l’ écrivain est roussi.
La suite à demain. — vous, vous raillez. Il partage
votre joie, avec l’ air d’ un prêtre de Carthage.
Il dit : leur cécité toujours me protégea.
Sa mâchoire, qui rit encor, vous mord déjà.
N’ est-ce pas? Ce brûleur avec bonté nous traite,
et son autodafé n’ est qu’ une chaufferette!
Ah! Les vrais tourbillons de flamme auront leur tour.
En elle, comme un oeuf contient le grand vautour,
la petite étincelle a l’ incendie énorme.
Attendez seulement que la France s’ endorme,
et vous verrez. Peut-on calculer le chemin
que ferait pas à pas, hier, aujourd’ hui, demain,
l’ effroyable tortue avec ses pieds fossiles?
Qui sait? Bientôt peut-être on aura des conciles!
On entendra, qui sait? Un homme dire à Dieu :
— l’ infaillible, c’ est moi. Place! Recule un peu. —
quoi! Recommence-t-on? Ciel! Serait-il possible
que l’ homme redevînt pâture, proie et cible!
Et qu’ on revît les temps difformes! Qu’ on revît
le double joug qui tue autant qu’ il asservit!
Qu’ on revît se dresser sur le globe, vil bouge,
près du sceptre d’ airain la houlette en fer rouge!
Nos pères l’ ont subi, ce double pouvoir-là!
Nuit! Mort! Melchisédech compliqué d’ Attila!
Ils ont vu sur leurs fronts, eux parias sans nombre,
le côte à côte affreux des deux sceptres dans l’ ombre;
ils entendaient leur foudre au fond du firmament,
moins effrayante encor que leur chuchotement.
— prends les peuples, César. — toi, Pierre, prends les âmes.
— prends la pourpre, César. — mais toi, qu’ as-tu? — les flammes.
— et puis? — cela suffit. — régnons. âges hideux!
L’ homme blanc, l’ homme sombre. Ils sont un. Ils sont deux.

Là le guerrier, ici le pontife; et leurs suites,
confesseurs, massacreurs, tueurs, bourreaux, jésuites!
ô deuil! Sur les bûchers et les sanbenitos
Rome a, quatre cents ans, braillé son vil pathos,
jetant sur l’ univers terrifié qui souffre
d’ une main l’ eau bénite et de l’ autre le soufre.
Tous ces prêtres portaient l’ affreux masque aux trous noirs;
leurs mitres ressemblaient dans l’ ombre aux éteignoirs;
ils ont été la Nuit dans l’ obscur moyen-âge;
ils sont tout prêts à faire encor ce personnage,
et jusqu’ en notre siècle, à cette heure engourdi,
on les verrait, avec leur torche en plein midi,
avec leur crosse, avec leurs bedeaux, populace,
reparaître et rentrer, s’ ils trouvaient de la place
pour passer, ô Voltaire, entre Jean-Jacque et toi!
Non, non, non! Reculez, faux pouvoir, fausse foi!
Oh! La Rome des frocs! Oh! L’ Espagne des moines!
Disparaissez! Prêcheurs captant les patrimoines!
Bonnets carrés! Camails! Capuchons! Clercs! Abbés!
Tas d’ horribles fronts bas, tonsurés ou nimbés!
ô mornes visions du tison et du glaive!
Exécrable passé qui toujours se relève
et sur l’ humanité se dresse menaçant!
Saulx-Tavanne, écumant une écume de sang,
criant : égorgez tout! Dieu fera le triage!
La juive de seize ans brûlée au mariage
de Charles deux avec Louise d’ Orléans,
et dans l’ autodafé plein de brasiers béants
offerte aux fiancés comme un cierge de noce;
Campanella brisé par l’ église féroce;
Jordan Bruno lié sous un ruisseau de poix
qui ronge par sa flamme et creuse par son poids;
d’ Albe qui dans l’ horreur des bûchers se promène
séchant sa main sanglante à cette braise humaine;
Galilée abaissant ses genoux repentants;
la place d’ Abbeville où Labarre à vingt ans,
pour avoir chansonné toute cette canaille,

eut la langue arrachée avec une tenaille,
et hurla dans le feu, tordant ses noirs moignons;
le marché de Rouen dont les sombres pignons
ont le rouge reflet de ton supplice, ô Jeanne!
Huss brûlé par Martin, l’ aigle tué par l’ âne;
Farnèse et Charles-Quint, Grégoire et Sigismond,
toujours ensemble assis comme au sommet d’ un mont,
à leurs pieds toute l’ âme humaine épouvantée
sous cet effrayant Dieu qui fait le monde athée;
ce passé m’ apparaît! Vous me faites horreur,
croulez, toi monstre pape, et toi monstre empereur!
25 mai.

LE SIECLE , XVII L’ ECHAFAUD .

— oeil pour oeil! Dent pour dent! Tête pour tête! à mort!
Justice! L’ échafaud vaut mieux que le remord.
Talion! Talion! — silence aux cris sauvages!
Non! Assez de malheur, de meurtre et de ravages!
Assez d’ égorgement! Assez de deuil! Assez
de fantômes sans tête et d’ affreux trépassés!
Assez de visions funèbres dans la brume!
Assez de doigts hideux, montrant le sang qui fume,
noirs, et comptant les trous des linceuls dans la nuit!
Pas de suppliciés dont le cri nous poursuit!
Pas de spectres jetant leur ombre sur nos têtes!
Nous sommes ruisselants de toutes les tempêtes;
il n’ est plus qu’ un devoir et qu’ une vérité,
c’ est, après tant d’ angoisse et de calamité,
homme, d’ ouvrir son coeur, oiseau, d’ ouvrir son aile
vers ce ciel que remplit la grande âme éternelle!
Le peuple, que les rois broyaient sous leurs talons,
est la pierre promise au temple, et nous voulons
que la pierre bâtisse et non qu’ elle lapide!
Pas de sang! Pas de mort! C’ est un reflux stupide
que la férocité sur la férocité.
Un pilier d’ échafaud soutient mal la cité.
Tu veux faire mourir! Moi je veux faire naître!
Je mure le sépulcre et j’ ouvre la fenêtre.
Dieu n’ a pas fait le sang, à l’ amour réservé,
pour qu’ on le donne à boire aux fentes du pavé.
S’ agit-il d’ égorger? Peuples, il s’ agit d’ être.
Quoi! Tu veux te venger, passant? De qui? Du maître?
Si tu ne vaux pas mieux, que viens-tu faire ici?
Tout mystère où l’ on jette un meurtre est obscurci;
l’ énigme ensanglantée est plus âpre à résoudre;
l’ ombre s’ ouvre terrible après le coup de foudre;
tuer n’ est pas créer, et l’ on se tromperait
si l’ on croyait que tout finit au couperet;

c’ est là qu’ inattendue, impénétrable, immense,
pleine d’ éclairs subits, la question commence;
c’ est du bien et du mal; mais le mal est plus grand.
Satan rit à travers l’ échafaud transparent.
Le bourreau, quel qu’ il soit, a le pied dans l’ abîme;
quoi qu’ elle fasse, hélas! La hache fait un crime;
une lugubre nuit fume sur ce tranchant;
quand il vient de tuer, comme, en s’ en approchant,
on frémit de le voir tout ruisselant, et comme
on sent qu’ il a frappé dans l’ ombre plus qu’ un homme!
Sitôt qu’ a disparu le coupable immolé,
hors du panier tragique où la tête a roulé,
le principe innocent, divin, inviolable,
avec son regard d’ astre à l’ aurore semblable,
se dresse, spectre auguste, un cercle rouge au cou.
L’ homme est impitoyable, hélas, sans savoir où.
Comment ne voit-il pas qu’ il vit dans un problème,
que l’ homme est solidaire avec ses monstres même,
et qu’ il ne peut tuer autre chose qu’ Abel!
Lorsqu’ une tête tombe, on sent trembler le ciel.
Décapitez Néron, cette hyène insensée,
la vie universelle est dans Néron blessée;
faites monter Tibère à l’ échafaud demain,
Tibère saignera le sang du genre humain.
Nous sommes tous mêlés à ce que fait la Grève;
quand un homme, en public, nous voyant comme un rêve,
meurt, implorant en vain nos lâches abandons,
ce meurtre est notre meurtre et nous en répondons;
c’ est avec un morceau de notre insouciance,
c’ est avec un haillon de notre conscience,
avec notre âme à tous, que l’ exécuteur las
essuie en s’ en allant son hideux coutelas.
L’ homme peut oublier; les choses importunes
s’ effacent dans l’ éclat ondoyant des fortunes;
le passé, l’ avenir, se voilent par moments;
les festins, les flambeaux, les feux, les diamants,
l’ illumination triomphale des fêtes,

peuvent éclipser l’ ombre énorme des prophètes;
autour des grands bassins, au bord des claires eaux,
les enfants radieux peuvent aux cris d’ oiseaux
mêler le bruit confus de leurs lèvres fleuries,
et, dans le Luxembourg ou dans les Tuileries,
devant les vieux héros de marbre aux poings crispés,
danser, rire et chanter : les lauriers sont coupés!
La Courtille au front bas peut noyer dans les verres
le souvenir des jours illustres et sévères;
la valse peut ravir, éblouir, enivrer
des femmes de satin, heureuses de livrer
le plus de nudité possible aux yeux de flamme;
l’ hymen peut murmurer son chaste épithalame;
le bal masqué, lascif, paré, bruyant, charmant,
peut allumer sa torche et bondir follement,
goule au linceul joyeux, larve en fleurs, spectre rose;
mais, quel que soit le temps, quelle que soit la cause,
c’ est toujours une nuit funeste au peuple entier
que celle où, conduisant un prêtre, un guichetier
fouille au trousseau de clefs qui pend à sa ceinture
pour aller, sur le lit de fièvre et de torture,
réveiller avant l’ heure un pauvre homme endormi,
tandis que, sur la Grève, entrevus à demi,
sous les coups de marteau qui font fuir la chouette,
d’ effrayants madriers dressent leur silhouette,
rougis par la lanterne horrible du bourreau.
Le vieux glaive du juge a la nuit pour fourreau.
Le tribunal ne peut de ce fourreau livide
tirer que la douleur, l’ anxiété, le vide,
le néant, le remords, l’ ignorance et l’ effroi,
qu’ il frappe au nom du peuple ou venge au nom du roi.
Justice! Dites-vous. — qu’ appelez-vous justice?
Qu’ on s’ entr’ aide, qu’ on soit des frères, qu’ on vêtisse
ceux qui sont nus, qu’ on donne à tous le pain sacré,
qu’ on brise l’ affreux bagne où le pauvre est muré,
mais qu’ on ne touche point à la balance sombre!
Le sépulcre où, pensif, l’ homme naufrage et sombre,

au delà d’ aujourd’ hui, de demain, des saisons,
des jours, du flamboiement de nos vains horizons,
et des chimères, proie et fruit de notre étude,
a son ciel plein d’ aurore et fait de certitude;
la justice en est l’ astre immuable et lointain.
Notre justice à nous, comme notre destin,
est tâtonnement, trouble, erreur, nuage, doute;
martyr, je m’ applaudis; juge, je me redoute;
l’ infaillible, est-ce moi, dis? Est-ce toi? Réponds.
Vous criez : — nos douleurs sont notre droit. Frappons.
Nous sommes trop en butte au sort qui nous accable,
nous sommes trop frappés d’ un mal inexplicable,
nous avons trop de deuils, trop de jougs, trop d’ hivers,
nous sommes trop souffrants, dans nos destins divers,
tous, les grands, les petits, les obscurs, les célèbres,
pour ne pas condamner quelqu’ un dans nos ténèbres. —
puisque vous ne voyez rien de clair dans le sort,
ne vous hâtez pas trop d’ en conclure la mort,
fût-ce la mort d’ un roi, d’ un maître et d’ un despote;
dans la brume insondable où tout saigne et sanglote,
ne vous hâtez pas trop de prendre vos malheurs,
vos jours sans feu, vos jours sans pain, vos cris, vos pleurs,
et ce deuil qui sur vous et votre race tombe,
pour les faire servir à construire une tombe.
Quel pas aurez-vous fait pour avoir ajouté
à votre obscur destin, ombre et fatalité,
cette autre obscurité que vous nommez justice?
Faire de l’ échafaud, menaçante bâtisse,
un autel à bénir le progrès nouveau-né,
ô vivants, c’ est démence; et qu’ aurez-vous gagné
quand, d’ un culte de mort lamentables ministres,
vous aurez marié ces infirmes sinistres,
la justice boiteuse et l’ aveugle anankè?
Le glaive toujours cherche un but toujours manqué;
la palme, cette flamme aux fleurs étincelantes,
faite d’ azur, frémit devant des mains sanglantes,
et recule et s’ enfuit, sensitive des cieux!

La colère assouvie a le front soucieux.
Quant à moi, tu le sais, nuit calme où je respire,
j’ aurais là, sous mes pieds, mon ennemi, le pire,
Caïn juge, Judas pontife, Satan roi,
que j’ ouvrirais ma porte et dirais : sauve-toi!
Non, l’ élargissement des mornes cimetières
n’ est pas le but. Marchons, reculons les frontières
de la vie! ô mon siècle, allons toujours plus haut!
Grandissons! Qu’ est-ce donc qu’ il nous veut, l’ échafaud,
cette charpente spectre accoutumée aux foules,
cet îlot noir qu’ assiège et que bat de ses houles
la multitude aux flots inquiets et mouvants,
ce sépulcre qui vient attaquer les vivants,
et qui, sur les palais ainsi que sur les bouges,
surgit, levant un glaive au bout de ses bras rouges?
Mystère qui se livre aux carrefours, morceau
de la tombe qui vient tremper dans le ruisseau,
bravant le jour, le bruit, les cris; bière effrontée
qui, féroce, cynique et lâche, semble athée!
ô spectacle exécré dans les plus repoussants,
une mort qui se fait coudoyer aux passants,
qui permet qu’ un crieur hors de l’ ombre la tire!
Une mort qui n’ a pas l’ épouvante du rire,
dévoilant l’ escalier qui dans la nuit descend,
disant : voyez! Marchant dans la rue, et laissant
la boue éclabousser son linceul semé d’ astres;
qui, sur un tréteau, montre entre deux vils pilastres
son horreur, son front noir, son oeil de basilic;
qui consent à venir travailler en public,
et qui, prostituée, accepte, sur les places,
la familiarité des fauves populaces!
ô vivant du tombeau, vivant de l’ infini,
Jéhovah! Dieu, clarté, rayon jamais terni,
pour faire de la mort, de la nuit, des ténèbres,
ils ont mis ton triangle entre deux pieux funèbres;
et leur foule, qui voit resplendir ta lueur,
ne sent pas à son front poindre une âpre sueur,

et l’ horreur n’ étreint pas ce noir peuple unanime,
quand ils font, pour punir ce qu’ ils ont nommé crime,
au nom de ce qu’ ils ont appelé vérité,
sur la vie, ô terreur, tomber l’ éternité!

1870, 07

LE SIECLE , XVIIIJOLIES FEMMES . SONNET POUR ALBUM .

on leur fait des sonnets, passables quelquefois;
on baise cette main qu’ elles daignent vous tendre;
on les suit à l’ église, on les admire au bois;
on redevient Damis, on redevient Clitandre;
le bal est leur triomphe, et l’ on brigue leur choix;
on danse, on rit, on cause, et vous pouvez entendre,
tout en valsant, parmi les luths et les hautbois,
ces belles gazouiller de leur voix la plus tendre :
— la force est tout; la guerre est sainte; l’ échafaud
est bon; il ne faut pas trop de lumière; il faut
bâtir plus de prisons et bâtir moins d’ écoles;
si Paris bouge, il faut des canons plein les forts. —
et ces colombes-là vous disent des paroles
à faire remuer d’ horreur les os des morts.
Juillet 1870.

1870, 03, 24

LE SIECLE , XIX

cent mille hommes, criblés d’ obus et de mitraille,
cent mille hommes, couchés sur un champ de bataille,
tombés pour leur pays par leur mort agrandi,
comme on tombe à Fleurus, comme on tombe à Lodi,
cent mille ardents soldats, héros et non victimes,
morts dans un tourbillon d’ évènements sublimes,
d’ où prend son vol la fière et blanche Liberté,
sont un malheur moins grand pour la société,
sont pour l’ humanité, qui sur le vrai se fonde,
une calamité moins haute et moins profonde,
un coup moins lamentable et moins infortuné
qu’ un innocent, — un seul innocent condamné, —
dont le sang, ruisselant sous un infâme glaive,
fume entre les pavés de la place de Grève,
qu’ un juste assassiné dans la forêt des lois,
et dont l’ âme a le droit d’ aller dire à Dieu : vois!
H.. -H.. — 24 mars 1870.

1870, 05, 22

la hache? Non. Jamais. Je n’ en veux pour personne.
Pas même pour ce czar devant qui je frissonne,
pas même pour ce monstre à lui-même fatal.
Qui supprime Tyburn abolit White-Hall;
et quand la mort, ouvrant son désastreux registre,
me dit : — que jettes-tu dans ce panier sinistre?
Ou la tête du peuple, ou la tête du roi? —
je dis : — ni celle-ci, ni celle-là. — ma loi,
c’ est la vie; et ma joie, ô Dieu, c’ est l’ aube pure.
Je ne suis pas de ceux qui font la pourriture;
je ne suis pas de ceux qui donnent à manger
au sépulcre, où l’ on voit ramper et s’ allonger
l’ affreux sarcopte éclos du miasme délétère;
je ne suis pas de ceux vers qui les vers de terre,
béants, tournent leur tête aveugle dans la nuit.
Tout supplice est un fait contre la loi, traduit,
pour l’ éducation des foules indécises,
devant l’ esprit humain, suprême cour d’ assises,
saint prétoire, infaillible et grave tribunal
où Beccaria juge aidé de Juvénal.
Le penseur n’ absout point les grands forfaits lyriques
que l’ histoire engloutit sous ses panégyriques;
il excuse parfois, il n’ approuve jamais.
Il veut de l’ aube, et non du sang, sur les sommets.
Peuple ou roi, quel que soit le tueur, il le blâme.
Pour lui l’ assassinat, même illustre, est infâme;
tout temple est sombre avec une morgue au milieu.
Quand le sang coule, il dit : malheur! Admirant peu
le resplendissement magnifique du glaive;
il n’ a pas, quand le cri des victimes s’ élève,
pour éblouissement la grandeur du bourreau;
pour lui, Saint-Just poussant Danton au tombereau,

Louis quatorze affreux, penché sur les Cévennes,
implacable, saignant la France aux quatre veines,
Titus livrant Sion massacrée aux vautours,
quoi qu’ on puisse alléguer et dire, c’ est toujours
le même crime errant dans la même nuit noire;
si grand que soit l’ éclat, quelle que soit la gloire,
c’ est toujours à ses yeux le meurtre, et, plein d’ ennui,
partout, il le condamne; et tout ce qu’ il sait, lui,
c’ est qu’ on ne lui fait pas accepter des décombres,
des désastres, des morts, des écrasements sombres,
même en posant dessus la patte d’ un lion.
Non, jamais de vengeance et pas de talion.
Quoi! Le cipaye irait jetant au feu des femmes
et tordant des enfants tout vivants dans les flammes;
quoi! L’ irlandais bigot, à travers le brouillard,
surgirait, la massue au poing; quoi! Le lollard
joindrait le fer qui frappe à la main qui mendie;
quoi! Le hubin boirait du sang; quoi! L’ incendie
éclairerait le rire horrible du truand;
le camisard aurait dans sa poche en tuant
sa bible toute grasse à force d’ être lue; —
et l’ âme incorruptible, et la bouche absolue,
la bouche du poëte et l’ âme du penseur
se tairaient! Et le jour accepterait pour soeur,
sous prétexte qu’ ensemble autrefois nous souffrîmes,
l’ aveugle obscurité, toute pleine de crimes!
Non, parle, et parle haut, vérité! Vérité!
La misère n’ a pas le droit de cruauté;
les échafauds s’ en vont et leur ombre s’ efface;
l’ impassible équité ne veut pas qu’ on en fasse,
pas même avec le bois douloureux des grabats;
non! Nous n’ admettons point, dans le deuil d’ ici-bas,
qu’ on puisse être bourreau parce qu’ on fut victime.
Le meurtre fils des pleurs n’ est pas plus légitime;
quand le faible devient à son tour le plus fort,
la conscience donne à la rancune tort
et force les instincts de vengeance à se taire,

et l’ on n’ est point absous par ce juge pour faire
du mal avec le mal que d’ autres vous ont fait.
Cette livre de chair dont Shylock triomphait,
malheur à qui la veut dans sa sauvage envie!
L’ homme est le travailleur du printemps, de la vie,
de la graine semée et du sillon creusé,
et non le créancier livide du passé.
Peuple, le philosophe est le témoin sévère.
Si Jésus s’ envolait féroce du calvaire,
et venait à son tour crucifier Satan,
je dirais à Jésus : tu n’ es pas Dieu. Va-t’ en!
22 mai 1870.

LE SIECLE , XXI

C’ est à coups de canon qu’ on rend le peuple heureux.
Nous sommes revenus de tous ces grands mots creux :
— progrès, fraternité, mission de la France,
droits de l’ homme, raison, liberté, tolérance. —
Socrate est fou; lisez Lélut qui le confond;
Christ, fort socialiste et démagogue au fond,
est une renommée en somme très surfaite.
Terre! L’ obus est Dieu, Paixhans est son prophète.
Vrai but du genre humain : tuer correctement.
Les hommes, dont le sabre est l’ unique calmant,
ont le boulet rayé pour chef-d’ oeuvre; leur astre,
c’ est la clarté qui sort d’ une bombe Lancastre,
et l’ admiration de tout peuple poli
va du mortier Armstrong au canon Cavalli.
Dieu s’ est trompé; César plus haut que lui s’ élance;
Jéhovah fit le verbe et César le silence.
Parler, c’ est abuser; penser, c’ est usurper.
La voix sert à se taire et l’ esprit à ramper.
Le monde est à plat ventre, et l’ homme, altier naguère,
doux et souple aujourd’ hui, tremble. — paix! Dit la guerre.

1846

LE SIECLE , XXII

elle passa, je crois qu’ elle m’ avait souri.
C’ était une grisette ou bien une houri.
Je ne sais si l’ effet fut moral ou physique,
mais son pas en marchant faisait une musique.
Quoi! Ton pavé bruyant et fangeux, ô Paris,
a de ces visions ineffables! Je pris
ses yeux fixés sur moi pour deux étoiles bleues.
Fraîche et joyeuse enfant! Moineaux et hochequeues
ont moins de gaîté folle et de vivacité.
Elle avait une robe en taffetas d’ été,
de petits brodequins couleur de scarabée,
l’ air d’ une ombre qui passe avant la nuit tombée,
je ne sais quoi de fier qui permettait l’ espoir.
Pendant que je songeais, croyant encor la voir
même après qu’ elle était enfuie et disparue,
et que debout, pensif au milieu de la rue,
contemplant, ébloui, cet être gracieux,
j’ avais l’ oeil dans l’ espace et l’ âme dans les cieux,
une vieille, moitié chatte et moitié harpie,
au menton hérissé d’ une barbe en charpie,
vêtue affreusement d’ un sinistre haillon,
effroyable, et parlant comme avec un bâillon,
me dit tout bas : — monsieur veut-il de cette fille?
ô pauvre colibri que vend une chenille!
1846.

1855, 03, 09

LE SIECLE , XXIII SUR UN PORTRAIT DE SAINTE .

c’ est toi, dénaturée! Oui, te voilà, c’ est toi
qui fis taire ton coeur pour écouter ta foi,
qui, pour gagner ton ciel de larve et de chouette,
foulas ton âme aux pieds, mère sourde-muette,
et qui, lorsque ton fils se couchait en travers
de ta porte, pleurant et les deux bras ouverts,
marchas sur ton enfant pour entrer dans le cloître.
Quand l’ amour décroissait, tu crus sentir Dieu croître;
ah! Folle! Et te voilà, face d’ austérité!
Va, la sainteté froide est fausse sainteté.
Croire qu’ on plaît au Dieu de lumière et de gloire
parce que d’ âme blanche on se fait âme noire,
parce qu’ on a d’ abord soufflé sur son flambeau,
parce qu’ on vient à lui, n’ étant plus qu’ un tombeau
où ceux qui vous aimaient d’ avance ont dû descendre,
et qu’ on en est le marbre et qu’ ils en sont la cendre!
ô morne vision! Mauvais songe que font
ceux qui désertent Dieu dans le couvent profond!
Dieu, c’ est la raison; Dieu, c’ est l’ amour; Dieu, c’ est l’ être;
c’ est le devoir de vivre après le droit de naître;
c’ est l’ immense clarté sur l’ immense combat.
Il a voulu que l’ homme aimât, conquît, tombât,
et ne fût pas fantôme et deuil. Le froc de bure
ne donne point à l’ homme une bonne courbure;
devenir ombre, c’ est obscurcir le saint lieu;
en s’ approchant du spectre, on s’ éloigne de Dieu.
Pas de cloître; la vie. Un voile couvre un rêve.
Le mérite n’ est pas, quand vers Dieu l’ on s’ élève,
de rejeter, ainsi qu’ un vêtement quitté,
ses parents, sa patrie et son humanité;

de s’ enfuir de son coeur ainsi que d’ une fange;
de dire : — arrachez-moi, Christ, pour que je sois ange,
mon père, ce lambeau, ma mère, ce haillon! —
de mettre à la nature effarée un bâillon;
de crier : — mes enfants où tout mon sang se mêle,
mon fils dans son berceau, ma fille à la mamelle,
tout cela, c’ est la nuit, car Dieu seul est le jour. —
de raturer en soi la famille et l’ amour
comme des contre-sens qui vous cachent le texte;
et de perdre la forme humaine, sous prétexte
qu’ on monte et qu’ on s’ en va dans le firmament bleu.
Faisons, tout en fixant notre regard sur Dieu,
tous nos devoirs de fils ou de frère ou de père.
Soyons l’ être penchant, même quand il espère.
Par l’ esprit vers le bien, par la chair vers le mal;
sans quitter le réel, conquérons l’ idéal;
restons homme, en montant vers le sépulcre austère.
Il faut aller au ciel en marchant sur la terre.
9 mars 1855.

LE SIECLE , XXIV ECRIT APRES LA VISITE D’ UN BAGNE , I

Chaque enfant qu’ on enseigne est un homme qu’ on gagne.
Quatre vingt-dix voleurs sur cent qui sont au bagne
ne sont jamais allés à l’ école une fois,
et ne savent pas lire, et signent d’ une croix.
C’ est dans cette ombre-là qu’ ils ont trouvé le crime.
L’ ignorance est la nuit qui commence l’ abîme.
Où rampe la raison, l’ honnêteté périt.
Dieu, le premier auteur de tout ce qu’ on écrit,
a mis, sur cette terre où les hommes sont ivres,
les ailes des esprits dans les pages des livres.
Tout homme ouvrant un livre y trouve une aile, et peut
planer là-haut où l’ âme en liberté se meut.
L’ école est sanctuaire autant que la chapelle.
L’ alphabet que l’ enfant avec son doigt épelle
contient sous chaque lettre une vertu; le coeur
s’ éclaire doucement à cette humble lueur.
Donc au petit enfant donnez le petit livre.
Marchez, la lampe en main, pour qu’ il puisse vous suivre.
La nuit produit l’ erreur et l’ erreur l’ attentat.
Faute d’ enseignement, on jette dans l’ état
des hommes animaux, têtes inachevées,
tristes instincts qui vont les prunelles crevées,
aveugles effrayants, au regard sépulcral,
qui marchent à tâtons dans le monde moral.
Allumons les esprits, c’ est notre loi première,
et du suif le plus vil faisons une lumière.
L’ intelligence veut être ouverte ici-bas;
le germe a droit d’ éclore; et qui ne pense pas
ne vit pas. Ces voleurs avaient le droit de vivre.
Songeons-y bien, l’ école en or change le cuivre,

tandis que l’ ignorance en plomb transforme l’ or.
Je dis que ces voleurs possédaient un trésor,
leur pensée immortelle, auguste et nécessaire;
je dis qu’ ils ont le droit, du fond de leur misère,
de se tourner vers vous, à qui le jour sourit,
et de vous demander compte de leur esprit;
je dis qu’ ils étaient l’ homme et qu’ on en fit la brute;
je dis que je nous blâme et que je plains leur chute;
je dis que ce sont eux qui sont les dépouillés;
je dis que les forfaits dont ils se sont souillés
ont pour point de départ ce qui n’ est pas leur faute;
pouvaient-ils s’ éclairer du flambeau qu’ on leur ôte?
Ils sont les malheureux et non les ennemis.
Le premier crime fut sur eux-mêmes commis;
on a de la pensée éteint en eux la famme;
et la société leur a volé leur âme.
27 février. — Jersey.
1853, 03, 06

LE SIECLE , XXIVECRIT APRES LA VISITE D’ UN BAGNE , II

ô vieux bagne éternel! énigme! Abîme obscur!
Que d’ ombres ont passé sur ce funèbre mur!
Ici le mal, la nuit, l’ ignorance servile;
à l’ autre extrémité de cette corde vile
le génie et la foi, l’ amour, la vérité,
l’ inventeur, le penseur de Dieu même agité,
le prophète écartant l’ erreur impie et fausse,
Saint Jean dans son caveau, Daniel dans la fosse,
Galilée au cachot, Colomb au cabanon;
et, remontant au jour de chaînon en chaînon,
cette chaîne de deuil, sur la terre jetée,
qui commence à Poulmann, finit à Prométhée.
à travers six mille ans, et traînant en chemin
ses monstrueux anneaux sur tout le genre humain,
elle part de Toulon et s’ attache au Caucase.
L’ homme met la lumière et l’ ombre au même vase;
le bagne, enfer stupide, admet dans son tombeau
depuis l’ homme poignard jusqu’ à l’ homme flambeau.
Malheur à qui dit : marche! Au progrès qui recule,
à qui jette un rayon dans notre crépuscule!
Que deviendrait l’ erreur si le jour triomphait?
C’ est le même attentat et le même forfait,
le même crime avec la même peine immonde
que de tuer un homme ou de trouver un monde.
Lucifer est Satan; l’ aigle est le basilic.
Quiconque allume un phare est l’ ennemi public.
Quoi, l’ archange enchaîné coudoyant les vampires!
L’ âme au carcan! Les bons traités comme les pires!
ô morne aveuglement de l’ homme et de ses lois!
L’ esprit tremble et frémit devant toutes ces croix

que portent les voyants, les inspirés, les sages;
pour s’ enfuir de la vie on cherche des passages,
ciel juste, quand on songe à ces révélateurs
qu’ on a saisis, pensifs et venant des hauteurs,
qu’ on a punis du bien ainsi que d’ une faute,
liés avec le crime au poteau côte à côte,
qu’ on a fouettés, martyrs saignants et radieux,
et qui furent forçats parce qu’ ils étaient dieux!
6 mars. — Jersey, 1853.

1870, 03

LE SIECLE , XXV

le spectre que parfois je rencontre riait.
 — pourquoi ris-tu? Lui dis-je. — il dit : — homme inquiet,
regarde. Il me montrait dans l’ ombre un cimetière.
J’ y vis une humble croix près d’ une croix altière;
l’ une en bois, l’ autre en marbre; et le spectre reprit,
tandis qu’ au loin le vent passait comme un esprit
et des arbres profonds courbait les sombres têtes :
 — jusque dans le cercueil vous êtes vains et bêtes.
Oui, gisants, vous laissez debout la vanité.
Vous la sculptez au seuil du tombeau redouté,
et vous lui bâtissez des tours et des coupoles.
Et, morts, vous êtes fiers. Oui, dans vos nécropoles,
dans ces villes du deuil que vos brumeux Paris
construisent à côté du tumulte et des cris,
on trouve tout, des bois où jasent les fauvettes,
des jets d’ eau jaillissant du jaspe des cuvettes,
un paysage vert, voluptueux, profond,
où le nuage avec la plaine se confond,
la calèche où souvent l’ oeil cherche la civière,
des prêtres sous le frais lisant leur bréviaire,
du soleil en hiver, de l’ ombrage en été,
des roses, des chansons, tout, hors l’ égalité.
Vous avez des charniers et des Pères-Lachaises
où Samuel Bernard seul peut prendre ses aises,
dormir en paix, jouir d’ un caveau bien muré,
et se donner les airs d’ être à jamais pleuré,
et s’ adjuger, derrière une grille solide,
des fleurs que le Temps garde en habit d’ invalide.
Quant aux morts indigents, on leur donne congé;
on chasse d’ auprès d’ eux le sanglot prolongé;
et le pauvre n’ a pas le droit de pourriture.
Un jour, on le déblaie. On prend sa sépulture

pour grandir d’ une toise un monument pompeux.
 — misérable, va-t’ en. Deviens ce que tu peux.
Quoi! Tu prétends moisir ici parmi ces marbres,
faire boucher le nez aux passants sous ces arbres,
te carrer sous cette herbe, être au fond de ton trou
charogne comme un autre, et tu n’ as pas le sou!
Qu’ est-ce que ce mort-là qui n’ a rien dans sa poche!
Décampe. — et la brouette et la pelle et la pioche
arrachent le dormeur à son dur traversin.
Sus! Place à monseigneur le sépulcre voisin!
Ce n’ est rien d’ être mort, il faut avoir des rentes.
Les carcasses des gueux sont fort mal odorantes;
les morts bien nés font bande à part dans le trépas;
le sépulcre titré ne fraternise pas
avec la populace anonyme des bières;
la cendre tient son rang vis-à-vis des poussières;
et tel mort dit : pouah! Devant tel autre mort.
Le gentleman, à l’ heure où l’ acarus le mord,
se maintient délicat et dégoûté. C’ est triste.
Et j’ en ris. Le linceul peut être de batiste!
Chez vous, oui, sous la croix de l’ humble dieu Jésus,
les trépassés à court d’ argent sont mal reçus;
l’ abîme a son dépôt de mendicité; l’ ombre
met d’ un côté l’ élite et de l’ autre le nombre;
on n’ est jamais moins près qu’ alors qu’ on se rejoint;
dans la mort vague et blême on ne se mêle point;
on reste différent même à ce clair de lune;
le peuple dans la tombe a nom fosse commune.
La tombe impartiale! Allons donc! Le ci-gît
tantôt se rétrécit et tantôt s’ élargit;
le péage, réglé par arrêté du maire,
fait Beaujon immortel et Chodruc éphémère.
Pourrir gratis! Jamais! Le terrain est trop cher.
Tandis que, tripotant ce qui fut de la chair,
la chimie, en son antre où vole la phalène,
fait de l’ adipocire et du blanc de baleine
avec le résidu des pâles meurt-de-faim,

tel cadavre, vêtu d’ un suaire en drap fin,
regarde en souriant la mort aux yeux de tigre,
jette au spectre sa bourse, et dit : Marquis d’ Aligre.
Vos catacombes ont des perpétuités
pour ceux-ci pour ceux-là des répits limités.
Votre tombe est un gouffre où le riche surnage.
Ce mort n’ a pas payé son terme; il déménage.
Le fantôme, branlant sur ses blancs tibias,
portant tout avec lui, s’ en va, comme Bias;
vivant, il fut sans pain, et, mort, il est sans terre.
L’ ossuaire répugne aux os du prolétaire.
Seul Rothschild, dans l’ oubli du caveau sans échos,
est mangé par des rats et par des asticots
qu’ il paye et dont il est maître et propritétaire.
Oui, c’ est l’ étonnement de la pariétaire,
du brin d’ herbe, de l’ if aussi noir que le jais,
du froid cyprès, du saule en pleurs, de voir sujets
à des expulsions sommaires et subites
des crânes qui n’ ont plus leurs yeux dans leurs orbites.
Vos cimetières sont des lieux changeants, flottants,
précaires, où les morts vont passer quelque temps,
à peine admis au seuil des ténébreux mystères,
et l’ éternité sombre y prend des locataires.
Quoi! C’ est là votre mort! C’ est avec de l’ orgueil
que vous doublez le bois lugubre du cercueil!
Vous gardez préséance, honneurs, grade, avantages!
Vous conservez au fond du néant des étages!
La chimère est bouffonne. Ah! La prétention
est rare, dans le lieu de disparition!
Quoi! Privilégier ce qui n’ est plus! Quoi! Faire
des grands et des petits dans l’ insondable sphère!
Traiter Jean comme peste et Paul comme parfum!
être mort, et vouloir encore être quelqu’ un!
Quoi! Dans le pourrissoir emporter l’ opulence!
Faire sonner son or dans l’ éternel silence!
Avoir, de par cet or dont sur terre on brilla,
droit de tomber en poudre ici plutôt que là!

Arriver dans la nuit ainsi que des lumières!
Prendre dans le tombeau des places de premières!
Ne pas entendre Dieu qui dit au riche : assez!
Je cesserai d’ en rire, ô vivants insensés,
le jour où j’ apprendrai que c’ est vrai, que, dans l’ ombre
de l’ incommensurable et ténébreux décombre,
l’ archange à l’ aile noire, assis à son bureau,
toise les morts, leur donne à tous un numéro,
discute leur obole, or ou plomb, vraie ou fausse,
et la pèse, et marchande au squelette sa fosse!
Le jour où j’ apprendrai que la chose est ainsi,
que Lucullus sous terre est du fumier choisi,
que le bouton d’ or perd ou double sa richesse
s’ il sort d’ une grisette ou bien d’ une duchesse,
qu’ un lys qui naît d’ un pauvre est noir comme charbon,
que, mort, Lazare infecte et qu’ Aguado sent bon!
Le jour où j’ apprendrai que dans l’ azur terrible
l’ éternel a des trous inégaux à son crible;
et que, dans le ciel sombre effroi de vos remords,
s’ il voit passer, porté par quatre croque-morts,
un cadavre fétide et hideux, le tonnerre
demande à l’ ouragan : est-ce un millionnaire?
Le jour où j’ apprendrai que la tombe, en effet,
que l’ abîme, selon le tarif du préfet,
trafique de sa nuit et de son épouvante,
et que la mort a mis les vers de terre en vente!
Mars 1870.

1874, 07, 26

que je prenne un moment de repos? Impossible.
Koran, Zend-Avesta, Livres sibyllins, Bible,
Talmud, Toldos Jeschut, Védas, lois de Manou,
brahmes sanglants, santons fléchissant le genou,
les contes, les romans, les terreurs, les croyances,
les superstitions fouillant les consciences,
puis-je ne pas sentir ces creusements profonds?
J’ en ai ma part. Veaux d’ or, sphinx, chimères, griffons,
les princes des démons et les princes des prêtres,
synodes, sanhédrins, vils muphtis, scribes traîtres,
ceux qui des empereurs bénissaient les soldats,
ceux que payait Tibère et qui payaient Judas,
ceux qui tendraient encore à Socrate le verre,
ceux qui redonneraient à Jésus le calvaire,
tous ces sadducéens, tous ces pharisiens,
ces anges, que Satan reconnaît pour les siens,
tout cela, c’ est partout. C’ est la puissance obscure.
Plaie énorme que fait une abjecte piqûre!
Ce contre-sens : Dieu vrai, les dogmes faux; cuisson
du mensonge qui s’ est glissé dans la raison!
Démangeaison saignante, incurable, éternelle,
que sent l’ homme en son âme et l’ oiseau sous son aile!
Oh! L’ infâme travail! Ici Mahomet; là
cette tête, Wesley, sur ce corps, Loyola;
Cisneros et Calvin, dont on sent les brûlures.
ô faux révélateurs! ô jongleurs! Vos allures
sont louches, et vos pas sont tortueux; l’ effroi,
et non l’ amour, tel est le fond de votre loi;
vous faites grimacer l’ éternelle figure;
vous naissez du sépulcre, et l’ on sent que l’ augure
et le devin son pleins de l’ ombre du tombeau,
et que tous ces rêveurs, compagnons du corbeau,

tous ces fakirs d’ Ombos, de Stamboul et de Rome,
n’ ont pu faire tomber tant de fables sur l’ homme
qu’ en secouant les plis sinistres des linceuls.
Dieu n’ étant aperçu que par les astres seuls,
les penseurs, sachant bien qu’ il est là sous ses voiles,
ont toujours conseillé d’ en croire les étoiles;
Dieu, c’ est un lieu fermé dont l’ aurore a la clé,
et la religion, c’ est le ciel contemplé.
Mais vous ne voulez pas, prêtres, de cette église.
Vous voulez que la terre en votre livre lise
tous vos songes, Moloch, Vénus, ève, Astarté,
au lieu de lire au front des cieux la vérité.
De là la foi changée en crédulité; l’ âme
éclipsant la raison dans une sombre flamme;
de là tant d’ êtres noirs serpentant dans la nuit.
L’ imposture, par qui le vrai temple est détruit,
est un colosse fait d’ un amas de pygmées;
les sauterelles sont d’ effrayantes armées;
ô mages grecs, romains, payens, indous, hébreux,
le genre humain, couvert de rongeurs ténébreux,
sent s’ élargir sur lui vos hordes invisibles;
vous lui faites rêver tous les enfers possibles;
le peuple infortuné voit dans son cauchemar
surgir Torquemada quand disparaît Omar.
Nul répit. Vous aimez les ténèbres utiles,
et vous y rôdez, vils et vainqueurs, ô reptiles!
Sur toute cette terre, en tous lieux, dans les bois,
dans le lit nuptial, dans l’ alcôve des rois,
dans les champs, sous l’ autel sacré, dans la cellule,
ce qui se traîne, couve, éclôt, va, vient, pullule,
c’ est vous. Vous voulez tout, vous savez tout; damner,
bénir, prendre, jurer, tromper, servir, régner,
briller même; ramper n’ empêche pas de luire.
Chuchotement hideux! Je vous entends bruire.
Vous mangez votre proie énorme avec bonheur,
et vous vous appelez entre vous monseigneur.
L’ acarus au ciron doit donner de l’ altesse.

Quelles que soient votre ombre et votre petitesse,
je devine, malgré vos soins pour vous cacher,
que vous êtes sur nous, et je vous sens marcher
comme on sent remuer les mineurs dans la mine,
et je ne puis dormir, tant je hais la vermine!
Vous êtes ce qui hait, ce qui mord, ce qui ment.
Vous êtes l’ implacable et noir fourmillement.
Vous êtes ce prodige affreux, l’ insaisissable.
Qu’ on suppose vivants tous les vils grains de sable,
ce sera vous. Rien, tout. Zéro, des millions.
L’ horreur. Moins que des vers et plus que des lions.
L’ insecte formidable. ô monstrueux contraste!
Pas de nains plus chétifs, pas de pouvoir plus vaste.
L’ univers est à vous, puisque vous l’ emplissez.
Vous possédez les jours futurs, les jours passés,
le temps, l’ éternité, le sommeil, l’ insomnie.
Vous êtes l’ innombrable, et, dans l’ ombre infinie,
fétides, sur nos peaux mêlant vos petits pas,
vous vous multipliez; et je ne comprends pas
dans quel but Dieu livra les empires, le monde,
les âmes, les enfants dressant leur tête blonde,
les temples, les foyers, les vierges, les époux,
l’ homme, à l’ épouvantable immensité des poux.
26 juillet 1874.

LE SIECLE , XXVII

Et les voilà mentant, inventant, misérables!
Les voilà, fronts sans honte et bouches incurables,
calomniant l’ honneur du pays, flétrissant
tous les lutteurs, ceux-ci qui versèrent leur sang,
ceux-ci, plus grands encor, qui, voyant que la flamme
et l’ espoir s’ éteignaient, répandirent leur âme.
Ces maroufles hideux outragent les héros!
Ils lancent au captif, à travers ses barreaux,
au proscrit, à travers son deuil, leur pierre infâme.
Ils offensent la mère, ils insultent la femme;
ils raillent l’ exilé que l’ ombre accable et suit;
ils tâchent d’ ajouter leur noirceur à sa nuit;
ils entassent sur lui d’ affreux réquisitoires;
et si, voyant passer et flotter ces histoires,
vous demandez au cuistre, au conteur, au grimaud :
— croyez-vous tout cela? — moi, dit-il, pas un mot.
— bien. Mais alors pourquoi le dites-vous? — pour rire.
Ah! Les bêtes des bois ne savent pas écrire,
le tigre ne pourrait griffonner un journal,
le renard ne sort pas du confessionnal
et ne saurait narrer la Salette en bon style;
mais au moins l’ aspic siffle en honnête reptile;
si, dans son hurlement candide, affreux, complet,
l’ ours se montre affamé de meurtre, c’ est qu’ il l’ est;
le jaguar ne ment pas et pense ce qu’ il gronde;
il n’ est pas un lion dans la forêt profonde
qui ne soit, dans l’ horreur de son antre fumant,
sincère, et qui ne croie à son rugissement.
Mais, honte et deuil! Ciel noir! Comment faut-il qu’ on nomme
ces scribes qui demain diront d’ un honnête homme :
— je suis son assassin, mais non son ennemi! —
ah! Ces gueux devant qui ma jeunesse eût frémi,

pires que Mérimée et Planche, nains horribles,
ces drôles, que je n’ eusse enfin pas crus possibles
jadis, quand d’ espérance, hélas! Je m’ enivrais,
n’ ont pas la probité d’ être des monstres vrais.

1874, 08, 04

LE SIECLE , XXVIIIAUX PRETRES .

il sied de ressembler aux dieux. Ton dieu, flamine,
dévore ses enfants; ton dieu, mage, extermine;
augure, ton dieu ment; uléma, ton dieu met
la terre sous le sabre impur de Mahomet;
ton dieu, Rome, est l’ agneau, mais il tette la louve;
ô noir dominicain qui rêves, ton dieu trouve
agréable l’ odeur infâme des bûchers;
d’ affreux temples, ayant pour prêtres des bouchers,
sont l’ habitation de ton dieu, corybante;
brahmine, ton dieu sombre aime la nuit tombante;
rabbin, ton dieu maudit la race de Japhet,
et cloue au fond du ciel le soleil stupéfait;
Sabaoth est cruel, Jupiter est immonde,
et pas un dieu ne sait comment est fait le monde;
les peuples ont le choix pour fléchir le genou
entre le monstre Asgar et le monstre Vishnou;
ce dieu brait, celui-là rugit, celui-ci beugle;
c’ est pourquoi l’ idéal de l’ homme est d’ être aveugle,
ténébreux, vil, féroce, ignorant, odieux,
afin d’ être aussi près que possible des dieux.
4 août 1874.

LE SIECLE , XXIX

Muse, un nommé Ségur, évêque, m’ est hostile;
cet homme violet me damne en mauvais style;
sa prose réjouit les hiboux dans leurs trous.
ô Muse, n’ ayons point contre lui de courroux.
Laissons-lui ce joujou qu’ il prend pour un tonnerre,
sa haine. Il est d’ ailleurs à plaindre. Au séminaire,
un jour que ce petit bonhomme plein d’ ennui
bêlait un oremus au hasard devant lui,
comme glousse l’ oison, comme la vache meugle,
il s’ écria : — mon Dieu! Je voudrais être aveugle! —
ne trouvant pas qu’ il fît assez nuit comme ça.
Le bon Dieu, le faisant idiot, l’ exauça.
L’ insulte est aujourd’ hui très perfectionnée.
On prend un peu de suie en une cheminée,
un peu d’ ordure au coin d’ une borne, à l’ égoût
de la fange, et cela tient lieu d’ esprit, de goût,
de bon sens, de syntaxe et d’ honneur; c’ est la mode.
Bons ulémas, tel est le procédé commode
que votre zèle met au service du ciel,
et c’ est avec la bouche écumante de fiel,
avec la diatribe en guise de sourire,
que vous venez, damnant ceux qu’ on n’ ose proscrire,
nous faire vos gros yeux, nous montrer vos gros poings,
nous dire vos gros mots, ô nos chers talapoins!
On vous pardonne. Eh bien, quoi, Ségur m’ exorcise.
Après? Il me maudit d’ une façon concise;
il me peint de son mieux, et voici le pastel
à peu près :—” monstre horrible. On n’ a rien vu de tel.
Informe, épouvantable et ténébreux. Un homme
qui brûlerait Paris et démolirait Rome.
Voluptueux. Un peu le chef des assassins.
Bref, capable de tout. Foulant aux pieds les saints,

les lois, l’ église et Dieu. Ruinant son libraire.”
faisons chorus. Hurler avec le loup, et braire
avec l’ évêque, eh bien, c’ est un droit. Usons-en.
J’ aime en ce noble abbé ce style paysan.
C’ est poissard, c’ est exquis. Bravo. Cela vous plonge
dans une vague extase où l’ on sent le mensonge.
Doux prêtre! On entend rire aux éclats Diderot,
Molière, Rabelais, et l’ on ne sait pas trop,
dans cette vision où le démon chuchote,
si l’ on voit un évêque ayant au dos la hotte
ou bien un chiffonnier ayant la mitre au front.
L’ antienne, quand un peu de bave l’ interrompt,
a du charme; on est prêtre et l’ on a de la bile.
D’ ailleurs, Muse, chacun sur terre a son Zoïle,
et Voltaire a Fréron comme Dante a Cecchi.
Et puis cela se vend. Combien? Six sous. à qui?
Aux sots. C’ est un public. Les mâchoires fossiles
veulent rire; le clan moqueur des imbéciles
veut qu’ on l’ amuse; il est fort nombreux aujourd’ hui;
n’ a-t-il donc pas le droit qu’ on travaille pour lui?
Depuis quand n’ est-il plus permis d’ emplir les cruches?
Tout a son instinct. Comme un frelon vole aux ruches,
comme à Lucrèce au lit court Alexandre six,
comme Corydon suit le charmant Alexis,
comme un loup suit les boucs, et le bouc les cytises,
comme avril fait des fleurs, Ségur fait des sottises.
Il le faut. Muse, il sied que le sage indulgent
rêve, écoute, et devienne un bon homme en songeant,
qu’ il regarde passer les vivants, qu’ il les pèse,
et qu’ au lieu de l’ aigrir, ce spectacle l’ apaise.
Ainsi soit-il. Et puis, allons au fait. Voyons,
suis-je correct? L’ hostie avec tous ses rayons
m’ éblouit-elle autant que le soleil? Ce prêtre
me voit-il le dimanche à sa messe apparaître?
Ai-je même jamais fait semblant de vouloir
lui conter mes péchés tous bas dans son parloir?
Quand suis-je allé chez lui, reniant ma doctrine,

me donner de grands coups de poing dans la poitrine?
Je suis un endurci. Ségur s’ en aperçoit.
Je suis athée au point de douter que Dieu soit
charmé de se chauffer les mains au feu du diable,
qu’ il ait mis l’ incurable et l’ irrémédiable
dans l’ homme, être ignorant, faible, chétif, charnel,
afin d’ en faire hommage au supplice éternel,
qu’ il ait exprès fourré Satan dans la nature,
et qu’ il ait, lui, l’ auteur de toute créature,
pouvant vider l’ enfer et le fermer à clé,
fait un brûleur, afin de créer un brûlé;
que les mille soleils dont là-haut le feu tremble
se mettent un beau jour à tomber tous ensemble,
j’ en doute; et quand je vois, au fond du zénith bleu,
les sept astres de l’ Ourse allumés, je crois peu
que jamais le plafond céleste se délabre
jusqu’ à ne pouvoir plus porter ce candélabre.
Je sais que dans la bible on trouve ce cliché,
la Fin du Monde; mais la science a marché.
Moïse est vieux; est-il sur terre un quadrumane
qui lève au ciel les yeux pour voir pleuvoir la manne?
Je trouve par moments plus d’ esprit, je le dis,
aux singes d’ à présent qu’ aux hommes de jadis.
Pape, Dieu, ce n’ est pas le même personnage.
J’ aime la cathédrale et non le moyen-âge.
Qu’ est-ce qu’ un dogme, un culte, un rite? Un objet d’ art.
Je puis l’ admirer; mais s’ il égare un soudard,
s’ il grise un fou, s’ il tue un homme, je l’ abhorre.
Plus d’ idole! Et j’ oppose à l’ encens l’ ellébore.
Quand une abbesse, à qui quelque nonne déplaît,
lui fait brouter de l’ herbe à côté d’ un mulet,
j’ ose dire que c’ est mal nourrir une femme;
j’ admire un arbre en fleurs plus qu’ un bûcher en flamme;
je suis peu furieux; j’ aime Voltaire enfin
mieux que saint Cupertin et que saint Cucufin,
et je préfère à tout ce que dit saint Pancrace,
saint Loup, saint Labre ou saint Pacôme, un vers d’ Horace.

Tels sont mes goûts. Je suis incorrigible. Et quand
Floréal, comme un chef qui réveille le camp,
met les nids en rumeur, et quand mon vers patauge,
éperdu, dans le thym, la verveine et la sauge,
quand la plaine est en joie, et quand l’ aube est en feu,
je crois tout bonnement, tout bêtement en Dieu.
En même temps j’ ai l’ âme âprement enivrée
du sombre ennui de voir tant d’ hommes en livrée,
tant de deuils, tant de fronts courbés, tant de coeurs bas,
là, tant de lits de pourpre, et là, tant de grabats.
Mon Dieu n’ est ni payen, ni chrétien, ni biblique;
ce Dieu-là, je l’ implore en la douleur publique;
c’ est vers lui que je suis tourné, vieux lutteur las,
quand je crie au milieu des ténèbres : — hélas!
Sur la grève que bat toute la mer humaine,
grève où le flux apporte, où le reflux remmène
les flots hideux jetant l’ écume aux alcyons,
qui donc apportera dans l’ ombre aux nations
ou l’ éclair de Paris ou le rayon de France?
Qui donc rallumera ce phare, l’ espérance? —
donc j’ ai ce grave tort de n’ être point dévot;
je ne le suis pas même au parti qui prévaut;
je n’ aime pas qu’ après la victoire on sévisse;
c’ est affreux, je pardonne; et je suis au service
des vaincus; et, songeant que ma mère aux abois
fut jadis vendéenne, en fuite dans les bois,
j’ ose de la pitié faire la propagande;
je suis le fils brigand d’ une mère brigande.
être clément, c’ est être atroce; ou pour le moins,
stupide. Je le suis, toujours, devant témoins,
partout. Les autres sont les vautours; je suis l’ oie.
Oui, quand la lâcheté publique se déploie,
il me plaît d’ être seul et d’ être le dernier.
Quand le voe victis règne, et va jusqu’ à nier
la quantité de droit qui reste à ceux qui tombent,
quand, nul ne protestant, les principes succombent,
cette fuite de tous m’ attire. Me voilà.

Comment veut-on qu’ un prêtre accepte tout cela!
Novembre.

LE SIECLE , XXX IDOLATRIES ET PHILOSOPHIES .

La philosophie ose escalader le ciel.
Triste, elle est là. Qui donc t’ a bâtie, ô Babel?
Oh! Quel monceau d’ efforts sans but! Quelles spirales
de songes, de leçons, de dogmes, de morales!
Ruche qu’ emplit de bruit et de trouble un amas
de mages, de docteurs, de papes, de lamas!
Masure où l’ hypothèse aux fictions s’ adosse,
ayant pour toit la nuit et pour cave la fosse;
bleus portiques béants sur les immensités,
de tous les tourbillons des rêves visités;
vain fronton que le poids de l’ infini déprime,
espèce de clocher sinistre de l’ abîme
où bourdonnent l’ effroi, la révolte, et l’ essaim
de toutes les erreurs sonnant leur noir tocsin!
Et, comme, de lueurs confusément semées,
par les brèches d’ un toit s’ exhalent des fumées,
les doctrines, les lois et les religions,
ce qu’ aujourd’ hui l’ on croit, ce qu’ hier nous songions,
tout ce qu’ inventa l’ homme, autel, culte ou système,
par tous les soupiraux de l’ édifice blême,
à travers la noirceur du ciel morne et profond,
toutes les visions du genre humain s’ en vont,
éparses, en lambeaux, par les vents dénouées,
dans un dégorgement livide de nuées.
Temple, atelier, tombeau, l’ édifice fait peur.
On veut prendre une pierre, on touche une vapeur.
Nul n’ a pu l’ achever. Pas de cycle ni d’ âge
qui n’ ait mis son échelle au sombre échafaudage.
Qui donc habite là? C’ est tombé, c’ est debout;
c’ est de l’ énormité qui tremble et se dissout;
une maison de nuit que le vide dilate.
Pyrrhon y verse l’ eau sur les mains de Pilate;

le doute y rôde et fait le tour du cabanon
où Descartes dit oui pendant qu’ Hobbes dit non;
les générations sous le gouffre des portes
roulent, comme, l’ hiver, des tas de feuilles mortes;
les escaliers, sans fin montés et descendus,
sont pleins de cris, d’ appels, de pas sourds et perdus
et d’ un fourmillement de chimères rampantes;
des oiseaux effrayants volent dans les charpentes;
c’ est Bouddha, Mahomet, Luther disant : allez!
Lucrèce, Spinosa, tous les noirs sphinx ailés!
Tout l’ homme est sculpté là. Socrate, Pythagore,
Malebranche, Thalès, Platon aux yeux d’ aurore,
combinent l’ idéal pendant que Swift, Timon,
ésope et Rabelais pétrissent le limon.
Est-il jour? Est-il nuit? Dans l’ affreux crépuscule
le rhéteur grimaçant ricane et gesticule;
on ne sait quel reflet d’ un funèbre orient
blanchit les torses nus des cyniques riant,
et des sages, jetant des ombres de satyres;
le devin rêve et tord dans les cordes des lyres
le laurier vert mêlé de smilax éternel.
Chaque porche entr’ ouvert découvre un noir tunnel
dont l’ extrémité montre une idéale étoile;
comme si, — tu le sais, isis au triple voile, —
ces antres de science et ces puits de raison,
souterrains de l’ esprit humain, sans horizon,
sans air, sans flamme, ayant le doute pour pilastre,
employaient de la nuit à faire éclore un astre,
et le mensonge impur, difforme, illimité,
vaste, aveugle, à bâtir la blanche vérité!
Partout au vrai le faux, lierre hideux, s’ enlace;
pas de dogme qui n’ ait son point faible, et ne lasse
une cariatide, un support, un étai;
Thèbe a pour appui l’ Inde, et l’ Inde le Cathay;
Memphis pèse sur Delphe, et Genève sur Rome;
et, végétation du sombre esprit de l’ homme,
on voit, courbés d’ un souffle à de certains moments,

croître entre les créneaux des hauts entablements
des arbres monstrueux et vagues dont les tiges
frissonnent dans l’ azur lugubre des vertiges.
Et de ces arbres noirs par instants tombe un fruit
à la foule des mains ouvertes dans la nuit;
quel fruit? Demande au vent qui hurle et se déchaîne!
Quel fruit? Le fruit d’ erreur. Quel fruit? Le fruit de haine;
la pomme d’ ève avec la pomme de Vénus.
ô tour! Construction des maçons inconnus!
Elle monte, elle monte, et monte, et monte encore,
encore, et l’ on dirait que le ciel la dévore;
et tandis que tout sage ou fou qui passe met
une pierre de plus à son brumeux sommet,
sans cesse par la base elle croule et s’ effondre
dans l’ ombre où Satan vient avec Dieu se confondre;
gouffre où l’ on n’ entend rien que le vent qui poursuit
ces deux larves au fond d’ un tremblement de nuit!

LE SIECLE , XXXI

Le viel esprit de nuit, d’ ignorance et de haine
des clous de Jésus-Christ forge à l’ homme une chaîne,
change l’ enfant candide et pur en nain vieillot,
lie au bûcher Jean Huss et Morus au billot,
frappe de sa férule Horace, et, si Voltaire
et Rousseau font du bruit en classe, il les fait taire.
Il donne sur les doigts au bon Dieu stupéfait.
Il refroidit les fronts que l’ aube réchauffait,
il insulte le ciel dans la femme, et le nie
dans l’ astre, dans la fleur, dans l’ art, dans le génie.
L’ éteignoir sur les yeux, la torche au poing, boudeur,
sournois, pédant, féroce, il aspire l’ odeur
de la pensée éteinte et de la chair brûlée.
Il fait mettre à genoux le vieillard Galilée
sur la terre qui tourne et devant le soleil.
Sur l’ oeil qui veut s’ ouvrir il verse le sommeil.
Il tient dans ses dents l’ âme humaine, et la grignote.
Il inspire Nisard, Veuillot, Planche, Nonotte,
laisse derrière lui tout coeur mort et glacé,
et l’ herbe ne croît plus où son âne a passé.

LE SIECLE , XXXII

Parfois c’ est un devoir de féconder l’ horreur.
Il convient qu’ un feu sombre éclaire un empereur.
J’ ai fait Les Châtiments. J’ ai dû faire ce livre.
Moi que toute blancheur et toute grâce enivre,
je me suis approché de la haine à regret.
J’ ai senti qu’ il fallait, quand l’ honneur émigrait,
mettre au-dessus du crime, en une ombre sereine,
le resplendissement farouche de la peine,
et j’ ai fait flamboyer ce livre dans les cieux.
Haïr m’ est dur. Mais quoi! Lorsqu’ un séditieux
interrompt du progrès les glorieuses tâches,
tue un peuple, et devient l’ infâme dieu des lâches,
il faut qu’ une lueur s’ allume au firmament.
J’ ai donc mis des rayons dans un livre inclément;
j’ ai soulevé du mal l’ immense et triste voile;
j’ ai violé la nuit pour lui faire une étoile.
26 mars.

1875, 05, 30

LE SIECLE , XXXIII

c’ est bien; puisqu’ au sénat, puisqu’ à la pourriture,
tu poses, calme, altier, fier, ta candidature,
puisque tu tends la main à l’ argent de César,
puisque ta conscience est cotée au bazar,
puisque tu prends ton rang dans la honte infinie,
ne te gêne pas, jette au peuple l’ ironie.
être le serviteur de l’ ennemi public,
avoir les torsions souples du basilic,
vendre aux dévots hautains des bassesses athées,
disperser dans les vents des choses effrontées,
offrir ta rhétorique abjecte à tout venant,
collaborer dans l’ ombre au crime rayonnant,
baver, salir, avoir l’ affront pour camarade,
être un sauteur de plus dans cette mascarade,
c’ est ce que maintenant tu peux faire de mieux.
Ainsi, quand la passante aux bras blancs, aux doux yeux,
qui fut femme d’ honneur, se fait fille de joie,
quand elle est devenue un fumier, une proie,
un sein qui la nuit s’ offre à qui veut l’ acheter,
elle n’ a plus qu’ à rire, à danser, à chanter,
et qu’ à se divertir jusqu’ à ce qu’ elle tombe
charogne à l’ hôpital et spectre dans la tombe.
30 mai 1875.

LE SIECLE , XXXIV

Il faut agir, il faut marcher, il faut vouloir.
Mais songer comme un turc et dormir comme un loir,
aller aux champs, au bois, au bal, puis chez les filles,
ce n’ est point la façon de sauver nos familles,
de relever nos droits, de redresser nos fronts,
et de porter remède au mal que nous souffrons.
On a la chaîne au cou, mais des fleurs sur la tête;
on rêve l’ âge d’ or antique de la bête
où tout était charmant pourvu qu’ on s’ accouplât;
on est spirituel, on est jeune, on est plat.
Oh! Que de lâchetés! Oh! L’ abjecte débauche
où la chute du peuple et de l’ homme s’ ébauche!
Cela ne sert à rien de faire les vainqueurs.
Ah! La mort du pays suit le sommeil des coeurs.
Le devoir est un dieu qui ne veut point d’ athée.
Je dis que la patrie auguste est souffletée,
que ce n’ est point l’ instant des jeux, mais des combats,
et que, lorsqu’ on aura mis le tyran à bas
et la loi sur le trône, il sera temps de rire.
Réveillez-vous! Je dis que la patrie expire,
que cette mère, hélas, dont j’ écoute les cris,
a besoin de Brutus et non de Sybaris,
qu’ il lui faut plus de fronts sévères et moroses,
plus de bras étreignant des glaives, moins de roses,
et que voilà pourquoi, moi, ployé par les ans,
sur la place publique, au milieu des passants,
en face du soleil sacré qui nous éclaire,
j’ apporte ma vieille âme et ma vieille colère!

1871, 06, 17

LE SIECLE , XXXV

Paris, le grand Paris agonise. Je pense
qu’ à l’ heure où tant de sang à grands flots se dépense,
avant de dire : un homme a fui, c’ est un gueusard!
Avant de mettre au banc des peuples au hasard
tous ces vaincus, traqués comme des loups dans l’ ombre,
on doit attendre; on doit peser le lieu, le nombre,
le temps, l’ évènement, la fièvre, l’ attentat.
Je le dis à messieurs les bonshommes d’ état,
car, fût-on grand au point de s’ appeler Cornesse,
pour qu’ on voie et qu’ on juge, il faut que le jour naisse,
et, même eût-on l’ honneur d’ être Anethan, il sied
d’ épargner au lion mourant le coup de pied.
Je dis cela. J’ ai tort. C’ est évident. Bruxelle
est une grande ville et dans son sein recèle
des talents variés sur tous les instruments,
des virtuoses fins, spirituels, charmants,
d’ oû coule l’ harmonie ainsi qu’ un flot de l’ urne,
et ces musiciens m’ ont offert un nocturne.
L’ exploit fera la place illustre désormais.
Ce fut exquis. On prit l’ heure où je m’ endormais;
et chaque faune avait amené sa bacchante.
J’ étais sans armes, seul; ils n’ étaient que cinquante;
et même on n’ est pas sûr qu’ ils fussent tous armés.
Ils ont livré bataille à mes volets fermés,
m’ ont jeté des hoquets et m’ ont lancé des pierres.
De mes petits-enfants je baisais les paupières,
pour qu’ ils eussent moins peur de ce fracas joyeux;
c’ était un ouragan de cailloux furieux.
Les coups au mur après les cris : à la lanterne!
Grondaient, comme la flûte avec le fifre alterne
Mort! à mort! Ainsi hurle un essaim de dragons.
D’ affreux chocs ébranlaient la porte sur ses gonds.
— qu’ il meure! — dans les bois, solitude commode,
ce genre de gaîté fut jadis à la mode.

Schinderhanne a donné de ces charivaris.
Aimable fête! Aussi, vous le voyez, j’ en ris.
Certe, il faudrait que j’ eusse une humeur bien sinistre
pour vouloir qu’ un nommé Kerwyn, fils d’ un ministre,
soit dérangé, s’ il plaît à ce jeune héros
de me casser la tête en brisant mes carreaux,
et pour ne pas comprendre, en cet antre où j’ habite,
que le gendarme est pris de surdité subite
et que le doux sommeil engourdit les sergents
quand un crime est commis par les honnêtes gens.
17 juin 1871, Vianden.

1871, 09, 20

LE SIECLE , XXXVI

soit, c’ est dit. Tout n’ est plus qu’ une cendre qui vole.
La révolution française est une folle,
une drôlesse, à qui Bruxelles dit : va-t’ en!
Danton est empoigné par monsieur d’ Anethan
et Robespierre est pris au collet par Cornesse;
on met Paris au poste ainsi qu’ une ivrognesse;
nous sommes un troupeau de moutons qui n’ est bon
qu’ à suivre son berger et son boucher Bourbon;
depuis quatre cents ans l’ esprit humain radote.
Qu’ est-ce que le progrès? Une vieille anecdote.
Nous nous sommes repus de chimères; le vrai,
c’ est Sanchez en morale, en finances Terray;
la guillotine est bien, la potence est meilleure;
ce que nous appelons conscience est un leurre;
Dieu parle dans le dogme et non dans la raison;
le confessionnal nous offre sa cloison,
collons-y notre oreille et soyons imbéciles,
c’ est le salut. Faisons vers les hommes fossiles
le plus que nous pourrons de pas à reculons.
Le vrai but resplendit derrière nos talons;
c’ est le passé, le trône et l’ autel, l’ ignorance.
Déshabituons-nous de ce grand mot : la France.
Le pape a décrété qu’ il est Dieu; donc il l’ est.
L’ esprit, qui de Paris sur le monde soufflait,
semait de la folie aux quatre vents éparse;
les droits de l’ homme sont une assez triste farce;
le monarque est le char, le peuple est le pavé;
nous n’ avons rien créé, nous n’ avons rien trouvé;
à nos inventions mettons le bonnet d’ âne;
Molière n’ est qu’ un drôle, et Tartuffe le damne;
Jean-Jacque est un croquant, Voltaire est un grimaud,
et Trublet, Patouillet, Pluche, ont le dernier mot.
Altwies, 20 septembre 1871.

1874, 12, 13

LE SIECLE , XXXVII

je suis haï. Pourquoi? Parce que je défends
les faibles, les vaincus, les petits, les enfants.
Je suis calomnié. Pourquoi? Parce que j’ aime
les bouches sans venin, les coeurs sans stratagème.
Le bonze aux yeux baissés m’ abhorre avec ferveur,
mais qu’ est-ce que cela me fait, à moi rêveur?
Je sens au fond des cieux quelqu’ un qui voit mon âme;
cela suffit. Le flot ne brise point la rame,
le vent ne brise pas l’ aile, l’ adversité
ne brise pas l’ esprit qui va vers la clarté.
Je vois en moi l’ erreur tomber et le jour croître;
je sens grandir le temple et s’ écrouler le cloître.
Rien de fermé. Le ciel ouvert. L’ étoile à nu.
L’ idole disparaît, Dieu vient. C’ est l’ inconnu,
mais le certain. Je sens dans mon âme ravie
la dilatation superbe de la vie,
et la sécurité du fond vrai sous mes pas.
L’ abri pour le sommeil, le pain pour le repas,
je les trouve. D’ ailleurs les heures passent vite.
Quelquefois on me suit, quelquefois on m’ évite;
je vais. Souvent mes pieds sont las, mon coeur jamais.
Le juste, — hélas, je saigne, où sont ceux que j’ aimais? —
sent qu’ il va droit au but quand au hasard il marche.
Je suis, comme jadis l’ antique patriarche,
penché sur une énigme où j’ aperçois du jour.
Je crie à l’ ombre immense : Amour! Amour! Amour!
Je dis : espère et crois, qui que tu sois qui souffres!
Je sens trembler sous moi l’ arche du pont des gouffres;
pourtant je passerai, j’ en suis sûr. Avançons.
Par moments la forêt penche tous ses frissons
sur ma tête, et la nuit m’ attend dans les bois traîtres;
je suis proscrit des rois, je suis maudit des prêtres;
je ne sais pas un mois d’ avance où je serai
le mois suivant, l’ orage étant démesuré;

puis l’ azur reparaît, l’ azur que rien n’ altère;
ma route, blanche au ciel, est noire sur la terre;
je subis tour à tour tous les vents de l’ exil;
j’ ai contre moi quiconque est fort, quiconque est vil;
ceux d’ en bas, ceux d’ en haut pour m’ abattre s’ unissent;
mais qu’ importe! Parfois des berceaux me bénissent,
l’ homme en pleurs me sourit, le firmament est bleu,
et faire son devoir est un droit. Gloire à Dieu!
13 décembre 1874.

1871, 06

LE SIECLE , XXXVIII

oui, vous avez raison, je suis un imbécile.
Le ciel qui cache au fond des antres de Sicile
la flûte de Moschus, chère aux échos profonds,
livre Arioste au vol fantasque des griffons,
et fait dialoguer le prophète avec l' aigle,
ce grand ciel d' où sur nous descend l' ombre et la règle,
m' avait créé pensif, de sorte que j' avais
l' oeil fixé sur la route incertaine où je vais,
et que je n' étais guère autre chose qu' un homme
attendri, de colère et de haine économe,
vieux par les souvenirs, jeune par les penchants,
fait pour la vénérable allégresse des champs.
Mais en même temps j' ai, comme Eschyle, deux âmes,
l' une où croissent les fleurs, l' autre où couvent les flammes;
Théocrite en mon coeur rencontre d' Aubigné;
ce qui fait que parfois j' ai, d' un oeil indigné,
regardé, dans ce siècle ainsi que dans l' histoire,
cette méchanceté qu' on nomme la victoire.
Ma pente est de bénir dans l' enfer les maudits.
Et vous me raillez. Soit. Eh bien, je vous le dis,
je ne me repens point. Je trouve bon, limpide,
consolant, honorable et doux, d' être stupide.
être inepte me plaît, me charme et me sourit,
puisque je vois comment sont faits les gens d' esprit.
Je suis de mon plein gré rentré dans la tempête.
Oui, rarement on eut l' audace d' être bête
à ce point, et mon deuil comprend votre gaîté;
j' étais en terre ferme, au port, en sûreté;
j' ai vu des naufragés qui s' enfonçaient dans l' ombre,
sans aide, et j' ai sauté sur le vaisseau qui sombre,
aimant mieux leur malheur que votre joie à tous,
et périr avec eux que régner avec vous.

Juin 1871.

LE SIECLE , XXXIX

Puisque je suis étrange au milieu de la ville,
puisque je veux la vie amère et jamais vile,
puisque je me dévoue avec stupidité;
puisqu’ improvisant tout, j’ ai tout prémédité,
n’ ayant d’ autres éclairs que ceux de mon cratère,
et ne parlant qu’ après avoir voulu me taire;
puisque je déraisonne à ce point de penser
que l’ ouragan ne doit rugir que pour bercer,
que la victoire aimante est la seule victoire,
qu’ un lever d’ astre plaît à la nuit la plus noire,
et qu’ un peu de clémence est nécessaire après
la sanglante arquebuse et les noirs couperets;
puisque j’ ose affirmer je ne sais quelles règles
d’ apaisement des vents, que connaissent les aigles,
mais que jamais Néron ni Séjan ne comprit;
puisqu’ assez de folie entre dans mon esprit
pour que j’ en vienne à dire aux hommes qu’ ils sont frères,
qu’ ils ont le même but, malgré les flots contraires,
que tout, sur terre, au ciel, là-haut comme ici-bas,
les tempêtes, les chocs furieux, les combats,
tout doit, les profondeurs étant des harmonies,
s’ évanouir dans l’ ombre en douceurs infinies;
puisque je crois que l’ homme est meilleur, pardonné;
puisque je m’ attendris au cri d’ un nouveau-né
à qui l’ exil, voleur féroce, a pris son père;
puisque je dis qu’ il faut, pour que l’ état prospère,
civiliser le riche autant que l’ indigent,
qu’ il faut panser l’ ulcère, et qu’ il est moins urgent
de punir les effets que de guérir les causes;
puisque je perds mon temps à répéter ces choses,
et puisqu’ on ne veut pas même en faire l’ essai,
laissez-moi retourner à mon noir Guernesey.
Là point de lâcheté, là point de bâtardise;
là je pense, et ne vois rien qui me contredise,

et librement je marche et respire, et je vis,
le grand océan sombre étant de mon avis.
27 juillet.

1875, 06, 02

LE SIECLE , XL

ainsi nous n’ avons plus Strasbourg, nous n’ avons plus
Metz, la chaste maison des vieux Francs chevelus!
Ces villes, ces cités, déesses crénelées,
ce teuton nous les a tranquillement volées!
Ainsi le Chasseur Noir a ces captives-là!
Ainsi ce cavalier monstrueux, Attila,
horrible, les attache aux arçons de sa selle;
à l’ un pend l’ héroïne, à l’ autre la pucelle!
Et les voilà, râlant dans le carcan de fer,
Metz où régna Clovis, Strasbourg d’ où vint Kléber!
Le vautour a ces monts et ces prés sous son aile!
Et tout cela pourtant, c’ est la France éternelle!
C’ est à nous, ce Haut-Rhin où la Gaule apparaît!
J’ en atteste l’ été, le printemps, la forêt,
les astres toujours purs, les roses toujours neuves
et le ruissellement d’ émeraudes des fleuves!
J’ en atteste l’ épi doré, le nid d’ oiseau,
et le petit enfant qui, nu dans son berceau,
joue avec son pied rose en attendant la France!
J’ en atteste l’ oeil bleu de la sainte espérance,
l’ honneur, le droit, l’ autel où l’ on prie à genoux,
cette Lorraine et cette Alsace, c’ est à nous!
Là rêva Gutenberg, là se dressa Lothaire;
ce ciel est notre azur, ce champ est notre terre;
nous nous sommes laissé prendre ces grands pays!
Nous, France! En même temps nous sommes envahis
par le prêtre, et flairés par la louve romaine!
Ainsi nous subissons la schlague qui nous mène!
Ainsi nous acceptons sur nous le traînement
du syllabus gothique et du sabre allemand!
Ainsi nous permettons au reître, au bonze, au cuistre,
de reclouer sur nous le grand linceul sinistre,
l’ ignorance, l’ erreur, le mensonge et la nuit!
Ainsi l’ immense aurore aux cieux s’ évanouit!

Ainsi, pourvu qu’ il ait au poing de l’ eau bénite,
pourvu qu’ après avoir fui devant le samnite,
il dresse un sombre glaive à la gloire inconnu,
le premier misérable imbécile venu
peut nous crier : paix là, vous tous! Gare à qui bouge!
Mais nos pères auraient mordu dans du fer rouge!
2 juin 1875.

1870, 06, 06

LE SIECLE , XLI

qui que tu sois qui tiens un peuple dans ta main,
sultan, czar pseudo-grec, césar pseudo-romain,
roi pour rire, empereur pour pleurer, Claude ou Jacques,
bonjour. Prospère, mange et règne, et fais tes pâques.
Je ne conteste pas ton prestige, et l’ émoi
que cause aux bonnes gens Ta Majesté. Pour moi,
quand dans la rue un roi, que sa garde enveloppe,
doré, superbe, orné de sabres nus, galope,
ma foi, je tourne moins la tête que si c’ est
Lise qui passe avec une rose au corset;
mais c’ est un goût bizarre, et tous les autres hommes
admirent qui leur fait payer de grosses sommes.
Donc sois heureux. Jouis du droit qu’ on a d’ abord
d’ avaler son voisin si l’ on est le plus fort;
va! Dans la probité des princes rien n’ accroche;
leur conscience auguste et sainte est une poche
si grande qu’ il y tient un royaume, et qu’ on peut
y fourrer tout un peuple et dessus faire un noeud,
et saisir Oldenbourg, Nassau, Hambourg, Hanovre,
d’ un tour de main, avec le riche, avec le pauvre,
avec châteaux, budgets et millions, avec
prêtres et sénateurs, le Te Deum au bec.
Par-dessus le marché, vous êtes un grand homme.
C’ est fait. Bandit, fi donc! C’ est héros qu’ on vous nomme.
Prenez Francfort, ou bien Venise avec Saint-Marc.
Ce qui fut Metternich est aujourd’ hui Bismarck;
Tibère est un lion dont Séjan est la griffe.
Puisque le maître est grand, qu’ importe l’ escogriffe.
Tout est bien. Hurrah! Prince! Aie un casque pointu.
Flanque au bagne l’ honneur, la gloire, la vertu;
ôte à ceux-ci leur droit, à ceux-là leur patrie;
complète ta grandeur par de la Sibérie;
soit. Mais aie à l’ esprit ceci présent, mon cher.
En même temps qu’ on est de marbre, on est de chair.

Parfois on est un monstre en croyant être un ange,
mais, quoi qu’ on fasse, on est un homme. Chose étrange,
un roi, cela vieillit, même un roi fort puissant.
Les rois ont des poumons, de la bile, du sang,
un coeur, qui le croirait? Et même des entrailles;
la fièvre avant l’ émeute a fréquenté Versailles;
le ventre peut manquer de respect; les boyaux
osent mal digérer les aliments royaux;
bons rois! Dieu joue avec leur majesté contrite;
dans la toute-puissance il a mis la gastrite;
il faut bien l’ avouer, dût en frémir d’ Hozier,
ainsi que les dindons, les rois ont un gésier;
Louis le Grand avait un anus; on constate
quelquefois, chez César lui-même, une prostate;
Charles neuf, faible et mou comme un jonc sous le vent,
fut par les vers de terre habité tout vivant.
Or les sages pensifs font remarquer aux princes
qu’ il est toujours aisé d’ empoigner des provinces,
mais qu’ un roi ne peut prendre, en eût-il grand besoin,
un muscle de son râble au crocheteur du coin.
Un césar souvent porte, à son dos qui cahote,
son empire moins bien qu’ un chiffonnier sa hotte,
mais il ferait tuer ses preux jusqu’ au dernier
avant de conquérir les reins du chiffonnier.
Majesté, vous aurez plutôt Rome, la Chine,
l’ Inde, qu’ une vertèbre ou deux de son échine.
La migraine se plaît sous les couronnes d’ or;
malgré l’ huissier de garde au fond du corridor,
elle entre. Trop d’ azote et pas assez d’ ozone,
c’ est assez pour qu’ allant du Gange à l’ Amazone,
le choléra-morbus s’ abatte à plomb sur vous;
l’ effrayant typhus passe, il rend les hommes fous,
vous êtes empereur, mais gare tout de même.
Vous dites : je suis presque un Alexandre. On m’ aime!
Eh bien, même Campaspe et même éphestion
n’ ont pas à votre place une indigestion.
C’ est doux d’ avoir, avec des vins à pleine amphore,

des femmes plus que n’ a de vagues le Bosphore;
sérails et festins sont charmants, et malfaisants.
Les gens de Géorgie apportent tous les ans
une vierge au sultan, c’ est une politesse;
mais ne peuvent, hélas, quand même sa hautesse
daignerait les rouer de coups de nerf de boeuf,
avec la viande fraîche offrir l’ estomac neuf.
On crache, on tousse, même en la plus haute sphère.
La nature est parfois insolente. Qu’ y faire?
On est le grand passant d’ Arcole et d’ Iéna;
on est le cavalier de la victoire; on a
pour soleil Austerlitz et pour ombre Brumaire,
si bien que Juvénal vous prend aux mains d’ Homère;
cela n’ empêche pas le sternum d’ exister.
Qui frappe? C’ est la mort qui vient vous débotter,
sire. On a beau régner, se faire un entourage
de trompettes, d’ encens, de fumée et d’ orage;
on a beau se coiffer de lauriers sur les sous,
avoir sous soi le peuple en paysans dissous,
être le criméen, l’ africain, le dacique,
s’ asseoir sur l’ aigle ainsi que le Jupin classique,
se loger au Kremlin, vivre à l’ Escurial,
au moment où l’ on est le plus impérial,
à l’ heure où l’ on remplit de son nom les deux pôles,
voilà qu’ on est poussé dehors par les épaules.
à rien ne sert d’ aller se cacher dans des trous.
Dieu vient. On perd sa peine à fermer les verrous.
Ce fâcheux-là n’ est point un de ceux qu’ on évite.
Hélas, mon prince, on meurt brutalement et vite.
Il suffit d’ un cheval emporté, d’ un gravier
dans le flanc, d’ une porte entr’ ouverte en janvier,
d’ un rétrécissement du canal de l’ urètre,
pour qu’ au lieu d’ une fille on voie entrer un prêtre.
H.. -H.. — 6 juin 1870.

LE SIECLE , XLII DIEU ECLABOUSSE PAR ZOÏLE .

Ah çà, si nous disions un peu son fait à Dieu?
Son oeuvre n’ a ni fin, ni tête, ni milieu.
L’ imagination de ce faiseur s’ épuise.
Sa meule tourne usant ce qu’ on dit qu’ elle aiguise.
Il se répète; il est au bout de son rouleau.
Quoi de plus vain que l’ air! Quoi de plus plat que l’ eau!
L’ hiver est blanc et vieux; l’ aurore est vieille et rose;
on croit qu’ il renouvelle, il fait la même chose;
toujours la même forme en ses oeuvres s’ épand;
l’ arbre est un hérisson, le fleuve est un serpent;
la lune jaune accuse, en copiant l’ orange,
une stérilité d’ invention étrange;
c’ est morne. Essayez donc de le tirer un peu
de son flot toujours vert, de son ciel toujours bleu!
La face du liard au revers est pareille;
le narcisse est un oeil, l’ épilobe, une oreille.
Ce monde est un immense opéra rococo,
doré par le reflet et rhythmé par l’ écho;
un ange endiablerait dans sa philosophie
d’ écouter le plain-chant que la forêt solfie;
le Léman n’ en dit pas plus long que l’ érié;
depuis des milliers d’ ans, Dieu n’ a point varié
la gamme du bouvreuil, du geai, de la linotte;
son vieux fou d’ ouragan n’ a qu’ une seule note;
sa musique est toujours comme au temps d’ Agénor;
en vain le rossignol, infortuné ténor,
dans l’ espoir de changer sa vieille cavatine,
interroge et poursuit d’ un regard qui s’ obstine
ce triste Dieu caché dans le trou du souffleur.
Mai porte à son chapeau toujours la même fleur.
Le destin, chausse-trape usée à la charnière,
s’ ouvre et se clôt toujours de la même manière.

Et la vie, où l’ espoir avorte et se morfond,
n’ est qu’ une boîte avec la mort pour double fond.
L’ histoire est un vieux thème usé dès Hérodote;
Dieu ne la refait pas, mon cher, il la radote;
il recrépit Tibère, il replâtre Néron;
il ressouffle la guerre avec son vieux clairon;
il livre, avec un tas de détails parasites,
aux russes Bonaparte ou Darius aux scythes;
pas un crime qui n’ ait été cent fois commis;
il pétrit Catherine avec Sémiramis;
il fait resservir Claude et Pilate; il retape
Caïn dans Borgia quand il lui faut un pape;
ce Louis quinze était à Londres Charles deux;
sous le nom de Cambyse Attila fut hideux;
Hicétas reparaît dans Galilée. En somme,
Dieu n’ a qu’ un seul patron sur lequel il fait l’ hommme;
il laisse de ses mains le monde informe choir;
il n’ a pas le moyen de changer d’ ébauchoir,
et c’ est toujours avec la même terre glaise
qu’ il fabrique une juive ou qu’ il crée une anglaise.
J’ ai vu le premier homme et j’ attends le second.
Dieu se trompe s’ il croit prouver qu’ il est fécond
parce qu’ il tire Adam à beaucoup d’ exemplaires.
Sur un profil, les pleurs, sur l’ autre, les colères.
C’ est toujours la victime et toujours le tyran.
Son Arcturus ressemble à son Aldebaran;
un juif du moins vous rogne ou vous dore une piastre;
lui n’ a pas encor pu remettre à neuf un astre!
Il faut pour admirer que l’ homme soit têtu.
Voilà ce que fait Dieu. Quand donc finiras-tu,
entre l’ endroit terrible et l’ envers ridicule,
de regarder toujours le même crépuscule,
ô création pauvre, ayant à tes deux bouts
les soleils ronds des cieux, les yeux ronds des hiboux!
Je déclare ton Dieu fini. Vois! Monotone
quand, zéphyr, il roucoule, et quand, bourrasque, il tonne,
rajustant l’ ancien cadre aux anciens horizons,

il n’ a que quatre vents et que quatre saisons.
Vieux grand-père en enfance, il ne sait qu’ une fable.
Et dans tous les recoins de son oeuvre ineffable,
dans son éclair qui n’ est que du rayon cassé,
dans la mare stagnante au fond de tout fossé,
dans le perroquet vide et bavard comme l’ homme,
dans ève et dans Vénus cueillant la même pomme,
dans la fumée aussi vague que le brouillard,
dans le dindon pleureur et dans l’ âne braillard,
dans les orangs-outangs autrefois troglodytes,
dans le cygne pareil au lys, que de redites!
L’ Auvergne et ses volcans s’ éteignent; au verso
expirent Ténériffe et le Chimborazo;
à force de cracher toujours le même soufre,
l’ Hékla meurt; le Gibel est au fond de son gouffre;
Vésuve époumoné n’ est qu’ un essoufflement.
Dans la bête hurlant toujours son hurlement,
dans le flux et reflux rongeant toujours sa digue,
dans le temps, dans l’ espace, on sent de la fatigue.
La mer poussive jette un sanglot décrépit;
son antique courroux n’ est plus qu’ un vieux dépit,
et sa tempête a pris la forme d’ un catarrhe.
Comme on voit pendre au mur un spectre de guitare,
la vieille poésie, où l’ amour a vingt ans,
frissonne dans le vide avec le vieux printemps.
Dieu regarde tourner la nature, machine
qu’ il domine, accroupi comme un magot de Chine;
et cela va si mal et c’ est si mal bâclé
qu’ on dirait par moments qu’ il a perdu la clé.
Quelque jour l’ araignée emplira de ses toiles
l’ horloge du matin, du soir et des étoiles,
et le bien, et le mal, et le sort, noirs bahuts
mal emboîtés, mal peints, mal cloués, mal fichus.
Vois! L’ azur est ridé, l’ aube tousse et grelotte;
la jeunesse éternelle est à la fin vieillotte;
le chant du point du jour chevrote quelque peu.
Juillet caduc voudrait s’ asseoir au coin du feu;

le bonhomme janvier geint, et sans verve épanche
la neige qui jaunit de l’ ennui d’ être blanche;
floréal est fané, passé, mangé des vers.
Ce sont des lieux communs que ces bocages verts
où vient nicher la grive, où vient glapir la caille;
la rose au frais bouton n’ est plus qu’ une antiquaille.
Les grands nuages sont d’ informes arrosoirs;
et le haut firmament, sombre pourpre des soirs,
rideau des arcs-en-ciel, déployant sur l’ abîme
ses constellations, épouvante du crime,
et ses nuits dont les yeux semblent tout épier,
est une loque à pendre au clou chez le fripier.
Ce monde, chaque jour plus gothique et plus trouble,
s’ embourbe plus avant dans l’ ombre qui redouble;
l’ homme en entend crier les joints, craquer les ais;
et les religions attellent sans succès
l’ éléphant de Brahma, le boeuf Apis, la bête
que saint Jean vit ayant sept cornes sur la tête,
et le cheval Pégase et la jument Borak
à ce noir chariot chargé de bric-à-brac!
Dieu ne fait de l’ effet qu’ en forçant les contrastes.
Son univers, malgré des détails assez vastes,
n’ est qu’ un long cliquetis au fond très puéril;
le blanc, le noir; le jour, la nuit; décembre, avril;
Salomon et Piron déclamant la même ode;
le cygne et le corbeau; Marc-Aurèle et Commode;
vice, vertu; la course effarée et le mors;
la rumeur des vivants, le silence des morts;
que tout crie et pérore! Assez, que tout se taise!
Je voudrais bien le voir sortir de l’ antithèse.
On sourit dès qu’ on met à nu le procédé.
Heureusement pour Dieu que Planche est décédé;
comme il vous donnerait, car c’ était là sa tâche,
sur les doigts de ce bon Jéhovah qui rabâche!
Quoi! Toujours ce poëme insipide des champs,
des halliers, des ruisseaux, et des vallons penchants,
plus usé qu’ un trumeau du bonhomme Natoire!

Quoi! L’ été, puis l’ hiver! Toujours ce répertoire!
Toujours le même loup montrant les mêmes dents!
Toujours ce vieux joujou des vents, des flots grondants!
Ce casse-tête horrible et niais tout ensemble
de la chose qui n’ est jamais ce qu’ elle semble,
où Dieu bande les yeux à l’ homme, où ce vieillard
avec Adam perdu joue à colin-maillard!
Toujours l’ illusion d’ optique qui vous frappe!
Le ciel qui sans bouger remue, et cette attrape
du soleil qui se lève et ne se lève pas!
Quoi! Toujours le cloaque au sortir du repas,
l’ humanité tirée en bas par la nature,
et le vomissement après la nourriture!
Mais le moindre grimaud qui porte la primeur
de ce que sa caboche enfante, à l’ imprimeur,
après s’ être gratté sa stupide perruque,
après s’ être empoigné de ses deux mains la nuque,
un rimeur de deux sous, un bêlître, un poussah,
un goîtreux, trouverait autre chose que ça!
Il est temps que ce Dieu repeigne et revernisse
le pré que six mille ans a brouté la génisse;
qu’ il blanchisse le lys, et qu’ il mette des freins
aux anciens vents hurlant leurs antiques refrains;
qu’ il change de l’ oiseau la chanson coutumière,
et qu’ il redore au fond du ciel noir la lumière.
Sa machine est connue et c’ est un grand défaut.
Oui, s’ il veut qu’ on le prenne au sérieux, il faut
qu’ il renouvelle, arrange, et radoube, et refasse
son univers, moyens et but, fond et surface,
son froid printemps qui fait sans cesse un faux serment,
ses édens, ses enfers, mieux inventés vraiment
ceux-ci par les Miltons et ceux-là par les Dantes,
son jeu dépareillé de forces discordantes,
son mystère, cassette à secret où déjà
le bras des fureteurs jusqu’ au coude plongea,
sa terre, son soleil, assez maigre étincelle,
et son attraction dont on voit la ficelle.

Il a pour vous distraire inventé les fléaux.
Voulant, selon la loi de maître Despréaux,
passer du grave au doux, du plaisant au sévère,
il brise un peuple ainsi qu’ un ivrogne son verre,
livre une pauvre ville à d’ affreux assiégeants,
grossit l’ eau de la Loire et noie un tas de gens.
Quelquefois, comme Horace aiguise un anapeste,
il termine une guerre au moyen d’ une peste,
ou fait un roi d’ un tigre, et se trouve charmant;
et le monde agonise... — ah! L’ on est par moment
tenté de lui fourrer le nez dans son ordure,
ou de lui crier, — car il a l’ oreille dure :
— tu deviens fatigant, tu deviens pluvieux,
mon pauvre éternel! Prends ta retraite, mon vieux!
Oui, rentre dans ton trou biblique ou druidique.
Cède la place au diable, au singe, à l’ homme. Abdique.
Tout autre fera mieux que toi ta fonction.
N’ attends pas qu’ un titan quelconque, un Ixion,
un Satan, un Typhée aux cent bras, un Voltaire,
fasse rafle un beau jour de tout ton vieux mystère;
mette au rancart l’ azur, les ténèbres, le mal,
le bien, l’ exception avec le fait normal,
le destin, le hasard, l’ impossible équilibre
du Très-Haut prescient posé sur l’ homme libre,
la crèche et le sépulcre, et la prairie en fleurs
que, sans savoir pourquoi, l’ aube inonde de pleurs;
plume l’ oison et l’ ange, envoie au linge sale
l’ affreux linceul troué de la nuit colossale;
et prenne brusquement, pour y jeter le ciel,
la terre, le chaos total et partiel,
et le septentrion, nocturne sentinelle,
et l’ océan roulant sa tempête éternelle,
et le cèdre et l’ hysope, et l’ herbe et le ruisseau,
leur hotte aux chiffonniers du faubourg Saint-Marceau!

1875, 04, 28

LE SIECLE , XLIII ILS SONT TOUJOURS LA .

Baal n’ est pas tombé; son temple,
antre du vieux crime immortel,
rayonne; et Baal se contemple
et s’ adore assis sur l’ autel;
il triomphe; il a dans sa crypte
la vieille Inde et la vieille égypte;
Baal resplendit au milieu
entre l’ idole et la momie;
et la sombre terre endormie
rêve que ce monstre est son dieu.
Les deux frères de la géhenne,
Phalaris et Torquemada,
attisent avec de la haine
l’ âtre où le boeuf d’ airain gronda;
tous deux, l’ un est roi, l’ autre est prêtre,
chantent; comme le chien son maître
la fournaise vient les lécher;
et pour ce front, et pour cette âme,
un panache sort de la flamme,
une mitre sort du bûcher.
Nemrod vit, et près d’ eux flamboie;
il éclabousse leur brasier;
il étale l’ horrible joie
de la trompette et de l’ acier;
il va, splendide, affreux, sonore;
il frappe, il tue; et l’ on ignore,
quand sur eux le regard descend,
si la flamme, hydre aux sombres ailes,
crache sur Dieu plus d’ étincelles
que le fer de gouttes de sang.
Midas, docteur, est dans sa chaire;
sur le champ, sur l’ être hébété,
il souffle la nuit, la jachère,
le sommeil, l’ imbécillité;

près de lui, pendant qu’ il enseigne,
un géant aveugle qui saigne
suit à tâtons un noir chemin;
car l’ ombre étouffe l’ espérance,
car dans ses deux mains l’ ignorance
tient les deux yeux du genre humain.
Cham est vivant, le fils infâme;
il brille, il est jeune, il est beau;
il noie aux débauches son âme;
il rit de son père au tombeau;
il n’ a même plus de mémoire;
un flot sourd croît dans la nuit noire,
il n’ en sait rien; et sans ennui,
sans peur, sans chercher de refuge,
il entend le bruit du déluge
qui remonte derrière lui.
Judas n’ est pas mort; il trafique;
il travaille aux pièges tendus;
il est le marchand magnifique
des Christs livrés, des dieux vendus;
sa drachme est un astre; il partage
son âme avec Londre et Carthage;
Judas domine les vivants;
debout sur la terre, heureux, blême,
fier, les mains pleines d’ or, il sème
de la trahison dans les vents.
Dracon, juge, emploie au supplice
du divin esprit Légion
quatre forces saintes, Justice,
Famille, Ordre, Religion;
sous son fouet la Vérité râle;
il torture cet ange pâle
sur l’ horrible échafaud vermeil,
et, front d’ airain et coeur de pierre,
fait écarteler la Lumière
aux quatre chevaux du soleil!
Messaline n’ est pas levée;

elle est toujours là dans son lit;
c’ est à peine, la réprouvée,
si, quand vient l’ aube, elle pâlit;
toujours belle, calme, effrontée,
elle éclate d’ un rire athée
sans pudeur, sans peur, sans ennui;
la prostituée éternelle
a changé de nom et s’ appelle
Conscience Humaine aujourd’ hui.
Le vieux Caïn, aïeul prospère,
s’ est fait un trône de l’ affront;
les crimes lui disent : mon père!
Il baise les vices au front.
Il rit de voir partout le glaive
et, sur toutes les croix qu’ élève
à tous ses étages Babel,
aux gibets qu’ on hait ou révère,
à Montfaucon comme au Calvaire,
l’ immense cadavre d’ Abel.
Ils sont libres, joyeux, superbes;
les vils chantent les meurtriers;
tous ont les mains pleines de gerbes,
de fleurs, de rayons, de lauriers;
qui ne voit qu’ eux cesse de croire;
toute la honte est de la gloire;
et c’ est Dieu qui semble puni;
sous le firmament qui s’ effare,
ils passent, comme la fanfare
du néant devant l’ infini.
à l’ autre extrémité du monde,
Satan, le sinistre oublié,
Satan, le responsable immonde,
seul, farouche et triste, est lié;
au-dessus de ses fils sans nombre,
Satan rêve, adossé dans l’ ombre
au poteau de l’ immensité;
et, debout sous les cieux funèbres,

il a ce masque, les Ténèbres,
et ce carcan, l’ éternité.
28 avril 1875.

LE SIECLE , XLIV FULGUR .

L’ océan me disait : ô poëte, homme juste,
j’ ai parfois comme toi cette surprise auguste
qu’ il me descend des cieux une immense rougeur;
et je suis traversé tout à coup, ô songeur,
par la foudre sublime, irritée et haïe,
comme toi par l’ esprit sinistre d’ Isaïe;
les éclairs sont mes cris, les foudres sont ma voix;
je gronde sur l’ écueil comme toi sur les rois;
je suis l’ avertisseur brusque, horrible et céleste.
L’ énorme bras de feu m’ associe à son geste
quand il menace l’ ombre et le bagne infernal.
On est beau par Virgile et grand par Juvénal,
et mon gouffre le sait aussi bien que ton âme;
j’ ai, comme toi, l’ azur, une douceur de femme,
une gaîté d’ enfant, des vagues pleines d’ yeux,
des aurores où rit le ciel prodigieux,
des écumes parfois blanches comme les cygnes;
les astres par-dessus mes flots se font des signes,
et se disent : viens donc te mirer dans la mer.
Je suis le niveau pur, le précipice clair;
j’ offre mes gouttes d’ eau nuit et jour aux brins d’ herbe.
Mais je fais peu de cas de tout ce bleu superbe,
de ce vaste sourire épanoui sur tout,
de cette grâce où l’ ombre en clarté se dissout,
de ces flots de cristal, de ces ondes de moire;
et le passage affreux du tonnerre est ma gloire.
13 juin.

1853, 11, 23

DEUX VOIX DANS LE CIEL , ZENITH - NADIR .

zénith.
Je suis le haut.
Nadir.
Je suis le bas.
Zénith.
J’ aime.
Nadir.
Je ris.
Zénith.
Par l’ éblouissement les coeurs sont attendris.
Adorer, c’ est aimer en admirant. ô cimes!
Que le soleil est beau sur les sommets sublimes!
Nadir.
Le dessous est charmant.
Zénith.
ô Paris!
Nadir.
ô Paris!
Zénith.
J’ aperçois les cerveaux, les têtes, les esprits,
les vastes fronts, foyers où rayonnent les âmes.
Nadir.
Je m’ amuse. Je vois le vrai côté des femmes.
Zénith.
Joie immense! Savoir! Sonder! Voir jusqu’ au fond
ce que rêvent les forts, ce que les sages font!
ô grands coeurs des héros!
Nadir.
Petits pieds de Suzette!
Zénith.
Je lis le livre écrit par Dieu.
Nadir.

Moi, la gazette
que le diable griffonne au verso.
Zénith.
Croire est doux.
Marchez les yeux au ciel!
Nadir.
Pour tomber dans les trous.
Zénith.
Cherchez les grands travaux et les grandes études,
vivez pensifs! Plongez votre âme aux solitudes!
Allez! Vous reviendrez meilleurs.
Nadir.
Et fort maigris.
Zénith.
Vivants! Enivrez-vous d’ extases!
Nadir.
Soyez gris.
Zénith.
Pensez!
Nadir.
Buvez, mangez, faites-vous de gros ventres.
Zénith.
Chantez, oiseaux; lions, rugissez dans vos antres;
vents, soufflez; gonflez-vous, ô mers; frémis, forêt;
prie, Adam! — le soleil se lève. Dieu paraît!
Nadir.
Crois-tu?
Zénith.
Création, salut!
Nadir.
Triste machine!
Zénith.
Gloire à Dieu!
Nadir.
Peuh!
Zénith.
Salut, ô France!

Nadir.
Bonjour, Chine.
Zénith.
Venez, lutteurs saignants! Venez, grands hommes las!
Dante avec Béatrix, Voltaire avec Calas!
Nadir.
Tiens! Il laisse tomber par terre la Pucelle!
Zénith.
Shakspeare, resplendis; Rabelais, étincelle;
Byron, montre ton front!
Nadir.
Et cache ton pied-bot.
Zénith.
Christ naît. J' entends un bruit de harpe.
Nadir.
Et de rabot.
Zénith.
Son père est roi.
Nadir.
Son père est charpentier.
Zénith.
ô psaumes!
ô David!
Nadir.
ô Joseph! ô scie!
Zénith.
Où sont les chaumes
est la paix. Le hameau m' attire.
Nadir.
Allons-nous-en.
Zénith.
Aime le villageois.
Nadir.
Mais crains le paysan.
Zénith.
J' ai l' oeil sur les hauts lieux où s' allume une gloire,
où César a gagné sa plus grande victoire,

où Juvénal farouche a fait son plus beau vers.
Je le sais, moi. Je vois l’ endroit.
Nadir.
Je vois l’ envers.
Zénith.
Athène! ô murs sacrés! Beauté! Chefs-d’ oeuvre! Exemples!
Strophes du statuaire écrites sur les temples!
Michel-Ange, à genoux tu les étudias.
Raphaël effaré contemple Phidias;
les profonds bas-reliefs, pleins d’ une vie étrange,
devant le demi-dieu font frissonner l’ archange.
ô sourire éternel des frontons dans l’ azur!
Sous ce mur immortel qu’ a ciselé l’ art pur,
les générations comme des fleuves roulent;
turcs et vénitiens et bavarois s’ écoulent;
les siècles, bûcherons qui s’ acharnent en vain,
comparent, convoqués par le sculpteur divin
devant le Parthénon mutilé comme un arbre,
l’ humanité d’ argile à l’ olympe de marbre.
Salut à Phidias!
Nadir.
Bonsoir à lord Elgin!
Zénith.
Justes, buvez l’ absinthe.
Nadir.
Absinthe, vin et gin.
Riches, l’ orchestre chante et les gorges sont nues;
le parc bleuâtre et frais livre ses avenues;
les lustres d’ or, mêlés d’ amours et de griffons,
pendent, buissons de flamme, à l’ anneau des plafonds;
dansez dans le salon et soupez dans la serre;
vous, les pauvres, les gueux, brutes de la misère,
soûlez-vous dans un bouge à la lueur des suifs!
Zénith.
Je regarde voler les aigles.
Nadir.
Moi, les juifs.

Zénith.
Morus meurt pour la loi; Caton, pour la patrie.
Nadir.
La lâche multitude obéit, tremble et crie.
Le cri monte de ceux sur qui l’ on marche à ceux
sur qui l’ on frappe : serfs, moujiks, fellahs crasseux,
esclaves. Les pavés se plaignent aux enclumes.
Zénith.
Que de couronnes d’ or, que de chapeaux à plumes
sur des fronts criminels!
Nadir.
Quels gros clous aux souliers
de l’ honnête homme!
Zénith.
ô bons, vous êtes les piliers
du ciel mystérieux où gravitent les mondes!
La raison de tout sort de vos âmes profondes.
Sans vous tout serait sombre et tout serait obscur.
La justice sacrée, et qui remplit l’ azur,
commence à l’ honnête homme et finit aux étoiles.
Les justes méconnus rayonnent sous leurs voiles;
comme le ciel, ils ont en eux l’ immensité,
et, s’ il est la lumière, ils sont la vérité.
Nadir.
Buvons!
Zénith.
Gloire au soleil!
Nadir.
Il rit de la nature.
Tous les échantillons d’ esprit et de stature
sont égaux et pareils devant ce bec de gaz,
depuis Petit Poucet jusqu’ à Micromégas!
Zénith.
Pudeur! Le lys t’ adore et le ramier candide
t’ aime, et l’ aube te rit, virginité splendide,
neige où se posera le pied blanc de l’ amour.
Nadir.

à bas la vierge! à bas le lys! à bas le jour!
Toute blancheur est fade et bête.
Zénith.
Tais-toi, nègre!
Nadir.
Est-ce ma faute, à moi? L’ ange! Tu deviens aigre.
Le nez en l’ air, au fond de toute chose assis,
où tu vois des géants, je vois des raccourcis.
Ce que tu vois monter, moi, je le vois descendre.
Tu vois la flamme aux fronts, je vois aux pieds la cendre.
Tout tient à la façon dont nous sommes placés.
Zénith.
Le bleu matin dorait l’ herbe dans les fossés;
les froids tombeaux, devant le porche de l’ église,
dormaient. Au coin du bois Pierre rencontra Lise,
et lui dit : — viens. — où donc? — au bois. — je ne veux pas.
Les moissonneurs prenaient à l’ ombre leur repas;
les gais pinsons jouaient sur les pierres des tombes.
— oh! Là-bas, sur ce toit, vois toutes ces colombes!
Dit-elle; et Pierre dit : — c’ est chez moi qu’ on les voit.
Viens les voir. J’ ai ma chambre au bord de ce vieux toit.
J’ ai chez moi la colombe et sa soeur l’ hirondelle.
Tu pourras dans tes mains les prendre. — vrai? Dit-elle,
dans mes mains? — dans tes mains! Viens-tu? — je n’ ose pas.
Le sentier, complaisant ou traître, pas à pas,
les mena tous les deux, pensifs, vers la chaumière.
Tout le long du chemin Lise avait peur de Pierre.
Pierre dit : — c’ est ici. — dans l’ escalier étroit
leurs souffles se mêlaient. Les colombes du toit,
les entendant venir, fuirent à tire-d’ aile.
— où donc est la colombe? Où donc est l’ hirondelle?
Dit Lise; et Pierre dit tout bas : — ô ma beauté,
les oiseaux sont partis, mais l’ amour est resté.
Des roses emplissaient ce nid d’ une odeur d’ ambre;
elle entra rougissante... —
nadir.
à l’ angle de la chambre,

le vieux Satan riait dans sa barbe de bouc.
Lise en ôtant ses bas chantait l’ air de Malbrouck.
Zénith.
Jacque, après son travail, las, brûlé par le hâle,
rentrait chez lui, son pain sous son bras. Maigre et pâle,
une femme passait, son enfant à la main.
— du pain! Cria l’ enfant. — la mère dit : — demain.
L’ enfant ploya son front comme l’ oiseau son aile.
— je ne crois pas en Dieu; mon fils a faim! Dit-elle.
Le pauvre doux enfant dit : — mère, ce n’ est rien. —
Jacques donna son pain. ô Jacques, tu fis bien.
Pour que la mère croie, il faut que l’ enfant mange.
Nadir.
Le mioche était horrible et monstrueux. Cet ange
louchait; il ressemblait vaguement à Dupin;
et, pendant qu’ il mangeait, son nez noyait son pain.
Zénith.
L’ oeil de chair ment. L’ esprit, c’ est l’ unique prunelle.
Les prophètes muraient leur grotte solennelle,
et, dans l’ ombre engloutis, vivaient dans la clarté.
L’ âme ignore la nuit comme la cécité.
L’ âme voit à travers les paupières fermées.
ô pures visions des choses innommées!
Majesté du voyant que l’ esprit seul conduit,
qui n’ a plus que son âme ouverte dans la nuit!
Milton était aveugle.
Nadir.
Et Camoëns fut borgne.
Zénith.
ô Dieu. Je suis heureux! Je contemple.
Nadir.
Je lorgne.
Platon contemple, et Juan lorgne; il a l’ oeil battu,
et Vénus dit tout bas à don Juan : montes-tu?
Zénith.
Silence!
Nadir.

Mon don Juan, mon beau faquin robuste,
dit Vénus, ce Platon n’ est bon qu’ à faire un buste.
Zénith.
Tout est bien, tout est beau.
Nadir.
Hein? Plaît-il? S’ il vous plaît?
J’ ai tant cherché le beau que j’ ai trouvé le laid.
Tout est mal.
Zénith.
L’ idéal rayonne, astre immobile.
Nadir.
Satan m’ a fait cadeau de l’ âme de Zoïle;
je me la mets dans l’ oeil en guise de lorgnon.
Zénith.
Tout glorifie...
Nadir.
à bas!
Zénith.
Et tout affirme.
Nadir.
Non!
Zénith.
Le sage, inaccessible à vos vices funèbres,
hommes, est votre phare au milieu des ténèbres.
Nadir.
Socrate était ivrogne et Thalès libertin.
Zénith.
Croyez.
Nadir.
Le vrai pas plus que le beau n’ est certain.
Qui semble un singe aux grecs semble un homme aux osages.
Zénith.
Démocrite, Héraclite étaient les deux visages
du genre humain.
Nadir.
C’ est Jean qui pleure et Jean qui rit.
C’ est toi, Zénith, et moi, Nadir.

Zénith.
Sinistre esprit,
n’ approche pas ton nom du mien.
Nadir.
Bah!
Zénith.
Tais-toi, fange!
Nadir.
Monsieur, je suis un diable et vous êtes un ange;
mais quand vous vous fâchez de la gaîté que j’ ai,
je rêve que quelqu’ un vous a pris votre g.
Zénith.
Qu’ ève, par toi perdue et dont tu fis la honte,
t’ écrase sous son pied!
Nadir.
Que Balaam vous monte!
Zénith.
ô Dieu vivant, pardonne au rire immonde et noir,
pardonne au rire misérable,
toi qu’ adore, incliné comme l’ arbre du soir,
le juste sombre et vénérable!
Le rire hurle, et mord le bas du firmament;
il déchire, il souille, il écume,
trouble la tombe, et crache, avec un grincement,
sur le monde, encensoir qui fume!
Regarde sans courroux le rire furieux,
le rire que rien ne désarme,
Dieu, vie, abîme, espoir! Grand oeil mystérieux
d’ où tombe l’ homme, cette larme!
23 novembre 1853.

LE LIVRE DRAMATIQUE — La Femme

un burg dans une forêt. Intérieur de la grande salle du rez-de- chaussée. Aspect de ruine. Le dénûment rustique mêlé au délabrement seigneurial. De vieilles statues dans des niches, de l’herbe dans le pavé. Dans les coins, des débris. Une table de chêne. Des chaises de bois. Vaisselle d’étain et grosse poterie sur une planche. Coffres le long des murs. Près de la table, sur un bahut de paysan, des in-folio reliés en parchemin. Un ou deux sont ouverts. Dans l’angle à gauche, sous une voussure en ogive, un enfoncement fermé d’une porte à deux volets. à droite, sur le devant, la tourelle de l’escalier en spirale qui mène aux étages d’en haut. Cette tourelle est contiguë à la muraille. La porte de la tourelle s’ouvre sur le devant du théâtre. On en voit les premières marches. Le mur de la tourelle est percé de petites fenêtres longues et étroites. Au fond une grande porte, tout ouverte, donnant sur la forêt. Fenêtres démantelées. Volets descellés. çà et là des vitres cassées.

SCENE PREMIERE

Ils entrent par la porte du fond. Le duc, élégant, beau, grisonnant, environ cinquante ans, avec la prétention de n’en paraître que quarante. Il a un pardessus de voyage. Gunich est vieux.
Le duc Gallus.

Que sais-tu d’elle?
Gunich.

Rien. — son nom, c’est tout. Nella.
Le duc Gallus.

Tes talents d’espion ont été jusque-là!
Il regarde autour de lui le délabrement.
Donc, c’est dans ce taudis qu’habite cette fille!
Gunich.

Avec son père.
Le duc Gallus.

Seule en ce burg!
Gunich.

Sans famille.
Le duc Gallus.

Elle a tous les attraits, me dis-tu.
Gunich, saluant.
Réunis.
Le duc Gallus.

Le plus beau des oiseaux dans le plus laid des nids!
Regardant dans la salle.
Personne.
Il frappe du pied sur le pavé et heurte le marteau sur la porte.

On ne vient pas. — entrons.
Ils avancent de quelques pas. Il hausse la voix et appelle.
à la boutique!
Silence et solitude dans le burg.
Le duc Gallus regarde de toutes parts si personne ne paraît.
Gunich le suit jusque sur le devant du théâtre.
Gunich.

Souffrez que je vous parle un moment politique.
Altesse, en attendant, votre neveu grandit.
Le duc Gallus.

Il ne me gêne point, puisqu'il reste inédit.
Gunich.

Ces complications sont fâcheuses en somme.
Moi, j'eusse, monseigneur, supprimé le jeune homme.
Tout ou rien. Pourquoi faire une chose à demi?
Le duc Gallus.

Et l'adoucissement des mœurs, mon cher ami!
On prend une couronne, et l'on n'est pas hostile.
Mon frère laisse un fils. Tuer l'enfant! Vieux style.
Fi! C'est de mauvais goût. On usurpe aujourd'hui
avec indulgence.
Gunich.

Humpf!
Le duc Gallus.

Mon frère mort, l'ennui
me prit. être sujet d'un marmot, c'était rude;
je fis je ne sais plus trop quelle platitude
à Kaunitz, et je fus reconnu duc régnant.
Je me débarrassai du mioche en l'éloignant.
Dans ces bois, comme fils d'un vieux maître de forge,
je l'ai fait élever. C'est l'étudiant George.

Point de dégât. J’ai mis dans ces monts, purs sommets,
mon prince légitime en sevrage à jamais.
Incognito, tout seul avec toi, sans escorte,
je viens de temps en temps voir comment il se porte.
Il ne se doute pas qu’il est duc.
Gunich.

C’est profond,
mais doux.
Le duc Gallus.

Les rois se font, mon cher, et se défont.
Gunich.

Humpf!
Le duc Gallus.

Ce que nous nommons nos droits, nous autres princes,
sont-ce des droits? Oui. Non. Puisque j’ai les provinces,
je les garde. Elles sont à mon neveu, mais quoi!
étant un peu larron, je suis d’autant plus roi!
Le premier qui fut roi fut un voleur sans juges.
Bah! Tout est bien, les bois sont d’augustes refuges,
ce garçon est vivant, les nids chantent, les cieux
sont sur nous. Quant à moi, je règne de mon mieux;
j’ai brisé les vieux jougs et les vieilles bricoles,
supprimé la potence, ouvert beaucoup d’écoles,
diminué l’impôt, semé le vrai, dissous
l’erreur, et je n’ai pas de remords pour deux sous.
Je tolère dans l’ombre un neveu qui s’ignore.
Claudius de Hamlet guette la pâle aurore,
mais il est Claudius et l’enfant est Hamlet.
Moi, nul spectre ne vient me saisir au collet.
Ce que j’ai, c’est l’ennui. Le trône, triste proie!
Sais-tu ce que je suis? Un pauvre homme de joie.
Plutôt bon que mauvais; très canaille; occupé,
mais oisif; fort penaud. Comme on est attrapé!

L’ambitieux pensif, usurpateur en herbe,
dit en préméditant le trône : — c’est superbe!
On est le maître; on a le budget plein les mains;
le prince resplendit, regardé des humains,
au-dessus de la terre; il est dans la comète!
Vite, ôte-toi de là, petit, que je m’y mette! —
c’est bon, j’ai pris la place, et je règne. à quel prix!
Quel néant! Un respect qui ressemble au mépris;
voir le fiel dans les cœurs et le miel sur les langues;
une dorure, pas solide; des harangues;
des valets; point d’amis; de faux éphestions;
des malédictions, des indigestions;
des Te Deum chantés par des prêtres athées;
du fracas, des grandeurs vaguement insultées
par cette conscience énorme des vivants,
sombre sous les rois, comme une mer sous le vents;
en chasse, en guerre, un tas de flatteurs déshonnêtes
vous aidant à viser les peuples et les bêtes;
les vastes bâillements du cérémonial;
beaucoup d’enterrement mêlé d’un peu de bal;
le rang suprême, un mot; le pouvoir, un problème;
ne jamais être sûr qu’une femme vous aime;
voilà ce qu’on usurpe, ami. — si j’avais su!
Gunich.

Vous êtes triomphant, grand, couronné…
Le duc Gallus.

Déçu.
Ah! De la chose sceptre et de la chose trône,
j’en suis revenu, va. J’y tiens peu. Pas de prône
plus sot que l’étiquette, et pas d’orgueil plus creux.
C’est un art des puissants de n’être pas heureux.
Ils appellent cela la majesté. C’est bête.
Trop de couronne, hélas, fait qu’on n’a plus de tête.
Sais-tu ce qui serait mon goût? Vivre à Paris.
Rome a son carnaval, Stamboul a ses houris,

mais Paris! Oui, c’est là qu’il faudrait que je vinsse
pour être un chenapan sans cesser d’être un prince.
Un chenapan, vois-tu, c’est un sage gouailleur
que Paris seul produit, qui rit, cueille la fleur
et la fille, est féroce au plaisir, vit, s’attable,
chante, danse, extermine, affreux gueux, et bon diable.
Le scrupule en un coin de son cœur se tient coi.
être ça, c’est vraiment exister. C’est pourquoi,
quand je pense à Paris, je me dis : c’est la ville!
Là le mal n’est pas laid, la fange n’est pas vile!
Jamais comme à Paris les gens d’esprit n’ont pu
savourer le parfum d’un éden corrompu;
Paris gâte la femme et l’homme, et les attaque
par tout le paradis que peut faire un cloaque.
J’aime Paris, de vice et de grandeur pavé.
N’y songeons pas. Je suis à mon sceptre rivé.
Je suis le patient du trône. Roi, je bâille.
Ah! N’être qu’un bourgeois, quel bonheur! On ripaille,
on s’amuse, on se vautre, amis, du vin, du rhum,
du gin! Et pas d’altesse, et pas de décorum,
on boit, la joie accourt et se livre en personne,
et vous la possédez! Sais-tu que je grisonne?
Gunich.

Mais…
Le duc Gallus.

Je grisonne! — or, j’ai, par-dessus le marché,
le désir bienveillant de commettre un péché.
Quel péché? Le meilleur, le grand, le vrai, l’unique.
L’amour. Attention. Mon cœur se communique.
Tout ce que le destin offre, j’en ai voulu;
ce sac, je l’ai vidé; ce livre, je l’ai lu.
Eh bien, Gunich, le fond du sort, le but de l’homme,
c’est Elle!
Gunich.

Elle? Qui donc?
Le duc Gallus.

Elle! Celle qu'on nomme
Plaisir, Tourment, Enfer et Ciel, Bien, Mal, Oui, Non.
Elle! En Grèce Aspasie. Elle! En France Ninon.
écoute, ô confident du prince! Combler d'aise
quelque fille sans cœur, sans préjugés, mauvaise,
charmante, aux grands yeux bleus, ou noirs, se portant bien;
avoir ma Pompadour comme un roi très chrétien,
je prémédite ça! Mille défauts, pas veuve,
et je la cherche aux bois pour l'avoir toute neuve.
Tel est mon idéal. L'ennui, j'en fais l'aveu,
me ronge, je confie au bon Dieu mon neveu,
et moi, de mon côté, je vais à l'aventure;
je suis un cœur errant quêtant sa nourriture.
Vois, je bâille. J'ai faim. Je n'ai rien sous la dent.
Je voudrais rencontrer quelque être indépendant
dont je sois le despote et qui me mène en laisse;
je cherche cette chose exquise : une drôlesse.
Gunich.

Monseigneur, ce n'est point impossible à trouver.
Le duc Gallus.

Mais je la veux sauvage.
Gunich.

Il la faudra rêver,
en ce cas, — c'est un peu de complaisance à mettre, —
et ne pas prendre trop votre rêve à la lettre.
Sauvage presque.
Le duc Gallus.

ô lacs, ô montagnes, qu'emplit
le grand songe orageux du torrent dans son lit,
du hallier, de la source, et de la bête fauve,

où l’antre vaguement s’arrondit en alcôve,
où Pan se remarie et change de maisons
avec les douze mois et les quatre saisons,
espaces que la nuit ensemence d’étoiles,
ronces où l’araignée ourdit ses sombres toiles,
j’accours, je viens sonder vos abîmes profonds;
dégoûté des bourreaux, et même des bouffons,
accablé de respect, obsédé de richesse,
las de cet à peu près qu’on nomme une duchesse,
blasé, mais confiant, ivre du grand concert,
je viens chercher Vénus toute nue au désert,
je tends les bras vers vous, bois, monts, épithalame!
ô nature, un sourire! ô forêts, une femme!
Gunich.

ô forêts, une vierge!
Le duc Gallus.

Oui, vierge. J’y consens.
Un démon vierge! Un être aux penchants malfaisants
ayant l’aspect du lys que la nature encense!
Laïs Agnès! Le monstre à l’état d’innocence!
C’est curiosité, rien de plus; mais j’aurais
cet appétit. La touffe épaisse des forêts
contient tout; fleurs, venins. Ami, gagner le quine
d’un ange contenant en germe une coquine!
Comprends-tu? L’observer! Voir aboutir au mal
l’innocence à tâtons dans l’instinct animal,
peser dans la vertu ce que la chair en ôte,
assister dans une âme à l’aube de la faute,
je ne suis pas méchant, mais j’aimerais ce jeu.
Moi, des crimes, fi donc! Mais des vices, parbleu!
Quel plaisir, se gratter du doigt la boîte osseuse,
et se dire tout bas : bon! Elle est paresseuse,
elle hait le travail, elle aime les bijoux,
elle me trompera pour d’affreux sapajous,
elle est chaque jour pire, elle est chaque jour moindre,

elle sent avec joie en elle Phryné poindre,
elle ignore l’honneur, le devoir, la raison;
elle a l’éclosion sinistre du poison!
Se dire : de farouche elle devient servile,
la faunesse des champs est catin à la ville,
Néère tourne mal et se change en Lola,
assez déesse ici pour être diable là!
Elle a des yeux profonds de plus en plus funèbres,
c’est une gueuse, ô joie! Et voir, dans les ténèbres,
lentement, dépouillant tout voile, tout remord,
toute pudeur, avec le regard de la mort,
sombre comme Astarté, blanche comme Suzanne,
de la vierge au front pur sortir la courtisane!
Et se dire : c’est bien! Je vais la dévorer!
Le tout pour rire.
Gunich.

Au fait, c’est gai.
Le duc Gallus.

Flâner, errer,
se refaire le cœur!
Gunich.

Bravo.
Le duc Gallus.

J’ai des nausées
des femmes qui chez nous naissent apprivoisées.
Cet immense plaisir, corrompre, on ne l’a pas.
Leur fuite est l’art savant de faire tous les pas.
Ces prudes! La Macette est dans la Cidalise.
Elles baissent les yeux en sortant de l’église;
elles prennent pour rien des airs majestueux;
leur croupe se recourbe en replis vertueux.
Moi qui sais le tarif, voir ces saintes-nitouches
s’offrir dans l’ombre en vente et faire les farouches,

ça m’assomme. Et je viens chercher en d’autres lieux
quelque chose de pis, c’est-à-dire de mieux.
Je viens ici, parmi les ignorances franches,
parmi l’échange obscur des baisers sous les branches,
parmi les impudeurs naïves, faire un choix.
L’acclimatation d’une femme des bois
à la cour, c’est mon rêve, ami!
Gunich.

Si, par prodige,
vous la trouvez…
Le duc Gallus.

Je veux la dévorer, te dis-je.
Gunich.

Je vois ce qu’il vous faut, une femme à croquer.
Le duc Gallus.

Je m’ennuie!
Gunich.

Il serait étrange de manquer
de femmes quand on est prince.
Le duc Gallus.

Si, d’aventure,
nous allions déterrer ici la créature!
Je l’espère!
Gunich.

Et le crois. Grattons du bec le sol.
Une allemande avec un regard espagnol
habite en ce burg.
Regardant au dehors par une des fenêtres ruinées.
Tiens, à point nommé, c’est elle!
Le duc Gallus.

Regardant par la même fenêtre, avec un geste de stupeur.
Et c’est lui!
Gunich.

Duo.
Le duc Gallus.

C’est mon neveu!
Gunich.

C’est la belle!
Le duc Gallus.

çà, que fait-il céans?
Gunich.

Dame! Il est prétendant.
Je ne suis pas du tout surpris de l’incident.
Vous l’avez dans ces bois mis avec soin vous-même.
Il flâne. Il est vivant, il en profite. Il aime.
Rapportez-vous-en donc aux jocrisses locaux!
Je m’étais renseigné près de tous les échos,
j’ignorais ce détail. Chimène a son Rodrigue.
Je comprends. La nature est une immense intrigue;
il aura rencontré la belle, par hasard.
Le hasard, monseigneur, quel dieu! Mais quel gueusard!
Dans les bois on a droit à l’églogue; l’eau coule,
l’air souffle, on est garçon et fille, et l’on roucoule.
Il regarde par la fenêtre.
Ce vieux burg est ainsi construit qu’ils sont forcés
de suivre les remparts tout le long des fossés.
Montrant la porte qui ouvre sur l’escalier.
Vous allez les revoir sortir par la tourelle.
Le duc Gallus.

Ah çà, mais me voilà jaloux!
Gunich.

Et de qui?
Le duc Gallus.

D’elle!
De lui!
Gunich.

Vous allez vite en besogne. Comment,
vous avez vu, de loin, cette belle, un moment,
prince, et voilà le feu qui prend à votre altesse!
Le duc Gallus.

être vite amoureux, c’est de la politesse.
Et puis, chacun son genre, ami. C’est ma façon,
à moi, de me hâter de perdre la raison.
Gunich.

Faites.
Il rit.
Le duc Gallus.

Quoi! L’on m’indique en ce donjon sinistre
une belle! J’accours, et tu ne veux pas, cuistre,
dadais, triple crétin, qu’en ce pays de loups
j’enrage, et que je sois furieux et jaloux!
Je trouve mon neveu qui courtise la dame!
Gunich.

Vous usurpez le trône, il usurpe la femme.
Carambolage.
Le duc Gallus.

Il a la bride sur le cou.
N’étant pas roi, qu’a-t-il besoin d’un garde-fou?

En fait de liberté jamais je ne lésine.
Il est étudiant ici près; il voisine.
Il était sur la piste avant moi. C’est flagrant.
Mais, bah! Je lutterai. Sais-tu qu’il est fort grand,
ce petit?
Gunich.

C’est un homme.
Le duc Gallus.

En outre il a l’astuce
d’être beau.
Gunich.

Prétendant à deux tranchants.
Avec un sourire.
Je l’eusse
supprimé.
Le duc Gallus.

Ce garçon est deux fois mon rival.
Gunich.

Droit, mince, il doit avoir bonne mine à cheval.
Le duc Gallus.

En politique il a son droit, et près des femmes
sa figure.
Gunich.

Il fallait, lorsque nous triomphâmes,
en finir de l’enfant. Certe, ainsi nous eussions
dans leur source extirpé les révolutions.
L’obscure pression des successeurs possibles
trouble un règne; un amas d’incidents invisibles
se forme, et le pouvoir ne peut se maintenir.
Qui veut régner doit faire eunuque l’avenir.

Monseigneur, on verrait du fait qui vous tracasse
rire Machiavel.
Le duc Gallus.

Et plus encor Boccace.
Oh! Ce George! Abuser de ce qu’il n’est pas roi
pour aimer, profiter de son retrait d’emploi
pour me prendre ma place ici. Quelle canaille!
Dois-je persévérer? Faut-il que je m’en aille?
Conclusion : je suis dans un bois, et volé.
Cupidon à Jupin escroque Sémélé.
George est dans le réel, moi je suis dans le rêve.
Satan, jadis, prit-il Adam? Non. Il prit ève.
Adam, c’est la puissance, ève est l’amour. Satan,
entre les deux façons qu’on a d’être sultan,
choisissait la meilleure en s’adjugeant la femme.
Moi, j’ai fait le contraire. à présent je réclame.
Trop tard. Empanaché, bardé d’un grand cordon,
je suis Mamamouchi battu par Céladon.
Mon neveu rit, je règne; il vit, je me lamente,
et j’enrage. Et je vois dans ses mains mon amante
au pillage. J’ai l’ombre, il a la proie. Et moi,
morbleu, je me sens dupe à force d’être roi!
Gunich.

Prince, vous êtes l’aigle, et vous planez.
Le duc Gallus.

Sans joie.
Le prince est un niais puissant; l’aigle est une oie.
Les palais, la fanfare, et les arcs triomphaux,
l’amour des sujets, l’or, le faste, c’est du faux;
le trône nous enferme en son cercle héraldique;
celui qu’on aime est roi; celui qui règne abdique.
Donc, voyant le garçon, beau, jeune, épris, pas vieux…
Gunich.

Vous en êtes jaloux…
Le duc Gallus.

Non. J’en suis envieux!
Vois-tu, l’heureux c’est lui, moi je suis l’imbécile.
Je changerais fort bien avec lui.
Gunich.

C’est facile.
Le duc Gallus.

Non, s’il est aimé.
Gunich.

Quoi! Vous tremblez, vous!
Le duc Gallus.

Moqueur!
Gunich.

Vous, prince!
Le duc Gallus.

On prend un trône, on ne prend pas un cœur.
Pourtant je lutterai.
Gunich.

Mais il est d’autres femmes.
Le duc Gallus.

Non.
Surprenant un ricanement de Gunich.
Sous ta flatterie on sent tes épigrammes.
Tu penses que je suis inepte. Je te dis
que mes aïeux livraient bataille un contre dix,
qu’étant grison, je dois affronter ce jeune homme,
que j’ignore comment cette fille se nomme,

que j’ai marché dans l’herbe et bu dans les ruisseaux,
que depuis ce matin j’entends un tas d’oiseaux
qui font l’amour dans l’ombre au-dessus de ma tête,
que George est bien plus fort que moi, puisqu’il est bête,
du moins je le suppose en voyant son succès,
que je devrais m’enfuir si je réfléchissais,
que puisque cette fille habite une masure
elle rêve un palais, qu’elle est vaine, peu sûre,
coquette, pauvre, avec des fleurs dans ses cheveux,
et que c’est pour cela, butor, que je la veux!
Je te dis qu’il n’est pas d’autre femme sur terre.
Gunich.

Le couple se croit seul en ce burg solitaire,
observons-les. J’entends dans l’escalier des pas.
Ce sont eux. Les voilà de retour ici-bas.
Le duc Gallus.

Que de choses seront à la mort révélées!
On saura le secret du vent, des giboulées,
des roses, de l’instinct féminin et viril,
des madrigaux dont est formé le mois d’avril!
L’œil tourné vers l’escalier.
Ils descendent du ciel en effet. Quelle ivresse,
être deux amoureux! Que Chloé soit traîtresse,
qu’importe! Daphnis bête est un heureux berger.
Paraissent George et Nella. Ils descendent l’escalier de la tourelle, George le premier,
donnant la main à Nella. Le duc Gallus et Gunich se retirent en arrière
de la tourelle, de façon à n’être pas aperçus. De ce recoin, le duc ne voit que
George. Nella reste sous la porte de la tourelle debout sur la dernière marche
de l’escalier. Le duc contemple la bonne mine de George.
Décidément, vingt ans, c’est charmant. C’est léger.
George est beau.

SCENE II

George.

Nella!
Nella.

George! — ami, je vous renvoie.
George.

à bientôt.
Nella.

Oui. Prenez garde qu'on ne vous voie.
Quel malheur que je sois fille noble!
George.

Et que moi
je sois roturier!
Nella.

George!
George.

Oh! Je ne sais pourquoi,
mais je fais en moi-même un roman. J'imagine
que je ne connais point au vrai mon origine.
J'ai le pressentiment d'un destin inconnu.
Mais non, je ne suis rien que le premier venu.
J'ose vous adorer. Nella.
Le duc gallus, à part.
Quelle bravoure!
Nella.

Profitez du moment où mon père laboure
au fond de son enclos, et fuyez par le bois.

Le duc gallus, à gunich.
Son père? Est-ce un soldat, ou bien un villageois?
Par la fenêtre il montre à Gunich quelqu’un au dehors.
C’est ce bon vieux là-bas courbé sur sa charrue.
George.

Vous êtes sur ma cendre une flamme apparue;
sans vous je ne vis pas. Quand pourrai-je, à genoux,
vous épouser?
Nella.

Hélas! Je ne sais. Cachez-vous.
Mon père est encor plein d’orgueil nobiliaire.
George.

Le donjon vieillissant n’a pas honte du lierre.
Pourquoi ce vétéran me repousserait-il?
Mon chaste amour ressemble à son farouche exil.
Nous serions là, devant son front que l’âge ploie,
nous aimant, et quel mal lui ferait notre joie?
Nella.

Il est bon. Attendons. Dieu nous aidera.
George.

Non.
J’accuse Dieu. Pourquoi suis-je un homme sans nom?
Nella.

Ami!
George.

Mon âme est franche et mon destin est louche.
Nella.

George!
Le duc Gallus fait des efforts pour voir Nella sans y parvenir.

Le duc gallus, à part.
Entendre la voix, c’est presque voir la bouche.
C’est égal. Maudit mur!
George.

Ah! Sort infortuné!
Pourquoi suis-je puni? Parce que je suis né.
Il fallait naître noble. Hélas, le grain de sable
est-il de son néant coupable et responsable?
Ah! Quel accablement! J’aime au-dessus de moi.
Nella.

Mon George!
George.

J’ai le cœur trop haut!
Nella.

Tu serais roi,
t’aimerais-je mieux?
George.

Non. Mais tu serais ma femme.
Nella.

George, dites-moi vous. Ne troublez pas mon âme.
Vous serez le mari, ne soyez pas l’amant!
Respectez-moi.
George.

Nella, laissez-moi seulement
déposer un baiser sur votre main.
Nella.

J’exige
que vous soyez sage.
George.

Oui.
Elle est restée sur l’escalier. George est hors de la tourelle.
Nella tend son bras nu par la lucarne. Il lui prend la main.
Nella.

Soyez sage, vous dis-je!
George.

Un seul baiser.
Il lui baise la main avec emportement.
Le duc gallus, à part.
Trois, quatre! — ah! Tu me le paieras.
Je suis éperdument amoureux de ce bras.
George.

Adieu, mon âme!
Nella.

Adieu, mon cœur!
George.

Quand reviendrai-je?
Nella.

Demain.
George.

Non. Aujourd’hui.
George furtivement et sans regarder s’esquive par une des fenêtres qui font brèche.
Le duc Gallus et Gunich s’effacent dans l’ombre de la tourelle. Il ne les voit
pas. Nella reste seule. On la voit dans l’escalier de la tourelle, pensive, cherchant
par la lucarne à voir encore de loin George, qui a disparu.
Le duc gallus, à part.

Le paradis, quel piège!
Comme ils sont pris! L’amour est le profond jardin
au fond duquel est Dieu caché. Bravo l’éden!
Toute cette ombre aimable est d’aube pénétrée.
Il s’agit maintenant d’y faire mon entrée.
Quaerens quem devoret. C’est moi. — George, mon cher,
on vous aime, mais bah! La beauté c’est la chair,
la femme c’est la faute; et vous avez le charme,
jeune homme, vous avez l’amour; mais j’ai mon arme,
l’expérience. Ami, vous allez en avant,
beau, tendre, frais, naïf. Moi, je suis le savant,
l’artiste. Il est ardent, moi calme. Il a l’ivresse,
j’ai l’appétit.
Cependant Nella est sortie de la tourelle; elle fait quelques pas, et s’arrête,
sans voir Gallus et Gunich. Le duc la montre à Gunich.
Comment trouves-tu ma maîtresse?
Gunich salue profondément le dos de Nella, immobile sur le devant du théâtre.
Le duc Gallus regarde par la fenêtre d’où il a aperçu le père travaillant dans
les champs.
Le pauvre père est dupe, et George tient Nella!
Gunich.

Nous venons au secours du père. Enlevons-la.
Vous êtes roi; je suis un baron pour tout faire.
Donc…
Le duc Gallus fait un signe de tête négatif.
Le duc Gallus.

J’ai l’attraction. Je suis la haute sphère.
Passer près d’elle doit suffire.
Nella, allant à une armoire.
Et mon couvert
qui n’est pas mis!
Elle tire de l’armoire une nappe de grosse toile très blanche

qu’elle étale sur la
table, puis des vaisselles et des gobelets d’étain, un pot de lait et un pain bis,
qu’elle dispose avec symétrie, puis deux assiettes et deux cuillers de fer, et elle
place deux chaises devant les deux assiettes.
Le duc Gallus la contemple. Gunich et lui sont restés au fond de la salle.
Elle ne se doute pas de leur présence.
Le duc gallus, à gunich.
Va-t’en rêver dans le bois vert.
Nella, se dépêchant.
Mon père va rentrer.
Le duc gallus, à gunich.
Laisse-nous. Herborise.
Gunich fait une nouvelle révérence au dos de Nella, et sort.

SCENE III

Le duc gallus, s’avançant et saluant.
Madame… — Nella se retourne et le regarde.
à part.
Elle a grand air. Elle n’est pas surprise.
Haut à Nella.
Je suis un voyageur qui passe. S’il vous plaît,
pourrait-on ici boire une tasse de lait?
En payant?
Nella.

Sans payer. Oui, monsieur.
Elle verse du lait dans un gobelet.
Le duc s’assied sur une des deux chaises, et boit une gorgée de lait. Nella va
et vient dans la salle, rangeant les meubles et serrant du linge dans les bahuts
sans s’occuper de lui.
Le duc gallus, lorgnant la masure.
Pierre et briques.
édifice à classer parmi les historiques.
Lorgnant la fille.
— vingt ans. De trop grands yeux, et de trop petits pieds.
Revenant à l’inspection du logis.
— des ancêtres cassés. Des preux estropiés.
Force héros sans nez, perdus dans les décombres.
Ce mélange imposant de Charlemagnes sombres,
de Barberousses morts, de Christs, de Jéhovahs,
de saints, que le vulgaire appelle des gravats.
L’auguste bric-à-brac, épars sous la fougère,
que l’histoire plus tard met sur son étagère.
Une commission de savants trouverait
regardant le chiendent qui pousse entre les pavés.
à camper dans cette herbe énormément d’attrait.
L’humidité triomphe, et fait sous ce portique

prospérer la grenouille, animal aquatique.
Tous les siècles moisis ensemble. Que c'est beau!
La ruine vraiment vaut presque le tombeau.
C'est superbe. Les goths, les romains, les sicambres.
Des pierres dans le blé, du gazon dans les chambres,
un burg, quoi! C'est là, certe, un rare monument,
où l'on doit s'ennuyer épouvantablement.
Lorgnant Nella.
 — divine! Un brin de fleur, et la voilà coiffée!
Haut à Nella.
 — mademoiselle, on voit dans les contes de fée
des belles, comme vous, que garde en une tour
un dragon, et pour qui des rois meurent d'amour,
et que viennent sauver des paladins bravaches.
 — ah çà! Que faites-vous ici?
Nella.

Je trais les vaches.
Le duc Gallus.

Traire les vaches. Soit. Il est d'autres bonheurs.
Que faites-vous après?
Nella.

Je porte aux moissonneurs
leur dîner dans les champs.
Le duc Gallus.

Après, belle pensive?
Nella.

Je lave à la fontaine et je fais la lessive.
Le duc Gallus.

Ah! Grâce pour ces mains charmantes! — puis après?
Nella.

Je balaie, et je range au cellier nos oeufs frais.
Le duc Gallus.

Après?
Nella.

J’ai ma quenouille, ou bien je raccommode
ma robe.
Le duc Gallus.

Qui n’est pas tout à fait à la mode.
Nella.

Je ne sais pas.
Le duc Gallus.

Après?
Nella.

Quand mon père, à pas lents…
Elle montre la fenêtre d’où le duc a déjà aperçu le père.
— regardez, — on le voit d’ici. — ces cheveux blancs! —
quand il rentre le soir, je tiens la table prête,
je mets la nappe.
Le duc Gallus.

Et puis?
Nella.

Nous soupons tête à tête.
Le duc Gallus.

De pain bis?
Nella.

Et de lait.
Le duc Gallus.

C’est là tout le gala?
Nella.

Puis je lui lis un peu de ces gros livres-là.
Elle montre les livres sur le bahut qui touche à la table. Le duc tourne
la tête et, sans se lever, regarde les titres des livres sur les dossiers des
volumes.
Le duc gallus, déchiffrant.
Homère. Grotius. Polybe, la Genèse.
Nella.

Ou bien, tout en causant, je couds près de sa chaise,
et, le travail faisant des trous à ses habits,
je les lui double avec de la peau de brebis.
Puis mon père me tend ses bottes, je les ôte.
Le duc Gallus.

Ensuite?
Nella.

Ensuite on fait la prière à voix haute.
Il m’embrasse, et l’on va dormir.
Le duc gallus, se levant.
C’est tout?
Nella.

C’est tout.
Le duc s’approche d’un air insinuant avec un sourire d’intelligence.
Le duc Gallus.

Qu’avez-vous dans l’esprit?
Nella.

Croire en Dieu.

Le duc Gallus.

C’est beaucoup.
Nella se remet à faire le ménage de la salle.
Après un silence.
Vous devez par instants vous sentir sérieuse?
Vous êtes…
Nella.

Je ne suis pas même curieuse.
J’ignore votre nom.
Avec une révérence fière.
Soyez le bien venu.
Le duc gallus, souriant.
Le bonheur est parfois caché dans l’inconnu.
Se rapprochant.
Rêvez-vous? Pensez-vous?
Nella.

Penser, c’est trop. J’espère.
Le duc gallus, accentuant son sourire.
Mais, belle, il faut aimer quelqu’un.
Nella.

J’aime mon père.
Le duc Gallus.

Mais par des cheveux blancs tout le cœur n’est pas pris.
Nella, le regardant.
J’aime les cheveux blancs, et non les cheveux gris.
Maintenant, s’il vous plaît, je vais serrer mon linge.
Le duc gallus, à part.
Une gazelle ayant de l’esprit comme un singe!
Nella retourne à ses occupations d’intérieur. Elle remet la ruine en ordre
le plus qu’elle peut. Elle va et vient, sans faire attention au duc.

Le duc gallus, se rasseyant.
Ah çà, je n’aime point voir des enterrements.
Ces yeux profonds et bleus comme des firmaments,
cette fraîcheur timide, et cette rougeur fière,
ce front rose qui semble un lever de lumière,
tout cela n’est pas fait pour garder la maison.
Je crois en vous voyant voir l’aurore en prison.
Oui, vous êtes l’aurore, et vous êtes esclave
dans la nuit! Au cachot, seule au fond d’une cave,
chez ce bonhomme affreux qu’on appelle l’hiver.
La beauté c’est le fruit, l’indigence est le ver.
Regardant la masure.
Burg sinistre! Où donc est ton échelle. ô Latude!
à Nella.
— tel que vous me voyez, j’aime la solitude,
à la condition de ne pas être seul. —
croupir! Devenir laide! Autant vaut le linceul.
Viviane se change en Toinon dans ces bouges.
La taille s’épaissit, les bras deviennent rouges.
Guerre à cet oppresseur infâme, le corset!
Je viens vous annoncer une nouvelle, c’est
qu’il existe des lieux charmants; c’est que Versailles,
Potsdam, Schoenbrunn, ont mis l’Olympe en leurs broussailles

c’est qu’il est des palais; c’est qu’il est des bosquets;
c’est qu’au seuil d’une idylle il faut de grands laquais;
c’est que le buisson, l’herbe, et la bruyère, et l’arbre,
ne sont beaux que mêlés à des nymphes de marbre;
c’est qu’un torrent est laid, et qu’au fond du vallon
l’eau doit se comporter comme dans un salon;
c’est qu’Homère et Milton ne sont que des maroufles
faits pour passer le temps à chanter vos pantoufles;
c’est qu’il est un devoir, l’oisiveté, pour ceux
qu’enivre la langueur des appas paresseux;
c’est que les beaux habits sont beaux; c’est que les femmes
doivent être de poupre et d’or, comme les flammes,
car toutes ont pour loi de brûler à leur tour

dans l’immense incendie universel, l’amour!
Je viens vous annoncer que vous êtes déesse;
que la beauté, cet astre, a pour ciel la richesse,
et que sur cette terre, ancien fief de Vénus,
où, pour voir deux beaux yeux et baiser deux pieds nus,
le pape donnerait Rome, et moi, Babylone,
vous avez une jupe en serge à dix sous l’aune!
Montrant tour à tour Nella et le burg.
Je ne suis pas Dieu. Non. Mais pour lui je rougis
que faisant de tels yeux, il fasse un tel logis!
Morbleu! Faut-il qu’on rie, ou bien faut-il qu’on pleure?
Vous êtes la beauté suprême, pour demeure
vous avez la tristesse horrible! C’est complet.
Ma parole d’honneur, si j’avais un valet
maladroit comme Dieu, laissant de sa fenêtre
tomber le pot de fleurs où le lys vient de naître
et cassant un destin charmant sur le pavé,
cachant dans un taudis l’être qu’on a rêvé,
brouillant tout, faussant tout, faisant traire les vaches
à Psyché, j’userais sur son dos vingt cravaches!
Dieu se moque de nous, tristes fils de Japhet!
Il s’est levé et, comme par mégarde, laisse s’écarter son habit de voyage
sous lequel on entrevoit sa plaque et son grand cordon.
Nella.

Monsieur, si vous croyez me faire de l’effet
parce que vous ouvrez votre habit de manière
à montrer un crachat sous votre boutonnière
et dans votre gilet le coin d’un cordon bleu,
vous vous trompez.
Elle va au coin où est la voussure, et écarte les deux volets fermés. En tournant
sur leurs gonds, ils découvrent un tableau qui est le portrait en pied d’un
homme de guerre en grand uniforme, couvert de décorations et de broderies,

avec un grand cordon, le même que porte le duc.
 — voici mon grand-père.
Le duc Gallus.

Vrai Dieu!
C’est un feld-maréchal.
Nella.

Parfaitement.
Le duc Gallus.

Vous êtes?…
Nella.

Sa petite-fille.
Elle salue le portrait avec gravité, puis se redresse.
Oui. Les tambours, les trompettes
l’annonçaient. Maintenant, il dort dans son linceul.
Les autres généraux l’admiraient. Mon aïeul
étant le plus prudent était le plus terrible.
Il était infaillible, il était invincible.
Et l’empereur, présent, voulait qu’il commandât.
Le duc Gallus.

Et son fils, votre père?…
Nella.

Est un simple soldat.
Elle salue de nouveau le portrait, puis se retourne vers le duc.
Mon père est le baron d’Holburg. La destinée
l’avait brisé déjà que je n’étais pas née.
On n’apprend point l’histoire aux femmes, c’est pourquoi
je ne vous dirai pas si ce fut pour le roi
ou l’empereur, si c’est pour la Prusse ou l’Autriche,
qu’étant noble, il donna son sang, et qu’étant riche,
il donna son argent jusqu’au dernier écu;
je sais qu’il eut le tort d’être pour le vaincu.

Le vainqueur le frappa. L’on mit sous le séquestre
ses fiefs seigneuriaux rayés de l’ordre équestre,
puis on le fit soldat. Ce burg fut son exil.
Tout paysan pour lui devint un alguazil;
les murs tombent, hélas, et les cœurs dégénèrent.
Ceux qu’il avait jadis nourris, l’espionnèrent.
Mon père n’eut plus droit de porter l’éperon.
Défense de lui dire excellence ou baron.
Il laboure son champ. Lui, cousin des margraves,
quoiqu’il fût le plus brave au milieu des vieux braves,
les jeunes officiers n’ont pas l’air de le voir.
Il fait le blé, je fais le pain. Calme, le soir,
il s’en revient, traînant le soc parmi les plaines,
tandis que le soleil descend dans les grands chênes.
Nous buvons l’eau du ciel qui remplit le fossé.
Il ne parle jamais de ce qui s’est passé;
si quelqu’un par hasard lui fait une demande,
il répond : j’ai servi la patrie allemande,
et se retire, un peu plus fier qu’auparavant.
Il songe volontiers dans les bois pleins de vent.
Il a le front pensif de l’homme qui persiste.
Il est vieux, seul, vaincu, proscrit. Il n’est pas triste.
On sent qu’il porte en lui la cause juste. Il croit.
à mesure que l’ombre autour de lui s’accroît
je vois dans sa prunelle augmenter la lumière.
Son donjon lentement devient une chaumière.
Il regarde souvent ce portrait, son trésor;
l’épaulette de laine à l’épaulette d’or
raconte son histoire et parle de la guerre,
et je vois mon aïeul qui sourit à mon père.
N’ayant pas de quoi mettre une tuile à son toit,
mon père dans sa chambre en ruine reçoit
l’averse quand il pleut et le froid quand il vente,
et moi je suis sa fille et je suis sa servante,
et c’est ce qu’on appelle être un homme déchu.
Le duc gallus, à part.
En entrant je voulais chiffonner ce fichu;

maintenant, — est-ce donc le sol qui se dérobe? —
je suis prêt à baiser le bas de cette robe.
Haut à Nella.
Je ne suis pas très fort en histoire non plus.
Votre père appartient aux âges révolus.
Mais, voyons, qu'a-t-il fait?
Nella.

De ce qu'a fait mon père,
je ne sais rien du tout, sinon que j'en suis fière.
Le duc Gallus.

L'empereur pourrait, tout étant calme aujourd'hui,
lui faire grâce.
Nella.

Hein? Lui faire grâce! à lui!
Lui seul aurait le droit de faire grâce aux autres.
De qui donc croyez-vous parler?
Le duc Gallus.

De l'un des nôtres.
D'un seigneur.
Nella.

Les seigneurs sont aussi courtisans.
Point. Nous sommes, mon père et moi, des paysans.
Mon père est un soldat, je suis une vachère.
Notre chute profonde et haute nous est chère.
Ah! Lui peut s'appuyer aussi sur mon honneur!
Mon père est en dépôt dans mes mains. Son bonheur
est mon devoir. Je sais que je dois être forte.
Je suis le seul débris de sa famille morte;
il n'a que moi. Vivez, vous les hommes dorés!
Oui, mes vaches, je vais les traire dans les prés.
J'aime leurs grands yeux bleus qu'on dirait pleins d'un rêve;
elles donnent leur lait à vous tous; je me lève

de grand matin, je cours, je saute les fossés,
je me mouille les pieds dans l’herbe; je ne sais
si le roi Frédéric combat l’empereur Charle;
mais elles, dans les champs, m’attendent; je leur parle;
chacune semble heureuse et gaie en m’écoutant;
elles lèchent mes mains, et j’ai le cœur content
dans la grande nature, et loin de vos chimères,
moi bonne fille, avec toutes ces bonnes mères.
Le duc gallus, à part.
Je ne sais pas pourquoi je tremble comme un sot.
Serais-je un honnête homme à mon insu? L’assaut!
Vite! Donnons l’assaut.
Haut à Nella.
Que diriez-vous, madame,
d’un prince qui voudrait vous apporter son âme,
son rang, ses millions, son nom grand et vainqueur?
Nella.

Le nom est quelquefois le contraire du cœur;
nom auguste, esprit vil; nom obscur, âme illustre.
Parfois le pâtre est prince et le monarque est rustre.
Ici c’est l’ombre. On n’a pas vu, dans ce manoir,
de princes, et l’on trouve inutile d’en voir,
et j’ai toujours pensé, quant à moi, qu’une altesse,
c’était de la grandeur, mais de la petitesse.
Le duc gallus, à part.
Brusquons.
Haut.
Vous devez, car il faut bien être heureux,
avoir un amant.
Nella, le regardant fixement.
Moi!
Le duc Gallus.

Pardon. Un amoureux.
Nella.

De quoi vous mêlez-vous? Venez-vous des étoiles
pour oser regarder l’âme à travers ses voiles!
Si j’aime, mon amour s’ajoute à mon orgueil.
Il est pur, grave et fier, et ma mère au cercueil
le sait, en attendant que mon père le sache.
L’innocence se voile et la faute se cache.
Je ne me cache pas. Aimer est ma grandeur.
Mon secret est sans honte et n’est pas sans pudeur.
Mon cœur cherche la nuit, mais ne craint pas le blâme.
L’œil de Dieu reste ouvert dans l’ombre de mon âme.
Le duc veut parler. Elle lui impose silence du geste.
Je comprends. Une fille est chez un paysan.
On se dit : allons-y.
Elle lui montre la porte.
C’est bien. Allez-vous-en.
Le duc se lève.
On n’entre pas ici par une ligne courbe.
Ah! Je sais distinguer le cœur vrai du cœur fourbe.
L’ange et le tentateur n’ont pas la même voix;
le loup n’est pas le chien fidèle; et dans les bois
le chant du rossignol n’est pas le cri du merle.
Le duc Gallus.

Je cherche un grain de mil, et je trouve une perle.
Attrapé.
Nella.

Sortez.
Le duc Gallus.

Mais…
à part.
Je suis chassé.
Entre George par la brèche, essoufflé, sans voir le duc.

SCENE IV

George.

J’accours.
C’est moi. Pour peu d’instants, et des instants bien courts!
J’en profite. Je viens. Ah! Loin de vous, que faire?
Puis-je entrer?
Nella, à part.
Grand Dieu! George! Et cet homme!
Le baron d’Holburg paraît à la porte du fond; vieux, en habit de soldat,
avec une souquenille de laboureur.
Et mon père!
Je tremble.
Le baron d’Holburg.
, apercevant le duc.
Un étranger!
Nella, au baron d’holburg.
Montrant le duc.
Je lui dis de sortir.
Le duc gallus, au baron d’holburg.
C’est vous le père? Eh bien, je dois vous avertir
que ces deux jeunes gens s’aiment.
Il montre George.
George.

Quel est cet homme?
Nella.

Ciel!
George, au duc.
Qu’êtes-vous, monsieur? Sachez que je me nomme
George.

Le duc Gallus.

C’est bon. On sait mieux que vous votre nom.
S’adressant au baron d’Holburg stupéfait.
Quand vous tournez le dos, ce jeune compagnon
— le scrupule aux amants ne pèse pas une once, —
vient voir mademoiselle, et je vous les dénonce.
Je viens d’être témoin d’un de leurs rendez-vous.
George.

Quel est cet espion?
Le duc gallus, continuant. Au baron d’holburg.
Monsieur fait les yeux doux.
Mademoiselle, avec réserve, les accepte.
Le baron d’Holburg.
.
Ma fille! Est-il possible!
Le duc Gallus.

Il faudrait être inepte
pour ignorer qu’avril est le mois des amours,
que la douceur des nuits suit la beauté des jours,
qu’un souffle est dans les bois, qu’il faut que tout renaisse,
que c’est la volonté de Dieu que la jeunesse
sente la pression amoureuse du ciel,
qu’avoir vingt ans oblige, et qu’il est naturel
qu’un baiser, envié par les nids du burg sombre,
tombe sur le bras blanc qu’on entrevoit dans l’ombre.
Nella, rougissante et suppliante.
Monsieur…
Le duc gallus, poursuivant. Au baron.
Moi je suis là, je passe, j’aperçois,
je viens vous informer du fait.
George, au duc.
Qui que tu sois,
ce que tu viens de dire, entends-tu, c’est l’épée,
la dague et le poignard, l’herbe de sang trempée,
sans quartier, tout de suite, et j’en fais le serment,

et regarde-moi bien en face fixement,
tu te rétracteras syllabe par syllabe!
Ton nom?
Le duc Gallus.

Je suis Gallus, landgrave de Souabe,
le frère du feu duc régnant George premier.
L’aigle à deux têtes prend son vol sur mon cimier.
L’Allemagne n’a pas de famille plus grande.
Il salue profondément le baron.
Et, monsieur le baron d’Holburg, je vous demande
en mariage ici votre fille Nella
pour mon neveu le duc George deux
montrant George.
Que voilà.
4 janvier 1869.

ESCA, DRAME

ACTE PREMIER : LISON

une route sur le versant d’une colline boisée. La colline monte et occupe le fond du théâtre. La route passe au premier plan, tourne, puis reparaît au second plan à mi-côte parmi les arbres où elle se perd. En bas, à droite, une maisonnette couverte de chaume, très propre et très pauvre. Un court sentier de traverse, qui n’a que quelques enjambées, sur le talus de la colline, met en communication le tronçon de route du premier plan avec le tronçon du deuxième plan. Gros arbres çà et là autour de la maison. Devant la maison, sous un arbre et dans un massif de roses, une source encadrée d’une margelle de grosses pierres frustes. La cabane, très basse, n’a qu’un rez-de-chaussée. Au lever du rideau, deux voitures cheminent sur la route; l’une , sur le tronçon supérieur, est une charrette chargée de fumier, attelée d’un âne et menée par un paysan en blouse juché sur le fumier; l’autre, sur le tronçon inférieur, au premier plan, est un coche de voyage et de gala, tout doré, blasonné d’armoiries, surmonté d’une couronne princière, avec glaces, et intérieur de satin, traîné par quatre chevaux empanachés, harnachés de bossages d’or, avec postillons et laquais. Dans la voiture est Gallus. On aperçoit Gunich dans le compartiment du devant. La porte de la chaumière est fermée; la fenêtre est ouverte. Une jeune fille, dans le demi-désordre d’une toilette commencée, se peigne devant la fenêtre. C’est Lison. On voit l’intérieur d’une chambre indigente. Beau soleil. Printemps.

ACTE PREMIER : LISON, SCENE PREMIERE

Gallus, se penchant à la portière du carrosse.
Oh! La charmante fille!
Lison, se penchant à la fenêtre de la chaumière.
Oh! La belle voiture!
Le carrosse passe et disparaît à droite. La charrette s'arrête. Harou en descend, son fouet à la main. Il dégringole par le sentier qui abrège, court à la chaumière et frappe à la porte d'un coup de sabot. Il a son fouet à la main.
Harou.

Il est neuf heures.
Lison, par la fenêtre.
Ah! C'est vous.
Harou.

Oui, ma future.
Lison.

C'est bon.
Elle jette un fichu sur ses épaules nues, et elle ouvre la porte.
Harou entre.
Harou.

Vous n'êtes pas encor prête?
Lison.

Pardi!
Harou.

Mais monsieur le curé nous attend à midi.
Lison.

Bien.
Harou.

L’autel est paré. C’est comme aux grandes fêtes.
Lison.

Bon.
Harou.

De cette cabane isolée où vous êtes,
jusqu’à l’église…
Lison.

Eh bien?
Harou.

C’est encor loin. Allons,
vite. Habillez-vous.
Lison.

Oui.
Harou.

J’aurai deux violons.
Lison.

Bien.
Harou.

Je vais décharger mon fumier, puis je rentre
vous prendre en ma charrette avec Thibaut, le chantre.
Lison.

Soit.
Harou.

Mamz’elle Lison…
Lison.

Dites Lisa.
Harou.

Lisa.
Vous êtes vertueuse, et c'est pour ça.
Lison.

Pour ça,
que quoi?
Harou.

Que je vous aime et que je vous épouse.
Vous avez du bonheur, hein? Plus d'une est jalouse.
Vous sentez bien que moi qui suis un gros fermier,
ayant acquêts et baux francs de droit coutumier,
c'est à qui m'aura. Vous, vous êtes sans famille.
être madame Harou, quel sort pour une fille!
Avoir six cents arpents de blé, trois cents de foin!
Et dire, en regardant tout le pays très loin :
c'est à moi! Voyez-vous, vous êtes orpheline,
pas un brin d'herbe n'est à vous sur la colline,
et vous êtes sans dot comme la fleur des champs.
Cela n'amuse pas les gens qui sont méchants
de voir que je vous prends pour femme. ça les fâche.
Vous n'étiez qu'une pauvre ouvrière à la tâche,
seule, et dont les parents sont morts sur des grabats,
gagnant six sous par jour à ravauder des bas.
Vous allez devenir bourgeoise, et cette chambre
où vous gelez, pas vrai, dès le mois de novembre,
vous l'allez changer contre un bon logis, ma foi,
où vous serez chez vous bien qu'en étant chez moi,
et d'où vous pourrez voir la mare avec les vignes,
et des canards si gros qu'on les prend pour des cygnes!
Ah! Les commères font du train! Moi, bon luron,
tout ce tas d'oiseaux noirs qui bat de l'aileron,
parce qu'elles voudraient être ce que vous êtes,
me fait rire. Piaillez, mesdames les chouettes!

Quand demain, bras dessus dessous, nous passerons,
cela fera sortir du trou leurs gros yeux ronds.
ça sera farce. Et vous, vous prendrez un air crâne,
vous direz : ma maison, mon champ, mon pré, mon âne.
Et puis du cidre! Et puis du pain, plein le buffet!
Moi, j’ai de l’amitié pour vous. C’est ce qui fait
que j’épouse. Sur vous, du reste, rien à dire.
Vous n’avez qu’un défaut, c’est que vous savez lire.
Moi pas. Ah! Par exemple, il faudra travailler.
étant maîtresse, on est servante. S’éveiller
au chant du coq, couper le seigle ou la fougère,
être bonne faucheuse et bonne ménagère,
manier gentiment la fourche à tour de bras,
laver les murs, laver les lits, laver les draps,
donner à boire aux gars ayant au dos leurs pioches,
blanchir l’âtre, écumer le pot, moucher les mioches,
porter, si le chemin est long et raboteux,
ses souliers à la main, les pieds s’usant moins qu’eux,
et vivre ainsi pieds nus et riche, heureuse en somme
d’être une brave femme et d’avoir un brave homme.
Nos bans sont publiés. Je vous ai fait cadeau
d’un parapluie, afin que, s’il tombe trop d’eau,
on ne s’en serve point, parce qu’il est en soie.
Et nous nous marions tantôt. Vive la joie!
Donc, mamz’elle, à midi, l’église. à minuit…
Il fait claquer ses doigts.
— bien!
Vous êtes un peu maigre. Ah! Cela ne fait rien.
En mangeant du gigot, de la soupe bien chaude,
du lard, avec le temps vous deviendrez rougeaude.
La viande, voyez-vous, c’est ça qui fait la chair.
Vous étiez mal nourrie. Au fait, tout est si cher!
Le moyen qu’une fille, en mangeant peu, soit belle!
Sans chardon, l’âne geint. Sans pré, le mouton bêle.
Nous serons très heureux. Moi, j’aurai soin des boeufs,
vous des cochons. Des fois, l’étable, c’est bourbeux,
dame, on pataugera dans la paille mouillée.

Bah!
Lison, à part.
On nous a souvent, le soir, à la veillée,
dit des contes de fée où l’on voit qu’au printemps
il arrive parfois aux filles de vingt ans
de trouver au milieu de leur chambre un jeune homme
portant un astre au front, qui leur dit : je me nomme
le prince Azur, je t’offre un palais où tout rit,
chante et danse, je t’aime, et je suis un esprit.
Considérant maître Harou.
Ce n’est pas ça.
Harou.

Je veux vous donner douze, oui, douze!
Chemises en bon fil.
Montrant sa manche.
Pareilles à ma blouse.
Lison, à part.
En toile à torchon!
Harou.

Moi…
Gallus et Gunich, enveloppés de manteaux, passent au fond du théâtre
et s’arrêtent derrière les arbres, en observation.
Lison, regardant Harou et reculant.
Quelle odeur!
Harou.

Moi, fermier,
je…
Lison.

Que sentez-vous donc? Pouah!
Harou.

Rien. C’est le fumier.

ça ne sent pas mauvais.
Il s’approche d’elle galamment.
Vous n’êtes pas commode.
J’aime ça. L’autre jour, j’ai, puisque c’est la mode,
voulu vous embrasser, moi mauvais chenapan,
mais vous m’avez donné juste en plein museau, pan!
Une pichenette! Ah! Comme vous m’attrapâtes!
Il rit et cherche à l’embrasser; elle recule.
Lison, le repoussant.
Ah! Pardon. Vous avez des mains!
Harou, riant plus fort.
De bonnes pattes,
hein?
Il rit et étale ses mains.
ça travaille.
Il les retourne toutes hâlées des deux côtés.
C’est de la bonne noirceur.
Lison se remet à se peigner.
Lison.

Dire que je n’ai pas une mère, une sœur,
pour m’habiller le jour de ma noce!
Harou.

L’usage
est qu’une du pays lace votre corsage.
Lison.

Je ne veux de personne.
Harou.

Oui. Vous êtes ainsi.
Quelle sauvage humeur de vous loger ici!
Seule, en cette cabane au bout de la vallée!
Lison.

J’ai ce choix : ici seule; au village isolée.

étant pauvre, on n’a pas d’amis, et j’aime mieux
voir le désert au fond des bois qu’au fond des yeux.
Harou.

Vous avez un parler trop haut. ça vient, je gage,
des livres. Quand on lit, ça gâte le langage.
Mais j’y mettrai bon ordre. Ah! Dans le temps ancien…
Lison, pensive et regardant un livre qui est sur sa table.
En fait de livre ici, je n’ai qu’un paroissien.
à part.
Savoir lire, à quoi bon? Pour lire de la messe!
Fi!
Harou, faisant claquer son fouet.
Je serai le maître, et j’en fais la promesse.
Il rit.
çà, pour vous épouser il faut que je sois fou,
moi qui suis riche, et vous qui n’avez pas le sou;
mais l’homme est un nigaud que la femme ensorcelle,
hein, mam’zelle Lison?
Lison.

Dites mademoiselle
Lisa.
à part.
Grossier pain bis, va!
Harou.

Convenablement,
je suis moins que mari, mais je suis plus qu’amant.
Un baiser.
Il s’approche. Elle le repousse vivement.
Lison.

Jamais!
Harou, éclatant de rire.
Oh! Jamais!
Il regarde à une grosse montre d’argent qu’il a sous sa blouse.

çà, je babille.
Il faut vous habiller. Il faut que je m'habille.
Lison, le regardant de côté.
Je crois que pour cravate il a sa corde à puits.
Harou.

Faire un brin de toilette est nécessaire, et puis,
vous, pendant ce temps-là, ma-de-moi-selle-Lise,
avec un clin d'œil.
— est-ce ça? — parez-vous. Puis, en route, à l'église,
gens de la noce! — et puis, ce soir,
avec un geste galant qui l'effarouche.
Plus de fichu!
Il fait claquer son fouet. Il escalade le sentier, rejoint la route d'en haut,
remonte dans la charrette et s'assoit sur le fumier. Il crie.
Je vais venir vous prendre en ma voiture. — hu!
Lison, seule.
Elle ôte son fichu, et n'a plus que sa chemise et un jupon.
Elle divise et natte ses cheveux.
C'est là le malaisé. Je suis une rêveuse.
Elle ouvre un tiroir de commode.
Habillons-nous.
Elle prend dans la commode quelques hardes, et s'arrête.
Ma tête est obscure, et se creuse.
Dire que je n'ai pas encor pris mon parti!
Elle tire de la commode une coiffure de mariée en fleurs d'oranger.
Souvent d'un oui, d'un non, on s'est bien repenti.
Dans une heure il sera trop tard.
Elle déplie une robe de grosse laine neuve, propre et laide.
L'ennui me ronge!
Elle met sur un escabeau une paire de gros souliers de femme, neufs.
Pas de destin auquel on ne préfère un songe!
Elle regarde la robe, les souliers et les fleurs d'oranger.
Que faire?
Elle se remet à natter ses cheveux.

Ce bouvier est honnête. — et hideux.
Elle les roule en tresse.
Lui, soit.
Elle les rattache en couronne sur sa tête.
J’avais pourtant rêvé le ciel à deux!
Elle interrompt sa toilette et médite.
Aimer, comme c’est bon! S’idôlâtrer sans cesse!
Et n’être pas trop pauvre! Ah! C’est beau, la richesse!
La vraie! En plein. Oui, tout! Pas l’épaisse façon
d’être riche à peu près qu’a ce pauvre garçon.
Sa femme ira pieds nus. Les souliers s’usent, dame!
Moi, je consens très bien aux pieds nus de la femme,
à la condition du tapis de velours.
Et ces poignets! Ces gens de campagne sont lourds!
Il faut, pour cet hymen de l’âme avec l’étoile
qu’on nomme Amour, un lit, pas en trop grosse toile,
un nuage où l’on flotte, on ne sait quel vivant
char d’aurore emporté par le rêve et le vent,
et pas plus de travail que l’oiseau sur la branche!
Pensive.
L’œil est d’autant plus doux que la main est plus blanche.
L’amour, dit l’Amadis de monsieur de Tressan,
c’est la vie. Et je hais le parler paysan.
Ouvrière. Orpheline. Oh! Je songe, et Dieu laisse
entrer dans mon œil trouble un regard de duchesse,
et j’ai des visions folles, plaire, charmer,
être libre, être belle, être adorée! Aimer!
Elle se remet à sa toilette.
Elle prend la coiffure de mariée et regarde les quatre murs de sa chambre.
Je n’ai pas de miroir, tant je suis misérable!
Elle sort de la chaumière, et va au puits de la source.
Si Dieu n’avait pas mis cette eau sous cet érable,
je n’aurais pas moyen de me coiffer, vraiment.
Elle se mire dans l’eau, tout en ajustant sa coiffure.
La fleur d’oranger. Peuh! — la rose, c’est charmant.
Elle ôte le bouquet d’oranger, cueille une rose dans le rosier,

et la met dans ses cheveux. Elle se mire.
Pauvre, ou ce mariage. Ah! La ressource est dure.
Elle ôte la rose et la regarde pensive.
Une fleur, ça se fane.
Gallus, derrière elle et sans qu'elle le voie, sort à moitié du massif qui entoure
la source, avance le bras, et lui pose un épi de diamants dans les cheveux.
Gallus, à demi-voix.
Un diamant, ça dure!
Il rentre vivement dans le massif.
Lison, se retournant.
Hein? On a parlé.
Elle regarde.
Non. Personne.
Elle se mire dans la source.
Ah! Dieu, mon Dieu!
Qu'ai-je au front?
Elle se redresse effarée.
Qui m'a mis cela?
Elle se mire de nouveau.
Qu'est-ce? Du feu?
ça doit brûler! — je n'ose y toucher.
Relevant la tête.
Je suis bête.
C'est cette eau qui me trompe et qui met sur ma tête
un reflet de soleil. Ce que c'est que d'avoir
une source au milieu d'un bois pour tout miroir!
Elle se retourne. Un grand miroir de Venise ovale, encadré de vermeil ciselé,
apparaît devant elle dans le massif.
Ciel!
Stupéfaite, elle regarde le miroir. Elle porte la main au bouquet de diamants
qu'elle a sur le front.
Ah! Les reines sont de la sorte coiffées!
Elle regarde le miroir.

Est-ce que par hasard il passe un vol de fées
qui s’est venu poser sur les branches du bois?
Elle regarde sa coiffure de diamants.
Ai-je peur? Non. J’ai fait ce rêve bien des fois.
Autour de moi tout tremble et devient ineffable.
Elle approche du miroir. Elle aperçoit un petit être, espèce de nain ou d’enfant,
vêtu de satin blanc glacé vert, qui porte le miroir et le lui présente, et qui
disparaît presque derrière, tant il est petit et tant le miroir est grand.
Lison, admirant l’enfant.
Qu’il est joli!
Elle le considère sans crainte et comme apprivoisée à l’aventure.
C’est ça! Le nain! C’est une fable
qui m’arrive.
Elle l’admire.
Il est fée. Es-tu fée? Oui, pour sûr!
Quelle est ta reine?
Le nain.
Vous, madame.
Lison, reculant.
C’est obscur,
mais charmant. Suis-je en vie? Oh! L’extase m’accable.
Suis-je morte?
Pendant qu’elle regarde le nain, le miroir et l’épi de diamants sur sa tête,
un collier vient se poser sur sa gorge et sur ses épaules nues.
Elle s’écrie.
Un collier tout en perles!
Elle se retourne et voit un nègre. Ce nègre vient de sortir du massif, et c’est lui
qui lui a agrafé le collier au cou, sans être aperçu d’elle. Il est vêtu de velours
feu. Lison le regarde, pas effarouchée.
Le diable!

Je comprends.
On entend une musique sous les arbres et une vague chanson
murmurée
qui semble chantée au loin par des passants invisibles.
Chanson.
— les lutins — dans les thyms — les hautbois —
dans les bois — les roseaux — dans les eaux — ont des voix. —
donc faisons — des chansons — et dansons. — l'aube achève —
notre rêve — et l'amour — c'est le jour. —
lison, pâmée et fascinée.
Je suis ève!
Une fumée se disperse dans les branches.
Qu'est-ce que cet encens dans l'ombre répandu?
Je sens comme une odeur de paradis.
Gallus, paraissant.
Perdu.
Enfin! Je tiens mon rêve!
Gallus, sorti du massif, laisse tomber son manteau. Il apparaît
vêtu de brocart
d'or de la tête aux pieds, avec son cordon bleu et sa plaque d'ordres. Il a sur la tête un panache couleur feu. Il se dresse devant Lison.
Lison.

Un homme fait de flamme!
On aperçoit dans les arbres Gunich au guet, caché par l'ombre
du bois.
Gallus, immobile, l'œil fixé sur
Lison.
à part.
D'abord disons-lui tu. Le bonheur de la femme
est d'être tutoyée, et son autre bonheur
est, quand on lui dit tu, de dire monseigneur.
Il hésite et hoche la tête.
Mais diantre! Tutoyer, c'est brusquer. C'est du style
bien familier. La nuit est l'intervalle utile.
L'amour dit vous le soir et dit tu le matin.
Il se décide.

Nuances qu’elle doit ignorer.
La regardant et l’admirant.
Quel butin!
Haut à Lison.
Que désires-tu? Parle, et ne sois pas modeste.
Je viens combler tes voeux.
Lison, maintenant effrayée. Avec une révérence tremblante.
Monseigneur Satan…
Gallus, à part.
Peste!
C’est plus que je n’osais espérer.
Lison, éperdue.
Oui. Non. Si!
Mais je suis toute nue, et c’est plein d’yeux ici.
Un manteau de velours pourpre lui tombe sur les épaules.
C’est le nègre qui lui met ce manteau.
Lison.

Monseigneur le démon…
Le duc gallus, souriant, à part.
Elle accepte l’abîme.
Haut.
Et d’abord, descendons de ce sommet sublime.
Je ne suis pas Satan. Je suis un simple roi.
Du moins j’étais cela l’an passé; mais l’emploi
m’ennuyait; j’ai lâché le sceptre qui m’assomme;
mais je suis encor prince, et même gentilhomme.
Sultan, j’ai planté là le sabre et le turban.
Lison.

Oh!
Gallus, souriant.
Tu vois un monarque en rupture de ban.
Je me refais aux champs une âme printanière,
et j’y viens à l’école. — école buissonnière.
Sois ma maîtresse.
Lison, effarouchée.

Moi!
Gallus, souriant.
D’école. Belle, il sied
d’expliquer tout. Ce nègre est mon valet de pied.
J’ai toujours avec moi ma musique de chambre,
et, même dans les bois, je fais brûler de l’ambre.
Il montre la fumée d’encens dans les arbres.
De là vient cette odeur de sainteté. Ce nain,
diabolique à peu près, tant il est féminin,
est un de mes laquais. J’ai de plus dans ma suite
un rimeur qui me dit la messe, étant jésuite;
ce maroufle est chargé de me faire mes vers.
J’en fais moi-même aussi parfois. J’ai pour travers
de rire, et de vouloir qu’autour de moi l’on rie.
Je me fabrique un peu d’aurore et de féerie.
Je voyage en nabab de l’Inde, et mes fourgons,
que Médée aurait fait traîner à ses dragons,
contiennent en décors de quoi jouer Armide;
je ne suis pas méchant, mais ne suis pas timide.
Qu’on nous donne un hallier, de l’ombre, et caetera,
et nous improvisons d’emblée un opéra.
Je suis riche, et j’ai pu, grâce à mes viles piastres,
te mettre sur la tête une coiffure d’astres,
ô belle, et te rouler une rivière au cou.
C’est là le réel. Point de rêve. Rien de fou,
tout est simple, et la fable en vérité s’achève.
Lison, comme somnambule et l’œil égaré.
Ce réel est déjà très joli comme rêve.
Gallus.

Fantastique grenier d’un palais incertain,
le rêve est le cinquième étage du destin,
et la réalité, c’est le rez-de-chaussée.
Restons en bas. Je suis un prince; ma pensée,
c’est de jouir; je vais, tâchant de peu vieillir.
Suis-je un songe-creux? Non. Mais je voudrais cueillir
le divin rameau d’or où l’oiseau bleu se perche.

L’homme ayant égaré le bonheur, je le cherche.
Comment t’appelles-tu?
Lison.

Monseigneur…
Gallus, la contemplant. — à part.
C’est vraiment
mon idéal. Le diable a fait évidemment
tant de perfections pour y loger des vices.
Une telle rencontre est un des grands services
que peut rendre l’enfer à quelqu’un d’ennuyé.
Elle a tout. Front pensif, air sauvage, œil noyé,
bouche à dents de souris qui doit haïr le jeûne,
mains qui doivent haïr le vil travail.
Lison, revenant peu à peu à la réalité. — à part.
Pas jeune.
Ce n’est pas encor ça.
Le regardant en dessous.
Tout doré. De beaux yeux.
Plus de jeunesse avec moins de dorure est mieux.
Mais il a l’air d’avoir bien de l’esprit.
Gallus.

Jolie
comme la trahison et comme la folie!
Ce petit pied, ce bras exquis, convenons-en,
cela n’était pas fait pour rester paysan.
Lison se rapproche du miroir et considère son manteau de velours et d’hermine.
Il la regarde se mirer.
Elle sera perverse en étant bien conduite.
Rien qu’à la voir songer, j’ai compris tout de suite
qu’en cette fille pauvre et coquette j’avais
un bon assortiment de tous les goûts mauvais.
Volupté, vanité, toilette, argent, paresse.
De son ongle déjà le diable la caresse.
Croquons-la. Cette fois, je me crois bien tombé.

Une faunesse exquise et digne d’un abbé!
Il s’approche d’elle avec une admiration passionnée.
Lison, regardant le duc fixement.
Souvent le cœur est froid quand les yeux semblent ivres.
Gallus.

Comment sais-tu cela?
Lison.

Je l’ai lu dans les livres.
Gallus, à part.
Elle sait lire! C’est une difformité.
Ma sauvagesse sort de l’université!
Une savante! ça trouble mes conjectures.
Il réfléchit.
Tout se répare avec un bon choix de lectures.
Faublas. Crébillon fils.
Avec un haussement d’épaules.
Aussi je lui trouvais
un certain air lettré…
Lison.

Lire! Est-ce donc mauvais?
Gallus.

Non. Ne pas lire est mieux. Une fille n’est faite
que pour être jolie et tout changer en fête.
Le temps qu’on donne au livre on le prend à l’amour.
Aucun livre ne vaut un baiser.
à part.
Quel sot tour
on m’a fait là, d’apprendre à lire à cette fille!
L’ignorance est sur l’âme une charmante grille,
qu’il est fort amusant d’entr’ouvrir lentement.
Nouveau haussement d’épaules, comme quelqu’un qui prend son parti.
Il se tourne vers elle.

Crois-moi d’abord en tout. C’est le commencement.
Lison.

Je crois tout ce qu’on dit, à moins qu’on ne le jure.
Gunich, en observation au fond du théâtre. à part.
Bon détail. Je mettrai ce mot dans ma brochure
sur les femmes.
Gallus, à lison.
Tu n’as toujours pas dit ton nom.
Lison.

élisabeth, qui fait Lise, ou bien Lisa.
Gallus.

Non.
Moi je te nommerai Zabeth. Te voilà née.
Je coupe en deux ton nom comme ta destinée,
et tu t’appelleras la marquise Zabeth.
Lison.

Marquise!
Gallus.

Je suis prince. Une étoile tombait,
l’amour la ramassa. Cette étoile est la joie.
Je serai ton esclave.
à part.
Et tu seras ma proie.
Soyons joyeux. Vivons. La vie est un gala.
Lison, se regardant dans le miroir. à part.
Oh! Comme je suis belle avec ces choses-là!
à Gallus.
Monsieur! Reprenez tout!
Gallus.

Pourquoi?
Lison.

C’était pour rire,
n’est-ce pas?
Gallus.

Je l’entends bien ainsi.
Lison.

Je me mire
avec des diamants, et j’oublie, ah mon Dieu!
Que je dois aujourd’hui me marier.
Gallus.

Parbleu,
tu peux…
Lison.

Dites-moi vous.
Gallus.

Madame la marquise,
vous pouvez…
Lison.

Laissez-moi! Je suis la pauvre Lise.
On entend un bruit de violons et le claquement d’un fouet dans la route d’en haut.
Gallus.

Votre voiture vient.
Lison.

Cette charrette!
Gallus.

à moins
que vous ne préfériez celle-ci.

Paraît la voiture dorée à quatre chevaux revenant dans la route basse
par le côté d'où elle est sortie.
Gunich, au duc. Du fond du théâtre.
Sans témoins
fuir serait aisé.
Lison, à gallus.
Mais… — à qui donc ce carrosse?
Gallus.

à vous!
Lison.

à moi!
Le carrosse s'arrête. Gunich ouvre la portière.
Gallus abat le marche-pied et y fait monter Lison éperdue.
Gallus.

Viens, c'est… — ta voiture de noce!
Tous sont dans le carrosse. La portière est refermée. Le carrosse part. Au moment
où il sort, entre dans la route haute, du côté opposé, la charrette traînée
par l'âne. On aperçoit dedans un groupe en tête duquel on voit Harou en
habits de marié avec un gros bouquet, et deux violoneux qui jouent du violon.
11 mars.

ACTE DEUXIEME : LA MARQUISE ZABETH==

à Paris. Un boudoir avec tous les raffinements du luxe. C'est l'hiver. Feu dans la cheminée. Au fond une haute et large fenêtre par où l'on voit les arbres d'un parc, noirs et couverts de givre. Le boudoir est octogone. Aux deux pans coupés du fond, des deux côtés de la fenêtre, deux grandes portes dorées à deux battants. La porte de droite donne sur les appartements intérieurs, la porte de gauche donne sur les vestibules et les antichambres. Sur une crédence, un bouquet de fleurs exotiques rares; à côté un écrin ouvert, montrant un fouillis de pierreries, posé sur un plat de vermeil. Sur une assiette de vermeil, un pli cacheté. La cheminée est à droite. En face, à gauche, une porte bâtarde, basse, dorée.

ACTE DEUXIEME : LA MARQUISE ZABETH, SCENE PREMIERE

Sillette range. Elle met l’écrin près du bouquet et l’expose très en vue. Nantais entr’ouvre un battant de la porte de gauche et passe la tête par l’entre-bâillement. On entend une chanson dans la coulisse et un bruit de guitare.
Chanson au dehors.
Zon, zon, Suzon.
On croit n’être que douze à table.
Gibier fin, turbot délectable,
vins à foison.
On n’est que douze, on est bien aise.
Mais on est treize,
pas vrai, Suzon?
Sillette, apercevant nantais.
Laquais de monseigneur, bonjour.
Fredon dans la coulisse.
Zon zon, Suzon.
Nantais.

Qui chante là?
Sillette.

L’abbé, meuble de la maison.
Ton maître va venir?
Nantais.

Moi d’abord. En personne.
Puis lui. — madame est là?
Sillette.

J’attends qu’elle me sonne.
Voici divers objets pour elle.
Elle montre la crédence.

Des bouquets.
Des cadeaux. Apportés par différents laquais.
Nantais.

Qui fait tous ces présents?
Sillette.

On ne sait.
Nantais.

Tu l’ignores?
Sillette.

Sont-ce des financiers? Sont-ce des monsignores?
Mystère. Tous les jours quelque présent nouveau.
Une main s’ouvre, donne, et se cache.
Nantais.

Bravo!
C’est élégant. Sont-ils plusieurs?
Sillette.

Je le suppose.
L’essaim des papillons flâne autour de la rose.
Nantais.

Donner sans se montrer, c’est de bon goût.
Sillette.

Ainsi
tous les jours on nous fait de la musique ici.
C’est un assez beau luxe à Paris. à ces arbres,
déjà pas mal ornés de grottes et de marbres,
tous les matins, à l’heure où le parc est désert,
on ajoute la grâce aimable d’un concert.
Qui paie? On ne sait pas. Mais l’aubade est exquise.
Nantais.

Et pendant ce temps-là madame la marquise…
Sillette.

Dort. Madame est rentrée assez tard, des Bouffons,
d’un bal, qui coûte au duc mille écus de chiffons,
ou de la comédie, ou du brelan, que sais-je?
Elle s’est attablée avec tout son cortège,
ayant sur son sofa son chat et son abbé,
puis on a voulu boire, et le punch a flambé,
elle a soupé, dansé, que c’est une folie,
elle a tout ce temps-là, mon cher, été jolie.
Fatigue. Toujours rire, et vivre au paradis,
cela vous courbature. Et le matin, tandis
qu’elle sommeille, après ces peines infinies,
les hommes à madame offrent des symphonies
qu’elle n’entend pas même; ils sont faits pour cela.
Nantais.

Ces filles-là!
La porte à gauche vient de s’ouvrir. Zabeth paraît; elle est enveloppée d’un surtout
de satin et de fourrure, et elle a sa faille et son manchon. Elle écoute.
Sillette, à nantais.
Silence. On vient.
Zabeth, à part.
Ces filles-là!
Haut, à Sillette.
Ma chaise est-elle en bas?
Sillette, avec un signe affirmatif.
Sous la porte cochère,
à toute heure elle attend madame.
Zabeth.

Bien, ma chère.
Surtout n’oubliez pas mes ordres pour ce soir.

Sillette.

Tout sera prêt, madame.
Zabeth.

Ici, dans ce boudoir.
Nouveau signe d’obéissance de Sillette. Elle présente à Zabeth
la lettre
sur l’assiette de vermeil.
Zabeth.

Qu’est-ce?
Elle ouvre la lettre.
Ah! Des vers!
Elle met la letre dans son manchon.
Sillette.

Voici des cadeaux qu’on apporte.
Zabeth regarde les fleurs et l’écrin avec distraction.
Zabeth.

J’ai la migraine. Il faut qu’une heure ou deux je sorte.
Si le duc vient, je vais rentrer.
à part.
Ces filles-là!
Elle sort par la porte opposée.
Nantais, écoutant à la porte bâtarde.
Elle part. L’autre arrive.
La porte bâtarde s’ouvre. Entrent Gallus et Gunich.
Gallus en habit de soie mordorée. Cordon bleu et plaque.
Sur un signe de Gunich, Sillette et Nantais se retirent par la
porte du fond à droite.
==ACTE DEUXIEME : LA MARQUISE ZABETH, SCENE II==

Gallus.

Et tu dis donc qu’elle a…

Moi qui ne quitte point Zabeth…
Gunich, à part.
Ce qui m’agace.
Gallus, continuant.
Je n’en sais pas si long que toi, baron sagace.
Combien d’amants dis-tu?
Gunich.

Sans vous compter, déjà
j’en ai vu sept ou huit passer. Cela changea
comme un décor.
Gallus.

Combien de dettes?
Gunich.

Elle achève
son second million, je pense.
Gallus.

Bonne élève.
Gunich.

Et vous allez garder cette femme?
Gallus.

Morbleu!
C’est mon chef-d’œuvre.
Gunich.

Mais…
Gallus.

C’est quand je gagne au jeu
que tu me dis : jetez les cartes. Je contemple
mon ouvrage, et j’élève aux sept péchés ce temple,
Zabeth.

C’est peu vraiment qu’un million ou deux
pour une telle église offerte à de tels dieux.
Zabeth me satisfait en tout. Je l’ai voulue
fausse.
Gunich.

Elle triche au jeu.
Gallus.

Gourmande.
Gunich.

Elle est goulue.
Gallus.

Vaine.
Gunich.

Elle est folle.
Gallus.

Aimant l’amour.
Gunich.

C’est Astarté.
Gallus.

Prodigue.
Gunich.

Elle est avare.
Gallus le regarde. Il insiste.
Et met l’or de côté.
Ah! Vous réussissez!
Gallus.

Toi, tu la calomnies.

Elle vaut mieux que toi.
Gunich.

Pour vous les gémonies
sont le vrai panthéon, ô grand prince railleur!
Pour vous le mal est bien, et le pire est meilleur;
pourtant, valet, je vois l’intérieur du maître;
vous n’êtes pas mauvais, vous voulez le paraître.
Jeu dangereux. Feu noir, dont on sent la cuisson
tôt ou tard.
Gallus.

Je m’amuse, ô cuistre, à ma façon.
Il fredonne.
Qu’est-ce en somme que la femme?
Beaucoup de chair, un peu d’âme,
un éden entre-bâillé,
un masque, un rêve, une fable,
un vaudeville du diable
auquel l’homme a travaillé.
Je travaille à
Zabeth.
L’outil, c’est la débauche.
Je fais le monstre, moi, dont Satan fit l’ébauche.
Et plein d’extase, ainsi que jadis Salomon,
je regarde sortir d’une perle un démon.
Gunich.

Vous m’avez l’air d’un homme amoureux.
Gallus.

Par exemple!
Gunich.

Dame! C’est une idole.
Gallus.

Et l’athée à ce temple
construit par moi, c’est moi.
Gunich.

Vous vous vantez.
Gallus.

Jamais.
Amoureux, moi! Jamais. Je rirais, si j’aimais!
Gunich.

Non, mais vous feriez rire et seriez une altesse
fort compromise aux yeux des badauds de Lutèce.
Comme avec un éclat de rire ils vous défont!
Paris la bonne ville est très méchante au fond.
Une altesse, elle mord dedans, elle en déjeune.
Quelle chute pour vous si l’on vous trouvait — jeune!
Vous voilez votre cœur, vous sentant en danger,
ah! Peste! Vous le loup, de passer pour berger.
Gallus.

Un Bartholo! Moi!
Gunich.

Non. Céladon. Grand modèle.
Gallus.

Quoi! Zabeth!
Gunich.

Monseigneur ne peut se passer d’elle.
Vous la traînez partout, cette madame-là.
Cette Lison changée en marquise brilla
tout de suite, en jetant aux moulins sa cornette,
près de vous, comme auprès du soleil la planète.
Bel astre. Et monseigneur a je ne sais quel air
de peu s’en soucier et d’en être très fier.

Ces nuances-là, dont se compose l’églogue,
sont l’énigme du cœur humain.
Gallus, haussant les épaules.
Idéologue!
Gunich.

Il vous la faut toujours, partout, car elle m’a
supplante, cette dame, oui!
Gallus.

L’enfer te forma
de la laideur de l’homme et de la jalousie
de la femme.
Gunich.

Avouez, c’est une fantaisie,
c’est un caprice, on peut aimer par accident,
convenez avec moi votre vieux confident
qu’elle égratigne un peu votre âme.
à part, ricanant.
Une âme mûre!
Gallus.

Je n’ai point d’âme, oison, donc point d’égratignure.
Gunich.

Au fond, vous la prenez au sérieux.
Gallus.

Qui? Moi!
J’en ris.
Gunich.

Vous affectez d’en rire. On voit pourquoi.
Vous êtes un dévot honteux de son église.
Vous vous cachez.
Gallus.

Nella m’échappant, j’ai pris Lise.
Je chassais, je cherchais des appas indulgents,
une charmeuse ayant pitié des pauvres gens,
un peu libre, un peu folle, ayant de la clémence.
Tombé sur des vertus par un hasard immense,
m’étant cassé le nez juste à l’escarpement
d’une vierge d’acier, d’ombre et de diamant,
ayant vu tout à coup, quand je rêvais la butte
Montmartre où dix moulins font gaîment la culbute,
surgir avec sa neige auguste la Yungfrau,
ayant tiré du sac ce mauvais numéro,
j’ai dit : je me crois aigle et lion, je suis âne.
Je me suis rejeté sur une paysanne
quelconque, fort jolie et pas bête, ma foi,
et je l’ai faite reine en me défaisant roi.
Roman simple; et j’en suis au deuxième chapitre.
Gallus fouille dans le gousset de son gilet, en tire sa
tabatière, ne s’aperçoit pas
qu’il vient d’en tirer en même temps un papier, et prend une
prise de tabac.
Le papier est tombé à terre. Gunich, en arrière de Gallus, le
ramasse, y jette
un coup d’œil, et le met dans sa poche pendant que Gallus
éternue et secoue
d’une chiquenaude les dentelles de son jabot.
Gunich.

çà, vous êtes un roi duquel je suis le pitre.
Gallus.

Faquin!
Gunich.

Le conseiller d’état, si vous voulez.
Je plains les papillons aux chandelles brûlés.
Je vous vois approcher d’une flamme hagarde,

charmante et formidable, et je dis : prenez garde.
Quelque chose se passe au fond de votre cœur.
Vous êtes un captif qui se drape en vainqueur.
C’est une maladie étrange propre aux hommes
très corrompus, blasés, exquis, comme nous sommes,
d’idolâtrer avec dédain, et d’être pris
parfois profondément, tout en disant : je ris.
L’eau qu’on jette à ce feu le rallume et l’attise.
Est-on jaloux? Fi donc! Tendre? Quelle bêtise!
Si quelqu’un vous pénètre et dans votre âme lit,
on se fâche; on se sent comme en flagrant délit.
Surtout il ne faut pas que la belle s’en doute.
Qu’aime-t-on d’elle? Rien. Et tout. Sotte, on l’écoute.
Grasse, c’est un Rubens; maigre, c’est un Watteau.
Don Juan extérieur, Pyrame incognito,
on se croit libertin. Point. On est platonique.
On couve en souriant un vague amour chronique.
On aime l’âme, et non la chair fragile, on croit
n’être que gris, hélas! On est ivre. L’œil froid
masque le cœur brûlant.
Gallus.

Dadais métaphysique!
Hors la bonne cuisine et la bonne musique,
qui sont la même chose au fond, je n’aime rien.
Gunich.

Hum! Parfois le lion a dans sa cage un chien.
Il croit d’abord qu’il va le manger; puis il l’aime.
Gallus.

Rien ne m’enivre.
Gunich.

Hum!
Gallus.

Je suis froid par système.
Gunich.

Hum!
Gallus.

Tu dis?…
Gunich.

Est-ce un cri factieux? Je dis : hum!
Gallus.

Mon cœur est le sommeil.
Gunich.

L’amour est l’opium.
Pardon, le cœur d’un prince, on ne sait trop qu’en dire.
Livre doré sur tranche où l’on n’ose pas lire.
Pourtant permettez-vous que…
Gallus.

Buse, je permets.
Gunich.

L’amour se pique au jeu quand on lui dit : jamais!
Vous cachez l’aventure et moi je la devine.
La rêver infernale et la trouver divine,
voilà votre accident devant cette
Zabeth.

Gallus.

Et d’abord, tu ne sais pas même l’alphabet
du respect. Nomme-la madame. Elle est au prince.
à moi, qui suis ton maître. Et maintenant, si mince
que soit ton intellect, comprends que, sans déchoir,
je ne puis aimer, moi qui jette le mouchoir.

être un Tityre inepte au fond d’un site agreste,
à d’autres! N’aimant pas, je reste moi. Je reste
le maître. Devenir amoureux, moi rieur!
Tu crois que je prendrais ce rôle inférieur!
Gunich, ricanant.
Le rôle vous prend.
Gallus.

Non. Si bon te semble, certe,
vieux fou, sois amoureux, passe aux femmes, déserte.
Moi, point. J’ai pu, le jour où le dégoût me prit,
abdiquer comme roi, mais comme homme d’esprit,
non pas. Moi, grimacer l’amour! Qu’on me lapide.
Je vois mes rides, va. Me crois-tu donc stupide
jusqu’à m’imaginer que de jeunes yeux bleus
planteront là messieurs les blancs-becs merveilleux
pour contempler rêveurs mon gilet de flanelle!
Ah! Rien ne change, ami, la nature éternelle!
Avril sera toujours par Aurore ébloui.
Matin et renouveau sont des lieux communs; oui,
c’est vieux, le lys, c’est vieux, la rose; mais qu’importe,
c’est toujours jeune, et l’aube est toujours la plus forte.
Oui, pour comprendre l’ombre et les cieux infinis,
l’astre et la fleur, Chloé se penche sur Daphnis,
oui, Nella cherche George, oui, les Agnès épellent
les Chérubins; jeunesse et jeunesse s’appellent.
Est-ce toi, printemps? Dit la fauvette tout bas.
Il faut les bleus sommets pour les tendres ébats.
Résignons-nous. Rions.
Gunich.

Monseigneur se résigne.
Il est grand, puissant, riche, illustre, auguste, insigne,
et son manteau royal d’aigles est parsemé.
Gallus.

à quoi cela sert-il si l’on n’est pas aimé!

Gunich.

Vous êtes toujours sûr, vous, prince, d’être au faîte.
Gallus.

Devant les femmes, non. L’orgueil du rang est bête.
Pour la femme, un roi passe après son page. Un duc
ne vaut point ses laquais, mon cher, s’il est caduc.
Aucun soleil couchant n’a droit à l’espérance.
Le sage ne fait pas aux jeunes concurrence;
il ne va pas livrer un sot amour risqué
aux quolibets des gens qui flânent sur le quai;
il voit son œil s’éteindre auprès d’un œil qui brille;
il s’observe. Devant n’importe quelle fille,
devant une catau de trente sous, on est
allié des Habsbourg et des Plantagenet,
Landgrave palatin, duc d’Autriche, infant d’Este,
prince!… — on voit ses cheveux blanchir, on est modeste.
Gunich.

On se poudre!
Gallus.

Ah! Tu crois, baron de peu de sens,
que cette neige-là cache celle des ans!
Mais j’ai dix lustres!
Gunich.

Soit. Bel âge!
Gallus.

Tout s’envole.
Mais je ne serai pas un Géronte frivole.
C’est assez d’avoir cru trop longtemps au matin.
Hélas! C’est triste. Avoir arrangé son destin,
son cœur, ses goûts, sa vie éclatante et sonore,
pour être à tout jamais la jeunesse, l’aurore,

l’aube, et voir sur son front monter la sombre nuit!
Gunich.

Ah! Je conviens que l’âge à la jeunesse nuit.
être jeune est le ciel. Rester jeune…
Gallus.

Est l’abîme.
Un ridicule à moi! J’aimerais mieux un crime.
Oh! Qui que vous soyez, devant Lise ou Ninon,
tenez-vous bien, soyez moqueur et fort, sinon
vous verrez bientôt poindre une belle hargneuse.
Le méprisant peut seul braver la dédaigneuse.
Surtout, méfions-nous des scènes que nous font
ces belles, et des cris, et de leur art profond
de s’irriter, de fondre en pleurs, d’être hardies,
et ne nous laissons pas prendre à leurs comédies.
Plutôt livrer ma vie au tigre libyen
qu’à la femme! — à propos, mon anneau, tu sais bien?
Ma bague empoisonnée?
Gunich.

Ah! Cet anneau terrible
qui contient un poison.
Gallus.

Un remède infaillible.
Gunich.

Eh bien?
Gallus.

Je ne l’ai plus.
Gunich.

Comment?
Gallus.

On me l’a pris
pendant que je dormais ou bien que j’étais gris.
Je le regrette.
Gunich.

Au fait, c’était un joyau rare.
Gallus.

Un ami. Cet anneau me venait de Ferrare
dont une Borgia fut duchesse. On vieillit,
tu comprends; le destin devient un mauvais lit;
un vieux beau, c’est un être absurde et difficile,
d’un côté sensitive et de l’autre fossile.
On sort de l’opéra, du bal, de chez Mesmer,
de chez le roi de France, avec le mal de mer.
C’est pour cela, dût-on n’en jamais faire usage,
qu’on tient à ces bijoux sinistres, et qu’un sage,
à tous les biens qu’il a, qu’il attend, qu’on lui doit,
qu’il espère ou qu’il veut, joint la mort, bague au doigt.
Gunich.

Un suicide en l’air, facultatif, possible,
départ à volonté pour le monde invisible,
avoir toujours la clef du tombeau sous sa main,
faire, comme un valet, venir ce noir Demain,
avoir derrière soi l’éternité qu’on sonne
et qui paraît : que veut monseigneur? — j’en frissonne,
mais c’est bien agréable, au fait.
Gallus, pensif.
L’empoisonneur
des bijoux, c’est le sort.
Gunich.

C’est vous. — donc, monseigneur,
c’est dit. Vous n’aimez point votre bonne fortune.
Gallus.

Zabeth! Il hausse les épaules.
Bah!
Gunich.

Soit. Eh bien! Moi, je vais vous faire une…
Révélation.
Gallus.

Quoi?
Gunich, s’approchant de la crédence et montrant le bouquet.
Voyez-vous ce bouquet?
Gallus.

Oui.
Gunich.

De qui ça vient-il?
Gallus.

De quelque freluquet
qui, ne pouvant payer des diamants infâmes,
s’imagine qu’avec des fleurs on a des femmes.
Gunich.

Tous les jours il en vient pour madame un pareil.
Il montre l’écrin.
Voyez-vous cet écrin?
Gallus.

Sur ce plat de vermeil?
Oui. C’est quelque galant, moins innocent que l’autre,
qui veut plaire.
Gunich, s’approchant de la fenêtre et montrant le jardin.
En ce parc, dessiné par Lenôtre,
tous les matins on joue une aubade.
Gallus

oui. Très haut.
C’est encore un galant quelconque. Un peu bien sot.
Car c’est à la Vénus qu’il offre la diane.
Gunich, continuant.
Quelqu’un tous les jours donne un bouquet.
Gallus.

Qui se fane.
Gunich, continuant.
Un écrin, un concert, et monseigneur le sait.
Gallus.

Je sais encor ceci qu’on ne sait pas qui c’est.
Ces trois bergers masqués et muets me font rire.
Personne ne connaît leurs noms.
Gunich.

Personne, sire,
excepté moi.
Gallus.

Tu dis?…
Gunich.

Excepté moi.
Gallus.

Tu crois
les connaître?
Gunich.

Je peux les nommer.
Gallus.

Tous les trois?
Gunich.

Tous les trois. Le premier, le jeune, offrant des roses,
c’est vous. L’autre, plus vieux, donnant ces belles choses,
ces diamants, c’est vous. Le troisième, à genoux
aussi lui, le seigneur des aubades, c’est vous.
Gallus.

Eh bien, après?
Gunich.

C’est vous.
Gallus.

Voilà ta découverte!
Gunich.

Niez-vous?
Gallus.

Non. C’est vrai. Qu’en conclut monsieur?
Gunich.

Certe,
que vous êtes, mon prince, énormément épris.
Gallus, se tenant les côtes.
Ah! Vraiment, mon baron est trop bête. Ah! J’en ris!
Ah! Je suis amoureux parce que je m’ennuie,
et qu’il me plaît de mettre un rayon dans la pluie,
du soleil dans la brume, un sourire en des yeux
qui, tristes, seraient laids, et qui sont beaux, joyeux.
C’est mon goût. La beauté, plus la gaîté; fleur double.
Ah! Mon pauvre espion myope, tu vois trouble.
Ah! Je suis amoureux parce que je distrais
mes cinquante ans à mettre en relief des attraits
qui, charmants sous des fleurs, sont exquis sous des perles!
Parce que le sommeil des moineaux et des merles
ne m’est pas à ce point sacré que dans ce bois
je ne me glisse avec des joueurs de hautbois,

et parce que j’ordonne à cinq ou six maroufles
de faire avec leurs chants, leurs gammes et leurs souffles,
flotter un songe d’or sur de beaux yeux fermés!
Parce que j’ai le goût des bouquets embaumés,
des bijoux envoyés aux belles, par Hercule,
je suis un vieux crétin d’amoureux ridicule!
Je m’amuse, morbleu! J’ai cette fille-là,
et j’en fais le motif d’un éternel gala!
Mais à qui donc veux-tu que je donne des roses?
à toi? Quand tes gros yeux collent leurs cils moroses,
quand tu dors, dois-je aller, pendant une heure ou deux,
faire de la musique à tes rêves hideux?
Faut-il qu’au point du jour sous tes volets je rôde?
Dois-je faire couler la perle et l’émeraude
en rivières autour de ton vieux cou ridé?
Dois-je te déclarer sultane validé?
Aegipans, nymphes, dieux, ô faunes de Sicile,
accourez, venez voir cet immense imbécile!
Mais pense un peu, voyons, peux-tu? Lise a vingt ans,
j’en ai cinquante. Eh bien, je me masque, et j’entends,
à défaut du bonheur, fleur que nul ne transplante,
lui faire une nuée amoureuse et galante.
Personnages du conte : Angélique et Médor.
Elle est Danaë. Soit. Moi, pluie et grêle d’or.
Elle est Héro, pensive, et moi je me ranime
à lui faire rêver un Léandre anonyme.
Trouves-tu qu’être aimable est au-dessous de moi?
Trop de distance! Elle est goton et je suis roi.
Non, belître. Elle est femme, et je suis gentilhomme.
être amoureux! Jamais. Non. Mais être économe,
non plus. Garder son cœur, dépenser son argent,
c’est ma mode. être aux goûts d’une femme indulgent;
lui faire tous les jours d’agréables surprises;
lui racheter l’ennui de voir vos mèches grises
par des bals, des bijoux, des fleurs; être courtois;
et se taire; et n’aller pas crier sur les toits :
mesdames et messieurs, je suis celui qui paie!

Faire en somme à la belle une existence gaie,
libre, opulente, vive et jeune, de façon
à se dire : après tout je suis un bon garçon!
Voilà l'élégance. Hein?
Gunich.

Vous êtes à l'escrime
très fort.
Gallus.

Je te dis, moi, de m'accuser d'un crime,
et non d'une bêtise. étant déjà l'amant,
si j'étais l'amoureux, je serais fou vraiment.
Gunich.

Vous me jetez ce mot : buse!
Gallus.

Oui, je le décoche.
Gunich.

Mais il ne faudrait pas alors de votre poche
laisser tomber ces vers écrits de votre main.
Il présente à Gallus le papier que Gallus a laissé tomber, le déploie,
et se met à lire.
Sonnet. à
Zabeth.

Déclamant.
… Belle au regard inhumain…
Gallus, lui arrachant le papier.
ô stupide espion! Voleur plus bête encore!
Que ne suis-je encor roi pour que je te décore
de l'ordre d'ânerie inventé tout exprès!
Gunich.

Mais lisez, monseigneur.
Lui montrant le sonnet.
— … Vos appas… Vos attraits… —
donc vous voulez charmer! Donc vous désirez plaire!
Gallus jette le papier au feu.
Gallus.

Tu me feras crever de joie et de colère.
Tudieu! Quel animal réjouissant! Comment!
Parce qu'étant poëte, un peu, suffisamment
pour égaler, si bon me semble, qui? Virgile,
je bâcle un vers ou deux, je meurs d'amour! Mais, Gille!
Un poëte est un être indifférent, divers,
qui s'exerce à viser un cœur avec un vers,
qui prend pour but d'une ode une femme quelconque,
et qui, tout en criant : c'est Vénus dans sa conque!
C'est Léda sur son cygne! Hébé! Turlututu,
ne veut pas plus charmer cette femme, vois-tu,
qu'un archer dans un tir ne veut tuer la cible.
La cible est en carton. La femme aussi. L'horrible,
c'est d'avoir pour laquais un baron saugrenu
tel que toi, marié jadis, jadis cornu,
croyant aux vers! Le vrai poëte est impassible.
Si les sonnets comptaient, tout serait impossible.
être forcé d'aimer, parce que ça rime!
Gunich.

Oui.
Au fond, c'est vrai. La rime est piège.
Gallus.

Homme inouï,
apprends tout. Ce sonnet, pour comble d'aventure,
Zabeth l'a dans les mains!
Gunich.

Mais d'une autre écriture.

Gageons.
Gallus.

Certes. Je puis fabriquer, s’il me plaît,
des vers, mais je les fais écrire à mon valet.
Par instants, une envie, honnête et sage en somme,
me prend d’écorcher vif ce hideux gentilhomme!
Apollon, c’est ainsi que tu remercias,
pour avoir chanté faux, le nommé Marsyas.
Gunich.

Je chante juste.
Gallus.

Va, je suis impénétrable.
Inaccessible, inex…
Gunich.

Pugnable.
Souriant et saluant.
Et vulnérable.
Gallus.

Comme Achille alors. Soit. Au talon. Non au cœur.
Gunich.

Le cœur, souvent les grands l’ont au talon.
Gallus.

Moqueur,
tu seras avec moi le moqué. Je t’enseigne,
et ma gaîté te crible, et ta bêtise saigne.
Gunich.

Vous perdez vos anneaux, vous perdez vos sonnets.
Prenez garde.
Gallus, lui tournant le dos.

Il me prend pour un de ces benêts
qui, vu qu'un grand cordon leur coupe en deux le ventre,
rêvent de plaire au sphinx accroupi dans son antre,
à la femme.
S'affermissant sur ses talons et regardant Gunich en face.
L'amour pour les niais est bon.
Je puis être un vieillard, mais jamais un barbon.
De Louis quinze vieux bien souvent nous sourîmes,
personne ne rira de moi. Quant à mes rimes,
c'est un jeu, mes bouquets, de même. Et, fût-on roi,
il faut avec la femme enfin qu'on a chez soi,
belle ou non, paysanne, ou marquise, ou comtesse,
savoir vivre. De là mes cadeaux. Politesse.
Gunich.

Vous êtes, monseigneur, éperdument poli.
Gallus.

à présent, sois muet. Je t'ordonne l'oubli.
Si de ceci tu dis un mot, ma politesse
t'étranglera.
Gunich, écoutant à la grande porte de gauche.
J'annonce un groupe à votre altesse.
Entre Zabeth, et avec elle une foule de petits jeunes gens, parmi lesquels le duc de Montbazon, avec le cordon bleu, le duc de Créqui avec la croix de Saint-Louis, lord Effingham avec la jarretière, le vicomte de Thouars. Au milieu des jeunes gentilshommes, un docteur, noir, en perruque ronde. En avant du groupe, un abbé. L'abbé entre le premier, en dansant et en raclant une guitare.

ACTE DEUXIEME : LA MARQUISE ZABETH, SCENE III

Tous, en arrivant, saluent Gallus, qui donne la main à quelques-uns.
L’abbé, chantant et dansant.
Les bœufs aux champs,
commère!
Les Anglais sont méchants,
la Prusse est en colère,
l’Autriche n’est pas claire,
qu’ils s’en aillent lanlaire.
Commère,
les bœufs aux champs!
ô belle bocagère,
va couper la fougère,
ôte tes bas, bergère,
les sentiers sont bourbeux.
Commère,
aux champs les bœufs!
Zabeth en entrant jette sur un fauteuil sa faille et son manchon
. Elle tire du
manchon son éventail et le pli que lui a remis Sillette à sa
sortie. Gallus la
salue d’un signe de tête, et Gunich d’une profonde révérence.
Gallus se met à causer avec le docteur. Les jeunes gens entourent Zabeth.
Lord Effingham.

Vous avez là, marquise, une mouche assassine.
Le duc de Montbazon.

Mes enfants, mon talent à moi, c’est la cuisine.
Zabeth.

De là ce cordon bleu.

Le vicomte de thouars.
J’arrive du sermon.
L’abbé, posant la guitare sur un pliant.
Je n’y vais plus. On dit trop de mal du démon.
On exagère.
Le vicomte.
Oh oui! L’abbé Maury, du reste,
tonne agréablement. Voltaire, Oedipe, Oreste,
la vierge d’Orléans, les juifs, les mécréants…
Zabeth.

Qu’est-ce que c’est que ça, la vierge d’Orléans?
Le vicomte, continuant.
Il prêche à lui tout seul comme les douze apôtres.
à
Zabeth.

Vous autres n’êtes pas admises là.
Zabeth, à part.
Vous autres!
Le duc de Créqui.

La vierge, autrement dit la pucelle. Cela
n’a jamais existé. Des vierges, oh la la!
Il rit.
Grande, la femme est fille; enfant, elle est poupée.
Une vierge! On n’en voit jamais!
Zabeth.

Bah! Votre épée.
Le duc de Créqui pirouette dédaigneusement et lui tourne le dos.
Le duc de créqui, au vicomte de thouars.
La Duthé dans un bal t’a, dit-on, maltraité.
Le vicomte.
Et j’ai fait mettre au For-l’évêque la Duthé,
vu que je suis Rohan.
Zabeth, à part, regardant le baronnet.

Breton du premier ordre.
L’abbé, à zabeth, lui montrant les seigneurs.
Dieu fit vos dents pour rire et fit les leurs pour mordre.
Zabeth, à l’abbé, montrant le duc de créqui.
D’où vient que ce petit est duc?
L’abbé.
Le droit du sang.
Il était digne d’être opulent et puissant,
n’ayant rien dans le cœur ni dans l’âme. Il hérite
d’un oncle. On a toujours les oncles qu’on mérite.
Zabeth, à lord effingham.
à propos, je reçois des sonnets.
Lord Effingham.

Des sonnets!
Zabeth, à gallus.
Laclos prête sa femme au duc de Nivernais.
Que dites-vous d’un homme acceptant cet opprobre?
Gallus, continuant sa conversation comme s’il n’entendait pas zabeth.
Les pléiades, docteur, qu’on voyait en octobre
à l’est, sont maintenant à l’ouest. Sans Képler
cela serait obscur; grâce à lui, c’est très clair.
Zabeth, insistant, à gallus.
Le duc lui prend sa femme.
Gallus, s’asseyant.
Eh bien! Il l’a conquise.
On est très bien assis dans vos fauteuils, marquise.
Dites-moi donc le nom de votre tapissier.
Il se tourne vers les petits seigneurs épars et causant autour de lui.
Allons-nous voir ce soir Brizard officier
en grand prêtre tragique? On donne Montezume.
Il se remet à causer avec le docteur.
Le vicomte de thouars, au duc de montbazon.
Montrant
Zabeth.

Nous sommes tous ici ses amants, je présume.
Le duc ne s'aperçoit de rien. Vois comme il rit.
Le duc de Montbazon.

Il s'aperçoit de tout, mais il a de l'esprit.
Le duc de créqui, au vicomte.
Le crois-tu bête au point d'aimer cette donzelle?
Zabeth prête l'oreille.
Zabeth, à part.
Donzelle!
Le duc de créqui, au vicomte.
Vois-tu bien, celle qu'on paie et celle
qu'on aime, c'est deux.
Le vicomte de thouars.
Mais d'autres sont fort épris.
Le duc de créqui.
Pas lui.
Le vicomte de thouars, montrant la crédence.
Vois ces cadeaux.
Le duc de créqui, regardant les diamants.
L'écrin est d'un grand prix,
certe!
L'abbé, flairant le bouquet.
En hiver, des fleurs de serre!
Zabeth, à gallus.
Votre altesse
est poëte.
Gallus.

Jamais.
Zabeth, lui tendant le pli qu'elle a à la main.
Lisez donc ceci.
Gallus.

Qu'est-ce?
Il prend le papier et y jette un coup d'œil.

Des vers. Fi donc!
Zabeth.

Comment les trouvez-vous?
Gallus, les parcourant négligemment.
Mauvais.
Zabeth.

Vous les trouveriez bons si vous les aviez faits.
Gallus.

Dieu m’en garde.
Zabeth.

Ces vers sont jolis.
Gallus.

Plats.
Zabeth.

Vous êtes
contrariant.
Gallus.

Des vers d’amour sont toujours bêtes.
L’abbé se remet à flairer les roses de Chine.
L’abbé, se retournant vers zabeth.
Beau bouquet?
Le docteur, à zabeth.
Qui vous l’a donné?
Zabeth, montrant le bouquet à gallus.
Qu’en dites-vous?
Gallus.

C’est un de ces bouquets qu’on a pour trente sous
chez la fleuriste au coin du pavillon d’Hanovre.
L’abbé, admirant les diamants.

Bel écrin!
Zabeth.

Je ne sais qui me l’envoie.
Gallus.

Un pauvre
évidemment. écrin médiocre, et fané.
Zabeth.

Vous le trouveriez beau si vous l’aviez donné.
Le marquis de cochefilet, à zabeth.
à propos, des hautbois dans un parc, c’est classique,
les jardins d’aujourd’hui sont faits pour la musique,
j’aime les violons dans les bois, et l’écho
des cors de chasse au fond des grottes rococo.
Vous offre-t-on toujours une aubade?
Zabeth.

Oui.
Gallus.

C’est fade.
Je ne sais de qui peut vous venir cette aubade.
C’était joli jadis, mais la mode en passa.
Zabeth.

Si c’était de vous, duc, vous ne diriez pas ça.
Gunich, à part, observant gallus.
Il a bien dépisté
Zabeth.

Zabeth.

Moi, je déclare
ces fleurs belles, ces vers charmants, cet écrin rare.
L’aubade, comme un chant des anges affaibli,

me berce, et le matin m’apporte un peu d’oubli.
C’est anonyme. Soit. Moi, pour ne rien vous taire,
si je savais qui m’offre, avec tant de mystère,
tant de galanterie, oui, je pourrais…
Gallus.

Eh bien?
Zabeth.

L’aimer.
Lord Effingham.

Ils sont plusieurs.
Le duc de Créqui.

Oh! Cela ne fait rien.
à
Gallus.

Hein? Si nous savions qui, les bonnes gorges chaudes!
Gallus.

à part.
Comme ils riraient! —
haut.
Les vers, les fleurs, les émeraudes,
et les aubades, peuh!
Il hausse les épaules et pirouette sur ses talons.
Zabeth.

Toujours vous me froissez,
monseigneur. On dirait que vous me haïssez.
Gallus, froid.
Non.
Zabeth.

Mais ça m’est égal.

Le duc de montbazon, à zabeth.
La haine, c’est province.
L’abbé, à zabeth.
Ne point aimer, ne point haïr, c’est être prince.
Le marquis, au duc de créqui.
Duc, en raillant l’estoc dont tu nous éblouis,
elle éclabousse un peu ta croix de Saint-Louis.
Le duc de Créqui.

De sa boue.
Il rit et regarde
Zabeth.

Le marquis.
Elle entend. Prends garde. Tu la blesses.
Le duc de Créqui.

Qu’est-ce que ça me fait, ces drôlesses?
Zabeth, aux écoutes, à part.
Drôlesses!
Ricanements autour de
Zabeth.
Gallus fait un signe. Tous s’approchent de lui.
Zabeth reste seule à l’autre coin du boudoir.
Gallus, à demi-voix, au groupe des gentilshommes.
Je n’ai pas le travers, qu’ont les gens fatigués,
d’empêcher, étant vieux, les jeunes d’être gais.
Riez. —
au duc de Créqui.
Pourvu, monsieur le duc et pair de France,
que cela n’aille pas jusqu’à la transparence.
Les femmes! Y compris la reine, j’ai souci
de toutes ces margots autant que de ceci;
il fait claquer ses doigts.
Mais une étant chez moi, l’on ne doit pas en rire.
Nous sommes bons amis. Je ne trouve à redire
qu’à de certains clins d’yeux railleurs. Messieurs, milords,

c’est compris, n’est-ce pas? Car, autrement, alors
il faudrait voir un peu la pointe des épées.
Il s’approche de Zabeth et lui montre le paysage nocturne au dehors.
Ah! Madame, admirez ces belles échappées
de clair de lune au fond de ces arbres! La nuit
est un profond concert que gâte notre bruit.
Ce monde, l’homme ôté, serait beau.
Il revient vers le groupe des gentilshommes.
Mais, j’y pense,
messieurs, la comédie à huit heures commence.
Le docteur, tirant sa montre.
Neuf heures.
Gallus.

Hâtons-nous, si nous voulons la voir.
N’y venons-nous pas tous?
Zabeth, à gallus.
Pas vous. Pas moi. Ce soir
vous soupez tête à tête avec moi.
Gallus.

Tête à tête!
La surprise est charmante, et c’est toute une fête.
Messieurs, vous entendez. Je vous laisse partir.
à Zabeth.
Je reste.
Le duc de Montbazon.

Comme il va s’ennuyer!
Le duc de Créqui.

ô martyr!
Tous saluent Gallus et sortent.
Zabeth va à la cheminée et sonne. La porte de droite s’ouvre à deux battants.
Entre Sillette, suivie de quatre laquais portant une table à

deux couverts sur
laquelle est servi un en-cas. Gibier. Vins. Cristaux. Au centre,
un surtout de
table en vermeil avec deux girandoles allumées.
Les valets posent la table au centre du boudoir, et placent un
fauteuil devant
chacun des couverts qui se font vis-à-vis.
Zabeth fait signe à Sillette et aux valets de sortir. Elle ôte
et jette sur un sofa sa
pelisse de soie et de martre, sous laquelle elle est décolletée,
avec un collier et
des bracelets de pierreries.
Elle montre à Gallus un des deux fauteuils et s'assied sur l'autre.
==ACTE DEUXIEME : LA MARQUISE ZABETH, SCENE IV==

Gallus.

Vous renvoyez vos gens. Solitude complète.
C'est tout à fait aimable.
Il s'assied.
Montrant un grand trumeau à glace derrière
Zabeth.

Ah! Ce trumeau reflète
des appas, qui feraient tourner la tête…
Zabeth.

à qui?
Pas à vous.
Gallus.

Je suis vieux. Mais ce petit Créqui…
Zabeth.

à lui pas plus qu'à vous, prince. D'ailleurs, qu'importe!
Je crois qu'il vient un peu de vent par cette porte.
Elle va à la porte du fond, comme pour s'assurer que personne n'écoute,

l’entr’ouvre, puis la referme.
Gallus prend une bouteille, emplit le verre de Zabeth, puis le sien.
Zabeth revient s’asseoir.
Gallus, regardant le couvert.
Joli dessus de table!
Il boit tout en examinant l’orfévrerie.
Oui, j’aime ce sommeil
des nymphes sous des rocs sauvages, en vermeil.
Il prend une pièce de gibier et la découpe.
Le râle de genêt. Fin gibier. ça patauge
tout l’été dans le thym, la lavande, la sauge,
la mauve, et ça devient exquis, surtout avec
la choucroute tudesque et le bon vieux vin grec.
Il offre une aile à Zabeth, met de la choucroute dans son assiette
et se verse à boire.
Dites-moi, trouvez-vous ici quelque lacune
dans l’hôtel, dans la table ou le service?
Zabeth.

Aucune.
Gallus, désignant du doigt le jardin.
Vous pourriez pour ce parc, c’est un conseil, pardon,
commander deux ou trois déesses à Houdon.
Zabeth.

Tout me vient de vous, duc, je dois le reconnaître.
Gallus, tout en mangeant et tout en servant zabeth.
Ce tout n’est rien, madame. Une femme est un être
charmant parce qu’il est tremblant, fort éperdu,
très frêle, et qui doit être en tout temps défendu
contre tout ce qui peut d’une ride être cause,
contre un frisson d’aurore et contre un pli de rose.
Il faut sur son alcôve un chant de séraphin,
le nectar à sa soif, l’ambroisie à sa faim;
de nos jours, ce progrès est goûté de Tartuffe,

le nectar est sauterne et l’ambroisie est truffe,
et quant au séraphin, il s’appelle Grétry.
Des millions! Sans quoi, la femme, ange meurtri,
languit, souffre. Exister, madame, est nécessaire.
Il faut tuer le temps qui nous tient dans sa serre;
donc des plaisirs; toujours, sans trêve, hier, aujourd’hui;
on ne saurait percer de trop de coups l’ennui.
Avoir froid est ignoble; avoir faim est étrange;
pourtant, dans un plat d’or, sans ridicule on mange;
et si la cheminée est un bijou charmant
du plus beau marbre, on peut s’y chauffer décemment.
La vie enfin doit presque être un conte de fée.
Je la veux de chansons et de joie étoffée;
Phébus, si cet orchestre à ma guise marchait,
ne serait pas de trop pour en tenir l’archet.
Morbleu! Je n’entends pas que l’ennui vous assomme.
Je vous protège, moi. Marquise, un galant homme
prend une femme en gré, sans être un songe-creux,
sans être pour cela forcé d’être amoureux,
et, gaîment, au-dessus des misères, l’enlève.
Les besoins de la vie et les besoins du rêve
se tiennent; c’est la robe avec le falbala.
J’ai tâché de comprendre à peu près tout cela,
et je prétends, c’est là ma façon d’être tendre,
vous préserver de tout et de tout vous défendre.
Zabeth, regardant gallus fixement.
Désirez-vous savoir la vérité?
Gallus.

Fort peu.
Zabeth.

Je vous ruine.
Gallus.

Après?
Zabeth.

Je vous trompe.
Gallus.

Parbleu!
Il découpe une aile de perdrix et l’offre à
Zabeth.

Des amants, c’est de droit. Moi, par-dessus la tête
j’en aurais, si j’étais femme, et, comme c’est bête!
ça n’empêcherait pas que je n’aime quelqu’un.
Trompez-moi. Je n’ai pas le goût d’être importun
et jaloux, ni le temps d’être amoureux et fade.
Et ruinez-moi. J’aime avoir une naïade,
une femme, chez moi, qui, d’un air négligent,
penche l’urne d’où coule à grands flots mon argent.
Zabeth.

Monseigneur, vous m’avez de vos bienfaits comblée.
Une pauvre âme fauve aux bois obscurs mêlée,
c’était moi. Je vivais dans des lieux inconnus,
misérable, et j’étais une fille pieds nus;
on m’avait par pitié fait lire une grammaire;
comme je n’avais plus mon père ni ma mère,
et que je travaillais beaucoup pour gagner peu,
j’étais parfois sans pain, j’étais souvent sans feu,
et je n’avais pas même un miroir. Un jour, sire,
vous vîntes. Vous m’avez, duc, avec un sourire,
prise en une cabane et mise en un palais.
Tout à coup j’eus des gens, des femmes, des valets,
je vis vers moi monter, avec un bruit de joie,
moi, fille de la bure, un flot d’or et de soie,
un océan d’azur, de perles, de saphirs;
et j’eus à mon service avril et les zéphirs
et l’aurore, et l’éden, avec tout ce qui tente
et charme, et je devins une femme éclatante.
Aujourd’hui, vous m’avez dorée en me touchant.

Loge à la comédie et carrosse à Longchamp,
j’ai tout, et, comme au fond du ciel noir, dans les boucles
de mes cheveux on voit luire des escarboucles;
je suis superbe, grâce à vous; je resplendis,
je brille, je suis riche. —
elle se lève.
Eh bien, je vous maudis!
Gallus.

Tiens, ça vous va très bien d’avoir l’air en colère.
à part.
Que veut dire ceci?
Zabeth.

L’âme en tombant s’éclaire.
Ah oui, contre la faim, le froid, vous l’avez dit,
contre tout ce qui presse, étreint, froisse, engourdit
les indigents sur qui tourbillonne la neige,
une barrière d’or me couvre et me protège;
vous m’entourez de soins, duc, n’importe à quel prix,
et vous me préservez de tout. — hors du mépris!
Gallus.

Je vous défends.
Zabeth.

C’est vrai, mais je vous en dispense.
Oui, de ce que l’on dit. Non de ce que l’on pense.
Gallus.

Ce qu’on pense, ah! Vraiment, ce qu’on pense, en effet,
je ne puis l’empêcher.
Zabeth.

C’est vous qui l’avez fait.
Gallus.

C’est pour rire, pas vrai? Vous avez des épaules
charmantes.
Zabeth.

La drôlesse insultera les drôles.
Se tournant vers la porte par où tous sont sortis.
Où sont-ils, ces faquins? Ah! Vil groupe rieur!
à Gallus.
Savez-vous ce qu’il faut à la femme, monsieur?
C’est l’amour. Je n’ai pas ce pain sacré de l’âme,
et je me sens haïe et je me vois infâme.
Soyez maudit.
Gallus s’accoude sur la table et la considère avec attention.
Elle poursuit.
Ces ducs, ces princes, ces marquis!
Tous! Ils sont monstrueux, à force d’être exquis!
Ils me glacent. Ils sont joyeux de quoi? De haine.
Ils ont la liberté féroce; j’ai la chaîne.
Ils ont une patrie, eux, c’est l’immense azur,
c’est le ciel. Dans la nue ils marchent d’un pied sûr.
Ils sont comme des dieux. On me mêle à la fête.
J’y vais. J’ai l’air d’en être. Et tout luit sur ce faîte,
tout chante. C’est à qui rira, boira, vivra.
Marquis, que donne-t-on ce soir à l’Opéra?
Veux-tu souper? Dansons. Mille louis. Je joue.
Belle, la rose est pâle auprès de votre joue.
Festins. Chasses. On a des lilas en janvier.
On va droit au plaisir sans jamais dévier.
De l’assouvissement on fait sa destinée,
et je suis la proscrite, et je suis la damnée!
Vous savez bien, les loups et les tigres des bois,
je les préfère à vous les hommes.
Gallus, à part.
C’est, je crois,
sérieux.
Zabeth.

Pas d’amour et pas d’espoir! Je souffre.
J’ai dans le cœur le vide et dans l’âme le gouffre.
Monseigneur! Monseigneur! Que vous avais-je fait?
Ah! L’auguste et profond soleil me réchauffait,
ah! J’avais l’innocente aurore pour ivresse!
Ah oui, c’est vrai, d’accord, j’étais une pauvresse,
et parmi les vivants, et sous le grand ciel bleu,
et dans tout l’univers, je n’avais rien, — que Dieu!
Je ne l’ai plus. Abîme! Oui, j’avais pour ressource
de cueillir une mûre et de boire à la source,
j’étais libre, et j’avais pour ami le rocher.
Quelle idée eûtes-vous de venir me chercher?
Ce Gunich vous aida, votre digne ministre.
Vous fîtes ce jour-là, prince, un complot sinistre
contre l’inconnu. Mettre un piège dans les cieux!
Saisir une âme au vol pour lui crever les yeux!
Ah! Ce qu’on tue au ciel, pour l’enfer on le crée.
ô monseigneur, j’étais l’ignorance sacrée.
Qu’avez-vous fait de moi? L’aveugle, mal conduit,
maudit son guide traître. Hélas! J’étais la nuit,
et vous avez été la mauvaise lumière.
Vous fûtes l’incendie, et j’étais la chaumière.
Sans doute je penchais vers la faute, mettons
que j’étais coquette, oui, mais j’étais à tâtons,
j’hésitais, un conseil honnête m’eût sauvée.
Ah! Duc! Vous m’avez fait une affreuse arrivée
dans la chute par l’âcre et fausse ascension,
et par l’enivrement dans la perdition!
Oui, j’étais l’alouette. Est-ce un crime? Hélas, être,
moi la pauvre aile folle, et vous le miroir traître,
ce fut notre destin. Moi, vaine et sans effroi;
vous, sans frein, et frivole! à quoi bon être roi
si l’on n’a dans le cœur quelque haute chimère?
Duc, laissant, au-dessus du vil peuple éphémère,
votre esprit souverain flotter dans l’absolu,
vous rêviez un grand rêve, altesse; il vous a plu
d’essayer de jeter une âme dans ce moule;

devant les yeux d’un roi l’infini se déroule;
créer, rien n’est plus beau; vous avez, duc féal,
voulu réaliser enfin cet idéal,
ce but noble où le cœur d’un grand prince s’applique,
et c’est pourquoi je suis une fille publique.
Un, c’est le paradis, et l’enfer c’est plusieurs.
Qu’est-ce que j’avais fait, ciel juste, à ces messieurs!
J’ignorais; ils savaient. Un jour, tremblante, nue,
je me suis vue au fond de l’opprobre, ingénue!
Ah! C’est un crime, c’est un sombre outrage à Dieu,
ah! C’est l’assassinat d’une âme, et c’est un jeu!
Jusqu’à quel point c’est noir, vous l’ignorez vous-même!
On ne sait pas toujours quel est le grain qu’on sème.
On s’imagine avoir le droit de s’amuser,
et que, puisqu’on nous dore, on peut bien nous briser!
Vous n’êtes pas méchant pourtant, mais vous vous faites
de nos chutes à nous, tristes femmes, des fêtes!
Ah! La fille du peuple est prise, et le seigneur
l’emporte, éblouissant et louche suborneur,
et les voilà tous deux dans la même nuée.
Folle, et sa chevelure éparse et dénouée,
la malheureuse rit, et lui l’entraîne au fond
d’une ombre où le démon avec Dieu se confond,
et l’on s’enivre, ensemble on s’égare, et l’on erre,
et de ce noir baiser sort un coup de tonnerre!
L’atome, on peut marcher dessus. Non. Je crierai.
Duc, vous êtes le char du triomphe doré,
mais savez-vous de quoi vous êtes responsable?
C’est de l’écrasement du pauvre grain de sable.
Il cassera ce char dont l’orgueil est l’essieu.
La prostitution, c’est l’hymen malgré Dieu.
Vous n’avez vu dans moi qu’une esclave qui ploie,
une chair misérable, un vil spectre de joie,
acceptant ce veuvage éternel, l’impudeur.
Vous vous êtes trompé, monsieur. J’étais un cœur.
Ah! Vous le croyez donc, vous avez fait ce songe
d’être ma providence, et moi je dis : mensonge!

Vous m’avez tout donné? Vous m’avez tout volé!
Vous m’avez pris l’honneur, le nom immaculé,
le droit aux yeux baissés, la paix dans la prière,
et la gaie innocence, et cette extase fière
de pouvoir confronter, quel que soit le destin,
sa conscience avec l’étoile du matin!
Vous m’avez pris la joie et donné l’ironie.
Duc, j’avais le sommeil, je vous dois l’insomnie.
Mon père, ma mère! Oh! J’y songe avec remords,
et je sens la rougeur venir au front des morts.
Vos bienfaits, vos bontés, prince, sont des sévices;
vos dons sont des soufflets. Qu’est-ce que j’ai? Des vices.
Par ces hideux passants mon cœur sombre est troublé.
Gallus.

Mais…
Zabeth.

Oh! Sarcler dans l’herbe! Oh! Glaner dans le blé!
M’éveiller, m’en aller, sereine et reposée,
l’âme dans la candeur, les pieds dans la rosée,
j’avais cela! J’avais la sainte pauvreté!
Maintenant je vois croître autour de moi, l’été,
l’hiver, sans fin, sans cesse, un luxe énorme, étrange,
fait de plaisir, de pourpre et d’orgueil, — et de fange!
Je n’ai plus rien, je râle, et tout me manque enfin!
Le mépris, c’est le froid; l’estime, c’est la faim.
Je dois cette indigence à vos tristes manœuvres,
monseigneur.
Elle arrache ses parures.
ô colliers et bracelets, couleuvres!
ô diamants hideux et vils! Joyaux méchants!
Bijoux traîtres!
Elle les foule aux pieds.
Où donc êtes-vous, fleurs des champs?
Se retournant vers Gallus.
Mais, direz-vous, avoir ce lourd fermier pour maître

m’eût froissée, et j’aurais eu quelque amant? Peut-être!
J’eusse pu rencontrer, oui, pourquoi le nier?
Quelque âpre aventurier des bois, un braconnier,
que sais-je? Un voleur! Oui, dans l’antre et dans l’ortie,
un homme commençant, prince, une dynastie,
un bandit, le fusil sur l’épaule, un rôdeur
demandant aux monts noirs, pleins d’ombre et de grandeur,
aux bois, où le soleil dans l’or sanglant se couche,
une épouse, et j’aurais pris cette âme farouche,
et j’aurais laissé prendre à cette âme mon cœur!
Il eût été mon chêne et j’eusse été sa fleur.
Et je vivrais ainsi, pauvre avec l’homme sombre,
habitant le hallier, la fuite, le décombre,
aussi hors de la loi que l’aigle et le vautour,
nue, en haillons, sans gîte… — eh bien! J’aurais l’amour!
Et j’entendrais peut-être en cette vie amère
une petite voix qui me dirait : ma mère!
Et mon voleur aurait de l’estime pour moi.
Il serait tendre et bon, n’étant pas encor roi,
et nous serions tous deux honnêtes l’un pour l’autre.
Tenez, duc, et voyez quelle soif est la nôtre!
Vous êtes prince et vieux, deux choses que je hais,
eh bien, pourtant peut-être, hélas! Nos vains souhaits
gardent au fond de l’ombre une porte fermée,
je vous aurais aimé si vous m’aviez aimée!
Gallus.

Mais…
Zabeth.

C’est fini. Silence! Avoir rêvé le ciel,
et s’éveiller avec l’arrière-goût du fiel,
et de tous les affronts sentir qu’on est la cible!
Hélas! Vous m’avez fait le cœur noir et terrible.
Soyez maudit.
Gallus veut parler. Elle l’arrête du geste.
Silence! Il me reste, et c’est beau,

contre vous, votre ennui, ma haine — et le tombeau.
Gallus.

Mais que voulez-vous donc? Dites-le!
Zabeth.

Ne plus vivre.
Elle tire de son sein quelque chose qu’elle approche de ses lèvres.
Gallus.

Qu’a-t-elle dans la main? Grand Dieu!
Zabeth.

Ce qui délivre.
Une nuit, vous étiez ivre, usage des grands.
Je vous ai pris ceci.
Elle montre à Gallus une bague.
Gallus.

L’anneau!
Zabeth mord vivement le chaton, et, pâle, tend l’anneau à Gallus.
Zabeth.

Je vous le rends.
Gallus.

Ciel! Mais c’est un poison! La mort terrible et prompte!
Zabeth.

Boire la mort n’est rien quand on a bu la honte.
Elle s’affaisse sur un fauteuil.
Adieu. Je prends mon vol, triste oiseau des forêts.
Personne ne m’aima. Je meurs.
Elle expire.
Gallus, se jetant à ses pieds.
Je t’adorais!

4 mars. — 3 avril 1869.

LE LIVRE LYRIQUE — La Destinée

LA DESTINEE , I

je suis fait d’ ombre et de marbre.
Comme les pieds noirs de l’ arbre,
je m’ enfonce dans la nuit.
J’ écoute; je suis sous terre;
d’ en bas je dis au tonnerre :
attends! Ne fais pas de bruit.
Moi qu’ on nomme le poëte,
je suis dans la nuit muette
l’ escalier mystérieux;
je suis l’ escalier Ténèbres;
dans mes spirales funèbres
l’ ombre ouvre ses vagues yeux.
Les flambeaux deviendront cierges.
Respectez mes degrés vierges,
passez, les joyeux du jour!
Mes marches ne sont pas faites
pour les pieds ailés des fêtes,
pour les pieds nus de l’ amour.
Devant ma profondeur blême
tout tremble, les spectres même
ont des gouttes de sueur.
Je viens de la tombe morte;
j’ aboutis à cette porte
par où passe une lueur.
Le banquet rit et flamboie.
Les maîtres sont dans la joie

sur leur trône ensanglanté;
tout les sert, tout les encense;
et la femme à leur puissance
mesure sa nudité.
Laissez la clef et le pène.
Je suis l’ escalier; la peine

médite; l’ heure viendra;
quelqu’ un qu’ entourent les ombres
montera mes marches sombres,
et quelqu’ un les descendra.
3 avril 1854.

1854, 08, 08

LA DESTINEE , II AUX OISEAUX ET AUX NUAGES .

ô vierges du zénith, nuées,
ô doux enfants de l’ air, oiseaux,
blancheurs par l’ aube saluées,
que contemple l’ oeil bleu des eaux;
vous qu’ ève nomma la première;
vous pour qui le Dieu redouté
fit cet abîme, la Lumière,
et cette aile, la Liberté;
vous qu’ on voit, du gouffre où nous sommes,
dans le grand ciel mystérieux;
vous qui n’ admirez pas les Romes,
les fourmilières valant mieux;
vous que la rosée en ses ombres
abreuve ou crée avec ses pleurs,
oiseaux qui sortez des nids sombres,
nuages qui sortez des fleurs,
parlez; vous que le jour fait naître
pour un essor illimité,
vous que le libre éther pénètre
de gloire et de sérénité,
vous qui voyez le mont austère,
le frais matin, le soir obscur,
toute la mer, toute la terre,
éternels passants de l’ azur;

que dit-on, dans la nuit sereine,
que pense-t-on, dans la clarté,
de toute cette honte humaine
qui rampe sous l’ immensité?
8 août 1854.

1855, 01, 22

LA DESTINEE , III

quand le bien et le mal, couple qui nous obsède,
fixant leurs yeux sur nous, nous demandant notre aide,
montrant deux chemins à nos pas,
l’ un, celui qui descend, l’ autre, celui qui monte,
sont là, nous appelant, prêts à combattre : — honte
à l’ homme qui ne choisit pas!
Honte au vivant timide, au passant inutile,
eunuque qui lui-même abdique et se mutile,
qui voit le devoir et le fuit,
et ne s’ y jette pas la tête la première,
et n’ ose pas ouvrir la porte de lumière
et fermer la porte de nuit!
Qui recule peut faire une ruine immense.
Grands, petits, Dieu sait seul où la force commence,
seul où la faiblesse finit;
quand un mont chancelant croule, le grain de sable,
s’ il pouvait empêcher sa chute, est responsable
des crimes du bloc de granit.
L’ homme faible est l’ appui du méchant qui se lève;
les peureux font l’ audace; ils ont avec le glaive
la complicité du fourreau.
Ne dites pas : — c’ est mal, mais je n’ y puis que faire. —
ne dites pas : — j’ ai peur; et je rentre en ma sphère;
meurs, victime; frappe, bourreau.
Je laisse le remords et le crime à ma porte;
je m’ en vais du forfait des autres; que m’ importe
leur scélératesse ou leur deuil!
Ce mort, s’ il m’ accusait, serait une âme fausse;

car, n’ étant pas de ceux qui creusèrent la fosse,
je suis quitte avec le cercueil. —
non, non! Il faut briser le poteau du supplice;
qui, pouvant empêcher, laisse faire, est complice.

Abstention, complicité.
Ce qui semble un atome est tout un crime immonde;
c’ est souvent dans le moindre espace qu’ en ce monde
tient la plus grande énormité.
Tel qui renie un meurtre en est le vrai ministre.
Le fond de la cuvette où, dans l’ ombre sinistre,
un lâche se lave les mains,
peut offrir au regard, — vision surhumaine,
et que tout l’ océan ne contiendrait qu’ à peine! —
un mont noir aux âpres chemins,
trois gibets, deux voleurs se tordant sous les cordes,
les cieux mystérieux pleins de miséricordes
s’ ouvrant pour recevoir l’ affront,
et sur la croix du centre, en une nuit sans lune,
un juste couronné d’ épines dont chacune
perce une étoile sur son front!
22 janvier 1855.

LA DESTINEE , IV

La calomnie immonde et qu’ on jette en courant
et dont on nous lapide,
traverse, sans troubler son calme transparent,
le flot d’ un coeur limpide.
Vile, engloutie au fond de l’ âme, loin du jour,
stagnante, elle s’ efface,
et la candeur, la paix, l’ espérance et l’ amour
restent à la surface.
Et les rêves sereins, la foi qui nous sourit,
la bonté, douce et franche,
n’ en reviennent pas moins dans ce tranquille esprit
baigner leur aile blanche.
L’ injure du passant dans le lac le plus pur,
dans les coeurs les plus dignes,
tombe; mais ce fond noir sur la vague d’ azur
laisse nager les cygnes.

LA DESTINEE , V , I CHANSON D’ AUTREFOIS .

Quelqu’ un connaît-il ma cachette?
C’ est un lieu calme, où le ciel clair
en un jour de printemps rachète
le mal qu’ ont fait six mois d’ hiver.
Il y coule des eaux charmantes;
l’ iris y naît dans les roseaux;
et le murmure des amantes
s’ y mêle au babil des oiseaux.
Là vivent, dans les fleurs, des groupes
épars, et parfois réunis,
avec des chants au fond des coupes
et le silence au fond des nids.
La grâce de cette ombre heureuse
et de ce verdoyant coteau
semble faite des pleurs de Greuze
et du sourire de Watteau.
Paris dans les brumes se plonge;
et le cabaret de Régnier
ne vaut pas une heure de songe
sous les branches d’ un châtaignier.
Les plus belles choses du rêve
sont celles qu’ admet l’ antre frais,
et que confusément achève
le balancement des forêts.

Je comprends peu qu’ on soit superbe
et qu’ il existe des méchants,
puisqu’ on peut se coucher dans l’ herbe
et qu’ il fait clair de lune aux champs.
Toutes les fleurs sont un langage
qui nous recommande l’ amour,

qui nous berce, et qui nous engage
à mettre dans nos coeurs le jour.
Les vagues robes brillantées,
les seins blancs et les jeunes voix
des Phyllis et les Galatées
conseillent le rire et les bois.
28 octobre.
1857, 05, 31

LA DESTINEE , V , II CHANSON D’ AUJOURD’ HUI .

la vision de la vie,
larve des vents poursuivie,
passe et ne m’ occupe pas.
La terre est une masure;
qu’ importe ce que mesure
l’ heure en tournant son compas!
Que me fait la moisson blonde,
l’ étoile sortant de l’ onde,
l’ aube dorant l’ horizon,
et le bouquet sur la branche,
et la nue obscure ou blanche!
Ce n’ est point là ma maison.

Je regarde d’ autres choses,
d’ autres astres, d’ autres roses,
l’ autre figure du sort,
et ce champ noir que recouvre
l’ ombre, où vaguement s’ entr’ ouvre
la fleur blême de la mort.
Oh! Pour qui donc fleurit-elle,
la pâle fleur immortelle?
Triste, elle s’ épanouit;
elle exhale, morne et sombre,
on ne sait quel parfum d’ ombre
dans l’ inexprimable nuit.
Au fond des brumes fatales,
sur ses sinistres pétales
tremble une étrange lueur;
la lugubre fleur regarde,
vertigineuse et hagarde,
comme une face en sueur.

à sa lumière où s’ éclipse
la terrestre apocalypse,
j’ entrevois la vérité;
car la vie est le mensonge,
la chair trompe, et l’ oeil qui songe
voit mieux l’ âme, l’ homme ôté.
Guernesey, 31 mai 1857.

1843, 05

LA DESTINEE , VI PRES D’ AVRANCHES .

la nuit morne tombait sur la morne étendue.
Le vent du soir soufflait, et, d’ une aile éperdue,
faisait fuir, à travers les écueils de granit,
quelques voiles au port, quelques oiseaux au nid.
Triste jusqu’ à la mort, je contemplais le monde.
Oh! Que la mer est vaste et que l’ âme est profonde!
Saint-Michel surgissait, seul sur les flots amers,
Chéops de l’ occident, pyramide des mers.
Je songeais à l’ égypte aux plis infranchissables,
à la grande isolée éternelle des sables,
noire tente des rois, ce tas d’ ombres qui dort
dans le camp immobile et sombre de la mort.
Hélas! Dans ces déserts, qu’ emplit d’ un souffle immense
Dieu, seul dans sa colère et seul dans sa clémence,
ce que l’ homme a dressé debout sur l’ horizon,
là-bas, c’ est le sépulcre, ici, c’ est la prison.
Mai 1843.

1852, 04, 23

LA DESTINEE , VII CHANSON .

j’ aime à me figurer, de longs voiles couvertes,
des vierges qui s’ en vont chantant dans les chemins
et qui sortent d’ un temple avec des palmes vertes
aux mains;
un rêve qui me plaît dans mes heures moroses,
c’ est un groupe d’ enfants dansant dans l’ ombre en rond,
joyeux, avec le rire à la bouche et des roses
au front!
Un rêve qui m’ enchante encore et qui me charme,
c’ est une douce fille à l’ âge radieux
qui, sans savoir pourquoi, songe avec une larme
aux yeux;
une autre vision, belle entre les plus belles,
c’ est Jeanne et Marguerite, astres, vous les voyez!
Qui, le soir, dans les prés courent avec des ailes
aux pieds!
Mais des rêves dont j’ ai la pensée occupée,
celui qui pour mon âme a le plus de douceur,
c’ est un tyran qui râle avec un coup d’ épée
au coeur!
Bruxelles, 23 avril 1852.

LA DESTINEE , VIII

Coup d’ épée; oui, mais non de poignard. Il te faut,
poëte, un tournoi franc et libre, où le front haut,
on lutte, glaive au poing, sans fureur vipérine,
pied à pied, face à face et poitrine à poitrine,
toi, soldat du droit, lui, champion de l’ enfer;
tu veux combattre au jour, loyal comme le fer,
fauve et terrible avec la candeur des colombes,
afin que si c’ est toi, poëte, qui succombes,
tu puisses, en entrant au sépulcre demain,
trouver Cid et Bayard qui te tendent la main.
29 mai.

LA DESTINEE , IX EN ECOUTANT CHANTER LA PRINCESSE .

Dans ta haute demeure
dont l’ air est étouffant,
de l’ accent dont on pleure
tu chantes, douce enfant.
Tu chantes, jeune fille.
Ton père, c’ est le roi.
Autour de toi tout brille,
mais tout soupire en toi.
Pense, mais sans rien dire;
aimer t’ est défendu;
doux être, ton sourire
en naissant s’ est perdu.
Tu te sens épousée
par une main qui sort
inconnue et glacée
de cette ombre, le sort.
Ton coeur, triste et sans ailes,
est dans ce gouffre noir
à des profondeurs telles
que tu ne peux l’ avoir.
Tu n’ es qu’ altesse encore,
tu seras majesté.
Bien qu’ un reflet d’ aurore
sur ton front soit resté,
enfant chère aux armées,
déjà nous te voyons

dans toutes les fumées
et dans tous les rayons.
Ton parrain est le pape;
vierge, il t’ a dit : Ave!

Quand tu passes, on frappe
des piques le pavé.
Comme Dieu l’ on t’ encense;
toi-même as le frisson
de la toute-puissance
mêlée à ta chanson.
De vieux légionnaires
te gardent, fiers, soumis;
et l’ on voit des tonnerres
à ta porte endormis.
Autour de toi se creuse
l’ éclatant sort des rois.
Tu serais plus heureuse
fauvette dans les bois.
3 avril.

1843, 01, 18

LA DESTINEE , X

un hymne harmonieux sort des feuilles du tremble;
les voyageurs craintifs, qui vont la nuit ensemble,
haussent la voix dans l’ ombre où l’ on doit se hâter.
Laissez tout ce qui tremble
chanter.
Les marins fatigués sommeillent sur le gouffre.
La mer bleue où Vésuve épand ses flots de soufre
se tait dès qu’ il s’ éteint, et cesse de gémir.
Laissez tout ce qui souffre
dormir.
Quand la vie est mauvaise on la rêve meilleure.
Les yeux en pleurs au ciel se lèvent à toute heure;
l’ espoir vers Dieu se tourne et Dieu l’ entend crier.
Laissez tout ce qui pleure
prier.
C’ est pour renaître ailleurs qu’ ici-bas on succombe.
Tout ce qui tourbillonne appartient à la tombe.
Il faut dans le grand tout tôt ou tard s’ absorber.
Laissez tout ce qui tombe
tomber!
18 janvier 1843.

1855, 03, 17

LA DESTINEE , XI

Dieu ne frappe qu’ en haut. Infimes que nous sommes!
Oh! Disais-je, qu’ ils sont heureux, tous ces grands hommes!
Eschyle a son exil et Job a son fumier.
Caton est le lion, le sort est le limier.
C’ est le fier ornement de la guerre civile,
que tous ces grands bannis qui vont de ville en ville.
Verser son âme au monde et son sang aux pavés,
c’ est grand; et les élus, ce sont les éprouvés.
Ils marchent, couronnés d’ un mystérieux lustre.
Oh! Parmi tous heureux et parmi tous illustre
celui que la tempête a choisi pour amant!
Dans l’ immense beauté du supplice infamant
des auréoles d’ or tremblent sur les génies.
Quel que soit dans l’ histoire, amas de gémonies,
le siècle qui les ait tenus sous ses barreaux,
les hommes glorieux, les sages, les héros,
sont tous contemporains de l’ adversité sombre.
Démosthène chassé parle à Milton dans l’ ombre;
Phidias expulsé rencontre Dante errant.
Phidias dit : le vrai! Dante répond : le grand!
Destins pareils! ô gloire! ô pléiade splendide!
Hérodote en exil suivi par Thucydide!
Thémistocle épervier, Aristide alcyon!
ô les quatrevingts ans du grave Phocion!
C’ est marque de grandeur dans ce monde où l’ on erre
que d’ être, ô cieux profonds, balafré du tonnerre!
Caucase est lumineux sous l’ éternel mourant.
Trombe, le vent est beau; l’ onde est belle, torrent.
Je t’ admire, ô ciguë, échafaud, je t’ envie.
Quelle sublime porte à sortir de la vie
que celle où se courba Danton, âpre titan!
Le chasseur d’ aigles dit au passereau : va-t’ en!
Et les évènements, comme d’ altiers molosses,

ne veulent, dédaigneux, mordre que les colosses! —
jaloux, je regardais sous les cieux constellés
à tous les grands poteaux ces grands dos flagellés,
et tous ces fiers saignants, traînés dans nos discordes,
les yeux pleins de rayons, les bras liés de cordes,
montant ou descendant les marches de la nuit.
ô crachats au visage! Affronts! Brume où l’ on fuit!
Grand devoir accompli dont le vertige attire!
Proscription! Misère! Ostracisme! Martyre!
Atome, j’ enviais ces pourpres des géants.
Mais nous, pensais-je, hélas! Perdus dans nos néants,
nous passons, dévorant quelque inutile joie;
nous sommes trop petits pour que l’ éclair nous voie;
nous, les vivants obscurs, nous ne méritons pas
que de notre côté Némésis fasse un pas;
Syène ne reçoit que Juvénal; Minturnes
n’ ouvre qu’ aux Marius ses ombres taciturnes;
Dieu nous créa, chétifs, pour le bonheur d’ en bas;
nous ne sommes pas faits pour les vastes combats,
et, comme ces proscrits aux têtes étoilées,
pour les rêves profonds près des mers désolées.
L’ atome n’ a pas droit aux grands écrasements;
il n’ a pas droit aux cris de la haine, aux tourments
de la claie âpre et sainte, aux faces hérissées
de serpents poursuivant sans trêve ses pensées,
non. — je baissais la tête et j’ étais triste ainsi. —
maintenant, ô destin, ô Méduse, merci.
17 mars 1855.

LA DESTINEE , XII NUITS D’ HIVER , I

Comme la nuit tombe vite!
Le jour, en cette saison,
comme un voleur prend la fuite,
s’ évade sous l’ horizon.
Il semble, ô soleil de Rome,
de l’ Inde et du Parthénon,
que, quand la nuit vient de l’ homme
visiter le cabanon,
tu ne veux pas qu’ on te voie,
et que tu crains d’ être pris
en flagrant délit de joie
par la geôlière au front gris.
Pour les heureux en démence
l’ âpre hiver n’ a point d’ effroi,
mais il jette un crêpe immense
sur celui qui, comme moi,
rêveur, saignant, inflexible,
souffrant d’ un stoïque ennui,
sentant la bouche invisible
et sombre souffler sur lui,
montant des effets aux causes,
seul, étranger en tout lieu,
réfugié dans les choses
où l’ on sent palpiter Dieu,

de tous les biens qu’ un jour fane
et dont rit le sage amer,
n’ ayant plus qu’ une cabane
au bord de la grande mer,
songe, assis dans l’ embrasure,
se console en s’ abîmant,
et, pensif, à sa masure
ajoute le firmament!

Pour cet homme en sa chaumière,
c’ est une amère douleur
que l’ adieu de la lumière
et le départ de la fleur.
C’ est un chagrin quand, moroses,
les rayons dans les vallons
s’ éclipsent, et quand les roses
disent : nous nous en allons!

LA DESTINEE , XII NUITS D’ HIVER , II

Le soir qui verse, ô mystère!
Le ciel noir sur le ciel bleu,
entre l’ espace et la terre
pose une barre de feu.
Le couchant, dorant mon bouge,
ferme, sur l’ ombre où je suis,
comme un verrou de fer rouge,
la porte énorme des nuits.
Cherchant au ciel des étoiles,
vous écoutez, matelots,
ce que le frisson des voiles
dit au tremblement des flots.

La bise, bouche vivante,
les vents, les bruits, les typhons,
toute la grande épouvante
erre sous les cieux profonds.
Je baisse mes yeux funèbres;
je me sens dans ma terreur
compagnon de ces ténèbres
et frère de cette horreur.
L’ homme, en proie aux maux sans nombre,
porte en son coeur, morne enfer,
toute la honte de l’ ombre,
de l’ abîme et de la chair.
Je sens que ce crépuscule
me pénètre soucieux,
et qu’ en moi l’ âme recule
comme le jour dans les cieux.
Il semble que tout s’ altère,
se traîne, expire ou s’ abat,
et qu’ il reste de la terre
ce qui reste d’ un combat.

L’ arbre, près du flot qui râle,
tord ses bras comme un banni;
on ne sait quel reflet pâle
des lueurs de l’ infini
perce les bois sans feuillée,
et teint d’ un livide éclair
cette cuirasse écaillée
que nous appelons la mer.
Tandis que l’ occident sombre
lutte contre le néant,

le levant s’ emplit de l’ ombre
de tout le gouffre béant.
Une main — est-ce la vôtre,
Dieu? — tire, en l’ azur désert,
les astres l’ un après l’ autre
du puits de l’ abîme ouvert.

LA DESTINEE , XII NUITS D’ HIVER , III

Nuit partout. Rien ne résiste,
au couchant comme au midi.
On sent la nature triste,
Dieu froid, le mal enhardi.
Dans l’ univers où s’ efface
le nombre et le mouvement,
les visions de l’ espace
vont et viennent vaguement;
et, tremblante dans ta gloire,
tu regardes, ô Vénus,
cette grande maison noire
pleine de pas inconnus.

LA DESTINEE , XII NUITS D’ HIVER , IV

Les caps aux lugubres formes
se dressent de tous côtés
comme des talons énormes
d’ archanges précipités.
L’ eau bat le roc qu’ elle insulte,
le vent bat l’ eau qu’ il poursuit;

toute l’ onde est un tumulte
de montagnes dans la nuit.
L’ écume; ni bords, ni centres;
de blancs flocons; l’ ouragan.
Chaque vague est un des antres
où bâille l’ hydre océan.
On ne voit rien que la trombe
où la brume s’ élargit;
c’ est du hurlement qui tombe,
de la neige qui rugit.
L’ onde sans fond court sans terme;
l’ eau roule en plis tortueux;
chaque flot s’ ouvre, se ferme,
se rouvre... — ô flots monstrueux!
à jamais l’ infini sombre
refait, défait, reconstruit
les écroulements sans nombre
de ces cavernes de bruit.
à jamais la vague essuie
le roc vert, l’ écueil félon,
et, sous ses haillons de pluie,
sous ses cheveux d’ aquilon,
chargé de siècles et d’ âges,
soufflant dans de noirs clairons,
faisant un bruit de cordages,
de tempête et d’ avirons,

au fond de l’ ombre insondable
où l’ astre meurt prisonnier,
le pâle hiver formidable
passe, effrayant nautonier.

1855, 01, 15

LA DESTINEE , XII NUITS D’ HIVER , V

oh! Reviens! Printemps! Fanfare
des parfums et des couleurs!
Toute la plaine s’ effare
dans une émeute de fleurs.
La prairie est une fête;
l’ âme aspire l’ air, le jour,
l’ aube, et sent qu’ elle en est faite;
l’ azur se mêle à l’ amour.
On croit voir, tant avril dore
tout de son reflet riant,
éclore au rosier l’ aurore
et la rose à l’ orient.
Comme ces aubes de flamme
chassent les soucis boudeurs!
On sent s’ ouvrir dans son âme
de charmantes profondeurs.
On se retrouve heureux, jeune,
et, plein d’ ombre et de matin,
on rit de l’ hiver, ce jeûne,
avec l’ été, ce festin.
Oh! Mon coeur loin de ces grèves
fuit et se plonge, insensé,
dans tout ce gouffre de rêves
que nous nommons le passé!
Je revois mil huit cent douze,
mes frères petits, le bois,
le puisard et la pelouse,
et tout le bleu d’ autrefois.

Enfance! Madrid! Campagne
où mon père nous quitta!
Et dans le soleil, l’ Espagne!
Toi dans l’ ombre, Pepita!

Moi, huit ans, elle le double;
en m’ appelant son mari,
elle m’ emplissait de trouble... —
ô rameaux de mai fleuri!
Elle aimait un capitaine;
j’ ai compris plus tard pourquoi,
tout en l’ aimant, la hautaine
n’ était douce que pour moi.
Elle attisait son martyre
avec moi, pour l’ embraser,
lui refusait un sourire
et me donnait un baiser.
L’ innocente, en sa paresse,
se livrant sans se faner,
me donnait cette caresse
afin de ne rien donner.
Et ce baiser économe,
qui me semblait généreux,
rendait jaloux le jeune homme,
et me rendait amoureux.
Il partait, la main crispée;
et, me sentant un rival,
je méditais une épée
et je rêvais un cheval.
Ainsi, du bout de son aile
touchant mon coeur nouveau-né,

gaie, ayant dans sa prunelle
un doux regard étonné,
sans savoir qu’ elle était femme,
et riant de m’ épouser,
cet ange allumait mon âme
dans l’ ombre avec un baiser.
Mal ou bien, épine ou rose,
à tout âge, sages, fous,
nous apprenons quelque chose

d’ un enfant plus vieux que nous.
Un jour la pauvre petite
s’ endormit sous le gazon... —
comme la nuit tombe vite
sur notre sombre horizon!
15 janvier 1855.

1855, 01, 09

LA DESTINEE , XIII , I CHANSON D’ AUTREFOIS .

jamais elle ne raille,
étant un calme esprit;
mais toujours elle rit. —
voici des brins de mousse avec des brins de paille;
fauvette des roseaux,
fais ton nid sur les eaux.
Quand sous la clarté douce
qui sort de tes beaux yeux,
on passe, on est joyeux. —
voici des brins de paille avec des brins de mousse;
martinet de l’ azur,
fais ton nid dans mon mur.
Dans l’ aube avril se mire,
et les rameaux fleuris
sont pleins de petits cris. —
voici de son regard, voici de son sourire,
amour, ô doux vainqueur,
fais ton nid dans mon coeur.
9 janvier 1855.

1854, 04, 03

LA DESTINEE , XIII , II CHANSON D' AUJOURD' HUI .

je disais : — Dieu qu' aucun suppliant n' importune,
quand vous m' éprouverez dans votre volonté,
laissez mon libre esprit choisir dans la fortune
l' un ou l' autre côté;
entre un riche esclavage et la pauvreté franche,
laissez-moi choisir, Dieu du cèdre et du roseau;
entre l' or de la cage et le vert de la branche
faites juge l' oiseau. —
maintenant je suis libre, et la nuit me réclame;
j' ai choisi l' âpre exil; j' habite au bois obscur;
mais je vois s' allumer les étoiles de l' âme
dans mon sinistre azur.
3 avril 1854.

1854, 10, 08

LA DESTINEE , XIV JERSEY .

Jersey dort dans les flots, ces éternels grondeurs;
et dans sa petitesse elle a les deux grandeurs;
île, elle a l’ océan; roche, elle est la montagne.
Par le sud Normandie et par le nord Bretagne,
elle est pour nous la France, et, dans son lit de fleurs,
elle en a le sourire et quelquefois les pleurs.
Pour la troisième fois j’ y vois les pommes mûres.
Terre d’ exil, que mord la vague aux sourds murmures,
sois bénie, île verte, amour du flot profond!
Ce coin de terre, où l’ âme à l’ infini se fond,
s’ il était mon pays, serait ce que j’ envie.
Là, le lutteur serein, naufragé de la vie,
pense, et, sous l’ oeil de Dieu, sur cet écueil vermeil,
laisse blanchir son âme ainsi que le soleil
blanchit sur le gazon les linges des laveuses.
Les rocs semblent frappés d’ attitudes rêveuses;
dans leurs antres, ainsi qu’ aux fentes d’ un pressoir,
l’ écume à flots bouillonne et luit; quand vient le soir,
la forêt jette au vent des notes sibyllines;
le dolmen monstrueux songe sur les collines;
l’ obscure nuit l’ ébauche en spectre; et dans le bloc
la lune blême fait apparaître Moloch.
à cause du vent d’ ouest, tout le long de la plage,
dans tous les coins de roche où se groupe un village,
sur les vieux toits tremblants des pêcheurs riverains,
le chaume est retenu par des câbles marins
pendant le long des murs avec de grosses pierres;
la nourrice au sein nu qui baisse les paupières
chante à l’ enfant qui tette un chant de matelot;

le bateau dès qu’ il rentre est tiré hors du flot;
et les prés sont charmants. Salut, terre sacrée!
Le seuil des maisons rit comme une aube dorée.

Phares, salut! Amis que le péril connaît!
Salut, clochers où vient nicher le martinet;
pauvres autels sculptés par des sculpteurs de proues;
chemins que dans les bois emplit le bruit des roues;
jardins de laurier rose et d’ hortensia bleu;
étangs près de la mer, sagesses près de Dieu!
Salut! à l’ horizon s’ envole la frégate;
le flux mêle aux galets, polis comme l’ agate,
les goëmons, toison du troupeau des récifs;
et Vénus éblouit les vieux rochers pensifs,
dans l’ ombre, au point du jour, quand, au chant de la grive,
tenant l’ enfant matin par la main, elle arrive.
ô bruyères! Plémont qu’ évite le steamer!
Vieux palais de Cybèle écroulé dans la mer!
Mont qu’ étreint l’ océan de ses liquides marbres!
Mugissement des boeufs! Doux sommeils sous les arbres!
L’ île semble prier comme un religieux;
tout à l’ entour, chantant leur chant prodigieux,
l’ abîme et l’ océan font leur immense fête;
la nue en passant pleure; et l’ écueil, sur son faîte,
pendant que la mer brise à ses pieds le vaisseau,
garde un peu d’ eau du ciel pour le petit oiseau.
Creux de la Touraille (l’ Homme sans Tête).
8 octobre 1854.

1854, 02, 18

LA DESTINEE , XV ANDROCLES .

quand tout me souriait encore,
jadis, quand j’ étais radieux,
aux jours de la jeunesse, aurore
dont on prolonge les adieux,
du milieu de l’ immense fête
des heureux d’ alors qui, joyeux,
sceptre en main et couronne en tête,
riaient, chantaient, mêlés aux cieux,
j’ ai vu, tandis que sur la terre
tout était faste, hymne et concert,
l’ exil qui saignait, solitaire
et terrible, dans son désert.
Je suis allé vers l’ âpre grève
où rampait le grand abattu;
j’ ai dit : je suis celui qui rêve.
Toi qui souffres, qui donc es-tu?
Et, levant sa prunelle pleine
du reflet lointain de Saint-Cloud,
il m’ a dit : je suis Sainte-Hélène.
Il m’ a dit : je suis Holyrood.
Alors, moi, fils de nos désastres,
attestant, devant ces douleurs,
et la nuit qui sème les astres,
et le jour qui sème les fleurs,
j’ ai salué dans sa ruine
le sombre maître estropié,

et j’ ai retiré son épine,
et baisé sa plaie à son pié.
Puis dans le vent qui tourbillonne
j’ ai continué mon chemin;
car j’ étais à l’ âge où rayonne
le mystérieux lendemain.

J’ ai vécu; j’ ai penché ma tête
sur les souffrants, sur les petits.
L’ azur fit place à la tempête;
j’ avais rêvé, je combattis.
Ainsi que le frère d’ électre,
comme Jacob, — Dieu, tu le veux, —
j’ ai saisi corps à corps le spectre,
et l’ ange m’ a pris aux cheveux.
Je combattis pour la pensée,
pour le devoir, pour Dieu nié,
pour la grande France éclipsée,
pour le soleil calomnié.
Je combattis l’ ombre et l’ envie,
sans peur, sans tache à mon écu;
puis il se trouva, c’ est la vie,
qu’ ayant lutté, je fus vaincu.
Je fus un de ceux que la foule
donne à dévorer à l’ exil.
Sur tout vaincu le dédain roule;
Brutus est fou, Caton est vil.
La Victoire éclatant de rire
montre Aristide à ses amants;
que de martyrs l’ exil déchire!
Sa cage est pleine d’ ossements!

Autour de moi des voix funèbres
criaient : Cayenne! Lambessa!
L’ exil songeait dans les ténèbres;
quand il me vit, il se dressa.
Il vint à moi, ce noir ministre
du sombre destin inclément.
Pendant qu’ il s’ avançait sinistre,
je le regardai fixement.
Il venait; sur la terre sombre
son pas sonnait comme un marteau.
Maintenant il me tient dans l’ ombre

et son ongle est sur mon manteau.
Mais, au lieu d’ angoisse et de peine,
j’ ai le calme et la joie au coeur.
Le lion s’ est mis, dans l’ arène,
à lécher le gladiateur.
Jersey, 18 février 1854.

1857, 10, 04

LA DESTINEE , XVI A MA FILLE ADELE .

tout enfant, tu dormais près de moi, rose et fraîche,
comme un petit Jésus assoupi dans sa crèche;
ton pur sommeil était si calme et si charmant
que tu n' entendais pas l' oiseau chanter dans l' ombre;
moi, pensif, j' aspirais toute la douceur sombre
du mystérieux firmament.
Et j' écoutais voler sur ta tête les anges;
et je te regardais dormir; et sur tes langes
j' effeuillais des jasmins et des oeillets sans bruit;
et je priais, veillant sur tes paupières closes;
et mes yeux se mouillaient de pleurs, songeant aux choses
qui nous attendent dans la nuit.
Un jour mon tour viendra de dormir; et ma couche,
faite d' ombre, sera si morne et si farouche
que je n' entendrai pas non plus chanter l' oiseau;
et la nuit sera noire; alors, ô ma colombe,
larmes, prière et fleurs, tu rendras à ma tombe
ce que j' ai fait pour ton berceau.
4 octobre 1857.

1854, 03, 17

LA DESTINEE , XVII EN MARCHANT LE MATIN .

puisque là-bas s’ entr’ ouvre une porte vermeille,
puisque l’ aube blanchit le bord de l’ horizon,
pareille au serviteur qui le premier s’ éveille
et, sa lampe à la main, marche dans la maison,
puisqu’ un blême rayon argente la fontaine,
puisqu’ à travers les bois l’ immense firmament
jette une lueur pâle et calme que la plaine
regarde vaguement,
puisque le point du jour sur les monts vient d’ éclore,
je m’ en vais dans les champs tristes, vivants et doux;
je voudrais bien savoir où l’ on trouve une aurore
pour cette sombre nuit que nous avons en nous!
Que fait l’ homme? La vie est-elle une aventure?
Que verra-t-on après et de l’ autre côté?
Tout frissonne. Est-ce à moi que tu parles, nature,
dans cette obscurité?
17 mars 1854.

1855, 07, 12

LA DESTINEE , XVIII

un groupe tout à l’ heure était là sur la grève,
regardant quelque chose à terre. — un chien qui crève!
M’ ont crié des enfants; voilà tout ce que c’ est. —
et j’ ai vu sous leurs pieds un vieux chien qui gisait.
L’ océan lui jetait l’ écume de ses lames.
 — voilà trois jours qu’ il est ainsi, disaient des femmes,
on a beau lui parler, il n’ ouvre pas les yeux.
 — son maître est un marin absent, disait un vieux.
Un pilote, passant la tête à sa fenêtre,
a repris : — ce chien meurt de ne plus voir son maître.
Justement le bateau vient d’ entrer dans le port;
le maître va venir, mais le chien sera mort. —
je me suis arrêté près de la triste bête,
qui, sourde, ne bougeant ni le corps ni la tête,
les yeux fermés, semblait morte sur le pavé.
Comme le soir tombait, le maître est arrivé,
vieux lui-même; et, hâtant son pas que l’ âge casse,
a murmuré le nom de son chien à voix basse.
Alors, rouvrant ses yeux pleins d’ ombre, exténué,
le chien a regardé son maître, a remué
une dernière fois sa pauvre vieille queue,
puis est mort. C’ était l’ heure où, sous la voûte bleue,
comme un flambeau qui sort d’ un gouffre, Vénus luit;
et j’ ai dit : d’ où vient l’ astre? Où va le chien? ô nuit!
12 juillet 1855.

1854, 02, 28

LA DESTINEE , XIX SUR LA FALAISE , I

tu souris dans l’ invisible.
ô douce âme inaccessible,
seul, morne, amer,
je sens ta robe qui flotte
tandis qu’ à mes pieds sanglote
la sombre mer.
La nuit à mes chants assiste.
Je chante mon refrain triste
à l’ horizon.
Ange frissonnant, tu mêles
le battement de tes ailes
à ma chanson.
Je songe à ces pauvres êtres,
nés sous tous ces toits champêtres,
dont le feu luit,
barbe grise, tête blonde,
qu’ emporta cette eau profonde
dans l’ âpre nuit.
Je pleure les morts des autres.
Hélas! Leurs deuils et les nôtres
ne sont qu’ un deuil.

Nous sommes, dans l’ étendue,
la même barque perdue
au même écueil.

LA DESTINEE , XIX SUR LA FALAISE , II

Tous ces patrons, tous ces mousses,
qu’ appelaient tant de voix douces
et tant de voeux,
ils sont mêlés à l’ espace,
et le poisson d’ argent passe
dans leurs cheveux.
Au fond des vagues sans nombre,
on voit, sous l’ épaisseur sombre
du flot bruni,
leur bouche ouverte et terrible
qui boit la stupeur horrible
de l’ infini.
Ils errent, blêmes fantômes.
Ils ne verront plus les chaumes
au pignon noir,
les bois aux fraîches ramées,
les prés, les fleurs, les fumées
dans l’ or du soir.
Dans leurs yeux l’ onde insensée,
qui fuit sans cesse, poussée
du vent hagard,
remplace, sombre passante,
la terre, à jamais absente
de leur regard.

Ils sont l’ ombre et le cadavre;
ceux qui vont de havre en havre
dans les reflux,
qui ne verront plus l’ aurore,
et que l’ aube au chant sonore
ne verra plus.

LA DESTINEE , XIX SUR LA FALAISE , III

Et cependant sur les côtes
on songe encore à ces hôtes
de l’ inconnu,
partis, dans l’ eau qui frissonne,
pour cette ombre dont personne
n’ est revenu.
C’ était l’ enfant! C’ était l’ homme!
On les appelle, on les nomme
dans les maisons,
le soir, quand brille le phare,
et quand la flamme s’ effare
sur les tisons.
L’ un dit : — en août, j’ espère,
ils reviendront tous, Jean, Pierre,
Jacques, Louis;
quand la vigne sera mûre; ... —
et le vent des nuits murmure :
évanouis!
L’ autre dit : — dans les tempêtes
regardez bien, et leurs têtes
apparaîtront.

On les voit quand le soir tombe.
Toute vague est une tombe
d’ où sort un front. —

LA DESTINEE , XIX SUR LA FALAISE , IV

c’ est dans cette onde effrénée
que leur âme au ciel est née,
divin oiseau.
Toute vague est une tombe;
toute vague, ô ma colombe,
est un berceau.
28 février 1854.

1852, 04, 28

LA DESTINEE , XX

j’ ai beau comme un imbécile
regarder dans ma maison,
si bien qu’ on dit dans la ville
que j’ ai perdu la raison,
j’ ai beau chercher; elle est morte.
Elle ne reviendra pas.
Elle est partie, et la porte
est encore ouverte, hélas!
Je tressaille quand on sonne.
Je l’ attends, j’ en fais l’ aveu.
Où sont ces beaux jours d’ automne
quand elle était là, mon Dieu!
Cette âme s’ en est allée.
Elle a fui, moi demeurant.
La nuit, à l’ ombre étoilée
je tends les bras en pleurant.
Je m’ accoude à ma fenêtre,
je songe aux jours révolus.
Hélas! Ce pauvre doux être
qui chantait, je ne l’ ai plus!
Bruxelles, 28 avril 1852.

1853, 11, 19

LA DESTINEE , XXI EN MARCHANT LA NUIT DANS UN BOIS , I

il grêle, il pleut. Neige et brume;
fondrière à chaque pas.
Le torrent veut, crie, écume,
et le rocher ne veut pas.
Le sabbat à notre oreille
jette ses vagues hourras.
Un fagot sur une vieille
passe en agitant les bras.
Passants hideux, clartés blanches;
il semble, en ces noirs chemins,
que les hommes ont des branches,
que les arbres ont des mains.

LA DESTINEE , XXI EN MARCHANT LA NUIT DANS UN BOIS , II

On entend passer un coche,
le lourd coche de la mort.
Il vient, il roule, il approche.
L’ eau hurle et la bise mord.
Le dur cocher, dans la plaine
aux aspects noirs et changeants,
conduit sa voiture pleine
de toutes sortes de gens.

Novembre souffle, la terre
frémit, la bourrasque fond;
les flèches du sagittaire
sifflent dans le ciel profond.

LA DESTINEE , XXI EN MARCHANT LA NUIT DANS UN BOIS , III

— cocher, d’ où viens-tu? Dit l’ arbre.
— où vas-tu? Dit l’ eau qui fuit.
Le cocher est fait de marbre
et le coche est fait de nuit.
Il emporte beauté, gloire,
joie, amour, plaisirs bruyants;
la voiture est toute noire,
les chevaux sont effrayants.
L’ arbre en frissonnant s’ incline.
L’ eau sent les joncs se dresser.
Le buisson sur la colline
grimpe pour le voir passer.

LA DESTINEE , XXI EN MARCHANT LA NUIT DANS UN BOIS , IV

Le brin d’ herbe sur la roche,
le nuage dans le ciel,
regarde marcher ce coche,
et croit voir rouler Babel.
Sur sa morne silhouette,
battant de l’ aile à grands cris,
volent l’ orage, chouette,
et l’ ombre, chauve-souris.

Vent glacé, tu nous secoues!
Le char roule, et l’ oeil tremblant,
à travers ses grandes roues,
voit un crépuscule blanc.

LA DESTINEE , XXI EN MARCHANT LA NUIT DANS UN BOIS , V

La nuit, sinistre merveille,
répand son effroi sacré;
toute la forêt s’ éveille
comme un dormeur effaré.
Après les oiseaux, les âmes!
Volez sous les cieux blafards.
L’ étang, miroir, rit aux femmes
qui sortent des nénuphars.
L’ air sanglote, et le vent râle,
et, sous l’ obscur firmament,
la nuit sombre et la mort pâle
se regardent fixement.
19 novembre 1853.

1854, 03, 18

LA DESTINEE , XXII LUEUR A L’ HORIZON .

je songe. Un clair rayon luit sur le flot sonore;
le phare dit : c’ est l’ aube, et souffle son flambeau.
Je voudrais bien savoir les choses que j’ ignore
et quelle est la blancheur qu’ on voit dans le tombeau.
L’ âme fuit-elle, auprès du Dieu qui la convie,
loin de ce corps glacé qui jadis remuait?
Quelle est cette lueur qu’ au delà de la vie
on aperçoit au fond de l’ infini muet?
Aurons-nous la figure effrayante de l’ ombre?
Pourra-t-on dans la tombe encor nous appeler?
Deviendrons-nous des voix qu’ à travers ce mur sombre
on entendra parler?
Comme les passereaux, comme les hirondelles,
l’ homme ira-t-il chercher l’ azur limpide et clair?
Nous envolerons-nous et prendrons-nous des ailes?
Passerons-nous la mort comme ils passent la mer?
Tout parle et tout s’ émeut. Le bois profond tressaille;
le boeuf reprend son joug et l’ âme sa douleur;
le matin, froid et bleu derrière la broussaille,
ferme l’ oeil de l’ étoile, ouvre l’ oeil de la fleur.
La vie avec ses biens, ses amours et ses gloires,
vaut-elle la nuée errante dans les cieux? ...
Que me voulez-vous donc, oiseaux des branches noires,
chanteurs mystérieux?

Je ne sais pas pourquoi je m’ obstine à ces rêves.
Seigneur, le laboureur creuse le sol béant,
le pêcheur va traînant son filet sur les grèves;
moi, je creuse la nuit, je traîne le néant!
Dieu, nous t’ interrogeons, et mieux vaudrait nous taire.
à quoi bon nos efforts, nos doutes, nos combats?
Pourquoi sonder l’ abîme? Attendons. Le mystère
vit en paix côte à côte avec l’ homme ici-bas.

Le marin, ce jouet du sort, du vent, de l’ onde,
qui siffle en levant l’ ancre et qui va s’ envoler,
laisse gronder la mer, et l’ océan qui gronde
laisse l’ homme siffler.
Jersey, 18 mars 1854.

1854, 05, 29

LA DESTINEE , XXIII SOUS TERRE .

— laisse-moi. — non. — ô griffe sombre,
bouche horrible! ô torture! ô deuil!
Pourquoi te glisses-tu dans l’ ombre
par les fentes de mon cercueil?
— il faut renouveler ma sève,
ô mort, voici le doux été.
Toute la nature qui rêve,
spectre, a besoin de ma beauté!
Il faut qu’ aucun lys ne m’ efface;
l’ abeille attend de moi le miel;
il me faut un parfum qui fasse
pâmer les cygnes dans le ciel.
Je dois orner l’ antre morose;
je dois sourire au soir boudeur,
et donner à tout quelque chose
de ma grâce et de ma splendeur.
Il faut que je pare le voile
des vierges au lever du jour,
que je respire pour l’ étoile,
que je rougisse pour l’ amour.
Et pendant que l’ aube m’ arrose,
ma racine vers toi descend.
— qui donc es-tu? — je suis la rose.
— et que veux-tu? — boire ton sang.
29 mai 1854.

1854, 10, 10

LA DESTINEE , XXIV BESTIARIUM .

les anges effarés viennent voir notre cage,
et se disent : “ — vois donc celui-ci, celui-là,
voici Tibère, une hydre au fond d’ un marécage;
regarde le Malthus auprès de l’ Attila. “ —
ils répètent entre eux les noms dont on nous nomme,
mêlés à d’ autres noms que nous ne savons pas.
Ils disent : “ — c’ est donc là ce qu’ on appelle l’ homme!
Une main dans le crime, un pied dans le trépas.
Voici l’ orgueil; voici le dol; voici l’ envie;
ce sont les plus mauvais qui sont les plus nombreux.
Ils rôdent dans la fosse immense de la vie,
et la terre tressaille à leur pas ténébreux.
Le faible est sous leurs pieds comme un grain sous les meules.
Voyez! Ils sont l’ horreur, l’ effroi, le mal sans frein;
ces coeurs sont des dragons, ces esprits ont des gueules,
ces âmes à l’ oeil fauve ont des griffes d’ airain.
Ceci, c’ est le Judas; cela, c’ est le Zoïle;
tous deux dans la nuit lâche on les voit se glisser;
l’ un baise et l’ autre mord; et, sanglante, âpre et vile,
la dent grince et rugit, jalouse du baiser.
Ce maître foule aux pieds la femme sans défense,
ou, limace du coeur, bave sur son printemps.
Ce vieux, pour s’ enrichir, lie au travail l’ enfance
et rive à ce boulet des forçats de huit ans;
il leur fait du labeur tourner la sombre roue,
et, gorgé d’ or, se vautre en tous ses appétits

pendant qu’ en ses poings noirs la fatigue secoue
les membres frissonnants de ces pauvres petits.
Ceux-ci, sur les vaincus jetant un oeil farouche,
disent : — percez, frappez, tuez jusqu’ au dernier! —
les chiens de Montfaucon viennent lécher leur bouche,
tant leurs discours sont pleins de l’ odeur du charnier.

Ceux-ci dressent sur l’ ombre une épée enflammée;
ceux-ci sur les blés d’ or et les villes en feu
font vomir les canons hideux, dont la fumée
se mêle, haillon noir, aux nuages de Dieu.
Ceux-ci veulent glacer et brûler tout ensemble,
et, tourmenteurs qu’ on voit dans la nuit se pencher,
soufflent en même temps sur la raison qui tremble
et sur la vieille torche horrible du bûcher.
Ceux-ci sont les heureux que tous les rayons dorent,
et que les lâchetés servent à deux genoux;
regardez la beauté sans âme qu’ ils adorent;
elle est Vénus pour eux et squelette pour nous.
Ceux-là sont les bourreaux que l’ ombre a sous son aile;
l’ espérance agonise et s’ éteint devant eux;
avec la corde sainte où pend l’ ancre éternelle
ils font le noeud coulant du gibet monstrueux.
Cette langue est serpent, cette idée est tigresse;
ce juif contre un doublon pèse une âme en sa main;
ceux-ci, fouettant le nègre et fouettant la négresse,
lâchent les chiens hurlants sur le bétail humain;
ils mettent l’ affreux bât de la bête de somme
à des esprits, comme eux pensant, comme eux vivant.
La chair humaine saigne entre les mains de l’ homme;
le sauvage la mange et le chrétien la vend.

écoutez ces grands cris qui par moments s’ élèvent;
voyez rire les uns et les autres trembler;
tous ne sont pas méchants, et quelques-uns qui rêvent
ont des ailes dans l’ ombre et voudraient s’ envoler.—”
et les anges, cachés sous leurs radieux voiles,
frémissent, l’ oeil en pleurs et le front attristé.
Nous sommes là pensifs, regardant les étoiles
à travers les barreaux de notre humanité.
10 octobre 1854.

1854, 04, 18

LA DESTINEE , XXV CHANSON .

proscrit, regarde les roses;
mai joyeux, de l’ aube en pleurs
les reçoit toutes écloses;
proscrit, regarde les fleurs.
 — je pense
aux roses que je semai.
Le mois de mai sans la France,
ce n’ est pas le mois de mai.
Proscrit, regarde les tombes;
mai, qui rit aux cieux si beaux,
sous les baisers des colombes
fait palpiter les tombeaux.
 — je pense
aux yeux chers que je fermai.
Le mois de mai sans la France,
ce n’ est pas le mois de mai.
Proscrit, regarde les branches,
les branches où sont les nids;
mai les remplit d’ ailes blanches
et de soupirs infinis.
 — je pense
aux nids charmants où j’ aimai.
Le mois de mai sans la France,
ce n’ est pas le mois de mai.
18 mai 1854.

1854, 11, 13

LA DESTINEE , XXVI REMONTRANCES .

une nuit qu’ au milieu des bourrasques farouches,
et de tous les effrois ouvrant toutes leurs bouches,
ma vitre en pleurs tremblait au choc du vent profond,
éveillé, je songeais : — hélas! Qu’ est-ce que font
toutes ces sombres eaux qui hurlent dans l’ espace?
Oh! Ce pauvre bateau qui dans cette ombre passe!
ô mon Dieu! Comme il lutte, et se débat, et fuit,
pris dans cette prison d’ épouvante et de bruit!
Quels geôliers que les flots quand ils tiennent les hommes!
Pour un peu de pain noir, ou pour de grosses sommes,
la barque affronte l’ onde et l’ air plein de sanglots
et la brume, et je plains les pâles matelots.
ô gouffre! Apocalypse! Effrayante épopée!
La mer a par moments l’ air de s’ être échappée.
Un cri farouche sort des vagues, ces tourments.
Il faudrait frissonner devant les éléments
si l’ écume, l’ écueil, l’ onde, l’ aquilon sombre,
pouvaient parfois briser l’ anneau noir qui dans l’ ombre
les rive à l’ équité, mystérieux pilier.
Est-ce que tout ceci serait irrégulier?
Est-ce que, par hasard, un flot passerait l’ autre?
Serait-ce un insensé que le vent qui se vautre
dans la nuée, et crie aux vagues d’ accourir?
Quoi! Ce bon vieux pêcheur part ce soir pour nourrir
sa famille qui souffre et dont la faim le navre,
et voilà, dès qu’ il est sorti de l’ humble havre,
que l’ orage et la nuit le jugent sans appel!
Sous ses pieds, les brisants, invisible archipel,
l’ accusent; sur son front l’ ouragan le discute;
et ce bourreau masqué, l’ abîme, l’ exécute!

Tout est dit. L’ eau s’ enfuit. Est-il coupable? Non.
Est-ce que l’ océan dans son sourd cabanon

peut saisir un pauvre homme et l’ étouffer sous l’ onde,
Seigneur, sans déranger l’ équilibre du monde?
Est-ce qu’ il serait vrai que la nature osât
frapper sur l’ homme, ainsi qu’ on bâtonne un forçat?
L’ eau cache-t-elle un piège en sa vague lyrique?
Et que deviendrons-nous si la mer prévarique?
Dieu la laisserait-il libre et folle en effet?
Est-ce que l’ ouragan ne sait pas ce qu’ il fait?
Ah! Si la goutte d’ eau noie à tort un atome,
est-ce qu’ on ne va pas, au fond du divin dôme,
voir trembler l’ astre, et voir, dans la mer des rayons,
pêle-mêle, sombrer les constellations?
Quoi! Puni sans mal faire! Est-ce que c’ est possible?
Quoi! D’ un carquois sans yeux l’ homme serait la cible?
Est-ce qu’ il se pourrait que le naufrage, ô Dieu,
la rafale, l’ esquif coupé par le milieu,
le cadavre roulé sous les houles funèbres,
fût un tâtonnement sinistre des ténèbres,
ces aveugles d’ en haut qui frappent à côté?
Est-ce qu’ il se pourrait que cette obscurité
fît devant l’ infini des actions infâmes?
Dieu, ces gens ont des fils, des mères et des femmes;
ce matin, ces pêcheurs, dans l’ île où nous tremblons,
faisaient sur leurs genoux sauter des enfants blonds;
pourquoi permettre aux eaux, à l’ air, aux rocs, aux lames,
de prendre en leurs poings noirs toutes ces pauvres âmes?
Pourquoi tiens-tu captifs, Seigneur, tous ces vivants
dans l’ orageux réseau des vagues et des vents?
Pourquoi ces flots suspects font-ils ce bruit de chaînes?
Pourquoi tous ces marins, bons coeurs, sans fiel, sans haines,
emportés par la mort, pris par l’ abîme amer,
liés dans l’ ombre au fond des cachots de la mer?
Qu’ ont-ils fait? Et pourquoi les frapper sans relâche?
Pourquoi tous ces éclairs que sur eux ta main lâche?
Je ne m’ explique pas ces souffles rugissants,

rués sur des plaintifs et sur des innocents.
Père, il ne se peut pas que ton gouffre se trompe,
que ta sagesse ait tort, bégaie ou s’ interrompe,
cela ne se peut pas; cela ferait douter.
L’ océan ne doit rien avoir à rétracter;
car l’ ouragan est juste et la foudre est intègre. —
et la bise de mer, bourrue, irritée, aigre,
couvrant d’ obscurs brouillards les astres que conduit
la navigation immense de la nuit,
m’ apparut, face pâle, à travers ma fenêtre,
et me dit : — que sais-tu? Nous délivrons peut-être.
13 novembre 1854.

1854, 12, 25

LA DESTINEE , XXVII PATI .

pourquoi ne pas aller tout de suite à la mort?
Quoi! Vieillir pour avoir un peu plus de remord
à l’ heure où Dieu videra l’ âme!
Qu’ attends-tu pour venir dans nos lits froids et noirs,
ô blême épouse, ô Nuit, dont tous nos désespoirs
hélas! Chantent l’ épithalame?
Pourquoi ne pas finir? Pleurer des pleurs de sang!
Vivre! Quoi! Le poison n’ est-il pas complaisant?
L’ abîme n’ est-il pas facile?
Mon couteau que j’ ai là rit de me voir souffrir.
Est-ce que l’ océan, toujours prêt à s’ ouvrir,
ne dit pas à l’ homme : Imbécile!
Brutus a-t-il mal fait? Caton avait-il tort?
Est-ce qu’ ils hésitaient, ces lutteurs au bras fort,
à fermer leurs regards superbes?
Que leur faisait la vie? Est-ce que ces romains
tenaient à voir passer les chars sur les chemins
et le vent courber les brins d’ herbes?
Comprenant l’ ironie, ils murmuraient : assez!
Par les flèches du sort colosses traversés,
ils ôtaient eux-mêmes la cible.
Ils mouraient de sentir à leurs fronts des rougeurs;
vous préfériez la mort à la vie, ô songeurs,
et l’ idéal à l’ impossible.
La mort se dressait pâle et leur apparaissait;
graves, ils se couchaient près d’ elle, puisque c’ est
avec elle qu’ il faut qu’ on dorme;
ils allaient au-devant de ce sinistre hymen;

ils mettaient leur anneau de chevalier romain
au doigt de ce squelette énorme.
Est-ce qu’ il est quelqu’ un qui blâme ces héros?
Ils ont du froid destin tordu les vains barreaux;

ils ont fait une brèche aux ombres;
maintenant à jamais, triste et des vents battu,
au bout de la sagesse, au bout de la vertu,
l’ homme voit leurs deux spectres sombres.
Oui, Caton a mal fait; oui, Brutus avait tort;
le sage est mal sorti, l’ intrépide est mal mort.
Le suicide est une fuite.
Dieu, qui seul a le droit d’ éteindre le flambeau,
quand ces grands essoufflés sont entrés au tombeau,
ne leur a dit qu’ un mot : trop vite.
Braver la destinée en s’ en rassasiant,
c’ est l’ honneur; le grand homme est le grand patient;
attendre est la vertu sévère;
sage, attends qu’ à l’ abri des verts rameaux flottants
la ciguë ait fleuri; juste, laisse le temps
à l’ arbre de croître au calvaire!
Socrate, et non Brutus! Jésus, et non Caton!
Vous mourrez, vous mourrez. Pourquoi se hâte-t-on?
Souffrez, enseignez, coeurs fidèles.
âme, pourquoi t’ enfuir avant l’ hiver venu,
et l’ apparition de l’ azur inconnu,
et le départ des hirondelles?
Quoi donc? As-tu peur d’ être oublié, passant noir?
Crains-tu d’ être ignoré du sombre vent du soir,
et qu’ il t’ épargne dans ta ville,
quand, terrible, il viendra balayer vers le nord
la vieille feuille morte et le vieux monde mort?
Il t’ emportera, sois tranquille!

Comme à chacun de nous ton heure sonnera.
Ton cadavre qui boit et qui mange sera
écrasé, broyé dans sa boue,
pétri dans le néant, supprimé, rejeté;
l’ infini passera sur toi; l’ éternité
a pour nous tous un tour de roue.
Si tu n’ es qu’ un vivant, frêle, obscur, incertain,

vis et pleure; descends pas à pas ton destin :
vieillis; reste l’ homme ordinaire.
De quel droit, cendre, atome, espèce d’ ombre aux fers,
fais-tu tomber sur toi la mort aux yeux d’ éclairs,
et déranges-tu le tonnerre?
Ou si de toi ton siècle a fait un grand témoin,
accepte échafaud, bagne, exil; sois au besoin
l’ esclave auguste de l’ exemple.
La pierre du gibet, dont le ciel est l’ aimant,
plus tard sort du charnier et monte lentement,
et devient le fronton du temple.
Ne te dérobe point par la mort aux lenteurs
du supplice qu’ il faut subir sur les hauteurs;
c’ est l’ épreuve; acceptons-la toute!
Agonise et vieillis sans dire : je suis las!
L’ homme est fait pour mourir heure par heure, hélas!
Les pleurs, pour tomber goutte à goutte!
La douleur est utile; et vivre, c’ est l’ effort.
Veux-tu devenir grand? Laisse-toi faire au sort.
Bois, et ne brise pas ton verre.
Laisse blanchir ton âme ainsi que l’ orient.
Sois à la fois l’ archange au regard souriant
et le titan au front sévère.
Les jours nous font saigner, mystérieux bourreaux;
saigne, et ris; c’ est ainsi qu’ on devient un héros,

c’ est ainsi qu’ on devient sublime,
et que l’ on est de ceux dont l’ esprit monte et luit,
et que le genre humain voit tout à coup, la nuit,
surgir splendides sur sa cime.
L’ homme est sombre; qu’ il souffre, il brillera; Dieu bon
refait le diamant avec le vil charbon;
l’ aube est sous nos brumes funèbres;
et la création n’ est qu’ un gouffre d’ où sort
le rayon qui, joyeux, dorant l’ ombre et la mort,
s’ épanouit hors des ténèbres.

L’ âme s’ étoile au choc du sort et du devoir.
Dieu, le grand forgeron, avec son marteau noir
qui sonne dans tous nos désastres,
sur l’ enclume d’ airain que nous nommons l’ azur,
bat l’ ombre, la nuit, l’ homme en deuil, l’ abîme obscur;
les étincelles sont des astres.
Christmas, 25 décembre 1854.

1855, 01, 14

LA DESTINEE , XXVIII

en hiver la terre pleure;
le soleil froid, pâle et doux,
vient tard, et part de bonne heure,
ennuyé du rendez-vous.
Leurs idylles sont moroses.
 — soleil! Aimons! — essayons.
ô terre, où donc sont tes roses?
 — astre, où donc sont tes rayons?
Il prend un prétexte, grêle,
vent, nuage noir ou blanc,
et dit : — c’ est la nuit, ma belle! —
et la fait en s’ en allant;
comme un amant qui retire
chaque jour son coeur du noeud,
et, ne sachant plus que dire,
s’ en va le plus tôt qu’ il peut.
14 janvier 1855.

1855, 02, 10

LA DESTINEE , XXIX

l’ absolu, l’ éternel. Rien après, rien avant.
Hors de cet horizon l’ esprit n’ est pas vivant.
S’ il n’ a point l’ abîme, il réclame.
Tout vouloir, tout savoir, tout sonder tour à tour,
c’ est la seule façon de composer un jour
qui suffise au regard de l’ âme.
L’ âme veut pour plafond la vaste liberté,
et ne peut demeurer que dans l’ illimité.
Ni cloisons, ni rideaux, ni toiles.
Seuls la nuit, sous le ciel calme et silencieux,
les sphynx n’ ont, pour emplir de lumière leurs yeux,
pas trop de toutes les étoiles.
L’ immensité, c’ est là le seul asile sûr.
Je crois être banni, si je n’ ai tout l’ azur.
Tout l’ espace, c’ est là que j’ entre.
Je veux tout le ciel bleu, je veux tout le ciel noir;
l’ infini par moments me semble à peine avoir
la dimension de mon antre.
10 février 1855.

1854, 10, 30

LA DESTINEE , XXX CHANSON .

il est un peu tard pour faire la belle,
reine marguerite; aux champs défleuris
bientôt vont souffler le givre et la grêle.
 — passant, l’ hiver vient, et je lui souris.
Il est un peu tard pour faire la belle,
étoile du soir; les rayons taris
sont tous retournés à l’ aube éternelle.
 — passant, la nuit vient, et je lui souris.
Il est un peu tard pour faire la belle,
mon âme; joyeuse en mes noirs débris,
tu m’ éblouis, fière et rouvrant ton aile.
 — passant, la mort vient, et je lui souris.
30 octobre 1854.

1870, 02, 08

LA DESTINEE , XXXI A MEURICE - A VACQUERIE .

hélas! Comme c’ est peu compris, les grandes âmes!
L’ orage était bien noir quand nous nous rencontrâmes;
je livrais au vieux monde un assaut hasardeux;
je luttais; vous, tribuns de l’ art, maîtres tous deux,
forts, dressant devant moi votre épée étoilée,
vous me prîtes la main dans l’ ardente mêlée;
et dans ce siècle, où l’ âme est en proie aux moqueurs,
je fus le combattant, vous êtes les vainqueurs.
Quand s’ ouvrit l’ âpre exil aux froides casemates,
proscrit, vous me suiviez, et haï, vous m’ aimâtes.
J’ ai le flot à dompter, j’ ai la nuit à franchir;
je vous cherche en mon ciel que vous faites blanchir;
ainsi le nautonier battu des mers obscures
épiait le lever des lointains Dioscures.
Ah! Vous vous oubliez, vous qu’ on n’ oubliera pas!
C’ est grand. Vous me tirez de l’ ombre pas à pas,
vous me rouvrez le port, vous me rendez les fêtes,
je sens l’ apaisement des profondes tempêtes,
et je vous aime, ô vous sur qui je m’ attendris,
d’ unir des coeurs si doux à de si fiers esprits!
8 février 1870.

1870

LA DESTINEE , XXXII TOURMENTE .

oh! Comme tout devient terrible sur la mer!
Ces noirs chanteurs chantant sans cesse le même air,
les flots, dressent leur blanche crête;
et la nuée accourt, soufflant sur l’ eau qui fuit
toute l’ horreur du gouffre et tout ce que la nuit
contient de haine et de tempête;
et voici l’ ouragan qui monte en mugissant
avec un grincement de chaîne, et qui descend,
et qui remonte dans la brume,
et moi, plus frissonnant que l’ air dans mon manteau,
je dis : — Seigneur! Seigneur! Qu’ est-ce que le marteau
fait à cette heure sur l’ enclume?
Dieu! Quels évènements d’ airain, quels rois de fer,
quels colosses armés des glaives de l’ enfer,
quels géants à l’ horrible forme,
vont sortir de votre ombre, et qu’ allons-nous donc voir? —
ainsi je rêve au bruit que fait sous le ciel noir
le soufflet de la forge énorme.
1870.

1854, 09, 13

LA DESTINEE , XXXIII , I

ma vie entre déjà dans l’ ombre de la mort,
et je commence à voir le grand côté des choses.
L’ homme juste est plus beau, terrassé par le sort;
et les soleils couchants sont des apothéoses.
Brutus vaincu n’ a rien dont s’ étonne Caton;
Morus voit Thraséas et se laisse proscrire;
Socrate, qu’ Anitus fait boire au Phlégéthon,
mourant, n’ empêche pas Jésus-Christ de sourire.
Le monde passe, ingrat, vain, stupide et moqueur.
Le blâme intérieur, Dieu juste, est le seul blâme.
Les caresses que fait la conscience au coeur
font saigner notre chair et rayonner notre âme.
Apaisé, je médite au bord du gouffre amer;
j’ aime ce bruit sauvage où l’ infini commence;
la nuit, j’ entends les flots, les vents, les cieux, la mer;
je songe, évanoui dans cette plainte immense.

LA DESTINEE , XXXIII , II

Il faut toujours quelqu’ un qui dise : je suis prêt.
Je m’ immole. Sans quoi, ma France bien-aimée,
la conscience au coeur de l’ homme se romprait;
peuple! Il ne resterait pas une âme allumée.
Il est bon en tout temps, aujourd’ hui comme hier,
que des hommes sereins, en qui rien ne recule,

se sentent un amour mystérieux et fier
pour l’ exil, nuit sinistre, et la mort, crépuscule.
Je suis de ceux sur qui le char roule effrayant;
l’ épreuve me flagelle et le devoir me broie;
je ne vois pas pourquoi je serais triste, ayant
ce lugubre bonheur et cette sombre joie.
D’ autres, meilleurs que moi, dans le deuil et l’ affront
expirèrent; ils sont dans la lumière pure.
Gloire à ces combattants du Golgotha! Leur front
est d’ autant plus serein que l’ épine est plus dure.
Ils furent grands. Ils ont souffert, ils ont aimé.
Leur linceul laisse voir leur clarté sous ses voiles;
et le rude chemin du martyre est semé
de leurs gouttes de sang qu’ on prend pour des étoiles.

LA DESTINEE , XXXIII , III

Socrate est un voyant; je ne suis qu’ un témoin.
Je vais. J’ ai laissé tout aux mains du sort rapace,
et j’ entends mes amis d’ autrefois rire au loin
pendant qu’ à l’ horizon, seul et pensif, je passe.
Ils disent, me voyant paraître tout à coup :
— qu’ est-ce donc que cette ombre au loin sur cette grève?
Regardez donc là-bas. Cela reste debout.
Est-ce un homme qui marche? Est-ce un spectre qui rêve?
C’ est l’ homme et c’ est le spectre! ô mes anciens amis,
c’ est un songeur tourné vers les profondeurs calmes,
qui, devant le tombeau priant pour être admis,
rêve sous la nuée où frissonnent les palmes.
Sachez, amis de l’ âge où l’ on se comprenait,
que, si je vous parlais, ce serait de vous-même.

Je suis l’ être pensif que la douleur connaît;
mon soir mystérieux touche à l’ aube suprême.
Vous qui tournez la tête et qui dites : c’ est bien!
Et qui vous remettez à rire à votre porte,
ce que j’ endure est peu, ce que je suis n’ est rien,
et ce n’ est pas à moi que ma souffrance importe;
mais, quoi que vous fassiez et qui que vous soyez,
quoi donc! N’ avez-vous rien au coeur qui vous déchire?
N’ avez-vous rien perdu de ceux que vous aimiez?
Qui sait où sont les morts? Comment pouvez-vous rire?

LA DESTINEE , XXXIII , IV

Heureux les éprouvés! Voilà ce que je vois;
et je m’ en vais, fantôme, habiter les décombres.
Les pêcheurs, dont j’ entends sur les grèves la voix,
regardent les flots croître; et moi, grandir les ombres.
Je souris au désert; je contemple et j’ attends;
j’ emplis de paix mon coeur qui n’ eut jamais d’ envie;
je tâche, craignant Dieu, de m’ éveiller à temps
du rêve monstrueux qu’ on appelle la vie.
La mort va m’ emmener dans la sérénité;
j’ entends ses noirs chevaux qui viennent dans l’ espace.
Je suis comme celui qui, s’ étant trop hâté,
attend sur le chemin que la voiture passe.
Ne plaignez pas l’ élu qu’ on nomme le proscrit.
Mon esprit, que le deuil et que l’ aurore attire,
voit le jour par les trous des mains de Jésus-Christ.
Toute lumière sort ici-bas du martyre.

LA DESTINEE , XXXIII , V

Je songe, ô vérité, de toi seule ébloui!
Ai-je des ennemis? J’ en ignore le nombre.
Tous les chers souvenirs, tout s’ est évanoui.
Je sens monter en moi le vaste oubli de l’ ombre.
Je ne sais même plus le nom de ceux qui m’ ont
fait mordre, moi rêveur, par le mensonge infâme.
J’ aperçois les blancheurs de la cime du mont,
et le bout de ton aile est déjà bleu, mon âme!
En dehors du combat pour la cause de tous,
si j’ ai frappé quelqu’ un pour me venger moi-même,
si j’ ai laissé pleurant quelque être fier et doux,
si j’ ai dit : haïssez, à ceux qui disaient : j’ aime;
Dieu! Si j’ ai fait saigner des coeurs dans le passé,
que votre grande voix me courbe et m’ avertisse!
Je demande pardon à ceux que j’ offensai,
voulant traîner ma peine et non mon injustice.
Je marche, à travers l’ ombre et les torts expiés,
dans la vie, aujourd’ hui sans fleurs et jadis verte,
morne plaine où déjà s’ allongent à mes pieds
les immenses rayons de la tombe entr’ ouverte.
13 septembre 1854.

LA DESTINEE , XXXIV ENTREE DANS L’ EXIL .

J’ ai fait en arrivant dans l’ île connaissance
avec un frais vallon plein d’ ombre et d’ innocence,
qui, comme moi, se plaît au bord des flots profonds.
Au même rayon d’ or tous deux nous nous chauffons;
j’ ai tout de suite avec cette humble solitude
pris une familière et charmante habitude.
Là deux arbres, un frêne, un orme à l’ air vivant,
se querellent et font des gestes dans le vent
comme deux avocats qui parlent pour et contre;
j’ y vais causer un peu tous les jours, j’ y rencontre
mon ami le lézard, mon ami le moineau;
le roc m’ offre sa chaise et la source son eau;
j’ entends, quand je suis seul avec cette nature,
mon âme qui lui dit tout bas son aventure;
ces champs sont bonnes gens, et j’ aime, en vérité,
leur douceur, et je crois qu’ ils aiment ma fierté.

1854, 07, 22

LA DESTINEE , XXXV

l’ immense être inconnu sourit. L’ aube réveille
le ciron, la fourmi, la fleur des prés, l’ abeille,
les nids chuchotants, les hameaux,
la forêt aux profonds branchages, les campagnes,
l’ océan, le soleil derrière les montagnes,
mon âme derrière les maux.
L’ être rêve. Il construit le lys dans le mystère;
son doigt aide la taupe à faire un trou sous terre;
il peint les beaux rosiers vermeils;
et la création, sur son travail courbée,
contemple; il fait, avec l’ aile d’ un scarabée,
l’ admiration des soleils.
Hommes, vos grands vaisseaux qui vont sous les étoiles,
embarrassant les vents dans leurs gouffres de voiles,
monstres qui s’ imposent aux mers,
fatiguant de leur poids la brise exténuée,
et traînant dans leurs flancs chacun une nuée
pleine de foudres et d’ éclairs,
vos canons, vos soldats, dont la marche olympique
d’ un coin de terre obscur fait une plaine épique,
vos drapeaux aux plis arrogants,
vos batailles broyant les moissons, vos tueries,
vos carnages, vos chocs, et vos cavaleries,
aigles de ces noirs ouragans,
vos régiments, pareils à l’ hydre qui serpente,
vos Austerlitz tonnants, vos Lutzen, vos Lépante,

vos Iéna sonnant du clairon,
vos camps pleins de tambours que la mort pâle éveille,
passent pendant qu’ il songe, et font à son oreille
le même bruit qu’ un moucheron.
22 juillet 1854.

1854, 08, 15

LA DESTINEE , XXXVI

oh! Quoique je sois, sur la grève,
le flocon d' écume qui fuit,
quoique je n' aie en moi qu' un rêve,
quoique je sois poussière et nuit,
quoique je sois un peu de boue,
un ver parmi les vers humains,
écrasé par ces tours de roue
qu' on appelle les lendemains,
quoique le mal m' ait dans sa serre,
quoique je sois nu, faible, obscur,
quoique je sois fait de misère
et que tu sois faite d' azur,
sans fléchir dans ta confiance,
sans te rebuter dans ta foi,
sainte servante, conscience
tu vas dans l' ombre devant moi!
Tu vas devant moi, toujours prête,
et tu me montres le chemin;
le voile du sort sur ta tête,
la lampe de Dieu dans ta main!
Tu me dis : — ta croix te réclame.
Debout! C' est ailleurs qu' on s' assied. —
tu me dis : — cache ici ton âme.
Tu me dis : — pose ici ton pied.
Tu dis : — la tristesse est meilleure.
L' ombre et le deuil sont nos amis. —

et tu souris lorsque je pleure,
et tu chantes quand je gémis.
Tu m' éclaires, calme et ravie,
marche à marche, avec ton flambeau,
toutes les douleurs de la vie,
sombre descente du tombeau.

15 août 1854.

1870, 07, 18

LA DESTINEE , XXXVII EXIL .

si je pouvais voir, ô patrie,
tes amandiers et tes lilas,
et fouler ton herbe fleurie,
hélas!
Si je pouvais, — mais, ô mon père,
ô ma mère, je ne peux pas, —
prendre pour chevet votre pierre,
hélas!
Dans le froid cercueil qui vous gêne,
si je pouvais vous parler bas,
mon frère Abel, mon frère Eugène,
hélas!
Si je pouvais, ô ma colombe,
et toi, mère, qui t' envolas,
m' agenouiller sur votre tombe,
hélas!
Oh! Vers l' étoile solitaire,
comme je lèverais les bras!
Comme je baiserais la terre,
hélas!
Loin de vous, ô morts que je pleure,
des flots noirs j' écoute le glas;
je voudrais fuir, mais je demeure,
hélas!

Pourtant le sort, caché dans l' ombre,
se trompe si, comptant mes pas,
il croit que le vieux marcheur sombre
est las.
18 juillet 1870.

1854, 08, 24

LA DESTINEE , XXXVIII

ô mon âme, en cherchant l’ azur, ton vol dévie.
Restons dans le devoir : le devoir, c’ est la vie.
Rentrons au noir foyer des hommes; essayons
la chaîne des captifs; fais-toi, dans ce lieu sombre,
la servante de l’ ombre,
ô fille des rayons!
Reprenons le labeur des saintes délivrances;
faisons la fonction divine des souffrances;
remettons notre lèvre à l’ éponge de fiel;
continuons les pleurs, les deuils, la lutte austère;
revenons à la terre
pour retourner au ciel.
24 août 1854.

LA DESTINEE , XXXIX

Tant qu’ on verra l’ amour pleurer, la haine rire,
le mal régner,
le dogme errer, l’ autel mentir, Néron proscrire,
Jésus saigner,
tant qu’ on aura des rois, des églises athées,
d’ affreuses tours,
des peuples que la chaîne étreint, des Prométhées
sous les vautours,
tant que je sentirai, coeur où rien ne mutile
le fier devoir,
que le vol d’ une strophe irritée est utile
dans le ciel noir,
je combattrai! Je sais que je serais un lâche
d’ être autrement;
je ne me laisserai détourner de ma tâche,
ô firmament!
Par rien, ni par avril, ni par l’ ombre ingénue
des verts taillis,
ni par les prés en fleurs, ni par la gorge nue
d’ Amaryllis.
En présence de tant de nations qui pleurent
sous le ciel bleu,
des tyrans qui, blanchis par le prêtre, demeurent
noirs devant Dieu,
et de vous tous, vivants, en proie aux vils mensonges,
aux rois voleurs;

qui flottez dans un rêve, et n’ avez hors des songes
que les douleurs;
en présence des maux, des crimes et des fautes,
des longs combats,
des hontes, des orgueils, de tant de têtes hautes
et de coeurs bas;

France, tant qu’ il faudra qu’ une lueur éclaire
l’ affreux récif,
je resterai fidèle à la sombre colère,
au deuil pensif;
je dirai sans relâche et redirai sans trêve
la vérité;
je serai dans l’ écume obscure de la grève
une clarté;
je serai ce fantôme, un juge; et ma voix triste
sera l’ écho
de ce clairon farouche à qui rien ne résiste
dans Jéricho;
je ne quitterai point, grande France trahie,
mon tribunal!
Avant que je me taise, ô tragique Isaïe,
ô Juvénal,
ô Dante, ézéchiel à l’ oeil visionnaire,
fier d’ Aubigné,
on verra dans les cieux s’ arrêter le tonnerre,
époumoné.
2 décembre.

LA DESTINEE , XL LA NUIT PENDANT QUE LES PECHEURS SONT

EN MER .

Les visions se répandent
dans le firmament terni;
de hideux nuages pendent
au noir plafond infini;
l’ étoile y vient disparaître;
il semble qu’ une main traître,
guettant les astres vermeils,
au fond de l’ ombre indignée,
tend ses toiles d’ araignée
pour ces mouches, les soleils.
L’ arbre se tord sur la côte;
le flot s’ acharne au récif;
une clameur triste et haute
avertit l’ homme pensif;
l’ écume roule, avalanche;
la lame féroce et blanche
luit comme l’ yatagan;
la terre sanglote et souffre,
livrée aux baisers du gouffre,
au viol de l’ ouragan.
La mer n’ est plus qu’ épouvante;
le ciel s’ effare; on dirait
que la nature vivante
devient songe et disparaît;
tout prend l’ aspect et la forme
d’ une horrible ébauche énorme
ou d’ un grand rêve détruit;
les ténèbres en décombres

emplissent de leurs blocs sombres
l’ antre immense de la nuit.
Ah! N’ est-ce pas, Dieu sublime,
Dieu qui fis l’ arche et le pont,

que tout naufrage est un crime
et que quelqu’ un en répond?
S’ il manque une seule tête,
tu puniras la tempête;
tu sais, toi qui nous défends
et qui fouilles les repaires,
le compte de tous les pères,
le nom de tous les enfants!

1854, 11, 04

LA DESTINEE , XLI DUO .

quoique je fusse assis au bord d’ un cimetière,
seul dans ce champ que l’ aube et l’ ombre ont pour frontière,
et perdu dans un tas de noirs cyprès et d’ ifs
et de ronces, tordant leurs sarments maladifs,
le rire était si franc que je levai la tête.
C’ étaient deux jeunes gens qui venaient de la fête
et qui s’ en retournaient à la ville en jasant,
couple penchant déjà, mais encore innocent.
Ces enfants rayonnaient sous ces branchages sombres,
lui charmant, elle pure; on eût dit dans ces ombres
le mois d’ avril donnant le bras au point du jour;
et moi l’ exil, pensif, je saluai l’ amour.
Allez, amants! Chantez, vie, extase, espérance!
Ainsi marchait un soir dans un bois, à Florence,
le jeune Dante auprès de Béatrice enfant;
Dante la contemplait, ivre, heureux, triomphant;
tout à coup elle dit : si je mourais, mon Dante?
Et, tressaillant, il vit l’ enfer, la voûte ardente,
la nuit, les pleurs, le deuil, les sept cercles ouverts;
et, dès le lendemain, il fit le premier vers
du poëme qu’ emplit la douleur insondée;
car jamais le songeur ne refuse l’ idée;
le crâne du poëte est un dôme effrayant
où de sombres oiseaux volent en tournoyant,
et qui dit au grand aigle : ô farouche figure,
entre! Mon diamètre admet ton envergure.
4 novembre 1854.

1874, 01, 16

LA DESTINEE , XLII PENSEES DE NUIT .

l’ ombre ici-bas la moins transparente, c’ est l’ âme.
L’ homme est l’ énigme étrange et triste de la femme,
et la femme est le sphinx de l’ homme. Sombre loi!
Personne ne connaît mon gouffre, excepté moi.
Et moi-même, ai-je été jusqu’ au fond? Mon abîme
est sinistre, surtout par le côté sublime;
et l’ hydre est là, tenant mon âme, et la mordant.
Toutes nos passions sont des bêtes rôdant
dans la lividité des blêmes crépuscules.
L’ homme le plus semblable aux antiques Hercules,
égal par sa stature aux noirs évènements,
qui dompte la fortune en ses poings incléments,
et fait au sort jaloux l’ effet d’ un belluaire,
cet homme, s’ il rencontre une femme, veut plaire,
tombe à genoux, adore et tremble, et ce vainqueur
du destin est toujours le vaincu de son coeur.
Tout nous ment! L’ âtre est noir, la patrie est ingrate.
Prêtre, pense à Jésus; juge, pense à Socrate.
L’ homme rend la justice ainsi qu’ il joue aux dés.
Quand, tour à tour, et l’ un après l’ autre, accoudés
au même livre, on a tourné les mêmes pages,
on meurt. Qu’ est-ce que c’ est que vos aréopages,
conciles et sénats, conclaves et divans?
Le poëte apparaît au milieu des vivants,
et, lapidé, s’ en va de la terre fatale,
laissant derrière lui, comme une trace pâle,
l’ éternelle beauté du vers mystérieux.
L’ homme qui l’ insulta le met au rang des dieux.
Et puis? Un autre esprit vient. L’ homme recommence.

Tout est aveuglement quand tout n’ est pas démence;
le ciel splendide est plein de la noirceur du sort;
on entre dans la vie en criant; on en sort

ruisselant, nu, glacé, comme d’ une tourmente.
Hélas! L’ enfant sanglote et l’ homme se lamente;
ignorer, c’ est pleurer, et savoir, c’ est gémir.
Je pense à tout cela quand je ne puis dormir,
la nuit, quand le vent semble une voix qui témoigne,
quand on entend le pas de quelqu’ un qui s’ éloigne.
16 janvier 1874.

LA DESTINEE , XLIII

Quand Eschyle au vautour dispute Prométhée,
quand Juvénal défend Rome aux tigres jetée,
quand Dante ouvre l’ enfer aux tyrans qu’ il poursuit,
ces hommes sont pareils à l’ antique euménide;
leur face, qu’ illumine une lueur livide,
semble un masque d’ airain qui parle dans la nuit.
On frémit, tant ils sont terribles! Leurs pensées,
sur leurs crânes profonds sifflantes et dressées,
mordant le crime heureux et les monstres rampants,
font aux poëtes saints d’ effrayants diadèmes,
et semblent sur ces fronts sévères et suprêmes
des chevelures de serpents.
Serpents mystérieux des Minerves antiques,
ô dragons presque dieux, gorgones prophétiques,
mêlant des cris humains à votre sifflement,
votre anathème était une leçon sublime;
vous étiez à la fois, pour le peuple et le crime,
la sagesse sereine et le noir châtiment.
Jersey, zzz 1 er novembre.

1849, 01, 05

LA DESTINEE , XLIV

ô misérable amas de vanités humaines,
rêves! Au premier vent qui souffle dans les plaines,
comme tout se disperse et tout s’ évanouit!
Puissance, amour, douleur qui brûle dans la nuit,
orgueils et voluptés, colères enflammées,
comme cela se mêle à toutes les fumées!
à quoi bon tant d’ ardeur et tant d’ emportement
pour arriver si vite à tant d’ abattement!
Hommes! Pourquoi ce bruit, et pourquoi faire attendre
des colosses au monde? On croit, à vous entendre
rugir dans le brasier des sombres passions,
au milieu des fureurs et des ambitions,
autour de ce que l’ âme embrasse, craint, désire,
que vous êtes de bronze, et vous êtes de cire!
5 janvier 1849.

1854, 08, 04

LA DESTINEE , XLV

le sommet est désert, noir, lugubre, inclément,
bordé de toutes parts d’ un sombre escarpement;
l’ horizon à l’ entour n’ est qu’ une solitude;
l’ hiver est éternel sur ce faîte âpre et rude,
et j’ y trouve, ô Seigneur, des traces de pieds nus
qui prouvent qu’ avant moi d’ autres y sont venus.
On y voit des carcans et des fers, comme au bagne.
J’ étais en bas, les yeux fixés sur la montagne.
Deux êtres ont passé pendant que j’ étais là;
et leurs regards brillaient, si bien qu’ il me sembla
que ces deux inconnus, rayonnant sous leurs voiles,
pour en faire leurs yeux avaient pris des étoiles.
L’ un avait l’ air candide et l’ autre l’ air altier.
Ils marchaient tous les deux dans le même sentier;
et l’ un murmurait : crois, et l’ autre disait : pense.
Et sur le front de l’ un on lisait : conscience,
et sur le front de l’ autre on lisait : vérité.
Moi, je les regardais, ému de leur beauté.
Alors ces deux passants sévères m’ ont fait signe
de me lever; c’ était l’ aigle à côté du cygne;
et je les ai suivis, et ce sont eux qui m’ ont
conduit et laissé seul sur le haut de ce mont.
4 août 1854.

LA DESTINEE , XLVI

Oui, la terre fatale, oui, le ciel nécessaire,
tout laisse en moi sa trace, et rien pour ma misère
n’ est hautain ni moqueur;
et quoique je ne sois qu’ un vivant fait de cendre,
quand le rayon me voit, il consent à descendre,
et se mêle à mon coeur.
J’ ai la confiance âpre et triste des apôtres,
et c’ est pourquoi je suis cet homme dont les autres
parlent confusément,
plein d’ erreurs comme Adam, plein de fautes comme ève,
que l’ enfer tire en bas, mais qu’ un éternel rêve
enchaîne au firmament.
L’ impure forme humaine, ébauchée, incomplète,
la chair, n’ empêche pas que le ciel se reflète
dans l’ abîme où je suis;
près de ce vil crapaud qui bave et qui se traîne,
la constellation vient resplendir sereine
dans le fond de mon puits.
Par instants l’ affreux monstre, en l’ ombre qui le voile,
passe et fait en passant tressaillir une étoile
dans mon cloaque noir;
puis elle reparaît. Dieu que notre espoir nomme,
sois béni de changer l’ eau bourbeuse de l’ homme
en céleste miroir!
Oui, tes vents m’ ont parlé, toutes tes solitudes
m’ ont jeté leurs rumeurs et leurs inquiétudes,
azur, nuit, vision!
à tes souffles de brume ou de clarté je vibre,

ciel, comme si j’ étais traversé par la fibre
de la création!
Comme si tous les fils invisibles de l’ être
se croisaient dans mon sein que l’ univers pénètre!

Comme si, par moment,
en moi, du front aux pieds, me mêlant au problème,
le sombre axe infini qui passe par Dieu même
tremblait confusément!
De sorte que je suis l’ aimant de la nature,
que la création m’ emplit, moi créature,
que Dieu coule en mon sang!
De sorte, ô ciel profond, que le zénith farouche
se verse dans mon crâne, et que le nadir touche
mon talon frémissant!
Mon âme dans sa nuit redit ta gamme immense;
je frissonne à tes bruits d’ orage ou de clémence,
vivant psaltérion;
sur ma lyre, qu’ émeut l’ esprit des Zoroastres,
les sept notes jadis tombèrent des sept astres
du bleu septentrion.

1854, 09, 18

LA DESTINEE , XLVII LETTRE .

est-ce que, ce mois-ci, des miens et des meilleurs,
quelqu’ un est mort, pendant que je regarde ailleurs?
Est-ce que par hasard, sur la colline verte,
quelque tombe de mère ou d’ enfant s’ est ouverte?
Ami, pourquoi me plaindre aujourd’ hui plus qu’ hier?
Ai-je, sans le savoir, perdu quelqu’ un de cher?
Jadis j’ eus des douleurs et je les ai pleurées;
les larmes du tombeau sont des larmes sacrées;
sur de profonds cercueils pleins de ciel étoilé,
tous les pleurs que j’ avais dans les yeux ont coulé.
Ce fut sombre. Aujourd’ hui, qu’ est-ce donc qui m’ arrive
que ta pitié s’ accroît? Je suis sur cette rive;
après? Et d’ où te vient ce langage abattu?
Tu m’ écris : “ ô banni, comment les portes-tu,
ces heures de l’ exil qui doivent être lourdes?”
tout est bien. Je n’ ai rien à dire aux âmes sourdes.
D’ ailleurs porté-je donc un si pesant fardeau?
Le vent souffle sur l’ homme et sur la goutte d’ eau.
Laissons souffler le vent. Qu’ importe ce que souffre
mon atome, au hasard emporté dans le gouffre?
D’ autres ont plus souffert qui valaient mieux que moi.
Tout est bien. Vivre errant, rejeté, hors la loi,
l’ ombre, l’ isolement, l’ ennui qu’ on exagère,
cette glace qu’ on sent à la terre étrangère,

tout cela ne vaut pas qu’ on fronce le sourcil.
Crois-tu pas que je vais pleurnicher mon exil?
Tu me dis : “ vous voilà dans la froide Angleterre.”
et moi je dis : — salut au vieux rivage austère!
à Londre où, quand Milton parle, Cromwell répond! —
tu reprends : “ — comment sont ces étrangers? “ ils sont
les étrangers. Ils ont leurs soucis, leurs colères,
leurs intérêts, leurs moeurs; ce sont des exemplaires

du vieil homme Adam, l’ un sur l’ autre copiés.
Dieu mit sur tous les fronts l’ azur, mais sous ses pieds
l’ homme a fait de la terre une chose diverse.
La fraternité meurt au fleuve qu’ on traverse;
on passe un bras de mer, on enjambe un chemin,
on saute un mur, on est sorti du genre humain;
on devient l’ étranger. Nous le sommes. La foule
autour de nous va, vient, fait ses affaires, coule.
L’ idée est peu comprise à son avènement;
elle monte un calvaire et marche lentement;
je ne vois pas pourquoi ces hommes seraient autres
que ceux qu’ a vus Socrate et qu’ ont vus les apôtres.
ô mes amis, proscrits qui m’ entourez, restons
comme les Thraséas et comme les Catons,
sereins, et sachons prendre en patience l’ homme.
Ceux-ci d’ ailleurs n’ ont rien que de tout simple, en somme.
Nous sommes les passants, ils sont les habitants.
D’ Aristide jusqu’ à nos jours, dans tous les temps,
le proscrit pour la foule est une énigme obscure.
On ne nous crache pas encore à la figure;
donc ne nous plaignons point. Tu me dis :—” dans ces lieux
où nous te cherchons, toi, le songeur oublieux,

que fais-tu? “ — je vois Dieu. Je suis l’ homme des grèves;
la nuit je fais des vers, le jour je fais des rêves.
Je lis les vieux lutteurs, Dante, Agrippa, Montluc.
Souvent, quand minuit sonne au clocher de Saint-Luc,
je médite, menant dans les zones bénies
de soleils en soleils cent lignes infinies,
reliant dans l’ azur les constellations,
architectures d’ ombre et d’ yeux et de rayons,
frontons prodigieux des célestes Solimes.
Mon esprit, combinant ces triangles sublimes,
fait, comme Orphée à Delphe et Jacob dans Endor,
une géométrie avec les astres d’ or.
Ainsi s’ en vont mes jours. Assis au bord des ondes,

je contemple la mer dont les houles profondes
ne s’ arrêtent jamais, tumultueux troupeaux
bondissant jour et nuit sans halte et sans repos;
et nous nous regardons, moi rêveur, elle énorme;
elle attend que je pleure et j’ attends qu’ elle dorme.
Jersey, 18 septembre 1854.

LA DESTINEE , XLVIII PROMENADES DANS LES ROCHERS ,

PREMIERE PROMENADE .

Un tourbillon d’ écume, au centre de la baie
formé par de secrets et profonds entonnoirs,
se berce mollement sur l’ onde qu’ il égaie,
vasque immense d’ albâtre au milieu des flots noirs.
Seigneur! Que faites-vous de cette urne de neige?
Qu’ y versez-vous dès l’ aube et qu’ en sort-il la nuit?
La mer lui jette en vain sa vague qui l’ assiège,
le nuage sa brume et l’ ouragan son bruit.
L’ orage avec son bruit, le flot avec sa fange,
passent; le tourbillon, vénéré du pêcheur,
reparaît, conservant, dans l’ abîme où tout change,
toujours la même place et la même blancheur.
Le pêcheur dit : — c’ est là, qu’ en une onde bénie,
les petits enfants morts, chaque nuit de Noël,
viennent blanchir leur aile au souffle humain ternie,
avant de s’ envoler pour être anges au ciel. —
moi je dis : — Dieu mit là cette coupe si pure,
blanche en dépit des flots et des rochers penchants,
pour être, dans le sein de la grande nature,
la figure du juste au milieu des méchants.
6 août. Passage.

LA DESTINEE , XLVIII PROMENADES DANS LES ROCHERS ,

DEUXIEME PROMENADE .

La mer donne l’ écume et la terre le sable.
L’ or se mêle à l’ argent dans les plis du flot vert.
J’ entends le bruit que fait l’ éther infranchissable,
bruit immense et lointain, de silence couvert.
Un enfant chante auprès de la mer qui murmure.
Rien n’ est grand, ni petit. Vous avez mis, mon Dieu,
sur la création et sur la créature
les mêmes astres d’ or et le même ciel bleu.
Notre sort est chétif; nos visions sont belles.
L’ esprit saisit le corps et l’ enlève au grand jour.
L’ homme est un point qui vole avec deux grandes ailes,
dont l’ une est la pensée et dont l’ autre est l’ amour.
Sérénité de tout! Majesté! Force et grâce!
La voile rentre au port et les oiseaux aux nids.
Tout va se reposer, et j’ entends dans l’ espace
palpiter vaguement des baisers infinis.
Le vent courbe les joncs sur le rocher superbe,
et de l’ enfant qui chante il emporte la voix.
ô vent! Que vous courbez à la fois de brins d’ herbe!
Et que vous emportez de chansons à la fois!
Qu’ importe! Ici tout berce, et rassure, et caresse.
Plus d’ ombre dans le coeur! Plus de soucis amers!
Une ineffable paix monte et descend sans cesse
du bleu profond de l’ âme au bleu profond des mers.
7 août.

LA DESTINEE , XLVIII PROMENADES DANS LES ROCHERS ,

TROISIEME PROMENADE .

Le soleil déclinait; le soir prompt à le suivre
brunissait l’ horizon; sur la pierre d’ un champ
un vieillard, qui n’ a plus que peu de temps à vivre,
s’ était assis pensif, tourné vers le couchant.
C’ était un vieux pasteur, berger dans la montagne,
qui jadis, jeune et pauvre, heureux, libre et sans lois,
à l’ heure où le mont fuit sous l’ ombre qui le gagne,
faisait gaîment chanter sa flûte dans les bois.
Maintenant riche et vieux, l’ âme du passé pleine,
d’ une grande famille aïeul laborieux,
tandis que ses troupeaux revenaient de la plaine,
détaché de la trre, il contemplait les cieux.
Le jour qui va finir vaut le jour qui commence.
Le vieux pasteur rêvait sous cet azur si beau.
L’ océan devant lui se prolongeait, immense
comme l’ espoir du juste aux portes du tombeau.
ô moment solennel! Les monts, la mer farouche,
les vents, faisaient silence et cessaient leur clameur.
Le vieillard regardait le soleil qui se couche;
le soleil regardait le vieillard qui se meurt.
Passage, 5 août. 7 heures du soir.

1843, 08, 07

LA DESTINEE , XLVIII PROMENADES DANS LES ROCHERS ,

QUATRIEME PROMENADE .

Dieu! Que les monts sont beaux avec ces taches d’ ombre!
Que la mer a de grâce et le ciel de clarté!
De mes jours passagers que m’ importe le nombre!
Je touche l’ infini, je vois l’ éternité.
Orages! Passions! Taisez-vous dans mon âme!
Jamais si près de Dieu mon coeur n’ a pénétré.
Le couchant me regarde avec ses yeux de flamme,
la vaste mer me parle, et je me sens sacré.
Béni soit qui me hait et béni soit qui m’ aime!
à l’ amour, à l’ esprit donnons tous nos instants.
Fou qui poursuit la gloire ou qui creuse un problème!
Moi, je ne veux qu’ aimer, car j’ ai si peu de temps!
L’ étoile sort des flots où le soleil se noie;
le nid chante; la vague à mes pieds retentit;
dans toute sa splendeur le soleil se déploie.
Mon Dieu, que l’ âme est grande et que l’ homme est petit!
Tous les objets créés, feu qui luit, mer qui tremble,
ne savent qu’ à demi le grand nom du Très-Haut.
Ils jettent vaguement des sons que seul j’ assemble;
chacun dit sa syllabe, et moi je dis le mot.
Ma voix s’ élève aux cieux, comme la tienne, abîme!
Mer, je rêve avec toi! Monts, je prie avec vous!
La nature est l’ encens, pur, éternel, sublime;
moi je suis l’ encensoir intelligent et doux.
Passage, 7 août 1843.

1859, 10, 27

LA DESTINEE , XLIX RENCONTRE D’ UNE PETITE

FAGOTIERE .

enfant au teint brun, aux dents blanches,
ton petit bras derrière toi
tire un tremblant faisceau de branches.
ô doux être d’ ombre et d’ effroi,
dans la clairière aux vertes routes,
tu passes; nous nous regardons,
moi, plein de songes et de doutes,
toi, les pieds nus dans les chardons.
à nous deux, seuls dans la rosée,
nous ferions sourire un cagot;
car, moi, je porte la pensée,
et toi, tu traînes le fagot.
27 octobre 1859.

1859, 10, 25

LA DESTINEE , L A J . DE S . - LABOUREUR A YVETOT

MI - CAREME DE 1 8 I

roi d’ Yvetot, mon camarade,
je te dis : — salut! Il fait beau! —
comme Racan à Benserade,
et comme Arioste à Bembo.
En famille chez toi l’ on soupe;
ta médiocrité te plaît;
la gaîté sainte est la soucoupe
de la tasse où tu bois ton lait.
On nous prêche ici la tristesse.
Sanchez dresse procès-verbal
de ce que la folle Lutèce
va, fort décolletée, au bal.
Il nous pleut des sermons sans nombre,
très funèbres, point variés;
mais vous êtes là-bas dans l’ ombre
quelques sages qui souriez.
L’ intolérance aux rois s’ appuie,
nous frappant de leur droit divin,
pendant qu’ avril déjà ressuie
les églantiers dans ton ravin.
Un quadrille est presque une émeute.
L’ essaim des cloîtres nous poursuit;

nos bals sont mordus par la meute
de tous ces dogues de la nuit.

LA DESTINEE , L A J . DE S . - LABOUREUR A YVETOT

MI - CAREME DE 1 8, II

Est-ce que les brumes augmentent?
L’ homme est de raison indigent
s’ il se livre à ces clercs qui chantent
au Dieu juste un hymne outrageant.
Il faut être de bonne pâte
pour se figurer que les rois
sont sacrés, et que Dieu se hâte
au moindre appel de leurs beffrois;
et qu’ il dit, laissant ses affaires,
les cieux, l’ abîme à diriger,
l’ ombre et la conduite des sphères :
— diantre! Tibère est en danger!
être l’ homme, et suivre la buse!
Croire, après un sermon peu neuf,
que Dieu n’ est qu’ un porte-arquebuse
debout derrière Charles neuf!
Il faut être inepte, ô Voltaire,
pour dire : c’ est vrai, l’ élément
et l’ astre aperçoivent sur terre
Louis quinze distinctement.
Il faut être naïf pour croire
que Dieu se plaît à châtier,
et qu’ Iblis, la grande âme noire,
aidé par un arbre fruitier,
invente la place de Grève,
les pédants, le code civil,

parce qu’ Adam mord après ève
dans une pomme de calvil.
Quand on peut croire aux lys, aux roses,

à l’ aurore, il est enfantin
de croire à cent romans moroses
mal traduits du grec en latin.
Il faut être un âne à la lettre
pour rêver Diderot puni,
pour damner Kant, et pour admettre
que Dieu, l’ aïeul de l’ infini,
ne s’ occupe, en sa gloire énorme,
sans cesse, hier comme demain,
qu’ à faire le procès en forme
à tout ce pauvre genre humain;
et que sa clémence est à l’ aise
dans le hurlement des maudits,
et dans le cri d’ une fournaise
couvrant le chant du paradis.

LA DESTINEE , L A J . DE S . - LABOUREUR A YVETOT

MI - CAREME DE 1 8, III

Depuis six mille ans on invente,
on suppose, on effraie, on ment,
malgré la lumière vivante
du vénérable firmament.
Le faux ciel que sur nous on penche
est de chimères pluvieux;
le mensonge a la barbe blanche;
l’ homme est enfant, le conte est vieux.
La loi devient l’ hiéroglyphe;
toujours l’ ombre au jour succéda;

Moïse, hélas, produit Caïphe,
Christ engendre Torquemada.
Quel néant l’ homme a sur sa table!
Rien fait mettre un monde à genoux.
Le temple est un lieu redoutable
où le sage enfante des fous.
Les religions sont des gouffres;
à leur surface on voit un mont,
l’ erreur, puis de grands lacs de soufres,
puis de l’ ombre, et Dieu triste au fond.
Non, non, ce n’ est pas pour le jeûne,
le cilice et les bras en croix,
que Jacque est beau, qu’ Agnès est jeune,
que l’ alouette chante aux bois!
Le diable et son soufflet de forge
s’ évanouissent aussitôt
que j’ écoute le rouge-gorge
dans ton petit champ d’ Yvetot.
Le baïram et le carême

ont le même idéal tous deux :
la femme maigre, l’ homme blême,
le ciel terrible, Dieu hideux.
Je désire autrement conclure.
Tous ces korans, en vérité,
ne laissent rien, qu’ une fêlure
au cerveau de l’ humanité.
Devant ces dogmes qu’ on redoute,
ciel difficile, enfer promis,
je prends le grand parti du doute,
et de remplir mon verre, amis.

LA DESTINEE , L A J . DE S . - LABOUREUR A YVETOT

MI - CAREME DE 1 8, IV

Le carnaval n’ est point un crime.
Jamais mon esprit ne croira
qu’ on tombe à l’ éternel abîme
par les trappes de l’ Opéra.
Que Dieu se fâche de la joie,
c’ est peu probable; et je suis sûr,
quand sur nos fronts l’ amour flamboie,
que quelqu’ un sourit dans l’ azur.
Quand Lise, au plaisir décidée,
drape son burnous nubien,
et court au bal, j’ ai dans l’ idée,
que l’ infini le prend très bien.
Je crois peu, dans ma petite ombre,
qu’ être gais, ce soit être ingrats,
et que le Dies irae sombre
ait pour masque le mardi gras.
Je doute que, cachant son glaive,
Michel, l’ effrayant chérubin,
pour voir où Musard entraîne ève,
loue un costume chez Babin.

LA DESTINEE , L A J . DE S . - LABOUREUR A YVETOT

MI - CAREME DE 1 8, V

Ces erreurs, nuage durable,
obscurcissent la terre, et font
que l’ âme humaine est misérable
en présence du ciel profond.

Ces védas, ces métempsychoses,
abrutissent l’ homme transi;
donc les champs sont de belles choses,
et la danse aux flambeaux aussi!
Quand mon archevêque me damne
pour une tranche de jambon,
et me maudit, j’ aime mieux Jeanne,
meilleure preuve d’ un Dieu bon.
J’ aime mieux rêver sous les saules
que de lire les mandements
de monsieur le primat des Gaules
contre les poulardes du Mans.
Je trouve charmantes les belles;
et je préfère la gaîté
des Margots et des Isabelles,
à Santeuil hurlant : Stupete!
Je répugne aux vieux dogmes tristes;
je veux, en deux efforts égaux,
tirer l’ art des mains des puristes
et Dieu des griffes des cagots.
Je hais les césars et les Romes;
ma sagesse, en ces temps railleurs,

c’ est beaucoup d’ amour pour les hommes,
beaucoup de pitié pour les fleurs.
Je donnerais dix rois de France
et vingt sultans de Dahomey
pour ôter au pauvre une transe,
une nuée au mois de mai.

LA DESTINEE , L A J . DE S . - LABOUREUR A YVETOT

MI - CAREME DE 1 8, VI

Tout homme est pris, dans son bas âge,
par le mensonge triomphant;
les ténèbres, cet esclavage,
m’ ont mis au bagne, tout enfant.
Ceux pour qui l’ ignorance est l’ ordre
ont, sur ma pensée où Dieu luit,
pris soin de nouer et de tordre
l’ énorme chaîne de la nuit.
Chaque chaînon de cette chaîne
est fait d’ autorité, de deuil,
d’ énigme, et de la vieille haine
forgée avec l’ antique orgueil.
La peur, tous les textes terribles,
tout l’ anathème, tout l’ enfer,
tous les korans, toutes les bibles,
mêlés, en composent le fer.
Cette chaîne, où rampe une flamme,
sur l’ enfant comme sur l’ agneau
pèse, et nous étreint; mais mon âme
rit, et passe à travers l’ anneau.
25 octobre 1859.

1859, 06, 16

LA DESTINEE , LI LE PARISIEN DU FAUBOURG .

il fait la noce éternelle.
La table est dans la tonnelle;
mort ivre, il tombe dessous;
et, c’ est là sa réussite,
il va, quand il ressuscite,
au paradis pour six sous.
Rire et boire, et c’ est la vie!
On régale; on se convie
sur le vieux comptoir de plomb;
toujours fête; et le dimanche
tient le lundi par la manche;
le dimanche a le bras long.
Le broc luit sous les charmilles.
— nous tendrons un verre aux filles
et nous les embrasserons;
être heureux, c’ est très facile.
La Grèce avait le Poecile,
la France a les Porcherons.
Las, on se couche aux carrières... —
oh! Ce peuple des barrières!
Oh! Ce peuple des faubourgs!
Fou de gaîtés puériles,
donnant quelques fleurs stériles
pour tant de profonds labours!
Il dort, il chante, il s’ irrite.
Rome dit : quel sybarite!
Sybaris dit : quel romain!
à toute minute il change;

et ce serait un archange
si ce n’ était un gamin.

L’ athénien est son père.
Par moments on désespère;
il quitte et reprend son bât.
Devinez cette charade :
il achève en mascarade
ce qu’ il commence en combat.
Il n’ a plus rien dans les veines;
il emploie aux danses vaines
ces grands mois, juillet, août;
quel bâtard, ou quel maroufle!
— mais un vent inconnu souffle;
il se lève tout à coup,
tout ruisselant d’ espérance,
disant : je m’ appelle France!
Splendide, ivre de péril,
beau, joyeux, l’ âme éveillée,
comme une abeille mouillée
de rosée au mois d’ avril!
Il se lève formidable,
abordant l’ inabordable,
prenant dans ses poings le feu,
sonnant l’ heure solennelle,
ayant l’ homme sous son aile
et dans sa prunelle Dieu!
Fier, il mord dans le fer rouge.
Il change en éden le bouge,
enfante chefs et soldats,
et, se dressant dans sa gloire,
finit sa chanson à boire
par ce cri : Léonidas!

Qu’ un autre lui jette un blâme.
Il est le peuple et la femme;
c’ est l’ enfant insoucieux
qui soudain s’ allume et brille;
il descend de la Courtille,

mais il monte dans les cieux.
Guernesey, 16 juin 1859.

LA DESTINEE , LII

ô rois, de qui je vois les royaumes, là-bas,
au fond d’ un gouffre plein de foudre et de combats,
je ne sais pas combien de temps Dieu vous accorde;
mais je sais qu’ il me donne en sa miséricorde
un petit coin de terre où la rose fleurit.
La vaste mer connaît mon île et lui sourit,
et murmure à mes pieds son doux épithalame,
et je ne connais rien de plus calmant pour l’ âme
que cette solitude immense, où j’ ai des fleurs.
Les frais zéphyrs de mai, mystérieux souffleurs,
me chuchotent des vers de Virgile à l’ oreille;
le printemps n’ admet pas ce qui le dépareille,
il chasse grêle et neige, et sur l’ hiver descend
avec le gai courroux d’ un enfant tout-puissant;
l’ aurore et la jeunesse entrent en équilibre;
partout éclate et rit la grande leçon libre
d’ amour, que chacun donne et que chacun reçoit;
nul n’ échappe à la loi divine, quel qu’ il soit;
la jeune fille montre au jeune homme la mousse;
le petit oiseau voit comment la feuille pousse
autour de l’ humble nid, par le chêne adopté;
le papillon enseigne au lys la volupté;
je contemple ce tas d’ écoles buissonnières;
et je hais l’ affreux vent qui gonfle vos bannières!

LA DESTINEE , LIII

J’ ai coudoyé les rois, les grands, le fou, le sage,
Judas, César, Davus,
Job, Thersite, et je suis effaré du passage
des hommes que j’ ai vus.
J’ ai subi l’ insulteur qui lapide la tombe
et qui raille l’ exil;
car sur nous le tonnerre auguste souvent tombe
avec le crachat vil.
J’ ai cherché le malheur comme un chasseur le tigre.
Mon fruit nourrit un ver.
Je suis une hirondelle étrange, car j’ émigre
du côté de l’ hiver.
Je ne serai jamais qu’ un vaincu; j’ ai pour règle
d’ être avec les blessés;
quand ils sont trop vainqueurs, je dis au peuple, à l’ aigle,
à Dieu lui-même : assez!
Je pense que j’ ai fait des choses nécessaires;
je n’ ai pas de regrets;
l’ homme juste est content d’ employer ses misères
à bâtir le progrès.
Pourtant vous ne pouvez empêcher que je songe,
las du sort par moments,
et de l’ ombre que laisse aux âmes le mensonge
de tant d’ évènements.
Le destin m’ a jeté de tempête en tempête,
de récif en récif;

jamais mon coeur saignant n’ a fait courber ma tête;
mon courroux est pensif.
J’ ai traversé les pleurs, les haines, les veuvages,
ce qui mord, ce qui nuit;
noir rocher, j’ ai connu tous les âpres visages
du deuil et de la nuit.

J’ ai lutté; j’ ai subi la sinistre merveille
des abîmes mouvants;
et jamais on ne vit dispersion pareille
d’ une âme à tous les vents.
Je suis presque prophète et je suis presque apôtre;
je dis : c’ est bien! Allons!
Mais je ne voudrais pas de mon sort pour un autre,
ô fauves aquilons!

1875, 07, 06

LA DESTINEE , LIV UNE ROUGEUR AU ZENITH .

quoi! Ce n’ est pas réel parce que c’ est lointain!
Ne croyez pas cela, vous qu’ un hasard hautain,
une chance, une erreur, l’ invention des prêtres,
un mensonge quelconque, a faits rois, princes, maîtres;
papes, sultans, césars, czars, qui que vous soyez,
qui tenez les vivants sous le sceptre ployés,
et qui mettez Berlin, Stamboul, Pétersbourg, Rome,
les ténèbres, le dogme et le sabre, sur l’ homme,
vous qui vous croyez grands et nous croyez petits,
regardez la lueur, et soyez avertis
que nous ne serons pas toujours le troupeau triste,
rois, et que l’ avenir, ce flamboiement, existe.
On vous rassure. On dit : utopie! Eh bien non;
ayez peur. Vous avez ici bas le canon,
le trône, l’ échafaud, l’ obus, le knout, le glaive;
mais nous avons là-haut cette clarté, le rêve;
nous avons ce rayon, l’ idéal; nous avons
ce qu’ avaient autrefois les pâles esclavons,
les juifs, les huguenots et les noirs, l’ espérance;
nous avons l’ infini, sublime transparence;
nous avons la traînée effrayante de feu
qui vient vers l’ homme avec un message de Dieu,
et qui fait frissonner l’ ombre, blêmir la roche,
fuir l’ orfraie et hurler les loups, à son approche.
Oui, le grand éden libre avec ses songes fous,
qui, l’ énorme avenir de lumière pour tous
qui vous rougit le ciel, rois, et qui nous le dore,
qui vous semble fournaise et qui nous semble aurore,
nous l’ aurons. Nous l’ avons! Car c’ est déjà l’ avoir,
c’ est déjà le tenir presque, que de le voir.
Et nous l’ apercevons, le superbe prodige!
Vous le voyez aussi. Levez les yeux, vous dis-je!

Ne vous figurez pas que pour être indistinct
cela ne soit pas vrai. Quoi! Mais c’ est presque éteint!
Non. C’ est mêlé de nuit! Il le faut. Sans pilote!
Qu’ en savez-vous? Quoi donc! Cette rougeur qui flotte,
c’ est quelque chose? ô rois, c’ est tout. Dans les palais,
les maîtres à voix basse en parlent aux valets,
et les valets ont peur, mais font semblant de rire.
Ah! Vous pouvez frapper, supplicier, proscrire;
cela n’ en vient pas moins. Cela marche. C’ est loin,
mais sûr. Rois, ce sera l’ acteur, c’ est le témoin;
c’ est le juge déjà. C’ est l’ idéal, ô princes!
C’ est le réel. Régnez, soit. Prenez des provinces,
volez-vous entre vous des peuples, triomphez;
respirez notre espace à nous les étouffés;
mangez, buvez, chez nous les affamés; souffrance,
c’ est patience; ô sombre et douce délivrance,
tu viens! ô rois, régnez, cela nous est égal;
ayez la Sibérie, ayez le Sénégal;
jetez-nous au vil bagne, aux noirs exils, qu’ importe!
Pendant que des clairons chantent à votre porte
et que des sabres nus gardent votre festin,
au zénith, une flamme informe, le destin,
le progrès, la confuse ébauche de la vie,
la lampe des penseurs d’ un jour pâle suivie,
sur laquelle jadis Torquemada soufflait,
brille et s’ avance, et jette on ne sait quel reflet,
prêtres, sur votre autel, princes, sur votre table.
La comète est ainsi vaguement formidable.
6 juillet 1875.

LA DESTINEE , LV HORREUR SACREE .

Souvent, dans le hallier où l’ églogue hypocrite
s’ en va chantant,
j’ ai tout à coup cessé de lire Théocrite
inquiétant;
Homère fait trembler; un gouffre est dans Eschyle;
parfois je veux
m’ enfuir quand Circé passe ou quand je vois Achille
pris aux cheveux;
les aigles sur les bords du Gange et du Caystre
sont effrayants;
rien de grand qui ne soit confusément sinistre;
les noirs paeans,
les psaumes, la chanson monstrueuse du mage
ézéchiel,
font devant notre oeil fixe errer la vague image
d’ un affreux ciel.
L’ empyrée est l’ abîme, on y plonge, on y reste
avec terreur.
Car planer, c’ est trembler; si l’ azur est céleste,
c’ est par l’ horreur.
L’ épouvante est au fond des choses les plus belles;
les bleus vallons
font parfois reculer d’ effroi les fauves ailes
des aquilons.
Ils sont pleins de regards et d’ aspects; et les sages,
seuls dans les bois,

méditent, attentifs dans l’ ombre à des passages
d’ yeux et de voix;
le poëte serein contient l’ obscur prophète;
Orphée est noir;
c’ est dans une lueur mystérieuse, faite
d’ aube et de soir,

c’ est en regardant fuir sous l’ insondable voûte
d’ affreux griffons,
qu’ Amos effaré songe et qu’ Isaïe écoute
les bruits profonds;
Alcée est sidéral, Lucrèce est redoutable,
Job voit l’ Esprit;
le Sphinx vient par moments s’ accouder sur la table
où Dante écrit;
Plaute par Thalia, formidable bouffonne,
s’ entend gronder;
et Pindare en levant les yeux voit Tisiphone
le regarder;
de là tant de beautés difformes dans leurs oeuvres;
le vers charmant
est par la torsion subite des couleuvres
pris brusquement;
à de certains moments toutes les jeunes flores
dans la forêt
ont peur, et sur le front des blanches métaphores
l’ ombre apparaît;
c’ est qu’ Horace ou Virgile ont vu soudain le spectre
noir se dresser;
c’ est que là-bas, derrière Amaryllis, électre
vient de passer.

La nature est en vain pleine de fleurs, de fêtes,
et de pardons,
les poëtes ont beau rayonner sur nos têtes,
nous entendons
parler de sombres voix à Delphe, aux Propylées,
et dans Endor;
et la nuit a toujours des méduses mêlées
aux astres d’ or.
7 décembre.

1870, 06, 01

LA DESTINEE , LVI , I

l’ âme humaine est sans cesse en tous les sens poussée.
Dans l’ étrange forêt qu’ on nomme la pensée,
tout existe. Sina n’ exclut pas Cythéron.
La douce flûte alterne avec le fier clairon;
le fifre railleur donne aux lyres la réplique;
ici Vesta cachée, et là Vénus publique;
le taillis chaste admet les faunes impudents;
et, quoiqu’ un mage austère et grave soit dedans,
l’ antre n’ empêche pas les nymphes d’ être nues.
La pensée est le lieu des routes inconnues,
du doute, où les chercheurs ont fait ce qu’ ils ont pu,
le vague itinéraire à chaque instant rompu.
Toujours plus loin! Voilà le seul avis que donne
au songeur cette sombre et fatale Dodone.
Tout est réalité, mais tout est vision.
Marchez.

LA DESTINEE , LVI , II

Et c’ est ainsi dans la création.
Rien qui ne soit passage, essai, brume, aventure,
songe, la vie ayant la mort pour nourriture.
Décor dont les châssis des deux côtés sont peints,
ici la face et là le masque. Les sapins,
les chênes, les torrents, l’ attitude effarée
des écueils à jamais battus par la marée,
tout parle. Rien ne ment. Pas un malentendu.

Pas une note fausse et pas un cri perdu.
Pas une voix disant une chose pour l’ autre.
Le vent sait ce qu’ il dit aussi bien que l’ apôtre;
l’ étoile dialogue avec l’ aube, et quand l’ air
s’ ouvre à la déchirure énorme de l’ éclair,
les orages profonds confusément murmurent
le verbe dont jadis les poëtes s’ émurent,
et d’ où sortit, écho du temple ténébreux,
avec le paean grec, l’ hosanna des hébreux.
Chaque saison apporte et remporte sa tente.
La fauve immensité n’ est pas toujours contente,
et l’ on entend en bas un grondement confus.
Mais qu’ importe. Parfois l’ ombre essaie un refus,
la nuit fait ses noirceurs, l’ hiver jette sa glace;
le mal, ce grand blasphème obscur, au bien s’ enlace;
tout cela, c’ est la vie. En toute chose on peut
de la nuit et du jour étudier le noeud;
le prodige divin roule dans ses tumultes
pêle-mêle, nos lois, nos croyances, nos cultes,
et pour faire avancer la justice, et prouver
le droit, et le progrès, cet éternel lever,
les désastres font presque autant que les victoires;
le mystère profond des voix contradictoires
éclate, et l’ enfer donne au paradis raison

d’ un bout à l’ autre bout du sinistre horizon.
Car le sarcasme affirme, et maudire, c’ est croire.
La huée est un bruit qui constate la gloire.

LA DESTINEE , LVI , III

Oui. Tout, c’ est l’ harmonie. Adorons et pensons.
Livrons notre âme ouverte aux cris comme aux chansons.
Le vent fuit. Regardons entrer dans l’ invisible
ce javelot lancé vers l’ éternelle cible;
l’ arbre pousse; observons cette croissance; ayons
l’ oeil attentif à l’ onde, aux souffles, aux rayons;

sondons de toutes parts à la fois le mystère.
Notre race, depuis qu’ elle est sur cette terre,
travaille, et ne sait rien que ce que l’ homme apprit
dans ces dispersions superbes de l’ esprit.
Oh! C’ est une raison de contempler sans cesse,
que ce ciel sans orgueil, ce gouffre sans bassesse,
cette guerre d’ où naît la paix, ces grands reflux
des éléments s’ offrant entre eux leurs superflus
et mêlant par les bords leurs océans farouches.
Oh! L’ unanimité sort de toutes les bouches!
Que c’ est beau, cet accord des contraires, disant
le même mot sublime, effrayant, innocent!
Sombre unité! La loi des choses est la nôtre.
Une saison ne sert qu’ à faire venir l’ autre;
Hier en reculant fait avancer Demain;
profonde identité. Sort! Nuit! L’ esprit humain
contient le même songe obscur que la nature;
il a sur l’ infini comme elle une ouverture,
mais l’ obstacle est dans l’ ombre, et nous y distinguons
une porte que nul n’ ébranle sur ses gonds,
c’ est l’ inconnu. L’ esprit de l’ homme, en qui tout vibre,
va heurter cette porte avec une aile libre;
nous la sentons, au fond de l’ abîme serein,
faite d’ on ne sait quel mystérieux airain;
quelqu’ un parle tout haut derrière cette porte;
de ce que cette voix dit, et des mots qu’ emporte

le vent semblable au rêve, et que nous saisissons,
naissent tous nos espoirs comme tous nos frissons.
Et ce sont ces mots-là qui viennent jusqu’ à l’ homme
à travers les songeurs de Judée et de Rome,

à travers Jérémie et Lucrèce, à travers
ce tumulte orageux de strophes et de vers
qui se mêle au ciel sombre et sort, fumée ardente,
de tous ces volcans, Job, Moïse, Eschyle, Dante.
Ces inspirés, en qui la nuit s’ unit au jour,
avaient ce grand courroux qui naît d’ un grand amour;
une fournaise était en leur coeur amassée.
Oui, les poëtes saints vont chercher la pensée
aux mêmes profondeurs que les volcans le feu;
Juvénal, noir, rongé par la muse, est un lieu
autant qu’ un homme, un mont de haine, et s’ accoutume
à la colère ainsi que Vésuve au bitume.
Le génie est un puits d’ éruptions; un cri
sort d’ un cratère, ou bien d’ un poëte attendri;
la lave chante et bout, l’ hymne s’ embrase et souffre;
l’ ardent prophète jette une clameur de gouffre,
et Dieu, que nul ne vit et que tout devina,
gronde dans Isaïe autant que dans l’ Etna.
Zzz 1 er juin 1870.

1870, 07, 21

LE JARDIN DE HAUTEVILLE HOUSE LE 1 4 JUILLET 1 8 7 0 , AUX PROSCRITS , I

semons ce qui demeure, ô passants que nous sommes!
Le sort est un abîme, et ses flots sont amers.
Au bord du noir destin, frères, semons des hommes,
et des chênes au bord des mers!
Nous sommes envoyés, bannis, sur ce calvaire,
pour être vus de loin, d’ en bas, par nos vainqueurs,
et pour faire germer par l’ exemple sévère
des coeurs semblables à nos coeurs.
Et nous avons aussi le devoir, ô nature,
d’ allumer des clartés sous ton fauve sourcil,
et de mettre à ces rocs la grande signature
de l’ avenir et de l’ exil.
Sachez que nous pouvons faire sortir de terre
le chêne triomphal que l’ univers attend,
et faire frissonner dans son feuillage austère
l’ idée au sourire éclatant.
La matière aime et veut que notre appel l’ émeuve;
le globe est sous l’ esprit, et le grand verbe humain

enseigne l’ être, et l’ onde, et la sève, et le fleuve,
qui lui demandent leur chemin.
L’ homme, quand il commande aux flots de le connaître,
aux mers de l’ écouter dans le bruit qu’ elles font,
à la terre d’ ouvrir son flanc, aux temps de naître,
est un mage immense et profond.
Ayons foi dans ce germe! Amis, il nous ressemble.
Il sera grand et fort, puisqu’ il est faible et nu.
Nous sommes ses pareils, bannis, nous en qui tremble
tout un vaste monde inconnu!
Nous fûmes secoués d’ un arbre formidable,
un soir d’ hiver, à l’ heure où le monde est puni,

nous fûmes secoués, frères, dans l’ insondable,
dans l’ ouragan, dans l’ infini.
Chacun de nous contient le chêne République;
chacun de nous contient le chêne Vérité;
l’ oreille qui, pieuse, à nos malheurs s’ applique,
t’ entend sourdre en nous, Liberté!
Tu nous jettes au vent, Dieu qui par nous commences!
C’ est bien. Nous disperser, ô Dieu, c’ est nous bénir!
Nous sommes la poignée obscure des semences
du sombre champ de l’ avenir.
Et nous y germerons, n’ en doutez pas, mes frères,
comme en ce sable, au bord des flots prompts à s’ enfler,
croîtra, parmi les flux et les reflux contraires,
ce gland, sur qui Dieu va souffler!

LE JARDIN DE HAUTEVILLE HOUSE LE 1 4 JUILLET 1 8 7 0 , AUX PROSCRITS , II

ô nature, il s’ agit de faire un arbre énorme,
mouvant comme aujourd’ hui, puissant comme demain,

figurant par sa feuille et sa taille et sa forme
la croissance du genre humain!
Il s’ agit de construire un chêne aux bras sans nombre,
un grand chêne qui puise avec son tronc noueux
de la nuit dans la terre et qui force cette ombre
à s’ épanouir dans les cieux!
Il s’ agit de bâtir cette oeuvre collective
d’ un chêne altier, auguste, et par tous conspiré,
l’ homme y mettant son souffle et l’ océan sa rive,
et l’ astre son rayon sacré!
Nature, que je sens saigner par nos fêlures,
dont l’ âme est le foyer où nous nous réchauffons,
et dont on voit la nuit les vagues chevelures
flotter dans les souffles profonds,
nous confions cet arbre à tes entrailles, mère!
Fais-le si grand, qu’ égal aux vieux cèdres d’ Hébron,
il ne distingue pas l’ aigle de l’ éphémère
et la foudre du moucheron;
et qu’ un jour le passant, quand luira l’ aube calme
de l’ affranchissement des peuples sous les cieux,
croie, en le voyant, voir la gigantesque palme
de cet effort prodigieux!
Nous te le confions, plage aux voix étouffées.
ô sinistre océan, nous te le confions;
nous confions le chêne adoré des Orphées
aux flots qu’ aimaient les Amphions!
Nuages, firmaments, pléiades protectrices,
écumes, durs granits, sables craints des sondeurs,

nous vous le confions; et soyez ses nourrices,
ténèbres, clartés, profondeurs!

LE JARDIN DE HAUTEVILLE HOUSE LE 1 4 JUILLET 1 8 7 0 , AUX PROSCRITS , III

Vents, vous travaillerez à ce travail sublime;
ô vents sourds, qui jamais ne dites : c’ est assez!
Vous mêlerez la pluie amère de l’ abîme
à ses noirs cheveux hérissés.
Vous le fortifierez de vos rudes haleines;
vous l’ accoutumerez aux luttes des géants;
vous l’ effaroucherez avec vos bouches pleines
de la clameur des océans.
Et vous lui porterez, vents, du fond des campagnes,
vents, vous lui porterez du fond des vastes eaux,
le frisson des sapins de toutes les montagnes
et des mâts de tous les vaisseaux.
Afin qu’ il soit robuste, invincible, suprême,
et qu’ il n’ ait peur de rien au bord de l’ infini!
Afin qu’ étant bâti par les destructeurs même,
des maudits même il soit béni!
Afin qu’ il soit sacré pour la mer sa voisine,
que sa rumeur s’ effeuille en ineffables mots,
et qu’ il grandisse, ayant la nuit dans sa racine
et l’ aurore dans ses rameaux!

LE JARDIN DE HAUTEVILLE HOUSE LE 1 4 JUILLET 1 8 7 0 , AUX PROSCRITS , IV

Oh! Qu’ il croisse! Qu’ il monte aux cieux où sont les flammes
!
Qu’ il ait toujours moins d’ ombre et toujours plus d’ azur,
cet arbre, en qui, pieux, penchés, vidant nos âmes,
nous mettons tout l’ homme futur!

Qu’ il ait la majesté des étoiles profondes
au-dessus de sa tête, et sous ses pieds les flots!
Et qu’ il soit moins ému du murmure des mondes
que des chansons des matelots!
Qu’ il soit haut comme un phare et beau comme une gerbe!
Qu’ il soit mobile et fixe, et jeune, même vieux!
Qu’ il montre aux rocs jaloux son ondoiement superbe,
sa racine aux flots envieux!
Qu’ il soit l’ arbre univers, l’ arbre cité, l’ arbre homme!
Et que le penseur croie un jour, sous ses abris,
entendre en ses rameaux le grand soupir de Rome
et le grand hymne de Paris!
Que, l’ hiver, lutteur nu, tronc fier, vivant squelette,
montrant ses poings de bronze aux souffles furieux,
tordant ses coudes noirs, il soit le sombre athlète
d’ un pugilat mystérieux!
Car l’ orage est semblable au sort qui se déchaîne,
la vie est un guerrier, les vents sont des bourreaux,
et traitent sous les cieux le héros comme un chêne,
et le chêne comme un héros.
Qu’ il abrite la fleur rampante sur le sable!
Qu’ il couvre le brin d’ herbe et le myosotis!
Qu’ il apparaisse aux vents déchaînés, formidable
de sa bonté pour les petits!
Que rien ne le renverse et que rien ne le ploie!

Qu’ il soit, sur ce rivage âpre et des vents battu,
la touffe frémissante et forte de la joie,
de l’ audace et de la vertu!
Qu’ il réjouisse, auguste, aux rayons pénétrable,
de son fourmillement de feuilles le ciel bleu!

Qu’ il vive! Qu’ il soit un et qu’ il soit innombrable
comme le peuple et comme Dieu!

LE JARDIN DE HAUTEVILLE HOUSE LE 14 JUILLET 1870, AUX PROSCRITS, V

En attendant, écume, autan, bruits, noires bouches,
ménagez l’ arbre enfant, éléments irrités!
Tant qu’ il sera petit, murmurez, voix farouches,
et quand il sera grand, chantez!
Les tyrans, entassant les fléaux, blocs funèbres,
brisant l’ homme idéal, broyant l’ homme animal,
sont en train de bâtir un fronton de ténèbres
au vieil édifice du mal.
Avec l’ ombre qui sort des guerres et des pestes,
avec les tourbillons des grands embrasements,
et les miasmes lourds et les souffles funestes
des fosses pleines d’ ossements,
avec les toits brûlants, les villes enflammées,
le noir temple du deuil par les rois est construit;
on voit d’ ici monter ces énormes fumées,
colonnes torses de la nuit!
Nous, vaincus, construisons le bonheur! Je convie
les siècles à ton ombre, ô gland d’ adversité!
Croîs, arbre; règne, idée; et que l’ arbre ait la vie,
l’ idée ayant l’ éternité!
Pierre et César sont là, pleins du passé féroce!
C’ est l’ instant de lutter, nous qu’ on osa bannir,
contre le mal géant, contre l’ erreur colosse,
avec ton atome, avenir!
Semons! — semons le gland, et qu’ il soit chêne immense!
Semons le droit; qu’ il soit bonheur, gloire et clarté!

Semons l’ homme et qu’ il soit peuple! Semons la France,
et qu’ elle soit Humanité!
C’ est le champ de l’ exil; semons-y l’ espérance.
Semons la nuit lugubre, et qu’ elle soit le jour!

Germe en Dieu, grain obscur! Semons notre souffrance,
proscrits, et qu’ elle soit l’ amour!
Oh! Que le genre humain monte sur la montagne!
Terre, souris enfin à l’ homme audacieux,
et sois l’ éden, après avoir été le bagne,
ô globe emporté dans les cieux!
21 juillet 1870.

LE LIVRE ÉPIQUE

LES STATUES

Le cavalier de bronze était debout dans l’ombre.

Autour de lui dormait la ville aux toits sans nombre;
Les hauts clochers semblaient, sur les bruns horizons,
De grands pasteurs gardant des troupeaux de maisons;
Notre-Dame élevait ses deux tours, dont chacune,
Lugubre, s’effrayait, dans cette nuit sans lune,
D’entrevoir vaguement sa gigantesque sœur;
Le zénith se voilait d’une telle épaisseur
Que les lueurs du gouffre avaient disparu toutes;
Râlant seul par moments sous les nocturnes voûtes,
Le vent semblait donner passage au désespoir;
Les nuages étaient les plis d’un rideau noir;
On eût dit que le jour ne devait plus renaître,
Ni le matin rouvrir sa sereine fenêtre,
Et que, charbon terrible, âtre à jamais détruit,
Dans cette immensité sur laquelle la nuit,
Monstrueuse, s’était pour toujours refermée,
Tout le soleil éteint s’en allait en fumée,
Tant sur la terre morne et dans le firmament
L’obscurité versait d’évanouissement!

Le ciel, pour on ne sait quels spectateurs funèbres,
Ouvrait jusqu’au fond l’antre immense des ténèbres.
Calme, l’épée au flanc, et portant sur le dos
Le harnais des anciens chevaliers féodaux,
Il était là debout en habit de bataille.
Héros par le sourire et géant par la taille,
Tenant la bride noire en son noir gantelet,
Colosse et roi, tranquille, immuable, il semblait
Pétrifier la nuit par son éternel geste;
Et, se confondant presque avec l’ombre funeste,
Mêlait son airain sombre à la noirceur des cieux.

La statue, au regard fixe et mystérieux,
Vision du sommet et spectre de la cime,
À l’immobilité sinistre de l’abîme,
Car, étant du sépulcre, elle est de l’infini.
Ce livide cheval qui n’a jamais henni,
Ce guerrier qui, muet, semble le personnage
Du suprême silence et du grand témoignage,
Ce socle dominant les hommes, élevant
Sa paix sombre parmi leur orage vivant,
Et sortant de la tombe avec un air de gloire,
Ce colosse qui prend de force la mémoire,
Qui semble encor le roi, le tyran, le bourreau,
Et qui ne pourrait pas chasser un passereau,
Toute cette figure est un monstre du rêve;
Même quand le soleil la précise et l’achève
Et vient la regarder en face, même au jour,
Même quand les passants fourmillent à l’entour,
D’une crainte secrète elle reste vêtue,
Elle est funèbre encor; mais le soir, la statue,
Roi pensif, dur soldat ou lugubre empereur,
Reprend toute sa nuit et toute sa terreur.

Donc il apparaissait dans l’ombre grandiose.

Tout ce que le néant contient d’apothéose,
Tout ce qu’un front royal peut garder de serein
Dans la captivité tragique de l’airain,
L’horreur du monument, tout ce qu’une prunelle
Peut conserver d’éclair quand elle est éternelle,
Toute la vie étrange et pâle de la mort,
Ce qui reste au héros jadis illustre et fort
Quand le trépas l’étreint de ses deux ailes noires,
Tout l’effort qu’au tombeau le gagneur de victoires
En cessant d’être roi fait pour devenir Dieu,
Et la grandeur de l’heure et la grandeur du lieu,
S’ajoutaient au colosse et de son attitude
Augmentaient la suprême et grave solitude;

Et la Seine fuyait avec un triste bruit
Sous ce grand chevalier du gouffre et de la nuit.
Le vent jetait son cri, l’eau jetait son écume;
Et les arches du pont, s’enfonçant dans la brume
Avec un vague aspect de spectre et de chaos,
S’ouvraient sous la statue auguste, et sur les flots
Du fleuve humilié qui pleure et qui querelle,
Porches d’ombre pour eux, arcs triomphaux pour elle.

Soudain, dans ce silence, et sans qu’on pût savoir
Qui parlait dans ce calme impénétrable et noir
Où la profondeur sourde et terrible sommeille,
Au-dessus du colosse immobile, à l’oreille
De la statue ouvrant ses yeux fixes devant
L’espace sépulcral plein de nuit et de vent,
Une voix, qui passa comme un souffle de glace,
Dit : — Va voir si ton fils est toujours à sa place.

Si quelqu’un à cette heure eût rôdé là, marchant
Sur le quai solitaire ou près du bord penchant,
Aux clartés du falot qui vacille et qui fume,
Cet être eût entendu tout à coup, dans la brume
Qui, l’hiver, fait Paris plus noir qu’une forêt,
Un bruit rauque pareil au bruit qui sortirait
De quelque panoplie énorme des ténèbres;
Il eût senti l’horreur frémir dans ses vertèbres,
Et sa langue à la nuit bégayer des aveux,
(Qui n’a pas son remords secret?) et ses cheveux
Se dresser, et ses dents se heurter dans sa bouche;
Car sur le piédestal où, dans le vent farouche,
Les nuages semblaient d’en haut la saluer,
La statue, ô terreur! Venait de remuer.

Rien, pas même l’airain, pour jamais ne s’arrête.

Le roi tourna la bride et le cheval la tête.

Le terre-plein frémit; de longs mouvements sourds
Ébranlèrent les toits, les églises, les tours,
Et les portails sacrés que les siècles vénèrent.

Les muscles monstrueux du bronze frissonnèrent,
La croupe tressaillit, le pied toujours levé
Qui laisse l’herbe croître aux fentes du pavé
S’abaissa, l’autre pied scellé dans l’architrave
Se leva; le colosse inclina son front grave,
Le destrier, ployant ses jarrets de métal,
Horrible, s’approcha du bord du piédestal,
— Visions où jamais un œil humain ne plonge! —
Et, comme par la rampe invisible d’un songe,
La statue à pas lents du socle descendit.
Alors l’âpre ruelle au nom fauve et maudit,
L’échoppe, la maison, l’hôtel, le bouge obscène,
Les mille toits mirant leurs angles dans la Seine,
Les obscurs carrefours où, le jour, en tous sens,
Court l’hésitation confuse des passants,
Les enseignes pendant aux crocs de fer des portes,
Les palais crénelés comme des villes fortes,
Le chaland aux anneaux des berges retenu,
S’étonnèrent devant ce cimier inconnu
Dont aucun ouragan n’eût remué la plume,
Entendirent le sol tinter comme une enclume
Et, tandis qu’au fronton des tours l’heure étouffait
Sa voix, n’osant sonner au cadran stupéfait,
Virent, dans l’épaisseur des ténèbres accrues,
Droit, paisible et glacé, s’avancer dans les rues,
Accompagné d’un bruit funèbre et souterrain,
L’homme de bronze assis sur le cheval d’airain.

L’eau triste frissonnait sous la rondeur de l’arche.

Horreur prodigieuse! Une statue en marche!

La lourdeur de cette ombre étonne le pavé.
Elle glisse, elle va, morne, le front levé,
Avec une roideur de cadavre, et sa forme
Inflexible résiste au vent du gouffre énorme.
L'affreux ordre nocturne en est bouleversé.
Après que cette chose effroyable a passé,
Sous les plafonds glacés où les cercueils séjournent,
Les squelettes hagards dans leur lit se retournent
Et disent à la nuit funeste qui ne sait
Que leur répondre : ô nuit, qu'est-ce donc qui passait?
Si l'œil pouvait plonger dans ces hideux royaumes
Et percer le mystère, on verrait les fantômes,
Frissonnants, éviter le lugubre inconnu.
Larve dont le regard sans pâlir soutenu
Fait toute la grandeur de don Juan athée!
Spectre où s'ébrécherait l'épée épouvantée,
Et qu'en l'osant toucher la main sentirait froid!
Actions de la vie, amours, justice, droit,
Crime, vengeance, orgueil, qu'un simulacre traîne!
Responsabilité de la figure humaine
Prise par le granit ou le bronze fatal!
Oh! Dans l'égarement d'un orage mental,
Dans quelque âpre chaos de villes abattues,
Qui donc a vu rôder lentement des statues?
Ces êtres inouïs, impossibles, affreux,
Vont, ayant la stupeur des ténèbres sur eux;
Et l'alarme est dans l'ombre, et le rêve lui-même,
Qui distingue à minuit dans l'immensité blême
Tout un monde terrible à travers l'œil fermé,
Le rêve, aux habitants de l'ombre accoutumé,
S'épouvante de voir cette lugubre espèce
De fantômes entrer dans sa nuée épaisse,
Et frémit, car le pas de ces noirs arrivants
N'est ni le pas des morts ni le pas des vivants.

Quand l'homme s'avança, les profondeurs s'émurent.
Et le dessous des ponts où les courants murmurent,

Les cimetières noirs, sentant venir un roi,
Les parvis dominés d’un porche ou d’un beffroi
Où passaient autrefois les carrosses des sacres,
Les charniers, les égouts où le sang des massacres
S’extravase et croupit et fait de tristes lacs,
Les bornes où, pensifs, montent les Ravaillacs,
Les puits mystérieux des vieilles tours muettes,
Les lourds carcans, pendus au clou des oubliettes,
Les lointains ponts-levis des forts et des fossés,
Les pavés où, l’hiver, la pluie à flots pressés
S’abat, tombant du ciel comme des trous d’un crible,
Se mirent à trembler sous le marcheur terrible.

Et comme il est certain — l’œil du tombeau le voit —
Que derrière tout roi qui passe, quel qu’il soit,
Toute la royauté se dresse, noir fantôme,
L’ancien Paris, vibrant de la masure au dôme,
Dans son plus vil repli, dans son plus dur pilier,
Fit un bruit sombre autour du fatal cavalier.
C’était comme le cri solennel et sauvage
De la vieille misère et du vieil esclavage,
Comme le hurlement de mille ans révoltés,
Comme la voix des temps et des calamités;
Tout le passé pleurait dans cette clameur triste,
Tout, ce qui disparaît comme ce qui subsiste;
C’était le sang, la chair, et le fer, et le feu,
Râlant à travers l’ombre un grand appel à Dieu;
C’était la tombe ouvrant ses immenses entrailles.
Dans ce fauve murmure éclataient les mitrailles,
Les meurtres, les splendeurs du pouvoir triomphant;
On y distinguait l’homme et la vierge et l’enfant;
Les balles des assauts sifflaient aux meurtrières;
Les femmes rugissaient dans les salpêtrières;
Les chambres de torture attisaient leurs réchauds;
On entendait gémir les geôles, les cachots,
Et l’affreux Saint-Lazare, et ce lugubre ancêtre
De tous les parias du vieux monde, Bicêtre;

Le désespoir passait suivi de ses lépreux,
La mort de ses bourreaux, le trône de ses preux;
Les mères s’arrachaient les cheveux à poignées;
Les Te Deum chantaient les batailles gagnées;
Tout y retentissait, les carrousels charmants,
Le quadruple galop des écartèlements,
La hache, le billot, le pal, le fouet, la chaîne,
Tout l’infâme appareil de supplices que traîne
Cette vieille Thémis humaine aux yeux bandés
Qui jadis prit Jésus, joua sa robe aux dés,
Le fit crucifier par le crime et le vice,
Et compte Dieu parmi ses repris de justice;
Tout s’y mêlait, les deuils, les complots assassins,
L’arquebuse du roi Charles neuf, les tocsins,
Les cloches que l’orfraie effleure de son aile,
Les cris qu’étouffe l’eau devant la tour de Nesle,
Marguerite vidant son lit dans le tombeau,
Médicis, Brunehaut, Frédégonde, Isabeau;
Les piloris râlant à côté des trophées.

Par moments, comme un vent qui s’éteint par bouffées,
Ou comme un océan apaisant ses reflux,
La rumeur se taisait, et l’on n’entendait plus
Que le pas mesuré du passant formidable.

L’horreur blême tombait du ciel inabordable
Où les nuages noirs se font et se défont;
Des flots d’ombre roulaient dans l’infini profond.

L’homme d’airain tourna par la place Dauphine,
Puis il suivit la berge étroite qui confine,
Au sud, au vieux logis des chevaliers du guet,
Au nord, à la grand’chambre à qui Nesmond léguait
Sa robe et son portrait peint par le Primatice;
Il côtoya les tours du palais de Justice
D’où tombe sur le peuple un aveugle anankè,
Passa le pont au Change, et, côtoyant le quai,

Gagna l’hôtel de ville et la place de Grève;
Il traversa l’arcade où maintenant s’élève
Tout un palais nouveau dressant ses lourds chevets,
Laissa derrière lui le portail Saint-Gervais,
Prit à gauche, et, perçant un dédale de rues,
Cavernes du vieil âge aujourd’hui disparues,
Où les maisons avaient des faces de bandits,
Lent et grave, il entra, par le porche où jadis
Une reine voilée attendait Bassompierre,
Dans une grande place aux arcades de pierre.

Au centre de la place, un feuillage tremblant
Laissait à demi voir un grand fantôme blanc;
C’était un cavalier de marbre.
                                        Altier, austère,
Sur un socle, au milieu d’un perron solitaire,
Couronné de lauriers comme un César romain,
Il surgissait tranquille, auguste, surhumain.
Au socle était sculptée une main de justice.
Grave, le coude ouvert et le poing sur la cuisse,
Il tenait à la main un bâton d’empereur.
Les arbres s’effaraient pleins d’une vague horreur,
Et leur cime semblait d’un vent d’hiver battue.

La statue alla droit dans l’ombre à la statue;
Et celui qui marchait regarda fixement
Celui qui songeait triste, immobile et dormant,
À travers la noirceur des sombres branches d’arbre.

L’homme de bronze alors dit à l’homme de marbre :

— Viens donc voir si ton fils est à sa place encor.

Comme un chasseur s’éveille au son lointain du cor,
Louis treize sortit de son éternel rêve;
Et le blanc porte-sceptre et le noir porte-glaive,
Le pâle roi César, le fier roi chevalier,

Descendant du perron le livide escalier,
Traversèrent la place et passèrent la grille;
Et, par-dessus les toits, un spectre, la Bastille,
Les vit qui s’en allaient vers le Paris vivant;
Le cavalier d’airain, calme, marchait devant,
Tenant son doigt levé pour indiquer la route.

Ils ne passèrent point sous l’arche de la voûte;
Ils prirent par le Pas de la Mule, et, suivant
Les boulevards qu’emplit, le jour, un flot mouvant,
Montèrent vers la Ville endormie à cette heure;
Et les quatre lions du Château-d’eau qui pleure,
Les toits des vieux faubourgs aux innombrables nids,
La porte Saint-Martin, la porte Saint-Denis,
Les Porcherons où vibre encor le bruit des verres,
Tremblants, virent passer ces deux profils sévères.
Ils marchaient sans parler, sans dire : par ici.
Et les deux cavaliers arrivèrent ainsi
Dans un des carrefours immenses de la ville.
Au centre, se dressait un autre homme immobile.

Cet homme n’était pas un homme, mais un Dieu.

Son front, qui semblait fait pour le ciel toujours bleu,
Se haussait arrogant, comme indigné de l’ombre;
On voyait sur sa tête un vague soleil sombre;
Il rayonnait, lugubre; il avait l’air fatal
Et superbe, que donne aux morts le piédestal,
Et tout ce qu’un vainqueur répand d’horreur sacrée
Quand le roi qui détruit contient un Dieu qui crée.
C’était un roi de bronze ainsi que le premier;
Il n’avait ni brassards, ni haubert, ni cimier,
Et, beau comme Apollon, était nu comme Hercule;
On voyait se courber, noirs dans le crépuscule,
Quatre fleuves, l’Escaut, l’Ister, le Doubs, le Rhin,
Sous les quatre sabots de son cheval d’airain;
Tranquille, il paraissait écouter dans les brises

Des chocs de bataillons, de cris de villes prises;
Et sa crinière était d’un lion; et, sans voix,
Sans geste, il commandait; il semblait tendre aux rois
Sa fière épée, à Dieu, dans l’azur solitaire,
Sa main, et son orteil aux baisers de la terre.

Il semblait de lui-même à jamais ébloui.
Et les deux cavaliers marchèrent droit à lui.

Le vent mystérieux suspendit son murmure;
L’aveugle nuit tâcha de voir.

L’homme à l’armure
Laissa derrière lui son blême compagnon,
Et dit très haut :

— Louis, quatorzième du nom,
Réveille-toi, Louis! Et viens avant l’aurore
Voir si ton petit-fils est à sa place encore. —

Le Dieu de bronze au front vaguement étoilé
Ouvrit sa lèvre sombre et dit : — M’a-t-on parlé?
Et son regard cherchant à ses pieds, sembla naître.
— Oui. — Qui donc? — Moi. — Qu’es-tu? — Ton père, dit l’ancêtre
— Quel est ce petit-fils que ta voix m’a nommé?
— Celui que tes sujets appelaient Bien-Aimé.
— Où donc est-il, l’objet de ces idolâtries?
— Dans une grande place au bout des Tuileries.
Viens.

Le noir demi-Dieu salua les deux rois,
Puis descendit du socle auguste, et tous les trois
Se mirent à marcher dans la nuit côte à côte,
L’aïeul passant les fils de sa tête plus haute.

Ils gagnèrent le quai, laissèrent derrière eux
Le balcon où, rêvant sur Paris malheureux,

La Saint-Barthélemy s’accoude, noir fantôme,
Et passèrent devant le palais du royaume,
Bloc difforme de murs et de toits inégaux
Qui, comme les palais de Thèbes et d’Argos,
À ses Agamemnons, ses Laïus, ses Électres,
La Seine refléta, sinistre, ces trois spectres,
Le roi soldat, le roi césar et le roi dieu,
Reconnut Louis treize et chercha Richelieu.
Le vieux Louvre entr’ouvrit ses royales croisées.

Eux, muets, s’avançaient vers les Champs-Élysées.

LES CARIATIDES

Puissant Germain Pilon, toi qui, rude ouvrier,
Entendis la douleur dans les gouffres crier,
Qui sentis l'art divin protester et combattre,
Toi qui, sous les héros et sous les Henri quatre,
Dédaignant Saint-Germain, Chambord et l'Œil-de-bœuf,
Groupas les mascarons tragiques du Pont-Neuf,
Colossal pétrisseur des formes ténébreuses,
Toi qui savais qu'ouvrant ses gueules douloureuses,
La demi-brute aboie après les demi-dieux,
Et que tout le dédain de l'abîme odieux,
Tout le deuil de l'enfer et du bagne grimace
Sur le visage informe et profond de la masse,
Ô dur géant, tandis que les autres sculpteurs,
Épris du bas-relief superbe des hauteurs,
Ciselaient le fronton de la toute-puissance;
Tandis que sur le socle où le prêtre l'encense,
Comme un olympien hautain et gracieux,
Écoutant la fanfare idéale des cieux
Qu'accompagnent les vents, mystérieux orchestre,
Ils dressaient dans l'azur César, fantôme équestre;
Tandis qu'ils prosternaient sous Tibère vieillard
La flatterie infâme et splendide de l'art,
Et qu'ils faisaient lécher Néron ou Louis onze
Par les langues de feu des fournaises du bronze,
Et que, prostituant le ciseau souverain,
Ils faisaient deux laquais du marbre et de l'airain;
Pendant que, bâtissant pour la terre enchaînée
Quelque Héliogabale ou quelque Salmonée,
Ils montraient le tyran, glaive au flanc, sceptre en main,
Serein, presque au delà de l'horizon humain,
Debout dans l'empyrée où l'on voit l'aube poindre,
Si loin qu'il semble grand, si haut qu'il paraît joindre
La couronne d'orgueil qui sur la terre luit
Avec celle que peut donner la sombre nuit,

Et qu’on voit resplendir au fond des sacrés voiles
Son front ceint de lauriers vaguement ceint d’étoiles;
Pendant qu’ils construisaient sur d’altiers piédestaux
De vastes empereurs traînant de lourds manteaux,
Des princes échappant dans le bronze à la fange,
Et qu’ils transfiguraient le despote en archange,
Et qu’ils faisaient le maître, et qu’ils faisaient le roi,
Et qu’ils faisaient le Dieu, tu fis le peuple, toi!
Tu fis le grand vaincu qui crache de la lave;
Tu fis le grand forçat, tu fis le grand esclave;
Au niveau de l’horreur et du deuil abîmé,
Tu tordis dans sa nuit l’effrayant opprimé!
Sous les Charles sanglants se lavant aux aiguières,
Sous les Louis suivis des fauves Lesdiguières,
Sous François à l’œil fier, sous Diane au pied nu,
Tu sentis remuer l’Encelade inconnu;
Tu levas des vivants l’affreux drap mortuaire,
Et tu leur dis : — Venez, je suis le statuaire!
Venez, vous qui souffrez! Vous qui pleurez, venez!
Venez, tous les lépreux, venez, tous les damnés!
Sous un socle royal je vais sur cette frise
Vous faire fourmiller dans la pierre âpre et grise.
Misère, maladie, ô deuils, haillons pendants,
Colère du grabat, faim qui montres les dents,
Venez, j’étalerai sous ce roi vos ulcères
Saignants, affreux, cruels, formidables, sincères;
Je vous donnerai vie et corps sur ce vieux pont
Où la clameur du fleuve à vos douleurs répond;
L’hiver, à l’heure obscure où le vent crie et souffre,
Vous entendrez passer toutes les voix du gouffre
Sous ces arches d’écume et de trombe et de nuit! —

Alors l’antique horreur sortit de son réduit;
Alors ton œil plongea dans tous les purgatoires;
Alors vinrent à toi toutes les faces noires;
Et ton souffle alluma des flammes dans ces yeux,
Et tout ce tourbillon de fronts mystérieux

S’abattit à jamais sur ces dalles funèbres
Comme un essaim hideux de mouches des ténèbres.

Ô mascarons d’un doigt magistral ébauchés!
Êtres vertigineux! Tristes géants couchés!
En butte à ce qui souille ainsi qu’à ce qui change,
Éclaboussés par l’onde et tachés par la fange!
Leurs têtes, où l’oiseau fait sa fiente et son nid,
Percent lugubrement l’étrave de granit
Et s’avancent sur l’eau comme de noires proues,
Et leur corps se prolonge en pavé sous les roues,
Sous les talons ferrés et sous les pas perdus;
Les attelages lourds, sous le fouet éperdus,
Marchent sur eux traînant des chaînes et des câbles,
Et, par moments, les pieds, les galops implacables,
La ruade féroce et l’affreux choc des fers
À ces durs patients arrachent des éclairs.
Oh! Qui que vous soyez, qui, penchés sur les choses,
Sondez l’humanité dans ses métempsychoses,
Approchez, regardez, méditez, et tremblez.

Les voilà tous pressés, accouplés, rassemblés;
Voilà tous les souffrants et tous les lamentables;
Voilà les ramasseurs de miettes sous les tables;
Voilà tous les abjects vaguement entrevus;
Voilà Scapin, voilà Sancho, voilà Davus;
La chimère se mêle au réel qui l’attire;
Le valet rit, surpris d’être aussi le satyre;
Voilà les portefaix de tout le poids humain.
Ils regardent passer hier, aujourd’hui, demain,
Ce qui naît, ce qui meurt, ce qui va, ce qui sombre,
Ce qui flotte, attentifs on ne sait à quelle ombre.
Ils font de l’onde vaine un lugubre examen.
L’eau s’évade et poursuit son tortueux chemin
Par sa pente au hasard en liberté conduite,
Sous ces captifs penchés, tantales de la fuite.
Le reflet des eaux fait, sous l’âpre entablement,

De profil en profil errer un flamboiement,
Et la chauve-souris de l’aile les effleure.
Est-ce que cela raille? Est-ce que cela pleure?

Ô bouches où l’esprit qui passe, d’horreur plein,
Rêve Pantagruel et retrouve Ugolin!
Masque de Rabelais sur la face de Dante!
Progression d’angoisse et d’horreur ascendante!
Fronts où flambe l’enfer, comme la tombe froids!
Ô larves! Visions de l’invisible! Effrois!
Mascarade aperçue à travers le suaire!
Morne évocation du mage statuaire
Qui n’a que Michel-Ange ou Milton pour rival!
Sinistre mardi gras des spectres! Carnaval
De l’infini, flottant dans le souffle insondable!
Descente de Courtille énorme et formidable
Pétrifiée au mur du songe et de la nuit!
Est-ce que l’ouragan qui frissonne et qui fuit
Ne va pas emporter cette fresque de pierre?
Dieu! Qu’est-ce que l’église et le trône ont pu faire
À ce peuple sans nom, sans lumière, sans voix,
Sans espoir, qui sanglote et ricane à la fois
En regardant, du fond du néant qui le couvre,
D’un côté Notre-Dame et de l’autre le Louvre?

Oh! Ces enfantements et ces créations,
Ces rencontres de l’âme avec les visions
Pèsent sur le génie, et, le courbant à terre,
Le penchent du côté le plus noir du mystère.
Du jour où tout ce monde étrange t’apparut,
Des passions d’en bas râlant l’horrible rut,
T’apportant des douleurs la sublime démence,
Ô sculpteur, à partir de cet instant immense,
Ta pensée à jamais fut mêlée à la nuit!

Homme grand parmi ceux qu’une flamme conduit,
Oui, maître, ce fut là ta puissance et ta gloire :

Aux princes effarés de force et de victoire,
Au pouvoir ignorant les devoirs et les droits,
Au palais sidéral des reines et des rois,
À l’immense colosse impérial qui lève
Sa tête dans l’éclair du vertige et du rêve,
Au trône sombre ayant pour dais le firmament,
Au monarque, tu fis le grand soubassement,
L’homme; sous le tyran tu mis la multitude!
Les puissants rayonnaient dans leur haute attitude,
Confiants, sûrs du vent, sûrs du flot, sûrs du port;
Toi, grave et dédaigneux, tu donnas pour support
À leur calme, à leur joie, à leur crime, à leurs fêtes,
L’hydre cariatide aux millions de têtes;
Au-dessous de leur gloire, au-dessous de ces noms
Sonnés par la trompette et dits par les canons,
Au-dessous des splendeurs, des vertus proclamées,
Et de la nudité des fières renommées,
Et de tout ce qui crie : Adorez! Je suis beau!
Je suis pourpre, je suis glaive, je suis flambeau!
Tu fis, dans le brouillard livide qui s’écroule,
Ramper le gigantesque anonyme, la foule.
Sous les jeux et les ris, sous les molles amours,
Sous Valois, sous Bourbon, sous Condé, sous Nemours,
Sous la tendre Chevreuse et la blonde d’Humière,
Sous toute la beauté dans toute la lumière,
Sous l’olympe royal, hautain, splendide à voir,
Tu sculptas le supplice inouï du bloc noir,
L’angoisse de la masse informe, et le calvaire
Du manant redoutable et du granit sévère.
Les puissants rayonnaient, faisant en liberté
Le partage insolent de la prospérité,
Désaltérant leur soif toujours inassouvie,
Prenant tout le bonheur, prenant toute la vie;
Vénus regardait Mars avec ses plus doux yeux;
Les fiers drapeaux faisaient de grands frissons joyeux;
Les rois étaient armés, les femmes étaient nues;
Les chasses s’enfuyaient au fond des avenues;

Tout était le palais, le banquet, le gala;
Toi, tu fis, en regard de tout ce Louvre-là,
Brusquement, aux lueurs de la torche qui brille,
Du grand cachot Misère apparaître la grille
Et les faces qu'on voit à travers ses barreaux!
Ô prostestation terrible! Les héros,
Les gagneurs de bataille et les dieux de la terre,
Des hauts arcs de triomphe habitant l'acrotère,
Vainqueurs, cuirassés d'or, vêtus de diamant,
Du genre humain pensif sombre éblouissement,
Éclatants, radieux, vaillants, criant Montjoie,
Résumaient le miracle effrayant de la joie,
De l'azur sans nuage et sans fond, du soleil;
Toi, songeur, tu voulus que là, sous leur orteil,
Tout un monde aux rictus sans fin, aux yeux sans nombre,
Effroyable, exprimât le prodige de l'ombre!
Ton art, que jusqu'aux fronts réprouvés tu courbas,
Sous les monstres d'en haut mit les monstres d'en bas,
Le peuple, qui se fait chaque jour moins difforme,
Et qui deviendra grand sans cesser d'être énorme.

Oui, l'Averne terrestre avec ses Ixions,
Le poème hagard des malédictions,
Gueux, cagoux, malingreux, bohémiens, marranes,
Le menton bestial du paria, les crânes
Que sous son bas plafond l'ignorance a faits plats,
Les fauves suppliants, tout ce qui dit : hélas!
Sylvains et paysans entrevus sous les lierres,
Lèvres avec l'injure et le cri familières,
L'oreille où s'est empreint le pavé, dur chevet,
La maigreur que la loque en grelottant revêt,
Le maraud, le manant, le prolétaire blême
À qui Malthus dit : Meurs! Quand Jésus lui crie : Aime!
Les pauvres frémissant de se sentir bandits,
La lèpre des cloisons malsaines du taudis
Gagnant l'habitant sombre, et passant, incurable,
Du mur de la misère au front du misérable,

Idiots, mendiants râlant sur les chemins,
Tout le fourmillement des cloportes humains,
Le berceau condamné, l’innocence punie,
Les mourants éternels de la grande agonie,
Un Pélion hideux sous un splendide Ossa,
Voilà ce que ton bras titanique entassa!
Et, tandis qu’on sculptait, pour le sceptre et l’épée,
Le bronze dithyrambe et le marbre épopée,
Ô poète, tu fis grimacer à jamais
Sous les guerriers d’airain des lumineux sommets,
Sous les déesses d’aube et de blancheur vêtues,
Les masques, populace horrible des statues!

Et pour égayer œuvre étrange, dans ce tas
De maux, de désespoirs, de sanglots, tu jetas
Toute une parodie infernale et farouche,
Brusquet, Guillot Gorju, Turlupin, Scaramouche,
Tous les spectres qui font trembler de leurs discours
Le tréteau de la rue ou le tréteau des cours;
Tu les fis vivre là! Mais, à ton insu même,
Devin qu’illuminait une clarté suprême,
Ayant de l’avenir déjà l’âpre sueur,
Railleur démesuré, tu mettais la lueur
Des révolutions dans le regard des faunes;
Tu mêlais aux Pasquins de vagues Tisiphones;
C’est presque en menaçant les rois qu’au-dessous d’eux
Tu sculptais leurs fous noirs et leurs bouffons hideux,
Et ta fatale main, ô grand tailleur de pierre,
Dans Trivelin sinistre ébauchait Robespierre.

Ce dur Germain Pilon que l’abîme inspirait,
Ce prophète, était-il dans son propre secret?
Avait-il, âme vaste aux grands hasards poussée,
La révélation de toute sa pensée?
Savait-il, ce songeur, quel symbole il jetait
Sur ce gémissement qui jamais ne se tait,
Sur ce fleuve qui glisse ainsi qu’une couleuvre?

Son regard plongeait-il jusqu’au fond de son œuvre?
Mystère! Avoir sculpté les douleurs, les affronts,
L’effroi, la peine; avoir à ces tragiques fronts
Donné pour miroir l’onde, autre image des foules;
Sur la vague, où du vent passent les tristes houles,
Sur tous les plis que fait le grand linceul des flots,
Sur l’âpre inquiétude et sur les longs sanglots
Que le fleuve orageux dans sa fuite promène,
Ô terreur! Avoir mis toute la ride humaine
Et tous les froncements du sourcil de la nuit;
Avoir, dans l’avenir par Dieu même introduit,
Montré l’émeute aux rois comme la mer aux grèves;
Avoir démuselé les gorgones des rêves;
Avoir multiplié Méduse sur ce mur
Où l’art vertigineux ouvre son œil obscur;
Évoquer le vieillard, l’homme, l’enfant, la femme;
Effarer le granit et le pénétrer d’âme;
Faire pleurer la pierre et la désespérer;
Ouvrir tout l’horizon du gouffre, et l’ignorer!
Être, sans s’en douter, le précurseur terrible;
Être, sans le savoir, Titan; est-ce possible?

Dieu! Collaborateur ténébreux et serein!
Qui sait si le génie, effrayant souverain
À qui les astres font dans l’ombre un diadème,
À l’intuition totale de lui-même?
Oh! De l’esprit humain ces grands amphictyons,
Dante, Isaïe, Eschyle, — Étranges questions! —
Cervante et Rabelais, savaient-ils leur empire?
Shakspeare, ô profondeurs! Voyait-il tout Shakspeare?
Molière par Molière était-il ébloui?
Qui pourrait dire non? Qui pourrait dire oui?
Qu’importe! Après avoir mis ce deuil sur ce râle,
Le sculpteur est rentré dans sa nuit sidérale,
Calme et sombre, et léguant aux siècles ce tableau :
La passion du peuple et le tourment de l’eau!
Et maintenant passez, et tâchez de comprendre!

Homère savait-il qu’il faisait Alexandre?
Socrate savait-il qu’il engendrait Jésus?
Ô gouffres de l’esprit vaguement aperçus!
Amer Germain Pilon qui dans la nuit nous plonges,
Qui sait, dans le dédale insensé de tes songes,
À quelle porte d’ombre et d’horreur tu frappas?
Qui sait si ton poème inouï ne vient pas
De plus loin que la terre et de plus haut que l’homme,
Des profondeurs que nul ne connaît et ne nomme,
Du précipice ouvert au delà du cercueil?
Qui sait si tu n’as point contemplé l’affreux deuil
De la nature immense, et si, funèbre artiste,
Tu n’avais pas en toi le souffle le plus triste
Dont puisse frissonner un esprit sous les cieux,
La désolation du Mal mystérieux,
Quand, regardant ces flots, tu penchas, noir génie,
L’éternel grincement sur la plainte infinie?

Or, tandis que les eaux fuyaient, mouvants miroirs,
En voyant les trois rois marcher sur les quais noirs,
Les masques monstrueux éclatèrent de rire,
Éclat si ténébreux et plein d’un tel martyre
Qu’aujourd’hui même, après que tant de flots d’oubli
Ont coulé sous ce pont chancelant et vieilli
Depuis la sombre nuit qu’en frissonnant j’éclaire,
Plusieurs des mascarons du fronton séculaire
En gardent le reflet dans leur œil flamboyant,
Et sont encor fendus de ce rire effrayant.

Et celui qui riait le plus haut dans le gouffre,
Larve ayant dans les dents une lueur de soufre,
Face mystérieuse aux cyniques sourcils
Soudain épanouie en fauve Némésis,
Jeta ce cri :

— Troupeau, tourbe, foule hagarde,
Manants, réveillez-vous! Populace, regarde;
Ouvrez vos yeux obscurs de larmes chassieux;
Voici trois de vos rois qui marchent sous les cieux.
Leur front a la noirceur que laisse un diadème.
Ils ont plus d’ombre en eux que n’en a la nuit même,
Car c’est après la mort le sort de tous ces dieux
Plus ténébreux, ayant été plus radieux.
Ils vont. Où donc vont-ils? Allez! Allez! Qu’importe!
Vous n’avez pas besoin qu’on vous pousse la porte,
Rois! La route est pavée et large est le terrain;
Allez! — L’un est en marbre et deux sont en airain;
Ces rois sont faits des cœurs de tous les rois leurs pères. —
Vous tous, réveillez-vous au fond de vos repaires,
Serfs qui depuis mille ans traînez l’immense croix,
Et regardez passer ces spectres qui sont rois!
Vous en avez pleuré, voici l’heure d’en rire.

Qui sont-ils? Écoutez ce que je vais vous dire.

Le premier, c’est la joie. Il fit tout en riant;
Il riait à la guerre, il riait en priant;
Le jour qu’il vint au monde, adopté par la gloire,
Son aïeul fit chanter sa mère et le fit boire;
Ce roi de belle humeur a ri jusqu’au tombeau;
C’est en riant qu’il fit de Dieu son escabeau;
Il marcha sur l’autel pour monter sur le trône;
Des meurtriers des siens il recevait l’aumône;
Il riait tant, qu’il dut exiler d’Aubigné,
Car le joyeux ne peut que chasser l’indigné;
Suivi de ses féaux, vaillantes valetailles,
Il s’épanouissait; il aimait les batailles
Et les filles, cherchant gaîment tous les hasards.

Oh! D’Estrée et de Bueil, d’Entrague et des Essarts!
Nuits! Parcs mystérieux, murmures des cascades!
Ô danses et chansons sous les pâles arcades!

Nymphes reines! Ô rois satyres et sylvains!
Ô bon Henri! Beautés, folles aux yeux divins!
Ces chiennes de l’amour, comme il s’en faisait suivre!
Comme il les enivrait de l’extase de vivre!
Comme il leur prodiguait les bijoux florentins,
Les fêtes, les ballets, les concerts, les festins
Sur qui, pour laisser voir les cieux, le plafond s’ouvre,
Les lits de brocart d’or dans les chambres du Louvre,
Et les vastes palais et les riches habits,
Et dans la pourpre en feu la braise des rubis,
Et les perles des mers dans les flots de la soie!
Ô temps heureux!

                                        Autour de ce trône de joie
Les juges, pour servir la royauté fougueux,
Allaient expédiant dans l’ombre un tas de gueux;
On pendait des marauds et des rustres, rebelles
À la taxe, à la taille, aux aides, aux gabelles,
Va-nu-pieds refusant les impôts; il faut bien
Que quelqu’un paie en somme et le roi n’y peut rien;
Et le soir, à travers le doux bruit des fontaines,
Quand les rires, mêlés aux musiques lointaines,
Semblaient accentuer la flûte et le hautbois,
Quand dans le jardin sombre épaissi comme un bois
On voyait des amants errer, et sous les branches
D’ardents profils chercher de vagues gorges blanches;
Quand dans les fleurs de lys planait l’amour ailé;
Quand Danaé vaincue offrait tout bas sa clé,
À l’instant où le roi, ravi, charmant, affable,
Jupiter fou, riait avec toute la fable,
Gai, ne quittant Léda que pour reprendre Hébé,
Et rendait le baiser qu’il avait dérobé
À quelque Gabrielle, à quelque Jacqueline,
Une brise jetait du haut de la colline
Une haleine de tombe entre ces deux baisers;
Et, non loin de ces jeux et de ces ris, brisés,
Nus, grelottant au vent sous les poutres muettes,

S’entre-choquant l’un l’autre et heurtés des chouettes,
Envoyant des bruits sourds jusqu’au royal balcon,
Les squelettes tordaient leur chaîne à Montfaucon!

Ce qui n’empêche pas que ce roi Henri quatre,
Ce Vert-galant qui sut aimer, boire et combattre,
Soit le meilleur de ceux qu’on appelle les rois.

Celui qui vient après fut moins joyeux; ses lois
Buvaient du sang; il fut comme un couteau qui tombe;
Son trône ténébreux eût une odeur de tombe,
Et le vautour y songe encore au haut du mont;
Faible et lugubre, il eut pour bras Laubardemont,
Pour cerveau Laffemas, pour âme La Reynie;
Un homme rouge fut son sceptre et son génie;
Son amitié menait, pour peu qu’on s’y fiât,
Concini dans l’égout, au billot d’Effiat;
Il semblait à ce roi, sombre tête perdue,
Que toute branche était comme une main tendue
Demandant un cadavre; il ne refusait pas;
Les arbres devenaient potences sous ses pas;
Jamais il ne laissait son prévôt la main vide;
Il jetait au supplice, affreuse goule avide
Qu’il croyait voir toujours dans l’ombre mendier,
Tantôt Galigaï, tantôt Urbain Grandier;
Il cherchait le charnier comme Henri la mêlée;
Il ne haïssait point l’odeur de chair brûlée;
Des chambres de torture il écoutait les bruits;
Ce vendangeur avait pour pommes et pour fruits
Les paniers du bourreau pleins de têtes coupées;
Dans sa tenaille ardente il tordait les épées;
Son prêtre lui faisait faire ce qu’il voulait;
D’une soutane horrible il était le valet;
Le sang l’éclaboussait des talons au panache;
Il séparait les duels avec un coup de hache;
Dépeuplant le sillon, décimant le manoir,
Il a sous les chouquets étendu le drap noir

À Paris, à Toulouse, à Nante, à la Rochelle;
Et de tous les gibets il a tenu l’échelle;
Et sa main en avait gardé le tremblement.
Ce temps fut morne, obscur, douloureux, inclément,
Implacable, et la Grève en fut la seule fête.
Tant que dura ce roi, le peuple eut sur la tête,
Au lieu d’azur, au lieu d’astres, au lieu de ciel,
On ne sait quoi de bas, d’infâme et de cruel;
On entendait la mort marcher sur cette voûte;
Ce règne eut pour plafond l’échafaud qui s’égoutte;
Donc ce roi, c’est le Juste.

Et celui qui le suit,
C’est le Grand. Ce héros, ce roi dont le front luit,
Fut magnifique; il fut le maître incomparable;
Fier, il avait sous lui la foule misérable,
Les disettes, les deuils, les détresses, les pleurs,
Un chaos de grabats, de fièvres, de douleurs;
Il fit, magicien, sortir de ces broussailles
Cette fleur gigantesque et splendide, Versailles.
Il fut le roi choisi, de puissance inondé;
Il eut Colbert, il eut Molière, il eut Condé;
Il fut lumière ainsi que Bel à Babylone;
Son trône fut si haut qu’il devint le seul trône,
Et tous les rois étaient de l’ombre devant lui;
La terre avait pour but d’occuper son ennui;
Et la toute-puissance et l’empire et la gloire
Et l’amour et l’orgueil faisaient dans la nuit noire
Au-dessus de sa tête un abîme étoilé;
Gloire à lui! Sous ses pieds, tandis que, Dieu voilé
Par toutes les splendeurs sur son front réunies,
Homme soleil ayant pour rayons des génies,
Vêtu d’or, triomphant, heureux, vertigineux,
Ne faisant point un pas qui ne fût lumineux,
Flamme, astre, il empourprait son olympe superbe,
Le peuple, n’ayant pas de pain, mangeait de l’herbe,
La nudité hurlait et se tordait les mains,

Les affamés gisants râlaient sur les chemins,
La France esclave avait un haillon pour livrée;
Un hiver, on en vint à ceci que, navrée,
N'ayant plus une ronce à manger, ne sachant
Que faire, ayant brouté tous les chardons du champ,
La misère attaqua les mornes catacombes;
Le soir on enjambait le mur triste des tombes;
Des cimetières noirs l'homme chassait les loups;
De la bière pourrie on écartait les clous,
Et le peuple fouillait de ses ongles les fosses;
Les femmes blasphémaient et pleuraient d'être grosses,
Et les petits enfants rongeaient les os des morts;
Les mères des cercueils tâchaient d'ouvrir les bords,
Cherchant ce qu'on pourrait manger dans ces décombres,
Creusant, mordant; si bien que les trépassés sombres,
Se dressant à travers les tombeaux écroulés,
Disaient à ces vivants : qu'est-ce que vous voulez?
Mais qu'importe! Il fut grand; il mit le monde en flamme;
Il fut le nom vainqueur que la foudre proclame;
Et les drapeaux au vent, les tambours, les canons,
Les batailles nouant leurs orageux chaînons,
Les plaines par la mort des villes élargies,
Le réseau flamboyant des vastes stratégies,
Turenne, Luxembourg, Schomberg, Lorge, Brissac,
Et Namur massacrée et Courtray mise à sac,
L'incendie à Bruxelle et le pillage à Furnes,
Les fleuves rougissant de sang leurs sombres urnes,
Gand, Maëstricht, Besançon, Heidelberg, Montmédy,
La boucherie au nord, la tuerie au midi,
L'Europe ravagée, écrasée, étouffée,
Lui firent dans son Louvre un colossal trophée
De ruine, de nuit, de cendre et de tombeaux.

Mais c'est peu, les cités ainsi que des flambeaux
Brûlant et répandant leur lueur sur la terre;
C'est peu l'éclat guerrier, la gloire militaire,
Cette goutte de sang qui s'élargit toujours;

C’est peu le choc des camps, l’écroulement des tours;
La guerre, cheval fauve, au-dessus des frontières,
Jetant aux fronts des rois ses ruades altières,
C’est peu; c’est peu l’épique et vaste assassinat
De l’Artois, de la Flandre et du Palatinat;
Remplacer les moissons par des flots de fumées,
Coucher sur les sillons des cadavres d’armées,
Briser les escadrons contre les escadrons,
Ce n’est rien; ce n’est rien la clameur des clairons,
L’obus crevant les murs, les places bombardées,
Gengiskhan et Timour passés de cent coudées;
Il fit plus, il se fit le grand bourreau de Dieu;
Pieux, il ramena, par le fer et le feu,
Son peuple à la candeur de la foi catholique,
Et Rome admire encor, dans sa joie angélique,
Ce qu’il a fait blanchir, en ces temps immortels,
D’âmes, de cœurs, d’esprits, au pied des vrais autels,
Et de crânes au pied de la potence horrible.
Oh! Comme l’évangile extermine la bible!
Comme c’est beau, le roi plein d’un Dieu furieux!
Splendides flamboiements du saint glaive des cieux!
De quoi les rois chrétiens ne sont-ils pas capables
Lorsqu’il faut venger Dieu de ces maudits, coupables
Du crime de vouloir prier à leur façon!
Ô spectacle admirable! Exil, bagne, prison,
Des pasteurs, des docteurs, des hommes consulaires
Courbés sous le bâton dans le banc des galères,
Cinq cent mille bannis, cent mille massacrés,
Dix mille brûlés vifs, rompus vifs, torturés,
Patients en chemise au seuil des basiliques,
Tourbillon des bûchers sur les places publiques,
Âcre fumée ayant des râles dans ses plis,
Surprises, guets-apens, gens tués dans leurs lits,
Juges fatals passant ainsi que des tonnerres,
Pinces tordant des seins de femme, octogénaires
Dont la barre de fer fait crier les vieux os,
Tous les dogues du meurtre ouvrant leurs noirs naseaux,

Rivières rejetant les noyés sur leurs plages,
Cavalerie affreuse écrasant les villages,
Feu, ravage, viol, le carnage, le sang,
La fange, et Bossuet, sinistre, applaudissant!
Ô roi pieux béni de l’église qu’il sauve!
Tout un peuple traqué comme une bête fauve!
Oui, ce fut comme un vol de sanglants éperviers;
Montrevel sur Tournon, Lamoignon sur Viviers;
Oui, ce fut monstrueux, oui, ce fut lamentable;
On tuait dans la rue, on tuait dans l’étable;
On jetait dans le puits l’enfant criant Jésus,
La mère, et l’on mettait une pierre dessus;
On sabrait du pasteur la vieille tête chauve;
Les crosses des mousquets écrasaient dans l’alcôve
La nourrice au berceau, l’aïeule à son rouet;
Siècle affreux! Les dragons chassaient à coups de fouet
Devant eux des troupeaux de femmes toutes nues;
La débauche inventait des rages inconnues;
L’orgie imaginait des supplices; le vin
Inspirait Sabaoth dans son courroux divin;
Cent monstres bondissaient de contrée en contrée;
La cartouche éclatait dans la vierge éventrée;
L’orthodoxie était comme un tigre qui rit,
Tartuffe encourageait de Sade au nom du Christ!
Fanatisme hideux, implacables doctrines,
Faisant de tout un peuple un monceau de ruines,
Affreux, le sabre aux dents, le crucifix au poing!
Tu ne crois pas en Dieu, Louvois! Tu n’y crois point,
Letellier! Ah! Vieillards, mères, enfants, victimes!
Ce sont les ennemis de Dieu qui font ces crimes;
Le servir de la sorte, avec du sang aux mains,
C’est vouloir l’étouffer dans le cœur des humains;
Ces religions-là, ce sont les pelletées
De terre que sur Dieu jettent les noirs athées!

Et c’est pourquoi ce roi rayonne; il est flagrant
Que l’autre étant le juste, il faut qu’il soit le grand.

Ô grandeur, de charnier et de meurtre mêlée,
Qui de têtes de mort apparaît étoilée!
Lion superbe ayant le chat pour compagnon!
Conquérant coudoyé par les supplices! Nom
Où la veuve Scarron jette son ombre vile!
Sceptre qui s’est laissé manier par Bâville!
Glaive altier dont la fouine a léché le fourreau!
Lauriers où sont marqués les dix doigts du bourreau!
Roi qui tresse la claie et comble la voirie!
Ô couronne des lys qui, la nuit, se marie
Au bonnet de béguine où l’église souda
La calotte de fer du vieux Torquemada!

Ô peuple que son roi broie et détruit! Désastre
D’un monde sur qui tombe et s’écrase son astre!

Tout le soir de ce règne appartient aux hiboux;
Dans ce noir crépuscule ils sortent de leurs trous;
Les billots, les poteaux mêlent leurs vagues formes,
Et l’on voit se dresser, monstrueuses, énormes,
Une roue au couchant, une roue au levant,
Où pendent, disloqués, dans les souffles du vent,
Deux cadavres, sur qui tout le genre humain prie,
L’un est la conscience et l’autre est la patrie.

Ô grand Louis, héros, vainqueur, sacré, flatté,
Adoré, l’avenir, qui dit la vérité
Plus haut que les Fléchiers et que les Bourdaloues,
T’offre un char triomphal, mais avec ces deux roues. —

Il se fit un silence, et le masque un moment
Se tut, puis se remit à rire affreusement.
— Allez! Le fleuve gronde et le vent se courrouce.
Allez! Allez, les rois! Où vont-ils? Qui les pousse,
N’ayant plus d’intérêt dans ce monde vivant?
Et qu’est-ce donc qu’ils ont à marcher en avant?
Allez! Allez! Où donc les mènes-tu, nuit blême?

Nuit! Ces trois rois en vont chercher un quatrième.

Ce quatrième-là, comment le raconter?

Venu pour tout corrompre et pour tout éhonter,
Il ne fut pas le roi du sang, mais de l’écume.
L’autre était le soleil, il vint, et fut la brume;
Il fut l’impur miasme, il fut l’extinction
De la dernière haleine et du dernier rayon;
Il répandit sur l’âme humaine exténuée
Tout ce que le bourbier peut jeter de nuée.
Il s’appela Rosbach, il s’appela Terray;
Adieu le pur, le grand, le saint, le beau, le vrai!
Corruption, débauche, impudeur, arbitraire,
Un sinistre appétit de faire le contraire
De ce que veut l’honneur, un satyre à l’affût,
Boue et néant, voilà ce que cet homme fut.
D’autres rois ont été flairés par les orfraies;
Ils ont été les pleurs, les tortures, les plaies,
Les terreurs, les fléaux; celui-ci fut l’affront,
On vit sous lui le front de la France, ce front
Où la lueur de Dieu s’épanouit et monte,
Apprendre la courbure horrible de la honte;
Ô deuil! Le drapeau franc et la peur mariés,
Deux vils sauve-qui-peut en même temps criés
Ici par la faillite, et là, par la déroute;
La vieille honnêteté publique croulant toute;
L’honneur mort; dans un siècle un seul jour : Fontenoy;
Ce règne est une cave, et sous ce lâche roi
Tout s’éclipse, grandeur, victoire, exploits célèbres;
Et, de mille fils noirs traversant les ténèbres,
Tout au fond, arrêtant dans leur vol vers l’azur
La grâce, la beauté, la jeunesse au front pur,
Son lit sombre rayonne en toile d’araignée.
Et cependant la terre est d’aurore baignée,
Un jour se lève, on sent un souffle frissonner;
La France est une forge où l’on entend sonner

Le marteau du progrès et l’enclume du monde;
Tout monte à l’idéal, lui, plonge dans l’immonde;
La France marche au jour, lui dans l’ombre s’enfuit;
Auprès de la lumière il élève la nuit;
En regard de Paris, ce roi bâtit Sodome.

Or on allait cherchant un surnom à cet homme.

Voyez : instincts rampants, amours empoisonneurs,
Toutes les lâchetés et tous les déshonneurs,
Ignorance du bien et du mal, turpitude,
Bon visage aux méchants, orgie, ingratitude,
Soupir de délivrance à la mort de son fils;
Organisant la faim, faisant d’affreux profits
Sur les peuples hagards que la misère mine,
S’engraissant de leur diète et mangeant leur famine,
Roi vampire; riant des sanglots, sourd aux cris;
Rampant, faisant régner l’Angleterre à Paris;
Laissant rouer Calas, laissant brûler Labarre;
Dur par indifférence et mollesse, barbare
Pour ne pas se donner la peine d’être bon;
Fumier fleurdelysé, Vitellius Bourbon;
Ayant sous ses plaisirs des prisons sépulcrales,
Des pleurs dans la Bastille exécrée, et des râles
Dans les cages de fer du vieux mont Saint-Michel;
Petit-fils de cent rois, mais pas le plus cruel,
Pas le plus oppresseur du peuple et de l’empire,
Pas le plus furieux ni le plus fou; — Le pire;
Le plus vil; exilant quiconque ose penser;
Débile, et par accès tâchant de redresser
Quelque horrible pilier de l’antique édifice;
Au fond du parc-aux-cerfs rêvant le saint-office;
Ayant le mal pour but, la fange pour chemin;
Ténébreux, soupçonné de bains de sang humain;
Foulant aux pieds le droit et la vertu, chimères;
Infâme; soulevant des émeutes de mères;
Froid regard, pied sali, front hautain, cœur fermé;

Comment nommer ce roi, sinon le Bien-Aimé?

On le méprise tant, ce malheureux, qu’on pleure.
Monstre! Il suffit qu’un fou d’une épingle l’effleure
Pour que ce Prusias devienne un Busiris,
Pour qu’on voie, au milieu de l’horreur et des cris,
Cent tourments, plus d’enfer que n’en a rêvé Dante,
Le feu, l’arrachement des membres, l’huile ardente,
Le plomb fondu qui fait d’un coupable un martyr,
Toute une éruption de supplices sortir
De son égratignure élargie en cratère.

Ô misérable! Il est le dégoût de la terre;
Il est l’éclat de rire insolent de vingt rois;
Et l’histoire lui tend l’opprobre et lui dit : bois!
Est-ce donc une loi, nuit, cieux incorruptibles,
Dieu bon, que les abjects succèdent aux terribles,
Qu’on n’échappe au torrent que pour choir au ruisseau,
Et que le sanglier soit suivi du pourceau!

La mort enfin souffla sur cette tête infâme;
Il rendit à la nuit ce qu’on nommait son âme;
Et comme on le portait, au glas sourd des beffrois,
À Saint-Denis où dort le noir monceau des rois,
Le lâche près du fort, l’impur près du féroce,
On vit, tandis qu’autour du funèbre carrosse
Les prêtres répandaient leur encens, vain brouillard,
Ruisseler de dessous le royal corbillard
On ne sait quelle pluie éclaboussant la roue
Qui suintait du char sombre et qui tachait la boue;
C’était ce roi, ce maître et cet homme d’orgueil
Qui tombait goutte à goutte à travers son cercueil.
Despotes, vous vivez, vous dévorez le monde,
Vous avez Pompadour, Diane ou Rosemonde,
Vous riez, vous régnez; les fronts se courbent tous;
La honte des pays frémit derrière vous;
Vous faites une tache immonde sur l’histoire;

Vous mourez : ô la chère et l'illustre mémoire!
Et l'oraison funèbre appelée au palais,
Pleurante, met sa mitre et ses bas violets,
Et, vous mêlant à Dieu, célèbre vos obsèques,
Vos gloires ne font pas reculer les évêques,
Mais vos cadavres font reculer l'embaumeur. —

Les masques bruissaient comme une onde en rumeur;
On eût cru, dans un fond insondable et sublime,
Entendre chuchoter les vagues d'un abîme;
Et l'un d'eux qui suivait les rois d'un œil ardent
S'écria :

— Nord et sud! Orient! Occident!
Où le soleil se lève, où le soleil se couche,
Partout! Ils sont partout!… Oh! Le grand vent farouche,
Le vent d'en haut, quand donc se déchaînera-t-il?
Le vent de deuil, le vent d'horreur, le vent d'exil
Qui roulera les rois dans ses larges bouffées,
Fera rugir d'effroi le lion des trophées,
Trembler le piédestal sous son orageux flot,
Et prendre à la statue équestre le galop?
Ô colosses de bronze et de pierre, monarques
Dont le globe meurtri porte partout les marques,
Tyrans, soyez maudits! Puisse, à travers les cieux,
La nuit vous emporter d'un souffle furieux,
Et, le fouet de l'éclair aux mains, pâle et vivante,
Vous poursuivre, mêlant dans l'immense épouvante
Et le cheval de marbre et le cheval d'airain,
Et, rois! Faire à jamais, dans la terreur sans frein,
Au fond du gouffre, plein d'éternelles huées,
Sous votre fuite sombre écrouler les nuées! —

Et ce masque pleurait et jetait des cris sourds.
Derrière les trois rois qui s'avançaient toujours,
Implacable, il semblait la pâle conscience.

Le rieur effrayant lui cria : Patience!

Et les trois rois marchaient sur le quai ténébreux,
Sans entendre ces cris de l’ombre derrière eux.

L’Arrivée

Oh! Les mornes chevaux, comme ils allaient, farouches!
Nul souffle ne sortait de leurs fatales bouches,
Nul regard n’étoilait la noirceur de leurs yeux.
À mesure que, froids, sourds et silencieux,
Ils entraient plus avant dans la grande nuit triste,
L’infini, qui, muet, aux prodiges assiste,
Épaississait la brume au fond de l’horizon;
Et les arbres, troublés d’un sépulcral frisson,
Tordaient leurs bras souffrants et leurs branches meurtries,
Tandis que cheminaient le long des tuileries,
Toujours du même pas vertigineux et lent,
Les deux cavaliers noirs et le cavalier blanc.

Devant eux, comme un cap où les flots se déchirent,
L’angle de la terrasse apparut; ils franchirent
Ce pas sombre, et le bruit cessa sur les pavés,
Et l’ombre fit silence; ils étaient arrivés.

L’eau du fleuve fuyait, d’obscurité couverte.

Ô terreur! Au milieu de la place déserte,
Au lieu de la statue, au point même où leurs yeux
Cherchaient le Bien-Aimé triomphal et joyeux,
Apparaissaient, hideux et debout dans le vide,
Deux poteaux noirs portant un triangle livide;
Le triangle pendait, nu, dans la profondeur;
Plus bas on distinguait une vague rondeur,
Espèce de lucarne ouverte sur de l’ombre;
Deux nuages traçaient au fond des cieux ce nombre :
— Quatrevingt-treize-chiffre on ne sait d’où venu.

C’était on ne sait quel échafaud inconnu.

Lugubre, il se dressait; derrière sa charpente

De quelque étrange abîme on devinait la pente;
Les arbres regardaient l’horrible vision;
L’ouragan retenait sa respiration
Devant la silhouette informe et ténébreuse;
Et tout semblait hagard; tant la machine affreuse,
Rouge comme un carnage et noire comme un deuil,
Debout entre l’énigme et l’homme, sur un seuil
Qui peut-être est le ciel, peut-être la géhenne,
Contenait de néant, d’épouvante et de haine!
Sous le blême triangle une échelle tremblait.
L’échafaud, immobile et monstrueux, semblait
Communiquer avec la tombe universelle.
Une pourpre, semblable à celle qui ruisselle
Et qui fume le long du mur des abattoirs,
Filtrait de telle sorte entre les pavés noirs
Qu’elle écrivait ce mot mystérieux : Justice.
On devinait que l’âpre et farouche bâtisse,
Calme, définitive, inexprimable à voir,
Avait été construite avec du désespoir,
Et sortait des douleurs, des pleurs et des décombres;
Et que les deux poteaux, dans les carrefours sombres
Où l’homme marche triste, aveuglément conduit,
Avaient jadis marqué les routes de la nuit;
On pouvait, dans la brume où l’infini commence,
Lire sur l’un : Pouvoir, et sur l’autre : Démence;
Le cercle, qui s’ouvrait sous le lourd coutelas,
Rappelait le carcan et le couronne, hélas!
On sentait, à travers la vague horreur des rêves,
Que ce triangle était forgé de tous les glaives,
Du fer d’Achab ainsi que du fer d’Attila;
Toute l’immensité de la mort était là,
Montant dans la nuée et jusqu’aux cieux terribles.

À peine palpitaient les choses invisibles;
Pas un cri, pas un bruit, pas un souffle. Parfois,
Et ceci redoublait la terreur des trois rois,
Entre les deux sanglants et tragiques pilastres,

La brume s’écartait et l’on voyait les astres.

Car, ô nuit! On sentait que Dieu, le grand voilé,
À cette chose étrange et triste était mêlé;
L’éternité pesait dans ce lieu tout entière;
Cette place fatale en semblait la frontière.

Les rois lisaient le mot écrit sur le pavé.

L’œil qui dans ce moment suprême eût observé
Ces figures, de glace et de calme vêtues,
Eût vu distinctement pâlir les trois statues.

Ils se taisaient; et tout se taisait autour d’eux;
Si la mort eût tourné son sablier hideux,
On en eût entendu glisser le grain de sable.

Une tête passa dans l’ombre formidable.
Cette tête était blême; il en tombait du sang.
Et les trois cavaliers frémirent; et, froissant
Vaguement le pommeau de sa lugubre épée,
L’aïeul de bronze dit à la tête coupée
(Dialogue funèbre et du gouffre écouté) :
— Oh! L’expiation, dans ce lieu redouté,
Règne sans doute avec quelque ange pour ministre?
Quel est ton crime? Ô toi qui vas, tête sinistre,
Plus pâle que le Christ sur son noir crucifix?

— Je suis le petit-fils de votre petit-fils.

— Et d’où viens-tu?

— Du trône. Ô rois, l’ombre est terrible!

— Spectre, quelle est là-bas cette machine horrible?

— C’est la fin, dit la tête au regard sombre et doux.

— Et qui donc l’a construite?

— Ô mes pères, c’est vous.
25 décembre 1857. Christmas.

SOIT. MAIS QUOI QUE CE SOIT QUI RESSEMBLE A LA HAINE

Soit. Mais quoi que ce soit qui ressemble à la haine
N’est pas le dénouement, et l’aurore est certaine;
C’est au bonheur que doit, quoi qu’on fasse, aboutir
L’effort humain, ce sombre et souriant martyr;
La vie aux yeux sereins sort toujours de la tombe;
Tout déluge a pour fin le vol d’une colombe;
Jamais l’espoir sacré n’a dit : je me trompais.
Oh! Ne vous lassez point, penseurs; versez la paix,
Versez la foi, versez l’idée et la prière,
Et sur ces flots de nuit des torrents de lumière!
Gloire à Dieu! Nul progrès ne se fait à demi.
Le malheur du méchant, le deuil de l’ennemi,
Non, ce n’est pas le but, sous ce ciel qui déborde
De bonté, de pardon, d’extase et de concorde.
Vivants, toutes les fois que ce globe de fer
Ébauche un peu d’éden, ruine un peu d’enfer,
Et qu’un écueil s’écroule, et qu’un phare flamboie,
Et que les nations font des pas vers la joie
En luttant, en cherchant, en priant, en aimant,
Le ciel rayonne et semble un grand consentement.

Les mains se chercheront de loin; tous les contraires,
Désarmés, attendris, calmés, deviendront frères;
Nous verrons se confondre en douces unions
Ce que nous acceptons et ce que nous nions;
Les parfums sortiront à travers les écorces;
L’idée éclairera l’aveuglement des forces;
L’antique antagonisme entre l’âme et le corps
Sera comme une lyre aux célestes accords;
Le souffle baisera l’argile, et la matière
Plongera dans l’esprit sa farouche frontière;
La charrue aidera l’hymne, et les travailleurs

Auront aux mains la gerbe et sur le front des fleurs;
Car pour le verbe saint nulle voix n’est muette!
La pioche du mineur, la strophe du poète,
Creusent la même énigme et cherchent le même or.
Qu’importent les chemins où l’homme marche encor
Tantôt mouillé de pluie et tantôt blanc de poudre!

C’est en fraternité que tout doit se dissoudre;
Et Dieu fera servir le calcul, la raison,
L’étude et la science, à cette guérison.
Peuples, Demain n’est pas un monstre qui nous guette;
Ni la flèche qu’Hier en s’enfuyant nous jette.
Ô peuples! L’avenir est déjà parmi nous.
Il veut le droit de tous comme le pain pour tous;
Calme, invincible, au champ de bataille suprême,
Il lutte; à voir comment il frappe, on sent qu’il aime;
Regardez-le passer, ce grand soldat masqué!
Il se dévoilera, peuples, au jour marqué;
En attendant il fait son œuvre; la pensée
Sort, lumière, à travers sa visière baissée;
Il lutte pour la femme, il lutte pour l’enfant,
Pour le peuple qu’il sert, pour l’âme qu’il défend,
Pour l’idéal splendide et libre; et la mêlée,
Sombre, de ses deux yeux de flamme est étoilée.

Son bouclier, où luit ce grand mot : Essayons!
Est fait d’une poignée énorme de rayons.
Il ébauche l’Europe, il achève la France;
Il chasse devant lui, terrible, l’ignorance,
Les superstitions où les cœurs sont plongés,
Et tout le tourbillon des pâles préjugés.
Oh! Ne le craignez pas, peuples! Son nom immense,
C’est aujourd’hui Combat et c’est demain Clémence.

À qui te cherche, ô Vrai, jamais tu n’échappas.
Une étape après l’autre. Après un pas, un pas.
Dans sa course qui met en feu son auréole,

Le Progrès n’a pas peur d’entrer, lui qui s’envole,
Chez ce monstre divin, la Révolution.
Il lui prend un éclair et lui donne un rayon;
Car il le peut, ses yeux étant faits de lumière;
Puis il sort de la haute et grondante tanière;
Et son attention est toute désormais
Sur ce grand but, plus pur que les plus blancs sommets,
Plus lointain que la nue à l’horizon perdue :
La Paix, clarté visible à travers l’étendue,
L’Harmonie, attirant vers elle l’élément,
L’Amour, prodigieux et chaud rayonnement.

L’aigle de la montagne est rentré dans son aire;
Il a fait en passant sa visite au tonnerre;
Maintenant, l’œil fixé sur l’abîme vermeil,
Calme, il rêve au moyen d’atteindre le soleil.
20 avril 1870.

LA LÉGENDE DES SIÈCLES: DERNIERE SERIE

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DERNIÈRE SÉRIE

JE NE ME SENTAIS PLUS VIVANT...

*

Je ne me sentais plus vivant; je me retrouve,
Je marche, je revois le but sacré. J’éprouve
Le vertige divin, joyeux, épouvanté,
Des doutes convergeant tous vers la vérité;
Pourtant je hais le dogme, un dogme c’est un cloître.
Je sens le sombre amour des précipices croître
Dans mon sauvage cœur, saignant, blessé, banni,
Calme, et de plus en plus épars dans l’infini.
Si j’abaisse les yeux, si je regarde l’ombre,
Je sens en moi, devant les supplices sans nombre,
Les bourreaux, les tyrans, grandir à chaque pas
Une indignation qui ne m’endurcit pas,
Car s’indigner de tout, c’est tout aimer en somme,
Et tout le genre humain est l’abîme de l’homme.

Le philosophe plane et rêve sur ces flots
De douleurs, de tourments, d’angoisses, de sanglots,
Où partout quelque esquif lutte, chavire et sombre;
Ainsi qu’une hirondelle au-dessus d’une eau sombre,
Dans ce monde qui semble au hasard châtié,
L’âme tournoie autour d’un gouffre, la pitié.
Que croire? — Oh! la pitié me prend, m’emplit, m’enivre,
Me donne le dégoût formidable de vivre,
Me porte à des excès étranges, secourir
Au hasard, à tâtons, ceux que je vois souffrir,
Être indulgent, pensif, tendre, clément, stupide;
Si bien que par moments la foule me lapide.

C’est bien fait, certe. — Amis, je rentre en tout cela,
J’étais absent, j’arrive, et je dis : me voilà!

Prendre garde à ce peuple obscur sur qui l’on marche,
Aimer mieux me jeter aux flots qu’entrer dans l’arche,
N’avoir jamais le mal des autres pour souhait,
Plaindre la haine, même en celui qui me hait,
Je reviens à mon œuvre. Et j’offre à cette bouche
Qui s’ouvre obscurément dans toute âme farouche,
Aux noirs désespérés errant sans feu ni lieu,
Un peu de vie à boire, et ce verre d’eau, Dieu.

I

LES GRANDES LOIS

I

Écoute; — nous vivrons, nous saignerons, nous sommes
Faits pour souffrir parmi les femmes et les hommes,
Et nous apercevrons devant nos yeux, vois-tu,
Comme des monts, travail, honneur, devoir, vertu,
Et nous gravirons l’une après l’autre ces cimes;
Quand nous serons en bas, loin des sommets sublimes,
Nous dresserons nos fronts; mais, en haut, nos genoux
Ploieront; les passions viendront rugir en nous,
Et nous leur servirons d’antres et de repaires;
Nous pleurerons nos fils, nous pleurerons nos pères,
Nous verrons le cercueil germer dans le berceau;
Dans nos soifs, nous boirons à Dieu, comme au ruisseau,

Nous deviendrons, après nos deuils et nos attentes,
Des âmes sur le bord du tombeau palpitantes,
Car, pour l’homme ici-bas marqué d’un divin sceau,
Vivre, pleurer, souffrir, c’est devenir oiseau,
Et toutes les douleurs sont les plumes de l’aile,
Nous suivrons la puissance, au néant parallèle,
Ou, plus sages, l’amour qui fuit au fond des bois,
Nous aurons nos espoirs, nos terreurs, nos abois;
Nous nous emplirons d’ombre ou d’azur la prunelle...

Et nous nous en irons vers l’étoile éternelle!

II

IRE, NON AMBIRE

Sachons mener à bout, sans égoïsme vain,
Notre travail humain sous le travail divin;
Si l’orgueil vient, broyons du pied cette couleuvre,
L’homme est l’outil, Dieu seul est l’ouvrier de l’œuvre,

Donc servons pour servir, avec simplicité.
Sans avoir pris de grade à l’université
Et sans être nommé recteur par le ministre,
Le blond soleil dissout l’ignorance sinistre.
Éclairons comme lui, non pour nous, mais pour tous,
Et faisons gravement ce que Dieu fait pour nous.
Je crois; cela vaut-il qu’on m’adore? Je pense;
Cela mérite-t-il aucune récompense?
Je vois; mais c’est déjà posséder tout que voir!
Hommes, jusqu’au martyre acceptons le devoir;
Souffrons, aimons; soyons l’apôtre, soyons l’ange,

Et ne demandons rien, pas même une louange.
La nature adoucit l’homme par ses rayons,
Elle brille dans l’aigle et dans les alcyons,
Dans l’onde où boit l’oiseau, dans l’herbe où l’agneau bêle,
Et ne tend pas la main quand on dit : qu’elle est belle!
Mai, sans être payé, combat l’hiver qui fuit;
Le lys n’a pas besoin qu’on le décore, il luit;
La lavande embaumée où l’abeille se pose
Ne lui vend pas le miel; quand il produit la rose,
Le rosier fait gratis cette action d’éclat,
L’astre a-t-il attendu jamais qu’on l’appelât
Et que quelque Lindor chantât une romance,
Pour venir de sa flamme éblouir l’ombre immense?

III

*

Par-dessus le marché je dois être ravi.
Quoi! des vivisecteurs, à la fois, à l’envi,
Des chimistes, anglais, allemands, tous ensemble,
Loupe et scalpel en main, m’affirment qu’il leur semble

Certain, démontré presque et probable à peu près
Qu’entre l’homme d’Athène et le loup des forêts,
Qu’entre un essaim d’égout et le peuple de France,

Le total fait, il n’est aucune différence;
Qu’on trouve, en les traitant par les mêmes réchauds,
La même quantité de phosphate de chaux
Dans le plus affreux chien que dans le plus grand homme;
Que par conséquent Sparte est égale à Sodome;
Que mon droit pèse autant qu’un souffle aérien,
Et que, fussé-je Eschyle ou Christ, je ne suis rien,
Rien, l’éclair, la vapeur de la locomotive.
Je dois être enchanté de cette perspective;
Sinon, je suis vraiment bien difficile.
Ah çà!
Consultez Don Quichotte ou bien Sancho Pança,
Depuis quand un marcheur, qui pour sa longue route
N’a rien, est-il tenu d’aimer la banqueroute?
Depuis quand, grand, petit, satrape ou chevrier,
L’homme qui cherche femme et veut se marier,
L’espérant belle, est-il heureux de l’avoir laide?
Exigerez-vous donc que les juifs de Tolède
Soient contents d’être cuits tout vivants dans des fours,
Et qu’on me voie errer parmi les carrefours,
Triomphant, plein de joie et d’extase électrique,
Parce que vous m’aurez promis des coups de trique?
Examinons.

*

Sortir de l’immortalité;
Être un orang-outang qui, par ancienneté
Ou par faveur, obtient le grade de jocrisse;
Avoir l’énorme nuit des bêtes pour nourrice,
Être de l’ombre après avoir été du bruit;
Suivre d’Argens, qui suit la Beaumelle, qui suit
Locke, qui suit Pyrrhon, qui suivait Épicure;
Me remettre à tourner dans cette roue obscure;
Recommencer la vieille aventure d’Isis;
Épousseter ce tas de systèmes moisis
Qui tuaient le scrupule et mettaient au service

De Borgia le crime et de Néron le vice;
Nier la dignité des hommes au profit
Des despotes à qui le vil troupeau suffit;
Ne point savoir si rien de ce qu'on pense existe,
Et pourtant affirmer la négation triste;

Croire qu'aucun soleil n'a jamais vraiment lui;
Entre deux doutes prendre avec amour celui
Qui m'abaisse et m'emplit de cendre et non de flamme,
Et vouloir être brute ayant le choix d'être âme!

Avoir dans l'infini besoin d'être zéro!

Eh bien non.
*

Non!
Je puis tirer un numéro,
Dites-vous, dans ce sac, la nature profonde,
Dans cette loterie insondable, le monde,
Où rien n'a commencé puisque rien ne finit,
Où tout est vie et gouffre, où l'étoile au zénith
Luit comme une paillette aux plis d'une basquine;
Eh bien, je ne suis point charmé d'avoir ce quine :

Gorille. Et j'aime mieux rester tout bêtement
L'homme, et sentir en moi vivre le firmament.
Quand vous venez me dire : — Un creuset, c'est tout l'homme;
Le destin est un feu, la fumée est la somme;
Tout aboutit au même abîme universel;
La vertu, c'est du sucre, et le crime est du sel;
Au fond, nulle action n'est mauvaise ni bonne,
Le droit, c'est un journal et l'on s'y désabonne;
Aujourd'hui pour, demain contre, pas de mépris
Aux méchants, pas de culte aux bons! — je suis surpris,
J'entends des cris en moi. Quoi! c'est votre programme!
L'homme est dans un flot sombre une inutile rame!

Quoi? ni devoir ni droit! rien n’est vrai, rien n’est faux!
Quoi! saluer Bismark sous les arcs triomphaux!
Avoir été la France et devenir province!
Quand Poërio meurt dans le bagne du prince,
Trouver sage le prince et fou Poërio!
Vrai, je suis peu tenté par ce scenario.
*

À vous en croire, l’homme au fond est sur la terre

Juste autant que le bœuf, l’onagre et la panthère;
Dans le premier venu des tigres l’homme est né;
L’homme est un léopard, mais perfectionné;
L’homme est parmi les ours la brute aristocrate!
*

Certe, Aristote est grand, mais j’aime mieux Socrate.
Ah! la science est belle et sublime, et je hais
Quiconque met obstacle à ses profonds souhaits;
Elle prend dans le piége auguste de ses règles
Les vérités au vol comme on prendrait des aigles,
Elle sonde le fait, le chiffre, l’élément;
Elle est vaste à ce point qu’il semble par moment
Que son puissant compas fait le tour de l’espace.
Mais pourtant quelque chose en l’homme la dépasse,
C’est la vertu. Quelqu’un est plus grand qu’elle, et va
Où jamais le calcul le plus haut n’arriva,
Quelqu’un sait mieux trouver l’or que roule le fleuve,
Quelqu’un voit mieux, quelqu’un prouve plus que la preuve,
C’est toi, Zénon, qui luis; c’est toi, Baudin, qui meurs!
Par la sérénité superbe de ses mœurs
Sparte fait plus qu’aucun docteur par sa doctrine.
Quoi! c’est zéro ce cœur qui bat dans ma poitrine!
Quoi! la chimie est tout! Quand j’ai mon résidu,
Un peu de cendre, un peu d’ombre, rien ne m’est dû!

La statique prouvant, non le droit, mais la force,

Le droit n’est pas! John Brown, Spartacus, Wilberforce,
Demeurent interdits si Biot ne les secourt!
Quoi! devant Gay-Lussac Mazzini reste court!
Garibaldi ne sait que dire à Lamettrie!
Quoi! tout, hormis l’algèbre et la géométrie,
Tout, excepté Poinsot, tout, excepté Bezout,
Excepté deux et deux font quatre, se dissout!
Quoi! le martyre est vain! l’héroïsme est stupide!
Brutus, brute! On te jette au gouffre, on te lapide,
Pour avoir défendu, quoi? ton pays? niais!
Tibère est fort, donc juste; et tu calomniais
Tibère. Le scalpel fouille tout fibre à fibre

Sans rien voir qui ressemble à ceci, l’homme libre;
Donc l’homme libre, ami, n’est pas. L’homme est du vent!
*

Vous m’offrez de ramper ver de terre savant;
Eh bien, non. J’aime mieux l’ignorance étoilée
De Platon, de Pindare, âme et clarté d’Élée,
Et de ce Dante errant qui baisse factieux
Son œil farouche où tremble une lueur des cieux.
L’homme est par eux aussi lumineux qu’il puisse être.
J’ai lu monsieur Leuret, le sage de Bicêtre
Et je n’ignore pas qu’un poëte est un fou;
Je sais que Planche crie à Milton : casse-cou!

Qu’avoir fait l’Iliade est, auprès de Nonotte
Et du bon abbé Gaume, une mauvaise note,
Et qu’au nom du bon sens, du bon goût, et de l’art,
Shakspeare est dédaigné par monsieur Baculard;
Je sais cela, j’en suis tremblant, et pourtant j’ose
Trouver dans tout ce tas de songeurs quelque chose;
Je vois ce qu’ils ont vu, je crois ce qu’ils ont cru;
Le visage du vrai là-haut m’est apparu,
Splendide, et ma prunelle en demeure éblouie.

Ils ont affirmé l’âme; et tous mes sens, l’ouïe,
Les yeux, rendent chez moi témoignage pour eux.
Sans doute il est bien doux d’être fort malheureux
Et de traîner des fers pendant beaucoup d’années,
Et de se dire : Après les dures destinées,
Après avoir souffert, après avoir pleuré,
Après avoir été de griffes effleuré
Et souffleté par l’aile obscure de l’envie,
Après avoir été juste toute ma vie,
Après avoir au front porté comme un cimier
La probité, j’aurai l’honneur d’être fumier,
Et je serai l’égal dans le sépulcre infâme

De Nisard comme esprit et de Judas comme âme.
Là s’efface l’immense et vaine vision;
Et tous les hommes, ceux de Tyr, ceux de Sion,
Ceux de Gomorrhe, ceux de Paris, ceux de Rome
Marc-Aurèle, du sang des peuples économe,
Nemrod, tigre accablant la terre de ses bonds,
Ceux qu’on nomme méchants, ceux qu’on appelle bons,
Tous, l’homme de douceur, l’homme de violence,
Et le juge effrayant qui vendit la balance,
Quoi que chacun ait fait, mêlant les pas aux voix,
Tous dans la vaste nuit reçoivent à la fois
Cette absolution sinistre, la poussière.
La mort, spectre masqué, n’a rien sous sa visière.
Le gouffre, où le destin se résout et s’absout,
Arrive à l’innocence effroyable de tout;
Le bourreau vaut autant que le martyr; l’asile

S’ouvre à Sforce joyeux comme à Dante imbécile;
Avec Caligula Jésus est acquitté;
La justice pourrit avec l’iniquité;
Et Thersite, Caton, Davus gai, Bacchus sombre,
Font le même néant pêle-mêle dans l’ombre.
Matière, éclipse, songe, oubli. Tout est passé.

Eh bien, soyez surpris, oui, je suis insensé
Jusqu’à ne point vouloir de cette offre. Elle est belle
Certes. Oui, les vivants, vague troupeau qui bêle,
Mordus toute la route et jusqu’à l’abattoir,
Saignent, et je suis un de ceux que le ciel noir
Frappe et n’empêche pas de lutter, nous subîmes
Toute la vaste pluie engouffrée aux abîmes,
Le sort nous meurtrit tous sans jamais dire assez,

Et je dois convenir que vous me proposez
Pour consolation et salaire une place
Dans le cloaque avec tous les rois, populace,
À côté du faussaire, et, près de l’assassin,
La pourriture avec Baroche pour voisin;
Eh bien non, j’aime mieux, après tant de désastres,
Être avec ce rêveur d’Homère dans les astres.
J’aime mieux croire au bien, au juste, but final,
Avec Tacite, avec Dante, avec Juvénal.
La certitude d’être un miasme me laisse
Vraiment froid, et je pousse à ce point la faiblesse
Que je n’ai nulle joie à penser que je vais
Être on ne sait plus quoi d’obscur qui sent mauvais!
Troppmann ne me fait point plaisir quand il m’avoue
Que je serai sa fange et qu’il sera ma boue;
Il faut me pardonner ma pauvreté d’esprit,
Mais je ne puis trouver Dupin égal au Christ,
Deutz égal à Bayard, et j’entends le tonnerre
Gronder si je mets Hoche auprès de Lacenaire.

Non, je ne jette point dans le même panier
Ferdinand sept geôlier et Riégo prisonnier.
Je voudrais démolir les deux tours d’injustice,
Celle où Latude expire, et l’aveugle bâtisse
Des rhéteurs confondant Caïn avec Abel,
Renverser la bastille et détruire Babel.
Quoi donc! boire, manger, jouir, voilons nos faces,
C’est tout? Alors, pourvu que tu te satisfasses

Et que je me contente, et que, rois, histrions,
Scribes, juges, soldats, prêtres, nous digérions
Nos crimes devenus nos festins et nos joies,
Pourvu que, fiers et fous, vautours parmi les oies,
Nous ayions sous nos pieds les peuples, rions d'eux
Et de nous, cela seul est réel; et, hideux,
Nous sommes sages, tout étant vide; alors, hommes,
Quoi qu'il fasse, celui qui, dans l'ombre où nous sommes,
Veut jouir, qui trahit pour jouir, qui meurtrit
Sa patrie, et qui vend sa ville, a de l'esprit,
Et celui qui, romain, meurt dans l'exil pour Rome,
Et qui, français, défend la France, est un pauvre homme;
Telle est la vérité que vos calculs nous font.

Ah! si c'est là le but, ah! si c'est là le fond,
Si c'est la vérité seule vraie, affirmée

Par Walpole, et par toi, sénateur Mérimée,
Je la déclare fausse, ô sacrés firmaments!
Et je crache dessus, et je lui dis : Tu mens!
À cette vérité qui, vile, atroce, obscène,
Donne tort à Barbès et raison à Bazaine!

Non! non! non! je l'ai dit et le dirai cent fois,
Ce n'est point pour cela qu'on a brisé les rois
Et fait entrer le jour dans les profonds repaires!
Non! non! non! ce n'est point pour cela que nos pères
Ont fait cette conquête altière, l'avenir!
Qu'ils poussaient leurs chevaux et les faisaient hennir
De Memphis à Berlin, de l'Èbre à la Thuringe!
Non! j'ai les droits de l'homme et non les droits du singe.

Je comprends qu'on se penche avec fraternité
Vers les êtres qui sont hors de l'humanité,
Qu'on éclaire leur nuit; mais qu'on s'y précipite,
Non. Je veux, de ce gouffre où la bête palpite,

Faire monter, labeur superbe et hasardeux,
Les monstres jusqu’à nous, et non tomber près d’eux;
Je veux être pour eux non l’égal, mais l’archange,
Et leur donner mon âme et non prendre leur fange.

Êtes-vous la science après tout? question.
Non, vous ne l’êtes pas. Vous doutez. Montyon
Donne un prix de vertu, Troplong un prix de crime;
Garibaldi délivre et Bonaparte opprime;
Où vont-ils? au néant? à Dieu? Tout le destin,
Si l’on vous en croit, flotte et ment, rien n’est certain;
L’énigme n’offre au loin que des plages désertes;
Vous êtes les premiers à tout ignorer; certes,
Votre doute est complet et vous le confessez;
Vous ne voyez qu’un mur fermé de noirs fossés,
C’est vous qui l’avouez; et nul ne peut conclure
Du présent l’avenir, du front la chevelure;
Nul ne voit l’autre aspect du destin, le trépas;
Nul ne sait rien. Alors j’ai le choix, n’est-ce pas?
J’ai mon goût, vous le vôtre; après tant de souffrance,
Le désespoir vous plaît, moi je prends l’espérance;
Et puisque selon vous rien n’est clair, rien n’est sûr,
Vous choisissez la cendre et je choisis l’azur.

*

Je veux être ici-bas libre, ailleurs responsable,
Je suis plus qu’un brin d’herbe et plus qu’un grain de sable;
Je me sens à jamais pensif, ailé, vivant.
*

Ce n’est point vers la nuit que je crie en avant!
Mourir n’est pas finir, c’est le matin suprême.
Non! je ne donne pas à la mort ceux que j’aime!
Je les garde, je veux le firmament pour eux,
Pour moi, pour tous, et l’aube attend les ténébreux;
L’amour en nous, passants qu’un rayon lointain dore,

Est le commencement auguste de l’aurore;
Mon cœur, s’il n’a ce jour divin, se sent banni,
Et, pour avoir le temps d’aimer, veut l’infini;
Car la vie est passée avant qu’on ait pu vivre.
C’est l’azur qui me plaît, c’est l’azur qui m’enivre,
L’azur sans nuit, sans mort, sans noirceur, sans défaut;
C’est l’empyrée immense et profond qu’il me faut,
La terre n’offrant rien de ce que je réclame,
L’heure humaine étant courte et sombre, et, pour une âme
Qui vous aime, parents, enfants, toi ma beauté,
Le ciel ayant à peine assez d’éternité!

IV

Le géant Soleil parle à la naine Étincelle :

— Ô néant, feu follet, ver que l’ombre recèle,
Lueur qui disparaît sitôt qu’elle a flotté,
Contemple-moi, je suis l’abîme de clarté.
Vois, dans mon flamboiement les mondes vont et viennent;
Mes rayons sont les fils effrayants qui les tiennent;
Sans moi le firmament ne serait qu’un linceul;
Je ne suis pas bien sûr de ne pas être seul;
Toute l’immensité, depuis l’aube première,
Me regarde effarée, ivre de ma lumière.

Ainsi parla le gouffre éblouissant de feu.
L’atome écouta l’astre, et lui répondit : Dieu.

II

VOIX BASSES

DANS LES TÉNÈBRES

II

VOIX BASSES DANS LES TÉNÈBRES

— Ô conquérants, guerriers, héros, faiseurs de cendres,
Vous les Nemrods, chasseurs géants, les Alexandres,
Vous qu'on nomme Alaric, Cyrus, Gengis, Timour,
Vous que la mort berça, petits, avec amour,
Et qui, grands, et marchant dans les apothéoses,
Ainsi qu'avril fait naître autour de lui des roses,
Avez fait sous vos pas éclore des tombeaux;
Vous que l'homme, par vous dévoré, trouve beaux;
Nous qu'il trouve hideux et qui sommes vos frères,
Nous qui sommes les noirs bénisseurs funéraires,
Les prêtres, nous avons à vous dire ceci.

Écoutez.
Notre gîte auguste fut saisi,
Comme le vôtre, hélas, par la raison humaine;
Nous avions, comme vous, les peuples pour domaine,
Et nous rôdions sur eux, puissants, l'œil en arrêt,
Vainqueurs, toute la terre étant notre forêt;
Et nous disions à Dieu : C'est par nous que tu frappes!
Car vous êtes les rois, mais nous sommes les papes;
Vous êtes Attila, nous sommes Borgia.
Nous avons la madone et la panagia,
L'idole, comme, vous, vous avez la bataille;
Princes, nous n'avons pas tout à fait votre taille,
Nous sommes le danger qui se met à genoux,
Vous grondez plus que nous, nous rampons mieux que vous;
On sent notre velours, pire que votre griffe;
Nous sommes Anitus, Torquemada, Caïphe.
Une grande tiare est sur nos fronts étroits.
Urbain huit, Sixte quint, Paul trois, Innocent trois,

Gerbert, l’âme livrée aux sombres aventures,
Dicatus, inventant les quatorze tortures,
Judas buvant le sang que Jésus-Christ suait,
La ruse, Loyola, la haine, Bossuet,
L’autodafé, l’effroi, le cachot, la bastille,
C’est nous; et notre pourpre effrayante pétille
Par moments, et s’allume, et devient flamboiement.
Nous étions, comme vous, des dieux; mais brusquement
La révolution nous mit des muselières.
La France mania de ses mains familières
Nos gueules, et, mordue et souriant, nous prit,

Fière, et sans même avoir de plaie, étant l’esprit,
Elle nous a jetés dans une basse-fosse,
Moi prêtre, et toi tyran; elle a déclaré fausse
Ma caverne, la foi, la guerre, ton palais;
Elle a d’altiers dompteurs, Mirabeau, Rabelais,
Molière, Diderot, Rousseau, Danton, Voltaire.
Maintenant nous voilà, nous qui tenions la terre,
Tenus à notre tour par la France.
Eh bien non!
À travers les barreaux de notre cabanon,
Frères, nous vous crions une bonne nouvelle :
L’orbe du soleil noir revient, et se révèle
Par un blêmissement farouche et triomphant;
Le passé, pour la terre épouvantable enfant,
Pour nous espoir, râlant d’une voix vengeresse,
Renaît, et ce cadavre en son berceau se dresse.
Son berceau c’est la tombe et son aube est la nuit.
La fleur noire du sombre autel s’épanouit
Pleine d’ombre, et promet le fruit plein de poussière.
Rome fatale vient de lever sa visière,

Dit à l’homme : Tais-toi! dit à Dieu : Le jour ment!
Et reprend la parole et le rugissement.

Encore un peu de temps, ce qui n’est que l’écorce
Tombera; le droit mort laissera voir la force;
Partout le joug, partout Pierre, partout César,
Et l’église tout bas tutoiera le bazar;
Les trônes reprendront leurs vastes équilibres,
Et les peuples seront esclaves, et nous libres.
À faire le gibet nous emploierons la croix.
Tout redeviendra guerre et vous serez les rois.
Tout redeviendra dogme et nous serons les maîtres.
Vous tyrans, étant chefs, nous bourreaux, étant prêtres,
Nous aurons de nouveau le monde sous nos pieds.
Et la terre verra puissamment copiés
Par des spectres nouveaux tous les anciens fantômes;
Et nous arrondirons les ténèbres en dômes
Au-dessus du grand temple où nous mettrons l’Erreur
Ayant le pape à droite, à gauche l’empereur.

Dans notre obscurité toute la terre plonge
Par degrés. Et déjà, d’un ongle qui s’allonge,
Par l’âme de l’enfant nous tenons l’avenir.

Chez nous, exterminer fait semblant de bénir;
La goutte de sang pleut du goupillon terrible;
Votre hache, ô guerriers, ne vaut pas notre bible;
Notre foudre est énorme, et votre quantité
De tonnerre est vraiment peu de chose à côté.
La Saint-Barthélemy sonne une sombre cloche;
Et cette cloche sainte aujourd’hui se rapproche;
Et cette cloche jette une plus grande voix
Que toute la bataille éparse autour des rois;
Car c’est derrière nous que le vrai deuil se lève;
Nous sommes le linceul, vous n’êtes que le glaive;
Vous pouvez tout au plus sur les hommes marcher,
Nous, nous leur commençons l’enfer par le bûcher.

C’est égal, vous soldats, nous prêtres, tous ensemble
Nous vaincrons; nous allons tout ravoir. Déjà tremble

La grille qu’on a mise entre le peuple et nous.
Satan en a tiré doucement les verrous.
Nous allons nous ruer sur les âmes sans nombre,
Nous allons ressaisir la terre. —
Ainsi, dans l’ombre,
Pendant que nous rêvons et que nous oublions,
La cage aux tigres parle à la cage aux lions.

III

III

Je me penchai. J’étais dans le lieu ténébreux;
Là gisent les fléaux avec la nuit sur eux;
Et je criai : — Tibère! — Eh bien? me dit cet homme.
— Tiens-toi là. — Soit. — Néron! — L’autre monstre de Rome
Dit : — Qui donc m’ose ainsi parler? — Bien. Tiens-toi là.
Je dis : — Sennachérib! Tamerlan! Attila!

— Qu’est-ce donc que tu veux? répondirent trois gueules.
— Restez là. Plus un mot. Silence. Soyez seules.
Je me tournai : — Nemrod! — Quoi? — Tais-toi. — Je repris :
— Cyrus! Rhamsès! Cambyse! Amilcar! Phalaris!
— Que veut-on? — Restez là. — Puis, passant aux modernes,
Je comparai les bruits de toutes les cavernes,
Les antres aux palais et les trônes aux bois,
Le grondement du tigre au cri d’Innocent trois,
Nuit sinistre où pas un des coupables n’échappe,
Ni sous la pourpre Othon, ni Gerbert sous la chape.
Pensif, je m’assurai qu’ils étaient bien là tous,
Et je leur dis : — Quel est le pire d’entre vous?

Alors, du fond du gouffre, ombre patibulaire
Où le nid menacé par l’immense colère
Autrefois se blottit et se réfugia,
Satan cria : — C’est moi! — Crois-tu? dit Borgia.

IV

MANSUÉTUDE

DES ANCIENS JUGES

IV

MANSUÉTUDE DES ANCIENS JUGES

Les chambres de torture étaient d’âpres demeures;
On n’y passait jamais plus de quatre ou cinq heures,
Et l’on entrait jeune homme et l’on sortait vieillard.
Le juge pour le code et le bourreau pour l’art
S’épuisaient et, mêlant fer rouge et loi romaine,
Ayant à travailler sur de la chair humaine,
N’épargnaient rien afin d’arriver à l’aveu.
Sous leurs mains, l’os, le muscle, et l’ongle et le cheveu
Frémissaient, et, hurlant plus fort selon la fibre
Qui tressaille, et selon le nerf profond qui vibre,
Un homme devenait un clavier où Vouglans
Jouait de l’agonie avec ses doigts sanglants.
Ne croyez pas pourtant que lui, ni Farinace,
Ou Levert, n’eussent rien au cœur que la menace;

Ils priaient au besoin le captif garrotté;
Ils sucraient la torture avec de la bonté;
L’accusé qui résiste attriste la grand’chambre;
Bénins, ils l’imploraient en lui brisant un membre;
Ils étaient paternels; ils se penchaient, prêchant,
Suppliant, regrettant d’agir, l’air pas méchant,
Pour faire à cet œil terne et sombre, à cette bouche,
À cette âme aux abois, vomir l’aveu farouche.
Pasquier leurrait d’espoir ces regards presque éteints;

Delancre au patient disait des vers latins;
Bodin, sachant par cœur Virgile et ses idylles,
Les citait; et parfois ils pleuraient, crocodiles.

V

L’ÉCHAFAUD

V

L’ÉCHAFAUD

C’était fini. Splendide, étincelant, superbe,
Luisant sur la cité comme la faulx sur l’herbe,
Large acier dont le jour faisait une clarté,
Ayant je ne sais quoi dans sa tranquillité
De l’éblouissement du triangle mystique,
Pareil à la lueur au fond d’un temple antique,
Le fatal couperet relevé triomphait.
Il n’avait rien gardé de ce qu’il avait fait
Qu’une petite tache imperceptible et rouge.

Le bourreau s’en était retourné dans son bouge;
Et la peine de mort, remmenant ses valets,
Juges, prêtres, était rentrée en son palais,

Avec son tombereau terrible dont la roue,
Silencieuse, laisse un sillon dans la boue,
Qui se remplit de sang sitôt qu’elle a passé.

La foule disait : bien! car l’homme est insensé,
Et ceux qui suivent tout, et dont c’est la manière,
Suivent même ce char et même cette ornière.

J’étais là. Je pensais. Le couchant empourprait
Le grave Hôtel de Ville aux luttes toujours prêt,
Entre Hier qu’il médite et Demain dont il rêve.
L’échafaud achevait, resté seul sur la Grève,
La journée, en voyant expirer le soleil.

Le crépuscule vint, aux fantômes pareil.
Et j’étais toujours là, je regardais la hache,

La nuit, la ville immense et la petite tache.

À mesure qu'au fond du firmament obscur
L'obscurité croissait comme un effrayant mur,
L'échafaud, bloc hideux de charpentes funèbres,
S'emplissait de noirceur et devenait ténèbres;
Les horloges sonnaient, non l'heure, mais le glas;

Et toujours, sur l'acier, quoique le coutelas
Ne fût plus qu'une forme épouvantable et sombre,
La rougeur de la tache apparaissait dans l'ombre.

Un astre, le premier qu'on aperçoit le soir,
Pendant que je songeais montait dans le ciel noir.

Sa lumière rendait l'échafaud plus difforme.
L'astre se répétait dans le triangle énorme;
Il y jetait, ainsi qu'en un lac, son reflet,
Lueur mystérieuse et sacrée; il semblait
Que sur la hache horrible, aux meurtres coutumière,
L'astre laissait tomber sa larme de lumière.
Son rayon, comme un dard qui heurte et rebondit,
Frappait le fer d'un choc lumineux; on eût dit
Qu'on voyait rejaillir l'étoile de la hache.
Comme un charbon tombant qui d'un feu se détache,
Il se répercutait dans ce miroir d'effroi;
Sur la justice humaine et sur l'humaine loi,
De l'éternité calme auguste éclaboussure.
Est-ce au ciel que ce fer a fait une blessure?
Pensai-je? Sur qui donc frappe l'homme hagard?
Quel est donc ton mystère, ô glaive? — Et mon regard
Errait, ne voyant plus rien qu'à travers un voile,
De la goutte de sang à la goutte d'étoile.

VI

INFERI

INFERI

On est dans l'invisible, on est dans l'impalpable.
Ici tout, jusqu'à l'air qu'on respire, est coupable,
Et l'eau qui pleure est un remords;
Sous on ne sait quelle ombre, on ne sait quelles formes
Flottent, et l'on voit, tels que des songes énormes,
Passer d'affreux univers morts!

Suivis de loin d'un œil fixe qui les regarde,
Tristement éclairés dans leur fuite hagarde
Par d'horribles astres hiboux,
Charriant prêtre et roi, prince, esclave, ministre,
Traînant dans leurs agrès l'éternité sinistre
Qui porte l'ombre à ses deux bouts;

Agitant des linceuls et secouant des chaînes,
Pleins de vers, fourmillant de monstres, noirs de haines,
Demandant au gouffre un flambeau,
En proie aux vents soufflant d'une bouche insensée,
Mondes spectres qui font hésiter la pensée
Entre le bagne et le tombeau;

Ils vont! les uns chantant ainsi que des Sodomes;
Les autres, visions, créations, fantômes,
Sans palpitation, sans bruit;
Et derrière eux, chargés des maux que nous subîmes,
Ils ont pour les pousser d'abîmes en abîmes
Toute la fureur de la nuit!

Ils vont! l'espace est morne et sourd; leurs envergures
Font dans l'affreux brouillard de lugubres figures.

Pas d'ancres et pas d'avirons.

L’hiver les bat, la grêle aux flots pressés les crible,
Et la pluie effarée à la crinière horrible
Tord les nuages sur leurs fronts.

Chiourmes de la mort, égouts, fosses communes!
On les voit vaguement comme de sombres lunes.
Rien n’arrête leur vol hideux.
Au-dessus d’eux la brume et l’horreur se répandent,
La profondeur les hait; les précipices pendent
Dans les gouffres au-dessous d’eux.

Ils traversent, allant où l’ouragan les lance,
Tantôt une tempête, et tantôt un silence;
L’univers vivant et profond
Ne les aperçoit pas dans les brouillards sans bornes;
Ils passent dans la nuit comme des faces mornes
Qui paraissent et qui s’en vont.

Ces globes, qu’en prisons, Seigneur, vous transformâtes,
Ces planètes pontons, ces mondes casemates,
Flottes noires du châtiment,
Errent, et sur les flots tortueux et funèbres
Leurs mâts de nuit, portant des voiles de ténèbres,
Frissonnent éternellement.

Des tourbillons ayant des formes de furies
Les poursuivent; les pleurs, sources jamais taries,
Les angoisses et les effrois,
Le désespoir, l’ennui, la démence, le crime,
Vident sur ces passants monstrueux de l’abîme
Toutes leurs urnes à la fois.

Là sont tous les punis et tous les misérables;
Rongés par leurs passés, ulcères incurables,
La face aux trous de leurs cachots,
Criant : où sommes-nous? d’une voix éperdue,
Et distinguant parfois, sous eux, dans l’étendue,

Des monts, pustules du chaos.

Là Caïn pleure, Achab frémit, Commode rêve,
Borgia rit, les vers de terre armés du glaive,
Les roseaux qui disaient : je veux!
Sont là; les pharaons et les Sardanapales
S'y courbent; le vent souffle; au fond, des larves pâles
Penchent leurs sinistres cheveux.

Là sont les trahisseurs mêlés aux parricides,
Tous les despotes fous redevenus lucides,
L'homme loup et l'homme renard;

Leur bagne par moment fait le bruit d'une claie;
Le ciel leur apparaît comme une immense plaie
Où chacun d'eux voit son poignard.

L'ombre est un miroir sombre où leurs forfaits se montrent,
Leur remords est debout dans tout ce qu'ils rencontrent;
Partout, dans le morne chemin,
Chacun d'eux voit son crime, et le reste est chimère;
Le même spectre fait dire à Néron : ma mère!
Et crier : mon frère! à Caïn.

Plus bas encor s'en vont dans l'ombre expiatoire
Des mondes dont la mort même ignore l'histoire,
Où le mal tord ses derniers nœuds,
Cieux où toute lueur expire évanouie,
À qui, dans la noirceur de leur brume inouïe,
Tibère apparaît lumineux.

Quelques-uns ont été des édens et des astres.
Et l'on voit maintenant, tout chargés de désastres,
Rouler, éteints, désespérés,
L'un semant dans l'espace une effroyable graine,

L'autre traînant sa lèpre et l'autre sa gangrène,

Ces noirs soleils pestiférés!

Et squelettes sans tête et crânes sans vertèbres,
Mages étudiant de lugubres algèbres,
Tous les maux par Satan rêvés,
Vices, hydres, dragons, sont là; l’horreur sanglote,
Ils passent; à l’avant le néant, leur pilote,
Regarde avec ses yeux crevés.

Où vont-ils? La nuit s’ouvre et sur eux se referme.
Le ciel, quoiqu’il soit l’ombre où la clémence germe,
Ignore le gouffre puni;
Et nul ne sait combien de millions d’années
Doivent errer, traînant les larves forcenées,
Ces lazarets de l’infini.

Ah! quel effroi sur terre, et même au fond des tombes!
Quel frisson, si, parmi les foudres et les trombes,
Aux lueurs des astres fuyants,
Nous voyions, dans la nuit où le sort nous écroue,
Surgir subitement l’épouvantable proue
D’un de ces mondes effrayants!

VII

LES QUATRE JOURS D’ELCIIS

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Vérone se souvient d’un vieillard qui parla
Pendant quatre jours, grave et seul, dans la Scala,
À l’empereur Othon qui fut un prince oblique;
Othon tenait sa cour dans la place publique,
Ayant sur les degrés du trône douze rois.
Empereur d’Allemagne et roi d’Arle, Othon trois

Étant malade avait fait allumer un cierge
Et fait vœu, s’il était guéri, grâce à la Vierge,
D’entendre et d’écouter, lui césar tout-puissant,
Tout ce que lui dirait n’importe quel passant,
Devant les douze rois et la garde romaine,
Cet homme parlât-il pendant une semaine.

Donc un passant fut pris rentrant dans sa maison.
On était aux beaux jours de la tiède saison;
Le passant fut conduit devant le trône; un prêtre
Lui fit savoir le vœu du roi d’Arle, et le maître
Lui dit : Aboie aussi longtemps que tu voudras.

Alors, comme autrefois devant Saül Esdras,
Pierre devant Néron et Job devant l’Abîme,
L’homme parla.
Le trône était sombre et sublime;

Cent archers l’entouraient, pas un ne remuait;
Et les rois semblaient sourds et l’empereur muet.
On voyait devant eux une table servie
Avec tout ce qui peut satisfaire l’envie
Des heureux, des puissants, de ceux qui sont en haut,
Viandes et vins, fruits, fleurs, et dans l’ombre un billot.

L’homme était un vieillard très grand, à tête nue,
Tranquille; on l’emmenait chez lui, la nuit venue,
Puis on le ramenait le matin; il était
Comme celui qui parle au tigre qui se tait;
Il fit boire à César son vœu jusqu’à la lie;
Et sa sagesse fut semblable à la folie.

Il parla quatre jours, toute la cour songea,
Et, quand il eut fini, l’empereur dit : Déjà!

I

LE PREMIER JOUR

GENS DE GUERRE ET GENS D’ÉGLISE

Je suis triste. Pourquoi? Princes, que vous importe!
Vous êtes joyeux, vous. Je refermais ma porte,
J’allais mettre la barre et tirer les verrous,
Pourquoi m’appelez-vous et que me voulez-vous?
Pourquoi me pousser hors de l’ombre volontaire?
Pourquoi faire parler celui qui veut se taire?
Roi d’Arles, tant qu’il reste au vieillard une dent,
Lui faire ouvrir la bouche est toujours imprudent.
On n’est pas sûr qu’il soit de l’avis qu’on désire.
Vous avez un conseil de jeunes hommes, sire,
Fort galants, fort jolis, fort blonds, convenez-en;
Pourquoi m’y faire entrer, moi le vieux paysan
Que la rude fierté des vieilles mœurs pénètre?
Et depuis quand a-t-on l’habitude de mettre

Une pièce de cuir aux pourpoints de velours?
Pour marcher devant vous, rois, mes pas sont bien lourds.

Si vous ne savez pas de quel nom je me nomme,
Je m’appelle Elciis, et je suis gentilhomme
De la ville de Pise, âpre et sévère endroit.

Je n’ai point à Pavie étudié le droit,
Et je n’ai pas l’esprit d’un docteur de Sorbonne.

Donc, sire, si la guerre est en soi chose bonne,
Je n’en sais rien; mais, bonne ou mauvaise, je dis
Qu’il faut la faire en gens sincères et hardis,
Et que l’honnêteté publique est en détresse,
Princes, de voir qu’on fait une guerre traîtresse,
Une guerre humble, habile aux besognes de nuit,
Achetant des félons et des lâches sans bruit,
Faisant moins résonner l’estoc que la cymbale,
Ayant des espions, des colporteurs de balle,
Des moines mendiants et des juifs pour appuis,
Et l’empoisonnement des sources et des puits.

Les hommes de mon temps faisaient la guerre franche.
Tout l’arbre tressaillait quand ils cassaient la branche,
Et, quand ils coupaient l’arbre avec leur couperet,
C’était au tremblement de toute la forêt;
Car ces hommes étaient des bûcherons sublimes.
Les survivants, et ceux que nous ensevelîmes,
Sont dans le souvenir des peuples à jamais.
Les hommes de mon temps hantaient les hauts sommets;

Ils allaient droit au mur et donnaient l’escalade;
Ils méprisaient la nuit, le piége, l’embuscade;
Quand on leur demandait : Quel compagnon hardi
Emmenez-vous en guerre? ils disaient : Plein midi.
C’étaient, sous l’humble serge ou l’hermine royale,
Les bons et grands enfants de la guerre loyale.
Ils n’étaient pas de ceux qui s’endorment longtemps;
Hors du danger auguste ils étaient mécontents;
Ils ne quittaient l’épieu que pour prendre la hache;
Car l’immobilité ne sied point au panache,
Ni la rouille à l’éclair du glaive, et le repos
N’est pas fait pour les plis orageux des drapeaux.
Quand ils s’en revenaient des combats, leurs armures

Étaient rouges ainsi que des grenades mûres,
Et leurs femmes trouvaient le soir sous leur pourpoint
De larges trous saignants dont ils ne parlaient point.
De tout bien mal acquis ils disaient : qu’on le rende!
Ils ne trouvaient jamais de distance assez grande

Entre eux et le mensonge abject, ni de cloison
Assez épaisse entre eux, sire, et la trahison;
Ils parlaient haut, étant des fils des grandes races;
Leurs poitrines avaient le dédain des cuirasses;
Leur galop rendait fous les libres étriers.
Il n’était pas besoin d’envoyer des fourriers
Pour leur dire : Il convient de se mettre en campagne.
Un noir se tord moins vite autour des reins son pagne
Qu’ils ne bouclaient l’estoc à leur robuste dos.
Ils donnaient peu de temps aux paters, aux credos,
Priant Dieu bonnement, comme fait le vulgaire;
Droits, hommes de parole, ils ne s’embrouillaient guère
Aux finesses du clerc qui ment au nom des cieux,
Et dédaignaient l’argot du moine chassieux
Qui crache du latin et fait des hexamètres,
Étant des gens de guerre et non des gens de lettres.
C’est avec la gaîté du rire puéril
Qu’ils se précipitaient au plus noir du péril;
Il sortait de leur casque un souffle d’épopée;
Quand on disait : l’épée est d’acier, leur épée,

Fière et toujours au vent, répondait : l’homme aussi.
Au chaume misérable ils accordaient merci.
Ces vaillants devenaient doucement barbes grises,
Ayant pour toute joie, après les villes prises
Et les rois rétablis et tous leurs fiers travaux,
De regarder manger l’avoine à leurs chevaux.
Oh! je les ai connus! dès que les couleuvrines,
Dogues des tours, fronçaient leurs sinistres narines,
Dès que l’altier clairon sonnait, ils étaient prêts.
Ils étaient curieux d’aller tout voir de près;

Jusque dans le sépulcre ils avançaient la tête;
Et ces hommes, joyeux surtout dans la tempête,
Sans trop d'étonnement et sans trop de souci
Auraient suivi la mort leur criant : par ici!

Qu'est-ce que vous voulez maintenant qu'on vous dise?
Ce temps-ci me répugne et sent la bâtardise.
Quand venaient les hiboux, jadis l'aigle émigrait;
Je m'en vais comme lui. Barons, c'est à regret
Qu'on voit se refléter jusque dans vos repaires
Ce grand rayonnement des anciens et des pères
Au-dessus de votre ombre au fond des cieux épars.
Vous vous croyez lions, tigres et léopards;
Les lions tels que vous sont pris aux souricières.

Les marmots nus qu'on porte ou qu'on mène aux lisières
Seraient dans le danger moins bégayants que vous.
Vous avez dans vos cœurs implacables et mous
Le dédain des vieux temps que vous osez proscrire;
Vous nous faites frémir et nous vous faisons rire.
Vous avez l'œil obscur, l'âme plus louche encor
Vous faites chevaliers avec des chaînes d'or
Des trahisseurs ou bien des pages de Sodomes,
Des gueux, des affranchis, de ces espèces d'hommes
Qu'on vend publiquement dans la rue à l'encan.
Où je vois le collier, je cherche le carcan.
Princes, mon cœur se serre en vous voyant, car j'aime
Le soleil sans brouillard, l'homme sans stratagème.
Vous avez l'appétit large, le front étroit,
Le mépris de tout frein, la haine de tout droit,
Et pour sceptre un couteau de boucher. Quelle histoire!
Quels jours! Les gros butins se citent comme gloire.

Vous régnez en tuant sans jamais dire : assez!
Ô pillards, si souvent de meurtre éclaboussés
Que la rouille vous vient plus haut que la jambière!
Toujours ivres; buveurs de vin, buveurs de bière,

Buveurs de sang; couards en même temps; vivant
Dans on ne sait quel luxe abject, lâche, énervant;
Car la férocité, que la volupté mine,
Devient facilement chair molle et s’effémine;
Aujourd’hui tout déchoit dans notre fier métier;
Pour faire une cuirasse on prend un bijoutier,
De sorte que l’armure a peur d’être battue.
C’est ordinairement par derrière qu’on tue.
Vos plus fameux exploits et vos plus triomphants
Sont des dépouillements de femmes et d’enfants,
Des introductions dans les pays par fraude,
Les brusques coups de dent de la fouine qui rôde,
D’attaquer ceux qu’on a d’abord bien endormis,
D’arriver ennemis sous des masques d’amis;

Faits honteux pour l’épée et pour la seigneurie,
Vils, et dont je vous veux laisser la rêverie.
Quant à moi, si j’étais l’un des rois que voilà,
Je ne porterais point légèrement cela;
Je frémirais, à l’heure où l’ombre étend ses voiles,
D’être ainsi misérable et noir sous les étoiles.

Je ne vous cache pas que je suis attristé.
Tout pâlit, tout déchoit! et, même la beauté,
Dernier malheur! s’en va. Toute la grâce humaine
C’est la langue toscane et la bouche romaine;
Et l’on parle aujourd’hui je ne sais quel jargon.

Roi, qui cherche un lézard peut trouver un dragon;
Vous vouliez un flatteur de plus qui vous caresse
Et rie, et tout à coup la vérité se dresse.

Vous avez reconnu que les hommes trop prompts
Courent parfois grand risque en vengeant leurs affronts;
Aussi vous n’avez pas de colère soudaine.

Défié par Venise, on regarde Modène.

Vous pesez le péril, rois, quoique altiers et vains.
Vous ne guerroyez pas sans l’avis des devins;
Un astrologue baisse ou lève vos visières.
Ô princes, vous allez consulter des sorcières
Sur le degré d’honneur et d’amour du devoir
Et de témérité qu’il est prudent d’avoir;
Vous combattez de loin derrière des machines;
Et vous frottez vos bras, vos reins et vos échines,
Moins propres, sur mon âme, aux harnais qu’aux licous,
D’huile magique à rendre invulnérable aux coups.
Je voudrais bien savoir, princes, si Charlemagne
Qui, se dressant, donnait de l’ombre à l’Allemagne,
Et si le grand Cyrus et le grand Attila
Se sont graissé leurs peaux avec cet onguent-là.

Vous avez fait sans peine, ô clients des Sibylles,
Marcheurs de nuit, tendeurs d’embûches, gens habiles,
Quoique chétifs de cœur et chétifs de cerveau,
Avec le vieil empire un empire nouveau.

L’empaillement d’un aigle est chose bien aisée;
Davus remplace Alcide et Thersite Thésée.

Rois, la fraude est vilaine et donne un profit nul;
Mentir ou se tuer c’est le même calcul;
Le fourbe est transparent, tout regard le pénètre;
La trahison devient la chair même du traître;
Il se sent sur les os un mépris corrosif;
Dès qu’on est malhonnête on est rongé tout vif
Par son mauvais renom et par sa perfidie
Visible à tous les yeux et toujours agrandie;
On est renard, la haine et l’effroi du troupeau;
On a l’ombre et le mal pour robe et pour drapeau;
Et Carthage a péri dans sa sombre tunique
De mensonge, de dol, de nuit, de foi punique.

La ciguë en vos champs croît mieux que le laurier.

Je verrais sans colère, ô rois, un serrurier
Bâtir, sans oublier de griller les fenêtres,
Entre vos probités et mon argent, mes maîtres,
Une porte solide aux verrous bien fermants.
Quant à votre parole et quant à vos serments,
Plutôt que m’assoupir sur votre signature
Et sur vos jurements par la sainte écriture,
Plutôt que me fier à vous, je me fierais
Aux jaguars, aux lynx, aux tigres des forêts,
Et j’aimerais mieux, rois, me coucher dans leur antre
Et mettre pour dormir ma tête sur leur ventre.

Ah! ce siècle est d’un flot d’opprobre submergé!

Autre plaie; et fâcheuse à montrer, — le clergé.

Puisque j’expose ici la publique infortune,
Puisque j’étale aux yeux nos hontes, c’en est une
Que le prêtre ait grandi plus haut que notre droit,
Et que l’église ait pris l’allure qu’on lui voit.

De mon temps, grand, petit, riche ou gueux, vieux ou jeune,
On observait l’avent, les vigiles, le jeûne,
On priait le bon Dieu, mains jointes, fronts courbés;
Mais on tenait la bride assez haute aux abbés.
On avait l’œil sur eux, on était économe
De baisers à leur chape, et l’on craignait peu Rome;
Sire, ce que voyant, Rome se tenait coi.

Aujourd’hui Rome, à tout, dit : comment? et pourquoi?
On laisse les bedeaux sortir des sacristies;
Qui touche aux clercs est plein de piqûres d’orties.
C’est fini, plus de paix. Ils sont partout. Veut-on
D’un évêque trop lourd raccourcir le bâton?
Querelle. Pour blâmer les luxures d’un moine,
Pour un prieur à qui l’on ôte un peu d’avoine,
Pour troubler dans son auge un capucin trop gras,

Foudre, anathème; on a le pape sur les bras.

Un seul fil remué fait sortir l’araignée.

Rome a sur tous les points la bataille gagnée.
On lui cède; on la craint.
Combattre des soldats
Oh! tant que vous voudrez! mais des prêtres, non pas!
La cave du lion est effrayante, et l’aire
De l’aigle a je ne sais quel aspect de colère;
On trouve là quelqu’un d’altier qui se défend;
Sire, attaquer cela, c’est beau, c’est triomphant;
Le bec est flamboyant, la gueule est colossale;
On sent que l’aquilon dont l’Afrique est vassale,
Que l’ouragan qui gronde et qui des cieux descend,
Est dans les crins de l’un encor tout frémissant,
Et qu’aux pattes de l’autre il reste de la foudre;
L’adversaire est superbe et plaît. Mais se résoudre
À mettre ses deux mains dans des fourmillements,
Poursuivre au plus épais des cloaques dormants

La bête de la bave et celle de la fange,
Avoir pour ennemi l’être plat qui se venge
De son écrasement par sa fétidité,
C’est hideux; et j’ai honte et peur, en vérité,
D’attaquer une larve au fond d’une masure,
Et de combattre un trou d’où sort une morsure!

De là l’empiétement des moûtiers, des couvents,
Des hommes tonsurés et noirs sur les vivants,
Et le frémissement du monde qui recule.

Rome a tendu sa toile au fond du crépuscule.
La vaste lâcheté des mœurs est son trésor.
Tout à Rome aboutit. Prostituée à l’or,
Rome cote, surfait, pare, étale, brocante

Son absolution que le vice fréquente;
Le saint-père est le grand mendiant indulgent;
Les choses en sont là qu'on a pour son argent
Plus ou moins de pitié, plus ou moins de prière,
Et que l'église en est la sinistre usurière.
Rome a dessous l'ordure, et la pourpre dessus.
Pour être petit, pauvre, humble, comme Jésus
Le commandait à Jacque, à Simon, à Didyme,
Le pape a le décime, et l'évêque a la dîme.
Tout est occasion fiscale, jubilé,
Sabbat, la chaise offerte et le cierge brûlé,
Cloches, confession, amulettes, jurandes,

La desserte du pain, la desserte des viandes,
Droit de manger du bœuf, droit de manger du porc,

Exorcismes, tonlieux, mortuaire, déport,
Sermons, pâque fleurie, eau bénite, corvées,
Saint chrême, enfants perdus ou filles retrouvées,
Procès, citation devant l'official.
Partout du créancier le profil glacial.
Le fisc ne quitte pas des yeux la femme grosse;
L'enfant paie. Êtes-vous dans une basse-fosse,
Le saint-père quémande à travers vos barreaux.
Vous plaît-il de fonder un hôpital? Vingt gros.
Une bonne action paie un droit; rien n'échappe;
Un juste non payant ferait loucher le pape;
Dix gros pour que l'abbé dise : sois bienvenu!

Pour faire devant soi porter un glaive nu,
Cent gros; pour acheter le blé des turcs, dispense;
Tant pour avoir le droit de penser ce qu'on pense;
Tant pour faire le mal, tant pour s'en repentir;
Péage pour entrer, péage pour sortir;
Le baptême, c'est tant; n'oubliez pas l'annate;
Tant pour l'enfant de cœur à la robe incarnate;

Tant pour vous marier; ah! vous mourez; c’est tant.
Corruption! Toujours une main qui se tend!
Dès que le père expire ou que la mère est morte,
Les enfants orphelins s’en vont de porte en porte
Mendier pour payer le prêtre, et, sans remord,
Un marchand sacré vend sa pourriture au mort.
Rome sur tout prélève une part, s’attribue
Sur deux mules la bonne et laisse la fourbue,
Taxe le berger, tond la brebis, prend l’agneau,
Goûte la fille au lit, le vin dans le tonneau,
Flaire la cargaison du vaisseau dans le havre,
Et mange avant les vers le meilleur du cadavre.
Jésus disait aimer; l’église dit : payer.

Le ciel est à qui peut acquitter le loyer,
On y sera logé bien ou mal, mieux ou guère,
Selon qu’on sera riche ou pauvre sur la terre;

Arrière le haillon! place au riche manteau!
Au mur du paradis Rome a mis écriteau.

La chaire de Saint-Pierre autrefois si sublime,
Espèce de tribune énorme de l’abîme,
Dont le dais formidable, au mystère mêlé,
Semblait s’évanouir dans un gouffre étoilé,
Est aujourd’hui l’obscure et lugubre boutique
Où le bien et le mal, la messe et le cantique,
Le vrai, le faux, le jour, la nuit, l’ombre et le vent,
Les anges, l’infini, la tombe, tout se vend!
Pourvu qu’il ait son crime en ducats dans son coffre,
L’homme le plus pervers voit le prêtre qui s’offre;
Et le plus noir bandit qui soit sous le ciel bleu
Fouille à sa poche et dit au pape : Combien Dieu?
Vous êtes un brigand, un gueux, un maniaque
De meurtres; bien; un tel, prêtre simoniaque,
Crible vos actions dans son hideux tamis,
Se signe, et dit : Allez, vos torts vous sont remis.

C’est triste d’être absous par ces viles engeances. —

Rois, si j’avais sur moi de telles indulgences,
De celles qui se font marchander et payer,
Je dirais à mon chien, pour me bien nettoyer,
De lécher le pardon d’abord, le crime ensuite.

Mais vous ne réglez pas ainsi votre conduite,
Et vous ne tombez pas dans ces scrupules vains.
Toujours, dans vos hauts faits de nuit et de ravins,
Comme vous entendez que Dieu vous soit commode,
Et comme parmi vous, en outre, il est de mode
Que la vipère prête au tigre son venin,
Vous avez près de vous un curé qui, bénin,
Vous conseille et vous sert dans toutes vos escrimes,
Qui trouve des raisons en latin à vos crimes,
Qui vous bénit après vos guets-apens, et coud
Un tedeum infâme à chaque mauvais coup.
D’où la difformité de la raison publique.
Caïphe et Busiris se donnent la réplique.
Quel est le faux? quel est le vrai? Qui donc a tort?
C’est l’honnête homme. À bas le droit! gloire au plus fort!
Le ciel a le rayon, mais le prêtre a le prisme.
La vérité bégaie et crache le sophisme;

La probité n’est plus qu’un enrouement confus.
Veut-on protester, vivre, essayer un refus?
On s’arrête, empêché dans l’immense argutie
Qu’en foule autour de vous le clergé balbutie;
On a le prêtre, là, dans le fond du gosier;
Et quand la conscience humaine veut crier
Ou parler haut, elle a l’église pour pituite.

Oh! le ciel grand ouvert, la prière gratuite,
Le prêtre pauvre au point de ne distinguer plus
Le cuivre d’un liard de l’or d’un carolus,

L’autel et l’évangile ignorant le péage
Et la monnaie, ainsi que l’astre et le nuage,
C’était beau, c’était grand, c’était ainsi jadis,
Dans le temps qu’on était des jeunes gens hardis,
Et que, libre, on allait chanter dans la montagne!
Est-ce que c’en est fait dans le deuil qui nous gagne?
Est-ce que les bons cœurs et les hommes de bien
Ne verront plus cela sous les cieux : Dieu pour rien?

Rome n’a qu’un regret, c’est que la bête échappe
À l’ombre monstrueuse et large de sa chape,
Que l’animal soit franc de son pouvoir jaloux,
Que l’ours rôde en dehors du fisc, et que les loups
Respirent l’air des cieux depuis le temps d’Évandre
Sans qu’on puisse trouver moyen de le leur vendre.

Dieu vole la nature au prêtre; il la soustrait;
Il lui dit : Sauve-toi dans la vaste forêt!
C’est son tort. Le soleil est de mauvais exemple;
Il ne réserve pas sa dorure au seul temple;
Il empourpre les toits laïcs, grands et petits,
Les maisons, les palais, les cabanes, gratis.
Quoi! le brin d’herbe est libre et donne ce scandale
De croître effrontément aux fentes de la dalle!
La folle avoine, auprès du lierre son voisin,
Pousse, sans acquitter le droit diocésain!
Quoi! depuis que l’Etna s’assied sur sa fournaise,
Géant sombre, il n’a pas encor payé sa chaise!
Quoi! l’éclair passe, va, revient, sans rien donner!
Quoi! l’étoile ose luire, éclairer, rayonner,
Sans qu’on lui puisse enfin présenter la quittance!
Le pape est avec Dieu tête à tête, et le tance.
Quoi! l’on ne peut au lys des champs, pris au collet,
Dire : pour les besoins du culte, s’il vous plaît!
Quoi! la vague, lavant les gouffres insondables,
Couvre l’énormité des plages formidables,
Quoi! l’écume jaillit jusqu’à cette hauteur

Sans retomber liard dans la main du quêteur!
Oh! si le prêtre enfin pouvait jeter sa serre
Sur la vie, et la prendre à Dieu, son adversaire!
Quel hosanna le jour où la fleur, le buisson,
Le nid, devraient payer au curé leur rançon!
Le jour où l'on pourrait mettre une bonne taxe
Sur l'usage que fait le pôle de son axe,

Chicaner sa caverne au lion, et tricher
L'eau que boit le moineau dans le creux du rocher!

Donc, viatique, psaume et vêpres, scapulaires,
Madones à clouer sur le bec des galères,
La vertu du chrétien, la liberté du juif,
Tout est en magasin et tout a son tarif.

Et les nécessités d'exploits hideux que crée
Cette vente à l'encan de la chose sacrée!
Ces pillages où Rome a plusieurs portions!
Ces envahissements et ces extorsions
D'héritages qu'on vient d'un coup de hache fendre,
Et qui n'ont plus le bras du chef pour les défendre!
Ces fouilles de corbeaux dans le ventre des morts!
Ces guerres où, n'osant s'en prendre aux hommes forts,
Craignant le bras qui frappe et la lance qui blesse,
La couardise appelle au combat la faiblesse!

Quand on a devant soi des barons, la plupart
Bandits bien crénelés et droits sur leur rempart,
Maîtres de quelque place à d'autres usurpée,
Qu'on arrondisse un peu sa terre avec l'épée,

En jouant au plus brave et non pas au plus fin,
Cela n'est pas très bien peut-être, mais enfin
Coup pour coup, le fer bat le fer, cela se passe
Entre ma panoplie et votre carapace,
Nous sommes gens gantés d'acier, bottés d'airain,

À visière féroce, à visage serein,
En guerre! et nous pouvons nous regarder en face.
Mais qu’on prenne aux petits pour les gros; mais qu’on fasse
Un apanage à tel ou tel prélat câlin
Avec des biens de veuve ou des biens d’orphelin;
Mais, au mépris des lois divines et chrétiennes,
Pour doter des frocards et des braillards d’antiennes,
Et des clercs qui, béats, par le vin attendris,
Vous disent : faites maigre! et mangent des perdrix,
Qu’on pille son douaire à cette pauvre vieille,
Qu’à cet enfant, qui fait un murmure d’abeille
Et qui rit en voyant entrer les assassins,
On vole sa maison et son champ, par les saints!
Je dis que c’est horrible, et toute honte est bue
Autant par qui reçoit que par qui distribue!

Le meurtre vole afin d’acheter le pardon.

Rome est un champ ayant le moine pour chardon;
Que l’âne de Jésus vienne donc et le broute!

Ces prêtres qui pour ombre ont derrière eux le doute,
Faux, masqués, emmiellant de leur perfide esprit
Le bord du vase au fond duquel le démon rit,
Traîtres du ciel, à qui l’opprobre profitable
Donne bon feu, bon lit, bon gîte et bonne table,
Ah! ces larrons sacrés, malheur sur eux, malheur!

Oh! que j’aime bien mieux le simple et franc voleur!
Des fauves attentats sauvage cénobite,
Il a l’ombre pour antre et pour cloître; il habite
Les déserts, les halliers creusés en entonnoirs,
Le derrière des murs croulants, les recoins noirs
Des palais qu’on bâtit, où, la nuit, dans les pierres
On entend le choc brusque et fuyant des rapières;
Ce brigand a du sang au front, mais pas de fard;
Il est âpre et hideux, mais il n’est point cafard,

Mais il ne se met pas un surplis sur le râble,
Mais il risque du moins sa peau, le misérable!

Le seigneur est la grille et le prêtre est la dent.

C’est grâce à tout cela que, la débauche aidant,
L’horreur est installée en nos tours féodales.

Ah! crimes, deuils, banquets, prêtres, femmes, scandales!
Rire et foudre mêlant leurs funèbres éclats!
Nous frissonnons de voir tout ce qu’on voit, hélas,
Dans ces vaillants manoirs si glorieux naguères,
Quand, vieux aigles blanchis, et vieux faucons des guerres,
Par les brèches que fit le glaive, nous plongeons
Nos yeux dans la noirceur lugubre des donjons!

*

Le soleil déclinait; de leurs piques bourrues
Les soldats refoulaient le peuple au coin des rues;
Les prêtres chuchotaient près du trône rangés.
— J’ai faim, dit Elciis. L’empereur dit : Mangez.

II

LE DEUXIÈME JOUR

ROIS ET PEUPLES

Vous êtes plusieurs rois ici, j’en suis bien aise.
Donc on peut vous parler en face. Toi, Farnèse,
Rends-nous compte de Parme; et toi, duc Avellan,
De Montferrat; et toi, Visconti, de Milan.
Vous avez ces pays; qu’est-ce que vous en faites?
L’Italie est heureuse et voit de belles fêtes!
Le duc Sforce est un sbire; il faudrait qu’on plongeât,

Pour trouver son pareil, plus bas que le goujat;

Voulez-vous des bandits? Guiscard vous en procure;
Strongoni, qui mourut d’une manière obscure
L’an passé, n’avait pas vécu très clairement;
Craignez Foulque après boire, Alde après un serment;
Squillaci roue et pend; Malaspina s’adonne
À mêler la jusquiame avec la belladone;
Le soir voit arriver joyeux à son festin
Des gens que voit mourir l’œil pâle du matin.
Si Pandolfe a trouvé quelque part sa patente

De général, pardieu, ce n’est pas dans la tente.
Sixte étrangla Thomond; Urbin extermina
Montecchi; le vieux Côme égorgea Gravina;
Ezzelin est faussaire, Ottobon est bigame;
Litta fait poignarder dans un bal à Bergame
Bernard Tumapailler, comte de Fezensac;

Jean massacre Borso; Pons dérobe le sac
Que Boccanegre avait laissé dans sa gondole;
Bonacossi sanglant rase la Mirandole;
Et quant à monsieur d’Este, ah! tous vos généraux
L’admirent; quel vainqueur! L’an passé, ce héros,
Avec force soudards levant la pertuisane,
Partit pour conquérir la marche trévisane;
On battait du tambour, on jouait du hautbois;
Un gros de paysans l’attaque au coin d’un bois,
L’armée au premier choc plie, et ce guerrier rare
Prit la fuite, et revint en chemise à Ferrare
Après avoir été volé dans le chemin.

Guy tue Alphonse afin d’être comte romain;
Le duc Fosdinovo vend Nice au barbaresque;
Spinetta se fait peindre ayant, dans une fresque,
Un crâne entre les dents comme un singe une noix;
Fiesque empoisonne Azzo, c’est le mode génois;
De par l’assassinat Sapandus est exarque;
Cibo, pour traverser le lac Fucin, embarque

Trois enfants, dont il doit hériter, ses neveux,
Sur un bateau doré qu’il suit de tous ses vœux,
Et qui les noie, étant fait de planches trop minces.
Mais expliquons-nous donc, vous nommez ça des princes!
Un tas de scélérats et de coupe-jarrets!
La justice en leur nom prononce des arrêts;
On les appelle grands, nobles, sérénissimes;
Ils sont comme des feux allumés sur des cimes;
Augustes marauds! gueux de l’honneur trafiquant.
Drôles que frapperaient, à l’autel comme au camp,
Au nom du chaste glaive, au nom du temple vierge,
Ulysse de son sceptre et Jésus de sa verge!

Si vous vous êtes mis dans l’esprit qu’en ayant
Plus d’infamie, on est un roi plus flamboyant,
Si vous vous figurez vos races rajeunies
Par vos férocités et vos ignominies,
Rois, je vous le redis, vous vous trompez; l’erreur,
C’est de croire qu’un nom peut grandir par l’horreur,
La fraude et les forfaits accumulés sans cesse.
Une augmentation de honte et de bassesse,

D’ombre et de déshonneur n’accroît pas les maisons;
La fange n’a jamais redoré les blasons.
Ah! deuil sans borne après les prouesses sans nombre!
Vous faites du passé votre piédestal sombre;
Sur les grands siècles morts sans tache et sans défaut
Vous montez, pour porter votre honte plus haut!
Vous semblez avec eux avoir fait la gageure
D’égaler leur lumière et leur lustre en injure,
Et de ne pas laisser à leur vieille fierté
Une splendeur sans mettre un opprobre à côté;
Et vous avez le prix dans cette affreuse joute
Où votre abjection à leur gloire s’ajoute!

Ô Dieu qui m’entendez, ces hommes sont hideux,

Certe, ils sont étonnés de nous comme nous d’eux.
Avez-vous fait erreur? et que faut-il qu’on pense?
À qui le châtiment? à qui la récompense?
Quelle nuit! N’est-ce pas le plus dur des affronts
Que nous les preux ayions pour fils eux, les poltrons!
Et qu’abjects et rompant les anciens équilibres,
Eux les tyrans, soient nés de nous, les hommes libres;
Si bien que l’honnête homme est chargé du maudit
Et que le juste doit répondre du bandit!
Qu’ont-ils fait pour porter des noms comme les nôtres?
Par quel fil pouvons-nous tenir les uns aux autres,

Dieu puissant! et comment avons-nous mérité
Eux, ces pères, et nous, cette postérité?
Ah! le siècle difforme et funeste où nous sommes,
En étalant, auprès des tombes, de tels hommes,
Si lâches, si méchants, si noirs, que j’en frémis,
Offense la pudeur des aïeux endormis.

Le vent à son gré roule et tord la banderole.
Je n’avais pas dessein quand j’ai pris la parole
De dire tout cela, mais c’est dit, et c’est bon.
Rois, je sens sur ma lèvre errer l’ardent charbon;
À moi simple, il me vient en parlant des idées;
La patrie et la nuit sur moi sont accoudées
Et toute l’Italie en mon âme descend.
Je sens mon sombre esprit comme un flot grossissant.
Dieu sans doute a voulu, sire, que votre altesse
Vît l’indignation qui sort de la tristesse.

Je sais que par instants le public devient froid
Pour le bien et le mal, pour le crime et le droit,
Le comble de la chute étant l’indifférence;
On vit, l’abjection n’est plus une souffrance;
On regarde avancer sur le même cadran
Sa propre ignominie et l’orgueil du tyran;
L’affront ne pèse plus; et même on le déclare.

À ces époques-là de sa honte on se pare;
Temps hideux où la joue est rose du soufflet.
La jeunesse a perdu l'élan qui la gonflait;
Le tocsin ne fait plus dresser la sentinelle,
Ce fauve oiseau qui bat les cloches de son aile
Est cloué sur la porte obscure du beffroi;
Oui, sire, aux mauvais jours, sous quelque méchant roi
Féroce, quoique vil, et, quoique lâche, rude,
Toute une nation se change en solitude;
L'échine et le bâton semblent être d'accord,
L'un frappe et l'autre accepte; et le peuple a l'air mort;
On mange, on boit; toujours la foule, plus personne;
Les âmes sont un sol aride où le pied sonne;
Les foyers sont éteints, les cœurs sont endormis;

Rois, voyant ce sommeil, on se croit tout permis.
Ah! la tourbe est ignoble et l'élite est indigne.
De l'avilissement l'homme porte le signe.
L'air tiède et mou, le temps qui passe, la gaîté,
Les chants, l'oubli des morts, tout est complicité;
Tous sont traîtres à tous, et la foule se rue
À traîner les vaincus par les pieds dans la rue;
Le silence est au fond de tout le bruit qu'on fait;
On est prêt à baiser Satan s'il triomphait;
Le mal qui réussit devient digne d'estime;
L'applaudissement suit, la chaîne au cou, le crime,
Que la libre huée a d'abord précédé;
On voit — car le malheur lui-même dégradé
Abdique la colère et se couche et se vautre,
Dans l'espoir d'avoir part au pillage d'un autre —
Les extorqués faisant cortége aux extorqueurs.
Pas une résistance illustre dans les cœurs!
La tyrannie altière, atroce, inexorable,
Est le vaste échafaud de l'homme misérable;
Le maître est le gibet, les flatteurs sont les clous.
Mangé de la vermine ou dévoré des loups,
Tel est le sort du peuple; il faut qu'il s'y résigne.

Des vautours, des corbeaux. Mais où donc est le cygne?

Où donc est la colombe? où donc est l’alcyon?
Quand on n’est pas Tibère, on est Trimalcion.
L’un rampe, lèche et rit pendant que l’autre opprime,
Sombre histoire! le vice est le fumier du crime;
Les hommes sont bassesse ou bien férocité;
Meurtre dans le palais, fange dans la cité;
Le tyran est doublé du valet; et le monde
Va de l’antre du fauve à l’auge de l’immonde.

Tout ce que je dis là vous fait l’esprit content;
C’est votre joie, ô rois, mais écoutez pourtant.

Rois, qu’une seule voix proteste, elle réveille
Au fond de ce silence une sinistre oreille
Et fait rouvrir un œil terrible en cette nuit;
Prenez garde à celui qui fait le premier bruit;
Un seul passant sévère et ferme déconcerte
Dans son abjection l’immensité déserte;
Un vivant n’a qu’à dire aux cadavres un mot,
Et l’ossuaire va se lever en sursaut.
Princes, aussi longtemps qu’on croit le ciel compère,
On se tait; tant qu’on voit le tyran qui prospère
Et le lâche succès qui le suit comme un chien,
C’est bon; tant que le mal qu’il fait se porte bien,
Sa personne est un dogme et son règne est un culte.
Un beau jour, brusquement, catastrophe, tumulte,
Tout croule et se disperse, et dans l’ombre, les cris,

L’horreur, tout disparaît; et, quant à moi, je ris
De ceux qu’ébahiraient ces chutes de tonnerre.

Pisistrate, Manfred, Hippias, Foulques-Nerre,
Hatto du Rhin, Jean deux, le pire des dauphins,
Macrin, Vitellius, ont fait de sombres fins;

Rois, ce ne sont point là des choses que j’invente;
C’est de l’histoire. On peut régner par l’épouvante
Et la fraude, assisté de tel prêtre moqueur
Et fourbe, à qui les vers mangent déjà le cœur,
On peut courber les grands, fouler la basse classe;
Mais à la fin quelqu’un dans la foule se lasse,
Et l’ombre soudain s’ouvre, et de quelque manteau
Sort un poing qui se crispe et qui tient un couteau.
Vous dites : — Devant moi tout fléchit et recule;
Moi, je viens de Turnus; moi je descends d’Hercule;
J’ai le respect de tous, étant né radieux
Et fils de ces héros qui touchaient presque aux dieux. —
Ne vous fiez pas trop à vos grands noms, mes maîtres;
Car vous seriez frappés, quels que soient vos ancêtres,
Eussiez-vous sur le front l’étoile Aldebaran.
On s’inquiète peu des aïeux d’un tyran,

Du Chéréas quelconque on applaudit l’audace,
Qu’Aurélien soit noble ou bourgeois, qu’il soit dace
Ou hongrois, ce n’est pas ce que je veux savoir;
Mais il fut dur et sombre, et, quant au vengeur noir
Qui rejette au tombeau cette âme ensanglantée,
Que ce soit Mucapor ou que ce soit Mnesthée,
Qu’importe? Un tyran tombe, un despote est détruit,
Je n’en demande pas davantage à la nuit.

Ces meurtres-là sont grands; Brutus en est la marque;
Chion, Léonidas en poignardant Cléarque,
Ont montré qu’ils étaient disciples de Platon;
Harmodius n’avait point de poil au menton
Quand il dit : je tuerai le tyran; il le tue;

Et la Grèce lui fait dresser une statue
Qui tenait à la main une épée et des fleurs.
On peut frapper le roi qui vit de vos malheurs,
L’usurpateur armé de forfaits et de ruses;
C’était l’opinion des grecs amants des muses,

Peuple si délicat que, sous ces nobles cieux,
Les orfèvres, sculpteurs des métaux précieux,
Moulaient les coupes d’or sur la gorge des femmes.
Ainsi furent punis certains hommes infâmes,
Car on n’épargne point qui n’a rien épargné;
Et l’histoire les suit d’un regard indigné.

Moi, je ne juge pas ces justices sinistres;
Je les vois, je n’ai point la garde des registres
Ni la revision des arrêts; je n’ai pas
De signature à mettre au bas de ces trépas;
C’est la chose de Dieu, non la mienne; l’affaire
Le regarde, et non moi, vieux néant de la guerre,
Spectre qui vais traînant mes pas estropiés,
Et qui sens des douleurs sous la plante des pieds;
Après tout, je ne suis ni mage ni prophète;
Et que la volonté du ciel profond soit faite!
Rois, je n’apporte ici que l’avertissement.

Ô princes, vous pouvez crouler subitement.
Vous avez beau compter sur vos soldats horribles;
Les comètes aussi sont fortes et terribles,

Elles vont à l’assaut du soleil rayonnant,
Elles font peur au ciel; mais Dieu, rien qu’en tournant
Son doigt mystérieux vers les nuits scélérates,
Fait dans l’océan noir fuir ces astres pirates.

Le pas des lansquenets sonnait sur les pavés.
— J’ai soif, dit Elciis. L’empereur dit : Buvez.

III

LE TROISIÈME JOUR

LES CATASTROPHES

L’éternité n’est point dans vos apothéoses;
Et Dieu ne l’a donnée à rien, pas même aux roses.
Le temps que vous avez n’est pas illimité.
Un jour vient, tout se paie; et la calamité,
Qui sortit si souvent de vos palais, y rentre.
La foule alors, autour du maître dans son antre,
Bouillonne et s’enfle; on voit les pauvres demi-nus
Rugir, humbles hier, brusquement devenus
Plus hagards que les huns et que les massagètes.
Ah! les reines — je plains les femmes — sont sujettes
Aux cheveux blanchissant dans une seule nuit.
L’incendie au sommet des tours s’épanouit,

Seule utile lueur qui sorte du despote;
Au-dessus du palais, buisson de flamme, il flotte,
Et, croissant à travers les toits, ouvre au milieu
Ses pétales d’aurore et ses feuilles de feu,
Étant la rose horrible et fauve des décombres.
Vous avez dans vos cœurs ces pressentiments sombres;
C’est pourquoi, malgré vous, vous êtes pleins d’ennuis.

Qui suis-je maintenant, moi qui parle? Je suis
Un vieux homme qui va sur la route. On l’arrête.
Entrez; il parle, il dit son avis sur la fête;
Rien de plus. Rois, je suis cet horrible inconnu
Qu’on nomme le passant et le premier venu;
Je suis la grande voix du dehors; et les choses
Que je dis, et qui font blêmir vos fronts moroses,
Sont celles qu’à vos pieds tout un peuple vivant
Rêve et pense, et qu’emporte au fond des cieux le vent.

Car lorsque je disais que les âmes sont mortes,
Tout à l’heure, et que rien ne remue à vos portes,
Et que la lâcheté publique a fait la paix
Avec votre infamie, ô rois, je me trompais.

Non, Rome vit dans Rome, et l’eau bout dans le vase.

Mais à mon âge on peut broncher dans une phrase;
Faire erreur sur un mot n’est rien; l’essentiel
C’est d’être une âme honnête et droite sous le ciel.

Donc, le moment approche où la grappe, étant mûre,
Tombera. L’heure vient. — Mais j’entends qu’on murmure.
Est-ce que par hasard ils ont imaginé
Ces princes, ces bandits compagnons d’un damné,
Ces gangrenés du mal, ces rois en qui suppure
Toute l’abjection de notre époque impure,
Que j’étais un soldat de l’humeur des valets;
Qu’en me disant : parlez, vous qui passez! j’allais
Avec la flatterie, immonde et vil dictame,
Panser complaisamment l’ulcère de leur âme;
Que moi, le vieux pisan, je courberais le front,
Et qu’ils pourraient, étant les malheureux qu’ils sont,
Ce Ranuce, ce Jean, ce Ratbert, cet Alonze,
Faire sucer leur plaie à la bouche de bronze!

Pour adorer Ratbert il faut être Ratbert;
Pour admirer Ranuce en perfidie expert
Et Jean l’homme du meurtre, il faudrait que je n’eusse
Pas plus de cœur que Jean ni d’âme que Ranuce.

Oh! laissez-moi cacher mon front sous mon manteau.
Quand me descendra-t-on dans le Campo-Santo,
Avec les trépassés augustes qu’on oublie,
Avec les chevaliers de la vieille Italie,
Loin des vivants, parmi les spectres d’Orcagna!
Pourquoi faut-il qu’à ceux que la guerre épargna
La mort vienne si tard, hélas! menant en laisse
Ces deux chiens monstrueux, la honte et la vieillesse!

Ah! jeunes gens! les ans font plier mes genoux.
Je suis triste jusqu’à la haine devant vous!
Ah! la décrépitude à l’opprobre ressemble!
Le dedans reste ferme; hélas, le dehors tremble.

Nous avons beau flétrir ces nouveaux arrivants,
Nous ne pouvons punir; nous ne sommes vivants
Que juste ce qu’il faut pour endurer l’offense.
Qu’il est dur de rentrer dans la mort par l’enfance!
Ah! c’est un grand malheur et c’est un grand dépit
D’être encore lion quand le renard glapit,
D’entendre les chacals et les bêtes funèbres
Faire leur fête horrible au milieu des ténèbres,
Et de ne pouvoir pas, étant malade et vieux,
Secouer sa crinière énorme jusqu’aux cieux!

Je vois ce qui s’écroule et je vois ce qui monte,
Ruine de la gloire et croissance de honte,
Et j’ouvre avec regret mes vieux yeux assoupis.
Et si je vais trop loin dans mes discours, tant pis!
Car je n’ai pas le temps de prendre des mesures
Du degré de respect qu’on doit à vos masures,
À vos tours, à vous, sire, et de la quantité
De mépris qui convient à votre majesté.

Ô misère, pendant que tout entiers vous êtes
Aux plaisirs, aux chansons, aux bals, aux coupe-têtes,
Aux meurtres, aux festins abjects, aux jeux brutaux,
Aux piéges qu’on se tend de châteaux à châteaux,
Ceux-ci pillant ceux-là, ceux-là tondant les autres,
Les plus sanglants disant tout bas des patenôtres,
Sournois, ayant toujours votre ami pour danger;
Pendant que vous passez votre temps à manger,

À vous soûler de vin et d’horreurs inconnues,
Regardant l’impudeur des femmes presque nues,
Contemplant aux miroirs vos malsaines pâleurs,
Vous parfumant de musc, vous couronnant de fleurs,
Et des gens que j’ai dit grossissant les prébendes,
Hélas! les sarrasins du Fraxinet, par bandes,
Infestent la Provence et le bas Dauphiné;
Humbert, dauphin de Vienne, est chez lui confiné;

Personne ne défend la marche occidentale

Où la cavalerie espagnole s’installe,
Et je ne sache pas qu’un comte ou qu’un marquis
S’en montre curieux et qu’on se soit enquis
De quels Guadalquivirs et de quelles Navarres
Sortent ces catalans et ces almogavares.
Partout l’étranger vient et de Naple aux Grisons
Montre sa pique au bord de nos noirs horizons.
Chocs, alertes, assauts, invasions soudaines;
Ils viennent de Nubie, ils viennent des Ardennes.
Au duc Welf qui, lassé de ne voir ni vaillant,
Ni prince devant lui, vous regarde en bâillant,
Quel bras opposez-vous, dites? Quel capitaine
Aux usurpations des tyrans d’Aquitaine?

Une maille de moins défait tout le tricot;
Vous n’avez plus le Var, vous n’avez plus l’Escaut.
Chaque passant arrache au vieux temple une brique.
Abraham, empereur des maures en Afrique,
Laissant derrière lui les royaumes penchés
Et saignants, et les champs de cadavres jonchés,
Approche, et le voilà qui touche à l’Italie;
Nos murs, dont le drapeau frissonnant se replie,
Chancellent, et déjà sur leur morne blancheur
Nous pouvons voir grandir l’ombre de ce faucheur.
Du sud accourt le nègre, et du nord vient le singe;
Les huns sortent velus des forêts de Thuringe;

Le spectre d’Alaric rôde et sonne du cor;
Les vieilles nations vandales sont encor
À nos portes, grinçant les dents et hurlant toutes,
Dans la Souabe, pays fauve et qui n’a pour routes
Que des sentiers perdus dans le sombre des bois.
L’empereur grec pâlit dans Byzance aux abois;
Son armée est sans duc, sa flotte est sans drungaire;
Pas d’hommes, pas d’argent; comment faire la guerre?

Toute la chrétienté le laisse sans appui;
Ce livide Andronic, entre les turcs et lui,
N’a plus qu’un bras de mer de deux milles de large;

Ce césar plie au poids du monde qui le charge;
Du toit de son palais, il voit à l’orient
Les barbares tirer leurs sabres en riant;
Son fils, Kyr Michaël, craint de livrer bataille.

Ici, quels chefs a-t-on? qui? de la valetaille.
Car vous n’obéissez qu’à plus petit que vous;
Vous avez l’orgueil bas ayant le cœur jaloux.
Princes, l’infirmité de ce croulant empire,
C’est que toujours le moindre est choisi par le pire;
Le cul-de-jatte est duc dans le camp des goîtreux.
Quant aux moines à casque, ils se battent entre eux,
Au lieu de s’occuper de notre délivrance.
Villiers de l’Ile-Adam, de la langue de France,
Guerroie Ugoccion, grand maître des portiers.

Une gorgone sort de tous ces bénitiers;
Et le pape à servir des messes utilise
Azon cinq, général des troupes de l’église.
Le peu qui nous restait des bons vieux généraux
Meurt de votre dédain aidé de vos bourreaux;
On oublie à Final don Fabrice, on expulse
Roger, on met au ban de l’empire Trivulce;
Et l’ennemi s’avance, et vous n’avez plus là
Bélisaire pour faire échec à Totila.

Tout le vieux fer romain n’est plus que de la rouille.

Deux femmes autrefois qui filaient leur quenouille,
Voyant que l’étranger enjambait le fossé,
Ont crié : guerre! et pris la pique, et l’ont chassé;
Ces deux femmes, c’étaient, autant qu’il m’en souvienne,
Auxilia de Nice, et Mahaud d’Albon-Vienne.

Fils de ces femmes-là qui battaient vos vainqueurs,
Vous avez hérité des fuseaux, non des cœurs.

Déserteurs du pays, oppresseurs de l’empire,

Le peuple est stupéfait et ne sait plus que dire
Dans le saisissement de votre lâcheté.
Que reste-t-il du ciel, rois, le soleil ôté,
Et de la terre, hélas! l’Italie éclipsée?

Voilà. Je vous ai dit à peu près ma pensée.
*

Elciis s’arrêtant, car le jour était chaud,
Dit : Je voudrais dormir. L’empereur dit : Bientôt.

IV

LE QUATRIÈME JOUR

DIEU

Le maître est insensé de peser ce qu’il pèse,
Et, parce qu’on se tait, de croire qu’on s’apaise.

Princes, sachez-le bien. Les hommes d’autrefois
Valaient mieux paysans que vous ne valez rois;
La clarté de leurs yeux gêne vos regards traîtres.
Leurs pieds font en marchant un bruit de pas d’ancêtres.
Quand, survenant du fond du vieil honneur lointain,
Un d’eux entre chez vous à l’heure du festin,
Il sent frémir autour de ses talons sévères
Le tremblement des cœurs, des glaives, et des verres.

Oui, vous êtes les nains d’un temps chétif et laid;
Que le plus grand de vous mette mon gantelet,
Je gage que son poing entrera dans le pouce.

Au rebours de l’honneur le vil instinct vous pousse.

Nous sommes les vaillants; vous, vos morts même ont peur;
L’angoisse d’un cœur faux et d’un esprit trompeur
Fait grelotter vos os; si bien que nos natures
Se distinguent encor jusqu’en nos pourritures;
Vous êtes les petits et nous sommes les bons;
Et lorsque vous tombez, et lorsque nous tombons,
La mort montre, parmi les broussailles farouches,
Nos cadavres aux loups, et les vôtres aux mouches.

Les signes de ce temps, les voici : des clairons,
Des femmes dans les camps, des plumes sur les fronts,
Des carnavals durant la moitié de l’année,
Une jeunesse folle au plaisir acharnée,
Joyeuse; et la rougeur sinistre des vieillards.

Quand deux pères rôdant le soir dans les brouillards
Se rencontrent non loin de vos éclats de rire,
Ils passent sans lever les yeux et sans rien dire.

Spectacle ténébreux qu’un peuple décroissant!
Même quand tous sont là, l’on sent quelqu’un d’absent;
C’est l’âme, c’est l’esprit sacré, c’est la patrie.
Une foule avilie, une race flétrie

Perd sa lumière ainsi qu’un bois mort perd sa fleur.
Que ce soit l’Italie ajoute à ma douleur.
La chose est surprenante et triste que des traîtres,
Des coquins, généraux de moines et de reîtres,
Puissent rapetisser lentement dans leur main
Un peuple, quand ce peuple est le peuple romain.
En lisant aux enfants l’histoire d’Agricole
Ou de Cincinnatus, les vieux maîtres d’école
S’arrêtent et n’ont pas la force d’achever.
Hélas, on voit encor les astres se lever,

L’aube sur l’Apennin jeter sa clarté douce,
L’oiseau faire son nid avec les brins de mousse,
La mer battre les rocs dans ses flux et reflux,
Mais la grandeur des cœurs c’est ce qu’on ne voit plus.

Ne croyez pas pourtant que je me décourage.
Je ne fais pas ici le bruit d’un vent d’orage
Pour n’aboutir qu’au doute et qu’à l’accablement.
Non, je vous le redis, sire, le grand dormant
S’éveillera; non, non, Dieu n’est pas mort, ô princes.
Le peuple ramassant ses tronçons, ses provinces,
Tous ses morceaux coupés par vous, pâle, effrayant,
Se dressera, le front dans la nuée, ayant
Des jaillissements d’aube aux cils de ses paupières;
Tout luira; le tocsin sonnera dans les pierres;
Tout frémira, du cap d’Otrante au mont Ventoux;
L’Italie, ô tyrans, sortira de vous tous.

De votre monstrueuse et cynique mêlée
Elle s’évadera, la belle échevelée,
En poussant jusqu’au ciel ce cri : la liberté!
Le vieil honneur tient bon et n’a pas déserté.
Pour ouvrir dans la honte ou la roche une issue,
Il suffit d’un coup d’âme ou d’un coup de massue.

Tous les peuples sont vrais, même les plus niés.
Vous vous tromperiez fort si vous imaginiez
Que Dieu permet aux rois, conseillés par le prêtre,
D’éteindre la lumière auguste, et qu’il peut être
Au pouvoir de quelque homme ici-bas que ce soit
De le vaincre, et d’aller aux cieux tuer le droit.

Régnez, frappez, soyez mauvais, faites des fautes,

Faites des crimes, soit; il est des lois très hautes.
Les flots sont doute, erreur, trouble; le fond est sûr.

Sachez-le, rois d’en bas, pour que ce globe obscur,
Création fatale et sainte, rayonnante,
Puis lugubre, et de tant de souffles frissonnante,
Ne soit pas, dans l’horreur de l’abîme ignoré,
Comme un sombre navire errant désemparé,
Rois, afin que la vie, et l’être, et la nature,
Restent et n’aillent pas se perdre à l’aventure
Dans le morne océan du mystère inconnu,
Par quatre chaînes d’or le monde est retenu;
Ces chaînes sont : Raison, Foi, Vérité, Justice;
Et l’homme, en attendant que la mort l’engloutisse,
Pèse sur l’infini, sur Dieu, sur l’univers,
Et s’agite, et s’efforce, orageux, noir, pervers,
Avec ses passions folles ou criminelles,
Sans pouvoir arracher ces ancres éternelles?
*

Les yeux sous les sourcils, l’empereur très clément
Et très noble écouta l’homme patiemment,
Et consulta des yeux les rois; puis il fit signe
Au bourreau, qui saisit la hache.
— J’en suis digne,
Dit le vieillard, c’est bien, et cette fin me plaît. —
Et calme il rabattit de ses mains son collet,

Se tourna vers la hache, et dit : — Je te salue.
Maîtres, je ne suis point de la taille voulue,
Et vous avez raison. Vous, princes et vous, roi,
J’ai la tête de plus que vous, ôtez-la-moi.

VIII

LES PAYSANS

AU BORD DE LA MER

LES PAYSANS AU BORD DE LA MER

I

Les pauvres gens de la côte,
L’hiver, quand la mer est haute
Et qu’il fait nuit,
    Viennent où finit la terre
    Voir les flots pleins de mystère
    Et pleins de bruit.

    Ils sondent la mer sans bornes;
    Ils pensent aux écueils mornes
    Et triomphants;
    L’orpheline pâle et seule
    Crie : Ô mon père! et l’aïeule
    Dit : Mes enfants!

    La mère écoute et se penche;
    La veuve à la coiffe blanche
    Pleure et s’en va.
    Ces cœurs qu’épouvante l’onde
    Tremblent dans ta main profonde,
    Ô Jéhovah.

    Où sont-ils tous ceux qu’on aime?
    Elles ont peur. La nuit blême
    Cache Vénus;
    L’océan jette sa brume
    Dans leur âme, et son écume
    Sur leurs pieds nus.

    On guette, on doute, on ignore
    Ce que l’ombre et l’eau sonore

Aux durs combats
Et les rocs aux trous d'éponges,
Pareils aux formes des songes,
Disent tout bas.

L'une frémit, l'autre espère.
Le vent semble une vipère.

On pense à Dieu
Par qui l'esquif vogue ou sombre
Et qui change en gouffre d'ombre
Le gouffre bleu!

II

La pluie inonde leurs tresses.
Elles mêlent leurs détresses
Et leurs espoirs.
Toutes ces tremblantes femmes,
Hélas! font voler leurs âmes
Sur les flots noirs.

Et, selon les espérances,
Chacun voit des apparences
À l'horizon.
Le troupeau des vagues saute
Et blanchit toute la côte
De sa toison.

Et le groupe inquiet pleure.
Cet abîme obscur qu'effleure
Le goëland

Est comme une ombre vivante
Où la brebis Épouvante
Passe en bêlant.

Ah! cette mer est méchante,

Et l’affreux vent d’ouest qui chante
En troublant l’eau,
Tout en sonnant sa fanfare,
Souffle souvent sur le phare
De Saint-Malo.
III

Dans les mers il n’est pas rare
Que la foudre au lieu de phare
Brille dans l’air,
Et que sur l’eau qui se dresse
Le sloop-fantôme apparaisse
Dans un éclair.

Alors tremblez. Car l’eau jappe
Quand le vaisseau mort la frappe
De l’aviron,
Car le bois devient farouche
Quand le chasseur spectre embouche
Son noir clairon.

Malheur au chasse-marée
Qui voit la nef abhorrée!
Ô nuit! terreur!
Tout le navire frissonne,
Et la cloche, à l’avant, sonne
Avec horreur.

C’est le hollandais! la barque
Que le doigt flamboyant marque!
L’esquif puni!

C’est la voile scélérate!
C’est le sinistre pirate
De l’infini!

Il était hier au pôle

Et le voici! Tombe et geôle,
Il court sans fin.
Judas songe, sans prière,
Sur l’avant, et sur l’arrière
Rêve Caïn.

Il suffirait, pour qu’une île
Croulât dans l’onde infertile,
Qu’il y passât;
Il fuit dans la nuit damnée;
La tempête est enchaînée
À ce forçat.

Il change l’onde en hyène,
Et que veut-on que devienne
Le matelot,
Quand, brisant la lame en poudre,
L’enfer vomit dans la foudre
Ce noir brûlot?

La lugubre goëlette
Jette à travers son squelette
Un blanc rayon;
La lame devient hagarde,
L’abîme effaré regarde
La vision.

Les rocs qui gardent la terre
Disent : Va-t’en, solitaire!
Démon, va-t’en!
L’homme entend de sa chaumière
Aboyer les chiens de pierre
Après Satan.

Et les femmes sur la grève
Se parlent du vaisseau rêve
En frémissant;

Il est plein de clameurs vagues
Il traîne avec lui des vagues
Pleines de sang.

IV

Et l’on se conte à voix basse
Que le noir vaisseau qui passe
Est en granit,

Et qu’à son bord rien ne bouge;
Les agrès sont en fer rouge,
Le mât hennit.

Et l’on se met en prières,
Pendant que joncs et bruyères
Et bois touffus,
Vents sans borne et flots sans nombre,
Jettent dans toute cette ombre
Des cris confus.

V

Et les écueils centenaires
Rendent des bruits de tonnerres
Dans l’ouragan;
Il semble en ces nuits d’automne
Qu’un canon monstrueux tonne
Sur l’océan.

L’ombre est pleine de furie.
Ô chaos! onde ahurie,
Caps ruisselants,
Vent que les mères implorent,
Noir gouffre où s’entre-dévorent
Les flots hurlants!

Comme un fou tirant sa chaîne,
L’eau jette des cris de haine

Aux durs récifs;

Les rocs, sourds à ses huées,
Mêlent aux blêmes nuées
Leurs fronts pensifs.

La mer traîne en sa caverne
L’esquif que le flot gouverne,
Le mât détruit,
Et la barre, et la voilure
Que noue à sa chevelure
L’horrible nuit.

Et sur les sombres falaises
Les pêcheuses granvillaises
Tremblent au vent,
Pendant que tu ris sur l’onde,
De l’autre côté du monde,
Soleil levant!

IX

[

LES ESPRITS]

I

Un homme aux yeux profonds passait; un patriarche
Lui demanda : — Combien as-tu de jours de marche,
Ô voyageur qui viens du côté du levant?
L’homme dit : — Je ne sais. Le vieux reprit : — Le vent,
Ô voyageur qui viens du côté de l’aurore,
T’a-t-il bien poursuivi? L’homme dit : — Je l’ignore.
Le vieillard dit : — Tu dois avoir près d’Engaddi
Trouvé la caravane allant vers le midi?
Combien de voyageurs et de bêtes de somme?
— Je n’ai rien rencontré ni rien compté, dit l’homme.
— Les hérons gris ont-ils passé dans le brouillard?
Dit le vieux. L’homme dit : — Je n’ai rien vu, vieillard.

Et le vieillard reprit : — Homme au sombre visage,
Aujourd’hui, dans ta route, as-tu selon l’usage,
Auprès de la citerne entre Édom et Gaza,
Crié trois fois le nom du saint qui la creusa?
Et l’homme répondit : — Quel saint? que veux-tu dire?
Le vieillard repartit : — Homme, est-ce de la myrrhe
Ou du baume qu’on doit en tribut envoyer
Au tétrarque Antipas pour laver son foyer
Et parfumer son lit? — Je ne sais pas, dit l’homme.
— Quoi! tu ne connais point le roi que je te nomme?
— Non. — Le vieillard reprit : — Tu ne distingues pas
Entre le lit de pourpre où se couche Antipas
Et la paille qui sert aux bêtes de litière?
— Non, dit l’homme.
Ils parlaient auprès d’un cimetière.
L’œil du vieillard tomba sur les fosses; il dit :
— Tous ces êtres, hélas! sur qui l’herbe grandit,
Étaient jadis vivants, bruyants, joyeux, utiles;
Maintenant les voilà tombés chez les reptiles,

Mangés des vers, mêlés à la terre, mêlés
À la cendre, et gisants. — Non, dit l'homme. Envolés.
Arriver au tombeau, c'est atteindre le faîte. —

Le patriarche alors reconnut un prophète,
Et murmura pensif, à voix basse, pendant
Que ce passant, doré par le rouge occident,
Disparaissait au loin dans le désert sublime :
— Ô savant seulement des choses de l'abîme!

II

Un grand esprit en marche a ses rumeurs, ses houles,
Ses chocs, et fait frémir profondément les foules,
Et remue en passant le monde autour de lui.
On est épouvanté si l'on n'est ébloui;
L'homme comme un nuage erre et change de forme;
Nul, si petit qu'il soit, n'échappe au souffle énorme;
Les plus humbles, pendant qu'il parle, ont le frisson.

Ainsi quand, évadé dans le vaste horizon,
L'aquilon qui se hâte et qui cherche aventure
Tord la pluie et l'éclair, comme de sa ceinture

Une fille défait en souriant le nœud,
Quand l'immense vent gronde et passe, tout s'émeut;
Pas un brin d'herbe au fond des ravins, que ne touche
Cette rapidité formidable et farouche.

III

Autrefois, j'ai connu Ferdousi dans Mysore.
Il semblait avoir pris une flamme à l'aurore
Pour s'en faire une aigrette et se la mettre au front;
Il ressemblait aux rois que n'atteint nul affront,
Portait le turban rouge où le rubis éclate
Et traversait la ville habillé d'écarlate.

Je le revis dix ans après vêtu de noir.

Et je lui dis :
— Ô toi qu'on venait jadis voir
Comme un homme de pourpre errer devant nos portes,
Toi, le seigneur vermeil, d'où vient donc que tu portes
Cet habit noir, qui semble avec de l'ombre teint?

— C'est, me répondit-il, que je me suis éteint.

IV

LE LAPIDÉ

Celui qui parle ici marchait dans une plaine
Sombre au point qu'un sentier s'y distinguait à peine;
On entendait un bruit de foudre à l'horizon.

Il vit on ne sait quoi d'affreux dans le gazon;
Un monceau d'ossements, noir sous un tas de pierres.
Alors, lui, le marcheur qui baisse les paupières,
Il s'arrêta, sévère et triste, et dit à Dieu :
— Dieu! sous votre ciel calme et dans cet âpre lieu
Où le vent vient gronder et l'apôtre se taire,
Dans ce désert voisin d'Horeb, je vois à terre

Quelque chose qui fut un homme, et qui vivait.
C'était un mage; il eut debout à son chevet,
Tout le temps qu'il vécut, votre esprit formidable;
Et votre esprit parlait à son âme; et le sable,
Et la poussière, et l'eau qui coule du rocher,
N'ont jamais empêché ses pieds nus de marcher;
Il passait les torrents et traversait les plaines;
Il était sur la terre une de vos haleines;
Il parlait au pontife, au scribe, au juge, au roi,
Et sa bouche soufflait sur eux le vaste effroi;
Il ne ménageait pas non plus la sombre foule;
Il passait, dispersant sa parole, et la houle
A le même frisson sous la trombe, et le bois

Sous l’orage indigné, que l’homme sous sa voix.
Du moins ce fut ainsi tant que vécut ce mage.

En bas son âme, en haut l’astre, étaient du même âge,
Et le peuple à ses pieds songeait dans la cité
Quand il parlait au gouffre avec fraternité.
Si bien que maintenant le voici dans cette herbe.
Le peuple est trop obscur, le prêtre est trop superbe
Pour se laisser longtemps crier par un passant
Qu’il faut aider le faible et bénir l’innocent,
Qu’il faut craindre l’augure et son sceptre d’érable,
Mais que la vérité surtout est vénérable,
Et que les fils d’Adam doivent se dire entre eux
Qu’il s’agit d’être juste et non pas d’être heureux.
Cet homme était sublime et pur dans ses prières;
C’est pourquoi, je le dis, le voilà sous ces pierres.
Ce mage a cet amas d’affreux cailloux pour lit,
Qui le tua vivant et mort l’ensevelit.
Certes, l’arbre qui près du cadavre s’élève
A plus d’ombrage ayant à ses pieds plus de sève;
L’herbe est belle, et les vers de terre sont contents;
Les loups ont, j’en conviens, à manger pour longtemps;
L’hyène après la chair rongera le squelette;
J’entends se réjouir dans l’ombre la belette,
Et le corbeau qui hait votre soleil divin;
Et l’églantier sauvage en fleur dans ce ravin

A pu boire le sang dont ses roses sont faites.
Est-ce donc à cela que servent les prophètes?

Et Dieu lui répondit :
— D’abord, c’est à cela.
Il faut que la fleur dise à l’aube : me voilà!
L’arbre existe; il est bon que l’herbe soit épaisse
Afin que la brebis joyeuse s’en repaisse;
Le ver de terre a droit de vivre; et le vautour
Dans le banquet du jour et de l’ombre a son tour;

Le grand ordre ignoré n’exclut pas la belette
De ceux que la mamelle universelle allaite;

Et moi qui sais que tout a pour racine tout,
Que, si l’un est couché, c’est que l’autre est debout,
Que l’être naît de l’être, et sans fin se transforme,
Et que l’éternité tourne en ce cercle énorme,
Sans quoi dans l’azur noir les soleils s’éteindraient,
Je ne vois pas pourquoi les prophètes seraient
Dispensés de donner leur chair pour nourriture
À l’affamée immense et sombre, la nature.
Et puis ce lapidé sert encore à ceci :
C’est qu’il te fait songer. L’homme passe, obscurci
Par la nuit, par l’hiver, par l’ombre, et par son âme,
Car il met de la cendre où j’ai mis de la flamme;
Eh bien, puisqu’il est sourd, et puisqu’il est haineux
À ceux qu’il voit venir ayant mon souffle en eux,
Puisqu’il a son plaisir pour loi, pour dieu son ventre,
Il est bon qu’en venant de jouer dans quelque antre
Ses jours, son bien, son cœur, tout, sur un coup de dé,
Soudain il voie à terre un sage lapidé,

Et qu’il compare, ému d’une terreur sacrée,
Les cadavres qu’il fait aux esprits que je crée.

— Et, poursuivit l’Esprit immense, écoute encor.
Quand, tels que des chasseurs menant au son du cor
Leur meute dans le bois sinistre des ténèbres
Les peuples, devant eux poussant ces chiens funèbres,
Haine, Ignorance, Envie, Orgueil, Rébellion,
Ont traqué mon prophète ainsi que le lion,
Quand ils boivent le sang et le vin dans leurs salles,
Adorant, nains hideux, leurs fautes colossales,
Quand le brûleur, soufflant sur un tas de charbon,
Se dit mon prêtre, et quand le mal leur semble bon,
Les mages inspirés parlent aux multitudes,
Comme le sombre vent, du fond des solitudes,

Mais je n’ignore pas que ce n’est point assez.
Le prophète est bien grand, mais ne peut, je le sais,
Dire les mots divins qu’avec la langue humaine;
Il sied que le prodige et que le phénomène
Apparaisse, et me nomme aux peuples, oublieux
De tout ce que j’ai mis d’obscur sur les hauts lieux;

Il faut faire entrevoir à l’homme mon mystère,
L’ordre silencieux doit cesser de se taire,
Et, pour le ciel profond, c’est le moment d’avoir
La clameur rappelant les peuples au devoir;
Un avertissement farouche est nécessaire;
Votre terre a besoin qu’un verbe altier, sincère,
Innocent, prenne l’ombre effrayante à témoin;
Alors il faut quelqu’un qu’on entende de loin
Et qui parle plus haut que la voix ordinaire,
Et c’est un des emplois que je donne au tonnerre.

X

LE BEY OUTRAGÉ

Le vieux bey de la régence
Murmure en baissant le front :
Demain s’appelle vengeance
Quand hier s’appelle affront.

Lui qui creusa tant de fosses
Que, lorsqu’il passe, inclément,
Le ventre des femmes grosses
Tressaille lugubrement,

Il tient nu son cimeterre;
Pâle, il bâille par instants;
Puis il regarde la terre
Comme s’il disait : Attends.

Il rêve. On sent qu’il résiste
Comme le pin des forêts,
Et qu’il sera d’abord triste
Pour être terrible après.

Ses regards sont insondables;
Son glaive dans ses yeux luit;
Ses paupières formidables,
Où passe un éclair de nuit,

Laissent, sans qu’il les essuie,
Tomber sur son yatagan
Ces larges gouttes de pluie
Qui précèdent l’ouragan.

XI

LA CHANSON

DES DOREURS DE PROUES

Nous sommes les doreurs de proues.
Les vents, tournant comme des roues,
Sur la verte rondeur des eaux
Mêlent les lueurs et les ombres,
 Et dans les plis des vagues sombres
 Traînent les obliques vaisseaux.

La bourrasque décrit des courbes,
Les vents sont tortueux et fourbes,
L’archer noir souffle dans son cor,
Ces bruits s’ajoutent aux vertiges,
Et c’est nous qui dans ces prodiges
Faisons rôder des spectres d’or,

Car c’est un spectre que la proue.
Le flot l’étreint, l’air la secoue;
Fière, elle sort de nos bazars
Pour servir aux éclairs de cible,
Et pour être un regard terrible
Parmi les sinistres hasards.

Roi, prends le frais sous les platanes;
Sultan, sois jaloux des sultanes,
Et tiens sous des voiles caché
L’essaim des femmes inconnues
Qu’hier on vendait toutes nues
À la criée en plein marché;

Qu’importe au vent! qu’importe à l’onde!
Une femme est noire, une est blonde,
L’autre est d’Alep ou d’Ispahan;
Toutes tremblent devant ta face;
Et que veut-on que cela fasse
Au mystérieux océan?

Vous avez chacun votre fête;
Sois le prince, il est la tempête,
Lui l’éclair, toi l’yatagan,
Vous avez chacun votre glaive;
Sous le sultan le peuple rêve,
Le flot songe sous l’ouragan.

Nous travaillons pour l’un et l’autre.
Cette double tâche est la nôtre,
Et nous chantons! Ô sombre émir,

Tes yeux d’acier, ton cœur de marbre,
N’empêchent pas le soir dans l’arbre
Les petits oiseaux de dormir;

Car la nature est éternelle
Et tranquille, et Dieu sous son aile
Abrite les vivants pensifs.
Nous chantons dans l’ombre sereine
Des chansons où se mêle à peine
La vision des noirs récifs.

Nous laissons aux maîtres les palmes
Et les lauriers; nous sommes calmes
Tant qu’ils n’ont pas pris dans leur main
Les étoiles diminuées,
Tant que la fuite des nuées
Ne dépend pas d’un souffle humain.

L’été luit, les fleurs sont écloses,
Les seins blancs ont des pointes roses,
On chasse, on rit, les ouvriers
Chantent, et les moines s’ennuient;
Les vagues biches qui s’enfuient
Font tressaillir les lévriers.

Oh! s’il fallait que tu t’emplisses,
Sultan, de toutes les délices
Qui t’environnent, tu mourrais.
Vis et règne, — la vie est douce.
Le chevreuil couché sur la mousse
Fait des songes dans les forêts;

Monter ne sert qu’à redescendre;
Tout est flamme, puis tout est cendre;

La tombe dit à l’homme : vois!
Le temps change, les oiseaux muent,
Et les vastes eaux se remuent,
Et l’on entend passer des voix;

L’air est chaud, les femmes se baignent,
Les fleurs entre elles se dédaignent;
Tout est joyeux, tout est charmant,
Des blancheurs dans l’eau se reflètent;
Les roses des bois se complètent
Par les astres du firmament.

Ta galère que nous dorâmes
A soixante paires de rames
Qui de Lépante à Moganez
Domptent le vent et la marée,
Et dont chacune est manœuvrée
Par quatre forçats enchaînés.

XII

TÉNÈBRES

TÉNÈBRES

I

L’homme est humilié de son lot; il se croit
Fait pour un ciel plus pur, pour un sort moins étroit;
L’homme ne trouve pas de sa dignité d’être
Malade, las, souffrant, errant sans rien connaître,
Pareil au bœuf qui mange, au bouc qui s’assouvit,
Poudreux d’un pas qu’il fait, souillé d’un jour qu’il vit,
Fatigué du seul poids de l’heure vaine, esclave
Du lit qui le repose et du bain qui le lave;
Il s’irrite, il s’indigne; il se déclare enfin
Avili par la soif, insulté par la faim.
Hélas! vieillir, trembler comme une feuille d’arbre,
Se refroidir, sentir ses os devenir marbre,
Après des songes noirs avoir de froids réveils,
Quel sort! et l’homme pleure.
— Eh, disent les soleils,

Qu’est-ce donc que veut l’homme? et quelle est sa folie?
Le joug universel le comprime et le lie;
Eh bien? que lui faut-il et de quoi se plaint-il?
L’être le plus grossier, l’être le plus subtil
Sont courbés comme lui par la force invisible.
Insensé, qui voudrait étreindre l’impossible
Dans les crispations débiles de son poing!
Il ne sait point que l’être est un; il ne sait point
Que le mystère obscur couvre tout de sa brume;
Que les vagues de l’ombre ont une affreuse écume
À qui nul front n’échappe, éblouissant ou noir,
Et que tout ce qui vit est fait pour recevoir
L’éclaboussure énorme et sombre de l’abîme.
Il trouve son destin trop humble et trop infime;

Il se sent abaissé par ce ciel écrasant,
Eh! c’est la loi commune, et rien n’en est exempt.
Il hait la cause; il garde à l’infini rancune;
Il voudrait être clair, limpide, sans aucune
De ces obscurités qui s’expliquent plus tard,
Que nous nommons énigme et qu’il nomme hasard;
Il se rêve complet, sans tache, sans problème,
Portant sur son front l’aube ainsi qu’un diadème.
Pur, lumineux, serein, parfait, calme; il voudrait
Être seul en dehors de l’effrayant secret.

Quoi! tout ce qui naît, vit, s’allume, se consomme,
Brille et meurt, ce serait pour aboutir à l’homme!
L’homme serait le but du splendide univers!
Mais que dirait la cendre et que diraient les vers?
Quoi! la création aurait pour toute fête
Et pour tout horizon d’avoir l’homme à son faîte!
Dieu serait pour l’atome un piédestal d’orgueil!
Non! l’homme souffre et rampe; il est son propre écueil;
Il tremble et tombe; il sent peser sur lui sans cesse
Son âme en ignorance et sa chair en bassesse;
Il est triste le soir et triste le matin;
Il tâte en vain le cercle où tourne son destin;
L’astre qu’il porte en lui suit une obscure ellipse;
La matière le voile et le sommeil l’éclipse;
Son berceau cache un gouffre ainsi que son cercueil;
C’est que tout a son crêpe et que tout a son deuil!
Eh! ne sommes-nous pas humiliés nous-même,
Nous les soleils, les feux du firmament suprême,
Quand l’ombre ouvre l’abîme où nous nous engouffrons :
Avec les sombres nuits, ces immenses affronts! —

II

La nuit! la nuit! la nuit! Et voilà que commence
Le noir de profundis de l’océan immense.
Le marin tremble, aux flots livré;

Miserere, dit l’homme; et, dans le ciel qui gronde,
L’air dit : miserere! Miserere, dit l’onde;
Miserere! miserere!

Le dolmen, dont l’ortie ensevelit les tables,
Pousse un soupir; les morts se dressent lamentables.
Gémissent-ils? écoutent-ils?
La jusquiame affreuse entr’ouvre ses corolles;
La mandragore laisse échapper des paroles
De ses mystérieux pistils.

Qu’a-t-on fait à la ronce et qu’a-t-on fait à l’arbre?
Qu’ont-ils donc à pleurer? Pour qui l’antre de marbre
Verse-t-il ces larmes d’adieux?
Sont-ce les noirs Caïns d’une faute première?
Deuil! ils ont la souffrance et n’ont pas la lumière!
Ils ont des pleurs et n’ont pas d’yeux!

Le navire se plaint comme un homme qui souffre,
Le tuyau grince et fume, et le flot qui s’engouffre
Blanchit les tambours du steamer,
Le crabe, le dragon, l’orphe aux larges ouïes,
Nagent dans l’ombre où rampe en formes inouïes
La vie horrible de la mer.

Le hallier crie; il semble, à travers l’âpre bise,
Qu’on entende hurler Nemrod, Sylla, Cambyse,
Rongés du ver et du corbeau,
Et sortir, dans l’orage et la brume et la haine,
Des froids caveaux où sont les damnés à la chaîne,
Les rugissements du tombeau.

Est-il quelqu’un qui cherche? est-il quelqu’un qui rêve?
Est-il quelqu’un qui marche à l’heure où sur la grève
Rôdent le spectre et l’assassin,
Et qui sache, ô vivants! pourquoi sanglote et râle
La forêt, monstrueuse et fauve cathédrale,

Où le vent sonne le tocsin?

On entend vous parler à l’oreille des bouches;
On voit dans les clartés des branchages farouches
Où passent de mornes convois;
Le vent, bouleversant l’arbre aux cimes altières,
Emplit de tourbillons les blêmes cimetières;
Quelle est donc cette étrange voix?

Quel est ce psaume énorme et que rien ne fait taire?
Et qui donc chante, avec les souffles de la terre,
Avec le murmure des cieux,
Avec le tremblement de la vague superbe,
Les joncs, les eaux, les bois, le sifflement de l’herbe,
Le requiem mystérieux?

Ô sépulcres! j’entends l’orgue effrayant de l’ombre,
Formé de tous les cris de la nature sombre
Et du bruit de tous les écueils;
La mort est au clavier qui frémit dans les branches,
Et les touches, tantôt noires et tantôt blanches,
Sont vos pierres et vos cercueils.

III

L’homme se trompe! Il voit que pour lui tout est sombre;
Il tremble et doute; il croit à la haine de l’ombre;
Son œil ne s’ouvre qu’à demi;
Il dit : — Ne suis-je pas le damné de la terre,
Lugubre atome, ayant l’immensité pour guerre
Et l’univers pour ennemi? —

S’il regarde la vie, elle est aussi le gouffre.
Toute l’histoire pleure et saigne et crie et souffre;
Tous les purs flambeaux sont éteints;
Morus après Caton dans le cirque se couche;
Le genre humain assiste au pugilat farouche

Des grands cœurs et des noirs destins.

L’énigme universelle est proposée à l’âme,
L’âme cherche; la terre et l’eau, l’air et la flamme
Font le mal, triste vision!

Le vent, la mer, la nuit sont pris en forfaiture;
Hélas! que comprend-on? Peu de la créature,
Et rien de la création.

Les faits, qui sont muets et qui semblent funèbres,
Surgissent au regard comme un bloc de ténèbres,
Et rien n’éclaire et rien ne luit;
L’horizon est de l’ombre où l’ombre se prolonge,
Où se dresse, devant l’humanité qui songe,
Toute une montagne de nuit.

Le sombre sphinx Nature, accroupi sur la cime,
Rêve, pétrifiant de son regard d’abîme
Le mage aux essors inouïs.
Tout le groupe pensif des blêmes Zoroastres,
Les guetteurs de soleils et les espions d’astres,
Les effarés, les éblouis,

Il semble à tout ce tas d’Œdipes qui frissonne
Que l’ouragan, clairon des nuages qui sonne,
La comète, horreur du voyant,
L’hiver, la mort, l’éclair, l’onde affreuse et vivante,
Tout ce que le mystère et l’ombre ont d’épouvante
Sorte de cet œil effrayant.

La nuit autour du sphinx roule tumultueuse. —
Si l’on pouvait lever sa patte monstrueuse,
Que contemplèrent tour à tour
Newton, l’esprit d’hier, et l’antique Mercure,
Sous la paume sinistre et sous la griffe obscure
On trouverait ce mot : Amour.

XIII

L’AMOUR

I

L’AMOUR

Quoi! le libérateur qui par degrés desserre
La double chaîne noire, ignorance et misère,
Le balayeur qui jette au vent le préjugé,
Quoi! l’immense marcheur, jamais découragé,
Le Progrès, qui de flamme éblouit le vulgaire,
Détrône l’échafaud et musèle la guerre,
Qui fait avec les mœurs des ratures aux lois,
Change en romain l’étrusque, en français le gaulois,
Crée et brise, sans cesse use l’un contre l’autre
Les mensonges, et va, rapide et ferme apôtre,
Lui, dont la chaude haleine émeut l’homme troublé,
Quoi! lui, le destructeur flamboyant, étoilé,
De l’antique caverne et de l’antique geôle,
Il n’a pu fondre encor la glace que d’un pôle!
Quoi! celles qui de l’âme élèvent le niveau
Et qui n’ont qu’à passer pour faire un ciel nouveau,
Quoi! du pur idéal ces comètes errantes,
Ces guerrières du bien, ces vastes conquérantes,
Les révolutions, archanges de clarté,
N’ont mis que la moitié de l’homme en liberté!

L’autre est encore aux fers, et c’est la plus divine.
Doux oiseaux qui chantez là-bas dans la ravine,
Quand donc lèvera-t-on l’écrou du triste amour?

Ô rossignol de l’ombre, alouette du jour,
Vous, gais pillards des blés, des seigles et des orges,
Moineaux, vous, amoureux de l’azur, rouges-gorges,
Fauvettes qui planez de l’aube jusqu’au soir,
C’est pour vous, n’est-ce pas? une douleur de voir

Que la porte de l’air s’est brusquement fermée
Au moment où les cœurs à travers la ramée
S’envolaient, tendre essaim vers le ciel bleu poussé,
Et que la vieille cage horrible du passé,
Où toujours notre effort retombe et nous ramène,
Tient par une aile encor cette pauvre âme humaine!
Ô libres oiseaux, fiers, charmants, purs, sans ennuis,
Vous dites à l’aurore, aux fleurs, à l’astre, aux nuits :
— Est-ce qu’on ne peut pas aimer quand on est homme?

Et l’aube où Dieu se montre, et l’astre où Dieu se nomme,
La nuit qui fait tomber ses soupirs les plus doux
Du nid des rossignols dans le trou des hiboux,

Les fleurs dont les parfums dans les rayons se fondent,
Et les herbes, les eaux, les pierres vous répondent,
D’une si douce voix qu’on ne peut l’exprimer :
— Ô bons petits oiseaux, tout est fait pour aimer!

II

Regardez-les jouer sur le sable accroupis,
Ou sur l’herbe, au milieu des fleurs, tendre tapis;

L’un traîne la charrette et l’autre tient la pelle.
Le paradis leur parle et l’hymen les appelle.
Six ans donne parfois une tape à trois ans.
Puis l’âge vient, on marche, ô frais sentiers glissants!
Elle a six ans, il a neuf ans; on se marie;
L’aurore et le printemps sont en coquetterie;
Les moineaux dans les bois font des choses entre eux
Qui changent deux enfants dans l’ombre en amoureux.
Encore un an, ou deux; les filles sont farouches
Tout à coup, disent non, et sentent sur leur bouche
L’éclosion charmante et sombre du baiser;
Ô mères, prenez garde! Éros vient se poser
Dans les cœurs; fauve oiseau, sans loi, sans frein, sans règle,
Qui commence en colombe et finit comme l’aigle.

N’importe! c’est exquis. Cupidon est Bébé;
Pyrame ne sait pas de quel sexe est Thisbé,
Et Bérénice joue au volant avec Tite.
Bel âge, où l’idylle est encor toute petite!

III

Il faut boire et frapper la terre d’un pied libre!
Dit Horace; et la chose est vraie aux bords du Tibre,
Vraie aux bords de la Seine; et songeons aux amours,
Maintenant, dit Horace, et moi je dis : Toujours!
Amis! amis! amis! soyons tous frères! gloire
À la beauté, vêtue ou non! Va-t’en, nuit noire!
La jeune année arrive avec l’aurore au front,
Remet le temps à neuf, court d’un pas leste et prompt
Lave le ciel, sourit à la terre engourdie,
Et commence gaîment, par une mélodie,
Le printemps. Chantez, nids! Ô fleurs, dans les fossés,
Les ravins, les étangs, les bois, les champs, croissez!
Boutons d’or que j’ai vus jadis aux Feuillantines,
Renaissez! Fourmillez, liserons, églantines,

Pâquerettes, iris, muguets, lilas, jasmins!
Le petit enfant mai frappe dans ses deux mains.
Allons, dépêchez-vous de naître, il vous appelle.
Il veut parer la terre ainsi qu’une chapelle,
Et mettre une guirlande autour du genre humain.
Avril s’appelle Amour et juin s’appelle Hymen,
Le fruit suivra la fleur. Faisons des nids, fauvettes!
La jeune fille rêve et rit quand vous en faites.
Donnez l’exemple, oiseaux! les vierges aux yeux doux
Vous regardent, ayant des ailes comme vous.
J’erre; un vent tiède émeut les bois, je vois les scènes
Que font les pauvres fleurs aux papillons obscènes;
Le lys vers le bourdon se penche, et, l’écoutant,
A l’air de s’écrier : Ah! vous m’en direz tant!
L’ombre a le tremblement sonore d’une tente
Et cache les amours; la nature est contente;

Et la fécondité fermente; et les appas,

Les soupirs, les baisers, ne s’inquiètent pas
Si quelque orage couve, et si cette gorgone,
La foudre, au loin, là-bas, à l’horizon bougonne.
Le vallon fleuri semble un encensoir fumant.
Quelqu’un a mis le feu partout, l’embrasement
Va de l’arbre au nuage et du ciel à la terre;
La prairie a l’éclat glorieux d’un cratère,
Partout des fleurs de pourpre, et tout flambe et tout luit,
Et la création bouillonnant à grand bruit
Bout tout entière ainsi qu’une eau dans la chaudière,
Et tout rit, le soleil étant l’incendiaire.
Oh! quelle vaste joie en cet abîme bleu!
À toute cette aurore il faudra dire adieu.
Hélas! cela finit par s’éteindre, une fête!
Nous n’y consentons pas, on détourne la tête,
À chaque heure qui passe on veut se retenir.
Mais rien ne ralentit le pas de l’avenir,
Il ne demande pas la permission d’être,
Il vient. Souvenons-nous que demain est un traître,
Et, puisque nous avons Aujourd’hui, jouissons.
L’eau qui fuit en chantant nous donne des leçons;
Fuyons, mais chantons. L’air est plein de senteurs douces
Un ensemencement de fleurs couvre les mousses.
L’homme est ombre; on ne peut guère dire pourquoi
Nous sommes sur la terre. Eh bien, je le dis, moi,

C’est pour aimer. Et Dieu nous a créés pour faire
Éclore un peu d’amour sur cette obscure sphère
Et pour faire lever un astre dans nos cœurs.
Être deux, c’est la loi. Les merles, ces moqueurs,
L’observent aussi bien que le ramier fidèle.
Si la nature, avec de si puissants coups d’aile,
Remue éperdument et partout à la fois
La vie au fond des mers, des cieux, des champs, des bois,
C’est afin d’arriver à son but, faire un couple.

Si le chêne est solide et si la branche est souple,
C'est parce que le nid a besoin dans l'azur
Que le rameau soit tendre, et que l'arbre soit sûr.
L'ombre en son innocence énorme a le satyre.
L'homme cherche, la vierge attend, la femme attire;
Léandre veut Héro, Manon veut Desgrieux;
Sachez cela, vous tous, vivants mystérieux.
Paix aux cœurs douloureux et joie aux fronts moroses!
Quel tourbillonnement éblouissant de roses!

IV

EN GRÈCE!

Écoute, si tu veux, puisque nous nous aimons,
Nous allons tous les deux fuir par delà les monts;
Nous irons sous le ciel de Grèce, où sont les muses.
Tu verras, toi qu'un rien charme, toi qui t'amuses
Du vol d'un papillon, comment les aigles font
Quand ils planent autour du firmament profond;
Tu verras par moments le fronton blanc d'un temple,
Avec la modestie auguste de l'exemple,
Se montrer à demi derrière un bois vermeil;
Tu verras l'aloès étaler au soleil
Des petits lacs de pluie aux pointes de ses feuilles;
Toi qui souvent, pensive et pure, te recueilles,
Toi qui soupires, toi qui songes, toi qui vois,
Tu prêteras l'oreille à de sauvages voix,
Et tu te pencheras sur des échos sublimes;
Car c'est l'altier pays des gouffres et des cimes,

Belle, et le cœur de l'homme y devient oublieux
De tout ce qui n'est pas l'aurore et les hauts lieux;
Et tu seras bien là, toi radieuse et fière;
Tu seras à mon ombre et moi dans ta lumière.

Viens; devant la splendeur de cet horizon bleu,

Nous sentirons en nous croître dans l’ombre un dieu;
Viens, nous nous aimerons dans ces fiers paysages
Comme s’aimaient jadis les belles et les sages,
Comme Socrate aimait Aspasie aux seins nus,
Comme Eschyle, le chantre immense, aimait Vénus,
Dans l’extase sereine et sainte, dans l’ivresse,
L’héroïsme, la joie et l’espoir; car la Grèce,
Terre où dans le réel l’idéal se confond,
Seule, a de ces amours, avec l’Olympe au fond.
Oh! l’amour, le superbe amour, c’est le mystère!
Dieu manquerait au ciel s’il manquait à la terre,
Car la création n’est qu’un vaste baiser;
Aimer, c’est le moyen de Dieu pour apaiser.
C’est le cœur qui nous crée et l’âme qui nous sauve;
Car l’hostie et l’hymen, et l’autel et l’alcôve

Ont chacun un rayon sacré du même jour;
La prière est la sœur tremblante de l’amour;
Qui prie adore; aimer, c’est prier une femme;
Les deux lumières sont au fond la même flamme.
Belle au tendre regard, ce que nous demandons
Aux baisers, aux transports brûlants, aux abandons
S’achevant en sommeil dans les bras l’un de l’autre
C’est ce que demandait aux tonnerres l’apôtre,
C’est ce que dans Tharsis, dans Thèbes, dans Ombos,
Le prophète éperdu demandait aux tombeaux,
La révélation, l’éternité, la vie!
À la suite d’une âme être une âme ravie,
Sentir l’être sacré frémir dans l’être cher,
Apercevoir un astre à travers une chair,
Voir à travers le cœur humain l’âme divine,
Achever ce qu’on voit avec ce qu’on devine,
C’est croire, c’est aimer. Par Ève l’homme naît.
La femme est vers le ciel tournée, et ce qui n’est
Que parfum dans la rose est encens dans la femme.
Adorons.
Nous irons au pays du dictame,

Du laurier, et de l’arbre à palmes, cher aux dieux;

Lieux bénis où le vent reste mélodieux
À force d’avoir mis son souffle dans les lyres.
Ô femme, ô fier œil noir qui m’emplis de délires,
Viens montrer à ce ciel de Grèce ton éclair,
Viens montrer à Paros le marbre de ta chair;
Toi, la Vénus nouvelle, à la Vénus ancienne
Viens te comparer! Toi, cette parisienne
Céleste, qui s’habille avec un goût profond,
Qui livre et cache, donne et reprend, sait à fond
L’art de la transparence enivrante, et câline
Mes yeux ardents avec la blanche mousseline,
Belle, viens compléter Athène avec Paris.

Ô toi qui souffres, plains, consoles et souris,
Je t’aime. Tu me fais l’effet d’une harmonie
Éclose d’on ne sait quelle harpe infinie.
N’es-tu pas l’esprit simple et calme? N’as-tu pas
Un rythme obscur et doux dans chacun de tes pas?
Galatée est lascive et Lesbie impudique;
Toi, même au bain, jamais ta chasteté n’abdique;

Ta beauté tremble et flotte au gré du flot mouvant,
Mais tu fuis si le bruit des feuilles dans le vent
Éveille le souci de pudeur qui t’obsède,
Et toute l’épaisseur de l’eau te vient en aide
Ainsi qu’une nuée au secours d’un rayon;
Naïade, tu craindrais un regard d’alcyon.
Tu dis : Mon cœur demeure innocent, puisqu’on m’aime!
Rien ne peut te ternir, ô pur albâtre; et, même
Dans les ravissements de l’amour accepté,
Tu restes la candeur, étant la volupté.
Parfois tu viens, muette et grave, sous l’yeuse
T’asseoir, puis te voilà subitement joyeuse,
Tu te mets à chanter quelque chanson d’enfant,
Et j’écoute, attendri, ton rire triomphant.

Oh! quel être charmant que celui qui varie
Tantôt son enjouement jusqu’à la rêverie,
Tantôt son chant plaintif jusqu’au refrain railleur,
Et qui, soudain, quittant pour le hallier en fleur
L’empyrée où l’esprit en plein azur s’enfonce,
Terrestre et cependant aérien, renonce
Au vol de l’ange et prend les ailes de l’oiseau!
Ta taille a la souplesse aimable du roseau;

Une lueur errante emplit ton sourcil sombre,
Comme si l’âme allait et venait dans cette ombre;
Il semble que Dieu met un ange à ton côté;
Tu m’éblouis; parfois je crois, fleur de beauté,
Entendre autour de toi des murmures d’abeille.
Quand près de moi tu viens, apportant ta corbeille,
Comme dans leur vieux cloître autrefois les nonnains,
Faire un tas de petits chefs-d’œuvre féminins,
Je t’admire, et je crois voir l’aube qui se lève.
On a beau tout rêver, tu dépasses le rêve;
Ton œil promet l’amour, ton cœur donne le ciel.
Tu passes dans la vie, humble, sans peur, sans fiel,
Sans faire de reproche à l’ombre, toi l’étoile.
Une musique sort, comme à travers un voile,
De ta beauté naïve et farouche à la fois;
Ta grâce est comme un luth qui vibre au fond du bois;
Tu sembles une note adorable ajoutée
Au concert qu’ici-bas l’âme écoute enchantée;
Car la femme est de tout le divin complément,
Car dans l’hymne éternel rien n’est faux, rien ne ment,
Et la nature, voix profonde, chante juste.

Viens, nous habiterons un coin de terre auguste

Que je connais; un fleuve est dans ce paradis,
C’est le Diras, torrent superbe, qui jadis
Sortit de terre afin de secourir Hercule;
Puis, jusqu’à l’horizon si le regard recule,

On voit le Sperchius, sorti des mêmes monts
Que le Diras, hanté par les mêmes démons,
Qui serpente et qui va se perdre aux mers de Crète,
Puis Thélos, devant qui le tonnerre s’arrête,
Car c’est là qu’autrefois, fronçant leurs noirs sourcils,
Les grands amphictyons songeaient, en cercle assis.

XIV

RUPTURE

AVEC CE QUI AMOINDRIT

XIV

RUPTURE AVEC CE QUI AMOINDRIT

Trêve à toutes ces vaines choses!
Vous êtes dans l’ombre, sortons.
Sans vous brouiller avec les roses,
Évadez-vous des Jeannetons.

Enfuyez-vous de ces drôlesses.
Derrière ces bonheurs changeants
Se dressent de pâles vieillesses
Qui menacent les jeunes gens.

Crains Manon qui te tend son verre;
Crains le grenier où l’on est bien.
Perse, à l’alcôve de Néère,
Préférait l’autan libyen.

Ami, ta vie est mansardée,
À ce petit ciel bas, plafond

De la volupté sans idée,
Les âmes se heurtent le front.

Le temps déforme la jeunesse
Comme un vieux décor d’opéra.
Gare à vous! c’est par l’ivrognesse
Que la bacchante finira.

L’églogue serait indignée,
Dans vos noirs galetas sans jour,
De voir des toiles d’araignée
Au bout des ailes de l’amour.

Le houx sacré, frère du lierre,
Que cueillait Plaute au fond des bois,
À Margoton trop familière
Eût dans l’ombre piqué les doigts.

L’antique muse tiburtine
Baisait les fleurs, le jasmin pur,
Le lys, et n’était libertine
Qu’avec les rayons, dans l’azur.

Vous avez autre chose à faire
Que d’engloutir votre raison
Dans la chanson qu’Anna préfère
Et dans le vin que boit Suzon.

Il est temps d’avoir d’autres fièvres
Que de voir se coiffer, le soir,
Lise, une épingle entre les lèvres,
Éblouissement d’un miroir.

Frère, l’heure folle est passée.
Debout, frère! il est peu séant
D’attarder l’œil de sa pensée
À la figure du néant.

Laisse là Fanchon et Fanchette!
Fermons les jours faux et charmants.
L’honneur d’être un homme s’achète
Par ces graves renoncements.

Les amourettes énervantes
Fatiguent, sans les émouvoir,
Les âmes, ces grandes servantes
De la justice et du devoir.

Viens aux champs! les champs sont sévères

Et pensifs plus que tu ne crois;
Les monts font songer aux calvaires,
Les arbres font songer aux croix.

Oublions les soupers, les veilles,
Le vin, le brelan, l’écarté!
Viens noyer ton cœur aux merveilles
De l’immense sérénité!

Fuyez; prenez votre volée.
Un peu plus et nous traînerons

Notre rauque idylle éculée
Dans le ruisseau des Porcherons.

Ouvrez les ailes de vos âmes;
Enfoncez le toit s’il le faut,
Les révélations, les flammes,
Et les ouragans sont là-haut.

Levez vos cœurs, levez vos têtes.
Allez où l’on a sur le front
Le vaste espace, les tempêtes,
Les étoiles, et pas d’affront.

Vous êtes faits comme les lyres,
Et pleins d’altiers frémissements;
De profonds et vagues sourires
Vous appellent aux firmaments.

Viens, nous lirons les livres sombres
Des penseurs et des combattants,
Pendant que Dieu fera des ombres
Et des clartés dans le printemps.

Nous scruterons les maux, les guerres,
Et le creux fatal qu’a laissé

Le pied tragique de nos pères
Dans l’âpre fange du passé.

Nous examinerons les songes,
L’autel, les korans, les clergés,
Les spectres mêlés aux mensonges,
Les dieux mêlés aux préjugés.

Molière, au fourbe ôtant sa guimpe,
Mina Bossuet comme il put;
Pascal frappa; Swift à l’Olympe
Offrit ce miroir, Lilliput.

Nous regarderons sur la terre
Ce tas d’erreurs que Beaumarchais
Rabelais, Diderot, Voltaire,
Ont remué de leurs crochets.

Nous saluerons ces Diogènes
De la raison et du bon sens;
Nous entendrons tomber les chaînes
Derrière ces divins passants.

Ô France, grâce à ces sceptiques,
Tu voyais le fond; tu trouvais

Des ordures sous les portiques
Et sous les dogmes des forfaits.

Ces puissants balayeurs d’étable
Ont fait un lion d’un baudet;
Dans leur cynisme redoutable
Un tonnerre profond grondait.

Sur l’homme dans l’ignominie
Ils jetaient leur rude gaîté,

Sachant que c’est à l’ironie
Que commence la liberté.

Dieu fait précéder, quand il change
En victime, hélas, le bourreau,
L’effrayant glaive de l’archange
Par le rasoir de Figaro.

La comédie amère et saine
Fait entrer Méduse en sortant;
Quand Beaumarchais est sur la scène
Danton dans la coulisse attend.

Les railleurs sous leur joug lugubre
Consolent les âges de fer;

Leur éclat de rire salubre
Déconcerte l’antique enfer.

Ils ont fait l’interrogatoire
Farouche, à travers le bâillon,
Des religions par l’histoire,
De la pourpre par le haillon.

Durs au bigot, fatals au cuistre,
Ils promènent à petit bruit
Une lueur gaie et sinistre
Dans le grand bagne de la nuit.

Escobar est le chat qui rôde
Et fuit, mais Voltaire est le lynx.
Ils font, sans pitié pour la fraude,
Rire la Gaule au nez du sphinx.

Ces douteurs ont frayé nos routes,
Et sont si grands sous le ciel bleu
Qu’à cette heure, grâce à leurs doutes

On peut enfin affirmer Dieu!

Leur rouge lanterne nous mène.
Ces contemplateurs du pavé,
En fouillant la guenille humaine,
Cherchaient le peuple, et l’ont trouvé.

Ils ont, dans la nuit où nous sommes,
Retrouvé la raison, les droits,
L’égalité volée aux hommes,
En vidant les poches des rois.

Ils ont fait, moqueurs nécessaires,
Et plus exacts que Mézeray,
De la torsion des misères
Tomber goutte à goutte le vrai.

Ils ont nié la vieille bible;
Ces guérisseurs, ces factieux
Ont fait cette chose terrible :
L’ouverture de tous les yeux.

Ils ont, sur la cime vermeille,
Montré l’aurore au genre humain;
Ils ont été la grande veille
Du formidable lendemain.

La révolution française
C’est le salut, d’horreur mêlé.
De la tête de Louis seize,
Hélas! la lumière a coulé.

XV

LES PAROLES

DE MON ONCLE

XV

LES

PAROLES DE MON ONCLE

LA SŒUR DE CHARITÉ

J’avais vingt ans, j’étais criblé de coups de lance,
On me porta sanglant et pâle à l’ambulance.
On me fit un lit d’herbe, on me déshabilla.
J’avais sur moi des vers; j’étais, dans ce temps-là,
Poëte, comme Horace amoureux de Barine.
Les lances qui m’avaient fort piqué la poitrine
Avaient aussi troué mes quatrains à Chloris.
Tout manquait; on n’est pas soigné comme à Paris
Dans ces vieilles forêts du pays de Thuringe;
Le chirurgien dit : — Nous n’avons pas de linge.
Il lut mes vers et dit : — C’est un payen, je crois.

La sœur de charité fit un signe de croix.
Et le docteur reprit : — Pas de linge! que faire? —
Ah! cette guerre était grande, et je la préfère
À votre paix. Quel temps! je suis un des témoins.
J’ai des grades de plus et des cheveux de moins,
Le vieux général songe au jeune capitaine;
Et l’envie. Ah! l’aurore est charmante, et lointaine! —
Donc je perdais mon sang, j’étais évanoui.
J’étais jeune, blessé, mourant, mais vivant; oui,
Très vivant! Le docteur disait : — La mort est sûre
Si l’on ne parvient pas à bander la blessure;
Du linge! ou dans une heure il est mort! — Cependant
Il partit. La bataille autour de nous grondant,

Pleine de chocs, de meurtre et d’ombre, et des haleines
De l’immense agonie éparse dans les plaines,
L’appelait de sa voix formidable au secours;
On ne donne aux blessés que des instants très courts.
J’étais seul, et mon flanc saignait, et mon épaule
Ruisselait, et la sœur de Saint-Vincent de Paule,
Très jeune, pâle, et rose à travers sa pâleur,
Me veillait. Elle dit : — Sauvons-le! quel malheur!
S’il mourait, il serait damné, ce pauvre impie! —
Elle arracha sa guimpe et fit de la charpie.
Tout entière à ses soins pour le jeune inconnu,
Elle ne voyait pas que son sein était nu,
Moi, je rouvrais les yeux... — Ô muses de Sicile,
Dire à quoi je pensais, ce serait difficile!

XVI

VICTORIEUX OU MORT

XVI

VICTORIEUX OU MORT

Une telle promesse étant faite à l’abîme,
On attend la lueur d’une action sublime
Et, s’en croyant déjà vaguement éclairé,
Le peuple bat des mains. — Va donc, hélas! — J’irai,
Dit-il, et reviendrai vainqueur ou mort.
La plaine
De tous les grondements de la bataille est pleine.
Soldats, sabres au vent! histoire, sois témoin!
Dans la vaste fumée il disparaît au loin.
Et la journée est longue et la mêlée est noire.

Il revient! — Cueillez tous des palmes! hurrah! gloire!
Le peuple, à saluer les nobles têtes prompt,
Accourt. — France! il revient, c’est un laurier au front,
Ou, comme Franceschi qu’on rapporta naguère,
Couché tout de son long sous son manteau de guerre!
C’est un grand nom de plus au livre d’or inscrit... —

Et la victoire pleure, et le sépulcre rit.

XVII

LE CERCLE DES TYRANS

I

LIBERTÉ!

De quel droit mettez-vous des oiseaux dans des cages?

De quel droit ôtez-vous ces chanteurs aux bocages,
Aux sources, à l’aurore, à la nuée, aux vents?
De quel droit volez-vous la vie à des vivants?
Homme, crois-tu que Dieu, ce père, fasse naître
L’aile pour l’accrocher au clou de ta fenêtre?
Ne peux-tu vivre heureux et content sans cela?
Qu’est-ce qu’ils ont donc fait tous ces innocents-là
Pour être au bagne avec leur nid et leur femelle?

Qui sait comment leur sort à notre sort se mêle?
Qui sait si le verdier qu’on dérobe aux rameaux,
Qui sait si le malheur qu’on fait aux animaux

Et si la servitude inutile des bêtes
Ne se résolvent pas en Nérons sur nos têtes?
Qui sait si le carcan ne sort pas des licous?
Oh! de nos actions qui sait les contre-coups,
Et quels noirs croisements ont au fond du mystère
Tant de choses qu’on fait en riant sur la terre?
Quand vous cadenassez sous un réseau de fer
Tous ces buveurs d’azur faits pour s’enivrer d’air,
Tous ces nageurs charmants de la lumière bleue,
Chardonneret, pinson, moineau franc, hochequeue,
Croyez-vous que le bec sanglant des passereaux
Ne touche pas à l’homme en heurtant ces barreaux?
Prenez garde à la sombre équité. Prenez garde!
Partout où pleure et crie un captif, Dieu regarde.
Ne comprenez-vous pas que vous êtes méchants?

À tous ces enfermés donnez la clef des champs!
Aux champs les rossignols, aux champs les hirondelles!
Les âmes expieront tout ce qu’on fait aux ailes.
La balance invisible a deux plateaux obscurs.
Prenez garde aux cachots dont vous ornez vos murs!
Du treillage aux fils d’or naissent les noires grilles;
La volière sinistre est mère des bastilles.
Respect aux doux passants des airs, des prés, des eaux!
Toute la liberté qu’on prend à des oiseaux
Le destin juste et dur la reprend à des hommes.
Nous avons des tyrans parce que nous en sommes.
Tu veux être libre, homme? et de quel droit, ayant

Chez toi le détenu, ce témoin effrayant?
Ce qu’on croit sans défense est défendu par l’ombre.
Toute l’immensité sur le pauvre oiseau sombre
Se penche, et te dévoue à l’expiation.
Je t’admire, oppresseur, criant : oppression!
Le sort te tient pendant que ta démence brave
Ce forçat qui sur toi jette une ombre d’esclave;
Et la cage qui pend au seuil de ta maison
Vit, chante, et fait sortir de terre la prison.

II

LES MANGEURS

Ils ont des surnoms, Juste, Auguste, Grand, Petit,
Bien-Aimé, Sage, et tous ont beaucoup d’appétit.
Qui sont-ils? Ils sont ceux qui nous mangent. La vie
Des hommes, notre vie à tous, leur est servie.

Ils nous mangent. Quel est leur droit? Le droit divin.

Ils vivent. Tout le reste est inutile et vain,
Le vent après le vent, le nombre après le nombre
Passe, et le genre humain n’est qu’une fuite d’ombre.

Est-ce qu’ils ont pour voix la foudre? Ils ont la voix
Que vous avez. Sont-ils malades? Quelquefois.
Sont-ils forts? Comme vous. Beaux? Comme vous. Leur âme?
Vous ressemble. Et de qui sont-ils nés? D’une femme.
Ils ont, pour vous dompter et vous accabler tous,
Des châteaux, des donjons. Bâtis par qui? Par vous.
Et quelle est leur grandeur? À peu près votre taille.
Ils ont une servante affreuse, la bataille;
Ils ont un noir valet qu’on nomme l’échafaud.
Ils ont pour fonction de n’avoir nul défaut,
D’être pour les passants, chefs, souverains et maîtres,
Pour la femme aux seins nus sultans, dieux pour les prêtres.
Par ces êtres, élus du destin hasardeux,
La suprême parole est dite, et chacun d’eux
Pèse plus à lui seul qu’un monde et qu’une foule;
Il écrit : ma raison, sur le canon qui roule.
Et quels sont leurs cerveaux? Étroits. Leurs volontés?
Énormes. Quelles sont leurs œuvres? Écoutez.
Celui-ci, que la croix du vieil Ivan protége,

A le bonheur d’avoir un sépulcre de neige
Assez grand pour y mettre un peuple tout entier;
Il y met la Pologne; il faut bien châtier
Ce peuple puisqu’il ose exister. Cette reine
Fut jeune, belle, heureuse, ignorante, sereine,
Et n’a jamais fait grâce, et tout son alphabet,
Hélas! commence au trône et finit au gibet.
Celui-ci parle au nom du martyr qu’on adore;
Sous la sublime croix qu’un reflet du ciel dore,
Cet homme plein d’un sombre et périlleux pouvoir,
Prie et songe, et n’est pas épouvanté de voir
Son crucifix jeter l’ombre des guillotines,
Cet autre, torche au poing, dans les cités mutines,
Se rue, et brûle et pille, et d’Irun à Cadix
Règne, et fait fusiller un prisonnier sur dix,
Et dit : Je n’en fais pas fusiller davantage,

Étant civilisé; puis il reprend : Le Tage

Et l’Èbre feront voir que le maître est présent;
Peuples, je veux qu’on dise en voyant tant de sang
Et tant de morts passer que c’est le roi qui passe! —
Cet autre est un césar de l’espèce rapace;
Le laurier est chétif, mais le profit est grand,
Cela suffit; il vient; et que fait-il? il prend.
Il empoche; quoi? tout; les sacs d’or qu’on lui compte,
Les provinces, les morts, Strasbourg, Metz, et la honte;
Ce que fit Metternich est refait par Bismarck.
Le père de cet autre a bombardé Saint-Marc
Et dans l’affreux Spielberg reconstruit la Bastille
Cet autre à son visir a marié sa fille :
Cette fille abusant de son droit à l’enfant,
Met au monde un garçon, ce que la loi défend;
L’aïeul fait étrangler son petit-fils. Cet autre,
Jeune, dans les tripots et les femmes se vautre,
Puis il se dit : Je suis Bonaparte à peu près;
Si je songeais au trône et si je m’empourprais?
Il s’empourpre; il devient sanglant. C’est un vrai prince.

Chez eux le plus puissant est souvent le plus mince;

Ils ont le cœur des rocs et la dent des lions;
Ils sont ivres d’encens, d’effroi, de millions,
De volupté, d’horreur, et leur splendeur est noire.
S’ils ont soif, il leur faut beaucoup de sang à boire;
La guerre leur en verse; il leur faut, s’ils ont faim,
Beaucoup de nations à dévorer.
Enfin,
Revanche! les mangeurs sont mangés, ô mystère!

— Comme c’est bon les rois! disent les vers de terre.

III

Archiloque l’atteste, Athène l’entendit,

Un jour un magistrat devint terrible et dit :
— Je m’en vais, je cherche un refuge,
L’Aréopage pèse à faux poids. Temps d’effroi!
Voilez-vous, cieux! on voit le droit hors de la loi
Et la justice hors du juge!

Cicéron était là quand un centurion
Brisa son glaive et dit à César : — Histrion,
Je connais ta pensée intime;

L’armée après toi marche avec ses généraux;
Pas moi. Je ne suis pas l’espèce de héros
Qu’il te faut pour commettre un crime.

Ô noir Machiavel, génie et paria,
Tu t’en souviens, un jour un apôtre cria :
— C’est trop! le pape trompe l’homme.
Horreur! Satan et lui mettent le même anneau.
Jérusalem, ils font dévorer ton agneau
Par la vieille louve de Rome! —

La conscience humaine est engloutie au fond
D’un océan de honte où tout rampe et se fond,
Mer sombre et sans route frayée;
Ce gouffre écume et roule, et l’on voit par moment
Reparaître au milieu des flots confusément
Le cadavre de la noyée.

IV

UN VOLEUR À UN ROI

IV

UN VOLEUR À UN ROI

Vous êtes, sous le ciel par moments obscurci,

Un ambitieux, sire, et j’en suis un aussi;
Roi, nous avons, car l’homme est diversement ivre,
Le même but tous deux, c’est d’avoir de quoi vivre;
Il nous faut pour cela, suis-je sage? es-tu fou?
À toi, prince, un royaume, à moi penseur, un sou.
Tout l’homme est le même homme et fait la même chose.
Roi, la bonté de l’Être inconnu se compose
De la dispersion de tout dans l’infini;
Nul n’est déshérité, personne n’est banni;
Et les vents, car telle est l’immensité des souffles,
Jettent aux rois l’empire et l’obole aux maroufles.
Nous voulons tous les deux, à tout prix, n’importe où,
Toi grossir ton royaume et moi gagner mon sou;
Et dans notre sagesse et dans notre démence,
Roi, nous sommes aidés par le hasard immense.
Seulement je vaux plus que toi. Daigne écouter.

Nous sommes tous deux fils, toi qu’il faut redouter,

De l’étrangère, et moi de la bohémienne;
Roi, que ta majesté fasse pendre la mienne,
Cela ne prouve pas qu’en notre désaccord
La tienne ait raison, sire, et que la mienne ait tort.
Je suis né, laisse-moi te raconter ce conte,
Pour avoir faim toujours et n’avoir jamais honte,
Car ce n’est pas honteux de manger. Rien n’est vrai
Que la faim; et l’enfer, dont l’homme fait l’essai,
C’est l’éternel refus du pain fuyant les bouches;
Et c’est pourquoi je rôde au fond des bois farouches.
Je ne suis pas méchant, moi qui parle; je veux,
Sans ôter aux mortels un seul de leurs cheveux,
Leur retirer un peu des choses superflues
Et pesantes qui font leurs bourses trop joufflues.
Je dépense à cela beaucoup de talent. Roi,

Je ne verse jamais le sang. Écoute-moi;
Médite si tu peux, et, si tu veux, digère,

Mais comprends-moi. Je hais le mal qui s’exagère;
Tuer, c’est de l’orgueil. Casser un bourgeois, fi!
À quoi bon? L’assassin est un larron bouffi.
Roi, je suis un aimant mystérieux qui passe
Et qui, par sa douceur éparse dans l’espace,
Attire, sans vacarme et sans brutalité,
Et fait venir à lui de bonne volonté
Les farthings endormis dans les poches des hommes.
Je m’annexe les sous sans mépriser les sommes,
Mais les bons sacs bien lourds c’est rare; il me suffit
D’un denier; et souvent je n’ai pour tout profit
De mes subtils travaux, dignes de vos estimes,
Messieurs les empereurs et rois, que cinq centimes;

Je m’en contente, étant aux hommes indulgent.
Je tâche de coûter au peuple peu d’argent,
Mais de manger. Avoir un trou, m’en faire un Louvre;
Guetter l’homme qui passe ou le volet qui s’ouvre;
Attendre qu’un marchand sous les brises du soir
Rêve, et laisse bâiller le tiroir du comptoir,
Vite y fourrer avec une agilité d’ange
Ma patte, et n’être vu dans ce mystère étrange
Que des astres pensifs au fond du ciel profond;
Épier la minute où les belles défont
Leur jarretière afin de leur chiper leur montre;
Des sous avec ma griffe opérer la rencontre;
Ajouter pour rallonge au destin mes dix doigts;
Dire à Dieu : Tu sais bien, au fond, que tu me dois,
Donc ne te fâche pas! telle est ma vie, altesse.
Vous avez la grandeur, moi j’ai la petitesse;
Mais devant le soleil, ce prodige flagrant,
L’infiniment petit vaut l’infiniment grand.
Vaut mieux. Je ne prends pas au sérieux l’étoffe
Qui m’habille, moi ver de terre et philosophe;

Jouer la comédie est le faible de Dieu;
Il ne s’irrite pas, mais il se moque un peu;

C’est un poëte; et l’homme est sa marionnette.
La naissance et la mort sont deux coups de sonnette,
L’un à l’entrée, et l’autre au départ du pantin,
Je ris avec le vieux machiniste Destin.
Tout est décor. Au fond la réalité manque.
Tout est fardé, le roi comme le saltimbanque;
Jocrisse, Hamlet. Sachez ceci, mortels tremblants,
Avec du calicot qui fait de grands plis blancs,
Avec de la farine et du blanc de céruse,
On est en scène un spectre, ou bien Pierrot. Ma ruse,
À moi, qui suis un être infinitésimal,
C’est de ne vraiment faire aux hommes aucun mal,
Et de vivre pourtant. Fais ça. Je t’en défie.

Roi, ce n’est pas de trop cette philosophie;
Je poursuis.
Je prétends que je vaux mieux que toi,
Que tous; et je le prouve, à toi foule, à vous roi.

J’ai remarqué que l’homme, infirme et pâle ébauche,
N’a rien que la main droite, et tout au plus la gauche,

Ce qui fait que toi, prince, homme, auguste animal,
Tu portes bien la force et la justice mal;
Alors j’ai médité, voulant dépasser l’homme;
Et, sûr de mon bon droit, mais d’emphase économe,
Bienveillant, point hâbleur, discret sous le ciel bleu,
Réparateur obscur des lacunes de Dieu,
À force de songer et de vouloir, à force
De sonder toute chose au delà de l’écorce,
Prince, et d’étudier à fond le cœur humain,
J’ai fini par avoir une troisième main.
Celle qu’on ne voit pas. La bonne. Tel est, sire,
Mon art. Le résultat, voleur. Masque de cire,
Fantôme, ombre, poussière et cendre, majesté,
As-tu compris? Ô rois, vous êtes un côté;
Je suis l’autre. Je suis l’homme d’esprit, le maître

Du crépuscule obscur, du risque, du peut-être,
Du néant, du passant, du souffle aérien;
Je possède ce tout que vous appelez rien;
Je combine le vent avec la destinée;
Et j’existe. Mon âme est vers l’azur tournée
Et songeant qu’après tout, dans ce monde gueusard,
Je suis un becqueteur paisible du hasard,
Que mes dents ne sont pas des dents inexorables,
Que je ne répands point le sang des misérables
Comme un juge, comme un bourreau, comme un soldat,

Songeant que de zéro je suis le candidat,
Que mon ambition, sans haine et sans durée,
Plane sur les humains d’une aile modérée
Et s’arrête à l’endroit où s’achève ma faim,
Et que je ne fais rien que ce que font enfin
Les gais oiseaux du ciel sous l’orme et sous l’érable,
Pour n’être point méchant je me sens vénérable.
Oui, je suis un mortel doué de facultés
Que n’ont pas bien des rois dans le marbre sculptés;
Un baïoque, métal inerte, simple cuivre,
S’il me sent là, devient vivant, cherche à me suivre,
Et la monnaie en moi voit son Pygmalion;
Et les sous des bourgeois qui sans rébellion,
Sans bruit, reconnaissant un chef à mon approche,
Les quittent pour venir tendrement dans ma poche,
Représentent, seigneur, de ma part tant de soins,
Tant d’adresse, un si beau scrupule en mes besoins,

Et tant de glissements d’anguille et de couleuvre,
Qu’ils sont chez eux des sous et chez moi des chefs-d’œuvre.
Ah! quel art que le mien! Mon collaborateur,
Dieu, qui met le possible, ô prince, à ma hauteur,
Sait tout ce qu’il me faut de calcul, d’industrie,
D’héroïsme, d’aplomb, de haute rêverie,
De sourires au sort bourru, de doux regards
À la fortune, fille aimable aux yeux hagards,

De patience auguste et d’étude acharnée,
Et de travaux, pour faire, au bout d’une journée
De pas errants, d’essais puissants, d’efforts hardis,
Changer de maître à deux ou trois maravédis!

Mais toi, quelle est ta peine? aucune; et ton mérite?
Nul. On croit être grand, quoi! parce qu’on hérite!
Ton père t’a laissé le monde en s’en allant.
Être né, quel effort! avoir faim, quel talent!
Téter sa mère, et puis manger un peuple! Ô prince!
Ton appétit est gros, mais ton génie est mince,
Un beau jour, sous ta pourpre et sous ton cordon bleu,
Trouvant qu’avoir un peuple à toi seul, c’est trop peu,
Tu jettes un regard de douce convoitise
Sur un empire ainsi qu’un bouc sur un cytise.
Tu dis : Si j’empochais le peuple d’à côté?
Alors, de force, aidé dans ta férocité
Par le prêtre qui fouille au fond du ciel, dévisse
La foudre, et met le Dieu de l’ombre à ton service,
De ton flamboiement noir toi-même t’aveuglant,

Tu saisis, glorieux, sacré, béni, sanglant,
N’importe quel pays qui soit à ta portée;
Toute la terre tremble et crie épouvantée;
Toi, tu viens dévorer, tu fais ce qu’on t’apprit;
Tu ne te mets en frais d’aucun effort d’esprit;
Tu fais assassiner tout avec nonchalance,
À coups d’obus, à coups de sabre, à coups de lance.
C’est simple. Eh bien, tu viens prendre une nation,
Voilà tout. N’es-tu pas l’extermination,
Le droit divin, l’élu qu’un fakir, un flamine,
Un bonze, a frotté d’huile et mis dans de l’hermine!
Va, prends. Les hommes sont ta chose. Alors cités,
Fleuves, monts, bois tremblants d’un vent sombre agités,
Les plaines, les hameaux, tant pis s’ils sont en flammes,
Les berceaux, les foyers sacrés, l’honneur des femmes,
Tu mets sur tout cela tes ongles monstrueux;

Et l’église te brûle un encens tortueux,
Et le doux tedeum éclaire avec des cierges
Le meurtre des enfants et le viol des vierges;
Et tout ce qui n’est pas gisant est à genoux.

Moi, pendant ce temps-là je rôde, calme et doux.

Telle est notre nuance, ô le meilleur des princes,
Je conquiers des liards, tu voles des provinces.

V

Qu’est-ce que ce cercueil déposé sur deux chaises?
C’est Charles premier, roi. Les communes anglaises
Ont fait ce monument de justice. Et quel est
Cet homme à l’œil sévère, au rude gantelet,
Qui s’avance pensif vers la bière hagarde,
Soulève le couvercle effrayant, et regarde?
C’est Cromwell. Il fut grand; tout devant lui trembla.

Soit; nous ne voulons plus de ces spectacles-là.
C’est grand dans le passé; c’est mauvais dans notre âge.
Quoiqu’un reste de nuit nous souille et nous outrage,
Désormais, ô vivants, nous avons fait ce pas,
Il faut aux nations un sauveur qui n’ait pas
De curiosité pour les têtes coupées;

Nous rejetons la hache au tas noir des épées;
Nous l’abhorrons; il faut aux hommes maintenant
Un libérateur pur, apaisé, rayonnant,
Qui ne soit pas vampire en même temps qu’archange,
Et qui n’ait pas au front, en tirant de la fange
Les peuples de misère et d’opprobre couverts,
La sinistre lueur des cercueils entr’ouverts.

VI

Je marchais au hasard, devant moi, n’importe où;
Et je ne sais pourquoi je songeais à Coustou

Dont la blanche bergère, au seuil des Tuileries,
Faite pour tant d’amour, a vu tant de furies.

Que de crimes commis dans ce palais! hélas!

Les sculpteurs font voler marbre et pierre en éclats
Et font sortir des blocs dieux et déesses nues
Qui peuplent des jardins les longues avenues.
Ô fantômes sacrés! ô spectres radieux!
Leur front serein contemple et la terre et les cieux;
Le temps n’altère pas leurs traits indélébiles;
Ils ont cet air profond des choses immobiles;
Ils ont la nudité, le calme et la beauté;
La nature en secret sent leur divinité;
Les pleurs mystérieux de l’aube les arrosent.
Et je ne comprends pas comment les hommes osent,
Eux dont l’esprit n’a rien que d’obscures lueurs,
Montrer leur cœur difforme à ces marbres rêveurs.

VII

AUX ROIS

VII

AUX ROIS

I

Est-ce que vous croyez que nous qui sommes là,
Nous que de tout son poids toujours l’ombre accabla,
Nous le noir genre humain farouche, nous la plèbe,
Nous, les forçats du sol, les captifs de la glèbe,
Nous qui, de lassitude expirants, n’avons droit
Qu’à la faim, à la soif, à l’indigence, au froid,
Qui, tués de travail, agonisons pour vivre,
Nous qu’à force d’horreur le destin sombre enivre;

Est-ce que vous croyez que nous vous aimons, vous!
Nous vassaux, vous les rois! nous moutons, vous les loups?
Ah! vraiment, ce serait curieux que des hommes
Hideux, désespérés, hagards comme nous sommes,
Nus sous leurs toits infects et leurs haillons crasseux,
Se prissent de tendresse et d’extase pour ceux
Qui les mangent, pour ceux dont leur chair est la proie,

Qui construisent avec leur douleur de la joie,
Et qui, repus, gorgés, triomphants, gais, charmants,
Bâtissent des palais avec leurs ossements!
Vous fourmillez sur nous! vous pullulez horribles!
Ce serait un miracle à mettre dans les bibles
Que nous vous bénissions pour être dévorants
À nos dépens; qu’un peuple eût le goût des tyrans,
Qu’une nation fût de sa honte complice,
Que la suppliciée admirât le supplice
Comme une femme adore et baise son époux,
Et qu’un lion devînt amoureux de ses poux!
Vos vices, ô tyrans, ont pour lustre vos crimes;
Quand les rois, débauchés, ivrognes, bas, infimes,
Se sentent dégradés et vils à tous les yeux,
Vite en guerre! et voilà des hommes glorieux!
C’est avec notre sang que leur fange se lave.
Par vous l’homme est reptile et le peuple est esclave;

Car par vous, j’en atteste ici le bleu matin,
J’en atteste l’affreux mystère du destin
Qui pèse sur nous tous et qui nous environne,
Par vous, les porte-sceptre et les porte-couronne,
Par vous, les tout-puissants et les forts, c’est par vous
Que nous avons l’infâme écorchure aux genoux,
Que nous sommes abjects, sinistres, incurables,
Et que notre misère est faite, ô misérables!
Aussi, je vous le dis, rois, nous vous détestons!
Nous rampons dans la cave éternelle à tâtons,
Notre prunelle luit, nous sommes dans nos antres,

Maigres, pensifs, avec nos petits sous nos ventres,
Et nous songeons à vous, les rois et les barons,
Et nous vous exécrons et nous vous abhorrons!

Mais nous sommes pourtant façonnés de la sorte
Que demain, s’il advient, rois, que l’un de vous sorte
Tout à coup de la nuit avec un astre au front,
S’il est pour secourir son pays brave et prompt,
Ou s’il chante, toujours jeune et beau, malgré l’âge,
S’il est le roi David, s’il est le roi Pélage,
Nous sommes éblouis! les oublis, les pardons,
Nous remplissent le cœur, et nous ne demandons

Rien à celui-là, rien! Malgré notre souffrance,
S’il est grand par l’idée ou par la délivrance,
Nous l’aimons! nous aimons sa lyre! nous aimons
Son glaive flamboyant dans l’ombre sur les monts!
Nous pourrions lui garder rancune de vous autres;
Mais non, nous devenons ses soldats, ses apôtres,
Ses légions, son camp, sa tribu, ses amis.
Nous lui sommes acquis, nous lui sommes soumis,
Il peut faire de nous ce qu’il veut. Dans notre âme
Nous voyons nos cités et nos hameaux en flamme
Sauvés par ce vengeur qui chasse l’étranger;
Ou nous sentons au fond de nos haines plonger
L’hymne de paix sorti d’une bouche divine,
Notre cœur s’ouvre au chant sublime où l’on devine
Tout cet immense amour par qui le monde vit;
Et nous suivons Pélage et nous suivons David!
Oui, pour que l’un de vous, bien qu’en nous tout réclame;
Fasse fondre l’hiver que nous avons dans l’âme,
Pour qu’un de nos tyrans devienne un de nos dieux,
Pour que nous, qui souffrons sous le ciel radieux,
Nous fils du désespoir et fils de la patrie,
Nous servions l’un de vous avec idolâtrie,
Une chose suffit, c’est qu’on lui voie au poing
Le fer que l’étranger insolent n’attend point,

Ou que sa grande voix verse au cœur l’harmonie;
C’est qu’il soit un héros ou qu’il soit un génie!

Rois, nous ne sommes pas plus méchants que cela.

C’est pourtant vrai! toujours, quand un prince brilla,
Quand il eut un rayon quelconque sur la tête,
L’immense peuple altier, puissant, auguste, et bête,
S’est fait son serviteur, son chien, son courtisan.

Mais celui-ci, qu’est-il? qu’a-t-il fait? parlons-en.
Il est né. Bien? Non, mal. C’est mal naître qu’entendre
Tout petit vous parler avec une voix tendre
Ceux que l’homme connaît par leur rugissement;
C’est mal naître, c’est naître épouvantablement
Qu’être dans son berceau léché d’une tigresse;
Par sa croissance, hélas! donner de l’allégresse
À l’hyène, et donner de la crainte à l’agneau,
C’est mal croître, être fait de bronze, être un anneau
De la chaîne de rois que l’humanité traîne,
C’est triste; et ce n’est point, certe, une aube sereine
Que celle qui voit naître un tyran! Celui-ci.
Donc, mal né, vécut mal. Les gueux ont pour souci
De voler des liards, il vola des provinces.

Il a fait ce que font à peu près tous les princes,
Il a mangé, dormi, bu, tué devant lui;
Il a régné féroce au hasard de l’ennui;
Il fut l’homme qui frappe, opprime, égorge, exile;
Ce fut un scélérat, ce fut un imbécile.
J’en parle simplement comme on en doit parler.
La mort savait son nom et vient de l’appeler;
Il est là. Le tombeau, c’est l’endroit difficile;
Ce n’est point un cachot, ce n’est point un asile;
C’est le lieu sombre où nul n’est plus en sûreté;
Le rendez-vous du fourbe avec la vérité,
Le rendez-vous de l’homme avec la conscience.

C’est là que l’inconnu perd enfin patience.
Vous autres vous vivez; mais l’âme, sans le corps,
Est nue et tremble; il faut qu’elle écoute. En dehors
Des bonnes actions qu’ils peuvent avoir faites,
S’ils ne sont ni docteurs, ni mages, ni prophètes,
Je n’ai pas de raison pour respecter les morts.
Honte aux vils trépassés que hante le remords,
Mêlé dans leur sépulcre au miasme insalubre!
Le fantôme est là seul sous le plafond lugubre,
Je m’ajoute aux vautours, je m’ajoute aux corbeaux.
Je sais que ce n’est point un de ces grands tombeaux
Où Rachel songe, où Jean médite, où pleure Électre,

Je me dresse, et je crache à la face du spectre.
II

N’opposez à ce qui se passe
Ni vos néants, ni vos grandeurs.
Laissez en paix les profondeurs.
L’ombre travaille dans l’espace.

Que fait-elle? Vous le saurez.
Derrière l’horizon, la nue
Monte, et l’on entend la venue
D’événements démesurés.

L’humanité marche et s’éclaire;
Le progrès est l’immense aimant;
À ce qui vient tranquillement
N’ajoutez pas de la colère.

N’irritez pas le peuple obscur.
Aveugles rois, tourbe inquiète,
Ne soyez pas l’enfant qui jette
Des pierres par-dessus le mur.

Dieu, sous les faits, qui sont ses voiles,

Continue un dessein béni.
Montrer le poing à l’infini,
Cela ne fait rien aux étoiles.

Dieu ne s’interrompt pas pour vous.
Ce qu’il fait, il faut qu’il le fasse.
Son travail, rude à la surface,
Dur pour vous, pour le peuple est doux.

Rois, respect au progrès sublime;
Rois, craignez ces reflux grondants;
Ne faites pas, rois imprudents,
Perdre patience à l’abîme.

Sait-on ses courroux, ses sanglots,
Ses chocs, son but, ses lois, ses formes?
Connaît-on les ordres énormes
Que le tonnerre donne aux flots?

Ne vous mêlez pas de ces choses.
Votre vain souffle aérien
Agite l’eau, mais ne peut rien
Sur l’immobilité des causes.

Hélas! tâchez de bien finir.
Redoutez l’onde soulevée,
Et ne troublez pas l’arrivée
Formidable de l’avenir.

Ah! prenez garde! les marées
Qu’on nomme révolutions
Et qu’il faut que nous apaisions,
Par vous, princes, sont effarées,

Et les gouffres sont plus amers,
Et la vague est plus écumante,
Quand l’orage insensé tourmente

La sombre liberté des mers.

XVIII

PAROLES DE GÉANT

Je suis votre vaincu, mais, regardez ma taille,
Dieux, je reste montagne après votre bataille;
Et moi qui suis pour vous un sombre encombrement,
À peine je vous vois au fond du firmament.
Si vous existez, soit. Je dors.
Vous, troglodytes,
Hommes qui ne savez jamais ce que vous dites,
Vivants qui fourmillez dans de l’ombre, indistincts,
Ayant déjà les vers de terre en vos instincts,
Vous qu’attend le sépulcre et qui rampez d’avance,
Sachez que la prière est une connivence,
Et ne me plaignez pas! Nains promis aux linceuls,

Tremblez si vous voulez, mais tremblez pour vous seuls!

Quant à moi, que Vénus, déesse aux yeux de grue,
Que Mars bête et sanglant, que Diane bourrue,
Viennent rire au-dessus de mon sinistre exil
Ou faire un froncement quelconque de sourcil,
Que dans mon ciel farouche et lourd l’Olympe ébauche
Son tumulte mêlé de crime et de débauche,
Qu’il raille le grand Pan, croyant l’avoir tué,

Que Jupiter joyeux, tonnant, infatué,
Démusèle les vents imbéciles, dérègle
L’éclair et l’aquilon, et déchaîne son aigle,
Cela m’est bien égal à moi qui suis trois fois
Plus haut que n’est profond l’océan plein de voix.
Hommes, je ris des nœuds dont la peur vous enlace.
Tous ces olympiens sont de la populace.
Ah! certes, ces passants, que vous nommez les dieux,
Furent de fiers bandits sous le ciel radieux;
Les montagnes, avec leurs bois et leurs vallées,
Sont de leur noir viol toutes échevelées,

Je le sais, et, resté presque seul maintenant,
Je suis par la grandeur de ma chute gênant;
Non, je ne les crains pas; et, quant à leurs approches,
Je les attends avec des roulements de roches,
Je les appelle gueux et voleurs, c’est leur nom,
Et ne veux pas savoir s’ils sont contents ou non.

Ô vivants, il paraît qu’à la haine tenaces,
Ces dieux me font de loin dans l’ombre des menaces.
Soit, j’oublie et je songe; et je m’informe peu
Si l’éclair que je vois est la lueur d’un dieu.
J’ai ma flûte et j’en joue au penchant des montagnes,

Je m’ajoute aux sommets au-dessus des campagnes,
Et je laisse les dieux bruire et bougonner.
Croit-on que je prendrai la peine de tourner
La tête dans les bois et sur les hautes cimes,
Que je m’effarerai dans les forêts sublimes,
Et que j’interromprai mon rêve et ma chanson,
Pour un roucoulement de foudre à l’horizon!

XIX

Quand le Cid fut entré dans le Généralife,
Il alla droit au but et tua le calife,
Le noir calife Ogrul, haï de ses sujets.
Le cid Campeador aux prunelles de jais,
Au poing de bronze, au cœur de flamme, à l'âme honnête,
Fit son devoir, frappa le calife à la tête,
Et sortit du palais seul, tranquille et rêveur.
Devant ce meurtrier et devant ce sauveur
Tout semblait s'écarter comme dans un prodige.

Soudain parut Médnat, le vieillard qui rédige

Le commentaire obscur et sacré du koran
Et regarde la nuit l'étoile Aldebaran.
Il dit au Cid, après le salut ordinaire :

— Cid, as-tu rencontré quelqu'un?
— Oui, le tonnerre.

— Je le sais; je l'ai vu, répondit le docteur.
Il m'a parlé. J'étais monté sur la hauteur,
Pour prier. Le tonnerre a dit à mon oreille :
Me voici, la douleur des peuples me réveille,
Et je descends du ciel quand un prince est mauvais;
Mais je vois arriver le Cid et je m'en vais.

XX

LA VISION DE DANTE

LA VISION DE DANTE

Dante m’est apparu. Voici ce qu’il m’a dit :

I

Je dormais sous la pierre où l’homme refroidit.
Je sentais pénétrer, abattu comme l’arbre,
L’oubli dans ma pensée et dans mes os le marbre.
Tout en dormant je crus entendre à mon côté
Une voix qui parlait dans une obscurité,
Et qui disait des mots étranges et funèbres.
Je m’écriai : Qui donc est là dans les ténèbres?
Et j’ajoutai, frottant mes yeux noirs et pesants :
Combien ai-je dormi? La voix dit : Cinq cents ans;
Tu viens de t’éveiller pour finir ton poëme
Dans l’an cinquante-trois du siècle dix-neuvième.

Et je me réveillai tout à fait; je n’avais
Plus rien autour de moi; la tombe aux durs chevets
S’était évanouie avec sa voûte sombre,
Et j’étais hors du temps, de la forme et du nombre;

Debout sans savoir où ni sans savoir sur quoi.
Enfin un peu de jour arriva jusqu’à moi,
Mes prunelles s’étant à l’ombre habituées
Alors je distinguai deux portes de nuées;
L’une au fond, devant moi; l’autre en bas, au-dessous
D’un brouillard composé des éléments dissous,
Comme un puits qu’on verrait dans les eaux. La première,
Splendide, semblait faite avec de la lumière;
C’était un trou de feu dans un nuage d’or;
Quelqu’un, celui qui parle aux sibylles d’Endor,
Pour construire cet arc, splendide météore,
Avait pris et courbé les rayons de l’aurore;

Du moins je le pensai, non sans frémissement.
Cette porte, où luisaient l’astre et le diamant,
Brillait au plus profond de l’espace livide

Comme un point lumineux et posait sur le vide;
On voyait au-dessous le libre éther flotter,
Car nul mont n’eût osé s’offrir pour la porter,
Et, sous les saints piliers de cette arche vivante,
Le Sinaï lui-même eût croulé d’épouvante.
L’autre porte à mes pieds montrait son cintre obscur
Noir comme une fumée, et ridé comme un mur
Vaguement aperçu dans des épaisseurs mornes,
Mêlant ses bords confus aux profondeurs sans bornes,
Espèce d’antre informe en ténèbres construit,

Cratère fait de bronze et couronnant la nuit.
Cette porte semblait la bouche des abîmes.

Songeant à tous les maux qu’ici-bas nous subîmes,
Mon esprit, où la crainte accompagne l’espoir,
Du portail rayonnant allait au porche noir,
Et, me ressouvenant de ce qu’on fait sur terre,
J’entrevis que c’étaient les portes du mystère.

Soudain tout s’éclipsa, brusquement obscurci.
II

Et je sentis mes yeux se fermer, comme si,
Dans la brume, à chacun des cils de mes paupières
Une main invisible avait lié des pierres.
J’étais comme est un prêtre au seuil du saint parvis,
Songeant, et, quand mes yeux se rouvrirent, je vis
L’ombre; l’ombre hideuse, ignorée, insondable,

De l’invisible Rien vision formidable,
Sans forme, sans contour, sans plancher, sans plafond,
Où dans l’obscurité l’obscurité se fond;

Point d’escalier, de pont, de spirale, de rampe;
L’ombre sans un regard, l’ombre sans une lampe;
Le noir de l’inconnu, d’aucun vent agité;
L’ombre, voile effrayant du spectre éternité.
Qui n’a point vu cela n’a rien vu de terrible.
C’est l’espace béant, l’étendue impossible,
Quelque chose d’affreux, de trouble et de perdu
Qui fuit dans tous les sens devant l’œil éperdu,
La cécité glacée est plus qu’un marbre lourde,
Une tranquillité muette, aveugle et sourde,
L’horrible intérieur d’un sépulcre infini.
Cependant un reflet sur mon cercueil jauni

Me fit tressaillir, mais tout restait immobile;
Et je vis dans cette ombre une lueur tranquille,
Un flamboiement profond, fixe, silencieux,
Pareil à la clarté que ferait à nos yeux
Derrière un rideau noir une torche allumée.
Et nul bruit ne sortait de l’ombre inanimée;
Car, sachez-le, vivants, hors du clair firmament,
L’affreuse immensité se tait lugubrement.
Cette clarté semblait, à la fois vie et flamme,
Regarder comme un œil et penser comme une âme;
Ce n’était cependant qu’un voile, et l’on sentait
Derrière la lueur quelqu’un qui méditait.

III

Ce flamboiement flottant sur les nuits éternelles
Entrait de plus en plus dans mes vagues prunelles;
Je compris où j’étais et j’eus un tremblement;
Car soudain j’aperçus, dans ce rayonnement
Semblable aux visions que voyaient les prophètes,
Les sept anges pensifs qui tiennent sept trompettes;
La clarté se mêlait à leurs cheveux vermeils;
Ils étaient là, debout, les yeux baissés, pareils

Aux sept géants qui sont sur le palais Farnèse,

Et, comme lorsqu’on est devant une fournaise,
Ils étaient noirs, ayant derrière eux la clarté.
L’abîme obscur, hagard, funèbre, illimité,
Semblait plein de terreur devant cette lumière.
J’essayai de prier, mais en vain; la prière
Rentra dans mon esprit comme un oiseau qui fuit
Et rentre au nid, tremblant, parce qu’il fait trop nuit
Et je restai glacé devant la clarté blême
Comme si j’eusse été quelque abîme moi-même.
Et je me dis : Voici qu’on va juger quelqu’un.
Cette ombre, des forfaits c’est le gouffre commun;
Ce feu, c’est la clarté de la face du juge.
Et j’eus peur.

IV

Ô sentence! ô peine sans refuge!

Tomber dans le silence et la brume à jamais!
D’abord quelque clarté des lumineux sommets
Vous laisse distinguer vos mains désespérées.
On tombe, on voit passer des formes effarées,
Bouches ouvertes, fronts ruisselants de sueur,
Des visages hideux qu’éclaire une lueur.
Puis on ne voit plus rien. Tout s’efface et recule,
La nuit morne succède au sombre crépuscule.
On tombe. On n’est pas seul dans ces limbes d’en bas;
On sent frissonner ceux qu’on ne distingue pas;
On ne sait si ce sont des hydres ou des hommes;
On se sent devenir les larves que nous sommes;
On entrevoit l’horreur des lieux inaperçus,
Et l’abîme au-dessous, et l’abîme au-dessus.
Puis tout est vide! On est le grain que le vent sème.
On n’entend pas le cri qu’on a poussé soi-même;
On sent les profondeurs qui s’emparent de vous;
Les mains ne peuvent plus atteindre les genoux;
On lève au ciel les yeux et l’on voit l’ombre horrible.
On est dans l’impalpable, on est dans l’invisible;

Des souffles par moments passent dans cette nuit.
Puis on ne sent plus rien. — Pas un vent, pas un bruit,
Pas un souffle; la mort, la nuit; nulle rencontre;
Rien, pas même une chute affreuse ne se montre.

Et l’on songe à la vie, au soleil, aux amours,
Et l’on pense toujours, et l’on tombe toujours!
Et le froid du néant lentement vous pénètre!
Vivants! tomber, tomber, et tomber, sans connaître
Où l’on va, sans savoir où les autres s’en vont!
Une chute sans fin dans une nuit sans fond,
Voilà l’enfer.

V

Pendant que je songeais, l’espace
Vibra comme un vitrail quand un chariot passe
Et je vis apparaître un ange surprenant.
C’était un être ailé, sévère et rayonnant.
Comme Jésus du front passait les douze apôtres,
Ce bel archange était plus grand que tous les autres,
Il avait la hauteur de deux stades romains;
Il tenait les morceaux d’un glaive dans ses mains;
Il portait sur sa tête ingénue et superbe

Ce mot des cieux, ce mot qui contient tout le verbe :
— JUSTICE. — On le pouvait lire distinctement,
Chaque lettre du mot était un diamant.

Justice! Ô mot profond que les gouffres vénèrent!

Quand l’archange parut, les trompettes sonnèrent.

Et l’archange cria : — Trépassés! trépassés!
Levez-vous, accourez, venez, comparaissez!
Voici l’instant où l’aigle aura peur des colombes.
Ô victimes! sortez des nuits, sortez des tombes,
Sortez de terre en foule, à la hâte, à la fois!

Venez du fond des mers, venez du fond des bois,
Venez, celui qui saigne avec celui qui pleure!
Car le juge est assis pour punir, et c’est l’heure

Où les clairons du ciel sonnent aux quatre vents,
Et Dieu veut que les morts lui parlent des vivants

Et quand l’ange eut fini, les ténèbres s’émurent.

VI

Un bruit, pareil au bruit des mouches qui murmurent,
Éclata tout à coup dans le gouffre muet,
Et je vis quelque chose en bas qui remuait.
C’était comme un point noir, puis comme une fumée,
Puis comme la poussière où s’avance une armée,
Puis comme une île d’ombre au sein des nuits flottant.
Et cet amas sinistre et lourd, vers nous montant,
Triste, livide, énorme, ayant un air de rage,
Venait et grandissait, poussé d’un vent d’orage.
Ce bloc était confus comme un brouillard du soir.
Quand il fut près de nous, je me penchai pour voir.

C’était une nuée et c’était une foule.

Cela voguait, courait, roulait comme une houle;
Et puis cela faisait un bruit mystérieux.
Dans cette ombre on voyait des faces et des yeux.
Je leur criai : — Quels sont les noms dont on vous nomme?
Ô spectres, comme vous j’étais jadis un homme,
Vous êtes maintenant des spectres comme moi. —
Ils n’entendirent point et passèrent. L’effroi
Et la stupeur glaçaient ce noir tourbillon d’ombres.
Les uns étaient assis sur d’informes décombres;
D’autres, je les voyais quoiqu’un vent les chassât,
Terribles, agitaient des vestes de forçat;
D’autres étaient au joug liés comme des bêtes;
D’autres étaient des corps qui n’avaient pas de têtes;

Des femmes sur leur sein montraient les clous du fouet;
Des enfants morts tenaient encore leur jouet,
Et leur crâne entr’ouvert laissait voir leurs cervelles;
D’autres gisaient en tas ainsi que des javelles;
D’autres avaient au cou la corde du gibet;
D’autres traînaient des fers; un autre se courbait,

L’affreux plafond trop bas d’un cachot solitaire
Ayant ployé sa tête à jamais vers la terre;
Des vieillards, dont le sang coulait à longs ruisseaux,
Tiraient avec leurs doigts des balles de leurs os;
D’autres touchaient leurs yeux crevés par les mitrailles;
D’autres avec leurs mains soutenaient leurs entrailles;
Innombrables, meurtris, pâles, échevelés,
Tous, dans la nuit farouche affreusement mêlés,
Dressaient leur front, et ceux qui n’avaient pas de têtes
Élevaient leurs deux poings, et le vent des tempêtes
Soufflait, et derrière eux, accroupis, accablés,
On voyait un monceau de fantômes voilés,
Muets et noirs; c’étaient les veuves et les mères.
La rumeur qui sortait de ces ombres amères
Ressemblait au bruit sourd que les grands arbres font;
Et, devant la clarté qui flamboyait au fond,
Joignant leurs mains, tordant leurs bras, ils s’arrêtèrent,
Et, comme tous sortaient de la fosse, ils ôtèrent
La terre de leur bouche, et crièrent : Seigneur!

À ce grand mot qui dit gloire, amour et bonheur,

L’abîme qui n’a plus, sous la verge inflexible,
Le droit de prononcer ce nom inaccessible
Poussa dans la nuit triste un long gémissement.
VII

Ils reprirent : Seigneur! Ce fut un noir moment.
Les cris d’enfant surtout venaient à mon oreille;
Car, dans cette nuit-là, gouffre où l’équité veille

La voix des innocents sur toute autre prévaut,
C’est le cri des enfants qui monte le plus haut,
Et le vagissement fait le bruit du tonnerre.

— « Seigneur! Seigneur! Seigneur! Justice pour la terre!
« Nous sommes les martyrs, nous sommes l’équité,
« La loi sainte, l’honneur, la foi, la liberté;
« Chassés par les brigands que là-haut on encense,
« Nous sommes la vertu, nous sommes l’innocence,
« Que Satan forgeron frappe à coups de marteau.
« Nous sommes ceux qu’on a liés au vil poteau,
« Ceux qu’égorgea le sabre et que perça l’épée;
« Nous sommes le sang tiède et la tête coupée;

« Nous sommes ceux qu’on jette aux chiens, ceux que la dent
« Déchire, ceux qu’on brise et qu’on foule, pendant
« Que les vices lascifs et les crimes énormes
« Au-dessus de leurs fronts chantent, géants difformes.
« Nous crions vers vous, père! Ô Dieu bon, punissez!
« Car vous êtes l’espoir de ceux qu’on a chassés,
« Car vous êtes patrie à celui qu’on exile,
« Car vous êtes le port, la demeure et l’asile;
« Les oiseaux ont le nid et les hommes ont Dieu.
« Là-haut le meurtre seul est libre; c’est un jeu
« D’égorger les vivants; le droit n’a plus de base,
« Et le bien et le mal, comme l’eau dans un vase,
« Sont mêlés, et le monde est en proie à la mort.
« Au sud on tue, on pend, on extermine; au nord
« On élargit le bagne, on élargit les fosses;
« On coupe à coups de knout le ventre aux femmes grosses;

« Le glaive a reparu, hideux, comme jadis.
« Dans Brescia, dans Milan, on a vu des bandits
« Écraser du talon le sein des vierges mortes;
« Des vieillards aux fronts blancs massacrés sur leurs portes
« Imprimaient à leur seuil leurs doigts ensanglantés,
« Et les petits enfants, du haut des toits jetés,

« Étaient reçus en bas sur les pointes des piques.
« Les mines de Tobolsk, les cachots des tropiques,
« Cayenne, Lambessa, le Spielberg, les pontons
« Sont pleins de nos douleurs! Seigneur, nous en sortons.
« Nous nous nommons le peuple, et sommes une plaie.
« Le genre humain saignant est traîné sur la claie.
« Nous venons de l'exil, nous venons du tombeau,
« Et nous vous rapportons l'âme, notre flambeau!
« Ô Dieu juste, il est temps que votre bras nous venge! »

— Quels sont vos meurtriers et vos bourreaux? dit l'ange,

Et d'une seule voix ils dirent : — Les soldats.

VIII

Jean à Pathmos, Manou rêvant sur les védas,
N'ont rien vu de pareil à ce que je raconte,

Comme après un nuage un autre brouillard monte
Je vis alors monter de l'abîme obscurci
Un autre amas informe, et l'ange dit : Ici!

Et ce groupe arriva, confus comme une ville,
Devant la clarté sombre et toujours immobile.
C'étaient des millions d'hommes bardés de fer,
Comme Bordeaux en vit du temps de Gaïfer,
Cavaliers, fantassins, multitudes fatales,
Au cri rauque, au pas lourd, aux statures brutales,
À l'œil stupide, ayant des chiffres sur le front.
Quelques-uns ressemblaient aux hiboux à l'œil rond,
D'autres au léopard hurlant dans sa tanière.

Ils étaient tous vêtus de la même manière;
Ils étaient teints de sang, des cheveux aux talons;
Noirs, pressés, ils venaient, sauvages bataillons;
Leurs armes m'étonnaient et m'étaient inconnues.
Ils surgissaient en foule et par mille avenues.

C’étaient des légions et puis des légions,
Flot d’hommes inondant ces mornes régions,
Chaos, têtes sans nombre au loin diminuées;

Les croupes des chevaux se mêlaient aux nuées;
Ils traînaient après eux des chariots d’airain
Avec le roulement d’un foudre souterrain.
Un grand vautour doré les guidait comme un phare.
Tant qu’ils étaient au fond de l’ombre, la fanfare,
Comme un aigle agitant ses bruyants ailerons,
Chantait claire et joyeuse au fond des escadrons,
Trompettes et tambours sonnaient, et des centaures
Frappaient des ronds de cuivre entre leurs mains sonores,
Mais, dès qu’ils arrivaient devant le flamboiement,
Les clairons effarés se taisaient brusquement,
Tout ce bruit s’éteignait. Reculant en désordre,
Leurs chevaux se cabraient et cherchaient à les mordre,
Et la lance et l’épée échappaient à leur poing.
En voyant la lueur qu’ils ne comprenaient point,
Ils s’arrêtaient, courbant leurs faces étonnées;
Ils avaient ce front bas des bêtes enchaînées
Quand, le loup étant pris au piége et garrotté,
L’air terrible fait place à l’air épouvanté.

Ô spectacle de voir la force au pied de l’être!
De voir s’évanouir le gendarme et le reître,
Hommes, glaives, chevaux, clairons, férocité,
Tout le sombre ouragan, devant cette clarté!

IX

L’ange dit : — Qu’êtes-vous?
— Nous sommes les armées.
Alors, pâles, debout, les ombres ranimées
Crièrent, écartant les linceuls de leurs seins :

— Malheur! malheur! malheur à tous ces assassins!

Et l’ange dit, levant les bras pour les confondre :

— Vous avez entendu. Qu’avez-vous à répondre?

Et les morts répétaient : — Malheur aux assassins!

— Répondez, cria l’ange.
Alors ces lourds essaims,
Ces soldats plus nombreux que les épis des plaines,
Dirent :
— Ce n’est pas nous, ce sont nos capitaines.
Nous dûmes obéir à leur ordre inhumain;
Nous n’étions que le glaive, eux, ils étaient la main.
C’est sur eux, non sur nous, que le crime retombe. —

L’ange, vers la lueur calme comme une tombe,

Leva, grave et pensif, son œil fixe aux cils blonds,
Puis, se tournant, il fit un signe aux aquilons.

Les vents ayant soufflé, ces hommes disparurent.
X

Puis au fond de la nuit les aquilons coururent
Et revinrent, poussant une nuée encor.
Et ce nuage était plein de fantômes d’or.

Il s’ouvrit devant l’ange avec un sourd tonnerre.

Je vis des commandants sur leurs chevaux de guerre,
L’épée au flanc, la plume au front, l’air irrité,
Debout sur la nuée avec autorité,
Des flammes dans leurs yeux et du sang dans leurs bouches;
Triomphants, quelques-uns très vieux, et plus farouches
Que les durs Teutatès et les noirs Irmensuls.
Ils tenaient des bâtons comme font les consuls.

Et l’ange leur cria : — C’est vous les capitaines?

— C’est nous. Que nous veux-tu?

— Silence aux voix hautaines!
Regardez cet oiseau qui dort, et taisez-vous!
Dit l’ange; et, dérangeant sa robe avec courroux,
Il leur montra la foudre en son sein endormie.

Il reprit : — Vous avez ainsi qu’une ennemie
Traité la race humaine; où vous avez passé
Tout est mort, l’herbe a crû; vous avez écrasé
Les femmes, les enfants, les vieillards aux fronts chauves,
Et lâché vos soldats comme des bêtes fauves;
Vous avez relevé le glaive et l’échafaud,
Brisé la loi d’en bas, bravé la loi d’en haut;
Vous êtes devant Dieu; qu’avez-vous à répondre?

Comme devant la braise on voit la cire fondre,
Ces noirs victorieux tombèrent à genoux,
Et, criant et pleurant, dirent :
— Ce n’est pas nous!
Ce n’est pas nous, Seigneur! Seigneur, ce sont les juges.
Après les châtiments, les fléaux, les déluges,
Les hommes ont assis sur des sièges sacrés
D’autres hommes savants, austères, vénérés,
Pour être au milieu d’eux comme la loi vivante.
Seigneur, quand nous frappions, tous ces juges qu’on vante
Disaient : — Vous faites bien. Tirez. Versez le sang.

Ceci, c’est le coupable. — Or c’était l’innocent.
Nous ne le savions pas. Nous, troupe au mal poussée,
Nous n’étions que le bras, ils étaient la pensée;
Nous n’étions que la force, eux, ils étaient l’esprit.
Nos meurtres sont leur crime!
Et l’archange reprit :

— Allez! —
Tout s’effaça comme un flocon d’écume.

XI

L’ange leva le doigt, et je vis, dans la brume,
Monter et croître au fond des brouillards épaissis
Une espèce de cirque, et là, muets, assis,
Un tas d’hommes vêtus d’hermine et de simarres,
Et je vis à leurs pieds du sang en larges mares,
Des billots, des gibets, des fers, des piloris.

Ces hommes regardaient l’ange d’un air surpris;
Comme, en lettres de feu, rayonnait sur sa face

Son nom, JUSTICE, entre eux ils disaient à voix basse :
— Que veut dire ce mot qu’il porte sur son front?

L’ange cria :
— Malheur à ceux qui mentiront!
Vos noms? parlez! —
Et tous semblaient vouloir se taire.

— Vous êtes, dit l’esprit, les juges de la terre.
De vous tous qui teniez le livre de la loi
Pas un ne me connaît, mais je vous connais, moi.
Écoutez. Vous avez trahi le droit auguste,
Absous les scélérats, condamné l’homme juste,
Et lié l’innocence aux pieds du crime heureux.
Quand le massacre ouvrant ses ongles ténébreux,
Planait sur la cité qui lutte et qui s’effraie,
Vous avez comme un aigle adoré cette orfraie;
Quand les soldats noyaient dans le meurtre les lois,
À leurs cris furieux vous mêliez votre voix,
Vous mettiez votre bouche à leurs clairons de cuivre,
C’est vous qui de la loi tenant toujours le livre,
Des martyrs aux brigands partagiez les habits;

C’est vous qui livriez aux tigres les brebis;

C’est vous qui des héros traîniez les agonies
Du carcan au gibet, du bagne aux gémonies,
Juges; et le bourreau d’épouvante vêtu,
Voyant qu’on lui disait d’égorger la vertu,
Pensait dans son esprit : Ces hommes-là se trompent.
Vous vous êtes assis aux festins qui corrompent,
Vous avez applaudi le mal, ri du remords,
Et vous avez craché sur la face des morts.
Ô juges, ce sont là des choses exécrables.
Qu’avez-vous à répondre?
Alors ces misérables,
Tombant hors de leur siége et se prosternant tous,
Tremblant et gémissant, dirent :
— Ce n’est pas nous.

— Mais qui donc est coupable alors?
Ce sont les princes.
La terre est par les rois divisée en provinces.
Nous renvoyons aux rois toutes nos actions.
Les princes commandaient; nous leur obéissons,
Seigneur, car de tout temps les prêtres et les mages
Nous ont dit que les rois, ô Dieu, sont vos images.

L’ange dit : — Amenez les images de Dieu.

Des êtres monstrueux parurent.

XII

Du milieu
De l’abîme on les vit surgir dans l’ombre impure.
L’un ressemblait au meurtre et l’autre à la luxure,
L’autre à la fraude, l’autre à l’orgueil, celui-ci
Au mensonge, et d’horreur je demeurai saisi,
Car ils avaient du mal toutes les ressemblances.

À travers cette nuit, les brouillards, les silences,
Dans ce gouffre sans fond de toutes parts béant,
Dans ces immensités qu’emplissait le néant,
Ils se dressaient, le sceptre appuyé sur l’épaule;
Les uns, Molochs blanchis par les neiges du pôle,
D’autres ayant au front un reflet du midi,
Tous habillés de pourpre et d’or, l’œil engourdi,

L’air superbe, l’épée au flanc, couronne en tête,
Globe en main; chacun d’eux était seul sur le faîte
D’un trône, comme un roi d’Édom ou d’Issachar,
Et chaque trône était porté sur un grand char.
Devant chaque fantôme, en la brume glacée,
Ayant le vague aspect d’une croix renversée
Venait un glaive nu, ferme et droit dans le vent.
Qu’aucun bras ne tenait et qui semblait vivant.
Les vapeurs au-dessous flottaient basses et lentes.
Les chars étaient traînés par des bêtes volantes,
Montres inconnus même au gouffre sans clarté;
Attelages impurs! L’un était emporté
Par des tigres ailés au pied large, aux yeux mornes,
L’autre par des griffons, l’autre par des licornes,
L’autre par des vautours à deux têtes, ayant
Des diadèmes d’or sur leur front flamboyant.
Tous ces monstres poussaient des cris, battaient de l’aile

Tantôt mêlés, tantôt en ligne parallèle.
Les trônes approchaient sous ces lugubres cieux,
On entendait gémir autour des noirs essieux
La clameur de tous ceux qu’avaient broyés leurs roues;
Ils venaient, ils fendaient l’ombre comme des proues;
Sous un souffle invisible ils semblaient se mouvoir;
Rien n’était plus étrange et plus farouche à voir
Que ces chars effrayants tourbillonnant dans l’ombre.
Dans le gouffre tranquille où l’humanité sombre,
Ces trônes de la terre apparaissaient hideux.

Le dernier qui venait, horrible au milieu d’eux,
Était à chaque marche encombré de squelettes
Et de cadavres froids aux bouches violettes,
Et le plancher rougi fumait, de sang baigné;
Le char qui le portait dans l’ombre était traîné
Par un hibou tenant dans sa griffe une hache.
Un être aux yeux de loup, homme par la moustache,
Au sommet de ce char s’agitait étonné,
Et se courbait furtif, livide et couronné.

Pas un de ces césars à l’allure guerrière
Ne regardait cet homme. À l’écart, et derrière,
Vêtu d’un noir manteau qui semblait un linceul,
Espèce de lépreux du trône, il venait seul;
Il posait les deux mains sur sa face morose
Comme pour empêcher qu’on y vît quelque chose :
Quand parfois il ôtait ses mains en se baissant,
En lettres qui semblaient faites avec du sang
On lisait sur son front ces trois mots : Je le jure.

Quoiqu’ils fussent encore au fond de l’ombre obscure,
Hommes hideux, de traits et d’âge différents,
Je les distinguais tous, car ils étaient très grands.
Je crus voir les titans de l’antique nature.
Mais ces géants brumeux décroissaient à mesure
Qu’ils s’éloignaient du point dont ils étaient partis,
Et, plus ils s’approchaient, plus ils étaient petits.
Ils rentraient par degrés dans la stature humaine;
La clarté les fondait ainsi qu’une ombre vaine;
Eux que j’avais crus hauts plus que les Apennins,
Quand ils furent tout près de moi, c’étaient des nains.

Et l’ange, se dressant dans la brume indécise,
Était penché sur eux comme la tour de Pise.
XIII

Et les glaives s’étaient éclipsés.

L’ange dit :

— Qu’êtes-vous?
Et le groupe à ses pieds répondit :

— Rois, et maîtres de tout, du droit de nos ancêtres.

— Rois! vous êtes les rois, vous n’êtes pas les maîtres,
Dit l’ange. Allons, venez, c’est l’heure, arrivez tous.
Vous voilà donc enfin, princes? D’où sortez-vous?
Ô princes, vous sortez, et je vais vous le dire,
Des forfaits, des fureurs, du meurtre et du délire,
Des deuils, des faux serments dont l’homme est éperdu,
Et du sang innocent à grands flots répandu,
Vous sortez des palais qu’habite la démence,
Des fortins, des charniers, et de la plaine immense
Du monde entier criant vers le haut firmament!
Rois! l’homme n’est pas fait pour votre amusement.

Rois! la terre est un temple et non pas une étable.
Le tyran, dans l’orgie, accoudé sur la table,
Commande au crime, et Dieu commande au châtiment.
Princes, avant que Dieu regarde froidement
Tout le sang qui ruisselle autour de vos armures,
Les astres tomberont comme des figues mûres
Qui tombent d’un figuier secoué par le vent.
Ô rois qui massacrez sous l’œil du Dieu vivant,
La voix du genre humain contre vos fronts s’élève.
Plus nombreux que les flots gémissant sur la grève
Les morts auprès de Dieu, rois, vous ont précédés
Ôtez votre couronne, accusés, répondez.
Tous ces crimes abjects, mêlés au vice immonde,
Les avez-vous commis?
Et ces maîtres du monde
Tremblèrent comme l’arbre au vol des ouragans,
Et l’ange regardait pâlir ces arrogants;
Et chacun d’eux, pareil au renard qui s’échappe,

Criait :
— Ce n’est pas nous!

— Et qui donc?
— C’est le pape.
Seigneur, vous aviez mis parmi nous ce docteur.
Il était le semeur, il était le pasteur,
Il enseignait d’en haut comme votre vicaire.
Nos trônes faisaient cercle autour de cette chaire.
Nous écoutions son verbe ainsi que votre voix.
Il nous disait : « Je suis celui qui parle aux rois;
« Quiconque me résiste et me brave est impie.
« Ce qu’ici-bas j’écris, là-haut Dieu le copie.
« L’église, mon épouse, éclose au mont Thabor,
« A fait de la doctrine une cage aux fils d’or,
« Et comme des oiseaux j’y tiens toutes les âmes.
« Seul je suis le mystère et seul j’ai les dictames.
« Rois, obéissez-moi selon qu’il est écrit.
« Quand vous me regardez, vous voyez Jésus-Christ.
« Je fais et je défais la loi quand je la touche,
« Et l’explication de tout est dans ma bouche;
« Je suis l’homme-justice et l’homme-vérité. »
Or, quand nous abattions droit, peuple, liberté,
Quand nous eûmes tué le tribun et l’apôtre,
Nous étions d’un côté, les morts étaient de l’autre,
Nous lui dîmes : — Quels sont les bons et les pervers?
Et cet homme leva la main, et l’univers
Vit descendre, seigneur, de cette main suprême
Sur nous l’apothéose et sur eux l’anathème;
Quand nous exterminions l’aïeul aux pas tremblants,

Ce vieillard nous criait : Malheur aux cheveux blancs!
Quand nous percions l’enfant au ventre de sa mère,
Il nous criait, debout au fond du sanctuaire,
Devant la mère froide et devant l’enfant mort :
L’enfant était coupable et la mère avait tort!
Il faisait, pour punir quiconque pense et rêve,

Jaillir des crucifix sous les éclairs du glaive!
Sa main, plus que nos bras, multipliait les coups.
Répondez, Pazzoli, Simoncelli, vous tous!
Cet homme interrompait la messe à l’offertoire,
Ce prêtre rejetait la gorgée au ciboire,

Seigneur, pour faire signe au bourreau de frapper,
Et lui montrer du doigt les têtes à couper.
Sa ceinture servait de corde à nos potences,
Il liait de ses mains l’agneau sous nos sentences,
Et quand on nous criait : Grâce! il nous criait! Feu!
C’est à lui que le mal revient. Voilà, grand Dieu,
Ce qu’il a fait; voilà ce qu’il nous a fait faire.
Cet homme était le pôle et l’axe de la sphère;
Il est le responsable et nous le dénonçons!
Seigneur, nous n’avons fait que suivre ses leçons,
Seigneur, nous n’avons fait que suivre son exemple.
Nos forfaits sous ses pieds sont nés dans votre temple.
Il nous a mis l’enfer dans l’âme au lieu du ciel
Lui seul porte le poids du crime universel!

Et l’archange cria :
— Faites venir cet homme!

Alors les sept clairons dirent :
— Pape de Rome!
Mastaï! Mastaï! nous t’appelons sept fois.
Viens rapporter à Dieu les peuples et les rois,
Car l’Éternel t’attend, assis sur les nuées.

Toutes les profondeurs frémirent, remuées.

Un vieillard blanc et pâle apparut dans la nuit.

XIV

Debout, morne, il tremblait comme un homme qui fuit,

Et des mains le tenaient au collet dans la brume,
Vêtu de lin plus blanc qu’un encensoir qui fume,
Il avait, spectre blême aux idoles pareil,
Les baisers de la foule empreints sur son orteil,
Dans sa droite un bâton comme l’antique archonte,
Sur son front la tiare, et dans ses yeux la honte.
De son cou descendait un long manteau doré,
Et dans son poignet gauche il tenait, effaré,
Comme un voleur surpris par celui qu’il dérobe,
Des clefs qu’il essayait de cacher sous sa robe.
Il était effrayant à force de terreur.

Quand surgit ce vieillard, on vit dans la lueur
L’ombre et le mouvement de quelqu’un qui se penche.
À l’apparition de cette robe blanche,
Au plus noir de l’abîme un tonnerre gronda.
L’archange, tout à coup terrible, regarda,
De cet œil flamboyant que vit luire Sodome,
L’ombre profonde, et dit :

— Connaissez-vous cet homme?

Alors, de tous les points de ces immensités,
Tous, — car je m’aperçus que tous étaient restés, —
Des flancs de la nuée et du bord des abîmes,
De toutes parts, en haut, en bas, tyrans, victimes,
Mères, enfants, vieillards, les juges, les jugés,
Les égorgeurs mêlés avec les égorgés,
Les grands et les petits, les obscurs, les célèbres,
Tous ceux que j’avais vus passer dans les ténèbres
Avançant leur front triste, ouvrant leur œil terni,
Fourmillement affreux qui peuplait l’infini,
Tous ces spectres vivant, parlant, riant naguère,
Martyrs, bourreaux, et gens du peuple et gens de guerre,
Regardant l’homme blanc d’épouvante ébloui,
Élevèrent la main et crièrent : C’est lui

Et pendant qu’ils criaient, sa robe devint rouge.

Au fond du gouffre où rien ne tressaille et ne bouge
Un écho répéta : — C’est lui! — Les sombres rois
Dirent : — C’est lui! c’est lui! c’est lui! voilà sa croix!
Les clefs du paradis sont dans ses mains fatales. —
Et l’homme-loup, debout sur les cadavres pâles
Dont le sang tiède encor tombait dans l’infini,
Cria d’une voix rauque et sourde : — Il m’a béni.

Et la lueur soudain grandit, funèbre et pure,
Et devint formidable ainsi qu’une figure.
Il semblait que ce fût le jour qui se levait.

XV

L’ange, pareil au lys que la candeur revêt,
Dieu au vieillard :
— Écoute et vois. Le juge est proche,
Tu sais pourquoi tu viens et ce qu’on te reproche,
Réponds. —
Lui se tourna vers l’ange en frissonnant,
Et je vis le spectacle horrible et surprenant
D’un homme qui vieillit pendant qu’on le regarde.
L’agonie éteignit sa prunelle hagarde,
Sa bouche bégaya, son jarret se rompit,
Ses cheveux blanchissaient sur son front décrépit,
Ses tempes se ridaient comme si les années
S’étaient subitement sur sa face acharnées,
Ses yeux pleuraient, ses dents claquaient comme au gibet
Les genoux d’un squelette, et sa peau se plombait,
Et, stupide, il baissait, à chaque instant plus pâle,
Sa tête qu’écrasait la tiare papale.

L’ange dit :
— Comprends-tu, vieillard, ce que tu vois?

Il frappa sa poitrine et demeura sans voix,
Et je vis, ô terreur! qu'il vieillissait encore.
Farouche, il regardait cette lugubre aurore
Et la robe de sang dont il était vêtu.

L'ange reprit :
— Voyons, défends-toi, parle; as-tu,
Pour lui jeter ta faute et pour qu'il en réponde,
Au-dessus de ta tête un être dans ce monde?

Et l'homme répondit :
— Je n'ai que vous, mon Dieu!

Alors je crus voir luire un rayon du ciel bleu,
Des sept anges rêveurs les clairons se baissèrent,
Le gouffre, que les nuits insondables enserrent,
Frémit comme frémit l'oiseau pris au lacet,
Et l'espace entendit une voix qui disait :

XVI

« Les vivants sous le ciel tremblent, souffrent et pleurent;

« La vertu, la raison et la sagesse meurent;
« Le crime est consommé.
« L'homme récolte ici ce que là-bas il sème.
« Mastaï, mastaï, Pie appelé neuvième,
« Approche, infortuné!

« Nul ne s'évade. Ici les choses sont connues,
« Les os sont transparents et les âmes sont nues;
« Ici tout est clartés;
« L'ombre de l'homme prend la forme de sa vie.
« La justice affamée ici n'est assouvie
« Que de réalités.

« Quand les princes foulaient aux pieds les multitudes,
« Transformaient des pays vivants en solitudes,

« Dressaient les échafauds,
« Et marchaient sur le peuple, affreux, vainqueurs, superbes,
« Comme le moissonneur à grands pas dans les herbes
« Marche avec une faulx;

« Tandis que l’orphelin pleurait avec la veuve,
« Et que l’humanité gémissait comme un fleuve,
« Et qu’eux étaient joyeux,
« Et qu’ils pillaient le peuple avec leurs économes,
« Tandis que tous ces rois versaient le sang des hommes
« Comme moi l’eau des cieux;

« Tandis que des couteaux ils aiguisaient les pointes,
« Toi, tu les bénissais; tu tombais les mains jointes
« À genoux sous un dais,
« Et tu me rendais grâce à moi, souverain maître,
« Ne t’imaginant pas que j’existais, ô prêtre,
« Et que je t’entendais!

« Me voici. Vois ma face; et sache que j’existe.
« Ô malheureux, regarde en toi-même et sois triste.
« Une main t’a saisi;
« Comme une vision rappelle-toi le monde;
« Ceci c’est ma clarté; le reste est nuit profonde;
« C’est moi qui suis ici!

« Sache que c’était moi qui t’avais mis au faîte.
« Le jour où, proclamé roi, pontife et prophète,
« Joyeux, tu te courbas,

« Tandis qu’on t’enivrait d’un hymne de victoire,
« Et que tout l’univers te chantait dans ta gloire,
« Je t’ai parlé tout bas;

« Je t’ai dit : — Mastaï, je te charge des hommes.
« Voici la clef du coffre et le compte des sommes
« Qu’il faudra rendre un jour.

« Sois le gardien sublime et le grand solitaire.
« C’est toi qui veilleras au centre de la terre
« Sur le haut de ma tour,

« Je t’ai dit : — Mastaï, travaille en ma présence,
« Remets de la vertu dans l’âme ou l’innocence
« Lentement se détruit;
« C’est toi qui verseras de l’huile dans ma lampe,
« Pour qu’en l’esprit de l’homme où le mal parfois rampe
« Il ne soit jamais nuit.

« Je t’ai dit : — Mastaï, chasse Satan, s’il entre.
« Tous les crimes hideux, rôdant hors de leur antre,
« Guettant l’homme éprouvé,
« Te trouveront debout sur leur route, ô pontife,
« Et fermeront leur gueule et baisseront leur griffe
« Devant ton doigt levé.

« Or, le monde t’a vu, toi le saint, toi l’auguste,
« Dire au crime : courage! et la porte du juste

« A tremblé sur ses gonds.
« Tu louas les bourreaux vainqueurs, toi mon ministre
« Tu pris sur tes genoux, magicien sinistre,
« La tête des dragons.

« Devant le créateur, devant les créatures,
« Tu mis sur les tyrans, tu mis sur les parjures,
« Sur le vol effronté,
« Sur le meurtre ivre et fou qui dans le sang se plonge,
« Tu mis sur cet amas d’horreur et de mensonge
« Mon sceau de vérité.

« Chien du troupeau, tu fus un loup comme les autres!
« Ô rois, ses attentats amnistiaient les vôtres;
« Si bien, pape romain,
« Qu’aujourd’hui, dans le trouble et dans l’inquiétude,

« Pas un abri lointain, pas une certitude
« Ne reste au genre humain!

« Pure étoile éclairant les vivants dans leurs routes,
« La vérité brillait au fond des sombres voûtes
« Où l’œil de l’homme atteint,
« Je t’avais, comme Aron et comme Zoroastre,

« Mis si haut que toi seul pouvais souffler sur l’astre;
« Prêtre, tu l’as éteint!

« J’avais entre tes mains déposé la justice,
« De peur que l’homme n’erre et ne se pervertisse
« Comme au temps de Japhet,
« Des âmes des vivants j’avais fait ton domaine,
« Je t’avais confié la conscience humaine.
« Réponds, qu’en as-tu fait? »
XVII

L’homme resta béant, et, sans cri, sans prière
Et sans souffle, il tomba les deux mains en arrière,
Comme s’il eût été poussé par la clarté
Je sentis tressaillir l’obscure éternité.

Et, comme je fuyais, dans la nuée ardente
Une face apparut et me cria : Mon Dante,
Prends ce pape qui fit le mal et non le bien,
Mets-le dans ton enfer, je le mets dans le mien.

XXI

XXI

Dieu fait les questions pour que l’enfant réponde.

— Les deux bêtes les plus gracieuses du monde,
Le chat et la souris, se haïssent. Pourquoi?
Explique-moi cela, Jeanne. — Non sans effroi
Devant l’énormité de l’ombre et du mystère,
Jeanne se mit à rire. — Eh bien? — Petit grand-père,
Je ne sais pas. Jouons. — Et Jeanne repartit :
— Vois-tu, le chat c’est gros, la souris c’est petit.
— Eh bien? — Et Jeanne alors, en se grattant la tête,
Reprit : — Si la souris était la grosse bête,
À moins que le bon Dieu là-haut ne se fâchât,
Ce serait la souris qui mangerait le chat.

XXII

OCÉAN

OCÉAN

I

Ces bâtiments qui font voile
Suivent chacun leur étoile
Et leur dessein;

Et l’eau bat toutes les proues,
Et l’air souffle à pleines joues
Sur cet essaim.

Ils se dispersent sur l’onde.
Ils vont; ils jettent la sonde
Au flot félon;

Ils ont leur carte et leurs règles;
Ils vont où vont les quatre aigles
De l’aquilon.

— Je pars, dit le capitaine,
Pour Gibraltar, pour Athène,
Pour Tafilet.
— Nous partons, disent les mousses,
Pour Malte où les nuits sont douces
Comme le lait.

— Nous partons, dit le pilote,
Pour l’Inde où la jonque flotte,
Pour Tétuan,
Pour Chypre, île aux belles femmes...
— Et pour le pays des âmes,
Dit l’océan.

La création aveugle
Hurle, glapit, grince et beugle;

Mais, sous sa main,
L’homme la dompte et la brise;
La forêt grondante est prise
Au piége humain.

Le tigre au Jardin des plantes
Passe ses pattes tremblantes

Par les barreaux;
Toute bête est terrassée
Par l’amour et la pensée,
Ces deux héros.

Tous deux ont le diadème.
Ces dompteurs, que l’enfer même
Jadis craignait.
Rois de tous les esclavages,
Tiennent les choses sauvages
Dans leur poignet.

Le fier taureau d’Asturie,
Qui marchait dans sa furie
Sans dévier,
Lui plus noir que l’eau marine,
Un anneau dans la narine,
Suit un bouvier.

Ce grand monstre, la nature,

Qui vivait à l’aventure,
N’écoutant rien,
Ouvrant sur l’homme qui souffre
Toutes les gueules du gouffre,
N’est plus qu’un chien.

L’homme s’accroît et se hausse.
Nul ne sait ce qu’en sa fosse,
Loin du ciel bleu,
Voyant qu’il faut qu’il y dorme,
Le lion, forçat énorme,
Reproche à Dieu.

Persée étouffe Gorgone,
Marthe écrase la dragone
Aux yeux ardents.
Visconti, vêtu de cuivre,
D’un coup de poing, à la guivre
Casse les dents.

Béhémot craint l’homme blême.
Le boa, n’ouvrant pas même
L’œil à demi,
N’est plus, lui serpent superbe,
Qu’un tronc d’arbre qui dans l’herbe
S’est endormi.

Le jaguar tourne en sa cage.
Le morse en un marécage
Croupit muré.
La chanson du pâtre attire
Hors des branches le satyre
Tout effaré.

Depuis Hercule et Thésée,
Teb à la lance aiguisée,
Bellérophon,
Icare qui nomme un golfe,
Hermès sur le sphinx, Astolphe
Sur le griffon,

Il n’est pas au monde un être

Qui ne reconnaisse un maître;
Tout est dompté.
La conquête se consomme;
L’ombre voit au front de l’homme
Une clarté.

Le lynx s’abat sur le ventre
Quand la ménade en son antre
Chante paean;
On prend l’aigle dans son aire...
— Où donc est mon belluaire?
Dit l’océan.

Et l’océan fauve ajoute :
— Je ne suis pas une route.
Que me veut-on?
Je te hais, flambeau sublime,
Que Colomb sur mon abîme
Passe à Fulton.

J’ai ma vague, Etna se lave.
Etna n’est pas un esclave.
Ni moi non plus.

J’ai pour reine et pour captive
La sombre terre attentive
À mon reflux.

Je ne suis pas fait pour être,
Comme le sentier champêtre,
Plein de vivants;
Je suis l’Onde en sa tanière,
Que prennent à la crinière
Les quatre vents!

Je suis le noir gouffre inculte;
Je donne, en mon fier tumulte,

Où rien ne ment,
Pour maître aux flots sourds l’air libre,
Et pour base à l’équilibre
Le tremblement.

Rien n’arrête et ne dirige
Mon formidable quadrige,
Que les typhons
Traînent, et qui, de la Perse
Jusqu’aux Hébrides, disperse
Ses bruits profonds.

Je suis la vaste mêlée,
Reptile, étant l’onde, ailée,
Étant le vent;
Force et fuite, haine et vie,
Houle immense, poursuivie
Et poursuivant.

Je suis, dans l’ombre étoilée,
La figure échevelée
De l’inconnu;
Ma vague, qu’Éole augmente,
Est, quand il lui plaît, charmante
Comme un sein nu.

Je ne suis pas votre auberge,
Je suis la tempête vierge
Qui peut briser
Caps et rochers comme verre,
À qui parfois le tonnerre
Prend un baiser.

Je m’appelle solitude,
Je m’appelle inquiétude,
Et mon roulis
Couvre à jamais des navires,

Des voix, des chansons, des rires,
Ensevelis.

Je suis funeste et salubre.

Je suis le fileur lugubre
Des noirs vallons
Que l’orage sans fin mouille,
Et qui file à sa quenouille
Les aquilons.

Je suis, dans l’écume en poudre,
Le combattant de la foudre,
L’hydre titan.
Je suis sans forme et sans nombre.
Venez, les vents, l’horreur, l’ombre.
Homme, va-t’en.

Je suis souffle, éclair et lame.
Je prends volontiers leur âme
Aux curieux.
Je suis le triple Cerbère
Dont le regard réverbère
Dieu furieux.

J’ai plus de nuit que la tombe.
Léviathan dans ma trombe
N’est plus qu’un ver;
Tout tremble sur mon épaule.
Je lie au poteau du pôle
Le spectre hiver.

Homme, la terre est ta mère.
Cherche ton bien éphémère
Dans ses douleurs;
Broie, arrache, brûle, embrasse.
Perce des chemins. Écrase

Ce tas de fleurs!

La plaine, quand on la ferre,
Obéit, et laisse faire
L’homme ennemi.
La terre est une imbécile;
Et la montagne est docile
À la fourmi.

Les Alpes sont des géantes
Terribles, fauves, béantes,
L’orage au cou;
L’homme rit des monts féroces,
Et, taupe, sous les colosses,
Il fait son trou.

Moi, je ne suis pas la rue.
J’ai pour roue et pour charrue
Le tourbillon;
Je bondis, c’est ma manière;
Je n’accepte pas l’ornière
Ni le sillon.

J’écume à flots sur ma grève,
Va-t’en. Ne viens pas, fils d’Ève,
Frêle rival,

Sauter sur mon dos farouche
Et mettre un mors à la bouche
De mon cheval.

Ma plaine est la grande plaine;
Mon souffle est la grande haleine
Je suis terreur;
J’ai tous les vents de la terre
Pour passants et le mystère
Pour laboureur.

Le météore en ma houle
Tombe, la nuée y croule
En rugissant;
L’écueil, écumant monarque,
À qui je donne la barque,
Me rend le sang;

L’aurore avec épouvante
Regarde mon eau vivante,
Mes rocs ouverts,
Mes colères, mes batailles,
Et les glissements d’écailles
Sous mes flots verts.

Vénus m’apporte son globe.
Je lui relève sa robe
Jusqu’au genou.

Le zéphyr des moissons blondes,
S’il se risque sur mes ondes,
Y devient fou.

Un jour l’orage des plaines
Vint chez moi sur mes baleines
Lancer ses traits;
Mais j’ai, d’un seul cri de rage,
Chassé ce canard sauvage
Dans vos marais!

Quand il vit dans ma caverne
Se sauver l’hydre de Lerne,
Mon compagnon
Typhon dit : Cela nous souille,
Gardons-nous cette grenouille?
Et j’ai dit Non!

Si je faisais une rose,
Moi, gouffre en qui toute chose
S’ébauche et vit,

Le soleil, flambeau fidèle,
Se lèverait auprès d’elle
Sans qu’on le vît.

Hommes, vous rêvez de croire
Que vous vaincrez mon eau noire,
Aux fiers bouillons,
Ma vague aux mille étincelles,
En pendant à des ficelles
Quelques haillons!

C’est donc là votre navire!
Une écorce qui chavire
Sous tout climat!
Cette épingle qui m’éraille,
C’est l’ancre, et ce brin de paille,
C’est le grand mât!

Ces quatre planches mal jointes
Se déchireront aux pointes
Du moindre écueil.
L’homme au front triste, aux mains blanches,
Ne sait clouer que les planches
De son cercueil.

Quoi! je serais si candide!
Porter sur mon dos splendide
Votre wagon!
Dans mon azur sans limite
Voir fumer votre marmite,
Moi le dragon!

Quoi! lui chez moi! l’homme! Il entre!

Sachez que devant mon antre,
Qu’emplit la nuit,
Le sage lion s’arrête,
Et qu’en voyant ma tempête
L’aigle s’enfuit!

Votre présence m’outrage.
Dieu fit mon immense orage
Mystérieux

Et mes flots pleins de désastres,
Pour être vus par ses astres,
Non par vos yeux.

Homme, ta marche est peu droite;
Ton commerce avide exploite
Les flots mouvants;
L’âpre soif de l’or t’anime;
Je donne pour rien l’abîme,
Toi, tu le vends.

Ne viens pas chez moi, te dis-je.
Ne mêle pas au prodige
Tes vils chemins.
Crains mes fureurs justicières!
Ah! vous frémiriez, poussières,
Pâles humains,

Si vous entendiez les choses
Que nous tous, les vents moroses
Et les saisons,
L’air qui souffle et l’eau qui tremble,
Quand nous sommes seuls ensemble,
Nous nous disons!

Devant votre crépuscule
Mon sombre horizon recule;

Vous m’insultez!
Genre humain, foule confuse,
L’ombre éternelle refuse
Vos nouveautés.

Elle refuse vos phares,
Vos boussoles, vos fanfares,
Vos noirs vaisseaux,

Et, quand passe votre flotte,
Indignée, elle sanglote
Au fond des eaux.

Allez-vous-en! Je devine
Qu’on rêve une ère divine
Fin des fléaux.
On court sur l’onde aplanie.
On m’emploie à l’harmonie!
Moi, le chaos!

C’est la paix qui se prépare.
Je n’en veux point. Je sépare.
Je n’unis pas.
Je brise à coups de nageoires
Et je broie en mes mâchoires
Votre compas!

L’homme doit courber sa tête
Sous la guerre et la tempête
Et le volcan.
La terre, c’est la géhenne.
Que chacun garde sa haine
Et son carcan.

Tu n’es pas même un fantôme!
Monstre pour l’archange, atome
Pour le titan,

Rien pour l’espace et le nombre!
L’homme n’est qu’une pénombre;
L’ombre est Satan.

Être mauvais, c’est ta peine.
Sois mauvais. Ta race traîne
L’anneau de fer.
Nous sommes tous la souffrance;
Et l’hirondelle espérance
Fuit notre hiver.

Sache que nous, et ces mondes
Qu’on voit, dans nos nuits immondes,
Au firmament,
Nous habitons l’insondable,
L’extrémité formidable
Du châtiment.

Notre nuit est si fatale
Que si la pitié, vestale
Chère aux élus,
Disait : Où donc est ce monde?
J’ai peur que Dieu ne réponde :
Je ne sais plus!

Donc subissez la loi dure.
Endurez ce que j’endure,
L’isolement;
Et soyez, dans votre bouge,
L’un pour l’autre le fer rouge,
Et non l’aimant.

N’essayez pas, dans ma sphère,
D’être frères, et de faire,
Dans ce tombeau,
Quand tout à l’ombre ressemble,
De vos esprits mis ensemble

Un grand flambeau,

Les hommes deviendraient anges!
Je ne veux pas de mésanges,
Moi, maintenant!
Je veux le glaive et le glaive.
Vivez comme dans un rêve,
Tas frissonnant!

Faites comme ont fait vos pères,
Et crénelez vos repaires.
Abhorrez-vous.
Barricadez vos Sodomes.
Dévorez-vous. Soyez hommes
Et restez loups.

Que l’Écosse ait sa claymore,
Le juif sa rage, et le more
Son yatagan;
Que chacun reste en sa ville;
Et qu’on me laisse tranquille
Dans l’ouragan.

II

Et l’homme dit : — Mer affreuse,
Que le char des foudres creuse
Sous son essieu,
Tais-toi dans ton ossuaire.
Tu cherches ton belluaire?
Gouffre, c’est Dieu!

Écoute-moi. La loi change.
Je vois poindre aux cieux l’archange!
L’esprit du ciel
M’a crié sur la montagne :
« Tout enfer s’éteint; nul bagne

N’est éternel. »

Je ne hais plus, mer profonde.
J’aime. J enseigne, je fonde.
Laisse passer.
Satan meurt, un autre empire
Naît, et la morsure expire
Dans un baiser.

Tu ne dois plus dire : arrière!
Tu n’es plus une barrière,
Dragon marin.

Sers l’avenir! porte l’arche.
Rien n’arrête l’homme en marche
Vers Dieu serein.

Rien! pas même toi, chimère,
Monstre de l’écume amère,
Géant puni,
Toi qui, seul dans ta nuit sombre,
As fait ton onde avec l’ombre
De l’infini!

Je vais! je suis le prophète.
À la houle stupéfaite
Je dis mon nom.
La trombe accourt; ma pensée
Fait rentrer cette insensée
Au cabanon.

L’esprit de l’homme, lumière,
Domptant la nature entière,
Onde ou volcan,
Plonge sa clarté sacrée
Dans la prunelle effarée
De l’ouragan.

Pour qu’à nos pas on se range,
Nous n’avons qu’à dire à l’ange
Comme aux démons,
Qu’à dire aux torrents de soufre,
Et qu’à te dire à toi, gouffre :
Nous nous aimons!

L’amour, c’est la loi suprême.
L’amour te vaincra toi-même.
Ton bruit est vain.
Pour que, caressant ta grève,
Ton hymne d’enfer s’achève
En chant divin,

Pour que ton hurlement tombe
Il suffit que la colombe
Qui vient le soir,
Ô sombre gouffre d’écume,
Laisse tomber une plume
Sur ton flot noir.

L’amour, c’est le fond de l’homme.
L’amour, c’est l’antique pomme
Qu’Ève cueillit.
L’ombre passe, l’amour reste.
Il est astre au dais céleste,
Perle en ton lit.

Nos inventions nouvelles
Prendront à tes vents des ailes;
Dieu nous sourit;
Nous monterons sur ta rage,
Nous attellerons l’orage
À notre esprit.

Oui, malgré tes chocs sauvages,

Nous lierons tes deux rivages

D’un trait de feu;
L’avenir aura deux Romes,
Et, près de celle des hommes,
Celle de Dieu.

L’avenir aura deux temples,
Deux lumières, deux exemples,
Un double hymen,
La liberté, force et verbe,
L’unité, portant la gerbe
Du genre humain.

Tais-toi, mer! Les cœurs s’appellent;
Les fils de Caïn se mêlent
Aux fils d’Abel;
L’homme, que Dieu mène et juge,
Bâtira sur toi, déluge,
Une Babel.

À cette Babel morale
Aboutira la spirale
Des deux Sions,
Où sans cesse recommence
Le fourmillement immense
Des nations;

Et tu verras sans colère,
Du tropique au flot polaire
Dieu te calmant,

Au-dessus de l’eau sonore,
Se construire dans l’aurore
Superbement

Les progrès et les idées,

Pont de cent mille coudées
Que rien ne rompt,
Et sur tes sombres marées
Ces arches démesurées
Resplendiront.

XXIII

Ô Dieu, dont l’œuvre va plus loin que notre rêve

Ô Dieu, dont l’œuvre va plus loin que notre rêve,
Créateur qui n’as pas de relâche et de trêve!
Œil sans paupière et sans sommeils!
Éternel jet de vie! âme jamais fermée!
Gouffre mystérieux d’où sort une fumée
D’hommes, d’êtres et de soleils!

Humanités dans tous les espaces semées,
Liguez-vous; dressez-vous, innombrables armées,
Et déclarez la guerre à Dieu;
Soit. Luttez, attaquez cet être inabordable,
Cet infini si doux qu’il en est formidable,
Et si profond qu’il en est bleu.

Mesurez-vous, vous l’ombre, à lui la plénitude.
Vous aurez, ô passants, légions, multitude,
Assiégeants de l’immense tour,
Essaim tourbillonnant autour du grand pilastre,
Vivants, avant qu’il ait usé son premier astre,
Dépensé votre dernier jour!

LA FIN DE SATAN

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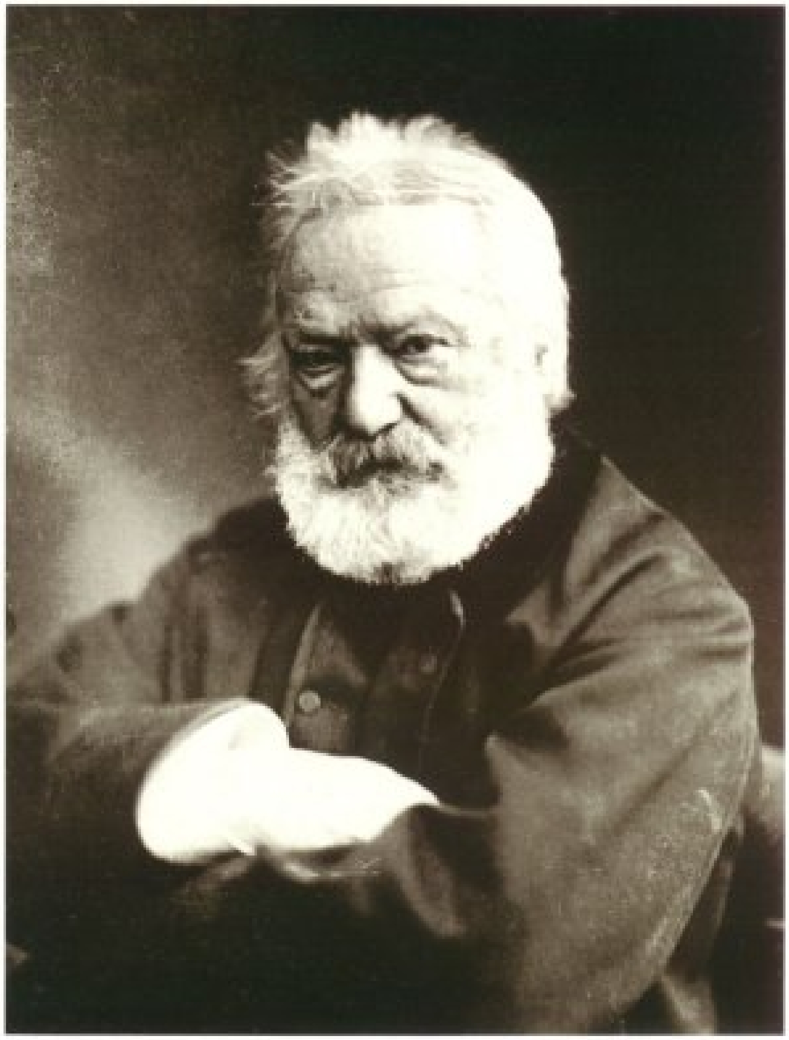

Hugo, close to the time of his death

HORS DE LA TERRE I

ET NOX FACTA EST

I

Depuis quatre mille ans il tombait dans l’abîme.

Il n’avait pas encor pu saisir une cime,
Ni lever une fois son front démesuré.
Il s’enfonçait dans l’ombre et la brume, effaré,
Seul, et derrière lui, dans les nuits éternelles,
Tombaient plus lentement les plumes de ses ailes.
Il tombait foudroyé, morne silencieux,
Triste, la bouche ouverte et les pieds vers les cieux,
L’horreur du gouffre empreinte à sa face livide.
Il cria: - Mort! - les poings tendus vers l’ombre vide.
Ce mot plus tard fut homme et s’appela Caïn.
Il tombait. Tout à coup un roc heurta sa main;
Il l’étreignit, ainsi qu’un mort étreint sa tombe,
Et s’arrêta.
 Quelqu’un, d’en haut, lui cria: - Tombe!
Les soleils s’éteindront autour de toi, maudit! -
Et la voix dans l’horreur immense se perdit.
Et, pâle, il regarda vers l’éternelle aurore.
Les soleils étaient loin, mais ils brillaient encore.
Satan dressa la tête et dit, levant le bras:
— Tu mens! - Ce mot plus tard fut l’âme de Judas.
Pareil aux dieux d’airain debout sur leurs pilastres,
Il attendit mille ans, l’oeil fixé sur les astres.
Les soleils étaient loin, mais ils brillaient toujours.
La foudre alors gronda dans les cieux froids et sourds.
Satan rit, et cracha du côté du tonnerre.
L’immensité, qu’emplit l’ombre visionnaire,
Frissonna. Ce crachat fut plus tard Barabbas.
Un souffle qui passait le fit tomber plus bas.
II

La chute du damné recommença. - Terrible,
Sombre, et piqué de trous lumineux comme un crible,
Le ciel plein de soleils s’éloignait, la clarté
Tremblait, et dans la nuit le grand précipité,
Nu, sinistre, et tiré par le poids de son crime,
Tombait, et, comme un coin, sa tête ouvrait l’abîme.
Plus bas! plus bas! toujours plus bas! Tout à présent
Le fuyait; pas d’obstacle à saisir en passant,
Pas un mont, pas un roc croulant, pas une pierre,
Rien, l’ombre, et d’épouvante il ferma sa paupière.
Quand il rouvrit les yeux, trois soleils seulement
Brillaient, et l’ombre avait rongé le firmament.
Tous les autres soleils étaient morts.

III

Une roche
Sortait du noir brouillard comme un bras qui s’approche.
Il la prit, et ses pieds touchèrent des sommets.

Alors l’être effrayant qui s’appelle Jamais
Songea. Son front tomba dans ses mains criminelles.
Les trois soleils, de loin, ainsi que trois prunelles,
Le regardaient, et lui ne les regardait pas.
L’espace ressemblait aux plaines d’ici-bas,
Le soir, quand l’horizon qui tressaille et recule,
Noircit sous les yeux blancs du spectre crépuscule.
De longs rayons rampaient aux pieds du grand banni.
Derrière lui son ombre emplissait l’infini.
Les cimes du chaos se confondaient entre elles.
Tout à coup il se vit pousser d’horribles ailes;
Il se vit devenir monstre, et que l’ange en lui
Mourait, et le rebelle en sentit quelque ennui.
Il laissa son épaule, autrefois lumineuse,
Frémir au froid hideux de l’aile membraneuse,
Et croisant ses deux bras, et relevant son front,
Ce bandit, comme s’il grandissait sous l’affront,

Seul dans ces profondeurs que la ruine encombre,
Regarda fixement la caverne de l’ombre.
Les ténèbres sans bruit croissaient dans le néant.
L’opaque obscurité fermait le ciel béant;
Et, faisant, au-delà du dernier promontoire,
Une triple fêlure à cette vitre noire,
Les trois soleils mêlaient leurs trois rayonnements.
Après quelque combat dans les hauts firmaments,
D’un char de feu brisé l’on eût dit les trois roues.
Les monts hors du brouillard sortaient comme des proues.
Eh bien, cria Satan, soit! Je puis encor voir!
Il aura le ciel bleu, moi j’aurai le ciel noir.
Croit-il pas que j’irai sangloter à sa porte?
Je le hais. Trois soleils suffisent. Que m’importe!
Je hais le jour, l’azur, le rayon, le parfum! -

Soudain, il tressaillit; il n’en restait plus qu’un.

IV

L’abîme s’effaçait. Rien n’avait plus de forme.
L’obscurité semblait gonfler sa vague énorme.
C’était on ne sait quoi de submergé; c’était
Ce qui n’est plus, ce qui s’en va, ce qui se tait;
Et l’on n’aurait pu dire, en cette horreur profonde,
Si ce reste effrayant d’un mystère ou d’un monde,
Pareil au brouillard vague où le songe s’enfuit,
S’appelait le naufrage ou s’appelait la nuit;
Et l’archange sentit qu’il devenait fantôme.
Il dit: - Enfer! - Ce mot plus tard créa Sodome.

Et la voix répéta lentement sur son front:
— Maudit! autour de toi les astres s’éteindront. -

Et déjà le soleil n’était plus qu’une étoile.

V

Et tout disparaissait par degrés sous un voile.

L’archange alors frémit; Satan eut le frisson.
Vers l’astre qui tremblait, livide, à l’horizon,
Il s’élança, sautant d’un faîte à l’autre faîte.
Puis, quoiqu’il eût horreur des ailes de la bête,
Quoique ce fût pour lui l’habit de la prison,
Comme un oiseau qui va de buisson en buisson,
Hideux, il prit son vol de montagne en montagne,
Et ce forçat se mit à courir dans ce bagne.

Il courait, il volait, il criait: - Astre d’or!
Frère! attends-moi! j’accours! ne t’éteins pas encor!
Ne me laisse pas seul! -

Le monstre de la sorte
Franchit les premiers lacs de l’immensité morte,
D’anciens chaos vidés et croupissant déjà,
Et dans les profondeurs lugubres se plongea.

L’étoile maintenant n’était qu’une étincelle.

Il entra plus avant dans l’ombre universelle,
S’enfonça, se jeta, se rua dans la nuit,
Gravit les monts fangeux dont le front mouillé luit,
Et dont la base au fond des cloaques chancelle,
Et, triste, regarda devant lui.

L’étincelle
N’était qu’un point rougeâtre au fond d’un gouffre obscur.
VI

Comme entre deux créneaux se penche sur le mur
L’archer qu’en son donjon le crépuscule gagne,
Farouche, il se pencha du haut de la montagne,
Et sur l’astre, espérant le faire étinceler,
Comme sur une braise il se mit à souffler,
Et l’angoisse gonfla sa féroce narine.
Le souffle qui sortit alors de sa poitrine

Est aujourd’hui sur terre et s’appelle ouragan.
A ce souffle, un grand bruit troubla l’ombre, océan
Qu’aucun être n’habite et qu’aucuns feux n’éclairent,
Les monts qui se trouvaient près de là s’envolèrent,
Le chaos monstrueux plein d’effroi se leva
Et se mit à hurler: Jéhova! Jéhova!
L’infini s’entr’ouvrit, fendu comme une toile,
Mais rien ne remua dans la lugubre étoile;
Et le damné criant: - Ne t’éteins pas! j’irai!
J’arriverai! - reprit son vol désespéré.

Et les volcans mêlés aux nuits qui leur ressemblent
Se renversaient ainsi que des bêtes qui tremblent,
Et les noirs tourbillons et les gouffres hideux
Se courbaient éperdus pendant qu’au-dessus d’eux,
Volant vers l’astre ainsi qu’une flèche à la cible,
Passait, fauve et hagard, ce suppliant terrible.

Et depuis qu’il a vu ce passage effrayant,
L’âpre abîme, effaré comme un homme fuyant,
Garde à jamais un air d’horreur et de démence,
Tant ce fut monstrueux de voir, dans l’ombre immense,
Voler, ouvrant son aile affreuse loin du ciel,
Cette chauve-souris du cachot éternel!
VII

Il vola dix mille ans. Pendant dix mille années,
Tendant son cou farouche et ses mains forcenées,
Il vola sans trouver un mont où se poser.
L’astre parfois semblait s’éteindre et s’éclipser,
Et l’horreur du tombeau faisait frissonner l’ange;
Puis une clarté pâle, obscure, vague, étrange,
Reparaissait, et l’ange alors disait: Allons.
Autour de lui planaient les oiseaux aquilons.
Il volait. L’infini sans cesse recommence.
Son vol dans cette mer faisait un effet immense.
La nuit regardait fuir ses horribles talons.

Comme un nuage sent tomber ses tourbillons,
Il sentait s’écrouler ses forces dans le gouffre.
L’hiver murmurait: tremble! et l’ombre disait: souffre!
Enfin il aperçut au loin un noir sommet
Que dans l’ombre un reflet formidable enflammait.
Satan, comme un nageur fait un effort suprême,
Tendit son aile onglée et chauve, et, spectre blême,
Haletant, brisé, las, et, de sueur fumant,
Il s’abattit au bord de l’âpre escarpement.

VIII

Le soleil était là qui mourait dans l’abîme.

L’astre, au fond du brouillard, sans vent qui le ranime
Se refroidissait, morne et lentement détruit.
On voyait sa rondeur sinistre dans la nuit;
Et l’on voyait décroître, en ce silence sombre,
Ses ulcères de feu sous une lèpre d’ombre.
Charbon d’un monde éteint! flambeau soufflé par Dieu!
Ses crevasses montraient encore un peu de feu
Comme si par les trous du crâne on voyait l’âme.
Au centre palpitait et rampait une flamme
Qui par instants léchait les bords extérieurs,
Et de chaque cratère, il sortait des lueurs
Qui frissonnaient ainsi que de flamboyants glaives,
Et s’évanouissaient sans bruit comme des rêves.
L’astre était presque noir. L’archange était si las
Qu’il n’avait plus de voix et plus de souffle, hélas!
Et l’astre agonisait sous ses regards farouches.
Il mourait, il luttait. Avec ses sombres bouches
Dans l’obscurité froide il lançait par moments
Des flots ardents, des blocs rougis, des monts fumants,
Des rocs tout écumants de sa clarté première:
Comme si ce volcan de vie et de lumière,
Englouti par la brume où tout s’évanouit,
N’eût point voulu mourir sans insulter la nuit
Et sans cracher sa lave à la face de l’ombre.

Autour de lui le temps et l’espace et le nombre
Et la forme et le bruit expiraient, en créant
L’unité formidable et noire du néant.
Le spectre Rien levait sa tête hors du gouffre.
Soudain, du cœur de l’astre, un âpre jet de soufre,
Pareil à la clameur du mourant éperdu,
Sortit, clair, éclatant, splendide, inattendu,
Et, découpant au loin mille formes funèbres,
Enorme, illumina, jusqu’au fond des ténèbres,
Les porches monstrueux de l’infini profond.
Les angles que la nuit et l’immensité font
Apparurent. Satan, égaré, sans haleine,
La prunelle éblouie et de ce rayon pleine,
Battit de l’aile, ouvrit les mains, puis tressaillit
Et cria: - Désespoir! le voilà qui pâlit! -

Et l’archange comprit, pareil au mât qui sombre,
Qu’il était le noyé du déluge de l’ombre;
Il reploya ses ailes aux ongles de granit,
Et se tordit les bras, et l’astre s’éteignit.
IX

Or, près des cieux, au bord du gouffre où rien ne change,
Une plume échappée à l’aile de l’archange
Etait restée, et pure et blanche, frissonnait.
L’ange au front de qui l’aube éblouissante naît,
La vit, la prit, et dit, l’oeil, sur le ciel sublime:
— Seigneur, faut-il qu’elle aille, elle aussi, dans l’abîme? -
Il leva la main, Lui par la vie absorbé,
Et dit: - Ne jetez pas ce qui n’est pas tombé.
*

Antres noirs du passé, porches de la durée
Sans dates, sans rayons, sombre et démesurée,
Cycles antérieurs à l’homme, chaos, cieux,
Monde terrible et plein d’êtres mystérieux,
O brume épouvantable où les préadamites

Apparaissent, debout dans l’ombre sans limites,
Qui pourrait vous sonder, gouffres, temps inconnus!
Le penseur qui, pareil aux pauvres, va pieds nus
Par respect pour Celui qu’on ne voit pas, le mage,
Fouille la profondeur et l’origine et l’âge,
Creuse et cherche au-delà des colosses, plus loin
Que les faits dont le ciel d’à présent est témoin,
Arrive en pâlissant aux choses soupçonnées,
Et trouve, en soulevant des ténèbres d’années,
Et des couches de jours, de mondes, de néants,
Les siècles monstres morts sous les siècles géants.
Et c’est ainsi que songe au fond des nuits le sage
Dont un reflet d’abîme éclaire le visage.

LA PREMIÈRE PAGE

I. L'ENTRÉE DANS L'OMBRE

I

Noë rêvait. Le ciel était plein de nuées.
On entendait au loin les chants et les huées
Des hommes malheureux qu'un souffle allait courber.
Un nuage muet soudain laissa tomber
Une goutte de pluie au front du patriarche.
Alors Noë, suivi des siens, entra dans l'arche,
Et Dieu pensif poussa du dehors le verrou.

Le mal avait filtré dans les hommes. Par où?
Par l'idole; par l'âpre ouverture que creuse
Un culte affreux dans l'âme humaine ténébreuse.
Ces temps noirs adoraient le spectre Isis-Lilith,
La fille du démon, que l'Homme eut dans son lit
Avant qu'Eve apparût sous les astres sans nombre,
Monstre et femme que fit Satan avec de l'ombre
Afin qu'Adam reçût le fiel avant le miel,
Et l'amour de l'enfer avant l'amour du ciel.
Eve était nue. Isis-Lilith était voilée.
Les corbeaux l'entouraient de leur fauve volée;
Les hommes la nommaient Sort, Fortune, Ananké;
Son temple était muré, son prêtre était masqué;
On l'abreuvait de sang dans le bois solitaire;
Elle avait des autels effrayants. Et la terre
Subissait cette abjecte et double obscurité:
En bas Idolâtrie, en haut Fatalité.

Aussi depuis longtemps tout était deuil et crainte.
Le juste - un seul restait - attendait la mort sainte
Comme un captif attend qu'on lève son écrou.

Le tigre en sa caverne et la taupe en son trou

Disaient depuis longtemps: l’homme commet des crimes.
Une noire vapeur montait aux cieux sublimes,
Fumée aux flots épais des sombres actions.
Depuis longtemps l’azur perdait ses purs rayons,
Et par instants semblait plein de hideuses toiles
Où l’araignée humaine avait pris les étoiles.

Car dans ces temps lointains, de ténèbres voilés,
Où la nature et l’homme étaient encore mêlés,
Les forfaits rayonnaient dans l’espace, en désastres,
Et les vices allaient éteindre au ciel les astres.
Le mal sortait de l’homme et montait jusqu’à Dieu.
Le char du crime avait du sang jusqu’à l’essieu;
Le meurtre, l’attentat, les luxures livides
Riaient, buvaient, chantaient, régnaient; les fils avides
Soufflaient sur les parents comme sur un flambeau;
Ce que la mort assise au seuil noir du tombeau
Voyait d’horreurs, faisait parler cette muette.
La nuit du cœur humain effrayait la chouette;
L’ignorance indignait l’âne; les guet-apens,
Les dols, les trahisons faisaient honte aux serpents;
Si bien que l’homme ayant rempli son âme immonde
D’abîmes, Dieu put dire au gouffre: Emplis le monde.

L’urne du gouffre alors se pencha. Le jour fuit;
Et tout ce qui vivait et marchait devint nuit.
Eve joignit les mains dans sa tombe profonde.
II

Tout avait disparu. L’onde montait sur l’onde.
Dieu lisait dans son livre et tout était détruit.
Dans le ciel par moments on entendait le bruit
Que font en se tournant les pages d’un registre.
L’abîme seul savait, dans sa brume sinistre,
Ce qu’étaient devenus l’homme, les voix, les monts.
Les cèdres se mêlaient sous l’onde aux goémons;
La vague fouillait l’antre où la bête se vautre.

Les oiseaux fatigués tombaient l’un après l’autre.
Sous cette mer roulant sur tous les horizons
On avait quelque temps distingué des maisons,
Des villes, des palais difformes, des fantômes
De temples dont les flots faisaient trembler les dômes;
Puis l’angle des frontons et la blancheur des fûts
S’étaient mêlés au fond de l’onde aux plis confus;
Tout s’était effacé dans l’horreur de l’eau sombre.
Le gouffre d’eau montait sous une voûte d’ombre;
Par moments, sous la grêle, au loin, on pouvait voir
Sur le blême horizon passer un coffre noir;
On eût dit qu’un cercueil flottait dans cette tombe.
Les tourbillons hurlants roulaient l’écume en trombe.
Des lueurs frissonnaient sur la rondeur des flots.
Ce n’était ni le jour, ni la nuit. Des sanglots,
Et l’ombre. L’orient ne faisait rien éclore.
Il semblait que l’abîme eût englouti l’aurore.
Dans les cieux, transformés en gouffres inouïs,
La lune et le soleil s’étaient évanouis;
L’affreuse immensité n’était plus qu’une bouche
Noire et soufflant la pluie avec un bruit farouche.
La nuée et le vent passaient en se tordant.
On eût dit qu’au milieu de ce gouffre grondant
On entendait les cris de l’horreur éternelle.

Soudain le bruit cessa. Le vent ploya son aile.
Sur le plus haut sommet où l’on pouvait monter
La vague énorme enfin venait de s’arrêter,
Car l’élément connaît son mystère et sa règle.
Le dernier flot avait noyé le dernier aigle.
On n’apercevait plus dans l’espace aplani
Que l’eau qui se taisait dans l’ombre, ayant fini.
Le silence emplissait la lugubre étendue.
La terre, sphère d’eau dans le ciel suspendue,
Sans cri, sans mouvement, sans voix, sans jour, sans bruit,
N’était plus qu’une larme immense dans la nuit.

III

Dans ce moment-là, tout étant dans l'insondable,
Un fantôme apparut sur l'onde formidable.
Ce géant était trombe, ouragan et torrent.
Des hydres se tordaient dans son oeil transparent;
Il semblait encor plein de la tempête enfuie;
Sa face d'eau tremblait sous ses cheveux de pluie;
Et voici ce que l'ombre effarée entendit:
Le géant se tourna vers le gouffre maudit,
Fit trois pas, et cria: - Chaos, reprends ce monde!

Une tête sortit de la brume profonde;
Aveugle, énorme, horrible, à l'autre bout des cieux;
Ayant deux gouffres noirs à la place des yeux;
Se dressa, pâle, et dit: - Je ne veux pas, déluge!
IV

LE DELUGE.
Reprends-le.

LE CHAOS.
Non.

LE DELUGE.
Il est rejeté.

LE CHAOS.
Par quel juge?

LE DELUGE.
Par Lui.

LE CHAOS.
Pourquoi?

LE DELUGE.
Le ver s'est glissé dans le fruit.

Le condamné d’en bas a soufflé dans la nuit
Le mal au cœur de l’homme à travers la nature;
L’homme, ouvert à l’erreur, au piège, à l’imposture,
Jusqu’au crime de vice en vice descendu,
Est devenu vipère, et sa bouche a mordu;
Le talon du Seigneur a senti la piqûre;
Et voilà ce qu’a fait, du fond de l’ombre obscure,
L’être qui vit sous terre au Dieu qui vit au ciel.
Ce monde était méchant et noir, l’être éternel
Le laisse tomber, monstre, et tu peux le reprendre.

LE CHAOS.
Pourquoi me l’a-t-il pris, si c’est pour me le rendre?

LE DELUGE.
J’ai roulé sur les monts le flot sombre et tonnant.
Tout est mort. J’ai fini; c’est à toi maintenant.
Reçois ce monde au fond de l’abîme où nous sommes.

LE CHAOS.
J’ai déjà les dragons, je ne veux pas des hommes.
V

L’éclair cria: - Silence aux pieds d’Adonaï! -
Et le chaos se tut dans le gouffre ébloui.
Et l’archange qui veille entre deux pilastres
Du seuil mystérieux plein d’yeux qui sont les astres,
Se courba sous l’azur sans oser faire un pas
Et dit au Dieu vivant: Le chaos n’en veut pas.
Et Dieu dit: Je consens que ce monde revive.

II. LA SORTIE DE L’OMBRE

I

L’eau baissa, comme un flux qui s’en va d’une rive,
Et les flots monstrueux, décroissant par degrés,
Descendirent du haut des monts démesurés.
Au-dessus de la terre une voix dit: Clémence!
Le crâne décharné de la noyée immense
Apparut, et l’horreur éclaira sous les cieux
Ce cadavre sans souffle et sans forme et sans yeux,
Les rochers, les vallons, et les forêts mouillées
Qui pendaient à son front de marbre, échevelées.
L’antre, où les noirs arrêts dans l’ombre étaient écrits,
Semblait la bouche ouverte encor pleine de cris;
Les monts sortaient de l’eau comme une épaule nue.
Comme l’onde qui bout dans l’airain diminue,
L’océan s’en allait, laissant des lacs amers.
Ces quelques flaques d’eau sont aujourd’hui nos mers.
Tout ce que le flot perd, la nature le gagne.
L’île s’élargissant se changeait en montagne;
Les archipels grandis devenaient continents.
De son dos monstrueux poussant leurs gonds tournants,
Le déluge fermait ses invisibles portes.
Les ténèbres dormaient sur les profondeurs mortes,
Et laissaient distinguer à peine l’ossement
Du monde, que les eaux découvraient lentement.
Soudain, réverbérée au vague front des cimes,
Une lueur de sang glissa sur les abîmes;
On vit à l’horizon lugubrement vermeil
Poindre une lune rouge, et c’était le soleil.

Pendant quarante jours et quarante nuits sombres,
La mer, laissant à nu d’effroyables décombres,
Recula, posant l’arche aux monts près d’Henocha,

Puis ce lion, rentré dans l’antre, se coucha.

II

Dieu permit au soleil de jeter l’étincelle.
Alors un bruit sortit de l’ombre universelle,
Le jour se leva, prit son flambeau qui blêmit,
Et vint; le vent, clairon de l’aube, se remit
A souffler; un frisson courut de plaine en plaine;
L’immensité frémit de sentir une haleine,
La montagne sourit, l’espace s’éveilla,
Et le brin d’herbe au bord des eaux, dit: Me voilà!

Mais tout était hagard, morne et sinistre encore,
Et c’est dans un tombeau que se levait l’aurore.

III

Derrière ces grands monts où plus tard l’aube a lui
Et que nous appelons les Alpes aujourd’hui,
Un marais descendait vers l’océan sans borne.
Dans ce désert vaste, âpre, impénétrable et morne,
Comme un ver qui se glisse à travers les roseaux,
Un fleuve, né d’hier, traînait ses pâles eaux,
Et découpait une île au pied d’un coteau sombre,
Sans savoir qu’en ces joncs, pleins de souffles sans nombre,
Germait, foetus géant, la plus grande des Tyrs.
Le coteau, qui plus tard fut le mont des martyrs,
Lugubre, se dressait sur l’île et sur le fleuve.
L’oiseau, l’être qui va, la bête qui s’abreuve,
Etaient absents; l’espace était vide et muet,
Et le vent dans les cieux lentement remuait
Les sombres profondeurs par les rayons trouées.
Dans la fange expiraient des hydres échouées.

C’est dans cet endroit-là, tout étant mort, pendant
Que les nuages gris croulaient sur l’occident
Comme de grands vaisseaux qui dans la nuit chavirent,
C’est là que les forêts et les collines virent

Soudain, tout se taisant dans l’univers détruit,
Un voile blanc marcher droit dans l’ombre et sans bruit;
Et l’ombre eut peur; et l’arbre, et la vague, et l’étoile,
Et les joncs, frissonnaient de voir passer ce voile.
Il allait, comme si quelqu’un était dessous.
Les êtres du passé, dans la vase dissous,
Semblaient, cherchant encore à tordre leurs vertèbres,
Rouvrir quand il passait leurs yeux pleins de ténèbres.
Le ciel qui s’entr’ouvrait referma son azur.

Tout à coup une voix sortit du voile obscur;
Le flot, qui sous le vent redevenait sonore,
Se tut, et quatre fois cette voix vers l’aurore,
Vers le sud, vers le triste occident, vers le nord,
Cria: Je suis Isis, l’âme du monde mort!

IV

Un long frisson émut le cadavre; la fange,
Pleine de monstres morts, fit une plainte étrange;
Et le spectre se mit à parler dans les vents:
Il a pu noyer l’homme et les êtres vivants,
Mais il n’a pu tuer l’airain, le bois, la pierre.
Or, nature qui viens de fermer la paupière,
Ecoute, écoutez-moi, flots, rochers, vents du ciel,
Car, ô témoins pensifs du deuil universel,
Il faut que vous sachiez ces sombres aventures:
Lorsque Caïn, l’aïeul des noires créatures,
Eut terrassé son frère, Abel au front serein,
Il le frappa d’abord avec un clou d’airain,
Puis avec un bâton, puis avec une pierre;
Puis il cacha ses trois complices sous la terre
Où ma main qui s’ouvrait dans l’ombre les a pris.
Je les ai. Sachez donc ceci, vents, flots, esprits,
Tant qu’il me restera dans les mains ces trois armes,
Je vaincrai Dieu; matin, tu verseras des larmes!
L’être qui vit sous terre et moi, nous lutterons.
Si Dieu veut sous les eaux engloutir les affronts,

Les haines, les forfaits, le meurtre, la démence,
Les fureurs, il faudra toujours qu’il recommence.
Oui, les déluges noirs, pareils aux chiens grondants
Qui veulent qu’on les lâche et qui montrent les dents,
Tant que le vieux Caïn vivra sous ces trois formes,
Pourront à l’horizon gonfler leurs flots énormes.

V

Le voile en s’écartant laissa voir dans deux mains
Un bâton, une pierre arrachée aux chemins,
Puis un long clou, semblable au verrou d’une porte;
Et si, dans ce tombeau de la nature morte,
Quelque oeil vivant eût pu rester dans l’ombre ouvert,
Sur le clou, sur le bois noueux et jadis vert,
Et sur l’affreux caillou pareil aux crânes vides,
Cet oeil eût distingué trois souillures livides;
Et le spectre montra ces trois taches au ciel,
Et cria: Cieux profonds! Voici du sang d’Abel!

Alors une lueur sortit, sinistre et sombre,
De ces trois noirs témoins des temps qui sont dans l’ombre;
L’être toujours voilé, blanc et marchant sans bruit,
Se pencha vers la terre et cria dans la nuit,
Et comme s’il parlait à quelqu’un sous l’abîme:
— O père! J’ai sauvé les trois germes du crime!

Sous la terre profonde un bruit sourd répondit.

Il reprit: - Clou d’airain qui servis au bandit,
Tu t’appelleras Glaive et tu seras la guerre;
Toi, bois hideux, ton nom sera Gibet; toi, pierre,
Vis, creuse-toi, grandis, monte sur l’horizon,
Et le pâle avenir te nommera prison.

LIVRE PREMIER - LE GLAIVE

STROPHE PREMIÈRE. NEMROD

I

De nouveaux jours brillaient; la terre était vivante;
Mais tout, comme autrefois, était plein d'épouvante.
L'ombre était sur Babel et l'horreur sur Endor.
On voyait le matin, quand l'aube au carquois d'or
Lance aux astres fuyants ses blanches javelines,
Des hommes monstrueux assis sur les collines;
On entendait parler de formidables voix,
Et les géants allaient et venaient dans les bois.
II

Nemrod, comme le chêne est plus haut que les ormes,
Etait le plus grand front parmi ces fronts énormes;
Il était fils de Chus, fils de Cham, qui vivait
En Judée et prenait le Sina pour chevet.
Son aïeul était Cham, le fils au rire infâme,
Dont Noë dans la nuit avait rejeté l'âme.
Cham, depuis lors, grondait comme un vase qui bout.
Cham assis dépassait les colosses debout,
Et debout il faisait prosterner les colosses.
Il avait deux lions d'Afrique pour molosses.
Atlas et le Liban lugubre au sommet noir
Tremblaient quand il jouait de la flûte le soir;
Parfois Cham, dans l'orage ouvrant ses mains fatales,
Tâchait de prendre au vol l'éclair aux angles pâles;
Arrachant la nuée, affreux, blême, ébloui,
Il bondissait de roche en roche, et devant lui,
Le tonnerre fuyait comme une sauterelle.
Si l'ouragan passait, Cham lui cherchait querelle.
Quand il fut vieux, Nemrod le laissa mourir seul.
Ayant ri comme fils, il pleura comme aïeul.
Donc Nemrod était fils de ces deux hommes sombres.

La terre était encore couverte de décombres
Quand était né, sous l’oeil fixe d’Adonaï,
Ce Nemrod qui portait tant de ruine en lui.

Etant jeune, et, chassant les lynx dans leur refuge,
Il avait, en fouillant les fanges du déluge,
Trouvé dans cette vase un clou d’airain, tordu,
Colossal, noir débris de l’univers perdu,
Et qu’on eût dit forgé par les géants du rêve;
Et de ce clou sinistre il avait fait son glaive.
Nemrod était profond comme l’eau Nagaïn;
Son arc avait été fait par Tubalcaïn
Et douze jougs de bœuf l’eussent pu tendre à peine;
Il entendait marcher la fourmi dans la plaine;
Chacune de ses mains, affreux poignets de fer,
Avait six doigts pareils à des gonds de l’enfer;
Ses cheveux se mêlaient aux nuages sublimes;
Son cor prodigieux qui sonnait sur les cimes
Etait fait d’une dent des antiques mammons,
Et ses flèches perçaient de part en part les monts.

III

Un jour, il vit un tigre et le saisit; la bête
Sauta, bondit, dressa son effroyable tête,
Et se mit à rugir dans les rocs effrayés
Comme la mer immense, et lui lécha les pieds;
Et quand il eut dompté le tigre, il dompta l’homme;
Et quand il eut pris l’homme, il prit Dan, Tyr, Sodome,
Suze, et tout l’univers du Caucase au delta,
Et quand il eut conquis le monde, il s’arrêta.

Alors il devint triste et dit: Que vais-je faire?

IV

Son glaive nu donnait le frisson à la terre.
Derrière ce glaive âpre, affreux, hideux, rouillé,
La Guerre, se dressant comme un pâtre éveillé,

Levait à l’horizon sa face de fantôme.
Et, tout tremblants, au fond des cités, sous le chaume,
Les hommes éperdus distinguaient dans la nuit,
Fronde en main, et soufflant dans des trompes épiques,
Cet effrayant berger du noir troupeau des piques.
Ce spectre était debout à droite de Nemrod.

Nemrod, foulant aux pieds la tiare et l’éphod,
Avait atteint, béni du scribe et de l’augure,
Le sommet sombre où l’homme en dieu se transfigure.
Il avait pour ministre un eunuque nommé
Zaïm, et vivait seul, dans sa tour enfermé.
L’eunuque lui montrait du doigt le mal à faire.
Et Nemrod regardait comme l’aigle en son aire;
Ses yeux fixes faisaient hurler le léopard.
Quand on disait son nom sur terre quelque part,
La momie ouvrait l’oeil dans la grande syringe,
Et les peuples velus à la face de singe
Qui vivent dans des trous à la surface du Nil
Tremblaient comme des chiens qui rentrent au chenil.
Les bêtes ne savaient s’il était homme ou bête.
Les hommes sous Nemrod comme sous la tempête
Se courbaient; il était l’effroi, la mort, l’affront;
Il avait le baiser de l’horreur sur le front;
Les prêtres lui disaient: O Roi, Dieu vous admire!
Ur lui brûlait l’encens, Tyr lui portait la myrrhe.
Autour du conquérant le jour était obscur.
Il en avait noirci des deux côtés l’azur;
A l’orient montait une sombre fumée
De cent villes brûlant dans la plaine enflammée;
Au couchant, plein de mort, d’ossements, de tombeaux,
S’abattait un essaim immense de corbeaux;
Et Nemrod contemplait, roi de l’horreur profonde,
Ces deux nuages noirs qu’il faisait sur le monde,
Et les montrait, disant: Nations, venez voir
Mon ombre en même temps sur l’aube et sur le soir.

STROPHE DEUXIÈME. CEUX QUI PARLAIENT DANS LE BOIS

I

Pendant qu'on l'adorait, l'eunuque son ministre
Chantait d'une voix douce au fond du bois sinistre:

Mourez, vivants! Croulez, murs! Séchez-vous, sillons!
Tombez, mouches du soir, peuples, vains tourbillons!
Blanchissez, ossements! Pleurs, coulez! Incendies
Etendez sur les monts vos pourpres agrandies!
Cités, brûlez au vent! Cadavres, pourrissez!
Jamais l'eunuque noir ne dira: C'est assez!
Car ce banni rugit sur l'éden plein de flamme;
Car ce veuf de l'amour est en deuil de son âme;
Car il ne sera pas le père au front joyeux;
Car il ne verra point une femme aux doux yeux
Emplir, assise au seuil de la maison morose,
La bouche d'un enfant du bout de son sein rose!
Je suis du paradis le témoin torturé.
O vivants, je me venge, et le maître exécré,
C'est moi qui l'ai lâché sur la terre où nous sommes;
J'ai vu Nemrod errant dans la forêt des hommes;
J'ai fait un tigre avec ce lion qui passait.
Je jette ma pensée, invisible lacet,
Et je sens tressaillir dans ce filet le monde.
L'arbre est vert; j'applaudis la hache qui l'émonde;
Des hommes dévorés j'écoute les abois;
Chasse, ô Nemrod! - C'est moi qui au glaive: bois!
Et j'attise à genoux la guerre, moi l'envie.
Les autres êtres sont les vases de la vie,
Moi je suis l'urne horrible et vide du néant.
Je verse l'ombre. Nain, j'habite le géant;

Toutes ses actions composent ma victoire;
Il est le bras farouche et je suis l’âme noire.
La guerre est. Désormais, dans mille ans, ou demain,
Toute guerre sera parmi le genre humain
Une flèche de l’arc de Nemrod échappée.
O Nemrod, premier roi du règne de l’épée,
Va! c’est fait. L’âme humaine est allumée, et rien
Ne l’éteindra. L’indou, l’osque, l’assyrien,
Ont mordu dans la chair comme Eve dans la pomme.
La guerre maintenant ne peut s’arrêter, l’homme
Ayant bu du sang d’homme et l’ayant trouvé bon.
L’embrasement sans fin naîtra du vil charbon.
Mort! l’homme va crouler sur l’homme en avalanche.
Mort! l’humanité noire et l’humanité blanche,
Les grands et les petits, les tours et les fossés
Vont se heurter ainsi que des flots insensés.
Temps futurs! lutte, horreur, tas sanglants, foules viles!
Chaînes autour des camps, chaînes autour des villes,
Marches nocturnes, pas ténébreux, voix dans l’air;
Les tentes sur les monts, les voiles sur la mer!
O vision! chevaux aux croupes pommelées!
O tempêtes de chars et d’escadron! mêlées!
Nuages d’hommes, chocs, panaches, éperons!
Bouches ivres de bruit soufflant dans des clairons!
Les casques d’or; les tours sonnant des funérailles;
Des murailles sans fin; d’où sortez-vous, murailles?
Des champs dorés changés en gueules de l’enfer;
Les hydres légions aux écailles de fer;
Des glaives et des yeux tourbillonnant en trombes;
La semence des os faisant lever des tombes;
L’orgueil aveugle aux chants joyeux, chaque troupeau
Promenant son linceul qu’il appelle drapeau;
Des vaisseaux se mordant avec des becs difformes,
Si bien que la mer glauque et l’onde aux plis énormes,
Les gouffres, les écueils, verront l’homme hideux,
Et que Léviathan dira: Nous sommes deux!
O tumulte profond des siècles dans la haine!

Abrutissement fauve et fou! terreur! géhenne!
Obscurité! furie à toute heure, en tout lieu!
Sinistre cliquetis de l’homme contre Dieu!
Combattants! combattants! sortez des nuits profondes.
Les uns viendront avec des haches et des frondes;
Des bêtes de la mort faites par l’homme horrible.
Des couleuvres de bronze au cou long et terrible
Souffleront et feront s’envoler à grand bruit
Le cheval, la fanfare et l’homme dans la nuit.
On meurt! on meurt! hiboux, corbeaux, noires volées!
Villes prises d’assaut! ô femmes violées!
O vengeance! - tuez! pourquoi? pour rien. Allez.
Ils tueront. Ils tueront, de massacres essoufflés,
Le riche en son palais, les pauvres dans les bouges,
Et se proposeront, portant des urnes rouges,
D’emplir avec du sang le sépulcre sans fond.
Tuez. Ce que Dieu fit, les hommes le défont.
Bien. O guerre! ô dragon qui dans l’ombre me lèches!
Le grand ciel est rayé d’un ouragan de flèches!
Bien. Guerre, roule-toi sur les peuples agneaux;
Noue à l’humanité tes lugubres anneaux;
Guerre! L’homme content veux que tu l’extermines.
Détruis! fais fourmiller les légions vermines.
Mange! Mange les camps, les murs, les chars mouvants,
Mange les tours de pierre et les ventres vivants;
Mange les dieux et mange aussi les rois; travaille;
Mange le laboureur, le soc, l’épi, la paille,
Le champ; mange l’abeille et mange l’alcyon;
Sois le ver monstrueux du fruit création.
Dieu! Pourquoi créas-tu la mort? l’homme invente;
L’eunuque bat des mains, ébloui d’épouvante.
Tuez, tuez! - Au nord, au couchant, au midi,
Partout, cercle effroyable et sans cesse agrandi,
La bataille repaît mes yeux visionnaires.
Oh! le sombre avenir roule plein de tonnerres!
Oh! dans l’air à jamais je vois la mort sifflant!
Oh! je vois à jamais saigner la guerre au flanc

De l’humanité triste, affreuse et criminelle;
Et le mutilé rit à la plaie éternelle!
Les races sécheront comme un torrent d’été;
La vierge sera veuve avant d’avoir été;
La mère pleurera d’avoir été féconde,
O joie! - En ce moment Nemrod est seul au monde;
La terre est encor faible et n’en peut porter qu’un;
Mais le ciel germera sous le ciel importun,
Mais vous pullulerez, ô glaive, ô cimeterre;
Quel spectacle quand tout se mordra sur la terre,
Et quand tous les Nemrods se mangeront entr’eux!
Parfois je vais, au bord d’un fleuve ténébreux,
Regarder, sur le sable ou dans les joncs d’une île,
Le vautour disputer sa proie au crocodile;
Chacun veut être seul, chacun veut être roi,
Chacun veut tout; et moi, je ris des cris d’effroi
Que poussent les roseaux de l’Euphrate ou du Tigre
Quand le lézard brigand lutte avec l’oiseau tigre.
Ainsi, peuples, de loin, je savoure vos deuils.
Vous avez les berceaux, vivants! J’ai les cercueils.
J’aspire le parfum des corps sans sépulture.
Ah! pourquoi m’a-t-on pris ma part de la nature!
Vous m’avez arraché du sein qui m’échauffait,
Quand j’étais tout petit, moi qui n’avais rien fait!
Vous avez tué l’homme et laissé l’enfant vivre!
Soyez maudits! Je hais. Ma propre horreur m’enivre.
Malheur à ce qui vit! Malheur à ce qui luit!
Je suis le mal, je suis le deuil, je suis la nuit.
Malheur! Pendant qu’au bois le loup étreint la louve,
Pendant que l’ours ému cherche l’ourse et la trouve,
Que la femme est à l’homme, et le nid à l’oiseau,
Que l’air féconde l’eau tremblante, le ruisseau
L’herbe, et que le ramier s’accouple à la colombe,
Moi l’eunuque, j’ai pris pour épouse une tombe!

II

Et dans le même bois et de l’autre côté

Un lépreux s’écriait:

Nature! immensité!
Etoiles! profondeurs! fleurs qu’en tremblant je nomme,
Ne maudissez pas que moi! soyez bonnes pour l’homme!
O Dieu, quand je suis né, vous ne regardiez pas.
La lèpre, rat hideux de la cave trépas,
Me ronge, et j’ai la chair toute déchiquetée.
Je suis la créature immonde et redoutée.
La terre ne m’a pris que pour me rejeter.
Les buissons ont pitié de me voir végéter;
Ce qu’ils ont en bourgeons sur moi croît en pustules.
Ma peau, quand je suis nu, fait peur aux tarentules.
De loin, au chevrier, au pâtre, au laboureur,
J’apparais, spectre, avec le masque de l’horreur.
La lèpre erre sur moi comme un lierre sur l’orme.
La sève qui, gonflant tout de son flot énorme,
Emplit de lionceaux les antres, les doux nids
De soupirs, de rameaux les arbres rajeunis,
La rose de parfums et l’espace de mondes,
Me fait manger vivant par des bêtes immondes!
Je suis le souffle peste et le toucher poison;
Je suis dans une plaie un esprit en prison,
Ame qui pleure au fond d’une fange qui saigne,
Je suis ce que le pied foule, écrase et dédaigne,
L’ordure, le rebut, le crapaud du chemin,
Le crachat de la vie au front du genre humain.
Je me tords, enviant la beauté des chenilles.
Mon reflet rend la source horrible; mes guenilles
Montrent ma chair, ma chair montre mes os; je suis
L’abjection du jour, l’infection des nuits.
Ainsi qu’un fruit pourri, la vie est dans ma bouche.
J’ai beau me retourner sur la cendre où je couche,
Je ressemble au remords qui ne peut pas dormir.
Quand je sors, ma maison a l’air de me vomir;
Quand je rentre, je sens me résister ma porte.
Seigneur! Seigneur! je suis importun au cloporte,

Le chien me fuit, l’oiseau craint mon front qui pâlit,
Et le porc monstrueux regarde mal mon lit.
Sous le ciel profond et bleu, mon âme est seule.
Ma bouche n’ose pas même baiser la gueule.
L’antre en me voyant gronde et devient soucieux.
Chaque jour rayonnant qui passe sous les cieux
Est un bourreau qui vient me traîner dans la claie.
Le tesson du bourbier, dont j’ai raclé ma plaie,
Va s’en plaindre à la fange et dit: il m’a sali.
Tout est votre pensée et je suis votre oubli,
Seigneur; le mal me tient sous sa griffe cruelle.
Des enfants en riant m’ont cassé mon écuelle;
Je n’ai plus que ma main lépreuse pour puiser
L’eau dans le creux du roc où l’air vient la verser,
De sorte qu’à présent je bois dans mon ulcère.
Seigneur! Seigneur! je suis dans le cachot misère.
La création voit ma face et dit: dehors!
La ville des vivants me repousse, et les morts
Ne veulent pas de moi, dégoût des catacombes.
Le ver des lèpres fait horreur au ver des tombes.
Dieu! je ne suis pas mort et ne suis pas vivant.
Je suis l’ombre qui souffre, et les hommes trouvant
Que pour l’être qui pleure et qui rampe et se traîne,
C’était trop peu du chancre, ont ajouté la haine.
Leur foule, ô Dieu, qui rit et qui chante, en passant
Me lapide saignant, expirant, innocent;
Ils vont marchant sur moi comme sur de la terre;
Je n’ai pas une plaie où ne tombe une pierre.
Eh bien! je suis content, Dieu, si je souffre seul!
Eh bien! je tire à moi tous les plis du linceul
Pour qu’il n’en flotte rien sur la tête des autres!
Eh bien! je ne sais pas quelles lois sont les vôtres,
Mais, dans mon anathème et mon accablement,
Je le dis, puisse, ô Dieu du profond firmament,
Du fond de ma nuit noire, en ce monde où nous sommes,
Mon malheur rayonner en bonheur sur les hommes!
Qu’ils vivent dans la joie et l’oubli, jamais las!

Ce qu’il vous doit, ô Dieu, l’homme l’ignore hélas!
Oh! que je sois celui qui pleure et qui rachète!
Laissez-moi vous payer leur rançon en cachette,
Dieu bon, par qui Noë connut le raisin mûr!
Femmes qui, si ma tête ose passer mon mur,
Si je tâche en passant de voir votre lumière,
Frémissantes, crachez sur ma pauvre chaumière,
Et qui vous enfuyez avec des cris d’effroi,
Que Dieu vous donne, hélas! L’amour qu’il m’ôte à moi!
Je vous bénis. Chantez dans cette vie amère.
Petit enfant qui tiens la robe de ta mère,
Et qui, si tu me vois songeant sous l’infini,
Dis: Mère, quel est donc ce monstre? sois béni.
Vous hommes, qui riez des pleurs de mes paupières,
O mes frères lointains qui me jetez des pierres,
Soyez bénis! bénis sur terre et dans les cieux!
Pères, dans vos enfants, et, fils, dans vos aïeux!
Car, puisque l’eau veut bien que ma lèvre la touche,
La bénédiction doit sortir de ma bouche,
Puisque mon bras peut prendre un fruit dans le chemin,
La bénédiction doit tomber de ma main,
Et, Ciel, puisque mon oeil voit ta face éternelle,
La bénédiction doit emplir ma prunelle!
Oui, j’ai le droit d’aimer! J’ai le droit de pencher
Mon cœur sur l’homme, l’arbre et l’onde et le rocher;
J’ai le droit de sacrer la terre vénérable
Etant le plus abject et le plus misérable!
Je dois bénir le plus étant le plus maudit.
Donc, terre, monts sacrés dont Adam descendit,
Fleuves, je vous bénis, et je vous bénis, plaines;
Vous tous, êtres! oiseaux, moutons aux blondes laines,
Fourmis des bois, pasteurs dans vos tentes de crin,
Toi, mer, qui resplendis comme un liquide airain,
Bêtes qui ressemblez à des branches horribles,
Fleurs dont les parfums sont des rayons invisibles,
Ciel qui nous dis tout bas dans l’ombre: je suis près;
Nocturnes profondeurs des muettes forêts,

Sources qui répandez vos murmures dans l'herbe,
Joncs frémissants qu'émeut le souffle, né du verbe,
Bœuf qui mugis, lion qui vas, chevreau qui pais,
Soyez dans la lumière et soyez dans la paix!
Moi je dois me cacher, l'homme n'est pas mon hôte;
J'ai la nuit. Pourquoi suis-je horrible? C'est ma faute.
Pardonnez-moi! pardon, ô femme! pardon, fleur!
Pardon, jour! - entrouvrant ses lèvres de douleur,
Mon ulcère, ô vivants, tâche de vous sourire.
Oui, vous avez bien fait, frères, de me proscrire
Puisque je souffrais tant que je vous faisais peur.
C'est de l'amour qui sort quand vous broyez mon cœur.
Le lépreux y consent, vivez, homme et nature!
Dans le ciel radieux je jette ma torture,
Ma nuit, ma soif, ma fièvre et mes os chassieux,
Et le pus de ma plaie et les pleurs de mes yeux,
Je les sème au sillon des splendeurs infinies,
Et sortez de mes maux, biens, vertus, harmonies!
Répands-toi sur la vie et la création,
Sur l'homme et sur l'enfant, lèpre! et deviens rayon!
Sur mes frères que l'ombre aveugle de ses voiles,
Pustules, ouvrez-vous et semez les étoiles!
O Dieu! dont ici-bas tout n'est que la vapeur,
O Dieu, rayonnement qu'adore ma stupeur,
O Dieu, qui portez l'astre et tenez le tonnerre,
Clarté que l'aigle montre aux aiglons dans son aire,
Ame! abîme! écoutez la prière du ver!
Faites devant l'été décroître l'âpre hiver,
La triste nuit devant l'aurore, les misères
Devant l'homme, les maux devant le bien, les serres
Devant le doux oiseau, les loups devant le daim!
Ramenez par la main le couple dans Eden.
Réconciliez l'être, ô père, avec les choses.
Arrachez doucement les épines des roses.
Faites que la brebis admire le lion.
Supprimez le combat, le choc, le talion;
Soufflez sur les fureurs et les horreurs humaines,

Et faites une fleur avec toutes ces haines!
Versez sur tous leurs fronts la sereine beauté.
O songeur de l’obscure et calme éternité,
Etre mystérieux dont les sphères débordent,
Dieu! faites se baiser les bouches qui se mordent;
Emplissez de bonheur les rameaux verts, mettez
La femme dans la grâce et l’homme à ses côtés;
Faites mûrir le fruit; faites lâcher la proie;
Faites des berceaux blancs sortir un bruit de joie,
Croître le lys, fleurir l’arbre, rire le jour,
Et sous l’immense azur chanter l’immense amour!

Et les astres voyaient dans les splendeurs profondes,
Pendant que, bénissant l’homme, les plaines blondes,
Les grands fleuves, les bois, les monts silencieux,
S’ouvrait et se dressait lentement vers les cieux,
La main du lépreux, noire, affreuse, triste et frêle,
La main de Jéhovah se lever derrière elle.

STROPHE TROISIÈME. SELON ORPHÉE ET SELON MELCHISÉDECH

I

Dans son désœuvrement Nemrod, d’ombre chargé,
Ravagea de nouveau le monde ravagé,
Recommença, brûla deux fois les mêmes villes,
Rougit la vaste mer du flamboiement des îles,
Brûla Ségor, brûla Gergesus, brûla Tyr.
Puis, ayant tout détruit, il se mit à bâtir.
Il construisit Achad, il créa Babylone,
Il bâtit Gour dans l’ombre où le vent tourbillonne,
Resen dans les palmiers, Chalanné sur les monts;
Lieux qu’on ne nommait pas comme nous les nommons.
Il fit, pour abriter Pytiunte et Dioscure,
Un mur énorme au fond de la Tauride obscure;
Il habilla d’acier ses soldats triomphants;
Il fit trembler des tours au dos des éléphants;
Il troua le Caucase ébranlé sur son axe;
Il versa dans la mer le Cyrus et l’Araxe;
Mais rien n’emplit son âme; il disait: J’ai vécu.
Que faire? et, chaque jour, plus las et plus vaincu,
Morne, il sentait monter dans son cœur solitaire
L’immense ennui d’avoir conquis toute la terre.
II

L’an deux mille, Nemrod, passant les flots émus,
Vint jusqu’à Dodanim que nous nommons l’Hémus.
Là, dans un noir désert dont le lion est l’hôte,
Il entendit quelqu’un qui parlait à voix haute.
C’était Orphée. Orphée au front calme, écouté
Par la sombre nature émue à sa clarté,
Homme à qui se frottait le dos des bêtes fauves,

Racontait aux forêts, aux vents, aux vieux monts chauves,
La bataille où les dieux vainquirent les typhons.
Voici ce que disait Orphée aux bois profonds:

«Les géants n'avaient plus de montagnes. Leur fuite
«Commençait, et l'Europe était presque détruite.
«Ils avaient entassé Pinde, Ossa, Pélion,
«Rhodope, et ces monts noirs d'où fuyait le lion,
«Nus, renversés, fumaient d'éclairs et de brûlures,
«Et leurs torrents pendaient comme des chevelures.
«Et les géant s couraient vers les mers où fut Tyr.
«Ils voyaient les dieux vaincre, et Neptune engloutir
«Oromédon sous Cos, Polybe sous Nisyre.
«Thryx embrasé fondait comme un flambeau de cire.
«Porphyrion, levant ses mains vides, criait
«A la terre, rôdant au loin, spectre inquiet:
«Mais apporte-nous donc une montagne, mère!
«Crès, par la foudre étreint, lui jetait l'onde amère.
«Andès, frère d'Astrée et père de Thallo,
«S'en allait à grands pas au plus profond de l'eau,
«Et jusqu'à la ceinture avait la mer Egée;
«Zeus Jupiter vint, la main d'éclairs chargée,
«Et lui cria: Sois pierre, ô monstre! Et le géant
«Vit Zeus, devint roche et s'arrêta béant.
«Et Titan dit: Merci! tu nous donnes des armes!
«Et, pendant que tremblait la terre, aïeule en larmes,
«Il courut, et, prenant Andès par le milieu,
«Il jeta le géant à la tête du dieu.»

Et Nemrod rêveur dit: Titan est mon ancêtre.

Il revint vers les monts où l'on voit l'aube naître;
Il rentra dans Assur que la splendeur revêt.
Son glaive, d'où la guerre était sortie, avait
Une tache inconnue, empreinte indélébile,
Que Nemrod par moments contemplait immobile.

Un soir, dans un lieu sombre où marchait ce bandit,
Une voix qui parlait dans un rocher, lui dit:
— Passe, Dieu reste. - Et lui, cria: J’ai pour royaume
Le monde; toi, qu’es-tu? - La voix reprit: - Fantôme,
Je suis Melchisédech, je vivrai dans mille ans. -
Nemrod dit: - Qu’as-tu vu depuis que dans ses flancs
Ce roc t’enferme? - Et l’être enfoui sous la pierre
Dit: « - Je suis âme, et l’âme est un oeil sans paupière.
«Le monde a commencé par être horrible. Avant
«Que le front se dressât plein de l’esprit vivant,
«Avant que, dominant l’animal et la plante,
«La pensée habitât la prunelle parlante,
«Et qu’Adam, par la main tenant Eve, apparût,
«L’ébauche fourmillait dans la nature en rut,
«Le poulpe aux bras touffus, la torpille étoilée,
«D’immenses vers volants, dont l’aile était onglée,
«De hauts mammons velus, nés dans les noirs limons,
«Troublaient l’onde, ou levaient leurs trompes sur les monts.
«Sous l’enchevêtrement des forêts inondées
«Glissaient des mille-pieds, long de cinq cent coudées,
«Et de grands vibrions, des volvoces géants
«Se tordaient à travers les glauques océans.
«L’être était effrayant. La vie était difforme.
«Partout rampait l’impur, l’affreux, l’obscur, l’énorme.
«La vermine habitait le globe chevelu.
«Et l’homme était absent; Dieu n’ayant pas voulu
«Donner ce noir spectacle à voir à l’âme humaine.
«Satan, dans ce lugubre et féroce domaine,
«Passait, comme un chasseur qui souffle dans son cor;
«Mais, avant ce temps-là, c’était plus sombre encor.
«Tout l’univers n’était qu’une morne fumée.
«Ainsi que des oiseaux dans une main fermée,
«L’horreur tenait captifs le germe et l’élément.
«Un tout, qui n’était rien, vivait confusément.
«Des apparitions flottaient sur l’insondable.
«Au fond de cette brume étrange et formidable,
«Comme si, quoique rien ne fût encor puni,

«Le gouffre eût essayé d’engloutir l’infini,
«On voyait, aux lueur des visions funèbres,
«S’ouvrir et se fermer la gueule des ténèbres.
«Partout apparaissait, à l’oeil épouvanté,
«La face du néant, faite d’obscurité.
«A chaque instant, le fond redevenait la cîme;
«Et, comme une nuée au-dessus d’un abîme,
«Dans cette ombre où rampaient les larves des fléaux,
«Le monstre Nuit planait sur la bête Chaos.
«C’était ainsi quand Dieu se levant, dit à l’ombre:
«Je suis. Ce mot créa les étoiles sans nombre,
«Et Satan dit à Dieu: Tu ne seras pas seul.”

Nemrod pensif cria: - Satan est mon aïeul.

III

Il resta trente jours au fond des solitudes
Rêvant par les rocs aux sombres attitudes;
Quand il revint son oeil brillait comme un flambeau.
Son eunuque Zaïm, plus noir que le tombeau,
Se prosternant, lui dit: - Roi, vous avez la terre.
Vous êtes roi d’Assur, dont Tyr est tributaire.
Il a suffi qu’Assur vînt pour qu’il triomphât
Aux sources de Cadès qu’on nomme aussi Misphat.
Dieu règne moins que vous. Votre face est sacrée.
Et vous faites couler, sur la terre qu’il crée,
Des rivières de sang près de ses fleuves d’eau.
L’homme porte Nemrod, et l’âne porte son fardeau.
A qui sont les palmiers d’Edom, l’herbe fleurie
D’Hébron, les trois cents tours qui gardent Samarie?
A vous. A qui les fronts, les yeux et les genoux
Des vieillards, des enfants et des femmes? A vous.
A qui l’Ibère brun qui parle avec emphase?
A vous. Sarapanis, citadelle de Phase?
A vous. Vous avez pris, sous les dattiers lointains,
Sa ville à Phetrusim, père des philistins.
Le Nil est votre chien, Thèbe est votre captive.

Trois chars passent de front sur les murs de Ninive;
Et Ninive est à vous. Gour veut vous obéir.
Sidon, les horréens dans les monts de Seïr,
Ophir, les bijoutiers qui sculptent les ivoires
Dans Cariathaïm, la ville aux portes noires,
Tout est à vous; Sichem, Chanaan, Hazerod.
Il ne reste plus rien.

- Que le ciel, dit Nemrod.

STROPHE QUATRIÈME. L’EXODE DE NEMROD

I

Il s’en retourna seul au désert; et cet homme,
Ce chasseur, c’est ainsi que la terre le nomme,
Avait un projet sombre; et les vagues démons
Se le montraient du doigt. Il prit sur de grands monts
Que battaient la nuée et l’éclair et la grêle,
Quatre aigles qui passaient dans l’air, et sous leur aile
Il mit tout ce qu’il put de la foudre et des vents.
Puis il écartela, hurlant, mordant, vivants,
Entre ses poings de fer, quatre lions lybiques,
Et suspendit leurs chairs au bout de quatre piques.
Puis le géant rentra dans Suze aux larges tours,
Et songea trente jours; au bout des trente jours,
Nemrod prit dans sa main les aigles, sur sa nuque
Chargea les lions morts, et, suivi de l’eunuque,
S’en alla vers le mont Ararat, grand témoin.
Il monta vers la cime où les peuples de loin
Voyaient trembler au vent le squelette de l’arche.
Il atteignit le faîte en deux heures de marche.
L’arche en voyant Nemrod trembla. Le dur chasseur
Prit ces débris, verdis dans leur lourde épaisseur
Par la terre mouillée, antique marécage,
Et de ces madriers construisit une cage,
Chevillée en airain, carrée, à quatre pans,
Et sur les trous du bois mit des peaux de serpents;
Et cette cage, vaste et sinistre tanière,
Pour toute porte avait deux trappes à charnière,
L’une dans le plafond, l’autre dans le plancher.
Et l’eunuque tremblait et n’osait approcher.
Nemrod debout foulait le pic inabordable.

Il allait et venait, charpentier formidable;
La terre l'écoutait remuer sur le mont;
Le bruit de son marteau, troublant l'éther profond,
Faisait au loin lever la tête aux monts Carpathes;
Accroupis, devant Thèbe allongeant leurs deux pattes,
De leur oeil fixe où l'ombre a l'air de rayonner,
Les sphynx le regardaient, cherchant à deviner.
Et la mer Caspienne en bas rongeait la grève.

Au bout d'un long sapin il attacha son glaive,
Puis pesa dans sa main ce vaste javelot,
Et dit: c'est bien. Le mont qu'avait couvert le flot
Et qui connaissait Dieu, frémit sous sa pensée.
II

Par une corde au sol la cage était fixée.
Il mit aux quatre coins les quatre aigles béants.
Il leur noua la serre avec ses doigts géants
Et les monts entendaient les durs oiseaux se plaindre.
Puis il lia, si haut qu'ils n'y pouvaient atteindre,
Au-dessus de leurs fronts inondés de rayons
Les piques où pendaient la viande des lions;
Nemrod dans ce char, noir comme l'antique Erèbe,
Mit un siège pareil à son trône de Thèbe,
Et cent pains de maïs et cent outres de vin.
Zaïm n'essayait pas même un murmure vain;
Et dans la cage, auprès de sa chaise thébaine,
Le roi fit accroupir l'eunuque au front d'ébène;
Et les cèdres disaient: Que va-t-il se passer?
Sur la cage inquiète et prête à traverser
Des horizons nouveaux et d'étranges tropiques,
Les quatre aigles criaient au pied des quatre piques.

Alors, une tiare au front comme Mithra,
Nemrod, son arc au dos, sa flèche au poing, entra
Dans la cage, et le roc tressaillit sur sa base;
Et lui, sans prendre garde aux frissons du Caucase,

Vieux mont qui songe à Dieu sous les soirs étoilés,
Coupa la corde, et dit aux quatre aigles: Allez.

Et d’un bond les oiseaux effrayants s’envolèrent.

III

Et dans l’immensité que les astres éclairent,
La cage s’éleva, liée à leurs pieds noirs.
Alors, tandis qu’en bas les lacs, vastes miroirs,
Les palmiers verts, les champs rayés par les cultures,
Horeb et Sinaï, sombres architectures,
Et les bois et les tours rampaient, et qu’emportés
Dans l’air, battant de l’aile au milieu des clartés,
Les quatre aigles cherchaient du bec la chair sanglante,
Il sortit presque hors de la cage volante,
Farouche, et regarda les montagnes d’Assur
Qui, s’enfonçant avec leurs forêts dans l’azur,
Semblaient tomber, dans l’ombre au loin diminuées,
Et s’écria, penché sur le gouffre:

- O nuées,
Nemrod, le conquérant de la terre, s’en va!
Je t’avertis là-haut, Jéhovah! Jéhovah!
C’est moi. C’est moi qui passe, ô monts aux cimes blanches,
Bois, regardez monter l’homme à qui sont vos branches,
Mer, regarde monter l’homme à qui sont tes flots,
Morts, regardez monter l’homme à qui sont vos os!
Terre, herbes que les vents courbent sous leurs haleines,
O déserts, noirs vallons, lacs, rochers, grandes plaines,
Levez vos fronts sans nombre et vos millions d’yeux,
Je m’en vais conquérir le ciel mystérieux!

IV

Et l’esquif monstrueux se ruait dans l’espace.
Les noirs oiseaux volaient, ouvrant leur bec rapace.
Les invisibles yeux qui sont dans l’ombre épars
Et dans le vague azur s’ouvrent de toutes parts,

Stupéfaits, regardaient la sinistre figure
De ces brigands ailés à l’immense envergure,
Et le char vision, tout baigné de vapeur,
Montait; les quatre vents n’osaient souffler de peur
De voir se hérisser le poitrail des quatre aigles.

Plus sans frein, sans repos, sans relâche et sans règles,
Les aigles s’élançaient vers les lambeaux hideux,
Plus le but reculant montait au-dessus d’eux,
Et, criant comme un bœuf qui réclame l’étable,
Les grands oiseaux, traînant la cage redoutable,
Le poursuivaient toujours sans l’atteindre jamais.
Et pendant qu’ils montaient, gouffres noirs, clairs sommets,
Tout s’effarait; l’étrusque, et l’osque, et le pélasge
Disaient: - Qu’est-ce que c’est que ce sombre attelage?
Est-ce le char où sont les orages grondants?
Est-ce un tombeau qui monte avec l’âme dedans? -
Pharan, Nachor, Sephar, solitudes maudites,
Les colosses gardiens des cryptes troglodytes,
Les faucons de la mer, les mouettes, les plongeons,
L’homme du bord des eaux dans sa hutte de joncs,
Chalanné, devant qui Thèbes semblait petite,
Gomorrhe, fiancée au noir lac asphaltite,
Sardes, Ninive, Tyr, maintenant sombre amas,
Hoba, ville qu’on voit à gauche de Damas,
Edom sous le figuier, Saba sous le lentisque,
Avaient peur; Ur tremblait; et les joueurs de disque
S’interrompaient, levant la tête et regardant;
Les chameaux, dont le cou dort sur le sable ardent,
Ouvraient l’oeil; le lézard se dressait sous le lierre,
Et la ruche disait: vois! à la fourmilière.
Le nuage hésitait et rentrait son éclair;
La cigogne lâchait la couleuvre dans l’air;
Et la machine ailée en l’azur solitaire
Fuyait, et pour la voir vint de dessous la terre
Un oiseau qu’aujourd’hui nous nommons le condor.
Et la mer d’Ionie, aux grandes îles d’or,

Ce gouffre bleu d’où sort l’odeur des violettes,
Frissonnait; dans les champs de meurtre, les squelettes
Se parlaient; le sépulcre au fronton nubien,
Le chêne qui salue et dit à Dieu: c’est bien!
Et l’antre où les lions songent près des prophètes,
Tremblaient de voir courir cette ombre sur leurs têtes
Et regardaient passer cet étrange astre noir.
Et Babel s’étonnait. Calme comme le soir
Nemrod rêvait au fond de la cage fermée.
Et les puissants oiseaux, la prunelle enflammée,
Montaient, montaient sans cesse, et volant, furieux,
Vers la chair, le faisaient envoler vers les cieux.

Symbole de nos sens lorsqu’allant vers la femme,
Eperdus, dans l’amour ils précipitent l’âme.

Mais l’amour n’était pas au cœur du dur chasseur.

Isis montrait ce char à Cybèle sa sœur.
Dans les temples profonds de Crète et de Tyrrhène
Les dieux olympiens à la face sereine
Ecoutaient l’affreux vol des quatre alérions.
Même aujourd’hui, l’arabe, à l’heure où nous prions,
Cherche s’il ne va pas voir encore dans l’espace
La constellation des quatre aigles qui passe;
Et, dans l’Afrique ardente où meurt le doux gazon,
Morne terre qui voit toujours à l’horizon
Nemrod, l’homme effrayant, debout, spectre de gloire,
Le pâtre, si son oeil trouve une tâche noire
Sur le sable où vivaient Sidon et Sarepta,
Devient pensif et dit: C’est l’ombre qu’il jeta.

V

Et les aigles montaient.

  Leurs ailes éperdues
Faisaient, troublant au loin les calmes étendues,

Un vaste tremblement dans l’immobilité;
Autour du char vibrait l’éther illimité,
Mer que Dieu jusque-là seul avait remuée.

Comme ils allaient franchir la dernière nuée,
Les monts noirs qui gisaient sur terre, soucieux,
Virent le premier aigle escaladant les cieux
Comme s’il ne devait jamais en redescendre,
Se tourner vers l’aurore et crier: Alexandre!
Le deuxième cria du côté du midi:
Annibal! Le troisième, à l’oeil fixe et hardi,
Sur le rouge occident jeta ce cri sonore:
César! Le dernier, vaste et plus terrible encore,
Fit dans le sombre azur signe au septentrion
Ouvrit son bec de flamme et dit: Napoléon!

STROPHE CINQUIÈME. LA TRAPPE D’EN BAS ET LA TRAPPE D’EN HAUT

I

L’infini se laissait pousser comme une porte;
Et tout le premier jour se passa de la sorte;
Et les aigles montaient.
   Or Nemrod, sans le voir,
Sentit, au souffle obscur qui se répand le soir,
Que la nuit folle allait couvrir sa pâle crypte;
Les mains sur les genoux comme l’Hermès d’Egypte,
Il dit au noir: - Hibou que ma droite soutient,
Vois comment comme est la terre et ce qu’elle devient. -
L’eunuque ouvrit la trappe en bas, et dit: - La terre,
Tachée et jaune ainsi qu’une peau de panthère,
Emplit l’immensité; dans l’espace changeant
Les fleuves sont épars comme des fils d’argent;
Notre ombre noire court sur les collines vertes;
De vos ennemis morts les plaines sont couvertes
Comme d’épis fauchés au temps de la moisson;;
Les villes sont en flamme autour de l’horizon;
O Roi, vous êtes grand. Malheur à qui vous brave!
— Approchons-nous du ciel, dit Nemrod? - et l’esclave
Ouvrit la trappe haute et dit: - Le ciel est bleu.
II

Et les aigles montaient.

    L’espace sans milieu
Ne leur résistait pas et cédait à leurs ailes;
L’ombre, où les soleils sont comme des étincelles,
Laissait passer ce char plein d’un sombre projet.
Lorsque l’eunuque avait faim ou soif, il mangeait;

Et Nemrod regardait, muet, cette chair noire
Prendre un pain et manger, percer une outre et boire;
Le chasseur infernal qui se croyait divin
Songeait, et, dédaignant le maïs et le vin,
Il buvait et mangeait, cet homme de désastres,
L'orgueil d'être traîné par les aigles aux astres.
Sans dire un mot, sans faire un geste, il attendit,
Rêveur une semaine entière, puis il dit:
— Vois comment est la terre. - Et l'eunuque difforme
Dit: - La terre apparaît comme une sphère énorme
Et pâle, et les vapeurs, à travers leurs réseaux,
Laissent voir par moments les plaines et les eaux. -
Nemrod dit: - Et le ciel? - Zaïm reprit: - Roi sombre,
Le ciel est bleu. -

III

Le vent soufflait en bas dans l'ombre.
Et les aigles montaient.

Et Nemrod attendit
Un mois; montant toujours; puis il cria: - Maudit,
Regarde en bas et vois ce que devient la terre. -
Zaïm dit: - Roi, sous qui la foudre doit se taire,
La terre est un point noir et semble un grain de mil. -
Et Nemrod fut joyeux. - Nous approchons, dit-il.
Vois! regarde le ciel maintenant. Il doit être
Plus près. - Zaïm leva la trappe et dit: - O maître,
Le ciel est bleu. -

IV

Le vent triste soufflait en bas;
Et les aigles montaient.

L'archer des noirs combats
Attendit, sans qu'un souffle échappât à son âme,
Un an, montant toujours, puis: - Chien que hait la femme,
Cria-t-il! Vois! La terre a-t-elle encor décru?

L’eunuque répondit: - La terre a disparu?
Roi, l’on ne voit plus rien dans la profondeur sombre.
Nemrod dit: - Que m’importe une terre qui sombre!
Vois comment est le ciel. Approchons-nous un peu?
Regarde. - Et Zaïm dit: - O roi, le ciel est bleu.

V

Le vent soufflait en bas.

Tournant son cou rapide,
Un aigle cria alors: - J’ai faim, homme stupide! -
Et Nemrod leur donna l’eunuque à dévorer.

Les aigles montaient.

Rien ne venait murmurer
Autour de la machine sa course effrénée.
Nemrod, montant toujours, attendit une année,
Dans l’ombre, et le géant, durant ce noir chemin,
Compta les douze mois sur les doigts de sa main;
Quand l’an fut révolu, le sinistre satrape
Resté seul, n’ayant plus l’eunuque, ouvrit la trappe
Que le soleil dora d’une lueur de feu;
Et regarda le ciel, et le ciel était bleu.

VI

Alors, son arc en main, tranquille l’homme énorme
Sortit hors de la cage et sur la plate-forme
Se dressa tout debout et cria: Me voilà.
Il ne regarda rien en bas; il contempla,
Pensif, les bras croisés, le ciel toujours le même;
Puis, calme et sans qu’un pli tremblât sur son front blême,
Il ajusta la flèche à son arc redouté.
Les aigles frissonnants regardaient de côté.
Nemrod éleva l’arc au dessus de sa tête,
Le câble lâché fit le bruit d’une tempête,
Et, comme un éclair meurt quand on ferme les yeux,

L’effrayant javelot disparut dans les cieux.

Et la terre entendit un long coup de tonnerre.
VII

Un mois après, la nuit, un pâtre centenaire
Qui rêvait dans la plaine où Caïn prit Abel,
Champ hideux d’où l’on voit le front noir de Babel,
Vit tout à coup tomber des cieux, dans l’ombre étrange,
Quelqu’un de monstrueux qu’il prit pour un archange;
C’était Nemrod.
VIII

   Couché sur le dos, mort, puni,
Le noir chasseur tournait encor vers l’infini
Sa tête aux yeux profonds que rien n’avait courbée.
Auprès de lui gisait sa flèche retombée.
La pointe, qui s’était enfoncée au ciel bleu,
Etait teinte de sang. Avait-il blessé Dieu?

STROPHE SIXIÈME. LES MAGES ATTENTIFS

Et Nemrod disparu n’emporta pas la Guerre.
Elle resta, parlant plus haut que le tonnerre;
Son regard au sillon faisait rentrer l’épi;
Et ce spectre, mille ans, sur le monde accroupi,
Lugubre, et comme un chien mâche un os, rongeant l’homme,
Couva l’œuf monstrueux d’où sortit l’aigle Rome.
Et pendant ce temps-là, comme parfois aux yeux
Une vapeur trahit un feu mystérieux,
Il sortait par endroits de la terre où nous sommes
D’affreux brouillards vivants qui devenaient des hommes,
Puis des dieux, qu’on nommait Teutatès, Mars, Baal,
Et qui semblaient avoir en eux l’âme du mal.
L’horreur, le sang, le deuil couvraient la race humaine;
Et les mages, que Dieu dans le désert amène,
Collaient l’oreille au sable, et, de terreur ployés,
Frémissants, sous la terre, au-dessous de leurs pieds,
Ils entendaient quelqu’un dans les nuits éternelles
Qui volait, et frappait la voûte de ses ailes.

Hors de la terre II

La Plume de Satan

La plume, seul débris qui restât des deux ailes
De l’archange englouti dans les nuits éternelles,
Etait toujours au bord du gouffre ténébreux.
Les morts laissent ainsi quelquefois derrière eux
Quelque chose d’eux-mêmes au seuil de la nuit triste,
Sorte de lueur vague et sombre, qui persiste.

Cette plume avait-elle une âme? qui le sait?
Elle avait un aspect étrange; elle gisait
Et rayonnait; c’était de la clarté tombée.

Les anges la venaient voir à la dérobée.
Elle leur rappelait le grand Porte-Flambeau;
Ils l’admiraient, pensant à cet être si beau
Plus hideux maintenant que l’hydre et le crotale;
Ils songeaient à Satan dont la blancheur fatale,
D’abord ravissement, puis terreur du ciel bleu,
Fut monstrueuse au point de s’égaler à Dieu.
Cette plume faisait revivre l’envergure
De l’Ange, colossale et hautaine figure;
Elle couvrait d’éclairs splendides le rocher;
Parfois les séraphins, effarés d’approcher
De ces bas-fonds où l’âme en dragon se transforme,
Reculaient, aveuglés par sa lumière énorme;
Une flamme semblait flotter dans son duvet;
On sentait, à la voir frissonner, qu’elle avait
Fait partie autrefois d’une aile révoltée;
Le jour, la nuit, la foi tendre, l’audace athée,
La curiosité des gouffres, les essors
Démesurés, bravant les hasards et les sorts,
L’onde et l’air, la sagesse auguste, la démence,
Palpitaient vaguement dans cette plume immense;
Mais dans son ineffable et sourd frémissement,

Au souffle de l’abîme, au vent du firmament,
On sentait plus d’amour encor que de tempête.

Et sans cesse, tandis que sur l’éternel faîte
Celui qui songe à tous pensait dans sa bonté,
La plume du plus grand des anges, rejeté
Hors de la conscience et hors de l’harmonie,
Frissonnait, près du puits de la chute infinie,
Entre l’abîme plein de noirceur et les cieux.
Tout à coup un rayon de l’oeil prodigieux
Qui fit le monde avec du jour, tomba sur elle.
Sous ce rayon, lueur douce et surnaturelle,
La plume tressaillit, brilla, vibra, grandit,
Prit une forme et fut vivante, et l’on eût dit
Un éblouissement qui devient une femme.
Avec le glissement mystérieux d’une âme,
Elle se souleva debout, et, se dressant,
Eclaira l’infini d’un sourire innocent.
Et les anges tremblants d’amour la regardèrent.
Les chérubins jumeaux qui l’un à l’autre adhèrent,
Les groupes constellés du matin et du soir,
Les Vertus, les Esprits, se penchèrent pour voir
Cette sœur de l’enfer et du paradis naître.
Jamais le ciel sacré n’avait contemplé d’être
Plus sublime au milieu des souffles et des voix.
En la voyant si fière et si pure à la fois,
La pensée hésitait entre l’aigle et la vierge;
Sa face, défiant le gouffre qui submerge,
Mêlant l’embrasement et le rayonnement,
Flamboyait, et c’était , sous un sourcil charmant,
Le regard de la foudre avec l’oeil de l’aurore.

L’archange du soleil, qu’un feu céleste dore,
Dit: - De quel nom faut-il nommer cet ange, ô Dieu?

Alors, dans l’absolu que l’Etre a pour milieu,
On entendit sortir des profondeurs du Verbe

Ce mot qui, sur le front du jeune ange superbe
Encor vague et flottant dans la vaste clarté,
Fit tout à coup éclore un astre: - Liberté.

LIVRE DEUXIÈME - LE GIBET

I. LA JUDÉE

I. LA TERRE SOUS LE TROISIÈME CÉSAR

En ce temps-là, le monde était dans la terreur;
Caïphe était grand-prêtre et Tibère empereur;
Hérode roi des juifs gouvernait sous Pilate;
Rome était la nuée où le tonnerre éclate;
Jérusalem était l’âne sous le bâton.
Des proconsuls assis le poing sous le menton,
Vêtus de pourpre, ayant le roi pour satellite,
Remplaçaient au-dessus du peuple israélite
Les pharaons à l’oeil fixe et mystérieux.
Quelques rares autels fumaient sur les hauts lieux,
Mais c’étaient les autels des guèbres, que tolère
Rome ayant trop de dieux pour croire avec colère.

Temps fatals! César roi, tout le reste sujet.
La conquête romaine, immense, submergeait
Les peuples qu’elle avait saisis l’un après l’autre;
Et cette vague épaisse où le soldat se vautre
Grossissait, et, de proche en proche, envahissait
La terre, où les songeurs disaient: Qu’est-ce que c’est?
Cette inondation de Rome était lugubre;
L’empire était partout comme une ombre insalubre;
Il croissait comme un fleuve épars sous des forêts,
Et changeait lentement l’univers en marais.
Les docteurs méditaient sur ce second déluge.
Ayant leurs livres saints pour cime et pour refuge,
Les prêtres, rattachés aux textes, au-dessus
Des hommes débordés dans un gouffre aperçus,
Laissaient couler sous eux ces vastes avalanches,
Pareils à des serpents enroulés dans des branches.

Un peuple commandait, le monde subissait.

Les jaguars, les lions, les ours pris au lacet,
Le tigre redouté même de sa femelle,
Rugissaient sous les pieds de Rome pêle-mêle
Avec les nations dans le même filet.
L’esclavage, à voix basse et dans la nuit, parlait.
L’unique grandeur d’âme était l’insouciance.
La force avait le droit. Qu’était la conscience?
Une reptilité sous un écrasement.
On regardait l’autel en face et le serment,
Et l’on se parjurait, et l’hymne et la huée
Riaient, et l’âme humaine était diminuée.
L’honnête et le néfaste et le mal et le bien
S’effaçaient dans les cœurs; l’homme ne voyait rien
Qu’une noirceur croissante au-dessus de sa tête;
Une lueur de torche illuminait le faîte
De l’univers sur qui marchaient les conquérants;
Les uns étaient petits, les autres étaient grands,
Personne n’était pur, saint, vénérable et juste;
De même que d’Octave avait pu naître Auguste,
De la fange partout sortait l’autorité.
Le destin avait l’air d’un abîme irrité;
L’ombre se résolvait en haine autour de l’âme.
L’or sentait bon. Le sage était celui qui blâme
La vertu, le devoir, la foi, le dévouement;
Le plus voisin du vrai c’était celui qui ment;
La mort régnait avec les licteurs pour ministres;
Le genre humain pendait en deux haillons sinistres,
Comme si Dieu l’avait déchiré de ses mains;
Les hommes d’un côté, de l’autre les romains.

II. HÉRODE ET CAÏPHE

Sous l’ongle dédaigneux de Rome fatiguée
Vivait la royauté des Juifs qu’avait léguée
L’Hérode Ascalonite à l’Hérode Antipas.
Cet idiot mêlait le meurtre à ses repas,
Et regardait danser Hérodiade nue.
Il avait redoré l’aigle que dans la nue
Son père avait sculptée au fronton du saint lieu,
Car, pour flatter César, ces rois insultaient Dieu;
Il avait fait murer dans le royal repaire
La chambre où, sur un lit de pourpre et d’or, son père,
Surnommé Grand, avait été mangé des vers;
Des paons rôdaient parmi ses jardins toujours verts;
Au fond brillait un lac dit le Bain du Tétrarque;
On y voyait errer les pêcheurs dont la barque
Vogue à coups d’avirons lents et bien maniés.
Il aimait les rhéteurs, l’un par l’autre niés,
Les philosophes grecs, les histrions, les mimes,
Et son ennui traînait le poids sombre des crimes.
Il avait, de l’argent d’un péage imposé
Aux caravanes d’Ur, d’Ophir et de Jessé,
Fait faire à son palais une enceinte de brique;
Car, dès les temps anciens, les marchands de l’Afrique
Venaient des profondeurs du désert calciné;
Ils apportaient des dents d’éléphant, du séné,
De l’alcali, des peaux de buffle, de la gomme,
Et de la pourpre verte aux proconsuls de Rome.

Caïphe, qui des lois dirigeait le timon,
Avait été nommé grand-prêtre après Simon;
Ce n’était point une âme inclinée aux mystères;
Caïphe n’était pas un de ces solitaires
Qui, pour sonder le sens glissant et ténébreux
Des prophètes luttant confusément entre eux,

Gardent la nuit leur lampe à côté de leurs couches,
Et songent, éperdus, sur ces livres farouches
Où l’on entend le choc des glaives de l’esprit.
Trop petit pour la tâche auguste qu’entreprit
Celui qu’on nomme Aaron, c’est-à-dire montagne,
Tortueux, il avait la fraude pour compagne;
Les yeux d’Hérode était sincères près des siens;
Son miel était poison; les chefs pharisiens,
Banaïas, intendant d’Epher, Jean l’économe,
Maccès, à qui Pilate avait donné pour nome
Tout le pays d’Horeb et tout le Nephath d’or,
Venaient lui parler bas dans le saint corridor;
De la couleuvre froide il avait la paresse;
Il était ce qui rampe et ce qui se redresse;
Il était chaste avec les femmes, redoutant
Le démon qu’à travers leur parole on entend,
Mais ces chastetés-là font brûler les Sodomes;
Comme prêtre, il était de cette espèce d’hommes
Qui, si le sénat vote aux pauvres quelque argent,
Disent: « non pas! l’état est lui-même indigent!”
Et qui trouvent utile et juste qu’on obère
Le trésor pour bâtir quelque temple à Tibère.
Caïphe eût aux renards indiqué des sentiers;
C’était un homme sombre, et pourtant volontiers
Il riait à travers l’ombre de sa pensée;
Mais on se sentait pris d’une sueur glacée
Devant cette gaieté, couvercle d’un cercueil.

Rosmophim de Joppé, prêtre au profond coup d’oeil,
Et docteur, l’assistait dans les choses civiles.

III. CELUI QUI EST VENU

Cependant il était question dans les villes
De quelqu’un d’étonnant, d’un homme radieux
Que les anges suivaient de leurs millions d’yeux;
Cet homme, qu’entourait la rumeur grossissante,
Semblait un dieu faisant sur terre une descente;
On eût dit un pasteur rassemblant ses troupeaux;
Les publicains, assis au bureau des impôts,
Se levaient s’il passait, quittant tout pour le suivre;
Cet homme, paraissant hors de ce monde vivre,
Tandis qu’autour de lui la foule remuait,
Avait des visions dont il restait muet;
Il parlait aux cités, fuyait les solitudes,
Et laissait sa clarté dans l’oeil des multitudes;
Les paysans le soir, de sa lueur troublés,
Le regardaient de loin marcher le long des blés,
Et sa main qui s’ouvrait et devenait immense,
Semblait jeter aux vents de l’ombre une semence.
On racontait sa vie, et qu’il avait été
Par une vierge au fond d’une étable enfanté
Sous une claire étoile et dans la nuit sereine;
L’âne et le bœuf, pensifs, l’ignorance et la peine,
Etaient à sa naissance, et sous le firmament
Se penchaient, ayant l’air d’espérer vaguement;
On contait qu’il avait une raison profonde,
Qu’il était sérieux comme celui qui fonde,
Qu’il montrait l’âme aux sens, le but aux paresseux,
Et qu’il blâmait les grands, les prêtres, et tous ceux
Qui marchent entourés d’hommes armés de piques.
Il avait, disait-on, guéri des hydropiques;
Des impotents, cloués vingt ans sous leurs rideaux,
En le quittant, portaient leur grabat sur leur dos;
Son oeil fixe appelait hors du tombeau les vierges;
Les aveugles, les sourds, - ô destin, tu submerges

Ceux-ci dans le silence et ceux-là dans la nuit! -
Le voyaient, l’entendaient; et dans son vil réduit
Il touchait le lépreux, isolé sous des claies;
Ses doigts tenaient les clefs invisibles des plaies,
Et les fermaient; les cœurs vivaient en le suivant;
Il marchait sur l’eau sombre et menaçait le vent;
Il avait arraché sept monstres d’une femme;
Le malade incurable et le pêcheur infâme
L’imploraient, et leurs mains tremblantes s’élevaient;
Il sortait des vertus de lui qui les sauvaient;
Un homme demeurait dans les sépulcres; fauve,
Il mordait, comme un loup qui dans les bois se sauve;
Parfois on l’attachait, mais il brisait ses fers
Et fuyait, le démon le poussant aux déserts;
Ce maître, le baisant, lui dit: Paix à toi, frère!
L’homme, en qui cent damnés semblaient rugir et braire,
Cria: Gloire! et, soudain, parlant avec bon sens,
Sourit, ce qui remplit de crainte les passants.
Ce prophète honorait les femmes économes;
Il avait à Gessé ressuscité deux hommes
Tués par un bandit appelé Barabbas;
Il osait, pour guérir, violer les sabbats,
Rendait la vie aux nerfs d’une main desséchée;
Et cet homme égalait David et Mardochée.
Un jour ce redresseur, que le peuple louait,
Vit des vendeurs au seuil du temple, et prit un fouet;
Pareils aux rats hideux que les aigles déterrent,
Tous ces marchands, essaims immondes, redoutèrent
Son visage empourpré des célestes rougeurs;
Sévère, il renversa les tables des changeurs
Et l’escabeau de ceux qui vendaient des colombes.
Son geste surhumain ouvrait les catacombes.
L’arbre qu’il regardait changeait ses fleurs en fruits.
Un jour que quelques juifs profonds et très instruits
Lui disaient: « - Dans le ciel que le pied divin foule,
Quel sera le plus grand?” cet homme dans la foule
Prit un petit enfant qu’il mit au milieu d’eux.

Calme, il forçait l’essaim invisible et hideux
Des noirs esprits du mal, rois des ténébreux mondes,
A se précipiter dans les bêtes immondes.
Et ce mage était grand plus qu’Isaïe, et plus
Que tous ces noirs vieillards épars dans les reflux
De la vertigineuse et sombre prophétie;
Et l’homme du désert, Jean, près de ce Messie,
N’était rien qu’un roseau secoué par le vent.
Il n’était pas docteur, mais il était savant;
Il conversait avec les faces inconnues
Qu’un homme endormi voit en rêve dans les nues;
Des lumières venaient lui parler sur les monts;
Il lavait les péchés ainsi que des limons,
Et délivrait l’esprit de la fange charnelle;
Satan fuyait devant l’éclair de sa prunelle;
Ses miracles étaient l’expulsion du mal;
Il calmait l’ouragan, haranguait l’animal,
Et parfois on voyait naître à ses pieds des roses;
Et sa mère en son cœur gardait toutes ces choses.
Des morts blêmes, depuis quatre jours inhumés,
Se dressaient à sa voix; et pour les affamés,
Les pains multipliés sortaient de ses mains pures.

Voilà ce que contait la foule; et les murmures,
Les cris du peuple enfant qui réclame un appui,
Environnaient cet homme; on l’adorait; et lui
Etait doux.

Tous les mots qui tombaient de sa bouche
Etaient comme une main céleste qui vous touche.
Il disait: - « Les derniers sont les premiers. - La fin,
«C’est le commencement. - Ne fais pas au prochain
«Ce que tu ne veux pas qu’on te fasse à toi-même.
«- On récolte le deuil quand c’est la mort qu’on sème.
«- Celui qui se repent est grand deux fois. - L’enfant
«Touche à Dieu. - Par le bien du mal on se défend.
«- Que le puits soit profond, mais que l’eau reste claire.”

Il disait: « - Regardez les choses sans colère;
«Car, si l’oeil est mauvais, le corps est ténébreux.
«- L’aube est pour les Gentils comme pour les Hébreux.
«- Mangez le fruit des bois, buvez l’eau de la source;
«- N’ayez pas de souliers, pas de sac, pas de bourse,
«Entrez dans les maisons et dites: Paix à tous!
«- Nul n’est exempt du pli sublime des genoux;
«Donc, qui que vous soyez, priez. Courbez vos têtes.
«- Dieu, présent à la nuit, n’est pas absent des bêtes.
«Dieu vit dans les lions comme dans Daniel.
«- Errer étant humain, faillir est véniel.
«Absolvez le pécheur en condamnant la faute.
«- On ajoute à l’esprit ce qu’à la chair on ôte.”
Il tenait compte en tout des faits accidentels.
Dans le champ du supplice il disait des mots tels
Que nul n’osait toucher à la première pierre;
Il haïssait la haine, il combattait la guerre;
Il disait: sois mon frère! à l’esclave qu’on vend;
Et, tranquille, il passait comme un pardon vivant;
Il blanchissait le siècle autour de lui, de sorte
Que les justes, dont l’âme encor n’était pas morte,
Dans ces temps sans pitié, sans pudeur, sans amour,
Voyaient en s’éveillant luire deux points du jour,
L’aurore dans le ciel et sur terre cet homme.
Cet être était trop pur pour être vu par Rome.
Pourtant parmi les juifs, dans leur temple obscurci,
Chez leur roi lâche et triste, on en prenait souci;
Et Caïphe y songeait dans sa chaire d’ivoire;
Et, sans savoir encor ce qu’il en devait croire,
Hérode était allé jusqu’à dire: - Il paraît
Qu’il existe un certain Jésus de Nazareth.

Quelques hommes, de ceux qui ne savent pas lire,
De pauvres pâtres, pris d’on ne sait quel délire
Et du ravissement de l’entendre parler,
Le suivaient, l’aimaient tant qu’il les faisait trembler,
Et le montraient au peuple en disant: - C’est le maître.

L’un d’eux, vieillard, semblait près de cet homme naître;
Et le plus jeune, enfant, avait l’air près de lui
D’un sombre aïeul pensif, gravement ébloui.
Humbles, ils lui tendaient leurs cœurs comme des urnes.
Et ces hommes, pareils à des lampes nocturnes
Adorant un soleil dans une vision,
Etaient devant ce maître en contemplation,
Et l’entouraient, ainsi qu’une auréole d’âmes.

IV. LES TREIZE PORTES DE JÉRUSALEM

Dans les vieux temps, l’archange aux quatre ailes de flamme,
Stellial dit un jour au noir Zorobabel
Quand ce maçon, porteur d’une échelle du ciel,
Eut entouré Sion de murailles très fortes:
— Pourquoi donc à la ville as-tu fait treize portes?
Et Zorobabel dit: - Ninive aux larges tours
Eut autant de portails que l’année a de jours,
Pour que jamais le temps, quand du gouffre il arrive,
Quel qu’il fût, ne restât en dehors de Ninive.
— Eh bien, dit Stellial, l’archange couvert d’yeux,
Le zodiaque ayant douze signes aux cieux,
Douze portes, c’était assez, mage imbécile,
Pour que chacun des mois pût entrer dans la ville.
— Ange, j’ai fait, reprit le maçon magistrat,
Treize portes afin que l’avenir entrât.
Chaque année on verra par les douze premières
Passer les douze mois, portant douze lumières,
Purs, sacrés, et menant par la main la saison;
Par la treizième doit passer la trahison.

V. LA JUDÉE

D’innombrables hameaux répandent leurs fumées
D’Arphac à Borcéos dans les six Idumées;
La Judée est dorée et verte sous l’azur;
Elle a des bois des monts, des lacs; son air est pur;
Le vent du sud le trouble et le vent d’est le calme;
Rome estime ses vins; comme l’huile de palme,
L’huile d’olive abonde à flots sous son pressoir;
L’ombre du Sinaï la couvre vers le soir.
La Judée est la terre où de temps en temps passe
Une lueur de Dieu qui se perd dans l’espace.

L’Egypte est, au couchant, cette plaine des blés
Où, dans les noirs tombeaux, dont les puits sont comblés,
Un miroir d’or massif pend au cou des momies
Pour refléter l’essaim des spectres, les lamies,
Les stryges, et la face errante des démons;
Au midi, les chacals, les rats, les ichneumons,
Remplissent le désert; au nord, la mer murmure.

La moisson en Judée est deux fois par an mûre;
Le moindre champ y donne un boisseau de maïs.

Ce qui va se passer dans ce fatal pays
Fait un nuage obscur sur l’avenir, et trouble
Abraham enterré dans la caverne double
Dont on voit l’âpre brèche et le seuil délabré
Au champ d’Ephron, voisin des chênes de Mambré.

VI. LES PAROLES DU DOCTEUR DE LA LOI

Deux prêtres, dont la robe est en toile d'ortie,
Veillent, l'un à l'entrée et l'autre à la sortie
Du Temple que jadis Salomon fit bâtir
Par Oliab avec le bois du roi de Tyr.
Sévère, à quelques pas des deux prêtres qui semblent
Faire taire la ville où mille bruits sourds tremblent,
Un docteur de la loi parle au peuple devant
Ce seuil terrible où luit l'arche du Dieu vivant.
Il est seul sur sa chaise; et, qu'on entre ou qu'on sorte,
Il ne s'arrête point, et continue; il porte
Le taled blanc où pend le zizith à cinq nœuds;
Le dogme sombre emplit son oeil vertigineux;
Des croyants sont auprès du docteur; les uns lisent
Dans des livres pendant qu'il parle; d'autres gisent
En travers de la porte, et l'on marche dessus;
Un plat brille à ses pieds où les dons sont reçus;
La foule abonde autour du prêtre, et l'environne;
Vieillard qu'une lueur de science couronne,
Calme et grave, il déploie au-dessus de son front
Ce que les siècles, l'un après l'autre, liront,
Le texte saint, écrit sur le rouleau mystique;
Il enseigne la foi, le rite, la pratique,
Au peuple remuant les lèvres par moment;
Et chaque fois qu'il lèvre un doigt au firmament,
Tous, éperdus devant l'insondable prière,
Ensemble et frémissants, font trois pas en arrière.

Il dit:

 - Voici la loi. Fais silence, Israël!
Peuple, crois au Dieu vrai, distinct, un, personnel,
Seul, unique, incréé, voyant ce que fait l'homme.
Dieu, c'est le créancier qui veut toute la somme,

C’est le jaloux qui veut tout le cœur, c’est la mer
Dont le flot, repoussé par la terre, est amer;
Dieu, s’il est repoussé par les hommes, se venge.
Observez le saint jour, Peuple, ou redoutez l’ange
Qui plane sur l’impie et d’un souffle l’abat;
Le plus pauvre a sa lampe, et, le jour du sabbat,
Peuple, il doit l’allumer, dût-il mendier l’huile;
Nos pères, ce jour-là, purifiaient la ville;
Ces hommes qui vivaient à l’ombre du palmier,
Etaient saints, et toujours nommaient Dieu le premier;
Ce respect les faisait vivre six cents années;
Le sabbat est le jour où les ombres damnées
Peuvent se retourner dans le lit de l’enfer;
Sepher tua Phinée, Aod tua Sepher,
Ces meurtres ne sont rien près du dogme qu’on brise
Et du sabbat qu’on met sous ses pieds, et Moïse
Dans sa tombe, et Jacob, et Job, ont moins d’effroi
Du sang d’un homme, ô juifs, que du sang de la loi;
Le fiel est plus amer que le coing n’est acide,
Or l’impiété, juifs, c’est le fiel; l’homicide,
Pâle, et suivi d’enfants crachant sur ses talons,
Marche à travers la ville avec ses cheveux longs,
La main droite liée au cou par une chaîne;
Mais l’impie a son spectre en croix dans la géhenne;
L’homme pèse sur l’un, sur l’autre pèse Dieu.
Les jours saints, taisez-vous, ne faites pas de feu;
Le salut dans le ciel est sur terre l’exemple;
Dieu vient à la prière; il entre dans le temple
Sitôt la porte ouverte et pourvu qu’on soit dix;
Donc, pratiquez la loi. Tremblez d’être maudits.
L’anathème entre au corps du maudit, qu’il traverse.
Theglath fut roi d’Egypte, Azer fut roi de Perse;
Gad les maudit; dès lors l’enfer fut dans ces rois
Qui voyaient se mêler une flamme à leur voix.
Chaque texte est un doigt montrant ce qu’il faut suivre;
Si vous ne faites pas ce que prescrit le livre,
Vous serez malheureux comme celui qui voit

Dans un songe tomber les poutres de son toit.
Trois tribunaux nous sont légués par les ancêtres;
Aaron pour enseigner a délégué Cent prêtres,
Onze pour gouverner, et Dix-Neuf pour juger;
Le sanhédrin les nomme et seul peut les changer.
Que la femme soit chaste et muette, et que l’homme
Ait dans un roseau creux tout le deutéronome.
Sinon, nous maudirons vos seuils et votre sang.
L’anathème qu’un saint jette au mal en passant
Est une si fatale et si noire rosée
Qu’un chien ayant été maudit par Elizée,
L’anathème rongea les oreilles du chien.
Femmes, l’homme est le roi; tremblez! et songez bien
A la sombre Lilith, femme née avant Eve;
Adam la renvoya dans l’ombre et dans le rêve;
Lilith répudiée est un spectre de nuit.
Lilith était l’orgueil, la querelle et le bruit;
Satan, voulant saisir l’homme, l’avait créée;
Elle roule à jamais dans la noire nuée;
Elle s’appelle Isis dans l’Inde où Satan luit,
Et l’encens de l’Egypte horrible la poursuit.
La femme file, trait la vache, bat le beurre,
Tourne le sablier quand vient la fin de l’heure,
Gronde l’esclave aux champs et l’enfant dans son jeu,
Veille et travaille; et l’homme est pensif devant Dieu.
Au temple, en récitant le verset ordinaire,
Etendez vos deux mains devant le luminaire;
L’ange du jour assiste à vos repas; mais fuit,
Sitôt que vous riez, devant l’ange de nuit;
Etudiez la loi sans cesse, et qu’on la lise
Dans le texte que fit Esdras d’après Moïse.
Pour faire un Livre, ô juifs, n’employez pas de lin;
Cousez avec des nerfs une peau de vélin,
Ecrivez-y, tremblants, le verbe inénarrable,
Et roulez le vélin sur deux bâtons d’érable.
Ayez des habits longs conformes à vos rangs;
Craignez le drap tissu de deux fils différents;

Jéhovah n’est pas deux. Fuyez les hommes ivres;
Ne faites point sécher des herbes dans vos livres;
L’herbe imprime un démon aux plis du parchemin;
Ne regardez jamais les lignes de la main;
Dans le texte sacré respectez les consonnes,
Au moment de la mort appelez dix personnes;
Confessez vos péchés, jougs par la chair subis,
Et que ceux qui sont là déchirent leurs habits;
La mort, même du juste, est une obscure fête.
Mettez aux morts un sac de terre sous la tête;
Tournez sept fois autour de la fosse en priant.
Redoutez l’occident et craignez l’orient,
Ce sont les deux endroits de Dieu. Le ciel le nomme.
Redoutez-le. La mort, c’est l’ombre. Il n’est pour l’homme
Rien d’éternel après cette vie; il ne peut
Rien retenir de lui quand Dieu brise ce nœud;
Ce qu’on appelle âme est un souffle, céleste
Chez les bons, infernal chez les méchants, qui reste
Un moment au-dessus du corps dans le trépas,
Puis pâlit, puis s’éteint, car Dieu seul ne meurt pas.
Pourtant le châtiment peut saisir ce fantôme
Et le fouetter longtemps sous le ténébreux dôme,
Et lui heurter le front aux poutres de la nuit.
Rien de ce qu’on a fait n’est perdu, ni détruit;
Tout compte. Justes poids et balances exactes.
Là-haut, le doigt toujours tourné vers tous vos actes,
La prière Bathkol, la Fille de la Voix,
Se tient près d’Elohim et lui dit: Seigneur, vois.
Lisez la Pentateuque à cinq; l’Exode à quatre.
Sachez punir, sachez venger, sachez combattre;
Haïssez les mauvais! Haïssez, haïssez
Ceux qui doutent, d’audace et d’orgueil hérissés,
L’incrédule, le lâche et le pusillanime,
Ceux pour qui le saint livre ouvert est un abîme,
Ceux qui tremblent devant les célestes degrés,
Et sur le bord de Dieu s’arrêtent effarés!
S’ils sont nombreux, s’ils ont de l’or dans leurs mains viles,

S’ils sont un peuple, ayant des moissons et des villes,
Des femmes, des vieillards, des enfants nouveau-nés,
Des vierges, des aïeux, des fils, exterminez!
Moïse commença par creuser une fosse,
O juifs, pour y coucher la religion fausse;
Il y jeta des tas de peuples révoltés;
Il remplit ce tonneau d’homme et de cités,
Et l’on distingue encor dans cette ombre profonde
D’énormes ossements dont chacun fut un monde;
Num ravage Amalec, Joram dévaste Ammon;
Partout où l’on voyait la lueur du démon,
Partout où l’on prenait qualque faux dieu pour règle,
Salomon accourait avec le bruit d’un aigle,
O Peuple, et c’est du sang que la terre a sué
Derrière Anathias, Saül et Josué;
Jéhovah bénissait ces grands impitoyables;
Sobres, purs, ils menaient au combat, dans les sables,
Dans la nuit, sans jamais songer au lendemain,
Des soldats qui buvaient dans le creux de leur main;
Le Tabernacle a crû dans le sang; Dieu consacre
Par un carnage Aser, Lévi par un massacre,
Et l’antique Lévite est saint pour ce seul trait
Qu’il marchait en tuant tous ceux qu’il rencontrait;
Samson ne laissait pas d’un mur pierre sur pierre;
Macchabée était plein d’une telle lumière
Que les peuples disaient: son armure est en or;
Et Lysias, Seron, Gorgias, Nicanor,
Fuyaient devant cet homme aux cris de guerre étranges,
Que suivaient, à cheval sur les vents, cinq archanges!
Ces héros ont toujours Jéhovah pour effort;
Leur fer ouvre un sillon; Peuple, ils font de la mort
Sortir la vie, et, grâce à leurs lances vermeilles,
Les gueules des lions sont des ruches d’abeilles.
Ayez autour de vous la peur, en vous l’effroi;
C’est le dogme. David fut un sublime roi;
Il se plaisait au rire, aux chants, aux grappes mûres,
Un jour il se pencha sur les choses obscures,

Et, pâle, il reconnut que le commencement
De la sagesse était un profond tremblement.
O Peuple, Sabaoth lugubrement médite
Sur la race d'Adam presque toujours maudite,
Sur le sang de Jacob presque toujours puni,
Et Dieu, c'est le sourcil froncé de l'infini.
Vivez les yeux fixés sur la terreur du gouffre!
Guerre à l'impie! Il faut qu'on punisse, ou qu'on souffre,
Frappez pour vous sauver. Songez au châtiment;
Songez à l'océan d'angoisse et de tourment;
Songez à cet enfer: l'immensité des larmes.
Les ennemis de Dieu pourront avoir des armes,
Ils pourront être fiers et puissants, ils pourront
Pousser des chars, avoir des casques sur le front;
Qu'est-ce que cela fait, si leur âme est de l'ombre?
Les festins, les palais que la splendeur encombre,
Le bonheur, les plaisirs, le triomphe effronté,
Sont des endroits d'oubli, mais non de sûreté.
Soit. Oubliez. Qu'importe au souvenir suprême?
La vengeance attend, calme, et la colère sème... -
Vous rirez, vous aurez des songes dans les yeux,
Tout à coup, au plus noir du ciel mystérieux
Que l'homme frémissant verra par échappées,
On entendra le bruit que font deux mains frappées,
L'archange porte-glaive, immense, apparaîtra;
Alors, sentant sous eux crouler Bel et Mithra,
Les méchants trembleront comme un vaisseau qui sombre,
Et tous reconnaîtront l'inutilité sombre
Des boucliers d'airain et des casques de cuir;
Ils souhaiteront d'être assez petits pour fuir
Par le bas d'une porte ou par les trous d'un crible,
La grande épée ayant un flamboiement terrible!
Mais Dieu dira: Trop tard! Donc, ô vivants, tremblez.
Dieu court dans les maudits comme un feu dans les blés.
Ecrasez d'épouvante et de haine l'impie.
Faites lever votre âme aux vices accroupie,
Et récitez, avant que l'archange soit là,

Le sharrith le matin, le soir le néhila.
Vengez Dieu par le glaive et vivez dans la crainte.
Tout ce que je vous dis, Peuple, c’est la loi sainte,
La loi d’en haut, connue aux seuls fils de Lévi.

Un homme en ce moment, de douze hommes suivi,
Blond, jeune, et regardé fixement par le prêtre,
L’interrompit et dit avec l’accent d’un maître:

— Toute la loi d’en haut est dans ce mot: aimer.

— Peuple, cria le prêtre, il vient de blasphémer.

VII. CAÏPHE EN CONTEMPLATION

Les deux guetteurs du temple ont aperçu la lune;
Le mois commence.

Aux champs la terre est encor brune;
Il pleut sur le mont Glon et sur le mont Sion;
Mais l'hiver va finir. On fait l'ablution
Du temple, dont on brosse et dérouille les chaînes,
Les gonds et les verrous, pour les fêtes prochaines.

Seul près du grand autel derrière le rideau,
Pendant que, se courbant sur des vases pleins d'eau,
Et répandant partout le nard et l'hyacinthe,
Les lévites portiers lavent la triple enceinte,
S'interrompant parfois pour baiser les pavés.
Le grand-prêtre se tient debout, les bras levés.
On dirait un fantôme avec son blanc suaire.

L'arche est sur une estrade au fond du sanctuaire;
Elohim lui laissa l'empreinte de son doigt;
Un éblouissement l'environne, et l'on voit
Des boîtes de parfum d'aspic sur chaque marche
Du degré qui se perd sous la splendeur de l'arche.
Caïphe est de la chose éternelle occupé.

Un docteur cependant, Rosmophim de Joppé
A soulevé ce voile et marche vers Caïphe
Qui ne dérange pas son geste de pontife
Et n'ouvre qu'à demi son oeil vague et fermé.

Le prêtre dit: - Je viens. Je me suis informé,
Hannasci, de celui des douze auquel tu penses.
C'est lui que dans la bande on charge des dépenses;
Quand on voyage, il compte avec les hôteliers;

Les autres semblent fiers de porter leurs colliers;
Lui seul a l’air d’un loup parmi les chiens; sa voie
Est obscure; à Naïm, une fille de joie
Avait, avec du baume et des parfums, lavé
Les pieds du maître, un peu meurtris par le pavé;
Cet homme s’emporta contre elle jusqu’à dire:
Tu viens de perdre là pour vingt deniers de myrrhe!
Et Caïphe répond: - C’est l’homme qu’il faudrait.
— Oui, répond Rosmophim. Il est jaloux, secret,
Triste, oblique, inquiet, solitaire, économe.
Prince, tu désirais savoir comme on le nomme.
Je l’ignorais le jour où tu le demandas.
Je le sais aujourd’hui. - Quel est son nom? - Judas.

VIII. LA SIBYLLE

La sibylle d'Achlab parle dans sa caverne;
Elle est seule; un esprit farouche la gouverne,
La courbe comme un feu sous un vol de démons,
Et de sa bouche obscure et de ses noirs poumons
Fait sortir le hasard des paroles terribles.
Des feuilles, qui plus tard s'iront coller aux Bibles,
S'échappent par moments de son antre, et s'en vont
En vagues flamboiements dans l'espace sans fond.
Elle les suit des yeux, et rit; puis recommence,
L'immensité s'étant mêlée à sa démence,
Et le souffle infini la traversant toujours.
Elle s'adresse à l'ombre, au gouffre, aux rochers sourds.
Spectre par le regard, par la maigreur squelette,
Elle parle une langue étrange où se reflète
L'avenir, à demi visible sur son front,
Et prononce déjà des mots qui ne seront
Dits par le genre humain que dans trois mille années.

Ses mains sur ses seins nus se crispent décharnées;
Son oeil lugubre songe, ivre d'obscurité;
Ce spectre balbutie avec autorité;
On dirait qu'elle fait la lecture éperdue
D'un mystérieux livre ouvert dans l'étendue;
Parfois elle s'arrête en disant: Je ne puis.

En ce moment, au fond de sa grotte, affreux puits
Plein de l'effarement des visions occultes,
Ce sont les fondateurs de dogmes et de cultes
Et de religions que son regard poursuit.
Il semble qu'elle parle, à travers l'âpre nuit,
A ceux qui cherchent Dieu pour le montrer aux hommes.
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«- ... Le livre d'en haut dit: - Qui que tu sois, qui sommes
«L'Etre de s'expliquer et le sphynx d'être clair,
«Qui que tu sois qui veux saisir l'eau, tenir l'air,
«Donner à la nuée une forme, et qui plonges,
«Avec ta nasse, bonne à la pêche des songes,
«Dans le sinistre abîme où flotte ce mot: Dieu;
«Qui que tu sois, qui viens forcer l'ombre à l'aveu,
«Tâter la certitude avec ta main peu sûre,
«Au temple sidéral adosser ta masure,
«Et désigner à l'Etre un texte, un nombre, un lieu;
«Homme, qui que tu sois, qui viens faire du feu
«Sous la foudre, allumer ta lampe sous l'étoile,
«Et dire à l'univers sans fond: Lève-toi, voile!
«Qui que tu sois qui prends l'impossible aux cheveux,
«Qui prononces ces mots inutiles: « - Je veux,
«Je sais, je suis, je crois, je sauve, je ranime; -"
«Qui que tu sois qui dis à l'Etre: « - Allons, abîme,
«Réponds, puisque c'est moi qui t'ai questionné. -"
«Sache que ta folie est sombre, infortuné!

«L'erreur sort du nuage et sans fin se dévide.
«Un rite, c'est un geste au hasard dans le vide;
«Avortement du chiffre et du mot! labeur vain
«De la voix pour nommer le prodige divin!
«Trimourti! Trinité! Triade! Triple Hécate!
«Brahmâ, c'est Abraham; dans Adonis éclate
«Adonaï; Jovis jaillit de Jéhovah;
«Toujours au même mot l'impuissance arriva;
«Toujours le sombre effort des religions tombe
«Dans le même fantôme et dans la même tombe.
«Toutes ces questions: « - Où? quand? pourquoi? comment?
«Jusqu'où?" - font le bruit sourd d'un engloutissement.

«Le livre d'en haut dit: - O penseurs, prenez garde!
«Il veut qu'on le contemple et non qu'on le regarde.
«Courbez-vous. L'adoré doit rester l'inconnu.

«Toutes les fois qu’un homme, un esprit, est venu
«L’approcher de trop près, et s’est, opiniâtre,
«Mis à souffler sur lui comme on souffle sur l’âtre,
«Il a frappé. Malheur aux obstinés qui vont
«Faire une fouille sombre en cet être profond!
«Vous qui vous appelez hier, demain, le sage,
«Le savant, le chercheur, la fuite, le passage,
«Larves! y songez-vous d’imposer à celui
«Qui songe et qui s’appelle à jamais Aujourd’hui,
«Vos auscultations, vos calculs, votre étude,
«Et la vibration de votre inquiétude!
«Il lui déplaît d’avoir vos chiffres hasardeux
«Courant partout sur lui, fourmillement hideux.
«Ta curiosité l’importune, ô vermine!
«L’Incréé n’aime pas que l’homme l’examine,
«Et sentir des esprits fureter dans ses coins.
«Sacrilège! le plus, mesuré par le moins!
«La mouche humaine allant heurter aux cieux son aile!
«Et l’essaim, effleurant l’attitude éternelle! -

«Le livre d’en haut dit: - Lui! lui! pas de témoins.
«Hommes, ne faites point un pas hors des besoins;
«L’homme est tortue, et l’ombre est votre carapace;
«Ne sortez pas du temps, du nombre et de l’espace;
«Car il se vengera, l’être mystérieux,
«Des voix, des bruits, des pas, des lampes et des yeux!
«Il est le maître obscur des tortures aiguës,
«Des haches, des brasiers, des chanvres, des ciguës.
«Il choisira les forts, il prendra dans sa main
«Ceux qui sont les cerveaux de tout le genre humain,
«Et, fatal, les jetant au glaive froid qui tue,
«Il décapitera la sagesse têtue.
«Pour punir les chercheurs, il n’a qu’à les livrer
«A la fureur de ceux qu’ils voudront éclairer.

«O sages, pour gravir les cieux où sont les Tables,
«Vous hantez les hauts lieux, ces cimes redoutables,

«Que visite l’horreur et que la bise mord;
«Vous y cherchez le jour, vous y trouvez la mort;
«Certains sommets fatals ont d’âpres calvities
«Où les hideuses croix, par le meurtre noircies,
«Se dressent, attendant les pâles rédempteurs;
«Et vous êtes, hélas, trahis par les hauteurs.
«Caïn sur cette terre, où le juste est victime,
«Traître, a laissé de quoi recommencer son crime;
«L’homme abrège, ô penseurs, vos ans déjà si courts!
«Pour vous assassiner, justes, l’homme a toujours
«Entre les mains assez du premier fratricide;
«Plus tard, le genre humain, redevenu lucide,
«Vient glorifier ceux que sa rage courbait...
«L’un a bu le poison, l’autre pend au gibet!

«Pensez-vous quelquefois à ce que fait l’archange,
«L’Etre d’en bas? Il est le Méchant. Il s’en venge?
«Il prend l’âme, la vie et le jour à revers;
«Et de sa chute il fait celle de l’univers.
«L’enfer est tout entier dans ce mot: Solitude.
«Avec tous les remords qui sont l’inquiétude
«Et le deuil de la terre, et dont il est l’aïeul,
«Dans l’effrayant cachot des nuits, Satan est seul.
«Le rocher qui le mure est fait avec du crime;
«Les autres condamnés sont dans un autre abîme;
«Il peut les torturer, mais il ne peut les voir.
«Seul, toujours seul, il est aveugle dans le noir.
«En lui, hors de lui, l’ombre. Il regarde, il se hausse,
«Il cherche; il n’a pas même une hydre dans sa fosse;
«Une hydre, ce serait quelqu’un. L’ange damné
«Vole et rôde, et, hagard, voudrait n’être pas né.
«Si les bêtes voyaient son cloaque, cet antre
«Ferait ramper les loups frémissants à plat ventre,
«Trembler le tigre, et fuir les hiboux aux yeux ronds.
«A chaque mouvement de ses lourds ailerons,
«Pendant qu’il plane, il sort du monstre des fumées;
«Elles montent sur terre, et ce sont des armées;

«Elles montent sur terre, et, dans nos régions,
«Ce sont des lois, des mœurs et des religions;
«Elles montent sur terre et prennent des figures
«De rois, de conquérants, de pontifes, d’augures;
«Et l’on entend le cri des hommes sous le pied
«D’un Satan Dieu qui règne et dans la nuit s’assied,
«Fantôme ressemblant au spectre des ténèbres;
«Et, triomphants, sacrés, grands, illustres, célèbres,
«Des vampires, la mitre ou le laurier au front,
«Elevant jusqu’au ciel une gloire d’affront,
«Disent: Je suis le Dogme, et je me nomme Empire.
«Et cent fléaux, fatals, noirs, dont l’homme est le pire,
«Se déchaînent; - Satan en bas plane toujours; -
«Peste, terre qui tremble, eau sur les rochers sourds,
«Le typhon sur les flots, le semoun dans les sables... -
«O sombres battements des ailes formidables!

«Le livre d’en haut dit: - Donc pas de curieux.
«La nuit est un conseil que le ciel donne aux yeux.
«Laissez l’Etre exister. Soyez ce que vous êtes.
«Regards, soyez l’effroi; bêtes, soyez les bêtes;
«Beauté, sois le squelette; homme, sois le néant.
«Dieu fait du ténébreux le bourreau du voyant.
«Ou, s’il lui plaît, savants, penseurs, ô tourbe infime,
«De vous abandonner à votre propre abîme,
«Il laissera l’ennui pesant, le moi jaloux,
«Le vertige et la peur croître d’eux-mêmes en vous,
«Et vos socs effrayés ne creuser que des fosses,
«Et se dresser, au fond de vos recherches fausses,
«Le chaos des erreurs, des fièvres, des tourments,
«Et s’offrir le fer rouge à vos tâtonnements;
«Si bien que de sa loi, de son énigme austère,
«De son nom, de son dogme obscur, de son mystère,
«Vous ôterez vos mains fumantes en criant:
«Nous nous sommes brûlés à cet être effrayant!
«Mage, il t’engloutira sous les bouillons de l’urne;
«Il remuera sous toi l’âpre échelle nocturne;

«Il rendra trouble, avec trop de lumière, l'oeil
«De la témérité, du rêve et de l'orgueil;
«Il n'aura qu'à montrer, pour vous mettre en démence,
«Un de ses attributs dans sa splendeur immense;
«Car le plus aveuglé, c'est le plus ébloui.
«Oui, si vous labourez au même champ que lui,
«Il emplira de cendre et de mort vos semailles.
«De toute la science il crèvera les mailles.
«L'infini ne se peut prendre dans un filet.
«Il ne souffrira point qu'on sache ce qu'il est.
«Il mettra les fléaux, les forces, les tonnerres,
«L'ombre, à votre poursuite, ô noirs visionnaires!
«Et s'il regarde, horreur! tout s'évanouira.
«Et les penseurs crieront: Grâce! Il leur suffira,
«Pour sentir la pensée en leurs fronts se dissoudre,
«D'entrevoir un moment sa prunelle de foudre.-

«Le livre d'en haut dit: - Vivez sans regarder.
«Passant, ta fonction est de passer. Sonder,
«C'est blesser. Qu'êtes-vous? Qu'es-tu? Ton nom? - Terpandre.
«Toi? - Linus. - Toi? - Thalès. - Vous vous appelez Cendre!
«Vous vous appelez Brume et Nuit! Disparaissez,
«Mourez. Parler est trop, bégayer est assez.
«Es-tu sage? tais-toi. Le silence est l'hommage.
«Quoi! tu veux pénétrer l'impénétrable, ô mage!
«Tu viens escalader avec effraction
«Le problème, le jour, la nuit, la vision,
«L'infini! Tu commets un attentat nocturne
«Sur la virginité du tombeau taciturne!
«Tu lèves ce couvercle, ô mage audacieux!
«Que fais-tu là, rôdeur des barrières des cieux?
«Tu viens, furtif, armé de ta vanité sombre,
«Forcer l'éternité! tu viens crocheter l'ombre,
«Fourrer ta fausse clé dans la porte de feu,
«Et faire une pesée, avec l'orgueil, sous Dieu!
«Va-t'en de la lumière, et va-t'en des ténèbres!
«Dehors! Va-t'en avec ta strophe et tes algèbres,

«Poète, géomètre, astronome, voleur!

«Ne cherchez pas; rampez. Tremblez, c’est le meilleur.
«Espace, point d’Icare; astres, pas de lunettes.
«O vivants, vous serez dans le vrai, si vous n’êtes
«Que ce que les vivants d’avant vous ont été.
«Ne voyez que la grande et calme éternité.
«Le bas est immobile et le haut immuable.
«En bas est l’ancre; en haut l’obscur anneau du câble.
«Est-ce que la nature essaie autour de vous
«De changer d’attitude, ô mortels vains et fous?
«Qu’est-ce que le tombeau? Le puits des nuits funèbres;
«Il a la plénitude auguste des ténèbres;
«Il ne demande rien, il ne fait pas de bruit;
«Le sépulcre est le vase où Dieu garde la nuit,
«L’astre est le vase où Dieu conserve la lumière;
«Tous deux sont à jamais ce que la loi première
«Les créa; l’un est l’ombre et l’autre est le rayon;
«Pourquoi l’homme veut-il changer sa fonction?
«Il est souffle; qu’il passe. A quoi bon la pensée?
«A quoi bon tant de force obscure dépensée?
«A quoi Zoroastre ou Moïse? A quoi sert
«Ce Jean, vêtu de peaux, parlant dans le désert?
«A quoi bon vos Talmuds? N’est-ce pas une honte
«De voir s’entreheurter Tyr contre Sélinonte,
«Delphes contre Eleusis, Thèbes contre Sion,
«Dans l’immobilité de la création?
«C’est l’ennui du voyant d’entendre les querelles
«Des superstitions se dévorant entre elles,
«Tous ces mages, luttant, affirmant ou niant,
«Et tous ces disputeurs de cendre et de néant
«Qui font tourbillonner leurs misérables rixes
«Entre les tombeaux noirs et les étoiles fixes!

«Un dogme est l’oiseleur, guettant dans la forêt,
«Qui, parce qu’il a pris un passereau, croirait
«Avoir tous les oiseaux du ciel bleu dans sa cage.

«La salutation du jonc au marécage
«N'est pas plus vaine, au fond du bois vague et jauni,
«Que les saluts que fait un homme à l'infini.
«Tout ce que vous nommez vérité devient fable
«Devant l'inénarrable et devant l'ineffable.
«Dieu! rêve! Oui finit par ressembler à Non.
«La raison de celui qui prononce ce nom
«S'en va, comme le sang quand on ouvre la veine.
«Oh! que le verbe est nul! que la syllabe est vaine!
«Comme le nombre est vite essoufflé quand il faut
«Faire l'addition du bas avec le haut,
«Et, de la profondeur remontant à la cime,
«Compter le gouffre après avoir compté l'abîme!”
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Pendant qu'elle parlait, pleine du sphynx caché,
Sur le puits ténébreux quelqu'un s'était penché;
Le soleil éclairait sur le seuil de la cave
Une figure douce, éblouissante et grave;
Un homme était pieds nus dans l'herbe et les genêts.

— Je ne t'ai jamais vu, mais je te reconnais.
Salut, Nazaréen! Dit la femme hagarde.

Et, montrant du doigt l'ombre, elle ajouta: Prends garde.

Alors entre la femme et cet homme, tandis
Que l'aube réchauffait les serpents engourdis
Et que les fleurs ouvraient au soleil leurs corolles,
Il se fit un échange auguste de paroles
Que la terre ignora, personne n'écrivant
Ce dialogue sombré emporté par le vent.

LE NAZARÉEN
O Prophétesse, il faut pourtant sauver les hommes.

LA SIBYLLE
A quoi bon?

LE NAZARÉEN
Pour sortir de cette ombre où nous sommes.

LA SIBYLLE
Restes-y.

LE NAZARÉEN
C’est la loi de monter vers le jour,
Qu’après l’iniquité la justice ait son tour,
C’est la loi.

LA SIBYLLE
La justice sur terre est un rêve.

LE NAZARÉEN
Les hommes pleins de haine ont à la main le glaive.
O femme, en les aimant on peut les apaiser.
Que dis-tu de l’amour? Parle.

LA SIBYLLE
Crains le baiser.

II. JÉSUS-CHRIST

I. LA POUTRE

Le brigand Barabbas est en prison. Son heure
Approche, car il faut que le meurtrier meure;
C’est du moins ce que dit le peuple.

Hors des murs,
Dans un champ où, pareil au ver dans les fruits mûrs,
Le chacal entre au flanc des charognes farouches,
Plaine où des os épars font bourdonner les mouches,
On entend un bruit sourd de scie et de marteaux.
Un homme dans un bouge équarrit des poteaux.
C’est Psyphax, charpentier de croix. Dehors un zèbre,
Des poules, du fumier, un coq. Psyphax est guèbre,
Adore le soleil et construit des gibets.

Le faubourg Zem, quartier des marchands au rabais
Et des fripiers vendant les haillons de la ville,
Borne au sud cette plaine âpre, déserte et vile.
Des cordes où parfois on se heurte en rêvant,
Où les laveuses font sécher leur linge au vent,
Flottent à des piquets plantés dans les décombres.
Les petits enfant nus de ces masures sombres
Où la famine habite et d’où la peste sort,
Vivent de ramasser dans l’herbe du bois mort
Qu’ils vont vendre en fagots sur les marches du temple.
Le prophète qui fait des gestes et contemple,
Quelque centurion par l’orgie attardé,
Des joueurs agitant la bassette ou le dé,
Hantent seuls ce lieu triste et cette lande aride.
Au-delà des terrains que l’ardent soleil ride,
Et que couvre un gazon brûlé, lépreux et court,
On voit les toits confus des maisons du faubourg
Où les femmes le soir médisent sur leurs portes.

Les mendiants hideux pareils à des cloportes
Rôdent aux alentours, tendant leurs pâles mains.
Au lieu de l’essaim d’or errant dans les jasmins,
L’oiseau de proie, affreux, vole aux carcasses mortes.
Près des maisons, les gueux, les nains aux jambes tortes,
Les goitreux, les boiteux, fourmillent en tous sens;
Et la difformité honteuse des passants,
Et ce faubourg infirme et malade, et ces bouges,
Importunent au loin l’aigle aux paupières rouges,
Et les vastes vautours africains dont le bec
Semble plein des rayons du désert de Balbeck.

Au fond de l’horizon est le Golgotha fauve;
Mont sans arbre, sans herbe et sans fleurs; sommet chauve
Et propre à la croissance horrible des gibets;
Ceux qui cherchent le sens des anciens alphabets
Et qui font du Talmud leur sévère lecture,
Tremblent devant ce mont, sachant son aventure;
Le vaste Adam est là, sous la terre dormant;
Si bien que le Calvaire est le noir renflement
De ce grand corps gisant sous la morne campagne,
Et qu’un air de cadavre en reste à la montagne.

Le toit de Psyphax, bas et marqué d’un poteau,
Fait une ampoule au centre isolé du plateau.
Le peuple craint les toits mystérieux des guèbres.
Ces fous de la lumière ont l’oeil plein de ténèbres;
On les voue aux métiers immondes: ils les font.
Ils mêlent leur chimère au céleste plafond;
Ils contemplent la nuit, d’astres profonds semée,
Et l’appellent Saba, ce qui veut dire armée;
Ils adorent un point du ciel nommé Kébla;
A toute heure de l’ombre et de l’aube, ils sont là
S’offrant, les hommes nus et les femmes sans voiles,
Au dieu soleil époux des déesses étoiles;
Ils maudissent la fève et l’ail, craignent le sel
Et l’ambre, et font lever le pain avec du miel.

Ils vont jusqu’en Egypte, affrontant les numides,
Pieds nus, sacrifier des coqs aux pyramides,
Ces trois tombeaux de Seth, d’Enos et de Sabi;
L’arabe en pâlissant leur ferme son gourbi;
Ils font un philtre avec des herbes qu’ils écrasent;
Ils respectent le bœuf et la brebis, se rasent,
Et n’osent pas nommer l’astre à qui leurs élus
Font, de l’aurore au soir, soixante-trois saluts;
Ils ont pour ville Haran en Mésopotamie;
Leur tabernacle, autel de trouble et d’infamie,
Au lieu de l’occident regarde le levant;
Ils adressent, hagards, des questions au vent,
Comptent l’onde, et parmi leurs prophètes on nomme
Loth, roi des Philistins, et Numa, roi de Rome;
Dans le mois du Bélier leur tribu danse en rond;
Ils vénèrent Péor, le faune obscène; ils ont
Sept temples dédiés par Cham aux sept planètes;
Ils sont jongleurs, charmeurs de tigres, proxénètes,
Baigneurs, marchands de sorts, plongeurs de tourbillons;
Quand ils sèment, ils font deux parts de leurs sillons,
Dont l’une est pour le dieu, l’autre pour les déesses;
Leurs femmes ont parfois des serpents dans leurs tresses;
Ils reprochent au char la plainte de l’essieu;
Ils regardent, pensifs, les ratures que Dieu
A faites sur le tigre ainsi que sur le zèbre;
C’est parce que tous deux ont ce signe funèbre
Et cette ombre des mots inconnus sur le dos
Que l’un porte la haine et l’autre les fardeaux;
Presque à l’égal du temple ils révèrent l’étable;
Leur sommeil est étrange, agité, redoutable;
Le sage est dur pour eux, même dans sa bonté,
Car leur religion donne à l’humanité
Une difformité misérable et terrible;
Ils ont un livre écrit par Satan, chose horrible;
Un autre par Adam, un autre par Enos;
Tous savent lire et sont des songeurs infernaux;
Ce sont, sous l’azur sombre où les nuages glissent,

Des hommes stupéfaits et fauves qu’éblouissent
Les immenses couchers du soleil dans les monts,
Et qui mangent du sang ainsi que les démons.

Près d’un champ maigre, où croît plus de ronce que d’orge,
Dans son hangar croulant qu’empourpre un feu de forge,
Psyphax le guèbre est seul; sans veste, sans bonnet,
Bras nus, la scie aux poings, il travaille; et l’on est
A la fin du mois Jar, le second de l’année.

Dans cette plaine vaste, obscure, abandonnée,
Deux hommes vers le soir, marchant dans les fossés,
Se rencontrent, venant de deux points opposés.
Ils se parlent très bas avec un air de honte.
— Voici l’argent.

- Combien?

- Trente.

- Comptons.

On compte;
Dans l’ombre; en étouffant, comme en flagrant délit,
Le bruit d’un sac d’argent qu’on vide et qu’on remplit.

— Marché fait.

- Viendra-t-il pour la fête?

- Peut-être.

— Mais au milieu des siens comment le reconnaître?

— Celui qu’on me verra baiser, ce sera lui.

— C’est dit.

Et souriant, mais non sans quelque ennui,
L’homme qui prend l’argent fait un salut servile,
Met le sac sous sa robe et rentre dans la ville.

Et l’autre attend qu’il ait disparu, puis, sans bruit,
Regardant si de loin personne ne le suit,
Il s’enfonce à pas sourds dans la plaine funèbre,
Et l’on dirait qu’il va vers la maison du guèbre.

Psyphax travaille. Il ouvre au milieu des outils
Un vieux livre, et ses yeux y semblent engloutis,
Comme s’ils en puisaient la lueur vénérable;
Puis il reprend la vrille et l’équerre d’érable,
Et se remet à fendre un bloc informe et noir;
Puis il lit, quoiqu’on lise avec peine le soir,
De sorte que cet homme à la fois semble suivre
Son travail sous l’outil et sa loi dans le livre;
Soudain, au soupirail du toit presque détruit,
Apparaît la première étoile de la nuit;
Psyphax lève les yeux, l’aperçoit, se redresse,
Ebloui, pâle, et dit à voix basse: O déesse!
Or l’homme qui venait arrive. Il montre un sceau.
Il crache sur le livre ouvert, et dit: - Pourceau,
Je suis du temple. - Il laisse, en l’écartant, paraître
Sous son manteau dans l’ombre une robe de prêtre.
Et le payen se tait, avec ce pli du front
Que donne l’habitude horrible de l’affront;
Car il a reconnu Rosmophim, un des sages
Qui du Talmud au peuple expliquent les passages,
Docteur et juge, après Caïphe le premier.
Il tremble; le rayon rend visite au fumier.
Pourquoi?

C’est ce docteur Rosmophim qui, naguère,
A, d’après la loi sainte et le texte vulgaire,
Condamné Barabbas, et dit: Deux fois malheur!

Mort sur le meurtrier et mort sur le voleur!

Rosmophim dit: - Au nom du sanhédrin! - L'esclave
S'incline, et Rosmophim reprend d'une voix grave,
Pendant que son regard sur le guèbre tombait:
— As-tu quelque tronc d'arbre à faire un grand gibet;

Dans une sorte d'antre au fond de la masure
Gisaient de noirs poteaux de diverse mesure;
Le payen remua ces affreux blocs dormants,
Ainsi qu'un fossoyeur trouble un tas d'ossements,
Et l'on en voyait fuir des bêtes qu'on ignore;
Les poutres retombaient sur la terre sonore;
Soudain l'homme, que l'âtre aidait de sa clarté,
Poussant un dernier bloc, non sans peine écarté,
Montra du doigt au prêtre un madrier difforme,
Ayant le poids du chêne avec les nœuds de l'orme,
Lourd, vaste, et comme empreint de cinq doigts monstrueux;
On voyait au gros bout, renflement tortueux,
On ne sait quelle tache épouvantable et sombre,
Et l'on eût dit du sang élargi dans de l'ombre.
Rosmophim regarda la poutre, maugréant:
— Serait-ce le bâton de marche d'un géant?

— Seigneur, c'est en effet cela, dit l'idolâtre.

Et le prêtre jeta trois grains d'encens dans l'âtre
Pour purifier l'air où l'homme avait parlé.

L'homme reprit:
- Un champ qui fait mourir le blé,
Qui n'a pas un rameau vivant où l'oiseau dorme,
Egout où du déluge on voit la boue énorme,
Est le lieu sombre où j'ai trouvé ce tronc hideux.
Les hommes d'autrefois ne pouvaient être deux
Sans combattre, et l'un l'autre ils se prenaient pour cible,
Et la marque d'un meurtre est sur cet arbre horrible.

Les géants de la race Énacim, qui d’abord
Ont habité la terre antique, ont fait la mort.
Leur ombre immense couvre encor les races neuves.
Ils écrasaient du pied les éléphants des fleuves
Devant qui la forêt monstrueuse se tait;
Leur bâton de voyage ou de défense était
Un chêne qu’ils avaient cassé dans la clairière;
Et nous pourrions bâtir toute une tour de pierre
Avec un des cailloux qu’ils tenaient dans leur poing.

— Oui, dit le docteur, Dieu qui ne s’égare point
En attendant le nombre, exagéra la forme;
Le monde a commencé par la famille énorme;
Du groupe gigantesque est né le genre humain;
Le bloc d’hier sera tas de pierres demain;
Un géant tient d’abord la place d’une foule;
Puis, comme la nuée en gouttes d’eau s’écroule,
De génération en génération,
Il s’amoindrit, pullule, et devient nation;
Et Dieu fait le colosse avant la fourmilière.
Il reprit: - Ce tronc d’arbre a des traces de lierre.

— Non, c’est la pression du poignet du géant,
Dit l’esclave.

- Chien vil, dit le docteur songeant,
Je choisis ce poteau. Dans ton ombre mortelle
Fais-en vite une croix vaste et haute, mais telle
Qu’un homme cependant puisse encor la traîner.

Laissant derrière lui Psyphax se prosterner,
Le prêtre s’en alla, l’oeil plein d’une âpre flamme.
Et le guèbre, tirant du tas la poutre infâme,
La regardait, la hache au poing, disant tout bas:

— Il paraît qu’on veut faire honneur à Barabbas.

II. LE CANTIQUE DE BETHPHAGÉ

CHOEUR DE FEMMES
L’ombre des bois d’Aser est toute parfumée.
Quel est celui qui vient par le frais chemin vert?
Est-ce le bien-aimé qu’attend la bien-aimée?
Il est jeune, il est doux. Il monte du désert
Comme de l’encensoir s’élève une fumée.
Est-ce le bien-aimé qu’attend la bien-aimée?
UNE JEUNE FILLE
J’aime. O vents, chassez l’hiver.
Les plaines sont embaumées.
L’oiseau semble, aux bois d’Aser;
Une âme dans les ramées.

L’amante court vers l’amant
Il me chante et je le chante;
Oh! comme on dort mollement
Sous une branche penchante!

Je m’éveille en le chantant;
En me chantant il s’éveille;
Et l’aube croit qu’elle entend
Deux bourdonnements d’abeille.

L’un vers l’autre nous allons;
Il dit: « O belle des belles,
«La rose est sous tes talons,
«L’astre frémit dans tes ailes!”

Je dis: « La terre a cent rois;
«Les jeunes gens sont sans nombre;
«Mais c’est lui que j’aime, ô bois!
«Il est flamme et je suis ombre.”

Il reprend: « Viens avec moi
«Nous perdre au fond des vallées
«Dans l'éblouissant effroi
«Des vastes nuits étoilées."

Et j'ajoute: « Je mourrais
«Pour un baiser de sa bouche;
«Vous le savez, ô forêts,
«O grand murmure farouche!"

L'eau coule, le ciel est clair.
Nos chansons, au vent semées,
Se croisent comme dans l'air
Les flèches de deux armées.
CHOEUR DE FEMMES
L'oiseau semble, aux bois d'Aser,
Une âme dans les ramées.
UN JEUNE HOMME
Elle dormait, sa tête appuyée à son bras;
Ne la réveillez pas avant qu'elle le veuille;
Par les fleurs, par le daim qui tremble sous la feuille,
Par les astres du ciel, ne la réveillez pas!

On ne la croit point femme; on lui dit: « Quoi! tu manges,
Tu bois! c'est à coup sûr quelque sainte liqueur!"
Tous les parfums ont l'air de sortir de son cœur;
Elle tient ses pieds joints comme les pieds des anges.

On dirait qu'elle a fait un vase de son corps
Pour ces baumes d'en haut qu'aucun miasme n'altère;
Elle s'occupe aussi des choses de la terre,
Car la feuille du lys est courbée en dehors.

Le bois des rossignols comme le bois des merles
L'admirent, et ses pas sont pour eux des faveurs;
Sa beauté, qui rayonne et luit, rendrait rêveurs
Les rois de l'Inde ayant des coffres pleins de perles.

Quand elle passe, avec des danses et des chants,
Le vieillard qui grondait, sourit; les plus maussades
L'admettent dans leur pré fermé de palissades;
La forme de son ombre est agréable aux champs.

Je pleure par moments, tant elle est douce et frêle!
L'autre jour, un oiseau, pas plus grand que le doigt,
S'est posé, frissonnant, sur le bord de mon toit;
J'ai dit: « Oiseau, soyez béni! priez pour elle.

Si je l'épouse, oh non! je ne veux plus partir.
Je ne m'en irai pas d'auprès de toi que j'aime,
Je ne m'en irai pas d'auprès de toi, quand même
Salomon m'enverrait vers Hiram roi de Tyr!

Son cœur, tout en dormant, m'adorait; douce gloire!
Un ange qui venait des cieux, passant par là,
Vit son amour, en prit sa part, et s'envola;
Car où la vierge boit la colombe peut boire.

Elle dormait ainsi qu'Annah rêvant d'Esdras;
O ma beauté, je fus le jour où vous m'aimâtes,
Ivre comme la biche au mont des aromates;
Son sein pur soulevait la blancheur de ses draps.
CHOEUR DE FEMMES
Ne la réveillez pas avant qu'elle le veuille;
Par les fleurs, par le daim qui tremble sous la feuille,
Par les astres du ciel, ne la réveillez pas!
LA JEUNE FILLE
Par l'ouverture de ma porte
Mon bien-aimé passa sa main,
El je me réveillai, de sorte
Que nous nous marions demain.
Mon bien-aimé passa sa main
Par l'ouverture de ma porte.

De la montagne de l’encens
A la colline de la myrrhe,
C’est lui que souhaitent mes sens,
Et c’est lui que mon âme admire
De la colline de la myrrhe,
À la montagne de l’encens.

Je ne sais comment le lui dire,
J’ai dépouillé mes vêtements;
Dites-le lui, cieux! Il soupire,
Et moi je brûle, ô firmaments!
J’ai dépouillé mes vêtements;
Je ne sais comment le lui dire.
CHOEUR DE FEMMES
Cieux! c’est lui que son âme admire,
C’est lui que souhaitent ses sens
De la colline de la myrrhe
À la montagne de l’encens.
LE JEUNE HOMME
Elle m’enflamme et je l’embrase,
Et je vais l’appelant, le cœur gonflé d’extase.
O nuages, elle est ce que j’aime le mieux.
Comme elle est belle avec son rire d’épousée,
L’oeil plein d’un ciel mystérieux,
Et les pieds nus dans la rosée!

Je la parfumerai de nard.
O rêve! elle mettra, dans notre couche étroite,
A mon front sa main gauche, à mon cœur sa main droite.
La nuit mes yeux joyeux font peur au loup hagard.
Je ressemble à celui qui trouve une émeraude.
Ma fierté fond sous son regard
Comme la neige sous l’eau chaude.

Son cou se passe de colliers;
La sagesse à la grâce en ses discours se mêle
Comme le ramier vole auprès de sa femelle;

Les séraphins lui font des signes familiers;
Cette vierge, ô David, ô roi rempli de gloire,
Ressemble à votre tour d'ivoire
Où pendent mille boucliers.

Femmes, croyez-vous qu'elle sorte?
Elle reste au logis et tourne son fuseau.
Et je l'appelle... mais je suis aimé, qu'importe!
Je bondis comme un faon des monts Nabujesso,
Comme si je planais dans l'air qui me réclame,
Et comme si j'avais une âme
Faite avec des plumes d'oiseau.

Venez voir quelqu'un de superbe!
Venez voir l'amant, fier comme un palmier dans l'herbe,
Beau comme l'aloès en fleur au mois d'élul!
Venez voir l'amoureux qui vaincrait les colosses!
Venez voir le grand roi Saül
Avec sa couronne de noces!
CHOEUR DE FEMMES
Venez voir le grand roi Saül
Avec sa couronne de noces!
LA JEUNE FILLE
L'amour porte bonheur. Chantez. L'air était doux,
Je le vis, l'herbe en fleur nous venait aux genoux,
Je riais, et nous nous aimâmes;
Laissez faire leur nid aux cigognes, laissez
L'amour, qui vient du fond des azurs insensés,
Entrer dans la chambre des âmes!

Qu'est-ce que des amants? Ce sont des nouveau-nés.
Mon bien-aimé, venez des monts, des bois! venez!
Profitez des portes mal closes,
Je voudrais bien savoir comment je m'y prendrais
Pour ne pas adorer son rire jeune et frais,
Venez, mon lit est plein de roses!

Ma maison est cachée et semble faite exprès;
Le plafond est en cèdre et l’alcôve en cyprès;
Oh! le jour où nous nous parlâmes,
Il était blanc, les nids chantaient, il me semblait
Fils des cygnes qu’on croit lavés avec du lait,
Et je vis dans le ciel des flammes.

Dans l’obscurité, grand, dans la clarté, divin,
Vous régnez; votre front brille en ce monde vain
Comme un bleuet parmi les seigles;
Absent, présent, de loin, de près, vous me tenez;
Venez de l’ombre où sont les lions, et venez
De la lumière où sont les aigles!

J’ai cherché dans ma chambre et ne l’ai pas trouvé;
Et j’ai toute la nuit couru sur le pavé,
Et la lune était froide et blême,
Et la ville était noire, et le vent était dur,
Et j’ai dit au soldat sinistre au haut du mur:
Avez-vous vu celui que j’aime?

Quand tu rejetteras la perle en ton reflux,
O mer; quand le printemps dira: « Je ne veux plus
«Ni de l’ambre, ni du cinname!”
Quand on verra le mois Nisan congédier
La rose, le jasmin, l’iris et l’amandier,
Je le renverrai de mon âme.

S’il savait à quel point je l’aime, il pâlirait.
Viens! le lys s’ouvre ainsi qu’un précieux coffret,
Les agneaux sont dans la prairie,
Le vent passe et me dit: « Ton souffle est embaumé!”
Mon bien-aimé, mon bien-aimé, mon bien-aimé,
Toute la montagne est fleurie!

Oh! quand donc viendra-t-il, mon amour, mon orgueil?
C’est lui qui me fait gaie ou sombre; il est mon deuil,

Il est ma joie; et je l’adore;
Il est beau. Tour à tour sur sa tête on peut voir
L’étoile du matin et l’étoile du soir,
Car il est la nuit et l’aurore!

Pourquoi fais-tu languir celle qui t’aime tant?
Viens! Pourquoi perdre une heure? Hélas, mon cœur attend;
Je suis triste comme les tombes;
Est-ce qu’on met du temps, dis, entre les éclairs
De deux nuages noirs qui roulent dans les airs,
Et les baisers de deux colombes?
CHOEUR DE FEMMES
Viens! ô toi qu’on attend! Chantons! l’air était doux.
Il la vit; l’herbe en fleur leur venait aux genoux.

III. LE TRIOMPHE

C’est ainsi que chantait, devant le ciel qui brille,
Le jeune homme alternant avec la jeune fille,
Un groupe des enfants du bourg de Bethphagé.
Au-delà d’un vallon de brume submergé,
On distinguait des tours, un mur blanc, une porte;
C’était Jérusalem. L’encens que l’aube apporte,
Les souffles purs, les fleurs s’éveillant dans les bois,
Les rayons, se mêlaient à l’ivresse des voix;
Et c’était à côté du chemin de la ville.
Hors du village, et près de la borne du Mille,
Tout en allant aux champs, ils s’étaient rencontrés;
L’herbe était verte, et l’aube éblouissait les prés;
Les hommes avaient dit: Trêve au travail austère!
Et les femmes avaient posé leur cruche à terre,
Et, sereins, ils s’étaient mis à chanter, tandis
Que les oiseaux poussaient des cris du paradis;
Une aïeule riait au seuil d’une masure;
Trois laboureurs hâlés, pour marquer la mesure,
Frappaient la terre avec le manche de leur faulx;
Les vierges, au front pur comme un lys sans défauts,
Songeaient, et, l’oeil noyé, la bouche haletante,
Regardaient l’horizon dans une vague attente.

Tout à coup, au moment où les femmes en chœur
Jetaient aux forêts l’hymne enflammé de leur cœur
Que marquait la cadence agreste des faucilles,
Quelqu’un dit: - Ecoutez! paix! - Et les jeunes filles
S’arrêtèrent, le doigt sur la bouche, entendant
Derrière le coteau brûlé du jour ardent,
D’autres voix qui chantaient, douces comme des âmes:

— « Le bien-aimé, celui que vous attendez, femmes,
«C’est celui-ci qui passe et que nous amenons.

«Le triomphe nous a choisis pour compagnons,
«La lumière permet que nous marchions près d’elle,
«Et nous menons le maître à son peuple fidèle,
«Voici le bien-aimé des âmes! et celui
«Sur qui la grande étoile éblouissante a lui!
«Toutes les majestés forment son diadème;
«Il pourrait foudroyer, il préfère qu’on l’aime;
«Il console Rachel, il relève Sara;
«Il marche entre la joie et la gloire; il sera
«Comme un bouquet de myrrhe entre deux seins célestes;
«Son sceptre anéantit dans les rayons les restes
«Du vieux monde terrible où se tord le serpent;
«Son nom divin est comme une huile qu’on répand;
«Au-dessus de sa tête, étonnement des anges,
«Le ciel est un murmure immense de louanges;
«Il est plus glorieux qu’Alexandre, et plus beau
«Que Salomon qui tient un lys dans son tombeau;
«Il a pour champ la terre, et l’esprit pour domaine;
«Il vient ôter la nuit de dessus l’âme humaine;
«Il fera reculer l’Hydre qui triomphait,
«Il transfigurera le monde stupéfait;
«L’abîme le regarde et l’aurore l’approuve;
«Le grondement du tigre et le cri de la louve,
«La haine, la fureur soulevant un pavé,
«La guerre, se tairont devant son doigt levé.
«Dans son immensité Moloch s’écroule et sombre.
«Il est sans tache, il est sans borne, il est sans nombre;
«Il produit, en fixant au ciel son oeil béni,
«La disparition du mal dans l’infini.
«Les chars de Pharaon près de lui sont de l’ombre.
«Il est plus radieux que Nemrod n’était sombre;
«Il brille plus qu’Ammon à qui rien ne manquait,
«Et dont le trône était le centre d’un banquet;
«Il dépasse Cyrus, debout sur son pilastre.
«Peuple, toute son âme est une clarté d’astre.
«C’est un roi; plus qu’un roi. C’est lui le Conquérant,
«C’est lui l’élu, c’est lui le vrai, c’est lui le grand!

«Gloire à lui! Le soleil le voit, l’ombre l’écoute.”

Alors on aperçut, au détour de la route,
Un homme qui venait monté sur un ânon.

Cet homme, dont chacun se redisait le nom,
Etait le même à qui naguère un prêtre blême
Avait jeté du haut du temple l’anathème.
Il avait les cheveux partagés sur le front;
Des femmes qui riaient et qui dansaient en rond,
Le suivaient, et de fleurs elles étaient couvertes,
Et des petits enfants portaient des branches vertes;
Et de partout, des champs, des toits, des bois obscurs,
Et de Jérusalem dont on voyait les murs,
Sortait la foule, gaie, heureuse, pêle-mêle;
Des mères lui montraient leur fils à la mamelle,
Et les vieillards criaient: Hosanna! Quelques-uns
Soufflaient sur des réchauds où brûlaient des parfums;
Il s’avançait avec le calme du mystère;
Et ces hommes louaient cet homme, et sur la terre
Etendaient leurs habits pour qu’il passât dessus;
Quelques lambeaux de pourpre à la hâte cousus
Faisaient une bannière en avant du cortège;
Et tous disaient: - Que Dieu le Père le protège!
Voilà celui qui vient pour nous rendre meilleurs! -
Lui, pensif, regarda Jérusalem, les fleurs,
Le soleil au plus haut des cieux comme une fête,
Ces tapis sous ses pieds, ces rameaux sur sa tête,
Et les femmes chanter, et le peuple accourir,
Et sourit, en disant: Je vais bientôt mourir.

IV. LE DEVOIR

Marie était assise entre Thomas et Jude;
Et le maître debout disait: - La solitude
Est un rayon d’en haut qu’on met dans son esprit;
Mais le sauveur va droit au peuple et s’y meurtrit;
Dieu livre le Messie aux multitudes viles;
La palme ne croit pas aux déserts, mais aux villes;
Malheur à qui se cache et malheur à qui fuit!
Laissons mûrir sur nous la mort ainsi qu’un fruit;
Et ne la troublons pas dans sa lente croissance;
Dieu, quand il juge un homme en sa toute-puissance,
Voit ce qu’il a vécu moins que ce qu’il a fait;
Au soleil de la mort David se réchauffait;
Ce serait mal aimer un frère que lui dire:
Recule! quand vers Dieu le sépulcre l’attire;
Et ce serait haïr et perdre son enfant
Que l’ôter du chemin funeste et triomphant;
Le calice est amer, mais l’exemple est utile;
Et c’est pourquoi je suis venu dans cette ville.

Ainsi parlait le fils et la mère écoutait.

V. DEUX DIFFÉRENTES MANIÈRES D'AIMER

C'est l'heure où le ramier rentre au nid et se tait.

Une femme se hâte en une rue étroite;
Elle regarde à gauche, elle regarde à droite,
Et marche. S'il faisait moins sombre au firmament,
On pourrait à ses doigts distinguer vaguement
Le cercle délicat des bagues disparues;
Son pied blanc n'est pas fait pour le pavé des rues;
Elle porte un long voile aux plis égyptiens
Plein de rayons nouveaux et de parfums anciens;
Jeune et blonde, elle est belle entre toutes les femmes;
Elle a dans l'oeil des pleurs semblables à des flammes;
C'est Madeleine, sœur de Lazare.

Elle court.
Près de son pas céleste un oiseau serait lourd.
Où va-t-elle?

Il est nuit, et personne ne passe.

Une lumière brille en une maison basse.

Une autre femme, grave, est debout sut le seuil.
Son front est gris; elle est sévère sans orgueil,
Douce comme un enfant et grande comme un sage.
Elle pleure et médite; on voit sur son visage
La résignation au sacrifice noir;
On dirait la statue en larmes du devoir;
Le cœur tremblant s'appuie en elle à l'âme forte;
C'est la mère.

Elle a l’air de garder cette porte.

Madeleine l’aborde, et presque avec des cris
Lui parle, et s’épouvante, et tord ses bras meurtris.

— Mère, ouvre-moi. Je viens. Il s’agit de sa vie.
Me voici. J’ai couru de peur d’être suivie.
On creuse l’ombre autour de ton fils. Je te dis
Que je sens fourmiller les serpents enhardis.
J’ai connu les démons, du temps que j’étais belle;
Je sais ce que l’enfer met dans une prunelle;
Je viens de voir passer Judas; cela suffit.
C’est un calculateur de fraude et de profit;
C’est un monstre. Ouvre-moi, que j’entre chez le maître.
Le temps presse. Il sera trop tard demain peut-être.
Il faut que ce soir même il fuie, et que jamais
Il ne revienne! ô mère! et, si tu le permets,
Je vais l’emmener, moi! Ces prêtres sont infâmes!
Manquer sa mission, ne point sauver les âmes,
Que nous importe, à nous les femmes qui l’aimons!
Il sera mieux avec les tigres dans les monts
Que dans Jérusalem avec les prêtres. Mère,
Qu’il renonce au salut des hommes, sa chimère,
Qu’il fuie! Oh! n’est-ce pas? nous baisons ses talons,
Et qu’il vive, voilà tout ce que nous voulons.
Ces juifs l’égorgeront! Demande à ma sœur Marthe
Si c’est vrai, s’il n’est pas nécessaire qu’il parte.
Laisse-moi l’arracher à son affreux devoir!
Oh! te figures-tu cela, mère? le voir
Saisi, lié, tué peut-être à coups de pierre!
O Dieu! le voir saigner, lui, ce corps de lumière!
Ouvre-moi. Je sais bien qu’il est dans ta maison
Puisque je vois sa lampe à travers la cloison.
O mère, laisse-moi l’implorer pour que vite
Il s’en aille et s’échappe et qu’il prenne la fuite!
A quoi songes-tu donc que tu ne réponds rien?
Si tu veux, à nous deux, nous le sauverons bien!

Veux-tu te joindre à moi pour arracher notre ange
Au gouffre monstrueux de ce devoir étrange,
Aux bourreaux, à Judas, son hideux compagnon?

La mère en sanglotant lui fait signe que non.

VI. APRÈS LA PÂQUE

On était aux grands jours où le temple flamboie,
Où les petits enfants s'éveillent pleins de joie;
La Pâque était venue. On avait dans les fours
Cuit le pain sans levain qu'on vend aux carrefours.

Or Jésus-Christ était sur la montagne obscure;
Au lieu même où plus tard fut un temple à Mercure
Bâti par Adrien, détruit par Constantin.

C'était le soir; Jésus avait dit le matin
Aux disciples rangés autour de lui: « - Vous, Jacques,
«Vous, Pierre, vous, Thomas, voici le jour de Pâques;
«Vous irez dans la ville où des gens passeront;
«Vous trouverez un homme ayant sa cruche au front;
«À l'endroit où cet homme ira, quel qu'il puisse être,
«Vous irez à sa suite, et vous direz: - Le Maître
«Vient faire ici la Pâque. - Et pour cette raison
«Le maître du logis donnera sa maison.
«Il sied que Dieu toujours nous mène où bon lui semble.
«Et nous célébrerons la Pâque tous ensemble.

Et cela s'était fait ainsi qu'il l'avait dit.

Ce que la Cène vit et ce qu'elle entendit
Est écrit, dans le livre où pas un mot ne change,
Par les quatre hommes purs près de qui l'on voit l'ange,
Le lion, et le bœuf, et l'aigle, et le ciel bleu;
Cette histoire par eux semble ajoutée à Dieu
Comme s'ils écrivaient en marge de l'abîme;
Tout leur livre ressemble au rayon d'une cime;
Chaque page y frémit sous le frisson sacré;
Et c'est pourquoi la terre a dit: Je le lirai!
Les âmes du côté de ce livre mendient,

Et vingt siècles penchés dans l’ombre l’étudient.

C’était donc le soir même où cet être divin
Venait de partager le gâteau sans levain;
Christ, assis, lui treizième, au centre de la table,
— Et ce noir chiffre Treize est resté redoutable, -
Avait rompu le pain, versé le vin, disant:
«Mangez, voici ma chair; buvez, voici mon sang.”
Puis il avait repris: « Allons où Dieu nous mène!”
Et tous étaient allés en sortant de la Cène
Au jardin qui fleurit derrière le Cédron.

Ce torrent, que jamais n’a touché l’aviron,
Coulait hors de la ville au pied d’une colline.
Les pâtres y montraient la cave sibylline
De Lilith, femme spectre, amante du démon;
C’est près de ce coteau que le prêtre Simon
Fit creuser le canal à laver les hosties;
Des sources y versaient, à travers les orties,
Une eau qui de la ville emplissait les viviers;
Et ce lieu s’appelait le Mont des Oliviers.

On venait sur ce mont aux époques de jeûnes.

Une plantation d’oliviers alors jeunes
Le couvrait en effet, jetant aux verts sentiers
Une ombre qui faisait durer les églantiers.
Christ y vint, murmurant tout bas: Que Dieu m’assiste!
Et ce qui s’y passa ce soir-là fut si triste,
Si lâche et si fatal qu’aujourd’hui ce jardin
Est voisin de l’enfer comme du ciel l’Eden.

Voici ce que Jésus disait sur la montagne;

«Ce qu’on perd sur la terre au ciel on le regagne.

«Qui regarde en arrière et s’étonne de peu, «Celui-là n’est pas propre au royaume de Dieu.

«Dieu se dévoile assez pour que l’homme le voie.

«Je suis moins grand que lui, mais c’est lui qui m’envoie.
«Quand je parle, c’est lui qui dit ce que je dis.
«Si vous vous aimez bien, voilà le paradis.

«Soyez bons. Dieu choisit ceux que je lui désigne.

«Il est le vigneron, et moi je suis la vigne.
«Il viendra, comme il fit pour Job et pour Amos,
«Une serpe à la main, émonder mes rameaux,
«Et, gardant les féconds, coupera les stériles.

«Enseignez tendrement le peuple dans les villes,
«Souriez, n’ayez point entre vous de débats.

«Quand vous êtes parmi les tombes, parlez bas;
«Car au fond du sépulcre une oreille est ouverte;
«Ceux qu’on croit endormis sous la grande herbe verte,
«Ecoutent, et vos voix leur parlent dans les vents,
«Et sachez que c’est là la maison des vivants.

«Qui maudit doit trembler. Ne faites rien trop vite.
«Esdras, voyant l’enfant d’une femme maudite,
«Le prit et le jeta tout vivant dans la mer
«Par l’effet surprenant d’un zèle trop amer.
«Dieu l’a puni.

  Marchez dans la route tracée.
«Aimez. N’enviez pas à d’autres leur pensée;
«Il faut se contenter des lumières qu’on a;
«L’un est plus sage et l’autre est plus doux; Dieu donna
«Plus de fruit au figuier, plus d’ombre au sycomore.
«Croyez.”

Il ajouta d’autres choses encore;
Puis soudain il dit, pâle et d’un frisson saisi:

— Allons! celui qui doit me vendre est près d’ici.

VII. COMMENCEMENT DE L’ANGOISSE

Alors il s’éloigna de près d’un jet de pierre,
Et se mit à genoux, et fit une prière.

Il resta longtemps seul et comme plein d’effroi.

Il disait: - « Ecartez ce calice de moi,
«Seigneur! S’il faut mourir pourtant, que la mort vienne!
«Que votre volonté soit faite, et non la mienne.”

Le reste dans le ciel ténébreux se perdit.

Les disciples dormaient. Christ revint, et leur dit:

— Quoi donc! vous n’avez pu même veiller une heure!

Il reprit:

- C’est ainsi qu’il convient que je meure.
Cela doit être, et nul au monde n’y peut rien.
Je suis venu pour être abandonné. C’est bien.
Il faut qu’on me rejette ainsi qu’un misérable.

On distinguait au loin le temple vénérable
Bâti par Salomon sur le mont Moria.

— Pardon pour tous! dit Christ. Mais Pierre s’écria:

— Si quelqu’un vous délaisse et vous quitte, ô mon maître,
Ce ne sera pas moi, car je suis votre prêtre.
Que le tombeau pour vous s’ouvre, j’y descendrai.

Jésus lui répondit, calme, tandis qu’André,
Jude et Thomas tournaient vers lui leurs têtes grises:

— Vous m’aurez renié, vous Pierre, à trois reprises
Que le coq n’aura pas encor chanté trois fois.

VIII. CHRIST VOIT CE QUI ARRIVERA

Il alla de nouveau prier au fond du bois.

Il songeait, et sa voix disait:

— Mon âme est triste
Jusqu’à la mort; et l’homme en moi tremble et résiste;
Je frémis comme Job, je crains comme Judith.

Puis il parla si bas que Dieu seul entendit.

Soudain il s’écria, pâle comme un prophète:

— Deuil, lamentation et douleur sur ta tête,
O Balaath qu’emplit un peuple querelleur!
Malheur, Corozaïm! Bethsaïde, malheur!
Parce que vous avez dédaigné mes oracles,
Parce que si j’avais fait les mêmes miracles,
Crié le même appel et le même pardon
Dans Ninive aux cent tours, dans Tyr et dans Sidon,
On aurait vu pleurer Ninive, et Tyr descendre
De son trône, et Sidon vêtir le sac de cendre!
C’est fini. Je vous vois désertes. Vous voilà
Muettes comme un lac dont toute l’eau coula.
Vos jardins ont l’odeur des charniers insalubres.
Tout croule. Vos palais sont devenus lugubres
Sous le passage obscur des châtiments divins;
Ce sont des pans de mur inutiles et vains;
Les mâchoires des morts ne sont pas plus terribles.
Malheur! on ne voit plus le grain sortir des cribles;
Plus de fille de joie assise sur son lit;
On n’entend plus cracher les passants; l’herbe emplit
Les sentiers que suivaient les mulets et les zèbres.
Le plein midi ne fait qu’augmenter vos ténèbres;

On a beau peindre en blanc le sépulcre, il est noir.
Le soleil est présent à votre désespoir;
Vos décombres sont pleins d'antres épouvantables.
O Moïse, ils ont fait une fêlure aux tables,
Ils ont brisé la loi; c'est bien, mourez. Assez!
Vous serez si tremblants, peuples, et si chassés
Que vous ferez sous terre une seconde ville.
Comme sous le pressoir on voit déborder l'huile,
Le sang en longs ruisseaux jaillit sous le talon
Des princes écrasant Ruben et Zabulon;
Isaachar et Lévi sont abolis. Partage
Et désert, comme après la chute de Carthage.
On vend un peuple ainsi qu'une bête au marché.
Malheur, Jérusalem! ô maison du péché,
Malheur; tu seras morte entre les cités mortes;
Les rois feront sculpter un pourceau sur tes portes;
Tu seras une ville infâme et sans témoin,
Qu'il sera défendu de regarder de loin.
La femme pleurera d'être grosse ou nourrice.
Qui te verra croira qu'il voit la cicatrice
Des tonnerres au front du monde châtié;
Et tu seras l'endroit où finit la pitié.

Quand il eut ainsi fait des reproches aux villes,
Il s'approcha des siens et dit:

— Soyez tranquilles;
Ce n'est pas à présent votre jour, c'est le mien.
Tout est bon si ma mort enseigne, tout est bien
Si dans la vérité l'homme se désaltère.
Or je m'élèverai de dessus cette terre
Et j'attirerai tout à moi du haut du ciel.
Christ finit le combat commencé par Michel.

Son oeil devint étrange et semblait voir des choses
Au fond de son esprit confusément écloses.

— Les trois femmes en deuil dans la tombe entreront,
Marchant l’une après l’autre, humbles, courbant le front
A cause du lieu bas et de l’entrée étroite,
Et verront un jeune homme assis dans l’angle à droite
Qui leur dira, serein comme un soleil levant:
«Pourquoi donc chez les morts cherchez-vous le vivant?

La vision d’un être inouï qui se lève
Dans un sépulcre avec la lumière du rêve,
Fera fuir les soldats pleins d’un effroi sacré.

Trois jours après ma mort je ressusciterai;
Mais quand j’apparaîtrai blanc près de la fontaine,
Vous me verrez ainsi qu’une forme incertaine;
Madeleine croira que c’est le jardinier;
Thomas commencera par douter et nier,
Mais les trous de mes pieds le forceront à croire;
Et quand il aura mis dans ma blessure noire
Son doigt qu’il ôtera tiède et mouillé de sang,
Il s’en ira songer dans l’ombre en frémissant.

Priez. Ne livrez point ma doctrine aux querelles.
Est-ce que les épis sont pour les sauterelles?
Quand je serai parti, vous répandrez ma loi.
Beaucoup se tromperont, l’erreur naîtra de moi.
L’ombre est noire toujours même tombant des cygnes.

Quand je ne serai plus vous verrez de grands signes.
Les ténèbres croîtront sur le front d’Israël;
On entendra parler une voix dans le ciel,
Et tous regarderont l’ombre extraordinaire:
Luc dira: c’est un ange; et Jean, c’est le tonnerre.

Je porterai les cœurs ainsi que des fardeaux;
Des laboureurs feront des sillons sur mon dos;
Ces laboureurs, c’est vous; et votre œuvre est austère.
L’homme n’a rien, ni sac plein d’or, ni coin de terre,

Qu’il puisse regarder ici-bas comme sien.
Allez sans hésiter dire au pharisien:
«Prends garde à cette fange immonde où tu te vautres!”
Soyez doux. Aimez-vous toujours les uns les autres.

En cet instant Jésus tressaillit, se parla
A lui-même, et, fermant les yeux, dit: le voilà.

Judas parut suivi d’hommes armés d’épées.

IX. JUDAS

Et Judas s’approchant, blême et les mains crispées,
Baisa Christ.

Et le ciel sacré fut obscurci.

— Mon ami, dit Jésus, que viens-tu faire ici?

Puis il reprit, tourné vers Dieu:

- Tu m’abandonnes;
Mais je ne perds aucun de ceux que tu me donnes,
Seigneur. Ma mort suffit, et seul je la subis.
Le pasteur doit périr en sauvant les brebis.

Et, désignant du doigt ses disciples, le maître
Dit aux soldats:

- Le Christ est facile à connaître.
Je suis celui qu’on cherche et dont on a souci.
Me voilà. Prenez-moi. Laissez aller ceux-ci.

Or Simon surnommé Pierre avait une épée,
Il cria:
- Dieu par qui Jézabel fut frappée,
Viens défendre ton Christ, ô Dieu qui châtias
Hérode pour avoir fait mourir Mathias!

Et, levant son épée, il vint droit à la troupe,
Et blessa le premier qui s’offrit dans le groupe,
Un nommé Malchus, aide et garde du bourreau.
— Remettez, dit Jésus, votre épée au fourreau.
Qui frappe avec le glaive est frappé par le glaive.
Il reprit: - Puisqu’on a commencé, qu’on achève. -

Et se mit de lui-même au milieu des soldats.
Il ne regardait rien, pour épargner Judas.
Quelqu’un du temple dit: - Marchons. L’heure s’écoule.
— Vous pouviez me saisir tous les jours dans la foule,
Dit Jésus, en offrant aux cordes ses poignets;
Quand j’allais dans le temple et lorsque j’enseignais,
J’étais sous votre main. Vous n’aviez qu’à l’étendre;
Et c’est par trahison que vous venez me prendre!
Et vous venez la nuit comme pour un voleur!
Je pourrais dire à Dieu: Père, apparaissez-leur!
Et vous entendriez accourir les tempêtes,
Et vous verriez, tremblants, au-dessus de vos têtes,
S’ouvrir et flamboyer l’ombre, et des millions
D’anges, et tout l’abîme avec tous ses lions!
Et si j’ajoutais: Viens toi-même! vos prunelles
Verraient soudain, parmi les foudres éternelles,
Sortir de la nuée un front prodigieux!
Mais il ne convient pas que j’appelle les cieux;
Faites; car c’est ici votre heure, et la puissance
Des ténèbres, et Dieu vous livre l’innocence;
Et tout doit s’accomplir ainsi qu’il est écrit.

Alors on acheva de lier Jésus-Christ;
Et le chef dit: - Il faut l’emmener. Ce qu’ils firent.
Et tous ceux que cet homme avait aimés, s’enfuirent.

X. LILITH-ISIS

Ô Jean, visionnaire effaré de Pathmos,
Comme tu te cachais derrière les rameaux,
Avec saint Marc, alors jeune et l’un des lévites,
En vous penchant parmi les arbres noirs, vous vîtes
Sur la colline un être effrayant, vague, seul,
Debout dans le frisson livide d’un linceul;
C’était de l’ombre ayant la forme d’une femme;
Cet être guettait Christ dans cette troupe infâme,
Comme s’il était là pour une mission;
Or la bande aperçut, en rentrant dans Sion,
Cette femme fixant sur eux dans les ténèbres
Ses deux yeux qui semblaient deux étoiles funèbres;
Un d’eux, que le Toldos appelle Eddon-Azir,
Courut vers elle, et comme il allait la saisir,
L’être, pareil aux feux fuyant dans l’ossuaire,
Disparut, lui laissant dans les mains le suaire.

Et plus tard, les soldats, contant après l’arrêt
Comment ils avaient pris Jésus de Nazareth,
Dirent qu’ils avaient vu sur la montagne sombre
La fille de Satan, la grande femme d’ombre,
Cette Lilith qu’on nomme Isis au bord du Nil.

XI. JÉSUS CHEZ ANNE

Jésus lié marchait disant: Ainsi soit-il!

On le mena d'abord chez Anne, ancien grand-prêtre,
Pour qu'il attendit là l'heure de comparaître,
Des servantes, des gueux, des vendeurs de poissons,
Des sacrificateurs vêtus de caleçons,
Le flot des curieux qui passe et qui repasse,
Entouraient Christ assis dans une salle basse;
Il était nuit; mais Anne, étant levé déjà,
Descendit, vint trouver Christ, et l'interrogea.
Et Christ lui répondit: - Interrogez la foule.
J'ai versé mon esprit comme une eau qui s'écoule.
Prêtre, j'ai deux témoins: l'homme et le firmament.
Parlez-leur. J'enseignais partout publiquement.
Et quant à mon royaume, il n'est pas de la terre.
Je n'ai rien à vous dire et n'ai rien à vous taire.
Qu'est-ce que vous venez demander à présent? -
Un soldat le frappa de sa verge en disant:
— Est-ce ainsi qu'on répond à notre ancien grand-prêtre?
— Si j'ai mal dit, tu peux blâmer, dit le doux maître;
Mais si j'ai bien parlé, pourquoi me frappes-tu?
Anne disait, s'étant à la hâte vêtu:
— J'ai froid. - Et tous criaient: - C'est un impie! Exemple!
Châtiment! il a dit qu'il détruirait le temple,
Seigneur, et qu'en trois jours il le rebâtirait.
— Peuple, le tribunal prononcera l'arrêt,
Dit Anne, et non pas moi: car je n'en suis plus membre.

Et, leur laissant leur proie, il rentra dans sa chambre.

Alors, ayant bandé les yeux du patient,
Ils l'outragèrent, tous pêle-mêle, et criant:
— Devine qui te frappe! et prophétise, ô sage!

Dis-nous quel est celui qui te crache au visage?
Fais sécher, si tu peux, le poing qui te meurtrit,
Messie!

Et les valets souffletaient Jésus-Christ.

XII. LES DIX-NEUF

Le jour est loin encor, pas un rayon n'effleure
L'orient froid et noir, mais on devance l'heure.

Les juges, dont l'orgueil est d'aller lentement,
Montent au tribunal d'un air calme et dormant.
Le grand-prêtre en souliers, les prêtres en sandales,
Marchent tous à la file et traversent les dalles.
Chacun d'eux a son nom sur sa chaise gravé.
Le Gabbatha, qu'on nomme aussi le Haut-Pavé,
Est le palais lugubre où le tribunal siège.

Devant la porte, un vase, où sur l'eau flotte un liège,
Semble dire au passant, qui songe avec effroi:
L'eau c'est le peuple, et rien ne submerge la loi.

Le sanhédrin, sous qui la Judée est courbée,
Ebauché par Moïse, accru par Macchabée,
Depuis qu'il a subi l'arrogant examen
Du préteur Gabinus, oeil du sénat romain,
Se réfugie, ainsi qu'une orfraie effarée,
Dans une sorte d'ombre inquiète et sacrée;
Jadis le peuple vil qui fourmille au soleil
Parfois apercevait cet austère appareil
Que la loi triste emplit de sa vague colère,
Les tables, les gradins, la chambre circulaire,
Les docteurs dans leur chaire assis sur les hauteurs,
Les scribes dans leur stalle aux genoux des docteurs,
Et l'essaim des enfants aux robes incarnates,
Les lévites, épars à terre sur les nattes;
Maintenant tout est clos. C'est loin de tous les yeux
Que le Prince s'assied, spectre mystérieux,
Ayant le Père à droite, ayant le Sage à gauche;
C'est dans l'obscurité qu'on laboure et qu'on fauche;

Rome pouvant entendre, on cache les débats;
Le sanhédrin se mure et la loi parle bas.

Donc depuis Gabinus, ce sénat de prière
Qui s’assemble au lieu dit le Conclave de Pierre,
Ce sanhédrin qui fait une haie à la loi,
Qui seul sait le comment et seul dit le pourquoi,
Pour punir le blasphème a commis dix-neuf juges.
Ces dix-neuf, devant qui l’impie est sans refuges,
Comme Dieu sur l’Horeb sont sur le Gabbatha.

La salle est large et haute. Oliab la sculpta.
La nuit ne sort jamais de ce lieu sans fenêtres.
Une lampe suffit au front blême des prêtres.
Dix-neuf chaises de cèdre, au fond du cintre obscur,
Mêlent leur double étage aux ténèbres du mur;
On sent que là, vertu, crime, innocence et vice,
Tremblent devant cette ombre humaine, la justice.

La poussière des ans, près du plafond, ternit
Un chérubin ouvrant six ailes de granit.

Les taffilins, nommés par les grecs phylactères,
Couvrent la voûte; à l’or de leurs saints caractères,
Textes brumeux épars sur des plaques de fer,
La lampe par instant arrache un vague éclair.

Les juges, les voici: huit scribes, tête nue;
Quatre docteurs qu’emplit la science inconnue,
Ceints du taled, l’esprit hors du monde réel;
Et, mêlés aux docteurs, sept anciens d’Israël,
Vêtus de blanc, pensifs sous leurs turbans à mitres.

Sabaoth luit dans l’oeil de ces sombres arbitres.

En montant à sa place, ainsi qu’Aaron faisait,
Chaque juge récite à voix haute un verset;

On dirait que la loi farouche les enivre.

Le sciamas tient les clefs; le cazan tient le livre.

L’oeil fixé sur le texte écrit par David roi,
Les deux hommes nommés les Epoux de la Loi
Lisent, en alternant d’une grave manière,
L’un la première page et l’autre la dernière.

La lampe a quatre bras comme celle d’Endor.

Un degré de sithim étoilé de clous d’or
Exhausse un large trône en ivoire où préside
Caïphe destiné dans l’ombre au suicide.
Ses souliers sont de pourpre et sa robe est de lin;
Autour de chaque bras il porte un taffilin
Où l’on peut lire un vers résumant la doctrine;
Et le rational qu’il a sur la poitrine
Mêle à la majesté de ses sacrés habits
Tous les noms des tribus gravés sur des rubis;
Le grand-prêtre est assis, fatal comme un prophète;
Et l’on voit remuer vaguement sur sa tête,
Comme au vent de la nuit brille et tremble un fanal,
La tiare, clarté du sombre tribunal.

La rumeur des versets qu’on récite s’apaise;
On se tait; chaque juge est assis dans sa chaise.

Christ est debout devant ces hommes ténébreux;
Son oeil inépuisable en rayons luit sur eux.

XIII. LA CHOSE JUGÉE

L’huissier du dogme dit: - Silence! on délibère.
Gloire au Dieu saint! et gloire à l’empereur Tibère!

Rosmophim parle. Il dit: - « L’homme que vous voyez
«Rit des lois et des saints par Dieu même envoyés;
«Il se croit plus grand qu’eux et se prétend Messie.
«Il se dit Roi des Juifs. Il ment. L’arche est noircie,
«O Prêtres, par la nuit qui sort de ses discours.
«Cet homme doit mourir. Nos pères ont toujours
«Fait creuser des tombeaux par la loi violée.

Josaphat crie: - « A mort l’homme de Galilée!

«- Observons la loi, dit Achias de Membré.
«Il faut que par le prêtre au prince il soit livré,
«Et qu’Hérode l’envoie à Pilate. A quoi servent
«Des lois que ni le roi ni le juge n’observent?

Joseph de Ramatha dit: « L’homme est innocent.”

«- L’exil, dit Potiphar.

   - Non, dit Samech, du sang!”

Et Nicodemus dit: - « Il faut d’abord qu’on prouve.

«- D’abord, répond Teras, qu’on le tue! et qu’on trouve,
«Demain, puisque cet homme a dit: nous sommes trois;
«Deux voleurs pour l’aller compléter sur la croix;

«- Qu’il meure, dit Riphar, dans les formes prescrites.”

Gamaliel se lève. Il est le chef des rites;

Et ce maître inflexible a vu le premier vol
Du jeune aigle effrayant qui plus tard fut saint Paul.
Il parle, l'oeil au ciel: - « L'indulgence est un leurre.
«Juste ou non, attaquant les lois, il faut qu'il meure.

«- Non, réplique Joram, j'absous! Je pense, moi,
«Que les arrêts trop durs font mal vivre la loi;
«Il sied qu'à l'accusé le juge compatisse;
«Sur la sévérité des juges la justice
«Pleure comme l'enfant sut le pain noir qu'il mord.

«- Ce langage est payen, dit Saréas. La mort.

«- Mort! dit Elieris; il prêche le ravage.

«- Mort! répète Diras; il combat l'esclavage.

Et Sabinti s'indigne au nom du sanhédrin;
Il atteste le vase aux douze bœufs d'airain,
Et crie: « - A mort! qu'il meure! ou l'arche est abattue!"

Simon, qui fut plus tard lépreux, dit: « - Qu'on le tue."

Le sénateur Mesa se lève après Simon:
«- S'il dit vrai, c'est un dieu; s'il ment, c'est un démon.
«Donc il faut qu'on l'adore ou bien qu'on l'extermine.

«- Dieu, dit Ptoloméus, peut avoir sa vermine.

Et Rabam jette un cri dans la rumeur perdu:
«- Ne le condamnez pas sans l'avoir entendu!"

La sagesse commence et finit au pontife;
Tout arrêt doit venir du grand-prêtre.

   Caïphe
Se lève le dernier, la double corne au front;

Dressant cette tiare où toujours brilleront
Les deux rayons du chef de la terre promise,
Sombre, et plus ressemblant à Satan qu'à Moïse,
Il dit:

« - Mieux vaut la mort d'un homme que la mort
«D'un peuple, et du viol des lois le gibet sort;
«Il faut punir. Sinon, malheur! Quiconque hésite
«Est une âme de nuit que le démon visite;
«Le juge indulgent suit le crime comme un chien;
«Celui qui ne sait pas ces choses ne sait rien.

Puis, à demi tourné vers Jésus, il ajoute:

«- Sa voix fera peut-être écrouler cette voûte.
«Pourtant, parle. Est-il vrai que tu te sois vanté
«D'être le fils de Dieu saint dans l'éternité?

Christ répondit: - C'est vous, ô prêtre, qui le dites.

Et, comme on pouvait voir confusément écrites
Des sentences au mur que le temps effaçait,
Calme, il montrait du doigt aux juges ce verset:

«Le sage adore Dieu. Quiconque est esprit, l'aime.
«Le soleil n'est nié dans la sphère suprême
«Ni par l'astre Allioth, ni par l'étoile Algol.
«Quand Dieu luit, refuser de croire, c'est un vol.
«Celui qui nie est fils de celui qui dérobe."

Caïphe dit: Blasphème! et déchira sa robe,
Quoique cela lui fût défendu par la loi.
Et, pâle, il s'écria:

« - Paix à quiconque a foi!
«Moi, Caïphe, courbé sous le Seigneur, je pense
«Qu'on doit au mal la peine, au bien la récompense,

«Et qu’il faut éclairer ceux qu’un fourbe a déçus,
«Et je condamne à mort l’homme appelé Jésus.”

Un prêtre casse en deux une baguette noire.

Caïphe se rassied sur son trône d’ivoire.

On emmène Jésus.

Les juges restent seuls;
Leurs robes dans la nuit paraissent des linceuls;
Tous font silence autour de Caïphe en prière.

XIV. LA FIDÉLITE DU MEILLEUR

Une servante vint dans la cour et vit Pierre
Qui se chauffait, ouvrant ses mains devant le feu:

— Vous étiez, lui dit-elle, un des gens de ce dieu,
De ce Jésus, car c’est le nom dont on le nomme.

— Et Pierre répondit: - Femme, quel est cet homme?
Je ne le connais point.

Alors le coq chanta.

Cependant les bourreaux, au haut du Golgotha,
Creusaient la terre afin d’y planter la potence.

Dans la cour du grand-prêtre et parmi l’assistance,
Pierre pensait.

Quelqu’un tout à coup l’appela
Et cria: - Vous étiez avec cet homme-là.

Pierre dit: - Je ne sais ce que vous voulez dire.

Une femme, un moment après, se prit à rire,
Disant: - Vous connaissez l’homme qu’on juge ici.
Car vous êtes venu de Galilée aussi.

Sur quoi Pierre jura d’une exécrable sorte:
— Non! je n’ai jamais vu cet homme!

Sur la porte
Le coq chanta.

La nuit couvrait les noirs chemins.

Pierre, se souvenant, prit son front dans ses mains
Et se mit à pleurer amèrement dans l’ombre.

XV. L'AUTRE CHAISE D'IVOIRE

Les scribes, les docteurs, les prêtres en grand nombre,
Entourent, précédés d'un lévite crieur,
Dans la cour du prétoire un porche extérieur
Qui sous son dôme abrite une chaise d'ivoire.

Cette chaise a l'aspect farouche de la gloire;
Et l'on y sent le droit que donne au conquérant
Le peuple qu'on massacre et la ville qu'on prend.
A cette chaise monte un escalier de bronze.

Ils sont tous là, les Cent, les Dix-Neuf et les Onze.

Derrière eux, et tombant parfois sur le genou,
Vient Jésus qu'un soldat traîne par un licou
Comme un muletier tire une bête de somme.

L'avertisseur public, un avocat de Rome,
Le vieux Némurion Plancus, grammairien
De la loi, que plus tard fit changer Adrien,
Parle et dit ce qu'il faut qu'on évite ou qu'on suive:

Un homme est arrêté par les juifs; la loi juive
Le condamne; les juifs peuvent le lapider;
C'est leur droit; cela dit, qu'ont-ils à demander?
La lapidation leur paraît trop rapide;
Ils veulent qu'on le cloue et non qu'on le lapide;
Ils viennent supplier qu'on mène l'homme en croix.
Or ceci touche Rome, et César, et ses droits.
Doit-on crucifier l'homme? voilà l'affaire.
D'où vient que pour ce juif le sanhédrin préfère
A leur supplice hébreu le supplice romain?
Est-il rebelle? est-il voleur de grand chemin?
Cela n'est point prouvé par les juifs: c'est leur culte

Qui semble avoir souffert de l’homme quelque insulte;
Or jamais un dieu juif ne recevra d’affront
Dont César sentira la rougeur à son front.
Un blasphémateur juif est-il un parricide?
Ce sanhédrin le dit; que le préteur décide.
Ces peuples, après tout, respectent le tribun;
S’ils tiennent à la mort honteuse de quelqu’un,
César clément leur peut accorder cette grâce.

Pendant que Plancus parle, un murmure s’amasse
Dans l’auditoire plein de gestes et de voix;
Tous les prêtres hagards éclatent à la fois:

— Préteur! c’est ton devoir de crucifier l’homme!
Il s’est dit Roi des Juifs; il est rebelle à Rome;
Notre dogme est ici d’accord avec ta loi;
Et c’est nier César que de s’affirmer roi.

Un licteur sous le porche écoute sans colère.

Derrière le licteur est l’homme consulaire,
Ponce Pilate, assis, distrait, calme, indolent.

Son pied chaussé de pourpre est sur du marbre blanc;
Ce marbre, qui l’exhausse au fond de la coupole,
Pour les romains l’honore et pour les juifs l’isole;
Et nul autre que lui ne touche du talon
Cette dalle que fit placer là Corbulon,
Proconsul en l’an deux du consulat d’Octave.
Pilate, ancien préfet dans le pays batave,
Fut si fidèle au temps de la rébellion
Qu’Auguste lui donna sa villa de Lyon.
Il est procurateur, lieutenant consulaire.
Le port de Tyr lui paie un talent par galère;
Il possède à Cythère en Grèce, un revenu
Que lui doivent, le droit de César retenu,
Les chercheurs de corail et les pêcheurs d’éponges.

Sa femme Procula sait le secret des songes.
C’est un homme d’esprit prudent, d’âge moyen.
Le peuple juif méprise en tremblant ce payen.
Pilate autour du front porte trois bandelettes
Dont une est écarlate et deux sont violettes;
Sa laticlave blanche à bandes rouges pend
Sur un nain familier entre ses pieds rampant;
Dans son ombre un greffier écrit sur une table;
Quand on parle trop haut, le licteur redoutable
Fait un signe, le bruit des voix contrariant
Le préteur assoupi comme un roi d’orient.

Et, sculptée au dossier de sa chaise curule,
Pendant que de ces cœurs, où tant de haine brûle,
Sort le gibet infâme entrevu vaguement,
Au-dessus des avis, des voix, du jugement,
Au-dessus de ce tas de scribes et de prêtres,
Sur tous ces noirs complots, sur tous ces regards traîtres,
Sur tous ces vils orgueils, l’âpre louve d’airain
Dresse son bâillement sinistre et souverain.

XVI. ROSMOPHIM

Les fossoyeurs de croix piochent sur le Calvaire.
Le brouillard, ce manteau de deuil du ciel sévère,
Couvre le mont, où, seuls, ces hommes, loin du bruit,
Dans l’ombre, ont travaillé presque toute la nuit.
On entend le Cédron dont les eaux sont très grosses.
Ils s’arrêtent après avoir creusé deux fosses.
Et l’un d’eux, le plus vieux, dit aux autres: - Je crois
Que c’est tout; nous n’avons d’ordres que pour deux croix,
Pour deux larrons qu’on doit mettre à mort dans les fêtes;
Dismas et Gestas; or, les deux fosses sont faites.
Un prêtre en ce moment, Rosmophim de Joppé,
Qui vient de survenir, d’ombres enveloppé,
Sort de la brume ainsi qu’un tigre sort de l’antre,
Et leur dit: - Creusez-en une troisième au centre.

XVII. PIRE QUE JUDAS

Alors Judas sentit le poids des trente écus.
Par le mal qu'ils ont fait les hommes sont vaincus.
Il vint au temple et vit Caïphe sur la porte,
Et, lui montrant le sac, il dit: - Je le rapporte.
J'ai vendu l'innocent; reprends ton or. Malheur!
Caïphe! reprends tout. - Je serais un voleur.
Garde ton sac, va-t'en! répondit le grand-prêtre.
J'ai l'homme, et toi l'argent. Tout est comme il doit être.
Tu dois être content. - Non. Je suis réprouvé!
Dit Judas, et, jetant l'argent sur le pavé,
Il cria: - Je rends tout. Voilà toute la somme!
Et les prêtres riaient; et ce malheureux homme
S'en alla dans un lieu sinistre et se pendit.

Où? dans quel vil ravin? dans quel recoin maudit?
Comment ce criminel subit-il sa sentence?
De quel arbre effrayant fit-il une potence?
Est-ce à quelque vieux clou d'un mur qui pourrissait
Qu'il attacha le nœud vengeur? Nul ne le sait.
Cette corde à jamais flotte dans les ténèbres.

XVIII. LE CHAMP DU POTIER

Oh! des champs sont fatals, des charniers sont célèbres,
Des plaines et des mers sont sanglantes, parfois
Des vallons ont la marque effroyable des rois
L’odeur des attentats, la trace des carnages;
Des crimes monstrueux, comme des personnages,
Ont traversé des bois ou des rochers, qu’on voit
Avec peur, en mettant sur ses lèvres son doigt,
Ascalon est hideux, Josaphat est austère,
Le lac Asphalte est noir; mais pas un lieu sur terre
Ne te passe en horreur, funèbre Haceldama!
Les vases qu’un potier de ta fange forma
Tremblent dans la lueur trouble des catacombes
Et blêmissent ainsi que des urnes de tombes;
Sans doute, dans l’endroit implacable et profond,
Ce sont ces vases-là que portent sur le front
Les spectres, quand ils vont puiser de l’ombre au gouffre.
Ton nom semble tragique et fait d’un mot qui souffre,
Haceldama! ce mot crie ainsi qu’un blessé.

Le sac de Judas fut des prêtres ramassé.

Or ils cherchaient un lieu de sépulture vile
Pour les gentils mourant par hasard dans la ville,
Afin que l’étranger restât toujours dehors,
Et ne fût pas chez lui, même étant chez les morts.
Ils choisirent l’enclos du potier solitaire.

Les trente écus dont fut payé ce coin de terre
Avaient déjà servi pour payer Jésus-Christ.

Et ce lieu depuis lors est nocturne.

Il fleurit.

Il verdoie, et l’aurore en s’éveillant le touche,
Rien ne peut dissiper sa nuit; il est farouche.
Il appartient au deuil, au silence, au regard
Fixe et terrifiant de l’infini hagard;
Une chauve-souris éternelle l’effleure;
Toujours quel que soit l’astre et quelle que soit l’heure,
L’oeil dans ce champ lugubre entrevoit à demi
L’épouvantable argent par Judas revomi;
On sent là remuer des linceuls invisibles,
Le sang pend goutte à goutte aux brins d’herbes terribles,
Des vols mystérieux de larves font du vent
Sur le front du songeur ténébreux et rêvant,
Et de vagues blancheurs frissonnent dans la brume
Hélas!

XIX. ECCE HOMO

C’était, le jour de Pâque, une coutume
Fort ancienne, où les juifs et Rome étaient d’accord,
Que le peuple, parmi les condamnés à mort,
Choisit un misérable auquel on faisait grâce.

Prés du palais, lieu sombre où la foule s’entasse,
Se pressait, comme autour des ruches les essaims,
Le peuple de la ville et des pays voisins
Qu’un licteur contenait du manche de sa hache.
Les paysans, menant par la corde leur vache,
Les femmes apportant au marché leurs paniers,
Devant le seuil, gardé par douze centeniers,
S’arrêtaient, éclairés par l’aurore vermeille.
La rumeur de la fête avait depuis la veille
Vers les quatre coteaux de Sion dirigé
Les habitants d’Aser et ceux de Bethphagé,
Ceux de Naim et ceux d’Émath; et sur la place
Chaque faubourg avait versé sa populace;
On y voyait aller et venir, sans bâton,
Gais, l’oeil joyeux, des gens qui jadis, disait-on,
Blêmes, et mendiant aux portes des boutiques,
Etaient aveugles, sourds, boiteux, paralytiques,
Et que l’homme appelé le Christ avait guéris.
C’était la même foule aux tumultueux cris
Qui, naguère, agitant au vent des branches vertes,
Et les âmes à Dieu toutes grandes ouvertes,
Battant des mains, chantant des cantiques, courait
Dans les chemins devant Jésus de Nazareth.
Plusieurs l’avaient béni comme un dieu qu’on écoute;
Et, pour avoir jeté leurs manteaux sur sa route,
Ils avaient de la terre encore à leurs habits.
Deux hastati de Rome, aux casques bien fourbis,
Se promenaient devant la porte du prétoire;

Et des marchandes d’eau vendaient au peuple à boire,
Et les petits enfants jouaient aux osselets.

Tout à coup apparut sur le seuil du palais
Christ couronné d’épine et vêtu d’écarlate;
Il avait un roseau dans la main; et Pilate,
Le leur montrant, leur dit: Voilà l’homme.

Le Christ
Se taisait, l’oeil au ciel.

Et Pilate reprit:
— C’est aujourd’hui qu’on laisse un misérable vivre.
Peuple, lequel des deux veux-tu que je délivre:
Barabbas, ou Jésus nommé Christ; - Barabbas;
Cria le peuple. Alors, au-dessous de leur pas,
Ils crurent tous entendre on ne sait quel tonnerre
Rouler... - C’était quelqu’un qui riait sous la terre.

Ainsi jugeaient les juifs sous l’oeil froid des romains.

Ponce Pilate songe et se lave les mains.

XX. LA MARCHE AU SUPPLICE

La première heure allait finir quand de la geôle
Jésus sortit, portant une croix sur l'épaule;
On avait délié les cordes du poignet;
Ayant été battu de verges, il saignait;
On le huait; la loi frappe, le peuple accable;
La croix, démesurée, écrasante, implacable,
Dont la cognée à peine avait taillé les nœuds,
Etait faite d'un bois féroce et vénéneux,
Et qui semblait avoir déjà commis des crimes.

La foule, allant, courant, mangeant les pains azymes,
Chantant, montrait les poings à Christ des deux côtés
De la route où marchaient ses pas ensanglantés;
Des vierges, reflétant l'aube sur leur visage,
L'insultaient, et battaient des mains sur son passage,
Et riaient des cailloux déchirant ses talons;
Et l'on voyait des tas de têtes d'enfants blonds
Aux portes des maisons, pour la fête fleuries.

Quelques disciples, fronts baissés, les trois Maries,
Sa mère, le suivaient de loin dans le trajet.

L'oeil sinistre de Jean dans les gouffres plongeait.
Le jour, blême, fuyait. L'attente était profonde.

Quatre anges se tenaient aux quatre coins du monde;
Ces anges arrêtaient au vol les quatre vents,
Pour qu'aucun vent ne pût souffler sur les vivants,
Ni troubler le sommet des montagnes de marbre,
Ni soulever un flot, ni remuer un arbre.

XXI. TÉNÈBRES

Barabbas stupéfait est libre.
  Sous les plis
D’un brouillard monstrueux dont les cieux sont remplis,
La ville est un chaos de maisons et de rues.
Des geôliers tout à l’heure, en paroles bourrues
Racontant l’aventure entre eux confusément,
Ont ouvert son cachot, rompu son ferrement,
Puis ont dit: - Va; le peuple a fait grâce! - De sorte
Qu’il ne sait rien, sinon qu’on a poussé la porte,
Que le ciel est tout noir, que nul ne le poursuit,
Et qu’il peut s’envoler dans l’ombre, oiseau de nuit.
Ce choix qui fait mourir Jésus et le fait vivre,
Tout ce récit, lui semble un vin dont il est ivre;
Il erre dans la ville, il y rampe, il en sort,
Comme parfois on voit marcher quelqu’un qui dort.
Quelle route prend-il; La première venue.
Il avance, il hésite et cherche, et continue,
Et ne sait pas, devant l’obscure immensité;
Il a derrière lui les murs de la cité,
Mais il ne les voit pas; son front troublé s’incline;
Il ne s’aperçoit point qu’il monte une colline;
Monter, descendre, aller, venir, hier, aujourd’hui,
Qu’importe; il rôde, ayant comme un nuage en lui;
Il erre, il passe, avec de la brume éternelle
Et du songe et du gouffre au fond de sa prunelle.
Il se dit par moments: c’est moi qui marche. Oui.
Tout est si ténébreux qu’il est comme ébloui.

Le chemin qu’au hasard il suit, rampe et s’enfonce
Aux flancs d’un mont où croît à peine quelque ronce,
Et Barabbas pensif, gravissant le rocher,
Sans voir où vont ses pas laisse ses pieds marcher;
La vague horreur du lieu plaît à cette âme louve;

Or, tout en cheminant, de la sorte, il se trouve
Sur un espace sombre et qui semble un sommet;
Il s’arrête, puis tend les mains, et se remet
A rôder à travers la profondeur farouche.

Tout en marchant, il heurte un obstacle; il le touche;
— Quel est cet arbre; où donc suis-je; dit Barabbas.
Le long de l’arbre obscur il lève ses deux bras
Si longtemps enchaînés qu’il les dresse avec peine.
— Cet arbre est un poteau, dit-il. Il y promène
Ses doigts par la torture atroce estropiés;
Et tout à coup, hagard, pâle, il tâte des pieds.
Comme un hibou surpris rentre sous la feuillée,
Il retire sa main; elle est toute mouillée;
Ces pieds sont froids, un clou les traverse, et de sang
Et de fange et d’horreur tout le bois est glissant;
Barabbas éperdu recule; son oeil s’ouvre
Epouvanté, dans l’ombre épaisse qui le couvre,
Et, par degrés, un blême et noir linéament
S’ébauche à son regard sous l’obscur firmament;
C’est une croix.

En bas on voit un vase où plonge
Une touffe d’hysope entourant une éponge;
Et, sur l’affreux poteau, nu, sanglant, les yeux morts,
Le front penché, les bras portant le poids du corps,
Ceint de cordes de chanvre autour des reins nouées,
Le flanc percé, les pieds cloués, les mains clouées,
Meurtri, ployé, pendant, rompu, défiguré,
Un cadavre apparaît, blanc, et comme éclairé
De la lividité sépulcrale du rêve;
Et cette croix au fond du silence s’élève.

Barabbas, comme un homme en sursaut réveillé,
Tressaillit. C’était bien un gibet, froid, souillé,
Effroyable, fixé par des coins dans le sable.
Il regarda. L’horreur était inexprimable;

Le ciel était dissous dans une âcre vapeur
Où l’on ne sentait rien sinon qu’on avait peur;
Partout la cécité, la stupeur, une fuite
De la vie, éclipsée, effrayée, ou détruite;
Linceul sur Josaphat, suaire sur Sion;
L’ombre immense avait l’air d’une accusation;
Le monde était couvert d’une nuit infamante;
C’était l’accablement plus noir que la tourmente;
Pas une flamme, pas un souffle, pas un bruit.
Pour l’oeil de l’âme, avec ces lettres de la nuit
Qui rendent la pensée insondable lisible,
Une main écrivait au fond de l’invisible:
Responsabilité de l’homme devant Dieu.
Le silence, l’espace obscur, l’heure, le lieu,
Le roc, le sang, la croix, les clous, semblaient des juges;
Et Barabbas, devant cette ombre sans refuges
Frémit comme devant la face de la loi,
Et, regardant le ciel, lui dit: ce n’est pas moi;

Puis, fantôme lui-même en cette nuit stagnante,
Larve tout effarée et toute frissonnante,
Pâle, il se rapprocha lentement du gibet;
Et, tout en y marchant, craintif, il se courbait,
Plus chancelant qu’un mât sur la vague mouvante,
Fauve, et comme attiré, malgré son épouvante,
Par l’espèce de jour qui sortait de ce mort.
Spectre, il montait, avec une sorte d’effort,
Vers l’autre spectre, vague ainsi qu’un crépuscule;
Et cet homme avançait de l’air dont on recule,
Inquiet, hérissé, comme agité du vent,
Et prêt à fuir après chaque pas en avant.
Jésus mort répandait un rayonnement blême:
La mort comme n’osant s’achever elle-même,
Laissait flotter, au trou morne et sanglant des yeux,
Le reste d’un regard tendre et mystérieux;
Son front triste semblait s’éclairer à mesure
Que cet homme approchait d’une marche mal sûre;

Quand Barabbas fut près, la prunelle brilla.
Si quelque ange, venu des cieux, eût été là,
Il eût cru voir ramper dans l'horreur d'une tombe
Un serpent fasciné par l'oeil d'une colombe.

Et le bandit, courbé sous l'épaississement
De la brume croissant de moment en moment,
Contemplait, et la terre avait l'air orpheline;
L'ombre songeait.

Alors, sur cette âpre colline,
Et sous les vastes cieux désolés et ternis,
Comme si le frisson des pensers infinis
Tombait de cette croix ouvrant ses bras funèbres,
On ne sait quel esprit entra dans les ténèbres
De cet homme, et le fit devenir effrayant.
Un feu profond jaillit de son oeil foudroyant;
L'âme immense d'Adam, couché sous le Calvaire,
Sembla soudain monter dans ce voleur sévère,
Il éleva la voix tout à coup, du côté
Où les monts s'enfonçaient dans plus d'obscurité,
Cachant Jérusalem sous le brouillard perdue,
Et pendant qu'il parlait, jetant dans l'étendue,
L'anathème, les cris, les plaintes, les affronts,
Quelque chose qu'on vit plus tard sur d'autres fronts,
Une langue de flamme, au-dessus de sa tête
Brillait et volait, comme en un vent de tempête;
Et Barabbas debout, transfiguré, tremblant,
Terrible, cria:

- Peuple, affreux peuple sanglant,
Qu'as-tu fait; Ô Caïn, Dathan, Nemrod, vous autres,
Quel est ce crime-ci qui passe tous les nôtres;
Voilà donc ce qu'on fait des justes ici-bas;
Populace! à ses pieds jadis tu te courbas,
Tu courais l'adorer sur les places publiques,
Tu voyais sur son dos deux ailes angéliques,

Il était ton berger, ton guide, ton soutien.
Dès qu’un homme paraît pour te faire du bien,
Peuple, et pour t’apporter quelque divin message,
Pour te faire meilleur, plus fort, plus doux, plus sage,
Pour t’ouvrir le ciel sombre, espérance des morts,
Tu le suis d’abord, puis, tout à coup, tu le mords,
Tu le railles, le hais, l’insultes, le dénigres;
O troupeau de moutons d’où sort un tas de tigres;
Quel prix pour tant de saints et sublimes combats;
Celui-ci, c’est Jésus; ceci, c’est Barabbas.
L’archange est mort, et moi, l’assassin, je suis libre;
Ils ont mis l’astre avec la fange en équilibre,
Et du côté hideux leur balance a penché.
Quoi; d’une part le ciel, de l’autre le péché;
Ici, l’amour, la paix, le pardon, la prière,
La foudre évanouie et dissoute en lumière,
Les malades guéris, les morts ressuscités,
Un être tout couvert de vie et de clartés;
Là, le tueur, sous qui l’épouvante se creuse,
Tous les vices, le vol, l’ombre, une âme lépreuse,
Un brigand, d’attentats sans nombre hérissé... -
Oh; si c’était à moi qu’on se fût adressé,
Si, quand j’avais le cou scellé dans la muraille,
Pilate était venu me trouver sur ma paille,
S’il m’avait dit: « Voyons, on te laisse le choix,
C’est une fête, il faut mettre quelqu’un en croix,
Ou Christ de Galilée, ou toi la bête fauve;
Réponds, bandit, lequel des deux veux-tu qu’on sauve;”
J’aurais tendu mes poings et j’aurais dit: clouez;
Cieux; les rois sont bénis, les prêtres sont loués,
Le vêtement de gloire est sur l’âme de cendre;
Un gouffre était béant, l’homme vient d’y descendre;
Un crime restait vierge, il vient de l’épouser;
Oh; Caïn maintenant tue avec un baiser;
C’est fini; le dragon règne, le mal se fonde,
On ne chantera plus dans la forêt profonde,
Les hommes n’auront plus d’aurore dans leur cœur,

L’amour est mort, le deuil lamentable est vainqueur,
La dernière lueur s’éteint dans la nature;
Eux-mêmes ont de leur main fait cette fermeture
De la pierre effroyable et sourde du tombeau;
Puisque le vrai, le pur, le saint, le bon, le beau,
Est là sur ce poteau, tout est dit, rien n’existe.
L’homme est dorénavant abominable et triste,
Cette croix va couvrir d’échafauds les sommets;
Ce monde est de la proie; il aura désormais
L’obscurité pour loi, pour juge l’ignorance;
Vaincre sera pour lui la seule différence;
La mise en liberté des monstres lui convient;
Cette bête, la Nuit scélérate, le tient.
Le mal ne serait pas s’il n’avait pas une âme;
Cette chaîne d’horreur qui, dans ce monde infâme,
Commencée à César, s’achève à Barabbas,
Dépasse l’homme et va dans l’ombre encor plus bas;
Et, comme le serpent s’enfle sous la broussaille,
Je sens un être affreux qui sous terre tressaille.
Sois content, toi, là-bas, sous nos pieds; J’aperçois
Au fond de cette brume et devant cette croix
Ton grincement de dents, ce rire des ténèbres.
Et toi, vil monde, à race humaine, qui célèbres
Les rites de l’enfer sur des autels d’effroi,
Tremble en tes profondeurs; j’entends autour de toi
La réclamation des gueules de l’abîme.
Je demande à genoux pardon à ta victime;
Genre humain, ta noirceur en est là maintenant
Que le gibet saisit l’apôtre rayonnant,
Que sous le poids de l’ombre abjecte, l’aube expire,
Et que lui, le meilleur, périt sous moi, le pire;
Oh; je baise sa croix et ses pieds refroidis,
Et, monstrueusement sauvé par toi, je dis:
Malheur sur toi!

    Malheur, monde impur, lâche et rude;
Monde où je n’ai de bon que mon ingratitude,

Sois maudit par celui que tu viens d’épargner;
Puisse à jamais ce Christ sur ta tête saigner;
Qu’un déluge d’opprobre et de deuil t’engloutisse,
Homme, plus prompt à choir du haut de la justice
Que l’éclair à tomber du haut du firmament;
Sois maudit dans ces clous, dans ce gibet fumant,
Dans ce fiel! sois maudit dans ma chaîne brisée;
Sois damné, monde à qui le sang sert de rosée,
Pour m’avoir délivré, pour l’avoir rejeté,
Monde affreux qui fais grâce avec férocité,
Toi dont l’aveuglement crucifie et lapide,
Toi qui n’hésites pas sur l’abîme, et, stupide,
N’as pas même senti frissonner un cheveu
Dans ce choix formidable entre Satan et Dieu.

III. LE CRUCIFIX

Depuis ce jour, pareille au damné qui rend compte,
La morne humanité, sur qui pèse la honte
Des justes condamnés et des méchants absous,
Est comme renversée en arrière au-dessous
D’une vision triste, éternelle et terrible.
Un Calvaire apparaît dans la nuée horrible
Que tout le genre humain regarde fixement;
Une lividité de crâne et d’ossement
Couvre ce mont difforme où monte un homme pâle;
L’homme porte une croix, et l’on entend son râle,
Ses pieds dans les cailloux saignent, ses yeux noyés
Pleurent, pleins de crachats qu’on n’a pas essuyés,
Le sang colle et noircit ses cheveux sur sa tempe;
Et l’homme, que la croix accable, tombe, rampe,
Se traîne, et sur ses mains retombe, et par moment
Ne peut plus que lever son front lugubrement.

Et l’oeil du genre humain frémissant continue
De regarder monter cet homme dans la nue.

Une tourbe le suit; il arrive au plateau;
D’infâmes poings crispés arrachent son manteau;
Cris féroces; va donc! pas de miséricorde;
Il va, montrant son dos rouge de coups de corde,
Hué par l’aboiement et mordu par les crocs
D’on ne sait quel vil peuple, envieux des bourreaux;
Au milieu des affronts il est comme une cible.
On étend l’homme, nu comme un Adam terrible,
Sur le gibet qu’il a traîné dans le chemin;
On enfonce des clous dans ses mains; chaque main
Jette un long flot de sang à celui qui la cloue,
Et le bourreau blasphème en essuyant sa joue;
La foule rit. On cloue après les mains, les pieds;

Le marteau maladroit meurtrit ses doigts broyés;
On appuie à son front la couronne d'épines;
Puis, entre deux bandits expiant leurs rapines,
On élève la croix en jurant, en frappant,
En secouant le corps qui se disloque et pend;
Le sang le long du bois en ruisseaux rouges coule;
Et la mère est en bas qui gémit; et la foule
Rit: - Voyons, dieu Jésus, descends de cette croix; -
Une éponge de fiel se dresse. - As-tu soif? bois; -
Le peuple horrible a l'air du loup dans le repaire;
Et le grand patient dit: - Pardonnez-leur, Père,
Car ces infortunés ne savent ce qu'ils font.

Et voici que la terre avec le ciel se fond.
Nuit! ô nuit; tout frémit, même le prêtre louche.
Et soudain, à ce cri qui sort de cette bouche:
— Elohim; Elohim; lamma sabacthani! -
On voit un tremblement au fond de l'infini,
Et comme un blême éclair qui tressaille et qui sombre
Dans l'immobilité formidable de l'ombre.
Et pendant que les cœurs, les mains jointes, les yeux,
Sont éperdus devant ce gibet monstrueux,
Pendant que, sous la brume épouvantable où tremble
Ce crime qui contient tous les crimes ensemble,
Brume où Judas recule, où chancelle la croix,
Où le centurion s'étonne et dit: je crois;
Pendant que, sous le poids de l'action maudite,
Sous Dieu saignant, l'effroi du genre humain médite,
Des voix parlent, on voit des songeurs bégayants,
La pitié se déchire en récits effrayants.
La tradition, fable errante qu'on recueille,
Entrecoupée ainsi que le vent dans la feuille,
Apparaît, disparaît, revient, s'évanouit,
Et, tournoyant sur l'homme en cette étrange nuit,
La légende sinistre, éparse dans les bouches,
Passe, et dans le ciel noir vole en haillons farouches;
Si bien que cette foule humaine a la stupeur

Du fait toujours présent là-haut dans la vapeur,
Vrai, réel, et pourtant traversé par des rêves.

•

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«Comme il montait, suant et piqué par les glaives,
«Une femme eut pitié, le voyant prêt à choir,
«Et l’essuya, posant sur son iront un mouchoir;
«Or, quand elle rentra chez elle, cette femme
«Vit sur le mouchoir sombre une face de flamme.”

.
«Comme il continuait de monter, tout en sang,
«Il s’arrêta, livide, épuisé, fléchissant
«Sous la croix exécrée et l’infâme anathème,
«Un homme lui cria: marche; - Marche toi-même,
«Dit Jésus-Christ. Et l’homme est errant à jamais.”

.
«Un des voleurs lui dit: - Faux dieu; tu blasphémais!
«Es-tu dieu; Sauve-nous et sauve-toi toi-même;
«L’autre voleur cria: - Jésus; je crois! je t’aime!
«Souviens-toi qu’un mourant s’est à toi confié!
«Alors, levant ses yeux vers ce crucifié,
«Jésus agonisant parvint à lui sourire:
«- Homme, pour avoir dit ce que tu viens de dire,
«O voleur sur la croix misérable expirant,
«Tu vas entrer aux cieux, et tu seras plus grand
«Qu’un empereur portant la couronne et le globe.”

.
«Ils se sont partagé le manteau, mais la robe
«N’ayant pas de couture, ils l’ont jouée aux dés.”

.
«De six à neuf, les monts furent d’ombre inondés;
«Toute la terre fut couverte de ténèbres;

«Comme si quelque main eût ployé ses vertèbres,
«Il baissa tout à coup la tête, et dans ses yeux
«Lugubres apparut la profondeur des cieux;
«Et, poussant un grand cri, Jésus expira. L’ombre
«Monta, fumée infâme, aux étoiles sans nombre;
«Dans le temple, les bœufs d’airain firent un pas,
«Le voile se fendit en deux du haut en bas.
«Hors des murs, il se fit un gouffre où se dressèrent
«D’affreux êtres sur qui les rochers se resserrent
«Et que la vaste fange inconnue enfouit;
«Et tout devint si noir que tout s’évanouit;
«Les sépulcres, s’ouvrant subitement, restèrent
«Béants, montrant leur cave où les taupes déterrent
«Les squelettes couchés dans des draps en lambeaux;
«Des morts pâles, étant sortis de leurs tombeaux,
«Furent vus par plusieurs personnes dans la ville.”

.
Ainsi sur ce troupeau frémissant, immobile,
Lugubre et stupéfait, qu’on nomme Humanité,
Tombent, du fond de l’ombre et de l’éternité,
On ne sait quels lambeaux de chimère et d’histoire
Et de songe, où l’enfer mêle sa lueur noire.
Et l’on a peur du ciel qui saigne à l’orient.
Et l’ouragan est plein de spectres s’écriant:
O nations; le meurtre éternel se consomme;
Et, parmi tous les mots que peut prononcer l’homme
Pas un, si frissonnant qu’il fût, ne suffirait
A peindre cette horreur de tombe et de forêt,
Le sourd chuchotement des quatre évangélistes,
Et l’agitation des grandes ailes tristes
Qu’en ce gouffre de deuil et de rébellion
Dressent l’aigle, le bœuf, l’archange et le lion.
Dix-huit cents ans ont pu s’écouler sans que l’homme,
Autour duquel mouraient Byzance, Athène et Rome,
Et passait Charlemagne et montait Mahomet,
Ait quitté du regard cette croix, ce sommet,

Cette blancheur sanglante, et ces lueurs divines
Sous l’entrelacement monstrueux des épines;
Et sans qu’il ait cessé d’entendre un seul moment
L’immense cri jeté dans le noir firmament,
Et lisible à jamais sur ce sombre registre,
Et le déchirement du grand voile sinistre,
Et dans l’obscurité consciente, au-dessus
De ce gibet où pend l’être appelé Jésus,
Au-dessus des songeurs étudiant les bibles,
Le sanglot effrayant des bouches invisibles.
Quand donc pourra-t-on dire: Hommes, le mal n’est plus;
Quand verra-t-on finir le flux et le reflux;

O nuit! ce qui sortit de Jésus, c’est Caïphe.
Le tigre, ayant encor de ce sang à la griffe,
Remonta sur l’autel et dit: je suis l’agneau.
Christ, ce libérateur, ne brisa qu’un anneau
De la chaîne du mal, du meurtre et de la guerre;
Lui mort, son dogme, hélas! servit à la refaire;
La tiare s’accrut de son gibet. Jésus,
Dans les cieux au-delà du sépulcre aperçus,
S’en alla, comme Abel, comme Job, comme Elie;
Quand il eut disparu, l’œuvre étant accomplie,
En même temps qu’au loin se répandait sa loi:
«- Vivez! aimez; marchez! délivrez! ayez foi! -”
Le serpent relevait son front dans les décombres,
Et l’on vit, ô frisson! ô deuil! des prêtres sombres
Aiguiser des poignards à ses préceptes saints,
Et de l’assassiné naître des assassins!
Ghisleri, Borgia, Caraffa, Dominique!... -
Faites donc que jamais l’homme ne soit inique,
Et que jamais le prêtre, impie et solennel,
N’emploie à quelque usage infâme l’Eternel!
La flagellation du Christ n’est pas finie.
Tout ce qu’il a souffert dans sa lente agonie,
Au mont des oliviers et dans les carrefours,
Sous la croix, sur la croix, il le souffre toujours.

Après le Golgotha, Jésus, ouvrant son aile,
A beau s'être envolé dans l'étoile éternelle;
il a beau resplendir, superbe et gracieux,
Dans la sérénité magnifique des cieux,
Dans la gloire, parmi les archanges solaires,
Au-dessus des douleurs, au-dessus des colères,
Au-dessus du nuage âpre et confus des jours;
Chaque fois que sur terre et dans nos temples sourds
Et dans nos vils palais, des docteurs et des scribes
Versent sur l'innocent leurs lâches diatribes,
Chaque fois que celui qui doit enseigner, ment,
Chaque fois que d'un traître il jaillit un serment,
Chaque fois que le juge, après une prière,
Jette au peuple ce mot: Justice! et, par-derrière,
Tend une main hideuse à l'or mystérieux,
Chaque fois que le prêtre, époussetant ses dieux,
Chante au crime Hosanna, bat des mains aux désastres,
Et dit: gloire à César! Là-haut, parmi les astres,
Dans l'azur qu'aucun souffle orageux ne corrompt,
Christ frémissant essuie un crachat sur son front.
— Torquemada, j'entends le bruit de ta cognée.
Tes bras sorti nus, ta face est de sueur baignée;
À quoi travailles-tu seul dans ton noir sentier; -
Torquemada répond: - Je suis le charpentier.
Et j'ai la hache au poing dans ce monde où nous sommes.
— Qu'est-ce donc que tu fais; - Un bûcher pour les hommes
— Avec quel bois; - Avec la croix de Jésus-Christ.
Après avoir courbé sous la loi qui flétrit
Et sous la loi qui tue, hélas! cet être auguste,
Après avoir cloué sur le gibet ce juste
D'où ruisselle le sang et d'où le pardon sort,
Devant l'obscurité des sentences de mort,
Devant l'affreux pouvoir d'ôter la vie, et d'être
Celui qui fait mourir, mais qui ne fait pas naître,
Devant le tribunal, devant le cabanon,
Devant le glaive, l'homme a-t-il reculé? non.
Sous cette croix que charge une horreur inconnue,

Ce qu’on nomme ici-bas Justice, continue.
Ce spectre aveugle et sourd, dont l’ombre est le manteau,
A peine se souvient d’avoir à ce poteau
Attaché cette immense innocence étoilée.

En présence du bien, du mal, dans la mêlée
Des fautes, des erreurs, où le juste périt,
Pas un juge n’a peur de ce mot: Jésus-Christ!
Le Calvaire n’a point découragé la Grève;
Montfaucon à côté du Golgotha s’élève;
Et le Messie a pu mourir sans éclairer.
L’homme n’a pas cessé de se dénaturer
Dans le tragique orgueil de condamner son frère.
L’ouverture hideuse, infâme, téméraire,
Du sépulcre au milieu des lois, c’est là le port;
Et le noir genre humain s’abrite dans la mort.

Tristes juges! ô deuil! quoi! pas un ne s’arrête!
Le grand spectre qui porte au-dessus de sa tête
L’écriteau ténébreux et flamboyant: INRI,
Pâle, éploré, sanglant, fouetté, percé, meurtri,
Pend devant eux au bois de la croix douloureuse,
Tandis que chaque mot prononcé par eux, creuse
Une fosse dans l’ombre et dresse un échafaud:
A mort cet homme! à mort cette femme! il le faut!
A mort le fils du peuple! à mort l’enfant du chaume!
— Vous ne voyez donc pas mes clous! dit le fantôme.
Et que de justes morts! Que de bons condamnés!
Que de saints, d’un arrêt infâme couronnés!
O martyre! escalade horrible du supplice!
Le meurtre fier, sacré, public; la loi complice!
Flots du sang innocent! Si, sur quelque sommet,
L’homme des anciens jours, Jacob se rendormait,
il reverrait encore une ascension d’anges,
Pensifs, purs, tout baignés de lumières étranges,
Montant l’un après l’autre, ayant de l’orient
Et de l’immensité sur leur front souriant,

Ceux-ci levant leurs mains, ceux-là dressant leur aile,
Calmes, éblouissants, sereins, et cette échelle,
Sœur de celle que l'ombre à ses yeux dérobait,
Hélas, n'aboutit pas au ciel, mais au gibet.
Oh! puisque c'est ainsi que les choses sont faites,
Puisque toujours la terre égorge ses prophètes,
Qu'est-ce qu'on doit penser et croire, ô vastes cieux!
Contre la vérité le prêtre est factieux;
Tous les cultes, soufflant l'enfer de leurs narines,
Mâchent des ossements mêlés à leurs doctrines;
Tous se sont proclamés vrais sous peine de mort;
Pas un autel sur terre, hélas, n'est sans remord.
Les faux dieux ont partout laissé leur cicatrice
A la nature, sainte et suprême matrice;
Partout l'homme est méchant, cœur vil sous un oeil fier,
Et mérite la chute immense de l'éclair;
Toute divinité dans ses mains dégénère
En idole, et devient digne aussi du tonnerre.
Qui donc a tort; qui donc a raison; que penser;
Dieu semble chaque jour plus avant s'enfoncer
Dans la profondeur sourde et fatale du vide;
Le Zend est ténébreux; le Talmud est livide;
Nul ne sait ce qu'un temple, et le dieu qu'on y sent,
Aime mieux voir fumer, de l'encens, ou du sang;
Toute église a le meurtre infiltré dans ses dalles;
Les chaires font en bas d'inutiles scandales,
Les foudres font en haut d'inutiles éclairs;
Ce qu'on doit faire avec ce qu'on doit croire, hélas!
Presque toujours conteste et rarement s'accorde.
L'abîme profond s'ouvre; un dogme est une corde
Qui pend dans l'ombre énorme et se perd dans le puits.
Ainsi mourut Jésus; et les peuples depuis,
Atterrés, ont senti que l'inconnu lui-même
Leur était apparu dans cet Homme Suprême,
Et que son évangile était pareil au ciel.
Le Golgotha, funeste et pestilentiel,
Leur semble la tumeur difforme de l'abîme;

Fauve, il se dresse au fond mystérieux du crime;
Et le plus blême éclair du gouffre est sur ce lieu
Où la religion, sinistre, tua Dieu.

HORS DE LA TERRE III

Satan dans la nuit

I

Je l’aime! - Nuit, cachot sépulcral, mort vivante,
Ombre que mon sanglot ténébreux épouvante,
Solitudes du mal où fuit le grand puni,
Glaciers démesurés de l’hiver infini,
O flots du noir chaos qui m’avez vu proscrire,
Désespoir dont j’entends le sombre éclat de rire,
Vide où s’évanouit l’être, le temps, le lieu,
Gouffres profonds, enfers, abîmes; j’aime Dieu.
Je l’aime. C’est fini. - Lumière; fiancée
De tout esprit; soleil! feu de toute pensée;
Vie! où donc êtes-vous; Je vous cherche. O tourment!
La création vit dans l’éblouissement;
O regard éclatant de l’aube idolâtrée,
Rayon dont la nature est toute pénétrée!
Les fleuves sont joyeux dans l’herbe; l’horizon
Resplendit; le vent court; des fleurs plein le gazon,
Des oiseaux, des oiseaux, et des oiseaux encore;
Tout cela chante, rit, aime, inondé d’aurore;
Le tigre dit: et moi! je veux ma part du ciel! -
L’aube dore le tigre et l’offre à l’Eternel.

Moi seul je reste affreux! Hélas, rien n’est immonde.
Moi seul, je suis la honte et la tache du monde.
Ma laideur, vague effroi des astres soucieux,
Perce à travers ma nuit et va salir les cieux.
Je ne vois rien, étant maudit; mais dans l’espace
J’entends, j’entends dans l’eau qui fuit, dans l’air qui passe,
J’entends dans l’univers ce murmure: va-t’en!
Le porc dit au fumier: je méprise Satan.
Je sens la nuit penser que je la déshonore.
Le tourbillonnement du grand souffle sonore,

Le vent du matin, libre et lâché dans le ciel,
Evite mon front morne et pestilentiel.

Jadis, ce jour levant, cette lueur candide,
C’était moi. - Moi! - J’étais l’archange au front splendide,
La prunelle de feu de l’azur rayonnant,
Dorant le ciel, la vie et l’homme; maintenant
Je suis l’astre hideux qui blanchit l’ossuaire.
Je portais le flambeau, je traîne le suaire;
J’arrive avec la nuit dans ma main; et partout
Où je vais, surgissant derrière moi, debout,
L’hydre immense de l’ombre ouvre ses ailes noires.

Les profonds infinis croisent leurs promontoires.
Tout devant moi, vers qui jadis l’amour vola,
Recule et fuit.

Je fus envieux. Ce fut là
Mon crime. Tout fut dit, et la bouche sublime
Cria: mauvais! et Dieu me cracha dans l’abîme.

Oh! je l’aime! c’est là l’horreur, c’est là le feu!
Que vais-je devenir, abîmes; J’aime Dieu!
Je suis damné!
II

L’enfer, c’est l’absence éternelle.
C’est d’aimer. C’est de dire: hélas! où donc est-elle,
Ma lumière; Où donc est ma vie et ma clarté;
Elle livre aux regards éperdus sa beauté.
Elle sourit là-haut à d’autres; d’autres baisent
Sa robe, et dans ses bras s’enivrent et s’apaisent;
D’autres l’ont. Désespoir!

Oh; quand je fus jeté
Du haut de la splendeur dans cette cécité,
Après l’écroulement de l’ombre sur ma tête,

Après la chute, nu, précipité du faîte
A jamais, à la tombe inexorable uni,
Quand je me trouvai seul au bas de l'infini,
J'eus un moment si noir que je me mis à rire;
La vaste obscurité m'emplit de son délire,
Je sentis dans mon cœur, où mourait Dieu détruit,
La plénitude étrange et fauve de la nuit,
Et je criai, joyeux, triomphant, implacable:
— « Guerre à ces firmaments dont la lumière accable!
«Guerre à ce ciel où Dieu met tant de faux attraits!
«Il a cru m'en chasser, c'est moi qui m'y soustrais.
«Il me croit prisonnier, je suis libre. Je plane.
«Et le démon, c'est l'aigle, et le monde, c'est l'âne.
«Et je ris. Je suis fier et content. J'ai quitté
«Les anges vains, abjects, vils, et toi, la clarté,
«Qui les corromps, et toi, l'amour, qui les subornes!
«O gouffres, quel bonheur que la haine sans bornes!
«Ce Dieu, ce cœur de Tout, ce père lumineux
«Que l'ange, l'astre, l'homme, et la bête, ont en eux,
«Ce pasteur près de qui le troupeau se resserre,
«Cet être, seul vivant, seul vrai, seul nécessaire,
«Je vais m'en passer, moi le colosse puni!
«C'est bien. Comme je vais maudire ce béni,
«Et faire contre lui, tandis qu'Adam l'encense,
«De la révolte avec mon ancienne puissance
«Et de la flamme avec les rayons que j'avais!
«Comme je vais rugir sur lui! Comme je vais,
«Moi l'affreux face à face avec lui le suprême,
«Le haïr, l'exécrer et l'abhorrer!" - Je l'aime!
..

DANS L'AIR

CHANSON DES OISEAUX

Vie! ô bonheur! bois profonds,
Nous vivons.
L'essor sans fin nous réclame;

Planons sur l’air et les eaux!
Les oiseaux
Sont de la poussière d’âme.

Accourez, planez! volons
Aux vallons,
A l’antre, à l’arbre, à l’asile!
Perdons-nous dans cette mer
De l’éther
Où la nuée est une île!

Du fond des rocs et des joncs
Des donjons,
Des monts que le jour embrase,
Volons, et, frémissants, fous,
Plongeons-nous
Dans l’inexprimable extase!

Oiseaux, volez aux clochers,
Aux rochers,
Au précipice, à la cime,
Aux glaciers, aux lacs, aux prés;
Savourez
La liberté de l’abîme!

Vie! azur! rayons! frissons!
Traversons
La vaste gaîté sereine,
Pendant que sur les vivants,
Dans les vents,
L’ombre des nuages traîne!

Avril ouvre à deux battants
Le printemps;
L’été le suit, et déploie
Sur la terre un beau tapis
Fait d’épis,

D’herbe, de fleurs, et de joie.

Buvons, mangeons; becquetons
Les festons
De la ronce et de la vigne;
Le banquet dans la forêt
Est tout prêt;
Chaque branche nous fait signe.

Les pivoines sont en feu;
Le ciel bleu
Allume cent fleurs écloses;
Le printemps est pour nos yeux
Tout joyeux
Une fournaise de roses.

Tu nous dores aussi tous,
Feu si doux
Qui du haut des cieux ruisselles;
Les aigles sont dans les airs
Des éclairs,
Les moineaux des étincelles.

Nous rentrons dans les rayons;
Nous fuyons
Dans la clarté notre mère;
L’oiseau sort de la forêt
Et paraît
S’évanouir en lumière.

Parfois on rampe accablé
Dans le blé,
Mais juillet a pour ressource
L’ombre, où, loin des chauds sillons,
Nous mouillons
Nos pieds roses dans la source.

Depuis qu’ils sont sous les cieux,
Soucieux
Du bonheur de la prairie,
L’herbe et l’arbre chevelu
Ont voulu
Dans leur tendre rêverie

Qu’à jamais le fruit, le grain,
L’air serein,
L’amourette, la nichée,
L’aube, la chanson, l’appât,
Occupât
Notre joie effarouchée.

Vivons! chantons! Tout est pur
Dans l’azur;
Tout est beau dans la lumière;
Tour vers son but, jour et nuit,
Est conduit;
Sans se tromper, le fleuve erre.

Toute la campagne rit;
Un esprit
Palpite sous chaque feuille;
— Aimons! murmure une voix
Dans les bois;
Et la fleur veut qu’on la cueille.

Quand l’iris a diapré
Tout le pré,
Quand le jour plus tiède augmente,
Quand le soir luit dans l’étang
Eclatant,
Quand la verdure est charmante,

Que dit l’essaim ébloui;
Oui! oui! oui!

Les collines, les fontaines,
Les bourgeons verts, les fruits mûrs,
Les azurs
Pleins de visions lointaines,

Le champ, le lac, le marais,
L’antre frais,
Composent, sans pleurs ni mine,
Et font monter vers le ciel
Eternel
L’affirmation sereine!

L’aube et l’éblouissement
Vont semant
Partout des perles de flamme;
L’oiseau n’est pas orphelin;
Tout est plein
De la mystérieuse âme!

Quelqu’un que l’on ne voit pas
Est là-bas
Dans la maison qu’on ignore;
Et cet inconnu bénit
Notre nid,
Et sa fenêtre est l’aurore.

Et c’est à cause de lui
Que l’appui
Jamais ne manque à nos ailes,
Et que les colombes vont
Sur le mont
Boire où boivent les gazelles.

Grâce à ce doux inconnu,
Adam nu
Nous souriait sous les branches;
Le cygne sous le bouleau

A de l’eau
Pour laver ses plumes blanches.

Grâce à lui, le piquebois
Vit sans lois,
Chéri des pins vénérables,
Et délivrant des fourmis
Ses amis
Les tilleuls et les érables.

Grâce à lui, le passereau
Du sureau
S’envole, et monte au grand orme;
C’est lui qui fait le buisson
De façon
Qu’on y chante et qu’on y dorme.

Il nous met tous à l’abri,
Colibri,
Chardonneret, hochequeue,
Tout l’essaim que l’air ravit
Et qui vit
Dans la grande lueur bleue.

A cause de lui, les airs
Et les mers,
Les bois d’aulnes et d’yeuses
La sauge en fleur, le matin,
Et le thym,
Sont des fêtes radieuses;

Les blés sont dorés, les cieux
Spacieux,
L’eau joyeuse et l’herbe douce;
Mais il se fiche souvent
Quand le vent
Nous vole nos brins de mousse.

Il dit au vent: - Paix, autan;
Et va-t’en;
Laisse mes oiseaux tranquilles.
Arrache, si tu le veux,
Leurs cheveux
De fumée aux sombres villes! -

Celui sous qui nous planons
Sait nos noms.
Nous chantons. Que nous importe;
Notre humble essor ignorant
Est si grand!
Notre faiblesse est si forte!

La tempête au vol tonnant,
Déchaînant
Les trombes, les bruits, les grêles,
Fouettant, malgré leurs sanglots,
Les grands flots,
S’émousse à nos plumes frêles.

Il veut les petits contents,
Le beau temps,
Et l’innocence sauvée;
Il abaisse, calme et doux,
Comme nous,
Ses ailes sur sa couvée.

Grâce à lui, sous le hallier
Familier
A notre aile coutumière,
Sur les mousses de velours,
Nos amours
Coulent dans de la lumière.

Il est bon; et sa bonté

C’est l’été;
C’est le charmant sorbier rouge;
C’est que rien ne vienne à nous
Dans nos trous
Sans que le feuillage bouge.

Sa bonté, c’est Tout; c’est l’air,
Le feu clair,
Le bois où, dans la nuit brune,
Ta chanson, qui prend son vol,
Rossignol,
Semble un rêve de la lune.

C’est ce qu’au gré des saisons
Nous faisons;
C’est le rocher que l’eau creuse;
C’est l’oiseau, des vents bercé,
Composé
D’une inquiétude heureuse.

Il est puissant, étoilé,
Et voilé.
Le soir, avec les murmures
Des troupeaux qu’on reconduit,
Et le bruit
Des abeilles sous les mûres,

Avec la nuit sur les toits,
Sur les bois,
Sur les montagnes prochaines,
C’est sa grandeur qui descend,
Et qu’on sent
Dans le tremblement des chênes.

Il n’eut qu’à vouloir un jour,
Et l’amour
Devint l’harmonie immense;

Tous les êtres étaient là;
Il mêla
Sa sagesse à leur démence.

Il voulut que tout fût un;
Le parfum
Eut pour sœur l’aurore pure;
Et les choses, se touchant
Dans un chant,
Furent la sainte nature.

Il mit sur les flots, profonds
Les typhons;
Il mit la fleur sur la tige;
Il se montra fulgurant
Dans le grand;
Le petit fut son prodige.

Avec la même beauté
Sa clarté
Créa l’aimable et l’énorme;
Il fit sortir l’alcyon
Du rayon
Qui baise la mer difforme.

L’effrayant devint charmant;
L’élément,
Monstre, colosse, fantôme,
Par Lui, qui le veut ainsi,
Radouci,
Vint s’accoupler à l’atome.

On vit alors dans Ophir
L’humble asfir
Vert comme l’hydre farouche;
Le flamboiement de l’Etna
Rayonna

Sur l’aile de l’oiseau-mouche.

Vie est le mot souverain,
Et serein,
Sans fin, sans forme, sans nombre,
Tendre, inépuisable, ardent,
Débordant
De toute la terre sombre.

L’aube se marie au soir;
Le bec noir
Au bec flamboyant se mêle;
L’éclair, mâle affreux, poursuit
Dans la nuit
La mer, sa rauque femelle.

Volons, volons, et volons!
Les sillons
Sont rayés, et l’onde est verte.
La vie est là sous nos yeux,
Dans les cieux,
Claire et toute grande ouverte.

Hirondelle, fais ton nid,
Le granit
T’offre son ombre et ses lierres;
Aux palais pour tes amours
Prends des tours,
Et de la paille aux chaumières.

Le nid que l’oiseau bâtit
Si petit,
Est une chose profonde;
L’œuf ôté de la forêt
Manquerait
A l’équilibre du monde.
..

III

Si je ne l’aimais point, je ne souffrirais pas.
Laissez-moi remonter, gouffres! - Non, pas à pas,
Je descends, je m’enfonce, à chaque effort je glisse
Plus avant. Le malheur de la nuit, son supplice,
C’est d’adorer le jour et de rester la nuit.
Cet amour, c’est l’horreur, et le mal est son fruit.
O ma lumière, où donc es-tu; Satan t’implore.
M’entends-tu, dis? reviens, aurore, aurore, aurore!
Ne leur dis pas: toujours; ne me dis pas: jamais;
Je souffre! - oh; tout est noir, je ne vois pas, je hais!

Je hais; - oui, je vous hais, tas humain, foule blême,
Parce que vous l’aimez, parce que Dieu vous aime,
Parce que sa clarté brille à travers vos os,
Parce que vous plongez vos urnes aux ruisseaux,
Parce que vous passez vivants dans la nature,
Parce que vous avez, pendant que la torture
Me tenaille et que j’ai mon âme pour vautour,
Dans vos yeux l’espérance et dans vos cœurs l’amour!

Hommes, larves, néants, ombres, faces rapides,
Vous n’êtes pas contents; ô favoris stupides,
Vous vous plaignez d’aller chaque jour vieillissant,
De passer, de sentir refroidir votre sang,
Et vous accusez Dieu! Quel rêve est donc le vôtre!
J’ai perdu plus que vous, moi; J’ai, l’un après l’autre,
Vu tomber mes rayons, comme vous vos cheveux!
IV

Ne pouvoir remonter, même quand je le veux;

Quoi! les morts repentants s’envolent de leurs tombes
Radieux, les hiboux se changent en colombes,
Les démons pardonnés rentrent au firmament,
Et moi, le spectre noir, je les vois lentement

Blanchir dans la nuit sombre et redevenir anges!
Des astres, fleurs du gouffre, éclosent dans les fanges!
Quoi! César est parti; Torquemada s'en va;
Busiris, dans la cave où le tient Jéhovah,
Distingue une lueur et commence à sourire;
Nemrod attend; je viens d'entendre Judas dire,
Dans la geôle où, son crime et moi, nous le lions:
— Je n'ai plus maintenant que quatre millions
De siècles à rester à la chaîne dans l'ombre. -
Que Judas est heureux! il peut compter un nombre.
Pour tous, pour tous, pour tous l'horizon blanchira.
Caïn, le vieux Caïn, lui-même sortira!
Moi seul, je resterai dans les déserts funèbres.
Horreur sans fond! Je suis l'éternel des ténèbres.

Je suis le misérable à perpétuité.
V

Mais je me vengerai sur son humanité,
Sur l'homme qu'il créa, sur Adam et sur Eve,
Sur l'âme qui sourit, sur le jour qui se lève,
Sur toi, l'astre! sur toi, l'aile! sur toi, la fleur!
Sur la vierge, et la mère, et sur l'enfant! Malheur!
Je défigurerai la face universelle.
Serpent, je secouerai dans l'ombre ma crécelle.
J'inventerai des dieux: Moloch, Vishnou, Baal.
Je prendrai le réel pour briser l'idéal,
Les pierres des édens pour bâtir les sodomes.
A travers les rameaux de la forêt des hommes
On verra mes yeux luire, et l'on dira: c'est lui.
Plus effaré du mal que du bien ébloui,
Le sage doutera de Dieu. Je mordrai l'âme.
J'enlaidirai l'amour dans le cœur de la femme.
Je mêlerai ma cendre à ces charbons éteints.
Et, mauvais, je rirai, rayant tous leurs instincts
Et toutes leurs vertus de l'ongle de mes ailes.
Je serai si hideux que toutes les prunelles

Auront je ne sais quoi de sombre; et les méchants
Et les pervers croîtront comme l’herbe des champs,
Le fils, devant le juge aux lèvres indignées,
Apparaîtra, tenant dans ses mains des poignées
De cheveux blancs du père égorgé. Je dirai
Au pauvre: vole; au riche: opprime. Je ferai
Jeter le nouveau-né par la mère aux latrines.
Tremble, ô Dieu! J’ouvrirai de mes mains leurs poitrines,
J’arracherai, fumant, et je tordrai leur cœur,
Et j’en exprimerai tous les crimes, l’horreur,
La trahison, le meurtre, Achab, Tibère, Atrée,
Sur ta création rayonnante et sacrée!
Tu seras Providence et moi Fatalité.
J’ai fait mieux que la Haine; ô vide! ô cécité!
J’ai fait l’Envie. En vain ce Dieu bon multiplie
Ces colosses dont l’âme est de rayons remplie,
Le génie et l’amour et l’héroïsme; moi
Par la négation je fais ronger la foi;
Je suis Zoïle; autour des Socrates j’excite
Anitus, et je mets sur Achille Thersite,
Et tout pleure, et j’égale, à force de venins,
A l’éclat des géants le gonflement des nains.
La matière a mon signe au front. Je la querelle.
J’effare l’eau sans fond sous des gouffres de grêle.
Je contrains l’océan, que Dieu tient sous sa loi,
Et la terre, à créer du chaos avec moi,
Je fais de la laideur énorme avec leur force,
Un monstre avec l’écume, un monstre avec l’écorce,
Sur terre Béhémoth, Léviathan sur mer.
Je complète partout le chaos par l’enfer,
La bête par l’idole, et les rats, les belettes,
La torpille, l’hyène acharnée aux squelettes,
La bave du crapaud, la dent du caïman,
Par le bonze, l’obi, le fakir et l’iman.
Dieu passe dans le cœur des hommes, j’y séjourne.
Sa roue avec un bruit sidéral roule et tourne,
Mais c’est mon grain lugubre et sanglant qu’elle moud;

Jéhovah reculant sent aujourd’hui partout
Une création de Satan sous la sienne;
Son feu ne peut briller sans que mon souffle vienne.
Il est le char; je suis l’ornière. Nous croisons
Nos forces; et j’emploie aux pestes, aux poisons,
Aux monstres, aux déserts, son pur soleil candide;
C’est Dieu qui fait le front, moi qui creuse la ride;
Il est dans le prophète et moi dans les devins.
Guerre et deuil! je lui prends tous ses glaives divins,
Le glaive d’air, le vent, le glaive d’eau, la pluie,
L’épée éclair, stupeur de la terre éblouie,
Je m’en sers pour mon œuvre; et la nature a peur.
A mon haleine une hydre éclôt dans la vapeur,
Et la goutte d’eau tombe en déluge agrandie;
Avec le doux foyer qui chauffe, j’incendie;
Je fais du miel le fiel, je fais l’écueil du port;
Dieu bénit le meilleur, je sacre le plus fort;
Dieu fait les radieux, je fais les sanguinaires.
Oui, pour broyer ses fils je prendrai ses tonnerres!
Oui, je me dresserai de toute ma hauteur!
Je veux dans ce qu’il fait tuer ce créateur,
Je veux le torturer dans son œuvre, et l’entendre
Râler dans la justice et la pudeur à vendre,
Dans les champs que la guerre accable de ses bonds,
Dans les peuples livrés aux princes; dans les bons
Et dans les saints, dans l’âme humaine tout entière!
Je veux qu’il se débatte, esprit, sous la matière;
Qu’il saigne dans le juste assassiné; je veux
Qu’il se torde, couvert de prêtres monstrueux,
Qu’il pleure, bâillonné par les idolâtries;
Je veux que des lys morts et des roses flétries,
Du cygne sous le bec des vautours frémissant,
Des beautés, des vertus, de toutes parts, son sang,
Son propre sang divin sur lui coule et l’inonde.
Voyez, regardez, Cieux! L’échafaud, c’est le monde,
Je suis le bourreau sombre, et j’exécute Dieu.
Dieu mourra. Grâce à moi, les chars sous leur essieu,

Les rois sous leur pouvoir, les aigles sous leurs griffes,
Les dogmes ténébreux et noirs, sous leurs pontifes,
Tout ce qui sur la terre à cette heure est debout,
Même les innocents sous leurs pieds, ont partout
Quelque chose de Dieu que dans l'ombre ils écrasent.
Mes flamboiements rampant sous l'univers, l'embrasent.
Je suis le mal; je suis la nuit; je suis l'effroi.

VI

Grâce! pardonne-moi! rappelle-moi! prends-moi!
Grâce! Ne sens-tu pas qu'il faut que toute chaîne
Se rompe, et que le mal finisse, et que la haine
S'éteigne, évanouie en ta sérénité;
Quoi; le bien infini, le mal illimité!
Toi le bien, moi le mal! est-ce que c'est possible;
Le monde gouverné par un double invisible!
Y songez-vous, Seigneur; un partage entre nous!
Non, vous êtes la face, et je suis les genoux.
Laissez-moi me plier et tomber, juge immense,
Sur ce pavé des cieux qu'on nomme la clémence!
Grâce, ô Dieu! L'univers, les terres et les eaux,
L'éther sans bornes, plein d'invisibles oiseaux,
Les glauques océans qui font rugir leurs ondes,
L'énormité vivante où rayonnent les mondes,
Quoi! c'est une balance où nous pesons tous deux;
Qu'en dites-vous, soleils; Lui charmant, moi hideux!
Quoi! lui dans un plateau, soleils, et moi dans l'autre!
La chair est ma servante et l'âme est son apôtre.
Je lutte. Nous tenons chacun notre côté.
Avoir l'infini, c'est avoir l'égalité.
Ton paradis ne fait qu'équilibre à mon bagne.
Dieu! - la création ainsi qu'une montagne,
Pèse sur moi; je lève à travers les chaos
Mon front d'où mes douleurs retombent en fléaux;
Je me tords sans repas, sans fin, sans espérance.
C'est une majesté qu'une telle souffrance.
Oui, c'est l'énigme, ô nuit, de tes millions d'yeux:

Le grand souffrant fait face au grand mystérieux.
Grâce, ô Dieu! pour toi-même il faut que je l'obtienne.
Ma perpétuité fait ombre sur la tienne.
Devant ton oeil flambeau rien ne doit demeurer,
Tout doit changer, vieillir et se transfigurer.
Toi seul vis. Devant toi tout doit avoir un âge.
Et c'est pour ta splendeur un importun nuage
Qu'on voie un spectre assis au fond de ton ciel bleu,
Et l'éternel Satan devant l'éternel Dieu!

VII

Ils sont là-haut! Ils sont dans l'hymne et dans la joie;
L'éther des paradis devant eux se déploie.
Ils planent satisfaits, bienveillants, sérieux,
Dans le rayonnement du ciel mystérieux;
Leurs robes dans l'azur font des plis de lumière;
Ils ont leur innocence et leur blancheur première.
Ils vont d'un monde à l'autre ainsi que des oiseaux.
L'amour les courbe ainsi que le vent les roseaux,
Et les redresse ainsi que le foyer ses flammes.
Ils s'abîment en Dieu tout en restant des âmes,
Et contemplent, heureux, la face de clarté.
Ils s'accouplent, noyés dans la félicité.
Ils le regardent être, il les regarde vivre.
Ils montent à jamais vers lui. Lui les enivre
Du sourire inouï de son immensité.
Il les voit. Il leur parle; il est Grâce et Beauté;
L'impénétrable est doux, le formidable est tendre... -
Oh! je voudrais saisir, arracher, tenir, prendre,
Oh! je voudrais broyer l'étoile du matin!

Le boiteux, le lépreux, et l'aveugle incertain,
Ceux qui marchent pieds nus et ceux qui n'ont pas même
Un toit l'hiver, ce sont des riches. Dieu les aime.
Ils ont pour vêtement ton regard de bonté.
Dieu! n'être pas aimé, c'est là la nudité!
Etre dehors, c'est là le bitume et le soufre.

VIII

J’ai mis sous une pierre et scellé dans un gouffre
La justice, le bien, le pur, le vrai, le beau;
Tout ce qui peut servir à l’homme de flambeau,
La vertu, la raison, penser, espérer, croire,
Ce qu’on nomme sagesse et ce qu’on nomme gloire,
Et je rêve accoudé sur ce tombeau profond.
Je suis grand. Et sous moi les ténèbres défont
Ce qu’a fait la lumière, et dans les noirs abîmes,
Pensif, j’entends tomber goutte à goutte les crimes.
Le chaos me contemple, et j’ai le pied dessus.
Hélas! hélas! mieux vaut l’étable où naît Jésus
Que Babel et Ninive et Tyr et Babylone,
Et Job sur son fumier que Satan sur son trône!

Oh! si j’étais heureux, je serais bon; Pitié!
Je ne maudirais pas! L’onagre a-t-il crié,
Le bœuf a-t-il mugi quand ils ont eu de l’herbe;
L’amour, l’azur, les lys, la lumière superbe,
Les grands rayons dorés qui vont s’élargissant,
Les vierges, les enfants joyeux, l’ange innocent,
La frange d’or de l’aube au rebord des ravines,
Oh; je crie éperdu vers ces choses divines
Que je ne vois plus; - Dieu; - Dieu; - Les splendeurs d’en haut
Ajoutent de la nuit, hélas, à mon cachot.
Il me tombe, de tous les concerts, des huées.

..
DANS L’INFINI
CHANT DES ASTRES
Lumière
..

Je souffre. Je voudrais attendrir les nuées,
Je tends les mains aux fleurs, je crie aux aquilons:
Grâce! Ayant tous les maux du monde pour haillons,

Je pleure, je demande à la ronce, à la gerbe,
Au nuage, à la tombe, à l’étoile, au brin d’herbe,
Aux bêtes reculant devant le front humain,
Aux cailloux qu’un forçat casse au bord du chemin,
A tout, au jour qui naît, au vent qui recommence,
De la pitié! Je suis le mendiant immense.

IX

Encor si je pouvais dormir; Si, seulement
Une heure, une minute, un instant, un moment,
Le temps qu’une onde passe au fond du lac sonore,
Fût-ce pour m’éveiller plus lamentable encore,
Sur n’importe quels durs et funèbres chevets,
Si je pouvais poser mon front; Si je pouvais,
Nu, sur un bloc de bronze ou sur un tas de pierres,
L’une de l’autre, hélas! rapprocher mes paupières,
Et m’étendre, et sentir quelque chose de frais,
De doux et de serein, comme si je mourais;
Si je pouvais me perdre un moment dans un songe,
Apaiser dans mon flanc ce qui remue et ronge,
Aspirer un fluide étrange, aérien,
Impalpable, et flotter, et n’entendre plus rien,
Ni mon aile frémir, ni battre mon artère,
Ni ces cris dont je suis la cause sur la terre:
— Tuons! Frappons! Damnons! J’ai peur! J’ai froid! J’ai faim!
Sentir ma misérable oreille sourde enfin!
Oh! me coucher, rentrer mes griffes sous ma tête,
Dire: « C’est bien! je dors, tout comme une autre bête,
«Comme un léopard, comme un chacal, comme un loup!
«Une nuée auguste et calme me dissout!”
Mais non; jamais! Je traîne à jamais l’insomnie
Dans une immensité sinistre d’agonie.
Ne pas mourir, ne pas dormir. Voilà mon sort.
En songe on ne sort pas, mais on croit que l’on sort;
C’est assez. Je n’ai point cette trêve. Ma peine
C’est d’être là, toujours debout; d’être une haine
Eternelle, guettant dans l’ombre affreusement;

Et c’est de regarder sans cesse fixement
Les escarpements noirs du mystère insondable.
Voir toujours fuir, ainsi qu’une île inabordable,
Le sommeil et le rêve, obscurs paradis bleus
Où sourit on ne sait quel azur nébuleux;
O condamnation!

Je suis sous cette voûte.
Je regarde l’horreur profonde, et je l’écoute.
Pas un être ne peut souffrir sans que j’en sois.
Je suis l’affreux milieu des douleurs. Je perçois
Chaque pulsation de la fièvre du monde.
Mon ouïe est le centre où se répète et gronde
Tout le bruit ténébreux dans l’étendue épars;
J’entends l’ombre. O tourment; le mal de toutes parts
M’apporte en mon cachot son âpre joie aiguë;
J’entends glisser l’aspic et croître la ciguë;
Le mal pèse sur moi du zénith au nadir;
La mer a beau hurler, l’avalanche bondir,
L’orage entreheurter les foudres qu’il secoue,
L’éclatant zodiaque a beau tourner sa roue
De constellations, sombre meule des cieux,
A travers le fracas vaste et prodigieux
Des astres dont parfois le groupe énorme penche,
A travers l’océan, la foudre et l’avalanche
Roulant du haut des monts parmi les sapins verts,
J’entends le pas d’un crime au bout de l’univers.
La parole qu’on dit tout bas, qui n’est pas vraie,
L’obscur tressaillement du blé qu’étreint l’ivraie,
La gangrène qui vient mordre la plaie à vif,
Le chuchotement sourd des flots noyant l’esquif,
Le silence du chien près du nid de la grive,
J’entends tout, je n’échappe à rien, et tout m’arrive
A la fois dans ce bagne où je suis submergé;
Tous les fléaux en moi retentissent; et j’ai
Le contre-coup de tous les monstres; et je songe,
Ecoutant la fureur, la chute, le mensonge

De toute cette race immonde de Japhet;
Je distingue le bruit mystérieux que fait
Dans une conscience un forfait qu’on décide;
O nuit! j’entends Néron devenir parricide.

Sommeil, lieu sombre, espace ineffable, où l’on est
Doux comme l’aube et pur comme l’enfant qui naît,
Dormir, ô guérison, détachement, rosée,
Stupeur épanouie, immense ombre apaisée,
Repos sacré, douceur farouche, bercement
Qui trempe dans les cieux les cœurs, noir et charmant,
Oh! ce bain des remords, ce baume des ulcères,
La paix qui fait lâcher ce qu’on a dans les serres
N’avoir jamais cela; jamais! n’avoir jamais
Cet assoupissement sur les vagues sommets,
Ce sommeil, devant qui les âmes sont pareilles,
Qui change l’antre en nid, et permet aux abeilles
De voler dans la gueule ouverte des lions!
Oh! cette voix qui dit: calmons et délions;
Ne l’entendre jamais dans mes nuits convulsives;
La flamme à la prunelle et la bave aux gencives,
Veiller, veiller, veiller, grincer des dents, voilà
Dans quelles profondeurs ma faute me scella;
Sort hideux; m’enfermer dans la nuit, et m’exclure
Du sommeil! me livrer à cette âcre brûlure,
La veille sans repos, le regard toujours noir,
Toujours ouvert! O nuit sans pitié; ne pouvoir
Lui prendre un peu de calme, et l’avoir sur moi toute!
Englouti dans l’oubli, n’en pas boire une goutte;

Toujours être aux aguets; toujours être en éveil!

O vous tous, êtres! fils de l’ombre ou du soleil,
Qui que vous soyez, morts, vivants, oiseaux des grèves,
Esprits de l’air, esprits du jour, larves des rêves,
Faces de l’invisible, anges, spectres, venez,
Vous trouverez Satan les yeux ouverts. Planez,

Rampez, allez-vous-en, revenez; Satan veille
Les yeux ouverts. C’est l’ombre ou c’est l’aube vermeille;
Il a les yeux ouverts. Hier, demain, toujours!
Laissez s’enfuir les pas du temps, tardifs ou courts,
Après des millions de jours, de mois, d’années,
De siècles, de saisons écloses ou fanées,
De flux et de reflux, de printemps et d’hivers,
Venez, vous trouverez Satan les yeux ouverts.
Deux yeux fixes, voilà le fond de l’épouvante.

L’obscurité spectrale, informe, décevante,
Chimérique, me tient dans ces gouffres, béant
Et ployé sous le poids monstrueux du néant.
Je souffre. Oh! seulement un instant que je dorme.
X

Je l’aime d’être beau, moi qui suis le difforme.
Que j’oublie un instant! - ô souvenir! - Je vois
Les anges lui parler dans l’ombre à demi-voix.
Que leur dit-il; je suis jaloux; Je me rappelle
Qu’il me parlait aussi, que la lumière est belle!
Je l’aime d’être bon, moi qui suis le mauvais.
Oh! le temps d’un éclair, hélas! si je pouvais
Au fond de mon chaos voir son ombre apparaître!
Je l’adore, ô terreur, plus que Jephté son prêtre,
Plus qu’Amos son prophète et David son chanteur.
Je l’aime d’être vrai, moi qui suis le menteur.
Le sang brûle mes yeux, l’écume emplit ma bouche,
Et, chien de l’infini, chassé du ciel, farouche,
Hagard, pleurant mon maître, à la porte du jour,
Mâchant le genre humain, je hurle mon amour!

Oui, chien!

En lui parlant ma voix devient horrible.
Parfois, pensif, courbé sous mon plafond terrible,
J’entends les séraphins le chanter dans les cieux,

Et, quand ils ont fini, l’écho chante après eux;
Alors je dis: - Eh bien, moi comme eux, moi de même,
Dieu, je veux te chanter; ô lumière, je t’aime!
Je veux d’un chant d’enfer ravir l’écho du ciel,
Satan est une lyre ainsi que Gabriel.
Dieu; c’est à toi, vrai jour, c’est à toi, seul refuge,
Dieu; c’est à toi, pasteur, roi, père, maître et juge,
Que la création songe éternellement; -
Et fou, vieux cœur de fer attiré par l’aimant,
Je dis: gloire! et ma strophe éclate en diadème,
Et je leur chante un hymne ineffable et suprême,
Hymne aux versets charmants d’ombre et d’extase emplis,
[Et] qui pourrait sortir de la bouche d’un lys,
Puis j’écoute; et l’écho qui me répond aboie!
XI

Les plus mornes cachots ont une claire-voie;
Au fond de l’oubliette, au fond du cabanon,
Quelque chose encor semble exister; ici, non.

Satan vers Jéhovah se tourne, las d’abîme.
Oh! l’unique assassin et l’unique victime,
C’est moi. J’ai pour tourment le mal que mes mains font
Les autres êtres sont, puis ne sont plus, ils vont
Puis s’arrêtent, un bruit, puis rien; je les envie.
Les autres sont morts; - moi, je suis veuf de la vie.
L’effroyable vivant du sépulcre, c’est moi.

Oui, le supplicié râle et rugit; la loi
Le tient dans ses poignets de bronze qu’on redoute,
Le tue à petit feu, l’égorge goutte à goutte,
Et s’interrompt parfois pour qu’il meure longtemps.
Ses pieds fument, sa chair pétille, et par instants
Flambe, et l’on voit sortir du ventre ses entrailles;
Il hurle; l’huile bout dans la cuve; tenailles,
Plomb fondu, roue, horreur; Par degrés cependant,
Malgré le vil bourreau de plus en plus ardent,

Sur l’homme évanoui la torture s’émousse;
La sinistre agonie arrive, affreuse et douce;
Le tourment vaincu semble à la surface errer;
Le misérable sent, au moment d’expirer,
Comme un éloignement ténébreux du supplice.
Entre ses cils brûlés un rayon pâle glisse,
C’est la mort, c’est le ciel, c’est l’infini profond;
Il y tombe, il y flotte, il lui semble qu’il fond;
Ses yeux tout grands ouverts se fixent sur du vide;
Il est mort. - Oh; cela, gouffres, j’en suis avide,
Je l’implore, et je crie: A mon secours, bourreaux;
La roue aux mille dents, les chevalets, les crocs,
L’attention du juge affreux, lent et barbare,
Les pinces, les crampons rougis, les coups de barre,
L’huile ardente rongeant la cuve de granit,
Le fer, le feu, c’est bon, c’est doux, cela finit.

XII

Ayez de la pitié, gouffres, prison, géhenne,
Sépulcre, chaos, nuit, désolation, haine,
Ayez de la pitié, si le ciel n’en a pas;
Sur Satan, de si haut précipité si bas,
O voûtes de l’enfer, laissez tomber des larmes;
Non, c’est Dieu, c’est le ciel, c’est l’azur plein de charmes,
L’aurore se livrant toute nue à mes yeux,
C’est le baiser du jour, c’est l’amour que je veux;
Rien; le deuil. Rien! l’hiver. Rien; l’âpre solitude.
Le vil chaos, toujours dans la même attitude;
Les blocs mystérieux de l’expiation;
Je ne puis même, hélas, voir une vision,
Un reflet, comme on voit du jour aux trous d’un crible.
J’écoute du néant le monologue horrible,
L’immensité pour moi ne contient qu’un affront.
Jamais Dieu; - Tout est noir. - Quand ma main sur mon front
Cherche les deux rayons de l’archange, elle y trouve
Les deux cornes du bouc; je ne sais quelle louve
Qui tient l’être en sa gueule et l’emporte et le mord,

Vient me lécher dans l’ombre, et dit: Je suis la mort.
Quoi; j’ai le désespoir à jamais pour demeure;
Horreur! je t’aime, ô Dieu! Grâce, ô mon Dieu!

Bien, pleure
Sanglote, implore, écume, aime; et sois rebuté!
Recommence toujours la même lâcheté!
Chien Satan, vautre-toi toujours dans ta bassesse! -
Oh; je monte et descends et remonte sans cesse,
De la création fouillant le souterrain,
Le bas est de l’acier, le haut est de l’airain,
A jamais, à jamais, à jamais; Je frissonne,
Et je cherche et je crie et j’appelle. Personne;
Et furieux, tremblant, désespéré, banni,
Frappant des pieds, des mains et du front l’infini,
Ainsi qu’un moucheron heurte une vitre sombre,
A l’immensité morne arrachant des pans d’ombre,
Seul, sans trouver d’issue et sans voir de clarté,
Je tâte dans la nuit ce mur, l’éternité.
...
DANS LE CIEL
HYMNE DES ANGES
Pensée
...
XIII

Ici la tombe, là le chaos; sur ma tête
La noirceur, sous mes pieds la chute; où je m’arrête,
La profondeur s’écroule, et tout est vide; eh bien,
Tous ces gouffres mêlés sur moi ne seraient rien
Si je pouvais donner le change à ma pensée,
Moi-même m’enivrer de ma fureur versée,
Et me persuader que je hais; Ce n’est pas
De la crypte stupide et sourde du trépas,
Ce n’est pas du cachot, du puits, de la géhenne,
Ce n’est pas du verrou, ce n’est pas de la chaîne,
C’est de son propre cœur qu’on est le prisonnier.

Haïr délivre.

XIV

Hélas, à force de nier,
Et d’enfoncer dans tout mon sarcasme, âpre lame;
A force de railler le grand épithalame,
Et de crier d’en bas aux crimes: je suis là!
Et de continuer Nemrod dans Attila,
Et de recommencer dans Borgia Caïphe,
A force d’ajouter à toute aile une griffe,
A force d’inspirer les basses actions,
A force de jeter mon cloaque aux rayons,
A force d’être l’ange infâme que sature
Tout le crime possible en la sombre nature,
A force de m’emplir de ténèbres, j’ai froid.

XV

Oh! l’essence de Dieu, c’est d’aimer. L’homme croit
Que Dieu n’est, comme lui, qu’une âme, et qu’il s’isole
De l’univers, poussière immense qui s’envole;
Mais moi, l’ennemi triste et l’éternel moqueur,
Je le sais, Dieu n’est pas une âme, c’est un cœur.
Dieu, centre aimant du monde, à ses fibres divines
Rattache tous les fils de toutes les racines,
Et sa tendresse égale un ver au séraphin;
Et c’est l’étonnement des espaces sans fin
Que ce cœur effrayant, blasphémé par les prêtres,
Ait autant de rayons que l’univers a d’êtres.
Pour lui créer, penser, méditer, animer,
Semer, détruire, faire, être, voir, c’est aimer.
Splendide, il aime, et c’est par reflux qu’on l’adore;
Tout en lui roule; il tient à la nuit par l’aurore,
Aux esprits par l’idée, aux fleurs par le parfum;
Et ce cœur dans son gouffre a l’infini, moins un.
Moins Satan, à jamais rejeté, damné, morne.
Dieu m’excepte. Il finit à moi. Je suis sa borne.
Dieu serait infini si je n’existais pas.

Je lui dis: Tu fis bien, Dieu, quand tu me frappas!
Je ne l’accuse point, non; mais je désespère!
O sombre éternité, je suis le fils sans père.
Du côté de Satan il est, mais n’est plus Dieu.

XVI

Cent fois, cent fois, cent fois, j’en répète l’aveu,
J’aime! Et Dieu me torture, et voici mon blasphème,
Voici ma frénésie et mon hurlement: j’aime!
J’aime à faire trembler les cieux! - Quoi; tout est vain;
Oh! c’est là l’inouï, l’horrible, le divin,
De se dresser, d’ouvrir des ailes insensées,
De s’attacher, sanglant, à toutes les pensées
Qu’on peut saisir, avec des cris, avec des pleurs,
De sonder les terreurs, de sonder les douleurs,
Toutes, celles qu’on souffre et celles qu’on invente,
De parcourir le cercle entier de l’épouvante,
Pour retomber toujours au même désespoir;
Dieu veut que l’homme las s’endorme, il fait le soir;
Il creuse pour la taupe une chambre sous terre;
Il donne au singe, à l’ours, au lynx, à la panthère,
L’âpre hospitalité des antres et des monts;
Aux baleines les mers, aux crapauds les limons,
Les roseaux aux serpents secouant leurs sonnettes;
Il fait tourner autour des soleils les planètes
Et dans la blanche main des vierges les fuseaux;
Il entre dans les nids, touche aux petits oiseaux,
Et dit: La bise vient, j’épaissirai leurs plumes;
Il laisse l’étincelle échapper aux enclumes,
Et lui permet de fuir, joyeuse, les marteaux;
Il montre son grand ciel aux lions de l’Athos;
Il étale dans l’aube, ainsi que des corbeilles,
Sous des flots de rayons, les printemps pleins d’abeilles
Sa grandeur pour le monde en bonté se résout.
Une vaste lueur ardente embrase tout,
De l’archange à la brute et de l’astre à la pierre,

Croise en forêt de feu ses rameaux de lumière,
Va, vient, monte, descend, féconde, enflamme, emplit,
Combat l’hiver liant les fleuves dans leur lit,
Et lui fait lâcher prise, et rit dans toute chose,
Luit mollement derrière une feuille de rose,
Chauffe l’énormité sidérale des cieux,
Brille, et de mon côté, prodige monstrueux,
Ce flamboiement se dresse en muraille de glace;
Oui, la création heureuse s’entrelace
Tout entière, clartés et brume, esprits et corps,
Dans le Dieu bon, avec d’ineffables accords;
L’être le plus déchu retrouve l’innocence
Dans sa toute tendresse et sa toute puissance;
Moi seul, moi le maudit, l’incurable apostat,
Je m’approche de Dieu sans autre résultat
Que de faire gronder vaguement le tonnerre!
Dieu veut que cet essaim d’atomes le vénère,
Il leur demande à tous leur cœur, leur chant, leur bruit,
Leur parfum, leur prière; à moi rien, de la nuit.
O misère sans fond; Ecoutez ceci, sphères,
Etoiles, firmaments, ô vieux soleils, mes frères,
Vers qui monte en pleurant mon douloureux souhait,
Cieux, azurs, profondeurs, splendeurs, - l’amour me hait!

L’ANGE LIBERTÉ

I

De la lumière. Et puis de la lumière encore.
Chaos de firmaments dans des gouffres d’aurore.

L’ange Liberté plane en l’azur spacieux.
On dirait que son oeil cherche une issue aux cieux.
Elle voit une étoile. Elle s’approche: - Ecoute,
Etoile; conduis-moi sous la fatale voûte;
Dieu permet que je parle à celui qui fut grand.
— Je ne puis, répond l’astre. Et Liberté reprend:
— Du moins, dis-moi la route et comment y descendre.
— Parle à l’Eclair, dit l’astre. Il peut seul te l’apprendre.
Cet ange est dans le ciel le seul qui sait tomber.

D’une aile que le vent même ne peut courber,
L’Ange Liberté part et franchit l’éther sombre.

Elle vola longtemps; - l’homme n’a pas de nombre
Pour compter ce temps-là; - son vol fier était sûr.

Tout à coup, dans un angle informe de l’azur,
Elle vit l’écurie énorme des nuées.
On entendait sonner des chaînes dénouées,
Et rouler on ne sait quels effrayants essieux;
L’ange Eclair travaillait dans cet antre des cieux;
Il en faisait sortir tous les chars du tonnerre;
Quelques-uns n’étaient faits que de flamme ordinaire;
D’autres semblaient forgés dans l’enfer par les nuits;
Et des ruissellements de foudres inouïs
Ebauchaient vaguement leur forme épouvantable;
Les écueils dans la mer, les taureaux dans l’étable,
Sont des roucoulements près des monstrueux bruits

De tous ces chars avec de l’abîme construits.

Liberté s’avança vers l’Eclair. L’immortelle
Sourit: - Ange, tu dois connaître, lui dit-elle,
L’éclatant Lucifer tombé dans le trépas.
— C’est moi qui l’ai frappé, je ne le connais pas,
Dit l’Eclair. - Mais le gouffre où tu jetas cette âme,
Tu peux me le montrer; - Non, dit l’esprit de flamme.
Va trouver le vieil ange Hiver. Il est le seul
Qui connaisse les plis ténébreux du linceul.
Moi, je ne me souviens de rien. Je brise, et passe.

Puis, il montra du doigt un point noir dans l’espace,
C’était la terre.

- Va, dit-il. Le triste enfer
Touche à ce monde et là tu trouveras l’hiver.

Et l’ange Liberté, telle qu’un jet de fronde,
Partit, et vit grandir la sphère obscure et ronde,
Et, superbe, et bravant la bise et le mistral,
S’abattit sur la terre à l’endroit sépulcral.

Dans ce cercle effrayant que les glaciers enserrent,
Au fond du désert blême où jamais ne passèrent
Les Colomb, les Gama, ces lumineux sondeurs,
Dans ces obscurités et dans ces profondeurs
Sur la création par le néant conquises,
Au-delà des spitzbergs, des flots et des banquises,
Au centre de la brume où tout rayon finit,
Loin du jour, dans l’eau marbre et dans la mer granit,
Le sombre archange Hiver se dresse sur le pôle;
La trompette à la bouche et l’ombre sur l’épaule,
Il est là, sans qu’il sorte, au milieu de ce deuil,
De son clairon un souffle, un éclair de son oeil;
Il ne rêve pas même, étant un bloc de neige;
Les vents ailés, pareils à l’oiseau pris au piège,

Sont dans sa main, captifs du silence éternel;
Son oeil éteint regarde affreusement le ciel;
Le givre est dans ses os, le givre est sur sa tête;
L’horreur pétrifiée autour de lui s’arrête;
Sa sinistre attitude effare l’infini;
Dur, morne, il est glacé, c’est-à-dire banni;
La terre sous ses pieds, de ténèbres vêtue,
Se tait; il est la blanche et muette statue
Debout sur ce tombeau dans l’éternelle nuit;
Jamais une lueur, un mouvement, un bruit
N’effleurent le géant, seul sous de sombres voiles.
Quand, à tous ces cadrans qu’on nomme les étoiles,
L’heure du dernier jour sans terme et sans milieu
Sonnera, la clarté de la face de Dieu
Dégèlera le spectre, et tout à coup sa bouche
Se gonflera d’un pli formidable et farouche,
Et les mondes, esquifs roulant sans aviron,
Entendront l’ouragan sortir de son clairon.

Jamais l’essaim chantant des paradis n’approche
Cette âme du silence et du deuil, faite roche,
Geôlière des cieux morts et des firmaments noirs;
Ce brouillard gris, pareil à la chute des soirs,
Fait peur aux chérubins extasiés et tendres;
Les neiges, cette forme effroyable des cendres,
Font de cet horizon, dont l’aube hait le seuil,
Quelque chose qui semble un dedans de cercueil.

L’ange-vierge, à travers les glaciers blancs décombres,
Vola droit au géant, seul dans ces déserts sombres
Dont le jour ne veut pas et qu’il n’a pas reçus.
D’abord elle plana radieuse au-dessus
Du lourd colosse, avec les grands cercles de l’aigle;
Puis, s’approchant, lui dit: - Celui qui juge et règle,
Celui qui fait tout vivre et qui fait tout trembler,
M’a permis de venir ici; je veux parler
A quelqu’un d’effrayant dont seul tu connais l’antre;

O géant, ouvre-moi le gouffre, pour que j’entre.

Le Vieillard de la Nuit resta sourd et muet;
Pas un pli du brouillard pesant ne remuait
Dans cette immensité d’ombre et de solitude;
Seulement, sans que rien troublât son attitude,
Et sans qu’un mouvement fit voir qu’il entendît,
La glace sous ses pieds lentement se fendit.
Une crevasse étrange apparut; ouverture
D’on ne sait quelle horreur qui n’est plus la nature,
Bouche d’un puits livide et morne, escarpement
D’un abîme qui va plus loin que l’élément,
Vision du néant formidable, enfermée
Entre deux murs sans forme où rampe une fumée;
Deuil, brume; obscurité sans fond et sans contour.

La vierge Liberté, blanche et faite de jour,
Sentit le froid du lieu funeste où rien n’existe.
La désolation de ce gouffre était triste
Et profonde; et c’était l’infini de la nuit.

Elle ouvrit sa grande aile où l’azur des cieux luit,
Et, calme, descendit dans cette ombre terrible.

II

Or, en ce même instant, l’horreur indivisible,
Sans palpitation, sans souffle et sans échos,
La lugubre unité de tombe et de chaos
Qu’on nomme Enfer, voyait une chose inouïe.

Une forme, parfois soudain évanouie,
Puis renaissant, flottant au loin, puis s’abîmant,
Sorte de voile ayant un vague mouvement,
Glissait sous ce plafond qu’on prendrait pour un rêve.

Cette figure était la même que la grève
Du fleuve Seine avait vue errer autrefois,

Et jeter dans les vents sa redoutable voix.

Elle allait, comme l’algue erre... - A travers le voile
La fixité des yeux flamboyait, et la toile
Dont ce voile était fait, semblait avoir été
Tissue avec du rêve et de l’obscurité.
Elle sondait l’enfer qui sans fin se prolonge;
Dans la stagnation des ténèbres, qui songe,
Et qui, farouche, a l’air d’un crime qui se tait,
Elle passait, tournait, descendait, remontait,
Prenant on ne sait quels plis informes pour guides,
Blême aux endroits obscurs, noire aux endroits livides.
Ainsi vole à travers les branches l’émouchet.
Parfois, comme quelqu’un qui cherche, elle touchait
Le mur prodigieux de la cave du monde.
Elle serpentait, lente et souple comme une onde,
Dans l’abîme où l’esprit lit ce mot triste: Absent.
Souvent elle laissait derrière elle en passant
Le bleuissement pâle et fugitif du soufre.

Soudain, comme sentant sous elle plus de gouffre,
Elle hésita, pencha ce qui semblait son front,
Et regarda.

La nuit qu’aucun jour n’interrompt
Gisait dans l’étendue effroyable et sublime.
Ce précipice émit de la mort, faite abîme.
On y sentait flotter du sépulcre dissous.
On voyait de la nuit sous la nuit; au-dessous
De l’ombre, dans un vide étrange, on voyait l’ombre.

Tout au fond remuait une apparence sombre;
Un fantôme entrevu, submergé, trouble, enfui,
Errant, rampant; c’était le Damné; c’était Lui.

On distinguait un front, des ailes, des vertèbres.

C’était l’archange larve, âme des lieux funèbres
Mêlant en lui de l’astre avec de l’animal;
C’était l’être sinistre en qui pense le mal;
C’était le criminel que le crime exécute;
C’était plus qu’un esprit tombé; c’était la Chute.

Le chaos se roulait sur l’ange en se gonflant;
Par intervalle, un ongle, un large crâne, un flanc
Rayé comme les lynx, les guêpes et les zèbres
Se dressait dans le spasme horrible des ténèbres
Ses écailles semblaient de fumée et de jais.
On croyait voir quelqu’un de ces vagues objets
Tortueux et flottants, dont on craint la piqûre.
Offrant tous les aspects dans une ébauche obscure,
Céleste, bestial, humain, vertigineux,
Laissant voir une face au milieu de ses nœuds,
Enflant des plis confus dans l’ombre où rien ne brille,
C’était par instants l’hydre et parfois la chenille.
Il se traînait, visqueux, blême, éclipsé, terni,
Reptile colossal du cloaque infini.

La caverne d’en bas de Tout; voilà ce gouffre.

C’était du vide en pleurs et du miasme qui souffre.
D’affreux rocs ébauchaient de noirs décharnements;
On croyait, dans la brume épaisse, par moments,
Entrevoir le cadavre effrayant de la Cause;
Tout était mort; Satan rôdait dans quelque chose
D’informe et de hideux qui paraissait détruit;
De sorte qu’au milieu de la fétide nuit,
Tout étant noirceur, peste, épouvante, misère,
Lividité, ruine, il semblait nécessaire
Qu’au fond de cette tombe on vit ramper ce ver.

Si quelque ange, égaré dans l’éternel hiver,
Fouillant la profondeur du vide impénétrable,
Hélas! fût arrivé jusqu’à ce misérable,

Il n’eût rien retrouvé dans ce dieu de l’enfer
Du géant éclaireur qu’on nommait Lucifer.
L’abîme avait fini par entrer dans sa forme.
La condamnation, lourde, lépreuse, énorme,
S’était, sur cet archange à jamais rejeté,
Lentement déposée en monstruosité.
L’impur typhus sortait de son haleine amère.
Parfois, car ce brouillard est rempli de chimère,
Dans cette nuit que, seul, le vertige connaît,
Quelque ruissellement de lueur dessinait
Son dos ou la membrane immonde de son aile.
La rondeur de sa rouge et fatale prunelle
Semblait, dans la terreur de ces lieux inouïs,
Une goutte de flamme au fond du puits des nuits.
Sa face était le masque effaré du vertige.
A de certains moments, phases du noir prodige,
Un flamboiement, sortant de lui, glissait sur lui;
L’abîme aveugle était brusquement ébloui;
Alors, ô vision! à travers l’insondable,
A travers l’inconnu qui n’est pas regardable,
Dans l’étrange épaisseur du gouffre devenu
Glauque autour du colosse inexprimable et nu,
Satan apparaissait dans toute sa souffrance;
Le démon fulgurant, dans cette transparence,
Horrible, se tordait comme un éclair noyé.
Puis la nuit revenait, glacée et sans pitié;
La vaste cécité refluait sous la voûte
De l’éternel silence et l’engloutissait toute;
Et l’enfer, un instant montré, se refermant,
Lugubre, s’emplissait d’évanouissement.

III

La goule Isis-Lilith cria dans cette fosse:

— « Sois content. Tout périt.” (Oh; toute langue est fausse
Comment rendre ces cris de spectre en mots humains?)
«Père, ce qu’une fois j’ai saisi dans mes mains,

«Moi, la Fatalité, jamais je ne le lâche.
«L'airain, le bois, la pierre, ont accompli leur tâche;
«L'airain s'est fait soldat, roi, prince, chevalier,
«Et le bois s'est fait juge et la pierre geôlier;
«Caïn a reparu sous trois formes, le glaive,
«Le gibet, la prison; et Babel se relève;
«Le sang coule, Jésus est mort, l'enfer prévaut;
«L'échafaud monstrueux du monde est le pivot;
«Tout croule; et dans le sang humain l'homme se lave;
«La guerre le fait brute et la prison esclave;
«L'homme subit le joug en sortant du combat;
«Et, tigre dans le cirque, est âne sous le bât.
«Sois content. Tout est fauve, impitoyable et triste.
«Tu règnes. Cependant un obstacle résiste;
«Dans cette fourmilière obscure un peuple luit;
«Il est le verbe, il est la voix, il est le bruit;
«Il agite au-dessus de la terre une flamme;
«Ce peuple étrange est plus qu'un peuple, c'est une âme;
«Ce peuple est l'Homme même; il brave avec dédain
«L'enfer, et, dans la nuit, cherche à tâtons l'Eden;
«Ce peuple, c'est Adam; mais Adam qui se venge,
«Adam ayant volé le glaive ardent de l'ange,
«Et chassant devant lui la Nuit et le Trépas;
«Il va; tous les progrès sont faits avec ses pas;
«Pas de haute action que ses mains ne consomment;
«Les autres nations l'admirent, et le nomment
«FRANCE, et ce nom combat dans l'ombre contre nous.
«Cette France est l'amour et la joie en courroux,
«C'est le bien qui rugit, l'idéal qui s'irrite;
«Tous nos prêtres, docteur qui ment, juge hypocrite,
«Faux juges, faux savants déformant les esprits,
«Nagent dans le crachat de son large mépris;
«Elle est volcan, torrent, flot, lave; elle bouillonne;
«Fière, elle a plus qu'Athène et plus que Babylone,
«Elle a Paris, la Ville univers, pour cerveau;
«Sur l'horizon humain, vaste, orageux, nouveau,
«Elle souffle la vie ainsi qu'une tempête.

«Mais écoute, ce peuple est vaincu: sur sa tête
«J’ai mis le joug; il est l’aube, je suis la fin.
«La pierre dont Abel fut frappé par Caïn,
«Gisait dans le sang, noire, inexorable, athée;
«Tu l’en souviens, je l’ai ramassée et jetée
«Près de la Seine, ainsi qu’une graine en un champ;
«Ton haleine, perçant le globe, et la touchant,
«L’a fait croître et grandir jusqu’au ciel, tour affreuse;
«Cette tour en cachots innombrables se creuse;
«Les rois en font leur antre; elle écrase Paris;
«Elle éteint sa lumière, elle étouffe ses cris;
«C’est là que toute chaîne aboutit et commence;
«Elle est le cadenas de l’esclavage immense;
«Elle est la glace au front de la France qui bout;
«Elle est la tombe; et l’ombre avec elle est debout.
«Elle garde en ses flancs le billot et la roue;
«Cette tour est la geôle où le vieux dogme écroue
«L’âme et la vie, et met l’esprit humain aux fers;
«Car Paris bâillonné fait muet l’univers;
«La prison de la France est le cachot du monde.
«Maintenant, c’est fini, tout râle et rien ne gronde;
«Ris, Satan. Plus que toi les hommes sont proscrits;
«La Bastille, implacable et dure, est sur Paris
«Comme l’épée avec la croix, sur les deux Romes.
«Puisque tous deux, moi spectre et toi démon, nous sommes
«Les damnés, sans repos, sans sommeil; les témoins;
«Puisque nous ne pouvons dormir, ayons du moins
«La joie âcre du mal dans notre fièvre horrible;
«A travers ton plafond comme à travers un crible,
«Toi, souffle la fureur aux hommes malheureux,
«Et moi je secouerai le suaire sur eux.
«Oui, ta vengeance étreint le monde, et le ravage.
«Dans ces trois cercles noirs, Haine, Meurtre, Esclavage,
«Le morne enfer tient l’homme à jamais enfermé.
«Un brouillard, d’ignorance et de douleur formé,
«Envahit lentement la terre comme une onde.
«O grand désespéré, dans ta tombe profonde,

«Sois content. Nuit, terreur, mort. Eclipse de Dieu.

Et le spectre, penchant ses prunelles de feu,
Regardant l'épaisseur qu'aucun frisson n'anime,
Attendit la réponse énorme de l'abîme.

Mais rien ne remua. Rien ne semblait vivant.

Le fantôme étonné regarda plus avant.

— Es-tu là? cria-t-il.

L'ombre resta muette.

Soudain la colossale et sombre silhouette
De l'ange monstre en qui le ciel s'évanouit,
Apparut, surnageant sur le flot de la nuit.

Sur son front formidable une molle fumée
Flottait, et sa paupière horrible était fermée.

O Prodige; Satan venait de s'endormir.

Une commotion de stupeur fit frémir
L'immuable nuée au fond du précipice.

L'antique patient de l'éternel supplice,
Pour souffrir à jamais à jamais rajeuni,
Lui, l'immense oeil de tigre ouvert sur l'infini,
Satan, le mal, l'horreur condensée en génie,
L'anxiété, le guet, la douleur, l'insomnie,
Dormait.

En même temps la terre eut un répit.
La lave folle aux flancs de l'Hékla s'assoupit;
Le fouet oublia l'âne; et l'ours, las de ses courses,
Vint boire avec la biche à la clarté des sources;

La rose parut belle aux dragons éblouis;
L’âme de Marc-Aurèle entra dans saint Louis;
Le plus grand, attendri, se pencha sur le moindre;
Le bonze, croyant voir de la lumière poindre,
Eut peur, chouette, et dit en frémissant: déjà!
La plante, qu’étouffait le roc, se dégagea;
Les mouches, qui pendaient aux toiles d’araignées,
S’envolèrent, de vie et d’aurore baignées;
Le poids se souleva des reins du portefaix;
Le vent s’arrêta court sur les flots stupéfaits,
Et fit grâce, et laissa rentrer la barque au havre;
L’enfant mort, dont la mère embrassait le cadavre,
Rouvrant les yeux, reprit le sein en souriant.

Satan dormait.
IV

Isis recula s’écriant:
— Il dort! Je souffre seule! Oh! je le hais.

Sa bouche
Ecarta presque, avec cette clameur farouche,
Le voile par ses yeux flamboyants traversé;
Puis les plis du linceul froid et toujours baissé
Tombèrent longs et droits, et Lilith immobile
Songea.

Ce rêve obscur d’un spectre, la sibylle
Peut seule l’entrevoir quand dans son noir réduit
Elle médite, ayant sous son coude la nuit.

On entendait suinter le néant goutte à goutte.

Soudain Isis leva son regard vers la voûte,
Et, comme la fumée aux cimes de l’Etna,
Dans toute sa longueur son linceul frissonna;
Elle se dressa haute, épouvantable et pâle,

Et jeta, secouant son voile, avec le râle
Du tigre apercevant le lion importun,
Ce cri, prodigieux dans ce gouffre: Quelqu'un!

Un ange éblouissant les ailes déployées,
Entrait.

Les profondeurs avec Satan broyées,
Tous ces monts que la fable appelle Othryx, Ossa,
Phlégon, et que le jet de soufre éclaboussa,
Monts frappés comme lui quand Dieu brisa son aile,
Et roulés dans sa chute avec lui pêle-mêle,
Les blocs cicatrisés et morts, les rocs maudits
Que Michel, soleil foudre, extermina jadis,
Crurent revoir l'éclair du grand coup de tonnerre.

Tout l'enfer tressaillit.

L'ange, extraordinaire,
Superbe, souriant, descendait.

Sa clarté
Sereine, blêmissait l'enfer épouvanté.
Le chaos éperdu montra sa pourriture.
On voyait au zénith du gouffre une ouverture
D'où tombait la lueur ineffable des cieux.
La géhenne s'ouvrit comme un oeil chassieux;
Tout le plafond, pendant en haillon formidable,
S'éclaira. L'on put voir le fond de l'insondable,
Et les recoins confus du grand cachot souillé;
L'abîme frissonna comme un voleur fouillé;
On distinguait les bords des précipices traîtres;
Les brouillards qui flottaient prirent des formes d'êtres
Monstrueux, qui semblaient ramper, et vivre là;
La menace qu'on sent dans les lieux noirs sembla
Plus fauve, et le visage irrité des décombres,
Le blanchissement vague et difforme des ombres,

Se hérissaient, montrant des aspects foudroyés;
Tous les renversements en arrière, effrayés,
Se dressaient; les granits remuaient sous la nue;
L'obscurité lugubre apparut toute nue;
On eût dit qu'elle ôtait l'ombre qui la revêt,
Que le masque inouï de l'enfer se levait,
Et qu'on voyait la face effroyable du vide.

L'ange continuait de descendre, splendide,
Dans cet effarement immense de la nuit.
V

Le vautour ne sait plus s'il poursuit ou s'il fuit
Quand il voit l'aigle au fond du nuage apparaître.

Isis, se retournant vers ce radieux être
Beau comme vesper, l'astre et l'ange avant-coureur,
Se dressa dans un geste effrayant dont l'horreur
S'accroissait sous le voile, et lui cria:

    - « Lumière,
«Qu'es-tu? Que nous veux-tu? N'avance pas. Arrière,
«Arrière! Les rayons sont de ce gouffre exclus.
«Va-t'en. Ne donne pas un coup d'aile de plus,
«Tremble! N'avance pas!"

 L'ange approchait, tranquille.

La rage alors sortit de l'abîme immobile;
On entendit, terreur! le cri du lieu muet;
L'enfer aboya.

    L'ombre écumait et huait.
L'ange approchait.

   Isis frémit. La pâle stryge,
Avec un mouvement de rêve et de prodige,

Se déploya debout tout entière devant
L’ange, majestueux comme le jour levant.

— « Mais réveille-toi donc, Satan; dit le fantôme.

Satan dormait.
VI

Ce fut, sous le ténébreux dôme,
Une attente sans nom quand l’abîme comprit
Que cette larve allait combattre cet esprit.

L’ange était une femme; il ne semblait pas même
S’apercevoir, du haut de sa fierté suprême,
Qu’il eût quitté l’azur où Dieu rayonne et vit.
Il venait.

Quand il fut près d’Isis, ce qu’on vit
Fut hideux, et l’horreur s’accrut, dans la mesure
De ce gouffre où Babel, le colosse masure,
Ne serait qu’un tesson et Chéops qu’un gravat.

A travers l’affreux voile, et sans qu’il se levât,
Une tête de mort, sombre masque de flamme,
Parut, et le linceul laissa voir sous sa trame
Un squelette de feu flottant dans ses plis noirs;
Deux yeux brillaient, ainsi que deux ardents miroirs,
Sur cet épouvantable et sinistre visage;
Isis ouvrit les bras, pour barrer le passage,
Ainsi que le gibet au haut du Golgotha;
Et l’apparition formidable jeta
Ces mots à l’ange, avec une clameur profonde:

«Je suis Lilith-Isis, l’âme noire du monde.
«Tremble! L’être inconnu, funeste, illimité,
«Que l’homme en frémissant nomme Fatalité,
«C’est moi. Tremble! Anankè, c’est moi. Tremble! Le voile,

«C’est moi. Je suis la brume et tu n’es que l’étoile;
«Tu n’es qu’un des flambeaux possibles, moi je suis
«La noirceur éternelle et farouche des nuits;
«Je suis la bouche obscure et soufflant sur les phares;
«Tremble; malheur à toi, ver luisant qui t’égares!
«Qu’est-ce que tu viens faire ici? Va-t’en. Ces lieux
«Sont du ciel et du jour et du maître, oublieux.
«Qui que tu sois, malheur à ce qui s’aventure
«Dans la négation et dans la sépulture;
«Malheur à vous, fourmis volantes du ciel bleu,
«Malheur! si vous tentez l’ombre où l’athée est Dieu,
«L’antre où le démon tient le sceptre de la cendre;
«Si je poussais un cri, tu te sentirais prendre
«Par ce qu’on ne voit pas, l’invisible forêt
«Lâcherait son hibou, la nuit se lèverait
«Et t’envelopperait dans la grande aile onglée!
«Fuis, imbécile esprit! Fuis, lumière aveuglée!
«Vil oiseau de l’azur, rentre à ton firmament.
«Qu’est-ce que tu viens faire au fond du châtiment?
«Qu’est-ce que tu viens faire, ô frêle créature,
«Dans les profonds dessous de la sombre nature,
«Dans la Haine, au-delà des êtres, dans Satan?
«Quoi! la mouche entre où n’ose entrer Léviathan!
«Misérable ange, tremble et fuis! Va-t’en, atome!

L’ange sans dire un mot regarda le fantôme
Fixement, et gonfla sa lèvre avec dédain.
L’étoile qu’elle avait au front se mit soudain
A grandir, emplissant d’aurore l’ombre obscure.
O vision terrible et sublime! à mesure
Que l’astre grandissait, la larve décroissait;
L’ardent grossissement de l’étoile poussait
Lilith-Isis vers l’ombre, et mêlait à la fange
Le fantôme rongé par la clarté de l’ange;
Les rayons dévoraient l’affreux linceul flottant;
L’étoile aux feux divins, plus large à chaque instant,
Météore d’abord, puis comète et fournaise,

Fondait le monstre ainsi qu’un glaçon dans la braise.
Quand l’astre fut soleil, le spectre n’était plus.

VII

Tout fit silence au fond du gouffre sans reflux,
Et rien ne troubla plus l’immobilité morte.

Comme le goëmon que le flot berce et porte,
Satan dormait toujours.

Dans la nappe de nuit
Où s’enfonçait son corps de chimère construit,
Ce qu’on entrevoyait, c’était sa forme humaine.

Semblable au flocon blanc qu’un vent dans l’ombre amène,
L’ange arrêta sur lui ses ailes qui flottaient,
Et pleura.

L’on eût dit que ses larmes étaient
De la lumière en pleurs coulant de deux étoiles.
Comme la tarentule au centre de ses toiles,
Le vaste malheureux et le vaste méchant
Palpitait; et la vierge immortelle, penchant
L’escarboucle allumée au sommet de sa tète,
Tendit les bras vers l’ange englouti dans la bête,
Et lui parla, planant et pourtant à genoux;
Et l’accent de sa voix divine était plus doux
Que l’incarnation vague et sombre des sphères.

«O toi; je viens. je pleure. Ici, dans les misères,
«Dans le deuil, dans l’enfer où l’astre se perdit,
«Je viens te demander une grâce, ô maudit!
«Ici, je ne suis plus qu’une larme qui brille.
«Ce qui survit de toi, c’est moi. Je suis ta fille.
«Sens-tu que je suis là? Me reconnais-tu, dis?
«M’entends-tu? C’est du fond des divins paradis,
«C’est de la profondeur lumineuse et sacrée,

«C’est de ce grand ciel clair où vit celui qui crée,
«Que je viens, éperdue, à toi, l’ange enfoui!
«J’ai crié vers Dieu; Dieu formidable a dit Oui;
«Il me laisse descendre au fond des nuits difformes,
«Et, pour que je te parle, il permet que tu dormes.
«Car, Père, pour tes yeux, hélas, le firmament
«Ne peut plus s’entr’ouvrir qu’en songe seulement!
«Oh! toute cette nuit, c’est affreux! Père, Père!
«Quoi! toi dans ce cachot! Quoi! toi dans ce repaire!
«Toi puni; toi mauvais! toi, l’aîné des élus!
«Te voilà donc si bas que Dieu ne te voit plus!,
«L’enfer! l’océan Nuit! Pas de flot, pas d’écume,
«Pas de souffle. Partout le Noir. C’est, dans la brume,
«Ta respiration lugubre que j’entends.
«La longueur de ton deuil dépassera le temps;
«Le chiffre de tes maux dépassera le nombre.
«Les soleils me disaient: prends garde, il est dans l’ombre!
«Et moi j’ai dit: je veux voir le désespéré.
«Hélas, l’astre du ciel te hait, la fleur du pré
«Te craint, autour de toi tous les êtres ensemble
«Frémissent, les clartés frissonnent, l’azur tremble,
«L’infini te redoute et t’abhorre: Eh bien, moi,
«Je t’apporte en amour tout cet immense effroi!

«Je viens te prier, toi qu’on proscrit. Toi qu’on souille,
«Je viens avec des pleurs te laver. J’agenouille
«La lumière devant ton horreur, et l’espoir
«Devant les coups de foudre empreints sur ton front noir;
«Entends-moi dans ton rêve à travers l’anathème.
«Ne te courrouce point, père, puisque je t’aime!
«Le blessé ne hait pas la main qui le soutient;
«L’affamé n’a jamais maudit celui qui vient
«Disant: Voici du pain et de l’eau. Bois et mange.

«Oh! quand j’étais mêlée à tes ailes, quel ange
«Que Satan, dans l’aurore et dans l’immensité!
«Dieu se nommant Bonté, tu t’appelais Beauté.

«Ta chevelure était blonde et surnaturelle,
«Et frissonnait splendide, et laissait derrière elle
«Une inondation de rayons dans la nuit!
«L’abîme était par toi comme par Dieu conduit.
«Un jour les éléments te prirent pour Lui-même;
«Comme tu te dressais avec ton diadème
«Sur le ciel, de ton lustre effrayant envahi,
«L’air dit: Emmanuel; et l’onde: Adonaï;
«Ton char faisait jaillir des mondes sous sa roue.
«Près de toi, Raphaël, Gabriel, qui secoue
«Un météore épars en flammes sur son front,
«Michel, dont la clarté jamais ne s’interrompt,
«Ithuriel, qui mêle aux rayons les dictames,
«Stellial, Azraël, porte-flambeau des âmes,
«N’étaient plus que l’essaim confus de la forêt;
«Un resplendissement de blancheur t’entourait;
«Et l’aube en te voyant s’écriait: je suis noire;
«Tu passais au milieu d’un ouragan de gloire;
«Les éthers t’attendaient pour devenir azurs;
«Les univers naissaient, prodigieux et purs,
«Avec des millions de fleurs et d’étincelles,
«Dans un rythme marqué par tes battements d’ailes;
«Tu faisais, en fixant sur eux ton oeil charmant,
«Reculer les soleils dans l’éblouissement;
«Tu flamboyais, candeur et force; un lys archange!
«Comme après le héros s’avance la phalange,
«A ta suite marchaient les constellations;
«L’ombre pleurait d’amour quand nous la traversions;
«La nuit, tu te levais dans un triomphe d’astres;
«Et les dômes divins et les sacrés pilastres,
«Et les éternels cieux et l’éden nouveau-né,
«T’adoraient dans ta joie immense, infortuné!

«Hélas, dès qu’en ce bagne, où nul regard ne plonge,
«Tu fus précipité, Satan, tu fis ce songe
«De te venger, démon géant, sur l’infini!
«Prés de l’ange proscrit tu mis l’homme banni;

«Tu fis tomber Adam et tu fis déchoir Eve;
«Tu voulus frapper Dieu dans le germe et la sève,
«Dans l’enfant, dans le nid des bois, dans l’alcyon;
«Seul, à jamais muré sous la création,
«Tu devins, dans l’horreur, le grand rêveur funeste;
«Dans les vierges forêts tu fis sortir la peste
«De l’épaisseur charmante et terrible des fleurs;
«Avec les voluptés tu forgeas les douleurs;
«Tu te mêlas à l’être auguste qui gouverne;
«L’espace se remplit d’un esprit de caverne;
«Tu dis à l’Eternel: à nous deux maintenant!
«Tu souillas l’infini rien qu’en l’espionnant.
«A travers l’océan tu soufflas le naufrage;
«Captif, tu pénétras la terre de ta rage;
«Le dessous ténébreux de la vie appartint
«A ta vengeance, et fut par ton haleine atteint;
«Tu mordis les tombeaux; tu mordis les racines;
«Tu mêlas aux parfums les herbes assassines;
«Tu mis partout le monstre à côté de la loi;
«Une émanation de nuit sortit de toi,
«Et tu déshonoras l’univers magnanime.
«Dieu rayonnait le bien, tu rayonnas le crime.
«Tu fis d’en bas, avec tes miasmes, des démons;
«Tu pris les instincts vils et les impurs limons
«Et tu créas avec cette fange les traîtres,
«Les lâches, les cruels; et tu fis dieux et maîtres
«Des êtres de l’abîme et des esprits forçats;
«Tu poussas les Nemrods aux guerres, tu dressas
«Les Caïphes sanglants contre les Christs sublimes;
«Et souvent là-haut, nous, les anges, nous pâlîmes
«D’entendre dans le deuil les prêtres et les rois
«Rire, et de voir grandir le glaive énorme en croix.

«A quoi cela t’a-t-il servi? plus de misère;
«Voilà tout. Ton éclair ronge et brûle ta serre;
«Ton empoisonnement du monde a commencé
«Par toi-même, ô géant d’un combat insensé.

«Le mal ne fait pas peur à Dieu; Dieu se courrouce,
«Et frappe. Tu croyais que la vengeance est douce;
«Elle est amère. Hélas! le crime est châtiment.
«La croissance du mal augmente ton tourment;
«Le mal qu'on fait souffrir s'ajoute au mal qu'on souffre;
«Ta lave au fond des nuits sur toi retombe en soufre;
«Et toi-même on t'entend par moments l'avouer.
«Le supplice de Tout sur toi vient échouer.
«Tu fais tout chanceler, tout trembler sur sa base,
«Tout crouler, et c'est toi que ton effort écrase;
«La Terre est sous ton joug, tu règnes à présent.
«Et te voilà sous plus d'épouvante gisant;
«Te voilà plus difforme, et ton cœur d'airain saigne!

«Mais, Satan, il faut bien qu'à la fin on te plaigne,
«Tu dois avoir besoin de voir quelqu'un pleurer,
«Je viens à toi!

Je viens gémir, luire, éclairer,
«T'ôter du moins le poids de la terrestre chaîne,
«Et guérir à ton flanc la sombre plaie humaine.
«Mon père, écoute-moi. Pour baume et pour calmant,
«Pour mêler quelque joie à ton accablement,
«Tu n'as jusqu'à cette heure, en ton âpre géhenne,
«Essayé que la nuit, la vengeance et la haine.
«O Titan misérable, essaye enfin le jour!
«Laisse planer le cygne à ta place, ô vautour!
«Laisse un ange sorti de tes ailes répandre
«Sur les fléaux un souffle irrésistible et tendre.
«Faisons lever Caïn accroupi sur Abel.
«Assez d'ombre et de crime! Empêchons que Babel
«Pousse encor plus avant ses hideuses spirales.
«Oh! laisse-moi rouvrir les portes sépulcrales
«Que, du fond de l'enfer, sur l'âme tu fermais!
«Laisse-moi mettre l'homme en liberté. Permets
«Que je tende la main à l'univers qui sombre.
«Laisse-moi renverser la montagne de l'ombre;

«Laisse-moi foudroyer l’infâme tour du mal!

«Permets que, grâce à moi, dans l’azur baptismal
«Le monde rentre, afin que l’Eden reparaisse!
«Hélas! Sens-tu mon cœur tremblant qui te caresse?
«M’entends-tu sangloter dans ton cachot? Consens
«Que je sauve les bons, les purs, les innocents;
«Laisse s’envoler l’âme et finir la souffrance.
«Dieu me fit Liberté; toi, fais-moi Délivrance!
«Oh! ne me défends pas de jeter dans les cieux
«Et les enfers, le cri de l’amour factieux;
«Laisse-moi prodiguer à la terrestre sphère
«L’air vaste, le ciel bleu, l’espoir sans borne, et faire
«Sortir du front de l’homme un rayon d’infini.
«Laisse-moi sauver tout, moi ton côté béni!
«Consens! Oh! moi qui viens de toi, permets que j’aille
«Chez ces vivants, afin d’achever là bataille
«Entre leur ignorance, hélas, et leur raison,
«Pour mettre une rougeur sacrée à l’horizon,
«Pour que l’affreux passé dans les ténèbres roule,
«Pour que la terre tremble et que la prison croule,
«Pour que l’éruption se fasse, et pour qu’enfin
«L’homme voie, au-dessus des douleurs, de la faim,
«De la guerre, des rois, des dieux, de la démence,
«Le volcan de la joie enfler sa lave immense!

VIII

Tandis que cette vierge adorable parlait,
Pareille au sein versant goutte à goutte le lait
A l’enfant nouveau-né qui dort, la bouche ouverte,
Satan, toujours flottant comme une herbe en eau verte,
Remuait dans le gouffre, et semblait par moment
A travers son sommeil frémir éperdument;
Ainsi qu’en un brouillard l’aube éclôt, puis s’efface,
Le démon s’éclairait, puis pâlissait; sa face
Etait comme le champ d’un combat ténébreux;
Le bien, le mal, luttaient sur son visage entr’eux

Avec tous les reflux de deux sombres armées;
Ses lèvres se crispaient, sinistrement fermées;
Ses poings s’entreheurtaient, monstrueux et noircis;
Il n’ouvrait pas les yeux, mais sous ses lourds sourcils
On voyait les lueurs de cette âme inconnue;
Tel le tonnerre fait des pourpres sous la nue;
L’ange le regardait, les mains jointes; enfin
Une clarté, qu’eût pu jeter un séraphin,
Sortit de ce grand front tout brûlé par les fièvres;
Plus difficilement que deux rochers, ses lèvres
S’écartèrent, un souffle orageux souleva
Son flanc terrible, et l’ange entendit ce mot: Va!

LIVRE TROISIÈME - LA PRISON

La Bastille

I

LES SQUELETTES

La tour est âpre et noire, et, du haut jusqu’en bas,
Elle est un instrument de supplice; un étage
Fait agoniser moins ou souffrir davantage;
Changer de cabanon, c’est changer de tourment;
Le captif, dans la cave, expire lentement;
Sous le toit, dans un trou qu’on nomme la calotte,
Il étouffe en juillet, en décembre il grelotte;
Sous plus ou moins d’horreur l’homme se sent plier
À mesure qu’il monte ou descends l’escalier;
Nulle part le repos, l’air frais, la clarté pure.
Chaque chambre a la forme utile à la torture;
Ici l’on gèle; ici l’on brûle; ici l’on meurt.

•

Dans ce lieu morne,
La minute est bourreau, l’heure est épouvantail.

Une horloge apparaît. Au-dessus du portail.
Autour du cadran triste, une chaîne est sculptée,
Cercle affreux, chaîne énorme à lier Prométhée;
Elle entoure le temps, et, monstrueuse à voir,
Saisit par ses deux bouts, au bas du fronton noir,
Une statue étrange et morne, prisonnière
Qui grince et fait effort pour sortir de la pierre;
La statue a deux fronts, l’un jeune et l’autre vieux;
Sur le cadran, rouillé par l’hiver pluvieux,
L’aiguille, résumant dans une heure une vie,
Par la chaîne toujours à tous ses pas suivie,

Part du jeune homme et vient aboutir au vieillard.
Lugubre, elle paraît marcher sous un brouillard;
On croit voir l’affreux doigt de la bastille sombre
Montrant ce qu’elle fait du prisonnier dans l’ombre,
Et disant - C’est ici que les pas sont tremblants,
Et que les cheveux noirs deviennent cheveux blancs.

Effroyable prison qui n’a point de mémoire!
La geôle, au dehors noire est aveugle au dedans;
Elle prend! sans les voir, des hommes dans ses dents
Et, sans s’informer d’eux, les mâche et les dévore.

En entrant dans ces murs terribles, où, pour eux,
Les heures maintenant, hélas, seront si lentes,
Les captifs sont inscrits sur des feuilles volantes;
Pas de livre d’écrou. Tout est fait de façon
Que rien ne laisse trace en cette âpre prison,
Et que le nom s’y perde en même temps que l’homme.
Quel est ce prisonnier, et comment on le nomme,
Après dix ou vingt ans, personne ne le sait;
Pas même lui. La dalle ignore ce que c’est,
Le carcan le saisit au cou sans le connaître,
Et le ver, qui déjà goûte à sa chair peut-être,
Ne peut dire son nom à la taupe qui fuit.
Hier, aujourd’hui, demain, ne font qu’un. Plus un bruit.
L’homme, qui maintenant va mourir goutte à goutte,
Une fois qu’il a mit le pied sous cette voûte,
Sent au-dessus de lui son propre effacement.
Sa vie est à jamais mêlée a ce ciment.
Le fil qui nous rattache au monde dont nous sommes,
Et lie à travers l’ombre un homme aux autres hommes,
Se brise ici. Sans air, sans jour, sans point d’appui,
L’homme le sent flotter rompu derrière lui.

Un vivant n’est plus là qu’un rêve dans un gouffre.

Entrer là, c’est entrer dans de l’oubli. L’on souffre,
On rampe, on saigne, on râle, on crie; on ne sait pas.
Le captif va, vient, tremble; il fait de vagues pas,
Sent à son pied sa chaîne et s’arrête farouche,
Boit à sa cruche, mord à son pain noir, se couche,
Se lève, se rendort, tressaille, et, réveillé,
Dit: Où suis-je? que suis-je? et tâte un mur mouillé.

Il ne sait plus qu’il souffre, il ne sent plus qu’il pleure;
Il semble à ce damné qu’il s’enfonce à chaque heure
Plus bas dans la prison, et que, dans lui vivant,
La prison chaque jour pénètre plus avant;
La Bastille le tient; hagard, il s’incorpore
A cet épouvantable et hideux madrépore;
Morne, il constate, au froid toujours croissant du fer,
La transformation de son bagne en enfer;
Il croit que l’heure est morte au-dessus de sa tête,
Et que l’éternité dans son cachot s’arrête.
Est-ce que son œil voit? est-ce que son cœur bat?
Il s’accoude des mois entiers sur son grabat,
Ecoutant dans un coin filer quelque araignée.
Son âme se détache et lui semble éloignée;
Il croit heurter sa bière en touchant à son lit;
L’évanouissement par degrés le remplit;
Il ne peut plus fixer un temps, compter un nombre;
La pierre devient nuit, lui-même il devient ombre,
Et sent croître, à travers la stupeur de l’ennui,
Autour de lui la tombe et le fantôme en lui.

•

O triste genre humain! Sur tous les échafauds
Tant de sang fut versé dans les deux hémisphères
Que du fer qu’on en eût tiré l’on eût pu faire
Hélas! tous les barreaux de toutes les prisons!

•

...le cabanon prépare à l’échafaud.
Le patient commence au captif; les supplices
Ont pour aide la geôle obscure, et pour complices
La cruche d’eau, l’ennui, la paille, le barreau;
Qu’est-ce que les verrous? des valets du bourreau.

L’énorme tour a douze étages de cachots,
Noirs, hideux, et selon la saison, froids ou chauds;
Des fournaises en juin, en janvier des glacières;
Chaque cellule est basse, et l’on voit des poussières
Qui jadis ont vécu, dans l’ombre des piliers;
Des squelettes, dans l’angle obscur des escaliers,
Sont adossés au mur, ayant au cou des chaînes;
On entend le vent fuir dans les forêts prochaines,
Et les captifs au fond du donjon sont pensifs;
Les portes sont de fer, les verrous sont massifs,
Et le trousseau de clefs fait la charge d’un homme.
Le roi, qui des deniers du peuple est économe,
A quinze ou vingt palais à meubler, de façon
Qu’il n’a pas de quoi mettre un lit dans la prison;
Aussi les prisonniers couchent-ils sur la pierre.
Cent vingt archers du guet, à la longue rapière,
Graves, muets, portant la jaquette à grands plis
Sous le hoqueton bleu semé de fleurs-de-lys,
Veillent du haut en bas, six devant chaque porte.

Oh! qu’elle avait commis de crimes, la géante!

II

CAMILLE ET LUCILE

III

LA PRISE DE LA BASTILLE

DÉNOUEMENT

SATAN PARDONNÉ

Le sanglot de Satan dans l’ombre continue.

Satan sous sa voûte

Je me dresse, marqué par l’effroyable trait:
Dernier degré de l’horreur! — L’amour me hait.
DIEU PARLE DANS L’INFINI

Non, je ne te hais pas

Un ange est entre nous; ce qu’elle a fait te compte;
L’homme, enchaîné par toi, par elle est délivré.
Ô Satan, tu peux dire à présent: je vivrai!
Viens, la prison détruite abolit la géhenne!
Viens, l’ange Liberté c’est ta fille et la mienne.
Cette paternité sublime nous unit.
L’archange ressuscite et le démon finit,
Et j’efface la nuit infâme, et rien n’en reste;
Satan est mort, renais, ô Lucifer céleste!
Remonte hors de l’ombre avec l’aurore au front!
..

À écrire au verso de la dernière page
Ô mondes du dehors, Dieu rayonne pour tous,
Vos mystères profonds ne regardent que vous.

TOUTE LA LYRE

This collection of poems was published posthumously in 1888. It includes both poems previously published and uncollected, dating from 1854 to 1875, the most productive period of Hugo's poetry.

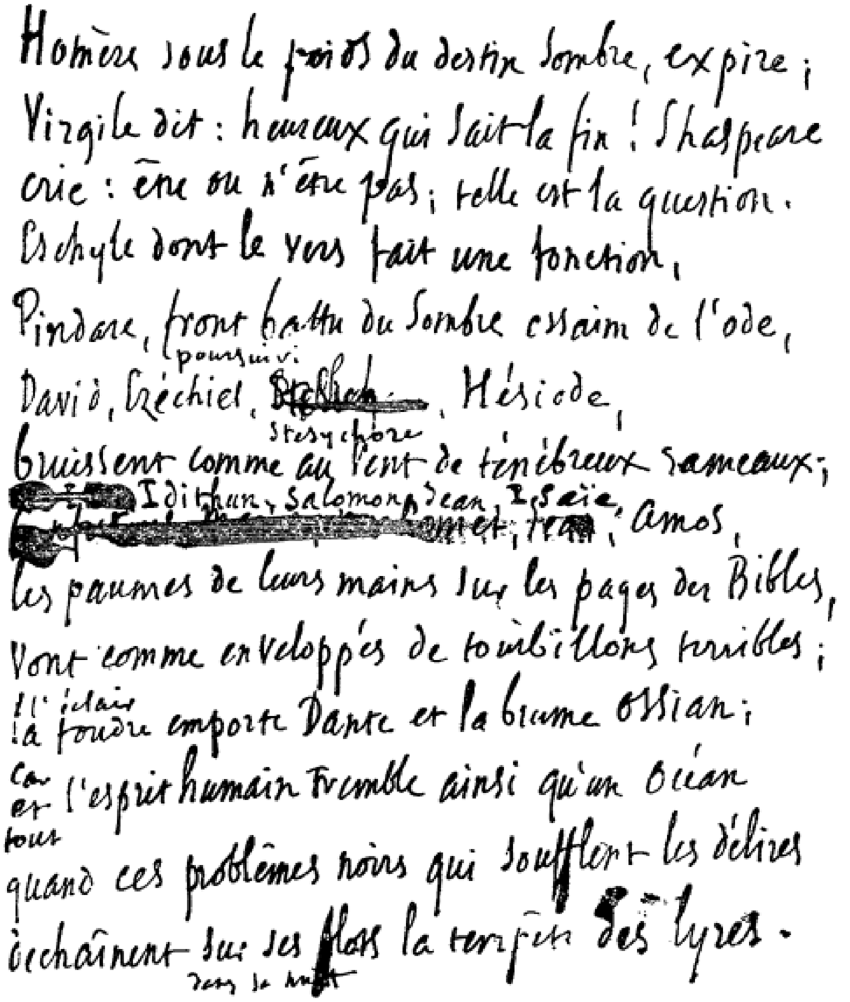

Homère sous le poids du destin sombre, expire ;
Virgile dit : heureux qui sait la fin ! Shakspeare
crie : être ou n'être pas ; telle est la question.
Eschyle dont le vers fait une fonction,
Pindare, front battu du sombre essaim de l'ode,
poursuivi
David, Ezéchiel, ~~[illegible]~~, Hésiode,
Stésichore
bruissent comme au vent de ténébreux rameaux ;
Idithun, Salomon, Jean, Isaïe,
[illegible] ~~Comet~~, ~~Jean~~, Amos,
les paumes de leurs mains sur les pages des Bibles,
vont comme enveloppés de tourbillons terribles ;
l'éclair
la foudre emporte Dante et la brume Ossian ;
car
et
tout
l'esprit humain tremble ainsi qu'un océan
quand ces problèmes noirs qui soufflent les délires
déchaînent sur ses flots la tempête des lyres.
dans la nuit

Toute la lyre — an original manuscript

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III LA FEMME
V Farouche austérité
VI Si le sort t’a fait riche,
VII À CEUX QUI FONT DE PETITES FAUTES
VIII Tandis qu’on ne sait quoi d’étrange
IX Quant à l’obscurité
X L’homme est faible;
XI Voilà l’homme.
XIII Ah! la philosophie est vorace!
XIV Parce que tu ne sais,
XV Qui donc passe au-dessus de nous
XVI Rends-tu de temps en temps des services à Dieu?
XVII Ceux par qui le malheur
XVIII L’espoir
XIX Y pensez-vous.?
XX Ce que vous appelez
XXI Jeunes gens,

XXII ÉPITAPHES D’ENFANTS
XXIII LA GUERRE QUI EST DANS L’AVENIR IMPORTUNE LES DEVINS
XXIV Ah! prenez garde
XXV Un homme est innocent;
XXVI Oh.! que l’homme n’est rien
XXVII À PAUL M.
XXVIII Vous êtes, ô jeune homme,
XXIX À mesure qu’au loin s’éclipse
XXX NUIT
XXXI L’homme croit avoir fait un pas
XXXII Les écrivains
XXXIII EN SORTANT D’UNE ÉGLISE
XXXIV Quand l’honneur est tombé
XXXV CONTEMPLATION, CONSOLATION
XXXVI Là-haut,
XXXVII Une nuit je rêvais,
XXXVIII Je rêve une nature innocente
XXXIX DANS LE CIMETIÈRE DE ...
XL Un jour que je songeais,
XLI Oh dis!
XLII INSCRIPTION DE SÉPULCRE
XLIII Sombres aboyeurs des ténèbres,
XLIV Nous sommes deux familles d’hommes
XLV UMBRA
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XLVIII Tu veux comprendre Dieu,
XLIX La haine,
LI À CEUX QUI SONT PETITS
LII Ô gloire,
LIII LE CHOEUR
LIV LE MAL
LVII Souffrance,
LVIII Ne laissez rien partir
LIX Homme, les avatars
LX Qu’est-ce que ta sagesse

LXI L’homme étreint dans ses bras
LXII Quelle idée as-tu donc de la mort,
LXIII Les anges du Seigneur
LXIV Homme, pourquoi nier
LXV Au nom de ce qui vit,
LXVI Vous dont la part est la meilleure,
LXVII Le calcul, c’est l’abîme.
LXVIII Collabore avec Dieu;
LXIX Des sages?
LXX MATÉRIALISME ET SPIRITUALISME
I Autrefois,
II Deux beaux enfants,
III Sur la coupe
IV Toujours l’esprit avance
VI L’expiation triste
VII Quand le poète est las,
VIII Quand tout un continent tremble
IX Aux heures où le ciel est noir,
XI Quand tu marches,
XII Honte au vain philosophe,
XIII À UN GRAND COMÉDIEN
XIV Lorsque j’étais enfant,
XV L’hexamètre,
XVI Doux poètes, chantez!
XVII CHANSON
XVIII Pour nous, nouveaux venus,
XIX BONHEUR D’ADMIRER
XX À PROPOS D’UNE GRILLE DE BON GOÛT
XXI Shakspeare alors,
XXII Les instruments sont pleins de la voix
XXIII ÉCRIT SUR UN VIRGILE
XXIV Dans le monde meilleur
XXV J’étais petit
XXVI LE RIRE
XXVIII La nature, éternelle mère,
XXIX Thiers raille Mazzini;
XXX Quand ce charmant petit poète gracieux

XXXI Oui, le Génie a ses athées.
XXXII C’est une loi: Veuillot existe,
XXXIII À UN POËTE
XXXIV LE DEVOIR
XXXV POURQUOI LES GRANDS HOMMES SONT MALHEUREUX
XXXVI À THÉOPHILE GAUTIER
I À LOUIS B.
II Admire, enfant!
III À UNE RELIGIEUSE
IV À cette heure indécise
V La France, ô mes enfants,
VI L’autre jour,
VII Vous êtes bien des fois venus
VIII À OL
IX Vénus rit toute nue
X A cette heure de nuit
XI Le couchant flamboyait
XII Virgile, en ce beau mois
XIII Le bien germe parfois
XIV Mon âme était en deuil;
XV JE TRAVAILLE
XVI Tu me dis Finis
XVII Quand je marelle à mon but,
XVIII Ô toi qui m’as maudit
XIX À UN ENFANT
XX Je marchais;
XXI J’ai mené parfois dure vie,
XXII À DEUX ENNEMIS AMIS
XXIII D.G.D.G.
XXIV UN SOIR
XXV LETTRE DE L’EXILÉ ARRIVANT DANS LE DÉSERT
XXVI Ô doux êtres!
XXVII À l’heure où
XXVIII J’aspire à m’enfouir sous les arbres
XXIX À JEANNE
XXX Si dans ce grand Paris,
XXXI CALOMNIÉ

XXXII SOUFFREZ, ô PRÉCURSEURS!
XXXIII L'aquilon change,
XXXIV AVE, DEA; MORITURUS TE SALUTAT
XXXV ENVOI
XXXVI Pygmée et Myrmidon,
XXXVIII Je ne m'arrête pas,
XXXIX Je vais dans la fureur du gouffre,
XL Omnia vidit
XLI Vous demandez à quoi je rêve?
XLII Vous qui, vainqueurs,
XLIV Ah! vous faites du froid
XLV La haute honnêteté,
XLVI L'enfant est très petit
XLVII Je suis enragé.
XLVIII ÉCHAPPÉ À L'ERREUR
XLIX APRÈS L'HIVER
LI Le vieillard
LII Tu rentreras comme Voltaire
I Lorsque ma main frémit
II Oh! si vous existez, mon ange,
III Vois-tu, mon ange,
IV Ce qu'en vous voyant si belle
V Vous m'avez éprouvé
VI Sais-tu ce que Dieu dit
VII Certe,
VIII ROMAN EN TROIS SONNETS
IX CHANSON
X HERMINA
XI Oh! la femme et l'amour!
XII J'étais le songeur qui pense
XIII L'AMOUR VIENT EN LISANT CHANSON
XIV Elle vit
XV Vous ne la fuyez pas, oiseaux,
XVI COMMENCEMENT D'UNE ILLUSION
XVII TRUMEAU
XVIII TOUTE LA VIE D'UN COEUR
XIX L'amour n'est plus

XX Or nous cueillions ensemble
XXI Il était une fois un caporal
XXII Un coup de vent passa,
XXIII QUINZE-VINGT
XXIV J’ai toujours redouté
XXV Qu’est-ce que cette année
XXVI DANS UN VIEUX CLOÎTRE
XXVII J’avais dans ma mansarde
XXVIII VIRGILE DANS L’OMBRE
XXIX Oui, je suis le regard
XXX N’est-ce pas, mon amour,
XXXI Je ne viens pas vous voir
XXXII L’heure sonne.
XXXIII À DEUX SOEURS
XXXIV UN JOUR QU’ELLE M’AVAIT DIT:
XXXV NI VEA NON FRIGIDA
XXXVI À MADAME LA PRINCESSE SOPHIE GALITZINE
XXXVII À MADAME J.
XXXVIII Je ne sais pas pourquoi
XXXIX PENDANT QU’ELLE DORT
XL LA FORÊT
XLI CHANSON
XLII J’étais un lycéen honnête;
XLIII FURENS FOEMINA
XLIV Cela la désennuie;
XLV CHANSON DE CELLE QUI N’A PAS PARLÉ
XLVI Ô toi d’où me vient ma pensée
XLVII DANSE EN ROND
XLVIII Oh! dis, te souviens-tu
XLIX Garde à jamais
L Ah çà mais! quelle idée as-tu,
LI À UNE IMMORTELLE
LII Horace,
LIII CHANSON
LIV À force de rêver
LV LES PÉRIPÉTIES DE L’IDYLLE
LVI Je pressais ton bras

LVII AU BAL
LVIII Nous étions, elle et moi,
LIX Aujourd’hui Galatée
LX DANGER D’ALLER DANS LES BOIS
LXI Tous deux
LXII L’OUTRAGE PEUT ÊTRE AUSSI DANS LA CARESSE
LXIII Son chien est couché
LXIV Quand deux cœurs en s’aimant
I LA BLANCHE AMINTE
II LE PRINCE FAINÉANT
III CE QUE GEMMA PENSE D’EMMA
IV VASE DE CHINE À LA PETITE CHINOISE Y-HANG-TSEI
V MAUVAISES LANGUES
VI Danseuse, écoute-moi.
VII LE PORCHE DE SAINT-LUC
VIII CHANSON
IX Oui, fût-on Homère,
X EN AFRIQUE
XI Quiconque est amoureux
XII À l’âge des bergeries,
XIII BRUIT DE GUITARE
XIV LA LUNE
XV Le marquis de Bade a deux cornes
XVI Veux-tu vivre,
XVIII Il avait le front bas,
XIX Messeigneurs,
XX Fils, je veux dans ce conte,
XXI QUAI DE LA FERRAILLE
XXII Un salon.
I LA MARQUISE ANTOINETTE
II IDYLLE
III COCARDE ET LOUCHON
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II Il était une fois
III Je suis Jean
IV L’oiseau passe
V CANCION
VI CHANSON DE MAGLIA
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IX MARGOT
X Rien
XI Tourne-toi
XII CHANSON DE BORD
XIII DANS LA FORÊT
XIV RONDE POUR LES ENFANTS
XV JEAN, JEANNE, JEANNOT
XVI LE CHANT DU VIEUX BERGER
XVII CHANT DES SONGES
XVIII Lamour f- le camp
XIX AIR DE LA PRINCESSE D’ORANGE
XX CHANT DU BOL DE PUNCH
XXI SÉRÉNADE
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XII Le lionceau songeait
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SOUS LES SAULES
III « Être aimé»

TOUTE LA LYRE: INTRODUCTION

Aie une muse belluaire,
Sinon tu seras dévoré.
Le ciel t’offre un double suaire,
L’un étoilé, l’autre azuré.
Va, revêts-les l’un après l’autre;
Et verse aux hommes, tour à tour,
Justicier sombre ou tendre apôtre,
Tantôt l’ombre et tantôt le jour.
Sois la nuit qui montre les astres;
Puis sois le soleil tout à coup,
Témoin des biens et des désastres,
Eclairant tout, éclipsant tout.
Car tu ressembles au prophète
Qui foudroyait et souriait;
Et ton âme de flots est faite
Comme l’océan inquiet.
Sois par l’aigle et par la chouette
Contemplé dans l’horreur des bois;
Sois l’immobile silhouette;
Sois la lueur et sois la voix.
Le psaltérion formidable
Vibre en tes mains, ô barde roi,
Esprit, poète, âme insondable!
Une aurore est derrière toi.
L’ange en passant te fait des signes;
Les lions te suivent des yeux;
Et, comme sept immenses lignes
S’allongeant de la terre aux cieux,
On voit, grâce à toi qui sais lire
Dans le coeur des hommes mouvants,
L’ombre des cordes de la lyre
Sur tout ce que font les vivants.

10 avril 1876

I Les nuages volaient

Les nuages volaient dans la lueur hagarde,
Noir troupeau que le vent lugubre a sous sa garde;
Et dans la profondeur blême au-dessous de moi,
Si bas que tout mon être en haletait d'effroi,
J'aperçus un sommet par une déchirure.

Ce faîte monstrueux sortait de l'ombre obscure;
Ses pentes se perdaient dans le gouffre inconnu;
Sur ce. plateau gisait, fauve, terrible, nu,
Un géant dont le corps se tordait sur la pierre;
Il en coulait du sang avec de la lumière;
Sa face regardait la nuit triste, et ses pieds,
Ses coudes, ses genoux, ses poings, étaient liés
D'une chaîne d'airain vivante, impitoyable
Et je voyais décroître et renaître effroyable
Son ventre qu'un vautour rongeait, oiseau bandit.
Le patient était colossal; on eût dit
Deux montagnes, dont l'une agonisait sur l'autre.
— Quel est, dis-je, ce sang qui coule ainsi? -Le vôtre,
Dit le vautour. Ce mont dont tu vois les sommets,
C'est le Caucase. -Et quand t'en iras-tu? -Jamais.
Et le supplicié me cria: Je suis l'Homme.
Et tout se confondit comme fine eau noire, ou comme
L'ombre se confondrait avec l'éclair qui luit
Sous une grande main qui mêlerait la nuit.

Une sorte de puits se fit dans l'insondable;
Le haut d'un autre mont en sortit formidable.
L'ombre avait cette horreur dont l'hiver la revêt;
Et j'entendis crier: Ararat! Il pleuvait.

— Qu'es-tu? dis-je à la cime âpre et des vents fouettée.
— J'attends l'arche; et j'attends la famille exceptée.
— Quelle arche? -Il pleut! il pleut! -Et le reste? -Englouti.

Quoi! dis-je, est-on créé pour être anéanti?
O terre! est-ce ta faute? O ciel! est-ce ton crime?
Mais tout déjà s’était effacé dans l’abîme.

Une flaque de bleu soudain perça l’amas
Des grêles, des brouillards, des vents et des frimas;
Un mont doré surgit dans cet azur terrible;
Là, sans frein, sans pitié, régnait la joie horrible;
Sur ce mont rayonnaient douze êtres sereins, beaux,
Joyeux, dans des carquois ayant tous les fléaux;
La nuée autour d’eux tremblait, et par les brèches
Le genre humain était la cible de leurs flèches;
On voyait à leurs pieds l’amour, les jeux, les ris;
Où l’on ne voyait rien on entendait des cris.
Une voix dit: Olympe! Et tout croula. L’espace,
Où l’informe à jamais flotte, passe et repasse,
Redevint un bloc noir; puis j’entendis un bruit
Qui fit une ouverture éclatante à la nuit,
Et je vis un sommet montré par les tonnerres;
Les vieux pins inclinaient leurs têtes centenaires,
L’aigle en fuite semblait craindre d’être importun;
Et là je vis quelqu’un qui parlait à quelqu’un,
Un homme face à face avec Dieu dans un rêve;
Un prophète effrayant qui recevait un glaive,
Et qui redescendit plein d’un céleste ennui
Vers la terre, emportant de la foudre avec lui.
Et l’infini cria: Sinaï! Puis la brume
Se referma, pareille à des nappes d’écume.
Les vents grondaient; le gouffre était au-dessous d’eux,
Noir dans l’immensité d’un tremblement hideux.
Soudain, comme heurté par quelque ouragan fauve,
Il s’ouvrit; et je vis une colline chauve;
Le crépuscule horrible et farouche tombait.
Un homme expirait là, cloué sur un gibet,
Entre deux vagues croix où pendaient deux fantômes;
D’une ville lugubre on distinguait les dômes;
Et le supplicié me cria: Je suis Dieu.

Les nuages erraient dans des rougeurs de feu;
J’entendis dans la nuit redoutable et sévère
Comme un souffle d’horreur qui murmurait: Calvaire!
L’obscurité faisait des plis comme un linceul.
Pâle, je contemplais, dans l’ombre où j’étais seul,
Comme on verrait tourner des pages de registres,
Ces apparitions de montagnes sinistres.

2 juillet 1856.

II LES ÉVANGÉLISTES

Sur des livres où rien n'était écrit-encore,
Quatre hommes méditaient quand mourut l'homme-Dieu;
Tournés au nord, au sud, au couchant, à l'aurore,
Ces hommes se nommaient Luc, Jean, Marc et Matthieu.
Pendant que sur leur noir registre
Tombait l'ombre du mont sinistre,
Et qu'ils rêvaient, battus des vents,
On vit, sur la croix qui nous navre;
Les clous de l'immense cadavre
Grandir et devenir vivants.

Le premier clou devint un aigle à forme étrange,
Le second fut un boeuf, le troisième un lion,
Le quatrième prit la figure d'un ange
Ayant l'éclair pour aile et pour oeil le rayon;
Puis, s'envolant du haut calvaire,
Ils quittèrent l'arbre sévère,
Ils quittèrent l'affreux, chevet,
Et chacun, dans l'ombre où nous sommes,
À l'oreille de ces. quatre hommes
Vint raconter ce qu'il savait.

4 avril 1854.

III Comme leurs yeux troublés

Comme leurs yeux troublés de sentiments contraires
Se baissaient devant lui,
Il dit: Allez en paix! allez en paix, mes frères,
Vous qui m’avez trahi!
Vivez, et que jamais sous vos pas ne s’entr’ouvre
Un piège inattendu,
Que la main du Seigneur vous assiste et vous couvre,
Vous qui m’avez vendu!

IV BOURGEOIS PARLANT DE JÉSUS-CHRIST

— Sa morale a du bon. -Il est mort à trente ans.
— Il changeait en vin l'eau. -Ça s'est dit dans son temps.
— Il était de Judée. -Il avait douze apôtres.
— Gens grossiers. -Gens de rien. -Jaloux les uns des autres.
— Il leur lavait les pieds. -C'est curieux, le puits
De la Samaritaine, et puis le diable, et puis
L'histoire de l'aveugle et du paralytique.
— J'en doute. -Il n'aimait pas les gens tenant boutique.
— A-t-il vraiment tiré Lazare du tombeau?
— C'était un sage. -Un fou. -Son système est fort beau.
— Vrai dans la théorie et faux dans la pratique.
— Son procès est réel. Judas est authentique.
— L'honnête homme au gibet et le voleur absous!
— On voit bien clairement les prêtres là-dessous.
— Tout change. Maintenant il a pour lui les prêtres.
— Un menuisier pour père, et des rois pour ancêtres,
C'est singulier. -Non pas. Une branche descend,
Puis remonte, mais c'est toujours le même sang;
Cela n'est pas très rare en généalogie.
— Il savait qu'on voulait l'accuser de magie
Et que de son supplice on faisait les apprêts.
— Sa Madeleine était une fille. -A peu près.
— Ça ne l'empêche pas d'être sainte. -Au contraire.
— Etait-il Dieu? -Non. -Oui. -Peut-être. -On n'y croit guère.
— Tout ce qu'on dit de lui prouve un homme très doux.
— Il était beau. -Fort beau, l'air juif, pâle. -Un peu roux.
— Le certain, c'est qu'il a fait du bien sur la terre;
Un grand bien; il était bon, fraternel, austère;
Il a montré que tout, excepté l'âme, est vain;
Sans doute il n'est pas dieu, mais certe il est divin.
Il fit l'homme nouveau meilleur que l'homme antique.
— Quel malheur qu'il se soit mêlé de politique!

V Du songe universel

Du songe universel notre pensée est faite;
Et le dragon était consulté du prophète,
Et jadis, dans l’horreur des antres lumineux,
Entr’ouvrant de leur griffe ou tordant en leurs noeuds
D’effrayants livres pleins de sinistres passages,
Les monstres chuchotaient à l’oreille des sages.

VI INSCRIPTION

Un sculpteur, qui vivait voilà bien trois mille ans,
Fit pour le noir Pluton, qu’en leurs cachots brûlants
Les ombres ont horreur de voir au milieu d’elles,
Ce temple, qu’aujourd’hui Dieu donne aux hirondelles.

17 juillet 1846.

VII Quand Auguste mourut

Quand Auguste mourut, Rome, donnant l’exemple,
Sur le mont Palatin lui fit bâtir un temple;
Et Livie y dressa des figures d’airain;
Elle mit au sommet du fronton souverain
Neptune et Jupiter, et sous le péristyle
Le mime Claudius et le danseur Bathylle

VIII Quand le vieux monde dut périr

Quand le vieux monde dut périr, sombre damné,
Quand l’empire romain d’horreur fut couronné,
Chaque vice vint faire au monstre une caresse.;
Luxure, Gourmandise, Avarice, Paresse,
Colère, Envie, Orgueil, vinrent; sur les sept monts
Rome vit se dresser debout les sept démons;

Tout fut dit. Le destin fit, pour l’oeuvre insondable,
Passer de main en main la pioche formidable;
Et l’on vit succéder, Christ étant au gibet,
Pour creuser le sépulcre où l’univers tombait,
La démence qui chante au mal qui délibère,
Le fossoyeur Néron au fossoyeur Tibère.

IX ÈRE DES CÉSARS

Un philosophe grec, persan ou byzantin,
Débarqua sur les bords du Tibre un beau matin.
Maint bourgeois tout de suite étourdit le pauvre homme
Des curiosités de la ville de Rome.
— Vous arrivez, monsieur? Si vous le permettez,
Nous visiterons Rome et toutés ses beautés:
Dès demain, nous irons, le jour levant à peine,
.Voir le pommier punique et la porte Capène,
L’Aventin, la cavale aux satyres, les bains,
La chapelle du vieux Sangus, roi des sabins,
Les Thermes, Cypris chauve, Isis patricienne,
Les faiseurs de cercueils bordant la voie ancienne,
Je vous montrerai tout, Jupiter Viminal,
L’autel de la Santé sur le mont Quirinal,
Le forum tout rempli de bruit et de scandales,
Apollon au colosse, Apollon aux sandales,
Le temple que Vénus a chez Salluste, et puis
Le vieux et noir quartier des Couvercles de Puits;
Ensuite, le Marché des Baladins, l’Auberge
Des Muses, le Juturne à côté de l’Eau Vierge,
Petit bois Somélis, grand bois Petilinus,
Nous verrons tout, endroits connus et non connus;
Enfin, pour que ce jour marque à jamais sa date,
Nous verrons les chevaux d’airain de Tiridate,
Et nous terminerons par les courses en char... -

— Romain, dit l’étranger, je voudrais voir César.

— Lequel? dites celui que vous voulez. Nous sommes
Fort riches en Césars. Nous avons plusieurs Romes
Et nous avons plusieurs Césars, jeunes et vieux.
Deux qui sont empereurs, et trente qui sont dieux.

Le penseur répondit: C’est là votre misère.

Pour qu’un peuple soit fort et règne sur la terre.
Un grand homme suffit, ô fils de Romulus,.
Et vous en avez tant que vous n’en avez plus!

16 août 1846.

X Le Mausolée est beau

Le Mausolée est beau, vaste, admirable à voir;
Sa première muraille est toute en granit noir,
La deuxième en albâtre, et la troisième enceinte
Est en gypse incrusté d'onyx et d'hyacinthe;
Franchissez-les; voilà le mur de jade vert
Qu'Eryclète, ouvrier de Corinthe, a couvert
De bas-reliefs où Flore aime et pleure Zéphyre;
Passez; vous rencontrez l'enceinte de porphyre;
Puis la salle d'argent ouvre son corridor;
Entrez; au centre luit l'immense trône d'or;
Sur le trône, approchez, sous un dais magnifique
Orné d'inscriptions d'écriture cufique,
Brille un cercueil formé d'un seul bloc de cristal,
Et dont on voit de loin, sur un haut piédestal,
Resplendir, comme une aube au fond des galeries,
Le couvercle étoilé d'un ciel de pierreries;
Regardez à travers ce grand cristal sacré,
Incorruptible, pur, vénérable, entouré
Des pleurs des nations scellés dans quatre vases,
Sous tous ces diamants, sous toutes ces topazes,
Regardez,-vous voici près du fond, près du roi,
Dérangez ces rubis, et que trouvez-vous? Moi.

XI INVOCATION DU MAGE CONTRE LES DEUX ROIS

Vents, souffles du zénith obscur et tutélaire,
N’éveillerez-vous pas quelque immense colère
Là-haut, dans le ciel sombre, en faveur des humains?
Puisque deux nations vont en venir aux mains
Parce que les deux rois se sont pris de querelle;
Puisque la plaine verte où court la sauterelle,
Où rit l’aube, où se chauffe au soleil le lézard,
Va tout à l’heure voir passer l’affreux hasard
Secouant dans la nuit ses mains pleines de flèches;
Puisqu’aux torrents taris entre les pierres sèches,
Vont succéder demain de longs ruisseaux de sang;
Puisque le grand lion qui pour boire descend
S’arrêtera pensif, surpris de ce flot rouge;
Puisque le paysan va trembler dans son bouge;
Puisque, si ces deux rois, le numide et le hun,
Ne sont pas soudain pris aux cheveux par quelqu’un,
On va voir éclater pour leurs folles chimères
La désolation lamentable des mères,
Et les deux camps côurir l’un sur l’autre acharnés,
Et, lorsqu’ils se seront entre eux exterminés,
Les durs vainqueurs, pareils aux bêtes des repaires,
Tuer les hommes, fils, frères, maris et pères,
Et les femmes, tordant leurs bras, cachant leurs seins,
Fuir devant les baisers de tous ces assassins;
Puisque deux peuples vont tomber dans cet abîme,
Vents, ne ferez-vous rien pour empêcher ce crime,
Et, vous qui pénétrez dans les profondeurs, vous
Qui vous réunissez ou vous dispersez tous
Plus vite que l’éclair, là-haut, quand, bon vous semble,
Vents, noirs avertisseurs, sur la terre qui tremble,
En ce moment funeste, en ce champ odieux,
N’amènerez-vous pas les formidables dieux?

28 juillet 1870.

XII Fuyez au mont inabordable!

Fuyez au mont inabordable!
Fuyez dans le creux du vallon!
Une nation formidable
Vient du côté de l’aquilon.

Ils auront de bons capitaines,
Ils auront de bons matelots,
Ils viendront à travers les plaines,
Ils viendront à travers les flots.

Ils auront des artilleries,
Des chariots, des pavillons;
Leurs immenses cavaleries
Seront comme des tourbillons.
Comme crie une aigle échappée,
Ils crieront: Nous venons enfin!
Meurent les hommes par l’épée!
Meurent les femmes par la faim!

On les distinguera dans l’ombre
Jetant la lueur et l’éclair.
Ils feront en marche un bruit sombre
Comme les vagues de la mer.

Ils sembleront avoir des ailes,
Ils voleront dans le ciel noir
Plus nombreux que les étincelles
D’un chaume qui brûle le soir.

Ils viendront, le coeur plein de haines
Avec des glaives dans les mains... -
Oh! ne sortez pas dans les plaines!
Oh! n’allez pas dans les chemins!

Car dans nos campagnes antiques
On n’entend plus que les clairons,
Et l’on n’y voit plus que les piques,
Que les piques des escadrons!

Oh! que de chars! que de fumée!
Ils viendront, hurlant et riant,
Ils seront une grande armée,
Ils seront un peuple effrayant,

Mais que Dieu, sous qui le ciel tremble,
Montre sa face dans ce bruit,
Ils disparaîtront tous ensemble
Comme une vision de nuit”

5 août 1846.

XIII Le calife a puni les gens de la montagne

Le calife a puni les gens de la montagne.
Ses soldats sont venus! Allah les accompagne,
Car ils n’ont rien laissé de vivant derrière eux.
Maintenant, oh! qùel deuil dans ce champ désastreux!
Les os de tout un peuple y gisent dans les pierres.
Le vautour décharné, l’aigle aux rouges paupières

Sont là seuls, triomphants, joyeux, le bec ouvert.
Tout est mort. Le chemin qui va dans le désert
Semble dallé, depuis Agra jusqu’à Nicée,
De tous ces crânes blancs qui couvrent la chaussée;
Et quand des chameliers passent dans cet endroit,
Le plus vieux, l’oeil fixé sur un poteau qu’Un voit,
Lit cette inscription au groupe qui l’écoute:
«Les paveurs du calife ont pavé cette route.”

22 septembre 1846.

XIV Tu volais donc mes bœufs

— Tu volais donc mes boeufs.
— C’en est fait de ma peau.
— Tu n’as pas de turban?
— Pas même de chapeau.
— Prends celui-ci.
— La mode en cette capitale
Est-elle qu’on vous coiffe avant qu’on vous empale?
— Tes habits sont troués.
— Monseigneur le sultan,
C’est vrai.
— Mets ce caftan.
— Moi!
— Toi. Mets ce caftan.
Esclaves, approchez. Choisis les trois plus belles.
— Moi!
— Je choisis pour toi. Prends ces trois-là.
— Lesquelles?
— Ces troupeaux sont à toi.
— À moi!
— Prends ce collier, présent d’un ancien roi.
— Qu’il est lourd! un collier d’or massif! Ça m’achève.
Ah çà! je n’y comprends rien du tout. C’est un rêve.
Ces trois astres! J’ai peur.

À moi ton turban vért, à moi ton caftan bleu!
Et tu me mets-au cou ce collier d’or! Au lieu
De me couper la tête ou de me faire pendre!
Tu me donnes, à moi qui voulais te les prendre,.
Tes troupeaux,, et de plus trois femmes pour moi seul!
— N’as-tu donc pas été l’hôte de mon aïeul.?

XV LE PASSAGE DES ÊTRES SOMBRES

Les démons, dont-le chant ressémble à des huées,
Volent dans le tumulte horrible des nuées,
Et jettent, en fuyant à travers l’infini,
Des cris d’amour au mal, surpris d’être béni.
— Chaleur, feu,, clarté, vie, enfantez les désastres!
Nature aux triples.seins, sous ton vêtement d’astres,
Sois bonne mère, et fais deux plis à ton manteau;
Mets un agneau dans l’un, dans l’autre un, louveteau.
Sanglier, deviens porc dans l’herbe où tu te vautres..
Malheurs, engéndrez-vous sans fin les uns les autres.
O bouches des fureùrs et des rugissements,
0 lionne, ô panthère, appelez vos amants!
Boas, vautours, requins, crocodiles, vipères,
Monstres, accomplissez au fond de vos repaires
L’auguste loi de croître et de multiplier.
Verdoie, et remplis-toi d’ombre, ô mancenillier,
Ours, renards, caïmans,. scorpions! ô famille
Du meurtre, du chaos et du néant, fourmille!
Vers de terre, oyez plus nombreux que les fleurs.
Ricanez dans les bois sacrés, merles siffleurs.
Voici le mois de mai, mésanges, tourterelles,
Ramiers, accouplez-vous dans les nids chauds et frêles,
Et, dans le bercement des. arbres murmurants,
Faites avec amour des petits pour les grands.
O prêtres, cachez Dieu. Cachez le soleil, bibles.
Masques, soyez charmants sur des faces horribles.
Asile où le lynx guette, où rôde lé jaguar,
Solitude, ouvre-toi devant l’errante Agar.
L’aile est au moucheron, l’araignée a ses toiles.
Dresse toujours plus haut sous le ciel plein d’étoiles,
Dans l’azur, dans le souffle orageux des typhons,
Au-dessus des étangs et des bourbiers profonds,
Tes branchages d’où sort le miasme insalubre,
Sombre monde ignoré, forêt, vierge lugubre!

Grandissez, passereaux, car l’épervier grandit.
Joie! ô bandit, sois prince! ô prince, sois bandit.
Règne, imposture, et prends le fils après le père.
Réussissez, rois, dieux, peste! Echafaud, prospère!
Ô guerre, ô fratricide, ayez tous les bonheurs
Que peuvent vous donner les tueurs, les seigneurs,
Les bourreaux, les mangeurs d’enfants, les chasseurs d’hommes.
Croîs, Babel! Sybaris, chantez! Aimez, Sodomes!
Ô pourriture, sois heureuse; écroulement,
Travaille; pullulez, corbeaux; et toi, gaîment,
Tourne,-ô meule de grès, et rends la lame aiguë.
Jusquiame, aconit, germez; fleuris, ciguë;
Chante sous les gibets, mandragore; venins
Des joncs vils, des buissons rampants, des arbres nains,
Gonflez-vous, car c’est nous, les inconnus terribles,
Qui, filtrant l’âpre sève à travers d’affreux cribles,
Confiant au printemps l’assassinat, faisons
Votre épaississement formidable, ô poisons!
Nous sommes l’essaim noir qui passe, et qui souhaite
Le cadavre au chacal, la nuit à la chouette,
Un sac d’or à Judas, à Jésus un baiser.
Nous voulons voir l’eau vive en marais s’apaiser;
Nous aimons ce qui hait; notre bonté procure
Une hache à Caïn qu’enivre une âme obscure.
Enfer, sois vrai; César, sois fort; tigre, sois beau;
Que ta faim soit toujours assouvie, ô tombeau!
Rose, accepte l’argent hideux de la limace;
Que sous toute beauté l’ossement vil grimace.
Tout est faux; de quel crime es-tu née, ô vertu?
Et toi, cendre, réponds, de quel fruit d’or viens-tu?
Car la surface a beau, chair pure ou clarté sainte,
Etre adorable, exquise et fraîche, et si bien peinte
Que les hommes sont pris d’amour en la voyant,
C’est à nous qu’appartient le dessous effrayant.
Abîme! il faut que tout ce qui vit, se hérisse,
Aime, se meut, va, vient, rit ou pleure, périsse;
Car tout est le sépulcre; et l’invisible écueil

Vers lequel le berceau flotte, c’est le cercueil,
Et le nouveau-né blanc et rose est un squelette,
Ô mort, que ta mamelle épouvantable allaite. -
Ainsi parle l’essaim, des démons factieux,
Et tout ce qui commet des crimes sous les cieux,
Les faux prêtres, les rois sanglants, le vent d’orage,
La peste, l’échafaud, la mort, reprend courage.

V. H. 29 août 1872.

XVI Le Campéador

Le Campéador, l’homme honnête et sans ennui,
Cria dans la forêt profonde devant lui,
— Ici, lion! il faut que je te parle. Approche.
Alors on vit sortir de derrière une roche
L’habitant chevelu dés monts d’Almonacid.
— Tiens, vous me tutoyez, dit le lion au Cid.
Pourquoi? -Le Cid terrible et doux, cher à l’Espagne,
Dit: -Parce que je suis ton frère: -Et la montagne,
Et la forêt, la rose, ét. l’herbe, et le buisson
Trouvèrent que le Cid superbe avait raison.

XVII Muse!

paix aux bergers, et paix aux laboureurs!
La justice, étrangère aux humaines erreurs,
Luit sur l’homme des champs comme une pure étoile,
Éclairant jusqu’au fond des-coeurs que rien ne voile,
Le vieillard au front gris, l’enfant aUx cheveux blonds;
Et le soir, on rencontre au penchant des vallons,
Retournant au logis par le chemin des vignes,
Les plus sages parlant d’elle avec les plus dignes.

XVIII Éole allait criant:

Éole allait criant: Bacchus m’a pris mon outre.
Mithra-lui dit avec son sourire divin:.
Qu’y mettais-tu? Du vent. -Qu’y mettra-t-il? -Du vin.
Tu peux te consoler, bonhomme, et passer outre,
Et laisser à Bacchus ton outre, dit Mithra,
La tempête en sortait,-l’ivresse en sortira.

Jersey, 28 octobre 1852.

XIX LE VIEUX DE BRISACH

(Paraissant sur le haut de sa tour)

Je me dis en moi-même et depuis uh moment
Voilà bien du vacarme et bien de l’aboiement.
J’ai puni les barons voleurs, les noirs burgraves
Qui remplissaient le Rhin de leurs forfaits hardis.
Rois, j’ai frappé les coups; j’ai fait sur ces bandits
Luire ce vieil estoc qui maintenant se rouille;
Vous vous êtes rués, vous rois, sur la dépouille,
Partageant tout ainsi que des associés;
De tout ce qui restait de ces suppliciés,
Princes, je vous ai vus vous faire un héritage;
Je n’ai pas trouvé bon d’entrer dans le partage,
N’ayant pas pour métier d’ôter les clous aux croix,
Et d’aller décrocher, la nuit, au fond des bois,
Pour les revendre aux juifs les chaînes des potences;
Sans cela, si j’avais usé des circonstances,
Si j’eusse, comme vous, mis la main dans le sac,
Je serais aujourd’hui, moi, le vieux de Brisach,
Riche à voir les abbés m’offrir leurs politesses,
Et, si bon m’eût semblé, roi comme vos altesses;
Je n’eusse eu pour cela, vous le savez bien tous,
Qu’à brocanter son peuple à quelqu’un d’entre vous;
Car tous, petits et grands, vous êtes à l’enchère,
Et, pour quitter ces monts, pour faire bonne chère
Ailleurs qu’en vos donjons aux sauvages créneaux,
Pour aller vivre à Rome auprès des cardinaux
Et du Saint-Père avec quelque drôlesse vile,
Il n’est pas un de vous qui n’eût vendu sa ville.
Princes, jusqu’à mes pieds quand jadis vous rampâtes,
Était-ce sur le ventre? était-ce à quatre pattes?
Je ne m’en souviens plus. Aujourd’hui, c’est fort bien,
Vous me montrez les dents quand je ne suis plus rien
Qu’un bonhomme qui songe et qu’une barbe grise;

Et vous me déchirez, et j’ai peu de surprise
De vous trouver renards et loups, vous sachant rois.
Votre courage est fait de vos anciens exploits.
Et je n’en dirai rien, sinon que je vous brave,
Et vous défie, ô rois, toi marquis, toi landgrave,
Toi duc, troupeau hurlant à ma piste attaché,
De mordre aucune place où vous n’ayez léché “.

XX La bête regarda l’homme

La bête regarda l’homme venir vers elle.
Ses quatre pieds, sa croupe âpre et surnaturelle,
Et son ventre hideux couvraient plus d’un arpent;
Avec les torsions subites du serpent
Elle avait l’oeil du tigre, et les vautours farouches
Volaient sur elle ainsi que sur un ver les mouches;
On eût dit que le mont sous son poids étouffait
Un lion rugissant près d’elle n’eût pas fait
Plus d’effet que Moschus soupirant une idylle;
L’ombre semblait   avoir peur de ce crocodile;
Sa gueule était le gouffre où la lave apparaît;
Ses glissements étaient marqués-dans la forêt
Par des écrasements de-roches et de chênes;
Sa prunelle était faite avec toutes les haines
Que l’enfer fait flamber à, ses noirs soupiraux;
Elle rugit. -Bonjour, lézard, dit le héros.

XXI Batailles!

Batailles! noirs duels de la force et du droit!
Guerres,-par le hasard en courant décidées,
N’êtes-vous pas souvent funestes aux idées?
Que de fois vous avez souillé d’iniquités
La Justice et la Paix, ces chastes déités!
Tout ne s’en va-t-il pas dans le bruit que vous faites,
O victoires! fracas! étincelantes fêtes!
Illuminations sous les grands arbres noirs!
Feux d’or épanouis dans le ciel clair des soirs!
Longue acclamation de la foule.aux armées!
Concerts! chants belliqueux! cris éclatants! fumées!
Qui remuez le coeur de chaque citoyen,
Et dont le lendemain il ne reste plus rien
Que des lampions vils mêlés aux branches d’arbre,
Et des taches de suif sur les Vénus de marbre!

XXII HUGO DUNDAS

Devant les douze lords de la chambre étoilée,
Hugo Dundas fut grand.
Du fond d'une tribune une femme voilée
L'admirait en pleurant.

Nuit, flambeaux, murs drapés, blasons des deux royaumes,
C'était sinistre et beau.
Les douze pairs muets semblaient douze fantômes,
Assis dans un tombeau.

Une hache brillait. Le peuple criait: honte!
Le peuple et les soldats.
Tous menaçaient. Mais rien ne fit pâlir le comte,
Le comte Hugo Dtindas.

— La Révolte a troublé les monts où l'aigle plane,
Et vous étiez là tous.
Que faisiez-vous, mylord, à Dumbar, à Cartlane?
Mylord, qu'y faisiez-vous?

— Mes pairs, j'ai défendu le roi que mon coeur nomme,
Mon clan, mon étendard.
J'aime l'aigle et le roi, car je suis gentilhomme
Et je suis montagnard. -
Ainsi le juge austère et le comte superbe
Se parlaient dans la tour.
Heureux le bon soldat qui meurt, couché sur l'herbe,
En plein air, en plein jour!

La cour se retira. -L'on voyait dans.la salle
Le peuple fourmiller.
Enfin l'aube apparut comme une vierge pâle
Que l'homme va souiller.

Les portes du conseil, de bronze revêtues,
S’ébranlèrent alors;
Et l’on vit, à pas lents, comme douze statues
Rentrer les douze lords.

Le juge en cheveux blancs, debout, parlant au comte,
Dit: -Nos jours durent peu.
Puisque cet homme au roi ne veut pas rendre compte,
Il rendra compte à Dieu.

I ÉCRIT SUR LE MUR DE VERSAILLES.

Sachez qu’on va dresser dévant la Tour de Londre
Un grand échafaud noir.
Lord comte Hugo Dundas, qù’avez-vous à répondre?
Vous mourrez demain soir. -
Alors un de ces cris, qui font que l’effroi monte
Jusqu’au juge inquiet,
Retentit sous la voûte... -On regarda le comte;
Le comté souriait.

Il dit: -Adieu la vie! -’Et; sans troùble dans l’âme,
Il salua la cour
Puis se tournant vers l’ombre où pleurait une femme,
— Adieu, dit-il, amour!

14 janvier 1844.

XXIII ÉCRIT SUR LE MUR DE VERSAILLES À CÔTÉ DU CORDON DE SONNETTE DE LOUIS XIV

L’objet est illustre
Dans ce temps caduc.
Le duc sonne un rustre,
Le roi sonne un duc.
Siècle étrange! il taille,
Sans mêler les rangs,
De la valetaille
A même les grands.
Il tient fous et sages
Au bout de son fil.
Il a deux-visages,
Mais un seul profil.
Il a sur l’épaule
Dans le même sac
Le duc et le drôle,
Frontin et Fronsac.

Versailles, IO août 1830

XXIV LA PEAU DE TIGRE

Quand la marquise était avec le roi fâchée,
Avant l'invention d'Esther par Mardochée,
Afin que chez Vasti Sa Majesté rentrât,
Il fallait mieux qu'un prince et plus qu'un magistrat;
Il fallait, pour conduire Alcandre à Cydalise,
Quelqu'un qui fût lettré, mais qui fût de l'église;
Pour porter les soupirs, pour mettre à l'entretien
Du maître et de la belle un peu d'accent chrétien,
Il convenait d'avoir en cour un personnage
Qui, sage par sa robe et grave par son âge,
Fût superbement prêtre et saintement valet;
Il fallait un pieux porte-voix; il fallait,
Pour qu'une bouche ayant d'austères habitudes,
Chère aux vices pédants, clémente aux fautes prudes,
Pût au besoin donner leur sens aux demi-mots,
Que monsieur Bossuet fût évêque de Meaux.

Certes, ce prêtre était farouche; il avait l'âme
Faite d'ombre, d'éclairs, de colère et de flamme;
Les Cévennes ont vu rugir ce sombre abbé,
Et quand le roi montait l'escalier dérobé,
Ce tigre était là; mais il servait de descente
Au lit où Montespan palpitait, rougissante.

XXV Oui, duc, nous sommes beaux

Oui, duc, nous sommes beaux, et nous avons l’amour
Dans les yeux, et l’esprit sur le front! Un beau jour,
Car il faut bien que tout, même le mal, finisse,
Bref, après avoir eu la fièvre et la jaunisse,
Après avoir aimé fort peu, beaucoup haï,
Après avoir menti, trompé, triché, trahi,
Fait rage; après un tas de choses mal agies,
Nuits au tripot, brelans, lansquenets, tabagies,
Nous crevons. Vils faquins que l’orgueil étouffait!
Et nous ne savons plus ce que nous avons fait
De notre âme, l’ayant derrière nous semée
Au hasard, dans cette ombre et dans cette fumée.
L’homme, fausse monnaie, écu sinistre et noir,
Et que Satan changeur souvent cloue au comptoir,
Sequin que la mort garde en paîment de l’orgie,
Est du néant que Dieu marque à son effigie.

XXVI Les révolutions,

Les révolutions, ces grandes affranchies,
Sont farouches, étant filles des monarchies.

Donc, quand le genre humain voulut, enfin lassé,
Entrer dans l’avenir et sortir du passé,
Il n’aperçut pas d’autre ouverture que celle
Qui s’offrait, sous ce fer où l’éclair étincelle,
Entre ces deux poteaux, chambranles effrayants.

Oui, c’est la seule issue, hommes, troupeaux fuyants;
Sortez par ce sépulcre. O mystère insondable!
Hélas! c’est du passé la porte formidable,!
Entrez dans l’avenir par ce pas sépulcral.
C’est à travers le mal qu’il faut sortir du mal.
Le genre humain, pour fuir de la sanglante ornière,
Marche sur une tête humaine, la dernière;
C’est avec de l’enfer qu’il commence ses cieux;
Et l’homme en écrasant le monstre est monstrueux.

Eruption des droits de l’homme! Sombres laves!
Sortie exaspérée et fauve des esclaves!
Triste loi du reflux qui ne peut dévier!
Lugubre enfantement du Vingt-et-un-Janvier 19!
Tout un monde surgit, tout un monde s’écroule;
Fiacre horrible qui passe au milieu de la foule!
Sacerdoce et Pouvoir sont là; que disent-ils?
Morne chuchotement de ces deux noirs profils!
Pendant qu’autour d’eux gronde, éclate et se proclame
La révolte du peuple et l’émeute de l’âme,
Pendant que, sur la terre et dans le firmament,
On entend le funèbre et double craquement
De l’ancien paradis et de l’ancien royaume,
Le roi spectre tout bas parle au prêtre fantôme.

Qu’est-ce qu’il avait fait, ce roi, ce condamné,
Ce patient pensif et pâle? Il était né.
Est-ce une injuste mort? Qui donc l’oserait dire?
C’est la punition; c’est aussi le martyre.
Responsabilité sombre de l’innocent!
O révolutions! l’idéal est en sang;
Le sublime est horrible et l’horrible est sublime;
Et comment expliquer ces aspects de l’abîme?

Oh! quels chocs de faisceaux, de tribuns, de pavois!
Je vois luire les fronts, j’entends parler les voix;
La lumière est accrue et l’ombre est agrandie;
Toute cette héroïque et vaste tragédie
Passe devant mes yeux comme par tourbillons.

La Marseillaise dit: Formez vos bataillons!
Là-bas, dans un rayon de gouffre et de colère,
Le vieux bonnet damné du forçat séculaire
Luit au bout d’une pique, étrange labarum.
Ce n’est pas un sénat, ce n’est pas un forum,
C’est un tas de Titans qui vient tout reconstruire;
Ces colosses hagards se mettent à bruire;
Nuit, tourmente; océan épouvantable et beau!
Chaque vague qui fuit s’appelle Mirabeau,
Robespierre, Brissot, Guadet, Buzot, Barnave,
Pétion... -Hébert salit l’écume de sa bave.
Et, submergé, saignant, arraché, mort, épars,
Le vieux dogme, partout, noyé de toutes parts,
Tombe, et tout le passé s’en va dans la même onde.
Danton parle; il est plein de la rumeur d’un monde;
C’est une idée et c’est un homme; il resplendit;
Il ébranle les coeurs et les murs; ce qu’il dit
Est semblable au passage orageux d’un quadrige;
Un torrent de parole énorme qu’il dirige,
Un verbe surhumain, superbe, engloutissant,
S’écroule de sa bouche en tempête, et descend
Et coule et se répand sur la foule profonde;

Il bâtit? non, il brise; il détruit? non, il fonde.
Pendant qu’il jette au vent de l’avenir ses cris,
Mêlés à la clameur de vieux trônes proscrits,
Le peuple voit passer une roue inouïe
De tonnerre et d’éclairs dont l’ombre est éblouie;
Il parle; il est l’élu, l’archange, l’envoyé!
Et l’interrompra-t-on? qui l’ose est foudroyé.
Qui pourrait lui barrer la route? qui? personne.
Tout ploie en l’écoutant, tout s’émeut, tout frissonne,
Tant ces discours, tombés d’en haut, sont accablants,
Tant l’âme est forte, et tant, pour les hommes tremblants,
Ces roulements du char de l’esprit sont terribles!

Auprès des flamboyants se dressent les horribles:
Justiciers, punisseurs, vengeurs, démons du bien.
— Grâce.! encore un moment! grâce! -Ils répondent: Rien.
Entendez-vous Marat qui hurle dans sa cave?
Sa morsure aux tyrans s’en va baiser l’esclave.
Il souffle la fureur;,:les griefs acharnés,
La vengeance, la mort, la vie, aux déchaînés
A plat ventre, grinçant des dents, livide, oblique,
Il travaille à l’immense évasion publique;
Il perce l’épais mur du bagne, et, dans son trou,
Du grand cachot de l’ombre il tire le verrou;
Il saisit l’ancien monde; il met à nu sa plaie;
Il le traîne de rue en rue, il est la claie;
Il est en même temps la huée; il écrit;
Le vent d’orage emporte et -sème son esprit,
Une feuille, de fange et d’aurore inondée,
Espèce de guenille horrible de. l’idée;
Il dénonce, il délivre; il. console, il maudit;
De la liberté sainte il est l’âpre bandit;
Il agite l’antique et monstrueuse chaîne,
Hideux, faisant sonner ce fer contre sa haine;
On voit autour de lui des ossements humains;.
Charlotte, ayant le coeur des ancêtres romains,
Seule osera tenter cet antre inabordable;

Il est le misérable,. il est le formidable;
Il est l'auguste infâme; il est le nain géant;
Il égorge, massacre, extermine, en créant;
Un pauvre en deuil l'émeut, un roi saignant le charme;
Sa fureur aime; il verse une effroyable larme;
Comme il pleure avec rage au secours des souffrants!
Il crie au mourant: Tue! Il crie au volé: Prends!
Il crie à l'opprimé: Foule aux pieds! broie! accable!
Doux pour une détresse et pour l'autre implacable,
Il fait à cette foule, à cette nation,
A ce peuple, un salut d'extermination.
Dur, mais grand; front livide entre les fronts célèbres!
Ténébreux, il attaque et poursuit les ténèbres.
Cette chauve-souris fait la guerre au corbeau.
Prêtre imposteur du vrai, difforme amant du beau,
Il combat l'ombre avec toutes les armes noires.
Pierres, boue et crachats, affronts, cris dérisoires,
Hymnes à l'échafaud, poignard, rire infernal,
Il puise à pleines mains dans l'affreux arsenal;
Cet homme peut toucher à tout, hors à la foudre.

La meule doit broyer si le moulin veut moudre;
Sur les versants divers des abîmes penchants,
Ceux qui paraissent bons, ceux qui semblent méchants,
Ébauchent en commun la même délivrance;
Ils font le droit, ils font le peuple, ils font la France.
Qu'appelez-vous Bourbon, majesté, roi, dauphin?
Toute chose dont sort l'indigence, la faim,

L'ignorance, le mal, la guerre, l'homme brute,
C'est fini, cela doit s'en aller dans la chute;
C'est une tête. Eh bien, le panier la reçoit.
Ils marchent, détruisant l'obstacle, quel qu'il soit;
Et c'est leur dogme à tous: -Tuer quiconque tue.
Ruine où l'ordre éclôt, vit et se constitue!
C'est par excès d'amour qu'ils abhorrent; bonté
Devient haine; ils n'ont plus de coeur que d'un côté

A force de songer au sort des misérables,
Et par miséricorde ils sont inexorables.
Pour eux ce blond dauphin, c’est déjà tout un roi;
Qu’importe sa pâleur, sa fièvre, son effroi?
Ils écoutent le triste avenir qui sanglote;
L’enfant a dans leur main la lourdeur d’un despote;
Ils l’écrasent meurs donc! -sous le trône natal.
Ainsi tous les débris du vieux monde fatal,
Évêques mis aux fers, rois traînés à la barre,
Disparaissent, broyés sous leur pitié barbare.
Tigres compatissants! formidables agneaux!
Le sang que Danton verse éclabousse Vergniaux
Sous la Montagne ainsi qu’aux pieds de la Gironde
Le même avenir chante et la même horreur gronde.

Oui, le droit se dressa sur les codes bâtards;
Oui, l’on sentit, ainsi qu’à tous les avatars,
Le tressaillement sourd du flanc des destinées,
Quand, montant lentement son escalier d’années,
Le dix-huitième siècle atteignit quatrevingt;
Encor treize, le nombre étrange, et le jour vint.
Alors, comme il arrive à chaque phénomène,
A chaque changement d’âge de l’âme humaine,
Comme lorsque Jésus mourut au Golgotha,
L’éternel sablier des siècles s’arrêta,
Laissant l’heure incomplète et discontinuée;
L’oeil profond des penseurs plongea dans la nuée,
Et l’on vit une main qui retournait le temps.
On comprit qu’on touchait aux solennels instants,
Que tout recommençait, qu’on entrait. dans la phase,
Que le sommet allait descendre sous la base,
Que le nadir allait devenir le zénith,
Que le peuple montait sur le roi qui finit!

Un blême crépuscule apparut sur Sodome,
Promesse menaçante; et le peuple, pauvre homme,
Mendiant dont le vent tordait le vil manteau,

Forçat dans sa galère ou juif dans'son ghetto,
Se leva, suspendit sa plainte monotone,
Et rit, et s'écria: -Voici la grande automne!
La saison vient. C'est mûr. Un signe est dans les cieux.

La Révolution, pressoir prodigieux,
Commença le travail de la vaste récolte,
Et, des coeurs comprimés exprimant la révolte,
Broyant les rois caducs debout depuis Clovis,
Fit son oeuvre suprême et triste, et sous sa vis
Toute l'Europe fut comme une vigne sombre.
Alors, dans le champ vague et livide de l'ombre,
Se répandit, fumant, on ne sait quel flot noir,
O terreur! et l'on vit, sous l'effrayant pressoir,
Naître de la lumière à travers d'affreux voiles,
Et jaillir et couler du sang et des étoiles;
On vit le vieux sapin des trônes ruisseler,
Tandis qu'on entendait tout le passé râler,
Et, le front radieux, la main rouge et fangeuse,
Chanter la Liberté, la grande vendangeuse.
Jours du peuple cyclope et de l'esprit titan!
Vie et trépas tournant le même cabestan!
Temps splendide et fatal, qui mêle en sa fournaise
Au cri d'un Josaphat l'hymne d'une Genèse!
Quiconque t'osera regarder fixement,
Convention, cratère, Etna, gouffre fumant,
Quiconque plongera la fourche dans ta braise,
Quiconque sondera ce puits: Quatrevingt-treize,
Sentira se cabrer et s'enfuir son esprit.
Quand Moïse vit Dieu, le vertige le prit;
Et moi, devant l'histoire aux horizons sans nombre,
Je tremble, et j'ai le même éblouissement sombre,
Car c'est voir Dieu que voir les grandes lois du sort.
Non, le glaive, la mort répondant à la mort,
Non, ce n'est pas la fin. Jette plus bas la sonde,
Mon esprit. Ce serait l'étonnement du monde
Et la déception des hommes qu'un progrès

N’apparût qu’en laissant aux justes des regrets,
Que l’ombre attristât l’aube à se lever si lente,
Et que, pour le toucher avec sa main sanglante
Le temps de lui céder la place et le chemin,
Toujours l’affreux hier ensanglantât demain!
Non, ce n’est pas la fin. Non, il n’est pas possible,
Dieu, que toute ta loi soit de changer de cible,
Et de faire passer le meurtre et le forfait
Des mains des rois aux mains du peuple stupéfait.
Le peuple ne veut pas de ce morne héritage 20.

Que serait donc l’effort de l’homme si le sage
N’avait à constater qu’un résultat si vain,
Le choc du droit humain contre le droit divin!
Et s’il n’apercevait que cette lueur trouble
Quand il écoute au fond de l’ombre la voix double,
Le passé, l’avenir, la matière, l’esprit,
La voix du peuple Enfer, la voix du peuple Christ!

C’est vrai, l’histoire est sombre. Ô rois! hommes tragiques!
Démences du pouvoir sans limites! logiques
De l’épée et du sceptre, exterminant, broyant,
Allant à travers tout à leur but effrayant!
Oh! la toute-puissance a Caïn pour ancêtre.
Rien qu’à voir par éclairs les siècles apparaître,
Quels règnes inouïs! que d’étranges lueurs!
Voici les idiots à côté des tueurs.
Zam, s’éveillant trop tard, met l’aurore à l’amende;
Claude égorge sa femme et puis la redemande;
Bajazet veut lier les vents à des poteaux;
Xercès fouette la mer, Phur crache sur l’Athos;
Pillage, trahison, vol, parjure, homicide;
Ici le parricide et là l’infanticide;
Pères dénaturés, fils en rébellion;
Octave usurpe, opprime, égorge, et dans Lyon
Soixante nations lui bâtissent un temple;
La Flandre est un bûcher que Philippe contemple;

Léon dix en riant étrangle un cardinal;
Maxence après Galère apparaît infernal;
Voilà Sanche, abruti d'ivresses funéraires;
Celui-ci, Mahomet, tua ses dix-neuf frères;
Après avoir frappé son père, Manfredi
S'assied dessus jusqu'à ce qu'il soit refroidi;
Les Transtamares font revivre les Orestes;
Achab fait ramasser sous sa table ses restes
Par des hommes sans mains, sans pieds, sans dents, sans yeux;
Caïus triomphe avec du sang jusqu'aux essieux;
Richard d'York étouffe Édouard cinq; Ramire
Le Mauvais est mauvais, mais Jean le Bon est pire;
Sélim, tout effaré de débauche et d'encens,
Court dans Stamboul, perçant de flèches les passants;
Zeb plante une forêt de gibets à Nicée;
Christiern fait tous les jours arroser d'eau glacée
Des captifs enchaînés nus dans des souterrains;
Galéas Visconti, les bras liés aux reins,
Râle, étreint par les noeuds de la corde que Sforce
Passe dans les oeillets de sa veste de force;
Cosme, à l'heure où midi change en brasier le ciel,
Fait lécher par-un bouc son père enduit de miel;
Soliman met Tauris en feu pour se distraire;
Alonze, furieux qu'on allaite son frère,
Coupe le bout des seins d'Urraque avec-ses dents;
Vlad regarde mourir ses neveux prétendants
Et rit de voir le pal leur sortir par la bouche;
Borgia communie; Abbas, maçon farouche,
Fait avec de la brique et des hommes vivants
D' épouvantables tours qui hurlent dans les vents;
Là, le sceptre vandale, ici la loi burgonde;
Cléopâtre renaît pire dans Frédégonde;
Ivan est sur Moscou, Carlos est sur Madrid;
Sous cet autre, Louis dit le Grand, on ouvrit
Les mères pour tuer leurs enfants dans leurs ventres.
Mais où sont donc les loups! Oh! les antres! les antres!
La jungle où les boas glissent, fangeux et froids!

Est-ce du sang qui coule aux veines de ces rois?
Ont-ils des coeurs aussi? Sont-ils ce que nous sommes?
Cieux profonds! Oh! plutôt que l'aspect de ces hommes,
La rencontre du tigre, et, plutôt que leur voix,
Le sourd rugissement des lions dans les bois!
Eh bien, vengeance donc! mort! malheur! représailles!
La torche aux Rhamséions, aux Kremlins, aux Versailles!
Qu'Ossa soit à son tour broyé par Pélion!
Au bourreau les bourreaux! Justice! talion!

Non! Jamais d'échafauds! C'est par d'autres répliques
Que doivent s'affirmer les saintes républiques.
Ce siècle, le plus grand des siècles, l'a compris.
Le jour où Février se leva sur Paris,
Il fit deux parts de l'oeuvre immense de nos pères,
Et, grave, agenouillé devant les grands mystères,
Ne gardant que le droit, rendit à Dieu la mort.
Notre doigt n'est pas fait pour presser le ressort
De ce fer monstrueux qui tombe et se relève;
La liberté n'est pas un outil de la Grève;
Elle s'emmanche mal au couperet hideux;
Carrier, Le Bas, Hébert, sont des Philippes deux;
Fouquier-Tinville touche au duc d'Albe; Barrère
Vaut de Maistre, et Chaumette a Bâville pour frère;
Marat, Couthon, Saint-Just, d'où la vengeance sort,
Servent la vie avec les choses de la mort;
Ce qu'ils font est fatal; c'est toujours la vieille oeuvre,
Et l'on y sent le froid de l'antique couleuvre.
Non, le vrai ne doit point avoir de repentirs;
Au nom de tous les morts et de tous les martyrs,
Non, jamais de vengeance! et la vie est sacrée.
L'aigle des temps nouveaux, planant dans l'empyrée,

Laisse le sang rouiller le bec du vieux vautour;
Le peuple doit grandir; étant maître à son tour,
Et c'est par la douceur que la grandeur se prouve.
Concorde! Nos enfants ne tettent plus la louve;

Notre avenir n’est plus dans un antre, allaité
Par l’affreux ventre noir de la fatalité.

Ce patient, traîné dans un tombeau qui roule,
Ces prunelles de tigre éclatant dans la foule,
Ce prêtre, ce bourreau, tout ce groupe fatal,
Ce tréteau, pilori s’il n’est pas piédestal,
Ce panier, cette fosse infâme qui se creuse,
Cette hache, c’était de l’ombre malheureuse;
Cela cachait le ciel, le vrai, l’astre éclipsé;
C’était du crépuscule et c’était du passé;
Le peuple sent en lui sa nouvelle âme éclore,
Et ne veut rien du soir et veut tout de l’aurore.
Avançons. Le progrès, c’est un besoin d’azur.
Certes, Danton fut grand; Robespierre était pur;
Jadis, broyant, malgré les cris et les menaces,
Les mâchoires de l’hydre entre ses poings tenaces,
Gladiateur géant du cirque des fléaux,
Ayant à déblayer tout l’antique chaos,
Ce grand Quatrevingt-treize a fait ce qu’il dut faire;
Mais nous qui respirons l’idéale atmosphère,
Nous sommes d’autres coeurs; les temps fatals sont clos;
Notre siècle, au-dessus du vieux niveau des flots,
Au-dessus de la haine, au-dessus de la crainte,
Fait sa tâche; il construit la grande Babel sainte;
Dieu laisse cette fois l’homme bâtir sa tour.
La république doit s’affirmer par l’amour,
Par l’entrelacement des mains et des pensées,
Par tous les lys s’ouvrant à toutes les rosées,
Par le beau, par le bon, par le vrai, par le grand,
Par le progrès debout, vivant, marchant, flagrant,
Par la matière à l’homme enfin libre asservie,
Par le sourire auguste et calme de la vie,
Par la fraternité sur tous les seuils riant,
Et par une blancheur immense à l’orient.

Après le dix août superbe, où dans la brume

Sous le dernier éclair le dernier trône fume,
Après Louis, martyr de son hérédité,
Roi que brise la France en mal de liberté,
Après cette naissance, après cette agonie,
Toute l'oeuvre tragique et farouche est finie.
L'ère d'apaisement suit l'ère de terreur.

Le droit n'a pas besoin de se mettre en fureur,
Et d'arriver les mains pléines de violences,
Et de jeter un glaive au plateau des balances;
Il paraît, on tressaille; il marché, on dit C'est Dieu.

Mort à la mort! Au:feu la loi sanglante! au feu
Le vieux koran de fer, l'affreux code implacable
Qui tord l'irrémissible avec l'irrévocable,
Qui frappe, qui se venge, et qui se trompe! À bas,
Croix qui saisis Jésus et lâches Barabbas!
A bas, potence, avec toutes tes branches noires!
Fourche que Vouglans mêle à ses réquisitoires,
Solive épouvantable où Tristan s'accouda,
Machine de Tyburn et de la Cebada,
Démolis-toi toi-même, et croule, mutilée,
Avec le saint-office et la chambre étoilée,
Et tourne contre toi la mort que tu contiens!
Charpente que l'enfer fait lécher à ses chiens,
Va pourrir dans la terre éternelle et divine
Qui ne te connaît point, toi l'arbre sans racine,
Qui t'exclut de la sève et qui ne donne pas
La vie au bois féroce où germe le trépas!
Fuis, dissous-toi, perds-toi dans la grande nature!
Engins qu'ont maniés le meurtre et la torture;
Ô monstrueux outils de la tombe, assassins,
Rappelez-vous les bons, les innocents, les saints,
Et demandez-vous-en compte les uns aux autres!
Tous les crimes du faible ont pour source les vôtres.

Poutre, ébrèche la hache et brise le couteau;

Hache, deviens cognée et frappe le poteau,
Frappe; exterminez-vous, ô ténébreux complices!
Et tombe pêle-mêle, ô forêt des supplices,
Roue, échelle, garrot, gibet, et glaive, et faulx,
Sous le bras du progrès, bûcheron d’échafauds!

XXVII Quinze cents ans

Quinze cents ans avaient fait sur l’homme la nuit;
Le vieux monde était là, de ténèbres construit,
Babel aux spirales sans nombre;
La Révolution cria: finissons-en!
Et d’un seul coup, ce spectre au pied de paysan
Fit écrouler toute cette ombre.

La Révolution, qui vint à pas bruyants,
Bras nus, pieds nus, sortait des siècles effrayants
De la torture et du malaise;
Elle saignait encor quand elle triomphait;
C’est du bois du gibet des peuples que Dieu fait
Les sabots de Quatrevingt-treize

XXVIII TALAVEYRA RÉCIT DE MON PÈRE

C’est à Talaveyra de la Reine, en Espagne.
Les anglais, contre qui nous étions en campagne,
Tenaient, en s’appuyant sur un vieux château-fort,
Le coteau du midi, nous le coteau du nord.
Deux versants; un ravin entre les deux armées.
On se battait depuis le matin; les fumées
Monstrueuses que fait un combat furieux
Salissaient le soleil, terrible au fond des cieux;
Et lui, l’astre éternel d’où sort l’aube éphémère,
Vieux, et jeune toujours comme le vieil Homère,
Lui, ce même soleil qu’Achille vit jadis,
Se vengeait sur nous tous combattants, assourdis
Par le vaste fracas des canons en démence,
Il versait les flots noirs de sa lumière immense,
Il nous aveuglait; sombre, il jetait au milieu
Des tonnerres humains le grand rayon de Dieu.
Il brillait, il régnait; il nous brûlait, sinistre.

Le roi don Charles quatre et Godoji, son ministre,
Nous avaient mis l’armée anglaise sur les bras,
Mais les anglais, qui sont peu faits pour les sierras,
Avaient chaud comme nous. La journée était dure.
Pas un brin d’herbe; au fond du ravin la verdure
De quelques pins d’Alep, espèce de rideau
Laissant voir sous son antre un maigre filet d’eau.
De même que les cils séparent deux paupières,
Ces arbres couvrant l’eau qui courait dans les pierres
Séparaient les deux plans inclinés du vallon.
Or, comme le semeur attaque l’aquilon,
Nous nous heurtions, français contre anglais. Les mitrailles
Pleuvaient, et l’on voyait des crânes, des entrailles,
Des ventres entr’ouverts ainsi qu’un fruit vermeil,
Et, sur l’immense mort sanglante, le soléil.
Le sabre, le canon, l’espingole; la pique,

C’est tout simple, on s’y fait; mais avoir le tropique
Sur sa tête, c’est trop. Nous avions soif. Le fer
Et le plomb, c’est la mort; mais la soif, c’est l’enfer.
Le soleil, la sueur, la soif, oh! quelle rage!
Nous n’en faisions pas moins notre implacable ouvrage,
Et l’on se massacrait éperdûment. Partout
Des cadavres, mêlés aux combattants debout,
Gisaient, indifférents déjà comme des marbres.
Tout à coup j’aperçus le ruisseau sous les arbres.
Un espagnol le vit et cria: caramba!
Je descendis vers l’eau, qu’un anglais enjamba;
Un français accourut, puis deux, puis trois, puis quatre;
On se mit à genoux, on cessa de se battre,
Quitte à recommencer; les blessés, à pas lents,
Se traînaient; on trinqua dans les casques sanglants.
— A votre santé! dis-je. Ils dirent: A la vôtre! -
Et c’est ainsi qu’on vint boire un peu l’un chez l’autre.

La bataille reprit, sans trêve cette fois,
Affreuse; et nous songions, nous, en pensant aux rois,
Aux empereurs, à tous ces sombres téméraires,
Qu’ils font des ennemis, mais que Dieu fait des frères.

XXIX ÉCRIT SUR UN LIVRE DU JEUNE MICHEL NEY

Enfants! fils des héros disparus! fils des hommes
Qui firent mon. pays plus grand que les deux Romes,
Et qui s’en sont allés, dans l’abîme engloutis!
Vous que nous voyons rire et jouer tout petits,
Sur vos fronts innocents la. sombre histoire pèse.
Vous êtes tout couverts de la gloire française.

Oh! quand l’âge où l’on pense, où l’on ouvré les yeux,
Viendra pour vous, enfants, regardez vos aïeux
Avec un tremblement de joie et d’épouvante.
Ayez toujours leur âme en vos âmes vivante,
Soyez nobles, loyaux et vaillants entre tous;’
Car vos noms sont si grands qu’ils ne sont pas à vous!

Tout passant peut venir vous en demander compte.
Ils sont notre trésor dans nos moments de honte,
Dans nos abaissements et dans nos abandons;
C’est vous qui les portez, c’est nous qui les gardons.

14 avril 1847.

XXX À UN SOLDAT DEVENU VALET

Jadis, ô vieux soldat, tu n’étais pas un homme.
La colonne trajane, antique orgueil de Rome,
Sur son marbre où revit en foule un peuple roi,
N’avait pas un profil plus farouche que toi!
Paysan chevelu, dans ta chaumière aimée,
Pris par la grande main qui fit la grande armée,
Tu vins tout jeune aux camps, pauvre pâtre breton.
Pour saisir un fusil tu jetas ton bâton.
Et c’est là qu’un beau jour, un matin de bataille,
En écoutant un bruit de bombe et de mitraille,
En voyant au galop passer Napoléon,
Éperdu, frissonnant, tu te sentis lion!
Tu fus lion dix ans. Autant qu’il t’en souvienne,
Tu visitas Madrid, Dresde, Berlin et Vienne;
Et ces villes tremblaient derrière les canons,
Quand elles te voyaient, parmi tes compagnons,
Accourir, haletant, formidable, invincible,
Secouant ta crinière avec un cri terrible!
Toi, partout, tu marchais, plein d’orgueil et de foi,
Car te sentir lion, c’était te sentir roi!
L’empire est mort. Hélas! quels fantômes nous sommes!
Les lions à la paix redeviennent des hommes.
L’homme est plein de misère. Il faut bien vivre enfin!
On bravait la mitraille, on se rend à la faim.
On descend chaque jour d’un pas. De chute en chute
L’homme arrive où jamais ne tomberait la brute.
Maintenant, ô soldat, maintenant, ô vainqueur,
Galonné comme un suisse à la porte du choeur,
L’oeil baissé, l’air dévot, tu portes à l’église
Le petit chien griffon d’une vieille marquise;
Et tandis qu’en tes bras jappe le chien moqueur,
L’ancien lion rugit de honte dans ton coeur!

13 mai 1835.

XXXI Qu’était-ce que l’enfant?

Qu’était-ce que l’enfant? qu’était-ce que la mère?
Je l’ignorais. C’était la saisôn éphémère
Qui nous enchante; et n’a qu’un défaut, durer peu,
Avril. De ma mansarde, entr’ouverte au ciel bleu,
Je regardais, à l’heure où le jour vient de naître,
Une femme tournant le dos à la fenêtre,
Assise sûr son lit, un enfant dans ses bras;
Je devinais l’enfant, je ne le voyàis pas,
Tant ils étaient tous deux serrés l’un contre l’autre.
Malheur au faible! ô sombre horizon que le nôtre!
Cette femme était là seulé, en ce bouge étroit.
Elle avait un enfant; mais avait-elle un toit?
Était-elle, humble plante et rose infortunée,
Livrée à ce vent noir qu’on nomme destinée,
Qui brise au haut des monts le cèdre et le sapin?
Avait-elle du lait? avait-elle du pain?
De quoi manger? de quoi nourrir? poignant problème!
Nos lois sont lés carcans de la misère blême..
Avait-elle un amant? avait-elle un m àri?
Qu’un rameau soit flétri parce qu’il est fleuri,
C’est triste, et c’est, hélas, souvent le sort des femmes!
Ce vil monde punit l’éclosion des âmes.
Elle semblait rêver sous un nuage obscur;
Elle ne parlait pas et regardait son mur;
Moi j’étais dans l’aurore, elle dans lés ténèbres;
Et je ne distinguais, dans ces ombres funèbres,
De ce double destin entrevu vaguement,
Rien que deux petits bras pressant un cou charmant.

9 mai 1877.

XXXII Au bord des flots,

Au bord des flots, au sein des sombres Babylones,
Reste à jamais debout sur les hautes colonnes!
Veille sur nos vaisseaux et veille sur nos tours!
Sois toujours fier de nous! Libre, calme, sereine,
La France a l’avenir! La France est encor reine!
Ton empire est tombé, ton peuple vit toujours.

Une aube meilleure
Sur nous brillera.

Nous attendons l’heure,
Mais l’heure viendra!
Comme Dieu lui-même
Qui récolte et sème
Dans l’immensité,
Notre auguste France
A la patience
De l’éternité!
En vain Londre et Moscou, dans leur rage inféconde,
L’une hors de l’Europe et l’autre hors du monde,
Ont mutilé la France alors que tu tombas;
Et sur nos maux profonds qui saignent et s’irritent
Ont posé, comme un vase où des serpents s’agitent,
Une fragile paix pleine de sourds combats!

Une aube meilleure
Sur nous brillera...
Dieu veut la grande France et la grande Allemagne.
Il fit Napoléon comme il fit Charlemagne,
Pour donner à l’Europe un centre souverain.
Que Stamboul meure, alors vers l’orient tournée,
Teutonia, de gloire et de paix couronnée,
Reprendra le Danube et nous rendra le Rhin!

Une aube meilleure
Sur nous brillera...
En attendant ce jour que chaque instant amène,
Jour où l’amour luira sur la famille humaine,
Jour où s’effaceront les crimes expiés,
Vois au-dessous de toi, figure solennelle,
L’éternelle tempête et la haine éternelle,
L’Océan sous tes yeux, l’Angleterre à tes pieds!

Une aube meilleure
Sur nous brillera.
Nous attendons l’heure,
Mais l’heure viendra.
Comme Dieu lui-même
Qui récolte et sème
Dans l’immensité,
Notre auguste France
A la patience
De l’éternité!

30 juillet 1841.

XXXIII LES DEUX CÔTÉS DE L’HORIZON

Comme lorsqu’une armée inonde des campagnes,
Une. immense rumeur se disperse dans l’air.
Il se fait un grand bruit du côté des montagnes;
Il se fait un grand bruit du côté de la mer.
Le poète a crié: -Qu’est ce bruit? Dans les ombres
Il remplit la montagne, il remplit l’océan.
N’est-ce pas l’avalanche, aigle des Alpes sombres?
O goèland des flots, n’est-ce pas l’ouragan?

Le goèland, du fond des mers où la nef penche,
Est venu. Le grand aigle est venu du Mont Blanc.
Et l’aigle a répondu: -Ce n’est pas l’avalanche.
— Ce n’est pas la tempête, a. dit le goëland.

Ô farouches oiseaux! quoi! cé n’est pas la trombe,
Ce n’est pas l’aquilon que votre aile connaît?
— Non, du côté des monts c’ést un monde qui tombe.
— Non, du çôté des mers c’est; un monde qui naît.

Et le poète a dit: -Que Dieu vous accompagne!
Retournez l’un et l’autre à vos nids hasardeux.
Toi, va-t’en à:ta mer. Toi, rentre à ta montagne.
Et maintenant, Seigneur, expliquons-nous tous deux.

L’Amérique surgit, et Rome meurt! ta Rome!
Crains-tu pas d’effacer, Seigneur, notre chemin,
Et de dénaturer le fond même de l’homme,
En déplaçant ainsi tout le génie humain?

Donc la matière prend le monde à la pensée!.
L’Italie était l’art, la foi, le coeur,. le. feu.
L’Amérique est sans âme. Ouvrière glacée,
Elle a l’homme pour but. L’Italie avait Dieu.

Un astre ardent se couche, un astre froid se lève.
Seigneur! Philadelphie, “un comptoir de marchands,
Va remplacer la ville où Michel-Ange rêve,
Où Jésus met sa croix, où Flaccus mit ses chants!

C’est ton secret, Seigneur. Mais, ô Raison profonde,
Pourras-tu, sans livrer l’âme humaine au sommeil,
Et sans diminuer la lumière du monde,
Lui donner cette lune au lieu de ce soleil 25?

9 avril 1840.

XXXIV Elle prend un miroir,

Elle prend un miroir, s’y regarde, le jette avec horreur, souffle
son flambeau, et tombe à genoux auprès de son lit.
Oh! je suis monstrueuse et les autres sont belles!
Cette bosse! ô mon Dieu!...

Elle cache son visage dans ses mains et laisse tomber sa tête sur le lit.
Elle s’endort.

UNE VOIX
C’est là que sont tes ailes!
La chambre s’emplit d’une lumière vague. -Elle dort toujours.
Au fond une forme ailée apparaît dans un nimbe de rayons.

Écoute-moi. Je suis ton fiancé des cieux.
Tu portes sur ton dos le sac mystérieux,
Tu portes sur ton dos l’oeuf divin de la tombe;
Sous ce poids bienheureux ton corps chancelle et tombe,
Et le regard humain a cette infirmité
De voir dans ta splendeur une difformité.
Ta gloire dans le ciel est ton fardeau sur terre.
Tu pleures. Mais pour nous, les voyants du mystère,
Qui savons ce que Dieu met dans l’humanité,
De ton épaule sombre il sort une clarté.
Etre qui fais pitié même aux prostituées,
O femme en proie au rire, à l’affront, aux huées,
Sur qui semble à jamais s’être accroupi Smarra,
A ta mort ton épaule informe s’ouvrira,
Car la chair s’ouvre alors pour laisser passer l’âme,
O femme, et l’on verra de cette bosse infâme,
Moquée et vile, horrible à tout être vivant,
Sortir deux ailes d’ange immenses, que le vent
Gonflera dans les cieux comme il gonfle des voiles,
Et qui se déploieront toutes pleines d’étoiles!
Oui, Lise, écoute-moi. Nous autres nous voyons

L’ange à travers le monstre, et je vois tes rayons!
Du songe où ta laideur rampe, se cache et pleure,
Oui, de ce songe affreux que tu fais à cette heure,
Tu t’éveilleras belle au-delà de tes voeux!
Tu flotteras, voilée avec tes longs cheveux
Et dans la nudité célèste de la tombe,
Et tu resteras femme en devenant colombe.
Tu percevras, dans l’ombre et dans l’immensité,
Un sombre hymne d’amour montant vers ta beauté;
Les hommes à leur tour te paraîtront difformes;
Tu verras sur leurs dos leurs fautes, poids énormes;
Les fleurs éclaireront ton corps divin et beau,
Car leur parfum devient clarté dans le tombeau;
Les astres t’offriront leur rose épanouie.
Tu prendras pour miroir, de toi-même éblouie,
Ce grand ciel qui te semble aujourd’hui plein de deuil;
Ailée et frissonnante au bord de ton cercueil,
Comme l’oiseau qui tremble au penchant des ravines,
Tu sentiras frémir dans les brises divines
Ton corps fait de splendeur; ton sein blanc, ton front pur,
Et tu t’envoleras dans le profond azur!

8 mars 1854.

XXXV BALMA

S’était-il dit: « L’hiver, les gouffres, la tempête,
«Gardent le roi des monts sous son dais de brouillards;
«Nul homme encor n’a pu fouler du pied sa tête,
«Presque inaccessible aux regards.
«J’irai! J’assiégerai, dans ma sublime audace,
«Cette forteresse de glace,
«Et ces tours, qui touchent aux cieux!
«Sur le sommet neigeux du mont hyperborée
«La Gloire fait fleurir-une palme ignorée
«Qui n’est visible qu’à mes yeux!”

Avait-il, l’humble pâtre, entendu dans un rêve
D’aériennes voix lui crier: « Ne dors pas!
«Jusqu’au front du Mont-Blanc que ton âme s’élève:
«Qu’elle y précipite tes pas!:
«Berger, qu’à ces hauteurs la terre te contemple.
«Va! l’esprit divin, comme un temple,
«Habita toujours le haut lieu.
«Va! quelque vision sans doute t’est promise.
«Sur ce nouveau Sina, comme un nouveau Moïse,
«Monte à la rencontre de Dieu!”

Je ne sais: mais un jour, à l’heure où dans les ombres
L’aube n’a pas atteint le front des Alpes sombres,
Il partit. Le Mont-Blanc, éclairé seul encor,
Comme un roi diligent, lorsque son camp sommeille,
Avant tous ses guerriers, tout armé se réveille,
Sur les monts obscurcis levait son casque d’or.

Quand on le vit portant sa lourde carnassière,
Et l’échelle d’écorce, et la hache de pierre,
Les pâtres, les chasseurs à l’oeil audacieux,
L’entouraient, demandant le but de ses voyages;
Et, d’abord, à son doigt levé vers les nuages,

On ne sut s’il montrait le Mont-Blanc ou les cieux.

Mais lorsqu’il révéla son dessein magnanime:
«Frère! du mont maudit tu veux toucher la cime?
«Quel démon à ta mort te conduit par la main?
«Arrière, malheureux! Tu veux périr sans doute!
«L’ouragan et l’abîme ont fermé cette route!...”
Il écouta leurs cris, et reprit son chemin.

Il franchit la colline où, sur ses lames blanches,
Le glacier des Buissons brise les avalanches;
Et le pic des Chamois, les degrés du Malpas,
Les torrents, les glaçons dressés en pyramides,
Et les granits glissants, et les gazons humides,
Et la mousse et les rocs fatiguèrent ses pas.

Il montait; et, volant sur les neiges tombées,
Renversant sur son dos ses cornes recourbées,
Le vif chamois fuyait vers ses antres amis;
Et les pierres, roulant sous sa marche incertaine,
Sondant les flancs du mont dans leur chute lointaine,
Éveillaient des échos jusqu’alors endormis.

Il montait; et bientôt disparurent les chênes,
Les mélèzes, des monts voilant les hautes chaînes,
Les noirs sapins, pressés dans les ravins déserts;
Puis les fleurs, tapissant le flanc des roches nues,
Puis l’eau qui court, l’oiseau qui vole dans les nues,
Puis l’herbe sous ses pieds, puis le bruit dans les airs.

Il montait; l’air déjà manquait à son haleine;
Les nuages pesants lui dérobaient la plaine;
Le lichen des rochers dorait le front vermeil;
Et ses pas, imprimés aux glaces éternelles,
Epouvantaient au loin l’aigle aux puissantes ailes
Qui ne lève les yeux que pour voir le soleil!

XXXVI Les mères

Les mères ont senti tressaillir leurs entrailles.
Les lourds caissons chargés de boîtes à mitrailles
Courent, et l’on dirait qu’ils bondissent joyeux.
Le peuple de Paris, pensif, les suit des yeux
Et s’en va par les quais vers les Champs-Élysées.
On ferme les maisons, on se penche aux croisées;
La cohue en haillons, morne comme la nuit,
Marche, grossit, s’avance, et l’on entend le bruit
Que font les bataillons et les cavaleries.
Elle passe, sinistre, auprès des Tuileries.
Oh! de ceux qui s’en vont, rêvant, par ce chemin,
Combien ne verront pas le soleil de demain!
Dans cette multitude aux pantomimes sombres
Combien parlent encor qui déjà sont des ombres!
Guerre civile! émeute! ô deuil! combien ce soir
Auront pour dernier lit le pavé froid et noir!.

XXXVII J’ai vu

J’ai vu pendant trois jours de haine et de remords
L’eau refléter des feux et charrier des morts
Dans une grande et noble ville 28.
Le tisserand, par l’ombre et la faim énervé,
De son dernier métier brûlé sur le pavé
Attisait la guerre civile.

Le soldat fratricide égorgeait l’ouvrier;
L’ouvrier sacrilège, aveugle meurtrier,
Massacrait le soldat son frère;
Peuple, armée, oubliaient qu’ils sont du même sang;
Et les sages pensifs disaient en frémissant:
O siècle! ô patrie! ô misère!

Durant trois nuits la ville, hélas! ne dormit plus.
Tous luttaient. Le tocsin fut le seul angelus
Qu’eurent ces sinistres aurores.
Les noirs canons, roulant à travers la cité,
Ébranlaient, au-dessus du fleuve ensanglanté,
L’arche sombre des ponts sonores!

Ah! la nature et Dieu, devant l’humanité,
Même étalant leur grâce avec leur majesté,
N’empêchent pas ces tristes choses!
Car ces événements se passaient, ô destin,
Sur les bords où Lyon à l’horizon lointain
Voit resplendir les Alpes roses.

4 septembre 1841.
22 février 1848.

XXXVIII ÉCRIT AU BAS D’UN PORTRAIT DE MADAME LA DUCHESSE D’ORLÉANS

Quand cette noble femme eut touché la frontière,
Proscrite et fugitive, hélas! mais reine encor,
Emportant son grand coeur, sa tristesse humble et fière,
Et ses enfants, tout son trésor,

À ce port de l’exil la voyant arrivée,
Après tant de périls dans ces sombres chemins,
Ceux qui l’accompagnaient disaient: Elle est sauvée!
Et pleuraient en joignant les mains.

Vers ces derniers amis que le malheur envoie,
Elle inclina son front et s’écria: Seigneur!
Me voici hors de France! ils en pleurent de joie,
Et moi, j’en pleure de douleur!

1 mars 1848.

XXXIX Ayant vu le massacre immense

Ayant vu le massacre immense, le combat,
Le peuple sur sa croix, Paris sur son grabat,
La pitié formidable était dans tes paroles;
Tu faisais ce que font les grandes âmes folles,
Et lasse de lutter, de rêver, de souffrir,
Tu disais: J’ai tué! car tu voulais mourir.

Tu mentais contre toi, terrible et surhumaine.
Judith la sombre juive, Arria la romaine,
Eussent battu des mains pendant que tu parlais.
Tu disais aux greniers: J’ai brûlé les palais!
Tu glorifiais ceux qu’on écrase et qu’on foule;
Tu criais: J’ai tué, qu’on me tue! Et la foule
Écoutait cette femme altière s’accuser.
Tu semblais envoyer au sépulcre un baiser;
Ton oeil fixe pesait sur les juges livides,
Et tu songeais, pareille aux graves Euménides.
La pâle mort était debout derrière toi.
Toute la vaste salle était pleine d’effroi,
Car le peuple saignant hait la guerre civile.
Dehors on entendait la rumeur de la ville.

Cette femme écoutait la vie aux bruits confus,
D’en haut, dans l’attitude austère du refus.
Elle n’avait pas l’air de comprendre autre chose
Qu’un pilori dressé pour une apothéose,
Et trouvant l’affront noble et le supplice beau,
Sinistre, elle hâtait le pas vers le tombeau.
Les juges murmuraient: Qu’elle meure. C’est juste.
Elle est infâme. -A moins qu’elle ne soit auguste,
Disait leur conscience; et les juges pensifs,
Devant oui, devant non, comme entre deux récifs,
Hésitaient, regardant, la sévère coupable.

Et ceux qui comme moi te savent incapable
De tout ce qui n’est pas héroïsme et vertu,
Qui savent que si Dieu te disait: D’où viens-tu?
Tu répondrais: Je viens de la nuit où l’on souffre;
Dieu, je sors du devoir dont vous faites un gouffre!
Ceux qui savent tes vers mystérieux et doux,
Tes jours, tes nuits, tes soins, tes pleurs, donnés à tous,
Ton oubli de toi-même à secourir les autres,
Ta parole semblable aux flammes des apôtres;
Ceux qui savent le toit sans feu, sans air, sans pain,
Le lit de sangle avec la table de sapin,
Ta bonté, ta fierté de femme populaire,
L’âpre attendrissement qui dort sous ta colère,
Ton long regard de haine à tous les inhumains,
Et les pieds des enfants réchauffés dans tes mains;
Ceux-là, femme, devant ta majesté farouche,
Méditaient, et, malgré l’amer pli de ta bouche,
Malgré le maudisseur qui, s’acharnant sur toi,
Te jetait tous les cris indignés de la loi,
Malgré ta voix fatale et haute qui t’accuse,
Voyaient resplendir l’ange à travers la méduse.

Tu fus belle et semblas étrange en ces débats;
Car, chétifs comme sont les vivants d’ici-bas,
Rien ne les trouble plus que deux âmes mêlées,
Que le divin chaos des choses étoilées
Aperçu tout au fond d’un grand coeur inclément,
Et qu’un rayonnement vu dans un flamboiement.

Décembre 1871.

XL Ô Georges

Ô Georges, tu seras un homme. -Tu sauras
A qui tu dois ton coeur, à qui tu dois ton bras,
Ce que ta voix doit dire au peuple, à l’homme, au monde;
Et je t’écouterai dans ma tombe profonde.
Songe que je suis là; songe que je t’entends;
Demande-toi si nous, les morts, sommes contents;
Tu le voudras, mon George. Oh! je suis bien tranquille!

Ce que pour le grand peuple a fait la grande ville,
Tout ce qu’après Cécrops, tout ce qu’après Rhéa,
Paris chercha, trouva, porta, fonda, créa,
Ces passages du Nil, du Rhin et de l’Adige,
La Révolution française, ce prodige,
La chute du passé, d’où, l’homme libre sort,
La clarté du génie et la noirceur du sort,
La France subjuguant et délivrant la terre,
Tout cela t’emplira l’âme de ce mystère
Dont l’homme est saisi, quand, à l’horizon lointain,
Il sent la mer immense ou l’énorme destin.

C’est ainsi que se font ceux qui parlent aux foules,
Ceux que les ouragans, les rocs, les flots, les houles,
Attirent, et qui sont rêveurs dans ce milieu
Où le travail de l’homme aide au travail de Dieu.
Alors tu songeras à nos vaillants ancêtres
Ôtant le sceptre aux rois, ôtant les dieux aux prêtres,
Au groupe affreux, tyrans, pontifes, scélérats;
Ému, tu penseras; pensif, tu grandiras.
Est-ce un rêve? oh! je crois t’entendre. A l’âme humaine,
Aux nations qu’un vent d’en haut remue et mène,
Aux peuples entraînés vers le but pas à pas,
Tu diras les efforts tentés, les beaux trépas,
Les combats, les travaux, les reprises sans nombre,
L’aube démesurée emplissant la grande ombre.;

Pour maintenir les coeurs à ce puissant niveau,
Tu feras des anciens jaillir l’esprit nouveau;
Tu diras de nos temps les lutteurs héroïques,
Ces vainqueurs purs, ces fiers soldats, ces fronts stoïques,
Et tu feras songer, en les peignant si bien,
Le jeune homme à ton père et le,vieillard au mien.

Novembre 1879.

II Je ne vois pas pourquoi

Je ne vois pas pourquoi je ferais autre chose
Que de rêver sous l’arbre où le ramier se pose;
Les chars passent, j’entends grincer les durs essieux;

Quand les filles s’en vont laver à la fontaine,
Elles prêtent l’oreille à ma chanson lointaine,
Et moi je reste au fond des bois mystérieux,

Parce que le hallier m’offre des fleurs sans nombre,
Parce qu’il me suffit de voir voler dans l’ombre
Mon chant vers les esprits et l’oiseau vers les cieux.

5 mars.

III LETTRE

La Champagne est fort laide où je suis; mais qu'importe,
J'ai de l'air, un peu d'herbe, une vigne à ma porte;
D'ailleurs, je ne suis pas ici pour bien longtemps.
N'ayant pas mes petits près de moi, je prétends
Avoir droit à la fuite, et j'y songe à toute heure.
Et tous les jours je veux partir, et je demeure.
L'homme est ainsi. Parfois tout s'efface à mes yeux
Sous la mauvaise humeur du nuage ennuyeux;
Il pleut; triste pays. Moins de blé que d'ivraie.
Bientôt j'irai chercher la solitude vraie,
Où sont les fiers écueils, sombres, jamais vaincus,
La mer. En attendant, comme Horace à Fuscus,
Je t'envoie, ami cher, les paroles civiles
Que doit l'hôte des champs à l'habitant des villes;
Tu songes au milieu des tumultes hagards;
Et je salue avec toutes sortes d'égards,
Moi qui vois les fourmis, tôi qui vois les pygmées.

Parce que vous avez la forge aux renommées,
Aux vacarmes, aux faits tapageurs et soudains,
Ne croyez pas qu'à Bray-sur-Marne, ô citadins,
On soit des paysans au point d'être des brutes;
Non, on danse, on se cherche au bois, on fait des chutes;
On s'aime; on est toujours Estelle et Némorin;
Simone et Gros Thomas sautent au tambourin;
Et les grands vieux parents grondent quand le dimanche
Les filles vont tirer les garçons par la manche;
Le presbytère est là qui garde le troupeau;
Parfois j'entre à l'église et j'ôte mon chapeau
Quand monsieur le curé foudroie en pleine chaire
L'idylle d'un bouvier avec une vachère.
Mais je suis indulgent plus que lui le ciel bleu,
Diable! et le doux. printemps, tout céla trouble un peu;
Et les petits oiseaux, quel détestable exemple!

Le jeune mois de mai, c’est toujours le vieux temple
Où, doucement raillés par les merles siffleurs,
Le gens qui s’aiment vont s’adorer dans les fleurs;
Jadis c’était Phyllis, aujourd’hui c’est Javotte,
Mais c’est toujours la femme au mois de mai dévote.
Moi, je suis spectateur, et je pardonne; ayant
L’âme très débonnaire et l’air très effrayant;
Car j’inquiète fort le village. On me nomme
Le sorcier; on m’évite; ils disent: C’est un homme
Qu’on entend parler haut dans sa chambre, le soir.
Or on ne parle seul qu’avec quelqu’un de noir.
C’est pourquoi je fais peur. La maison que j’habite,
Grotte dont j’ai fait. choix pour être cénobite,
C’est l’auberge;ion y boit dans la salle d’en bas;
Les filles du pays viennent, ôtent leurs bas,
Et salissent leurs pieds dans la mare voisine.
La soupe aux choux, c’est là toute notre cuisine;
Un lit et quatre murs, c’est là tout mon logis.
Je vis; les champs le soir sont largement rougis;
L’espace est, le matin, confusément sonore;
L’angélus se répand dans le ciel dès l’aurore,
Et j’ai le bercement des cloches en dormant.
Poésie: un roulier avec un jurement.;
Des poules becquetant un vieux mur en décombre;
De lointains aboiements dialoguant dans l’ombre;
Parfois un vol d’oiseaux sauvages émigrant.
C’est petit, car c’est laid, et le beau seul est grand.
Cette campagne où l’aube à regret semble naître,
M’offre à perte de, vue au loin sous ma fenêtre
Rien, la route, un sol âpre, usé, morne, inclément.
Quelques arbres sont là; j’écoute vaguement
Les conversations du vent avec les branches;
La plaine brune alterne avec les plaines blanches;
Pas un coteau, des prés maigres, peu de gazon;
Et j’ai pour tout plaisir de voir à l’horizon
Un groupe de toits bas d’où sort une fumée,
Le paysage étant plat comme Mérimée.

IV Quand la lune apparaît

Quand la lune apparaît dans la brume des plaines,
Quand l’ombre émue a l’air de retrouver la voix,

Lorsque le soir emplit de frissons et d’haleines
Les pâles ténèbres des bois,
Quand le boeuf rentre avec sa clochette sonore
Pareil au vieux poëte, accablé, triste et beau,
Dont la pensée au fond de l’ombre tinte encore
Devant la porte du tombeau,
Si tu veux, nous irons errer dans les vallées,
Nous marcherons dans l’herbe à pas silencieux,
Et nous regarderons les voûtes étoilées.
C’est dans les champs qu’on voit les cieux!
Nous nous promènerons dans les campagnes vertes;
Nous pencherons, pleurant ce qui s’évanouit,
Nos âmes ici-bas par le malheur ouvertes,
Sur les fleurs qui s’ouvrent la nuit!
Nous parlerons tout bas des choses infinies.
Tout est grand, tout est doux, quoique tout soit obscur!
Nous ouvrirons nos coeurs aux sombres harmonies
Qui tombent du profond azur!
C’est l’heure où l’astre brille, où rayonnent les femmes!
Ta beauté vague et pâle éblouira mes yeux.
Rêveurs, nous mêlerons le trouble de nos âmes
A la sérénité des cieux!
La calme et sombre nuit ne fait qu’une prière
De toutes les rumeurs de la nuit et du jour,
Nous, de tous les tourments de cette vie amère
Nous ne ferons que de l’amour!

À l’Assemblée: 15 juin 1849

V Une tempête

Une tempête
Approchait, et je vis, en relevant la tête,
Un grand nuage obscur posé sur l’horizon;
Aucun tonnerre encor ne grondait; le gazon
Frissonnait près de moi; les branches tremblaient toutes,
Et des passants lointains se hâtaient sur les routes.
Cependant le nuage au flanc vitreux et roux
Grandissait, comme un mont qui marcherait vers nous.
On voyait dans des prés s’effarer les cavales,
Et les troupeaux bêlants fuyaient. Par intervalles,
Terreur des bois profonds, des champs silencieux,
Emplissant tout à coup tout un côté des cieux,
Une lueur sinistre, effrayante, inconnue;
D’un sourd reflet de cuivre illuminait la nue,
Et passait, -comme si, sous le souffle de Dieu,
De grands poissons de flamme aux écailles de feu,
Vastes formes dans l’ombre au hasard remuées,
En ce sombre océan de brume et de nuées
Nageaient, et dans les flots du lourd nuage noir
Se laissaient par instants vaguement entrevoir!

VI Nous marchons;

Nous marchons; il a plu toute la nuit; le vent
Pleure dans les sapins; pas de soleil levant;
Tout frissonne; le ciel, de teinte grise et mate,
Nous verse tristement un jour de casemate.
Tout à coup, au détour du sentier recourbé,
Apparaît un nuage entre deux monts tombé.
Il est dans le vallon comme en un vase énorme,
C’est un mur de brouillard, sans couleur et sans forme.
Rien au delà. Tout cesse. On n’entend aucun son;
On voit le dernier arbre et le dernier buisson.
La brume, chaos morne, impénétrable et vide,
Où flotte affreusement une lueur livide,
Emplit l’angle hideux du ravin de granit.
On croirait que c’est là que le.monde finit
Et que va commencer la nuée éternelle.
Borne où l’âme et l’oiseau sentent faiblir leur aile,
Abîme où le penseur se penche avec effroi,
Puits de l’ombre infinie, oh! disais-je, est-ce toi?
Alors je m’enfonçai dans ma pensée obscure,
Laissant mes compagnons errer à l’aventure.

Pyrénées, 28 août.

VII Le matin,

Le matin, les vapeurs, en blanches mousselines,
Montent en même temps; à travers les grands bois,

De tous les ravins noirs, de toutes les collines,
De tous les sommets à la fois!

Un jour douteux ternit l’horizon; l’aube est pâle;
Le ciel voilé n’a plus l’azur que nous aimons,
Tant une brume épaisse à longs flocons s’exhale
Du flanc ruisselant des vieux monts.

On croit les voir bondir comme au temps du prophète,
Et l’on se dit, de crainte et de stupeur saisi:
O chevaux monstrueux! quelle course ont-ils faite,
Que leurs croupes fument ainsi?

Cauterets, 27 août.

VIII Seigneur,

Seigneur, j’ai médité dans les heures nocturnes,
Et je me suis assis, pensif comme un aïeul,
Sur les sommets déserts, dans les lieux taciturnes
Où l’homme ne vient pas, où l’on vous trouve seul;

J’ai de l’oiseau sinistre écouté les huées;
J’ai vu la pâle fleur trembler dans le gazon,
Et l’arbre en pleurs sortir du crêpe des nuées,
Et l’aube frissonner, livide, à l’horizon;

J’ai vu, le soir, flotter les apparences noires
Qui rampent dans la plaine et se traînent sans bruit;
J’ai regardé du haut des mornes promontoires
Les sombres tremblements de la mer dans la nuit;

J’ai vu dans les sapins passer la lune horrible,
Et j’ai cru par moments, muet, épouvanté,
Surprendre l’attitude effarée et terrible
De la création devant l’éternité.

Cauterets, 28 août.

IX ÉGLOGUE

Un journal! Donnez-moi du papier, que j'écrive
Une lettre, et voyez si le facteur arrive.
Il semblé que la poste aujourd'hui tarde un ,peu.
Vent, brouillard, pluie. On est en juin; faites du feu.
Comme ces champs ont l'air bougon et réfractaire! -
Un gros nuage noir est tout près de la terre;
Le jour a le front bas, et les cieux sont étroits;
Et l'on voit dans la rue, en file, trois par trois,
Serrés dans leurs boutons et droits dans leurs agrafes,
Passer des titotlers grisés par des carafes;
Ils sont jeunes, plusieurs ont vingt ans; et pendant
Que, regardant la vie avec un oeil. pédant,
Ils laissent se transir Betsy, Goton et Lise,
L'eau qu'ils boivent leur sort du nez en chants d'église.
Jadis c'était le temps du beau printemps divin;
Silène était dans Vautré et ronflait plein de vin;
Mai frissonnait d'aurore, et des flûtes magiques
Se répondaient dans l'ombre au fond des géorgiques;
L'eau courait, l'air jouait; de son râle étranglé
La couleuvre amoureuse épouvantait Eglé;
Les paons dans la lumière ouvraient leurs larges queues;
Et, lueurs dans l'azur, les neuf déesses bleues
Flottaient entre la terre et le ciel dans le soir,
Et chantaient, et, laissant à travers elles voir
Les étoiles, ces yeux du vague crépuscule,
Elles mêlaient Virgile assis au Janicule,
Moschus dans Syracuse, et les sources en pleurs,
Les troupeaux, les sommeils sous les arbres, les fleurs,
Les bois, Amaryllis, Mnasyle et Phyllodoce,
A leur mystérieux et sombre sacerdoce.
29 mai 1856.

X Le soir calme et profond

Le soir calme et profond se répand sur la plaine.
Ma fille, asseyons-nous. Le couchant jette à peine
Une vague lueur sous l’arche du vieux pont.

Une forge lointaine à l’angélus répond.

Le Seigneur sur la cloche et l’homme sur l’enclume
Forgent la même chose, et l’étoile s’allume
Là-haut en même temps qu’ici-bas le foyer.
Notre destin, vois-tu, mon ange, est tout entier
Dans ces deux bruits qui sont deux voix, deux voix austères;
Tous deux conseillent l’homme au milieu des mystères,
Et lui montrent le but, le port, le gouvernail.
La cloche dit: prière! et l’enclume: travail!

15 septembre 1849

XI On devient attentif et rêveur

On devient attentif et rêveur, on s’attend
— A voir passer là-haut quelque groupe éclatant,
Des choeurs éblouissants, des fêtes idéales,
Des archanges menant des pompes triomphales,
Des âmes dans la. gloire et dans l’azur, le soir,
Quand le vent, dans le ciel mystérieux et noir,
Sur l’horizon, chargé de vapeurs remuées,
Bâtit confusément des portes de nuées.

15 août 1847. -Assomption.

XII David, le marbre est saint,

David, le marbre est saint, le bronze est vénérable.
Sous le bois, où grandit le tilleul et l’érable,
Où le chêne tressaille, où les germes vivants,
Comme une bouche ouverts, boivent l’onde et les vents,
Sous le fleuve moiré qui, roulant ses eaux vives,
Décompose en ses flots les ombres de ses rives,
Sous le mont colossal, sous l’énorme plateau
Que Jéhovah tailla de son divin marteau,
Sous les vallons charmants, sous la fraîche prairie,
Ce globe laisse voir à notre rêverie
Et cache en même temps à nos yeux trop charnels
Des métaux glorieux, des granits éternels
Veinés de noirs filons et de zébrures blanches
Comme le sol marbré par les ombres des branches,
Blocs où filtre la sève, où l’eau monte et descend,
Que le fleuve connaît, que la montagne sent,
Et que l’âpre forêt sous sa racine austère
Presse et fait sourdement remuer dans la terre!
Car la chose aime l’être et tout dans tout se fond.
Un esprit bienveillant, intelligent, profond,
Circule dans les. champs, dans l’air, dans l’eau sonore;
Et la création sait ce que l’homme ignore!

XIII Je me fais paysan comme eux.

Je me fais paysan comme eux. Cela te fâche “?
Non. Le cercle où chacun se courbe sur sa tâche,
L’homme tissant la paille et la femme le fil,
Où le travail fait grave et doux chaque profil,
Le soir, près du foyer aux lueurs assoupies,
A l’heure où l’on n’entend que le vol noir des pies,
Et de rares sabots courant dans les sentiers,
Les mains sur les genoux, j’écoute volontiers
Le racontage vrai des amours de village:
Comme Pierre et Toinon s’adoraient avant l’âge
Comme Anne était hardie à douze ans, d’envier
Sa soeur Marthe embrassant maître Yvon le bouvier;
Récit réel d’où sort une odeur de feuillées,
Et qui, soudain, au souffle effaré des veillées,
S’envole, comme au vent la bulle de savon
Nuance d’arc-en-ciel, Marthe embrassant Yvon,
Perd toute forme humaine, enfle, et se dégingande,
En conte où Puck badine avec la fée Urgande.

XIV AUX CHAMPS

Ce ne sont qu’horizons calmes et pacifiques;
On voit sur les coteaux des chasses magnifiques;
Le reste du pays, sous le ciel gris ou bleu,
Est une plaine avec une église au milieu.
Un lierre monstrueux à tige arborescente
Qui sort de l’herbe, ainsi qu’une griffe puissante,
Comme un des mille bras de Cybèle au front vert,
Semble, en ce champ aride et de ronces couvert,
Avoir un-jour saisi l’église solitaire,
Et la tirer d’en bas lentement dans la terre..
Tour, arcs-boutants, chevet, portail aux larges fûts,
Il cache et ronge tout sous ses rameaux touffus.
Sans doute que dans l’ombre il parle à ces murailles
Et qu’il leur dit: Jadis vous-dormiez aux entrailles
Des collines d’où l’homme arrache incessamment
Le marbre, le granit, l’argile et le ciment.
O pierres, vous devez être lasses d’entendre
Les hommes bourdonner, les orages s’épandre,

Et les cloches d’airain gémir dans les clochers.
Redevenez cailloux, galets, débris, rochers!
Dans la terre au flanc noir retombez pêle-mêle!
Rentrez au sein profond de l’aïeule éternelle!

Bondouf , 5 novembre 1846.

XV Nature!

Nature! âme, ombre, vie! ô figure voilée!
O sphère toujours noire et toujours étoilée!
O mystère aux feuillets d'airain!
Texte écrit dans la nue ainsi que dans les marbres!
Bible faite de flots, de montagnes et d'arbres,
De nuit sombre et d'azur serein!

Souvent, quand minuit sonne aux clochers de la côte,
Tandis que sur la mer, au loin sinistre et haute,
Fuit le navire, ce coursier,
Et qu'au-dessus des mâts penchant au poids des toiles,
Le nuage en passant se déchire aux étoiles
Comme un voile à des clous d'acier;

À cette heure où l'Atlas s'ouvre au tigre qui rentre,
Où le lion rugit dans la fraîcheur de l'antre,
Tandis que l'eau des sources luit,
Et que sur les débris des bas-reliefs de Thèbe
La vieille ombre Ténare et le vieux spectre Érèbe
Entr'ouvrent leurs yeux pleins de nuit;

Pendant qu'Ormuz endort les parsis et les guèbres,
Et que les sphinx camus, laissant dans les ténèbres
Hurler l'hyène et le chacal,
Lisent, dans le désert allongeant leurs deux griffes,
Les constellations, sombres hiéroglyphes
Du noir fronton zodiacal;

Pendant que le penseur, scrutant la nuit sublime,
Et cherchant à savoir ce que lui veut l'abîme,
Ombre d'où nul n'est revenu,
Questionne le bruit, le souffle,. l'apparence,
Et sonde tour à tour la crainte et l'espérance,
Ces deux faces de l'inconnu;

À cet instant profond où l'âme erre éperdue,
Où je ne sais quelle hydre au fond de l'étendue
Semble ramper et se tapir,
Moment religieux où la nature penche,
Phase obscure où. le ciel dans un souffle s'épanche
Et la terre dans un soupir;

À cette heure sacrée et trouble, où l'âme humaine,
Jalouse, avare, impure, avide, lâche, vaine,
Menteuse comme l'histrion,
Étale, abject semeur de ses propres désastres,
Ses sept vices hideux, et le ciel les sept astres
De l'éternel septentrion;
Quand la profonde nuit fait du monde une geôle,
Quand la vague, roulant d'un pôle à l'autre pôle,
Se creuse en ténébreux vallons,
Quand la mer monstrueuse et pleine de huées
Regarde en frissonnant voler dans les nuées
Les sombres aigles aquilons;

Ou plus tard, quand le jour, vague ébauche, commence.
O plaine qui frémit! bruit du matin immense!
Tout est morne et lugubre encor.
L'horizon noir paraît plein des douleurs divines;
Le cercle des monts fait la couronne d'épines,
L'aube fait l'auréole d'or!

Moi, pendant que tout rêve à ces spectacles sombres,
Soit que la nuit, pareille aux temples en décombres,
Obscurcisse l'azur bruni,
Soit que l'aube, apparue au fond des cieux sincères,
Farouche et tout en pleurs, semble sur nos misères
L'oeil effaré de l'infini;

Je songe au bord des eaux, triste; -alors les pensées
Qui sortent de la mer, d'un vent confus poussées,

Filles de l’onde, essaim fuyant,
Que l’âpre écume apporte à travers ses fumées,
M’entourent en silence, et de leurs mains palmées
M’entr’ouvrent le livre effrayant

XVI Un monument romain

Un monument romain dans ce vieux pré normand
Est tombé. Les enfants qui font un bruit charmant
Vont jouer là, vers l’heure où le soleil se montre,
Et quand on va du Havre à Dieppe on le rencontre.

Quelque pâtre accroupi sur le bord du chemin
Vous y mène, ou vous suit en vous tendant la main.
Le hameau voisin mêle aux branches ses fumées,
Et l’on entend les coqs chanter dans les ramées.
C’est là, vous dit le pâtre, et vous ne voyez rien.
Des pierres, des buissons. -Mais, en regardant bien,
Si l’on se penche un peu, l’on distingue, dans l’herbe
Où prairial rayonne en sa gaîté superbe,
D’anciens frontons sculptés, bas-reliefs triomphaux,
Monstres chargés de tours et chars ornés de faulx,
Des soldats, qui, sans nuire au vol des hirondelles,
Assiègent sous les fleurs de vagues citadelles;
Et l’on voit, sous les joncs comme sous un linceul,
Le grand César rêvant dans la nuit, triste et seul,
Les daces, noirs profils pleins d’injure et de haine,
L’ombre, et je ne sais quoi qui fut l’aigle romaine.

16 avril 1847.

XVII Les paupières des fleurs,

Les paupières des fleurs, de larmes toujours pleines,
Ces visages brumeux qui, le soir, sur les plaines
De’ssinent-.les vapeurs qui vont se déformant,
Ces profils dont l’ébauche apparaît dans le marbre,
Ces yeux mystérieux ouverts sur les troncs d’arbre,
Les prunelles de l’ombre et du noir firmament
Qui rayonnent partout et qu’aucun mot ne nomme,
Sont les regards de Dieu, toujours surveillant l’homme,
Par le sombre penseur entrevus vaguement.

XVIII L’ÉTÉ À COUTANCES

Ah! l’équinoxe cherche noise
Au solstice, et ce juin charmant
Nous offre une bise sournoise;
L’été de Neustrie est normand!

Notre été chicane et querelle;
Son sourire aime à nous leurrer;
Il se, rétracte; il tonne, il grêle;
Il pleut, manière de pleurer.

Mais qu’importe! entre deux orages,
Ses rayons glissent, fiers vainqueurs,
Et la pourpre est dans les nuages,
Et le triomphe est dans les coeurs.

Cette grande herbe est mon empire.
Je suis l’amant mystérieux
De l’âme obscure qui soupire
Au fond des bois, au fond des cieux!

Je suis roi chez les fleurs vermeilles.
Quelle extase d’être mêlé
Aux oiseaux, aux vents, aux abeilles,
Au vague essor du monde ailé!

L’arbre creux vous offre une chaise;
L’iris vous suit de son oeil bleu;
On contemple; il semble qu’on baise
Le bord de la robe de Dieu.

XIX À GUERNESEY

Ces rocs de l’océan ont tout, terreur et grâce,
Cieux, mers, escarpement devant tout ce qui passe,
Bruit sombre qui parfois semble un hymne béni,
Patience à porter le poids de l’infini;
Et, dans ces fiers déserts qu’un ordre effrayant règle,
On se sent croître une aile; et l’âme y devient aigle.

XX GROS TEMPS LA NUIT

Le vent hurle; la rafale
Sort, ruisselante cavale,
Du gouffre obscur,

Et, hennissant sur l’eau bleue,
Des crins épars de sa queue
Fouette l’azur.

L’horizon, que, l’onde encombre,
Serpent, au bas du ciel sombre
Court tortueux;
Toute la mer est difforme;
L’eau s’emplit d’un bruit énorme
Et monstrueux.

Le flot vient, s’enfuit, s’approche,
Et bondit comme la cloche
Dans le clocher,
Puis tombe, et bondit encore;
La vague immense et sonore
Bat le rocher.
L’océan frappe la terre.
Oh! le forgeron Mystère,
Au noir manteau,
Que forge-t-il dans la brume,
Pour battre une telle enclume
D’un tel marteau?

L’Hydre écaillée à l’oeil glauque
Se roule sur le flot rauque
Sans frein ni mors;
La tempête maniaque
Remue au fond du cloaque
Les os des morts.

La mer chante un chant barbare.
Les marins sont à la barre,
Tout ruisselants;
L’éclair sur les promontoires
Éblouit les vagues noires
De ses yeux blancs.

Les marins qui sont au large
Jettent tout ce qui les charge,
Canons, ballots;
Mais le flot gronde et blasphème:
Ce que je veux, c’est vous-même,
O matelots!

Le ciel et la mer font rage.
C’est la saison, c’est l’orage,
C’est le climat.
L’ombre aveugle le pilote.
La voile en haillons grelotte
Au bout du mât.

Tout se plaint, l’ancre à la proue,
La vergue au câble, la roue
Au cabestan.
On croit voir dans l’eau qui gronde,
Comme un mont roulant sous l’onde,
Léviathan.

Tout prend un hideux langage;
Le roulis parle au tangage,
La hune au foc;
L’un dit: -L’eau sombre se lève.
L’autre dit: -Le hameau rêve
Au chant du coq.

C’est un vent de l’autre monde
Qui tourmente l’eau profonde

De tout côté,
Et qui rugit dans l’averse;
L’éternité bouleverse
L’immensité.

C’est fini. La cale est pleine.
Adieu, maison, verte plaine,
Âtre empourpré!
L’homme crie: ô Providence!
La mort aux dents blanches danse
Sur le beaupré.

Et dans la sombre mêlée,
Quelque fée échevelée,
Urgel, Morgan,
À travers le vent qui souffle,
Jette en riant sa pantoufle
À l’ouragan.

2 février 1854.

XXI DANS MA STALLE

Ô vieil antre, devant le sourcil, que tu fronces,
Parmi les joncs sifflants, les épines, les ronces,
Et les chardons, broutés par l’âne positif,
Sous la protection d’un grand chêne attentif
Qui battait la mesure avec sa tête énorme,
Poussait le coude au frêne et faisait signe à l’orme,
Au fond du hallier sombre, où, dans l’arbre entr’ouvert,
La fée, à des coussins de mousse en velours vert,
S’accoude, -une linotte, encor toute petite,
Débutait. Dans le lierre et dans la clématite,
Une fauvette dit: Pas mal! puis fredonna;
Et, rêveur, j’écoutais cette prima donna.

15 octobre 1854.

XXII C’est l’heure

C’est l’heure où le sépulcre appelle la chouette.
On voit sur l’horizon l’étrange silhouette
D’un bras énorme ayant des courbes de serpent;
On dirait qu’il protège, on dirait qu’il répand
On ne sait quel amour terrible dans cette ombre.
C’est Arimane. O ciel, sous les astres sans nombre,
Dans l’air, dans la nuée où volent les griffons,
Dans le chaos confus des branchages profonds,
Dans les prés, dans les monts, dans la grande mer verte,
Dans l’immensité bleue aux “aurores ouverte,
Qu’est-ce donc que l’esprit de haine peut aimer?
Lui qui veut tout flétrir, que fait-il donc germer?
Qu’est-ce que dans l’azur son doigt noir peut écrire?
Sur qui donc fixe-t-il son effrayant sourire?
Que regarde-t-il donc avec paternité?
Fait-il croître un hiver tel qu’on n’ait plus d’été?
Pour les dards dans la nuit fait-il luire les cibles?
Il semble heureux. Il parle aux choses invisibles;
Il leur parle si bas, si doucement, qu’on peut
Entendre le rayon de lune qui se meut
Et la vague rumeur des ruches endormies;
Son fantôme agrandit les ténèbres blêmies;
On ne sait ce qu’il fait, on ne sait ce qu’il dit;
Les loups dressent émus leur tête de bandit;
Iblis parle; et la stryge affreuse, la lémure,
Ainsi qu’une promesse accueillent ce murmure;
Rien n’est plus caressant que cette obscure voix;
Comme un nid d’oiseaux chante et jase dans les bois,
Et comme un sein de vierge au fond d’une humble alcôve
S’enfle et s’abaisse, ainsi chuchote l’esprit fauve,
Celui que. Mahomet nomme le sombre émir;
Et cependant, on voit toute -l’ombre frémir, -
Et la mère en son flanc sent l’enfant qui va naître
S’épouvanter, car l’âme humaine craint peut-être,

Quand une main immense apparaît au zénith,
Moins un dieu qui maudit qu’un démon qui bénit.

V. H. 28 avril 1872.

XXIII SOIR

Septentrion, delta de soleils dans les cieux,
Écrit du nom divin la sombre majuscule;
Vénus, pâle, éblouit le blême crépuscule;
Traînant quelque branchage obscur et convulsif,
Le bûcheron contemple en son esprit pensif
La marmite chauffant au feu son large ventre,
Rit, et presse le pas; l’oiseau dort, le boeuf rentre,
Les ânes chevelus passent, portant leurs bâts;
Puis tout bruit vivant cesse; et l’on entend tout bas
Parler la, folle avoine et le pied-d’alouette.
Tandis que l’horizon se change en silhouette,
Et que les halliers noirs au souffle de la nuit
Tressaillent, par endroits l’eau dans l’ombre reluit,
Et les blancs nénuphars, fleurs où vivent des fées,
Les bleus myosotis, les iris, les nymphées,
Penchés et frissonnants, mirent leurs sombres yeux
Dans de vagues miroirs, clairs et mystérieux.

XXIV Nuit,

Nuit, tu me fais l’effet ce soir, ô nuit glacée,
D’avoir quelque mauvaise et lugubre pensée;
Tu t’avances sans lune, et sans souffle, et sans bruit;
Est-ce donc que tu veux trahir, ô sombre nuit,
Et saisir brusquement dans l’ombre, et, toi qui lâches
Tous les êtres méchants et tous les êtres lâches,
Livrer à quelqùe bec noir; sinistre, enflammé,
L’oiseau qui dort, et qui, confiant, l’oeil fermé,
Son aile recouvrant sa tête délicate,
Tient le tremblant rameau du bon Dieu dans sa patte?

23 mai 1855.

XXV QUAND NOUS QUITTIONS AVRANCHES

Ami, vous souvient-il? quand nous quittions Avranches,
Un beau soleil couchant rayonnait dans les branches.
Notre roue en passant froissait les buissons verts.
Nous regardions tous trois les cieux, les champs, les mers,
Et l’extase un môment fit nos bouches muettes,
Car elle, vous et moi, nous étions trois poëtes.

Doux instants, où le coeur jusqu’aux bords est rempli.
Puis la route tourna, le terrain fit un pli,
L’océan disparut derrière une chaumière.
Cependant tout encore était plein de lumière;
Le soleil grandissait les ombres des passants,
Et faisant briller l’eau des lointains frémissants
Allumait des miroirs sous les rameaux des saules.
Un pont, fait par César quand il vint dans les Gaules,
Montrait à l’horizon son vieux profil romain.
De beaux enfants, pieds nus, couraient dans le chemin;
Nous semions dans leurs mains toute notre monnaie;
Eux, dépouillant le pré, la broussaille et la haie,
Nous lançaient des bouquets aux riantes couleurs;
Nous leur faisions l’aumône, ils nous jetaient des fleurs.
Nous emportions ainsi, tous, notre douce proie,
Eux, un morceau de pain, et nous un peu de joie.

Bientôt tout se voila du crêpe obscur des soirs.
Nous passions au galop dans les villages noirs.
Des formes s’agitaient sur les vitres rougeâtres;
Des visages pourprés riaient autour des âtres.
Cependant, à travers ces visions-de nuit,
Nos quatre ardents chevaux, dans la poudre et le bruit,
Couraient en secouant leurs sonnettes de cuivre,
Et les chiens aboyants s’essoufflaient à les suivre.

Quand le matin des cieux vint bleuir le plafond,

A l’heure où le regard voit, dans l’éther profond,
Pencher vers l’horizon les sept astres du pôle,-
Elle laissa tomber son front-sur mon épaule,
Et s’endormit; et nous, nous parlions; nous disions
Que, si la Poésie, aux yeux pleins de rayons,
Comme la-Foi sa soeur, règne sur l’âme humaine,
La Sculpture; payenne, a la chair pour domaine;
Car du génie ancien cet art a le secret;
Et, comme Phidias, Jean Goujon adorait
Diane, la déesse aux longs cheveux d’ébène,
Dont les flèches, troublant la montagne thébaine,
Chassent le daim fuyard qui saute le fossé
Et guette, sur ses pieds de derrière dressé.

Juin 1830

XXVI

Voici le printemps, mars, avril au doux sourire,
Mai fleuri, juin brûlant, tous les beaux mois amis;
Les peupliers, au bord des fleuves endormis,
Se courbent mollement comme de grandes palmes;
L’oiseau palpite au fond des bois tièdes et calmes;
Il semble que tout:rit, et que les arbres verts
Sont joyeux d’être ensemble et se disent des vers.
Le jour naît couronné d’une aube fraîche et tendre,
Le soir est plein d’amour, la nuit, on croit entendre,
A travers l’ombre immense et sous le ciel béni,
Quelque chose d’heureux chanter dans l’infini.

XXVII JARDINS DE LA MARGRAVE SIBYLLE

Le jardin était plein de bonne: compagnie.
Thérèse dans un coin, avec quelque ironie,
Tenait sa cour, menant du bout de l’éventail
Des ducs, des financiers, des prélats, son bétail;
Les terrasses étaient tout en charmille, et mainte
Rhadamire y jasait avec quelque Aramynthe;

Dans l’ombre au fond d’un antre un vieux faune courbé
Faisait du bel esprit avec un jeune abbé;
Deux philosophes gris, se prodiguant le geste,
Disputaient, et mêlaient le Phédon au Digeste;
L’un répondait Quia quand l’autre disait Cur;
Les grottes rayonnaient, et, dans le clair-obscur,
On. voyait les bras nus et les gorges de marbre
Des déesses riant parmi les branches d’arbre,
Pendant que des marquis en manteaux espagnols
Leur lisaient des sonnets sifflés des rossignols.

XXVIII Seul dans tes grands bois

Seul dans tes grands bois, seul dans tes grandes pensées,
Tu marches, et les vents, les feuilles balancées,
Les sources, les oiseaux t’approchent sans effroi,
Les vieux arbres pensifs dont l’ombre emplit la cime,
Chantent autour de toi le même hymne sublime
Que ton âme, ô rêveur, chante au dedans de toi!

XXIX CE QUE C’EST QUE DE SORTIR EN EMPORTANT UN NUMÉRO DU CONSTITUTIONNEL

Il fait beau, l’air est pur; le ciel est d’un bleu tendre;
A bas l’hiver. Géronte, adieu; bonjour, Clitandre,
Je ne me le fais pas dire deux fois, l’été
Nous appelle, et l’idylle est mise en liberté;
Ah! je profiterai, certes, de l’ouverture
Des portes, puisque avril nous livre la nature,
Et puisque le printemps nous invite à venir
Entendre les chevaux de l’aurore hennir.
Mon programme est ceci: là-haut des voix divines;
Les fleurs prendront des airs penchés dans les ravines;
Lalagé se mettra des roses sur le front,
Et rira; les rayons des deux sexes pourront
Se mêler; le gazon sera sans pruderie;
Les bois murmureront Ici l’on se marie;
Et l’arbre aura tant d’ombre-et les coeurs tant de feu
Qu’on ne trouvera pas un seul défaut à Dieu;
Pan nous laissera voir sa grande âme attendrie;
La nature sera pleine de rêverie;
Rien ne se gênerà pour vivre et pour aimer;
Par des, chuchotements on s’entendra nommer,
Et l’on croira qu’au fond les oiseaux nous connaissent;
Les cieux,-les eaux; les prés où les églogues naissent,
Seront presque aussi beaux qu’un décor d’opéra
Les papillons feront tout ce qui leur plaira;
Les nids échangeront-tout bas et sous les branches
De libres questions et des réponses franches,
Et je respirerai l’odeur-des liserons,
Et l’ombre sera tiède, et nous mépriserons
Ensemble au fond des bois, ô nymphes de Sicile,
Barbey d’Aurevilly; l’effroyable imbécile.

8 mai.

XXX Seul au fond d’un désert,

Seul au fond d’un désert, avez-vous quelquefois
Entendit des éclats de rire dans les bois?
Avez-vous fui, baigné d’une sueur glacée?
Et, plongeant à demi l’oeil de votre pensée
Dans ce monde inconnu d’où sort la vision,
Avez-vous médité sur la création
Pleine, en ses profondeurs étranges et terribles,
Du noir fourmillement des choses invisibles

7 juillet 1846.

XXXI Cette création,

Cette création, t’a semblée immortelle,
Meurt; mais comment naît-elle? et comment finit-elle?
Oh! quel-oeil sombre a vu des mondes expirer?
Vers le cloaque noir qui doit les engouffrer
Ils voguent presque éteints, ils descendent; ils roulent;
Des flots d’éternité sur leurs orbes s’écroulent;
Et l’agonie affreuse en ses exhalaisons
Engloutit lentement leurs vagues horizons;
Ils passent effrayants dans des lueurs livides;
Ils semblent, dans l’horreur des immensités vides,
Des coques de vaisseaux monstrueux dérivant
Sous on ne sait quel fauve et lamentable vent,
Des crânes de géants, des têtes foudroyées;
Leurs-sinistres rondeurs flottent, demi-noyées;
L’impulsion qui prend ce qui n’est plus vivant
Et qui chasse la larve et la cendre en avant,
Pousse vers le néant ces tragiques masures;
Ils perdent, comme on perd le sang par ses blessures,
Les éléments de l’être en dissolution;
La mort blême sur eux plane, sombre alcyon;
Et, dans l’obscurité qui, sous l’immense brume,
Les couvre de sa noire et formidable écume,
Comme des naufragés qui de l’esquif profond,
Pâles, l’un après l’autre, à la nage s’en vont,
Le temps, le jour, l’espace, et la forme, et le nombre,
Quittent lugubrement ces épaves de l’ombre.

XXXII Ne vous croyez ni grand,

Ne vous croyez ni grand, ni petit! Contemplez.
Asseyez-vous le soir sous les cieux étoilés,
Sur le penchant d’un mont, près de la mer profonde.
Voyez s’évanouir les écumes sur l’onde;
Voyez sortir des flots les constellations;
Regardez trembler l’algue et fuir les alcyons;
Écoutez les bruits sourds qu’on entend dans cette ombre;

De vos ans écoulés rappelez-vous le nombre;
Laissez votre âme, en deuil de la fuite des jours,
Se fondre au souvenir de vos jeunes amours;

Pleurez, tandis que l’eau murmure sur la grève;
Et puis, songez à Dieu, qui regarde et qui rêve,
Toujours clément, toujours penché, toujours veillant,

À Dieu qui du même oeil égal et bienveillant
Voit la comète ouvrant sa flamboyante queue,
Et l’humble oiseau perdu dans l’immensité bleue.

28 juillet 1846.

XXXIII Dans les ravins

Dans les ravins la route oblique
Fuit   -Il voit luire au-dessus d’eux
Le ciel sinistre et métallique
A travers des arbres hideux.

Des êtres rôdent sur les rives;
Le nénuphar nocturne éclôt;
Des agitations furtives
Troublent l’herbe, rident le flot.

Les larges estompes de l’ombre,
Mêlant les lueurs et les eaux,
Ébauchent dans la plaine sombre
L’aspect monstrueux du chaos.

Voici que les spectres se dressent.
D’où sortent-ils? que veulent-ils?
Dieu! de toutes parts apparaissent
Toutes sortes d’affreux profils!

Il marche. Les heures sont lentes.
Il voit là-haut tout en marchant
S’allumer ces pourpres sanglantes,
Splendeurs lugubr`es du couchant.

Au loin, une cloche, une enclume,
Jettent-dans l’air leurs faibles coups.
A ses pieds flotte. dans la brume
Le paysage immense et doux.

Tout s’éteint. L’horizon recule.
Il regarde en ce lointain noir
Se former dans le crépuscule
Les vagues ,figures du soir.

La plaine, qu’une brise effleure,
Ajoute, ouverte au. vent des nuits,
A la solennité de l’heure
L’apaisement de tous les bruits. -

À peine, ténébreux murmures,
Entend-on, dans l’espace mort,
Les palpitations obscures
De ce qui veillé quand tout dort.

Les broussailles, les grès, les ormes,
Le vieux saule, le pan de mur,

Deviennent les contours difformes
De je ne sais quel monde obscur.

L’insecte aux nocturnes élytres
Imite le cri des sabbats.
Les étangs sont comme des vitres
Par où l’on voit le ciel d’en bas.

Par degrés, monts, forêts, cieux, terre,
Tout prend l’aspect terrible et grand
D’un monde entrant dans un mystère,
D’un navire dans l’ombre entrant.

XXXIV NUIT

Le ciel d’étain au ciel de cuivre
Succède. La nuit fait un pas.
Les choses de l’ombre vont vivre.
Les arbres se parlent tout bas.

Le vent, soufflant des empyrées,
Fait frissonner dans l’onde où luit
Le drap d’or des claires soirées,
Les sombres moires de la nuit.

Puis la nuit fait un pas encore.
Tout à l’heure, tout écoutait.
Maintenant nul bruit n’ose éclore;
Tout s’enfuit, se cache et se tait.

Tout ce qui vit, existe ou pense,
Regarde avec anxiété
S’avancer ce sombre silence
Dans cette sombre immensité.

C’est l’heure où toute créature
Sent distinctement dans les cieux,
Dans la grande étendue obscure
Le grand Être mystérieux!

II

Dans ses réflexions profondes,
Ce Dieu qui détruit en créant,
Que pense-t-il de tous ces mondes
Qui vont du chaos au néant?

Est-ce à nous qu’il prête l’oreille?
Est-ce aux anges? Est-ce aux démons?

A quoi songe-t-il, lui qui veille
A l’heure trouble où nous dormons?

Que de soleils, spectres sublimes,
Que d’astres à l’orbe éclatant,
Que de mondes dans ces abîmes
Dont peut-être il n’est pas content!

Ainsi que des monstres énormes
Dans l’océan illimité,
Que de créations difformes
Roulent dans cette obscurité!

L’univers, où sa, sève coule,
Mérite-t-il de le fixer?
Ne va-t-il pas briser ce moule,
Tout jeter, et recommencer?

III

Nul asile que la prière!
Cette heure sombre nous fait voir
La création tout entière
Comme un grand édifice noir!

Quand flottent les ombres glacées,
Quand l’azur s’éclipse à nos yeux,
Ce sont d’effrayantes pensées
Que celles qui viennent des cieux!

Oh! la nuit muette et livide
Fait vibrer quelque chose en nous!
Pourquoi cherche-t-on dans le vide?
Pourquoi tombe-t-on à genoux?

Quelle est cette secrète fibre?
D’où vient que, sous ce. morne effroi,

Le moineau ne se sent plus libre,
Le lion ne se sent plus roi?

Questions dans l’ombre enfouies!
Au fond du ciel de deuil couvert,
Dans ces profondeurs inouïes
Où l’âme plonge, où l’oeil se perd,

Que se passe-t-il de terrible
Qui fait que l’homme, esprit banni,
A peur de votre calme horrible,
O ténèbres de l’infini?

20 mars 1846.

XXXV L’aube est moins claire,

L’aube est moins claire, l’air moins chaud, le ciel moins pur;
Le soir brumeux ternit les astres de l’azur.
Les longs jours sont passés; les mois charmants finissent.
Hélas! voici déjà les arbres qui jaunissent!
Comme le temps s’en va d’un pas précipité!
Il semble que nos yeux, qu’éblouissait l’été,
Ont à peine eu le temps de voir les feuilles vertes.

Pour qui vit comme moi les fenêtres ouvertes,
L’automne est triste avec sa bise et son brouillard,
Et l’été qui s’enfuit est un ami qui part.
Adieu, dit cette voix qui dans notre âme pleure,
Adieu, ciel bleu! beau ciel qu’un souffle tiède effleure!
Voluptés du grand air, bruit d’ailes dans les bois,
Promenades, ravins pleins de lointaines voix,
Fleurs, bonheur innocent des âmes apaisées,
Adieu, rayonnements! aubes! chansons! rosées!

Puis tout bas on ajoute: ô jours bénis et doux!
Hélas! vous reviendrez! me retrouverez-vous?

XXXVI L’espace est noir

L’espace est noir, l’onde est sombre;
Là-bas, sur le gouffre obscur,
Brillent le phare dans l’ombre
Et l’étoile dans l’azur.
La nuit pose, pour la voile
Qu’emportent les vents d’avril,
Dans l’espoir sans fin l’étoile,
Le fanal sur le péril.

Deux flambeaux! doublé mystère,
Triste ou providentiel!
L’un avertit de la terre,
Et l’autre avertit du ciel.

15 janvier 1855.

XXXVIIÔ poète!

Ô poète! pourquoi tes stances favorites”
Marchent-elles toujours cueillant des marguerites,
Toujours des liserons et toujours des bleuets,
Et vont-elles s’asseoir au fond des bois muets
Laissant sur leurs pieds nus, lavés par les eaux pures,
Ruisseler les. cressons comme des chevelures?
Pourquoi toujours les champs et jamais les jardins?
D’où te viennent, rêveur, ces étranges dédains?
Loin dés buis rehaussant le sable des allées,
Loin du riant parterre aux touffes étoilées,
Bordé d’oeillets en foule empressés à s’ouvrir,
Pourquoi fuir, et pourquoi ne pas faire fleurir
Dans tes vers, où sourit l’heureux printemps qui t’aime,
Le blanc camélia, le jaune chrysanthème?

Et le poète dit: Nous y viendrons un jour.
Versez dans vos jardins plus de joie et d’amour.
La rêverie a peur des portes et des grilles.
La Liberté, parmi les socs et les faucilles,
Chante dans les prés-verts et rit sous le ciel bleu.
L’homme fait le jardin, les champs sont faits par Dieu.

19 juin 1839.

XXXVIII Dans cette ville où rien ne rit

Dans cette ville où rien ne rit et ne palpite,
Comme dans une femme aujourd’hui décrépite,
On sent que quelque chose, hélas! a disparu!
Les maisons ont un air fâché, rogue et bourru;
Les fenêtres, luisant d’un luisant de limace,
Semblent cligner des yeux et faire la grimace,
Et de chaque escalier et de chaque pignon,
Il sort je ne sais quoi de triste et de grognon.
Des portes à claveaux du temps de Loùis treize,
Des bonshommes de pierre avec pourpoint et fraise,
Des cours avec arceaux en anses de panier,
Force carreaux cassés, maint immonde grenier,
Des tours, de grands toits bleus sur des façades rouges,
Ce serait des palais si ce n’était des bouges.
Voilà ce qu’on rencontre à chaque pas, et puis
D’affreux enfants tout nus jouant au bord des puits.
Quelques arbres malsains, tout couverts de verrues,
Percent le long des murs le pavé dans les rues.
Les écriteaux sont pleins d’un gothique alphabet;
Les poteaux à lanterne ont un air de gibet;
Les vastes murs, les toits aigus, les girouettes,
Font sur le ciel brumeux de mornes silhouettes.
C’est surtout effrayant et lugubre le soir.
Le jour, les habitants sont rares. On croit voir
Partout le même vieux avec la même vieille.
Dans ces réduits vitrés en verres de bouteille,
Dans ces trous où jamais le, soleil n’arriva,
On entend bougonner le siècle qui s’en va.

XXXIX À DOS D’ÉLÉPHANT

Supposez Goliath mené par Myrmidon.
Le cornac est tout jeune et la bête est énorme.
Le palanquin tremblant par instant se déforme
Et vous cahote au point de vous estropier
Sous ses rideaux de cuir et son toit de papier.
Un monstre n’a pas moins de roulis qu’un navire;
Comme un vaisseau chancelle un éléphant chavire,
Et vous avez le mal de mer sur Béhémoth.
Le cornac, nain pensif, conseille à demi-mot
Le colosse, et le monstre écoute et ne se trompe
Sur rien, ni sur le gué qu’il sonde avec sa trompe,
Ni sur la route à suivre, et jamais l’éléphant
N’a peur, pourvu qu’il soit conduit par un enfant.

XL SOIR

Ciel! un fourmillement emplit l’espace noir;
On entend l’invisible errer et se mouvoir;
Près de l’homme endormi tout vit dans les ténèbres.
Le crépuscule, plein de figures funèbres,
Soupire; au fond des bois le daim passe en rêvant;
A quelque être,ignoré qui flotte dans le ,vent
La pervenche. murmure, à voix basse: je t’aime!
La clochette bourdonne auprès du chrysanthème
Et lui dit: paysan, qu’as-tu donc à dormir?
Toute la plaine semble adorer et frémir.
L’élégant peuplier vers le saule difforme
S’incline; le buisson caresse l’antre; l’orme
Au sarment frissonnant tend ses-bras convulsifs;
Les nymphæas, pour plaire aux nénuphars pensifs,
Dressent hors du flot noir leurs blanches silhouettes;
Et voici que partout, pêle-mêle, muettes,
S’éveillent, au milieu des joncs ét des roseaux,
Regardant leur ,front pâle au bleu miroir des eaux,
Courbant leur tige, ouvrant leurs yeux, penchant leurs urnes,
Les roses des étangs, ces coquettes nocturnes 51
Des fleurs déesses font des lueurs dans, la nuit,
Et dans les prés, dans l’herbe où rampe un faible bruit,
Dans l’eau, dans. la, ruine informe et décrépite,
Tout un monde charmant et. sinistre palpite.
C’est que là-haut, au fond du ciel mystérieux,
Dans le.soir vaguement splendide et glorieux,
Vénus rayonne, pure, ineffable et sacrée,
Et, vision, remplit. d’amour l’ombre effarée.

6 mars 1854.

XLI UN DESSIN D’ALBERT-DORER

MINUIT

Le frêle esquif’sur la mer sombre
Sombre;
La foudre perce d’un éclair
L’air.

C’est minuit. L’eau gémit, le tremble
Tremble,
Et tout bruit dans le manoir
Noir;

Sur la tour inhospitalière;
Lierre,
Dans les fossés du haut donjon,
Jonc;

Dans les cours, dans les colossales
Salles,
Et dans les cloîtres du couvent,
Vent.

La cloche, de son aile attèinte;
Tinte;
Et son bruit -tremble en s’envolant,
Lent.

Le son qui dans l’air se disperse
Perce
La tombe où le mort inconnu,
Nu,

Épélant quelque obscur problème
Blême,

Tandis qu’au loin -le vent mugit;
Gît.

Tous se répandent dans les ombres,
Sombres,
Rois, reines, clercs; soudàrds, nonnains,
Nains.

La voix qu’ils élèvent ensemble
Semble
Le dernier soupir qu’un mourant
Rend.

Les ombres vont au clair de lune,
L’une
En mitre, et l’autre en chaperon
Rond.

Celle-ci qui roule un rosaire
Serre
Dans ses bras un. enfant tremblant,
Blanc.

Celle-là, voilée. et touchante,
Chante
Au bord d’un gouffre où le serpent
Pend.

D’autres, qui dans Pair.se promènent,
Mènent
Par. monts et vaux des palefrois,
Froids.

L’enfant mort, à la pâle joue,
Joue;
Le gnome grimace, et l’Esprit
Rit:

On dirait que le beffroi pleure;
L’heure
Semble dire en traînant son glas:
Las!

Enfant! retourne dans ta tombe!
Tombe
Sous le, pavé des corridors,
Dors!

L’enfer souillerait ta faiblesse.
Laisse
Ses banquets à tes envieux,
Vieux.

C’est aller -au sabbat trop jeune!
Jeûne,
Garde-toi de leurs jeux hideux,
D’eux!

Vois-tu dans la. sainte phalange
L’ange
Qui vient t’ouvrir le paradis,
,.Dis?

Ains la mort nous chasse et nous foule,
Foule
De héros petits et d’étroits
Rois.

Attilas, Césars, Cléopâtres,
Pâtres,
Vieillards narquois et jouvenceaux,
Sots,

Bons évêquesà charge d’âmes,

Dames,
Saints docteurs, lansquenets fougueux,
Gueux,
Nous serons un jour, barons, prêtres,
Reîtres,
Avec nos voeux et nos remords
Morts.
Pour moi, quand l’ange qui réclame
L’âme
Se viendra sur ma couche un soir
Seoir;

Alors, quand sous la pierre froide,
Roide;
Je ferai le somme de plomb,
Long;

Ô toi, qui dans mes fautes mêmes,
M’aimes,
Viens vite, si tu te souviens,
Viens
T’étendre à ma droite, endormie,
Mie;
Car on a froid dans le linceul,
Seul.

26 décembre 1827.

XLII Qui donc mêle au néant de l’homme vicieux

Qui donc mêle au néant de l’homme vicieux
Des vertus de la terre et des lueurs des cieux?
Flambant la nuit plein de ramée,
Ton âtre te ressemble, homme, énigme sans mot;
Les étincelles sont dans sa cendre, et, là-haut,
Les étoiles dans sa fumée.

XLIII O RUS?

Laissons.les hommes noirs bâcler dans leur étable.
Des lois qui vont nous faire un bien épouvantable;
Allons-nous-en aux bois;
Allons-nous-en chez Dieu, dans les prés où l’on aime,
Près des lacs où l’on rêve, et ne sachons pas même
Si des gens. font des lois!

Oh! quand on.peut s’enfuir aux champs, dans le grand songe,
Dans les fleurs, sous les cieux, les hommes de mensonge,
Prêtres, despotes, rois,
Comme c’est peu de chose, et comme ces: maroufles
Sont des fantômes vite effacés dans les souffles,
Les rayons et les voix!

Laissons-les s’acharner à leur folle aventure.
Enfants, allons-nous-en là-haut, dans la nature.
Mai dore le ravin,
Tout rit, les papillons et leur douce poursuite
Passent, l’arbre est en fleur, venez, prenons la fuite
Dans cet oubli divin.
L’évanouissement des soucis de la terre
Est là; les champs. sont purs; là souriait Voltaire,
Là songeait Diderot;
On se sent rassuré par les parfums;.les roses
Nous consolent, étant ignorantes des choses
Que l’homme connaît trop.

Là, rien ne s’interrompt, rien ne finit’d’éclore;
Le rosier respiré par Eve embaume encore
Nos deuils et nos amours; -
Et la pervenche est plus éternelle que Rome;
Car ce qui dure peu, monts-et forêts, c’est l’homme;
Les fleurs durent toujours.
La Pyramide après trois mille ans est ,ridée,

Le lys n’a pas un pli. -Ni la fleur, ni l’idée,
Ni le vrai, ni le beau,
N’expirent; Dieu refait sans cesse leur jeunesse;
La mort c’est l’aube, et c’est afin que tout renaisse
Que Dieu fit le tombeau.

Ô splendeur! ô douceur! l’étendue infinie
Est un balancement d’amour et d’harmonie;

Contemplons à genoux;
Une voix sort du ciel et dans nos fibres passe;
De là nos chants profonds; le rythme est dans l’espace
Et la lyre est en nous.
Venez, tous mes enfants, tous mes amis! les plaines,
Les lacs, les bois n’ont point de perfides haleines
Et de haineux reflux;
Venez; soyons un groupe errant dans la prairie,
Qui va dans l’ombre avec des mots de rêverie
Et ne sait même plus,

Tant il sent vivre en lui la nature immortelle,
Si la Chambre a quitté Pantin pour Bagatelle,
Versailles pour Saint-Cloud,
Et si le pape enfin daigne rougir la jupe
Du prêtre dont le nom commence comme dupe
Et finit comme loup.

27 mai 1875.

XLIV C’est l’hiver.

C’est l’hiver. Ô villes folles,
Dansez! Dans le bal béant
Tourbillonnent les paroles
De la joie et du néant.

L’homme flotte dans la voie
Où l’homme errant se perdit;
En bas le plaisir flamboie,
En haut l’amour resplendit.

Le plaisir, clarté hagarde
Du faux rire et des faux biens,
Dit au noir passant: Prends garde!
L’amour rayonne et dit: Viens! -

Ces deux lueurs, sur la lame
Guidant l’hydre et l’alcyon,
Nous éclairent; toute l’âme
Vogue à ce double rayon.

Mer!j’ai fui loin des Sodomes;
Je cherche tes grands tableaux;
Mais ne voit-on pas les hommes
Quand on regarde les flots?

Les spectacles de l’abîme
Ressemblent à ceux du cour;
Le vent est le fou sublime,
Le jonc est le-nain moqueur.

Comme un ami l’onde croule;
Sitôt que le jour s’enfuit
La mer n’est plus qu’une foule
Qui querellé dans la nuit;

Le désert de l’eau qui souffre
Est plein de cris et de voix,
Et parle dans tout le gouffre
A toute l’ombre à la fois.
Où donc est la clarté? Cieux, où donc est, la flamme?
Où. donc est 1a lumière éternelle de l’âme?.
Où donc est. le regard. joyeux..qui voit toujours?
Depuis qu’en proie aux deuils, aux luttes, aux amours,
Plaignant parfois l’heureux plus que le misérable,
Je traverse, pensif, la vie impénétrable,
J’ai sans cesse vu l’heure, en tournant pas à pas,
Teindre d’ébène et d’or les branches du compas.
Penché sur la nature, immense apocalypse,
Cherchant cette lueur qui. jamais ne s’éclipse,
Chaque fois que mon oeil s’ouvre après le sommeil,
Hélas! j’ai toujours vu, riant, vainqueur, vermeil,
De derrière la cime et les pentes sans nombre
Et les blêmes versants de la montagne. d’ombre,
Le bleu matin surgir, -disant: Aimez! vivez!
Et rouler devant lui de ,ses deux bras levés -
L’obscurité, bloc triste aux épaisseurs funèbres;
Et, le soir,. j’ai ,toujours, sous le roc des ténèbres,
Tas monstrueux de brume où nul regard ne luit,
Vu retomber le jour, Sisyphe de la nuit. -

7 janvier 1855.
Que dit-il? Dieu seul recueille
Ce blasphème ou ce sanglot;
Dieu seul répond à la feuille,
Et Dieu seul réplique au flot.

XLVI UNITÉ

Veux-tu te figurer le monde?
Coupe un tronc d’arbre dans -les bois.
L’aubier sur sa surface ronde
Offre cent sphères à la fois.
L’oeil peut retrouver chaque orbite
Que la planète d’or habite
Dans les cercles du bois vermeil;
La sève erre en leur zone obscure
Comme Mars, Vénus et Mercure;
Le noeud du centre est le soleil.

XLVII Ô champs mystérieux!

Ô champs mystérieux! Vallons! Eden visible!
Je suis doux comme vous et comme vous paisible!
Oiseaux! j’ai quelque peine à rappeler parfois
Mes strophes qui s’en vont avec vous dans les bois!
Nature! de vos chants ma chanson se compose,
Et je suis votre écho si je suis quelque chose.
Car j’inonde mon âme et mon vers attristé
De votre rêverie et de votre beauté,
J’admire, -et m’emplissant de vos douéeurs secrètes
Je fais ce que je suis avec ce que vous êtes!

XLVIII ARRIVÉE

On arrête. Un falot flambe aux pieds d'une Vierge.
C'est là. -Le voyageur aspire à des draps blancs;
Le cocher cogne, et jure, et crie: Hé, dans l'auberge!
Et le silencé noir s'emplit de chiens hurlants.

L'hôte arrive en chemise avec une pantoufle;
La porte ouvre un battant et l'hôtesse ouvre un oeil;
La chandelle frissonne, et, dans le vent qui souffle,
La servante aux yeux ronds s'effare sur le seuil.

XLIX Chacun choisit un homme,

Chacun choisit un homme, et moi j’ai choisi Dieu!
Oui, j’ai, pour l’expliquer à la foule muette,
Pris le plus grand poème et le plus grand poète!
Je ne lis pas du grec ni du latin; je lis
Les horizons brumeux, les soirs doux et pâlis,
Le ciel bleu, le lac sombre où l’étoile se mire;
Je déchiffre le cœur de l’homme, le sourire,
Le soupir, le regard, la voix que nous aimons,
Puis et toujours, les champs, les forêts et les monts,
Et dans mon œuvre grave et parfois solennelle,
Je traduis la nature, épopée éternelle.

I EFFETS DE RÉVEIL

On ouvre les yeux; rien ne remue; on entend
Au chevet de son lit la montre palpitant;
La fenêtre livide. aux spectres est pareille;
On est gisant ainsi qu'un mort. On se réveille,
Pourquoi? parce qu'on s'est la veille réveillé
Au même instant. Ainsi qu'un rouage rouillé
Et vieilli, mais exact, l'âme a ses habitudes.
Oh! la nuit, c'est la plus sombre des solitudes.
L'heure apparaît, entrant, sortant, comme un passeur
D'ombres, et notre esprit voit tout dans la noirceur;
Des pas saris but, des deuils sans fin, des maux sans nombre.
Le rêve qu'on avait et qui tremblait dans-l'ombre; .
S'ajuste à la pensée indistincte qu'on a.
Tous les gouffres au bord desquels nous amèna
Ce fantôme appelé le Hasard, reparaissent;
Les mêmes visions redoutables s'y dressent;
Ici le précipice, ici l'écroulement,
Ici la chute, ici ce qui fuit, ce qui ment,
Ce qui tue, et là-bas, dans l'âpre transparence,
Les vagues bras levés de la pâle espérance.
Comme on est triste! on sent l'inexprimable effroi;
On croit avoir le mur du tombeau devant soi; .
On médite, effaré par les. choses possibles;
Toute rive s'efface. On voit les invisibles,.
Les absents, les manquants, cette morte, ce mort,
On leur tend les mains.. Ombre et songe! On se rendort...

Homme, debout! voici le jour, l'aube ravie,
L'azur; et qu'est-ce donc qui rentre? C'est la vie,

C'est le cri du travail, c'est le chant des oiseaux,
C'est le rayonnement des champs, des airs, des eaux;
La nuit traîne un linceul, l'aurore agite un lange;
Tout ce qu'on vient de voir spectre, on le revoit ange;

Du père qu’on vit mort on voit l’enfant vivant;
Le monde reparaît, clair comme auparavant;
On ne reconnaît plus son âme; elle était noire,
Elle est blanche; elle espère et se remet à croire,
A sourire, à vouloir; on a devant les yeux
Un éblouissement doré, chantant, joyeux,
On ne sait quel fouillis charmant de lueurs roses;
Et tout l’homme est changé parce qu’on voit les choses,
Les hommes, Dieu, les cœurs, les amours, le destin,
A travers le vitrail splendide du matin.

V. H. 14 septembre 1872.

II Quand l’enfant nous regarde,

Quand l’enfant nous regarde, on sent Dieu nous sonder.
Quand il pleure, j’entends le tonnerre gronder;
Car penser c’est entendre; et le visionnaire
Est souvent averti par un vague tonnerre.
Quand ce petit être, humble et pliant les genoux,
Attache doucement sa prunelle sur nous,
Je ne sais pas pourquoi je tremble; quand cette âme,
Qui n’est pas homme encore et n’est, pas encor femme,
En qui rien ne s’admire et rien ne se repent,
Sans sexe, sans passé derrière elle rampant,
Verse, à travers les cils de sa rose paupière,
Sa clarté dans laquelle on sent de la prière,
Sur nous les combattants, les vaincus, les vainqueurs,
Quand ce pur esprit semble, interroger nos coeurs,
Quand cet ignorant, plein d’un jour que rien n’efface,
A l’air de regarder notre science en face,
Et jette, dans cette ombre où passe Adam banni,
On ne sait quel rayon de rêve et d’infini,
On dirait, tant l’enfance est ressemblante au temple;
Que la lumière, chose étrange, nous contemple;
Toute la profondeur du ciel est dans cet oeil.
Fût-on Christ ou Socrate, eût-on droit à l’orgueil,
On dit: laissez venir à moi cette auréole!
Comme on sent qu’il était hier l’esprit qui vole!
Comme on sent manquer l’aile à ce petit pied blanc!
Oh! comme c’est débile et frêle et chancelant!
Comme on devine aux cris de cette bouche, un songe
De paradis qui jusqu’en enfer se prolonge,
Et que le doux enfant ne veut pas voir finir!
L’homme, ayant un passé, craint pour cet avenir.;
Que la vie apparaît fatale! Comme on pense
A tant de peine avec si peu de récompense!
Oh! ,comme on s’attendrit sur ce nouveau venu!
Lui cependant, qu’est-il, ô vivants? l’inconnu.

Qu’a-t-il en lui? l’énigme. Et que porte-t-il? , l’âme.
Il vit à peine; il est si chétif qu’il, réclame
Du brin d’herbe ondoyant aux vents, un point d’appui;
Parfois, lorsqu’il se tait, on le croit presque enfui,
Car on a peur que tout ici-bas ne le blesse.
Lui, que fait-il? Il rit. Fait d’ombre et de faiblesse
Et de tout ce qui tremble, il ne craint rien. Il est
Parmi nous le seul être encor vierge et complet;
L’ange devient l’enfant lorsqu’il se rapetisse;
Si toute pureté contient toute justice,
On ne rencontre -pas l’enfant sans quelque effroi;
On sent qu’on est devant un plus juste que soi;
C’est l’atome, le nain souriant, le pygmée;
Et quand il passe, honneur, gloire, éclat, renommée,
Méditent; on se dit tout bas: Si je priais?
On rêve; et les plus grands sont les plus inquiets;
Sa haute exception dans notre obscure sphère,
C’est que n’ayant rien fait, lui seul n’a pu mal faire.;
Le monde est un mystère inondé de clarté;
L’enfant. est sous l’énigme adorable abrité.;
Toutes les vérités couronnent, condensées
Ce doux front qui n’a pas encore. de pensées;
On comprend que l’enfant, ange de nos douleurs,
Si petit ici-bas, doit être grand ailleurs;
Il se traîne, il trébuche.; il n’a dans l’attitude,
Dans la voix, dans le geste, aucune certitude;
Un souffle à qui la fleur résiste fait ployer
Cet être à qui fait peur le grillon du foyer;
L’oeil hésite pendant que la lèvre bégaie;
Dans ce naïf regard que l’ignorance égaie
L’étonnement avec la grâce se confond,
Et l’immense lueur étoilée est au fond:

Juin 1874.

III LA FEMME

Je l’ai dit quelque part, les penseurs d’autrefois,
Épiant l’inconnu dans ses plus noires lois,
Ont tous étudié la formation d’Ève.
L’un en fit son problème et l’autre en fit son rêve.
L’horreur sacrée étant dans tout, se pourrait-il
Que la femme, cet être obscur, puissant, subtil,
Fût double, et, tout ensemble ignorée et charnelle,
Fît hors d’elle l’aurore, ayant la nuit en elle?
Le hibou serait-il caché dans l’alcyon?
Qui dira le secret de la création?
Les germes, les aimants, les instincts, les effluves!
Qui peut connaître à fond toutes ces sombrès cuves?
Est-ce que le Vésuve et l’Etna, les reflux
Des forces s’épuisant en efforts superflus,
Le vaste tremblement des feuilles remuées,
Les ouragans, les fleurs, les torrents,. les nuées,
Ne peuvent pas finir par faire une vapeur.
Qui se condense en femme et dont le sage a peur?
Tout fait Tout, et le même insondable cratère
Crée à Thulé la lave et la rose à Cythère.
Rien ne sort des volcans qui n’entre dans lès coeurs.
Les oiseaux dans les bois ont des rires moqueurs
Et tristes, au-dessus de l’amoureux crédule.
N’est-ce pas le serpent qui vaguement ondule
Dans la souple beauté des vierges aux seins nus?
Les grands sages étaient d’immenses ingénus;
Ils ne connaissaient pas la forme de ce globe,
Mais, pâles, ils sentaient traîner sur eux la robe
De la sombre passante, Isis au voile noir;
Tout devient le soupçon quand Rien est lè savoir;
Pour Lucrèce, le dieu, pour Job, le kéroubime
Mentaient; on soupçonnait de trahison l’abîme;
On croyait le chaos càpable d’engendrer
La femme, pour nous plaire et pour nous enivrer,

Et pour faire monter jusqu’à nous sa fumée;
La Sicile, la Grèce étrange, l’Idumée,
L’Iran, l’Egypte et l’Inde, étaient des lieux profonds;
Qui sait ce que les, vents, les brumes, les typhons
Peuvent apporter d’ombre à l’âme féminine?
Les tragiques forêts de la chaîne Apennine,
La farouche fontaine épandue à longs flots
Sous l’Olympe, à travers les pins et les bouleaux,
L’antre de Béotie où dans l’ombre diffuse
On sent on ne sait quoi qui s’offre et se refuse,
Chypre et tous ses parfums, Delphe et tous ses rayons,
Lé lys que nous cueillons, l’azur que nous voyons,
Tout cela, c’est auguste, et c’est peut-être infâme.
Tout, à leurs yeux, était sphinx, et quand une femme
Venait vers eux, parlant avec sa douce voix,
Qui sait? peut-être Hermès et Dédale, les bois,
Les nuages, les eaux, l’effrayante Cybèle,
Toute l’énigme était mêlée à cette belle.

L’univers aboutit à ce monstre charmant.
La ménade est -déjà presque un commencement
De la femmè-chimère, et d’antiques annales
Disent qu’avril était le temps des bacchanales,
Et que la liberté de ces fêtes s’accrut
Des fauves impudeurs de la nature en rut;
La nature partout donne. l’exemple énorme
De l’accouplement sombre où l’âme étreint la forme;
La rose est une fille; et ce qu’un papillon
Fait à la plante, est fait au grain par le sillon.
La végétation terrible est ignorée.
L’horreur des bois unit Flore avec Briarée,
Et marie une fleur avec l’arbre aux cent bras.
Toi qui sous le talon d’Apollon te cabras,
O cheval orageux du Pinde, tes narines
Frémissaient quand passaient les nymphes vipérines,
Et, sentant là de l’ombre hostile à ta clarté,
Tu t’enfuyais devant la sinistre Astarté.

Et Terpandre le vit, et Platon le raconte.

La femme est une. gloire et peut être une honte
Pour l’ouvrier divin et suspect qui la fit.
A tout le bien, à tout le mal, elle suffit.
Haine, amour, fange, esprit, fièvre, élIe participe
Du gouffre, et la matière aveugle est son principe.
Elle est le mois de mai fait chair, vivant, chantant.
Qu’est-ce que le printemps? une orgie. A l’instant,
Où la femme naquit, est morte l’innocence.
Les vieux songeurs ont vu la fleur qui nous encense
Devenir femme à l’heure où l’astre éclôt au ciel,
Et, pour Orphée ainsi que pour Ézéchiel,
La nature n’étant qu’un vaste hymen, l’ébauche
D’un être tentateur rit dans cette débauche;
C’est la femme. Elle est spectre et masque, et notré sort
Est traversé par elle; elle entre, flotte et sort.
Que nous veut-elle? A-t-elle un but? Par quelle issue
Cette apparition vaguement aperçue
S’est-elle dérobée? Est-ce un souffle de nuit
Qui semble une âme errante et qui s’évanouit?
Les sombres hommes sont une forêt, et l’ombre
Couvre leurs pas, leurs voix, leurs yeux, leur bruit, leur nombre;
Le genre humain, mêlé sous les hauts firmaments,
Est plein de carrefours et d’entre-croisements,
Et la femme est assez blanche pour qu’on la voie
A travers cette morne et blême claire-voie.
Cette vision passe; et l’on reste effaré.
Aux chênes de Dodone, aux cèdres de Membré,
L’hiérophante ému comme le patriarche
Regarde ce fantôme. inquiétant qui marche.
Non, rien ne nous dira ce que peut être au fond
Cet être en qui Satan avec Dieu se confond:
Elle résume l’ombre énorme en son essence.
Les vieux payens croyaient à la toute-puissance
De l’abîme, du lit sans fond, de l’élément;
Ils épiaient la mer dans son enfantement;

Pour eux, ce qui sortait de la tempête immense,
De toute l'onde en proie aux souffles en démence
Et du vaste flot vert à jamais tourmenté,
C'était le divin sphinx féminin, la Beauté,
Toute nue, infernale et céleste, insondable, -
Ô gouffre! et que peut-on voir de plus formidable,
Sous les cieux les plus noirs et les plus inconnus,
Que l'océan ayant pour écume Vénus!
Aucune aile ici-bas n'est pour longtemps posée.
Quand elle était petite, elle avait un oiseau;
Elle le nourrissait de pain et de rosée,
Et veillait sur son nid comme sur un berceau.
Un soir il s'échappa.Que de plaintes amères!
Dans mes bras en pleurant je la vis accourir... -
Jeunes filles, laissez, laissez, ô jeunes mères,
Les oiseaux s'envoler et les enfants mourir!

C'est une loi d'en haut qui veut. que tout nous quitte.
Le secret du Seigneur, nous le saurons un jour.
Elle grandit. La vie, hélas! marche si vite!
Elle eut un doux enfant, un bel ange, un amour.
Une nuit, triste sort des choses éphémères!
Cet enfant s'éteignit, sans pleurer, sans souffrir... -
Jeunes filles, laissez, laissez, ô jeunes mères,
Les oiseaux s'envoler et les enfants mourir!

22 juin 1842.

— Ô femmes! chastetés augustes! .fiertés saintes!
Pudeur, crainte sacrée entre toutes les craintes!

8 avril 1874.

V Farouche austérité

Farouche austérité du front pensif et doux!
O vous à qui je veux ne parler qu’à genoux,
Dont la forme est si noble en notre chaos sombre,
Qu’on ne se souvient plus, en la voyant dans l’ombre,
De rien que de divin et de mystérieux,
Sorte d’oubli tombé sur la terre des cieux,
Etres charmants créés pour la plus haute sphère;
O femmés, parmi nous que venez-vous donc faire? -
Alors questionnant l’inconnu,-l’inouï,
Aux voix qui disent non tâchant d’arracher oui
J’écoute, et je regarde, et, plein de rêveries,
Je vais au Luxembourg, je vais aux Tuileries,
Parlant à tout ce qui va, vient, passe, et cherchant
La réponse à ce cri vague et pur comme un chant;
Et toujours, et. partout, et de toutes les femmes,.
De celles-ci, les coeurs, de celles-là,; les âmes,
Du brun regard, de l’oeil voilé de blonds cheveux,
Sort un sourire immense aux enfants, ces aveux.

17 novembre 1879.

VI Si le sort t’a fait riche,

Si le sort t’a fait riche, aie au bien l’âme prompte.
Sois pensif, humble et doux; rachète en t’abaissant
Ta trop haute stature, et songe que Dieu monte
Vers celui qui descend.

Ne réveille jamais brusquement ton esclave;
Laisse dormir le boeuf qui creuse le sillon.;
Sénateur, plains le pauvre, et que ton laticlave
Ait pitié du haillon.

Sers celui qui te sert, car il te vaut peut-être;
Pense qu’il a son droit comme toi ton devoir;
Ménage les petits, les faibles. Sois le maître
Que tu voudrais avoir.

VII À CEUX QUI FONT DE PETITES FAUTES

Sois avare du moindre écart d’honnêteté. -
Sois juste en détail. Voir des deuils, rire à côté,

4 juin.

Mentir pour un plaisir, tricher pour un centime,
Cela ne te fait rien perdre en ta propre estime,
Eh bien, prends garde. Tout finit par s’amasser;
Des choses que tu fais presque sans y penser,.
Vagues improbités parfois inaperçues
De toi-même, te font tomber, sont des issues
Sur le mal, et par là tu descends dans la nuit.
Un lourd câble est de fils misérables construit;
Qu’est-ce que l’océan? une onde après une onde;
Un ver creuse un abîme, un pou construit un monde;
C’est brin à brin que l’aigle énorme fait son nid;
Un tas de petits faits peu scrupuleux finit
Par faire le total d’une action mauvaise.
Et d’atome en atome on empire, et l’on pèse,
Souvent, quand vient le jour du compte solennel,
En n’étant qu’imprudent, le poids d’un criminel.
Homme, la conscience est une minutie.
L’âme est plus aisément que l’hermine, noircie.
Le vrai sans s’amoindrir toujours partout entra.
Ne crois pas que jamais, parce qu’on les mettra
Dans les moindres recoins de l’âme, on rapetisse
La probité, l’honneur, le droit et la justice.
Devant les. cieux qu’emplit un vague aspect d’effroi,
Sur tout, sans savoir qui, sans demander pourquoi,
Le philosophe pleure, aime, intercède, prie.
Il pense; il sonde avec sa prunelle attendrie
Le mystère, et comprend que quelqu’un gémit là.
Il parle à l’infini comme Jean lui parla;
Il y penche son âme et par cette. ouverture

Répand un sombre amour sur la vaste nature;
Il bénit à voix basse en marchant devant lui
Toutes les profondeurs de l’ombre et de l’ennui,
L’antre, l’herbe, les monts glacés, les arbres torses,
Les courants, les aimants, l’hydre aveugle des forces,
Les joncs tremblants, les bois tristes, les rochers nus,
L’air, l’onde, et le troupeau des monstres inconnus;
Il console, incliné; ce qui vit, ce qui souffre,
Et, tous les noirs captifs invisibles du gouffre,
Epars dans l’Être horrible aux effrayants halliers,
Enchaînés aux carcans ou tirant des colliers.
Il perçoit les soupirs des visions funèbres;
Il console et secourt plus bas que l’animal;
Tendre, il fait du bien, même à ce qui fait du mal;
Sans distinguer sur qui tombent ses pleurs, lui-même
N’étant qu’une lueur flottant dans le problème,
Il prie, argile, chair, larve; et semble un rayon
Aux sombres yeux ouverts dans l’expiation.

L’ardeur d’apaiser tout est sa sublime fièvre;
Il va! prophète ou non, qu’importe que sa lèvre
Ait ou n’ait pas le feu du céleste charbon!
Il sait bien qu’on l’entend, qu’il suffit d’être bon,
Et que les exilés rêvent la délivrance;
Il passe en murmurant Espérance! espérance!
Et. toute la souffrance est un appel confus
A son coeur d’où jamais il ne sort un refus.

VIII Tandis qu’on ne sait quoi d’étrange

Tandis qu’on ne sait quoi d’étrange et de farouche
Surgit dans des berceaux, dans les tombeaux se couche,
Tandis que l’ouragan souffle, et que par moment
La vie universelle est un rugissement,
Et qu’à d’autres moments tout n’est plus qu’une face
De silence où le cri de l’abîme s’efface,
Tandis, que le flot roule à l’engloutissement,
Que la livide mort court sous le firmament
Distribuant le monde aux fléaux ses ministres;
Que les astres hagards ont des levers sinistres,
Et qué tout semble craindre un lugubre abandon,
Lui, tranquille, il dit: .Paix, harmonie et pardon!
Il jette sa pitié dans la sourde étendue,
Dans l’ombre formidable à jamais éperdue,
Dans le deuil, dans l’énigme affreuse, dans l’horreur;
Il marche, et, sans rien voir, perdu, quoique éclaireur,
Sous la brume éternelle à flots noirs épanchée,
Sent dans la nuit sa main par des langues léchée.

IX Quant à l’obscurité

Quant à l’obscurité que tu dis éternelle,
Qu’en sais-tu? l’univers tient-il dans ta prunelle?
L’ombré est la forme énorme et triste dé l’ennui;
Mais qu’y vois-tu? Sais-tu ce que c’est qu’Aujourd’hui?
As-tu bien une. idée exacte de la phase
Où tu passes, tremblant d’épouvante ou d’extase.?
Qui te dit que le monde, étant un noir vivant,
N’a pas comme toi-même, homme jouet du vent,
Son moment de sommeil où la brume le couvre,
Après quoi son oeil sombre et vertigineux s’ouvre!
Cet instant fugitif où le sort a jeté
Les vagues siècles noirs de ton humanité,
Peut-être est-ce la nuit du monde? Sais-tu l’heure?
Sais-tu si tu n’es pas un être vain qui pleure
Et se déforme, et n’est, en attendant la mort,
Qu’un rêve sur le front de l’infini qui dort.

X L’homme est faible;

L’homme est faible; il n’a pas encor trouvé sa loi.
Aussi le prêtre dit: -Il lui faut une foi;
Il lui faut un appui qui ne soit pas la terre.
— Et, comme, en vérité, l’homme, au bien réfractaire,
Se livre, bon, au mal, et, petit, à l’orgueil;
Comme nous sentons, nous, gardiens de votre seuil,
Satari dans le meilleur et Titan dans le moindre,
On voit de toutes parts. les religions poindre.
Mais sont-ce les lueurs vagues de l’horizon?
Est-ce Dieu qui se. montre à l’humaine raison?
Pourquoi ces visions s’offrent-elles à l’âme,
L’une couleur de sang, l’autre couleur de flamme?
Qu’ont-elles de réel ou de faux? questions!
Et de l’esprit humain les noirs amphictyons,
Les douteurs, les Pyrrhons, les Voltaires, les Hobbes,
Regardent effarés toutes ces sombres aubes.

XI Voilà l’homme.

Voilà l’homme. Qui donc a dit: l’homme est sublime!
Qui donc s’est écrié: l’homme est un spectre infime!
Il est grand, il est vil; il est tout à la fois.
Et, comme tout se meut suivant de sombres lois,
Comme dans l’univers rien n’est stationnaire,
Pour l’homme, quoi qu’il fasse ou rêve,-qu’il vénère
Ou blasphème, qu’il sème ou l’amour ou l’effroi,
Vivre, c’est travailler sans trêve, ayant en soi
L’archange qui rayonne et l’âne qui se vautre,
A diminuer l’un en agrandissant l’autre.
Le méchant grandit l’âne et rétrécit l’esprit
Le bon, le juste, en qui la brute dépérit,
En qui l’ange fleurit, c’est celui:qui, sans cesse,
Augmentant sa lumière, amoindrit sa bassesse.

Ô passant! toi qui vas, tâchant d’ouvrir la nuit,
Pâle, inquiet, semblable à-celui qui poursuit,
Rêvant l’être quadruple, esprit, force, amour, joie,
Qui résume ce monde où sa. lueur: flamboie,
Tâtant les quatre-coins du “firmament, touchant
Le nord après le sud, l’aube après le couchant,
T’efforçant de voir Dieu, cherchant la quadrature
De ce cercle effrayant qu’on nomme la nature,
Toi qui, boiteux, ailé, par essors inégaux,
Voudrais monter, monter jusqu’au Demiourgos,
Comme Jacob le pâtre ou Baruch le prophète,
Quitte cette entreprise, et, je te le répète,
Explique, si tu peux, ce lugubre inconnu,
Ce soleil dans un. peu de fange contenu,
Cet être monstrueux, prodigieux et-triste,
L’homme. Amer, ignorant dans quel monde il existe,
Faisant, comme ce globe horrible dont il sort,;
Dans le jour et -la nuit; dans la vie et la mort;”
Dans la bête et l’esprit, ses deux sombres demeures,

Sa révolution toutes les vingt-quatre heures,
Mur du cloaque affreux, cloison des cieux bénis,
Et séparation de deux-noirs infinis,
Il vole dans l’aurore et dans l’égout il trempe;
Et le Voilà. qui plane et le voici qui. rampe
Ver de terre et rayon, confinant d’un côté
A l’azur, on ne sait par quelle pureté,
De l’autre à la matière, on ne sait pour quels crimes.
Songeur! qu’est-ce que l’homme? Uri entre-deux d’abîmes.

Que d’escarpements! L’esprit songe,
Au bord des problèmes venu.
Partout des puits noirs où l’oeil plonge:
Le ciel; la terre, l’inconnu;
Le mystère, embûche sublime;
Le mal, abîme; l’âme, abîme;
Le tombeau, précipice; Dieu.
Profondeur tellement étrange
Que le tonnerre, l’astre et l’ange
S’y perdent dans de-l’ombre-en feu!

Oh! l’immensité, quelle Bible!
L’homme tremble et se sent puni:
La contemplation terrible
De l’absolu, de l’infini,
Nous démontre notre poussière,
Et fait écrouler pierre à pierre
Dans les gouffres de l’horizon,
Comme des murs dans des tranchées,
Ces deux énormes tours penchées,
Notre orgueil et notre raison!

XIII Ah! la philosophie est vorace!

Ah! la philosophie est vorace! il lui faut
L’idée avec le fait, la chose avec le mot,
Le connu, l’inconnu, le réel, l’impossible.
Elle ne peut marcher sans tout ce combustible.
C’est en épuisant tout que ce lourd cachalot
Nage, vogue, navigue, et se maintient à flot:

Regarde. On est en route. On fuit le long des grèves.
Toute la Grèce rit comme un palais des rêves.
L’ardent vaisseau qui traîne à travers le flot bleu
Ses nôirs poumons de houille et son souffle de feu,
Voit défiler les caps, les îlots, les calangues.
Il va. Les passagers, parlant toutes les langues,
Contemplent, attroupés sur le pont du steamer,
Le matin, quelque port serein, le soir, la mer
Par le soleil couchant chauffée au rouge sombre,
L’Archipel où l’eau gronde et que l’écueil encombre,
Le cône refroidi du volcan de Lemnos,
Et la Crète, et ses monts qui semblent des créneaux,
Et Corinthe, et Mycène, et Nauplie, et les restes
Du temple d’Erechthée, et la tour des Cyrrhestes,
Et, tout au fond, le mont Othrys, le mont Cnémis,
Noirs géants dans la nuit homérique endormis.
Le paquebot va, court, roule pale sur pale;
Et la vague est de nacre et la côte est d’opale,
Et les grands horizons passent,. ayant sur eux
Ou le nuage rose ou l’éclair sulfureux;
Après une île enfuie on voit une île éclore.
Et pendant ce temps-là la machine dévore
Des monceaux de. Newcastle et des tas de Cardiff.
Ainsi l’esprit humain, glouton quoique tardif,
Dans son voyage autour des systèmes, consomme
L’éternité, le temps, la mort, la vie et l’homme.

Et tout cela pourquoi? pour ne pas arriver.
Pas de pilote; pas de boussole; rêver
Dans tout lointain nuage une rive abordable,
Percer l’impénétrable et sonder l’insondable,
Tel est l’effort humain quand il fouille le ciel.
Là philosophie erre au noir gouffre éternel;
Atteindre à Diêu! comment? Elle ignore.les. passes;
Et souvent elle -va, dans les sombres espaces
Jetant sa cargaison, faux et vrai, mal et bien,
Se heurter à -l’écueil infranchissable Rien,.
Roche obscure où, battu du doute aux flots, sans nombre,
L’énorme Spinoza râle, échoué dàns l’ombre

XIV Parce que tu ne sais,

Parce que tu ne sais, toi l'homme, ce que font
Les choses en travail dans l'univers profond,
Ténèbres et chaos que traversent des gloires;
Parce que tu ne sais où vont les forces noires,
Les effluves, les gaz, les foudres; les aimants,
Les principes cachés au fond des éléments;
Parce qu'en même temps, suivant ta propre trace,
Bâtissant pas à pas le progrès de ta race,
Mettant pierre sur pierre, aujourd'hui sur demain,
Tu vois distinctement ton petit but humain;
Tu prends l'impénétrable en pitié, tu confrontes
Cette obscurité, sourde à tes œuvres si promptes;
Tu t'admires, tu dis: -j'entreprends; mais, du moins,
Je veux, j'achève, et j'ai mes travaux pour témoins;
Je ne perds pas l'haleine et l'effort! - Et tu railles
L'infini, l'invisible, effrayantes murailles;
Et, noircissant les cieux avec ton vil charbon;
Ta main hautaine écrit sur l'abîme: à quoi bon?
Tu couvres l'Inconnu de ton dédain immense.
— Ô nature, à quoi bon toute cette démence,
Ces ondes, ces courants, ce trouble aérien,
Et la matière en proie aux tourmentes - pour rien?
A quoi bon tes vieux monts, Alpes et Cordillères?
Quel temple as-tu construit avec ces tas de pierres?
Ton torrent ne vaut pas mon moindre portefaix;
Compare ton nuage aux dômes que je fais,
Compare ta fumée à ma colonne torse;
Pourquoi cette dépense inutile de force?
Que sert la cataracte? à quoi bon le volcan?
Et ton soufflet de forge insulte l'ouragan.

XV Qui donc passe au-dessus de nous

Qui donc passe au-dessus de nous, ô Dieu de l’ombre,
Pendant que, nus,-gisants, pêle-mêle, sans nombre,
Nous élevons les yeux du fond du noir cachot,
Sans pouvoir distinguer ce qui marche là-haut,
Et que nous frémissons, foule toujours décrue,
Et que, sous la rondeur des cieux, l’aube apparue
L’un après l’autre éclaire avec son front qui luit
Les jours, arches d’azur sous le pont de la nuit?

8 avril 1854.

XVI Rends-tu de temps en temps des services à Dieu?

Rends-tu de temps en temps des services à Dieu?
S’en remet-il sur toi, dans le funèbre lieu,
Du soin d’acheminer les ombres dans l’abîme?
Est-ce toi qui, selon le mérite ou le crime,
Ouvre aux chutes le gouffre et l’azur aux essors?
Est-ce toi qui dis: entre? est-ce toi qui dis: sors?
Dieu trouve-t-il tes yeux assez grands,. assez calmes,
Pour qu’il ait dans tes mains mis la gerbe des palmes
Ou la sinistre clef dés ténèbres sanS bords.?
L’aides-tu dans la fosse au classement des morts?
Lés lendemains de cirque et de fête dans Rome,
Quand les gladiateurs ont rougi l’hippodrome,
Les jours d’autodafé, de Saint-Barthélemy,
Quand, sanglant, dans la mort un massacre â vomi,
Quand un champ de bataille, effroyable. hécàtombe,
Se vide un soir d’été tout entier dans la tombe,
Quand, après une peste, un naufrage, un combat,
S’ouvre l’éternité, rive obscure où s’abat
Ce vol-d’âmes, jetant des murrimurés’sauvages,
Es-tu là, surveillant -ces sombres arrivages?

XVII Ceux par qui le malheur

Ceux par qui le malheur sur les innocents tombe,
Et qui n’ont pas de repentir,
Voudront après la mort voler hors de la tombe,
Dieu juste, et n’en pourront sortir.
Glaives, sceptres, gibets! L’homme.aux cieux est contraire;
C’est toujours l’homme du passé!
Il s’aime dans lui-même et se hait dans son frère,
Coeur-sombre où la ronce a poussé! .
Hélas! on se regarde avec des yeux, funèbres,
Grands et petits, jeunes et vieux,
Et le riche orgueilleux se sent dans les ténèbres
Mordu par le pauvre envieux.

On crache sur Caton, on bave sur Socrate;
Le fort lest bon; le faible a tort;
Le déshérité rampe, et la terre est ingrate;
Il pleut, c’est la nuit, l’enfant dort,

— Enfant, debout! Va-t’en à ton travail! C’est l’heure. -
Triste, il part; nul ne le défend,
Et le ciel effrayant qui sanglote et qui pleure
Glace de ses larmes l’enfant.

Les femmes sont aux fers dans les lois: inégales;
L’homme entend leurs cris de courroux,.
Sans plus s’en émouvoir que du chant des. cigales
Dans les chaumes des sillons roux.

Le cadavre d’un peuple, Europe, est à ta porte;
Quoi, tous périssent pour un seul! .
O czar! .ô fossoyeur! la Pologne est la morte,
La Sibérie est le linceul.

Des beautés sans pudeur, à leurs festins venues,

Disent aux oppresseurs merci!
On frémit en voyant ces Vénus toutes nues,
L'âme étant toute nue aussi.

Peuple, libre, est-ce bien sous ton ciel que nous -sommes?
Ecoutez ces hideux abois:
Le nègre fuit les chiens monstrueux, et les hommes
Chassent aux hommes dans les bois.

Partout vont gémissant les opprimés sans nombre
Dans les cités et dans les champs... -
File, ô ver du sépulcre, et fais ta toile sombre
Où se prend l'âme des méchants!

16 juillet.

XVIII L’espoir

L’espoir mène à des portes closes.
Cette terre est pleine de choses
Dont nous ne voyons qu’un côté.
Le sort de tous nos voeux se joue;
Et la vie est comme la roue:
D’un char dans la poudre emporté!

XIX Y pensez-vous.?

Y pensez-vous.? l’état à l’église. mêlé!
Mais par où vit l’état, l’autel est ébranlé!
Mais de ce que l’un fait l’autre se scandalise!
Ou dans l’état froissé vous installez l’église,
Ou bien vous déformez, par un autre attentat,
L’église en y faisant de force entrer: l’état.
Alors tout se confond. L’intrigue dit la messe.
Alors de ses péchés au crime on se confesse.
Alors je ne sais quoi de triste et de petit
Entre le prêtre et Dieu sur l’autel se blottit.
C’est l’état: -C’est-à-dire un immonde mélange
De mille objets honteux; un tas d’or et de fange;
L’intérêt, nain hideux; la brigue, impur démon
Qui met des sens cachés dans les plis d’un sermon.
Alors c’est le boudoir qui se fait sacristie,
C’est un festin coupable où l’on mange l’hostie.
C’est un. ensemble vil, morne, déshonoré,
Où le profane vit guindé sur le sacré
C’est le manteau du roi que le prêtre s’agrafe.
C’est l’église prêtant sa tour au télégraphe.

XX Ce que vous appelez

Ce que vous appelez dans votre obscur jargon:
Civilisation du Gange à l’Orégon,
Des Andes au Thibet, du Nil aux Cordillères,
Comment l’entendez-vous, ô noires fourmilières?
De toute votre terre interrogez l’écho.
Voyez Lima, Cuba, Sydney, San-Francisco,
Melbourne. Vous croyez civiliser un monde,
Lorsque vous l’enfiévrez de quelque fièvre immonde,
Quand vous troublez ses lacs, miroirs d’un dieu secret,
Lorsque vous violez sa vierge, la forêt;
Quand vous chassez du bois, de l’antre, du rivage
Votre frère aux yeux pleins de lueurs , le sauvage,
Cet enfant du soleil peint de mille couleurs,
Espèce d’insensé des branches et des fleurs,
Et quand, jetant dehors cet Adam inutile,
Vous peuplez le désert d’un homme plus reptile,
Vautré dans la matière et la cupidité,
Dur, cynique, étalant une autre nudité,
Idolâtre du dieu dollar, fou qui palpite,
Non plus pour un soleil, mais pour une pépite,
Qui se dit libre, et montre au monde épouvanté
L’esclavage étonné servant la liberté!

Oui, vous dites: Voyez, nous remplaçons ces brutes;
Nos monceaux de palais chassent leurs tas de huttes;
Dans la pleine lumière humaine nous voguons;
Voyez nos docks, nos ports, nos steamers, nos wagons,
Nos théatres, nos parcs, nos hôtels, nos carrosses! -
Et vous vous contentez d’être autrement féroces!
Vous criez: - Contemplez le progrès! admirez!
Lorsque vous remplissez ces champs, ces monts sacrés,
Cette vieille nature âpre, hautaine, intègre,
D’âmes cherchant de l’or, de chiens chassant au nègre,
Quand à l’homme lion succède l’homme ver,

Et quand le tomahawk fait place au revolver!

Note:

1. ↑ Une variante donne: Votre frère naîf et sombre. *(note Wikisource)*

XXI Jeunes gens,

Jeunes gens, prenez garde aux choses que vous dites.
Tout peut sortir d’un mot qu’en passant vous perdîtes.
Tout, la haine et le deuil! -Et ne m’objectez pas
Que vos amis sont sûrs et que vous parlez bas... -
Écoutez bien ceci:

Tête-à-tête, en pantoufle,
Portes closes, chez vous, sans un témoin qui souffle,
Vous dites à l’oreille au plus mystérieux
De vos amis de cœur, ou, si vous l’aimez mieux,
Vous murmurez tout seul, croyant presque vous taire,
Dans le fond d’une cave à trente pieds sous terre,
Un mot désagréable à quelque individu;
Ce mot que vous croyez qu’on n’a pas entendu,

Que vous disiez si bas dans un lieu sourd et sombre,
Court à peine lâché, part, bondit, sort de l’ombre!
Tenez, il est dehors! Il connaît son chemin.
Il marche, il a deux pieds, un bâton à la main,
De bons souliers ferrés, un passeport en règle;
— Au besoin, il prendrait des ailes comme l’aigle! -
Il vous échappe, il fuit, rien ne l’arrêtera.
Il suit le quai, franchit la place, et cætera,
Passe l’eau sans bateau dans la saison des crues,
Et va, tout à travers un dédale de rues,
Droit chez l’individu dont vous avez parlé.
Il sait le numéro, l’étage; il a la clé,
Il monte l’escalier, ouvre la porte, passe,
Entre, arrive, et, railleur, regardant l’homme en face,
Dit: -Me voilà! je sors de la bouché d’un tel.
Et c’est fait. Vous avez un ennemi mortel.

XXII ÉPITAPHES D'ENFANTS

Enfant, que je te porte envie!
Ta barque neuve échoue au port.
Qu'as-tu donc fait pour que ta vie
Ait sitôt mérité la mort?

II

Entre au ciel. La porte est la tombe.
Le sombre avenir des humains,
Comme un jouet trop lourd qui tombe,
Échappe à tes petites mains.

III

Qu'est devenu l'enfant? La mère
Pleure, et l'oiseau rit, chantre ailé.
La mère croit qu'il est sous terre,
L'oiseau sait qu'il s'est envolé.

XXIII LA GUERRE QUI EST DANS L’AVENIR IMPORTUNE LES DEVINS

Les, prophètes pensifs sgnt loin dés mûltitudes,
Loin des villes qu’emplit lé tumulte et lé bruit.
On sait qu’ils sont là-bas dans leurs sombres études.
Ils n’ont autour d’eux, nus au fond des solitudes,
Le jour que le soleil et que l’ombre la nuit.

Nul vivant ne les suit. Que le vent souffle ou dorme,
Jamais leur toit de joncs n’attire un pas humain.
Du désert morne et grand leur esprit prend la forme.
Le lion, qui parfois montre sa tête énorme,
Les voit de loin rêver et passe son chemin.

Et cependant, voici-ce qu’ont dit les prophètes.
Dont l’oeil voit l’avenir et brille aux lieux sacrés:
Jusques à quand, troublés au fond de nos retraites,
Entendrons-nous des cris et le bruit des trompettes,
Et verrons-nous s’enfuir des hommes effarés.

14 juillet.

XXIV Ah! prenez garde

Ah! prenez garde à ceux que vous jetez ati bagne!
La colère devient leur sinistre compagne.
Cet homme était né bon, et le voilà méchant.
Dans ce cerveau pensif qui va se desséchant,
La consciehce’meurt comme expire une lampe.
L’innocence est un feu redoutable qui rampe
Et couve sous la peine injuste, et lentement
Emplit un coeur de fiel et de ressentiment;
On sent en -soi grandir une fournaise infâme
Faite de ce qu’on a de plus noble dans l’âme.
Quel spectre: qu’un forçat sans tache, en qui se tord
Une rage à laquelle on ne peut donner tort!
Lui, l’honnête homme, il est dans le gouffre de honte!
Vous tous, s’il peut jamais vous. en demander compte,
Oh! comme. il châtiera votre-exécrable erreur!
Plus il eut de vertu, plus il a de fureur,
Noircissement étrange et terrible du cygne!
N’espérez pas qu’au bagne inique on se résigne.

On attise sa haine avec tous ses amours;
Vengeance! on songe aux coeurs adorés, aux beaux jours,
A cet azur charmant de. la vie innocente,
A la mère, à la soeur, à la femme, à l’absente,
Aux chansons, au travail probe, libre, assidu,
A tout ce paradis doré qu’on a perdu,
Aux doux petits enfants qu’avec furie on nomme,
Aux anges, et ce ciel creuse un enfer dans l’homme.

12 janvier.

XXV Un homme est innocent;

Un homme est innocent; son voisin le dénonce.
Gisquet dont le sourcil facilement se fronce,
Ou n’importe quel autre Anglès ou Valentin,
Fait saisir l’homme au saut du lit un beau matin;
L’homme résiste et veut s’enfuir; mauvaises notes;
On l’insulte, il réplique; on lui met les menottes;
Il dit: Je n’ai rien fait! C’est vrai; mais il a tort
De crier le plus haut n’étant pas le plus fort;
On le lui fait sentir en serrant les poucettes.
Coupable, vous cédez; mais innocent, vous êtes
Idiot; vous luttez, vous ruez, vous avez
La rage, quand le sang coule entre les pavés,
De croire que le juge examine et diffère,
Et que, n’ayant rien fait, on ne doit rien vous faire.
Le juge, examiner! différer! à quoi bon?
On entre jeune au bagne et l’on en sort barbon,
Prenez garde, c’est là le sort du réfractaire.

Vous avez ce devoir, souffrir, ce droit, vous taire;
Être rebelle est grave, être innocent est vain;
Sachez que la justice est la justice, enfin,
Et vous êtes un gueux, puisqu’on vous brutalise!
La police ressemble au sable où l’on s’enlise;
Plus on se débat, plus on enfonce. Jamais
Les grands et les heureux qui sont sur les sommets
Ne se penchent vers ceux qu’engloutit la justice.
Tombez dans l’eau, soyez pris sous une bâtisse
Qui s’effondre, ou plongé dans quelque horrible puits,
De partout il vous vient des amis, des appuis,
Jeune, vieux, riche, pauvre, et tout sexe et tout âge,
Chacun va s’employer pour votre sauvetage,
Vous êtes secouru, servi, plaint, assisté;
Mais ne naufragez pas sous la société!
L’état saigne pourtant s’il perd un membre utile,

Et dans un homme, c’est le peuple qu’on mutile;
Ce misérable était honnête, bon et doux;
Savez-vous qu’il avait une famille, vous?
Bah! Qu’importe! On le jette en une casemate.
D’un mécanisme horrible il devient l’automate;
La chiourme le manie en ses rudes ressorts.
Debout! réveille-toi! Travaille! Rentre! Sors!
Tout à coup on l’embarque, on l’envoie à Cayenne.
Cette bête aux regards de sphinx, aux cris d’hyène,
La mer, le prend, rugit, hurle, et va le cacher
Derrière l’horizon; là-bas, sur un rocher,
Dans une ombre où le bruit de l’homme arrive à peine.
Là, tout est brume, oubli, gouffre; un souffle de haine
Vient du ciel, et les flots semblent des ennemis.
Là, l’espèce de crime inconscient commis
Par nous tous sur ce pauvre inconnu, se consomme.
La nuit spectre enchaîné, le jour bête de somme,
Il est un chiffre; il n’a pas droit même à son nom;
Il vit dans un carcan, il dort sous le canon;
Ses froids bourreaux sont là dès l’aube, et leur complice,
L’aurore, en se levant travaille à son supplice,
Et les captifs s’en vont labourer deux à deux
Quelque affreux champ brûlé sous le soleil hideux;
En faisant des forçats la loi fait des fantômes;
Les nuages, l’azur, les cieux, tous ces grands dômes,
Leur semblent le plafond d’airain de leur malheur.

Lui, qui n’est pas faussaire; assassin ni voleur,
Sous l’écrasant fardeau qu’il traîne, triste atome,
Vaincu, stupide, il bâille; et l’on verse pour baume
Goutte à goutte l’affront sur” son tragique ennui;
Une plaie effroyable et sinistre est en lui,
On la lui lave avec de l’acide nitrique.
Le Code, cette hache, a pour manche une trique,
Et ce glaive hautain s’achève en vil bâton;
Si parfois s’accoudant, le poing sous le menton,
Fiévreux,. malade, il rêve, un gourdin le réveille;

Il a. toujours un bruit de chaînes dans l’oreille,
Il est on ne sait quoi d’abject et de battu,
Un chien le flaire et gronde, un mouchard lui dit tu,
Quel sort! labeur sans fin, pain noir, paille pourrie! ...

Un jour, un bruit profond se fait dans la. patrie,
La Marseillaise ailée arrive dans le vent,
Et l’on dit à ce mort: Lève-toi! ..Sois vivant.
La mer courbe ses flots, la France ouvre sa porte,
Il revient. Il avait une femme,. elle est morte;

Un fils, on ne sait pas ce qu’il est devenu;
Une petite fille, ange à l’oeil ingénu,
Était sa joie; il voit dans la rue une femme
Qui rit, bras nus, seins nus, fleurs au front, gaie, infâme;

C’est elle. Et maintenant la ville est en rumeur;
La Révolution, formidable semeur,
Disperse aux quatre coins des cieux l’âpre colère;
Alors dans ce coeur sombre et funeste, il éclaire,
Il tonne dans cette âme, et cet homme n’est plus
Qu’ une sorte de gouffre en proie aux noirs reflux;
Dans cet infortuné le deuil immense écume.
Où donc. est la mitraille? Où donc est le bitume?
C’est son tour d’être horrible, il l’est. Il grince, il mord;
Pas de pitié! Ce juge, à bas! ce prêtre, à mort!
Il tue, il pille, il brûle, il massacre, il égorge.
Un innocent qu’on frappe est un bandit qu’on forge.

Paris, 28. novembre.

XXVI Oh.! que l’homme n’est rien

Oh.! que l’homme n’est rien et que vous êtes tout,
Seigneur! O Dieu vivant, toi seul restes debout
Dans la tranquillité des choses éternelles.
Le sombre aigle Infini, quand il ouvre ses ailes,
Plonge l’une en ton ombre et l’autre en ta clarté.
L’homme est Baal, Moloch, Arimane, Astarté;
L’abjection habite avec la bête humaine.
Le néant, de la fange à la cendre nous mène.
Ame aveuglée, esprit éteint, coeur en lambeau,
L’homme est mort bien avant qu’il descende au tombeau;
Toute corruption de son vivant le ronge,
L’avarice; l’orgueil, la haine, le mensonge,
L’amour vénal, l’erreur folle, l’instinct bâtard;
De sorte qu’on ne sait ce qui pourrit plus tard.

Fourmilière du mal, insectes de l’abîme,
Sur nos entassements de folie et de crime,
Sur nos monceaux d’horreurs, d’échafauds, de pavois,
Nous nous dressons pendant qu’énorme, tu nous vois.
Tu regardes nos cris, nos bruits, notre démence.
Le grand ciel est le bleu de ta prunelle immense.
De notre vie obscure usant les vils chaînons,
Sous cet oeil formidable et doux nous nous traînons;
Nos splendeurs sont un-feu rampant dans l’herbe noire;
Et dans ces sombres nuits qu’on nomme âges de gloire,
Temps d’Alcide, d’Hermès, d’Achille, d’Amadis,
Siècle de Périclès, siècle de« Léon dix,
Sur ces tas de fumier, les Athènes, les Romes,
Passent ces vers luisants qu’on appelle grands hommes.

19 août 1851.

XXVII À PAUL M.

Paul, je connais si bien l’autre côté des choses
Que toujours je regarde en mes apothéoses
La hauteur du rocher d’où je devrai tomber;
Le sort change, -je l’ai subi sans Me courber,
Une femme en squelette, un palais en masure;
Et c’est pourquoi, passant fraternel, je mesure,
Souriant et pensif, sans retirer ma main,
A l’amour d’aujourd’hui la haine de demain.
Aux éblouissements de l’aube je calcule
La morne hostilité qu’aura le crépuscule;
Qui ne fut point haï n’a vécu qu’à demi;
Et, tâchant d’être bon, je laisse, ô mon ami,
Passer l’un. après l’autre, en cette ombre où nous sommes,
Tous les faux lendemains de la terre et des hommes,
Sûr de ce lendémain immense du ciel bleu
Qu’on appelle la mort et que j’appelle Dieu.

XXVIII Vous êtes, ô jeune homme,

Vous êtes, ô jeune homme, une noble nature,
Un esprit riche et grave, une âme tendre et pure;
Nul instinct généreux chez vous n'est endormi.
— Vous devez bien souffrir de trahir votre ami!
Lui, dont l'âme apaisée est un trésor d'excuses,
Il vous aime; il connaît le démon et ses ruses;
Mais, trop grand pour se plaindre et dire: c'est assez,
Il souffre aussi de voir que vous le trahissez.

5 novembre 1839.
2 septembre 1872.

XXIX À mesure qu’au loin s’éclipse

À mesure qu’au loin s’éclipse
La plaine effacée au regard,
Toute une sombre apocalypse
Apparaît à l’homme hagard.

Tous ces fantômes que, sans nombre,
Produit le soir qui s’assombrit,
L’entourent, et, sortant de l’ombre,
Entrent en foule en son esprit.

Noir cerveau sur qui Dieu surplombe,
Il rêve ce que Jean rêva,
Le jour qui fuit, la nuit qui tombe,
La mort qui vient, l’homme qui va...

Devant sa paupière enflammée,
Sur un fond morne. et sans rayons,
Comme les flots d’une fumée,
Passent les lentes visions.

La destinée à lui se montre.
Il croit entrevoir, en fuyant
Les pâles spectres qu’il rencontre,
Quelque paysage effrayant.

Il songe effaré! -Tout se lève,
Tout retombe, tout a flotté.
Il ne sait plus si c’est lé rêve
Ou si c’est la réalité. -

Puis tout prend forme, tout se range
Comme en un enfer douloureux,
Et tout dans cette brume étrange
Devient distinct, et reste affreux.

Il voit les fortunes humaines
Comme un taillis vertigineux
Où resplendit l’oeil des sirènes
Sous des branchages épineux:

Il plonge son regard qui brille
 Dans ce gouffre aux aspects mouvants,
Dàns ces ténèbres où fourmille
L’aveugle foule des vivants.

À travers l’ombre et ses embûches,
Il entend bruire leurs voix
Comme des essaims dans les ruches,
Comme des oiseaux dans les bois.

Chacun travaille, -loi tracée
Par Dieu même à l’homme maudit!
L’un son champ, l’autre sa pensée.
L’un creuse, l’autre approfondit.

Tous vont cherchant, aucun ne trouve.
Le ciel semble à leur désespoir
Noir comme l’antre d’une louve,
Au fond d’un bois, l’hiver, le soir.

Où vont-ils? . vers la mêrne porte.
Que sont-ils? les flots-d’ùn torrent.
Que disent-ils? la nuit l’emporte.
Que font-ils? la tombe le prend.

Un vent, comme le jonc flexible;
Les courbe tons; jeunes et vieux.
Oh! de quelle bouche invisible
Souffle ce vent mystérieux!

XXX NUIT

Toute la nature vivante
Travaille, à l’heure-où le jour fuit,
Sous je ne sais quelle épouvante
Qui tombe des astres la nuit.

Livrée aux -mystères sans nombre,
Morne, elle voit en frémissant
S’ouvrir sur elle dans cette ombre
L’oeil-de l’Inconnu tout-puissant.

Oh! quel effroi! se reconnaître,
Sans durée et sans-liberté,
A la discrétion de l’être.

Qui se meut dans, l’éternité!

Noire énigme où tout se rassemble
Pour cacher. le but et le, mot mot!
On sent en bas quelqu’un qui tremble;
On, sent quelqu’un qui rêve en haut.

28 avril 1846.

XXXI L’homme croit avoir fait un pas

L’homme croit avoir fait un pas dans l’inconnu
Quand il met sur l’autel quelque faune cornu,
Quelque dragon rampant sur des membres hybrides,
Ou quelque affreux Brahma dont il dore les rides;
Il croit s’être avancé bien loin dans l’idéal
Lorsqu’il a complété Zeus par Bélial,
Ou lorsqu’il a choisi pour s’en faire une idole
Quelque apparition du sommeil, sombre et folle,
Et qu’il s’est prosterné devant ses cauchemars
En les nommant Mithra, Neptune, Irmensul, Mars!
Est-il du moins l’auteur de ces larves? Non. L’être,
En se décomposant dans l’ombre, les fait naître;
Et tous ces dieux, Moloch, Jupiter, Astarté,
Thor, masques de démence ou de difformité,
Chacun portant son thyrse, ou sa foudre, ou sa bible,
Sont des types de nuit flottant dans l’invisible.

Quoiqu’ils soient vils, méchants, obscènes, odieux,
Homme, tu n’as pas même enfanté tes faux dieux.
O passant misérable, ô chercheur éphémère,
Tu ne peux rien créer, pas même une chimère!
L’Ombre qui t’enveloppe, ô pauvre être banni,
La Profondeur, qui semble un mur de l’infini,
L’effrayant fond brumeux d’où les visions pleuvent,
Sur qui confusément les atomes se meuvent,
Où l’on distingue à peine et la vie et la mort,
Et les linéaments mystérieux du sort,
L’immense obscurité, pleine de vagues porches
Où de tous les autels, tremblent toutes les torches,
Où des souffles, suivis d’effacements soudains,
Dessinent des enfers, des pindes, des édens,
Deucalion, Pluton, Satan, Eve et sa pomme,
Triste, n’accepte pas des dieux sortis de l’homme.
Crois-tu donc imposer tes. rêves à la nuit?

Cette grande songeuse envoie en ton réduit
Ses blêmes légions d’ombres battant de l’aile;
C’est elle qui les fait, et tu les reçois d’elle.
Et quand un prêtre dit tout bas dans son orgueil:
J’invente des démons qui mettent l’homme en deuil;
Je suis le créateur suprême et solitaire
D’un tas de spectres, honte ou frayeur de la terre;
Et le monde, stupide et morne, est sous le faix
De tous les dieux impurs ou sanglants que je fais,
Fô, Dagon, Teutatès, Vénus aux yeux funèbres! -
La nuit, qui les créa d’un pan de ses ténèbres,
Rit, et de leur noirceur a peu d’étonnement.
Le formidable ciel sait que le prêtre ment.

XXXII Les écrivains

Les écrivains sont tous plus ou moins des démons.
Ils veulent nous ôter le Dieu que nous aimons!
Prenez garde à l’enfer! Défiez-vous des livres!
Ainsi parlent, avec des gestes de gens ivres,
De pauvres hommes noirs, vaguement égarés,
Qui sont fakirs dans l’Inde et parmi nous curés.
Comme ils sont ignorants, ces chers énergumènes!
Plaignons-les: Leur colère aux phrases inhumaines
S’agite dans de l’ombre, et fait. le triste bruit
Du torrent dans la chute et du vent dans la nuit.
Un jour, terrifiant le pâtre et la vachère,
Un de ces bonzes-là pérorait dans sa chaire; ,
Le bon bavard farouche aux longs bras, au sommet
De son bahut, orné d’un pigeon, écumait;
Ce rustre sèmbre; avec l’éloquence patoise
Qui ferait rire Athène et fait trembler Pontoise,
Secouait sur Satan, Voltaire et le bon sens
Toutes sortes de coups de foudre paysans.
C’était de quoi frémir. Nonotte, plus de Maistre.
C’était la foi sans fin, le dogme à grand orchestre,
Un Sauveur menaçant qui grinçait et suait,
Et Jocrisse venant secourir Bossuet.
Autour de ce hurleur formidable, les branches
Offraient leur ombre amie aux vagues ailes blanches,
Les halliers étaient pleins de la douceur des nids
D’où sortait le rayon des bonheurs infinis;
Les plaines étalaient la vaste paix champêtre;
Ce Dieu, que dans l’église obscurcissait le prêtre
A force de credos et de confiteors,
Le soleil le prouvait tranquillement dehors.
Mon père, doux passant qui m’a conté la chose,
Était là. Laissez-moi, car ce nom me repose,
Vous dire que mon père était un sage pur,
Un de ces penseurs vrais qui, dans le monde obscur,

Montrent un front serein même à l’épreuve austère,
Qui cherchent. le. côté rassurant du mystère,
Et se font expliquer, l’énigme du destin:
Par le splendide chant des oiseaux le matin.
Il était souriant toujours, jamais sceptique.
Aucune Bible, aucune illusion d’optique,
Ne troublaient son regard fixé.sur le réel.
Il était confiant dans la beauté du ciel.

Donc le digne curé faisait rage. Et les chênes,
Les ormes, qui sans peur tremblent, grondent sans haines,
Continuaient leur grand murmure dans les bois;
Une confusion de rumeurs et d’abois
S’éteignait dans les champs-et venait de la ville,
Auguste apaisement des clameurs dans l’idylle
Cette conviction que donne aux coeurs l’azur,
Sorte de point d’appui mystérieux et. sûr,
Était partout sensible, et les molles prairies
Exhalaient ces parfums qu’on nomme rêveries;
La clémence éternelle était, visible aux yeux;
Le bon curé semblait d’autant plus furieux;
La foudre au poing, voyant dans Vaugirard Sodome,
Sinistre, il accablait du poids du bon Dieu l’homme;
Il damnait tout, sans choix, sans trêve, sans répit.

Tout à coup un Gros-Jean quelconque interrompit,
Raillant le prêtre; ainsi parfois Pyrrhon poignarde
Patouillet à travers la blouse campagnarde:
— Si Dieu n’existait-pas? répondez à cela! ,

— Il faudrait l’inventer, dit mon père. Voilà,
S’écria le curé, j’en prends à témoin Rome
Et-le Saint-Père, un cri de l’âme! Et le bonhomme
Sut gré du cri de l’âme à mon père, lequel
L’avait pris dans le diable, édition de Kehl.

3 mars 1877.

XXXIII EN SORTANT D’UNE ÉGLISE

Ce prêtre a dit au peuple:

— Enfants, baissez les Yeux.
Dieu n’est point l’âme vague éparse au fond des cieux.
La nature vous trompe et l’univers vous leurre.
Qui n’est point avec nous à -jamais souffre et pleure.
Ne cherchez jamais Dieu hors du texte divin!
Ainsi l’immensité chante un cantique vain!
Quoi donc! je dois, avant de voir Dieu tel que l’âme
L’aperçoit, flamboyant d’une bonté de flamme,
Avant de l’adorer tel que me le font voir
Toutes les profondeurs de l’aurore et du soir;
L’étoile dans l’azur, la perle dans la nacre,
Faire rectifier l’Éternel par un diacre!
Il faut sous un missel. prosterner notre foi!
L’aube enseigne l’amour et la Bible l’effroi
Le curé crie: enfer! l’astre crie: espérance!
C’est le curé qu’il faut croire de préférence!
Je dois subordonner, dans mon coeur qui bondit,
Ce que dit l’univers à ce qu’un prêtre dit!
Ce n’est pas l’infini, c’est l’homme qu’il faut suivre.
Quoi! la création n’est-elle, donc qu’un. livre
Dont les religions rédigent l’erratum!
Quoi! les lys de Sâron, les roses, de Poestum,
La foudre, le soleil dorant-la solitude,
N’ont pas dans leur lumière autant de certitude
Qu’un symbole en latin ou qu’un dogme en hébreu!
Tout bien considéré, nous destituons Dieu!

XXXIV Quand l’honneur est tombé

Quand l’honneur est tombé, rien ne reste debout.
On s’avilit, qu’importe! on s’accoutume à tout,
Aux lâches actions comme aux paroles louches.
On laisse aller son nom au hasard dans les bouches.
On descend chaque jour, sans remords, sans appuis,
Plus bas, un peu plus bas, toujours plus bas, et puis
On ne s’aperçoit plus qu’on monte ou qu’on descende.
Il arrive un moment où la honte est si grande
Qu’on ne fait même pas d’efforts pour en sortir.
C’est le dernier degré de ne la plus sentir.
Quand on ne rougit plus et lorsqu’on rit sans cesse,
C’est que l’on a touché le fond de la bassesse;
C’est qu’on se trouvé là comme sur un plancher,
Et qu’on est satisfait d’y vivre et d’y marcher. -
Alors tout est fini. Plus d’espoir, plus de crainte.
La dernière lueur des âmes est éteinte.
On est naïvement un monstrueux gredin. -
L’opprobre; le dégoût, le mépris, le dédain, -
Devient si naturel aux hommes comme aux femmes
Qu’ils en sont à ne plus savoir qu’ils sont infâmes!

XXXV CONTEMPLATION, CONSOLATION

Que la douleur est courte et vite évanouie!
Hélas! sitôt qu’une ombre en terre est enfouie,
Vers cet être éclipsé qui jadis rayonna,
Nul ne se tourne plus. Le premier soin qu’on a
C’est de se délivrer de la mémoire chère.
Dehors ce mendiant! L’un rit, fait bonne chère,
Et dit: Buvons, mangeons, vivons! c’est le réel.
L’autre endort son regret en regardant le ciel,
Admire et songe, esprit flottant à l’aventure,
Et fait évaporer ses pleurs dans la nature.
L’homme, que le chagrin ne peut longtemps plier,
Passe; tout nous est bon, hélas! pour oublier;
La contemplation bercé, apaise et console;
Le coeur laisse, emporté par l’aile qui l’isole,
Tomber les souvenirs en montant dans l’azur;
Le tombeau le plus cher n’est plus qu’un point obscur.
Ceux qui vivent chantant, riant sans fin ni trêve,
Ont bien vite enterré leurs morts; celui qui rêve
N’est pas un meilleur vase à conserver le deuil;
La nature emplit l’âme en éblouissant l’oeil;
Et l’araignée oublie, quand elle tend sa toile,
D’un bout l’attache à l’homme et de l’autre à l’étoile.

18 mai 1854.

XXXVI Là-haut,

Là-haut, soeur du forfait et soeur de l’innocence,
Pâle, joignant les, mains, suppliant, en présence
Des anges du ciel bleu,
La justice au front pur, l’effrayante boiteuse,
La pitié se dresse, humble, en pleurs, triste, honteuse,
Auguste, aux pieds de Dieu.

Penchant sur les maudits sa couronne étoilée,
Les aimant, acceptant de leur être mêlée,
Cachant la nudité,
Baisant l’ulcère infect, ne trouvant, l’immortelle,
Rien de trop misérable et de trop vil pour elle
Dans sa sublimité,
Prenant sa part du crime et sa part du supplice,
Priant pour les méchants, couvrant de son cilice
Bourreaux, tyrans, soldats,
Pour tous les réprouvés criant miséricorde,
Elle apparaît pieds nus, ayant au cou la corde
Où se pendit Judas.

XXXVII Une nuit je rêvais,

Une nuit je rêvais, et je vis dans mon rêve
Une plaine sans bords pareille aux flots sans grève,
Ouverte à tous les vents comme les vastes mers.
C’était un de. ces lieux inquiets et déserts
Où flotte encor le bruit confus des multitudes,
Où l’on sent à travers les mornes solitudes,
Aux palpitations dont frémit l’air troublé,
Quelque peuple inconnu, comme une onde écoulé.
Cette plaine était rousse, immense, triste et nue,
Sans une goutte d’eau pour refléter la nue.
Pas un champ labouré, pas un toit. Nul témoin,
Nul passant. Seulement on y voyait au loin
De grands lions de pierre, étranges et superbes,
De distance en distance isolés dans les herbes.
Immobiles, debout sur des granits sculptés
Qu’étreignaient les buissons par le vent agités,
Tous ayant quelque fière et terrible posture,
Ils semblaient, au milieu de la sombre nature
Qui rayonnait dans l’ombre à mon oeil ébloui,
Ecouter la rumeur d’un monde évanoui.

Qu’est-ce que ces lions faisaient dans cette plaine?
Peut-être y gardaient-ils quelque mémoire vaine,
Quelque grand souvenir dans l’ombre descendu,
Comme des chiens pensifs dont le maître est perdu?
Etaient-ce des rochers? Etaient-ce des fantômes?
Peut-être avaient-ils vu tomber bien des royaumes.
Qui sait? avant ces temps obscurs, profonds, lointains,
Où l’histoire à tâtons perd ses flambeaux éteints,
Où la tradition indistincte s’émousse,
Peut-être étaient-ils là, déjà rongés de mousse?
Peut-être l’ouvrier n’avait-il rien d’humain
Qui lés avait sculptés de sa puissante main?
Qui donc les avait mis seuls dans ce vaste espace

Pour entendre à jamais pleurer le vent qui passe,
Siffler l’herbe et glisser le lézard dans les grès?
Sans oser faire un pas, je les considérais

Avec l’effroi qu’on a devant les choses sombres.
Nul vestige autour d’eux, ni sentiers, ni décombres;
Rien que la ronce obscure et le buisson noirci.

Or, tout à coup, pendant que je rêvais ainsi,
Il apparut, -c’était l’heure où le jour recule, -
Dans le ciel sépulcral et froid du crépuscule,
L’aile ouverte et planant sur cet horizon noir,
Un oiseau monstrueux, vaste, effroyable à voir,
D’une forme inconnue à la nature entière,
Si fauve et si hideux que les lions de pierre
S’enfuirent en poussant de longs rugissements.

Ô Dieu, vous qui penché sur les esprits dormants,
Leur envoyez la nuit le Moloch ou l’Archange,
Que vouliez-vous me dire avec ce songe étrange?
Serait-ce, après nos jours sans joie et sans honneur,
La figure des temps où nous entrons, Seigneur?

XXXVIII Je rêve une nature innocente

Je rêve une nature innocente et meilleure;
Je ne comprends pas bien pourquoi le renard pleure;
Et comment il se peut que de l’oeil effare
Sorte une larme après qu’un rayon est entré;
Où la lumière vient doit demeurer la joie;
Dans ce frais paradis idéal où j’emploie
Mes songes, ou je mets le possible divin,
On chantera; chanter n’est pas stérile et vain,
Chanter est le doux bruit des esprits sur les cimes;
En jetant l’harmonie aux profondeurs sublimes,
Aux vents, aux océans, aux sillons, aux prés verts,
Une chanson travaille à l’immense univers;
La mélodie utile et sainte est une haleine;
Une femme qui passe en chantant dans la plaine
Mêle une vague lyre au rhythme universel;
De là, plus d’âme aux fleurs et plus d’azur au ciel;
De là je ne sais quelle indulgence sereine.

On n’aura pas besoin de se donner de peine
Pour se sentir aimé là-haut dans l’infini;
Le nid sera sacré, l’épi sera béni;
Tout germe engendrera son fruit, toute promesse
Tiendra parole, et sàns église ni sans messe,
Sans prêtres, tant sera transparent le ciel bleu,
La sôlf verra la source et lame verra: Dieu.

10 janvier 1876.

XXXIX DANS LE CIMETIÈRE DE ...

Je priais, recueilli dans ma pensée. intime.
Le cimetière est doux au deuil silencieux
A cette heure où le soir ineffable et sublime
Vient à la paix des morts mêler la paix des cieux.

J’entendis qu’on marchait, je levai les paupières;
Le vent remuait l’herbe autour des crucifix,
Et je vis à pas lents venir parmi les pierres
Un aïeul par la main menant son petit-fils.

Ému, j’interrompis mes funèbres extases,
Pour les suivre des yeux et tout bas les bénir.
Un vieillard! un enfant! ô mystérieux vases!
L’un rempli du passé, l’autre de. l’avenir!

Cette petite main dans cette main débile
Me rappelait des jours enfuis, des jours meilleurs!
Le vieillard, par moments s’arrêtant immobile,
Regardait les tombeaux; l’enfant cherchait des fleurs.

Le vieillard regardait les sépulcres dans l’ombre,
Comme si, morne et blême et baigné de sueur,
A force d’y fixer son oeil profond et sombre,
Il en faisait sortir quelque étrange lueur!

15 août 1846.

XL Un jour que je songeais,

Un jour que je songeais, à Dieu, j’ai reconnu
Que l’homme ici vient nu pour s’en retourner nu,
Que la tombe et la crèche ont des rapports étranges,
Qu’on naît dans un linceul et qu’on meurt dans des langes,
Et, qu’eût-on été grand, superbe et triomphant,
A force de vieillesse on redevient enfant.
Amour, pouvoir, richesse, honneurs, apothéoses,
Tous les biens d’ici-bas passent comme les choses
Qu’aperçoit dans la plaine un voyageur de nuit.
Voir un peu de lumière, entendre un peu de bruit,
C’est là toute la vie. On marche; on fait sa route;
L’un consulte la foi; l’autre écoute le doute;

La clarté qui nous luit nous conduit-elle au port?
On ne sait. On se dit, à l’heure de la mort:
Ai-je suivi la vraie? ai-je suivi la fausse?
Puis on est au hasard jeté dans une fosse;
Ou l’on s’en va, chargé du poids d’un monument,
Attendre le clairon du dernier jugement,
Couché de tout son long sans ouvrir la paupière,
Seul dans l’intérieur d’une chambre de pierre.

Nuit du 18 au 19 juillet 1843. En malle-poste.

XLI Oh dis!

Oh dis! pourquoi toujours regarder sous la terre,
Interroger la tombe et chercher dans la nuit?
Et toujours écouter, penché sur une pierre,
Comme espérant un bruit?

T’imagines-tu donc qué ceux que nous pleurâmes
Sont là couchés sous l’herbe attentifs à nos pas?
Crois-tu donc que c’est là qu’on retrouve les âmes?
Songeur, ne sais-tu pas

Que Dieu n’a pas voulu, lui qui règne et dispose,
Que la flamme restât quand s’éteint le flambeau,
Et que l’homme jamais pût mettre quelque chose,
Hélas! dans le tombeau!

Ne sais-tu pas que, l’âme une fois délivrée,
Les fosses, dévorant les morts qu’on enfouit,
Se remplissent d’une ombre effrayante et sacrée
Où tout s’évanouit!

Tu te courbes en vain, dans ta douleur amère,
Sur le sépulcre noir plein des jours révolus,
Redemandant ta fille, et ton père, et ta mère,
Et ceux qui ne sont plus!

Tu te courbes en vain. Ainsi que sous la vague
Un plongeur se fatigue à chercher des trésors,
Tu tâches d’entrevoir quelque figure vague
De ce que font les morts.

Rien ne brille pour toi, sombre tête baissée;
La tombe est morne, et close au regard curieux;
Tu n’as plus un rayon qui luise en ta pensée.
Songeur, lève les yeux!

Lève les yeux! renonce à sonder: la poussière;
Fais envoler ton âme en ce firmament bleu,
Regarde dans l'azur, cherche dans la lumière,
Et surtout crois en Dieu!

Crois en celui dont tout répète les louanges!
Crois en l'éternité qui nous ouvre les bras!
Appelle le Seigneur, demande-lui. tes anges,
Et tu les reverras!

Oui, mêmedèsce monde où pleure ta misèré,
En élevant toujours tôn coeur rempli d'espoir,
Sans t'en aller d'ici; sans qu'il soit Nécessaire
Dè mourir pour les voir,

Parce qu'en mëditant la l'Or s'accroît sans cesse,
Parce qu'à l'oeil croyant le ciel s'ouvre éclairci,
Un jour tu t'écrieras-tout à coup, plein d'ivresse
O mon Dieu! les voici!

Et tu retrouveras, ô, pauvre âme ravie!
Une ombre du bonheur de ton passé joyeux
D'ans ces fantômes chers, qui charmèrent ta vie
Et qui sont dans les cieux!

Comme à l'heure où la plaine au loin se décolore,
Quand le soif àssôà brit le jour pâle et décru,
Là-haut, dans la nuée, on peut revoir encore
Le soleil disparu.

27 octobre 1846.

XLII INSCRIPTION DE SÉPULCRE

Je nais. Qui suis je? Ô deuil, j’ai peur, j’ai froid, je pleure;
Je souffre, je suis homme, hélas!
Il faudra que je vive, il faudra que je meure.
Avant de marcher, je suis las

Je suis le frais jeune homme, altier comme un génie,
J’aime une femme au pur regard,
Et voici les douleurs, les larmes, l’insomnie.
On aime, on pleure. Hélas, plus tard,

L’âme de souvenirs doucement remuée,
On crie: O beaux jours! temps joyeux!
Car nos amours s’en vont ainsi que la nuée,
Pluie à nos fronts, pourpre à nos yeux.

Je saigne; tous les coeurs sont ingrats; je travaille,
La terre est plus ingrate encor;
Mon maître prend l’épi, mon lit garde la paille;
J’ai faim, devant la gerbe d’or!

Voici l’âpre vieillesse, et je me sens décroître;
Mes. amours, mon coeur en lambeaux,
Gisent en moi; mes jours sont les arches d’un cloître
Jetant leur ombre à des tombeaux.

Ma vie est un suaire et j’en suis le squelette.
Les ans, des maux accompagnés,
Me garrottent; chaque heure est une bandelette
Sur mes ossements décharnés.

Suis-je une âme? est-ce un Dieu qui m’attend? Rien ne semble
L’explication à mes yeux;
Et ce double inconnu, sous mon grabat qui tremble,
Croise ses X mystérieux.

La blême horreur du gouffre effare mes prunelles:
Mon jour s’éteint, pâle et terni.
Azur! azur! azur! Dieu vivant! j’ai des ailes!
Ô bleu profond de l’infini!

26 juillet 1854.

XLIII Sombres aboyeurs des ténèbres,

Sombres aboyeurs des ténèbres,
Abîmes, que me voulez-vous?
Que demandez-vous, nuits funèbres?
Pourquoi soufflez-vous, vents jaloux?
Pourquoi, mêlant brumes, nuées,
Tourbillons, flots pleins de huées,
Multiplier autour de moi,
Devant mes prunelles obscures,
Dans toutes ces vagues figures
Les attitudes de l’effroi?
Je suis une âme ombres farouches,
Je vous échappe; mon flambeau
Ne peut être éteint par vos bouches,
Gouffres de l’énorme tombeau!
Je ne vous dois rien que ma cendre,
Que ma chair qui doit redescendre,
Vaine argile qui dure peu,
Poussière, d’où l’esprit s’élance.
Je vous la donnerai. Silence.!
Et laissez-moi songer à Dieu.

XLIV Nous sommes deux familles d’hommes

Nous sommes deux familles d’hommes:
Savants et voyants; les uns fils
Des Paris, des Londres, des Romes,
Les autres, d’Ur et de Memphis;
Nous, faits pour l’ombre, humbles apôtres,
Qui tâchons de savoir; les autres,
Prophètes pleins d’Adonaï,
Ames d’extase ou de colère
Qu’à travers les siècles éclaire
Le flamboiement du Sinaï.
Penchés à la même fenêtre,
Ils regardent nous écoutons.
Un esprit différent pénètre
Les Moïses et les Newtons;
C’était ainsi, même à l’aurore,
Lorsqu’aux mages parlait encore
La Muse aux lèvres de corail,
Aux temps où ces rêveurs sauvages
Voyaient descendre des nùages
Le centaure au double poitrail.

Nous que la science accompagne,
Eux que le bleu rayon conduit,
Nous montons la même montagne;
Pour nous tout meurt, pour eux tout luit;
Tous ensemble, par la prière,
Ou par l’idée, âpre ouvrière,
Fouillant le sol, cueillant le fruit,
Nous sondons l’âme et la matière,
Eux sur le versant de lumière,
Nous sur le versant de la nuit.

XLV UMBRA

Obscurité! le songe lève
Son front dans la réalité:
Que serait l’être sans le rêve,
Et la face, le voile ôté?
L’âme est de l’ombre qui sanglote.
Moi l’atome, j’erre et je flotte.
J’allais, ô pleurs! j’aimais, ô deuil!
Mon seuil s’ouvre sur le naufrage.
Ma maison, quand la mer fait rage,
Sonne la nuit comme un écueil.

Que dites-vous à l’âme humaine,
Que bégayez-vous pour mon coeur,
Monde; vision, phénomène,
Eau lugubre, aquilon moqueur?
A qûoi, sous la neige ou les laves,
Pensent les monts, ces vieux esclaves,
Fouettés de tous les fouets de l’air,
Ces patients du grand supplice,
Vêtus d’ombre, et sous leur cilice
Marqués du fer chaud de l’éclair?

N’est-il pas lugubre de dire
Que la porte sombre est sans clé,
Que la terre où l’homme respire
Est comme un manuscrit roulé?
Il semble que toutes les forces
Se donnent pour but les divorces,
Et que la nature ait pour voeu
D’ôter l’aube du cimetière,
D’épaissir l’horreur, la matière
Et l’énigme entre l’homme et Dieu!

Est-ce donc qu’ils sont nécessaires

Tous ces fléaux dont nous souffrons?
Pourquoi cet arbre des misères
Croisant ses branches sur nos fronts?
Le mal nous tient. Où sont les causes?
On dirait que le but des’choses
Est de cacher Dieu qui nous fuit,
Que le prodige obscur nous raille,
Et que le. monde entier travaille
A la croissance de la nuit.
Que regarde dans les bois fauves
Le grand cerf à l’oeil égaré?
Vénus, qui luis sur les monts chauves,
D’où te vient ton rayon sacré?
Qu’est-ce que ton anneau, Saturne?
Est-ce que quelque être nocturne,
Quelque vaste archange puni,
Quelque Satan -dont le front plie,
Fait tourner sûr cette poulie
La chaîne, du puits infini?

Que tu menaces ou promettes,
Dis-nous le secret de tes pleurs;
Aube? Et vous, qu’êtes-vous, comètes,
Faces aux horribles pâleurs?
Êtes,-vous, dans l’éther qui roule,
Des étoiles dont le sang coule,
Faisant des mares de clarté?
Venez-vous des noirs ossuaires?
Êtes-vous, traînant vos suaires,
Les mortes de l’immensité?

Ô profondeurs épouvantables,
Qu’est-ce donc que vous me voulez?
Que dois-je lire sur vos tables,
Cieux, temples, porches étoilés?
Ta rougeur de naphte et de soufre;
Ta clarté qui m’aveugle, ô gouffre,

Est-ce la vérité qui luit?
Le vent souffle-t-il sur mon doute
Quand, -penché sur l’ombre, j’écouté
Ce que dit ce crieur de nuit? -

Par moments, dressé sur ma couche,
Sombre, et peut-être blasphémant,
Je suis prêt à crier, farouche:
Allons! laisse-moi, firmament!
Par moments, je suis prêt à dire:
Vous dont je sens l’or dans ma lyre,
Le flamboiement dans mon courroux,
L’air dans mes strophes hérissées,
Et les rayons dans mes pensées,.
Astres, de quoi vous mêlez-vous? ,

En vain j’essaie et je m’élance.
Le gouffre effare le flambeau.
Rien dans le. ciel que le silence,
Rien que l’ombre dans le tombeau!

Oh! de quelle fosse entr’ouverte,
Sentons-nous le souffle, herbe verte?
Quels chevaux entend-on hennir?
Quel fantôme erre en nos décombres?
Quels yeux voit-on par tes, trous sombres,
Masque. effrayant de l’avenir?

La vie et la mort! qu’est-ce, abîme?
Où va l’homme pâle et troublé?
Est-il l’autel, bu la victime?
Est-il le soc? est-il lé blé?
Oh! ces vents que rien ne fait taire!
Que font-ils de nous sur la terre,
Tous ces souffles prodigieux?
Quel mystère en nous se consomme?
Qu’apportent-ils de l’ombre à l’homme?

Qu’emportent-ils de l’homme aux cieux?

Énigme! Où je dis: pourriture;
Le vautour vient et dit: festin!
Qu’est-ce que c’est que la nature?
Qu’est-ce que c’est que le destin?
Marchons-nous dans des routes sûres?
Dépend-il des forces obscures
De tordre là-bas mon chemin?
Peux-tu, sort fatal qui nous pousses,
Dans l’ombre, à force de secousses,
Changer la forme de demain?

Toutes ces lois qu’un faux jour perce,
Vie et sort, textes décevants
Dont le sens confus se disperse
Dans l’âpre dispute des vents,
Ce monde où chaque élément jette
Son mot à l’âme qui végète,
Cette nature aux fatals noeuds,
Ce destin hagard qui nous brise,
N’est-ce qu’une sombre méprise,
Malentendu vertigineux!

L’ancre est un poids qui rompt le-câble.
Tout est promis, rien n’est tenu.
Serait-ce donc que l’implacable
Est un des noms de l’inconnu?
Quel est donc ce maître farouche
Qui pour la toile fait la mouche,
L’orageux cheval pour le mors,
Tous les escaliers pour descendre,
Oui pour non, le feu pour la cendre,
La mémoire pour le remords?
D’où viennent les soirs, les aurores,
Les flots enflés, les flots décrus,
Les déluges, les météores,

Ces apparus, ces disparus!
Pourquoi le miracle Nature
Contient-il l’effroi, la torture,
Le mal, sur l’homme se courbant?
Le mal a-t-il le bien pour tige?
Ou serait-ce que le prodige
Tombe, et devient monstre en tombant?
Quand dans les forêts forcenées
Court l’ouragan,. ce furieux
Arrache-t-il à nos années
Quelque lambeau mystérieux?
L’arbre, qui -sort d’une fêlùre,
A-t-il en bas sa chevelure
Qui plonge au globe rajeuni?
Penseurs, têtes du ciel voisines,
Vos cheveux sont-ils les racines
Par où vous puisez l’infini?

Est-ce l’effroi des cieux horribles
Que je sens, en moi palpiter.
A de certains moments, terribles,
Où le monde semble hésiter?
Aux heures où la terre tremble,
Quand la nuit s’accroît, quand il semble
Qu’on voit le flot noir se gonfler,
Quand la lune s’évade et. rampe,
Quand l’éclipse sur cette lampe,
Masque. sinistre, vient souffler! .
Si vous attendez quelque chose,
Rochers pensifs, dites-le-moi!
Dites-moi de quoi se. compose
Le bien, le mal, le sort, la:loi,
O récifs! pièges! araignées!
Foudre qui jettes à poignées
Tes cheveux de flamme aux enfers,
Secouant sur les flots sauvages
Dans l’âpre forêt des nuages

Le hideux buisson des éclairs!
Et toi, la: grande vagabonde,
L’hydre verte au dos tortueux,
Que dis-tu, mer. où l’ombre abonde,
Bouleversement monstrueux?
O flots! ô, coupe d’amertume!

Quel symbole êtes-vous, écume,
Bave d’en bas jetée au jour,
Fange insultant l’aube sereine,
Éternel crachat de la haine
A l’éternel front de l’amour!

Laissons les flots battre la plage!
Laissons la mer lugubre en paix!
Et laissons. l’orageux feuillage
Frissonner dans les bois épais!
Ne troublons pas les harmonies
Rauques, étranges, infinies,
Des océans et des typhons!
Laissons les vents à leurs démences!
Et laissons dans les cieux immenses
S’envoler les aigles profonds!

Je vais, j’avance, je recule,
Je marche où plus d’un se perdit;
Par moments dans ce crépuscule
Une voix lugubre me dit:
— Que cherches-tu? tout fuit, tout passe.
La terre n’est rien. Et l’espace,
Que contient-il? Est-ce réel?
Tu ne peux qu’entrevoir, atome,
La création, ce fantôme,
Derrière ce linceul, le ciel.

Où vas-tu, pauvre âme étonnée?
Monade, connais-tu l’aimant?

Que sais-tu de la destinée,
Et que sais-tu du firmament?
Connais-tu le vrai, le possible,
Tous les réseaux de l’invisible,
Ce qui t’attend, ce qui te suit?
Connais-tu les lois éternelles?
Entends-tu les tremblements d’ailes
Dans les grands filets de la nuit?

Sens-tu parfois, dans l’ombre infâme
Qu’agite un vent farouche et lourd,.
Une toile où se prend ton âme
Et sur laquelle un monstre court?
Sens-tu parfois, fils de la terre,
S’ouvrir sous tes pieds le mystère,
Et se mêler, ô passant nu,
A tes cheveux que l’hiver mouille,
Les fils de la sombre quenouille,
Les cheveux du front inconnu?

Certaines planètes fatales,
Certains mirages de l’éther,
Certains groupes d’étoiles pâles
Ont un -rayonnement éclair.
Que sais-tu sur tes mornes grèves?
Es-tu sûr, au fond de tes rêves,
Que ce que l’ombre aux murs de fer
Couvre comme une épaisse grillé,
Soit le ciel, et que ce qui brille,
O songeur, ne soit pas l’enfer?

Les constellations tragiques,
Ouvrant siir vous leurs fauves yeux,
Passent, grandes larves magiques,
Sur vos destins mystérieux.
Insensé qui croit les cieux vides!
Quelques-unes, les plus livides,

Apparurent, ô sombre esprit,
En chiffres noirs dans les ténèbres
Sur les dés des jdueurs funèbres
Qui jouaient la robe du Christ.

Mais insensé qui s’imagine
Connaître tous les horizons,
La tombe, la fin, l’origine,
Se dévoue et crie: Avançons!
Insensé ce Jésus lui-même
Qui s’immole parce qu’il aime!
Insensés les audacieux
Qui se jettent dans le cratère,
Rêvant le progrès sur la terre
Ou le paradis dans les cieux!

Quand tu vois rire le squelette,
Es-tu sûr que ce noir rictus
Où le jour d’en -bas se reflète
N’est pas, pour les bons abattus,
Pour les justes sur qui tout pèse,
Pour les martyrs dans la fournaise,
Pour l’esprit croyant et créant,
Pour l’âme espérant sa patrie,
L’épouvantable moquerie
Du tombeau, qui sait le néant?

Non! il ne se peut, ô nature,
Que tu sois sur l’homme au cachot,
Sur l’esprit, sur la créature,
De la haine tombant -d’en haut!

Il ne se peut pas que ces forces
Mêlent à tous leurs noirs divorces
L’homme, atome en leurs poings tordu,
Lui montrent l’horreur souveraine,
Et fassent, sans qu’il les comprenne,

Des menaces à l’éperdu!

Il ne se peut que l’édifice
Soit fait d’ombre et de surdité;
Il ne se peut que sacrifice,
Héroïsme, effort, volonté,
Il ne se peut que la sagesse,
Que l’aube, éternelle largesse,
La rose qui s’épanouit,
Le droit, la raison, la justice,
Tout, la foi, l’amour, aboutisse
Au ricanement de la nuit!

Il ne se peut pas que j’invente
Ce que Dieu n’aurait pas créé!
Quoi! pas de but! quoi! l’épouvante!
Le vide! le tombeau troué!
Non! l’être ébauché, Dieu l’achève!
Il ne se peut pas que mon rêve
Ait plus d’azur que le ciel bleu,
Que l’infini soit un repaire,
Que je sois meilleur que le Père,
Que l’homme soit plus grand que Dieu!

Quoi! je le supposerais juste
Ce Dieu qui serait malfaisant!
C’est moi qui serais l’être auguste,
Et ce serait lui l’impuissant!
L’homme aurait trouvé dans son âme
L’amour, le paradis, la flamme,
La lumière sur la hauteur,
Le bonheur incommensurable...
Dieu ne serait qu’un misérable,
L’homme serait le créateur!

Oui, comme après tout, c’est un songe
Qu’un monde formé de néant,

Qui fit le mal fit le mensonge;
C’est moi qui reste le géant!
Que ce Dieu vienne et se mesure!
Qu’il sorte donc de sa masure!
Il fit le mal, j’ai cru le bien;
J’ai contre lui, si je me lève,
Toute la gloire de mon rêve,
Toute l’abjection du sien!
Non! non! la fleur. qui vient d’éclore
Me démontre le firmament.
Il ne se peut pas que l’aurore
Sourie à l’homme faussement,
Et que, dans la tombe profonde,
L’âme ait droit de. dire à ce monde
D’où l’espoir toujours est sorti,
A ces sphères, de Dieu vassales,
Affirmations colossales:
Étoiles! vous avez menti! .

Ce qui ment, c’est toi, doute! envie!
Il ne se peut que lé rayon;
Que l’espérance, que la vie
Soit une infâme illusion!
Que tout soit faux, hors le blasphème!
Et que ce Dieu ne soit lui-même,
Dans’sonvain temple aérien,
Que l’immense spectre Ironie
Regardânt; dans l’ombre infinie,
L’univers accoudé sur Rien 1.

Un Dieu qui rirait de son oeuvre,
Qui rirait des justes déçus,
Et du cygne et de la couleuvre,
Et de Satan et de Jésus,
Un tel Dieu serait si terrible
Que, devant cette face horrible,
L’âme humaine se débattrait

Comme si, par ses ailes blanches,
Elle était, prise. sous les branches -
De. quèlque, sinistre forêt!

Que Rabelais, rieur énorme,
Railleur de, l'horizon humain,
Borné par le nombre et la fdrnie,
Hue aujourd'hui, sans voir demain;
Qu'il joue, étant jouet lûi-même,
Avec la vie et le problème,
Qu'importe! il passe, il meurt, il fuit;
Il n'est ni le fond, ni la-cime;
Mais un Rabelais de l'abîme
Ferait horreur, même à la nuit!

Que les éclairs soient les augures,
Que le vrai sorte du plaintif,
Que les fléaux, sombres figures,
Disent le mot définitif,
Je ne le crois pas! Vents farouches,
Nuits, flots, hivers, enflez vos bouches,

Tordez ma robe dans mes pas,
Étendez vos mains sur moi, faites
Tous vos serments dans les tempêtes,
Ténèbres, je ne vous crois pas!

Je crois à toi, jour! clarté! joie!
Toi qui seras ayant été,
A toi, mon aigle, à toi, ma proie,
Force, raison, splendeur, bonté!
Je crois à toi, toute puissance!
Je crois à toi, tôute innocence!
Encore à toi, toujours à toi!
Je prends mon être pierre à pierre;
La première est de la lumière,
Et la dernière est de la foi!

Dieu! sommet! aube foudrôyante!
Précipice serein! lueur!
Fascination effrayante
Qui tient l’homme et le rend meilleur!
De toutes parts il s’ouvre, abîme.
Quand on est sur ce mont sublime,
Faîte où l’orgueil toujours s’est tu,
Cime où.vos instincts vous entraînent,
Tous les vertiges qui vous prennent
Vous font tomber dans la vertu.

Donc laissez-vous choir dans ce gouffre,
Vivants! grands, petits, sages, fous,
Celui qui rit, celui qui souffre,
Vous tous! vous tous! vous tous! vous tous!
Tombez dans Dieu, foule effarée!
Tombez, tombez’! roulez, marée!
Et sois stupéfait, peuple obscur,
Du néant des songes sans nombre,
Et d’avoir traversé tant d’ombre
Pour arriver à tant d’azur!

Oh! croire, c’est la récompense
Du penseur aimant, quel qu’il soit;
C’est en se confiant qu’on pense,
Et c’est en espérant qu’on voit!
Chante, ô mon coeur, l’éternel psaume!
Dieu vivant, dans ma nuit d’atome,
Si je parviens, si loin du jour,
A comprendre, moi grain de sable,
Ton immensité formidable,
C’est en croyant à ton amour!

XLVI DIEU SUIT SA VOIE

Quand dans le coeur d’un peuple il a disposé tout,
Un rien suffit pour faire éclater tout à coup
Ces révolutions fatales et divines
Qui jettent des clartés et qui font des ruines.
En des jours, comme ceux que le sort nous a, faits,
La plus petite cause. a les pires effets.
Dans ce siècle où le mal; comme le bien, est libre,
Où l’égalité mine et sape l’équilibre,
Tout est en question. Que voyons-nous souvent?
De grands coups de hasard et de grands coups de vent.
Veillons donc. Nous vivons dans un temps où nul homme
N’est petit, où chacun est redoutable, en somme.
Le bois nourrit la flamme, et la haine nourrit
Tous les mauvais instincts de l’homme. Crains l’esprit,
Crains le coeur où dans l’ombre abonde et s’amoncelle
La haine qui s’enflamme à la moindre étincelle.
Parfois, un mendiant qui vous suit pas à pas,
Un rêveur en haillons que vous ne voyez pas,
Dans le fond de son âme inconnue et hautaine,
A toute une forêt de colère et de haine
Qui n’attend que le choc d’un caillou, qu’un moment,
Pour remplir l’horizon d’un vaste embrasement!

XLVII Qui sait

Qui sait si tout n’est pas un pourrissoir immense?
Qui sait si ce qu’on croit gloire, vie et semence,
N’est pas horreur et deuil?
Contemplateur sur qui le rayon des nuits. tombe,
Qui sait si ce n’est pas de néant et de tombe
Que tu remplis ton oeil? .

Qui sait, espaces noirs, éthers, vagues lumières,
Si le fourmillement mystérieux des sphères
Ne ronge pas le ciel?
Et si l’aube n’est pas la rougeur d’une torche
Qui passe, et que quelqu’un promène sous le porche
Du sépulcre éternel?

Peut-être que l’abîme est un vaste ossuaire,
Que la comète rampe aux plis d’un noir suaire,
O vivants pleins de bruit,
Peut-être que la Mort, colossale et hagarde,
Est sous le firmament penchée, et vous regarde
Ayant pour front la nuit!

Peut-être que le monde est une chose morte;
Peut-être que le ciel où la saison apporte-
Tant de rayons divers,
O mortels, est soumis à la loi qui vous navre,
Et que de cet énorme et splendide cadavre
Les astres sont les vers!

XLVIII Tu veux comprendre Dieu,

Tu veux comprendre Dieu, mais d’abord comprends l’homme;
Je t’en défie.
Allons! définis, classe, nomme,
Sonde, explique, suivant n’importe quelle loi;
L’être mystérieux que tu portes en toi.
Scrute avec ton regard, flaire avec ta narine;
Fouille-toi; tire-toi l’homme de la poitrine,
Et mets-le sur ta table, et penche-toi pour, voir
Ce que c’est que ce monstre, éblouissant et noir!
Qu’en dis-tu? Te plaît-il que nous parlions de l’homme?
Es-tu flamme et génie? es-tu bête de somme?
Dis, parle. Oh! quel spectacle étrange que ceci:
Un dieu monstre, un esprit par la chair obscurci,
Vivant, comme debout sur le tranchant d’un glaive,
Entre l’ombre qui monte et l’aube qui se lève,
Du ciel dans le fumier toujours précipité,
Et d’une extrémité dans l’autre extrémité,
Et ramené sans cesse au point dont il dévie
Par l’oscillation lugubre. de la vie!
Songes-tu quelquefois à ce mystère affreux,
La chair? Ce corps abject, douloureux, ténébreux,
Cette vie où l’enfer dans l’azur se reflète,
Mariage effrayant d’une. âme et d’un squelette,
Cette aile intérieure et qu’un cachot meurtrit,
Cette cage des os qui renferme un esprit,
En sondes-tu la nuit et le prodige, ô sage?
En comprends-tu l’horreur? Sens-tu sous ton visage
Cette tête de mort sur laquelle tu ris?
Entends-tu de ton âme en toi les sombres cris?
Parle. As-tu peur de l’homme? As-tu peur de cet ange
Que tu sens remuer vaguement dans ta fange? -
Dis, le jour où tu vins au. monde, as-tu compris? .
O ver de terre aveugle, ombre entre les esprits;
Espèce de fantôme en suspens sur deux mondes,

Sortant des lumineux pour aller aux immondes,
Tantôt Trimalcion, tantôt Ithuriel,
O zénith; ô nadir, souffle immatériel
Qui te fais par la chair rendre d’impurs services,
Et dans le sac du corps vas portant tous les vices,
De. toi-même ébloui, de toi-même effrayé,
Plus souillé que le bât d’un onagre rayé,
Et que le vert-de-gris des plus viles monnaies,
Ce qui n’empêche point, par instants, que tu n’aies;
Dans tes heures d’orgueil et de rébellion,
Des couchers de soleil, des réveils de lion,
Rôdeur qui veux quitter ta sphère pour les nôtres,
Trouve donc ton énigme avant d’en chercher d’autres!

N’as-tu donc point assez de ton gouffre? réponds.
Comment rejoindras-tu l’homme à l’homme? quels ponts
Pourront jamais unir, à travers la nuit noire, -
Un de ses bords à l’autre, et sa honte à sa gloire?

Sois un pasteur d’esprits, un guide des vivants,
Un fier tribun du peuple aux, discours émouvants,
Dont la mort est plus tard pour la terre un désastre;
Sois grand et fort avec une lumière d’astre;
Sois Colomb, et découvre un monde; sois Schiller,
L’aigle du coeur plus grand que les aigles. de l’air;
Sois Mirabeau, Shakspeare et Platon tout ensemble;
Si profond, si puissant, si sublime qu’il semble
Qu’on ne va plus te voir que derrière le ciel,
Avec une figure: au delà du réel;
Sois Christ, le fils aîné de la clarté divine,
En qui l’homme s’efface, en qui Dieu se devine,
Le grand Christ arrachant, calme et le bras tendu,
Aux faits épouvantés. le miracle éperdu;
Passe ton jour entier, être à haute stature,
A modeler en toi l’humanité future,
Du matin jusqu’au soir roule dans ton cerveau
Le système insondable et l’univers nouveau,

Où tout aura ta forme, arts, lois, dogmes, doctrines;
Et, maintenant, forçat, c’est ton heure. Aux latrines!

Ô génie accablé d’un viscère! destin
Traversé par l’abject et lugubre intestin!

Oh! quelle ombre après tant de clarté! tout à l’heure,
Tu semblais l’ange, roi de l’éther qu’il effleure;
Socrate sur le Pnyx ou Moïse au Galgal,
Tu planais; tu parlais à Dieu comme un égal;
Tu semblais de l’énigme être le grand ministre;
A présent te voilà nu, frissonnant, sinistre,
Misérable au niveau du bourbier, et réduit
Aux accroupissements des bêtes dans la nuit!
Et tu fais tous les jours cette chute, prophète,
Roi, mage, osant revoir l’azur quand tu l’as faite!
Tous les jours, l’homme allant aux astres ses pareils,
Vole avec les esprits au-dessus des soleils,
Luit, resplendit, flamboie, et tous les jours retombe
De plus haut que le ciel dans plus bas que la tombé!

L’homme a beau. sous son front sentir les cieux frémir,
Être un génie; il faut manger, il faut dormir!
Il se heurte aux besoins. Les besoins sont les bornes.
C’est le rappel brutal aux réalités mornes;
L’éternelle cuisson du stigmate de feu;
C’est le coup de bâton de la matière au dieu.

Oui, médite. C’est là ton sort. Nuit, crépuscule,
Maladie et famine, hiver et canicule,
Ton âme endure tout; elle est esclave enfin.
Ton esprit, à travers ta chair, a soif, a faim,
A la fièvre, maigrit, engraisse, brûle, gèle.
Chacun de tes besoins en, passant te flagelle.
Et ces besoins sont vils,! Si hideux, si honteux
Que tu te sens coupable et puni devant eux,
Et que, sentant peser sur ta tête inféconde

Le poids antérieur d'un mystérieux monde,
Tu dis: qu'ai-je donc fait ailleurs pour être ici?
Mais tu reprends ton vol, le jour s'est éclairci,
La science t'appelle, homme, l'art te relève,
Tu fuis dans la clarté bleue et vague du rêve,
Tu t'évades aux cieux; te voilà libre! ... -Non.
Redescends dans ton corps, rentre en ton cabanon;
Avec ton sombre esprit la fange est familière;
Ton sang est ton bourreau, ta chair est ta geôlière;
De l'infâme prison tes sens sont les. habits;
Tu ne peux les quitter, et, courbé; tu subis,
Toujours, toujours, le jour, la nuit, et sans relâche,
La fustigation inexplicable et lâche.
Au moment où l'azur t'ouvre son pur chemin,
Où tu te vois auguste, et splendide, une main,
Qui que tu sois, beau, juste, illustre, innocent, vierge,
Te prend, et, frémissant, tu sens le coup de verge.
L'horreur crie: .es-tu là? Ta fange répond: oui.
Et rien ne te soustrait à ce joug inouï.

Il est une heure sainte, inexprimable, altière,
Où tout ce qui. n'est pas joie, orgueil et lumière,
Semble s'évanouir dans. ton coeur transporté; .
C'est quand tu vois la femme, aube, blancheur, beauté,
Qui met sous son pied nu tes résistances vaines,
Et qui fait ruisseler du, soleil dans tes veines.
Telle que dans l'Éden jadis elle brilla,
Elle apparaît, charmante; homme, en ce moment-là,
Tu méprises la bête, infecte créature,
Fier, superbe, oubliant ta propre pourriture;
Bien! prends ton Ève blonde; Emporte-la. Le jour
La donne à ta nuit... -Ah! tu frissonnes d'amour,
La volupté t'enivre.!,Ah! l'extase te gagne!
Tu ne te souviens plus de la chaîne du bagne,
Tu te crois ange... -Allons! , réveille-toi, fouetté
Jusque dans ton plaisir, par ta fétidité!

XLIX La haine,

La haine, tantôt fière, effrontée, ingénue,.
Aspire à s’étaler au soleil toute nue,
La calomnie aux dents, rit d’un sage ou d’un roi,
Lève sa jupe infâme et dit admirez-moi!
Tantôt, se souvenant qu’elle a mêlé peut-être
Jadis à vos amis son sourire humble et traître,
Elle arme sa fureur d’un regard innocent,
Emmielle son poison, et glisse en gémissant
Sa morsure plus lâche, et plus âcre et meilleure
Sous un. masque éraillé d’ancien ami qui pleure!
«Ce pauvre ami, dit-elle, oh! comme il est changé!
«Dans cette voie, hélas! pourquoi s’être engagé!
«Disons-lui qu’il se perd par amour pour la gloire...”
O vile hypocrisie! envie. épaisse et noire
Qui s’attache à l’esprit comme -la rouille au fer!
Louches regards! , pleurs, faux, qui font rire l’enfer!
Prends-tu l’humanité pour la cause finale?
Crois-tu que cette sombre aïeule virginale,
Toute jeune et portant les siècles sur son front,
Qui fait tomber l’encens des fleurs, les fruits du tronc,
Des feuilles la fraîcheur, de l’écorce la gomme,
La nature sacrée est servante chez l’homme,
Qu’elle l’adore, prend ses ordres, suit ses pas,
Fait les quatre saisons pour ses quatre repas,
Et n’a pour fonction, toute à ce maître étrange,
Que de bercer le lit de cette âme qui mange,
De ce coeur compliqué d’un ventre, et le hamac
De cet esprit sublime orné d’un estomac,
Qui suce et boit du sang en rêvant des doctrines,
Et qui s’emplit à l’auge et se vide aux latrines?
Crois-tu que l’ache verte en poussant ait pour but
De préserver ta bouche et tes dents du scorbut?
Crois-tu que la montagne, où Dieu laissa ses traces,
N’a d’autre utilité que d’être, quand tu chasses,

L’écho des voix; des cris, des cors et des abois?
Crois-tu que lé, croissant, lampe oblique des bois,
Qui lorsque le bandit sent le sbire à ses trousses,
Se cache à point derrière un tas de branches rousses,
Egarant la patrouille avec le caporal,
Soit du rôdeur de nuit le complice moral?
Crois-tu que l’aquilon soit le garçon de salle
Qui vient te balayer l’azur quand il est sale?
Que l’eau pense à l’usine en courant au ravin?
Penses-tu que ce soit pour te sucrer ton vin
Que la comète va chez toi, sombre évadée?
Dis-tu, quand tes pavés sont lavés par l’ondée:
Bien, bon Dieu! la besogne est faite ce matin!
Crois-tu que dans un ciel perdu, gouffre lointain
Qui sent; au froid rayon-du soleil qui l’éclaire,
Se mêler l’effrayante attraction stellaire,
Dans un ciel où jamais un ange ne vola,
Une planète morne, et fatale, au delà
D’Uranus qui lui-même est plus loin que Saturne,
Se traîne, obscure; sourde, âpre, à jamais nocturne,
Traçant dans l’être, au fônd d’un blême tourbillon,
Presque hors de la vie un lugubre sillon;
Et que cette planète épouvantable râle,
Et que ce monde triste autour du soleil pâle
Qu’à travers la distance il peut à péine voir,
Accomplisse, tournant comme un chariot noir,
Une sinistre année, égale à cent des vôtres;
Et que, monstre, géant des globes, loin des autres,
Il traverse à jamais, seul dans un sombre bruit,
Un ouragan d’hiver, d’épouvante et de nuit,
Et soit énorme, et soit funeste, et soit horrible,
Et montre à l’ombre immense une face terrible,
Pour faire, en votre bouge et dans votre terrier,
Donner la croix d’honneur à monsieur Leverrier?

LI À CEUX QUI SONT PETITS

Est-ce ma faute à moi si vous n’êtes pas grands?
Vous aimez les hiboux, les fouines, les tyrans,
Le mistral, le simoun, l’écueil, la lune rousse,
Vous êtes Myrmidon que son néant courrouce;
Hélas! l’envie en vous creuse son puits sans fond;
Et je vous plains. Le plomb de votre style fond
Et coule sur les noms que dore un peu de gloire,
Et tout en répandant sa triste lave noire,
Tâche d’être cuisant et ne peut qu’être lourd;
Tortueux, vous rampez après tout ce qui court;
Votre oeil furieux suit les grands aigles véloces;
Vous reprochez leur taille et leur ombre aux colosses;
On dit de vous: -Pygmée essaya, mais ne put. -
Qui haïra Chéops si ce n’est Lilliput?
Le Parthénon vous blessè avec ses fiers pilastres;
Vous êtes malheureux de la beauté des astres;
Vous trouvez l’Océan trop clair, trop noir, trop bleu;
Vous détestez le ciel parce qu’il montre Dieu;
Vous êtes mécontents que tout soit quelque chose;
Hélas, vous n’êtes rien. Vous souffrez de la rose,
Du cygne, du printemps pas assez pluvieux,
Et ce qui rit vous mord. Vous êtes envieux
De voir voler la mouche et de voir le ver luire.
Dans votre jalousie acharnée à détruire,
Vous comprenez quiconque aime, quiconque a foi,
Et même vous avez de la place pour moi.
Un brin d’herbe volis fait grincer s’il vous dépasse;
Vous avez pour le monde auguste, pôur Pespace,
Pour tout ce qu’on voit croître, éclairer, réchauffer,
L’infâme embrassement qui voudrait étouffer.
Vous avez juste autant de pitié que le glaive.
En regardant un-champ vous maudissez la sève;
L’arbre vous plaît à l’heure où la hache le fend;
Vous avez quelque chose en vous qui vous défend

D’être bons, et la rage est votre rêverie.
Votre âme a froid par où la nôtre est attendrie;
Vous avez la nausée où nous sentons l’aimant;
Vous êtes monstrueux tout naturellement;
Vous grondez quand l’oiseau chante sous les grands ormes;
Quand la fleur, près de vous qui vous sentez difformes,
Est belle, vous croyez qu’elle le fait exprès.
Quel souffle vous auriez si l’étoile’était près!
Vous croyez qu’en brillant la lumière vous blâme;
Vous vous imaginez, en voyant une femme,

Que c’est pour vous narguer qu’elle prend un amant,
Et que le mois de mai vous verse méchamment
Son urne de rayons et d’encens sur la tête;
Il vous semble qu’alors que les bois sont en fête,
Que l’herbe est embaumée et que les prés sont doux,
Heureux, frais, parfumés, charmants, c’est contre vous.
Vous criez au secours quand le soleil se lève.
Vous exécrez sans but, sans choix, sans fin, sans trève,
Sans effort, par instinct, pour mentir, pour trahir;
Ce n’est pas un travail pour vous de tout haïr.
Fourmis, vous abhorrez-l’immensité sans peine.
C’est votre joie impie, âcre, cynique, obscène;
Et vous souffrez. Car rien, hélas, n’est châtié
Autant que l’avorton, géant d’inimitié!
Si l’oeil pouvait plonger sous la voûte chétive
De votre crâne étroit qu’un instinct vil captive,
On y verrait l’énorme horizon de la nuit;
Vous êtes ce qui bave, ignore, insulte, et nuit;
La montagne du mal est dans votre âme naine.
Plus le coeur est petit, plus il y tient de haine.

9 décembre.

LII Ô gloire,

Ô gloire, les héros, les esprits souverains,
Les poëtes profonds, lumineux et sereins,
Les grands législateurs et les grands capitaines, -
Font sur tes clairs sommets leurs demeures hautaines.
Hôtes du palais bleu sans porte et sans chemin,
Au-dessus du tumulte et du chaos humain,
Ils brillent comme l’astre ou planent comme l’aigle.
Car toute âme a son but, son champ, sa loi, sa règle,
Et, selon qu’un instinct bon ou mauvais nous luit,
Quand l’un vole à l’azur, l’autre court à la nuit.
O sombre Ignominie au front bas, aux yeux ternes,
Les gredins monstrueux habitent tes cavernes.
Ils sont tous là, cachés, ces éternels filous!
Loups à visage humain, gueux au profil de loups,
Ceux-ci, vils fainéants qui rôdent pleins de haine,
Traînant leur lâche coeur comme on traîne une chaîne,
Sans toit, sans. pain, sans Dieu; ceux-là, riches oisifs,
Sceptiques par fatigue et par ennui lascifs,
Tous. sans foi, sans élan, sans courage, sans flamme,
Envieux d’un gros sou comme d’une grande âme,
Rampants, hideux, exclus, damnés, grinçant des dents,
Ils regardent la vie avec des yeux ardents.

LIII LE CHOEUR

Les hommes sont à l’oeuvre en leur antre profond,
La grande cité sombre ils font tout ce qu’ils font
Avec de la noirceur et de la petitesse;
Leurs puissants chefs, qu’on nomme empereur, sire, altesse,
Sont chétifs les passants vont et viennent autour
Du soldat dans sa tente et du roi: dans sa tour
La foule rôde et guette, agitée et diffuse;
Et le maître a la force et l’esclave a la ruse;
Des chars roulent, on bat l’enclume, la rumeur
Passe et disperse au loin des noms comme un semeur;
La haine est dans les coeurs, le fiel est dans les bouches,
Et les événements sortent de là, farouches:
Le bien, se forge avec le mal tout est mêlé
Une porte, dont nul ici-bas n’a la clé,
Ferme la destinée, enceinte ténébreuse;
Et tous y sont murés; on fouille, on sonde, on creuse,
On cherche; et-le penseur, rêve devant l’effort
Et le grand brùit qué font ces condamnés à mort.

8 février 1875.

LIV LE MAL

L’optique.
N’a-t-il pas ses aspects et ses illusions?
Et d’ailleurs pense donc, songeur, aux visions...
Que dans l’ombre à travers le verre des lunettes,
Peuvent en s’approchant se donner deux planètes?
Tu, rencontres le mal. Qui te dit qu’il te suit?
Est-ce que par hasard deux mondes dans la nuit
Ne peuvent point passer l’un à côté de l’autre
Sans troubler l’astronome et dérouter l’apôtre?

Le grand Un, le grand Tout, l’être où Thalès plongeait,
Entrecroise le monde esprit au monde objet,
Et mêle, en l’unité de ses lois inflexibles;
Des orbites moraux aux orbites visibles;
Dans l’idéal ainsi que dans le lumineux
Les phénomènes, noirs ou brillants, font des noeuds;
Il n’est qu’un tisserand, qui ne fait qu’une toile;
La vérité n’est pas moins astre que l’étoile;
Un soleil n’est pas plus centre qu’une vertu.

Donc, représente-toi, songeur des vents battu,
Des ensembles de faits moraux, sombres problèmes
Ayant leur raison d’être et l’ayant en eux-mêmes,
Dans un système au cours des planètes pareil,
Tdurnant autour de Dieu comme autour d’un soleil.
Ô songeur, je dis Dieu; je pourrais dire Centre.
Ils vont, viennent; l’un sort, l’autre accourt, l’autre rentre,
Et l’un pour l’autre ils sont des apparitions.
Tel fait qui sert de base à vos convictions
Et qui chez vous émeut le savant et le sage,
N’est sôuvent qu’un aspect, un fantôme, un passage.

Maintenant, connais-tu la révolution,
Homme, du fait idée et du fait passion?

Connais-tu les réels? connais-tu les possibles?
Toutes les fonctions te sont-elles visibles?
Sais-tu, triste passant dans cette ombre venu,
Tout ce qui tourne autour du pivot inconnu,
Et la totalité de l’ordre planétaire?
Parce qu’en décrivant son orbe, ton mystère
Arrive à côtoyer dans le cercle fatal
L’autre mystère obscur que tu nommes le mal,
Faut-il pas t’expliquer cette coïncidence?

L’essor plus ou moins lourd dans l’air plus ou moins dense,
L’aigle fait pour l’éther, l’esprit fait pour l’amour,
Ces équilibres-là t’apparaîtront un jour.

Comment de l’idéal le réel est capable;
Comment ce qui vous est caché nous est palpable,
Comment votre visible est invisible à nous;
Comment il est un monde abstrait, terrible et doux,
Que vous ne voyez pas et qui se mêle au vôtre
Ainsi que, branche à branche, un arbre entre dans l’autre;
Comment l’univers lie, en un ordre éternel,
L’engrenage moral au rouage charnel;
Comment aux-faits”vivants qui pleurent, chantent, grondent,
D’autres faitsdans l’idée et l’esprit correspondent;
Comment, sur l’axe unique où tout l’être est construit,
Avèc lé zodiaque éclatant de la nuit,
Tourne le zodiaque effrayant du mystère;
Comment, tout en parlant, l’ombre semble se taire;
Ces faits, tu les pourras peut-être concevoir
Quand tes yeux, agrandis par la mort; pourront voir,
Comme tu vois l’azur aux millions de flammes;
La constellation formidable des. âmes.
Ô douceur, sainte esclave! ô bonté, sainte reine!
Que la bête ait en l’homme un maître respecté!
Que, partout où. la vie est en proie à la peine,
La douceur porte la bonté!
Synthèse, dit le ciel... L’homme dit: Analyse.!

Vous dites: -.« Tout végète ou se minéralise.
«Nos pères s’égaraient à force de rêver.” -
C’est en déchiquetant que vous croyez trouver.
La foudre, dont tremblaient le mage et le druide,
Ô savants, à cette heure est pour vous un fluide
Forcé d’être vitreux s’il n’est pas résineux;
L’âme est un gaz; certains animaux l’ont, en eux.
Hommes, vous disséquez le miracle; vous faites
De la chimie avec le songe des prophètes;
Vous sacrez le creuset Principium et fous;
Acharnés, vous coupez les prodiges profonds,
Insaisissables, sourds, entiers, incorruptibles,
En un tas de petits morceaux imperceptibles;
Pour vous rien n’est réel que le moment. présent;
Science, ton scalpel n’apprend’’qu’en détruisant!
Si tu n’étais science; on te croirait envie.
De la nature, pourpre auguste de la vie,
Vous faites un haillon, ô vivants, un lambeau,
Une loque, un néant; et le ver du tombeau
Nomme cela manger; vous l’appelez connaître.
Toi, savoir! tu ne peux que décomposer l’être!

Apprenez donc ceci puisque vous apprenez:
Les fluides, d’un souffle invisible entraînés,
Ne savent pas où sont les pôles de la pile.
Qui ne sait pas un mot d’optique? la pupille.
Le chiffre ne sait pas l’algèbre; l’élément
Ne sait pas la science; et l’être est un aimant
Attirant tout à lui sans connaître les formes;
Toutes les forces sont des aveugles énormes;
L’absolu, c’est le fait immobile et total;
L’absolu ne sait pas, nains, votre piédestal,
Larves, vos visions, vos bruits, marionnettes,
Votre fourmillement d’yeux, d’esprits, de lunettes,
Votre oscillation, votre onde, votre flot;
Il ne sait pas si c’est cinq minutes qu’il faut
A la lumière, au fond des obscurités bleues,

Pour franchir trente-cinq millions de vos lieues,
Et venir du soleil, braise de l’infini,
A la terre, affreux globe, impur, lépreux, banni,
Roulant dans votre amas d’ombres inférieures,
Ô vivants, et si c’est quinze jours et seize heures
Qu’il faut à l’escargot pour faire un mille anglais.
Le gnomon dont l’ombre erre au front de vos palais,
L’horloge, de vos jours ténébreuse sourdine,
Qui, dans votre néant, stupide, se dandine,
L’aiguille du cadran, lourd cheval hébété,
Qui tourne, puisant l’heure au puits éternité,
Et qui la vide en bruit sur vos têtes fragiles,
Vos éclairs, vos longueurs, vos bronzes, vos argiles,
Le rythme de vos voix et l’écart de vos pas,
Vos espaces, vos temps, il ne les connaît pas!

Si le plaisir qui dure agonise en souffrance;
Si le nom de Shakspeare, allant de Londre en France,
A mis cent cinquante. ans à-passer le détroit;
Si l’équateur a chaud et si le pôle a froid;
Si quelque Alizuber, lieutenant du prophète,
Traversant les combats comme une sombre fête,
N’en est jamais sorti, sanglant, poudreux, fumant,
Sans recueillir, le soir, sur son noir vêtement,
Cette poussière afin de la mettre. en sa tombe;
Si le Crédit foncier vaut -mieux que le Grand’Combe;
Si Louis, dit le grand, en Flandre a réussi
Par le conseil d’Harcourt ou l’avis de Torcy;
Si Tibère César en sa galère vogue
Et songe; et ce qu’en dit le vent, ce démagogue;
Si; arien;
L’absolu n’en voit rien, l’absolu n’en sait rien,
L’absolu ne sait point qui je suis, qui vous êtes.
Seul, ni bon, ni méchant, au-dessus de nos têtes,
Il a, nous laissant dire assez, peu, trop, beaucoup,
L’impartialité terrible d’être tout.
L’âme, il l’a; l’invisible, il le voit; l’impossible,

Il l’est; ce qu’il comprend, c’est l’incompréhensible.

Si l’absolu pouvait, dans le gouffré où je suis,
Se pencher sous le porche insondable des nuits
Où se meuvent, selon la loi de ces grands antres,
Les globes himineux que vous croyez des centres,
S’il voyait cela, lui, l’oeil providentiel,
Sa stupeur, ce serait ce pauvre petit ciel,
Ce firmament chétif qu’à peine un rayon dore,
Cette bave de feu que vous nommez l’aurore,
Ce soleil clignotant que l’oeil perd dans l’azur
Tant il flotte enfoui sous un brouillard obscur,
Cette ombre, et la lenteur de l’escargot lumière.

LVII Souffrance,

Souffrance, es-tu la loi du monde?
L’homme vient triste et s’en va nu;
Il naît débile et meurt immonde;
Es-tu le fond de l’inconnu?

Les grêles, les foudres, les trombes;
Les marteaux meurtrissant les clous;
Le grain dans le bec des colombes,
L’agneau dans la gueule des loups;

Le tigre ayant l’horreur secrète
De sa propre férocité;
Le lion, fauve anachorète
Qui hurle dans l’immensité;

L’enfant qui meurt, âme qui sombre;
Le lys qu’on fauche, à peine éclos;
Les marins qu’engloutit dans l’ombre
La bave sinistre des flots;

Partout les embûches funèbres,
Le glaive, la griffe, la dent;
Des yeux fixés dans, les ténèbres;
Le crime guettant et rôdant

L’abeille que chasse la guêpe;
La guerre battant du tambour;

Un horizon voilé d’un crêpe,
Où croît l’ombre, où décroît l’amour;

Les discordes qui se répandent;
Caïn, Nemrod, Néron, Macbeth;
Tous les coeurs des hommes qui pendent

A la haine, ce grand gibet;

Le doute qui sort de la tombe,
Et, du haut du ciel sans clarté,
Semble un soir éternel gui tombe
Sur la lugubre humamte;

Toutes ces douleurs, est-ce l’ordre?
L’air du sépulcre emplit les cieux,
Et sur l’abîme on voit se tordre,
La nuit, des bras mystérieux.

Et toutes ces choses farouches
Disent cette plainte à la fois,
Et de toutes ces sombres bouches
On entend sortir cette voix:

— Dieu! qu’a donc fait la créature,
Et pourquoi l’être est-il puni? -
C’est le grand cri de la nature
Dans le grand deuil de l’infini.

27 juillet 1854.

LVIII Ne laissez rien partir

Ne laissez rien partir sans adieu que la tombe
Emporte consolés, hélas! ceux qu’elle atteint.
Accordez un soupir à la rose qui tombe!
Accordez un regard à l’astre qui s’éteint!

La femme veut qu’on l’aime. Et l’oiseau ne réclame
Qu’une oreille écoutant son chant plaintif et beau.
Que le dernier amour trouve une dernière âme!
Et que le dernier chant trouve un dernier écho!

Vous que le croyant voit, vous que les penseurs rêvent,
Seigneur, prenez pitié de l’humaine clameur.
Vers vous de toutes parts, nos bras tendus se lèvent.
Apaisez ce qui vit; consolez ce qui meurt.

18 janvier 1843.

LIX Homme, les avatars

Homme, les avatars et les métempsychoses
Dans l’immobilité formidable des choses;
La rougeur qui s’allume au sommet des Thabors;
Le destin; gouffre où Job cherche à saisir les bords,
Où Platon s’épouvante, où Christ même redoute
Les flux et les reflux de la vague du doute;
L’aube en fleur; les tombeaux, intérieurs-vermeils;
La petitesse obscure et morne des soleils,-
L’énormité, sondée en vain, du grain de sable;
Les rayons inouïs de l’incommensurable;
Le monde immédiat, hideux pour les voyants,
Les buissons, lès forêts, lés rochers effrayants,
La surdité plus sombre encor que le silence,
La mer triste, oscillant ainsi qu’une balance,
L’écueil sanglant, le flot démesuré, bavant
Dans les gémissements lamentables du vent,
L’orage, des éclairs secouant la crinière,
Ne s’interrogent point de la même manière,
Dans l’horreur des chaos vaguement apparus,
Que l’évêque panade ou le moine Pyrrhus a.

LX Qu’est-ce que ta sagesse

Qu’est-ce que ta sagesse et que ton jugement?
Homme, en ta conscience as-tu, quelque mesure
Pour peser, pour compter, pour régler, qui soit sûre?
Toi-même, n’es-tu pas ton propre étonnement?
Ce que le genre humain fait misérablement
T’effraie, et tu ne sais ce que tu dois en croire.
L’homme pour l’homme est nuit. Devant ta propre histoire
Entends-tu clairement l’évidence crier?

Voyons. Explique-toi. Quel est le meurtrier:
Brutus tuant César, ou César tuant Rome?
Quand. même l’âpre Dante et cet autre qu’on nomme
Tacite, et celui-là qu’on nomme Juvénal
Siégeraient dans ton âme ainsi qu’un tribunal,
L’un Minos, l’autre Éaque, et l’autre Rhadamante,
Tu ne sentirais pas que la lumière augmente,
Et que plus de justice avec plus de raison
Se lève dans ton coeur et sur ton horizon.

Voici la bête fauve et la bête de somme,
D’un côté l’empereur, de l’autre côté l’homme,
Claude et le genre humain, Tibère et l’univers;
L’un est-il plus abject que l’autre n’est pervers?

Tiens, vois: -comme le soir les nuages s’amassent,
Les sombres légions rentrent; les soldats passent,
Aigle et bannière au vent, sous les arcs triomphaux;
Le peuple bat des mains du haut des échafauds;
Ils mêlent aux clairons quelque strophe sauvage:
«-Nous sommes compagnons de gloire et de ravage,
«O Commode, empereur égal à Jupiter!
«Qui donc pourrait compter les vagues de la mer,
«Les rois que tu domptas, les murs que nous rompîmes?”
Ils. passent, rapportant les dépouilles opimes;

A leur têté est le maître immense, le vainqueur;
Toute Rome à ses pieds n'est plus qu'un vaste choeur;
Il marche précédé de la fanfare altière;
Et le cirque frémit; dans le noir bestiaire
De grands tigres ouvrant leurs pattes sont debout,
Et, pour voir passer l'homme à qui Dieu livre tout,
Le César adoré du globe qu'il saccage,
Collent leur ventre fauve aux barreaux de leur cage.
Et maintenant, César, content du bon accueil,
César, dont la lumière est faite avec le deuil
Des nations sur qui pèse l'ombre profonde,
L'empereur effrayant de cette nuit du monde,
En rendant grâce aux dieux, donne au peuple romain
Un banquet où l'on va boire du sang humain,
Où la brute des bois et Rome souveraine,
Joyeuses, rugiront ensemble dans l'arène,
Où l'encens fumera parmi les cris plaintifs,
Un festin de chrétiens, de martyrs, de captifs,
D'esclaves ramenés de l'Etixin ou du Tage,
Et le peuple s'attable, et le tigre partage.
Qui, du tigre ou de l'homme, est le monstre? réponds.

Et plus tard, quand des voix diront là-haut: frappons!
Quand l'histoire verra, dans la nuit prête ànaître,
Les vieux démons de l'homme, horribles, reparaître,
Et s'écriera, les bras levés au ciel: Voilà
Caïn dans Constantin, Nemrod dans Attila!
Quand Rome penchera, c'est-à-dire le monde;
Quand, pour tout engloutir, viendront dans la même onde
La Barbarie affreuse et le Christ radieux;
Quand tout se défera, les lois, les moeurs, les dieux,
Quand la ville éternelle, esclave reine, en proie
Aux eunuques, joyeux d'on ne sait quelle joie,
Fera remplir sa coupe avec un rire impur
En entendant le pas d'Alaric sous son mur,
Quand Rome n'aura plus que l'immonde énergie
D'attendre le viol, les coudes dans l'orgie,

Lorsque le sort fera cet éclat d’enivrer
Cette prostituée avant de la livrer;
Quand la fatalité donnera le scandale
Du visigoth, du hun stupide, du vandale,
Qu’est-ce que tu feras, qu’est-ce que tu diras?
Quand les fléaux seront comme des magistrats,
Quand l’aube et le tombeau seront mêlés ensemble,
Quand tout sera si juste et si cruel qu’il semble
Que Dieu soit le faucheur, que Satan soit la faulx,
Quel sage d’entre vous distinguera le faux
Du vrai, le oui du non, le rayon de la foudre,
Ce qu’il faut condamner de ce qu’il faut absoudre,
Le héros du bandit, l’ange. de l’animal,
L’affreux débordement du déluge normal,
Et du mal et du bien pourra faire la somme
Dans cet épouvantable écroulement de l’homme?

LXI L’homme étreint dans ses bras

L’homme étreint dans ses bras, l’obstacle, comme Hercule.
La peste disparaît et la brute recule;
Le serpent fuit; le loup s’en va; l’arbre épineux,
Rentre sa griffe ét tord moins méchamment ses noeuds.
La vie a cessé d’être une sombre aventure.
L’homme, autrefois mordu par la, fauve nature,
Met une muselière à la création.
La mer cède, la terre obéit; l’alcyon
Chante un hymne d’espoir à sa sueur la colombe.
L’étang n’exhale plus le soufflé de la tombe.
La forêt, qui frissonne à la bouche de. Pan,
S’emplit de fleurs; le lac rit dans les monts; le paon
Traîne la gerbe d’yeux qui frémit sur sa queue.
Eden vague et lointain montre sa porte bleue.
Adam n’est plus sinistre et glacé de sueur.
Dans l’ombre par degrés se lève une lueur;
La pensée, aube pure, à travers la matière
Luit et s’épanouit dans la nature entière;
Et dans l’âpre univers, jadis horrible et noir,
Qui se mouvait, pareil aux visions, du soir,
Et que semblait emplir une hydre aux yeux de flamme,
L’homme sent chaque jour moins de monstre et plus d’âme.

IO février 1854.

LXII Quelle idée as-tu donc de la mort,

Quelle idée as-tu donc de la mort, vain penseur?
Devant l’obscurité, le doute, la noirceur,
La tombe au fond du sort et la mort infaillible,
Tu frémis; car ce monde est un temple terrible.
L’affreux fourmillement des fosses te fait peur;
A travers sa malsaine et fétide vapeur,
Le tombeau, s’il fallait que tu l’approfondisses,
T’apparaîtrait ainsi qu’un gouffre d’immondices,
Plein d’êtres, beaux jadis, lugubres maintenant,
Au lieu de la prunelle et de l’oeil, rayonnant
N’ayant sous leur sourcil qu’un horrible cratère,
D’où-sortent leurs regards devenus vers de terre.
Non. Le cercueil n’est pas, homme, ce que tu crois.
La mort, sous le plafond des tombeaux noirs et froids,
C’est la mystérieuse et lumineuse offrande.
Ce n’est pas seulement pour l’âme qu’elle est grande,
Mais pour la chair, poids vil sur la terre gisant.
La tombe, astre central vers qui tout redescend,
Jetant un rayon double à la double frontière,
Transfigure l’esprit, transforme la matière;
La mort, qui n’est pour toi qu’un spectre monstrueux,
Saisit l’être et le tord entre ses doigts noueux,
Et comme une laveuse agenouillée au fleuve,
Blanchit les os, le corps, la chair de l’esprit veuve,
La guenille animale et le haillon humain,
Dans un ruissellément de lumière sans fin.
C’est dans de la splendeur que tout se décompose.
La mort, c’est l’unité qui reprend toute chose.
Oh! cetté obscure mort dont Dieu sait le secret,
Quel éblouissement, elle te jetterait
Si, comme nous, dont l’oeil voit l’aspect véritable,
Tu pouvais, dans l’espace étrange et redoutable,
Voir, partout à la fois, à toute heure, en tous lieux,
En roses sur la terre, en phosphores aux cieux,

En fleurs, en fruits, en sève, en pàrfum, en aurore,
La pourriture énorme et magnifique éclore!

LXIII Les anges du Seigneur

Les anges du Seigneur passent de temps en temps;
Leurs robes dans l’azur font des plis Mâtants;
Leurs ailes, qui d’en haut éblouissent nos âmes,
Sont des ruissellements de rayons et de flammes;
Ils planent en parlant sur nos fronts-ténébreux;
Les âmes justes vont pensives derrière eux
Ramassarif ce qui tombe, ainsi que des glaneuses;
Ils disent dans la nuit des choses lumineuses;
Leur lèvre pure, où chante et luit l’éternité,
Laisse échapper sans fin un verbe de clarté,
Si bien que, lorsqu’ils sont dans nos ombres farouches,
A la lueur des mots on peut suivre leurs bouches.

LXIV Homme, pourquoi nier

Homme, pourquoi nier ce que tu ne vois point?
En deux égales parts, qu’un sort commun rejoint,
L’invisible au visible est mêlé dans un être
Qu’appesantit l’argile et que l’esprit pénètre;
Cet être, composé de l’une et l’autre loi,
Mange et pense; et veux-tu le voir, regarde-toi.
Homme, tu ne vois pas le céleste; et c’est triste;
Il se voile à tes yeux de chair; mais il existe.
Cet univers, abîme autant qu’ascension,
Ce monde au double aspect, cette création
Dont la moitié splendide échappe à ta prunelle,
N’a pas, étant la sphère une, vraie, éternelle,
Le côté du démon sans le côté de Dieu
Le singe prouve l’ange, et l’homme est le milieu.

LXV Au nom de ce qui vit,

Au nom de ce qui vit, paix à ce qui n’est, plus!
Paix aux vieux codes morts! . aux siècles vermoulus!
Paix aux religions, quelle que soit l’église!
Paix à ce qui s’en va, que le fantôme lise
Dans les missels latins ou les Talmuds hébreux!
Paix au passé! pitié pour le soir ténébreux!
Morne, il hait l’avenir qu’il ne doit pas atteindre.
Laissez ce qui s’éteint tranquillement s’éteindre,
Et ne regardez pas de ce côté. Plus d’air,
Plus de soleil, hélas! le couchant triste et clair
Sur tout le fond du ciel tendu comme un suaire,
Jette dans la masure un reflet mortuaire,
Dessine en noir, au bord du blême soupirail,
La toile d’araignée. enèadrée au vitrail,

Et fait lugubrement trembler dans les charpentes
Des haillons de houx sombre et de ronces grimpantes;
Le crépuscule passe entre les lourds piliers,
Et blanchit vaguement des dessous d’escaliers;
Dans l’ombre un rouet file; à des lueurs de lampe
éclairant quelque étrange ét tortueuse rampe,
Sous des enfoncements de portes, des vieillards
Rêvent, ayant leurs ans autour d’eux en brouillards.

LXVI Vous dont la part est la meilleure,

Vous dont la part est la meilleure,
Oh! méditez!
Soyez comme celui, qui pleure,
Vous qui chantez;

Vous dont une femme a pris l'âme,
Soyez toujours
Comme si vous étiez sans femme
Et sans amours;

Vous qui gouvernez un royaume,
Soyez, ô rois,
Comme ceux qui sont sous le chaume
Au fond des bois;

Vous qui vivez parmi les roses,
Les sens en feu,
Dans la splendeur de toutes choses
Sous le ciel bleu,

Soyez comme en la nuit profonde
Où rien ne luit
Car la figure de ce mondé
S'évanouit.

1 juin 1846.

LXVII Le calcul, c’est l’abîme.

Le calcul, c’est l’abîme. Ah’! tu sors de ta sphère,
Eh bien, tu seras seùl. Homme, tâche de faire
Entrer dans l’infini quelque être que ce soit
De ceux que ta main touche et que ton regard voit;
Nul ne le peut. La vie expire en perdant terre.
Chaque être a son milieu; hors du bois la panthère
Meurt, et l’on voit tomber, sans essor, sans éclair,
Hors du feu l’étincelle et l’oiseau hors de l’air;
Nulle forme ne vit loin du réel traînée;
La vision terrestre à la terre est bornée;
Le nuage lui-même, errant, volant, planant,
Allant d’un continent à l’autre continent,
S’il voyait l’absolu, serait pris de vertige;
Sortir de l’horizon n’est permis qu’au prodige;
L’homme le peut, étant le monstre en qui s’unit
Le miasme du nadir au rayon du zénith.
Entre donc dans l’abstrait, dans l’obscur, dans l’énorme;
Renonce à la couleur et renonce à la forme;
Soit; mais pour soulever le voile, le linceul,
La robe de la pâle Isis, te voilà seul.
Tout est noir: C’est en vain que ta voix crie et nomme.
La nature, ce chien qui, fidèle, suit l’homme,
S’est arrêtée au seuil du gouffre avec effroi.
Regarde. La science exacte est devant toi,
Nue et blême et terrible, et disant: qu’oh remporte
L’aube et la vie! ayant l’obscurité pour porte,
Pour signes, l’alphabet mystérieux qu’écrit
Son doigt blanc hors du jour dans l’ombre de l’esprit,
Pour tableau noir le fond immense de la tombe.
Ici, dans un brouillard qui de toutes parts tombe,
Dans des limbes où tout semble, en gestes. confus,
Jeter au monde, au ciel, au soleil, un refus,
Dans un vide immobile où rien ne se déplace,
Dans un froid où l’esprit respire de la glace,

Où Fahrenheit avorte ainsi que Réaumur,
Monte dans l’absolu le nombre, horrible mur,
Incolore, impalpable, informe, impénétrable;
Les chiffres, ces flocons de l’incommensurable,
Flottent dans cette brume où se perdent tes yeux,
Et, pour escalader le mur mystérieux,
Ces spectres, muets, sourds, sur leur aile funèbre
Apportent au songeur cette échelle, l’algèbre,
Echelle faite d’ombre et dont les échelons
De Dédale et-d’Hermès ont usé les talons.

Géométrie! algèbre! arithmétique! zone
Où l’invisible plan coupe le vague cône,
Où l’asymptote cherche, où l’hyperbole fuit!
Cristallisation des prismes de la nuit;

Mer dont le polyèdre est l’affreux madrépore;
Nuée où l’univers en calculs s’évapore,
Où le fluide vaste et sombre épars dans tout
N’est plus qu’une hypothèse, et tremble, et se dissout;
Nuit faite d’un amas de sombres évidences,
Où les forces, les gaz, confuses abondances,
Les éléments grondants que l’épouvante suit,
Perdent leur noir vertige et leur flamme et leur bruit;
Caverne où le tonnerre entre sans qu’on l’entende,
Où toute lampe fait l’obscurité plus grande,
Où l’unité de l’être apparaît mise à nu!
Stalactites du chiffre au fond de l’inconnu!
Cryptes de la science!

On ne sait quoi d’atone
Et d’informe, qui vit, qui creuse et qui tâtonne!
Vision de l’abstrait que l’oeil ne saurait voir!
Est-ce un firmament blême? est-ce un océan noir?
En dehors des objets sur qui le. jour se lève,
En dehors des vivants du sang ou de la sève,
En dehors de tout être errant, pensant, aimant,

Et de toute parole et de tout mouvement,
Dans l’étendue où rien ne palpite et ne vibre,
Espèce de squelette obscur de l’équilibre,
L’énorme mécanique idéale construit
Ses figures qui font de l’ombre sur la nuit.
Là, pèse un crépuscule affreux, inexorable.
Au fond, presque indistincts, l’absolu, l’innombrable,
L’inconnu, rocs hideux que rongent des varechs
D’A plus B ténébreux mêlés d’X et d’Y grecs;
Sommes, solutions, calculs où Won voit pendre
L’addition qui rampe, informe scolopendre!
Signes terrifiants vaguement aperçus!
Triangles sans Brahma! croix où manque Jésus!
Réduction du monde et de l’être en atomes!
Sombre enchevêtrement de formules fantômes!
Ces hydres qui chacune ont leur secret fatal,
S’accroupissent sur l’ombre, inerte piédestal,
Ou se traînent, ainsi qu’échappés de l’Erèbe
Les monstres de l’énigme erraient autour de Thèbe;
Le philosophe à qui. l’abeille offrait son miel,
Les poètes, Moïse ainsi qu’Ezéchiel,
Et Platon comme Homère expirent sous les griffes
De ces sphinx tatoués de noirs hiéroglyphes;
Point d’aile ici; l’idée avorte ou s’épaissit;
La poésie y meurt, la lumière y noircit;
Loin de se dilater, tout esprit se contracte
Dans les immensités de la science exacte,
Et les aigles portant la foudre aux Jupiters
N’ont rien à faire avec ces sinistres éthers;

Cette sphère éteint l’art comme erï son âpre touffe
La ciguë assoupit une fleur qu’elle étouffe.
Toutefois. la chimère y peut vivre portant
D’une main la cornue et de l’autre l’octant,
Faisant l’algèbre même à ses rêves sujette,
Dans un coin monstrueux la magie y végète;
Et la science roule en ses flux et reflux

Flamel sous Lavoisier, Herschel sur Thrasyllus:
Qui pour le nécromant et pour la mandragore
Chante abracadabra? l’abac de Pythagore;
Car d’un côté l’on monte et de l’autre on descend,
Et de l’homme jamais le songe n’est absent.

La pensée ici perd, aride et dépouillée,
Ses splendeurs, comme l’arbre en janvier sa feuillée,
Et c’est ici l’hiver funèbre de l’esprit.
Le monde extérieur s’y transforme ou périt;
Tout être n’est qu’un nombre englouti dans la somme;
Prise àvec ses rayons dans lés doigts noirs de l’homme,
Elle-même, en son gouffre où le calcul l’éteint,
La constellation; que l’astronome atteint,
Devient chiffre, et, lugubre, entre dans la formule.
L’amas des sphères d’or en zéros s’accumule.
Tout se démontre ici. Le chiffre, dur scalpel,
Comme un ventre effrayant ouvré et fouille le ciel.
Dans cette atmosphère âpre, impitoyable, épaisse,
La preuve règne. Calme, elle compte, dépèce,
Dissèque; étreint, mesure, examine, et ne sait
Rien hors de la balance et rien hors du creuset;
Elle enrégistre l’ombre et l’ouragan, cadastre
L’azur, le tourbillon, le météore et l’astre,
Prend les dimensions de l’énigme en dehors,.
Ne sent rien frissonner dans le linceul des morts,
Annule l’invisible, ignore ce que pèse
Le grand Moi de l’abîme; inutile hypothèse,
Et met du plomb aux pieds des lugubres sondeurs.
A l’appel qu’elle jette aux mornes profondeurs,
Le flambeau monte après avoir éteint sa flamme;
La loi vient sans l’esprit, le fait surgit sans l’âme;
Quand l’infini paraît, Dieu s’est évanoui:

Ô science! absolu qui proscrit l’inouï!
L’exact pris pour le vrai! la plus grande méprise
De l’homme, atome en qui l’immensité se brise;

Et qui croit, dans sa main que le néant conduit,
Tenir de la clarté quand il tient de la nuit!

Ô. néant! de là vient que le penseur -promène
Souvent son désespoir sur la science humaine,

Et que ce cri funèbre est parfois entendu:
— Savants, puisque votre oeuvre est un effort perdu,
Puisque, même avec vous, nul chercheur ne pénètre
Dans le problème unique, et n'arrive à connaître;
Que, même en vous suivant dans tant d'obscurité,
Hélas! on ne sait rien de la réalité,
Rien du sort, rien de l'aube ou de l'ombre éternelle,
Rien du gouffre où l'espoir ouvre en tremblant son aile;
Puisqu'il faut qu'après vous encor nous discutions;
Puisque vous ne pouvez répondre aux questions:
Le monde a-t-il un Dieu? la vie a-t-elle une âme?
Puisque la même nuit qui nous tient, vous réclame,
Pourquoi votre science et votre vanité?
A quoi bon de calculs ronger l'immensité,
Et creuser l'impossible, et faire, ô songeurs sombres,
Ramper sur l'infini la vermine des. nombres? -

N'importe! si jamais l'homme s'est approché
De la mystérieusé et fatale Psyché,
Si jamais, lui poussière, il a fait un abîme,
C'est ici. La science est le vide sublime.

Dans ce firmament gris qu'on nomme abstraction,
Gouffre dont l'hypothèse est le vague alcyon,
Tout est l'indéfini, tout est l'insaisissable.
Le calcul, sablier dont le chiffre est le sable,
Depuis que dans son urne un premier nombre est né,
N'a pas été par l'homme une fois retourné.;
Et les premiers zéros envoyés par Monime
Et Méron pour trouver les derniers dans l'abîme
Depuis quatre mille ans ne sont pas revenus;

Les pâtres de Chaldée, effrayants, ingénus,
Rêvent là, frémissants, comptant sur leurs doigts l’être;
On y voit Aristote errer et disparaître;
Là flottent des esprits, Geber, Euclide, Euler,
Comme autrefois,:hagards dans les souffles de l’air,
Les prophètes planaient sous le céleste dôme;
Comme Elie a son char, Newton a son binôme;
Qu’est-ce donc qu’ils font là,. tous ces magiciens,
Laplace et les nouveaux, Hipside et les anciens?
Ils ramènent au chiffre inflexible l’espace.
Halley saisit la loi de l’infini qui passe;
Copernic, par moments, biffant des mondes nuls,
Puise une goutte d’encre au fond des noirs calculs,
Et fait une rature à la voûte étoilée;
Hicétas tressaillant appelle Galilée;
La terre sous leurs pieds fuit dans l’azur vermeil,
Et tous les deux d’un signe arrêtent le soleil;
Et tout au fond du gouffre et dans une fumée,
On distingue, accoudé, l’immense Ptolémée.

Tous ces titans, captifs dans un-seul horizon,
Cyclopes du savoir, n’ont qu’un oeil, la raison;
On entend dans ces nuits de vagues bruits d’enclumes;
Qu’y forge-t-on? le doute et l’ombre. Dans ces brumes
Tout est-il cécité, trouble; incertitude? Oui.
Pourtant, par cet excès d’ombre même ébloui,.
Parfois, pâle, éperdu, frissonnant, hors d’haleine,
Comme au fanal nocturne arrive le phalène,
On arrive, à travers ces gouffres infinis,.
À la lueur Thalès, à la lueur Leibniz,
Et l’on voit resplendir, après d’affreux passages;
La lampe aux sept flambeaux qu’on nomme les sept sages;
Et la science entière apparaît comme un ciel
Lugubre, sans matière et pourtant sans réel,
N’acceptant point l’azur et rejetant la terre,
Ayant pour clef le fait, le nombre pour mystère;
L’algèbre y luit ainsi qu’une sombre. Vénus.;

Et de ces absolus et de ces inconnus,:
De ces obscurités terribles, de ces-vides,
Les logarithmes sont les pléiades livides;
Et Franklin pâle y jette une clarté d’éclair,
Et la comète y passe, et se nomme Kepler.
Il est deux nuits, deux puits d’aveuglement, deux tables
D’obscurité, sans fin, sans forme, épouvantables,
L’algèbre, nuit de l’homme, et le ciel, nuit de Dieu;
Les siècles s’useraient à compter, hors du lieu,
De l’espace, du temps, de ton monde et du nôtre,
Les astres dans une ombre et les chiffres dans l’autre!

Mathématiques! chute au fond du vrai tombeau
Où descend l’idéal qui rejette le beau!
Abstrait! cher-aux songeurs comme l’étoile, aux guèbres!
Mur de bronze et de brume! ô fresque des ténèbres
Sur la nuit! torsion de l’idée en dehors
Des êtres, des aspects, des rayons et des corps!
Création rampant sur la chose en décombres!
O chapelle Sixtine effrayante des nombres
Où ces damnés, perdus dans le labeur quils font,
S’écroulent à jamais dans le calcul sans fond!
Précipice inouï, quel est ton Michel-Ange?
Quel penseur, quel rêveur, quel-créateur étrange,
Quel mage, a mis ce gouffre au fond le plus hagard
De la pensée humaine et mortelle, én regard
De-l’autre gouffre, vie et monde, qu’on devine
Au fond de la pensée éternelle et divine!

LXVIII Collabore avec Dieu;

Collabore avec Dieu; prévois, pourvois; prends soin
De l'univers; veille, aide; et répare au besoin;
Prends dans ta main, savant, prends dans ta main, druide,
La gravitation, la chaleur, le fluide,
Ces aimants où l'on sent comme une volonté,
Ces flux et ces reflux d'intime affinité,
Tout ce vaste filet de lois impérieuses,
De fécondes clartés, d'ombres mystérieuses,
Freins que l'élément ronge, enchaînements, réseaux
Où l'on entend souffler d'invisibles naseaux;
Mets ton tablier, homme, et fourbis-moi ces boucles
De soleils, de rayons, d'étoiles, d'escarboucles,
Ces noeuds de l'Inconnu que toi seul tu connais;
Sois le palefrenier de ce sombre harnais
De forces, de courants, d'attraction profonde,
Qui bride et qui contient l'effrayant cheval Monde;
Et s'il veut, dérobant sa bouche horrible au mors,
Briser ces lois, qui font même obéir les morts,
Interviens,, et rajuste avec ton bras énorme
Le noir caparaçon sur sa croupe difforme.

LXIX Des sages?

Des sages?
En veux-tu voir, songeur? Vois ces frais, écoliers
Qui s’échappent des bancs et courent aux halliers,
Et vont aux champs, légers, libres, de jeunesse ivres,
Poussant des cris, cueillant des fleurs, jetant les livres,
Et qui se laissent vivre et de joie inonder,
Et s’emplissent l’esprit de jour, sans demander
A l’aurore des cieux comment elle s’appelle!
Vois ces deux amoureux qui cherchent la chapelle
De l’azur, des taillis profonds, des bruits d’oiseaux,
Et qui laissent leur coeur fuir, avec les ruisseaux,
Jaser avec les nids, avec le soleil luire,
Sans vouloir, sans tenter, sans creuser, sans construire
Autre chose qu’un rêve ineffable et réel!
Ils s’inquiètent peu de l’inutile ciel;
Ils n’en ont pas besoin puisqu’ils disent: je t’aime!
Qu’en feraient-ils; étant le paradis eux-même?
Ils portent l’un et l’autre un songe sur leur front;
Ils sont heureux; pour aube et pour azur ils ont,

Lui, qu’elle soit si belle, elle, qu’il soit si tendre!
Le rossignol suspend son chant pour les entendre.
Ils vont, doux insensés du coeur, couple enivré
De la voix amoureuse et du regard sacré;
Ils vont, ils sont! La main par la main est pressée;
Ils vivent lèvre à lèvre et pensée à pensée;
Si bien que tout leur être est un frisson joyeux,
Et que, près des rayons que prodiguent leurs yeux,
Le matin est avare et l’astre est économe;
Et que la jeune fille aime, et que le jeune homme
Adore, et qu’autour d’eux le bois frémit! si bien
Qu’ils ne savent plus rien, qu’ils ne veulent plus rien,
Que pour ces éblouis la plaine est une fête,
Et que tous les passants tournent vers eux la tête,

Et que les jeunes sont jaloux, et que les vieux
Tristes de n’être plus jaloux, sont envieux!
Ce beau couple est penché sur l’eau qui désaltère.

Songeur! songeur! il est deux sages sur la terre;
Le premier est l’enfant, le second est l’amant.

LXX MATÉRIALISME ET SPIRITUALISME

PYRRHON
Je mourrai tout entier.

SOCRATE
Moi, j’espère en la mort.

PYRRHON
Je vous dis que je suis une bête.

SOCRATE
D’accord.

8 juillet 1875

I Autrefois,

Autrefois, dans les temps de la lumière pure,
L’antique poésie à l’antique nature
parlait; le vers ailé, fier, sublime, ingénu,
Était comme un oiseau, des autres reconnu,
Auquel l’aigle disait: c’est toi! dans les nuées;
Les cimes des forêts gravement remuées,
Les antres; les rochers, les lys, les flots marins
Dialoguaient avec Orphée aux yeux sereins;
Les choses comprenaient le chant profond des hommes;
La tige offrait ses fleurs, la branche offrait ses pommes
Au doux mage Linus par la muse enivré
Quand Homère chantait, le mendiant sacré,
Le dieu Terme attendri se tournait sur les bornes;
Et la chèvre, l’agneau, le boeuf aux larges cornes,
La vache au pis gonflé broutant les verts gazons,
Rêveurs, levaient la tête au-dessus des buissons,
Et, les yeux éblouis d’une lueur divine,
Venaient pour regarder passer dans la ravine,
Plein de rires, de chants, de masques et d’épis,
Le vieux. chariot fou que promenait Thespis.

5 novembre 1853. Jersey.

II Deux beaux enfants,

Deux beaux enfants, Chromis et le berger Mnasyle
Ont vu Silène au fond d’une grotte endormi,

Seul, et comme toujours, ivre plus qu’à demi.
Ses bandelettes d’or se déroulaient dans l’antre;
Sa cruche était cassée et gisait sur le ventre.
Tous deux pour le saisir ont profité du lieu;
Avec la bandelette ils ont lié le dieu,
Vieux chanteur qui souvent leur manqua de parole.
Eglé, la belle nymphe, Eglé, la belle folle,
Survient, les encourage, et redouble les noeuds;
Et, quoique le vieillard rouvre déjà les yeux,
Elle lui peint la face au milieu des risées
Avec le sang vermeil des mûres écrasées.
Lui s’éveille et sourit.
— Laissez-moi libre, amis,
Et vous aurez les chants que je vous ai promis;
Acceptez la rançon qu’ici je vous propose;
J’ai pour vous des chansons et pour elle autre chose. -
Puis il commence et chante.
Alors, à cette voix,
On vit les daims, les loups et les bêtes des bois
Se mêler aux sylvains dans une étrange danse,
Et les chênes pensifs agiter en cadence
Leur front d’où l’ombre au loin tombe sur le vallon.
Le rocher du Parnasse est moins fier d’Apollon,
Et Rhodope et l’Ismare écoutent moins Orphée.

III Sur la coupe

Sur la coupe où le vin mousse et se précipite,
Le centaure au flanc roux lutte avec le Lapithe;
L’artiste ingénieux cisela sur l’étain,
O leçon! ce combat qui naquit d’un festin;
La mêlée est affreuse; au milieu des huées,
Un des géants, enfant orageux des nuées,
Se voyant désarmé dans ce banquet d’enfer,
Rit, et prend pour massue un chandelier de fer

Cauterets, 22 août 1843.

IV Toujours l’esprit avance

Toujours l’esprit avance et l’art se renouvelle:
Pour refaire sans cesse avec de la clarté
Une dot de chéfs-d’oeuvre à l’homme épouvanté,
Les grànds hommes sont là Comme de grands prodigues.
Nous avons beau forger des lois, creuser des digues,
Le génie engloutit tout ce que nous faisons
Sous un splendide amas d’immenses floraisons:
Rien n’arrête le pas du genre humain; il marche;
II fait Rome après Thèbe et le dôme après l’arche;
Il fait le Colisée après le Parthénon.
Homère meurt, laissant comme un astre son nom,
Eschyle suit; la France éclôt quand Rome expire;
Puis Rabelais surgit, Cervantes naît, Shakspeare
Luit, et ces hommes sont comme des océans.
Le colosse qui vient fait peur aux vieux géants;
Dante épouvante Amos; Michel-Ange intimide,
Rien qu’en dressant le front,. la grande, Pyramide,
Et, de l’Apollon grec au Sphinx, égyptien,
Fait devant l’art nouveau frissonner l’art ancien”
Homère, sous le poids du destin sombre, expire;
Virgile dit: Heureux qui sait la fin! Shakspeare
Crie: Etre ou n’être pas; telle est la question.
Eschyle, dont le vers fait une fonction,
Pindare,, front battu du sombre essaim de l’ode,
David, Ezéchiel, Stésichore, Hésiode,
Bruissent comme au vent de ténébreux rameaux;
Idithun, Salomon, Jean, Isaïe, Amos,
Les paumes de leurs mains sur les, pages. des. Bibles,
Vont comme enveloppés de:tourbillons terribles;
L’éclair emporte Dante et la brume Ossian;
Et l’esprit humain tremble ainsi qu’un océan
Quand ces problèmes noirs qui soufflent les délires
Déchaînent dans sa nuit la tempête des lyres.

VI L’expiation triste

L’expiation triste et le sort, noeud de fer,
La douleur, la matière odieuse, la chair,

Enferment l’homme, esprit captif, âme asservie,
Et sont la grille noire et dure de la vie;
Mais qu’on entende en haut ce cri: paix au pécheur!
Que du côté. des cieux il vienne une blancheur,
Et tout à coup, la chair, dont la lourdeur accable,
L’âpre expiation, la matière implacable,
Le destin, la douleur, se mettront à chanter,
Et, vibrant dans cette ombre où l’aube va monter,
Devant le soupirail où l’homme cherche à lire,
Ces barreaux deviendront les cordes d’une lyre “.

VII Quand le poète est las,

Quand le poète est las, ce grand esprit banni,
De battre avec son aile immense l’infini,
Quand il sent le besoin d’interrompre sa course
Entre la mort, fin sombre, et Dieu, fatale source,
Ne pouvant plus planer, mais voguer seulement,
Sidéral et superbe, il se pose un moment
Sur quelque passion courante et populaire;
Pareil à l’aigle blanc, chasseur du ciel polaire,
Qui s’abat de fatigue aux vergues d’un vaisseau.

VIII Quand tout un continent tremble

Quand tout un continent tremble au souffle électrique,
Quand de la triste Europe ou de l’âpre Amérique
On voit l’étincelle jaillir,
Que l’humanité crie en son angoisse amère,
Et qu’on entend, pareille au ventre de la mère,
La sombre terre tressaillir,

Sachez, blêmes passants dont je vois la figure,
Que l’aigle Poésie à la vaste envergure
Craint peu cette convulsion;
Il n’est jamais plus fier qu’au choc des catastrophes,
Alors qu’il fait crouler l’avalanche des strophes
Du vieux mont Révolution.

Il couve les Jean Huss comme il couve les Dantes.
Sachez que, dans la trombe et sur les mers grondantes,
Ce grand oiseau toujours plana,
Et qu’il irait, sans même en sentir les secousses,
Faire son nid et tordre avec son bec des mousses
Dans le cratère de l’Etna.

Calme, il prend l’ouragan dans sa serre, et le dompte;
Il est l’esprit humain il. vole, il plane, il monte,
Dans la foudre et dans la clarté,
Étendant tour à, tour sur l’énorme fournaise
L’aile quatrevingt-neuf, l’aile quatrevingt-treize,
Immense dans l’immensité.

IX Aux heures où le ciel est noir,

Aux heures où le ciel est noir, où l’astre est clair,
Lorsque les visions de, nuit flottent dans l’air”
Comme ces tourbillons qui “vont le long des grèves,
Quand les hommes sont lourds dans leur lit plein de rêves,
Dieu leur ouvre, l’oreille et leur parle. tout. bas.
Il leur dit ce qu’il faut qu’ils sachent de quel pas
Le juste doit marcher dans l’ombre de la vie.;
Grand, éviter l’orgueil, et petit, fuir l’envie.
Oh! tressaillez, vous, tous, qu’avertit cette. voix!.
Écoutez-la bien! Dieu ne,parle qu’une fois ,
Et ne répète point les choses qu’il a dites.

C’est la voix que jadis,”tremblants, vous entendîtes,
O prophètes! esprits qui songiez au désert!

Et c’est tantôt la foudre, et tantôt un concert.
Oh! tandis que! le roi, brisant murs et palais,
Bat cette pauvre ville avec ses noirs boulets,
Dresse en ce. sombre. camp, plein de splendeurs vulgaires,
Ta tente, intëlligence! et rêve au bruit des guerres,
Et-.songe; toi que Dante eût pris pour compagnon,
Quel engin il faudrait, et quel fameux canon,
Et quelle armée énorme à tes pieds amassée;
Pour jeter bas la tour bâtie en ta pensée!

XI Quand tu marches,

Quand tu marches, distrait, dans la ville où tout passe,
Où lutte une cohue âprè, aveugle et rapace,
Tu livres ta pensée aux calmes visions!
Tu sembles écouter, belle âme qu’on envie,
Au delà de la foule, au delà de la vie,
De vagues acclamations!

Oui, la postérité que ton grand nom éveille,
Et qui dès à présent murmure à ton oreille,
O grand homme! ô songeur! sait déjà que tu vis!
Elle voit tous tes vers poindre à leur origine!
Tout ce que ton esprit rêve, apprête, imagine,
Est visible à ses yeux ravis!

Ô poète profond qu’on suit et qu’on révère,
L’oeuvre est encor cachée en ton esprit sévère,
Dérobant dans la nuit ses traits graves et beaux,
Que la gloire déjà la distingue dans l’ombre!
La gloire! astre tardif, lune sereine et sombre
Qui sé lève sur les tombeaux!

La gloire voit ton rêve!! et sa clarté nocturne,
Comme jadis Phoebé dans le.bois taciturne
Baisait Endymion de son rayon ami,
Du fond de l’avenir caresse avec mystère,
A travers les rameaux de ta pensée austère,
Le chef-d’oeuvre encore endormi!

29 décembre 1841.

XII Honte au vain philosophe,

Honte au vain philosophe, à l'artiste inutile
Qui ne met pas son sang et son coeur dans son style!
Honte au sophiste assis sur le seuil des vertus
Qui commente Platon sans méditer Brutus!
Honte à ceux qui, bruyants, adorent la patrie,
En font une publique et chaude idolâtrie,
Et qui, quand l'heure vient du gouffre et du péril,
Ne l'aiment pas jusqu'à lui préférer l'exil!
Honte au tribun qui crie au peùple de le suivre,
Et qui se sent à l'âme un lâche amour de vivre!

Honte au rhéteur.qui dit: Progrès, humanité,
Avenir! sans vouloir le calvaire à côté.!
Ils peuvent un moment charmer Athène ou Rome,
Tromper Sparte; l'antique honnêteté de l'homme,
Qui marchande la gloire aux lutteurs peu meurtris,
Gronde et. n'est pas leur dupe, et montre leurs écrits
Cloués sur son comptoir comme fausse monnaie;
Et ce vieux peseur d'or, le temps, qui;juge et paie,
Qui dit à l'un: toujours! qui dit à l'autre: assez!
Refuse à son guichet leurs noms vertdegrisés.

17 novembre.

XIII À UN GRAND COMÉDIEN

Va, sois le messager des poètes sublimes!
Emporte l’âme humaine à leurs augustes cimes.
Marche comme celui qui vient du Cythéron!
Fais éclater leur voix sur la foule pressée;
Prends leur pensée
Comme un clairon!

Sois Othello, Macbeth, Titan, Oreste, Achille:
Sois l’apparition de Shakspeare et. d’Eschyle!,
L’ombre que ces-penseurs font sortir dé l’enfer,
La création sombre où resplendit leur flamme!
Ils en sont l’âme,
Sois-en la chair.

Prends les dieux corps à corps! Conquiers ces vastes rôles
Qui font plier le faible aux chétives épaules.
Transforme-toi. -Grandis dans nos émotions!
Sois le géant! sois l’aigle à l’immense. envergure!
Sois la figure
Des visions!

Rôde avec Yorick près des fosses ouvertes.
Cherche avec Caliban les solitudes vertes.
Sois chevalier, valet, prêtre, empereur, -bourreau.
Partout, en haut, en bas, qu’un esprit t’accompagne!
Sois Charlemagne
Et Figaro!

Invente en traduisant! Lutte avec les. idées
Des poètes, semeurs des âmes fécondées.!
Lutte avec leurs beautés qui nous viennent ravir!
Saisis-les, dompte-les, ces beautés souveraines!
Et par ces reines
Fais-toi servir!

Sur le vers frémissant, plein de tragiques haines,
Qui se tord au seuil noir des passions humaines,
Composé d’idéal et pétri de limon,
Dresse-toi formidable, éblouissant, étrange,
Comme l’archange
Sur le démon!

Prêtre des dieux de l’art! emplis de leur génie
Le peuple aux mille échos qui les raille et les nie!
Répands ton âme à flots sur l’homme qui sourit,
Car, toujours dépensée, elle est toujours entière.
Sur la matière
Verse l’esprit!

28 juillet 1849.

XIV Lorsque j’étais enfant,

Lorsque j’étais enfant, sortant de rhétorique,
J’envoÿais aux journaux de la prose lyrique
En l’honneur des géants du sombre esprit humain;
J’essayais d’expliquer. leur but et leur chemin,
De quel pas ils marchaient et vers quélle lumière;
Ce qu’ils faisaient; pourquoi la Bible est la première,
Et plus bas l’Iliade; et je disais pourquoi
Molière demi-dieu passe Corneille roi;
Ce qu’est Milton; pourquoi; je n’étais pas athée
Au génie; et pourquoi j’admirais Prométhée;
Pourquoi je contemplais les esprits éclatants,
Poètes, orateurs, sages; -puis, par instants,
Je m’écriais, brisant mes plumes inquiètes:
— A quoi bon célébrer en prose les poètes?
Louer l’immensité, l’azur, la profondeur!
Peut-on dorer la flamme et grandir la grandeur?
Chanter Homère en style à trente sous la page!
Coudre un vain feuilleton, inutile tapage,
Accrocher ma louange en verres de couleur
Au roi Priam, géant de l’antique douleur,
A Job, à Jérémie, à Dante, à toi, Shakspeare,
Au vieil Eschyle en qui le vieux Titan respire!
Dire au génie, au bas du journal: sois béni!

Vanter ces écrivains du grand livre infini
Dont la foule ne sait pas même l’orthographe!
Pendre une girandole en bouchons de carafe
A l’anneau de Saturne énorme et flamboyant!

Et tout bas une voix me disait: -Ô. croyant,
Le ciel t’a mis dans l’âme une lyre ingénue,
Non, ne t’arrête pas! tu fais bien. Continue.
Admire. C’est ainsi qu’on vole au firmament.
Comprendre le génie est le commencement.

L’esprit religieux, dans ce monde où nous sommes,
Ébauche l’hymne à Dieu par un hymne aux grands hommes.
Les grands hommes, enfant, sont les lueurs de Dieu.
Ils sont l’ardente roue autour du sombre essieu.,
Ils jettent, des hauteurs de leùr brûlant solstice,
L’un de la vérité, l’autre de la justice,
L’autre de la sagesse, et tous de l’infini.
Le penseur qui, d’en bas à leur splendeur uni,
Tente l’ascension de leur sommet austère,
Voit dans tous ces esprits les degrés du mystère;
Il sent dans chacun d’eux l’être inconnu, qui vit,
Il va de l’immortel à l’éternel, gravit
Du poète au prophète et du sage à l’apôtre,
Et, montant pas à pas d’une clarté sur l’autre,
Épelant le saint nom sur chaque front vermeil,
Fait avec les rayons une échelle au soleil.

XV L’hexamètre,

L’hexamètre, pourvu qu’en rompant la césure,
Il montre la pensée et garde la mesure,
Vole et marche; il sé tord, il rampe, il est debout.
Le vers coupé contient tous les tons, et dit tout.
C’est ce qui fait qu’Horace est si charmant à lire.
Son doigt souple à la fois touche à toute la lyre.

XVI Doux poètes, chantez!

Doux poètes, chantez! Dans vos nids, sous la feuille,
Même au déclin des ans,

1 février 1855.

L’aube vous rit; soyez les seuls dont l’amour veuille
Dorer les cheveux blancs!

Le poète est un chant qui vole à nos oreilles;
Il vit dans un rayon;
Enfant, il est Platon baisé par les abeilles,
Et, vieux, Anacréon.

Ô poètes! vivez, aimez, battez de l’aile,
Radieux et cachés!
Le bonheur vous convie à sa fête éternelle!
Mais si vous approchez

Des révolutions énormes et sévères,
Fier chaos, gouffre obscur
Où les sommets ont tous des formes de calvaires,
Renoncez à l’azur!

Renoncez à l’amour, renoncez à la fête!
Faites-vous de grands coeurs
Qui, dans plus de souffrance et dans plus de tempête,
Se sentent plus vainqueurs.

Le genre humain, depuis six mille ans à la chaîne,
Levant soudain le front,
S’est enfin révolté contre la vieille peine,
Contre le vieil affront;

Il faut être puissant et grave quand on entre

Dans ces rébellions.
Soyez oiseaux; alors ne volez pas dans l’antre;
Ou devenez lions.

18 avril 1854.

XVII CHANSON

Écoutez la. voix touchante
De l’oiseau de l’air qui chante,
Du poète qui sourit;
Écoutez ces voix fidèles,
Car les oiseaux ont des ailes,
Et le poète a l’esprit.

Pendant que.le vin t’enivre;
Pendant que tu lis le livre
Choisi par ta vanité;
Ou que tu te prostitues
A ces trois froides statues,
Richesse, orgueil, volupté;

Pendant que, face ridée,.
Tu vas traînant ton idée,
Creusant ta vie ou ton champ;
Pendant que ton instinct mène
Dans la grande ornière humaine
Quelque chariot penchant;

Tandis que, gais ou moroses,
Vous faites cent tristes choses
Qui vous font baisser les yeux,
Vous avez tous sur vos têtes
Les oiseaux et les poètes,
Pêle-mêle dans les cieux.

21 juin 1843.

XVIII Pour nous, nouveaux venus,

Pour nous, nouveaux venus, qui voyons l’astre éclore,
Fils d’une époque où tout a des lueurs d’aurore,
Pour nous, gens d’aujourd’hui, qui sortons du brouillard,
Qui n’échafaudons point pêle-mêle dans l’art
Près d’un spectre de bronze une poupée en cire,
Tancrède près d’Oreste et près d’Electre Alzire,
Et né confondons point l’antique avec le vieux,
Le ciel où Boiléaù plane est un ciel pluvieux;
La muse’à lui baiser la bouche nous convie;
Nous nous sentons, devant le grand siècle, une envie
Parricide, d’en être un peu les ravageurs,
Et dé dire: Aristote, hé! nous sommes majeurs.
L’art n’est plus le salon de Madame dù Maine,
Une odeur de moisi sort du bon Théramène,
La tragédie est froide et sent le renfermé.
Oui, pour quiconque a vu, marché, souffert, aimé,
Les règles d’autrefois sont une cave humide;
Tout, même le génie, y baisse un front timide,
Et Calliope y tousse; et dans l’ombre on peut voir
Voler en clignotant sous ce grand plafond noir

Une chauve-souris qu’on nomme l’âme humaine.
De l’air! de l’air! qu’au vrai l’idéal nous ramène!
Quand Racine blêmi n’est plus que Campistron,
Quand l’art languit, avec Brossette pour patron,
Honteux d’être sous clef quand l’aigle est dans la nue,
C’est l’honnête devoir de toute âme ingénue
D’entrer là, de tirer largement les rideaux,
D’épousseter sonnets, idylles et rondeaux,
Dût-on à leurs vieux vers faire des déchirures,
D’être désagréable aux verrous, aux serrures,
Aux volets, barricade aveugle du logis,
D’assainir les recoins brusquement élargis,
Et d’ouvrir à grand bruit la fenêtre, indignée

D’avoir chassé l’aurore et logé l’araignée.

15 novembre 1854.

XIX BONHEUR D’ADMIRER

Femmes belles entre les femmes,
Fiers poètes, grands coeurs ouverts,
Qui traînez après vous les âmes
Ivres d’un sourire ou d’un vers,

Qui que vous soyez, ô génies,
Fronts divins, gloire, et toi, beauté,
Vous qui, vivantes harmonies,
Venez à nous dans la, clarté,

Quand je mêle aux bravos sans nombre
Mon obscure acclamation,
Ne vous retournez pas vers l’ombre
Et ne demandez pas mon nom.

Qu’importe mon nom, or ou cuivre,
Perle ou goutte d’eau dans la mer!
Je suis de la foule pour suivre
Et de l’élite pour aimer.”

19 février 1849.

XX À PROPOS D'UNE GRILLE DE BON GOÛT

Le bon goût, c'est une grille.
Gare à ce vieux bon goût-là!
De tout temps, sous son étrille,
Pan, le bouc sacré, bêla.

Le goût classe, isole, trie,.
Et, dé crainte des ébats,
Met de la serrurerie
Autour de tout, ici-bas.
Il cloître, et dit: j'émancipe:
Il coupe, et dit: j'ai créé.
Être sobre est son principe,
Des malades agréé. ,

Il est cousin de l'envie.
Il est membre des sénats.
Il donne au coeur, à la vie,
La forme d'un cadenas.

Sur un Pinde jaune d'ocre,
A mi-côte, en l'art petit,
Il satisfait, médiocre,
Son absence d'appétit.

Devant le grand il recule.
Soit! ce n'est point sans dégâts
Qu'on est touché par Hercule
Ou pris par Micromégas.
Contre toutes les. folies,
Les chefs-d'oeuvre, les rayons
Et les femmes trop jolies,
Il prend ses précautions:

Pour lui, l'idéal, le style,

L’homme, les bois, les oiseaux,
Ont pour but de rendre utile
Une paire de ciseaux.

Il fait les âmes jésuites,
Il fait les esprits pédants,
Et, tranquille sur les suites,
Dit: Prenez le mors aux dents!

Cul-de-jatte, sois lyrique!
Lièvre, deviens effréné!
Couvre-toi de roses, trique!
Macette, sois Evadné!
Taupe, allume le tonnerre.
Dompte, oison, les flots marins.
Ça, porte-moi, poitrinaire,
Deux cents kilos sur tes reins.

Crétin, lâche ton génie.
Glaçon, tâche d’avoir chaud.
Étreins ferme Polymnie
Entre tes deux bras, manchot.

S’abrutir est le précepte
Le plus clair du rituel.
C’est à force d’être inepte
Qu’on devient spirituel.

C’est là tout l’Art Poétique.
Galoper très bien, beaucoup,
Avec ce point pleurétique
Qu’on appelle le bon goût.

Le goût nous donne licence,
Fais tout ce que tu voudras.
Avec cette réticence
Que nous serons des castrats.

L’effet de son beau désordre
Rate, si nous oublions
Qu’une défense de mordre
Est intimée aux lions.
Définitions: Mesdames
Et messieurs, l’ancien bon goût,
C’est l’âne ayant charge d’âmes,
C’est Rien, grand-prêtre de Tout.

C’est bête sans être fauve,
C’est prêcher sans enseigner,
C’est Phoebus devenu chauve,
Qui tâche de se peigner.

L’échevelé l’exaspère.
Que lui veut cette toison
Désagréable et prospère
Du grand art, jeune à foison?

Le goût, tondu; n’aime aucune
Chevelure en liberté.
Car un crâne a la rancune
D’un amoureux déserté.
Crânes nus, hommes sans flammes,
Souffrent, et sont indignés.
De ces cheveux, de ces femmes
Qui les ont abandonnés.

XXI Shakspeare alors,

Shakspeare alors, nourri d’affronts et de huées,
Surgit, front orageux, de l’ombre des nuées.
Ce noir poète, fit une oeuvre, en vérité,
Si rude et si superbe en son énormité,
Si pleine de splendeurs, de vertiges, d’abîmes,
Et de rayonnements s’épandant sur les cimes,
Si sombre et si féconde en gouffres. inouïs,
Que depuis trois cents ans les penseurs éblouis
.La contemplent, surpris que tout les y ramène,
Ainsi qu’une montagne au fond dè l’âme, humaine.

XXII Les instruments sont pleins de la voix

Les instruments sont pleins de la voix chi mystère.
J’aime le cor profond dans, le bois solitaire
J’aime l’orgue, tonnerre et lyre, éclair et nuit,
Bronze et frémissement, forge énorme de bruit,
Fournaise d’harmonie. aux noires cheminées.;
J’aime la contrebasse aux plaintes obstinées,
Et sous l’archet tremblant l’effrayant violon
Qui, mêlant le hautbois, la forêt, l’aquilon ,.
Et l’aile de la mouche et le fifre et le sistre,
Verse dans l’âme sombre un clair-obscur sinistre.

12 octobre 1854.

XXIII ÉCRIT SUR UN VIRGILE

Veux-tu guérir tes maux et blanchir tes noirceurs?
Lis les poètes saints. Rêve au pied de leur trône.
L’esprit humain mendie au seuil des grands penseurs.
Un vers est un secours; totit livre est une aumône.

Verse donc en ton sein, passant triste ou moqueur,
Leur poésie où filtre et se répand le inonde;
La méditation fait l’homme bon; le coeur
Devient d’autant plus doux que l’âme est plus profonde.

18 mai 1847.

XXIV Dans le monde meilleur

Dans le monde meilleur que rêve mon caprice,
Tout chantera; le chant du travail est l’ami;
Et, malgré La Fontaine et grâce à Paul Meurice ,
La cigale dira son fait à la fourmi.

Un jour, tout finira par être l’harmonie;
Chante en attendant, Jeanne. Au zénith, au nadir,
Dieu collabore avec une lyre infinie
Un passereau qui chante aide un chêne à grandir.

Quiconque chante émeut la nature ravie;
La mùsique est la soeur des rayons réchauffants;
Une chanson éparse est utile à la vie;
Chantez, petits oiseaux; chantez, petits enfants.

Le soir, à l’heure où l’ombre endort les nids qui rêvent,
Quand tout s’éteint, un astre apparaît au couchant,
Quand tout se tait, les voix de l’infini s’élèvent,
La nuit veut une étoile et le silence un chant.

16 janvier 1876.
Le Maître d’école, drame de Paul MEURICE.

XXV J’étais petit

J’étais petit avec le désir d’être grand;
C’était dans l’ancien temps où Paris, tel que Rome
Qui fut reine du monde et l’esclave d’un homme,
Voyait tomber César, frappé par vingt bourreaux,
Et pleurait. son tyran autant que son héros;
Les Bourbons revenaient, famille paternelle;
Le Luxembourg, Pizzo, la plaine de Grenelle
Avaient part à la fête, et Trestaillon régnait;
On massacrait Ney, Brune et Mouton-Duvernet,
Et Murat, parodiste éblouissant d’Achille.

Je savais mal le grec; je voùlus lire Eschyle;
J’étais jeune, ignorant, innocent, ingénu;
Je pris chez le premier bouquiniste venu
Un Eschyle en français, car, pour être sincère,
Une traduction m’était fort nécessaire... -
Savarin devant qui s’envole un mets friand,
L’ange à qui le démon vole une âme en riant,
Une fille qui laisse échapper une puce,
Colomb qui voit son monde escroqué par Vespuce,
N’ont pas plus de stupeur et de fureur que moi
Croyant trouver Eschyle et rencontrant Brumoy.

XXVI LE RIRE

L’avenir seul peut rire et. seul peut bafouer.
Avec le puissant rire il ne faut pas jouer.
Jupiter qui foudroie, ou Jupiter qui raille,
Je crains plus le, dernier. Le rire est la mitraille.
L’éclat de rire humain poursuit le noir passé,
Taquine les pédants bornés à l’A B C,
Et manque de respect aux oreilles de l’âne;
Il nargue ce qui. boite au nom de ce qui plane;
Rois vermoulus, faux dieux gâtés, codes pourris,
Ressemblances de prêtre et de chauve-souris,
Terrible, il frappe tout; il augmente à mesure
Que le jour croît, plus clair sur la terre plus sûre;
Il dénonce l’autel ef les dogmes pieux
Qui vont en rampe douce aux budgets copieux;

Il veut que l’art plus fier à de grands buts nous mène;
Il ne se laisse rien conter par Théramène;
Si l’ennui se présente, il refuse l’impôt;
Quand, tout émerveillé du fusil Chassepot,
Tartuffe, sabre aux dents, prend un air de victoire,
I1 crie à la chienlit derrière cette gloire;
Il voit l’erreur qu’on chasse, assiste sans regrets
A cette fuite sombre au grand vent du progrès,
Et se prodigue, altier, rude, aux tristes figures,
Au juge, faux, au prince en retraite, aux augures,
Qui ne se peuvent plus regarder sans pleurer;
Il redouble en voyant tout se transfigurer;
Il fait balle; il est feu, projectile, étincelle;
Il crible la routine en retard; il harcèle
Tous ces traînards qu’on voit préférer, engourdis,
Au bel enfant Demain le bonhomme Jadis,
Et, du wagon traîné par l’éclair, il ricoche
Sur la rosse poussive attelée au vieux coche.

22 novembre 1867.

== XXVII Autant j’aime un livre,

Autant j’aime un livre, autant je hais
Ce que le bourgeois nomme une bibliothèque.
Du patagon au turc et du guèbre à l’aztèque,
L’homme délire. Soit. Ses erreurs. sont nos deuils.
C’est bien. Mais pourquoi faire à grands frais des recueils
Et des collections, qui n’amusent personne,
De toutes les façons dont ce fou déraisonne?
O bahuts solennels, vénérables amas
Des diverses erreurs dans les divers formats,
Rayons qu’emplit la nuit pédagogique, alcôves.
Des bouquins vermoulus chers aux bonshommes chauves;
Cloisons, armoires, trous, compartiments, châssis
Où tous les vieux néants montrent leurs dos moisis,
Dans vos flancs ténébreux, sous la brume des vitres,
Je distingue le tas difforme des bélîtres!
Oh! ceux qu’on ne lit pas et ceux qu’on ne lit plus,
Laharpe et Lebatteux se faisant des saluts
Des deux côtés d’un cippe ou du haut d’un balustre!
Tuet et Patouillet se donnant de l’illustre!
Les adorations de ces cuistres entre eux!
Oh! les socles ventrus sous lés bustes goitreux!
Rapin louant Bouhours! Oh! le bon voisinage
De Saumaise grattant l’échine de Ménage!

L’ombre amoureusement étreint sous le tasseau
Lipse avec Moreri, Brossette avec Crasso;
L’oie admire la dinde et l’on se congratule;
La patte cordiale empoigne la spatule;
Zéro met gravement Nihil sur le pavois.
Bouffissure du vide! ombre! Quand je vous vois,
Sombres in-folio classiques, je me sauve!
L’ennui des siècles dort sur votre vélin chauve;
Le bâillement vous garde, affreux, montrant les dents.

O noirs livres flairés du profil des pédants,
Je crois voir, à travers vos pages diaphanes,
Des grouins de pourceaux baisant des mufles d’ânes!

XXVIII La nature, éternelle mère,

La nature, éternelle mère,
Vous versa ,ses chastes faveurs,
Vieil Hésiode, vieil Homère,
O poètes, géants rêveurs!

Chantres des socs et des épées, -
A travers les temps, noir brouillard,
Vous montrez dans. vos épopées
L'homme enfant à-l'homme vieillard.

On voit en vous, comme une aurore,
Briller ce beau passé doré
Que la Grèce contemple encore
Avec un sourire effaré.

Comme l'ourse et les dioscures
Percent les branchages touffus,
On voit dans vos lueurs obscures
Remuer-un monde confus.

On voit, moins divins que vous-mêmes,
Resplendir, calmes et tonnants,
Dans la nuit de vos vieux poèmes -
Les olympiens rayonnants!

Votre cime touche les nues;
Dans votre ombre où luit l'orient
Les héros, les déesses nues
Vont et viennent en souriant.

Les.dieux, qui pour. nous sont des marbres,
Vivent dans vos livres jumeaux.
Comme des oiseaux dans les arbres,
Ils volent dans vos grands rameaux!

29 mars 1847.

XXIX Thiers raille Mazzini;

Thiers raille Mazzini; Pitt raille Washington;
Juvénal à Nisard semble de mauvais ton,
Shakspeare fait hausser à Planche les épaules;
Avant que la vapeur eût conquis les deux pôles,
Les savants bafouaient Fulton; monsieur Pouillet,
Qui naguère au zénith de l'Institut brillait,
Niait le télégraphe électrique, folie!
L'esprit noué déteste.un esprit qui délie
Celui qui voit de près et bas méprise un peu
L'Himalaya; le ciel, ce précipice bleu,
Ce noir puits des éclairs, déplaît à ces bonshommes
Qui ne savent jamais au juste où nous en sommes,
Et qui, fort dédaigneux: d'Euler et de Newton,
Ne marchent qu'en tâtant le chemin-du bâton;
Essayez donc de faire admirer aux myopes
Le regard. étoilé des sombres Calliopes
Assises sur le Pinde et sondant l'infini!
Eschyle; ce proscrit, et Dante, ce banni,
Radotent, et leur -vué est par l'exil faussée;
L'âme de Job paraît à Prudhomme insensée,
Car c'est aux envieux et c'est aux impuissants
Qu'appartient cette chose auguste, le bon sens;
L'époux que se choisit la foule, c'est l'eunuque;
Le chef incontesté sous qui.courbent la nuque
Tous les traîneurs de sabre et les porte-rabats,
C'est un Midas à qui Zoïle parle bas.
Quand il rôde au milieu des villes, Isaïe
Sent par les noirs vivants sa grande âme haïe,
Et marche sans trouver un coeur qui le comprend;
Les blêmes insulteurs suivent Corneille errant;
Derrière. Milton gronde une meute livide.
Quiconque a le talent d'être lourd étant vide
Est sûr d'être admiré des fats et des jaloux,
Ces chiens qui pour les grands et les forts sont des loups;

Voyez-les se jeter sur les talons d’Homère!
Voyez-les vénérer le crétin éphémère,

Le zéro solennel qui, pour l’instant, prévaut -
Chez-la gent soldatesque ou dans le clan dévot!
Un idiot étant-l’étui d’un personnage,
Il suffit qu’un grimaud soit plus vieux que son âge
Et qu’il se taise’avec’l’air d’un niais profond
Pour qu’on l’estime; et ceux qui font et qui défont
Tous -les noms de hasard mêlés à nos orages,
L’acclament de leur voix enrouée aux outrages,
Sachant qu’on ne peut mieux compléter les assauts
Aux grands hommes raillés qu’en admirant les sots.
Si vous faites le bien on vous fera la guerre,
Et, sans.savoir pourquoi, le stupide vulgaire
Est furieux autour du prophète pensif.

Voir le gouffre de haut, voir de loin le récif,
C’est un-tort. Etre grand, c’est être ridicule.
Pygmée est fier, étant pygmée; il toise Hercule;
Myrmidon ne prend pas Titan au sérieux.
Tous ces géants qui sont debout sur les hauts lieux
Font rire Lilliput, fourmilière féroce.

Le nain se sent un poids sur le dos, et sa bosse
Dont il est satisfait, bien qu’en-somme un peu las,
Lui fait le même effet qu’à toi le monde, Atlas!

Il te vaut. Qu’a-t-il donc. de moins que toi? Tu portes
Ton-fardeau comme lui le sien.
Barrez vos portes
Et fermez vos volets, de peur que la raison
Et que la -vérité n’entrent dans la maison,
O bourgeois! Homme. docte, homme grave, mollusque,
Qui que tu sois, prends garde à l’irruption brusque
Des clartés, des penseurs, des esprits, dans le trou
Où la nuit sombre a mis ton coeur sous le. verrou.

Tu végètes; -prends garde à ce grand -danger, vivre.
L’huître doit se, fermer dès que s’ouvre le livre
Car il suffit d’un mot dans une âme jeté
Pour. y creuser un gouffre et l’emplir de clarté.
De la stupidité l’ignorance est l’asile.
Ne lis rien, si tu tiens à rester imbécile.
Comme il sied.
L’oison glousse et boite, radieux;
Semblable au paon, l’orgueil, bien qu’il ait beaucoup d’yeux,
Ne s’en sert pas pour voir, mais pour être superbe;
Le faux sage a sa queue épanouie en gerbe

Qui le suit, vit par lui, l’aime, le croit divin,
Et le rend plus inepte en le rendant plus vain;
C’est le public des sots qui fait cortège au cuistre;
Le pédant idiot, arrogant et sinistre,
Qu’il soit homme d’église ou bien homme d’état,
Ignore tout, sait tout, et tient pour attentat
Le génie, et Guizot ne veut pas. de Voltaire.
Silence, Mirabeau! Danton, veux-tu te taire!
Ce Galilée est-il assez impertinent
Avec son soleil fixe et sa terre tournant!
Peut-on se, figurer rien de plus chimérique
Que ce Colomb faisant ce. rêve, l’Amérique!
Contre ces fiers croyants on prend à témoin Dieu.
Les églises, les rois qui sont grands de si peu,
Ces lourdes légions tardigrades, s’indignent
Contre ceux qui vont vite, et qui ne se résignent
Jamais à cè qui ment, jamais à ce qui nuit.
Ces hommes parlent haut et font peur.à la nuit.
A bas ces amoureux terribles de l’aurore!

Les grands penseurs sacrés qu’une flamme dévore,
Les poëtes, les forts esprits, les fiers rêveurs
Savent que l’infini ne fait pas de faveurs -
Mais ne fait pas non plus d’injustices; ils songent,
Méditant les destins d’en bas qui se prolongent

Dans le profond destin d'en haut, abîme obscur;
C'est pourquoi leur regard ne quitte point l'azur,
Et s'emplit, dans l'espace où flotte la science,
D'un éblouissement d'où naît la clairvoyance.

Sitôt que, se levant sur notre monde noir,
L'astre dieu de:l'aurore apparaît, faisant voir
A l'immense chaos l'énormité de l'âme,
Dès que ce monstre d'ombre à crinière de flamme,
Dès que cet inconnu splendide, le soleil,
Effrayant, rassurant, masqué d'éclairs, vermeil,
Surgit, égalisant sous sa lueur superbe
Les grands monts, la rondeur de. la mer, le brin d'herbe,
Et l'horreur des forêts d'où. sort un vague chant,
Dès que, fertilisant, achevant, ébauchant,
Vie et mystère, énigme expliquant les problèmes,
Faisant les gouffres clairs, faisant les ,astres blêmes,
Aidant le coeur à croire et l'esprit à prier,
Il s'est mis au travail comme un bon ouvrier,
Dès qu'il a commencé sa tâche de lumière,
Dès que, lié lui-même à la cause première,
Il a blanchi les-cieux, profonde vision,

Et jeté dans la nuit ce plongeur, le rayon,
Prompt comme le tonnerre et droit comme la règle,
La taupe lui dénonce un aveugle, c'est l'aigle.

28 avril 1876.

XXX Quand ce charmant petit poète gracieux

Quand ce charmant petit poète gracieux
Qui se perd dans les fleurs ne pouvant fuir aux cieux,
S’en vient étourdiment t’attaquer, ô génie,
Et, moqueur, se hasarde en ton ombre infinie,
Tu ne t’émeus point: Dante aperçoit peu Gresset.
L’espèce de bruit faible et confus qu’il faisait
Le premier jour qu’il vint t’insulter, géant triste,
N’est pas pour toi de ceux qui prouvent qu’on existe,
Et tu n’as pas même eu le vague mouvement
D’un colosse distrait de son rêve un moment.
Tu laisses cela vivre et bourdonner. Le gîte
De l’écureuil, pour peu qu’un vent souffle, s’agite,
Non l’antre du lion; et, sans chercher d’abri,
L’aigle reçoit le coup de bec du colibri.
Tu laisses fuir cette aile inutile et dorée.
Depuis quand l’astre est-il troublé dans l’empyrée
Parce qu’un follet saute et danse au fond des bois;
Depuis quand, le tonnerre énorme dont la voix
Émeut le mont qui tremble et la mer qui chancelle,
Allume-t-il l’éclair pour punir l’étincelle?

XXXI Oui, le Génie a ses athées.

Oui, le Génie a ses athées.
Devant l’envie à l’oeil hagard
Les grandes âmes insultées
Baissent leur pudique regard.
L’envieux s’accouple à l’impie,
L’âme bassement accroupie,
Tous deux se tiennent par la main,
Mentant, et de leur lèvre impure
Niant Dieu, l’un dans la nature,
L’autre dans le génie humain!

Mais la justice sort des choses;
Ils souffrent, ils sont malheureux;
Ils cachent sous leurs fronts moroses
Un ennui louche et ténébreux.
L’éternelle équité qui juge
Quiconque a l’ombre pour refuge,
L’erreur pour but, le mal pour voeu,
Condamne à la tristesse noire
Ceux qui font douter de la gloire
Et ceux qui font douter de Dieu.

XXXII C’est une loi: Veuillot existe,

C’est une loi: Veuillot existe, ce maroufle;
Planche est réel, Barbet 10° respire, Nisard souffle;
Rolle vit; Fréron mord Voltaire, on ne sait qui
Pique Milton; Cecco, qu’on nomme aussi Cecchi,
Met sur Dante indigné sa patte familière;
Green rampe sur Shakspeare et Visé sur Molière;
Les grands hommes qu’au fond de l’azur nous voyons
Passer sous leur couronne immense de rayons,
Splendides, par la mort faits plus vivants encore,
A jamais envolés dans la superbe aurore
Et pour l’éternité. dé la gloire partis,
Sont rongés et couverts d’infiniment petits;
Doric l’éblouissement n’exclut, pas la ,vermine;
La gloire a son insecte et l’acarus la mine;
L’Océan sent la pieuvre errer dans son flot bleu.;
Zoïle est sur Homère et Satan èst sur Dieu;
Le sublime n’est pas dispensé de l’immonde;
Et je ne serais pas surpris le moins du monde
Quand un ange viendrait nous révéler à tous
Que dans le ciel profond les astres ont des poux.

Paris, 20 septembre 1874.

XXXIII À UN POËTE

Ô rêveur, ne va pas sur les cimes, j’en viens;
C’est terrible. Les sourds autans diluviens
Sont là qui passent et repassent;

Là, flotte et disparaît tout ce que nous songions;
Là, dans ces grands tombeaux nommés Religions,
Des corbeaux inconnus croassent.
Crains les hauts lieux hantés par les spectres; les jeux
De l’abîme ne sont jamais plus orageux
Que sur les sommets formidables;
Là, le réel avec l’ignoré se confond,
Et les échelons noirs des visions sans fond
Sont lugubrement abordables.

Là, rayonne un soleil que la brume élargit;
Là, sont les fauves dieux, Néméos qui rugit,
Python qui siffle, Apis qui beugle
Sombre éblouissement dont ces. grands ingénus,
Les sages, sortent fous, et d’où sont revenus
Tasse insensé, Milton aveugle.

Ne va pas dans les bois sacrés, ni sur les monts
Où Pythagore a vu la face des démons,
Où sont toutes ces formes blanches
Dont les mages profonds ne savent que penser,
Et qu’ils guettent, n’osant rien de plus que passer
Leurs têtes à travers les branches.

Crains l’inspiration farouche du désert;
Le désert est tin lieu d’effroi dont Dieu se sert,
Et n’est point fait pour tes études:
Les gouffres ont parfois dévoré les plongeurs;
Ne baigne pas ton front aux immenses rougeurs
Du couchant dans les solitudes.

Crains de rencontrer là ce qu’il ne faut pas voir.
Crains les ascensions vers le haut sommet noir.
Les ombres n’ont rien à te dire.
Cueille ta poésie aux champs parmi les fleurs,
Et ne va pas chercher de l’épouvante ailleurs
Puisque mai consent à sourire.

Crains les rudes coups d’aile et les becs flamboyants.
Crains ces halliers où sont dés êtres effrayants
Qui méditent sans lois ni règles.
Si tu cherchais à prendre au vol dans. ces forêts
Quelque strophe. sauvage et sombre, tu courrais
Des périls de dénicheur d’aigles.

23 août 1874.

XXXIV LE DEVOIR

Et toi, qui que tu sois, génie,
Toi qui sens ta force et qùi vis,
Et dans la gloire ou l'ironie,
De ta grande âme t'assouvis!
Toi qui n'as, sévère nature,
Que toi-même pour nourriture
Et que toi-même pour rayon!
Toi, tout ensemble hymne et huée,
Astre en même temps que nuée,
A la fois caverne et lion!

Quel que soit ton siècle, ombre, orage,
Abandon, peur, haillon, linceul,
Va! que rien ne te décourage!
Marche! Homère est nu. Dante est seul.
Laisse s'amonceler les houles!
Laisse s'évanouir les foules!
Va, toi qui n'as pas de remords,
Accepte tes superbes tâches.
Sois l'intrépide chez les lâches,
Et sois le vivant chez les morts!

Quelquefois l'âme humaine lasse
Semble prise d'accablement;
Le grelottant baise la glace,
L'aveugle aime l'aveuglement.
Décroissances, inexorables!
Les choses se font misérables
Et les hommes se font petits.
Tout meurt. Il semble que commence
L'abâtardissement immense
Des coeurs devenus appétits.

Hélas! parfois un peuple -ô Grèce,

Tu l’as. vu! Rome, tu le sais! -
Sent une honteuse paresse
D’être grand, et dit: C’est assez!
Assez d’Ajax! Assez d’Achilles!
De Brutus, de Solons, d’Eschyles!
Assez de héros au front pur!
Assez de ces arches de gloire
Qui font de toute notre histoire
Un pont de géants dans l’azur!

Assez de hautains. Propylées,
De Panthéons, de Parthénons!
Assez de têtes étoilées!
Assez de grands hommes! Dînons.
Toute l’histoire n’est qu’un songe.
Gloire au festin qui se prolonge!
Gloire aux crimes inexpiés!
Que la fémme soit de la fête,
Nue avec des fleurs sur la tête,
Des bagues d’or aux doigts des pieds!

Qu’un esprit nouveau nous visite!
Soyons ceux ,qu’on n’a jamais vus!,
Qu’Athènes s’appelle Thersite!
Que Rome s’appelle Davus!
Des vieilles conquêtes vivantes,
Ô peuple, faisons nos servantes.
Vivre est la’seule ambition.
Cuisons, joyeuse foule athée, `
Avec le feu de Prométhée
Le souper de Trimalcion!

Alors les pâles multitudes
Qu’attend je sépulcre béant,
Prennent toutes les attitudes
De la fumée et du néant. -
Une horrible;nuit acharnée

Couvre l’âme, la destinée, -
Les pas, les fronts, les coeurs, les yeux;
La foule dort,-boit, mange, ignore,.
Rampe, chante et rit’; et l’aurore
Refuse de monter aux cieux.

Voyant qué l’homme n’a plus d’aile,
La femme pleure son affront,-
Et pour le fils qui naîtra d’elle
Se sent de la rougeur au front.
Alors, penseur, c’est l’heure trouble,
Lutte! que ton effort redouble,
Montre l’idée et le ciel bleu
A l’homme qui, n’osant plus croire,
Voit l’avenir vide de, gloire -
Et l’univers vide de Dieu.

Quand ton siècle aux basses prudences,
Décroît, toi, marche à pas plus francs!
Surgis! c’est dans les décadences
Que les grands.hommes sont plus grands.

C’est surtout parmi les décombres
Qué les hautes colonnes sombres,
Dépassant tout; dominant tout,
Belles dans les débris difformes,
Gisantes, paraissent énormes,:
Et semblent sublimes, debout!

V. H. IO juin 1870.

XXXV POURQUOI LES GRANDS HOMMES SONT MALHEUREUX

Une nuit, j’écoutais, seul, parmi des décombres;
Et j’entendis parler les Évènements sombres:

Nous sommes les forgeurs; et les grands hommes sont
Les enclumes que Dieu met dans l’antre profond,
Prêtes au dur travail de créer d’autres races.
Car les hommes sont vils, méchants, lâches, voraces,
Monstrueux, et-le temps est venu de changer.
C’est à force de coups qu’on parvient à forger.
Donc les hommes, sans frein, sans loi, sans coeur, sans flamme,
Sans joie, avaient besoin qu’on leur fit une autre âme,
Et que quelqu’un de grand sur eux étincelât.
Il fallait faire à l’Homme une âme ayant l’éclat,
Le rayon, la puissance et la douceur, une âme
Paternelle à l’enfant, fraternelle à la femme,
Une âme juste. -Un jour, Dieu nous dit: Forgez-leur
Cette âme, et nous donna pour marteau le malheur;
Les grands hommes pensifs étant là, nous conclûmes
Que nous pouvions frapper sur ces sombres enclumes.

15 août 1874. Paris.

XXXVI À THÉOPHILE GAUTIER

Ami, poète, esprit, tu fuis notre nuit noire.
Tu sors de nos rumeurs pour entrer dans la gloire;
Et désormais ton nom rayonne aux purs sommets.
Moi qui t’ai connu jeune et beau, moi qui t’aimais,
Moi qui, plus d’une fois, dans nos altiers coups d’aile,
Éperdu, m’appuyais sur ton âme fidèle,
Moi, blanchi par les jours sur ma tête neigeant,
Je me souviens des temps écoulés, et songeant
A ce jeune passé qui vit nos deux aurores,
A la lutte, à l’orage, aux arènes sonores,
A l’art nouveau qui s’offre, au peuple criant oui,
J’écoute ce grand vent sublime évanoui.

Fils de la Grèce antique et de la jeune France,
Ton fier respèct des morts fut rempli d’espérance;
Jamais tu ne fermas les yeux à l’avenir.
Mage à Thèbes, druide au pied du noir menhir,
Flamine aux bords du Tibre et brahme aux bords du Gange,
Mettant sur l’arc du dieu la flèche de l’archange,
D’Achille et de Roland hantant les deux chevets,
Forgeur mystérieux et puissant, tu savais
Tordre tous les rayons dans une seule flamme;
Le couchant rencontrait l’aurore dans ton âmè;
Hier croisait demain-dans ton fécond cerveau;
Tu sacrais le vieil art aïeul de l’art nouveau;
Tu comprenais qu’il faut, lorsqu’une âme inconnue
Parle au peuple, envolée en éclairs dans la nue,
L’écouter, l’accepter;. l’aimer, ouvrir Ies cceurs;
Calme, tu dédaignais. l’effort vil des moqueurs
Écumant sur Eschyle et, bavant sur Shakspeare;
Tu savais que, ce siècle a son air qu’il respire,
Et que, l’art ne marchant qu’en se transfigurant,
C’est embellir le beau que d’y joindre le grand.
Et l’on t’a vu pousser d’illustres cris de joie

Quand le Drame a saisi Paris comme une proie,
Quand l’antique hiver fut chassé par Floréal,
Quand l’astre inattendu du moderne idéal
Est venu tout à côup, dans le ciel qui s’embrase
Luire, et quand l’Hippogriffe a relayé Pégase!

Je te salue au seuil sévère du tombeau.
Va chercher le vrai, toi qui sus trouver le beau.
Monte l’âpre escalier. Du haut des sombres marches,
Du noir pont de l’abîme on entrevoit les arches;
Va! meurs! la dernière heure est le dernier degré.
Pars, aigle, tu vas voir des gouffres à ton gré;
Tu vas voir l’absolu, le réel, le sublime.
Tu vas sentir le vent sinistre de la cime
Et l’éblouissement du prodige éternel.
Ton olympe, tu vas le voir du haut du ciel,
Tu vas du haut du vrai voir l’humaine chimère,
Même celle de Job, même celle d’Homère,
Ame, et du haut de Dieu tu vas voir Jéhovah.
Monte, esprit! Grandis, plane, ouvre tes ailes, va!

Lorsqu’un vivant nous quitte, ému, je le contemple;
Car entrer dans la mort, c’est entrer dans le temple
Et quand un homme meurt, je vois distinctement
Dans son ascension mon propre avènement.
Ami, je sens du sort la sombre plénitude;
J’ai commencé la mort par de la solitude,
Je vois mon profond soir vaguement s’étoiler;
Voici l’heure où je vais, aussi moi, m’en aller.
Mon fil trop long frissonne et touche presque au glaive;
Le vent qui t’emporta doucement me soulève,
Et je vais suivre ceux qui m’aimaient, moi, banni.
Leur oeil fixe m’attire au fond de l’infini.
J’y cours. Ne fermez pas la porte funéraire.

Passons; car c’est la loi; nul ne peut s’y soustraire;
Tout penche; et ce grand siècle avec tous ses rayons

Entre en cette ombre immense où pâles nous fuyons.
Oh! quel farouche bruit font dans le crépuscule
Les chênes qu’on abat pour le bûcher d’Hercule!
Les chevaux de la mort se mettent à hennir,
Et sont joyeux, car l’âge éclatant va finir;
Ce siècle altier qui sut,dompter le vent contraire,
Expire 0 Gautier! toi, leur égal et.leur frère,
Tu pars après Dumas, Lamartine et Musset.
L’onde antique, est tarie où l’on rajeunissait;
Comme il. n’est plus de Styx il n’est plus de Jouvence.
Le dur faucheur avec sa large lame avance
Pensif et pas à pas vers le reste du blé;
C’est mon tour; et la nuit emplit mon oeil troublé
Qui, devinant, hélas, l’avenir des colombes,
Pleure sur des berceaux et sourit à des tombes.

V. H. 2 novembre 1872. Jour des Morts.

I À LOUIS B.

Non, je n’ai point changé. Tu te plains à tort, frère.
Hélas! quoique le ciel parfois nous soit, contraire,
Quoique nous n’ayons rien. ici qui soit à nous,
Quoique dans nos travaux, rudes et pourtant doux,
Le sort jaloux souvent vienne et nous interrompe,
Non, je n’ai point changé, Louis ton coeur se trompe.
Je suis l’homme pensif que j’ai toujours été.
Contemplant la nature, adorant la beauté,
Fait d’admiration, d’étude-et de prière;
Prosterné devant l’ombre ét devant la lumière,
J’ai, créé pour souffrir et vivre par l’amour,
Deux musiques en moi qui chantent tour à tour:
Dans la tête un orchestre et dans l’âme une lyre.
Cette création que je, tâche de lire,
Avec ses univers, ses lueurs, ses splendeurs,
Remuant mon cerveau jusqu’en ses profondeurs,
En fait en même temps vibrer toutes les fibres.
Je veux les peuples grands, je veux les hommes libres;
Je rêve pour la femme un avenir meilleur;
Incliné sur le pauvre et sur le travailleur,
Je leur suis fraternel du fond de ma pensée;
Comment guider la foule orageuse et pressée,
Comment donner au droit plus-de base et d’ampleur,
Comment faire ici-bas décroître la douleur,
La faim, le dur labeur, le mal et la misère,
Toutes ces questions me tiennent dans leur serre;
Et puis, quoique songeur, aisément réjoui,
Je me sens tout à coup le coeur épanoui
Si, dans mon cercle étroit, j’ai, par une parole,
Par quelque fantaisie inattendue et folle,

Fait naître autour de moi, le soir au coin du feu,
Ce rire des enfants qui fait sourire Dieu.

Ainsi tu m’as connu. Je suis toujours le même.
Aujourd’hui seulement, attristant ceux que j’aime,
Le deuil monte parfois à mon front douloureux,
Je reste moins longtemps au milieu des heureux,
Et dans mes yeux, souvent fixés hors de ce monde,
Le sourire est plus pâle et l’ombre est plus profonde.

11 octobre 1846.

II Admire, enfant!

— Admire, enfant! souvent aux marins de Messine
Un pauvre feu de pâtre au loin montre et dessine
Charybde ou bien Scylla.
Il conduit le nocher dans sa route prospère!...
— Mais, répondit l’enfant, l’étoile aussi, mon père,
Peut servir à cela.. -

Q mon fils, ô mon fils! tu l’as dit! Parle encore!
O front pur qui vers moi montes comme une aurore,
Mon enfant bien-aimé!
Tout est grand! Tout est bon! tu l’as dit de ta bouche
Qui versa tant de fois sur mon esprit farouche
Son souffle parfumé!

Tu l’as dit! un seul mot de ta« pure innocence
— Vaut mieux que ma sagesse et plus que ma science,
Enfant religieux!
Pour un regard d’enfant le ciel n’a pas de voiles.
Où pourrait-on trouver le secret des étoiles
Si ce n’est dans tes yeux?

III À UNE RELIGIEUSE

Dans vos dévotions que comprend ma pensée,
Ne vous détournez pas comme une âme blessée,
Sainte fille du ciel, oh non! je n’ai pas ri.
Mon coeur d’un Dieu rêveur de tout temps fut l’abri.
Et ce que je vénère avant tout dans ce monde
C’est l’homme, raison calme et passion profonde,

Qui fait la part de tout, à toute heure, en tout lieu,
Debout devant le sort; à genoux devant Dieu.
Voyez-vous, je suis. né sous des regards austères;
Et ma joie ingénue en de graves mystères
A souvent regardé sans, risée et-sans peur.
La belle enfance, ainsi qu’une blanche vapeur,
Toujours dans notre esprit reparaît et surnage;
Et moi, je m’en souviens,. jouant dans mon jeune âge
Avec mon frère Eugène, avec mon frère Abel,
Mêlant ma voix aux leurs, innocente Babel,
Tout petit, j’ai rempli de chansons enfantines
Le saint. cloître où. jadis priaient “ les Feuillantines.

25 juin 1837

IV À cette heure indécise

À cette heure indécise où le jour va mourir,
Où tout s’endort, le coeur oubliant de souffrir,
Les oiseaux de chanter et les troupeaux de paître,
Que de fois sous mes yeux un chariot champêtre,
Groupe vivant de.bruit, de chevaux.et-de voix,
A gravi sur le flanc du coteau dans les bois
Quelque route creusée entre les ocres jaunes,
Tandis que près d’une eau qui fuyait sous les aulnes,
Seul, j’écoutais gémir dans les brumes du soir
Une cloche enrouée au fond d’un vallon noir!
Que de fois épiant la rumeur des chaumières,
Le brin d’herbe moqueur qui siffle entre deux pierres,
Le cri plaintif du soc, gémissant et traîné,
Le nid qui jase au fond du cloître ruiné
D’où l’ombre se répand sur les tombes des moines,
Le champ doré par l’aube où causent les avoines
Qui pour vous voir passer, comme un peuple ravi,
Au bord du chemin creux se penchent à l’envi,
L’abeille qui tout bas chante et parle à la rose,
Parmi tous ces’. objets. dont l’être se compose,
Que de fois j’ai rêvé, triste et parfois heureux,
Tâchant de m’expliquer ce qu’ils disaient entre eux!

V La France, ô mes enfants,

La France, ô mes enfants, reine aux tours fleuronnées,
Posait, sous l’empereur que votre aïeul servait,

Le bras droit sur le Rhin, le gauche aux Pyrénées,
Et ses pieds et sa tête avaient, ô destinées!
L’Océan pour lion, les Alpes pour chevet.

Austerlitz, Iéna, Friedland, météores,
Rayonnaient. Un seul homme enflammait tous les yeux;
Sa gloire, grandissant à toutes les aurores,
Se composait du bruit des trompettes sonores
Et des tambours joyeux.

Et l’Europe voyait briller, vaincue et fière,
Dans ce camp, d’où sortaient la guerre et ses terreurs,
Autour de cette France en tous lieux la première,
Comme des moucherons autour d’une lumière,
Un groupe humilié de rois et d’empereurs.

Ces choses se passaient quand mon âme innocente
S’ouvrait, comme la vôtre, au soleil réchauffant;
Le léopard anglais rôdait, gueule béante,
César était debout, la France était géante,
Lorsque j’étais enfant;

Lorsque j’étais enfant, envié par les mères,
Libre dans le jardin et libre dans les bois,
Et que. je m’amusais, errant près des chaumières,
A prendre des bourdons dans les roses trémières
En fermant brusquement la fleur avec mes doigts.

Bois d’Andernach-sur-le-Rhin.

12 septembre 1840.

VI L’autre jour,

L’autre jour, ami cher, ami de vingt années,
Tandis qu’en vos pensers, rêvant des jours meilleurs,
Vous sondiez de l’état les hautes destinées,
Je regardais jouer vos enfants dans les fleurs.

Inégales par l’âge, également aimées,
L’aînée à la dernière avec amour sourit.
Trois filles! êtres purs! âmes au bien formées
Que pénètre un rayon de votre grand esprit!

La rosée inondait les fleurs à peine écloses;
Elles jouaient, riant de leur rire sans fiel.
Deux choses ici-bas vont bien avec les roses,
Le rire des enfants et les larmes du ciel.
Beaux fronts où tout est joie et qui n’ont rien de sombre!
Oh! je les contemplais, le coeur de pleurs gonflé,
Moi qui vis désormais l’oeil fixé sur une ombre,
Moi qui cherche partout mon doux ange envolé!
Devant votre bonheur j’oubliais ma souffrance,
Je priais, d’un esprit paisible et raffermi;
Mon deuil recommandait à Dieu votre espérance,
Et du fond de mon coeur je vous disais: = Ami!
Soyez toujours heureux dans bes têtes si chères!
Que chaque jour qui passe ajoute à leur beauté!
Voyez sur votre seuil, en proie aux soins austères,
S’épanouir leur grâce et leur sérénité!
Dieu vous doit ce bonheur!, car dans notre nuit noire,
Ces êtres si charmants nous consolent parfois!
Car vous vous détournez du bruit de votre gloire
Pour écouter, pensif, l’heureux bruit de leur voix!
Aimé dans vos foyers, admiré de la foule,
Esprit profond, lutteur aux discours triomphants,
Passant du juste au vrai, votre destin s’écoule
Entre les grands travaux et les petits enfants!

Oh! quand de noirs soucis vos heures sont ternies,
Regardez! regardez cet avenir si doux,
Ces trois fronts rayonnants, ces trois aubes bénies
Qui se lèvent dans l’ombre, ô père, autour de vous!

24 septembre 1844.

VII Vous êtes bien des fois venus

Vous êtes bien des fois venus dans ma demeure
En m’appelant ami!
Vous avez dans vos bras bercé l’enfant qui pleure
Et l’enfant endormi.
Et tandis qu’ils dormaient, beaux fronts où semble luire
Tout un monde meilleur,
Vous paraissiez, penchés avec un pur sourire,
Vague reflet du leur;

Tenir vos coeurs ouverts aux sereines pensées;
Aux songes réchauffants,
Qui sortent doucement, pour nos âmes blessées,
Du sommeil des enfants.

VIII À OL

Tu vivais autrefois penché sur la nature,
O rêveur! ton esprit, sans changer de posture,
Se penche maintenant sur les événements.
Déjà des temps futurs les noirs linéaments
Pour ta prunelle fixe et claire sont visibles.
Souriant vaguement aux rencontres possibles,
Tu marches devant toi dans la nuit. Crainte, espoir,
Que t'importe? tu vas où tu vois le devoir.
Si l'on creuse à tes pas des pièges, tu l'ignores.
Parmi ces hommes fous et vainement sonores,
Grave, triste, et rempli: de l'avenir lointain,
Tu caches ou tu dis les choses du destin;
Car le ciel rayonnant te fit naître, ô poète,
De l'Apollon chanteur et de l'Isis muette.

27 novembre.

IX Vénus rit toute nue

Vénus rit toute nue au-dessus de mon lit
Qu’un damas écarlate à glands dorés plafonne.
Des singes sur mon mur, bande agreste et bouffonne,
Font cent choses avec ces rires furieux
Qui ravissent Molière et choquent Andrieux.
Près d’eux songent, l’oeil plein d’une douce chimère,
Ma bisaïeule belle et jeune et ma grand’mère
Toute petite, avec une fleur dans sa main.
Partout, autour de moi, sur maint vieux parchemin,
Sur le satin fleuri, sur les pots, sur les laques,
Vivent confusément les djinns, les brucolaques,
Les mandarins à l’air vénérable et sournois,
Les dragons, les magots, et ces démons chinois
Fort laids, mais pétillants de malice et de flamme,
Qui doivent ressembler aux rêves d’une femme
Amoureuse de vous, ô mon ami Crémieux!
Mon esprit dans ce monde étrange songe mieux;
Comme un oiseau tenté par de lointaines grèves,
Il ouvre lentement les ailes dans ces rêves,
Il part du chimérique et monte à l’idéal.

X A cette heure de nuit

A cette heure de nuit où l’homme vague et trouble,
Chair, âme, entre la terre et le ciel se sent double,
Quelquefois, à l’instant où. je vais m’endormir,
Où tous les flots de l’ombre en moi viennent frémir,
Une idée apparaît à mon esprit, et passe;
Ou quelque vers profond serpente dans l’espace,
Espèce de poisson ondoyant du sommeil;
Un moment je l’admire, étrange, obscur, vermeil,
Et, si je veux le prendre, il fuit, se mêle aux ombres,
Et s’enfonce à jamais dans les profondeurs sombres.

9 mars 1856.

Après avoir perdu cette nuit. Un vers que je regrette.

XI Le couchant flamboyait

Le couchant flamboyait à travers les bruines
Comme le fronton d’or d’un vieux temple en ruines.
— L’arbre avait un frisson.
La mer au loin semblait, en ondes recourbée,
Une colonne torse en marbre vert, tombée
Sur l’énorme horizon.

La vague, roue errante, et l’écume, çavale,
S’enfuyaient; je voyais luire par intervalle
Les cieux pleins de regards;
Les flots allaient, venaient, couraient; sans fin,-sans nombre,
Et j’écoutais, penché sur ce cirque de l’ombre,
Le bruit de tous ces chars.

Lugubre immensité! profondeurs redoutées!
Tous sont là, les Satans comme les Prométhéen.
Ténébreux océans!
Cièux, vous êtes l’abîme où tombent les génies.
Oh! combien l’oeil, au fond des brumes infinies,
Aperçoit de géants!

Ô vie, énigme, sphinx, nuit, sois la bienvenue!
Car je me sens d’accord avec l’Ame inconnue.
Je souffre, mais je crois.
J’habite l’absolu, patrie obscure et sombre,
Pas plus intimidé dans tous ces gouffres d’ombre
Que l’oiseau dans les bois.

Je songe, l’oeil fixé sur l’incompréhensible.
Le zénith est fermé. Les justes sont la cible
Du mensonge effronté;
Le bien, qui semble aveugle, a le mal pour ministre,
Mais, rassuré, je vois sous la porte sinistre
La fente de clarté.

11 avril 1870.

XII Virgile, en ce beau mois

Virgile, en ce beau mois, je sens moins les douleurs;
Par la nature et toi mon âme dort bercée;
J’ai devant ma fenêtre un jardin plein de fleurs,
Et ton doux livre ouvert sous l’oeil de ma pensée.

22 mai 1847.

XIII Le bien germe parfois

Le bien germe parfois dans les ronces du mal.
Souvent, dans l’éden bleu de l’étrange idéal,
Que, frissonnant, sentant à peine que j’existe,
J’aperçois à travers mon humanité triste,
Comme par les barreaux d’un blême cabanon,
Je vois éclore, au fond d’une lueur sans nom,
De monstrueuses fleurs et d’effrayantes roses:

Je sens que par devoir j’écris toutes ces choses
Qui semblent, sur le fauve et tremblant parchemin,
Naître sinistrement de l’ombre de ma main.
Est-ce que par hasard, grande haleine insensée
Des prophètes, c’est toi qui troubles ma pensée?
Où donc m’entraîne-t-on dans ce nocturne azur?
Est-ce un ciel que je vois? Est-ce le rêve obscur
Dont j’aperçois la porte ouverte toute grande?
Est-ce que j’obéis? est-ce que je commande?
Ténèbres, suis-je en fuite? est-ce moi qui poursuis?
Tout croule; je ne sais par moments si je suis
Le cavalier terrible ou le cheval farouche;
J’ai le sceptre à la main et le mors dans la bouche;
Ouvrez-vous que je passe, abîmes, gouffre bleu,
Gouffre noir! Tais-toi, foudre! Où me mènes-tu, Dieu?
Je suis la volonté, mais je suis le délire.
O vol dans l’infini! J’ai beau par instants dire
Comme Jésus criant Lamma Sabacthani
Le chemin est-il long encore? est ce fini,
Seigneur? permettrez-vous bientôt que je m’endorme?
L’Esprit fait ce qu’il veut. Je sens le souffle énorme
Que sentit Élisée et qui le souleva;
Et j’entends dans la nuit quelqu’un qui me dit: Va!

XIV Mon âme était en deuil;

Mon âme était en deuil; c’était l’heure de l’ombre.
L’air mêlait les aspects sans forme aux voix sans nombre;
Un chant de mort semblait sortir de tous ces bruits;
L’ombre était comme un temple immense aux triples voiles;
Et`je voyais au fond scihtiller les étoiles,
Cierges mystérieux sur le drap noir des nuits.

l janvier 1846

XV JE TRAVAILLE

Amis, je me remets à travailler; j’ai pris
Du papier sur ma table, une plume, et j’écris;
J’écris des vers, j’écris de la prose; je songe.
Je fais ce que je puis pour m’ôter du mensonge,
Du mal, de l’égoïsme et de l’erreur; j’entends
Bruire en moi le gouffre obscur des mots flottants;
Je travaille. Ce mot, plus profond qu’aucun autre,
Est dit par l’ouvrier et redit par l’apôtre;
Le, travail est-devoir et droit, et sa beauté
C’est d’être l’esclavage étant la liberté.
Le forçat du devoir et du travail, est libre.
Mais quoi! penseur, tu vas remettre en équilibre
Au fond de ton esprit, qu’occupaient d’autres soins,
L’idée avec le mot, le plus avec le moins!
De la prose! pourquoi? des vers! pourquoi? des rimes!
Des phrases! A quoi bon? A quoi bon les abîmes,
Les mystères, la vie et la mort, les secrets
De la croissance étrànge et sombre des forêts
Et des peuples, et l’ombre où croulent les empires,
Et toute cette énigme humaine où les Shakspeares
Plongeaient, et que fouillaient, les yeux tout grands ouverts,

Tacite avec sa prose et Dante avec son vers!
A quoi bon la beauté, l’art, la forme, le style?
Lucrèce et le spondée, Horace et le dactyle,
Et tous ces arrangeurs de rhythmes et de mots,
Pindare, Eschyle, Job, Plaute, Isaïe, Amos!
A quoi bon ce qui fait l’homme grand sur la terre?
Ceux qui parlent ainsi feraient mieux de se taire;
Je connais dès longtemps leur vaine objection.
L’art est la roue immense et j’en suis l’Ixion.
Je travaille. À quoi? Mais à tout; car la pensée
Est une vaste porte à chaque instant poussée
Par ces passants qu’on nomme Honneur, Devoir, Raison,

Deuil, et qui tous ont droit d’entrer dans la maison.
Je regarde là-haut le jour éternel poindre.
A qui voit plus de ciel la terre semble moindre;
J’offre aux morts, dans mon âme èn proie au choc des vents,
Leur souvenir accru de l’oubli des vivants.
Oui, je travaille, amis! oui, j’écris! oui, je pense!
L’apaisement superbe étant la récompense
De l’homme qui, saignant et calme néanmoins,
Tâche de songer plus afin de souffrir moins.
Le souffle universel m’enveloppe et me gagne.
Le lointain avenir, lueur de la montagne,
M’apparaît, par-dessus tous les noirs horizons.
C’est par ces rêves-là que nous nous redressons.
O frisson du songeur qui redevient prophète!
Le travail, cette chose inexprimable; faite
De vertige, d’effort, de joug, de volonté,
Vient quand nous l’appelons, nous jette une clarté
Subite, et verse en nous tous les généreux zèles,
Et, docile, ardent, fier, ouvrant de brusques ailes;
Écartant les douleurs ainsi que des rameaux,
Nous emporte à travers l’infini, loin des maux,
Loin de la terre, loin du malheur, loin du vice,
Comme un aigle qu’on a dans l’ombre à son service.

12 janvier 1874.

XVI Tu me dis Finis

Tu me dis Finis. donc ton livre des Misères.

Ami, pour achever ce vaste manuscrit,
Il me faut avant tout ma liberté d’esprit.
Quand un monde se meut dans le cerveau d’un homme,
Il ne peut pas songer aux affaires de Rome,
A monsieur Bonaparte, à Faucher, à Molé.
Rends-moi l’espace immense et le ciel étoilé!
Rends-moi la solitude et la forêt muette!
Hélas! on ne peut être en même temps poète
Qui s’envole, et tribun coudoyant Changarnier,
Aigle dans l’idéal et vautour au charnier.

Octobre 1851.

XVII Quand je marelle à mon but,

Quand je marelle à mon but, auguste
Ce qui menacé me sourit.
Ô Dieu! ce que je veux, est juste
Et je le veux d’un ferme esprit.

Ni juin. formidable et farouche;
Ni les cris, ni le rire amer;
Ni Changarnier au regard. louche,
Ni le vent soufflant sur là mer,

Ni la haine où jè suis en butte,
Rien ne me fera chanceler.
Si le monde croulait,. sa chute
M’écraserait sans m’ébranler.

XVIII Ô toi qui m’as maudit

Ô toi qui m’as maudit dans tes souffrances sombres,
Un jour,. ceux qui vivront quand nous serons des ombres,
Les passants qu’après nous agitera le vent,
Surpris, viendront au champ des morts, et, soulevant
La pierre du tombeau sur ma bière muette,
Ils me demanderont: pourquoi donc, ô poète,
Quelqu’un t’a-t-il maudit, toi qui saignas pour tous?
Et moi je répondrai, spectre farouche et doux,
Faisant signe à la pierre afin qu’elle retombe:
— Silence! laissez-moi songer seul dans ma tombe.
Laissez-moi savourer-la sombre-volupté
De me dire: il eut tort, ce grand çceur irrité.

Bruxelles. 1 janvier 1852

XIX À UN ENFANT

Quoique je sois de ceux qui se sont autrefois
Penchés sur ton berceau plein de ta jeune voix,
Tu commences, enfant, à ne plus me connaître.
Je ne suis rien pour toi qu'un étranger, un être
Évanoui, perdu dans de noirs lendemains,
Un voyageur dont l'ombre est sur d'autres chemins,
Quelqu'un qu'on vit jadis, avant les jours funèbres,
Lorsqu'on était petit, passer dans les ténèbres;
Tu ne songes pas plus à moi qu'au moucheron
Qui volait tout à l'heure en sonnant du clairon,
A ta balle perdue, à ta lampe soufflée;
Pas plus qu'à-ce parfum d'herbe et de giroflée
Qu'avril mêle à l'aurore et qui dure un moment;
Tu m'as laissé tomber de ton esprit gaîment
Comme un càhier fini tout noirci de grimoire.
Tu fais bien. Nous avons, hélas, plus de mémoire,
Enfants, nous qui, vivant pendant que vous naissez,
Lisons vos avenirs écrits dans nos passés;
Votre sort noùs émeut, et bien souvent nous sommes
Rêveurs, nous grands enfants, devant vous, petits hommes.
Aussi, vois-tu, du fond des mornes horizons,
Je viens à toi, jeune âme, et je te dis: causons.

Pose un moment ta plume et ferme ta grammaire.
Ecoute. Te voilà grandissant, et ta mère
Est debout près de toi comme un gardien des cieux.
Seule et veuve, et livrée aux vents capricieux,
En proie aux souffles noirs qui n'épargnent personne,
Elle étend sur ton front son aile qui frissonne,
Et veille; la colombe a peur pour le roseau.
Car le sort menaçant nous tient dès le berceau;
Qu'on soit un petit prince ou bien un petit pâtre,
Nul n'échappé au destin; son ongle opiniâtre
Se mêle à nos cheveux et nous traîne effarés.

Oh! fixe ton regard sur ses yeux adorés!
Ici-bas c’est ta mère, et là-haut c’est ton ange.
Cette femme a subi plus d’une épreuve étrange,
Enfant, c’est toi qui dois l’en consoler. Retiens
Que, touchante à nos yeux, elle est sacrée aux tiens.
La nature là fit reine; et le sort martyre.
Qui la voit pleurer sent un charme qui l’attire.
Hélas! l’ombre d’hier assombrit aujourd’hui.
Elle accepte, stoïque et simple, l’âpre ennui,
L’isolement, l’affront dont un sot nous lapide,

La haine des méchants, cette meule stupide
Qui broie un diamant ainsi qu’un grain de mil,
Et toutes les douleurs, contre-coups de l’exil.

Oh! l’exil! il est triste, il s’en va, grave et morne,
Traînant un deuil-sans fin dans l’espace sans borne,
Et, sur le dur chemin qui vers l’ombre descend,
Hélas! on voit tomber goutte à goutte le sang
Des racines du coeur qui pendent arrachées!

Le malheur, c’est le feu dans les branches séchées.
Il dévore, joyeux, nos jours évanouis.

Naguère elle brillait aux regards éblouis,
Pareille au mois de mai qu’un zéphyr tiède effleure;
Naguère elle brillait; maintenant elle pleure.
Ce rayon n’a duré que le temps d’un éclair.

Mais la pensée auguste habite son oeil fier;
Mais le malheur, qui, même en nous frappant, nous venge,
A mis des ailes d’aigle à ses épaules d’ange.
Dieu, caché dans la nuit de cet être souffrant,
Brille et fait resplendir son-sourcil transparent,
L’albâtre laisse voir la lumière immortelle,
Son front luit!

Toi, son fils, tressaille devant elle
Comme Gracchus enfant quand-sa mère venait;
Car elle est la clarté de ton aube qui naît.

Qu’importe que la foule ignore ou méconnaisse
J’ai vu; moi, quand l’angoisse étreignait sa jeunesse,
Comment elle a souffert, comment elle a lutté,
Et j’ai dit dans mon coeur: Cette femme eût été
Archidamie à Sparte ou Cornélie à Rome.

Enfant, ressemble-lui si tu veux être un homme;
Car elle est brave; car à l’abîme, au péril,
Son doux oeil féminin jette un regard viril;
Car c’est un ,ferme esprit! car c’est un vrai courage!
Jamais, sous le ciel bleu, jamais, devant l’orage,
Jamais, retiens cela, quoique tu sois petit,
Dans un plus noble séin plus grand coeur né battit!

Elle est femme pourtant, et ses maux sont sans nombre.
Mais un profond azur emplit son âme sombre.
Elle marche à travers la vie, âpre forêt,
Et regarde au-delà des rameaux; on dirait
Qu’elle cherche le mot d’une énigme dans l’ombre;
Et puis elle s’incline ainsi qu’un mât qui sombre;

Elle dit à l’espoir: va-t’en! au souvenir:
Silence! au jour qui meurt: hâte-toi de finir!
Car, conscience pure, elle est un esprit triste.
Même en rêvant longtemps sa tristesse persiste.
Hélas! le doute injuste est au fond de son coeur
Comme au fond d’un beau vase une amère. liqueur.
C’est qu’elle a tant gémi dans ,ces lugubres. voies
Où Dieu nous pousse avec nos douleurs et nos joies!
Une larme éternelle erre au bord de ses yeux...
Oh! courbons-nous devant ces fronts mystérieux
Qui, faibles et ployés, dans l’ombre où Dieu nous jette,

Semblent faits pour porter la souffrance muette,
Que le destin poursuit, ce bourreau jamais las,
Que tous les maux sur terre et tous les deuils, hélas!
Couvrent de leur cilice, accablent de leurs voiles,
Et qu'attendent aux cieux des couronnes d'étoiles!

Aime-la! porte-lui ton coeur chaque matin,
Ris! Réjouis cette âme à ton rire enfantin.
Sois le flot pur qui porte et caresse le cygne.
Quand elle parle, adore; obéis sur un, signe.
Sois son consolateur et sois son défenseur.
Que le mensonge vil, trompé dans sa noirceur,
Vienne apportant l'affront, te voie, et le remporte.
Qu'on te sente déjà veillant devant. sa porte.
Si le sort m'eût donné, sainte et charmante loi,
Ce grand devoir de fils qu'il te confie à toi,
Oh! comme elle eût dormi sous ma garde fidèle,
Et, lion pour autrui, j'eusse été chien pour elle!

Sois bon, spis doux, sois tendre. Écarte de ta main,
Sous ses pieds délicats, les pierres du chemin.

Pour elle, ô pauvre enfant, tu donnerais, écoute,
Ton âme souffle à souffle et ton sang goutte à goutte,
De sa robe à genoux tu baiserais les plis,
Tu la contemplerais comme on contemple un lys,
Comme on contemple un ciel où se lève l'aurore,
Mains jointes,l'oeil en pleurs, ce ne serait encore,
Pour cet être au front pur à qui tu dois le jour,
Pas assez de respect et pas, assez d'amour!

Grave en ton jeune esprit, fils d' une noble femme,
Ces paroles qui sont comme l'adieu d'une âme;
Enfant, écoute-moi, pendant que je suis là.
Car l'oeil qui luit s'éteint, la bouche qui parla
Se ferme; nous vivons le temps de disparaître.
Enfant, je te le dis, je suis de ceux peut-être

Qu’on ne reverra plus, tant ils sont dans la nuit.
Ils vont enveloppés d’un tourbillon de bruit,
Meurtris, blessés, les yeux pleins de clartés sereines.
L’ouragan monstrtieux des fureurs et des haines,
Souffle qui vient d’en bas, courbe leur front pensif.
Leur âme vole, oiseau, de récif en récif.
Ils traversent le choc des diverses fortunes,
Et leur main se cramponne au marbre des tribunes,
Aux lois, à la patrie, aux colonnes du droit.
Plus le péril grandit,. plus leur devoir s’accroît;
Du flot toujours plus noir leur foi sort plus robuste.
Ils luttent pour le bien, pour l’honneur, pour le juste,
Pour le beau, pour le vrai, laissant saigner leurs coeurs.
On dit: Où s’en vont-ils? reviendront-ils vainqueurs?
Est-ce l’adversité qui sera la plus forte?
Et cependant le vent sinistre les emporte;
Puis on les perd de vue; et, bien longtemps après,
On lit au bord des mers leur nom sous un cyprès.

22 décembre 1853.

XX Je marchais;

Je marchais; j’entendais, comme tombait la nuit,
Des amants se parler dans l’ombre à petit bruit;
Des lèvres se cherchaient dans l’obscure feuillée;
Maint couple était assis dans l’herbe un peu mouillée;
Et moi, j’adorais Dieu qui, dans les bois charmants,
Pour le poète errant au milieu des amants,
Mêle à ce doux mystère entrevu sous des voiles
Le spectacle splendide et profond des étoiles.

30 octobre 1846.

XXI J’ai mené parfois dure vie,

J’ai mené parfois dure vie,
Proscrit, errant de lieux en lieux,
Triste et jétant un oeil d’envie
Au sépulcre mystérieux.

J’ai fait à pied de longues routes;
Marchant la nuit, craignant les voix,
Plus rempli d’ombres et de doutes
Que la bête fauve des bois.

Ô vaincus des luttes civiles,
Malheur à vous! rien ne vous sert.
J’ai le soir traversé des villes
Comme on traverse le désert.
Seul, comptant mon chétif pécule,
Loin de tous mes amis absents,
Je regardais, au crépuscule,
Aller et venir les passants.

L’eau des chemins mouillait mes guêtres.
Las, je tombais sur de vieux bancs.
Je regardais par les fenêtres
La gaîté des âtres flambants.
J’entendais rire sous le chaume
Les paysans à leur repas;
Un étranger est un fantôme;
Les murs ne le connaissent pas.

Comme Tullius fuyant Rome,
J’allais, ignorant où j’étais,
Accueilli par ceux que je nomme,
Repoussé par ceux que je tais.

La bise sifflait sur ma tête.

Je fuyais sans. savoir comment,
Enveloppé de la tempête
Comme d’un sombre vêtement;

En guerre avec l’ombre où nous sommes,
Avec l’onde et le vent marin,
Avec le ciel, avec les hommes,
En paix avec mon coeur serein!
Mon âme ouvrait ses yeux funèbres;
Tout était noir, plus de ciel bleu;
Mais je voyais dans ces ténèbres
La lointaine blancheur de Dieu.

Je me disais dans ma souffrance:
— Pleurer est bon, mourir est beau.
Car la porte de l’espérance
S’ouvre avec la clef du tombeau.

Autour de moi, troupes ailées,
Les strophes dont l’essaim me suit.
Tourbillonnaient échevelées
Dans les souffles noirs. de la nuit.

J’étais sûr, à travers mes peines,
Que j’étais un juste aux abois,
Et quelles-rochers et les chênes
Ne pouvaient point haïr ma voix.

Je parlais -aux astres de flamme;
Se taire ne sied qu’au maudit;.
Et je faisais chanter mon âme
Pour que la nature entendît.

Je ne sais pas quelles réponses ,
Les vents faisaient à mes chansons.
J’ai mangé les mûres des ronces
Et j’ai dormi sous les buissons.

14 octobre 1853. Jersey.

XXII À DEUX ENNEMIS AMIS

Du bord-des mers sans fond qui jamais ne pardonnent,
Du milieu des éclairs ét des vents qui me donnent
Le spectacle effrayant de l’éternel courroux,.
Je vous le crie: Amis! réconciliez-vous.
Vous n’avez pas le droit de ne pas être frères:...
Moi, qui sais les fureurs du sort, les vents contraires,
Les chocs. inattendus, les luttes, sans pitié;
Je vous dis: Aimez-vous! la solide amitié
Ceint d’un-cercle d’acier l’homme, vase fragile.
Virgile aimait Horace, Horace aimait Virgile
Au point qu’en cette Rome, où l’oeil va les chercher,
On ne distinguait plus, en voyant se toucher
Leurs têtes. dans la gloire intime et familière,
D’où venait le laurier et d’où venait.le lierre.

Toi, n’es-tu pas celui qui, songeant, écrivant,
Cerveau monde où sè meut tout un peuple vivant,
T’éclairant à ton gré du -jour que. tu préfères,
Du drame et-.du roman,fais tes deux hémisphères?
Toi, n’es-tu pas celui qui va, monte, descend,
Ne tiens-tu pas ta plume, au vol éblouissant,
Qui touche à tous les temps, qui perce tous les voiles,
Et jette sur Paris un-tourbillon d’étoiles?
Vous êtes deux noms chers qu’au monde nous offrons.
Les acclamations abondent sur vos fronts

Comme sur les palais s’abattent les colombes.
Dieu qui, pour vous créer ouvrit deux grandes tombes,
Pour allumer vos coeurs fit jaillir un éclair
Sur l’un, de Diderot, sur l’autre, de Schiller;
Et maintenant chacun de vous, dans son domaine,
Eclaire un des côtés de la grande âme humaine.
Puisque vous êtes forts, amis, vous êtes doux.
Vous êtes à vous deux la lumière; aimez-vous!

Vos bouches sur les coeurs, sur les foules conquises,
Dévident l’écheveau des paroles exquises;
Liez-vous l’un à l’autre avec ces chaînes d’or.
L’éloquence est richesse et l’amitié trésor.
Le flot s’apaise, ému, dès qu’il voit l’aube luire.
Voyez-vous seulement le temps de vous sourire,
Et vous vous comprendrez; vous le devez, étant
Ceux qui domptent le siècle, en régnant sur l’instant.
Revenons, tout le reste étant deuil ou chimère,
Aux cordialités titaniques d’Homère;
Apprenez à la foule, à qui manquent les dieux,
Et qui, dans son brouillard morne et fastidieux,
S’attriste et ne voit plus d’Olympe qu’où vous êtes,
Ce que c’est que le rire éclatant des poëtes.
Sur le char lumineux soyez le couple ardent.
Oui, vous vous comprendrez, rien qu’en vous regardant.
Si tout se comprenait, tout serait harmonie;
Tout serait gloire, azur, splendeur, joie infinie,
Amour; et le chaos n’est qu’un malentendu.

Dans ma nuit orageuse où je me sens mordu
Tantôt par la vipère et tantôt par l’hyène,
Laissez-moi me débattre avec la sombre haine.
C’est mon destin. Avant que mon front se courbât,
J’ai commencé tout jeune, hélas! ce noir combat.
Jacob lutte avec l’Ange, et je lutte avec l’Ombre.
Ah! je prends pour moi seul les maux, les deuils sans nombre!
Que je sois seul saignant, tous étant radieux!
Votre accord charmera mon coeur gonflé d’adieux,
Mon âme que le sort brise et qui reste entière,
Et peut-être fera couler la larme altière
Qui pend depuis trois ans suspendue à mon cil.
Donnez-moi ce bonheur au fond de mon exil,
Donnez-moi cette joie au fond de ma tempête
De voir que rien ne manque à votre double fête,
De me dire: ils sont 1à dans le rayonnement,
Lui, l’athlète invaincu, lui, le vainqueur charmant!

De m’éblouir de loin, moi l’homme des ténèbres,
De vos enchantements chaque jour plus célèbres,
D’entendre les échos sans cesse vous grandir,
Et, par tous applaudis, vos deux noms s’applaudir!

Aimez-vous pour celui qui tous les deux vous aime.
Aimez-vous! que l’envie ,en devienne plus blême.
Jumeaux, redevenez frères à tous les yeux.
Et montrez.que le jour, superbe,, heureux, joyeux,
N’est pas sourd à la voix qui sort de la nuit sombre,
Montrez que les rayons veulent consoler l’ombre,
Vous quetout couronna, vous à qui tout sourit,
En mettant vos deux mains dans la main du proscrit.

21 décembre 1854.

XXIII D.G.D.G.

I

Elle s’est donc en allée,
Et se tait.
Ô noire voûte étoilée,
Rends-nous la grande âme ailée
Qui chantait!

Elle était de. ceux qu’attire
a maison.
L’autre année elle y vint luire,
Et m’éclaira d’un sourire
L’horizon.

Paix à vous, bon coeur utile,
‘Beaux yeux clos,
Esprit splendide et fertile!
Elle aimait ma petite île,
Mes grands flots,

Ces champs de trèfle et de seigle,
Ce doux sol,
L’océan que l’astre règle,
Et mon noir rocher ou l’aigle
Prend son vol.

II

La vie à ces âmes fières
Ne plaît pas;
Car les vivants sont des pierres
Sur leurs fronts et des-poussières
Sous leurs pas.

Dieu, c’est la nuit que tu sèmes
En créant
Les hommes, ces noirs problèmes;
Nous sommes les masques blêmes
Du néant.

Nous sommes l’algue et la houle,
O semeur!
Nous flottons, le vent nous roule;
Toute notre oeuvre s’écroule
En rumeur.

Le mal tient les foules viles
Dans ses noeuds;
Multitudes puériles,
Nous faisons des bruits stériles
Ou haineux.

Nains errant sur des décombres,
Embryons,
Ébauches, fantômes, ombres,
Dans tes immensités sombres,
Nous crions.

Dieu! les hommes, têtes basses,
Yeux charnels,
Raillent l’abîme. où tu passes,
Tes profondeurs, tes.espaces
Éternels!

Ils crachent sur le grand voile
Du ciel bleu;
Blâment tout, mer, barque et voile;
Insultent l’ombre et l’étoile,
L’âme et Dieu!

Ils insultent l’aube pure,

L’air vital,
Le beau, le vrai, la nature,
Et cette sombre ouverture:
L’idéal!

Ils insultent l’invisible,
Le cyprès,
Le sort dont ils sont la cible,
L’onde, et le frisson terrible
Des forêts.

Ils insultent le pontife,
La lueur,

L’être, saint hiéroglyphe,
Et l’énigme sous ta griffe,
Sphinx rêveur!

Leurs voix sont prostituées,
Jéhovah!
Quand l’aigle entend leurs huées,
Il regarde les nuées
Et s’en va!

III

Ô grande âme prisonnière,
Coeur martyr,
C’est l’aigle de ma tanière
Qui t’a montré la manière
De partir.

Pendant qu’assis sous les branches,
Nous pleurons,
Ame, tu souris, tu penches
Tes deux grandes ailes blanches
Sur nos fronts.

Et, du fond de nos abîmes,
Soucieux,
Nous te voyons sur les cimes,
Levant tes deux bras sublimes
Vers les cieux.

IV

Destin! gouffre aux vents contraires,
Aux flots sourds!
Oh! que d'urnes funéraires!
Ma fille, amis, parents, frères,
Joie, amours!

On luit, on brille, un beau rêve
Vous dit: viens!
Et voilà qu'un vent s'élève;
Le temps d'un flux sur la grève;
Et plus rien!

La bise éteint, brise, emporte
Le flambeau,
Et souffle, toujours plus forte,
Par-dessous la noire porte
Du tombeau.

Notre bonheur est livide,
Et vit peu.
Hélas! je me tourne avide
Vers le sépulcre, ce vide
Plein de Dieu.
Dieu, là, dans ce sombre monde
Met l'amour,
Et tous les ports dans cette onde,
Et dans cette ombre profonde
Tout le jour.

Ô vivants qui dans la brume,
Dans le deuil,
Passez comme un flot.qui fume,
Et n’êtes que de l’écume
Sur l’écueil,
Vivez dans les clartés fausses,
Expiez!
Moi, Dieu bon qui nous exauces!
Je sens remuer les fosses
Sous mes pieds.

Il est temps que je m’en aille
Loin du bruit,
Sous la ronce et la broussaille,
Retrouver ce qui tressaille
Dans la nuit.

Tous mes noeuds dans le mystère
Sont dissous.
L’ombre est ma patrie austère.
J’ai moins d’amis sur la terre
Que dessous.

16 juillet 1855

XXIV UN SOIR

Parmi les étoiles sans nombre,
Mon esprit s’évanouissait;
Je vis une blancheur dans l’ombre.
C’était un ange qui passait.

Elle posa ses mains divines
Sur mon front sombre et soucieux...
O champs! ô vallons! ô collines!
O sereine beauté des cieux!’
Et ma bouche ardente et pâmée
Murmura: Viens! adorons-nous!
Vivons! et cette bien-aimée,
Pâle, tomba sur me’s genoux.
Que de fois j’ai dit sur les grèves:
O flots! vous êtes une voix.!
Que de fois j’ai rempli de rêves
L’étrange profondeur des bois!

Avril 1851.

XXV LETTRE DE L’EXILÉ ARRIVANT DANS LE DÉSERT

Tu me dis: Que fais-tu? Rien. Je suis seul. Je rêve.
Je vais voir si quelqu’un me connaît sur la grève.
Je cherche à rencontrer dans ces rudes forêts,
Dans ces monts, quelque ami tragique que j’aurais,
Quelque bon vieil écueil bien. battu de l’abîme,
Quelque sapin cassé d’une façon sublime;
Un roc ayant le deuil et n’ayant pas l’effroi.
Je parle à l’océan, et je lui dis: C’est moi.
Alors nous nous mettons àcauser, lui plein d’ombre,
Mêlant un conseil grave à ses rumeurs sans nombre,
Et redisant toujours dans l’écume et les vents
La même phrase: Aimez, car vous souffrez, vivants!
Moi, songeur et distrait par la barque qui vogue.
Le tonnerre souvent prend part au dialogue;
Cette interjection, l’éclair, tombe du ciel.

La mer me plaît; on sent sa vertu dans son fiel.
Elle assainit la terre à force d’amertume.
Je l’aime. Aussi l’aller trouver est ma coutume
Quand je sens dans mon coeur monter sous le ciel bleu
L’âpre indignation qui questionne Dieu.
Elle me calme avec son souffle de nuée.
Ma douleur dans ses flots s’endort diminuée.

On médite en voyant des prodiges entiers.
Je fraternise avec le gouffre volontiers..
Les proscrits sont des gens qui content leurs affaires
Aux vagues dans l’orage et dans la nuit aux sphères;
Nous ouvrons nos coeurs fiers et forts, quoique mouvants,
A ces premiers venus farouches, tous les vents;
Et l’on finit par prendre une altière habitude
De tutoiement avec la sombre solitude.

De là l’apaisement. O vastes cieux vainqueurs!
L’autan passe, arrachant l’écume de nos coeurs;
Et quand sur notre haine et sur notre colère
S’est d’en haut répandu l’immense bruit polaire,
Quand la foudre nous a regardés dans les yeux,
Que reste-t-il d’un homme honnête et furieux?
Un sage. On sonde mieux le mystère où nous sommes
Devant ces grands flots noirs, moins troubles que les hommes;
On sent qu’en ce chaos un monde est à l’essai;
On confronte, attentif, le faux gouffre et le vrai,
La trahison dé l’homme et l’embûche de l’onde;
On contemple les plis de l’eau rauque et profonde,
On s’ouvre à la candeur comme eux à l’alcyon,
Et l’on devient pensif dans la proportion
Du prodige, et l’on sent que le courroux s’efface
Sous ce flot calme au fond et fauve à la surface.
On croit voir dans son âme obscure le lever
D’un astre; et c’est cela qui vient de m’arriver.

J’ai vu tant de néants, tant d’hommes et de choses,
Tant d’immobilités, tant de métamorphoses,
Que je suis las. Après tous ces chiens, tous ces loups,
Dupin, Montalembert, Veuillot, Proudhon, Falloux,
Après l’oison qui glousse, après le chat qui grince,
Après ce reître, après ce juge, après ce prince,
Après ces nains, ces fous, ces gueux, ces intrigants,
J’ai le goût des éclairs, j’aime les ouragans,
J’entre dans cette énorme et formidable fête,
L’onde, et je me repose, ami, dans la tempête.

26 août 1852.

XXVI Ô doux êtres!

Ô doux êtres! ma joie et mon amour sacré!
Que ce jour sera triste où je vous quitterai!
Ce sera comme un soir qui tombe:
Pendant que je dirai, la sueur sur le front:
Que vont-ils devenir sur-la terre? ils diront:
Que deviendra-t-il dans la tombe?

XXVII À l’heure où

À l’heure où le soleil se couche,
Quand j’erre au fond des bois, les soirs,
Seul, songeant, souriant, farouche,
Effaré sous les arbres noirs;

Ou quand, près du foyer qui flambe,.
Laissant mes livres cent fois lus,
Croisant ma jambe sur ma jambe,
Je regarde et n’écoute plus;

Vous dites: Qu’a-t-il donc? Il rêve!
Oui. Je rêve! -C’est que je voi
L’ombre où l’astre idéal se leve
Croître et monter autour de moi!

C’est. qu’en. cette. nuit où s’efface ,
La clarté faite pour nos yeux,
Je sens approcher de ma face
Dès visages mystérieux!.

C’est qu’il me vient des apparences,
Dés formes, des voix, des soupirs,.
Du monde où sont cès espérances ,
Que nous-appelons souvenirs!

C’est que des espaces funèbres
S’oùvrent à mes sens convulsifs;
C’est q`ue je sens dans ces ténèbres
Môn pere et ma mère pensifs!

C’est que je sens passer un ange,
Toi, ma fille, âme au front charmant,
A je ne sais quel souffle étrange
Dont je frissonne doucement!

C’est que, sous nos plafonds paisibles
Comme dans nos bols pleins d’effroi,
Les morts présents, mais invisibles,
Fixent leurs yeux profonds sur moi!

6 janvier 1850.

XXVIII J’aspire à m’enfouir sous les arbres

J’aspire à m’enfouir sous les arbres. Je suis
Comme ces animaux sauvages que des hommes

Ont pris, saisis, traînés dans la ville où nous sommes,
Et qui, dans une cage enfermés tristement,
Voyant la face humaine avec étonnement,
Font tous les mouvements d’un serpent qui se sauve,
A travers les barreaux passent leur museau fauve,
Et sombres, effarés, pensifs, cherchent à voir
Quelque taillis épais, quelque buisson bien noir,
Un trou profond caché dans un fouillis champêtre,
Où tout a coup dans l’ombre ils puissent disparaître

XXIX À JEANNE

Je suis triste; le sort est dur; tout meurt, tout passe;
Les êtres innocents marchent dans de la nuit;
Tu n'en sais rien; tu ris d'écouter dans l'espace
Ce qui chante, et de voir ce qui s'épanouit;
Toi, tu ne connais pas le destin; tu chuchotes
On ne sait quoi devant l'Ignoré; tu souris
Devant l'effarement des sombres don Quichottes
Et devant la sueur des pâles Jésus-Christs.
Tu ne sais pas pourquoi je songe, pourquoi tombe
Kesler à Guernesey, Ribeyrolle au Brésil;
Jeanne, tu ne sais pas ce que c'est que la tombe,
Jeanne, tu ne sais pas ce que c'est que l'exil.
Certes, si je pensais que j'assombris ton âme,
Je ne te dirais point toutes ces choses-là;
Mais, vois-tu, bien qu'avril dore à sa pure flamme
Ton front, que Dieu pour moi tout exprès étoila,
Quoique le ciel ait l'aube et mon coeur ton sourire,
Jeanne, la vie est morne, et l'on gémit parfois;
Puisque tu n'as qu'un an, je puis bien tout te dire,
Tu comprends seulement la douceur de ma voix.

16 août 1870

XXX Si dans ce grand Paris,

Si dans ce grand Paris, ô charmante infirmière
Qui jetez dans notre ombre un regard de lumière,

Quelque-mitraille ou quelque obus, présent de roi,
Me fait l’insigne honneur de s’abattre sur moi,
Ou si quelque hulan m’octroie un coup de lancé,
Je ne me ferai pas porter à l’ambulance
Où votre pitié douce accueille le blessé,
Où sur tant de douleurs votre oeil tendre est baissé;
Je n’irai point, de peur, infirmière adorable,
En m’en allant guéri, de sortir incurable.

XXXI CALOMNIÉ

Un trop lourd projectile a peine à s’élever;
Trop d’intervalle empêche un caillou d’arriver;
Une sphère, lapide, en vain, une autre sphère.
Sachez que le premier grimaud venu peut faire
Des mensonges abjects qui jusqu’au soir vivront,
Mais qu’il est malaisé de jeter un affront,
Assez haut pour qu’il aille atteindre un honnête homme.
Un gueux se fait payer, il empoche la somme;
Puis calomnie. Eh bien, nul effet. Voyez-vous,
Celui qui se sent juste, et qui, sévère, est doux,
Qui n’a jamais fait m’al qu’au mal, qui fut fidèle
A l’honneur comme l’est à son nid l’hirondelle,
Qui pour combattre et puis faire grâce, a vécu,
Qui n’a jamais dit Non à l’ennemi vaincu,
Qui veut tous les devoirs et ne veut aucun rôle,
Peut défier la haine; et c’est pourquoi tel drôle,
Vil, fait pour les bas-fonds et non pour les sommets,
Qui m’insulte toujours, ne m’offense jamais:

XXXII SOUFFREZ, ô PRÉCURSEURS!

Malheur dans les bas-fonds, malheur sur les hauteurs,
A vous, penseurs, esprits, marcheurs, libérateurs!
L’ignorance ne sait que jeter de la haine;
L’esclave mord la main qui vient briser sa chaîne;
L’enfer punit quiconque a rêvé paradis.
Nous étions les proscrits, nous étions les maudits;

Et cinq ans, et dix ans, et vingt ans nous vécûmes
D’outrages, de fureurs, de cris, d’affronts, d’écumes;
Tous; ceux-ci dans l’exil, ceux-là sous les barreaux.
Le progrès est un char que fouettent lès bourreaux,
Qui pour ornière a l’ombre et le sang, et pour roue
Le martyre. Qu’un homme aux hommes se dévoile,
Hélas, c’est la première énigme qu’ici-bas
L’homme ne comprend pas et ne devine pas;
C’est ce qui fait grandir les épines aiguës,
C’est ce qui fait pousser dans l’ombre les ciguës.

XXXIII L’aquilon change,

L’aquilon change, et met la poupe où fut la proue;
Il ne faut pas beaucoup de temps pour qu’une roue
Tourne, et pour que le bas soit en haut, et souvent
Ce qui semble tombé riposte en se levant:
Nous reprendrons nos droits,-nos terres, nos provinces;
Et le vent qu’il fera ce jour-là, rois et princes,
Allez le demander au moulin de Valmy!
Oh! je le vois, ce jour splendide! on a dormi,
On s’éveille; la France est là, redevenue
Déesse; et son front rit, et son épée est nue;
Cette fumée en fuite au loin, c’est l’ennemi.
Le firmament, car Dieu ne fait rien à demi,
Pose son arc-en-cièl profond sur nos deux villes.
Non, je ne pense pas que les rois soient tranquilles.
Je n’ai plus qu’une joie au monde, leur souci.
Je dis presque aux bourreaux de mon pays.: merci!
Et puisque d’un enfer peut naître une genèse,
Je ne suis pas fâché d’être dans la fournaise;
Purification du feu, je te bénis!
Les phénix lumineux ont les brasiers pour nids;
L’âme s’augmente et luit dans la flamme; est esclave
Tout ce qui ne sort pas vivant du bain de lave,
Et je trouve l’épreuve utile Croîs, lion.
J’attends.

Rois, consommez votre rébellion.

XXXIV AVE, DEA; MORITURUS TE SALUTAT

La mort et la beauté sont deux choses profondes
Qui contiennent tant d’ombre et d’azur qu’on dirait
Deux soeurs également terribles et fécondes
Ayant la même énigme et le même secret;

Ô femmes, voix, regards, cheveux noirs, tresses blondes,
Brillez, je meurs! ayez l’éclat, l’amour, l’attrait,
Ô perles que la mer mêle à ses grandes ondes,
O lumineux oiseaux de la sombre forêt!

Judith, nos deux destins sont plus près l’un de l’autre
Qu’on ne croirait, à voir mon visage et le vôtre;
Tout le divin abîme apparaît dans vos Yeux,

Et moi, je sens le gouffre étoilé dans mon âme;
Nous sommes tous les deux voisins du ciel, madame,
Puisque vous êtes belle et puisque je suis vieux.

XXXV ENVOI

Tu sais; ami rêveur qui vois ma destinée,
Quelle meute envieuse, âpre, immonde, acharnée,
Jappe après mes talons, et m’insulte, et me mord,
Comme si j’étais grand, comme si j’étais fort!
Mets sous clef ce poéme, et n’en parle à personne.
Cette meute surgit dès que mon clairon sonne,
Et rentre dans sa nuit sitôt qu’il a cessé.
Je. veux la condamner au silence forcé. -
Pour quelque temps du moins. -Cet oubli qui lui pèse
— Me plaît, et je me tais afin qu’elle se taise.

25 août 1843. Cauterets.

XXXVI Pygmée et Myrmidon,

Pygmée et Myrmidon, c’est haine et calomnie.
Avoir l’envie au coeur, aux lèvres l’ironie,

12 juillet.

Poète, c’est un peu l’habitude d’en bas.
Après tant de travaux, après tant de combats,
L’affront Vassiègé; ils sont toute une multitude
T’insultant dans ton deuil et dans ta solitude;
Mais toi que le destin absorbe, tu n’as point
Le temps de voir ces gens qui te montrent le poing.
Les tumultes ont beau t’entourer, tu médites.
Toutes tes oeuvres sont par Zoïle maudites;
Le fauve acharnement de la haine est sur toi.
Toi qui jadis planais archange, et qu’une loi
Met sur la terre, au fond des visions funèbres,
Prisonnier dans la cage énorme des ténèbres,
Toi, l’aigle échevelé de l’ombre, le banni
Tombé d’un infini dans un autre infini,
Du zénith dans l’abîme et du ciel dans ton âme,
Éclairé, mais brûlé par ta profonde flamme,
Rongé du noir regret du firmament vermeil,
Toi dont l’oeil fixe fait un reproche au soleil
Et semble demander. de quel droit l’on t’exile,
Toi qui n’as plus que toi pour cime et pour asile,
Tu ne te distrais point de ton rêve éternel;
Et, pendant qu’émus comme autour d’un criminel,
Les passants te voudraient tuer, et qu’on te hue,
Et qu’à tes pieds, grondant et grinçant, la cohue
Bourdonne avec le bruit d’orage d’un essaim,
Et t’appelle idiot, traître, avare, assassin,
Incendiaire, esprit méchant, âme mauvaise,
Voleur et meurtrier, clameur que rien n’apaise
Comme si la fureur sans cesse grossissait,

Pensif, tu ne sais pas au juste ce que c’est.

24 mai 1874.

== XXXVII Je la revois, après vingt ans,==

Je la revois, après vingt ans, l’île où Décembre
Me jeta, pâle naufragé.
La voilà! c’est bien elle. Elle est comme une chambre
Où rien encor n’est dérangé.

Oui, c’était bien ainsi qu’elle était; il me semble
Qu’elle rit, et que j’aperçois
Le même oiseau qui fuit, la même fleur qui tremble,
La même aurore dans les bois;

Il me semble revoir, comme au fond d’un mirage,
Les champs, les vergers, les fruits mûrs,
Et dans le firmament profond; le même orage,
Et la même herbe au pied des murs,

Et le même toit blanc qui m’attend et qui m’aime,
Et, par delà le flot grondeur,
La même vision d’un éden, dans la même
Éblouissante profondeur.

Oui, je la reconnais cette grève enchantée,
Comme alors elle m’apparut,
Rive heureuse où l’on. cherche Acis et Galatée,
Où l’on trouve Booz et Ruth;

Car il n’est pas de plage, ou de montagne, ou d’île,
Parmi les abîmes amers,
Mieux faite pour cacher les roses de l’idylle
Sous là tragique horreur des mers.

Ciel l’ océan! c’était cette même nature,

Gouffre de silence et de bruit,
Ayant on ne sait quelle insondable ouverture
Sur la lumière et sur la nuit.

Oui, c’étaient ces hameaux, oui, c’étaient ces rivages;
C’était ce même aspect mouvant,
La même âcre senteur des bruyères sauvages,
Les mêmes tumultes du vent;

C’était la même vague arrachant aux décombres
Les mêmes dentelles d’argent;
C’étaient les mêmes blocs jetant les mêmes ombres
Au même éternel flot changeant;

C’étaient les mêmes caps que l’onde ignore et ronge,
Car l’âpre mer, pleine de deuils,
Ne s’inquiète pas, dans son effrayant songe,
De la figure des écueils;

C’était la même fuite immense des nuées;
Sur ces monts, où Dieu vient tonner,
Les mêmes cimes d’arbre, en foule remuées,
N’ont pas fini de frissonner;

C’était le même souffle ondoyant dans les seigles;
Je crois revoir sur l’humble pré
Les mêmes papillons avec les mêmes aigles
Sur l’océan démesuré;

C’était le même flux couvrant l’île d’écume,
Comme un cheval blanchit le mors;

C’était le même azur, c’était la même brume,
Et combien vivaient, qui sont morts!

8 août 1872.

En arrivant à Jersey.

XXXVIII Je ne m’arrête pas,

Je ne m’arrête pas, jamais je ne séjourne;
Quand le flot, mon témoin,
Tremble, je crie au vent: Marchons! quand le vent tourne,
Je dis au flot: Plus loin!

Et j’avance, et toujours plus d’ouragan m’emporte...
Homme! aime tes amours,
Assieds-toi sur le banc de pierre de ta porte,
Et laisse fuir les jours!

Heureux celui qui vit stupide en sa demeure,
Et qui, chaque soir, voit
Le même oiseau de nuit sortir à la même heure
Du même angle du toit!

13 août 1872.

XXXIX Je vais dans la fureur du gouffre,

Je vais dans la fureur du gouffre, dans l’écume,
Pâle, écoutant les mots
Que disent, pleins d’horreur, la sibylle dans Cume
Et l’apôtre à Pathmos.

Quand je passe en cette ombre, où, fuyant la tempête,
Nul encor n’a passé,
L’abîme est sous mes pieds, la foudre est sur ma tête,
On dit: C’est l’insensé!

Tandis que l’ouragan qui parfois semble rire,
Puis éclate en sanglots,
Joue avec les agrès comme avec une lyre,
Un chant noir sort des flots.

Et moi sur qui le deuil, la haine, la vieillesse,
L’onde et le vent trompeur,
S’acharnent, je poursuis mon chemin, et je laisse
Les autres avoir peur.
Pourtant vous ne pouvez empêcher que je songe,
Las du sort par moments,
Et de l’ombre que laisse aux âmes le mensonge
De tant d’événements.

Le destin m’a jeté de tempête en tempête,
De récif en récif;
Jamais mon coeur saignant n’a fait courber ma tête;
Mon courroux est pensif.

J’ai traversé les pleurs, les haines, les veuvages,
Ce qui mord, ce qui nuit.
Noir nocher, j’ai connu tous les âpres rivages
Du deuil et de la-nuit.

J’ai lutté; j’ai subi la sinistre merveille
Des abîmes mouvants;
Et jamais on ne vit dispersion pareille
D’une âme à tous les vents:

Je suis presque prophète et je suis presque apôtre;
Je dis: C’est bien! Allons!
Mais je ne voudrais pas de ce sort pour un autre,
O fauves aquilons!

V. H. 13 août 1872.

XL Omnia vidit

Omnia vidit
Eversa.
(JUVÉNAL)

Un vieillard est souvent puni de sa vieillesse
Par le peu de clarté que le destin lui laisse.
Survivre est un regret poignant, presque un remords.
Voir sa ville brûlée-et tous, ses enfants morts
Est un malheur possible, et.l’aïeul solitaire
Tremble et pleure de s’être attardé sur la terre.
Que te sert, ô Priam, d’avoir vécu si vieux?
Hélas! tu vois tomber la foudre sur tes dieux.

XLI Vous demandez à quoi je rêve?

Vous demandez à quoi je rêve?
Je me souviens qu'un jour, jadis,
A l'heure où l'aube qui se lève
Ouvre ses yeux de paradis,

Je passais, parmi des colombes,
Dans un cimetière, jardin
Qui, couvrant de roses les tombes,
Cache le néant sous l'éden.

J'errais dans cette ombre insalubre
Où les croix noires sont debout...
Une grande pierre lugubre
Se mit à vivre tout à coup.

C'était, dans l'herbe et les pervenches,
Un sépulcre sombre et hautain
Qu'effleura soudain sous les branches
Un furtif éclair du matin;

II était là sous une yeuse,
Triste, et comme pour l'apaiser,
La jeune aube mystérieuse
Donnait à ce spectre un baiser.

Et cela rendit, ô merveille,
La vie au sépulcre hagard.
Ce sourd-muet ouvrit l'oreille
Et cet aveugle eut un regard.

En voyant venir la lumière,
Comme au désert le noir Sina,
Ce sinistre linceul de pierre
Où pleure une âme, rayonna.

Et je le vis, dans ,1e bois sombre,
Dans le champ pestilentiel,
Comme transfiguré dans l'ombre
Par cette dorure du ciel.

Ce n'était plus la dalle affreuse,
Qui se dresse hors de tout bruit,
Sous laquelle un gouffre se creuse,
Plein d'étoiles, mais plein de nuit;

— Ce n'était plus la tombe où rêve
Un vague fantôme banni,
Abîme où le fini s'achève,
Borne où-commence l'infini.

Grâce à l'aube, au pied du vieil arbre,
Dans la ronce et dans le genêt,
Le froid granit, l'orgueilleux marbre
Que le ver de terre connaît,

Illuminait ces bois funèbres,
Craints de l'homme, aimés du corbeau,
Et, calme, avait dans les ténèbres
On ne sait quel air de flambeau.

Il cessa d'être le fantôme.
Le liseron fut ébloui,
Et l'oeillet lui jeta son baume;
Les fleurs n'eurent plus peur de lui.

Les roses que nos yeux admirent
Baisèrent son socle détruit,
Et les petits oiseaux se mirent
A chanter autour de sa nuit.

Noble femme aux vaincus fidèle,
Votre sourire frais et beau,

Quand il luit sur moi, rappelle
Cette aurore sur ce tombeau.

V. H. 5 septembre.

XLII Vous qui, vainqueurs,

Vous qui, vainqueurs, avez mis, depuis vingt-cinq ans,
Maîtres sanglants qui rendrez compte,
Votre nuit sur la France en deuil, et sur les camps
Votre gloire qui leur fait honte,

Toi, prêtre, toi, soldat, chef des sombres exploits,
Que suit des yeux l'histôire triste;
Toi, juge escamoteur, qui du fourreau des lois
Tiras le poignard du sophiste,

Quand vous couvrez d'affronts haineux, de cris amers,
Et d'un tumulte de huées,

Cet homme qui longtemps, pensif au bord des mers,
Vécut le front dans les nuées,

Et qui, dans la candeur de ses calmes desseins,
Veut la justice égale et grande,
Avant de l'appeler défenseur d'assassins,
Attendez donc qu'il vous défende!
Tu nous regardes, Nuit, grande passante noire;
Tu ne dois pas beaucoup comprendre notre histoire,
Car elle est bien souvent plus sombre encor que toi.
Soyez homme d'honneur, de probité, de foi,
Vous serez l'ennemi public; dans la tempête
Risquez pour une idée auguste votre tête,
Et vous serez traité de la même façon
Que la poltronnerie et que la trahison;
Cet homme ose invoquer la pitié vénérable,
Il offre asile au faible, à bas le misérable!
Quoi donc! il s'interpose entre le meurtre et nous!
Il s'émeut en voyant des femmes à genoux,
Il s'indigne des morts que nous jetons aux fleuves,
Il plaint lés orphelins, il ne fait pas de veuves,

Il ose prononcer l'horrible mot Pardon!
A cette heure où chacun fait à tous l'abandon
De ces vieux préjugés: droit, liberté, clémence,
Où l'on sent que le monde antique recommence,
Lorsqu'on voit qu'un grand pas en arrière est sensé,
Et quand pour avenir on reprend le passé,
Il s'obstine, il soutient les vaincus sans relâche,
Il les défend, dût-on l'assassiner, le lâche! -

C'est ainsi qu'on raisonne à de certains moments.
Un joûr, voyant passer d'affreux événements,
Voyant qu'au grand Paris on creusait une, fisse,
Ne croyant pas Dieu mort et la vérité fausse,
Ne. me figurant pas que tuer fût un droit,
Je me dressai, je dis: Le jour meurt, l'ombre croît,
Prenez garde! Au-dessus de vos fauves mêlées,
O noirs lutteurs, il est des choses étoilées,
La raison, le progrès, la patrie et l'honneur.
Le vainqueur est souvent son propre empoisonneur.
Arrêtez. L'amnistie est une fin sereine.
Soyez cléments.
Alors j'eus sur moi tant de haine,
Tant d'exécration, d'épouvante et d'horreur
Que je fus presque, ô Nuit, l'égal d'un empereur!

18 décembre 1874.

XLIV Ah! vous faites du froid

Ah! vous faites du froid devoir vôtre bonheur!
Ah! vous ne buvez pas l’oubli de votre honneur,
Et l’impudeur, l’orgie, et la honte,-à plein verre!
Ah! vous êtes prudent, économe, sévère,
Pour marcher le front haut, et c’est votre souci!
Vous ne voulez pas être un jour à la merci
Des gens qui font métier de tarifer une âme,
Et d’acheter tantôt l’homme, et tantôt la femme!
Ah! vous ayez présent à l’esprit l’affreux sort
De ceux que la faim sombre a, sous peine de mort,
Forcés d’être-valets et de se vendre au maître,
Et vous ne jetez pas l’argent par la fenêtre,
Eh bien! vous êtes pingre, avare, grigou,-rat,
Pire qu’un misérable et presque un scélérat!
Ladre! dit la catin. Pleutre! ajoute le prêtre.
La vertu vous est vice, et ne voulant pas être-
En ce temps de coeurs plats parlant un vil jargon,
Arétin ou Dangeau, vous êtes Harpagon!

12 avril 1874.

XLV La haute honnêteté,

La haute honnêteté, c’est là toute ma gloire.
0 peuple, après ma mort tu mettras ma mémoire
Sur cet âpre sommet, le devoir accompli.
Et quand je serai là, quelqu’un contre l’oubli
Me défendra, quelqu’un de farouche, la haine.
Elle accourra, poussant des cris, sinistre et vaine,.
Avec le rauque essaim des affronts ténébreux;
Et tous ces monstres noirs se querellant entre eux,
Jour et nuit, calomnie, impudence, bassesse,
Tâcheront de me mordre-et grinceront sans cesse.
Dans l’Inde, quand d’affreux vautours sont aperçus

Le soir, planant en cercle et dans l’ombre au-dessus
De quelque cime sombre, on dit dans la campagne:
C’est parce qu’on a mis un mort sur la montagne.

15 décembre 1874.

XLVI L’enfant est très petit

L’enfant est très petit et l’aïeul est très vieux.
L’insulteur ne craint rien. Comme un ciel pluvieux
Verse l’ondée aux bois que l’orage secoue,
Cette main de vieillard a sur plus d’une joue
Autrefois élargi les sonores soufflets.
Mais à présent-les longs exils, le ciel anglais,
Et soixante-treize ans ont refroidi cet homme;
Calme, il dédaigne. A peine il sait comment se nomme
L’insulteur, pour avoir, lorsque juillet brilla,
Jadis aidé quelqu’un qui portait ce nom-là’26.
Rien de plus. Et qu’importe un jéune drôle immonde?
Qu’est-ce que cela fait qu’un laquais soit aù monde?
Qu’est-ce qu’un jappement de plus dans le chenil?
Qu’importe au sphinx rêveur dans les roseaux du Nil
Le glissemént sinistre et vague d’un reptile?
Les gueux peuvent sans peur faire aboyer leur style.
Voir passer un vieillard que le deuil accabla,
La bravoure du lâche est faite de cela.
Nul damer. Le gredin est à son aise infâme;
Il se répete, afin d’encourager son âme
Où beaucoup de prudence a l’audace aboutit,
Que l’aïeul est bien vieux et l’enfant bien petit.

31 mars 1875.

XLVII Je suis enragé.

Je suis enragé. J’aime et je suis un vieux fou.

— Grand-père? -Quoi? -Je veux m’en aller. -Aller où?
— Où je voudrai. -C’est bien. -Je veux sortir, grand-père.
— Sortons. -Grand-père? -Quoi? -Pleuvra-t-il? -Non, j’espère.
— Je veux qu’il pleuve, moi. -Pourquoi? -Pour faire un peu
Pousser mon haricot dans mon jardin.. -C’est Dieu
Qui fait la pluie. -Eh bien, je veux que Dieu la fasse.
— Tu veux! tu veux! -Grand-père? -Eh bien quoi? Si je casse

Mon joujou, le bon Dieu ne peut pas m’empêcher.
C’est donc moi le plus fort. -Parlons sans nous fâcher.
— Je ne me fâche pas. Je veux qu’il pleuve. -Ecoute,
Je te donne raison. -Il va pleuvoir? -Sans doute.
Viens, prenons l’arrosoir du jardinier Jacquot,
Et nous ferons pleuvoir. Où? -Sur ton haricot.

XLVIII ÉCHAPPÉ À L’ERREUR

Gouffres, m’entendez-vous? Me voyez-vous, écumes?
Je surnage. Longtemps, doux enfants, nous vécûmes,
Mes deux frères et moi, dans cet A B C D
D’imposture et d’erreur, dont l’homme a fait sa bible;
Mais c’est fini, j’en sors et je lutte, terrible
Et joyeux comme un évadé.

Nous sommes quelques-uns nageant dans l’ombre immense,
Éperdus; tout est piège, ignorance, inclémence;,
La mer n’a, pas un pli qui ne soit triste et noir;
L’écueil gémit; le vent pleure, la vague tremble;
La brume, c’est le doute; et par moments, il semble
Que l’abîme est au désespoir.

L’océan, ce despote, a l’autan pour ministre.
Je regarde au delà de l’horizon sinistre,
Je résiste à l’horreur du gouffre illimité;
Je vois plus loin que l’ombre et la haine et la guerre.
Comme Colomb criait à ses compagnons: Terre!
Je crie aux hommes: Vérité!

Et je vois Pythagore, Eschyle, esprits sublimes,
Job, Dante, âmes ayant l’habitude des cimes,
Thalès, Milton, planer dans l’obscur firmament.
Ainsi, malgré les chocs de l’onde et ses huées,
Une dispersion d’aigles ,dans les nuées
Tourbillonne superbement.

Prêtres, vous.n’avez pu m’engloutir dans vos songes;
Dieu ne m’a pas laissé noyer par vos mensonges,
J’avance, et je fais signe aux pâles matelots;
Je rapporte des mers la perle qu’on y trouve,
Je vis!L’évasion du naufrage se prouve
Par la tête au-dessus des flots.

4 mai 1878.

XLIX APRÈS L’HIVER

N’attendez pas de moi que je vais vous donner
Des raisons contre Dieu que je vois rayonner;
La nuit meurt, l’hiver fuit; maintenant la lumière,
Dans les champs, dans les bois, est partout la première.
Je suis par le printemps vaguement attendri.
Avril est un enfant, frêle, charmant, fleuri;
Je sens devant l’enfance et devant le zéphyre
Je ne sais quel bèsoin de pleurer et de rire;
Mai complète ma joie et s’ajoute à mes pleurs.
Jeanne, George, accourez, puisque voilà des fleurs.
Accourez, la forêt chante, l’azur se dore,
Vous n’avez pas le.droit d’être absents de l’aurore.
Je suis un vieux songeur et j’ai besoin de vous,
Venez! je veux aimer, être juste, être doux,
Croire, remercier confusément les choses,
Vivre sans reprocher les épines aux roses,
Ètre enfin un bonhomme acceptant le bon Dieu.
O printemps! bois sacrés! ciel profondément bleu!
On sent un ,souffle d’air vivant qui vous pénètre,
Et l’ouverture au loin d’une blanche fenêtre;
On mêle sa pensée au clair-obscur des eaux;
On a le doux bonheur d’être avec les oiseaux,.
Et de voir, sous l’abri des branches printanières,
Ces messieurs faire avec ces dames des. manières

26 juin 1878.

L Qu’es-tu, pèlerin?
— Qu’es-tu, pèlerin? -Je me nomme
Celui qui pleure. -En vérité,
Viens avec nous. -Je suis un homme
Par une main d’ombre arrêté.

— Viens! -Non. -Les ans t’ont fait débile.
Pourquoi, l’oeil ouvert à demi,
Restes-tu dans l’ombre, immobile?
— Une pierre me tient, ami.

— Ton âme de nuit est vêtue.
Seul, debout, n’as-tu pas l’effroi

D’un lent changement en statue?
— La terre sombre monte en moi.
— Que fais-tu là? Viens. Le soir tombe,
Le vent souffle en tes cheveux gris.
— J’attends que se rouvre une tombe
Où le bas de ma robe est pris.
26 août. Route d’Aix-la-Chapelle à Düren.

LI Le vieillard

Le vieillard chaque jour dans plus d'ombre s'éveille.
A chaque aube il est mort un peu plus que la veille.
La vie humaine, ce noeud vil,
Se défait lentement rongé par l'âme ailée;
Ce sombre oiseau lié veut prendre sa volée
Et casse chaque jour un fil.

Ô front blanc qu'envahit la grande nuit tombante,
Meurs! -Tour à tour sa voix, sa force succombante,
Son oeil où décroît l'horizon
S'éteignent, -ce sera mon destin et le vôtre! -
Comme on voit se fermer le soir l'une après l'autre
Les fenêtres d'une maison.

LII Tu rentreras comme Voltaire

Tu rentreras comme Voltaire
Chargé d’ans, en ton grand Paris;
Des Jeux, des Grâces et des Ris
Tu seras l’hôte involontaire;

Tu seras le mourant aimé;
On murmurera dès l’aurore,
A ton seuil à demi fermé,
Déjà! mêlé de: Pas encore!

Tu seras marmot et barbon;
Tu goûteras la joie honnête
D’être si bon qu’on te croit bête
Et si bête qu’on te croit bon.

I Lorsque ma main frémit

Lorsque ma main frémit si la tienne l'effleure,
Quand tu me vois pâlir, femme aux cheveux dorés,
Comme le premier jour, comme la première heure,
Rien qu'en touchant ta robe et ses plis adorés;
Quand tu vois, que les mots me manquent pour te dire
Tout ce dont tu remplis mon sein tumultueux;
Lorsqu'en me regardant tu sens que ton sourire
M'enivre par degrés et fait briller mes yeux;
Quand ma voix, sous le feu de ta douce prunelle,
Tremble en ma bouche émue, impuissante à parler,
Comme un craintif oiseau, tout à coup pris par l'aile,
Qui frissonne éperdu, sans pouvoir s'envoler;
Ô bel ange créé pour des sphères meilleures,
Dis, après tant de deuils, de désespoirs, d'ennuis,
Et tant d'amers chagrins et tant de tristes heures
Qui souvent font tes jours plus mornes que des nuits;
Oh, dis! ne sens-tu pas se lever dans ton âme
L'amour vrai, l'amour pur, adorable lueur,
L'amour, flambeau de l'homme, étoile de la femme,
Mystérieux soleil du monde intérieur!
Ne sens-tu point, dis-moi, passer sur ta paupière
Le souffle du matin, des ténèbres vainqueur?
Ne vient-il.pas des voix tout bas te dire:espère!
N'entends-tu pas un chant dans l'ombre de ton coeur?

Oh! recueille ce chant, âme blessée et fière!
Cette aube qui se lève en toi, c'est le vrai jour.
Ne crains plus rien! Dieu fit tes yeux pour la lumière,
Ton âme pour le ciel et ton coeur pour l'amour!

Regarde rayonner sur ton destin moins sombre
Ce soleil de l'amour qui pour jamais te luit,
Qui, même après la mort brille, sorti de l'ombre,
Qui n'a pas de couchant et n'aura pas de nuit!

9 novembre 1845.

II Oh! si vous existez, mon ange,

Oh! si vous existez, mon ange, mon génie,
Qui m’emplissez le coeur d’amour et d’harmonie,
Esprit qui m’inspirez, sylphe pur qu’en rêvant
J’écoute me parler à l’oreille souvent!
Avec vos ailes d’or volez à la nuit close
Dans l’alcôve qu’embaume une senteur de rose
Vers cet être charmant que je sers à genoux
Et qui, puisqu’il est femme, est plus ange que vous!
Dites-lui, bon génie, avec votré voix douce,
A cét être si cher qui parfois me repousse,
Que, tandis que la foule a le regard sur lui,
Que son sourire émeut le théâtre ébloui,
Que tous les coeurs charmés ne sont, tant on l’admire,
Qu’un orchestre confus qui sous ses pieds soupire,
Tandis que par moments le peuple transporté
Se lève tout debout et rit à sa beauté,
Il est ailleurs une âme, éperdue, enivrée,
Qui, pour mieux recueillir son image adorée,
Se cache dans la nuit comme dans un linceul,
Et qu’admiré de tous, il est aimé d’un seul!

Février 1833

III Vois-tu, mon ange,

Vois-tu, mon ange, il faut accepter nos douleurs.
L’amour est comme la rosée
Qui luit de mille feux et de mille couleurs
Dans l’’ombre où l’aube l’a posée.
Rien n’est plus radieux sous le haut firmament;
De cette goutte d’eau qui. rayonne un moment
N’approchez pas vos yeux que tant de splendeur charme;
De loin, c’était un. diamant,
De près, ce n’est plus qu’une larme.

Souffrons, puisqu’il le faut. Aimons et louons Dieu!
L’amour, c’est presque toute l’âme.
Le Seigneur aime à voir brûler sous le-ciel bleu
Deux coeurs, mêlant.leur double flamme.
Il fixe sur-nous tous son oeil calme et clément,
Mais parmi ces vivants qu’il voit incessamment
Marcher, lutter, courir, récolter ce qu’ils sèment,
Dieu regarde plus doucement
Ceux qui pleurent parce qu’ils aiment!

I0 janvier 1835.

IV Ce qu’en vous voyant si belle

Ce qu’en vous voyant si belle
Je sens d’extase et d’orgueil,
Respectueux et fidèle,
Je le dis à votre seuil.

Ce qu’en ma pensée éveille
Votre oeil si fier et si doux,
.Votre bouche-si vermeille,
Je le dis à vos genoux.

Ce que tu mets dans mon. âme,
Où toujours tu régneras,
D’amour,. d’ivresse et de flamme,
Je veux le dire en tes bras.

Décembre 1844.

V Vous m’avez éprouvé

Vous m’avez éprouvé par toutes les épreuves,
Seigneur. J’ai bien souffert. Je suis pareil aux veuves
Qui travaillent la nuit et songent tristement;
Je n’ai point fait le mal, et j’ai le châtiment;
Mon oeuvre est difficile et ma vie est amère.
Les choses que je fais sont comme une chimère.

Après le dur travail et la dure saison,
J’ai vu mes ennemis marcher sur ma moisson.
Le mensonge et la haine et l’injure avec joie
Ont mâché dans leurs dents mon nom comme une proie.
J’ai tout rêvé. Le doute a lassé ma raison.
L’ardente jalousie, âcre et fatal poison,
A dans mon coeur profond, qui brûle et se déchire,
Tué la confiance et le joyeux sourire.
J’ai vu, pâle et des yeux cherchant votre horizon,
Des cercueils adorés sortir de ma maison.
J’ai pleuré comme fils, j’ai pleuré comme père,
Et je tremble souvent par où tout autre espère.

Mais je ne me plains pas, et je tombe à genoux,
Et je vous remercie, ô maître amer et doux,
Car vous avez, Dieu bon, Dieu des âmes sincères,
Mis toutes les douleurs et toutes les misères
Sur moi, sur mon coeur sombre en vos mains comprimé,
Excepté celle-là, d’aimer sans être aimé!

23 juin 1843.

VI Sais-tu ce que Dieu dit

Sais-tu ce que Dieu dit à l’enfant qui va naître?
Quand cet humble regard s’entr’ouvre à notre jour,
Il lui dit: Va souffrir, va penser; va connaître;
Ame, perds l’innocence et rapporte l’amour! -

Oui, c’est là le secret. Oui, c’est là le mystère.
Quoi qu’on fasse, il n’est rien qu’on ne puisse blâmer,
On tombe à chaque pas qu’on fait sur cette terre,
Tout est rempli d’erreur, mais il suffit d’aimer.

Colombe, c’est l’amour qu’il faut que tu rapportes!
Après ce dur voyage, obscur, long, hasardeux,
Le ciel d’où nous venons peut nous rouvrir ses portes.
On en est sorti seul, il faut y rentrer deux.

19 juillet 1850.

VII Certe,

Certe, elle n’était pas femme et charmante en vain;
Mais le terrestre en elle avait un air divin;
Des flammes frissonnaient sur mes lèvres hardies;
Elle acceptait l’amour et tous ses incendies,
Rêvait au tutoiement, se risquait pas à pas,
Ne se refusait point et ne se livrait pas;
Sa tendre obéissance était haute et sereine;
Elle savait se faire esclave et rester reine,
Suprême grâce! et quoi de plus inattendu
Que d’avoir tout donné sans avoir rien perdu!
Elle était nue avec un abandon sublime
Et, couchée en un lit, semblait sur une cime.
À mesure qu’en elle entrait l’amour vainqueur,
On eût dit que le ciel lui jaillissait du coeur; -
Elle vous caressait avec de la lumière;
La nudité des pieds fait la marche plus fière
Chez ces êtres pétris d’idéale beauté;
Il lui venait dans l’ombre au front une clarté
Pareille à la nocturne auréole des pôles;
À travers les baisers, de ses blanches épaules
On croyait voir sortir deux ailes lentement;
Son regard était bleu d’un bleu de firmament;
Et c’était la grandeur de cette femme étrange
Qu’en cessant d’être vierge, elle devenait ange.

VIII ROMAN EN TROIS SONNETS

I

Fille de mon portier! l’Érymanthe sonore,
Devant vous, sentirait tressaillir ses pins verts;
L’Horeb, dont le sommet étonne l’univers,
Inclinerait son cèdre altier qu’un. peuple adore;.

Les docteurs juifs, quittant les talmuds entr’ouverts,
Songeraient; et les grecs, dans le temple d’Aglaure
Le long duquel Platon marche en lisant des vers,
Diraient en vous voyant: Salut, déesse Aurore!

Ainsi palpiteraient les grecs et les hébreux,
Quand vous passez, les yeux baissés sous votre mante;
Ainsi frissonneraient sur l’Horeb ténébreux

Les cèdres, et les pins sur l’auguste Érymanthe;
Je ne vous cache pas que vous êtes charmante,
Je ne vous cache pas que je suis amoureux.

3 décembre.

II

Je ne vous cache pas que je suis amoureux,
Je ne vous cache pas que vous êtes charmante;
Soit; mais vous comprenez chue ce qui me tourmente,
C’est, ayant le coeur plein, d’avoir le gousset creux.
On fuit le pauvre ainsi qu’on fuyait le lépreux;
Pour Tircis sans le sou Philis est peu clemente,
Et l’amant dédoré n’éblouit point l’amante;
Il sied d’être Rothschild avant d’être Saint-Preux.

N’importe, je m’obstine; et j’ai l’audace étrange

D’être pauvre et d’aimer, et je vous veux, bel ange;
Car l’ange n’est complet que lorsqu’il est déchu;
Et je vous offre, Églé, &iletière étonnée,
Tout ce qu’une âme, helas, vers l’infini tournée,
Mêle de rêverie aux rondeurs d’un fichu.

9 décembre.

III

Une étoile du ciel me parlait; cette vierge
Disait: -« O descendant crotté des Colletets,
J’ai ri de tes sonnets d’hier où tu montais
Jusqu’à la blonde Eglé, fille de ton concierge.

«Églé fait -j’en pourrais jaser, mais je me tais -
Des rêves de velours sous ses rideaux de serge.
Tu perds ton temps. Maigris, fais des vers, brûle un cierge,
Chante-la; ce sera comme si tu chantais.

Un galant sans argent est un oiseau sans aile.
Elle est trop haut pour toi. Les poètes sont fous.
Jamais tu n’atteindras jusqu’à cette donzelle.” -

Et je dis à l’étoile, à.l’étoile aux yeux doux:
— Mais vous avez cent fois raison, mademoiselle!
Et je ferais bien mieux d’être amoureux de vous.

IO décembre.

IX CHANSON

Il suffit de bien peu de chose
Pour troubler l’ordre des saisons

Et cet azur dont se compose
La splendeur de nos horizons;

Ma bien-aimée,,il peut suffire,
Selon des lois que Dieu connaît,
Pour perdre ou sauver un empire,
D’un enfant qui meurt ou qui naît;

Il ne faut, au milieu de Rome
Et d’un peuple qui suit un char,
Qu’un peu de fer aux mains d’un homme
Pour ôter le monde à César.

Les petites causes sans peine
Produisent des effets bien grands;
Mais le plus hardi capitaine,
Mais le plus hautain des tyrans,

Mît-il en flamme Europe, Asie,
Troublât-il la terre et la mer,
N’ôtera pas sa fantaisie
Au doux rêveur qui veut aimer!.

17 mai 1846.

X HERMINA

J’atteignais l’âge austère où l’on est fort en thème,
Où l’on cherche, enivré d’on ne sait quel parfum,
Afin de pouvoir dire éperdument: Je t’aime!
Quelqu’un.

J’entrais dans ma treizième année. Ô féuilles vertes!
Jardins! croissance obscùre et douce du printemps!
Et j’aimais Hermina, dans l’ombre. Elle avait, certes,
Huit ans.

Parfois, bien qu’elle fût à jouer occupée,
J’allais, muet, m’asseoir près d’elle, avec ferveur
Et je la regardais regarder sa poupée,
Rêveur.

Il est une heure étrange où l’on sent l’âme naître.
Un jour, j’eus comme un chant d’aurore au fond du coeur.
Soit, pensai-je! Avançons, parlons, c’est l’instant d’être
Vainqueur.

Je pris un air profond, et jelui dis: -Minette,
Unissons nos destins. Je demande ta main. -
Elle me répondit par cette pichenette:
— Gamin!

22 juin 1878.

XI Oh! la femme et l’amour!

Oh! la femme et l’amour! inventions maudites!
Il n’est de gens heureux que les hermaphrodites!
Que nous dit-on que Dieu doit nous punir un jour?
Le diable, c’est la femme, et l’enfer, c’est l’amour!
O rage! être jaloux! surveiller une belle,
L’épier, et toujours laisser pendre sur elle
L’heure où l’on ne vient pas, mais où l’on peut venir!
Se rider par le front, par le coeur rajeunir!
Compter ses cheveux gris! faire mille sots rôles!
Voir reluire autour d’elle un tas de jeunes drôles!
N’oser rien accorder, n’oser rien refuser!
Être heureux pour un signe et fou pour un baiser!
Porter les éventails durant les promenades!
La suivre en se cachant entre les colonnades!
Oh! que l’homme amoureux est un triste animal!
Puis la rupture, hélas! qui se ressoude mal,
Le raccommodement, la querelle, la brouille,
Sur l’amour qui vieillit épaississent leur rouille!
Ou, si l’on aime encor, le soir, pour son péché,
Mordu de jalousie, errant, effarouché,
On va grincer des dents parmi les sérénades;
Ou bien on la conduit, parée, aux pasquinades
Pour la faire manger par les regards d’autrui!
Puis les petites voix: -Vous êtes aujourd’hui
Biên maussade! -(On enrage!) -Oh non! ma souveraine!
— Conduisez-moi ce soir au jardin de la reine!
Et puis un doux sourire, et puis la trahison!
Je n’en veux plus! adieu l’amour! j’ai ma raison!
C’est vil! c’est dégradant! c’est affreux! c’est infâme!
Je ne veux de ma vie approcher d’une femme!

Que diriez-vous si Pierre en ces mots vous parlait:
— C’est un malheur de voir, car le monde est fort laid.
Les lunettes parfois grossissent fort les choses.

Les yeux craignent le froid, le chaud, les amauroses,
Les fraîcheurs, les amours trop vifs ou trop rassis,
Sans compter l’ophtalmie et la trichiasis.
Si quelqu’un, dans un duel pour des filles qu’on lorgne,
Vous crève un oeil, cela suffit pour qu’on soit borgne.
L’oignon vous fait pleurer, et quand il fait du vent,
La poussière dans l’oeil vous éntre fort souvent;
Pour peu qu’on boive un coup, on s’expose à voir double.
Un trop grand jour vous blesse, un trop faible vous trouble;
Voir clair est un péril étrange et sérieux.
Fort bien: je vais me faire arracher les deux yeux!

XII J’étais le songeur qui pense

J’étais le songeur qui pense,
Elle était l’oiseau qui fuit
Je l’adorais en silence,
Elle m’aimait à grand bruit.
Quand dans quelque haute sphère
Je croyais planer ,vainqueur,
Je l’entendais en bas faire
Du vacarme dans mon coeur.

Mais je reprenais mon songe
Et je l’adorais toujours,
Crédule au divin mensonge
Des roses et des amours.

Les profondeurs constellées,
L’aube, la lune qui naît,
Amour, me semblaient mêlées
Aux rubans de son bonnet.

Dieu pour moi; sont-ce des fables?
Avait mis dans sa beauté
Tous les frissons ineffables
De l’abîme volupté. -’

Je rêvais un ciel étrange
Pour notre éternel hymen.
— Qu’êtes-vous? criais-je; un ange?
Moi! disait-elle, un gamin.

Je sentais, ame saisie
Dans les cieux par un pinson,
S’effeuiller ma poésie
Que becquetait sa chanson.

Elle me disait: -Écoute,
C’est mal, tu me dis vous! fi! -
Et la main se donnait toute
Quand le gant m’aurait suffi.

Me casser pour elle un membre,
C’était mon désir parfois.
Un jour je vins dans sa chambre,
Nous devions aller au bois,

Je comptais la voir bien mise,
Chaste comme l’orient;
Elle m’ouvrit en chemise,
Moi tout rouge,-elle riant.

Je ne savais que lui dire,
Et je fus contraint d’oser;
Je ne voulais qu’un sourire,
Il fallut prendre un baiser.

Et ma passion discrète
S’évanouit sans retour;
C’est ainsi que l’amourette
Mit à la porte l’amour.

12 avril 1855.

XIII L’AMOUR VIENT EN LISANT CHANSON

Madeleine
Et moi, lisions près du feu
Cette histoire: « En Aquitaine,
«Un page aimait une reine...
«Le père était duc, d’Athène,
«Cordon bleu. -»

— Sois ma. femme!. -
Lui disais-je. Oh! charmant jeu!
Amour! dans mon coeur, madame,
Votre céil voyait une flamme;
Moi, je voyais dans votre âme
Le ciel bleu.

Doux mystère!
Mots furtifs! timide aveu!
Le livre aidant, j’osai plaire.
Mais le bonhomme de père
S’écria plein de colère:
Ventrebleu!

Ce tapage
Effraya la belle un peu.
Mais nous tournâmes la page;
Malgré son mince équipage,
La reine épousa le page;
Conte bleu.

L’hirondelle
Nous dit bonjour, puis adieu.
Hélas! l’amour vient comme elle,
Et comme elle, à tire d’ailé,
Il s’enfuit, l’amour fidèle,
Oiseau bleu.

22 novembre 1853.

XIV Elle vit

Elle vit que j’étais en train de lire Homère.
Mes yeux étaient remplis de l’immense chimère
D’Achille, et des combats que j’entendais, hennir.
— Qu’est-ce que tu fais là,? Veux-tu-bien t’en venir!
Dit-elle; mais tu n’es qu’une bête! et la preuve,
C’est que tu ne vois pas que j’ai ma robe neuve.
Nous allons à Verrière, et nous y mangerons
De ces fraises qu’on trouve avec les liserons.
Vous serez sage. Ah çà! pas, de vilaines choses.
Figure-toi qu’on dit que c’est tout plein de roses!
Tu choisis bien ton temps pour lire un vieux bouquin! -

Je me levai, je mis ma veste de nankin; ,
Et Suzon m’emmena, foulant sous sa bottine
Lemnos, Egialée et la roche Erythine.

13 août 1859.

XV Vous ne la fuyez pas, oiseaux,

Vous ne la fuyez pas, oiseaux, petits farouches,
Car elle est votre soeur dans ce monde âpre et vain,

Elle a pour ce qui sort des âmes et des. bouches
Votre dégoût divin.

Elle semble un rayon qui ploierait sous de l’ombre.
On se dit en voyant ce nimbe, ce parfum,
Cette grâce au milieu de nos laideurs sans nombre:
Peut-elle aimer quelqu’un?

Oh! comme parmi vous elle marche, l’altière!
Elle dédaigne, esprit ailé, le ver qui fuit,
Et, lyre, la rumeur, et, souffle, la matière,
Et, lumière, la nuit.

Quand, seuls, au fond des bois nous nous perdons ensemble,
Je lui dis: j’aime! avec mon regard le plus doux,
Elle répond: je hais. Et, voyant que je tremble,
Elle ajoute: Pas vous.

2 juillet.

XVI COMMENCEMENT D’UNE ILLUSION

Il pleut; la brume est épaissie;
Voici novembre et ses rougeurs,
Et l’hiver, effroyable scie
Que Dieu nous fait, à nous songeurs.

L’abeille errait, l’aube était large,
L’oiseau jetait de petits cris,
Les moucherons sonnaient la charge
À l’assaut des rosiers fleuris.

C’était charmant. Adieu ces fêtes,
Adieu la joie, adieu l’été!
Adieu le tumulte des têtes
Dans le rire et dans la clarté!

Adieu les bois où le vent lutte,
Où Jean, dénicheur de moineaux,
Jouait aussi bien de la flûte
Qu’un grec de l’île de Tinos!

Il faut rentrer dans la grand’ville
Qu’Alceste laissait à Henri;
Où la foule encor serait vile
Si Voltaire n’avait pas ri.

Noir Paris! tas de pierres morne
Qui, sans Molière et Rabelais,
Ne serait encor qu’une borne
Portant la chaîne des palais!

Il faut rentrer au labyrinthe
Des pas, des carrefours, des moeurs,
Où l’on sent une sombre crainte
Dans l’immensité des rumeurs.

Je regarderai ma voisine
Puisque je n’ai plus d’autre fleur!
Sa vitre vague où se dessine
Son profil, divin de pâleur,

Son réchaud où s’enfle la crème,
Sa voix qui dit encor maman,
Gare! c’est le seuil d’un poème,
C’est presque le bord d’un roman.

Ma voisine est une ouvrière,
Au front de neige, aux dents d’émail,
Qu’on voit tous les soirs en prière
Et tous les matins au travail.

Cet ange ignore que j’existe,
Et, laissant errer son oeil noir,
Sans le savoir me rend très triste
Et très joyeux sans le vouloir.

Elle est propre, douce, fidèle,
Et tient de Dieu, qui la bénit,
Des simplicités d’hirondelle
Qui ne sait que bâtir son nid.

4 novembre.

XVII TRUMEAU

Ô bonheur d’être aimé! Félicité suprême!
Berger, rends grâce aux Dieux! on te désiré! on t’aime!
O berger! Vesper luit, ce bel astre éclatant.
Ta maîtresse est là-bas qui brûle et qui t’attend.
Traverse la forêt, traverse la clairière,

Cours et chante à grand bruit ta chanson la plus fière,
Chante et passe gaîment, et laisse au fond des bois
La triste nymphe Écho se plaindre à demi-voix.

16 juillet 1840.

XVIII TOUTE LA VIE D’UN COEUR

1817 ADOLESCENCE

J’allais au Luxembourg rêver, ô temps lointain,
Dès l’aurore, et j’étais moi-même le matin:
Les nids dialoguaient tout bas, et les allées,
Désertes, étaient d’ombre et de soleil mêlées;
J’étais pensif, j’étais profond, j’étais niais,
Comme je regardais et comme j’épiais!
Qui? La Vénus, l’Hébé, la nymphe chasseresse.
Je sentais du printemps l’invisible caresse.
Je guettais l’inconnu. J’errais. Quel curieux
Que Chérubin en qui s’éveille Des Grieux!
O femme! mystère!”être ignoré qu’on encense!
Parfois j’étais obscène à force d’innocence.
Mon regard violait la vague nudité
Des déesses, debout sous les feuilles l’été;
Je contemplais de loin ces rondeurs peu vêtues,
Et j’étais amoureux de toutes les statues;
Et j’en ai mis plus d’une en colère, je crois.
Les audaces dans l’ombre égalent les effrois,
Et, hardi comme un page et tremblant comme un lièvre,
Oubliant latin, grec, algèbre, ayant la fièvre
Qui résiste aux Bezouts et brave les Restauts,
Je restais là stupide au bas des piédestaux,
Comme si j’attendais que le vent sous quelque arbre
Soulevât les jupons d’une Diane en marbre.

10 septembre 1873.

Sur l’impériale d’un omnibus.

1820

Printemps. Mai le décrète, et c’est officiel.

L’amour, cet enfer bleu très ressemblant au ciel,
Emplit l’azur, les champs, les prés, les fleurs, les herbes;
Dans les hautes forêts lascives et superbes

L’innocente nature épanouit son coeur
Simple, immense, insulté. par le merle moqueur.
La volonté d’aimer régné, surnaturelle,
Partout. -Comme on s’adore et comme on se querelle!
Les papillons,. lâchés dans le bois ingénu,
Font avec le premier bouton de fleur venu
Des infidélités aux roses, leurs amantes;
On entend murmurer les colères charmantes,
Et tous les grands courroux des belles s’apaiser
Dans le chuchotement auguste du baiser.
O but profond des cieux, la vie universelle!
Comme, afin que tout soit solide, tout chancelle!
Comme tout cède afin que tout dure! ô rayons!
L’idylle en souriant dit au gouffre: Essayons!
Et’le gouffre obéit; et la mer sombre adore.
Le germe éclot, le nid chante, l’azur se dore;
L’éternelle indulgence au fond du firmament
Rêve; et les doux fichus s’envolént vaguement.

10 avril 1875.

1833 A J...

Puisque le gai printemps revient danser et rire,
Puisque le doux Horace et que le, doux Zéphyre
M’attendent au milieu des prés et des buissons,
L’un avec des parfums, l’autre avec des chansons,
Puisque la terre en fleurs semble un tapis de Perse,
Puisque le vent murmure et dans l’azur disperse
La brume -et la nuée en flottants archipels,
Il me plaît de répondre à ces profonds appels,
Il me plaît de rôder dans les molles prairies,
Entraînant avec moi l’essaim des rêveries

Et la strophe qui vole au-dessus de mon front;
Tant que sous le ciel bleu les âmes aimeront,
Tant qu'avril, ce brodeur, avec l'herbe et les roses
Et les feuilles, créera toutes sortes de choses
Charmantes, et que Dieu, des monts, des airs, des eaux,
Fera de grands palais pour les petits oiseaux,
Tant que l'aube éclora dans cette ombre où nous sommes,
Les songes tourneront sur la tête des hommes,
Et les penseurs seront attendris dans les bois.
Les frais halliers sont pleins de pudeurs aux abois,
Femmes, oiseaux, tout cède et les baisers se mêlent,
Les adorations vaguement se querellent,
L'eau soupire, le lys s'ouvre, le firmament
Rayonne, et, si tu veux, je serai ton amant.

4 mai. 1835

PROMENADE

Je t'adore. Soyons deux heureux. Viens t'asseoir
Dans une ombre qui soit un peu semblable au soir.
Marchons bien doucement. Sois pensive. Sois lasse.
Profitons du moment où personne ne passe;
Entrons dans le hallier, cachés par les blés mûrs.

Que ne puis-je élever brusquement quatre murs
Ici, dans ce coin chaste, et d'un coup de baguette!
La nature est un oeil invisible qui guette;
Glissons-nous; le silence entend; défions-nous
Du bruit que fait-une âme embrassant deux genoux,
Car, moi, je ne suis pas autre chose qu'une âme;
Mais une âme peut prendre en sa serre une femme,
Et l'emporter, et. faire un bruit mystérieux
Delionne-sur terre ou d'aigle dans les cieux.

Tu grondes. -Un baiser! -Jamais! -Je le dérobe.
Tu dis c'est mal! -Et j'ôte une épingle à ta robe;

L’amour aime les yeux fâchés de la pudeur,
Et rien n’est plus charmant qu’un paradis boudeur.
C’est vrai, belle, depuis que, les blanches épaules
Dé Galatée ont pris la fuite sous les saules,
Et que Marot a vu, sans être trop puni,
Un doux sourire faire éclore un doux nenni,
Une gloire ineffable est à l’amour mêlée.
La femme est. de son trop de puissance accablée;
Vaincue, elle se sait maîtresse; elle nous plaît;
Comme c’est ravissant d’avoir ce qu’on voulait,
Et de sentir beaucoup de reproches se taire!
Comme une rougeur vague après l’heureux mystère
Enivre, et comme on sent le prix d’une faveur
Que veut presque, reprendre un silence rêveur!
Reprendré? Non; pourquoi? Donner encor?’Peut-être.

Cachons-nous. Une branche a remué. C’est traître.
On devinait qu’Eschyle avait, un rendez-vous
Avec Mégaryllis, la farouche aux yeux doux,
Et qu’elle se laissait dire de tendres choses,
Quand les feuilles tremblaient au bois des lauriers-roses.

12 juillet 1874-1840

MAI

Je ne laisserai pas se faner les pervenches
Sans aller écouter ce qu’on dit sous les branches,

Et sans guetter, parmi les rameaux infinis,
La conversation des feuilles et des nids;
Il n’est qu’un dieu, l’amour; avril est son prophète;
Je me supposerai convive de la fête
Que le pinson chanteur donne au pluvier doré;
Je fuirai de la ville et je m’envolerai,
Car l’âme du poëte est une vagabondé,
Dans les ravins où mai plein de roses abonde;

Là les papillons blancs et les papillons bleus,
Ainsi que le divin se mêle au fabuleux,
Vont et viennent, croisant leurs essors, joyeux, lestes,
Si bien qu'on les prendrait pour des lueurs célestes;
Là jasent les oiseaux, se cherchant, s'évitant;
Là Margot vient quand c'est Glycère qu'on attend;
L'idéal démasqué montre ses pieds d'argile;
On trouve Rabelais ,où l'on cherchait Virgile.
O jeunesse! ô seins nus des femmes dans les bois!
Oh! quelle vaste idylle et que de sombres voix!
Comme tout le hallier, plein d'invisibles mondes,
Rit dans le clair-obscur des églogues profondes!
J'aime la vision de ces réalités;
La vie aux yeux sereins luit de tous les côtés;
La chanson des forêts est d'-une douceur telle
Que, si Phébus l'entend, quand, rêveur, il dételle
Ses chevaux las. souvent au point de haleter,
Il s'arrête, et fait signe aux Muses d'écouter.

6 mai 1847

Tu vols un homme ayant un projet sous les cieux,
Mes voeux n'ont plus de frein, je suis ambitieux,
J'ai résolu d'avoir un dimanche superbe,
Et mon plan, c'est d'aller nous étendre sur l'herbe.
Je couve ce dessein, je fais cet opéra.
Et nous serons autant de couples qu'on voudra.
Nous chercherons un lieu désert, une chapelle,
Un burg ne sachant plus le nom dont il s'appelle,
N'ayant plus pour baron que le merle siffleur,
Qui soit tout en ruine et qui soit tout en fleur,
D'affreux murs, noirs dans l'ombre, absolument farouches;
Là les bouches auront des bontés pour les bouches;
C'est mon programme. Il est un arbuste gourmand
Dont la feuille est d'un tour si frais et si charmant
Qu'on en faisait jadis une couronne aux verres;
Il orne les vieux murs d'alcôves peu sévères;

C’est par lui qu’un logis qui s’écroule est complet;
Belle, ce tapissier des masures me plaît.
Viens, nous serons heureux, et pour auxiliaires,

Ô belle, nous aurons les dieux, les chants, les lierres.
Le mois de mai fera son devoir; Dieu clément
Le veut; on entendra chuchoter vaguement
Des profondeurs d’oiseaux sous des épaisseurs d’arbres;
On se parlera bas; les seins seront des marbres,
Non les coeurs; on aura quelque ami pour témoin,
Sans empêcher pourtant qu’il aille un peu plus loin.

26 mai.

XIX L’amour n’est plus

L’amour n’est plus l’antique et menteur Cupido,
L’enfant débile et nu qu’aveuglait un bandeau.;
C’est un fier cavalier, la visière baissée,
Qui brise et foule aux pieds la Haine terrassée;
C’est le vainqueur armé du sort sombre et jaloux.
Madame, il est puissant quand il combat pour vous,
Au-dessus de son front quand il vous voit sans voiles
Planer, belle âme ailée, au milieu des étoiles,
O rayonnant esprit! rayonnante beauté!
Il est fort; il abat, d’un bras plus irrité,
L’envie, impur démon qui jusqu’à vous se traîne;
Il triomphe; et, rempli d’une fierté sereine,
Tour à tour il regarde, avec un oeil joyeux,
Le monstre sous ses pieds, et l’ange dans les cieux.

29 décembre 1843.

XX Or nous cueillions ensemble

Or nous cueillions ensemble la pervenche.

Je soupirais, je crois qu'elle rêvait.
Ma joue à peine avait un blond duvet.
Elle avait mis son jupon du dimanche;
Je le baissais chaque fois qu'une branche
Le relevait.

Et nous cueillions ensemble la pervenche.

Le diable est fin, mais nous sommes bien sots.
Elle s'assit sous de charmants berceaux

Près d'un. ruisseau qui dans l'herbe s'épanche;
Et vous chantiez dans votre gaîté franche, -
Petits oiseaux.

Et nous cueillions ensemble la pervenche.

Le paradis pourtant m'était échu.
En ce moment, un bouc au pied fourchu
Passe et me dit: Penche-toi. Je me penche.
Anges du ciel! je vis sa gorge blanche
Sous son fichu!

Et nous cueillions ensemble la pervenche.

J'étais bien jeune et j'avais peur d'oser.
Elle me dit: Viens donc te reposer
Sous mon ombrelle, et me donna du mariche
Un petit coup, et je pris ma revanche
Par un baiser.

Et nous cueillions ensemble la pervenche.

20 septembre 1854.

XXI Il était une fois un caporal

Il était une fois un caporal cipaye,
Pauvre diable; et n’ayant ni pitance, ni paye.
C’était à Jagrenat. Un soir il pénétra
Dans la grande pagode où la déesse Intra
Reluit, monstre incrusté d’escarboucles sans nombre.
Il grimpa sur l’idole, et lui vola dans l’ombre
Un beau caillou brillant qui faisait l’oeil du front.
La nuit l’avait fait brave et la peur le fit prompt;
Il s’enfuit, emportant l’objet. Le triste hère
Attacha le caillou, ne sachant trop qu’en faire,
Au pommeau de son sabre avec un fil d’archal;
Puis il se pavanait, fier comme un maréchal.
Un jour enfin, étant ivre entre les plus ivres,
A je ne sais quel juif il le vendit six livres..

Voilà ce que c’était que ton premier amant.

Le caillou du soldat était un diamant;
L’hébreu qui l’achetait était un lapidaire.
0 Vénus de Milo, Phébus du Belvédère,

Vous n’étiez rien qu’un marbre informe, jusqu’au temps
Où le sculpteur vous prit sous ses doigts palpitants,
Et vous tira du bloc, nus, rayonnants, sans voiles,
Et vous mit dans l’Olympe au milieu des étoiles!
Ainsi, des noires mains du lapidaire obscur,
Avec mille éclairs d’or et de pourpre et d’azur,
Sortit le diamant, taillé, poli, splendide,
Magnifique, et si beau que son maître sordide
Le vendit à son tour quatre ou cinq millions.
C’était un de ces juifs, hideux tabellions,
Qui vendraient le printemps, la rosée et les astres,
Pour un mulet ployant sous sa charge de piastres.

Voilà ce que c’était que ton deuxième amant.

Aujourd’hui, contemplé par tous avidement,
Pur, superbé, admiré par la foule qui passe,
Et posé sur un front devant qui tout s’efface,
Le merveilleux caillou, rare et divin trésor,
Brille au plus haut fleuron d’une couronne d’or.
Son doux rayonnement dissipe l’ombre noire;
Et, le voyant reluire à ce sommet de gloire,
L’oeil croit voir resplendir l’éternel diamant,
L’éclatant Sirius dans le bleu firmament!
Léa! brille à jamais à ce sublime faîte!

Le troisième est un roi, c’est-à-dire un poète.

Le premier te vola, le second te vendit.
L’un fut un goujat vil, et l’autre un juif maudit.
Madame, le troisième, esprit noble, âme éprise,
Seul vous a méritée et seul vous a comprise.

1 février 1845.

XXII Un coup de vent passa,

Un coup de vent passa, souffle leste et charmant
Qui fit tourbillonner les jupes follement.
Je la savais ailée, étoilée, azurée,
Je l’adorais; mon âme allait dans l’empyrée
A sa suite. Oh! l’amour, c’est tout; le reste est vain.
Je ne supposais pas que cet être divin
Qui m’emportait rêveur si loin de la matière
Eût des jambes; soudain je vis sa jarretière;

Et cela me choqua: -Quoi! me dis-je, elle aussi!
Je la contemple, ému, tremblant,. brûlant, transi,
Et je vois de la chair où j’adorais une âme!
Soit. Le songe est fini. Ce n’est donc qu’une femme
Qui marche sur la terre, et se retrousse au vent!
Et je fus amoureux bien plus qu’auparavant.

XXIII QUINZE-VINGT

Noùs étions seuls dans l’ombre et l’extase suprême.
Elle disait: je t’aime! -et je disais je t’aime!
Elle disait: toujours!, et je disais: toujours!
Elle ajoutait: nos coeurs sont époux; nos amours
Vaincront la destinée, et rien ne me tourmente,
Étant, toi le plus fort et moi la plus aimante.
Et moi, je reprenais: la ville est sombre, vois.
La sagesse serait de vivre dans les bois.
Elle me répondait: vivons-y, soyons sages.

Si vous voulez savoir le chiffre de nos âges,
Elle quinze, et moi vingt: à nous deux nous faisions
Un aveugle, et nos Yeux étaient pleins de rayons

13 juin 1855.

XXIV J’ai toujours redouté

J’ai toujours redouté d’aborder une femme.
Risquer le coeur est grave autant que risquer l’âme.
La femme est le dessus de ce gouffre, l’amour.
Quel piège! et comment dire aux déesses: bonjour?
On salue, et la belle observe; on est nu-tête;
Rêve-t-elle? on a peur. Rit-elle? on a l’air bête.
On est Platon de peur de sembler Rabelais.
Donc je vous adorais, madame, et je tremblais.
C’est convenable, mais c’est inepte. Et, timide,
Soucieux de Circé, préoccupé d’Armide,
J’étais ambitieux, immobile et prudent,
Et j’avais l’air d’un arbre imbécile attendant

Qu’une étoile s’envole et vienne sur ses branches.
D’autres que moi pourtant, fats aux allures franches,
Hardis, vous saluaient, et, pleins d’enivrements,
Entraient en pourparlers avec vos yeux charmants,
Et leurs fronts s’inclinaient devant votre sourire;
J’étais comme un niais qui se laisse proscrire;
Si bien qu’un jour, tant pis, mon coeur se résolut,
Je me dis: il est temps de faire mon salut,
Et je vous abordai, chapeau bas...

XXV Qu’est-ce que cette année

Qu’est-ce que cette année emporte sur son aile?
Je ne suis pas moins tendre et tu n’es pas moins belle.
Nos dèux coeurs en dix ans n’ont pas vieilli d’un jour.
Va, ne fais pas au temps de plainte et de reproche.
A mesure qu’il fuit, du ciel il nous rapproche,
Sans nous éloigner de l’amour.

31 décembre 1842.

XXVI DANS UN VIEUX CLOÎTRE

Alors elle me dit: Pourquoi n'avez-vous pas
Parlé plus tôt? Et moi je répondis tout bas:
— Mais que voulais-tu donc que je te demandasse! -
Tutoyer une étoile est une douce audace,
Même avec l'imparfait du subjonctif. Déjà
Elle avait fort rougi; ce qui fait qu'on songea,
Le désir dans mon âme et la peur dans la sienne,
A se réfugier dans cette église ancienne
Où nous voilà, priant tous deux, dans le saint lieu,
Elle Marie, un ange, et moi l'Amour, un dieu.

XXVII J’avais dans ma mansarde

J’avais dans ma mansarde un buste de Platon,
— Ou d’Euclide -un vieux marbre ayant barbe au menton,
Et dans l’oeil. un regard tout.blanc, fixe et morose;
Or ce buste devint amoureux d’une rose.
Qu’au temps où des amours je gazouillais l’argot,
J’avais gaîment cueillie au corset de Margot;
La rose auprès du buste ornait ma cheminée;
Et le buste disait: ô douce fleur fanée,
Si j’étais homme et toi femme, quels bons moments!
Et comme nous ferions une paire d’amants!
La rose répondait: ô le plus beau des marbres,
Si nous étions oiseaux, nous irions sous les arbres,
Et dans les verts rameaux tout pénétrés de jour,
Nous bâtirions un nid où chanterait l’amour!

Je tire de ceci deux maximes fort justes
Ne point s’exagérer la sagesse des bustes,
Eussent-ils l’oeil d’Euclide et le nez de Platon,
Et cueillir, quand. on peut, des fleurs sur Margoton.

Nuit du 13 au 14 janvier 1859.

XXVIII VIRGILE DANS L’OMBRE

Je chante Lycoris si Gallus le désire;
Je ferai faire un peigne en corail à Corcyre
Pour peigner les cheveux divins d’Amaryllis;
Cymodoce, ayant plus de roses et de lys.
Sur son sein que n’en a le printemps dans la plaine,
Chloé sachant comment s’y’prendre avec Silène
Pour lui faire chanter l’Olympe et le ciel bleu,
Et pour faire sortir de l’ivrogne le dieu,
Néera toute nue ayant dompté le faune,
Flore étant belle à mettre en fuite Tisiphone,
Je mettrai dans des vers que l’avenir lira
Cymodoce, Chloé, Flore, et vous, Nééra.

XXIX Oui, je suis le regard

Oui, je suis le regard et vous êtes l’étoile.
Je contemple. et vous rayonnez!
Je suis la barque errante et vous êtes la voile.
Je dérive et vous m’entraînez!

Près de vous qui brillez je marche triste et sombre,
Car le jour radieux touche aux nuits sans clarté,
Et comme après le corps vient l’ombre
L’amour pensif suit la beauté.

XXX N’est-ce pas, mon amour,

N’est-ce pas, mon amour, que la nuit est bien lente
Quand on est au lit seule et qu’on ne peut dormir?
On entend palpiter la pendule tremblante,
Et dehors les clochers d’heure en heure gémir.

L’esprit flotte éveillé dans les rêves sans nombre.
On n’a pas, dans cette ombre où manque tout soleil,
Le sommeil pour vous faire oublier la nuit sombre,
Ni l’amour pour vous faire oublier le sommeil.

8 septembre 1844.

XXXI Je ne viens pas vous voir

Je ne viens pas vous voir le jour; voici pourquoi:
C’est que toutes les nuits, madame, je vous voi.
Au réveil je me dis: elle est sévère et bonne,
Douce et rebelle tour à tour;
Prends garde; elle pourrait te refuser le jour
Ce que la nuit elle te donne.

XXXII L’heure sonne.

L’heure sonne. Un jour va naître.
Le nuage erre au zénith;
La barque est sous ta fenêtre;
L’hirondelle est dans son nid;
Dans ton âme qu’il féconde
L’amour veille nuit et jour... -
Laisse fuir la barque et l’onde!
Ne laisse pas fuir l’amour.

À nos coeurs qui se désolent
Les heures parlent parfois,
Quand dans l’ombre elles s’envolent
De quelque église des bois.
Les pires et les meilleures
Sur nous passent tour à tour... -
Ange! laisse fuir les heures!
Ne laisse pas fuir l’amour.

Est-il une chose au monde
Qui ne tremble à quelque vent?
Le nuage est comme l’onde,
Clair parfois, sombre souvent.
Il s’en va! triste voyage,
Sans but, sans port; sans retour...
Oh! laissé fuir le nuage!
Ne laisse pas fuir l’amour.

L’onde, la nuée et l’heure,
Tout passe, et nous. pleurons tous!
Qu’une chose en nous demeure
Quand tout change autour de nous!
L’oiseau quitte à tire-d’aile
Son doux nid, sa vieille tour...
Oh! laisse fuir l’hirondelle!

Ne laisse pas fuir l’amour.

28 juin 1844.

XXXIII À DEUX SOEURS

Belles, vous passez, pures toutes deux;
Que vous fait ce monde ingrat et hideux?
Vous êtes deux. soeurs, vous êtes deux vierges;
Comme sur l’autel s’allument les cierges,
Vos âmes ont mis leur flamme à vos fronts;
Belles, je voudrais voir sur vos bras ronds,
Sur votre poitrine et sur votre hanche,
S’entr’ouvrir les plis de la gaze blanche;
Belles, je voudrais voir votre sein nu,
Votre pied charmant, pudique, ingénu,
Et je voudrais voir vos épaules, belles,
Pour chercher la place où furent les ailes.

V. H., 17 mars 1873.

XXXIV UN JOUR QU’ELLE M’AVAIT DIT:

Oh! mes yeux sont à vous. Ils sont, je le proclame,
Audacieux,
Car leur regard parfois monte jusqu’à votre âme
Ou jusqu’aux cieux!

Gardez-les. Je vous donne, ô grand coeur que j’admire
Dans vos douleurs,
Leur langage secret, leur flamme, et leur sourire
Avec leurs pleurs.

A vous tout droit sur eux! le droit doux et suprême
De les charmer,
Le droit de les ouvrir,, et, quand vous voudrez même,
De les fermer!

20 mars 1845.

XXXV NI VEA NON FRIGIDA

Elle prouve que la blancheur
N’ôte à la femme
Aucune ivresse, aucun bonheur,
Aucune flamme;

Qu’en avril les coeurs sont enclins
Aux tendres choses,
Et que les bois profonds sont pleins
D’apothéoses;

Qu’une belle fait en tout lieu
Son doux manège,
Et que l’on peut être de feu,
Étant de neige.

5 avril.

XXXVI À MADAME LA PRINCESSE SOPHIE GALITZINE

Mon vers se hâte et vole à celle qui l’appelle.
Elle fait de bien loin rêver mon coeur charmé.
Quand l’esprit est si grand, l’âme doit être belle.
Si c’est un tel bonheur d’être compris par elle,
Que serait-ce donc d’être aimé?

XXXVII À MADAME J.

Âme, statue, esprit, Vénus,
Belle des belles,
Celui qui. verrait vos pieds nus
Verrait des ailes.

À travers vos traits radieux
Luit l’espérance;
Déesse, vous. ayez des dieux
La transparence.

Comme eux, vous avez le front pur,
La blancheur fière,
Et dans le fond de votre azur
Une lumière.
Pas un de nous, fils de la nuit,
Qui ne vous sente
Dans l’ombre où tout s’évanouit,
Éblouissante!

Vous ràyonnez sous la beauté;
C’est votre voile.
Vous êtes un marbre, habité
Par une étoile.

4 avril. Paris.

XXXVIII Je ne sais pas pourquoi

Je ne sais pas pourquoi les femmes
Font tant de façons pour montrer
Ce côté charmant de leurs âmes
Qui permet de les adorer.

Elles ont la honte divine
D’être belles, et d’entraîner
L’homme au but que leur coeur devine
Et refuse de deviner.

La beauté, céleste et sereine,
Sait tomber en restant debout,
Sait être esclave en restant reine,
Et sait tout prendre en donnant tout.

Au fond, elles sont peu méchantes.
L’amour est la chanson des nids;
Femme, en la commençant tu chantes,
Quitte à pleurer quand tu finis.

Car toute joie arrive aux larmes.
O toi que j’aime à deux genoux,
Qu’importe! Espérons! tu me charmes,
Et le printemps est avec nous.

Viens, ne crains rien; l’aube est vermeille,
Le ciel est bleu, les bois sont sourds.
Tout bas, au bon Dieu,. dans l’oreille,
Je raconterai nos amours.

28 mai.

XXXIX PENDANT QU’ELLE DORT

Je dirais à l’abeille: accours, mouche vermeille,
Viens, elle dort, bourdonne autour de son chevet!
Si l’abeille
Me suivait.

Je dirais à la rose: embaume quelque chose
Pour elle, pour ta soeur qui rêve et qui se tait!
Si la rose
M’écoutait.

Je dirais à l’étoile: Astre, à travers son voile
Jette un rayon au coeur que mon coeur attendait!
Si l’étoile
M’entendait.

Je dirais au ciel bleu: sur la terre tout change.
Cieux, laissez-nous entrer aux éternels palais!
Si, mon ange,
Tu voulais!

31 mai 1874.

XL LA FORÊT

De quoi parlait le vent? De quoi tremblaient les branches?
Etait-ce, en ce doux mois des nids et des pervenches,
Parce que les oiseaux couraient dans les glaïeuls,
Ou parce qu’elle et moi nous étions là tout seuls?
Elle hésitait. Pourquoi? Soleil, azur, rosées,
Aurore! Nous tâchions d’aller, pleins de pensées,
Elle vers la campagne et moi vers la forêt.
Chacun de son côté tirait l’autre, et, discret,
Je la suivais d’abord, puis, à son tour docile,
Elle venait, ainsi qu’autrefois en Sicile
Faisaient Flore et Moschus, Théocrite et Lydé.
Comme elle ne m’avait jamais rien accordé,
Je riais, car le mieux c’est de tâcher de rire
Lorsqu’on veut prendre une âme et qu’on ne sait que dire;
J’étais le plus heureux des hommes, je souffrais.
Que la mousse est épaisse au fond des antres frais!
Par instants un éclair jaillissait de notre âme;
Elle balbutiait: Monsieur... et moi: Madame.
Et nous restions pensifs, muets, vaincus, vainqueurs,
Après cette clarté faite dans nos deux coeurs.
Une source disait des choses sous un saule;
Je n’avais encor vu qu’un peu de son épaule,
Je ne sais plus comment et je ne sais plus où;
Oh! le profond printemps, comme cela rend fou!
L’audace des moineaux sous les feuilles obscures,
Les papillons, l’abeille en quête, les piqûres,
Les soupirs, ressemblaient à de vagues essais,
Et j’avais peur, sentant que je m’enhardissais.
Il est certain que c’est une action étrange
D’errer dans l’ombre au point de cesser d’être un ange,

Et que l’herbe était douce, et qu’il est fabuleux
D’oser presser le. bras d’une femme aux yeux bleus.
Nous nous sentions glisser vaguement sur la pente

De l’idylle où l’amour traître et divin serpente,
Et qui mène, à travers on ne sait quel jardin,
Souvent à l’enfer, mais en passant par l’éden.
Le printemps laisse faire, il permet, rien ne bouge.
Nous marchions, elle était rose, et devenait rouge,
Et je ne. savais rien, tremblant de mon succès,
Sinon qu’elle pensait à ce que je pensais.
Pâle, je prononçais des noms, Béatrix, Dante;
Sa guimpe s’entr’ouvrait, et ma prunelle ardente
Brillait, car l’amoureux contient un curieux.
Viens! dis-je... -Et pourquoi pas, ô bois mystérieux?

3 avril 1874.

XLI CHANSON

Le prince de Joinville
En mer s’en est allé.
Sa femme sur la ville
Jette un oeil désolé.
Le prince de Joinville
En mer s’en est allé.

Oh! dit-elle,
Hirondelle,
Qui t’en vas au pays, à mon pays chéri!
Tu diras à ma soeur, tu diras à ma tante,
Que dans ce pays-ci je ne suis pas contente,
Je n’ai plus mon soleil, je n’ai pas mon mari.

Le prince de Joinville
En mer s’en est allé.
Sa femme sur la ville
Jette un oeil désolé.
Le prince de Joinville.
En mer s’en est allé.

Oh! dit-elle,
Hirondelle,
Tu diras que les bois sont morts et dépouillés,
Que Joinville aime trop la Méditerranée.

Je l’attends, je suis seule, il pleut toute l’année,
Et les murs des maisons sont toujours tout mouillés.
Le prince de Joinville
En mer s’en est allé.
Sa femme sur’la ville
Jette un oeil désolé.
Le prince de Joinville
En mer s’en est allé.

Oh! dit-elle,
Hirondellè,
Tu diras que j’ai froid, que les étés sont courts,
Que Paris est tout noir, et puis mille autres choses.
Le premier mai, ma soeur, au lieu de voir des roses,
Je vois des gens très laids qui font de longs discours.
Le prince de Joinville
En mer s’en est allé.
Sa femme sur la ville
Jette un oeil désolé.
Le prince de Joinville
En mer s’en est allé.

XLII J’étais un lycéen honnête;

J’étais un lycéen honnête;
Denise avait l’oeil hasardeux;
Elle était belle et j’étais bête;
Nous faisions un conte à nous deux.

Ainsi que la belle Fosseuse,
Elle riait des imprudents;
L’huître en perles est connaisseuse,
C’est pourquoi j’admirais ses dents.

Un jour elle me dit: farouche!
Et m’offrit un baiser moqueur.
Je pris le baiser sur ma bouche
Et sentis la morsure au coeur.

9 avril 1855.

XLIII FURENS FOEMINA

— Oui, dit-elle, je suis jalouse de Flora!
Alors elle frappa du pied, gronda, pleura,
Eut des regards pareils au ciel quand il éclaire,
Fut terrible, et je vis une femme en colère;
Je n’avais pas eu d’elle encore un seul baiser,
J’espérai. Faut-il pas à la fin s’apaiser?
Il n’est point de courroux qui ne prenne la fuite.
Plus.le nuage est noir, plus l’azur revient vite.
Je l’admirais, couvant on ne sait quel dessein.
Elle ne voyait pas que je voyais son sein
Presque nu, la colère étant inattentive;
Les hommes sont friands de volupté furtive,
Nous sommes les voleurs des appas mal cachés;
L’hiatus d’un fichu sourit, plein de péchés;
Une belle irritée est encor notre proie;
Rêveurs, nous caressons celle qui nous foudroie;
Tout à coup elle vit mon regard. -Insolent!
Dit-elle. Et je repris: -Que votre bras est blanc!
— Non. -Vos yeux sont le ciel! ton sein est un prodige!
— Il me tutoie! -Hélas, je t’aime! répondis-je.
— Jamais! -Viens! -Oh! le monstre! -

Et ce que je conquis
Dans ce charmant accès de fureur, fut exquis.

21 juin 1878.

XLIV Cela la désennuie;

Cela la désennuie; elle vit toute seule;
Elle est pauvre et travaille; elle n’est pas bégueule;
Elle échange de loin, et pour se reposer,
Un regard, et parfois, de la main, un baiser,
Avec un voisin, seul aussi dans sa mansarde;
Et c’est étrange comme un baiser qu’on hasarde
Sait son chemin, et comme il a ce don vainqueur
De partir de la bouche et d’arriver au coeur.
Pourtant est-ce qu’elle aime? Elle n’en est pas sûre.
Un baiser qui gaîment visite une masure,
Cela dore toujours un peu l’humble plafond.
Les songes, quand ce sont les pauvres qui les font,

Sont riches, et remplis de choses ineffables.
Ovide et ses romans, La Fontaine et ses-fables,
Ne sont rien à côté d’un cerveau de vingt ans
Qui fermente, et le coeur d’une fille, au printemps,
Crée un ciel, trouve un monde, et dépasse en chimère
Le bon Pilpay, le bon Perrault, le bon Homère.

La chimère suffit, on s’attarde à rêver
Un dieu dans. ce jeune homme, on ne sait quel lever
D’étoile, en un grenier vaguement apparue,
Et l’on ne pense pas à traverser la rue;.
Elle n’est pas Agnès, et lui n’est pas Platon;
Et peut-être jamais ne se parlera-t-on.
Car l’amour ébauché quelquefois. se -prolonge
Dans la nuée au point de finir par un songe,
Et souvent, au moment où l’on croyait tenir
Une espérance, on voit que c’est un souvenir.

V. H. novembre 1872.

XLV CHANSON DE CELLE QUI N’A PAS PARLÉ

L’énigme ne dit pas son mot.
Les flèches d’or ont des piqûres
Dont on ne parle pas tout haut.
Souvent, sous les branches obscures,

Plus d’un tendre oiseau se perdit.
Vous m’avez souvent dit: je t’aime.!
Et je ne vous l’ai jamais dit.
Vous prodiguiez le cri suprême,

Je refusais l’aveu profond.
Le lac bleu sous la lune rêve
Et, muet, dans la nuit se fond;
L’eau se tait quand -l’astre se lève.

L’avez-vous donc trouvé mauvais?
En se taisant le coeur se creuse.
Et, quand vous étiez là, j’avais
Le doux tremblement d’être heureuse.

Vous parliez trop, moi pas assez.
L’amour commence par de l’ombre;

Les nids du grand jour sont blessés,
Les choses ont leur pudeur sombre.

Aujourd’hui -comme, au vent du soir,
L’arbre tristement se balance! -
Vous me quittez, n’ayant pu voir
Mon âme à travers mon silence.

Soit. Nous allons nous séparer.

— Oh! comme la forêt soupire! -
Demain qui me verra pleurer
Peut-être vous verra sourire.

Ce doux mot, qu'il faut effacer,
— Je t'aime -aujourd'hui me déchire;
Vous le disiez sans le penser,
Moi, je le pensais sans le dire.

26 septembre 1875.

XLVI Ô toi d’où me vient ma pensée

Ô toi d’où me vient ma pensée,
Sois fière devant le Seigneur!
Relève ta tête abaissée,
O toi d’où me vient mon bonheur!

Quand je traverse cette lieue
Qui nous sépare au sein des nuits,
Ta patrie étoilée et bleue
Rayonne à mes yeux éblouis!

C’est l’heure où cent lampes en flammes
Brillent aux célestes plafonds!
L’heure où les astres et les âmes
Échangent des regards profonds!

Je sonde alors ta destinée.
Je songe à toi, qui viens des cieux,
A toi, grande âme emprisonnée,
A toi, grand coeur mystérieux!

Noble femme, reine asservie,
Je rêve à ce sort envieux
Qui met tant d’ombre dans ta vie,
Tant de lumière dans tes yeux!

Moi, je te connais tout entière
Et je te contemple. à genoux;
Mais autour de tant de lumière,
Pourquoi tant d’ombre, ô sort jaloux?

Dieu lui donna tout, hors l’aumône
Qu’il fait à tous dans sa bonté;
Le ciel qui lui devait un trône
Lui refusa la liberté!

Oui,;ton aile que le bocage
Et l’air libre appellent en vain,
Se brise.aux barreaux d’une cage,
Pauvré grande âme, oiseau divin!

Bel ange, un joug te tient captive,
Cent préjugés sont ta prison,
Et ton attitude pensive,
Hélas, attriste ta maison.

Tu te sens prise par le monde
Qui t’épie, injuste et mauvais..
Dans ton amertume profonde

Souvent tu dis: si je pouvais!
Mais l’amour en secret te donne
Ce qu’il a de pur et de beau,
Et son invisible couronne,
Et son invisible flambeau!

Flambeau qui se cache à l’envie,
Qui luit, splendide et clandestin,
Et qui n’éclaire de la vie
Que l’intérieur du destin!

L’amour te donne, ô douce femme,
Ces plaisirs où rien n’est amer,
Et ces regards où toute l’âme
Apparaît dans un seul éclair!

Et le sourire! et la caresse!.
L’entretien furtif et charmant,
Et la mélancolique ivresse
D’un ineffable épanchement!

Et les traits chéris d’un visage,

Ombre qu’on aime et qui vous suit,
Qu’on voit le jour dans le nuage,
Qu’on voit dans les rêves la nuit!

L’amour, dont nos coeurs sont les urnes,
Te donne tous ses doux tourments,
Les longs adieux aux seuils nocturnes,
Les longs regrets des courts moments!
Et les extases solitaires
Quand tous deux nous nous asseyons
Sous les rameaux pleins de mystères
Au fond des bois pleins de rayons!
Purs transports que la foule ignore,
Et qui font qu’on a d’heureux jours
Tant qu’on peut espérer encore
Ce dont on se souvient toujours!
Va, sèche ton bel oeil qui pleure, -
Ton sort n’est pas déshérité.
Ta part est encor la meilleure,
Ne te plains pas, ô ma beauté!
Ce qui manque est bien peu de chose
Quand on est au printemps vermeil,
Et quand on vit comme la rose
De parfums; d’ombre et de soleil!
Laisse donc, ô ma douce muse,
Sans le regretter un seul jour,
Ce que le destin te refuse
Pour ce que te donne l’amour!

25 octobre 1844.

XLVII DANSE EN ROND

Fanny vint danser en rond
Le dimanche au buis béni.
— Les garçons en chasse vont;
Les filles disent nenni.
Elle a l’aube sur le front;
Le hâle m’a tout bruni.
— Les garçons en pêche vont;
Les filles disent nenni.

Je l’adore nuit et jour,
Et je n’ai jamais fini.
— Les garçons vont au labour;
Les filles disent nenni:

Un rossignol chante au fond
De mon vieux coeur rajeuni.
— Les garçons aux vignes vont;
Les filles disent nenni.
Grands arbres du bois profond,
Serai-je aimé de Fanny?
— Les garçons en guerre vont;
Les filles disent nenni:
J’ai deux ormeaux dans ma cour;
L’un dit: non, l’autre dit: si!
— Les garçons vont à l’amour;
Les filles, y vont aussi.

Guernesey, 17 juin 1857.

XLVIII Oh! dis, te souviens-tu

Oh! dis, te souviens-tu de cet heureux dimanche?
— Neuf juin! -Sur les rideaux de mousseline blanche
Le soleil dessinait l’ombre des vitres d’or.

Il te nommait son bien, sa beauté, son trésor.
Tu songeais dans ses bras. Heures trop tôt passées!
Oh! comme vous mêliez vos âmes, vos pensées!
Dehors tout rayonnait, tout rayonnait en vous,
Et vos ravissements faisaient le ciel jaloux.
Tes yeux rêveurs brillaient, pleins d’un vague sourire.
Aux instants où les coeurs se parlent sans rien dire,
Il voyait s’éclairer de pudeur et d’amour,
Comme une eau qui reflète un ciel d’ombre et de jour,
Ton visage pensif, tour à-tour pâle et rose;
Et souvent il sentait, ô la divine chose!
Dans ce doux abandon, des anges seul connu,
Se poser sur son pied ton pied charmant et nu.

25 juin 1844.

XLIX Garde à jamais

Garde à jamais dans ta mémoire,
Garde toujours
Le beau roman, la belle histoire
De nos amours!

Moi, je veux que rien ne s’émousse.
Pourquoi finir?
J’aime la joie amère et. douce
Du souvenir.

Oui, je vois tout dans ma pensee,
Tout à la fois!
La trace par ton pied laissée
Au fond des bois,

Les champs, les pelouses qui cachent
Nos verts sentiers,
Et ta robe blanche où s’attachent
Les églantiers,

Comme si ces fleurs amoureuses
Disaient tout bas:
— Te voilà! nous sommes heureuses.
Ne t’en va pas!

Je vois la profonde ramée
Du bois charmant
Où nous rêvions, toi, bien-aimée,
Moi, bien-aimant!

Donc puisqu’en moi j’ai cette flamme,
Il faut aussi
Que ton âme ait comme mon âme
Ce doux souci!

Rappelle-toi nos bois tranquilles,
Nos bois du roi!
Rappelle-toi nos frais. asiles!
Rappelle-toi

L’herbe épaisse, la roche austère,
L’antre ignoré,
Temple de joie et de mystère,
Sombre et sacré,

Où du refus tendre et farouche
J’étais vainqueur!
Où ma bouche cherchait ta bouche,
Ton coeur mon coeur!

Rappelle-toi, ma bien-aimée,
Nos doux combats,
Et les mots que. la voix pâmée
N’achevait pas!

Là, cachés au milieu des roses,
Dans un beau lieu,
Contemplés par toutes les choses
Qu’a faites Dieu,

Purs témoins qui sans haine et comme
S’y conformant,
Regardent le bonheur de l’homme
Paisiblement,

Nous aimions! tandis qu’onde pure,
Bois embaumés,
Grotte en fleurs, tout dans la nature
Disait: aimez!

Car c’est la loi! tout vit! tout aime!

Aime! il le faut!
Voilà ce qu’à tout moment sème
La main d’en haut!
Dieu dans la nature affaissée
A mis le jour,
Et plus qu’une grande pensée, -
Un grand amour!

Viens! la saison n’est pas finie.
L’été renaît.
Cherchons la grotte rajeunie,
Qui nous connaît!

Là, le soir, à l’heure où tout penche,
Où Dieu bénit,
Où la feuille baise la branche,
L’aile le nid,

Tous ces objets saints qui nous virent
Dans nos beaux jours
Et qui, tout palpitants, soupirent’
Dè nos amours,

Tous les hôtes de l’antre sombre
Pensifs et doux,

Avant de s’endormir, dans l’ombre,
Parlent de nous!

Là, le rouge-gorge et la grive,
D’herbe couverts,
Le liseron et dans l’eau vive
Les cressons verts,

La mouche aux ailes d’or qui passe,
L’onde et le vent,
Chuchotent sans cesse à voix basse

Ton nom charmant!

Jour et nuit, au soir, à l’aurore,
A tous moments,
Entre eux ils redisent encore
Nos doux serments!

Viens dans l’antre où nous les jurâmes
Nous reposer!
Viens! nous échangerons nos âmes
Dans un baiser!

5 juillet 1844.

L Ah çà mais! quelle idée as-tu,

— Ah çà mais! quelle idée as-tu, capricieuse,
De vouloir qu’à cette heure où, sous la verte yeuse,
L’herbe s’offre à nos pas dans le bois attiédi,
Je te parle d’Eylau, d’Essling et de Lodi!
Parlons de notre amour et non de la bataille.
Oui, nos aïeux régnaient par la guerre, et leur taille
Était haute, et mon père était un des géants;
Et nous, s’il faut demain braver les flots béants,
Et subir les cieux noirs après les jours prospères,
Nous, les fils, nous ferons comme faisaient nos pères;
Nous combattrons comme eux, dût-on être engloutis,
Avec un coeur égal et des bras plus petits;
Et le monde entendra notre clairon sonore;
Mais aujourd’hui je t’aime et tu m’aimes; l’aurore
Emplit les champs, emplit les cieux, emplit nos coeurs;
Les moineaux aisément sont d’Horace moqueurs
Lorsqu’il a près de lui Barine émue et rose
Et qu’il passe son temps à parler d’autre chose.

Vais-je donc étonner ces prés,ces bois, ces eaux,
Par un homme ayant moins d’esprit que les oiseaux?
C’est pour le jeune amour que les, forêts sont faites.
Belle, ne me rends pas ridicule aux fauvettes.
Sois clémente, et comprends qu’en de si charmants lieux
C’est plutôt aux enfants qu’on pense qu’aux aïeux.
Veux-tu fâcher les fleurs par nos façons moroses?
Veux-tu nous mettre mal avec toutes ces roses?
Si j’ai dit que je suis discret; je te trompais.
Belle, ici, tout est joie, accord, silence, paix;
Les champs et les vallons sont des choses calmées.
Vois ces grottes où rit l’ondine aux mains palmées,
Vois ces halliers qu’un dieu mystérieux bénit;
La branche n’a qu’un but, c’est de cacher un nid;
C’est l’amour qui ravit les rossignols, doux chantres;

Les poursuites” d’amants-aboutissent aux antres;
La nature n’est qu’une alcôve; et c’est Vénus
Dont on distingue au fond de l’ombre les seins nus;
Janvier part, floréal accourt; le dialogue
De l’hiver qui bougonne avec la vive églogue
Tourne en querelle, et l’air est plein d’un vague chant
Qui fait que la beauté n’a point le coeur méchant.
Les arbres ont besoin, belles, de-votre rire;
Une joie espiègle est mêlée au zéphyre;
La pomme d’Eve aux mains de Galatée atteint
Virgile; et tout serait manqué, maussade, éteint,
Si Chloé, que les nids couvrent de gais murmures,
Ne barbouillait le vieux Silène avec des mûres;
Et, si Phyllis entre eux n’était comme un démon,
Ménalque ne saurait que dire à Palémon.
— Aime, et baigne en chantant tes pieds nus dans la source;
Les rires étouffés, belle, sont la ressource
Des taillis ténébreux et des coeurs palpitants.
O profondeur sauvage et fraîche du printemps!
On entend alterner des flûtes sous les chênes.
Quel est -le maître? Éros. Et quelles sont les chaînes?
Les rayons, les parfums, lés soupirs, les chansons,
Et l’entrelacement des fleurs dans les buissons.
Cette nature au flanc sacré n’est pas contente
Si vous êtes “chez elle et que rien ne vous tente.
Belle, vois cette idylle immense, l’horizon;
Vois la-fougère et l’herbe et ses bancs de gazon;
Crois-tu que de cette ombre; et de ce. paysage
Il sorte le conseil insensé d’être sage;;
D’être froid; de ne point s’approcher de trop près,
D’être sourd aux instincts, d’être aveugle aux attraits,
De refuser d’entrer dans l’amour, douce école,
Et de substituer Wagram, Jemmape, Arcole,
Les révolutions, la patrie en péril,

Et la rauque bataille, au tendre hymen d’avril?
Belle, ayons pour affaire unique l’arrivée

Du premier souffle tiède échauffant la couvée,
L’éclosion du lys des étangs, les rameaux
Où le nid et le vent jasent à demi-mots,
La pénétration du soleil dans les feuilles,
Le clair-obscur des eaux, le bouquet que tu cueilles,
Le parfum qui te plaît, la clarté que tu vois,
L’herbe et l’ombre, et l’amour, mélodie à deux voix.
Ici, Pan cherche Astrée et Faune guette Flore.
Ne mêlons pas la guerre à toute cette aurore,
A moins que ce ne soit la guerre des baisers.
Soyons des coeurs ardents l’un par l’autre apaisés.
Aimons. Le. mois de mai, c’est la saison lucide.
Kléber pas plus qu’Ajax, Marceau pas plus qu’Alcide,
N’ont que faire en ces champs pleins de molles faveurs
Où le printemps chuchote au fond des bois rêveurs;
Car Homère ne peut qu’effarer Théocrite;
Moschus craint l’épopée avec le glaive écrite,
Et le groupe dansant et chantant des bergers
Fuit devant le divin Achille aux pieds légers. -
Alors elle me dit dans la saison des roses:

— Ami, ne croyez pas que j’écoute ces choses;
Je ne vous en veux pas; je sais que c’est ainsi
Qu’on parle à sa maîtresse, à son esclave aussi;
Oui, l’aube au fond des bois ébauche un frais sourire,
Le doux avril accourt avec un bruit de lyre;
Les oiseaux sur qui rien ne pèse sont contents;
Oui, ce qui doit emplir nos coeurs, c’est le printemps,
C’est l’idylle, c’est Flore et Maïa, c’est Astrée,
C’est l’éden; c’est aussi la tristesse sacrée.
Toutes les fleurs ont beau me fêter à l’envi,
Je songe au noir clocher de Strasbourg asservi,
Et je vois à travers l’églogue pleine d’ombre
Au fond de l’horizon la grande flèche sombre.
Ah! parlez-moi de guerre! Où sont les fiers défis?
Penser à ses aïeux, c’est penser à ses fils.
C’est pour faire un héros qu’il est beau d’être femme;

Tâchons de repriser aux cieux quelque vieille âme;
Scellons un grand hymen! Je vous aime pourtant;
Mais, dans cet obscur bois farouche et palpitant,
C’est l’indignation, non l’amour, qui me dompte;
On n’a pas de pudeur quand on a de la honte;
Je le dis, mon pays est ma seule rougeur,
Je ne veux d’un baiser que s’il crée un vengeur!

LI À UNE IMMORTELLE

Quoi! vous, gloire, auréole, éblouissement, grâce,
Vous qui ne passez pas, vous craignez ce qui passe?
Comment! vous la beauté céleste, vous craignez,
Déesse, la beauté d’en bas! Vous qui régnez,
Vous redoutez l’éclat éphémère de celles
Qu’avril jette et qui sont comme ses étincelles,
Qui, comme la verveine ét la sauge et le thym,
Naissent dans la lueur fuyante du matin,
Embaument un moment les prés et les charmilles,
Et qui durent autant que l’aube, étant ses filles?
Vous, jalouse! de qui? vous, troublée! -et pourquoi?
Le jour sans nuit, c’est vous; l’amour sans fin, c’est toi.
Qui peut-elle envier, celle que tout envie?
Qui donc détrônerait du trône de la vie
La beauté? Qui pourrait saisir ce diamant,
Vénus, et l’arracher du front du firmament?
Sois calme en ton azur. Que t’importe, à toi, flamme,
Clarté, splendeur, toujours présente. comme une âme,
A toi l’enchantement. de l’abîme vermeil;
Faite pour le baiser éternel du soleil,
Qu’un rayon en passant sur une fleur se pose?
L’étoile au fond des cieux n’a pas peur de la rose.

Champs-Élysées, 7 juillet 1874.

LII Horace,

Horace, et toi, vieux La Fontaine,
Vous avez dit: Il est un jour
Où le coeur qui palpite à peine
Sent comme une chanson lointaine -
Mourir la -joie et fuir l’amour. -

Ô poètes, l’amour réclame
Quand vous dites: Nous n’aimons plus,
Nous pleurons, nous n’avons plus d’âme,
Nous cachons dans nôs coeurs, sans flamme
Cupidon goutteux et perclus. -

Le temps d’aimer jamais rie passe,
Non, jamais le coeur n’est fermé.

Hélas! vieux Jean, ce qui s’efface,
Ce qui s’en va, mon doux Horace,
C’est le temps où l’on est aimé.

8 mars 1849.

LIII CHANSON

LE PÈRE
Bon empereur, vous êtes maître
Du grenadier et du sapeur,
Et quand vous regardez leur guêtre
Les soldats d’Austerlitz ont peur.

Bon empereur, vous êtes l’homme
Qu’on appelle Napoléon.
Vous êtes un César pour Rome,
Un héros pour le Panthéon.

Tout vous cède; la renommée
Est partout votre avant-coureur.
Vous êtes général d’armée!
Je viens à vous, bon empereur.

Ma fille au vieux Thibaut préfère
Le plus jeune de mes neveux.
Vous qui pouvez tout, daignez faire
Qu’elle aime celui que je veux.

L’EMPEREUR
Ami, j’ai gagné cent batailles,
J’ai pris cent villes. Tout me sert!
J’ai constellé de mes mitrailles
Les pyramides du désert.

J’ai brisé des rois centenaires
Et j’ai fait rois mes compagnons.
Le Dieu d’en haut a ses tonnerres,
Moi, Dieu d’en bas, j’ai mes canons.

Je puis rajeunir et refondre
L’Europe, vieux monde épuisé.

Un de ces jours je prendrai Londre.
Tout cela. n’est pas malaisé.

Mais la difficulté suprême;
Plus haute que remparts et tours,
C’est de faire qu’une fille aime
Autre chose que ses amours.

22 mai 1846.

LIV À force de rêver

À force de rêver et de voir dans la plaine
Une fille aux yeux bleus aller à la fontaine,
Gad s’aperçut un jour qu’il était amourëux.
Plus de sommeil. Où fuir ce souci douloureux?
Il voulut. s’en guérir, mais tout fut inutile.
Triste, il alla s’asseoir aux portes de la ville,
Et, voyant un vieillard qui passait, il lui dit:
— A mon aide, seigneur! -Le vieillard l’entendit,
Et vint. C’était un homme à longue barbe grise.
Les palmiers frissonnaient au souffle de la brise;
Le soleil se couchait dans le désert poudreux.
— Qu’as-tu? dit le vieillard. -Je suis très malheureux,
Dit Gad, puis il reprit: -Hélas! j’aime une femme.

— J’avais, dit le vieillard, ce mal cuisant dans` l’âme
Quand j’étais un jeune homme aux yeux clairs et brillants
Comme toi. Maintenant mes cheveux sont tout blancs,
Mon front tremble, mon ceil s’éteint, l’âge me glace;
Et pour moi tout est sombre, et chaque jour qui passe
Est de la nuit qui tombe, et, sans air, sans soutien,
Je souffre, et c’est mon mal de n’avoir plus le tien.

14 août 1846.

LV LES PÉRIPÉTIES DE L’IDYLLE

Vous voulez bien venir avec moi dans les bois
Cueillir des fleurs, chercher l’ombre, écouter des voix,
Méditer, des lueurs épier le passage,

À la condition que je serai très sage.
Et je vous obéis. Pourtant dans ce hallier
Le vent me semble avec les branches familier,
Le papillon souhaite un calice et le trouve,
La rose est nue, et l’herbe est tendre, et le lys prouve
Qu’on montre sa blancheur sans perdre sa vertu,
Et les petits oiseaux tout bas se disent tu.
Faisons comme eux. Veux-tu? Non. Voulez-vous, Madame?
Tu souris.

Le printemps est un épithalame;
La feuille est un rideau, la source est un soupir;
Cupidon vient dans l’herbe agreste se tapir
Et rit de voir les fous le chercher dans les villes.
Les alcôves de pourpre et d’or sont laides, viles
Et pauvres à côté du lit profond des fleurs.
Comme ils riraient de moi, les gais merles siffleurs,
Si je n’abusais pas un peu des solitudes!
Essayons. Ah! tu prends de graves attitudes.
J’ai tort; pardonne-moi. Ces bois sont pleins d’ébats
Mystérieux. Veux-tu nous adorer tout bas?
Veux-tu que ma caresse inquiète ne fasse
Pas plus de bruit qu’un pli d’une onde qui s’efface,
Et que je sois heureux prudemment, de façon
Que ces bois, en sentant passer. ce doux frisson,
Pensent, sans devenir pour cela plus farouches,
Que ce sont deux baisers envolés de deux bouches,
Perdus par des amants au hasard-dans les prés,
Qui se sont en flottant dans l’azur rencontrés,
Et, que ces deux baisers, sans maître, espèces d’âmes,

Courent, libres, joyeux, dansants, comme deux flammes,
L’un après l’autre, et font l’amour au fond des bois?
Veux-tu l’idylle ainsi? Non. Eh bien, fais ton choix.
Que veux-tu? Tu réponds: Manger, j’ai faim.

Tu règnes.
Je te sers. Le repas est frugal. Des châtaignes,
Du miel, et quelques fruits sur des feuilles posés,
Suffisent à l’amour, vorace de baisers.
Cette voracité te déplaît, On regarde,
Me dis-tu, des passants écoutent! Prenez garde,
Monsieur, aux paysans rusés et curieux.
Soyez un amoureux du genre sérieux.
Est-ce que vous croyez que les dieux de l’Olympe
Chiffonnaient un jupon, taquinaient une guimpe?
— Oui, d’abord. -Qu’ils manquaient aux déesses? -Un peu.
Ensuite, je suis homme et je ne suis pas dieu.
— Taisez-vous. -Je me tais. Mais voilà que tu chantes!
Ah! -que les femmes sônt charmantes et méchantes!
Pour me faire tenir tranquille, tu te mets
A rire comme rit l’aube sur les sommets,
Et tu jettes au vent ta belle voix sonore.
Tu dis: soyons muets, il faut qu’on nous ignore,
Qu’on ne soupçonne pas quelqu’un dans ce ravin...
Et te voilà faisant un vacarme divin!
Tu fais sortir là-bas des gens de leur chaumière;
Je veux de l’ombre, toi, tu veux de la lumière;
Je voulais des soupirs, toi, tu veux des chansons.
Belle, un baiser! -Jamais. Paix, Monsieur. Finissons.

J’obéis.

Mais pourquoi m’entraînes-tu toi-même
Dans plus d’ombre, et pourquoi murmures-tu: Je t’aime!
O femmes!

Résister et céder, c’est la loi.

Peut-on du mois de mai faire un meilleur emploi
Que de s’aimer, et l’ombre a-t-elle une autre affaire
Que l’hymen de celûi que la beauté préfère
Avec celle que l’âme a choisie? O forêts!
Tu chuchotes encor: Sois sage! Tu voudrais,
Mais tu n’oses. Vivons! Sois Bacchante! Sois Grâce!
Tu t’appelles Barine et je m’appelle Horace.
Quand Catulle avait bu son petit vin sabin
Il ne se gênait pas pour voir Glycère au bain.
Je suis classique. Il faut suivre les doux exemples.
Faire de tous les lieux où tu passes des temples,
C’est ta puissance, amour! je suis-transfiguré.
Ajouter un baiser, c’est monter un degré;
Le ciel, en même temps que la bouche, s’approche.
L’attendrissement gagne et pénètre la roche,
Le granit, l’azur noir des chastes lacs dormants,
Les nuages, les champs, les monts, quand deux amants
Sont là, mêlés, perdus, comme en avril les roses,
Dans le céleste oubli des hommes et des choses.

Moment de calme. Arrêt. Nous voici retombés
En pleine rêverie, et là-bas, deux abbés
Qui passent, livre en main, marmottant des prières,
Ont cru que nous lisions aussi nos bréviaires,
Tant tu sembles un ange et tant j’ai l’air d’un sot.
On prend de deux façons le paradis d’assaut;

Un des côtés, c’est Dieu l’autre côté, c’est Eve;
C’est pourquoi le serpent se glisse dans mon rêve;
Or jamais les baisers ne sont bien assoupis;
S’éveiller est leur droit. Tu te fâches. Tant pis!
Tant mieux!’ne crains donc pas ces branches qui tressaillent.
Quoi! pour que Lycoris et Virgile s’en aillent,
Quoi! pour chasser d’auprès d’Horace Lalagé,
Il suffit qu’un vieil arbre imbécile ait bougé!
Non, non. Je brave tout. Je me livre au pillage,
Sans me troubler d’un souffle errant dans le feuillage,

Et sans m’inquiéter si l’écart du fichu
Fait dans l’ombre loucher le faune au pied fourchu.

28 juillet.

LVI Je pressais ton bras

Je pressais ton bras qui tremble;
Nous marchions tous deux ensemble,
Tous deux heureux et vainqueurs.
La nuit était calme et pure.
Dieu remplissait la nature,
L'amour emplissait nos coeurs.

Tendre extase! saint mystère!
Entre le ciel et la terre
Nos deux esprits se parlaient.
A travers l'ombre et ses voiles,
Tu regardais les étoiles,
Les astres te contemplaient.

Et sentant jusqu'à ton âme
Pénétrer la douce flamme
De tous ces mondes vermeils,
Tu disais: Dieu de l'abîme!
Seigneur! vous êtes sublime.
Vous avez fait les soleils.

Et les astres à voix basse
Disaient au Dieu de l'espace,
Au Dieu de l'éternité:
Seigneur, c'est par vous qu'on aime.
Vous êtes grand, Dieu suprême.
Vous avez fait la beauté!

30 mars 1844.

LVII AU BAL

Elle se rapprochait, car il parlait tout bas.
Il lui disait: On a, dans ces bruyants ébats,
Une liberté plus entière.
C’est la foule, on est seul en ces salons dorés.
Le bal joyeux nous cache aux regards effarés
Dans un tourbillon de lumière.
Les quadrilles ardents, follement entraînés,
Bondissent. Nous rêvons, l’un sur l’autre inclinés,
Un rêve peut-être impossible.
Sans voir ces fleurs, sans voir ces fronts épanouis,
Nous passons dans ce bal rayonnant, éblouis
Par une autre fête invisible.
Ils sont aux voluptés, nous sommes à l’amour.
Nos coeurs émus sont pleins d’un mystérieux jour;
Un feu passager les embrase.
Ce que nous contemplons, ils ne peuvent le voir.
Notre âme est un obscur et céleste miroir.
Ils ont l’ivresse, et nous l’extase.
Tandis que dans leurs. yeux le plaisir brûle et luit,
Nous voudrions, troublés par la joie et le bruit,
Nous enfuir sous de chastes voiles.
La foule rit. notre âme est plus ravie encor.
Pour eux, à ces plafonds; brillent les lustres d’or,
Et pour nous, plus haut, les étoiles!

2 mars.

LVIII Nous étions, elle et moi,

Nous étions, elle et moi, dans cet avril charmant
De l’amour qui commence ,en éblouissement.
O souvenirs! ô temps’! heures évanouies!
Nous allions, le. coeur plein d’extases inouïes,
Ensemble dans les bois, et la main dans la main.
Pour prendre le sentier nous quittions le chemin,
Nous quittions le sentier pour. marcher, dans les herbes.
Le ciel resplendissait dans ses regards superbes;

Elle disait: Je t’aime et je me sentais dieu.
Parfois, près d’une source, on s’asseyait un peu.
Que de fois j’ai montré sa gorge aux branches d’arbre!
Rougissante et pareille aux naïades de marbre,
Tu baignais tes pieds nus et blancs comme le lait.
Puis nous nous en allions rêveurs. Il me semblait,
En regardant autour de nous les pâquerettes,
Les boutons d’or joyeux, les pervenches secrètes,
Et les frais liserons d’une eau pure arrosés,
Que ces petites fleurs étaient tous les baisers
Tombés dans le trajet de ma bouche à ta bouche
Pendant que nous marchions; et la grotte farouche,
Et la ronce sauvage et le roc chauve et noir,
Envieux, murmuraient: Que va dirè ce soir
Diane aux chastes yeux, la déesse étoilée,
En voyant toute l’herbe au fond du bois foulée?

3 avril. Jersey.

LIX Aujourd’hui Galatée

Aujourd’hui Galatée aux lascives épaules
Qui voulait être vue et fuyait sous les saules,
Et jetait en courant des pommes aux garçons,
Cymodoce aux doux yeux qui chantait des chansons
Et lavait aux ruisseaux ses belles jambes nues,
Seraient des Pamélas jouant les ingénues
Chez Bobino, prenant un banquier pour sultan,
Sous l’ombrage sacré d’une mère en tartan.

LX DANGER D’ALLER DANS LES BOIS

Ne te figure pas, ma belle,
Que les bois soient pleins d’innocents.
La feuille s’émeut comme l’aile
Dans les noirs taillis frémissants;

L’innocence que tu supposes
Aux chers petits oiseaux bénis

N’empêche pas les douces choses
Que Dieu veut et que font les nids.

Les imiter serait mon rêve;
Je baise en songe ton bras blanc;
Commence! dit l’Aurore. -..Achève!
Dit l’étoile. Et je suis tremblant.

Toutes les mauvaises pensées,
Les oiseaux les ont,. je les ai,
Et par les forêts insensées
Notre coeur n’est point apaisé.

Quand je dis mauvaises pensées.
Tu souris -L’ombre est pleine d’yeux,
Vois, les fleurs semblent caressées
Par quelqu’un dans les bois joyeux.

Viens! l’heure passe. Aimons-nous vite!
Ton coeur, à qui l’amour fait peur,.
Ne sait s’il cherche ou s’il évite
Ce démon dupe, ange trompeur.

En attendant, viens au bois sombre.
Soit. N’accorde aucune faveur.
Derrière toi, marchant dans l’ombre,

Le poète sera rêveur;

Et le faune, qui se dérobe,
Regàrdera du fond des eàux
Quand tu relèveras ta robe
Pour enjamber les clairs ruisseàux.

2 juin.

LXI Tous deux

Tous deux -est-ce à Tibur? est-ce à Ville-d’Avray?
Nous errions, et sa voix me disait: -L’amour vrai
Craint le rapprochement vertigineux des bouches.
Respecte mes peurs. L’âme a des bonheurs farouches;

Elle veut voir s’ouvrir l’éden, et refuser.
C’est assez d’un soupir et c’est trop d’un baiser.
La pudeur, c’est de l’ombre, et l’amour s’en augmente.
Ce que perd la maîtresse est gagné par l’amante;
Oublions cette chair que tu nommes beauté.
L’amour devient le ciel sitôt le corps ôté.
Tu m’aimes, je t’adore. Eh bien! soyons fidèles,
Purs, et contentons-nous d’un frémissement d’ailes.
Mon coeur en plein mystère et ma vie en plein jour,
Je fais ce chaste rêve. Oh! laisse mon amour
Se dresser dans mon âme avec un front d’étoile!
Il faut au coeur un songe, il faut au temple un voile.
Respecte-moi. Soyons des parfums, des rayons!
Dans ce frais mois de mai qu’est-ce que nous voyons?
La promiscuité des âmes et des roses.
Anges, nous nous mêlons à ces apothéoses.
Une honte sacrée est un divin flambeau.
Je t’aime. Un coeur sauvage et tendre est aussi beau
Qu’un ciel sombre éclairé de lueurs boréales.

Pendant qu’elle disait ces choses idéales,
Dans le plus ténébreux du bois je regardais,
Sous un chêne étendant son ombre comme un dais,
Non pas quélque déesse, une Vénus de marbre,
Mais un bonhomme en bois taillé dans un tronc d’arbre,
Un antique magot riant à nos ébats,
Satyre aux yeux de bouc qui me parlait tout bas
Avec sa large bouche effroyable et vorace,
Comme si j’eusse été ce doux flâneur d’Horace:

«Jadis, j’étais un tronc de figuier, bon à rien.
«-Oui-dà, dit un sculpteur persan ou dorien,
«De ceux dont le génie au cabaret trébuche,
«Ferai-je un banc, ferai-je un dieu, de cette bûche?
«Il lui plut que je fusse un dieu. C’est bien. Je fus
«Priape, et jè rêvai sous les arbres touffus.”

8 mai. (Pendant le plébiscite.)

LXII L’OUTRAGE PEUT ÊTRE AUSSI DANS LA CARESSE

Hélas, les rayons sont des crimes.
Les vils chardons aux lys sublimes
Disent dans l’ombre: c’est assez.
O Dieu, qui seul savez les sources et les causes,
Qu’est-ce donc que les belles choses
Ont fait, que vous les punissez!
Expiation jamais lasse!
Les flots sont une populace
Qui jette.aux caps l’affront amer;
Les rocs sentent sur eux cracher ces mille bouches;
Ils ont sur leurs. faces farouches
L’âcre salive de la mer.

La fleur radieuse est dans l’herbe;
C’est un malheur qu’être superbe;
Sa splendeur déplaît à quelqu’un;
La limace tyran monte à la rose. esclave,
La baise et la souille, et la bave
Est le châtiment du parfum.

Pourgtioi, tempête, sans relâche,
Frappes-tu de ton éclair lâche
Le mont dressé dans le brouillard?
De quel droit, dans l’Eden imitant les chenilles,
Viens-tu-toucher aux jeunes filles,
Lèvre difforme du vieillard?

Le grand bourreau se nomme Envie,
La longue injure de la vie
S’accomplit à tous les moments.
Dieu, qui n’épargne rien, fait tomber de son aire
Sur les fronts puissants le tonnerre,

Le baiser sur les fronts charmants.

26 juillet 1854.

LXIII Son chien est couché

GABONUS, seul.

Son chien est couché à ses pieds.
La belle s’appelait mademoiselle Amable.
Elle était combustible et j’étais inflammable.
Un treize, je la vis passer sur le Pont-Nuit;
Les Grâces étaient trois, les Muses étaient neuf;
Et c’est là ce qui fait sacré le nombre douze,
Et treize fatal. Donc, un treize, une andalouse
De Pantin, telles sont les rencontres qu’on a,
Amable, d’un regard charmant, m’assassina.
Duel, duo. Sous l’oeil paternel des édiles,..
Il naît sur le Pont-Neuf beaucoup de ces idylles.

Je la qualifiai d’ange, un mois à peu près.
Bref, je me demandais un jour si je romprais,
Quand, par un doux soleil d’avril, entre deux pluies,
Je reçus ce billet de l’ange: « Tu m’ennuies.
Bonsoir.” -Ce qui me fit furieux. D’autant plus
Que c’est elle, parbleu, qui m’ennuyait le plus

Ensuite, éperdument, à je ne sais plus quelle
Déesse qu’entourait une étrange séquelle,
Des poètes, des gueux, des grecs, des chambellans
De l’atout, noir démon qui hante les brelans,
Gens qui s’enrichissaient dans l’aventure épique
Du roi de coeur floué par la dame de pique,
Disant de l’amour: fi! disant de l’honneur: peuh!
Mais trichant. -J’adorai cette drôlesse un peu.
Puis je fus planté là pour un prince valaque.
Je fis la connaissance après d’un chef de claque
Qui me fit pénétrer dans les arts, et j’obtins
Par lui d’être admis presque au rang des cabotins,
Et l’honneur d’approcher parfois les cabotines

En qualité d’esclave adorant leurs bottines;
Une, Lise, accepta mon coeur sous ses talons;
Le temps qu’un perroquet grimpe trois échelons,
Je fus vainqueur, je fus heureux, et je fus bête;
Trois progrès. Mais, hélas! la fémme est la tempête.
Lise en colère un jour chassa tous ses laquais;

(Dont moi.)

Comme un roman déchiré sur les quais,
J’avais déjà perdu plus d’un de mes chapitres;
J’étais sorti des grecs, j’étais sorti des pitres,
Mes amantes n’étaient qu’un vague souvenir;
Tout à coup je sentis en moi tout rajeunir
Comme si le soleil empourprait ma fenêtre,
Et mes illusions les plus roses renaître
En voyant une fille au confessionnal;
Le gamin Cupidon dans mon vieux coeur banal
Fit sa rentrée avec trompettes et fanfares.
Ah! quand donc mettra-t-on sur la femme des phares!
Dans l’église où du mal meurt la contagion,
Chez les prêtres; au coin de la religion,
Entre deux saints de pierre, un apôtre, un prophète,
Apercevant dans l’ombre une fille parfaite,
Je fis cette sottise énorme de l’aimer;
Elle m’incendia sans pourtant s’allumer;
J’eus l’âpre enivrement des flammes méprisées;
Elle me permettait d’errer sous ses croisées;
Rien de plus. Je perdis gaîté, raison, humour;
Je fus toute une année imbécile d’amour.
Ah! lorsqu’elle émiettait sa prière, autour d’elle,
Certes, comme un essaim d’oiseaux, à tire-d’aile,
Les chérubins venaient, et lui disaient: ma soeur!
Quand elle s’enfermait avec son confesseur,
Je me la figurais penchant sur le calvaire
Ses mains jointes, ses yeux vierges, son front sévère,
Son profil chaste, fait pour Greuze ou pour Lancret.

Un beau jour, par un trou de serrure indiscret,
Au lieu du Golgotha je contemplai l'Olympe;
Moi qui n'eusse du doigt osé. toucher sa guimpe,
Je la vis toute nue aux bras de son abbé.
Marie était Vénus, Agnès était Hébé.
Ceci me mit en fuite, et j'en fus longtemps blême.

Pourtant j'avais toujours dans l'esprit ce problème:
Trouver un coeur qui fût le compagnon du mien.
Je me fis voyageur, chercheur, bohémien,
Nomade, et j'explorai les mers, les flots, les îles.

Un jour je débarquai dans un pays sans villes,
Sans hommes presque, un lieu charmant; et j'eus l'émoi,
Comme j'étais rêveur, que soudain vînt à moi,
Dans l'état de nature, une femme inconnue.
Je m'écriai, voyant qu'elle était toute nue:.
Ah! celle-ci du moins avoue! -Et, très flatté:
De quel puits sortez-vous, lui dis-je, ô Vérité?
Elle vint, puis s'enfuit, puis. revint, et Végèce.
Eût moins bien manoeuvré que cette sauvagesse,
Si bien qu'à la façon dont elle m'aborda,
Je vis qu'Otaïti ressemblait à Bréda.
Je la civilisai. Mais, ciel bleu! que de choses
Il fallut lui donner! jupons blancs, chapeaux roses,
Robes, manteaux, satins, velours, bijoux de prix!
La sauvage, au rebours des femmes de Paris,
Commence toute nue et finit fort vêtue.
L'homme fait la poupée et Dieu fit la statue;
Toute la femme tient dans ces quelques mots-là.
La chair sert de prétexte à notre falbala.
L'île était un éden tiède et toujours en fête;
J'étais Adam, mon Eve était belle et bien faite;
Or ce chef-d'oeuvre avait un singe pour amant;
J'étais de temps en temps regardé fixement,
A travers les rameaux en fleurs, par un gorille.
Sept pieds de haut, des dents de tigre, un oeil qui brille,

Peste! je m’évadai du paradis. -Depuis,
Cherchant les amours, comme un lierre les appuis,
J’ai fait tous les essais possibles je rature
Une aventure en moi par une autre aventure;
J’aimai,-me figurant qu’aimer n’a jamais nui,
Celle-ci par plaisir, celle-là par ennui,
L’une pour sa chanson, l’autre pour sa richesse,
L’autre parce qu’étant vieille, elle était duchesse,
L’autre pour ses amants, l’autre pour son mari;
J’adorai Berthe, Anna, Mousqueton, Colibri,
Jeannette, Olympia. -Donc j’ai connu les femmes,
J’en ai connu les coeurs, j’en ai connu les âmes,
Le haut, le bas, le vrai, le faux, le mal, le bien;
Et la conclusion; la voici: Viens, mon chien!

20 décembre.

LXIV Quand deux cœurs en s’aimant

Quand deux coeurs en s’aimant ont doucement vieilli,
Oh! quel bonheur profond, intime, recueilli!
Amour! hymen d’en haut! ô pur lien des âmes!
II garde ses rayons même en perdant ses flammes.
Ces deux coeurs qu’il a pris jadis n’en font plus qu’un.
Il fait, des souvenirs de leur passé commun,
L’impossibilité de vivre l’un sans l’autre.
— (Juliette, n’est-ce pas? cette vie est la nôtre!)
Il a la paix du soir avec l’éclat du jour,
Et devient l’amitié tout en restant l’amour!

22 septembre 1854.

I LA BLANCHE AMINTE

— Çà, dit-il, que t’en semble
Écoute, Écho, faisons une chanson ensemble.

Sitôt qu’Aminte fut venue
Nue,
Devant le dey qui lui semblait
Laid,

Plus blanche qu’un bloc de Carrare
Rare,
Elle défit ses cheveux blonds,
Longs.

Alors, ô tête de l’eunuque,
Nuque
Du Bostangi, tu te courbas
Bas.

Le bassa, dont l’amour enflamme
L’âme,
À ses pieds laissa son mouchoir
Choir,

En disant: -Ne sois pas rebelle,
Belle,
Tes pieds blancs et tes blonds cheveux
Veux.

Or c’était le bassa d’Épire
Pire
Qu’un vrai moine et plus qu’un manchot
Chaud,

Faisant turques et circassiennes

Siennes,
Et pour soi seul en nourrissant
Cent.

Donc, à sa parole exigeante
Gente
Aminte ne dit au vaurien
Rien.
Elle inclina son cou de cygne,
Signe
Qu’elle trouvait le vieux corbeau
Beau.

Quand ses femmes virent Aminte,
Mainte
Jalouse idée à plus de vingt
Vint.

Longtemps le sérail infidèle
D’elle
Parla, puis de ses cheveux blonds
Longs,

Les blanches qu’à Chypre on rencontre
Contre,
Et les noires de Visapour
Pour.

3 janvier 1829.

II LE PRINCE FAINÉANT

Il n’est trésor que de vivre à son aise.

VILLON.
Guy, mon père,
N’use point,
A rien faire
Son pourpoint.
Pas de fête
Qu’il n’apprête,
Casque en tête,
Dague au poing.

Mon grand-père,
Navarrois,
Fit la guerre
Pour la croix,
Sous Alonze
Coeur-de-bronze,
En l’an onze
Cent vingt-trois.

Jean de Mesme
Son aïeul
Qui dort blême
Au linceul,
Dans Toulouse
La jalouse,
Contre douze
Luttait seul.

Mes ancêtres
Fort vantés,
Portaient, maîtres
Des comtés,

Sur la marge
D’un dos large
Une charge
De cités.

L’un d’eux, Eudes
De Montfort,
Fut des leudes
Le plus fort,
Son épaule
Jusqu’au pôle
Portait. Dôle,
Sans effort.

Le grand-père
De ceux-là,
Noir sicaire
D’Attila,
Vieille lame,
Eut dans l’âme
Plus de flamme
Que l’Hékla.

Moi, leur mince
Suppléant,
Suis le prince
Fainéant.

Mon bras casse,
S’il déplace
Leur cuirasse
De géant.

Car d’entailles
Moins friand,
Des batailles
Souriant,

Tout me lasse,
Fêtes, chasse,
Dire: grâce,
En priant!

Même aux belles
J’ai mépris,
Et loin d’elles
Mon coeur pris
Laisse, en somme,
Faire un somme
Aux cerfs, comme
Aux maris.

30 juin juillet 1828.

III CE QUE GEMMA PENSE D’EMMA

Que fait l’orfèvre? Il achève
Quelque anneau mystérieux.
Sa boutique semble un rêve
Qu’emplissent de vagues yeux;

L’opale est une prunelle,
La turquoise est un regard;
La flamme tremble éternelle
Dans l’œil du rubis hagard.

L’émeraude en sa facette
Cache une ondine au front clair;
La vicomtesse de Cette
Avait les yeux verts de mer.

Le diamant sous son voile
Rêve, des cieux ébloui;
Il regarde tant l’étoile
Que l’étoile entre dans lui.

L’ambre est une larme austère;
Le saphir au chaste feu
Est devenu bleu sous terre
Tant il a contemplé Dieu!

Une femme chez l’orfèvre
Entre, sourire éclatant;
Les paroles sur sa lèvre
Battent de l’aile en chantant.

Elle porte un châle à palmes,
Un chapeau rose charmant;
Autour de ses grands yeux calmes
Tout frissonne doucement.

Elle brille et jase, et semble
Lueur, parfum, colibri;
Si belle que le cœur tremble,
S’étonne, et cherche un abri.

Où va-t-elle? d’où sort-elle?
D’où sort l’aube? où va le jour?
Elle est la joie, étincelle
De cette flamme, l’amour.

Le peuple à la vitre admire,
D’un œil. tendre et transporté,
Les femmes le cachemire
Et les hommes la beauté.

Tous l’appellent fée ou reine,
Astre, ange des cieux venu,
Et se sentent pleins de haine
Pour son amant inconnu.

Elle est blanche, aimable, exquise,
Folle et gaie; et, sans combats,
Toute la foule est conquise;
Chacun soupire tout bas:

Je voudrais être!... -et se nomme
Quelque idéal triomphant.
— Son ami! dit un jeune homme.
— Son mari! dit un enfant.

Qu’est-ce cloné que cette femme?
C’est une femme. Cela,

Quand Dieu fit la première âme,
Naquit et l’ensorcela.
Elle choisit chez l’orfèvre

Tous les beaux joyaux tremblants;
Et l’or semble avoir la fièvre
Entre ses petits doigts blancs.

Elle prend tout, la pirate,
L’aigue, soeur des gouttes d’eau,
Les agates de Surate
Et les émaux du Lido,

Et la parure complète
De sardoine et de béryl;
Elle éclate à chaque emplette
D’un doux rire puéril.

La perle voit cette belle.
Pourquoi fuir, perle au doux front?
— J’aime mieux la mer, dit-elle;
C’est moins sombre et moins profond.

5 avril 1855.

IV VASE DE CHINE À LA PETITE CHINOISE Y-HANG-TSEI

Vierge chi pays du thé,
Dans ton beau rêve enchanté,
Le ciel est une cité
Dont la Chine est la banlieue.

Dans notre Paris obscur,
Tu cherches, fille au front pur,
Tes jardins d’or et d’azur
Où le paon ouvre sa queue;

Et tu souris à nos cieux;
A ton âge un nain joyeux
Sur la faïence des yeux
Peint l’innocence, fleur bleue.

1er décembre 1851.

V MAUVAISES LANGUES

Un pigeon aime une pigeonne.
Grand scandale dans le hallier
Que tous les ans mai badigeonne.
Une ramière aimé un ramier.

Leur histoire emplit les charmilles.
Par les leurs ils sont compromis.
Cela se voit dans les familles
Qu’on est entouré d’ennemis.

Espionnage et commérage.
Rien ne donne plus d’âcreté,
De haine, de vertu, de rage
Et de fiel, qu’un bonheur guetté.
Que de fureur sur cette églogue!
L’essaim volant aux mille voix
Parle, et mêle à , son dialogue
Toutes les épines des bois.

L’ara blanc, là mésange bleue,
Jettent des car, des si, des mais,
Où, les gestes des hoche-queue.
Semblent semer des guillemets:

«-J’en sais long sur la paresseuse,
Dit un corbeau, juge à mortier.
— Moi, je connais sa blanchisseuse.
— Et moi, je connais son portier.

— Certe, elle n’est point sauvagesse.
— Est-on sûr qu’ifs sont mariés?
— Voilà, pour le prix de sagesse,
Deux pigeons bien avariés.”

Le geai dit: Leurs baisers blasphèment.
Le pinson chante: Ça ira.
La linotte fredonne: Ils s’aiment.
La pie ajoûte: Et cætera.

On lit que vers elle il se glisse
Le soir, avec de petits cris,
Dans le rapport à la police
Fait par une chauve-souris.

Le peuple ailé s’indigne, tance,
Fulmine un verdict, lance un bill.
Tel est le monde. Une sentence,
Redoutable, sort du babil.

Cachez-vous, Rosa. Fuyez vite
Loin du bavardage acharné.
L’amourette qu’on ébruite
Est un rosier déraciné.

Tout ce conte, ô belle ineffable,
Doit par vous être médité.
Prenez garde, c’est une fable,
C’est-à-dire une vérité.

9 août 1865.

VI Danseuse, écoute-moi.

Danseuse, écoute-moi. Le Dieu du firmament
Qui créa l'aube pure et fit ton front charmant,
A tout ce qui contient le bonheur, jeune, fille,
Attache de sa main quelque chose qui brille
D'un éclat à la fois chimérique et réel,
La paillette à ta jupe et l'étoile à son ciel.

8 août 1839.

VII LE PORCHE DE SAINT-LUC

Le porche de Saint-Luc, sur un vieux fût de pierre
S’appuie, et porche et fût ne sont plus qu’herbe et lierre.
Au noir pilier s’adosse un homme singulier,
Plus grave et mieux assis au rebord du pilier
Qu’un archevêque en chaire ou qu’un juge en grand’chambre;
Vieillard morne et hideux comme le mois Décembre
Et dont vous auriez peur, madame, je le crois,
Plus que d’un beau bandit rencontré, dans un bois.
On frémit d’un serpent moins que d’une chenille.
C’est un mendiant roux, vêtu d’une guenille,

Qui se confond, ridé, sordide et chevelu,
Avec la borne grise et le mur vermoulu.
Sur ce vieillard narquois vont pleuvant les monnaies.
Le pilier n’est que. lèpre et l’homme n’est que plaies.
Par Hercule! on est prêt à jurer que ce vieux
Un beau matin -gèrma dans ce bloc chassieux,
Et, pareil au gui noir qui sur le chêne pousse,
Couvert de barbe àinsi que la pierre de mousse,
Sortit, comme une fleur qui s’ouvre aux papillons,
Des fentes dù granit avec tous ses haillons;
Si bien que, maintenant,, grimaçant sur la rue,
Il est du vieux pilier la vivante verrue.

Homme étrange entre tous, qui vous ferait affront,
Qui, sans trop s’émouvoir, verrait votre beau front,
Vos longs cheveux, dorés comme les cheveux d’Eve,
Votre bouche qui rit, votre regard qui rêve,
Et leur préférerait -est-il sage? est-il fou? -
Le profil d’un vieux roi gravé sur un gros sou!

3 octobre 1842.

VIII CHANSON

L’hiver gronde et fait cent querelles,
^ vieilles gens, ô vieilles gens,
Aux girouettes, des tourelles;
Pendant qu’elles grincent entre elles,
Courez aux tripots indulgents,
O jeunes gens,ô jeunes gens.

L’araignée au mur fait sa trame,
^ vieilles gens, ô vieilles gens.
L’archet frémit, le gaz s’enflamme,
L’aile du beau papillon femme
Étale ses reflets changeants,
O jeunes gens, ô jeunes gens.

Cachez de l’or dans vos paillasses,
^ vieilles gens, ô vieilles gens.
Buvez du punch, prenez des glaces,
Les rires narguent les grimaces,
Les masques raillent les sergents,
O jeunes gens, ô jeunes gens.

La mort tient tout dans ses doigts grêles,
O vieilles gens, ô vieilles gens.
Volis serez dupés par les belles,
Et vous fuirez hors de chez elles,
Nus comme de petits Saint-Jeans,
O jeunes gens, ô jeunes gens.
La mort vide vos escarcelles,
O vieilles gens, ô vieilles gens.
Les tourtereaux aux molles ailes
Sont plumés par les tourterelles;
Bouches roses et becs rongeants;
O jeunes gens, ô jeunes gens.

27 novembre 1853.

IX Oui, fût-on Homère,

Oui, fût-on Homère, il faut rire;
Il faut rire, fût-on Caton.
Le bois nous offre Déjanire,
Le pré nous donne Margoton.
Le rire vient des dieux. À Rome
Comme à Pantin, il règne, il est.
Le rire est l’attribut de l’homme,
César riait, Brutus riait.
Jésus souriait. Mais en somme,
Sourire, c’est bien rire un peu.
Et c’est pour cela qu’il est homme,
Et c’est pour cela qu’il est Dieu.

Le bois nous offre Déjanire,
Le pré nous donne Margoton.
Oui, fût-on Homère, il faut rire,
Il faut rire, mon cher Caton.

X EN AFRIQUE

J’allai faire visite au roi. Les avenues
De son palais étaient pleines de femmes nues,
  Espèce de sérail épars comme un troupeau.
Quand j’entrai, le roi vint, coiffé d’un grand chapeau,
En habit noir; pieds nus, et complètêment ivre;
Il s’assit sur un trône en cuir à clous-de cuivre,
Et dit: Homme, sais-tu que je suis petit-fils
Du mage Zoroastre, ancien roi de Memphis?
Parle. -Et je répondis -au fils de Zoroastre i.
 — Oui, sire. -Et je lui mis dans la main une piastre.
Il fut content, m’offrit à boire, et s’en alla:

XI Quiconque est amoureux

Quiconque est amoureux est esclave et s’abdique.
L’amour n’est pas l’amour; il s’appelle Ananké.
Si l’on ne veut pas être à la porte flanqué,
Dès qu’on aime une belle, on s’observe, on se scrute;
On met le naturel de côté; bête brute,
On se fait ange; on est le nain Micromégas;
Surtout on ne fait point chez elle de dégâts;
On se tait, on attend; jamais on ne s’ennuie,
On trouve bon le givre, et la bise et la pluie,
On n’a ni faim, ni soif, on.est de droit transi;
Un coup de dent de trop vous perd. Oyez ceci:
Un brave ogre des bois, natif de Moscovie,
Était fort amoureux d’une fée, et l’envie.
Qu’il avait d’épouser cette. dame s’accrut
Au point de rendre fou ce pauvre cœur tout brut;
L’ogre un beau jour d’hiver peigne sa peau velue,
Se présente au palais de la fée, et salue,
Et s’annonce à l’huissier comme prince Ogrousky.
La fée avait un fils, on ne sait pas de qui.
Elle était ce jour-là sortie, et quant au mioche,
Bel enfant blond nourri de crème et de brioche,
Don fait par quelque Ulysse à cette Calypso,
Il était sous la porte et jouait au cerceau.
On laissa l’ogre et -lui tout seuls dans l’antichambre.
Comment passer le temps quand il neige en décembre,
Et quand on n’a personne avec qui dire un mot?
L’ogre se mit alors à croquer le marmot.
C’est très simple. Pourtant c’est aller un peu vite,
Même lorsqu’on est ogre et qu’on est moscovite,
Que de gober ainsi les mioches du prochain.
Le bâillement d’un ogre est frère de la faim.

Quand la dame rentra, plus d’enfant. On s’informe.
La fée avise l’ogre avec sa bouche énorme.

As-tu vu, cria-t-elle, un bel enfant que j’ai?
Le bon ogre naïf lui dit: Je l’ai mangé.
Or, c’était maladroit. Vous qui cherchez à plaire,
Jugez ce que devint l’ogre devant la mère
Furieuse qu’il eût soupé de son dauphin.
Que l’exemple vous serve; aimez, mais soyez fin;
Adorez votre belle, et soyez plein d’astuce;
N’allez pas lui manger, comme cet ogre russe,
Son enfant, ou marcher sur la patte à son chien.

XII À l’âge des bergeries,

À l’âge des bergeries,
Quand les lèvres sont fleuries,
Nous errions loin des prairies,
Lise et moi, dans le hallier;
Lise, au vent livrant sa tresse,
Moi, tremblant d’une caresse;
La maîtresse,
L’écolier.

Voyant la nuit prête à naître,
J’osai ne plus me connaître,
Je pris un baiser peut-être;
Un vieux frêne soupira;
La république des bêtes
Chantait, moineaux et fauvettes,
Sur nos têtes,
Ça ira!

Le soir répandait ses brumes.
Doux amoùr, tu nous consumes!
Tout à coup nous aperçûmes
(Était-ce un bouc? je le crois)
Dans la sauge et la joubarbe,
O conteur du roi de Garbe!
Une barbe
Dans le bois!

Moi qui connais mon Tityre
Et qu’Horace aux champs attire,
Je criai: C’est un satyre!
Lise dit: C’est un sapeur!
Sans plus nous en rendre compte,
Nous fuîmes; elle moins prompte;
Elle eut honte,

Et j’eus peur.

L’âpre forêt taciturne
A dans son ombre nocturne
Tous les fantômes, Saturne,
Faune, Irmensul, Urian;
D’une vague horreur couverte,
La grande Dryade verte
Déconcerte.
Florian.

8 février 1855.

XIII BRUIT DE GUITARE

La même belle nous dompte,
Hélas! depuis l’an passé;
Le choisi, c’est toi, vicomte;
Moi, je suis le méprisé.

À nous deux de cette fée
Nous composons l’entretien.;
Et, de ton amour coiffée,
Elle se chausse du.mien.

D’où nous vient ce double rôle?
Elle ne sait pas pourquoi.
Je lui fais l’effet d’un drôle.
Tu lui fais l’effet d’un roi.

Mais son cceur pour. rien rie-compte
Dans ta joie et dans mon deuil;
Je suis son dédain, vicomte,
Et tu n’es que son orgueil.

Viendra quelque gueux, moins bête,
Qu’elle aimera, c’est la loi,
Lui faisant comme à toi fête,
Le méprisant comme moi.

16 janvier 1855.

XIV LA LUNE

L’Olympe a dans l’azur des degrés inconnus;
Un jour, en descendant cet escalier, Vénus
Tomba, se fit des bleus ailleurs que sur la face,
Et les hommes en bas rirent; l’effroi. s’efface
Quand on peut voir les dieux par leur autre côté.
— Soit, dit alors Vénus, pour leur rire effronté,
Les hommes, ayant eu cette bonne fortune,
Ne verront plus de moi que cela.
C’est la lune.

3 juin.

XV Le marquis de Bade a deux cornes

Le marquis de Bade a deux cornes;
Il en décore son blason.
Je désire peu que tu m’ornes
De cette parure, ô Suzon.

Belle, tu n’as point d’armoiries,
Mais ton doux rire est enchanteur;
Bois aux sources, jamais taries,
Et crois au ciel, jamais menteur.

Ces princes, que l’ombre enveloppe,
Avaient toujours l’épée en main;
Ils conquéraient souvent l’Europe,
Et quelquefois le grand chemin.

Guerre au dehors, guerre civile,
Tout plaisait à ces hasardeux;
Calmes, ils laissaient dans leur ville
Leur femme, avec un page ou deux.

Ces fiers badois au piéd allègre
Firent la guerre aux fils d’Orcan,
Au négus, magot chrétien nègre,
Au grand Knez, cousin du grand Khan,

Aux pays de neige et de sable,
A Vienne, où régnait le dauphin,
A Chypre, à Zante, à Rome, au diable;
Ils voyagèrent tant qu’enfin

Ces marquis, sujets aux absences,
Jaloux des cornes du bison,
Ajoutèrent ces excroissances
A la grandeur de leur maison.

Bade, 10 septembre 1865

XVI Veux-tu vivre,

Veux-tu vivre, être admiré,
Et de graisse rembourré,
Et centenaire enterré?
Crains le pourpoint trop serré,
Les gens en bonnet carré,.
L’encre et le papier timbré.;
Fais usage modéré
Cibo, Baccho, Venere;
Laisse aux manants le. poiré,
Le. champignon dans le pré,
Et ta servante au curé..
Le seizième eut Turlupin.
Le dix-septième eut Scapin.
Le dix-huitième eut Crispin.
Le dix-neuvième a Dupin.

XVIII Il avait le front bas,

Il avait le front bas, le rire d’un pirate;
Le poil noir, l’œil chinois, la mine scélérate;
Un turban le coiffait comme un Nostradamus;

Et, se rejoignant présque à son gros nez camus,
Moustaches et sourcils d’une énorme envergure
Lui dessinaient un X à travers la figure.

XIX Messeigneurs,

(Trianon, sur son tréteau, annonçant le spectacle.)

Messeigneurs, nous aurons pour lustre la grande Ourse.
Vous entendrez, chacun payant selon sa bourse,
Irus pour un liard, Crésus pour un sequin,
A demi-voix, au bord du manteau d'arlequin,
Jaser la folle avoine avec le brin de vigne.
Un lac, où vous verrez vaguement fuir un cygne,
Servira de miroir, parmi l'herbe et le thym,
Aux fleurs se recoiffant dans l'ombre le matin.
Les bois seront ornés d'une biche effrayée.
La scène au premier plan sera tout égayée
D'aveugles, de pieds-bots défaisant leurs chaussons,
De lépreux se raclant avec de vieux tessons,
Et de voleurs auxquels on lira leur sentence.
Au fond monsieur Haillon et madame Potence
Se feront des saluts respectueux. Enfin,
Gueux, les dents de la Mort et les dents de la Faim
Riront au dénoûment de la pièce, et la Gale
Epousera l'auteur dans un feu de Bengale;
Ils s'en iront chantant et bras dessus dessous,
Et le diable au bon Dieu jettera des gros sous.

XX Fils, je veux dans ce conte,

Fils, je veux dans ce conte, où vont venir les fées,
Bâtir un temple avec des fleurs et des trophées,
Heurter les Arlequins contre les Amyntas,
Et vous montrer les jeux et les amours d’un tas
De rayons d’or prenant leurs ébats dans la brune,
Et mêler le grand jour avec le clair de lune;
Vous verrez à minuit apparaître midi;
Je prétends marier Piastre à Maravédi,
Le pied de Cendrillon aux bottes de sept lieues,
Et faire en plein soleil danser les âmes bleues.

XXI QUAI DE LA FERRAILLE

CHOEUR DES RACOLEURS

Nous sommes les sergents recruteurs. Pour la gloire,
Pour l’empire, pour être illustre dans l’histoire,
Il faut des meurtriers au roi; nous en cherchons.
Pour faire nos drapeaux noùs prenons des torchons;
Pour faire des héros nous prenons des canailles.
Nous.rions en ouvrant dans l’ombré nos tenailles;
Qui se fie au sourire est pincé par l’étau.
Le froid, la faim, la soif, sônt des coups de marteau
Qui donnent une forme obscure-aux misérables;
Mais pourvu qu’il leur reste un œil fier,. de bons râbles,
Des vices, de la rage et des instincts fougueux,
Ils sont notre gibier; nous épluchons les gueux;
Nous trions les gredins; nous passons à nos cribles
Toutes sortes de gens sauvages et terribles;
Les méchants sont les bons; les sanglants sont les beaux.
Ils deviendront vautours, ayant -été corbeaux.
A nous tout ce qui traîne! à nous tout-ce qui passe!
Sa Majesté nous dit: Sergents, faites main basse.
Elle nous livre en bloc le tas des mendiants;
Nous lui rendons des Cids et des Esplandians.
Nous avons carte blanche et pleins pouvoirs pour faire
L’armée horrible ainsi que le roi la préfère; -
Nous enrôlons des loups, des ours, des juifs de choix
Et de bons allemands qui pattent les pourchois;
Nous prenons tin coquin,-faux boiteux, faux aveugle,
Nous l’offrons gentiment à Bellone qui beugle,
Et plus tard il aura, rampant sur les pavés,
La jambe de bois vraie et de vrais yeux crevés.
Nous montrons à qui veut les voir nos -tours fort drôles,
Nos trucs, nos fleurs de lys, parfois sur nos épaules,
Nos façons de tricher aux cartes, nos galons,
Nos plumets, notre sabre. et jamais nds talons. -

Nous régnons; nous dressons nos fières silhouettes,
Étant tous très voleurs et même un peu poëtes.
On nous suit. Si ce n’est de force, c’est de gré.
Que c’est beau, l’épaulette et le colback tigré!
Qui veut de l’or? Venez, manants. Notre escarcelle
S.offre, brille, éblouit le pauvre, et le harcèle.
Quand nous voyons passer des moines, nous louchons
Du côté de ces gars masqués de capuchons;
En fait de va-nu-pieds, nous préférons les carmes;

Pour les guerres, les camps, les clairons, les vacarmes,
Les sacs et les viols, on prend des assassins
Et des larrons, à moins qu’on n’ait des capucins;
Les abbés défroqués sont d’admirables reîtres
Et nos meilleurs bandits sont faits avec des prêtres;
Un casque sied au prêtre aussi bien qu’un turban.

(Une pause.)

Beau sexe, attention! Tambours, battez un ban.
En pêchant ces messieurs les héros en eau trouble,
On sert Mars et Vénus, et nous faisons coup double.
Les dames, grâce à nous, ne manquent point d’amants
Vu que nous fournissons l’état de garnements.
L’enfant Amour, crieur public, annonce et braille
Le départ pour Cythère au quai de la Ferraille;
Cypris, étant déesse et toute nue, aurait
Grand tort de ne point suivre Ajax au cabaret;
Achille a pour Catau des façons très civiles.
Les grenadiers -battez tambours! -ça prend les villes
Et les mentons; c’est gai, féroce et tapageur.
Babet devant Fanfan sent une humble rougeur;
Les belles ont le goût des héros, et le mufle
Hagard d’un scélérat superbe sous le buffle
Fait bâiller tendrement l’hiatus des fichus;
Quand passe un tourbillon de drôles moustachus,
Hurlant, criant, affreux, éclatants, orgiaques,

Un doux soupir émeut les seins élégiaques.
Quels beaux hommes! housard ou pandour, le sabreur
Effroyable, traînant après lui tant d’horreur
Qu’il ferait reculer presque la sombre Hécate,
Charme la plus timide et la plus délicate.
Rose, qui ne voudrait toucher qu’avec son gant
Un honnête homme, prend la griffe d’un brigand,
Et la baise; telle est la femme. Elle décerne
Avec emportement son âme à la caserne;
Elle garde aux bourgeois son petit air bougon.
Toujours la sensitive adora le dragon.
Sur ce, battez, tambours! Ce qui plaît à la bouche
De la blonde aux doux Yeux, c’est le baiser farouche;
La femme se fait faire avec joie un enfant
Par l’homme qui tua, sinistre et triomphant;
Et c’est la volupté de toutes ces colombes
D’ouvrir leurs lits à ceux qui font ouvrir des tombes.

31 mars 1870.

XXII Un salon.

I LA MARQUISE ANTOINETTE

Un salon.
ANTOINETTE, marquise ayant épousé un vieux. Autrefois grisette. Trente ans.
ADOLPHE, bon état. Dix-huit ans.

ADOLPHE, à part.
Elle est seule.

LA MARQUISE ANTOINETTE, à part.
C’est lui.

ADOLPHE, à part.
Profitons du moment.
Il s’arrête et l’admire.
Qu’elle est belle!

ANTOINETTE, sans se déranger de son attitude.
Bonjour, Adolphe.
A part.
Il est charmant.

ADOLPHE, à part.
C’est l’étoile Vénus!
I1 salue.
Madame la marquise...
A part.
Comme elle est adorable et comme elle est exquise
Avec son bras ainsi ployé sous le menton!

ANTOINETTE
Que dit-on de nouveau?

ADOLPHE,
L’amiral Codrington

Vient de battre les turcs à Navarin.

ANTOINETTE
Adôlphe,
Qu’est-ce que c’est que ça, Navarin?

ADOLPHE
C’est un golfe.

ANTOINETTE
En France?

ADOLPHE
Non. En Grèce.

ANTOINETTE
Ah! bien.

ADOLPHE
Au fond, Pylos,
Au premier plan, la baie avec quelques îlots,
Voa Navarin. Or...
A part.
Quel regard, quelle taille!
Balbutiant.
Madame...

ANTOINETTE
Nous parlions, je crois, de la bataille...

ADOLPHE
De Codringtôn. Non pas, Navarin!
A part.
Je suis fou.
Je patauge.
Haut.
On était dans les eaux de Corfou;

On savait que les turcs, non sans quelque mystère,
Avaient quitté Cythère...

ANTOINETTE
Ah! qu’est-ce que Cythère?

ADOLPHE
C’est une île. Cythère, autrement Cérigo.
On y peut cultiver le poivre et l’indigo.
Cette île sert aux turcs de poste et de caverne.
Sinan Cigale dit: Cythère est la lanterne
De l’Archipel.

ANTOINETTE, distraite.
Ainsi -l’amiral...

ADOLPHE
Codrington.

ANTOINETTE
Après?

ADOLPHE
Le vingt octobre, au point du jour, dit-on,
Les flottes ont quitté le mouillage de Zante.
La marine ottomane était molle et pesante,
Le système des turcs était de refuser...

ANTOINETTE
Un baiser! je crois bien.

ADOLPHE
Ce n’est pas un baiser,
C’est le combat.

ANTOINETTE
C’est vrai. Vous disiez? le système

Des turcs...

ADOLPHE
Je ne sais plus où j’en étais...

LE DIABLE, dans le trou du souffleur.
Je t’aime!

ADOLPHE
Je t’aime!

ANTOINETTE, à part.
Allons donc!

Haut.
Ciel! monsieur, que faites-vous?
Si vous ne lâchez pas sur-le-champ mes genoux,
Ce que vous faites là, monsieur, n’est pas honnête!
Je vais sonner, monsieur!

LE DIABLE, à part.
J’ai cassé la sonnette.

ADOLPHE
Je t’aime!

ANTOINETTE
Taisez-vous!

ADOLPHE
Je meurs d’amour!

ANTOINETTE
Tais-toi!

ADOLPHE
Madame, ayez pitié! J’ai le coeur plein d’effroi!

Laissez-vous adorer ainsi qu’une madone!
Si tu savais! je sens ma tête en feu. Pardonne!
Oh! laisse-moi mourir à tes pieds!

ANTOINETTE
Dans mes bras!

LE DIABLE
J’ai cru que le crétin ne s’en tirerait pas.
Il ne savait d’abord pas un mot de son rôle.
On entend un bruit de baiser.
Rêvant et riant.
Sans nous le monde est bête, avec nous il est drôle.

II IDYLLE

Un bois.

LISE
Puisque votre regard m’apparaît dans l’aurore,

ALBERT
Puisqu’en vos yeux je crois voir une étoile éclore,

LISE
Puisque je veux rester et fuir quand je vous vois,

ALBERT
Puisqu’une lyre est moins douce que votre voix,

LISE
Puisqu’à vos pieds les coeurs font des battements d’ailes,

ALBERT
Puisque vous êtes belle entre toutes les belles,

LISE
Puisque l’oiseau ne peut chanter sans vous nommer,

ALBERT
Puisque je ne puis faire autrement que t’aimer,

LISE
Je dis que l’air est frais,

ALBERT
Je dis que l’onde est pure,

LISE
Je vois un grand sourire au fond de la nature,

ALBERT
Je te prends et t’épouse,

LISE
Et de toi je fais choix,

ALBERT
Et je dis que je veux m’en aller dans les bois.
Moment de rêverie.
Viens.
Est-ce pour jamais?

ALBERT
Oui. Donne ta main blanche.
Ils s’enfoncent dans la forêt.

ÉROS

LISE
Coeur, aie un seul amour!

PAN
Arbre, une seule branche?
C’est malaisé.

LE DIABLE, dans l’ombre.
Léandre aime à cette heure Héro.
Lise aime Albert. La suite au prochain numéro.

25 mars 1874.

III COCARDE ET LOUCHON

LOUCHON
Paul est roux.

COCARDE
Jean est laid.

LOUCHON,
Paul me bat.

COCARDE
Jean me rosse.

LOUCHON
Paul, s'il n'était bandit, serait bête féroce.

COCARDE
Tout l'hiver Jean se grise.

LOUCHON
Et Paul boit tout l'été.

COCARDE
Jean a mis mes effets au mont-de-piété.

LOUCHON
Lorsqu'il tonne et qu'il pleut chez moi, c'est Paul qui souffle.

COCARDE
Jean est un chenapan.

LOUCHON
Et Paul est un maroufle.

COCARDE

Je le déclare ici, ce drôle est mon vainqueur.

LOUCHON.
J’aime cette canaille au fin fond de mon coeur.

IV AU LUXEMBOURG

Un banc. Deux astronomes.

PREMIER ASTRONOME
L'équinoxe ravage affreusement nos côtes.

DEUXIÈME ASTRONOME
Le vent est vicieux. Il fait beaucoup de fautes.

PREMIER ASTRONOME
L'homme se met en route et se trompe souvent.

DEUXIÈME ASTRONOME
Notre vie est de l'eau conduite par du vent.

Sur un autre banc. Des invalides causent.

UN INVALIDE
Tout est en feu.

UN AUTRE
Depuis Berlin jusqu'en Sicile!

UN AUTRE
Faire rentrer Bellone en cage est difficile.

UN AUTRE
Il faut faire la paix avec cet animal
De roi de Prusse.

UN AUTRE
À bas la guerre!

UN AUTRE
Tout va mal.

UN AUTRE
L’empereur ne sait plus où donner de la tête.

UN RÊVEUR, passant.
Les rois lâchent la guerre et c’est Dieu qui l’arrête.
Sur un autre banc. Deux étudiants.

LE PREMIER ÉTUDIANT
Que lis-tu? Cujas?

LE DEUXIÈME
Non. Je lis Dante et Lucain:
Mon père est royaliste et moi républicain.
C’est sa faute. Il m’envoie à Paris. Je m’y forme.
J’y grandis. Je m’emplis de la lumière énorme,
Et j’étais paysan et je suis citoyen.

Sur un autre banc. Deux prêtres.

L’ABBÉ CARON
Fils, le but, c’est l’église, et Dieu c’est le moyen;
Cela n’empêche pas Dieu d’être Dieu; mais; prêtres,
Nous sommes serviteurs avant d’être les maîtres;
Le prêtre est roi, depuis Moïse et Salomon;
Ce qu’on nomme l’esprit humain, é’est le démôn;
La raison est un mot que le dogme rature;
Et c’est pourquoi souvent, corrigeant la nature,
Ce que le ciel permet, le prêtre le défend;
Quand on entend parler le diable dans l’enfant,
Il faut sévir, il faut lui dire de se taire.

L’ABBÉ DE LAMENNAIS
Et c’est ainsi qu’étant Porée, on fait Voltaire.

Sur un autre banc.

UN VIEILLARD
Vous donnez une charte au peuple; qui se perd,
Pour qu'il soit sage. Eh bien, c'est terrible, il s'en sert...

UN AUTRE VIEILLARD
Pour être libre.

Sous les arbres.

UNE JEUNE FILLE
Non!

UN JEUNE HOMME
Que le sein soit de marbre,
C'est bien, mais pas le coeur.

LA JEUNE FILLE
Laissez-moi!

LE JEUNE HOMME
Sous un arbre
On s'embrasse.

LA JEUNE FILLE
Embrassez. -Mais pas comme cela.

LE JEUNE HOMME
LA JEUNE FILLE
Non!

Dans une allée.

UN ENFANT, à une boule qu'il fait rouler.
Je ne veux pas que vous alliez par là!

25 juin 1876.

V LE MENDIANT

Devant la vitre éclairée de la chambre où un jeune homme s’habille pour le bal masqué.

Fort bien. Habillez-vous. -Tiens, c’est le mardi gras!
Rions. Ne soyons point à la jeunesse ingrats.
Il faut se divertir et que le temps se passe.
Vous avez su tirer d’un vieil oncle rapace
Si!

Vingt écus; vous allez les boire en une nuit.
Habillez-vous, jeune homme! à grands cris, à grand bruit!
Sonnez tous vos laquais et vos valets de chambre!
— Bourguignon, mon pourpoint! Picard, ma boîte d’ambre!
Chaussez-moi! rasez-moi! peignez-moi! -C’est cela.
Que vous êtes galant sous l’habit que voilà!
Cambrez la taille un peu. Mettez-vous une mouche,
Comme fait Jeanneton, sur le coin de la bouche.
Le flot de rubans. -Bien. -Et l’air impertinent.
Cela sied. -Le manteau, les gants, et maintenant
L’épée avec sa pomme à mettre des pistaches. -
Que de coeurs suspendus au croc de vos moustaches!
Que de femmes vont dire:. Adorable seigneur!
Vous avez tout, jeunesse, et richesse, et bonheur;
Tout est pour vous, bosquets fleuris, tendres trophées,
C’est bien. On vous dirait habillé par les fées,
Et vous êtes toujours au bal un des premiers
Riez. -Un jour les ans viendront, lourds costumiers;
Maladie et vieillesse, habilleuses sinistres,
Éteindront vos regards sous d’affreux cercles bistres,
Vous ôteront la grâce, et vous mettront,, ô deuil!
Un dôme sur le dos, une loupe sur l’œil,
Une bouche sans dents qui dira: soyons sage!.
Un gros nez, un gros ventre, et sur ce frais visage,
Doux, superbe, adoré de toutes nos houris,

Un vieux masque obstrué d’un buisson de poils gris.
Alors, désespéré, tordant vos mains fiévreuses,
Fuyant les miroirs pleins de visions affreuses,
Aussi lugubre à voir que vous étiez charmant,
Sans pouvoir arracher votre déguisement,
Domino ridicule et chassé des quadrilles,
Voyant les beaux garçons sourire aux belles filles,
Vous irez, trouble fête, errer au milieu d’eux,
Jusqu’à ce que ce spectre, autre masque hideux,
Sans nez, sans yeux, montrant toutes ses dents sans rire,
Qui vient nous chercher tous et par le bras nous tire,
Vous jette un soir, d’un coup de sa fourche de fer,
Dans ce noir carnaval qu’on appelle l’enfer!

Elle, c’est le printemps; pluie et soleil; je l’aime;
Je m’y suis fait.
Un jour, elle me dit:
— Quand même
On est tout seul, les bois sont doux. Les belles eaux!
La campagne me plaît à cause des oiseaux.

Ecoutons-les chanter.
Moi, l’âme épanouie,
J’écoutais. -
— Les oiseaux, dit-elle, ça m’ennuie.
Jouons.
— Aux cartes?
— Non.
— A quoi?
— Je hais le jeu.
Causons. Le jaune est laid, je préfère le bleu.
— Je suis de ton avis.
— Toujours dans les extrêmes!
— Le bleu, dis-je, c’est beau.
— Pourquoi?
— D’abord, tu l’aimes.
Ensuite, c’est le ciel.

Mais le jaune; `c’est l’or:
— Va pour le jaune.
— Il est de mon avis encor!
C’est assommant!
— Faisons la paix.
— Je te pardonne.
Un autre jour:
— Ami, viens, je me sens très bonne,
Le temps est beau, sortons à pied. -
Comme j’offrais
Mon landau:
— Non, dit-elle, il faut, par ce vent frais,
Marcher, rôder, courir au bois à l’aventure. -
On s’habille, on descend.
— Où donc est la voiture?
— Mais tu voulais sortir à pied.
— A pied, jamais!
Marcher par ce vent froid! fi donc! -
Je me soumets.
On attelle.
— Voici le landau.
— Pourquoi faire?
— Mais, pour sortir.
— Tords-moi le cou, je le préfère.
Ah çà! tu veux sortir par cet horrible temps! -
Un autre jour:
— Nos coeurs, dit-elle, sont contents.
Ami, j’ignore tout, mais je suis ta servante.
Puisque je sais aimer, je suis assez savante.
Je t’adore. Mon dieu, c’est toi. -
Le lendemain,
Un grand soufflet sortit de sa petite main,
Et tomba sur ma joue.
— Hé! dis-je.
— Bagatelle!

Viens m’embrasser. Comment me trouves-tu? dit-elle.

— Charmante! -
Et c’est ainsi que je m’accoutumai
Aux inégalités d’humeur du mois de mai.

24 juillet 186...

VII IDYLLE DE LA RUE N.D. DE LORETTE

— Six amants! -Cela fait crier?
— A la fois? -Pourquoi pas? Coquette,
Pourquoi Psaphon? -C’est un poète.
— Pourquoi Dimas? -C’est un banquier.
— Et Grib, l’affreux casse-noisette
Plus noirci que son encrier?
— Diable! il écrit dans la gazette.
— Pourquoi Senex, le maltôtier?
— Avoir un vieux, c’est mon système.
— Et Mars? -C’est un beau grenadier.
— Et moi, madame? -Ah! toi! je t’aime.

Avril 1849.

VIII Une rue

(Une rue, la nuit.)

MILLION
Vois-je point là dans l'ombre un homme titubant?

CROQUEFER
Quel est ce gredin triste accroupi sur un banc?

MILLION
Qui vive?

CROQUEFER
Qui va là, sans lanterne, à la brune?

MILLION
Empereur de la Chiner.

CROQUEFER
Empereur de, la luné!
Ils se reconnaissent:

MILLION
C'est toi, drôle?

CROQUEFER
C'est toi, canaille! -touche là.
Ils se serrent la main.

MILLION
Que viens-tu faire ici?

CROQUEFER
J'allais comme cela
Devant moi, trébuchant dans l'obscurité grande.

Dieu! quelle sombre nuit! Cartouche avec sa bande
A passé par ici. N’ayant pas, le coquin;
Trouvé de pauvre diable à qui prendre un sequin,
Ayant aux carrefours en vain tendu ses toiles,
Il a pillé le ciel et volé les étoiles.
— Toi, que faisais-tu là?

MILLION
— Je rêvais.

CROQUEFER
O vertus!
Sais-tu, mortel rêveur, que nous sommes vêtus
Comme d’affreux laquais payés à coups de gaules,
Et qu’on voit des haillons flotter sur nos épaules?

MILLION
Vicomte, je le sais.

CROQUEFER
Tu le sais, et c’est tout!
Et rien dans ton cerveau ne s’indigne et ne bout!
Ô vrai sage! ô poëte! ô le plus grand des hommes!
Gueux, et -tout bonnement rêveur!

MILLION
Mon cher, nous sommes
Riches. Oui, nous avons le ciel bleu, le grand air,
La forêt où l’oiseau chante, et, par Jupiter!
La fierté qu’on éprouve à marcher dans les plaines
Librement! -Nous avons l’été, les nuits sereines,
La lune se mirant dans le fleuve argenté...

CROQUEFER
J’aimerais mieux dix sous.

MILLION

Tu n’es pas dégoûté!

IX SUSURRANT VOCES

LA CHEMINÉE
Du bois! j’ai froid.

LA VITRE
Je gèle, et la bise est bourrue.

UN COMMANDEMENT D’HUISSIER
Songe à la providence!

LA MONTRE
Elle demeure rue
Paradis, au Marais, et se nomme...

UN VIEUX CLOU ROUILLÉ DANS LA CLOISON
Le clou.

UN VOLUME D’ANDRÉ CHÉNIER OUVERT SUR LA TABLE
Voix du ciel, bruits divins, chantez!

LISETTE, frappant à la porte.
Pan! pan!

Chut!

UNE BOUTEILLE
LE BONHEUR
LA PORTE
Glou glou.
Je bâille.

LE COFFRE
LE TROU DE LA SERRURE
Je regarde.

LE MUR
J’écoute.

LE LIT
Je m’appelle l’amour.

L’OREILLER
Je m’appelle le doute.

LA CHANDELLE
Le soleil a beaucoup de taches.

LA TRANCHE DE JAMBON
Le laurier
Fut créé pour le porc.

LA TABLE
Je porte l’encrier,
Ce nid tout noir d’où sort l’idée aux ailes blanches.

LE PUPITRE
Le trône et le cercueil sont faits de quatre planches.

UN TOME DÉPAREILLÉ DE BOSSUET
Disparaissez, Vishnou, Bel, Jupiter, Mithra!
Saint-Pierre seul gouverne et règne...
Je ris.

LA PANTOUFLE
Et cætera.
Gloire au pied nu d’Anna!

LA SAVATE
Le pied se change en patte.

UN BUSTE SUR LA CHEMINÉE
Tout commence à pantoufle et finit à savate.

9 décembre 1853.

X Sylvia

SYLVIA
On prétend, Sylvio, que toujours je vous aime.

SYLVIO
On conte, Sylvia, que partout je vous suis.

SYLVIA
Je vous donne mes jours!

SYLVIO
Ô ma beauté suprême!
Gardez les jours, donnez les nuits!

XI André et Lise

ANDRÉ
Je te jure un amour-éternel!

LISE, souriant.
Calme-toi!
Parlons net. Et soyons fripons de bonne foi.

ANDRÉ
Lise!

LISE, caressante.
Dispense-toi, cher amant, de poursuivre.
André, pour de l'or faux je donne du vrai cuivre;
Des serments d'un menteur mon cœur est peu friand;
Je suis franchement fourbe, et je paye en riant
Tes écoute-s'il-pleut, d'un va-t'en-voir-s'ils-viennent.
Fous qui font des serments et niais qui les tiennent!
Tu me feras des traits et je te les rendrai.
André brûle pour Lise et Lise adore André,
Mais Lise berne André comme André trompe Lise.
Amour est notre autel, Caprice est notre église;
On se suit aujourd'hui pour se quitter demain;
D'ailleurs, être autrement, c'est n'avoir rien d'humain;
La passion finit par une pirouette;
Homme veut dire vent et femme girouette.
Aimons-nous, puisque c'est la meilleure façon
D'unir ta perfidie avec ma trahison,
Mais ne nous gênons point et ne soyons point dupes.
Pas de glu sur ta plume et de plomb à mes jupes.
André, soyons heureux; de plus soyons joyeux.
Quel bête de bandeau l'Amour a sur les yeux!
Ôtons-le-lui, veux-tu? Voyons clair dans nos âmes.
Il faut pour faire un feu toutes sortes de flammes,
Et pour faire un destin toutes sortes d'amours.

Les cœurs toujours constants sont aveugles et sourds.
L’œil qui n’a plus d’éclair, l’esprit qui n’a plus d’aile,
Meurt, et c’est être infirme enfin qu’être fidèle.
Gaîment on se retrouve après qu’on se perdit.
Hein? Soyons bonne femme et bon homme. Est-ce dit?
La douce main d’amour n’est point une tenaille.
Aimons-nous. Trompons-nous.

ANDRÉ
J’y consens.

LISE, furieuse.
Ah! canaille!

XII ENTRE LE ZIST ET LE ZEST

LE MARQUIS GRUCCIA. -BARACCA, jolie femme (Zist).
STRUBBLE (Zest).

BARACCA
Qu’est Strubble?

GRUCCIA
Mon ami.

BARACCA
Moi, je suis ton amante.
Parbleu.
Strubble est laid.

BARACCA
GRUCCIA
Certe!

BARACCA
Et moi je suis...

GRUCCIA, avec un baiser.
Charmante!

BARACCA
Strubble est chauve, et moi j’ai des cheveux.
Elle laisse tomber sa chevelure blonde sur ses épaules nues.

GRUCCIA
Apollo
N’est pas plus coiffé d’or alors qu’il sort de l’eau.
Tes cheveux sur ton front sont comme un flot d’aurore.

BARACCA

Il ressemble à Midas.

GRUCCIA
Tu ressembles à Flore.

Il est bête.
À peu près:

BARACCA
GRUCCIA
BARACCA
J’ai de l’esprit.

GRUCCIA
Tout plein.

BARACCA
Il a le ton sec.

GRUCCIA
Dur.

BARACCA
J’ai le parler...

GRUCCIA
Câlin.

BARACCA
Son odeur!

GRUCCIA
On le flaire, et, toi, l’on te devine.
Galamment.
Ainsi, quand Vénus marche, elle apparaît divine.

BARACCA

Il est mal fait.

GRUCCIA
Bossu.

BARACCA
Triste!...
Elle rii.
Et vois-ma gaîté!

GRUCCIA
Il se nomme laideur, tu t’appelles beauté!

BARACCA
C’est un homme épineux, piquant, pointu, morose,
Désagréable. Il est le chardon!

GRUCCIA
Toi la rose.

BARACCA
M’aimes-tu?

GRUCCIA
BARACCA
Eh bien, rien à demi.
Choisis de ta maîtresse ou bien de ton ami.
Strubble ou moi. L’un des deux est de trop. Et c’est l’heure
Qu’il faut que l’un s’en aille et que l’autre demeure.
Entre la belle fille et l’affreux vieux garçon,
Décide. Strubble ou moi quitterons la maison.
Choisis. Moi d’un côté, de l’autre cette brute.

GRUCCIA
Mais je n’hésite pas, mon ange, une minute.
Je te flanque à la porte.
Baracca se lève indignée et sort sans le regarder.

Il reste seul.

XXIII CHANSONS

J’adore Suzette,
Mais j’aime Suzon.
Suzette en toilette,
Suzon sans façon.
Ah! Suzon, Suzette!
Suzette, Suzon!
Je t’adore.

Rimons pour Suzette,
Rimons pour Suzon,
L’une est ma musette,
L’autre est ma chanson.
Ah! Suzon, Suzette!
Suzette, Suzon!

La main de Suzette,
La jambe à Suzon,
Quelle main bien faite!
Quel petit chausson!
Ah! Suzon, Suzette!
Suzette, Suzon!

Je rêve à Suzette,
J’embrasse Suzon,
L’une est bien coquette,
L’autre est bon garçon.
Ah! Suzon, Suzette!
Suzette, Suzon!-

Tapis pour Suzette,
Jardin pour Suzon,
Foin de la moquette,
Vive le gazon!
Ah! Suzon, Suzette!

Suzette, Suzon!

Au bal va Suzétte,
Aù bois va Suzon,
J’épie et je guette
L’ombre et le buisson.
Ah! Suzon, Suzette!
Suzette, Suzon!

Jaloux de Suzette`!
Jaloux de Suzon!
La bergeronnette
Fait damner l’oison.
Ah! Suzon, Suzette!
Suzette, Suzon!

Si jamais Suzette
Rit comme Suzon,
Au diable je jette
Toute ma raison.
ison.
Ah! Suzon,-Suzette!
Suzette, Suzon!

Si comme Suzette
Souriait Suzon,
Cette humble amourette
Serait mon poison.
Ah! Suzon, Suzette!
Suzette, Suzon!

S’il faut fuir Suzette
Ou quitter Suzon,
Et que je n’en mette
Qu’une en ma maison,
Ah! Suzon, Suzette!
Suzette, Suzon!

Je quitte Suzette,
Je garde Suzon,
L’une me rend bête,
L’autre me rend bon.
Ah! Suzon, Suzette!
Suzette, Suzon!

II Il était une fois

Il était une fois
Un jardin, et j’y vis madame Rosemonde;
L’air était plein d’oiseaux les plus charmants du monde;
Quelle ombre dans les bois!

Il était une fois
Une source, et j’y vins boire avec Rosemonde;
Des naïades passaient, et je voyais sous l’onde
Des perles à leurs doigts.

Il était une fois
Un baiser, qu’en tremblant je pris à Rosemonde.
— Tiens, regarde, ils sont deux, dit une nymphe blonde.
— Non, dit l’autre, ils sont trois.

Il était une fois
Une fleur, qui sortit du coeur de Rosemonde;
C’est mon âme. Et je brûle, et dans la nuit profonde
J’entends chanter des voix.

Schiedam, 3 août 1861.

III Je suis Jean

Je suis Jean qui guette,
Chanteur et siffleur,
Qui serait poète
S’il n’était voleur,

Et qui serait morne
S’il ne trouvait pas
Au coin de la borne
Ses quatre repas.

J’ai la mine haute
Et le nez en fleur
De la Pentecôte
A la Chandeleur.

Je rôde, je marche;
J’ai pour toit le ciel,
Pour alcôve une arche
Du pont Saint-Michel.

Ah! c’est toi, vieux singe!
Disent les cathos
Qui battent leur linge
Au bord des bateaux,

Drôlesses ingambes,
Et que j’aime à voir
Se laver les jambes
En chantant le soir.

J’ai près d’une belle
Respect et bon ton;
Je lui dis mamselle;
Ça flatte Goton.

Quand j’ai d’aventure
Fait quelque bon coup,
J’en mène en voiture
Quelqu’une à Saint-Cloud.

J’invite à ma table,
Pour un fin soupé,
La plus respectable,
Une franche p.

Les sergents de ville,
Valets du plus fort,
Ont l’âme si vile
Qu’ils me font du tort.

Sous la raison basse
Que j’ai pris parfois
Leur bourse qui passe
A d’affreux bourgeois,

On vient, on saccage
Mon lit de roseau,
On me met en cage
Comme un pauvre oiseau.

J’échappe, et m’en tire;
Mais c’est ennuyeux,
Pour moi qui respire
Tout le vent des cieux!

Cela me dérange.
Des fois j’ai logé
Sous le pont-au-change;
J’ai déménagé.

J’ai plus d’une issue.

Ma vie est ainsi
Toute décousue,
Ma culotte aussi.

Ah! les temps sont rudes!
Souvent on a faim,
Les filles sont prudes,
La jeunesse enfin

N’a plus, que c’est bête!
Le moindre oripeau,
Ni joie en la tête,
Ni plume au chapeau.

Je suis, pour tout dire,
Un garçon railleur,
Moins mauvais qu’un pire,
Moins bon qu’un meilleur.

Je ris comme un coffre,
Je bois comme un trou.
Q Satan! je m’offre
A toi pour un sou!

22 avril 1847.

IV L’oiseau passe

L’oiseau passe
Dans l’espace
Où l’amour vient l’enflammer;
Si les roses
Sont des choses
Faites exprès pour charmer,
Le ciel est fait pour aimer.

L’oiseau vole,
Et console
Le désert et la maison,
Et les plaines
Et les chênes
Écoutent, quand sa chanson
Va de buisson en buisson.

Hymne et flamme,
Il est l’âme
Du bois, du pré, de l’étang,
Des charmilles,
Et des filles
Que dès l’aurore on entend
Ouvrir leur porte en chantant.

5 septembre 1861, Guernesey.

V CANCION

J’avais une bague, une , bague d’or
Et je l’ai perdue hier dans la ville;
Je suis pandériste et toréador,
Guitare à Grenade, épée à Séville.

Mon anneau luit plus que l’astre vermeil;
Le diable, caché dans l’oeil de ma brune,
Pourrait seul produire un bijou pareil
S’il faisait un jour un trou dans la lune.

Si vous retrouvez l’anneau n’importe où,
Rapportez-le-moi. C’est Gil qu’on me nomme.
Certes, je vaux peu; je ne suis qu’un sou,
Mais près d’un liard je suis gentilhomme.

Je n’ai que mon chant comme le moineau.
Rendez-moi ma bague, et que Dieu vous paie!
Vous connaissez Jeanne? Eh bien, cet anneau,
C’est, avec son coeur, le seul or que j’aie.

20 décembre 1854.

VI CHANSON DE MAGLIA

Vous êtes bien belle et je suis bien laid.
A vous la splendeur de rayons baignée;
A moi la poussière, à moi l’araignée.
Vous êtes bien belle et je suis bien laid;
Soyez la fenêtre et moi le volet.

Nous réglerons tout dans notre réduit.
Je protégerai ta vitre qui tremble;
Nous serons heureux, nous serons ensemble;
Nous réglerons tout dans notre réduit;
Tu feras le jour, je ferai la nuit.

VII CHANSON EN CANOT

Les gueules de loup sont des bêtes,
Les gueules de loup sont des fleurs,
Et vivent les femmes bien faites,
La Seine et les grandes chaleurs!

Je m’amuse et je me promène.
Amis, ayons congé! Versons
Le dimanche sur la semaine,
Et sur tous les jours des chansons.
Les bois sont pleins de pâquerettes,
De geais et de merles siffleurs. -
Les gueules de loup sont des bêtes,
Les gueules de loup sont des fleurs.

Vacances sans trêve! Est-il sage
De s’ennuyer six jours sur sept?
Victoire m’attend au passage
Avec une fleur au corset.
Donc, amis, Victoire et conquêtes!
Les hommes jôyeux sont meilleurs. -
Les gueules de loup sont des bêtes,
Les gueules de loup sont, des fleurs.
Le bon Dieu n’ôte pas leurs ailes
Aux papillons passé midi;
Les roses sont tout aussi belles
Le mercredi que le jeudi,
Et les dimanches et les fêtes
N’ajoutent rien à leurs couleurs. -
Les gueules de loup sont des bêtes,
Les gueules de loup sont des fleurs.

Ô prêtre, en quelle erreur tu tombes!
Est-ce qu’on voit, à certains jours,
Cypris dételer ses colombes

Du char stupéfait de l’amour?
Les nids sont-ils dans leurs retraites
Moins tendres et moins querelleurs? -
Les gueules de loup sont des bêtes,
Les gueules de loup sont des fleurs.

Papas et maris, vieux bonshommes,
Je ne m’occupe pas de vous;
Donc ne venez point où nous sommes
Troubler la fête des yeux doux.
Je ne veux savoir où vous êtes
Qu’afin de tâcher d’être ailleurs. -
Les gueules de loup sont des bêtes,
Les gueules de. loup sont des fleurs.

Marthe, il faut qu’on s’enrégimente
Dans le régiment de Vénus,
Et que chacun ait une amante,
Et je veux baiser tes pieds nus.
Ça, mesdames, êtes-vous prêtes?
Les amours sont les racoleurs. -
Les gueules de loup. sont -des. bêtes,
Les gueules de loup sont des fleurs.

Marthe apparaît à sa lucarne.
Lise m’appelle et me répond.
Choisissez: la Seine, ou la Marne?
Asnière, ou Joinville-le-Pont?
Partons, l’aurore est sur nos têtes,
Gais bateliers, gais bateleurs! -
Les gueules de loup sont des bêtes,
Les gueules de loup sont des fleurs.

Parfois, en rêve, je me sauve
Vers l’océan bouleversé,
Trop étroit pour ma chanson fauve,
Chantant son refrain insensé!

Mais Lise, à travers les tempêtes,
Me fait des pieds de nez railleurs. -
Les gueules de loup sont des bêtes,
Les gueules de loup sont des fleurs.

Marthe et Lise, amis, sont gentilles.
Embrassons-les à tout moment.
Prendre un baiser aux belles filles,
C’est les traiter honnêtement.
Il sied d’être toujours honnêtes,
Donc il faut être un peu voleurs. -
Les gueules de loup sont des bêtes,
Les gueules de loup sont des fleurs.

27 septembre 1862.

VIII LA CHANSON DU SPECTRE

Qui donc êtes-vous, la belle?
Comment vous appelez-vous?
Une vierge était chez nous;
Ses yeux étaient ses bijoux.
Je suis la vierge, dit-elle.
Cueillez la branche de houx.

Vous êtes en blanc, la belle;
Comment vous appelez-vous?
En gardant les grands boeufs roux,
Claude lui fit les yeux doux.
Je suis la fille, dit-elle.
Cueillez la branche de houx.

Vous portez des fleurs, la belle;
Comment vous appelez-vous?
Les vents et les coeurs sont fous,
Un baiser les fit époux.
Je suis l’amante, dit-elle.
Cueillez la branche de houx.

Vous avez pleuré, la belle;
Comment vous appelez-vous?
Elle eut un fils, prions tous,
Dieu le prit sur ses genoux.
Je suis la mère, dit-elle.
Cueillez la branche de houx.

Vous êtes pâle, la belle;
Comment vous appelez-vous?
Elle s’enfuit dans les trous,
Sinistre, avec les hiboux.
Je suis la folle, dit-elle.
Cueillez la branche de houx.

Vous avez bien froid, la belle;
Comment vous appelez-vous?
Les amours et les yeux doux
De nos cercueils sont les clous.
Je suis la morte, dit-elle.
Cueillez la branche de houx.

13 avril 1855.

IX MARGOT

Je signais d’un grand paraphe
Un billet doux bien écrit;
J’avais toute l’orthographe,
Margot avait tout l’esprit.

Sa bouche,, où quelque-ironie
Avait l’air de dire: osez,
Était la Californie
Des rires et des baisers.

Que je fusse un imbécile,
C’était probable; et pourtant
La belle trouvait facile
De m’adorer en chantant,

Jusqu’au jour où, pour la mode
Changeant d’amours et de ton,
Margot trouverait commode
De devenir Margoton.

Nous étions quelques artistes,
Des poètes, des savants,
Qui jetions nos songes tristes
Et nos jeunesses aux vents.

Nous étions les capitaines
De la fanfare et des chants,
Des parisiens d’Athènes,
Athéniens de Longchamps.

Moi, j’étais, parmi ces sages,
Le rêveur qui parle argot,
Met son coeur dans les nuages
Et son âme dans -Margot.

Gais canotiers de Nanterre,
Nous voguions sur le flot pur;
Margot lorgnait un notaire
Quand je contemplais l’azur.

Elle trouvait l’eau trop fraîche,
Et préférait l’Ambigu,
Et s’écriait: Quand je pêche,
C’est avec l’accent aigu.

Le sort déchira ses voiles;
Elle s’enfuit, j’échappai;
Je montai dans les etoiles
Et Margot dans un coupé.

X Rien

Rien n’est comme il devrait être.
Le maître
Plus que le valet,
Est laid.
Je hais ton jargon, Zémire.
J’admire,
Malgré son argot,
Margot.

Souvent d’une pauvre fille
Qui brille,
Les pieds en sabots
Sont beaux.

Ici, la guerre âpre et noire;
Bruit, gloire,
Lauriers triomphaux,
Or faux.

Ici la bête de somme;
C’est l’homme;
Et là les héros
Zéros.

Ici le nécessaire, aigre
Et maigre;
Là le superflu
Joufflu.
Dans l’église et la guinguette
Qu’il guette,
Le diable survient;
Il tient
Par sa guimpe et son air prude
Gertrude,

Et par son chignon
Ninon.
Le destin, ce dieu sans tête
Et bête,
A fait l’animal
Fort mal.
Il fit d’une fange immonde
Le monde,
Et d’un fiel amer
La mer.

Tout se tient par une chaîne
De haine;
On voit dans les fleurs
Des pleurs. ,

Tout ici-bas, homme, femme,
Vie, âme,
Est par Ananké
Manqué.

Aussi, lorsque l’homme achève
Son rêve,
Quel triste avorton
Voit-on!

Homme, mon frère, nous sommes
Deux hommes
Et, pleins de venins,
Deux nains.

Ton désir secret concerte
Ma perte,
Et mon noir souhait
Te hait;

Car ce globe où la mer tremble

Nous semble
Pour notre appétit
Petit.

Nous manquons, sur sa surface,
De place
Pour notre néant
Géant.

XI Tourne-toi

MAGLIA, accordant sa guitare.
Il chante.

Tourne-toi vers celle qui t’aime.
Ne regarde point au delà.
L’amour récolte ce qu’il sème.
Toutes les filles de Bohême,
Toutes les belles d’Alcala,
Atala, Léila, Lola,
Olympe avec son diadème,
Suzon avec son falbala,
Tralalala, tralalala,
Ne valent pas celle qui t’aime.
Trala
La la.

Tourne-toi vers celle qui rêve
Et qui voudrait quetu sois là.
Toutes les autres filles d’Eve,
Celles qui dansent sur la grève,
Celles qui-font cercle au gala,
Carmen qui toujours-s’envola,
Luz dont la jupe se soulève,
Fanchon dont l’oeil dit: me voilà!
Tralalala, tralalala,
Ne valent pas celle qui rêve.
Trala
La la.

XII CHANSON DE BORD

Marin, l’onde est une femme.
Crains le sable, crains la lame,
Crains le rocher.
C’est vers Pluton que tu vogues.
Les flots sont -les bouledogues -
Du noir boucher.

La Bourrasque, pâle et nue,
Traîne un linceul dans la nue,
Disent les vieux.
La place des yeux est vide
Sous son grand crâne livide
Et pluvieux.

Dès qu’on est dans cette écume,
On a comme un bruit d’enclume
Dans le tympan
La vague saute sur l’homme;
Le vent se comporte comme
Un chenapan.

Qui s’en tire gagne un quine..
La mer est une coquine,
Disent les vieux.
La mer est une sauvage.
Le flot toujours du rivage
Est envieux.

Toute la terre fleurie
Ne serait qu’une prairie
Et qu’un gazon
Sans cette mer de ténèbres
Qui gonfle ses plis funèbres
A l’horizon.

Malheur à qui lève l’ancre!
Elle est la bouteille d’encre
Qu’un jour trouva
Satan que l’envie enivre,
Et qu’il vida sur le livre
De Jéhova.

XIII DANS LA FORÊT

UN PASSANT, chantant.
La duchesse et la paysanne
Se valent sur le vert gazon;
Jérusalem offre Suzanne,
Mais la Cou’rtille offre Suzon;
Cupidon nous donne Inézille
Et les perles de sa résille,
Ou Javotte au bonnet cauchois.

L’ÉCHO
Au choix.

AUTRE PASSANT
Quel doux tyran qu’un regard tendre!
O vierge, donne-moi ton coeur;
Je l’ai dit, se donner, c’est prendre;
Ton prisonnier c’est ton vainqueur;
VII, 23 CHANSONS -XIV 493
On devient reine en étant femme;
Si ton baiser prenait mon âme,
Quand crois-tu que j’échapperais?

L’ÉCHO
Après.

AUTRE PASSANT
Je te le jure par l’aurore,
Je te le jure par la nuit,
Je t’épouserai! Je t’adore.
Viens! ton pur regard me séduit,
L’amour à tes pieds n’a plus d’aile,
Je serai ton mari fidèle,
Et toute la forêt m’entend...

L’ÉCHO
«Mentant.

25 mai 1876.

XIV RONDE POUR LES ENFANTS

Fillettes, les fleurs sont écloses,
Dansez, courons,
Je suis ébloui par les roses
Et par vos fronts.

Chez les fleurs vous êtes les reines;
Nous le dirons
Aux bois, aux prés, aux marjolaines,
Aux liserons.

Avec l’oiselle l’oiseau cause,
Et s’interrompt
Pour la quereller d’un bec rose,
Aux baisers prompt.

Donnez-nous, gaîtés éphémères,
Futurs tendrons,
Beaucoup de baisers. -A vos mères
Nous les rendrons.

XV JEAN, JEANNE, JEANNOT

La forêt grelotte;
La nuit tombe; il pleut;
J’entends la roulotte
De Braine-l’Alleud.
Un beau jour un ange,
Nommé le Baiser,
Vint dans une grange,
Pour se reposer.

La forêt grelotte;
La nuit tombe; il pleut;
J’entends la roulotte
De Braine-l’Alleud.

Il y trouva Jeanne,
Il y trouva Jean;
Jean n’était qu’un âne;
L’ange dit: hi-han!

La forêt grelotte;
La nuit tombe; il pleut;
J’entends la roulotte
De Braine-l’Alleud.

L’âne comprit l’ange.
Regardez plutôt
La miche que mange
Le petit Jeannot.

La forêt grelotte;
La nuit tombe; il pleut;
J’entends la roulotte
De Braine-l’Alleud.

1865.

XVI LE CHANT DU VIEUX BERGER

Je suis vieux, mais, ô lauriers-roses,
Ô lys, cela n’empêche pas
Toutes sortes de tendres choses,
Toutes sortes de frais appas,

De s’épouser, rayons, haleines,
Dans les champs pleins de douces voix,
Et l’aube de dorer les plaines,
Et l’oiseau de chanter au bois.

Les fleurs écoutent la promesse
Du papillon; la tiendra-t-il.?
Est-ce une orgie, est-ce une messe
Que ce radieux mois d’avril?

Un vieux de plus dans la:nature,
Ce n’est que quelqu’un qui s’en va;
Toùjours, à la Sombre ouverture,
Chérubin lui-même arriva.

Je suis vieux; mais pourvu que j’aime,
Je n’ai rien à me reprocher
Et l’abeille ira tout dè même
Cajoler la fleur du pêcher.

Le vent fredonne, l’eau miroite,
Le gai lapin sort du terrier;
La rose se tient toute droite
Comme. une fille à marier.

Des couples dans l’ombre s’effacent,
Les grands chênes chassent le jour;
Que voulez-vous que les, bois fassent
Si ce n’est de cacher l’amour?

Les nids ont, l’arbre pour complice;
L’amour prend les coeurs à sa glu;
Il faut. bien que tout s’accomplisse
Comme le bon Dieu l’a voulu.

Les feuilles sont les soeurs des ailes;
Un bosquet c’est une cloison;
Les bois sont complaisants aux belles,
Et je trouve qu’ils ont raison.

Aimons! c’est ce qu’avril préfère.
Avec tous ses chiens sans colliers
Diane indignée a beau faire
Un bruit fauve au fond des halliers,

Cette grande vierge, farouche.
Perd son temps contre les amants;
L’amour c’est la bouche, et la bouche,
C’est l’éclair qui fait des serments;

Qu’importe Diane et ses dogues!
Chloé trouve Atys éloquent.
Les bois aiment ces dialogues
Que ponctue un baiser fréquent.

La nature est l’immense alcôve;
Et c’est ainsi que tout se perd,
Et c’est ainsi que tout se sauve;
Cupidon, c’est. l’enfant expert;

Il est subtil, il est superbe;
Vaste hymen providentiel!
Les daims font l’idylle dans l’herbe,
L’aigle fait l’épopée au ciel.

On entend des murmures d’âmes;

Toute l’ombre est un grand frisson;
Et je sais encor l’air, mesdames,
Si je ne sais plus la chanson.

9 octobre.

XVII CHANT DES SONGES

Hurrah! hurrah!
Toutes les portes sont ouvertes,
Hurrah! Smarra
Pour nous qui sortons des eaux vertes
Et qui venons du hallier noir!

Les hommes agitent les glaives,
Le fouet, la chaîne, l’encensoir;
Nous, nous courons le long des grèves
Et nous sommes les oiseaux rêves.

Hurrah! hurrah!
Toutes les portes sont ouvertes,
Hurrah! Smarra!
Pour nous qui sortons des eaux vertes
Et qui venons du hallier noir!

Qu’on s’enferme! qu’on se séquestre!
Fermez la ville, et venez voir.
Nous sommes dans la salle équestre
Assis au fauteuil du bourgmestre!

Hurrah! hurrah!
Toutes les portes sont ouvertes,
Hurrah! Smarra!
Pour nous qui sortons des eaux vertes
Et qui venons du hallier noir!

Le sergent fait le pied de grue.
— Qui va là? -Vieux, fais ton devoir.
Autour de sa tête bourrue
Nous tourbillonnons dans la rue.

Hurrah! hurrah!

Toutes les portes sont ouvertes,
Hurrah! Smarra!
Pour nous qui sortons des eaux vertes
Et qui venons du hallier noir!
La nuit sème ses perles d’ambre.
Fermez le bouge et le manoir,
A double tour! c’est en décembre.
Bon! nous voilà dans votre chambre!

Hurrah! hurrah!
Toutes les portes sont ouvertes,
Hurrah! Smarra!
Pour nous qui sortons des eaux vertes
Et qui venons du hallier noir!

Blondes filles et vieillards chauves,
Fermez vos rideaux, c’est le soir,
Et maintenant, dans vos alcôves,
Regardez luire nos yeux fauves!

Hurrah! hurrah!
Toutes les portes sont ouvertes,
Hurrah! Smarra!
Pour nous qui sortons des eaux vertes
Et qui venons du hallier noir!

Fermez vos yeux, dormez, profanes.
Soyez votre propre éteignoir.
Nos chauves-souris diaphanes
Battent de l’aile sous vos crânes!

Hurrah! hurrah!
Toutes les portes sont ouvertes,
Hurrah! Smarra!
Pour nous qui sortons des eaux vertes
Et qui venons du hallier noir!

Nous soufflons la cendre et les flammes,
L’amour, le deuil, la peur, l’espoir;
Fermez vos coeurs, hommes et femmes,
Nous parlons dans l’ombre à vos âmes!

Hurrah! hurrah!
Toutes les portes sont ouvertes,
Hurrah! Smarra!
Pour nous qui sortons des eaux vertes
Et qui venons du hallier noir!

17 mars 1854.

XVIII Lamour f- le camp

HACQUOIL (Le Marin).
Chantant.

L’amour f- le camp comme un b -
Filant dix noeuds dans un bon lougre
En pleine mer.
La beauté passe -sarabande!
Comme passe la contrebande
A Saint-Omèr.

Mon grand-père était un grand drôle.
Tu n’irais pas à son épaule,
Tambour-major.
Et ma grand’mère -farandole! -
Etait belle comme une idole
Dorée en or:

La dame, point avariée,
Etait duchesse et mariée
A de l’argent.
Et mon grand-père -la bourrée! -
Lui dit. un. soir Mon adorée,
Je suis sergent.

Et mon grand-père à ma grand’mère
Proposa de faire mon. père
En s’échauffant;
Mais ma grand’mère -la gavotte!
Mais ma grand’mère était dévote,
Et fit l’enfant.

16 février.

XIX AIR DE LA PRINCESSE D’ORANGE

Viens, ô toi que j’adore.
Ton pas est plus joyeux
Que le vent des cieux;
Viens, les yeux de l’aurore
Sont divins, mais tes yeux
— Me regardent mieux.

Avril, c’est la jeunesse.
Viens, sortons, la maison,
L’enclos, la prison,
Le foyer, la sagesse,
N’ont jamais eu raison
Contre la saison.

Pour peu que tu le veuilles,
Nous serons heureux; vois,
L’aube est sur les toits,
Et l’eau court sous les feuilles,
Et l’oh entend des voix
Du ciel dans les bois.

Toutes les douces choses,
L’hirondelle au retour
Dans la vieille tour,
Les chansons et les roses
Et la clarté du jour,
Sont faites d’amour.

Aimer, c’est lâ première
Des lois du Dieu clément;
Le bois est charmant;
Et c’est de la lumière;
Et c’est du firmament
Qu’on fait en aimant.

Belle, à la mort tout change;
Le ciel s'ouvre, embaumé,
Superbe, enflammé,
Et nous dit: viens! sois ange!
Mais qui n'a pas aimé
Le trouve fermé.

28 mai 1857. Guernesey.

II

Mai dans les bois recèle
Les amours innocents;
Les amours innocents,
L'homme en est l'étincelle;
Les amours innocents,
La femme en est l'encens.

Couchez-vous sur la mousse
Dans le beau mois de mai;
Dans le beau mois de mai
La chose la plus douce,
Dans le beau mois de mai,
C'est quand on est aimé.

Parcourez les charmilles,
Les sources, les buissons!
Les sources, les buissons,
Autour des jeunes filles,
Les sources, les buissons
Chanteront des chansons.

Sitôt qu'une femme aime,
Au fond de son esprit,-
Au fond de son esprit
Brille l'aube elle-même;

Au fond de son esprit
Une rose fleurit.

On s’embaume, on s’éclaire
Quand deux coeurs ne font qu’un;
Quand deux coeurs ne font qu’un,
L’amour est leur lumière;
Quand deux coeurs ne font qu’un,
L’amour est leur parfum.

Si vous voulez des flammes,
Si vous voulez des fleurs,
Si vous voulez des fleurs,
‘Cherchez-en dans les âmes;
Si vous voulez des fleurs,
Cherchez-en dans les coeurs.

27 mai 1857.

Guernesey, Route de Fermain-Bay.

XX CHANT DU BOL DE PUNCH

Je suis la flamme bleue.
J’habite la banlieue,
Le vallon, le coteau.
Sous l’if et le mélèze,
J’erre au Père-Lachaise,
J’erre au Campo-Santo.

L’eau brille au crépuscule,
Le passant sur sa mule
Fait un signe de croix,
Son chien baisse la queue;
Je suis la flamme bleue
Qui danse au fond des bois.
La nuit étend son aile;
De Profundis se mêle
A Traderidera;
Les morts ouvrent leur bière.
Spectres, au cimetière!
Masques, à l’Opéra!

— Garçon, du punch! -J’arrive.
Je suis le bleu convive,
L’esprit des lacs blafards,
Le nain des joncs moroses;
Je viens baiser les roses
Après les nénuphars.

Buvez, fils et donzelles.
D’autres ont été belles,
D’autres ont été beaux.

Riez, joyeuses troupes.
Pour danser sur vos coupes
Je sors de leurs tombeaux.

Monte à ta chambre, apporte
Ton charbon, clos ta porte,
Allume; c’est le soir.
Regarde dans ton bouge,
Comme un masque à l’oeil rouge,
Flamber ton réchaud noir.

D’autres boivent dans l’ombre,
Toi, tu meurs; ton oeil sombre
S’éteint, ton front pâlit;
Je suis là, je t’éclaire,
Et j’ai quitté leur verre
Pour danser sur ton lit.
Le bol s’éteint.

XXI SÉRÉNADE

MAGLIA, chantant.
Quand les heures de paix et d’ombre sont venues,
Les belles sur leur lit s’endorment toutes nues,
Laissant la lune errer dans le ciel argenté,
Et la fenêtre ouverte à cause de l’été.

XXII LE CHÂTEAU DE L’ARBRELLES

DANSE EN ROND

Va cueillir, villageoise,
La fraise et la framboise
Dans les champs, aux beaux jours.

À huit milles d’Amboise,
A deux milles de Tours,
Le château de l’Arbrelles,
Ràì de ces alentours,
Se dresse avec ses tours,
Ses tours et ses tourelles.
Va cueillir aux beaux jours
La fraise et la framboise,
A huit milles, d’Amboise,
A deux milles de Tours,
C’est là que sont les tours,
Les tours et les tourelles
Du château de l’Arbrelles
Bien connu des vautours.
II
Cueillez, Jeanne et Thérèse,
La framboise et la fraise,
Rions, dansons, aimons,
Le ciel en est bien aise,
Moquons-nous des sermons.
Le château de l’Arbrelles,
Qu’en chantant nous nommons,
Dresse sur les vieux monts
Ses tours et ses tourelles.
Rions, dansons, aimons,
Cueillez, Jeanne et Thérèse,
La framboise et la fraise,
Moquons-nous des sermons.

Là-bas, sur les vieux monts
Se dressent les tourelles
Du château de l’Arbrelles
Bien connu des démons.
III
Cueillez, filles d’Amboise,
La fraise et la framboise.
Les démons, les vautours,
Ont changé de figure
Depuis les anciens jours.
Tours de sinistre augure,
L’herbe croît dans vos cours,
Croulez, vilaines tours!
Le ciel en est bien aise.
Aimons, les ans sont courts,
Cueillez, Jeanne et Thérèse,
La framboise et la fraise.
Ô belles, nos amours,
Pour piller vos atours,
Pour vous emplir de flammes,
Les démons sont nos âmes,
Nos coeurs sont les vautours.

7 octobre 1876.

XXIII Le joli page

Le joli page imberbe
Soupire, elle s’émeut.
— Sous un arbre, s’il pleut,
Et s’il fait beau, dans l’herbe.

De sa jupe superbe.
Elle défit le noeud.
— Sous un arbre, s’il pleut,
Et s’il fait beau, dans l’herbe.

Le bleuet vaut la gerbe;
Plaire! un page le peut.
— Sous un arbre, s’il pleut,
Et s’il fait beau, dans l’hérbe.

Conjuguons le doux verbe;
Aimons-nous! Dieu le veut.
— Sous un arbre, s’il pleut,
Et s’il fait beau, dans l’herbe.

25 avril 1873.

XXIV CHANSONS DE GAVROCHE

I

Ran tan plan!
Tape, tambour, tape encore.
Pan pan pan,
Pif paf boum, ran plan tan plan,
Gai l’aurore! ,

On fait de la peine aux rois,
Viens à leur secours, bourgeois,
Avec ton enthousiasme,
Ton parapluie et ton asthme.

Tape encor, tape, tambour.
Gai le jour!

Faut-il des rois sur les têtes
Des peuples changés en bêtes?
Tu dis oui, toi le canon.
Moi le pavé, je dis non.

Tape, tambour, tape encore.
Ran tan plan,
Pan pan pan,
Pif paf boum, ran plan tan plan,
Gai l’aurore!

Et toi, mon vieux chiffonnier,
Prends ton croc et ton panier,
Car il est temps que tu pinces
Tous les rois et tous les princes.

Tape encor, tape tambour.
Gai le jour!

Ce tas de trônes cahote.
Flanque-les tous dans ta hotte,
Depuis le roi Dagobert
Jusqu’à l’empereur Gobert.

Tape, tambour, tape encore.
Ran tan plan,
Pan pan pan,
Pif paf boum, ran plan tan plan,
Gai l’aurore!
Quand Dalila, Paméla,
Atala, Stella,
Lola,
Trouveront pour leurs filets
Les-mylords anglais
Trop laids,

Quands les avocats plaidants,
Quand les noirs pédants
Grondants,
Quand les harangueurs des cours,
Feront des discours
Trop courts,

Quand les peuples lèveront
Plus haut que l’affront
Leur front,
Et n’auront plus sur les bras
Tout ce tas d’ingrats
Trop gras,

On ne verra plus Gamin
Tendre, nain romain,
La main,
Et marcher sur les. talons
De ses pantalons

Trop longs.
III
La bourgeoisie est un veau
Qui s’enrhume du cerveau
Au moindre vent frais qui souffle;
Le bourgeois c’est la pantoufle
Qu’un roi met sous ses talons
Pour marcher à reculons.

Je fais la chansonnette,
Faites le rigodon.
Ramponneau Ramponnetté, don!
Ramponneau Ramponnette!

Le bourgeois est un grimaud
Qui prend sa pendule au mot
Chaque fois qu’elle retarde.
Il contresigne en bâtarde
Coups d’état, décrets, traités,
Et toutes les lâchetés.

Je fais la chansonnette,
Faites le rigodon.
Ramponneau Ramponnette, don!
Ramponneau Ramponnette!

Il enseigne à ses marmots
Comment on rit de nos maux;
Pour lui, le peuple et la France,
La liberté, l’espérance,
L’homme et Dieu, sont au-dessous
D’une pièce de cent sous.

Je fais la chansonnette,
Faites le rigodon.
Ramponneau Ramponnette, don!
Ramponneau Ramponnette!

Le bourgeois a des regrets;
Il pleure sur le progrès,
Sur ses loyers qu’on effleure,
Sur les rois, fiacres à l’heure,
Sur sa caisse, et sur la fin
Du monde où l’on avait faim.

Je fais la chansonnette,
Faites le rigodon.
Ramponneau Ramponnette, don!
Ramponneau Ramponnette!

18 octobre 1861.

LA CORDE D’AIRAIN

Et j’ajoute à ma lyre une corde d’airain.
Les Feuilles d’Automne.

À LA FRANCE DE 1872

Ô France, un ,de tes fils devant toi s’agenouille.
L’humble prêtre de l’art divin que rien ne souille
T’apporte sa tristesse et son austère amour.
Quand toutes les grandeurs d’un pays tour à tour,
Sous l’acharnement vil du sort opiniâtre,
S’écroulent, dans les jours ténébreux, le théâtre,
Qui jadis, riant, grave, orageux ou serein,
Parlait aux nations par deux masques d’airain,
Doit, quand saigne la plaie horrible des frontières,
Ne dire au peuple ému que des choses altières.
,Quand la Patrie en deuil baisse les yeux devant
Sa vieille histoire en cendre, à terre, éparse au vent,
Quand le fier Capitole a fait place au Calvaire,
Nous avons pour devoir le souvenir sévère;,
Et l’homme est par les chants de la muse avili,
S’il y puise une ivresse allant jusqu’à l’oubli.
Désormais, après tant d’angoisse, après les fuites,
Les camps cernés, les murs vendus, les tours détruites,
Et la captivité des sombres légions,
Quand l’Europe nous hait, nous qui la protégions,
Ces hymnes qu’on appelle Ode, Drame, Epopée,
Devront ressembler tous à des fourreaux d’épée;
Si le tigre en ses dents emporte la brebis,
Des resplendissements furieux et subits
Sortiront tout à coup de ces puissants poèmes;
Leurs vers seront grondants, menaçants et suprêmes;
On y sentira sourdre un souffle de combat,
On y verra la gloire en pleurs sur son grabat,
Et ces grandes clameurs auront des voix hautaines
Remuant l’âpre honte au coeur des capitaines
Et leur donnant la rage et la soif de plonger
Leur honneur dans ce flot sublime, le danger;
Et c’est ainsi qu’on sauve un peuple, et que l’on fonde
Dans toi, Paris, dans toi; Rome, une âme profonde.

Ne venez pas ici chercher d’autre plaisir
Que d’entrevoir un glaive et de le ressaisir;
L’art ne doit aux esprits que des fêtes viriles;
Ayons d’affreux jours, soit, mais pas d’instants stériles.
Plus le bonheur décroît, plus le coeur doit grandir;
L’astre accepte la nuit pour y mieux resplendir.
L’étoile, dédaigneuse au fond des cieux funèbres,
A l’augmentation de l’ombre et des ténèbres
Répond par la croissance auguste des rayons.
C’est pourquoi tous ici, tous, qui que nous soyons,
Fils de ceux qui de près virent Berlin et Vienne,
Ne trouvant pas qu’il soit juste et qu’il nous convienne
D’avoir de tels aïeux et de n’y point songer,
Et de laisser leur gloire en gage à l’étranger,
Ayant le sombre ennui d’hommes sur qui l’on marche,
Nous souvenant que c’est à nous de porter l’arche
Et d’être à l’avant-garde altière du progrès,
Nous pensons qu’il est bon d’aiguiser nos regrets,
Et qu’avec un fer rouge il faut toucher nos plaies;
Et que, puisque déjà reverdissent les haies,
Puisque voici venir le mois de mai charmant,
Nous devons regarder le sacré firmament,
Les bois, les champs, le lys, la rose, la pervenche,
Avec cette pensée au coeur: notre revanche!
Si nous nous laissions mettre aux fers par le destin,
Si, tournés vers le soir et non vers le matin,
Nous pouvions, prisonniers, continuer de vivre,
Si nous ne rêvions pas, l’âme de colère ivre,
Chacun de nous ayant sur le front la rougeur
De n’être pas celui qu’on attend, le vengeur;
Ah! si nous n’étions pas pensifs devant tout homme
Qui flétrit son bourreau, se redresse et se nomme,
Et lui prend son épée afin de le tuer,
Si nous pouvions nous taire et nous habituer
A l’opprobre, et montrer, transformation vile,
Qu’on peut être Thersite après qu’on fut Achille,
Si nous donnions raison aux rois riant entre eux,

Si nous découvrions en nous des coeurs affreux
Prêts aux consentements infâmes de la chute,
Si devant le vainqueur criant: Cessons la lutte,
Paix! et restons-en là! nous disions: J'y pensais!
Ah! tout serait fini! de sa tête, ô français,
La France arracherait, sous ses mains indignées,
Ses lauriers, et, parmi ses cheveux, des poignées
D'étoiles, qui s'iraient éteindre dans la nuit!
Non, nous ne serons pas ce qui s'évanouit;
Non, nous ne serons pas le fils qui dégénère,
Et nous saurons hâter le réveil du tonnerre.
Non, nous n'acceptons pas notre honneur obscurci.
Car ce qui fait un peuple illustre, le voici:
C'est le théâtre, c'est la tribune, c'est l'âme
De tout homme allumée à toute pure flamme,
C'est l'essor pour l'esprit, le travail pour le corps,
C'est l'art, c'est la pensée'-et l'ennemi-dehors.

Tant qu'ils sont èn Alsace et qu'ils sont en Lorraine,
Ils sont chez nous. Sur toi, France, leur sabre traîne.
Ils t'ont pris ton bien, France? Eh bien, on le reprend.
Ah! même le plus grand des siècles n'est pas grand
Si quelque ombre-de honte est mêlée à sa gloire.
Avec une aile blanche avoir une aile noire,
Non, France, non! jamais ainsi tu n'as vécu.
Et la paix n'est la paix qu'après qu'on a vaincu.

Ô Grèce! ô Périclès! jours fiers! âge splendide!
Pindare d'un côté, de l'autre Thucydide;
L'idéal du réel devenait le vrai nom,
Et Phidias sculptait le mur du Parthénon;
Hippocrate tâtait le pouls de Démosthènes;
Les peuples s'abreuvaient. de lumière aux fontaines
Qu'on nomme Apollodore, Euripide, Platon;
Le dur Solon, levant sur Thespis son-bâton,
Était mort, et Socrate ôtait les dieux à l'homme;
Athènes vaguement semblait éveiller Rome

Qui répondait dù fond de l’ombre à son appel, -
Et les perses étaient chassés de l’Archipel!
Qui donc a dit: La France tombe!
Demain, on verra tout à coup
La grande pierre de sa tombe
Se lever lentement debout.

Oui, demain, oui, l’heure est prochaine.
Voyez. Elle se dresse, ayant
Dans ses deux poings où pend sa chaîne,
Un tronçon d’épée effrayant.

Oui, l’avenir nous le ramene,
Ce puissant glaive où Dieu clément
A remplacé la lame humaine
Par le céleste flamboiement.
Oh! souhaitons la bienvenue
A ce glaive prodigieux!
Qu’il nous fasse voir dans la nue
Le groupe étoilé des aïeux!
Que son éclair montre à notre âme
Toutes ces faces de géants,
Martel qui terrasse Abdérame,
Jeanne qui délivre Orléans;
Et ces preux, beaux dans leur croyance,
Bayard qui ne plia jamais,
Marceau qui mourut sous Mayence,
Hoche qui fut mort devant Metz!
Qu’on écoute leurs voix bruire,
Et qu’on ne puisse deviner
Si c’est Kléber qu’on entend rire,
Ou le ciel qu’on entend tonner!
Que ce fier glaive de la France
Soit le glaive du genre humain;
Qu’il abolisse la souffrance,
Epée aujourd’hui, soc demain;
Qu’il soit pour tous la délivrance,

Qu’il perce le nuage obscur,
Et qu’il nous rende l’espérance
Ici-bas, et là-haut l’azur!
Que ce glaive crée et foudroie,
Qu’il sème à coups d’éclairs le jour,
Et qu’il en sorte de la joie,
Et qu’il en sorte de l’amour.
Sur toute la terre ravie,
Qu’il allume avec sa clarté
Un sublime orage de vie,
De victoire et de liberté!
Qu’il fauche, le mal comme l’herbe;
Qu’on dise: il a fondé nos droits;
Et qu’il soit à jamais superbe
Par l’immense fuite des rois!

Paris, 19 février 1872.

I APRÈS SEDAN

C’est bien. Essuyez-vous. France; Prusse, lavez
Toi, ton opprobre; toi, ta gloire. Vous avez
Chacune une rougeur au front; la honte épaisse
Sur toi, France; et sur toi, la Prusse, ton espèce
De victoire. César, quel pourboire veux-tu?
Cinq milliards. C’est fait. Empoche. Honneur, vertu,
Pudeur, fraternité, probité, passez, ombres!

L’avenir curieux viendra voir ces décombres
Qu’on appelait jadis justice, droit, raison.
Comme la ronce croît! `Comme la trahison,
La conquête, le vol, le meurtre et les rapines
Prospèrent vite, et sont fécondes en épines,
En nuit noire, en horreur, sur le temple abattu!
Comme un roi; d’or, de pourpre et dé haine vêtu,
Ploie et courbe à son gré la race la plus fière,
Et comme il est facile aux empereurs ,de faire
D’un peuple leur esclave et d’un lion leur chien!
Soyez russe, borusse, anglais, autrichien, -
Soyez lè coq, soyez l’aigle, soyez le cygne,
Votre maître vous tient, et n’a qu’à faire, un signe
Pour qu’il ne reste plus de vous, peuple détruit,
Que des oiseaux de proie et des oiseaux de nuit!
Vous étiez l’Allemagne et vous êtes la Prusse!
Hélas!

S’il existait, pour que j’y comparusse,
Un tribunal de rois, fier, auguste, hideux,
Présidé par ton spectre, ô noir Philippe-deux,
Un sombre. aréopage où siégerait Tibère,
Je dirais: Est-ce là que Satan délibère?
Et j’entrerais. Pourquoi? Pour leur dire: ceci:

— Je ne suis qu’un passant, moi qui.vous parle ici,

Mais regardez-moi bien, vous tous, césars de Rome,
Maîtres du monde, rois, papes, je suis un homme.
Ce que je veux, je viens-vous le crier: Je veux
La paix -pour nous, pour vous, pour nos derniers neveux;
Je veux le vrai, le beau, la fraternité, l’âme
De-Dieu même, l’Amour, ce rayon, cette flamme

Formidable, éclairant le bien, brûlant le mal,
Éblouissant tout, l’homme ainsi que l’animal,
Versant la vérité, la douceur, la clémence,
Et visible au plus haut des cieux dans l’ombre immense!
Je veux rouvrir l’éden à tous les grands souhaits;
Je veux la vérité, la justice, et je hais
Les fourbes, les tyrans, les traîtres, les transfuges,
Et c’est moi l’accusé, puisque c’est vous les juges.

II À DES RÉGIMENTS DÉCOURAGÉS

Ô nos pauvres soldats, oui, vous avez fléchi.
Avant que ce Paris sacré soit affranchi,
Avant que notre France auguste soit sauvée,
Avant que l’aigle ait mis à l’abri sa couvée,
Vous avez dit: A bas la guerre, citoyens!
Et nous, qui, sous la bombe et sous les biscayens,
Luttions comme vous, prêts aux plus terribles tâches,
Indignés, nous avons crié: Taisez-vous, lâches!

Eh bien, nous eûmes tort, vous êtes des vaillants.
Hélas! pour généraux avoir des chambellans,
Et pour chefs des valets et pour maîtres des cuistres,
C’est trop, et vous avez subi les jours sinistres.
Au-devant de l’affront vous fûtes envoyés;
Vous avez combattu pour être foudroyés;
Vous vîtes comment croule une gloire détruite,
Et vous avez appris le chemin de la fuite,
O douleur! vous les fils de ceux par qui tonna
Austerlitz, et par qui resplendit Iéna!
Ah! sombres coeurs brisés et qu’emplit l’amertume!
Espérez, ô vaincus! ce n’est pas la coutume
De la France d’avoir longtemps le front courbé.
Après Blenheim, après Rosbach, on est tombé,
Mais on s’est relevé par Ulm et par Arcole.
Subissez le malheur comme on subit l’école;
Couvez l’âpre courroux des coeurs humiliés.
Soit. Pour un instant, fils de France, vous pliez,
Hélas, et vous avez fait un pas en arrière;
Mais vous n’en rentrerez que d’une âme plus fière
Dans notre antique gloire et dans nos vieux chemins.

Ils défaillaient aussi, les grands soldats romains;
Et quand César passait, ces mécontents épiques
Lui demandaient la paix en abaissant les piques;

Ce qui n’empêchait pas, pourtant nous l’oublions,
Ces hommes de se battre ainsi que des lions,
Et les peuples d’avoir pources légionnaires
Le culte épouvanté qu’on a pour les tonnerres.
Oui, parfois, quand l’élan romain s’interrompit,
Les barbares avaient un moment -de répit,
Et l’on riait de voir s’en retourner aux villes
Les vieux hastati las et blancs et les pupilles
Dont le visage à peine avait un blond duvet.;
Mais bientôt cette armée en qui Rome vivait
Rebouclait sa cuirasse, et rentrait en campagne;
Et partout, en Dacie, en Phrygie, -en Espagne,
Les rois se remettaient à trembler, quand le vent
Leur apportait le bruit de sa marche en avant.

Paris, 8 janvier 1871.

III DESTRUCTION DE LA COLONNE

ACCEPTATION DU TRAITE PRUSSIEN

Quand la géante fut tombée, on approcha.

Si quelque bey d’Égypte, un khédive, un pacha,
Renversait le pilastre impur de Cléopâtre,
Bon à faire un peu d’ombre à midi pour le pâtre,
On dirait Barbarié et l’on aurait raison.
Or ce trophée était sublime à l’horizon;
Il avait l’air d’un phare éclairant une rive
Les villes du prodige et du rêve, Ninive,
Memphis que fit Menès, Sarde où régna Cyrus,
Sarepta, qu’emplissaient tant d’hommes disparus,
Jéricho, Palenquè, Sofala, Babylone,
N’avaient rien de plus beau que cette âpre colonne;
Ce cippe triomphal qu’un siècle respecta,
Effaçait l’obélisque altier d’Eléphanta,
La borne de Byzance au fond de l’Hippodrome,
Et le pilier de Thèbe et le pilier de Rome.

Cette colonne était toute pleine de voix,
Étant forgée avec des canons pris aux rois;
On entendait le peuple en ce bronze, bruire;

Et nous n’avions pas, nous, le droit de la détruire,
Car nos pères l’avaient construite pour nos fils.
Elle représentait, bravant tous les défis,
La révolution de l’Europe, ébauchée
Par leur vertigineuse et vaste chevauchée,
Et l’esprit de Fleurus planant sur Austerlitz,
Et nos drapeaux ayant des rayons dans leurs plis.
En voyant sur la place auguste la spirale
De toute cette gloire énorme et sidérale,
Et ce noir tourbillon de fantômes, tordu,

Fixe et pétrifié sous le vent éperdu,
On songeait. Il semblait que la haute fumée
Sortie en tournoyant de cette fière armée,
N’avait pas, sous le ciel orageux ou serein,
Voulu se dissiper, et. s’était faite airain.

Semblable au moissonneur foulant des gerbes mûres,
Cette colonne avait pour socle un tas d’armures.
Elle offensait les rois et non les nations.
Afin qu’on pût juger les pas que nous faisions,
Elle fixait le point d’où nos pères partirent;
Elle indiquait le lieu d’où les flots se retirent,
Et rattachait. aux jours nouveaux les jours anciens;
Après les grands soldats place aux grands citoyens!
Elle était, dans Paris que le soleil inonde,
Comme un style au milieu de ce cadran du monde,
Et son ombre y: marquait les heures du progrès.

Les rois n’osaient venir la regarder de près.

Hier elle tomba, la grande solitaire.
On a pu mesurer, quand on l’a vue à terre,
Tout ce qu’on peut ôter d’orgueil en un instant
Au siècle le plus sombre et le plus éclatant.

Ceux qui sur ce débris collèrent leur oreille
Entendirent dans l’ombre une rumeur pareille
A l’océan qui parle et se plaint sous les cieux.

Voici ce que disait ce bruit mystérieux:

Vous vous êtes trompés comme se trompait Rome.
Ce que vous avez pris pour la gloire d’un homme,
C’est la gloire d’un peuple, et c’est la vôtre, hélas!
Peuple, quels sont mes torts? les trônes en éclats,
L’Europe labourée en tous sens par: la France,
La bataille achevée en vaste délivrance,

Le moyen-âge mort, les préjugés proscrits.
Que me reprochez-vous? le sang, les pleurs, les cris,
Les deuils, et les trop grands coups d'aile des victoires;
D'être une cime où luit l'éclair dans les nuits noires,
De vivre, et d'attester que vos pères ont mis
Leur âme dans l'airain des canons ennemis.
Mon crime, c'est la lutte altière des épées,
Le choc des escadrons, les cuirasses frappées,
Les échelles au mur, les clairons, les assauts.
Les lions sont haïs par vous les lionceaux;
Votre enfance n'a pu supporter ma vieillesse. -
Soit. Je pars avec Ulm et Wagram.; je vous laisse
Avec Sedan. Adieu. Je gêne. Je m'en. vais.
J'aime encor mieux ma. guerre, hélas, que votre paix.

IV La grande République

La grande République a des griffes fatales.
Gare à ceux qui voudraient, sans être les vrais mâles,
Sans être les époux réels et sérieux,
Faire, accepter au fond des bois mystérieux
Leur virilité fausse à la rude femelle!
Pallas demanderait de quoi Davus se mêle;
La géante serait peu tendre au myrmidon
S’il osait essayer un instant d’abandon,
L’ongle altier pourrait bien maltraiter cette nuque;
Ce n’est pas sans danger parfois qu’une perruque,
Eût-elle un aspect fauve et d’âpres épaisseurs,
Prend des airs de crinière aux yeux des connaisseurs;
Je ne conseille pas au sieur Scapiglionè
De faire le lion auprès de la lionne.

Paris, 16 octobre 1871.

V APRÈS L’ÉCROULEMENT DE L’HOMME

Pour venger le passé, pour sauver l’avenir,
O peuple, j’ai senti que je devais punir
Un homme, et qu’il fallait châtier une tête;

Et moi, qui dans ma serre ai porté la tempête,
Quand la Justice au front redoutable et sacré
M’a dit: Foudroie, ami! j’ai dit Je le ferai.
Soit. Car ce ne sont pas les aigles, d’ordinaire,
Qui refusent de prendre en leur griffe un tonnerre.
Et j’ai lutté. Ce maître était là sous son dais;
Et je le combattais, et je le regardais;
Il avait tout pour lui, du Volga jusqu’au Tibre,
Tout, l’Allemagne esclave et l’Angleterre libre;
Je lui faisais la guerre à travers cette paix;
Et la foule, à ses pieds, tandis que je frappais,
S’étonnait que quelqu’un osât rester honnête;
L’ignominie était devenue une fête;
Moi, seul au bord des mers, banni, haï de tous,
D’autant plus indigné qu’il était plus absous,
O Guernesey, debout sur tes fières collines,
Je lui jetais d’en haut des feuilles sibyllines;
Les vents les lui portaient, ombre, nuage, affront;
Et lorsqu’elles passaient au-dessus de son front,
Il en sortait un vers ressemblant à la foudre.
Mais maintenant que l’homme infâme est dans la poudre,
Qu’il est à terre, affreux, gisant, et que je vois
Son nom faire partout frémir toutes les voix,
Et les passants marcher sur César misérable,
Fais place, âpre justice, au pardon vénérable,
Ou du moins, si c’est trop de pardonner, permets
Que ma colère en feu reste sur les sommets,
Et ne descende. pas à frapper ce cadavre.
Laisse-moi me tourner vers tout ce qui me navre,
Vers ceux qui maintenant sont puissants, et qui font

Pencher la France au bord de la chute sans fond.
Je lutte, ô Vérité, mais jamais je n’accable.
Le coeur persévérant n’est point l’âme implacable.
L’écrasement de qui n’est plus est puéril.
Le tort ne suffit pas, il me faut le péril.
Pour ceux-là seulement mon courroux est tenace
Qui dans la main ont l’arme et dans l’oeil la menace,
Et dans mon dédain calme et pensif j’engloutis
Les monstres, s’ils sont morts, ou bien s’ils sont petits.
La foudre veut un but, et se trouve inutile
Sur l’hydre inanimée ou l’acarus reptile,
Et le noir justicier, sur les cimes frappant,
Laisse vivre le ver et pourrir le serpent.

VI L’ORGIE DES MEURTRES

Ah çà, je. mets les points sur les i. Soit. J’admets
La guerre, à la rigueur; l’assassinat, jamais.
Avouez qu’il serait étrange que j’aimasse
La tuerie en détail, moi qui l’exècre en masse,
Ou que, la réprouvant en détail, j’eusse un goût
Pour le sang, quand ses flots font déborder l’égout.
Oui, les cadavres sont voilés parles décombres;
Mais l’histoire plus tard saura des choses sombres.
Tu veux en vain couvrir, tablier du boucher,
La Saint-Barthélemy malaisée à cacher;
Les éponges dés gens agenouillés sont vaines
Pour laver le ravin sinistre des Cévennes,
Et toujours il en suinte, un long ruisseau de sang.

L’assassinat a beau prendre un air innocent,
Prouver ce qui n’est pas, nier ce qu’on démontre;
Expliquer ses raisons, dire son Pour et Contre;
Que, si l’on ne mettait personne hors la loi,
Veuillot serait sans tâche et Carrier sans emploi,
(Tâche, n’oubliez pas cet accent circonflexe,
Imprimeurs), qu’on ne peut tenir compte du sexe,
De l’âge, et cetera, car on est fort pressé,
Et la chaux vive est là qui bout dans le fossé,
Que c’est une besogne après tout peu commode,
Qu’il faut se défier du pathos à la mode,
Qu’on voudrait vous y voir, messieurs les mécontents,
Que désormais voilà de l’ordre pour longtemps,
Qu’il faut tout extirper pour que rien ne menace,
Le meurtre a beau jurer ses grands dieux, saint-Ignace,
Fouquier-Tinville, Hébert, de Maistre, Jacques-deux,
C’est en vain qu’il ébauche un sourire hideux,
Il est le crime, issu du peuple et de la Bible,
Et, même pour le bon motif, il est horrible;
Qu’il se nomme Albe, Omar, Cromwell, Bellart, Marat,

Il est-toujours stupide et toujours scélérat.
Quel que soit le parti qui dans l’horreur se vautre,
Malheur au meurtre autant d’un côté Mie de l’autre!
Je trouve Atrée affreux, même tuant Caïn.
Qui que tu sois qui fus bourreau, cache ta main.
.Sache que tu ne peux à, ceci -te soustraire
Qu’un crime n’est jamais commis que sur un; frère,
Et que tôute victime-est soeur du meurtrier.
On distingue entre erreur et forfait, mais trier

Parmi les massacreurs, voir la neige ou le sable
Teints de sang, et plaider pour le tigre excusable,
Jamais. Nous n’aurons point pour le meurtre hébété
Ce pardon qui ressemble à la complicité.

Ah! que de Niobés, d’Hécubes et d’Électres!
Hélas! j’entends parler à voix basse les spectres,
Et jusqu’à mon oreille un sourd chuchotement
Des morts, à travers l’ombre, arrive vaguement.
Moi qui ne suis qu’un homme ayant pour loi de plaindre,
De lutter, de ne rien tuer, de ne rien craindre,
Qui vainqueur “m’agenouille et vaincu suis debout,
Ma résolution est d’aller jusqu’au bout.
Je sens en moi la force énorme, l’innocence.
N’avoir pour aucun crime aucune complaisance,
C’est ma loi. Je dis donc à tous la vérité.
A toi Rigault, à toi Galliffet. Probité,
Sincérité, devoir, c’est là toute-mon âme.
Les tueurs rouges ont au front le signe infame,
Mais je hais, comme étant aux rouges ressemblants,
Les fratricides noirs et les assassins blancs.
Je suis le balayeur impartial qui passe
Et jette aux quatre vents farouches de l’espace
Tout ce qui sàuille l’homme ou le peuple ou la loi,
L’assassin de Duval, l’assassin de Darboy,
L’erreur, point d’appui sombre où le crime s’attache,
Haynau, Cissey, Jourdan-coupe-tête et sa hache,

Le prêtre et son missel, le reître et son cimier.
Quelque tas monstrueux que fasse le fumier,
Ne vous figurez pas, messieurs, que je recule.
Je rencontre Augias et j’ai l’humeur d’Hercule.

16 septembre.

VII Oui, l’on a sauvé l’ordre et l’état

Oui, l’on a sauvé l’ordre et l’état, et je crois
Que c’est pour la cinquième ou’la sixième fois;
Le steamer pourvoyeur du bagne est dans nos havres;
On a pendant huit jours enjambé des cadavres,
Des fosses, des mourants; on s’est habitué;
On a très vite fait justice; on a tué
Hommes, femmes, enfants, tout un peu pêle-mêle;
Maintenant sont forçats, mangeant à la-gamelle
Et vêtus des habits de la chiourme, plusieurs
Qui de “la tyrannie étaient les fossoyeurs,
Et dont nous avions vu, du Volga jusqu’à l’Ebre
Et du Tage au Niémen, voler le nom célèbre;
Victoire! On n’a point fait les choses à demi.
Pour sauver la patrie et devant l’ennemi
Paris avait cinq mois eu la rumeur immense
Des forêts que le vent semble mettre en déence;
Il ressemblait au sombre ouragan libyen;
Il a fallu le faire un peu taire; c’est bien.
Nous voilà soulagés; car c’est une souffrance
Qu’une ville acharnée. à délivrer la France;
L’Allemagne nous dit à demi-voix: Merci.
Les cafés sont rouverts, les églises aussi;
La paix sanglante sort de la guerre civile.
Nous avons de plus l’ordre et de moins cette ville.
Des gens auraient aimé peut-être moins de morts;
Mais qu’un cheval ait trop d’écume sur le mors
Quand il a bien couru, n’est-ce pas ordinaire?
La bombe n’y voit pas plus clair que le tonnerre;
Les faux coups sont permis, en de si durs combats
Au Jupiter d’en haut comme aux Jupins d’en bas.
Bref, nous sommes sauvés. De tous les coeurs s’élance
Ce cri d’enthousiasme et de bonheur: Silence.!
Que personne ne pense et qu’on ne parle plus!
Il est temps que la. mer montante ait son reflux,

Et que l’utile vent du tombeau décourage
Toutes ces libertés qui font un bruit d’orage.
Ce siècle a trop d’éclairs, de foudre et. de rayons;
Il est bon, et c’est là ce qu’enfin nouS voyons,
Qu’un poing sauveur, sorti des ténèbres, l’étreigne;
La société veut, la religion règne;
C’est dans le droit divin, c’est dans le syllabus
Qu’est le salut, le peuple étant presque un abus.
De là ce grand succès: l’ombre dans la fournaise;
Quatrevingt-neuf puni de son quatrevingt-treize;
Plus de licence, plus de tumulte, plus rien.
De la butte Montmartre au mont Valérien,
Ce Paris,. bouillonnant comme le flot dans l’urne,
Se tait, et nous avons l’apaisement nocturne;
Le peuple est sous le sabre, heureux, content, muet;
On recommencerait si quelqu’un remuait.
Ces, choses, j’,en conviens, ont de quoi satisfaire;
Chacun, en attendant le maître qu’il préfère,
Voit la police faite, et c’est toujours cela;
Et, certe, on n’a pas trop payé cette paix-là
Au prix d’un peu de sang qui sous nos pieds rougeoie;
Pourtant je n’en suis pas devenu. fou de joie.

6 juin.

VIII En Belgique

En Belgique (et peut-être, hélas! ailleurs encor!)
La justice, le droit, la loi, c’est un décor;
Pour le peuple il en sort un bras armé d’un glaive;
Mais que quelqu’un d’en haut passe, cela s’enlève;
Le juge est un châssis, Thémis est en carton,
La magistrature âpre et sombre est. un mouton
Sur roulette, et le code est une bergerie;
Pour faire évanouir la fantasmagorie
Il suffit de ce coup de sifflet réussi
Qu’on entend au théâtre, et dans les bois aussi.
Exemple: des gandins avec leurs gourgandines,
Ô Brillat-Savarin, de la cave où tu dînes,
Sortent, et, gais soupeurs, veulent avec raison
Servir l’ordre en mettant à sac une maison;
S’ils ont bu de bon vin, si cette populace
Se compose de gens titrés, d’hommes en place,
De barons, de marquis, de princes, de laquais,
Gueux bien mis, assassins du genre freluquets,
Si ce sont des bandits à la dernière mode,
Incapables de prendre un sou dans ma commode,
Faisant la bouche en coeur, fredonnant un couplet,
Désirant seulement tuer qui leur déplaît,
Nul magistrat ne doit troubler ce badinage.
Si le principal drôle est presque un personnage,
S’ils ont pris le soin d’être en nombre suffisant,
Armés, et contre un seul cinquante, au besoin cent,
S’ils sont prudents, s’ils n’ont à craindre en ce repaire
Que deux petits enfants gardés par un grand-père,
S’il s’agit d’un français quelconque, d’un quidam,
Monsieur Anspach devient bourgmestre de Saardam,
Pas un sergent ne vient, pas un exempt ne bouge;
Çà, croit-on que Kerwin va se fâcher tout rouge
Contre son fils qui fait dans l’ombre un tour charmant?
La policé se change en Belle au bois dormant.

Comme au fond la justice est une simagrée,
Étant admis l'État à qui la chose agrée
Et qui transforme en cippe, en terme, en borne, en pion,
Ce dogue, le gendarme, et ce lynx, l'espion,
Tout se passe le mieux du monde; on laisse faire.
Anspach boit ce vacarme ainsi qu'un somnifère.
Dérange-t-on les géns pour ces misères-là?
Un assaut! tout au plus un meurtre! qu'est cela?
Après tout, c'est bien fait. Amuse-toi, jeunesse.
Dormez, monsieur Berden, ronflez, monsieur Cornesse.
Nous sommes par des lois complaisantes régis.
Crocheter une porte, assiéger un logis!
Bravo'! ces Franquillons ne sont que des bélîtres.
Va-t-on pas ennuyer de gais-casseurs-de vitres
Pour une pierre ayant pu tuer un enfant.?
Garder l'homme attaqué! Non, celui qu'on défend,
C'est l'agresseur.

Alors luit dans l'ombre livide
Une métamorphose où se plairait Ovide,
Et la mythologie aimable reparaît.
Toute une capitale est changée en forêt;
La patrouille enchantée imite l'écrevisse;
Chez Argus souriant Morphée est de service.

Bruxelles, 30 mai 1871.

IX À UN ROI DE TROISIÈME ORDRE

Roi, tu m’as expulsé, me dit-on. Peu m’importe.
De plus, un acarus, dans un journal cloporte,
M’outrage de ta part et de la part du ciel;
Affront royal qui bave en style officiel.
Je ne te réponds pas. J’ai cette impolitesse.
Vois-tu, roi, ce n’est pas grand’chose qu’une altesse.
Ton journaliste et toi, je vous ignore, étant
Fort occupé des fleurs que Dieu dans cet instant
Nous prodigue, et voulant fêter le mois des roses.
D’ailleurs, je ne crois pas que les grands sphinx moroses,
Ni que le sombre écueil hanté par l’alcyon,
Fassent dans l’infini beaucoup d’attention
Les uns au grain de sable et l’autre au jet d’écume.
Qu’un courtisan insulte et qu’un lampion fume,
C’est tout simple; un rêveur n’en est point irrité;
C’est pourquoi je suis calme envers ta majesté.
Tu peux tranquillement décorer ton bourgmestre.
Par la grâce du Dieu que protège de Maistre,
Tu règnes, et ton scribe écrit. Vivez en paix.

J’erre, fauve chasseur, dans les halliers épais;
J’écoute l’aboiement d’une meute idéale;
Je tiens à la grandeur de la bête royale;
Et j’aime à rencontrer de fiers êtres méchants
Afin de rassurer le monde avec mes chants;

Je ne suis pas fâché quand des lions m’attaquent;
Des monstres, légions rugissantes, me traquent,
C’est bien, je les attends, songeant sous des cyprès.
Je leur montre les dents quand ils viennent trop près;
J’en. fais, quand il le faut,,. un exemple efficace;
Et l’on peut voir dans l’ombre à mes pieds la carcasse
De l’un d’eux qui, je crois, était un empereur.
Mais j’ai fort peu le temps de me mettre en fureur,

Et j’aime mieux rester tranquille. Je médite
Sur la terre, bénie au fond des cieux, maudite
Au fond des temples noirs par le fakir sanglant;
J’aime dans l’oeuf l’oiseau, le chêne dans le gland,
Dans l’enfant l’avenir, et sitôt que l’aurore.
Commence à nous verser du jour, je dis: Encore!
Et je demande au ciel pour nous, humanité,
Un élargissement immense de clarté;
Les injures qu’on peut me faire sont couvertes
Par l’azur, par le doux frisson des branches vertes,
Par le divin babil des nids mélodieux;
Cette nature a tant d’oreilles et tant d’yeux,
Elle regarde avec tant. de majesté l’homme,
Elle est si bien prodigue et si bien économe
De sa force que tout reçoit, que rien ne perd,
Elle mêle un tel verbe à son puissant concert,
Que je sens le besoin d’être un songeur utile;
Dieu surveille le vent, je surveille mon style,
Car l’orage et le vers seraient de vils moqueurs
Si l’un troublait les flots, si l’autre ouvrait les coeurs
. Sans règle, et s’ils n’avaient pour but, dans l’ombre infâme,
L’un d’assainir la mer, l’autre d’agrandir l’âme;
L’ombre, c’est l’ennemi, je la combats; je veux.
Aux énigmes du sort arracher des aveux,
Leur ôter notre coeur qu’elles ont dans leur serre,
Dissiper l’ignorance, abolir la misère;
Je suis l’esprit sévère, inquiet, froid, hautain,
Et le contradicteur de l’énorme destin;
Je marche sous l’horreur des branchages superbes,
Dans les profondes fleurs et dans les hautes herbes,
Ignorant les pays. interdits à mes pas,
Insulté de si loin que. je ne le sais pas;
J’aime tous les soleils et toutes les patries;
Je suis le combattant des grandes rêveries,
Le songe est mon ami, l’utopie est ma soeur;
Je n’aide haine en moi qu’à force de douceur;
J’écoute, comme un bruit de vagues débordées,

Le murmure confus des futures. idées,
Et je prépare un à ce torrent qui vient;
Je sais que. Dieu promet, ce que. l’avenir tient,
Et j’apprête au progrès sa route dans l’espace;
Je défends les berceaux et les tombeaux, je passe,
Ayant le vrai, le bien, le beau, pour appétits,
Inattentif aux rois quand ils sont trop-petits.

12 juin.

X ALSACE ET LORRAINE

Ô le rêve insensé que font ces misérables!
De qui parlez-vous là? Des rois. Jours exécrables!
Jours que de noirs essaims d’Euménides suivront!
Terre et cieux! que mon nom, synonyme d’affront,
Soit maudit, que ma main se sèche et se flétrisse
Si jamais se taisait ma voix accusatrice!”
Temps hideux! voilà donc comment ces meurtriers,
Eclaboussés de sang du casque aux étriers,
Ivres d’orgueil, de bruit, de clairons, de bannières,
Traitent les nations, leurs pâles prisonnières!.
César brille, une flamme affreuse l’empourprant.
On coupe par morceaux les peuples. On en prend
Ce qu’on veut, ce qui plaît, le bras, le coeur, la tête.
On est un tas d’oiseaux de proie et de tempête
Se ruant sur l’auguste et sombre genre humain.
On est les chefs de l’ombre et l’on a dans la main
Les rênes des chevaux du sépulcre, on excite
De la voix tous les chiens monstrueux du Cocyte,
Grant, Bismarck et Gladstone et Bancroft l’aboyeur;
Cette prostituée inepte, la frayeur,
Mère des lâchetés, vous aide épouvantée;
Et pour tuer Paris,-ô tentative athée!
Comme jadis Xercès contre Léonidas,
On pousse la marée horrible des soldats,
On gonfle le flot noir des légions sinistres
On est les dieux ayant les démons pour ministres;
Et quand on a commis tous ces crimes, on va
Remercier ce spectre idiot, Jéhovah!,
Puis on chante et l’on rit, sans voir que Cette fête
Où manque le vrai Dieu, déplaît au vrai prophète,
Et que le justicier, Juvénal, d’Aubigné,
Tacite, est là qui rêve et regarde indigné.
On enterre l’argent pillé, les deux provinces,.
Les morts; on a la joie effroyable des princes;

On se visite, on s’offre un régiment, on est
Plus souriant que n’est épineux le genêt;
On traîne aux bals charmants ses royales paresses,
Et l’on se fait de tigre à tigre des caresses.
. Quant au sang, laissez-le couler, c’est un torrent.
Et cependant, on a des sophistes, dorant
Ces gloires, ces traités haineux, cette infamie.
Une belle captive est une belle amie
Pourvu qu’elle comprenne et se calme; fermons
L’antre des vents soufflant sur les mers et les monts;
Que du drame sanglant sorte l’idylle agreste;
Paix! quand on a tout pris, on peut laisser le reste.
Bonheur! concorde! Plus de courroux! Plus d’effroi!
Et l’on dit à la France: Allons, apaise-toi,
C’est fini, France. -Eh quoi, de ma mémoire amère,
J’effacerais Strasbourg et Metz! dit cette mère
Ah! j’oublierais plutôt mes deux seins arrachés!

Non, nous n’oublierons pas! Rois, ce que vous cherchez,
Le butin, puis la paix dans la forêt déserte,
Ce que, vous attendez, vous ne l’aurez pas, certe;
Mais ce que vous aurez, vous ne l’attendez pas:
C’est le. gouffre. Avancez ,dans l’ombre pas à pas.
Allez, marchez. Toujours derrière la victoire
L’avenir, livre obscur, réserve pour l’histoire
.Un feuillet, noir ou blanc, qu’on nomme le revers.
Les naufrages profonds devant vous sont ouverts.
Allez, hommes de nuit. Ah! vous êtes superbes,
Vous régnez! ô faucheurs, vous pliez sous vos gerbes
De cadavres, de fleurs, de cyprès, de lauriers,
Conquérants dont seraient jaloux les usuriers!
Mais vous comptez en vain, voleurs de ma Lorraine,
Sur mon peu de mémoire et sur mon peu de haine,
Je suis un, je suis Tous, et ce que je vous dis
Tous les coeurs furieux vous le disent, bandits!
Non, nous n’oublierons pas! Lorraine, Alsace, ô villes,

O chers français, pays sacrés, soyez tranquilles.
Nous ne tarderons point. Le glaive est prêt déjà
Que Judith pâle au flanc d’Holopherne plongea.
Eternel souvenir! Guerre! guerre! Revanche!

Ah! ton peuple vivra, mais ton empire penche,
Allemagne. 0 ,révolte au Tond du tombeau sourd!
O. tocsin formidable au clocher de Strasbourg!
Ossements remués-!’dressement de fantômes!
Czars, princes, empereurs, maîtres du monde, atomes,
Comme ces grands néants s’envolent dans la nuit!
Comme l’éternité des rois s’évanouit!
Des hommes, jeunes, vieux, hurlant, des paysannes,
Des paysans, ayant des faulx pour pertuisanes,
Ah! le jour de la lutte, il en viendra plus d’un!
Metz imitera Lille et Strasbourg Châteaudun;
Vos canons contre vous retourneront leurs gueules,
Les pierres se mettront en marche toutes seules
Et feront des remparts contre vous, et les tours
Vous chasseront, hiboux, milans, corbeaux, vautours!
On verra fourmiller le gouffre des épées;
Alors revivra, fière, au vent des épopées,
La. Révolution debout, le sabre au poing;.
Et, pâles, vous de qui l’avenir ne veut point,
Vous verrez reparaître, ô rois, cette gorgone
A travers le branchage effrayant de l’Argonne;
La France embrassera l’Alsace, embrassera
La Lorraine, ô triomphe! et l’Europe sera!
Et les vengeurs, avec des chants et des huées,-
Plus abondants que l’ombre au puits noir des nuées,
Plus pressés que l’averse en un ciel pluvieux,
Viendront, et je verrai cela, moi qui suis. vieux!

Vous riez. N’est-ce pas que l’heure est mal choisie,
Rois, pour tant d’espérance et tant de frénésie,
Quand on vide nos sacs d’écus, quand nous avons
Le même sort qu’ont eu jadis les esclavons,

Quand tout notre sang fuit par notre veine ouverte,
Quand vos fusils joyeux ont tous leur branche verte,
Quand tout est gloire, orgueil, force! -Eh bien, vous verrez.
Soit. Les songes ne sont pas encor dédorés
Mais, princes, cette chose étrange, la justice;
Existe; et, quel que soit le château qu’on bâtisse,
Fût-il de marbre, il est d’argile, et son ciment
Périra, s’il n’a pas le droit pour fondement;
Son mur est vain s’il n’est gardé que par le nombre,
Et sa porte de bronze est faite avec de l’ombre.
Vos peuples sont déjà repentants de vous voir
Tant d’ivresse, un tel sceptre aux mains, tant de pouvoir;
Ils vous ont couronnés, ne sachant pas qu’un Louvre
Abrite la rapine et le vol, dès qu’on l’ouvre;
Ils frémissent de voir que vous avez tout pris.
C’est de leur flanc que l’arbre immense du mépris
Sortira comme un chêne horrible sort de terre.

Vous croyez, tout-puissants stupides, qu’on fait taire
L’éternelle clameur des hommes opprimés!
Vous pesez sur les gonds de la nuit, vous fermez
La porte. par où doit venir la grande aurore!
Vous tentez d’étouffer l’aube-auguste et sonore!:

Ah! vous vous attaquez au sinistre avenir!
Il vient ressusciter, sauver, aimer, punir!
Tremblez! vous violez la rive inabordable.
Savez-vous les secrets de la nuit formidable?
C’est nous que le matin mystérieux connaît;
Ce qui germe, ce qui s’avance, ce qui naît,
Ce qui pense, est à nous. Donc tremblez, ô despotes.
Tout ce que tu fais, Krupp, tout ce que tu tripotes,
Bismarck, tous les fourneaux, flamboyants entonnoirs,
Où l’âpre forge, souffle avec ses poumons noirs,
Fabriquant des canons, des mortiers, des bombardes,
Tout ce qu’un faux triomphe inspire à de faux bardes,
Rois, je vous le redis, ce décor d’opéra

Pâlira, passera, fuira, s’écroulera

Oui, nous sommes tombés et vaincus, et le Xanthe
Frémissant ne vit pas Ilion plus gisante;
Oui, nous sommés à terre, à bas, brisés, battus
Oui, mais Quatrevingt-douze et ses sombres vertus
Crôissent dans nos enfants, et notre ciel se dore
De ce vieil astre, éclos dans cette jeune aurore;
Leurs fraîches voix sont là chantant les grands défis,
Nous voyons nos aïeux renaître dans nos fils;
Oui, vous l’emportez; mais nul ne trompe et n’évite
L’oeil invisible; et bien qu’un larron marche vite,
Le châtiment boiteux le suit et le rejoint;
Mais mon pays n’est pas assez mort pour ne point
Entendre votre éclat de rire dans sa tombe,
Et cela te réveille, ô France, ô ma colombe,
O ma douce patrie, ô grand aigle effrayant!
Oui, vous croyez que tout finit en balayant,
Et que lorsqu’on a mis dans un coin les décombres,
On peut sur les tombeaux laisser rôder les ombres.
Eh bien non. Car une ombre est une âme. Oui, tyrans,
Nous sommes accablés, dépouillés, expirants,
Nous n’avons plus d’amis, plus d’argent, plus d’armée,
Plus de frontières, mais nous avons la fumée
De nos hameaux brûlés qui vous dénonce tous,
Et qui noircit le ciel contre vous, et pour nous!
Mais l’étoile survit quand. le navire sombre;
Mais quand l’assassiné saigne dans le bois sombre,
Une blême lueur sort du cadavre nu.
Mais le destin pensif s’est toujours souvenu
De la nécessité de punir les coupables;
Mais l’invincible essaim des forces impalpables
Qu’on nomme vérité, devoir, progrès, raison,
Vient vers nous et remplit de rumeur l’horizon;
Mais nous sommes aidés par toute l’âme humaine;
Mais le monde a besoin d’un flambeau qui le mène,
Et vous vous appelez Ténèbres; mais le jour,

Le saint travail, la paix, la liberté, l’amour,
Tout cela conduit l’homme et tient dans le mot France!
Oui, nous sommes le deuil, la chute, la souffrance,
Nul peuple de si bas encor n’est revenu;
Mais nous avons pour nous ce quelqu’un d’inconnu
Dont on voit par moments passer l’ombre sublime
Par-dessus là muraille énorme de l’abîme!

9 novembre 1872

XI LA LIBÉRATION DU TERRITOIRE

Je ne me trouve pas délivré. Non, j'ai-beau
Me dresser, je me heurte au plafond du, tombeau,
J'étouffe, j'ai sur moi l'énormité terrible.
Si quelque soupirail blanchit la nuit visible,
J'aperçois là-bas Metz, là-bas Strasbourg, là-bas
Notre honneur; et l'approche obscure des combats,
Et les beaux enfants blonds, bercés dans les chimères,
Souriants, et je songe à vous, ô pauvres mères.
Je consens, si l'on veut, à regarder, je vois
Ceux-ci rire, ceux-là chanter à pleine voix,
La moisson d'or, l'été, les fleurs, et la Patrie
Sinistre, une bataille étant sa rêverie.
Avant peu l'Archer noir embouchera le cor;
Je calcule combien il faut de temps encor;
Je pense à la mêlée affreuse des épées.
Quand des frontières sont par la force usurpées,
Quand un peuple gisant se voit le flanc ouvert,
Avril peut rayonner, le bois peut être vert,
L'arbre peut être plein de nids et de bruits d'ailes;
Mais les tas de boulets, noirs dans les citadelles,
Ont l'air de faire un songe et de frémir parfois,
— Mais les canons muets écoutent une voix
Leur parler bas dans l'ombre, et l'avenir tragique
Souffle à tout cet airain farouche sa logique.

Quoi! vous n'entendez pas, tandis que vous chantez,
Mes frères, le sanglot profond des. deux cités!
Quoi! vous ne voyez pas, foule aisément sereine,
L'Alsace en frissonnant regarder la Lorraine!
— O soeur, on nous oublie! on est content sans nous! -
Non! nous n'oublions pas! nous sommes à genoux

Devant votre supplice, ô villes! Quoi! nous croire
Affranchis, lorsqu'on met au bagne notre gloire,

Quand on coupe à la France un pari de son manteau,
Quand l'Alsace au carcan, la Lorraine au poteau,
Pleurent, tordent leurs bras sacrés, et nous appellent,
Quand nos frais écoliers, ivres de rage, épellent
Quatrevingt-douze, afin d'apprendre quel éclair
Jaillit du coeur de Hoche et du front de Kléber,
Et de quelle façon, dans ce siècle où nous sommes,
On fait la guerre aux rois d'où sort la paix des hommes!
Non, remparts, non, clochers superbes, non jamais
Je n'oublierai Strasbourg et je n'oublierai Metz.
L'horrible aigle des nuits nous étreint dans ses serres,
Villes! nous ne pouvons, nous français, nous vos frères,
Nous qui vivons par vous, nous par qui vous vivez,
Etre que par Strasbourg et par Metz délivrés!
Toute autre délivrance est un leurre; et la honte,
Tache qui croît sans cesse, ombre qui toujours monte,
Reste au front rougissant de notre histoire en deuil,
Peuple, et nous avons tous un pied dans le cercueil,
Et pas une cité n'est entière, et j'estime
Que Verdun est aux fers, que Belfort est victime,
Et que Paris se traîne, humble, amoindri, plaintif,
Tant que Strasbourg est pris et que Metz est captif.
Rien ne nous fait le coeur plus rude et plus sauvage
Que de voir cette voûte infâme, l'esclavage,
S'étendre et remplacer au-dessus de nos yeux
Le soleil, les oiseaux chantants, les vastes cieux!
Non, je ne suis pas libre. O tremblements de terre!
J'entrevois sur ma tête un nuage, un cratère,
Et l'âpre éruption des peuples, fleuve ardent;
Je râle sous le poids de l'avenir grondant,
J'écoute bouillonner la lave sous-marine,
Et je me sens toujours l'Etna sur la poitrine!

Et puisque vous voulez que je vous dise tout,
Je dis qu'on n'est point grand tant qu'on n'est pas debout,
Et qu'on n'est pas debout tant qu'on traîne une chaîne;
J'envie aux vieux romains leurs couronnes de chêne;

Je veux qu’on soit modeste et hautain; quant à moi,
Je déclare qu’après tant d’opprobre et d’effroi,
Lorsqu’à peine nôs murs chancelants se soutiennent,
Sans me préoccuper si des rois. vont et viennent,
S’ils arrivent du Caire ou bien de Téhéran,
Si l’un est un bourreau, si l’autre est un tyran,
Si ces curieux sont des monstres, s’ils demeurent
Dans une ombre hideuse où des nations meurent,
Si c’est au diable ou bien à Dieu qu’ils sont dévots,
S’ils ont des diamants aux crins de leurs chevaux,
Je dis que, les laissant se corrompre ou s’instruire,
Tant que je ne pourrais faire au soleil reluire
Que des guidons qu’agite un lugubre frisson,
Et des clairons sortis à peine de prison,
Tant que je n’aurais pas, rugissant de colère,
Lavé dans un immense Austerlitz populaire
Sedan, Forbach, nos deuils, nos drapeaux frémissants,
Je ne montrerais point notre armée aux passants!

Ô peuple, toi qui fus si beau, toi qui naguère
Ouvrais si largement tes ailes dans la guerre,
Toi de qui l’envergure effrayante couvrit
Berlin, Rome, Memphis, Vienne, Moscou, Madrid,
Toi qui soufflas le vent des tempêtes sur l’onde
Et qui fis du chaos naître l’aurore blonde,
Toi qui seul eus l’honneur de tenir dans ta main
Et de pouvoir lâcher ce grand oiseau, Demain,
Toi qui balayas tout, l’azur, les étendues,
Les espaces, chasseur des fuites éperdues,
Toi qui fus le meilleur, toi qui fus le premier,.
O peuple, maintenant, assis sur ton fumier,
Racle avec un tesson le pus de tes ulcères,
Et songe.

La défaite a des conseils sincères;
La beauté du malheur farouche, c’est d’avoir
Une fraternité sombre avec le devoir;

Le devoir aujourd’hui, c’est de se laisser croître,
Sans bruit, et d’enfermer, comme une vierge au cloître,
Sa haine, et de nourrir les noirs ressentiments.
A quoi bon étaler déjà nos régiments?
A quoi bon galoper devant l’Europe hostile?
Ne point faire envoler de poussière inutile
Est sage; un jour viendra d’éclore et d’éclater;
Et je crois qu’il vaut mieux ne pas tant se hâter.

Car il faut, lorsqu’on voit les soldats de la France,
Qu’on dise: -C’est la gloire et c’est la délivrance!
C’est Jemmapes, l’Argonne, Ulm, Iéna, Fleurus!
C’est un tas de lauriers, au soleil apparus!
Regardez. Ils ont fait les choses impossibles.
Ce sont les bienfaisants, ce sont les invincibles.
Ils ont pour murs les monts et le Rhin pour fossé. -
En les voyant, il faut qu’on dise: -Ils ont chassé
Les rois du nord, les rois du sud, les rois de l’ombre;
Cette armée est le roc vainqueur des flots sans nombre,
Et leur nom resplendit du zénith au nadir! -
Il faut que les tyrans tremblent, loin d’applaudir:

Il faut qu’on dise: -Ils sont les amis vénérables
Des pauvres, des damnés, des serfs, des misérables,
Les grands spoliateurs des trônes, arrachant
Sceptre, glaive et puissance à quiconque est méchant;
Ils sont les bienvenus partout où quelqu’un souffre.
Ils ont l’aile de flamme habituée au gouffre.
Ils sont l’essaim d’éclairs qui traverse la nuit.
Ils vont, même quand c’est la mort qui les conduit.
Ils sont beaux, souriants, joyeux, pleins de lumière;
Athène en serait folle et Sparte en serait fière. -
Il faut qu’on dise: -Ils sont d’accord avec les cieux!
Et que l’homme, adorant leur pas audacieux,
Croie entendre, au-dessus de ces légionnaires
Qui roulent leurs canons, Dieu rouler ses tonnerres!

C’est pôurquoi j’attendrai.

Qu’attends-tu? -Je réponds:
J’attends l’aube, j’attends que tous disent: -Frappons!
Levons-nous! et donnons à Sedan pour réplique
L’Europe en liberté! -J’attends la république,
J’attends l’emportement de tout le genre humain!
Tant qu’à ce siècle auguste on barre le chemin,
Tant que la Prusse tient prisonnière la France,
Penser est un affront, vivre est une souffrance,
Je sens, comme Isaïe insurgé pour Sion,
Gronder le profond vers de l’indignation,
Et la colère en moi n’est pas plus épuisable
Que le flot dans la mer immense, et que le sable
Dans l’orageux désert remué par les vents.

Ce que j’attends? J’attends que les os soient vivants!
Je suis spectre, et je rêve, et la cendre me couvre,
Et j’écoute; et j’attends que le sépulcre’s’ouvre.
J’attends que dans les coeurs il s’élève des voix,
Que sous les conquérants s’écroulent les pavois,
Et qu’à l’extrémité du malheur, du désastre,
De l’ombre et de la honte, on voie un lever d’astre!

Jusqu’à cet instant-là, gardons superbement,
Ô peuple, la fureur de notre abaissement, -
Et que tout l’alimente et que tout l’exaspère.
Étant petit, j’ai vu quelqu’un de grand, mon père.
Je m’en souviens; c’était un soldat, rien de plus;
Mais il avait mêlé son âme aux fiers reflux,
Aux revanches, aux cris de guerre, aux nobles fêtes,
Et l’éclair de son sabre était dans nos tempêtes.
Oh! je ne-vous veux pas dissimuler l’ennui,
A vous; fameux hier, d’êtré obscurs aujourd’hui,
O nos soldats, lutteurs infortunés, phalange
Qu’illumina jadis la gloire sans mélange,
L’étranger à cette heure, hélas! héros trahis,

Marche-sur votre histoire et sur votre pays.;
Oui, vous avez laissé ces reîtres aux mains viles
Voler nos-champs,-voler nos murs, voler nos villes,
Et compléter leur gloire avec nos sacs d’écus;
Oui, vous fûtes captifs, oui, vous êtes vaincus;
Vous êtes dans le puits des chutes insondables;
Mais c’est votre destin d’en sortir formidables,
Mais vous vous dresserez, mais vous vous lèverez,
Mais vous serez ainsi que la faulx dans les prés;
L’hercule celte en vous, la hache sur l’épaule,
Revivra, vous rendrez sa frontière à la Gaule,
Vous foulerez aux pieds Fritz, Guillaume, Attila,
Schinderhanne et Bismarck, et j’attends ce jour-là!

Oui, les hommes d’Eylau vous diront: Camarades!

Et jusque-là, soyez pensifs loin des parades,
Loin des vaines rumeurs, loin des faux cliquetis,
Et regardez grandir nos fils encor petits.

Je vis désormais, l’oeil fixé sur nos deux villes.

Non, je ne pense pas que les rois soient tranquilles;
Je n’ai plus qu’une joie au monde, leur souci.
Rois, vous avez vaincu, vous avez réussi,
Vous bâtissez, avec toutes sortes de crimes,
Un édifice infâme au haut des monts sublimes.
Vous avez entre l’homme et vous construit un mur,
Soit. Un palais énorme, éblouissant, obscur,
D’où sort l’éclair, où pas une lumière n’entre,
Et c’est un temple, à moins que ce ne soit un antre.

Pourtant, eût-on pour soi l’armée et le sénat,
Ne point laisser de trace après l’assassinat,
Rajuster son exploit, bien laver la victoire,
Nettoyer le côté malpropre de la gloire,
Est prudent. Le sort a des retours tortueux,

Songez-y. J’en conviens, vous êtes monstrueux;
Vous et vos chanceliers, vous et vos connétables,
Vous êtes satisfaits, vous êtes redoutables;
Vous-avez, joyeux, forts, servis par ce qui nuit,
Entrepris le recul du monde vers la nuit;

Vous faites chaque jour faire un progrès à l’ombre;
Vous avez, sous le ciel d’heure en heure plus sombre,
Princes, de tels succès à nous faire envier
Que vous pouvez railler le vingt-et-un janvier,
Le quatorze juillet, le dix août, ces journées
Tragiques, d’où sortaient les grandes destinées,
Que vous pouvez penser que le Rhin, ce ruisseau,
Suffit Tour arrêter Jourdan, Brune et Marceau,
Et que vous pouvez rire en vos banquets sonores
De tous nos ouragans, de toutes nôs aurores,
Et des vastes efforts des titans endormis.
Tout est bien; vous vivez, vous êtes bons amis,
Rois, et vous n’êtes point de notre or économes;
Vous en êtes venus à vous donner les hommes
Vous vous faites cadeau d’un peuple, après souper;
L’aigle est fait pour planer et l’homme pour ramper;
L’Europe est le reptile et vous êtes les aigles;
Vos caprices, voilà nos lois, nos droits, nos règles;
La terre encor n’a vu sous le bleu firmament
Rien qui puisse égaler votre assouvissement;
Et le Destin pour vous s’épuise en politesses;
Devant vos majestés et devant vos altesses,
Les prêtres mettent Dieu stupéfait à genoux;
Jamais rien n’a semblé plus éternel que vous;
Votre toute-puissance aujourd’hui seule existe;
Mais, rois, tout cela tremble, et votre gloire triste
Devine le refus profond de l’avenir;
Car sur tous les bonheurs que vous croyez tenir,
Sur vos arcs triomphaux, sur vos splendeurs hautaines,
Sur tout ce qui compose, ô rois, ô capitaines,
L’amas prodigieux de vos prospérités,

Sur ce que vous rêvez, sur ce que vous tentez,
Sur votre ambition et sur votre espérance,
On voit la grande main sanglante de la France.

29 août 1873. Villa M.

XII Le lionceau songeait

;il était tout petit,
Caché muet, pareil au chat qui se blottit,
Loin du soleil, dans l’ombre où les rayons s’émoussent.

Combien faut-il de temps pour que ses ongles poussent?
Il songeait.

Laissez-moi vous dire qùe les rois,
Lugubres, font le mal; foulent aux pieds les dràits,
Les vérités, l’honneur, la vertu, la justice -
Ils font venir le prêtre afin qu’on rebâtisse
L’enfer dans l’âme humaine où Dieu mit la raison;
Et leurs prospérités sont faites de façon
Que la gloire d’un peuple est la honte de l’autre;
Leur grandeur dans les tas d’immondices se vautre,
Leurs sceptres aux plaisirs obscènes sont mêlés,
La bauge aux pourceaux plaît à ces paons étoilés;
Hier, ils souffletaient lés nations meurtries;
Gais, ils jouaient aux dés les robes des patries;
A celui-ci le Nil, à celui-là le Rhin;
Quand.ils. ont sur leur front. mis leur cimier d’airain,
Rien ne peut modérer leurs fureurs, peu calmées
Par des chansons d’église et des. danses d’almées;
Ils ont on ne sait quel appétit monstrueux
D’être horribles; ils sont, les dragons tortueux,
Les hydres, les passants sinistres de l’histoire;
Ils ont pour-eux le deuil, l’échafaud, la victoire,
Tout ce qui rampe et tremble; et les rires hautains;
La famine du peuple assiste à leurs festins;
L’aurore est leur palais, l’ombre est leur forteresse,
Leur faux pouvoir devant l’éternel Dieu se dresse
Dans toute l’impudeur de sa rébellion;
ils,sont dorés, ils sont fangeux.

Grandis, lion!

9 octobre 1873. Paris.

XIII Ô royauté!

Ô royauté! tàs d’ombre! amas d’horreur, d’effroi;
De crime, formidable au peuple, puis au roi,
Aveuglant les yeux qui le voient,
Plein de spectres, semblable aux visions d’Endos!
On n’y distingue rien qu’une couronne d’or
Dont les vagues fleurons flamboient.

Tempête d’ignorance, et de haine, et de nuit,
Où se heurtent chevaux, hommes, glaive qui luit,
Canon grondant, clairon sonore! -
Brume affreuse, pareille aux faces du tombeaù,
Qui fait, comme une bouche éteignant un flambeau,
Souffler l’ouragan sur l’aurore!

Lourd nuage, épandu sur les siècles tremblants,
D’où, quand il a pesé sur l’homme deux mille ans,
Et sur le peuple, flot qui roule,
On voit, après le bruit que fait un tombereau,
Sortir soudain le poing sinistre du bourreau
Montrant une tété à la foule!

XIV Quoi donc!

Quoi donc! avoir pour but cette lâcheté, plaire!
Se donner cet emploi noble, auguste, exemplaire,
La flatterie! avoir pour maîtres les passants!
Obéir au vent noir soufflant dans tous les sens!
Être contre, être pour, suivant le baromètre!
Blâmer, puis approuver, défendre, puis permettre,
Non selon le devoir, mais selon le succès!
Parce qu’il est des fous risqûant tous les essais,
Qui violent nos droits au nom de nos principes,
. Laisser faire! Laisser dénaturer les types
De l’honneur, du progrès, du droit, de l’équité!
Vouloir le talion! souffrir, ô Liberté,
Qu’un trousseau de clés pende et sonne à ta ceinture!
Quand dans une ombre énorme et triste on aventure
Toutes les vérités en deuil, dire: C’est bon!
Nier l’astre, admirer la blancheur du charbon,
Déclarer vrai le faux, et l’injustice juste,
Louer Carrier après avoir flétri Procuste!
Vêtir sa conscience au gré de la saison!
Se mettre à la fenêtre et guetter l’horizon,
Regarder se gonfler telle ou telle bannière,
Pour savoir à quelle heure et de quelle manière
On pourrait être vil le plus utilement!
Quoi!.ce principe hier sincère, aujourd’hui ment!
Quoi! toute vérité qui gêne n’est plus vraie!
Si c’est mon intérêt, le cygne est une orfraie,
Peuple, et de ce lion, le droit, je fais mon chien!
Il suffit, pour changer soudain le mal en bien,
Que ce soit un tyran. qui règne, au lieu d’un autre,
C’est un roi, l’on combat; c’est la foule, on se vautre.

Quoi! le penseur aura tonné superbement
Si c’est un empereur qui se sert du supplice,
Si c’est la multitude, il en sera complice!

— Et cet homme indigné sera l'homme ébloui!
O ciel! Après avoir dit non, bégayer oui!
Et, devant l'échafaud, dès que la foule en use,
Mettre un lâche sourire au masque de Méduse!
Voilà donc où la soif de plaire conduirait!
Non! Non! Non! Déserter, pour un sombre intérêt,
Ces vérités que nous français, nous établîmes,
Au peuple honnête et bon et plein d'instincts sublimes,
Mais préférant parfois les bas-fonds aux sommets,
Dire qu'il a raison quand il a tort,: jamais"!
Ah! plutôt qu'accepter de telles servitudes;
L'hoinnie qui parle ici fuirait aux solitudes,
Subirait tout, le froid, la faim; l'exil amer,
L'ennui, la surdité sauvage de la mer,
Tout, loin de la patrie et loin de la lumière,
Et le soir, bûcheron rentrant dans sa chaumière,
Las, pieds nus, à travers les ronces, traînerait
Derrière lui le bois coupé dans la forêt!...

27 avril 1871.

XV Un grand sabre

Un grand sabre serait d’utilité publique:
Est-ce qu’il n’est pas temps d’exterminer la clique
Des songeurs, des rêveurs, des penseurs, des savants,
Et de tous ces semeurs jetant leur graine aux vents,
Et de mettre au pavois celui qui nous fait taire,
Et de souffler sur l’aube, et d’éteindre Voltaire!
Qu’attendez-vous? Oh! comme il serait beau de voir
Quelque bon vieux tyran faire enfin son devoir,
Couper, tailler, trancher et mettre à vos Molières,
A vos Dantes, à vos Miltons, des muselières!
Nous en avons assez de tous ces bavards-là.
Le mal des hommes vient du premier qui parla.
0n va criant: Progrès! Fraternité! Couragè!
Quel besoin avons-nous de tous ces mots d’orage?
Jadis tout allait bien pourvu qu’on,se tînt coi.
On veut être à présent libre et maître. Pourquoi?
Liberté, c’est tempête. Il faut qu’un bon pilote
Ramène au port, la barque et le peuple à ,l’ilote.
Il faut qu’un belluaire ou qu’un homme d’état
Bride, ce peuple osant commettre l’attentat
De naître, et s’égarant jusqu’à la convoitise
Que montre au lys l’abeille et la chèvre au cytise.
Les révolutions continueront, le bruit
Et le vacarme iront grossissant dans la nuit,

Tant que nous n’aurons pas trouvé ce politique.
Reprenons l’ancien temple et l’ancienne boutique;
Revivre le passé nous suffit. Que veut-on?
A quoi sert Diderot? à quoi rime Danton?
Pourquoi Garibaldi trouble-t-il la Sicile?
Votre progrès n’est rien que fatigue imbécile!
Quelle rage avez-vous de marcher en avant?
Trop de tumulte sort de l’homme trop vivant.
L’esprit humain; longtemps calme et sombre, s’agite;

Ne serait-il pas bon qu’on fît rentrer au gîte
Et qu’on remît sous clefs et qu’on paralysât
Ce monstre, secouant sa chaîne de forçat?
Quoi! la.mouche, autrefois loyale et résignée,
Manque au respect qu’on doit aux toiles d’araignée!
Elle tente d’y faire un trou pour s’échapper!
La plèbe ose exister, gouverner, usurper!
Quoi! la vérité sort! la raison l’accompagne!
Vite! Rejetons l’une au puits, et l’autre au bagne!
Pour quiconque ose aller, venir, briser l’écrou,
L’enfer est un cachot avec Dieu pour verrou.
Qu’on y rentre. O révolte affreuse! Quel désordre
Que tous ces ouragans lâchés, tâchant de mordre,
Se ruant sur l’autel, sur la loi, sur le roi!
Oh! quel déplacement tragique de l’effroi!
L’inexorable pleure et les terribles tremblent;
Les vautours effarés aux passereaux ressemblent.
Deuil! horreur! regarder surgir de tous côtés
Un tas de vérités et de réalités,
Voir leur flamme, et songer que peut-être chacune
Apporte on ne sait quelle effrayante rancune,
Et, rayonnante, vient au monde reprocher
Le sceptre, l’échafaud, le glaive et le bûçher!
Oh! tant qu’on n’aura pas mis hors d’état de nuire
Tout ce qui veut créer, chauffer, féconder, luire,
Tant que le vieux bon ordre encourra le péril
De voir brusquement naître un formidable avril,
Tant qu’il sera permis aux folles plumes ivres
De porter les oiseaux et d’écrire les livres,
Tant qu’un homme qui dit j’ai faim! pâle, priant,
Pensif, fera blanchir vaguement l’orient;
Tant que le ciel complice aura la transparence
Qui laisse distinguer aux pauvres l’espérance,
Tant que le va-mi-pieds se croira citoyen,
Je suis de votre avis, bourgeois, aucun moyen
De dormir en repos, et nul coin de navire
Où l’on puisse être seul sauvé quand tout chavire.

Quoi! pas un prêtre, pas un juge, pas un roi,
Qui, tandis que frémit le livre de la loi,
S’il regarde la nuit le ciel noir, ne se sente
Troublé par la lueur du zénith grandissante!
Ceci, c’est. l’utopie, et ceci, le calcul,
Ceci, c’est le progrès sans terme et sans recul,
Voici le beau, le vrai, l’idéal qui prend. forme,
Et le juste, et voici la conscience énorme!
Qui donc pourrait, parmi les enfants de Japhet,
Conjurer le mystère inquiétant qui fait
Que nous voyons tomber dans l’ombre pêle-mêle
Tant de gouttes de lait de l’immense mamelle?
O terreur! tout s’éclaire! il est temps d’en-finir.
Qui sauvera le monde en péril d’avenir?
Caïn pleure, Judas gémit, Phalaris souffre.
Oh! qu’il serait urgent d’arrêter net le’gouffre
En pleine éruption de lumière; et la paix,
Le progrès, s’évadant des nuages épais,
La science, et, montant là-haut vers le solstice,
L’âme, et cette blancheur céleste, la justice;
Et comme on ferait bien de mettre à la raison
Les astres se levant en foulé à l’horizon!

25 août 1872. H. H.

XVI AUX HISTORIENS

Soyez juges. Soyez apôtres. Soyez prêtres.
Dites le vrai. Surtout n’expliquez pas les traîtres!
Car l’explication finit-par ressembler
A l’indulgence affreuse; et cela fait trembler.
Ne me racontez pas un opprobre notoire
Comme on raconterait n’importe quelle histoire.
Quelle est la quantité d’assassinat permis,
Jusqu’où peut-on s’entendre avec les ennemis,
Jusqu’où peut-on couper la gorge à la patrie,
L’épaule de Rague est-elle trop flétrie,
Dupont mérite-t-il tout ce qui l’accabla,
Non, non, je ne veux point de ces recherchés-là!
Je frémis, la rougeur au visage me monte.
Voilà tout. Je veux être un ignorant de honte.
Je veux rester stupide et furieux devant
Les coups du sort, les coups de mer, les coups de vent,
Auxquels vient s’ajouter le guet-apens d’un lâche.
Je prends le crime en bloc. Qui me calme, me fâche.
Non, l’histoire n’est point un lavage d’égout.
Historiens, ayez les traîtres en dégoût.

Ne rôdez point avec vos lampes dans leur cave;
Ne dites pas: Pourtant ce lâche était un brave;
Ne cherchez pas comment leur forfait se construit
Et s’éclaircit, laissez ces monstres à la nuit.
Où donc en serions-nous si l’on s’expliquait l’homme
Qui tel jour a livré Paris ou trahi Rome!
Discuter, c’est déjà l’absoudre vaguement.
Quoi! vous alléguerez ceci, cela, comment
Il se fait qu’on devient ce misérable étrange!
Quoi! vous m’expliquerez le pourquoi de la fange!
Vous me ferez toucher du doigt que ce soldat,
Ayant le fier devoir de mourir pour mandat,
A pu vendre le peuple et la France et l’armée,

Qu'il a pu devenir, souillant sa renommée,
Transfuge, sans nausée et sans rébellion,
Et qu'un renard était dans la peau du lion!
Vous aurez pour ces faits, dont l'effroi me pénètre,
Des prétextes, qui sait? et des motifs peut-être!
Non! je n'ai pas l'humeur d'écouter vos discours
Quand notre vieil honneur m'appelle à son secours,
Quand le malheur public sous ma fenêtre passe.
Quand l'abject trahisseur vient me demander grâce,
Je suis d'airain, je suis sourd, aveugle et muet;
J'aurais horreur de moi si mon coeur remuait.

Il ne me convient pas, sachez-le, de comprendre
Qu'un homme, ayant l'épée en main, ait pu la rendre;
Je ne veux pas savoir si ce gueux se méprit;
Il ne me convient pas de mettre en mon esprit
L'itinéraire affreux que suit le parricide;
Je ne veux pas qu'un grave écrivain m'élucide,
Avec faits à l'appui, groupés et variés,
Le cerveau de Clouet, le coeur de Dumouriez.
Ma strophe est l'euménide et je poursuis Oreste.
Meurtrier, c'est assez. Ce mot dit tout. Le reste
Est inutile et peut être nuisible. Il faut
Que Juvénal arrive et dresse l'échafaud,
Et qu'Eschyle, dieu noir, justicier olympique,
Frappe le traître avec le plat du glaive épique!
Lorsqu'un fourbe exécré du peuple qu'il perdit,
Un marchand de patrie et d'honneur, un bandit,
Vous prend pour avocats, ô penseurs, lorsqu'il ose
Vous porter son dossier, vous charger de sa cause,
Je suis content de vous si votre plaidoyer,
Justes historiens, consiste à foudroyer.

Toute explication d'un monstre l'atténue;
Je veux la perfidie immonde toute nue.
Le scélérat montré sans voile à tous les, yeux.
Donne un frisson meilleur et m'épouvante mieux.

Pour de certains forfaits clémence est connivence.
Quand dans l’intérieur d’un grand crime j’avance,
Quand dans l’ombre un cadavre auguste est découvert,
Quand il s’agit du flanc de ma mère entr’ouvert,
Quand l’impur ouvrier-.d’une exécrable trame,
Monk livrant un pays, Deutz livrant. une femme,
Coriolan, Leclerc, Pichegru,, m’apparaît,
Quand j’entre dans cette âme et dans cette forêt,
Je tremble, et je veux être, à cette approche noire,
Averti,par le cri terrible de l’histoiré.

Devant l’affront, devant, le traître à son puys,
O deuil! devant les champs paternels envahis,
Devant le râle affreux des cités violées,
Devant le sang versé pour rien dans les mêlées,
Si facile qu’on soit au pardon, non! jamais!
Il faut punir! Devant Baylen, devant Metz,
C’est pour la France en pleurs que notre cceur se serre,
La, lapidation publique est nécessaire;
Aux pavés, tous! frappons! et que l’écrasement
Du bandit soit sous l’ombre et les pierres fumant!
Pas de grâce! il faut être ou vèngeur ou complice;
Et quiconque n’est pas du crime est du suppliée.
Hélas!
Ce que je veux tuer, ce n’est pas lui,
C’est, son crime. Cet homme a failli, s’est enfui,.
Pour l’âme épouvantable et vile,
Pour celui qui livra la porte de la. ville,
Qui donna ses soldats, comme on donne un troupeau,
Qui poignarda la gloire et vendit le drapeau,
Pour cet homme de deuil, de mensonge et de ruse,
Les sombres firmaments n’admettent pas d’excuse.
Après que dans un siècle, où tout semble effacé,
Un si lâche assassin de l’honneur a passé,
On ne tient plus à vivre, on ne sait plus que croire;
Et la vertu, la foi, la probité, l’histoire,,
Sont comme des rayons dans la mer engloutis.

Si l’on voulait mêler-cet homme à ses petits,
La tigresse serait indignée et confuse;
La fauve honnêteté des-antres le refuse
Et ne lui donne point dans les bois frémissants
Place parmi les loups hideux, mais innocents;
A tout perdu!

Et toute la nature, étant une patrie,
Abhorre, en sa sauvage et fière rêverie,
Le fourbe autour duquel Satan vient chuchoter
L’astre des cieux n’est pas d’avis qu’on puisse ôter
Sa honte à ce damné dont Caïn est l’ancêtre,
Et veut lé voir infâme après l’avoir vu traître.
Ne faisons point douter les hommes; laissons-leur
L’horreur du meurtrier, du menteur, du voleur,
Ne troublons pas en eux la notion du juste;
Faisons luire à leurs yeux la certitude auguste,
L’héroïsme est un ciel, l’honneur est un azur;
Si vous livrez le peuple au scepticisme obscur,
Il ne sait plus quelle est la lueur qui le mène;
Alors tout flotte; alors la conscience humaine
A des blêmissements pires que la noirceur.

L’esquif dans l’eau diffuse a son avertisseur,
La boussole; il navigue et les hommes ont l’âme.
Laissez-leur ce conseil, laissez-leur cette flamme;
La droiture est leur pôle et le devoir leur nord;
La flotte en pleine mer et le peuple en plein sort,
La vie étant brumeuse et l’ombre étant profonde,
Ont besoin, dans la vaste obscurité de l’onde,
L’une de voir l’étoile et l’autre de voir Dieu.
Dieu, c’est la vérité rayonnant au milieu
Des ténèbres, du doute et de l’idolâtrie;
Et, quand les ennemis sont là, c’est la patrie.

Pour qui vend son pays, ciel noir, pas de pitié!

Ah! ne partageons point le crime par moitié
Entre le hasard louche et l'homme misérable.
Pas de grâce. Imitons l'abîme vénérable
Qui ne se laisse pas détourner de. son but;
Tout forfait doit payer au châtiment tribut;
La justice est la foi de fer que rien ne touche;
La peine a pour épée une flamme farouche;,
Le glaive de cet ange horrible est sans fourreau.
Pas plus que le hibou ne devient passereau,
Pas plus qùe le corbeau ne se change en colombe,
Un perfide ne peut être un juste; et la tombe
Pose et ferme à jamais son couvercle sur lui.
Les peuples, dont l'honneur est le seul point d'appui,
Veulent que le destin sur ce monstre exemplaire
Jette une catastrophe égale à leur colère;
Il convient que Judas ait Judas pour bourreau;
J'approuve le boulet qui terrassa Moreau
Et qui fut ce jour-là ressemblant au tonnerre.

Tout cet inattendù formidable où l'on erré,
Qu'on nomme histoire, où l'ombre a le ciel pour reflet,
C'est l'océan, tremblant, terrible, et, bien qu'il ait
De vagues mouvements de berceau, c'est le gouffre.
L'homme en ces profondeurs travaille, cherche, souffre,
Et l'espérance vole en avant, doux oiseau:
O pilote démon qui trahit le vaisseau!
Malheur au matelot monstrueux qui se traîne
Et fait avec sa vrille un trou dans la carène
Quand lé navire lutte en proie aux aquilons!

Historien, soyez implacable aux félons..
Je me sens inclément quand la patrie expire
Je ne hais point la mort, trouvant la honte, pire
Je ne suis. pas sévère et terrible à demi
Lorsqu'il s'agit de mettre en fuite l'ennemi;
J'exige la fureur, l'effort, la réussite!
Vous tenez le stylet tragique de-Tacite.

Eh bien soyez farouche et dur. Il me déplaît
Que le narrateur fasse un détail trop complet
De la difficulté de combattre, et calcule,
Complaisamment, le lieu, l’heure, le crépuscule,
La distance, le temps de marcher au cànon,
Si les soldats étaient bien disposés ou non,
S’il n’était point venu d’ordre contradictoire;
Je n’aime pas entendre ainsi parler l’histoire.
Et ce tas d’arguments, de motifs, de raisons,
C’est l’encouragement sinistre aux trahisons.
La plaidoirie est sombre et l’excuse est malsaine.
Ah! vous semez Grouchy! vous récoltez Bazaine.

15 janvier 1875

XVII VICTOIRES ET CONQUÊTES DE LA RELIGION

Garaste a triomphé de l’encyclopédie.
Tartufe est grand. L’église avait la maladie;
Elle est en traitement chez le docteur Véron.
Sbrigani joint les mains; Crispin rentre au `giron;
Pasquin est parfumé de myrrhe et de cinname.
Robert Macaire vieux s’est senti dans son âme
Pris de l’ambition d’une honorable fin;
Au paradis Veuillot il s’est fait séraphin.
Il s’y rend fort utile; il ouvre la boutique;

Il sait l’art d’ajuster le libelle au cantique;
Et tout bas, il murmure à travers son Credo:
Quand je serai curé, Bertrand sera bedeau.
Ayant, en qualité de regardeur oblique,
Un peu l’inspection de la chose publique,
Il surveille aujourd’hui l’esprit de nouveauté;
Pour lui la presse libre est une obscénité,
Et la. philosophie un tapage nocturne;
Dans l’église le cloître et dans l’art le cothurne,
Dans l’état le sergent de ville; tout est là.
Rien avant Hildebrand, rien après Loyola.
Scapin l’aide. Il déclame: Enfer! crime! hérésies!
Tremblez, âmes déjà plus qu’à moitié roussies!
Honnêtes gens, c’est moi qui vous passe au tamis.
Ayez foi seulement dans le bon Dieu permis.
Songez que je suis là! -Mascarille dit: Gare!
La conscience humaine étant une bagarre,
Il s’en fait conducteur; il sait le droit chemin;
Il veut qu’après l’émeute et les grands coups de main,
Le peuple se repente, ait l’âme d’ennui pleine,
Pleure, et de la Bastille aille à la Madeleine.
Toute la vérité tient dans le Syllabus.

La pensée en dehôrs d’Ignace est un abus,
Et tout ce qui survient n’est qu’erreurs et tumultes;
Debout au marchepied de l’omnibus des cultes,
Barrant la porte, il crie à tout venant: Complet!
Falstaff, dont le menton si gaîment se triplait,
Est dévot. Que sert-il? la messe. Il s’associe
Au dogme, et ses hoquets sentent l’orthodoxie;
Il coud un psaume au bout de son ancien couplet;
Une âme libre ouvrant ses ailes lui déplaît;
Montant la garde autour du missel, ce gros homme
Prêche, et son ventre prend fait et cause pour Rome;
Il dit qu’il ne faut pas laisser sans examen
L’homme communiquer avec l’esprit humain,
Qu’il est bon de tout craindre, et, de peur d’aventure,
De garder l’Éternel derrière une clôture;
Il croit; son estomac s’accouple au sacré-coeur;
Au seuil noir du mystère il s’installe vainqueur,
Prêt à barricader le gouffre avec sa table;
Il consacre au seul culte auguste et véritable
Ce qui reste à ses pieds des bons vins qu’il a bus;
Il emploie à servir les Jéhovahs fourbus
Et les religions mortes ou corrompues,
Tout l’arsenal cassé de ses franches repues;
Il n’entend pas qu’on aille à travers le ciel bleu,
L’ombre immense, en dehors du pape, chercher Dieu;
Il refuse aux penseurs l’air, l’horizon, l’espace,
Plantant, pour empêcher que l’esprit humain passe
Au-delà de la bulle In Caena Domini,
Tous ses culs de bouteille au mur de l’infini.

24 juin 1870.

XVIII Ô sombre femme,

Ô sombre femme, un jour, n’ayant plus de royaume,
Spectre, tu paraîtras devant le grand fantôme;
Et lui, l’être idéal, le seul. être vivant,
Il te dira: -Qu’es-tu?

Tremblante, comme au vent
La branche morte, hélas, tu diras: -J’étais reine.

— Étais-tu femme?

— Ô Dieu, ma jeunesse sereine
Fut belle et douce aux bras d’un mari triomphant;
J’eus la puissance avec le bonheur; tout enfant,
Je portais un grand sceptre antique et noir de rouille.

— Le sceptre importe peu. Que faisait ta quenouille
Pendant que tout un peuple’à tes pieds se courbait?
Réponds. Qu’as-tu filé?

— La corde du gibet.

24 novembre 1867.

Hier ont été pendus à Manchester les trois fenians Larkin, Alton et Gould.

XIX LA QUESTION SOCIALE

Non, non, non. Ce n’est point par la ruse, vous dis-je,
Que vous aurez raison du gouffre et du prodige;
Les ouragans ne sont en rien déconcertés
Par nos expédients et nos habiletés;
Non, je ne pense pas que l’aquilon s’apaise
Par égard pour Blondin flottant dans son trapèze,
Ni qu’un homme d’état fasse peur à l’éclair.
A force de danser sur une corde en l’air;

Le tonnerre n’est pas un chien hargneux qui boite
Et que nos coups de fouet font rentrer dans-sa boîte.
Jésus-Christ, tel qu’il est, dans saint-Luc et saint-Marc,
Voyait la politique autrement que Bismarck
Et voyait la justice autrement que Delangle;
A l’homme qu’on assomme, à l’homme qu’on étrangle,
Il prodiguait les soins du bon samaritain;
Si des vaincus tâchaient d’échapper au destin,
Son temple offrait l’asile à leur fuite tragique;
Si bien qu’on l’aurait, certe, expulsé de Belgique.

Ô mer, à ton niveau fatal tu monteras.
Il n’est pas d’empereurs et pas de magistrats,
II n’est pas de trident, gouffre, il n’est pas de conque,
Qui puissent à ton flot faire un effet quelconque;
L’abîme est la demeure orageuse de Dieu;
On ne calmera pas cet effrayant milieu
Quand même on enverrait des nymphes ingénues
Rire, et jusqu’au nombril s’y montrer toutes nues;
Ce profond océan, le genre humain, connaît
L’instant où le jour meurt, l’heure où l’étoile naît;
Il a sa loi, le flux et le reflux, l’espace,
Il voit le fond de l’ombre où Léviathan passe;
Il croît sur une plage et. sur l’autre il décroît;
Son équateur bouillonne et ses pôles ont froid;

Mais il n’écoute pas monsieur Rouher; il reste
Le vaste flot, tantôt joyeux, tantôt funeste,
Âpre, énorme, impossible à dompter, y mît-on
Bonaparte en Neptune et Devienne en Triton.

Peuple, en ton chaos, noir parfois d’écume immonde,
Le douteur ne voit rien, le penseur trouve un monde.
Tu montes, tu descends, tu remontes; tu n’as
Ni portes, ni verrous, ni clefs, ni cadenas;
Tu vas dans l’infini, liberté formidable!
Dieu te fait navigable et te laisse insondable;
Le sceptique te jette en vain son fil à plomb;
Mer fermée à Pyrrhon, tu t’ouvres à Colomb!

Vianden, 19 juin 1871.

XX Crois-tu donc qu’on sera César sans l’expier

Crois-tu donc qu’on sera César sans l’expier?
Qui donc t’a dit qu’on puisse être, sans récompense,
Epictète qui saigne en même temps qu’il pense?

Rêves-tu que toujours les uns seront en haut,
Rois que le trône fait exempts de l’échafaud,
Prêtres grands par le mal, soldats forts par le crime,
Et les autres en bas, subissant tout l’abîme?
Vois-tu le ciel pencher et crouler quelque part?
Tout a son contrepoids. Comptes-tu, par hasard,
Sans la grande équité qui se révèle et vibre
Et luit de tous côtés dans l’immense équilibre?
Dis, crois-tu que les uns seront mal, d’autres bien,
Que les uns auront tout, les autres n’ayant rien,
Ceux-ci sans pain, ceux-là couvrant de mets leurs tables,
Et qu’il ne viendra point des reflux redoutables?
Attends le dénoûment. La fin mettra le sceau.
Compte sur les retours. Crois-tu que le pourceau,
Formidable mangeur de toute pourriture,
De vos vomissements fera sa nourriture,
Hélas! et souffrira ce tourment sous le ciel
D’ouvrir la bouche au fond de l’égout’éternel,
Et d’être l’être infect souillé par l’être horrible;
Et qu’il ne viendra pas un jour, un jour terrible,
Où le monstre, penché sur tous, resplendissant
De la sombre lueur du monde finissant,
Éclaboussant quiconque a vécu dans l’ordure,
Ceux dont le coeur fut noir, ceux dont l’âme fut dure,
Les prêtres sur l’autel, les rois sous leur cimier,
Dans un hoquet vengeur leur rendra leur fumier!

XXI Jeunes hommes

Jeunes hommes éclos sous l’empire rapace,
Frais, roses et glacés, vous dites quand je passe:
«-Ah çà! qu’est-ce que c’est que cet homme? il est fou.
Les vieux ont pour devoir d’être vieux. Un hibou
N’a pas le droit d’aimer le soleil. A son âge,
Il devrait de l’hiver faire le personnage,
Et ne point se répandre en élans-insensés.

Quoi donc! il dit Encor! quand, nous disons Assez!
Un falot nous suffit; il lui faut l’aube immense.
Il va, criant: Progrès! Fraternité! Clémence!
Enfantillage. Il est à ce point puéril
D’accepter un devoir qui contient un péril.
Il veut la liberté quand il a la vieillesse;
Qu’en fera-t-il? Aïeul, quitte ce qui te laisse,
Quand auras-tu fini d’avoir vingt ans,vieillard?
Il veut le plein midi, nous aimons le brouillard;

Au sac d’or qui nous charme, il préfère une idée.
Quand l’homme est vieux, il sied que l’âme soit ridée.
Il veut des droits pour nous qui voulons des écus.
Il pense qu’on a tort d’écraser les vaincus;
Il ne voit pas qu’Octave est couvert par Auguste;
Il en est à ne pas comprendre qu’il est juste
De faire arquebuser par monsieur Galliffet
Les gens dont on a peur, quand même ils n’ont rien fait;
Qu’il faut de bons bourreaux dans la guerre civile;
Et qu’on ne doit pas plus plaindre un peuple, une ville,
Pour quelques va-nu-pieds qu’on a pris, mis sous clé,
Ou tués,qu’on ne plaint un champ qu’on a sarclé.
Cet homme est la démence et nous sommes les sages.
Ah! comme c’était bon, les antiques usages!
Quand verra-t-on les fous, les brouillons, les bavards,
Pendre aux arbres gaîment le long des boulevards?

Quoi! nés d’hier, c’est nous dont la raison éduque
Cette caboche dure, ingénue et caduque!
Il est plein de chimère et plein de vision.
Comme le rossignol et comme l’alcyon,
Il chante dans la nuit et court à la tempête.
Cetté vieille âme semble au combat toujours prête;
Il recommencerait l’exil, s’il le fallait;
II est stupide. Çà, bonhomme, apprends qu’il est
Deux enfances, et sache, Argan; qu’on y retombe;
L’une est près du berceau, l’autre est près de la tombe.
Les pierres, les sifilets, voilà ce qu’on te doit.
Ce n’est pas sans raison qu’on te montre du doigt,
Qu’un bébé fait ta joie, et que ta tête blanche,
Comme vers tes pareils, vers les enfants se penche.
Trop de jeunesse est grave à ton âge; il est bon
De n’être point marmot alors qu’on est barbon;
Chérubin dans la peau de Géronte fait rire.
Nous te le répétons, il faut savoir proscrire,
Frapper, amputer; vaincre, et le bien sort des maux.
Rêveur, laissons un peu de côté les grands mots,
Ne déclamons pas. Vois le fond réel des choses.
Nous acceptons les faits sans en chercher les causes,
Disons la vérité crûment; l’homme est complet
Lorsqu’il est le plus fort; on est riche, on s’y plaît;
Est-ce que ce n’est pas tout simple? On a des rentes,
Elles ne nous sont pas du tout indifférentes;
Plus de champagne à boire et de truffe à manger,
Nous l’avouons tout net, c’est poùr nous un danger;
Donc nous nous défendons, c’est juste. Diogène,
Rageant de voir dîner Trimalcion, le gêne.
La politique est l’art utile d’émonder.
Supprimer, c’est créer; châtrer, c’est féconder.
Quand la sève au printemps déborde et surabonde,
Une serpe a raison de cette vagabonde;
Couper le rameau fou qui fait tort au voisin,
Est sage; un jardinier est-il un assassin?
L’arbre étant surchargé d’un feuillage inutile

Et farouche, on le sauve alors qu’on le mutile;
Qui donc est de trop? nous, gens d’esprit, qui brillons?
Non! mais. les malvenus, les grabats, les haillons,
Les misères, les gueux, ceux que tu recommandes,
Pleutre, et les meurt-de-faim sont les branches gourmandes.
Qu’on les retranche. On a Cayenne pour cela.
Toujours un. peu de sang sur l’ordre ruissela;
Ce n’est pas. notre faute, et sot qui s’apitoie.
Un ouragan balaye, un carnage nettoie.
L’homme d’état réel prend son temps; celui-là,
Adroit, sait être Monck, et, fort, être Sylla.
Quoi donc! ton âge ignore et le nôtre t’enseigne!
Le peuple est un fiévreux qu’il faut:parfois qu’on saigne;
L’homme est habile et grand parmi les souverains
Qui lui lace un gilet de force sur les reins.
Le peuple est ton pégase, il est notre bourrique.
Sans doute il faut savoir user de rhétorique,
Jurer qu’on est du siècle, et qu’on respectera
La liberté, les droits de l’homme, et cætera;
Cela sonne bien; mais toute âme un peu maligne
Finit par s’appuyer sur la troupe de ligne;
On couronne des plans sûrs,-et dans l’ombre prêts,
Par un massacre heureux qu’on fait bénir après.
Le scrupule commence où finit la victoire;
Tels sont les temps, tels sont les coeurs, telle est l’histoire.
N’es-tu donc pas honteux. qu’on t’appelle innocent?
Nous estimons, retiens ceci, le trois pour cent,
Un grand sabre, et Bismarck; le reste, on le méprise.”

Soit, imberbes docteurs, raillez ma barbe grise
Qui pourtant, ne devrait pas faire d’envieux
Oui, c’est vrai, je suis jeune, et vous, vous êtes vieux.

19 août.

XXII RENTRÉE DANS LA SOLITUDE

Ô ses amis d’hier, pas d’aujourd’hui, qu’il trouve
La prudence pour vous bonne, et qu’il vous approuve,
Cela doit vous suffire. Il dit: Reniez-moi,
Et sourit. Il poursuit sa route sans émoi;

Il faut bien que le coeur des hommes se révèle.
Croyez-vous que ce soit une chose nouvelle
Pour lui qui reste droit lorsqu’on est à genoux,
De tenir tête aux sots, aux furieux, à vous?
Quand Bonaparte était le maître de la terre,
Devant ce tout-puissant il fut le solitaire.
Braver, lutter, souffrir, ne sont-ce pas ses moeurs?
N’a-t-il pas l’habitude ancienne des clameurs?
N’a-t-il pas; du sommet d’un roc dans les nuées,
Vu vingt ans à ses pieds écumer les huées?
Vingt ans, couronne au front, l’empire n’a-t-il point
A cet homme pensif, d’en bas montré le poing?
Il avait l’oeil hagard des antiques prophètes.
Alors comme aujourd’hui c’était un fou. Donc, faites.
Adieu. Ce qu’il promit, il le tient maintenant,
Et c’est trop fort, il est fidèle, il est gênant.
Reniez-le. Tournez du côté de l’injure;
Tout doit finir. La vie est-elle une gageure?
L’entêtement d’un seul est un reproche à tous.
Le devoir des lions est de vieillir toutous;
Les vents époumonés ont dégonflé leur outre.
Pourquoi s’obstine-t-il, cet homme? Passons outre.
C’est bien. Il reste seul. L’ombre est devant ses pas,
Il connaît le désert et ne s’en émeut pas.
Il s’évanouira de nouveau dans l’abîme.
Soit. Mais, toutes les fois que pour commettre un crimè
Les ennemis publics se feront signe entre eux,
Peuple, toutes les fois qu’un homme désastreux
Dressera contre toi quelque embûche à sa guise,

Toutes les fôis qu’un bruit de couteau qu’on aiguise
Se mêlera sinistre au tumulte confus
Des noirs événements pareils aux bois touffus,
Chaque fôis qu’un vaisseau partira pour Cayenne,
Chaque fois que Paris, la ville citoyenne,
Sera livrée au sabre, et que la liberté
Sentira quelque pointe infâme à son côté,
Chaque fois que des pas tortueux et funèbres
Marcheront vers un but obscur dans les ténèbres,
Alors, dans la nuit lâche où s’éclipsent les lois,
On entendra gronder une lointaine voix,
On verra tout à coup un fantôme apparaître,
Et les hommes distraits reconnaîtront peut-être
Cette ombre à sa tristesse au fond du firmament,
Et cette conscience à son rugissement.

Vianden, juin 1871.

XXIII Ô princes insensés!

Ô princes insensés! quoi! ne tremblent-ils pas
D’ouvrir la porte eux-même aux colères d’en bas!
De donner quelque chose à briser à la foule!
D’ébranler, de leurs mains, la maison qui s’écroule!
Et d’appeler en aide à leurs iniquités,
D’appeler au secours de leurs lâchés traités,
De leur pouvoir caduc, de leurs lois menacées,
Le morne paysan plein d’obscures pensées!
Ils ont pu, sans pâlir, voir à leur folle voix,
Sortir des lieux profonds, des masures, des bois,
Pour se répandre en hâte au loin sur des décombres,
Le noir fourmillement des multitudes sombres!

Ô princes insensés! Dieu juste! enseigne-leur
Ta loi, ton but sacré, ta justice!

Ah! malheur!
Malheur dans les hameaux et malheur dans les villes,
Quand parmi nos débats et nos luttes civiles,
Parmi nos passions, nous voyons, ô terreur!
Apparaître soudain la faulx du laboureur,
Qui, terrible et fatale à tous tant que nous sommes,
Quitte les champs de blés et vient faucher les hommes!

Effroyable moisson! calamités! forfaits!
Faulx, d’où la gerbe d’or, l’abondance et la paix
Devaient sortir, hélas, et d’où sort le ravage!
Outil rustique et saint! arme horrible et sauvage!
O croissant, d’où jaillit un large et sombre éclair,
Faulx! symbole du temps, de la mort, de l’enfer,
De tout bras qui moissonne implacable servante,
Dieu! comment n’ont-ils pas frissonné d’épouvante,
Ces rois! quand ils ont vu soudain, au milieu d’eux,
Ton resplendissement formidable et hideux!

Comment n’ont-ils pas eu, le prince et le ministre,
Quelque éblouissement de ta clarté sinistre,
Et n’ont-ils pas dans l’ombre entrevu ton chemin:
Les seigneurs aujourd’hui, les couronnes demain!

XXIV LE POËTE PREND LA PAROLE

J’ai pour muse, en ce monde où souffle un vent terrible
Sur l’homme et le destin, sur la graine et le crible,

Et sur les insensés livrés aux furieux,
Une sombre déesse au regard sérieux
Qui, lueur traversant l’ombre visionnaire,
Rôde dans la nuée, et, comme le’tonnerre,
Sent on ne sait quel noir besoin de châtier.
Car elle est juste. Eh quoi! voici le bénitier:
La bénédiction monstrueuse y surnage;
Voici le vrai, le faux, changeant de personnage,
Le mal joyeux; voici les pires qui sont rois,
Les démons sur le trône et les dieux sur la croix,
Voici le Te Deum valet de la bataille;
Voici le meurtre absous s’il est de haute taille
Et devenant vertu par son énormité;
Voici l’épouvantable et double nudité
Grelottant sous le chaume ou riant dans l’orgie;
Voici la plaie au flanc de la terre élargie,
L’exil, le deuil, les pleurs, les héros, les bouchers,
Et sur les paradis des reflets de bûchers;
Voici la sacristie et voilà la mosquée;
Voilà dans la forêt la vérité traquée
Que mordent.tous ces chiens hurlants, les appétits;
Voici’tout le fardeau du mal sur les petits,
Voici partout l’atroce engendré par l’immonde,
Et vous vous étonnez qu’en haut une voix gronde,
Et que parfois dans l’ombre on voie au fond des cieux
Un pâle éclair sortir d’un vers mystérieux!

26 août 1874.

XXV GRANDES OREILLES

C’est un bel attribut, la longueur de l’oreille.
L’oreille longue, au-fond de l’ombre, oscille, veille,
Songe, se couche à plat, se dresse tout debout,
Entend mal, comprend peu, s’épouvante, a du goût,
Frémit au moindre souffle agitant les ramées,
Se plaît dans les salons aux choses mal rimées,
S’émeut pour les tyrans sitôt qu’il en tombe un,
Fuit le poète, craint l’esprit, hait le tribun.
Ayez cette beauté, messieurs. La grande oreille
Avec le crâne altier et petit s’appareille;
En être orné, c’est presque avoir diplôme; on est
On a l’autorité de l’ignorance énorme;
On dit: -Shakspeare est creux, Dante n’a que la forme;
La Révolution est un phare trompeur
Qui mène au gouffre; il est utile d’avoir peur.
De l’effroi qu’on n’a plus on fait de la colère;
Pour glorifier l’ordre, on mêle à de l’eau claire
Des phrases qui du sang ont la vague saveur;
Dès que le progrès marche, on réclame un sauveur;
On vénère Haynau, Boileau, l’état, l’église,
Et la férule; et c’est ainsi qu’on réalise
Pour les Suins, les Dupins, les Cousins, les Parieux,
Les Nisards, l’idéal d’un homme sérieux,
Et qu’on a l’honneur d’être un bourgeois authentique,
Ane en littérature et lièvre en politique.

24 mai 1872.

XXVI À de certains moments,

À de certains moments, l’homme juste est risible.
Tous les archers moqueurs prennent l’honneur pour cible;
Les choses et les mots changent de sens; on est
Barbès, Garibaldi, Baudin, lisez: benêt;
Caton est le Sosie auguste de Jocrisse;
Prudence et dignité se nomment avarice;
Tout est défiguré, calomnié, noirci;
Un front de vierge n’est qu’un masque réussi.
Quoi! vous vous dites pur, vous me croyez donc bête.
Quel est votre motif secret pour être honnête?
Le bien suspect confine au mal; pas de vertu
Qui ne vienne d’un vice immonde qu’on ait eu;
Oh! s’il vivait, celui qu’on mena chez Pilate”
Sanglant, coiffé d’épine et vêtu d’écarlate,
Comme on reprocherait, en glosànt là-dessus,
La Madeleine au Christ et-saint-Jean à Jésus!
Comme on l’appellerait sacrilège, profane,
Fourbe! comme on rirait de ce dieu sur un âne!
Car on a tant d’esprit qu’on est inepte; on dit:
Monk est un paladin, Bayard est un bandit.
Un contresens hideux fausse les âmes viles.
O grandeurs des vieux temps, laissez-nous donc tranquilles!
La déroute, l’orgie, et la peur, sont nos soeurs;
Ceux qu’on nomme héros, nous les nommons poseurs;
Les invincibles sont suivis des incurables.
On entend un jongleur dire, -ô temps misérables! -
Que l’honneur est néant, que la gloire est zéro,

Et qu’il hait le martyr autant que le bourreau.
Quoi! Régulus! d’Assas! quoi! des vertus si hautes,
De tels dévoûments, c’est à se tenir les côtes!

Écoutez-les parler: Je dis, et je m’en tords
De rire, que Socrate au fond a tous les torts;

Bien vivre, et de laquais emplir son vestibule,
Cela vaut mieux que d’être Horace ou Thrasybule;
Je préfère, en dépit de Dante le rimeur,
Trimalcion qui soupe à Thraséas qui meurt;
Je contemple Aristide avec insouciance;
Je sens mon estomac plus que ma conscience;
Je ne tiens pas le moins du monde à rayonner,
Et plus qu’un grand exploit j’estime un bon dîner.
Ayons donc le bon sens d’être ce que nous sommes,
Des nains; délivrons-nous du fardeau des grands hommes.
A bas tous ces gens-là! l’orgueil les étouffait;
Votre Léonidas veut faire de l’effet;
Qu’est-ce que Winkelried? un crétin ineffable.
Quant à Guillaume Tell, messieurs, c’est une fable.
Le lion qui mangea Callisthène a bien fait.
Hoche, Marceau, Kléber? J’aime autant Galliffet.
Vivent ceux qui toujours plièrent et fléchirent! -

Et des sages, sortis de Lilliput, déchirent
Toute la vieille histoire où ces grands noms ont lui.
On se sent insulté par la gloire d’autrui.
On excuse Anitus et l’on comprend Zoïle.
Le vrai, le faux, cela se joue à croix ou pile.
On ébauche en l’honneur du tigre un vague chant;
Est-on sûr que Néron, après tout, fût méchant?
L’oiseau de basse-cour fête l’oiseau de proie.
On est abominable et stupide avec joie;
Décroître plaît; c’est. doux et bon d’être petit;
La multitude, ayant pour amour l’appétit,
Craint la contagion des âmes magnanimes;
Duperie et devoir deviennent synonymes;
L’infamie est utile et la probité nuit
Et c’est ainsi qu’on entre en raillant dans la nuit,
O douleur! et qu’on voit s’effacer au solstice
Tous ces astres, le droit, l’idéal, la justice,
C’est ainsi que notre âme abdique, c’est ainsi
Qu’un peuple est lentement par la honte saisi,

C’est ainsi qu’on est monstre après qu’on fut archange,
Que la Rome d’Émile et de Gracchus se change
En la Rome d’Ignace, et que le grand Paris
Tombe de plus que Sparte à moins que Sybaris.
16 août 1873. Auteuil. V. M.

XXVII À VOUS TOUS

Je ne vous cache pas que je pense à nos pères.
Durs au tigre,, ils mettaient le pied sur les vipères;
Ils affrontaient la griffe, ils bravaient les venins,
Et ne craignaient pas plus les géants que les nains.
Ils étaient confiants, ils faisaient de grands songes,
Et par toute l’Europe, au-dessus des mensonges,
Des crimes, des erreurs, ils faisaient sans repos
Flotter ces fiers chiffons qu’on appelle drapeaux;
Quand les rois accouraient vers nous, gueules ouvertes,
Quand, fauve, horrible, éparse en nos campagnes vertes,
Quelque armée arrivait, ils étaient là; souvent
Ils avaient dissipé comme un nuage au vent
Cette armée innombrable et terrible naguère,
Que les fleurs qu’ils mettaient à leur chapeau de guerre
N’avaient pas encore eu le temps de se faner.
Je sais que l’homme fort ne doit pas s’étonner,
Et qu’il est de bon goût d’envoyer des bouffées
De cigare à l’histoire, aux tombeaux, aux trophées;
Boire son vin vaut mieux que répandre son sang;
Je sais que le dédain sied aux coeurs d’à présent;
Et que des gens d’esprit et de bon sens qu’enivre
Ce but sublime, rire et digérer, bien vivre,
Sont grands, certe, et n’ont point le travers puéril
De vénérer ces vieux qui cherchaient le péril;
Les filles ont des droits, certes, et, je l’avoue,
C’est doux de contempler sur leur gorge et leur joue
Les roses et les lys, et la poudre de riz.
Quel ténor aura-t-on cette année à Paris?
Est-ce de damas rose ou bien de satin mauve
Qu’il faut vêtir sa belle et tendre son alcôve?
Quand passe, éblouissante et faite pour aimer,
Une femme au. front pur et charmant, s’informer
Si cet ange est à vendre et combien on l’achète;
Prier chez Dupanloup et souper chez Vachette;

Croire et jouir hanter des membres du Sénat;
Attendre dos au feu, le sourire incarnat
De l’aurore, attablés à des brelans féroces,
Pendant que nos cochers dorment sur nos carrosses;
Dormir, bâiller, railler, ignorer, être ainsi,
C’est beau, je le répète; et je comprends aussi
Qu’on évite un aïeul comme on fuit un reproche,
Et qu’on soit élégant, et qu’on n’ait dans sa poche,
Tandis que d’autres vont pieds nus sur le pavé,
Que de l’or dans de l’eau de Cologne lavé.
Je ne suis point ingrat pour l’air que je respire
Jusqu’à n’y pas sentir le parfum de l’empire,
Et le Napoléon troisième a fait nos coeurs
Tels qu’ils sont, gracieux, point fanfarons, moqueurs;
Toujours les Sybaris ont bafoué les Romes;
C’est bien. Màis il n’en est pas moins vrai que ces hommes
D’autrefois, peu frottés des savons de Guerlain,
Entrèrent dans Moscou, dans Vienne et dans Berlin;
Qu’ils châtiaient les rois de leurs façons brutales,
Qù’ils étaient familiers avec les capitales;
Qu’ils se plaisaient parfois à d’étranges assauts,
Que leur cavalerie attaquait des vaisseaux,
Les prenait, et donnait aux flottes l’abordage;
Que chacun d’eux, vieillard, enfant, se sentait d’âge
Et d’humeur à servir la France, et qu’à Valmy,
A Jemmape, à Fleurus, ils chassaient l’ennemi
A coups de hache, à coups de sabre, à coups de lance;
Qu’on e’n voyait plus d’un sortir de l’ambulance,
Et, comme à l’Océan retourne l’alcyon,
Revenir au combat, sans faire attention
A la blessure encore ouverte qui suppure;
Qu’ils mangeaient du pain sec et buvaient de l’eau pure,
Qu’ils allaient, qu’ils marchaient, qu’ils ne trouvaient jamais
Les gouffres trop profonds ni trop hauts les sommets;
Qu’ils étaient fraternels aux races orphelines;
Et qu’ils disaient: -Que sont les Alpes? des collines.
Porter l’artillerie à bras sur les hauteurs

Est simple, et le passage est aisé, ces menteurs!
Il n’en est pas moins vrai que ces hommes-là rirent
De tout ce qui nous fait trembler, et qu’ils défirent
Ce que vingt siècles noirs et tristes avaient fait;
Qu’ils battirent Brunswick, Cobourg, Mélas, Clairfait;
Qu’ils dônnaient en spectacle à notre enfance blonde
L’évanouissement superbe du vieux monde,
Que la justice était à l’aise au milieu d’eux,
Qu’ils braquaient le canon sur le passé hideux
Qu’ils n’avaient point de sacs d’argent, ni d’or en piles,
Mais qu’ils faisaient l’Argonne égale aux Thermopyles,
Qù’ils enjambaient le Rhin dont nous nous éloignons,
Et que ce n’étaient pas de petits compagnons.
Sur l’impériale de l’omnibus.

7 septembre 1873.

Annexes

I Pièces de l’édition originale (1893) supprimées en 1897.
— II, 15 (« Venez nous voir dans l’asile...”): voir Les Années funestes, XXVIII.

— II, 28: pièce retirée de l’édition originale sans qu’on ait pris le temps de modifier la numérotation des poèmes ni la pagination. Le titre (« Horreur divine”) figure encore à la table des éditions ordinaires; il a été supprimé dans les exemplaires sur Chine (voir l’exemplaire de Paul Meurice à la Maison de Victor Hugo). Peut-être s’agit-il d’« Horreur sacrée” (Les Quatre Vents de l’Esprit, III, 55)?

— III, 8 (Quatre heures du matin): publié dans Les Quatre Vents de l’Esprit (III, 35).

— IV, 20 (Les Guides): publié dans L’Année terrible (« Mars. I”).

— V, 8 (« Le sommet est désert, noir, farouche, inclément...”): publié dans Les Quatre Vents de l’Esprit (III, 45).

— La Corde d’airain, I (Ecrit sur un exemplaire des « Châtiments”): voir Les Années funestes, VI.

II Dossier des «Chansons des rues et des bois»

Cécile Daubray a d’autre part écarté de son édition de Toute la lyre (1935) plusieurs poèmes de l’édition originale, rendus par elle au « Reliquat” des Chansons des rues et des bois (Imprimerie nationale, 1933). Nous les donnons ici dans le texte de l’édition originale:

DROIT DE REPRENDRE HALEINE

Certe, ô solitude,
Je suis l’homme rude,
Le songeur viril;
Mais puis-je répondre
De ce que fait fondre
Un rayon d’avril?

L’âme, ô lois obscures,
A des aventures.
Je vis absorbé,
Pensée irritée,
Comme Prométhée,
Comme Niobé;

L’aspect de l’abîme,
La haine du crime,
L’horreur, le dédain,
Mettent dans ma bouche
Un hymne farouche...
Mais parfois, soudain,

Une strophe passe
Emplissant l’espace
D’ébats ingénus,
Et m’arrive, ailée,
Fraîche dételée
Du char de Vénus.
L’exil sombre assiste
A mon hymne triste;
Et je suis amer
Dans ma rêverie,
Comme la patrie
Et comme la mer.

Le sceptre et le glaive
Règnent, je me lève
Pour les réprimer;
Mais suis-je coupable
D’être aussi capable
De rire et d’aimer?

Le barde est prophète;
Mais son âme est faite
De plusieurs clartés.
Dieu n’est Dieu, lui-même,
Que parce qu’il sème
De tous les côtés.

Est-ce donc ma faute ,
Si le soleil m’ôte
Mon deuil par instants?
Est-ce par faiblesse
Que l’âpre hiver. laisse
Entrer le printemps?

Je n’y puis que faire;
Némésis préfère
Certes ma fureur;
Je charme Erinnye
Quand mon vers manie
Un blême empereur;

Je plais à Tacite
Quand je ressuscite,
Emplissant ma voix
De chants populaires,
Toutes les colères
Contre tous les rois;

Sous les nuits tombantes
Les vieux corybantes

Mettaient en courroux
Au bruit de leur cistre
Dans le soir sinistre
Les grands aigles roûx;

Et je leur ressemble
Quand ma strophe tremble,
Sonne, parle aux cieux,
Punit, venge, insulte,
Et semble un tumulte
De cris furieux.

Mais l’esprit s’apaise.
Châtier lui pèse.
O forêts! ciel pur!
Ombre des grands chênès!
Au delà des haines,
Il cherche l’azur.

Comme l’hydre énorme,
Avant qu’elle dorme,
Veut sur l’onde errer,
Les penseurs funèbres
Hors de leurs ténèbres
Viennent respirer.

25 avril.

(II, 20)

VISIONS DE LYCÉEN

Quand on sort de rhétorique,
Du livre et de l’encrier,
On a l’âme chimérique
Et le coeur aventurier.

On a pour nid des murs bistres,
Des galetas fabuleux,
Que les rats ont faits sinistres,
Que l’illusion fait bleus.

On n’est pas très difficile
Aux divinités qu’on voit;
Et les nymphes de Sicile
S’accoudent au bord du toit.

Puisqu’il faut que j’en convienne,
C’est vrai, souvent nous prenons
Dans le passage Vivienne
Des Margots pour des Junons.

Toute la mythologie
Vient becqueter nos taudis;-
Nous y faisons une orgie,
De ciels et de paradis.

Je rêve. Oui, la vie est sombre
Et charmante; et des clins d’yeux
M’arrivent au fond de l’ombre
Qui m’ont mis au rang des dieux.

L’extase au cinquième habite,
L’amour fait multiplier
Les rêves du cénobite
Par le front de l’écolier.

Je suis naïf au point d’être
Par moments persuadé
Que Vénus, à sa fenêtre,
M’a fait signe à Saint-Mandé.

Mon oeil sous ma boîte osseuse
Est à de tels songes prêt
Qu’à travers ma blanchisseuse
Phyllodoce m’apparaît.

Une chemisière aimante
Vint hier dans mon grenier;
Elle portait, la charmante,
Des rayons dans son panier;

Ravi de cette descente,
Je crus que je voyais choir
Hébé, toute frémissante
D’aurore, sur mon perchoir.

Comment peindre l’air de fête
De deux yeux presque innocents?
Fraîche, elle avait sur la tête
Cette lumière, seize ans.

Et l’autre jour, plein d’Homère,
Je songeais je ne sais où
Je marchais dans la chimère,
Tout au bord, sans garde-fou;

Une muse au front suprême
Passa dans mon horizon.
— C’est Calliope elle-même!
Criai-je. C’était Suzon:

Je me risquai, dans l’échoppe

Dont un coffre est le sofa,
A chiffonner Calliope;
Calliope me griffa.

La modiste est la sirène.
J’attire Anne à mon foyer,
Lui donnant des noms de reine
Afin de la tutoyer.

Ainsi je vis, l’oeil en flammes,
Dans mes bouquins, loin du bruit,
étoilant toutes les femmes,
Confusément, dans la nuit.

Je les fais déesses toutes,
Et sur leurs chiffons je mets
La lueur des sombres voûtes
Ou l’éclair des bleus sommets.

Je vois parfois la tunique
S’ébaucher sous le torchon
Et la Diane ionique
Sous le madras de Fanchon.

Je m’éblouis, solitaire;
Car il faut que nous usions
L’une après l’autre, sur terre,
Toutes les illusions.

Je guette et je me hasarde
A sonder d’un oeil ardent
L’empyrée et la mansarde;
Et je contemple; et, pendant

Que rôde sur ma gouttière
Quelque gros chat moustachu,
Cypris met sa jarretière,

Pallas ôte son fichu.

(VI, 8)
La grecque et la parisienne
Font, parmi nos couples railleurs,
Comme à travers l’idylle ancienne,
La même course dans les fleurs.

Toutes deux sont l’amour, la joie,
Le coup d’oeil tendre ou hasardeux,
Le caprice, et pour qu’on les voie
Elles se cachent toutes deux.

Toutes deux montrant leurs épaules
Pour dire oui prononcent non,
Et Galatée est sous les saules
Comme sous l’éventail Ninon.

Deux soeurs! à qui la préférence?
Pan hésite au fond des forêts
Entre l’Arcadie et la France,
Entre Théocrite et Segrais.

Romainville vaut le Taygète;
Et, ramassant sur tous ses pas
Les bouquets que le temps lui jette,
L’églogue ne donnerait pas,

Dans sa clairière, où la noisette
Ai sa place à côté des lys,
Li bas bien tiré de Frisette
Pour les pieds nus d’Amaryllis.

(VI12)

LA FIGLIOLA

Moins de vingt ans et plus de seize,
Voilà son âge; et maintenant
Dites tout bas son nom: Thérèse,
Et songez au ciel rayonnant.

Quel destin traversera-t-elle?
Quelle ivresse? quelle douleur?
Elle n’en sait rien; cette belle
Rit, et se coiffe d’une fleur.

Ses bras sont blancs; elle est châtaine;
Elle a de petits pieds joyeux,
Et la clarté d’une fontaine
Dans son regard mystérieux.

C’est le commencement d’une âme,
Un rien où tout saura tenir,
Coeur en projet, plan d’une femme,
Scénario d’un avenir.

Elle ignore; elle est gaie et franche;
Le dieu Hasard fut son parrain.
Elle s’évade le dimanche
Au bras d’un garnement serein.

Il est charmant, elle est bien faite,
Et Pantin voit, sans garde-fou,
Flâner cette Vénus grisette
Avec cet Apollon voyou.

Elle s’ébat comme les cygnes;
Et sa chevelure et sa voix
Et son sourire seraient dignes
De la fauve grandeur des bois.

Regardez-la, quand elle passe;
On dirait qu’elle aime Amadis
A la voir jeter dans l’espace -
Ses yeux célestes et hardis.

Ces blanches filles des mansardes
Aux tartans grossiers, âux traits fins,
Ont la liberte des poissardes
Et la grâce des séraphins.

Elles chantent des chants étranges
Mêlés de misère et -de jour,
Et leur indigence a pour franges
Toutes les poupres de l’amour.

(VI, 17)

Je suis naïf, toi cruelle;
Et j’ai la simplicité
De brûler au feu mon aile
Et mon âme à ta beauté.

Ta lumière m’est rebelle
Et je m’en sens dévorer;
Mais la chose sombre et belle
Et dont tu devrais pleurer,

C’est que, toute mutilée,
Voletant dans le tombeau,
La pauvre mouche brûlée
Chante un hymne au noir flambeau.

(VI, 20)

L’IDYLLE DE FLORIANE

I

La comtesse Floriane
S’éveilla comme les bois
Chantaient la vague diane
Des oiseaux, à demi-voix.

Quand elle fut habillée,
Comme pour Giulietta
Toute la sombre feuillée
Amoureuse palpita.

Et quand, blanche silhouette,
Sur le balcon du préau,
Elle apparut, l’alouette
Chercha des yeux Roméo.

J’accourus à tire d’ailes,
Car c’est mon bonheur de voir
Le matin lever les belles
Et les étoiles le soir.

II

À l’heure où, chassant le rêve,
L’aube ouvre les firmaments,
C’est le moment, filles d’Ève,
D’aller voir des diamants;
Toute une bijouterie
Brille à terre au jour serein;
L’herbe est une pierrerie,
Et l’ortie est un écrin;
Des rubis dans les nymphées,
Des perles dans les halliers;

Et l’on dirait que les fées
Ont égrené leurs colliers.

Et nous nous mîmes à faire
Un bouquet dans l’oasis;
Et la fleur qu’elle préfère
Est celle que je choisis.

III

Gaie, elle sautait dans l’herbe
Comme la belle Euryant,
Et, montrant le ciel superbe,
Soupirait en souriant.

— J’aimerais mieux, disait-elle,
Courir dans ce beau champ bleu,
Cueillant l’étoile immortelle,
Quitte à me brûler un peu;

Mais, vois, c’est inaccessible.
(Car elle me tutoyait.)
Puisque l’astre est impossible,
Contentons-nous de l’oeillet.

IV

Aucune délicatesse
N’est plus riante ici-bas
Que celle d’une comtesse
Mouillant dans l’herbe ses bas.

Au gré du vent qui la mène,
Dans les fleurs, dans le gazon,
La beauté de Célimène
Prend les grâces de Suzon.

Elle montrait aux pervenches,
Aux verveines, sous ses pas,
Ses deux belles jambes blanches,
Qu’elle ne me cachait pas.

On se tromperait de croire
Que les bois n’ont pas des yeux
Et, dans leur prunelle noire,
Plus d’un rayon très joyeux.

Souvent tout un bois s’occupe
A voir deux pieds nus au bain,
Ou ce frisson d’une jupe
Qui fait trembler Chérubin.

Les bleuets la trouvaient belle;
L’air vibrait; il est certain
Qu’on était fort épris d’elle
Dans le trèfle et dans le thym.

Quand ses légères bottines
Enjambaient le pré charmant,
Ce tas de fleurs libertines
Levait la tête gaîment.

Et je disais: Prenez garde,
Le muguet est indécent.
Et le liseron regarde
Sous votre robe en passant.
Ses pieds fuyaient... Quel délire
D’errer dans les bois chantants!
Oh! le frais et divin rire
Plein d’aurore et de printemps!

Une volupté suprême
Tombait des cieux entr’ouverts.
Je suivais ces pieds que j’aime;

Et, dans les quinconces verts,

Dans les vives cressonnières,
Moqueurs, ils fuyaient toujours;
Et ce sont là les manières
De la saison des amours.

J’admire, ô jour qui m’enivres,
Ô neuf soeurs, ô double mdnt!
Les savants qui font des livres
D’être les taupes qu’ils sont,

De fermer leur regard triste
A ce que nous contemplons,
Et, quand ils dressent la liste
Des oiseaux, des papillons,

Des mille choses ailées,
Moins près de nous que des cieux,
Qui volent dans les allées
Du grand parc mystérieux,

Dans les prés, sous les érables,
Au bord des eaux, clairs miroirs,
D’oublier, les misérables,
Ces petits brodequins noirs!

VI

Nous courions dans les ravines,
Le vent dans nos cheveux bruns,
Rançonnés par les épines,
Mais payés par les parfums.

Chaque fleur, chaque broussaille,
L’une après l’autre attirait
Son beau regard, où tressaille

La lueur de la forêt.

Elle secouait leurs gouttes;
Tendre, elle les respirait,
Et semblait savoir de toutes
La moitié de leur secret.

Un beau buisson plein de roses
Et tout frissonnant d'émoi
Se fit dire mille choses
Dont j'aurais voulu pour moi.

Ému, j'en perdais la tête.
Comment se rassasier
De cette adorable fête
D'une femme et d'un rosier!

Elle encourageait les branches,
Les fontaines, les étangs
Et les fleurs rouges ou, blanches,
A nous faire un beau printemps.

Comme elle était familière
Avec les bois d'ombre emplis!
— Pardieu, disait un vieux lierre,
Je l'ai vue autrefois lys!
VII

Quel bouquet nous composâmes!
Pour qu'il durât plus d'un jour,
Nous y mîmes de nos âmes;
La comtesse, tour à`toùr

M'offrant tout ce qui se cueille,
Jouait à me refuser
La rose ou le chèvrefeuille
Pour m'accorder le baiser.

Les ramiers et les mésanges
Nous enviaient. par moments;
Nous étions déjà des anges
Quoique pas encore amants.

Seulement, son coeur dans l'ombre
M'appelait vers son corset
Au fond de mon rêve sombre
Une alcôve frémissait.

Quoique plongés aux ivresses,
Quoique égarés et joyeux,
Quoique mêlant des caresses
Aux profonds souffles des cieux,

Nous avions ce bonheur calme
Qui fait que le séraphin
Trouve un peu, lourde sa palme,
Et voudrait être homme enfin.

Car là-haut même,. ô mystère,
Il faut, et je vous le dis,
Un peu de chair et de terre
Pour qu'un ciel soit paradis.

22 juin 1859.

(VI, 21)

À UN RAT

Ô rat de là-haut, tu grignottes
Dans le grenier, ton oasis,
Les Pontmartins et les Nonottes
Moisis.

Tu vas, flairant de tes moustaches
Ces vieux volumes qu’ont ornés
De tant d’inexprimables taches
Les nez.

Rat, tu soupes et tu déjeunes
Avec des romans refroidis,
Des vers morts, et des quatrains jeunes
Jadis.

Ô rat, tu ronges et tu songes!
Tu mâches dans tôn galetas
Les vieux dogmes et les vieux soriges
En tas.

C’est pour toi qui gaîment les fêtes
Qu’écrivent les bons Patouillets;
C’est pour toi que les gens sont bêtes
Et laids.

Rat, c’est pour toi qui les dissèques
Que les sonnets et les sermons
Disent dans les bibliothèques:
Dormons!

Pour toi, croulent les noms postiches,
Tout à bien pourrir réussit,
La rime au bout des hémistiches
Rancit.

C’est pour toi qu’en ruine tombe
L’amas difforme des grimauds;
C’est pour toi que grouille la tombe
Des mots.

C’est pour toi, rat, dans ta mansarde,
Que Garasse se fait vieillot;
Et c’est pour toi que-se lézarde
Veuillot.

La postérité, peu sensible,
Traite ainsi l’oeuvre des pédants
La nuit dessus; toi, rat paisible,
Dedans.

Le public incivil se sauve
Devant ces bouquins d’aujourd’hui
Où gît, comme au fond d’une alcôve,
L’ennui;

Toi, tu-n’as point de ces faiblesses.
On reconnaît, ô rat poli,
Au coup de dent que tu lui laisses
L’oubli.

C’est égal, je te plains; contemple
Là-bas, sous les cieux empourprés,
Le lapin dans l’immense temple
Des prés.

Il va, vient, boit l’encens, s’enivre
De rayons, de vie et d’azur,
Pendant que tu mords dans un livre
Trop mûr.

L’aurore est encore en chemise,

Que lui, debout, il se nourrit;
Sa nappe verte est toujours mise;
Il rit,

Il est le roi de la clairière;
Il contemple, point soucieux,
Tranquille, assis sur son derrière,
Les cieux.

Il fait toutes sortes de mines
A la prairie, à l'aube en feu,
Aux corolles, aux étamines,
A Dieu.

Télégraphe de l'herbe fraîche,
Ses deux pattes à chaque instant
Jettent au ciel cette dépêche:
Content!

En plein serpolet il patauge.
Vois, il est vorace et railleur.
Compare: il broute, lui, la sauge
En fleur,

L'anis, le parfum, la rosée,
Le trèfle, la menthe et le thym;
Toi, l'Ermite de la Chaussée
D'Antin.

1859.

(VII, 6)

SOUS LES SAULES

LUI
Farouche!

ELLE
Moqueur!

LUI
Ta bouche!

ELLE
Ton coeur!

(VII, 10, 3)

III « Être aimé»

Manque également dans l’édition de Cécile Daubray un fragment de «comédie” (on y aurait vu un roi mal aimé retourner aux bas-fonds pour l’amour des gueux et des galériens; édition chronologique, t. XV-XVI/2, p. 294-299). Entre crochets droits, les passages supprimés dans l’édition originale

(1893): ÊTRE AIMÉ

Écoute-moi. Voici la chose nécessaire:
Etre aimé. Hors de là rien n’existe, entends-tu?
Etre aimé, c’est l’honneur, le devoir, la vertu,
C’est Dieu, c’est le démon, c’est tout. J’aime, et l’on m’aime.
Cela dit, tout est dit. Pour que je sois moi-même,
Fier, content, respirant l’air libre à pleins poumons,
Il faut que j’aie une ombre et qu’elle dise: Aimons!
Il faut que de mon âme une autre âme se double,
Il faut que, si je suis absent, quelqu’un se trouble,
Et, me cherchant des yeux, murmure: Où donc est-il?
Si personne ne dit cela, je sens l’exil,
L’anathème et l’hiver sur moi, je suis terrible,
Je suis maudit. Le grain que rejette le crible,
C’est l’homme sans foyer, sans but, épars au vent.
Ah! celui qui n’est pas aimé, n’est pas vivant.
Quoi, nul ne vous choisit! Quoi, rien ne vous préfère!
A quoi bon l’univers? l’âme qu’on a, qu’en faire?
Que faire d’un regard dont personne ne veut?
La vie attend l’amour, le fil cherche le noeud.
Flotter au hasard? Non! Le frisson vous pénètre;
L’avenir s’ouvre ainsi qu’une pâle fenêtre;
Où mettra-t-on sa vie et son rêve? On se croit
Orphelin; l’azur semble ironique. On a froid;
Quoi! ne plaire à personne au monde! rien n’apaise
Cette honte sinistre; on languit, l’heure pèse,
Demain, qu’on sent venir triste, attriste aujourd’hui.

Où vivre? où fuir? On est seul dans l’immense ennui.
Une maîtresse, c’est quelqu’un dont on est maître;
Ayons cela. Soyons aimé, non par un être
Grand et puissant, déesse ou dieu. Ceci n’est pas
La question. Aimons! Cela suffit. Mes pas
Cessent d’être perdus si quelqu’un les regarde.
Ah! vil monde, passants vagues, foule hagarde,
Sombre table de jeu, caverne sans rayons!
Qu’est-ce que je viens faire à ce tripot, voyons?
J’y bâille. Si de moi personne ne s’occupe,
Le sort est un escroc, et je suis une dupe.
J’aspire à me brûler la cervelle. Ah! quel deuil!
Quoi! rien! pas un soupir pour vous, pas un coup d’oeil!
Que le fuseau des jours lentement se dévide!
Hélas! comme le coeur est lourd quand il est vide!
Comment porter ce poids énorme, le néant?
Toute l’ombre est un trou de ténèbres, béant;
Vous vous sentez tomber dans ce gouffre. Ah! quand Dante
Livre à l’affreuse bise implacable et grondante
Françoise échevelée, un baiser éternel
La console, et l’enfer alors devient le ciel.
Mais quoi! je vais, je viens, j’entre, je sors, je passe
Je meurs, sans faire rien remuer dans l’espace!
N’avoir pas un atome à soi dans l’infini!
Qu’est-ce donc que j’ai fait? De quoi suis-je puni?
Je ris, nul ne sourit; je souffre, nul ne pleure;
Cette chauve-souris de son aile m’effleure,
L’indifférence, blême habitante du soir.
Être aimé! sous ce ciel bleu -moins souvent que noir -
Je ne sais que cela qui vaille un peu la peine
De mêler son visage à la laideur humaine,
Et de vivre. Ah! pour ceux dont le coeur bat, pour ceux
Qui sentent un regard quelconque aller vers eux,
Pour ceux-là seulement, Dieu vit, et le jour brille!
Qu’on soit aimé d’un gueux, d’un voleur, d’une fille,
D’un forçat jaune et vert sur l’épaule imprimé,
Qu’on soit aimé d’un chien, pourvu qu’on soit aimé!

14 mars 1874. (VI,4)

DIEU

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I — Le Seuil du gouffre

L’Esprit humain

Et je voyais au loin sur ma tête un point noir.
Comme on voit une mouche au plafond se mouvoir,
Ce point allait, venait; et l’ombre était sublime.

Et l’homme, quand il pense, étant ailé, l’abîme
M’attirant dans sa nuit toujours de plus en plus,
Comme une algue qu’entraîne un ténébreux reflux,
Vers ce point noir, planant dans la profondeur blême,
Je me sentais déjà m’envoler de moi-même
Quand je fus arrêté par quelqu’un qui me dit
«Demeure.”
   En même temps une main s’étendit.
J’étais déjà très haut dans la nuée obscure.

Et je vis apparaître une étrange figure;
Un être tout semé de bouches, d’ailes, d’yeux;
Vivant, presque lugubre et presque radieux.
Vaste, il volait; plusieurs des ailes étaient chauves.
En s’agitant, les cils de ses prunelles fauves
Jetaient plus de rumeur qu’une troupe d’oiseaux
Et ses plumes faisaient un bruit de grandes eaux.
Cauchemar de la chair ou vision d’apôtre,
Selon qu’il se montrait d’une face ou de l’autre,

Il semblait une bête ou semblait un esprit.
Il paraissait, dans l’air où mon vol le surprit,
Faire de la lumière et faire des ténèbres.

Calme, il me regardait dans les brouillards funèbres.
Et je sentais en lui quelque chose d’humain.

Qu’es-tu donc, toi qui viens me barrer le chemin,
Être obscur, frissonnant au souffle de ces brumes?
Lui dis-je. Il répondit: — Je suis une des plumes

De la nuit, sombre oiseau de nue et de rayons,
Noir paon épanoui des constellations.

Je suis ce qui court, vole, erre, s'enfle, s'apaise;
Je suis en même temps ce qui retombe, pèse,
Saisit l'aile qui va, retient l'essor qui fuit,
Et descend; car le fond de mon être est la nuit.

— Ton nom? — dis-je.

Il reprit:
— Pour toi qui, loin des causes,
Vas flottant, et ne peux voir qu'un côté des choses,
Je suis l'Esprit Humain.
Mon nom est Légion,
Je suis, l'essaim des bruits et la contagion
Des mots vivants allant et venant d'âme en âme.
Je suis Souffle. Je suis cendre, fumée et flamme.
Tantôt l'instinct brutal, tantôt l'élan divin.
Je suis ce grand passant, vaste, invincible et vain,
Qu'on nomme vent; et j'ai l'étoile et l'étincelle
Dans ma parole, étant l'haleine universelle;
L'haleine et non la bouche; un zéphir me grandit
Et m'abat; et quand j'ai respiré, j'ai tout dit.
Je suis géant et nain, faux, vrai, sourd et sonore,
Populace dans l'ombre et peuple dans l'aurore;
Je dis moi, je dis nous; j'affirme, nous nions.
Je suis le flux des voix et des opinions,
Le fantôme de l'an, du mois, de la semaine,
Fait du groupe fuyant de la nuée humaine.
Homme, toujours en moi la contradiction
Tourne sa roue obscure et j'en suis l'Ixion.
Démos, c'est moi. C'est moi ce qui marche, attend, roule,
Pleure et rit, nie et croit; je suis le démon Foule.
Je suis comme la trombe, ouragan et pilier.

En même temps je vis dans l'âtre familier.

Oui, j'arrache au tison la soudaine étincelle
Qui heurte un germe obscur que le crâne recèle,
Et qui, des fronts courbés perçant les épaisseurs,
Fait faire explosion à l'esprit des penseurs.
Je vis près d'eux, veilleur intime; je combine
Le vieux houblon de Flandre et la vigne sabine,
La franche joie attique et le rire gaulois;
L'antique insouciance avec ses douces lois,
Paix, liberté, gaîté, bon sens, est mon breuvage;
J'en grise Erasme et Sterne, et même mon sauvage,
Diderot; et j'en fais couler quelques filets
De la coupe d'Horace au broc de Rabelais.

Il poursuivit:

— Je crie à quiconque commence,
— Assez. — Finis. — Je suis le Médiocre immense.
Toutes les fois qu'on parle et qu'on dit: — Mitoyen,
Mode, médiateur, méridien, moyen,
Par chacun de ces mots on m'évoque, on m'adjure,
Et tantôt c'est louange, et tantôt c'est injure.

Je suis l'esprit Milieu; l'être neutre qui va
Bas sans trouver Iblis, haut sans voir Jéhovah;
Dans le nombre, je suis Multitude; dans l'être,
Borne. Je m'oppose, homme, à l'excès de connaître,
De chercher, de trouver, d'errer, d'aller au bout;
Je suis Tous, l'ennemi mystérieux de Tout.
Je suis la loi d'arrêt, d'enceinte, de ceinture
Et d'horizon, qui sort de toute la nature;
L'éther irrespirable et bleu sur la hauteur,
Dans le gouffre implacable et sourd, la pesanteur.
C'est moi qui dis: — Voici ta sphère. Attends. Arrête.
Tout être a sa frontière, homme ou pierre, ange ou bête,
Et doit, sans dilater sa forme d'aujourd'hui,
Subir le nœud des lois qui se croisent en lui.
Je me nomme Limite et je me nomme Centre.

Je garde tous les seuils de tous les mondes. Rentre.
Tout est par moi, saisi, pris, circonscrit, dompté.
Je me défie, ayant peur de l’extrémité,
De la folie un peu, beaucoup de la sagesse.
Je tiens l’enthousiasme et l’appétit en laisse;
Pour qu’il aille au réel sans s’écarter du bien,
J’attelle au genre humain ce lion et ce chien;
Et, comme je suis souffle et poids, nul ne m’évite,
Car tout, comme esprit, flotte, et, comme corps, gravite.

Et l’explication, je te l’ai dit, vivant,
C’est que je suis l’esprit matériel, le vent;
Et je suis la matière impalpable, la force.
Je contrains toute sève à rester sous l’écorce;
Et tout piège miroir par mon souffle est terni.
Contre l’enivrement du sinistre infini
Je garde les penseurs, ces pauvres mouches frêles.
Je tiens les pieds de ceux dont l’azur prend les ailes.
Je suis parfum, poison, bien, mal, silence, bruit.
Je suis en haut midi, je suis en bas minuit;
Je vais, je viens; je suis l’alternative sombre;
Je suis l’heure qui fait sortir en frappant l’ombre,
Douze apôtres le jour, la nuit douze césars.
Du beau donnant sa forme au grand, je fais les arts.
Dans les milieux humains, dans les brumes charnelles,
J’erre en voyant; je suis le troupeau des prunelles.
Je suis l’universel, je suis le partiel.
Je nais de la vapeur ainsi que l’eau du ciel,
Et j’éclos du rocher comme le saxifrage.
Je sors du sentier vert, du foyer, du naufrage,
Du pavé du chemin, de la borne du champ,
Des haillons du noyé sur la grève séchant,
Du flambeau qui s’éteint, de la fleur qui se fane
Je me suis appelé Pyrrhon, Aristophane,
Démocrite, Aristote, Esope, Lucien,
Diogène, Timon, Plaute, Pline l’ancien,
Cervantes, Bacon, Swift, Locke, Rousseau, Voltaire.

Je suis la résultante énorme de la terre.

La raison: J'étais là, pensif, troublé, muet;
Pendant que j'écoutais, l'être continuait:

— Homme, à nous le mystère est ouvert. Nous en sommes.
Pour l'abîme, je suis un spectre; pour vous, hommes,
Je suis la Voix qui dit: allez, mais sachez où.
J'erre près du néant le long du garde-fou.
J'avertis.

Il reprit:
— Écoute, esprit qui trembles;
Et qui ne peux pas même entrevoir les ensembles:
Hommes, vous m'ignorez, mais je vous connais tous;
Et je suis encor vous, même en dehors de vous.

Entre les brutes, foule, et les anges, élite,
Il est sur chaque terre et chaque satellite,
Un être à part; pensée et chair matière esprit;
Page mixte du livre où la nature écrit,
Dernier feuillet du Monstre et premier du Génie;
Créature où la fange et l'or font l'harmonie,
Dans la bête à moitié, dans l'idée à demi,
Flamme accouplée avec le corps son ennemi,
Double rayon tordu d'ombre et d'aube ravie,.
Mystère; ayant un pied, dans l'échelle de vie,
Sur une fin, un pied sur un commencement;
Cet être comparant, sentant, voyant, aimant,
C'est l'homme. Que la mort conserve, accroisse ou fauche
Cet à peu près sublime et ce chef-d'œuvre ébauche,
Qu'il ait ce qu'il appelle une âme, en ce moment
Je ne t'en parle pas, je te dis seulement
Que partout l'homme existe, étant un milieu d'êtres.
Il vit près des soleils, foyers, astres ancêtres.
Sur des terres qui sont plus ou moins loin du feu,
Il vit, domptant son globe; il est grand, il est peu;

Par la forme divers, mais un par sa nature;
Il a l’hydre animal et plante pour ceinture;
Il est sur le sommet de son visible à lui;
Et, larve ou deux lueurs se croisent, point d’appui
De tout un phénomène, identique à lui-même,
Marque partout le même étage du problème;
Entre l’aile, et le ventre il est l’être debout;
Il est partout le roi planétaire; partout
Il possède et régit l’astre — intermédiaire
Entre l’ombre et le grand soleil incendiaire.
Car tout globe qui tourne autour d’une clarté
Est planète de loin, de près humanité.
Or, — puisque jusqu’a moi ton œil plonge et pénètre,
C’est moi qui suis l’esprit collectif de cet être,
Partout; sous toute forme, et dans l’immensité.
Tu n’es qu’homme, ô passant; je suis humanité.
L’être effrayant, planant dans l’ombre inaccessible,
Ajouta: .

— Nul ne doit sortir de son possible.
Nul ne doit transgresser son réel. Cependant
Je veux, puisque tu viens dans cette ombre, imprudent,
Faire une exception pour toi que je rencontre.
Quel que soit ton dessein, va! je n’irai pas contre;
Homme, je consens même à contenter tes vœux.
Etant de l’infini, je peux e que je veux;
Ma main peut ouvrir tout puisqu’elle peut tout clore;
Qui puise de, la nuit peut puiser de l’aurore,
Et ce que tu voudras, je te l’accorderai.
Que demandes-tu? parle.

Et dans l’effroi sacré
Je me taisais; roseau ployant, vil brin de chaume.

— Tu n’es pas jusqu’ici venu, dit le fantôme,
Pour ne pas demander quelque chose. Voyons,
Parle. Veux-tu des feux, des nimbes, des rayons?

Que veux-tu de ce gouffre où, lorsque je me penche,
La colombe nuée accourt, farouche et blanche?
Veux-tu savoir le fond du serpent, ou du ver?
Veux-tu que je t’emporte avec moi dans l’éther?
Je t’obéirai. Parle. Ou faut-il qu’on te montre
Comment l’aurore arrive, et vient à la rencontre
Du parfum de la fleur et du chant des oiseaux?
Veux-tu que nous prenions la tempête aux naseaux,
Et que nous nous roulions tous deux dans la tourmente,
Quand la meute du vent court sur l’onde écumante
Et quand l’archer tonnerre et le chasseur éclair
Percent de traits la peau d’écailles de la mer?
Veux-tu qu’à pleines mains, tous deux, dans l’invisible,
O passant, nous puisions l’illusion terrible?
Veux-tu que nous penchions nos yeux sur les secrets,
Et que nous regardions la nature de près
Pendant qu’elle produit dans l’immense pénombre?
Parle. Es-tu curieux de l’accouchement sombre?
Veux-tu voir dans le germe, et voir comment éclôt
Le songe ou le rocher, le sommeil ou le flot,
Et prendre sur le fait la création, mère
De la réalité comme-de la chimère?
Veux-tu d’une naissance entendre la rumeur,
Regarder un éden poindre, avoir la primeur
D’une sphère, d’un globe en fleur, d’une lumière?
Ou voir surgir l’idée, éblouissante, fière,
Cherchant l’époux Génie au fond du ciel lointain?
Dis, veux-tu dans la nuit, veux-tu dans le destin-
Voir quelque lever d’astre ou quelque lever d’âme?
Tu peux choisir. Demande, interroge, réclame;
Parle. J’attends. Faut-il ressaisir, je le puis,
Une étoile aux cheveux dans la fuite des nuits,
Et te la rapporter splendide et frémissante?
Que veux-tu? Veux-tu voir dix soleils, vingt, soixante,
Se lever à la fois dans soixante univers?
Veux-tu voir, sur le seuil des cieux tout grands ouverts,
Le matin dételant les sept chevaux de l’Ourse-?

Ou veux-tu que, dans l'ombre où le jour à sa source,
Homme, pour te donner le temps d'examiner,
Les mondes, qu'un prodige éternel fait tourner,
S'arrêtent un moment et reprennent haleine?
Parle.

L'esprit baissa ses ailes de phalène,
Et se tut. L'air tremblait sous mes pieds hasardeux.
Et l'âpre obscurité qui nous voyait tous deux

Et s'étoilait au loin de vagues auréoles,
Put entendre ce sombre échange de paroles.
Entre l'esprit étrange et moi, l'homme ébloui:
— Non, rien de tout cela — Que, demandes-tu? — LUI.

Tout sembla devant moi se fermer; et l'espèce
De clarté qui tremblait dans la nuée épaisse
Sombra dans l'air plus noir qu'un ciel cimmérien.
J'entendis un éclat de rire, et ne vis rien.
Hélas! n'étant qu'un homme, une chair misérable,
Dans cette obscurité fauve, âpre, inexorable,
Dans ces brumes sans jour; sans bords; sous ce linceul,
Je songeai qu'il était horrible d'être seul.
Puis mon esprit revint à son but: — voir, connaître,
Savoir; pendant que l'ombre informe, louche, traître,
Roulant dans ses échos l'affreux rire moqueur,
Grandissait dans l'espace ainsi que dans mon cœur.

Et je criai, ployant mes ailes déjà lasses
— Dites-moi seulement son nom, tristes espaces,
Pour que je le répète à jamais dans la nuit!.

Et je n'entendis rien que la bise qui fuit.
Alors il me sembla qu'en un sombre mirage,
Comme des tourbillons que chasse un vent d'orage,
Je voyais devant moi pêle-mêle passer
Et croître et frissonner et fuir et s'effacer

Ces cryptes du vertige et ces villes du rêve,
Rome sur ses frontons changeant en croix son glaive,
Thèbes, Jérusalem, Mecque, Médine, Hébron.;
Des figures tenant à la main un clairon,
Et des arbres, hagards, des cavernes, des baumes
Où priaient, barbe au vent, de lugubres Jérômes,
Et, parmi des Babels, des tours, des temples grecs,
D’horribles fronts d’écueils aux cheveux de varechs
Et tout cela, Ninive, Éphèse, Delphe, Abdère, .
Tombeau de saint Grégoire où veille un lampadaire,
Marches de Bénarès, pagodes de Ceylan, .
Monts d’où l’aigle de mer le soir prend son élan,
Minarets, parthénons, wigwams, temple d’Aglaure
Où l’on voit l’aube, fleur vertigineuse, éclore,
Et grotte de Calvin, et chambre de Luther,
Passages d’anges bleus dans le liquide éther,
Trépieds où flamboyaient, des âmes, yeux de braise.

De la chienne Scylla sur la mer calabraise,
Dodone, Horeb, rochers effarés, bois troublants,
Couvent d’Eschmiadzin aux quatre clochers blancs,

Noir cromlech de Bretagne, affreux cruach d’Irlande,
Poestum où les rosiers suspendent leur guirlande,
Temples des fils de Cham, temples des fils de Seth,
Tout lentement flottait et s’évanouissait
Dans une sorte d’âpre et vague perspective;
Et ce n’était; devant ma prunelle attentive,
Que de la vision qui ne fait pas de bruit,
Et de la forme obscure éparse dans la nuit.

Et, pâle, en moi, tout bas, je fis cet appel sombre,
Sans oser élever la voix, de peur de l’ombre:’

Êtres! lieux! choses! nuit! nuit froide qui te tais!
Cèdres de Salomon, chênes de Teutatès;
plongeurs de nuée, ô rapporteurs de tables;

Devins, mages, voyants, hommes épouvantables;
Thébaïdes, forêts, solitudes; Ombos
Où les docteurs, vivant dans des creux de tombeaux,
S’emplissent d’inconnu comme d’eau les éponges;
   croisements obscurs des gouffres et des songes,
Sommeil, blanc soupirail des apparitions;
Germes, avatars, nuit des transformations
Où l’archange s’envole, où le monstre se vautre;
Mort, noir pont naturel entre une étoile et l’autre,
Communication entre l’homme et le ciel;
Colosse de Minerve aptère, aux pieds duquel
Le vent respectueux fait tomber ceux qui passent’;
Flots revenant toujours que les rocs toujours chassent;
Chauve Apollonius, vieux rêveur sidéral;
   scribes, qui, du bout du bâton augural
Tracez de l’alphabet les ténébreux jambages;
Époptes grecs fakirs, voghis, bonzes, eubages,
   tours d’où se jetaient les circumcellions;
Sanctuaires; trépieds, autels, fosse aux lions;
Vous qui voyez suer les fronts pâles des sages,
Cimetières, repos, asiles, noirs passages
Où viennent s’essuyer les penseurs, ces vaincus;
Monstrueux caveau peint du roi Psamméticus;
François d’Assises, Scot, Bruno, sainte Rhipsime
   marcheurs attirés aux clartés de la cime;
Sept sages qui parlez dans l’ombre à Cyrselus;
Du rêve et du-désert redoutables reclus’
Qui chuchotez avec les bouches invisibles;
Fronts courbés sous les cieux d’ou descendent les bibles;
Spectres; effarements de lampe et de flambeau;
Toi — qui vois Chanaan; montagne de, Nébo;
Moines du mont Athos, chantant de sombres proses’;
Libellules d’Asie errant dans les jamroses;
Isthme de Suez fermant l’Inde comme un verrou;

Ô voûtes d’Ellora, croupes du mont Mérou
D’où s’échappe le Gange aux grandes eaux sacrées;

Ombre, qui n’as pas l’air de savoir que tu crées;
vous qui criez: deuil! vous qui criez: espoir!
Spherus qui, toujours seul dans l’antre toujours noir,
Cherches Dieu — par les mille ouvertures funèbres,
Blanches, tristes, que font à l’âme les ténèbres;
Prêtres qu’en votre nuit suit le doute importun;
Vous, psalmistes, David, Éthan, grave Idithun;
Jean, interlocuteur de l’oiseau chéroubime;
Et vous, poetes; Dante, homme effrayant d’abîme,
Grand front tragique ombré de feuilles de laurier,
Qui t’en reviens, laissant l’obscurité crier,
Rapportant sous tes cils la lueur des avernes;
Dompteurs qui sans pâlir allez dans les cavernes
Chercher le hurlement jusque dans son chenil;
Pilotes nubiens qui remontez le Nil;
prodigieux cerf aux rameaux noirs qui brames
Dans la forêt des djinns, des pandits et des brames;
Hommes enterrés vifs, songeant dans vos cercueils;
pâtres accoudés; ô bruyères; écueils
Où rêve au crépuscule une forme sinistre;
Pythie assise au front du hideux cap Canistre;
Angles mystérieux où les songeurs entrés
Distinguent vaguement des satrapes mitrés;
Vous que la lune enivre et trouble, sélénites;
Vous, bénitiers sanglants des seules eaux bénites,
Yeux en pleurs des martyrs; vous, savants indécis;
Merlin, sous l’escarboucle inexprimable assis;
Toi, Job, qui te plains; toi, Basile, qui médites;
Est-ce qu’on ne peut pas voir un peu de jour, dites?

Et, sombre, j’attendis; puis je continuai:

— Quoi! l’homme tomberait, hagard, exténué,
Comme le moucheron qui bat la vitre blême!
Quoi! tout aboutirait à du néant suprême!
Tout l’effort des chercheurs frémissants se perdrait!
L’homme habiterait l’ombre et serait au secret!

Marcher serait errer! l’aile serait punie!
L’aurore, ô cieux profonds, serait une ironie!

Alors, tout haut; levant la voix, levant les bras,
Éperdu, je criai: — Cela ne se peut pas!
Grand inconnu! méchant ou bon! grand invisible!
Je te le dis en face, Être! c’est impossible!
On éclata de rire une seconde fois...

Et ce rire était plus un rictus qu’une voix;
Il remua longtemps l’ombre visionnaire,

Et, s’évanouissant, roula comme un tonnerre
Dans ce prodigieux silence où le néant
Semblait vivre, insondable, immobile et béant.

Ô méditations! oh! comme l’esprit souffre
Sous les porches hagards et difformes du gouffre!
Comme le souffle noir du vide vous poursuit,
Sinistre, en vous jetant du trouble et de la nuit!
Comme on sent que le rêve est un être qui vole
Et passe... — On m’adressait dans l’ombre la parole;
Et de funèbres voix que sur mon front j’avais
Comme les endormis en ont à leurs chevets,
Chuchotaient au-dessus de moi des choses sombres.
Je sentais la terreur muette des décombres
Et je me demandais: — Qui donc murmure ainsi?
C’était, dans le ciel morne et de brume épaissi,
Comme un nuage obscur de bouches sur ma téte;
Des faces me parlaient dans un vent de tempête;
Puis ces voix s’éteignaient comme le vague son
Qui n’est plus la parole et devient le frisson.
Noirs discours! l’ironie y grinçait dans le râle;
Des plaintes, sanglotant dans l’ombre sépulcrale
Comme entre les roseaux gémit le gavial,
S’achevaient en sarcasme amer et trivial;
Je croyais par moments qu’en ces vagues royaumes

J’assistais au concile effrayant des fantômes
Que nous nommons raison, logique, utilité,
Certitude, calcul, sagesse, vérité;
Il me semblait, parmi le grand murmure austère
De l’horreur, de la nuit, du tombeau, du mystère,
Entendre Aristophane; et voir, après les pleurs,
Toutes sortes d’éclairs cyniques et railleurs,
Moqueurs, étincelants, percer l’ombre ennemie,
Et Rabelais passer à travers Jérémie;
J’écoutais frémissant et par moments vaincu.
Était-ce des esprits d’hommes ayant vécu?
Était-ce les conseils qui flottent dans les nues
Pour quiconque s’égare aux routes inconnues?
Mon front sous l’infini ployait lugubrement.
L’espace affreux, éther, ténèbres, firmament,
Espèce de taillis sans branches étoilées,
Où les brouillards fuyaient en confuses mêlées,
Semblait d’une forêt le redoutable dais...
Qu’était-ce que ces voix? je ne sais. — J’entendais.
Et ma raison tremblait en moi, diminuée,
Dans des tressaillements d’orage et de nuée.

Cependant par degrés l’ombre devint visible;
Et l’être qui m’avait parlé précédemment

Reparut, mais grandi jusqu’à l’effarement;
Il remplissait du haut en bas le sombre dôme
Comme si l’infini dilatait ce fantôme;
De sorte que l’esprit effrayant n’offrait plus
Que des faces roulant par flux et par reflux,
Un sourd fourmillement d’hydres, d’hommes, de bêtes,
Et que le fond du ciel me semblait plein de têtes.
Ces têtes par moments semblaient se quereller.
Je voyais tous ces yeux dans l’ombre étinceler.
Le monstre grandissait en silence, sans cesse.
Et je ne savais plus ce que c’était. Était-ce
Une montagne, une hydre, un gouffre, une cité,

Un nuage, un amas d’ombre, l’immensité?
Je sentais tous ces yeux sur moi fixés ensemble.
Tout à coup, frissonnant comme un arbre qui tremble,
Le fantôme géant se répandit en voix,
Qui sous ses flancs confus murmuraient à la fois;
Et, comme d’un brasier tombent des étincelles,
Comme on voit des oiseaux épars, pigeons, sarcelles,
D’un grand essaim passant s’écarter quelquefois,
Comme un vert tourbillon de feuilles sort d’un bois,
Comme, dans les hauteurs par les vents remuées,
En avant d’un orage il vole des nuées,
Toutes ces voix, mêlant le cri, l’appel, le chant,
De l’immense être informe et noir se détachant,
Me montrant vaguement des masques et des bouches,
Vinrent sur moi bruire avec des bruits farouches,
Parfois en même temps et souvent tour à tour,
Comme des monts, à l’heure où se lève le jour,
L’un après l’autre, au fond de l’horizon s’éclairent
Et des formes, sortant du monstre, me parlèrent:

I. Une voix

Les rudes bûcherons sont venus dans le bois.
— Si tu ne vois pas nie et doute si tu vois,
A dit Cratès. — Zénon Gorgias, Pythagore,
Plaute et Sénèque ont dit: — Si tu vois, nie encore.
Bacon a dit — Voici l’objet, l’être, le corps,
Le fait. N’en sortez pas; car tout tremble dehors.
— Quel est ce monde? a dit Thalès. Apollodore
A dit: C’est de la nuit que de la cendre adore.

Et Démonax de Chypre, Epicharme de Cos,
Pyrrhon, le grand errant des monts et des échos,
Ont répondu: — Tout est fantôme. Pas de type.
Tout est larve. — Et fumée, a repris Aristippe.
— Rêve! a dit Sergius, le fatal syrien.
— Rencontre de l’atome et de l’atome, et rien.
Ces mots noirs ont été jetés par Démocrite.
Ésope a dit: — À bas, monde! masque hypocrite!
Épicure qui naît au mois Gamélion,
Et Job qui parle au ver, Dan qui parle au lion,
Amos et Jean troublés par les apocalypses,
Ont dit: — On ne le voit qu’à travers les éclipses.
— L’être est le premier texte et l’homme est le second.
Lisible dans la fleur et dans l’arbre fécond,
Et dans le calme éther des cieux que rien n’irrite,
La nature est dans l’homme obscure et mal transcrite.
Voilà ce qu’Alchindé l’Arabe a proclamé.
Cardan a dit: — Hélas! c’est fermé, c’est fermé!
Alcidamas a dit: — Miracle, autel, croyance,
Dogme, religion, fondent sous la science
Dieu sous l’esprit humain, tas de neige au dégel.
Et Goethe au vaste front, Montaigne, Fichte, Hégel,
Se sont penchés pendant que le grand rieur maître,
Rabelais, chuchotait sur l’abîme peut-être.
Diogène a crié: — Des flambeaux! des flambeaux!

Shakespeare a murmuré, courbé sur les tombeaux:
— Fossoyeur, combien Dieu pèse-t-il dans ta pelle?
Et Jean-Paul a repris: — Ce qu’ainsi l’homme appelle,
C’est la vague lueur qui tremble sur le sort;
C’est la phosphorescence impalpable qui sort
De l’incommensurable et lugubre matière;
Dieu, c’est le feu follet du monde cimetière.
Dante a levé les bras en s’écriant: Pourquoi?
— Ô nuit, j’attends que tout s’affirme et dise: moi.
Quel est le sens des mots: foi, conscience humaine,
Raison, devoir? a dit le pâle Anaximène.
Locke a dit: — On voit mal avec ces appareils.
Reuchlin a demandé: — Qu’est-ce que les soleils?
Sont-ce des piloris ou des apothéoses?
Lucrèce a dit: — Quelle est la nature des choses?
Il a dit: Tout est sourd, faux, muet, décevant.
Sous cette immense mort quelqu’un est-il vivant?
Sent-on une âme au fond de la substance, et l’être
N’est-il pas tout entier dans ce mot: apparaître?
L’ombre engendre la nuit. De quoi l’homme est-il sûr?
Et le ciel, le hasard, l’obscurité, l’azur,
Le mystère, et la vie, et la tombe indignée
Retentissent encor de ces coups de cognée.

Oui, les douteurs; les fiers incrédules, les forts,
Ont appelé Quelqu’un, quoique restés dehors;
Ils ont bravé l’odeur que le sépulcre exhale;
Le front haut, ils disaient à l’ombre colossale:
— Ose donc nous montrer ton Dieu, que nous voyions
Ce qu’il a de carreaux, ce qu’il a de rayons,
Gouffre horrible, et si c’est avec de la colère
Ou du pardon divin que son visage éclaire!
Et, prêts à tout subir, sans peur, prêts à tout voir,
Calmes, ils regardaient en face le ciel noir,
Et le sourd firmament que l’obscurité voile,
Farouches, attendant quelque chute d’étoile!
Certes, ces curieux, ces hardis ignorants,

Ces lutteurs, ces esprits, ces hommes étaient grands,
Et c’étaient des penseurs à l’âme fiers et fière
Qui jetaient à la nuit ce défi de lumière.

Chercheur, trouveras-tu ce qu’ils n’ont pas trouvé?
Songeur, rêveras-tu plus loin qu’ils n’ont rêvé?

II. Une autre voix

Ne nous demande pas, ô songeur, qui nous sommes.
S’ils nous entrevoyaient, nous ferions peur aux hommes.
Soit en bien, soit en mal, nous avons conseillé
Quiconque a médité, cherché, pensé, veillé, —
Tous les grands insensés, tous les sages célèbres:
Nous volons d’arbre en arbre aux forêts de ténèbres;
Tout ce que l’homme appelle Énigme, Doute, Mort,
Brume, Silence, Effroi, Hasard, Mystère, Sort,
Est pour nous, sous l’horreur des voûtes éternelles,
Comme un taillis obscur par où passent nos ailes;
Nous sommes les flottants de l’immense azur noir;
Si quelque mage osait essayer de nous voir,
De saisir un de nous, de compter notre nombre,
Nous nous dissiperions comme des oiseaux d’ombre.

C’est nous que vous nommez démons; homme, tu sens
Sous des souffles confus tes cheveux frémissants,
C’est nous. Nous versons l’ombre aux jours que tu consommes;
Nous jetons des lueurs dans ton-sommeil. Nous sommes
Pris dans l’obscurité comme vous dans la chair.
Nous, sommes les passants — sinistres de l’éclair,

Les méduses du rêve aux robes dénouées,
Les visages d’abîme épars dans les nuées.
Tout ce que vous voyez, nous ne le voyons pas.
Nous ne distinguons point votre terre, vos pas,
Vos faces, d’un soleil invisible inondées,
Mais dans votre cerveau nous voyons vos idées;
Votre pensée est nue à nos regards moqueurs;
Nous voyons le dedans vertigineux des cœurs.
L’haleine de la nuit nous chasse et nous oublie,
Et fait flotter le fil mystérieux qui lie
Vos sciences, vos plans, vos travaux, vos desseins,
Vos efforts, vos projets, vos vœux, à nos essaims.

Nous mêlons notre nuit avec votre ignorance;
Vous appelez cela savoir. La transparence
De l’Être parfois laisse apercevoir nos fronts.
Parfois jusqu’à vos cœurs, la nuit, nous pénétrons,
En rêve, et vous sentez comme une vague étreinte.
Sans cesse des courants d’espérance ou de crainte,
Des flux et des reflux de sentiments divers
Vont, dans les profondeurs de l’espace, à travers
Le vide, l’aquilon, le tombeau, le décombre,
De vous le peuple aveugle à nous le peuple sombre.
L’Inconnu nous tient tous dans ses mornes filets.
Nous sommes vos échos, vous êtes nos reflets;
Car tout est l’unité. Forme joyeuse ou triste,
Tout se confond dans Tout, et rien à part n’existe,
Ô vivant! Et sais-tu ce que dit l’abîme? UN.
Sans que vous le sachiez, nous pensons en commun;
Nous tremblons au-dessus de vous, livide armée;
Et de votre feu noir nous sommes la fumée.
Nos formes de la nuit sont le lugubre jeu
Nous allons, nous flottons. — Et toi, tu cherches Dieu?
Hélas!
Qui que tu sois, redoute, au gouffre où tu te plonges,
Le vague coudoiement des vains passants des songes.
— Fuyez d’ici, vivants, dont l’esprit, fléchissant
Sous l’incompréhensible et sous l’éblouissant,
Peut à peine porter le poids d’un évangile.
Ce n’est pas sans danger que des hommes d’argile,

Tremblants quand ils sont las, glacés quand ils sont nus,
Dialoguent dans l’ombre avec des inconnus.

À force de songer, ô pâle solitaire,
Tu sentiras de l’air sous toi; tu perdras terre...
Oh! les souffles! craignez les souffles de la nuit!
Où vous emportent-ils? Ceux qu’un rêve conduit
Deviennent rêve eux-mêmes, et, sans être coupables,
Tombent dans l’essaim noir des faces impalpables.

C’est alors qu’éperdu, terrible, tu tendras
Les mains comme les morts sous leurs lugubres draps.

Mais à quoi bon? Tout fuit. Un vent qui vous pénètre
Vous roule dans l’espace à jamais... — O deuil! être
Des espèces d’esprits misérables chassés!
Oh! n’entendre jamais ce mot céleste: assez!
Un souffle vous apporte, un souffle vous remmène..
On a, sur ce qu’on garde encor de forme humaine,
D’obscurs attouchements et des passages froids;
Toute l’ombre n’est plus qu’une suite d’effrois;
On sent les longs frissons des roseaux de l’abîme.
Jamais le jour. — Jamais un rayon qui ranime.
Errer! errer! errer! errer! faire des nœuds
D’ombre, dans l’invisible et le vertigineux!
Monter, tomber, monter, retomber! sort terrible!
Être à jamais l’informe égaré dans l’horrible,
Le contraire du jour, de l’hymne et de l’encens!
Des témoins de l’énigme, à jamais frémissants
Devant le ténébreux, devant l’inabordable,
Et face à face avec un voile formidable!
Être, en dehors de l’être, en dehors du trépas,
Quelque chose d’affreux qui souffre et ne vit pas!
Être de la clameur dans l’infini semée,
Un vague tourbillon pleurant, une fumée
De larves, de regards, de masques, de rumeurs,
De voix ne pouvant pas même dire: je meurs,
Passant toujours, toujours, toujours, comme un flot sombre,
Sous les arches sans fin du hideux pont de l’ombre!

IV. Une autre voix

Malheur au curieux lugubre, — qui s’acharne
À la vertigineuse et sinistre lucarne!
Malheur aux imprudents penchés, sur l’absolu!

Pour avoir trop sondé, pour avoir trop voulu,
Pour s’être trop plongés dans l’abstraction triste
Où rien de saisissable et d’humain ne persiste,
C’est fini; les voilà sur les fatals sommets,
Égarés en dehors de l’homme désormais,
Sortis du bien, du mal, de l’orgueil, de l’envie,
De l’amour, de la haine, et plus grands que la vie!
Leur esprit, emporté loin de vous, ô vivants,
Prend, dans la vision des gouffres décevants,
Dans on ne sait quoi d’âpre et d’horrible et d’immense,
Cette divinité que vous nommez démence.
Ils ne sont plus jamais éveillés ni dormants.
Terrestre et claire encor dans ses commencements,
Leur pensée, obscurcie en grandissant, achève
D’ouvrir ses vagues yeux dans le monde du rêve.

Oh! monde redoutable! oh! ce que nous voyons!
Des échelles d’esprits dans de pâles rayons;
Les flamboiements, les feux, les cratères, les soufres,
Les éclairs, gouvernés par les anges des gouffres;
Des sons de voix qu’on a dans la joie entendus;
D’affreux escarpements dans des mondes perdus;
Des astres, dans des mains portés comme des lampes;
Et là-bas, dans la nue aux tortueuses rampes,
Errent ceux qui vivaient et ne sont plus; ils vont,
Tous ces crânes à l’œil monstrueux et profond,
Tous ces squelettes blancs venus des ossuaires;
Ils vont, tous ces linceuls, tous ces hideux suaires,
Tous ces draps frissonnants, foule effrayante à voir,
Et, chassant devant lui, dans l’affreux chemin noir,

Leur conscience nue et leur âme sans voiles,
L’ange fouette les morts avec son fouet d’étoiles.
Et l’on voit des lueurs, on entend des appels;
Les constellations, flamboyants archipels,
Brillent au zénith sombre, et le chaos conspue
Le ciel avec son eau sinistre et corrompue.

Et les désespérés passent. Qui donc sont-ils?
Sont-ce des esprits morts? Sont-ce des corps subtils?
Ils tombent on ne sait de quelle obscure cime,
Tantôt plus noirs, tantôt moins sombres que l’abîme;
Leur chute flotte au gré de l’air qui les poursuit;
Ils seraient les flocons, s’il neigeait de la nuit.
Qu’est-ce que ce nuage inconcevable d’êtres,
Phalènes se heurtant à de vagues fenêtres?
Les uns n’ont qu’un regard et sont comme les yeux
De l’infini glacé, sourd et silencieux;
D’autres vont droits et blancs dans la profondeur blême;
D’autres, plus effrayants que les ténèbres même,
Luttent contre la nuit dans les horreurs du vent,
Poussant des cris, mordant l’ombre, n’apercevant
Que la lividité des mornes étendues,
Ne distinguant qu’un flot de formes éperdues,
Et que ce qu’on peut voir de nuée et de cieux.
Dans des renversements de torses furieux.

Et ces larves s’en vont. Est-on sûr qu’elles soient?

Et les contemplateurs sont la. Tristes, ils voient.
Quoi? l’inconnu, muré dans sa muette loi.
Et qui dira jamais ce qu’expriment d’effroi
Ces profils ténébreux, ces postures fatales,
Ces yeux hagards noyés dans des aurores pâles?
Ils pensent, échoués dans l’immobilité;
La terreur sans espoir fait leur tranquillité;
Leur épaule fléchit comme s’ils portaient toute
La charpente du monde avec toute la voûte;

Et, comme en un caveau, goutte à goutte, la nuit
Filtre sous leur front blême où leur œil fixe luit.
Ils ont pour vision éternelle la Chose
Sans nom, sans jour, sans bruit, sans bord, sans fin, sans cause,
Jamais ne s'arrêtant, jamais ne s'achevant,
Terrible, avec des vols de spectres dans le vent.

Que viens-tu demander à ce monde nocturne?
Un Dieu! Pourquoi viens-tu plonger ta main dans l'Urne?
Job entire Satan et Mahomet Iblis.
Les gouffres ont-ils Dieu dans leurs profonds oublis?
Ce Dieu sert-il de centre à leurs circonférences?
Le voit-on à travers leurs sombres transparences?
Ou bien est-ce ce Tout, cette âpre immensité,
Ce ciel, que vous, prenez pour une volonté?
Sont-ce ces profondeurs, ces vents, ces fondrières,
Ces forêts de nuée aux livides clairières.

Ces éléments, ces nuits, ces mornes régions,
Que vous appelez Dieu dans vos religions?
Avez-vous pour mirage, ô fils du cimetière,
De voir la chose-Dieu sous la chose Matière?
Est-ce Dieu qui paraît quand s'enfuit l'alcyon;
Quand l'hydre de l'écume entre en convulsion;
Quand partout on entend dans la sombre nature
Comme un bruit d'ouragan brisant une mâture,
Quand le ciel lamentable éclate en tristes voix;
Quand le nuage accourt; quand les bêtes des bois
Tremblent; quand les lions, hagards, baissent la tête
Sous des écrasements d'éclairs et de tempête?

Est-ce lui que la mer appelle en sa clameur?
Homme, est-il quelque part un effrayant semeur
Qui jette dans l'azur des chiffres et des nombres,
De la graine d'abîme éclose en larves sombres,
Des vivants comme nous qui te semblent des morts,
Des esprits comme toi qui nous semblent des corps,

Et qui voit, dans le champ des espaces sonores,
Ondoyer des épis d’étoiles et d’aurores?
Qui peut répondre oui? qui peut répondre non?
Un geôlier rôde-t-il autour du cabanon?
Qu’importe! Vis. Tais-toi. Va-t’en. Aime ton père,
Ta mère et tes enfants. Qui cherche désespère.

V. Une autre voix

Ah! c’est l’obscurité, c’est la source profonde
Que ton œil veut scruter, que veut fouiller ta sonde,
Ô songeur dont la nuit hérisse les cheveux!
Ah! c’est l’énigme Dieu qui t’occupe! Tu veux
Aller au fond! tu veux voir clair dans la nuée!
Vider l’ombre! Il te faut, pauvre âme exténuée,
Cette science-là... — Voyons: tente; entreprends;
Avec les papyrus, les missels, les korans,
Les bibles que les sphynx portaient sur leurs poitrines,
Rebâtis la charpente informe des doctrines;
Des croyances de l’homme écrasé sous le faix,
Échafaude l’amas monstrueux, et refais
Un édifice avec ces poutres mal unies
Qu’on nomme vérités, dogmes, théogonies;
Restaure, démolis, fonde. Fais des essais.
Remets le vieux bahut debout sur ses vieux ais;
Crois comme Jean Climaque et Jean Catéchumène;
Ou taille un meuble neuf dans la science humaine
Pour y mettre sous clef l’ombre et l’éternité.
Questionne l’autel d’Isis ou d’Astarté,
Ou les temples payens, peu salués des sages,
Ayant de noirs corbeaux nichés dans leurs bossages,
Ou le blême Irmensul debout dans le menhir;
Creuse dans le passé, creuse dans l’avenir;
Regarde fixement le Temps noir qui feuillette
L’homme et la vie avec son pouce de squelette;
Épèle l’univers que le souffle créa,
Texte dont chaque monde est un alinéa;
Chiffre et déchiffre; éprouve, interprète, proclame;
Confronte ce que l’homme a d’ombre dans son âme
Avec ce que le ciel a d’âme dans sa nuit
Relance Olympe ermite au fond de son réduit;
Interroge le ver sur la toile qu’il file;
Montre et vois; fais la pâque ainsi que Théophile

Le quatorzième jour de la lune de mars;
Visite Ammon; tiens tête aux colosses camards
Conteste, affirme; nie, attends; dis ton rosaire;
Sens la terre trembler — sous toi comme Césaire;
Prêche avant d'être prêtre ainsi que Bellarmin;
Exprime en ton cerveau tout le savoir humain
Fais-toi de tout comprendre une étrange prouesse;
Vois venir au-devant l'un de l'autre Boèce
Et Saint-Denis, chacun sa tête dans sa main;
De la même façon fais le même chemin;
Hante les profondeurs dont Pythagore est pâle;
Commente nuphre, Adon, Glareanus de Bâle
Sois druide, fakir, bonze, magicien;
Installe, si tu veux, sur le modèle ancien,
Au-dessus des brouillards de l'erreur chimérique,
Une sagesse avec entablement dorique;
Sois le médiateur des aveugles Volta
Dément Clairaut; Cyrille au front du Golgotha
Voit dans l'Ombre une croix haute de quinze stades
Bossuet de Calvin tance les incartades;
L'évêque Archelaüs poursuit l'errant Manès;
Hildebrand dit: Moi SEUL. Luther dit: HERR OMNES
Ce qu'adore Pascal Diderot le diffame;
Reuchlin dit: — Vos trois rois! conte de bonne femme!
— D'où viennent-ils? demande Arouet à Calmet;
De l'Inde ou de l'Afrique? — Et Paracelse met
Trois pégases de flamme aux ordres des trois mages;
Salomon sculpte l'arche; Huss brise les images;
Pélage veut la lutte; Augustin veut la foi;
Interviens; crée un centre, une règle, une loi;
Trouve l'axe commun des doctrines contraires
À force de raison rends les raisonneurs frères;
Amalgame Épicure avec Ézéchiel;
Pour ceux-ci, l'univers n'a que l'enfer pour ciel;
C'est le cachot du mal dont vous êtes les proies;
Pour ceux-là, c'est le lieu des fêtes et des joies
Les uns vivent chantant: tout est plaisir et jeu!

D’autres lisent le livre à la lueur du feu.
Combine ce zénith et ce nadir des sages.
Fais pour ton œil, penché sur les faits, sur les âges,
Une lentille avec tout ce que l’homme apprit;
Cherche; dis-toi: — Je vais faire dans mon esprit

Converger la clarté pour la changer en flamme,
Condenser Dieu sur moi pour allumer mon âme.
Fouille Alcuin, saint-Thomas, Gorgias Léontin,
Le ménologe grec, le rituel latin;
Va de Thèbe Heptapyle à Thèbe Hécatonpyle;
Éblouis-toi d’énigme et d’effroi la pupile;
Écris et lis; sois gond du portail; sois flambeau,
Sois cardinal avec Sadolet et Bembo;
Va-t’en dans le désert manger des sauterelles
Comme Jean qui de l’ombre écoutait les querelles;
Fais une enquête; prends des informations
Près des vents, près des flots où sont les alcyons;
Cueille chaque chimère et chaque schisme; laisse
Novatus pour Eustathe, Arius pour Mélèce;
Va des juifs aux parsis, va des esprits aux corps,
De la ronde des dieux à la ronde des morts,
De la danse morphasme à la danse macabre.
Veille; allume ta lampe au sombre candélabre
Que tiennent, près du trône où Septentrion luit,
Persée et Sirius, ces nègres de la nuit.
Interpelle le germe et la cendre; rédige
Un interrogatoire en forme du prodige;
Écoute pétiller le feu dans l’encensoir;
Écoute le cri sourd de la foudre, et, le soir,
Dans le Campo Santo le bruit que fait la pioche;
Parle à Domnus premier, évêque d’Antioche,
Et sur l’irrémissible et sur le véniel,
Consulte Cassien, Scaliger, Torniel;
Sois le voyant! pareil aux tremblants aruspices,
Va regarder la nuit l’horreur des précipices;
Au fond de tout abîme aie un sinistre aimant;

Observe, spectateur des deux gouffres, comment
L’homme entre dans la mort et l’astre dans l’éclipse;
Donne aux vierges ta plume ainsi que Juste Lipse;
Attends dans l’infini, leur morne promenoir,
Zénon, le sage fou, Gerbert, le pape noir;
Prie, évoque, bénis, sacre, exorcise, adjure;
Accoude-toi sur l’être obscur; fais la gageure
De l’énigme, du sphinx, du gouffre, de demain,
D’hier, de l’avenir! jauge, la toise en main,
Le ciel par kilomètre ou bien par centiare;
Drape-toi d’un suaire ou coiffe une tiare;
Tâte dans le cercueil l’affreux nœud gordien;
Prends-toi pour unité; fais-toi méridien;
Ajoute ta raison, ton but; ta conjecture
Et ta pensée ainsi qu’un faîte à la nature;
Mets sur cette Chéops le pyramidion;
Sois un convertisseur comme Spiridion;
Sois un avertisseur comme le coq sonore;
Monte sur le cheval terrible de Lénore,
Ayant pour t’éclairer le feu de ses naseaux,
Et la lumière qu’ont les spectres sur leurs os;
Superpose et bâtis comme une tour solide
Wiclef, Leibnitz; le diacre Ambroise, Basilide,
Swedenborg, Lyranus, Rupert, Abulensis,
Cardan, sous l’escarboucle inexprimable assis,
Photin, Cassiodore, Alcidamas, Eusèbe,
Potamon d’Héraclée et Paphnuce de Thèbe,
Tous les docteurs, vrais, faux, grands, petits, inconnus,
Connus, depuis Sophron jusqu’à Théotechnus,
Les devins, les savants, Paris, Rome, Épidaure,
Les poëtes sereins, ces frères de l’aurore
Faits de la même pourpre et dorés du même or,
La congrégation des pères de Saint Maur,
La grâce, le péché, l’oraison impétrante,
Les vingt-cinq sessions du concile de Trente,
Les feuillets sibyllins tombés on ne sait d’où,
Le livre turc, le livre hébreu, le livre hindou;

Passe les jours, les nuits; deviens blanc dans les rêves;
Sois Jérôme; oui, sois Jean rôdant le long des grèves;
Sois Dante pour penser et sois Newton pour voir;
Sois Origène, Euler, Platon! Veux-tu savoir
Ce que tu construiras sur Dieu? de la fumée.

Oui, combine, l’Égypte, et Delphe, et l’Idumée;
Cherche le sens des mots Zéus, Vichnou, Mithra;
Fouille le zodiaque obscur, de Denderah;
Espère où Nicomaque et Thalès désespèrent;
Reprends les chiffres noirs, où d’autres se trompèrent
Reprends-les tous, reprends ceux où tu te trompas;
Tous les cercles que peut contenir ton compas,
Trace-les; songe; parle aux arbres; fais-leur signe;
Compte, compte, recompte; additionne, aligne,
Devant l’impénétrable et devant le fatal,
Devant ce qui n’a pas de nombre et de total,
Tous tes zéros, anneaux du rideau de la tombe;
Le sépulcre, c’est là que toujours on retombe,
Se dresse devant toi, regarde tes travaux,
Bons, mauvais, inexacts, exacts, anciens, nouveaux,
Et ce tas de calculs que, ta pensée anime,
Et te jette ce cri, le seul mot de l’abîme
Qu’il sache, et le seul nom qu’il se connaisse: Après?

Question que se font dans l’ombre les cyprès.

VI. Une autre voix

Et d’abord, de quel Dieu veux-tu parler? Précise.
Quel est celui qui tient ta pensée indécise?
Dis, est-ce du Dieu peint en jaune, en rouge, en bleu;
Habitant d’un triangle où flambe un mot hébreu;
Face dorée au fond d’une nuée épaisse;
Portant couronne, étole, et glaive, et sceptre; espèce
D’empereur, habillé d’un habit de soleil,
Ayant au poing le globe et Satan sous l’orteil,
Assis dans une chaire, et dictant la sentence
D’Arius à Nicée et de Huss à Constance;
Niant le genre humain, concile universel;
Servant de majuscule aux pages du missel;
Dieu qui met Galilée en prison, et de Maistre
En sentinelle au seuil du paradis terrestre;
Dieu qu’une vieille en rêve, au bruit qu’en se choquant
Font dans l’immensité des foudres de clinquant,
Sous un grand dais d’azur que l’astre damasquine,
Aperçoit lui montrant les numéros d’un quine;
Dieu gothique, irritable, intolérant, tueur,
Noir vitrail effrayant qu’empourpre la lueur
Du bûcher qui flamboie et pétille derrière?
Est-ce du Dieu qui veut la chanson pour prière,
Qu’on invoque en trinquant, Dieu bon vivant, qui rit;
Comprend, sait que la chair est faible, a de l’esprit;
Dieu point fâcheux qui vit en bonne intelligence
Avec les passions de votre pauvre engeance,
Excusant le péché, l’expliquant au besoin,
Clignant de l’œil avec le diable dans un coin,
Flânant, regardant l’homme en sa fainéantise,
Mais jamais du côté qui fait une sottise,
Et pas très sûr au fond lui-même d’exister?
Est-ce du Dieu qu’on voit à Versailles monter
Aux carrosses du roi, bien né, suivant les modes,
Rendant aux Montespans les Bossuets commodes,

Dieu de cour, Dieu de ville, avec soin expurgé
De toute humeur brutale et de tout préjugé,
Complaisant; paternel aux morales mondaines;
Avec les Massillons émoussant les Bridaines;
Dieu qu’un fripon coudoie avec tranquillité;
Dieu par la politique et le siècle accepté;
Lâchant son ciel; disant: Paris vaut une messe;
Souple et doux, dispensant les rois de leur promesse,
Point janséniste, point pédant, point monacal;
Permettant à Sanchez d’effaroucher Pascal,

Au banquier d’encoffrer cent pour cent, à la femme,
Laide, d’être méchante, et, belle, d’être infâme;
Passant l’épice au juge, au marchand le faux poids;
Habile; à Notre-Dame accouplant Quincampoix;
Sévère seulement aux têtes raisonnantes,
Tuant un peu Ramus, biffant l’édit de Nantes,
Mais qui, pourvu qu’on soit, dans les grands jours, pilier
À l’église, et qu’on soit cousin d’un marguillier,
Et qu’on veuille que Rome en tout règne et s’accroisse,
Et qu’on rende le pain bénit à sa paroisse,
Vous prend en amitié, vous soutient chaudement,
Vous épouse, travaille à votre avancement,
Parle à son excellence et vous pousse, et procure
Un grade aux fils aînés, aux cadets une cure,
En attendant la mitre ou les canonicats;
Dieu facile, logeable, aimable, utile en-cas
Qui se contente, ayant d’indulgence boutique,
D’un peu d’hypocrisie et d’un peu de pratique;
Dogme et religion des dévôts positifs
Qui font de temps en temps des voyages furtifs,
Courts, dans l’éternité, l’abîme, le mystère,
Et l’insondable, avec ce Dieu pour pied-à-terre?
Est-ce du Dieu guerrier, militaire, sanglant,
Qui s’inquiète peu que vous mangiez du gland
Ou du pain, mais qui veut pour rites et pour cultes
Glaives, piques, corbeaux, scorpions, catapultes,

Grappin horrible où pend un vaisseau tout entier,
Tortue avec sa claie enduite de mortier,
Béliers fixes, heurtant les murs comme des proues,
Telenos enlevant des soldats, tours à roues
Recouvertes de mousse et de crin de cheval;
Plus tard, pierriers broyant quelque donjon-rival
Jusqu’à ce qu’il s’en aille en cendre et se dissoude,
Mangonneaux, fauconneaux, bat-murs, pièces à coude,
Renversant les cités dans leur fossé bourbeux;
Volcans grégeois traînés par trente jougs de bœufs,
Canons vénitiens, serpentines lombardes;
Dieu qui dit à Coglione: attelle les bombardes;
Qui rit, pauvre blessé, du grabat où tu geins,
Que la bataille enivre avec tous ses engins,
Chaudrons à poix bouillante et fours à boulets rouges,
Qui chasse les manants éperdus de leurs bouges;
Qui rêve Te Deum qui s’endort aux accents
De l’obusier Lancastre et du mortier Paixhans;
Qui prête, quand la mine est faite sous la brèche,
Son tonnerre du besoin pour allumer la mèche,
Et, quand la terre s’ouvre avec un large éclair,
S’épanouit de voir les gens sauter en l’air?
Vision du passé par votre âge subie!
Est-ce du Dieu jugeur? Oh! l’étrange lubie!
Dieu chancelier, portant perruque in-folio,
Vidant le procès Homme et l’Être imbroglio!
Dieu président, siégeant dans l’univers grand’chambre,
Jugeant l’âme, et bâillant, sous un ciel de décembre,
Entre l’avocat ange et l’avocat démon?
Dis, est-ce le dieu guèbre, est-ce le dieu mormon
Qu’il te faut? Ou le Dieu qui fit rouer Labarre?
Vois. Choisis. Ou le Dieu qui donne au turc barbare
Des femmes plein la tombe et plein le firmament?
Ou bien est-ce le Dieu qui fait lugubrement
Chanter, quand l’heure vient de vêpre ou de matines,
L’homme qui n’est plus homme aux chapelles sixtines,
Et qui, lui créateur, se plaît à l’écouter?

Ou parles-tu du Dieu qu’il faudrait inventer,
Que dans l’ombre la peur concède au phénomène,
Par les sages bâti sur la sagesse humaine,
Utile à ton valet, bon pour ton cuisinier,
Modérateur des sauts de l’anse du panier,
Dieu de raison qu’au fond de son spectre solaire
Le bourgeois bienveillant raille, exile et tolère,
Dieu consenti par Locke et que Grimm refusa,
Très-Haut à qui d’Holbach a donné son visa,
Éternel maçonné par le vivant qui passe,
Entrecolonnement du temps et de l’espace,
Pièce d’architecture ajoutée après coup
À la vie, au destin, au bien, au mal, à tout,
Tour tremblante de vide et hors-d’œuvre de l’homme?
Tous ces dieux, quel que soit le nom dont on les nomme,
Sont tout, excepté Dieu.
 L’homme abject a besoin,
Étant méchant, d’un juge, et, hideux, d’un témoin;
Il veut un Dieu. C’est bien. L’homme prend de la brique,
De la pierre, du plomb, du bois, et le fabrique;
Chaque peuple a le sien; et la religion
A l’Unité pour masque et pour nom Légion.
Un temple voit la nuit où l’autre voit l’aurore;
Chéos adore Ammon que Jagrenat ignore;
Pour Delphe Odin n’est pas; la solimaniéh
Affirme Mahomet par le dolmen nié.
La terre crée un monstre et se met sous sa garde;
Et c’est avec stupeur que le grand ciel regarde
Croître sur vos fumiers ce misérable Dieu.
Nous ne nous mettons pas en peine de si peu,
Nous autres les esprits errant dans l’étendue;
Et, sans nous acharner à la lueur perdue,
Sans poursuivre l’obscure et pâle vision,
Sans exiger de l’ombre une solution,

Nous raillons dans la nuit votre Brahma fétiche,
Dieu qui mêle à à sa barbe un infini postiche,

Dieu singe pour le nègre et Dieu peste au Thibet;
Bourreau dressant sur l’homme un immense gibet,
Bœuf à Memphis, dragon à Tyr, hydre en Chaldée,
Chimère et non raison, idole et non idée.
Ton globe, vieil enfant, joue avec ce hochet.
Homme, esprit fou qu’en vain Diogène cherchait,
Homme, tu fais pitié même aux êtres du gouffre,
Même à l’obscurité qui frissonne et qui souffre;
Car ton monde étroit rêve un rêve limité;
Il se compose un Dieu de son infirmité;
Et, dans l’abjection de ses passions vaines,
Instinct, science, amour, colère, guerres, haines,
Il se fait de sa fange une divinité!
Il pétrit de la terre avec l’éternité!
Et quand dans sa furie, et quand dans sa débauche,
Inepte, il a forgé cette effroyable ébauche,
Ce géant muet, sourd, aveugle, dur, fatal,
Ce spectre d’ombre ayant l’horreur pour piédestal,
Il achève ce Dieu de laideur, d’imposture,
De nuit, avec la peur qu’il a de la nature.
Ô toi qui passes là, que veux-tu donc?

Et moi:
— Je veux le nom du vrai, criai-je plein d’effroi,
Pour que je le redise à la terre inquiète.

VII. Une autre voix

Est-ce que tu serais par hasard un poète?
Qui te rend si hardi? réponds, questionneur.
Viens-tu comme Shakespeare à la tour d’Elseneur?
Pour entrer dans la brume où s’éteint la science,
Pour tenter le mystère, aurais-tu confiance,
Homme dont l’ombre fuit les pas trop approchants,
Dans le pouvoir suave et sinistre des chants?
Oui, c’est vrai, le poète est puissant. Qui l’ignore?
L’esprit, force et clarté, sort de sa voix sonore.
Trophonius est seul dans son caveau divin;
L’homme lui dit: poète! et l’abîme: devin!

Amphion chante et met en mouvement les pierres;
Orphée errant du tigre éblouit les paupières;
Homère est dans la tombe, et son âme, à travers,
Pousse au Gange Alexandre enivré de ses vers;
Prenant forme au plus noir de l’antre, les fantômes
Blanchissent à l’appel des blêmes Chrysostômes
Isaïe en criant: Deuil! malheur! fait hennir
Le féroce Orient qui dit: je vais venir!
Euripide, Sophocle, Eschyle qu’un dieu mine,
Sont comme le trépied d’où jaillit Salamine;
Elle à son gré vide et lance au peuple hébreu
Les flèches de la pluie ou le carquois du feu;
L’âpre Archiloque avec le marteau de l’ïambe
Enfonce le clou sombre où se pendra Lycambe;
Dante dit, l’œil fixé sur un homme passant
— Je t’ai vu dans l’enfer! L’homme, pâle, y descend.
La Marseillaise énorme est un bruit de mêlée;
Tyrtée est une lyre effrayante; envolée
Au-devant des combats et des drapeaux mouvants,
Et traînant, après elle un peuple dans les vents.
Les poètes profonds, hommes de la stature
Des éléments, du bien, du mal, de la nature,

Vivaient jadis, géants, en familiarité
Avec le jour, la nuit, l’ombre et l’éternité;
Ils méditaient, ayant, dans l’horreur solennelle,
Toujours devant leur âme et devant leur prunelle
La contemplation; ce mur vertigineux;
Ils avaient la science et l’ignorance en eux;
Épars, ils blanchissaient le fond des solitudes;
Ils rêvaient; ils avaient diverses attitudes;
Les uns, calmes, restaient, leur menton dans leur main,
Du côté des vivants, sur le rivage humain;
Ils regardaient passer les foules pêle-mêle,
Homme, femme, vieillard, enfant à la mamelle,
Chocs de glaives, pavois; codes, mœurs, échafauds,
Les cintres pleins d’azur des grands arcs triomphaux,
Le trône avec son roi, le prêtre avec son livre;
Et devant tout ce flot, forcené, bruyant, ivre,
Triste, joyeux, confus, violent, inclément,
Sourd, ignorant la chute et l’âpre escarpement,
Ils contemplaient de loin la mort, sombre barrage.
Les autres se tenaient hors du terrestre orage,
Comme s’ils. étaient morts, et de l’autre côté;
Ils regardaient, roulant vers eux, l’humanité
S’engouffrer sous leurs pieds, race à race engloutie;
De ce faîte, ils étaient présents à la sortie
Des empires, des faits, des grands événements,
Des prines, de puissance et de guerre écumants,

Et voyaient peuples, rois; tout ce qu’en la, nuit noire
Dégorge le sépulcre; énorme vomitoire.
Ils rayonnaient; leurs yeux sereins étincelaient;
Ils devenaient eux-même ombre et souffle, et semblaient
Au genre humain, perdu dans ses mornes délires,
Des fantômes chantants, passant avec des lyres.
Quelques-uns, murés, sourds, n’avaient plus de regard
Que l’œil intérieur, lumineux et hagard,
Et ces hommes sacrés, semblables à des mânes,
Hors du monde, habitaient dans l’antre de leurs crânes;

D’autres vivaient aux bois, et leurs esprits songeaient,
Et, laissant là leurs corps, éblouis, voyageaient;
Ils erraient d’être en être et du fait à la cause;
Voyaient s’épanouir l’arbre en apothéose;
Ils allaient, pénétrant au-delà du réel,
Par la racine au gouffre et par la fleur au ciel,
Dans la création entraient le plus possible,
Tordaient l’insaisissable avec l’inaccessible,
Étudiaient comment se forment les métaux
Dans la forge invisible aux ténébreux marteaux,
Et la seve, et le feu des volcans, et les haltes
Des laves sous l’écorce affreuse des basaltes;
Le vent chantait pour eux un sublime paean;
Ils observaient l’hiver, l’Ouragan, l’océan,
L’avalanche, l’écueil, les grêles épaissies,
Les vagues, effarés de ces épilepsies;
Et, pensifs; saisissant, jusqu’aux plus hauts zéniths,
Les intersections de tous les infinis,
L’endroit où le bien nuit, l’endroit où le mal aine,
Ils tâchaient de trouver le point fatal, suprême,
Terrible, surprenant, caché sous le linceul,
Sombre, où tous les secrets se fondent en un seul!
Dans les grottes de l’Inde ou dans les rocs d’Eubée,
Lieux où l’on croit toujours être à la nuit tombée,
À Cartlane où la fleur mandragore chanta,
À Delphe, à Summum, dans l’île Éléphanta,
Ou dans la Bactriane ou dans la Sogdiane,
Ou dans les monts qu’emplit la sinistre Diane,
Dans les déserts où l’être a l’air de se mouvoir
En dégageant un sombre et lugubre pouvoir,
Les pâtres rencontraient un homme dont la face
Semblait une lueur étrange de l’espace,
Dont la bouche parlait, et dont l’égarement
Ramenait tout à lui comme un farouche aimant;
Le loup craignait cet homme, et les brutes fuyantes
S’en allaient de son ombre encor plus effrayantes;
Et toute chose douce à ses pieds triomphait,

L’agneau, l’aube; et c’était le poète en effet.
Et de quoi vivait-il? Nul ne le sait. Son âme
Aspirait l’inconnu comme un puissant dictame;
Sa chair s’oubliait l’homme était en lui dissous;
Du, splendide Univers il tâtait le dessous;
Livide, il assistait aux blancheurs idéales,
Aux détonations d’aurores boréales,
Aux déluges roulant dans leurs vastes limons
Des hydres qui semblaient des gouffres et des monts,
Aux chaos combattant la vie, aux héroïsmes -
Des globes traversant ces rudes cataclysmes,
Au miracle, à l’atome; et son regard voyait
Des naissances d’édens dans l’abîme inquiet,
Des jets d’étoiles d’or, des chutes de décombres,
Et des explosions de créations sombres.
Et pendant qu’il rêvait, immobile, voyant
L’inouï, — l’ignoré, le trouble, l’ondoyant,
Les visions, l’azur indicible, feux, nimbes,
Masques crispés d’enfants sanglotant dans les limbes,
Et la torche de l’astre allant mettre le feu
À des mondes perdus au fond du vide bleu,
Et la larve, à travers les brumes décuplantes,
Entre les doigts des pieds il lui poussait des plantes,
Et les feuilles, qui font leur ouvrage sans bruit,.
Couvraient cet homme ainsi qu’un chêne dans la nuit.

Et cette intimité formidable avec l’être
Faisait de e songeur farouche, plus: qu’un prêtre,
Plus qu’un augure, plus qu’un pontife; un esprit;
Un spectre à qui, la mort radieuse sourit.
Et c’est de là que vient cette auguste puissance
Faite d’immensité, d’épouvante, d’essence,
Qu’a le poète saint et, qu’on sent dans ses vers
Les prodiges au fond du mystère entr’ouverts
Mêlent leur rayon fauve à son âme élargie,
Presque jusqu’à l’horreur et jusqu’à la magie,
Et qui parfois Côtoie, ainsi qu’un noir plongeur;

Le cercle où de l’enfer commence la roûgeur:

Oui, le poète peut ce qu’il veut; le poète
Arrête en lui parlant l’immense gypaète;
Il domine la ville et le désert; il peut
Unir la terre au ciel; et, dans le même nœud,
L’idéal au réel, et tisser une-’toile
Avec des fils de chanvre et des rayons d’étoile;
Il dégage de tout, du fait, vaste ou petit,
De tout ce qu’on apprend, dé tout ce qu’on bâtit,
Du progrès, du tombeau,de la matière même,
Une grande Uranie azurée et suprême;
Il met sur la science un plafond sidéral;
Il fait tomber la haine et l’épine-et-le mal.

Ce nom déborde vaste, inouï, réfractaire,
Quelque être que ce soit, au ciel et sur la terre.
O passant, entends-tu bégayer à la fois
Par toutes les rumeurs et par toutes les voix
De la création ténébreuse et murée,
Par toute l’étendue et toute la durée,
Ce nom mystérieux, énorme, illimité?
Le printemps et l’automne et l’hiver et l’été
Sont quatre accents divers de ce grand nom qui gronde;
La syllabe du vent n’est pas elle de l’onde;
Chaque être dit la sienne et la murmure à part;
L’antilope en a peur quand c’est le léopard.
Qui le proclame au fond de la forêt sonore;
Et la nuit le prononce autrement, que l’aurore.
L’homme à saisir ce mot s’est parfois occupé;
Mais en vain; car ce nom ineffable est coupé
En autant de tronçons qu’il est de créatures;
Il est épars au loin dans les autres natures;
Personne n’a l’alpha, personne l’oméga;
Ce nom, qu’en expirant le passé nous légua,
Sera continué par ceux qui sont à naître;
Et tout l’univers n’a qu’un objet: nommer l’être!

Et des soleils sont morts et des soleils mourront,
Et l’espace où l’étoile éclôt, la flamme au front,
A vu naître et pâlir dans ses profondeurs fauves
Des feux qui ne sont plus que de vieux astres chauves;
L’heure apporte et reprend les jours, les mois, les ans,
Et la mémoire avorte à compter ces passants,
Et l’ombre épouvantable en ses aveugles ondes
Roule des millions de millions de mondes,
Et le sillon engendre et la fosse enfouit,
Et tout se développe et tout s’évanouit,
Et tout brille et s’éteint; mon phosphore et le vôtre,
Et les êtres confus tombent l’un après” l’autre,
Et toujours, à jamais, sans qu’il cesse un moment
D’emplir le jour, la nuit,l’éther, le firmament,
Sans qu’aucun autre bruit l’interrompe et s’y mêle,
Le nom infini sort de la bouche éternelle!
De la ronce hideuse et de l’âme méchante;
Tendre, il plane au-dessus du cirque horrible et chante
Pour les martyrs un chant qui fait honte aux lions;
À la guerre civile il fait dire: oublions!
Il prend les cœurs lointains des peuples et les mêle,
Accouple à la raison la foi, sa sœur jumelle,
Calme la foule, endort le flot, dompte le feu,
Change l’homme; il peut tout; hors ceci: nommer Dieu.
Nommer Dieu de façon que l’abîme comprenne.
Il peut tout, hors ceci: faire à l’aube sereine,
Au lys, à l’astre, à l’hydre, à l’éclair enflammé,
Dire dans l’étendue obscure: il, l’a nommé!

== VIII. Une autre voix

Est-ce que, voyageur fatal, tu prémédites
Des actions de rêve étranges et maudites,
D’aller, de forcer l’Ombre, et fouillant, et bravant,
De t’enfoncer plus loin que les ailes du vent?
Dis. Parle. Oh! les songeurs ont une sombre envie
Ils voudraient tous avoir déjà franchi la vie,

Pour connaître, pour être ailleurs, pour voir plus loin.
Pour eux, vivre est l’Obstacle et savoir le besoin.
En attendant la tombe, ils s’en vont aux nuées,
Par les rêves de l’homme en bas continuées,
Aux vents, aux monts; aux lieux déserts, aux lieux secrets,
À tout ce qui contient de l’abîme, forêts,
Antres, écueils des mers, nids d’où tombe la plume,
À la, fleur qui s’entr’ouvre, à l’astre qui s’allume,
À tout ce qui voit l’ombre et tremble sur le bord,
Désaltérer leur soif lugubre de la mort.
As-tu donc aussi, toi, cette soif surhumaine?
Veux-tu voir? Est-ce là, passant, ce qui t’amène?
Sois tranquille, homme. Attends. Cela finit toujours
Par s’ouvrir devant toi, pauvre ombre aux instants courts.
Le mystère, à présent sans clef, sans déchirure,
Clos, fermé par la nuit, la sinistre serrure,
T’apparaît, recouvrant on ne sait quel écrou,
Barré, farouche, ayant tout l’azur pour verrou;
Ton cadavre en tombant défonce cette porte.
Le ciel noir plie et s’ouvre au poids de la chair morte.
L’homme entre enfin au gouffre exécrable ou béni.
Par la fente que fait la mort à l’infini.
Attends donc cette mort qui fait l’âme complète,
La pénétration de Dieu dans ton squelette,
Les astres, plus nombreux, quand l’homme n’est pas noir,
Dans les plis du linceul que dans les plis du soir;
Attends l’ascension suprême de la chute;
Attends la fin du songe, homme, et de la minute.
Cette explication qu’on nomme éternité.

Tout ce que tu peux faire en ton humanité,
— Écoute, dans, ta chair, homme, dans ta bassesse,
C’est de chercher, partout, de contempler sans, cesse,
De loin, de près, avec ton cœur et ta raison,
Le trépas qui jamais ne manque à l’horizon,
C’est d’observer toujours, à travers ta souffrance,
Ce visage sinistre et noir de l’espérance,

Homme, et de ne jamais quitter des yeux la mort,
Et de vivre tourné, comme l’aiguille au nord,
Vers ce but de ta route; ô pauvre âme asservie!

La mort est la veilleuse étrange de la vie,
La lueur allumée au sommet du destin.
Rougeur du soir ayant des blancheurs de matin,
Elle fait apparaître à sa clarté des rives,
Des cieux toute l’énigme en pâles perspectives,
Les cimes des flots d’ombre au fond des gouffres noirs,
Et le bien et le mal, mystérieux miroirs;
Vivante, incorruptible, égale, elle prolonge
À travers l’apparence, et la brume, et le songe,
Et tout le faux dont l’être éperdu fait l’essai,
Une lumière intègre et terrible de vrai;
Elle montre la vie; elle met en saillie
Tous ces masques, amour, haine, raison, folie,
Qui flottent dans le vent pêle-mêle, et qui vont;
Elle blêmit le bord du sans fin, du sans fond
D’où l’on ne revient pas avec la même forme;
Elle jette un rayon sur une entrée énorme,
Effleure ces rondeurs, ciel, globe, crâne nu,
Et, tranquille; avertit, de quoi? de l’inconnu.
Elle éclaire un port vague où l’on se réfugie.
On voit sur l’infini cette sombre vigie.
Donc, attends.

Autrement, sache, qui que tu sois,
Qu’un voyage en cette ombre est un lugubre choix;
Le vertige saisit les noirs plongeurs tenaces
Qui du grand ciel farouche affrontent les menaces;
L’immobile infini, fait un nain du géant.
Avant d’aller plus loin, regarde ton néant.
Car tu ne pourras, pas, quelle que soit ta course,
Aborder l’inconnu, l’origine, la source,
Le lieu fatal où tout s’explique et se rejoint,

Car tu n’entreras point, car tu n’atteindras point,
Car, l’océan de nuit, de bitume et de soufre,
Jamais tu ne pourras le franchir, car, le gouffre,
Tu ne le vaincras pas, quand même tu serais
Une espèce d’esprit des monts et des forêts,
Un cœur sentant en soi la nature bruire;
Un homme traversé par une énorme lyre!
Quand même tu serais une âme aux yeux ardents
Dont la fauve pensée a pris le mors aux dents,
Et qui, dans la caverne où le trépas seul entre,
Fuit, terrible, aspirant tous les souffles de l’antre!
Quand même tu serais un de ces mages fiers
Que nous voyons parfois, blêmes passants des airs,

Se ruer dans le gouffre où, comme eux, tu te plonges,
Pâles, les poings crispés aux rênes de leurs songes,
Se penchant, se dressant, lâchant et retenant
On ne sait quoi d’obscur, d’envolé, de tonnant,
Regardant, dispersant leurs prunelles livides,
Comme s’ils conduisaient dans l’ombre à grandes guides
À travers l’éther vague et le tourbillon fou,
Dans la brume, au hasard, devant eux, n’importe où,
Peut-être vers la nuit, peut-être vers la cime,
Un char que, traîneraient, avec un bruit d’abîme,
Croupes sombres, fuyant, s’abaissant, s’élevant;
Six cents chevaux d’éclair, de nuée et de vent!
Te figures-tu donc être, par aventure,
Autre chose qu’un point dans l’aveugle nature?
Toi, l’homme, cendre et chair, te persuades-tu
Que d’une fonction l’ombre t’a revêtu?
Quel droit te crois-tu donc à chercher, à poursuivre,
À saisir ce qui peut exister, durer, vivre,
À surprendre, à connaître, à savoir, toi qui n’es
Qu’une larve, et qui meurs aussitôt que tu nais?
J’admire ton néant inouï s’il suppose
Qu’il est par l’absolu compté pour quelque chose!
Quelle idée, ô songeur du songe humanité,

As-tu de ton cerveau pour croire, en vérité,
Qu'il peut prendre ou laisser une empreinte à l'abîme?
Ta pensée est abjecte; étroite, folle, infime
L'homme est de la fumée obscure qui descend.
T'imagines-tu donc laisser trace; ô passant?
Rêves-tu l'absolu comme ton fleuve Seine.
Coulant entre les quais de ta ville malsaine,
Recueillant les égouts de toutes tes maisons,
Doctrines, volontés, illusions, raisons;
Ayant dans son courant, si quelqu'un te réclame,
Quelque pont de Saint-Cloud où l'on repêche l'âme?
Crois-tu que cette eau vaste et sourde, Immensité,
Ne t'enveloppe pas d'oubli, de cécité,
De silence, et sanglote à ta chute,:et soit triste?
Crois-tu que ta chimère en ce gouffre persiste,
Qu'elle y garde sa forme, espoir, rêve, action;
Et qu'on retrouve, après ta disparition,

Quelque chose de toi, ton cadavre ou ton ombre,
Aux noirs filets flottants de l'éternité sombre?

X. Une autre voix

As-tu vu les penseurs s’en aller dans les cieux?
Les as-tu vus partir, hautains, séditieux,
Jetant dans l’inconnu leur voix terrifiante,
Espérant abuser de la nuit confiante,
Méditant des larcins prodigieux, rêvant
D’aller toujours plus loin et toujours plus avant,
Se proposant d’atteindre à la source première,
Au centre, au but; de prendre ou l’ombre ou la lumière
Ou l’être, et de saisir le météore au vol,
Emportés comme Élie, ailés comme saint Paul,
Et de trouver le fond, dût-on faire le vide,
Dût-on escalader le mystère livide,
L’obscurité, les cieux brumeux, les cieux vermeils,
Avec effraction d’azurs et de soleils!
Les as-tu vus, fuyants, blanche robe du prêtre,
Bras levés du devin, décroître et disparaître
Dans la profondeur sourde où tout s’évanouit?
Parle? et les as-tu vus devenir de la nuit?
Es-tu resté tremblant, cherchant leur trace vague?
Puis, regardant l’éther, les ténèbres, le vague,
Passant les jours, les nuits, debout sur une tour,
Ô songeur, as-tu vu ces hommes au retour?
Les as-tu vus de l’ombre énorme redescendre?
Et toi, l’obscur veilleur vêtu du sac de cendre,
Te dressant au-devant de leur vol éperdu,
Leur as-tu dit: — Eh bien? — Et qu’ont-ils répondu,
Ces noirs navigateurs sans navire et sans voiles?
Et qu’ont-ils rapporté, ces oiseleurs d’étoiles?

Ils n’ont rien rapporté que des fronts sans couleur
Où rien n’avait grandi, si ce n’est la pâleur.

Tous sont hagards après cette aventure étrange;
Songeur! tous ont, empreints au front, des ongles d’ange,

Tous ont dans le regard comme un songe qui fuit,
Tous ont l’air monstrueux en sortant de la nuit!
On en voit quelques-uns dont l’âme saigne et souffre,
Portant de toutes parts les morsures du gouffre.

XI. Une autre voix

Les monts sont vieux; cent fois et cent fois séculaires,
Muets, drapés de nuit sous leurs manteaux polaires,
Leur âge monstrueux épouvante l’esprit;
Sur leur front ténébreux tout l’abîme est écrit;
Une neige de jours a neigé sur leur tête;
Le temps est un morceau de leur masse; leur faîte,
De loin morne profil qui s’efface de près,
Livre au vent une barbe épaisse de forêts;
Ils ont vu tous les deuils, toutes les défaillances,
Toutes les morts passer autour de leurs silences;
Ils ont vu s’écrouler des mondes dans le puits
De l’horreur infinie et sourde; ils ont depuis
Bien des millions d’ans la lassitude d’être;
Eh bien, sur leurs noirs flancs décrépits, le vent traître,
L’orage furieux, l’éclair fauve, ce ver
Qui serpente dans l’ombre immense de l’hiver,
L’ouragan qui, farouche, aux grands sommets essuie
Sa chevelure d’air, de tempête et de pluie,
L’aquilon qui revient quand on croit qu’il s’enfuit,
La grêle, et l’avalanche, et la trombe, et le bruit,
Toutes les visions des affreuses nuées,
La tourmente et ses chocs, la bise et ses huées,
S’acharnent; et ne font, sous leurs dais de brouillards,
Pas même remuer ces effrayants vieillards.
Sois comme eux: si tu vas dans l’espace terrible,
Ne chancelle pas, homme; et garde un calme horrible.

XII AUTRES VOIX

Remonte aux premiers jours de ton globe; voilà
Une muraille; elle est prodigieuse; elle a
Dix mille pieds de haut, et de largeur dix lieues.
Falaise, alluvion, dans les profondeurs bleues
Ce haut boulevard monte, altier; froid, surprenant,
Et d’une mer à l’autre il barre un continent:
Vaste géométrie, on dirait que l’équerre;
Assise par assise, a fait ce mont calcaire,
Et que, forgeant l’espace, on ne sait quels marteaux
L’un sur l’autre ont cloué ses plans horizontaux.
L’escarpement à pic montre en bandes étroites
Ses couches s’allongeant fermes, égales, droites,
Rides profondes, plis de ce front de la nuit.
Contre ce mur se heurte et flotte et roule, et fuit
Ce que chaque saison pêle-mêle charrie.
Ce massif colossal de la maçonnerie
Terrible, que construit et détruit l’élément,
Semble un coffre de pierre immense renfermant
Les archives d’une âpre et sombre catastrophe,
Et tout un monde mort ployé comme une étoffe,
Avec ses fleurs, ses champs, ses rocs boisés ou nus,
Et ses fourmillements de monstres inconnus.
Dans des millions d’ans, ses pierres ruinées,
Ses moellons croulants seront les Pyrénées.

En attendant, vois: large, auguste, encombrant l’air,
Il est encor tout neuf, comme bâti d’hier;
Rien n’ébrèche sa ligne entière et régulière;
Et son sommet correct semble une seule pierre
Plate comme le toit d’un palais d’orient;
Le matin et le soir, en se contrariant,
Font de cette muraille épouvantable et sombre
Tantôt un banc d’aurore et tantôt un bloc d’ombre.

Et fais attention à présent: — l’air s’émeut;
Voici que sur le haut, du mur géant, il pleut.
La pluie erre et s’en va, par le vent emportée;
Mais une goutte d’eau sur le faîte est restée.
Le lendemain, la brume, humide et blanc rideau,
Revient; il pleut encore; une autre goutte d’eau
S’ajoute à la première; et; sous cette:rosée,
Une vasque s’ébauche, et la pierre est creusée.
Désormais sur ce point l’eau va s’obstiner. Vois;
Il pleut; et l’on entend comme une triste voix;
Peut-être est-ce un démon sous la roche, qui grince
De sentir l’eau plus forte et la pierre plus mince.
Il pleut, il pleut, il pleut; janvier lugubre et mort
Passe avec l’ombre, il pleut; la goutte tombe, mord,
Et creuse; avril arrive et rapporte la nue,
Il pleut; la goutte d’eau, féroce, continue;
Et la première assise est percée; et déjà
La deuxième, qu’en vain le granit protégea,
Est atteinte; et la goutte, implacable, acharnée,

Qui dépense le siècle aussi bien que l’année,
Revient, et plonge, et troue et mine, dur foret,
Et le dedans du mont, formidable, apparaît,
Zone à zone, et voilà que, là-haut, l’aube éclaire,
La goutte étant sphérique, un bassin circulaire.
Un étang que le ciel dore, azure, rougit,
Sur le plateau désert s’étale et s’élargit.
La goutte d’eau revient, revient, revient encore,
Et tombe opiniâtre, et se fait dès l’aurore
Rapporter par le vent qui, la nuit, l’enleva,
Et fait ses volontés dans la montagne, et va,
Vient, soumettant le marbre à ses lois triomphantes,
Et passe entre deux plans, et glisse entre deux fentes,
Et démolit et sculpte, infatigable main.
Urne hier, aujourd’hui réservoir, lac demain,
L’œuvre augmente et s’enfonce, et l’œil qui veut la suivre
Croit voir un-trou qu’un ver fait aux pages d’un livre.

Penche-toi: devant nous, comme si nous rêvions,
Forant ce monstrueux monceau d’alluvions,
D’une lame percée allant à l’autre lame,.
Obéissant au poids qui d’en bas la réclame,
Hydre outil, vilbrequin; pioche, trompe, suçoir,
Commençant le matin, recommençant le soir,
Descendant l’escalier de l’épaisseur des couches,
Polissant leurs largeurs en murailles farouches,
Élargissant le haut, baissant l’âpre fond noir,
Évasant et fouillant sans cesse l’entonnoir,
Cognant partout, toujours, hiver, printemps, automne,
Son petit marteau sombre, effrayant, monotone,
Usant le mont, coupant le roc, sciant le grès,
Complétant sa ruine et faisant son progrès,
Et profitant d’un creux pour creuser davantage,
Et d’une argile-à l’autre, et d’étage en étage,
Du haut en bas, de bloc en bloc, de banc en banc,
Errant, roulant, brisant, sapant, taillant, courbant,
La goutte d’eau travaille, et, terrible ouvrière,.
Tord en cercles profonds l’énorme fondrière.
Le vaste mont, battu des aquilons sifflants,
Frémit de voir creuser dans ses ténébreux flancs
Ce puits prodigieux par ette vrille infime,
Et de sentir l’atome en lui créer l’abîme.
Sur ce qui s’édifie et ce qui se détruit,
Laissons rouler du temps, du gouffre et de la nuit.

Et maintenant regarde: Un cirque! un hippodrome,
Un théâtre où Stamboul, Tyr, Memphis, Londres, Rome,
Avec leurs millions d’hommes pourraient s’asseoir,
Où Paris flotterait comme un essaim du soir!
Gavarnie! un miracle! un rêve! Architectures
Sans constructeurs connus, sans noms, sans signatures,
Qui dans l’obscurité gardez votre secret,
Arches, temples qu’Aaron ou Moïse sacrait,
O champ clos de Tarquin où trois-cent milles têtes
Fourmillaient, où l’Atlas hideux vidait ses bêtes,

Casbahs, At-meïdans, tours, Kremlins, Rhamséions,
Où nous, spectres, venons, où nous nous asseyons,
Panthéons, parthénons, cathédrales qu'ont faites
De puissants charpentiers aux âmes de prophètes,
Monts creusés en pagode où vivent des airains,
Aux plafonds monstrueux, sombres ciels souterrains,
Cirques, stades, Elis, Thèbe, arènes de Nîmes;
Noirs monuments, géants, témoins, grands anonymes,
Vous n'êtes rien, palais, dômes, temples, tombeaux,
Devant ce colysée inouï du chaos!
Vois: l'homme fait ici le bruit de l'éphémère:
C'est l'apparition, l'énigme, la chimère
Taillée à pans coupés et tirée au cordeau.
L'aube est sur le fronton comme un sacré bandeau,
Et cette énormité songe, auguste et tranquille.
Morceau d'Olympe; reste étrange d'une ville
De l'infini, qu'un être inconnu démembra;
Cour des lions d'un vague et sinistre Alhambra;
Gageure de Dédale et de Titan; démence
Du compas ivre et roi dans la montagne immense;
Stupeur du voyageur qui suspend son chemin;
Exagération du monument humain. .
Jusqu'à la vision, jusqu'à l'apothéose;
Monde qui n'est pas l'homme et qui n'est plus la chose;
Entrée inexprimable et sombre du granit
Dans le rêve, où la pierre en prodige finit
Problème; précipice édifice; sculpture
Du mystère; œuvre d'art de la fauve nature;
Construction que nie et que voit la raison,
Et qu'achève, au delà du terrestre horizon;
Sur le mur de la nuit, la fresque de L'abîme;
C'est Vignole à la base et l'éclair sur la cime.
C'est le spectre de tout ce que l'homme bâtit,
Terrible, raillant l'homme, et;le faisant petit.

La grande pyramide ici serait la borne.
Où le taureau courbé vient aiguiser sa corne,

Et tu demanderais: quel est donc ce caillou?
Plante dans le pavé du cirque d’Arle un clou,

Et ce clou jettera dans l’herbe qui se fane
La même ombre qu’ici la colonne trajane.
Quel joueur gigantesque a laissé là ce dé?
Un mont dort dans un angle, un autre est accoudé
Et la brume à son cou s’enfle et pend comme un goître.
Vois croître vers la cime et vers le bas décroître,
Écaillant de lichens leurs lourds granits vermeils,
Ces grands cercles de bancs superposés, pareils
A des boas roulés l’un au-dessus de l’autre.
Avec on ne sait quelle attitude d’apôtre,
Un rocher rêve au seuil, et, le long des degrés,
D’autres blocs stupéfaits, voilés, désespérés,
Semblent des Niobés, des Rachels, des Hécubes.
Vois ces pavés; le moindre a dix mille pieds cubes.

La forme est simple, c’est le cirque; mais le mur,
À force de grandeur et de vie, est obscur;   .
Qu’est-ce que c’est qu’un mur vertical, rouillé, fruste,
Où, comme un bas-relief, le glacier blanc s’incruste?
Des albâtres, des gneiss, des porphyres caducs
Mêlent à ses créneaux des arches d’aqueducs,
Et là-bas la vapeur sous des frontons estompe
Des éléphants portant des blocs, baissant leur trompe;
Ces tours sont les piliers angulaires; de quoi?
Du vide, de l’éther, du souffle, de l’effroi.
L’impossible est ici debout; l’aigle seul brave
Cette incommensurable et farouche architrave.
Comme, lorsque la terre a tremblé, sont confus
Dans l’herbe, les claveaux, les chapiteaux, les fûts,
Tout se mêle, l’art grec avec l’art syriaque.
Sous les portes croupit l’ombre hypocondriaque.
Vois: tours où l’on dirait que chante Beethoven,
Pilône, imposte, cippe, obélisque, peulven,
Tout en foule apparaît; soubassements, balustres

Où l’eau nacrée étale au jour ses vagues lustres;
Crevasses où pourraient tenir des bataillons;
Sur les parois des creux pareils à ces sillons
Qu’aux temps diluviens faisaient aux seuils des antres
Et dans les grands roseaux des passages de ventres;
Là, des courbes, des arcs, des dômes; par endroits
Des murs carrés, des plans égaux, des angles droits;
Partout la symétrie inconcevable et sûre;
Des gradins dont on semble avoir pris la mesure
Aux angles des genoux des archanges assis!
Des pinacles géants portent des oasis;
Ordre et gouffre; les pins semblent sous les arcades
L’herbe; et les arcs-en-ciel s’envolent des cascades.
Tout est cyclopéen, vaste, stupéfiant;
Le bord fait reculer le chamois défiant;
L’édifice, étageant ses marches que l’œil compte;
Blanchit de — plus en plus à mesure qu’il monte,
Et, de tous les reflets de l’heure s’empourprant,
Passe du roc calcaire au marbre pur, et prend,
Comme pour consacrer sa forme solennelle,
Sa dernière corniche à la neige éternelle
Combien a-t-il de haut? demande au ciel profond,
Au vent, à l’avalanche, aux vols: d’oiseaux qui vont,
Aux douze chutes d’eau que l’ombre entend se plaindre
Dans cet épouvantable et tournoyant cylindre,
Aux gaves, épuisés, d’écume et de combats,
Qui s’écroulent; torrent en haut, fumée en bas!

Piranèse effaré, maçon d’apocalypses,
Seul comprendrait ce nœud d’angles, d’orbes, d’ellipses;
Pourtant l’œil peut encore en mesurer, le jour,
La forme inexprimable et l’effrayant contour,
Mais sitôt qu’effaçant le bord, le fond, le centre,
Le soir dans l’édifice ainsi qu’un brouillard entre,
La forme disparaît; c’est sous le firmament.
Une espèce d’étrange et morne entassement
De brèches, de frontons, de cavernes, de porches

Où les astres:hagards tremblent comme des torches,
Et, dans on ne sait quel cintre démesuré,
De l'étoilé qui flotte avec de l'azuré.
Entre encor plus avant dans la chose géante:

Ce cirque, ce bassin, embouchure béante,
Imprime un mouvement de roue à l'aquilon,
Et fait de tout le vent qui passe un tourbillon;
La bise habite: là, traître et battant de l'aile,
Et la trombe y tournoie en spirale éternelle.
Embûche formidable à prendre l'ouragan!
Le précipice s'ouvre en gueule de volcan,
Et malheur au nuage errant qui se hasarde
À venir regarder par quelque âpre lézarde!
Sitôt qu'il y pénètre, il ne peut plus sortir;
Il a beau reculer, trembler, se repentir,
Le tourbillon tient: C'est fini. Le nuage
Lutte, bat le courant comme un homme qui nage;
Il roule. Il est saisi! Vois, entends-le gronder.
Il fait de vains efforts, il cherche à s'évader;
On dirait que le gouffre implacable le raille.;
Il monte, il redescend; le long de la muraille,
Fauve, il quête une issue, un soupirail, un trou;
Étreint par la rafale, égaré, fuyant, fou,
Il vomit ses grêlons, crache sa pluie, et crible
D'aveugles coups d'éclair l'escarpement terrible;

Et le vieux mont s'émeut, car les rocs convulsifs
Tremblent quand, s'accrochant aux pitons, aux récifs,
Du haut de l'azur calme où toujours elle rôde,
Libre et sans soupçonner l'immensité de fraude,
À ce sombre entonnoir trébuchant brusquement,
Et de son épouvante et de son hurlement
Ébranlant la paroi, les tours, la plate-forme,
La tempête, ce loup, tombe en ce piège énorme!
Voisinage effrayant pour les arbres, tordus
Par le vent ou roulés dans l'abîme, éperdus!

Du brin d’herbe au rocher, du chêne à la broussaille,
Tout l’horizon autour du cirque noir tressaille,
Le gave a peur, le pic, par l’orage mouillé,
A le frisson dans l’ombre, et le pâtre éveillé,
Pâle, écoute, et, parmi les sapins centenaires,
Entend rugir la nuit cette fosse aux tonnerres!

Et ce cirque qui met, au lieu de loups et d’ours,
Les ouragans aux fers dans ses cabanons sourds,
Ce large amphithéâtre au mur inaccessible,
Cet édifice fou, redoutable, impossible,
Fait à l’esprit, et même au delà des titans,
Rêver de tels combats et de tels combattants
Qu’on le croirait bâti, qui sait? pour la mêlée
Des hydres que d’en bas la terre humble et troublée
Entrevoit dans l’horreur du taillis sidéral;
Qu’il semble en ce champ clos étrange et sépulcral,
Que, sous cette splendide et sublime falaise,
Les constellations pourraient se tordre à l’aise;
Et que, dans cette arène inouïe, on a peur
Parfois d’y voir descendre à travers la vapeur,
Pour s’entre-dévorer, les bêtes des étoiles;
Et d’entendre lutter, là, sous de sombres voiles,
Et hurler et rugir le taureau, monstre ailé,
L’effrayant capricorne aux nuages mêlé,
Le lion flamboyant, tout semé d’yeux funèbres,
Bâillant de la lumière et mâchant des ténèbres,
Le scorpion tenant dans ses pattes le soir,
Et, se ruant sur tous, le sagittaire noir,
Ce chasseur au carquois rempli de météores,
Dont par moments on voit, ainsi que des aurores
Qui passent et s’en vont et qu’un sillon d’or suit,
Les flèches d’astres luire et tomber dans la nuit!

Immensité! l’esprit frissonne. Quel Vitruve
A bâti ce vertige et creusé cette cuve?
Quel Scopas, quel Sostrate ou quel Eutinopus

A construit cet attique avec des monts rompus?

Quel Phidias du ciel a fait à sa stature
L’âpre sérénité de cette architecture?
Qui forgea les crampons? qui broya les ciments?
Ô nature, qui donc à ces escarpements
A lié les torrents, ces chevaux dont les queues
Pendent en crins d’argent dans les cascades bleues?
Du haut de quel zénith tomba le fil à plomb?
Qui mesura, toisa; régla; tailla? le long
De quel mur idéal a-t-on tracé l’épure?
De quelle région de la vision pure
Est sorti le rêveur de ce rêve inouï?
Quel cyclope savant de l’âge évanoui,
Quel être monstrueux, plus grand que les idées;
A pris un compas haut de cent mille coudées,
Et, le tournant d’un doigt prodigieux et sûr,
A tracé ce grand cercle au niveau de l’azur,
Rondeur sinistre ayant le gouffre pour fenêtre,
Puits qui, lorsque le soir le noircit, pourrait être
La coupe d’ombre énorme où vient boire la-nuit?
Aux temps où, rien n’étant complètement construit,
Du chaos encor proche on sentait le mélange,
Quand la montagne était encore un tas de fange;
Quelque étrange géant, fils de Cham ou de Bel,
A-t-il pris brusquement et retourné Babel,
Et l’a-t-il appuyée à ce mont, comme on scelle
Un cachet sur la cire ardente qui ruisselle,
De sorte que, léguant, dans le mont affaissé;
Sa forme renversée au trou qu’elle a laissé,
La tour s’est dans le roc imprimée en citerne,
Avec sa rampe où l’ombre après le jour alterne,
Et ses escaliers noirs et ses étages ronds;
Et ses portails: s’ouvrant en bouches de clairons
Si bien que maintenant l’œil voit ce moule horrible,
Et le creux dont Babel fut le relief terrible!

L’auteur, je te l’ai dit; c’est l’atome; l’auteur,
C’est ce fil brun rayant l’azur sur la hauteur,
C’est un peu de brouillard d’où tombe un peu de pluie,
C’est le grain de cristal qu’un souffle tiède essuie,
C’est, au jour ou dans l’ombre, au matin comme au soir,
La molécule d’eau qui coule du ciel noir,
C’est la larme échappée aux cils de la nuée;
C’est ce qui tremble au bout de l’herbe remuée,
Ce qui n’a pas de nom, ce qui ressemble aux pleurs;
C’est ce que la lumière, en traversant, les fleurs,
Prend et roule en son vol sans en être chargée,
Ce qu’un petit oiseau boit dans une gorgée!
Oui; ce cirque et ses tours, édifice sacré
Où le drapeau d’azur du gouffre est arboré,

Ce théâtre où le vent combat la trombe enfuie,
Voilà ce qu’a construit un atome de pluie.
Quel besoin as-tu donc d’un Vishnou, d’un Allah,
D’un Bouddha, d’un Ammon cornu, pour tout cela?
Pourquoi sortir du cercle où le réel t’enferme?
À quoi bon détrôner l’élément et le germe?
Pourquoi donc à la chose ôter sa mission?
Pourquoi forcer l’atome à l’abdication?
Pourquoi destituer, homme, le grain de sable?
Quelqu’un qui dise moi t’est-il indispensable?
Tu mets en haut de tout un pronom personnel!
Quelle rage as-tu donc d’un faiseur éternel?
Ne peux-tu faire un pas sans un Très-Haut quelconque?
L’océan se va-t-il ruer hors de sa conque,
Tout mordre et tout ronger si ton Zéus n’est là
Pour le saisir aux crins et mettre le holà?
Tout n’est-il qu’une grotte à loger ce druide?
Crois-tu que le solide étreindra le fluide,
Que la mer manquera d’onde et de gonflement,
Que le soleil fuira, s’éteignant et fumant,
Que le germe oubliera le secret de la vie,
Que la terre prendra la route qui dévie,

Ou que la lune va perdre un de ses quartiers,
Si tu n’as dans un coin, pilant dans les mortiers,
Forgeant, créant, sculptant les os, broyant les poudres,
Un fantôme forgé d’étoiles et de foudres?
Dis, sans cet arrangeur, vivant, perpétuel,
Soulignant ce qu’il faut changer au rituel,
Dont tu doutes, songeur, pendant que tu l’implores,
Les lys pâliront-ils sur les robes des flores,
Les violettes, dis, perdront-elles la clé
De la boîte aux parfums dans l’herbe et dans le blé?
Entre l’ombre passée et la flamme future,
Dis, l’homme sera-t-il, en sa sombre aventure,
Englouti par hier ou détruit par demain,
Si tu n’as, pour sauver le triste germe humain,
Quelque Janus bifront, faisant face aux deux hydres?
La minute va donc figer dans les clepsydres,
Le temps, cet ouvrier mystérieux qui court,
Au cabestan du ciel va donc s’arrêter court,
La lumière, l’aimant, la sève, l’atmosphère,
Vont se déconcerter et ne savoir que faire,
Tout le mouvement va s’interrompre transi
Si ton Brahma ne vient leur crier par ici!
Avril a-t-il besoin d’un mot d’ordre? Un tonnerre
Est-il un frissonnant et noir fonctionnaire
Attendant que quelqu’un lui fixe son emploi?
Faut-il donc un veilleur toujours présent, sans quoi
Les astres manqueraient les heures des aurores?

Le monde est une tour pleine de bruits sonores;
Faut-il un horloger derrière le cadran,
Réglant les poids dans l’ombre et tant de fois par an,
Mettant de l’ordre au ciel, versant l’huile aux rouages
Des globes, des saisons, des vents et des nuages;
Disant: Vesper, Vénus, rentrez! sors, Jupiter!
Donnant à chaque sphère à son tour dans l’éther
Ou la note qui chante, ou la note qui prie,
Et remontant la vaste et sombre sonnerie?

Prends-tu pour des pantins et pour des jacquemards
Orion, Sirius, Vesta, Saturne et Mars?
Et la création est-elle une fontaine
À mécanique ainsi que la Samaritaine?
As-tu donc peur de voir le monde aller tout seul?
Faut-il que la forêt dise: — Père, un tilleul!
Un chêne! des sapins! donnez-moi de la mousse
Pour que le bruit du vent dans mes antres s’émousse!
Quoi! cet échange vaste et saint d’attraction,
Ce flux et ce reflux de la création
Qui jette dehors l’être et sans fin le résorbe,
L’univers, ne peut-il rouler, cercle, flamme, orbe,
Sans que ta terreur crie:nous fait des étais!
Sans que l’homme, appelant à l’aide Teutatès,
Irmensul, Bhagavan, Chronos, Théos, échine
Un travailleur divin à tourner la machine?
Fais ce rêve, homme! et marche où L’erreur te conduit.
Quant à moi; qui suis l’ombre et qui vais dans la nuit,
Je n’accepterais pas, pour faire des prodiges,
Pour creuser un puits sombre et l’emplir de vertiges,
Pour soulever un monde, effroyable fardeau,
L’échange de ton Dieu contre ma goutte d’eau.

— Oui, mais la goutte d’eau, criai-je, qui l’a faite?

XIII. Une autre voix

Swedenborg prit un jour la coupe de Platon,
Et, pensif, s’en alla boire à l’azur terrible.
Il entra sous le porche obscur de l’invisible
Et disparut. Où donc alla-t-il? Qui le sait?
Peut-être aux lieux sacrés où Socrate pensait,
Où, dans l’ombre, effleuré de l’urne des Homères,
Le vin de l’idéal sort du puits des chimères.

Peut-être égara-t-il ses pas plus haut encor;
Jusqu’au gouffre inconnu, jusqu’aux pléiades d’or,
Jusqu’au ruissellement des fontaines d’aurore,
Jusqu’à l’ombre où l’on voit l’inexprimable éclore;
Là sont les cuves: sève, esprit, immensité;
Là vit, abonde et croît la vigne de clarté
Où l’on ne trouve pas un seul astre qui dorme,
Où les créations font leur vendange énorme;
Où la grappe de vie à flots ruisselle, ayant
La pierre du tombeau pour pressoir effrayant;
Là sont les infinis, la cause, le principe,
L’être qui s’évapore en mondes, se dissipe
En astres, et s’épanche en ciel démesuré:
Il revint éperdu, chancelant, effaré,
Ployant sous la lueur farouche des étoiles;
Voyant l’homme à travers des épaisseurs de voiles
Et de tremblants rideaux de lumière où, sans fin
Multipliés; flottaient l’ange et le séraphin;
Ayant dans son cerveau l’ombre et tous ses délires,
De ses doigts écartés Cherchant de vagues lyres,
Nu, bégayant l’abîme et balbutiant Dieu;
Rapportant cette joie étrange du ciel bleu
Qui fait peur à la vie et trouble les fils d’Ève,
Et laissant voir, ainsi que le monde du rêve,
Dans de blêmes rayons tombés on ne sait d’où,
Un paradis sinistre au fond de son œil fou.

La raison l’attendait, grave, et lui dit: Ivrogne!

Esprit, fais ton sillon, homme, fais ta besogne.
Ne va pas au delà. Cherche Dieu. Mais tiens-toi,
Pour le voir, dans l’amour et non pas dans l’effroi.

II — L’Océan d’en haut

I

Et je vis au-dessus de ma tête un point noir.

Et ce point noir semblait une mouche du soir
Volant à l’heure où, l’ombre à prier nous invite.
Et, l’homme, quand il pense, étant ailé, j’eus vite,
Franchi l’éther, qui s’ouvre à l’essor des esprits
Et cette mouche était une chauve-souris.

Et ce lugubre oiseau volait seul dans l’espace
Et disait: — C’est énorme et hideux. Ce qui passe
Devant mes yeux me fait trembler. C’est effrayant.
Quand donc serai-je hors de l’ombre? Et, me voyant,
Il cria: « Que veux-tu de moi?”, passant rapide.
Je regarde, éperdu, la matière stupide.
Homme, écoute: je suis l’oiseau noir que trouva
Démogorgon en Grece et dans l’Inde Shiva
Je contemple l’horreur de la sombre nature.
Homme, quel est le sens de l’affreuse aventure

Qu’on appelle univers? Je le cherche et j’ai peur.
J’interroge ce bloc qui n’est qu’une vapeur;
J’observe l’infini monstrueux, et je scrute
La taupe et le soleil, l’homme, l’arbre et la brute.
Je suis triste. O passant, comprends-tu ce mot: Rien!
Ce qu’on nomme le mal est peut-être le bien.
Quand un gouffre se comble, un autre puits se creuse.
Tourment, volupté, rire et clameur douloureuse,
Flux et reflux, le juste et l’injuste, le bon,
Le mauvais, blanc et noir, diamant et charbon,
Vrai, faux, pourpre et haillon, le carcan, l’auréole,
Jour et nuit, vie et mort, oui, non; navette folle
Que pousse le hasard, tisserand de la nuit!
Connaît-on ce qui sert, et sait-on ce qui nuit?
Tout germe est un fléau, tout choc est un désastre;

La comète, brûlot des mondes, détruit l’astre;
Le même être est victime et bourreau tour à tour,
Et pour le moucheron l’hirondelle est vautour.
Les cailloux sont broyés par la bête de somme,
L’âne paît le chardon, l’homme dévore l’homme,
L’agneau broute la fleur, le loup broute l’agneau,
Sombre chaîne éternelle où l’anneau mord l’anneau!
Et ce qu’on voit n’est rien; les fils tuant les pères,
Les requins, les Nérons, les Séjans, les viperes,
Cela n’est que peu d’ombre et que peu de terreur;
L’infiniment petit contient la grande horreur;
L’atome est un bandit qui dévore l’atome;
L’araignée a sa toile et le ver son royaume;
Les fourmilières sont des Babels; l’animal
En se rapetissant se rapproche du mal;
Plus la force décroît, plus la bête est difforme;
Et, quand il les regarde avec son œil énorme,
Homme, les gouttes d’eau font peur à l’océan;
La rosée en sa perle a Typhon et Satan;
Ils s’y tordent tous deux à jamais; l’éphémère
Est Moloch; l’infusoire, effroyable chimère,
Grince, et si le géant pouvait voir l’embryon,
Le béhémoth fuirait devant le vibrion.
Le Moindre grain de sable est un globe qui roule
Traînant comme la terre une lugubre foule
Qui s’abhorre et s’acharne et s’exècre, et sans fin
Se dévore; la haine est au fond de la faim.
La sphère impereptible à la grande est pareille;
Et le songeur entend, quand, il penche l’oreille,
Une rage tigresse et des cris léonins
Rugir profondément dans ces univers nains.
Toute gueule est un gouffre, et qui mange assassine.
L’animal a sa griffe et l’arbre a sa racine;
Et la racine affreuse et pareille aux serpents
Fait dans l’obscurité de sombres guet-apens;
Tout se tient et s’embrasse et s’étreint pour se mordre;
Un crime universel et monstrueux est l’ordre;

Tout être boit un sang immense, ruisselant
De la création comme d’un vaste flanc.
On lutte, on frappe, on blesse, on saigne, on souffre, on pleure.
Tout ce que vous voyez est larve; tout vous leurre,
Et tout rapidement fond dans l’ombre; car tout
Tremble dans le mystère immense et se dissout;
La nuit reprend le spectre ainsi que l’eau la neige.
La voix s’éteint avant d’avoir crié: Que sais-je?
Le printemps, le soleil, les bêtes en chaleur,
Sont une chimérique et monstrueuse fleur;
À travers son sommeil ce monde effaré souffre;
Avril n’est que le rêve érotique du gouffre;
Une pollution nocturne de ruisseaux,
De rameaux, de parfums, d’aube et de chants d’oiseaux.
L’horreur seule survit, par tout continuée.
Et par moments un vent qui sort de la nuée
Dessine des contours, des rayons et des yeux
Dans ce noir tourbillon d’atomes furieux.
O toi qui vas! l’esprit, le vent, la feuille morte,
Le silence, le bruit, cette aile qui t’emporte,
Le jour que tu crois voir par moments, ce qui luit,
Ce qui tremble, le ciel, l’être, tout est la nuit!
Et la création tout entière, avec l’homme,
Avec ce que l’œil voit et ce que la voix nomme,
Ses mondes, ses soleils, ses courants inouïs,
Ses météores fous qui volent éblouis,
Avec ses globes d’or pareils à de grands dômes,
Avec son éternel passage de fantômes,
Le flot, l’essaim, l’oiseau, le lys qu’on croit béni,
N’est qu’un vomissement d’ombre dans l’infini!
La nuit produit le mal, le mal produit le pire.
Écoute maintenant ce que je vais te dire:

L’oiseau noir s’arrêta, d’épouvante troublé,
Puis, sombre et frémissant, reprit:
Je suis allé
Jusqu’au fond de cette ombre, et je n’ai vu personne.

Je tressaillis. L’oiseau poursuivit:

J’en frissonne

À jamais, dans ce gouffre où j’erre plein d’effroi!
Dans cette Obscurité personne ne dit: moi!
Noire ébauche de rien que personne n’achève!
L’univers est un monstre et le ciel est un rêve;
Ni volonté, ni loi, ni pôles, ni milieu;
Un chaos composé de néants; pas de Dieu.
Dieu, pourquoi? L’idéal est absent. Dans ce monde,
La naissance est obscène et l’amour est immonde.
D’ailleurs, est-ce qu’on naît? est-ce qu’on vit? quel est
Le vivant, le réel, le certain, le complet?
Les penseurs, dont la nuit je bats les fronts moroses,
Questionnent en vain la surdité des choses;
L’eau coule, l’arbre croît, l’âne brait, l’oiseau pond,
Le loup hurle, le ver mange; rien ne répond.
La profondeur sans but, triste, idiote et blême;
Quelque chose d’affreux qui s’ignore soi-même;
C’est tout: sous mon linceul voilà ce que je sais.
Et l’infini m’écrase, et j’ai beau dire: assez!
C’est horrible. Toujours cette vision morne!
Jamais le fond, jamais la fin, jamais la borne!.
Donc je te le redis, puisque tu passes là:
J’entends crier en bas, Jéhovah, Christ, Allah!
Tout n’est qu’un sombre amas d’apparitions folles;
Rien n’existe; et comment exprimer en paroles
La stupéfaction immense de la nuit?
L’invisible s’efface et l’impalpable fuit;
L’ombre dort; les, foetus se mêlent aux décombres;
Les formes, aspects vains, se perdent dans les nombres;
Rien n’a de sens; et tout, l’objet, l’espoir, l’effort,
Tout est insensé, vide et faux, même la mort;
L’infini sombre au fond du tombeau déraisonne;
La bière est un grelot où le cadavre sonne;
Si quelque chose vit, ce n’est pas encor né.

Muet, quoique béant, sourd, lugubre, étonné,
Les ténèbres en lui, hors de lui les ténèbres,
Sans qu’un rayon, éclos dans ces brumes funèbres,
Vienne jamais blanchir l’horizon infini,
Pas même criminel, et pas même puni,
Le monde erre au hasard dans la nuit éternelle,
Et, n’ayant pas d’aurore, il n’a pas de prunelle.
Le monde est à tâtons dans son propre néant.

La nuit triste emplissait le ciel comme un géant;
Et la chauve-souris rentra dans l’ombre horrible;
Et j’entendis l’oiseau, disparu, mais terrible,
Qui criait: — Dieu n’est pas! Dieu n’est pas! désespoir!

II

Et je vis au-dessus de ma tête un point noir;
Et ce point noir semblait une mouche dans l’ombre.
Et rien n’avait de borne et rien n’avait de nombre;
Et tout se confondait avec tout; l’aquilon
Et la nuit ne faisaient qu’un même tourbillon.
Quelques; formes sans nom, larves exténuées,
Ou souffles noirs, passaient dans les sourdes nuées;
Et tout le reste était immobile et voilé.
Alors, montant, montant, montant, je m’envolai
Vers ce point qui semblait reculer dans la brume;
Car c’est la loi de l’être en qui l’esprit s’allume
D’aller vers ce qui fuit et vers ce qui se tait.
Or ce que j’avais pris pour une mouche était
Un hibou, triste, froid, morne, et de sa prunelle
Il tombait moins de jour que de nuit de son aile.
Et ce hibou parlait devant lui, sans rien voir,
Comme s’il se savait écouté dans le noir.
Inquiet, palpitant, il regardait, avide,
Le fond muet de l’ombre inexprimable et vide,
Et, l’œil fixe, attentif, sans louer, sans huer,
Disait:

Quelqu’un est là. J’ai senti remuer.
Puis il reprit, parlant à la nuée épaisse:
— Quelqu’un est là. Mais qui?Doute! angoisse! énigme! Est-ce
Le Juste ou l’Inégal, le Bon ou le Méchant?
Son nom est-il un cri? son nom est-il un chant?
Est-ce un père qui doit plus tard, chassant la crainte,
Resplendir, éclaireur du profond labyrinthe?
Est-ce un hermaphrodite, homme et femme, ange et nuit,
Vers qui tout monte et vole et devant qui tout fuit?
Est-ce un capricieux qui réprouve ou préfère?
Est-ce un contemplateur calme qui laisse faire?
Est-ce un hideux semeur de vrai, de faux, subtil

Et fort, puissant et traître? Il est là; mais qu'est-il?
Alors je m'approchai de cette silhouette,
Et je lui demandai: que fais-tu là, chouette?
Et le noir chathuant me dit: Je guette Dieu.

Je suis la larve affreuse aspirant au ciel bleu;
Je suis l'œil flamboyant des ténèbres; j'épie
La grande forme obscure en l'abîme accroupie.
Moi, je ne la vois pas; mais je crois qû'elle est là.

Un jour dans l'étendue une voix m'appela.
— Hibou! me dit Hermès j'étouffais dans le vide;
Mais Hermès AEgyptus, le grand songeur livide,
M'a pris, tout en rêvant son sacré Poemander,
Et c'est lui qui m'a fait respirer un peu d'air.
Je suis-esprit par l'aile et démon par la griffe.
Dans un long papyrus; informe hiéroglyphe,
Lourd manuscrit de brume humaine submergé,
Hermès avait écrit ce qu'il avait songé.
Un soir Hermès, à l'heure où l'on sent l'être vivre,
Vit passer l'Inconnu qui lisait dans un livre;
Et l'Ombre s'approcha du blanc magicien,
Prit le livre d'Hermès et lui laissa le sien.
C'est ce livre que l'Inde épèle, et qu'en sa crypte
La bête Sphynx traduit tout bas au monstre Égypte,
Car il est défendu de parler haut; on sent,
Au silence du monde effrayé; Dieu présent.
Dieu! J'ai dit Dieu. Pourquoi? Qui le voit? Qui le prouve?
C'est le vivant qu'on cherche et le cercueil qu'on trouve.
Qui donc peut adorer? qui donc peut affirmer?
Dès qu'on croit ouvrir l'être, on le sent se fermer.
Dieu! cri sans but peut-être, et nom vide et terrible!
Souhait que fait l'esprit devant l'inaccessible!
Invocation vaine aventurée au fond
Du précipice aveugle où nos songes s'en vont!
Mot qui te porte, ô monde, et sur lequel tu vogues!
Nom mis en question dans les lourds dialogues

Du spectre avec le rêve, ô nuit, et des douleurs
Avec l’homme, et de l’astre avec les sombres fleurs
Qu’éveillent sur l’étang les froids rayons lunaires!
Sujet de la querelle énorme des tonnerres!
Solution-que va nuit et jour poursuivant
La polémique obscure et confuse du vent!
Dieu! conception folle ou sublime mystère!
Notion que nul crâne, au ciel ou sur la terre,
Fût-il surnaturel, ne saurait contenir!
Quel que soit le passé, quel que soit l’avenir,
Nul ne la saisira, nul ne l’a possédée;
Et, dans l’urne où l’on veut mettre une telle idée,
On sent de toutes parts des fuites d’infini.

Le ciel à force d’ombre était comme aplani.
Et l’oiseau, dont l’œil rond jette un reflet de soufre,
Me dit:

Viens, je vais tout t’apprendre. Il est un gouffre.
Comme s’il eût tout dit dans ce mot, le hibou
S’arrêta; puis reprit:
Quand? pourquoi? comment? où?
Tout se tait, tout est clos, tout est sourd; tout recule.
Tout vit dans l’insondable et fatal crépuscule.
L’être mortel médite et songe avec effroi
En attendant qu’un jour quelqu’un dise: c’est moi.
La taciturnité de l’ombre est formidable.
Il semble qu’au delà du nimbe inabordable,
Une sorte de front vaste et mystérieux
Se meuve vaguement au plus obscur des cieux;
Et Dieu, s’il est un Dieu, fit à sa ressemblance
L’universelle nuit et l’éternel silence.

Moi, j’attends. Qui va naître? Est-ce l’aube, ou le soir?

Un de mes yeux est foi; mais l’autre est désespoir.
J’examine et je plane. O brumes éternelles!

La nuit rit du regard, l’infini rit des ailes.
Tout devant moi se perd, se mêle et se confond.
Je tâche de saisir, là-bas, dans le profond,
Un moment de clarté, d’oubli, de transparence,
Ou d’entrevoir du moins le cadavre Espérance,
Afin de pouvoir dire au monde épouvanté:
C’est un tombeau! Le fond, le fait, la vérité,
Le réel, quel qu’il soit, vide ou source féconde,
Voilà ce qu’il me faut, voilà ce que je sonde.
Je suis le regardeur formidable du puits;
Je suis celui qui veut savoir pourquoi; je suis.
L’œil que le torturé dans la torture entr’ouvre;
Je suis, si par hasard dans le deuil qui le couvre,
Ce monde est le jouet de quelque infâme esprit,
La curiosité de ceux dont on se rit;
Devant l’âme de tout, hélas, peut-être absente,
Je suis l’Anxiété lugubre et grandissante;
Et je serais géant, si je n’étais hibou.
L’abîme, c’est le monde, et le monde est mon trou.
Triste, je rêve au creux de l’univers; et l’ombre
Agite sur mon front son grand branchage sombre.

Je regarde le vide et l’éther fixement,
Et l’ouragan, et l’air, et le sourd firmament,
Et les contorsions sinistres des nuées.
Mes paupières se sont au gouffre habituées.
Toute l’obscurité du ciel vertigineux
Entre en mon crâne, et tient dans mon œil lumineux.
Je sens frémir sur moi le bord vague du cercle;
L’urne Peut-être ayant l’infini pour couvercle!
J’ai pour spectacle, au fond de ces limbes hagards,
Pour but à mon esprit, pour but à mes regards,
Pour méditation, pour raison, pour démence,
Le cratère inouï de la noirceur immense;
Et je suis devenu, n’ayant ni jour ni bruit,
Une espèce de vase horrible de la nuit,
Qu’emplissent lentement la chimère, le rêve,

Les aspects ténébreux, la profondeur sans grève,
Et, sur le seuil du vide aux vagues entonnoirs,
L’âpre frémissement des escarpements noirs.
Homme, il se fait parfois dans cette léthargie,
Dans cette épaisseur triste à jamais élargie,
Comme une déchirure au vent de l’infini.
Alors, moi, le veilleur solitaire et banni,
Je tressaille; un rayon sort de la plénitude,
Et la création, difforme multitude,
M’apparaît; et j’entends des bruits, des pas, des voix
Et, dans une clarté de vision, je vois
Ce livide univers, vaste danse macabre,
Où l’astre tourbillonne, où la vague se cabre,
Où tout s’enfuit! Je vois les sépulcres, les nids,
Le hallier, la montagne, et les rudes granits,
Du vieux squelette monde informes ankyloses,
La plaine vague ouvrant ses pâles fleurs écloses,
Les flots démesurés poussant de longs abois,
Et les gestes hideux des arbres dans les bois.
Et d’en bas il m’arrive une musique, obscure,
L’hymne qu’après Hermès entendit Épicure;
Tout vibre, et tout devient instrument; le désert
Chante, et la forêt donne au farouche concert
Son branchage sonore et triste, et le navire
Son gréement, dont le vent fait une sombre lyre.
Tout se transforme et court dans le brouillard trompèur;
Les morts et les vivants qui sont une vapeur,
Se mêlent; le volcan, crête et bouche enflammée,
Vomit un long siphon de cendre et de fumée;
L’air se tord, sans qu’on sache où l’aquilon conduit
Les miasmes pervers et traîtres de la nuit;

La marée, immuable et hurlante bascule,
Balance l’océan dans l’affreux crépuscule;
Et la création n’est qu’un noir tremblement.
On ne sait quelle vie émeut lugubrement
L’homme, l’esquif, le mât, l’onde, l’écueil, le havre;

Et la lune répand sa lueur de cadavre.

Je cherche, un soupirail. Quel sens peut donc avoir
Ce monde aveugle et sourd, cet édifice noir,
Cette création ténébreuse et cloîtrée,
Sans fenêtre, sans toit, sans porte, sans entrée,
Sans issue, ô terreur! par moment des blancheurs
Passent; on aperçoit vaguement des chercheurs,
Sans savoir si ce sont réellément des êtres,
Et si tous ces sondeurs du gouffre, mages, prêtres,
Eux-mêmes ne sont pas de l'ombre à qui les vents
Donnent dans le brouillard des formes de vivants;
On voit les grands fronts blancs d'Égypte et de Chaldée;
Et, comme les forçats immenses de l'idée,
On voit passer au loin les esprits hasardeux
Traînant la pesanteur des problèmes hideux,
Savants, prophètes, djinns, démons, devins, poètes;
Et l'abîme leur dit: qu'êtes-vous, si vous êtes?

Quel est cet univers? et quel en est l'aïeul?
Ce qu'on prend pour un ciel est peut-être un linceul.
Qui peut dire où l'on vogue et qui sait où l'on erré?
Oh! l'eau terrible ayant des rumeurs de tonnerre!
Les sourds chuchotements du vent sous l'horizon!
Entre le jour et nous quelle épaisse cloison!
Ténèbres. Pourquoi tout parle-t-il à voix basse?
Tout visage qui rit a, dans l'horrible espace,
Derrière lui pour ombre une tête de mort.
Naître! mourir! On entre, entrez. — Sortez, on sort! —
Et je songe à jamais! à jamais mon œil sombre
Voit aller et venir l'onde énorme de l'ombre!
À quoi bon? et vous tous, à quoi bon? vous vivez;
Vivez-vous? et d'ailleurs, pourquoi? pensez, rêvez,
Mourez! heurtez vos fronts à la sourde clôture!
Qu'est-ce que le destin? qu'est-ce que la nature?
N'est-ce qu'un même texte en deux langues traduit?
N'est-ce qu'un rameau double ayant le même fruit?

Le lierre qui verdit à travers le décombre,
La mer par le couchant chauffée au rouge sombre,
Les nuages ayant les cimes pour récifs,
Les tourmentes volant en groupes convulsifs,
La foudre, les Etnas jetant des pierres ponces,
Les crimes s’envoyant les fléaux pour réponses,

L’antre surnaturel, l’étang plein de typhus,
Les prodiges hurlant sous les chênes touffus,
La matière, chaos, profondeur où s’étale
L’air furieux, le feu féroce, l’eau brutale;
La nuit, cette prison, ce noir cachot mouvant
Où l’on entend la sombre évasion du vent,
Tout est morne. On a peur quand l’aube qui s’éveille
Fait une plaie au bas des cieux, rouge et vermeille;
On a peur quand la bise épand son long frisson;
On a peur quand on voit, vague, à fleur d’horizon,
Montrant, dans l’étendue au crépuscule ouverte,
Son dos mystérieux d’or et de nacre verte,
Ramper le scarabée effroyable du soir.
On a peur quand minuit sur les monts vient s’asseoir.
Pourtant, dans cette masse informe et frémissante,
Il semble par moments qu’on saisisse et qu’on sente
Comme un besoin d’hymen et de paix émouvant,
Toutes ces profondeurs de nuée et de vent;
Tout cherche à se parler et tout cherche à s’entendre;
La terre, à l’océan jetant un regard tendre,
Attire à son flanc vert ce sombre apprivoisé
Mais l’eau quitte e bord après l’avoir baisé,
Et retombe, et s’enfonce, et redevient, tourmente;
Il n’est rien qui n’hésite et qui ne se démente;
Le bien prête son voile au mal qui vient s’offrir;
Hélas! l’autre côté de savoir, C’est souffrir;
Aube et soir, vie et deuil ont les mêmes racines;
Le sort fait la recherche et l`angoisse voisines;
D’où jaillit le regard on voit sortir le pleur;
Et, si l’œil dit Lumière, il dit aussi Douleur.

Tout est morne. Il n est pas d’objet qui ne paraisse
Faire dans l’infini des signes de détresse
Et pendant que, lugubre et vague, autour de, lui,
Dans la blême fumée et dans le vaste ennui,
Le tourbillon des faits et des choses s’engouffre,
Ce spectre de la vie appelé l’homme souffre,
Ces deux tragiques voix, Nature, Humanité,
Se font écho, chacune en son extrémité
La tristesse de l’un sur-l’autre se replie;
La pâle angoisse humaine a-la mélancolie
Du plaintif univers pour explication;
Et les gémissements de là création
Sont pleins de la misère insondable de l’homme.

Pourtant vous n’êtes rien que des larves en somme!
Vous marchez l’un sur l’autre; obscurs, troubles, dormants,
Fuyants, et tous vos pas sont des effacements.
Il ne reste de vous, s’il reste quelque chose,
Que l’embryon, peut-être effet, peut-être cause,
Que les rudiments sourds, muets, primordiaux.
L’être éternel est fait d’atomes idiots.

Lui-même est-il? voilà le sinistre problème.
O semeur, montre-nous du moins la main qui sème!

Hermès, mais qui peut voir ce qu’a vu l’œil d’Hermès?
M’a dit qu’il avait vu, du haut des grands sommets,
Au delà du réel, au delà du possible,
Une clarté, reflet du visage invisible;
Elle éclairait la brume où nous nus abîmons;
Tout le bloc frissonnant des êtres; arbres, monts,
Ailes, regards, rameaux, était penché sur elle;
Et, jetant des éclairs soudains, surnaturelle,
Cette lueur sans fond, qu’on n’osait approcher,
Epouvantait parfois le chêne et le rocher
Même le plus terrible et le plus intrépide.
Comme c’est-immobile, et comme c’est rapide!

Comme cela s’échappe à de certains moments!
Comme l’abîme fait d’étranges mouvements!
Oh! j’ai beau vouloir fuir, et fuir, et fuir encore!
La contemplation du gouffre me dévore.
Oui, je te l’ai dit, oui, sur la sombre hauteur,
Je vois le monde!

Aimants, fluides, pesanteur,
Axes, pôles, chaleur, gaz, rayons, feu sublime,
Toutes les forces sont les chevaux de l’abîme;
Chevaux prodigieux dont le pied toujours fuit,
Et qui tirent le monde à travers l’âpre nuit;
Et jamais de sommeil à leur fauve prunelle,
Et jamais d’écurie à leur course éternelle!
Ils vont, ils vont, ils vont, fatals alérions,
Franchissant les zéniths et les septentrions;
Traînant-tous les soleils dans toutes, les ténèbres,
L’homme sent la terreur lui glacer les vertèbres
Quand d’en bas il entend leur pas mystérieux.
Il dit.: — Comme l’orage est profond dans les cieux!
Comme les vents d’ouest soufflent là-bas au large!
Comme les bâtiments doivent jeter leur charge,
Et comme-l’océan doit être affreux a voir!
Comme il pleut cette nuit! comme il tonne ce soir!
O vivants, fils du temps, de l’espace-et du nombre,
Ce sont les noirs chevaux du chariot de l’ombre.

Écoutez-les passer. L’ouragan tortueux,
La foudre, tout ce bruit difforme et monstrueux
Des souffles dans les monts, des vagues sur la plage,
Sont les hennissements du farouche attelage.

Cette création est toujours en travail;
L’astre refait son or, et l’aube son émail,
La nuit détruit le jour, l’onde détruit la digue,
Incessamment, sans fin, sans repos, sans fatigue.
Sans cesse les noirceurs, les germes, les clartés,

Les croisements d’éclairs dans les immensités,
Les effluves, les feux, les métaux, les mercures,
Les déluges profonds, ablutions obscures,
Font des enfantements dans la destruction;
La matière est pensée et l’idée action;
On naît, on se féconde, on vit, on meurt, sans trêve;
Et parfois j’aperçois, même au delà du rêve,
Dans des fonds ou mes yeux n’étaient jamais venus,
Des levers effrayants de mondes inconnus.

Oh! pourquoi ces chaos, si tout vient d’un génie?
Oh! si c’est le néant, pourquoi cette harmonie?
Est-il, Lui? L’univers m’apparaît tour à tour
Convulsion, puis ordre; obscurité, puis jour.
S’Il est, pourquoi sent-on le froid de la couleuvre?
S’Il est, d’où vient qu’un ver ronge toute son œuvre,
La mère dans l’enfant, la fleur dans son pistil?
Et pourquoi souffre-t-on? Et pourquoi permet-il
La Douleur, cette immense et sombre calomnie?
Qu’est-ce que fait le mal dans l’univers? il nie.
Il dit: — vous rêvez Dieu quand c’est moi qui vous suis.
La preuve qu’il n’est pas, vivants, c’est que je suis.

Est-ce mauvais ou bon? est-ce splendide ou triste?
Tout cela suffit-il pour prouver qu’Il existe?
Et qu’il est quelque part un Auteur, un Voyant,
Un être épouvantable ou secourable, ayant
La distance du mal au bien pour envergure?
Esprit fait monde avec l’abîme pour figure!
Grand inconnu tenant la pensée en arrêt!
Mais qui nous dit que l’ombre est ce qu’elle paraît?
Est-elle unité sombre? est-elle foule horrible?
Ne voit-on de clarté que par les trous d’un crible?
Cela roule; sur qui? Cela tourne; sur quoi?
D’où vient-on? où va-t-on? Je ne sais rien. Et toi?.

Et l’oiseau regarda de ses deux Yeux mon âme;

Et je vis de la nuit tout au fond de leur flamme.
Et, comme je restais pensif, il poursuivit:
Ombre sur ce qui meurt! ombre sur ce qui vit!

J’ai lu ceci, qu’Hermès écrivit sur sa table:
«Pyrrhon d’Élée était un mage redoutable.
«L’abîme en le voyant se mettait à hennir.
«Il vint un jour au ciel; Dieu le laissa venir.;
«Il vit la vérité, Dieu la lui laissa prendre.
«Comme il redescendait — car il faut redescendre;
«L’Idéal met dehors les sages enivrés; —
«Comme il redescendait de degrés en degrés,
«De parvis en parvis, de pilastre en, pilastre,
«De la terre aperçu, tenant dans sa main l’astre,
«Soudain, sombre, il tourna vers les grands cieux brûlants
«Son poing terrible et plein de rayons aveuglants,
«Et laissant de ses doigts jaillir l’astre, le sage
«Dit: je te lâche, ô Dieu, ton étoile au visage!
«Et la clarté plongea jusqu’au fond de la nuit;
«On vit un instant Dieu, puis tout s’évanouit.”

Hermès contait encore avoir vu dans un songe.
Un esprit qui lui dit: — Homme, un doute me ronge.
Je ne me souviens point d’avoir été créé.
J’étais, je flottais, seul, pensif, pas effrayé;
Forme au vent agrandie, au vent diminuée,
J’étais dans la nuée et j’étais la nuée;
Je nageais dans le rêve et dans la profondeur.
Tout a coup l’univers naquit; cette rondeur
Entra dans l’horizon qui devint formidable;
Je ne supposais pas le vide fécondable;
J’eus un moment d’effroi; depuis, avec stupeur,
J’examine ce monde inquiétant; j’ai peur
D’être dans l’ombre avec quelqu’un de redoutable.
Hermès s’en est allé les deux mains étendues.
Il cherchait, il sondait les profondeurs perdues;
Et comme lui je cherche; et dans ce que je fais

J’étouffe, comme avant de chercher, j’étouffais.
Car la nuit me punit de vouloir la connaître.
C’est une obscénité de lever, fût-on prêtre,
Le grand voile pudique et sacré de l’horreur.
D’ailleurs, que trouve-t-on? faux sens, fumée, erreur.
L’illusion, riant de son rire sinistre,
Sort de l’ombre, écrit: FIN, et ferme le registre.

On se perd à descendre, on s’égare à monter.
Chercher, c’est offenser; tenter, c’est attenter;
Savoir, c’est ignorer. Isis au bandeau triple
À la surdité morne et froide pour disciple.
Ne pas vouloir est bien, ne pas pouvoir est mieux.
Porte envie à l’aveugle, et n’ouvre pas les yeux.
Tais-toi! tais-toi! S’il est quelques bouches frivoles
Qui parlent, ô vivant, sache que les paroles
Troublent l’énormité menaçante des cieux.
Le muet est plus saint que le silencieux.

Oui, se murer l’oreille avec, le mur silence;
Ne jeter aucun poids dans aucune balance;
Ne pas toucher aux plis lugubres du rideau;

Oui, garder le bâillon, oui, garder le bandeau;
Végéter sans vouloir, sans tenter, sans atteindre;
Laisser les yeux se clore et les soleils s’éteindre;
Telle est la loi.

Pourtant je veux; mais je ne puis.
— Cherche, m’a dit Hermès. Je n’ai rien vu depuis.

Nuée en bas, nuée en haut, nuée au centre;
Nuit et nuit; rien devant, rien derrière; rien entre.
Par moments, des essaims d’atomes vains et fous
Qui flottent; ce-qu’on voit de plus réel, c’est vous,
Mort, tombe, obscurité des blêmes sépultures,
Cimetières, de Dieu ténébreuses cultures.

Mais pourquoi donc ce mot me revient-il toujours?
Est-ce qu’il est l’écho de ces grands porches sourds?
Oh! n’est-il pas plutôt le vide où tout s’achève;
L’éclat de rire vague et sinistre du rêve?
Cependant il faut bien un axe à ce qu’on voit;
Et, quelque chose étant; il faut que quelqu’un soit.
Haine ou sagesse, joie ou deuil, paix ou colère,
Il faut la clef de voûte et la pierre, angulaire;
Il faut le point d’appui, le pivot, le milieu.
À la roue univers il faut bien un essieu.
Croyons! croyons! Sans voir la source, on peut conclure
De l’œuvre à l’ouvrier, et de la chevelure
À la tête, et du ercle au centre d’où: tout part,
Et du parfum partout à la fleur quelque part.
Homme, l’Etre doit être. Homme, il n’est pas possible
Que la flèche esprit vole et n’ait pas une cible.
Il ne se peut, si vain et si croulant que soit

Ce monde où l’on voit fuir tout ce qu’on aperçoit;
Il ne se peut, ô tombe! ô nuit! que la nature
Ne soit qu’une inutile et creuse couverture,
Que le fond soit de l’ombre aveugle, que le bout
Soit le vide, et que Rien ait pour écorce Tout.
Il ne se peut qu’avec l’amas crépusculaire
De ses grands bas-reliefs qu’un jour lugubre éclaire,
Avec son bloc de nuit, de brume et de clarté,
La création soit, devant l’immensité,
Un piédestal ayant le néant pour statue.
Croyons. En disant non, l’esprit se prostitue.
L’Être a beau se cacher, tout nous dit: le voilà!
Croyons.

Je me répète, ô songeur, tout cela;
Mais c’est au-doute affreux que toujours je retombe;
Tant la fleur et la foudre, et l’étoile et la trombe,
Et l’homme et le sépulcre, et la terre et le ciel,
Font trembler et fléchir le rayon visuel!

Tant ce qu on aperçoit trouble ce qu’on suppose!
Tant l’effet noir voit peu directement la cause!
Tant, même aux meilleurs yeux, la brume et le rayon,
Les éléments toujours en-contradiction,
Les souffles déchaînés et les ailes captives,
Ouvrent sur l’inconnu de louches perspectives!
Tant il est malaisé de crier: Vérité!
Et tant, la certitude a d’obliquité!

Je regarde et je cherche et j’attends et je songe,
Et le silence froid devant moi se prolonge.
Par moments, dans l’espace où son fantôme a l’air
D’errer avec le vent, la nuée et l’éclair,
Je vois passer Hermès, mon prodigieux maître.
Abordant ou fuyant l’inconnu qu’il pénètre,
Il rêve, il pense, il tend ses deux bras pour prier;
J’entends alors sa voix formidable crier:
— Oh! l’être! l’être! l’être effrayant! il m’accable
Sous son nom inouï, sombre, incommunicable!
Je ne le dirai pas! Sois tranquille, infini!
Puis il passe terrible, après m’avoir béni.

Et moi je reste là, tressaillant, dans la nue.
Et l’oscillation des gouffres continue.

Oh! toujours revenir au point d’où l’on partit!
Et derrière le grand toujours voir le petit P.
J’ai beau creuser la vie et creuser la nature;
J’ai des lueurs de-tout dans ma science obscure,

Mais j’y respire un air de sépulcre; et j’ai froid.
Oh! que cet univers, s’il est vide, est étroit!
Oh! toujours se heurter aux mêmes apparences!
Oh! toujours se briser aux mêmes ignorances!
S’il existe, d’où vient qu’il se cache et qu’il fuit?
Est-il dans l’univers comme un grain dans le fruit,
Comme le sel dans l’eau, comme le vin dans l’outre?

Oh! percer la matière horrible d’outre en outre!
Faire, à travers le bien, le mal; l’onde et le feu,
L’homme, l’astre et la bête; une trouée a Dieu!
Qui le pourra? personne. Oh! tout n’est qu’ironie.
Sage celui qui doute et fort celui qui nie!

Tu cherches aussi l’Être, ô passant! je te plains.
Les firmaments d’abîme et d’abîme sont pleins.
La route est longue, va! l’éternel, parallèle
À l’infini, t’aura bien vite brisé l’aile.
Cours, vole, essaie, et cherche, et plane, et sois puni!
Moi, l’œil fixe suffit tant qu’il n’est pas terni,
Je reste où je suis. Va, monte! Et prends garde en route
Aux visions qui font qu’on s’égare et qu’on doute.
Tu trouveras peut-être à quelque seuil d’enfers
Des fantômes de feu, de pâles Lucifers,
Punis pour s’être mis au front un peu d’aurore,
Larrons de feu céleste ou d’infernal phosphore,
Noirs dénicheurs de nids d’astres dans les rameaux
D’où tombent les terreurs, les songes et les maux.
Passe, et va devant toi, sois méfiant, et rôde,
Sans croire à la clarté, dans la nuit, cette fraude;
Ne suis pas ce qu’on voit, ne suis pas ce qui luit.
À force de vouloir aveugler tout, la nuit
Finit par faire éclore une lueur athée;
Et les flamboiements sont de l’ombre révoltée.
J’en suis moi-même.

Alors le hibou frémissant
Se tourna vers la nuit, cherchant l’énorme absent.
On eût dit que sa tête et ses deux ailes grises
Dans un pesant filet invisible étaient prises;
Il tremblait, puis restait rêveur comme un vieillard.

Tout à coup il cria dans l’immense brouillard:

Profondeurs! Profondeurs! Profondeurs formidables!

Embryons éternels, atomes imperdables,
D’où sortez-vous? Substance, air, flamme, moule humain,
Terre! avez-vous été pétris par une main?
O parturition ténébreuse de l’Être!
Je veux trouver, je, veux savoir, je veux connaître!

Le vide est impossible, et tout est plein; tout vit.
Qui le sait? Le ciel croule aussitôt qu’on gravit.
Si l’univers nous dit de douter; ou nous somme
De croire, je l’ignore: Oh! que dit l’aube à l’homme?
Que dit le froid mistral et le semoun ardent?
Vision! la mer triste entrechoque en grondant,
Sous les nuages lourds que les souffles assemblent,
Ses monstrueux airains en fusion, qui tremblent!
Les flots font un fracas de boucliers affreux
Se heurtant et l’éclair sépulcral est sur eux!
Quelle est la foi, le dogme et la philosphie
Que toute cette horreur sombre nous signifie?
L’étendue, où, vaincu; mon vol s’est arrêté,
Est si lugubrement faite d’obscurité,
L’obstacle est si fatal, l’ombre est si dérisoire,
Que j’arrive à ne plus comprendre, à ne rien croire;
Et je dis à la nuit: pas un être n’est sûr
Même d’un peu de Dieu, nuit, dans un peu d’azur!
Oh! la création est-elle volontaire?
Un maître y dit-il moi? Ciel! Ciel! de quel cratère
Du vieux volcan chaos; sous l’énigme englouti,
Ce monde, éruption sinistre, est-il sorti?
Quelqu’un a-t-il soufflé sur ses torrents funèbres:
Pour en faire la pierre énorme des ténèbres?
Quelqu’un l’a-t-il vu lave avant qu’il fût granit?,
Qui donc, sur le versant monstrueux du zénith,
Figea cette coulée effrayante d’étoiles?
Est-il? S’il est, qu’il parle! Oh! dis-moi qui tu voiles;
Ciel morne! L’être est-il parce que la vue est?
Je sens sous l’infini ce fantôme muet:
Je le sens; mais est-il? Et j’ai beau le poursuivre;

L’ombre incommensurable et fuyante m’enivre.
Toute ma découverte est, cendre et chute. O deuil!
Le strabisme effrayant du doute est dans mon œil!
Le fil de l’infini devant moi se dévide.
Que la création soit une chose vide,
Cela ne se peut pas. Où serait la raison?

Mais d’un autre côté, dans le vaste horizon
Tout souffre; et tout répond aux questions: je pleure!
L’esprit comme la chair, le siècle comme l’heure,
Le colosse et l’atome infinitésimal.
O nuit! pourquoi le vide? Oui, mais pourquoi le mal?
Oh! si je trouvais Dieu! Si je pouvais, à force
D’user ma griffe obscure à saisir cette écorce,
Déchirer l’ombre! voir ce front, et le voir nu!
Ôter enfin la nuit du visage inconnu!
Mais rien! Le ciel est faux, l’astre ment, l’aube est traître!
Je n’ai qu’un seul effort, je me cramponne à l’être;

Je me cramponne à Dieu dans l’ombre sans parois;
Si Dieu n’existait pas! Oh! par moments je crois
Voir pleurer la paupière horrible de l’abîme.
Si Dieu n’existait pas? si rien n’avait de cime?
Si les gouffres n’avaient qu’une ombre au milieu d’eux?
Oh! serais-je tout seul dans l’infini hideux?
O vous, les quatre vents soufflant dans le prodige,
Est-il? est-il? est-il? est-il? Moi-même suis-je?
Ne verrai-je jamais blanchir les bleus sommets?
Et devons-nous rester face à face à jamais,
Sous l’énigme, idiote et monstrueuse voûte,
Lui qui s’appelle Nuit, moi qui m’appelle Doute!
Et rien ne répondit; et l’oiseau curieux
Et funèbre, crispant son ongle furieux,
Frémit; et, se ruant sur l’espèce de face
Qui toujours dans la brume apparaît et s’efface,
Poursuivant l’éternel évanouissement,
Tâchant de retenir le vide, le moment,

L’éclair, le phénomène informe, le problème,
Et tout ce rien fuyant qu’il ne voyait pas même,
Cherchant un pli, cherchant un nœud, faisant effort
Pour prendre l’impalpable et l’obscur par le bord,
Et pour saisir, dans l’ombre où tout essor avorte,
La nuit par le trou noir de quelque étoile morte,
Las, rauque, haletant dans l’insondable exil:
— Mais, spectre, arrache donc ce masque! cria-t-il.
Et je ne le vis plus; l’ombre avait saisi l’être
Qui voulait saisir l’ombre; et tout doit disparaître,
Et tout doit s’effacer, et tout, Rhodope, Ossa,
Athos, tout doit passer, et cet oiseau passa.

Seulement, comme un souffle a peine saisissable,
Comme un bruit de fourmi roulant un grain de sable,
Dans le gouffre où venait d’entrer l’oiseau d’Hermès,
J’entendis murmurer tout bas ce mot: jamais!
Toute l’ombre exhalait un brouillard léthifère

Et je demeurai là, ne sachant plus que faire
De mes ailes, n’osant ni chercher, ni vouloir.

III

Et je vis au-dessus de ma tête un point noir;
Et ce point noir semblait une mouche dans l’ombre.
Dans le profond nadir que la ruine encombre,

Où sans cesse, à jamais, sinistre et se taisant,
Quelque chose de sombre et d’inconnu descend,
Les brouillards indistincts, et gris, fumée énorme,
S’enfonçaient et perdaient lugubrement leur forme,
Pareils à des: chaos l’un sur l’autre écroulés.

Montant toujours, laissant sous mes talons ailés
L’abîme d’en bas, plein de l’ombre inférieure,
Je volai, dans la brume et dans le vent qui pleure,
Vers l’abîme d’en haut, obscur comme un tombeau;
J’approchai de la mouche, et c’était un corbeau.
Et ce corbeau disait:,
Ils sont deux! Zoroastre.
L’un est l’esprit de vie, au vol d’aigle, aux yeux d’astre,
Qui rayonne, crée, aime, illumine, construit;
Et l’autre est l’araignée énorme de la nuit.
Ils sont-deux; l’un est l’hymne et l’autre est la huée.
Ils sont deux; le linceul et l’être, la nuée
Et le ciel, la paupière et l’œil, l’ombre-et le jour,
La haine affreuse, noire, implacable, et l’amour.
Ils sont deux combattants. Le combat, c’est le monde.
L’un, qui mêle à l’azur sa chevelure blonde,
Est l’ange; il est celui qui, dans le gouffre obscur,
Apporte la clarté, le lys, le-bonheur pur;
Du monstre aux pieds hideux il traverse les voiles;
Sur sa robe frissonne un tremblement d’étoiles;
Il est beau! Semant l’être et le germe aux limons,
Allumant des blancheurs sur la cime des monts,
Et pénétrant d’un feu mystérieux les choses,
Il vient, et l’on voit l’aube à travers ses doigts roses;

Et tout rit; l’herbe est verte et les hommes sont doux.
L’autre surgit a, l’heure où pleurent à genoux.
Les mères et-les sœurs, Rachel, Hécube, Électre;
Le soir monstrueux fait apparaître le spectre;
Il sort du vaste ennui de l’ombre qui descend;
Il arrête la sève et fait couler le sang;
Le jardin sous ses pieds se change en ossuaire;
De l’horreur infinie il traîne le suaire;
Il sort pour faire faire aux ténèbres le mal;
Morne, en l’être charnel comme en l’être aromal,
Il pénètre; et pendant qu’à l’autre bout du monde,
Abattant les rameaux du crime qu’il émonde,
L’éblouissant Ormus met sur son front vermeil.
Cette tiare d’or qu’on-nomme le soleil,

Lui, sur l’horizon noir, sinistre, à la nuit brune,
Se dresse avec le masque horrible de la lune,
Et, jetant à tout astre un regard de côté,
Rôde, voleur de l’ombre et de l’immensité.
Grâce à lui, l’incendie éclos d’une étincelle,
Le jaguar qui dévore à jamais la gazelle,
La peste, le poison, l’épine, la noirceur,
L’âpre ciguë à qui le serpent dit: ma sœur,
Le feu qui ronge tout, l’eau sur qui tout chavire,
L’avalanche, le roc qui brise le navire,
Le vent qui brise l’arbre, étalent sous le ciel
La vaste impunité du forfait éternel.
Il se penche effrayant sur les dormeurs qui rêvent;
C’est vers lui qu’à travers l’obscurité s’élèvent
L’hymne d’amour du monstre et le feu du bûcher,
Les langues des serpents cherchant à le lécher,
Tous les dos caressants des bêtes qu’il anime,
Et les miaulements énormes de l’abîme.
Il pousse tous les cris de guerre des humains;
Dans leurs combats hideux c’est lui qui bat des mains,
Et qui, lâchant la mort sur les têtes frappées,
Attache cette foudre à l’éclair des épées.

Il marche environné de la meute des maux;
Il heurte aux rochers l’onde et l’homme aux animaux.
Chaque nuit il est près de triompher; il noie
Les cieux; il tend la main, il va saisir la proie,
Le monde; l’océan frémit, le gouffre bout,
Ses dents claquent de joie, il grince, et tout à coup,
À l’heure où les parsis, les mages et les guèbres
Entendent ce bandit rire dans les ténèbres,
Voilà que de l’abîme un rayon blanc jaillit,
Et que, sur le malade expirant dans son lit,
Sur les mères tordant leurs mains désespérées,
Sur le râle éperdu des lugubres marées,
Sur le juste au tombeau, sur l’esclave au carcan,
Sur l’écueil, sur le bois profond, sur le volcan,
Sur tout cet univers que l’ombre veut proscrire,
L’aurore épanouit son immense soutire!
Sous l’univers, hagard, lié d’un triple nœud,
Un être, qui ne sait s’il existe, se meut;
C’est l’idiot; le sombre enchaîné de la cave,
Chaos, s’il est permis de nommer cet esclave.
Stupide, il rêve là, connu des spectres seuls,
Caché sous tous les plis que font tous les linceuls,

Ébauche par en haut et par en bas décombre,
Mendiant sourdement un peu de jour dans l’ombre,
Sanglottant au hasard, formidable pleûreur,
Il tord ses deux moignons, ignorance et terreur;
Et la pluie éternelle et lugubre l’inonde.
Il rampe dans un trou; fondrière du monde;
Sans yeux, sans pieds, sans voix, mordant et dévoré,
Se heurtant aux parois des gouffres, effaré
D’éclairs pleuvant sur comme sur une cible,
Espèce d’affreux tronc ayant pour gaine horrible
La coque de l’œuf:noir d’où l’univers sortit
Son crâne sous le poids du néant s’aplatit;
Et l’on voit vaguement tâtonner dans l’informe,
Au fond de l’infini, ce cul-de-jatte énorme.

Il n’entend même pas le bruit que font en haut
Les deux principes dieux, ébranlant son cachot,
Et leurs trépignements sur sa morne demeure.
Le méchant veut qu’il vive et le bon veut qu’il meure.

Ainsi luttent, hélas!’ces deux égaux puissants;
L’un, roi de l’esprit; l’autre, empoisonneur des sens;
Les choses à leur souffle expirent ou végetent.
Rien n’est au-dessus d’eux. Ils sont seuls. Ils se jettent
L’hiver et le printemps, l’éclair et le rayon;
Ils sont l’effrayant duel de la création.
Tout est leur guerre; sont dans la flamme, dans l’onde,
Dans la terre où les monts fument, dans l’air qui gronde;
Leurs chocs font tressaillir les firmaments, et font
Trembler les soleils d’or à ce sombre plafond;
Et le nid, dans la mousse, est leur champ de bataille.
L’abîme est entr’ouvert quand Arimane bâille;
Alors l’essaim hagard des hydres se répand.
Les deux colosses, l’un planant, l’autre rampant,
S’étreignent. Où l’on voit deux cœurs qui se haïssent,
Deux dragons qui la nuit l’un vers l’autre se glissent,
Deux forces s’attaquant à grand bruit, deux guerriers
Combattant, deux poignards dont les coups meurtriers
Se croisent, et parfois deux bouches qui se baisent,
Ce sont eux. Noirs assauts qu’aucuns repos n’apaisent!
Jamais de trêve. Ils sont; et rien n’existe qu’eux.
Les éléments sont-pleins de leurs cris belliqueux.
Et partout où l’on pleure et partout où l’on chante,
Dans l’homme, dans le vent, dans la ronce méchante,
Dans la bête des bois et dans les cieux émus,
L’ombre hurle Arimane et le jour dit Ormus!

Et dans les profondeurs cette lutte s’étale;
Et l’oscillation est heureuse ou fatale,
Et le large roulis nous bere, ou son reflux
N’emporte que clameurs et sanglots superflus,
Et le boa s’enroule au tronc du sycomore,

Jérusalem voit naître à son côté Gomorrhe,
Thèbes lègue un linceul de sables à Memphis,
Nemrod luit, Marc-Aurèle a Commode pour fils,
Ou l’océan sourit, et l’abîme et l’étoile
S’entendent pour sauver une petite voile,
Le bois chante; les nids palpitent, les oiseaux
Réjouissent les fleurs en buvant aux ruisseaux,
La mère, en qui l’orgueil à l’extase se mêle,
Emplit d’elle l’enfant qui presse sa mamelle,
Et l’homme semble un dieu de sagesse vêtu,
Et tout grandit en grâce, en puissance, en vertu,
Ou dans le flot du mal tout naufrage et tout sombre,
Selon que le hasard, roi de la lutte sombre,
Précipite Arimane ou voile Ormus terni,
Et fait pencher, au fond du livide infini,
L’un ou l’autre plateau de la balance énorme.
Arimane aux yeux d’ombre attend qu’Ormus s’endorme;
Ce jour-là, le chaos et le mal le verront
Saisir dans ses bras noirs le ciel au vaste front,
Et, fouillant tout orbite et perçant tous les voiles,
De ce crâne éternel arracher les étoiles;
Ormus, tout en dormant, frémira de terreur;
L’immensité, pareille au bœuf qu’un laboureur
A laissé dans un champ ténébreux, et qui beugle,
O nuit, s’éveillera le lendemain aveugle,
Et, dans l’espace affreux sous la brume enfoui,
L’astre éteint cherchera le monde évanoui!

Et le corbeau rentra dans l’ombre formidable.

L’infini sous mes pieds reflétait l’insondable;
Des lueurs y flottaient comme dans un miroir.

IV

Et je vis au-dessus de ma tête un point noir,
Et ce point noir semblait une mouche dans l’ombre.

J’y volai. L’eau des mers, sous son flot le plus sombre,
À des monstres obscurs qui vont, seuls ou nombreux,
Et l’éther cache aussi des êtres ténébreux;

Sous les ombres on vit comme on vit sous les ondes.
Je franchis ces hauteurs lugubres et profondes,
Et cette mouche tait un vautour.

Il planait
Dans le: vide, que nul ne sonde et ne connaît,
Criant
— Hé! le géant! Hé! l’homme de l’abîme!
Est-ce que tu n’es pas fatigué? de ma cime,
J’entends le craquement éternel de tes os.
Ta livide sueur pleut dans l’affreux chaos.
Es-tu bien las? Réponds. Sur ton immense épaule
Pèse l’énormité monstrueuse du pôle;
Le globe, avec les cieux, et les monts chevelus,
Avec les mers roulant les flux et les reflux,
Avec ses dieux ayant des gouffres pour ancêtres,
Avec sa fourmilière épouvantable d’êtres,
Avec ses millions-de chocs, de bruits; de pas,
Ses vivants et ses morts... c’est très lourd, n’est-ce pas?
Nulle voix ne sortit du vide pour répondre;
Et tout continua d’être horrible, et de fondre
La cécité muette avec l’obscurité.
Et le vautour me vit, et, s’étant arrêté,
Grave et hideux, me dit:
Passant, sache les choses.
Il est des dieux. Ils sont les dieux, mais non les causes.
Il poursuivit:

Je suis le grand vautour béant.
J’étais sur la montagne et j’avais un géant.
Pas l’être à qui je viens de parler, mais un autre.
Vous, hommes, votre loi, c’est d’apprendre; la nôtre,
À nous, les becs d’acier, craints même des tombeaux,
C’est d’arracher la vie et la chair par lambeaux
Il faut au dur vautour la proie ensanglantée.
La mienne me plaisait; je mangeais Prométhée;
Quand Orphée apparut, et-me dit: Viens. J’allai,
Rauque et tout frémissant, vers cet homme étoilé.
Il chantait, et son hymne était une prière,
Et, lui, marchait devant, et je volais derrière;
Et tout ce que je sais, ténèbres, c’est l’esprit,

C’est Orphée au front calme et doux, qui me l’apprit;
Stupide, j’ai suivi cette voix enchantée;
Et c’est ainsi que fut délivré Prométhée.

Écoute. En écoutant l’esprit se forme et naît.
Prométhée, à travers les, tourments, m’enseignait;
Orphée a complété l’œuvre de Prométhée;
Sache à ton tour.

Le monde est de l’ombre agitée;
L’ombre en heurtant ses flots produit le chaos noir,
D’où sort la masse informe et brute, laissant voir
Dans ses plis ces noirceurs, ces larves, ces chimères
Que la nuit sombre appelle à voix basse les Mères;
Et le père de tout, c’est le vague étoilé.

L’univers a sur lui, globe d’ombre mêlé,
Trois déesses qui sont trois aveugles terribles.
Maîtresses du réseau des forces invisibles,
Elles ouvrent sans bruit leurs bras insidieux,
Et prennent les titans, les hommes et les dieux;
L’œil partout voit surgir une sombre inconnue;

Sur la terre Vénus, la grande nymphe nue,
En bas, dans l’âpre lieu des mânes redouté,
Le spectre Hécate, en haut l’ombre Fatalité;
Vénus étreint la vie et rien ne lui résiste,
Hécate tient l’enfer, et, comme un geôlier triste,
L’ombre Destin s’adosse au grand ciel constellé.
On voit sur l’azur noir ce fantôme voilé.
Ainsi le monde, enfer, terre et cieux, plein de haines,
Est triple pour souffrir et frémit sous trois chaînes.
Tout par une noirceur vers un gouffre est conduit.
Hécate, c’est la nuit, le Destin, c’est la nuit,
Et Vénus, c’est la nuit; Vénus, fauve et fatale,
. A deux filles, la mort et la volupté pâle;
Et Mort et Volupté sont deux ombres qui font
Chacune sous la vie un abîme sans fond.

Ô déités, tenant, les noires et la blonde,
Les entrailles, le cœur et le cerveau du monde,
Et toute la nature attachée à trois fils!
Les astres sont leurs yeux, les nuits sont leurs profils.
Rien ne peut les fléchir; c’est en vain qu’on réclame;
Le sort est tigre, Hécate est sphynx, Vénus est femme.

Une cariatide immense porte tout
Tellus en deuil, Neptune amer, Pluton qui bout,
Arbres, moissons, déserts, flots confus, rocs inertes,

Fleuves laissant traîner leurs longues barbes vertes,
Hommes et champs d’où sort un bruit sourd, tournoiements
Des nuages, de jour ou d’orage écumants,
Et Pan, qui, dérangeant les branchages des ormes,
Apparaît vaguement au fond des bois énormes.

Tout est un groupe obscur d’aspects fallacieux;
Les astres font un bruit de lyres dans les cieux;
Le porche sidéral, antre du sort, gouverne
Ce monde triple, ciel, terre en fleurs, rouge Averne.

Une grâce lugubre est mêlée à l’effroi.
Partout quelque chaos, dont quelque monstre est roi,
Obéit, dans l’écume ou la flamme ou l’épine,
Aux yeux d’une Amphitrite ou d’une Proserpine
Ou de quelque Cybèle au front blond et serein.
Partout se croisent l’eau, le feu, l’autan sans frein,
Les satyres dansants, les nymphes chasseresses,
Et dans le sombre azur des essors de déesses.
Et, tour à tour, et l’un après l’autre, au plus noir
De l’antre, que blanchit l’aube et qu’ombre le soir,
On voit passer, forgeant la lumière ou la brume
Sur l’Heure, étincelante et ténébreuse enclume,
Le Jour, la Nuit, géants, cyclopes à l’œil rond,
Ayant, l’un le soleil, l’autre la lune, au front.

La Matière est au centre, au fond des sombres voûtes,
Hydre, divinité, la plus noire de toutes!
Tout cherche tout, sans but; sans trêve, sans repos.
Ces femmes qu’un dieu pousse et dont les blanches peaux
En touchant l’arbre ému, font frémir les écorces,
Ces démons composés d’ivresses et de forces,
Les Ménades aux seins de Sirène, aux yeux fous,
Passent levant leur robe au-dessus des genoux,
Mêlant les voix, le luth, la timbale et le cistre.
O monde ténébreux, éblouissant, sinistre!
La fange se soulève et veut lécher les cieux.
Les cieux n’abhorrent pas cet hymen monstrueux.
Omphale aux blonds cheveux étreint le vaste Hercule.
Tout frémit. Dans le vague et trouble crépuscule
Les temples entrevus dressent leurs noirs piliers;
Les flamboiements des yeux errent dans les halliers:
Le pâtre attend Phoebé; l’ombre qui se déchire
Laisse voir le dragon, l’elfe, l’hécatonchyre,
Tâchant de s’enlacer, de s’unir, de sentir;
La blanche vision des nymphes fait sortir
Sylvain des bois, Triton des eaux, Vulcain des forges;

Pan contemple effaré la nudité des gorges;
L’arbre est un faune ardent qu’on ne peut assoupir,
Et les antres sont pleins d’un immense soupir,
Dans l’orageux banquet des thyrses et des lyres,
Et de toutes les soifs buvant tous les délires,
Bacchus, environné de tigres, chante et rit;
Et, dégorgeant au fond des cerveaux qu’il flétrit,
Sa fumée âcre où vont et viennent des fantômes,
Spectres bleus de l’éther, larves des noirs royaumes,
Les cris, les coups, la rage et le baiser lascif,
Le vin cynique emplit les coupes d’or massif.
On fait un nid de l’ombre, un lit de la matière.
Se ruant les seins nus sur la nature entière,
Étonnés, hérissés, debout, couchés, assis,
Les mages de Cybèle et les mages d’Isis,
L’éphèbe au front charmant, les vierges, les prêtresses;
Les bacchantes livrant aux vents leurs folles tresses,
Naïades, chèvre-pieds, kabyres, aegipans,
Et les hommes chevaux et les femmes serpents,
Les prêtres qu’en passant, bouc rêveur, tu salues,
Les troglodytes roux aux poitrines velues,
Polyphème, Astarté, Cerbère, Hylas, Atys,
Toutes les passions et tous les, appétits,
S’accouplent, Évohé! rugissent, balbutient,
Et sous l’œil du destin calme et froid, associent
Le râle et le baiser, la morsure et le chant,
La cruauté joyeuse et le bonheur méchant,
Et toutes les fureurs que la démence invente;
Et célèbrent, devant l’esprit qui s’epouvante,
Devant l’aube, devant l’astre, devant l’éclair,
Le mystère splendide et hideux de la chair;
Et cherchant les lieux sourds, les rocs inabordables,
Échevelés, pâmés, amoureux, formidables,
Ivres, l’un qui s’échappe et l’autre qui poursuit,
Dansent dans l’impudeur farouche de:la nuit!

Au faîte de l’orgie et dans le bruit des coupes,

La géante qui plonge aux flots ses larges croupes,
Dont chaque mouvement pour l'homme est un fléau,
Le monstre aux millions de visages, Géo,
Sur des Alpes couchée et montagne comme elles,
Prodigue ses amours, ses lèvres, ses mamelles,
Et, s'ouvrant sans relâche aux longs embrassements,
Engouffre en ses flancs noirs tout un monde d'amants,
Le devin, le rôdeur, des monts, l'homme de l'antre,
Epicure, l'esprit, et Silène, le ventre,
Le rayon, le fumier, et tout l'impur troupeau
Des êtres vils ayant des toisons sur la peau,
L'ours, l'hyène et le tigre et la louve échauffée,
Et derrière ce groupe affreux, le pâle Orphée!
Elle se donne à tous ensemble, et, tour à tour,
Les fait rugir de haine et se tordre d'amour,
Les étreint, les ravit, les baise et les dévore.
À ses cils ténébreux elle mêle l'aurore.
L'homme la voit qui guette au milieu des roseaux.
Laissant ses cheveux d'herbe ondoyer dans les eaux.
Elle chante, appuyant à sa hanche écaillée
Ses coudes de branchage et ses mains de feuillée:
— Viens! je suis la Nature! — Et, charmés, palpitants,
Vaincus, de tous les points du monde en même temps,
Les bergers, les songeurs, les voyants, les colosses,
Les mornes dieux de l'Inde aux têtes de molosses,
Les lourds typhons d'en bas, le peuple hydre et géant,
Pullulant, fécondant, multipliant, créant,
Frémissant d'approcher peut-être de leur mère,
Fixent leurs fauves yeux sur l'obscène chimère!
Et l'écume embrassant le roc sauvage et brut,
Les baisers de l'orage et des vagues en rut,
L'entourent; et son souffle émeut la bête immonde;
Et, sans cesse, à jamais, dans l'air, la flamme et l'onde,
À travers l'éternelle et livide vapeur,
La prunelle des nuits regarde avec stupeur,
Et l'ouragan flagelle, et l'océan caresse
La prostitution de la sombre déesse!

C’est ainsi que tout vit et tout meurt, haletant.
L’astre est une étincelle et le siècle un instant.
Le souffle de la mort couvre à chaque rafale
D’ombres le fleuve Styx, d’oiseaux le lac Stymphale,
Et la guerre aux longs cris plane, et les pestes vont
S’accoupler pêle-mêle au bas du ciel profond,
Elles se dressent, sœurs du meurtre et de l’envie,
Et leurs regards de larve épouvantent la vie.
Et l’on entend, au fond des brouillards soucieux,
Hurler la bête fauve effrayante des cieux,
Le Tonnerre, et, troublés, et prêts à se dissoudre,
Les mers, les bois, les monts, sous les pas de la foudre,
Tremblent, et le vent jette à travers ses éclats
Les imprécations du portefaix Atlas.

Car tout pèse sur lui. Je te l’ai dit, le monde,
Avec l’air bleu, le feu vermeil, l’eau verte et ronde,
Avec l’éther, l’espace, et les ascensions
Splendides et sans fin, des constellations,
Oscille, soutenu sur ce vivant pilastre.
Au sommet resplendit l’Olympe, caverne astre.
L’Olympe est couronné de spectres radieux
Qui seraient des brigands s’ils, n’étaient pas des dieux;

L’Olympe a pour fleurons les douze dieux sublimes.
Leur rayonnement calme aveugle les abîmes.
Au-dessous, les Titans, les mammons, les géants,
L’hydre Glaucus gonflant-sa croupe d’océans,
Rampent, et les sylvains, les trichines, les dives,
Dans les eaux, sous les plis des algues maladives,
Serpentent avec l’orphe horrible, et l’anthia,
Et l’impur Géryon qu’Alcide châtia;
Et l’on distingue en bas la race lapidaire,
Gorgone, que la lune en tremblant considère,
Les trois parques branlant la tête sur le bruit
Du rouet où le jour est filé par la nuit,
Chronos, face à quatre yeux, Derceto pisciforme;

Et, comme lé brin d'herbe entre le cèdre et l'orme,
L'homme entre le titan et le dieu disparaît,
Les monstres sur son front faisant une forêt.
Les douze dieux, ayant triomphé, sont tranquilles
Et féroces; ils ont les temples: dans les villes,
Les forêts dans la plaine et les rocs sur les monts;
Vulcain, par les Brontès et par les Pyracmons,
Leur fait forger la foudre et le vent en armures;
Dodone les salue avec de sourds murmures;
Ils sont grands et sereins, et chacun de leurs pas
Mesure un tiers du ciel dans son vaste compas.
Toute pudeur sur tiers à leur souffle se fane;
Jupiter est tyran, Cypris est courtisane;
Phoebus est assassin; Pallas tue; et Junon
A le meurtre au regard fixe pour compagnon;
Éole fou vomit la pluie échevelée;
Neptune est la tempête et Mars est la mêlée;
Saturne abat la vie avec sa large faulx;
Parmi les dieux méchants Mercure est le dieu faux;
Le serpent le soupçonne et le renard le flaire;
.En haut, l'horrible Amour; pire que la colère,
Règne, et perçant les cœurs de flèches, diaprant
La terre de rosiers et de tombeaux, il prend
L'univers par les dieux et les dieux par la femme;
Telle est l'orgie; et l'œil va, dans ce monde infâme,
De la substance énorme à l'esprit odieux.
Les fléaux sont titans et les vices sont dieux.

On entend les dieux rire; on voit leurs vagues trônes
Resplendir-au-dessus des monts Acrocéraunes,
La vie est autour d'eux un sourd frémissement;
La prière à leurs pieds boîte; l'oracle ment;

La moitié de la-terre est un marais qui trempe
Dans le chaos, cloaque où l'être informe rampe;
Et le ciel est trop bas pour qu'Othryx le géant
Se puisse à son réveil mettre sur son, séant.

Et Tout, c’est toi, Substance!

Oui, l’ombre où Pythagore
Voit passer le triton, la nymphe et l’égrégore;
La Syrène, la nuit, quand brille le halo,
Ouvrant son chant dans l’air, ses nageoires dans l’eau,
C’est toi; c’est toi, Téthys, la femme aux mains palmées;
Ces dieux, c’est toi; c’est toi, ces monstres; ces pygmées
Et ces géants, c’est toi; tous ces masques béants,
Corybantes hurlant les cyniques paeans,
Stryges, psylles, c’est toi; c’est toi, ces myriades
De méduses, d’éons, de faunes, de dryades;
C’est toi, cette stupeur, c’est toi, ce mouvement,
Matière! bloc inerte et noir fourmillement!

Et, devant ce chaos, toute philosophie
Pousse un cri, puis se tait, rêve et se pétrifie.
Quant à l’homme, qu’est-il? Rien. Et je te l’ai dit.
Fait d’un peu de limon que Jupiter perdit,
N’ayant, sous l’affreux ciel d’où tombe la sentence,
Ni loi, ni liberté, ni droit, ni résistance,
Il n’est que le hochet des monstres.

Nu, fatal,
L’homme commet le crime et les dieux font le mal,
L’homme, face au vil souffle et bouche aux plaintes vaines,
Sent en lui, dans ses os, dans ses nerfs, dans ses veines,
Germer l’arborescence horrible du destin.
Tout-banquet est suspect; les dieux sont du festin;
Atrée offre la coupe aux lèvres de Thyeste;
Oreste est parricide et Jocaste est inceste;
Phèdre a peur, Myrrha tremble, et Pasiphaè fuit;
Hélas!.elles ont bu les philtres de la nuit!
Le sort est un bandit; la vie est une folle.
Le glaive naît du glaive. Agamemnon immole
Sa fille, et Clytemnestre, immole Agamemnon.

— Justice; crie Ajax, es-tu? — La Mort dit: Non.
Médée est ivre et rit. Oh! comme vous pleurâtes,
Cassandre, dans l’horreur des ombres scélérates!
Quoique innocents, il vont comme des criminels.
Autour d’eux à jamais se dressent éternels

Le remords, le bois triste où l’on entend des râles,
Le meurtre; et l’entourage, affreux des spectres pâles.
Apollon forcené se jette, sombre amant,
Sur Daphné; c’est Daphné qu’atteint le châtiment.
Thémis aveugle tient la balance incertaine.
Tout est dragon, serpent, hydre, polype, antenne,
Griffe, ongle, serre; et l’homme est pris dans les anneaux
‘De Géo, de Typhon, d’Éole et d’Ouranos.
Tous les arbres de l’ombre ont de fatales pommes.
Il suffit de passer dans le taillis des hommes
Pour secouer la branche exécrable des maux.
Le crime et l’équité sont deux néants jumeaux
Que dans le même abîme emporte la même aile.
Sans voir, sans regarder, sans choisir, pêle-mêle,
Le dieu d’en bas, l’inepte et ténébreux Hadès
Jette vieillards, enfants, guerriers, rois sous le dais,
À l’égout Styx, où pleut l’éternelle immondice;
Sourd; même pour Orphée, il lui prend Eurydice.
Tout est dérision. Vénus étreint Psyché.
Achille meurt par où sa mère l’a touché.
Oh! les mères! Cherchez les fils, cherchez la joie!
Niobé devient pierre et nuit; Hécube aboie.

Être chaste. À quoi bon? Vivre austère. Pourquoi?
Plus de vertu contient plus d’ombre et plus d’effroi.
Les assassins, creuseurs de fosses à la hâte,
Le voleur, écoutant à la, porte qu’il tâte,
Ne sont pas plus troublés qu’Oedipe au front pieux.
Comme le sanglier s’abat sous les épieux.
L’homme tombe percé par les carquois célestes.
Les grands sont les maudits, les bons sont les funestes.

Le ciel sombre est croulant sur les hommes; l’autel,
Calme et froid, à celui qui l’embrasse est mortel,
Une Eurydice dort sur les marches du temple;
Le meilleur, si le sort veut en faire un exemple,
N’a plus de cœur; n’a plus d’entrailles, n’a plus d’yeux,
Ploie et meurt sous le poids formidable des dieux.
Les générations s’envolent dissipées.
Les jours passent ainsi que des lueurs d’épées.
Au-dessus des vivants le sort lève le doigt.
Nul ne fait ce qu’il fait; nul ne voit ce qu’il; voit.
Nais: la main du sort s’ouvre. Expire: elle se ferme.
Nul ne sait rien de plus. Guerres sans but, sans terme,
Sans conscience, écume aux dents, et glaive au poing!
La bouche mord l’oreille et ne lui parle point
Le sourd étreint l’aveugle; on lutte, on se dévore
On se prend; on se quitte, on se reprend encore;
Et nul n’est jamais libre un instant sous les cieux;
Ce que le destin lâche est repris par les dieux;

Ce qu’épargnent les dieux fatigués, l’amour traître.
Le ressaisit; tout saigne et tout souffre, sans être.
Le penseur voit, au-bord des noirs destins venu,
Se prolonger sans fin dans le gouffre inconnu,.
Cette agitation des vagues de ténèbres.
Où sont les grands, les forts, les puissants, les célèbres?
Ils sont où la fumée est allée, où les bois
Ont envoyé les bruits, les souffles et les voix;
Et le sourd néant dit: ce n’était pas la peine.
Et maintenant, Platon,. Socrate, Callysthène,
Diogène, Zénon, Démocrite, Archytas,
Thalès, Cratès, Pyrrhon, Anaxagore, ô tas
De sages, répondez: qu’est-ce que la sagesse?
Veille ou dors, viens ou fuis, nie ou crois, prends ou laisse.
Sois immonde ou sois pur sois bon ou sois pervers;
Insulte l’aube, ou ris sous les feuillages verts;
Montre-toi, cache-toi; va-t-en,demeure, oscille;
Ignore, ou bien apprends; pense, ou sois imbécille.

Science humaine! essai de regard! louche effort
Pour faire un trou de flamme au mur brumeux du sort!
Imprécation sombre et pleine d’anathèmes!
Esprit humain! rumeur! passage de systèmes!
Place publique où vont et viennent, dans le soir,
Les projets de penser que l’homme peut avoir!
Le monde est une meule à broyer, la pensée.
Après une science épuisée et lassée,
Une doctrine vient criant: qu’est-ce que c’est?
Et passe en redisant ce que l’autre disait.
Tous répètent — Pourquoi? pourquoi? — Nul ne devine
L’obscur secret de l’ombre infernale et divine.
— Comment sortir? comment entrer? Vouloir, savoir,
Ouvrent-ils les verrous de ce dédale noir?
Essayons de la mort! Essayons de la vie!
La volonté se sent par le destin suivie.
Si nous redescendions ou si nous remontions?
Quelle est l’issue, ô nuit? — Toutes les questions
Ont des portes d’énigme et des yeux de fantôme;
Et, tristes, et courbés sous le ténébreux dôme,
Les songeurs frissonnants cherchent les sombres clefs
Dans la sereine horreur des gouffres étoilés.
Et chacun d’eux, penché sur l’ombre où tout s’achève,
Jette à qui passera ces noirs conseils du rêve:
— La prière est sans but. L’être est un fait hagard.
Ne te mets pas en frais d’amour pour le hasard.

Chante ou maudis. Qu’importe au destin que tu l’aimes?
Les pas du genre humain sont-bordés de problèmes.
La vie est l’avenue effrayante des sphinx.
L’orgueil et-la science, yeux de paon, yeux de lynx,
Aboutissent au même avortement; et l’homme.
Tremble, et sent des démons dans tous les dieux qu’il nomme.
Prométhée a voulu sortir de cette nuit,
Éclairer l’homme au fond du mystère introduit;
Labourer, enseigner, civiliser, et faire
Du globe une vivante et radieuse sphère;

Tirer du roc sauvage et des halliers épais
Les éblouissements de l’ordre et de la paix,
Défricher la forêt monstrueuse de l’être,
Et faire vivre ceux que le destin fait naître;
Il a voulu sacrer la terre, ouvrir les yeux,
Mettre le pied de l’homme à l’échelle des cieux,
Soumettre la nature et que l’homme là mène,
Diminuer les dieux de la croissance humaine,
Couvrir les cœurs d’un pan de l’azur étoilé,
Faire du ver rampant jaillir l’esprit ailé,
Tendre une chaîne d’or entre l’arbre et la ville,
Au Tartare à jamais plonger la haine vile,
Lier le mal horrible au chaos épineux,
Et fonder, dans le cœur des hommes lumineux,
Afin que la raison l’achève et le bâtisse,
Un temple; et remplacer Atlas par la justice.

Les dieux l’ont puni. Seul, vaincu, saignant, amer,
Il est tombé, pleuré des filles de la mer;
Et moi, j’ai bu le sang de l’enchaîné terrible.

Tout est mort maintenant; et, dans l’ombre inflexible,
Sous le rayonnement des boucliers divins,
Les efforts des géants et des hommes sort vains.

Toutefois, tant qu’il reste un peu d’air; l’oiseau vole.
Orphée en me quittant m’a dit cette parole:

«Être ailé; l’aile est bonne et sainte. Souviens-toi
Qu’espérer est la force et qu’atteindre est la loi.
«L’obstacle est là? passants; il attend qu’on le brise.
«Ce qu’a fait Prométhée est fait; la flamme est prise;
«Elle est sur terre; elle est quelque part; l’homme peut
«La retrouver; grandir; vivre, exister, s’il veut!
«S’il sait penser, gravir, creuser; saisir, étreindre,
«S’il ne laisse jamais le saint flambeau s’éteindre,

«S’il se souvient qu’il peut, puisque l’idée a lui,
«Allumer quelque chose en lui de plus que lui,
«Qu’il doit lutter, que l’aube est une délivrance,
«Et qu’avoir le flambeau, c’est avoir l’espérance;
«Car deux sacrés rayons composent la clarté,
«Et l’un est la puissance, et l’autre est la beauté.”

— Ô vautour, dans la nuit sans fond qui nous assiège,
Où donc est la clarté dont tu parles? criai-je.

J’attendais la réponse, il avait disparu.

Il s’était effacé sans même avoir décru.
Ainsi vient, tourbillonne et fuit la feuille morte
Au vent que la nuit fait quand elle ouvre sa porte,
À l’heure où sur les monts le pâtre vient s’asseoir.
Et je vis au-dessus de ma tête un point noir.
Et ce point noir semblait une mouche dans l’ombre.

Comme lorsque la lune au fond des brouillards sombre,
Une vague lueur flottait; l’immensité
Blanchissait.

Je repris ma course, et je montai
Dans l’air que je fendais d’une aile prompte et sûre,
Vers le point qu’on voyait dans l’espace; à mesure
Que je montais, l’objet grossissait, et, pareil
Aux figures qu’on voit croître dans le sommeil,
Il prenait une forme étrange; et cette mouche
Était un aigle au vol tournoyant et farouche.
Le vide était moins sombre et le vent moins mauvais.
Chacun des noirs oiseaux vers qui je m’élevais,
Comme jadis le mage était loin de l’apôtre,
Volait seul dans sa zone et ne voyait pas l’autre.

L’aigle criait:
Qui donc est là, gouffre hideux?

Qui donc dit: il n’est pas! Qui donc dit: ils sont deux!

Qui donc dit: — Ils sont douze, ils sont cent, ils sont mille;
Ils emplissent l’azur comme un peuple une ville;
Et le ciel serait clair, limpide et radieux,
S’il n’était obscurci du noir essaim des dieux.
Ô vents, il est! Abîme! il est seul. Seul, vous dis-je!
Ténèbres, demandez aux soleils. Le prodige,
   gouffres, ce serait qu’il ne fût pas. Je suis
L’aigle éclairé d’en haut qui plane au fond des nuits;
Je suis la bête à qui ressemble le génie;
J’ai dans mon œil hagard la lueur infinie;
Je suis le grand voyant et le grand inquiet.
J’étais près de Moïse alors qu’il s’écriait:
— O soleil! nourricier du monde! anachorète!
Seul au fond du grand ciel comme en une retraite!
Père de l’aube, roi du jour; maître du feu,
Écarte tes rayons, que je puisse voir Dieu!
Au pied du Sina sombre, il dit: Qui m’accompagne?
J’ai dit: moi! — J’étais là, quand, montant la montagne,
Il s’enfonça, superbe et tremblant a la fois,
Dans le nuage plein de foudres et de voix;
J’ai suivi le prophète en cette ombre livide...
   sanglots de la mère auprès du berceau vide,
   chaîne de l’esclave, ô sceptre de Néron,
Toi, peste au souffle impur, toi, guerre au fier clairon,
Éperviers qui guettez la caille à sa sortie,
Broussailles de l’horreur, ronce, aconit, ortie,
   Fatalité, spectre à l’œil morne, au pas lent,
Mal, millepieds hideux sur l’homme fourmillant,
Chimère Obscurité qui traînes tes vertèbres,
Chouette Nuit, crapaud Chaos, taupes Ténèbres,
Vieux ciel noir du néant, suaire du ciel bleu,
Vous mentez, vous mentez, vous mentez, j’ai vu Dieu!
En ce moment l’oiseau suprême et solitaire
M’aperçut; fauve, il dit:

— Quel est ce ver de terre?
De quel droit voles-tu dans l’ombre où tu rampas?
Est-e toi qui disais tout à l’heure: il n’est pas?
Si c’est toi

Je n’osais parler

Si c’est toi, sache
Qu’il se montre surtout dans tout ce qui le cache.
Qu’es-tu? Réponds. Sais-tu le but, l’objet, la loi?
Sais-tu pourquoi le taon mord la vache, pourquoi
L’oiseau mange la mouche et le ver le concombre?
Dis? où sont les poumons du vent? Connais-tu l’ombre?

Es-tu dans le secret? Et, quand il a tonné,
Sais-tu ce qu’on a dit?.As-tu questionné
Les flots, quand vers l’écueil que bat leur inclémence
Ils viennent, commentant dans leur rumeur immense
Les actes inconnus de l’onde et de la nuit?
L’univers est un texte obscur; l’as-tu traduit?
Qu’est-ce que nous voulaient les aurores enfuies?
Pourquoi le larmoiement formidable des pluies?
Comment l’arbre tient-il dans le pépin du fruit?
As-tu questionné le Gibel et son bruit,
L’Atlas et son semoun, l’Alpe et son avalanche?
Connais-tu la Jungfrau, la grande vierge blanche?
T’a-t-elle dit le fond de la virginité?
As-tu rempli ta cruche au puits éternité,
Et ta stupidité puise-t-elle à l’abîme?
Parle. Ton ignorance, homme, est-elle la dîme
Que tu viens prélever, précédé du corbeau,
Sur la science étrange et morne du tombeau,
Brume où se sont perdus tant de mages célèbres?
T’es-tu penché pour boire a, même les ténèbres?
Et t’es-tu redressé sur le vide où tu vas,
Recrachant ta gorgée et criant: Dieu n’est pas!
En est-il ainsi, brute? En ce cas, je m’afflige

De te voir. C’est Dieu seul qui règne et vit, te dis-je,
Et Dieu seul qui survit. Fais-tu le froid, le chaud,
La nuit, l’aube? Est-ce toi qui fais hurler là-haut
L’orage maniaque, et toi qui le fais taire?
Es-tu le personnage immense du mystère?
Prouve-le-moi. Voyons, homme. Quand le torrent,
Cet ouvrier terrible, inquiet, dévorant,
Sciant les rocs, traînant les terres aux campagnes,
Se met à décharner dans l’ombre les montagnes,.
Empêche-le donc! dis à l’océan à bas!
Est-ce toi qui, prenant les lions, les courbas
Si bien qu’on ne sait plus, dans leurs fuites funèbres,
Si ce sont des lions ou si ce sont des zèbres!
Es-tu de ceux qui vont dans l’inconnu sans-voir,
Qui se heurtent la nuit à l’immense mur noir,
Et qui, battant l’obstacle avec leurs sombres: ailes,
Glissent sans fin le long, des parois éternelles?
Sors-tu de quelque grotte affreuse, aux âpres flancs,
Où ton œil est resté fixe quatre mille ans,
Comme Satan dans l’ombre où Dieu le fit descendre?
As-tu l’esprit qu’avait la payenne Cassandre
Lorsqu’elle allait voyant d’avance Ajax brigand,
Comptant les grands palais en flamme, et distinguant
Dans la profonde nuit le glaive nu d’Egysthe?
Parle. Es-tu plein du gouffre? Es-tu le trismégiste,
Marches-tu de plain-pied avec les cieux, disant

Aux douze heures: venez me parler, à présent
Que vous voilà sur terre, ayant en vous chacune
La gaîté du soleil ou l’horreur de la lune?
As-tu vécu parmi les bêtes dans les bois,
Le tigre t’indiquant la source, et disant: bois!
Et, lorsque tu songeais la face contre terre,
Un ange, qu’adoraient le lynx et la panthère,
T’a-t-il jeté, de l’ombre écartant les rideaux,
Quelque effrayant manteau d’étoiles sur le dos?
Pour parler de la sorte, es-tu celui qui lie

Et qui délie? As-tu le double esprit d'Elie?
Qu'es-tu? Dis-moi ton nom. Les prophètes jadis,
À l'heure où, sur les monts par la brume engourdis;
La large lune d'or surgissait comme un dôme,
Faisaient sur l'horizon des gestes de fantôme,
Dialoguaient avec les vents, et grands, et seuls,
Ils secouaient les nuits ainsi que des linceuls;
Car le désert, prenant de graves attitudes,
Jadis parlait a l'homme, et l'homme aux solitudes;
La mer ouvrant son gouffre et l'aigle ouvrant son bec
Entendaient les devins, dans Endor, dans Balbeck,
Faire des questions aux ténèbres, et l'ombre
Donner aux noirs devins l'explication sombre.
Es-tu de ceux-la? Non! Tu serais le dernier
Que tu ne serais pas si fou de le nier.

Serais-tu par hasard, ô parleur dérisoire,
Un des grands mécontents de l'immensité noire?
Trouves-tu que les cieux sacrés vont de travers?
Peut-être étais-tu là quand Dieu fit l'univers?.
Et sans doute, en ce cas, ta peine fut cruelle
De voir que ce maçon n'avait pas de truelle,
Et qu'il bâtissait l'ombre et l'azur et le ciel,
Et l'être universel et l'être partiel,
Et l'étendue où fuit le pâle météore,
Qu'il bâtissait le temps, qu'il bâtissait l'aurore,
Qu'il bâtissait le jour que l'aube épanouit,
Les vastes firmaments bleus jusque dans la nuit,
Et les dômes profonds où vole la tempête,
Sans monter à l'échelle, une auge sur la tête!
Es-tu quelque être à qui la clarté dit: Va-t-en!
Sorti du grand flanc sombre et triste de Satan?
Non! tu n'es qu'un passant frêle et vain. Je convie
Ton esprit à songer que Dieu seul est la vie;
Tout le reste est la mort; et je l'affirme en toi
À l'homme, ce buveur de la coupe d'effroi,
Ce pâle choisisseur de redoutables routes,

Cet aveugle qui guette: et ce sourd aux écoutes!
Viens-tu braver ce Dieu que l'ombre a combattu?

Allons, parle, as-tu vu Léviathan? L'as-tu
Surpris dans l'antre où-l'eau, baigne les granits chauves,
Ou dans quelque forêt pleine de-lueurs fauves?
Peux-tu dire: j'ai vu Léviathan! voici
Comment il est! comment il rampe! il nage ainsi!
As-tu lu seulement ce qu'en dit Job? Non, certes!
Écoute alors:

«, Son corps, couvert de lames vertes,
Semble un mouvant amas de boucliers d'airain.
Son sommeil fait le bruit d'un torrent souterrain.
Quand il a soif, sa gueule, ouverte, vaste, horrible,
Boit tout un fleuve avec un aboîment terrible."

Voilà ce que dit Job, c'est effroyable, eh bien,
Moi qui l'ai vu je dis: ce que dit Job n'est rien.
Léviathan! Des poils, des crêtes, des mâchoires;
Ailes qui sont des bras, pieds qui, sont des nageoires,
Des griffes qu'on prendrait pour des herbes, des nœuds,
Mille antennes qui font un branchage épineux,
Un nombril vert; pareil à là mer qui se creuse,
C'est l'ombre faite monstre, et qui vit; chose affreuse!
Je ne sais quoi de noir et de prodigieux
Qui mord avec-des dents, qui voit avec des yeux!
La façon dont il met ses pieds l'un devant l'autre
Est horrible; le flot rugit quand, il s'y vautre;
Ainsi qu'un vase au feu sur son front la mer bout;
Il sème en se traînant ses écailles partout
Comme un cygne sa plume au moment de la mue
La foudre tomberait sur lui sans qu'il remue.
Il est l'horreur; il est l'hydre dont tout frémit;
Et quand. Léviathan crache, Satan vomit.
Que cet être affreux soit dans le monde où nous sommes
Et puisse regarder le ciel comme les hommes,

Cela trouble l’esprit et confond la raison.
Lorsqu’il passe la nuit derrière l’horizon,
La lueur de ses yeux semble l’aube; la grève
Blanchit; le voyageur dit: l’aurore se lève,
Et ne se doute pas, dans sa tranquillité,
Que c’est Léviathan qui fait cette-clarté.
Passant paisible, il songe à l’aube douce et blonde,
À la rosée, aux fleurs... Quelle terreur profonde,
Quel frisson si dans l’ombre il pouvait soudain voir
Cette forme inouïe et sombre se mouvoir!

Parfois Léviathan redescend vers le gouffre,
Et les masques ont peur au fond du lac de soufre,
Et l’enfer tremble avec son geôlier pâlissant
Quand, là-haut, sur leurs fronts, tout a coup surgissant,
Sa tête, comme un mont qui remuerait sa cime,
Se dresse épouvantable au rebord de l’abîme.

Toi qui viens dans mon ombre, iras-tu le chercher
Dans sa grande herbe verte, ou bien sous son rocher?
Iras-tu le lier de cordes sous le ventre,
Et le traîneras-tu, hideux, hors de son antre,
Pour faire dans ta cour, en plein soleil, devant
Cet être, objet nocturne, incroyable et vivant
De tant de visions et de tant d’épouvantes,
Attrouper les enfants et rire les servantes!
Eh bien! dans sa main songe à cela, vil roseau,
Dieu prend Léviathan comme on prend un oiseau!
L’aigle reprit

— Moïse était seul sous la nue;
Au fond resplendissait une face inconnue,
Et moi, je regardai; la face, c’était Dieu.
Je l’ai vu!.Je l’annonce à vous qui vivez peu,
J’ai vu l’effrayant Dieu de l’éternité sombre!
Dieu! dernier jour du temps! dernier chiffre du nombre!
Voici ce que l’esprit apprend sur la hauteur:

Avant la créature était le créateur;
Le temps sans fin était avant le temps qui passe;
Avant le monde immense était l’immense, espace;
Avant tout ce qui parle était ce qui se tait;
Avant tout ce qui vit le possible existait;
L’infini sans figure au fond de tout séjourne.
Au-dessus du ciel bleu qui remue et qui tourne,
Où les chars des soleils vont, viennent et s’en vont,
Est le ciel immobile, éternel et profond.
Là, vit Dieu. La durée, ainsi qu’une couleuvre,
Se roule et se déroule autour de lui. Son œuvre,
C’est le monde; il la fait; l’œuvre faite, il s’endort.
Alors partout s’épand comme une nuit de mort
Où les créations flottent abandonnées;
Après avoir dormi des millions d’années,
L’être incommensurable à qui rien n’est pareil,
Dont l’œil en s’entr’ouvrant luit comme le soleil,
Se réveille au milieu d’une extase profonde
Et de son premier souffle il crée un nouveau monde,

Création splendide; univers lumineux,.
Où l’atome étincelle, où se croisent des feux,
Clair, vivant, traversé par des astres sans nombre,
Qui tourbillonne autour de sa bouche dans l’ombre.
Et puis il se rendort, et ce monde s’en va.
Un monde évanoui, qu’importe à Jéhovah?
Il est, lui seul existe, et l’homme est un fantôme.
Pas plus que le soleil ne s’occupe du chaume
Après la moisson faite et les épis coupes,
L’être ne prend souci des mondes dissipés.
Il est. Cela suffit. Sa plénitude ignore.
La forme fuit, le son neurt dans l’onde sonore,
Ce qui s’éteint s’éteint, ce qui change,est changé.
Il dit: je suis c’est tout. C’est en bas qu’on dit: j’ai!
L’ombre croit posséder, d’un vain songe animée,
Et tient des biens de endre en des doigts de fumée.
Dieu-n’a rien, étant tout. Ah! malheur à-celui

Qui doute: Je vous dis que sa face m’a lui
Et que j’ai vu son œil sombre dans les tonnerres.
Les patriarches blancs et huit fois centenaires
Lui parlaient autrefois. C’est-lui! C’est le vivant.
C’est dans la grande nuit le grand soleil levant.

Rien n’existe que Dieu.

Tout le craint, tout le nomme.
La pierre du tombeau souffle sur l’homme, et l’homme
S’évanouit; ses jours n’ont pas de lendemain
Il marche quelques pas-dans un obscur chemin,
Puis son pied se dissipe et sa route s’efface;
Il meurt, et tout est mort Quoi qu’il tente ou qu’il fasse,
Il possède l’éclair, le vent, l’instant, le lieu;
Il est le rêve, et vit le temps de dire adieu.
Fantômes! vous flottez sur les heures obscures
Dans ce monde ou l’on voit passer quelques figures!
Hommes, qu’êtes-vous donc? Des visages pensifs.
Le mal descend de, vous comme le froid des ifs.
Vos desseins sont des puits d’iniquité; vous êtes
Des antres où le vie et le crime ont leurs fêtes;
Vos maisons et vos seuils et vos toits et vos murs
Portent plus de forfaits qu’un cep de raisins mûrs
Vous incrustez d’or fin vos lits de bois d’érable;
Vous tordez les haillons du pauvre misérable
Et votre pourpre est faite avec le sang qui sort;
Vous changez-en hochet le redoutable sort;

Et vous jouez aux dés, riant, perdant des sommes,
Pendant que «dans sa nuit le destin joue aux hommes;
Vos villes sont des bois; on vole, on fraude, on vend;
L’ignorant est le pain que mange le savant;
Et l’homme vautour tient l’homme taupe en sa serre,
Et l’ânier Intérêt fouette l’âne Misère;
Vous souffrez à toute heure et de tous les côtés.
À quoi bon? étant tous au néant emportés.

Vous pensez. Croyez-vous? Vos crânes sont des voûtes
Sans lampes, d'où les pleurs suintent à larges gouttes.
Vous priez. Qui? comment? pourquoi? Vous ne savez.
Vous aimez. O nuit sombre! ô cieux en vain rêvés!
Vos sens sont un fumier dont votre amour s'arrange,
Et dans votre baiser le porc se mêle à l'ange.
Et Satan a tant fait que votre abaissement
Est noirceur sur la terre et tache au firmament.

Donc il fit tout, ce Dieu! les cieux, les monts, les bêtes,
Tout, même votre bruit et l'ombre que vous faites;
Donc il ouvrit la main, le semeur éternel,
Et sema dans l'espace à tous les vents du ciel
Les étoiles, poussière ardente, cendre ignée,
Tout ce que vous voyez la nuit; cette poignée
De graines d'or, jetée au sillon de clarté,
Tombe dans l'infini pendant l'éternité.

Parfois, quand Dieu regarde, il a honte de l'homme;
Et les tigres des bois et les césars de Rome,
Les rois portant au front Mané Thécel Pharès,
Réverbèrent, parmi les vivants effarés,
Le vague flamboiement de sa colère, immense.

Hommes, sachez ceci, spectres pleins de démence
Il est, quand il lui plaît, le Dieu farouche. Il met
La marque de sa foudre à tout hautain sommet;
Lorsqu'il s'éveille, il est terrible; il frappe, il venge.
Il souffle sur la endre, il crache sur la fange;
Il livre Tyr et Suze aux onagres rayés;
Il poursuit, à travers les siècles effrayés,
Ainsi qu'on traque un loup de repaire en repaire,
Vingt générations pour le crime du père.
O passants de la nuit, marcheurs des noirs sentiers,
Hommes, larves sans nom, qui mourez tout entiers,
Dieu montre brusquement sa face à qui l'outrage;
Et quand vous l'insultez dans votre folle rage,

Comme le grand lion surgit dans la forêt,
Adonaï s’efface et Sabaoth paraît!
Saint, saint, saint, le seigneur mon Dieu! Silence, abîmes!

Et l’aigle s’enfonça dans les brumes sublimes
Pareil au grain de feu tombé de l’encensoir.

VI

Et je vis au-dessus de ma tête un point noir;
Et ce point noir semblait une mouche dans l’ombre.
J’y volai
L’âpre nuit mourait, mais sa pénombre
Mourait dans un jour gris qu’on voyait poindre aux cieux.

Et cette mouche était un griffon monstrueux
Qui faisait trembler l’ombre avec son-aile énorme.

Et le griffon cria:
Que l’aigle d’en bas dorme!
Je veille: Dieu plus haut que l’aigle m’emporta.
Tu viens du Sinaï, je viens du Golgotha;
Aigle, la foudre emplit ton oe il visionnaire
Moi, j’ai vu le gibet plus grand que le tonnerre!
Quand les bourreaux dressaient la croix, j’étais dessus;
J’ai frissonné sur l’arbre où l’on cloua Jésus;
J’ai vu cette agonie immense et solennelle;
Marc a pris pour l’écrire une plume à mon aile;
J’ai regardé Jésus saigner et s’assoupir;
Je sais tout; je suis plein de son dernier soupir.
Je sème sa parole au souffle de la bise.
Aigle, Christ en sait plus que Moïse, Moïse
N’ayant que les rayons, et Christ ayant les clous.
Non, Dieu n’est pas vengeur! non, Dieu n’est pas jaloux!
Non, Dieu ne s’endort pas, portant toute la voûte!
Non, l’homme ne meurt pas tout entier.

Aigle, écoute:
Dieu, le monde étant fait, reconnut que ela
N’était-rien, puisque rien n’y disait: me voilà;
Puisque rien n’y pensait et-n’y parlait de sorte
Que là création en-naissant était morte;
Or l’incréé voulut-engendrer l’immortel.

Il fit l’âme, et la mit dans l’homme, son autel.
L’homme seul reçut l’âme en l’univers visible.
Dieu créa pour Adam ce faîte inacessible.
Au-dessous dé l’homme, âme, intelligence, esprit,
La matière-roula dans la pierre, fleurit

Dans la plante, et hurla dans la bête, sans vivre.
Voyant qu’il avait seul une âme, Adam fut ivre;
Il voulut la science et déroba le fruit.
C’est pourquoi Dieu jeta les hommes dans la nuit.
Et depuis ce jour-là, l’urne amère est remplie.
Sous la faute d’Adam tout le genre humain plie.
Le labeur est ingrat et le sillon est dur;
L’homme naît mauvais, triste, inexorable, impur;
L’enfantement du mal déchire le flanc d’Eve.
La guerre et l’échafaud, ces deux tranchants du glaive,
Vont fauchant l’ignorant, le faible et l’innocent;
Le fratricide affreux, qui croit le père absent,
Fait peur aux cieux avec le sang qu’on lui voit boire;
Hélas! dans la forêt de l’humanité noire,
Un éternel Caïn tue à jamais Abel.
L’homme adore Moloch, Dagon, Teutatès, Bel;
Et sur les crimes rois les monstres dieux flamboient.
Les vices, meute infâme, autour de l’âme aboient.
Toute l’humanité tinte comme un beffroi.
Partout l’horreur, le râle et le rire, et l’effroi.
Toute bouche est ulcère et tout faîte est cratère.
Un bruit si monstrueux sort de toute la terre
Que la nuit, veuve en deuil, dit au jour qui rougit:
C’est le tigre qui parle ou l’homme qui rugit!
Satan à l’entour vole et plane, oiseau de proie
Des âmes. La douleur formidable est sa joie.

Et plein de feux, de pleurs, de tourments éperdus,
Et de bustes vivants dans les flammes tordus,
Pleins de cris qui s’en vont au bronze de la voûte
Et que la surdité de l’impossible écoute,

Coupole de l’abîme ayant pour pendentifs
D’affreux écroulements d’êtres noirs et plaintifs,
Geôle sans fond, sans jour, sans espoir, sous la foule
Des vivants, sous ce tas de vanité qui roule,
Sous le flot des passants de la vie et du bruit,
Sous le penseur, captif du rêve qu’il construit,
Sous les guerriers casqués et sous les femmes nues,
Sous les larges festins qui chantent jusqu’aux nues,
Sous tout ce qui s’allume et tout e qui s’éteint,
Sous tous les pas de l’homme, orgueil, science, instinct,
Sous tout être qui marche, ou chancelle, ou trébuche,
L’enfer éternel guette et s’ouvre, vaste embûche.

Noir sillon composé de tous les vils limons,
Qui reçoit des esprits et qui rend des démons,
Qui produit des moissons de spectres, et des gerbes
De monstres flamboyants, lugubres et superbes,
D’où sort tout ce qui tue, où croît tout ce qui ment,
Et qui tressaille, ému d’un long frémissement,
Chaque fois qu’il entend l’affreux-cri de la chute,
Chaque fois qu’en sa nuit descend, essaim qui lutte,
Quelque tourbillon sombre et triste où l’âme luit,
Et qu’il voit au-dessus de lui, noire et-sans bruit,
S’ouvrir l’immense main de-son semeur sinistre!
Mais le livre de vie est là, divin registre,
L’homme, c’est l’âme; l’homme est l’hôte d’un rayon,
Et la matière seule est la damnation.
Dieu pense, et la douleur lentement le désarme.
Dieu s’appelle pardon, l’homme se nomme larme;
Dieu créa la pitié le: jour où l’homme est né.
Devant lés actions de l’homme infortuné
Souvent, la, pureté des firmaments s’indigne;
Souvent l’astre aux yeux d’aigle et l’ange au vol de cygne
S’étonnent de ette ombre et de cette noirceur;
Dieu, voyant l’homme fourbe, implacable, oppresseur,
Est triste; et quand, sortant de la nuit, la Colère
Apparaît, face sombre et que la foudre éclaire,

Rappelant au Seigneur ce que l’homme lui doit,
Prête à maudire, il met sur cette bouche un doigt.
Ce doigt mystérieux-et doux, c’est la clémence.

Le pardon dit tout bas à l’homme: recommence!
Redeviens pur. Remonte à ta source. Essayons
Rentre au creuset: Ton Dieu t’offre dans les rayons,:
Pour refaire ton âme obscurcie et difforme,
Le cercueil, ce berceau de la naissance énorme.

Clémence, c’est le fond de Dieu. Dieu boit le fiel.
Dieu ne vengé pas Dieu devant l’azur-du ciel.
Il ne revomit rien sur l’homme. Secourable,
Tendre, il chasse du pied le mal, ce misérable:
Dieu, que l’homme coupable appelait, s’est penché,
Et, voyant l’univers sanglant; mort, desséché;
Et, songeant, pour lui-même et pour lui seul sévère,
Que pour sauver un monde il suffit d’un calvaire,
Il a dit: Va, mon fils! Et son fils est allé.

Rédemption! mystère! Ô grand Christ étoilé!
Soif du crucifié, d’amertume assouvie!
Linceul dont tous les-plis font tomber de la vie!
Ô gibet qui bénit Judas et Barabbas!
Qui verse à flots la sève et l’espérance en bas,

Croix, à tous les esprits, arbre, à toutes les plantes!
Sublime embrassement des grandes mains sanglantes!
Oeil mourant de Jésus dont l’éternité luit!
   pardon! ô pitié de l’azur pour la nuit!
Paix céleste qui sort de toutes les clémences!
   mont mystérieux des oliviers immenses!
Après le créateur, le sauveur s’est montré..
Le sauveur a veillé pour tous les yeux, pleuré
Pour tous les pleurs, saigné pour toutes les blessures.
Les routes des vivants, hélas! ne sont pas sûres,
Mais Christ, sur le poteau du fatal carrefour,

Montre d’un bras la nuit et de l’autre le jour!

Après lui sont venus les apôtres, ces têtes
Flamboyantes; les saints; martyrs jetés aux bêtes,
Vierges louant Jésus dans le noir tombereau,
Femmes grosses chantant pendant que le bourreau,
Effroyable, arrachait leurs enfants de leurs ventres,
Et les pères des bois et les docteurs des antres,
Et les voix des déserts et des cloîtres, criant
À l’homme en sa nuit froide: Orient! Orient!
Oh! vous l’avez cherché sans l’entrevoir, sibylles,
Ce Dieu mystérieux des azurs immobiles!
Filles des visions, toi, sous l’arche d’un pont,
Daphné; toi, guettant l’œuf que la chouette pond,
Albunée, et brûlant une torche de cire;
Toi, celle de Phrygie, épouvante d’Ancyre,
Parlant à l’astre et, pâle, écoutant s’il répond;
Celle d’Imbrasia; celle de l’Hellespont
Qui se dresse déesse et qui retombe hyène;
Toi, Tiburtine; et toi, la rauque Libyenne,
Criant: Treize! essayant la loi du nombre impair;
Toi dont le regard fixe inquiétait Vesper,
Larve d’Endor; et toi, les dents blanches d’écume,
Les deux seins nus, ô folle effrayante de Cume;
Chaldéenne, filant un invisible fil;
Sardique a l’œil de chèvre, au tragique profil;
Toi, maigre et toute nue au soleil, Érythrée,
D’azur et de lumière et d’horreur pénétrée;
Toi, Persique, habitant un sépulcre détruit,
face à qui parlaient les passants de la nuit
Et les échevelés qui se penchent dans l’ombre
Toi, mangeant du cresson dans ta fontaine sombre,
Delphique; âpres esprits, toutes, vous eûtes beau
Hurler, frapper le vent, remuer le tombeau,

Rouler vos fauves yeux dans la profondeur noire,
Nulle de vous n’a vu clairement dans sa gloire

Ce grand Dieu du pardon sur la terre levé.
Sainte-Thérèse, avec un soupir, l’a trouvé.
Le pardon est plus grand que Caïn, et le couvre.
La clémence de Dieu de tous les côtés s’ouvre,
Et c’est là le seul piège où l’on tombe toujours.
La langue des muets et l’oreille des sourds,
C’est le pardon: La grâce aide clin s’abandonne.
C’est ce qui manque à tous et ce qu’à, tous Dieu donne.
Père, il sourit aux fils clin lui, Montrent le poing.
Dieu serait le puni s’il ne pardonnait point:
Son ciél est un regard clément. Toutes les grâces
Qu’il fait à chaque instant, s’envolent, jamais lasses,
Se dispersent au loin dans tous les univers,
Et, du faible au méchant, du farouche au pervers,
Errent, abeilles d’or, et butinent les âmes,
Puis reviennent, mêlant baumes, encens, dictames,
Rapportant les parfums extraits des cœurs maudits,
Emplir du miel pardon la ruche paradis.
Clémence! mot formé de toutes les étoiles!
Dieu! ciel de tous les yeux! port de toutes les voiles!
Jamais, brume ou tempête, et quel que soit le vent,
L’asile n’est fermé tant que l’homme est vivant;
Toute lèvre est reçue au céleste ciboire; .
Le sang du sauveur coule et toute âme y peut boire;
Si ténébreux que soit l’homme qui va partir,
À l’heure de la mort un cri de repentir,
Un appel de la foi que le tombeau recrée,
Un regard attendri vers la lueur sacrée,
Vers ce qu’on insultait et ce qu’on dénigrait,
Un sanglot, moins encore, un soupir, un regret
De l’âme détestant sa tache originelle,
Suffit pour qu’elle échappe à la peine éternelle,
À l’enfer qui, voyant ce que les hommes font,
Tord les chaînes sans fin dans les gouffres sans fond.
Qui que fil sois, esquif, tourne vers Dieu ta proue.
Le châtiment sans terme et sans espoir écroue,
Sous les éternités plus lourdes que les monts,

Les démons seuls et ceux qui deviennent démons.
Pour que la peine tombe immuable et tardive,
Il faut du dernier cri l'horrible récidive;
Dans l'éternité sombre, Achab, Caligula,
Borgia qu'entre tous la tiare étoila,
Philippe deux, Timour, Phalaris, Louis onze,
Néron, sont au carcan sur des trônes de bronze.

Pourquoi? parce qu'ils ont dit non! au grand moment,
Que leur âme est sortie en un vomissement!
L'homme n'a qu'à pleurer pour retrouver son père.
Le malheur lui dit: crois. La mort lui crie: espère!
Qu'il se repente, il tient la clef d'un sort meilleur.
Dieu lui remplace, après l'épreuve et la douleur,
Le paradis des fleurs par l'éden des étoiles.
Ève, à ta nudité Marie offre ses voiles;
L'ange au glaive de feu rappelle Adam proscrit;
L'âme arrive portant la croix de Jésus-Christ;
L'éternel pres de lui fait asseoir l'immortelle.
Aigle, la sainteté de l'âme humaine est telle
Qu'au fond du ciel suprême où la clarté sourit,
Où le Père et le Fils se mêlent dans l'Esprit,
Il semble que l'azur égalise et confonde
Jésus, l'âme de l'homme, et Dieu, l'âme du monde!
Et, l'œil au firmament, ne regardant plus rien,
Comme ivre de rayons, le monstre-aérien,
Lion par la crinière et l'ongle, aigle par l'aile;
Chanta:
Paix, vie et gloire à la voûte éternelle!
Il est le véritable! Il vit. Il est présent.
Comme il est l'invisible, il est l'éblouissant;
Il a créé d'un mot la chose et le mystère,
Tout ce qu'on peut nommer et tout ce qu'il faut taire.
Quand l'homme juste meurt, il lui ferme les yeux;
Le beau jardin Azur est plein d'esprits joyeux;
Ils entrent à toute heure et par toutes les portes;
Dieu fait évanouir les gonds des villes fortes;

Entre ses doigts distraits il tord le pâle éclair;
Le grand serpent lui semble un cheveu dans la mer.
Il est le grand poete, il est le grand prophète.
Il est la base, il est le centre, il est le faîte;
Il est celui qui songe, il est celui qui voit;
Il connaît l’avenir auquel tout homme a droit,
L’Éden soleil, l’abîme et ses chambres funèbres.
Ceux qui marchent sans lui s’en vont dans les ténèbres.
Il ordonne à la nuit d’envelopper le jour.
Il met la mort, archer, au créneau de la tour.
Les cèdres du Liban, pareils à de vieux prêtres,
Parlent de lui tout bas; l’ombre de tous les êtres
S’incline devant lui les matins et les soirs.
Les vierges à ses pieds, dans de purs encensoirs,
Font brûler un parfum composé des prières
De tous ceux que le monde appelle ses lumières,
De tous les saints qui sont sur terre et dans le ciel;
Cette blanche fumée enveloppe l’autel,
Et l’Incréé, caché sous des voiles de flammes,
Se penche, respirant la douce odeur des âmes.
Les colonnes des cieux s’étonnent devant lui;
Ces hauts piliers, chargés de ce dôme inouï,
Frissonnent éperdus à son souffle, et ressemblent
À leur propre reflet dans des ondes qui tremblent.
Ô Dieu! roi! père! asile! espoir du criminel!
Éternel laboureur! moissonneur éternel!
Maître à la première heure et juge à la dernière!
C’est lui qui fit le monde avec de la lumière!
Le firmament est clair de sa sérénité.
Par moments, dans l’azur splendide et redouté,
Ô mystère! il se fait des silences d’une heure;
Personne en haut ne chante et nul en bas ne pleure;
L’ange abaisse, pensif, son clairon éclatant;
Dieu médite; le ciel rêve; l’enfer attend.
Et c’est ce mot qui sort de l’ombre: Je pardonne.

Le griffon s’effaça, comme l’éclair qui tonne, Dans une brume où rien ne semblait se mouvoir.

VII

Et je vis au-dessus de ma tête un point noir;
Et ce point noir semblait une mouche dans l’ombre.

La nuit derrière moi, comme un hideux décombre,
Fuyait, et vers le point lointain, vague et vivant,
Je volai, m’enfonçant de plus en plus avant
Dans le bleu firmament doré d’une aube étrange;
Et cette mouche était un ange.
Et cet archange,
Immense, déployant sur mon front qui rêvait,
Deux ailes, l’une blanche et l’autre noire, avait
L’œil fixe, et sur son front le jour semblait éclore;
Et l’aile blanche allait se fondre dans l’aurore,
Et l’aile noire allait se perdre dans la nuit.

Dans ce ciel où mon vol profond m’avait conduit,
Mer où notre ciel noir semblait une presqu’île,
L’ange apparaissait fier, heureux, puissant, tranquille;

Si la nuit descendait et si le jour montait,
Il ne le savait pas; on eût dit qu’il était
À jamais immobile; ayant trouvé la sphère
Où l’extase n’a plus de mouvement à faire,
Et qu’il était créé, lui l’être grand et pur,
Pour ne rien regarder qui ne fût pas l’azur;
Il se tenait debout sans baisser la prunelle,
Comme s’il ne voyait qu’une chose éternelle.

Et, sentant que vers lui d’en bas quelqu’un venait,
— Qu’es-tu? dit l’ange, beau comme l’astre qui naît,
Et sans tourner vers moi ses yeux ni sa figure;
Et je lui dis: — O front voisin de l’aube pure,
Je suis l’être à qui plaît la tombe dans l’exil.
L’ange me regarda. — Demeure, me dit-il.

Puis, et je vis alors qu'il tenait une palme,
Il se mit à parler au gouffre:

— L'Être est calme.
Dieu vit. Le Oui du jour et le Non de la nuit
Sont deux larves qu'un souffle obscur forme et détruit;
Le mot noir est un grain de cendre dans la brume,
O gouffre, et le mot blanc est un flocon d'écume;
L'infini ne sait point ce qu'on murmure en bas;
Moi, j'écoute et j'entends. Shiva dit: — Dieu n'est pas,
Et du crime de tout personne n'est coupable.
Hermès dit: — L'invisible erre dans l'impalpable.
— Deux dieux, dit Zoroastre. Un désordre normal.
L'être, n'est le combat du bien contre le mal. —
Orphée au chant profond dit: — Les dieux semblent être;
Mais quand on les contemple, on les voit disparaître;
Tant la Fatalité, larve sans front, sans yeux,
Sans cœur, étreint la terre et l'enfer et les cieux.
Moïse dit: — Il n'est qu'un Dieu. Dieu crée et venge.
L'homme est une ombre, et meurt. — Et Jésus au front d'ange
Dit: — Dieu pardonne. Il rend les bons au paradis.
L'âme humaine survit à l'homme. — Et moi, je dis,
— Car, sur chaque échelon de l'échelle où meurt l'ombre,
Le verbe lumineux succède au verbe sombre;
On monte à la parole après le bégaiement
Je dis:

Dieu, c'est le vrai. Ni vengeur, ni clément;
Il est juste. Venger l'affront, c'est le connaître,
Et c'est le mériter. Être clément, c'est être
Injuste pour tous eux qu'on ne pardonne pas.
Quand tu vis Sabaoth, aigle, tu te trompas.
Griffon, qui sur ton aile as porté l'évangile,
Ecoute. Écoutez tous! Zoroastre est d'argile;
Shiva, qui n'est qu'un sage et que l'Inde croit dieu,
Est un morceau de terre; Orphée au regard bleu
A senti son squelette au sépulcre descendre;

Et le voleur du feu, Prométhée, est de cendre;
Moïse n’est pas près du Seigneur Jésus-Christ
N’est pas près du Seigneur; nul prophète n’écrit
Près de Dieu; nul archange ailé, nul personnage,
Nul saint: l’Eternité n’a pas de voisinage.
Écoutez! Gravissez le réel pas à pas.
Dieu n’est point le pêcheur qui jette des appâts
Au pauvre être fuyant que l’appétit assiège;
Et son bonheur n’est pas de prendre l’homme au piège.

Pas d’enfer éternel. Quoi, l’être aux instants courts,
Quoi, le vivant rapide enchaîné pour toujours!
Quoi, des illusions, des erreurs, des risées,
Quoi, des fautes d’un jour et d’une ombre, écrasées
Par ce roc immobile et monstrueux, jamais!
Dieu se faisant bourreau du haut des clairs sommets!
Dieu, pire que Shylock, le vil rogneur de piastres!
L’Incréé, couronné de comètes et d’astres,
Tenaillant dans sa cave un moucheron puni!
La grandeur s’acharnant aux petits! L’infini
Donnant la question à l’insecte qui pleure!
L’Éternité tordant les minutes de l’heure!
Quoi! ce juge aurait soif, quoi! ce père aurait faim
De l’angoisse sans borne et du-tourment sans fin!
Il aurait pour travail la souffrance, et pour joie
De faire écarteler, dans l’enfer qui flamboie,
L’homme, atome éperdu, sanglant, épouvanté,
Aux quatre vents de l’ombre et de l’immensité!
Chassez ce songe, vous, fantômes, qui le faites!
Quoi! ces mondes créés dans des robes de fêtes,
Quoi! la vie et le jour, l’éther, le firmament,
L’azur, l’océan perle et l’astre diamant,:
Cette resplendissante et profonde nature,
Ne seraient qu’une chambre énorme de torture!

Et dans les vastes cieux la constellation,
Du gouffre émerveillé sublime vision,

Mêlant l’étoile bleue et blanche au soleil rouge,
Éclatante, serait la chandelle du bouge!
Que quelqu’un ait rêvé cela, c’est mon ennui.

Et, comme les damnés, hier, demain, aujourd’hui,
Toujours, brûlent au feu qui ne doit pas s’éteindre;
Et, comme ce serait blâmer. Dieu que les plaindre;
Ce serait supposer qu’il peut être meilleur;
En outre, comme, étant larme, angoisse et douleur,
La pitié ferait tache au paradis; et, comme
Dieu ne doit rien cacher de sa justice a l’homme,
À l’âme, à l’ange, aux saints, et que l’éternel feu,
L’enfer, est un côté de la vertu de Dieu;
Comme, alors, les élus devant voir la géhenne,
Il faut qu’elle les charme, et que pour eux la peine
Se résolve en bonheur, et qu’avec son tourment
L’enfer soit pour le”ciel un assaisonnement,
Et que l’ange se plaise au sanglot qui s’élève;
Le paradis n’est plus qu’un balcon de la Grève,
Où l’on vient voir, avec un sourire serein,
Brûler la Brinvilliers et rouer vif Mandrin,
Où l’on vient savourer l’agonie âpre et lente,
Et voir l’effet que font l’huile et la poix bouillante
Sur Caïn, et Judas hurler, et Lucifer
Rugir à chaque coup de la barre de fer!
Il se tut; puis rouvrit ses deux lèvres vermeilles
D’où les mots s’envolaient ainsi qûe des abeilles,
Comme s’ouvre la ruche après que l’aube a lui
Personne n’est puni pour la faute d’autrui.
D’ailleurs, hommes, le fruit est fait, pour qu’on le cueille.

Le livre monde est fait pour qu’on tourne la feuille.
Savoir, c’est vivre; et vivre est le droit. Adorer,
C’est connaître; et la porte aime à voir l’âme entrer.
‘Quelle que soit la lutte ou la peine ou l’épreuve,
Chaque fois que l’homme, humble et que le doute abreuve,
Saisit un fait nouveau dans l’ombre, il a goûté

De Dieu, de la lumière et de l’éternité.

C’est bien. C’est vers le jour une marche gagnée.
À grands coups de science, à grands coups de cognée,
Les vivants ont raison, dans leur obscurité,
D’ébaucher la statue immense Vérité.
L’homme est le noir sculpteur, le mystère est le marbre.
Faites. Ève a raison de se dresser vers l’arbre;
Prométhée a raison, Galilée a raison;
Colomb, qui cueille un monde au fond de l’horizon,
Fait bien; Dante envahit la nuit cercle par cercle;
Spinosa du néant lève l’affreux couvercle;
Fulton dompte la mer que Xercès révolta;
Galvani forge et mêle, à côté de Volta,
Les fluides, force, âme, aimants, métaux, mercures;
Mesmer tressaillant touche aux frontières obscures;
C’est ton droit, homme. Eschyle et Shakespeare ont raison,
Ô terre, d’étoiler ton plafond de prison.
Roemer arrête au vol la lumière ravie;
Guttenberg fait du jour, de l’amour, de la vie
Avec le plomb fondu du vieux supplice humain;
Pythagore soumet l’ombre a son examen;
Papin attelle à l’homme, à la terre charmée,
À l’âme; au char de feu, le noir cheval fumée;
Halley de la comète est l’éclatant héraut;
Leibniz offre à l’esprit l’évasion d’en haut,
Et, tressant le calcul, la pensée et l’étude,
Jette dans l’infini l’échelle de Latude;
Harvey dit: le sang coule, et l’homme vit! Képler
Prend dans les cieux l’étoile, et Franklin prend l’éclair;
Jackson ôte l’angoisse à la chair qu’il mutile;
Ils sont tous dans le vrai, dans le beau, dans l’utile.
Allez! prenez la bêche et bêchez le jardin!
Mongolfier veut l’azur en attendant l’Éden;
Bien. Et Luther fait bien d’ouvrir l’âme, et Vésale
Éclairant le dedans de la mort colossale,
Fait bien. L’audace est sainte et Dieu bénit l’effort.

Tous les glaives de feu derrière Adam ont tort.

Monte, esprit. Dieu t’attend. Dans ses deux mains de flamme,
Équilibre, il tient l’astre, et, justice, il tient l’âme;
Et, l’univers ayant ce but: voir et savoir,
Pour l’astre et pour l’esprit rayonner est devoir.
Monte, et ne tremble pas. C’est une âpre montée.
Quelquefois l’âme hésite, à mi-côte arrêtée.
L’esprit humain qui va, voit devant lui l’écueil,
L’escarpement, l’horreur, le chaos, le cercueil;

Et le sentier toujours plus sinistre et plus roide.
Ce marcheur a le front baigné de sueur froide.
Va, marcheur! Mal et Bien portent à leurs deux bouts
L’effroi. Souvent, féroce au bonheur des hiboux,
Le, progrès, rudoyant tous les petits bien-êtres,
Vomit tous les rayons dans toutes les fenêtres.
Le bien est sans pitié. Traverse sans trembler
Tout ce que tu verras autour de toi hurler;
Le progrès a parfois l’allure vaste et fauve;
Et le bien bondissant effare: ceux qu’il sauve.
Va donc! Double le pas! L’horizon s’élargit.
Va! monte! à chaque étape une larve surgit;
C’est l’avenir debout dans sa figure étrange
L’avenir semble spectre avant d’apparaître-ange.
Marche! Qui veut aller à lui doit être prêt,
À tous les grands combats; l’homme se tromperait
S’il croyait qu’on-obtient Dieu sans; peine, et qu’on pousse
L’enfer dans le-tombeau sans lutte et; sans secousse.
L’enfantement du mieux a ses convulsions.
Tout dans les cieux se fait par révolutions.
Qu’est-ce que-le progrès? un lumineux désastre,
Tombant comme la bombe et restant comme l’astre.
L’avenir vient avec, le souffle d un grand vent.
Il chasse rudement les peuples en avant;
Il fait sous les gibets des tremblements de terre;
Il creuse brusquement sous l’erreur qu’il fait taire,

Sous tout ce qui fut lâche, atroce, vil, petit,
Des ouvertures d’ombre où le mal s’engloutit.
Va, lutte, Esprit de l’homme! il ne faut pas qu’on aille
S’imaginer le bien de facile trouvaille.
Le bien étonne; et l’âme a peur en le créant;
Il a la majesté suspecte du géant
Quand, écumant, avec une rumeur confuse,
Il sort, lion de l’antre, ou vague de l’écluse.
Oui, le, bien est une eau qui monte dans la nuit;
Il monte, il est torrent du passé qu’il détruit,
Il est le châtiment; il vient; pas de refuge;
Il monte, il est marée; il monte, il est déluge!
Sombre inondation de bonheur! ô terreur,
Dit l’homme! Et le génie, indomptable éclaireur,
Crie: O joie! — Allons, marche, esprit de l’homme! avance.
Accepte des fléaux l’énorme connivence!
Marche! Oui, souvent, douteux pour qui l’a souhaité,
Le progrès, effrayant à force de clarté,
A, quand il vient broyer le faux, l’abject, l’horrible,
Des apparitions de crinière terrible:
Sa promesse menace; et pour tout ce qui doit
Tomber, mourir, finir dans le jour qui s’accroît,
Faux dieux, faux prêtres, mage impur, juge vendable,
Son rire est le rictus de l’aube formidable.
Depuis Adam, depuis Noé, de temps en temps,
Le progrès, qui poursuit ses vaincus haletants,
Qui veut qu’on soit, qu’on marche et qu’on creuse et qu’on taille,
Pousse ses légions d’azur dans la bataille,
Ses penseurs constellés, éthérés, spacieux,
Tous ses olympiens vêtus d’un pan des cieux;
Euler le sidéral; le splendide Épicure,
Et, comme les chouans dans la Vendée obscure,
Les hommes du passé, lourds, troublés, nébuleux,
Disent en les voyant: fuyons! voici les bleus!
Et ces hommes divins, et ces hommes solaires
Font marcher leurs bienfaits aux pas de leurs colères.
Le bien saisit le mal et l’écrase à son tour.

Accepte l’incendie invincible du jour,
Homme! va! jette-toi dans ces gueules ouvertes
Qu’on nomme inventions, nouveautés, découvertes!
L’esprit humain, chercheur de Dieu, voit par moments
Les rayons s’irriter comme des flamboiements
Quand, poussant devant lui la foule coutumière,
Il va de l’hydre d’ombre à l’hydre de lumière!
N’importe! ne crains pas le progrès rugissant
Pour le sage, le bon, le juste et l’innocent!
Ne crains pas le progrès dévorant les ténèbres!
Trouvant les idéals par l’effort des algèbres!
Montant, géométrie et poésie, à Dieu!
Ne crains pas le progrès, conquérant de ciel bleu,
Sphynx qui fait vivre, archer de l’éternelle cible,
Montagnard du sublime et de l’inaccessible!
Suis ce monstre splendide, homme! car il est beau
De toutes es laideurs qu’on nomme Mirabeau,
Socrate, Camons, Cromwell, Tyrtée, Ésope;
Et, faisant le niveau du cèdre et de l’hysope;
Il apparaît, mêlé d’Homère, de Newton,
Et de Moïse, avec la face de Danton,
Et monte aux cieux portant la tête échevelée
De la nuit sombre au bout de sa pique étoilée!
C’est bien.
L’ange songeait, pareil au lys qui penche.
Il semblait ne vouloir voir que son aile blanche;
On eût dit qu’il chantait et priait tour à tour,
Et qu’il assoupissait et noyait dans le jour,
Ne se sentant plus vivre et palpiter qu’à peine;
Ses yeux demi fermés pleins de fierté sereine:
Mais l’autre aile tremblait sur son dos frémissant
Comme pour réveiller le grand esprit absent;
Il rouvrit par degrés ses yeux brillants de gloire,
Et reprit, regardant malgré lui l’aile noire:

— Oui, c’est vrai, l’ombre. — Hélas! quand donc l’Éden, l’hymen,
L’aube? ô noirs cauchemars du lourd sommeil humain!

Le crime originel! l’enfer! Ève et la pomme!
Lugubres visions! Hélas! hélas! pour l’homme,
Dieu ne se fait sentir que par sa pesanteur.
L’homme s’obstine à voir dans Dieu le tourmenteur,
Le boucher sombre, armant de tenailles tonnerres
Et de pinces éclairs ses poings tortionnaires,
Le tortureur sans frein, sans loi, sans cœur, sans but!
Il rêve dans les cieux l’effrayant Belzébuth!
Il se fait un azur, un mystère, une bible
Qu’emplit une façon d’Être Suprême horrible;
Les hommes font Dieu sombre!
Oui, quand l’immensité
Germe en religion dans leur cœur agité,
Voilà ce qu’en voyant l’absolu, leurs yeux voient!
Oui, Dieu monstre attisant les mondes qui flamboient!
L’homme voudrait au ciel arracher cet aveu!
Nous ne pouvons parler avec l’homme de Dieu
Sans mâcher quelque idée affreuse de supplice;
Démons dans le brasier, damnés sous le cilice,
Dieu borné par l’enfer sans:bornes, les pavés
De l’ombre à jamais pleins de pâles réprouvés!
Ceux-là, dans l’infini, comme tombe une pierre,
S’enfoncent, et, tremblants, ayant dans leur paupière
Le gouffre, vision et disparition,
Dévidant l’écheveau, de la damnation,
Pendent au fil sans fin d’une chute éternelle;.
Ceux-là râlent, saignant sous leur forme charnelle
Dans on ne: sait quel antre idéal et hideux!
Satan fait un coupable, et le ciel en veut deux;
Adam et l’homme. Ainsi, comme il est impossible
Que, lorsque l’innocent-dans le monde visible,
Pour la faute d’Adam est puni sans pitié,
Lui, le vrai criminel, ne soit pas châtié,
Adam aurait été conduit devant le juge,
Et là, sombre, à genoux, sans espoir, sans refuge,
Sur le ciel formidable et tendu d’un drap noir,
Lié sur une claie, affreux, terrible à voir,

Sous l’éternité morne abaissant son front blême,
Adam l’ingrat, Adam, le coupable suprême,
Ajoutant tous les maux de sa race à ses maux,
Souffrant, tronc monstrueux, dans ses mille rameaux,
Ayant pour cri le cri qui sort de tous les langes,
Serait exécuté par des bourreaux archanges!
Il serait à jamais supplicié là-haut!
Les hommes, ses enfants, auraient dans leur cachot
Pour plafond le dessous de l’échafaud du père!
Ces étoiles qu’on voit parfois, dans leur repaire,
Par des fentes du ciel s’échappant et glissant,
Tomber sur eux, seraient les gouttes dé son sang!
Ah! fais cela, toi, l’homme à qui l’horreur agrée,
Esprit de jour taché de-nuit, âme tigrée!
Homme de Louis onze et de Domitien,
Qui, dans les temps nouveaux comme dans l’âge ancien,
Mets l’âme et le cadavre à jamais en présence!
Qui t’appelles Jeffrye et t’es nommé Mézence!
O du bien et du mal amphibie effrayant,
Homme qui ne vois pas les anges s’enfuyant!
Fais-ces actions-là dans ta brume de crimes;
Mais ne les prête pas au songeur des abîmes!
Ne les impute pas au Dieu vivant!
L’esprit
S’arrêta, regarda le gouffre, puis reprit:

Cependant, dans tes jours de piété, toi, l’homme,
Tu rends hommage à Dieu; tu dis: « Je souffre. En somme,
«J’ai l’âme. Ame, ici-bas je ne suis pas fini.
«Tout est bien. Je vivrai par la mort rajeuni.
«Qu’importe que mon corps se blesse et se meurtrisse!
«Mon âme ira montrer à Dieu la cicatrice.
«Dieu, le débiteur sûr, s’est: toujours acquitté.
«Je suis le créancier de la grande équité.
«Souffrir, traîner la vie est l’affaire d’une heure;
«L’astre me tire hors de l’ombre inférieure.
«Mes maux obligent Dieu; le baume après le fiel;

«Tout homme en pleurs a droit au regard éternel.
«Tous, l’esclave, le nègre aux reins ceints d’une pagne,
«Le casseur de cailloux songeant dans la campagne,
«Le vil forçat, roulant quelque horrible rocher,
«N’ont qu’à gémir pour voir Jéhovah se pencher.
«L’oubli que ferait Dieu du dernier et du moindre
«Suffirait pour ôter au jour le droit de poindre,
«Pour que l’univers ploie et tremble comme un jonc,
«Pour que l’étoile ait peur et dise: qu’est-ce donc?
«Et pour qu’au seuil de l’ombre aux profondes marées,
«Les constellations se dressent effarées!
«Oui; je souffre, mais j’ai, dans mon accablement,
«Hypothèque sur l’aube et sur le firmament,
«Sur tous les éléments que, vivants, nous subîmes,
«Sur l’équilibre immense et sombre des abîmes!
«Je suis aux fers, j’ai soif; j’ai faim, j’ai froid, j’ai chaud;
«Mais le paradis brille aux fentes du cachot.

«De ce monde si noir l’ombre est à claire-voie.
«Dieu juste ne veut pas que ma larme me noie;
«Jamais le port ne manque au pauvre matelot;
«Ma tempête aboutit à l’azur; mon sanglot
«Sourit subitement et s’achève cantique.
«Mourir, c’est naître à Dieu. Je suis Caton d’Utique,
«Je ne veux point du bât que portent les romains,
«Et je tombe indigné, poignardé de mes mains,
«Sanglant; je suis Socrate, et je bois la ciguë;
«Je suis Jean Huss, ma chair meurt dans la flamme aiguë;
«Mais j’ai l’éternité. Je suis l’atome humain,
«Mais l’enfer aujourd’hui promet le ciel demain;
«Nous luttons, nous râlons, nous gémissons, qu’importe!
«Pas un cri n’est perdu, pas un tourment n’avorte;
«Le paradis se fait de toutes les douleurs
«Qui deviennent baisers sur le front des meilleurs.
«Le deuil conquiert les cieux comme l’aigle sa proie.
«La racine malheur s’épanouit en joie
«Dans cet Éden sublime où la terre fleurit;

«Mes maux seront un jour mes biens; je suis l’esprit.
«Misère, angoisse, pleurs, tout ce que nous saignâmes
«Se retrouve en rayons dans la main de nos âmes;
«Le tombeau, que la nuit flamboyante bénit,
«Murmure: Ciel! avec ses lèvres de granit;
«Là-haut toute souffrance en bonheur est comptée;
«Dieu, ce soleil qui fait même une ombre à l’athée,
«Serait injuste et faux si c’était autrement.
«Le sépulcre n’est pas une bouche qui ment.
«J’ai la peine d’un jour, mais j’ai l’âme immortelle!”
Alors, homme, pourquoi la brute souffre-t-elle?
Pourquoi bats-tu ton âne à grands coups de bâton?
Quel est son lendemain? Ton âne est-il Caton?
Pourquoi le héron gris, qui s’enfuit dans les brumes,
Sent-il le noir faucon fouiller du bec ses plumes?
Pourquoi, troussant ta manche et tachant tes habits,
Plonges-tu les couteaux aux gorges des brebis?
Pourquoi bois-tu le sang ayant tondu la laine?
Pourquoi vas-tu traînant tes buffles dans la plaine
Par cet anneau de fer qui perce leurs naseaux?
Qu’est-ce que l’hydre doit penser au fond des eaux?
Vois ce saumon d’argent: vers ses pauvres ouïes
Les flammes du brasier montent épanouies;

Il était fait pour fuir sous l’eau des bleus ruisseaux.
Vois. Juge. Quoi! la carpe est coupée en morceaux,
Elle est jetée à l’huile ardente, toute vive!
Quoi!.l’huître vit et souffre aux dents de ton convive!
Et c’est, tout!.Te voilà satisfait dans ta chair
Quand, devant un grand tas de fagots, vif et clair,
Ta broche plie, offrant les lièvres et les cailles.
À la bûche qui rit, monstre aux rouges écailles,
Et livrant l’humble essaim qui jouait, qui volait,
Le hallier, et la sauge avec le serpolet,
L’alouette et les prés, l’étang et la macreuse,
Aux mâchoires de feu de l’âtre qui se creuse!
Les charbons dans la cendre ouvrent leurs sombres yeux.

En voyant ce brasier riche, éclatant, joyeux,
Le passant, à travers la vitre illuminée,
S’empourpre; et, contemplant ta haute cheminée,
Tu ne te doutes pas que, toi-même, tu ris
À la géhenne horrible, et que, rempli de cris,
D’engrenages hideux et de pinces rougies,
Ce beau foyer de pierre, espoir de tes orgies,
Ce réchaud où la mort frémit à pleine voix,
Où les battements d’ailes et les soupirs des bois
S’en vont, chants des vanneaux et baisers des sarcelles,
Dans la fumée affreuse en fauves étincelles,
Cet antre, où l’on entend, quand on vient s’y pencher,
Tous les pétillements du rire et du bûcher,
Où l’oiseau fume, où meurt le nid, où flambe l’orme,
Est un des trous béants de la fournaise énorme!
C’est l’autel vil du ventre et du plaisir charnel;
Et le fond communique au mystère éternel!
Cours au désert; la vie est-elle plus joyeuse?
Que d’effrayants combats dans le creux d’une yeuse
Entre la guêpe tigre et l’abeille du miel!
Va-t’en aux lieux profonds, aux rocs voisins du ciel,
Aux caves des souris, aux ravins à panthères;
Regarde ce bloc d’ombre et ce tas de mystères;
Fouille l’air, l’onde, l’herbe; écoute l’affreux bruit
Des broussailles, le cri des Alpes dans la nuit,
Le hurlement sans nom des jongles tropicales;
Quelle vaste douleur! Les hyènes bancales
Rôdent; sur la perdrix le milan tombe à pic;
La martre infâme mord le flanc du porc-épic;
La chèvre, les deux pieds de devant dans la haie,
Voit la couleuvre et bêle avec terreur; l’orfraie
S’agite dans l’effroi du problème inconnu;
Sur le crâne pelé du mont sinistre et nu
Le trou de l’aigle est plein de carnage et de fiente;
La chouette, en qui vit la nuit terrifiante,
Tout en broyant du bec le rat qu’elle surprit,

Songe; le vautour blanc lui prend sa proie, et rit;
L’éléphant marche avec un fracas d’épouvante;
L’affreux jararrara, comme une onde vivante,
Autour des hauts bambous et des joncs tortueux
Se roule, et les roseaux deviennent monstrueux;
Le museau de la fouine au poulailler se plonge;
Sur la biche aux yeux bleus le léopard s’allonge;
Le bison sur son dos emporte le couquard
Qui lui suce le sang pendant qu’il fuit hagard;
La baudroie erre et semble un monstre chimérique;
Quand le grand-duc cornu dans les bois d’Amérique
Plane, l’essaim fuyant des ramiers prend son vol.
Vois. L’oblique hibou guette le rossignol.
Le loup montre sa gueule et l’homme son visage,
Le désert frémit. Vois, les pigeons de passage
Qui vont; pillant le houx et le genévrier,
L’ours qui sort de son antre au mois de février,
Le phoque au poil luisant qui semble frotté d’huile,
Tout le fourmillement des brutes, le reptile,
L’autour, le scorpion tapi dans les lieux frais,
Le renard, le puma, ce grand chat des forêts
Qui fait en miaulant le bruit d’un bœuf qui gronde,
Le lynx, l’impur condor à la prunelle ronde,
Brigands que la nuit cache en son vaste recel,
Le jaguar à l’affût près, des sources de sel,
Les files de chameaux des horizons arabes,
L’ibis mangeur de vers; le rat mangeur de crabes;
Les musquas rongeurs pris au fond des lacs vitreux
Par la glace et l’hiver, se dévorant entr’eux,
Et les boas nageurs et les boas énygres,
Et les vipères, sœurs du crâne plat des tigres,
Le mulot, la bigaille, et, sortant du ruisseau,
L’horrible caïman à tête de pourceau,
Méduse, cachalot, orphe, requin, marbrée,
Baleine à la mâchoire infecte et délabrée,
Mouches s’engloutissant au gouffre engoulevent,
L’unau, le fourmilier traître, lent et bavant,

L’once au jurement fauve, aux moustaches roidies,
Bêtes de l’ombre errant comme des Canidies,
Tout souffre; grand, petit, le hardi, le prudent,
Tout rencontre un chasseur, une griffe, une dent!
Une sorte d’horreur implacable enveloppe
L’aigle et le colibri, le tigre et l’antilope.
L’eau noire fait songer le grave pélican.
Partout la gueule s’ouvre à côté du volcan;
Partout les bois ont peur partout la bête tremble
D’un frisson de colère ou d’épouvante; il semble
À celui qui ne voit l’être que d’un côté
Qu’une haine inouïe emplit l’immensité.

Hommes, les animaux, confuses multitudes;
Saignent dans vos cités et dans leurs solitudes;
La bête pleure, rampe, agonise. Pourquoi?.
Et si le lion dit: qu’est-ce que j’ai fait, moi?
Que pourras-tu répondre à ce montagnard triste?
Quoi! Timour est, Nemrod sûrvit, Caïphe existe;
Ils souffrent; mais leur âme est là, blanche et-rêvant,
Qui, prête pour les cieux, frémit dans l’ombre au vent,
Et l’ours et le chacal râlent sans espérance!
Et Dieu voit tout le reste avec indifférence,
Tandis que, regardant fuir Tibère envolé,
Le grand lion rugit sous le ciel étoilé!
Est-ce que cette rosse efflanquée, et qu’on tire
Par la bride au charnier, passe sans te rien dire?
Pauvre être qui s’en va, ses os trouant sa peau,
Boitant, suivi d’un tas d’enfants, riant troupeau,
Qui viennent lui jeter des pierres et qui chantent!
Est-ce que Montfaucon, ce lieu spectre que hantent
Les noirs Laubardemont, les Maillards, les Vouglans,
Ce sphynx mystérieux des abattoirs sanglants,
Devient soudain pour toi clair comme l’eau de roche,
Parce qu’il démolit sa potence, décroche
L’affreux squelette humain de son fétide étal,
Et se fait, d’étrangleur légal, royal, fatal,

Équarrisseur tuant la brute à tant par tête,
Et, de bourreau de l’homme, assassin de la bête!
Parce qu’il a changé le sang du tablier,
Tout est dit! Retournez l’effrayant sablier,
.Ou chargez-en le sable, et faites qu’il y tienne
De la cendre animale au lieu de cendre humaine,
Plus d’énigme! la bête appartient à la mort;
C’est l’ordre, et tout est bien. Ni doute, ni remord:
Quoi! partout, crocs, bouchers, égorgements, tueries!
Quoi! dans les noirs combats du bœuf des Asturies,
Ivresse populaire et passe-temps royaux,
Le cheval éperdu, marche sur ses boyaux,
Le taureau lui crevant le ventre à coups de cornes!
Quoi! vous jetez des cœurs sanglants aux coins des bornes,
Les pattes des oiseaux et leur pauvre duvet,
Des entrailles, des yeux, et tout cela vivait!
Les chênes qu’adoraient les fauves troglodytes
Sous la hache à grand bruit tombent c’est; vous le dites,
De la nature morte et l’on peut la tuer.
Le chien aux coups de fouet a dû s’habituer;
La bête doit souffrir sous le dieu qui foudroie;
Tout l’arbre qu’on abat et le pavé qu’on broie,
Tout souffre pour souffrir! C’est bien? Iniquité!
De quel droit, moi l’esprit, suis-je dans la clarté?

Pourquoi faut-il que toi, matière, tu pâtisses!
Quoi! l’astre et le caillou seraient des injustices!
Une injustice en haut! une injustice en bas!
Quoi! le porc dans l’ordure et l’âne sous les bâts,
À jamais! La souffrance à l’angoisse s’enlace;
Puis, rien! quoi, l’homme, roi! quoi, l’être, populace!
Adam seul serait graine et sa seule âme fleur!
Sabaoth vannerait dans un van de douleur
Le monde, et l’homme seul passerait par le crible!
S’il en était ainsi, tout deviendrait terrible,
L’univers fourmillant de bêtes s’emplirait
D’un long rugissement ainsi qu’une forêt,

Les pierres hurleraient: injuste! injuste! injuste!
L’arbre en convulsion, la broussaille, l’arbuste,
Se tordraient comme ceux qui sont sur un grabat;
Et la création ne serait qu’un combat
Des monstres révoltés contre Dieu, belluaire.
S’il en était ainsi, ce monde mortuaire,
Chaos infâme en proie au furieux autan,
Ne vaudrait même pas le crachat de Satan!
S’il en était ainsi, créer serait un crime;
Une exécration, sortirait de l’abîme,
Te dis-je, on entendrait les brutes gémissant,
Et le loup sans reproche, et le tigre innocent,
Devant les éléments cités en témoignage,
Devant l’infini triste où l’équité surnage,
Dénonçant Dieu, bourreau masqué du monstre obscur.
Alors, sur la sellette immense de l’azur,
L’horreur souffletterait cet accusé sinistre.
Quoi, le malheur pour œuvre et le mal pour ministre!
Quoi! ployés à jamais sous un arrêt hideux,
Tant d’êtres si nombreux qu’Adam n’est rien près d’eux!
Quoi, pas de lendemain! quoi, pas de récompense!
Quoi, l’homme seul dirait: je vivrai, car je pense!
Qu’a-t-il fait pour cela? l’être, galérien!
Fouettés, brisés, broyés, pétrifiés, puis rien!
Se tordre! et n’être plus, pour dernière aventure!
L’évanouissement au bout de la torture!
Le supplice, et c’est tout! quoi, cet être vaincu,
Quoi! cette créature innocente a vécu,
Souffert, saigné, traîné la terreur, bu la haine,
Et traversé d’un bout à l’autre la géhenne,
Tandis que je rayonne et luis, moi séraphin,
Et quand, lasse, elle tombe, agonisante enfin,
Et pose sur la nuit sa tête exténuée,
Dieu ne lui doit rien! vide, effacement, nuée,
Silence; et le néant, oreiller de l’enfer!
Ô loi dont frémirait même un livre de fer,
Qui, par Néron dictée en un éclat de rire,

Ferait pleurer le bronze où l'on voudrait l'écrire!

Quoi! je suis une bête et fais ce que je puis!
L'abîme! et puis l'abîme, et puis l'abîme, et puis
L'abîme! O désespoir! ce serait la sentence!

Mais toi, l'élu risible, l'homme à quelle-distance
Es-tu de l'animal? Le sais-tu? Ta maison
Est celle du castor; l'Égypte avait raison
D'être inquiète au seuil de la grande syringe;
Es-tu sûr de ne pas jeter l'ombre d'un singe?
Quoi! l'animal n'est rien! vaux-tu mieux par hasard?
Le flatteur sait-il mieux ramper que le-lézard?
L'envieux a-t-il plus d'esprit que la vipère?
Qui, de l'homme ou du porc, est le fils ou le père?
Vaux-tu le geai voleur que tu prends à l'appeau?
Je voudrais bien savoir ce que c'est que ta peau,
Et si les astres, pleins de sombres rêveries,
En la voyant pendue à vos écorcheries,
S'en étonneraient plus, dans le gouffre des cieux,
Que de la peau d'un bœuf aux yeux mystérieux,
Ou du cerf au poil roux jaspé de taches blanches
Dont l'œil effaré fait des lueurs dans les branches!
Plus d'un secret étrange entre le monstre et toi
Palpite; et parfois-l'homme en sent le vague effroi
Il est des êtres noirs au-dessous de la bête,
Qui, miasme, poison, peste, aquilon, tempête,
Ouvrant en bas la gueule, aveugle des fléaux,
Font à tous les vivants la guerre du chaos.
Quoique sa dent te morde et que ton bras l'assomme,
L'animal est ton frère, et la bête avec l'homme
Contre la nature hydre a souvent combattu;
Elle te communique une obscure vertu,.
Et la peau du lion aidait le grand Hercule.
Ah! tu te crois plein jour et ris du crépuscule!
La pensée est ton lot! Dieu n'a rien réussi
Hors toi! Tu te crois rare et parmi tous choisi,

Parce qu’un vent d’en haut parfois souffle en ta brise,
Et que, de temps en temps, criant: Brahma! Moïse!
Isis! ou murmurant: Lamma Sabacthani,
Relayant d’autres sœurs dont le temps est fini,
Une. Religion, dans l’ombre ou la lumière,
Paraît à ton chevet, et, nouvelle infirmière,
Vient charger l’oreiller de ton lit d’hôpital!
Toi providentiel, et le reste fatal!
Mais, voyons, raisonnons un peu; sois économe
D’extase pour toi-même, et regarde-toi.

L’homme,
Titan du relatif et nain de l’absolu,
Se croit astre, et se voit de clarté chevelu;

Homme, l’orgueil t’enivre! et c’est un vin de l’ombre.
Redescends! redescends! tout à l’heure, âpre et sombre,
L’aigle en rudoyant l’homme avait raison souvent.
Parce que je t’ai dit, moi: c’est bien! en avant!
Ne t’en va pas cogner les soleils, larve noire!
Épargne à l’infini l’assaut de l’infusoire.
Voyons, qu’es-tu? peux-tu toi-même t’affirmer?
À quoi te résous-tu? douter? haïr? aimer?
Que crois-tu? Que sais-tu? Tu n’as dans ta science
Pas même un parti pris d’ombre ou de confiance.
Tu sais au hasard. Lois que ton œil calcula,
Faits, chiffres, procédés, classements, tout cela
Contient-il Dieu? réponds. Ta science est l’ânesse
Qui va, portant sa charge au moulin de Gonesse,
Sans savoir, en marchant front bas et l’œil troublé,
Si c’est un sac de cendre ou bien un sac de blé.
Que dit l’artiste ému, le prêtre en sa chapelle,
Le vacher retournant le fumier sous sa pelle,
Le pâtre à l’œil vitreux, l’ermite, l’érudit?
Que dit l’anatomiste au trappiste? Que dit
Le plongeur du cadavre au mineur du squelette?
Que dit le médecin au géologue, athlète

Qui lutte avec la terre et tombe exténué?
Et l’algébriste exact, par l’espace hué,
Que dit-il, ce berger des chiffres indociles?
Que dit le devin, roi des stryges et des psylles,
Poussant vers l’inconnu qu’à ton vol tu soumets,
Quelque système aveugle ou boîteux qui jamais
N’arrive au bout d’un fait sans trouble et sans encombre?
Que dit le philosophe, aventurier de l’ombre?
Et le poète ami des cieux où l’aube point?
Que disent, frémissants, pâles, la pioche au poing,
Tous ces noirs fossoyeurs de la fosse Science?
Homme! ils disent tous: nuit, misère, imprévoyance,
Erreur, néant, fumée, imbécillité, deuil.
Et c’est avec cela que tu fais ton orgueil!
Jour coudoie ignorance en ton savoir hybride.
Tu ne sais pas tenir ta fantaisie en bride.
Tu vas, tu vas, tu vas! Où vas-tu?
Vanité!
Tu crois qu’en te créant Dieu t’a mis de côté,
Que ton berceau contient toutes les origines,
Et que tout se condense en toi; tu t’imagines
Qu’à mesure que tout naissait et surgissait,
L’Éternel t’en donnait quelque chose; et que c’est
Sous ton crâne que Dieu pensif traça l’épure
De ce monde qu’emplit son auréole pure.
Tu dis: j’ai la raison, la vertu, la beauté.
Tu dis: Dieu fut très las pour m’avoir inventé,

Et tu crois l’égaler chaque fois que tu bouges.
Allons! mire-toi donc un peu dans les peaux-ronges!
Que dis-tu-des Yolofs, barbouillés de roucou,
Attachant des colliers d’oreilles à leur cou,
Et des hùrons ornés de stupides balafres?
Mire-toi dans les noirs, mire-toi dans les cafres,
Dans les Yoways; trouant leurs nez, peignant leurs peaux,
Empoisonnant leur flèche aux glandes dés crapauds!
Apprends ceci, rayon apprends ceci, pensée

L’ange commence à l’homme et l’homme au chimpanzée;
L’orang-outang ton frère, est, un homme à tâtons.
Tu peux bien l’accepter, puisque nous t’acceptons!
Mire-toi d’ans tes goûts, dans tes mœurs, dans tes races!
Dans tes amours brutaux dans tes instincts voraces;
Dans l’auge où nous voyons boire tes appétits!
Ton histoire! tes lois! ton bruit! ton cliquetis!
Te figures-tu pas que tes gestes, tes guerres,
Tes cris, troublent l’azur de leurs fracas vulgaires,
Et que le jour mesure à ton pas son déclin?
Crois-tu pas que le ciel est guelfe ou gibelin,
Que l’Être est Armagnac ou Bourguignon, que l’astre
Connaît oui, non, Genève et, Rome, York et Lancastre,
Et que le monde pend à ton sacré cheveu?
Tes princes? tes sultans? tes rois? demande un peu
Ce que de ta grandeur pensent les astronomes.
Parles-en à Newton. Parce que tu te nommes
César ou Henri quatre, et qu’un beau jour Casca
Ou Ravaillac, te prit en traître, s’embusqua
Dans l’ombre, et te coupa la veine cardiaque,
Crois-tu pas déranger l’énorme zodiaque?
Et quant à tes cités, Babels de monuments
Où parlent à la fois tous les événements,
Qu’est-ce:que cela pèse? arches, tours, pyramides,
Je serais peu: surpris qu’en ses rayons humides,
L’aube les emportât pêle-mêle un matin
Avec les gouttes d’eau de la sauge et du thym.
Et ton architecture étagée et superbe
Finit par n’être plus qu’un tas de pierre et d’herbe
Où, la tête au soleil, siffle l’aspic subtil:
Ton marbre, dont tu fais des dieux, que devient-il?
Le temps court, et monnoye en courant tes statues;
Ton bronze qu’à tes rois guerriers tu prostitues,
On en fait des liards qui valent les héros.
Ton marbre, chaux et plâtre, emplit les tombereaux.
Homme, le papillon qui vit une semaine,
Le puceron qu’un jour crée et qu’un jour remmène,

L’éphémère, enviant cette longévité,
Égalent ton granit devant l’immensité.

Ah! tes œuvres, vraiment, parlons-en. Meurtre, envie,
Sang! Tu construis la mort quand Dieu sème la vie!
Et, pendant que Dieu fait les chênes sur les monts,
Les baobabs pareils à des pieds de mammons,
L’arbre a pain, le palmier splendide, les mélèzes,
D’où sort un chant pareil à la voix des falaises,
L’olivier, le figuier, le cèdre, le nopal,
Tu fais l’arbre gibet, l’arbre croix, l’arbre pal,
L’affreux arbre supplice, énorme, vaste, infame,
Cyprès dont les rameaux, faisant la nuit sur l’âme,
Sonnent lugubrement comme des enchaînés,
Dont chaque branche, hélas! porte deux condamnés,
Et penche en frissonnant deux spectres sur l’abîme;
Au soleil, du côté de l’homme, la victime,
Et du côté de Dieu, dans l’ombre, le bourreau!

Ah! tu te crois divin! tu places ton zéro
En regard de cet orbe inouï qu’emplit l’onde
De l’océan sagesse et qu’on nomme le monde!
Ah! géant! tout savoir, ce n’est pour toi qu’un jeu.
Pourquoi te contenter d’un à peu près de Dieu?
Pourquoi ne pas tirer l’abîme à clair? Colosse!
Plus haut qu’Atlas, et plus que les oiseaux véloce!
Pourquoi te contenter de tes religions?
Lorsque dans l’infini nous nous réfugions,
Pourquoi ne pas nous suivre, âme au cercueil penchante,
Et tout prendre? Pourquoi, ce que l’abîme chante,
Ne pas le déchiffrer? tu n’as qu’à le vouloir!
Si tu ne l’entends pas, tu peux du moins le voir,
L’hymne éternel vibrant sous les éternels voiles.
Les constellations sont des gammes d’étoiles;
Et les vents par moments te chantent des lambeaux
Du chant prodigieux qui remplit les tombeaux.
Allons, fais un effort, esprit plus grand que l’aigle;

Prends ton échelle, prends ta plume, prends ta règle;
Toute cette musique à l’ineffable bruit
Est là sur le registre effrayant de la nuit;
Va, monte; tu n’as plus qu’à tracer des portées
Sous les septentrions et sous les voies-lactées
Pour lire à l’instant même, au fond des cieux vermeils,
La symphonie écrite en notes de soleils!
Qu’attends-tu, dis? Va donc au fond de Dieu! va vite!
Ah! souffle du fumier que le parfum évite,
Homme, ombre! coureur vain de tous les pas perdus!
Marchand des Christs trahis et des Josephs vendus!
Va! tu sors de la fange, et ta mère malsaine,
C’est la matière infecte et la matière obscène!
Tes sombres légions vermineuses, amas,
Troupeau, tas imbécile adorant des lamas,

Avec ce qu’elles font et ce qu’elles projettent,
Entre la nourriture et l’excrément-végètent!

Mais tu te fais petit; tu changes d’argument,
Et c’est là, reprends-tu, ta plainte justement
L’homme est un désir vaste en une étreinte étroite,
Un eunuque amoureux, un voyageur qui boîte;
L’homme n’est rien la terre à chaque heure lui ment;
La vie est un à-compte au lieu d’être un paiement;
Tes sages te l’ont dit, et, dans ton humeur noire,
Toi, l’homme, tu n’es pas éloigné de le croire;
C’est trop peu d’être un homme; en naissant Dieu devait
Te donner tout l’azur dont la mort te revêt.
Ah! tu n’es pas déjà content de Dieu toi-même!
Tu voudrais sur la-terre être un être suprême;
Créancier exigeant, tu te plains d’être né
À demi, que le ciel ne t’ait pas tout donné,
Que Dieu soit en retard, que lui, lui qui médite,
Lui qui vit, ne t’ait pas, à l’échéance dite,
Fait livraison de l’ombre et de l’éternité;
Et tu voudrais encor que tout l’autre côté

De la création, misère inaperçue,
Fût à jamais plongé dans la nuit sans issue!
Mais tu dis: — Le caillou brisé, l’arbre abattu,
Ne souffrent point; la bête ignore. — Qu’en sais-tu?
Sais-tu la profondeur du soupir, et l’abîme
Du cri? pour voir le fond du gouffre, es-tu la cime?
Et s’il était des pleurs qui coulent en dedans?
Et s’il était un doigt, léché des flots grondants,
Qui sentît tressaillir la montagne plaintive,
Et pour qui le rocher fût une sensitive?
Que sais-tu? Ta morale; ô jûif, payen, chrétien,
Est une carte obscure et bizarre du bien
Et du mal, dont tu peins a ton gré les frontières.

Ce livre, dont tu fais la table des matières,
L’as-tu lu? Que vois-tu par ton trou de prison?
Portes-tu dans ton-œil l’insondable horizon?
Fermes-tu l’univers en fermant ta fenêtre?
De quel droit marques-tu des limites a l’être,
Et dis-tu, te penchant sur le monde obscurci
Et sur le flot vivant: On souffre jusqu’ici!
Eh! vois donc les douleurs de ces bêtes hagardes!

Ah! la souffrance étant l’avenir, tu la gardes!
Tu n’en veux que pour toi! tout le reste est trop vil.
Tu vois l’arbre se tordre et: tu dis Souffre-t-il?
Tu dis: — La brute meurt; son souvenir s’envole
Elle ne s’aperçoit pas même qu’on la vole.
Quoi! l’homme fils unique, et l’univers bâtard!

Quoi! tes maux seuls auraient le paradis plus tard
Qui, vrai pour toi, serait pour tout autre une fable!
La bête trouverait l’Éternel insolvable!
Quoi! les monstres auraient, songeurs silencieux,
Droit de hocher la tête en présence des cieux!
Dieu baisserait les yeux devant leur sombre lutte!
Ils pourraient lui jeter le mépris de la brute!

Quoi! devant les soleils, les astres triomphaux,
Et l’étoile, et l’aurore, ils pourraient dire: or faux!
Douleur, néant, horreur, seraient la destinée!
Quoi! la création tout entière damnée,
Rêve affreux! pas de but; l’homme seul arrivé;
Souffrir, et ne rien voir; la douleur, œil crevé;
Tout injuste, une vaste et stupide spirale
D’êtres perdus, sans jour, sans nœud, sans loi morale,
Allant on ne sait où, venant on ne sait d’où,
Et, tout au fond de l’ombre effroyable, Dieu fou!
Ce Jéhovah Moloch! que veut-on que j’en fasse?
Songe exécré! crachat de l’homme sur ta face,
Ô mon Dieu! calomnie au père universel!
Bave d’inventions qui tacherait le ciel,
Si la fange pouvait atteindre, écume vile,
Dieu, l’outragé sublime, éternel et tranquille!
Non! tous les êtres sont, et furent, et seront.
Qu’il ait sa cendre au cœur, qu’il ait sa flamme au front,
Tout être est immortel comme essence; et retrouve
Ce qui lui reste dû par la loi qui l’éprouve;
Ce n’est point un motif parce qu’on est petit
Pour ne pas être vu; nul en vain ne pâtit;
Dieu n’est pas le myope immense de l’espace.
L’aboiement de l’écueil qui-jamais ne se lasse,
Le tonnerre, le vol de l’astre échevelé,
Tous les rugissements du vent démuselé,
La trombe, le volcan, font, dans l’éternel gouffre,
Moins de bruit que ce cri d’un moucheron: je souffre!
Tous les êtres sont Dieu; tous les flots sont la mer.

Non! non! l’écrasement n’est point la loi du ver.
Non! non! toute souffrance est un sillon. Prière
Et pleurs défont toujours quelque chose en arrière
Et font, ô cieux sereins! quelque chose en avant.
Tout être se rachète ou tout être se vend.

Ô dédain de la bête et mépris de la chose!

Double faute de l’homme et son double malheur!
Si pour la vie infime il eût été meilleur,
Au lieu d’écraser tout, s’il eût fait le contraire,
Au lieu d’être bourreau, s’il se fût montré frère,
S’il eût compris l’amas vivant qui remuait,
Et l’être monstrueux, e grand souffrant muet,
L’homme, en butte à cette heure aux aboiements de l’ombre,
Eût été l’aîné roi de la famille sombre.
Cet aveugle serait devenu le voyant.
Il eût vu revenir à lui l’être fuyant.
La vie a son esprit qu’a troublé l’ignorance
Fût apparue avec toute sa transparence,
Et l’homme, sous le marbre ou le bois ou la chair,
De l’âme universelle eût vu le pâle éclair.
En s’inclinant, avec la majesté des prêtres,
Sur ces masques hagards qu’on appelle les êtres,
Calme, il eût relevé le morne abattement
Du monde terrassé qui vit sinistrement.
Sa pitié, s’émiettant aux souffrances farouches,.
Eût fait tourner vers lui toutes ces âpres bouches.
La bête eût accepté l’homme; le chêne l’eût
Accueilli dans les bois de son grave salut;
La pierre en son horreur l’eût adoré. La roche,
Morne, se fût sentie émue à son approche;
Et dans tous les cailloux il eût eu des autels.
Il eût senti sous lui de sombres immortels.
Il eût été le mage. Il eût connu lès causes.
Il aurait sur son front la lumière des choses;
Il serait l’Homme Esprit. L’aigle eût fraternisé;
Et, lui montrant le, ciel, le lion eût posé
Sa griffe sur l’épaule auguste du Génie.
Au lieu de le haïr dans leur morne agonie,
Les vivants effrayants d’en bas eussent béni
Ce grand communiant de l’amour infini.
En le voyant, la fosse eût resplendi, pareille
Aux soirs d’été qu’embrase une clarté vermeille;
La tombe aurait chanté, le spectre aurait souri.

Il eût des inconnus été le favori,
Bien et mai. La loi vient de derrière la vie
Et derrière la mort continue. Homme, envie
Ton chien; tu ne sais pas; triste maître hagard,
S’il n’a pas plus d’azur que toi dans le regard.
Tout vit. Création couvre métempsychose.

Le bien-aimé de ceux-qui sont sous, les écorces,
Sous les granits, avec les sèves et les forces,
Et, dans tous ses travaux, sans cesse, à tout moment,
Toute l’obscurité l’eût baisé doucement.
L’ombre immense serait son fauve auxiliaire.
La nature, de l’homme aurait été le lierre,
Et l’aurait, dans les pleurs, dans les chocs, dans les maux,
Dans les deuils, protégé de ses mille rameaux.
Il eût senti, du fond des insondables cuves,
Monter vers lui les vents, les parfums, les effluves,
Les magnétismes purs, les souffles, les aimants,
Et le secours profond des sombres éléments;
Les fléaux, qui lui font la guerre du désordre,
Fussent venus lécher ses pieds qu’ils viennent mordre;
Quand sa barque, le soir, se risque hors du port,
Le flot eût dit au vent: c’est lui. Souffle moins fort.
L’azur eût murmuré: paix à la voile blonde!
L’écueil eût fait effort pour se courber sous l’onde.
L’être multiple épars dans l’expiation
L’eût partout conseillé de son vague rayon;
Sentant cette belle âme humaine, bonne et tendre,
Se baisser, et toucher leur chaîne, et la détendre,
La création brute au difforme poitrail,
L’instinct, cette lueur de l’âme au soupirail,
Le grand Tout, ce flot sourd qui s’enfle et qui se creuse,
L’énormité, la chose informe et ténébreuse,
L’horreur des bois, l’horreur des mers, l’horreur des cieux,
Tout le mystérieux, tout le prodigieux,
Fût accouru, soumis, à son appel sublime,
À travers l’ombre; et l’homme eût eu pour chien l’abîme.

Il sentirait, rêveur, satisfait, ébloui,
La pénétration des étoiles en lui;
L’ange le montrerait à l’ange qui se penche;
Il serait aujourd’hui la grande tête blanche
Aperçue au-dessus du gouffre et de la nuit.

Mais il n’a rien compris, rien sondé, rien traduit,
Rien aimé, que lui-même et lui seul. L’égoïste
Vit dans sa vanité démesurée et triste,
Presque en dehors du groupe immense des vivants.
Dans ce sombre univers, monceau d’esprits rêvants,
Il voit deux êtres: lui qu’il sent, Dieu qu’il suppose.
L’étincelle de Dieu, l’âme, est dans toute chose.
Le monde est un ensemble où personne n’est seul;
Tout corps masque un esprit; toute chair est linceul;
Et pour voir l’âme on n’a qu’à lever le suaire.

La faute est le squelette et l’être est l’ossuaire.
C’est à dire, ô vivant, car pour la terre il faut
Sans cesse commenter les formules d’en haut,
Que ce monde, où Dieu met ce que des cieux il ôte,
N’est que le cimetière horrible de la faute.

Tout fait, germe: Et la vie est un flanc qui conçoit,
Quoi? la vie à venir. Tout être, quel qu’il soit,
De l’astre à l’excrément, de la taupe au prophète,
Est un esprit traînant la forme qu’il s’est faite.
Autant que dans la grâce et que dans la beauté,
L’être persiste et vit dans la difformité
Sous l’engloutissement de la matière infâme;
Autant qu’Eve au doux front, Léviathan, c’est l’âme.
La noirceur d’aujourd’hui fait la nuit de demain.
Oui, bête, arbre, rocher, broussaille du chemin,
Tout être est un vivant de l’immensité sombre;
L’homme n’est pas le seul qui soit suivi d’une ombre;
Tous, même le caillou misérable et honteux,
Ont derrière eux une ombre, une ombre devant eux;

Tous sont l'âme, qui vit, qui vécut, qui doit vivre,
Qui tombe et s'emprisonne, ou monte et se délivre!.
Tout ce qui rampe expie une chute du ciel.
La pierre est une cave où rêve un criminel,
Prends garde, esprit! recule au seuil du mal, arrête!
L'arbre t'attend, le roc te guette, esprit! La bête
Est une chausse-trape où l'homme peut tomber.
Tremble. Pas d'action qu'on puisse dérober
À Dieu, pour qui dans toi veille ta conscience.
Tout être est responsable; il croît, décroît, vit, pense,
Condamné par lui-même ou par lui-même absous;
Tout ce qu'il fait s'en va dans l'espace; et dessous
Est l'infini, compteur exact, plateau sans bornes;
Et la chute possible, et les ténèbres mornes
Où serpentent, chassés du vent qui les poursuit,
Les essaims tortueux des mondes de la nuit.
Oui, l'âme dans le mal, hélas, naufrage et sombre.

Hommes, votre lumière est faite avec de l'ombre;
Sous votre bagne il est d'autres cachots profonds;
Vous ne vous en doutez pas même; ô noirs bouffons,
Qui riez, qui chantez, qui raillez, c'est le pire,
Le monde des sanglots commence a votre rire.
En même temps la joie est au-dessus de vous;
Car, devant le regard de l'Être sans courroux,
Tout se tient; et l'extase a la douleur s'enlace.

L'ange me regardait, et, sans que je parlasse,
Il voyait ma pensée, et, dans mon âme entrant,
Son œil fixe rendait mon crâne transparent.
Il dit, levant un doigt de sa main souveraine:

— Que l'oreille d'en bas qui m'écoute, comprenne
Que l'ange ne s'est pas contredit en montrant
L'homme si vain après l'avoir montré si grand;
Tout est haut, tout est bas tout est lent, tout va vite;
Toute chose créée est splendide et petite;

Tout être a deux aspects, ténèbres et rayons;
Et la justice sort des confrontations
Du côté misérable avec la face auguste.
L'être est un hideux tronc qui porte un divin buste.
Mais à la conscience heureux qui s'est fié!
Tout, même ce tronc vil, sera glorifié.

Dieu, l'avertisseur juste, incessamment regarde
La vie, et dans les vents murmure: prenez garde!
Et suit des yeux le choc des bons et des mauvais.
Tout à l'heure, ô vivant terrestre, tu pouvais
Me répondre: Oui, le ciel est gibelin ou guelfe;
L'astre connaît Isis et Phoebus, Thèbe et Delphe,
Genève et Rome, Oedipe et Sphynx, énigme et mot;
Le météore prend fait et cause là-haut
Pour ou contre Pompée ou César, pour ou contre
Le pâle Capulet qu'un Montaigu rencontre;
Car dans toute querelle est un peu d'équité,
Et dans toute lueur un peu de vérité;
Et si la rose rouge a tort, la rose blanche
A raison. Et cela suffit pour que Dieu penche.
Le nuage, le jour; la rosée en sueur,
La comète traînant sa sinistre lueur,
Tous les êtres profonds qui passent dans l'abîme,
Sont du parti de ceux qu'on foule et qu'on opprime;
Et, luttant pour le droit et pour la vérité,
Le faible a dans les reins toute l'immensité
De là l'auguste foi du cœur simple et robuste.
Vivants, tous les cheveux de la tête du juste,
Par des fils que nul bras n'a pu briser encor,
Sont liés aux rayons de tous les astres d'or.
Vis, âme: — Oh! que Dieu soit dans ce que tu préfères!
La loi, sous ses deux noms une dans les deux sphères,
Vivants, c'est le progrès; morts, c'est l'ascension.
Toute cité, d'en bas ou d'en haut, est Sion;
Tout être, par l'effort du labeur volontaire,
Sort de l'épreuve, et rentre au bonheur; toute terre

Doit devenir Éden et tout ciel paradis.

Les gisants s'écrieront: debout! les engourdis
Remueront; l'avenir, parlant d'une voix tendre,
Dira: terre, voici le chemin qu'il faut prendre,
O terre! et l'harmonie en chantant conquerra
L'horreur du Groënland, l'horreur du Sahara,
Et le sable et la neige, et ces larves barbares,
Caraïbes, hurons, bédouins, malabares,
Peuples sourds de l'Ohio, du Thibet, du Darfour,
Que l'ombre garde assis dans son noir carrefour.
L'aube, cette blancheur juste, sacrée, intègre,
Qui se fait dans la nuit, se fera dans le nègre.
La Rome du désert naîtra de Tombouctou.
Oh! pourvu que ce soit en avant, Dieu sait où,
Va, vole! Je l'ai dit, et je te le répète,
La-bas, où l'on entend sonner de la trompette,
La-bas dans l'inconnu, là-bas dans le réel,
Dans;le vrai; dans le beau, dans le grand, dans le ciel,
Genre humain, genre humain, ouvre tes larges ailes!

En même temps la mort aux splendides prunelles
Pousse vers l'éternelle et suprême clarté
Le monstre, et l'homme au vent du sépulcre emporté,
Troupeau fuyant qu'au bord du gouffre elle dénombre.
L'aurore est un baiser qui veut les fronts de l'ombre.
Tout se meut, se soulève, et s'efforce, et gravit,
Et se hausse, et s'envole, et ressuscite, et vit!
Rien n'est fait pour rester dans l'obscurité sourde.
L'âme en exil devient à chaque instant moins lourde,
Et s'approche du ciel qui vous réclame tous.
D'heure en heure, pour ceux qui se sont faits plis doux,
La peine s'attendrit l'ombre en bonheur se change;
La bête est commuée en homme, l'homme en ange;
Par l'expiation, échelle d'équité,
Dont un bout est nuit froide et l'autre bout clarté,
Sans cesse, sous l'azur que la lumière noie,

L’univers Châtiment monte à l’univers Joie.

Et l’on y vient d’un bond, et du plus triste lieu.
Oui, l’horreur et le mal peuvent aux pieds de Dieu

Se verser tout à coup en urnes de lumière.
Oui, les plus noirs ont droit à la plus blanche sphère;
Les plus vils ont pour loi d’atteindre les plus hauts.
Tous les rayonnements puisent tous les chaos,
Vident la nuit, et font, ravissement des anges,
Des gerbes d’arcs-en-ciel avec toutes les fanges!
Point de déshérité! Non! point de paria!
Je levai les deux mains au ciel; l’ange cria:
Ô profondeurs, voilà que ce passant s’étonne!.
Puis il reprit:

— Rêveur qu’emporte un vent d’automne,
Sors de l’infirmité de ta stupeur sans yeux.
Apprends l’immensité. Guetteur obscur des cieux,
Sache, ô vivant qui viens regarder l’aube naître,
Que l’expiation va plus avant peut-être
Que tu ne descendis et que tu ne sondas,
Homme, et qu’elle peut faire un élu de Judas
Sache que Dieu, domptant même l’œil qui fascine,
Change, quand il lui, plaît, le serpent en racine,
Si bien qu’avec le temps ses desseins sont remplis,
Et que de la vipère il fait sortir un l’ys.
Qu’ont donc appris à l’homme Inde, Égypte et Chaldée,
S’il est pétrifié par cette simple idée
Que l’âme se perdra, se perd et se perdit,
Mais que Dieu peut toujours la trouver? Qui te dit
Que, le jour où, la mort enfin te fera naître,.
Tu ne verras, pas, homme, au seuil des cieux paraître,
Un archange plus grand et plus éblouissant
Et plus beau que celui qui te parle à présent,
Ayant des fleurs soleils, des astres étincelles,
Et tous les diamants du gouffre dans ses ailes,

Qui viendra vers toi, pur, auguste, doux; serein,
Calme, et qui te dira: c’est moi qui fus:Caïn?
Homme, sache que Dieu pourrait prendre un cloporte,
Un crapaud, l’acarus que ton ulcère porte,
Et lui donner l’aurore et le septentrion.
Sache que Dieu pourrait choisir un vibrion,
Un ver de terre au fond du sépulcre nocturne,
Et lui dire: — Voilà Sirius et Saturne,
Arcturus, Orion et les pléiades d’or;
Je te les donne. Prends. Et je te donne encor

Le vaste Jupiter avec ses quatre lunes.
Prends l’ouragan, le bruit, le jour bleu, les nuits brunes,
Le tropique et l’été, le pôle avec l’hiver.
Vénus, perle du soir, je te donne à ce ver.
Ver, prends Aldebaran que vit Jean, mon apôtre,
Et prends ses trois soleils qui roulent l’un sur l’autre;
Prends tous les firmaments et tous les océans,
Et le haut zodiaque aux douze astres géants,
Tournant comme une roue au fond des ombres noires.
Sache que Dieu pourrait donner toutes ces gloires
A ce vil ver de terre immonde et chassieux
Sans étonner un seul archange dans les cieux!
Et sache aussi que Dieu donnerait à cet être:
Ce que dans tous les lieux l’éternité voit naître,
Tous les astres qu’on voit, tous ceux qu’on ne voit pas,
Tout ce qui tourbillonne au souffle du trépas,
Et les mille flambeaux tremblant sur le grand voile,
Sans que l’infini fût amoindri d’une étoile,
Et qu’ayant tout donné, Dieu n’aurait rien de moins.

Et l’archange reprit: Soleils, soyez témoins,
Soyez témoins, ô cieux, que l’ilote et l’esclave,
Le goîtreux dont l’œil rêve et dont la lèvre bave
Dans ses mornes sommeils,
Et sur son lit maudit, le lépreux solitaire,
 cieux, sont vos égaux, et que les vers de terre

Sont vos frères, soleils!

Soyez témoins, éthers où vit l’âme ravie,
Épanouissements de splendeur et de vie,
Édens par Dieu dorés;
Paradis qui passez avec le son des lyres,
Rayons, soyez témoins, soyez témoins, sourires,
Que les pleurs sont sacrés!

Il ne tient qu à la nuit, et cela dépend d’elle,
D’être heureuse, innocente, et sincère, et fidèle,
De nous éblouir tous,
Et de voir tout à coup, clartés dans l’ombre écloses,
Des flots de colibris; sortis d’un tas de roses,
Aveugler ses hiboux!

Le méchant est un mort dont l’harmonie est veuve.
Il peut, quand il lui plaît, renaître après l’épreuve,
Et revenir, ailé,

Superbe, triomphant, sans pleurs, sans deuil, sans crainte,
Serein car tout esprit de la justice sainte
Est l’époux étoilé!

Hommes! l’orgueil en vous parfois crie et résiste,
Et vous dites, entant que votre terre est triste:
«Dieu pour nous est sans nom:
«Qu’a trouvé Ptolémée et que sait Épicure?
«Double négation «:.le ciel noir, l’âme obscure.
«L’être est Nuit, l’homme est Non.
«Le mal est notre maître et, le doute est notre hôte;
«Dieu nous montre la peine et nous cache la faute;
«Que veut ce dieu lointain?.
«Notre vie est si morne et notre âme est si noire,
«Hélas! que, par moments, nous hésitons à croire
«L’étoile du matin!
«Il semble que Dieu triste essaie à chaque aurore

«De créer un jour pur, divin, charmant, sonore,
«Par la joie expliqué,
«D’un éternel midi réchauffant la nature,
«Sans tache... et chaque soir, la nuit revient, rature
«Du jour toujours manqué!

«Qui nous dit que ce monde inique et léthifère
«Est l’œuvre de quelqu’un qui sait ce qu’il veut faire?
«Tout rampe de terreur;
«Ces monts, ces mers, ces champs où nos troupeaux vont paître,
«Ces globes, ces soleil; ces cieux ne sont peut être
«Que quelque immense erreur!”

Et vous criez, vivants sinistres de la tombe:
«L’anathème nous tient;l’horreur sur nous surplombe;
«Ce guichetier nous suit;
«L’obscurité nous couve, et la geôle âpre et lourde
«Nous guette, et chaque étoile est la lanterne sourde
«D’un spectre de la nuit!
«Nous sommes prisonniers; les ténèbres nous gardent;
«Tous les yeux de l’abîme à la fois nous regardent;
«Comment fuir? on nous voit!
«Comment nous evader?” Il suffit, pour qu’on sorte,
Qu’une bonne action pousse l’énorme porte..
Du bout du petit doigt!

Le Dieu juste, qui met à toute peine un terme
Ne veut pas que le grand sur le petit se ferme;
Il veut la liberté,
Et c’est avec l’atome, ô pauvre âme inquiète,
Que ce Dieu fait la clef de la serrure faite
Avec l’immensité.

Dieu ne permet à rien l’oppression; la brute
Et l’ange sont amis; au fond de toute chute
Dieu met de sa clarté;
De toute ascension Dieu marque le solstice;

Il crie aux quatre vents: Égalité!. Justice!
Equilibre! Équité!
Et l’un des quatre vents va le dire à l’aurore;
L’autre au couchant pourpré qu’un divin nimbe dore
Et qui s’épanouit
Le troisième le dit au midi qui s’enivre
De l’éblouissement de tout ce qu’il fait vivre;
Le dernier à la nuit.

Qu’est-ce que le rayon a de plus que la bête?
Le tigre a sa fureur, le ciel a sa tempête;
Tout est égal à tout
L’insecte vaut le globe; et, soleils, sphères, gloires,
Tous les géants, égaux à tous les infusoires,
Gisent sous Dieu debout.
Tout n’est qu’un tourbillon de poussière qui vole.
La mouche et sa lueur, l’astre et son auréole,
Cendre! apparitions!
Vie! Être! ô précipice obscur! horreurs sacrées,
Où Dieu laisse en rêvant tomber des empyrées
Et des créations!

L’infiniment petit, l’infiniment grand; songes!
Ces soleils que tu vois, ces azurs où tu plonges;
Ame errant sans appuis,
Les orbites de feu des sphères vagabondes,
Les éthers constellés, les firmaments; les mondes,
Cercles du fond du puits!

Ô citerne de l’ombre! Ô profondeurs livides!
Les plénitudes sont pareilles à des vides.
L’œil cherche le soutien.
L’être est prodigieux à ce point, j’en frissonne,
Qu’il ressemble au néant; et Tout par moments donne
Le vertige de Rien!

On revient au néant par l’énormité même,

Oui! S’il n’était pas là, lui, le témoin suprême,
Oh! comme on frémirait!

Mais ce grand front serein dans l’immensité rentre,
Et, comme un feu suffit pour éclairer un antre,
L’univers reparaît.

Ô Création, choc de souffles, bruit d’atomes,
Terre, trône de l’homme, univers, cieux, royaumes,
Rayons, sceptres, pavois,
Monde noir qui te tais et qui dors! Dieu se lève.
Ombre! il est le regard; sommeil! il est le rêve;
Silence, il est la voix!
Dieu vit. Quiconque mange est assis à sa table.
Il est l’inaccessible, il est l’inévitable;
L’athée au sombre vœu,
En se précipitant, sans foi, sans loi, sans prisme,
La tête la première; au fond de l’athéisme,
Brise son âme à Dieu!
Il est le fond de l’être. Oui, terrible ou propice,
Tout vertige le trouve au bas du précipice.
Satan, l’ange échappé,
Se cramponne lui-même au père, et l’on devine
Dans le pli d’un des pans de la robe divine
Ce noir poignet crispé.

Dieu! Dieu! Dieu! l’âme unique est dans tout, et traverse
L’âme individuelle, en chaque être diverse;
Tout char l’a pour essieu;
La tête de mort, blême au fond de l’ombre immonde,
Par un de ses deux trous, sinistre, voit le monde,
Et par l’autre voit Dieu.
Cet ensemble, où l’on voit toujours plus d’aube naître,
Et qu’on nomme le ciel et l’enfer, se pénètre;
Rayon et flamboiement;
L’un descend, l’autre monte; et Dieu dans l’ombre passe;
Et chacun d’eux éclaire un côté de sa face

Au fond du firmament.
Par moments, dans l’azur où l’archange a son aire,
Il se fait des hymens que chante le tonnerre;
L’âme épouse le ver;
Et le ciel et l’enfer, et la lumière et l’ombre,
Et le rayon splendide et le flamboiement sombre
Se mêlent dans l’éclair.

Rien n’est désespéré, car rien n’est hors de l’être.
Vivez! Le disparu peut toujours reparaître.
Le mal par vous construit,
Se place, dans la vaste et morne apocalypse,
Entre votre âme et Dieu; l’enfer est une éclipse;
Le mal passe, Dieu luit!
Transfigurations splendides et subites!
Les châtiments sont pleins de sombres: cénobites,
De bras au ciel tendus.
Parfois les lieux profonds ont des sanglots sublimes
Qui jettent tout à coup près de Dieu sur les cimes
Des monstres éperdus!

Chaque globe est un œuf hideux, sur qui se pose
La nuit triste, où l’on sent remuer quelque chose,
Couvert d’êtres maudits,
Lugubre, affreux, rongé de moisissure verte,
Qu’un jour un bec de feu brise, et d’où, l’aile ouverte,
Sort l’aigle Paradis.

Ce n’est pas le pardon c’est la justice auguste;
C’est, après le rachat, la délivrance juste;
L’équitable retour
Des hydres vers l’azur où l’on voit l’astre éclore,
Des muets vers la voix, des larmes vers-l’aurore,
Des spectres vers le jour!

Dieu n’est pas moins en bas qu’en haut; oui, la nature
Sacre l’égalité de toute créature

Devant le créateur; .
Et c’est le cœur de Dieu que sent l’être unanime
Dans ces deux battements énormes de l’abîme,
Profondeur et Hauteur.

Ces deux pulsations de la vie éternelle
Jettent l’âme innocente et l’âme criminelle,
L’une aux cieux; l’autre aux nuits;
Chacun va dans la sphère où sa pesanteur tombe.
Dieu, pour noircir l’orfraie et blanchir la colombe,
N’a:qu’à dire je suis.

La conscience est là, lueur crépusculaire.
Vous êtes avertis, vivants; le crime éclaire.
Tu tombes, tu sais où!
La drachme de Judas, par la nuit ramassée,
Rayonne et luit au fond de l’ombre hérissée;
C’est l’œil rond du hibou.

Dieu laisse à tous le poids qu’ils ont. Coupable-ou sainte,
L’action est un pied qui marque son empreinte.
. Dieu laisse au mal le mal.

Dieu, choisir! l’absolu n’a pas de préférence;
Le cercle ne peut rien sur la circonférence;
Le parfait est fatal.

Oui, Dieu, c’est l’équilibre. Êtres, Dieu pèse et crée:
À droite l’étendue, a gauche la durée;
L’évident, l’incompris;
Les éblouissements, contre-poids des désastres;
L’abîme balançant l’âme; ici tous les astres,
Et là tous les esprits.

En lui sont la raison et le centre imperdable;
Tous les balancements de l’ordre formidable
S’y règlent à la fois;

Toutes les équités forment cette âme immense;
Elle est le grand niveau de l’être; et la clémence
Y serait un faux poids.

L’absolu! l’absolu! Ni fureurs, ni faiblesses.
Impassible, étoilée, âpre, tu ne te laisses,
Au fond du ciel béni,
Violer, dans ta paix qu’aucun flot ne déborde,
Jamais, à rien, pas même à la miséricorde,
Sombre vierge Infini!

Rien ne fait vaciller l’axe, que la justice.
Chacun pèse sa vie; orgueil, sagesse ou vice.
Vivez! cherchez le mieux!
L’action pend à l’âme. Avec tout ce qu’il sème,
Chaque être a son insu se compose à lui-même
Son poids mystérieux.

La balance n’a pas le droit de faire grâce.
Elle oscille en dehors du temps et de l’espace;
Elle est la vérité;
Sous la seule équité son tremblement s’apaise.
Demande aux deux plateaux si l’immensité pèse.
Plus que l’éternité!

L’archange disparut comme, au front du Vésuve,
S’efface une fumée, ou comme, dans la cuve,
S’évanouit l’écume en tombant du pressoir.

VIII

Et je vis au-dessus de ma tête un point noir.
Et ce point noir semblait une mouche dans l’ombre.

Comme un vert rejeton sort d’une souche sombre,
Des profondeurs sortait le jour éblouissant,
Je me précipitai vers le point grandissant,
Plus prompt que les oiseaux envolés hors des branches;
C’était une lumière avec deux ailes blanches;
Et qui m’avait semblé, lorsque je l’aperçus,
Obscure, tant le ciel rayonnait-au-dessus.

Cette clarté disait:
— Pas de droite et de gauche;
Pas de haut ni de bas; pas de glaive qui fauche;
Pas de trône jetant dans l’ombre un vague éclair;
Pas de lendemain, pas d’aujourd’hui, pas d’hier;
Pas d’heure frissonnant au vol du temps rapace;
Point de temps; point d’ici, point de là; point d’espace;
Pas d’aube et pas de soir; pas de-tiare ayant
L’astre pour escarboucle à son faîte effrayant;
Pas de balance; pas de sceptre, pas:de globe;
Pas de Satan caché dans les plis de la robe;
Pas de robe; pas d’âme à la main; pas de mains;
Et vengeance, pardon, justice, mots humains.

Qui que tu sois, écoute: il est.
Qu’est-il? Renonce!

L’ombre est la question, le monde est la réponse.
Il est. C’est le vivant, le vaste épanoui!
Ce que contemple au, loin le soleil ébloui,
C’est lui: Les cieux, vous, nous; les étoiles, poussière!
Il est l’œil gouffre, ouvert au fond de la lumière,
Vu par tous les flambeaux, senti par tous les nids,

D’où l’univers jaillit en rayons infinis.
Il regarde, et c’est tout. Voir suffit au sublime,
Il crée un monde rien qu’en voyant un abîme
Et cet être qui voit, ayant toujours été,
A toujours tout créé, de toute éternité.
Quand la bouche d’en bas touche à ce nom suprême,
L’essai de la louange est presque le blasphème:
Pas d’explication donc! Fais mettre à genoux
Ta pensée, et deviens un regard; comme nous.
Pourquoi chercher les mots où ne sont plus les choses?
Le vil langage humain n’a pas: d’apothéoses.

Ce qu’Il est, est à peine entrevu du tombeau.
Il échappe aux mots noirs de l’ombre. On aurait beau
Faire une strophe avec les brises éternelles,
Et, pour en parfumer et dorer les deux ailes,
Mettre l’astre dans l’une et dans l’autre la fleur,
Et mêler tout l’azur à leur splendide ampleur,
On ne peindrait pas Dieu. Songeur, qu’on le revête
De bruit et d’aquilon, de foudre et de tempête;
Qu’on le montre éveillé, qu’on le montre dormant,
Sa respiration soulevant doucement
Toutes les profondeurs de toute l’étendue,
Remuant la comète au fond des cieux perdue,
Le vent sur son cheval, la mort sur son éclair,
Et le balancement monstrueux de la mer,
On ne le peindra pas. Lui! Lui! l’inamissible,
L’éternel, l’incréé, l’imprévu, l’impossible,
Il est. La taupe fouille et creuse, et l’aperçoit;
L’ombre dit à la taupe es-tu sûre qu’il soit?
La taupe répond: Dieu! Dieu de l’aigle est la proie.
Suppose que sur terre un seul être en Dieu croie,
Cet être, si jamais le soleil, s’éclipsait,
Remplacerait l’aurore. Et sais-tu ce que c’est
Que le fauve ouragan, tonnant et formidable?
C’est, dans les profondeurs du gouffre inabordable,
L’infini murmurant: je l’aime! à demi-voix;

Quand l’étoile rayonne, elle dit: je le vois!
Tout le cri, tout le bruit et tout l’hymne de l’homme
Avorte à dire Dieu! Le baiser seul le nomme.

J’aime!
Ici la clarté me dit:

— Si tu m’en crois,
Va-t’en. Car les rayons brûlants dont tu t’accroîs
Pourraient te consumer, frémissant, avant l’heure.
L’homme meurt d’un excès de flamme intérieure;
L’ange qui va trop loin dit: Ne restons pas là.
En voulant trop voir Dieu, Moïse chancela;
Un peu plus, il tombait du haut de cette cime,
L’œil plein des tournoiements terribles de l’abîme.

— Parle! oh! parle! criai-je à la forme de feu.

— Ô curieux du gouffre, Empédocle de Dieu,
Je parlerai, dit l’être, et même ton langage;
Car, quand dans l’infini sous vos yeux on s’engage,
Hommes, on ne peut plus toucher a ses rameaux
Sans en faire tomber vos misérables mots.

Le tout éternel sort de l’éternel atome.
De l’équation Dieu le monde est le binôme
Dieu, c’est le grand réel et le grand inconnu;
Il est; et c’est errer que dire: Il est venu.
Quoique l’impénétrable énigme le vêtisse,
Quoiqu’il n’ait ni lever, ni coucher, ni solstice,
Êtres bornés, il marque, au fond du ciel sans bord,
Vos quatre angles, levant, occident, midi, nord;
Il est X, élément du rayonnement, nombre
De l’infini, clarté formidable de l’ombre,
Lueur sur le coran comme sur le missel,
Éternelle présence à l’œil universel!
C’est lui l’autorité d’où jaillit l’âme libre;

C’est lui l’axe invisible autour duquel tout vibre,
Et l’oscillation dans l’immobilité;
Oscillation sombre, au cercle illimité,
Qui va, prodigieuse, une, inouïe, étrange,
Des oreilles de l’âne aux ailes de l’archange.
L’être sans cesse en lui se forme et se dissout;
Il est la parallèle éternelle de tout;
Il est précision, loi, règle, certitude,
Justesse, abstraction, rigueur, exactitude,
Et toute cette algèbre en tendresse se fond.
Et dans l’indéfini, l’obscur et le profond,
À travers ce qu’on nomme air et terre, flamme, onde,
Cet X a quatre bras, pour embrasser le monde,
Et, se dressant visible aux yeux morts ou déçus,
Il est croix sur la terre et s’appelle Jésus.

Hors de la terre il est l’innommé.

Chaque sphère
Le nomme en frissonnant du nom qu’elle préfère,
Mais tous les noms sur Dieu sont des flots insensés.
Quant au globe-chétif et morne où vous passez,
Hommes, l’ange a parlé d’une façon sévère;
L’homme est l’être sacré que la terre révère;
Mais l’arbre est quelque chose et la bête est quelqu’un;
La pierre et son silence, et l’herbe et son parfum;.
Vivent; l’homme, rayon, doit plaindre la poussière;
L’être est une famille où l’homme est le grand frère
Et lui, l’âme, d’en haut, il doit, dans leurs combats,
Verser tout son azur sur les âmes d’en bas;

L’homme, malgré sa haine et malgré sa démence,
Est le commencement de la lumière immense.
L’égalité dans l’ombre ébauche l’unité;
L’unité, c’est le but de la route clarté.
Âme! être, c’est aimer.

Il est.

C’est l’être extrême.
Dieu, c’est le jour sans borne et sans fin qui dit: j’aime.
Lui, l’incommensurable, il n’a point de compas;
Il ne se venge pas, il ne pardonne pas;
Son baiser éternel ignore la morsure;
Et quand on dit: justice, on suppose mesure.
Il n’est point juste; il est. Qui n’est que juste est peu.
La justice, c’est vous, humanité; mais Dieu
Est la bonté. Dieu, branche où tout oiseau se pose!
Dieu, c’est la flamme aimante au fond de toute chose.
Oh! tous sont appelés et tous seront élus.
Père, il songe au méchant pour l’aimer un peu plus.
Vivants, Dieu pénétrant en vous;-chasse le vice.
L’infini qui dans l’homme entre, y devient justice;
La justice n’étant que le rapport secret
De ce que l’homme fait à ce que Dieu ferait.
Bonté, c’est la lueur qui dore tous les faîtes;
Et, pour parler toujours, hommes, comme vous faites,
Vous qui ne pouvez voir que-la forme et le lieu,
Justice est le profil de la face de Dieu.
Vous voyez un côté, vous ne voyez pas l’autre.
Le bon, c’est le martyr; le juste n’est qu’apôtre;
Et votre infirmité, c’est que votre raison
De l’horizon humain conclut l’autre horizon.
Limités, vous prenez Dieu pour l’autre hémisphère.
Mais lui, l’être absolu, qu’est-ce qu’il pourrait faire
D’un rapport?.L’innombrable est-il fait pour chiffrer?
Non, tout dans sa bonté sombre vient s’engouffrer.
On ne sait où l’on vole, on ne sait où l’on tombe,
On nomme cela mort, néant, ténèbres, tombe,
Et, sage, fou, riant, pleurant, tremblant, moqueur,
On s’abîme éperdu dans cet immense cœur!
Dans cet azur sans fond la clémence étoilée
Elle-même s’efface, étant d’ombre mêlée!

L’être pardonné garde un souvenir secret,
Et n’ose aller trop haut; le pardon semblerait
Reproche à la prière, et Dieu veut qu’elle approche;
N’étant jamais tristesse, il n’est jamais reproche,
Enfants; et maintenant, croyez si vous voulez!

Devant le sacrifice et les cieux constellés,
Devant l’aigle effaré; devant les forêts vertes,
Devant les profondeurs dans tout être entr’ouvertes,
Hommes, on peut nier, mais l’inconvénient
C’est que l’esprit décroît et noircit en niant.
L’être fait pour l’extase et la soif infinie
Devient sarcasme, rire, ignorance, ironie;
Il n’a plus rien de saint, il n’a plus rien de cher;
Et sa tête de mort apparaît sous sa chair.
Votre t’erre niant ne serait qu’une infâme,
Et sa nuit grandirait; car retirer cette âme.
À l’univers, c’est faire un abîme au milieu.
Qui, du centre de l’être insondable, ôte Dieu,
Ôte l’Idée avec tous ses aspects, puissance,
Vérité, liberté, paix, justice, innocence;
Ôte aux êtres le droit, ôte aux forces l’aimant,
Ote la clef de voûte, et vois l’écroulement!
Je t’ai parlé ta langue, homme que je rencontre.
Et que veux-tu de plus? faut-il qu’on te le montre?
O regardeur aveugle et qui te crois voyant,
Comment te montrer Dieu, cet informé effrayant?
Comment te dire: ici finit, ici commence?
Fin et commencement sont des mots de démence.
Fin et commencement sont vos deux grands haillons.
Homme, chante ou blasphème à travers tes bâillons,;
Tu mêleras, sans dire un mot de la grande âme,
Ton blasphème à la nuit et ton hymne à la flamme:
L’idée à peine éclôt que les mots la défont.
Comment se figurer la face du profond,
Le contour du vivant sans borne, et l’attitude
De la toute-puissance et de la plénitude?

Est-ce Allah, Brahma, Pan, Jésus, que nous-voyons?
Ou Jéhovah? Rayons! rayons! rayons! rayons!
La clarté s’arrêta, comme tout éblouie.
Je m’évanouissais, et la vue et l’ouïe,
Et jusqu’aux battements du cœur s’interrompant,
S’en allaient hors de moi comme une eau se répand.

Et la clarté cria dans la profondeur noire
Où flottaient vaguement sous la brume illusoire
Ces faces de néant qu’on voit dans le trépas:

Ô Ténèbres, sachez ceci: la nuit n’est pas.

Tout est azur, aurore, aube sans crépuscule,
Et fournaise d’extase où l’âme parfum brûle.
Le noir, c’est non; et non, c’est Rien. Tout est certain.
Tout est blancheur, vertu, soleil levant, matin,
Placide éclair, rayon serein, frisson de flamme.
Un ange qui dirait: la nuit, dirait: je blâme.
Les astres ne sont pas. Ces lueurs des tombeaux
Sont fausses, et le jour ignore les flambeaux.
La constellation dans l’illusion rampe;
Le plein midi n’aurait que faire d’une lampe;
Tout rayonnement vient du centre et du milieu;
Comme il n’est qu’une aurore, il n’est qu’un soleil, Dieu,
Qui pour les yeux de chair, couverts de sombres voiles,
Pleut le jour en rayons et la nuit en étoiles.
L’âme est l’œil, il est l’astre. Elle ne voit que lui.
Tout est clarté. Le ver rampant, l’ange ébloui,
Tout, les immensités où se perdent les sondes,
Tout, ces vagues de Dieu que vous nommez les mondes,
L’apparent, le réel, vierge en robe de lin,
Homme, enfant, cieux et mers, espaces, tout est plein
D’un resplendissement d’éternité tranquille.
Comptez les milliards de siècles par cent mille,
Vous n’aurez pas dit un devant l’éternité.

Jetez toute votre ombre, ô nuits, à la clarté,
Au gouffre de splendeur que Dieu profond anime,
Et vous ne ferez pas une tache a l’abîme.
Vous n’êtes point. Au bas des cieux où nous montons,
On voit vos grandes mains qui cherchent a tâtons,
O nuits, spectres! on voit vos formes de nuées
S’approcher et grandir ou fuir diminuées,
Et le grand gouffre bleu, plein d’éblouissements,
O brumes, ne sait rien de vos écroulements,
Et le rayonnement formidable flamboie.
Ombres, vous n’êtes point. Pour être il faut qu’on voie.
Ténèbres, il n’est pas, devant les firmaments,
De ténèbres; il n’est que des aveuglements.

Des aveugles! Pourquoi? Pourquoi la loi, la-règle,
Le gland avant le chêne, et l’œuf sombre avant l’aigle?
L’aveugle est l’embryon du voyant; le voyant
Se change en lumineux; qui devient, flamboyant;
C’est la loi. Vous verrez, vous rayonnerez; ombres!
Vous serez les frontons éternels, ô décombres!
Limbes, vous serez ciel! Vous l’êtes déjà, nuit!
De même que déjà le germe, c’est le fruit;
Que déjà dans le gland, monde que l’herbe ignore,
Avec toute sa feuille éclatante d’aurore,
Avec son noir branchage où la lune blêmit,
Solide et frissonnant, le grand chêne frémit,
Plein de cris, de chansons, d’hymens et de querelles;
Et que dans l’œuf profond déjà tremblent les ailes!
Devoir être, c’est être. Oui, la fange est cristal:
Chrysalide du bien qu’on appelle le mal,
Ne te plains pas; un fil à Dieu même te noue.
Le réel, c’est la roue, et non le tour de roue.
larves, vous serez. Attendez votre tour.
Puisque le papillon qu’elle doit être un jour;
Est là-haut, ouvrant l’aile; et, joyeux, tourbillonne,
Puisque le paradis qu’il doit être-rayonne,
La chenille n’est pas, l’enfer n’existe point.

À la vie à venir le sort présent se joint.
L’être, qui n’est vivant que complet, se déploie
Composé d’aucune ombre et de toute la joie,
Ne gardant du passé que l’extase, et rempli
D’un souvenir céleste et d’un divin oubli.

L’univers, c’est un livre, et des yeux qui le lisent.
Ceux qui sont dans la nuit ont raison quand ils disent:
Rien n’existe! Car c’est dans un rêve qu’ils sont.

Rien n’existe que lui; le flamboiement profond,
Et les âmes, les grains de lumière, les mythes,
Les moi mystérieux, atomes sans limites,
Qui vont vers le grand moi, leur centre et leur aimant;
Points touchant au zénith par le rayonnement,
Ainsi qu’un vêtement subissant la matière,
Traversant tour à tour dans l’étendue entière
La formule de chair propre à chaque milieu,
Ici la sève, ici le sang, ici le feu;
Blocs, arbres, griffes, dents, fronts pensants, auréoles;
Retournant aux cercueils comme à des alvéoles;
Mourant pour s’épurer, tombant pour s’élever,
Sans fin, ne se perdant que pour se retrouver,

Chaîne d’êtres qu’en haut l’échelle d’or réclame,
Vers l’éternel foyer volant de flamme en flamme,
Juste éclos du pervers, bon sorti du méchant;
Montant, montant, montant sans cesse, et le cherchant,
Et l’approchant toujours, mais sans jamais l’atteindre,
Lui, l’être qu’on ne peut toucher, ternir, éteindre,
Le voyant, le vivant, sans mort, sans nuit, sans mal,
L’idée énorme au fond de l’immense idéal!

La matière n’est pas et l’âme seule existe.

Rien n’est mort, rien n’est faux, rien n’est noir, rien n’est triste;

Personne n’est puni, personne n’est banni.
Tous les cercles qui sont dans le cercle infini
N’ont que de l’idéal dans leurs circonférences:

Astres, mondes, soleils, étoiles, apparences,
Masques d’ombre ou de feu, faces des visions,
Globes, humanités, terres, créations,
Univers où jamais on ne voit rien qui dorme,
Points d’intersection du nombre et de la forme,
Chocs de l’éclair puissance et du rayon beauté,
Rencontres de la vie avec l’éternité,
Ô fumée, écoutez! Et vous, écoutez, âmes,
Qui seules resterez étant souffles et flammes,
Esprits purs qui mourez et naissez tour à tour:
Dieu n’a qu’un front: Lumière! et n’a qu’un nom: Amour!
Je tremblais; comme si, prêt à changer de forme,
J’eusse été foudroyé par un baiser énorme.
La clarté flamboyait, transparente et debout.
Et je criai: lumière, ô lumière, est-ce tout?

Et la clarté me dit: silence. Le prodige
Sort éternellement du mystère, te dis-je.
Aveugle qui croit lire et fou qui croit savoir!

IX

Et je vis au-dessus de ma tête un point noir.

Fragments

Que ce poème au vol de feu
Effleure le siècle où nous sommes,
Qu'il passe vite et brille peu,
Et qu'à travers l'oubli des hommes,
Sombre, il s'en retourne vers Dieu.

Fragments des *Voix*

Mais les mages hagards, les sages inquiets,
Les noirs explorateurs des mystérieux faîtes,
Les contempteurs soudain transformés en prophètes,
Comment ont-ils été par la foi terrassés,
Comment ont-ils crié sous l'évidence: Assez!
Demande à l'ineffable, au gouffre, au phénomène!
Qui peut le raconter dans votre langue humaine?
Ils méditaient, sondant l'inconnu, regardant.
L'espace, ici flot vague et là cratère ardent,
Le grand fond immobile et sourd, la violence
Des visions mêlée à l'éternel silence,
Rien et Tout, le roulis gigantesque des cieux
Dans on ne sait quel vent lugubre et monstrueux,
Des tours d'ombre dont l'œil ne peut compter les marches,
Des déluges roulant d'inexprimables arches,
La pluie immense au loin rayant les infinis,
Des lueurs blanchissant des masques d'Érynnis,
Des passages subits de méduses, frappées
D'une clarté pareille à des reflets d'épées,
Des ponts difformes, noirs, allant hors du réel
Sinistres, bleuissant vaguement près du ciel,
L'ascension sans but et la chute sans bornes;
Voilà ce que voyaient ces contemplateurs mornes,
Et tristes, ils disaient: « Cette ombre n'est pas Dieu."
Far moments les fléaux, dans des souffles de feu,

Survenaient, et taisaient, comme un esquif sans voiles,
Sombrer un monde au fond d’une écume d’étoiles,
La vague des chaos montait engloutissant
Quelque éden encor plein d’un sourire innocent,
Comme un groupe ennemi qui gronde et qui s’insulte,
Les éléments fuyaient avec un grand tumulte,
Tout croulait dans le vide où nul regard n’ atteint
Et rien ne vivait plus dans l’univers éteint;
Or à l’heure où, devant ces sombres catastrophes,
Voyants aveugles, saints tremblants, vains philosophes,
Ils crispaient dans l’espace horrible leur poignet,
A l’heure où la stupeur du doute les gagnait,
Éperdus, ils voyaient subitement des astres
De confirmation poindre dans ces désastres,
Ou sortir brusquement d’un nuage ébloui
Un tonnerre hurlant dans les gouffres: C’est lui!

Parmi les visions, parmi les paraboles,
Ils vont, ils vont, ils vont. Et ces sagesses folles
Cherchent Dieu, le front pâle et baigné de sueurs;
Et tout ce qu’on peut voir de farouches lueurs,
Tous les éclairs d’été d’une chaude soirée,
La trombe, tous les yeux d’une meute effarée,
Les passages subits d’astres dans la vapeur,
N’expriment pas l’effroi, le trouble, la stupeur,
De toutes ces raisons, de toutes ces pensées,
Dans cette poursuite âpre et terrible lancées.

Homme, tu sentiras, hagard, frémissant, pâle,
Dans ton être éperdu pénétrer par degrés
Les profondeurs sans fond, les cieux démesurés;
Tune trouveras plus de mots pour tes pensées;
Tu chercheras en toi les ombres effacées

De ton humanité disparue et fuyant.
Tu deviendras sinistre, impossible, effrayant;
Et tu te sentiras fumée au fond de l’ombre;
Tu voudras préciser un lieu, compter un nombre,
Et tu ne pourras plus, n’étant qu’un front rêvant,
Et qu’un sombre esprit vague arraché par le vent;
Tu seras larve et nuit; car le songeur à force
De faire avec la vie et les choses divorce,
Se dilate au delà du terrestre milieu,
Se fond dans l’infini, se décompose en Dieu,
Et mêle lentement sa lueur et sa forme?
Avec l’obscurité de la nuée énorme.

Prends garde à la recherche effrayante de Dieu!
Heureux qui se limite et sage qui s’enferme!
Ne te hasarde pas dans ce puits!
    Le plus ferme
Arrive à je ne sais quelle âpre pâmoison
De son entendement par excès d’horizon.
On dit: allons! on veut lutter, chercher, combattre
On se décide; on entre; on fait deux pas, trois, quatre,
On songe; on s’aperçoit qu’on est dans l’inconnu,
On frémit; on voudrait ne pas être venu;
Mais comment reculer? le précipice pousse.
On sent la profondeur vertigineuse et douce,
Le formidable amour de l’abîme, et l’aimant
Du ciel épouvantable, impossible et charmant;
C’est fini. L’on se jette au sans fond, au sans bornes,
On franchit des milieux mystérieux et mornes;
On traverse la nue et l’énigme et l’horreur
De l’incommensurable et monstrueuse erreur,
Et la création dans l’étendue, à l’aise,
Astre, dans cet azur, mer, sous cette falaise.
On rencontre Rousseau, de Maistre qui vous mord,

Platon évanoui, Pascal fou, Bacon mort;
On rencontre le bien, le mal, la conscience,
Un brouillard, la sagesse, une nuit, la science;
On tâche d’abriter sa raison sous sa main;
Le vent de ce voyage étrange et surhumain
Renverse de l’esprit la flamme aventurière;
Le flambeau frissonnant voudrait fuir en arrière;
Et la lampe pâlit, quel qu’en soit le porteur;
Et, quoi qu’il ait d’essor, d’audace et de hauteur,
Le chercheur quel qu’il soit, cerveau fier, raison sûre,
S’effraie, et cependant va toujours... — À mesure
Qu’il prend plus de réel et de vie, et qu’il tient
Plus d’idéal, il tremble, et, sentant qu’il devient
De plus en plus néant et de plus en plus cendre,
Aveugle de trop voir et sourd de trop entendre,
Dans l’éblouissement du ciel toujours plus blanc,
Effaré, désormais plus emporté qu’allant,
Ivre de tout ce sombre azur qui le pénètre,
Sentant l’écrasement de l’abîme sous l’être,
Respirant mal l’air vierge et fatal du zénith,
Il avance, et blanchit, et s’efface; et finit
Pat se dissoudre, avec son doute ou sa prière,
Dans une énormité de foudre et de lumière.

Quelle chimère as-tu l’audace de couver?
Pourquoi viens-tu rôder ici? Crois-tu trouver
Quelque part un Olympe, un Ararat, un Pinde,
Et refaire une Égypte, une Chaldée, une Inde?
Es-tu de ceux qui font commerce habituel
Avec un bréviaire, avec un rituel?
Dis-tu: — Le voile saint, le rideau des idées
Doit être en telle étoffe, avoir tant de coudées;
L’ange chante tel psaume en rallumant le soir
La lampe de l’étoile accrochée au ciel noir?
Dis, réponds. Te faut-il des religions faites

De livres, de docteurs, de dimanches et fêtes,
Ayant leur baïram, leur pâque, leur avent?
Crois-tu que le nuage et la foudre et le vent
Sont des diacres servant la messe des tempêtes?
Crois-tu qu'un météore, un astre sur nos têtes,
Soit un prélat de l'ombre ou bien un chambellan
Accomplissant, aux jours marqués, tant de fois l'an,
Le cérémonial énorme du prodige?
Crois-tu qu'il faut à Dieu l'étiquette qu'exige
Bronzini pour le pape ou Dangeau pour le roi?
Est-ce ce livre-là que tu viens dans l'effroi
Chercher, ô vain passant qu'un jour d'en bas éclaire?
Espères-tu trouver dans l'ombre un formulaire
Du gouffre, contenant l'heure, le temps, le lieu,
A telle page l'âme, à telle page Dieu?
Crois-tu dans notre nuit rencontrer des mêlées
De dogmes, de rayons, de choses révélées?
Es-tu, parle, un croyant de bibles? un de ceux
Qui cherchent l'éternel dans un sanscrit chanceux?
Supposes-tu que Dieu passe son temps à faire
Des testaments qu'il jette ensuite à votre sphère?
Des règlements disant: — Vis de cette façon.
Tel jour, mange la chair, et, tel jour, le poisson.
L'Amérique n'est pas, n'étant point révélée.
Qu'à jamais Josué rature Galilée! —
Dis, te figures-tu l'esprit humain ancré
Dans quelque texte au fond d'un papyrus sacré?
Bible, ou Koran? prends-tu Dieu pour un bouquiniste
Qui, pour ces fureteurs livides, Manès triste,
Moïse, Orphée errant de sommet en sommet,
Pythagore, Thalès, Socrate, Mahomet,
Etale dans un coin quelques vieux exemplaires
De l'infini, tombés des profondeurs stellaires,
Et les expose ouverts à qui veut lire, au bord
Du mystère, du ciel, du destin, de la mort,
S'informant peu, tandis qu'aux soleils il s'adosse,
Si quelque page vole et tombe dans la fosse,

Et laissant feuilleter tous ces livres, eddas,
Lévitiques, phédons, pentateuques, védas,
Sur le quai du néant par le vent de l’abîme?
Ou serais-tu quelqu’un de ces menteurs qu’anime
L’imposture, lugubre et redoutable esprit,
Qui tâchent de trouver le divin manuscrit,
Ou du moins d’en saisir au vol quelque passage,
Pour en faire, plus tard, prétextant un message.
Quelque impur code humain, dur, inique, inégal;
Et qui, selon qu’ils sont Omar ou bien Fingal,
Forgent un ciel sérail, un paradis d’épées,
Rêvant la femme nue ou les têtes coupées,
Compliquant l’infini d’un vice ou d’un climat,
Et réduisant la bible énorme à leur format?
Qui que tu sois, prends garde aux formules écrite
Sache que les autels, les cultes et les rites,
Les korans, les talmuds, ont besoin pour durer
Que nul principe faux ne les vienne altérer.
La superstition qui leur tend sa mamelle,
Les infecte et les tue; et quand l’homme se mêle
A ces religions que vous avez en bas,
Elles pourrissent vite et ne se gardent pas.

Le fond de l’être est clos par un nuage obscur,
Traversé de lueurs, aux prodiges semblable,
Voile de l’insondable et de l’incalculable,
Sans limite, sans fin, sans contour, sans milieu;
C’est ce nuage noir que l’homme appelle Dieu.
Un lugubre aquilon qui souffle en ce mystère,
Et qui vient par moments jusque sur votre terre
Des chercheurs inquiets éteindre les flambeaux,
A ce sombre nuage arrache des lambeaux,
Et ces lambeaux, épars sous les nocturnes dômes,
Flottent dans l’ombre avec des formel de fantômes;
Et Jupiter chassé par le vent et Vénus,

Moloch, Mithra, Brahma, Cybèle aux huit seins nus,
Odin, Isis, des sphynx de Thèbes saluée,
Sont les vagues flocons de l’énorme nuée.

Oui, ces spectres, de feux rougis, d’aube dorés,
Ces aspects vains, voilà ce que vous adorez;
Oui, vos religions naissent de ces passages
De vents et de brouillards dans l’esprit de vos sages;
Oui, ces arrachements du nuage sacré,
Ces fragments monstrueux du grand Tout ignoré,
Qui dans le crépuscule errent, et se déforment,
Sinistres, sur le front des hommes qui s’endorment,
Ces haillons d’infini, vus des pâles mortels,
Sont rêves dans vos nuits et dieux sur vos autels.

A de certains instants, quand on ne sait quel vent
Tourne vers l’infini l’homme, pâle vivant,
Quand cette énigme: Dieu, sur votre terre sourde
Apparaît, triste, énorme, et pour l’homme trop lourde,
Parmi tous les esprits, philosophes, songeurs,
Savants, de l’horizon épiant les rougeurs,
Entre tous les penseurs, figures inquiètes,
Ceux qu’elle émeut le plus, ce sont les noirs poètes.
Dieu! mot fatal! il luit; peut-être il va tonner,
Il flamboie, et l’on voit les bardes s’étonner
Ainsi que des lions au seuil de leur tanière,
Les poètes étant situés de manière
A sentir les premiers tous les souffles qui font
Frissonner des lueurs dans l’abîme sans fond.
Les Lucrèces, les Jobs, les blêmes Jérémies,
La lèvre émue encor de leurs strophes frémies,
Courbés sous l’épouvante, épars dans les courroux,
Ont l’air d’esquifs perdus et de navires fous,
Et l’on voit se dresser, vagues dans les décombres,
Tous ces grands effarés, porteurs des harpes sombres!

Quelques-uns, corps à corps, avec des inconnus
Luttent; et tout est l'ombre; et que sont devenus
Tant de systèmes vains, tant de cris, tant de rêves,
Tant d'écume que l'homme a jetée à ses grèves?
Et chacun interroge ou prie avec frayeur;
Et l'un parle au marin, et l'autre au fossoyeur.

Hélas, l'homme, jouet de l'élément, en proie
Au sol qui le dévore, au ciel qui le foudroie,
Fatal, débile, et né dans un accablement,
Ayant pour se guider sa raison qui lui ment
Et le peu de clarté que l'instinct lui procure,
Lutte éternellement avec la force obscure!
Vois dans le pli que fait le coude d'un rocher
Ce hameau de pêcheurs, groupant sous son clocher
Quelques vieux toits parmi des barques échouées.
La ceinture sans fin des vagues dénouées
L'enveloppe et le presse et l'étreint, noir serpent.
Il est là, seul, chétif; et sur lui se répand
L'orage monstrueux, et l'ouragan l'assiège;
Et l'océan n'est grand que pour lui tendre un piège.
Le colossal nuage où fuit l'aigle chasseur
Et que l'espace emplit de toute sa noirceur,
L'éclair, le bruit, le flot où roule le cadavre,
Toute l'ombre se heurte au mur du petit havre;
Et c'est l'immensité, c'est la nuit, c'est la mort
Qui se rouille aux anneaux de la chaîne du port.

Ce point imperceptible où, jamais assouvie,
L'onde écume et s'acharne, hommes, c'est votre vie.
Eh bien, étant si peu, quelle folie as-tu
D'escalader ce ciel par tous les vents battu,
D'ailler, toi qui, tremblant, as déjà tant de peine
A porter seulement l'aspect du phénomène,
Toi le terrassé, toi l'errant, toi le banni,

Toi, le vaincu du gouffre, attaquer l’infini!

Que veux-tu? quelle est donc cette audace insensée
De jeter comme une ancre au gouffre, la pensée?
Le spectre voilé rit de toi, le spectre nu.
Quel besoin l’homme a-t-il de sonder l’inconnu?
N’a-t-il donc pas assez déjà de se défendre
Contre l’énormité qui le couvre de cendre
Et de brume et de trouble et d’énigme et de deuil!
Naufragé, laisse-toi ruisseler sur recueil;
Cet aquilon, ce choc, cette horreur, cette pluie,
C’est l’ombre qui, terrible, à ton néant s’essuie;
C’est cet inconnu même, ô songeur, qui sur toi
Tombe avec le frisson, la souffrance et l’effroi!
Pendant que le vent roule et verse sur ta tête
Toute l’obscurité dans toute la tempête,
Toi, jeté dans l’espace et pourtant au cachot,
Recueille-toi, courbé sous ce souffle d’en haut,
Et, sans interroger l’horrible ciel sublime,
Sur tes membres glacés laisse couler l’abîme!

Quelle pensée as-tu d’allumer ton esprit
Au bord du noir problème où la raison périt?
Pourquoi ne pas laisser les grandes ailes d’ombre,
Songeur, se déployer sur cet univers sombre?
Pourquoi vouloir leurrer d’un feu follet qui fuit
L’antique Adam, errant dans l’insondable nuit?

Sous ces voûtes de brume où tourbillonne l’heure,
Où le temps filtre et coule et, goutte à goutte, pleure,
Où, minute à minute, hier, aujourd’hui, demain,
On entend dans la nuit tomber le genre humain,
Dans cette immensité de l’ombre indivisible,
Toute lampe essayée est un effort risible,
La foi meurt, la science est un sombre embarras.

Que gagneras-tu donc quand tu réussiras
A jeter des clartés farouches dans le vide?
Quand tu feras blêmir quelque Babel livide,
Ou, dans les profondeurs dont tout être est banni,
Le spectre monstrueux du pont de l’infini?
Quand tu feras glisser des lueurs sur ses arches,
Et quand, triste, au delà de la terre où tu marches,
Songeur, tu blanchiras de ton pâle flambeau
Trois ou quatre degrés du dedans du tombeau?
Va, renonce, il n’est plus de lumière possible.
Tous les prodiges sont rentrés dans l’invisible.
L’Ombre est sur tout. Qui donc, fût-il le plus aimant
Qui donc pourra lever ou faire seulement
Remuer un instant les grands voiles funèbres,
Les plis démesurés du manteau de ténèbres?
C’est la faute de l’homme, hélas, si tout est noir.
Le jour, cet obstiné qui ressemble à l’espoir,
Ne demandait pas mieux peut-être que d’éclore;
Mais tout le mal terrestre a soufflé sur l’aurore;
La blanche aurore est morte, et l’homme est dans la nuit.
Il lui restait encor, dans le temple où Dieu luit,
L’effrayant chandelier dont la flamme constante
Pendant qu’ils écrivaient, éclaira les Septante;
Mais il n’a même plus ce foyer du vrai jour;
Les sept vices de l’homme ont, chacun à leur tour,
Éteint un des flambeaux de la lampe à sept branches;
Maintenant c’est fini. L’abîme où tu te penches,
L’obscurité lugubre aux vagues épaisseurs,
Le firmament formé de toutes les noirceurs,
Cet océan de nuit où l’esprit flotte et sombre,
Rit de te voir risquer ta lanterne en cette ombre
Où dans la main de Dieu s’est éteint le soleil.

Oui, je le dis, la mort est pleine de matin;

Tout le sépulcre n’est qu’un point du jour lointain;
A l’heure où sur leurs fronts la tombe va se clore,
Le coq, l’oiseau sacré de la sereine aurore,
Est nommé par Socrate et nommé par Jésus.

Que ceux qui cherchent Dieu sachent qu’ils cherchent l’ombre,
Etreindre l’infini, c’est le songe du nombre;
Saisir l’éternité, c’est le songe du temps.
Avec vos grains de sable entasser vos instants,
Faire un monceau de vœux, de systèmes, d’algèbres,
Devant la pyramide immense des ténèbres,
Avec l’esprit humain tâter l’esprit divin,
C’est inutile et fou, c’est imprudent, c’est vain,
C’est triste; et l’impossible est là qui vous regarde.
Que cherche le devin? que demande le barde?
Qu’espère le poète? Où vont ces curieux?
Emplir d’éternité ses yeux mystérieux,
Égarer dans l’obscur son vol enthousiaste,
Être de l’inconnu le sombre Ecclésiaste,
Croire qu’on va dans l’âpre et haute région,
Puiser de quoi bâtir une religion
Qui, pure et sans erreur, sur les autres s’élève,
C’est le plus effrayant précipice du rêve.

Vivants, l’homme pour l’homme est l’être essentiel
L’homme a la terre; eh bien, qu’il laisse là le ciel.
La terre doit suffire à la race adamite.
Hommes, le limité doit vivre en sa limite;
Hommes, l’être fini doit vivre dans sa fin;
Et boire, s’il a soif, et manger, s’il a faim,
Et fuir l’ombre où l’attend la chimère exécrée.
Ce n’est point sans raison que la loi qui vous crée
Arrondit, bornant tout comme avec un compas,
L’horizon sous vos yeux, la terre sous vos pas;
Vous êtes enfermés dans un cercle, la vie.

Restez-y. Tout effort qui va trop haut, dévie.
La pesanteur vous tient par les pieds; votre chair
S’essouffle, et ne peut rien respirer hors de l’air.
O vivants, votre race est d’un monde héritière;
Vous avez à vous seuls une nature entière;
Contentez-vous-en. L’homme a les larges chemins,
Dans le front la pensée et la semence aux mains.
Ne volez pas, marchez. La charrue à la terre
Laisse un sillon vivant, fécond, solide, austère;
Le navire en fuyant laisse, déjà moins sûr,
Un sillage sur l’eau; l’aile, rien, dans l’azur.
Que l’homme creuse donc, force au vrai seul guidée,
Avec le double soc du cœur et de l’idée,
Sur son monde, par lui de moissons d’or vêtu,
Que l’homme creuse donc, force au vrai seul guidée,
Avec le double soc du cœur et de l’idée,
Sur son monde, par lui de moissons d’or vêtu,
Un sillon de science, un sillon de Vertu;
Qu’il fasse de son globe un jardin de lumière;
Le sort vous a donné la matière première,
Cette ferre à pétrir, ce bloc d’air, de feu, d’eau,
D’argile, à délivrer de l’horreur, son fardeau;
Monde, dont vous devez féconder les tempêtes,
Qui, jadis, s’est nommé le monstre, étant aux bêtes,
Et qui, repris par l’homme, apprivoisé, dompté,
Sauvé, doit s’appeler un jour l’Humanité,
Voilà l’œuvre. Restez dans cette sainte tâche.
En voulant saisir Dieu, c’est la terre qu’on lâche;
Et la terre est le but. Bornez vos pas hardis.
C’est sur terre qu’il faut chercher le paradis.
Laissez le ciel au ciel. L’homme, qui là-haut sombre,
Sur terre est de la vie et dans le ciel de l’ombre;
Qu’il reste, être réel, dans la réalité.
En marche, argile! O chair esclave, en liberté!
Debout! debout! debout! Sur la terre engourdie
Allume le progrès comme un grand incendie!
Lave l’or des limons; tire le mal du bien!

Impose un rail de fer au sable nubien;
Révolte-toi f Réplique au désert par la ville;
Les fléaux sont tyrans; fais ta guerre servile!
Les uns sont des lions, les autres sont des porcs,
Combats, nettoie! Et règne, et vis! — Creuse des ports,
Perce des rocs, conduis des eaux, bâtis des voûtes,
Sur le vieux monde pris croise un filet de routes;
Sut le globe à grands pas promène-toi, semeur
De mouvement, de bruit, de foule et de rumeur!
Entre deux coups de bec de vautour, Prométhée
A crié, par-dessus la nuit épouvantée:
«Hommes, soyez titans, et remuez les monts,
Secouez la lumière aux yeux des dieux démons!
Levez-vous, levez-vous comme l’aurore blonde,
Hommes, et, dieux vous-même, éblouissez le monde!”
C’est-à-dire, allez droit au progrès, marchez-y!
Vous avez sous vos pieds, nommes, peuple choisi,
Sous vous, sous votre esprit, sous votre destinée,
Par l’antique chaos la terre assassinée.
De cette grande morte arrachez les linceuls,
Et ressuscitez-là! Vous le pouvez, vous seuls.
Sondez la profondeur du flot qui vous submerge;
Violez la forêt, cette effrayante vierge;
Peuplez, plantez, greffez, labourez, défrichez,
Éclairez! Dédaignez, sur le grand but penchés,
La rêverie ingrate, aveuglante, énervante!
La pesanteur est reine; homme, fais-la servante;
La matière est le poids; fais-en le portefaix;
Réunis l’Atlantique au Pacifique; fais
Des baisers d’océans sous tes pieds formidables;
Coupe les isthmes; rends les neiges fécondables;
Sois partout, sur la terre et sur la mer, épars;
Vivifie et transforme; ouvre de toutes parts
Les sciences sur l’ombre ainsi que des paupières
Aux croupes du chaos attache des croupières;
Sois le vivant ayant l’idéal pour labeur,
Mais l’idéal terrestre et vrai; sois le courbeur

Terrible et rayonnant des têtes monstrueuses,
Que mordent de côté les gueules tortueuses,
Mais qui, sûr de demain qu'il tient par aujourd'hui
Dédaigne la morsure - ayant la vie en lui.
Abats l'échafaud! Rompt les fers! Brise les piquet!
Donne aux pôles l'été! Donne avril aux tropiques!
Soit le libérateur du globe enfin heureux!
Tu ne vois qu'un côté, le côté ténébreux;
La création noire, âpre, vertigineuse,
Te cache du grand Tout la face lumineuse;
Tu n'as qu'à faire un signe, et tout change; et voilà
Que ces moteurs sans nom qu'Archimède attela,
Les gaz, ces ouvriers, les aimants, ces cyclopes,
Les forces soulevant toutes les enveloppes,
Les chevaux Éléments et les Fléaux dragons
Font tourner la nature horrible sur ses gonds!
Sois le dompteur géant par qui tout s'émancipe.
Laisse Dieu. Fais le monde homme. Fais-toi principe.

Laisse Dieu dans son ciel comme il te laisse en bas
Suer tes durs labeurs, saigner tes durs combats.
Laisse l'éternité tranquille. Sois la vie.
Sois l'inquiet désir que le réel convie;
Sois, sur l'altier chemin du vrai, du bon, du beau,
Le grand coureur humain qui porte le flambeau,
Le crieur, le marcheur par qui les choses vivent,
Et que tous les progrès pêle-mêle poursuivent;
Sois le fougueux, l'ardent, l'orageux, l'agité,
Et ne t'occupe pas de la sérénité!

L'absolu vous ignore. Ignorez-le. Vous, hommes,
Avancez, travaillez; après, dormez vos sommes;
Ne vous égarez pas dans les espaces fous.
Car, s'il est à quelqu'un, le ciel n'est pas à vous.
Il est des visiteurs dont cette solitude,
Redoutable, a fini par prendre l'habitude;
L'éclair y plonge et fuit; le pur rayon vermeil,

Le temps qu’on ouvre l’œil, arrive du soleil;
L’azur a pour passant le pâle météore;
La comète d’un bond va du soir à l’aurore,
Prompte, ignorée, aveugle, épouvantablement,
Elle franchit de part en part le firmament,
Et retourne, d’un coup de sa lugubre queue,
De l’immensité noire à l’immensité bleue.
Ces farouches oiseaux sont faits pour ce grand vol.
Mais vous, je vous l’ai dit, vous portez le licol
Du globe, de la chair, de la mort, de la vie.
N’ayez donc pas de l’ombre une inutile envie.
Vivez dans ce qui germe et non dans ce qui fuit.
Ne mettez pas le pied sur l’escalier de nuit.
L’énormité, muette, aveugle, continue,
Toujours sinistrement voilée et toujours nue,
Pleine d’un inconnu dont vous ne pouvez point
Distinguer un contour, même quand le jour point,
Toute faite de nuit, de silence, d’abîme,
Sans écho, sans reflet, sans fond, sans bord, sans cime
Ouvre et forme sur vous ses gouffres étoiles,
Vit, songe, et ne sait pas ce que vous lui voulez.

Viens-tu de l’infini feuilleter le dossier?
Espères-tu trouver la glose d’un Dacier
En marge de la nue et des autres sans nombre,
Et des notes au bas de la page et de l’ombre?
Dis, te figures-tu que les éthers, remplis
De brumes et de feux mêlant leurs larges plis,
Les globes, l’étendue aux livides frontières,
Sont un livre classé par ordre de matières
Où le Très-Haut, voilé par les bleus horizons,
Prouve son existence et donne ses raisons?
Crois-tu que Dieu, — s’il est, — prévoyant dans sa sphère
Toutes les questions que tu comptes lui faire,
N’a pu se hasarder à créer l’univers,

Les espaces au vol des tourbillons ouverts,
Le vaste monde où rien n’hésite et ne dévie,
Les flots d’êtres roulant sous les souffles de vie,
L’azur reparaissant dès que la brume a fui,
Qu’en bonne forme avec les pièces à l’appui?
Crois-tu que l’inconnu se hâte de descendre
S’il s’entend appeler par toi, le grain de cendre,
Qu’il va, toi présidant, répondre à l’examen,
Et t’éclairer, tenant les documents en main,
Le but de tout, du jour, de la nuit, de toi-même?
Crois-tu que l’éternel va, sans l’azur suprême,
T’expliquer l’infini peuplé dans tes conseils,
Et te justifier les cieux et les soleils?

Quoi! t’imagines-tu, songeur, qu’on paisse avoir
Une discussion avec l’horreur sacrée?
Que l’air va te conter comment l’idéal crée?
Crois-tu que la rumeur orageuse des flots
Chicane ou complimente, entre deux noirs sanglots,
Manon sur les vedas, Moïse sur les nombres;
Et que les quatre vents, tournant leurs clairons sombres
Au nord, à l’orient, à l’occident, au sud,
Grondent pour le Phédon ou contre le Talmud?
Crois-tu que Sirius et Mars sont une glose?
Crois-tu que le semoun ne soit pas autre chose
Que le ciel qui disserte et que l’inflexion
De sa voix répondant à quelque objection?
Crois-tu que le prodige éternel se dissipe
Comme une opinion d’Orose ou d’Hégesippe?
Crois-tu que le matin va te faire un traité
De l’Être abstrait, du Verbe et de la Trinité?
Penses-tu que le bleu, le profond, l’empyrée,
Et que la vaste nuit pâle et désespérée
Tremble aux négations que tu vas lui lancer,

Et qu’avec un dilemme on puisse embarrasser
La comète, qui vient du gouffre, et qu’on réfute
Le soir triste, apportant les autres dans sa chute?

Jette de la logique à sa grève déserte,
Mais sans finir par donc ni commencer par certe.
L’ombre est un grand hymen, l’abîme est un grand lit;
L’Être emplit l’étendue et l’emplit et l’emplit;
Sans qu’on sache comment les globes se soutiennent,
Au même point des cieux les planètes reviennent;
Les mondes, monstrueux et beaux, uns et divers,
Tous les objets créés, bêtes, monts, rameaux verts,
L’homme par la pensée et la fleur par la tige,
Entrent dans le miracle et sortent du prodige;
L’air frémit, l’arbre croît, l’oiseau chante, l’eau fuit,
Et des lumières vont jusqu’au fond de la nuit;
L’illusion serait étrange, que t’en semble,
De voir dans ce splendide et redoutable ensemble,
Dans ce flot de la vie et dans ce noir torrent,
Un docteur de Sorbonne énorme pérorant.

O Dieu! problème! essence insondable! unité!
Si haute vérité qu’elle touche à la fable!
Tu veux t’imaginer, homme, cet ineffable!
Ah! tu le veux toucher et voir absolument!
Soit Édifie, avec n’importe quel ciment,
Sculpte dans les azurs, dans les brouillards funèbres,
Mets sur le piédestal monstrueux des ténèbres
Un être ayant le monde entier pour fondement;
Construis quelqu’un d’immense avec ton firmament,
Avec ton empyrée aux splendides pilastres,
Avec ta terre, avec ta mer, avec tes astres;

Espèce de colosse abîme, ouvrant des yeux
Faits de tous les rayons du ciel prodigieux,
Ayant au front l’essaim des esprits et des dives,
Et, pareil au géant que Rhodes sur deux rives
Bâtit et qui tenait dans sa main une tour,
Ayant un pied dans l’ombre et l’autre sur le jour;
Oui, mêle à ses cheveux, profusions obscures,
Les pléiades, Cancer, Vénus, les Dioscures,
Et tous ces soleils d’or qu’on voit s’enchevêtrer,
J’y consens; et je veux que tu fasses entrer
Dans la construction de la sombre figure
Tout ce que rêve l’homme et le prêtre et l’augure,
Le tonnerre, le vent, l’éclair, l’illusion,
Toute l’énormité de la création
Et de la grande nuit redoutable et muette;
Bien. Que concluras-tu de cette statuette?
Croiras-tu t’être fait une image de Dieu?

*

Et, sombre, j’attendis; puis je continuai:

— Quoi! l’homme tomberait, hagard, exténué,
Comme le moucheron qui bat la vitre blême!
Quoi! tout aboutirait à du néant suprême!
Tout l’effort des chercheurs frémissants se perdrait!
L’homme habiterait l’ombre et serait au secret!
Marcher serait errer! l’aile serait punie!
L’aurore, ô cieux profonds, serait une ironie! —

Alors, debout, levant la voix, levant les bras,
Éperdu, je criai:
— Cela ne se peut pas!
Grand Inconnu, méchant ou boni grand Invisible!

Je te le dis en face, Être! c’est impossible! —

*

Une troisième fois, dans l’effrayant ciel noir
On éclata de rire.
Et muet, sans pouvoir
Deviner d’où venait cette gaîté terrible,
Je regardai, lutteur frémissant, l’ombre horrible.

Dans l’obscurité sourde, impalpable, inouïe,
Je me retrouvai seul, mais je n’étais plus en moi;
Ou du moins, dans ma tête ouverte aux vents d’effroi,
Je sentis, sans pourtant que l’ombre et le mystère
Eussent cassé le fil qui me lie à la terre,
Monter, grossir, entrer, presque au dernier repli,
Comme une crue étrange et terrible d’oubli;
Je sentis, dans la forme obscure pour moi-même
Que je suis et qui, brume, erre dans le problème
Presque s’évanouir tout l’être antérieur;
Si bien que le fantôme et l’effrayant rieur
Et tous les êtres noirs sortis du gouffre énorme
N’étaient plut qu’un nuage en ma mémoire informe,
Et que mon souvenir en un instant perdit
Tout ce que Légion par cent voix m’avait dit.
A peine de ma vie avais-je encor l’idée,
Et ce que jusqu’alors, larve aux lueurs guidée,
J’avais nommé mon âme était je ne sais quoi
Dont je n’étais plus sûr et qui flottait en moi.
Il ne restait de moi qu’une soif de connaître,
Une aspiration vers ce qui pourrait être,
Une bouche voulant boire un peu d’eau qui fuit,
Fût-ce tu creux de la main fatale de la nuit.

III. Le Jour

Et ce point prit bientôt la forme d'un suaire.

Ses plis vagues jetaient une odeur d'ossuaire;
Et sous le drap hideux et livide on sentait
Un de ces êtres noirs sur qui la nuit se tait.

C'était de ce linceul qu'était sorti le rire
Qui m'avait par trois fois troublé jusqu'au délire.
Sans que l'Être le dît, je le compris. Mon sang
Se glaça; je frémis.
   L'être parla:

    — Passant,
Écoute. — Tu n'as vu jusqu'ici que des songes,
Que de vagues lueurs flottant sur des mensonges,
Que les aspects confus qui passent dans les vents
Ou tremblent dans la nuit pour vous autres vivants.
Mais maintenant veux-tu d'une volonté forte
Entrer dans l'infini, quelle que soit la porte?

Ce que l'homme endormi peut savoir, tu le sais.
Mais, esprit, trouves-tu que ce n'est pas assez?
Ton regard, d'ombre en ombre et d'étage en étage,
A vu plus d'horizon... — en veux-tu davantage?
Veux-tu, perçant le morne et ténébreux réseau,
T'envoler dans le vrai comme un sinistre oiseau?
Veux-tu derrière toi laisser tous les décombres,
Temps, espace, et, hagard, sortir des branches sombres?
Veux-tu, réponds, aller plus loin qu'Amos n'alla,
Et plus savant qu'Esdras et qu'Élie, au delà
Des prophètes pensifs et des blancs cénobites,
Percer l'ombre, emporté par des ailes subites?
O semeur du sillon nébuleux, laboureur
Perdu dans la fumée horrible de l'erreur,

Front où s’abat l’essaim tumultueux des rêves,
Doutes, systèmes vains, effrois, luttes sans trêves,
Te plaît-il de savoir comment s’évanouit
En adoration toute cette âpre nuit?
Veux-tu, flèche tremblante, atteindre enfin la cible?
Veux-tu toucher le but, regarder l’invisible,
L’innommé, l’idéal, le réel, l’inouï?
Comprendre, déchiffrer, lire? être un ébloui?
Veux-tu planer plus haut que la sombre nature?
Veux-tu dans la lumière inconcevable et pure
Ouvrir tes yeux, par l’ombre affreuse appesantis?
Le veux-tu? Réponds. — Oui, criai-je. — Et je sentis
Que la création tremblait comme une toile.

Alors, levant un bras et, d’un pan de son voile,
Couvrant tous les objets terrestres disparus,
Il me toucha le front du doigt.

Et je mourus.

LES ANNÉES FUNESTES

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AVERTISSEMENT DE L’ÉDITEUR

Dans les éditions précédentes, les poésies qui composent les Années funestes ont été échelonnées de 1852 à 1870, répondant ainsi au titre même, mais à l’aide d’un classement factice. Par exemple, les vers qui ouvrent le volume sont datés dans le manuscrit: 4 juin; nous avons pu établir qu’ils sont de 1875, l’écriture et le papier employé suffisent d’ailleurs à le démontrer; mais comme cette poésie, sorte de préface aux Années funestes, a pour sujet l’arrivée en exil, on l’avait datée: 1852.

Les exécuteurs testamentaires agissaient selon la recommandation de Victor Hugo lui-même « dans l’esprit et la pensée qu’ils lui connaissaient”. Nous ne pouvons, nous, dans cette édition documentaire, nous permettre les mêmes libertés. Tout en conservant l’ordonnance du volume, nous avons reproduit exactement les dates du manuscrit, et, pour les poésies non datées, nous avons, comme dans Toute la Lyre, dressé un tableau approximatif d’après l’écriture ou d’après certaines particularités. Ce tableau suit la description du manuscrit.

I Testament littéraire. Actes et Paroles. Depuis l’exil.

J’ai dit à l’Océan: - Salut! veux-tu, que j’entre,
O gouffre, en ton mystère, ô lion, dans ton antre?
J’arrive du milieu, des. hommes asservis.
Gouffre, je ne’ sais plus au juste si je vis;
J’ai ce cadavre en moi, la conscience humaine;
Et je sens cette morte immense qui me mène.
Quoique tuée, elle est vivante encor pour moi.
Mais ai-je sur la face assez d’ombre et d’effroi
Pour être justicier, réponds, mer insondable?
Je voudrais être mort pour être formidable.
Les morts dans leur prunelle ont un tel inconnu
Que le tyran frissonne ainsi qu’un enfant nu
Quand sur lui ce regard de sépulcre s’appuie.
Mer, puisque le soldat, valet d’un traître, essuie
Une infamie avec les plis de son drapeau,
Puisque le prêtre met en vente son troupeau
Et jette on ne sait quel Te Deum 2 à l’abîme,
Horreur! puisque le juge est juge au nom d’un crime,
Puisque les trahisons remplacent les exploits,
Puisque nous n’avons plus qùe des ombres de lois,
Puisqu’on a poignardé la France entre deux portes,
Mer, j’aimerais mieux être avec les choses mortes
Qu’avec tous les vivants de ce monde âpre et vil.
Le nuage, où parfois s’ébauche un noir profil,
Prouve qu’il peut tomber un éclair d’un fantôme.
Du linceul d’Isaïe il sort un sombre psaume.
Je voudrais n’être rien qu’un aspect irrité,
Une apparition d’ombre et de vérité.
A force d’être une âme on cesse d’être un homme;
Qui suis-je? mer, dis-moi de quel nom je me nomme.

C’est par les visions que les rois sont punis.

Est-ce que ce n’est pas une ombre qu’Erynnis?
Est-ce que ce n’est pas une larve qu’Electre?

Et l’Océan m’a dit: - Sois le bienvenu, Spectre.

14 juin

II J’applique mon oreille à travers mon cachot

J’applique mon oreille à travers mon cachot
Contre la conscience énorme de là-haut.
Et j’écoute. Et, pensif, je fuis, et, solitaire,
Je m’envole. Quiconque a pour prison la terre,
A pour évasion le ciel. Là, j’ai l’effroi
De sentir comme une âme immense entrer en moi
Et j’én tremble, et j’en suis joyeux. Sévère joie!
Va, sois le Châtiment, me-dit quelqu’un. Foudroie.
La foudre est le jet noir du firmament vengeur.
Je me penche du fond d’une blême rougeur,
Et, dii seuil étoilé, comme d’une fenêtre,
Sur ta simarre, ô juge, et sur ta robe, ô prêtre,
Je vide la justice avec la vérité.
Vivez, régnez! ma strophe au sanglot irrité,
Mon vers sanglant, fumant, amer, qui, du ciel sombre,
Ainsi que. d’une bouche entr’ouverte dans l’ombre,
Jaillit; tombe, se rue, éclate, et sur les fronts
Se disperse en horreur, en tempête, en affronts,
Flétrit, submerge; noie; éclabousse et remonte,
Est le vomissement dé Dieu sur votre honte.

26 février 1870.

III Un peuple était debout,

Un peuple était debout, et ce peuple était grand.
Il marchait lumineux dans le progrès flagrant.
Lés autres nations disaient: Voici la tête!
Il avait traversé cette énorme tempête
Quatrevirigt-treize, et mis le vieux monde au tombeau;
Dans la lutte difforme il était resté béau;
Ce’ fier peuple, assailli d’évènements funèbres,
Avait fait des rayons de toutes ces ténèbres;
Il avait fait, démon, dieu, sauveur irrité,
De la combustion des siècles sa clarté.
Il avait eu Pascal, il avait eu Molière;
Il avait vu sur lui s’épaissir comme un lierre
L’amour des nations dont il était l’appui;
Et pendant soixante ans sur sa cime avait lui
Voltaire, cet esprit de flamme armé du rire,
Ce titan qui, proscrit, empêchait de proscrire,
Ce pasteur guidant l’âme, enseignant le devoir
Et chassant le troupeau des dogmes au lavoir.
Ce peuple avait en lui la loi qui développe;
A force d’être France il devenait Europe;
A force d’être Europe il était l’univers.
Il savait rester un tout en étant divers;
Chaque race est un chiffre, il en était la somme;
Et ce peuple était plus qu’un peuple; il était l’Homme.
Dans la forêt sinistre il était l’éclaireur;
Son pas superbe était le recul de l’erreur;
Il proclamait le vrai sur la terre; une lave
Sortait de son esprit qui délivrait l’esclave,
Et la femme, et le faible, et le pauvre inquiet,
Et l’aveugle ignorant, de sorte qu’on voyait
Devant sa flamme, hostile au mal, au crime, aux haines,
S’enfuir la vieille nuit traînant les vieilles chaînes.
Il était entouré des ruines du mal,
D’abus tombés, monceau formidable et fatal,

De droits ressuscités, de vertus retrouvées,
Et de petites mains d’enfants, vers lui levées.
Au lieu de dire: Grâce! il disait: Il lé faut!
Il combattait la guerre, il tuait l’échafaud.
Père et frère, il donnait la vie, ôtait les maîtres.
Guetté, mais fort, trop grand, hélas! pour croire aux traîtres,
Il marchait aussi pur que l’aube en floréal,
L’oeil fixé sur ce ciel qu’on nomme l’idéal.
Subitement, il est tombé dans l’embuscade,
Et son cadavre est là sur une barricade.
Ce trépassé, sanglant, nu, mordant son baîllon,
Pâle, n’a même plus la gloire, ce haillon,
Et ses noirs assassins, de leur main lâche et fausse,
Creusent sous lui la nuit comme on creuse une fosse.

Décembre souriant, suivi de son Sénat,
A fait hommage aux rois de cet assassinat,
Les rois ont respiré cet encensoir fétide.
Et devant Fualdès mort, le juge est pour Bastide
Et le prêtre bénit Caïn tuant Abel.
Sous ta tiare d’or qui ressemble à Babel,
Et qui, de la Sixtine illuminant les voiles,

A plus de diamants que le ciel n’a d’étoiles,
Sur ta chaire, splendide et sacré tribunal,.
Pape, tu ne vaux pas, dans ton haut Quirinal,
Qui du monde romain domine les déluges,
Rois, vous ne valez pas, vous ne valez pas, juges,
Tu ne vaux pas, César dans la pourpre élevé,
Les chiens qui vont léchant le sang sur le pavé!

IV CESAR

Il fait le mal il boit des pleurs; il boit du sang;
Partout la mort, l’exil, des veuves gémissant,
Des orphelins, des foyers vides;
C’est ainsi qu’entassant deuils, forfaits, désespoirs,
Les tyrans font téter à nos vers, dogues noirs,
La mamelle des Euménides:

Tous ces prétoriens qui l’ont fait empereur
L’entourent; Rome est calme et parle avec terreur;
On ne laisse approcher personne;
Ils gardent son palais et veillent à l’entour,
Mille à chaque barrière et cent sur chaque tour;
Le inonde tremble, et lui frissonne.

Il évoque, effaré, livide, anéanti,
Tous ses prédécesseurs, que les’ clypeati
Couvraient de leurs mâles poitrines;
Et l’histoire, témoin qu’on trouve toujours là,
Fait sortir de l’égout le dieu Caracalla
Et le dieu Néron des latrines.
Il erre en son palais. Ici tout le défend;
Ici leprêtre adore Auguste triomphant,
Ici les fronts sont dans ‘la poudre,
Ici’là terre apporte un respect assidu;
Au-dessus de sa tête il entend, éperdu,
L’éclat de rire de la foudre.

2 décembre 1869.

ÉCRIT SUR UN EXEMPLAIRE DE LA VIE D’APOLLONIUS DE TYANE
Les sages, en suivant leurs rêves nécessaires,
Ne perdent pas de vue ici-bas les misères;
L’astre les enchaîne à son char;

Ils creusent l’être, l’âme, et l’espace, et le nombre;
Un de leurs yeux profonds contemple Dieu dans l’ombre,
Mais l’autre est fixé sur César;
Les constellations énormes chue Dieu penche
Tantôt vers l’âpre nuit, tantot vers l’aube blanche,
L’ombre, les abîmes, les fleurs,
L’immense vision des choses éternelles,
Emplissent de rayons une de leurs prunelles,
Et de l’autre. il tombe des pleurs;
Leur esprit, dont la foule écoute les paroles,
Penché sur les soleils, les ondes, les corolles,
Sur l’arbre où Jésus s’endormit,
Sur les ténèbres, gouffre où la clarté se lève,
Regarde en même temps la nature qui rêve
Et l’humanité qui gémit;
De sorte qu’il arrive, - et tu le sais, Éphèse 5! -
Que, tout en expliquant lés cieux, sombre fournaise,
Septentrion, Aldebaran;
Le monde, et Dieu pensif contemplant son ouvrage,
Ils se dressent soudain ‘en s’écriant: Courage,
Stephanus! frappe le tyran!

6 avril 1854. Jersey.

VI Le frissonnant essaim des pâles Euménides

ÉCRIT SUR UN EXEMPLAIRE DES CHÂTIMENTS

Le frissonnant essaim des pâles Euménides
Met les effrois
Dans l’homme, et ne veut pas laisser les âmes vides
Et les coeurs froids;

Elles vont secouant sur nos fronts une chaîne
Avec des chants,
Leur fonction étant de nous emplir de haine
Pour les méchants;

Et ces femmes de l’ombre, éparses et volantes,
Rôdent dans l’air,
Furieuses, et font.des colères trop lentes
Jaillir l’éclair;

— Allons! réveille-toi! ne vois-tu pas Tibère?
Viens! fais un pas!
Est-ce que pour frapper la foudre délibère?
Ne vois-tu pas

Le mal partout; ici le crime et là le vice;
Judas rêvant;
Ce roi, ce juge, l’un achetant la justice
Que l’autre vend?

Frappe! - Ainsi vont grondant les gorgones sublimes;
Et leur vertu,
Sinistre, ouvre au songeur l’horizon des abîmes;
Et dis: Viens-tu?

Et le poète suit ces filles formidables.
— Monstres, j’accours!

C’est bien! Et; sur le haut des monts inabordables,
Dans les bois sourds;

Dans l’inclément désert, sur l’âpre mer sonore,
La sombre nuit
Est contente; et, plus bas, dans les prés où l’aurore
S’épanouit,

Dans l’azur, dans l’été, dans l’herbe et dans. les mousses,
Dans la chaleur,
Dans l’idylle, on entend toutes les choses douces
Qui sont en fleur,

L’églantier, le rosier plein d’une âme invisible,
Le frais buisson,
Dire en voyant passer le poète terrible.:.
Il a raison.

6 décembre.

VII. LES CHÂTIMENTS

Rester où nous sommes!
Non! puisque ces hommes;
Tes fils, Liberté;
Ne sont que des femmes,
Relever les âmes
C’est ma volonté.

Puisque tout s’écroule,
Puisque cette foule
N’est, sous ce pouvoir,
Que poussière et sable,
Être formidable
C’est le grand devoir.

La loi n’est pas morte,
La justice est forte,
On est nation,
Dieu pensif approuve;
Tant qu’Une âme cotive
L’indignation.

Il est nécessaire,
Quand tout est misère,
Opprobre, douleur,
Torpeur, frénésie,
Que la poésie,
Cette plaine en fleur,

À toutes les roses,
A toutes les choses
Du printemps serein,
Dont elle est semée,
Mêle la fumée
D’un feu souterrain.

Quand, parce qu’un homme
Est béni par Rome,
Il peut tout braver,
Ne rendre aucun compte,
Et couvrir de honte
L’aube à son lever,

Quand tout le protège,
Et quand son cortège
Rampe avec orgueil,
Tas d’hommes de proie,
Vils, ayant pour joie .
La patrie en deuil,
Quand on n’a plus d’armes,
Quand Tyrtée en larmes
Réjouit Scapin,
Quand frémit l’histoire,
Quand l’homme est sans gloire,
La femme sans pain,

Certe, il est utile
Qu’on voie en mon style
Les rois châtiés,
L’ouragan, l’outrage,
Et toute la rage
Des grandes pitiés.

Certes, je dois plaire,
France, à ta colère,
Quand je dis: Allons!
Et quand j’encourage
Au souffle, à l’orage,
Les noirs aquilons.

Et quand aux poètes,
Je dis: Gypaètes,
Faucons et vautours,

Guerre aux infidèles!
Guerre! ayons des ailes
Puisqu'ils ont des tours!

Guerre au front servile!
La lâcheté vile
Du fourbe est l'appui:
Guerre au' maître 'infâme!
Dispersons notre âme
En foudre sur lui!

Je sens que moi-même,
Furieux, je m'aime;
Et je suis content
Quand sous mon vol sombre,
Le, tyran, dans l'ombre,
Tête basse, attend.
Quel abîme creuse
Leur croissance affreuse!
On voit, radieux,
Sur la terre en cendre,
Ces démons s'étendre
Et grandir ces dieux;

Ils sont sur le faîte;
Dante les arrête
De son poing d'acier,
Et les rapetisse;
Dieu pour sa justice
Fit ce justicier.

Quand s'ouvre le gouffre,
Quand le peuple souffre
Sous d'impurs vainqueurs,
Cet énorme câble,
La haine implacàble,
Soutient tous les coeurs.

Des gueux ont des mondes;
Des Césars immondes,
Sous leurs pieds ayant
La loi, leur victime,
Ajoutent au crime
Un rire effrayant.

J’envoie à leurs fêtes
Mes hymnes tempêtes
Luire et flamboyer,
Et mon âme est haute
Quand l’éclair mon hôte
Sort de mon foyer.

Pour frapper les traîtres,
Faux dieux et faux prêtres,
Vil groupe inhumain,
Debout dans mon aire
Je montre au tonnerre
Le plus court chemin.

C’est la sainte cause.
Mon vers superpose
La justice au mal,
Jésus à Tibère,
L’idéale sphère.
Au gouffre animal.

Cette oeuvre est la vraie.
Abhorrer l’ivraie
C’est aimer l’épi.
Je trouve dans l’antre
De l’histoire, où j’entre,
Tacite accroupi;

Juvénal, ce fauve,

Eschyle au front chauve,
Me disent: C’est bien.
Sombre philosophe,
Je mets dans ma strophe
Le vent libyen.

L’ombre est mon amante;
J’aime la tourmente,
Le déchaînement;
J’aime le désordre
Des rois que vient mordre
L’ïambe écumant.

Cieux! j’aime la haine
Quand elle est sereine,
Quand elle a raison,
Et quand, comme Electre,
Elle est le grand spectre
Droit sur l’horizon.

23 avril.

VIII Eh bien, allons!

Eh bien, allons! mentant, pillant, volant, broyant,
Coalisez-vous tous! que ce soit effrayant!
Nous sommes prêts au deuil, à la mort, au martyre.
Que d’un coup de collier le genre humain s’en tire!
Frappez-nous, percez-nous! Traversons, s’il le faut,
Avec le dernier camp, le dernier échafaud!
Qu’il soit hideux, devant la terre intimidée,
Ce duel sombre où la force a terrassé l’idée!
Que le passé se rue et morde l’avenir!
Qu’Haynau vienne tuer et Mastaï bénir!
Qu’ils soient les éperviers, Seigneur, et nous les proies!
Que nos poignets gonflés saignent sous les courroies!
Qu’on nous jette à l’exil, au bagne, à la prison!
Que sur le coteau noir, tumeur de l’horizon,
L’affreux gibet, squelette aux sinistres vertèbres,
Se dresse! Que l’esprit des antiques ténèbres
Risque l’un après l’autre, et tire coup sur coup
Ses monstres de sa poche, et fasse son va-tout,
Et joue en rugissant sur sa dernière carte

IX TRIOMPHE PAS DE BRUME.

Son dernier Nicolas, son dernier Bonaparte!
Oui, crachez vos serments, hurlez vos Te Deums,
Invoquez vos Agnus, vos bons dieux, vos Mahoms!
Que les czars et les-rois et les hommes des sacres
Lancent tous les bourreaux, fassent tous les massacres!
Que nous soyons trahis, vaincus, chassés, brisés,
Et que tous les Judas donnent tous les baisers!
Finissons-en; voici nos têtes pour le glaive!
Pourvu qu'à l'orient une blancheur se lève!
Pourvu que, dans ses mains tenant tous les flambeaux,
L'éclatant avenir sorte de nos tombeaux!
Pourvu que naisse enfin la nouvelle âme humaine!
Pourvu qu'au vieil Adam Dieu par la main amène,
Après tant de douleurs, tant de sang, tant de fiel,
Cette âme, Ève d'en haut, la future du ciel!
Pourvu qu'un jour, jour saint et dont mon coeur tressaille,
Après nous; derniers morts du grand champ de bataille,
Derniers épis du; mal, derniers martyrs du fer,
On voie, en un Eden fait avec notre enfer;
Debout sur notre cendre et sur notre désastre,
L'homme-adorant la paix, l'aigle regardant l'astre!

18 octobre 1854.

X Triomphe.

Triomphe. Pas de-brume en ce splendide azur.
Marche dans tous les sens sur ton crime; il est sûr.
Danse dessus, bâtis dessus; il est solide.
Le droit divin te garde en habit d'invalide;
Le pape te bénit, le sultan te bénit.
Ta constellation resplendit au zénith;
Qu'elle est belle! Nemrod géant, Rhamsès farouche,
Charlemagne, César, ,Napoléon, Cartouche!
L'aurore, a pour toi, prince, un sourire charmant.
Le bleu du bonheur monstre ,emplit ton firmament.
Pas un plaisir, permis ou non, que. tu n'effleures
Dans l'entrelacement voluptueux des heures;
Ta journée est un long festin renouvelé.
Par chaque instant qui passe, heureux, chantant, ailé.
Que veux-tu? le, pouvoir? Sonne La France vote.
Elle est voltairienne, elle sera dévote, -
Pour te plaire. Veux-tu des palais? Prends. Choisis.
Sois chez toi. Sur quel trône est-on le mieux assis?
Prends celui de Versaille ou prends celui du Louvre.
La planche de sapin qu'un peu de velours couvre

A du bon, certe, et vaut les meilleurs piédestaux
Quand Brumaire et Décembre en sont les deux tréteaux.
Brumaire, c'est le droit, Décembre, c'est la force.
Un profil hollandais doublé d'un profil corse e,
De face, cela fait un visage français.
Veux-tu la gloire? prends son masque, le Succès.
Tu n'es plus tout à fait un jeune homme. Qu'importe!
Cupidon vient gratter doucement à ta porte;
Vénus par Bacciochi t'envoie un tendre aveu.
Pas un moment du jour, ô César, ô neveu,
Qui pour toi, comme un flot qui sur des fleurs s'épanche,
Ne soit gloire, bonheur, splendeur.

Le soir, revanche.

L’ombre n’est pas à toi. Dormir, c’est être pris.
Une main, qui saisit par l’aile les esprits,,
S’ouvre, et lâche le songe où luit la catastrophe;
Le vrai surgit; tu fais d’affreux rêves. Ma strophe
La nuit devient ta femme, et, spectre, dans tes draps
Se couche, et tu l’entends dire: - Tu ne seras
Pas même lampion; toi qui prends des airs d’astre! -
Ton destin t’apparaît. Tu te vois, ô désastre!
Ô deuil! redevenu l’aventurier gueusard,
Le prince bric-à-brac, l’altesse de hasard,
Portant pour diadème un feutre qui s’effondre,
N’ayant, ô dur retour des maigres jours de Londre,
Plus de sceptre à la main ni de bottes aux pieds;
Et tout, empire, encens, Te Deum expiés,
S’évanouit devant tes prunelles hagardes,
Tout, depuis les cent sous, hélas! jusqu’aux cent gardes!
Et tu ne comprends plus, effaré sous le vent,
Ton propre sort; tu dis: Est-ce après? est-ce avant?
Tu voudrais t’éveiller. Non. Le remords t’accable
Et te tient, et te cloue au sommeil implacable,
Et de partout sur toi, maudit, tombe l’affront,
Et tous tes forfaits vont et viennent sur ton front,
Montmartre, les fourgons cahotant les cadavres,
Les chaînes dans les forts, les pontons dans les havres,
La mitraille, Charlet, Cirasse, Cuisinier “,
Les votes; l’urne traître auprès du noir -panier,
Bidauré fusillé deux fois, Mazas, Cayenne,
Les proscrits, Lambessa que vient flairer l’hyène;
Le ruisseau de la rue au sang habitué, ‘
Baudin tué, Dussoubs tué, l’enfant tué “; ‘
Tu ne vois plus qu’horreur, billots, linceuls, tempêtes,
Têtes cherchant leurs corps et corps cherchant leurs têtes,
Et ton oreille entend, à travers l’aquilon,
Rouler dans l’avenir le boulet de Toulon.

9 juillet.

XI BORD DE LAMER

— Tenez, mon président, je vous le dis d’aplomb,
Je trouve, en vérité, que cela devient long.
Cela finit par être un triste dialogue.
Nous faisons à nous deux une lugubre églogue.
Vrai, vous me fatiguez; mon juge du bon Dieu.
Si nous renouvelions la causerie un peu?.
Parlons d’astronomie ou bien d’hippiatrique.
Oui, c’est vrai, je me suis servi de cette trique
Assomme-t-on les gens avec! des éventails?
Quand vous répéterez sans fin tous ces détails?
Après? Bon, j’en conviens, c’est affreux, c’est infâme,
Ce n’est pas bien du tout, j’ai tué cette femme;
Dans l’ombre, en guet-apens, si vous le préférez.
J’ai de ses cheveux blancs à mes souliers ferrés;
On voit ces choses-là dans tous les mélodrames.
Est-ce donc bien joli, mon juge, à dire aux dames?
Nous devrions changer de conversation.
Je l’ai mise en un trou, la belle invention!
Et j’ai pillé la caisse et débouclé la bâche.
Connu. C’est vieux! D’honneur, mon président rabâche;
Il faudrait varier dans l’intérêt de 1’art.
Vous ressassez toujours: - C’était dans le brouillard.
— En décembre.- Au sortir.d’un bois. - Un jour de pluie... -
Eh bien, je vous le dis tout net, cela m’ennuie.
Vous n’avez vraiment pas d’imagination.
Et puis, vous y mettez beaucoup de passion.
Cette femme était vieille et j’étais pauvre. En somme,
Là, ne pourrait-on pas, quand mai réjouit l’homme,
Quand les petits oiseaux chantent au fond du bois,
Quand les champs sont pleins d’ombre et d’amour et de voix,
Et puisque nous voilà dans la saison des roses,
Rire un moment, que diable! et parler d’autres choses! -

Et le juge répond, triste comme la loi

— Ta mère assassinée est là, derrière toi!

22 décembre 1854.
Le jour, chasse le vent- nocturne qui soufflait;
Le soleil dans la mer délaie-un long reflet;
; « M. Victor Hugo ne s'aperçoit donc
pas qu'il dévient monotone?"

(Les Journaux de l'Empire.)
Et monte, et semble fier que le gouffre lui mette
Une traîne de flamme et le change en comète;
Les navires tremblants fendent l'onde, et ses plis
Penchent leurs noirs agrès par la brise assouplis;
Un mont de roche à pic sur la plage s'élève;
La route qui descend des plaines à la grève
Ouvre en la rencontrant les deux bras de l'Y grec
Par où les chariots vont chercher du varech;
L'eau partout se hérisse, immense hécatonchire;
L'écume à tous les vents s'effare et se déchire,
Et vole, et l'on dirait que de ces flocons blancs
Quelques-uns prennent vie et sont les goélands;
Le tumulte infini dans l'ombre au loin bégaie;
Et la légèreté des nuages égaie
Toute cette farouche et fauve profondeur;
L'aube chantante joue avec le flot grondeur;
L'océan frais et pur se fronce aux rocs arides;
La jeunesse éternelle offre toutes ses rides;
L'innocent liseron, nourri de sel amer,
Fleurit sous les blocs noirs du vieux mur de la mer,
Et la création semble une apothéose.
Comme un papillon donne un coup d'aile à la rose,
Là-bas l'aigle de mer tourne autour du récif.

Et moi qui suis assis au bord des flots, pensif,
Ne voyant même pas ces horizons sévères,
Regardant, nôir rêveur, dans la nuit des Calvaires,

Les Socrates mourants, les pâles Jésus-Christs,
J’écris ces vers au pied du Rocher des Proscrits,
Pendant qu’un hollandais, qui prétend être corse,
Met à l’esprit humain la chemise de force,
Et trône en pleine orgie, empereur des français,
Entre l’escroc Serment et la fille Succès.

XII LE TIREPOINT

Ô pauvre vieux, tu vis en paix, tu bois ta chope,
Sans feu, parfois sans pain et jamais sans sommeil,
Comme un fagot flambant gratis, dans ton échoppe,
Tu reçois le soleil.

Lorsque tu vois passer curés, bedeaux et diacres,
Toute ta politique est de gronder un peu;
Parmi les porteurs d'eau, les filles et les fiacres,
Tu ris sous le ciel bleu.

Peut-être est-ce un grand-père à toi - sais-tu l'histoire? -
Qui vit jadis entrer dans son bouge, âpre et seul,
N'ayant plus de souliers, vieux, pieds nus dans sa gloire,
Corneille, notre aïeul!

Que t'importe? tu vis au hasard, pêle-mêle,
Dans ce mondé arrivé sans. savoir trop par où,
Ajustant le cuir neuf à la vieille semelle,
Dans un coin, dans un trou.

Tu vas au cabaret savourer la litharge;
Pour toi, d'un travail lourd, monotone, inclément,
Le livre de la vie ést plein, et 'sur la marge
Tu te grises gaîment.

Sous toute autorité, juste ou non; sainte ou vile,
Tu te courbes, timide et sentant ta maigreur;
Pour toi, pauvre et chétif, dans le sergent de ville
Commence l'empereur.

Portant le joug âirisi qu'une bête dé 'somme,
Lorsqu'on se bat, qu'on voit l'émeute se ruer,
Tu dis: Je suis trop vieux. C'estbon pour un jeune homme
De se faire tuer.

Jour et nuit ton marteau résonne sur l’empeigne.
Dès le matin tu ris’; rire est.ton seul trésor;
L’aube à tes cheveux gris,’ que’ n’approche aucun peigne,
Mêle ses rayons d’or:

Entouré de. tessons, de loques, de décombres,
Laissant pendre à vingt clous sous ton plafond obscur
Un tas d’affreux souliers’ éculés dont les ombres
Dansent sur ton vieux mur,

Jasant, grâce au ‘ vin bleu, comme un moineau prolixe,
Trop petit pour sentir le despote ou le roi,
Sans voir Brutus rêveur, noir fantôme à l’oeil fixe,
Qui rôde autour de toi,

Vieux bohême chanteur sans veste et sans cravate,
Tu brandis, en criant: Venez voir mon bazar!
Ton tirepoint qui. peut, recoudre une savate
Ou défaire un césar.

15 novembre. Jersey.

XIII ENTENDU DANS LE CIEL

LE 2 MARS 1855

« Dis-moi donc ce qui se passe,
« Mer? que fait-on dans l’espace?
A quoi, grands flots azurés,
«Veut-on donc que je consente,
« Moi, la sinistre passante
« Des nuages effarés?
« Je suis la Flamme vivante;
« Je suis la haute épouvante,
« Le cri sourd du ciel serein,
« La roue aux éclairs sans nombre
« Du grand tourbillon de l’ombre;
«-Le sombre marcheur d’airain!
« Je suis la bête Tonnerre;
« J’ai broyé Cham dans son aire,
« Et Capanée 16 en son nid;
«Mes griffes se sont posées
« Sur les faces écrasées
« Des pharaons de granit.
« Je luis, je frappe, j’émonde.
« Quand Dieu veut détruire un monde,
« C’est moi qui crie: Essayons!
« C’est moi qui brûle les âmes,
« Et, pour en faire des flammes,
«Moi qui rends fous les rayons.
«Ô mer, je fends, quand j’y tombe,
« Comme une vitre, la tombe;
« Quand je touche un dieu de nuit,
«Le dieu meurt aux mains du bonze;
«Quand. je crache sur du bronze,
«Le bronze s’évanouit.
« Quand dans ma gueule je mâche
« Un méchant, un traître, un lâche,

«Le mal semble s’éclipser;
« Quand sous mes pieds je trépigne
« Quelque noir colosse indigne
« On dit: Dieu vient de passer!
« J’ai tordu dans ma fournaise
« Les géants de la Genèse,
« Les titans aux bras nerveux;
« Brûlant leur cri dans leurs “bouches,
« Je les emportais farouches,
« Mes éclairs dans leurs cheveux!

« J’ai dévoré sons leurs dômes
Les cinq rois des cinq sodomes,
« Gur, Zaïm, Henôch, Eloph,
« Bél, monstre aux mains jamais lasses... -
« Maintenant tu me remplaces,
« Talon de botte d’Orloff “!

«Orloff est, mon frère sombre;
«Tous deux, sous nos pieds, dans l’ombre,
«Débout sur le même char,
« Nous écrasons, moi l’étoile
« De Satan que la nuit voile,
« Lui les yeux crevés du czar.

«Mais qu’est-ce donc?’’à cette heure,
« Orloff lui-même est un leurre!
« Les rois monstres triomphants
« S’endorment parmi les cierges,
« Souriants comme des vierges,
« Sereins comme des enfants!

« Ces meurtriers dans leur ville
« Ont pour oreiller tranquille
« Leurs crimes inexpiés
« Leur front doucement s’y penche;
« Et Tobolsk 1e, leur chienne blanche,

« Mange un peuple sous leurs pieds!

« Tandis que, pour leurs chimères,
« Pleurent les soeurs et les mères,
« Que leur nom, fait de remord;
«D’épouvante et de huées;
« Sort du milieu des nuées
« Comme un clairon de la mort;

« Tandis que leur feu dévore,
« Et que, dû soir à l’aurore
« Et de l’aube jusqu’au soir,
« Toute la terre enflammée’
« Roule autour d’eux sa fumée
« Comme un lugubre encensoir;
« Ils font venir leurs familles;
« Ils prodiguent à leurs filles
« Leurs caresses d’Attila;
«.Puis ils bénissent le monde... -
« Et dis-moi donc, mer profonde,
« Qu’est-ce que nous faisons là?

« Puisque tu ne sais pas même,
« Mer, gonfler ton flot suprême,
« Et l’emplir de Jéhovah,
« Et prouver que Dieu t’habite,
« Et faire une hydre subite
« De la couleuvre Néva;

« Puisque l’eau que tu gouvernes
« N’ose entrer dans les cavernes,
« Que tu lui dis: Viens-nous-en!
« Puisqu’un trône est un refuge,
« Que toi, qui fus le déluge,
« Tu n’es plus que l’océan;

« Puisque la justice boîte;

« Puisque, moi, qu’en sa main droite
« Tient l’ouragan plein de bruit;
« Moi dont l’abîme est l’ornière,
« La grande raison dernière
« Du mystère et de la nuit;

« Puisque moi, la flamme ardente
« Qui sers de prunelle à Dante,
« La semeuse du trépas,
« Moi que fuit l’âme éperdue,
« Moi, la bombe inattendue
« Du mortier qu’on ne voit pas,

« Puisque je ne suis plus bonne
« Qu’à faire un bruit monotone
« Ainsi que les moucherons,
« Et que, stupide, je roule,
« Aux mains d’un joueur de boule,
« Sur le plafond des Nérons;

« Puisque Dieu ne sait qu’absoudre,
« Je m’en vais!” - Ainsi la foudre,
Dans le ciel que l’ombre emplit,
Parle à la sombre marée,
Et rugit, désespérée
Qu’un czar meure dans son lit.

18 avril 1855.

XIV ILS NOUS RAILLENT, DISANT..

J’étais dans une église, et j’entendis un homme
Vêtu du vêtement de ténèbres de Rome,
Qui disait: - Bénissons César dans le saint lieu.
La vérité qu’il tue était due à l’abîme,
Peuple, et la main du prince a frappé la victime
Que lui montrait let doigt de Dieu. -

J’étais dans une rue, et je lus cette affiche:
— De par la loi! Vous tous, grand, petit, pauvre, riche,
Silence! obéissez.. Le prince a combattu,
Le prince a triomphé; maintenant qu’il bâtisse.
Ce qu’il a fait est bien. Nous sommes la justice
De même qu’il est la vertu. -

Sache, ô prêtre, et toi, juge, apprends, qu’il est infâme
De mettre la louange à la place du blâme,
Et que, lorsqu’un massacre a souillé la cité,
On est, ô vils flatteurs agenouillés dans l’ombre,
Plus hideux pour avoir lavé ce pavé sombre
Que , pour, l’avoir ensanglanté..

10 mars.

XV Ils nous raillent, disant:

Ils nous raillent, disant:
 — Ces gens, en vérité,
Ont de bien mauvais yeux. Ils ont pris à côté
Des bons chemins, pourtant si doux et si faciles:
Où donc sont-ils allés, ces’ pauvres imbéciles?
Ils ont voulu le deuil et la misère. Ils l’ont.
Dis donc, Magnan, dis donc, Sibour, dis ‘donc, Troplong,
Il ne tenait pourtant qu’à ces idiots d’être
Comme nous riches, grands et rentés par le maître.
Les niais! ils n’avaient qu’à dire: Ainsi soit-il!
Et, le sénat s’offrant, ils ont choisi l’exil! -

Eux cependant, sans voir devant eux, vils, horribles,
Souillés, sanglants, ils vont aux ténèbres terribles,
A la honte, à la fange, à la calamité,
A Dieu qui dans la nuit les regarde irrité,
Au gouffre où court le fourbe et le traître et l’impie;
Et leur cécité rit de notre myopie.

XVI Les prêtres des faux dieux

Les prêtres des faux dieux jouant leurs comédies,
Le mal, l’erreur,
Ce Bonaparte, et toi, paysan, qui mendies
Un empereur,

Toi qui peux être un homme et veux être une brute,
Troupeaux mouvants
Sur qui s’acharne et passe et repasse la lutte
Des quatre vents,

Foule qui vas courbant des millions de têtes,
Bourgeois distraits
Qui vivez avec l’oeil plus vague que les bêtes
Dans les forêts,

Les noirs évènements sur les masses obscures,
Les talions,
Les deuils, les envieux, les serpents, leurs piqûres
Aux grands lions,

Me dire que quiconque, à Paris ou dans Rome,
Honte et remords!
Mettra l’oreille à terre, entendra de cet homme
Parler les morts,

Que tout ce qu’il a fait d’iniquités égale
La quantité
D’astres qu’on voit aux cieux quand chante la cigale,
Les soirs d’été;

Rouler dans mon esprit la sanglante besogne
Du boulevard,
Et Morny, puis. Troplong 20, aller de cet ivrogne
A ce bavard;

Puebla, Mentana; Compiègne, son opprobre,
Ses jeux, ses goûts;
Les meurtres plus nombreux que les mouches d’octobre
Dans les égouts;

Le pontife sans foi, l’apôtre sans doctrine,
Abject semeur,
C’est tout cela qui fait sortir de ma poitrine
L’âpre clameur!

C’est tout cela qui fait que ma colère gronde
Profondément,

Et que l’écueil n’est pas sous les affronts de l’onde
— Plus écumant;

C’est tout cela qui. fait que ma strophe aux cent bouches,
Pleine d’effrois, ..
Ressemble au hallier sombre où des. bêtes farouches
Mêlent leurs voix,

Je suis l’avertisseur terrible qui se dresse,,
L’avant-coureur;
Et mes vers n’ont .pas moins de haine vengeresse,
Pàs moins d’horreur

Que les filles d’Hellé chantant leur ronde austère
Dans Ipsara;
Et l’intervention d’aucun pouvoir sur terre
N’arrachera

De mes mains ce tyran, ce juge, ce ministre,
Cet histrion;
Pas plus qu’un souffle humain n’éteindrait le sinistre
Septentrion.

28 novembre.

XVII QUAND DES TROUS À SES MAINS

Vous n’avez pas pris garde au peuple que nous sommes.
Chez nous, dans les grands jours, les enfants sont des hommes,
Les hommes des os, les vieillards des géants.
Oh! comme vous serez stupides et béants,
Le jour où vous verrez, risibles escogriffes,
Ce grand peuple de France échapper à vos griffes!
Le jour où vous verrez fortune, dignités,
Pouvoirs, places, honneurs, beaux gages bien comptés,
Tous les entassements de votre orgueil féroce,
Tomber au premier pas que fera le colosse!
Confondus, furieux, cramponnés vainement
Aux chancelants débris de votre écroulement,
Vous essaîrez encor de crier, de proscrire,
D’insulter, et l’Histoire éclatera de rire.

XVIII Quand, des trous à ses mains,

Quand, des trous a ses mains, des trous à ses pieds froids,
Du sang sur chaque membre,
La France, peuple-Christ, pendait les bras en croix
Au gibet de Décembre,

Quand, l’épine à son front, râlait sur le poteau
La nation pontife,
Toi, malheureux, tu vins des clous et du marteau
Complimenter Caïphe.

Il fit cortège au crime avec un front riant.
Lévite, il vendit l’arche:
Maintenant le voilà dans un livre criant:
« - Remettons-nous en marche!

« Dans la stagnation, tout rampe et dépérit,
« Et l’ombre est importune.
« Il faut le Verbe à Dieu, la parole à l’esprit,
« Aux peuples la tribune.” -

Il plaide pour le droit! Regret pur! deuil touchant!
Il ne veut plus qu’on dorme!
Ô vérité sacrée, aux lèvres du méchant
Ta louange est difforme!

Les passants qui l’ont vu du crime réussi
Grossir l’immonde escorte,
Disent en l’entendant: Pourquoi donc celui-ci
Parle-t-il de la sorte?

C’est qu’il a peur de Dieu! , c’est qu’il a peur des lois!
C’est que ce fourbe tremble!
C’est qu’il sent dans son coeur. frissonner à la fois
Tous les effrois ensemble!

C’est que, dans cette orgie où le Meurtre éhonté
Chante: Que nous importe!
Lui songe au cimetière où dort la Liberté,
La redoutable morte!

C’est que sur le festin il voit tomber le soir;
C’est qu’en ce banquet sombre,
Il songe à l’avenir, incorruptible et noir,
Qui fait des pas dans l’ombre;

C’est que la peine vient! c’est qu’il se sent plier
Comme les branches d’arbre!
C’est que, pâle, il entend monter dans l’escalier
Un visiteur de marbre!

21 janvier.

XIX DES REMORDS? LUI! POURQUOI?...

SA CONSCIENCE
— Écoutais-tu parfois ta conscience? - Certe!
— Et que t'a-t-elle dit?

— - Elle m'a dit: Déserte -
Tout sentier trop ardu, trop rude et trop étroit.
Heurte ce mot l'Honneur contre ce mot le Droit,
Et tire un son fêlé de l'un comme de l'autre.
Aie un tarif. Combien ce héros? cet apôtre?
Ce tribun? C'est tant. Paie, et sois fort. Je t'absous.
Prends les millions, jette au peuple les gros sous.
Achète aux prêtres. Dieu. Jamais Dieu ne réclame.
Sois d'abord sûr d'tin fait, c'est que tu n'as point d'âme.
C'est agréable. On est nuit, matière, animal,
Cendre, et l'on ne fait rien de bien ni rien de mal
On arrive à la mort, juste aussi responsable
Que l'hydre s'échouant dans l'ombre sur le sable.
Raille ces fous, croyant au bien, au juste, au beau,
Qui pensent qu'un palais pèse sur un tombeau.
Jouis, et ne crains pas le sépulcre. Il est vide.
Jure et mens; le serment est un fil qu'on dévidé
Jusqu'à ce qu'il se casse. Alors, guerre, terreur,
Masque jeté, carnage et mort. Sois empereur.
Touche la cible, atteins le but, gagne le quine;
Tue, éclate de rire, et règne!

— Ah! la coquine!

H.H. 12 décembre.

XX Des remords? lui! Pourquoi?

Des remords? lui! Pourquoi? Qu’a-t-il fait? Mais, Cayenne?
Le Deux Décembre? Quoi! l’on veut qu’il-se souvienne!
Ces êtres-là n’ont point de ces infirmités.
La mémoire, c’est bon pour vous autres. Luttez,
Vivez, souffrez, plaidez telle ou telle doctrine;
Si vous avez mal fait, frappez-vous la poitrine;
Le bien, le mal, le vrai, le faux, Judas, Jésus,
Cela compte pour vous, mais eux sont au-dessus.
Ils ont tué, pillé; brisé la loi détruite;
Il leur semble plaisant qu’on leur en parle ensuite;
Sitôt qu’on est vainqueur et maître, on éconduit
L’histoire, le massacre, et la mort et la nuit.
On ne veut plus savoir dans la joie et la fête
Par quelle ombre on passa pour parvenir au faîte.
D’ailleurs cela fait-il quelque chose à quelqu’un?
Vaincre est faire un charnier d’où s’exhale un parfum.
Ils ont vaincu. C’est bien. Cela doit vous suffire.
Laissons l’aurore peindre et luire, et le zéphire
Frissonner à travers les branchages profonds.
Ces êtres trouvent Dante et Juvénal bouffons.
Ce que les mécontents nomment une âme noire,
C’est de la fange ayant pour trône de la gloire.
La gloire couvre tout, et l’ensemble est vermeil.
Cherchez donc un voleur caché dans un soleil!
Ces sinistres esprits, bâtisseurs de décombres,
Qui, lâchés dans la nuit des évènements sombres,
Ont pour succès la chute effrayante de tout,
Peuple, ne savent rien, sinon qu’ils sont debout.
Cette ignorance-là, dans la toute-puissance
Et l’ombre, est une sorte affreuse d’innocence.
Ils ont, dans le scrutin qui termine tout ça,
Don Quichotte contre eux, pour eux Sancho Pança.
Régnons. Le repentir? quel est ce parasite?
Le remords pour eux, c’est un fâcheux qui visite

Mal. à propos les gens et qui fait qu'à son pas
On s'esquive, et l'on dit aux valets: N'ouvrez pas!
On dort, on est chez soi. - Qui va là,? quelqu'un sonne?
— C'est votre crime. - Bien.. Je n'y suis pour . personne.
Même quand leur destin échoue au but fatal, ,
Ces âmes-là n'ont point conscience du mal,
Et l'expiation n'est qu'une petitesse
De Dieu qui veut un peu molester une altesse.
Est-ce qu'ils ont commis des forfaits? C'est selon.
Ils se sentent à peine une épine au talon.
Leur faute, si c'est là le mot, si c'en est une,
Fait tout ce qu'elle peut pour leur être importune,
Mais, fût-elle éternelle avec des ongles noirs,
Les suivît-elle avec d'effroyables miroirs,
Ils n'en ont point souci. L'on jase, on crie, on glose,
Qu'importe! Tout cela vraiment n'est pas grand'chose.
Des épithètes; monstre, horreur, canaille. Après?
Vous leur montrez toujours, quoi? le même cyprès.
Au fond cela finit par être une chicane.
C'est du vacarmé; Rome ou Paris qui ricane.
Ils ont réponse à tout. Ne suis-je pas César?
Mané Thécel Pharès trouble peu Balthazar;
L'ardent tartare avec son four à réverbère
Peut ennuÿer, mais non déconcerter Tibère.
Faites gueuler l'Erèbe, ameutez tout le tas
Des méduses montrant le poing aux coups d'états;
Les attentats riront; la foudre. les effleure.
Si Dieu croit en frappant se prouver, il se leurre;
Il reste l'inconnu, l'énigme, le grand X..
Les Euménides sont les poissardes du Styx;
Le démon punisseur qui grince et qui s'acharne
Est un loustic montrant son masque. à la lucarne;
L'enclume sans broncher laisse cogner Vulcain;
Frédégonde en enfer dit à Satan: Taquin!

31 mars 1870.

XXI LE MAL DU PAYS

On rôde; on a la mer immense pour prison;
On n’a plus l’avenir, mais on a l’horizon;
On médite; on attend qüe l’océan s’en aille.
La mémoire, bourreau, vous tient dans sa tenaille.
Je cherche ce Paris perdu, que je défends; .
Où donc est le jardin où jouaient mes enfants
Lorsqu’ils étaient petits et lorsque j’étais jeune?
J’entends leurs fraîches voix crier: Père, on déjeune!
Où donc es-tu, foyer où je me réchauffais?
Les arbres étrangers, hélas!ne sont pas faits
Comme ceux du pays natal; l’ombre où l’on erre
Est noire et par degrés vous fait visionnaire;
Comme on avait raison de tâcher de mourir!
L’azur indifférent vous regarde souffrir;
C’est survous qüe cette eau goutte à goutte distille
Son fiel, et c’est à vous que l’écume est hostile; .
Les flots autour de vous sont comme. des archers;
On se sent vaguement haï par les rochers;
L’herbe est froide, l’épine est mêlée à la mousse;
Quoi! j’ai cru la nature hospitalière et douce!
J’ai cru les bois calmants! Comme je m’aveuglais!
On se dit par moments: la foudre parle anglais.
Oh! comment s’évader de l’âpre nostalgie!
On jette à ce chaos quelque strophe rugie
Dans l’orage, et, pensif, on dit aux quatre..vents
De la porter à Dieu par dessus les vivants.
Et l’on s’arrête, et puis on attend. Toujours l’onde.
Què la terre de France était riante et blonde!
Où donc est-elle? On rêve; et l’on a la rougeur
De la honte d’autrui. Ciel! ô ciel! un vengeur!
Où donc est Juvénal? Gouffre! où donc est Tacite?
On se rappelle tout, l’inrame’ réussite,
L’aube noire du jour monstrueux, et Paris
Pris à la gorge et ‘mis à la chaîne, et les cris,

Et les convulsions du peuple qu'on opprime,
Et tous ces affreux chefs, capitaines du crime.
«Vous allez voir comment on meurt pour vingt-cinq francs!"
Disait Baudin; les mots de la tombe sont grands.
Cela n'empêche pas un tas de misérables
De crier aux proscrits, aux vaincus mémorables
Par le devoir au fond de l'abîme liés:
— C'est bien fait. Vous étiez comme nous. Vous vouliez
Etre sénateurs, ducs, ambassadeurs, ministres... -

Oh! que la mer est sombre au pied des rocs sinistres!

20 juillet.

XXII Je suis de ceux qui,

Je suis de ceux qui, sûrs du progrès, l’âme ouverte,
Mettent l’ombre à l’essai,
Et, durs navigateurs, vont à la: découverte
Dans ce gouffre, le vrai.

Je vais sondant, pareil au navire qui rôde,
L’immense espoir amer,
Battu de l’onde, en proie aux hydres d’émeraude
De cette sombre mer.

Ces hydres au dos vert, flots vils du gouffre auguste,
Sous Socrate mourant
Hurlaient, et punissaient Thraséa d’être juste
Et Caton d’être grand.

XXIII Tout est bien.

Tout est bien. Honte et gloire. On encaisse des sommes.
Le peuple dort; dormir, c’est abdiquer; les hommes
Sont ou gisants de force ou courbés de plein gré.
L’empereur brille, d’ombre et de soleil tigré.
Pas un talent ne l’aide; et c’est là le miracle.
L’histoire n’avait pas encor vu ce spectacle
La complicité bête autour d’un crime noir.
C’est une des beautés de César que d’avoir
Seul de la profondeur dans ses sanglants, caprices,
Et que d’être un mandrin servi par des jocrisses.
Rouher, en lui venant baiser le tibia,
L’inonde de pathos, et Suin de charabia;
Grandperret, Chaix d’Estange, assassinent la langue;
Car ils ont dépassé dans le genre harangue
Même l’ancien patois bête des vieilles cours
Leur bouche vile abonde en stupides discours;
De toute ignominie ils ont les monopoles.
Ô Satan, qui créas les Séjans,- les Walpoles,,
Les Dubois, les Rùfins, jamais tu n’accouplas
A d’aussi lâches coeurs des esprits aussi plats!
Mais cette petitesse augmente Bonaparte.
Colosse à Sybaris,- on serait nain à Sparte;
Si Pygmée- est debout parmi des endormis,
Il domine, et Tom Pouce est grand chez les fourmis.

XXIV Vous êtes riche,

Vous êtes riche, heureux, souriant, point austère,
Bien mis; homme du monde et maître de la terre;
Vous êtes empereur, et de plus élégant;
Bourgeois de Suisse, ainsi que fut bourgeois de Gand
Charles-Quint, votre égal, et, sans souci de l'âge,
Vous voyez à vos pieds tout un frais vasselage
De bouches roses, d'airs aimables, de doux yeux,
De bras nus, de seins nus, ne demandant pas mieux;
Vous êtes cavalier accompli, valseur tendre;
Quoique j'habite loin de vous, je puis entendre
Les bénédictions, - les voeux, les hosannas
Qu'avec tous les clergés chantent tous les. sénats,
Et dont vous écoutez vaguement l'harmonie;
Héros si bon vous semble, et, s'il vous plaît, génie,
Clio vous donne au choix le socle et les métaux
Dans tout le bric-à-brac dè ses vieux piédestaux;
Chez vous tout est rayons, reflets d'or, parfums d'ambre,
Et, chaîne au cou, le code est huissier 'd'antichambre;
Vous possédez sur terre un coin du firmament,
Et le Louvre, et Compiègne, et Saint-Cloud si charmant
Dans la saison riante où l'hirondelle émigre,
Ô Prince, -, et vous avez des taches comme un tigre.

7 mars.

XXV UN PRÉSIDENT

UN PRÉSIDENT
Est-ce ma faute à moi s'il s'appelle Brunet?

Brunet jadis était un pître. Il rayonnait
Au-dessus des humains à force de bêtise.
Il broutait des couplets comme un bouc le ,cytise.
Son camarade était Janot aux bas chinés
Lorgnant un papillon qui tremblait sur son nez.
Ce Brunet-là charmait les foules inquiètes
Rien qu'en laissant tomber une pile d'assiettes;
Son rire absurde était un baume à tous les maux;
Il avait de gros yeux et disait de gros mots.
Peut-être était-ce un homme. Il avait- la bassesse
Pour triomphe, et l'affront d'être content sans cesse.
Il fascinait la ville, enchantait les faubourgs,
Frappait sur les lazzi comme sur des tambours,
Et se jetait parmi les rires tête-bêche.
Un éblouissement sortait de ce bobèche.
C'était, sous les clartés du manteau d'arlequin,
Le spectre de la joie en culotte nankin.
Il était le bouffon du peuple; il était l'hôte
De Tabarin, Molière etant l'hôte de Plaute;
Son souffle, son accent, son geste, était guetté
Dans la foule, si triste au fond, par. la gaîté;
Il avait ce grand don, cher aux grecs du Poecile.
L'épanouissement profond de l'imbécile.
Et quand on le voyait pensif, vide et béant,
On croyait voir zéro ricaner du néant.
C'était l'innocent fourbe et le niais cupide.
Son ahurissement faisait Paris stupide.
Ce clown fut sans égal. Ce Brunet gambadait,
Coiffé de la splendide oreille du baudet,
Roulait éperdument ses prunelles éparses,
Cassait des pots, chipait des sous, faisait des farces,

Était grotesque, était inepte, était cocu,
Chantait, et recevait des coups de pied au cul.

Maintenant il attend les soufflets de l’histoire.
Son tréteau paraît noble auprès de son prétoire.
Le Brunet d’à-présent est un juge. Il est noir.
Est-ce, le même? Oui. Non. Pourquoi pas? ,On peut voir
Des faits plus surprenants que ces métamorphoses;
Pasquin Z’ et Partarrieu prennent les mêmes poses;
Parfois dans Rhadamante on sent un galopin;
Est-ce que Mascarille est fort loin de Dupin?
Pourquoi voudriez-vous que je m’émerveillasse
Qu’on soit Jeffrye après avoir été Paillasse?
Quoi qu’il en soit, fût-il le même, un peu moisi,
Ce -Brunet, certes est bien l’homme de ce temps-ci
Où, juge, on vend le code et, prêtre, le ciboire.
Thémis -rend un arrêt et demande un pourboire.
Éaque est domestique-et Minos est agent.
Qu’est ceci? La justice. Avez-vous de l’argent?
C’est à vendre. Et ceci? C’est notre conscience.
Payez-nous-la. C’est tant. - O juges, patience!
La Justice viendra. Jugez en attendant. -
Donc Brunet de farceur est passé président.
Ce comique est tragique. Il décrète, il condamne.
Il règne. Il a toujours le même bonnet d’âne.
Mais ce bonnet rapporte énormément. Faut-il
Punir? il est auguste. Absoudre? il est subtil.
Que veut- César? Brunet obéit. Le salaire
Auquel un juge a droit, puisqu’il juge pour plaire,
Est son but. C’est pourquoi vous irez en prison.
Tel est Brunet. La loi vous prend par trahison.
Cujas est sbire au fond et juge à la surface.
Ne faut-il pas qu’enfin la police se fasse?
On est Brunet. On rend des sentences:ad. hoc.
Jadis cétait Jocrisse. A présent c’est Vidocq.

19 février 1870.

XXVI À UN ENNEMI INCONSCIENT

Désespérér de toi, valet du vestiaire?
Pourquoi? Le ciel est grand, Dieu n’a pas de frontière,
Qui sait? Peut-être, un jour, te sera-t-il donné’
D’être Saint-Paul, vers l’aube éternelle entraîné;
Car aujourd’hui féroce, ignorant et stupide,
Tu gardes les manteaux pendant qu’on nous lapide.

1e, juillet 1875.

XXVII Est-ce mon siècle,

Est-ce mon siècle, ou bien le vent? J'ai le frisson.

Du haut de mon rocher, derrière l'horizon,
J'entends confusément. des brouhahas hostiles;
Et j'écoute; et, moi-même en butte aux projectiles,
J'examine, rêveur, les insulteurs lointains.

Dans mes vers sur lesquels ont soufflé les destins
J'ai tort de me servir de ce grand mot: la Haine.
Peuple, la calomnie est aujourd'hui sereine.
Et bonne fille; -on a de nos jours inventé
La diffamation sanglante avec gaîté,
Une espèce de meurtre amusant pour les autres,
L'affront pour rire; hélas, oui, ces moeurs sont les vôtres,
Et je médite.

On sait qu'on ment, on en convient,
On en joue; on ne veut qu'un succès, on l'obtient:
Être deux ou trois jours cru par les imbéciles.
L'exil; l'ombre, le deuil ne sont plus des. asiles; °
On lapide le crêpe au chapeau d'un proscrit.
Que Jésus soit Jésus, bon! S'il devient lè Christ,
On le hue. Ah! faquin! tu veux être exemplaire!
On ajoute des clous à sa croix, sans colère:
La colère fatigue, on n'en a pas. Pourquoi?
Faut-il que le menteur dans son mensonge ait foi?

Cet homme m'est livré. Je demande sa tête,
Suis-je son ennemi pour cela? Pas si bête.
Je hurle, et crie: A bas! mort! il a trop vécu! -

Être acharné, c'est bien, mais être convaincu
C'est du luxe. On serait donc idiot soi-même.
Et d'ailleurs avoir foi, cela rend triste. On sème

La ciguë et la mort, mais on n’y goûte pas.
On est un bon enfant qui pour vivre est Judas,
Et ne prend pas la chose au sérieux. On tâche
D’être tranquillement et sans nuage un lâche.
Si l’on voyait passer l’homme qu’on va demain
Poignarder par derrière, on lui tendrait la main,
Et l’on se vanterait de ce contact auguste!
John Brown est un héros et Barbès est un juste;
On l’avoue entre soi; mais en public on dit:
Barbès est un niais, John Brown est un: bandit.
On l’affirme, et cela n’empêche pas de rire,
Ne pas le croire étant un motif pour le dire.

Çà, vivons, insultons, mais sans nous mettre en frais
D’inimitié, de bile et de fiel. Buvons frais!
Le tigre mord sans faim et Thersite “ sans haine.
Les calomniateurs ne prennent pas la peine
D’abhorrer, même un. peu, ceux qu’ils veulent tuer.
La conscience étant bonne à prostituer,
On vend sa plume ainsi que l’on vendrait sa femme.
Cela s’offre, un esprit; cela. se paie, une âme.
L’affront décolleté, fardé, riant, banal,
Rôde sur ce trottoir qu’on appelle un journal,
Car il est une presse abordable à Javotte12,
Qui, certe, a le droit d’être obscène, étant dévote.
On jette l’eau bénite et la boue au hasard;
On est indifférent, venimeux et poissard
On injurie à tant la ligne, à tant par tête;
On dit: Léonidas est vil, Voltaire, est bête,
Tant on se fie, ainsi qu’aux ténèbres d’un bois,
A la stupidité profonde des bourgeois!
Qu’ils seraient furieux, ces gérontes qui bâillent,
S’ils savaient comme ceux qui les servent, les raillent!
S’ils entendaient les gens achetés parler d’eux!
S’ils savaient à quel point par ces moqueurs hideux,
L’épaisseur de leur âme obscure est exploitée!
Tel insulteur bigot est un farceur athée;

Il est épouvantable et doux, fait son métier,
Rit, et l’encre du diable est dans le bénitier.
Ne rien aimer, ne rien haïr; être des drôles;
Comme c’est simple! avoir un masque, avoir des rôles,
Les prendre, les quitter, être froid, être chaud,
Admirer tout bas ceux qu’on déchire tout haut,
Cela ne fait de mal à personne. On enseigne
Aux badauds qu’un titan sur la montagne saigne,
Mais qu’il le fait exprès; que Caton sans espoir
N’est qu’un ambitieux; que le soleil est noir,
Que partout le droit tombe et que la force monte;
On leur fait épeler l’A B C de la honte;
On ouvre école; on montre aux goîtreux l’alphabet
Expliquant le bûcher de Jean Huss, le gibet
De Coligny, la corde au cou de Galilée’;
On suspend l’imposture à la voûte étoilée,
Et l’ombre qui descend de là change en baudets
Ceux qui viennent brûler un cierge sous ce dais;
On leur apprend qu’apprendre est mauvais, que se taire
C’est penser, et qu’un homme est leur propriétaire
S’il se nomme Habsbourg, Bonaparte ou Bourbon;
Et tout en s’écriant: Comme cela sent bon!
On leur penche le nez sur le fakir fétide;
On déclare à Prudhomme ébahi qu’Aristide
Fut un gueux, et qu’au fond Turgot est un escroc;
S’il s’étonne, on lui dit: Tais-toi. Ce serait trop,
O crétin, s’il fallait encor que tu comprisses!
On livre les Brutus au rire des Jocrisses;
On prouve la bonté du mal, du roi, du fer,
Du feu, de l’échafaud, du bagne et de l’enfer;
Et l’éducation des gens est reussie
Quand la méchanceté germe dans l’ineptie.
Puis on tend la sébile, et Pluche et Baculard”
Empochent en louchant les gros sous; et c’est l’art
D’élever les bourgeois pour s’en faire des rentes.
Le songeur voit passer des bouches murmurantes -
Qui vont balbutiant des outrages confus.

On a l’iniquité comme on a le typhus;
Elle est dans l’air, on l’a respirée; un maroufle
Quelconque nous a mis sur les lèvres ce souffle;
Vous dites ce que dit ce rhéteur de l’égout,
Et lui qui ne croit rien, il vous fait croire tout.
Oh! qui pourra jamais, plongeur mélancolique,
Sonder cet affreux puits, la bêtise publique!

Quel labeur! constater jusqu’au dernier bourgeois!
Conclure que cet âne est un âne par choix,
Qu’il s’y plaît, et qué c’est son goût d’être une brute!
Voir braire Aliboron que Zoïle recrute “!

XXVIII Venez nous voir dans l’asile

Venez nous voir dans l’asile
Où nôtre nid s’est caché,
Où Chloé suivrait Mnasyle,
Où l’Amour suivrait Psyché.

Si vous aimez la musique,
C’est ici qu’est son plein vol
Mozart n’est qu’un vieux phthisique
A côté du rossignol.

Ici la fleur, le poète,
Et le ciel font des trios.
Ô solos de l’alouette!
Ô tutti des loriots!

Chant du matin, fier, sonore!
L’oiseau vous le chantera.
Depuis six mille ans “, l’aurore
Travaille à cet opéra.,

Venez; fiers de vos présences,
Les champs, qui sont des jardins,
Auront mille complaisances
Pour vous autres citadins.

Nos rochers valent des marbres;
Le beau se fera joli
Et le moineau, sous les arbres,
Quoique franc, sera poli.

XXIX EN CONSEIL

Mai joyeux, juin frais etendre
Arriveront à propos
Pour que: vous puissiez entendre
La clochette des troupeaux.

Venez, vous verrez les guêtres
Du vieux laboureur normand;
Les mouches par vos fenêtres
Entréront éperdûmént.

Le soir, sous les vignes vierges,
Vous Verrez Dieu qui nous luit
Allumer les mille cierges
De sa messe de minuit.

Et nous oublierons ces choses
Dont on pleure et dont on rit,
L'homme ingrat, les ans moroses,
L'eau sombre où l'esquif périt,

La fuite de l'espérance,
Les coeurs faux le temps si court,
Et qu'on partage la France
Dans la Gazette d'Augsbourg.

25 juin 1859.
— Toute la question, dit-il, c'est l'ouvrier.
Que Décembre lui soit meilleur que Février,
C'est là ma politique. Écoutez, mes ministres.
Il faut sourire au peuple avec des yeux' sinistres.
Ainsi l'on règne. Ainsi l'on gouverne. J'entends
Faire adorer leur chaîne ' aux travailleurs contents.
— Sire, c'est malaisé. - C'est simple. - Comment faire
Pour loger l'ouvrier? - Je lui bâtis un square.

Il aura sa caserne ainsi que le soldat.
Ils sont frères. - C’est vrai - Leur plaire est mon mandat.
— Mais, sire, l’ouvrier veut manger. Je le gave.
L’engraissement éteint la fierté de l’esclave.
L’ouvrier veut trouver une femme au logis.
— Je le fais marier par Saint-François-Régis.
— L’ouvrier, car il fait, sire, beaucoup de rêves,
Veut être mieux payé - Je lui permets les grèves.
— L’ouvrier veut aller au spectacle - Il aura
Partout le lupanar sous le nom d’opéra.
Je lui prodiguerai des tas de femmes nues.
Je lui montre Astarté planant au fond des nues.
Je lui donne Gorju, Bobêche et Turlupin.
Je l’enchante. - Oui, voilà des cirques et du pain.
Mais du vin? - Je l’en soûle. à battre la muraille.
— Et s’il veut être libre enfin? - Je le mitraille.

Ainsi l’on parle, et moi, dans le bouge infamant,
J’entre, et je te regarde, Histoire, fixement.

20 octobre.

XXX Je ne désire pas la mort de Bonaparte

Je ne désire pas la mort de Bonaparte.
Quand cette aveugle idée arrivé, je l’écarte.
Je ne suis pas assez dans le secret du sort
Pour me croire le droit de vouloir une mort;
Mon âme en son cachot n’a pas de meurtrière
Par où laisser tomber une telle prière.
Hommes, je ne hais point, même quand je combats.
Je regarde, pensif, les choses d’ici-bas;
J’en suis blessé, mais non irrité; j’y devine
Sous le néant humain l’immensité divine,
Et je laisse Dieu faire, en l’implorant pour tous.
Celui qui, comme moi, sait qu’il faut être doux,
Et que tout à la fin se retrouve et retombe,
Ne jette jamais rien dans l’ombre de la tombe.

10 février 1861.

XXXI L’EMPEREUR À COMPIÈGNE

Cet homme est dans les fleurs; il a, s’il fuit la ville,
Saint-Cloud, Biarritz,
Compiègne, autant d’azur que l’aigle, autant d’idylle
Que Lycoris
Autour de lui les dieux rayonnent dans des marbres;
Les prés, les blés,
Les champs brillent au- loin, et-les paons sous les arbres
Sont étoilés;

En voyant ce front vil qu’aucuns remords n’émeuvent,
Cet oeil vitreux;
Que pensent les lauriers? Qu’est-ce que les lys peuvent
Sé dire entre eux?

On ne s’explique pas pourquoi le myrte encense
L’homme dé sang,
Et comment à subir une telle présence
Avril consent..

Les bois respectueux ont l’air de dire: sire!
A ce larron;
Ils ne refusent rien au maître, et s’il désire
Un liseron;

Un iris, un bleuet candide, une pervenche,
Ils les lui font;
Est-ce que la nature ignore là revanche,
O ciel profond!

Est-ce qu’il , est permis de se donner pour tâche
Le mal, l’horreur,
D’être un fourbe, un escroc, un gueux, un drôle, un lâche,
Un empereur,

De jeter sur Paris la mort fauve et hagarde,
Le faux serment,
L’effroi, sans que personne ait l’air d’y prendre garde
Au firmament,
Sans qu’un puissant témoin fasse aux étoiles signe
De moins briller,
Au mois de mai d’avoir moins de parfum, au cygne
De s’envoler,

Sans qu’on entende au loin gronder le flot sonore,
Le vent huer,
Et sans qu’on voie autour du coupable l’aurore
Diminuer;

Sans qu’au nom de l’honneur, de. l’auguste justice,
Des saintes lois,
Et du grand ciel, la ronce indignée avertisse
L’ombre des bois,
Et sans que le printemps distingue entre un faussaire,
D’où sont venus
Tous nos pleurs, tous nos maux, tous nos deuils, et Glycère,
Nymphe aux pieds nus!
Il a parfaitement oublié tous ses crimes,
Le sang versé,
Son serment, son honneur, son âme, et les abîmes
Du noir passé;

Il a saisi le peuple et la loi dans sa serre,
Joué son jeu,
Et fait la quantité de forfaits nécessaire
Pour être un dieu;

Les bonzes, les cadis, sous leur robe de femme,
Le trouvent grand;
C’est tout au plus s’il sait combien il est infâme,
Et s’il comprend;

Il est l’idole informe et vague qu’on encense;
Ses yeux font peur;
On devine qu’il est plein de toute-puissance
A sa stupeur;

Car c’est bien surprenant d’être un tel misérable,
Et que les rois
Soient petits devant vous plus qu’au pied de l’érable
L’herbe des bois.

Ah! quand un homme a fait tout ce qu’a fait cet homme,
Quand il est là,
Lui qui livra ta Rome, ô Caton, à la Rome
De Loyola,

Lui qui fit faire un pas monstrueux en arrière
A la raison,
Lui que guette la Prusse, espionne et guerrière,
A l’horizon,

Lui qui, mettant un vote imbécile à la place
Des droits trahis,
Règne contre le peuple et par la populace
Sur mon pays,

Lui par qui,. dans un jour de deuil, d’abîme et d’ombre,
Tout se perdit,
Il semble qu’il faudrait un rugissement sombre
Sur ce bandit!

XXXII AMNISTIE

Il semble que les champs devraient être lugubres
Et mécontents,
Et qu’il devrait sortir des forêts insalubres
Un faux printemps;

Eh bien, non! mai l’accepte et floréal l’accueille,
Et ce pervers
Ne fait pas perdre un nid, une branche, une feuille
Aux buissons verts’

Et l’entréeeri enfer due à ce, misérable,
C’est ce jardin,
Le lys, l’églantier, l’orme; et le cèdre et l’érable;
O lâche éderi!
chez lui.
Jamais par une phis monstrueuse ouverture
Le mal n’a lui.
Le sort est vil de nous toujours,traître et fantasque,
Il s’est jeté;
Mais jamais jusqu’ici l’on n’avait vu ce masque
Si dénoué.

Et c’est l’étonnement des prophètes moroses;
De toi, martyr,
De toi, penseur, que tant de crime à tarit de roses
Puisse aboutir.
Il s’assied sous un hêtre; il murmure J’oublie.
Oubliez. Oublions. - Douce mélancolie!-
Puis, tendre, il prend sa flûte et soupire: .

Ô proscrits!
Pyrame aima Thisbé. Céphale aima.Procris,
Je vous aime. Accourez. Bannis, je vous appelle.
Amnistie est un mot singulier que j’épelle;

Je ne sais pas très bien ce qu’il veut dire: Et vous?
Mais je vous aime. L’ombre est tiède, l’air est doux.
Il est dans le printemps; il est dans la nature
Proscrits, je songe à vous dans ma joie innocente;
Pour que je sois heureux il faut que je vous sente
Respirer le même air que moi dans les vallons.
Revenez. Je le sais, les jours d’exil sont longs.
Il est temps qu’enfin moi, vous, vos fils, vos compagnes,
Nous allions tous ensemble errer dans les campagnes
Et que nous écoutions sous les mêmes berceaux
Et sous le même ciel le même chant d’oiseaux.
Il est temps que je dise à mon Pinard fidèle
Tiens! voici le proscrit, et voici l’hirondelle!
Dieu te ramène l’une, et moi l’autre. Exilés,
Prenez la clef des champs dans mon trousseau de clés;
L’air du pays. natal plaît à l’âme des sages;
Les champs vous calmeront. Beauté des paysages!
Moi César, devant qui Béhic est à genoux,
Chers bannis, je vous rends la patrie. Aimons-nous.
Revenez. Craignez Nous que mes chiens ne vous mordent?
Non. Mon sénat est doux. Les coeurs enfin s’accordent,
Et de boucher je suis redevenu berger.
Plus de banni dehors, dedans plus d’étranger,
Je suis français. Amis, j’ai quitté mon écorce;
Car pour-être français et cesser d’être corse,
Il suffit que l’é manque ou que l’i soit ôté;
Moi je suis Bonaparte et non Buonaparté.
Conti, l’homme par qui le vrai chez moi pénètre,
Se change en monsieur Conte et Piétri 42 devient piètre.
Donc, nous serons français, vous vivrez sous mes lois.
Accourez dans mes bras. Ainsi les vieux gaulois
Se réconciliaient trinquant sous la tonnelle;
Le fond du verre était garni de pimprenelle.
Mon âme en sa beauté s’offre à vos yeux. Hélas!
Laissez-vous attendrir, proscrits. Quand Ménélas
Vit le sein nu d’Hélène, il jeta son épée.
Ma molle rêverie est de vous occupée.

Ingrats, vous détournez les yeux de mes appas.
J’ai beaucoup de Parieux, de Fialins, de Maupas,
De juges, de soldats, et de billets de banque;
Mais proscrits, vous absents, quelque chose me manque.
Je ne sais ce que j’ai, je fuis dans les forêts.
En vain le Moniteur m’arrive, humide et frais,
J’ai beau suivre aux prés. verts la vache aisée à traire,
Et songer au budget; j’ai beau pour me distraire
Laisser errer mes yeux sur lecrâne poli
Du maréchal Regnault de Saint-Jean-d’Angely;
En vain je verse Aÿ, Nuits, Sauterne, Alicante
A Rouher qui me fait l’effet d’une bacchante;
Boudet en vain me suit, poussant de longs abois;
En vain je vois Troplong sourire au fond des bois;
En vain tous mes curés sur qui vous vous trompâtes,
Tous mes évêques, gros et gras, joignent leurs pattes,
Et font un hourvari de prières; en vain.
Romieu le faune, en vain Bacciochi le sylvain
Soufflent éperdûment dans leurs buccins de cuivre;
En vain Morny, buvant; aimable, sanglant, ivre,
Sur son char attelé de tigres, passe au fond
Du hallier où Dodone avec Bondy se fond;
Aux applaudissements des nymphes familières,
En vain, le thyrse en main, ventru, coiffé de lierres,
Baroche énorme et gai vient monté sur Nisard;
En vain Delangle est bête, en vain Fould est gueusard;
Je suis triste. Je sens du vague. Chaix-d’Est-Ange
M’ennuie; et par moments je me-tourne: - Qu’entends-je?
Est-ce leur pas? vont-ils revenir, mes bannis? -
Oh! revenez! Avril gazouille dans les nids,
Toutes les fleurs des bois mêlent leurs aromates,
Venez! pontons, cachots, poucettes, casemates,
Cayenne, Lambessa, j’oublierai .tout. Venez!
Quand même on me mettrait-Fould en fleur sous le nez,
Quand Suin décolleté montrerait ses-épaules,
Quand Glandaz et Leboeuf, pleureurs comme ‘deux saules,
Me chanteraient Dunois sur la muse de blé, -

Mon vide, je le sens ne serait pas comblé.
Il me faut mes proscrits, mes proscrits à moi. Certe,
Je suis grand, mais sans vous la patrie ést déserte.
Rentrez. Plus d’exil. Joie et chansons! Doux émoi!
Vous me contemplerez ayant autour de moi
Boitelle, Martinprey, Forey, Magnan et Magne;
Ainsi les’ douze pairs entouraient Charlemagne:
Vous verrez mon petit apprendre l’A’B C.
Voyons, finissons-en, liquidons le passé.
Vous étiez endormis; j’ai surpris, vos vedettes.
Si l’on n’est empereur, comment payer ses dettes?
Il le fallait Le Louvre exempte de Clichy ,
Un parvenu n’est rien s’il n’est un enrichi.
Comprenez. Vous savez, il vous passe une idée.
La Françe était en vie et je l’ai poignardée,
J’en conviens, j’ai commis ce péché véniel,
Avec Canrobert, Korte,Espinasse et Niel.
La République un jour s’éveilla désarmée,
Et me vit souriant, debout, mèche allumée;
J’ai tiré le canon, puis on s’est tenu coi;
J’avais peut-être un peu juré je ne sais quoi,
Mais à tous ces vieux faits qu’est-ce qui s’intéresse?
Ce fut un coup de force avec, un tour d’adresse;
Je fus Machiavel compliqué d’Auriol;
Vous étiez la loi, soit, et je fus le viol..
N’en-parlons plus. Je hais les choses éternelles,
Elles sont sans-pitié, l’implacable est en elles.
L’enfer dirait Toujours, mais moi je dis Assez!
Je vous ai mitraillés, traqués, bannis, chassés,
Dispersés, comme un tas de cendre dans l’espace,
Volés, assassinés... - Eh bien, je vous fais grâce!

XXXIII EN PLEIN DIX-NEUVIÈME SIÈCLE.

ROSALIE DOISE

On voulait condamner cette fille, attendu
Qu’une femme effarée, au regard éperdu,
Dont on voit le col nu que va trancher la hache,
Qui hurle, qu’à la planche effroyable on attache,
Et dont on dit: Voyez, longtemps elle se tut,
Puis parla, cela pose un jeune substitut.
On passe conseiller, président, avant l’âge,
Et l’on finit par faire un très beau mariage,
Et par avoir des champs, des femmes, un château,
En suifant la rainure où glisse le couteau.

Ne jamais gaspiller tant on se sent capable,
Son temps à distinguer l’innocent du coupable,
Ecraser l’accusé que Bergasse étouffait,
N’être point scrupuleux, se montrer si bien fait
Pour l’opprobre qu’on a l’estime de Baroche,
Etre un de ceux à qui la honte dit: approche!
Et qui viennent, - la honte aide à l’avancement, -
Eh quoi! mais c’est tout simple! et c’est ainsi, vraiment,
Que le bonnet carré se dore et se galonne,
Que du temple des lois on devient la colonne,
Et qu’on reçoit la croix d’honneur, dans la saison,
Des mains d’un accusé de haute trahison.
C’est pourquoi, lorsqu’on a tout ce qu’il faut pour plaire,
Qu’on est, par la cravate et les gants, exemplaire,
Qu’on sait être au bal jeune et vieux au tribunal,
Quand on est élégant, doctrinaire, banal,
Quand on a ce patois gn’Aulois prend pour du style,
Faire guillotiner une femme est utile.
D’une tête sanglante un juge est couronné.
N’allez-vous pas blâmer un jeune homme bien né,
Qui trouve sous sa main une obscure ouvrière,

Une fille, et qui tient à faire sa carrière,

II

De montrer à propos quelque férocité?
On est un personnage important et compté
Et que le journal’ cite en lettre majuscule,
Quand on a fait lier quelqu’un à la bascule:
Chez le préfet le soir vous prenez votre thé;
Par les meilleurs salons vous êtes accepté
Voilà ce substitut terriblè qu’on renomme!
Et l’évêque vous dit: -C’est bien. Tonnez, jeune homme!
Ah! l’herbe de Clamart donne dé beaux profits!
On est celui que montre une mère à son fils,
On fascine, étant presque un acteur sur l’affiche,
Une Agnès de seize ans, fraîche, ingénue et riche,
Qui danse avec vous rit, parle de vos succès,
Et de la femme à qui vous fîtes son procès,
Pendant qu’en son tombeau cette morte farouche
Sent fourmiller les vers de terre dans sa bouche.

Tel est le rêve fait par tous les débutants.
Ainsi songeait le frais Delangle à son printemps;
Ainsi songeait Troplong alors qu’il était rose;
Ainsi tout substitut songe en peignant sa prose,
Laubardemont en herbe et Laffemas en fleur;
Ayant derrière lui la mort; sombre soufiieur,.
Bellart jeune se dit: Soyons Jeffrye en France!
Et c’est. le front chargé de ce tas d’espérance
Qu’en son riant matin, vers le but qui lui plaît,
Chemine Grandperrette avec .son pot au lait.
Tous veulent une affaire horrible en cour d’assises.
Comme on haranguerait les faces indécises .
Des jurés, par la phrase aux meurtres entraînés!
Car la justice est bête, et par le bout du nez
On conduit où l’on veut Thémis, la vieille aveugle.
On a reçu du ciel l’éloquence qui beugle;

Si la chancellerie un jour vous remarquait,
Tout serait dit; d'emblée on arrive au parquet
De. Paris, et l'on est bourreau sous l'oeil du prince.

Or ce juge apprenti travaillait en province.

Un matin, calculant l'avenir, fatigué
Des bals de préfecture, et bâillant, et peu gai,
Ce garçon' s'était dit dans un moment lucide.
— Ah! ce qu'il me faudrait, c'est un bon parricide! -
Car en effet, en Grève; il est beau de pouvoir
Assaisonner la tête avec un. voile noir.
Il chercha. Ce fut toi qu'il trouva, misérable!

Donc on prit cette femme. Il est fort déplorable
Qu'on n'ait plus la torture. A bas Beccaria!
On fit du mieux qu'on put. On mit la paria
Dans un trou, sur un lit de paille, au fond de l'ombre.
Les geôles ont toujours quelque cabanon sombre,
Trop court pour qu'on s'y puisse étendre, trop étroit
Pour qu'on marche, et trop bas pour qu'on s'y tienne droit.
Le captif est là, seul, sous les noeuds qu'on lui forge,
Sous le poing de la nuit qui lui serre la gorge,
Et l'insomnie, en pleurs brûle ses yeux sanglants.
Cela remplace un peu le réchaud de Vouglans,
Le chevalet, l'étau de bronze, la rapière
Lardant le patient sur la tablé de pierre,
Et le bouc qui léchait un homme enduit de miel.
Là, sans point d'apptii, loin des hommes, loin du ciel,
Sentant la voix du juge ainsi qu'une piqûre,
Pendant que chaque jour grossit sa charge obscure,
Le prisonnier se dit: Je ne sais où je vais!

Personne assurément ne peut trouver mauvais
Qu'ayant besoin de faire avouer cette femme,
On l'enterrât vivante en cette crypte infâme.
C'est juste. On s'arrangea de façon qu'elle fût

Sans jour, sans air, avec le geôlier à l’affût,
Guettant ses pleurs, ses cris, sa faim, sa soif, ses rêves;
L’affreux tourment qui n’a ni relâches ni trêves,
L’étouffement, pesait sur elle. Ne pouvoir
Respirer, et râler dans l’ombre, et ne rien voir!
Ne pas dormir! Toujours dans l’immonde cellule
Quelque fourmillement effroyable pullule.
Les murs glacés ont l’air d’être vos ennemis.
Oh! les hideux cachots! il semble qu’on ait mis
Un morceau de la nuit du tombeau dans ces caves.
Mais si l’on n’avait pas ces geôles, ces entraves,
Ces gênes, tout irait fort mal, et l’accusé
Peu docile, serait à tuer malaisé.
Là du moins il est pris de tout l’on tient registre.
Il descend marche à marche un escalier sinistre;
Les juges font sur lui de lugubres essais;
Pâle, il se sent poussé par derrière un procès
Est une pente douce où l’on glisse à la tombe.

Cette fille expirait dans cette catacombe.
— C’est sa faute, disait le juge, elle se tait!
Criminelle, avouez! - Mais elle résistait,
Et refusait d’entrer dans la sombre descente,
La drôlesse, attendu qu’elle était innocente.
Et c’était là sans doute un inconvénient.
Mais le juge ne peut avoir tort: En niant,
On l’irrite. Il ‘apprit soudain qu’elle était grosse,
Et dit: Soit. Pour berceau l’enfant aura la fosse.
C’était son droit. Ne point vous ôter un cheveu,
Mais faire ce qu’il faut pour avoir un aveu.
C’est le dernier degré de l’art et de l’étude
D’être tortionnaire avec mansuétude,
Et, sans bruit, sans emprunts au vieux code gaulois,
D’employer l’agonie au triomphe des lois.

La damnée étouffait, et criait: Grâce! grâce!
Le juge lui disait - Que veux-tu que j’y fasse?

Avoue! - Elle pleurait. - De l’air! je meurs! - Tu n’as
Qu’à parler, et d’un mot tu romps ce cadenas.
Ta prison deviendra très douce. Vois, décide. °
Tu n’as qu’à t’avouer simplement parricide.
— Non! - Je te rendrai l’air et le jour. Tu pourras
Avoir des fleurs, avoir un lit, avoir des draps;
Sortir dans le préau si cela te contente;
Tu redeviendras fraîche et grasse et bien portante;
Tu seras bien logée et bien nourrie; il faut,
Femme, si tu veux vivre, accepter l’échafaud.

Et ce raisonnement touchait peu cette folle.
Force à la loi. Tout autre axiome est frivole.
Quoi, tant d’hommes savants, quoi, Treilhard, Portalis,
Quoi, Tronchet qui plaida devant les fleurs de lys,
Séguier, Berlier, auront dépensé des semaines
A souder la loi gothe avec les lois romaines;
Bigot-Préameneu, payé par le budget,
Aura consulté Mourre et consulté Target.
Ils auront fait un çode étonnant, et ces maîtres,
Ces clercs, sachant par cœur le droit de nos ancêtres,
Cas simples, cas royaux; chefs-plaids et francs-alleux,
Auront perdu leur temps! Ce serait scandaleux,
Certe; et puis à la fin l’amour-propre s’en mêle..
Quoi! la loi fléchirait devant cette femelle!
Un jeune magistrat, voyons, peut-il lâcher’
Une femme qu’il est allé très loin chercher;
Qui peut-être, après tout, quoique fort obstinée, -
Est à peu près coupable, et qui guillotinée;
Fera parler de lui chez le garde des séeaux!
Cette fille est d’ailleurs sans moeurs. Les noirs ciseaux
Sont au greffe, et bientôt mordront sa chevelure.
Il criait: Parricide! avoue. Il faut conclure! -
Elle disait: - Jamais. - L’innocence est de fer.
On dut la murer presque au fond de cet enfer.

Dans son sein cependant le pauvre petit être,

L’ange obscur, avait l’air de ne vouloir plus naître,
Et, sans savoir nos lois, nos jougs, notre secret,
Ni ce que lui faisait la justice, il mourait.
Elle en tremblait du moins. Prise entre ces murailles,
Elle épiait cette âme éclose en ses entrailles,
Elle en craignait la fuite, et dans son flanc muet
Il lui semblait parfois que. rien ne remuait;
Si bien qu’un jour, vaincue enfin, découragée,
Stupide, cette mère et cette naufragée,
Sans espoir, n’ayant plus que le choix de l’écueil,
Sentant son ventre, hélas! devenir un cercueil,
Et le doux innocent périr dans ce repaire,
Pour sauver son enfant, dit: - J’ai.tué mon père!

22 novembre.

XXXIV APPROBATION DES PRÊTRES

C’était dans un sépulcre, ou bien quartier Bréda.

J’y vis un monstre, et lui, lascif, me regarda,
Et dit, me souriant d’un vil sourire oblique:
— Je m’appelle Succès, je suis fille publique;
Je cogne à mon carreau, Mastaï m’aperçoit,
Et monte.
Oui, le succès; le succès, quel qu’il soit,
Est une gorge nue à laquelle aucun prêtre
Ne résiste, et l’on vient baiser la bouche traître.
De tous les crimes, fiers de leur flagrant délit,
Et l’on fait sa prière en couchant dans leur lit.
Rien n’égale. l’amour que chez Tartuffe excite
Une action mauvaise en pleine réussite.
C’est un massacre? Soit. Un parricide? Après?
Les sophismes, trempés d’eau bénite, sont prêts.
L’Audace heureuse est là. Devant cette sultane,
Le dogme déboutonne en riant sa soutane,
Le sermon s’attendrit, le syllabus en rut
Refait les gros soupirs de Booz avec Ruth.
Rome lèche vos pieds si vous gagnez le quine.
Le pape est le galant, la chance est la coquine;
Elle attire, on la suit dans ses obscurs chemins,
Et le fard sur le front cache le sang aux mains.
Qui fraude est orthodoxe et qui ment est biblique.
Quand ce maroufle impur brisa la République,
Le jour où l’oncle fut calqué par le neveu,
Les juges, qui s’étaient mis à juger un peu
Bonaparte; risquant sa hideuse gageure,
Ébauchaient vaguement du côté du parjure
Un agenouillement pendant qu’il triomphait.
Ce voleur a tué ce passant. C’est bien fait.
Le chêne par le coin félon s’est laissé fendre,
Tant pis pour lui. Tu meurs? il fallait te défendre.

Qui t’égorge a raison. Paix! meurs. La papauté
Est un faux poids toujours aux succès ajouté.
La Papauté pour frère a le Glaive. Elle ouate
Avec des trahisons sa douillette béate,
Cherche avant tout l’utile, et grossit d’un fardeau
D’attentats, d’infamie et d’horreur, son credo.
Elle aime Octave immonde, absout Clovis Sicambre,
Sacre un Dix-huit-Brumaire et lave un Deux-Décembre.
La justice, le droit chassé par les tyrans,
L’honneur et la vertu, lui sont indifférents,
N’ayant rien de solide et rien de saisissable,
Autant qu’au sphinx camard les tourbillons de sable
Roulés sous le ciel noir par le vent libyen.
Charles-Neuf tue. Amen. Sylla proscrit. C’est bien.
Le poignard est divin; la hache est innocente.
Pas un forfait à qui l’église ne présente
Pour s’essuyer les mains, la nappe de l’autel.

L’église est pour Gessler contre Guillaume Tell,
Pour Rossa contre Huss, pour Cauchon contre Jeanne.
Elle offre à Trestaillon la colonne Trajane.
Elle est l’auberge entrez si vous pouvez payer;
Le Te Deum sera compris dans le loyer.
Mandrin est un sauveur, Cartouche est un messie;
Qui réussit est pur. Payez. Rome associe
A l’acceptation des forfaits l’Éternel.
Monter est vertueux, tomber est criminel.
O terreur! elle fait bénir la perfidie,
L’affreux plan qu’un faussaire à loisir étudie,
Le bagne ouvert aux bons, les gueux mis au sénat,
Tous les viols, le fer, le feu, l’assassinat,
César et ses complots, l’araignée et ses toiles,
Par cette grande main sombre et pleine d’étoiles,
Sans même regarder un moment le ciel bleu,
Et sans se demander si c’est possible à Dieu!

25 février 1870.

XXXV QU’ÊTES-VOUS? - TU LE VOIS...

— Qu’êtes-vous? - Tu le vois à notre robe. - Quoi?
Les prêtres de Dieu? -Non, les prêtres de la loi.
— De quelle loi? Du maître. - Et qu’est le maître? - Un homme.
On l’appelle empereur ici, césar à Rome.
Il est aigle de droit et de race’ vautour.’
Celui-ci fut jadis un criminel. Un jour
Il fit un serment, puis il s’embusqua derrière,
Puis, comme les voleurs la nuit dans la clairière,
Il sortit `brusquement, de sa cachette, et:prit’
A la gorge l’honneur, la probité, l’esprit,
La gloire, la vertu, la pudeur, la patrie,
Et les tua. D’abord, voyant la loi meurtrie,
Nous fîmes préparer la corde et le, gibet, `
Comptant bien. l’étrangler tout pet, s’il succombait.
Mais il a réussi, la rudesse est un vice,
Et chez lui maintenant nous sommes en service;
A qui nous souffleta notre respect est dû;
Il sied qu’il soit sacré, puisqu’il n’est. pas pendu;
Nous faisons à présent pendre en son- nom les autres;
Nous sommes les appuis de l’état, les apôtres
De l’ordre, et nous lavons les pieds du maître, .emploi
Utile, et le meilleur que puisse avoir- la loi;
La clarté de cet homme éclaire notre livre;
Car il est naturel et simple qu’on lui livre
La conscience humaine et le code et Jésus,
Puisque c’est lui qui paie et qu’il a le dessus.
— Qu’est-ce que vous rendez, là, dans cette bâtisse,
Par la bouche.? - Cela s’appelle la justice.

Lorraine-Altwies, 27 août .

XXXVI Pour le prêtre il est saint

Pour le prêtre il est saint, pour le juge il est juste;
Il a raison;
Nul ne résiste; il est sacré, suprême, auguste,
Par trahison.

C’est de vin et de sang que sa lèvre est rougie.
Lourd prisonnier
De cette double ivresse, il complète l’orgie
Par le charnier.

Il a tout; les sénats lui prodiguent leur âme
Et leur fierté,
L’évêque en chape d’or la prière, et la femrne
La nudité.

Devant lui la vertu frémit, l’honneur émigre;
Pâle Psyché,
L’âme humaine voudrait s’enfuir; et par le tigre
Il est léché.

Il a par un viol possédé la victoire,
Il est prudent,
Mais guerroyeur; il compte arriver à la gloire,
Bazaine aidant.

Les peuples sur leur tête ont cette splendeur noire;
Il est debout;
César, majesté, prince,, empereur, dans l’histoire,
Et dans l’égout.

Le monde, ainsi qu’au temps de Claude et de Comnène,
Est la béant,
Contemplant ce pygée énorme, grandeur naine,
Hautain néant:

Il est le sphinx du trône; il a pour toute règle
Le crime heureux;
Il habite un fond d'ombre; il est seul comme l'aigle
Et le lépreux.

Il a l'armée, il a l'église; il est superbe,
Blême, ébloui;
Et tous les crimes sont épanouis en gerbe
Autour de lui.

Il règne, il a la joie obscure de Tibère;
Il est content;
Et pendant ce temps-là,' le destin délibère,
Et l'ombre attend;

Et, soeur de Némésis, l'implacable logique
Au front serein,
Assise à son fourneau, chauffe à son feu tragique
Le vers d'airain.

26 novembre.

XXXVII POUR L’ÉCRIVAIN VÉNAL...

Pour l’écrivain vénal il est un dur moment.
Après avoir tiré de son encre qui ment
Tout ce qu’elle contient de noirceur et de bave,
Après avoir été l’affreuse plume esclave,
Après avoir haï pour le compte d’autrui,
Soudain cet homme un jour sent que, venant de lui,
L’injure est un éloge et la louange un blâme,
Et qu’il ne peut plus nuire à force d’être infame.
Quand il est démontré, prouvé, public, patent
Qu’on a livré son âme èt qu’on a reçu tant,
Qu’on est prostitué par brevet authentique,
Qu’au trottoir du chantage. on a tenu boutique,
Qu’on s’est fait insulteur, moyennant un loyer,
Qu’on est allé chez ceux. qui peuvent bien payer
Vendre de l’imposture et de la calomnie,
Qu’on a, pour de l’argént, outragé le génie,
La probité, le droit, le courage, l’honneur,
On est mieux ‘qu’assassin, on est émpoisonneur;
On est moins qu’un bandit des bois, on est un drôle;

L’or aux mains flétrit plus que lè fer sur l’épaule.

Altwies, 18 septembre .

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== XXXVIII Qu’il vienne des coquins==
<pre>

Qu’il vienne des coquins sur la honte qu’on sème;
Qu’à propos de Monsieur Bonaparte troisième,
Morlot cite Hildebrand, Troplong Justinien;
Qu’en ce gouvernement napoléonien
Le grand Napoléon soit pris, qu’on rende Hercule
Grotesque, Achille farce et Nemrod ridicule;

Qu’on fasse du clinquant, du faux, des oripeaux,
Avec les ,grands exploits, avec les grands drapeaux,
Avec les saints chevrons des brigands de la Loire “;
Que cet empire, utile aux banques, ait pour gloire
De n’avoir point d’Eylau, d’Essling ni d’Austerlitz;
Qu’on soit des enrichis contents d’être avilis,
Que le public opprobre à la Bourse se cote;
Que l’aigle se marie avec une cocotte;
Soit. Que m’importe à moi! j’ai l’immense dédain;
Je regarde pousser les fleurs de mon jardin,
La mer chante, et je vois naître l’aube candide;
D’Austerlitz éclipsé le soleil sort splendide;
Et si César décroît, les bois me sont témoins
Que le doux mois d’avril n’a pas un nid de moins.

XXXIX Vous le trouvez bon.

Vous le trouvez bon. Soit. Moi je suis triste. Hélas!
Je pleure; et je finis, sinistre, accablé, las,
Dans ce deuil où je sens tant d'angoisse m'étreindre,
Par n'avoir qu'un besoin immense de tout plaindre;
Tout, même ce vieillard, ô ciel noir, surtout lui!
Je songe à sa pauvre âme, où jamais rien n'a lui
Qu'une fausse clarté cachant la lueur vraie;
Le crépuscule est-il la faute de l'orfraie?
Hélas! ces malheureux grands-prêtres sont plongés
Sous un tel flot de nuit, d'ombre et de préjugés!
D'Aod à Samuel, de Joad à Caïphe,
Toujours le dogme a fait chanceler le pontife;
Toujours dans cette coupe, hélas, l'homme hébété
A -bu l'erreur croyant boire la vérité.
Il a ce livre, Dieu mais il ne sait pas lire.

Ah! j'ai beau m'indigner, je ne puis pas maudire.

XL JE-SERAIS TRÈS CONTENT..

Je serais très content si j’étais Bonaparte
Qu’on me prouvât que nul n’a combattu pour Sparte,
Qu’Aristide est un mot, que Tell est inventé,
Que Spartacus fait rire, et qu’un doute est resté
Sur Thrasybule en Grèce et sur Brutus dans Rome.
Je trouverais utile et bon, si j’étais l’homme
Qui sur la France morte à cette heure est debout,
Qu’en sortant de souper avec monsieur About
Chez madame Mathilde, un beau soir, monsieur Taine
Démontrât de façon triomphante et certaine
Que personne ne peut faire ni bien ni mal,
Qu’un gueux, comme un héros, est un produit normal,
Que tout est de la fange étant de la matière,
Que le juste et l’injuste au même cimetière
Mêlent tranquillement leur phosphate de chaux,
Que Tibère à Caprée et Huss dans les cachots
Sont égaux et n’ayant d’âme ni l’un ni l’autre,
Sont le néant despote et le néant apôtre;
Car tout se vaut devant le rien universel.
La vertu c’est du sucre, et le crime est du sel 56
On secrète, sans but, et pour se mettre à l’aise,
Une bonne action, ainsi qu’une mauvaise
De la même manière, et l’homme est un ruisseau
Où le serpent vient boire aussi bien que l’oiseau.
Le louer, le blâmer, pourquoi? Louez-vous l’onde
Qu’un cygne fait charmante et qu’un ver fait immonde?

XLI APRÈS SEIZE ANS

I

L’empire est un succès. Quel beau commencement!
Paris vaut une messe et coûte un faux serment;
Ce n’est pas cher. Seize ans de gloire! une jonchée
De lauriers et de fleurs, et l’histoire est trichée.
Tant pis pour elle. Hurrah.! plus d’émeute à Roubaix.
Le sultan à la France offre huit chevaux bais;
On en attellera le carrosse du sacre.
Nul revenant ne vient rabâcher le massacre;
Les morts du Deux-Décembre ont le sommeil profond.
Les institutions de bienfaisance vont,
Et Saint-François-Régis sourit dans l’atmosphère.
Le crédit mobilier est une bonne affaire
Pour les Pereire; et Fould, quoique mort, est vivant
Dans tout ce qu’on achète et dans tout ce qu’on vend,
Compris la conscience, é’t dans les phénomènes ,
De l’enregistrement, du’ timbre et des domaines.
L’emprunt met une pièce aux déficits. Fort-bien.
Le vieux Paris, Sauvai, Du Breul, Félibien,
Se sauvent effarés devant Haussmann qui pioche.
Au bambino du ciél l’empire offre son mioche 58;
Le pape, doux parrain, donne un récépissé.
Le droit est un vieux mot, peu su, mal prononcé;
La justice est un pont qu’on passe avec péage;
Quand les Commùniqués pleuvent, c’est un nuage
De vérités qui crève, et, nôn sans quelque ennui,
Le journal se secoue, arrosé malgré lui;
L’honneur, qui pour bien vivre a plus d’une recette,
Est un fils que Tartuffe eut jadis de Macette
Quant à la probité, c’est une bague au doigt;
Ayez cet ornement, si bon vous semble. On voit
Le temps qu’il fait au juge ainsi qu’au baromètre.
Tout ce qu’un crime ‘peut au bon ordre promettre,

L’empire l’a tenu. Le peuple est au repos;
Les’Turennes manquant, on a des chassepots;
Tout rit. L’esprit humain est las; l’armée .est .forte.

II

Lui, règne.
,Mais Dieu dit: Le châtiment m’importe.
Nous l’aurons.

Vous l’avez. -Que vous faut-il de plus?
Quoi donc! ne voit-on pas commencer le reflux?
Hier triste, Aujourd’hui lugubre, et Demain pire.
Derrière ce châssis mal peint qu’on nomme empire,
Les ténèbres; un puits d’ignorance, un cachot
D’opprobre, en bas la faim, la banqueroute en haut,
Paphos pourrie offerte à ceux qui rêvaient Sparte,
Deuil, cendre, et tout au fond l’accusé Bonaparte;
Si Won tâche de voir un peu l’autre côté
Du triomphe, et l’envers de la prospérité,
On aperçoit cela. Que vous faut-il encore?
Le hibou ne croasse et Troplong ne pérore
Que la nuit. La nuit sourde est leur milieu joyeux.
Donc il fait nuit. Voyez la lueur de leurs yeux.
Sans doute on parle fort dans-les régions hautes
Des succès qu’on remporte, ici, là, sur ces côtes,
Dans ce désert, là-bas, en Cochinchine, ailleurs,
Partout; on a de quoi se railler des railleurs,
On -est vêtu de pourpre, et l’historiographe
Du manteau de César pourra dorer l’agrafe.
Bien. Soit. - Tournez la page et voyez le verso..
Le sépulcre est déjà visible en ce berceau.

Nous eûmes du bonheur au jeu; mais notre caisse
A des fêlures, fuit, penche, et son niveau baisse
Comme une eau qui se vide en d’obscurs entonnoirs;
L’azur du Livre Bleu se pique de points noirs;

Sadowa nous surprend, Luxembourg nous échappe;
Que faire? s'incliner. La Providence frappe.
La main est divine. Oui. Le soufflet est prussien.
Notre pape in petto, le petit Lucien,
A tout l'air d'un fruit sec. Du Vulturne à la Sprée,
Toute la monarchie en masse est délabrée.
Czars mal portants, sultans malades, archiducs
Peu chanceux, pape aveugle et sanglant, rois caducs.
Est-ce que ces voleurs de peuples, ces gueux princes,
Ces. grecs du trône, entr'eux s'escroquant des provinces,
N'entendent point craquer sous leurs pas le plancher?
Mané Thécel Pharès commence à s'ébaucher.
Couza fuit, François fuit, Maximilien ,tombe.
Le trône est une trappe ouverte sur la tombe..
Le dur Mexique lutte armé du talion,
Car la louve espagnole allaita ce lion,
Et sa liberté fauve ignore la clémence;
Dans cette ombre, hélas, erre une femme en démence;
Les contre-coups lointains deviennent sérieux
Et, dans on ne sait quel brouillard mystérieux
Où pleure Hécube, ou rit Cassandre, où rôde Électre,
L'empereur assassin songe à l'empereur spectre.
Il décline par où naguère il triomphait.
Que de revers!. Comptez. Qu'est-ce que, son forfait?
Un cachot sur nos fronts; sous ses pieds un abîme.
Il sent se lézarder sinistrement son crime.,
N'est-ce, pas assez?

III

Tout. Les tyrans à bas et les hommes debout.
Tout. La fin. Ce qu'il faut à notre âpre insomnie,
C'est la captivité du genre humain finie,
C'est le souffle orageux des clairons, c'est l'écho
Des trompettes jetant à terre Jéricho,
C'est le débordement des Tibres et des Rhônes,
C'est l'écroulement vaste et farouche des trônes,

C’est leur dernière armée en fuite à l’horizon!
Ce qu’il nous faut, c’est l’âme écrasant sa prison,
C’est le peuple arrachant sa chaîne avec furie,
C’est l’Amour criant: Guerre!, et la sainte Patrie
Criant: Peuples, j’abdique, et suis l’Humanité!
C’est la Paix disant: Passe avant moi, Liberté!
C’est en nos coeurs gonflés la colère profonde,:
C’est l’épée en nos mains pour délivrer le monde,
C’est l’imbécile amas des rois séditieux
A nos pieds, et l’aurore immense dans les cieux!

H. H. 2 décembre 1867.

XLII BAUDIN

La barricade était livide dans l’aurore,
Et, comme j’arrivais; elle fumait encore;
Que voulez-vous. donc?
— Tout.

Rey me serra la main et dit: Baudin est mort.

Il semblait calme et doux comme un enfant qui dort;
Ses yeux étaient fermés, ses bras pendaient, sa bouche
Souriait d’un sourire héroïque et farouche;
Ceux qui l’environnaient l’emportèrent.

Et tous,
Depuis ce jour, l’exil s’étant fermé sur nous,
Nous songeons à celui qui mourut, et dont l’âme
Luit sur Paris ainsi que dans l’ombre une flamme,
Et nous disons: Hélas! c’est toi qui fus* choisi!

Ô toi qui dors là-bas, nous qui saignons ici,
Nous t’envions. Heureux ceux que reprend la tombe!
Celui qui reste droit devant celui qui tombe
Médite, car tous deux sont, en dépit du sort,
Debout, l’un dans la vie et l’autre dans la mort.
Mais dans ce monde où passe et repasse sans cesse
Une inondation de honte et de bassesse,
Où tant d’hommes, plus vains que les mouches d’été,
Vendant leur avenir au présent effronté,
Pour-avoir plus d’orgie acceptent plus d’abîme,
Et chantent, joyeux d’être abjects, ô ciel ‘sublime,
Ciel noir! comment ne pas envier la faveur
D’une balle qui vient frapper un front rêveur!
Comment ne pas frémir devant la suite obscure
Des crimes de Néron vivant comme Epicure,
Ne s’inquiétant pas de ce que produiront

Ses forfaits, ses plaisirs, sa joie et notre affront,
Faisant avec Dieu sombre une folle gageure, .
Et vil, petit, terrible, avec son noir parjure,
Ses fraudes, son succès, sa fange, affreux ciment,
Bâtissant on ne sait quel vaste écroulement!
Comment ne pas aimer la caresse subite
De la mort, spectre auguste avec qui l’âme habite,
Et qui vous ouvre une ombre étoilée où tout luit!
La mort, c’est le matin, et l’exil, c’est la nuit.
Quand tombent les hérauts du progrès populaire,
Quand une main d’en haut, dans un jour de colère,
Leur ôte brusquement des lèvres le clairon,
Quand Botzaris périt, quand expire Byron,
Quand les quatre sergents de la Rochelle meurent,
On entend le sanglot des nations qui pleurent;
Les peuples sous ces deuils se courbent accablés
Et tristes, comme après un orage les blés.
Ces martyrs sont sacrés, et sur toutes les lèvres
Leurs noms volent, donnant aux coeurs les saintes fièvres;
Ils sont l’exemple, ils sont l’honneur, ils sont l’espoir;
Même quand tout s’éclipse on croit encor les voir;
Leur oeil fixe soutient ceux qui jamais ne cèdent;
Ils font songer l’enfant- qui s’élève, ils l’obsèdent
Du superbe besoin de leur être pareils;
Et quand la Liberté, dorant les cieux vermeils,
Reparaît, et revient sur les cimes éclore,
Leurs grands fantômes sont mêlés à cette aurore.
Mourir, c’est vaincre. Un mort brille, éclaire et conduit.

Dans les temps ténébreux où tout s’écroule et fuit,
Quand un assassin fait balbutier l’histoire,
Quand le crime finit par avoir de la gloire,
Et qu’il ôte son masque inutile à garder,
Estimant que sa honte est bonne à regarder;
Quand, lâche, et subissant cette infâme bravade,
La conscience, ainsi qu’un voleur qui s’évade,
Retient son souffle, rampe et tremble; quand les fronts

N’ont presque plus de forme à cause des affronts,
Il est bon de sentir dans l’ombre la présence
De la mystérieuse et sévère innocence
Qui vit dans les tombeaux et que les morts ont seuls,
Et de voir dans la nuit la blancheur des linceuls.
Ce qu’on appelle une ombre est une âme rentrée
Dans. l’azur, mais restée au fond de l’empyrée,
Et qui parle à voix ‘basse au peuple humilié.

Ah! les morts sont présents! L’absent, c’est l’oublié.
L’absent, c’est le proscrit.

Que fait donc la patrie?
Se dit-il. Un bandit la tient, elle est flétrie,
Elle est vendue, elle est esclave, sans appui,
Sans gloire; et l’on entend quelqu’un rire, c’est lui,
Et c’est elle.

Eh bien, soit. On est proscrit, on pense,
On saigne, avec l’oubli railleur pour récompense;
Tout est bien. Voulait-on autre chose? En avant!
Vers quoi? vers le tombeau, vers la nuit, vers le vent,
Vers l’orage et l’écueil. Pourquoi pas? Rome! Auguste
Sort d’Octave, et le vrai devient faux, et l’injuste
En perspective avec le juste se confond;
Tais-toi, proscrit.

On sent de l’ironie au fond
Du murmure des flots comme du bruit des hommes.
Dans cette brume où tous pêle-mêle nous sommes
On jette sa pensée, inutile semeur;
L’insulte est par moments distincte en la rumeur
Que fait autour de vous la vie universelle’;
On rêve; l’océan, .plus grand que vous, chancelle;
On est chez l’étranger qui, froid, libre et jaloux,
Aime chez lui le droit et le tyran chez vous’;
On regarde l’anglais admirer Bonaparte;

On voit cette Carthage où brille un peu ‘de Sparte,
Londre, à quiconque opprime autrui tendre la main.
On marche seul, on suit à pas lents son chemin
Dans ce désert, la foule... - O nostalgie amère! -
On passe regardé de travers, comme Homère.

15 juillet.

XLIII CET ÊTRE EST SI PETIT..

Cet être est si petit qu’il est presque invisible. .
Il a pour fonction’ d’être insecte et nuisible;
Et, rôdant et glissant dans la nuit de Paris,
Punaise, de piquer le sommeil des proscrits.’
Il est sorti, de là sa senteur ordinaire,
De ce vieux bois de lit appelé séminaire
Où Basile offre à ceux qui veulent sommeiller
Un grabat dont Tartuffe a fourni l’oreiller.
Impur bi-frons, il est jésuite, il est laïque;
Il arrange avec art l’ouvrage en mosaïque,
Lourd, mais bariolé, stupide, mais faquin,
Et l’on croit voir Prud’homme en habit d’Arlequin.
Il est critique; il a son tarif et sa taxe,
Et d’autant plus d’aplomb qu’il a moins de syntaxe;
Il insulté à l’honneur, au devoir accompli;
Calomnier est simple et ne fait pas un pli;
C’est ainsi que sans foi, sans probité, sans style,
Et sans talent, on est un misérable utile.
Les pouvoirs forts se font aider, témoin Sylla;
Et leur luxe est d’avoir de ces vermines-là.
Il n’a qu’un dard; les seuls vrais monstres ont des griffes.
Fausses lettres, anas tronqués, mots apocryphes,
Tels sont ses trucs, jeux vils où Fréron se souillait,
Et que contre Voltaire inventa Patouillet 62.
Il met sa lâche injure au service du prince.
Il échappe au talon. vengeur, tant il est mince.
La platitude peut braver l’écrasement.
Il a l’infecte odeur de la bouche qui ment. ..
Tel qui naît chiffonnier finit par être scribe.
Il porte sur son dos sa hotte à diatribe.
Il la charge, il l’emplit; c’est vide et c’est complet.
Il rampe. Il est si bas que c’est en haut qu’il plaît.
Quel est son nom? Cherchez. Vous trouverez peut-être.
C’est la moitié d’un cuistre et c’est le quart d’un prêtre.

L’autre quart, c’est une ombre, un doute, un gueux flétri
Qu’eût dédaigné Vidocq, mais qu’estime Piétri.

12 octobre 1869.

XLIV Toi qui derrière moi

Toi qui derrière moi vantes la guillotine,
Toi qui baves et qui, dans ta rage crétine,
Dénonces le penseur comme on dénonce un roi,
Hurle et grince des dents, je n’ai pas peur de toi,
Ni de l’ongle allongé, ni de l’oeil qui menace,
Ni de ton faux système imbécile et tenace
Qui contre le bon sens entre en rébellion,
Car je te sens chacal et je me sens lion.

XLV LESURQUES

La Chambre criminelle de la Cour de cassation...
Déclare la révision du procès Lesurques non recevable.

(Arrêt du 17 décembre 1868.)

I

Et c'est ainsi qu'un tas d'hommes à jupe rouge,
Plus vils dans leur sénat qu'un forçat dans son bouge,
Prêtres hideux du temple indigné de la loi,
Plats sous la république et rampants Sous le roi,
Culs-de-jatte du droit dont la griffe est impure,
Et dont la conscience incurable suppure,
C'est ainsi que d'abjects et cyniques robins,
Jésuites que d'un signe on ferait jacobins,
Tout prêts à se tailler des bonnets dans leurs toges,
Profils féroces, comme on en voit dans les loges
Du jardin bestial d'Anvers, et dans l'horreur
Des bois où le loup rôde et tient lieu d'empereur,
C'est ainsi que Monsieur Troplong, monsieur Delangle,
Cuistres, de Guillotin adorant le triangle,
Lourds magots variant leurs poses de sommeils,
Poussahs de la justice et de l'ennui, pareils
Aux mandarins dormant sur les coussins des jonques;
Dupins, Crispins, Scapins, Chaix d'Est-Anges quelconques,
C'est ainsi que ces gens qui disent: nous jugeons!
Durs comme le granit, souples comme les joncs,
Valetaille à genoux sous le plat de l'épée,
Ont fait rouvrir les yeux à la tête coupée!

Elle était dans le fond de la tombe, elle avait
Les pierres de la fosse infâme pour chevet;
Autour d'elle gisaient, muets sous l'herbe haute,
Tous les sinistres morts qui dorment côte à côte

Dans ce fatal Clamart dont les cercueils sont courts “;
Sans haleine, sans voix, morte, attendant toujours,
Elle était là, pensive à cause des ténèbres; ,
Ses yeux fermés, le sang collant leurs cils funèbres,
Semblaient faire un refus farouche au firmament,
Et vouloir regarder l’ombre éternellement.
L’âme espère au tombeau n’être point poursuivie.
Mais un bruit est venu du côté de la vie,
Et la tête coupée a remué, son oeil .
Plein d’un feu sombre, a fait le jour dans le cercueil,
Et morne, a regardé les hommes, chose affreuse!

Et la nature, mère énorme et douloureuse,
Hélas! s’est efforcée alors de l’apaiser;
Les moineaux ont couru près d’elle se poser,
Et la mouche, apportant la pitié de l’atome;
La rosée a lavé sa pâleur; divin baume,
La fleur l’a-parfumée, et.l’herbe.qui verdit
L’a doucement baisée,. et les corbeaux ont dit
— N’écoute pas le noir croassement des juges!

Et dans ce moment-là; cyprès, tombeaux, refuges,
Ossements, ossements, vous l’avez entendu.
Et toi, ciel étoilé, gouffre où rien n’est perdu,
Cette tête, du, fond de la fosse maudite,
A crié; dans l’horreur sacrée où Dieu médite.
— Ils ont trouvé moyen de. reboire mon sang,
Dieu juste, et de tuer deux fois un innocent!

14 décembre.

II

«... Si l’on eût réhabilité Lesurques,
il eût fallu restituer à sa famille ses biens
confisqués, capital et intérêts, depuis
plus de soixante ans, ce qui, dit-on,

dépasserait deux millions. Cette importante considération a dû gravement
influer sur l’arrêt de la cour.”
(Tous les journaux. Décembre 1868.)

Deux millions, voilà l’obstacle.
Si c’était
Pour qu’en son salon rose où chante Colletet,
L’impératrice puisse inviter à Compiègne
Grandguillot, Grandperret, tous les grands de ce règne;
Si c’était pour gaver de truffes les Bourbeaux,
Pour offrir à Pinard des fêtes aux flambeaux,
Pour faire aux Nélatons quitter leurs clientèles;
Ou pour couvrir de fleurs, de bijoux, de dentelles
Les femmes de la cour aux charmes ingénus,
Essaim de nymphes, tas de belles aux bras nus,
Riant, montrant l’aisselle et laissant voir la pointe
Du sein par l’hiatus d’une gaze peu jointe;
Si c’était pour offrir des chiens au grand veneur;
Si c’était pour dorer, l’or rehaussant l’honneur,
Palikao, Failly, Leboeuf, Martinprey, Korte,
Tous les épouvantails moustachus de l’escorte;
Si c’était pour aider Rome à faire la nuit;
Si c’était pour aller au Mexique, à grand bruit,
Tambour battant, avec une nuée altière
D’étendards déployés, fonder un cimetière;
Si c’était pour forger des. chassepots meilleurs,
Si c’était pour créer des engins mitrailleurs
Appropriés au temps de progrès où nous sommes,
Afin d’abattre vite et bien des milliers d’hommes
Comme une faulx passant dans un champ de maïs,
Afin de faire, au meurtre immense du pays,
Travailler nos soldats changés en janissaires,
Afin d’assassiner les hurlantes misères,
Afin que le drapeau de France dans ses plis
Montre Ricamarie à côté d’Austerlitz,
Afin d’exterminer des pauvres, des famines,

Des détresses, vieillards, enfants, forçats des mines,
Pâles, mourant de faim, réclamant des liards;
Deux millions, c’est peu; prenez deux milliards;
Mais il s’agit de rendre à l’innocent justice,
Il s’agit de frapper un coup qui retentisse,
Et de purifier un nom infortuné;
Il s’agit de tirer de l’enfer un damné;
De dire: Apaise-toi, spectre qui te lamentes!
Et d’aller, dans l’oubli des tombes infamantes,
Chercher une Mémoire, et de mettre; à côté
D’un mensonge, en ces nuits sans fond, la vérité:
On ne peut gaspiller à ce point les finances!

Confisquer fut le droit. Les vieilles ordonnances
Sévirent sur Lesurque ainsi qu’au temps ancien.
En .lui volant sa vie; on lui vola son bien.
Les fils ont disparu, famille foudroyée;
La fille s’est jetée à la Seine et noyéé
Tout ce groupe effaré, morne, épàrs, frissonnant,
A sombré sous l’arrêt funèbre; et maintenant,
La nuit après la mort, hélas! c’est la logiqué;
On ne distingue rien dans cette ombre tragique,
Sinon des enfants nus, quelques pauvres petits
Dans l’abîme; orphelins pas ençore engloutis..
Cette détresse est là sous nos yeux, cela souffre,
Crie, appelle, et l’on voit leurs bras sortir du gouffre,
Ils pleurent, et la terre et le ciel sont témoins.
À présent, calculons. Deux. millions au moins.
Trois peut-être. Tout rendre aux fils est nécessaire.
Il faudra rembourser cette longue misère.
N’a-t-on pas plus tôt fait de dire: Toi qui fus
Innocent, reste infâme! Et c’est fini. Refus:
Tout est dit. Être juste est bien, être économe.
Est mieux.
Et puis, de quoi te plains-tu, mon brave homme?
De ce qu’on t’a coupé la tête par erreur?
Ce n’est pas notre faute à nous; et l’empereur

Doit-il, parce qu'on dit beaucoup d'impertinences
Sur cet accident-là, pâtir-dans ses finances,
Renonçer à Biarritz, vu que Lesurque est cher,
Et n'avoir plus de quoi payer monsieur Rouher?
Qu'en pensez-vous, Glandaz? Qu'en pensez-vous,.Devienne?
Président Legagneur, autant qu'il men souvienne,
Tu jugeas l'accusé Bonaparte jadis,
Et tu sers l'empereur; rends ton oracle! dis!
Allons-nous ruiner le budget, qui nous dote,
Pour recrépir à neuf une antique anecdote,
Pour raccommoder, quoi? le nom d'un homme mort,
Et pour laver au fond du code un vieux remord?
Bah! nous rencontrerions, si nous l'osions prescrire,
Le doux nenni de Magne avec son doux sourire.
Le jour où, devant l'huis du trésor, surgirait,
Enclose dans les flancs' sacrés de notre arrêt,
La justice, devoir, dette, loi des croyances,
Clarté, sommation céleste aux consciences;
Le caissier, ricanant de Lesurques plaintif,
Allumerait son poêle avec ce plumitif.
Sous l'empire on est fort; on gouverne, on décrète;
De la chose jugée on fait sa,cigarette.
D'ailleurs on est sceptique. A bas les morts gênants!
On tourne volontiers le dos aux revenants,
Surtout quand le fantôme apporte une quittance.
Le vrai vieilli n'est plus vraisemblable à distance;
Et nous ferions hausser les épaules de ceux
Qui gagnèrent le lot d'un coup d'état chanceux
Si nous venions leur dire: O succès! ô puissance!
Il existe une chose appelée innocence.

Et puis, voyons, vraiment, où s'arrêterait-on?
Que fut à son début l'empire? Un gueuleton.
S'ait: Mais si l'on persiste à faire ainsi ripaille,
L'empereur finira par être sur la paille.
Le budget fêlé fuit. Nous avons des héros,
Nous avons des sauveurs, et cela coûte gros.

On paya Bacciochi, Dieu sait pour quels services,
Magnan pour ses forfaits et Morny pour ses vices,
Va-t-on indemniser tout le monde à présent?
Hier le criminel, aujourd’hui l’innocent.’
C’est trop. Bornons les frais. La loi, qui règne et fauche,
Frappa Lesurques. Bien. Complétons cette ébauche.
On a guillotiné le grand-père à tâtons;
Exécutons les fils orphelins, et mettons
Leur requête au panier, comme on y mit sa tête.

Faisons à ce sépulcre une faillite honnête;
Motivons-la si bien qu’on dise: Ils ont raison.
Remettons ce Lesurque en terre, de façon
Qu’il ne puisse, à travers la broussaille, l’ortie,
L’injustice et l’oubli, faire une autre sortie.
Les morts n’ont pas le droit d’ennuyer les vivants.
Régnons, cadis altiers, du haut de nos divans,
Dans notre pourpre ayant un linceul pour doublure.
Ne cédons point; laissons sur ce nom la souillure;
Car la démagogie en ce siècle grandit.
Finissons-en avec ce Lesurques. C’est dit.
Ne souffrons pas qu’on touche aux lois, vieille bâtisse.
Quand un homme a péri par arrêt de justice,
Correctement, au jour voulu, sur l’échafaud,
N’admettons point qu’on trouve à la hache un défaut.
Sans nous tout croulerait sous d’effrayants déluges.
Résistons; et soyons dignes d’être des juges,
Après ces vénérés antiques magistrats,
Gravement accoudés sur d’augustes fatras,
Bien payés par les rois, bien bénis par les prêtres,
Et tous morts en odeur de Montfaucon, nos maîtres!
Vous allez me trouver peut-être curieux,
Mais je voudrais savoir, si tous ces Partariieux,
Tous ces Bellarts qu’on vante et dont on nous agace,
Suin copiant Severt, Aulois singeant Bergassè,
L’un sanguinaire et vil, l’autre horrible et moqueur,
Ont quelque’ chose en eux qu’on’ puisse appeler coeur!

Décembre.

III

Et puis, songez-y donc, si l’on allait conclure
De tout cela, qu’il est parfois unefêlure
A la chose jugée, et qu’un tribunal peut
Se tromper, faire faire à la cordé un faux nœud,
Un faux coup à la hache, un faux acte au concierge
De Thémis, un faux pas à la loi; cette vierge
Qui n’a jusqu’à ce jour’guère eu d’autres époux
Que cinq ou six Bellarts et sept ou huit Maupeoux!
Reste, ô sombre innocent, dans ton opprobre inique.
Garde ce crime ainsi. que l’ardente tunique, .
Que devient la peau même et qu’on n’’arrache pas 6S
Les juges monstrueux prennent leur faux compas
Et font autour. de toi ce cercle. épouvantable.
Au banquet de César la- Justice s’attable.;
Elle n’a pas le temps d’être juste. Il te faut,
Comme Jésus sa croix, porter ton échafaud..
Reste sous ton fardeau, patient! Sur ta tombe,
Un remords qui médite, une larme qui tombe,
Tu n’as pas même, hélas! ce lugubre bonheur.
Sois pour. toujours muré dans le noir déshonneur.
On t’ enferme éperdu dans le forfait d’un autre.
Va, ton crime n’est pas ton crime, il est le nôtre!
Car, lorsqu’il râle et meurt, le fer des lois au. sein,
L’innocent a le monde entier pour assassin.
Quiconque a respiré pendant le meurtre, adhère,
Et quiconque boit, mange et dort, est solidaire;
Le ciel blâme et maudit le genre humain, passant
Sans voir que sur la foule immense il pleut du sang.
Le peuple qui, stupide, aux juges se confie,
Regardant le bourreau pendant qu’il crucifie,
Laissant enfoncer l’un après l’autre-les clous,
Est lâche, et les moutons sont complices des loups.

Le juge, à ce Lesurque où sa- rage s'attache,
Donne un coup de poignard après un coup de hache;
De féroce il devient infâme; et nous l'aidons
Par notre indifférence et par nos abandons.
Il viole un cercueil. Sous ce fatal empire,
Le prêtre est assassin et le juge est vampire!
Et nous voyons, béants, ces hommes manier
L'innocence et la loi, la tête et le panier!

Ah! la goutte de sang, plus que la goutte d'huile,
S'élargit, et la Grève éclabousse la ville 69
L'échafaud, vu de tous, est un hideux sommet.
L'attentat qu'en plein jour, nous présents, l'on commet,
Est l'égout collecteur de nos lâchetés sombres.
Du droit humain brisé nous sommes les décombres;
Nul n'est de la souillure universelle exempt;
Le grand forfait public est én nous frémissant;
Jamais l'innocent mort, qui nous trouble et nous pèse,
Dans notre conscience obscure ne s'apaise.
Deuil profond!

Protestons du moins. Si je flétris
Ces juges, par mon vers dans leur honte pétris,
Si j'ai cette huée implacable à la bouche,
Si j'ai redit vingt fois cette plainte farouche,
Peuple, c'est que ma part de crime m'étouffait.
Peuple, avoir laissé faire, hélas, c'est avoir fait!
Garde toute l'horreur de ta lugubre histoire,
Lesurques! dresse-toi, grande figure noire!
Qu'on te voie à jamais debout sur l'horizon.
Et vous, famille à qui l'on vola sa maison,
Martyrs dont la stupeur s'est changée en folie,
Veuves qu'on déshonore, orphelins qu'on spolie,
Désormais plus de plainte, et taisez-vous, proscrits.
Ah! je frémis de voir leurs prières, leurs cris,
Leurs larmes, leurs appels craintifs, leurs plaidoiries,
Leurs tremblantes douleurs par le dédain meurtries,

Leurs fronts baissés, leurs bras suppliants, quand c’est nous,
Nous tous, qui devrions nous traîner à genoux,
Joindre les mains, pleurer notre erreur insondable,
Peuple, et demander grâce au spectre formidable!

2 décembre.

IV

Pourquoi ne pas marcher un peu? Je vais rêvant,
Tâchant de disperser mon mal de tête au vent.
C’est décembre. L’eau gronde, immense, et le rivage
La repousse et la brise en son refus sauvage;
L’écume se déchire en larges haillons blancs;
Tous les arbres du-bord de la mer sont tremblants;
La nature subit l’hiver, ce noir malaise.
L’herbe est mouillée et morte; au pied de la falaise
Un tumulte d’oiseaux, mauves, courlis, plongeons,
Fourmille et se querelle au milieu des ajoncs;
Le nuage et le flot font de grands plis farouches’;
Et l’on entend, dans l’air plein d’invisibles bouches,
Le Sourd chuchotement du ciel mystérieux;
L’écueil se tait, témoin tragique et sérieux,
Qui le jour est montagne et la nuit est fantôme,
Et qui, tandis qu’au loin fuit la barque, humble atome,
Regarde vaguement dé ses yeux de granit
Les constellatibns qui rôdent au zénith;
L’infini balbutie un fragment du cantique
Que dit le Pacifique et qu’entend l’Atlantique;
Là-bas des voiles vont, Dieu sait où! dans les vents,
Les vagues, les roulis et lés fracas mouvants,
Et s’enfoncent, par l’ombre au loin diminuées,
Sous la mélancolie énorme des nuées;
L’océan m’environne avec ses chants, ses cris,
Sa brume, et moi je songe à ce gouffre Paris.

Qu’est-ce que je fais là, près des mers? Je suis triste.

Et vous vous figurez que votre arrêt existe!
Ah! nous déchirerons, nous tordrons, nous mettrons
En pièces la sentence atroce sur vos fronts!
Nous vous souffletterons avec votre justice,
Juges! Il ne se peut qu'un peuple s'abrutisse
Au point de' croire en' vous et de vous respecter!
Il faudra bien un jour te laisser confronter,
Code, avec le bon sens, et le bon sens est rude.
Juges! votre sagesse-est une vieille prude
Qui, pour cacher ses mains nialpropres, met des gants,
Et votre conscience, ô bonzes arrogants,
A laissé bien des fois César trousser sa jupe:
Sous vos crânes hautains dont le bourgeois est dupe,
Vos scrupules,- vos lois, vos textes, vos fiertés,
Vos pudeurs, vos vertus et vos austérités, "
N'ont qu'un souci, sé vendre, et sont des Rigolboches
Dansant leur danse impure au fond -de vôs-caboches.
Négocier sa voix, brocanter son serment,
Livrer au plus offrant son âme habilement
Et sans qu'il y paraisse, est votre art, et j'atteste
Troplong qui réussit le tour manqué par Teste. -
Troplong a le collier et Teste a le carcan
Au fond c'est le même homme et c'est le même encan.
Vous êtes bien les vrais successeurs des vieux cuistres
Qui peuplaient la Grand'Chambre au temps des rois sinistres,
Et qui dans leurs décrets mêlaient le vrai, le faux,

Le bien, le mal, l'horreur, la mort, les échafauds,
Lourds, et dissimulant cette pointe assassine
Par l'assaisonnement d'un latin de cuisine!

Votre sentence ira pourrir dans le vieux tas
De leurs indignités et de leurs attentats.
Vous imaginez-vous, ô sombres imbéciles,
Qu'après l'arrêt bavé par vos bouches fossiles,
Tout est dit; que c'est fait; que vous avez ôté

Du monde l’équilibre et des coeurs l’équité,
Que vous êtes, magots toussant dans vos flanelles,
Quelque chose à côté des clartés éternelles,
Et qu’il sort du bouquin légal un tel pouvoir
Que l’homme empêche Dieu de faire son devoir!

Ah!Ton pourra puiser au fond des écritoires
Les galimatias et les réquisitoires
Et la prose infamante où Broë triomphait,
Et cracher sur ce spectre, et dire: c’est bien fait!
Ah! l’on entassera tant qu’on voudra la honte;
Le juge, le bailli, le capitoul, l’archonte,
Toutes les robes d’ombre et tous les bonnets noirs,
Tous les hiboux ayant les greffes pour manoirs,
Pourront venir, pourront prodiguer leur grimoire
Et leur haine à cette humble et tragique mémoire,
Ces stercoraires sont un assez vil essaim .
Pour croasser sans cesse: assassin! assassin!
Ils pourront, tous, en foule, à l’heure où la nuit tombe,
Se percher, au-dessus de cette pauvre tombe,
Dans les hideux rameaux du code, obscur cyprès
D’où tombe cette fiente immonde, leurs arrêts;
Ils pourront épaissir leur justice fétide
Sur -ce damné, des lois morne cariatide;
Ils pourront ajouter le désespoir .au deuil,
Sous leur chose jugée accabler ce cercueil,
Faire une ignominie exprès pour cette fosse,
Déclarer le lys noir et la vérité fausse;
Paris, ce vieux Paris si petit et si grand,’
Pourra dormir, chanter, manger, boire, ignorant
A qui le droit, à qui l’opprobre, à qui la palme;
Soudain, un jour, le ciel oublié, le ciel calme,
Blanchira du côté maudit de l’horizon;
Ceux qui regarderont auront un grand frisson
Et l’attente sacrée entrera dans leur âme;
Et l’on verra, là-bas, dans l’atmosphère infâme,
Tout à coup, au-dessus du sépulcre effrayant

Que la loi,- l’Euménide inepte, en bégayant,
Monstre aveugle, a flétri dans sa toute-puissance,
Se lever lentement cet astre, l’innocence!

H.-H. 27 décembre.

XLVI DEUX ARRÊTS ONT ÉTÉ RENDUS CE MOIS-CI...

Oh! je sais maintenant pourquoi je ne pouvais .
Respirer, trouvant l’air de la terre mauvais;
Pourquoi j’avais le fiel du flot sombre à la bouche,
Pourquoi je m’agitais dans’ le sommeil farouche,
Et pourquoi dans l’espace immense, j’étouffais.
Deux meurtres viennent d’être en moins d’un mois refaits,
Recommencés, dans l’ombre où je suis, où vous êtes,
Peuple, et nous les sentons dégoutter sur nos têtes!
En ce décembre obscur, aux sépulcres pareil,
Où l’on sent plus de honte avec moins de soleil,
Les hommes préposés à. cette forfaiture .
Qu’on nomme en France loi, code et magistrature,
Prêts, devant qui les paie, à fléchir le genou, .
Jetant aux cabanons quiconque vole un sou,
Mais souriants devant un: trône qu’on dérobe,
Ont trouvé le moyen de reteindre leur robe .
Avec du rouge pris, au baquet d’es bourreaux, ..
Le sang d’un innocent et le. sang d’un héros;
Et sur eux maintenant le reflet des abîmes
Flamboie, et leur justice a l’aspect. de deux crimes!
Si bien qu’à leurs jupons, tachés par leurs arrêts,
Voyant du sang ancien qui semble encor, tout frais,
Le peuple, en qui s’accroît la colère, à mesure
Que s’élargit sur eux la double éclaboussure,
Dit en. les ,regardant avec son noir dédain:
D’un côté c’est. Lesurque,, et de l’autre, Baudin!

XLVII EN 1869

Vous me dites:

— Pourquoi cet éternel courroux?
Le ciel n’est pas autant en colère que vous.
Est-ce que ce forfait qui vous indigne, empêche
Le soleil de mûrir le raisin et la pêche
Et de verser la vie et la lumière àux bois
Pleins d’éblouissements, de parfums et de voix?
Est-ce que, renonçant à .la molle verdure,
Depuis vingt ans bientôt que cet empire dure,
Les arbres ont cessé de croître un seul instant?
Est-ce qu’en son labeur le chêne haletant,
Las d’ajouter sans fin des branches à des branches,
S’est arrêté, disant: Ramiers, colombes blanches,
Bouvreuils, allez-vous-en, je ne veux plus de vous,
J’ai fini! Quel est donc, sous le ciel calme et doux,
Le lilas qui s’abstient, le hêtre qui retire
Son murmure à Virgile et son ombre à Tityre?
Quel frêne a pris parti pour vous? quel peuplier
S’est dispensé de vivre et de multiplier?
Contre Aman.Bonaparte et pour vous Mardochée,
Quelle branche de saule ou d’ormeau s’est fâchée?
Quel marronnier, sachant que l’on ne doit pas voir
Les nids tremblants, renonce à faire son devoir,
Et refuse aux oiseaux d’épaissir son feuillage?
Tous les ans, aussi beau qu’Achille et que Pélage,
Une flamme à la main, Mai, ce libérateur,
Apparaît, cuirassé d’azur, sur la hauteur,
Rit, chasse ce tyran, l’hiver aux yeux moroses,
Redore l’aube, et met hors de prison les roses,
Et tire le verrou glacé qui retenait
Captifs l’acacia, la ronce et le genêt,
Et le fourmillement des feuilles recommence.
Qu’est-ce que Morny fait à la Dryade immense?

Est-ce qu’un seul .bouton d’églantier s’est flétri
Parce que Rouher passe appuyé sur Piétri?
L’épanouissement universel prospère;
Le tilleul qui n’est pas troublé d’une vipère,
Ignore Mérimée, et couvre les sentiers
D’un mystère où l’amour s’ajoute volontiers;
Depuis vingt ans, toujours de plus en plus charmante,
La forêt pousse, et verte, et vieille, et jeune, augmente
Son frais tumulte, au bruit d’une cité pareil. -

Je suis juste, et c’est vrai; je constate, ô soleil,
Sous ce ciel où, superbe et tranquille, tu montes,
Le lent grandissement des arbres, et des hontes.

8 août.

XLVIII ON EST CE PERSONNAGE...

On est ce personnage étrange, fait d’acier,
D’azur et d’idéal, le rêveur justicier,
Le poëte chargé de foudres, le nuage
Poussé dans la lumière et l’ombre par ce sage
Qui semble fou, le vent, assainisseur du ciel;
On a l’empire infame et pestilentiel .
Sous soi, très bas, très loin, dans une brume impure;
On voit la conscience humaine qni suppure;
Des Te Deum rampant à tâtons dans l’enfer,
Et sous ce poids; sénats de fange, lois de fer,
L’honneur las qui frémit, morne cariatide;
Mais Avril, qui refait tous les ans l’Atlantide,
Prend peu souci de l’homme; et pendant que descend
Toute l’âme d’un peuple, il monte éblouissant,
Il emplit l’horizon d’églogues et de fêtes;
On contemple, on oublie, et comme les prophètes,
Comme les mages, pleins d’orage et de douleurs,
Sombre, on se laisse aller à regarder les fleurs;
On a des yeux, on a malgré César, une âme;
On se laisse dorer par cette immense flamme,
La vie; et le printemps vous entre malgré vous
Dans le coeur, et vous fait presque paisible et doux,
Avec des grondements pourtant par intervalles;
On écoute chanter des fauvettes, rivales
Du divin rossignol, qui, lorsque l’aube luit,
Prolongent dans le jour sa chanson de la nuit;
Juvénal transparent laisse entrevoir Virgile;
Devant la Némésis la Galatée agile
Surgit, folle, et d’un geste’ aimable et souverain,
Jette en riant sa pomme au noir. masque d’airain;
Et le masque effrayant sourit. Que faire, ô lyre?
Tout est parfum, tout est rayon, tout est délire;
L’abîme est nuptial et les flots sont lascifs;
L’écume est de l’amour qui baise les récifs;

Paissez, moutons; laissez aux buissons de la laine
Pour que l’oiseau l’emploie à son nid! vaste haleine,
Souffle! Boeufs qui songez, tirez le soc fécond!
Le premier dieu, c’est Dieu, mais l’homme est le second.
Il crée après le Père, il règne après le Maître;
Faire mourir n’est pas son droit, mais faire naître
Est son devoir; la vie est à lui, non la mort.
L’arbuste tend sa feuille au chevreau qui la mord,
La rose au papillon se livre toute nue,
La violette, aussi rêve, et cette ingénue
S’offre, et partout l’idylle ouvre de vagues yeux;
O femmes, baignez-vous dans l’océan joyeux
Qui rit de ce grand rire où se mêlent des larmes;
Faites comme les fleurs, belles, mettez vos charmes
Un peu dehors; amant externa camenae
O rapide Atalante, ô fuyante Daphné,
Arrêtez-vous à temps, ne courez pas si vite;
Vous savez bien qu’on cherche un peu ce qu’on évite;
L’enfant que, vierge, on craint, mère, on l’adorera;
Ô Glycère, Aglaè, Lalagé, Nééra,.
Soyez les nudités adorables du rêve;
Homère veut Vénus et Moïse veut Eve;
Le reflet de la femme est sur tous les grands fronts;
O vivants, nous aimons parce que nous souffrons;
Donc l’amour est sacré. Sans peur, sans fin, sans nombre,
Aimez! vous tous, là-bas, tout le ciel, toute l’ombre,
Aimez; vivez, créez! Mondes, atomes, nids,
Oiseaux, soleils, soyez les amants infinis,
Car l’immensité veut être continuée!
Et voilà comme on flotte, esprit, barde, nuée.
Et voilà comme on va, tout furieux qu’on- est,
Dans l’azur, dans ce beau floréal qui renaît,
Dans l’hymen, dans l’amour, mais sans que Dante abdique,
Sans que la grande haine indignée et pudique
Cesse d’être au plus noir de. votre âme debout;
Car sans cesse à travers tout ce printemps, partout,
Toujours l’âpre devoir reparaît; et on erre

Semant sur son chemin des chutes de tonnerre.

27 juin 1875.

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== XLIX AU DESSERT==
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— Mon frère, vous avez sauvé l’ordre. - Mon frère,
Vous avez eu raison d’un peuple téméraire.
Cette Pologne était pour l’Europe un ennui.
— Mon frère, grâce à vous, tout prospère aujourd’hui.
— Vous dominez Paris et vous protégez Rome.
— J’estime Jellachich. - Mouravief est un homme.
— Vous avez Canrobèrt qui vaut mieux que Bugeaud.
— Je bois votre Tokay. - Moi votre Clos-Vougeot.
— Mon frère, nous étions en querelle naguère,
Mais je vous aime. Et moi, je’ vous ai fait la guerre
Malgré moi. - Vous ‘avez battu mes généraux.
Vous, fûtes le vainqueur, sire. - Et vous le héros.
— Votre génie est- grand. - Moins que votre bravoure.
— Mon frère, entendez-vous ces vivats? Je savoure
Ces acclamations qui s’adressent à vous.
Le peuple est sous vos. pieds. - Il est à vos genoux.
C’est mieux. - Il me respecte, oui, mais il vous adore.
— Vous avez voulu, sire, et tout à coup l’aurore
A reparu; les lois et la société
Revivent; et cela, sire, n’a rien coûté. -

L AUBIN

Causerie entre czars et rois, propos de table
Qui font rire les morts d’un rire épouvantable. .
H. H. décembre.
LE PASSANT , LA PASSANTE

— Quel âge as-tu? - Seize ans. - De quel pays es-tu?
— D’Aubin. - N’est-ce pas là, dis-moi, qu’on s’est battu?
— On ne s’est pas battu, l’on a tué. - La mine .-
Prospérait. Quel était son produit? - La famine.
— Oui, je sais, le mineur vit sous terre, et n’a rien.
Avec la nuit de plus, il est galérien.
Mais toi, faisais-tu donc ce travail, jeune fille? -
— Avec tout mon village ét toute ma famille,
Oui. Pour chaque hottée on me donnait un sou.
Mon grand-père était mort, tué du feu grisou.
Mon petit frère était boiteux d’un coup de pierre.
Nous étions tous mineurs, -lui, mon père, ma mère,
Moi. L’ouvrage était dur, le chef n’était pas bon.
Comme on, de pain, on mâchait du charbon.
Aussi, vous le voyez, monsieur, je suis très maigre;
Ce qui me fait du tort - Le mineur, c’est le nègre.
Hélas, oui! - Dans la mine on descend, on descend.
On travaille à genoux dans le puits. C’est glissant.
Il pleut, quoiqu’on n’ait pas de ciel. On est sous l’arche
D’un caveau bas, et tant qu’on peut marcher, on marche;
Après on rampe; on est dans une eau noire; il faut
Étayer le plafond, s’il a quelque défaut;
La mort, fait un grand bruit quand tout à coup elle entre;
C’est comme le tonnerre. On se couche à plat ventre.
Ceux qui ne sont pas morts se relèvent. Pas d’air.
Chaque sape est un trou dont un homme est le ver.
Quand la veine’ est en long, c’est bien; quand elle est droite,
Alors la tâche est rude et la sape est étroite:
On sue, on gèle, on tousse; on a chaud, on a froid.

On n’est pas sûr si c’est vivant. tout ce qu’on voit.
Sitôt qu’on est sous terre on devient des fantômes.
— Les pauvres paysans qui vivent sous les ‘chaumes
Respirent du moins l’air des cieux. - On étouffait.
— . Pourquoi ne pas vous plaindre aussi? - Nous l’avons fait.
Nous avons demandé, ne croyant pas déplaire,
Un peu moins de travail, un peu plus de salaire.
— Et l’on vous a donné, quoi? - Des coups de fusil.
— Je m’en souviens, le maître a froncé le sourcil.
— Mon père est mort frappé d’une balle. - Et ta mère?
— Folle. - Et tu n’as plus rien? - Si. J’ai mon petit frère.
Il est infirme, il faut qu’il vive de façon
Que j’ai mendié, mais on m’a mise en prison.
Je ne sais pas lès lois, mais on me les applique.
— Que fais-tu donc alors? - Je suis fille publique.
Reposons nos regards sur d’autres femmes.

Dieu

A mis toute la paix d’en-haut dans ce beau lieu;
C’est un palais et c’est un éden. Faste et joie.
Le rubis sur les seins, l’aube au ciel, tout rougeoie,
Tout est pourpre et splendeur, lumière et volupté.
Roses et femmes sont ouvertes, c’est l’été;
Et l’on voit dans les fleurs et l’on voit dans les âmes.
César rêve, entouré de parfums et de flammes.
Le soir, on fait errer des orchestres sûr l’eau;
Diane en marbré avec la lune en son halo
Mêlent leur regard chaste à la tiède soirée;
L-’eau par les coups de rame est ‘mollement moirée;
La voix du rossignol, la flûte dé Ttilou “,
Alternent, et l’on chante un refrain’ andalou,
L’air se tait, toute l’ombre écoute la. fanfare,
Et le daim qui buvait au lac sombre, s’effare.

H. H.

II

Soit. Entre ce deuil morne et ce joyeux azur,
La différence est grande. Oui. Mais es-tu bien sûr,
Dis, que ce ne soit pas au fond le même abîme?
Et que, dans cette cour qui croit être une cime,
Parmi ces femmes, choeur de déesses, beautés
Qui, mêlant aux rayons de César leurs clartés,
Visibles à travers de majestueux voiles,
Enferment ce soleil dans leur cercle d'étoiles,
Parmi ces déités, reines au front charmant,
Qui semblent faites d'aube et d'éblouissement,
Puisant à pleines mains dans l'or, dans la fortune,
Dans la toute-puissance, il n'en est pas plus d'une
Qui, toute rayonnante en ce royal palais,
Si tu l'interrogeais et si tu lui parlais,
Sous ton oeil froid chassant toute pensée oblique,
Répondrait, elle aussi: Je suis fille publique.

H. H. 10 décembre.

LI QUANT A PARIS, TON POING...

Quant à Paris, ton poing l’étreint. Grâce aux bâtisses,
Paris, le grand Paris des superbes justices
Qui dressait en août, en septéinbre, en juillet,
Son front où tout à coup une étoile brillait;
Ce Paris. qui, semblable au fauve dans les jungles,
Allongeait ses faubourgs comme tin lion ses ongles,
Ce Paris où Danton poussant dans le ciel noir
Ces grands chevaux ailés, Droit, Gloire, Honneur, Devoir,
A travers la tempête, à travers le prodige,
Passa comme un géant debout sur un quadrige,
Aujourd’hui ce Paris énorme est un éden
Charmant, plein de gourdins et tout constellé d’N;
La vieille hydre Lutèce est morte; plus de rues
Anarchiques, courant en liberté, bourrues,
Où la façade au choc du pignon se cabrant;
Le soir, dans un coin noir faisait rêver Rembrandt;
Plus de caprice; plus de carrefour méandre
Où Molière mêlait Géronte avec Léandre;
Alignement! tel est le mot d’ordre actuel.
Paris, percé par toi de part en part en duel,
Reçoit tout au travers du corps quinze. ou vingt rues
Neuves, d’une caserne utilement accrues;
Boulevard, place, ayant pour cocarde ton nom,
Tout ce qu’on fait prévoit le boulet de canon;
Socrate moustachu, tu fais marcher Xantippe
Ferme et droit; l’idéal a maintenant pour type
Un beau sergent de ville étendu de son long.
Phidias n’est qu’un sot auprès’ du fil à plomb.
Que c’est beau! de Pantin on voit jusqu’à Grenelle!
Ce vieux Paris n’est plus qu’une rue éternelle
Qui s’étire, élégante et belle comme l’I,
En disant: Rivoli! Rivoli! Rivoli!

L’empire est un damier enfermé dans sa boîte.

Tout, hors la conscience, y suit la ligne droite.

LII . . MISÈRE

<pre<
Partout la force au lieu du droit. L’écrasement Du problème, c’est là l’unique dénoûment. Partout la faim. Roubaix, Aubin, Ricamarie. La France est d’indigence et de honte maigrie. Si quelque humble ouvrier réclame un sort meilleur, Le canon sort de l’ombre et parle au travailleur. On met sous son talon l’émeute des misères. L’Afrique agonisante expire dans nos serres. Là tout un peuple râle et demande à manger. Famine dans Oran, famine dans Alger., - Voilà ce que nous fait cette France superbe .! Disent-ils. - Ni maïs, ni pain. Ils broutent l’herbe. Et l’arabe devient épouvantable et fou. On rencontre, une femme au fond de quelque trou, Accroupie, et mangeant avec un air étrange. . - Qu’est-ce que tu, fais là? . Hé bien, j’ai faim, je mange. - Ton chaudron sur le feu fume, qu’as-tu dedans? Ces os, que l’on entend crier entre tes dents,. Cette chair qu’en grondant ronge ta bouche amère, Qu’est-ce? C’est un enfant que j’avais, dit la mère. Les déclamations ne prouvent rien; soyons Impartiaux; cette ombre est-elle sans rayons? Vous passez votre à dire que l’on souffre Partout, et que partout on pleure, et qu’en un gouffre On gémit, comme un tas d’affamés sur l’écueil, Et vous criez: Tout est misère et tout est deuil Tout est misère et deuil? Quelle erreur- est la vôtre! Ah çà, vous ne voyez qu’un côté! Voyez l’autre.

Jouissance et splendeur. Doit-on, en vérité, Montrer l’adversité sans’ la prospérité? Ce contrepoids ôté fausse votre balance. Oui la détresse là, mais ici l’opulencé. Soyons justes. Voyez. Plaisirs, bals, volupté, Luxe, et l’hiver le Louvre, et Compiègne l’été: Oui, faites approcher vos vers les plus féroces: Oseront-ils nier ces palais, ces carrosses, Ces festins? Est-ce là de la misère enfin? Est-ce qu’en cette fête éternelle on a faim? En ‘ne montrant jamais que l’indigence, on triche. Vous étalez le pauvre, eh ‘bien, voyons ce riche. Qu’en dites-vous? Parlez. Est-il assez complet? Il a ce qu’il convoite, il fait ce qui lui plaît. Ses désirs sont noyés dans le faste lyrique. Ah! je voudrais bien voir que- votre rhétorique Contestât cette aisance auguste, et s’escrimât A prouver que ce luxe est d’un mince format, Que cette argenterie est reprochable, et manque Du poids qui la ferait recevoir à la banque, Que ces, cochers ne sont point gras, que ces jockeys Montent, mal galonnés, des chevaux peu coquets, Et que ces millions, ruisselant sur ces tables En ivresses sans fin, ne sont pas véritables? Reconnaissez qu’ici l’on

ne manque de rien. On s’est fait tout-puissant pour être épicurien. On est un homme heureux. C’est doux. Pas de rebelles. On est le Jupiter d’un Olympe de belles. On a Biarritz; veut-on varier le tableau? Après la mer, les bois; on a Fontainebleau. Chasses, danses, galas, petits jeux sous les.treilles, Rougissantes beautés sous les grappes vermeilles; Puis course au bois; on fut en décembre vainqueur, Et l’on rêve, et l’on sent pénétrer dans son cœur Le pur soleil des champs, des fleurs, des prés, des vignes, L’azur des clairs étangs et la blancheur des cygnes.
H. H. Décembre.
LIII C’EST BIEN, BUVEZ, MANGEZ...==

C’est bien, buvez, mangez, rampez, courbez la tête.
Nos aïeux
Étaient les habitants hagards de la tempête
Dans les cieux.

Ils dispersaient les vents sous leurs vastes coups d’ailes,
Rayonnaient,
Donnaient des rendez-vous à la mort, et, fidèles,
Y venaient.

Ils suivaient, dans l’espace aujourd’hui sombre et vide
Qui se tait,
La Marseillaise, un ange au regard d’Euménide,
Qui chantait.

Ils faisaient alterner l’ombre et le météore; -
Hosanna!
Revanche! Et de Rosbach ces preux faisaient éclore
Iéna.

L’Europe les voyait crier: Luttons encore!
Noüs vaincrons!
Et regardàit sortir on ne-sait quelle aurore
De leurs fronts.

Quand ils proclamaient Dieu seul Dieu, sans évangile

Ni Koran,
Et quand ils maniaient cette chose fragile,
Un tyran.
Leurs sabres ont chassé, secouant leur dragonne,
De Valmy,
De Fleurus, et des bois sinistres de l’Argonne,
L’ennemi!:
Devant cès preux, semant les progrès, les désastres,
Et le bruit,
Les rois disparaissaient comme des fuites d’astres
Dans la nuit.

Moi; je suis un prôscrit.. J’assiste aux mers farouches,
Aux combats
De l’ombre et de l’écume, où d’invisibles bouches
Parlent bas,

Et, tout en écoutant passer ce cri: Justice!
Dans les vents,
Je songe à la grandeur des morts qui rapetisse
Les vivants.
Il mai.

LIV DÉPART ET RETOUR DES RÉGIMENTS

— Aigles, où courez-vous?
Que c’est beau la lumière!
Que c’est beau le soleil! Dans ‘sa splendeur première,
Quand l’aurore apparut, l’aigle la contempla,
Et, s’envolant, il dit à l’astre me voilà!
Car vous avez, oiseaux que hait l’ombre éternelle,
Pour le soleil les yeux, pour la liberté l’aile.
L’aigle chasse la brume affreuse du vallon;
Il n’est qu’un souffle alors, mais s’appelle aquilon.
Les peuples ont besoin, Dieu seul étant leur règle,
D’avoir au-dessus d’eux l’immense vol de l’aigle;
Car il tombe de l’aigle un éblouissement.
L’aigle va chercher l’aube au fond du firmament,
Vole, et crie en planant dans son vaste équilibre:
Hommes, voilà comment on est quand on est, libre!
Le groupe obscur des Nuits craint cet,audacieux.
Aigles, votre coup d’aile est nécessaire aux cieux.
Tout ce qui n’est pas vie, amour, clarté, principe,
Devant votre passage. effrayant, se dissipe
Votre fier bruit d’orage épouvante le mal;
Le monde esprit succède au vil monde animal;
Partout où vous planez surgit la délivrancé,
Vous n’êtes plus la Guerre et vous vous nommez France.
Le bruit d’ailes s’éloigne. Ils s’en vont.

On dirait
Que le ciel tout à coup devient une forêt.
Dieu! quelle chute brusque et sombre de ténèbres!
Sous l’épaississement des silences funèbres,
Tout s’efface, et l’espace obscur se refroidit;
L’horizon misérable et morne a l’air maudit;
Des lueurs qui brillaient meurent l’une après l’autre;
De ces langues de feu qui tombaient sur l’apôtre,
A peine’en flotte-t-il quelques-unes, au fond

D’une-ombre où nul ne voit ce que les peuples font;
Toute la terré a pris l’aspect visionnaire;
Et dans cette noirceur roule un vague tonnerre.
Le paysage horrible est pestilentiel;
Chacun des quatré vents; aux quatre coins du ciel,
Prononce un mot sinistre, et, comme dans un rêve,
On entend sur les monts, sur la mer, sur la ‘grève,
Cette clameur: Hélas! Puebla! puis ce glas:
Hélas! Mentana! puis ces cris: Aubin! Hélas!
Hélas! Ricarnarie! Hélas! Un sombre dôme
Reluit; c’est Rome, à moins que ce ne soit Sodome.
Des silhouettes sont à terre, et c’est épars,
Nu, terrible, et le sang fume de toutes parts;
On’ entend un tumulte ailé qui se rapproche;
Et dans l’ombre, ici, là, sous l’arbre, sous la roche,
Dans les villes, au fond des bois, au pied des tours,
Partout, on voit des morts...

D’où venez-vous, vautours?

H. H., décembre.

LV Et voilà dix-sept ans

Et voilà dix-sept ans bientôt qu’ils sont à table!
Le Vol est chancelier, le Meurtre est connétable;
Ici le Bienheureux, et là le Tout-puissant;
Le prêtre et le soldat. Paie, ô France. Or et sang.
Le budget se débraille et danse une pyrrhique.
L’obéissance atteint la bassesse lyrique.
Le front haut, vers l’opprobre on marche avec élan;
C’est à qui tâchera d’être un peu chambellan,
Et d’avoir sur son dos de la honte brodée;
La France, qui jadis, fier peuple de l’Idée,
Faucha les rois ainsi qu’un moissonneur les blés,
Aboutit à des tas de valets-étoilés.
Quel festin! Tous y font liesse. Rien n’y manque.
On a l’église, on a l’armée, on a la banque.
Auguste fait asseoir Davus à son côté.
Mangeons! L’empire est pris d’un accès de gaîté.
Buvons! L’homme rayonne et la femme étincelle.
Chacun s’essaie au genre où son voisin excelle;
Dupin est scélérat. César a de l’esprit.
Dix-huit-Brumaire est mort, mais Deux-Décembre rit.
Piétri raille Maupas, Scapin berne Jocrisse,
Tout est gloire; et s’il faut parer l’impératrice
Pour les bals où bondit l’empereur encor vert,
L’écrin de la couronne est là tout grand ouvert,
On y puise; et parmi le saphir, l’émeraude,
Le rubis, la, topaze et la perle, on maraude.
L’ivresse-émeut les vieux et reflue aux enfants;
Tous les. Napoléons petits sont triomphants;
Louis traite Conneau, Nisus fête Euryale.
La cour est au balcon; la garde impériale
Défile altière, et fait, devant ces frais minois,
Sonner la grosse caisse et le chapeau chinois.
Ces belles! allez donc leur parler des famines!
Ah! comme elles riraient, ces augustes gamines!

On est le joyeux crime et le joyeux péché;
On a des aumôniers par-dessus le marché,
Payés pour ajuster à cela l’évangile.
Le soir, au fond du parc, ces dames, ô Virgile,
Sous les buissons, où glisse un bruit de taffetas,
Dans l’ombre, avec César qui devient Amyntas,
Font des églogues, presque aussi décolletées
Que tes Amaryllis et que tes Galatées.

H. H., 9 décembre.

LVI ÉPIZOOTIE DANS LES HOMMES DE DÉCEMBRE

Cela n’empêche pas le maître ,
De continuer le festin.
On a vu Mocquart, disparaître;
Espinasse est mort ce matin;
Bineau suit Fortoul qui. l’appelle;
Le fossoyeur a pris sa pelle;
Apportez les bières de plomb;
Fossoyeur, aide à les descendre,
Jette sur Morny de la cendre
Et de la fange sur Troplong.

Chacun son tour: Partez, complices.
Noir Saint-Arnaud au coeur d’acier,
Tu trébuches; Magnan, tu glisses;
Tu t’en vas, sanglant Pélissier.
Fould, la corruption est vraie,
Meurs. La mort fauche cette ivraie,
Comme les moissonneurs le blé;
Billault tombe; Delangle tombe;
Dupin vient d’entrer dans la tombe,
Les vers de terre ont reculé.

Oh! de Strasbourg jusqu’à Bayonne’
Quelle fête, et comme on est gai!
Compiègne rit, Biarritz rayonne;
Saint-Cloud de joie est fatigué.
Basile raille don Quichotte.
Un doux bruit de baisers chuchote -
Dans la molle fraîcheur des bois.
On trinque; effusion touchante!
Et le guet-apens dit: Je chante!
Et le massacre-dit: Je bois!

La table est une grandè lyre;
Tous mangent gloire aux dieux régnants!
Le vin d'où sort l'éclat de rire'
Luit dans les verres frissonnants;
Les femmes ont la gorge nue;

La fanfare dans l'avenue
Saute et bondit comme un esprit
Le bal tourbillonne en cadence;
Et maintenant, tandis qu'on danse,
Et maintenant, pendant qu'on rit,
Morts, faites vos festins funèbres,
Dressez-vous sur votre séant,
Et d'abord, mangez des ténèbres,
Ensuite mangez du néant;
Sous les ifs que le vent balance,
Mangez de l'oubli, du silence,
De l'horreur, de la surdité;
Mangez, spectres et pourritures!
Emplissez vos bouches obscures
De l'ombre dè l'éternité.

H. H., 15 juin 1870.

LVII Le sénateur peut être un valet

Le sénateur peut être un valet; le flamine
Peut être un doux bandit priant qu’on extermine;
Le juge peut avoir des faux poids plein les mains;
Tel prince fait l’effet d’un gueux de grands chemins;
On peut se demander s’il est digne, en ce rôle,
D’avoir les fleurs de lys au front, ou sur l’épaule;
La parole peut être, en flattant d’affreux rois,
Pire qu’un hurlement de bête au fond des bois;
La religion peut faire la mijaurée,
Puis se vendre, et l’honneur peut être une denrée;
Verrès peut bafouer Caton; la trahison,
Comme un pêcheur qui dit: j’ai pris bien du poisson!
Peut rentrer et le soir passer devant nos portes,
Traînant dans ses filets des consciences mortes;
La femme peut tourner ses yeux doux vers celui
Sur qui le crime, étoile épouvantable, a lui;
Tout le tas des vertus peut être une fumée;
Les docteurs, les consuls, les généraux d’armée,
Peuvent être du bois dont on fait les gibets;
Vesta lascive peut rêver: Si je tombais?
Le progrès peut marcher comme les écrevisses;
Devant le vil succès des forfaits et des vices
L’honnête homme peut être un lâche et rester coi;
La foudre peut dormir dans le ciel; c’est pourquoi
Juvénal indigné démuselle les haines
Dans ce style d’airain qui fait un bruit de chaînes.

12 avril 1870.

LVIII 2 JANVIER 1870

Nous devenons bon prince et nous changeons de sphère.
L’empire est libéral. Diable! qu’allons-nous faire
De tous les vieux grédins du coup d’état? Jésus!
Les vendre? quel rabais! comme on perdrait dessus!
Le Deux-Décembre est mort. Le Deux-Janvier l’enterre.
Ils sont tous là, Piétri, -Fleury; bon militaire,
Quentin-Bauchart, Haussmann, en pleurs, les goussets pleins.
Hélas! irons-nous perdre aux bois ces orphelins?
La forêt dé Bondy pourrait les reconnaître.
Mais eux, quel abandon! Pourquoi Dieu fit-il naître
Tous ces pauvres coquins dont pas un n’est répu,
Puisqù’il voulait jouer au crime interrompu!
L’esclave usé n’est point d’une bonne défaite:
Un vieux préfet orné de sa vieille préfète
Fait aux passants l’effet d’un ancien falbala.
On ne vend point Rouland comme on vendrait Lola.
Ferez-vous acheter bien cher par le Khédive
Suin mirant aux lacs bleus sa beauté ‘maladive?
Rouher en femme, certe, aurait beaucôup d’appas,
Mais faites-moi sultan; et je n’en voudrai pas.
Faut-il mettre au sérail ou bien mettre à la broche
Cette grasse blancheur qui s’appelle Baroche?
Pour l’oreille aussi bien que pour le traquenard,
Un reste d’Espinasse est visible en Pinard,
Le négocierez-vous? Ce sont vos odalisques;
Mais au marché d’Alep, la ville aux ‘obélisques,
Le turc obscène exige un plus joli bétail.
Quand même il cacherait derrière l’éventail
Son ceil noir enflammé d’une fureur jalouse,
Grandperret n’aura pas le flou d’une andalouse.
A vos soudards fanés, à vos vétérans saurs.
Croit-on qu’Abdul-Azis offre des huit ressorts?
Rigolboche et Toinon feraient mieux son affaire.
Où caser un héros fourbu qui se déferre?

Personne n’en voudra. Pas même un maquignon.
Ce qui fut hier chance est ‘aujourd’hui guignon.
Tel est le sort. Maupas a perdù tous’ ses charmes.
Nul ne jette un regard d’amour aux vieux gendarmes.
Alignez d’un côté du bazar un troupeau
D’anciens sabreurs sans dents en culotte de peau,
Un tas d’hommes d’état, fêlés, hors de service,
Faisant une grimace affreuse et tendre au vice,
Foreys, Palikaos, Chaix-d’Est-Anges, Marnas,
Que les bagnes un jour reprendront aux sénats,

Bavards brodés, tueurs dorés, gueux et ganaches,
Portant tous les mépris avec tous les panaches;
Puis de l’autre côté mettez un fol essaim
De jeunes belles point avares de leur sein,
Montrant leur torse ainsi qu’Astarté dans la Bible,
Et dépensant le plus de nudité possible
A l’éblouissement des passants enivrés,
Et maintenant prenez. l’homme que vous voudrez,
Je gage Persigny contre Fialin que l’homme
Offrira, quel qu’il soit, une plus forte somme
Pour les nez retroussés que pour les crânes nus,
Et, lascif, à Parieu préférera Vénus.
Aphrodite voguant blonde et rose en sa conque
Éclipsera toujours un Mimerel quelconque;
Tout le conseil d’état qu’on paie un million
Serait coté deux sous à l’hôtel Bullion,
L’empereur aurait beau leur dire à tous ma chère!
Ils réussiraient moins que Trinette à l’enchère,
Quoique le coup d’état leur ait pris le menton;
Et Zangiacomi ne vaut pas Margoton.
Habillez Gilardin en jeune mariée,
Puis essayez d’aller le vendre à la criée!
Je doute que Barnum offre un prix insensé.
Brocantez Canrobert. Quot libras in duce? 82
Nubar -l’égyptien est un mortel lubrique,.
J’y consens, mais j’ai beau tâcher d’être lyrique,

je ne vois pas d’ici Nubar faire joujou
Avec Bonjean voulant un meuble en acajou.
J’ouvre un concours, j’y mets mademoiselle Fiocre,
Boudet en maillot rose y sera médiocre,
Et Larabit fort laid, quand même Larabit
Ôterait sa culotte en gardant son habit.
Je craindrai pour l’Huys beaucoup de coeurs de roche
Et fort peu d’acheteurs, hélas, si l’on rapproche
Du frais museau d’Anna le grouin de l’Huys.
Pensez-vous qu’une foule aux regards éblouis
Ira darder sa flamme et braquer ses lorgnettes
Sur Delesvaux cambré cognant des castagnettes?
Jeanne avec son cancan fera sur un pacha
Plus d’effet que Piétri dansant la cachucha.
Entre Ida fraîche éclose et Nisard qui se gâte,
Qui donc hésiterait? Et moi qui parle, en hâte,
Certes, je donnerais, malgré leur teint bruni,
Goyon, Korte et Leboeuf pour Blanche d’Antigny.

H. H. 2 janvier 1870.

LIX À ***

Ou vous êtes naïf ou vous êtes subtil.
Une réforme! où donc? Un progrès! quel est-il?
Vous dites qu'un grand pas est fait. Quel pas? Je cherche.
A Mandrin pataugeant Jocrisse tend la perche.
Le coup d'état devient ondoyant et divers.
Nous en vîmes l'endroit, nous en voyons ,l'envers.
Je ris sans admirer. Quel spectacle! Sodome,
Brusquement transformée en Paraclet; Prudhomme
Trouvant trop rouge encor le bonnet de coton
D'Arlequin qui jadis se grimait en Caton.;.
Tom Pouce dans uh coin qui sé croit ceçôudées;
La trahison criant: Messieurs, j'ai des idées!
L'ogre au bon peuple enfant disant: Baisez papa!
Tous les sous-entendus d'un faux mea culpa;
L'empire devenu, sorte d'oison sans ailes,
Presque un pensionnat de jeunes demoiselles;
Tibère concourant pour le prix Monthyon;
Goton rose devant la moindre question;
Rouher baissant les yeux, Maupas mettant un voile;
Et toujours l'araignée au centre de sa toile!
Toujours le piège! Une ombre où grondent les fléaux!
Aujourd'hui, le néant et demain le chaos!
Un nain creusant un gouffre!

Ô Dieu. partout visible,
Sauve-moi du petit, fût-ce dans le terrible!
Jette-moi, Dieu puissant, chez quelque nation
Entrant, superbe et sombre; en révolution,
Ou sur quelque océan que la tempête éclaire!
Que j'entende, épelant ce que dit ta colère
Dans un langage obscur, mystérieux et beau,
Ou la foudre parler, ou tonner Mirabeau!

Mars 1870.

LX On me dit: Courez donc

On me dit: Courez donc sur Pierre Bonaparte.
Non. J’ai ma piste; et c’est l’Autre et je ne m’écarte
Jamais du but que rien ne me fait oublier.
Forêts! je chasse au tigre et non au sanglier.

2 avril 1870.

LXI Honnête homme,

Honnête homme, c’est bien, tu souffres, sois content.
Montre, en te tenant droit, le but auquel on tend.
Sers de cible aux méchants et sers aux bons d’exemple.
Quand César est fait dieu par le prêtre en plein temple,
Quand les Trimalcions se mettent à genoux,
Prouver sa force est grand, montrer son coeur est doux.
Le malheur, tu le veux; l’exil, tu le réclames.
La conscience est l’astre intérieur des âmes
Dont le juste en son coeur contemple le lever.
Tout est le bien venu qui vient nous éprouver.
Ce que vous appelez,, vous autres, chose triste,
Sort fatal, deuil, douleur; n’est rien, quand on persiste.
Qu’importe l’ouragan, l’éclair, la foudre, tout?
Le chêne est satisfait quand il reste debout.

20 avril 1870.

LXII L’empire atroce avorte en empire plaintif.

L’empire atroce avorte en empire plaintif.
Sénat, conseil d’état, et corps législatif,
Va, Babel! continue. Emplis-toi de harangues!
Parle neuf cents patois avec tes neuf. cents langues!
Entasse lois, projets, rêves, décrets perdus!
Bâtis avec le bien et le mal confondus,
Avec le plomb et l’or, le granit et l’argile,
Avec Dupin, Franklin, Voltaire et l’Evangile,
Ton monument que Dieu jamais ne protégea,
Pas encore édifice et ruine déjà!
Sois au maître quelconque! aboie aux hommes libres!
Du peuple douloureux froisse toutes les fibres!
Va! Dieu tient seul le peuple et seul dicte la loi.
Le soir mystérieux se fait autour de toi.
L’ombre qui vient du fond des mornes solitudes,
Et qui mêle l’espace avec les multitudes,
T’enveloppe, ô Babel, et baigne tes degrés!
Devant tes bras tendus et tes cris effarés
L’auguste conscience éternelle recule.
Tu trembles comme un arbre au vent du crépuscule,
Tandis que l’avenir approche avec le bruit
D’un déluge, ô terreur! qui monte dans la nuit.

Mars 1870.

LXIII COUPS DE CLAIRON

Soufflez-moi vos rages,
Soufflez-moi vos cris,
Justices, outrages,
Tragiques mépris,

Soufflez la huée!
Penchez-vous sur moi,
Venez, ô nuée.
Des faces d’effroi;

Raison qui M’éclaires,
Gloire au rude accent,
O dents populaires
Dans l’ombre grinçant,

Droit, force imperdable,
Sarcasme qui mords,
Rire formidable,
Plaie au flanc-des morts,

Logique implacable,
Honneur déserté,
Loi qu’un crime accable,
Et toi, Liberté,

Pâle, en proie aux fièvres
Du vil Lambessa,
Essuyant tes lèvres
Que Judas baisa;

Grands devoirs sévères
Fiers de rester seuls,
Douleurs des Calvaires,
Trous noirs des linceuls,

Haine incorruptible.
Du mal châtié,
Et toi si terrible,
O sainte pitié,

Vérités farouches
Dont tremble Néron!
Vous êtes les bouches,
Je suis le clairon.
I

Quelle est cette ville
Haute sous les cieux
Et qui semble vile,
Bien qu'énorme aux yeux?

Cette ville est celle
Qui commande ici;
Le vin y ruisselle,
Et le sang aussi.

Cette citadelle
Sur cet- horizon
Règne, et n'est fidèle
Qu'à la trahison.

Ce burg où l'on monte
Luit dans la vapeur.
Le mont en a honte,
Et l'arbre en a peur;

Car ces tours damnées,
Hostiles aux cieux,
Sont les cheminées
D'un feu monstrueux.

Vois sur la colline,
Sous les lourds barreaux,
La lueur féline
De leurs soupiraux.

Une flamme noire
Où l’honneur, les lois,
La vertu, la gloire,
Brûlent à la fois,

Dans cette bastille,
Peuple! aux yeux de tous,
Flamboie et pétille;
La cendre; c’est vous.

II

Cette cité veille
Du haut de ses forts,
Au dedans vermeille,
Sinistre au dehors.
Ses maîtres jouissent,
Brigands potentats:
Fiers, ils s’éblouissent
De leurs attentats.
Fêtes décevantes!
Heureux et hideux 1 .
Des lyres servantes
Rôdent autour d’eux.

Ces apothéoses.
Cachent des remords.
C’est un tas de roses
Sur un tas de morts.
Ils ont pour trophée.
Un glaive félon.
La tombe étouffée

Est sous leur talon.
Clameurs jusqu’aux nues,
Faux dieux évoqués;
Les femmes sont nues,
Les coeurs sont masqués.
L’affreuse prière
Du prêtre effronté
Chante et rit, dèrrière.
La horde sans culte,
Sans foi, sans laurier;
Emplit de tumulte.
L’antre meurtrier.
Il leur faut des belles,
Il leur faut des lys;
Ces tyrans rebelles,
D’un vin sombre emplis,
Font cette chimère
D’unir sous le ciel
La fleur éphémère
Au crime éternel.
Ils se prostituent;
La couronne au front,
Ils boivent, ils tuent,
Et, repus, ils ont

Dans leurs noirs refuges;
A leur vil foyer,
Leur iniquité.
La robe des juges
Pour tout essuyer.

L’homme est lâche et souple;
A leur déshonneur
Le destin s’accouple;
Et ce long bonheur

Que nul coup ne brise,

Que voit le ciel bleu,
Sera la surprise
Du réveil de Dieu.

III

Le choc de leurs verres
Sous les grands arceaux,
Fait sur les Calvaires
Remuer des os.

On voit des Électres
Dans l’obscurité.
L’oeil fixe des spectres
Est sur leur gaîté.

Dans l’ombre où leurs faces
Semblent des clartés,
On voit des audaces
Et des nudités.

On voit par la vitre
Ce flagrant délit,
Le casque et la mitre
Dans le même lit.

L’Église se livre,
Pâmée, au plus fort;
Le Sacerdoce ivre
Epouse la Mort.

Effroyables noces!
On dirait les voix
Des bêtes féroces
Chantant dans les bois.

IV

Ils vivent en hâte.
C’est l’éden enfer
Que la foudre tâte
Avec un éclair.
Le roi de Sodome
Est là, l’oeil en feu,
Et, crachant sur l’homme,
Ecume sur Dieu.

On a tant de fêtes
Sous cet empereur
Que les blancs prophètes
Frémissent d’horreur!

Dans ce crépuscule,
Brume où Dieu s’abstient,
Le lion recule
Et le serpent vient.

V

Ce tas de complices
Est en sûreté.
Hélas! dés supplices
Sort la lâchete.

Toujours fut muette:
La ville où tombait’
L’odeur du squelette,
L’ombre du gibet.

Eux, que leur importe
A ces impudents,
Puisqu’ils ont leur porte,
Barree en, dedans!,

Qu’est-ce donc - ô proie!
O fortune! ô sort -
Qui manqué à leur- joie?
Tout n’est-il pas mort?

Les créneaux sans nombre,
Le long mur dormant
Font un monceau d’ombre
Sur leur flamboiement.

Visible en ces brtimes,
L’aigle menaçant
Passe entre ses plumes
Son bec teint de sang.

Leur dédain féroce
Nargue l’ennemi.
Leur tour est colosse,
Le reste est fourmi.
Sous ce mur immense
Se mettre en arrêt!
Dieu même en démence
Y réfléchirait.

Jamais dans la Grèce,
Jamais dans Rama,
Ville ou forteresse
Si bien ne ferma.

L’écureuil qui saute
Tremblerait de voir
Une tour si haute,
Un fossé si noir.

L’entrée est oblique,
Le rempart est sûr,.
Et quiconque applique

Son oreille au mur

Jamais ne s’en vante,
Et, pâle, éperdu,
Garde l’épouvante
Du rire entendu.

J’ai la foi, la flamme,
La religion
Par laquelle une âme
Devient légion!

Qu’en mon coeur se forme
Et déborde à flot
La parole énorme
Qui semble un sanglot!

Que de mes entrailles
Sorte le grand mot
Qui court aux murailles
Et donne l’assaut!

Le mot que le bonze
Craint plus, mage impur,
Qu’un bélier de bronze
Au pied de son mur!

Le mot qu’à Florence.
Dit Dante irrité;
Le mot Espérance!
Le mot Liberté!

Que chaque vers chante
Et soit un guerrier!
Que la strophe ardente
Se mette à crier!

Que ce fier poème,
Apre, ouvrant son flanc,
Semant l’anathème,
Bondissant, mêlant

Au choc de l’épée
Le pas du lion,
Semble une épopée
En rébellion!

Que, hors de la tente,
Devant l’escadron,
L’Idée éclatante
S’allonge en clairon!

Que l’hymne s’élève,
Clair, rude, inclément,
Chanson qui s’achève
En rugissement!

Ah! la ville est forte,
Et ses lourds remparts
Pour chiens à leur porte
Ont des léopards;

La ville est fermée
Et le mur hautain
Abrite une armée
Et couvre un festin

Dans la forteresse
Rit le camp vermeil;
Ainsi la tigresse
Se lèche au soleil.

Mais les fêtes cessent
Si soudain le soir

Des clairons se dressent
Sur l’horizon noir.

Le vil prêtre avide
Jette son Koran;
Tout devient livide
Autour du tyran;

Et le maître même
Pâlit, bégayant,
Quand un cri sûprême,
Un chant effrayant

Éclôt, populaire,
Fauve et souverain,
Dans de la colère
Et dans de l’airain!

Trompettes terribles,
Chantez et sonnez!
Sur ces tours horribles,
Clairons indignés,

Clairons et trompettes,
Jetez votre bruit,
Car ces tours sont faites
De crime et de nuit!

Votre voix de cuivre,
Quand vient le moment,
Gronde et se fait suivre
Par l’écroulement.

Jetez votre insulte,
Comme un vent des cieux,
Jetez le tumulte
Des chants furieux

Sur les tours altières
Des fourbes vainqueurs,
Sur ces sombres pierres,
Sur ces affreux coeurs!

Sur Davus ministre,
Sur César Typhon,
Sur le nain sinistre,
Sur le nain bouffon,

Sur l’enfer qui grince
Et qui triomphait,
Sur le bandit, prince
De tout ce forfait!

Jetez l’harmonie
Qui hurle et hennit
Sur la tyrannie
Bâtie en granit,

Sur l’âpre muraille,
Sur le burg lascif
Où le festin raille
Le tombeau pensif!

Ils ont beau, ces traîtres,
Bénis des faux dieux
Et chers aiix faux prêtres,
Être monstrueux;

Leur alcôve obscène,
Douce à leurs sommeils,
Le matin est pleine
De rires vermeils;

Gais, ils peuvent prendre,

Bourreaux en chaleur,
Des baisers de cendre
Aux bouches en fleur;

Les prostituées
Dans leurs alhambras
Comme des nuées.
Pssent dans leurs bras;

Mathan les encense;
Ils ont, à huis clos,
Tout; l’or, la puissance,
Et la fange, à flots;

Clairons! vomitoires!
Votre acharnement
Remplace ces gloires
Par le châtiment!

Courage! couràge!
Guerre à l’antre obscur!
Que l’immense outrage
Soufflette ce mur!

Guerre au nid pirate!
Dénoncez au ciel
Cette scélérate
Qu’on nomme Babel!

Que dans l’air qui tremble
Votre hymne écumant
Vole, éclate et semble
Un déchaînement!

Votre souffle d’ombre
Déjà donne aux tours
Un penchement sombre,

Effroi des vautours,

Et fait, sous l'opprobre,
Mieux crouler les murs
Qu'un soleil d'octobre
Ne fend les fruits mûrs.

Sonnez! tout s'effare.
Sonnez, voix du sort!
De votre fanfare
Une flamme sort.

Malheur à la joie!
Au maître, au seigneur
Sous qui le sort ploie!
Malheur au bonheur!

Malheur au roc chauve,
Au donjon dès loups,
Au parapet fauve
Hérissé de clous!

Malheur aux prunelles
Du lynx, du chacal,
Et des sentinelles
Qui gardent le mal!

Malheur aux chlamydes
Des archers postés
Sur des pyramides
Autour des cités!

Malheur aux mosquées,
Aux portes des rois,
Aux tours attaquées
La nuit par des voix!

L’essaim d’hirondelles
Fuira de leur front;
Les battements d’ailes
S’évanouiront.

On verra des rides
Aux murs blancs de chaux,
Et les chambres vides
S’empliront d’échos.

Que les Babylones
Et que les Memphis;
Dressent des colonnes
Comme des défis;

Qu’on fasse une ville
A triple fossé;,
Que tout soit servile
Ou soit terrassé;

Que le roi barbare
Sorti des limons,
Mette une tiare.
De tours sur les monts;

Sur les lois qu’il foule
Il luit, foudroyant;
Il règne; et la foule
Demande, en voyant

Que tout le contemple,
Prêtres et valets,
S’il est dans un temple
Ou dans un palais.

Il est grand, superbe,
Et sous ce voleur.

L’homme est comme l’herbe;
C’est bien, mais malheur,

Malheur à ce temple,
A cette impudeur,
A ce crime, exemple
D’ombre et de grandeur;

Malheur à ce groupe
De murs factieux
Que le soir découpe
Sur le clair des cieux;

Malheur à ces fêtes,
Aux grands dômes lourds
Qui, montrant leurs faîtes
Plus hauts que les tours,

Difformes; immondes,
Noirs avec Iendeur,
Des ténébreux mondes
Semblent la rondeur;

Malheur aux armées
Jetant dans les champs,
La nuit, des fumées,
Et le jour, des chants;

Malheur à ces fastes,
Aux jeux, aux concerts,
ces palais vastes,
A ces donjons fiers,

Emplissant l’espace,
Dans l’ombre aperçus;
Si quelqu’un qùi passe
Vient souffler dessus!

Clairons! ceux qui saignent
Ont l’air de dormir,
Les âmes s’éteignent.
On n’ose frémir.

La morne patrie
Se laisse accabler.
Que votre furie.
La fasse parler!

Que toute souffrance,
Que tout droit meurtri,
Reprenne espérance
Et jette son cri!

Que l’espace immense
Soit plein de clartés,
Et d’une semence
De coeurs irrités!

Que chaque âme envoie
Son éclair sanglant!
Que dans l’ombre on voie
Jaillir, s’envolant

Sur les bois, les haies,
Les champs, le lac bleu,
Des lèvres des plaies.
Les langues de feu!

Sonnez sans relâche!
Racontez aux cieux
A quel point ce lâche
Fut audacieux!

Frappez l’homme blênie!

Faites en ce lieu
Un bruit de blasphème
En l’honneur de Dieu!

Frappez la muraille
Du crime impuni.
Que votre appel aille
Droit à l’infini!

Que ce chant s’enfonce;
Et, deuil; foudre, affront,
Force à la réponse
L’Inconnu profond!

Du soir à l’aurore
Criez au secours!
Et sonnez encore,
Et sonnez toujours!

Quand par la pensée,
Souffle aérien,
La roche est poussée,
Elle dit hé bien!

La tour la plus fière
Sous ce vent périt.
Qu’est-ce que la pierre
Peut contre l’esprit?

Qu’après la tempête
De vos sombres chants,
Le spectre, la bête,
Les mages méchants,

Demandent aux nues;
Au vent qui s’enfuit:
Que sont devenues

Les tours de la nuit?

Où donc, ô vallée,
O brume, ô mistral,
S’en est-elle allée,
La ville du mal? .

La ville ivre et fière
D’où Dieu fut banni,
Qui-choquait son verre
Contre l’infini,

Qu’on entendait rire,
Et qui sur les monts
Le soir, faisait luire
Des yeùx dé démons? -

Qu’ils cherchent, funèbres,
Ecoutant l’écho,
L’amas de ténèbres
Qui fut Jéricho!

Qu’ils cherchent les arbres,
Les chars, les pavois!
Qu’ils cherchent les marbres,
Qu’ils cherchent les voix!

Qu’ils Cherchent le maître,
Le chef, le gardien,
Le psaume du prêtre,
L’aboiement du chien!

Et les hallebardes,
Et l’encensoir d’or,
Et le pas des gardes
Dans le corridor!

Les thyrses de lierre,
Les murs teints de sang,
Et la fourmilière
Des femmes dansant!

Les belles fantasques,
A l’oeil tendre et fou,
Qui nouaient des masques
Derrière leur cou!

L’herbe et l’alouette,
Et l’aigle en son nid,
Et la silhouette
Des sphinx de granit!

Les donjons épiques,
Les grands arsenaux!
Qu’ils cherchent les piques
Entre les créneaux!

Qu’ils cherchent les rampes,
Les jardins, les cours,
Le reflet des lampes
Aux rondeurs des tours!

Quelle nuit profonde,
O vent syrien!
Qu’ils cherchent un monde,
Et ne trouvent rien!

2 février 1870.

DERNIERE GERBE

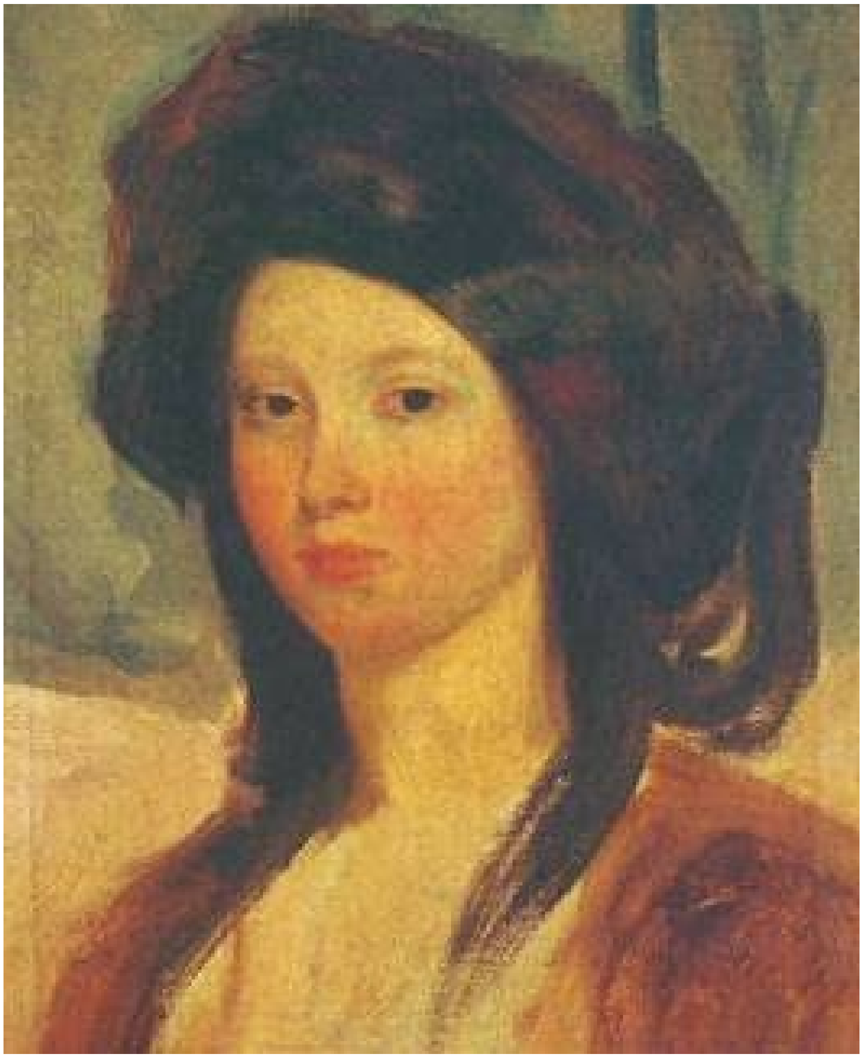

Juliette Drouet, Hugo’s mistress for nearly 50 years

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TAS DE PIERRES

DERNIÈRE GERBE AVERTISSEMENT DE L’ÉDITEUR

Si l’on compare l’édition originale de Dernière Gerbe et celle-ci, on trouvera des différences que nous croyons utile d’expliquer.

Nous avons dû supprimer les divisions: Avant l’exil, Pendant l’exil, Depuis l’exil, divisions factices établies pour la présentation du volume en 1902, mais que ne justifie pas l’aspect du manuscrit, l’écriture de certaines poésies non datées ne correspondant pas à la période désignée. Nous avons rétabli le texte intégral partout où des coupures avaient été pratiquées; en revanche, nous avons respecté les lacunes présentées par le manuscrit, soit au début, soit à la fin, soit même au milieu d’une poésie. Ne vaut-il pas mieux, dans cette édition documentaire, laisser au texte son véritable aspect? La table même de ce volume déroutera peut-être le lecteur de l’édition originale, car bien des pièces ont été privées ici de leur titre fictif.

Six poésies figurant dans d’autres volumes ont été retirées de celui-ci, ce sont:

SWEDENBORG. - LE NAUFRAGÉ - DIALOGUE AVEC L’ESPRIT qu’on trouvera dans cette édition au Reliquat et au texte de Dieu;

OH! L’AMOUR EST PAREIL AUX PERLES DE ROSÉE: variante d’une pièce publiée dans Toute la Lyre: Vois-tu, mon ange, il faut accepter nos douleurs;

A UNE ÂME QUI NE S’APERÇOIT PAS QU’ELLE EST UNE FEMME: Chansons des Rues et des Bois (Reliquat);

LA CITÉ DÉCRÉPITE, publiée sans titre dans Toute la Lyre;

Et toute la division: SCÈNES ETDIALOGUES que nous avons restituée au Théâtre en Liberté.

Enfin, puisant dans les nombreux vers destinés à former le dernier volume inédit: Océan, nous avons enrichi cette édition de soixante- quinze poésies, et soixante-quinze pensées nouvelles sont venues grossir le Tas de Pierres.

I BILLET À CHARLES NODIER *

Je l’ai lu, ton beau poème.
Tes sept châteaux de Bohême,
C’est un legs rare et suprême
Que tu tiens, en fils pieux,
D’Yorick qui l’eut de son père
Rabelais, bâtard d’Homère, - -
Lequel était fils des,Dieux.
C’est là, Nodier; ta famille.
Moi, j’édifie en Castille.
Une bien frêle bastille
Que bientôt fera plier
Le peuple au front de bélier.
Mais qu’Hernani tienne ou croule!
Qu’importe à tes sept donjons,
Qu’en vain viendront battre en foule
Maintes ailes de pigeons!
Ils vivront. Leur garde est forte,
Ta gloire veille à leur porte.
Quoi donc! il me vient de toi,
Ce livre charmant que j’aime!
Quoi! sept châteaux de Bohême!
Don de poète ou de roi!
En échange t’offrirai-je’
Ma tour qu’un parterre assiège?
Hélas; pour tes sept châteaux
Qui du front de leurs coteaux
Dominent sur la campagne,
Moi, dont Jodelle est l’aïeul,
Je ne t’en promets qu’un seul.
Encore est-il en Espagne!

• En 1829 (octobre) on commençait à répéter Hernani au Théâtre-Français. Charles

Nodier publia le Roi de Bohême et ses sept châteaux et m’envoya le livre. Je lui répondis par ce billet. (Note de Victor Hugo.)

II Ami z,

Ami z, tu m’es présent en cette solitude.
Quand le ciel, mon problème, et l’homme, mon étude,
Quand le travail, ce maître auguste et sérieux,
Quand les songes sereins, profonds, impérieux,
Qui tiennent jour et nuit ma pensée en extase,
Me laissent, dans cette ombre où Dieu souffle et m’embrase,
Un instant dont je puis faire ce que je veux,
Je me tourne vers toi, penseur aux blancs cheveux,
Vers toi, l’homme qu’on aime et l’homme qu’on révère,
Poète souriant, historien sévère!
Je repasse, bonheur pourtant bien incomplet,
Par tous les doux sentiers d’un souvenir qui plaît.
Ton Henri, - ton fils Pierre ami de mon fils Charles,
— Et ta femme, - ange heureux qui rêve quand tu parles,
Je me rappelle tout: ton salon, tes discours,
Et nos longs entretiens qui font les soirs si courts,
Ton vénérable amour que jamais rien n’émousse
Pour toute belle chose et toute chose douce!
Maint poème charmant que nous disait ta voix
M’apparaît... - Mon esprit, admirant à la fois
Tant de jours sur ton front, tant de grâce en ton style,
Croit voir un patriarche au milieu d’une idylle!

Ainsi tu n’es jamais loin de mon âme, et puis
Tout me parle de toi dans ces champs où je suis;
Je compare, en mon coeur que ton ombre accompagne,
Ta verte poésie et la fraîche campagne;
Je t’évoque partout; il me semble souvent
Que je vais te trouver dans quelque coin rêvant,
Et que, dans le bois sombre ouvrant ses ailes blanches,
Ton vers jeune et vivant chante au milieu des branches.
Je m’attends à te voir sous un arbre endormi.
Je dis: où donc est-il? et je m’écrie: - Ami,
Que tu sois dans les champs, que tu sois à la ville,

Salut! bois un lait pur, bénis Dieu, lis Virgile!
Que le ciel rayonnant, où Dieu met sa clarté,
Te verse au coeur la joie et la sérénité!

Qu’il fasse à’ tout passant ta demeure sacrée!
Qu’autour de ta vieillesse aimable et vénérée,
Il accroisse, tenant -tout ce qu’il t’a promis,
Ta famille d’enfants, ta famillé d’amis!
Que le sourire heureux, te soit toujours facile!
Doux vieillard! noble esprit! sage tendre et tranquille!

III Le Hartz

«Le Hartz est un pays de frênes et d'érables;
Nous chassions devant nous un tas de misérables,
En guenilles, fuyant: à travers les halliers;
Hommes, femmes, enfants; n'ayant pas de souliers,
Nous étions sans pitié pour les pieds nus des autres;
En guerre on dit: Chacun ses haillons, vous les vôtres,
Moi les miens; on est peu sensible, on a raison,
Et pour faire sa soupe on brûle une maison.

«Pensif, je constatais ces moeurs, sans trop m'y plaire.
On n'a pas de scrupule, on n'a pas de colère,
On sent qu'on est victime, on est des meurtriers,
On chante, on a la joie étrange des guerriers;
Et les choses qu'on fait, dans le sang et les flammes,
Sont illustres; sinon elles seraient infâmes".

IV À l’heure où je t’écris,

À l’heure où je t’écris, je suis dans un village.
Le soleil brille; octobre a jauni le feuillage;
Je vois là-bas, les toits d’un.charmant vieux   château.
Force rouges pommiers couronnent le coteau,
Si,chargés qu’on soutient par des fourches leurs branches.
Mon hôtesse est coiffée, à la mode d’Avranches
D’un immense bonnet qui lui tombe aux talons.’
Dans la cuisine où luit le cuivre des ,poêlons
Bout un vaste chaudron tout rempli d’herbe verte,
Et, passant au grand trot devant ma porte ouverte,
Un petit paysan rit sur un grand cheval.

Lé château fut bâti pour Anne de Laval
Par le beau roi François premier. Dans les mansardes
Les vieilles font sécher au vent d’affreuses hardes.
Sur la colline où mène un sentier dans les prés,
On aperçoit parmi les branchages pourprés
Un pauvre vieux clocher qui tousse et s’époumonne
A convier au prêche Alain, Claude et Simone.

V Voici que la saison décline,

Voici que la saison décline,
L’ombre grandit, l’azur décroît,
Le vent fraîchit sur la colline,
L’oiseau frissonne, l’herbe a froid.

Août contre septembre lutte;
L’océan n’a plus d’alcyon;
Chaque jour perd une minute,
Chaque aurore pleure un rayon.

La mouche, comme prise au piège,
Est immobile à mon plafond;
Et comme un blanc flocon de neige,
Petit à petit, l’été fond.

[Carnet 1861]

VI PAYSAGE

Des halliers, des tournants, des rochers et des chênes.
Quelques coteaux pierreux donnant de maigres vins;
Chaume, ardoises, hameaux tordus par les ravins,
Et des toits écaillés sur des maisons velues.
Des bibles en latin difficilement lues
Courbent autour du feu les fronts des vieilles gens,
Et, derrière la vitre aux losanges changeants,
Le soir; on aperçoit sous le plafond rougeâtre
Leurs groupes éclairés confusément par l'âtre.
[Carnet, 1862]

VII EN MAI

Une sorte de verve étrange, point muette,
Point sourde, ‘éclate et fait du printemps un poète;
Tout parle ‘et tout écouté et tout aime à la fois;
Et l’antre est une bouche et la source une voix;
L’oiseau regarde ému l’oiselle intimidée,
Et dit: Si je faisais un nid? c’est une idée!
Comme rêve un songeur le front sur l’oreiller,
La nature se sent en train de travailler,
Bégaie un idéal dans ses noirs dialogues,
Fait des strophes qui sont les chênes, des églogues
Qui sont les amandiers et les lilas en fleur,
Et se laisse railler par le merle siffleur;
Il lui vient à l’esprit des nouveautés superbes;
Elle mêle la folle avoine aux grandes herbes;
Son poème est la plaine où paissent les troupeaux;
Savante, elle n’à pas de trêve et de repos
Jusqu’à ce qu’elle accouplé et combine et confonde
L’encens et le poison dans la sève profonde
De 1a nuit monstrueuse elle tire le jour;
Souvent avec la haine elle fait de l’amour -
Elle a la fièvre et crée ainsi qu’un sombre artiste;
Tout ce que la broussaille a d’hostile et de triste,
Le buisson hérissé, le steppe, le maquis,
Se condense, ô mystère, en un chef-d’oeuvre exquis
Que l’épine complète et que le ciel arrose
Et l’inspiration dés ronces, c’est la rose.

21 janvier 1877.

VIII Je m’arrêtai.

Je m’arrêtai. C’était un ravin très étroit
Avec des toits au fond sur qui le lierre croît.
Tu sais, j’aime beaucoup ces choses: une ferme
Où se meut tout un monde et qu’un vieux mur enferme,
Des vaches dans un pré, l’herbe hàute, un ruisseau,
Un dogue sérieux allongeant le museau,,
Des enfants dans du pain mordant à pleines, joues,
Des poules; me voilà content. De vieilles roues
Dans un coin. Qu’un bouvier siffle et qu’un arbre au vent
Tremble, et je reste là jusqu’à la nuit, rêvant.
Une eau vive courait, et des fleurs sur la berge
Brillaient, et je disais: - Si c’était une auberge,
Comme j’y logerais! comme j’y mangerais
Du pain bis, de la soupe aux choux, et des oeufs frais!
Dans cette basse-cour quelles charmantes fêtes!
Comme je-passerais mes jours avec ces bêtes!
Comme je me ferais de Suzon Atala!
Comme je causerais avec ce gros chien-là!

IX Jadis, adolescent,

.
Jadis, adolescent, faisant mes premiers vers,
Sachant à peine encor, dans cette étrange escrime,
Parer les coups que porte à la raison la rime,
Dans mes vagissements croyant voir des travaux,
J’étais, ô fol enfant, avide de bravos,
De bruits et de rumeur et goulu de fumée;
Je me disais, rêvant succès et renommée:
— Qu’est-ce que c’est qu’un nom qui n’a pas retenti?
J’étais triste et pensif; j’avais pris le parti
De bouder le destin et de rester maussade
Jusqu’à ce que je visse au loin quelque façade,
De Panthéon-sortir de l’ombre exprès pour moi,
.Les femmes prononcer mon nom avec émoi,
La gloire à l’horizon poindre, et que j’aperçusse
Ma statuette en plâtre à la vitre de Susse * .
* Aujourd’hui, je suis altéré de calme et de tombeau.

X Dans les cités que troublent

Dans les cités que troublent
Tant de chars se heurtant, et tant de noirs débats,
Où rampent, pleins d’orgueil, tous les sentiiriénts bas,
Où tdut est fiel, dédain, querelle, envie infâme,
J’étouffe, et, tu le sais, à chaque instant, mon âme
Qui languit sans amour comme un cygne sans eau,
Ouvre son aile et veut s’enfuir comme l’oiseau.
Comment n’aurais-je pas jusqu’au fond de moi-même
Ces aspirations vers votre paix suprême,
Ô déserts! ô vallons! quand, fatigué de bruit,
Je médite, appuyé sur mon livre la nuit,
Et que, dans mon esprit, je compare et j’oppose
A la foule orageuse, à la ville morose,
Aux hommes durs, amers, haineux; âpres, ‘méchants,
La profonde douceur-des forêts et’ des .champs!
Une forge là-bas flamboie au pied des monts.
Vois, ces deux forgerons que le feu montre et voile.
Le fer rouge étincelle. On dirait deux - démons
À grands, coups de marteaux écrasant une étoile.

Que forgent-ils donc là, ces deux sombres forgeurs?
Font-ils une charrue ou font-ils une épée?
Leur enclume sonore incessamment frappée
Fait sur la route au loin rêver les voyageurs.

Glaive ou soc, ce qu’ils font est l’oeuvre de Dieu même.
Que ce soit l’humble fer ou l’acier belliqueux,
L’oiseau chante autour d’eux, l’eau palpite, l’ombre aime,
La nature profonde,est en paix aveç eux...

31- octobre 1840. - Route ‘d’Épernay à Château-Thierry.

XI Je ne vois,

..
Je ne vois, du sommet de la dune où je suis,
Qu’un maigre filet d’eau sous les branches d’un aulne,
Et le fond d’un ravin brûlé, torride et jaune,
Fort triste, et qu’on dirait de soleil accablé.
J’aperçois à mi-côte un chariot de blé
Tiré par trois chevaux à la pauvre crinière, .
Qui monte lentement, cahoté par l’ornière,
Penchant à droite, à» gauche à demi-soulevé,
Si chargé que. les brins traînent sur, le pavé,
Et, comme une chouette au trou- d’une muraille,
Une tête de vieille apparaît dans la paille.

XIII Sur les cloches d’airain

Sur les cloches d’airain qui frissonnent toujours,
Sur les beffrois plaintifs qui dorment dans les tours,
La nuit n’a pas encor frappé la douzième heure,
Mais son aile déjà s’approche et les effleure.

— Baoum! - Chut! voici le premier coup. - Baoum! - Deux.
J’ai vu passer dans l’air comme un masque hideux.
Trois - Quatre - Pas un astre au ciel. - Cinq - Sur ma table
Pour conjurer cette heure étrange et redoutable
J’ai des charmes écrits en hébreu. - Six - Je vois
Une vague lueur glisser le long des toits.
Sept - Huit - Neuf - Dix - J’entends l’archet d’un bal dans l’ombre.
Son gai frémissement meurt en grincement sombre.
Onze - Une porte au loin se ferme en ce moment.
Douze - Le dernier coup! Il tinte lentement,
Puis il tremble et s’éteint dans le clocher qui râle...
Minuit. - Puis tout se tait. L’ombre est plus sépulcrale.
On dirait qu’un linceul sur la ville est tombé.

XIV Je ne demande pas autre chose aux forêts

Je ne demande pas autre chose aux forêts
Que de faire silence autour des antres frais
Et de ne pas troubler la chanson des fauvettes.
Je veux entendre aller et venir les navettes
De Pan, noir tisserand que nous entrevoyons
Et qui file, en tordant l’eau, le vent, les rayons,
Ce grand réseau, la vie, immense et sombre toile
Où brille et tremble en bas la fleur, en haut l’étoile.

XV En plein midi,

En plein midi, quand l’astre est à plomb sur nos têtes,
On se sent la sueur, tiède, perler au front;
Les heures, groupe las, ne dansent plus en rond;
Tout fait la sieste; on veut la grotte, on cherche l’arbre;
La fleur se penche et dort; et les nymphes de marbre
Elles-mêmes ont chaud dans les parcs assombris
Quand l’ombre de leurs seins descend vers leurs nombrils.

XVI Les bois,

Les bois, les monts, les prés, ont pour notre pauvre âme
Un étrange pouvoir de mise en liberté.
O matin, triomphante et sereine clarté!
Délivrance de l’aube et du jour qui se lève!
Évanouissement subit de tout le rêve!
Comme les vils soucis de la terre s’en vont!
Comme on devient un être ineffable et profond!
Comme on quitte sa peau de souffrance et de haine!
Dieu bon! comme on sent bien son aile et peu sa chaîne!
On ne se souvient plus que quelqu’un est proscrit;
Les Te Deum chantés-par Satan qui sourit,
La splendeur du méchant heureux que l’un attise
Avec sa lâcheté, l’autre avec sa bêtise,
Le bien, songe avorté, le mal, fait accompli,
Oh! comme tout cela n’est plus qu’un tas d’oubli,
Comme on n’a plus dans l’âme une place meurtrie,
Comme rien n’est exil, comme tout est patrie,
Dès qu’on s’en est allé se promener aux champs,
Parmi les fleurs, au fond des rayons et des chants,
Dans la nature immense, étoilée, embrasée,
Et sitôt qu’on a mis les pieds dans la rosée!

Serk, 30 mai. La Coupée, 8 h. 1/2 du matin .

XVII Après avoir souffert,

Après avoir souffert, après avoir vécu,
Tranquille, et du néant de l'homme convaincu,
Tu dis je ne sais rien! - Et je te félicite,
O lutteur, ô penseur, de cette réussite.
Maintenant, sans regret, sans désir, humblement,
Bienveillant pour la nuit et pour l'aveuglement,
Tu médites, vibrant au vent comme une lyre;
Tu savoures l'azur, le jour, l'astre; et sans lire
Les papyrus hébreux, grecs, arabes, indous,
Tu regardes le ciel mystérieux et doux;
Et par l'immensité ton âme est dilatée
Au point d'emplir de .flamme et d'aube un monde athée.
Tes jardins sentent bon, et sont tout chevelus
De lierres, de jasmins et de convolvulus;
Mai fleurit tes lilas, août mûrit tes pommes;
Et, pendant que le tas tumultueux des hommes
Crie: abattons! tuons! exterminons! broyons!
Toi, parmi les parfums et parmi les rayons,
Voilà que tu finis et que tu te reposes,
Vieux, dans une masure, et, sage, dans les roses.

XVIII MON JARDIN

Dans le gazon qu'au sud abrite un vert rideau,
On voit, des deux côtés d'une humble flaque d'eau
Où nagent des poissons d'or et de chrysoprase,
Deux aloès qui font très bien dans une phrase;
Le bassin luit dans l'herbe, et semble, à ciel ouvert,
Un miroir de cristal bordé de velours vert;
Un lierre maigre y rate un effet de broussaille;
Et, bric-à-brac venu d'Anet ou de Versaille,
Pris à l'antre galant de quelque nymphe Echo,
Un vase en terre cuite, en style rococo,
Dans l'eau qui tremble avec de confuses cadences,
Mire les deux serpents qui lui tiennent lieu d'anses,
Et qui jadis voyaient danser dans leur réduit
Les marquises le. jour, les dryades la nuit.
...
Un rayon de soleil! une bête à bon Dieu!

Oh oui, je te comprends, printemps, tu m'insinues
Que c'est le mois des fleurs, des bois, des gorges nues,
Des billets doux ornés d'un' coeur d'où sort du feu,
Et que je pourrais voir en me penchant un peu,
Si jusqu'au bord du toit mon regard se hasarde,
Marguerite en chemise au fond de sa mansarde.
Mois de- Maïa! Lilàs, parfums, ruisseaux, bosquets,
Marquises regardant en dessous leurs laquais!
Les êtres sont poussés au péché par les choses;
Oh! la douce saison que la saison des roses!

L'homme s'écrie: Amour! et l'âne dit: hi han!
Au temps jadis, au temps du bel Esplandian
Pour être en ce moment visité dans mon bouge
Par Garlinde, j'aurais mordu dans du fer rouge,
J'eusse été frénétique autour des voluptés,
J'aurais eu faim et soif de toutes les beautés,

Pour la belle Euriante. ou la belle Fosseuse,
J’aurais au coin des murs cogné ma boîte osseuse,
Je me serais tué, je me serais damné;
Aujourd’hui, peuh! la femme! aujourd’hui j’ai dîné.
Je resterais plus froid qu’Abeilard, le vrai sage,
Lors même que Brahma viendrait dans son nuage
M’apporter sur un lit en acajou tout neuf
Berthe aux grands pieds avec Junon aux yeux de boeuf!
Je suis Platon au lieu d’être un drôle robuste.
Je tourne au marbre blanc et je deviens un buste.
C’est beau, mais assommant; c’est fort original,
Mais très fastidieux. Nodier à l’Arsenal
M’eût juché sur un cippe entre deux bôuquins jaunes.
Que Suzon dans les prés dorme à l’ombre des aulnes,
Qu’Anna, qui ravirait un faune au pied fourchu,
Fasse en penchant la tête entr’ouvrir son fichu,
Je n’en profite pas. Je reste comme un terme.
Avril ne me fait pas frissonner l’épiderme.
A la barbe du mois de mai, je suis un sot.
Lise offre le duel, mais j’évite l’assaut.
Le soir, sur mon grabat, en bâillant comme une huître,
Je m’étends sans daigner regarder par ma vitre
Si Vénus monte au ciel et Gretchen dans son lit.

XX Charle, il faut quitter

Charle, il faut quitter l’ode et descendre à l’épître;
On passe en vieillissant du trépied au pupitre;
Le feuillet sibyllin s’envole, et dans la main,
O misère, vous laisse un blême parchemin
Que la strophe, sirène, ondine, muse, almée,
Egratigne en fuyant de sa griffe palmée.
On s’accoude à son poéle au lieu d’aller rêver
Dans les champs et guetter la lune à son lever;
Les bons alexandrins vous viennent, mais sans prismes,
Sans aile, et refusant, de peur de rhumatismes,
De se mouiller les pieds dans l’herbe et dans le thym;
Et l’on n’est plus celui qui va de grand matin,
Pâle, faire sa cour à l’Aurore, et s’occupe
A regarder trembler les astres. sur sa jupe.
On. s’alourdit;, le ventre est votre souverain.
On préfère un turbot, une truite du Rhin,
Une bonne poularde accommodée en daube,
Un vin vieux, à l’oeillade enivrante de l’aube.
On murmure tout bas: jadis, quand nous aimions...
D’autres sont les Pâris et les Endymions
A qui viennent s’offrir, sous la sombre liane,
La Minerve sacrée et la grande Diane:
On ne dit plus: ma lyre; on dit: mon encrier.
On n’entend plus au bois la bacchante crier.
Votre oreille a présent jamais ne se régale
De ce que le grillon raconte à la cigale
Et de ce que redit la cigale au grillon,
L’un chantant le foyer et l’autre le sillon.
Adieu la folle immense aux chansons infinies,
L’imagination, maîtresse des génies!
Adieu l’égarement dans les espaces bleus,
L’extase, et l’idéal, ce réel fabuleux,
Et les aspects profonds du rêve! adieu la cime
Vue à travers l’écume énorme de l’abîme!

Adieu l’élan superbe et l’essor factieux!
Adieu. la joute avec les aigles dans les cieux!
Adieu les gnomes noirs aux mitres d’escarboucles,
Et les nymphes ayant des algues dans leurs boucles,
Et la fée, égrenant ses colliers de coraux!
On emploie à tracer des distiques, moraux,
Dignes d’être scandés aux écoles primaires,
Les doigts, qui caressaient la gorge des chimères.
Votre hippogriffe las demande l’abreuvoir;
Et vos rimes n’ont plus d’assez bons yeux pour voir,
Sous l’étoile agrafée aux plis blancs de la nue,
Vénus au front divin sourire toute nue.

C’est fini. L’on devient bourgeois de l’Hélicon.
On loue au bord du gouffre un cottage à balcon.
On consent bien, du haut de sa raison morose,
A .faire encor des vers, pourvu qu’ils soient en prose.
De là l’épître. Hélas, le poète à vau-l’eau
Est un Orphée éteint qui finit en Boileau.

XXI Le soir, je m’assieds, grave,

..
Le soir, je m’assieds, grave, au milieu de mes brutes,
Ainsi qu’un chancelier dans la chambre des lords,
Et mon front a parfois un pli sévère. Alors,
Ma chienne, la Chougna, qui n’est pas une bête,
Approche, et sous mes mains fourre sa grosse tête,
Et sentant qu’un sermon va venir, se tient coi.
Et je lui prends l’oreille, et je lui dis: Pourquoi
Te comportes-tu mal, Chougna, devant le monde?
Pourquoi, quand nous sortons, - il faut que je te gronde, -
Cours-tu, jappant, hurlant, à travers les buissons,
Après les jeunes chiens et les petits garçons?
Pourquoi ne vois-tu pas un coq sans le poursuivre?
Si bien que, moi, j’ai l’air d’avoir une chienne ivre!
Cela nous fait mal voir, les gens sont irrités;
Je te connais beaucoup de bonnes qualités,
Mais, vraiment, quand tu sors, tu n’es pas raisonnable!

XXII CHUTE DU RHIN

... Le Rhin tombe en hurlant
Dans le gouffre où l’écume, immense chaos blanc,
Tourne éternellement son effroyable roue;
Dans le puits inconnu que l’eau sombre secoue,
Tout bave et gronde; ainsi rugiraient des titans
Vautrés dans un abîme énorme, et combattants.
Cela frémit, cela hurle, cela blasphème.
On dirait Caliban colletant Polyphème.
On pressent, sous ce vaste et formidable bruit,
Toutes les profondeurs sinistres de la nuit.
Le fleuve à son tourment court avec épouvante.
L’âpre rondeur des eaux, glauque, aveugle et vivante,
Croule, et renaît toujours pour toujours se briser.
L’arc-en-ciel frissonnant brille et vient s’y poser;
Sur la courbe difforme il met sa courbe pure,
Et l’on croit voir Diane, au fond de l’ombre obscure,
Dressant dans ce fracas son front tranquille et fier,
Du bout de son arc vierge apaiser un enfer.

XXIII Ce que j’ai sous les yeux

27 septembre 1869.

Ce que j’ai sous les yeux et quel est ce pays,
Jugez-en:

Des terrains par la vase envahis,
Des saules, des carrés de chanvre, des passages
De voiles couleurs d’ocre au fond des paysages,
Des chariots, à foin peints, sculptés et dorés,
Des bois, et la senteur immense des grands prés;
Des essaims que la nuit même ne fait pas taire;
Des canaux à plein bord coulant à fleur de terre;
De frais enfants à qui l’on jette des gros sous
Des massifs d’arbres verts; l’eau s’enfonce dessous.
Le jonc fléchit, l’amarre ondule, le jonc plie,
Et la nature est molle à ce point qu’on oublie
Utrecht et ses tocsins, Ruyter et ses combats,
Et Delft ensanglantée, et qu’Amsterdam là-bas
Montre au pâle Océan ce que c’est que Venise.
La charrue est si près du mât qu’on fraternise;
L’aviron parle au soc et lui dit: Travaillons.
L’heure en prenant son vol rit dans les carillons;
Chaque beffroi secoue une grappe de cloches;
D’instant en instant passe, avec ses larges poches,
Un vieux coche d’osier sous sa coiffe de cuir;
De grands oiseaux de lacs et d’étangs qu’on voit fuir,
Ont les plumes du bout’ des ailes espacées,
Et l’on dirait des mains ouvertes et dressées.
Le houleux Zuyderzée est jaune à l’horizon.

Les villes sur leur porte ont un grand écusson;
Jadis leur libérté blasonna leur richesse;
Rotterdam est marqùise, Amsterdam est duchesse;
Ce qui n’empêche pas ces cités et ces champs,

Et tous ces blasons, d’être en somme des, marchands,
Et d’avoir à Ceylan, au Brésil, en Syrie,
Des comptoirs où se tient debout leur Seigneurié.
Pays riche, pays joyeux; les gras troupeaux,   .
L’herbe, l’homme, l’oiseau, le travail, le repos,
Tout rit, les paradis.succèdent aux cocagnes.;
Le Rhin, ce noir seigneur descendu des montagnes,
N’est plus qu’un bon bourgeois qui se retire aux champs;
L’humble fumée éparse autour des toits penchants
Rampe et monte à travers les frênes et les ormes;
Et d’effrayants moulins aux vastes plate-formes,
Qui tournent éperdus et sombres dans le vent
Avec on ne sait quoi d’énorme et de vivant,
Frappant l’espace avec leurs bras de sauterelles,
Mêlent l’azur, la nue et l’ombre à leurs quatre ailes.

À coup sûr ces géants, ces pourfendeurs de l’air,
Toujours enveloppés par un quadruple éclair;
Feraient mettre en arrêt la lance à don Quichotte.

Dans la cuve à houblon Gouda vide sa hotte;
Telle ville a son lait, telle autre ses fraisiers;
Telle autre sa balance à peser les sorciers.
On vogue; on reconnaît les cantons catholiques
Aux mendiants pieds nus qui baisent des reliques;
Car la châsse est dorée aux dépens des sillons;
La madone à bijoux fait la femme en haillons.
Le taillis noyé semble un miroir sous des branches;
Des marmots blonds, mordant leur pain aux larges tranches,
Regardent les bateaux dans le canal glisser.
La langue, c’est l’étang; on entend coasser
Dans le mot la consonne, et dans l’eau la grenouille.
A travérs une vitre on voit une quenouille;
C’est l’aïeule au front blanc qui guette et se tapit.

L’eau, qui devrait courir, est barrée, et croupit
On cultive le miasme, on récolte le goître;

L’affreux tabac pullule où le blé devrait croître;
Dieu fait l’endroit du monde et l’homme en fait l’envers.
L’église est jaune, l’orgue est bleu, les murs sont verts;
Ce pays est repeint par l’homme à la détrempe;
On peint le toit, le seuil, l’escalier et la rampe;
L’arbre peut-être est peint; la grue et le pigeon
Volent, de peur d’avoir leur part du badigeon.
Un démon gouailleur souffle en ces joncs fantasques.
Les meuniers ont des tours, les femmes ont des casques,
Les enfants ont leur pipe avant d’avoir leurs dents.
Où donc as-tu trouvé ton soleil, ô Jordaens?
Ce pauvre soleil gris que le brouillard fait fondre,
Et qui ne serait pas même accepté par Londre,
Clignote, et ses longs jets de lumière blafards
Entrent dans l’eau rayons et sortent nénuphars.
Les jardins, côtoyés sans bruit par le pilote,
Sont pleins de dieux mouillés, et l’Olympe y, grelotte;
Virgile frémissait de voir l’airain suer,
On tremble ici de voir le marbre éternuer,
Et l’on serait tenté d’emmailloter Pomone,
D’offrir un châle à Flore, et de faire l’aumône
D’un rayon de soleil à Phébus enrhumé.
Ici le plein midi craint le grand jour; en mai
On a novembre; avril meurt de froid; juin s’embourbe,
Et juillet en toussant souffle le feu de tourbe.

Mais qu’importe! le rire est roi dans la maison;
L’âtre est gai. Bon visage à mauvaise saison.
Le brouillard blême emplit les champs; mais la kermesse
N’en fait pas moins, après le prêche, après la messe,
Tournoyer, jupe au vent, Goton dont le jarret,
Par moments entrevu, tient Gros-Pierre en arrêt.
Car Gretchen est Goton et Pieter est Gros-Pierre.
Cette Ève et cet Adam sont partout; et la terre
N’eût point fait et meublé, sans Gros-Pierre et Goton,
Eden pour nos aïeux et pour nous Charenton.

On passe d’un méandre à l’autre et la patache,
Chaque soir, aux poteaux des berges se rattache.
L’aubergiste, bonhomme à l’air vague et chinois,
Croque le voyageur comme un singe une noix;
Lesage dans Drika saluerait Léonarde.
On boit; les pots sont grands. La Gueldre goguenarde
Fait ses cruches avec des ventres d’échevin,
Dè même que la Grèce au sourire divin,
Fait des bras de Phryné les anses de son vase.

Cependant le bateau glisse, le roseau jase,
Les nids parlent tout bas, l’eau chuchote, on s’endort;
Et voilà la Hollande.

Ami, ce peuple est fort:
N’en rions pas. C’est vrai qu’il ouvre aux vents d’automne
Une plaine sans fin, âprement monotone;
Certe, ailleurs, j’en conviens, l’aube a plus de clarté,
Et ce ne sont point là de ces champs où l’été,
Splendide et glorieux, jette à pleines corbeilles.
Les fleurs, les fruits, les blés, les parfums, les abeilles;
Sans doute quelque ennui sort de cet horizon;
Mais c’est le sol qui fut l’abri de la raison;
C’est la terre des gueux qui brisèrent les princes;
On referait l’Yssel, l’Amstel, les sept Provinces,
Pourvu que, sous un ciel de pluie, on accouplât
L’herbe au jonc, et l’eau morte avec, le pays plat;
Mais ce qu’on ne saurait refaire, c’est la flamme
Qui dans ce petit. peuple a mis une grande âme.

Juillet-août 1861

XXIV Voyons, d’où vient le verbe?

Voyons, d’où vient le verbe? Et d’où viennent les langues?
De qui tiens-tu les mots dont tu fais tes harangues?
Écriture, Alphabet, d’où tout cela vient-il?
Réponds:

Platon voit l’I sortir de l’air subtil;
Messène emprunte l’M aux boucliers du Mède
La grue offre en volant l’Y à Palamède;
Entre les dents du chien Perse voit grincer l’R;
Le Z à Prométhée apparaît dans l’éclair;
L’O, c’est l’éternité, serpent qui mord sa queue;
L’S et l’F et le G sont dans la voûte bleue,
Des nuages confus gestes aériens;
Querelle à ce sujet chez les grammairiens:
Le D, c’est le triangle où Dieu pour Job se lève;
Le T, croix sombre, effare Ezéchiel en rêve;
Soit; crois-tu le problème éclairci maintenant?
Triptolème a-t-il fait tomber, en moissonnant,
Les mots avec les blés au, tranchant de sa serpe?
Le grec est-il éclos sur les lèvres d’Euterpe?
L’hébreu vient-il d’Adam? le celte d’Irmensul?
Dispute, si tu veux! Le certain, c’est que nul
Ne connaît le maçon qui posa sur lé vide,
Dans la direction de l’idéal splendide,
Les lettres de l’antique alphabet, ces degrés
Par où l’esprit humain monte aux sommets sacrés,
Ces vingt-cinq marches d’or de l’escalier Pensée.

Eh bien, juge à présent. Pauvre argile insensée,
Homme, ombre, tu n’as point ton explication;
L’homme pour l’oeil humain n’est qu’une vision;
Quand tu veux remonter de ta langue à ton âme,
Savoir comment ce bruit se lie à cette flamme,
Néant. Ton propre fil en toi-même est rompu.

En toi, dans ton cerveau, tu n’as pas encor pu
Ouvrir ta propre énigme et ta propre fenêtre,
Tu ne te connais pas, et tu veux le connaître,
LUI! Voyant sans regard, triste magicien,
Tu ne sais pas ton verbe et veux savoir le sien!

XXV Ô terre, dans ta course immense

Ô terre, dans ta course immense et magnifique,
L’Amérique, et l’Europe, et l’Asie, et l’Afrique
Se présentent aux feux du Soleil tour à tour;
Telles,. l’une après l’autre, à l’heure où naît le jour,
Quatre filles, l’amour d’une maison prospère,
Viennent offrir leur front au baiser de leur père.

XXVI Tout est doux et clément!

Tout est doux et clément! astres ou feux de pâtres,
Tout ce que nous suivons de nos yeux idolâtres
Tient de Dieu sa clarté.
Il est dans les soleils comme il est dans les roses.
L’atome est plein de gloire, et les plus grandes choses
Sont pleines de bonté.

Ainsi l’étoile d’or, cette splendeur suprême,
Ne se contente pas de faire voir Dieu même
A l’oeil du genre humain,
Elle, prend en pitié la, nacelle qui flotte,
Se fait humble, et d’en haut souriant au pilote
Lui montre son chemin!

XXVII Un souffle rajeunit la forêt décrépite

Un souffle rajeunit la forêt décrépite.
La nature profonde autour de moi palpite;
L’étoile a des regards; le tronc d’arbre a des yeux.
Je ne sais quoi d’obscur et de mystérieux
Dans la fraîche épaisseur des herbes et des mousses,
Vit, et les bois sont pleins de voix sombres et douces.
Partout où l’ombre est calme, où les flots sont ‘dormants,
Le rêveur voit trembler et luire par moments,
Sous le roc qui se penche et l’arbre qui chancelle,
Une vague lueur de l’âme universelle.

XXVIII Là, je cause le soir

.
Là, je cause le soir avec un vieux curé,
Têtu comme un mulet, lettré comme une carpe,
Jurant par saint Pancrace et par saint Polycarpe,
Qui sait être ignorant sans faste et sans hauteur.
O derviche accompli! Ce vertueux pasteur
Ne se lave jamais et jamais ne se peigne.
II laisse, dans un tas de livres qu'il dédaigne,
Manger l'esprit humain aux rats de son grenier;
Et du fond dè son coeur croit qu'au siècle dernier
Le diable en deux morceaux étant' tombé sur terre,
L'un s'appela Jean-Jacque et l'autre eut nom Voltaire.

XXIX J’étais dans le clocher

J’étais dans le clocher, obélisque plein d’ombre,
Et mon oeil se perdait sous cet entonnoir sombre.
Le bourdon murmurait un chant mystérieux.
Pensif, je contemplais d’en bas ce cône austère;
Je croyais voir, immense et tourné vers la terre,
Un clairon embouché par quelqu’Un. dans les cieux.

XXX Mer pareille à la destinée!

15 juillet

Mer pareille à la destinée!
Mer triste au chant mystérieux!
Dis-nous quelle force obstinée,
Quel vent de la terre ou des cieux
Sur tes bords que ta vague broie,
Te prend, te jette et te renvoie
Et te précipite toujours,
Et par moments, joyeux ou sombre
Peint de rayons ou couvre d’ombre
Tes flots mêlés comme nos jours!
En sortant de Fécamp - au haut de la côte

6 heures du soir

XXXI La mer, ô célestes abîmes,

La mer, ô célestes abîmes,
Vous est égale en majesté!
Elle a ses profondeurs sublimes,
Elle est aussi l’immensité;
Ce qu’est à l’air le vent qui gronde,
Les courants le sont à son onde;
Elle a son azur éternel,
Ses météores, ses étoiles,
Et le navire ouvrant ses voiles
Est l’oiseau de cet autre ciel!

XXXII Un jour que mon esprit

Saint-Valéry-en-Caux, 17 juillet

Un jour que mon esprit de brume était couvert,
Je gravis lentement la falàise au dos vert,
Et puis je regardai quand je fus sur la cime.
Devant moi l’air et l’onde ouvraient leur double abîme.
Quelque chose de grand semblait tomber des cieux.
Le bruit de l’océan, sinistre et furieux,
Couvrait de l’humble port les rumeurs pacifiques.
Le soleil, d’où pendaient des rayons magnifiques,
A travers un réseau de nuages flottants,
S’épandait sur la mer qui brillait par instants.
Le vent chassait les flots où des formes sans nombre
Couraient. Des vagues d’eau berçaient des vagues d’ombre.

L’ensemble était immense et l’on y sentait Dieu.

XXXIII LA PASSION HUMAINE

Ombre où Brutus médite, où saigne Jésus-Christ;
Les Salomés sont là regardant les Electres;
Là, pleine de clairons, de tumultes, de spectres,
De squelettes, de rois hideux, d’hommes hagards,
De corps sans bras, de bras sans mains, d’yeux sans regards,
Sous un ciel monstrueux hennit, gronde et se cabre
La guerre, tourbillon hurlant, danse macabre.

XXXIV La mort est sous un toit

La mort est sous un toit comme sur un navire.
Tel qui dompte la mer sur la terre chavire,
Tel se perd dans les flots encor plein d’avenir.
Les uns - ô nautoniers, vos destins sont les nôtres! -
Reviennent pour ne plus repartir, et les autres
S’en vont pour ne plus révenir!

17 juillet .

XXXIV Des mains,

Des mains, à travers la nuée; -
Perçant vos ténèbres, Seigneur,
A notre soif exténuée.
Tendent dans l'ombre le bonheur;
Elles nous tendent les ivresses,
Les extases enchanteresses,
L'espoir charmant, l'amour béni;
Et sur notre terre âpre et noire,
L'âme en frémissant cherche à boire
A ces coupes de l'infini.

Quiconque aime, quiconque souffre,
Au profond mystère est uni;
Tout cerveau qui pense est un gouffre;
Tout être est plein de l'infini;
Le coeur qui s'ouvre ouvre une porte;
Les âmes, atomes qu'emporte
Un souffle d'ombre ou de clarté,
Sentent frémir, aux cieux dressées,
Dans la moindre de leurs pensées
Les ailes de l'immensité.

XXXV Une clarté livide entre en ce sombre lieu

Une clarté livide entre en ce sombre lieu;
Le jour semble y mourir, la mort y semble naître;
Lézarde, écroulement, larmier, brèche, fenêtre,
On ne sait pas quel nom donnèr aux soupiraux;
Et, cachant à demi des châssis sans vitraux,
Une guipure noire et difforme de branches
Et de feuilles frissonne aux ouvertures blanches.

XXXVII APPARITION

À force d’aspirer à ce grand but: connaître,
À force de sonder le fond sacré de l’être,
A force de fixer mes regards inquiets
Sur toi qui peux, sur toi qui vis, sur toi qui es,
A force de parler à l’inconnu sans bornes,
Au mystère où l’horreur entr’ouvre ses yeux mornes,
A force de vouloir, noir plongeur fait de jour,
Jusqu’en l’océan Nuit trouver la perle Amour,
J’ai fini, coeur où vibre une invisible lyre,
Par voir sortir de l’ombre un effrayant sourire.

XXXVIII Dans ces heures où Dieu

Dans ces heures où Dieu donne ou reprend la flamme,
Où le soleil revient ou s’en va comme une âme,
Où tout est solennel,
Où pour se transformer l’ordre éternel s’arrête,
Où le jour et la nuit luttent sur notre tête
A qui prendra le ciel;

Le monde est en suspens. Quiconque pense ou rêve
Sait que l’heure où tout change est l’heure où tout s’achève,
Que l’espoir est menteur;
Et l’esprit qui se penche alors sur la nature
Y sent de toutes parts ployer la créature
Devant le créateur!

Car on touche à la crise où tout peut se suspendre,
L’essieu peut se briser, le ressort se détendre,
Le flambeau s’éclipser.
Dans tous les coeurs se dresse un spectre affreux: PeuT-ÊTRE!
Le souffle qui passait et qui faisait tout naître
Peut ne plus repasser!

Car l’éternel concert n’en est qu’à son prélude.
Celui qui fait la loi la réforme ou l’élude.
Des cieux il est l’auteur.
Et sait-on ce que Dieu, qui trompe notre *étude,
Dans sa toute-puissance et dans sa solitude,
Fait à cette hauteur?

Qui nous répond de toi, Seigneur? Qui sait encore
Si ton souffle un matin n’éteindra pas l’aurore,
A l’heure de venir?
Le soleil est à Dieu. La terre ignore et rampe.
Qui sait si le travail qu’il fait à cette lampe
N’est pas près de finir?

Quand il aura fini Dieu l'éteindra sans doute.
Que ferons-nous alors dans l'ombré et .dans .le doute
Heurtant tous, nos essieux?
Qu'est-ce que tous ces chais qu'on appelle des mondes,
Et qui portent chacun tant de choses profondes
Deviendront dans les cieux?

Aussi quand le soleil s'est éteint sur les-cimes;
Quand l'obscurité rampe au penchant des abîmes
Et du fond. monte au bord;
Quand dans les lieux profonds la profondeur redouble;
Quand le rêve au contour monstrueux, à l'oeil trouble,
De toute chose sort;

Quand les ombres de tout par les bords se rencontrent;
Lorsqu'un réseau de brume où cent formes se montrent,
Flotte, au vent dénoué;
Quand le ciel où la nue à plis sombres se traîne
Laisse voir par endroits un peu de jour à peine
Comme un manteau troué;

Alors un mouvement se fait dans la nature;
La nuit vient; gouffre ,sombre où l'être s'aventure
De guides dépourvu! .
Car il semble qu'à l'heure où tout dort et repose
Toujours la nuit peut .faire au monde quelque chose
D'horrible et d'imprévu!

XXXIX Dieu.

Dieu.
A travers ce qu’on sent confusément bruire,
C’est lui qui fait trembler, c’est lui qui fait reluire
L’oeil sous le cil baissé, l’eau sous la berge en fleurs;
Le rayon de la lune au bas des monts paisibles
Et le vague reflet des choses invisibles
Au front incliné des rêveurs.

XL L’épanouissement,

L’épanouissement, c’est la loi du Seigneur.
Il a fait la beauté, l’amour et le bonheur,
Il veut la fleur dans la broussaille.
Son âme immense, à qui l’aube sert de clairon,
Vibre à l’anxiété du moindre moucheron.
Toute douleur en Dieu tressaille.

Quand on lie un oiseau, Dieu souffre dans le nceud.
Dieu, tout objet froissé vous touche et vous émeut
Dans l’ombre où votre esprit repose;
Couché sur l’univers qu’emplit votre rayon,
Vous sentez, vous aussi, dans la création,
Le pli. d’une feuille de rose.

XLI Au fond du ciel serein,

Au fond du ciel serein, âmes supérieures,
Les astres vivent seuls; quant aux âmes d’en bas,
Ces grands isolements ne leur conviennent pas.
Il leur faut l’air, la foule et les branches voisines,
Et le croisement souple et profond des racines,
Les réponses, les bruits, les yeux, les pas mouvants,
Et la rumeur des voix dans la rumeur des vents.

XLII La solitude sainte

La solitude sainte aux faibles est fatale.

Voyez, il part, il fuit, il se cache, il s'installe
Dans un bois, dans un trou, loin de tout grand chemin.
Le voilà seul. Bonsoir! Voir un visage humain?
Pourquoi? qui? Non! plutôt, que le soleil périsse!
Vivent les ours! L'ennui le tient et le hérisse.
Il ne se peigne plus, il ne se'rase plus:
Son âme est cùl-dejatte et son coeur est perclus.
Fermez la porte. Il vit, fauve, dans sa tanière.
N'ayant pas autre chose, il prend sa cuisinière.
Il devient triste, froid, lascif, méchant, petit
Son esprit par degrés dans la chair` s'engloutit.
En lui la brute monte et gagne sa cervelle;
Le néant sous son front lentement se nivelle;
I1 boit,- il mange, il marche; autrefois ça, pensait.
Vit-il? on ne sait plus au juste ce que c'est,
Et le vieux loup Satan rit dans ses nuits funèbres
De voir cette lueur sombrer dans les ténèbres.

XLIII Conquérants, prêtres, rois.

Conquérants, prêtres, rois.

L’épée est une fauve et sinistre, lionne;
La tiare flamboie et la mitre rayonne,
Le trône, splendide escabeau,
Luit; mais Dieu gtii dans l’ombre ouvre et ferme les fosses,
Fait saisir et broyer toutes ces grandeurs fausses
Par les mâchoires du tombeau.

XLIV Ô profondeur sans fond

Ô profondeur sans fond où va tout ce qui pense!
Où l’on tombe, n’ayant que soi pour tout appui!

Cet homme était hier empereur; aujourd’hui.
Il est mort. Les canons tonnent, les clochers grondent;
Toutes les voix d’airain dans les cieux se répondent;
L’air murmure: - Il est mort! Il est mort!à genoux!
Celui qui disait: Moi! celui qui disait: Nous! -
Le maître! le héros! la majesté sacrée!
L’élu! l’homme qui règne, ombre de Dieu qui crée!
Il est au ciel, l’heureux, le superbe, le fort!
Il fut grand dans la vie, il est grand dans la mort! -
Et les foules en deuil se hâtent accourues,
Et les lourds pots-à-feu flambent le long des rues,
Et le royal convoi passe. Vingt escadrons
Ouvrent la marche; on voit venir dans les clairons
Une espèce de tombe éblouissante et fière,
Un grand sépulcre trône inondé de lumière,
Un cénotaphe immense aux panaches mouvants
Qui roule et resplendit, secouant dans les vents
L’orgueil, l’encens, la myrrhe, et, comme des crinières,
Les flammes d’or, les plis de pourpre, les bannières.
Le corbillard étale au peuple émerveillé
Toute la gloire humaine, un manteau constellé,
Une couronne, un sceptre, une épée, un cadavre.
Et la grande cité que son veuvage navre,
Et, tout autour, les champs, les hameaux, les faubourgs
Ne sont qu’une rumeur de pas et de tambours.

Écoutez maintenant. Ô vertige! peut-être,
Pendant qu’on dit: - C’est lui! c’est le roi! c’est le maître!
Celui que Dieu servait dans ce qu’il entreprit! -
Il vient de s’éveiller, morne et sinistre .esprit,
Dans un des noirs chevaux de l’attelage sombre

Qui tirent ce grand char de triomphe vers l’ombre!
Frissonnant, il bégaie: Où suis-je? Il se souvient;
Il sent derrière lui, son cadavre qui vient;
De ses portes de marbre il voit s’arrondir l’arche;
Il connaît le valet de pied qui lui dit: marche!
Il veut crier: C’est moi! le maître! Il ne le peut;
La mort le tient muet sous son terrible noeud.
Sous sa nouvelle forme effroyable, il tressaille;
Et tout en traversant son Louvre, son Versaille,
Son Kremlin, son Windsor ou son Escurial,
Couverts de ses blasons: lys, aigle impérial,
Savoie, Espagne, Autriche, ou Lorraine, ou Bourgogne,
Son cocher le fustige au nom de sa charogne.
Misérable, il est pris dans la bête au pas lent.
Ce qu’il a d’éternel en lui, puni, tremblant,
S’attelle à ce qui va rentrer dans la nature;
Son immortalité traîne sa pourriture;
Terreur! terreur! tandis que son nom dans l’azur
Brille, et qu’on voit son chiffre à tous les coins de mur
Porté par un génie ou par une victoire; .
Tandis qu’auguste et beau,. s’ouvrant à cette gloire
Comme s’ouvre au soleil le portique du soir,.
Tout Saint-Denis n’est plus qu’un sarcophage noir
Si vaste qu’on dirait qu’on a fait, sous ses porches,
Avec ses millions d’étoiles et de torches,
Entrer toute la nuit pour en faire du deuil;
Pendant que les drapeaux adorent son cercueil,
Pendant qu’un- Bossuet quelconque le célèbre,
Et l’appelle, du haut de l’oraison funèbre,
Bon, juste, glorieux, grand comme l’univers,
Son âme sous le fouet porte son corps aux vers!

XLV Tu seras riche, heureux, beau,

Le choeur.

Tu seras riche, heureux, beau, puissant, triomphant;
Tu trôneras, calife, au dos d’un éléphant;
Tu tiendras   dans ta main la pomme impériale;
Tu seras plus aimé qu’Atys ou. qu’Euryale;
Femmes dans ton sérail,   chevaux ‘dans tes haras,.
Tu posséderas tout; et, quand tu dormiras,
Des déesses, dansant avec un bruit de lyres,
Pâles, te berceront de splendides sourires;
Et les peuples, devant ton front si radieux,
Croiront te voir briller de la lueur des dieux.
C’est bien; -tu vivras fier, grand, ivre de toi-même,
Tranquille, oubliant l’heure où le sépulcre blême
S’ouvre immense, confus et noir comme la mer.

Soudain, tu sentiras passer un souffle d’air,
Et tu t’envoleras, force, orgueil, renommée,
Sans faire plus d’effet au vent que la fumée.

XLVI On a de chauds clients

On a de chauds clients et des amis nombreux;
On rit, on chante, on brave, on vit; on est heureux,
On est impie à l’aise; on triomphe; on oublie:
La mort qui se souvient, l’heure où tout se délie,
Et la submersion sombre de l’absolu. .
Mais il vient, ce moment où tout est superflu,
Où la nuit vous saisit comme un hideux reptile,
Où tout ce qu’on peut faire est une offre inutile,
Où l’on a beau prier, implorer, supplier.
As-tu vu d’aventure un riche se noyer?
Il crie à ceux qu’il voit sùr le rivage: - À l’aide!
— ... Cent francs! - ... dix mille francs! - ... tout ce que je possède!
Et la voix du noyé se perd sous le flot noir.
Ainsi, précipité, sans appui, sans espoir,
Le damné, s’attachant aux parois de la tombe,
Sent sous lui l’ouverture épouvantable, et tombe.
Il se tord, il appelle, il voit le firmament
Et la terre et le jour s’enfuir rapidement,
Et n’est plus qu’une forme indistincte qui sombre,
Et s’enfonce, et, hagard, roule à jamais sous l’ombre.

XLVII O siècle inachevé,

O siècle inachevé, plein d’angoisse et de doutes,
Où tout flotte et se mêle en un milieu diffus!
Que l’oeil avec terreur s’enfonce sous tes voûtes
Où les rois à tâtons, vont demandant leurs routes,
Car la concession perd comme le refus!

Quels bouleversements dans tes lointains sans nombre,
Que d’antres ténébreux sous tes rameaux touffus,
Redoutable avenir où le poète sombre
Voit les trônes pencher de plus en plus dans l’ombre
Sous un amas croulant d’évènements confus!

XLVIII Toujours sur cette mer sauvage

Toujours sur cette mer sauvage
La gloire à l’horizon montre son beau rivage,
Son beau port, sans récifs, sans écueils meurtriers,
Son soleil arrêté dans son ciel sans nuage,
Et ses temples dans des lauriers.

Alors on rame, on vogue, et pour dompter la lame,
Vers l’île rayonnante on laisse fuir son âme,
On s’épuise, on aspire à l’aile des oiseaux,
On ouvre toute voile, on saisit toute rame,
On remue et l’air et les-eaux!

La nuit, à l’horizon on la voit nébuleuse,
On vogue, le jour vient, et sur la mer houleuse,
Reparaît l’île heureuse et son riant gazon,
Le soir, on dit: où donc est l’île merveilleuse?
Hélas! toujours à l’horizon!

Elle trompe toujours notre poursuite avide.
Pour attirer et fuir le voyageur sans guide,
Jamais vent orageux, égaré sur les flots,
Ne fit sur une mer plus fausse et plus perfide,
Errer plus flottante Délos!

Et quand dé près enfin à vos regards s’étale,
Comme la table offerte à l’affamé Tantale,
Cette île radieuse, aux rivages si beaux,
Alors on reconnaît, dérision fatale!
Que ses temples sont des tombeaux!

XLIX Oh! que,d’amis j’ai vus

Oh! que d’amis j’ai vus à pas lents disparaître!
Que j’en ai vu quitter le chemin tour à tour,
Et sortant de la vie avant la fin du jour,
Descendre le versant de la colline noire!
Combien, dont la gaîté me faisait vivre et croire,
Dont l’oeil d’aise et d’amour semblait étinceler,
Ont cessé brusquement de rire et de parler,
Et pâles, frissonnants, tristes, la main glacée,
Sans même terminer la phrase commencée,
S’en sont allés, laissant leur destin incomplet,
Comme si tout à coup quelqu’un les appelait!
Est-ce que vous croyez que les roses - vermeilles
Ne trouvent pas moyen de suivre les abeilles,
Et que les papillons, errant dans les benjoins,
Ne sont pas dans l’azur par les parfums rejoints?
La mémoire est un souffle envoyé dans la tombe;
C’est la colombe allant s’unir à la colombe.
Non!il n’est pas d’absence, il n’est pas de tombeau;
Le pâle survivant, rallumant le flambeau,
Fait envoler son âme au delà de la terre
A la suite du mort entré dans le mystère;
L’âme revoit l’autre âme à force d’y rêver,
Et dans le ciel profond sait où la retrouver.

4 septembre 1857

LI C’est le ciel que la tombe

C’est le ciel que la tombe, aube obscure, reflète;
Le gouffre a pour barreaux les côtes du squelette;
On entend, comme ceux qui songent sur un bord,
Bruire l’infini dans le vide du crâne;
Et le Dieu qui pardonne, et le Dieu qui condamne
Luit dans les deux yeux de la mort.

La clarté du cercueil, pour nous fils des désastres,
O nuit sombre, est égale à la clarté des astres;
Comment devant les morts s’aveugler et nier?
Ce qui vécut est plein du mystère sublime;
L’immensité rayonne étoile dans l’abîme
Et cadavre dans le charnier.

LII Babel

Babel est tout au fond du paysage horrible.

Si l’épouvante était une chose visible,
Elle ressemblerait à ce faîte inouï.
Sommet démesuré dans le ciel enfoui!
Ce n’est pas une tour, c’est le monstre édifice.
Sans pouvoir l’éclairer, le jour sur elle glisse.
Des ouvertures d’ombre engouffrent dans ses flancs
Tous les vents de l’espace orageux et sifflants;
Il en sort on ne sait quelles sombres huées.
Sa spirale difforme et mêlée aux nuées
Peut-être y recommence et peut-être y finit.
L’ouragan a rongé ses porches de granit;
Son mur est crevassé du haut en bas; la brèche
Est comme un trou que fait dans la terre une bêche;
Ses rampes ont des blocs de roches pour pavés;
Sur ses escarpements lugubres sont gravés
Des maques, des trépieds, des gnomons, des clepsydres;
Ses antres, assez grands pour contenir des hydres,
Semblent de loin la fente où se cache l’aspic;
Sur les reliefs brumeux de ses parois à pic
Des forêts ont poussé comme des touffes d’herbes;
Ses faisceaux d’arcs rompus sont pareils à des gerbes;
La pierre a la pâleur sinistre du linceul.

Babel voulait monter jusqu’au zénith; Dieu seul
A son ascension pouvait mettre une .borne.
On frémit d’entrevoir son intérieur morne;
Il est si noir qu’un astre y serait à tâtons;
Des chutes de muraille ont entre les frontons
Creusé des profondeurs qui font inaccessibles
D’affreux colosses; pris par la foudre pour cibles.
Le seuil porte deux tours qui sont deux chandeliers.
Ce spectre est loin., Un dôme; un. chaos d’escaliers,

Des terrasses, des ponts, prennent vaguement forme
Dans ce blêmissement d’architecture énorme
Montant confusément derrière l’horizon.
Et comme on voit, au bord du toit d’une maison
S’abattre, à la saison des fleurs, à tire-d’aile,
Les pigeons au pied rose ou la vive hirondelle,
Sur son entablement funèbre aux trous profonds,
Viennent du fond du ciel se poser les griffons,
Les hippogriffes noirs, les sphinx volants des rêves
Dont les plumes sans plis ressemblent à des glaives,
Le dragon, sous son, ventre étouffant des éclairs,
L’aigle d’apocalypse, et les . larves des airs,
Et les blancs séraphins, qu’une aile immense voile,
Farouches, arrivant fatigués d’une étoile.
La création va,’ sombre, et démesurée;
L’étendue à jamais se meut dans la durée;
Le temps tourne au cadran du ciel
Et l’homme, pendant l’heure où disparaît son âge,
Pâle, entend remuer l’effrayant engrenage
De l’infini dans l’éternel.

Le peu de jour qu’on voit passe entre des vertèbres;
Les blancheurs sont le deuil autant que les ténèbres;
Rien ne rayonne, rien n’est sûr;
Le penseur, attentif aux mystères sans nombre,
A travers l’amas noir de ces rouages d’ombre,
N’aperçoit qu’un lugubre azur.

LIV Parmi des monts,

Parmi des monts, épars comme un tas de décombres,
L’horizon ébauchait avec des pourpres sombres
Une aube monstrueuse, et j’en étais témoin;
L’ombre était vaste, un gouffre était béant au loin;
J’entendais chuchoter des voix exténuées,
Et je voyais passer dans les blêmes nuées
Des fantômes mêlés aux visions des airs;
Le vent sur la montagne au milieu des éclairs
Tordait les cheveux gris d’un prophète terrible.

LV Quand... au milieu de la nuit,

Quand... au milieu de la nuit,
Surpris par un mari chez une belle, Horace
S’enfuit, en laissant choir ses grègues sur sa trace,
Et conte l’aventure à son valet mignon
Dans des vers que Boileau lisait à Lamoignon,
Il ne se doute pas, en riant avec Dave,
Lui, le sage, qui traite en ami son esclave
Et qui parle en égal à Jupiter tonnant,
Il ne se doute pas qu’il touche en badinant
Au problème insondé de l’homme et de la femme;
Qu’il est des droits profonds que l’avenir réclame;
Que tout marche, et qu’un jour l’inquiet genre humain,
De l’amour mieux’ compris faisant sortir l’hymen,
Osera secouer la vieille chaîne noire
Du coeur, libre d’aimer comme l’esprit de croire.

LVI Quand le soleil d'avril rit

Quand le soleil d'avril rit à travers les feuilles,
Quand, d'un regard charmant, joyeuse, tu, m'accueilles,
Je sens un feu divin dans mon coeur s'allumer;
Sans l'amour, sans la foi, notre âme serait, noire.
Dieu ne l'a pas voulu. La nature fait croire,
La femme fait aimer.

Il avril 1843.

LVII Oh! pour le reste de ta vie,

Oh! pour le reste de ta vie,
Qu’on nous plaigne ou qu’on nous envie,
Tant que nos coeurs se comprendront,
Puisse une sereine pensée,
A ton chevet toujours fixée,
Poser ses ailes sur ton front!

LVIII Figurez-vous un beau front triomphant

Figurez-vous un beau front triomphant,
Un frais sourire en une- fraîche bouche,
Un oeil limpide, innocent et farouche
Dont la paupière en amande se fend..
Elle était gaie et rose, grande et belle.
Je respirais à peine devant elle,
Tout fier d’être homme èt tout sot d’être enfant.

LIX Elle est gaie et pensive

Elle est gaie et pensive; elle nous fait songer
A tout ce qui reluit malgré de sombres voiles,
Aux bois pleins de rayons, aux nuits pleines d’étoiles.
L’esprit en la voyant s’en va je ne sais où.
Elle a tout ce qui peut rendre un pauvre homme fou.
Tantôt c’est un enfant, tantôt c’est une reine.
Hélas! quelle beauté radieuse et sereine!
Elle a de fiers dédains, de charmantes faveurs,
Un regard doux et bleu sous de longs cils rêveurs,
L’innocence, et l’amour qui salis tristesse encore
Flotte empreint sur son front comme une vague aurore,
Et puis je ne sais quoi dé calme et de vainqueur!
Et le ciel dans ses yeux met l’enfer dans mon coeur!

LX N’écoutez pas, mon ange,

N’écoutez pas, mon ange, en votre rêverie,
Paris aux mille voix qui là-bas pleure et crie.
Entends plutôt mon coeur qui parle à ton côté.
Ecoute-le chanter pendant que tu reposes.
Va, les soupirs d’un coeur disent bien plus de choses
Que les rumeurs d’une cité!

14 mai 1834. Butte Montmartre,
5 heures après midi.

LXI Relève ton beau front,

Relève ton beau front, assombri par instants;
Il faut se réjouir, car voièi le printemps:
Avril, saison dorée où parmi les zéphyres,
Les parfums, les chansons, les baisers, les sourires,
Et tous ces doux propos qu’on tient à. demi-voix,
L’amour revient au coeur comme l’ombrage au bois.

13 janvier 1839.

LXII Janvier est revenu.

Janvier est revenu. Ne crains rien, noble femme!
Qu’importe l’an qui passe et ceux qui passeront!
Mon amour toujours jeune est en fleur dans mon âme;
Ta beauté toujours jeune est en fleur sur ton front.
Sois toujours grave et douce, ô toi que j’idolâtre;
Que ton humble auréole éblouisse les yeux!
Comme on verse un lait pur dans un vase d’albâtre,
Emplis de dignité ton coeur religieux.

Brave le temps qui fuit. Ta beauté te protège.
Brave l’hiver. Bientôt mai sera de retour.
Dieu, pour effacer l’âge et pour fondre la neige,
Nous rendra le printemps et nous laisse l’amour.

1, janvier 1842.

LXIII Oh! de mon ardente fièvre

Oh! de mon ardente fièvre
Un baiser peut me guérir.
Laisse ma lèvre à ta lèvre
S’attacher pour y mourir.

Ta bouche, c’est le ciel même.
Mon âme veut s’y poser.
Puisse mon souffle suprême
S’en aller dans un baiser!

LXIV Ne vous contentez pas, madame, d’être belle

Ne vous contentez pas, madame, d’être belle.
Notre coeur vieillit mal s’il ne se renouvelle.
Il faut songer, penser, lire, avoir de l’esprit.
Être, pendant dix ans, une rose qui rit,
Cela passe.. - La vie est une triste chose,
Un travail de ruine et de métamorphose
Qui fait d’une beauté sortir une laideur.
Fixez votre oeil charmant, parfois un peu boudeur,
Sur les deux termes sûrs d’une vie achevée,
Sur le point de départ et le point d’arrivée,
Chemin que parcourront, hélas! vos pas tremblants,
— Dents blanches, cheveux noirs; - dents noires, cheveux blancs!
Moi, j’estime la femme, humble et sage personne,
Qui ne s’éblouit pas, belle, veut être bonne,
Songe à la saison dure ainsi que les fourmis,
Et qui fait pour l’hiver provision d’amis.
Vieillir, c’est remplacer par la clarté la flamme;
Le coeur doit lentement rentrer derrière l’âme.

LXV Âme que j’ai trouvée

Âme que j’ai trouvée ainsi qu’un diamant!
O noble esprit, jaloux, chaste, superbe, aimant!
Vous que l’amour fait reine et la beauté déesse,
Qui souffrez cependant et qui doutez sans cesse,
Qui vous cachez, plaintive et cruelle à la fois,
Et, comme les lions, fuyez au fond des bois,
Madame, en même temps si charmante et si rude!
Oh! si des profondeurs de votre solitude,
De ces vastes forêts où vous songez en vain,
Votre regard pensif, défiant et divin,
Pouvait comme un rayon pénétrer dans mon âme,
Si vous la pouviez voir telle qu’elle est, madame,
Dieu le sait, ô bel ange à qui manque la foi,
Tu ne trouverais rien dans cette ombre que toi!
Que toi, toujours bénie et toujours adorée,
Ton image, d’amour et d’orgueil entourée,
Ton nom, ton souvenir vivant,’sacré, vainqueur,
Et mon coeur sombre et doux brisé par ton grand coeur!

10 mars.

LXVI Ô souvenirs!

Ô souvenirs! beaux jours, douces heures passées!
Rappelle-toi ce ciel, ces mers, ces grands tableaux,
Quand nous laissions errer, confondant nos pensées,
Nos pas sur lés rochers, nos âmes sur les flots!

Saint-Valéry-sur-Somme, 1849.

LXVII Doux ami,

— Doux ami, quand j’aurai quitté la chair mortelle,
Ne me fais remplacer par personne! dit-elle.
Pas d’autre amante! - Et grave, elle ajouta ce mot,
Les yeux levés au ciel: Car j’en mourrais là-haut.

LXVIII Vent du soir!

Vent du soir! dont le vol nous courbe tous ensemble,
Respecte le blé d’or plein des rayons du jour,
Respecte tous les coeurs où quelque flamme tremble,
Mais jette où tu voudras, emporte où bon te semble
La paille sans épi, la femme sans amour!

LXIX Quand je ne serai plus qu’une cendre glacée

Quand je ne serai plus qu’une cendre glacée,
Quand mes yeux fatigués seront fermés au jour,
Dis-toi, si dans ton coeur ma mémoire est fixée:
Le monde a sa pensée,
Moi, j’avais son amour!

LXX C’était la première soirée

I

C’était la première soirée
  Du mois d’avril.
Je m’en souviens, mon adorée.
  T’en souvient-il?

Nous errions dans la ville immense,
  Tous deux, sans bruit,
À l’heure où le repos commence
  Avec la nuit!

Heure calme, charmante, austère,
  Où le soir naît!
Dans cet ineffable mystère
  Tout rayonnait,

Tout! l’amour dans tes yeux sans voile,
  Fiers, ingénus!
Aux vitres mainte pauvre étoile,
  Au ciel Vénus!

Notre-Dame, parmi les dômes
  Des vieux faubourgs,
Dressait comme deux grands fantômes
  Ses grandes tours.

La Seine, découpant les ombres
  En angles noirs,
Faisait luire sous les ponts sombres
  De clairs miroirs.

L’oeil voyait sur la plage amie
  Briller ses eaux

Comme une couleuvre endormie
  Dans les roseaux.

Et les passants, le long des grèves
  Où l’onde fuit,
Étaient vagues comme les rêves
  Qu’on a la nuit!

Je te disais: - « Clartés bénies,
  Bruits lents et doux,
Dieu met toutes les harmonies
  Autour de nous!

Aube qui luit, soir qui flamboie,
  Tout a son tour;
Et j’ai l’âme pleine de joie,
  Ô mon amour!

Que m’importe que la nuit tombe,
  Et rende, ô Dieu!
Semblable au plafond d’une tombe
  Le beau ciel bleu!

Que m’importe que Paris dorme,
  Ivre d’oubli,
Dans la brume épaisse et sans forme
  Enseveli!

Que m’importe, aux heures nocturnes
  Où nous errons,
Les ombres qui versent leurs urnes
  Sur tous les fronts,

Et, noyant de leurs plis funèbres
  L’âme et le corps,
Font les vivants dans les ténèbres
  Pareils aux morts!

Moi, lorsque tout subit l’empire
  Du noir sommeil,
J’ai ton regard, j’ai ton sourire,
  J’ai le soleil!

Je te parlais, ma bien-aimée;
  Ô doux instants!
Ta, main pressait ma main charmée.
  Puis, bien longtemps,

Nous nous regardions pleins de flamme,
  Silencieux,
Et l’âme répondait à l’âme,
  Les yeux aux yeux!

Sous tes cils une larme obscure
  Brillait parfois;
Puis ta voix parlait, tendre et pure,
  Après ma voix,

Comme on entend dans la coupole
  Un double écho;
Comme après un oiseau s’envole
  Un autre oiseau.

Tu disais: « Je suis calme et fière,
  Je t’aime! oui!”
Et je rêvais à ta lumière
  Tout, ébloui!

Oh! ce fut une heure sacrée,
  T’en souvient-il?
Que cette première soirée
  Du mois d’avril!

Tout en disant toutes les choses,

Tous les discours
Qu’on dit dans la saison des roses
Et des amours,

Nous allions, contemplant dans l’onde
Et dans l’azur
Cette lune qui jette au monde
Son rayon pur,

Et qui, d’en haut, sereine comme
Un front dormant,
Regarde le bonheur de l’homme
Si doucement!
II

Tu disais: « Ô soleils sans nombre!
Nuit! ciel en feu!
Dans vos clartés et dans votre ombre,
Tout monte à Dieu.

Rien ne se perd! Cendre, étincelle,
Ramier, vautour,
Le moindre battement d’une aile
Ou d’un amour,

Le chant du nid qui sous la feuille
Va s’assoupir,
Du coeur pensif qui se recueille
Chaque soupir,

Les rêves de l’âme enivrée,
Du front qui bout;
La nature immense et sacrée
Retrouve tout!

Car tout suit sa loi grave et douce!
Tout à la fois!

L’herbe verdit, la branche pousse
  Au fond des bois,

La nuit endort les champs, la foule,
  Les mers, les monts,
Le vent fuit, l’astre luit, l’eau coule,
  Et nous aimons!

Nous aimons parce que nous sommes!
  C’est notre voeu!
Aimer, c’est vivre loin des hommes
  Et près de Dieu!

C’est s’ouvrir à la clarté pure,
  Comme la fleur!
C’est sentir toute la nature
  Vivre en son coeur!

C’est accomplir le code auguste
  D’Éden naissant
Que suivait devant le ciel juste
  L’homme innocent!

Soyons heureux, ô toi que j’aime!
  Bravons le sort!
Car seuls à cette heure suprême,
  Seuls quand tout dort;

Dédaignant d’un monde où tout tremble
  Les bonheurs vains,
Sûrs d’être en paix avec l’ensemble
  Des faits divins,

Comme en un temple où l’ombre rampe
  Devant nos pas,
On suit la lueur d’une lampe
  Qu’on ne voit pas,

Nous sentons sur notre âme fière,
  Tout en rêvant,
L’oeil sans sommeil, l’oeil sans paupière
  Du Dieu vivant!

Va, dans mon coeur rien ne chancelle.
  Sois mon époux.
La conscience universelle
  Est avec nous!

Donnons-nous à l’amour! - Écoute,
  Soupirs, concerts,
Pervenche du bord de la route,
  Perle des mers,

La mousse en avril épaissie
  Des bois dormants,
Les sourires, la poésie,
  Les pleurs charmants,

Le bleu du ciel, le vert de l’onde,
  L’éclat du jour,
Les belles choses de ce monde
  Sont à l’amour!

C’est l’amour qui tient tolite chose,
  Et fait d’un mot
Épanouir ici la rose,
  L’astre là-haut.

C’est lui qui veut qu’on ne commande
  Qu’à deux genoux!
C’est lui qui fait la femme grande
  Et l’homme doux!

Ainsi tu parlais, et sans doute,

Dieu t’inspirait;
Car j’écoutais comme on écoute
Dans la forêt,

Quand Dieu se mêle à la nature,
Au bruit des vents,
Quand il parle dans le murmure
Des bois vivants!

Août 1844.

LXXI Ton beau front s’est penché

Ton beau front s’est penché comme une fleur froissée;
J’ai senti tressaillir ta pauvre âme blessée;
Oh! dors, et songe à moi, doux ange au coeur profond!
Pendant que ta veilleuse argente tdn plafond,
Laisse passer devant tes paupières baissées
Les rêves souriants, ombres de mes pensées,
Et demain, quand le ciel ramènera le jour,
Tourne tes yeux vers l’aube et ton coeur vers l’amour!

Minuit. En rentrant.
9 novembre.

LXXII GUITARE

Vous avez, madame, une grâce exquise,
Une douceur noble, un bel enjouement,
Un regard céleste, un bonnet charmant,
L’air d’une déesse et d’une marquise.

Vos attraits piquants, fiers et singuliers,
Dignes des Circés, dignes des Armides,
Font lever les yeux même aux plus timides
Et baisser le ton aux plus familiers.

La nuit, quand je vois, dans les cieux sans voiles,
Les étoiles-d’or, mon coeur songe à vous;
Le jour, jeune belle aux regards si doux,
Lorsque je vous vois, je songe aux étoiles.

30 septembre 1844.

LXXIII Quand je veux savoir

Quand je veux savoir vos douleurs secrètes,
Vous dites, ô belle aux yeux adorés:
— « Je ne puis sortir des lieux où vous êtes;
Vous êtes mon maître!” - Et puis vous pleurez.

Et vous reprenez: «Quoi! sans récompense
Mes jours près de vous s’usent à souffrir!
Je veux vous quitter, mais, lorsque j’y pense,
Je ne sais pourquoi je me sens mourir!”

Le même esclavage, ô belle, est le nôtre;
De vous jusqu’à moi la chaîne revient;
Nous ne sommes pas libres l’un ni l’autre;
Je vous tiens; madame, et le sort me tient.

Vous êtes à bord, et je suis, la barque:
Oui, comprends-moi bien, mes discours sont vrais,
Cet homme qui t’aime, esclave et monarque,
Est un dur navire aux sombres agrès.

Il emporte au loin votre coeur, votre âme;
Il est emporté par le gouffre amer!
Vous ne pouvez pas en sortir, madame,
Et lui ne peut pas sortir de la mer.

Il subit l’autan, le nord, l’hiver, l’onde;
Souvent sur l’écueil on le croit perdu
L’eau s’en joue, et quand la tempête gronde,
Dans l’oragè noir il passe éperdu!

Il lutte; les vents n’épargnent-personne.
En se rappelant maint naufrage ancien,
S’ur les vastes mers il flotte, il frissonne.
Il est votre maître et n’ést: pas le sien.

11 novembre 1847.

Vivre, aimer, tout est; là, le reste est ignorance;
Et la création est une transparence;
L’univers laisse voir toujours le même:sceau,
L’amour, dans le soleil ainsi que-dans l’oiseau;
Nos sens sont des conseils: des voix sont dans les choses;
Ces voix disent: Beautés, faites comme les roses;
Faites comme les nids, amants! Avril vainqueur
Sourit. Laissez le ciel vous entrer dans le coeur.

LXXV À ANDRÉ CHÉNIER

.
Tout à coup j'entendis s'éveiller ma voisine.
J'avais seize ans, bel âge où tous les chérubins
Rôdent, tâchant de voir par les vitres des bains,
Où la soutane est lourde et brûle les lévites,
L'âge que vous aviez, mon André, quand vous vîtes
Un beau matin, du fond de son réduit obscur,
Grâce à ces accidents de terrain ou de mur
Que le hasard nous offre avec quelque avarice,
Sortir du lit Myrrha, qui s'appelait Clarisse;
Bref, je fis comme vous, mon doux André Chénier,
Et j'appliquai mon oeil aux fentes du grenier.
Elle bâillait, laissant entrevoir ses épaules;
Puis, comme une naïade ondoyant sous les saules,
Par je ne sais quel brusque et naïf mouvement,
Rapide, elle écarta son drap si vaguement
Que l'oeil ne savait pas si ce charmant manège
Découvrait de la chair ou montrait de la neige.
L'aube, à côté de nous, dorait le vieux portail;
Elle regarda l'aube; - ici, Muse, un détail.
Soit qu'elle ignorât l'art de l'exquise indécence;
Soit qu'étant gens voisins de l'antique innocence
On n'eût point fait alors ce progrès triomphal
D'avoir plus de dentelle encore au lit qu'au bal;
Soit que la pauvre enfant n'eût pas même un centime
Dans son chétif budget pour la parure intime;
Soit manque d'idéal; soit enfin qu'Alizon,
Simple, n'eût pas prévu ces trous à la cloison;
Soit pour toute autre cause, à votre choix, poète,
Sa toilette de nuit était fort peu coquette.
Un cordon lui serrait le cou lugubrement;
On devinait son sein divin, son dos charmant,
Mais mon vers, obligé de peindre, se désole
De les empaqueter dans une camisole;

Un serre-tête plat lui pressait les cheveux;
Et je dois confesser, pour clore ces aveux,
Que son bras, qu’eût chanté la nymphe de Sicile,
Se dérobait aux-yeux sous un linge imbécile:

LXXVI À DES BAIGNEUSES

Ô femmes, la pudeur, c’est la honte sacrée:
Le lieu sombre et divin qui rayonne et qui crée,
Cette chair sous laquelle on aperçoit l’esprit,
Le ventre qui féconde et le sein qui nourrit,
Sont des mystères pleins d’épouvante et de charme.
C’est pourquoi votre oeil roule une céleste larme;
C’est pourquoi vous cherchez, loin des pas et des voix,
Ô baigneuses, l’abri silencieux des bois.
La nature sauvage et profonde vous couvre.
Votre robe inquiete en tressaillant s’entr’ouvre,
Puis tombe, et vous avez, le dernier voile ôté,
Peur de votre lumièré et de votre beauté.
Si quelqu’un me voyait! dit la nymphe ingénue..
Comme c’est effrayant d’être une aurore nue!
Et vous avez raison, belles, de vous cacher..
Vos corps exquis, plus frais que la fleur du pêcher,
Frémiraient du regard d’un passant, faune. infâme
Qui cherche la matière au lieu de chercher l’âme.
A toute belle chose il-faut un vêtement.
L’oeil de l’homme toujours guette en quoi se dément
La beauté, la vertu, le génie, et s’attache,
Sinistre, à la splendeur pour y trouver la tache.
Toute clarté, pour fuir l’offense de nos yeux,
S’enveloppe d’un pli chaste et mystérieux,
Et l’on se sent farouche alors qu’on est suprême
Et voilà pourquoi Dieu, sachant que l’astre même
A sa pudeur, et veut un voile auguste et pur,
Met sur la nudité des étoiles l’azur.

15 juillet 1876

LXXVII LUCIO

Plaire à deux yeux charmants, c’est le but de ma vie.
Pour toute ambition; j’ai cette douce envie.
Je souhaiterais tout à la fois dans les cieux.

Oui. Mais au fond, pourquoi? pour plaire à deux beaux yeux.
Descendre du vieux Cid ou d’Amadis de Gaule;
Briller à l’oeil-de-boeuf faire sur son épaule
Ondoyer une étoile aux plis de son manteau;
Avoir chevaux, piqueurs, chiens, carrosse, château;
Etre beau, jeune, riche et grand par la naissance,
Patrice de Venise ou duc et pair de France;
Etre homme de génie au front large et sacré,
Calomnié de tous et de tous admiré;
Que sais-je! être empereur! - tout cela, sur mon âme,
Représente pour moi le regard d’une femme.

LXXVIII Vous souffrez ici-bas

Vous souffrez ici-bas mille maux nuit et jour,
Sans cesse, et pauvres gens, vous dites: c’est l’amour.
Erreur. L’amour n’est pas le mal, c’est le remède.
Toujours de quelque belle, et souvent, que Dieu m’aide!
De plusieurs à la fois je suis le prisonnier.
Je vis au carnaval deux filles l’an dernier.
L’une était ragusaine et l’autre bergamasque.
Leur rire épanoui rayonnait sous leur masque,
Et l’on voyait flamber des yeux sous leurs deux loups,
Dont les charbons ardents eussent été jaloux.
Quel éblouissement de voir ces créatures!
Leurs regards étoilés étaient pleins d’aventures;
Leurs petits doigts semblaient jouer, doux et moqueurs,
D’un clavier invisible où vibraient tous les coeurs.
Le satin était bure auprès de leurs épaules.
Les plus hardis faquins et les plus joyeux drôles
Leur parlaient un moment, sans y songer du tout,
Et devenaient rêveurs et bêtes tout à coup.

LXXIX Bon! voilà son esprit qui part!

..
Bon! voilà son esprit qui part! - Ô cavaliers,
Piquez des deux! Marins, faites force de voiles!
Vive araignée, étends tes plus subtiles toiles!
Aigles chasseurs, volez aussi prompts que l’éclair!
Bien! hâtez-vous! allez! - Ni dans l’eau, ni dans l’air,
Vous ne pourrez jamais, quoique vous alliez vite,
Suivre, atteindre, saisir et ramener au gîte
La raison d’une- femme alors qu’elle s’en va!

LXXX PORTRAIT

Foin de cet orateur, pédant enchifrené
De qui l’esprit ne sort qu’en passant par son né!
Son éloquence humide abonde en longs filandres.
Quand ce bavard, pour mettre un terme à nos esclandres,
Paraît, blême et bouffi d’un ennui colossal,
A la tribune, orné de son courroux nasal,
Vous attendez qu’il tonne et moi qu’il éternue.
Quoi! du nasillement l’heure est-elle venue!
Oh! le puissant tribun qui fait que les partis,
Quand il parle, oubliant griefs, voëux, appétits,
Et toi, Liberté sainte, aujourd’hui prisonnière,
Pensent à leur mouéhoir et non à leur bannière!
Soit; émerveillez-vous! Fort bien, criez: bravo!
Moi je n’admire pas ce rhumé de cerveau..
Certes, ce coryza, je l’avoue, est énorme,
Stupéfiant, tenace à rendre un nez difforme,
Monstrueux, magnifique, horrible, point bénin;
Le rhume est d’un titan, mais le cerveau d’un nain.
Vous n’êtes pas sensible à la prose, jeune homme.
Il vous faut le vers. Soit. L’art s’accommode en somme
De la prose aussi bien que du vers, et Pascal.
Vaut Corneille. Pourtant le vers, pontifical, ..
Monte dans plus d’âzur et sur un plus haut faîte,
Et le penseur en prose, en vers devient prophète.
Donc préférons le vers: C’est un plus fier démon.
Mais la prose, Tacite, Arouet, Saint-Simon,
Est plus humaine étant moins divine, et, superbe,
Est la Parole, alors que la strophe est le-Verbe.
Aimons l’esprit humain complet, et l’art entier.

LXXXII Mes strophes sont comme les balles

Mes strophes sont comme les balles
Aux coups meurtriers et fréquents.
Mes deux rimes sont deux cymbales
Qui sonnent sur le front des camps.
Lorsqu’on les entend, tout tressaille;
Le soldat rêve la bataille;
L’éclair sort des bronzes tonnants;
Les cavaliers à l’oeil austère
Sentent sous les housses de guerre
Trembler leurs chevaux frissonnants.

LXXXIII Quiconque pense,

Quiconque pense, illustre, obscur, sifflé, vainqueur,
Grand ou petit, exprime en son livre son coeur.
Ce que nous écrivons de nos plumes d'argile,
Soit sur le livre d'or comme le doux Virgile,
Soit comme Alighieri sur la bible de fer,
Est notre propre flamme et notre propre chair.
Le livre est à ce point l'auteur, et le poëme
Le poëte, notre oeuvre est tellement nous-même,
Nous la sentons en nous si mêlée à nos pleurs,
A notre sang, si bien faite de nos douleurs
Et si profondément dans nos os pénétrante,
Que lorsqu'il arriva qu'en l'an mil huit cent trente
Mademoiselle Mars, Firmin et Joanny
Pour la première fois jouèrent Hernani,
J'eus un frémissement de pudeur violée.
Jusqu'à ce moment-là, dans une ombre étoilée,
Ruy, Carlos, le bandit, le cor de la forêt,
Doua Sol pâle, étaient mon rêve et mon secret;
Je leur parlais au fond des extases farouches, ,
Je voyais remuer distinctement leurs bouches,
Je vivais tête-à-tête, ému d'un vague effroi,
Avec ce monde obscur qui se mouvait en moi.
La foule s'y ruant me parut un supplice.
Il me sembla quand, seul derrière la coulisse,
Je vis Faure crier au machiniste: Va,
Et lorsqu'en frissonnant la toile se leva,
Que devant tout ce peuple immense aux yeux de flamme
Je sentais se lever la jupe de mon âme.

Jersey, septembre 1852.

LXXXIV L’Inconnu,

L’Inconnu, ce quelqu’un qu’on distingue dans l’ombre,
Prend les poètes, joue avec leur âme sombre,
Emplit leurs yeux profonds de la lueur des soirs,
Et donne à, deviner à ces OEdipes noirs
Le bien, le mal, l’enfer, Dieu, l’amour, les désastres;
Ce mystérieux sphinx, dont les yeux sont deux astres,
Mêle l’immense énigme au clavier de leurs vers,
Les ouvre ou les referme ou les laisse entr’ouverts,
Et pose en souriant ses griffes contractiles
Sur le spondée auguste et sur les frais dactyles,
De sorte qu’on les sent pleins d’un charme hideux;
Et, voyant le problème horrible trop près d’eux,
Craignant d’être emportés sur de trop rudes faîtes,
Les poètes ont peur de devenir prophètes.

LXXXV Le prophète et le poète

Le prophète et le poète
Affirment l’être au néant;
La terre écoute inquiète
Cet archange et ce géant;
La foule aux vils dialogues,
Ce tas de loups et de dogues
Qui, rôdent sous le ciel bleu,
Tout ce noir troupeau qui nie
Aboie après le génie
Interlocuteur de Dieu.

Toute la sombre cohue
Des errants et des vivants
Craint les penseurs; elle hue
Ces grands fronts, battus des vents;
Elle s’écrié en sa haine:
«D’où vient qu’ils n’ont pas de chaîne,
Et planent quand nous fuyons?
D’où vient que leurs coeurs flambôient?
Qu’est-ce donc que leurs yeux voient,
Pour avoir tant de rayons?”

Quand les grands aigles fidèles
Dans l’âpre nuit sans amour .   -
Vont, donnant de fiers coups d’ailes
Du côté du point du jour,
L’ombre aveugle, l’ombre athée,
Invective, épouvantée,
Ces passants à l’oeil vermeil
Qui troublent sa solitude
Avec leur vieille habitude
De regarder le soleil.

1 janvier 1854,

LXXXVI Poëtes, si le monde avait une âme encor

Poëtes, si le monde avait une âme encor,
Sur vos lèvres sereines
Reviendraient se poser ou des abeilles d’or
Ou des baisers de reines!

Vous verriez, comme l’aigle au front du mont grondant,
S’ouvrir pour votre extase
Les deux chevaux ailés, ou l’Hippogriffe ardent,
Ou l’effrayant Pégase.

LXXXVII Voici les Apennins,

Voici les Apennins, les Alpes et les Andes.
Tais-toi, passant, devant ces visions si grandes.
Silence, homme! histrion! Les monts contemplent Dieu;
Ils regardent, penchés au bord du gouffre bleu,
Comme des spectateurs sur un gradin sublime,
Le drame formidable et sombre de l’abîme,
L’entrée et la sortie étrange de la nuit,
Ces personnages noirs, le vent, l’éclair, le bruit,
La comète, ange obscur dont vous voyez le glaive,
Le rideau de l’azur qui pour le jour se lève,
Les chutes, les terreurs, les chocs, les dénouements
Des mondes engloutis dans les chaos fumants,
Et les astres masqués, et les apocalypses
Des grands spectres du ciel, des aubes, des éclipses.
Pour eux ce que la terre et ses fantômes font
N’est qu’un peu de fumée et dans l’ombre se fond;
Pour eux l’homme n’est pas, un peuple s’évapore.
De la lave éternelle effrayant madrépore,
Vésuve ignore Naple; Etna qu’un feu détruit
Ne connaît pas Messine et parle avec la nuit;
Olympe ne voit pas Athènes, pour Soracte
Des grandeurs de là-haut Rome n’est que l’entr’acte;
Balkan, sans .voir Stamboul, chante son noir salem;
Sina voit l’infini, mais non Jérusalem.
Tout homme est un grain de poussière.
Pourquoi suivre des yeux chaque atome incertain?
De l’humanité tout entière,
Rêveur, je sonde le destin.
Sans condamner le pire et sans railler le moindre,
Je contemple ce qui va poindre,
J’observe ce qui va finir.
Comme la plaine au soir s’emplit d’ombres énormes,
Je vois dans ma pensée errer toutes les formes
Du vague et lointain avenir.

LXXXIX Ce monde, fête ou deuil,

Ce monde, fête ou deuil, palais ou galetas,
Est chimérique, faux, ondoyant, plein d’un tas
De spectres vains, qu’on nomme Amour, Orgueil, Envie.
L’immense ciel bleu pend, tiré sur l’autre vie.
Le vrai drame, où dejà nos coeurs sont rattâchés,
Les personnages vrais, hélas! nous sont cachés
Par ce ciel dont la mort est le noir machiniste.
Le sage sur le sort s’accoude, calme et triste,
Content d’un peu de pain et d’une goutte d’eau,
Et, pensif, il attend le lever du rideau.

15 octobre 1854.

XC Il faut que le poète,

Il faut que le poète, en sa dignité sainte,
Comme un dieu-boit le fiel sache boire l’absinthe,
Qu’il marche’gravement par son oeuvre absorbé,
Comme le laboureur sur le sillon courbé,
Oubliant les frelons dont l’essaim l’environne,
Et les insectes noirs qui mordent sa couronne.
Il sied que le poète, à toute heure obsédé,
Sur le jaloux rhéteur à sa chaire accoudé,
Sur l’obscur pamphlétaire accroupi dans son bouge,
Imprime son dédain quoiqu’il ait un fer rouge!
Mais il est bon parfois qu’entouré d’envieux,
Il songe aux ennemis d’un maître illustre et vieux,
Qu’il tire de l’oubli qui sur leurs fronts retombe
Tous ces vils Bavius 1s enfouis dans la tombe,
Et que sa main, tardive ainsi que le remords,
Fasse pour les vivants un exemple des morts!

XCI Je voudrais qu’on trouvât tout simple

Je voudrais qu’on trouvât tout simple qu’un rêveur,
Las des faux biens, qui n’ont qu’une ingrate saveur,
Cherche l’ombre et devienne une face tournée
Vers l’inconnu dont est pleine la destinée.
Je ne m’explique point qu’on ne comprenne pas
Qu’un homme, après avoir pris ses quatre repas,
Bu, mangé, dormi, dit des choses inutiles,
Goûté dans vingt journaux à tous les mauvais styles,
Et refait tous les riens que les gens graves font,
N’est point pour cela quitte avec le ciel profond.
Souvent, j’ai dit, pensif, les coudes sur ma table,
Qu’une chose appelée honneur est véritable,
Que l’âme est, et qu’il faut sur terre avant tout voir
Non le bonheur, ô noirs vivants, mais le devoir.
Et puisque vous parlez de rêveurs, sachez, hommes,
Qu’entre la libre Sparte et les lâches Sodomes,
Nous laissant le choix, calme, invisible, écoutant,
Dans l’abîme un songeur immense nous attend.
A l’homme la souffrance, à lui la patience.
J’affirme qu’une haute et juste conscience
Met tout en mouvement dans ces grands flots du sort
Dont nous sommes battus quand notre barque sort.
Sans cette probité suprême qui gouverne,
Le monde ne serait qu’une affreuse caverne
D’ombre, de vents, d’écueils, de démence et de bruit,
Et nous devons tâcher d’élever, dans la nuit,
L’âme humaine au niveau de cette âme divine.
Lier ce qu’on démontre avec ce qu’on devine,
Chercher l’aube à travers les mornes épaisseurs,
Telle est la fonction sévère des penseurs.
Au-dessous d’eux les noirs événements se brisent.
Et quant à ce que font, et quant à ce que disent
Tous ceux qui de régner commettent l’attentat,
Rois, empereurs, valets de la raison d’état,

Chefs d’armée ou de peuple, imans, vizirs, ministres,
Princes, tas monstrueux de tout-puissants sinistres,
Considérant les coeurs, les haines, les effrois,
Les faits; chaos farouche et plein d’obscures lois,
Et le flux et reflux formidable où nous sommes,
J’estime que l’effort énorme de ces hommes
Laisse à peu près la trace, en nos destins amers,
Que laisse un cri d’oiseau dans la rumeur des mers.

3 septembre 1872.

XCII PLANÈTES

Dans nos noirs firmaments, cieux des mondes maudits,
Sombre loi, les enfers pèsent aux paradis.
Chacun de ces foyers que l’ombre a dans ses voiles,
Qui de près sont soleils et de loin sont étoiles,
A des fourmillements de globes ténébreux,
Terres, lunes, anneaux, mondes noirs et nombreux,
Mêlés aux longs fils d’or de sa vaste lumière.
Morne expiation d’une faute première!
Tous ces grands chevelus des feux et des rayons,
Les soleils à la face énorme, ces lions
De l’abîme, accroupis au seuil des bleus pilastres,
Dans leur crinière immense ont des vermines d’astres.

XCIII Comme on a hors de soi

Comme on a hors de soi ce prodigieux monde
Tournant autour d’un centre où la lumière abonde,
Et d’où sortent la vie, et l’aurore et la loi,
Et comme en même temps. on porte un centre en soi
Autour duquel le monde intérieur gravite,
Pour peu qu’on réfléchisse et pour peu qu’on médite,
On sent l’identité de l’âme et du soleil.

XCIV Une sorte de vague énorme,

Une sorte de vague énorme, errante et souple,
Nous enveloppe, et tout dans cette onde s'accouple.
C'est, à travers ce flot qu'on entrevoit au loin
L'oeil fixe et lumineux de Pan, sombre témoin.
C'est le chaos, j'y tremble; et c'est l'ordre, j'y pense.
J'y sens du châtiment et de la récompense.
Et je vais le plus droit que je peux devant moi.
Je crois. C'est en amour que se dissout l'effroi.
Dans cet ensemble, vrai quoique visionnaire.
Tout a sa place; un cèdre, un brin d'herbe; un tonnerre
Passe, et n'a pas le droit de faire taire un nid
Qui, comme lui, comprend l'abîme et le bénit.
Nul du concert sacré n'est exclu. On écoute.
La nature au milieu de l'ombre parle toute;
L'effet rend témoignage à la cause; penché
Sur tout ce vaste hymen qu'on nomme à tort péché,
L'homme songe; il entend les êtres et les choses,
Les monstres chevelus, les oiseaux aux becs roses,
Tous, terribles, charmants, pêle-mêle, en tout lieu,
A toute heure, à la fois, chanter ou rugir Dieu.
Un hymne immense sort de cet immense rêve;
L'alouette l'ébauche et le lion l'achève.

18 juin 1870.

XCV Le sépulcre géant d’étoiles se compose

Le sépulcre géant d’étoiles se compose.
Poète, tu l’as dit, la mort n’est autre chose
Qu’un formidable azur d’astres illuminé.
O poète, toi-même as jadis deviné
Que nous, les noirs gardiens des espaces sans borne,
Nous livrions aux morts leur sérénité morne,
Et que, dans le dedans du cercueil, nous faisions
Pendre les lustres d’or des constellations.
Oui, la fosse contient tous les astres du rêve;
Meurs et vois! De la nuit le couvercle se lève.
Sombre éblouissement! Les morts mystérieux
Laissent de sphère en sphère errer leurs vagues yeux,
Et dressent, effarés, leur regard taciturne’
Dans les dômes sans fond du grand palais nocturne;
La mort, c’est l’ouverture effrayante des cieux;
L’immense firmament, tranquille et monstrueux,
Où vibre d’astre en astre un hymne séraphique,
Emplit de ses soleils la tombe magnifique.

XCVI À ce point de la vie

À ce point de la vie où je suis arrivé,
L’insulte offense peu; cette chose qu’on nomme
Le laurier d’un poète ou la gloire d’un homme
Dépend de l’avenir, non des contemporains.
Les louanges, ayant les affronts pour refrains,
Sont trop près d’un tombeau pour y faire grand’çhose.
Et désormais ce bruit, injure, apothéose,
Doit par le penseur calme et grave, être écouté
Dans les lointaines voix de la postérité;
Car l’avenir seul dit le mot superbe ou sombre
Qui détrône une idole ou fait un dieu d’une ombre.

XCVII Ô consul, toi qui peux dire

Ô consul, toi qui peux dire: - J’ai dans l’histoire
Ce hasard, c’est que, j’ai le pouvoir sans la gloire,
Nul destin n’est pareil au mien, et j’ai vécu
Assez pour gouverner Rome, étant un vaincu;
Car ce sont lès vainqueurs qui règnent, d’ordinaire;
Et moi qui dans mes mains fis rater le tonnerre,
Je n’en suis pas moins dieu. - L’on t’admire, consul.
Rome, devant qui tremble Anubis, Irmensul,
Le Jéhovah des juifs, le Jupiter de Grèce,
Le Pont, la Perse, et l’Inde, et l’Afrique tigresse,
Tu la tiens sous tes pieds. Et l’on s’écrie: Honneur!
Nous te faisons cortège, ô consul, chef, seigneur!
Et pour te saluer, quand le Sénat te nomme,
Tous ceux à, qui plaît l’aube éternelle de Rome,
Son passé, son vieux mont par la foudre choisi,
Son histoire, sont là. - C’est vrai, j’y suis aussi;
Et, vieux romain, je dis, pendant que tes esclaves
T’entourent, quelques-uns vêtus de laticlaves,
Quand tu digères, seul sur ton lit de vermeil,
Lourd de toute-puissance et de demi-sommeil
Dans la salle splendide et sonore où tu dînes:
— Notre histoire me plaît, moins les Fourches Caudines.

5 avril 1874

XCVIII Ô destin!

Ô destin!
Toi par qui nous tombons et toi par qui nous sommes!
Grandes fatalités qui brisez les grands hommes!
Évènements qu’on voit dans l’ombre à tout moment
Broyer tout, séparant la paille du froment,
Mus par un vent dû ciel qui jamais ne repose,
Sans relâche occupés à moudre quelque chose,
Machine aux mille essieux, travaillant jour et nuit,
Dont je vois tourner l’aile et dont j’entends le bruit,
Ce hameau ne craint pas vos rouages difformes.
Le grain de mil échappe à vos meules énormes.

XCIX Z

(ÉPÎTRE.)
..
Il s’agit d’une fête à célébrer. C’est bon.
Comment s’y prendre afin d’avoir beaucoup de joie?
On a de l’argent bien; mais il faut qu’on l’emploie.
Vous avez une idée excellente: - Parbleu,
Illuminons la ville. Ayons tout au milieu
Un gros feu d’artifice avec des ifs superbes,
Des serpenteaux faisant de grands zigzags, des gerbes.
Comme ce sera beau! le ciel sera très noir. -
Vous ne songez qu’au feu que vous allez avoir;
L’eau se fâche, et voilà qu’il pleut sur vos fusées;
Vos lampions fumants empestent vos croisées.
Vos gerbes sous l’averse ont l’air de lumignons.
C’est fort beau tout de même en dépit des grognons
Qui bougonnent: « J’ai froid. C’est manqué. Ça m’assomme” .
Une autre bonne idée est de donner la somme
Entière, avec l’espoir que Dieu dira merci,
Aux pauvres; et notez cet avantage-ci,
C’est que le mauvais temps ne gâte point la fête.
Pour que l’humanité soit complète et divine,
C’est peu qu’elle triomphe, il faut qu’elle ait raison;
Heureux celui qui plaint les vaincus! il devine
Ce que pense quelqu’un derrière l’horizon.
Les vaincus d’on ne sait quelle guerre inconnue
Ce sont les animaux; vénérons leur malheur;
La victoire par trop d’orgueil se diminue,
Et l’on n’est le plus fort qu’en étant le meilleur.

D’ailleurs connaissons-nous les horizons de l’ombre?
Et nous, qui sommes-nous? Nos ports sont nos écueils.
Songeons au ciel; tâchons que cette aurore sombre
Si noire en nos berceaux, soit blanche en nos cercueils.

CI À UN HOMME PARTANT POUR LA CHASSE

Oui, l’homme est responsable et rendra compte un jour.
Sur cette terre où l’ombre et l’aurore ont leur tour,
Sois l’intendant de Dieu, mais l’intendant honnête.
Tremble de tout abus de pouvoir sur la bête.
Te figures-tu donc être un tel but final
Que tu puisses sans peur devenir infernal,
Vorace, sensuel, voluptueux, féroce,
Échiner le baudet, exténuer la rosse,
En lui crevant les yeux engraisser l’ortolan,
Et massacrer les bois trois ou quatre fois l’an?
Ce gai chasseur, armant son fusil ou son piège,
Confine à’ l’assassin et touche au sacrilège.
Penser, voilà ton but; vivre, voilà ton droit.
Tuer pour jouir, non. Crois-tu donc que ce soit
Pour -donner meilleur goût à la caille rôtie
Que le soleil ajoute une aigrette à l’ortie,
Peint la mûre, ou rougit la graine du sorbier?

Dieu qui fait les oiseaux ne fait pas le gibier.

CII Je te dis qu’il travaille

Je te dis qu’il travaille et travaille toujours,
Et que, rien qu’en vidant son verre dès l’aurore,
Et. qu’en le remplissant pour le vider. encore,
En riant, en chantant, en narguant tout devoir,
En se laissant rouler sous la table le soir,
Aidé sans le savoir par le dèstin qu’il raille,
Il construit, sans marteau, sans clous et sans tenaille,
Par un travail certain, infaillible et fatal,
Le brancard qui le doit porter à l’hôpital!

CIII Le sort s’est acharné sur cette créature

Le sort s’est acharné sur cette créature.
C’était peu Aue cet être eût la prunelle obscure,
L’oeil éteint, le front bas, le cri rauque, et des noeuds
D’opprobre et de misère à ses genoux cagneux;
Qu’il fût difforme, abject, vil; il fallait encore
Que, battu, fouetté, maigre, et marchant dès l’aurore
Sous un fardeau trop lourd pour sa force, il courbât
Son échine sàignante aux boucles de son bât.
Et cependant l’ortie, à ses pieds, sur la routé,
Liée au sol tandis qu’il va, vient, passe et broute,
Muette, ne pouvant fuir ni changer de lieu,
Tremblante sous la dent de l’âne, le croit dieu.
Et plus bas, car la brume a la nuit pour voisine,
Seul dans la terre aveugle et noire, sans racine,
Sans germe, sans lien avec quoi que ce soit,
Le caillou, sourd, stérile, informe, .inerte, froid,
Sent au-dessus de lui la plante frémir, vivre,
Fleurir dans la clarté dont l’infini s’enivre,
Et croître, et s’abreuver au souffle universel,
Et, dur, triste, envieux, dit: L’ortie est au ciel!

Descends; tu trouveras des jaloux de la pierre.
Les zones sont sans fin dans cette fondrière!
Monte; monte aussi haut que peut s’élever l’oeil;
Où l’azur t’apparaît, tu trouveras le deuil.

Vois: ce génie ayant pour épouse la grâce,
Cet être à qui la femme en souriant s’enlace,
Cet élu de la force et de la majesté,
Par l’aigle et le lion à peine contesté,
Ce front craint des serpents qui rampent sur leurs ventres,
Cet éblouissement des bêtes dans les antres,
Ce souverain de l’eau, de la terre et du feu,
Grand,-fier, obéissant pourtant à son milieu,

Pris par la pesanteur, loi de sa sphère, et chaîne
De son globe qui passe avec un bruit de haine,
L’homme, avec ses besoins de la chair et des sens,
Avec ses appétits du fumier renaissants,
De la honte secrète incurable piqûre,
Rappel perpétuel à la bassesse obscure,
Avec son sang fatal, âcre et noir, dont ses moeurs,
Ses croyances, ses dieux, ses lois sont les tumeurs,
Avec le doute affreux que son regard reflète,
Et ses fièvres, ses maux, ses pleurs, et son squelette,
Spectre qui vaguement se dessine à son flanc,
Et son vil alambic d’entrailles, distillant
Le cloaque, et, hideux, souillant même la fange,
L’homme, roi pour la brute, est un forçat pour l’ange.

De là toutes vos soifs d’idéal et de beau,
Et l’aspiration des jtistes au tombeau.
Et l’ange, ce gardien des races planétaires,
Lumineux visiteur de lunes et de terres;
Comme vous d’une terre,’ habitant d’un soleil,
Ayant pour vol l’éclair de son rayon vermeil,
Pour domaine l’azur qu’il échauffe, et pour borne
Le point où ce rayon s’éteint dans l’éther morne,
L’ange, errant dans vos cieux comme dans une mer,
Est lui-même la nuit, l’inférieur, l’enfer,
Pour l’immense archange ivre et ruisselant d’aurore,
Espèce d’aigle monde et d’oiseau météore!

CIV Au point du jour,

Au point du jour, souvent en sursaut, je me lève,
Eveillé par l’aurore,. ou par la fin d’un rêve,
Ou par un. doux oiseau qui chanté, ou par le vent.
Et vite je me mets au travail, même avant
Les pauvres ouvriers qui près de moi demeurent.
La nuit s’en va. Parmi les étoiles qui meurent
Souvent ma rêverie errante fait un choix.
Je travaille debout, regardant à la fois
Eclore en moi l’idée et là-haut l’aube naître.
Je pose l’écritoire au bord de la fenêtre
Que voile et qu’assombrit, comme un antre de loups,
Une ample vigne vierge accrochée à cent clous,
Et j’écris au milieu des branches entr’ouvertes,
Essuyant par instants ma plume aux feuilles vertes.

CV Les quatre enfants joyeux

Les quatre enfants joyeux me tirent par la manche,
Dérangent mes papiers, font rage, c’est dimanche;
Ils s’inquiètent peu si je travaille ou non;
Ils vont criant, sautant, m’appelant par mon nom;
Ils m’ont caché ma plume et je ne puis écrire;
Et bruyamment, avec de grands éclats de rire,
Se dressant pàr-dessus le dos du canapé,
Chacun vient à son tour m’apparaître, drapé
Dans un burnous arabe aux bandes éclatantes;
Et je songe à l’Afrique, aux hommes sous les tentes,
A la Mecque, au désert formidable et vermeil;
On part avant le jour, de crainte du soleil;
La file des piétons et des chameaux s’allonge,
Passe confusément, chemine, et semble un songe;
La nuée au vent flotte ainsi qu’une toison;
Et les vagues de sable, emplissant l’horizon,
Les ravins où jadis rêvait le patriarche,
Font dans l’ombre onduler la caravane en marche.

30 novembre 1862.

CVI Je racontais un conte

.
Je racontais un conte
À quatre ou cinq marmots, auditoire choisi,
Et j’en étais, je crois, à l’endroit que voici:
«... Dans un instant où Dieu tournait le dos, le diable
« Se glissa, sans rien dire et d’un air amiable,
« Ce qu’il fait très souvent, derrière le bon Dieu;
« Il coupa dans le ciel un morceau de drap bleu,
« Et, polir cacher le trou, mit dessus un nuage...”
Jeanne m’interrompit. - Allons, Jeanne, sois sage,
Dit George, intéressé par le diable et par Dieu,
Nous écoutons, tais-toi. - Jeanne s’en troubla peu.
— Je croyais que le ciel; dit-elle, était en soie.

CVII Je suis comme dans un cloître

Je suis comme dans un cloître;
On dit de moi: « D’où vient-il?”
Je sens à chaque heure croître
Le froid profond de l’exil;
Je ne vois plus ma patrie;
Toute ma joie est flétrie;
J’ai blanchi, vieil affligé;
La tombe, amis, me réclame;
Comme il gelait dans mon âme,
Sur ma tête il a neigé.

CVIII MON PETIT-FILS

Oui, ce petit, c’est l’aube, et moi je suis le soir.
Il naît. Que va-t-il voir? Je meurs. Que vais-je voir?
Tous deux nous ignorons. Son jour vient, ma nuit tombe.
Il essaie à tâtons le berceau, moi la tombe.

CIX Ce qui rend la vieillesse auguste

..
Ce qui rend la vieillesse auguste et vénérable,
Ce n’est point la lenteur des pas froids et pesants,
La blancheur des cheveux ni le nombre des ans,
Non, c’est la bienveillance et l’absence de haine,
C’est la douceur qui fait vers la vertu sereine
Monter de toutes parts les bénédictions,
C’est cette majesté des bonnes actions
Qui dans l’oeil du vieillard met une pure flamme,
Et que la longue vie ajoute à la grande âme!

CX 25 L’oeuvre humaine

L’oeuvre humaine est l’écho de la chose divine.
Astre ou pensée, on sent errer le même mot
Du- chef-d’oeuvre d’en bas au chef-d’oeuvre d’en haut.
Shakspeare, Dante, Job, Eschyle, vos génies
Sont eux-mêmes, devant l’azur, des harmonies;
Ils contemplent le inonde et l’ombre et le ciel bleu
Et l’être; et ce qu’ils font est leur réponse à Dieu.
Ils prennent l’idéal dans leurs vastes poursuites.
Vois. Dieu fait l’Océan; l’homme fait Hamlet. Quittes.

CXI La porte

La porte
Céda. Je tâtonnai du bout de mon bâton;
J’entrai; tout était noir; à peine pouvait-on
Distinguer, à travers les ombres étouffantes,
Le jour qui des volets rayait les blêmes fentes.
Tout sembla s’éveiller quand la porte bâilla.
Nul’ depuis soixante ans n’avait pénétré là.
Les meubles de santal, de citronnier, d’érable,
Dormaient sous la poussière épaisse et vénérable;
Les miroirs détamés semblaient sur les dressoirs
Des morceaux de ciels blancs tout piqués de trous noirs,
Et me multipliaient en faces fantastiques
A travers des essaims d’immobiles moustiques;
Au tremblement d’un pas dans cette ombre perdu,
Le lustre, avec un bruit de squelette pendu,
Au-dessus de ma tête entre-choquait ses prismes;
Les vieux gonds de la porte avaient des rhumatismes,
Les lampas décloués, aux angles du plafond,
S’éploraient et flottaient tels que les vers les font;
Les murs étaient tendus de toiles d’araignées;
Les portraits noirs avaient des mines indignées;
Tous ces objets tremblaient dans un vague rayon,
Et prenaient par degrés un air de vision
Comme si l’on eût vu bouger et parler presque
Des personnages peints sur quelque sombre fresque;
Une espèce de vieux, en habit d’Apollon,
Trônait, encadré d’or, au milieu du salon;
C’était Louis, portant l’auréole qu’agrafe
Au front de tout césar tout historiographe,
Peint à l’âge, où prenant l’ennui pour compagnon,
Le grand roi, devenu Monsieur de Maintenon
Gagnant de la perruque et perdant du panache,
Étant encor soleil, était déjà ganache.

Toute la salle avait gardé ce dernier pli,
Lugubre et froid, que fait en s’en allant l’oubli;
La cheminée était comme un tas de décombres;
On ne sait quelle horreur sortait des fauteuils sombres
Où des spectres semblaient avoir passé la nuit.
Au fond de ce silence on entendait un bruit
Faible comme le pas des larves sur les cendres:
Des médaillons de dieux, d’Hercliles, d’Alexandres,
Luisaient parmi des sphinx étrangement groupés;
Sculptée au dossier d’or des. larges canapés, ,
Cléopâtre montrait dans leur rondeur princière
Deux seins que modelait vaguement la poussière;
Et sur la devanture informe des bàhuts
Tityrus devisait avec Meliboéus.

J’eus peur, et je sentis comme une sombre lutte;
Car ces vieilles splendeurs étonnent dans leur chute,
Les figures de l’ombre ont de sinistres yeux,
La ruine est terrible, et les mornes aïeux
Semblent jeter des cris avec leurs pâles bouches
Dans le délabrement de leurs luxes farouches.

CXII NOS AMUSEMENTS

NOS AMUSEMENTS AVEC LAMARTINE, SOUMET, VIGNY, LES DEUX DESCHAMPS, SAINTE-BEUVE ET NODIER, VERS 1827

Amis; j’ai vu des morts le festin mémorable,
Ils parlaient à grand bruit, ils mangeaient du lapin;
Leur appétit s’aiguise en leur lit de sapin,
Leur dent s’attaque à tout, aùx cuises, même au râble.
Mais ils parlaient! c’était un bruit, dans le quartier!
Hélas, l’homme qui fait ce malheureux métier
De fantôme vivant parle peu, mais; mort; hâble.

CXIII J’aime ces grands esprits,

J’aime ces grands esprits, j’aime ces grandes oeuvres,
J’aime Jean La Fontaine ami de Jean Lapin,
Corneille sans souliers fils d’Homère sans pain,
Et tous ceux qu’on oublie, et même ceux qu’on loue,
Retz, Pascal, Sévigné, Saint-Simon, Bourdaloue.
Toi surtout, le rieur qui saigne, Poquelin!

J’aime de ces beaux noms ce beau Versailles plein,
Mais, j’en conviens, le sang ruisselant aux Cévennes,
La femme au ventre nu dont on ouvre les veines,
Les dragons rôtissant l’enfant à petit feu,
La roue et le gibet, me gâtent quelque peu
Ce grand siècle qui met l’épaisseur d’une prude
Entre toute splendeur et toute turpitude,
Et, sur la Maintenon mêlant Dave et Néron,
Courbe Louis quatorze à l’auge de Scarron.

CXIV Attention. Voici Louis quatorze

Attention. Voici Louis quatorze. Gare
Le grand siècle! j'en parle, ami, comme je peux.
O Boileau Despréaux, satirique pompeux!
Régnier, affreux vaurien, plus tendre que Racine,
Tenant sous ses deux bras Goton et Mnémosyne,
Menait au cabaret la poésie en rut.
Enfin Despréaux vint, enfin Boileau parut,
Lequel à coups de fouet chassa cette drôlesse.
Louis fait l'amour, fait la guerre, se confesse
Et meurt. Roi, qu'il est grand! Homme, qu'il est petit!
Beaux jours! l'espèce humaine en masse s'engloutit
Sous l'immense toison qui lui couvre la nuque.
La périphrase alors naquit de la perruque.
La crinière aux longs flots pénétra dans les moeurs.
D'horribles faux cheveux hérissaient les rimeurs,
Et de tous ces cerveaux la pensée immortelle
Sortait en emportant la perruque avec elle.
De là tous ces grands vers qui n'ont plus rien d'humain
Et vont frisure en tête et la canne à la main.

CXV RACONTÉ EN RÊVE PAR LORD BYRON (PEUT-ÊTRE)

Nous étions, John Beauclerck et moi, deux jeunes lords.
L’église de Harrow, vieux bric: à-brac d’alors,
Avait sous son portail un Jupiter de pierre
Où les chrétiens faisaient volontiers leur prière.
Un jour que nous quittions la classe pour le jeu,
John donne un coup de carine à l’idole, et me crie,
A moi qui m’indignais, plein de respect du lieu:
— Je ne sais. Je suis pair. Et c’est par seigneurie.
— Oh! dis-je. Et pair aussi, je crachai sur le dieu.

Nuit du 5 au 6 novembre 1862.

CXVI Hé, prends ton microscope,

Hé, prends ton microscope, imbécile! et frémis.

Tout est le même abîme avec les mêmes ondes.
L’infiniment petit contient les mêmes mondes
Que l’infiniment grand. Qué vas-tu’contempler
Le ciel noir quand il plaît aux nuits de l’étoiler,
Le groupe constellé, le globe, la planète,
Orion; Sirius que ,grossit ta lunette;
L’anneàu de celui-là, les lunes de ceux-ci?
La fourmi sous sa patte a des sphères aussi;
L’intervalle que font les ailes d’une mouche
Contient tout un azur où se lève et se couche
Un soleil invisible, éblouissant au loin
De profonds univers qui n’ont pas de témoin:
Montez ou descendez; tout s’ouvre sans rien clore;
On trouve au fond d’un puits un autre puits encore;
La limite n’est pas dans la nature; elle est
Dans l’instrument grossier, dans l’organe incomplet;
Votre prunelle est moins un moyen qu’un obstacle;
Tu n’as qu’à grandir l’oeil pour grandir le spectacle;
Le petit, c’est l’immense. En ta main, ô passant.
Prends la mer bleue ainsi ‘qu’un vèrre grossissant,
Et, courbé sur là vie, abîme dont la lampe
Est un soleil qui brille ou bien tin ver qui rampe,
A travers l’océan regarde un puceron;
Tu pâliras ainsi qu’Amos, Élie, Aaron,
Devant les visions de l’incompréhensible,
Et tu ne sauras pas si cet être impossible,
Formidable, aperçu par toi confusément,
N’est pas le chaos même, horrible, en mouvement
Dans l’éther qu’il obstrue avec sa forme immonde,
Et si tu vois un monstre ou si tu vois un monde!

Oui, l’aube le matin emplit ton corridor

Des constellations de la poussière d’or;
La toile d’araignée en ses mailles nocturnes
A des. gouffres où vont et viennent des Saturnes;
Une création passe entre chaque fil;
Tout homme, le dernier, le moindre, le plus vil,
L’esclave, le forçat de Brest, le juif qui rogne
Un liard, le voleur de grand chemin, l’ivrogne,
Le grec qui triche au jeu dans un bouge aux eaux d’Aix,
Broie un astre en fermant son pouce et son index.

Il ne faut pas que l’âme humaine s’assoupisse
Au bord de l’atome, ombre, abîme, précipice;
Homme, il n’est pas d’esprit qui, s’il se penche un peu
En bas, sur le petit, l’autre côté de Dieu,
Ne frissonne devant l’élargissement sombre
Du néant, du caché, de l’espace, du nombre!
II suffit que, demain, un ouvrier savant,
Inventant un cristal plus clair et plus vivant,
Pose sur l’inconnu des lentilles puissantes,
Pour que, si ton regard s’en approche, tu sentes
Le vertige du trou d’une aiguille, et la peur
De tomber dans ton souffle, effrayante vapeur!
Le point n’a pas de fond. Homme, l’inaccessible
Est dans le grain de sable, à jamais divisible;
L’imperceptible est fait de la même grandeur
Que les cieux qui n’ont pas encore eu de sondeur.
Un pou dè l’infini contient en lui la somme;
Tu serais Dieu le jour où tu pourrais, toi l’homme,
Voir le commencement et la fin d’un ciron.
Pendant qu’un maringouin sonne de son clairon,
Homme, des millions de mondes peuvent naître
Et mourir; à l’instant où je parle peut-être,
Des peuples ignorés, vague fourmillement
Qu’un infusoire couvre ainsi qu’un firmament,
Regardent s’étoiler le ventre d’un volvoce;
Sourds, obscurs, adorant quelque idole féroce,
Noirs, enfouis dans l’être, ensevelis dessous,

Invisibles, perdus.; et peut-être est-ce vous!

CXVII Insondable, immuable,

.
Insondable, immuable, éternel, absolu;
Face de vision; être qui toujours crée;
Centre; rayonnement d’épouvante sacrée;
Toute-puissance ayant des devoirs let des lois;
Présence sans figure et sans borne et sans voix;
Seul, pour prunelle ayant l’immensité sereine;
Regardant du même oeil ce qu’un puceron traîne,
Ce que dévore un ver, ce qu’un-ciron construit;
Et le fourmillement des soleils dans la nuit;
Volonté, d’où le monde en jets vivants s’élance,
Qui pour matériaux a la nuit, le silence,
Le vide, le néant, rien; et pour canevas
L’infini reflétant de vagues Jéhovàhs
Pensée aboutissant, lumineuse, aux prodiges`;
Moi gouffre où tous les moi tombent; pris de vertiges;
Essence inexprimable en qui tout se confond;
Tourbillonnement d’ombre et de lueur au fond
D’on ne sait quoi de grand, de splendide et de sombre;
Espèce de forêt de facultés sans nombre;
IL est là, formidable, unique, illimité,
Stupéfiant les cieux de son énormité;
Et, sous le porche immense et brumeux de l’abîme,
Au’ degré le -plus noir du chaos, sur la cime,
Tous les êtres créés, en haut, en bas, partout,
Astres, globes, édens, enfers dont lé flot bout,
Les rochers, les volcans, les monts, les mers houleuses,
Les âmes, les esprits, les foules nébuleuses,
La bête dans les bois, l’ange dans l’éther bleu,
Se courbent effarés devant l’horreur de Dieu.

CXVIII Dans les leçons qu’il donne aux esprits

.
Dans les leçons qu’il donne aux esprits comme aux yeux
L’abîme, dont la tombe est la blême fenêtre,
N’est pas exact, précis et clàir; quoique peut-être
Il en sache aussi long qu’Ulysse -Aldrovandus
Par qui veut écouter les cieux, sont entendus;
Mais croire qu’ils vont tout dévoiler, c’est un rêve.
Jé n’imagine pas que le mystère lève .
Son capuchon sinistre au fond de l’infini
Comme un religieux du Corpus domini;
Je doute que l’Etna, sous sa crête- fumante,
Prêche, expose, débatte, examine, argumente
Je doute que la mer où planent les autans;’ .’
Mêle sous son écume à ses bleus habitants,
Et roulé, et dans- le tas de ses hydres confonde
Une théologie errânt dans l’eau profonde;
Sans doute l’Océan, miroir du firmament,
Est un grand syllogisme, âpre, amer, écumant;
Chaque fois qu’il endort son flot glauque, il apaise
De l’analyse en lutte avec de la synthèse,
Mais son Verbe n’est pas le jargon d’un pédant.
Son gouffre, de clarté farouche débordant,
Jette de la logique à sa grève déserte,
Mais sans finir par donc ni commencer par certe.
L’ombre est un grand amour, l’abîme est un grand lit;
L’Etre emplit l’étendue et l’emplit et l’emplit;
Sans qu’on sache comment, les globes se soutiennent;
Au même point des cieux les planètes reviennent,
Les mondes, monstrueux et beaux, uns et divers,
Tous les objets créés, bêtes, monts, rameaux verts,
L’homme par la pensée et la fleur par la tige
Entrent dans le miracle et sortent du prodige.;
L’air frémit, l’arbre croît, l’oiseau chante, l’eau fuit,
Et des lumières vont jusqu’au fond de la nuit;

L’illusion serait étrange, que t’en semble,
De voir. dans le splendide et redoutable ensemble,
Dans le flot de la vie et dans le noir torrent
Un docteur de Sorbonne énorme pérorant.

CXIX RÉPONSE À L’OBJECTION: MAL

...
— Ah! puisque c’est ainsi, je ne veux pas de Dieu!
Je ne veux pas de Dieu! - Voilà ton cri morose.
Ayant trouvé le mal au bout de toute chose,
Ayant, trouvé le fond amer, -l’homme manqué
Par l’incompréhensible et fatal ananké,
Tu dis: - Je hais le dieu, si c’est cela le monde!
Pour juger l’ouvrier, sur son oeuvre on se fonde;
Or l’ouvrage est mauvais, donc l’auteur est méchant,
Et je hais ce Dieu! - Puis, un remords te touchant,
Tu dis: - Mais j’ai peut-être erré; l’ombre est profonde;
Peut-être n’est-ce pas dans Dieu que va ma sonde;
Peut-être, ô vain chercheur, Dieu m’a-t-il échappé;
Si je m’étais trompé?

Tu ne t’es pas trompé.
Ta sonde est bien tombée à l’abîme suprême;
Oui, tu viens de jeter ton esprit dans-Dieu même;
Oui, c’est ce précipice énorme de rayons,
C’est Dieu.

Jette une éponge à l’Océan, voyons;
Reprends-la. Qu’as-tu? Rien. Un verre d’eau salée.
Quant à la mer, profonde et terrible mêlée,
Quant à l’immensité des écumes, des bruits,:
Des flots, incessamment détruits et reconstruits,
Quant au chaos dés chocs, des trombes,. des tempêtes,
Dont l’ouragan hagard sonne les sombres fêtes,
Plein de’ monstres sans nom qui rôdent engloutis,
Cachant des oasis et des O-Taïtis
Où des idylles vont et viennent toutes nues;
Quant à cette tourmente insondable de nues,
D’ondes, d’écueils, d’azur flottant, d’azur qui luit;
Quant à ce gouffre où naît le matin, où la nuit

Trempe sa robe d’ombre et son manteau d’étoiles;
Quant à ce rendez-vous des- souffles et des voiles;
Quant à cet infini, noir, fauve, éblouissant,
Crois-tu que tu le tiens dans ta main? A présent
S’il te plaît de porter à ta bouche ce verre,
S’il te plaît de tremper ta lèvre à l’eau sévère,
Et si ton estomac frémit en la buvant,
Si ton viscère abject-se soulève, trouvant
Une saveur amère à la chose sublime,
Est-ce que tu diras qu’ayant goûté l’abîme;’
Tu viens, toi qui ne vis que si bas et si peu,
De revomir la mer et de recracher Dieu?

CXX Est-ce que par hasard le monde,

Est-ce que par hasard le monde, sous nos yeux,
Se défait, se déjette, et périt? d’aventure,
Est-ce que nous voyons se rider la nature,
Et disparaître, au fond de l’ombre, en proie aux vers,
Sous une moisissure énorme, l’univers?
Le zodiaque est-il branlant dans sa charpente
Au point que les saisons s’écroulent sur sa pente?
L’été meurt-il de froid? l’hiver meurt-il de chaud?
L’astre se couvre-t-il de poussière là-haut?
Siriùs: s’éteint-il, faute d’huile? Persée
Est-il tombé, sa chaîne étant vieille et cassée?
Aperçoit-on, parmi les gouffres inconnus,
Des toiles d’araignée entre Mars et Vénus?
Le grand ciel s’en va-t-il par plaques? l’empyrée
A-t-il à l’orient sa teinte dédorée?
Le zénith n’est-il plus qu’un faux plafond mal joint?
L’aurore noircit-elle? en est-on à ce point
Que l’azur se détache et tombe de vieillesse?
Est-ce parce qu’il voit les vents qu’il tient en laisse,
Phtisiques et poussifs, s’arrêter haletants,
Et la rose manquer son entrée au printemps,
Et tout se disloquer au ciel et dans l’abîme,
Que l’Auteur continue à garder l’anonyme?

CXXI Crois-tu que de ceci mon rêve se repaisse

Que je sois satisfait, que je sois une espèce
De bienheureux, louant à toute heure, en tout lieu;
Que j'aie entre les dents un dithyrambe à Dieu;
Que je trouve tout grand, complet, parfait, sublime;
Que je dise: il ne manque à rien un coup de lime!
Tout est beau! que je sois un faiseur d'embarras,
Que je crie à la nuit: fais ce que tu voudras!
Que j'aille acceptant tout, et que je contresigne
Aveuglément le lys, le paon, l'aigle, le cygne,
Homme? et que je constate, en me pâmant, le pré,
La source, la forêt, le buisson diapré,
L'aube sur un vieux mur dorant les giroflées,
L'ouragan noir chassant les vagues essoufflées?
Non, non, ce n'est pas moi qui, tout joyeux devant
Le problème muet, sourd, obscur, décevant,
M'obstine à voir dans tout des marques d'alliance.
Homme, ce n'est pas moi qui vis de confiance,
Ce n'est pas moi qui vais béant aux paradis
Quand l'âpre énigme est là. Ce n'est pas moi qui dis:
L'univers n'est pas clair; non, mais il est splendide.
Ce n'est pas moi qui suis l'adorateur candide,'
Qui félicite l'être effrayant d'être noir,'
Qui fais le sphynx camus avec mon encensoir!
Qu'a-t-elle donc de beau cette création,
Et de pur, de charmant, d'heureux, pour qu'on l'admire?
Quoi donc! devant Adam faut-il brûler la myrrhe,
Louer ses passions, ses vices, sa laideur,
Ses vils instincts qui, font décroître la pudeur
Dans la femme, et qui font croître en l'homme la honte?
Et si je plonge au bas du gouffre, ou si je monte
Dans ce faux éiel béat bâillant plus qu'il ne rit,
Que veux-tu que je pense, homme, quand mon esprit,
Comparant le démon rampant que l'enfer noie,
Et l'ange coassant dans son marais de joie,

Va de ce saurien à ce batracien?

CXXII La souffrance, géante et spectre

La souffrance, géante et spectre, sur le monde
Se dresse; un long cri sort de sa bouche profonde
Et remplit l'infini mystérieux et sourd.
Et la femme aux bras blancs, le vieillard au pas lourd,
Partout, sous tous les cieux et sous tous les tropiques,
Londres, Rome, Paris, ces cavernes épiques,
Le laboureur courbé, forçat des verts sillons,:
L'éclatant capitaine au front des bataillons,
Et les rois.sur leur trône et le pauvre en son bouge,
Les branches de la ronce où la vipère bouge,
Ceux qui disent: priez, ceux qui disent: aimons,
L'algue au fond de la mer et l'arbre au haut des monts,
L'eau roulant le caillou, la faux coupant la gerbe,
Le tigre se traînant sur le ventre dans l'herbe,
Le doux oiseau tordant la mousse, de son nid, -
Le navire et l'écueil, le jonc et le granit,
Le martyr, le bourreau, le conquérant, l'apôtre, .
Ne font que répéter d'un bout du monde à l'autre,
Même l'enfant qui rit, même la vierge en fleur, -
Les gestes désolés de l'immense douleur.

13 juillet 1854.

.
Même avant le cercueil, la matière vous quitte;
Votre âme sur la terre est bien longtemps en deuil
De vos jeunes amours, de votre jeune orgueil;
Après les bals, les jeux, les cris, et les orgies
Du vil plaisir jusqu'à soixante ans élargies,
Et la danse brutale et stupide des sens,
Votre argile agonise au souffle froid des ans;
La chair est une bête infirme, horrible, morte;
Le vieillard est un spectre; - où l'âme vit? - Qu'importe!
Les cheveux noirs sont morts et les dents ne sont plus,

L’appétit est gisant dans l’estomac perclus,
Les roses de la joue ont passé, le front ploie,
Rien n’est resté vivant de ce corps plein de joie
Qui faisait fête au monde et sonnait du clairon.
Songeur, qu’est-ce que l’âme? Une veuve Scarron.
L’hymen royal l’attend dans le mystère sombre.
Son trône est le tombeau. Sa grandeur est de l’ombre.

CXXIV MÉLANCOLIE

Le père est mort hier, l’enfant joue aujourd’hui.
L’ombre peut-être est là, pleine d’un sombre ennui.
L’enfance est froide, hélas! Son oeil bleu qui nous charme
Nous glace. O deuil! le temps d’essuyer une larme,
Le chagrin de l’enfant s’en va, vide et subtil.
Hier! Qu’est-ce qu’hier? Un mort! où donc est-il?
Pourquoi n’y sont-ils plus, ceux qu’on voyait? les choses
Disparaissent la nuit. Vois donc les belles roses!
L’enfant rit. Sa pensée est une mouche. Il rit.
Nul souvenir ne reste en ce rapide esprit,
Nul reflet dans cette eau dont vacille la moire;
Chaque souffle qui passe emporte sa mémoire.
Qu’est-il? rose lui-même en attendant qu’il soit
Quelqu’un de grandissant que le sort aperçoit.
Voyez-le dans l’aurore avec les autres plantes
Comme lui faites d’ombre et comme lui tremblantes,
Il n’est rien qu’un parfum comme elles; frais, vermeil;
La pénétration charmante du soleil
Le dore, et fait qu’on voit au fond d’une auréole
Sa petite âme ouverte ainsi qu’une corolle;
De pleurs et de rayons l’aube vient le baigner,
Et c’est la seule fleur qui doive un jour saigner.

19 Xbre 1853.

CXXV Le juste

Le juste de ses fers subit l’indigne poids;
Il souffre, il saigne, il va, tout l’accable à la fois;
Le jour est dur, la nuit est pire;
Mais, dans ce noir sentier du ‘deuil et de l’affront,
Calme, il voit resplendir au-dessus de son front
La libre mort au doux sourire.

Les pervers sont joyeux; faux prêtres, rois méchants,
Ils ont- tous les bonheurs, la pourpre et l’or, lés chants,
Les fruits vermeils, les belles femmes;
Ils marchent, fiers, puissants, poussant dans le chemin
A coups de pique, à coups dé fouet, le genre humain,
Noirs bouchers’ du troupeau des âmes;

Mais, comme dernier terme au voyage qu’ils font,
S’enfonçant pas à pas dans le crime profond,
Faisant mentir Korans et Bibles,
Ils peuvent voir, au fond de l’ombre où tout s’enfuit,
Un sépulcre sur qui se croisent dans la nuit
On ne sait quels barreaux terribles.

CXXVI Quand Jean-Jacques vivait

Quand Jean-Jacques vivait, l’homme à qui dans les âges
Jamais le genre humain ne paîrâ ce qu’il doit,
Les passants le huaient et le montraient du doigt.
Ce penseur, coeur saignant, front triste, âme’meurtrie,
Se cachait, fugitif dans sa propre patrie;
Et les petits enfants, hélas! qu’il aimait tant,
Le poursuivaient, à coups de pierres, lui, jetant
A la tête en détail sa future statue.

CXXVII Oh! je t’emporterai

Oh! je t’emporterai si haut dans les nuées,
Vipèré, que. la bourbe où la nuit t’engendra,
La plaine et le marais, les cris et les huées,
Les voix, les pas, le bruit, tout s’évanouira!

Je briserai tes dents dans ta bouche, ô vipère!
En vain tu te tordras, reptile épouvanté,
En vain tu te tordras, cherchant des yeux la terre,
Tu ne verras plus rien qu’une immense clarté!

Rien que le ciel profond, éternel, immobile,
Que les êtres créés sentent au-dessus d’eux
Et qui dans sa splendeur implacable et tranquille
Pèse de toutes parts sur les monstres hideux!
Et ce ne sera pas, pour l’oiseau dans la nue,
Un médiocre effroi de voir cet être impur,
Cette chose difforme au soleil inconnue,
Qui, faite pour la fange, expire dans l’azur!
Si ceux qui t’admiraient - car, vipère, on t’admire, -
Te cherchent au cloaque où tu crois t’abriter,
Il sortira de l’ombre une voix pour leur dire:
Un aigle a passé là qui vient de l’emporter.

23 mai 1850.

CXXVIII Oui, le tonnerre éclaire

..
Oui, le tonnerre éclaire et gronde sous mon front,
J’ai sous mon crâne obscur le gouffre et la tempête,
Et l’indignation du flot que rien n’arrête;
J’ai dans mon coeur le roc et toute sa fierté;
Et je jette dans l’air un cri de liberté,
J’insulte le brouillard des préjugés sans nombre,
Je souffle un tourbillon de vérité sur l’ombre,
Je lâche au vent mon. âme, et certes, j’ai ce droit,
Puisque l’oiseau de mer vient voler sur mon toit.

CXXIX Quand ce banni,

Quand ce banni, jadis perdu dans les brouillards
Et dans les flots, parut parmi ces durs vieillards,
Ils frémirent, ainsi que l’herbe au pied de l’arbre.
Son souffle fut terrible et les fit tous de marbre.
Il les pétrifia rien qu’en passant sur eux:
Ces hommes qu’emplissaient le passé ténébreux,
Et dont plusieurs, étaient courbés sous de vieux crimes,
Gardèrent l’attitude obscure des abîmes,
Et pâles, se sentant saisis par ce regard,
N’osèrent même plus lever leur front hagard.
Leur immobilité faite de violence
Se taisait. Et, tragique, accablant leur silence
Du sombre et formidable orage de sa. voix,
Il semblait, au milieu de ces faiseurs de lois
Plus aveugles encore, hélas! que sanguinaires,
Une apparition secouant des tonnerres.
Tel surgirait, dans l’Ombre où, sans geste et sans bruit,
Les larves du néant, les formes de la nuit
Sont assises, de brume et de rêve vêtues,
Un spectre qui viendrait parler à des statues.

23 mai 1876.

CXXX La terre est à l’erreur

...
La terre est à l’erreur, au vertige, à l’absurde.
O démence éternelle! ô noir diapason,
Hommes, de la folie avec votre raison!
En Perse, le muezzin, toujours; c’est la loi sainte,
Est un vieillard pour qui la lumière est éteinte.
Et ce veilleur sans yeux est debout sur sa tour;
Et que fait cet aveugle? il annonce le jour.

CXXXI Oh! vers le progrès magnifique

Oh! vers le progrès magnifique
Guidez les générations!
Malheur à l’âme qui trafique
De son soufflé ét de ses’ rayons!
Que le supplice vous attire!
Précipitez-vous au martyre!
De peur qu’il ne voie, dans les harems.
Penseurs! pour vaincre il faut souffrir.
L’homme, qui ne peut rien connaître,
Marche de cette énigme: naître,
Jusqu’à cet abîme: mourir.

Sur son berceau naît son étoile.
Comme il ouvrait l’oeil, elle a lui.
Comme Isis sous le triple voile.
La conscience habite en lui.
Elle l’éclaire quand il doute;
Elle lui, montre sur sa route
Tout ce. que la raison trouva;
Elle est pareille à la glaneuse;
Il est libre, elle est lumineuse;
Il dit: Que suis-je? elle dit: Va.

Il sent qu’il contient le mystère,
Qu’il a la bêche et le jardin,
Qu’il doit, condamné de la terre,
Avec Babel refaire Eden.
Apre ouragan ou brise douce,
II sent qu’il est le vent qui pousse
Les battants du seuil éternel,
Et que les vertus et les crimes
Font tourner sur ses gonds sublimes
La porte invisible du ciel.

D’où vient-il? où va-t-il? il songe.
Evitera-t-il Dieu lointain?
Il est maître de son mensonge,
Un autre est maître du destin.
Il tremble; il se sent responsable
Pour un pas risqué sur le sable,
Pour un souffle sur un flambeau.
O nuit sombre où nous portons l’arche’!
La liberté de l’homme marche
Entre la crèche et le tombeau!

4 septembre 1854.

CXXXII LE PROGRÈS

L’Utile fait tenir tour à tour son flambeau
Par son frère le Laid, par son frère le Beau;
Nul n’est trop bas et nul n’est trop haut pour l’Utile;
Seul il sait la façon dont chaque être est fertile;
Dans la foudre qui passe il voit une clarté.
Le Progrès, qui s’appelle aussi nécessité,
Ploie invinciblement à son oeuvre les hommes,
Les derniers des hameaux et les premiers des . Romes,
Les grands et les petits, et noue au même fil.
Ce qui paraît auguste et ce qui semble vil;
Il fait jaillir l’éclair de la poudre, étincelle .
Où s’évanouira le passé qui chancelle,
De la profonde nuit d’ün cerveau monacal,;
Pour faire une brouette il dépense Pascal;
A son but, à sa loi, tout concourt, tout se range,
Tout obéit; l’Utile a cette force étrange
De se faire à la fois servir par l’ignorant
Et par l’altier génie au fond des cieux errant;
Le moulin d’un côté tire à lui mir la-rotite
L’âne abject qui se traîne à pas lents et qui broute,
Et de l’autre à son aile il mêle l’ouragan.

CXXXIII La cloche suspendue

La cloche suspendue attend l’heure terrible.
Autour d’elle, échappés dans les cieux infinis,
Mais rentrant au clocher, ruche immense de nids,
Tous les oiseaux de l’air, hirondelles; mésanges,
Placés entre les bruits de l’homme et ceux des anges,
Le moineau, qui du peuple aimant les alentours,
Se perche aux buissons verts sans dédaigner les tours,
La cigogne qui vient du Gange ou du Caÿstre;
Planent en tournoyant sur le beffroi sinistre
Comme autour d’un écueil rôde le cormoran,
Et disent à l’esclave énorme du cadran:
— Cloche, l’homme bourdonne et la foule se rue,
Tout le peuple fourmille et parle dans la rue,
Les ponts sont pleins de voix, de rires et de pas;
O cloche, quelle est donc cette heure que tu vas
Sonner dans ta lugubre et sublime demeure?
Et la cloche répond: - Je vais sonner une heure.
Je ne sais rien de plus.

CXXXIV Sombre justice inique

Sombre justice inique! ô code terroriste!
Sépulcre ouvert par l’homme! il semble au songeur triste
Dont l’oeil, au plus profond des choses introduit,
Voit tous les êtres vivré et sentir dans la nuit,
Que la loi meurtrière et fratricide effraie
Jusqu’aux gibets, hantés par la louve et l’orfraie;
Oui, que c’est à regret que les pals, les poteaux,
La piqûre des clous, la lourdeur des marteaux,
Les tenailles, les crocs, les carcans, sont complices
Des tortures, des çris, des sanglots, des supplices;
Et que devant le juge et l’assassin légal,
Et l’horrible balance au poids jamais égal,
Et la goule Thémis, vieux spectre parasite,
Le couperet proteste et la potence hésite.
Au poids de Rylesef la corde se cassant,
Marie au premier coup ruissélante de sang,
Jeanne montrée, au pied de la charpente infàme,
Toute nue aux bourreaux par la première flamme,
Sont comme des avis que de sa propre horreur
La peine de mort donne aux codes en fureur.
Tout l’affreux code humain, sourd brouillard, brume épaisse,
Apparaît au regard pensif comme une espèce
De soir mystérieux et de chute du jour,
Où Babel laisse voir confusément sa tour;
Et l’on dirait parfois qu’en ce noir crépuscule
L’échafaud frémissant devant l’homme recule.

CXXXV Ne vous figurez pas,

Ne vous figurez pas, ténèbres, que je tremble
Parce que vous venez le soir murer les cieux;
J’entends des voix parler tout bas dans l’ombre ensemble
Et je sens des regards sur moi sans voir des yeux;

Mais j’ai foi! L’Arimane a peur du Zoroastre;
Plus l’obscurité vient, plus le sage aime et croit,
Et devant la grandeur lumineuse que l’astre
Donne au prophète bon, le dieu méchant décroît.

Vous êtes malgré vous de rayons traversées;
L’espérance est mêlée à vos blêmes effrois;
Vous ne nous troublez point sous vos ailes dressées
Pas plus que les corbeaux n’ébranlent les beffrois.

Ô ténèbres, le ciel est une sombre enceinte
Dont vous fermez la porte, et. dont l’âme a la clé;
Et la nuit se partage, étant sinistre et sainte,
Entre Iblis, l’ange noir, et Christ; l’homme étoilé.

23 novembre 1876.

CXXXVI Quoi! tu doutes de l’âme!

.
Quoi! tu doutes de l’âme!
Et c’est l’astre qui brille, et c’est l’aube qui point!
Et que verras-tu donc si tu ne la vois point?
L’âme! elle est dans le cri. L’âme! elle est dans le verbe;
Elle sort de la foule ainsi qu’un lys de l’herbe;
Elle empêche Caton pensif de se courber.
Quand Danton, formidable et noir, laissait tomber
Ce grondement du haut dé la, tribune austère: .
— ‘La Révolùtion, ô mâitres de la terre,
ô despotes, c’est l’heure où le lion a faim. -
Quand Cicéron disait: - Jusqués à quand enfin
Abuseras-tu, donc de notre patience,
Catilina? - Quand Job sentait sa conscience
S’indigner contre l’ombre, et, s’écriait Assez!
Je souffre. Ayez pitié de moi, vous qui passez!
Tous ces hommes jetaient le sombre éclair de l’âme.
Ni Bible, ni Koran, ni Talmud. Je voudrais
Que l’homme renonçât à montrer les dictées
Faites à Pierre, à Paul, aux Christs, aux Prométhées.
Je voudrais laisser Dieu tranquille. Ce grand ciel,
Temple immense auquel nuit le temple officiel,
Suffit à ce grand Dieu. Je rêve le chômage
Du prêtre,,de l’abbé, du druide, du mage.

CXXXVIII La vision devient une réalité

La vision devient une réalité
Et le fait prend l’aspect mystérieux du songe;
L’impossible devient le possible, et s’allonge
Jusqu’aux détails qui sont la vie, et se répand,
Oiseau, sur les enfers, et sur l’éden, serpent;
Est-il Jésus? Est-il Satan? il est le rêve;
Il est le fait douteux qui sans raison, sans trêve,
Sans but, sort triomphant du juste assassiné
Et sous lui deux mille ans tient le monde étonné,
Raillé des sages, craint des foules, dramatique,
D’autant plus accepté qu’il est moins authentique.

CXXXIX Il a fait la colombe.

Il a fait la colombe. Et qui fit le serpent?
Lui. Le même.
En combien d'usages se répand
L'eau qui sort de la source et qui va. dans les plaines!
Elle lave, elle noie; et cristal aux fontaines,
Elle est fange aux égouts. Ainsi, dans les esprits,
Ce qui fait saints les Jobs, ce qui fait dieux les christs,
Ce que cherchait Orphée en cherchant Eurydice,
Le vrai, mêlé d'erreur comme l'eau d'immondice,
L'idéal, l'absolu, se décompose et fuit;
Le dogme plein de jour coule et s'emplit de nuit;
La torsion du mal enveloppe et féconde
Le bien, et Jéhovah que le démon seconde
Subit l'affreux baiser du monstre filial;
Dieu qui part d'Hélios arrive à Bélial;
Toute religion finit par être un crime;
Tout commence en éden et s'achève en abîme;
Et le ciel, d'où toujours un enfer déborda,
Blanc chez Jésus, devient noir chez Torquemada.

CXL Quelle religion

Quelle religion cherche aujourd’hui les astres?
Le catholicisme âpre et transformant en piastres
Des morceaux de liards et de maravédis,
N’est plus qu’un négrier marchand de paradis,
Qui vend le ciel et qui des âmes fait la traite.
Du globe émancipé capitale en retraite,
Rome est caduque, et n’a, son âge l’accablant,
Qu’un aigle aveugle et triste et de vieillesse blanc,
Plus de mémoire, plus de rayons, plus de gloire,
Plus de dents, quoiqu’elle ait encore une mâchoire.
Elle laisse crouler ses héros et ses dieux, .
Ne se rappelle plus son passé radieux,
Et n’en sait, l’idiote et pauvre douairière,. .
Que ce qu’il faut pour faire en latin sa. prière,
Et dans le Capitole où César triomphait,
Mange la pension que le monde lui fait.

CXLI L’ENFER

L’expiation rampe au plus profond de l’être.
Qu’est-elle? Énigme triste et que nul ne pénètre
Et qui fait quereller les sages ténébreux!
Une vapeur qui sort de ce mystère affreux
Filtre lugubrement à la surface obscure
Des dogmes, sur qui plane Azraël ou Mercure,
Et que traduit, au peuple. aveugle qu’il soumet,
Tantôt Tirésias et tantôt Mahomet.
Aux vivants effarés cette vapeur qui monte
Révèle vaguement le lieu d’ombre et de honte.
— C’est l’enfer! disent-ils, la peine, le tourment!
Et l’on en voit l’étrange et hideux flamboiement
Trembler au noir sommet des religions sombres.

L’Hadès où les titans râlent sous des décombres,
Le Ténare, eau qui brûle et dont le flot rongeur
Jette aux porches de l’ombre, une fauve rougeur,
Le Phlégéton. l’Averne au funèbre cratère;
Sont les trous monstrueux qu’à travers cette terre
L’homme fait en tremblant du côté de la nuit,
Et la forme, qu’au fond du gouffre où rien ne luit,
Sa superstition, sa crainte ou sa démence.
Donne aux noirs soupiraux, du châtiment immense.

L’antique enfer payen tombe et croule aujourd’hui;
Il est vide; on ne sait dans quel néant ont fui
Ses mânes au long voile et ses mégères nues;
On n’en répare plus les blêmes avenues,
Et le prêtre en dédaigne aujourd’hui l’entretien;
La terre maintenant croit à l’enfer chrétien;
La foi des hommes s’est par degrés retirée
Du Tartare où s’éteint l’épouvante sacrée;
Leur peur quitte Pluton et passe à Lucifer;
Leur mobilité va jusqu’à changer d’enfer;

L’abandon épaissit sa ronce parasite
Dans tous ces gouffres morts, Styx, Achéron, Cocyte;
L’homme n’y sent plus rien d’hostile et de puni;
Un reste de fumée au fond de l’infini
Noircit à peine encor, ces vieilles cheminées.

CXLII Toute la quantité d’équité,

...
Toute la quantité d’équité, de raison,
Et de fraternité que nous pouvons admettre,
Monte et baisse en nos coeurs comme en un thermomètre,
Suit les flux et reflux du. temps prompt à changer,
Croît, si nous n’y voyons pour l’instant nul danger,
Et, dès que notre peur grandit, se rapetisse;
Et mieux que tous ces mots plus ou moins creux, justice,
Droit, devoir, liberté, progrès, nous comprenons
La vérité qui sort des bouches des canons.

CXLIII Le pauvre;

Le pauvre; là-dessus l’accord est unanime,
Souvent vole le riche. Eh bien, de son côté
Le riche peut voler le pauvre, en vérité.
Il ne s’en doute pas, triste engeance ignorante!

Écoute et songe. Hier, j’ai touché de ma rente
Une somme, et je tire un franc de mon gousset.
Le voici. Maintenant je demande à qui c’est.
Ce franc, certe, est à moi le riche, à moi le maître.
Il est à moi si peu, que si, par la fenêtre,
Je le jette à la mer, je le vole. A qui donc?
Aux pauvres. Oui, quiconque en notre enfer sans fond,
Plein de fièvres, de soifs, et de faims innombrables,
Perd ce qu’il peut donner, le prend aux misérables.
Qui souffre attend, et c’est un droit que le malheur.
Le prodigue est voleur et l’avare est voleur.
Car avoir c’est devoir; car celui qui dissipe
Ou thésaurise, fait une plaie au principe;
Car, ayant tout, il a commis, entends-tu bien,
L’affreux crime d’avoir volé ceux qui n’ont rien.

CXLIV ÉPÎTRES

Je n’ai pas de besoins. Pour m’épanouir l’âme,
Entendre un enfant rire est assez. Je n’ai point
D’horreur pour un vieux feutre ou pour un vieux pourpoint,
Je vivrais d’un morceau de pain et de fromage.
Si j’avais un palais, moi, ce serait dommage.
Qu’on me donne un grenier, j’y serai comme un roi.
Il me suffit de voir la joie autour de moi;
Et quand je sais autrui content, je m’en contente.

CXLV Je t’aime,

Je t’aime, avec ton oeil candide et ton air mâle,
Ton fichu de siamoise et ton cou brun de hâle,
 — Avec ton rire et ta gaîté,
Entre la Liberté, reine aux fières prunelles,
Et la Fraternité, doux ange ouvrant ses ailes,
Ma paysanne Égalité

CXLVI Tous les hommes sont l’Homme

Tous les hommes sont l’Homme; et pas plus que les cieux
Le droit n’ a de rivages;
Ma sombre liberté sent le poids monstrueux
De tous les esclavages.
Avec tout prisonnier je me sens enfermé;
Ses chaînes sont les nôtres;
Guerre aux rois! Délivrance! Un seul peuple opprimé
Opprime tous les autres.

CXLVII À UNE STATUE

Non, tu n’es pas la grande et sainte République!
Celle que l’homme attend, que l’évangile explique,
Qui se composera de tous les bons instincts
Allumés et vivants, et des mauvais, éteints;
Qui s’enveloppera d’une paix magnifique,
Fera sortir des coeurs un hymne séraphique,
Pénétrera les lois de lumière et de jour,
En ôtera la mort pour y mettre l’amour,
Fera, sur les versants même les plus contraires,
Libres tous les esprits et tous les peuples frères,
Nous réchauffera tous autour du même feu,
Sera sur tous les fronts comme un ciel toujours bleu,
Et qui, comme si Dieu, dans sa bonté profonde,
Rendait visible aux yeux la grande âme du monde,
Mettra, vaste et sublime épanouissement,
Toute l’humanité dans son rayonnement!

Tu n’es pas même, non, tu n’es pas la déesse,
La déesse terrible, étrange, vengeresse,
Qui tua le vieux monde et créa le nouveau,
Broya peuples et rois sous son fatal niveau,
Vainquit l’Europe armée, et qui, dans la fournaise,
Après quatrevingt-neuf jeta quatrevingt-treize,
Comme en son moule ardent le fondeur souverain
Mêle le plomb à l’or quand il fait de l’airain!
Non, tu n’es pas la grande et sainte République!
O fantôme à l’oeil louche, à l’attitude oblique,
Tu n’as pas su donner l’honneur à nos drapeaux,
Au peuple le travail, au pays le repos;
Tu n’as point reconnu le droit des misérables;
Tu n’as point su toucher à leurs maux vénérables!
Tu pouvais, en suivant un élan immortel,
De l’échafaud brisé te bâtir un autel,
Et tu ne l’as point fait. Tu n’as rien su comprendre

Au peuple qui, pour être heureux, superbe et tendre,
Ne veut qu’un peu de gloire avec un peu de pain.
Tu n’as, comme les rois, qu’un tréteau de sapin,
Et tu n’as su montrer, triomphante et rapace,
Que la voracité d’un étranger qui passe.
Tu troublas les palais sans calmer les greniers;
Tu n’as point eu pitié des pauvres prisonniers,
Et tu n’as pas eu même un instant ,de clémence.
Tes pères, nains chétifs, qui mesuraient; démence!
La pensée à l’équerre et le coeur au compas,
T’ont faite à leur image avec ce qu’ils n’ont pas;
Des sourds t’ont dit: entends! des boiteux t’ont dit: marche!

La patrie est un temple et tu n’en es point l’arche;
Car l’éclair d’en haut manque à ton code impuissant,
Car Dieu n’est pas visible où le peuple est absent!

Fille des courts instants et des heures troublées,
Éclose au dur cerveau des sombres assemblées,
Parmi les rires vains, les rumeurs,. les refus
Des sages,- et les cris dans les groupes confus,
Qui donc t’a mise ici, dans un jour d’ironie,
Près de la pierre auguste où revit le génie
°Des temps évanouis et: des peuples anciens;
Énigme dont rêvaient les sphinx égyptiens,
Sinistre et du manteau des siècles revêtue?
Qui donc ainsi t’adosse, ô fragile statue,
A l’obélisque empreint du doigt de Sésostris?
La pluie âpre et chassant les feuillages flétris,
Inonde le quai morne et les Champs Élysées,
Et ce pavé, témoin des royautés brisées;
Que viens-tu faire, à. l’heure où l’automne finit,
Spectre de plâtre au pied du géant de granit?

12 novembre 1848.

CXLVIII L’excès de la pitié

L’excès de la pitié, c’est une. erreur auguste.
Je plains jusqu’au tyran quand il meurt. Même juste,
J’ai l’expiation, en horreur. Je n’ai pas
L’âpre haine et le goût des sévères trépas.
C’est pourquoi je frémis devant quatrevingt-treize.
Mais du moins, dans ces jours dont le spectre nous pèse,
On gardait le front haut, sans pâlir, sans bouger,
Devant la guillotine et devant l’étranger;
Ceux qui régnaient avaient une grandeur horrible;
Saint-Just était puissant, Marat était terrible;
Sur la haute tribune on s’entredévorait;
Et l’Europe tremblait d’un tremblement secret
Quand Danton hurlant, fier, le feu dans la paupière,
Mordait Collot d’Herbois ou mâchait Robespierre.
Ces temps étaient affreux, ils n’étaient pas petits.
Mais aujourd’hui, quels sont ces êtres aplatis
Qui tous autour de moi vont la tête courbée?
Hélas! le front baissé trahit l’âme tombéé.
Comme on oublie orgueil, fierté, devoir, mandat!
Comme on lèche humblement la botte du soldat!
Comme on presse en tremblant ses genoux! comme on flatte
Son caban africain à la ganse écarlate!
Comme à son moindre mot, ordre, grâce, refus,
On adore, on éclate en jappements confus!
Comme autour de ce banc où l’oeil soumis s’attache,
On attend qu’un sourire entr’ouvre sa moustache!
Il dit Venez! on vient. Comme à chaque moment
Avec l’avidité de l’avilissement,
Devant ce sabre obscur qui n’est pas même un glaive,
On se couche à plat ventre!... - Ah! mon coeur se soulève,
Vers le passé hideux je tourne un oeil jaloux,
Et quand je vois ces chiens, je regrette les loups!

25 novembre . En séance

CXLIX LYRNESSI DOMUS ALTA, SOLO LAURENTE SEPULCR UM

Livrée à tous les vents qui descendent du pôle,
Mon île est au milieu de la mer, et la Gaule
S’y fait chêne et granit;
Elle est la grande roche altière et combattante;
Et le tonnerre y vient comme un roi dans sa tente,
Comme un aigle à son nid.

Jeté là par l’exil, mon vieil ami sévère,
Regardant l’éclair luire aux cieux que je’ révère
Comme un âpré ataghan,:
J’ai souvent fait ce rêve: avoir -ma sépulture
Dans cette formidable et farouche nature;
Dormir dans l’ouragan.

Mais aujourd’hui qu’un souffle inconnu me rapporte
Dans ce Paris qui voit la bataille à sa porte
Et qui se tient debout,
Dans ce Paris où tout frémit, où rien ne tremble,
Qui s’emplit d’une pourpre immense, et qui ressemble
A l’urne où l’airain bout,

Je voudrais bien mourir sur ces remparts célèbres,
Afin qu’un jour je puisse, à travers les ténèbres,
Murmurer: « O guerriers!
J’ai ma haute maison où s’abat la colombe,
Où vient l’aigle, au pays des chênes, et ma tombe
Au pays des lauriers.

Paris Décembre 1870.

TAS DE PIERRES

Un coeur peut, comme un monde, avoir eu son désastre;
Alors, dans le passé, sans trouble et sans frayeur,
Le pâle souvenir creuse, âpre fossoyeur;
De la fosse qu’il rouvre il fait sortir un astre.
[1864-1866.]

Forêt Noire
Le jeune chevrier rit dans les monts antiques;
Et, traînant deux à deux des chariots rustiques,
Des boeufs inégaux vont sous les grands sapins verts,
Tristes d’être accouplés la tête de travers.
Album de voyage, 1840.

Voici que le matin, dont l’haleine est remplie
De brises qu’il répand sur la forêt qui plie,
Enfant vêtu de pourpre au sourire immortel,
Sur les étoiles d’or, flambeaux du grand autel,
Se hâte de souffler, comme un jeune lévite
Qui les éteint, de peur de les user trop vite.
[1834-1836]

MI ALMA
Si jamais vous venez regarder dans cette âme,
Vous n’aurez pas de peine à vous y voir, Madame,
Car votre souvenir rayonne en cette nuit;
Dans l’ombre de ce coeur votre front charmant luit;
Et mon âme limpide et profonde et sans voiles
Reflète les amours comme un lac les étoiles.

Là, roule un torrent...
Sur, la rive escarpée un- grand chêné se dresse.
Les feuilles, verts amas que la brise caressé,
Couvrent sa large tête, abri des passereaux,

Et son tronc, que jamais ne touche la cognée,
Et l’uii de ses bras noirs en tient une poignée
Qu’il tend d’un bord à l’autre -ux avides chevreaux.
[1834-1836]
[1870-1872]

Gros-Claude en bourgeron de toile, et la Thomasse
Aùx cheveux gras, aux mains rouges, à l’air homasse,
S’appellent aujourd’hui Fernand et Malvina.
Car les noms de roman dont nagère on s’orna
Ont quitté les salons jadis. pleins d’andalouses,
Et portent maintenant des sabots et des’ blouses.
[1836-1840]

ÉPÎTRES

Une fleur en prison chez soi, quelle folie!
Le pot est bien plus laid que la fleur n’est jolie.
[1872-1873]

VÉNUS

Ô Dieu, soyez béni pour cette belle étoile!

MAGLIA - PAYSAGE

Le beau soleil couchant, dans la nue élargi,
Semble un grand bouclier dans la forge rougi,
Et des mêmes rayons dore au coin du bois sombre
Le poète qui chasse à la rime dans. l’ombre,
Et le voleur pensif qui rêve au noeud coulant.
Les charrettes de foin, dans les chemins roulant,
Laissent leurs cheveux verts et flottants, à poignées,
Aux branches qui les ont au passage peignées.
[1857-1859]

Pied à pied, front sur front, et les rangs dans les rangs,
Sourds, furieux, pressés, l’un à l’autre adhérents

Comme la hache au bloc de chêne qu’elle entaille,
Uné pelouse drue avec des arbres bas,
Un gros clocher de pierre au milieu du feuillage,
Des toits à fleur de champ laissant voir des grabats,
Des mares, du fumier, des coqs: c’est le village
Les régiments épais se heurtent; la bataille
Hurle, et d’égorgements le glaive se repaît;
On jette aux flots les morts du haut du parapet;
Et, tandis que le fleuve écume, et que la plaine,
Livrée aux chocs sanglants, s’emplit d’une âpre haleine,
Au centre du combat, sur le ciel clair du soir,
On voit dans la mêlée un cavalier tout noir ,
Qui sonne, du clairon sur un pont couvert d’hommes.
Carnet, 1862.

Dans l’église de...
L’orgue commence, voix profonde!

Un éclair, d’harmonie éclate et disparaît.
Puis, comme en la mêlée et comme en la forêt,
Le bruit monte, tremble, s’écroule,
Et se redresse ainsi qu’un combattant debout,
Et comme dans une urne embrasée où l’eau bout,
Les sombres voix croissent en foule.

Il semble qu’on ne sait quel attendrissement,
Devant la terre, champ de bataille fumant,
Où tant de douleurs se lamentent,
Ait saisi tout à coup l’airain farouche et froid,
Et qu’il veuille apaiser l’âme humaine, et l’on croit
Entendre des canons qui chantent.
Carnet, 1867

Comédie - L’IDÉAL ET LE CHARNEL

Thérèse, votre amour montait aux cieux, le mien
Brûlait mes os. Était-ce un mal? était-ce un bien?

Sur de telles amours, on ne peut s’y soustraire,
La même cause amène un double effet contraire:
Nos deux cœurs sont changés. Hélas! je me soumets.
Vous n’aimez plus, et moi, j’aime plus que jamais.
C’est fini. Nous brûlions différemment, Thérèse;
Le souffle éteint la flamme et ranime la braise.
[1852-1853]

On cite de mémoire, on rit, on s’embarrasse,
On se défie à qui sait le mieux son Horace,
On parie, et, chacun à son tour, nous disons
Un des six premiers vers de l’Epître aux Pisons.

Vous avez déployé grammaires et lexiques,
Et nous pouvons chanter notre De Profundis.
Vous êtes forts, Messieurs les professeurs classiques!
Vous nous avez battus, défaits, abasourdis!
Quel poids ont vos discours! ô logique inflexible!
Nous gisons écrasés devant vos arguments,
Et nulle résistance à présent n’est, possible.
De nous, les assommes, à vous, les assommants!
Album, 1843

Tu brilles au milieu des évêques; doux prêtre;
Tous, l’oeil fixé sur toi, chantent:’Libera nos!
Mais ton humilité souffre et -s’attriste d’être
Un des point cardinaux.
Les blancheurs que Dieu crée amusent la noirceur.
Satan regarde avec une sinistre joie
La vertu, cette sotte, et le cygne cette oie.
[1855-1856]

C’était un bon enfant,
C’est-à-dire un gaillard bruyant, gai, triomphant,
Jovial en dessus, fin ‘en dessous, en somme,
Très fort; le bon enfant plus tard fait le bonhomme;
Défiez-vous-en.

...Un rossignol faisait visite à des chouettes
Si souvent qu'à la fin, notez ceci, poètes,
Les chouettes disaient: « Le vilain animal!
Comme il est ennuyeux et comme il chante mal!"
28 avril 1847

Que de nuit dans ta gloire; ô Versailles!
O siècle de Louis, mêlant sur son pavois
La splendeur de Molière aux crimes de Louvois!
Règne pompeux, rongé de lèpre et de vermine!
Une femme empoisonne, une femme extermine;
La Maintenon est spectre après la Brinvilliers.
[1856-1858]

Je compare à nos espérances,
A nos rêves, à nos regrets,
Ces lueurs et ces transparences
Qu'on voit le soir dans les forêts.
[1859-1860]

Guerre! le tambour bat. Guerre! on entend les cuivres
Et les clairons chanter comme des bouches ivres,
Et les tocsins sonner;
On voit sur les cités, dont leur ongle étreint l'âme,
Le lion incendie et la crinière flamme
Rugir et frissonner.

[1858-1859]
[1859-1860]
GUERRE
Rien de plus juste, il faut payer les aumôniers,
Peuples, un éternel au pied de paix volts coûte
Moins cher qu'un Tout-Puissaùt au pied de guerre. En route,
Canons, mortiers, drapeaux, et vous, psaumes blindés
Couvrant les rois pendant qu'on joue un peuple aux dés,
Te Deum cuirassés, encensoirs de bataille!
Près des tambours-majors dressant leur haute taille,

Que les Agnus Dei fassent la grosse voix!

Le vautour se prépare à dépecer les morts.
Il entend les chevaux hennir, rongeant le mors,
Et les casques sonner ainsi que des enclumes,
Et passe, frissonnant, son bec entre ses plumes.
La vieille bougonnait dans sa barbe; les mômes
Grognaient, petit tas noir de Pierres et de Jeans;
Le gîte était immonde à faire fuir les gens;
Près du feu qui mettait son suif à la torture,
Une chandelle en deuil pleurait dans la friture.
[1858-1859]

LE CROQUEMORT, titubant.
   Après m'avoir soûlé
De son vin de Surêne abject et peu salubre,
Cet être m'a lâché ce calembour lugubre:
   Ami, tu portes bien la bière, et mal le vin.
Carnet, 1856.

Ouragans Visions
Dans les nuages noirs pareils à des marées,
Flottent des yeux ardents, des faces effarées,
De vagues cheveux sur des fronts;
Les vents tumultueux tournent comme des roues;
On peut voir dans les cieux des gonfléments de joues
Ajustés à de grands clairons.
[1872-1874.]

Dieu montre le bonheur et ne le donne pas.
[1832-1834
]
Euripide naissait le jour de Salamine:
Trophée où luit Sophocle, et qu'Eschyle domine.
Carnet, 1856

Le progrès tue les bêtes de la nuit, le mal et l’impur.
La porte de clarté sur notre monde noir
Ouvrira ses battants splendides, sans savoir
Si, tandis qu’elle épand l’aube à nos fronts difformes,
Le cloporte écrasé meurt, daris ses gonds énormes.
[1870-1872]

À UN CRITIQUE

Un aveugle a le tact très fin, très net, très clair;
Autant que le renard des-bois, il a le flair;
Autant que le chamois des monts, il a l’ouïe;
Sa sensibilité, rare, exquise, inouïe,.
Du moindre vent coulis lui fait un coup de poing.
Son oreille est subtile et délicate au point
Que.lorsqu’un oiseau chante, il croit, qu’un.taureau beugle.
Quel flair! quel tact! quel goût! Oui, mais il est aveugle.
Octobre 1866

À QUOI MAGLIA RÉPLIQUE PAR CE DOUBLE QUATRAIN:

Vous me trouvez- monotone
Avec mes quatrains, vraiment!
A mon tour si je m’étonne,
C’est de votre étonnement.

Sans que rien les puisse abattre,
Pour aller vous supplier,
Mes vers toujours quatre à quatre
Monteront votre escalier.
[1836-1840]

Que de religions profondément creusées
Pour t’enfouir, rayon que cherchent nos pensées!
Je veux, te voir au fond de l’ombre, je ne puis;
Dieu fit la vérité, mais l’homme a fait le puits.
[1857-1858]
Je frissonne en songeant

Combien la destinée est trouble, obscure, amère,
Et que-c’est, triste énigme! en parlant à sa mère
Que Jésus; Christ du - monde et maître de la loi,
Dit: - Qu’est-il de commun, femme, entre vous et moi?
[1858-1860]

Idée! art, science, mystère,
O souffle de Delphe ou d’Endor,
Courbe toi, poésie austère,
Sous la royauté du sac d’or.
L’intérêt te fouette attelée
A sa charrette, ô muse ailée!
Il rit dé toi, le ventre plein;
Il te broie en ses mains félonnes,
Et du disque de tes colonnes
Fait la meule de son moulin.
[1872-1874]

Oui, nos illusions s’éteignent flamme à flamme.
Et pourtant, que la gloire ou l’oubli le réclame,
Au matin de ses ans, au déclin de ses jours,
Chacun n’a-t-il pas dans son âme
Un songe qu’il rêve toujours?

Les prophètes sont pleins d’un jour mystérieux;
Ils songent, et l’on voit des lueurs dans leurs yeux,
Et c’est par leur clarté que se font reconnaître
Ces hommes transparents que l’avenir pénètre
[1875-1877]

Ecoutez ce que dit le ,voluptueux sombre:
— Le mal d’autrui s’ajoute à vos plaisirs dans l’ombre;
Il est doux, quand le vent trouble, le gouffre amer,
D’être sur terre alors. qu’un autre, est sur la mer.
Carnet, 1861.

Les grands hommes plus tard sont vengés par l’histoire.

Mais c’est quand ils sont morts qu’on dit: ils sont vivants.
Tant qu’ils sont là, la haine acharnée à leur gloire
Poursuit cette fumée et la disperse aux vents.
[1848-1850]

Toute haute figure un jour est abattue.
Le peuple brise un homme après l’avoir porté.
Le piédestal finit par haïr la statue,
Car il en sent le poids sans en voir la beauté.
[1848-1850]

Venise. Palais des doges.
L’escalier des géants (où les doges sont proclamés,
  où Faliero a été décapité).
Au bas de l’escalier,
  Sur deux socles, parmi les roses et les trèfles,
L’architecte a sculpté deux paniers pleins de nèfles
Pour faire entendre au peuple, enfant aux mille cris,
Que les hommes d’état ne   sont bons que’ pourris.
[1857-1858]

Avez-vous vu parfois dans le soleil lévant,
Tournoyer, cendre d’or, les atomes du vent,
Étoilant le néant, faisant dans la lumière
Avec des grains de cendre et des grains de poussière
Des constellations d’infiniment petits?

Des soldats mèdes sont rangés encercle aùtour
De cette tente ayant la forme d’une tour;
Leurs boucliers sont faits de peau de nasicorne;
Ils ont le sabre nu, la mître au front, l’air, morne,
L’oeil triste, et sur les mains du sang jamais lavé.
Le trône, formidable et lourd, fait d’un pavé,
Est sur un drap de pourpre, au centre de la tente.
[1870-1871]

Progrès de la science.
Astronomie (17° siècle.)
Le réseau des soleils, des mondes et des cieux,’
Entrevu= malgré l’ombre et dérrière la nue,
Filet où l’âme humaine est prise et retenue,
Et qui croise sés fils vertigineux dans l’air,
Se défait maille à maille autour du pâle Euler.
Le même vent d’en haut courbe les foules pâles,
Et ces hommes, géants des ténèbres fatales,
Qui fâ.uchent l’homme sans remord,
Et qui, soldat, bourreau, mufti, sultan, ministre,
Quand elle va monter sur son cheval sinistre,
Tiennent l’étrier,à la mort.
[1859-1861]

Un jour, pensif, tourné vers l’obscur horizon,
Debout, parlant du haut de la colline verte
A tout un peuple ému près d’une fosse ouverte,
J’ai dit: La mort n’a rien dont tremble la raison.
Les sages n’ont pas peur des ombres éternelles.
Ils savent que le corps y trouve une prison,
Mais, que l’âme y trouve des, ailes!
[1848-1850]

Ô mes petits-enfants, ayez pitié des’ âutres.
Anges là-haut, soyez en bas d’humbles apôtres,
Plaignez tous ces pieds nus meurtris aux durs pavés.
Georges, Jeanne, donnez touf ce que vous avez.

[1875-1877]

Être frère aux souffrants, être père aux petits.
[1872-1874]

Riche, donne ton bien; pauvre, donne ton coeur.
[1878-1880]

De qui donne sa vie et son or aux plaisirs,
Aux femmes, aux chevaux, au jeu, l'aumône est rare:
Un prodigue toujours est doublé d'un avare.
Carnet, 1874

Je ne suis pas un saint, je tâche d'êtrè un justé.
[1875-1877]

En riant de la chair dans la chanson obscène,
L'âme est comme un forçat qui joue avec sa chaîne.
[1859-1860]

La douleur qui s'en va passe en jetant des cris.
Soupirs, larmes, sanglots, deuil rapide et prolixe,!
Le désespoir au front sévère, au regard fixe, .
Se tait, sans oublier et sans se, résigner.
L'oeil qui ne pleure pas laisse le coeur saigner.
[1843-1844]

La douleur se mesure à la grandeur du coeur.
Carnet, 1864

L'enfant ne meurt qu'une fois, mais le père!
Il mourra tous les jours jusqu'à ce qu'on l'enterre.
Le premier serviteur du père, c'est le fils.
Carnet, 1862.

L'esclave prosterné s'avilit et m'éclaire.
Quelquefois on échoue où l'on croit débarquer.
[1840-1844]
[1875-1877]
[1856-1858]

Qui change en y perdant change par conscience.
Carnet, 1867

Tel imbécile prend le dégoût pour le goût.

La vie est un remords quand elle est inutile.
[1866-1868]
Ma destinée étant de mourir en exil,
Je me.suis arrangé sous un rocher farouche
Mon tombeau. Comme on fait son sépulcre, on se couche.
[1863-1864]

Quoique d’air inondé, quoique plein de lumière, .
Le penseur solitaire au désert est pareil;
Sombre malgré l’espace et malgré le soleil.

Ainsi 1 ‘écrivain turc, dans la cour des mosquées,
Au devant du passant et du premier venu,
Se rue, et ses haillons troués montrent à nu,
Pendant qu’offrant son style il s’acharne à vous suivre,
Son flanc maigre que bat l’écritoire de cuivre.
[1858-1860]

Je préfère à Paris, au Louvre, aux Tuileries,
Aux grands carrosses d’or couronnés de laquais,
Aux spectacles, aux. bals, aux fêtes, aux banquets,
Au cirque éblouissant où plane l’écuyère,
Les chansons qu’on entend. le soir dans le bruyère.
Carnet, 1861

Tas d’esclaves! histoire! Ah!,quel troupeau. nous sommes!
Tas de tyrans! l’un chasse aux oiseaux, l’autre aux hommes;
Ils s’ébattent; chacun dans son genre.est complet;
Chacun s’en va chasser la chasse qui lui plaît,
Marchant, l’un dans le sang, l’autre dans la rosée;
Et chacun porte au poing sa bête apprivoisée:
Louis treize un faucon, et Richelieu le roi.
[1838-1840]

L’avare qui dans l’ombre enfouit loin du jour
Son trésor qui lui pèse,
Et qui croit toujours voir s’amonceler autour
La foule aux yeux de braise.

[1838-1840]

C’est un sage, dites-vous?

Et moi, je vous le dis, il fera cent folies.
C’est un homme amoureux? C’est un homme nouveau.
L’amour, dont les chaleurs nous Montent au cerveau,
A bien vite, troublé 1a raison éclipsée.
Cent chimères qui font vacillèr la pensée;
Un brouillard qui remplit l’esprit d’illusions;
Un tourbillon confus de folles actions;
Sortent de ce brasier dont l’âme est consumée.
D’un feu qui brûle au coeur la tête a la fumée

[1840-1844]

Le fleuve se recourbe à nos pieds dans la plaine
Comme un grand fer forgé pour un cheval géant.
Album, 1836.

Les perles de rosée et les pleurs des tempêtes
Sont des gouttes des mêmes eaux;
Le petit cri des nids répond aux flots sublimes;
Le même pied remue, ô Dieu, tous les abîmes
Et balance tous les berceaux.

LE REMORDS
Si vous êtes bon, juste et doux, vos actions
Volent dans votre nuit comme des alcyons;
Le souvenir vous baise au front dans tous vos rêves;
Si vous êtes bandit, si vous heurtez les glaives,
Si vous faites’ le mal, le souvenir vous mord

Dans l’ombre, avec les dents d’une tête de mort.
Carnet, 1856.

Le faux peut quelquefois n’être pas vraisemblable 54.
Je crois à la prière et je crois à mes fautes.
Carnet, 1874.

L’encens
Qui monte à Dieu du fond des lys reconnaissants.
[1838-1840]

Les forces de la nuit sont joyeuses des peines
Qui tombent par instants sur les têtes-humaines.

Et quand la terre a vu quelque grand châtiment,
Quelque tyran tombé sur son trône fumant,
Les tonnerres, vers l’ombre où songe l’Invisible,
Reviennent en chantant leur fanfare terrible.
Loin dans l’obscurité, battu d’affreuses. grêles,
Hérissant de gibets le toit de ses tourelles,
Plus noir que le vol du corbeau,
Vague, confus, brumeux, perdu dans l’insondable,
L’édifice du mal apparaît formidable.
Comme le spectre d’un tombeau.
[1859-1861]

L’enseignement mystérieux est nécessaire.
Songeurs du lac et du rocher,
Bardes, mages, hommes des voiles,
Il faut de plus en plus pencher
Le genre humain vers les étoiles.
[1869-1872]

Je l’ai cueillie au bord d’une eau cachée et lente,
Elle est bleue et demain on la verra jaunir.
La fleur du, souvenir n’est pas bien. ressemblante,

Car la fleur passe et meurt, et non le souvenir.
Carnet, 1861.

L'ORAGE

Quel monstre que la foudre! et qu'est-ce donc, abîme,
Que ce vent qui remue avec un bruit sublime
Tout l'effrayant plafond du ciel, et qui produit
L'énorme craquement des poutres de la nuit?
Carnet, 1857.

Àu-dessus du vieux lit, moisissait dans un cadre
Un portrait d'un, aïeul quelconque, en chef d'escadre,
Qui, dans un golfe ayant la courbure d'un G,
Bombardait un grand-turc, par les mites rongé.

Le temps mène le deuil de nôtre destinée;
La terre est un sépulcre, et la lugubre année,
Gardienne pâle des tombeaux,
Autour du cénotaphe où gît, couvert de voiles,
Le genre humain couché sous le drap des étoiles,
Allume ses douze flambeaux.
La bise fait le bruit d'un géant qui soupire;
La fenêtre palpite et la porte respire;
Le vent. d'hiver glapit sous les tuiles des toits;
Le feu fait à mon atre une pâle dorure;
Le trou de ma serrure
Me souffle sur les doigts.

SOMMEIL

Ô pesanteur formidable
De la paupière qui dort!
L'âme est dans l'ombre insondable,
Et l'oeil ténébreux est mort..

[1860-1862]

Le lys est la coupe de l’âme.

Quand le coeur. est malade, il cherche à se guérir.
Il se rappelle alors, triste jusqu’à mourir,
Par quels secours le ciel calme notre souffrance;
Et c’est de souvenir qu’est faite l’espérance.
[1834-1836]

Enfant! n’ayons jamais de haine pour les hommes.
Lorsqu’ils sont malheureux, tous; hélas! nous le sommes,
Plains-les, ne donne pas ton bon coeur à moitié,
Et lorsqu’ils sont méchants, ajoute à la pitié!

Le méchant souffre plus, donc il faut plus le plaindre.

Ô ciel, éternel rêve
Des chaldéens, des grecs, des guèbres, des hébreux!
Quelle est donc la moisson du grand champ ténébreux?
Sur quels grains merveilleux, sur quels épis sublimes
Tourne-t-il donc, au fond des sinistres abîmes,
Ce zodiaque obscur, meule de l’infini?
[1859-1862]

On n’arrache pas Dieu des coeurs facilement.
[1874-1876]

La terre est belle, amis, quoique pleine de tombes;
Dehors sont les jardins, les roses, les colombes,
Les filles aux seins nus, les rayons; et dedans
Les morts silencieux qui tiennent dans leurs dents
Un denier pour payer à Caron leur passage.
[1862-1864]

L’encre, cette noirceur d’où sort une lumière.

Eh! quoi! vous affamez les nations, tyrans?
Imbéciles! la faim est un loup; prenez garde
A la faim; la misère est sinistre et hagarde;
Ah! baîllonnez du moins le peuple avec du pain!
[1868-1869]

Fais passer ton esprit à travers le malheur.
Comme le grain du crible, il sortira meilleur!
20 janvier 1835.

LES IVRESSES

La vigne gaie et verte et de grappes chargée,
Rit au seuil des maisons et grimpe jusqu'au toit;
Le houblon est joyeux sur la terre et l'où voit
Dans les larges tonneaux où trempe sa guirlande
Mousser l'ale d'Ecosse ou le porter d'Irlande.
Carnet, 1861.

Il est bon d'être ancien et mauvais d'être vieux.
[1832-1836]

Pour cheveux blancs, cheveux gris c'est jeunesse 55
[1834-1836]

L'amour...
[1840-1842]

L'océan, vieux guerrier, vieux sabreur des rochers.
Son écume, est de neige et sa vague est de nuit.
Il a la barbe blanche et la moustache noire.
[1857-1858.]

Quiconque est envieux s'avoue inférieur.
Mettez en prière l'enfant,
Nous sommes accablés par la Toute-Puissance,

Faites intercéder pour nous cette innocence,
Mère, employez votre ange à désarmer le ciel.
[1862-1864]

Sa bonne humeur énorme est une plénitude;
Il est hilare, il est folâtre, il est serein;
Et jamais un soupir, un nuage, un chagrin,
Un regret, un souci, ne comprime et n’étrique
Son rire olympien et sa joie homérique.
[1862-1864]

Et dans le clair-obscur court la rivière étroite;
Parfois le paysage étrange qui miroite
Ressemble à ces dessins qu’on voit dans l’acajou.
Un vieux château, bâti par les comtes d’Anjou,
Dresse sur l’horizon sa silhouette noire.
Heureux l’homme
Que ce feu brûle encore à l’âge où tout s’éteint

[1864-1866.]
Dieu, qui créa la nuit, ne peut punir l’erreur.
Toi qui t’es seulement trompé, sois sans terreur.
L’homme un jour contre.lui, dans ces ombres si hautes,
N’aura pas ses erreurs, mais il aura ses fautes.
[1874-1876]

On distingue, malgré son mystère et ses voiles,
Dieu par la claire-voie immense des étoiles.
[1873-1874]

Tous les hommes sont l’Homme, et tous les dieux, c’est Dieu.

Ô folie! ô génie! effrayants voisinages!
La forme du bonheur change avec les années.
L’homme scande ici-bas le vers qu’il chante au ciel.
La vie est un torchon orné d’une dentelle.

POÈMES UNCOLLECTED

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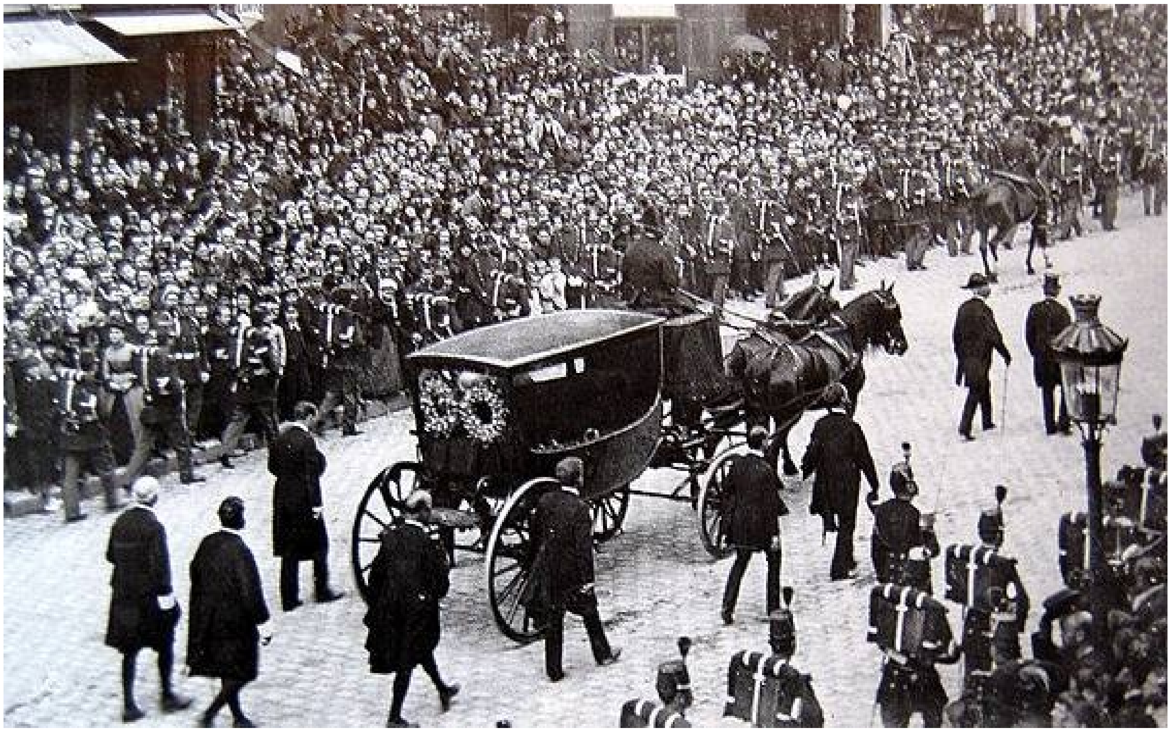

Victor Hugo’s funeral march, 1885

À MADAME LA GENERALE LUCOTTE

Pour le 1er janvier 1814

Madame, en ce jour si beau
Qui vous annonce un an nouveau,
Je vous souhaite de bonnes années,
Des jours de soie et d’or filés,
Et surtout en votre vieillesse
De bons enfants et des richesses.
Ainsi, madame, pour en finir,
C’est avec bien du plaisir
Que je vous présente en ce jour
Et mon hommage et mon amour.

Par son serviteur,
VICTOR HUGO.

LE RETOUR DE L’EMPEREUR

1840

Dors! nous t’irons chercher! — Ce jour viendra peut-être!
Car nous t’avons pour dieu sans t’avoir eu pour maître;
Car notre œil s’est mouillé de ton destin fatal,
Et, sous les trois couleurs comme sous l’oriflamme,
Nous ne nous pendons pas à cette corde infâme
Qui t’arrache à ton piédestal.

Oh! va, nous te ferons de belles funérailles!
Nous aurons bien aussi peut-être nos batailles,
Nous en ombragerons ton cercueil respecté.
Nous y convierons tout, Europe, Afrique, Asie,
Et nous t’amènerons la jeune poésie
Chantant la jeune liberté.
Ode à la Colonne, Octobre 1830.

I.

Après la dernière bataille,
Quand, formidables et béants,
Six cents canons sous la mitraille
Eurent écrasé les géants;
Dans ces jours où caisson qui roule,
Blessés, chevaux, fuyaient en foule,
Où l’on vit choir l’aigle indompté,
Et, dans le bruit et la fumée,
Sous l’écroulement d’une armée,
Plier Paris épouvanté;

Quand la vieille garde fut morte,
Trahi des uns, de tous quitté,
Le grand empereur, sans escorte
Rentra dans la grande cité.
Dans l’ancien palais Elysée
Il s’arrêta, l’âme épuisée;
Et, n’attendant plus de secours,
Repoussant la guerre civile,
Avant de sortir de sa ville,
Triste, il la contempla trois jours.

Sa tête enfin était courbée.
Plus de triomphes! plus de cris!
Sa popularité tombée
Couvrait sa gloire de débris.
Partout l’abandon ou la haine!
Le soir, quelque passant à peine,
S’arrêtant, mais sans approcher,
Dans le palais cherchant le maître,
A travers la haute fenêtre
Regardait son ombre marcher

Durant ces heures solennelles,
Tandis qu’il sondait son malheur,
L’œil des muettes sentinelles
L’interrogeait avec douleur.
Soldats toujours prêts pour la lutte,
Hélas! ils comptaient de sa chute
Chaque symptôme avant-coureur;
Et, comme un jour qui se retire,
Ils voyaient s’effacer l’empire
Dans le regard de l’empereur!

Adieu ses légions sans nombre!
Adieu ses camps victorieux!
II se sentait poussé vers l’ombre
Par un souffle mystérieux.
La nuit, sa fièvre était sans trêves;
II voyait flotter dans ses rêves
Le spectre d’un rocher lointain;
Déjà, l’âme d’angoisses pleine,
II entrevoyait Sainte-Hélène
Dans les brumes de son destin.

Le jour, en proie à la pensée,
L’œil fixé sur le sol sacré,
Le front sur la vitre glacée,
Il disait: « Oh! je reviendrai!
Je reviendrai! toujours le même,
Seul, sans pourpre et sans diadème,
Sans bataillons et sans trésors;
Je veux, proscrit, chassé, qu’importe?
Choisir, pour rentrer, cette porte,
Cette porte par où je sors.

«Une nuit, dans une tempête,
Rapporté par un vent des cieux,
Avec des éclairs sur la tête,
Je surgirai, vivant, joyeux!

Mes vieux compagnons d’aventure
Dormiront dans la brume obscure,
Et tout à coup, à l’orient,
Ils verront luire, ô délivrance!
Mon œil, rayonnant pour la France,
Pour l’Angleterre flamboyant!

«J’apparaîtrai dans les ténèbres
A ce Paris qui m’adora;
Le jour succède aux nuits funèbres,
Et mon peuple se lèvera!
Il se lèvera plein de joie,
Pourvu que dans l’ombre il me voie
Chassant l’étranger, vil troupeau,
Pâle, la main de sang trempée,
Avec le tronçon d’une épée,
Avec le haillon d’un drapeau!”

*

Sire, vous reviendrez dans votre capitale,
Sans tocsin, sans combat, sans lutte et sans fureur,
Traîné par huit chevaux sous l’arche triomphale,
    En habit d’empereur!

Par cette même porte, où Dieu vous accompagne,
Sire, vous reviendrez sur un sublime char,
Glorieux, couronné, saint comme Charlemagne
    Et grand comme César!

Sur votre sceptre d’or, qu’aucun vainqueur ne foule,
On verra resplendir votre aigle au bec vermeil,
Et sur votre manteau vos abeilles en foule
    Frissonner au soleil.

Paris sur ses cent tours allumera des phares;
Paris fera parler toutes ses grandes voix;

Les cloches, les tambours, les clairons, les fanfares,
Chanteront à la fois.

Joyeux comme l’enfant quand l’aube recommence,
Emu comme le prêtre au seuil du lieu sacré,
Sire, on verra vers vous venir un peuple immense,
Tremblant, pâle, effaré;

Peuple qui sous vos pieds mettrait les lois de Sparte,
Qu’embrase votre esprit, qu’enivre votre nom,
Et qui flotte, ébloui, du jeune Bonaparte
Au vieux Napoléon.

Une nouvelle armée, ardente d’espérance.
Dont les exploits déjà sèmeront la terreur,
Autour de votre char criera: Vive la France!
Et vive L’Empereur!

En vous voyant passer. ô chef du grand empire!
Le peuple et les soldats tomberont à genoux;
Mais vous ne pourrez pas vous pencher pour leur dire
Je suis content de vous!

Une acclamation douce, tendre et hautaine,
Chant des cœurs, cri d’amour où l’extase se joint,
Remplira la cité; mais, ô mon capitaine!
Vous ne l’entendrez point.

De sombres grenadiers, vétérans qu’on admire,
Muets, de vos chevaux viendront baiser les pas;
Ce spectacle sera touchant et beau; mais, sire,
Vous ne le verrez pas.

Car, ô géant! couché dans une ombre profonde,
Pendant qu’autour de vous, comme autour d’un ami,
S’éveilleront Paris, et la France, et le monde,
Vous serez endormi!

Vous serez endormi, figure auguste et fière,
De ce morne sommeil, plein de rêves pesants,
Dont Barberousse, assis sur sa chaise de pierre,
    Dort depuis six cents ans.

L’épée au flanc, l’œil clos, la main encore émue
Par le dernier baiser de Bertrand éperdu,
Dans un lit où jamais le dormeur ne remue,
    Vous serez étendu.

Pareil à ces soldats qui, devant cent murailles,
Avaient suivi vos pas, vainqueurs, toujours debout,
Et qui, touchés un soir par le vent des batailles,
    Se couchaient tout à coup.

Leur attitude grave, altière, armée encore,
Ressemblait au sommeil, et non point au trépas;
Mais la diane, hélas! cette voix de l’aurore,
    Ne les réveillait pas.

Si bien que, vous voyant glacé, dans son délire,
Et tel qu’un dieu muet qui se laisse adorer,
Ce peuple, ivre d’amour, venu pour vous sourire,
    Ne pourra que pleurer.

Sire, en ce moment-là, vous aurez pour royaume
Tous les fronts, tous les cœurs qui battront sous le ciel
Les nations feront asseoir votre fantôme
    Au trône universel.

Les poètes divins, élite agenouillée,
Vous proclameront grand, vénérable, immortel,
Et de votre mémoire, injustement souillée,
    Redoreront l’autel.

Les nuages auront passé dans votre gloire;

Rien ne troublera plus son rayonnement pur;
Elle se posera sur toute notre histoire
    Comme un dôme d’azur.

Vous serez pour tout homme une âme grande et bonne,
Pour la France un proscrit magnanime et serein,
Sire, et pour l’étranger, sur la haute colonne,
    Un colosse d’airain,

Vous cependant, — tandis qu’une pompe sacrée
Mènera par la ville un cortège inouï,
Et que tous croiront voir revivre à votre entrée
    Un monde évanoui;

Tandis qu’on entendra, près du dôme ou des ombres
Gardent tous les grands noms dont Paris se souvient,
Rugir les vieux canons comme des dogues sombres
    Quand le maître revient;

Tandis que votre nom, devant qui tout s’efface,
Montera vers les cieux, puissant, illustre et beau, —
Vous sentirez ronger dans l’ombre votre face
    Par le ver du tombeau!

*

Sombres événements, hérauts aux noirs messages!
Masques dont le Seigneur connaît seul les visages,
Que vous parlez parfois un langage effrayant!
Oh! n’arrachez-vous pas au livre de Dieu même
Ces feuillets ténébreux, pleins d’un vague anathème,
    Que vous nous jetez en fuyant?

Rien n’est complet; à tout il manque quelque chose;
L’homme a le pilori, l’ombre a l’apothéose.
Ces héros sont trop grands! un même sort les suit.
Hélas! tous les Césars et tous les Charlemagnes

Ont deux versants ainsi que les hautes montagnes;
D’un côté le soleil, et de l’autre la nuit.

Et quel temps fut jamais plus grave et plus sévère!
Le Christ déraciné tremble sur le Calvaire.
Oh! que d’écroulements! tout chancelle à la fois,
Tout plie et rompt, les grands sous la charge des haines,
Les rois sous le fardeau du sort, les lois humaines
    Sous le poids des divines lois!

Rien de ces noirs débris ne sort — que toi, pensée!
Poésie immortelle à tous les vents bercée!
Ainsi, pour s’en aller en toute liberté,
Au gré de l’air qui souffle ou de l’eau qui s’épanche,
Teinte à peine de sang, la plume chaste et blanche
Tombe de l’oiseau mort et du nid dévasté.

II.

Sainte-Hélène! — leçon! chute! exemple! agonie!
L’Angleterre, à la haine épuisant son génie,
Se mit à dévorer ce grand homme en plein jour;
Et l’univers revit ce spectacle homérique;
La chaîne, le rocher brûlé du ciel d’Afrique,
    Et le Titan — et le Vautour!

*

Cependant ces tourments, cette auguste infortune,
Cette rage punique, implacable rancune,
Faisant saigner d’en bas le grand crucifié,
Ces affronts, qui tombaient sur toute âme hautaine,
Comme un vase profond où coule une fontaine,
Emplissaient lentement le monde de pitié.

Pitié des nobles cœurs! cri de toute la terre!
Qui t’irritaient dans l’ombre, ô geôlier d’Angleterre!
Car l’admiration, de son feu souverain,
Endurcit l’homme vil, amollit la grande âme.
Hélas! où pleure un brave, un lâche rit, La flamme
    Sèche la fange et fond l’airain.

*

Lui, pourtant, restait fier comme un roi chez son hôte.
On l’entendait parler dans son île à voix haute.
Il rêvait; il dictait d’illustres testaments;
Il repoussait l’oubli dont l’exil s’enveloppe;
Et, quand son œil parfois se tournait vers l’Europe,
Il en venait encore de grands rayonnements.

Un jour — Lanne assoupi tressaillit sous son dôme; —

Les quatre aigles pensifs de la place Vendôme
Frémirent en voyant passer un noir corbeau.
On regarda. La nuit était sur Sainte-Hélène.
Un guichetier anglais sous son impure haleine
    Avait éteint le grand flambeau.

*

Vingt ans il a dormi dans cette île lointaine!
Dans les monts, près d’un saule, au bord d’une fontaine,
    Sans affront, sans honneur,
Vingt ans il a dormi sous une dalle obscure,
Seul avec l’océan, seul avec la nature,
    Seul avec vous, Seigneur!

Là, dans la solitude, après tant de tempêtes,
Tandis que son esprit revivait dans nos têtes,
Que l’Europe indignée exécrait sa prison,
Et que les rois, tremblant jusque dans leurs entrailles,
Voyaient le tourbillon de toutes ses batailles
Gronder confusément encore à l’horizon;

Durant les nuits, à l’heure où l’âme dans l’espace
N’entend que l’eau qui fuit, le cormoran qui passe,
    Le flot des flots heurté,
L’air balayant les monts que la nuée encombre,
Et ce que dit tout bas à l’éternité sombre
    La sombre immensité;

Quand la forêt frissonne au front de la colline,
Quand le ciel lentement vers l’océan s’incline,
Lorsque, brisant sa vague aux nocturnes rayons,
La mer, où vont plongeant des étoiles sans nombre,
    Semble écumer dans l’ombre
Au choc étincelant des constellations;

Dans ces heures de paix, les déserts, les vallées,

Les vents, les bois, les monts, les sphères étoilées,
    Chantant un divin chœur,
Couvrant d’oubli sa tombe aux bruits humains murée,
Ensemble accomplissaient la fonction sacrée
    De calmer ce grand cœur.

III.

Jadis, quand vous vouliez conquérir une ville,
Ratisbonne ou Madrid, Varsovie ou Séville,
Vienne l'austère, ou Naple au soleil radieux,
Vous fronciez le sourcil, ô figure idéale!
Alors tout était dit. La garde impériale
    Faisait trois pas comme les dieux.

Vos batailles, ô roi! comme des mains fatales,
L'une après l'autre, ont pris toutes les capitales;
Il suffit d'Iéna pour entrer à Berlin,
D'Arcole pour entrer à Mantoue, ô grand homme!
Lodi mène à Milan, Marengo mène à Rome,
    La Moskova mène au Kremlin!

Paris coûte plus cher! c'est la cité sacrée!
C'est la conquête ardue, âpre, démesurée!
Le but éblouissant des suprêmes efforts!
Pour entrer dans Paris, la ville de mémoire,
Sire, il faut revenir de la sombre victoire
    Qu'on remporte au pays des morts!

Il faut avoir forcé toute haine à se taire,
Rallié tout grand cœur et tout grand caractère,
S'être fait de l'Europe et l'âme et le milieu,
Et, debout dans la gloire ainsi que dans un temple,
Etre pour l'univers, qui de loin vous contemple,
    Plus qu'un fantôme et presque un dieu!

Il faut, soleil du siècle, en éclipser les astres;
Il faut, héros accru même par les désastres,
Dépasser Lafayette, effacer Mirabeau,
Sortir du fond des mers où l'autre ciel commence,
Et mêler la grandeur de l'océan immense

A la majesté du tombeau!

IV.

Oh! t’abaisser n’est pas facile,
France, sommet des nations!
Toi que l’idée a pour asile,
Mère des révolutions!
Aux choses dont tu fais le moule
Tout l’univers travaille en foule;
Ta chaleur dans ses veines coule;
Il t’obéit avec orgueil;
Il marche, il forge, il tente, il fonde;
Toi, tu penses, grave et féconde... —
La France est la tête du monde,
Cyclope dont Paris est l’œil!

Te détruire? — audace insensée!
Crime! folie! impiété!
Ce serait ôter la pensée
A la future humanité!
Ce serait aveugler les races!
Car, dans le chemin que tu traces,
Dans le cercle où tu les embrasses,
Tous les peuples doivent s’unir;
L’esprit des temps à ta voix change;
Tout ce qui naît sous toi se range! —
Qui donc ferait ce rêve étrange
De décapiter l’avenir?

Te bâillonner? — Rois! Dieu lui-même
Pourra vous le prouver bientôt,
Ce siècle est un profond problème
Dont la France seule a le mot.
Ce siècle est debout sur la rive,
D’une voix terrible ou plaintive,
Questionnant quiconque arrive,

Tribuns, penseurs, — ou rois, hélas!
Il propose à tous, dès l'aurore,
L'énigme inexpliquée encore,
Et, comme le sphinx, il dévore
Celui qui ne le comprend pas!

T'insulter? — mais, s'il se rencontre
Des rois pour courir ce danger,
Vois donc les choses que Dieu montre
A ceux qui voudraient t'outrager!
Vois, sous l'arche où sont nos histoires,
Wagram, les mains de poudre noires,
Ulm, Essling, Eylau, cent victoires,
Défiler au bruit du tambour!
Dieu, quand l'Europe te croit morte,
Prend l'empereur et te l'apporte,
Et fait repasser sous ta porte
Toute ta gloire en un seul jour!

T'insulter! t'insulter! ma mère!
Mais n'avons-nous pas tous, ô ciel!
Parmi nos livres, près d'Homère,
Quelque vieux sabre paternel?
Nos pères sont morts, France aimée!
Mais de leur foule ranimée
Peut-être on ferait une armée
Comme on en fait un Panthéon!
Prêts à surgir au bruit des bombes,
Prêts à se lever si tu tombes,
Peut-être sont-ils dans leurs tombes
Entiers comme Napoléon!

*

Toi, héros de ces funérailles,
Roi! génie! empereur! martyr!
Les temps sont clos; dans nos murailles

Rentre pour ne plus en sortir!
Rentre aussi dans ta gloire entière,
Toi qui mêlais, d’une main fière,
Dans l’airain de ton œuvre altière
Tous les peuples, tous les métaux;
Toi qui, dans ta force profonde,
Oubliant que la foudre gronde,
Voulais donner ta forme au monde
Comme Alexandre au mont Athos!

Tu voulais, versant notre sève
Aux peuples trop lents à mûrir,
Faire conquérir par le glaive
Ce que l’esprit doit conquérir.
Sur Dieu même prenant l’avance,
Tu prétendais, vaste espérance!
Remplacer Rome par la France
Régnant du Tage à la Néva;
Mais de tels projets Dieu se venge.
Duel effrayant! guerre étrange!
Jacob ne luttait qu’avec l’ange,
Tu luttais avec Jéhova!

Nul homme en ta marche hardie
N’a vaincu ton bras calme et fort;
A Moscou, ce fut l’incendie;
A Waterloo, ce fut le sort.
Que t’importe que l’Angleterre
Fasse parler un bloc de pierre
Dans ce coin fameux de la terre
Où Dieu brisa Napoléon,
Et, sans qu’elle-même ose y croire,
Fasse attester devant l’histoire
Le mensonge d’une victoire
Par le fantôme d’un lion?

Oh! qu’il tremble, au vent qui s’élève,

Sur son piédestal incertain,
Ce lion chancelant qui rêve,
Debout dans le champ du destin!
Nous repasserons dans sa plaine!
Laisse-le donc conter sa haine
Et répandre son ombre vaine
Sur tes braves ensevelis!
Quelque jour, — et je l’attends d’elle! —
Ton aigle, à nos drapeaux fidèle,
Le soufflettera d’un coup d’aile
En s’en allant vers Austerlitz!

LE 15 DÉCEMBRE 1840.

Écrit en revenant des Champs-Élysées

Ciel glacé, soleil pur. — Oh! brille dans l’histoire,
Du funèbre triomphe impérial flambeau!
Que le peuple à jamais te garde en sa mémoire,
    Jour beau comme la gloire,
    Froid comme le tombeau!

The Plays

4e ARR
PLACE
DES VOSGES
6

‘La maison de Victor Hugo’ — a museum in Paris

CROMWELL

Hugo’s first play was written in 1827. At the time Hugo belonged to a literary circle that identified itself as Romanticist, taking Shakespeare as their model dramatist rather than the Classicist models of Jean Racine and Pierre Corneille, who were supported by the French Academy. This historical play was Hugo’s attempt to present a play that aspired to the beliefs of the Romantic movement, but sadly it was never performed on stage. It tells the story of Oliver Cromwell’s internal disputes in being offered the crown of England. The play is notable for its preface, which is now considered to be the manifesto of the Romantic movement.

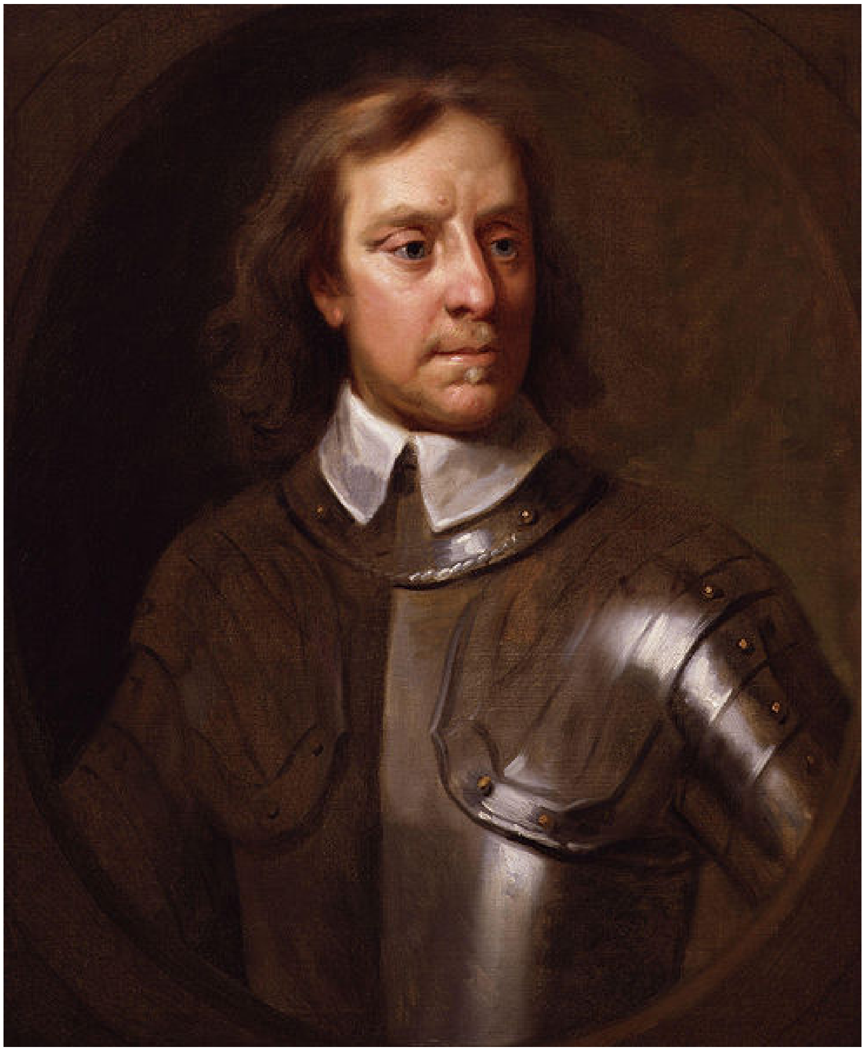

Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658)

CROMWELL

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PREFACE

The drama contained in the following pages has nothing to commend it to the attention or the good will of the public. It has not, to attract the interest of political disputants, the advantage of the veto of the official censorship, nor even, to win for it at the outset the literary sympathy of men of taste, the honour of having been formally rejected by an infallible reading committee.

It presents itself, therefore, to the public gaze, naked and friendless, like the infirm man of the Gospel — *solus, pauper, nudus*.

Not without some hesitation, moreover, did the author determine to burden his drama with a preface. Such things are usually of very little interest to the reader. He inquires concerning the talent of a writer rather than concerning his point of view; and in determining whether a work is good or bad, it matters little to him upon what ideas it is based, or in what sort of mind it germinated. One seldom inspects the cellars of a house after visiting its salons, and when one eats the fruit of a tree, one cares but little about its root.

On the other hand, notes and prefaces are sometimes a convenient method of adding to the weight of a book, and of magnifying, in appearance at least, the importance of a work; as a matter of tactics this is not dissimilar to that of the general who, to make his battle-front more imposing, puts everything, even his baggage-trains, in the line. And then, while critics fall foul of the preface and scholars of the notes, it may happen that the work itself will escape them, passing uninjured between their cross-fires, as an army extricates itself from a dangerous position between two skirmishes of outposts and rear-guards.

These reasons, weighty as they may seem, are not those which influenced the author. This volume did not need to be *inflated,* it was already too stout by far. Furthermore, and the author does not know why it is so, his prefaces, frank and ingenuous as they are, have always served rather to compromise him with the critics than to shield him. Far from being staunch and trusty bucklers, they have played him a trick like that played in a battle by an unusual and conspicuous uniform, which, calling attention to the soldier who wears it, attracts all the blows and is proof against none.

Considerations of an altogether different sort acted upon the author. It seemed to him that, although in fact, one seldom inspects the cellars of a building for pleasure, one is not sorry sometimes to examine its foundations. He will, therefore, give himself over once more, with a preface, to the wrath of the *feuilletonists. Che sara, sara*. He has never given much thought to the fortune of his works, and he is but little appalled by dread of the literary *what will people say*. In the discussion now raging, in which the theatre and the schools, the public and the academies, are at daggers drawn, one will hear, perhaps, not without some interest, the voice of a solitary *apprentice* of nature and truth, who has withdrawn betimes from the literary world, for pure love of letters, and who offers good faith in default of good taste, sincere conviction in default of talent, study in default of learning.

He will confine himself, however, to general considerations concerning the art, without the slightest attempt to smooth the path of his own work, without pretending to write an indictment or a plea, against or for any person whomsoever. An attack upon or defence of his book is of less importance to him than to anybody else. Nor is personal controversy agreeable to him. It is always a pitiful spectacle to see two hostile self-esteems crossing swords. He protests, therefore, beforehand against every interpretation of his ideas, every personal application of his words, saying with the Spanish fablist: —

Quien haga aplicaciones
Con su pan se lo coma.

In truth, several of the leading champions of “sound literary doctrines” have done him the honour to throw the gauntlet to him, even in his profound obscurity — to him, a simple, imperceptible spectator of this curious contest He will not have the presumption to pick it up. In the following pages will be found the observations with which he might oppose them — there will be found his sling and his stone; but others, if they choose, may hurl them at the head of the classical Goliaths.

This said, let us pass on.

Let us set out from a fact. The same type of civilization, or to use a more exact, although more extended expression, the same society, has not always inhabited the earth. The human race as a whole has grown, has developed, has matured, like one of ourselves. It was once a child, it was once a man; we are now looking on at its impressive old age. Before the epoch which modern society has dubbed “ancient,” there was another epoch which the ancients called “fabulous,” but which it would be more accurate to call “primitive.” Behold then three great successive orders of things in civilization, from its origin down to our days. Now, as poetry is always superposed upon society, we propose to try to demonstrate, from the form of its society, what the character of the poetry must have been in those three great ages of the world — primitive times, ancient times, modern times.

In primitive times, when man awakes in a world that is newly created, poetry awakes with him. In the face of the marvellous things that dazzle and intoxicate him, his first speech is a hymn simply. He is still so close to God that all his meditations are ecstatic, all his dreams are visions. His bosom swells, he sings as he breathes. His lyre has but three strings — God, the soul, creation; but this threefold mystery envelopes everything, this threefold idea embraces everything. The earth is still almost deserted. There are families, but no nations; patriarchs, but no kings. Each race exists at its own pleasure; no property, no laws, no contentions, no wars. Everything belongs to each and to all. Society is a community. Man is restrained in nought. He leads that nomadic pastoral life with which all civilizations begin, and which is so well adapted to solitary contemplation, to fanciful reverie. He follows every suggestion, he goes hither and thither, at random. His thought, like his life, resembles a cloud that changes its shape and its direction according to the wind that drives it. Such is the first man, such is the first poet. He is young, he is cynical. Prayer is his sole religion, the ode is his only form of poetry.

This ode, this poem of primitive times, is Genesis.

By slow degrees, however, this youth of the world passes away. All the spheres progress; the family becomes a tribe, the tribe becomes a nation. Each of these groups of men camps about a common centre, and kingdoms appear. The social instinct succeeds the nomadic instinct. The camp gives place to the city, the tent to the palace, the ark to the temple. The chiefs of these nascent states are still shepherds, it is true, but shepherds of nations; the pastoral staff has already assumed the shape of a sceptre. Everything tends to become stationary and fixed. Religion takes on a definite shape; prayer is governed by rites; dogma sets bounds to worship. Thus the priest and king share the paternity of the people; thus theocratic society succeeds the patriarchal community.

Meanwhile the nations are beginning to be packed too closely on the earth’s surface. They annoy and jostle one another; hence the clash of empires — war. They overflow upon another; hence, the migrations of nations — voyages. Poetry reflects these momentous events; from ideas it proceeds to things. It sings of ages, of nations, of empires. It becomes epic, it gives birth to Homer.

Homer, in truth, dominates the society of ancient times. In that society, all is simple, all is epic. Poetry is religion, religion is law. The virginity of the earlier age is succeeded by the chastity of the later. A sort of solemn gravity is everywhere noticeable, in private manners no less than in public. The nations have retained nothing of the wandering life of the earlier time, save respect for the stranger and the traveller. The family has a fatherland; everything is connected therewith; it has the cult of the house and the cult of the tomb.

We say again, such a civilization can find its one expression only in the epic. The epic will assume diverse forms, but will never lose its specific character. Pindar is more priestlike than patriarchal, more epic than lyrical. If the chroniclers, the necessary accompaniments of this second age of the world, set about collecting traditions and begin to reckon by centuries, they labour to no purpose — chronology cannot expel poesy; history remains an epic. Herodotus is a Homer.

But it is in the ancient tragedy, above all, that the epic breaks out at every turn. It mounts the Greek stage without losing aught, so to speak, of its immeasurable, gigantic proportions. Its characters are still heroes, demigods, gods; its themes are visions, oracles, fatality; its scenes are battles, funeral rites, catalogues. That which the rhapsodists formerly sang, the actors declaim — that is the whole difference.

There is something more. When the whole plot, the whole spectacle of the epic poem have passed to the stage, the Chorus takes all that remains. The Chorus annotates the tragedy, encourages the heroes, gives descriptions, summons and expels the daylight, rejoices, laments, sometimes furnishes the scenery, explains the moral bearing of the subject, flatters the listening assemblage. Now, what is the Chorus, this anomalous character standing between the spectacle and the spectator, if it be not the poet completing his epic?

The theatre of the ancients is, like their dramas, huge, pontifical, epic. It is capable of holding thirty thousand spectators; the plays are given in the open air, in bright sunlight; the performances last all day. The actors disguise their voices, wear masks, increase their stature; they make themselves gigantic, like their roles. The stage is immense. It may represent at the same moment both the interior and the exterior of a temple, a palace, a camp, a city. Upon it, vast spectacles are displayed. There is — we cite only from memory — Prometheus on his mountain; there is Antigone, at the top of a tower, seeking her brother Polynices in the hostile army (*The Phoenicians*); there is Evadne hurling herself from a cliff into the flames where the body of Capaneus is burning (*The Suppliants* of Euripides); there is a ship sailing into port and landing fifty princesses with their retinues (*The Suppliants* of Aeschylus). Architecture, poetry, everything assumes a monumental character. In all antiquity there is nothing more solemn, more majestic. Its history and its religion are mingled on its stage. Its first actors are priests; its scenic performances are religious ceremonies, national festivals.

One last observation, which completes our demonstration of the epic character of this epoch: in the subjects which it treats, no less than in the forms it adopts, tragedy simply re-echoes the epic. All the ancient tragic authors derive their plots from Homer. The same fabulous exploits, the same catastrophes, the same heroes. One and all drink from the Homeric stream. The Iliad and Odyssey are always in evidence. Like Achilles dragging Hector at his chariot-wheel, the Greek tragedy circles about Troy.

But the age of the epic draws near its end. Like the society that it represents, this form of poetry wears itself out revolving upon itself. Rome reproduces Greece, Virgil copies Homer, and, as if to make a becoming end, epic poetry expires in the last parturition.

It was time. Another era is about to begin, for the world and for poetry.

A spiritual religion, supplanting the material and external paganism, makes its way to the heart of the ancient society, kills it, and deposits, in that corpse of a decrepit civilization, the germ of modern civilization. This religion as complete, because it is true; between its dogma and its cult, it embraces a deep-rooted moral. Arid first of all, as a fundamental truth, it teaches man that he has two lives to live, one ephemeral, the other immortal; one on earth, the other in heaven. It shows him that he, like his destiny, is twofold: that there is in him an animal and an intellect, a body and a soul; in a word, that he is the point of intersection, the common link of the two chains of beings which embrace all creation — of the chain of material beings and the chain of incorporeal beings; the first starting from the rock to arrive at man, the second starting from man to end at God.

A portion of these truths had perhaps been suspected by certain wise men of ancient times, but their full, broad, luminous revelation dates from the Gospels. The pagan schools walked in darkness, feeling their way, clinging to falsehoods as well as to truths in their haphazard journeying. Some of their philosophers occasionally cast upon certain subjects feeble gleams which illuminated but one side and made the darkness of the other side more profound. Hence all the phantoms created by ancient philosophy. None but divine wisdom was capable of substituting an even and all-embracing light for all those flickering rays of human wisdom. Pythagoras, Epicurus, Socrates, Plato, are torches: Christ is the glorious light of day.

Nothing could be more material, indeed, than the ancient theogony. Far from proposing, as Christianity does, to separate the spirit from the body, it ascribes form and features to everything, even to impalpable essences, even to the intelligence. In it everything is visible, tangible, fleshly. Its gods need a cloud to conceal themselves from men’s eyes. They eat, drink, and sleep. They are wounded and their blood flows; they are maimed, and lo! they limp forever after. That religion has gods and halves of gods. Its thunderbolts are forged on an anvil, and among other things three rays of twisted rain (*tres imbris torti radios*) enter into their composition. Its Jupiter suspends the world by a golden chain; its sun rides in a four-horse chariot; its hell is a precipice the brink of which is marked on the globe; its heaven is a mountain.

Thus paganism, which moulded all creations from the same clay, minimizes divinity and magnifies man. Homer’s heroes are of almost the same stature as his gods. Ajax defies Jupiter, Achilles is the peer of Mars. Christianity on the contrary, as we have seen, draws a broad line of division between spirit and matter. It places an abyss between the soul and the body, an abyss between man and God.

At this point — to omit nothing from the sketch upon which we have ventured — we will call attention to the fact that, with Christianity, and by its means, there entered into the mind of the nations a new sentiment, unknown to the ancients and marvellously developed among moderns, a sentiment which is more than gravity and less than sadness — melancholy. In truth, might not the heart of man, hitherto deadened by religions purely hierarchical and sacerdotal, awake and feel springing to life within it some unexpected faculty, under the breath of a religion that is human because it is divine, a religion which makes of the poor man’s prayer, the rich man’s wealth, a religion of equality, liberty and charity? Might it not see all things in a new light, since the Gospel had shown it the soul through the senses, eternity behind life?

Moreover, at that very moment the world was undergoing so complete a revolution that it was impossible that there should not be a revolution in men's minds. Hitherto the catastrophes of empires had rarely reached the hearts of the people; it was kings who fell, majesties that vanished, nothing more. The lightning struck only in the upper regions, and, as we have already pointed out, events seemed to succeed one another with all the solemnity of the epic. In the ancient society, the individual occupied so lowly a place that, to strike him, adversity must needs descend to his family. So that he knew little of misfortune outside of domestic sorrows. It was an almost unheard of thing that the general disasters of the state should disarrange his life. But the instant that Christian society became firmly established, the ancient continent was thrown into confusion. Everything was pulled up by the roots. Events, destined to destroy ancient Europe and to construct a new Europe, trod upon one another's heels in their ceaseless rush, and drove the nations pell-mell, some into the light, others into darkness. So much uproar ensued that it was impossible that some echoes of it should not reach the hearts of the people. It was more than an echo, it was a reflex blow. Man, withdrawing within himself in presence of these imposing vicissitudes, began to take pity upon mankind, to reflect upon the bitter disillusionments of life. Of this sentiment, which to Cato the heathen was despair, Christianity fashioned melancholy.

At the same time was born the spirit of scrutiny and curiosity. These great catastrophes were also great spectacles, impressive cataclysms. It was the North hurling itself upon the South; the Roman world changing shape; the last convulsive throes of a whole universe in the death agony. As soon as that world was dead, lo! clouds of rhetoricians, grammarians, sophists, swooped down like insects on its immense body. People saw them swarming and heard them buzzing in that seat of putrefaction. They vied with one another in scrutinizing, commenting, disputing. Each limb, each muscle, each fibre of the huge prostrate body was twisted and turned in every direction. Surely it must have been a keen satisfaction to those anatomists of the mind, to be able, at their debut, to make experiments on a large scale; to have a dead society to dissect, for their first "subject."

Thus we see melancholy and meditation, the demons of analysis and controversy, appear at the same moment, and, as it were, hand-in-hand. At one extremity of this era of transition is Longinus, at the other St. Augustine. We must beware of casting a disdainful eye upon that epoch wherein all that has since borne fruit was contained in germs; upon that epoch whose least eminent writers, if we may be pardoned a vulgar but expressive phrase, made fertilizer for the harvest that was to follow. The Middle Ages were grafted on the Lower Empire.

Behold, then, a new religion, a new society; upon this twofold foundation there must inevitably spring up a new poetry. Previously — we beg pardon for setting forth a result which the reader has probably already foreseen from what has been said above — previously, following therein the course pursued by the ancient polytheism and philosophy, the purely epic muse of the ancients had studied nature in only a single aspect, casting aside without pity almost everything in art which, in the world subjected to its imitation, had not relation to a certain, type of beauty. A type which was magnificent at first, but, as always happens with everything systematic, became in later times false, trivial and conventional. Christianity leads poetry to the truth. Like it, the modern muse will see things in a higher and broader light. It will realize that everything in creation is not humanly *beautiful*, that the ugly exists beside the beautiful, the unshapely beside the graceful, the grotesque on the reverse of the sublime, evil with good, darkness with light. It will ask itself if the narrow and relative sense of the artist should prevail over the infinite, absolute sense of the Creator; if it is for man to correct God; if a mutilated nature will be the more beautiful for the mutilation; if art has the right to duplicate, so to speak, man, life, creation; if things will progress better when their muscles and their vigour have been taken from them; if, in short, to be incomplete is the best way to be harmonious. Then it is that, with its eyes fixed upon events that are both laughable and redoubtable, and under the influence of that spirit of Christian melancholy and philosophical criticism which we described a moment ago, poetry will take a great step, a decisive step, a step which, like the upheaval of an earthquake, will change the whole face of the intellectual world. It will set about doing as nature does, mingling in its creations — but without confounding them — darkness and light, the grotesque and the sublime; in other words, the body and the soul, the beast and the intellect;

for the starting-point of religion is always the starting-point of poetry. All things are connected.

Thus, then, we see a principle unknown to the ancients, a new type, introduced in poetry; and as an additional element in anything modifies the whole of the thing, a new form of the art is developed. This type is the grotesque; its new form is comedy.

And we beg leave to dwell upon this point; for we have now indicated the significant feature, the fundamental difference which, in our opinion, separates modern from ancient art, the present form from the defunct form; or, to use less definite but more popular terms, *romantic* literature from *classical* literature.

“At last!” exclaim the people who for some time past *have seen what we were coming at*, “at last we have you — you are caught in the act. So then you put forward the ugly as a type for imitation, you make the *grotesque* an element of art. But the graces; but good taste! Don’t you know that art should correct nature? that we must *ennoble* art? that we must *select*? Did the ancients ever exhibit the ugly or the grotesque? Did they ever mingle comedy and tragedy? The example of the ancients, gentlemen! And Aristotle, too, and Boileau, and La Haipe Upon my word!”

These arguments are sound, doubtless, and, above all, of extraordinary novelty. But it is not our place to reply to them. We are constructing no system here — God protect us from systems! We are stating a fact. We are a his torian, not a critic. Whether the fact is agreeable or not matters little, it is a fact. Let us resume, therefore, and try to prove that it is of the fruitful union of the grotesque and the sublime types that modern genius is born — so complex, so diverse in its forms, so inexhaustible in its creations, and therein directly opposed to the uniform simplicity of the genius of the ancients, let us show that that is the point from which we must set out to establish the real and radical difference between the two forms of literature.

Not that it is strictly true that comedy and the grotesque were entirely unknown to the ancients. In fact, such a thing would be impossible. Nothing grows without a root, the germ of the second epoch always exists in the first. In the Iliad Thersites and Vulcan furnish comedy, one to the mortals, the other to the gods. There is too much nature and originality in the Greek tragedy for there not to be an occasional touch of comedy in it. For example, to cite only what we happen to recall, the scene between Menelaus and the portress of the palace. *(Helen*, Act I), and the scene of the Phrygian

(Orestes, Act IV) The Tritons, the Satyrs, the Cyclops are grotesque, Polyphemus is a terrifying, Silenus a farcical grotesque.

But one feels that this part of the art is still in its infancy. The epic, which at this period imposes its form on everything, the epic weighs heavily upon it and stifles it. The ancient grotesque is timid and forever trying to keep out of sight. It is plain that it is not on familiar ground, because it is not in its natural surroundings. It conceals itself as much as it can. The Satyrs, the Tritons, and the Sirens are hardly abnormal in form. The Fates and the Harpies are hideous in their attributes rather than in feature; the Furies are beautiful, and are called *Eumenides*, that is to say, *gentle, beneficent*. There is a veil of grandeur or of divinity over other grotesques. Polyphemus is a giant, Midas a king, Silenus a god.

Thus comedy is almost imperceptible in the great epic *ensemble* of ancient times. What is the barrow of Thespis beside the Olympian chariots? What are Aristophanes and Plautus, beside the Homeric colossi, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides? Homer bears them along with him, as Hercules bore the pygmies, hidden in his lion’s skin!

In the idea of men of modern times, however, the grotesque plays an enormous part. It is found everywhere; on the one hand it creates the abnormal and the horrible, on the other the comic and the burlesque. It fastens upon religion a thousand original superstitions, upon poetry a thousand picturesque fancies. It is the grotesque which scatters lavishly, in air, water, earth, fire, those myriads of intermediary creatures which we find all alive in the popular traditions of the Middle Ages; it is the grotesque which impels the ghastly antics of the witches’ revels, which gives Satan his horns, his cloven foot and his bat’s wings. It is the grotesque, still the grotesque, which now casts into the Christian hell the frightful faces which the severe genius of Dante and Milton will evoke, and again peoples it with those laughter-moving figures amid which Callot, the burlesque Michelangelo, will disport himself. If it passes from the world of imagination to the real world, it unfolds an inexhaustible supply of parodies of mankind. Creations of its fantasy are the Scaramouches, Crispins and Harlequins, grinning silhouettes of man, types altogether unknown to serious-minded antiquity, although they originated in classic Italy. It is the grotesque, lastly, which, colouring the same drama with the fancies of the North and of the South in turn, exhibits Sganarelle capering about Don Juan and Mephistopheles crawling about Faust.

And how free and open it is in its bearing! how boldly it brings into relief all the strange forms which the preceding age had timidly wrapped in swaddling-clothes! Ancient poetry, compelled to provide the lame Vulcan with companions, tried to disguise their deformity by distributing it, so to speak, upon gigantic proportions. Modern genius retains this myth of the supernatural smiths, but gives it an entirely different character and one which makes it even more striking; it changes the giants to dwarfs and makes gnomes of the Cyclops. With like originality, it substitutes for the somewhat commonplace Lernaean hydra all the local dragons of our national legends — the gargoyle of Rouen, the *gra-ouilli* of Metz, the *chair sallée* of Troyes, the *drée* of Montlhéry, the *tarasque* of Tarascon — monsters of forms so diverse, whose outlandish names are an additional attribute. All these creations draw from their own nature that energetic and significant expression before which antiquity seems sometimes to have recoiled. Certain it is that the Greek Eumenides are much less horrible, and consequently less *true,* than the witches in *Macbeth*. Pluto is not the devil.

In our opinion a most novel book might be written upon the employment of the grotesque in the arts. One might point out the powerful effects the moderns have obtained from that fruitful type, upon which narrow-minded criticism continues to wage war even in our own day. It may be that we shall be led by our subject to call attention in passing to some features of this vast picture. We will simply say here that, as a means of contrast with the sublime, the grotesque is, in our view, the richest source that nature can offer art. Rubens so understood it, doubtless, when it pleased him to introduce the hideous features of a court dwarf amid his exhibitions of royal magnificence, coronations and splendid ceremonial. The universal beauty which the ancients solemnly laid upon everything, is not without monotony; the same impression repeated again and again may prove fatiguing at last. Sublime upon sublime scarcely presents a contrast, and we need a little rest from everything, even the beautiful. On the other hand, the grotesque seems to be a halting-place, a mean term, a starting-point whence one rises toward the beautiful with a fresher and keener perception. The salamander gives relief to the water-sprite; the gnome heightens the charm of the sylph.

And it would be true also to say that contact with the abnormal has imparted to the modern sublime a something purer, grander, more sublime, in short, than the beautiful of the ancients; and that is as it should be. When art is consistent with itself, it guides everything more surely to its goal. If the Homeric Elysium is a long, long way from the ethereal charm, the angelic pleasureableness of Milton’s Paradise, it is because under Eden there is a hell far more terrible than the heathen Tartarus. Do you think that Francesca da Rimini and Beatrice would be so enchanting in a poet who should not confine us in the Tower of Hunger and compel us to share Ugolino’s revolting repast? Dante would have less charm, if he had less power. Have the fleshly naiads, the muscular Tritons, the wanton Zephyrs, the diaphanous transparency of our water-sprites and sylphs? Is it not because the modern imagination does not fear to picture the ghastly forms of vampires, ogres, ghouls, snake-charmers and jinns prowling about graveyards, that it can give to its fairies that incorporeal shape, that purity of essence, of which the heathen nymphs fall so far short? The antique Venus is beautiful, admirable, no doubt; but what has imparted to Jean Goujon’s faces that weird, tender, ethereal delicacy? What has given them that unfamiliar suggestion of life and grandeur, if not the proximity of the rough and powerful sculptures of the Middle Ages?

If the thread of our argument has not been broken in the reader’s mind by these necessary digressions — which in truth, might be developed much further — he has realized, doubtless, how powerfully the grotesque — that germ of comedy, fostered by the modern muse — grew in extent and importance as soon as it was transplanted to a soil more propitious than paganism and the Epic. In truth, in the new poetry, while the sublime represents the soul as it is, purified by Christian morality, the grotesque plays the part of the human beast. The former type, delivered of all impure alloy, has as its attributes all the charms, all the graces, all the beauties; it must be able some day to create Juliet, Desdemona, Ophelia. The latter assumes all the absurdities, all the infirmities, all the blemishes. In this partition of mankind and of creation, to it fall the passions, vices, crimes; it is sensuous, fawning, greedy, miserly, false, incoherent, hypocritical; it is, in turn, Iago, Tartuffe, Basile, Polonius, Harpagon, Bartholo, Falstaff, Scapin, Figaro. The beautiful has but one type, the ugly has a thousand. The fact is that the beautiful, humanly speaking, is merely form considered in its simplest aspect in its most perfect symmetry, in its most entire harmony with our make-up. Thus the *ensemble* that it offers us is always complete, but restricted like ourselves. What we call the ugly, on the contrary, is a detail of a great whole which eludes us, and which is in harmony, not with man but with all creation. That is why it constantly presents itself to us in new but incomplete aspects.

It is interesting to study the first appearance and the progress of the grotesque in modern times. At first, it is an invasion, an irruption, an overflow, as of a torrent that has burst its banks. It rushes through the expiring Latin literature, imparts some coloring to Persius, Petronius and Juvenal, and leaves behind it the *Golden Ass* of Apuleius. Thence it diffuses itself through the imaginations of the new nations that are remodelling Europe. It abounds in the work of the fabulists, the chroniclers, the romancists. We see it make its way from the South to the North. It disports itself in the dreams of the Teutonic nations, and at the same time vivifies with its breath the admirable Spanish *romanceros*, a veritable Iliad of the age of chivalry. For example, it is the grotesque which describes thus, in the *Roman de la Rose*, an august ceremonial, the election of a king: —

“A long-shanked knave they chose, I wis,
Of all their men the boniest.”

More especially it imposes its characteristic qualities upon that wonderful architecture which, in the Middle Ages, takes the place of all the arts. It affixes its mark on the façades of cathedrals, frames its hells and purgatories in the ogive arches of great doorways, portrays them in brilliant hues on window-glass, exhibits its monsters, its bull-dogs, its imps about capitals, along friezes, on the edges of roofs. It flaunts itself in numberless shapes on the wooden façades of houses, on the stone façades of châteaux, on the marble façades of palaces. From the arts it makes its way into the national manners, and while it stirs applause from the people for the *graciosos* of comedy, it gives to the kings court-jesters. Later, in the age of etiquette, it will show us Scarron on the very edge of Louis the Fourteenth’s bed. Meanwhile it decorates coats of-arms, and draws upon knight, shields the symbolic hieroglyphs of feudalism. From the manners, it makes its way into the laws, numberless strange customs at test its passage through the institutions of the Middle Ages. Just as it represented Thespis, smeared with wine-lees, leaping in her tomb it dances with the *Basoche* on the famous marble table which served at the same time as a stage for the popular farces and for the royal banquets. Finally, having made its way into the arts, the manners, and the laws, it enters even the Church. In every Catholic city we see it organizing some one of those curious ceremonies, those strange processions, wherein religion is attended by all varieties of superstition —

the sublime attended by all the forms of the grotesque. To paint it in one stroke, so great is its vigour, its energy, its creative sap, at the dawn of letters, that it casts, at the outset, upon the threshold of modern poetry, three burlesque Homers: Ariosto in Italy, Cervantes in Spain, Rabelais in France.

It would be mere surplusage to dwell further upon the influence of the grotesque in the third civilization. Every thing tends to show its close creative alliance with the beautiful in the so called “romantic” period. Even among the simplest popular legends there are none which do not somewhere, with an admirable instinct, solve this mystery of modern art. Antiquity could not have produced *Beauty and the Beast*.

It is true that at the period at which we have arrived the predominance of the grotesque over the sublime in literature is clearly indicated. But it is a spasm of reaction, an eager thirst for novelty, which is but temporary, it is an initial wave which gradually recedes. The type of the beautiful will soon resume its rights and its role, which is not to exclude the other principle, but to prevail over it. It is time that the grotesque should be content with a corner of the picture in Murillo’s loyal frescoes, in the sacred pages of Veronese, content to be introduced in two marvellous *Last Judgments*, in which art will take a just pride, in the scene of fascination and horror with which Michelangelo will embellish the Vatican, in those awe-inspiring represervations of the fall of man which Rubens will throw upon the arches of the Cathedral of Antwerp. The time has come when the balance between the two principles is to be established. A man, a poet-king, *poeta soverano*, as Dante calls Homer, is about to adjust everything. The two rival genii combine their flames, and thence issues Shakespeare.

We have now reached the poetic culmination of modern times. Shakespeare is the drama; and the drama, which with the same breath moulds the grotesque and the sublime, the terrible and the absurd, tragedy and comedy — the drama is the distinguishing characteristic of the third epoch of poetry, of the literature of the present day.

Thus, to sum up hurriedly the facts that we have noted thus far, poetry has three periods, each of which corresponds to an epoch of civilization: the ode, the epic, and the drama. Primitive times are lyrical, ancient times epical, modern times dramatic. The ode sings of eternity, the epic imparts solemnity to history, the drama depicts life. The characteristic of the first poetry is ingenuousness, of the second, simplicity, of the third, truth. The rhapsodists mark the transition from the lyric to the epic poets, as do the romancists that from the lyric to the dramatic poets. Historians appear in the second period, chroniclers and critics in the third. The characters of the ode are colossi — Adam, Cain, Noah; those of the epic are giants — Achilles, Atreus, Orestes; those of the drama are men — Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello. The ode lives upon the ideal, the epic upon the grandiose, the drama upon the real. Lastly, this threefold poetry flows from three great sources — The Bible, Homer, Shakespeare.

Such then — and we confine ourselves herein to noting a single result — such are the diverse aspects of thought in the different epochs of mankind and of civilization. Such are its three faces, in youth, in manhood, in old age. Whether one examines one literature by itself or all literatures *en masse*, one will always reach the same result: the lyric poets before the epic poets, the epic poets before the dramatic poets. In France, Malherbe before Chapelain, Chapelain before Corneille; in ancient Greece, Orpheus before Homer, Homer before Aeschylus; in the first of all books, *Genesis* before *Kings*, *Kings* before *Job*; or to come back to that monumental scale of all ages of poetry, which we ran over a moment since, The Bible before the *Iliad*, the *Iliad* before Shakespeare.

In a word, civilization begins by singing of its dreams, then narrates its doings, and, lastly, sets about describing what it thinks. It is, let us say in passing, because of this last, that the drama, combining the most opposed qualities, may be at the same time full of profundity and full of relief, philosophical and picturesque.

It would be logical to add here that everything in nature and in life passes through these three phases, the lyric, the epic, and the dramatic, because everything is born, acts, and dies. If it were not absurd to confound the fantastic conceits of the imagination with the stern deductions of the reasoning faculty, a poet might say that the rising of the sun, for example, is a hymn, noon-day a brilliant epic, and sunset a gloomy drama wherein day and night, life and death, contend for mastery. But that would be poetry — folly, perhaps — and *what does it prove*?

Let us hold to the facts marshalled above; let us supplement them, too, by an important observation, namely that we have in no wise pretended to assign exclusive limits to the three epochs of poetry, but simply to set forth their predominant characteristics. The Bible, that divine lyric monument, contains in germ, as we suggested a moment ago, an epic and a drama — *Kings* and *Job*. In the Homeric poems one is conscious of a clinging reminiscence of lyric poetry and of a beginning of dramatic poetry. Ode and drama meet in the epic. There is a touch of all in each; but in each there exists a generative element to which all the other elements give place, and which imposes its own character upon the whole.

The drama is complete poetry. The ode and the epic contain it only in germ; it contains both of them in a state of high development, and epitomizes both. Surely, he who said: “The French have not the epic brain,” said a true and clever thing; if he had said, “The moderns,” the clever remark would have been profound. It is beyond question, however, that there is epic genius in that marvellous *Athalie*, so exalted and so simple in its sublimity that the royal century was unable to comprehend it. It is certain, too, that the series of Shakespeare’s chronicle dramas presents a grand epic aspect. But it is lyric poetry above all that befits the drama; it never embarrasses it, adapts itself to all its caprices, disports itself in all forms, sometimes sublime as in Ariel, sometimes grotesque as in Caliban. Our era being above all else dramatic, is for that very reason eminently lyric. There is more than one connection between the beginning and the end; the sunset has some features of the sunrise; the old man becomes a child once more. But this second childhood is not like the first; it is as melancholy as the other is joyous. It is the same with lyric poetry. Dazzling, dreamy, at the dawn of civilization it reappears, solemn and pensive, at its decline. The Bible opens joyously with *Genesis* and comes to a close with the threatening *Apocalypse*. The modern ode is still inspired, but is no longer ignorant. It meditates more than it scrutinizes; its musing is melancholy. We see, by its painful labour, that the muse has taken the drama for her mate.

To make clear by a metaphor the ideas that we have ventured to put forth, we will compare early lyric poetry to a placid lake which reflects the clouds and stars; the epic is the stream which flows from the lake, and rushes on, reflecting its banks, forests, fields and cities, until it throws itself into the ocean of the drama. Like the lake, the drama reflects the sky; like the stream, it reflects its banks; but it alone has tempests and measureless depths.

The drama, then, is the goal to which everything in modern poetry leads. *Paradise Lost* is a drama before it is an epic. As we know, it first presented itself to the poet’s imagination in the first of these forms, and as a drama it always remains in the reader’s memory, so prominent is the old dramatic framework still beneath Milton's epic structure! When Dante had finished his terrible *Inferno*, when he had closed its doors and nought remained save to give his work a name, the unerring instinct of his genius showed him that that multiform poem was an emanation of the drama, not of the epic; and on the front of that gigantic monument, he wrote with his pen of bronze: *Divina Commedia*.

Thus we see that the only two poets of modern times who are of Shakespeare's stature follow him in unity of design They coincide with him in imparting a dramatic tinge to all our poetry, like him, they blend the grotesque with the sublime, and, far from standing by themselves in the great literary *ensemble* that rests upon Shakespeare, Dante and Milton are, in some sort, the two supporting abutments of the edifice of which he is the central pillar, the buttresses of the arch of which he is the keystone.

Permit us, at this point, to recur to certain ideas already suggested, which, however, it is necessary to emphasize. We have arrived, and now we must set out again.

On the day when Christianity said to man "Thou art twofold, thou art made up of two beings, one perishable, the other immortal, one carnal, the other ethereal, one enslaved by appetites, cravings and passions, the other borne aloft on the wings of enthusiasm and reverie — in a word, the one always stooping toward the earth, its mother, the other always darting up toward heaven, its fatherland" — on that day the drama was created. Is it in truth, anything other than that contrast of every day, that struggle of every moment, between two opposing principles which are ever face to face in life, and which dispute possession of man from the cradle to the tomb?

The poetry born of Christianity, the poetry of our time, is, therefore, the drama, the real results from the wholly natural combination of two types, the sublime and the grotesque, which meet in the drama, as they meet in life and in creation. For true poetry, complete poetry, consists in the harmony of contraries. Hence, it is time to say aloud — and it is here above all that exceptions prove the rule — that everything that exists in nature exists in art.

On taking one's stand at this point of view, to pass judgment on our petty conventional rules, to disentangle all those scholastic labyrinths, to solve all those trivial problems which the critics of the last two centuries have laboriously built up about the art, one is struck by the promptitude with which the question of the modern stage is made clear and distinct. The drama has but to take a step to break all the spider's webs with which the militia of Lilliput have attempted to fetter its sleep.

And so, let addle-pated pedants (one does not exclude the other) claim that the deformed, the ugly, the grotesque should never be imitated in art; one replies that the grotesque is comedy, and that comedy apparently makes a part of art. Tartuffe is not handsome, Pourceaugnac is not noble, but Pourceaugnac and Tartuffe are admirable flashes of art.

If, driven back from this entrenchment to their second line of custom-houses, they renew their prohibition of the grotesque coupled with the sublime, of comedy melted into tragedy, we prove to them that, in the poetry of Christian nations, the first of these two types represents the human beast, the second the soul. These two stalks of art, if we prevent their branches from mingling, if we persistently separate them, will produce by way of fruit, on the one hand abstract vices and absurdities, on the other, abstract crime, heroism and virtue. The two types, thus isolated and left to themselves, will go each its own way, leaving the real between them, at the left hand of one, at the right hand of the other. Whence it follows that after all these abstractions there will remain something to represent — man; after these tragedies and comedies, something to create — the drama.

In the drama, as it may be conceived at least, if not executed, all things are connected and follow one another as in real life. The body plays its part no less than the mind; and men and events, set in motion by this twofold agent, pass across the stage, burlesque and terrible in turn, and sometimes both at once. Thus the judge will say: “Off with his head and let us go to dinner!” Thus the Roman Senate will deliberate over Domitian's turbot. Thus Socrates, drinking the hemlock and discoursing on the immortal soul and the only God, will interrupt himself to suggest that a cook be sacrificed to *Aesculapius*. Thus Elizabeth will swear and talk Latin. Thus Richelieu will submit to Joseph the Capuchin, and Louis XI to his barber, Maître Olivier le Diable. Thus Cromwell will say: “I have Parliament in my bag and the King in my pocket”; or, with the hand that signed the death sentence of Charles the First, smear with ink the face of a regicide who smilingly returns the compliment. Thus Caesar, in his triumphal car, will be afraid of overturning. For men of genius, however great they be, have always within them a touch of the beast which mocks at their intelligence. Therein they are akin to mankind in general, for therein they are dramatic. “It is but a step from the sublime to the ridiculous,” said Napoleon, when he was convinced that he was mere man; and that outburst of a soul on fire illumines art and history at once; that cry of anguish is the résumé of the drama and of life.

It is a striking fact that all these contrasts are met with in the poets themselves, taken as men. By dint of meditating upon existence, of laying stress upon its bitter irony, of pouring floods of sarcasm and raillery upon our infirmities, the very men who make us laugh so heartily become profoundly sad. These Democrituses are Heraclituses as well. Beaumarchais was surly, Molière gloomy, Shakespeare melancholy.

The fact is, then, that the grotesque is one of the supreme beauties of the drama. It is not simply an appropriate element of it, but is oftentimes a necessity. Sometimes it appears in homogeneous masses, in entire characters, as Daudin, Prusias, Trissotin, Brid'oison, Juliet's nurse; sometimes impregnated with terror, as Richard III, Bégears, Tartuffe, Mephistopheles; sometimes, too, with a veil of grace and refinement, as Figaro, Osric, Mercutio, Don Juan. It finds its way in everywhere; for just as the most commonplace have their occasional moments of sublimity, so the most exalted frequently pay tribute to the trivial and ridiculous. Thus, often impalpable, often imperceptible, it is always present on the stage, even when it says nothing, even when it keeps out of sight. Thanks to it, there is no thought of monotony. Sometimes it injects laughter, sometimes horror, into tragedy. It will bring Romeo face to face with the apothecary, Macbeth with the witches, Hamlet with the grave-diggers. Sometimes it may, without discord, as in the scene between King Lear and his jester, mingle its shrill voice with the most sublime, the most dismal, the dreamiest music of the soul.

That is what Shakespeare alone among all has succeeded in doing, in a fashion of his own, which it would be no less fruitless than impossible to imitate — Shakespeare, the god of the stage, in whom, as in a trinity, the three characteristic geniuses of our stage, Corneille, Molière, Beaumarchais, seem united.

We see how quickly the arbitrary distinction between the species of poetry vanishes before common sense and taste. No less easily one might demolish the alleged rule of the two unities. We say *two* and not *three* unities, because unity of plot or of *ensemble*, the only true and well founded one, was long ago removed from the sphere of discussion.

Distinguished contemporaries, foreigners and Frenchmen, have already attacked, both in theory and in practice that fundamental law of the pseudo-Aristotelian code. Indeed, the combat was not likely to be a long one. At the first blow it cracked, so worm eaten was that timber of the old scholastic hovel!

The strange thing is that the slaves of routine pretend to rest their rule of the two unities on probability, whereas reality is the very thing that destroys it. Indeed, what could be more improbable and absurd than this porch or peristyle or ante-chamber — vulgar places where our tragedies are obliging enough to develop themselves; whither conspirators come, no one knows whence, to declaim against the tyrant, and the tyrant to declaim against the conspirators, each in turn, as if they had said to one another in bucolic phrase —

Alternis cantemus, amant alterna Camenae.

Where did anyone ever see a porch or peristyle of that sort? What could be more opposed — we will not say to the truth, for the scholastics hold it very cheap, but to probability? The result is that everything that is too characteristic, too intimate, too local, to happen in the ante chamber or on the street-corner — that is to say, the whole drama — takes place in the wings. We see on the stage only the elbows of the plot, so to speak; its hands are somewhere else. Instead of scenes we have narrative, instead of tableaux, descriptions. Solemn-faced characters, placed, as in the old chorus, between the drama and ourselves, tell us what is going on in the temple, in the palace, on the public square, until we are tempted many a time to call out to them: “Indeed! then take us there! It must be very entertaining — a fine sight!” To which they would reply no doubt: “It is quite possible that it might entertain or interest you, but that isn’t the question; we are the guardians of the dignity of the French Melpomene.” And there you are!

“But,” someone will say, “this rule that you discard is borrowed from the Greek drama.” Wherein, pray, do the Greek stage and drama resemble our stage and drama? Moreover, we have already shown that the vast extent of the ancient stage enabled it to include a whole locality, so that the poet could, according to the exigencies of the plot, transport it at his pleasure from one part of the stage to another, which is practically equivalent to a change of stage-setting. Curious contradiction! the Greek theatre, restricted as it was to a national and religious object, was much more free than ours, whose only object is the enjoyment, and, if you please, the instruction, of the spectator. The reason is that the one obeys only the laws that are suited to it, while the other takes upon itself conditions of existence which are absolutely foreign to its essence. One is artistic, the other artificial.

People are beginning to understand in our day that exact localization is one of the first elements of reality. The speaking or acting characters are not the only ones who engrave on the minds of the spectators a faithful representation of the facts. The place where this or that catastrophe took place becomes a terrible and inseparable witness thereof; and the absence of silent characters of this sort would make the greatest scenes of history incomplete in the drama. Would the poet dare to murder Rizzio elsewhere than in Mary Stuart’s chamber? to stab Henri IV elsewhere than in Rue de la Ferronerie, all blocked with drays and carriages? to burn Jeanne d’Arc elsewhere than in the Vieux-Marché? to despatch the Duc de Guise elsewhere than in that chateau of Blois where his ambition roused a popular assemblage to frenzy? to behead Charles I and Louis XVI elsewhere than in those ill-omened localities whence Whitehall or the Tuileries may be seen, as if their scaffolds were appurtenances of their palaces?

Unity of time rests on no firmer foundation than unity of place. A plot forcibly confined within twenty-four hours is as absurd as one confined within a peristyle. Every plot has its proper duration as well as its appropriate place. Think of administering the same dose of time to all events! of applying the same measure to everything! You would laugh at a cobbler who should attempt to put the same shoe on every foot. To cross unity of time and unity of place like the bars of a cage, and pedantically to introduce therein, in the name of Aristotle, all the deeds, all the nations, all the figures which Providence sets before us in such vast numbers in real life, — to proceed thus is to mutilate men and things, to cause history to make wry faces. Let us say, rather, that everything will die in the operation, and so the dogmatic mutilators reach their ordinary result: what was alive in the chronicles is dead in tragedy. That is why the cage of the unities often contains only a skeleton.

And then, if twenty-four hours can be comprised in two, it is a logical consequence that four hours may contain forty-eight. Thus Shakespeare’s unity must be different from Corneille’s. ’Tis pity!

But these are the wretched quibbles with which mediocrity, envy and routine has pestered genius for two centuries past! By such means the flight of our greatest poets has been cut short. Their wings have been clipped with the scissors of the unities. And what has been given us in exchange for the eagle feathers stolen from Corneille and Racine? Campistron.

We imagine that someone may say: “There is something in too frequent changes of scene which confuses and fatigues the spectator, and which produces a bewildering effect on his attention; it may be, too, that manifold transitions from place to place, from one time to another time, demand explanations which repel the attention; one should also avoid leaving, in the midst of a plot, gaps which prevent the different parts of the drama from adhering closely to one another, and which, moreover, puzzle the spectator because he does not know what there may be in those gaps.” But these are precisely the difficulties which art has to meet. These are some of the obstacles peculiar to one subject or another, as to which it would be impossible to pass judgment once for all. It is for genius to overcome, not for treatises or poetry to evade them.

A final argument, taken from the very bowels of the art, would of itself suffice to show the absurdity of the rule of the two unities. It is the existence of the third unity, unity of plot — the only one that is universally admitted, because it results from a fact: neither the human eye nor the human mind can grasp more than one *ensemble* at one time. This one is as essential as the other two are useless. It is the one which fixes the view-point of the drama; now, by that very fact, it excludes the other two. There can no more be three unities in the drama than three horizons in a picture. But let us be careful not to confound unity with simplicity of plot. The former does not in any way exclude the secondary plots on which the principal plot may depend. It is necessary only that these parts, being skilfully subordinated to the general plan, shall tend constantly toward the central plot and group themselves about it at the various stages, or rather on the various levels of the drama. Unity of plot is the stage law of perspective.

“But,” the customs-officers of thought will cry, “great geniuses have submitted to these rules which you spurn!” Unfortunately, yes. But what would those admirable men have done if they had been left to themselves? At all events they did not accept your chains without a struggle. You should have seen how Pierre Corneille, worried and harassed at his first step in the art on account of his marvellous work, *Le Cid*, struggled under Mairet, Claveret, d’Aubignac and Scudéri! How he denounced to posterity the violent attacks of those men, who, he says, made themselves “all white with

Aristotle!” You should read how they said to him — and we quote from books of the time: “Young man, you must learn before you teach; and unless one is a Scaliger or a Heinsius that is intolerable!” Thereupon Corneille rebels and asks if their purpose is to force him “much below Claveret.” Here Scudéri waxes indignant at such a display of pride, and reminds the “thrice great author of *Le Cid* of the modest words in which Tasso, the greatest man of his age, began his apology for the finest of his works against the bitterest and most unjust censure perhaps that will ever be pronounced. M. Corneille,” he adds, “shows in his replies that he is as far removed from that author’s moderation as from his merit.” The young man *so justly and gently reproved* dares to protest; thereupon Scudéri returns to the charge; he calls to his assistance the *Eminent Academy;* “Pronounce, O my Judges, a decree worthy of your eminence, which will give all Europe to know that *Le Cid* is not the chef-d’oeuvre of the greatest man in France, but the least judicious performance of M. Corneille himself. You are bound to do it, both for your own private renown; and for that of our people in general, who are concerned in this matter; inasmuch as foreigners who may see this precious masterpiece — they who have possessed a Tasso or a Guarini — might think that our greatest masters were no more than apprentices.”

These few instructive lines contain the everlasting tactics of envious routine against growing talent — tactics which are still followed in our own day, and which, for example, added such a curious page to the youthful essays of Lord Byron. Scudéri gives us its quintessence. In like manner the earlier works of a man of genius are always preferred to the newer ones, in order to prove that he is going down instead of up — *Melite and La Galerie du Palais* placed above *Le Cid*. And the names of the dead are always thrown at the heads of the living — Corneille stoned with Tasso and Guarini (Guarini!), as, later, Racine will be stoned with Corneille, Voltaire with Racine, and as to-day, everyone who shows signs of rising is stoned with Corneille, Racine and Voltaire. These tactics, as will be seen, are well-worn; but they must be effective as they are still in use. However, the poor devil of a great man still breathed. Here we cannot help but admire the way in which Scudéri, the bully of this tragic-comedy, forced to the wall, blackguards and maltreats him, how pitilessly he unmasks his classical artillery, how he shows the author of *Le Cid* “what the episodes should be, according to Aristotle, who tells us in the tenth and sixteenth chapters of his

Poetics"; how he crushes Corneille, in the name of the same Aristotle "in the eleventh chapter of his *Art of Poetry*, wherein we find the condemnation of *Le Cid*"; in the name of Plato, "in the tenth book of his *Republic*"; in the name of Marcellinus, "as may be seen in the twenty-seventh book"; in the name of "the tragedies of Niobe and Jephthah"; in the name of the "*Ajax* of Sophocles"; in the name of "the example of Euripides"; in the name of "Heinsius, chapter six of the *Constitution* of *Tragedy*; and the younger Scaliger in his poems"; and finally, in the name of the Canonists and Jurisconsults, under the title "Nuptials." The first arguments were addressed to the Academy, the last one was aimed at the Cardinal. After the pin-pricks the blow with a club. A judge was needed to decide the question. Chapelain gave judgment. Corneille saw that he was doomed; the lion was muzzled, or, as was said at the time, the crow (*Corneille*) was plucked. Now comes the painful side of this grotesque performance: after he had been thus quenched at his first flash, this genius, thoroughly modern, fed upon the Middle Ages and Spain, being compelled to lie to himself and to hark back to ancient times, drew for us that Castilian Rome, which is sublime beyond question, but in which, except perhaps in *Nicomede*, which was so ridiculed by the eighteenth century for its dignified and simple colouring, we find neither the real Rome nor the true Corneille.

Racine was treated to the same persecution, but did not make the same resistance. Neither in his genius nor in his character was there any of Corneille's lofty asperity. He submitted in silence and sacrificed to the scorn of his time his enchanting elegy of *Esther*, his magnificent epic, *Athalie*. So that we can but believe that, if he had not been paralyzed as he was by the prejudices of his epoch, if he had come in contact less frequently with the classic cramp-fish, he would not have failed to introduce Locuste in his drama between Narcisse and Neron, and above all things would not have relegated to the wings the admirable scene of the banquet at which Seneca's pupil poisons Britannicus in the cup of reconciliation. But can we demand of the bird that he fly under the receiver of an air-pump? What a multitude of beautiful scenes the *people of taste* have cost us, from Scudéri to La Harpe! A noble work might be composed of all that their scorching breath has withered in its germ. However, our great poets have found a way none the less to cause their genius to blaze forth through all these obstacles. Often the attempt to confine them behind walls of dogmas and rules is vain.

Like the Hebrew giant they carry their prison doors with them to the mountains.

But still the same refrain is repeated, and will be, no doubt, for a long while to come: “Follow the rules! Copy the models! It was the rules that shaped the models.” One moment! In that case there are two sorts of models, those which are made according to the rules, and, prior to them, those according to which the rules were made. Now, in which of these two categories should genius seek a place for itself? Although it is always disagreeable to come in contact with pedants, is it not a thousand times better to give them lessons than to receive lessons from them? And then — copy! Is the reflection equal to the light? Is the satellite which travels unceasingly in the same circle equal to the central creative planet? With all his poetry Virgil is no more than the moon of Homer.

And whom are we to copy, I pray to know? The ancients? We have just shown that their stage has nothing in common with ours. Moreover, Voltaire, who will have none of Shakespeare, will have none of the Greeks, either. Let him tell us why: “The Greeks ventured to produce scenes no less revolting to us. Hippolyte, crushed by his fall, counts his wounds and utters doleful cries. Philoctetes falls in his paroxysms of pain; black blood flows from his wound. Oedipus, covered with the blood that still drops from the sockets of the eyes he has torn out, complains bitterly of gods and men. We hear the shrieks of Clytemnestra, murdered by her own son, and Electra, on the stage, cries: ‘Strike! spare her not! she did not spare our father,’ Prometheus is fastened to a rock by nails driven through his stomach and his arms. The Furies reply to Clytemnestra’s bleeding shade with inarticulate roars. Art was in its infancy in the time of Aeschylus as it was in London in Shakespeare’s time.”

Whom shall we copy, then? The moderns? What! Copy copies! God forbid!

“But,” someone else will object, “according to your conception of the art, you seem to look for none but great poets, to count always upon genius.” Art certainly does not count upon mediocrity. It prescribes no rules for it, it knows nothing of it; in fact, mediocrity has no existence so far as art is concerned; art supplies wings, not crutches. Alas! D’Aubignac followed rules, Campistron copied models. What does it matter to art? It does not build its palaces for ants. It lets them make their ant-hill, without taking the trouble to find out whether they have built their burlesque imitation of its palace upon its foundation.

The critics of the scholastic school place their poets in a strange position. On the one hand they cry incessantly: “Copy the models!” On the other hand they have a habit of declaring that “the models are inimitable”! Now, if their craftsman, by dint of hard work, succeeds in forcing through this dangerous defile some colourless tracing of the masters, these ungrateful wretches, after examining the new *refaccimiento*, exclaim sometimes: “This doesn’t resemble anything!” and sometimes: “This resembles everything!” And by virtue of a logic made for the occasion each of these formulae is a criticism.

Let us then speak boldly. The time for it has come, and it would be strange if, in this age, liberty, like the light, should penetrate everywhere except to the one place where freedom is most natural — the domain of thought. Let us take the hammer to theories and poetic systems. Let us throw down the old plastering that conceals the facade of art. There are neither rules nor models; or, rather, there are no other rules than the general laws of nature, which soar above the whole field of art, and the special rules which result from the conditions appropriate to the subject of each composition. The former are of the essence, eternal, and do not change; the latter are variable, external, and are used but once. The former are the framework that supports the house; the latter the scaffolding which is used in building it, and which is made anew for each building. In a word, the former are the flesh and bones, the latter the clothing, of the drama. But these rules are not written in the treatises on poetry. Richelet has no idea of their existence. Genius, which divines rather than learns, devises for each work the general rules from the general plan of things, the special rules from the separate *ensemble* of the subject treated; not after the manner of the chemist, who lights the fire under his furnace, heats his crucible, analyzes and destroys; but after the manner of the bee, which flies on its golden wings, lights on each flower and extracts its honey, leaving it as brilliant and fragrant as before.

The poet — let us insist on this point — should take counsel therefore only of nature, truth, and inspiration which is itself both truth and nature. “Quando he,” says Lope de Vega,

“Quando he de escrivir una comedia,
Encierro los preceptos con seis llaves.”

To secure these precepts “six keys” are none too many, in very truth. Let the poet beware especially of copying anything whatsoever — Shakespeare no more than Molière, Schiller no more than Corneille. If genuine talent could abdicate its own nature in this matter, and thus lay aside its original personality, to transform itself into another, it would lose everything by playing this role of its own double. It is as if a god should turn valet. We must draw our inspiration from the original sources. It is the same sap, distributed through the soil, that produces all the trees of the forest, so different in bearing power, in fruit, in foliage. It is the same nature that fertilizes and nourishes the most diverse geniuses. The poet is a tree that may be blown about by all winds and watered by every fall of dew; and bears his works as his fruit, as the *fablier* of old bore his fables. Why attach one’s self to a master, or graft one’s self upon a model? It were better to be a bramble or a thistle, fed by the same earth as the cedar and the palm, than the fungus or the lichen of those noble trees. The bramble lives, the fungus vegetates. Moreover, however great the cedar and the palm may be, it is not with the sap one sucks from them that one can become great one’s self. A giant’s parasite will be at best a dwarf. The oak, colossus that it is, can produce and sustain nothing more than the mistletoe.

Let there be no misunderstanding: if some of our poets have succeeded in being great, even when copying, it is because, while forming themselves on the antique model, they have often listened to the voice of nature and to their own genius — it is because they have been themselves in some one respect. Their branches became entangled in those of the near-by tree, but their roots were buried deep in the soil of art. They were the ivy, not the mistletoe. Then came imitators of the second rank, who, having neither roots in the earth, nor genius in their souls, had to confine themselves to imitation. As Charles Nodier says: “After the school of Athens, the school of Alexandria.” Then there was a deluge of mediocrity; then there came a swarm of those treatises on poetry, so annoying to true talent, so convenient for mediocrity. We were told that everything was done, and God was forbidden to create more Molières or Corneilles. Memory was put in place of imagination. Imagination itself was subjected to hard-and-fast rules, and aphorisms were made about it: “To imagine,” says La Harpe, with his naive assurance, “is in substance to remember, that is all.”

But nature! Nature and truth! — And here, in order to prove that, far from demolishing art, the new ideas aim only to reconstruct it more firmly and on a better foundation, let us try to point out the impassable limit which in our opinion, separates reality according to art from reality according to nature. It is careless to confuse them as some ill-informed partisans of *romanticism* do. Truth in art cannot possibly be, as several writers have claimed, *absolute* reality. Art cannot produce the thing itself. Let us imagine, for example, one of those unreflecting promoters of absolute nature, of nature viewed apart from art, at the performance of a romantic play, say *Le Cid*. "What's that?" he will ask at the first word. "The Cid speaks in verse? It isn't *natural* to speak in verse."— "How would you have him speak, pray?"— "In prose." Very good. A moment later, "How's this!" he will continue, if he is consistent; "the Cid is speaking French!"— "Well?"— "Nature demands that he speak his own language; he can't speak anything but Spanish."

We shall fail entirely to understand, but again — very good. You imagine that this is all? By no means: before the tenth sentence in Castilian, he is certain to rise and ask if the Cid who is speaking is the real Cid, in flesh and blood. By what right does the actor, whose name is Pierre or Jacques, take the name of the Cid? That is *false*. There is no reason why he should not go on to demand that the sun should be substituted for the footlights, *real* trees and *real* houses for those deceitful wings. For, once started on that road, logic has you by the collar, and you cannot stop.

We must admit, therefore, or confess ourselves ridiculous, that the domains of art and of nature are entirely distinct. Nature and art are two things — were it not so, one or the other would not exist. Art, in addition to its idealistic side, has a terrestrial, material side. Let it do what it will, it is shut in between grammar and prosody, between Vaugelas and Richelet. For its most capricious creations, it has formulas, methods of execution, a complete apparatus to set in motion. For genius there are delicate instruments, for mediocrity, tools.

It seems to us that someone has already said that the drama is a mirror wherein nature is reflected. But if it be an ordinary mirror, a smooth and polished surface, it will give only a dull image of objects, with no relief-faithful, but colourless; everyone knows that colour and light are lost in a simple reflection. The drama, therefore, must be a concentrating mirror, which, instead of weakening, concentrates and condenses the coloured rays, which makes of a mere gleam a light, and of a light a flame. Then only is the drama acknowledged by art.

The stage is an optical point. Everything that exists in the world — in history, in life, in man — should be and can be reflected therein, but under the magic wand of art. Art turns the leaves of the ages, of nature, studies chronicles, strives to reproduce actual facts (especially in respect to manners and peculiarities, which are much less exposed to doubt and contradiction than are concrete facts), restores what the chroniclers have lopped off, harmonises what they have collected, divines and supplies their omissions, fills their gaps with imaginary scenes which have the colour of the time, groups what they have left scattered about, sets in motion anew the threads of Providence which work the human marionettes, clothes the whole with a form at once poetical and natural, and imparts to it that vitality of truth and brilliancy which gives birth to illusion, that prestige of reality which arouses the enthusiasm of the spectator, and of the poet first of all, for the poet is sincere. Thus the aim of art is almost divine: to bring to life again if it is writing history, to create if it is writing poetry.

It is a grand and beautiful sight to see this broad development of a drama wherein art powerfully seconds nature; of a drama wherein the plot moves on to the conclusion with a firm and unembarrassed step, without diffuseness and without undue compression; of a drama, in short, wherein the poet abundantly fulfills the multifold object of art, which is to open to the spectator a double prospect, to illuminate at the same time the interior and the exterior of mankind: the exterior by their speech and their acts, the interior, by asides and monologues; to bring together, in a word, in the same picture, the drama of life and the drama of conscience.

It will readily be imagined that, for a work of this kind, if the poet must *choose* (and he must), he should choose, not the *beautiful*, but the *characteristic*. Not that it is advisable to “make local colour,” as they say to-day; that is, to add as an afterthought a few discordant touches here and there to a work that is at best utterly conventional and false. The local colour should not be on the surface of the drama, but in its substance, in the very heart of the work, whence it spreads of itself, naturally, evenly, and, so to speak, into every corner of the drama, as the sap ascends from the root to the tree’s topmost leaf. The drama should be thoroughly impregnated with this colour of the time, which should be, in some sort, in the air, so that one detects it only on entering the theatre, and that on going forth one finds one’s self in a different period and atmosphere. It requires some study, some labour, to attain this end; so much the better. It is well that the avenues of art should be obstructed by those brambles from which everybody recoils except those of powerful will. Besides, it is this very study, fostered by an ardent inspiration, which will ensure the drama against a vice that kills it — the *commonplace*. To be commonplace is the failing of short-sighted, short-breathed poets. In this tableau of the stage, each figure must be held down to its most prominent, most individual, most precisely defined characteristic. Even the vulgar and the trivial should have an accent of their own. Like God, the true poet is present in every part of his work at once. Genius resembles the die which stamps the king's effigy on copper and golden coins alike.

We do not hesitate — and this will demonstrate once more to honest men how far we are from seeking to discredit the art — we do not hesitate to consider verse as one of the means best adapted to protect the drama from the scourge we have just mentioned, as one of the most powerful dams against the irruption of the commonplace, which, like democracy, is always flowing between full banks in men's minds. And at this point we beg the younger literary generation, already so rich in men and in works, to allow us to point out an error into which it seems to have fallen — an error too fully justified, indeed, by the extraordinary aberrations of the old school. The new century is at that growing age at which one can readily set one's self right.

There has appeared of late, like a penultimate branching-out of the old classical trunk, or, better still, like one of those excrescences, those polypi, which decrepitude develops, and which are a sign of decomposition much more than a proof of life — there has appeared a strange school of dramatic poetry. This school seems to us to have had for its master and its fountain-head the poet who marks the transition from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, the man of wearisome description and periphrases — that Delille who, they say, toward the close of his life, boasted, after the fashion of the Homeric catalogues, of having *made* twelve camels, four dogs, three horses, including Job's, six tigers, two cats, a chess-board, a backgammon-board, a checker-board, a billiard-table, several winters, many summers, a multitude of springs, fifty sunsets, and so many daybreaks that he had lost count of them.

Now, Delille went into tragedy. He is the father (he, and not Racine, God save the mark!) of an alleged school of refinement and taste which flourished until recently. Tragedy is not to this school what it was to Will

Shakespeare, say, a source of emotions of every sort, but a convenient frame for the solution of a multitude of petty descriptive problems which it propounds as it goes along. This muse, far from spurning, as the true French classic school does, the trivial and degrading things of life, eagerly seeks them out and brings them together. The grotesque, shunned as undesirable company by the tragedy of Louis the Fourteenth's day, cannot pass unnoticed before her. *It must be described*, that is to say, ennobled. A scene in the guard-house, a popular uprising, the fish-market, the galleys, the wine-shop, the *poule au pot* of Henri Quatre, are treasure-trove in her eyes. She seizes upon this canaille, washes it clean, and sews her tinsel and spangles over its villainies; *purpureus assuitur pannus*. Her object seems to be to deliver patents of nobility to all these *roturiers* of the drama; and each of these patents under the great seal is a speech.

This muse, as may be imagined, is of a rare prudery. Wonted as she is to the caresses of periphrasis, plain-speaking, if she should occasionally be exposed to it, would horrify her. It does not accord with her dignity to speak naturally. She *underlines* old Corneille for his blunt way of speaking, as in, —

"*A heap of men* ruined by debt and crimes."

"Chimène, *who'd have thought it*? Rodrigue, *who'd have said it*?"

"When their Flaminius *haggled with* Hannibal."

"Oh! do not *embroil* me with the Republic."

She still has her "Tout beau, monsieur!" on her heart. And it needed many "seigneurs" and "madames" to procure forgiveness for our admirable Racine for his monosyllabic "dogs!" and for so brutally bestowing Claudius in Agrippina's bed.

This Melpomene, as she is called, would shudder at the thought of touching a chronicle. She leaves to the costumer the duty of learning the period of the dramas she writes. In her eyes history is bad form and bad taste. How, for example, can one tolerate kings and queens who swear? They must be elevated from mere regal dignity to tragic dignity. It was in a promotion of this sort that she exalted Henri IV. It was thus that the people's king, purified by M. Legouvé, found his "ventre-saint-gris" ignominiously banished from his mouth by two sentences, and that he was reduced, like the girl in the old *fabliau*, to the necessity of letting fall from those royal lips only pearls and sapphires and rubies: the apotheosis of falsity, in very truth.

The fact is that nothing is so commonplace as this conventional refinement and nobility. Nothing original, no imagination, no invention in this style; simply what one has seen everywhere — rhetoric, bombast, commonplaces, flowers of college eloquence, poetry after the style of Latin verses. The poets of this school are eloquent after the manner of stage princes and princesses, always sure of finding in the costumer's labelled cases, cloaks and pinchbeck crowns, which have no other disadvantage than that of having been used by everybody. If these poets never turn the leaves of the Bible, it is not because they have not a bulky book of their own, the *Dictionnaire de rimes*. That is the source of their poetry — *fontes aquarum*.

It will be seen that, in all this, nature and truth get along as best they can. It would be great good luck if any remnants of either should survive in this cataclysm of false art, false style, false poetry. This is what has caused the errors of several of our distinguished reformers. Disgusted by the stiffness, the ostentation, the *pomposo*, of this alleged dramatic poetry, they have concluded that the elements of our poetic language were incompatible with the natural and the true. The Alexandrine had wearied them so often, that they condemned it without giving it a hearing, so to speak, and decided, a little hastily, perhaps, that the drama should be written in prose.

They were mistaken. If in fact the false is predominant in the style as well as in the action of certain French tragedies, it is not the verses that should be held responsible therefore, but the versifiers. It was needful to condemn, not the form employed, but those who employed it: the workmen, not the tool.

To convince one's self how few obstacles the nature of our poetry places in the way of the free expression of all that is true, we should study our verse, not in Racine, perhaps, but often in Corneille and always in Molière. Racine, a divine poet, is elegiac, lyric, epic; Molière is dramatic. It is time to deal sternly with the criticisms heaped upon that admirable style by the wretched taste of the last century, and to proclaim aloud that Molière occupies the topmost pinnacle of our drama, not only as a poet, but also as a writer. *Palmas vere habet iste duas*.

In his work the verse surrounds the idea, becomes of its very essence, compresses and develops it at once, imparts to it a more slender, more definite, more complete form, and gives us, in some sort, an extract thereof. Verse is the optical form of thought. That is why it is especially adapted to the perspective of the stage. Constructed in a certain way, it communicates its relief to things which, but for it, would be considered insignificant and trivial. It makes the tissue of style finer and firmer. It is the knot which stays the thread. It is the girdle which holds up the garment and gives it all its folds. What could nature and the true lose, then, by entering into verse? We ask the question of our prose-writers themselves — what do they lose in Molière’s poetry? Does wine — we beg pardon for another trivial illustration — does wine cease to be wine when it is bottled?

If we were entitled to say what, in our opinion, the style of dramatic poetry should be, we would declare for a free, outspoken, sincere verse, which dares say everything without prudery, express its meaning without seeking for words; which passes naturally from comedy to tragedy, from the sublime to the grotesque; by turns practical and poetical, both artistic and inspired, profound and impulsive, of wide range and true; verse which is apt opportunely to displace the caesura, in order to disguise the monotony of Alexandrines; more inclined to the *enjambement* that lengthens the line, than to the inversion of phrases that confuses the sense; faithful to rhyme, that enslaved queen, that supreme charm of our poetry, that creator of our metre; verse that is inexhaustible in the verity of its turns of thought, unfathomable in its secrets of composition and of grace; assuming, like Proteus, a thousand forms without changing its type and character; avoiding long speeches; taking delight in dialogue; always hiding behind the characters of the drama; intent, before everything, on being in its place, and when it falls to its lot to be *beautiful*, being so only by chance, as it were, in spite of itself and unconsciously; lyric, epic, dramatic, at need; capable of running through the whole gamut of poetry, of skipping from high notes to low, from the most exalted to the most trivial ideas, from the most extravagant to the most solemn, from the most superficial to the most abstract, without ever passing beyond the limits of a spoken scene; in a word, such verse as a man would write whom a fairy had endowed with Corneille’s mind and Molière’s brain. It seems to us that such verse would be *as fine as prose*.

There would be nothing in common between poetry of this sort and that of which we made a *post mortem* examination just now. The distinction will be easy to point out if a certain man of talent, to whom the author of this book is under personal obligation, will allow us to borrow his clever phrase: the other poetry was descriptive, this would be picturesque.

Let us repeat, verse on the stage should lay aside all self-love, all exigence, all coquetry. It is simply a form, and a form which should admit everything, which has no laws to impose on the drama, but on the contrary should receive everything from it, to be transmitted to the spectator — French, Latin, texts of laws, royal oaths, popular phrases, comedy, tragedy, laughter, tears, prose and poetry. Woe to the poet whose verse does not speak out! But this form is a form of bronze which encases the thought in its metre beneath which the drama is indestructible, which engraves it more deeply on the actor's mind, warns him of what he omits and of what he adds, prevents him from changing his role, from substituting himself for the author, makes each word sacred, and causes what the poet has said to remain vivid a long while in the hearer's memory. The idea, when steeped in verse, suddenly assumes a more incisive, more brilliant quality.

One feels that prose, which is necessarily more timid, obliged to wean the drama from anything like epic or lyric poetry, reduced to dialogue and to matter-of-fact, is a long way from possessing these resources. It has much narrower wings. And then, too, it is much more easy of access; mediocrity is at its ease in prose; and for the sake of a few works of distinction such as have appeared of late, the art would very soon be overloaded with abortions and embryos. Another faction of the reformers incline to drama written in both prose and verse, as Shakespeare composed it. This method has its advantages. There might, however, be some incongruity in the transitions from one form to the other; and when a tissue is homogeneous it is much stouter. However, whether the drama should be written in prose is only a secondary question. The rank of a work is certain to be fixed, not according to its form, but according to its intrinsic value. In questions of this sort, there is only one solution. There is but one weight that can turn the scale in the balance of art — that is genius.

Meanwhile, the first, the indispensable merit of a dramatic writer, whether he write in prose or verse, is correctness. Not a mere superficial correctness, the merit or defect of the descriptive school, which makes Lhomond and Restaut the two wings of its Pegasus; but that intimate, deep-rooted, deliberate correctness, which is permeated with the genius of a language, which has sounded its roots and searched its etymology; always unfettered, because it is sure of its footing, and always more in harmony with the logic of the language. Our Lady Grammar leads the one in leading-strings; the other holds grammar in leash. It can venture anything, can create or invent its style; it has a right to do so. For, whatever certain men may have said who did not think what they were saying, and among whom we must place, notably, him who writes these lines, the French tongue is not *fixed* and never will be. A language does not become fixed. The human intellect is always on the march, or, if you prefer, in movement, and languages with it. Things are made so. When the body changes, how could the coat not change? The French of the nineteenth century can no more be the French of the eighteenth, than that is the French of the seventeenth, or than the French of the seventeenth is that of the sixteenth. Montaigne's language is not Rabelais's, Pascal's is not Montaigne's, Montesquieu's is not Pascal's. Each of the four languages, taken by itself, is admirable because it is original. Every age has its own ideas; it must have also words adapted to those ideas. Languages are like the sea, they move to and fro incessantly. At certain times they leave one shore of the world of thought and overflow another. All that their waves thus abandon dries up and vanishes. It is in this wise that ideas vanish, that words disappear. It is the same with human tongues as with everything. Each age adds and takes away something. What can be done? It is the decree of fate. In vain, therefore, should we seek to petrify the mobile physiognomy of our idiom in a fixed form. In vain do our literary Joshuas cry out to the language to stand still; languages and the sun do not stand still. The day when they become *fixed*, they are dead. — That is why the French of a certain contemporary school is a dead language.

Such are, substantially, but without the more elaborate development which would make the evidence in their favour more complete, the *present* ideas of the author of this book concerning the drama. He is far, however, from presuming to put forth his first dramatic essay as an emanation of these ideas, which, on the contrary, are themselves, it may be, simply results of its execution. It would be very convenient for him, no doubt, and very clever, to rest his book on his preface, and to defend each by the other. He prefers less cleverness and more frankness. He proposes, therefore, to be the first to point out the extreme tenuity of the thread connecting this preface with his drama His first plan, dictated by his laziness, was to give the work to the public entirely unattended *el demonio sin las cuernas*, as Yriarte said It was only after he had duly brought it to a close, that at the solicitations of a few friends, blinded by their friendship, no doubt, he determined to reckon with himself in a preface — to draw, so to speak, a map of the poetic voyage he had made, to take account of the acquisitions, good or bad, that he had brought home, and of the new aspects in which the domain of art had presented itself to his mind Someone will take advantage of this admission, doubtless to repeat the reproach already uttered by a critic in Germany, that he has written “a treatise in defence of his poetry.” What does it matter? In the first place he was much more inclined to demolish treatises on poetry than to write them. And then, would it not he better always to write treatises based on a poem, than to write poems based on a treatise? But no, we repeat that he has neither the talent to create nor the presumption to put forth systems “Systems,” cleverly said Voltaire, “are like rats which pass through twenty holes, only to find at last two or three which will not let them through.” It would have been, therefore, to undertake a useless task and one much beyond his strength What he has pleaded, on the contrary, is the freedom of art against the despotism of systems, codes and rules It is his habit to follow at all risks whatever he takes for his inspiration, and to change moulds as often as he changes metals. Dogmatism in the arts is what he shuns before everything God forbid that he should aspire to be numbered among those men, be they romanticists or classicists, who compose *works according to their own systems*, who condemn themselves to have but one form in their minds, to be forever *proving* something, to follow other laws than those of their temperaments and then natures. The artificial work of these men, however talented they may be, has no existence so far as art is concerned. It is a theory, not poetry.

Having attempted, in all that has gone before, to point out what, in our opinion, was the origin of the drama, what its character is, and what its style should he, the time has come to descend from these exalted general considerations upon the art to the particular case which has led us to put them forth. It remains for us to discourse to the reader of our work, of this *Cromwell*; and as it is not a subject in which we take pleasure, we will say very little about it in very few words.

Oliver Cromwell is one of those historical characters who are at once very famous and very little known. Most of his biographers — and among them there are some who are themselves historical — have left that colossal figure incomplete. It would seem that they dared not assemble all the characteristic features of that strange and gigantic prototype of the religious reformation, of the political revolution of England. Almost all of them have confined themselves to reproducing on a larger scale the simple and ominous profile drawn by Bossuet from his Catholic and monarchical standpoint, from his episcopal pulpit supported by the throne of Louis XIV.

Like everybody else, the author of this book went no further than that. The name of Oliver Cromwell suggested to him simply the bare conception of a fanatical regicide and a great captain. Only on prowling among the chronicles of the times, which he did with delight, and on looking through the English memoirs of the seventeenth century, was he surprised to find that a wholly new Cromwell was gradually exposed to his gaze. It was no longer simply Bossuet's Cromwell the soldier, Cromwell the politician; it was a complex, heterogenous, multiple being, made up of all sorts of contraries — a mixture of much that was evil and much that was good, of genius and pettiness; a sort of Tiberius-Dandin, the tyrant of Europe and the plaything of his family; an old regicide, who delighted to humiliate the ambassadors of all the kings of Europe, and was tormented by his young royalist daughter; austere and gloomy in his manners, yet keeping four court jesters about him; given to the composition of wretched verses; sober, simple, frugal, yet a stickler for etiquette; a rough soldier and a crafty politician; skilled in theological disputation and very fond of it; a dull, diffuse, obscure orator, but clever in speaking the language of anybody whom he wished to influence; a hypocrite and a fanatic; a visionary swayed by phantoms of his childhood, believing in astrologers and banishing them; suspicious to excess, always threatening, rarely sanguinary; a strict observer of Puritan rules, and solemnly wasting several hours a day in buffoonery; abrupt and contemptuous with his intimates, caressing with the secretaries whom he feared, holding his remorse at bay with sophistry, paltering with his conscience, inexhaustible in adroitness, in tricks, in resources; mastering his imagination by his intelligence; grotesque and sublime; in a word, one of those men who are “square at the base,” as they were described by Napoleon, himself their chief, in his mathematically exact and poetically figurative language.

He who writes these lines, in presence of this rare and impressive *ensemble*, felt that Bossuet's impassioned sketch was no longer sufficient for him. He began to walk about that lofty figure, and he was seized by a powerful temptation to depict the giant in all his aspects. It was a rich soil. Beside the man of war and the statesman, it remained to draw the theologian, the pedant, the wretched poet, the seer of visions, the buffoon, the father, the husband, the human Proteus — in a word, the twofold Cromwell, *homo et vir*.

There is one period of his life, especially, in which this strange personality exhibits itself in all its forms. It is not as one might think at first blush, the period of the trial of Charles I, instinct as that is with depressing and terrible interest; but it is the moment when the ambitious mortal boldly attempted to pluck the fruit of that monarch's death; it is the moment when Cromwell, having attained what would have been to any other man the zenith of fortune — master of England, whose innumerable factions knelt silently at his feet; master of Scotland, of which he had made a satrapy, and of Ireland, which he had turned into a prison; master of Europe through his diplomacy and his fleets — seeks to fulfil the dream of his earliest childhood, the last ambition of his life; to make himself king. History never had a more impressive lesson in a more impressive drama. First of all, the Protector arranges to be urged to assume the crown: the august farce begins by addresses from municipalities, from counties; then there comes an act of Parliament. Cromwell, the anonymous author of the play, pretends to be displeased; we see him put out a hand toward the sceptre, then draw it back; by a devious path he draws near the throne from which he has swept the legitimate dynasty. At last he makes up his mind, suddenly; by his command Westminster is decked with flags, the dais is built, the crown is ordered from the jewelers, the day is appointed for the ceremony. — Strange dénouement! On that very day, in presence of the populace, the troops, the House of Commons, in the great hall of Westminster, on that dais from which he expected to descend as king, suddenly, as if aroused by a shock, he seems to awaken at the sight of the crown, asks if he is dreaming, and what the meaning is of all this regal pomp, and in a speech that lasts three hours declines the kingly title.

Was it because his spies had warned him of two conspiracies formed by Cavaliers and Puritans in concert, which were intended, taking advantage of this misstep, to break out on the same day? Was it an inward revolution caused by the silence or the murmurs of the populace, discomposed to see their regicide ascend the throne? Or was it simply the sagacity of genius, the instinct of a far-seeing, albeit unbridled ambition, which realizes how one step forward changes a man's position and attitude, and which dares not expose its plebeian structure to the wind of unpopularity? Was it all these at once? This is a question which no contemporaneous document answers satisfactorily. So much the better: the poet's liberty is the more complete, and the drama is the gainer by the latitude which history affords it. It will be seen that here the latitude is ample and unique; this is, in truth, the decisive hour, the turning-point in Cromwell's life. It is the moment when his chimera escapes from him, when the present kills the future, when, to use an expressive colloquialism, his destiny *misses fire*. All of Cromwell is at stake in the comedy being played between England and himself.

Such then is the man and such the period of which we have tried to give an idea in this book.

The author has allowed himself to be seduced by the childlike diversion of touching the keys of that great harpsichord. Unquestionably, more skillful hands might have evoked a thrilling and profound melody — not of those which simply caress the ear — but of those intimate harmonies which stir the whole man to the depths of his being, as if each key of the key-board were connected with a fibre of the heart. He has surrendered to the desire to depict all those fanaticisms, all those superstitions — maladies to which religion is subject at certain epochs; to the longing to "make playthings of all these men," as Hamlet says. To set in array about and below Cromwell, himself the centre and pivot of that court, of that people, of that little world, which attracts all to his cause and inspires all with his vigour, that twofold conspiracy devised by two factions which detest each other, but join hands to overthrow the man who blocks their path, but which unite simply without blending; and that Puritan faction, of divers minds, fanatical, gloomy, unselfish, choosing for leader the most insignificant of men for such a great part, the egotistical and cowardly Lambert; and the faction of the Cavaliers, featherheaded, merry, unscrupulous, reckless, devoted, led by the man who, aside from his devotion to the cause, was least fitted to represent it, the stern and upright Ormond; and those ambassadors, so humble and fawning before the soldier of fortune; and the court itself, an extraordinary mixture of upstarts and great nobles vying with one another in baseness; and the four jesters whom the contemptuous neglect of history permitted me to invent; and Cromwell's family, each member of which is as a thorn in his flesh; and Thurloe, the Protector's Achates; and the Jewish rabbi, Israel Ben-Manasseh, spy, usurer, and astrologer, vile on two sides, sublime on the third; and Rochester, the unique Rochester, absurd and clever, refined and crapulous, always cursing, always in love, and always tipsy, as he himself boasted to Bishop Burnet —

wretched poet and gallant gentleman, vicious and ingenuous, staking his head and indifferent whether he wins the game provided it amuses him — in a word, capable of everything, of ruse and recklessness, calculation and folly, villainy and generosity; and the morose Carr, of whom history describes but one trait, albeit a most characteristic and suggestive one; and those other fanatics, of all ranks and varieties: Harrison, the thieving fanatic; Barebones the shopkeeping fanatic; Syndercomb, the bravo; Garland the tearful and pious assassin; gallant Colonel Overton, intelligent but a little declamatory; the austere and unbending Ludlow, who left his ashes and his epitaph at Lausanne; and lastly, "Milton and a few other men of mind," as we read in a pamphlet of 1675 (*Cromwell the Politician*), which reminds one of "a certain Dante" of the Italian chronicle.

We omit many less important characters, of each of whom, however, the actual life is known, and each of whom has his marked individuality, and all of whom contributed to the fascination which this vast historical scene exerted upon the author's imagination. From that scene he constructed this drama. He moulded it in verse, because he preferred to do so. One will discover on reading it how little thought he gave to his work while writing this preface — with what disinterestedness, for instance, he contended against the dogma of the unities. His drama does not leave London; it begins on June 25, 1657, at three in the morning, and ends on the 26th at noon. Observe that he has almost followed the classic formula, as the professors of poetry lay it down to-day. They need not, however, thank him for it. With the permission of history, not of Aristotle, the author constructed his drama thus; and because, when the interest is the same, he prefers a compact subject to a widely diffused one.

It is evident that, in its present proportions, this drama could not be given at one of our theatrical performances. It is too long. The reader will perhaps comprehend, none the less, that every part of it was written for the stage. It was on approaching his subject to study it that the author recognized, or thought that he recognized, the impossibility of procuring the performance of a faithful reproduction of it on our stage, in the exceptional position it now occupies, between the academic Charybdis and the administrative Scylla, between the literary juries and the political censorship. He was required to choose: either the wheedling, tricky, false tragedy, which may be acted, or the audaciously true drama, which is prohibited. The first was not worth the trouble of writing, so he preferred to attempt the second. That is why, hopeless of ever being put on the stage, he abandoned himself, freely and submissively, to the whims of composition, to the pleasure of painting with a freer hand, to the developments which his subject demanded, and which, even if they keep his drama off the stage, have at all events the advantage of making it almost complete from the historical standpoint. However, the reading committees are an obstacle of the second class only. If it should happen that the dramatic censorship, realizing how far this harmless, conscientious and accurate picture of Cromwell and his time is removed from our own age, should sanction its production on the stage, in that case, but only in that case, the author might perhaps extract from this drama a play which would venture to show itself on the boards, and would be hissed.

Until then he will continue to hold aloof from the theatre. And even then he will leave his cherished and tranquil retirement soon enough, for the agitation and excitement of this new world. God grant that he may never repent of having exposed the unspotted obscurity of his name and his person to the shoals, the squalls and tempests of the pit, and above all (for what does a mere failure matter?) to the wretched bickerings of the wings; of having entered that shifting, foggy, stormy atmosphere, where ignorance dogmatises, where envy hisses, where cabals cringe and crawl, where the probity of talent has so often been misrepresented, where the noble innocence of genius is sometimes so out of place, where mediocrity triumphs in lowering to its level the superiority which obscures it, where one finds so many small men for a single great one, so many nobodies for one Talma, so many myrmidons for one Achilles! This sketch will seem ill-tempered perhaps, and far from flattering; but does it not fully mark out the distance that separates our stage, the abode of intrigues and uproar, from the solemn serenity of the ancient stage?

Whatever may happen, he feels bound to warn in advance that small number of persons whom such a production might attract, that a play made up of excerpts from *Cromwell* would occupy no less time then is ordinarily occupied by a theatrical performance. It is difficult for a *romantic* theatre to maintain itself otherwise. Surely, if people desire something different from the tragedies in which one or two characters, abstract types of a purely metaphysical idea, stalk solemnly about on a narrow stage occupied only by a few confidents, colourless reflections of the heroes, employed to fill the gaps in a simple, unified, single-stringed plot; if that sort of thing has grown tiresome, a whole evening is not too much time to devote to delineating with some fullness a man among men, a whole critical period: the one, with his peculiar temperament, his genius which adapts itself thereto, his beliefs which dominate them both, his passions which throw out of gear his temperament, his genius and his beliefs, his tastes which give colour to his passions, his habits which regulate his tastes and muzzle his passions, and with the innumerable procession of men of every sort whom these various elements keep in constant commotion about him; the other, with its manners, its laws, its fashions, its wit, its attainments, its superstitions, its events, and its people, whom all these first causes in turn mould like soft wax. It is needless to say that such a picture will be of huge proportions. Instead of one personality, like that with which the abstract drama of the old school is content, there will be twenty, forty, fifty, — who knows how many? — of every size and of every degree of importance. There will be a crowd of characters in the drama. Would it not be niggardly to assign it two hours only, and give up the rest of the performance to opera-comique or farce? to cut Shakespeare for Bobèche? — And do not imagine that, if the plot is well adjusted, the multitude of characters set in motion will cause fatigue to the spectator or confusion in the drama. Shakespeare, abounding in petty details, is at the same time, and for that very reason, imposing by the grandeur of the *ensemble.* It is the oak which casts a most extensive shadow with its myriads of slender leaves.

Let us hope that people in France will ere long become accustomed to devote a whole evening to a single play. In England and Germany there are plays that last six hours. The Greeks, about whom we hear so much, the Greeks — and after the fashion of Scudéri we will cite at this point the classicist Dacier, in the seventh chapter of his *Poetics* — the Greeks sometimes went so far as to have twelve or sixteen plays acted in a single day. Among a people who are fond of spectacles the attention is more lively than is commonly believed The *Mariage de Figaro,* the connecting link of Beaumarchais’s great trilogy, occupies the whole evening, and who was ever bored or fatigued by it Beaumarchais was worthy to venture on the first step toward that goal of modern art at which it will be impossible to arrive in two hours, that profound, insatiable interest which results from a vast, lifelike and multiform plot. “But,” someone will say, “this performance, consisting of a single play, would be monotonous, would seem terribly long” — Not so. On the contrary it would lose its present monotony and tediousness. For what is done now? The spectator's entertainment is divided into two or three sharply defined parts. At first he is given two hours of serious enjoyment, then one hour of hilarious enjoyment, these, with the hour of entr' actes, which we do not include in the enjoyment make four hours What would the romantic drama do? It would mingle and blend artistically these two kinds of enjoyment. It would lead the audience constantly from sobriety to laughter, from mirthful excitement to heart breaking emotion, "from grave to gay, from pleasant to severe." For, as we have already proved, the drama is the grotesque in conjunction with the sublime, the soul within the body, it is tragedy beneath comedy. Do you not see that, by affording you repose from one impression by means of another, by sharpening the tragic upon the comic, the merry upon the terrible, and at need calling in the charms of the opera, these performances, while presenting but one play, would be worth a multitude of others? The romantic stage would make a piquant, savoury, diversified dish of that which, on the classic stage, is a drug divided into two pills.

The author has soon come to the end of what he had to say to the reader. He has no idea how the critics will greet this drama and these thoughts, summarily set forth, stripped of their corollaries and ramifications, put together *currente calamo,* and in haste to have done with them. Doubtless they will appear to "the disciples of La Harpe" most impudent and strange. But if perchance, naked and undeveloped as they are, they should have the power to start upon the road of truth this public whose education is so far advanced, and whose minds so many notable writings, of criticism or of original thought, books or newspapers, have already matured for art, let the public follow that impulsion, caring naught whether it comes from a man unknown, from a voice with no authority, from a work of little merit. It is a copper bell which summons the people to the true temple and the true God.

There is to-day the old literary régime as well as the old political régime. The last century still weighs upon the present one at almost every point. It is notably oppressive in the matter of criticism. For instance, you find living men who repeat to you this definition of taste let fall by Voltaire: "Taste in poetry is no different from what it is in women's clothes." Taste, then, is coquetry. Remarkable words, which depict marvellously the painted, *moucheté,* powdered poetry of the eighteenth century — that literature in paniers, pompons and falbalas. They give an admirable résumé of an age with which the loftiest geniuses could not come in contact without becoming petty, in one respect or another; of an age when Montesquieu was able and apt to produce *Le Temple de Gnide,* Voltaire *Le Temple du Goût,* Jean-Jacques *Le Devin du Village*.

Taste is the common sense of genius. This is what will soon be demonstrated by another school of criticism, powerful, outspoken, well-informed, — a school of the century which is beginning to put forth vigorous shoots under the dead and withered branches of the old school. This youthful criticism, as serious as the other is frivolous, as learned as the other is ignorant, has already established organs that are listened to, and one is sometimes surprised to find, even in the least important sheets, excellent articles emanating from it. Joining hands with all that is fearless and superior in letters, it will deliver us from two scourges: tottering *classicism*, and false *romanticism,* which has the presumption to show itself at the feet of the true. For modern genius already has its shadow, its copy, its parasite, its *classic*, which forms itself upon it, smears itself with its colours, assumes its livery, picks up its crumbs, and, like *the sorcerer's pupil,* puts in play, with words retained by the memory, elements of theatrical action of which it has not the secret. Thus it does idiotic things which its master many a time has much difficulty in making good. But the thing that must be destroyed first of all is the old false taste. Present-day literature must be cleansed of its rust. In vain does the rust eat into it and tarnish it. It is addressing a young, stern, vigorous generation, which does not understand it. The train of the eighteenth century is still dragging in the nineteenth; but we, we young men who have seen Bonaparte, are not the ones who will carry it.

We are approaching, then, the moment when we shall see the new criticism prevail, firmly established upon a broad and deep foundation. People generally will soon understand that writers should be judged, not according to rules and species, which are contrary to nature and art, but according to the immutable principles of the art of composition, and the special laws of their individual temperaments. The sound judgment of all men will be ashamed of the criticism which broke Pierre Corneille on the wheel, gagged Jean Racine, and which ridiculously rehabilitated John Milton only by virtue of the epic code of Père le Bossu. People will consent to place themselves at the author's standpoint, to view the subject with his eyes, in order to judge a work intelligently. They will lay aside — and it is M. de Chateaubriand who speaks— "the paltry criticism of defects for the noble and fruitful criticism of beauties.” It is time that all acute minds should grasp the thread that frequently connects what we, following our special whim, call “defects” with what we call “beauty.” Defects — at all events those which we call by that name — are often the inborn, necessary, inevitable conditions of good qualities.

Scit genius, natale comes qul temperat astrum.

Who ever saw a medal without its reverse? a talent that had not some shadow with its brilliancy, some smoke with its flame? Such a blemish can be only the inseparable consequence of such beauty. This rough stroke of the brush, which offends my eye at close range, completes the effect and gives relief to the whole picture. Efface one and you efface the other. Originality is made up of such things. Genius is necessarily uneven. There are no high mountains without deep ravines. Fill up the valley with the mountain and you will have nothing but a steppe, a plateau, the plain of Les Sablons instead of the Alps, swallows and not eagles.

We must also take into account the weather, the climate, the local influences. The Bible, Homer, hurt us sometimes by their very sublimities. Who would want to part with a word of either of them? Our infirmity often takes fright at the inspired bold flights of genius, for lack of power to swoop down upon objects with such vast intelligence. And then, once again, there are *defects* which take root only in masterpieces; it is given only to certain geniuses to have certain defects. Shakespeare is blamed for his abuse of metaphysics, of wit, of redundant scenes, of obscenities, for his employment of the mythological nonsense in vogue in his time, for exaggeration, obscurity, bad taste, bombast, asperities of style. The oak, that giant tree which we were comparing to Shakespeare just now, and which has more than one point of resemblance to him, the oak has an unusual shape, gnarled branches, dark leaves, and hard, rough bark; but it is the oak.

And it is because of these qualities that it is the oak. If you would have a smooth trunk, straight branches, satiny leaves, apply to the pale birch, the hollow elder, the weeping willow; but leave the mighty oak in peace. Do not stone that which gives you shade.

The author of this book knows as well as any one the numerous and gross faults of his works. If it happens too seldom that he corrects them, it is because it is repugnant to him to return to a work that has grown cold. Moreover, what has he ever done that is worth that trouble? The labor that he would throw away in correcting the imperfections of his books, he prefers to use in purging his intellect of its defects. It is his method to correct one work only in another work.

However, no matter what treatment may be accorded his book, he binds himself not to defend it, in whole or in part. If his drama is worthless, what is the use of upholding it? If it is good, why defend it? Time will do the book justice or will wreak justice upon it. Its success for the moment is the affair of the publisher alone. If then the wrath of the critics is aroused by the publication of this essay, he will let them do their worst. What reply should he make to them? He is not one of those who speak, as the Castilian poet says, "through the mouths of their wounds."

Por la boca de su herida.

One last word. It may have been noticed that in this somewhat long journey through so many different subjects, the author has generally refrained from resting his personal views upon texts or citations of authorities. It is not, however, because he did not have them at his hand.

"If the poet establishes things that are impossible according to the rules of his art, he makes a mistake unquestionably; but it ceases to be a mistake when by this means he has reached the end that he aimed at; for he has found what he sought,"— "They take for nonsense whatever the weakness of their intellects does not allow them to understand. They are especially prone to call absurd those wonderful passages in which the poet, in order the better to enforce his argument, departs, if we may so express it, from his argument. In fact, the precept which makes it a rule sometimes to disregard rules, is a mystery of the art which it is not easy to make men understand who are absolutely without taste and whom a sort of abnormality of mind renders insensible to those things which ordinarily impress men."

Who said the first? Aristotle. Who said the last? Boileau. By these two specimens you will see that the author of this drama might, as well as another, have shielded himself with proper names and taken refuge behind others' reputations. But he preferred to leave that style of argument to those who deem it unanswerable, universal and all-powerful. As for himself, he prefers reasons to authorities; he has always cared more for arms than for coats-of-arms.

October, 1827.

DRAMATIS PERSONS

THE LORD MAYOR.
THE SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE OF PARLIAMENT.
THE CLERK OF THE HOUSE OF PARLIAMENT.
A Town Bailiff.
THE HIGH SHERIFF.
THE CHAMPION OF ENGLAND *and his Suite.*
DOCTOR LOCKYER.
Town Crier, Servants of the Town, Lords and Noblemen, Workmen, Bodyguards of the Protector, Archers, Halberdiers, Partisans, Pages, Sergeants-at-Arms, Citizens, the Parliament, the crowd.

LONDON, 1657.

CROMWELL.

ACT I.

THE CONSPIRATORS.

SCENE. — *Inn of the Three Cranes. Tables, chairs of rough wood. In the background a door leading out into a square. Interior of an old house of the Middle Ages.*

SCENE I.

LORD ORMOND, *disguised as a Roundhead, hair cut very close, tall hat with large brim, black coat, breeches of black serge, high boots; he is seated at a table in a dark corner of the room.* LORD BROGHILL, *elegant morning costume of a Cavalier, hat with feathers, breeches and doublet of satin, slashed; small boots.*

LORD BROGHILL (*enters by the door in the back, which remains half open, disclosing the Square and the old houses lighted up by the dawn. He holds an open letter in his hand and reads it attentively).* " To-morrow, on the twenty-fifth of June, Year sixteen hundred fifty-seven, one Whom Lord Broghill once cherished tenderly Will be at the Three Cranes at early morn And wait for him near the wine market, at The corner of the streets."
[He looks around.] This is the tavern, — The same place that Charles, whom God forsook At Worcester, in great stress to save his head, Chose, here in London, to escape Cromwell.
[He turns to the letter again. Whence comes this letter I received last night? The writing —

LORD ORMOND *(rising).* May God keep Lord Broghill!

LORD BROGHILL (*examining him from head to foot with a contemptuous air)*.
What!
‘T is you, my friend, who cause me to leave home For this smoke-smothered hole? What is your name? Whence come you? Why? From whom? What do you want? I’ve seen that fellow somewhere!

LORD ORMOND.
Lord Broghill!

LORD BROGHILL. Well, answer, can’t you? Knaves like you were made To ply your tricks for servants at our door. That’s all the honour, sirrah, to pay you well, Which your degree in life can claim from ours. I find you bold!

LORD ORMOND. Without displeasing you, Do words like these become a mighty lord, The friend of Cromwell?

LORD BROGHILL.
The old Puritan, Should you rouse him by chance at such an hour, Would let you hang some twenty cubits high Till you had changed the colour of your thoughts.

LORD ORMOND *(aside).*
I hope to make him sleep, not waken him!

LORD BROGHILL. When Cromwell’s firmly seated on the throne, He will know how to punish insolence.

LORD ORMOND. His throne’s a scaffold, and his robes are blood. False servant of the Stuarts, you forget —

LORD BROGHILL. That look, that tone — Who are you?

LORD ORMOND.
Broghill asks!

Have you forgot the Irish wars, my lord? Together, in those days, we served the King.

LORD BROGHILL. Lord Ormond, my old friend— ‘t is you!
[Taking his hand affectionately.
In London, And you come here the evening of that day When Cromwell’s to be crowned. A price is on Your head. Ah, if this visit should be known — What brings you here, unhappy man?

LORD ORMOND.
My duty!

LORD BROGHILL. How is it possible I knew you not? That gloomy look, that ministerial dress, The years — You are so changed!

LORD ORMOND.
Less changed than you! You’ve bent the knee to Cromwell, Lord Broghill! You bow low down before this regicide. I’ve changed my clothes; you’ve changed your heart and soul. Can it be you, our mighty warrior! You soared so high only to fall so low!

LORD BROGHILL. Proscribed, I honour you; vanquished, I pity. But such words —

LORD ORMOND.
They are less severe than just. However, you can make amends for all: Serve me —

LORD BROGHILL With Cromwell! Willingly. I fly! Your life I can save, for it is proscribed.

LORD ORMOND. Hold, friend ‘ Ask me to save your head instead. Your insolent support, protector, king, Your Cromwell is more near his fall than I.

LORD BROGHILL.
What do I hear?

LORD ORMOND.
This truth: consumed by sadness, Weary of petty titles, such as highness Or lord protector, Cromwell wants to be Hailed on a royal throne as Majesty. Among the spoils, of which each claims his share, He asks the bloody heritage of Charles. He shall receive it all, — his throne; his shroud.
The kingly regicide in that proud hour Shall learn that crowns are heavy and although They may be seized by treachery, their weight Oft bends the head which wears them to the earth.

LORD BROGHILL.
What's this?

LORD ORMOND. To-morrow just as Westminster Shall open to this king, by hell's will crowned, Upon that throne which his mad pride usurps He'll fall a bloody corpse beneath our swords.

LORD BROGHILL. Rash man ' The army's with him. He ne'er moves Without this living wall of iron for Defence. Know you the number of his guards? Break through three rows of halberds, if you can; Through heavy foot-guards, heralds, esquire beadles, Through his red cuirassiers, black musketeers!

LORD ORMOND.
They 're ours!

LORD BROGHILL. With what vain hope you drug yourself, To see Roundheads unite with Cavaliers!

LORD ORMOND. Here, in an instant, will come Royalists To mix with men of Parliament. It is Fanaticism which rules Puritans. They want no more of Oliver than Charles. If Cromwell makes himself a king, he dies. Lambert, his rival and their chief, is ours. He dares to think he can take Cromwell's place. That will be settled later. Spanish gold And Flemish gold have made us many friends Within these walls. In short, the time is ripe, The chances good, and we throw down the dice.

LORD BROGHILL. Cromwell is skilful; you will risk your head.

LORD ORMOND. God knows to whom to-morrow will bring joy. Our plot, Broghill, is certain of success. This morning Rochester will bring Sedley, Lord Clifford, Jenkins, Davenant the poet, Which last is charged with secret message from The King. To the same meeting will come Carr, Sir Richard Willis, Harrison.

LORD BROGHILL.
But they Are all in prison; they ‘re his enemies, Whom Cromwell has imprisoned in the Tower.

LORD ORMOND. One word will answer that. Among our friends, All urged by different motives, but all bent On crushing Cromwell, we have gained Barkstead, The Regicide, the keeper of the Tower, Whom hope of pardon brings upon our side. See, with what art the plot has been matured. Within a giant net-work Cromwell’s caught. He’ll not escape; all parties have conspired To dig this precipice beneath his throne. ‘T is this which brings me from the Continent. I want to save you. In the name of Charles, My master, do you choose to die a traitor Or live a faithful subject?

LORD BROGHILL.
What say you?

LORD ORMOND. Return beneath the royal standard!

LORD BROGHILL.
Ah, I was a loyal subject once, my friend.
In civil wars I’ve captured many castles;
I have defended cities for our king.
Hard fate has changed the soldier of the Stuarts To Cromwell’s courtier. Well, let it be so.
Leave a deserter to his gloomy fate.
But you, in your turn, listen; be my judge.
It was during the war with Parliament.
I had come here to arm a regicide,
And like yourself, a price was on my head.
I had a visit from an unknown man.

‘T was Cromwell; and my life was in his hand.
He saved me. I forgot all things for him.
He took possession of me. I became
Rebellious, sacreligious like himself.
I gave my arm to his republicans;
And brought up for my king, I fought against him.
Cromwell, in turn, made me one of his peers,
Lieutenant-general of artillery, Lord of his high court and his private council.
Lifted by his protection to such power,
If he should fall, I must go down with him.
And since against my king legitimate I have rebelled, however great the love I bear unto his house, I can’t return Into its service without treachery.

LORD ORMOND. Sad consequence of private griefs. Alas! On what foundation public virtues rest! How many owe mistakes to cruel fate! How many are accounted noble who Are only fortunate! Broghill, throw off This yoke which crushes us! Prove your repentance

LORD BROGHILL.
By added crimes? Oh, no! To you, Ormond, Though not accomplice, I can be a friend, A confident, and, neutral in this fight, Endure your triumph or soften your fall. Whoever be the victor, true to all, — With Cromwell die, or pardon win for you!

LORD ORMOND. Keep silence, and not act? Ah, you will be Untrue to Cromwell without helping us. Be faithful friend or faithful enemy; Do not be satisfied to stand half-way. Denounce me, rather!

LORD BROGHILL *(proudly).*
Were you not proscribed, I would have satisfaction for that speech.

LORD ORMOND (*extending his hand to him).* Your pardon! An old soldier, dear Broghill. For twenty years I’ve served my king. My battles and my services are written Upon my body in enduring scars. More than one expert chief instructed me, Montrose among the number, and Prince Rupert

I have commanded without pride, obeyed Without reluctance. I’ve grown grey beneath My helmet and grown old within my armour.
I have seen Strafford die and Derby too.
Seen Dunbar, Tredagh, Worcester, and Naseby, —
Those giant arms which of themselves could shake The throne of England or could hold it up;
I saw it fall at last, crushed by the camps.
I’ve fought with ranters, preachers, saints; my hand In ceaseless slaughter exercised, well knows How many cuts it takes to blunt a sword.
Well, I have reached the end of my hard fight.
Cromwell is doomed! Our turn has come at last.
But ‘midst our joy must poison steal its way?
Must our success cost a dear friend his life?
Remember, comrade, we have bathed our swords In the same blood and sinelled the fire of the Same battles. For the second time, — the last, In name of our dear master, I ask you Will you live faithful, or disloyal die?
Reflect! Ormond gives you one hour to choose!
[He writes some words on a paper and gives it to BROGHILL.
My name assumed and my secret address.

LORD BROGHILL *(rejecting the paper).* Don’t give it me! I know too much already. The same tent hath protected both of us For years, my friend; I know it well. But now I must fulfil my destiny. Farewell! Informer or accomplice I’ll not be. I will forget, at once, what I have heard. But are you certain, friend, of your success? Nothing escapes this Cromwell. His bold glance Is over Europe: he sees everything. He holds all destinies within his hand. E’en when your arm seeks where to strike him best Perhaps he holds the string which moves the arm! Beware, my friend.

LORD ORMOND *(offended).*
Leave me, I beg of you! I kiss your lordship’s hands.
[LORD BROGHILL *exits through the door at the back, which closes after him.*

SCENE II.

LORD ORMOND *(alone).*
I’ll think no more About it.
[.He sits and seems to reflect profoundly; while he is dreaming, a voice is heard, drawing nearer by degrees, which sings the following verses to a gay air: —

THE VOICE.
A surly soldier in a rage One night arrests a pretty page, — A page with roguish eye.
O — page, O page, my beauty, Why rush so quickly by!
To sleep is the world’s duty And you in satin. Fie!
Good soldier, since you curious are, I — I — bear a sword and a guitar Concealed beneath my gown.
I ‘m going to a love-tryst, sir, And dread the husband’s frown, The sword for him, the song for her, When sweet my dame looks down.
[The singing stops. Some one knocks at the door in the back, then the voice resumes its song: —
But the black sentinel on high Rolling his eye-balls furiously Cries from the dizzy tower, “ We don’t believe you, pretty page;
Love wakes not at this hour.
It looks more like a tryst of war
Than hying to love’s bower.”
[.Louder knocking.

LORD ORMOND (*rising to open the door).* Who is singing thus? Some fool, Or else it’s Rochester!
[He opens door and looks out into the street. ‘T is he; scribbling Upon his knee!
[LORD ROCHESTER *enters gaily, a pencil and paper in his hand.*

SCENE III.

LORD ORMOND; LORD ROCHESTER, *very elegant costume of Cavalier, covered with jewels and ribbons, over which he wears a Puritan cloak of heavy grey cloth, large Roundhead hat. His black skull-cap hardly conceals his blond curls, which creep out under his ears, according to the fashion adopted by the young Cavaliers of the day.*

LORD ROCHESTER *(with a slight salutation).*
Forgive me, my lord count.
I ‘m writing my new song. I must tell you —
[Begins to write upon his knee.
God save your Grace! Faith, I can hardly see.
You ‘re waiting for our men? How is this air? *[Singing.*
A surly soldier in a rage One night arrests a pretty page —
Exile can teach us many things. I learned That old French air in Paris.

LORD ORMOND *(shaking his head).*
I ‘m afraid The soldier will arrest the pretty page, In truth.

LORD ROCHESTER *(looking at his song).* The rest is at the bottom of The sheet. — [*Giving his hand to* LORD ORMOND.
You ‘re first, as always, at the post. Where are our friends? My lord, should you have liked If I had written thus, —
A soldier with a surly lace Stops, as he hurries past the place, A page with roguish eye.
Instead of this:
A surly soldier in a rage, Arrests one night a pretty page, — A page — *et cetera?*
The repetition of “ a page “ has charm, It seems to me. The French —

LORD ORMOND.
Pray pardon me! My mind’s not formed to judge this sort of talent.

LORD ROCHESTER. Indeed, my lord, your judgment’s excellent. To prove it to you, I will read you here A quatrain which is new.
[.Draping his cloak around him and reciting with animation.
“Egeria!—”
[Interrupting himself. Imagine, please, to whom this is addressed.

LORD ORMOND. It seems to me the hour for jests is passed. *[Aside.]* Charles is more mad than he to send him here.

LORD ROCHESTER. But this is serious; perhaps it is The best of all my quatrains. And besides, The object is so charming, — Frances Cromwell!

LORD ORMOND.
Frances Cromwell?

LORD ROCHESTER (*assenting with his head).* I'm in love with her!

LORD ORMOND. With Cromwell's youngest daughter?

LORD ROCHESTER.
She's divine!
Oh, God! she is an angel.

LORD ORMOND.
In Heaven's name Lord Rochester in love with —

LORD ROCHESTER.
Frances Cromwell. Does it surprise you? 'T is because you have Not seen her radiant beauty. Seventeen, Black hair, proud air, white skin, hands exquisite. A sylph, a nymph, a fairy, royal queen. I saw her yesterday; her hair ill-dressed, — What matter? Everything becomes that face. They say, she has been here only a month; That, far from Cromwell, brought up by her aunt, At heart she cherishes the royal cause And dearly loves the King.

LORD ORMOND.
Nonsense, my friend! Where saw you this fair one?

LORD ROCHESTER.
At Westminster. They gave a royal banquet to old Cromwell Yesterday. May God confound him! I Was curious to see the great Protector; But when I reached his high platform And saw this Frances, modest as a flower, Absorbed and motionless I saw no more. In vain the crowd pushed me on

every side, My eyes turned not an instant from her face. When I had left the feast, I did not know If Cromwell lifts his head or holds it down, If his forehead is high or nose too long, If he is sad or gay, or blond or black, Ugly or handsome. I saw nothing there But this sweet woman, and, upon my soul! I'm mad about her.

LORD ORMOND. I believe you, sir!

LORD ROCHESTER. This is the madrigal, in latest form —

LORD ORMOND. 'T is all the same to me.

LORD ROCHESTER.
You don't mean that! Shakspeare is a barbarian, — that, of course, You know, — and Yithers is a genius. Can You find a single love-song in Macbeth? The English taste yields to the French; the charm —

LORD ORMOND *(aside)*. The devil take your English or French taste! Your quatrain too. This folly will be fatal! *[Aloud.]* Pray pardon me, my lord. To be quite frank, 'T would be more to the purpose at this hour To give me information where we stand, How many nobles are to meet us here, If Lambert can be truly counted on, Than to sing quatrains to fair enemies.

LORD ROCHESTER. My lord is hasty. 'T is no treachery To fall in love.

LORD ORMOND. In love with father too?

LORD ROCHESTER. You are incensed! Wherefore, I do not see. The story, I am sure, would please the King. My love for daughter makes new war upon The sire. Besides, I do not mind him much.
We never met, I think; but we shared once A charming mistress, Lady Dysert, who Reforms at present and weds Lauerdale.

LORD ORMOND. I never thought to hear him slandered thus. Cromwell is chaste; wherefore deny the fact? He is austere, as true reformers are.

LORD ROCHESTER *(laughing).* He? This austerity hides mysteries. By more than one act this old hypocrite Proves Puritans lack not humanity. But come back to our quatrain, if you please!

LORD ORMOND *(aside).* St. George! he stuffs his quatrain down my throat. *[Aloud and solemnly*.] Lord Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, hear me.
You ‘re young, while I am almost an old man. I know the legends of true chivalry, And that is why I dare to tell you now These quatrains, madrigals and foolish songs Which fill the Paris idlers with delight, By truly noble minds are much despised And counted fit for only common men; Small lawyers make them, but your equals, Lord, Would blush to write down madrigals. Your family is noble, of great date. Upon your shield, if I remember well, You bear the crown of earl and cloak of peer; Above, this legend: “Aut nunquan aut semper.” Latin is not my strong point, I admit, But in plain English this is what it means: “ Support your king, defend your feudal rights, But don’t compose rondeaus and verses; that Belongs to common people.” Peer of England, Have more respect for your high rank; refrain From what the smallest baronet, the most Ignoble country squire would scorn to do. Make no more verses.

LORD ROCHESTER.
Hear my lord’s decree. I will admit my fault is great; but then Among these rhymesters of base, common stock I have Armand du Plessis Richelieu, The cardinal-poet, for a colleague. Why Not speak the truth? If on my crest there stood The royal lion and the unicorn, I still would write my verses and my songs. *[.Aside*.] The old man has the temper of a bear.
[.Looking out of the door he exclaims Ah, come and change our conversation, please! Hail, Davenant’
[DAVENANT *enters: simple black costume, long coat, and large hat.*

SCENE IV

LORD ORMOND, LORD ROCHESTER, DAVENANT.

LORD ROCHESTER (*rushing to* D.YVENANT). Dear poet, we await Your presence to recite a quatrain.

DAVENANT (*saluting the two lords).*
Nay, Another matter brings me here. May God Be with you both!

LORD ORMOND. From Germany you bring Us orders?

DAVENANT. From Cologne. I’ve just arrived.

LORD ORMOND.
You saw the King?

DAVENANT. No, but I spoke with him.

LORD ORMOND. I do not understand you.

DAVENANT.
I’ll explain. Before permitting me to go away, Lord Cromwell sent for me. He made me give My word of honour not to see the King. I gave it, but when I had reached Cologne I recollected tricks of Gascony: I wrote and asked an audience of the King By night, in an unlighted chamber.

LORD ROCHESTER *(laughing).*
Good!

DAVENANT *(to* LORD ORMOND). His Majesty consented, talked with me, Gave me an order to transmit to you. Thus I was faithful to a double task; I did not see the King, yet talked with him.

LORD ROCHESTER *(laughing still more heartily).* Ah, Davenant! The ruse was well contrived; ‘T is not the least droll of your comedies.

LORD ORMOND *(low to* ROCHESTER). ‘T would not be wise to cavil at this point, And to a poet’s oath one pins no faith; But subtleties like this bear other names, And no true noble would descend to them. *[To* DAVENANT.] Where is the order of the King?

DAVENANT.
I bear It in a velvet bag, hid in my hat. ‘T is safe; I’m sure no one would seek it there. *[He draws from his hat a red velvet bag, takes out of it a sealed ‘parchment which he hands to* LORD ORMOND, *who receives it on his knees and opens it after having kissed it respectfully.*

LORD ROCHESTER (*low to* DAVENANT). While he is reading I want you to hear The verses —

LORD ORMOND (*half aloud, half to himself).*
“To John Butler, faithful, worthy Earl and Marquis of Ormond: Unto Cromwell at White-Hall Rochester must go.”

LORD ROCHESTER. He wants me to seduce the daughter? Good! *[To* DAVENANT.] My quatrain celebrates her radiant charms.

LORD ORMOND (*continuing to read).* “ The wine he drinks at table must be drugged. When he’s asleep, surround him in his bed And bring him to me here, alive. We will Avenge ourselves. Have faith in Davenant. It is our will. Consider this as final. CHARLES, *King.”*
[He returns the royal letter with the same ceremony to DAVENANT, *who kisses it and replaces it in the velvet bag and hides it in his hat.*
That is much easier said than done. How, under heaven, introduce this man Into the palace? It needs skill —

DAVENANT.
I know An old doctor of law who lives with him As secretary and interpreter, — John Milton; he is blind. Good clerk enough, But a distressing poet.

LORD ROCHESTER. Who? this Milton, The friend of regicides, — the man who wrote The “ Iconoclast “ and other senseless things? Obscure antagonist of great Saumaise!

DAVENANT. I’m glad enough to be his friend to-day. They need a chaplain there, I have been told.
[.Indicating ROCHESTER. Milton can get the place for Rochester.

LORD ORMOND *(laughing).* Make Rochester a chaplain! Droll disguise.

LORD ROCHESTER. Why not, my lord? I’ve played in comedies — I played a thief, you know, *[To* DAVENANT.] In “ Woodman King;” Now I will play a doctor puritan. One only needs to preach to get one’s self Afloat, then always talk of golden calf, Of dragons, caves of Endor, flutes of Jezer. To get to Cromwell is an easy thing.

DAVENANT (*sitting at the table and writing).* John Milton, at my wish, will recommend You to his Satanship; and chaplain to The devil you shall be.

LORD ROCHESTER. Frances, my love! *[He advances his hand eagerly for the letter.*

DAVENANT.
Pray, let me fold it.

LORD ROCHESTER. I will see Frances!

LORD ORMOND *(to* LORD ROCHESTER). No follies with the little one — I hope.

LORD ROCHESTER.
Oh, no!
[Aside.] Just get my quatrain to her eye! A quatrain often helps things on.
[Aloud to DAVENANT.] When I Am there, what must I do?

DAVENANT *(giving him a phial).*
Behold!
A strong narcotic is contained in this. Each night they bring the future sovereign Some hippocras with sprig of rosemary. Put in some of this powder and buy up The guard of the park gate.

[Turning to LORD ORMOND.] The rest is in Our hands.

LORD ORMOND. Why carry Cromwell off to-night When he's to die to-morrow? His own people Have decreed it.

DAVENANT. That is just the reason. From Puritans the King delivers him. He wants to do without them; and besides, 'T is good to hold a living enemy For hostage.

LORD ROCHESTER. Where's the money?

DAVENANT.
On the Thames A brig bears a large sum destined for us.
In any urgent need, Manasses, Jew, Will give us all we want at eight per cent.

LORD ORMOND.
Good!

DAVENANT.
We must keep the Roundheads on our side. We strike an oak whose roots sink very deep; We want their help, that if the wily fox Escape our net, he'll fall beneath their swords.

LORD ROCHESTER. Well said, dear Davenant. What splendid words! You make a poet's use of metaphor. Cromwell is oak and fox at the same time. A splendid thought! a fox stabbed to the heart. You are the torch on England's Pindus, sir, And I appeal, O master, for judgment —

LORD ORMOND *(aside).* The quatrain surges to the top once more!

LORD ROCHESTER. Upon some verses, which I wrote last night.

LORD ORMOND. My lord, is this the place?

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).*

What petty minds Have these great noblemen. If a poor lord Has just by chance a little sense, he loses Caste.

DAVENANT *(to* LORD ROCHESTER). When Charles the Second sits at Windsor-Lodge You can recite your verses, and we'll have Vithers, Saint-Albans, Waller, to attend. Will you permit me to abstain just now?

LORD ORMOND. Let us conspire in peace.
[To DAVENANT.] You've spoken like A prince, my lord.
[Aside.'] Wilmot should die of shame. The poet Davenant is much less mad Than he.

LORD ROCHESTER *(to* DAVENANT). You will not listen?

DAVENANT.
No! I think Lord Rochester himself will pardon me. We've many points to settle for our plot.

LORD ROCHESTER. My lord thinks that my quatrain is not good Because I've done no tragi-comedies Nor masquerades. So be it.
[Low to LORD ORMOND.] Rhapsodies! 'T is jealousy, if he defends himself.

DAVENANT.
My lord's not angry?

LORD ROCHESTER.
Devil take you! Let Me be!

DAVENANT. I did not think to wound you, sir.

LORD ORMOND.
I beg, my lord —

LORD ROCHESTER (*turning away).* What pride!

DAVENANT.

My lord, I beg —

LORD ROCHESTER (*repulsing him).*
And envy!

LORD ORMOND (*impatiently).* Gentleness is not my forte. A drop of water makes the vase o'erflow! The greatest dandy who in Paris struts, The silliest fop who haunts the Place Royale, With all his feathers flying on his hat, His bands of lace, his ribbons tied in bows, His fluted wig and wide extended boots Has much less rubbish in his head than you, My lord.

LORD ROCHESTER *(furious).* You 're not my father, Lord Ormond! In vain your grey hairs would redeem your speech. Your words are young and equalize our years! You'll give me satisfaction for this wrong?

LORD ORMOND. Most willingly! Let fly your sword, my spark!
[They both draw their swords. Faith! To my eyes 't is but a flimsy reed.

DAVENANT (*placing himself between them).* My lords, what are you thinking of? Have done! Upon the instant, peace!

LORD ROCHESTER *(fighting).* Your peace Is good: our war is better, friend!

DAVENANT *(trying to separate them).*
What if The crier hears you? — [*Knocking at the door.*
Some one knocks, I think I
[Louder knocking.
In name of Heaven, lords! — *[They still fight.*
In the King's name! *[The two adversaries stop and drop their swords. Knocking.* All may be lost! Perhaps that is the guard. Peace:
[The two lords replace their swords in the scabbard, put their large hats on their heads and wrap their cloaks around themselves. More knocking. DAVENANT *opens the door.*

SCENE V.

The same. CARR, *complete costume of Roundheads. He pauses solemnly on the threshold and salutes the three Cavaliers with his hand, without taking off his hat.*

CARR.
Is not this the meeting-place of saints? DAVENANT (*returning his salutation).*
It is.
[Low to LORD ORMOND.] That's what these damned old humbugs call Themselves.
[Aloud to CARR.] In this conventicle, you 're welcome, Brother. — [CARR *approaches them slowly.*

LORD ORMOND (*low to* LORD ROCHESTER). Our quarrel was ridiculous. Let us abandon it. I was the first At fault. Be friends.

LORD ROCHESTER *(bowing).*
Command me, Lord Ormond.

LORD ORMOND. We will think only of our king whose wrongs Demand that your hand should unite with mine.

LORD ROCHESTER. It is my duty and my happiness, My lord! — *[They clasp hands.*
And is it not enough, good God! To have exile, proscription, hurled at us, Death-sentences, a price put on our heads, With how much more, the fruits of wretched war, *[Indicating by gesture his disguise.* Without these fearful felt hats and cloth cloaks!

CARU (*takes a few steps forward slowly, joins his hands upon his breast, lifts his eyes to heaven, then turns them from, one to the other of the Cavaliers).* Go on, my brothers; when I come to church I am the humblest guest at the great feast. Let no one rise for old man Carr. I see This war of words, which in the street I heard, Was but the noise of spiritual fight.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).*
The deuce!

CARR (*continuing).* These strifes are common things to me. Resume the combats which sustain the soul.

LORD ROCHESTER *(low to* DAVENANT). Or overcome it.

DAVENANT *(same tone).* Peace, my lord.

CARR *(continuing).*
‘T is written “ Wander throughout the world and preach my words.”

LORD ROCHESTER *(low to* DAVENANT). This is a study for my chaplain’s part.

CARR *(after a pause).* I won the hatred of Long Parliament. For seven years the Tower has held me fast. I’ve wept for liberty by Cromwell slain;
This morning when the jailer oped my door He said, “ Seek the Three Cranes: they wait for you.
There Israel is gathering its tribes.
Cromwell and his abuses are to die.
Go forth!” I went, and came unto this door, As Jacob to Mesopotamia came In ages past. My salutation, friends!
My soul is waiting for your words of cheer, As waits the parched earth for Heaven’s rain.
The curse defies me and envelops me.
With hyssop purify me, make me clean;
For if your eyes don’t turn their flames on me, I’m like a dead man going to the tomb.

LORD ROCHESTER (*low to* DAVENANT). What gibberish is this?

DAVENANT (*low to* LORD ROCHESTER). Apocalypse.

CARR.
My soul seeks light.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).*
Remove, then, the eclipse.

LORD ORMOND *(low to* DAVENANT). I gather from his “ buts “ and “ thens “ and “ fors “ He’s from the Tower, and that his name is Carr. ’Tis a conspirator whom Barkstead sends. He’s a sectarian, an old bird of prey. Assisted by Strachan in the late war, He separated his camp from the camp Of Parliament. They put him in the Tower; But (this will be a great surprise to you)
He hates Cromwell because, through treachery, He wrecked the Parliament which put him there.

DAVENANT *(low).* Is he one of the ordinary sort, — A ranter, a socinian?

LORD ORMOND (*low).* No, he is Millennialist; thinks the saints will rule O’er all the earth one thousand years. The saints —
They are the Friends.

CARR *(who has been absorbed in a sombre ecstasy).*
Brothers, I’ve suffered much. I was forgotten in the gloom, as are The dead, a century old, in their dark tomb. The Parliament, which to my grief I wronged, Was overthrown by Cromwell; in my cell I wept o’er England as the pelican Weeps by a lake deserted. Then I wept Over myself; for by the fires of sin My brow was branded, withered was my arm, Accursed by the God whom I proclaim. I was like wood, when half consumed by fire. I’ve wept so much, lambs of the holy flock, That my poor bones are rotted in my flesh. At last the Lord has mercy, lifts me up; Upon the temple’s stone he whets my axe. Cromwell he strikes, and far from Zion sends This desolation and pollution!

LORD ROCHESTER *(low to* DAVENANT).
Zounds!
Harangues like his are damned original.

CARR.
I will resume my raiment virginal.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).*
Indeed!

CARR.
Guide in the narrow path, my steps, And glorify yourselves whose hearts are strong. The thousand years are come! The saints will rule From Gog to Magog as God hath ordained. You are the saints.

LORD ROCHESTER *(politely).*
You flatter us, I'm sure.

CARR *(with enthusiasm).* The stones of Zion to the Lord are dear!

LORD ROCHESTER.
Well said.

CARR.
Unless God moves me unto speech, I'm like a dumb man, and my lips are mute. My heart will always hang upon your words, For in them a celestial manna lies.
[Indicating LORD ORMOND. It seems to me you were not quite agreed. Upon what text arose your wise disputes?

LORD ROCHESTER. When you were knocking, sir? About a verse, *[Aside.]* 'Sdeath! my quatrain, it might please his taste! He listens with unequalled ardour now. What poet, worthy of the name, would fail To launch his verses at that gaping ear. I'll risk the madrigal, let come what may! We'll make him drink first. Even Puritans Relax their wrinkles when the cups are full. *[Aloud.]* You 're thirsty?

CARE.
Never thirsty, sir, nor hungry; For I eat ashes as I would eat bread.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* If that's his dinner, let him eat alone! No matter!
[Aloud.] Landlord — boy!

[A tavern boy appears. Bring us a jug Of muscadine, some wine, some hippocras. *[The boy places jugs and two pewter mugs on a table.* CARR *and* LORD ROCHESTER *sit down.* CARR *pours out wine first, and offers it to the Cavalier, who continues: —*
You asked us — I thank you — upon what text We were disputing a short time ago. It was a quatrain, sir —

CARR. A quatrain?

LORD ROCHESTER.
Yes!

CARR.
What is a quatrain?

LORD ROCHESTER.
Certain kind of psalm.

CARR.
Ah, sir, I listen.

LORD ROCHESTER. Tell me what you think. “ Egeria the Fair,” — the one to whom These verses are addressed, — Frances is called. But that’s a vulgar name and at the end Of dainty love-songs would be out of place. I changed it, hesitating long between Griselidis and Parthenolicy. I chose the sweet name of Egeria! She was wise Numa’s cherished nymph, you know. He was law-giver; I’m in Parliament; That seemed in keeping. Have I chosen well? Judge you! This is the amorous epigram.
[With a gallant and languorous air. “ Egeria the Fair: you burn my soul! Your eyes, where Cupid lights a conquering flame, Are like two glowing mirrors which reflect The fires consuming me!” What do you say to that?
[CARR *who listened at first with attention and then with sombre disapproval, rises, furious, and overturns the table.*

CARR.
Damnation! devils! Ye Saints and Heaven, pardon if I swear! But can one calmly listen to a flood Of bold obscenity at one’s own side? Away! Back!

Edomite, Amalekite, Madianite!

LORD ROCHESTER. Good Lord! What rhymes in “ ite “! He’s more original than Ormond is.

CARR (*indignant)*. Like Satan, you have led me to a mount; And you have said, “ You’ve finished a long fast; You ‘re thirsty. At your feet I place the earth.”

LORD ROCHESTER. I only offered you a cup of wine.

CARR.
I listened as if to a sainted soul. My heart opened itself to his false lips, As rose of Sharon opens to the dew! Instead of holy treasures of the mind He shows me a vile sore!

LORD ROCHESTER.
A sore? My quatrain

CARR.
A fearful sore, which reeks with popery, With love, voluptuousness and heresy, Episcopacy! Horror! A vile plague Which holds the filth of Moloch, Cupid, and Astarte.

LORD ROCHESTER. Pardon! Not Astarte, sir.
Egeria!

CARR.
Your lips are venom which Infect my soul. Go back from me, you doers Of iniquity; you fornicators — back! You dry my bones e’en to the marrow, sir. The saints will triumph! Your accursed brood Will not crush them as if they were but reeds.

The floods will burst o’er you, but will not reach The level of their holy feet I

LORD ROCHESTER.

You rave!
What use will be your tall boots to you then? If it won’t rain on you, why wear big hats?

CARR *(with bitterness).* Such words become a son of Zerviah. *At this instant* LORD ROCHESTER’S *cloak opens and discloses his rich costume, covered with bows, precious stones, and love-knots.* CARR *casts a look of horror upon it and continues.* Look! A magician! Sphinx with a man’s face, Dressed and adorned in Sodom’s latest style. Satan’s own doublet is not different: He also struts with cuffs upon his wrists, Covers his cloven foot, to hide it well from view, With silken stockings and rosettes on shoes; He wears his garter up above his knee; Has rings and jewels sacred to Wishnon, — All amulets of Nabo, idol vile! And that hell may be satisfied withal, Behind his ears he hangs in shameless way That rank abomination, a love-tress!

LORD ORMOND.
What fools!

CARR *(beside himself with indignation).*
No! These vile creatures are not saints.

LORD ROCHESTER *(laughing).* You give us up?

CARR.
It is a club of demons; A Papist vigil: These are Cavaliers. Let me go hence!

LORD ROCHESTER. Farewell, excited friend!

CARR *(going to door).* My feet are treading on hot coals of hell.

SCENE VI.

The same. COLONEL JOYCE, MAJOR-GENERAL HARRISON, BAREBONE *the currier,* LIEUTENANT-GENERAL LUDLOW, COLONEL OVERTON, COLONEL PRIDE, SYNDERCOMB, *soldier,* MAJOR WILDMAN, *deputies* GARLAND, PLINLIM- MON, *and other Puritans. Wrapped in their cloaks they enter in form of a procession, hats pulled down, tall boots, long swords which lift up the lower end of their cloaks.*

JOYCE (*stopping* CARR).
What is the matter? Going as we come?

CARR.
Joyce, you ‘re deceived. Come not to Nineveh.
Leave this vile place. Barebone and Harrison, These men are Cavaliers; they are not saints.
We are betrayed!

JOYCE *(low to* CARR).
These men belong to us.
Since we’ve no others, we must use their help.
These are allies.

CARR.
Death to the Royalists!
No union with the sons of Belial.

JOYCE *(to* OVERTON).
He’s simple yet.
[To CARR.] Come, Carr, stay here with us.

CARR *(with gloomy resignation).*
To keep you from vile contact, I will stay.
[The three Cavaliers have seated themselves around a table on the right: the Puritans, grouped on the left, talk among themselves in low tones and every now and then cast glances of hatred toward the Cavaliers. During all the scenes which follow, it must be supposed there is space enough between the two groups to make the conversation of the one inaudible to the other.

CARR *is the only one who watches the Cavaliers unceasingly. He holds himself somewhat apart from the Roundheads.*

LORD ORMOND *(low to* DAVENANT).
That coward Lambert does not seem to come.
He must have dreamed of scaffolds this last night.

LORD ROCHESTER *(low to the two others).*
Our saintly friends have a most sombre look.
We ‘re only three, and they are numerous.
St. George! — *[Looking toward the door.*
Here comes a reinforcement. Clifford, Sedley, Roseberry, and Lord Drogheda!

LORD ORMOND *(rising).*
Illustrious Jenkins whom the tyrant loves Yet persecutes, because he fears his virtue!

SCENE VII.

The same. SEDLEY, LORD DROGHEDA, LORD ROSEBERRY, SIR PETERS DOWNIE, LORD CLIFFORD, *Cavaliers in Puritan cloaks and wearing Puritan hats.* DOCTOR JENKINS, *an old man dressed in black, and other Royalists. The Cavaliers enter pell-mell;* DOCTOR JENKINS *alone preserves a dignified and solemn gait.*

LORD ROSEBERRY (*gaily).* Lord Ormond, Davenant, and Rochester, It’s warm!

CARR (*aside in a comer).* Lord Ormond — Rochester!

LORD ORMOND *(low, and with a vexed look, to* LORD ROSEBERRY).
Please speak Our names a trifle lower —

LORD ROSEBERRY *(low, and looking toward the Roundheads).*

Ah, those crows!
I didn’t see them.

LORD ORMOND *(low to* LORD ROSEBERRY). Have a care, my lord, Not to become their prey.
[The Cavaliers go to the table where ORMOND, ROCHESTER, *and* DAVENANT, *were seated. They notice the table and the pewter mugs which* CARR *overturned.*

LORD CLIFFORD *(gaily).*
A table turned Already? Who began the fray? ‘Sdeath!
Two cups for three? Which one of you keeps fast? We’ll straighten this disorder!
[He picks up the table, calls a boy of the inn, who places new jugs of beer and wine upon the table; the young Cavaliers quickly seat themselves around it.
I am hungry, And thirsty too.

CARR *(aside with indignation).*
They’ve mouths only to bite, These Pagans! Hunger, thirst, — eternal cry! They ‘re buried in their carnal appetites.

SCENE VIII.

The same. SIR RICHARD WILLIS, *costume of the old Cavaliers; white hair, appearance of great suffering.*

LORD ORMOND.
Sir Richard Willis!
[All the Cavaliers arise and go to meet him; he seems to walk with difficulty. ROSEBERRY *and* ROCHESTER *each offer an arm to help him.*

SIR RICHARD *(to the Cavaliers who surround him).* From his weary chain Freed for an instant, Richard drags himself To you. Alas! my feebleness and pain Come from the persecutions I endure. My eyes have lost the habitude of light, Cromwell has used such skill in torturing me.

LORD ORMOND.
My poor old friend —

SIR RICHARD.
Ah, do not pity me, If, dragging one foot in the grave, my arm Wounded with chains but strong with zeal, I come To help restore the throne legitimate. I glory in the cause; and if God wills, I'll shed with joy my heart's blood for my king.

LORD ORMOND.
Oh, loyalty sublime!

LORD ROCHESTER. Devotion rare!

SIR RICHARD. I am of least importance 'mongst you all. I have no other pride than to have been Of all his servitors the most oppressed.

DOCTOR JENKINS. What a grand model of fidelity!

SIR RICHARD (*With gesture of humility')*. Whom wait you for? The Roundheads are all here.

LORD ORMOND. Lambert is lacking: cowards all come late.

LORD ROCHESTER (*drinking. to* LORDS ROSEBERRY *and* CLIFFORD).
Look! with their black felts turned into a tower, Are not our saints ridiculous?

SIR RICHARD *(to* LORD ORMOND).
Who are All these sectarians?

LORD ORMOND. Down there are Ludlow And Plinlimmon, — members of Parliament. That one, who's watching us with hate, is Carr. Then that inspired currier, damned Barebone.

SIR RICHARD.
Who is this Barebone?

DAVENANT *(low to* SIR RICHARD).
An uncommon man. Declared an enemy to tyrant power, He’s currier to saints, upholsterer To Lord Cromwell; he prays at double altars, And ties double strings unto his bow. With one hand he prepares a massacre, And with the other ornaments a feast. His voice proscribes the head of Cromwell, crowned And makes a bargain for the coronation. This great man, bound unto opposing ends, Sings hymns to God while working Satan’s will. Obliging merchant and a heartless saint, Fanatically fond of Noll, yet sells Unto the highest bidder dear Noll’s throne.

SIR RICHARD. Was not his brother speaker of the House?

DAVENANT.
Of the late Parliament; and Barebone was A member too.

SIR RICHARD (*to* LORD ORMOND). The others?

LORD ORMOND.
Harrison, A regicide, and Garland, regicide, And Overton, a regicide.

LORD CLIFFORD. Is’t known Which of the three is Satan?

LORD ORMOND.
Peace, my lord. There speaks the ravisher of kingships, — Joyce.

LORD ROSEBERRY.
Accursed race!

LORD ROCHESTER. What pleasure I would take In jostling those Roundheads against each other As they go on their sacrilegious way. I’d crop their ears still shorter, for reward — That they might bask in pure rotundity. How many pleasant things I’d find to do Unto these wretches, were they not our friends!

SCENE IX.

The same. LIEUTENANT-GENERAL LAMBERT, *simple costume of the Roundheads; long sword with copper guard. On* LAMBERT’S *arrival all the Roundheads bow with great deference.*

LORD ORMOND. At last, Lambert is come!

CARR *(aside).*
Strange mystery!

LAMBERT.
A greeting to old England’s oldest friends.

LORD ORMOND *(to his followers).* The hour has come to risk the fatal stroke. Let us conclude the bond and settle all.
[He advances toward LAMBERT, *who comes to meet him.* Jesus the crucified —

LAMBERT.
For man’s redemption.
We are ready!

LORD ORMOND. At my command I have Three hundred noblemen; these are the chiefs. When shall we strike the curséd one?

LAMBERT.
When he Is king!

LORD ORMOND. To-morrow!

LAMBERT.

We will strike to-morrow.

LORD ORMOND.
It is said!

LAMBERT.
‘T is said!

LORD ORMOND.
The hour — Speak!

LAMBERT.
At noon.

LORD ORMOND.
The place!

LAMBERT. At Westminster.

LORD ORMOND.
Alliance.

LAMBERT.
Friendship. *[They grasp hands. [.Aside.*] I will possess the diadem. When you Have served my turn, the scaffold of Capell Will not be worm-eaten too much to hold A block for your proud head.

LORD ORMOND *(aside).*
He thinks to mount A throne; he’ll mount the gallows in its place.
[A pause.

LAMBERT *(aside).* I’ve compromised myself. I’m chosen chief. Why did I suffer it? No matter! On! My fears are useless; and when one retreats Then, least of all, can one see clear the way. I’ll speak!
[He crosses his arms upon his breast and lifts his eyes to heaven. The Puritans take their attitudes of ecstasy and prayer. The Cavaliers are seated at the table, the young men drinking joyously. ORMOND, WILLIS,

DAVENANT, *and* JENKINS *are the only ones who appear to listen to* LAMBERT'S *speech.*
My pious friends, 't is known to us That, in defiance of this people's right, A man who calls himself the Lord Protector Intends to claim the title of our king. That reason brings us now to you, to ask If 't is not fitting we rebuke his pride, If you will help us to avenge our wrongs, Regain our rights of franchise now usurped, And pass death-sentence on the serpent head Of Oliver Cromwell of Huntington.

ALL (*except* CARR *and* HARRISON). Death unto Cromwell!

ROUNDHEADS.
Traitor, you shall die.

CAVALIERS.
Strike the usurper!

OVERTON. We will have no king!

LAMBERT.
We'll have no master.

HARRISON. I most humbly beg Permission to present a thought. Suppose He were an instrument in Heaven's hand! Although a tyrant, he is free of heart. Perhaps it is his fate Daniel foretells, When in his prophecy he says, " The saints Shall take the kingdom of the world, and will Possess it."

LUDLOW. Yes, the text is plain; but yet The prophet will console your troubled mind, For elsewhere, general, great Daniel says, " Unto the saints the kingdom shall be given For my designs." Now, one has not the right To take it, ere't is given.

JOYCE. Then, the saints!
We are the saints!

HARRISON. I yield unto your wisdom. But, although I confess I'm vanquished, friend, *[To* LUDLOW.] I am not satisfied these texts mean just

What you attribute to them. By and by We will confer together on these things, Which are prohibited to minds profane. Unto ourselves we'll add some pious friends Who, with their lights, will help to clear our doubts.

LUDLOW.
With all my heart. We'll call it Friday next.
[HARRISON *bows in sign of acquiescence.*

LAMBERT *(aside, as if absorbed in his reflections).* What I've just said, in truth, is very bold.

JOYCE *(pointing out to* LAMBERT *a group of Roundheads, who until now have held themselves apart in the background).*
Three new conspirators are there. They feel Most loath to come into the vineyard late, But they present themselves to you in faith, Since it is written, " Equal salary To all."

LAMBERT *(sighing).* Bid them approach.
[The group advances to LAMBERT. What are your names?

ONE OF THE NEW CONSPIRATORS. What-ever-the-unrighteous-may-conspire Against-you-Praise-God-Pimpleton.

LAMBERT.
And you?
A SECOND CONSPIRATOR. Death-to-sin-Palmer.
A THIRD.
Live-for-resurrection Jeroboam-of-Emer.

LORD ROCHESTER (*low to* LORD ROSEBERRY). Pray, what is that?

LORD ROSEBERRY (*low to* LORD ROCHESTER). They have a crazy way of winding up Their names in verses of the Bible.

LAMBERT (*holding an open Bible toward them).*
Will You swear?

PRAISE-GOD-PIMPLETON. We? Swear?

DEATH-TO-SIN-PALMER.
Away from us all oaths.

LITE-FOR-RESURRECTION-JEROBOAM-OF-EMER. Hell only hears, while Heaven denounces them.

PRAISE-GOD-PIMPLETON.
May faith deliver us from Pagan sins.

LAMBERT.
Then, will you promise — hand upon the Book —
[He hesitates.
To strike down Cromwell?

ALL THREE (*hands on Bible).* Yes!

LAMBERT (*more forcibly).*
To lend us help, Keep silence, and to act?

ALL THREE.
We promise — yes.

LAMBERT.
Be welcome here!
[The three conspirators take seats among the Puritans.

OVERTON (*low to* LAMBERT).
All things move prosperously. Have courage: all looks well.

LAMBERT *(aside).*
To-morrow night I'll wear an added crown, or lack my head.

OVERTON *(indicating the conspirators, to* LAMBERT). Look! all these friends, my lord.

LAMBERT *(aside)*.
And witnesses.

SYNDERCOMB *(in the group of conspirators)*. Die, Oliver Cromwell!

CARR *(to Roundheads)*.
After your axe Has cut off Cromwell from his gorgeous dream, After this Baal, men adore, is down, What will you do?

LUDLOW *(thoughtfully)*.
In truth, what will we do?

LORD ORMOND *(aside)*.
I know!

LAMBERT *(embarrassed)*. We'll form a council numbering ten. *[.Aside.*] And which will have one head.

HARRISON *(warmly)*.
Ten members, Lambert? Ten are too few. Let us have seventy, As in the Hebrew Sanhedrim; it is The sacred number.

CARR.
But the rightful power Is the Long Parliament, dissolved by crime.

JOYCE.
A council made of officers?

HARRISON *(becoming excited)*.
I'm right. To govern well we must be seventy.

BAREBONE. For England no salvation's possible Unless, according to the Bible laws, We claim from merchants from their higher gains Support for temple and the chosen ones. Give up Chaldea, Egypt, for dear Zion, Resolving foot to palm and brace to cubit.

GARLAND.

That is most sensible.

JOYCE. Is Barebone mad? Is he a fool to see naught but his hole? Does he mistake his counter for the throne, His cap for crown, and his yard-stick for sceptre?

PLINLIMMON *(to* JOYCE *indicating* BAREBONE). Pray, do not jest. God oft inspires him. *[To* BAREBONE.] My friend, I think with you!

BAREBONE *(air of great importance).*
To do things well From every country we must take the best.

JOYCE *(with a contemptuous laugh).* That means the curriers.

BAREBONE (*bitterly to* JOYCE).
You are polite. I thank you! But before you got so proud Were you not a tailor, Mr. Mob-cap?
[JOYCE *makes a gesture of anger.* BAREBONE *continues.* I, whom the city counts among its notables — [JOYCE *menaces him with his fist, and is about to rush upon him.*

OVERTON *(placing himself between them).* Come, come!

LORD ROSEBERRY *(to Puritans. He rises rolls his eyes devoutly, puts on an air of compunction, and heaves a great sigh).*
The law of the twelve tablets, sirs, — The tables of the law —
[The Puritans become attentive. CARR.
What does he mean?

LORD ROSEBERRY. Demand not death by hunger nor by thirst. I vote for a good meal; my stomach groans. *[The Roundheads turn away with indignation. The servants of the inn set the table of the Cavaliers.*

CARR *(contemplating the Cavaliers who eat).* How mad for flesh and wine these Satans are!

BAREBONE.
These Pagans!

CARR *(to Puritans).* Ere we go too far, let’s talk. Is it so sure that Cromwell wants the crown?

OVERTON.
Too sure! To-morrow a base Parliament Will place the hateful thing upon his head.

ALL (*except* CARR). Death to his mad ambition!

HARRISON.
I don’t see What pushes Cromwell to this fatal step. He must be mad indeed to want the throne. Of all the crown’s possessions none are left. For public moneys we sold Hampton Court, Woodstock’s destroyed, and Windsor destitute.

LAMBERT (*low to* OVERTON). Old plunderer! who on the brow of kings Sees nothing but the rubies of a crown. And in a throne, the goal of Cromwell’s hope, He sees but yards of velvet to re-sell. Parched with a thirst for gold which naught can quench, He loves the sceptre for the goldsmith’s art. And if some crown by chance should tempt his soul, He’d rather steal than win it.

BAREBONE *(with ecstasy).*
Ah, wherefore To the despair of holy men has God Turned Jacob’s lion to a scapegoat? Once, This Oliver, clothed with the robes of truth. Appeared to walk on the right hand of God. He was a ripened sheaf in our wheat-fields; He wore the Judah armour, battle-proof; And when he stood before their awe-struck eyes The Philistines retreating cried, “ ‘T is he! “ He was the pillow unto Israel’s bed. But honey changed to poison on her lips. He made himself a Tyrian; Edom’s sons Laughed loud at her abandonment. The Amorrheans trembled with delight To see the demons pushing him their way.
Inflamed by the unrighteous Abishag He wants to be a king like David. Well! He shall be one like Agag.

SYNDERCOMB.
Death to him.’

LAMBERT.
He’s filled his measure to the top with crimes.

LORD DROGHEDA. Drogheda reeks yet with his victims’ blood.

LIVE-FOR-RESURRECTION-JEROBOAM-OF-EMER. Children of Tyre, Gomorrah, haunt his court

LORD ORMOND. Blood of the martyr king has stained his hands.

HARRISON.
To detriment of those who fought his wars He gives back to the Cavaliers their lands.

DEATH-TO-SIN-PALMER. At that vile banquet, in the city’s name Which the lord-mayor gave him yesterday, He was presented with a sword, which he Returned.

LAMBERT. Thus aping royalty.

JOYCE.
We’re slaves!

DOCTOR JENKINS. He judges, taxes, pardons, punishes, Without appeal.

SIR RICHARD.
He murdered Lord Capell, Lord Holland too: this tiger’s prey they were!

BAREBONE. He boldly flaunts a fine doublet of silk.

OVERTON.
He has refused us things which are our rights. He exiled Bradshaw.

LORD ROCHESTER.
Bradshaw was not hung.

PRAISE-GOD-PIMPLETON. In spite of Holy Writ, he tolerates The rites of popery, and prelateship.

DAVENANT.
He has profaned the tombs of Westminster.

LUDLOW.
He buried Ireton by torches' light.

CAVALIERS.
A sacrilege!

ROUNDHEADS. Idolatrous!

JOYCE.
My friends, No mercy!

SYNDERCOMB (*drawing his dagger)*. He must die!

ALL (*lifting their daggers).*
Exterminate The tyrant and his race.
[At this moment some one knocks violently on the door of the tavern; the conspirators pause: silence of terror and surprise. Knocking is repeated.

LORD ORMOND (*going to door).*
Who is it? Speak!

LAMBERT *(aside).*
The deuce!
A VOICE *(outside).* A friend.

LORD ORMOND.
What do you want?

VOICE.
By heaven!
I say, a friend! Open the door!

LORD ORMOND.
Your name?

VOICE.
I’m Richard Cromwell.

ALL THE CONSPIRATORS.
Richard Cromwell!

LORD ORMOND.
Son Of the Protector!

LAMBERT.
We have been betrayed LORD ROSEBERRY.
We must open the door!
[He opens the door. RICHARD CROMWELL *enters.*

SCENE X.

The same. RICHARD CROMWELL, *costume of the Cavaliers. Upon* RICHARD’S *entrance all the Puritans fold their cloaks around them and pull down their hats.*

RICHARD CROMWELL.
Well, my good friends, I never saw so fortified a den. No stronghold is defended half so well. Clifford, without your voice and Roseberry’s, Which rose above the din of bottles, faith! Poor Richard would have given up the fight.
[Saluting the conspirators around him. Good-day, sirs!. Whose good health were you about To drink? Unto your wishes, I add mine.

LORD CLIFFORD (*embarrassed)*. Dear Richard, we were saying —

LORD ROCHESTER *(laughing).*
Heaven bless you!

RICHARD CROMWELL. Of me? You talked of me? You are too kind!

BAREBONE *(aside)*. May hell burn out its cinders in your throat!

RICHARD CROMWELL. I ‘m not intruding?

LORD ROSEBERRY (*stammering).*
You? No. On the contrary — We are much pleased. Some business brings you here

RICHARD CROMWELL. Yes; the same sort of business which brought you.

CARR *(aside)*. Can he be one of them?

SIR RICHARD *(aside).*
What! Richard, too?

RICHARD CROMWELL *(raising his voice)*. Ah, gentlemen! You — Sedley, Clifford, Downie, And Roseberry — I cry you treason!

LORD ROSEBERRY *(startled).*
What? LORD CLIFFORD *(anxious)*. Dear Richard —
[.Aside.] Damn my soul! he knows it all.

SEDLEY *(with anguish)*. I swear to you — we —

RICHARD CROMWELL.
Hear me out, I beg, Then justify yourselves if possible.

LORD ROSEBERRY *(low to others)*. We are found out.

DOWNIE.
The fact is evident.

RICHARD CROMWELL. For near ten years we’ve been the best of friends, We’ve shared all things in common until now, — Balls, hunts, delights forbidden or allowed, Our purse, our joys, our griefs, our mistresses. Your dogs were mine, my falcons were your own; And we sought the same balconies by night. Although my name dragged me in different paths, I’ve looked on you as if you were my brothers. But now, in spite of this close comradeship, You have a secret. What a secret, too!

LORD ROSEBERRY. All’s lost! What shall I say?

RICHARD CROMWELL
Question your soul! Should I expect this? It is infamous!

SEDLEY.
Believe, dear Richard —

RICHARD CROMWELL.
Search for reasons, yes! Have I not done unnumbered things for you? Who was your resource, in those direful days, ‘Gainst money-lenders, worse than Roundheads? Yes! Why did I pay the Jew Manasses those Five hundred nobles, and for whom?

LORD CLIFFORD *(confused).*
I know —
I won’t deny! Accursed Jew!

RICHARD CROMWELL.
Downie, A bill struck down your banished family; Who was your surety when they came for you?

DOWNIE (*embarrassed).*
You were!

RICHARD CROMWELL (*to* ROSEBERRY). Who kept in jail for you, for crime Of libel, on a certain night, the husband Of your dear one?

LORD ROCHESTER (*low to* DAVENANT).
He looks like a good fellow!

BAREBONE *(low to* CARR). The shameless Herod, lending despotism To lechery.

LORD ROCHESTER *(to* DAVENANT). He has a ready way Of improvising widows.

LORD ROSEBERRY *(to* RLCHARD CROMWELL). I have had Innumerable proofs of your good-will —

RICHARD CROMWELL *(folding his arms across his chest).* And for this friendship, dangerous to me, I am repaid by all — with treachery.

LAMBERT *(aside).*
With treachery?

LORD CLIFFORD. What! treachery?

SEDLEY.
Just God!

CARR *(astonished).* What do they mean?

RICHARD CROMWELL *(earnestly).*
You come to drink, and don’t Ask me!

LORD ROSEBERRY. I breathe again.
[Low to Cavaliers.] The motive of This meeting has escaped him. He has seen The bottles, not the daggers.
[To RICHARD CROMWELL. Richard, we —

RICHARD CROMWELL. High treason, I tell you! If you but knew How this base deed of yours goes to my heart! Think of it — to get drunk and not tell me! What have I done? Am I not good-for-nothing, Like yourselves? To drink without me — ah, ‘T was wrong! You think I cannot hold my tongue? That you should keep it from the Puritans, Disguise yourselves beneath those horrid hats, And hide beneath their cloaks, — that is all right; But to conceal such things from me, when I Was first to laugh at sumptuary laws And sober Solons, whose despotic bills Fixed tavern reckonings at a crown per head. Is this an act of comradeship, my friends? Have I held back from any of your schemes? Am I less seen, in spite of stringent rules, At cock-fights or at races? Have I not Gone to the limit of your recklessness, And taken part in comedies with you?

BAREBONE (*indignant).*
The Sadducee!

RICHARD CROMWELL. I’m ready for them all! Gay feasts or duels, tricks of any sort. With what can you reproach me?

LORD CLIFFORD.
Naught, indeed!
Your qualities, of an exalted sort, Are dear to us.

RICHARD CROMWELL. I may deceive myself; Our eyes are none too keen to see our faults, And we look only on the brightest side. I may have failings.

SEDLEY.
No!

RICHARD CROMWELL.
Please point them out.

LORD ROSEBERRY.
Richard —

RICHARD CROMWELL. You do me that much justice, sure, To think I hate these cursed Puritans As much as you do!

BAREBONE.
We?

RICHARD CROMWELL
That's what I said. My God! how can one stand these stupid men, Who stain their holy books with bloody thoughts, Who murder every one, and worship God, Preach endless sermons and then cheat at cards?

CARR (*under his breath).* Play cards, — you lie, you son of Herod, you!

RICHARD CROMWELL. I'm croaking quite as much as they. No more! To prove I dread not being compromised, How truly my desires accord with yours, How much I love the cause on which your hopes Are bent, — *[He fills a glass and raises it to his lips.*
I drink the health of your King Charles.

ALL THE CONSPIRATORS *(surprised)* King Charles!

RICHARD CROMWELL. Why all this terror? We 're alone.

CARR *(aside).* I had suspected Israel was a dupe. At heart, it's for the Stuarts they come here. We'll see!

SIR RICHARD. And he is Cromwell's son! Well, well! If he has joined this plot, he is most rash. *[At this moment the sound of a trumpet is heard outside; renewed silence of astonishment and anxiety.*
A LOUD VOICE *(outside).* Open this inn in name of Parliament.
[Movement of terror among the conspirators.

LORD ROCHESTER *(to* DAVENANT). This is the time we 're caught in our own tomb, Like Cacus.

LAMBERT *(low to* JOYCE). This means our arrest, by Cromwell.

JOYCE *(LOW)*. He knows all! This time there is no mistake.

OVERTON *(low)*. We'll have to cut a passage with our swords.

LAMBERT *(low)*. What's to be done? Of course the square is filled With guards.
[The sound of the trumpet is heard again.

RICHARD CROMWELL. The devil! To disturb us now!

VOICE *(outside)*. Open this inn in name of Parliament.

BAREBONE.
Let us obey! — *[He goes to open door.*

LAMBERT *(aside)*. My head begins to turn Upon its shoulders, ready for its fall! [BAREBONE *opens the inn door; the other conspirators lift off the blinds and the back drop appears, in which are large grated windows. Through these windows the urine-market place is visible; it is filled with people. In the centre of the stage* THE TOWN-CRIER *is seen on horseback, surrounded by four Town-servants in livery, armed with pikes, and by a guard of Archers and Halberdiers.* THE CRIER *holds a trumpet in one hand and an unfolded parchment in the other.*

SCENE XI.

The same. THE TOWN-CRIER, *Town-servants, Halberdiers, Archers, Populace. The conspirators range themselves on the right and on the left of the stage.*

TOWN-CRIER (*after having blown his trumpet)*. Silence! This must be listened to by all. " His Highness—"

HARRISON (*low to* GARLAND). Soon his Majesty.

TOWN-CRIER.
“The Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell, unto All citizens, all military subjects And all civilians, this makes known—”

OVERTON (*low to* LUDLOW).
The word *Subject* returns.

TOWN-CRIER. “ To learn God’s holy will, Touching the recent motion which was made In Parliament by a most honoured man, —
Pack, alderman and cavalier, — to wit, That the aforesaid Lord Protector be Proclaimed king—”

LUDLOW *(low to* OVERTON). Now, the usurper lifts The mask!

TOWN-CRIER. “ Moreover, to protect this people From miseries which the eclipse foretells, And to entreat God to be merciful, The Commons sitting now in Parliament, On motion of those doctors whom all love Decree this day to be a day of fast; Enjoining every citizen to make Examination of his crimes and sins.” It is decreed.

TOWN-SERVANT. Amen!

TOWN-CRIER.
And now — God bless The English nation evermore.

THE CHIEF OF ARCHERS.
According Unto this bill of Parliament we bid All sutlers, landlords, innkeepers close up Their taverns and their shops upon the instant, Under the pain of twenty deniers fine.

LAMBERT *(aside).* I’ve got off with a fright this time! Well done!
[Low to Puritan conspirators. Until to-morrow we must separate.

GARLAND (*low).* When shall we meet again’!

BAREBONE (*low).*

In the great hall Of Westminster. Before the fatal hour I’ll place you close beside this wicked throne, Which I, his own upholsterer, have raised. *[The conspirators, grouped around* BAREBONE, *grasp his hand in sign of fidelity.*

OVERTON.
Good! Without mystery, now separate.

TOWN-CRIER AND TOWN-SERVANTS. God bless the English nation evermore!

PURITAN CONSPIRATORS (*low).* Death unto Cromwell! — *[They go out.*

RICHARD CROMWELL (*to the Cavaliers who are about to go out).*
It’s a stupid thing To be pursued by fasts at such a time. This is sure proof my father is not young. I wouldn’t pay a fast to get a throne.
[He goes out with the Cavaliers.

ACT II.

THE SPIES.

SCENE. — *Banquet hall at White-Hall. In the background one sees the casement through which Charles I. passed to his execution. On the right stands a large gothic arm-chair beside a table covered with a velvet cloth on which are still distinguishable the initials C. R. (Carol us Hex). The same letters, gilt on a blue ground, cover the walls, although they are half effaced. As the curtain rises, the stage is Jilted with numerous groups of courtiers in gala dress, which appear to be talking together in low tones. The ambassadors from Spain ami from France, with their Suites, are in front. The Spanish Ambassador is on the left, surrounded by pages, squires, court magistrates, alguazils; a herald of the council of Castile bears the chain of the order of the Golden Fleece on a black velvet cushion. The French .*Ambassador *is on the right, surrounded by pages and noblemen.* MANCINI *stands near him; behind him stand two noblemen, one bearing on a cushion a magnificent sword, with a gold-wrought handle, the other bearing a letter, to which is suspended a great seal of red wax, also on a velvet cushion. The Spanish Ambassador wears the costume of a knight of the Golden Fleece; his Suite are dressed in black velvet and satin. The French Ambassador wears the costume of a knight of the Holy Ghost, his Suite displaying a great variety of costumes, uniforms, and liveries. Behind these two principal groups are groups of Swedish, Piedmontese, and Dutch Envoys, all remarkable for their divers costumes. In the back, a final group of English lords, among whom one distinguishes* HANNIBAL SESTHEAD, *a young Banish lord, by his suit of gold brocade, and by two pages who follow him. Two Puritan sentinels, with musket and halberd on their shoulders, walk up and down before a large gothic door in the back of the hall.*

SCENE I.

DUKE DE CREQUI, *ambassador from France,* MANCINI, *nephew to Cardinal Mazarini, and their Suites;* DON LUIS DE CARDENAS, *ambassador from Spain, and his Suite;* FILIPPI, *envoy from, Christina, and his Suite; three Deputies from Vaud; six Envoys from the Dutch Republic;* HANNIBAL SKSTHEAD, *cousin to the King of Denmark, and two pages; Lords and English noblemen; two sentinels.*

DON Luis DE CAEDENAS *(to one of his pages).* What time is it?

THE PAGE (*looking at a large watch which he carries at his side).* ‘T is noon, my lord.

DON LUIS DE CARDENAS.
Then by St. James the elder, I have waited here Two hours. However great he be, I know ‘T is necessary for his fame to keep A proud Castilian chafing at his door; But by the virgin! he keeps me too long.

THE PAGE.
Most worthy master, while your Highness deigns To wait the pleasure of Don Cromwell here, He’s holding council —

DON LUIS DE CARDENAS *(severely, with a side glance at* CRÉQUI).
Peace! Who questioned you!

MANCINI *(low to* DUKE DE CRÉQUI). What an amusing thing, to see a Spaniard Begging the favour of a look from England. How pride and shame are struggling to possess His countenance.

DON LUIS DE CARDENAS *(aside).*
How will he take my message?

DUKE DE CRÉQUI (*to* MANCINL). What hall is this, in which we stand, my lord?

MANCINI.
We ‘re in the banquet-hall, your Grace; which serves As general court. Of slaughtered Charles one sees The monogram forgotten on the walls. To

reach the scaffold, he passed out this way. ‘T was just one step out from his natal home; And now a regicide, sectarian —
[The great folding-door is thrown open.

AN USHER (*announcing with very loud voice).* The Lord Protector!
[All uncover, and bow with great respect. CROMWELL *enters, his hat on his head.*

SCENE II.

The same. CROMWELL, *in simple military dress; a close buff coat, a broad cross-belt embroidered with his arms, to which hangs a long sword.* WHITELOCKE, *lord commissioner of the Seal, long black satin robe bordered with ermine, large wig.* EARL OF CARLISLE, *captain of the Lord Protector's Guards, dressed in his own particular uniform;* STOUPE, *secretary of State for foreign affairs. During all this scene* THE EARL OF CARLISLE *stands behind the Protector's arm-chair, holding his sword unsheathed;* WHITELOCKE *stands to the right;* STOUPE *to the left, with an open book in his hand. As* CROMWELL *enters, the assembly ranges itself in two rows and. remains with bowed head until the Protector has reached his seat.*

CROMWELL (*standing beside his arm-chair).*
Peace and greeting to All well-disposed hearts. Since each of you Is sent as deputy to us, in name Of England's people we accord you welcome.
[He sits, removes his hat, then puts it on again. Duke de Créqui, speak!
[THE DUKE DE CREQUI, *followed by* MANCINI *and his embassy, approach* CROMWELL *with the same salutations they would make to a king. The other people retire to the back of the hall, out of hearing distance.*

DUKE DE CRÉQUI.
My Lord Protector, The alliance, of whose enduring loyalty His most Christian majesty hereby sends you Assurance, is drawn closer by new ties To-day. My Lord Mancini will read you The letter his illustrious uncle

sends. [MANCINI *approaches, kneels, presents the Cardinals letter upon the cushion.* CROMWELL *breaks the seal and returns it to* MANCINI.

CROMWELL *(to* MANCINL). It is from Cardinal Mazarini. Read!

MANCINI *(unfolds the letter and reads).*

TO HIS HIGHNESS MY LORD PROTECTOR OF THE REPUBLIC OF ENGLAND.

MY LORD, — The glorious share which your Highness' troops performed in the present war between France and Spain, and the useful help which they are lending to my master's arms in the campaign of Flanders, redouble the gratitude which his Majesty feels for an ally as illustrious as yourself, and for one who so efficiently aids him in repressing the aggressiveness of the house of Austria.

It has therefore been the King's good pleasure to send the Duke de Crequi as ambassador extraordinary to your Court, charging him to acquaint your Highness with the fact that the strong city of Mardyke recently captured by our troops is placed at the disposition of the generals of the English Republic, awaiting the hour when Dunkirk, which still holds out, shall be surrendered to them, according to treaty. Monsieur the Duke de Crequi is moreover charged with the duty of begging your Highness to accept a gold sword, which the King of France sends you as a token of his esteem and his friendship. Monsieur de Mancini, my nephew, will make you acquainted with the contents of this letter, and will also place at your feet a small present which I venture to add in my own behalf to that of the King; it is a tapestry of the new royal manufactures, called the Gobelins. I trust that this expression of my devotion may prove agreeable to your Highness. If I were not ill at Calais, I should go to England myself in order to pay my respects to one of the greatest men who ever lived, the one whom I should have been most ambitious to serve after my king. Deprived of that honour and gratification, I send the nearest to me in blood, to convey to your Highness all the veneration I feel for your person and the assurance that it is my resolve to preserve an eternal friendship between you and my master.

I have the temerity to subscribe myself, with passion, the very obedient and very respectful servant of your Highness,

GIUXIO MAZARINI, *Cardinal of the Holy Roman Church.*
[With a profound obeisance MANCINI *hands the letter to* CROMWELL, *who passes it to* STOUPE; *upon a sign from* THE DUKE DE CRIIQUI, *the pages in royal livery place the cushion which bears the sword upon* CEOMWELL'S *table; and upon a sign from* MANCINI, *the pages in* MAZARINI'S *livery unroll a rich piece of Gobelin tapestry at the feet of the Protector.*

CROMWELL *(to* DUKE *and to* MANCINI). For these rich presents which are now received, Pray give my thanks unto the Cardinal. Tell him England will be sister to France. *[Low to* WHITELOCKE.] This priest who flatters me on bended knee, Shouts forth, " Great man! " and whispers," Lucky fool!"
[Turning abruptly to the deputies from Vaud. What do you want?
[The men from Vaud advance respectfully.

ONE OF THE DEPUTIES.
With dire oppressed heart We come to ask assistance.

CROMWELL.
Who are you?

DEPUTY.
We 're deputies sent unto you from Vaud.

CROMWELL *(with kindly tone).*
Indeed!

DEPUTY.
Oppressive laws have laid upon Our lives a cruel yoke; we 're Calvinists, Our prince is Roman Catholic. Our cities Have been o'erwhelmed with fire and sword To force us to accept his faith. In grief Our country sends us here to beg for help.

CROMWELL (*with indignation).* Who dares oppress you thus?

DEPUTY.
Duke of Savoy!

CROMWELL *(to* DUKE DE CRÉQUI). Ambassador from France, do you hear this? Entreat your cardinal for love of us To help these people in their direful straits. This most high duke is in the hands of France. Force him to yield. ’Tis ‘gainst all law divine To persecute for faith. Besides, I like This Calvin. — [DUKE DE CRÉQUI *bows.*

MANCINI *(low to* DUKE). To write “ public tolerance “ He dipped his hand in holy Catholic blood!

CROMWELL *(to the Swedish Envoy).* Your name!
[Turning to the Deputies from Vaud, who are about to retire to the back of the hall.
Count on us always, men of Vaud.

ENVOY FROM SWEDEN *(bowing).* Filippi, and I come from Terracine. It is my privilege to place this gift Sent by my royal mistress, Queen Christina At your proud feet.
[He places a small casket, surrounded with rings of polished steel, before CROMWELL, *and hands a letter to him which the Protector passes to* STOUPE. *[Low to* CROMWELL.] This letter tells you why And by whose order Monaldeschi was Assassinated close to Fontainebleau.

CROMWELL. At last she has avenged herself, has she?

THE ENVOY *(still with low voice).* The Cardinal allowed my outraged queen To strike this man e’en in the heart of France.

CROMWELL *(low to* WHITELOCKE). To grant a hospitality to crime!

THE ENVOY (*continuing).* My queen, who from her throne exiles herself, Bess shelter near the Lord Protector.

CROMWELL *(surprised and displeased).*
Here?

Near me? I cannot give you answer now. In this land we’ve no palaces for queens.

DON LUIS DE CARDENAS *(aside).* But they will have to find one for a king.

CROMWELL *(to* FILIPPI, *after a moment’s silence).* Let her remain in France, for London air Is fatal to dethroned kings.
[Low to WHITELOCKE.] Bring here This royal courtesan, this woman without Morality, who will expose herself To every shaft of public hate!
[As he turns he observes the Envoy still standing beside him in the attitude of one waiting for something. With surprise.
What now?

FILIPPI (*lowing and, indicating the casket).* My task is not completed yet. The casket Has not been opened!

CROMWELL.
What does it enclose?

FILIPPI (*bowing more ‘profoundly).* Pray, deign to look, my lord!

CROMWELL.
Amazing thing!
What is the mystery?

FILIPPI *(presenting a golden key).* Here is the key, My lord.

CROMWELL. Give it to me.
[He takes the key. FILIPPI *places the casket on the table;* CROMWELL *prepares to open it;* WHITELOCKE *stops him.*

WHITELOCKE *(low to* CROMWELL).
Beware, my lord. More than one traitor by his master sent To work the ruin of a mighty man Has brought him poison or destroying fire In just such golden coffers as this is. Discovery kills the victim. Have a care; You’ve

enemies. This man is marked with crime. Beware of him. That casket may contain Some artifice which threatens you with death.

CROMWELL *(low to* WHITELOCKE). You think so? It may be. Well, open it Yourself.

WHITELOCKE *(stammering with fright).* I am devoted to your service — *[Aside]* Heavens!

CROMWELL (*with a smile).*
I know it, and make use of it. *[Aside.]* I'll test it now! — *[Giving him the key.*

WHITELOCKE *(aside).*
What courage it requires To be a courtier! Cruel circumstance! To have to choose between disgrace and death. Disgrace is but another name for death.
[He approaches the casket and with trembling hand places the key in the lock. Let us die gracefully!
[He opens the casket with the extreme carefulness of one who expects a violent explosion, casting a terrified look within, he exclaims:
A crown!
[The Swedish Envoy assumes a radiant look.

CROMWELL *(astonished).*
A crown?

WHITELOCKE *(drawing a royal crown out of the box and placing it on the table. Aside).* Another sort of trap!

CROMWELL *(frowning).*
What does this mean?

FILIPPI (*bowing with satisfaction).*
My sire!

CROMWELL (*indicating the crown).* Is it good gold?

FILIPPI *(hurt).*
You doubt it, sire?

CROMWELL *(aloud to* WHITELOCKE). Good! Have it melted. I'll present it to The hospitals of London.
[To FILIPPI, *stupefied*.] Nothing better Can I do with jewels, — royal play things! For these women's trinkets, I have no use.

DON LUIS DE CARDENAS *(aside).* Intends he to remain Protector, then?

MANCINI *(low to* DUKE DE CREQUI). He might have sent her back a royal head In fair exchange.

DUKE DE CREQUI *(low to* MANCINL). So bold a present would Most fittingly unite a queen assassin Unto a vassal regicide.

CROMWELL *(dismissing* FILIPPI *with a gesture of displeasure).* Farewell, My Swedish lord, native of Terracine!
[Low to WHITELOCKE.] Filippi and Mancini! What strong chains Have always bound Italians to intrigue! These bastard sons of ancient Rome, who know Not law nor honour, are degraded heirs Of the great masters of the earth, who bore Aloft the battle sceptre. This strange race Still rules the earth, but 't is from underneath.
Rome governs Europe, just as then she did;
But now the lynx creeps where the eagle soared.
The chain which fettered twenty different lands Is worn into a thread invisible, Which jerks and pulls vile jumping-jacks.
Oh, dwarffed progeny of giants, foxes Conceived of wolves, you 're known o'er the broad earth By your smooth tongues, — Filippi, Mazarini, Torti, Mancini. When the devil makes A visit to this earth, I 'm very sure He chooses names that end in *i*.
[After a moment of silence, to the Flemish Envoys.
What wait You for? The truce is at an end.

CHIEF OF THE DUTCH ENVOYS. States general of the United Provinces, Free people, Protestants like you, ask peace.

CROMWELL *(roughly)*. It is too late. Moreover, Parliament Finds you too worldly in your politics, And will not sign fraternal treaties with Allies so vain and carnal-minded.
[.He makes a gesture and the Flemish Envoys retire; then he appears to perceive for the first time DON LUIS, *who until this moment has been making ceaseless efforts to attract his attention.*
Ah, My lord ambassador from Spain, good-day! We did not see you.

DON LUIS DE CARDENAS *(concealing his mortification with a profound obeisance).*
God be with your Highness! We come, for lofty interests of state, To beg of you a private interview. We are divided by the Flemish war, But you will find our king can treat with you. He feels for you a most profound esteem, In sign of which he sends the Golden Fleece.
[The pages bearing the Golden Fleece approach.

CROMWELL (*rising with indignation)*. What words are these which you dare speak to me, The chief of England's old republicans? That I should desecrate this contrite heart With such a Pagan symbol of earth's lust? Upon the breast of one who conquered Sodom You would fasten a Grecian idol and Rome's rosary? Away, abominations, — Base vanities and pomps! Balthasar and Cromwell are not allies!

DON LUIS DE CARDENAS *(aside).*
The heretic!
[Aloud.] The Catholic king was first to welcome you As chief of the Republic.

CROMWELL *(interrupting him).*
Did he think By recognizing Cromwell's strength, to change A tower of Zion to a sepulchre? The Golden Fleece to me? Idolaters! I'll leave to them their temple-theatres, Their puppet-priests. In grim hell let them seek Their gods and their salvation. Hell-fire keep Their Golden Fleece as well as golden calf.
[He pauses a moment, easting a haughty glance over the entire Spanish Embassy, after which he continues warmly:
But I? Am I to be affronted thus?

Does this great brother save his envoy from My wrath? How does your master dare insult Me to my face by his ambassador!
‘T would be a great mischance for him. Now go;
You are dismissed.

DON LUIS DE CARDENAS (*furiously).*
Farewell! Then it is war! War to eternity! — *[He goes out with his Suite.*

MANCINI (*low to* DUKE DE CRÉQUI). Spain rubbed him wrong.

DUKE DE CRÉQUI *(aside, looking at the Golden Fleece, which the pages are bearing away).* That insult I sued humbly for!

CROMWELL *(low to* STOUPE).
Since France Was here, I had to break with Spain, in public. Go, follow Cardenas, appease him, try To learn what are the plans which brought him here. [STOURE *exits. The great folding-doors are opened and an Usher appears.*

USHER.
My lady Protectress!

CROMWELL *(aside).*
It is my wife! *[Dismissing those present by a gesture.*
Farewell, Sir Duke and gentlemen.
[All make profound obeisances and go out through a side door. THE EARL OF CARLISLE *and* WHITELOCKE. *re-conduct the Ambassador of France with great ceremony. While they are going out,* ELIZABETH BOURCHIER, *wife of* CROMWELL *enters, accompanied by* MISTRESS FLEETWOOD, LADY FALCOXBRIDGE, LADY CLEYPOLE, *and* LADY FRANCES, *her daughters. They make deep courtesies to their father.*

SCENE III.

CROMWELL. ELIZABETH BOURCHIER, MISTRESS FLEETWOOD, *both in black, the latter affecting a Puritan simplicity;* LADY FALCONBRIDGE, *dressed with great elegance and richness;* LADY CLEYPOLE *wrapped up like a sick person — a very languid manner;* LADY FRANCES, *a very young girl, in white, with a veil.*

CROMWELL *(to the Protectress).*
Good-day.
You are not looking well. Did you sleep ill?

ELIZABETH BOURCHIER. I did not close an eyelid until dawn. ‘T is certain I am not a friend to fasts. The queen’s room, where I sleep, is much too large; That bed with crests of Stuarts and of Tudors, Its canopy of silver, posts of gold, Tall plumes, and that high railing which shuts me A prisoner within my royal cell, The velvet furniture, the golden vases, —
They are horrible dreams which kill my sleep. Besides, to know this palace is an art. I never shall learn how to walk about; I’m always lost, here in this grand White-Hall, And in a royal chair I can’t sit well.

CROMWELL. Your fortune is a burden hard to bear! Each day a new complaint.

ELIZABETH.
It wearies you, — I know it; but it’s true. I’d rather be In our old house at Cock-Pit than live here. *[To* MISTRESS FLBETWOOD.] Ten thousand times we would prefer our home At Huntingdon, my daughter, would we not? *[To* CROMWELL.] Those happy days! To get up with the sun, Then go into the orchard or the park, To let the children play out in the fields; And you and I go to the brewery.

CROMWELL.
Hush!

ELIZABETH. Happy days when Cromwell was no one When I was comfortable and slept well.

CROMWELL. Forget those common tastes.

ELIZABETH.
No; they are mine! My infancy prepared me not for this;
Grandeur and I are not congenial friends, And your long trains are troublesome. At the Lord Mayor’s banquet yesterday, I wept. What pleasure to eat dinner with all London? You looked unhappy too, my friend. Alas! We used to sup so gaily at Cock-Pit.

CROMWELL.
My present rank —

ELIZABETH. Think of your mother. How this strange, gloomy grandeur troubled her; Those thoughts, not years, laid her within her grave. Counting the perils which surrounded you, While you climbed up, her heart measured your fall Each time that you had gained new victories And London celebrated your success, If to her deadened ear the wild sounds came, The cannon, bells, the march of soldiery, The people shouting in their mad delight, She would jump up and lift her anxious head, And turn to horror all the sounds of joy By shrieking, “ Mercy, God! My son is dead!”

CROMWELL.
She sleeps within the tomb of kings to-day.

ELIZABETH.
Great satisfaction! Sleeps one better there? Knows she if you will ever reach her side? God grant it may be long ere then!

LADY CLEYPOLE *(with feeble voice).*
‘T is I
Who will precede you there, my father.

CROMWELL *(to* LADY CLEYPOLE).
Always These thoughts of death, and always ill.

LADY CLEYPOLE.
Yes, father.

The strength I had is almost gone I need the air and sunshine of the fields. This gloomy palace is a grave to me. Through these long corridors and the vast halls The chill of misery appals my soul. I’ll soon die here.

CROMWELL (*kissing her forehead).*
Ah, no, my child, not that! Soon we will find your pleasant fields for you. Just wait a short time longer for me here.

MISTRESS FLEETWOOD *(sharply).* Time to complete your plans and gain your throne. That is your purpose! Frankly, is it not? Fleetwood, my husband, will prevent it though.

CROMWELL.
My son-in-law?

MISTRESS FLEETWOOD. He wants no crooked lines. In a republic he will have no king. And I agree with him upon that point.

CROMWELL.
My daughter, too.

LADY FALCONBRIDGE *(to* MISTRESS FLEETWOOD). A curious thing to say! Is not our father free? His throne is ours!
Why not become a king, if’t is his will. And why deny us the extreme delight Of royal highness and princess of blood.

MISTRESS FLEETWOOD. Such vanities do not appeal to me! My heart is fixed on saving of lost souls.

LADY FALCONBRIDGE. I love the Court, and see no reason why, Since I’ve a lord for husband, I can’t have A father for a king.

MISTRESS FLEETWOOD. Eve’s pride, my sister, Destroyed the first man.

LADY FALCONBRIDGE (*turning away with scorn).*
‘T is easy seen Her husband is no lord!

CROMWELL *(vexed).*
Be silent. Hush! For both of you, it would be sensible To copy your young sister's gentleness. *[To* FRANCES, *who stands absorbed, with her eyes fixed on the casement of Charles I.* What are you thinking of, my child?

LADY FRANCES.
Ah, me!
My heart grows heavy in this sacred place. Your sister, in whose care I've always lived, Taught me respect for — the unfortunate. And ever since I've lived within these walls, I've felt sad shadows passing close by me.

CROMWELL
What shadows, child?

LADY FRANCES. Our Stuarts!

CROMWELL *(aside).*
Ah, that name, No matter where I go, reaches my heart.

LADY FRANCES. 'T was here the martyr died.

CROMWELL.
Alas! my child.

LADY FRANCES *(indicating the casement at the back).* That is the window, father, is it not, Through which the king, whom England had disowned, Passed, when he left White-Hall for the last time?

CROMWELL *(aside).* My innocent young daughter, how you hurt Your father ' — [*Enter* THURLOE.]
Thurloe comes!

SCENE IV.

The same. THURLOE, *bearing a portfolio marked with the arms of the Protector; Puritan costume.*

THURLOE *(bowing).*
‘T is pressing work, My lord.

CROMWELL *(to his wife).* Your ladyship will pardon me? Your Highness, I would be alone.

ELIZABETH. Speak you?

CROMWELL. Unto your Highness!

ELIZABETH.
Oh’ to me? I must entreat your pardon. In this grandeur My poor self is obliterated. Yes, I’m lost in all this turmoil; much I fear These borrowed titles and my simple name Will never mix. My lady Protectress Will never find a friend in Mistress Cromwell. [SHE *goes out with her daughters;* CROMWELL *signs to the two Musketeers on duty to retire.*

SCENE V.

CROMWELL, THURLOE. *While* THURLOE *spreads the papers out on the table,* CROMWELL *appears to be absorbed in a sad reverie; at last he breaks the silence with a great effort.*

CROMWELL.
I am not happy, Thurloe!

THURLOE.
These ladies To whom Adore your Highness.

CROMWELL. But five women — five! I’d rather rule by absolute decree Five cities, counties, — nay, five kingdoms more.

THURLOE.
What! You who govern England, Europe too?

CROMWELL.
Mate a good house-wife with a master-mind! I am a slave, my friend.

THURLOE.
You might, my lord — CROMWELL.
No! Of my fate the equilibrium’s spoiled. Europe is on one side; upon the other Is my wife.

THURLOE. If I could change my place For yours, a wife —

CROMWELL *(severely).*
You are extremely bold To have such thoughts.

THURLOE *(terrified).*
My lord, believe me, I —

CROMWELL.
Enough; dismiss the subject! Come, what news?
[He sits in the arm-chair.

THURLOE (*taking up the papers).* From Scotland: the grand Provost will surrender. The entire North submits to the Protector.

CROMWELL.
Well

THURLOE.
From Flanders: Spaniards now are ready To capitulate. Dunkirk ere long will be Delivered to the Lord Protector.

CROMWELL.
Well!

THURLOE.

From London: twelve flat boats are lying in The Thames; they ‘re loaded with the millions which Blake won from Portuguese on three galleons.

CROMWELL.
Go on!

THURLOE.
The Duke of Holstein begs acceptance Of eight horses from Fresland, grey.

CROMWELL.
Go on!

THURLOE.
To show that if he welcomed Rupert, he repents, His Grace, the Duke of Tuscany, whom Blake Has seen, gives you the pay for twenty mules In golden sequins.

CROMWELL. Well!

THURLOE (*taking up another parchment, to which a seal hangs by a green silk thread).*
The clerks of Oxford, Your rivals, have named you for Chancellor Of University.
[.Presenting a parchment to the Protector. Here’s the diploma.

CROMWELL
Well!

THURLOE *(searching among the papers).* The Russian Emperor implores A public sign of your good-will.

CROMWELL.
Go on!

THURLOE (*holding a letter with an anxious manner).* My lord, I am informed by secret means, There is a plot to murder you to-morrow.

CROMWELL.
Well!

THURLOE. Concerned in the conspiracy Are military chiefs and Cavaliers.

CROMWELL *(interrupting him with impatience)*. Go on!

THURLOE.
Do you not wish to know the details Of their plans?

CROMWELL. No, it is some fable. What Remains?

THURLOE (*continuing).* The marshal of the Polish diets —

CROMWELL (*interrupting him again)*. Indeed! No letters from Cologne?

THURLOE (*seeking among the dispatches).*
Yes, one.

CROMWELL.
From whom?

THURLOE.
Your agent, Manning, who's near Charles. CROMWELL.
Give it to me.
[Takes the letter and breaks the seal hastily. The fifth. How slow they are! It takes these letters twenty days.
[Reads, and exclaims while reading. Ah, ha!
Sir Davenant, the fraud was delicate. At night, the lights extinguished; how could one More honourably break one's word? It takes A Papist for that sort of thing! What's this? A royal message hidden in his hat! A wise precaution, but I 'm curious. Tell Mr. Davenant I wish to see him. He's lodging at The Siren, London Bridge.
[THURLOE *goes out to execute the order.* We'll see which one his artifice will wreck. Malevolents! The darkness where you plot, And which you think so safe, is lighted by My torch, which nothing can extinguish.

[THURLOE *re-enters. [To* THURLOE.] Well, What did the Spanish envoy say?

THURLOE.
He offers Calais, if you will help him at Dunkirk.

CROMWELL (*reflecting).* Spain offers Calais, France gives me Dunkirk. What lessens much the value of their gift Is that Dunkirk belongs to Spain, and Calais Is part of France. Each king most royally Gives me a city in his foe's domains; And that I may appreciate the gift, Gives me the chance of winning it myself. With France's king we must remain at peace. Wherefore betray? The other offers less.

THURLOE (*continuing his report).*
The Protestants of Nismes implore your help, As lately did the deputies from Yaud.

CROMWELL.
We'll write the cardinal-minister for them. When will this Mazarin be tolerant?

THURLOE *(continuing).* The Catholic town of Armagh has been seized By Devereux \ the chaplain Peters sends This letter, evangelic, on the victory. He writes, " Jehovah this day showed himself Most friendly to the arms of Israel. Armagh is taken; with the sword and fire We have exterminated old and young; Two thousand at the least are dead, and blood Flows everywhere. I've come from church, where I Gave thanks to God."

CROMWELL *(with enthusiasm).*
Peters is a great saint.

THURLOE.
Shall those remaining of this race be spared?

CROMWELL.
Wherefore? No mercy to the Papists! No! Among this hateful people let us be A burning torch within a field of wheat.

THURLOE *(bowing).*
It is decreed.

CROMWELL. There is a pulpit vacant In Armagh. Peters shall fill it, for his words Are eloquent.

THURLOE *(bows again, continuing his report).* The Emperor wants to know Wherefore you keep new armaments afloat, Which are so well equipped?

CROMWELL *(sharply).*
Bid him attend To festivals and leave warfare to me. He has his auld council and an eagle With double head. What does he want of me? To frighten me perhaps! Good Emperor, Because he carries round on gala days A painted globe of wood and says it is The world? His thunder's always rumbling, but It never strikes. — *[He signs to* THURLOE *to continue.*

THURLOE. From Colonel Titus, who Was seized for libel.

CROMWELL. Yes; what does he want?

THUELOE.
He wants his liberty; for nine long months he's lain Forgotten on his prison bed of straw.

CROMWELL.
Nine months! That is impossible.

THUELOE.
They seized Him in October, we are now in June. Count it yourself, my lord!

CROMWELL (*counting on his hand).*
Yes, you are right.

THUELOE.

In direst want the wretched man has lived, Alone, naked and frozen, all this time.

CROMWELL.
Nine months! How fast time flies! — *[A silence.*
What is the mind Of Parliament’s secret committee on The present project?

THUELOE.
Nicholas, Goffe, Pride, Purefoy, and Garland above all have spoken Against you.

CROMWELL *(angrily).* Yes, Garland the regicide.

THURLOE.
But they have fought their bitter fight in vain. Majority of votes are ours; and Pembroke, That ancient peer who trims to every wind, Declares the crown belongs to you.

CROMWELL *(with contempt).*
Dull man

THURLOE.
There’s only one, John Birch, who hesitates; Although he leans to the majority, Some Bible scruple holds him back, and keeps The matter still unsettled.

CROMWELL.
Something’s due Him at the Excise Office; speedy payment Will relieve his mind, — above all, if The clerk should make an error in his favour. But as for you, speak more respectfully, I beg you, of the holy Bible.

THURLOE *(after lowing humbly).* Fagg Says your ambition moves him to oppose you.

CROMWELL. I will make him sergeant of the city.

THURLOE.

And Trenchard is discontented too.

CROMWELL.
A tithe Of the estates of Montrose shall be his.

THURLOE.
Sir Gilbert Pickering, whom all can buy, Is obstinate.

CROMWELL. Make him Lord of Exchequer.

THUELOE.
Leave the rest unto me. I will attend To all. To-day you will be humbly begged, In name of Parliament, to wear the crown.

CROMWELL. At last, elusive sceptre, you are mine! I've climbed the mountain huge of shifting sands; My feet are on the top.

THUELOE.
You've reigned already Many years.

CROMWELL. I have had authority, But I've not had the name. You smile, Thurloe; But you don't know the cavern which ambition Digs in the depths of human hearts, nor how She goads us on through grief and work and peril Unto an end which seems a petty thing. It's hard to leave one's fortune incomplete. Then there's a lustre, which no eye resists, About a king; since ancient days the words *King, majesty,* have been magicians. How Can one be arbiter of earth and not Be king? The thing without the name! The power Without the title! Empty show! Trust me, Rank and dominion travel hand-in-hand. You cannot understand the rankling hurt Of climbing from the gutter to the top To there find something which eludes the grasp. Though but one word, that word is everything. *[Here,* CROMWELL, *who has forgotten himself so far as to lean his elbow familiarly on* THURLOE'S *shoulder, suddenly turns around, as if awakening from a dream, to see a door concealed by tapestry, slowly opened;* MANASSES-BEN-ISRAEL *appears and pauses upon the threshold, casting a scrutinizing look around the room, then bows profoundly.*

SCENE VI.

CROMWELL; THURLOE; MANASSES-BEN-ISRAEL, *old Jewish rabbi, grey, ragged robes, hump-backed, keen eye under long grey eyebrows, broad and wrinkled forehead, twisted beard.*

MANASSES (*bowing profoundly).*
God keep you, my good master, to the end.

CROMWELL.
It is the Jew Manasses.
[To THURLOE.] Finish your Dispatches, Thurloe.
[THURLOE *sits at the large table.* CROMWELL *goes near to the Rabbi and speaks in a low voice.*
What brings you?

MANASSES *(low).*
Fresh news!
A Swedish vessel filled with caroluses Sent to the friends of ancient exiled kings Is anchored at this moment in the Thames.

CROMWELL. The flag is neutral. If you can contrive To let me confiscate it skilfully, One half the booty shall belong to you.

MANASSES.
In truth? Then is the vessel yours, my lord. Give me the help of a strong hand, if needed.

CROMWELL *(writes a few words on a paper, which he hands to the Jew).*
Here is your talisman, my sorcerer; Make haste! Come back and tell me the effect

MANASSES. Another word, my lord!

CROMWELL. Go on!

MANASSES.
I ought To tell you your son Richard is conspiring With the Cavaliers

CROMWELL.
My son! Richard!

MANASSES.
He has Paid Clifford’s debts; that is sufficient proof.

CROMWELL *(laughing).* Your strong-box tells you tales of every one. My son is foolish; he makes thoughtless friends; That’s all.

MANASSES. To pay, and never count pistoles;
‘T is serious.

CROMWELL *(shrugging his shoulders).* Go, now!

MANASSES.
In mercy, sire, Since in my humble way I’ve served you well, For recompense, open our synagogues, Revoke the law against astrologers —

CROMWELL *(dismissing him with a gesture).* We’ll see!

MANASSES *(bowing to the earth).* We humbly kiss your feet.
[Aside.] Vile Christians

CROMWELL.
Depart in peace!
[Aside] Base Jew, fit to string up Between two dogs!
[MANASSES *goes out by the small door, which closes after him.*

SCENE VII.

CROMWELL, THURLOE.

THURLOE. Will not your Highness trust Me now? This foreign ship, this money which It brings to malcontents, the Jew’s strange news, — Is not all this in keeping with my words? Will you not see?

CROMWELL. See what?

THURLOE.
These wicked plots, Of which a friendly warning gives me clew. I tremble at the little which we know.

CROMWELL. If every time such news had come to me, I’d racked my brains about it, spent my time In ferreting the mystery, my days, My nights, my life, would not have half sufficed!

THURLOE.
This case seems threatening, my lord.

CROMWELL.
For shame!
Blush, Thurloe, at your foolish fright. I know Full many think my yoke is tyrannous, And certain generals will be loath to see In their equal to-day their future king. But friend, the army’s mine! As to the gold This Jew discovered, ‘t is a present sent By Charles, and is most welcome at this hour, When we need much a coronation fund. Be easy! Think of all the false alarms Which have tormented our poor brains. These plots Are but the tricks of jealous malcontents, Whose power’s reduced to making fun of us.
[Noise of footsteps. CROMWELL *looks out through a side gallery.*
The courtiers come, shining with festive looks. I’m going out. I’ll leave you here to cope With them.
[He goes out through the small door.

SCENE VIII.

THURLOE, WHITELOCKE; WALLER, *poet of the day;* SERGEANT MAYNARD, *in his robes;* COLONEL JEPHSON, *in uniform;* COLONEL GRACE, *in uniform;* SIR WILLIAM MURRAY, *ancient court dress;* MR. WILLIAM LENTHALL, *formerly Speaker of Parliament;* LORD BROGHILL, *in court dress;* CARR. CARR *arrives the last, and pauses in the background, casting a scandalized glance around; the others talk without perceiving him.*

WHITELOCKE *(to* THURLOE).
His Highness is away?

THURLOE.
He is.

MR. WILLIAM LENTHALL *(to* THURLOE).
I wanted to remind him of my rights.

SERGEANT MAYNARD (*to* THURLOE). I came for something most important.

COLONEL JEPHSON *(to* THURLOE).
Weighty Affairs have brought me here!

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY *(to* THURLOE).
This petition which I here present his lordship begs an office In his future court.

WALLER *(to* THURLOE).
It has been long my rule Not to molest his Highness, but —
[They speak with great rapidity and all together; THURLOE *tries in vain to make himself heard and to free himself from their importunities.*

CARR *(in a loud voice, his eyes raised to the ceiling).*
Behold The new made Sodom!

What strange animal *[All turn with surprise and fix their eyes upon* CARR, *who stands motionless, his arms folded across his breast.*

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY.
Is this?

CARR *(solemnly).* It is a man. I realize His face is unfamiliar in this den, Which Baal lords with his vile countenance. Here Pagans, actors, drunkards, wolves, and hawks, Winged serpents, dragons with a thousand heads Blasphemers, vultures, basilisks abound!

WALLER *(laughing).* If you mean these to be our portraits, thanks, Sir man!

CARR (*becoming animated).* You boon-companions of the devil, Ashes are hidden in the apple — eat! Dead are the people; curse of Israel, Devour their flesh, — flesh of the saints elect; Flesh of the strong, the warriors of the lord; Flesh of the steeds!

WALLER (*laughing more heartily).* It is no vulgar meal. We are o’erwhelmed with honour to be told That we are basilisks and eat horse-flesh.
[General laugh among the courtiers.

CARR *(furious).*
Laugh, hellish lips!

WALLER *(ironically).*
Politeness is so pleasant!

ALL.
Put him outside!

MR. WILLIAM LENTHALL *(going up to* CARR *and trying to lead him out).* Good fellow, if his Highness — *[They all try to get him out;* CARR *resists.*

CARR.
If he should come, I would not have to go. You would!

WHITELOCKE. He is a saint.

WALLER.
He is a fool.

CARR.
You all are drunk, — drunk with vain pride and sin, Drunk with the dregs of wine; and it is you Who call my wisdom folly!

LORD BROGHILL.
His Highness Will soon appear.

CARR. It is for him I wait.

LORD BROGHILL. Wherefore, in Heaven's name?

CARR.
I have some words To tell this Ichabod who's called " Highness."

LORD BROGHILL. You'd better leave your message, sir, with me; I will deliver it. My power at Court — I'm Lord Broghill.

CARR *(Utterly).* How Oliver is changed! An old republican's a blot upon His retinue. Broghill, a Cavalier, Protects me at his court.

THURLOE *(who has watched* CARR *with attention, aside).*
I know this man; His words lack sense, but though he seems a fool I think the Tower of London more than Bedlam Is his affair. I'll find his Highness. — *[He goes out.*

SCENE IX.

The same, except THURLOE.

LORD BROGHILL (*with protecting manner to* CARR).
Yes, I'll answer for you, friend, but how — CARR *(with a sad smile).*
At Zion, 'T was thus the devil bribed the Son of Man.

WHITELOCKE.
He is unmanageable.

WALLER. Yes, past cure.

ALL.
Well, never mind. Let's put him out. *[They advance again toward* CARR, *who looks at them firmly.*

CARR.
Go back!
I tell you, I must speak to him, this man, This Judas Maccabaeus who became Judas Iscariot.

LORD BROGHILL. You fool!

WALLER.
That is A clever phrase to indicate Cromwell.

CARR.
Ere Heaven's fire consumes this Sodom, I, An angel, have been sent to exhort Lot.

WALLER *(laughing).* You dare to say God's angels are as sheared As you!

COLONEL JEPHSON *(laughing).* I'm glad to see you are promoted, friend; From man you've climbed to angel.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY *(to* CARE, *pushing him).*
Come, sir, come; You can't annoy his Highness with your visions. *[To the others*.] He will distract him from our own affairs.

[Rudely to CARR.
Come, now, get out!

COLONEL JEPHSON. Go out!

SERGEANT MAYNART).
Out, sir!

ALL.
Come, come;
Move on!

CARR *(gravely)*. Cease troubling me with words like these.

SERGEANT MAYNARD. His lordship will command you to the Tower.
[CARR *looks at him and shrugs his shoulders.*

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY *(indicating* CARE'S *Puritan costume).* Wear you a costume which befits the Court?

MR. WILLIAM LENTHALL. His lordship would demean himself to talk To you.

ALL.
Go out!
[They throw themselves upon CARR *and try to drag him out.*

CARR (*struggling, with loud lamentation).* God of our warriors! O Sabbath, cast down thine eyes on me!

ALL *(pushing him)*
Go out!

CARR *(continuing his invocations and lifting his eyes to heaven)*. I struggle with Leviathan In thy behalf.
[CROMWELL *enters, accompanied by* THURLOE: *all pause, uncover, and bow to the earth.* CARR *replaces his hat, which fell off in the struggle, and*

re-assumes his austere and ecstatic attitude.

CROMWELL *(looking at* CARR *with surprise).* 'T is Carr, the independent. *[To the others with a disdainful gesture.* Retire at once! *[Aside.]* Oh, mystery! *[They are all amazed, and go out after making profound obeisances.* CARR *remains motionless.*

WALLER *(low to* MR. WILLIAM LENTHALL, *indicating* CARR).
He said It would be so. We'll leave Lot with the angel.

SCENE X.

CARR, CROMWELL. CROMWELL, *alone with* CARR, *looks at him for some time in silence, with a severe and, threatening expression.* CARR, *calm and fearless, with his arms folded across his chest, looks the Protector full in the eyes, without flinching. At last* CROMWELL *speaks haughtily.*

CROMWELL. Long Parliament put you in prison; what Has brought you out?

CARR.
Treason has brought me out.

CROMWELL (*astounded and alarmed).* What do you say?
[.Aside.] No doubt his mind is gone.

CARR *(dreamily).*
I grieved the high assembly of the saints. Now we are all proscribed beneath thy law. I, culpable, by them: they, innocent, By you.

CROMWELL. Since you approve your punishment, Who broke your chains?

CARR *(shrugging his shoulders).*

I tell you, treachery! They dragged me, blinded, to another crime; I saw the trap in time.

CROMWELL. What trap?

CARR.
Baal Is born again.

CROMWELL. Explain!

CARR (*seats himself in an arm-chair).*
Attend me well:
A dark plot is afoot.
[To CROMWELL, *who has remained standing and uncovered.* Put on your hat:
[Pointing to THURLOE'S *stool.*
Sit down.
[CROMWELL *hesitates a moment with vexation, then covers his head and sits on the stool.*
Above all, do not interrupt.

CROMWELL *(aside).* These airs, my friend, would cost you dear enough, At any other time.

CARR *(with solemn gentleness).* Although Cromwell Keeps no account of crimes, although he feels For scores of victims no pang of remorse, Though ceaselessly he joins, in these dark days, Hypocrisy to schism, ruse to rage —

CROMWELL (*indignantly, rising).*
Sir —

CARR.
You are interrupting s [CROMWELL *re-seats himself with an air of enforced resignation;* CARR *continues.*
Yes, although He lives with Moabites in Egypt-land, With Babylonians, Pagans, Arians;

Though he does all for self, for Israel naught;
Though he repels the saints, and gives himself To Amalekites, to Ammonites, to Edomites;
Although he worships Dagon, Astaroth, And Elim; though the ancient serpent be His dearest friend; although defying God He boldly trod on people's rights, dispersed The Parliament which Zion had evoked, And to Christ's brethren shouted " Bacca!" No, In spite of all these crimes I cannot think He has so hard a heart or black a soul, Is so far lost from grace, that he'll refuse To openly avow in Israel's sight That for this English nation, bleeding, torn, Upon Job's dung-hill dragging out its sores, The greatest blessing it could ask of fate, The noblest joy it e'er could hope to feel, Would be your death, Cromwell!

CROMWELL *(starting back).*
My death, you say?

CARR *(with great gentleness).* You interrupt me all the time. Come, come! The incense of a corrupt world drugs you! Judge not all things by selfish interest. Let's argue without anger. A great good, A wondrous benefit your death would be; Admit it.

CROMWELL *(with rapidly increasing anger).* What temerity!

CARR (*imperturbably).* I am So well convinced of it myself, that in This aim I always carry underneath My cloak this dagger, waiting for your time To come.
[He draws a long dagger from his breast and presents it to the Protector.

CROMWELL (*starting back with horror).* A dagger! An assassin! Ho!
What ho!
[To CARR.] At least, good Carr —
[Aside.] Thank God! I wear A stout cuirass.

CARR (*replacing the dagger under his coat).*
Fear nothing. Do not call.

CROMWELL (*terrified).*

Hell-fire’

CARR.
The man who kills a tyrant does Not show his knife; your hour is not yet come. Be easy: I have come to save your head From vengeful daggers much less pure than mine.

CROMWELL *(aside)*. What is he driving at?

CARR.
Sit down again. Your life’s more sacred at this hour to me Than is the flesh of swine to thirsty hind, Than were the bones of Jonah to the whale, Whose gaping jaws preserved him from the flood. [CROMWELL *returns and seats himself, casting a look of deep defiance and curiosity at* CARR.

CROMWELL *(aside)*. The shortest way will be to let him talk.

CARR.
Conspiracy assails you! Understand, If you alone were to be sacrificed I would not waste my breath in warning you;
I hope you do me greater justice still, And feel I would assist the saints with pride.
But Israel is what I want to save.
And if you must be saved as well, Amen!

CROMWELL.
Is this plot earnest? Know you where they meet?

CARR.
I come from them.

CROMWELL. Who freed you from the Tower?

CARR.
Prepare to tremble; ‘t was Barkstead.

CROMWELL.

The traitor! And yet he signed the sentence of the King.

CARR.
The hope of pardon won him back.

CROMWELL.
‘T is to Restore the Stuarts?

CARR.
When I went at dawn To meet these people, I confess I hoped Deliverance to Israel meant death To you.

CROMWELL.
Thanks!

CARR.
‘T would give back to Parliament The power your despotism had destroyed. But hardly there, I saw a Philistine, In velvet doublet slashed with satin. Three There were of these. The chief of the cabal Sang quatrains to me, briefs and bulls.

CROMWELL.
Sang quatrains

CARR.
Yes, a new name for Pagan psalms. Soon came The saints and pious citizens; but they, bewitched By all this heathen glamour, smiling looked Upon the demons, who with angels moved. The demons cried, “ Death unto Cromwell!” loud, And in low tones said, “ Profit by their wars; Gomorrah shall give place to Babylon, The roofs of sycamore to cedar wood, Bricks unto stones; Dor shall succeed to Tyre, The yoke follow the bit; to brazen rod Succeed the iron sceptre.

CROMWELL.
Charles the Second After Cromwell — eh, friend?

CARR. It is their dream. But Jacob will not let them kill his ox With his own axe unless he gets his share! He’ll not have Cromwell slaughtered for the Stuarts. No! However bad you are, you ‘re not so bad As is this Herod, royal debauchee, ‘ This parasital mistletoe torn from Our ancient oak! Frustrate, therefore, their plot, Which I reveal to you.

CROMWELL *(striking him on the shoulder).*
I’m grateful, friend!
Your words are timely.
[Aside.] Thurloe was not wrong. *[To* CABE, *with caressing tone.]* The factions of the King and Parliament Are leagued against me: name the Royalists.

CAEE.
Think you I kept account of them? I care For these accursed Satans just as much As for the straw I slept on seven years However, I remember Ormond’s name, And Rochester’s.

CROMWELL *(seizing eagerly a paper and pen).*
You ‘re sure? In London! They! *[To* CARR.] Please make another effort. *[He places himself opposite to* CARR *and interrogates him with look and gesture.*

CARR *(slowly and after much reflection).*
Sedley.

CROMWELL *(writing).*
Good

CARR.
Lord Drogheda, and Clifford. Roseberry — CROMWELL *(writing).*
The libertines!
[.Approaching CARR *with increased gentleness and friendliness.*
What popular chiefs were there?

CARR *(starting back indignantly).* No more! Think you I would deliver up Our saints, the sinews of our heart? Not if You offered me ten thousand golden shekels, As to the Witch of Endor did King Saul; Not if you commanded eunuchs to essay The sharpness of their swords upon my neck; No, not if you should place me for refusing Like Daniel in the lion's den; not if You should kindle a fire bituminous Ten times more ardent than has ever glowed, And I, like Ananias, should behold The lurid flames rise, tower-like, around, Gilding the inundated homes of vice, And over-topping scaffolds to the height Of cubits, thirty-nine —

CROMWELL.
Pray, calm yourself.

CARR.
No, never! should you give the plains of Thebes, And those near by, the Tigris, Lebanon, Tyre with the golden gates, Ecbatana Built of well squared stones, a thousand oxen, Lemons from the Egyptian Nile, a throne, The magic art which makes fire leap from floods, And with one call brings from the ends of earth Across the open sky and its blue seas The fly from Egypt and the Assur bee! Not if you made me colonel of the army!

CROMWELL *(aside).* A fatal thing, to open mouths long shut. Oh, try it not!
[To CARR, *extending his hand.]* Carr, we have long been friends.
God placed us like two mile-stones in his field.

CARR.
You, for a mile-stone have moved fast.

CROMWELL.
To-day, You've saved me from a danger imminent. I'll not forget it. Cromwell's rescuer!

CARR *(abruptly).* Do not insult me; I saved Israel.

CROMWELL *(aside).* Sectarian arrogant, I'll deal with you! On my heights must I kiss the hand which wounds? *[Very humbly, to* CARR.] What am I? But a worm upon the earth.

CARR.
Yes, we agree on that. In sight of God You ‘re nothing but a worm, like Attila. For us, you are a serpent, since you wish The crown.

CROMWELL *(with tears in his eyes).* How you misjudge me! Pity me. This purple decks an ulcerated heart.

CARR *(laughing bitterly).*
O — God of Jacob, hear this Nimrod wail!

CROMWELL *(with an air of great grief).*
I — I — merit condemnation from the saints.

CARR.
Fear not; through your own flesh you will atone.

CROMWELL *(surprised).* What do you mean by that?

CARR *(triumphantly).*
There’s one more name Which you can add unto your list. But why Reveal it? Crime is disciplined by vice. [CROMWELL, *whose suspicions are aroused by this reticence, approaches* CARR *eagerly.*

CROMWELL.
What name? Tell me this name! For this last word You can demand what price you will.

CARR *(as if suddenly inspired with an idea).*
In truth!
You’ll keep your promise?

CROMWELL.
Sacred as an oath.

CARR.
For certain price I can reveal this sore.

CROMWELL *(aside, with scornful satisfaction).* To him who flatters them, or him who pays, All these Republicans at heart belong. Their virtues made of wax melt near my sun. *[Aloud]* What do you ask, my brother? Title, grade, Domain?

CARR.
Hein?

CROMWELL.
Speak! What can I do for you?

CARR.
This: abdicate!

CROMWELL *(aside).* Incorrigible man!
[Aloud, after an instant's reflection. To abdicate, my friend? Am I a king?

CARR.
A subterfuge! You will not keep your word!

CROMWELL *(confused).*
Why not?

CARR.
You see yourself, you hesitate.

CROMWELL *(sighing).* Alas! what violence I've done myself To keep this power; it has been my cross.

CARR *(shaking his head).* You don't improve. 'T is easier for a camel To travel through a needle's eye, or through An eel's throat for Leviathan to slip, Than for the great and rich to enter heaven.

CROMWELL *(aside).*
What a fanatic!

CARR *(aside).* Hypocrite! *[To* CROMWELL.] YOU waste Your strength in captious words like these.

CROMWELL *(with contrite air).*
Then hear!
I own my power is arbitrary, wrong, But in all Judah, Gad, and Issachar There's no one whom it crushes like myself.
I hate these vanities enough to fly To catacombs, these words as vacuous As tombs, this throne, this sceptre, these vain honours Which Charles has left behind him, these false gods Which are not Alpha and not Omega.
But am I right to cast back selfishly This burden on a nation which I love?
To yield, before the four and twenty old Men come to rule with the four animals?
Go find St. John and Selden, jurisconsults, Judges and doctors of religion; ask Of them to form a plan of government Which will allow me to retire at once.
Are you content?

CARR *(shaking his head).*
Not too much so. These doctors Give but vexing answers to one's prayers. I hate to leave you, though, unsatisfied.

CROMWELL *(with eagerness).* Reveal the other enemy. Tell me His name.

CARR.
'T is Richard Cromwell.

CROMWELL *(sadly).*
Mine own son!

CARR *(imperturbably).* Himself. Are you content?

CROMWELL *(absorbed in painful reflection).*
Thus, blasphemy And vice have led him on to parricide. The Jew was right!
'T is Heaven's punishment. I was my king's assassin; now my son Turns on his father!

CARR. Yes, it is the law. The viper breeds a viper. It is hard To recognize a felon in one’s son. To be no David, yet have Absalom. As to Charles’ death, which you call your great crime, It is your one act saintly, grand, and true, By which you have redeemed your sinful ways. It is the noblest part of your whole life.

CROMWELL *(without hearing him).* My son, whom I thought frivolous and weak, Light as a bird who sings and flies away, — He plots my death!
[.Earnestly to CARR, *grasping his hand.]* My friend, are you quite sure ‘T was Richard?

CARR.
He was with the rest to-day.

CROMWELL. Where was this meeting?

CARR.
Inn of the Three Cranes.

CROMWELL.
What did he say?

CARR.
Things faded from my mind. He sang, laughed a great deal, and swore he’d paid Lord Clifford’s debts.

CROMWELL *(aside).*
Thus said the wretched Jew.

CARR.
But — this you’ll not believe — I saw him drink To Herod’s health!

CROMWELL.
What Herod?

CARR.
Yes, Balthasar.

CROMWELL.
What?

CARR.
To Pharaoh.

CROMWELL. Will you be plain?

CARR.
The anti-Christ, who's called the King of Scotland, — To Charles the Second.

CROMWELL (*thoughtfully).*
What debauchery! To drink his health was drinking to my death. A festival of noisy laughs and songs; Not one regret! O wanton parricide! Some day, on your pale brow will it be Cain Or Sardanapalus that is written?

CARR.
Both.
[THURLOE *enters; he approaches* CROMWELL *with an air of mystery.*

THURLOE *(low to* CROMWELL). Sir Richard Willis waits, my lord.
[As soon as he perceives THURLOE, CROMWELL *resumes his serene expression.*

CROMWELL.
'Tis well.
[Aside] He will explain all this to me.
[To THURLOE.] I go.

THURLOE *(indicating the large door through which the courtiers passed out).* These gentlemen who wait about the door, May they not enter?

CROMWELL.
Yes, since I go out. *[Aside]* Compose yourself; serenity repays. My heart is flesh, but let my brow be bronze. *[The courtiers re-enter conducted by*

THURLOE; *they salute* CROMWELL, *who returns their greeting by a gesture, and addresses himself to* CARR.

CROMWELL (*taking* CARR’S *hand).* My thanks to you, but not farewell. Join us. A place of honour will be found for you. My power is limitless in its good-will.
[He goes out with THURLOE; *all bow except* CARR.

CARR (*remaining alone, in front).* ‘T is in this fashion that he abdicates. Thrice damned usurper!

SCENE XI.

CARR, WHITELOCKE, WALLER, SERGEANT MAYNARD, COLONEL JEPHSON, COLONEL GRACE, SIR WILLIAM MURRAY, MR. WILLIAM LENTHALL, LORD BROGHILL. *All the courtiers watch* CROMWELL’S *exit with disappointment, and gaze upon* CARR *with envy and surprise.*

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY *(to the other courtiers in the back).*
With what graciousness His Highness spoke to that man. What great favour. He has shown him.

CARR (*alone at front of stage).* Rascality!

MR. WILLIAM LENTHALL.
He deigned To smile —

CARR.
Insulting!

COLONEL JEPHSON.
What an honour!

CARR.

Shame!
Where shall I find revenge?

WALLER.
Some favourite.

CARR.
I am his victim. This base tyrant strikes At every one, — even at me.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY.
‘T was all For him!

CARR.
He wants my riches, wants my virtue! A servant to Nebuchadnezzar? I? Live at his court? What, like a linen fine, Once snow-white, but stained by temple-venders With their saffron, purple, and indigo, Shall I, called Carr, change to Abednego?

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY (*examining* CARR). He has a certain air of nobleness: Our judgment was at fault.

CARR.
A satrap, I? What does this Cromwell think of me?

MR. WILLIAM LENTHALL *(to* SIR WLLLIAM MURRAY).
He’s high In favour.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY (*to* Mr.WLLLIAM LENTHALL). Yes, a noble, certainly, — Although his costume is not quite correct.

CARR.
The traitor!

MR. WILLIAM LENTHALL *(aside).*
Such great friendliness might serve Petitioners whom he would second. Ah, If he would use his power for me! Why not? He has the master’s ear. My lord, *[.Approaching* CARR *with a profound salutation.*

Oh, deign, Out of your unexampled graciousness To speak for me, to him whom we both know, One of those charming words you speak so well. I ought to be a lord. I ‘in master of The roles; and if your condescending heart —

CARR *(opening his astonished eyes).* Upon the willows I have hung my harp. I do not sing my country’s holy songs To Babylonians who’ve invaded us *[As soon as they perceive* LENTHALL’S *purpose, all the courtiers rush precipitately upon* CARR *and surround him.*

SERGEANT MAYNARD. To our petitions —

MR. WILLIAM LENTHALL *(discouraged to* MAYNARD). He bears us ill-will.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY *(breaking through the crowd).* His lordship cannot recommend us all. Be my protector. We ‘re to have a king, And I can be of greatest use to him. I am a noble Scotchman; in my youth I was much honoured by the Prince of Wales. Each time, surrendering to an evil thought His royal Highness did commit a sin, ‘T was I who had the glorious privilege Of bearing all the blows which were his due.

CARR (*with concentrated indignation).* Poor sycophant, who doubly criminal, Vile with the Stuarts, is with Cromwell vile. Like Mephibosheth, crooked on both legs.

WALLER (*presenting a paper to* CARR). I’m Waller, please your lordship; I have made A poem on the galleons won from Spain.

CARR (*between his teeth).* For gold you wrote, and you are paid by gold. Poor worshipper of Noll.

COLONEL JEPHSON *(to* CARR).
Pray, speak my name Unto his Highness. Colonel Jephson, please. My mother was a countess. I would be A member of the House of Peers.

SERGEANT MAYNARD.

Inform His lordship how much I have lost for him. George Cony, victim of illegal tax, Chose me for counsel. I am very poor, Yet I refused.

CARR *(aside).* All their discourse is filled With venom of the asp and dragon’s gall.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY *(to* CARR). Grant me your name at bottom of this page.

CARR *(rudely).* Go ask Beelzebub to sign your scrawl.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. My lord is vexed —
[To the others.] ‘T is you who importune him.

WALLER *(to* CARR). I much desire an office, please your lordship.

CARR.
In the lunatic asylum.

COLONEL GRACE. Good! enough! That is the place for poets.
[To CARR.] Please indorse My application —

CARR. No, sir, I will not. In Noah’s ark were not more animals.

COLONEL JEPHSON. ‘T was I who first proposed in Parliament To make our Cromwell king —

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY.
Your words, my lord

CARR *(furious).* My lord — your lordship — What bedlam of speech! The clank of chains is sweet compared to this. A jailer’s pleasanter than Baal’s priests, The Tower of London better than this Babel. I will go back to prison. Hell confound These men!
[He forces a way through the crowd of courtiers and exits.

SCENE XII.

The same, except CARR, *afterward* THURLOE.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. He spoke about the towers of London And of Babel.

SERGEANT MAYNARD. What! The Protector’s friend Says he is going back to prison!

WALLER.
Fool. —
That’s all he is.

MR. WILLIAM LENTHALL.
Why does his Highness treat With so much kindness a demoniac?
[THURLOE *enters.*

THURLOE *(bowing).* The Lord Protector sends this word to you: His levee can’t be held to-day.

COLONEL JEPHSON.
‘T is strange He can receive this fool and no one else. *[They go out with a discontented air; as soon as they have all left, the door concealed by draperies, opens.* CROMWELL *enters and gazes carefully around.*

SCENE XIII.

CROMWELL, SIR RICHARD WILLIS.

CROMWELL (*turning to the opened door).* They ‘re gone; come in. Since you must not be seen You can go out this way.
[SIR RICHARD WILLIS *appears; he is enveloped in a cloak, and wears a hat which conceals his face; there is no longer any appearance of suffering*

or of lameness about him. CROMWELL *and he start to cross the stage.* CROMWELL *stops abruptly.*

CROMWELL (*clasping his hands).*
I cannot doubt —
My eldest son!

SIR RICHARD.
He drank Charles Stuart's health. E'en the conspirators, his bosom friends, Your enemies, called it fool-hardy.

CROMWELL.
Strange!
When to a throne I've raised his destiny. Repeat the names of the false Puritans.

SIR RICHARD.
First, Lambert.

CROMWELL *(with a scornful laugh).*
That's a rankling thought to me; To plot so well, and choose so base a chief! By chance more oft than genius, empire goes. Vitellius many times; a Caesar once. Amazing that a crowd's degraded hands Must always on its great achievements Place some petty mark. Rome had for standard What? A stack of hay.
[To WILLIS.] GO on!

SIR RICHARD.
Ludlow.

CROMWELL. A simple man who'll not go far; a brute And not a Brutus.

SIR RICHARD. Syndercomb, Barebone — *[As* WILLIS *speaks the names,* CROMWELL *follows them on a list which he holds.*

CROMWELL. I think he's my upholsterer. A fool.

SIR RICHARD.
Joyce —

CROMWELL
Clown!

SIR RICHARD. And Overton.

CROMWELL.
The wit.

SIR RICHARD.
The next Is Harrison.

CROMWELL.
A thief.

SIR RICHARD.
And Wildman.

CROMWELL.
Dolt, Who dictates well turned phrases against me Unto his valet. This seems like a farce.

SIR RICHARD.
A certain Carr —

CROMWELL. I know him.

SIR RICHARD.
Plinlimmon, And Garland.

CROMWELL. Plinlimmon, you say?

SIR RICHARD.
And Barkstead, One of the King’s executioners.

CROMWELL *(with a violent start).* Whom are you speaking to?

SIR RICHARD (*lowing with great confusion).*
Your pardon, sire, The habit's old, — acquired in other days. Such words cannot affect your Majesty.

CROMWELL *(aside).* His flattery adds venom to the sting. An awkward man.
[.Aloud.] Enough.
[,Showing the list] Are these the names Of all the Puritans?

SIR RICHARD. Yes, sire.

CROMWELL *(aside).*
We'll make Inquiries.
[To WILLIS.] NOW the Cavaliers.

SIR RICHARD.
My sire, It was agreed I should not give their names. They are old friends; I cannot ruin them. Besides, they are all watched; they can't escape.

CROMWELL.
'T is well. *[Aside]* All traitors have their scruples.
[Aloud] Yes;
Respect the secrets of your comrades —
[Aside] Since I have their names. What very different men Have made these lists! Willis gave Puritans; Carr gave the Rovalists.

SIR RICHARD. You'll not condemn Them, sire, to death. You promise? On my honour, My remorse would be too burdensome.

CROMWELL *(aside).*
His honour!

SIR RICHARD. For I am doing them a service, sire, And in advance entreat your clemency. I have revealed their plot; ‘t is so unwise! But if I play the traitor, ‘t is because I am their friend.

CROMWELL. Your salary is raised Two hundred pounds.
[Between his teeth.] Of your own party’s blood, Which you now shed for me, that is the price. O tiger cat, who flatters, then devours, And sells his friends out of humanity.

SIR RICHARD *(who only hears the last word).* Yes, sire, humanity.

CROMWELL *(opening his portfolio and taking out a paper which he gives to him).* Here is the draft.

SIR RICHARD *(receiving it with a low bow).* Upon the privy purse as usual, sire?

CROMWELL *(making an affirmative sign).* Yes. By the way, did you see Davenant, — Under the Stuarts, laureat. He comes From Germany.

SIR RICHARD. I saw not such a man, My prince.

CROMWELL. He brought a letter — from some one, To Ormond.

SIR RICHARD. I saw nothing given to The marquis, yet I kept a faithful watch. He was not one of the conspirators.

CROMWELL *(aside).* Weak instrument! I will see Davenant Myself.
[ROCHESTER *appears in the background, wearing the costume of a Puritan minister.*

SCENE XIV.

CROMWELL, SIR RICHARD WILLIS, LORD ROCHESTER.

LORD ROCHESTER *(at the back of the hall).* I ‘m here. Let me repeat my lesson. When one comes from Milton one must apply A double dose of Puritanic style. So far so good; thanks be to Davenant, And Milton whom he fools, I’ll be Noll’s chaplain Within an hour. If Satan calls me home To-day, he’ll take no less a personage Than Oliver’s own chaplain. Here begins The tragi-comedy, Wilmot, my friend. Thrust thy bold head into the lion’s jaws, And without murmuring, wear for thy King This hat, and these cloth stockings which offend The skin. You shall see Frances.
[He here perceives CROMWELL *and* WILLIS, *who while he has been talking, have been absorbed in private conversation.*
Who are these?

SIR RICHARD *(to* CROMWELL). A Swedish brig transports the money here; The chancellor assured me in his letter That a Jew has promised them large credit

LORD ROCHESTER *(in the background).* What! They correspond with my Lord Hyde? Might they —

CROMWELL *(to* RLCHARD WLLLIS).
Return unto the Tower of London, Lest we should arouse suspicion.

LORD ROCHESTER *(still in the same place).*
What is that?
This is most curious!

SIR RICHARD *(to* CROMWELL). Your Majesty Knows the extent of my devotion.

LORD ROCHESTER *(still unseen).*
Strange!
“Your Majesty “—” devotion.” Cavaliers! The faithful here?

CROMWELL *(to* WILLIS, *as they go towards the door).* Look out for sentinels. If you are seen all will be compromised.
[They go out.

LORD ROCHESTER *(alone).* Most wonderful! It is — it must be true! King Charles's friends are rash to come To such a place as this to talk affairs, Conspire in Cromwell's home. Audacity!
[Looking out into the gallery. Now one is coming back. I'll frighten him. I'll make him feel how he exposes us. I'll hide.
[He hides behind one of the pillars of the hall. CROMWELL *re-enters.*

SCENE XV.

LORD ROCHESTER, CROMWELL.

CROMWELL *(without seeing* ROCHESTER). Man plans and God accomplishes. I thought I was in port, calm, sheltered, safe, And here I am amidst a raging sea Of treachery. My head is on the dice Once more. Come, courage! Face the final storm. Strike one last blow to paralyze thy foes. Crush all resistance. England needs a king.

LORD ROCHESTER *(from behind the pillar).* Upon my soul, a rampant Royalist!

CROMWELL.
Cast nets around them, follow in their tract, Surround their feet with chains invisible, Delude them, watch them; they shall not escape.

LORD ROCHESTER. He dooms Cromwell and all his family.

CROMWELL.
Let them all die!

LORD ROCHESTER. Except his daughter, please.

CROMWELL (*plunged in a sombre reverie).* What dost thou want, Cromwell? A throne? What for?
Art Bourbon, Stuart, or Plantagenet? Art one of those strange mortals who are born, Thanks to a troop of ancestors, to view One part of earth as their

own sovereign right? What sceptre has not shivered ‘neath thy weight, Thou warrior, and what crown is big enough For thy broad brow? Thou son of destiny, A king? The future races would account Thy reign as one of thine adventures, and Thy house, — it would be called thy dynasty

LORD ROCHESTER. He’s for the house of Stuart, certainly.

CROMWELL (*continuing)*. A king of Parliament! Dead bodies For ascending steps! Is that the way One mounts a throne legitimate? Art thou Not tired of walking on so far, my friend? This sceptre, does it hide some magic charm? Behold! the universe obeys thy law; It lies in thy right hand, and it is naught. The chariot of thy fortune rolls in strength, And splashes sovereigns with royal blood; In war triumphant, powerful in peace, — All this is nothing, since thou hast no throne! Oh, base ambition!

LORD ROCHESTER. He treats Cromwell ill.

CROMWELL.
And when thou hast this English throne and ten More thrones, what wilt thou do with them? On what Will thy next fancy fall? Must one Not have some object for his hopes, always, Poor fool!

LORD ROCHESTER. If the Protector heard these things!

CROMWELL.
What is a throne? A stage beneath a dais, — Some roughhewn boards, which catch the public eye. It changes names according to its cloth. ‘T is black, — a scaffold! Velvet,— ‘t is a throne.

LORD ROCHESTER.
A wise man!

CROMWELL. And is that thy great desire, O Cromwell? Just a scaffold! Ah, that word Fills me with horror. Let me have some air! My head is burning!
[Approaching the casement of Charles I. The warm sun, the wind, Will dissipate my gloom.

LORD ROCHESTER.
He’s free enough! He acts as though he were at home.

CROMWELL (*tries to open the window; it resists).*
‘T is opened Rarely and the lock is full of rust.
[Starting back with a motion of horror. It is not rust. It is the blood of Stuart. Yes, ‘t was from here he mounted to the skies.
[Walks thoughtfully to the front. If I were king, it might have opened easier.

LORD ROCHESTER.
Faith! he is not fastidious.

CROMWELL.
If all crimes Are expiated, tremble Cromwell, for This was an impious wrong. A nobler brow Ne’er graced a royal crown, — a just, kind prince.

LORD ROCHESTER. A loyal subject, this!

CROMWELL. But could I check Their murderous fury? Did I spare myself In fasts, in prayers, in vigils, penances? Did I leave aught undone to save him? No! In heaven already was his warrant signed.

LORD ROCHESTER. And signed by Cromwell, too, who falsified The scales, and while you prayed, in darkness schemed, The honest man!

CROMWELL *(with profound dejection).*
How oft these walls have seen Me weep the fate of this great Englishman!

LORD ROCHESTER *(wiping away a tear).* Dear friend, you touch my heart.

CROMWELL.
How much remorse This royal head has caused me!

LORD ROCHESTER.
Be more just Unto yourself. Regrets, perhaps, but why Remorse?

CROMWELL *(eyes bent upon the ground).* What do these dead men think of us, I wonder?

LORD ROCHESTER. Grief is affecting his poor head.

CROMWELL. What unknown misery a crime reveals! To give back life to you, King Charles, how oft I would have shed my blood!

LORD ROCHESTER.
He speaks too loud. He might be overheard; that would be bad.
Such sentiments, in low tones, I approve; But to proclaim them boldly, this is not The place. I'll frighten him.
[He comes out from his hiding-place and advances suddenly upon CROMWELL.
Hello, my friend!
What are you doing here?

CROMWELL (*surprised, eyeing him from head to foot).*
Whom is this fellow Speaking to?

LORD ROCHESTER. To you!
[Aside] He said the “ fellow”! Good! Then I do look like a saint. So much The better. I will boldly act my part.
[Aloud and with an air of cleverness. Know you, my good man, where you are?

CROMWELL
And you, Do you know, knave, to whom you speak?

LORD ROCHESTER.
St. George!
[Aside] Hold on! I mustn't swear.
[Aloud] I know full well.

CROMWELL *(aside).* He may be an assassin, paid by Charles. *[Drawing a pistol from his breast and pointing it at*

ROCHESTER. *[Aloud]* You rascal, come no nearer!

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).*
Prudence. All Conspirators are armed unto the teeth.
I won’t fight with a brother for Cromwell. *[.Aloud.*] I do not want to ruin you.

CROMWELL (*surprised, disdainfully).*
Indeed!

LORD ROCHESTER. No; on the contrary, I want to give You good advice. Your words were most seditious For such a place.

CROMWELL.
My words?

LORD ROCHESTER.
Yes, yours, my friend.
Go out, or I will call for help.

CROMWELL *(aside).*
He’s mad.
[Aloud.] What sort of man are you to talk like this?

LORD ROCHESTER. Remember you are at the Lord Protector’s.

CROMWELL.
Well! who are you?

LORD ROCHESTER.
His humblest servant, sir.
I am his chaplain.

CROMWELL. You? You lie with strange Audacity! My chaplain? You?

LORD ROCHESTER (*terrified, aside).*

My God!
It’s Cromwell. We’ve a traitor in our midst.

CROMWELL.
You ought to crawl upon the ground, you bold, You impious impostor.

LORD ROCHESTER. Pardon me, Your Highness — *[Aside.]* Should I say “ your Highness “ or “ Your Grace “?
[Aloud.] Excuse me. From excess of zeal Against your enemies, I’ve erred. Some words Half understood —

CROMWELL. Why did you tell this lie?

LORD ROCHESTER. Intense devotion realized my dream. I’ve dared to beg the post of chaplain Unto your Highness.

CROMWELL. Are you doctor, by good right?
What is your name?

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).*
Zounds, my poor memory! What is my saintly name, for heaven’s sake? *[Aloud.]* Of humble state —

CROMWELL.
Your name! The spring can burst From cavern depths.
[ROCHESTER, *confused, appears to recollect something of importance, suddenly; he feels hastily in his pocket and draws out a letter which he presents to* CROMWELL *with a profound obeisance.*

LORD ROCHESTER.
This note will tell your Highness Who I am.

CROMWELL (*taking the letter).* From whom is it?

LORD ROCHESTER.
Mr. John Milton.

CROMWELL (*opening the letter*). A worthy man. Blind — very sad. [Reads *a few lines.*
Your name Is Obededom.

LORD ROCHESTER (*bowing, aside*). God forbid! That name? *[Aloud.]* My lord has said it.
[Aside.] Obed — Obededom — Zounds! A name to make the devil run. Accursed Davenant. One can't pronounce This name without a frightful grimace.

CROMWELL (*re-folding the letter*).
'T is A saintly name. This Obededom was Of Geth. Within his home he welcomed once The ark when it was travelling. My friend, Prove yourself worthy of this noble name.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* So much for Obededom!

CROMWELL.
A great saint, John Milton, council clerk, vouches for you.
[Aside] He seems, in fact, a most devoted man, His violence was hearty proof of it. *[Aloud]* But't is my duty to examine you, And see that you have rigid views of faith, Before I name you chaplain, sir.

LOUD ROCHESTER *(lowing).*
Amen!
[Aside] This is the moment critical.

CROMWELL.
Tell me When Solomon began to build his temple.

LORD ROCHESTER. In Zio, second month of sacred year.

CROMWELL.
When did he finish it?

LORD ROCHESTER.
The month of bull.

CROMWELL. Had Thara not three children? Where?

LORD ROCHESTER.
Chaldea.

CROMWELL. Who will appear to purify this earth?

LORD ROCHESTER. The saints, who are to reign a thousand years.

CROMWELL.
By whom are saintly duties best fulfilled?

LOUD ROCHESTER. Believers bear within sufficient grace! To preach, one mounts unto the desk and says, Inspired by Carmel's light, not ABC, But Aleph, Beth, and Ghimel.

CROMWELL.
'T is well said. Continue, friend; spread out your sails.

LORD ROCHESTER *(with enthusiasm).*
The Lord Reveals his spirit to each human soul. One can receive from Heaven the fecund light, Yet not be priest or minister.
[Aside] Call the light Sunshins.
[.Aloud] Without faith, man grovels: watch, Illuminate your soul with this white lamp. Each soul's a sanctuary and each man A priest: bring to the common hearth your fire. The prophets preached in public places, and The holy temple had its darkened rooms. *[Aside]* Now, Obededom Wilmot, may you hang If any words of yours I understand.

CROMWELL *(aside).* An anabaptist. In his logic strong, But in his doctrine demagogic Well!

LORD ROCHESTER *(continuing with ardour).* The gift of languages comes unto those Who speak often and much.
[Aside] I'm proof of that! *[Aloud]* With prayer and vigilance one can become A Levite. Then can one o'ertake Satan, Although he travels fast,

and in one day Despite his cloven foot, goes from Beth-Lebaoth Unto Beth-Marchaboth.
[Aside.] It’s going well: God’s love! Keep on! Now for the ecstasy!

CROMWELL (*interrupting him).* Sufficient! You have built your edifice Upon a false foundation. We will speak Of that hereafter. Name the animals Impure.

LORD ROCHESTER. All herons, ostriches, and bitterns, The ibis, banished from the ark —
[Aside.] And Cromwell. *[Aloud]* Everything which flies or walks.

CROMWELL.
Which ones Are safe to eat?

LORD ROCHESTER. The attacus, my lord, The bruchus and the serpent, please your honour!

CROMWELL.
But you forget the grasshopper, my friend.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* The deuce! Who wants those beasts inside his stomach?

CROMWELL. You have neglected this important word: “ To touch dead bodies renders one impure Till evening.”
[Aside] Never mind. He’s learned. One Can’t ask such universal thoughts as mine. *[Aloud]* A final word. Does it become a saint To wear long hair or short?

LORD ROCHESTER *(boldly).*
Extremely short. *[Aside]* Rejoice, Roundhead!

CROMWELL.
Which leads one to believe —

LORD ROCHESTER *(warmly).* Our hair is naught but sinful vanity. Was Absalom not hung by his long hair?

CROMWELL.
Truly; but Samson died when he was sheared.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside, biting his lips).* The devil!

CROMWELL. To elucidate this thought I'll seek the Bible's penetrating light.
[He goes out.

SCENE XVI.

LORD ROCHESTER *(alone).* The first attack I have sustained with glory. Although a Puritan, he is no fool. I fear instead — Who can this traitor be? A confident of Cromwell and of Hyde! Ah, but I've duped the old arch-demon well!
In what sermonic style he questions one, And cross-examines with his canting eye.
[Examining himself from head to foot. I 'in a vile-looking fellow, thank the Lord! A cross between a knave and regicide. He took me for a robber at the start. *[Laughing.]* This preaching soldier, brigand patriarch, Can have no respite; he must always go Armed to the teeth, e'en in his palace walls. Of psalms and pistols he makes constant use, So that on all sides, he can hold his own.

SCENE XVII.

LORD ROCHESTER, RICHARD CROMWELL.

LORD ROCHESTER (*perceiving* RICHARD, *who is coming towards him).* ‘T is Richard Cromwell! Zounds! I must be off. If he should recognize me, — rope or fire! Then Obededom’s Greek would not avail.

RICHARD CROMWELL (*examining* ROCHESTER). I think I’ve seen that countenance somewhere.

LORD ROCHESTER (*putting on a gloomy Puritan expression; aside).* The fox doth smell the counterfeit.

RICHARD CROMWELL.
I’m sure!

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).*
Hard luck!

RICHARD CROMWELL (*still looking at* LORD ROCHESTER). He’s anything but Puritan. He drank wine with the Cavaliers to-day. Ah, now I know who’t is! The scamp!

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).*
Confound him!
I never was in such a hole as this, — No, not since that vile *tête-à-tête*, when I Kissed Lady Seymour, aged fifty years.

RICHARD CROMWELL *(aside).* Why should he doubt a man with whom he drinks?

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* What hateful looks!

RICHARD CROMWELL *(aside).*
One of my father’s spies, And will, no doubt, give full report of me. He’ll tell him I carouse in taverns with Men who conspire against his government. That is a crime worthy imprisonment, My father thinks, — *lèse-majesté*, high treason! I must try to bribe him, try to stem the storm.
[.Feeling in the pocket of his vest. I have some nobles in my purse.

LORD ROCHESTER *(watching his action, aside).*
He means Attack. He carries pistols too.
[He draws back with some anxiety.

RICHARD CROMWELL.
So long As they are paid, what matters it to them Who pays?
[Approaching LORD ROCHESTER, *with a smiling and affable manner.*
Good-day to you.

LORD ROCHESTER *(troubled).*
God keep your Grace. *[Aside]* With an infernal smile he nears his prey. *[Aloud]* An humble prop of the Church-Militant Am I: my prayers are yours.

RICHARD CROMWELL.
I've heard you, far From praying, swear most lustily.

LORD ROCHESTER.
My lord, You are mistaken. Heard me swear?

RICHARD CROMWELL.
I did, —
First by St. George, then by St. Paul, then by — LORD ROCHESTER.
In mercy! I —

RICHARD CROMWELL.
Swear that you did not swear!

LORD ROCHESTER.
I?

RICHARD CROMWELL. Come, my reverend, why can't you be frank?

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).*
The deuce!

CROMWELL.

RICHARD CROMWELL. You ‘re not at all what you appear. You hide a traitor’s eye beneath the mask Of saint.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside, with consternation)*. I’m lost!

RICHARD CROMWELL. Is it not true?

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).*
Damnation!

RICHARD CROMWELL. Yes, I know all! Look here; do not denounce me!

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside, with surprise).* What! I had the same prayer upon my lips. What does he mean?

RICHARD CROMWELL.
I have a reckless nature, — I make friends everywhere. This morn I drank With Cavaliers, like you, my Puritan. What use is it to tell my father that, — To tell him that his son clinked glasses there? And for a little wine (I hardly drank) Get me repudiated by the tribe?

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).*
I ‘in saved!
r

RICHARD CROMWELL. Of course my father wants to know All that is done and seen and thought; but then, ‘T is not with plots that we amuse ourselves.
For I know you, my friend; you are a spy. I’ve guessed your secret.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).*
Yes, and guessed it well. I’ve made a hit tremendous in this part; I’ve grasped so well the colour of the sect That I can pass for robber or for spy.
[Aloud to RICHARD, *with low bow.* You honour me by far too much, my lord.

RICHARD CROMWELL Spare me my father’s morbid discipline. Give me your word — I swear I’m rich enough — That from the Lord Protector you’ll conceal What you have seen this morning.

LORD ROCHESTER.
Willingly.

RICHARD CROMWELL *(offering him a large purse, embroidered with his arms).* Accept my purse. I’m not ungrateful, sir.

LORD ROCHESTER *(accepting it after a moment’s hesitation). [Aside]* Why not? ‘T is a resource. Conspirators Need money. And moreover, avarice Is part of my disguise. *[Aloud]* You ‘re generous, my lord!

RICHARD CROMWELL Take it, my friend, and get a drink.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* This ends much better than I dared to hope.

RICHARD CROMWELL.
How much does such a trade as yours bring in, — Not counting gallows?

LORD ROCHESTER.
I mean as spy.
Doctor of the faith?

RICHARD CROMWELL.

LORD ROCHESTER. My lord confers a name.

RICHARD CROMWELL. Your kind of business needs philosophy. Why should you blush?

LORD ROCHESTER.
My lord —

SCENE XVIII.

The same. CROMWELL.

CROMWELL (*holding a Bible marked with his arms).*
Hark to this verse, Sir Obededom; ‘t is about Dabir, The King of Edom. *[Perceiving his son.]* Ah!
[To LORD ROCHESTER.] Leave us alone!

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* What now? How he resumes his haughty air’ The tyrant takes the place of pedagogue. *[He goes out.*

SCENE XIX.

RICHARD CROMWELL, CROMWELL. CROMWELL *goes close to his son. Stands with his arms folded, and looks at him fixedly.*

RICHARD CROMWELL (*bowing profoundly).* My father, whence this unexpected gloom? What means this cloud upon your brow, my lord? On what shall fall the thunder it prepares, Whose lightning flashes now within your eyes? What is it? What’s been done? What do you fear? What grief strikes you ‘midst universal joy? To-morrow the republic dies; and as It joins the ashes of departed kings, Bequeaths three kingdoms unto you. To-morrow Beholds your grandeur lifted to the throne. To-morrow Westminster proclaims your right; And throwing his hereditary glove At all your rivals, this armed champion Of ancient England shall defy the world In Cromwell’s name, who now is made a king To roaring cannon and to ringing bells. What do you lack? Europe and England, London And your entire family obey Your will. If I dared name my humble self, My father and my master, I would say I have no wish but for your happiness, Your health, your safety —

CROMWELL *(who has not taken his eyes from off his son’s face).*
How is his Majesty, Charles Stuart?

RICHARD CROMWELL (*stupefied)*. Oh, my lord!

CROMWELL.
Another time Choose mess-mates with more care, my son.

RICHARD CROMWELL
My lord, May I be cut in pieces! oh, may I Be viler than the pavement in the streets, If I —

CROMWELL (*interrupting him)*. Drink they good wine at the Three Cranes?

RICHARD CROMWELL *(aside)*. That damned spy had already told.
[Aloud.] I swear —

CROMWELL.
You seem abashed! Is it such grievous wrong To gather a gay crowd around a jug Of muscadine? You drank it to my health, Of course?

RICHARD CROMWELL *(aside)*. He knows of that accursed toast. *[Aloud]* My lord, this meeting was most innocent. Upon my soul, it was.

CROMWELL *(with a voice of thunder)*. Infamous wretch! It was my son who drank with Cavaliers His portion of my blood, in a wild feast.

RICHARD CROMWELL.
My father!

CROMWELL. Drink with Pagans whom I hate! Drink to King Charles’s health! A fast day, too!

RICHARD CROMWELL. I swear, my lord, I did n’t know it was!

CROMWELL.
Reserve your oaths to give your Tyrian king. Don’t come here, you blasphemous parricide, To flaunt your baseness in my very eyes. Some

hellish wine has overpowered your mind, — That was a poison which you drank to Charles. My vengeance, on the watch, observed your crime. Although a son, my victim you shall be. The tree will fire itself to kill its fruit.
[.He goes out.

RICHARD CROMWELL *(alone).* For one small glass of wine, what a great noise! Drink on a fast day, — that's the crime! That makes One traitor, parricide, blasphemer, fiend. It costs much less, although a banquet's good, To fast with saints than to carouse with fools. I never had perceived, until to-day, That very precious truth! My father's lost His senses. — [*Enter* LORD ROCHESTER.

SCENE XX.

RICHARD CROMWELL, LORD ROCHESTER.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* Richard seems to be distressed.

RICHARD CROMWELL (*perceiving* ROCHESTER *as he crosses the back of the stage).* Ah, there's my spy! The liar! He had told! Like a Scotch fox, I'll cross him on his path.
[Advancing toward RICHARD *with menacing air.* I have you, traitor!

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).*
What! a new attack? I thought we had sworn peace.
[Aloud.] What have I done?

RICHARD CROMWELL. This time for jesting is inopportune. You think you can conceal your perfidy? I saw my father, fool, and he knows all.
[Seeing that ROCHESTER *stands motionless and confused.* Reflect upon what answer you can make.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* It's true one of our men is Cromwell's spy. Do they know me?

RICHARD CROMWELL.
He’s laughing in his sleeve.

LORD ROCHESTER.
My lord!

RICHARD CROMWELL. Think you a wretch escapes me twice? Your treachery has been at last revealed. My father’s wild.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).*
Then I’ve been recognized. Well, let us face the storm!

RICHARD CROMWELL.
You coward!

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).*
Time, To put forth courage and drop artifice —
[.Aloud.] Since, Mr. Cromwell, I am known to you, I beg the honour of a duel. Both Of us have injuries which claim redress.
Arrange the hour, the place, the arms. I leave All choice to you. I hold myself a champion Most worthy of your sword.

RICHARD CROMWELL.
I fight a spy!

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* He’s not got over that? Then all is well.

RICHARD CROMWELL. You, in your serpent’s skin, your churchly dress, — You talk of duels? Do you hold yourself Less vile than is a Jew? Pray, do yourself More justice, recreant.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* A civil man!

RICHARD CROMWELL. To secretly betray me, when I’d paid; Take a man’s purse and sell its owner, quick!

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside)*. What does he mean?

RICHARD CROMWELL.
At least, give back the gold.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside)*. The deuce! To Ormond I have sent the purse.

RICHARD CROMWELL.
What shall Will you give it back, you wretched thief?

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside)*.
I do?
[Aloud.] The sum is not so very large —

RICHARD CROMWELL. Indeed! It was too small! Upon your bones, Your flesh, you'll pay it back at a good price.
[Drawing his sword.
Come, come, my purse!

LORD ROCHESTER *(retreating)*.
He means to kill me, Heaven!
Accursed be that purse!

SCENE XXI.

The same. EARL OF CARLISLE, *accompanied by four halberdiers.* RICHARD CROMWELL *recovers himself.* THE EARL OF CARLISLE *makes him a profound obeisance.*

EARL OF CARLISLE.
Lord Richard Cromwell, In the Lord Protector's name, give me your sword.

RICHARD CROMWELL (*surrendering his sword to* THE EARL).
For punishing a traitor 't was in use. You've come a bit too soon.

LORD ROCHESTER *(with loud voice and an air of inspiration).*
Oh, blessed chance. God saves Eleazar from Antiochus.

EARL OF CARLISLE *(to* RICHARD CROMWELL). Your honour will please pass into your room: Two archers I must station at the door.

RICHARD CROMWELL *(to* LORD ROCHESTER). This is where I am brought by your deceit.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* ‘T is most astounding! What! I am accused Of getting Cromwell’s son made prisoner? And when with rage this son threatens my life ‘T is Cromwell who preserves me from his sword. Yet I am doing all I can to hurt The father, while I’ve never wronged the son.

RICHARD CROMWELL. Dare you still face me with your insolence, You coward?
[To EARL OF CARLISLE.] DO not trust this man, my lord. He’s double-faced. I would not have complained If I had paid him back as he deserved. A double-face demands four kicks, my lord!
[RICHARD CROMWELL *exits, surrounded by halberdiers.*

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* That’s what it costs to pass for a Roundhead.

SCENE XXII.

EARL OK CARLISLE, LORD ROCHESTER, THURLOE.

THURLOE *(to* LORD ROCHESTER). My lord appreciates your learning, sir, And chaplain of his household has named you. You will deliver prayers at morn and night, You’ll preach a sermon to his body-guards, You’ll speak a benediction o’er his food, And bless the hippocras he drinks at night.

LORD ROCHESTER *(bowing low, aside).* That is our object — thanks!

THURLOE.

Such are your duties.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* Rochester to pray for Cromwell! Good! enough! A devilet pronouncing benediction On a devil.

THURLOE *(to* EARL OF CARLISLE, *handing him a parchment). A* conspiracy's afoot For Westminster, to-morrow.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).*
That's not all.

THURLOE *(to* CARLISLE).
Seize Rochester!

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* Yes! Find him first.

THURLOE *(continuing).*
And Ormond.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* If he received the message that I sent, He will have changed his name and rooms ere this.

THURLOE.
As to the others, watch them close! Trust them To throw themselves into our nets, in time.
[They go out.

SCENE XXIII.

LORD ROCHESTER *(alone).* Our stratagem will bring to naught their plans: To-night will place King Cromwell in our hands. All things are moving well. Although betrayed By some, we still are strong for Stuart's cause. For their sake, we'll brave ridicule and rage, Their pistols, sword-thrusts, biblical debates. In fox's skin protected from these wolves, We'll be

impromptu chaplain, saint of luck, On hand for catechism, skirmishes; By day Ezekiel, Scaramouche by night.
[He goes out.

ACT III.

THE FOOLS.

SCENE. — *The Painted Chamber at White-Hall. To the right a large gilded arm-chair, placed at the top of several steps, covered with the Gobelin tapestry sent by Mazarin. A semi-circle of tabourets opposite to the arm-chair. Near to the latter, a large table with velvet cover and a folding-chair.*

SCENE I.

CROMWELL'S FOUR FOOLS. TRICK, *first fool, dressed in motley of yellow and Hack, hat similar in colour, pointed, with golden bells; the arms of the Protector embroidered in gold on his breast.* GIRAFF, *second fool, motley yellow and red, cap similar, bordered with silver bells; the Protector's arms in silver on his breast.* GRAMADOCH, *third fool, and train-bearer to his Highness, motley red and black, square cap similar, with gold bells; the Protector's arms in gold on his breast.* ELESPURU (*pronounced Elespourou), fourth fool, costume entirely black; black three-cornered hat with silver bell at each corner; the Protector s arms in silver on his breast. All four carry at the side a small sword with big handle and a wooden blade.* TRICK *has a fool's-cap in his hand. They gambol on to the stage.*

ELESPURU *(sings).*
Hear this, nor mock: I went to hell. Moloch, Sadoch, Threw me pell-mell In the red loch.
My linen flamed, My doublet burned. May none be blamed. Great Satan turned Me monkey named And my race spurned.
[Hums.
Great Satan turned —

GIRAFF *(gravely)*. He let you go? Who, think you, is Cromwell, Our temporal king and spiritual chief?

GRAMADOCH (*to* GLRAFF). Can one be Satan just by wearing horns? At this rate devils must be limitless.

ELESPURU.
Can one suspect Elizabeth Cromwell?

GRAMADOCH.
Hark to this stanza which a Frenchman made: *[He sings.*
“In Paris through two portals All dreams must pass in state: Through ivory ones to lovers Through horn to lawful mate.”
Lord Cromwell makes me bear his train. All right. His wife makes him wear horns.

TRICK.
Have done! For shame! Such words as those deserve the gallows, sir. I’m cavalier of Dame Elizabeth; ‘T is Cromwell’s and mine honour I defend. Oh, I will vouch for her, — a homely thing!

GRAMADOCH.
That’s true. I’ll not deny it, friend. I lied.
Where there is nothing new, we must invent.
I’m horribly afraid of *ennui*. Faith!
It makes me sick. I’ll go and sing a ballad To Mistress Echo. — *[He sings.*
Why such a plight, Carmelite? Has Rose betrayed you? Hi!
Why so much rage, Pretty page? Are you her lover? Aye! Why so morose, Dainty Rose! The husband comes, Sad.
To bed where passion Took possession, He’s returning Mad.
Your ear so keen Strains, I ween, To catch the hoof Near.
Now ends the life Of faithless wife. Tremble! He is Here.
The priest and page Quick engage To leave the place. Fly!
Under the walls, Laughter falls. “ Ho! you are caught; Die!”
The high words flash, Thunders clash: “ For vulture’s food — Swing.
“From the great top Let them drop. Crows o’er them, — Sing.”
To sinful mirth Open earth; Marriage haters — Grin!

When he started, Broken-hearted, She knew not guilt — Sin!
Nor page nor priest Shared love's feast. Her chaste lips— "No!"
When he returned Twenty burned At her feet.
Oh!

TRICK *(to* GRAMADOCII). Hear my legend now! — *[He sings.*
Strange century! Job, Lazarus Wrapped in gold; Lacedemon Offers alms To King Croesus. Era strange; Medley queer; Angel is devil, Black is white; Maidens are Virgins pure, Or profess to be; Easy beauties, Docile husbands; Silly fools, Whom Lucretias None too fierce Change to Vulcans; Democrite8, Hypocrites; Kings who please; Heraclites, Heteroclites; Thinking fools; Halberds bold For argument; Tender lovers Drink tisane; Wolves and mules And glow-worms; Courtesans, Courtiers. Women loved; Headsmen kind; Gentle nuns Unconfined; Chiefless armies, Heathen clerks, Pygmy titans; Giant dwarfs, — That's my age. Nothing lives In this whirl But the scourge. Bad to worse Goes the earth;
Caesars great Lizards small; Cyclopes are Myopes; Brutus proud Plutus is; Orpheus makes Morpheus. Our Jupin Is Scapin. Silly age, Crazy days. Hercules Always off. One climbs, Two fall; And Olympus Is a howl.

GRAMADOCH. 'T is bad; form tights, and slaughters reason.

ELESPURU.
Mine! *[He sings.*
You unto whom each night Hell grins with all its might, Angus and Errol sorcerers! Oh, you who know the ways, And in your gloomy maze Keep owls for nightingales. Undines beneath your falls Renounce their parasols. Of sylphs the cavalcades Surmounting barricades Jump from the great Orcades To spire of St. Paul's; Bad hunters Tyrolese, Whose packs scamper at ease Through every woody turn; Clerks Argant, troops of Roll Hung to the halter's pall Quick at the witchs' call Let your old dust reburn. Pistol and Caliban, Macduff, Zingaris ran In murder's ghastly van; Which is the devil, pray, Old Nick or Noll? come, say. Which of the snakes of earth To which Satan gave birth Thinks he of the most worth, The asp or viper, eh! The asp or basilisk, Old Noll or the old Nick? His left eye is old Nick, But old Noll is his right. Old Nick can skilful be, Old Noll's as smart as he; Beelzebub is cute, and he Holds both in his grim might. When this great

couple ride, Death follows at their side, And hell relay provides. Each one holds to his own; The broom-handle for Nick, For Noll the hatchet's stick, And to conclude this quick, Before he's hermit grown, I wish, for virtues great I might see Noll, in state, Hauled off by Nick the Great, Or else in his own place, See Nick's angelic face Appear, and with due grace Wring old Noll's neck.

[The Fools applaud with great bursts of laughter and repeat in chorus: —

Or else in his own place See Nick's angelic face Appear, and with due grace Wring old Noll's neck.

TRICK.

Know you strange things are passing hereabouts, — Enough to furnish texts for parodies?

GIRAFF.

Yes, Cromwell makes himself a king. The devil Wants to become a god.

GRAMADOCH.

I hear it said Two plots have almost spoiled his game.

ELESPURU.

'T is true.

The army is dissatisfied; the people Have begun to talk.

TRICK. Should he renounce His armour for a crown, alas for him! An unprotected heart's an easy goal For daggers pointed by avenging hands.

GIRAFF.

This mad turmoil is greatly to my taste.

I'd like to set the dogs upon the wolves!

If Satan would present to Oliver A red-hot sceptre on a massive grill, Use Cavaliers for his disgraceful nags, And play at nine-pins with the Roundheads — eh?

TRICK.

What think you, brother, of the chaplain who Blessed us to-day with such a knowing look?

ELESPURU.
Hum!

GIRAFF.
Deuce!

GRAMADOCH.
The devil.

TRICK.
So! We think alike, I see.

GRAMADOCH.
Friends, I’ll unfold a tale to you!
[.All draw near to him. You know he haunts the park for archery, — This Obededom, — shooting near the gate Where stand the guards, to whom he talks, and feigns To edify their minds with texts, yet makes Them drunk and gives them money, and one time When they were close around him, said, “ To-night. To enter, *White-Hall* and *Cologne* will be The password.”

GIRAFF (*clapping his hands with jog).*
Then he’s working for King Charles!

ELESPURU.
No! Cromwell’s spy, if what our master’s son Said in his rage against the saintly scamp Be true. You know ’twas Obededom’s words Which locked poor Richard up.

GIRAFF *(laughing).*
That’s true. How droll Richard, who soon will be condemned, desired To kill his father. What rare fun!

TRICK.
I’ve something Funnier yet.

GRAMADOCH.

Indeed!

GIRAFF. Not possible.

TRICK *(showing a roll of parchment tied with a pink ribbon)*
Look here!

ELESPURU.
Well, what is that?

TRICK.
This parchment fell From the black doctor's pocket in my hands.

GRAMADOCH. It is some sermon, terrible and long, Opening with hell and ending with the devil. Come, let's see it. quick! It is essential That fools should master Puritanic cant.
[Unfolding the roll which TRICK *has given him.* This chaplain seems to be as mad as we. He ties his thunder with pink ribbon. Hear! *[He casts a glance on the open parchment and bursts into a great fit of laughter.* GIRAFF *takes the parchment, looks at it, and laughs louder yet.* ELESPURU, *to whom he passes it, laughs also, and.* TRICK, *as he watches the other two, laughs still more heartily.*

ELESPURU *(laughing).* A pretty devil wrote this sermon — eh?

TRICK (*laughing).* What think you of it?

ELESPURU *(reading).*
"Quatrain to my love: Egeria the fair, you burn my soul!"

GIRAFF *(snatches the parchment and reads* " Your eyes, where Cupid lights a conquering flame—"

GRAMADOCH *(snatching the parchment in his turn).* "Are like two glowing mirrors —

TRICK *(taking it from.* GRAMADOCH.

“Which reflect The fires consuming me.”
[All burst into fits of increasing laughter

ELESPURU.
These verses fell from pockets Puritan, Oh, fie!

GIRAFF. The giddy man!

GRAMADOCH (as *if struck with an idea).*
Of course, that’s it, — I’m sure of it! — *[Drawing the rest towards him.*
You know Dame Guggligoy, — The Lady Frances’ governess?

TRICK.
Of course.

GRA.MADOCH. I saw the chaplain whispering in her ear, And he gave her a purse.

TRICK. What did she do?

GRAMADOCH.
She said, “ This night, my handsome fellow, you Shall be alone with her. I sang a song. — *[He sings.*
The witch said to the pirate, Lord of the nipping air, “ I will not be ungrateful;
Go, take your lady fair.
But give me, as my wage, Some pretty, merry page Who will ignore my age And kiss for fun.
And add to that, for peace, Two sheep with their white fleece, A good whale’s bones and grease, Caineleon one, An idol, charm of tin, Six asps, a weasel’s skin, Of your men the most thin To be my skeleton.”
My faith! the Guggligoy should go for less; She is an active skeleton herself. But it is fair, I take it, to conclude This sheared seducer of the guards and maids Is here for neither Charles nor Noll, but Frances.

ELESPURU.
My mind is still more muddled than before. What does it mean?

GIRAFF.
I don’t know; but it’s droll.

GRAMADOCH. This man who deems himself master of all, Might do much worse than borrow his fools’ eyes. Suppose we tell him?

GIRAFF.
Tell him? We? Oh, no! No, Gramadoch; you ‘re mad. It’s naught to us. Why are we hired by Noll? To make him laugh. Well, let us hold ourselves within our sphere. He keeps us, and perhaps he pays us, more To cheer his days than to defend his life. Let them abduct his child, or force his door, Shear him or choke him, what is it to us?

GRAMADOCH.
He’s right.

ELESPURU.
That’s true.

TRICK.
Each one to his own trade. He rules, we laugh. Let him be cut in quarters, Be burned or flayed, he can’t find fault with us So long as we don’t fail to laugh for him.

ELESPURU.
Our vengeful laughter will repay his scorn. How his buffoons will jeer the failure king.

GRAMADOCH. At bottom this false chaplain is like us, For fools and lovers do go hand-in-hand. His name of Obededom seems expressly Fashioned to fit with Trick, Elespuru, Giraff, and Gramadoch.

TRICK.
But he conspires. We must defend ourselves. If Charles comes back, He’ll have us hung.

ELESPURU. Hang four poor fools? For what?

TRICK.
Oh, just to see our grimace when we swing. Men of our trade can’t beg for mercy. No. It’s too much fun to see the jumping-jacks Upon the string.

GIRAFF.
Hang us, — the innocents? Oh, never fear! Should Charles the Second come, He will need fools; and we are on the field. Where could he find profounder jesters, sir? The common sort are fools by instinct, we By principle. Don’t be afraid. A fool Can always jump the falling bridge. To live To old age here, where all is fugitive, One studies folly, — wisdom after all.

TRICK.
Moreover, Cromwell’s tiresome. Charles is gay.

ELESPURU. The tyrant’s eagle eye, is it so tired? Is’t possible, we know what he knows not; We hold the thread he does not even see, — We, Cromwell’s fools?

GRAMADOCH.
Oh, no, Elespuru. We ‘re his buffoons; but he, — he is our fool. He thinks we are his puppets: he is ours. Has he deceived us with his liturgies, Or terrified us with the thundering voice, The pious eye-winks, which subdue the world?
He cannot look at us without a smile.
His secret policy and profound schemes Impose on all the world except four fools.
His reign, so fatal to the people it destroys, Is but a stupid drama to our eyes.
Yes, watch. We’ll see, passing before our gaze, Some twenty actors, merry, awkward, sad:
We stand aside, we, the philosophers, And laugh at points, applaud at climaxes.
Let us leave Charles and Cromwell the whole fight For our amusement they can rend themselves.

We hold the key to this strange mystery, But we say nothing to the master.

ELESPURU.
No!
Let him find out!

GIRAFF. Let us keep still and laugh.

TRICK.
We triumph everywhere. Satan has made These tyrants for amusement to buffoons; While all earth trembles ‘neath the despots frown, We take his sceptre for our hobby-horse.

SCENE II.

The same. CROMWELL; JOHN MILTON, *Hack coat, white hair, rather long, Hack cap, chain of the secretaryship of the Council around his neck. He is assisted by a young page who wears the livery of the Protector.* WHITELOCKE; PIERPOINT; THURLOE; LORD ROCHESTER; HANNIBAL SESTHEAD.

CROMWELL.
Here are my fools. ‘T is a good time to be Diverted.
[THURLOE *enters.* THURLOE *(to* CROMWELL). Parliament awaits your lordship In the throne-room.

CROMWELL *(impatiently).* Well! Let it wait!

THURLOE *(low to Protector).*
It bears The Humble Address, which is a desire From all the people to make the Protector King.

CROMWELL *(radiant).*
At last!

[.Aside.] Are they not dull?
[To THURLOE.] ‘T is well! I will attend to them, but after council. I must look at the Fresland horses which The Duke of Holstein sends to me. Distract them, My friend; inflaming their great zeal, suggest Discussion of a text until I come.

GRAMADOCH *(low to* TRICK). Yes, in the book of Kings, for instance.
[THURLOE *goes out.* LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).*
What!
Oh, Charles! oh, martyred king, you are avenged! What a base rod succeeds to thy bright sceptre.

CROMWELL (*pointing out his Fools to* LORD ROCHESTER). Since we are all alone, I want to laugh. These are my fools, Doctor. I present you.
[LORD ROCHESTER *and the Fools bow to each other.* When times are good, they are a merry set. We all make verses. Even my old Milton Takes a hand, too. — *[Indicating* MILTON.

MILTON (*with vexation).*
“Old Milton “! I beg you — I am nine years less old than you, my lord.

CROMWELL
Have it your way.

MILTON. You come from ninety-nine, I come from sixteen hundred eight.

CROMWELL.
Remembrance Has an eternal youth.

MILTON (*impatiently).*
You might treat me More civilly. I am a lawyer’s son, One who was alderman in his own town.

CROMWELL.
Be calm. I know much better who you are; You ‘re Milton, great theologian and good poet, — Next unto Vithers and to Donne. Beware God keeps account of all he gives —

MILTON *(as if talking to himself).* Come next to them? Alas! what cruel words. We must be patient. In good time they'll know What gifts I had. The future is my judge.
Posterity will comprehend my Eve, Who falls like a sweet dream on night of hell; Good, guilty Adam; the arch-angel great And dauntless, proud of any reign eternal, Noble in his despair, wise in his madness, Arising from the lake of fire, which his Huge wing chastises. Yes, within my soul A genius travails: great, mysterious dreams Keep floating through my brain, when all is still. I live within my thoughts, and Milton finds Sweet consolation there. Oh, in my turn, In emulation of almighty God, I want to make a world, somewhere between The earth, the sky, and hell.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).*
What's that? The deuce!

HANNIBAL SESTHEAD *(to Fools).* A ludicrous enthusiast.

CROMWELL *(looks at* MILTON *and shrugs his shoulders).* You wrote A noble thing in the " Iconoclast." But as for your great devil, meant to be A new Leviathan, — he's very bad. — [*Laughing.*

MILTON *(under his breath, indignant).* 'T is Cromwell laughing at my Satan! Well!

LORD ROCHESTER *(approaching* MILTON). Pray, Mr. Milton —

MILTON *(without hearing him, continues looking at* CROMWELL). 'T is all jealousy.

LORD ROCHESTER *(to* MILTON, *who listens with an absent air).*
You do not comprehend true poetry. You have some wit, but scarcely any taste. The French excel us all in everything. Go study Racan. Read his pastorals. Let Tircis with Aminta haunt your fields Leading a gentle lamb with a blue ribbon. But for your Eve, your Adam, and your hell, Your lake of fire, — all that is hideous. Your naked Satan with his scorchéd wings! It might be done if he were clothed in silk And wore a golden helmet on his

wig, A rich aurora jacket, Florence cape, As once I saw, if I remember well, The Sun dressed, at the opera in France, When all the Court was there.

MILTON *(astonished).*
What worldly talk To come from a saint's mouth.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside, biting his lips).*
Another slip! He listened ill, for my good luck. Beware! You play this Obededom sorry tricks, My lord.
[Aloud to MILTON.] I was but jesting, sir.

MILTON.
Bad jest.
[Aside, and still turned toward CROMWELL. How Cromwell treats me. What great thing is it To govern Europe? Nothing but child's play.
I'd like to see him making Latin verses As I do.
[During these speeches, CROMWELL *has been talking with* WHITELOCKE *and,* PIERPOINT. HANNIBAL SESTHEAD *with the Fools.*

CROMWELL *(gruffly).* Come, somebody, sirs, must laugh. Fools, find some idiotic thing to say. Sir Hannibal —

HANNIBAL SESTHEAD *(with an offended air).* I beg to be excused. I 'in not your fool; I'm cousin to a king, — King of an ancient race, who rules Denmark.

CROMWELL *(aside, biting his lips).* I comprehend. That is an insult. Why Cannot my anger crush him now? *[.Rudely to Fools]* Come, laugh!

FOOLS *(laughing).*
Ha! ha!

CROMWELL *(aside).* Their laughter is sardonic. *[Aloud; angrily to Fools.]* Hush! *[The Fools are silent,* CROMWELL *continues with impatience.*
It's Milton, that infernal poet, who Upsets us all with his Satanic visions.

[MILTON *turns proudly on* CROMWELL, *who continues. [Aside.]* Calm thyself!
[Aloud.] Well! what were we discussing? Trick, order beer and pipes.

TRICK.
I go at once!
My lord desires to smoke.
[He goes out, and returns in a moment followed by two servants, bearing a table laden with pipes and mugs.

CROMWELL.
I want to be Diverted. Do you hear? I want to laugh. *[.Aside*.] Betrayed by mine own son! *[Silence.* CROMWELL *seems to surrender himself to gloomy thoughts. The others sit in silence, their eyes fixed on the ground.* LORD ROCHESTER *and the Fools are the only ones who appear to observe the gloomy countenance of the Protector. Suddenly* CROMWELL *becomes conscious of the embarrassed attitudes of his companions, and rousing himself from his reverie, addresses the Fools.*
How many verses Have you composed since I constructed those Replying unto Colonel Lilburne’s sonnet?

TRICK.
Hippocrene is most miserly, Yet this —
[Presenting a rolled parchment to the Protector.

CROMWELL.
Read it.

TRICK (*unfolding the parchment).*
“A quatrain “ (verses bad) “ To my loved one: Egeria the Fair—”

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* My God! My quatrain.
[He rushes to TRICK *and snatches the parchment from his hand.*
Devil and damnation!
My lord, pray pardon me —
[.Bowing to CROMWELL.] If I have sworn! But where’s the blood that’s sanctified enough To hear this torrent of obscenity Break forth at one’s own

side?
[To TRICK, *who is laughing heartily.* Go, Edomite! Fly hence, impure Madianite! Avaunt — *[Aside.]* I have forgot that other name in “ ite.” My quatrain! Oh, those devils robbed my pocket!

CROMWELL *(to* LORD ROCHESTER). I fully understand the scorn you feel.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).*
Not scorn.

CROMWELL. But this is not a church, my friend. I want to read what scandalizes you. Give it to me.

LORD ROCHESTER. A song from hell!

CROMWELL *(impatiently).*
Give quickly!

LORD ROCHESTER.
But —

CROMWELL *(imperiously).* Obey me, sir.
[ROCHESTER *lows and hands the parchment to* CROMWELL *who casts his eyes over it, and says, as he gives it lack:* —
Indeed, these verses Are most detestable.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* Detestable? You lie, detestable old regicide! Cromwell a judge of verses? Bah!

CROMWELL.
This quatrain Is truly stupid.

LORD ROCHESTER (*casting a glance on the parchment).* Yes, of such vile songs All authors are condemned; yet to my mind The verses are most aptly turned.

TRICK *(low to the other Fools).*
He is The author, never fear.
[Aloud.] I made those rhymes; But I admit, Apollo should inflict Me with a fourfold chastisement, they are So bad.

LORD ROCHESTER *(giving a side glance at the Fools; aside).*
Go on; jeer to your heart’s content, You monkeys of a leopard, popinjays To the great vulture!

CROMWELL. Learned Obededom, It is not in your line to criticise Such gallant, drowsy quatrains.

LORD ROCHESTER *(putting the quatrain in his pocket;*
aside).
Frances may Look at my efforts with a friendlier eye.

TRICK *(making* LORD ROCHESTER *an ironical salutation).* My lord is much too flattering.

LORD ROCHESTER.
Flatter you? I’d like to beat you while God’s damning you, And ride you through the streets of London backwards Upon a mule.

TRICK.
You think the author merits Such grievous punishment?

LORD ROCHESTER *(perplexed).*
I don’t say that.

TRICK.
Do you suppose I would conceal his name?

LORD ROCHESTER (*whose anxiety increases).* Enough!

TRICK.
I am not undertaking his Defence; he well deserves the lash.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).*
The fool!

TRICK *(laughing; low to the other Fools).* I've mixed him well.
[Enter EARL OF CARLISLE.
Deuce take my Lord Carlisle! He's coming to upset our fun.

LORD ROCHESTER (*breathing freely).*
At last!
[CROMWELL *draws the* EARL OF CARLISLE *hastily into a corner of the stage; the rest all retire, but cease not to watch* CROMWELL *and* CARLISLE.

CROMWELL (*low to* EARL OF CARLISLE, *who makes a profound obeisance).*
Lord Ormond?

EARL OF CARLISLE. He has changed his lodging-place.

CROMWELL.
And Rochester?

EARL OF CARLISLE. Cannot be found. He's hiding.

CROMWELL.
Richard?

EARL OF CARLISLE.
He still persists in his denials. The torture might perhaps force out the truth.

CROMWELL *(severely).* Your head shall answer the least scratch on him. You know my horror of these tortures! What! My son upon the rack? Oh, no, my lord; That shall be saved for his accomplices. Where's Lambert?

EARL OF CARLISLE.
Gone back to his summer home, Where he is diligently growing flowers.

CROMWELL *(bitterly).* A touching occupation! All escape. At least I hold the crown safe in my hands.

EARL OF CARLISLE. To Westminster all London throngs. The soldiers And all the people boldly execrate The name of king that’s offered unto you!

CROMWELL. Weigh well your words!

EARL OF CARLISLE.
Your Highness will forgive.

CROMWELL *(aside).*
All’s going wrong.
[Aloud and with vexation. I bade you to be gay! What are you thinking of!
[Aside.] They ‘re listening, The varlets!
[Low to EARL OF CARLISLE. Place a double guard, my lord, Around this palace.
[EARL OF CARLISLE, *exits.* Well! the quatrain; come! *[Aside]* I suffocate with rage.
[THURLOE *re-enters*

THURLOE *(to* CROMWELL).
The sect of Ranters, Whom the Holy Ghost inspires, have come to you To ask for light upon a point of faith. They wait, my lord.

CROMWELL.
Let them come in at once [THURLOE *exits. [Aside]* If I were born a king, I’d send them back. A popular chief is doomed to lead the crowd By satisfying it.
[THURLOE *re-enters, introducing the Ranters who are dressed in black, with blue stockings, large grey shoes, large grey hats, on which a small white cross is distinguishable. They keep their hats on.*

CHIEF OF THE DEPUTATION *(with solemnity).* To Oliver, Captain and Judge in Zion, we are come. The saints who now in London congregate Holding your wisdom as a vase designed To overflow, we ask must they be burned Or hung, those men who speak not as St. John, — Those who say Sibboleth not Shibboleth?

CROMWELL *(meditating).* The question is important and demands Much thought. To speak it Sibboleth is to Commit idolatry and merit death, Which doth delight Beelzebub. But torment Ought to pursue a twofold object, and Humanity must claim its right. To give The body up should be to save the soul. Well, which is better, rope or fire, to win The soul of sinners back unto their God? Fire purifies —

LOED ROCHESTER *(aside).* Ropes strangle.

CROMWELL.
It is true, Daniel grew pure within the scorching flame, But gallows have their virtues too. A gibbet Was the cross.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* In all this I admire The way this Cromwell glides ‘mongst all these tortures With the assured air of one at home. He talks of this kind now of that, and goes From halter to the fagot, and from gallows Unto the stake without so much as winking. And out of them he draws a thousand charms.

CROMWELL *(still reflecting).* With what great care the truths are hid from us. It is an arduous task, and this one case I place amongst the most profound and delicate. *[After a moment’s silence, turning abruptly to* LORD

ROCHESTER. Clerk, you pronounce the verdict.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).*
Pilate’s method. CROMWELL *(to the Ranters, indicating* LORD ROCHESTER). He is another Cromwell.

LORD ROCHESTER (*bowing low).*
Words divine.

CHIEF OF THE RANTERS *(to* LORD ROCHESTER). If any one should fall into this sin, Must it be rope or fire?

LORD ROCHESTER *(firmly).* The gallows, sir! And with him, ‘neath the same anathema Shall die his Amorrhean father and His mother Cethean.

CHIEF OF THE RANTERS *(gravely).*
The gallows, — why?

LORD ROCHESTER *(embarrassed).* Wherefore? Because — the ladder leads to it; That is the reason. God revealed unto A shepherd; by a ladder one ascends The sky.
[Aside.] ‘T is with great effort I refrain From laughing in their faces.

CROMWELL *(looking at* LORD ROCHESTER *with satisfaction).*
He is wise, Our chaplain.

CHIEF OF THE RANTERS *(grasping* ROCHESTER’S *hand in thanks).*
You have argued well. They’ll hang.
[They go out.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* Here are some wretches justly judged, my faith!

CROMWELL *(to* LORD ROCHESTER). I’m pleased with you.

LORD ROCHESTER *(with an obeisance).*
Your Highness is most gracious.

GIRAFF *(to the other Fools).* Even we could not have cut the knot With better grace.
[Re-enter THURLOE.

THURLOE *(to* CROMWELL).
The privy-council waits.

CROMWELL.
‘T is well.

THURLOE.
Your lordship knows the object?

CROMWELL *(quickly).*
Yes, I know; let them come in.

TRICK *(low to Fools).*
Come, merry-wits, To the magicians let us yield our place.
[Upon a gesture from CROMWELL *the buffoons,* LORD ROCHESTER, HANNIBAL SESTHEAD *go out; two lackeys bear off the table laden with mugs, beer, and pipes.* THURLOE *introduces the privy-council, who advance in two rows, and stand each before a horse-shoe seat, while* CROMWELL *mounts to his arm-chair, and* MILTON *guided by his two pages, approaches the folding-chair and the table.* WHITELOCKE, STOUPE, *and the* EARL OK CARLISLE *take their respective places beside the Protector, upon the platform steps.*

SCENE III.

CROMWELL, EARL OF WARWICK; LIEUTENANT-GENERAL FLEETWOOD, *son-in-law of* CROMWELL; EARL OF CARLISLE; LORD BROGHILL; MAJOR-GENERAL DESBOROUGH, *brother-in-law of* CROMWELL; WHITELOCKE; SIR CHARLES WOLSELEY; MR. WILLIAM LENTHALL; PIER- POINT; THURLOE; STOUPE; MILTON. *Each of these personages wears the suit appropriate to his office.* CROMWELL *sits and puts on his hat; all sit, but remain uncovered.*

CROMWELL *(aside).* Well! we must stand the chatter of these birds. *[Aloud.]* Sir councillors of my government, be seated All, and let us pray.
[He kneels; all the councillors do the same. After a few instants of meditation the Protector arises and re-seats himself. All follow his example. He continues, with a profound sigh.
For government, Alas! good sirs, I have no talent, but, Our God, whom my disinclination chafes Has moved the Parliament to force on me An overwhelming increase of my power. That is the object of our meeting here.

I must confer, discuss this o’er, with you. Is it desirable to have a king? Am I the one to choose? On these two points Give me your judgment absolute. Each one, In turn, reveal to us his thought, and speak As frankly, as I’m speaking now to you. The Earl of Warwick is most eminent Among you; let him be the first. Pray listen, Mr. Milton.

EARL OF WARWICK *(rising).*
There is naught on earth To equal your ability, your truth, Your character; and if you needed more, You are related by maternal side Unto the Warwicks; on your crest you bear The selfsame helmet. Since we need a king In every kingdom, surely your great self Is more desired than some poor king of chance. Why can’t a Rich as well as Stuart reign?
[Reseats himself.

CROMWELL *(aside).* One needs but luck to own a family. Cromwell unknown was nothing: on the throne The Riches are his cousins, ancestors, — My noble ancestors, inherited About four years ago!
[A loud.] Now, Fleetwood, you!

LIEUTENANT-GENERAL FLEETWOOD *(rising).* My lord, I vote republic! Father-in-law, I speak to you in all sincerity. For the republic we built Stuart’s scaffold. We have made war for it; we need it now. Let God alone wear the true diadem. Not Oliver the First, nor Charles the Second, Do we desire. No king! — *[Re-seats himself.*

CROMWELL.
You are a child, My son-in-law. Now you, Carlisle.

EARL OF CARLISLE.
My lord, Your broad, triumphant brow was made to fit A crown. — *[Re-seats himself.*

CROMWELL.
Broghill!

LORD BROGHILL *(rising).* My lord, I ask Permission to give utterance to my thoughts In private.

[.Aside.] Ormond's plot disturbs my mind. In this bold drama, what a part is mine! The councillor of Cromwell, confidant Of Charles. If silent, I'm a traitor; and A traitor if I speak.

CROMWELL. What reasons?

LORD BROGHILL.
State.
[CROMWELL *signs to him to approach.* STOUPE, THURLOE, WHITELOCKE, *and* CARLISLE, *withdraw from them.*

LORD BROGHILL (*low to* CROMWELL). Why don't you try to treat with Charles, — propose Your daughter's hand?

CROMWELL *(surprised).*
What? To — to the — young man?

LORD BROGHILL. Yes, Lady Frances' hand.

CROMWELL.
His family?

LORD BROGHILL. You 're crowned under the name of Oliver. You are both kings.

CROMWELL. And January thirtieth!

LORD BROGHILL. You give a father to him.

CROMWELL.
Give — but not Give back.

LORD BROGHILL. He will forget.

CROMWELL *(with scornful laughter).*
My crime? Oh, no! His mind will never comprehend it, nor His eye discern the goal on which my heart Was bent. He dissipates too much to pardon.

No! Your plan is mad.
[LORD BROGHILL *returns to his place; the grand officers return to theirs.* Speak, Desborough!

MAJOR-GENERAL DESBOROUGH *(rising).* Your plans are daring, my dear brother-in-law. What! Face again the woes of royalty? No king whatever! Soldiers will acclaim You Cromwell, and will curse you Oliver. Let courtiers, doctors, and let systems die.

CROMWELL.
You wage your war against a word, a name. If this good people want a king, why not? This name of king, proscribed by your cheap pride, What is it to a soldier? — but a plume Upon his helmet.
[He signs to WHITELOCKE *to speak.* WHITELOCKE *arises and* DESBOROUGH *sits.*

WHITELOCKE *(aside, looking at* DESBOROUGH). That plough-man to be questioned before me! *[Aloud]* My lord! I will be truthful, whate’er comes.
No people without laws: no laws without A king. Hear me, the argument’s worth while.
[Aside.] Before me, Desborough! *homuncio*! dolt.
[Aloud.] The king was always legislator called.
Lator, bearer, *legis* the law; whence comes That prince to law is as Adam to Eve.
No people *sans* a king, I say once more;
And, to confirm my theory, refer To Moses, Aaron, Glynn, St. John, Fountaine, And Selden, third book, chapter on “Abuse:”
“Quid de his censetur modo codicibus.”
You are decreed to reign, “ Dixi.” *[lie-seats himself.*

CROMWELL (*complimenting him by look and gesture).* How well does Latin season a discourse! Let us hear Wolseley.

SIE CHAELES WOLSELEY *(rising).* Without artifice I’ll undeceive your Highness in my turn. The chief of a free people, prophets say, “ Tanquam in medio positus,” not top. This chief, on whate’er seat he may be placed Is *major singulis, minor universis;* Therefore, king’s title hurts our privilege. “ Rex violat legem.” — *[Re-seats himself.*

CROMWELL. ‘T is college wit. I ‘m not familiar with your Latin words. Bad reasons. *[To* PIERPOINT.] You!

PIEEPOINT *(rising).*
Proud staff of Israel, Which through you dominates the earth to-day, These are my words. This English nation whose High Parliament is called imperial, Holds the right immemorial and grand To have a king for chief; its dignity Requires it. Deign, your Highness, to accept A title which offends you. ‘T is your duty Unto the people. ‘T were a grievous wrong To them to reign and not to be a king. *[Re-seats himself.*

CROMWELL.
You, Mr. Lenthall.

MR. WILLIAM LENTHALL *(rising).* Parliament commands The nation in which royalty resides. It rules the smallest as it rules the great. A Parliament proclaims you king, you should, Conformably to Roman law and to The decalogue, obey the Parliament And reign.

CROMWELL *(aside).* An artful courtier.

MR. WILLIAM LENTHALL *(aside).*
He’ll consent. I hope he’ll put me in the House of Lords.

THURLOE *(low to* CROMWELL). My lord, the Parliament is waiting still.

CROMWELL *(low and impatiently).*
Be silent!

THURLOE *(same).*
But —

CROMWELL *(low to* TLIURLOE). Before accepting it I must reflect.

LIEUTENANT-GENERAL FLEETWOOD *(rising).* Ah, yes! my lord, refuse! For you — for your own honour — I —

CROMWELL *(dismissing them with his hand).*
Go, all.
And seek the Lord in prayer.
[All go out slowly in processional form. MILTON, *who goes out last, pauses on the threshold of the door, lets them all depart, then leads his guides back to* CROMWELL, *who has left his arm-chair and is seated at the front of the stage.*

SCENE IV.

CROMWELL, MILTON.

MILTON *(aside).*
I can’t refrain;
I must open my heart.
[Walking straight to CROMWELL. Look at me well! *[He folds his arms;* CROMWELL *turns around and fixes a surprised and haughty glance upon him.* I know your eyes flash angrily. You think How dare this Milton speak without my leave! I have no place ‘mongst your wise councillors; If some one sought my face amid the crowd, They’d tell him: “ These are orators beloved. This Warwick, Pierpoint; and that dumb man there, That’s Milton.” Well, since he belongs to you, What part give you to him? The part of silence!
That is his measure! I, whom worlds shall hear Some day, have not a voice in Cromwell’s council.
I, alone! But to be blind and dumb, That is too much to-day. Do you not see They ‘re luring you to death with that gold crown?
I’ve come to plead against yourself, my brother!
Cromwell wants to become a king! He says, “ For me the people were victorious;

The goal of all their combats, all their prayers, Their pious labours and their vigils brave, Their flowing blood and all their bitter tears, —
I was the goal of all that misery.
I reign, and they are satisfied. Why not Be happy, since at cost of priceless toil They’ve changed their kings, renewed their heavy chains.”
At such a thought, I blush e’en to my soul.
Oh, hear me, Cromwell; you are most concerned.
Thus, all the leaders of our civil wars, Vane, Pym, who at a word roused every town, The martyr of our rights, great Ireton, Your son-in-law, whom your vain pride exiles Within a royal sepulchre, and Sydney, Hollis, Martyn, Bradshaw, the mighty man Who read his death-warrant to Charles the First, And Hampden, young descended to the tomb, —
All worked for Cromwell and are now forgot.
‘T is you who ordered losses on each side, And robbed the dead upon the battle-field.
Rebellious only in your interest, For fifteen years we’ve played at liberty.
In this grand purpose you saw but a chance, And in the King’s death but a heritage!
I have no wish to humble you, my lord;
No one but you could have eclipsed yourself.
The mighty man of thought and man of sword, You, only, filled the measure of our dreams.
In all of Israel I loved you best, My hero; and none placed you nearer to God’s throne than I. Now, for a title, just A word as empty as it ringeth loud, The hero, saint, apostle vilifies Himself. Of his gigantic enterprise This was the end, — the purple, a soiled rag;
The sceptre, bawble for a silly child.
Thrown by the storm upon the heights of fate, Drunk with your destiny, you seek to bind This faded tinsel round your brow. Beware!
None is so blind as he whose eyes are dazed.
Of Oliver we ask, Where is Cromwell?
Where is his glory, which you’ve turned to shame?
Old man, where is the virtue of your youth?
Perhaps you say, ‘t is good when one is tired To fall asleep to murmurs of devotion Upon a throne, to be a king, to fill The towns with images of one’s proud self, To have one’s rising an event, to ride In chariots to Westminster,

to pray At Temple Bar, to lord it through a servile Crowd, to be harangued by city clerks, To add some flourish to one’s crest! Oh, Cromwell!
Can that be all? Remember Charles the First!
Dare you pick up that crown from out his blood, And take his scaffold to rebuild a throne?
You want to be a king? Think of it well!
Have you no fear, draped as before with crape, This White-Hall where your reckless grandeur struts, Shall ope its fatal window once again?
You smile, but in your star have you such faith?
Think of Charles Stuart! Recollect! Reflect!
When this king died, when the sharp axe was raised, It was a headsman masked who struck the blow.
A king, he died in sight of all his people, And none afforded help; nor did he know What hand it was that robbed him of his life!
The road you travel leads to that same spot.
Your fate is also shrouded with a mask.
Fear lest the same veiled spectre waits for you Upon the scaffold which your acts have raised.
Oh, sad catastrophe of dreams so proud!
There’s but one side from which one mounts the throne;
On all the others yawns a precipice.
If you must grasp the tattered purple, dread To see assembled in this chamber here Another court, some day, where you’ve no place.
For it is possible, at last alarmed By your rebellious sword to sceptre changed, The people whom you have impressed so long Shall see your kingship, not your regicide.
You shrink not? Ah, for pity cast aside This painted sceptre and this mask of king.
Maintain the equilibrium of the world.
Be Cromwell! O’er the earth let a free nation Rule. Don’t fetter it. Respect its liberty.
How often this proud commonwealth has blushed To see you begging from the Parliament A little tyranny in change for gold.
Belie your base traducers! Stand aloft, Pure, incorruptible. Judge, legislator, Conqueror, apostle, — how much more Than king are these! Unto this pristine glory Re-ascend. One word created light.
Let Milton’s voice now re-create Cromwell!

[He throws himself at CROMWELL’S *feet.*

CROMWELL (*bidding him rise, with a scornful gesture).* The fellow speaks to me in wondrous style. I fear, John Milton, secretary and Interpreter of the State Council, you Have too much of the poet ‘bout your mind. You have forgotten, in your rhapsody That I am called your Highness and my lord. This flimsy title much humiliates me, But for the people I do sacrifice; And since it reigns, who honours, must obey. I have resigned myself; do you the same.
[MILTON *rises proudly and goes out in silence. [.Alone*.] At heart, he’s right. Yes, but he vexes me! Forever Charles the First! Yes, you are blind. Kings like King Oliver do not die thus. Fanatics stab them, but they are not judged. I’ll think about it though. A gloomy choice.

SCENE V.

CROMWELL, LADY FRANCES.

CROMWELL *(perceiving* LADY FRANCES, *who enters).* Ah, Frances! One might think she felt my woes, And came, a radiant joy, to banish grief. My fair young star, illuminating fate, Come hither, child. My human angel, come! What sweet instinct draws you most near to me When I’m most sad? Is it because you know I’m always happy when I see your face? Your brilliant eye, your pure and gentle voice, Have magic ways of bringing back my youth. With your dear arms give to your sire new life.
You, who know naught of all the sins of life, Embrace me. You ‘re my favourite child.

LADY FRANCES *(embracing him joyfully).*
My father, Tell me, is it the truth you will restore The throne?

CROMWELL. ‘T is said; I will.

LADY FRANCES.
Oh, joyful day! England will owe her happiness to you.

CROMWELL. Her happiness has been my only aim.

LADY FRANCES. My father and my lord, how pleased she'll be, — Your good, kind sister! We are then to see, After eight years of waiting, our King Charles.

CROMWELL (*astonished).* What do you say?

LADY FRANCES.
You are so just and good!

CROMWELL. 'T is not a Stuart who will be the king.

LADY FRANCES. Who then? A Bourbon. They've no lawful right Unto the throne of England.

CROMWELL.
No, they've not.

LADY FRANCES. Who, then, would dare to touch the sacred sceptre?

CROMWELL *(aside).* How to answer her! My name hangs heavy Upon my lips: to speak it seems a crime. *[Aloud.*] New days, my girl, demand new governments. Could you not think of one to fill the place?

LADY FRANCES.
Of whom?

CROMWELL *(gently).* Why not your father, — not Cromwell?

LADY FRANCES (*quickly).* For such a thought God would have punished me.

CROMWELL *(aside).*
Alas!

LADY FRANCES. I — do my father such a wrong? I — name my father an usurper? No!

CROMWELL. You over-estimate my virtue, child.

LADY FRANCES. That you have clothed yourself with transient power Is a misfortune of the times you keenly feel; But from the martyr king to steal the crown, Become one of his executioners, Reign by his murder! Oh!

LADY FRANCES. I do not know; then, I was young, alone. I wept for him, but did not understand.
What?

CROMWELL. In the King's trial did you never read The list of courtiers, judges, list of —

LADY FRANCES.
The regicides?

CROMWELL. Yes, Frances, — regicides!

LADY FRANCES. No, sir, I never heard their fearful names. I nothing knew but hatred of their crimes. Their names were never mentioned where we lived.

CROMWELL.
Who caused his death?

CROMWELL. My sister never spoke to you of me?

LADY FRANCES. Of you, oh, yes. I learned to love you there.

CROMWELL.
I hope so. Then you hate, with all your heart Those daring men who sentenced him to death?

LADY FRANCES. I hate them! May they be accursed — all!

CROMWELL.
All, Frances?

LADY FRANCES. Yes, sir, all.

CROMWELL *(aside).*
Ah, retribution! By my sweet daughter cursed and by my son Betrayed.

LADY FRANCES. May each one share the fate of Cain.

CROMWELL *(aside).* Implacable are innocence and virtue! And yet men think I go unpunished! Ah! This dearest daughter and my last-born child Is a relentless conscience in my path. The sweetness of her youthful eye and voice Abash this Cromwell who defied the world. Before her purity I have no strength. Shall I go on? Dare I attain the goal? Prostrate beneath the weight of my firm throne, The world will hold its peace. What will she say? What will her eyes say, in their eloquence, — Those winsome eyes which stab me to the heart. With what abhorrence will she learn the truth That I, a regicide, have dared to be A king. We'll send her back to her old home. Success demands the sacrifice of joy. I will renounce the light of my last years. Reality shall never sadden her. No! I'll not undeceive the only heart Which in the whole wide world believes in me. Pure angel! my dark fate shall not blight yours. We will be king, but you shall know it not.
[Aloud to FRANCES.] Keep your white heart; I love you thus, my child. — *[Goes out.*

LADY FRANCES (*looking after him).* What is it? In his eyes I saw a tear. Good father! How he loves me!
[DAME GUGGLIGOY *and* LORD ROCHESTER *enter.*

SCENE VI.

LADY FRANCES, LORD ROCHESTER, DAME GUGGLIGOY.

DAME GUGGLIGOY *(to* LORD ROCHESTER, *in the background).*
There she is, Alone!

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* What magic lies in gold doubloons! They've gained a grim duenna's complaisance And won the saints who act as musketeers. The dame succumbed immediately; I feared At first Mount Tabor's pillars would not yield; But when gold touches these apostles' palms, The round heads whirl at a tremendous speed. They 're tired of Cromwell, who oppresses them. To Ormond I've sent word that the park gate Will be surrendered to our men to-night. Now, for fair Frances. My heart's mad with love, And I've some sovereign methods of success, — I've quatrains, and I've gold doubloons to spend. Let's try our fate.
[He approaches LADY FRANCES, *who does not see him; she seems absorbed in a deep reverie.*

DAME GUGGLIGOY (*looking at the purse which she holds in her hand).* A sum by no means small. *[Aside, looking at* LOUD ROCHESTER. He's really handsome, this young nobleman. To be disguised, dare everything for love, Young men are mad. Alas! each has his turn. Thus Amadis of Gaul had done, I'm sure. Should I permit it? Am I doing right? This Cavalier said not one word to me. He only gave me money.
[Stopping LORD ROCHESTER, *who is about to address* LADY FRANCES.
If you please, One instant, sir.

LORD ROCHESTER (*turning around).* For what?

DAME GUGGLIGOY (*leading him to the other corner of the stage).*
Only a moment. LORD ROCHESTER.
Why?

DAME GUGGLIGOY (*smiling at him).* You have no more to say to me?

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* The purse was heavy and should have sufficed.

DAME GUGGLIGOY *(aside).* I hope he'll not humiliate me by offering More doubloons.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside, feeling in his empty pockets).* I've not another sou. Let's play upon the weakness of old age And stop her ears with gallantries.
[.Aloud.] What tongue Could ever say all that it wished to you? Ah, if no weightier cares had brought me here —

DAME GUGGLIGOY *(stepping back).* My lord, I fear you 're flattering me.

LORD ROCHESTER.
Oh, no!
My time, alas! is short.
[Takes a step towards LADY FRANCES; DAME GUGGLIGOY *stops him.*

DAME GUGGLIGOY.
You've only eyes For my young mistress, that's the truth.

LORD ROCHESTER.
I swear That you are charming. If I had to choose — *[Aside.]* Does she intend to keep me till I mould?

DAME GUGGLIGOY *(aside).* He has good taste. I am worth looking at, When I've had time to ornament myself. Indeed, I am no subject for one's scorn In my pink petticoat and farthingale; When I've my love-knots and my gorgeous sleeves And my two panniers well poised on my hips. *[Aloud]* You think so?

LORD ROCHESTER *(turning to* FRANCES).
Suffer me —

DAME GUGGLIGOY *(holding him back).*
I feel remorse!
Sir, 't is my duty to protect this child.

LORD ROCHESTER. Your eyes, believe me, madame, in their prime, Would have made Galaor faithless, Esplandian Himself inconstant.

DAME GUGGLIGOY *(still keeping him).*
Oh, I feel so culpable! If any one should come!

LORD ROCHESTER.
Oh, Sir Pandarus Of Troy had burned to wear your colours.

DAME GUGGLIGOY *(aside).* How grand he talks!

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).*
Are n't we ridiculous, We two?

DAME GUGGLIGOY. Yes, on my soul, I swear that now I feel such scruples they congeal my blood.
[Taking his hands.

LORD ROCHESTER. Your hands are velvet — *[Aside]* Must I waste on her, This old hag dried up even to her claws, All that love's daintiest fancy has devised? What will remain for Frances?

DAME GUGGLIGOY.
Let me be!

LORD ROCHESTER.
For Guggligoy, Mars would have quitted Venus.

DAME GUGGLIGOY. I suffocate! Surely, this must be love! *[Aloud]* None but a husband must address me so.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* She wants a husband! God! I pity him. And as for flattery, she'll get no more From me. The obstinate old fool! In Spain Alone, 'mid mules and old duennas will She find her like.

DAME GUGGLIGOY. You seem to me a man Of noble taste; I want your frank opinion.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).*
My blood boils!

DAME GUGGLIGOY *(indicating* LADY FRANCES). Pray, what is there about Those giddy things to please —

LORD ROCHESTER.
There is, you know

DAME GUGGLIGOY. Explain how they can rouse ardours of love. What charm about that pretty, vapid face?

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* She asks, with her Chinese complexion! Oh!

DAME GUGGLIGOY. They've youth, I grant; but that's not very much. Just devil's beauty —

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).*
While his ugliness You've got. The deuce! How to get rid of her? *[Aloud]* Let me converse two moments with your charge, And afterwards, my radiant rosebud, we — Faith of a Cavalier! I'll find for you Things which you do not even dream about. *[Aside]* A door to Bedlam.

DAME GUGGLIGOY.
Good! I will wait near.

LORD ROCHESTER *(sighing with relief).*
At last!

DAME GUGGLIGOY. Be careful. What e'er else you do, Do not betray me. I'd be burned alive.

LORD ROCHESTER. Be easy! Now walk off a little way.
[Aside, watching her go off. I'm sure her bones are dry enough to burn.

SCENE VII.

LADY FRANCES, LORD ROCHESTER.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* I'm free of her. For love I'll now dare all.
[.Looking at FRANCES, *who sits motionless and thoughtful.* What features and what grace! Oh, my fair soul! I'll walk around before I make attack. A young girl is a fort, I have observed. The eye-winks and the charm one puts in dress, The gentle cares and tender words are trenches Made in zigzag shape; the declaration, — That is the assault; and on the quatrain A full surrender follows quick. I can't Do things quite systematically here, So I will cut preliminaries short.
[Advancing to FRANCES. *Aloud with a profound salutation.*
My lady — miss —

LADY FRANCES *(turns with an astonished air).* Sir!

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).*
I am all confused.

LADY FRANCES *(smiling).* Ah, you 're the chaplain!

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).*
Yes, accursed garb, I can put on the gayest airs I please, — She'll only see a parson and Roundhead.

LADY FRANCES. Give me a benediction, holy man! On what text will you speak?

LORD ROCHESTER.
On passion, please.

LADY FRANCES. Your zeal inspires attention in my heart. A humble sinner stands before your eyes, My father.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* " Father "! My disguise is good. *[.Aloud.]* My daughter, listen.

LADY FRANCES.
Yes, with great respect.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).*
Respectability’s a damned thing.
[Aloud] My daughter, listen. ‘T is not kind of you To strew disaster broadcast in your path.

LADY FRANCES *(astonished).*
I?

LORD ROCHESTER. Yes; one look destroys a hundred souls.

LADY FRANCES.
Oh, you are wrong!

LORD ROCHESTER. Indeed, I ‘m not.

LADY FRANCES.
Explain.

LORD ROCHESTER. One of your victims stands before you now.

LADY FRANCES. What have I done to you? If I’ve wronged you, I’ll go and ask my father —

LORD ROCHESTER *(stopping her).*
Do not grieve. Of all this sorrow you ‘re quite innocent

LADY FRANCES. I do not understand you.

LORD ROCHESTER.
Candid soul!

LADY FRANCES. If I unconsciously have done you harm, I must make reparation.

LORD ROCHESTER *(placing his hand on his heart).* Ah!

LADY FRANCES.
It is My duty so to do.

LORD ROCHESTER. What words are these? You might be exorable to prayers of mine? With joy you daze me, my adored princess.
[He tries to take her hand; she moves away.

LADY FRANCES.
I am no princess. One adores but God.
You frighten me! — [*Starting to go away.*

LORD ROCHESTER.
Ah! Frances, do not go!

LADY FRANCES. With what familiar tone he speaks! *[.Approaching* LORD ROCHESTER *with a compassionate manner.*
Perhaps He's suffering with his head.

LORD ROCHESTER.
No, with his heart.

LADY FRANCES.
Poor man!

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* Now let us scale the walls. She pities, Therefore love lags not far behind that state. *[Aloud,.']* Give back my life —

LADY FRANCES.
Yes, you shall have a doctor. This is a sudden fever, certainly.

LORD ROCHESTER. For four years now I've hung upon your steps. *[Aside]* Lies are effective —

LADY FRANCES.
What is it you want?

LORD ROCHESTER. To die! Your eyes alone can heal my wounds.

LADY FRANCES (*moving lack).* He terrifies me much.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* That’s flattering. *[Aloud, and clasping his hands with an air of supplication.* My queen, my deity, my nymph, my all!

LADY FRANCES. How many names! I have but one, — Frances.

LORD ROCHESTER. I’m all a-fire and all a-chill for you. For love of you I came in this disguise. I am no chaplain; I’m a Cavalier. Had I but India’s wealth to offer you! Oh, to a love which lasts for twelve long years, Will you be cold and cruel, with your gentle eyes, As Ophis, priestess was to Tiridates? For your beauty, I would have crossed Asia. You fly from me, alas! and do not speak. Then must I die of this great pain of love! Just one small word, my splendid tigress, speak! That word will make you to this humble slave The most celestial object of earth’s love.

LADY FRANCES *(opening wide and astonished eyes).* What mean such words?

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).*
She stands in ecstasy. It must be, for I’ve spoken word for word, Text of “ Ibrahim or Bassa the Great,” — There, where Lysander, Turk, speaks to Zulmis. It is pure Scudery. I will go on! *[Aloud]* Ungrateful woman!
[Holding back LADY FRANCES, *who seeks to go.*
Stay, or I will drown Myself in the Euphrates.

LADY FRANCES *(laughing).*
The Euphrates?

LORD ROCHESTER. Instead of that, fulfil your first design. Yes, take this sword and pierce my throbbing heart. *[Puts his hand to his side, searching for his sword; aside.* No sword! With this damned costume, how can one

Affect to kill himself, which must be done; How to continue in this gallant strain? We have a quatrain, though, if not a sword. If she succumbs not now, God take my soul! *[Aloud]* Give ear unto your slave, my sovereign.
[Presenting a rolled parchment tied with a pink ribbon. The picture of my heart is painted here. It would have been destroyed by fire and flood, If fire had not dried up my tears, madame, And if, in turn, tears had not quenched the fire. Take, read, and judge of my most ardent love.
[Throwing himself at LADY FRANCES’ *feet.*

LADY FRANCES *(throwing his parchment to the floor and stepping back with dignity).* I understand you. You are insolent. You’ve dared to force an entrance to this house.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* This little maid is not so easy won.

LADY FRANCES. Rise, or I’ll call for help.

LORD ROCHESTER (*still on his knees).*
No; I stay here.

LADY FRANCES. You will repent your insolence with grief, If my —

SCENE VIII.

The same. CROMWELL.

CROMWELL *(■’perceiving* LORD ROCHESTER *at* LADY FRANCES’ *feet).*
What brings you to my daughter’s knees?

LORD ROCHESTER (*aghast, without changing his position; aside).*
I’m lost. ‘T is Cromwell! For this trifling sin I’ll hate to hang! Caught in the very act. He’ll find no punishment too great for me.

CROMWELL. Well done, my chaplain!

LADY FRANCES *(aside).*
Pity, one should have For a poor fool.

CROMWELL *(to* LORD ROCHESTER, *stupefied).* My vengeance you forgot.

LADY FRANCES *(aside).* My father will annihilate this man.

CROMWELL.
This idiot has dared to love my daughter; And my Eve harkkd to the serpent's wily tongue. Oh, Frances, you allowed —

LADY FRANCES *(embarrassed).*
My father, no!
'T was not of me this gentleman was speaking.

CROMWELL.
Upon what theme was he required to kneel?

LADY FRANCES. He spoke in ardent terms of love, 't is true; But't was to win me to assist his suit. He loves one of my women.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside, rising with astonishment).*
What is this?

CROMWELL.
Which one?

LADY FRANCES *(smiling).* Dame Guggligoy.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).*
For shame!

CROMWELL *(appeased).*
That alters all.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* And I must choose between The gallows or the old duenna! Zounds! She might have left selection unto me.

CROMWELL *(to* LORD ROCHESTER). Why did you not speak out at once, my friend, Since joys of flesh do yet appeal to you?

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* Flesh? Yes, — enough to stick a set of bones Into an old duenna’s shape.

CROMWELL.
Your wish Shall be fulfilled. I like not to be feared. I’m pleased with you. I’ll give your beauty’s hand.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* My beauty? — an old spectre to be damned; A body to repel carnivorous beasts, A face to make witches miscarry.

CROMWELL *(aside).*
True, I thought him, first, a man of better taste. *[Aloud*.] I wish you to be married.

LORD ROCHESTER *(bowing).*
You ‘re too kind, My lord.

CROMWELL. All your desires shall be fulfilled.
[DAME GUGGLIGOY *enters.*

SCENE IX.

The same. DAME GUGGLIGOY.

DAME GUGGLIGOY *(aside, terrified).* The lovers and the father are together! All is lost!

CROMWELL *(perceiving* DAME GUGGLIGOY). ‘T is you, good woman!

DAME GUGGLIGOY *(aside).*
Oh, My knees bend under me.

CROMWELL.
You ‘re wanted here.

DAME GUGGLIGOY *(with terror).* I — I — my lord?
Heaven!

CROMWELL. You knew the chaplain loved you?

DAME GUGGLIGOY.

CROMWELL. And you approved?

DAME GUGGLIGOY.
I knew — approved? I — oh, my lord, I swear to you —
[.Aside.] He’s told — The little traitor! It is easy seen By his dark looks that something has occurred.

CROMWELL.
I know the truth.

DAME GUGGLIGOY *(aside).* Indeed, I thought you did. *[A pause.* DAME GUGGLIGOY *appears stupefied;* LADY FRANCES *smilingly watches* LORD ROCHESTER, *who turns his disappointed eyes from the young girl to the duenna.*

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* The change is unexpected and most rude.

DAME GUGGLIGOY *(throwing herself at* CROMWELL’S *feet).* Have mercy on me! Mercy — oh, my lord!

CROMWELL *(turning away).* She acts the part of prude. *[Signing to her to get up.*

Come, come, arise. This Master Obededom is our friend. His heart holds nothing which is not allowed.

DAME GUGGLIGOY. May he aspire, then, to the one he loves?

CROMWELL. Whom does he love so high up? You?

DAME GUGGLIGOY.
What, I?

CROMWELL. You are the one, — ask him.
[To ROCHESTER.] IS it not true?

LORD ROCHESTER *(embarrassed).*
I confess —

DAME GUGGLIGOY. Is it, in truth, for me you burn?

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).*
As if I were in hell.
[Aloud] Madame —

CROMWELL.
Come, come, Let all the ardours of your love burst forth. I give permission. Tell Dame Guggligoy That on your knees you asked my daughter's help —

DAME GUGGLIGOY *(to* LORD ROCHESTER, *who is speechless).* For that then, you abominable man — Without my own consent —

LORD ROCHESTER *(easting a glance of reproach at* LADY FRANCES, *who is laughing).*
I know I've done Unpardonable things.

DAME GUGGLIGOY.
Audacious wretch! My anger — dread it, sir!

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).*

With her grey hair, Which formerly was red.

DAME GUGGLIGOY *(aside).*
A charming man! *[Aloud]* My little upstart, you’re in love with me?

LORD ROCHESTER. I cannot say the contrary to you! *[Aside]* Oh, Wilmot, how thy straits would please the King!
‘Twixt Lady Seymour and Dame Guggligoy!

DAME GUGGLIGOY.
You love me?

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* If Cromwell heard not my words! I must he tender under pain of death. *[Aloud]* I love you!

DAME GUGGLIGOY *(lackadaisically).* ‘T is too much!

LORD ROCHESTER.
I’m of your mind.

DAME GUGGLIGOY. You wish to marry me?

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside, biting his lips).*
Ah, there’s the rub!
[Aloud, with embarrassment.
I do not say —

DAME GUGGLIGOY *(indignant at his hesitation).*
Know you that’t is an honour! Insolent! concupiscence, for shame! — [*Weeping.*

CROMWELL *(to* LORD ROCHESTER). Console her, since you want her for your wife.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).*
Good God!

Consent.
[Aside.] Old leather burnt with temper.

DAME GUGGLIGOY (*sighing, and dropping her eyes).* I will sacrifice myself.
[Extending her hand to him, which he takes with loathing.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* And so will I!

DAME GUGGLIGOY. I'm kind, and I consent to be embraced.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* A favour? Give me gallows and exemption! [DAME GUGGLIGOY *presents her cheek to him. himself to place a kiss and a grimace upon*

DAME GUGGLIGOY. I'll turn to you also the other cheek.

LORD ROCHESTER.
A thousand thanks!

DAME GUGGLIGOY. You 're sulking.

LORD ROCHESTER.
I am not.

CROMWELL.
He forces it.
No scandal here. We'll end the matter now. You shall be married on the spot. Your joys Are not well suited to a long delay. I will content you both at once.

LORD ROCHESTER.
But I —

CROMWELL.
Love is impatient. I know that. What ho!
[Three Musketeers enter.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* Who would believe this is my wedding day?

CROMWELL *(to Chief of Musketeers).* Cham Biblechan, one of our Scottish seers Must marry instantly, by Holy Book, Sir Obededom and Dame Guggligoy.
[To LORD ROCHESTER *and* DAME GUGGLIGOY. He will conduct you.
[TO LORD ROCHESTER.] Cham's an Anabaptist, Like yourself.

LORD ROCHESTER *(bowing respectfully, aside).* What thoughtfulness!

CROMWELL.
I know You are a dogmatist.

LADY FRANCES *(smiling, and looking sidewise at* LORD ROCHESTER *as he bows to her, aside).*
Well caught, young man!

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* She's played me a fine trick. I like her, though. I love that ruse and innocence well mixed. Her childish malice and her kindly heart Defends from sire and gives me to the maid. She's found a way to punish and to save.

DAME GUGGLIGOY (*to* LORD ROCHESTER). Come, come, my love! How motionless you stand!

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside, sighing deeply).* I follow Sibyl into hymen's hell.
[.He goes out with DAME GUGGLIGOY *and the Musketeers.*

CROMWELL *(to* LADY FRANCES). I leave you, to attend a sermon preached By Lockyer upon Rome and Ammon's priests.
[He goes out.

SCENE X.

LADY FRANCES, *alone.*

LADY FRANCES. He cut a sorry figure, the poor man! I fear the punishment was too severe, — Thus to be wedded, without knowing why. And to be forced to love Dame Guggligoy. I half repent! I did him wrong. But then, My father would have treated him still worse. *[Perceiving the rolled parchment which has remained on the floor.*
There is his note. I wonder what he said. I will not read it.
[Looking at the parchment with curious and eager eyes. Shall I not forgive? No pity for him? Yes, I'll read his words. No harm is done if I replace them quick. I owe it to him, he endured so much. *[Picks up the parchment hastily, unfastens it, unrolls it, and pauses.*
'T is wrong! Shall I, since all is ended now?
Come, let me read! — *[Reading.*
"My lord " — my lord? Strange man! He called me object, princess, nymph, queen, angel; And now he says, " my lord "! A lunatic!
[Continuing to read. " All has worked well;" he writes just as he talks. No one can understand. " All has worked well" — What has? Let us go on. — *[Reading.*
"To-night, at midnight, At the gate, present yourself." In love With me — He meant to take me off! — *[Reading.*
"I have Seduced the guard." That's it: the fool was sure He could not be refused. " The password's given, And our success is sure." A modest man! *[Continuing.* " You are to say ' Cologne;' they'll say the rest." Less clear. — *[Reading.*
"You can, thanks to their friendly aid, Seize Cromwell, whom I shall have put to sleep. " The Devil's Chaplain."
Ah! what have I read? What light breaks on my horror-stricken eyes? It is my father that this villain wants!
[Examining the paper carefully. What is the address? " Bloum, Rat House, The Strand." The traitor handed this note by mistake. I must go warn my father of the plot. Some one is coming. Let me hurry, quick! It may be the assassin.
[Rushes off hastily, taking the parchment with her. DAVENANT *enters.*

SCENE XI.

DAVENANT, *afterwards* LORD ROCHESTER.

DAVENANT *(alone).* The Protector Has sent for me. I wonder why he did. Oh, nothing! Just pure curiosity. [*Enter* ROCHESTER. *[.Perceiving* ROCHESTER.] Who is this hypocrite? God, what a sight! A saint, of course; some holy Puritan.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside, without perceiving* DAVENANT). Alas! it's done. I am a married man.
[Advancing to the front and recognizing DAVENANT. Why, Davenant!

DAVENANT *(aside).* He knows my name!
[Aloud] Well, sir — Do I not recognize Lord Rochester?

LORD ROCHESTER. Be silent! — *[They grasp hands.*

DAVENANT *(indicating disguise).* You 're a master-hand at this. I think, if you were married, your own wife Would hardly know you under this disguise.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside, with profound sigh).* God grant it!
[Aloud] Davenant, no pleasantries.

DAVENANT. Your lordship never has refused before To crack a joke at husbands.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).*
Different now! Can any one be married and still laugh? I'd like to see that sort of man.
[Aloud.'] Enough! What chance has brought you to our house? Your face Quite startled me!

DAVENANT *(laughing).* “ Our house “! You speak with ease. My lord has soon acclimatized himself. Fear nothing. Cromwell always bids me here When I return from foreign journeyings. How do you like your life with him?

LORD ROCHESTER.
Full well.
Since Milton is my sponsor, he’s most kind, And does me many favours in his way.
[.Aside.] I’d gladly have dispensed with the last one.
[Aloud.] You know, of course, I came here just in time.
A traitor, unknown spy within our ranks, Has told this Cromwell everything; but thanks To my discovery, Ormond disappeared, and I
Concealed myself at Cromwell’s.

DAVENANT.
Dastard spy! Sir Richard wished to have him flayed alive. We’ve charged him to unearth the villain.

LORD ROCHESTER.
Well!
We’re fortunate to have the counter-mine.
[<Showing his vest.
I have your vial here. All terminates To-night.

DAVENANT. Naught is suspected by Cromwell?

LORD ROCHESTER.
No. Only three of us prepared the plan.

DAVENANT.
The guards are won?

LORD ROCHESTER. They are.

DAVENANT.
‘T was difficult?

LORD ROCHESTER. Not so. Puritanism is dying fast. Gold renders saints quite docile.

DAVENANT.
You are sure Old Noll has no suspicions about me?

LORD ROCHESTER. You’d be arrested if he had your name.

SCENE XII.

DAVENANT, LORD ROCHESTER, DAME GUGGLIGOY.

DAME GUGGLIGOY *(to* LORD ROCHESTER). What, sir? You fly already from your love?

DAVENANT *(starting back).* Whom is she after?

DAME GUGGLIGOY (to LORD ROCHESTER). I lament in vain, I call, I weep, I languish, and I die; I wail enough to melt a rock to tears, But you come not. Abandoned wife am I. Oh, is your passion so soon spent, my lord? Behold my grief! My heart to water turns.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside, turning away his eyes).* The awful creature! Is this sad or droll?
[Low to DAVENANT, *indicating* DAME GUGGLIGOY. What do you think of her?

DAVENANT *(same).*
What spectre is’t?

LORD ROCHESTER *(same low tones).* It is my wife.

DAVENANT *(laughing).* Your wife?

LORD ROCHESTER.
Yes, on my word. Come, poet, an epithalamium, quick!

DAVENANT.
My lord is jesting!

LORD ROCHESTER. Nothing is less droll.

DAME GUGGLIGOY. Where are your ardent vows, you traitor?

DAVENANT (*low to* LORD ROCHESTER).
Faith!
Your mistress is of most uncommon sort. My compliments upon such rare good luck.

LORD ROCHESTER (*low to* DAVENANT). Luck? She's my wife, — that's all. No insults, please.

DAME GUGGLIGOY. Superfluous are my tears. He heeds me not!

DAVENANT.
While she is raving, please explain to me.

LORD ROCHESTER (*low to* DAVENANT). Lord Cromwell gave me, out of his kind heart, The woman and her dowry.

DAME GUGGLIGOY (*pulling* LORD ROCHESTER'S *sleeve).*
My dear husband —

DAVENANT (*low to* LORD ROCHESTER, *who is trying to keep* DAME GUGGLIGOY *off).*
How —

LORD ROCHESTER *(low to* DAVENANT). I will tell you by and by. Just now This Sibyl has a right to use that name. We did it; in a chapel made of guards, A drum rolled out the sermon, and we were United by a corporal. I feared We might be forced by martial law to use A camp-bed for a nuptial couch; but no, That we escaped.

DAVENANT *(laughing)*. I wish I could have seen The soldier marry this duenna to Our almoner.

LORD ROCHESTER *(low)*. That is the way we do.

DAVENANT.
Such weddings make a grand conclusion to Dramatic work. The corporal joins the beauty Unto the lover. All is said.

DAME GUGGLIGOY *(sharply)*.
Of whom Speak you in those low tones? He flies from me! Did fate ordain I should descend to this, — I, not bad-looking, who have safe and sound Two hundred jacobuses bright as new!

DAVENANT *(to* LORD ROCHESTER). You've gained, my friend, a great inheritance, — Two hundred jacobuses and three teeth.

DAME GUGGLIGOY *(to* LORD ROCHESTER). You treacherous man, who gave me such fair words!

LORD ROCHESTER *(to* DAVENANT). She dreamed that.
[To DAME GUGGLIGOY.] I beg you, leave us in peace, And may God damn you, madame. *[Pushing her off.*

DAME GUGGLIGOY.
All alike!
They 're tender to their loves, hard to their wives;
Cats before marriage, tigers afterwards.
[To LORD ROCHESTER.] Barbarous man, to change myrtle to Cyprus! Ah! Abandon your young wife!

LORD ROCHESTER.
Hush, you old witch! Were Satan dead, you 'd be his dowager.

DAME GUGGLIGOY. What language for a saint!

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).*
Yes, I forgot. *[Aloud]* O woman, I have made a vow —
[Aside] Come forth, My parson air!
[Aloud] Of chastity.

DAME GUGGLIGOY.
Of what?

LORD ROCHESTER. In vain you do entreat, “ Come sleep with me.” I have renounced voluptuousness.

DAME GUGGLIGOY.
Indeed!
You drive me from our couch connubial?

LORD ROCHESTER. No, madame, you can stay long as you please. ‘T is only mine own self I must exile.

DAME GUGGLIGOY. This outrage! Serpent, monster, adder, wretch, Beware of my revenge!

LORD ROCHESTER (*drawing back).*
Look out for eyes. This fairy has hooked nails.

DAME GUGGLIGOY *(weeping).*
Yet hear me! Since A husband’s rights have come to you —

LORD ROCHESTER.
Oh, rage!

DAME GUGGLIGOY. What ice has come to chill your former fire? Why fly? What demon holds you in his power?

LORD ROCHESTER.
You ask me that?

DAME GUGGLIGOY. Come here; sit down by me.
I long for you!

LORD ROCHESTER *(hurrying off).* What shall I do to-night?

DAME GUGGLIGOY (*running after him).* Ungrateful wretch! — [*Goes out after him.*

DAVENANT *(alone, shrugging his shoulders).*
Wilmot must be insane. What folly's this? Unite to tragedy This masquerade!
[Goes to the back of stage and watches them off. CROMWELL *enters.*

SCENE XIII.

DAVENANT, CROMWELL.

CROMWELL (*holding* LORD ROCHESTER'S *parchment in his hand; without seeing* DAVENANT *and without being seen by him).*
Behold! another trap, In which I almost fell. From mine own palace They would abduct me! All their madness may Mean triumph in the end. Without my daughter, A simple child, the kings had lost their master. Oh, fools, who dare not face the light of day, To come to London to abduct Cromwell! How could I have foreseen this madman's plan? I vainly seek instruction from this note. But fortunately, they are all insane. To court the daughter and dethrone the sire! Go to his den to set the lion's trap, And frolic with his whelps before his eyes! Were they not madmen, they'd be idiots. The " Devil's Chaplain." Ah, you double face! This Obededom is a saint — outside. Who is he? Some young chief of Cavaliers. Which? Wilmot Rochester or Buckingham? A gallant at the Court — apostle here! It must be either Wilmot or Villiers. My soldiers won! Then I am loved no more! We'll see! I have already made my plan. But yet, to tempt them better to the bait, I wish I knew the rest of the password. However, I am ready for them all, — Ormond, and his Episcopalians too.

[DAVENANT, *coming to the front, perceives* CROMWELL.

DAVENANT *(aside).*
‘T is Cromwell!
[Aloud, bowing.] Highness —

CROMWELL (*with an air of agreeable surprise). .*
You’ve arrived in time, Good Davenant.

DAVENANT *(with another profound obeisance).* Entirely at your service.

CROMWELL *(smiling).* Are you still lodging at The Siren, sir?

DAVENANT.
I am, my lord.

CROMWELL.
A comfortable place. How is your health, by grace of God?

DAVENANT *(bowing).*
My health Is excellent.

CROMWELL. You had a pleasant journey? Were you quite satisfied?

DAVENANT. I was, my lord.
[Aside.] Mere words!

CROMWELL.
You had some object in your travels? Business or pleasure?

DAVENANT.
For my health, my lord.

CROMWELL.
Your health?
[Aside.] I doubt if that improved it, sir. *[Aloud]* ‘T is well to make a change of domicile And breathe new air. What places did you visit?

DAVENANT (*embarrassed).* The north of France, my lord —

CROMWELL.
Too small a place; The borders of the Rhine are better far. I’ve always longed to visit them myself. Did you go there?

DAVENANT *(with increasing embarrassment).* I did.

CROMWELL.
And you did well. You saw Frankfort and Maintz and Freves, of course; Cologne?

DAVENANT *(aside).* His smiling manner frightens me. *[Aloud.]* I did, my lord.

CROMWELL.
Cologne, — city of wisdom! The land of sainted Bruno and Agrippa!

DAVENANT *(anxiously to himself).* Let us make haste to leave Cologne.
[Aloud.] I went To Bremen, stopped at Spa —

CROMWELL.
Suppose we tarry At Cologne.
[Aside.] He’d like to be in Bremen now. *[Aloud]* The University? What century?

DAVENANT.
Fourteenth.

CROMWELL. A very interesting place Unto a cultured mind. You saw it?

DAVENANT *(aside).*
God!
Can he suspect?
[Aloud.] I? No! See what, my lord?

CROMWELL.
The great cathedral! ‘T is the lateral door Which is the most admired.

DAVENANT.
He does not know. *[Aloud.]* Yes, but the whole effect is in bad taste.

CROMWELL.
Bad taste? That’s such an easy thing to say. It is an noble edifice, and ought To be admired. There’s naught to mar its beauty Except the thought that heathens worshipped there.
[After a pause.
So, in the city, you saw nothing more?

DAVENANT.
Nothing, my lord.

CROMWELL *(smiling).*
You did not even make A courteous visit to a certain Stuart?

DAVENANT *(aside, stupefied).*
An unexpected blow!
[Aloud.] I swear to you I saw him not, my lord.

CROMWELL.
I know how faithful Are all true Papists to their vows. Who then Put out the candles? Was it Lord Mulgrave?

DAVENANT *(aside).*
He must know all.

CROMWELL. I’ve confidence in you, And do believe you did not see the King. You wear a hat of a most curious shape, Will you not kindly make exchange with mine?

DAVENANT *(aside).*
I am betrayed!

[Aloud] My lord —

CROMWELL *(snatching the hat from him).*
Give it to me.
I thank you.
[He feels inside of the lining and draws out the royal message, which he reads with eagerness. He breaks out into expressions of triumph while reading it.
It is well. The “ Devil’s Chaplain.” Is my Lord Rochester. ‘T is well arranged, — Quite wonderful. It seems a simple thing To pull wool o’er my eyes, deceive me, drug me, To carry me away! A splendid plan! *[To* DAVENANT.] Your tragi-comedies can have no peers If they are equal to your perfidies. *[To* THURLOE, *who enters*.] See that this man’s conducted to the Tower.
[THURLOE *goes out, and comes back accompanied by six Puritan musketeers, between whom* DAVENANT *places himself without resistance.* CROMWELL *dismisses him with a bitter and ironical laugh.* Charles Stuart coiffed you; I give you a home. God keep you well!

DAVENANT *(aside).* Oh, sad catastrophe!
[Goes out with guards.

THURLOE *(to* CROMWELL).
The Parliament, your Highness, which has been Exhorted by a saint, at your command, Brings divers bills for sanction unto you, And notably the Humble Address or law Offering the crown to you.

CROMWELL.
Let them come in. *[Alone.]* A gloomy project this. And they must fall By their own artifice. I want to catch Them in the trap which they’ve prepared for me. *[Looking first at* ROCHESTER’S *parchment, then at* DAVENANT’S *message.* Now, I hold everything in my own hands.
[Making a gesture of shutting the two hands together. There’s nothing left to me but to crush them.
God has declared for me. Behold! here comes The Parliament.
[The Parliament, conducted by THURLOE, *enter in their dress of ceremony. At the head of the members marches* THE SPEAKER, *in robes,*

followed by the clerks of the Parliament; he is preceded by the sergeants of the House, the mace-bearers carrying their maces, and the usher, with the black rod. CROMWELL *mounts to his protectoral chair and the Parliament pauses a few steps away from him, outside of the circle of stools.*

SCENE XIV.

CROMWELL, *the Parliament,* EARL OF CARLISLE, WHITELOCKE, STOUPE, THURLOE. *Upon a sign from* CROMWELL, CARLISLE *and* THURLOE *draw near to the Protector.*

CROMWELL (*low to* THE EARL OF CARLISLE).
My lord, see that the soldiers Who are stationed at the park gate for this night Be all arrested on the instant.
[EARL OF CARLISLE *bows and goes out. Low to* THURLOE, *while handing him* ROCHESTER'S *parchment.*
This Must go at once to Bloum, upon the Strand.
[Indicating the superscription on the letter.
You'll find there his address, — or better still, Sir Richard Willis shall be messenger.
Go!

THURLOE *(bows, and takes parchment).*
Yes, my lord. — *[Goes out.*

CROMWELL *(aside).*
This Bloum conceals Ormond, Whom my star now gives up to me.
[Seats himself, and puts his hat on. Ah, yes!
[WHITELOCKE *and* STOUPE *take their places at his side; aloud.*
We give you our attention, gentlemen.

THE SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE OF PARLIAMENT *(standing, and uncovered, as are all those who accompany him).* My lord, we bear the bills of Parliament. Your Highness will perceive in its designs Our strong allegiance to the good old cause. Deign to confirm our laws.

CROMWELL.
We’ll see anon.

THE SPEAKER *(turning to* THE CLERK). Your duty, clerk of Parliament.

THE CLERK OF PARLIAMENT *(with loud voice, holding open the record of deliberation).*
“This day June twenty-fifth, ninth year of liberty Which God has given us. These are the bills, Last voted on in Parliament. *Primo:* Considering we may sin imprudently As Noah did, from love of vintage fruit, And swear by saints’ names not maliciously, Aforesaid Parliament declares its will To soften penalties upon these points, And limits punishment unto the lash For drunkards, rope for those who swear.”

CROMWELL.
Too mild!
He who blasphemes the God to whom we pray Is equal to assassins and actors. Why a less punishment? These laws are transient; We do consent.
[THE SPEAKER *and members of Parliament make a profound obeisance.*

THE CLERK (*continuing to read). “ Secundo:* Victories Which Robert Blake, our admiral, has won Are to be honoured by a general fast. The House, having long searched the holy books, Presents a diamond worth five hundred pounds To him. Moreover it decrees his triumph Shall be immortalized in its report.”

CROMWELL.
To that We give consent *[All bow profoundly.* THURLOE *re-enters and takes his place beside the Protector.*

THURLOE (*low to* CROMWELL). ‘T is done.

THE CLERK (*continuing).*

“Tertio: In York The mobs, excited by the malecontents, Have filled with great affright all English hearts, So that aforesaid Parliament decrees York rebels to be placed outside the law, And to that end places *quo warranto* Upon their city charters.”

CROMWELL *(low to* THURLOE).
Twenty soldiers Would do more than hundred *quo warranto.* But I will manage that.
[.Aloud.] We do consent. *[All bow again.*

THE CLERK *(continuing). “Quarto:* The House decrees in order to Replenish the exhausted treasury, Each Englishman who would atone past crimes Shall fast one day per week at profit of The State, — a method authorized to saints, To save one’s soul and help the treasury.”

CROMWELL.
We do consent. — *[All bow again.*

THE CLERK *(continuing with a louder voice). “Quinto:* Humble Petition, and Advice unto the warrior of Zion.
[All the members of Parliament malce a profound obeisance to CROMWELL, *who answers by a sign of the head.* Considering that it is an ancient mode To close domestic wrangling by a king; That God himself, when giving his wise laws Changed desks to thrones and judges into kings; Having heard the speakers for and those against, To the Protector Parliament affirms The nation needs an individual chief, To whom the name of king shall be restored. And she begs Cromwell to accept the crown, With all hereditary rights.”

THE SPEAKER *(to* CROMWELL).
My lord, I beg to speak.

CROMWELL. Speak on!

THE SPEAKER.
In every age, My lord, times present and times far remote, Kings have directed the affairs of earth. The primal book in which all truths abound Has

written everywhere, *Reges gentium.* We meditate on Gibeon, Actium, And see, wherever has been civil war It is a sword which cuts the gordian knot. That sword becomes a sceptre, and is proof, That every question's settled by a king. I know of scholars it has been the thought That Christ, assisted by his saints, might reign. But the lord of eternal destinies Cannot appear as king to carnal eyes. Kingdoms of earth need human sovereigns, — *Rex substantialis,* as the precepts say. Such arguments one cannot well refute. Republics are, of all conditions, worst. The people need to lean upon a king; For they, my lord, no matter what is said, Are like the heron, who sleeps on one foot. The sleeping heron, is he crippled? Well, The people are this heron. Has it wars? The army is its beak, the Houses wings. But when the bark is anchored once again, Let it sleep on, *Stans pede in uno.* This thought is much too clear for argument. Then let your Highness over Europe stretch The sword of Judah and great Aaron's rod. Be King of England; be the heron's foot. We make appeal to laws common to earth. *Dixi quid dicendum,* — we speak for all.
[THE SPEAKER *ceases, and* CROMWELL, *absorbed in his thoughts, remains silent for a few moments; finally he lifts his eyes to heaven, folds his arms across his breast, and sighs profoundly.*

CROMWELL.
We will consider the request. *[General astonishment.*

THE SPEAKER *(aside).*
What's this?

WHITELOCKE *(low to* THURLOE). Does he refuse? What does he say?

THURLOE.
He fears Some peril, and he hesitates.

CROMWELL *(low to* THURLOE).
I must.
Let us delay this. 'Gainst the Cavaliers 'T will serve to neutralize the Puritans.
We must not, in this coming struggle, place Two burdens on our back, two thorns upon Our feet. No! let us first destroy the net Which Ormond casts

about me. There is time To seize upon the crown when we get through.
‘T will calm the Puritans, if I avoid This honour. — *[Aloud to those present.* Go in peace and seek God’s grace. *[All, excepting* THURLOE, *go out with profound obeisances and signs of great astonishment.*

SCENE XV.

CROMWELL, THURLOE.

THURLOE *(aside).* Something has happened here within the hour.

CROMWELL *(aside).* Until to-morrow let this act deceive. *[Both stand silent and motionless for a moment;* CROMWELL, *leaning on the arm of his chair, seems to le thinking deeply.* THURLOE *advances to him and bows.*

THURLOE.
‘T is late, my lord.

CROMWELL *(abruptly).* Then let them ring The curfew bell.

THURLOE. Do you not need some rest?

CROMWELL. I do; but I have now no wish to sleep.

THURLOE.
Where will you sleep to-night, my lord?

CROMWELL *(aside).*
Hard life, —
To hide as if I were a criminal! Be sovereign, to change one’s bed each night! Forever, everywhere death lurks for me.
[Aloud to THURLOE.
Make my bed here.

THURLOE.
The Painted Chamber? No!
Charles' judges —

CROMWELL *(aside).*
Ah, forever that one thought!

THURLOE.
T was here they came to meet together.

CROMWELL.
Well?
[Aside.] This Charles!
[Aloud] Your memory is too good, my friend.
Obey.
[THURLOE *bows, exits, comes back followed by servants, who arrange a bed and bring two candles.* CROMWELL, *who has remained silent, goes up to* THURLOE *when the servants have gone out.*
Besides, when everything is dark, If spectres haunt this room they'll not see me.
[Grasping THURLOE'S *hand and pointing to the bed.* This bed is not for me.

THURLOE *(surprised).* For whom?

CROMWELL (*whispering).*
Speak low.
The one for whom this bed is made fears not King's phantoms — no, nor headless ghosts.

THURLOE.
What means —

CROMWELL.
Hush! Do my will, and you will understand Hereafter.

THURLOE *(aside).* I am all amazed. ‘T is thus That he makes use of us. Forever mute! Do all he bids and never know wherefore. Be dumb and deaf and blind, when he commands, Then have a hundred eyes, a hundred arms, A hundred voices if need be.
[Aloud to CROMWELL.] My lord, Your pardon, if I venture — Danger threatens? Whence comes it? — [.*Indicating bed.*
And who is he who takes your place?

CROMWELL.
Be silent. Is not our good chaplain late? *[Aside, walking hastily to and fro at the front of the stage.*
How proud they are! They think they hold me now! On one side Ormond laughs, and Rochester Laughs on the other. Good! Their genius has A chance to match itself with mine. My grave They’ve dug; but ‘t is a narrow one, And matches them in size.
[Pausing before a table on which two candles are burning, as if disturbed by their light, and says rudely to THURLOE: —
Why so much light? One candle is enough. Economy In my affairs, I beg you. *[Blows out one of the candles.*
Thus we may Extinguish enemies. A breath! — all’s done. Well, where’s my chaplain?
[LORD ROCHESTER *enters accompanied by a page, who bears a golden salver; on it is a golden goblet in which floats a sprig of rosemary.*

THURLOE.
Here he comes, my lord. CROMWELL.
At last! — *[Rubbing his hands with joy.*

SCENE XVI.

The same. LORD ROCHESTER.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* The goblet’s full! Old Noll must drink It all, and then, my faith! he will sleep well. I emptied the whole phial. A good

turn I do him, for I tear him from remorse. He’ll not have slept so well for a long time. *[Taking the salver from the page, who goes out, he presents it to* CROMWELL *with a humble obeisance. [Aloud]* My lord —
[Aside] Our final ceremonious act. *[Aloud]* Pray drink this liquor which my hands have blessed.

CROMWELL *(sneeringly).* So you have blessed it?

LORD ROCHESTER.
Yes.
[Aside] The frightful look!

CROMWELL. It ought to benefit me, don’t you think?

LORD ROCHESTER. Yes, hippocras contains the wondrous power of bringing sleep, my lord.

CROMWELL.
Then drink yourself. *[Takes the goblet from the salver and presents it suddenly to* LORD ROCHESTER.

LORD ROCHESTER (*drawing back with terror).* I — drink?
[Aside] A thunder clap!

CROMWELL *(with a dubious smile).*
You hesitate? Habituate yourself to favours, sir! We have yet greater ones in store. Take this; Throw off the awe which seems to trouble you, And drink.
[Forces LORD ROCHESTER, *who is consternated, to take the goblet.*
You know not how you ‘re cherished here, Nor how your blessings will come home to roost.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).*
I’m stupefied.
[Aloud] My lord —

CROMWELL
I tell you, drink!

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* Something most wonderful has happened here. *[Aloud]* I swear to you!

CROMWELL.
Drink first, then you can swear.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* What will become of our great plot, and all Our clever preparations?

CROMWELL.
Won't you drink?

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* Old Noll is more malicious than we are.

CROMWELL.
You need much urging.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).*
Let me drink it down.
[Drinks.

CROMWELL *(with a sardonic laugh).* How does it taste?

LORD ROCHESTER *(placing the goblet on the table).*
May God protect the King! *[Aside]* At least, I'm saved from Madame Guggligoy. Old Noll can do whate'er he will to me. My new-made wife was waiting at the door. This time my shipwreck's fortunate; I fall From Charybdis to Scylla, — from her arms To Cromwell's. One puts you to sleep by force, The other forces you to fight all night. I've changed my torturer, and that is all. I yawn — already —
down on one of the folding-chairs.

THURLOE *(to* CROMWELL). Was it poisoned?

LORD ROCHESTER
Humph!

That’s flattering to Cromwell and to me.

CROMWELL *(low to* THURLOE).
We’ll see!

THURLOE *(aside, looking at* LORD ROCHESTER). Poor man!

LORD ROCHESTER *(yawning).*
My head is turning round.
[Yawning again.
When one has played a comedy all day, Has preached so much, and sworn so little, prayed And fasted, worn a saintly countenance, And borne a Hebrew name; when one has been Examined — on the Bible — by old Noll —
To go to sleep *[yawns’]* just as the climax comes —
Is hard —— *[Yawning again.*
I hope I shall not wake up, hung. Alas! poor Ormond will go down with me. That’s all that I regret. Away, bad dreams!
[Yawning.
Oh, hellish drink! I cannot raise my head. Good-night, Mr. Cromwell — God save the King!
[His head falls on his shoulder, and he sleeps.

CROMWELL (*eyes fixed on* LORD ROCHESTER).
That is devotion. Who’d do that for me?
[To THURLOE.] We’ll place him on the bed.
[They take up LORD ROCHESTER *and carry him to the bed on which they place him without awakening him. At this moment some one knocks at a low door leading to one of the side corridors of the Painted Chamber.*

THURLOE *(anxiously to* CROMWELL).
Some one is knocking At that door.

CROMWELL.
I know. Go open it.

THURLOE *(opening the door).*
The rabbi.

SCENE XVII.

CROMWELL, THURLOE, MANASSES-BEN-ISRAEL; LORD ROCHESTER, *asleep.*

CROMWELL *(to* MANASSES, *who prostrates himself on the threshold).* Well, what does the Jew bring me? [MANASSES *rises and draws near to* CROMWELL *with a mysterious air.*

MANASSES *(low to* CROMWELL).
Some gold —
[Opens his robe and reveals a heavy bag, which he carries with difficulty.

CROMWELL (*to* THURLOE). Go out. *[Low.]* But do not go too far.
[.THURLOE *bows and goes out.*

MANASSES *(to* CROMWELL). The Swedish brig is taken, and I come Immediately to bring your lordship's share.

CROMWELL *(examining the bag).* What jest is this? My share?

MANASSES (*biting his lips).*
My lord, I mean A first instalment.

CROMWELL. That is better, sir! *[Takes the bag and puts it on the table beside him.*

MANASSES *(aside).*
No thing on earth escapes that lynx's eye! The Cavaliers, thank God, are easy fooled. I take their ship, and let them use my bank. Thanks to my care, they 're destitute of gold; And I, according to the bargain made, Sell back at eight per cent all that I steal. To steal from Christians is no sin at all.

CROMWELL. What news have you, my purgatory face?

MANASSES. Nothing, save that in London it is said They've hung at Dover an astrologer.

CROMWELL.
Then they did well. You 're an astrologer Yourself, I think.

MANASSES (*after a moment's hesitation).*
Bear not false witness, says The decalogue. 'T is true, I know this book, Obscure to devils, read by Solomon And spelled by Zoroaster. Yes, I can Bead in the skies your trials and your joys.

CROMWELL *(aside, eyes fixed on the Jew).* Strange destiny! To watch mankind and stars: Up there astrologer; down here a spy.

MANASSES *(with eagerness, approaching an open window: in the lack of the room, through which one sees the star- besprinkled heavens).* Look! Wonderful! Look, beside Scorpion — there! Strange! at this moment I can see —

CROMWELL.
See what?

MANASSES (*without taking his eyes from the sky).* Your star. — *[Turning solemnly to* CROMWELL.
Yes, from your future I can lift The veil.

CROMWELL *(thrilled).* You can? oh, no! you lie, old man. Are n't you afraid to tempt a dagger's point?

MANASSES *(solemnly).* If't is a lie, may Death, who waits for all, Close instantly these eyes, which read the truth.

CROMWELL *(aside, thoughtfully).* Why not? To pluck away the veil from destiny; Far in the heavens read a far-off fate; Decipher every life and every

soul; To hold the key to all the mysteries Which a supreme, an unseen hand Has traced upon heaven's surface by these suns, — Oh, what a power! 'T is sharing God's own crown! And I was satisfied with a small throne: Proud to ascend it after petty kings. I scorned this Jew. Beside him what am I? What is my power when compared to his? How humble my attempts, beside the goal Which he has won! His kingdom is the world, And no horizon marks its end. But no! It can't be true. Our reason must forbid — Our reason? Cavern into which we throw All that we have, and which gives nothing back. Blind doubt denying everything It cannot understand. Oh, yes! the fool Quotes reason, then he laughs. It's easy done. Whence might this power come from, after all? God has assigned a goal to every one. Of all these beings circling Nature's breast Each has his centre, each his place and sphere. Beasts know not men. Man knows not God. The skies Keep their own secrets, just as we keep ours. Can souls from this world into others look? Bring to the living, torches from the dead? Must they stay always this side of the tomb? Once dead, cannot they leave the catacombs, Or living penetrate the sealed tombs? Who knows? Must we deny all things we do Not see? Does death break every bond? Have not Things terrible and strange been seen on earth?
But man to scan the heaven's flaming page!
Who knows what God puts in a new-made soul?
And yet this man, this Jew, this varlet, wretch, Can he interpret earth in its grand sense?
To Holy of Holies can his base look pierce?
Why not? What do we know? All things are strange, —
A reason why, perhaps. If to my mind He could explain the language of my star, Tell when this struggle which I wage, shall cease!
We are alone — no witnesses. I'll try.
[Aloud to MANASSES.
Jew!

MANASSES *(who has not ceased his contemplation of the heavens, turns and bows).*
Lord!

CROMWELL. If it is true these rays of light Illuminate your soul with mystic force, And lend your eye the gleams of prophecy —

[Pausing and appearing to hesitate.

MANASSES.
What does the master of his servant ask?

CROMWELL *(lowering his voice).* I want the future.

MANASSES *(rising, and drawing himself up proudly).* Dare you aim so high? Uncircumcised, you lift your eyes to this? Your soul, in spite of barriers of flame, Would see the stars, the gold, the diamond dust, Which firmaments roll in their bottomless Abyss. The heavens you would penetrate, Behold the sanctuary with its gloom, The fiery laboratory where He stands, The great Jehovah, holding in his grasp Pivot and compass of eternity?
You'd pierce the flames, the ether, and the seas, The triple veil of heaven, triple wall Of earth, to learn what suns are they which burn Their words of fire on God's white diadem?
You read the future! Could you, heart profane, Support the glory of this mystery?
You, always buried in the cares of earth, Have you spent nights and days unto this end?
What marvels have you grasped? What trials stood?
Behold my pallid brow! Tobias' age Is mine. I've passed through this delusive life And never turned my gaze from that great world.
Think — in a century — no hour, no day!
And many times at night I've left my home To go and listen at the door of tombs, To find but worms devouring putrid flesh.
How happy was I, king of the dark realms, When I could change a corpse into a ghost, And make some dead man from the gallows cut Breathe just a word of the great alphabet.
The dead revealed the mystery of worlds;
And my weak eyes almost obtained a glimpse Of the Great Being in his awful home, Who on the heaven's orbit, as upon The folds of every shroud, inscribes his name, —
His fatal name, known unto him alone.
But for your eyes, blind in their first dark night, The constellations are but smouldering fires.

Absorbed in contemplation of these sights, Has your hair fallen, has your beard turned white?
Ah! Tell me, have you passed your weary days As did the old magicians, in despair, Despised, proscribed ‘mongst men?

CROMWELL *(interrupting him impatiently).*
Enough! I pay You for your services.

MANASSES. ‘T is a mistake? Man can indeed subserve himself to men. While I am living my ignoble life, While flesh covers my skeleton, in truth, I am the servant of your haughty plans; But when, my lord, did I agree to spy Upon the heavens?

CROMWELL *(aside).* This is no hypocrite. He’s loyal to his science, and proscribed, He honours it. — *[Aloud, and with violence.*
Discover if my planet Is propitious. I command you!

MANASSES.
I cannot.

CROMWELL.
I wish it.

MANASSES. Do you wish it?

CROMWELL *(quickly grasping his dagger).*
That will make You speak, or this will make you dumb.

MANASSES (*after hesitating).*
What if I add to heaven, hell; by the Koran The Talmud place? Will you not shrink?

CROMWELL.
Not I.

MANASSES.

The spirit yields to sword: unto the tyrant The magician yields. Speak on, my son!

CROMWELL To my astounded soul, reveal, I beg, The secret of my life and destiny. While yet a child I had a vision strange: Because of humble birth, I'd been sent forth From those fair lawns, of which proud Oxford boasts, And which are trod by none but noble-born. When I regained my cell, with bursting heart I wept and cursed the rank which branded me. Night came: I slept not, sitting by my couch. A breath that chilled me to the very soul Passed by, and near to me I heard a voice Which said, " All honour unto Cromwell — king! " This voice, which was almost inaudible, Was menacing, yet full of pathos too. Pale, seized with terror, in the gloom I rose. I sought the place from whence the sound had come. I found it. There a trunkless head stood bathed With livid light, in that dark spot. A halo, A blood-coloured halo, decked the brow, And to it hung the remnants of a crown. There, motionless, — old man, I tremble yet, — It watched me with a leer upon its lips, And murmured, " Honour unto Cromwell — king!"
I took one step, — all disappeared, and left Except upon my frozen heart, no trace. " All honour unto Cromwell!" — what think you, Manasses, of this vision? What was meant? At night! those ghastly vapours of the air! A hideous head, the shreds of a grim spectre Pledging me kingdoms with its taunting laugh! Oh, it was horrible! was't not, old Jew? That head, I saw it once again, — one day In winter, when I faced a maddened crowd; Then it was dumb, — but from the headsman's hand 'T was hanging!

MANASSES (*reflecting).* Well! Ezekiel, son-in-law To Jethro, had some visions, much less strange, Belshazzar's warning at the festival Was not equal to this; Toldos Jeschut Gives us no history resembling yours. To see the head of a still living king ' 'T was strange.

CROMWELL. Nothing could be more horrible.

MANASSES (*reflecting).* Perhaps — but no! The ghosts I have in mind Claimed vengeance for crimes past, but yours Concerned the future. You were not asleep?

CROMWELL.
No.

MANASSES. Vision without parallel: for if You had been sleeping, it was but a dream, And I know many that are worse than that.
[.Resuming his reflections.
The only spectre that rose not from graves. In my long life I've nothing seen like that!
[Turning to CROMWELL. What odour did its absence leave behind?

CROMWELL *(abruptly)*. No matter. Tell me what my vision means. Was it a truth or an illusion? Speak! " All honour unto Cromwell! " Come, reveal My destiny. Shall I be made a king?

MANASSES (*fixing his eyes on the heavens)*. I see it, yes! From zenith to the nadir I would always recognize that star. 'T is fixed, And seems to grow while one is watching it. 'T is brilliant, but a spot is in its heart.

CROMWELL *(impatiently)*. Your eyes have been turned up there long enough. Shall I be king?

MANASSES. In vain I'd flatter you; Upon the firmament one reads no lies. I can't withhold the fact that in its course Your star forms not the triangle mystic With the stars Jod and Zain.

CROMWELL.
Triangle! Come, What matters that? Out on you, son of Cain! Tell me the meaning of the trunkless head! Am I to be a king? Answer me that!

MANASSES. No king, except a miracle transpires.

CROMWELL *(rudely)*. What mean you by a miracle?

MANASSES.
I mean —

CROMWELL.

Well, what?

MANASSES. A miracle.

CROMWELL.
And what am I?
Am I a miracle?

MANASSES *(thoughtfully)*. Perhaps.

CROMWELL.
It is a throne You promise me?

MANASSES. I cannot, for your sake, Change the replies of heaven.

CROMWELL.
Can you not! What was the vision then, — a mockery Of death? Oh, as for you astrologers, I think you are impostors, — all of you ‘ Working these planets for your private ends.

MANASSES *(seriously)*. Do not blaspheme, my son. Give me your hand. [CROMWELL, *apparently subjugated by the authority of the astrologer, gives his hand.* MANASSES *seizes it, examines it, and sings in a monotone, without taking his eyes from it.*
Avaunt! all workers of untruth And sorcerers restored to youth By magic philters venomous; All dragons, spirits luminous; And all the centenary kind Who cannot run for lack of wind.
Avaunt! all phantoms robed in white; The asp, who robs with grim delight The mad crows of their putrid prey; All demons hunting souls away; All monstrous dwarfs, and fires which blaze Around the tombs in wild amaze.
The patriarchal robe put on; The belt zodiacal now don; Gold rings put on your fingers all, The Amess, mitre conical; The purple ephod, tunic red Which twice in strong dye has been spread. *[A loud to* CROMWELL, *after a moment of silence.* A danger threatens you!

CROMWELL. What sort?

MANASSES.
Your death. If you accept a crown your death is sure!

CROMWELL.
My death is sure?

MANASSES (*pointing to* CROMWELL'S *heart).*
The wound, it will be there.

CROMWELL (*placing his hand on his heart).*
Here?

MANASSES (*with an affirmative gesture).* There!

CROMWELL.
Speak! When?

MANASSES.
To-morrow.

CROMWELL.
Lie you not?

MANASSES.
O son of Ammon! Lie? Shall I call up Your demon? To control him, you must speak With me eight lines, each one beginning with The self-same letter —
[CROMWELL *appears to hesitate at this proposition. At this moment* LORD ROCHESTER *turns on his bed and sighs.*

MANASSES *(troubled).*
Some one listens — *[Draws near to the bed and perceives* LORD ROCHESTER *asleep.*
Yes!
The charm is broken; he has heard it all.

CROMWELL.

You think he can have heard us?

MANASSES.
Without doubt.

CROMWELL.
Then he must die!
[Draws his dagger and approaches LORD ROCHESTER, *who is still asleep.*

MANASSES. Yes, strike! You could not do A nobler deed.
[Aside.] Yes, let a Christian's hand strike down A Christian —

CROMWELL. He has heard the interview Between the Jew and Cromwell! Let him die!
[liaises his dagger, and then pauses.
But yet he sleeps!

MANASSES *(pushing his arm)*. Well, well!

CROMWELL (*still undecided).*
He is so young.

MANASSES. It is the Sabbath day. Then strike!

CROMWELL *(starting).*
Alas!
A day of fast, of vigil, and of holy rest. I to commit a murder, lend my ear To this astrologer! — *[Throwing aside dagger.*
[To MANASSES.] Jew! get you hence!
[Calling.] Thurloe!

THURLOE *(running in).*
My lord!

MANASSES *(astonished).* Your Highness —

CROMWELL *(to* MANASSES).
Leave me, I tell you!

MANASSES *(aside)*. What vertigo has sudden seized his mind?

CROMWELL *(in low tone to Jew)*. Go; if you speak one word of what's passed here, Consider yourself doomed to death. Now go!
[Jew prostrates himself and goes out. [To THURLOE.] Oh, save me from this Jew and from myself, Thurloe!

THURLOE *(anxiously)*. What is the matter, my good lord?

CROMWELL *(composing himself)*. I — nothing! Nothing! Thurloe, I love you.

THURLOE.
You said — and you appear so troubled — CROMWELL.
What?
Did I say anything?

THURLOE.
My lord, you said —

CROMWELL *(abruptly)*. No, I said nothing. Hush! and follow me.

THURLOE. How pale you are, my lord!

CROMWELL.
It is the light Of these sepulchral candles. Come! I need you; Come, follow me!
[THURLOE *follows* CROMWELL; *he pauses, while passing, at* LORD ROCHESTER'S *bed.*

THURLOE. He sleeps!

CROMWELL.
Yes, a hard sleep, —

One much resembling death.
[They go out.

ACT IV.

THE SENTINEL.

SCENE. — *The park gate at White-Hall. To the right, groups of trees; in the background groups of trees, above which the gothic projectures of the castle are outlined on the dark sky. To the left, the park gate, a small door under a deep arch, and very much ornamented with sculpture.*

SCENE I.

CROMWELL, *disguised as a soldier, heavy musket on his shoulder, a huff cuirass, hat of high conical shape with large brim, tall boots. He walks up and down in front of the gate after the manner of a guard. Some instants after the curtain has risen, one hears the cry of a distant sentinel.*

SENTINEL.
All's well!
Do you keep watch?

CROMWELL (*resting his musket on the ground, repeats).*
All's well! Do you keep watch?
A THIRD SENTINEL *(in the distance).*
All's well! Do you keep watch?

CROMWELL (*after a moment's silence).*
I watch for all.
Cromwell, whom a wise Providence sends here, Will open to his murderers the door.
[Noise of footsteps and voices in the distance.
Already? No, midnight has not yet tolled:
It is some passer-by. — [*Indistinct singing is heard.*

What! Singing songs? The fellow has not kept his fast to-day. *[The voice approaches, and one hears these words sung to a monotonous air.*

Towards setting sun, Oh, you who run To seek fortune, beware! Don’t slip, don’t fall, Beneath night’s pall: Darkness is everywhere.

Treacherous sea With mystery Covers the downs at night;

As far as eye Can earth descry, Not any house in sight.

Thieves come behind. At night you’ll find They follow every one. The forest dame Oft gives us blame For what we have not done.

They wander wide, Oh, woe betide Whoever meets them there! The goblins light, With mad delight, Dance in the moonbeams’ glare. *[The voice approaches nearer and nearer, and then ceases.*

CROMWELL. ‘T is one of my own fools. Elespuru, I think.

SCENE II.

CROMWELL, TRICK, GIRAFF, ELESPURU, GRAMADOCH. *The Fools, led by* GRAMADOCH, *enter cautiously, on tip-toe.*

ELESPURU *(humming).*
The goblins light, With mad delight, Dance in the moonbeams’ glare.

GIRAFF *(low to* ELESPURU). Elespuru, be still! You ‘re mad.

GRAMADOCH *(to the others, indicating a turf bank behind a hedge).*
Let us hide there.

CROMWELL *(without seeing them).* My fool is coming home.
[The four Fools sit on the turf bank.

GRAMADOCH *(low to his comrades).* At this point all the action concentrates. Here we’ll see everything.

TRICK *(low).*
With a clerk’s eye! See? It is lighter in the devil’s kiln.

ELESPURU *(low).* If any of these actors see our face, This spectacle will cost us a round sum.

GRAMADOCH *(low).* We ‘re here in time. Naught has been yet begun.

GIRAFF (LOW*).*
Be silent, will you?
[All are silent and remain motionless. CROMWELL.
Yes, the fool’s gone by! He knew not that this place, where he sung loud, Would see an empire’s fate decided soon. A happy man, this fool. E’en in White-Hall He carries with him his ideal world. He has no subjects, has no throne; he’s free! He has no aching fibre in his heart. He does not wear upon his careless breast A steel cuirass! Wherefore? Who wants his blood? What need has he of court or retinue Or guard? He laughs, he sings, he passes by; None heeds. About the future, what cares he? He’ll always find some velvet rags to wear In winter, and some jokes to pay for bread. He sleeps at night, and fears no traitor’s snares. He has no frightful dreams; he wakes and smiles And has no memories. Thrice happy man! His speech is noise; his life is but a dream. When he attains that point where all things end, Death’s scythe, which is a terror unto all, Will be a bawble to this worn-out child. Meanwhile, his voice will always laugh or weep, Give any sound you wish or any cry, Will talk on everything, and sing when bid. His flippancy conceals eternal rest, A plaything of the world, void, resonant, Whose words are water that evaporates, Responsive to each touch, and easier moved Than are the silver bells upon his cap. This fool would never do so mad a thing As try to hold the world in his small brain.
No weighty words, no thoughts surcharged with sighs, Come from his heart as from volcano’s fire;
His soul — has he a soul? — can always sleep.
To-day he knows not what he did last night;
Remembering naught! Alas! how fortunate.
Ah, never, harassed by relentless thoughts, Fears he, in passing by some gloomy spot, To look behind, lest he a spectre see.
He does not pray his name may be forgot, Nor wish the thirtieth of January Had never been. Oh, enviest thou thy fool, Great Cromwell? Thou art the all-powerful, Yet with thy life, what hast thou done? To reign?

Prevail against a world aghast with fear?
For such vain glamour what a price thou’st paid.
All parties have abandoned thee; the people Have disowned thee, and thine own family Are in continual strife against thy hopes;
They make their wishes a rude law to thee, And torture thee with taunts at thy kingship.
Thy son himself — I’m hated everywhere!
O’er all the earth my foes implacable Wait to o’erwhelm me; yes, and elsewhere too, —
At bottom of the tomb! Good days must come, Some better days, at last! What do I say?
For fifteen years life’s been a miracle.
What wish had I that has not been fulfilled?
The nations underneath my yoke are bent;
With but one word, to-morrow, I am king.
What more foreshadowed my ambitious dreams?
Reformer, judge, a conqueror, potentate, —
Have I not all my joy? The great result, To be a watchman here, paid by the night!
What pomp outside; what festering sore within!
[A pause.
It is a freezing night, almost the hour, — Yes, hour, — when spectres from their coffins rise And show to murderers, with their blood-red hands, Their wounds which always gape and bleed a-fresh, Their shroud all covered with its loathsome stains. Oh, hideous thought! Because I am alone, Am I a child? Alas! I wish I were. That damnéd Jew has chilled me to the heart With all the visions he aroused to-night. I’m shaken, and I tremble — with the cold. To neutralize these sacrilegious thoughts I’ll speak some verses against sorcery.
[.Midnight begins to toll from the belfry; he starts. That noise! The belfry! The expected hour!
[Listening.
I never heard it at this time before.
‘T is like a knell, — a human voice that weeps.
[Stops and listens again. That tolled the last hour of a martyr, once.
[After the last strokes of the bell. Midnight! Alone! I will invoke the saints.

[Sound of footsteps behind the trees. I’m reassured. Here my assassins come.

SCENE III.

The same. LORD ORMOND, LORD DROGHEDA, LORD ROSEBERRY, LORD CLIFFORD, DOCTOR JENKINS, SEDLEY, SIR PETERS DOWNIE, SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. *The Cavaliers enter stealthily,* LORD ORMOND *and* LORD ROSEBERRY *at the head. They -wear large hats, pulled over their eyes, and great black cloaks, lifted up by their swords; they speak together in low tones.* CROMWELL *replaces his musket on his shoulder and stands before the arched gate.*

LORD ROSEBERRY *(to the others).*
‘T is here.

LORD ORMOND. Yes, here. I recognize the place. *[Indicating the gate whose shadow conceals* CROMWELL *from them.*
Through that gate used the royal hunt to pass.

CROMWELL *(musket on his shoulder, aside).* ‘T is they! At last I know with whom I deal.

SIR PETERS DOWNIE *(to* LORD ORMOND). Should Wilmot not await us here?

CROMWELL *(aside, shrugging his shoulders).*
He’s sharp.

LORD DROGHEDA *(to* DOWNIE). How can he? He has duties to perform; Think you his halter is so very loose?

CROMWELL *(aside).* Assassins, you shall have a like one soon. And Haman’s gibbet’s none too high for you.

LORD ORMOND *(to Cavaliers)*. He would most likely spoil the whole affair. If they have kept him, I for one, am glad.

CROMWELL *(aside)*.
And I, for two.

LORD ORMOND.
Wilmot is dangerous. But let us end this.

CROMWELL *(aside)*. *End* is the right word.

LORD ORMOND *(to Cavaliers)*. To see how far this madman's folly goes, Hear this: Old Noll a pretty daughter has. Wilmot's in love with her; that's naught to me.

CROMWELL *(aside)*.
What insolence!

LORD ORMOND (*continuing)*. He writes a madrigal About her. Rochester a rhymester! Shame! Still worse; forgetting what is due my age And rank, he wants to read the verse to me. That insult I received in fitting way. But here, just now, while I was waiting, lo! There came a letter, an important one. Impatiently I broke the seal — and found The quatrain to his little Cromwell!

CROMWELL *(aside)*.
Knave!
To speak of her, before me, in this way.

LORD ROSEBERRY *(laughing, to* LORD ORMOND). Your persecution was most rigorous.

SIR PETERS DOWNIE *(laughing)*. His verses must be read! Quite like a king! Ah, that's a poet's style!

LORD ORMOND.

There is yet more. After these verses, sealed with so much care, A second messenger from Wilmot came. That was the word which told us to be here; But this time ‘t was a parchment, rolled with grace, And tied with a pink ribbon.

ALL THE CAVALIERS.
Is that true?

LORD ORMOND. See how that idiot betrays our cause!

LORD CLIFFORD. It’s frightful! Does he think such jests are droll?

LORD ORMOND.
This last to Willis was confided; but It might have fallen in disloyal hands.

LORD ROSEBERRY. Then we would need nothing so much as wings.

DOCTOR JENKINS. Upon what frail support we rest our faith! ‘T is terrible to think of all the things Which fate holds trembling o’er a poor fool’s head. At the least noise, the slightest change of wind, The frightful structure totters, and by night Thrones, nations, worlds vanish for evermore.

SEDLEY.
It seems to me that Davenant’s not here.

LORD ORMOND. The poet Davenant! The mountebank! He’s hiding. Who would count on such a clown?

DOWNIE.
Our good friend Richard, the usurper’s son, Is now in prison. Did you know, some spy —

LORD DROGHEDA.
Alas, poor Richard!

CROMWELL *(aside).* The poor parricide!

LORD ROSEBERRY.
Such a good fellow!

CROMWELL *(aside)*.
Yes?

SEDLEY *(to* LORD ROSEBERRY).
His father learned Of his too loyal toast this morning?

LORD ROSEBERRY.
Yes.

CROMWELL *(aside)*.
The traitor!

LORD ORMOND *(to Cavaliers)*. Shall we waste our time in words?
Let us begin.

CROMWELL *(aside)*. Now let their plot unfold. To these Egyptian rats, these royal souls, Let's open White-Hall as we would a trap. Lord Rochester's the bait, Cromwell's the trap, Which, once it closes, will let nothing out

LORD ORMOND *(low to Cavaliers)*. Let's try the soldier. *[Aloud, approaching* CROMWELL Hem!

CROMWELL (*presenting his musket to him)*.
Who goes there?

LORD ORMOND *(low to* CROMWELL).
Friend!
Cologne!

CROMWELL *(aside)*. I've not the password! What to do?

LORD ORMOND.
Cologne!

CROMWELL *(aside).* What shall I say? [LORD ORMOND, *astonished at the sentinel's silence, steps lack with an air of mistrust.*

LORD ROSEBERRY *(to* LORD ORMOND).
What is it? Speak!

LORD ORMOND *(indicating* CROMWELL). He's silent.

LORD ROSEBERRY. What if Cromwell should suspect? What if he'd changed the palace guard to-night?

LORD ORMOND *(to Cavaliers, who gather uneasily around him).*
When one has entered on a plot like this, To go back is to lose. Let us advance.
[Approaches CROMWELL *again.*

CROMWELL *(aside).*
To be too easy would excite their doubts.
[To LORD ORMOND, *who is advancing.* Who goes there? Speak!

LORD ORMOND.
Cologne!

CROMWELL *(aside).*
How to cheat them? How catch them without help of this password?

LORD ORMOND *(low to Cavaliers, who have retired to a corner of the stage on the right).*
Still silent!

LORD CLIFFORD *(low and eagerly).* Let us kill this sentinel!

DOCTOR JENKINS *(low to* LORD CLIFFORD). What? Send a soul to God without the time To make one prayer?

LORD CLIFFORD *(low to* DOCTOR JENKINS).
What matters that to us?

LORD ORMOND *(low to* LORD CLIFFORD). What? Strike him from the back?

LORD CLIFFORD *(low to* LORD ORMOND).
We must pass on.
I'm sorry for the man.

ALL *(low to* ORMOND).

Yes; kill him, quick!

DOCTOR JENKINS *(low to Cavaliers).* Stained with his sins, to send him to his judge?

ALL (*low to* DOCTOR JENKINS). It must be. He must die.

CROMWELL *(aside).*
What do they say? *[The Cavaliers draw their daggers and advance on* WELL. SIR WILLIAM MURRAY *stops them.*

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. You ‘re wrong. I'm sure that man belongs to us, Else when he saw us grouped against this wall He would have given the alarm at once. A little gold, I think, will make him speak. There is no danger, save to money, here. If he is silent, ‘t is for more doubloons; If to your password a deaf ear he turns, ‘T is but the greedy nature Puritan. ‘T is easier to pay for a passport Than kill for one, which is a noisy way.

LORD ROSEBERRY. ‘T is true. The boor won't hesitate to call For help if we attack him.

LORD CLIFFORD *(sighing).*
Well, then we Will pay our ransom.

SIR PETERS DOWNIE.
Gold is very scarce With us, unfortunately.

SEDLEY. Because he, That robber Cromwell, stole our brig from us. Oh, that this thief should sit on England’s throne!

LORD ORMOND. Manasses, that old rat who gnaws at crowns, Lent me some money, but it is all spent. Wait — there’s a purse I got from Rochester.
[Feels in his coat.
Yes, here it is.
[Draws a purse from his pocket and shows it to the Cavaliers.

LORD ROSEBERRY. A providential help.

LORD CLIFFORD (*indicating* CROMWELL). It’s hard to pay that hypocrite with gold, When a good dagger-thrust would do as well.

LORD ORMOND *(handing the purse to* SIR WILLIAM MURRAY).
Go, William Murray and negotiate;
You know more of their saintly ways than we.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY *(taking the purse)*. Count upon me.

CROMWELL *(aside, seeing* SIR WILLIAM MURRAY *approach him slowly)*. They’ve held their council! Why? Just for a word, a nothing, all this fuss. They want to enter: I desire it too. We ought to come to terms.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY *(aside)*.
I must arrange This matter skilfully.

CROMWELL *(to* SIR WILLIAM MURRAY, *who is approaching)*.
Stop! Who goes there?

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. A saint, my brother.

CROMWELL *(aside)*. Hypocrite!

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY.
A blessing On the steel which girds you —

CROMWELL *(aside).*
I am rich To get a blessing from these Royalists.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY *(aside).* In their own tongue one must address these fools.
[Aloud to CROMWELL. On Zion’s tower, my brother, archers stood And watched, and called each other night and day; You are their counterpart.

CROMWELL.
My thanks to you.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY.
The night is cold.

CROMWELL.
It is.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY.
The birds do sleep Within their nests, the ox sleeps in his stall: All rest; you watch.

CROMWELL. It is my destiny.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. You would be better off in a good bed.

CROMWELL *(aside).*
Say, rather, you!

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. Alone, on frozen ground, A heavy musket to encumber you, You keep the watch; and he whose cross you bear, Your Cromwell, sleeps in full content.

CROMWELL.
Does he?

Not so: he never sleeps when I keep watch.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. With those illusive words he drugs your ear.

CROMWELL.
You think he sleeps?

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY.
I know he does. To you He owes this gentle calm, this dreamless sleep. He takes the pleasure, leaves the toil to you.

CROMWELL.
That’s acting ill.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY *(aside)*.
Ah, we have won him now!
He is dissatisfied.
[Aloud.] You do so much For him. This great man, does he know your name?

CROMWELL.
I think so.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY *(shrugging his shoulders)*. You ‘re an honest simpleton.

CROMWELL *(aside)*.
He’s clever — he!

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY.
And from his splendid throne Think you he’ll ever cast a look at you? Oh, no, my friend; he does not know your name, I ‘m sure.

CROMWELL *(aside)*. Sure of all things, except your head. ‘T would seem, he had made me!

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY.
You ‘re honest, but About these things you think yourself too wise.

CROMWELL.
That’s wrong.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. We lived at court of the late king.

CROMWELL *(aside).* The idiot, he forgets. He drops his mask, And to the Puritan adds Cavalier.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. My friend, all courts at heart are just the same. Of course, you don’t know that.

CROMWELL *(aside).*
How wise he is!

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. You sacrifice your life to Cromwell?

CROMWELL.
Yes.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. Well, for him shed your blood too, drop by drop, He’ll care about it just as much, my man, As he cares for the water clear or foul That runs beneath his bridges.

CROMWELL.
No I think My matters go much nearer to his heart.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY *(laughing).* A simple mind you have. What does he care If you are dead or living?

CROMWELL.
As for that, What do you know about it?

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY.
Does your life Touch his in any way?

CROMWELL *(aside).*
It touches closer Than you conceive, for your misfortune, friend

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. Have you not right to ask for recompense? What are you? But a guard. The crying shame! I dare say you have stood by him through all.

CROMWELL.
I have.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. You've shared in all his battles?

CROMWELL.
Yes.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. Many are sergeants who have done much less.

CROMWELL *(aside)*. To win me over, that is a good card. *[Aloud]* You flatter?

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY.
No. Why show you such disdain Is he so great a captain, pray, himself?

CROMWELL *(aside).*
Impertinence!

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. To have his palaces, His carriages of state, his guards, his men, Who is this Cromwell you adore so much? A soldier like yourself.

CROMWELL
That's all he is.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY *(aside)*. Our way is won!
[.Aloud.] He's nothing more than you.

CROMWELL
That’s true!

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. Why serve him, then, upon your knees?

CROMWELL
I don’t do so.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY *(aside)*. He’s stepping in my net. *[Aloud*.] Why not usurp that place as well as he?

CROMWELL. There’d be no incongruity, in truth.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. Not any. Soldier for a soldier — good! How can you fill your arduous duties here? For this hard labour what’s your salary?

CROMWELL.
I am not paid.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. Not paid? Upon my soul! Thus to abandon an old soldier; shame! I pity you.

CROMWELL *(aside)*. He pities me!

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY.
No pay!
This Cromwell is a tyrant.

CROMWELL *(aside)*.
He arrives.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY.
A righteous anger chokes me.

CROMWELL *(aside)*.
Touching thing!

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY *(taking his hand)*. I want to comfort, aye, avenge you, too.

CROMWELL.
Avenge me?

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. Yes, on Cromwell. *[Whispering in his* ear.] Ope the gate. Judith by Holofernes shall be slain.

CROMWELL. You mean Judith slay Holofernes — eh? Don’t quote the Bible wrong.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY.
A just rebuke.

CROMWELL.
For Judith, friend, your beard is pretty black.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY *(aside)*. Why did I meddle with this history? Of course Judith’s a woman. Never mind! *[Aloud.]* Let us surprise your sleeping general, And ‘t will be well for you.

CROMWELL.
You think so, sir?

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. What matter if six men pass through this gate? ‘T is fortune creeping in its sleep to you.

CROMWELL.
It’s sleep?

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY *(giving him a purse)*. Accept this on account. You have No other duty than to say “ White-Hall,” When others say “ Cologne.”

CROMWELL *(aside)*.
White-Hall’s the word!

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. Here, take the money. Men of our sort pay.

CROMWELL *(aside).* And men of my sort, too.
[Aloud, to SIR WILLIAM MURRAY, *taking the purse.* This is a debt Which I contract with you, my friend.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY.
You'll watch For us, while we complete our task?

CROMWELL
I will.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. 'T is well. — [*Offering his hand.*
Touch hands. By heaven, you are a man!

CROMWELL.
When you've got Cromwell, what do you propose To do with him?

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. I think — it seems to me — We'll kill him, — that is all.

CROMWELL
That is not much.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. We'll be contented with an easy death. We are not cruel.

CROMWELL *(aside).* Neither will I be.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY.
It is agreed

CROMWELL. You've said the word.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY *(to the Cavaliers, who have been waiting in a corner of the stage).*

Come! Haste!
The temple we can enter if we pay The priest. I knew it would be so.

LORD ORMOND *(to* SLR WLLLIAM MURRAY).
‘T is done?

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY.
It is.

LORD ORMOND (*to Cavaliers).* Let us move on. *[The Cavaliers form themselves in a double line and advance to* CROMWELL, *who presents his musket.*

CROMWELL.
Stop! Who goes there?

LORD ORMOND.
Cologne!

CROMWELL.
White-Hall! Pass on!

LORD ORMOND *(aside).*
Well done!

CROMWELL.
[Watching the Cavaliers as they pass through the gate.
That’s right.

LORD ORMOND *(low to* SLR WLLLIAM MURRAY). You’d better stay, my lord, and watch that man. *[To* CROMWELL.] Where’s Cromwell to be found?

CROMWELL.
He’s sleeping in The Painted Chamber.

LORD ORMOND *(to* CROMWELL).

Night obscures our steps, But keep strict watch.

CROMWELL. Be satisfied; pass on.

LORD ORMOND *(joyfully).* At last I touch the goal; my final years Are to be crowned with a triumphant joy. I have him; I will seize him ‘neatli the dais! God grants the boon that I have prayed for long. I hold this Cromwell, sleeping, in my hand. Kind Heaven abandons him to me.

CROMWELL *(aside, watching him as he goes off).*
What one Asks heaven vainly for, hell sometimes gives. [LORD ORMOND *hurries through the gate, which the Cavaliers have already passed, with the exception of* SIR WILLIAM MURRAY.

SCENE IV.

CROMWELL, SIR WILLIAM MURRAY; THE FOUR FOOLS, *still in their hiding-place.*

CROMWELL *(his eyes fixed on the gate through which the Cavaliers have passed).*
At last!

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY *(rubbing his hands).* We have achieved it, by the rood! This Cromwell who on earth has had no peer, This famous general, statesman astute, To whom all Europe chants eternal praise, This master for whose kingship men have deemed The throne too narrow, the sceptre too light, — Is taken like a bird without its wings, By eight fools: not two brains among them all, —
For mine’s the only brain that has served here. Without me nothing had been done. A tramp, This Cromwell, — not even a nobleman; A poor adventurer — to reign o’er kings As Caesar did o’er Rome! A lesson rare We give to royalty. He, whose dominion Oppressed them all, has been captured by us In his own home, — an ignominious fate. Yet fifteen years he’s been a genius. Ha!

[Turning to CROMWELL, *who listens imperturbably.* Can you conceive a reason? Just because He won some battles —

CROMWELL *(aside).*
Where you were not seen!

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY *(continuing).* Because with fine grimaces, words, and sounds He knows enough to draw the multitude, Behold! all Europe kneels when she should hiss A boor, who cannot even make a bow.

CROMWELL *(aside).* Perhaps he can't, but he can teach the rest

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. It's true: his manners are almost like yours.

CROMWELL.
Almost?

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. You have the manners for your place. You never have aspired to lofty rank. Your attitudes befit a trooper Swiss Who leads the charge and drills.

CROMWELL.
You 're much too kind.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. Each man unto his trade, my friend. I'm sure You'd not be such a fool as ask the world To watch you, strutting to an usurped throne. This Cromwell's just about your calibre. Imagine how grotesque the sight must be To see him hoisted on a royal throne. This life of his is destiny's debauch; His levee proved him awkward as a lout.

CROMWELL.
You went there — eh?

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY.
Not so familiar, please; We are not travelling at an equal gait. I am a noble Scottish lord, while men Of your estate should run before my coach. Know

you I bear a wolf upon my crest? And that, under King James the First, I had The honour to be whipped for young Prince Charles?

CROMWELL.
You ‘re right. Our station has been different.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. I’m glad you understand it.

CROMWELL.
Pray return To Cromwell’s levees. So you do attend This man’s receptions, whom you so despise?

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY.
To see what I can get. One can’t be fighting Forever, like Montrose.

CROMWELL.
Yes, beg a place While you are waiting to betray the man, In favour of your king.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY.
How blunt you are

CROMWELL I have no gift for the poetical.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY *(aside).*
Plebeian!

CROMWELL. How did Cromwell welcome you? I wager he refused —

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. No, he did not.

CROMWELL *(aside).*
The liar!

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. He received me courteously; He felt the honour I accorded him, And gave me choice of places in his gift.

CROMWELL *(aside)*. A choice between the door and window, yes! *[Aloud.]* Why do you then conspire against his power?

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. I have reflected. Can one serve a boor? A man who rules like corporal of the guard? A dunce who wants to smile and show his teeth, Who can't make any but a knock-kneed bow?

CROMWELL.
I understand.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. I heard his fall was near.

CROMWELL.
Then you bethought you of the Stuarts' rights.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. The Stuarts' rights and Cromwell's clumsiness, My friends who urged me, and our sure success Won me unto the plot.

CROMWELL.
Good reasons, all.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. You understand. These are my principles. The Norman William violated them, But he atoned by marrying his son To Princess Maude of Scotland; and from them, And from the Athelings, the Stuarts came. So Charles the Second in his person blends The rights of Norman and of Saxon blood.

CROMWELL.
'T is clear.
[Aside] I do not grasp his reasoning.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY.
I'll make you judge.

CROMWELL *(aside)*.
His choice is excellent!

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. The rights of our young king are manifest.

CROMWELL.
Doubtless.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. And they are what Cromwell contests. Is't not unheard of that this vulture cock Should leave his cellar for the eaglet's lair? If he had genius, yes! But I tell you It's falling Jericho without the drums.

CROMWELL *(aside).*
Well said!

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. His fate stalks on in royal state, But't is a phantom crumbling at one's touch.

CROMWELL *(ironically).* An idol with gold head and waxen feet.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. I've always thought him a fine counterfeit. No reputation dazzles me, my man. I judged this Cromwell. *It* would be a king! In what an age we live! *It* does not know How to frustrate a plot, foresee a snare. You have yourself a thousand-fold more wit Than has that fool they 're taking from his bed.

CROMWELL *(aside).* If he but knew what truth he spoke!

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY.
Does he Think reigning is an easy matter? King? I would n't even have him for a courtier.

CROMWELL
You would be right.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY.
He may have sense enough To brew good beer, but has he even right To don the greaves or to shoulder the gun? Well, just about. Provincial family, — His name's not even equal to Milton's.

CROMWELL *(aside).*
What insolence!

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY.
He might have been a brewer Of excellent repute; instead of that He wants to act the great man, play the hero, Cut down the tyrants. Oh, these little squires! Are n’t they ridiculous? Distilling cider Has taught him how to curb the populace, Vanquish the hydra, govern all the earth!

CROMWELL *(aside).*
The fool!

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. Because fortune abetted him, He thinks himself a Caesar, Moses, a Capet! What most amazes me is that Warwick Should condescend to cousin with this cheat.

CROMWELL *(aside).* Cameleon! This man grovelled at my feet But yesterday.

SIE WILLIAM MUEEAY *(as if seized with an idea).* I am a simpleton!

CROMWELL.
Indeed! Why so?

SIR WILLIAM MUEEAY.
While our hawks snatch their prey, They’ve left me here, that when the pay goes round, As it must do, they can keep all themselves.

CROMWELL *(aside).*
Poor sharper!

SIR WILLIAM MUEEAY. Will they give my honest share? What I, old hawk, shall I wait idly here? No! I’ll deserve his Majesty’s reward.

CROMWELL. You will not be forgotten, trust to me.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. I want my hand on the old devil too.

CROMWELL *(aside).*
Then go.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY *(grasping his hand).* Your help has been invaluable. When we shall settle up the whole account, You'll have your share. I'll make you corporal.
— [Goes out.

CROMWELL *(alone, shrugging his shoulders).* The court dwarf, who rates me at his size! Go, cackling goose, to hiss the eagle's flight.
[MANASSES *enters cautiously, holding a dark-lantern.*

SCENE V.

CROMWELL, MANASSES.

MANASSES *(without seeing* CROMWELL). The Puritans, the Cavaliers, Cromwell, And Charles the Second, — they are Christians all.

CROMWELL *(perceiving* MANASSES, *on whom the gleam of the lantern falls.* The odious Jew! How now! What brings him here? Comes he out of a tomb?

MANASSES *(without seeing* CROMWELL, *who listens to him).*
What matters it Which of the rival factions falls? 'T is but The blood of Christians vile which shall be shed. That's the advantage of conspiracies. If Cromwell die, or Ormond's plot be foiled, 'T is here their fate must soon decided be. I want to see it. All's against Cromwell —

CROMWELL *(aside).*
The traitor!

MANASSES (*continuing, with eyes lifted to heaven).* All, except the heavenly signs. He seems to be advancing to his doom, Yet shines his star with undiminished light. In vain I note the lines upon his palm. I see no danger there, until to-morrow.

CROMWELL *(aside)*. What says he? Do these damned astrologers Cheat even when communing with themselves?

MANASSES *(continuing)*. What matter? One of them must be destroyed. They mean to kill each other.
[Watching the star-covered sky. What a night!

CROMWELL *(aside)*. First, the glib courtier, then this impious Jew. The loathsome crow replaces the magpie. Without disgust or pity or remorse, He comes to get his share of death's decay.

MANASSES *(pointing his glass to the sky).*
While waiting here for our conspirators, Let me observe the curves which are described By satellites of He in Thou's orbit; With holy vane I'll strike on heaven's door.
[Places his eye to the glass, then interrupts himself. At eight per cent! In such a time as this I might have charged him double rates.

CROMWELL *(aside)*. Banker to Cavaliers; to Cromwell, spy.

MANASSES *(looking through the glass)*. Into a ram's horn has the line been turned (I've got the caroluses from Cologne, And caroluses bring, e'en when they 're chipped), From this I think that the eclipse is sure. (Eleven, when they are dollars; ducats, nine!) Yes, Cromwell, Ormond, I've deceived them all. *[.At this moment he hears the periodical cry of the distant sentinel.*

SENTINEL.
All's well! Do you keep watch?

CROMWELL (*impatiently, aside).*
Why break they in Upon us now? Their cry but frightens owls. I must reply.
[Aloud.] All's well! Do you keep watch?
[At the sound of this voice the Jew turns suddenly.

MANASSES *(aside).* Jacob! I did not see this sentinel. What a thick veil has age hung o'er my eye!

SENTINEL *(in the distance).* All's well! Do you keep watch?

MANASSES *(approaching* CROMWELL *respectfully).*
Good-evening, friend.

CROMWELL *(aside).* Unlucky cry to change his train of thought. How he revealed himself!
[Aloud.] Good-evening, Jew!

MANASSES *(with another bow).* You 're stationed by Lord Ormond there?

CROMWELL.
Why should You, prophet's son, be answered? Yes.
To see your triumph. Cromwell falls at last, And I congratulate you.

CROMWELL. Thanks!

MANASSES *(bowing).*
The power Of former kings will be revived for us. What happiness for you!

CROMWELL. Indeed!

MANASSES.
My best felicitations. You expect To be advanced, of course!

CROMWELL.
I do. I am To be a corporal.

MANASSES. A noble grade! To be a corporal is a great thing. I think a corporal commands four men. Magnificent! And gold lace, too, he wears.

CROMWELL.
Superb!

Accept

MANASSES.
I’m glad

MANASSES. How quickly the Protector’s fall Builds up your fortune, my lord soldier — eh?

CROMWELL *(aside).*
The traitor!

MANASSES. Yes, accursed Cromwell, now You’ll expiate your crimes against the Jews. Fanatic, hypocrite, and miser!
[Addressing CROMWELL.] Zounds! This Lord Protector reckons up a bill. Don’t talk to me of crownfed citizens! Their minds are narrow as their fortunes were. No brilliant festivals, no games, no balls, No money loans! What business can one do? If, by their will, you seize a Swedish brig, They search your pocket, feel of both your hands; And to repay for all the dangers run, Give you, perhaps, three quarters of the prize.

CROMWELL.
That is a swindle!

MANASSES. Yes; the shabby kings! They know the odds ‘twixt sequins and besants.

CROMWELL.
A frightful state!

MANASSES. That Cromwell, — mark you this, Did he not insolently fine me once, Because, I know not now at just what rate, I doubled, by good luck, the sums I lent?

CROMWELL.
It was a shame!

MANASSES. He has killed industry. Was it his business, tell me, any way? What right had he, to please his fellow cranks, To stop all theatres and concerts, balls And races, where the young men of the day Drunk with excitement, squandered their estates? Was't legal, thus to rob them of their rights? Sly, hateful, economical, and stern, He is a monster! England lives through you. Your noble arm saves it from tyranny More dire than hell can e'er again conceive. I say not all these things to flatter you.

CROMWELL.
I am convinced of that.

MANASSES *(aside, shrugging his shoulders and looking down on* CROMWELL).
Machines of war! Incense is ne'er too thick to please their taste.

CROMWELL *(aside)*. How many masks that odious visage wears! Suppose we tear them off now, one by one. *[Aloud]* Tell me my fortune, Jew!

MANASSES *(bowing)*.
Your destiny? 'T would be an honour, my lord corporal. *[Aside]* The fool!
[Aloud] Your way leads unto happiness. *[Aside]* A telescope to see a candle — bah! *[Aloud]* So be it, gentle lord, I'll read your fate. In polished Latin this method is called, Experience *in anima vili*. *[.Aside*.] I laugh in Latin in this booby's face. *[Aloud]* Extend to me your hand; I will reveal — This infamous Cromwell —
[Examining CROMWELL'S *hand by the light of the lantern.*
I'm a dead man! *[Falls prostrate at* CROMWELL'S *feet.*

CROMWELL *(smiling)*. What is it, speak? What devil's bitten you?

MANASSES *(striking his forehead on the ground)*. A dead man!

CROMWELL. Then you know me, wretched Jew?

MANASSES *(with inaudible voice)*. I know that hand, whose palm can hold the world; I know them, all those lines where Heaven wrote The limitless extent of Cromwell's power. Your star lied not.

CROMWELL. I hear you speak, old man. You are a wretched knave. I could, no doubt, In my turn, with this bit of polished steel Experiment *in anima vili.*

But I've no strength to waste in crushing worms. Arise!

[MANASSES *rises.* CROMWELL *indicates a stone bench near the door.*

Sit there.

[The Jew sits, overcome, in the darkest corner of the bench.

Above all things, keep still. A single word, and your false soul shall fly To heaven to read its fatal alphabet.

[The Jew lets his head fall on his breast. CROMWELL *comes to the front of the stage and continues, watching him from the corner of his eye.* This Jew served Ormond. Fate betrays them all, And adds this night-bird to the other hawks. *[Walking up and down, breaking into speech from time to time.*

My crimes, according to their evidence, Are, that I don't bow well and count too close. Of English charter or of Charles the First They do not say one word.

[Putting his hand on the pocket of his coat. What have I here? *[Drawing from his pocket, the purse which* SIR WILLIAM

MURRAY *gave him.* The price of blood! Ah, yes, I had forgot; They paid me to assassinate myself. I wonder how much gratitude I owe! I'll count, to judge of their munificence. The head of Cromwell, how much is it worth? 'T would not be civil to buy it too cheap. *[Takes the lantern from the Jew's hands and turns its light upon the purse; at the first look he starts back with horror.*

My God! My son's own name is on this purse. He furnished money for this parricide.

[Examining it with attention. I'm not mistaken: 't is indeed his crest. What proof is lacking to his treachery? Ah! wretched father and more wretched son! You were not then content to seek their den, To take your part in all their plots and feasts, Inspire their deeds and drink unto my death; You had to pay the funeral trappings too! He gave his gold to them to buy my life, And sharing everything without remorse Pays the great banquet,"which shall be my death.

[Throwing the purse violently upon the ground. His prodigalities included parricide. [RICHARD CROMWELL *enters, and appears to be seeking his way.*
Some one is coming.

SCENE VI.

The saint. RICHARD CROMWELL.

RICHARD CROMWELL (*advancing slowly to the front).* ‘T is not very light.

CROMWELL (*without being seen).* Impossible! Is it my son?

RICHARD CROMWELL.
I’m free At last!

CROMWELL *(aside).* Delivered by your friends, no doubt, To whom you sold me. Yes, go add your hand In brother’s love to theirs which drip with blood.

RICHARD CROMWELL *(without seeing his father).* Result of paying well the sentinel.

CROMWELL *(aside).*
He owns it!

RICHARD CROMWELL. I am free!

CROMWELL *(aside).*
At what a price!

RICHARD CROMWELL. It cost a sum; but no ingrate am I.

CROMWELL *(aside)*. No, not ungrateful to assassins hired To rob you of your father.

RICHARD CROMWELL.
One more spree!

CROMWELL *(aside)*. With what a careless tone this Joas speaks Of murdering me.

RICHARD CROMWELL. My father is asleep.

CROMWELL *(aside)*.
Is he?

RICHARD CROMWELL. He suspects nothing.

CROMWELL *(aside)*.
He keeps watch, And he hears you.

RICHARD CROMWELL *(laughing)*.
I’ll have to pay for this!

CROMWELL *(aside)*. My God! that laugh to follow such a crime. The wretch has come to ask them, “ Is it done?” What if I gave him, now, his punishment?

RICHARD CROMWELL. Come, come, have courage! How the saints will fret When they find that the bird has flown his cage.

CROMWELL *(aside)*. If I should stab him?
[Draws his dagger, takes a step towards RICHARD CROMWELL, *and pauses behind him.*
No, it is my son.

RICHARD CROMWELL. The Cavaliers will laugh at my exploit.

CROMWELL *(aside)*. He has the heart to jest o’er my own blood.

[Taking a step.
I’ll strike.

RICHARD CROMWELL. This end is a good thing for me.

CROMWELL *(aside).*
Is it?

RICHARD CROMWELL. He never would have pardoned me; But now paternal anger I escape.

CROMWELL *(aside).* No, you’ll escape it not, you fiend! I’ll strike. No pity; I am firm.
[Starts towards RICHARD CROMWELL, *then pauses.* My first-born child! It was a day of joy when God gave him. This steel will find my own blood in his veins. What care and trouble did his childhood give, And what great happiness! When I appeared, His little eyes would dance and shine; his arms Would reach their tender strength to touch mine own; His little body fluttered as with wings. Oh, when he smiled, the stars shone in my sky!

RICHARD CROMWELL. He is a tyrant! All the worse for him.

CROMWELL *(aside).* That last word is enough. No more a son Is one who has become a parricide.
[Gets close to his son, lifts his dagger.
Die, traitor!
[A noise of footsteps outside the gate. CROMWELL *pauses, and turns around.*
Hold! what noise in this dark path? Lord Ormond, coming with his Cavaliers. To its conclusion let us see his crime; We can conclude the drama afterwards. *[.Replaces his dagger in its sheath; the Cavaliers enter, with drawn swords, hearing* ROCHESTER *asleep and gagged, with a handkerchief covering his face.*

SCENE VII

The same. LORD ORMOND, LORD CLIFFORD, LORD DROG- HEDA, LORD ROSEBERRY, SIR PETERS DOWNIE, SIR WILLIAM MURRAY, SEDLEY, DOCTOR JENKINS, LORD ROCHESTER. *AS the Cavaliers enter,* CROMWELL *resumes his place and* RICHARD CROMWELL *turns with astonishment.*

RICHARD CROMWELL *(without being seen by the Cavaliers).*
These men have a suspicious air. I'll watch.
[.Retires to the left of the stage, among the trees.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY *(to* CROMWELL, *with a triumphant air).*
This mighty lord had no brocaded bed. A flickering candle on his table burned; We could not see. Thanks to the lethargic, He did n't move as we conveyed him hence. We gagged him without trouble; here he is.

CROMWELL.
'T is he?

RICHARD CROMWELL *(aside).* What does this mean?

LORD CLIFFORD.
We've seized him. Yes, 'T is victory t

RICHARD CROMWELL *(aside).* What says he?

SIR PETERS DOWNIE.
Now the worst Is done. The night is dark; let us make haste. Move on!
[To DROGHEDA, EOSEBERRY, SEDLEY, *and* CLIFFORD *who are the bearers of the sleeping prisoner and who have stopped.*
What is the matter?

LORD ROSEBERRY *(to* DOWNIE).
Easy said By those who carry naught.

SEDLEY *(to* DOWNIE).

Since no relays Have been provided, we must stop and rest.

RICHARD CROMWELL *(aside).* I know these voices.

LORD ORMOND *(his eyes fixed on the burden which the Cavaliers have placed upon the ground).*
Here lies Cromwell then, Most justly punished for his monstrous crimes. We hold him, this Colossus of earth's fame, In whom the world more than in God believed. 'Tis he, and he lies helpless at our feet. There's nothing strong, nor wise, nor bold enough To wrest the culprit now from his great judge. All fled before him; where's his shelter now? Unhappy soldier, to what end have you Kept fifteen years this nation under yoke? What use are all your battles, all your wounds? The substitution of your name for Stuart's. Your reign of hate and terror and despair; The royal calvary which you have made? These crimes, sealed with the mark of Charles's crown, Are a most awful load to carry now! What an account! How will you render it? All powerful, I hated you; but crushed, I pity. Had I killed you in fair fight — Oh, cruel fate! to seize, not overcome. A triumph without battle! 'T is our fate. The sword gave place to daggers. What a head Has destiny thrown down upon the scales To make them drop upon the Stuarts' side.

RICHARD CROMWELL *(aside).* What do I hear? In silence, I'll keep watch.

CROMWELL *(aside).* I like that Ormond; he speaks generously. A soldier's heart can be depended on.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY *(to* LORD ORMOND, *indicating the prisoner).*
Your lordship does great honour to the knave.

CROMWELL *(aside).*
Vile courtier!

SIR PETERS DOWNIE *(to those who are to hear the prisoner).* Let us get away.

LORD DROGHEDA.

Pray, wait.
He is as heavy as if he were dead.

SEDLEY.
It is no easy task to bear this load Unto its destination. What to do? We must deliberate.

LORD CLIFFORD. Let’s kill our man And finish, quick.

LORD DROGHEDA. So say I. Kill our man.

SEDLEY.
It is the shortest way.

RICHARD CROMWELL *(aside).*
What fiends they are!
Who is the prisoner?

CROMWELL *(aside).*
The spear is lodged;
Now let us give it rope.

MANASSES *(who has observed, all this in profound silence, lifting his head; aside).*
This spectacle. Relieves my grief. Now they will kill themselves. That will be consolation.

LORD CLIFFORD *(to Cavaliers, brandishing his sword over* ROCHESTER).
Is’t agreed?

DOCTOR JENKINS *(stopping* CLIFFORD). What? Without witnesses? Without a judge? No jury, law, procedure? Gentlemen, This is assassination. The term’s hard, But what especial warrant has made you A court of justice or council of war? To prove you do not violate the law, Where’s your commission, signed with royal seal? Which is attorney, which is president? I do not see two lawyers pleading here, One for the Crown, one for the criminal; What legal apparatus have you? Speak! Who knows Latin enough to be a judge, Or to confront, examine, witnesses; Give sentence, in accordance with the texts, To gallows or to hurdle? What's the day Of session? How will you your judgment date? Where is the instigator of the crime, and where Are the accomplices? On what offences Do you base your punishment? My lords, 't is not Cromwell I here defend; it is the law. I hold him, though unjudged, a criminal. He faltered in allegiance to his king, — A crime which has its punishment in law. " Qui laedit in rege majestatem Dei."

'T is England's law which has been disobeyed. That this great criminal should lose his head, In order to enforce the sacred rights, Is very just; but we must have the forms. You can't condemn him in this lawless way. You've usurped qualities not in accord; You can't be witnesses, accuser, judge, And executioner. It is absurd! I must protest 'gainst the attempt, my lords.

CROMWELL *(aside).* That must be Jenkins; honest magistrate!

LORD CLIFFORD *(to the Cavaliers, shrugging his shoulders).* What does he think his croaking words will do?

LORD DROGHEDA *(to* JENKINS, *with an aggrieved manner).* You think us ignoramuses, good sir?

SIR PETERS DOWNIE. Think you to rule the court from the king's bench?

SEDLEY *(laughing).* Since when said the owl to his friend the goshawk —
[Counterfeiting the voice and gestures of DOCTOR JENKINS.
"We'll sit And pronounce sentence on the animal."

LORD ROSEBERRY *(laughing).* He talks to us in Latin.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY. Stupid talk!

LORD CLIFFORD. My dagger is the judge, without appeal. I strike

CROMWELL *(aside).* Well, let him strike!

ALL THE CAVALIERS.
We’ll make an end! [LORD CLIFFORD *advances with lifted sword towards the prisoner, whose face is still concealed.*

DOCTOR JENKINS *(gravely).*
I do protest.

RICHARD CROMWELL *(aside).* This scene is horrible! Is it some fearful dream?

LORD CLIFFORD *(pushing* DOCTOR JENKINS *aside).*
Protest away!

LORD ORMOND *(stopping* CLIFFORD). One moment, Clifford; what he says is right, And I approve. The King commanded us To bring the prisoner to him, alive. It is his will; submit.

LORD CLIFFORD *(to* LORD ORMOND). After to-night ‘T will cost a hundred battles to bear him Away.

SIR PETERS DOWNIE. Besides, when we have got him there, Intends his Majesty to ticket him And keep him in a cage?

LORD DROGHEDA.
Well! we can send The animal well stuffed.

LORD CLIFFORD (*to* LORD ORMOND).
When once the sword Has left the scabbard, it must strike, my lord. This hour belongs to us; make use of it. He’s in our hands. I say, let Cromwell die.

ALL THE CAVALIERS (*except* LORD ORMOND *and* JENKINS). Yes!
[With drawn swords they rush upon the prisoner, who does not stir.

DOCTOR JENKINS *(solemnly).* I protest.

RICHARD CROMWELL *(aside, beside himself with anxiety).*
They'll kill my father! Heaven! *[Throwing himself into their midst.*
Assassins, stop!

ALL THE CAVALIERS. It's Richard Cromwell. 'Sdeath!

CROMWELL *(aside).*
What is he doing?

RICHARD CROMWELL *(to the Cavaliers).* Stop, for pity's sake! If of our friendship there is left one trace, Oh, hear me, Downie, Sedley, Roseberry!

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY *(impatiently).*
The devil!

RICHARD CROMWELL.
Spare my father!

SEDLEY.
Did he spare His king?

RICHARD CROMWELL. What's that you say? It was a crime. But am I guilty, must I die for it? In killing him, you kill me too, my friends.

CROMWELL *(aside).* Is that my Richard, hardened parricide? I do not understand.

LORD ROSEBERRY *(to* RICHARD CROMWELL). You are our comrade, Good Richard, but our duty we must do.

RICHARD CROMWELL You shall not kill him!

CROMWELL *(aside).*
He defends my life. What happiness! How I misjudged my son!

RICHARD CROMWELL. Was it in preparation for this end You made me welcome at your table, friends? For this we shared our games and feasts and revels That my purse was ever open to your needs? Oh, my once kind associates, compare What I have done, with what you do for me.

LORD ROSEBERRY *(low to Cavaliers).* Is he so wrong?

DOCTOR JENKINS (*to* RICHARD CROMWELL).
Go on, young man; that's good! But harp upon the radical defect, They have no right. Oh, plead your cause! Plead! Plead!

RICHARD CROMWELL (*to* DOCTOR JENKINS).
Sir —

DOCTOR JENKINS. Yes, with you, I am opposed.

RICHARD CROMWELL *(to Cavaliers, clasping his hands).*
My friends!

CROMWELL *(aside).* I see all things in a much fairer light. My son — I have been most unjust to him. I'm sure he knew naught of a plot so dark Except the part of drinking with his friends.

LORD ORMOND *(to* RICHARD CROMWELL). Your father played a heavy game with us. Each staked his head. He lost.

RICHARD CROMWELL.
Assassinate A father while his son looks on! Good God!
[Cries with all his strength.
Help! murder! help!
[To Cavaliers.] I'm not his only hope!
[Cries again.
Help! murder! soldiers, here!

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY *(interrupting him).*
The men are ours.

RICHARD CROMWELL. Then I, alone, — I will defy you all!
[Putting his hand to his side to seize his sword. Ah, what! No sword assists my vengeful arm. My father, why deprive me of my sword?

CROMWELL *(aside).*
Poor Richard!

LORD ORMOND *(to* RICHARD CROMWELL). I am sorry, sir. But go, Leave us, and let the King's men work their will.

RICHARD CROMWELL. Oh, Heaven! work their will? I want no favour. Kill me upon his body, which I clasp. *[Throws himself on the sleeping* LORD ROCHESTER *and presses his arms around him closely.*

CROMWELL *(aside).* My son! He goes too far. 'T would be too hard To die on a false Cromwell's breast.

LORD ROSEBERRY *(trying to calm* RICHARD).
Come, Richard!

RICHARD CROMWELL (*still clasping* LORD ROCHESTER). No! Either strike me with your steel, or let Me save him.
[The Cavaliers try to drag RICHARD *from off* LORD ROCHESTER'S *body; he struggles with them, and clings to* LORD ROCHESTER *with greater violence. During this struggle* CROMWELL *watches all the movements of the Cavaliers, and is ready at any moment to give assistance to his son.* MANASSES *lifts his head and watches all intently, without speaking a word.*

LORD ROCHESTER (*waking with a violent start, and struggling in his turn).* Oh, you 're strangling me! The deuce!
[All pause with consternation.

LORD ORMOND. What voice was that, just God?
[LORD ROCHESTER *tears off the handkerchief which has covered his face, and* CROMWELL *turns the light of the lantern upon him.*

RICHARD CROMWELL (*starting hack).*
It is the spy.

ALL THE CAVALIERS.
It’s Rochester!

LORD ROCHESTER (*to* RLCHARD CROMWELL). You are the headsman, sir? You choked me hard enough to make me yield Two ghosts instead of one. Now, could n’t you Be a bit gentler, act in harmony With me, and hang me with less energy?

LORD ORMOND *(amazed).*
Lord Rochester!

LORD ROCHESTER *(half awake, touching the handkerchief around his neck).* The cord’s already on, But I don’t see that any gibbet’s here.
Are they to hang me on some rusty nail, As if I were an owl?

LORD ORMOND.
Where is Cromwell?

CROMWELL *(with a voice of thunder, disclosing himself).* He is here! Come forth, out of your tents, Jacob And Israel.
[At CROMWELL’S *words the astonished Cavaliers turn around and see the back of the stage entirely filled by a multitude of soldiers, bearing torches; they have come out from all parts of the garden, and all the doors of the palace; among them* THURLOE *and the* EARL OF CARLISLE *are visible. All the windows of White-Hall are suddenly illuminated, and reveal armed soldiers everywhere.* CROMWELL’S *shadow is thrown out against this brilliant background.*

SCENE VIII.

The same. EARL OF CARLISLE, THURLOE, *Musketeers, Halberdiers, Noblemen, Cromwell’s Body-Guard.*

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY *(terrified).* How many soldiers! God! I’m a dead man.

THE CAVALIERS. Ah, this is treachery!

LORD ORMOND *(fixing his eyes first on* LORD ROCHESTER, *then on* CROMWELL). Cromwell and Rochester!

LORD ROCHESTER (*rubbing his eyes).*
Well, am I hung? Perhaps I am in hell; these fearful lights, These spectres, all these demons with their fire, — Of course it’s hell: Wilmot had never counted Upon heaven. — [*Looking at the Protector.]*
Yes, there is Satan. On my soul, He looks exactly like the Lord Protector!

CROMWELL (*indicating the Cavaliers, to* THURLOE *and the*

EARL OF CARLISLE). Arrest these gentlemen.
[A crowd of Puritan soldiers rush upon the Cavaliers, seize them, and take away their swords, before they have time to resist.

LORD ORMOND (*breaking his sword on his knee).*
None takes my sword!

RICHARD CROMWELL *(aside).* What is all this? For this new escapade I’ll undergo another punishment. I broke from prison. I am lost!

LORD ROCHESTER *(looking around with astonishment).*
How now?
Here’s Drogheda and Downie, Roseberry — I’ll burn in most distinguished company. The Jew who ransomed Clifford, — he is here. They’ll roast him in his strong-box, sure. It seems We all are dead and damned. Good-night, my friends. *[To Cavaliers*.] Let us defy old Satan! To the devil With hell! Let’s jeer Beelzebub unto His face!

LORD ORMOND. In what a fatal trap we fall!

LORD ROCHESTER (*to Cavaliers).* Our noble scheme has had a sorry end. Cocytos, Cromwell puts into our wine. *[Until now* CROMWELL *has remained silent in his triumph, arms folded across his chest, eyes turned haughtily upon the crushed and terror-stricken Cavaliers.*

CROMWELL *(aside, looking at* LORD ORMOND).
I did not know Ormond. In spite of me, His character inspires me with respect.

LORD ORMOND *(eyes fixed upon* CROMWELL). How he deceived us! What audacity! What skill!

CROMWELL *(aside).* Alone, he looks me in the face. A noble adversary, he! He was Commissioned, and he did obey. Let's speak Unto this soldier.
[.Approaching LORD ORMOND *and looking at him proudly; aloud.*
Speak! Your name. LORD ORMOND.
'T is Bloum. *[Aside]* Not even dying will I let him know He conquered Ormond.

CROMWELL *(aside).*
For pride's sake, he lies.
[Aloud] Who are you?

LORD ORMOND.
One rebellious against you, Because of England and its lawful king.

CROMWELL. What do you think of me?

LORD ORMOND.
Yes, speak.
Of you, Cromwell?

CROMWELL.

LORD ORMOND. No tongue describes you but the sword.

CROMWELL. Despotic argument. It has one fault; To daggers oft the scaffold makes reply.

LORD ORMOND.
What matters that?

CROMWELL (*folding his arms).*
You thirsted for my blood?

LORD ORMOND.
My steel would have chastised the regicide.

CROMWELL.
Chastised? What right?

LORD ORMOND.
Retaliation’s right.

CROMWELL.
You dared to seek the lion in his den!

LORD ORMOND.
You mean the tiger?

CROMWELL.
In the master’s home?

LORD ORMOND. Cromwell, call him the regicide.

CROMWELL.
Always!
That is their speech, their reason, their reply, To every purpose and to every thought. Have I deserved the name of regicide? The people rose against illegal tax: I was severe and honest, Charles was rash. His fall was necessary, and his death Was a sad accident. I venerate The virtues which he had. The king I killed While praying for the man.

LORD ORMOND.
Oh, hypocrite!
You can’t beguile me.

CROMWELL. We must disagree Upon this point.

LORD ORMOND. A place by Ravaillac Is saved for you.

CROMWELL. Hate heats your heart too much, Old man! Your white hair should make you more wise. Cromwell or Ravaillac! Can you compare The hand which guides the world to that base one, The axe a people swings unto the knife Of an assassin? Scripture proves this truth. Blood branded Cain and honoured Samuel.

LORD ORMOND. Well, Ravaillac, whose memory is scorned, Does he not share your glory lawfully? Like you, he killed a just and noble king. What’s lacking to his deed?

CROMWELL.
He struck too low. Kings should be struck nowhere but at the head.

LORD ORMOND. Oh, Charles, my master! Clear I see him now.
[Repelling CROMWELL. Away from me, — you who have raised your hand Against the sacredness of royalty!

CROMWELL. Blood can defile and blood can purify. *[.Aside.*] Wherefore? He judges; I defend myself. I let him stand before me and parade His foolish honour and his virtues dull. His petty mind cannot conceive how fate Drives on, remorselessly, a giant soul! He is incurable. Leave him alone. *[Turns his back on* LORD ORMOND *and approaches* DOCTOR JENKINS.
Ah, Doctor Jenkins!
[.Indicating LORD ORMOND *and* SIR WILLIAM MURRAY.
‘Mongst these madmen — you? *[Indicating* SEDLEY, LORD CLIFFORD, *and* LORD ROCHESTER. And with these knaves? You who are wise and just!

DOCTOR JENKINS *(gravely).* You have a right to say what pleases you; You've conquered.

CROMWELL. To my favour, you preferred To share with dreamers a catastrophe Which must be rudely punished.

DOCTOR JENKINS.
If you please, Make just distinction in the words you use. You can avenge yourself, not punish us. It is as well, I think, to be exact. " Tyrannus non judex," — a tyrant is Not judge. If, thanks to traitors, to deserters, You have been the most skilful in the fight And force declares for you, with us stands right. You can condemn us, true, by violence. What's that? We die an arbitrary death, *De facto;* pray consult your men of law, Your Whitelocke, Pierpoint, Maynard. I'll agree To stand by their decision, though Whitelocke Has a false system, and your other two Oft plead for fox against the poulterer.

CROMWELL.
Well, then! accept the gallows for your share.

DOCTOR JENKINS. I will; but we have the advantage still. An incensed tyrant's gibbet is our fate. The pillory of posterity is yours.
[CROMWELL *shrugs his shoulders.*

LORD ROCHESTER *(still half awake).* Where are my wits gone? If I'm not asleep, I must be dead. This Cromwell puzzles me. Already here? I left him, yesterday, Up there. — [*Addressing Soldiers who surround him.*
Come, can't one change one's dreams, one's hell? Deliver me from Noll, you've a kind look.

CROMWELL *(after a moment of reflection, folds his arms and speaks smilingly to the Cavaliers).* Well, sirs! You have prepared a wondrous plot. You thought to catch Cromwell in a child's trap, To murder him, — for your triumphant knives Would not have treated me, before the gate, As David treated Saul within the cave. I think no one of you had been content To gently cut the border of my cloak. I understand. 'T is simple. I approve; But, in approving, I must frankly say You might have stumbled on a better plan. For this attempt is weak in all its points. I’m sorry that I knew it not in time To offer you my counsel, my good friends; But do not blame me. You have sweated hard To think this out. And I, like Joshua, Whom twenty kings united could not harm, Have cut the sinews of your steeds of war. We all have acted as became our place.

You made attack, and I planned my defence. As for your project, in itself, I own I like the ardour of such loyal hearts. Audacity and courage suit my taste. Although success has not been quite complete, I shall esteem your efforts none the less. You worked with boldness, firm and disciplined; You did not falter, hesitate, nor blench; You are, — accept these compliments sincere, — Good foemen, not unworthy of my steel. I see no reason to disparage you. I value you too high to let you go. These feelings shall be publicly expressed, And with proud honours I will have you hung Don’t thank me; pardon me instead, if I *[.Indicating* SIR WILLIAM MURRAY, *who is overcome with terror.*

Must place this weeping braggart by your side. To me he is not worth the rope he costs. He ought to thank you; for without your aid He’d not have had a chance to rouse my ire.

[.Indicating MANASSES, *who stands motionless.* Forgive me, also, if I add this Jew, — A sin, with Christians mix a deicide, To honest robbers join Barabbas; but I’ll favour you: he shall be hung low down. I beg each one of you to pardon me For such scant pay; I give what I have got: Compared unto your merit, ‘t is not much. Go now; prepare your own account with God. We all are sinners, friends. In a few hours, When dawn shall cast its light upon these walls, You will be hung. Now go — and pray for me. *[The Guards, with the* EARL OF CARLISLE *at their head, lead off the prisoners, who, with the exceptions of* MURRAY *and the Jew, preserve a proud and scornful attitude.* CROMWELL *stands reflecting a few moments and then turns suddenly to* THURLOE.

Let them prepare Westminster. I am king!

[He re-enters White-Hall through the gate, and THURLOE *with a profound obeisance exits through the park.*

SCENE IX.

THE FOUR FOOLS. *AS* CROMWELL *and* THURLOE *go out,* GRAMADOCH *advances his head from the Fools' hiding- place, then comes out cautiously, looking around to see if any one is present; after an instant he makes a sign to the others, who follow, and the four Fools, standing close together, look from one to the other and burst into violent fits of laughter.*

GRAMADOCH (*to the others).*
What do you say to that?

GIRAFF *(laughing).*
Whew! how ridiculous!

ELESPURU.
The nether world is visible in this.

TRICK.
'T is something mad, idiotic, unheard of!

GIRAFF.
It's a gay spectacle. Cromwell unmasked, Fire without smoke, and Satan true to life.

GRAMADOCH. Of all the actors in this fateful scene, Which was the maddest? Come, to whom the prize?

TRICK.
To Murray, who on Cromwell spent his scorn, Then turns from Noll to Charles in pirouette, And swears a weather-vane is a true flag.

GIRAFF.
No, 't is to Richard, son of Belial, Who dies for Rochester from filial love.

TRICK.
If Cromwell had killed Richard in his rage, 'T would have been fine.

GIRAFF.

That would have ended all.

TRICK.
A shame!

GRAMADOCH. So then to Richard you award The noble fool’s-cap, trophy of our art?

ELESPURU. The Doctor’s learned frankness I prefer.

TRICK.
Lord Ormond preached to Cromwell! That was good. Was’t not amusing? I would have preferred To teach justice unto a man of law, To comb a polar bear, a panther track, Or stir the crater of Vesuvius.

—

GIRAFF.
This Jew has no conception of romance, —
This rabbi-spy, miser-astrologer, Who, while his thoughts gloat o’er the glint of gold, Comes with his lantern to decipher stars.

ELESPURU.
Amphibious animal, to both spheres strange. This Jew appeared upon the scene as comes A bat to pierce the darkness of the tomb.

GIRAFF.
Most apt is your comparison, because Upon a cross, before some tall church door, Old Noll will nail him for a scare-crow. Ha!

TRICK.
Thus Cromwell settles with the Cavaliers. Upon his gallows many ropes has he.

GRAMADOCH. Yet, though he bears a world upon his back, Cromwell’s more mad than all the rest, because He will be king; and death waits at the door. *[These words arrest the attention of the Fools; they drove close to* GRAMADOCH.

GIRAFF *(to* GRAMADOCH).
What’s that?

GRAMADOCH. You’ll see.

TRICK *(to* GRAMADOCH).
But, tell us —

GRAMADOCH.
By and by.

ELESPURU *(to* GRAMADOCH). Why should you care?

GRAMADOCH *(shaking his head).*
A mystery’s an egg. Don’t break it if you wish the chicken hatched. Have patience. Cromwell, who in all succeeds, If he takes this step, finds his precipice. Death’s waiting. At the coronation, friends, You’ll see, you’ll laugh. Ah, he is much more mad Than are the dwarfs he crushes as he walks! A thousand times more mad, because he thinks He is so wise.

TRICK.
But, to conclude this talk, The most idiotic, counting Cromwell, are Ourselves. If we were wise, we would not waste Our time on these stupidities, when we Might pass the hours in idleness or sleep, In singing to the echoes all our woes, Or looking at the moon down in a well.
[They go out.

ACT V.

THE WORKMEN.

SCENE. — *The Great Hall at Westminster. On the left, towards the back, the main door of the hall seen obliquely; in the background semi-circular steps, rising to a good height. Rich hangings of tapestry fill the spaces between the gothic pillars all around the hall, allowing but the capitals and cornices to be seen. To the right, a frame covered with boards, which are to form the steps of the throne's platform. Several men are working on them, as the curtain rises; some are nailing the final boards on the steps, while others are covering them with a rich scarlet velvet carpet, fringed with gold; others are arranging a dais of the same material and the same colour above the platform. Under the canopy, the arms of the Protector are embroidered in gold. Divers implements belonging to the carpenters and upholsterers are scattered on the floor; and some ladders placed against the pillars show that the draping has just been terminated. Opposite to the throne is a pulpit. All around the hall are tribunes and balconies richly draped. It is three o'clock in the morning; day is beginning to dawn, and rays of light fall through the half- opened door and through the casements, making the light of the lamps look pale. Numerous brass lamps are hung around the room for the benefit of the night labourers.*

SCENE I.

SOME WORKMEN.

THE FOREMAN *(by gesture encouraging those who are arranging the dais).*
The work progresses. Good! The dais is large Enough.
[To a Workman who stands near, with the Bible in his hands.

Come, brother, edify us. Read.

THE WORKMAN *(reading).* “ Now, the temple had a cedar wainscot, A floor of spruce—”

THE FOREMAN (*to Workmen).*
Eat of the holy feast.

THE READER (*continuing).* “ King Solomon supported it, from space To space, by plateaus with five sides and by Four-cornered tiles; he covered this great work With plates of gold, and in the oracle Beside the altar placed two cherubim With outstretched wings.”
A WORKMAN (*casting a glance over the preparations).*
Our hands accomplished much Last night. That his work should be left complete King Solomon gave seven years unto His temple and fifteen unto his palace. But for our labour, we had one short hour.

THE FOREMAN.
Well said. [*To the Workmen who are arranging the dais.*
That ladder is a better one. *[To* ENOCH.] Can one make too much haste —
[To the Workmen who are putting the curtain on the dais.
That is the height — *[To* ENOCH.] When one for the Protector builds a throne?

SECOND WORKMAN. The ceremony will take place to-day?

THE FOREMAN. Yes; by good luck the platform will be ready. *[To* ENOCH.] We never worked —
[To the Workmen who are nailing the hoards.
Less noise, come, over there! *[To* ENOCH] Naught was e’er done so quick, except that night —

ENOCH.
What night?

THE FOREMAN. Your memory is not very good. Eight years ago: it was a cold, dark night, — The night of January thirtieth, Or twenty-ninth. We also worked that time For my Lord Oliver.

SECOND WORKMAN. Did we not build The scaffold of King Charles that night?

THE FOREMAN.
Yes, Tom!
Of King Barabbas is it thus one speaks? Of English Pharaoh?

ENOCH *(as if recalling memories).* I recollect. The scaffold rested ‘gainst the palace wall. Faith! those were no rough steps on which to hang The rabbis, and burn witches: no indeed! A scaffold, black, well-built, as one should be. ‘T was on a level with the window, too. No need of ladder: most convenient.

THE FOREMAN. And strong enough to bear all Herod’s sons. Robin himself could find no better joists. One could die comfortably without a fear.

TOM *(on the platform).* This throne is not as solid: see, it shakes.

ENOCH.
The scaffold was not built so rapidly.

THE WORKMAN (*who holds the Bible, shaking his head).* No, ‘t was not finished in a single night.

ENOCH.
Why not?

THE WORKMAN *(indicating the throne).* It was a part of this same scene. This is one higher step which Cromwell mounts. What he began then, terminates to-day. The scaffold is completed by this throne.

TOM.
Inspired Nahum sees things in their truth.

NAHUM *(eyes fixed upon the throne).* Yes, stage for stage, I like that one the best. ‘T was Charles’ turn then: now, it will be ours. On the black cloth Cromwell but slew a king; Upon that purple, now, the nation dies.

THE FOREMAN *(to* NAHUM). Dare you speak thus? What if some one should hear?

NAHUM.
To sack-cloth and to ashes am I doomed! What does it matter? Would that Cromwell heard. If he insists on being crowned, he falls. He is accursed; and I predict his death.
Yes, I, poor miserable man, who am Worth more than he, with all his vile renown. For God preferred a desert unto Tyre, The grape of Ephraim to Abiezer’s vine.

THE FOREMAN (*watching* NAHUM, *who stands in ecstasy).* Imprudent man!
[To ENOCH.] The royal arm-chair must Be placed upon the platform. Lend your help. *[Both mount the steps, carrying a large arm-chair covered with scarlet velvet, and heavily gilded; upon its back the arms of the Protector are embroidered and heavily embossed in gold. They place the arm-chair in the centre of the platform.*

TOM (*looking at the royal seat).* A good arm-chair. He’ll sit there like a king. —

ENOCH *(giving the final touches to the arm-chair; to* THE FOREMAN).
That night you speak of, I prepared the block, — A fine oak block it was, — for Charles’s head, All furnished with its cramps and double chain, Quite new: used only for Lord Strafford.

THIRD WORKMAN.
Yes!
Who came to bid us stop our hammering?

THE FOREMAN. ‘T was Tomlinson, colonel on duty then. He said the torture we need not begin, And that our hammers with their violent noise

Deprived the criminal of his last sleep.

NAHUM.
He slept: how strange!

FOURTH WORKMAN.
During those gloomy hours, If any one had seen us working there Building a scaffold by the torches’ light, As if we were grave-diggers at a grave, Or demons, who by witchcraft in one night Can build up an abnormal edifice, That person would have been well terrified.

ENOCH.
I like nocturnal work; it pays us well. I lived, with my ten children, for two weeks On Charles’s scaffold.

FIFTH WORKMAN. I wonder if Cromwell Will pay as much for thrones as scaffolds.

TOM.
But ‘T is Master Barebone, the upholsterer Who gets the most out of this whole affair. He furnishes the curtains, seats, brocades, And of our salary three quarters takes.

NAHUM.
A temple-vender!

FIFTH WORKMAN.
Mede!

FOURTH WORKMAN.
True son of Eve, Who blindly steps upon the axe’s edge.

NAHUM (*rejoining).*
A pillar of the ark, buttress of Babel;
One foot in heaven, the other one in hell.

TOM.

Be silent! He’ll dismiss us if he finds We treat him as he treats his master. Hark, He comes!

[BAREBONE *enters. All the Workmen resume their work in silence;* NAHUM, *alone, remains standing, motionless, his eyes fixed on the old, much-worn open Bible, which he holds.*

SCENE II.

The same. BAREBONE.

BAREBONE (*looking over the work which has been done).* This is encouraging.

[To Workmen.] I’m pleased With you. I think there’s nothing left to do. *[Aside]* I am extremely gratified to find They’ve finished their abominable task so soon; For the conspirators, who now are due, Can hold a council without witnesses; Can overlook the place, and decide how To strike the surest blow at Oliver. How fortunate for this conspiracy That I’m upholsterer to this anti-Christ! Let me dismiss them.

[Aloud to Workmen.] Go, my brothers, go! Be strong against all spirits that seduce. Love well your neighbours, — even wicked men *[To* THE FOREMAN.] Sir Nehemias, [THE FOREMAN *approaches* BAREBONE, *while the Workmen pick up their tools and load themselves with their lamps and ladders.*

Get the buff cuirass Completed instantly, for Cromwell’s use, Whom may the Lord protect.

[Low, and whispering in THE FOREMAN’S *ear.*

From what is left, Make at your leisure, when no one can see, Some scabbards for the daggers of our saints. [THE FOREMAN *bows his head in acquiescence, and goes out accompanied by all the Workmen.*

SCENE III.

BAREBONE *(alone, standing before the throne, as if in contemplation).* Behold this throne, — unrighteous edifice On which we ‘re placed, a sacrifice to Nesroch; Where the successful chief becomes a king; Where this rejuvenated serpent casts His skin. By this he thinks to clinch his power, This Zerubbabel in whom Nimrod breathes, This priest of hell; corrupter of mankind, Who, prostituting our most sacred church, Designs within the depths of his vile soul To make the spouse of saints his concubine. God’s fierce oppressor and betrayer too, Than Stharnabusai thousand-fold more base. Behold this throne decked with anathema! All is correct: six feet by nine, and draped In crimson velvet. Yes, it took ten bales To cover it like this. ‘T was not enough For this irreverent son to wield a power Usurped from God himself; to trample On our Israel as on a broken reed; More than Adonibesec to be feared; To ape the glutton, over Europe stretched, Beneath whose table sixty kings shall feed. No, he must have a throne! And what a throne! A mass of fringe, of damask, satin, plumes, Whereon, as of the Holy Lamp’t was writ, The sculptor and the lapidary joined Their arts. This tinsel he must have as well, — When I say tinsel, I mean solid gold; Pure gold of Hungary. These tassels fine Would furnish four republics with gold coin. I chose them all myself; of lesser weight They would have hurt the velvet’s grand effect, — Rare Spanish velvet. Let him reign and die. The crown shall glorify his final hour. We’ll put Sisera’s nail upon his brow.

[Looking at the throne cushions. I paid five dollars for each yard of this; I’ll sell it now for ten, — an ancient mode. This Ehud’s a good customer, were’t not For avarice. His death is close at hand. Under the mighty dais, with its folds, Where his plebeian crest usurps a crown, The royal steps will yield beneath his tread. The place is suited to the dagger’s act. *[Walks up and down before the throne, and his countenance changes its expression of rage to one of admiration for all the ornaments which decorate it.* He’s capable of beating me down yet; Of letting Maynard mutilate the bill; Clipping the gold brocades, cheapening the moires; Then, if I dare complain, in his good faith, He sends his soldiers to talk law to me.

Serve Pharaohs? Ingratitude always Is the first impulse of their frozen hearts.

However, he should be content with me.

To parody the majesty of kings, There’s nothing wanting to this corrupt throne, This hideous theatre, this altar vile.

All is magnificent. I spared no pains.
To Moloch’s splendour I resigned myself.
Carpets, Bohemian leather, I’ve exposed To all the peril blasphemy invites.
Die, Jebusite! — [*Seized by a sudden thought.*
Where will I get my pay When he is dead? Great Deborah left not Her nail in the unholy brow she struck. When Samson’s drowsy vigour overturned The alien temple, what great risk ran he? When, in her splendour, from the bloody feast, Where Holofernes had succumbed to her, Fled Judith, she contrived to save her life And all her jewels. Who’ll defray my bill? What profit will accrue me from his death? I must leave something for my widow’s needs. I see the matter in a different light. Let me reflect. — Here are our friends, the saints. *[Enter the Puritan conspirators with* LAMBERT *at their head. They all wear long cloaks, and large conical- shaped hats with wide brims, which are pulled down over their dark and sombre countenances. They walk slowly, as if absorbed in profound reflection; several seem to be murmuring prayers. The gleam of dagger- blades, is visible through their half-open cloaks.*

SCENE IV.

BAREBONE, LAMBERT, JOYCE, OVERTON, PLINLIMMON, HARRISON, WILDMAN, LUDLOW, SYNDERCOMB, PIMPLETON, PALMER, GARLAND, PRIDE, JEROBOAM OF EMER, *and other Roundhead conspirators.*

LAMBERT (*to* BAREBONE).
Well?
[For all answer BAREBONE *points to the throne and the regal decorations, on which the conspirators cast glances of hatred.* LAMBERT *turns to his companions and addresses them solemnly.*
You behold! Faithful to his designs, Cromwell completes his sacrilegious work. At Westminster all things have been prepared. The platform’s raised, and all may see the steps Where Parliament will grovel at his feet. Of our last chance let us make noble use. We judge this second king; his crime is clear, — That throne is proof.

OVERTON.
It is his scaffold, friends. He will ascend to make a fatal fall. His last hour is determined by himself. Here, resurrected from the tomb of kings, This pomp shall be his funeral display. Our knife will join his soul to Stuart’s ghost. To come to this! This tyrant, hypocrite, Exhumes the royalty which we proscribed. There, where we threw it, in the tomb he seeks The bloody sceptre that he envied Charles. He dares purloin the crown from out the grave. But back ‘t will fall, and drag down Cromwell too;
And if some other one should dare as much, May every royal robe be a new shroud.

LAMBERT *(aside).*
He goes too far!

OVERTON *(continuing).* Anathema to him!

ALL.
Anathema!

OVERTON *(continuing).* All have conspired with us, — Cromwell himself. His fortune blinded him, This Attila inspired by Machiavel. Without his help, hate had been powerless To undermine his popular control. He lost himself, because he did not know When his firm tread encountered different ground. He, who forsook his native heath, must die. To be a king, he is become a man; And Death, beneath that title, claims her prey. The crowd, once his support, leaves him to us. ‘T was he who signed this ill-omened divorce; In yielding up the people, he renounced His strength. They ‘re willing to be crushed and wronged, But by a Lord Protector, not a king. As a plebeian tyrant he was safe. Had he been worse than Herod, to the world His uncrowned brow was deemed the only one Strong to support the burden of the State; But on that brow let shine a diadem, And all things change: to those who loved him most, ‘T is but a king’s head, and belongs by right Unto the executioner.

ALL (*excepting* LAMBERT *and* BAREBONE. *Since the conspirators arrived,* BAREBONE *seems to be absorbed in deep reflection).*

Well said! JOYCE.
We’ve drawn our swords, and reeking they shall go Back to our scabbards, to the hilt besmeared A second time with blood of traitor kings.

PRIDE.
Yes, ‘t is his tomb he seeks at Westminster. He was the high-priest of his insincere, His hell-bespoken sect; he wants to be Its idol. He has raised the altar; now Upon it he shall immolate himself.

LUDLOW.
Goffe, Skippon, Wolseley, chiefs of his own guard, Will strike with us, if he puts on the crown. Naught can defend him from our thirsty knives. His son-in-law Fleetwood, his brother-in-law, Will let him fall, to freedom true in heart. They’d rather see him dead than crowned a king.

HARRISON.
To Fleetwood honour, and to Desborough! Their souls are not weakened by childish fears Or women’s pity.

GARLAND (*who has remained silent up to this time, his eyes fixed on the first rays of the rising sun).*
I ne’er saw a brighter sun. A worthy victim do we strike to-day. I never felt such joy nor such great pride In following a path God had revealed. No, not when we forced Strafford’s head to lie Between the sainted axe and holy block; Nor when Laud died, that execrable fiend, Infernal meteor of the Star Chamber, That prelate in whose temple Bethel rose, And who turned to the east his altar vile; Who scoffed with hatred at our Sabbath rights, And spent the day of prayer in shameful games. Nor yet, when Stuart, proud of ancient rights, Deeming a royal crest was God’s own mark, Knelt in his royalty, superb and calm, Before the axe of a rebellious world. In each, I thought we slew an anti-Christ In human form, according to the text. But now I see triumphant Zion strike At Cromwell, the base sycophant, and from The steps whereon he mounts with dizzy tread, Cast him to Tophet, whence hell threw him up. Oh, what a day! Goliath, England’s scourge, Shall bite the dust beneath the patriots’ feet

SYNDERCOMB. No finer dagger-thrust was ever made.

PRIDE.
What honour for God’s warriors!

JOYCE (*mounting the throne).*
His blood Shall stream upon the purple, where our net Awaits him.
[At these words, BAREBONE, *who has listened in silence all this time, starts, as if seized with a sudden and terrible anxiety.*

BAREBONE *(aside, striking his brow).* Out upon me! Was I mad? They’ll spoil my throne with their great streams of blood. Twenty per cent I’ll lose upon it, then.
[Aloud, after a moment’s reflection. Your speech is soft as amber to my soul. I’m but the humblest member of the fold, Yet listen. To the law obedient, You will stab Cromwell. Are you sure’t is right? Remember Malchus: when Peter cut off His ear, the sword by Jesus was accursed. Is’t not in God Almighty’s name forbid To strike with steel and cause the blood to flow? If in this matter still your hearts feel doubt, Read chapter ninth of Genesis, and Numbers, Chapter the thirty-fifth.
[A great movement of indignation among the Roundheads.

JOYCE.
Who dares speak thus? LUDLOW.
Pray, what has softened you, Barebone?

GARLAND.
You wish To spare the anti-Christ?

BAREBONE *(stammering).*
No! I do not —
I did not mean —

SYNDERCOMB. Are you false to the cause?

HARRISON.
Are we then brigands, to be so condemned, Assassins?

OVERTON. No! to kill is not perforce To commit murder; for on altar fires The goat becomes a holy sacrifice, And his destroyer is a sacred priest. Agag was killed by Samuel, and we Kill the Protector. We are the ministers Of the Most High, and of the multitude.

JOYCE *(to* BAREBONE). From your dark looks I argued nothing good. You wished to save Cromwell? You hear our words.

BAREBONE.
Barebone save Attila? May God forbid!

SYNDERCOMB *(casting indignant looks upon* BAREBONE). He is a pheresite or gueber.

GARLAND.
Whence This mortuary pity for Cromwell?

BAREBONE. To shed blood is to violate the law.

SYNDERCOMB *(striking him on the shoulder).* Must one not dye the purple of this king?

PRIDE.
Barebone is mad.

WILDMAN. Do you mean to withdraw?

LUDLOW (*shaking his head).* Oft treason borrows scruples for a cloak.

BAREBONE (*terrified).* You'd think that —

SYNDERCOMB (*furious, to* BAREBONE). Silence!

GARLAND (*to* BAREBONE).
Have you drunk, by chance, The waters of the Dead Sea?

HARRISON.

He upholds Balthasar.

OVERTON. Are you Achan who has come To spoil the peace of the afflicted tribes?

PRIDE.
I do not recognize Barebone! May be Some devil has borrowed his countenance To succour Ammon!

GARLAND.
That must be the case I had a most atrocious dream last night.

SYNDERCOMB (*drawing his dagger).* We’d better test his magic with our swords. *[As he beholds the flashing steel,* BAREBONE, *who has tried in vain to get a chance to speak, cries out violently.*

BAREBONE.
But listen!

LAMBERT.
Speak!

BAREBONE (*terrified).*
My friends, I have no wish To save this English Ehud from his fate; But there are holier ways of killing him, — To strangle, poison, beat, and many more.

SYNDERCOMB (*replacing his dagger in its scabbard).* That’s fortunate!

GARLAND *(grasping* BAREBONE’S *hand).* I did not understand.

WILDMAN *(to* BAREBONE). I’m glad you’ve not abandoned your high thoughts.

OVERTON *(to* BAREBONE). Although to shed his blood is a great sin, We have not time to kill him righteously.

BAREBONE *(yielding with bad grace).* So be it: stab him, if it is your will. *[.Aside.*] It’s frightful, all the same!

GARLAND.
Yes, Judith’s sword Is brother to the knives with which we strike; Their place is waiting in heaven’s arsenal.

HARRISON.
Now to almighty God we render thanks For sparing us the aid of Cavaliers; Their help had hurt our task and dimmed our fame. But God, who to us wills the victory, Confounds Ormond and Cromwell in their plans. Gives Ormond unto Cromwell, and gives him Unto the saints.

ALL (*brandishing their daggers).* Almighty God be praised!

LAMBERT.
The hours are passing, gentlemen. Ere long The people unto Westminster will rush. If we should be surprised —

OVERTON (*low to* JOYCE).
He always fears.

LAMBERT.
Let us not lull ourselves in a false hope. What have we settled? Come, let us conclude.

SYNDERCOMB. In spite of armour, we must strike Cromwell; That’s all.

LAMBERT. But where and when and how!

OVERTON.
Listen to me Among the actors or spectators placed, We’ll be attentive to the great display, Holding our daggers hidden in our hand. At first the rhetoricians will be heard, The aldermen, and afterwards the preachers. Then will come Cromwell, who, upon his throne, From Warwick’s hands will take the royal purple, While the Lord Mayor will bestow the axe. Whitelocke will give the seals; and, greater sacrilege, The Bible with gold

clasps will be offered By Thomas Widdrington. Lambert, at last, Will place the crown: that is the time for us. Let us surround him, and as soon as gleams The gold upon his forehead, let us strike.

ALL.
Amen!

LAMBERT. Who will strike first?

SYNDERCOMB.
I will!

PRIDE.
I will!

WILDMAN.
I will!

OVERTON. The honour is my due.

GARLAND.
‘T is mine!
I’ve blessed this blade: it cannot miss his heart.

HARRISON. I will begin: I owe his corrupt heart A blow for each of the Lord’s hundred names. For four weeks now I have been practising The blow upon a Cromwell made of wax.

LUDLOW.
The glory of a deed like this is great; ‘T is natural we all should urge our claim.
As for myself, if I have ever asked Of Heaven a conspicuous sign of grace,
‘T is that my arm might strike this monster down.
I hoped my sons should one day say of me, “ He overthrew the Stuarts and Cromwell;
Twice did Ludlow demolish tyranny.”

But this same Ludlow is a citizen, And holds the people’s good above his own.
Lambert is highest here amongst us all:
He bears the crown, he stands beside the throne;
He, best of all, can strike the fatal blow.

LAMBERT *(aside, with alarm).* What does he say?

LUDLOW *(continuing).*
In such an hour as this Each one should sacrifice to public weal. Do as I do.
To General Lambert I yield the honour of the opening blow.

LAMBERT *(aside).* Who asks him for it? God! he ruins me.

PRIDE.
So be it. I agree to Ludlow’s words.

SYNDERCOMB.
I sacrifice myself.
[To LAMBERT.] TO you the blow!

LAMBERT *(hesitatingly).* Such honour, gentlemen, consoles my grief. *[Aside]* Frightful embarrassment!

WILDMAN *(to* LAMBERT).
Yes, it is you, Who shall strike Cromwell. Happy fate is yours!

GARLAND.
Like an archangel you will crush Satan.

LAMBERT *(troubled).*
I am confused —

OVERTON *(low to* JOYCE). He changes colour, look!

JOYCE *(low to* OVERTON).
The coward!

LAMBERT *(continuing).* I am overjoyed.
[Aside.] My God! What shall I do? I'm in despair. Curse Ludlow! *[Aloud]* Thus honoured by your choice — I can't express —

OVERTON *(low to* JOYCE). He's white with terror.

LAMBERT (*continuing).* I —

GARLAND *(to* LAMBERT).
The god of strength Reveal himself in you!

SYNDERCOMB *(to* LAMBERT). Your part Will be as easy as magnificent.
[He mounts the platform and points to the arm-chair. There sits Cromwell or Nabo, both together Making one devil —
[Taking one step, he indicates the place LAMBERT *should occupy near the throne.*
You are to stand here.

LAMBERT *(aside).*
'T is unavoidable!

SYNDERCOMB (*continuing his demonstration).* With perfect ease You can displace his mantle when you give The crown; then you can stab him to the heart. I envy you!

LAMBERT *(to* SYNDERCOMB). As a true friend, I yield The honoured place to you.

LUDLOW *(eagerly to* LAMBERT).
'T is you we need; Your place alone can guarantee the blow. To yield to Syndercomb, were to risk all.

LAMBERT *(insisting).* I'm the least worthy —

OVERTON. Lambert hesitates!

LAMBERT *(aside).*
Well, then!
[Aloud.] I'll strike!

ALL (*brandishing their daggers).*
Then die, Amalekite!
Die, Oliver Cromwell!

BAREBONE *(with supplicating tone).*
Pray, Zion, hear me! O great deliverers of Israel, In stabbing Cromwell, do not spoil my throne. This velvet's dear, — ten dollars by the yard. *[At* BAREBONE'S *words all the Puritans more back and look at him with indignation.* BAREBONE *continues without noticing it.* Save the rich curtains, as you strike him, please, And make him, if you can, fall on his back, In order that this Moloch's ruddy blood May stain my carpets the least possible.
[Renewed demonstration of anger from the conspirators.

SYNDERCOMB *(looking sidewise at* BAREBONE). Who is this publican?

PRIDE.
What, Barebone, — more

GARLAND.
Of Nebuchadnezzar I've heard men speak.

WILDMAN *(to* BAREBONE). Know you the parable of the rich man?

LUDLOW.
We give our life: you count your farthings — faugh!

OVERTON *(laughing).* That's it. Our friend, upholsterer of Cromwell Invokes the aid of Heaven to save his goods, And puts them under God's protection.

GARLAND.

’Tis A sin to mix such matters, and deserves To draw God’s idle thunder on our heads.

WILDMAN.
Erastianism vile!

BAREBONE *(aside).* ‘T is the right word.
Alas!
[Aloud] Allow me to explain myself. Does one rebel ‘gainst God, betray the State, Because one feels a love for Heaven’s gifts, Which God gives man who lives on earth an hour, As consolation for his loneliness?
[Indicating the throne. Six cubits from the base unto the top! Such decorations should not one regret? All I possess is there!

HARRISON *(casting envious looks upon the splendid trappings to which* BAREBONE *points).* A splendid sight! Upon my soul! I did not look before. Those tassels of pure gold; look, Syndercomb, That arm-chair of brocaded velvet cost A thousand jacobuses.

BAREBONE. At the least!

HARRISON *(to* SYNDERCOMB). What do you say?

SYNDERCOMB *(devouring the arm-chair with his eyes).* What booty!

BAREBONE *(starting).*
What said he?

SYNDERCOMB *(to the other conspirators).* God, who stands by us, gives his saints good things. Therefore all things belong to us. He dies Beneath our blows; we will divide the spoils.

BAREBONE.
Now, God forbid! My gold cloth, curtains, silk!

SYNDERCOMB. Of Lebanon’s eagles the gold calf is prey!

BAREBONE.
Of eagles — why not crows? You would do that?

OVERTON *(separating them)*. Come, let us kill first; afterwards divide!

ALL.
Amen!

BAREBONE. Damnation! They are pirates — these! They want to pillage! Plunderers! Alack! They'll make an infidel of me. What shall I do? Divide my fortune amongst them! Damnation!
[BAREBONE *retires to the centre of the conspirators' circle and gives himself up to gloomy thoughts.*

OVERTON *(to the Roundheads, who are grouped around him).*
While waiting for Israel To struggle with this King of Babylon, And lift with us, 'gainst Oliver the First, The banner on which stand the harp and palm, Six must remain in the Guards' Hall.

ALL.
E'en so!

OVERTON (*continuing)*. Hiding their daggers from the partisans, Twelve of us shall be grouped around the steps Where Richard fastened Norfolk's spurs. Four more Within the waiting-chamber, and four more Within the court of Tutellage; the rest Dispersed among the chapels of the Stuarts, Tudors, and Plantagenets, must guard The stairs and hold the corridors; so that If Cromwell lose or win, we may have power To open or to close the right of way. These last must help, by speech, to fan the fire Which will be smould'ring in the active crowd, And by inciting the great tribes to rage Quicken the eruption of the volcano.

ALL (*except* BAREBONE, *clutching their daggers).* Devour Abiron! Dathan be consumed!

GARLAND (*throwing himself on his knees in the centre of the Puritan circle, lifting his dagger to heaven)*. O God! creator of the atom and

Leviathan, assist our enterprise. To manifest thy power, which men fear not, Let fire burst flaming from this Cromwell’s breast. Direct our blows, Redeemer God, kind God, God merciful! Yield up thy enemies. Since we are thy obedient servants, Lord, Let shine within our hands, upon our brows, Thy flaming swords and lurid tongues of fire.
[He rises; the Puritans, remaining a few seconds with bowed heads, seem to pray with him.

BAREBONE *(aside).*
Abomination dwells within their thoughts.
Divide my fortune!

LAMBERT.
Friends, the hour is past.
Let us go forth.
[Aside] How shall I strike this blow?

LUDLOW.
We’ll speak no more; we’ll strike. Let the accursed Render account to the elect.
[All the conspirators, except BAREBONE, *go out with the same processional solemnity which marked their entrance. As* LAMBERT *is about to cross the threshold,* OVERTON *holds him back by the arm.*

SCENE V.

LAMBERT, OVERTON, BAREBONE. *During this entire scene,* BAREBONE, *who is still absorbed in melancholy reflections, is concealed from the two men by the platform of the throne.*

OVERTON.
My lord!

LAMBERT.
What is it?

OVERTON.
General, I beg a word!

LAMBERT.
Go on!
[Both return to the front of the stage and remain an instant in silence, — LAMBERT *in the attitude of expectation,* OVERTON *as if not knowing just how to begin.*

OVERTON.
Is yours a steady hand?

LAMBERT.
What! do You question it?

OVERTON.
I do!

LAMBERT *(haughtily).*
How dare —

OVERTON.
Hear me!
To cut down Cromwell in his pride, they've placed The sword of Israel within your hand. You have been chosen to destroy these schemes, And cut the knot of this great tragedy. Well, you received with a debasing fear The honour I'd have bought with my heart's blood. You would have shirked your task with joy. I know Your heart, ambitious coward, you! [LAMBERT *makes a gesture of anger;* OVERTON *restrains him.*
Oh, let Me speak! I'll not consider now your plans, Covered by a most penetrable mask. I need not tell you that my eye reads you, That I discern your plot, yet to be born, Which travails now in our conspiracy.
You think our arms will help to make your tide.
You think, for pride is a false reckoner, A giant is replaced by a dwarf.
You want the heritage that Cromwell leaves, And all its burdens do not stagger you.

The load is rather heavy for your back.
I see the hand which takes, but not the arms Which can sustain. There’s nothing simpler than Your thoughts, which plan things as your heart desires.
You think the people will support your claim, —
As if’t were ever seen in the world’s course That when a yoke bends Liberty’s bold brow A tyrant is less burdensome when small.

LAMBERT (*furious).* Colonel, this injury —

OVERTON.
Whene’er you will, I’m at your service, sir. Now you must hear The brutal frankness of an honest voice. You are no king as yet to be deceived. Without dwelling on your ambitious dreams, This is what I am moved to say to you: You are to strike a blow which you redoubt, I am to stand near you. If your hand fails To punish Cromwell’s regal insolence, When he has placed the crown upon his brow If you don’t stab him, I will be more prompt! Look at this knife. [*Showing his dagger to* LAMBERT.
In lack of other, this, To strike his heart, will pass first through your own. [LAMBERT *starts back, aghast with anger and astonishment.* I leave you choice between two dastard acts. [*Goes out.*

SCENE VI.

LAMBERT; BAREBONE, *still in the corner of the stage.*

LAMBERT (*trembling with rage, following* OVERTON *to the great door).*
You dare this? Insolent! Hear me! He’s gone! And on my brow a burning blot of shame Upbraids my hand, too slow for punishment. Gone! Did the traitor humble me enough? With what madmen fate now associates me! As a conspirator, what is my life? Always far distant from the goal I seek; Threatened with loss of all, now that we win; Exposed to thousand perils through affronts; Crushed by the tyrant, outraged by the slaves! Retreat? A precipice! Advance, on lava beds. Cromwell or Overton, headsman or prey! What! draw his sword against me? Yes, he would. I know him! I must strike the fatal blow!

BAREBONE (*without being heard or seen by* LAMBERT). This guilty race would plunder me!

LAMBERT *(musing).*
Strike him Amongst his friends, in sight of his own guards! Strike him, who lavished benefits on me! What base ingratitude! If I should miss —

BAREBONE *(thoughtfully).* Rob me of capital to found a bank!

LAMBERT.
Fatal ambition! You’ve led me too far. I sought the throne, and stumble ‘gainst the block. *[Walking up and down with agitation, casting glances outside.*
Some one is coming. Let us go. The crowd Is here already. I will go prepare Myself. — *[Goes out.*

BAREBONE.
False friends, all envious of my wealth. Misfortune unto you, to me, to all. — *[Goes out.*

SCENE VII.

TRICK, GIRAFF, ELESPURU, *afterwards* GRAMADOCH. *The three Fools come into the Great Hall by the main door and look sidewise at* BAREBONE as *he goes out.*

TRICK.
Barebone!

GIRAFF.
He is not gay.

ELESPURU.
The idiot!

TRICK.
A Samuel behind the counter. Ha! A Jeremiah in a shop!

ELESPURU. ‘T was he Who furnished this for Cromwell.

TRICK.
He robs him.

GIRAFF.
And he does better still, — he kills him.

TRICK.
Yes!
Noll satisfies his thirst for gold and blood; He takes his purse and life at the same time.

ELESPURU.
What matters it to us?

GIRAFF.
Where shall we stand?

TRICK (*indicating a narrow alcove in a bay)*. In this tribune.

ELESPURU. Yes, it will hold us all. *[The three Fools pass under the hangings and in a moment re-appear in the tribune.*

TRICK.
‘T is comfortable here.

GIRAFF.
We will see well.

ELESPURU *(stretching himself on a cushion and yawning).*
Good place to sleep, on one ear, then the other;

I’ll need it. We were fools to keep awake All night out there to watch the garden scene, To sit through all that drama of night air And run the risk of getting cold and gout.

TRICK.
Cromwell will pay us when he gets his crown; Gramadoch promises a startling end.

GIRAFF.
Gramadoch! We will see him in his state, Bearing the train, armed with the ivory rod.

ELESPURU.
His state? Yes, call it so. Faith! though a fool, I’d not be train-bearer to that vile king. What a disgrace! In sight of all the world To be seen dragging Satan by his tail.

TRICK *(sings).*
As for myself, I can’t deny In love with Oliver the last am I, And Gramadoch, a philosophic fool, — Two pieces of the self-same wool.
There’s nothing funnier to see In all the melancholy show Than this fool who doth proudly go, Bearing the train of royalty.

GIRAFF.
If Gramadoch had but a noble air, He’d look the fool leading in leash, the wise!

ELESPURU. The fool would be in front.

TRICK.
Why does Cromwell Have his train carried?

ELESPURU.
Sharp, indeed, is Trick! He wants to keep the royal mantle clean: Save it from sweeping up the dirt that’s ‘round.

TRICK.

I understand. The reason’s natural, But who can do it when he wears the robe?

GIRAFF
Ormond had done it.

ELESPURU.
Cromwell sends him off, With naked feet and haltered neck, to make Apology.

GIRAFF I wonder if he’s hung poor man!

TRICK.
Not yet.

GIRAFF. So much more fun for us. When we have finished with this tiresome play, We may have time to go and sees the hanging. We must laugh somehow.

TRICK.
Judging by the looks, We’ll find sufficient chance for laughter here. Death plays his part in this fine spectacle. If I have eyes, Cromwell walks to his doom. I’ve been all over London to observe, And mourning everywhere attracts the eye. At Temple Bar, at Gate House, on the Strand, I saw the military blush with hate At sound of king. They’ve plotted in the gloom ‘Gainst Oliver; all parties have combined. All’s threatening.

ELESPURU. The people, what think they?

TRICK.
They ‘re on the watch. They lie in wait like leopards. They gaze upon these wolves who rend themselves. They wait and let them fight the battle out, Knowing the victor will remain for them. The mine is primed; and if I’m not deceived, At Cromwell’s feet ‘t is ready now to burst.

GIRAFF *(joyously)*. What a mad noise the saints and fools will make! They’ll clash their swords, and we will clap our hands.

ELESPURU *(sings).* Good Master Oliver, beware, All traitors meet their match somewhere. Maybe that Satan did prepare This stately throne of yours I I’m sure the platform Death did make. Perhaps during the scene he’ll wake And turn you out of doors. Around yon fatal edifice There lurks some dangerous artifice.

Your stars have lied, my friend. Upon this *fété* which looks so well The sorcerers have cast their spell. Beneath the flowers which sweet do smell, The dais’ spangled end, You’ll find, if once that purple falls, Some ghastly skeletons, in palls, Beneath you there, And that those haughty steps that rise Resplendent with their draperies, Conceal from only your blind eyes, A gallows-stair.

TRICK AND GIRAFF (*applauding).* A charming thing!

TRICK.

My friends, I have a thought. [ELESPURU *and* GIRAFF *draw near to* TRICK *with an expression of great interest.* While Gramadoch, in stately dignity, Holds at arm’s length the great Protector’s train, In sight of all the solemn Parliament, Under the nose of all the sober clerks, We’ll make up faces and get him to laugh!

ELESPURU (*clapping his hands).*

A great idea!

GIRAFF *(frisking around).*

Good! Good!

A VOICE OUTSIDE *(sings).*

Above all, when the lady Abbess drops Her eyes, One knows that all her sweet devotions are But lies.

Her heart beats in that gloomy cell of stone With fire;

Her soul is God’s. She gives her heart to Love Entire.

No relics cold and lifeless does she sell To him Who comes to barter for the cloister’s grace His sin.

When one is abbess, all of Love ignored Is but His name; naught else is of the gentle god Forgot.

[GRAMADOCH *enters.*

TRICK.
It is himself.
‘T is Gramadoch who comes.

GIRAFF *(to* GRAMADOCH).
What brings you back To us to-day?

TRICK *(to* GRAMADOCH). Since when do train-bearers Come in advance of him whose train they bear?

GRAMADOCH. To pay subservient court to his new king, Lord Roberts’ son entreated for my place. Since a most noble lord competed, I Am but an honorary slave to-day.

ELESPURU. A lord’s son bear the train of Oliver! Our shame is his ambition; he descends To envy of it. Let him have his way. Friend, I embrace you, and my pride returns; Thanks to the Lord for honouring the fools. [GRAMADOCH *mounts into the tribune and his comrades crowd around him.*

GIRAFF.
Your wit was lacking to our merriment.

TRICK.
More fools there are, more fun there is, they say. I’m glad one place gives shelter to all four.

ELESPURU.
Together we taste pleasures of the gods, We fools, united.

GRAMADOCH.
That is what I like.
[Enter MILTON. Here’s Master Milton. Now our group’s complete.

SCENE VIII.

THE FOUR FOOLS, MILTON.

MILTON (*accompanied by his guide, advances slowly, and stands a long time turned towards the throne, as if crushed by a great despair)*. It must be! It is done. I drink the dregs; Exempted from no pang, I face the pain. I'll see this king made. All is now prepared. Before the day is past, Cromwell shall be Within the tomb or lost upon a throne.

TRICK (*low to* GRAMADOCH). The devil's poet preaches sermons well.

MILTON (*continuing)*. Whether he reigns or dies, this fatal day Opens the coffin of his noble fame. The hero to the king surrenders him, Barters his halo for a diadem, — Oh, rare debasement of a god-like brow! Cromwell a prince! With eagerness he gives For rank, his glory; for a sound, his name!

GRAMADOCH (*low to* TRICK). For a non-mitred soul he is not bad.

MILTON (*continuing)*. To hate this archangel is a hard task, Whose name I would have carved on altar stones. With futile errors he beguiled us all; This man I looked on as incarnate truth. I come to take my everlasting leave Of you, revolted against God and man. Grasp Caesar's royalty and that of Guise; The crown is gilded and the dagger's sharp. *[.Retires into a corner of the stage, opposite to the Fools' retreat. Remains there motionless.*

SCENE IX.

The same. Populace, afterwards WILLIS, *afterwards* OVER- TON, SYNDERCOMB, *and the Puritan conspirators. A group of the people enter, men, women, old men, in Puritan dress; they seem to belong to divers professions. Among them is an old reformed soldier. They arrive in a crowd and in great haste. The first call to those behind.*

CITIZENS.
This way!

MILTON *(to his page).*
Who comes?

PAGE.
The populace.

MILTON.
Ah, yes!
The people, always ignorant and dazzled!
They come to watch a scene for which they pay;
To see a strange hand risk their destiny.
A CITIZEN.
No guards here yet?

SECOND CITIZEN. Thank goodness, we ‘re the first.

THIRD CITIZEN. Let’s take the best positions, quick. *[They place themselves near the throne.* SIR RICHARD WILLIS *enters; he is enveloped in a long cloak.*

TRICK (*indicating the citizens and* WILLIS *to his companions).*
Behold The citizens and that man with a squint. The common feeling is not shared by him. They come to see; but this man comes to watch. ‘T is the spy Willis.

GIRAFF.
Why condemn the man? On empty words must wise men always feed? But curiosities of different sort, These are; that’s all!
[Enter OVERTON *and* SYNDERCOMB. *In silence they join the group of spectators already assembled.*

FIRST CITIZEN (*indicating the platform, to his neighbour).*
This is a splendid throne!

SECOND CITIZEN.
Magnificent!

THIRD CITIZEN. Our Oliver does naught Half way.
A WOMAN. The throne is made of solid gold.

ANOTHER WOMAN. These fringes are superb.

THIRD WOMAN.
At last we'll have Some games, some feasts, some spectacles!
A MERCHANT *(in the crowd).*
Indeed, Barebone is a most lucky man. It pays To have a brother in the Parliament.

FIRST CITIZEN *(to* THE MERCHANT). Yes, he was Barebone of the Rump, that one!

THE MERCHANT *(examining the hangings of a pillar).* He sells them that for Chinese goods! Well done! Upholsterer to the Court. If I were that, I would put my commission in the Book, And on my knees at that. He must get gold In tons.

SECOND CITIZEN. Long live King Oliver!

FIRST WOMAN.
No more Preaching monotonous. We will have balls.

SECOND CITIZEN.
Horse racing —

THIRD WOMAN. Actors who'll defy the provost.

SECOND WOMAN. Gypsies, who used to come before in crowds To dance the saraband in Mulberry Garden.

THE SOLDIER *(who has been silent and motionless, steps towards the women and cries with a loud voice).*

Be silent, women! Hush!
[Movement of surprise from all.

FIRST CITIZEN.
It is a soldier!

SECOND CITIZEN. E’en so, what has he got to say against The wives of citizens?

THE SOLDIER *(to the Citizens).*
Hush! Women, hush!

THE CITIZENS.
Women — we?

THE SOLDIER. Yes, women, you! And more Than they. — *[Indicating women.*
These creatures are poor souls, but you — What shall I say of you who surpass them In naught but foolish laughter, giddy looks!

OVERTON (*striking* THE SOLDIER *on the back).* Good fellow! You have had your fill of wrongs! After long years of service you have been Reformed; deprived of your employment — eh?

THE SOLDIER. Worse still than that. I am to have a king.

OVERTON *(to the crowd).* He’s in the right. Is it indeed an hour To laugh when Israel weeps and God is wroth; When one oppresses those who protect him, And heaps a throne on people overwhelmed; When all augments the woe England endures?

FIRST CITIZEN. That’s true enough, but his words were too harsh. *[The crowd increases little by little; the workman* NAHUM *enters.*

OVERTON.
Oh, pardon him! A noble martyr, friends, Whose heart is harrowed by this Tyrian pomp. Let him join his expression of deep grief Unto our country’s

cry of agony, — Our mother, whose proud loins are rent to-day In giving birth unto this monster king.

THIRD CITIZEN. A king! That word hurts, but I know not why!

SECOND CITIZEN. All that I thought, this man explains to me.

NAHUM.
A king's a tyrant.

SECOND CITIZEN. Live the republic!

OVERTON.
And what a king! A despot, liar, cheat! What was he yesterday?

THE SOLDIER.
A soldier!

THE MERCHANT.
Brewer.

THIRD CITIZEN. From this mad festival who will save us?

FIRST CITIZEN.
Of Cromwell, who'd have thought it? Terrible! Usurper!

NAHUM.
Dares to call himself a king! 'T is sacrilege!

SECOND CITIZEN.
A crime!

FIRST CITIZEN.
All royalty Has been proscribed.

OVERTON. You all have rights unto This throne.

FIRST CITIZEN. Of course! What has he more than we

OVERTON.
Hell has planned out his route: resuscitates Old kings and their abuses.

NAHUM.
It’s old name Of Jesus giving to Jerusalem.

OVERTON.
To crush us with the weight of a vile throne!

SECOND WOMAN. They say his eyes glare at one in the night.

THIRD WOMAN. He’s got three rows of teeth inside his mouth, They say.
[All the Puritan conspirators come in by degrees, except LAMBERT. *They grasp each other s hands when they meet, and then mingle silently with the crowd.*

NAHUM.
It is the monster which Saint John Announced.

SECOND CITIZEN. The beast of the Apocalypse.

THE SOLDIER.
It is.

OVERTON.
Cromwell will bring the nine plagues on Our heads.

NAHUM. He’s an Assyrian.

OVERTON.
He is.
Our misery has reached its limit now.

THE MERCHANT.
I sell no goods.

THE SOLDIER. No food; our feet are bare; On the hard ground we sleep. If this lasts long, While Noll upon each pillar hangs his crest, We will be forced to use our teeth for nails To mend our shoes.

OVERTON. We’ll stand before his door And wait for charity.

NAHUM. What Cromwell needs Is not a throne, but Haman’s gibbet and Barabbas’ cross.

SYNDERCOMB. Yes, death to Cromwell!

SIR RICHARD WILLIS (*among the crowd).*
Death!

MILTON (*starting at* WILLIS’S *voice; to the Puritan conspirators).*
Speak lower, men!

SIR RICHARD WILLIS. To the usurper, death!

THE SOLDIER. Speak lower? Why! What do I care? I’ll go And on his threshold cry out, “ Death to you!”

NAHUM *(to* THE SOLDIER). God speaks his judgments in no hidden voice. Your lips are pure.

THE SOLDIER *(to* NAHUM).
Just as you see me now, Poor and forgotten like a clod upon the field, Left naked by the flood of human strife,
If I can see this child of Sirah killed, I’ll die consoled.

OVERTON (*leading him aside and showing dagger to him).*
Friend, you shall be consoled. [THE SOLDIER *makes a movement of surprise and joy which* OVERTON *restrains.* Be still!
[A detachment from CROMWELL’S *regiment enters. They wear red uniforms, with cuirass; musket and partisan on their shoulder.*

The guard arrives. We must keep still. *[The Soldiers push back the people on both sides.*

CHIEF OF THE DETACHMENT (*with loud voice).* Room for the English Lion’s Ironsides.
[To some citizens whom he thrusts back.
Move back!

ONE OF THE CITIZENS *(to another citizen).*
‘T is plainly seen from their proud looks They are from the Protector’s regiment.
[The Soldiers form in line from the throne to the door.

THE SOLDIER *(low to* OVERTON, *indicating the officer).* The officers of Ahab wear silk coats.
A YOUNG SENTINEL *(pushing him back among the crowd).* Keep in your place, my friend.

OVERTON *(low to* THE SOLDIER).
How they push you! These hired assassins take their master’s tone, And the recruit insults the veteran.

THE SOLDIER *(pressing his hand).* Patience, my friend!

CHIEF OF THE DETACHMENT *(to his troops).*
Soldiers, the Holy Ghost Has called us here. Pray for our general!

OVERTON *(to* CHIEF OF THE DETACHMENT). Your general! Why not say for your king?

CHIEF OF THE DETACHMENT. Our king? Who dares insult him thus?

OVERTON.
I dare!

CHIEF OF THE DETACHMENT.
You lie!

OVERTON.
I do not lie.

CHIEF OF THE DETACHMENT.
Our Cromwell king!
Now, God forbid!

OVERTON. He will be king to-day.

CHIEF OF THE DETACHMENT. Who told you that?
[THE CHAMPION OF ENGLAND *enters; he is in complete armour, on horseback, and flanked by four Halberdiers, who carry in front of him a banner on which are the Protector's arms.*

OVERTON. Behold!

SCENE X.

The Same. THE CHAMPION OF ENGLAND.

THE SOLDIER (*low to* OVERTON).
Let's see what words He comes to cast upon the wind.

THE CHAMPION *(on horseback, in front of the throne).*
Hosannah! I speak to you in God's eternal name! The most high Parliament, which long has prayed Unto the Holy Ghost for special light To put an end unto the nation's woes, Ordains that Oliver Cromwell be king!
[.Murmurs among THE CROWD.

TRICK *(low to his companions, indicating the people).* Watch these psalm-singers fly into a rage.

THE CHAMPION *(continuing).* Should there in London, or Three Kingdoms, be An old or young man, boor or Cavalier, Who dares contest

the right of my Lord Oliver, We, England’s champion, do defy him here, With dagger, hatchet, sword or cimeter! We’ll immolate him without tolerance, And hang his crest upon this horse’s mane. If such a man is here, let him stand forth And speak, and with his sword confirm his words. You are my witnesses, that free from sin, I throw down at his feet this glove torn off From my right hand.
[THE CHAMPION *throws down his gauntlet before the people, draws his sword and lifts it above his head.*

STANDARD BEARER, AND THE CHAMPION’S HALBERDIERS. Hosannah!
[Amazed silence among the people. All eyes are fixed on the gauntlet.

THE CHAMPION.
No one speaks!

OVERTON *(aside).* Must one always keep silence?

MILTON *(with loud voice).*
Why only one, Great Champion? If such be your master’s plans, He should throw down as many gloves as he Thinks he has subjects.
[Movement of approbation in THE CROWD.

THE CHAMPION.
Who is this, who speaks? The blind man! Go away from here, my man. *[The Soldiers push* MILTON *aside.* OVERTON *approaches the officer who commands the Guard and interrogates him with a look.*

OFFICER *(casting down his eye, with sombre countenance).* All goes ill.

OVERTON *(low to* SYNDERCOMB). All goes well.

THE CHAMPION *(looking around upon the people).*
Well! no one speaks?

OVERTON *(to* MILTON, *pressing his hand).* We’ll send Lord Cromwell to rejoin his glove.

MILTON *(aside).*
Alas!

THE CHAMPION.
I wait!

THE SOLDIER *(aside, looking at* THE CHAMPION). Puppy! Proud satellite!

SYNDERCOMB *(low to* OVERTON). I know not what keeps me from flogging him.
[Takes one step towards the glove; OVERTON *stops him.*

OVERTON.
Let us be prudent.

GRAMADOCH *(low to his companions, indicating the group of Puritan conspirators).*
Those fools will spoil all. If they pick up that glove, farewell the rest. We must not let them ruin everything.

TRICK.
How shall we stop it?
[GRAMADOCH *twists his head with a knowing air.*

THE CHAMPION *(still holding his sword high).*
No one answers me!

GRAMADOCH *(jumping from the tribune into the hall).* Yes, one! I do! —
[Surprise among the people.

THE CHAMPION *(astonished).* You lift that glove?

GRAMADOCH *(picking up the glove).*
I do!

THE CHAMPION.
Who are you?

GRAMADOCH. A grimace-vender like you! We both wear masks to mystify the world! Mine makes men laugh, and yours makes them afraid; That’s all the difference.

THE CHAMPION.
A knavish air Have you.

GRAMADOCH. You have the same!

THE CHAMPION *(to Halberdier).*
It is a fool.

GRAMADOCH. Just so! A fool by taste and principle. Yes, that is my position at the Court. You’ve guessed it.

VOICE IN THE CROWD.
Harlequin defies the rope! It is Noll’s fool; the action is most bold! A real fool?

MILTON. What is this parody? *[Great bursts of laughter from the Fools’ tribune.*

GRAMADOCH. Come, let us take the field!

THE CHAMPION.
Poor jester you! Go hence, or I will have you whipped.

GRAMADOCH.
Oh, ho!
What fine disdain! A puppet like myself, Except your faces are not gay like mine. I tell you once again, Cromwell pays us To make a little noise in this droll scene. A bell is your voice, and a clapper mine!

THE CHAMPION.

You knave —

GRAMADOCH. Without hurting our characters, We might measure our strength for or against King Oliver. I am his train-bearer; His trumpet, you!

THE CHAMPION *(angrily).*
Which weapon do you choose?

GRAMADOCH.
I choose —— [*Unsheathing his lath.*
My wooden sword.
[.Brandishing it with a martial air.
‘Gainst a straw soldier, It is a fitting weapon. Captain — guard! *[To* THE CROWD. Come, battle, battle, come! — *[To* THE CHAMPION.
I want to see If we can furnish a second Dunbar, And if your durandal is worth my blade. *[To* THE CROWD. Come, see —— *[Indicating* MILTON.
I mean no disrespect to him — See singing Falstaff fight with bugling Stentor. See a fool thrash a bully!

OVERTON (*low to* SYNDERCOMB).
Looks this not As though the scene had been prepared before?

GRAMADOCH (*strutting before* THE CHAMPION). Well, well, my champion! What! Are you afraid? You hesitate, — you who defied us all! I only want to smash you in two blows, You can pick up the pieces afterwards.

THE CHAMPION (*indicating* GRAMADOCH). Arrest this fool!
[The Guards surround and seize GRAMADOCH.

GRAMADOCH (*fighting, and laughing to himself).*
Why? I am in the right! He is a coward! He’s afraid! Enough! If he gets me enraged, I will begin A suit against him—” quare impedit.” *[The Fools in the tribune applaud and laugh immoderately.*

THE CHAMPION (*with solemn voice).* Since none of you contests what I have said, Except a blind man and a fool, I now, Before the entire world, proclaim this truth, That Oliver Cromwell is England’s king!

THE SATELLITES OF THE CHAMPION. God save King Oliver!
[Profound silence among the people and the troops.

THE CHAMPION.
Let us pass on! *[Goes out slowly with his escort.*

SYNDERCOMB *(low to* OVERTON, *indicating* GRAMADOCH, *who is laughing).* ‘T was to amuse the people!

OVERTON *(same tone, pointing to the astonished populace).*
Yes. He threatens;
They are dumb!

SCENE XI.

THE CROWD.

VOICES IN THE CROWD. Old Noll is long! — When do you think He’ll leave White-Hall?— ‘T is hard to wait like this. *[Violent ringing of bells is heard outside; distant cannon is heard at intervals.*
—— Be silent! Do you hear the bells, the cannon?
—— He’s starting! — Will he pass Old Baily? — No! By Piccadilly he will go. — Look there!
How many people stand now in the Square.
—— It is the populace: how many heads!
—— Above, below, all swarins with life. — Although It is hot weather, there is not a roof, Not any inch of pavement, uncovered By jarring faces. — Balconies up there Were rented at a fabulous price, I know.
—— Just to behold Cromwell, a human face.
—— The Babylonians are insane. — I stifle! May God protect me! — The procession comes: It spreads over the Square. — At last!
[Movement among THE CROWD: *all eyes are eagerly turned to the main door.*

— Tell me, Who marches at the head? — Major Skippon.

—— What, Skippon.? — A good soldier of repute.

—— At Worcester, of the army he was first To cross the Severn on the bridge of boats.

—— The saints made good use of their swords that day.

—— They used their better still at White-Hall on The thirtieth of January! — Man!

You say that in a manner to procure Your death. — Be silent! — Well, I laugh! — Be still!

—— Laughing’s not talking. — If I were not crushed, I’d go and strangle you! — Have done! — Behold, Here’s the Lord Mayor.

[THE LORD MAYOR *enters with the Aldermen, the City Clerks, the Constables; all are in costume.* THE LORD MAYOR *and the city officers halt on the left of the main door.*

— Admire Pack, alderman, There in the file, “whom Noll, to please the city, Made knight with a fagot-staff. — With what an air He rides his high horse! — It was he who put The motion which made Pilate king. *[The courts enter in procession; the courts of justice take their places on, the top benches at the back of the hall.*

— Behold! The barons of the courts in scarlet robes.

—— Huzza! Judge Hale. — Sergeant Wallop, huzza!

—— Look at the colonels who go flying by!

—— What! are there not sufficient guards on pay? The long robed corporations fall in line.

—— Noll is a tyrant! An usurper base!

—— A Titan who would climb the heavens high. No right but force has this Enceladus!

O

He scales the Stuarts’ throne; he mounts it not!

—— Escaped Oxonian, peace. — The learned fool, Speaks he not Latin? — I’ve a right to curse This Appius in his curule chair. — He thinks He can slay Cromwell with a ferrule!

AN USHER *(in black, appears on the threshold and cries).*

Room!

Room for the Parliament!

[The Parliament enters in double file, preceded by THE SPEAKER *before whom walk the Mace-bearers, the Ushers, the Clerks, and the Sergeants of the House. Great attention among* THE CROWD. *While the Parliament seat themselves on the first row of benches, conversation among* THE CROWD *continues.*

VOICES IN THE CROWD.
— The Speaker’s name, What is it?— ‘T is Sir Thomas Widdrington, I think. — A handsome man! — He is a Judas!

OVERTON *(low to* WILDMAN). The people hold resentments; did you note None cried, “ God save the House of Commons!”

WILDMAN *(low to* OVERTON, *indicating the Parliament).*
No!
May God confound them! they ‘re all sold to him. They worship him and Belatucadrus.

TRICK *(fixing his eyes on the assembly).* The courts, the aldermen, and Parliament, These are poor England’s only deities. Behold them!

GIRAFF. The amusing gods!

ELESPURU.
What think You of them, brother?

GIRAFF.
Gods in the same way That we are fools.

TRICK. I sorely long to see This tempest burst on grave Olympus!

GIRAFF.
Yes;
Like yours, my mind holds pandemonium More entertaining than this pantheon.

ELESPURU (*indicating* GRAMADOCH, *who, guarded in a corner of the hall by four Halberdiers, is making a thousand contortions).* Look! Gramadoch is making signs to us.

GRAMADOCH (*making faces to his comrades).* Hum! — [*The Fools burst out laughing.*

ELESPURU.
Faith! his joke was just a bit too strong. TRICK.
How will he extricate himself?

GIRAFF.
That's no Concern of ours.

ELESPURU.
True! We laughed heartily, And for the present moment 't is enough.

AN USHER *(on the balcony of a great tribune, facing the throne, and richly decorated).*
My Lady Protectress!
[All the city functionaries rise, uncover and make a profound obeisance to the Protectress, who enters accompanied by her four daughters, each dressed after her own style. The Protectress, MISTRESS FLEETWOOD, *and* LADY CLEYPOLE *are in black with jet ornaments;* LADY FALCONBRIDGE *in full court dress, with mantle of brocaded gold cloth, skirt of ginger-coloured velvet embroidered with Venetian scorpions, feathers, and a peeress's crown;* FRANCES *in dress of white gauze worked with silver. The Protectress returns the salutation of* THE LORD MAYOR *and the Aldermen with a •profound courtesy, then seats herself with her daughters, in the front of the tribune; the back is occupied by their women.*

TRICK *(to the Fools).*
'T is fortunate That face has not yet donned the name of queen.
A SOLDIER *(in the Fools' tribune).*
Peace, knights of Hellebore!

TRICK *(sneeringly).*

Trust a soldier To always cry out peace!
[THE SOLDIER *makes a threatening gesture;* TRICK *re-seats himself, shrugging his shoulders. The entrance of* CROMWELL'S *family causes a great commotion, and all eyes are fixed on the tribune.*

VOICES IN THE CROWD.
— What! it is she?
The Lady Protectress! How stout she is!

—— The daughter of a man named Bourchier.
— — 'T is a fine dream she's having now. — Sir, who Is that young Eve at her right hand? — What, here?
—— No, there! — That's Lady Frances. — His daughter?
—— Yes.
—— Old Noll has five or six, eh? — He has four. Look at them. — The youngest is a pretty thing!
—— How warm it is! — Oh, how uncomfortable.
—— The crowd increases. — We are crowded here As were those sons of hell whose numbers matched The sands beside the sea. — What luck to be A bird and have a pair of wings! — I'm crushed! *[,Suddenly the sound of a cannon is heard close to Westminster.*

SYNDERCOMB *(low to the group of conspirators).* He comes!
[Second cannon. Great noise in the square outside: intense expression of interest in the hall.

OVERTON *(low to Conspirators).* The faithful to their posts! *[The conspirators scatter themselves among the crowd. The sound of cannon is heard at regular intervals: noise of trumpets and shouts. The city officials advance to meet the Protector.*

VOICES IN THE CROWD.
— 'Tis he!
—— There! — Let us see! — Himself! — At last! — Oh!
—— Ah!
—— The Achan of nations — Pharaoh-Necho!
—— He rides alone! — He's looking at his watch.

—— The mayor and sheriffs go to meet him, look!
—— If you can see, sir, tell me how he's dressed.
—— Black velvet! Neighbour, your elbow is sharp.
—— The mayor accosts him. — Ah, the carriage stops!
—— They make a speech. — He signals with his head.
—— They hand him a petition: he passes it To Lord Broghill. — The mayor is speaking yet.
—— What, yet? — When will he finish? — He is on His knees, almost. — Eunuch to Holofernes! Haranguer to any chance government!
—— The Lord Protector answers. — Listen! — Hark!
—— The wolf is lecturing the sheep! For shame!
—— At Dunbar, Noll's beard was much dirtier.
—— He's getting out. — Where is he going? — Oh, To say his prayers in the chancellor's office. — Humph!
—— He prays to Satan. — How his Ironsides Surround him! — Vain precaution, that! — His guards Are ill content to keep a king! — Be still!
—— A new delay! — How do you think he looks?
—— He's gloomy! — He is gay! — A heavy man!
—— Majestic! — He's much aged! — No, he is tired.
—— The sunshine troubled him! — He has the gout!
—— Drawn by eight horses: I'm disgusted with The monster. — This is hauling rubbish in Triumphal chariots! — He's coming back!
—— Good! now to Westminster! — Behold! there goes His sword-bearer and his train-bearer, too.
—— The reverend minister with his blue cape!
—— Is it not Lockyer? — Yes. — The palace clerks, The sergeants of the court, pages, lackeys!
—— On horseback, the Lord Mayor precedes his coach, Drawn sword, uncovered! — Oh, usurper bold!
—— Airs of our ancient kings! — Die Oliver The Last! — Lord Halberdier, please let me see!
—— He comes!
[Surrounded by his escort, CROMWELL *appears upon the threshold of the main door; immense agitation in the crowd,. All the assembly arise and stand uncovered, in attitude of great respect. The Protector is in black velvet costume without sword and without cloak. His escort, at some distance behind him, forms a flashing circle of gold and steel. Nearest to the*

Protector, in front, stands THE LORD MAYOR *with drawn sword; back of him stands the* EARL OF CARLISLE *with drawn sword. Among the escort the following men are to be distinguished:* GENERALS DESBOROUGH *and* FLEETWOOD, THURLOE, STOUPE, *the Secretaries of State and the private secretaries of the cabinet;* EICHARD CROMWELL; HANNIBAL SESTHEAD, *with his gorgeous costume of gold brocade, his pages and his Danish dogs; a crowd of generals, of colonels, whose brilliant uniforms and resplendent cuirasses make a strong contrast to the blue cloak and brown robe of the preacher* LOCKYER, *who stands among them. To the right of the door stand a group of high dignitaries who are to figure in the ceremony; on a red velvet cushion the* EARL OF WARWICK *bears the purple robe, on another red cushion* LORD BROGHILL *bears the sceptre,* GENERAL LAMBERT *bears the crown,* WHITELOCKE, *the state-seals; an Alderman bears for* THE LORD MAYOR *the sword; a clerk of the House of Commons bears for* THE SPEAKER *the Bible.*

SCENE XII.

CROMWELL, *his family, his escort,* THE CROWD. *AS* CROMWELL *appears on the threshold of Westminster Hall, amid the noise of cannon which has not ceased during the entire preceding scene, amid the bells, the trumpet flourishes and the rolling drums, one hears the acclamations which follow him from outside.*

VOICES *(outside).* Hurrah for England’s Lord Protector!

OVERTON (*low to* GARLAND). These shouts are paid for! We will hush them soon! ‘T was just the same when Noll, at Grocers-Hall, Made Thomas Viner loyal baronet. He was acclaimed at Cheapside, for his cash! [CROMWELL *pauses a few seconds on the threshold and makes several salutations to the people outside.*

VOICES IN THE CROWD. Lord Cromwell! — Is that Cromwell? — What, the king?

—— The regicide! — He's very homely! — What A little man to be a hero ‘ — Yes!
I thought him taller! — I thought him less fat!
—— How that man with a big hat spoils my view! Take off your hat, sir! — I — since when, madame, Do we doff hats before the anti-Christ?
[CROMWELL *turns to the people inside; profound silence.*

CROMWELL (*taking a few steps).* In name of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost Peace be with you!
[Silence among the assembly; acclamations continue outside on the Square.

VOICES *(outside).*
God keep you, Oliver!
—— Long live Cromwell!
[CROMWELL *turns lack again and salutes the people outside in the square.*

THURLOE (*low to* CROMWELL).
Success smiles on your act. What acclamations! What enthusiasm! What a grand day!

CROMWELL (*low and Utterly to* THURLOE).
Yes; these tremendous crowds, Intoxicated with delight and love, who seem A proud accomplice of my triumph now, Would be as eager to applaud my death. In my success they see a spectacle; They run to it rejoicing, and nothing Could better rouse their transports and their hopes Than thus to see me crowned, — except it were To see me hung. Look now, how still they are! Good people!

THURLOE *(low).* The saints' levellers did this. *[The Parliament, with* THE SPEAKER *at their head, advance in double file towards* CROMWELL; *they respectfully salute the Protector, who takes off his hat and replaces it.*

THE SPEAKER *(to* CROMWELL). My lord! When Samuel made sacrifice He kept the heifer's shoulder for King Saul, To prove to him, behind the sacred veil, How great the burden of a nation is, — Which fact has led Maximilian to assert ‘T is hard to fit one's self for government. Few mortals

who have gained control o’er men Know how to guide the progress of the world. The chariot of life rolls heavily, Loaded with human souls; fate drags it on. To steer it skilfully o’er tortuous roads Necessitates a firm arm and strong hands.
Oft times at night, when clouded are the skies, We ‘scape the rut to fall o’er precipice.
This car, whose groaning axle all earth hears, Can’t be unharnessed and can have no brake.
It must move onward, without halt or pause;
The steeds whom God has bound to the great pole Forever, wildly as on battle-field, In spite of lash must kick, in spite of bit Must run, and crushing kings, cities, nations, Drag the blind wheels over their fatal course.
When chance sometimes directs its destiny, In the deep ruts flows such a sea of blood That dogs, when dry, do quench their thirst in it.
Then all earth totters and great kingdoms fall.
Therefore, you see what hangs upon the choice Of driver for this car which all men dread.
A double right must place him there, — God’s will, Above all, and the people’s honest voice.
To diadem be joined the tongues of fire.
Then is he proven one of those rare men Whom people follow as a beacon light.
But ah, not easily is such rank won!
This master spirit needs omniscient force.
Like to the suns, which God alone creates, They roll, and drag worlds with them in their course;
Their heights are lighted by the rays of God, And burning always, never can they rest.
From all I’ve said, the people must conclude There is but one arm strong enough to guide our fate.
‘T is time a chieftain should appear ‘mongst us!
Earth needs a man! That man, my lord, is you.
[The Parliament and the entire assembly bow low. Assume direction of our destinies. Accept your House of Common’s loyal faith!
[Profound silence among the people.

OVERTON (*low to* MLLTON). His House of Commons!

CROMWELL *(to* THE SPEAKER).
I am grateful, sir! This land is prosperous, by grace of God. In Ireland, in spite of civil wars Faith holds its own and conquers fresh domain. Bent on suppressing the foul Papist sore, Harry, my deputy, by fire and sword Extirpates with one hand; with the other, sears. Armagh is burning. Rome has no priest there. The clans in Scotland have resumed their yoke. Outside, all's well! Dunkirk has no more hope. Old England, with the French Alliance, holds Spain, humbled, in the palm of her broad hand. Our Indian commerce has made giant strides. The envious Castilian burns with rage. God's help has proven that our cause is just. Much blood has flowed at Madrid and Lisbon; Vast sums of gold has their rebellion cost. Blake fills our treasury with their galleons. Unto Jamaica I've dispatched two fleets; Meanwhile the army works out its old plans. The Tuscan's penitent, we'll pardon him; And when all other matters are arranged, Since he invites us and entreats our aid, We'll save the Russian from the Turkish hordes. God grants immediately whate'er we ask; You see no nation stands so high as ours. Live, then, protected by celestial grace; But that the Lord should manifest his love, We needs must supplicate on bended knees. Let us all pray, and may his gracious spirit come And rest upon us.
[CROMWELL *kneels; his entire escort, Parliament, the city officials, courts of justice, soldiers, kneel also: moment of silence and meditation, during which one hears only the bells, the cannon, the trumpets, and the noise of the crowd outside.*

SYNDERCOMB *(low to* OVERTON *and* GARLAND, *who have drawn near to the throne).* They are kneeling, all! The tyrant and his guards; their swords are down. No eye is watching us; why don't we strike?

GARLAND *(repulsing him with indignation).* Wretch!

SYNDERCOMB.
Hush! Why cry so loud? GARLAND.
Strike him at prayer?

SYNDERCOMB.
What else to do?

GARLAND. Against him, let us pray! Enough of murderous rage! Let God make choice Between our prayers!
[The Puritans bow their heads and pray; silence.

CROMWELL *(rising)*. Proceed!
[All arise. EARL OF WARWICK *advances with slow and stately step towards the Protector, bends one knee, and presents to him the purple robe bordered with ermine.*

EARL OF WARWICK *(to* CROMWELL).
Vouchsafe to wear This royal purple.
[CROMWELL, *assisted by* WARWICK, *puts on the robe.*

OVERTON *(low to Puritans')*. 'T is his shroud he wraps Around him, friends!

GARLAND *(low)*.
Behold him now! It is The scarlet son of prostituted Tyre.

WILDMAN *(low)*. Heaven's thunder, burst!
[CROMWELL, *robed in the purple mantle, whose train is borne by the young* LORD ROBERTS, *richly dressed, advances gravely towards the throne.* EARL OF WARWICK *precedes him with drawn sword.* EARL OF CARLISLE *follows, his sword's point bent to the ground.*

SYNDERCOMB *(aside)*.
What a brilliant escort He's borrowed from the nether world! Fine purple, Soldiers of iron, gilded noblemen, Ermine, a throne beplumed, with haughty dais, Women unchaste, and men who know not shame; Pomp, power, and triumph; the great man lacks naught. He floats in pride and rapturous joy! E'en so! To make it vanish like a fleeting dream, The shadow of a chariot, or flash of sword, What needs almighty God? What needs the Lord?
[.Hugging his dagger to his breast. A bit of steel in a poor sinner's hand!
[Having crossed the hall slowly, amid profound silence, CROMWELL *reaches the foot of the throne and prepares to ascend it. The conspirators quietly mingle with the crowd and surround the platform.*

MILTON *(from the crowd, with startling voice).* Cromwell, beware!

CROMWELL *(turning towards the people).* Who speaks?

SYNDERCOMB *(low to* GARLAND).
May God confound This blind man whose voice puts them all on guard.
Our secrets.

MILTON *(to* CROMWELL). Beware the Ides of March!

OVERTON *(low to* MILTON).
Do not reveal

CROMWELL *(to* MLLTON). Explain yourself!

MILTON *(to* CROMWELL).
Mene, Tekel, Upharsin.
[CROMWELL *shrugs his shoulders and ascends the throne.*

OVERTON *(to* GARLAND). He ascends. I breathe again.

GARLAND *(low).* The alarm was forcible.
[CROMWELL *seats himself upon the throne.* THE EARLS OF WARWICK *and* CARLISLE, *with drawn swords, stand behind his arm-chair.* THURLOE *and* STOUPE *stand beside him.* THE LORD MAYOR, *bearing the cushion which holds the sword, and followed by his Aldermen, approaches the throne; he ascends a few steps, bends one knee, and presents the sword to* CROMWELL.

THE LORD MAYOR (*to* CROMWELL).
This which I place Within your hands, Lord Cromwell, is the sword. For lack of anvil, on the tyrant's brow Its steel, by the whole nation, has been forged. This sword has double blades, — for justice one, And one for war; alternately they shine In battle and in holy place, now in The soldier's grasp, now flaming in God's hand. The city of London yields it now to you.
[CROMWELL *girds on the sword, draws it from the sheath, holds it over*

his head, and then returns it to THE LORD MAYOR, *who replaces it in its sheath and retires backwards.*

WHITELOCKE (*approaching* CROMWELL *with the same ceremony).* My lord, I bring the seals.
[CROMWELL *receives the seals, then returns them to* WHITELOCKE *who retires.* THE SPEAKER, *followed by the officers of the House of Commons, approaches in his turn, bearing the Bible with gold clasps.*

THE SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE OF PARLIAMENT *(kneeling before* CROMWELL).
I bring the Book, My lord.
[CROMWELL *receives the Bible, and* THE SPEAKER *retires, making profound obeisances.* LAMBERT, *pale and anxious, approaches next, bearing the crown on a rich crimson velvet cushion.* OVEKTON *breaks through the crowd and takes position beside him.*

LAMBERT (*kneeling upon the steps of* CROMWELL'S *platform).*
My lord —

OVERTON (*low to* LAMBERT).
'T is I. Be brave!

LAMBERT *(aside).*
He stands Here, at my side! *[A loud to* CROMWELL, *stammering.* Receive the crown!

OVERTON *(drawing his dagger, low to* LAMBERT).
And death!
[All the conspirators scattered among the crowd place their hands upon their daggers.

CROMWELL *(as if awakening with a start).* Hold! What is this? Wherefore bring you this crown? What shall I do with it? Who gave it me? Is this a dream? Is that the diadem? What right have you to force me among kings? Who adds such scandal to our holy feast? His crown to me who

caused his head to fall? Has this occasion been misunderstood? My lords, my brothers, Englishmen, hear me! I come not here to don the diadem.
To dip my title in the people's heart, I came; to refresh my power and renew My rights. The sacred crimson twice was dyed.
This people owns the purple, and with loyal heart I take it from them; but a royal crown!
When did I ask it? Who says I desire it?
I would not give one hair from this poor head, Which has grown white in serving England's needs, For the gold crests of all the kings of earth.
Take it from here! Go, bear this bawble hence, —
The vainest of all human vanities!
Don't wait for me to crush it under foot.
Alas! how little they know me, these men Who with base flattery bid me crown myself.
What they can never give, I have received From God, — grace inadmissible. Of self I'm master; when one is a son of God, Can one be less? Of our prosperity The universe is jealous; what need I
More than this knowledge of your happiness?
I've said this nation is the chosen one, And Europe is a satellite to her.
All yields before our star: the infidel Is cursed. It seems by this, as if God said, " Grow, England, and my eldest daughter be.
Among all nations I have crowned you;
Be my beloved, and walk close to my side."
He pours upon us constant benefits;
Each day that ends, each new day that begins, Adds one more golden link to this great chain.
'T would seem as if our God, to Philistine So terrible, had, like a labourer, Hewn out our path: as if his arm, upon An axis indestructible by time, Had fastened the machinery of this Vast edifice. Oh, grand, mysterious work, Which through long ages his great hand prepared.
All things move thus. The wheels, together chained, Gnaw with their iron teeth at the machine.
The living labyrinth of beams and yards And weights starts into motion; without halt Continuing its inexorable route Accomplishes its herculean task!
Nations entire, caught in its myriad arms, Were crushed to atoms fled they not aside.

That I should impede God, whose glorious law Prepares a special destiny for us;
Of this people elect, scorning the rights, I'd place my wish before their interest;
I, pilot, open sails to adverse winds?
No! To false friends I give no joy like this.
The English fleet is still Queen of the Waves.
Colossus stands erect. What use serve plots Against Great Britain's noble destiny?
What harm can pickaxe do to mountain-side?
[Casting lynx glances around him. This warning to the ill-disposed: we know All that they do; transparent is the sea Although the precipice is deep. We see The bottom of the trap where their hopes crawl. Sometimes the viper's wounded by his sting. The fire we kindle often burns ourselves. And the Lord's eye can pierce through everything. Between kings and the people who decreed Divorce? I did! With such a silly bait Thought men to trap me? Crown? I crushed one once. Although I've worn it not, I know its weight. What! for a Court give up the camp I love? To sceptre change my sword, for diadem Renounce my helmet? Come, am I a child!
Was I born yesterday? Do I not know That gold weighs more than iron. Erect a throne For me? Ah, would you dig my grave? Cromwell Knows well how one descends from such a height.
And then, what weariness assails the brow Wrinkled with care, and furrowed with its gems;
Each one of them conceals a biting thorn.
The crown kills men. Grim anguish undermines Their heart; it changes e'en the gentlest soul Into a tyrant, — crushing him, it makes Him crush us in his turn. The crowd delight In all this show; oblivious of self.
They count the rubies shining in his crown.
But they would pity those who bear the weight If they observed the brow, not diadem.
O'erwhelmed with trouble, soon their sovereign hands Blindly confuse the reins of government.
Take back the execrable sign! Away!
Too oft it falls from brow to blind the eyes.
[With pathos. What should I do with't? Not born to power, My tastes are simple and are innocent. If I, with sling in hand, have watched the fold,

Have taken the helm when rocks appeared ahead, I sacrificed myself to common weal. Could I but have grown old in my own sphere; If, in the shadow of my hut, my woods, I could have seen the vanquished tyrant fall! God is my witness, dearer far to me Than all the pomp of empire, were my fields; And thousand-fold more charm had life for me As shepherd, than as combatant ‘gainst kings. *[Weeping.]* Speak you of sceptre? What a failure I Have made of life! That bit of tinsel holds Naught that attracts me. Pity me, my friends, Don’t envy; pity your old general, — Old Oliver, who feels his arm is weak, And that his end is near. I’m old; I’m weary. I ask compassion. Is’t not time to rest? Each day I ask it of God’s holy will; Each day, before his throne, I strike my breast! To wish to be a king? So frail, so proud! This project, — oh, I swear it! — is as far From me, as is the sunlight to a babe Within its mother’s womb. Away with it, Forever! I accept not anything from you But the hereditary right. In proof Of what I say, I will entreat at once Some theologian of great light to read My soul. If need be, I will consult two. To the Most High I owe a full account Of all your rights; unto his will I bow, And will accomplish what the hundred and Tenth psalm commands.
[Applause and acclamations burst forth from every side. The people and the soldiers, losing by degrees all feeling of hostility, give vent to their enthusiasm. The Parliament and the Protector’s escort are stupefied. CLLOM- WELL *prepares to resume his discourse, and makes a gesture to the people; all become silent.*
Now let us pray to God With humble and obedient heart, asking That he may keep you all in his good care. We have revealed to you our inmost soul; We ask your pardon in a last request, For such long speech upon so warm a day. *[He re-seats himself. The acclamations and the enthusiasm of the people burst forth again. The disconcerted Puritan conspirators stand gloomy and silent, casting aside their daggers.*

OVERTON (*low to* GARLAND). He will die in his bed.

GARLAND *(low).*
They want him, now They’ve got him!

THE CROWD. Hurrah!

WILDMAN *(low).*
Hereditary right He’s gained, the juggler!

THE CROWD.
To the Protector, hail! Hurrah < Long live Cromwell! Live Oliver! Glory unto the conqueror of Tyre.

OVERTON *(low to Puritans).* He fooled us well! Some one betrayed our plans. He has been warned; a case of forfeiture!

BAREBONE *(aside).* It was the only way to save my bill. *[Most of the Puritan conspirators mix in the crowd, which continues rapturously to acclaim the triumph of* CROMWELL. LAMBERT, *pale and stupefied, prepares to come down from the platform.* CROMWELL *stops him.*

CROMWELL. You are to dine with us to-day, Lambert.
Who?
[Low to LAMBERT, *who turns to him with amazement.* Why tremble, since he is no longer there?

LAMBERT *(stammering).*

CROMWELL (*Still low).* He, — this Overton, who was to push Your faltering hand. — [*With a sardonic smile.*
You were in league with them.

LAMBEET.
My lord, I swear —

CROMWELL. Swear about nothing!

LAMBEET.
But —

CROMWELL.
I have good witnesses. You were the chief Of the conspiracy!

LAMBEET.
The chief!

CROMWELL.
In name, At least. You feared your own audacity, And were not brave enough to dare to stab Me face to face!

LAMBEET.
My lord! *[Aside]* For this man’s eye Each mortal has his thoughts writ on his brow!

CROMWELL *(aloud, to* LAMBEET, *smiling).* Have I been well informed? A tattling voice Says you have taste for a retired life, — That you are passionately fond of flowers.
[Low, and grinding his teeth. You will return me your commission, sir!
[He dismisses him with a gesture. LAMBERT *descends from the platform and mingles with the crowd. At this moment* CROMWELL *perceives the sceptre which* LORD BROGHILL *placed upon the steps of the throne.* What’s this? A sceptre? Take this fool’s toy hence *[Turning to* TRICK.
For you, my fool.
[The people and soldiers redouble their cheers.

TRICK (*from his tribune).* Not so! ‘T is the concern Of bigger fools than we!
[A BAILIFF *enters; he bows before the throne, and addresses* CROMWELL.

BAILIFF *(to* CROMWELL).
The High-Sheriff Awaits your pleasure.

CROMWELL. Let him come in. *[Enter* THE HIGH-SHERIFF, *followed by two Sergeants-at- arms.*
Well!

THE HIGH-SHERIFF (*saluting* CROMWELL). These prisoners who have been condemned to death, My lord, — this Bloum —

CROMWELL *(starting).*
What! Is't already done?

THE HIGH-SHERIFF.
Not yet, my lord?

CROMWELL. That's fortunate!

THE HIGH-SHERIFF.
Hewlet Prepared the gallows at Tyburn by dawn. Upon their way unto the fatal spot They beg an audience of you, my lord. Shall their request be granted or refused?

CROMWELL What reason do they urge?

THE HIGH-SHERIFF.
A prayer to make!

CROMWELL.
You may admit them.

THE HIGH-SHERIFF. Here, my lord?

CROMWELL.
Yes, here.
[Upon a sign from CROMWELL, THE HIGH-SHERIFF *bows and goes out. For some instants* CROMWELL *remains silent amid the acclamations of the people and the whisperings of the Generals and the Parliament. Then he suddenly rouses himself and addresses* DOCTOR LOCKYER, *who is among his escort.* Come, Master Lockyer, were you not advised To edify us with the Holy Word? We wait: time passes and grace takes its flight. [DOCTOR LOCKYER *mounts the pulpit opposite the throne, slowly and with evident embarrassment.*

DOCTOR LOCKYER.
My lord, this is my text —
[Hesitates, and appears troubled.

CROMWELL.
Continue! Speak!

DOCTOR LOCKYER *(reading from, a Bible which he holds in his hands).* “ One day the assembled trees, to choose a king, Said to the olive-tree, ‘ Become our king—’”

CROMWELL (*angrily, interrupting him).* Where did you find that text? ‘T is a bold one.

DOCTOR LOCKYER. My lord, ‘t is in the Bible.

CROMWELL. „ What?

DOCTOR LOCKYER.
Behold!
Judges, ninth chapter and eighth verse.

CROMWELL.
Silence!
With this hour what connection has your text? Can you find nothing better in the Holy Book? Could you not choose a chapter or a verse Which had a bearing on our present need? This, for example: “ May he be accursed Who leads the wandering blind astray.” Or this, “ The truly wise man dares and doubts;” or “ The Archangel went to bind the devil in The wilderness.” Then there are other themes Which preachers who are eloquent can touch, And which the present scene had dignified. “ Is mankind double?” “ Must the angels of God, When they come to us, change their sphere? “ Or else; What consequence, if Whiggamores, who are Strict dogmatists were antipoedo Baptists? Such things at least would have been understood. For this people, wise and intelligent, You might have treated twenty subjects such As these. I’m wearied to the death to hear These college pastors preach all day, talk through The nose, and praise, in the same breath, the sun, The moon, and my Lord Egliuston. Come down! *[Renewed acclamations.* LOCKYER, *much confused, leaves the pulpit and mingles in the crowd.* A BAILIFF *enters, pauses on the threshold of the door and calls out.*

BAILIFF.
The prisoners, my lord!

CROMWELL.
Let them come in. *[The condemned Cavaliers enter,* LORD ORMOND *at their head. They are preceded by* THE HIGH-SHERIFF *and are surrounded by Archers and Sergeants-at-Arms.*

SCENE XIII.

The same. LORD ORMOND, LORD ROCHESTER, LORD BOSEBERRY, LORD CLIFFORD, SIR PETERS DOWNIE, LORD DROGHEDA, SEDLEY, SIR WILLIAM MURRAY, DOCTOR JENKINS, MANASSES-BEN-ISRAEL, *all, with hands bound behind their buck, naked feet, and rope around the neck.* THE HIGH-SHERIFF, *Archers of the city, Sergeants-at- Arms. The crowd watch with interest and curiosity the entrance of the Cavaliers and step back as they appear.*

THE SERGEANTS-AT-ARMS.
Room — room!
[The Cavaliers pause before CROMWELL'S *throne,* ORMOND *and* ROCHESTER *are in the front row; they are firm and tranquil.* MURRAY *and* MANASSES *are the only ones who appear dejected. For some instants* CROMWELL *watches the prisoners, the assembly, the crowd, and seems to enjoy the anxious silence which pervades the place.*

CROMWELL (*folding his arms and turning to the Cavaliers).* What do you want?
[Aside] If they would ask For pardon!

LORD ORMOND *(with steady voice).*
We are men of courage, and Ask neither pity nor pardon from you! Men who die as we are to die are proud. Naught troubles nor debases us. What can We hope to gain from you, a murderer, A vassal, who upon his vulgar

shield Puts crest and robe and royal sceptre, ‘til He has the arms of England quartered there!

CROMWELL *(interrupting him).* Then wherefore come to me?

LORD ORMOND.
To ask one word. What path shall lead us to our heavenly home? Your men conduct us to the gallows: do You know our rank?

CROMWELL.
We know that you are traitors Condemned to death.

LORD ORMOND.
But we are noblemen. You do not seem to understand: I will Explain. The gallows are not made for men Who bear our names; however low your rank The rope, dishonouring us, hurts you as well. There is no hanging between men of taste And men of quality. We claim our rights.

CROMWELL.
Is that all?
[Aside.] It is life they ask.

LORD ORMOND.
It is.
Consider the request.

CROMWELL. What do you wish?

LORD ORMOND. To have our heads cut off: freedom from gallows, And its indignities. We have the right To be beheaded.

CROMWELL (*low to* THURLOE). Humanity is strange! They have no fear, no shame: to scaffold mounts Their pride with them. They face eternity With thoughts governed by prejudice; for them The block is but a scene of vanity.
[To the Cavaliers with a bitter smile. I understand: when you appear in heaven You want the folding-doors to open wide. For a rough hemp, the

honour were too great To choke this high and mighty English lord! It has been done, however. In your ranks There are those whose ancestors would not blush, Because they have not any! There's the Jew, And the plebeian magistrate.

DOCTOR JENKINS.
I am Not judged; you have no right to fine, nor kill, Nor send me unto prison. I am free! The Norman charter reads: " Nullus homo Liber imprisionetur."

LORD ROCHESTER (*laughing, to* SEDLEY). 'Sdeath'
Will he quote laws to him from Arthur's time?

CROMWELL *(to Cavaliers)*. We hold you, gentlemen. Accomplices, Lieutenants, chiefs, you 're caught in your own trap. The hour has tolled; the avenging arm is raised; The moment is unfortunate to ask For favours!

LORD ORMOND *(interrupting him)*. Favours, sir? May God forbid! A right of England's old nobility We claim. A right! Do you hear? Favour? Faith! A block, the axe!

CROMWELL. Peace, you who speak so loud. Last night you came girded with swords and knives Into my house. You bribed or fooled the guard. You thought to seize me helpless in my bed. What end had you in store for me?

LORD ORMOND.
No gallows!

CROMWELL.
Doubtless; you were in too much haste. The knife Works faster. But since God delivered you Into my hands, my gentlemen assassins, What do you ask of me?

LORD ORMOND.
To die as knights;
To die for our king.

LORD ROCHESTER. Die for Rowland — yes I
[Low to ROSEBERRY. I'm always ready; 't was my money first, And now it is my head. Another debt To his account.

CROMWELL *(to* LORD ORMOND, *after a moments reflection).*
Old man, I make you judge. If chance had put me in your place, and you In mine, tell me, what would you do?

LORD ORMOND.
I would Not pardon!

CROMWELL. Well, I pardon you!
[Movement of surprise in the assembly.

ALL THE CAVALIERS.
What's this?

CROMWELL.
You 're free!

LORD ORMOND. Just Heaven! *[To* CROMWELL.] If you but knew my name —

CROMWELL (*interrupting him).* That does not matter.
[Low to THURLOE.] If he names himself We can't control the people.
[Turning suddenly to LORD BROGHILL, *who has stood among the escort in solemn silence.*
An old friend Of yours, Lord Broghill, is in London. [LORD ORMOND *and* LORD BROGHILL *turn away with astonishment.*

LORD BROGHILL.
Who?

CROMWELL.
Lord Ormond.

LORD BROGHILL.

Ormond!
[Aside.] What if he should know!

CROMWELL.
He has been here five days, my dear Broghill.
[Feels in his coat and takes out the sealed packet which he seized from DAVENANT.
Here is a packet of great interest To him; his name is on the fold. Do you Know his address?

LORD BROGHILL *(troubled).* No, I do not, my lord!

CROMWELL.
'T is Bloum, the Rat House, on the Strand.

LORD BROGHILL *(stammering).*
Wherefore —

LORD ORMOND *(aside, examining the parchment* CROMWELL
holds).
The royal message! Davenant was false.

CROMWELL *(jiving package to* LORD BROGHILL). Give it to Ormond with my compliments; This letter falling into other hands Might compromise him. Beg him to depart At once and be content not to return. If he needs money, give him some.

LORD ROSEBERRY *(low to* LORD ORMOND).
Money!
Thrice happy man! If he had offered me But surety for my debts!

LORD ROCHESTER *(low, congratulating* LORD ORMOND).
A pleasant act. I'm charmed he spared the mention of our name.

CROMWELL (*with loud, gruff voice).* Lord Rochester!

LORD ROCHESTER (*starting with surprise).* What?

CROMWELL.
I have pardoned you!
Go to the devil!

LORD ROCHESTER (*low to* LORD ROSEBERRY). Less civility He shows to me. No matter. Proteus Is this man, a magician? On approach He seems a royal lion; try to make Him go to sleep: a touch of wand — presto! The sleeping lion is a wakeful cat; The cat becomes a tiger, and roars loud; Presto! the claw is changed to velvet paw, But through the velvet one can feel its clutch.

CROMWELL. My learned chaplain, we entreat you not To stay too long among us.

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).*
I agree!

CROMWELL *(continuing).* Thanks to the fines, imposed by a just law, To swear in England is expensive, friend. Since you, with best intentions, can't keep still, Taxed by this law at every syllable, You would be ruined speedily.

LORD ROCHESTER.
My thanks For the good counsel.
[To the people who follow him with derisive laughter. Yes, applaud, vile race!

CROMWELL.
Wait, Doctor! Take your wife away with you.

LORD ROCHESTER *(trembling).*
My wife?

CROMWELL. My Lady Rochester. [DAME GUGGLIGOY *hastily descends from the Lady Protectress's tribune and throws herself on* ROCHESTER'S *neck. Hooting in the crowd.*

DAME GUGGLIGOY *(embracing* ROCHESTER).
Dear spouse!

LORD ROCHESTER *(trying to free himself).* God’s mercy!

CROMWELL.
Yes, you must united be! What would men say to see one half depart Without the other? — *[To* DAME GUGGLIGOY.
Go, follow your husband. [DAME GUGGLIGOY *takes* ROCHESTER’S *arm, who resigns himself sadly.*

LORD ROCHESTER *(aside).* What amnesty! You are the most chastised And most ridiculous, Wilmot! Behold The strange appearance which your two halves make! One with this coat, the other with that face, — And Frances sees me! God! ‘t will make me wise!

CROMWELL (*pointing to* SIR WILLIAM MUREAY, *in the group of Cavaliers).* Go, Murray, once again receive the blows Due Charles, in common parlance Prince of Wales, For this bad plot, which failed so stupidly. *[The populace applaud. The Archers and Constables seize* MUEEAY, *who hides his face in his hands and seems to be overwhelmed with shame and despair.* CROMWELL *addresses the Rabbi.* This Jew who would have graced the astragal Of gallows, is now free.
[MANASSES *joyfully lifts his face;* CROMWELL *continues, turning to* BAREBONE, *who stands beside the throne.* If he consents To pay your bill, Barebone.
[BAREBONE *draws a long parchment from his pocket, which he hands to* MANASSES.

MANASSES (*examining the bill).*
‘T is dear.

CROMWELL *(to the other prisoners).*
You are All free! — *[The Archers unbind the Cavaliers.*

THURLOE *(low to* CROMWELL). All? Think, this plot was serious!

CROMWELL *(low)*. I have the people; no use for gibbets now! [SIR WILLIAM MURRAY, *whom the Archers are dragging away, throws himself on his knees and turns his clasped hands to* CROMWELL.

SIR WILLIAM MURRAY.
Mercy, my lord!

CROMWELL.
What, from the whip? Away!
Is such not a fit service for your back, —
Whipped for your king? You serve a noble cause.
You'll call yourself a martyr, a Montrose!
[Makes a sign and the Archers drag MURRAY *away. The Protector addresses the crowd with an imperious and an inspired air.*
O sainted people, spare our fallen foes!
The elephant forbears to crush the snake.
Thus may Heaven save you from all future snares, You chosen vessels!

LORD ROCHESTER (*low to* SEDLEY).
They are naught but jars.
[The people respond to the Protector's words by prolonged shouts; with a gesture, he commands silence and continues.

CROMWELL.
By clemency I wish to mark this day!
[To THE HIGH-SHERIFF.
Seek Carr, a prisoner in the Tower.
[THE HIGH-SHERIFF *goes out.* CROMWELL *leans on the arm of his chair and seems to meditate. Silence and attention among the audience.* SIR RICHARD WILLIS, *who was absent a short time and has now returned, accosts* ORMOND *among the group of Cavaliers.*

SIR RICHARD (*saluting* LORD ORMOND).
My lord, Accept my compliments.

LORD ORMOND (*surprised).*
What! It is you? Free also? An enigma is that man! He apes kingcraft to pardon us like this!
[Pressing SIR RICHARD'S *hand.* I owe him thanks for you, if not for me.
[With a mysterious air he bends to SIR RICHARD'S *ear.* The traitor's Davenant! If I meet him —

SIR RICHARD. Do you think so? There are some reasons for And some against. Mistrust him, if you will. Be prudent, now that you've escaped!

LORD ORMOND *(pressing his hand again).*
My friend, How much we are deceived!

CROMWELL *(rousing himself from his reverie, designating the Cavaliers to* STOUPE).
Embark these fools To-morrow on the Thames. Their punishment I here remit in full.
[Rudely addressing HANNIBAL SESTHEAD, *who has displayed his luxurious equipment on the steps of the platform.*
Sir Hannibal, Though cousin of a king, you must be taught That I am master in my own domain. You 're light of character, and have strange ways Not much in harmony with our elect. Pray, take them hence. Go forth, and sin no more.

HANNIBAL SESTHEAD *(aside).* He pardons treason sooner than satire. I am the only sufferer.
[Goes out with his pages and his dogs. The crowd hoots at him and applauds CROMWELL.

OVERTON (*low to* GARLAND). Behold The people's transports! Just a speech, a word, And they are changed.

LORD ROCHESTER (*low to* ROSEBERRY).
From the Protector's arm God saves us. Let us be content!

GARLAND (*low to* OVERTON).
He broke Our weapons with a single word!

CROMWELL (*perceiving* GRAMADOCH *between the Guards).*
What does My fool between four constables?

GRAMADOCH *(boldly).*
Oh, these Are the Fool's guard.

AN ARCHER. This idiotic dwarf Took up the gauntlet which your Highness threw.

CROMWELL (*irritated.. to* GRAMADOCH). You knave!

GRAMADOCH. Only a fool dared do it, lord.

CROMWELL *(smiling, and signing to the Archers to release him).*
Go! Go!
[GRAMADOCH *hastens to rejoin his comrades in their tribune; they embrace him, and give him a cordial welcome. In the mean time* CROMWELL *has turned to* MILTON.
Milton, is he content?

MILTON.
He waits!

CROMWELL.
I am content with you. Speak to me now. Have you nothing to ask me?

MILTON.
Yes, I have.

CROMWELL.
What is it?

MILTON.
A favour!

CROMWELL.

I grant it. Speak!

MILTON.
Your Highness pardoned all your enemies; But one is left.

CROMWELL.
Who?

MILTON.
Davenant.

CROMWELL.
What, he? The Papist! Davenant! The royal spy! Ask something else.

MILTON. Ah, no! Let me insist. He was of the conspiracy, — too true. He is a Papist, and he sought your death. But since that you have pardoned these men!

CROMWELL.
No, I cannot.

MILTON. He was sharer in these plots, I know, but —

CROMWELL (*impatiently).* Speak no more of him to me. The man writes comedies.
[MILTON, *disappointed, turns away;* CROMWELL *recalls him with a gentler tone.*
It is our will To make you poet-laureate, Milton.

MILTON.
Such title I could not accept, my lord; The post is not yet vacant.

CROMWELL (*surprised).*
No? By whom Is it then filled?

MILTON. By Davenant!

CROMWELL (*shrugging his shoulders).*
Under The reign of the late James the First!

MILTON.
Since he Must keep his chains, leave him his laurels too.

CROMWELL. There's logic worthy of a poet, yes! Phrases an arm in length; bombastic soul! You'd govern and reprove your governors, You who pass all your time forcing poor words Into strange metre!

MILTON. Solomon composed Five thousand proverbs.
[CROMWELL *turns away and signs to his son* RICHARD *to approach.*

CROMWELL *(to* RICHARD CROMWELL).
Come, Richard, my heir, The army and the Parliament must ope Its doors to you. I make you colonel, peer Of England, member of the Privy Council.

RICHARD CROMWELL *(saluting his father with embarrassment).*
The duties of the House — my tastes — you are My father and my master too, my lord. But so much honour quite confuses me. If you'll allow me, I will frankly say I have more than I'm worth — more than I want. I love the woods, the fields; leisure I love, And also rest. I like to hunt the deer And stags in herds. I like the open plains, Where I fear no revolts except among My hawks, my falcons, and my hounds. *[Dissatisfied and disconcerted,* CROMWELL *dismisses him with a gesture.*

CROMWELL *(aside, with bitterness).*
Alas!
Would that the other were my eldest son!
What use is all I do?
[Enter CARR, *accompanied by* THE HIGH-SHERIFF. *He forces his way slowly through the crowd; looks with indignation upon all the royal decorations, and advances gravely to the tribune where* CROMWELL *stands.*

SCENE XIV.

The same. CARR.

CARR (*folding his arms and looking* CROMWELL *in the face).* What do you want? Base tyrant by the right of crime, are cells No refuge from your tyranny? What wants The apostate with me now? The turn-coat, what Says he?

VOICES IN THE CROWD. Down with the madman!

CROMWELL *(to the people).*
Let him speak!
God wishes to try David; he permits The son of Semei to curse him thus! *[To* CARR.] GO on!

CARR.
Yes, hypocrite, that is your plan! With fine outside you cover base designs;
On your infernal brow put heaven’s veil;
Jeer while you torture, ornament your chains, And on a bleeding heart pour irony.
That I might crush your sceptre and your mask, God kept me in his quiver until now.
He said, “ Go to the city with your lute, From Cromwell’s temple drive a servile crowd, Destroy the altar, let the idol burn, Tell them the Egyptian is a man, not God.”
Behold you, Cromwell, on your shining throne!
Tremble! Night follows close on gorgeous day.
Think of Nimrod the hunter. Our great Lord Shattered his crossbow as if’t were a toy.
Remember Ishbosheth: that foolish king Was first to make the people line his path;
One hundred warriors of Issachar Went on their horses in advance of him.
But God brings forth — and ’tis the soul’s despair —
Grief out of joy, and ashes from the flame!
Proud Ishbosheth fell like abortive fruit, As falls an echo borne off by the winds!

Bemember Shalmaneser! On fleet steeds This king, surrounded by his armfed hosts, Passed, as in summer ‘neath a heavy sky The lightning passes, ominous and still!

Remember Sennacherib, as he came With his fierce army from Assyria;

Nine hundred thousand men, so furious And proud their breath had pushed the heavens up!

Unclean magicians, centaurs hideous, Arabs clashing their cymbals mightily, Oxen and leopards to the bridle trained;

War chariots armed with brazen scythes; mad steeds Which tigresses had suckled; great elephants Six hundred strong, like moving fortresses, Among the legions planting their huge feet And shaking towers upon their monstrous backs.

Camels and buffaloes and mastodons, Zebras and mammoths of extinguished worlds, —

A roaring herd through which crashed wheels of steel Belonging to the chariots scaled with gold.

At night the camp looked like a field of fire;

And when this monstrous army roused itself The fishermen, sailing their barks of reed, Imagined that they heard the ocean roar.

All added glory to this splendid king.

His mares had wings, and crushed earth as they flew.

With brow banded by stars, he grander seemed Than his grand chariot drawn by elephants.

Around him banners, flags, and flames streamed forth, As stream gold fires around a comet’s course.

But Heaven had pity on this wretched world:

God blew upon this star with shining mane, And suddenly the wonder disappeared, As dies the flickering lamp of vigils lone!

Proud sycophant, you deem yourself more strong Than such great kings, the suns of eastern worlds!

Can you, like eagles, swoop, at any hour Upon Damascus, Carchemish, Samaria?

Have you, like sand, invaded the bazaar, Destroyed Sochoh-Benoth, Tiglath-pileser?

Have you with chariots, horses, rushing crowds, Disturbed the solitude of Lebanon?

No, you have not! O Sovereign of Kings, Your arm has changed the boundaries of States;
Mankind at sight of you draws back in fear.
You hold the world as prey, within your fangs, —
But that is all! In all your wars and deeds God helped above, the people helped below.
Yourself did naught. You ‘re but an instrument, —
The flail which beats the wheat on threshing-floor Where are the gods of Ava and Emathia? What can the Sepharvaim do when touched By God? These idols reigned: you’ll pass away As they have done, inconsequent as is The bell which rattles on a camel’s neck. Soon will the saints gird on their robes ‘gainst you Gad, Asher, Benjamin, and Naphtali Will stand upon Mount Ebal and curse you. The women’s and the children’s jeers will taunt And follow you. Unto your eyes, blinded By hell; unto your feet, earth will be iron, And bronze will be the skies. A purple night Enshrouds your haughty eye-lids, but our God Will crush your head beneath two stones; and we Shall see the people, who have won their rights, Stone future tyrants with your whitened bones. On impious thrones, the world has often seen Its Pharaohs of Memphis and Sultans Of Ethiopia; its popes, its dukes, And emperors, who have amused themselves By torturing their subjects and their slaves. But such a man as you, magician, king, And satrap, a mind so cruel and astute And bold the sun of heaven has not yet looked Upon! Be you accursed!

CROMWELL.
Is this the end?

CARR.
Not yet! Be cursed at setting sun and cursed At break of day; be cursed upon your steed And in your chariot; accursed be Your wooden weapons and your arms of steel.

CROMWELL.
Is that all?

CARR.

No! Accursed be the air Which Zephyr brings; accursed be your bed, The threshold of your door. Be you accursed!

CROMWELL
Well, is that all?

CARR.
No! Be accursed! CROMWELL.
Come, come!
You’ll rend your lungs! Have you finished? Hear me! You are in prison for an ancient crime! I pardon you. Go! You are free!

CARR.
Tyrant!
By what right, free? Have you not sinned enough?
Do you wish to increase your list of crimes?
With your ballista wherefore strike my tower?
Why drag me from the cell where I must spend My days? To break my chains? Speak, were they forged By you? You pardon me? Heartless despot!
Your clemency brings ruin like your rage!
Long Parliament placed me within my cell;
My treachery deserved the punishment, For I rebelled against the sacred yoke.
I had marked two portions of the heroes’ spoil, And I am punished. I live in the depths Of a dark tower where iron bars shut out All glint of day; the spider hangs his web Upon my bed, and in its meshes oft The bat tangles his wings; at night, I hear The worm arise and toil within the tomb.
I hunger and I thirst; in summer I
Am warm; in winter I am cold. ‘T is well!
To all things I submit and give example.
But you, how dare you touch the temple, Noll?
How dare you even move a post? What they, The saints, have bound can you unbind? Alas!
Of thunder can one hide the consequence?
Condemned by them, no one can set me free.
No! and I proudly walk among these men, The last vestige of their authority.

A shattered pine, deep in the precipice, I flaunt the noble scar upon my brow.

You wish to break my chains by force, do you?

[To people.] See, how your tyrant treads you under-foot!

No, I prefer — I, Carr, who face you now, Prefer the chain of captive to the yoke Of slave. What do I say? I much prefer My destiny to yours. I like my tower Far better than your palace heaped with spoil.

I'd not exchange my sentence for your crime, My honest chains for your usurped throne.

We are both criminals, and when we die The Lord will count your crimes and my remorse.

Re-ope my prison doors, or, if you wish My freedom, restore the equilibrium Of our great State: give back our Parliament;

Then, come with me. Both of us with bowed head, Bound with one rope, with ashes on our face, Before its bar we'll stand and sue for grace.

But while I wait for that auspicious day, Give back my chains; respect my liberty!

[.Bursts of laughter from the multitude. Hush, yonder rabble! In my cell, I am The only Englishman you do not rule!

The only free man. There I curse you; there I offer our two selves as holocaust To Heaven! My prison! In vain you bid me break Its bars! My prison! If profane laws you need And worldly texts for your corrupted hearts, By right of *habeas corpus* I go back!

CROMWELL.

So be it! He invokes a law without Repeal.

TRICK *(in the Fools' tribune).* His prison! 'T is a mistake; he means His private box.

[CARR *exits proudly amid the hisses of the populace.*

SYNDERCOMB *(low to* GARLAND). He is the only man Amongst us all.

VOICES IN THE CROWD. Hail! Glory to the saints! Glory to God! The God of Sinai! — Long life to the Protector!

[SYNDERCOMB, *exasperated by the imprecations of* CARR *and the acclamations of the people, draws his dagger and rushes towards the* *platform.*

SYNDERCOMB *(waving his dagger).*
To the King Of Sodom, death!

EARL OF CARLISLE *(to Halberdiers).* Arrest the assassin!

CROMWELL *(restraining the Guard by a gesture).*
Make way For this man! — *[To* SYNDERCOMB.
Your death!
Speak! What do you want?

SYNDERCOMB.

CROMWELL.
Depart in liberty! Depart in peace!

SYNDERCOMB.
I am the risen avenger! If your guard Did not restrain my lips —

CROMWELL *(motioning to the Soldiers to release him).*
Speak on!

SYNDERCOMB.
No words Of mine should touch you. Did they not hold back My arm —

CROMWELL.
Strike!

SYNDERCOMB *(advancing one step and lifting his dagger).* Die, O tyrant! *[The people rush upon him and disarm him.*

VOICES IN THE CROWD.
Murder is The answer that he makes to pardon. Let Him perish! Let the murderer die! *[The infuriated people seize* SYNDERCOMB *and drag him, struggling desperately, out of the hall.*

CROMWELL *(to* THURLOE).
See what Is done to him. — [THURLOE *goes out.*

VOICES IN THE CROWD. Annihilate the traitor!

CROMWELL.
My brothers, I have pardoned him. He knows Not what he does.

VOICES IN THE CROWD *(outside).*
Away! Unto the Thames! Drown him! — [*Re-enter* THURLOE.

THURLOE *(to* CROMWELL). The people are satisfied. The Thames Received the mad apostle.

CROMWELL *(aside).*
Clemency Is, after all, a method too. ‘T is one Foe less; but to such deeds the people must Not get too. well accustomed.
[Moment of silence; cries of joy and triumph among THE CROWD. CROMWELL, *seated on his throne, seems to quietly relish the delirious acclamations of the populace and the army.*

OVERTON *(low to* MILTON).
To this idol A human victim has been sacrificed. All is for him; the frivolous multitude, The army too. He lacks not anything. He has All that he needs. Our efforts served To raise him higher, that was all. In vain Do men defy him; vainly shall they dare To attack him; he has the power to crush us, one By one. Devotion he inspires; terror He inspires also; he should be satisfied.

CROMWELL (*dreamfully).* When am I to be king?

CURTAIN

THE BURGRAVES

A TRILOGY

This historical play was first performed by the Comédie-Française on 7 May 1843. The drama takes place along the Rhine and concerns the return of Barbarossa, who was a German Holy Roman Emperor.

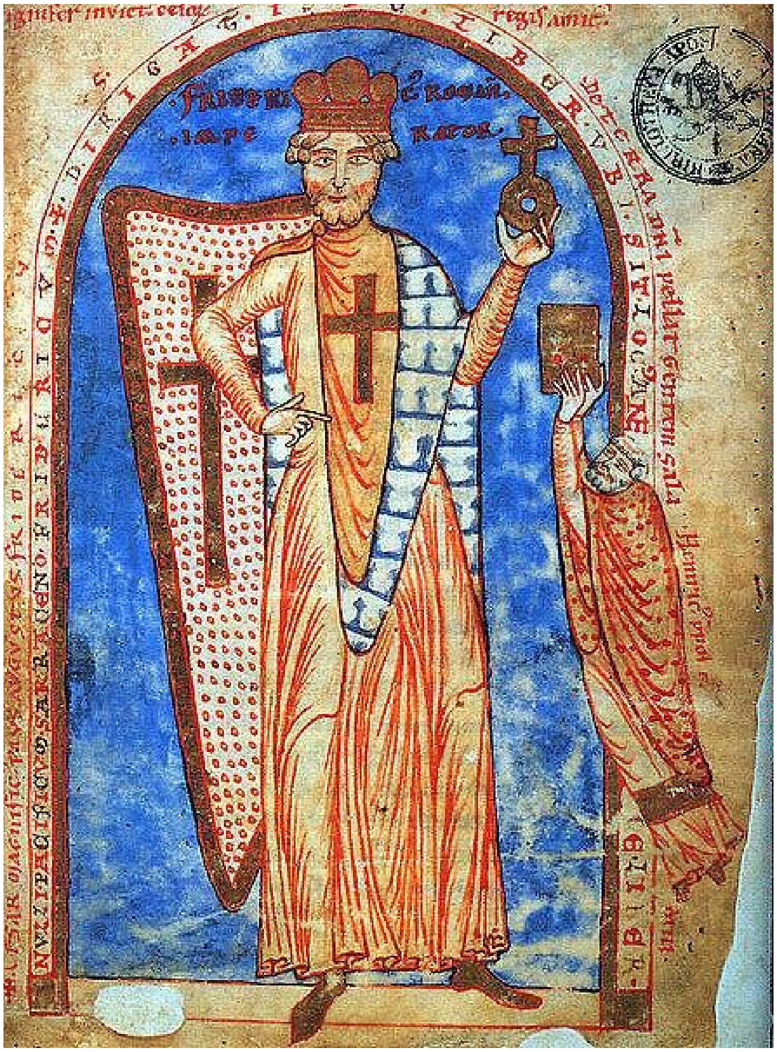

Frederick I Barbarossa (1122–1190)

THE BURGRAVES

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DRAMATIS PERSONS.

JOB, *Burgrave of Heppenheff.* MAGNUS, *son of Job, Burgrave of Wardeck.* HATTO, *son of Magnus, Marquis of Verona, Burgrave of Nollig.*
GORLOIS, *son of Hatto (bastard), Burgrave of Sareck.*
FREDERIC, *of Hohenstaufen.*
OTBERT.
DUKE GERHARD, *of Thuringen.*
GILISSA, *Margrave of Lusatia.*
PLATON, *Margrave of Moravia.*
LUPUS, *Count of Mons.*
CADWALLA, *Burgrave of Okenfels.*
DARIUS, *Burgrave of Lahneck.*
ZOAGLIO GIANNILARO, *Genoese nobleman.*
UTHER, *Pendragon of Brittany.*
COUNTESS REGINA.
GUANHUMARA.
EDWIGE.

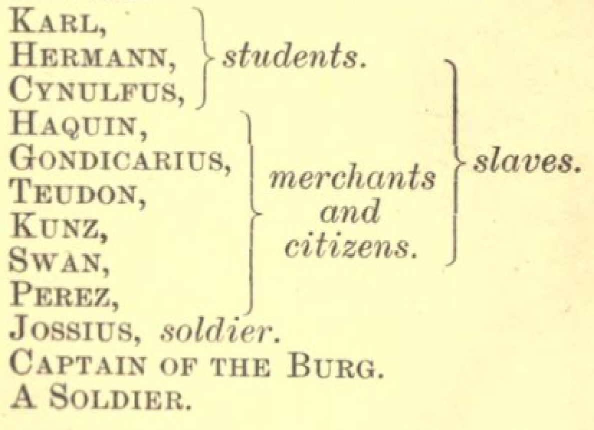

KARL,
HERMANN, *students.*
CYNULFUS,
HAQUIN,
GONDICARIUS,
TEUDON, *merchants and citizens.* *slaves.*
KUNZ,
SWAN,
PEREZ,
JOSSIUS, *soldier.*
CAPTAIN OF THE BURG.
A SOLDIER.

Setting: HEPPENHEFF, 1200.

THE BURGRAVES.

PART I.

THE GRANDSIRE.

SCENE. — *The ancient gallery of seigniorial portraits of the burg of Heppenheff. This gallery is circular in form and spreads around the great tower; it communicates with the rest of the castle by means of four large doors which are situated at the four cardinal points. As the curtain rises, one notices that a portion of this gallery makes a turn and is lost behind the round wall of the tower. To the left, one of the four large communicating doors. To the right, a large and high door, communicating with the interior of the lower it stands upon an elevation of three steps and has a small house-door beside it. In the background a semi-circular roman promenade with low pillars, curious capitals, over which is a second story, (practicable) communicating with the gallery by means of a stair case of six steps. The sky is visible through the large arches of this promenade and also the remainder of the castle, whose highest tower is surmounted with an immense black flag, which floats in the breeze. To the left, near to the large folding-door, there is a small window filled with high-coloured glass. Near to the window, an arm-chair. The gallery looks uninhabited and dilapidated. The walls and the stone vaulting, on which some almost effaced frescoes are distinguishable, are green and mouldy through the oozing of rain. The portraits hung in the panels of the gallery are all turned to the wall. As the curtain rises, evening approaches. That part of the castle which is visible through the arches of the promenade seems to be lighted and illuminated in the interior, although it is yet broad daylight. The noise of trumpets and clarions comes from that side of the bury, and at times loud songs accompanied by the clinking of glasses are heard. Nearer, one hears the rustling of iron, as if a troop of men in chains were mooing about in that portion of the promenade which is invisible. A woman leans against the great door, and appears to be listening to the flourishes and singing in the neighbouring hall. She is alone, old, half covered by a long black veil, dressed in ragged sack-cloth, bound with a chain, which by a double link is fastened to her waist and to her naked feet, she has an iron collar around her neck.*

SCENE I.

GUANHUMARA *(alone, listening. Song outside).*
“To us the civil war Eternal glory brings: Defiance to the cities, Defiance to the kings.
“The Burgrave flourishes When days of peace are o’er. Barons, defy the pope, Defy the emperor!
“We ‘re brave! Then let us reign, — Reign by the fire, the rod. Burgraves, defy the devil! Defy almighty God!”

[Trumpets and clarions.

GUANHUMARA.
The lords are gay! The feasting still goes on’
[She looks towards the opposite side of the theatre. Under the lash, the prisoners work since dawn.
[*She listens.*
Here, sounds of revel; there, the clank of chains.
[She fixes her eyes on the door of the tower to the right. There, father and grandfather, bent with years, Watch the results of all their sombre work. They meditate upon their life, their race, And, out of reach of yon mad jests, review Their crimes, less hideous than their progeny. How great these lords in their prosperity Have been, and are to-day. Frontier dukes, And sovereign counts, and sons of gothic kings Bend to their level and their equals are ‘ Their city, full of clarions, songs, and hoots, Stands inaccessible among the clouds. A thousand soldiers, bandits with fierce eyes, Armed to the teeth, keep an eternal watch. All things go for protection to their lair. And yet in a dark corner of the place Wanders a woman, old and bent and sad, Chains on her feet, a yoke upon her neck, In rags, face veiled; a wretched slave is she: But, princes, tremble! This slave’s name is Hate! *[She goes up stage and mounts the steps of the promenade. A troop of slaves enter from the gallery at the right; they are chained (some of them in couples), and they carry working-tools, pics, pickaxes, hammers, etc., in their hands.* GUANHUMARA, *leaning against one of the pillars in the promenade,*

loatches them thoughtfully. By the torn and soiled garments of the prisoners one can recognize their former professions.

SCENE II.

KUNZ, TEUDON, IIAQUIN, GONDICARIUS, *citizens and merchants with grey beards*; Jossius, *an old soldier;* HERMANN, CYNULFUS, KARL, *students from, the University of Boulogne and the School of Maintz;* SWAN *(or* SUEUON) *merchant from Lubeck. The prisoners advance slowly in separate groups, the students with the students, citizens and merchants together, soldier alone. The old men seem exhausted with work and grief. During this entire scene and the two which follow it, the flourishes and singing from the next hall are audible.*

TEUDON (*throwing down the tool which he held, and sitting on the stone step, in front of the double door of the tower).*
The hour of rest at last! Oh, I am tired’

KUNZ (*shaking his chain).*
Once I was free and rich — and now!

GONDICARIUS *(leaning against a pillar).*
Alas!

CYNULFUS *(watching* GUANHUMARA, *who crosses the promenade slowly).*
I wish I knew on whom that woman spies.

SWAN *(low to* CYNULFUS).
The other month, our masters, — race accursed! —
Seized her among the merchants of Saint Gall.
I know no more’

CYNULFUS.
It is enough for me That she has freedom while we all are chained.

SWAN.
She cured a fever which near killed Hatto, —
Hatto, the eldest of the grand-children.

HAQUIN.
A serpent bit the Burgrave Rollo’s heel. The other day; she cured that too.

CYNULFUS.
Indeed!

HAQUIN.
I think, for my part, she’s a sorceress.

HERMANN.
No! she’s a fool.

SWAN.
She knows a thousand things. She cured not only Rollo, Hatto, but Eloi, Kniid, Azzo, — lepers from whom all men fled.

TEUDON.
This woman’s working at some sombre scheme. I tell you, she’s some wretched plot afoot With these three lepers, who are bound to her. You stumble on them at most every turn. They ‘re like three dogs which follow a she-wolf.

HAQUIN.
Yes; in the cemetery, yesterday, I saw them where the lepers live, these four, Making a coffin; nailing down the planks. She held a vase, and waved it, in her hands, Crooning, as women sing to babes who sleep. She made a philtre of the dead man’s bones.

SWAN.
All night they were afoot. The stars were bright, And one could see this woman and the lepers, Masked! It was horrible! I could not sleep; I watched them.

KUNZ.
Yes, they have some hiding-place Here in the caves. The other day the witch With her three lepers passed with surly looks By the long wall. I turned my eyes away One instant. When I looked again they'd gone, — Had sunk within the wall!

HAQUIN.
These wretched men, These lepers, sorcerers, with whom we live, Oppress me.

KUNZ.
It was near to the Lost Cave.
You know it?

HERMANN. That these lepers serve the one Who healed them is but natural and just.

SWAN.
Instead of lepers and bad Hatto, Kunz, The one within these walls she ought to cure Is old Job's niece —

KUNZ.
Regina! God bless her!
She is an angel.

HERMANN. She is dying.

KUNZ.
Yes!
Horror of Hatto, loneliness, and grief Are killing her. Each day she's nearer death.

TEUDON.
Poor child —
[GUANHUMARA *re-appears at back of stage and crosses slowly.*

HAQUIN.

Look! There the old witch goes again. She terrifies me. Everything about her, — Her wild looks, her dumb grief, her piercing glance So wise, so clear, so terrible at times, Her wondrous powers which are miraculous, — They frighten me!

GONDICABIUS. Accursed be this place.

TEUDON.
Be quiet! Peace!

GONDICABIUS. Nobody comes this way. Our masters are at supper. We ‘re far off, We can’t be overheard.

TEUDON *(lowering his voice and looking towards the tower).*
They ‘re both in there.

GONDICAEIUS.
Who — both?

TEUDON.
The old men, — son and father. Peace. Except Madame Regina (this I have From Edwige the nurse), except Otbert, The young adventurer who came last year, Though but a boy to serve at Heppenheff, And whom the grandfather, cursed in his sons, Loves for his youth and for his loyalty, — No hand opens that door, no one comes here. The man of prey sits in his den alone’ There was a time when he defied the world; When twenty counts and twenty dukes, his sons And grandsons, generations five, of which His mountain was the ark, surrounded him, As if this bandit patriarch were king. But age has broken him. He lives apart And sits there, ‘neath a gorgeous canopy, Alone. His son, old Magnus, standing, holds His lance. For months he never speaks a word. At night one sees him, entering, pale and crushed, Some secret hall of which he keeps the key. Where does he go?

SWAN.
This old man has strange griefs. HAQUIN.
His sons weigh like bad spirits on his mind.

KUNZ.
‘T was not in vain that he was cursed!

GONDICARIUS.
‘T was just.

SWAN.
When he was very old, he had a son, His last son, whom he loved, — so goes the world; Always the grey-beard loves the head of gold. When but one year of age this child was lost.

KUNZ.
A gypsy stole it.

CYNUFLUS. Near a field of wheat.

HAQUIN.
As for myself, I know, this city built On mountain top, and having, so they say, Witnessed a monstrous crime, was left long time Deserted, and at length was pulled down by Teutonic order. Finally the years Oblivion brought, and suddenly, one day The master, a fantastic man, who changed His name as we change hats, returned. Since then, By his command, the black flag always waves Over the castle.

SWAN *(to* KUNZ). Have you noticed, son, At base of the round tower, above the stream Which howls in the ravine, at angle with The moat, a narrow window crossed with bars, Twisted and broken?

KUNZ.
It is the Lost Cave. I spoke about it a short while ago.

HAQUIN.
A gloomy spot. A spectre habits there, ‘T is said.

HERMANN.
Nonsense!

CYNULFUS. The wall seems streaked with blood.

KUNZ.
What’s certain, is, that none can enter there. The secret of the entrance’s lost. The window Is all we know of it. No living soul Goes in.

SWAN.
Yet, every night, when I pass by The rock, I hear footsteps within.

KUNZ *(with horror).*
You ‘re sure?

SWAN.
Quite sure.

TEUDON.
Come, Kunz — enough! Here silence would Be wise.

HAQUIN. This place is full of mystery. I watch all things; all gives me food for thought.

TEUDON.
Let’s talk of something else; what is to happen No one but God can tell.
[Turns to a group which has taken no part in the scene so far. They are in a corner, listening attentively to what a young student is saying.
Come, Karl, we’ll hear Your story too.
[KARL *comes to the front, all draw around him; the two groups of slaves, old men and youths, mingle together, displaying the same attention.*

KARL.
You must remember, for ‘T is an important point, that’t was last month The adventure happened — [*Seems to reflect a moment.*
Twenty years ago! When Barbarossa died in the Crusades —

HERMANN. Your Max was in a bad locality. So be it!

KARL.

Yes, it is a wretched place, A dreaded spot. A flight of ravens, black And sinister, eternally sweeps ‘round The mountain, and at night, when the deep gloom Envelops them, their awful cries affright The boldest of the huntsmen chasing them Back to Lantern. Great drops of water fall, Like tears from some most awful countenance.

A cavern, black and of most fearful shape, Gapes deep in the ravine. Max Edmoud, Count, Feared not to climb that fearful mount by night.

He boldly entered the unearthly caves.

A pallid light of dawn revealed their horrors As he moved on, when suddenly, far down The gloomy depths, beneath a vaulted arch, Seated upon a chair of brass, his feet Enveloped by his mantle, to the right A sceptre, to the left a globe, he saw An old man, frightful, motionless, bowed down, In purple robes, armed with a sword, and crowned.

Upon a block of stone the old man leaned.

Although Count Max was brave and had waged war With John the Warrior, he felt himself Grow pale before this old man, almost lost Amid the grass, the moss, and ivy leaves.

It was the Emperor Frederic Barbarossa.

He slept; a wild and fearful sleep. His beard, Which once was gold, was white as snow, and wound Itself three times around the block of stone;

His long white lashes shut his heavy lids;

A pierced heart bled on his scarlet shield.

At instants during his unnatural sleep His hand grasped blindly at his sword. God knows What dreams were passing through his soul

HERMANN.

What more?

KARL.

Listen. The sound of footsteps in the cave Awakened the old man; he raised his head, And fixing on the Count a savage look, He asked him, as he opened his dull eyes, “ Chevalier, have the ravens flown away?” Count Max returned, “ No, sire.” At that reply The old man bowed his head without a word. And Max, dumb, stupefied with terror, saw This phantom emperor fall asleep again. *[While* KARL *has been speaking, all the prisoners have gradually drawn around him, listening with increasing interest to his story.*

Jossius *was one of the first to come as soon as he heard the name of* BARBAROSSA.

HERMANN (*laughing heartily).* That is a most extraordinary tale!

HAQUIN *(to* KARL). If rumour’s right, ‘t was in the Cydnus that The Emperor drowned himself in sight of all His troops.

JOSSIUS. The current carried him away. I know, for I was there. I saw it all. It was a fearful sight, and from my mind The memory will never be effaced Othon of Wittelsbach, you know, hated The Emperor, but when he saw him thus At mercy of the waves, while on him rained The Turkish javelins, he, Prince Othon, On horseback leaped into the angry stream, Offering himself as target to the foe. “ We’ll save the Emperor,” he cried.

HERMANN.
In vain!

JOSSIUS.
Yes, vain, though all tried valiantly. There died Two counts and soldiers sixty-three for him.

KARL.
That’s nothing to prevent his ghost from haunting The Malpas Valley —

SWAN.
Well, I have been told, That by a miracle he saved himself, Became a hermit, and is yet alive.

GONDICARIUS. Pray God he be! May he help Germany Before the year twelve hundred twenty comes, — The fatal year, when the empire must fall.

SWAN.
Already, on all sides, our glory wanes.

HAQUIN.
Yes, if he were alive! I dream of it.

To rescue us his loyal subjects from This hell, he’d recommence the Burgraves’ war!

KUNZ.
The whole world groans as much as we poor slaves. Our country has no chief, Europe no bounds.

HAQUIN.
Bread fails —

GONDICARIUS. Along the borders of the Rhine There’s naught but swarming of new brigand life.

KUNZ.
The electors feed on quarrels ‘mongst themselves.

HERMANN. Cologne declares for Suabia.

SWAN.
And Erfurt For Brunswick.

GONDICARIUS. Maintz elects Berthold.

KUNZ.
And Treves Wants Frederic.

GONDICARIUS. Meanwhile the country dies.

HAQUIN.
The cities are all closed.

SWAN.
It is unsafe To travel save in companies well armed.

KARL.
Small tyrants harass our good citizens.

TEUDON.
Four emperors! Too much, and not enough; For when it comes to kings, you see, one king’s Worth more than four.

KUNZ.
We need a mighty arm To fight for us; but Barbarossa’s dead!

SWAN *(to* JOSSIUS). Was nothing ever found of him?

JOSSIUS.
The waves Kept all their booty.

TEUDON. Swan, you recollect The prophecy they made upon his birth: “ This child, whose laws one day will rule the world, Shall twice be held as dead, and shall revive.” Well! this prediction, which was ridiculed And then forgotten, has been half fulfilled.

HERMANN.
He’s been the hero of full many a tale.

TEUDON.
I’m telling what I know. In ninety-two, I saw a certain Sfrondati within The hospital at Prague. An aged man, Dalmatian, and ‘t was said, of feeble mind.
This man, within his prison, loudly told That when a youth and searching for adventure He became squire to Rarbarossa’s father, The old Duke Frederic. The Duke was stunned With the prediction made about his son.
The child indeed seemed born for double war;
Guelf through his mother, Ghibeline through his sire, He might be fairly claimed by either side.
His father brought him up within a tower At first, away from every eye, and tried To hide him from the clutch of destiny.
But by and by he sought another refuge, —
One still more safe. A noble girl had borne
To him a bastard son, who, born and bred Among the mountains, did not know his sire Was Duke of Suabia and chief of war.
He knew him only by the name Othon.

The good duke kept this son concealed, for fear He might desire to be a prince and strive To wrest a province from his own dukedom.

The bastard, through his mother, owned a city Near to the Rhine, of which he was Burgrave, And the lord suzerain, — a bandit castle, An eagle’s nest, a lair! The father thought This shelter safe. He sought the burgrave, and Embracing him, said, as he gave the child Into his care, “ My son, this is your brother!”

He went away. No man cheats destiny.

Of course, the father thought his secret safe, Because the child himself ignored the truth.

Till he was twenty Barbarossa lived With the burgrave, when, mark you, this is strange!

One day some herdsmen, passing by the stream Which sweeps the basement of the castle walls, Found in a thicket, at a boulder’s base, Two bloody, naked bodies — breathing yet.

Two men, stabbed in the castle, without noise, And thrown by night into the precipice, Yet were not dead! A miracle, you see.

These two men, who were saved by God’s own hand, Were Barbarossa and his friend Sfrondati, Who alone possessed a knowledge of his birth.

They both were healed; then, with great mystery Sfrondati brought the young son to the Duke, Who for reward imprisoned Sfrondati.

He kept his son, which was the wisest course, And only sought to hush the whole affair.

He never saw his bastard son again;

But when he felt his end approaching, called His son, and had him kiss the crucifix, And swear, kneeling beside his dying bed, Not to disclose himself unto his brother, Nor to avenge himself, but wait until His brother’s age had reached a hundred years. By which *never* was meant, though God is judge. In fact, the bastard died and never knew He was a duke’s son and the brother Of a great emperor. Sfrondati’s face Grew white with horror if one tried to probe This family secret. The two men had loved One girl. The elder felt himself betrayed, Killed one, and sold the other to a bandit, Remorseless fiend, who yoked her, like a man, To boats that ply from Ostia to Rome, — A fearful fate! Sfrondati shook his head And said, “ Forgotten!” His mind was a blank. Nothing survived the dark night of his soul, — Neither the name of bastard, nor the woman. He knew no longer how, he knew not where. I saw this man, imprisoned for a fool In Prague; now he is dead.

HERMANN.
And you conclude?

TEUDON.
I only think. If all these facts are true, The prophecy holds good: because, surely, This hope is not fantastical; if once It is accomplished, why not twice? If young, Our Barbarossa was accounted dead, Why may he not revive again?

HERMANN *(laughing).*
We'll wait Until he comes.

KUNZ *(to* TEUDON). I've heard this tale before. Young Frederic was called Donato then; The bastard's name was Fosco; and the girl Who made the trouble was a Corsican, If I remember right. The lovers used To hide in some cave out of sight, to which The entrance was their own sweet mystery. One night the brother Fosco found them there. With jealous heart and furious hand he changed The idyll to a tragedy.

GONDICARIUS.
And yet That Frederic should have reached the height of power And never tried to find the woman he had loved, Has always seemed a blot upon his fame, — That is, if this romantic tale be true.

TEUDON.
Ah, but he did, my friend! For thirty years Did his most valiant arm ransack both borders Of the Rhine. But the bastard —

KUNZ.
Fosco? TEUDON *(continuing).*
Yes.
Had left his home to serve in Brittany. I think, 't was many years ere he returned.

The emperor devastated mountains, woods, Laid siege to castles and destroyed burgraves, But found her not.

GONDICARIUS (*to* JOSSIUS).
You were among his troops; You fought those knaves; do you remember it?

JOSSIUS.
It was a war of giants. The burgraves For once, stood by each other, tooth and nail.
We had to carry every portal, every wall!
Above, below, riddled with shot and bathed In blood the barons fought; and laughing wildly Beneath their hideous masks, let fiery oil And melted lead upon their helmets stream.
We had to hold the siege without and fight within.
We cut down with our swords, bit with our teeth.
Oh, what assaults! and when at last, with storm And fire we took a castle, oftentimes It buried us among its ruins. It was then That Barbarossa, masked but crowned, fought singly With a bandit, who, forced from his lair, Burned Frederic’s arm with a red hot trefoil, And made the Emperor say to Count d’ Arau, “ I’ll let the headsman pay him back, my friend.”

GONDICARIUS. Was this man taken prisoner?

JOSSIUS.
He escaped. His visor hid his face, and Frederic kept The trefoil on his arm.

TEUDON (*to* SWAN). Well, as for me, I think that Barbarossa is alive. You’ll see!

JOSSIUS. I’m sure that he is dead.

CYNULFUS.
And Max?

HERMANN.
Delusion!

TEUDON. And the grotto at Malpas?

HERMANN.
A fairy-tale!

KARL.
Yet Sfrondati has thrown New light upon this history.

HERMANN.
My faith!
They ‘re naught but dreams of a demented mind, Within whose flickering lights all visions pass, Having no better substance than the clouds.
[Enter a SOLDIER, *whip in hand.*

SOLDIER.
Slaves, get to work! To-night the guests intend To visit this division of the castle. Lord Hatto, the master, brings them. Pass on! Let him not find you dragging your chains here! *[The prisoners pick up their tools, couple themselves together silently and go out with lent heads, driven by* THE SOLDIER *with his whip.* GUANHUMARA *appears upon the upper gallery and follows them with her eyes. Just as the prisoners disappear,* REGINA, EDWIGE, *and* OTBERT *enter through the great door.* REGINA *is dressed in white.* EDWIGE, *the nurse, is old, and dressed in black.* OTBERT *wears the costume of a soldier of fortune, with cutlass and long sword.* REGINA *is very young. She is pale, weak, and is hardly able to walk. She seems like one who has been ill a long time and is about to die. She leans on the arm of* OTBERT. *who supports her, and watches her with great anxiety.* EDWIGE *follows them. Without being seen by any of them,* GUANHUMARA *watches them and listens to them for a few moments, then exits on the side opposite where she came in.*

SCENE III.

OTBERT, REGINA, EDWIGE *(at intervals).*

OTBERT.

Lean more on me. There! Do not walk so fast. Sit down and rest a moment. *[Leads her to a great chair near the window.* How are you?

REGINA.
I ‘m ill — I’m cold. I shiver. Ah! that feasting —
O
It made me suffer.
[To EDWIGE.] See that no one comes.
[EDWIGE *goes out.*

OTBERT.
Have no fear! They will drink until day-break. Why do you go there if it tires you?

REGINA.
Because Hatto —

OTBEET. Hatto?

REGINA (*pacifying him).*
Speak low. He might Have forced me. I am his betrothed.

OTBERT.
You should Have spoken to the old man: Hatto is Afraid of him.

REGINA. What does it matter, now That I am soon to die?

OTBERT.
Oh, don’t say that! REGINA.
To suffer, dream, and die is woman’s lot.

OTBERT (*turning to window).* Look! The fine sunset.

REGINA.
Yes; a dying sun Sets all the world afire I ‘T is autumn — night! All’s dying, — leaves and grass and moss and light.

OTBERT. The leaves will live again!

REGINA (*dreamily, looking at sky).*
Yes, they'll return. Ah me, how fast they fly! 'T is sad to see Them go, the swallows, for they go so far, — Way to the sunny south.

OTBERT.
They will come back!

REGINA.
Perhaps — but not in time! I'll never see The birds, nor look upon the leaves again.

OTBERT.
Regina!

REGINA. Push me closer, closer to The window! — *[She gives him her purse.*
Take my purse, Otbert, and throw The money to those prisoners!
[OTBERT *throws the purse from a window at the lack: she continues looking out of window.*
Ah, yes!
The sun is fire' Those rays, the last ones, look! Have made a crown upon the brow of Taunus. How the river shines. Red splendours decorate The forests. See! those panes of glass in yon Small hamlet, there, are livid fire. How grand! How grand ' Ah me, how beautiful life is! All nature is a stream of living light. Yet I, who have no father and no mother, I'm dying; nobody can save me. None Can help me; I am doomed. Alone and sad, I feel existence ebbing from my heart.

OTBERT.
Alone? And where am I, who love you?

REGINA.
Ah!
Your love is like the rest, — a dream. Sweet dream! But dreams which come at night, go with the dawn, And soon — you will forget me; yes, you

will!

OTBERT.
For you I’d die; for you I’d dare damnation!
You say I do not love you! Ah, you are Not kind! One year ago, when in this den, Surrounded by these plunderers, I saw You first, I loved you. In this gloomy place Where crimes are heaped more high than hope, my eyes Found you, the one white lily in the slums Of hell, one radiant star amid eternal Night! I loved you, the Countess of the Rhine!
Loved you, his bride, — Hatto the invincible.
I’m a poor man (I’ve told you so before), Soldier of fortune, of uncertain birth, Perhaps a slave, or less than slave; perhaps A greater than a king. But all I am Is yours. When you leave me, my life is done.
They ‘re two, in this black castle, whom I love:
You first, you most, you above every one, —
Above a father had I one, or God!
Then next I love the old man, cowering there Beneath the weight of a remorseless past.
In you he finds his only joy. You are, O — sweet young girl, his one last torch of life, His one last faith in Heaven, his one last trust That God, who made you, must be merciful.
I —— wretched, hapless youth, crushed underneath The heel of destiny, I bless you both;
For near you I forget my lot, near him My soul feels power to break its iron bars.
Near you it feels the courage to endure.
You understand me now. I’ve told you all.
That I am sad, am jealous, and I suffer;
Oh, yes, I suffer every hour! Just now, When Hatto looked at you, up in my heart There surged a very hurricane of hate.
I could have killed him, and I checked myself.
I do not love you? Child, give me one kiss And take my heart’s blood. Dear, go tell the priest He does not love his God; Regina, tell The free-born Tuscan that he does not love His home; go tell the sailor that he does Not love the dawn which follows fearful nights;
Go tell the weary prisoner who dies Within his cell, he does not love the hand Which sets him free, — but do not tell me that I love you not! To me

you are the light Which pierces the abyss through which I go, —
The hand of God, sustaining when I fall.
To you I must belong eternally.
You know that well! ‘T is strange! the kindest women, They love to trifle with men’s agonies —
But pardon me, I talk about myself And you are suffering. Upon my knees, Let me give sympathy unto your pain, Which, while I kiss your hands, breathe out on me.

REGINA.
My lot, like yours, Otbert, was full of woe. I am an orphan, just the same as you. If Heaven had willed, our fortunes, so akin, United might have borne us joys divine. But now —

OTBERT.
Since we have spoken of our love, Grief cannot hurt you, for I’ll be on guard. ‘I’ll serve, adore you! I will kill Hatto If he should fret you! I will be Your father and your mother. Do not fear, I will replace them both. Your father, — see, my arms Your mother, — feel, my heart!

REGINA.
You right Now I read clear into your soul.’ T is fierce, resistless as a giant is, And tender, like a woman. That’s you • Your nature is like that, Otbert. Alas “ You can’ do anything for me.

OTBERT.
I can! REGINA.
’Tis not from Hatto that I need defence. As brave and valiant as you are, you can’t Dispute me with the one who claims my body, Demands my soul. My veritable bridegroom, He is death! Before I go to my dark home, Of what is best in me I make two parts; I give one to my Saviour, one to you. Friend, place your gentle hand upon my brow. I say to you as now I stand upon The threshold of another life: Otbert My soul belongs to God, my heart to you. You are my love!

EDWIGE *(returning).* Some one is coming.

REGINA *(to* EDWIGE).
Come!
[Leaning upon OTBERT *and* EDWIGE, *she takes a few steps towards the door. As she is about to pass through, she pauses and turns.* To be sixteen and die, is horrible, When life can give us such great happiness! Otbert, I want to live! Oh, grant my prayer! Don't let the cold tomb separate us, love ' I'm horribly afraid of death! O life! I must have life! Can you not give it me?

OTBERT.
Yes! You shall live!

SCENE IV

[REGINA *exits with* EDWIGE. *The door closes:* OTBERT *seems to follow her with his eyes and continues to speak with her although she has disappeared.*
What! Die? So young and fair! No! Though damnation be the price of life For you, the price I'll pay, and you shall live! *[Perceives* GUANHUMARA, *who has been standing for some time, motionless, at back of stage.* You are the one I want. I need you. Come!

GUANHUMARA.
Go — go your way!

OTBERT. No; hear me!

GUANHUMARA.
Hear you ask About your family, your country. Well! Suppose I do not know? The reason why Your youth was passed in gaunt exile with me? If your true name is Otbert, or Yorglii? If't was in Corsica I found you, naked And alone, searching for life, or if It was Moldavia? Why, I made you come Into this castle? Why I came myself And found you, yet forbade all recognition? Why, although Regina's touched our tyrant's heart, I keep this

chain around my neck, and why, Where’er I go, as if bound by a vow, I always wear this ring? If I am Slav, Or Corsican, or Jew, or Moor? I’ll tell You nothing. Go! Denounce me if you will — But no! Although she gave you bitter food, You’ll not betray the one who fed you with Her life, — the only mother you have known. And after all, what hurt could death give me? *[She tries to pass: he stops her.*

OTBERT.
‘T is nothing of myself I’d ask you now. You, who know everything, Regina —

GUANHUMARA.
Will Be dead within a month. *[Tries to go; he detains her.*

OTBERT.
Can you not save Her?

GUANHUMARA. Save her? What is she to me? *[Dreamily, speaking to herself.’]* Ah, yes! In India I wandered through the woods At night, in unknown depths, a hideous thing, Livid and terrible e’en to the beasts. I searched for herbs, for poisons, philtres strange, Which make the dead alive, and living dead!

OTBERT.
Speak! Can you save her?

GUANHUMARA.
Yes.

OTBERT.
For sake of pity, For God’s sake who now hears us, and for mine, — For me, who kiss your feet with tears, — you will?

GUANHUMARA. Will I? Suppose, a few moments ago, When you looked into your Regina’s eyes, Suppose your enemy, Hatto, had come Upon you suddenly like a wild storm, And, laughing with inhuman rage, had pierced Her palpitating heart with his cold steel And thrown her tender body to the stream Which, like a tiger, howls and fumes below; Suppose he then took you with his red hands And led you to the neighbouring town, and bound You, broken-hearted as you were, with chains, And placed you, naked, in the trader’s mart To be insulted, bought and sold, — a slave; Suppose that you a soldier, born free-man, Were harnessed like a dog, to draw the ships That ply the River Tiber; and suppose After that fearful day life took no note Of you or him for nigh a hundred years, — When you had wandered, mad, from land to land, Throughout those awful years of slavery, And had come back, what would there be Within your heart? Speak now, and tell me that’

OTBERT.
Vengeance and murder and a thirst for blood.

GUANHUMARA. Well, I am vengeance! I am murder, too. I am the thirst for blood! Blind spectre of The Past, unerringly I march unto My goal. And what is this you ask of me? You want me to have pity, to save life, To feel a human kindness — paugh! You make Me laugh. You say you need me. Have a care! What if I should need you? Do not grow pale. What if I brought you up unto this end? What if I’ve tried to shun you for your sake, Because I shrink before your innocence? You, in your turn, O child whom I would spare, Must shrink from rousing memories of my wrongs, Must leave me to my solitude and death. Well, now! At last you know my history! Was it not cruel? ‘T was the lover whom They killed. The woman — ah, I was the woman She was made a slave and sold Alas, she lived! The assassin — he lives too! You can help me. Indeed, I’ve suffered, — suffered long’ Oh, all The rains of heaven have fallen on my brow. I have grown hideous, like a beast, from pain. Tor sixty years I’ve lived on what makes weaker People die. Hunger, exile, and grief Have crushed me to the dust. I’ve seen the Nile, The Indus, seen the ocean and the storms, And the eternal nights of the North Pole. My chains have been embedded in my flesh. I, sick and frozen, — I, a woman, — have Been driven by my masters, with the lash. But it is over. There is nothing human In me now; and when I place my hand *[Putting her hand on her heart.* Here, nothing stirs. I am a statue and I live within a tomb. When, white and cold, I reached this castle just about at dusk One month ago, I wondered, ‘mid the storm, No fateful ear o’erheard my steps of stone. Well! I, who’ve slept with hate for sixty years, I hold my enemy within my power At last. Yea, in my grasp, and if I choose, This hour he dies. One word, he cowers at my feet; One step, and he is dead. Shall I repeat It twice? You are the one, the only one, Who can give me the vengeance that I want. But now that I have won the fearful chance, I say, “ No, no, it would be horrible!” I, who’ve gone down to hell, — I feel afraid. Don’t seek me. Do not tempt me. Keep away; For if there’s question of a pact with me, I’ll claim conditions that will make you blench! Speak! Will you draw your dagger from its sheath? Become a murderer — a headsman? Ah, You tremble! Go, weak heart and faltering arm! I have not sought you! Go; leave me alone!

OTBERT *(pale, and lowering his voice).* What do you ask of me?

GUANHUMARA.
Keep innocent And go —

OTBERT.
To save her, I will shed my blood.

GUANHUMARA.
Go! go!

OTBERT.
Commit a crime! Is that enough?

GUANHUMARA. He tempts me’ Demons, you hear witness that He tempted me. Well, I will not resist. I take you at your word, and you are mine! No matter what may happen. Do not waste Your time in prayers to me. My soul’s a hell Within whose livid depths all prayers are lost. I told you I am pitiless; I can Feel no remorse, except he should come back, — The man who died; Donato, whom I loved. Now listen for the last time, while you stand Upon the threshold of this awful task. I tell you all. There’s some one you must kill, — Kill, as one kills upon the scaffold. Kill, Here; when I will and whom I will, and have No mercy and no faltering. Do you hear?

OTBERT.

Go on!

GUANHUMARA. Each breath of this soft air is pushing Your fair Regina to her tomb. Without My help she dies; and if I will, she lives. You see this phial: just one drop of this, Each night, will bring life back to her.

OTBERT.
Good God Do you speak truly? Give it me!

GUANHUMAEA.
No, wait!
If, thanks to this, you see her come to you With life upon her lips, health in her eyes, A resurrected angel, happy woman, Then you belong to me!

OTBERT *(beside himself).*
My God! I do!

GUANHUMARA.
You swear it?

OTBERT.
Yes.

GUANHUMARA. So be it. Your Regina Shall be my surety, — shall be the forfeit If you break faith with me. I know this place; I am acquainted with its mysteries, And can go anywhere at any time.

OTBERT (*holding out his hand for the phial).* You promise me she'll live?

GUANHUMARA.
Think of your oath.

OTBERT.
She will be saved!

GUANHUMARA. Remember, in exchange I claim your soul.

OTBERT.
Take it and give —

GUANHUMARA.
‘T is mine!
[Gives him the phial.
Until to-morrow!

OTBERT.
Yes, until to-morrow.
[GUANHUMARA *goes out.*

OTBERT *(alone).* Thank you! No matter who you are or what you do, My blessings on you if Regina lives ‘ I’ll take this to her.
[Goes towards the small door, stops a moment and looks at phial.
Cheerfully I give Myself to hell to save my loved one’s life. *[He exits hastily through the small door, which closes after him. From the opposite side, one hears laughter and singing, which gradually draws nearer. The large folding-door opens. The Princes and the Burgraves, led by* HATTO, *enter joyously; they are all crowned with flowers, dressed in silk and gold, without armour of any kind, and with glasses in their hands. They drink, laugh, talk in groups, among which pages are passing, bearing bottles full of wine, golden ewers, and platters laden with fruit. In the background are Halberdiers, motionless and silent. Musicians, clarions, trumpets, heralds.*

SCENE V.

HATTO, GORLOIS, DUKE GERHARD OF THURINGEN; PLATON, *Margrave of Moravia;* GILISSA, *Margrave of Lusatia;* ZOAGLIO GIANNILARO, *Genoese nobleman;*

DARIUS, *Burgrave of Lahneck;* CADWALLA, *Burgrave of Okenfels;* LUPUS, *Count of Mons (a very young man, like* GORLOIS). *Other Burgraves and Princes; some dumb personages, among others* UTHER, *pen- dragon of the Bretons, and the brothers of* HATTO *and, of* GORLOIS. *A few women handsomely dressed. Pages, halberdiers, captains.*

COUNT LUPUS *(singing).*
“The winter’s cold, the wind is high, The snow the mountain covers: What matters that, since we can love? What matters snow to lovers?
“My mother is dead; our family priest Eternal grief discovers: What matters that, since we can love! What matters grief to lovers?
“Beelzebub outside my door, With all his demons, hovers; What matters that, since we can love What matters hell to lovers ‘(“

MARGRAVE GILISSA *(leaning from, the side window, to* COUNT LUPUS).
One sees the portal and the winding path From here.

MARGRAVE PLATON *(examining the general dilapidation of the place).* What dreariness and what decay!

DUKE GERHARD *(to* HATTO).
‘T is like a castle tenanted by ghosts.

HATTO *(indicating door of tower).*
My grandfather is there!

DUKE GERHARD.
Is he alone?

HATTO.
No, with my father.

MARGRAVE PLATON.
How did you contrive To rid yourself of them?

HATTO.
They’d had their day. Besides, their minds are troubled. ‘T is two weeks Since the old man has spoken. Old age must Give way! He’s near a hundred. Well, they ‘re gone, And I am in their place.

GIANNILARO.

They left, themselves?

HATTO.
Well, not exactly —— [A CAPTAIN *enters.*
What is it?

CAPTAIN *(to* HATTO)
My lord The jeweller Perez’ ransom is not paid.

HATTO.
Let him be hung!

CAPTAIN.
The citizens of Linz, Much frightened, beg for quarter.

HATTO.
Pillage them.
‘T is conquered territory.

CAPTAIN.
Those of Rhens?

HATTO.
Those pillage too! — [THE CAPTAIN *goes out.*

BURGRAVE DARIUS (*glass in hand, turning to* HATTO).
Your wine is good, Marquis.
[Drinks.

HATTO.
My faith ‘ it ought to be. It’s ruddy wine. Bingen, afraid and anxious to conciliate me, Sends me two tuns a year.

DUKE GEKHABD.
She’s beautiful, —
Regina, your betrothed.

HATTO.
Ah, well! We use What we have got. On the maternal side She is related to the family.

DUKE GERHARD.
She’s ill.

HATTO.
It’s nothing.

GIANNILARO (*low to* DUKE GERHARD).
She is dying.

GERHARD.
Ah!
[Enter CAPTAIN.

CAPTAIN *(low to* HATTO). The merchants will pass here to-morrow.

HATTO *(aloud).*
Good!
Go; lie in wait for them.
[CAPTAIN *exits.* HATTO *continues, turning to the Princes.*
My father would Be there with them. I stay at home. Once we Were warriors; now we amuse ourselves. Once it was force, now it is stratagem. The traveller curses me; the traveller says “ Hatto and his wild brothers lead a life Most terrible within that gloomy place Which furious tempests lash continually. Hatto gives feasts to margraves, dukes, and counts. His princely guests are served by princely slaves, Who humbly kiss the dust beneath his feet.” My faith! it’s a fine life. I’m feared and envied, I laugh always; my dungeon settles all. Waiting for hell, I make a paradise Of life. I let my bandits loose as huntsmen Let loose their dogs. I revel in my life. You saw that my betrothed is beautiful. How is’t with you? Do you intend to wed The Countess Isabel?

DUKE GERHARD. No, I do not!

HATTO.
You took her city from her, the last year, And promised to espouse her.

DUKE GERHARD.
Possibly.
They made me swear it on the Bible, too, I think. But I — I kept the city and I left The girl. — *[He laughs.*

HATTO *(laughing).*
What said the diet?

DUKE GERHARD *(laughing).*
It was dumb.

HATTO.
And your oath, on the Bible.

DUKE GERHARD.
Bah'
[Some moments before this, the door of the tower has been opened, revealing several steps of a gloomy staircase, on which two old men are discovered. One is a little more than sixty years old, his hair is grey, his beard is grey; the other, very much older, is almost entirely bald and has a long white beard; both wear a cuirass of steel, with armour on legs and arms; a long sword at their sides, and over their soldier dress, the oldest one wears a white robe lined with gold cloth; the other one a great wolf-skin, whose jaws are adjusted on his head. Behind the older man, a squire stands as if petrified; he has a white beard, is dressed in armour, and holds a large black banner, without any device, above the old man's head. OTBERT, *with his eyes cast down, stands near the older man; he is somewhat in the background, and the old man rests his right arm, on him. In the shadow, behind each of the old knights, two squires are visible. They are dressed in armour like their masters, and are not less old than they; long white beards flow from the visors which are pulled down from their helmets. On cushions of scarlet velvet the squires hold the helmets of the two old men; they are of extraordinary shape, and their crests are formed of the jaws of fantastic animals. The two old men listen in silence; the younger*

leans his chin upon his two hands joined on the handle's point of an immense Scotch axe. The guests, busily talking together, have not perceived them.

SCENE VI.

The same. JOB, MAGNUS, OTBERT. MAGNUS.
There was A time when oaths, made in old Germany, Were like our armour and our arms, — of steel. I think of it with pride, as something solid, And lustrous to the eye, which direst battle Could never shatter, which was made to match The man in spirit, and hugged fast to pillow By the most noble, while he slept; which dim And rusty, still was strong and to be feared. When a proud noble died and was interred, His armour covered him not half so well As his unbroken word; that, time and death, Which rots the fairest steel must leave untouched. But now faith, honour, and our pledged word Follow the giddy fashions of the day. They 're made of tinsel, silk. The strongest vow, With witnesses or not, will last about As long as lasts a handsome doublet, more Or less, — most often less; is soon worn out And cast aside as are the ragged garments Which give offence because they 're out of style. *[As* MAGNUS *speaks, all look around at him with consternation. Sudden silence among the guests.*

HATTO (*bowing to the old man).*
My father —

MAGNUS.
You young fellows make much noise. Leave the old men alone in their grim night. Your glaring torches hurt their tired eyes. We men of old clashed swords. You children clash Your glasses, — but let it be far from us.

HATTO.
My lord —
[At this moment he perceives all the portraits are turned face to the wall.

What’s this? *[To* MAGNUS.] Your pardon, who has dared — These portraits, my ancestors, what bold hand Has turned them thus?

MAGNUS.
I did.

HATTO.
You did?

MAGNUS.
Yes, I.

HATTO.
My father —

DUKE GERHARD *(to* HATTO). ‘T is a jest.

MAGNUS *(to* HATTO).
I turned them thus, That they might not see their descendants’ shame.

HATTO *(furious)*. For a less insult Barbarossa killed His great-uncle Louis. And if you go Too far —

MAGNUS *(turning his head half way to* HATTO). Some one has spoken Barbarossa’s name Some one, I think, praised this barbarian. Before me, let none dare to speak his name!

COUNT LUPUS *(laughing)*. What did he do to you, old man?

MAGNUS.
My sires, Veil, veil your eyes! What did he do to me, My masters? Little Count of Mons, ‘t was you Who asked me, was it not? Go down the Rhine; Start from the lake and go to the Seven Mountains, Counting all the proud castles on the way Which are in ruins! What he did to me? He took our daughters, sisters, and he made Them slaves; he built imperial gallows on Our rocks, and built them with the stones of our Ancestral halls; upon us he made war And carnage and assault unto the death; He put a slave’s yoke on

our noblest men, — That’s what he did to me, and what he did To you! For thirty years we’ve borne with fire And exile, chains, indignities; with wrongs And tortures, dungeons, death, — all from this man, This Caesar, the invincible. From him We’ve suffered everything. Good God! like Jews, Like slaves, we have endured these infamies, This one eternal victory; and now Our sons, degraded, don’t remember it.

All bowed before him. When this Frederic, A mass of gold from crested head to heel, Surged from the top of some breach, all afire.

And cast his gauntlet in the teeth of our Entire army, not one man had strength To face him; they all shook with fear, and fled.

My father —— [*Indicating the, old man.*

Yes, my father who stands here, Alone had courage, when he met this god In a small passage face to face, to bar His way and with a red-hot iron to brand His right hand with the mark of a trefoil. O memories, O time, — all, all is past’ The lightning’s disappeared from our dazed eyes. The baron lords are gone. The ruins strew The fields; of all the forest there remains But one great oak; — [*Bowing before the old man.*

And that great oak is you, My father most revered. — [*Straightening himself up.*

Accursed be The name of Barbarossa, name abhorred! Our crests lie underneath the moulding earth, Our Rhine, dishonoured river, flows by naught But savage ruins. We shall be avenged! ‘T will be my lot, my task! Without compunction Or mercy, pity, shame, — on him if he’s Alive, or on his race, — my hate shall fall. God keep me from the tomb ‘til this is done! God keep me living ‘til we are avenged. To taste that awful, that unequalled joy, I’d lift my arms from out my tomb and seize My prey! To come back to the earth and end This holy task, I’d burst the bonds of death. Oh, be God willing or be he adverse, Whatever gate shuts down upon my soul, Let it be heaven or hell, with dauntless heart I’ll burst it with my fist of iron —

[Interrupts himself and remains silent.

Alas!

What say I, — wretched, hopeless, weak old man?

[He falls into a deep reverie, and does not appear to notice anything around him. Little by little, the guests resume their laughter and gaiety. The two old men seem like statues. Wine circulates, and the revellers resume their jests.

HATTO (*low to* DUKE GERHARD, *indicating the old men, and shrugging his shoulders).*
Age has disturbed their mind.

GORLOIS (*low to* COUNT LUPUS, *indicating* HATTO).
The day will come When father will resemble them, and I
Will be like him.

HATTO *(to* DUKE GERHARD). The soldiers are devoted To them, that is the worst.
[In the mean time GORLOIS *and some pages have gone towards the window and are looking outside. Suddenly* GORLOIS *turns around.*

GORLOIS.
Father, look there!
See that old man with the white beard!

COUNT LUPUS *(running to the window).*
How old!
How slowly he ascends the winding path!
His brow is bent.

GIANNILARO (*approaching).* How tired he looks!

COUNT LUPUS.
The wind Blows lustily through his old cloak.

GOKLOIS.
It looks As though he meant to ask for shelter here.

MARGRAVE GILISSA. He’s a poor beggar!

BURGRAVE CADWALLA. Or a spy.

BURGRAVE DARIUS.
Away!

HATTO *(at the window)*. Let the old wretch be chased away at once, With stones!

LUPUS, GORLOIS, AND PAGES *(throwing stones)*. Off with you, dog'

MAGNUS (*awakening with a start).*
Almighty God! In what age are we living, and what men Are these we call our sons! To stone like this A poor old man, who totters to our door!
[Looking at them all. In my day we had follies like the rest: We sang, we feasted, we were young, like you.
But if an old man, bent with age and pain, Came unto us, with out-stretched hand, to beg, Whether we were in midst of revel, feast, Or song; we stopped, we filled a casque with money, And we gave him wine, because, who knows? ofttimes Beggars are sent by God. Then we resumed Our revels, while the old man went his way, His feeble hands cheered with the touch of gold, His sad heart warmed with wine. That's what we did.
Compare to that what you have done just now.

JOB (*straightening himself up, taking one step forward, and touching the shoulder of* MAGNUS). Young man, be still. In my time, at our feasts We drank and sang much gayer songs than you. We used to sit around an entire ox Served on a dish of gold; but if, by chance, A beggar, an old man in rags, passed by, An escort went to meet him; when he came, The clarions burst forth, the barons rose, The young men ceased to sing or speak or smile; They bowed themselves before him humbly, though They might be princes of the Holy Empire. The old men stretched their hands to him, and said, " Accept a welcome here, my lord."
[To GORLOIS.] GO you And bring the stranger up.

HATTO *(bowing).* But —

JOB *(to* HATTO).
Silence!

DUKE. GERHARD.
My lord —

JOB (*to* DUKE GERHARD). Who dares to speak when I have said “ Be still!”
[All fall back in silence. GORLOIS *obeys him and exits.*

OTBERT *(aside)*. Good, Count! You, grand old lion, look with shame On these poor tiger-cats God gave to you For sons. But if they goad you on too far, Set up your lion’s mane and make them blench.

GORLOIS (*re-entering, to* JOB). He’s coming up, your lordship.

JOB *(to those princes who have remained sitting’).*
Rise! All rise’
[To his sons.] Gather around me.
[To GORLOIS.] Here!
[To the heralds and trumpeters.] Now, clarions, blow! Blow loud, as though you were to greet a king! *[Flourishes. The Burgraves and the Princes stand on the left. All the sons and grandsons of* JOB *stand around him on the right. Halberdiers are in the background holding the banner high. Through the centre door enters a beggar, who seems almost as old as* COUNT JOB. *His white beard descends to his stomach; he wears a hooded robe of brown drugget, which is in rags; a large brown cloak full of rents; his head is bare; around his waist he wears a cord from which hangs a large rosary; his naked feet are corded. When he reaches the top of the sixth step, he stands motionless, leaning upon a long, knotted stick. The Halberdiers salute him with the banner and the clarions blow fresh flourishes.* GUANHUMARA *has appeared before this, on the upper story of the promenade, and has watched the entire scene.*

SCENE VII.

The same. A BEGGAR.

JOB (*standing among his children, to* THE BEGGAR, *motionless upon the threshold).* Whoever you may be, have you e'er heard That in Taunus, between Cologne and Spire, There stands a rock tremendous, by whose side Tall mountains look like hills; upon this rock Built on a heap of lava stands a burg Whose master is redoubted o'er the earth? Has it been told you that this lawless man, Tainted with crime, renowned for valiant deeds, By Frankfurt diet and the Pisan council Thrust from the Holy Empire and the church, Was chastised, hunted, ostracized, yet still Kept on his mountain-top and held his own? He waged a tireless war, with never halt Nor quarter, ‘gainst the Elector Palatine, And ‘gainst the Archbishop of Treves? With bold, Unerring foot pushed back, for sixty years, The ladder which the Empire tried to rest Against his wall? Has it been told you that The brave man always finds a shelter there? That this proud burgrave makes the rich man poor And of the mightiest makes slaves; that now, High overhead of all the dukes and kings And emperors, in face of Germany All bruised and torn and bleeding from their broils, He floats upon his tower, in sign of hate Of grim defiance and of bold appeal To the enchainéd people, a black flag, Whose gloomy folds sweep out rebellious ‘gainst The wild destruction of the storms? Has it Been told you that he's near his hundredth year;
That, braving God and man unto the last, He claims, since he ascended to his lair, Not wars which have burned castles all around, Not Caesar furious, nor almighty Rome, Not years, which crush all men beneath their weight, Have ever vanquished, bent, or broken him, This Titan, excommunicated Job?
Did you know that?

THE BEGGAR. I did.

JOB.
You ‘re at his home. Welcome, my lord. I'm Job, called the accursed.
[Indicating MAGNUS. This is my son, here at my feet; and these Are sons of his, much less in size than we. Thus hope often betrays us. My good sword, My father left me. It has won for me A name of terror. In my mother's right I hold this castle D'Heppenheff. Name, sword, And castle, all belong to you, my guest. Now, in your turn, speak loud and free to us.

THE BEGGAR. Lords, counts, and princes! Also you, O slaves I enter and salute you, and I say If everything’s at peace within your souls, If nothing, when you think of actions past Troubles your hearts, pure as the sky is pure, Live, laugh, and sing; but, otherwise, at once Direct your thoughts to God. Young men, old men, You crowned with flowers and you crowned with years, If underneath God’s sky you do base deeds, Look well before you and be grave. Our days Are short and full of strange uncertainties.
Age conies to few: to most opens the tomb.
Young men, so proud of being young and strong, Think of the old. Old men, remember death!
Love the sweet law of hospitality;
For when we turn a stranger from our door, Do we know who he is, or whence he conies?
Were you all kings, you should respect the poor.
For God, who with a single breath lays low The pines which have withstood a hundred years, Can also fill with lightning and with storm The hand the beggar hides beneath his rags.

PART II.

THE BEGGAR.

SCENE. — *Hall of Panoplies. To the left a door. In the background a gallery with apertures, through which the sky is visible. Plain walls of basalt. General appearance rude and severe. Complete suits of armour set up against the pillars. As the curtain rises,* THE BEGGAR *is discovered leaning on his staff, in the front of the stage; his eyes are fixed on the ground, and he seems the prey of sorrowful thoughts.*

SCENE I.

THE BEGGAR *(alone)*. The hour is come to strike the fateful blow! All might be saved: but we must risk it all. What matters it, if God be on my side!

O — Germany, my country, how thy sons Have fallen! In what state, I find thee now, After my weary exile. Philip dead, And Ladislas a fugitive, and they Have poisoned Henry. With an easy mind They sold Richard the Lion-Hearted just As they would sell Achilles. Fearful fall!

Complete decadence! Unity is lost.

The bonds which held the States are loosening.

In this land, once the home of bravest men, I — I — see Lorrainers, Flemish, Saxons, Franks, Moravians, and Bavarians; but of Germans, Not one! Adepts these men are in their arts. It's for the monk to sing, the priest to preach, It's for the page to bear his master's lance.

For lord barons to rob, for kings to sleep.

Those who've not learned to rob, can only groan, And tremblingly, as in the Salic days, Kneel at a shrine and kiss its relics. Bah!

All men are either brutes or cowards, vile Or cruel. The Elector Palatine As carver, has the first voice after Treves, He sells it. Unrespected goes the truce Of lords. Bohemia's king is Slav; he is Elector. Every man is bound to stretch To his full stature. Horrors everywhere, And violence, and force the only right!

The sock is trampled into lance of steel, While scythes forsake the harvest fields for war.

Incendiarism's in the air. The tramp Who passes singing by the cottage door Conceals his flint and steel beneath his cloak.

The Vandals own Berlin, — most fearful sight!

The Pagans are at Dantzic. The Moguls At Breslau. All these horrors crowd themselves Persistently upon my aching brain.

Oh, shame! There is no money. All is dead, —

The country, cities, and surrounding lands!

How will the Strasburg spire be raised? By whom The banner of the towns be borne? By Jews, Who have grown rich out of our civil war.

Oh, degradation! Sorrow! This empire Leaned on great pillars once, — on Guelders, Cleves, On Holland, Luxemburg, Juliers. All gone!

We have no Poland, no more Lombardy.

Our only help against a bold attack Is Ulm and Augsbourg, — homes of bad church-men.

The work of Charlemagne and pious Othon Exists no more. Our eastern frontier's lost.

The counts of Alsace claim Upper Lorraine, And Lower is possessed by Counts Louvain. No more Teutonic order. At Gauvain There are but eight and twenty cavaliers, One hundred men-at-arms, and Denmark threatens, While England agitates her Ghibelines And Guelfs; Lorrainers are all traitors. Brabant grows, and fire is smouldering at Turin, lie's strong, Philip Augustus; Genoa Demands a price; the interdict hangs still. The Holy Father, seated on his throne, Uncertain, haughty, dreams away, in Rome. And not one leader — God! at such a time. The mad electors crown whoever pays; They fight each other, digging their own graves. And as a victim, bleeding, must succumb When four strong horses rend his limbs apart, So these electors let four emperors From Ratisbonne to Anvers, and Lubeck To Spire, dismember our great empire. God! O Germany — poor Germany! Alas! *[His head falls on his breast; he slowly exits through the back.* OTBERT, *who entered an instant before, follows him with his eyes.* THE BEGGAR *disappears under the arches of the gallery. Suddenly* OTBERT'S *face brightens with joy and surprise.* REGINA *appears on the* *side opposite where* THE BEGGAR *went out; she is radiant with happiness and health.*

SCENE II.

OTBERT, REGINA.

OTBERT.
Regina! Is it possible? 'T is you!

REGINA.
Yes, dear Otbert! I speak, I breathe, I live! My feet have life in them. My lips have smiles. I'm free from suffering, full of vigour new; I live, I'm happy, I belong to you.

OTBERT (*gazing at her).*
Oh, joy!

REGINA.
I slept last night in such great calm. If aught stirred in my brain, 't was thought of you! What a sweet sleep! without a single pain. And when the morning sun awoke me, love, It was a birth into another world. The sparrows' cheerful song fell on my ear; The flowers unclosed their leaves so ardently I felt them breathe. My soul had sympathy For everything with voice, for everything With life, and tears fell from my happy eyes. I cried to the sweet birds, to the sweet flowers " 'T is I, O dear companions, it is I!" Otbert, I love you!
[Throws herself into his arms; she draws the phial from her breast.
Your elixir 's life. You've cured me, won me from Death's arms, Otbert; Now save me from Hatto's!

OTBERT.
I will, my love! My beauty, my Regina! Oh, my joy ' I will not leave my work undone. But do Not praise me. I am nothing; neither good Nor

virtuous nor strong. I’ve naught but love. You live, and life begins also for me! You live: my soul is born again like yours. Look in my eyes. God! you are beautiful. Is ‘t true you do not suffer any more?

REGINA.
The pain is truly gone, forever gone!

OTBERT.
My God, I thank you!

REGINA.
I thank *you,* Otbert! *[They remain clasped in each, other’s arms for an instant;*
then REGINA *draws herself away.* Our good Count Job expects me. Oh, my king, I only came to say I loved you. Now, I’ll go. Good-bye!

OTBERT. Come back.

REGINA.
Yes, by-and-by, But I must hurry now; he waits for me. — *(Exits.*

OTBERT *(falling on his knees, and lifting his hands to heaven).*
I thank thee, God in heaven. She is saved!
[GUANHUMARA *appears up stage.*

SCENE III.

OTBERT, GUANHUMARA.

GUANHUMARA (*placing her hand on* OTBERT’S *shoulder).* Well.

OTBERT *(with horror)*. Guanhumara!

GUANHUMARA. Are you satisfied? You see, I kept my promise.

OTBERT.
I’ll keep mine.

GUANHUMARA.
Without relenting?

OTBERT.
Without weakness. Then — *[Aside.’]* I’ll kill myself.

GUANHUMARA.
You will be waited for To-night at twelve.

OTBERT. Where?

GUANHUMARA.
By the tower which floats The black flag.

OTBERT.
‘T is a ghastly place. No one Dares go there. It is said the rock is marked —

GUANHUMARA. With blood. It creeps from out a window which O’erhangs the torrent.

OTBERT (*with horror).*
Blood? It’s blood, you say? Blood burns and stains forever!

GUANHUMARA.
No, it cleans;
It quenches thirst!
Alone and masked.

OTBERT. What orders to your slave? Whom shall I find there?

GUANHUMARA.
You will find a man.

OTBERT. What then?

GUANHUMARA.
You’ll follow him.

OTBERT.
‘T is well!
[GUANHUMARA *violently seizes the dagger which* OTBERT *wears at his belt; she draws it out and fixes a terrible look on its blade, then lifts her eyes to heaven.*

GUANHUMARA. O mighty skies! Mysterious depths! Great fecund ocean of eternal blue! Night, calm, majestic, sad, serene! You, whom I clung to through my long exile, You, link of my old chain, my faithful friend, Bear witness now! And you, walls, castle, oaks, Which lend your shade to hide vindictive steps, Listen to me! To this avenging knife I dedicate the life of Fosco, lord Of forests, rocks, and fields; as dark as you, O night! as old as you, great oaks!

OTBERT.
Who is This Fosco?

GUANHUMARA. By your hand he dies to-night.
[Giving back dagger.
Farewell, till midnight!
[She goes out through the gallery at the back, and does not see JOB *and* REGINA, *who come in from the opposite side.*

OTBERT *(alone).*
Pity me, my God!

SCENE IV.

OTBERT, REGINA, JOB.

REGINA *(enters running, then goes back to* COUNT JOB, *who is following slowly).* Yes, I can run! My lord, look! see! I can — *[Approaches* OTBERT *who seems to be yet listening to the last words of* GUANHUMARA; *he has not seen them come in.* Otbert, we ‘re here!

OTBERT *(starting from his reverie).*
My lord and countess! Yes!

JOB.
This morning, heavier than usual, grief Oppressed me. What the beggar said last night Flashed every moment through my weary brain. *[To* REGINA.] I thought of you almost in Death’s cold arms, Of your sweet mother, whose pale shadow haunts This place —
[To OTBERT.] When suddenly into my room, Fresh, rosy, sparkling eyes and radiant brow, She bursts, this girl — my child. A miracle! I laugh, I weep. I tremble for great joy. “ Come thank Sir Otbert,” she exclaims; and I — I answer, “ Let us run to thank him. Come!” We crossed the whole deserted castle —

REGINA *(gaily).*
And —
We’ve run to you —

JOB *(to* OTBERT). What mystery is this? Regina’s health restored? Quick, tell me all! Whence did you get the power to save her? Speak!

OTBERT.
It was a philtre sold me by a slave.

JOB.
From this day forth that slave is free. I give Him fields and vines, one hundred livres in gold;
I pardon all our men condemned to death;
I grant the franchise to a thousand peasants Whom our Regina shall select. *[He takes their hands.*
My heart Will burst with joy — [*Looking at them tenderly.*

‘T is happiness enough For me to look at you!
[He takes a few steps forward and seems lost in a sombre reverie.
‘T is true, I am accursed! I’m old, alone, and sad. I hide myself Down in the dungeon of my sires, and there Dejected, dumb, and lost, I sit and watch The shadows hemming in my loneliness. Life is so dark! I turn my glance afar O’er Germany and find nothing but hate, But tyrants, butchers, steeped in wine or blood. Poor country! whom a thousand arms push down The precipice, where it must lodge at last, Unless God lets some giant soul go by Who will have pity and will hold it back. My country tortures me! As to my race, My children, and my home, all’s evil, hate, And wrong. Hatto against Magnus, and Gorlois Against Hatto. The whelp defiant snarls And gnashes at the wolf. My race makes me Afraid. It makes me look into myself, Into my life! I blench before it, God! Such a revolting mask wears every act Which memory calls up from out my soul. Yes, dark — all dark! My country’s rent by demons; I have begotten monsters, and black spectres Haunt my dark soul. When my gaunt eye grows sick Of gazing on this waste, this triple night, And vainly seeking God and God’s daylight, Dares to escape the desert, where I dream, I need to see you, holy rays of sun, You saints, who hover merciful near hell, You children, shining with the grace of life, You brave young man, you pure and radiant girl, Who, when you turn your virgin eyes on me, Are like two angels bringing peace to Satan.

OTBERT *(aside).*
Sorrow!

REGINA. Alas! my lord.

JOB.
Come! let me clasp You both close to my heart.
[To OTBERT, *looking at him tenderly.* Your glance is true: One knows you would be faithful to an oath, — As faithful as the eagle to the sun, As is the steel unto the magnet. Yes, All that he promises, this boy will do. *[To* REGINA.] Is it not so?

REGINA.
I owe my life to him.

JOB.
Before my fall, I was like him, — as pure, As chaste, as true as is a virgin or An unfleshed sword! — *[Goes to window.*
Soft air, a smiling sun, Give new assurance to the sinking heart.
[Coming back to REGINA *and indicating* OTBERT. Look you, Regina, yon brave figure there Reminds me of a boy, my last born son. It seemed like pardon, when he came to me. ‘T is twenty years! A child to my old age, How great a gift! I stood beside his cradle Ceaselessly, e’en while he slept. I talked So gaily! We ‘re most foolish when we ‘re old. And nights, I held his blond head on my knee. You cannot know, for then you were not born. He prattled back those words which make us laugh. Not one year yet! Oh, he was very bright; He knew me always, — I can’t tell it all. He laughed; and I, old dotard that I was, With that sweet laughter drank in life’s sunshine. I thought to rear him great, a conqueror. I called him George. One day, — sad memory! — While he was playing in the fields — oh, when You are a mother never let your boy Play far from you — they took him from me! Jews! A woman! Why? To slaughter him, they said, Upon their Sabbath day. ‘T is twenty years, And yet I weep to-day, the same as then. I loved him so! He was my little king. I was quite mad with joy — quite drunk with joy. When his sweet hands played with my old grey beard, I felt as any soul must feel when heaven Is opening and celestial joys float down Upon it! That is all! It breaks my heart! *[To* OTBERT.] He would have been your age. He would have had Your noble brow! He would be innocent, Like you. I love you! Come, come to my arms! [GUANHUMARA *has come in before this, and, has observed this scene from the back, without being seen.* JOB *presses* OTBERT *in a close embrace and weeps.* Sometimes, in seeing you, I’ve said, “ ‘T is he!” By a strange fascinating miracle, Your eyes, your air, your voice, your ways, In bringing back this lost son to my soul, Make me remember and forget him too. Oh, be my son!

OTBERT. My lord!

JOB.
Yes, son. Hear me! You splendid boy, in love with truth and right, Child of nobody, orphan, without home, But with a great heart, filled with noble dreams, When I say, “ Young man, be my son,” to you, Do you know what I mean? All that I mean? *[To* OTBERT *and* REGINA.] I know. My children,

listen. It is hard To pass long days with an old man whose face Is turned forever to the tomb; to live From dreary morn to evening in a cell When womanhood is beautiful and manhood Is supreme. Oh, it would be inhuman, Odious, and vile, if in that gloomy cell, In spite of the old man, whose eyes are dull One could not give a look or catch a smile! What I do mean is this: the old man sees, He knows what love is, and he bids you wed.

REGINA (*beside herself with joy).* Kind Heaven!

JOB *(to* REGINA). I'll complete your cure, my child!

OTBERT.
You say —

JOB *(to* REGINA). Your mother left you to my care. She was my niece. Alas! she is no more. I watched her die. And seven of my sons, I watched them die. They were my bravest sons.
Then George — they robbed me of my pretty boy! And my last wife, she died! I lost them all. That is the penalty of living long. We see death follow death, with certain law, Just as month follows month, while every year Brings new funereal garments to the home! But you, at least, Regina, shall be happy; You shall marry each other. It is right. Hatto would crush you, flower that you are! When your good mother died, I said to her, " Your daughter is my daughter. Have no fear. If need be, I will shed my blood for her!"

REGINA.
A good, kind father you have been to me.

JOB.
I promised it.
[To OTBERT). YOU, son, grow tall and rugged; Be a warrior. You've no possessions, But I will give for dowry to your bride My fief of Rammerberg, dependency Of Heppenheff. Go, seek your destiny As Nimrod did, and Caesar, and Pompey. I had two mothers, — one, a woman; one, A sword. I was the bastard of a count, And son legitimate of my own deeds. Do you, as I did. *[Aside]* All except the crimes. *[Aloud.]* Above all

things, be honest and be brave I’ve thought about this marriage a long time. The free knight Job can well ally himself With Otbert, the free archer. I suppose You’ve said, “ I’ll have to live a wretched life, Condemned to be a page to the old count, A dog to the old lion, chained to him As long as he shall live.” Ah, no, my son!
I love you for your happiness, not mine.
Old men are not as selfish as you think.
Let us arrange it all. I fear Hatto.
We’ll have no words about it here. ‘T were death.
[Lowering his voice.
My tower has a passage to the moats. I keep the keys. Otbert, to-night, with guards You shall depart. The rest concerns yourselves.

OTBERT.
But —

JOB *(smiling).*
You refuse?

OTBERT.
To enter Paradise?
Oh, no!

JOB.
Then do not say another word. But do as I have bid you. When the sun Has set, you must depart in haste. I’m here To keep Hatto from going in pursuit. The marriage can take place at Caub — [GUANHUMARA, *who has heard everything, goes out.* JOB *takes the arm of each within his own and looks at them tenderly.*
And now, My lovers, tell me I have made you happy, Ere you leave me.

REGINA. My dear father, yes!

JOB.
I want a last word full of love from you. Think what my life will be, when you are gone!
When my dark past, grown heavier every hour, Surrounds me once again!

[To REGINA.] Alas! my child, Though we can silence memory sometimes, Its voice is never rendered dumb.
[To OTBERT.] I feel All will be well. I'll let Gunther, my chaplain, Go with you. Some day you'll come back to me. Restrain your tears for I need all my strength. You 're happy! You are lovers! You are young! What does it matter if an old man weeps? Take what life gives at twenty years. Good-bye! God surely will not let me suffer long. Wait for me here. Otbert, you know the door. I go to get the keys. I'll bring them here.
[He goes out through door on the left.

SCENE V.

OTBERT, REGINA.

OTBERT (*watching him with bewilderment, as he goes out).*
Heaven, kind Heaven, I do not understand!
Fly with Regina from this fearful place?
Oh, if I'm dreaming, lady, pity me, And do not wake me! Is it truly you?
You, angel, you belong to me? To-night?
Oh, let us fly at once ' God! if you knew.
There Eden radiant, and behind me, hell.
To fly to happiness! To fly from crime!

REGINA.
My love, what say you?

OTBERT.
Nothing. I will fly. My oath! Regina, love, I swore an oath! It does not matter. I'll escape. I'll fly! God, who is just, will judge me. He was kind. That old man is a saint. I love him! Yes, We'll fly! Come quickly; everything will help, I feel it! Nothing would have heart to bar The way to our sweet happiness!
[During the last moments, GUANHUMARA *has come back through the gallery. She has brought* HATTO, *and with her finger points to* OTBERT

and REGINA *who are locked in each other's arms.* HATTO *makes a sign, and behind him enter a crowd of Princes, Burgraves, and Soldiers.* THE MARQUIS *points to the two lovers, who, absorbed in each other, hear nothing and see nothing. When, with a start,* OTBERT *turns to go, drawing* REGINA *with him,* HATTO *bars the way.* GUANHUMARA *has disappeared.*

SCENE VI.

OTBERT, REGINA, HATTO, MAGNUS, GORLOIS, *the Bur- graves, Princes*, GIANNILARO, *Soldiers, afterwards* THE BEGGAR, *afterwards* JOB.

HATTO *(to* OTBERT).
Why not? REGINA.
Heavens! Hatto!

HATTO *(to the Archers).*
Seize that woman and that man!

OTBERT (*drawing his sword and with a gesture stopping the Soldiers).* My lord, you are a wretch! A traitor! Vile And base! I'd like to see if terror too Lies at the bottom of your recreant heart, Choked as it is with every hideous vice. Between ourselves, my marquis, I suspect You 're nothing but a coward; and these lords, Who doubtless are more brave than you, will see When I have struck the mask of valour off, A sickly hue of fear creep o'er your face. By her own sovereign choice, I speak for her, — Regina, noble, Countess of the Rhine. Prince, she refuses you and marries me. I challenge you to meet me on the sward Near to the Wisper, not three miles from here, With any weapon, single combat, now, Without delay, mercy, or quarter, face Uncovered, on the borders of the stream. Into the stream the vanquished will be thrown. We kill or die!
[REGINA *faints; her women carry her off.* OTBERT *bars the way to the Archers who try to approach.*

Beware! Let no one stir! I speak to all these lords. Pray, listen well. You princes, who unto this mount have come, Duke Gerhard, Sir Uther the pendragon of Brittany, Darius the Burgrave, And Burgrave Cadwalla, before you all I strike this baron in the face and claim, In order to chastise him for his crimes, The right of the free archers ‘gainst free counts. *[He strikes his glove across* HATTO’S *face.* THE BEGGAR *enters, unnoticed among the crowd.*

HATTO.
I’ve let you talk!
[Low to ZOAGLIO GIANNILARO, *who stands near him in the crowd of Princes.*
My sword is trembling yet, Giannilaro, in its sheath.
[To OTBERT.] NOW, sir, For you! Who may you be, my daring friend? Speak! Are you son to king or sovereign, duke Or margrave, that you dare defy me thus? Come! Let us hear your name, — if you know it! You call yourself Otbert, Archer —
[To Lords] He lies! *[To* OTBERT.] YOU lie! Your name is not Otbert. I know From whence you come, whose family you are, What you are worth! Your name, my master, is Yorghi,— ‘t is Yorghi Spadaceli, and you Are not so much as noble. Come, I know! Your sire was Corsican, your mother Slav. You ‘re but a cheat! A slave, son of a slave! Away!
[To nobles.’] My lords, we’ve many princes here.
If they will stand by him, I’ll fight them all.
Firm foot, at any place, at any time, Two daggers to the hand and naked breast.
[To OTBERT.] But you, presumptuous brigand, Corsican, Escaped from apes, throw your gloves to the valets!

OTBERT.
You wretch!

THE BEGGAR (*talcing one step toward* HATTO). Marquis, I’m ninety-two years old, But I’ll stand up against you! Ho! A sword!
[He throws away his staff and takes a sword from one of the panoplies suspended on the wall.

HATTO (*bursting into a laugh).* A fool was lacking to this feast, my lords! Behold him! From whence comes the churl? We've jumped from gipsy to a beggar! Well! What is your name?

THE BEGGAR. 'T is Frederic of Suabia, German Emperor!

MAGNUS. 'T is Barbarossa! *[Surprise and stupefaction. Everybody moves and forms a sort of circle around* THE BEGGAR, *who disengages a cross which is suspended around his neck and holds it up, in his right hand; his left rests on the sword, whose point sticks into the ground.*

THE BEGGAR. Behold the cross of Charlemagne!
[All eyes are fixed upon the cross; moment of silence. He continues.
Yes, I!
Lord of the mountain whereon I was born, King of the Romans and crowned emperor, Sword-bearer to almighty God, and King Of Burgundy and Aries. The holy tomb Where great Charles slept, unworthy, I profaned. I've made atonement for it. Twenty years On bended knees I've wept, despaired, and prayed, Within a desert, living on the herbs Of nature and the dews from heaven. I was A phantom horrible to all who saw.
The whole world thought me lost among the dead, But in those depths I heard my country call. I left behind my chosen solitudes. For high should every patriot stand to-day. Who here can recognize me?

MAGNUS (*approaching).*
Show your arm, You Roman Caesar!

THE BEGGAR. Yes, the trefoil's there Which one of you burnt on it.
[Holds out his arm to MAGNUS. Look!
[MAGNUS *bends over and examines* THE BEGGAR'S *arm carefully, then straightens himself up.*

MAGNUS *(to spectators).*
It is!
Since I have recognized him, I will speak. 'T is Emperor Frederic Barbarossa!

ALL.
Ah!
[Surprise is at its height; the circle grows larger. THE EMPEROR, *leaning on the great sword, turns towards the guests and fixes a terrible glance on them.*

THE EMPEROR. You've heard my steps before within these vales, When golden spurs clanked on my heels. Look well, And recognize the master, O burgraves, Who subjugated Europe, gave new birth To Othon's Germany and made her queen; Whom three sovereigns in Mersebourg, two popes In Rome, made supreme judge, because he was An honest noble and good emperor;
I who gave a crown to Suénon, the tiara Unto Victor, and with the sceptre touched Their brows; who overthrew the Hermann's throne;
Who subjugated in Icóne and Thrace, The cailiff Arslau, Isaac emperor;
Who, Genoa, Pisa, Milan keeping down, Suppressing wars and cries and treacheries and rage, Held all the hundred towns of Italy In his large hand. He is the one who speaks, Who rises up before you now!
[Takes a step forward; all fall back. I've known How to track wolves. I've known how to judge kings.
I've had the chiefs of seven Lombardian cities Hung. I have broken through ten thousand halberds With which Albert the Bear defied my will!
My footsteps are in every road. My hands Dismembered Henry's kingdom, took away His duchies, provinces, and with the wreck Made fourteen princes. Yes, for forty years, With iron fingers I've been pulling down Your Rhenish towers, stone by stone. Bandits, Yon recognize me! Now I come to say That I feel pity for my country's state, That I intend to blot you from the earth And blow your shameful ashes to the winds.
[Turns to the Archers. Your soldiers understand me. They are mine. I count on them. They shared my glory ere They shared your shame. 'T was under me They served before our land was blighted, and They've not forgotten their old emperor. Am I not right, my veterans, comrades, friends?
[To the Burgraves.] Ah, wretches, recreants, ravagers of homes!
My death gave life to you. Well, touch and hear And see, 't is I!
[Taking long strides among them; all fall back. No doubt you think yourselves Brave cavaliers! You 're saying, under breath, " We 're sons of barons and great noblemen; We continue the race!" Continue it? Your

fathers, great in mind as well as size, Fought in great wars. They made great marches, leaped O'er bridges, which the enemy broke down; Dared pike-men, squadrons; music at their head, And clarions blowing, faced a world entire, And held their own. However high the castle, Mountain, they could take the strongest tower With a mere wooden ladder, bending 'neath Their weight and braced against defended walls, Whence sulphur rained down. Yes, on a cord, These warriors, more like fiends than men, have rocked In the abysses, while the night winds lashed Their bodies 'gainst the jagged rocks. If any Blamed these night assaults, the captains bold Threw their defiance at the Emperor And waited, one 'gainst twenty, in the shade For day to come and bring their sovereign.

'T was thus they gained their castles, cities, lands.

So well they fought, that after twenty years When eyes looked 'round to see how things had changed, Behold! small men were dukes, great men were kings.

But you, like jackals and like vultures, hid Behind the copse, behind the osier-trees, Vile, silent, crouching, dagger in your hand, Dreading the bite of every vagrant dog;

You lie in wait, sunk in some loathsome marsh, Close to those roads considered dangerous For sound of footstep or for bell of mule. You go a hundred strong to rob one man; Then, with your booty, fly back to your rock. Do you dare call yourselves your fathers' sons, — Your fathers, strong among the strong, and great Among the greatest? They were conquerors, While you are only robbers'

[The Burgraves bow their heads with humiliation, indignation, and terror. He continues.

Had you hearts, Could you be made to feel, I'd say to you, " You are too infamous." What moment, cowards, Do you choose to follow this great business? Speak! Good God! You choose the hour when Germany Expires! What ignominy! Wicked sons, You rob your mother as she gasps for life. She weeps, and lifting high her stiffening arms, Cries with the breath that rattles in her throat, " Be cursed!" What she inaudibly has said, I say aloud. I am your emperor. I am no more your guest. I claim my rights, — Now, on the instant! Having scourged myself, I've come to wreak God's vengeance on you all. *[He perceives the two Margraves,* PLATON *and* GILISSA, *and walks up to them.* Lord of Moravia, Marquis of Lusatia, What do you on the borders of the Rhine? Is this your place? While with these bandits, here, You clash your glasses, in the East one hears The champ of war-steeds. Oriental hordes Stand at Vienna's gates. To the frontier, My lords! Move on! Remember bearded Henry, Ernest the Breast-plated! To the front! Away! We guard the battlements. You guard the moat.

[Perceiving ZOAGLIO GIANNILARO. Giannilaro, I'm not pleased to see You here. What do you want? Come, Genoese, Go back to Genoa! *[To the Pendragon of Brittany.*

And what wants he, Sir Uther? Bretons too? We seem to have All earth's adventurers here.

[To the two Margraves, PLATON *and* GILISSA.

Margraves, you pay One hundred thousand marks of fine.

[To COUNT LUPUS.] YOU 're young, But wickeder than young. You 're nothing now. Your city I make free!

[To DUKE GERHARD.] She lost her county, Countess Isabel. You were the thief. You go to Bale; the imperial chamber we Will convene there and publicly, my prince. You'll walk a mile, and in your arms carry A Jew!

[To the Soldiers.] Now liberate your prisoners, And link the cruel chains they've worn so long Around their master's neck.

[To the Burgraves.] 'T is a surprise? You had not counted on this resurrection? No! You spent your hours in feasts and wine and dance, You sang your songs, you shouted loud for joy, You gaily dug your nails into the flesh Of your poor victims! Yes, this nation which I love, you tore its limbs asunder, and Between your greedy selves, you parcelled out The palpitating spoils. But suddenly, To this lair of monstrosity, he comes, — The great avenger, furious and strong!

He scales the walls called inaccessible, And like an eagle, swoops upon his prey. *[.All are dumb with consternation and terror.* JOB *has entered the hall during the speech, and has silently joined the crowd of nobles.* MAGNUS *alone has listened to* THE EMPEROR *without fear, and has looked fixedly at him the whole time. When* BARBAROSSA *has finished,* MAGNUS *looks at him once more from head to foot, then his countenance changes to a wild expression of joy and of fury.*

MAGNUS (*his eye fixed on* THE EMPEROR). Yes, it is he indeed — alive!

[With a violent gesture he pushes aside Soldiers and Princes, goes up stage, with a single bound ascends the six steps of the staircase, with his

two fists seizes hold of the battlements of the gallery, and cries to those outside with a voice of thunder.

What ho!
Treble your sentinels! Lift up the bridge!
Go, archers, to the turrets; slingers to The wings! Down the portcullis! Man the walls!
A thousand in the battlements, a thousand In the gorge. The rest go to the woods!
Cut granite and cut trees, — the biggest blocks, The tallest trees; and on this mound which keeps A world in awe, we'll build a gallows worthy Of this great emperor! — *[He comes down.*
He gave himself!
He is our prisoner!
[Folding his arms and looking at THE EMPEROR *face to face.*
I must admire You, sire. Where are your people? Harbingers?
Shall we soon hear your trumpets blow? Will you Upon this stronghold which you mean to raze Strew salt as at Lubeck, or hemp, as once You did at Pisa? What? We hear no sound!
Have you come all alone? No army, Caesar?
No troops? I know that is your usual way'
I know't was in this fashion, all alone, Your sword in hand, your name upon your lips, You burst the gates and captured Tarsus and Coré. One step sufficed. It needed but One cry to force Utrecht and Genoa, and Rome degenerate; Iconium bent Before you, Lombardy grew pale as soon As Milan shivered at your breath of steel.
All that we know! But know you who we are?
[Pointing to Soldiers. Just now I heard you speaking to these men. You called them veterans, comrades! Good! But see. Not one of them has stirred an inch. Because You 're nothing here. My father is the man, — The man they fear, the man they love! To Job These men belong more than they do to God! Unto the bandit lord there's nothing sacred But his guest, and you are our guest no more! You said it but a moment since, yourself.
[.Indicating JOB. That is my father, — look, that old man there! T was he who branded you upon the arm. That mark is better proof of your estate Than all the sacred oil rubbed off your brow. The hatred of you twain outweighs your years. You put a price upon his head; he did The same by

yours. And now he holds it. You Are here alone, unharmed, and in our power.
Fritz-Hohenstaufen, gaze upon us well.
Sooner than enter here, in this dumb crowd Of princes, fierce, revengeful, mad with hate, Darius, Gorlois, Hatto, Magnus, Job, —
Mighty Count Job, the burgrave of Taunus, Sooner than enter here, you King of Aries, Who scarcely know with whom you speak, you madman Whose rash folly is a sure guarantee That you are Barbarossa, — mark me now, It would have been far better had you gone By darkest night into some fearful den Of Africa, and suddenly amid The gloom found you were hemmed in by wild beasts, By tigers, lionesses, on the spring, With lust of murder in their gleaming eyes. *[While* MAGNUS *has been talking, the circle of Burgraves has drawn itself closer around* THE EMPEROR. *Behind the Burgraves a treble line of Soldiers, armed to the teeth, have ranged themselves in silence; above them rises the great standard of the burg, red and white equally divided, with a silver axe embroidered on a field of gules; this motto is under the axe, “Monticomam, viro caput.”* THE EMPEROR, *without yielding a step, overawes this crowd. Suddenly, when* MAGNUS *has concluded, one of the Burgraves draws his sword.*

CADWALLA (*drawing his sword).* Yes, Caesar, give us back our citadels.

DARIUS (*drawing his sword)* Our burgs, which are no more than nests for birds.

HATTO (*drawing his sword).* The friends you killed, who come to haunt our turrets When the fierce night winds moan and blow!

MAGNUS (*seizing his axe).*
Yes, yes!
You come out from the tomb? Well, then, go back. I’ll send you there, that, on the instant when A thousand voices rapturously cry, “ He lives!” dull echo will retort, “ He’s dead!” Oh, tremble, fool, who thought to menace us! *[The Burgraves with swords drawn and violent cries press around* BAKBAROSSA. JOB *comes out of the crowd and raises his hand; all are silent.*

JOB *(to* THE EMPEROR). My son Magnus has told you, sire, the truth. You are my enemy. I was the man, The furious soldier, who gave you the wound. I hate you, but I want a Germany Within the world! My country's breaking, sire. She's tottering o'er her grave. You can save her. Where they defied you, on my knees I fall, Prostrate before my emperor, whom my God Brings back.

[He kneels before BARBAROSSA, *then half turns to the Princes and Burgraves.*

Kneel, all of you! Cast down your swords! *[All throw down their swords and kneel, except* MAGNUS.

JOB, *still kneeling, speaks to* THE EMPEROR. This hapless nation needs you, — only you! Help us! Without you, the whole country's lost. There are in Germany two Germans left: You 're one, and I am one. That is enough! Reign, sire. — *[Designating the others.*

I let them talk, poor foolish men! Excuse them; they are young!

[To MAGNUS, *who is still standing.* Magnus, obey!

[MAGNUS, *a prey to some gloomy irresolution, appears to hesitate; his father makes a gesture; he falls on his knees.* JOB *continues.* It is a truth that serfs and barons, naked feet And visored brows, that labourers and hunters Must always live on hate. Eternally The mountain-tops have fought the fields. You know It, sire. Now, without anger, I admit The barons acted ill, — the mountain-tops Were wrong. — *[Rising up: to the Soldiers.*

Go, set the captives free, at once! *[The Soldiers obey in silence, and detach the chains of the prisoners, who during this scene have stood in groups in the gallery at the back of the stage.* JOB *continues.* Now, burgraves, you, take as great Caesar bids Their chains and clogs!

[The Burgraves rise up in indignation. JOB *looks at them with authority.*

Begin with me! *[With a gesture he orders a Soldier to put one of the iron collars on his neck. The Soldier drops his eyes and turns away his head.* JOB *repeats the sign, the Soldier obeys. The other Burgraves allow themselves to be chained without resistance.* JOB*, with his chain attached to his neck, turns to* THE EMPEROR.

Behold!

We are as you would have us. Emperor, In his own palace Job becomes a slave And brings his head to you. But if the brow Which years of fearful struggle have not bent, Deserves your pity, listen, O my king! When you, our master, go to the frontier, Let us, — grant us this one, this final prayer, — Let us go with you, prisoners, soldiers too. We'll keep our chains, but put us face to face With your worst enemies, the most inhuman, The most depraved; and be they Vandals, Maygars, Be they Hungarians wild, be they more thick Than is the hail of springtime or the snows Of winter: be they more in numbers than The grains of wheat in a rich harvest time, You'll see us, scourged and humbled as we are, With eyes cast down, rebellious 'gainst our shame, Sweep, — in God's sight I swear it! — sweep these hordes Like dust before your eyes. Chained, terrible, And dauntless, soaked from head to foot in blood, We who are convicts here, there will be gods!

CAPTAIN OF ARCHERS OF THE BURG (*advancing toward* JOB, *and lowing, awaits his orders).*
My lord!
[JOB *shakes his head and signs to him to address* THE EMPEROR, *who stands motionless and silent.* THE CAPTAIN *turns to* THE EMPEROR *and salutes him with great respect.*
Sire!

THE EMPEROR (*indicating the Burgraves).* Take them off to prison! *[The Soldiers lead the Burgraves off, all except* JOB, *who, upon a sign from* THE EMPEROR *remains. All go out. When they are alone,* FREDERIC *approaches* JOB *and unfastens his chain.* JOB, *stupefied, lets him do it. A moment of silence.*

THE EMPEROR (*looking into* JOB'S *face).*
Fosco!

JOB (*shuddering with horror).*
Great heaven!

THE EMPEROR (*putting his finger on his lips).* Hush! Speak not a word.

JOB *(aside).*
My God

THE EMPEROR. Watch for me there, where you go every night.

PART III.

THE LOST CAVE.

SCENE. — *A gloomy cavern, low, round, damp, of hideous aspect. Some few pieces of tapestry, mouldy from age, are hanging on the walls. To the right, a window, grated, among whose bars are three which have been violently wrenched off. To the left, a bench and table roughly hewn in stone. In the background, in the shadow, a sort of gallery, whose pillars supporting the arches are visible. It is night. A moonbeam falls through the window and forms a white, square figure on the opposite wall. As the curtain rises.* JOB *is discovered alone in the cave, seated on the stone bench, a prey to gloomy thought**. A lighted lantern is placed on the block of stone at his feel. He wears a garment of grey drugget.*

SCENE I.

JOB *(alone).*
What said the Emperor? What did I reply?
I did not understand. No, I heard wrong.
Since yesterday my mind has been confused.
I walk with trouble, know not where I go I lose my way with every step I take;
And actual objects trembling in a mist Delude my weary eyes, which search the gloom In vain, as we seek phantoms of a dream. [*Dreaming.*
The demons love to torture wretched hearts.
Yes, it must be a dream. But oh, how sad!
In our poor hearts, pierced with a triple blade, When virtue falls asleep, crime furnishes The dreams. Ah, when we ‘re young, we count On triumph; when we ‘re old, on punishment.
At both mysterious ends of life, a dream:
The first one is a lie. The second — what?

[A moment of silence. All I know now is that my haughty walls Have crumbled. Barbarossa's master here! Oh, misery! But yet I did my duty! I did well! I have saved my country. Yes, I saved the kingdom. — [*Dreaming.* Oh, the Emperor! A phantom we have been each to the other; And when we met, it was with dazzled eyes, Like giants of an ancient, vanished world, We faced each other, knowing only two were left Out of the wreck of a colossal age. We stand upon the peaks of the great past! This new, disastrous day has submerged all! But her great waves, gigantic as they were, Were never tall enough to touch our brows!

[Becoming more absorbed. Now one of us must yield. It will be I. I feel the shadows coming: day is done! Oh, fall of my proud mountain! Father Rhine Will tell, to-morrow, to old Germany That the fierce duel waged so long between Old Job and Barbarossa sees an end at last. To-morrow, no more children, no more slaves. Farewell, O giant struggle — victories! Glory, that I have loved so dear, farewell! To-morrow, if I listen, I shall hear The passer-by make jest and game of me! He will see Job, who was a hundred years A sovereign, who defended inch by inch Each rock upon his Rhine; Job, who, in spite Of Caesar, spite of Rome, kept on his feet And lived, — he will behold him vanquished, chained, His vitals gnawed by this Imperial eagle;

A colossus prostrate, whom all men May touch; the last of the great burgraves, nailed To his own rocks! — *[Rises.*

What, I — Count Job, — I fall Like this? Hush, pride! Bend low thy head Here in this tomb. These walls which palpitate Tell such a tale of horror! 'T is so long ago! And always yesterday, my God!

[He falls back on the stone bench, covers his face with his hands and weeps.

Beneath this vault Forever since that day, my crime has sweated, Drop by drop, this sweat of blood, which men Do call remorse. Here every night I cry Unto the dead, who, since they left this world, Have bribed Insomnia to stick her leaden Fingers through my sockets. If I sleep, By Nature goaded, through a sea of blood Two figures float around me, and do pull Me down into their flood. — *[Rising.*

Just God!

[Coming to front of stage. The world Has thought me great. Forgotten by God's thunder The lawless bandit has grown old upon His mountain-top,

towards which all Europe turned Admiring eyes. But let a murderer Do all he can, he'll never do so much As to make conscience dupe of earthly glory. No! Men have thought me drunk with victory, But every night for sixty years I've come To kneel in dumb repentance on these stones. These walls, sad cancer in my haughty home, Have ceaselessly thrust back upon my heart The mean and lying grandeur of my fame.

Loud blew the clarions everywhere I went.

My banners were borne high, for I was mighty, —

Imperious count at Court, unconquerable Lion in my den. But when earth lay A pygmy at my feet, then crime grew tall, —

A giant in my breast. It laughed aloud At every epithet of praise I earned.

And when men bowed with veneration as I passed, it stuck its teeth into my heart And shouted, " Wretch!" Ginevra, Donato, Will you forgive your executioner When God has pardoned him? To strike one's breast, To kneel on the damp stones, to weep, repent, Make life eternal prayer, 't is not enough!

No pitying thing has pardoned me. I've known No respite! Soul forever damned! — [sits *again.*

I have Had ancestors, descendants too! But now My city's fallen; my own son is old. His sons are traitors, and my one ewe-lamb, My last born, he was taken long ago. Regina and Otbert, whom I loved much, — The soul must always love, for't is divine, — They fled, no doubt, when these disasters came. I have been looking for them: both are gone! 'T is all too bitter! Let me die!

[he draws a dagger from his belt. Some one, Something, has always been around me here, My heart has felt it. Well, at this dread hour I cry for pardon! Mercy, Donato! Here, on death's threshold, Job appeals no more. There is but Fosco. Mercy, peace for him!

A VOICE *(in the shadow, feeble, like a murmur).* Cain!

JOB *(startled).* What? Who spoke? An echo, nothing more! If any voice speaks here, 'tis from the tomb. Who else could enter this dark catacomb? This secret spot where never day has shone Is known to nothing living but myself. Those who did know it, long, long since are dead!

[Takes a step up stage. My hands are clasped and raised in anguish! Hear! O martyr, pardon Fosco!

THE VOICE.
Cain!

JOB (*starting back with terror).*
How strange! Some one did speak. That’s certain. Be it so! Come shadow, phantom, ghost, whate’er you be, Strike! I would rather die than hear again That ghastly echo to my pleading.

THE VOICE.
Cain’
[.Becoming fainter, and as if lost in the depths. Cain! Cain!

JOB.
My God! My knees bend under me! I’m dreaming. Grief has made me mad at last! This wine from hell has made a drunken fool Of me. Remorse is laughing at my elbow. Oh, yes! I hear you, devils! Hideous dreams, Which all through life have tortured me, You’ve reached your high-flood now; and I — I can’t elude your grip in this black hell! Speak, then, O voice which rises from the tomb, I’m here! Whatever thing you wish to know, Whatever explication you demand, I without faltering will answer. Speak! *[A woman appears at the back. She is dressed in black, has a lamp in her hand. She comes from behind a pillar on the left.*

SCENE II

JOB, GUANHUMARA.

GUANHUMARA *(veiled).* Where is your brother, Cain?

JOB (*with terror).*
Who’ What are you?

GUANHUMARA. Up there I am a slave; down here a queen! Each mortal has his destiny! This castle, As you well know, is double. Underneath Its

halls and towers are many tombs, like this. All that the sun reveals up there, is yours; All that foul gloom conceals down here, is mine!
[Moves slowly towards him. I hold you fast. You can’t escape me now!

JOB.
Who are you, woman? Speak!

GUANHUMARA.
The Past! I have A tale of infamy to tell. It happened, — ah, So long ago! Many of them are dead! Those of a hundred were scarce thirty then.
[She indicates a corner of the cave. Two lovers, Count, were there! Mark well the chamber. It was at night, — a calm September night. A chilly moonbeam entered through those bars And cast a figure, like a shroud, upon The wall.
[She turns and points to the wall, touched by the moon. Look, there it is! With sudden fury, Sword in hand —

JOB.
Be merciful! I know!

GUANHUMARA. You know the story ‘ Well, Fosco, the place Where he, Donato, fell — *[Points to the stone bench.*
‘T was there! The arm Which struck the blow —— [SEIZES JOB’S *right arm.*
‘T is here’

JOB.
My God! strike me, But speak no more I

GUANHUMARA The body —
[she drags him to the window. Come! They threw Donato, master, and Sfrondati, squire, Out from the window; and to get them through, One of the murderers with his fist of steel Burst these three bars. That fist, to-day, a reed —
Behold it, Count! — *[She seizes his hand again.*

JOB.

Have mercy!

GUANHUMARA.
Some one plead For mercy then. Oh, grief! A woman! Shame! She wrung her hands entreating mercy! Shame! He laughed, the murderer; he had her hound Here, Count, and put this chain around her foot Himself! Look at it now!
[Lifts up her dress and shows him the chain riveted around her naked foot.

JOB.
Ginevra!

GUANHUMARA.
Yes!
Dead heart, cold hand, extinguished eyes! Ginevra!
Ah, my name was sweet in Corsican!
In the rough countries of the North it changed To Guanhumara! Age, that other north Which freezes and disfigures us, has made A livid spectre of the fair young girl.
Behold it!
[Lifts her veil and reveals her emaciated and mournful face to JOB.
You must die!

JOB.
I thank you!

GUANHUMAKA.
Wait I
Before you thank me, wait, old man! Your son Is living, — your son George!

JOB.
What’s that you say?

GUANHUMAKA.
I stole him from you.

JOB.
For God’s sake! GUANHUMAKA.
He wore This little chain.
[Draws a child’s necklace of pearls and gold from her bosom and throws it to him. He picks it up and covers it with kisses. Then he falls on his knees.

JOB.
I embrace your knees. Have pity! Let me see him!

GUANHUMARA.
You shall see Him soon. He is the one who is to kill You!

JOB *(rising with horror)*. Have you made a monster of my boy That he would kill his father?

GUANHUMARA.
‘T is Otbert!

JOB (*clasping his hands to heaven)*. Oh, God! My heart revealed this thing before. He is a noble boy. He’ll not kill me. How foolishly you count upon Otbert!

GUANHUMARA. Do I? You’ve lived your life in the broad sun. I’ve spent my days in earth’s eternal gloom. ‘T is strange you never heard my vengeful steps As they gained on you. Wake up now! Too late! Fosco, the serpent’s fangs are in your flesh. While you were talking with the Emperor, I went to see Regina, in her room. She drank, because I willed, a mighty drug. I was alone with her. Look at her now! *[Through the back of the gallery on the right, two men enter, dressed in black and masked; they bear a coffin, covered with a black cloth, slowly across the stage.* JOB *hastens to them; they stop.*

JOB.
A coffin!
[JOB *draws away the black cloth with terror; the masked men allow it.* THE COUNT *lifts the shroud and sees a white figure. It is* REGINA.
My Regina! *[To* GUANHUMARA.] Killed! By you! You are a monster!

GUANHUMARA. She is not dead yet. I am accustomed to these tricks. She’s dead For you; for me, she only sleeps; and if —
[She makes a gesture as if to awaken her.

JOB.
What price for her awakening? Speak!

GUANHUMARA.
Your death.
I’ve told Otbert. The choice lies in his hands.
[She places her right hand on the coffin. I swear, by the eternity a wrong Endures, by golden Corsica my home, By the cold skeleton which sleeps below, By this voracious wall which drank his blood, That empty from this place that coffin shall Not go!
[The two men take up the coffin and disappear on the side opposite where they came in.
He is to choose, — or you or her! If you want to escape, fly from your doom, You can! Then both of them shall die! They ‘re in My power!

JOB (*hiding his face in his hands)*. Horrible!

GUANHUMARA. Resist me not!
Die, and Regina lives.

JOB.
Wait! One last prayer. To die is nothing. Take me, — take my life, My blood! — but spare the innocent from crime. Is not one victim food enough for your Revenge? A strange world shows itself to me. My crime has generated on this mount A hell, within whose shadows I see demons Fight, — a hideous nest of scorpions, hatched From the big drops which from my dagger fell;
For murder is prolific harvester Of ill: I know it! I have learned it! Well, In your infernal circle I am caught.
What more do you desire? I am your prey.
‘T is just’ I feel your clutch with joy. You have Done well. I am a wretched man, accursed In sons and grandsons. But the boy, my last!

You have the heart to let him enter here, Pure, strong, and noble, with unstained soul, Then send him back marked with the awful curse I, Cain, have borne? Ginevra, bear with me!
You thought it right to take him, — all I had! —
Take him from me, whose feet were near the tomb.
I’ll not gainsay the right. You kept him, yes;
You did not make him suffer for my sin, I ‘m sure of that. You’ve had my rights, my joy:
You’ve seen his bright eyes open to the world, You’ve felt his dear head rest upon your breast.
Well, he is now your child, — yours more than mine:
I swear it’ Oh, indeed, I’ve suffered much.
I have been punished, truly! When they came And told me he was lost, that he was stolen, I went mad almost. They will tell you — no, I don’t exaggerate. I gave one cry, “ My boy is stolen!” and I fell — yes, fell Down on the ground. My little boy! How well I can remember it! He was out playing Amid the flowers. These are the things that torture, Is it not so? You can be judge if I
Have suffered. Listen! Don’t commit this crime, More hideous than my own; but leave him pure.
Keep free from guilt that soul which is divine.
Oh, if a heart beats in your woman’s breast —

GUANHUMARA.
It beats no more there. You have torn it out.

JOB.
Well, I am willing. You must understand That I am eager for the tomb. But not — His hand!

GUANHUMARA. A brother killed his brother here. Why not a son his father?

JOB *(on his knees, hands clasped, dragging himself to* GUANHUMARA’S *feet).*
Spare me this! Some other death, Ginevra, I implore!

GUANHUMARA. Accursed man! I prayed to you, like this. Did I not tell you, that? Upon my knees, With naked bosom, desperate and mad, I wrung my hands in anguish, at your feet Until at last, beside myself, I rose, And shouting, “ I am Corsican,” defied You! Then you hurled your victim to the moat, And with demoniac laughter, kicked me back, Replying “ Get your vengeance if you can! I’m having mine!”

JOB.
My boy said nothing; he Did you no wrong. Remember, I was jealous! Look, now I weep. I loved you tenderly!

GUANHUMARA. Hush! What a ghastly, an inhuman thing, That two lost souls, sunk in the mire of crime, Pollution in their hearts, blood on their hands, Should dare to breathe the sacred name of love! Well, if you loved, how much the more loved I, Whose breast has been a chaos sixty years’ Give back Donato! Fratricide, give back My love to me!

JOB (*rising, with gloomy resignation).*
Knows Otbert whom he kills?

GUANHUMARA. He does not. For Regina he will strike, Ignoring who you are.

JOB.
Oh, fateful night!

GUANHUMARA. He knows he is avenger of a crime, — No more. Be silent; hide your face, and die. I will consent to that.
[Takes off her veil and gives it to him.

JOB (*seizing the veil).* I thank you!

GUANHUMARA.
Hush!
I hear a step. Confide your soul to God. He comes, I go. I shall hear everything. I hold Regina in my cave. Be quick. There is no time to lose.
[Goes out on the left, where the bearers of the coffin made their exit.

JOB (*falling on his knees by the stone bench).*
God, thou art just!
[Covers himself with the black veil and remains kneeling, motionless, in the attitude of prayer. Through the gallery on the right a man, masked, dressed in black, and bearing a torch, appears; he motions to some one to enter: it is OTBERT. OTBERT *pale, wild, distraught. As* OTBERT *enters, and while he is speaking,* JOB *does not move. As soon as* OTBERT *has come in, the masked man disappears.*

SCENE III.

JOB, OTBERT. OTBERT.
Where have you brought me? What dark place is this?
[Looking around.
The masked man is not here ‘ Heavens! Where am I?
Is this the place? Already? A cold shiver Runs through my veins. My poor head swims. I faint!
[Perceiving JOB. Whom do I see there in the gloom? No one!
[Going towards JOB. The dark is so deceptive! *[Puts his hand on* JOB’S *head.*
‘T is a man!
[JOB *remains motionless.* God’ The cold sweat of crime creeps o’er my flesh. Is this the scaffold? Is the victim there? Is this sad Rosco, who must die to-night? Speak, is it you? He speaks not! It is he. Whoever you may be, I hate myself! I’ve not a thing against you. I ignore Why you are there so motionless, and why You do not rise and crush me! I know nothing! I’m as unknown to you as you to me. But you can feel these weak and trembling hands Are not a murderer’s. Of course, you know I am the instrument of mad revenge, Chastiser of a crime. You do not know A shroud has wound itself around my feet. I’ve tried, but cannot extricate myself. Speak, do you know Regina, my sweet love, This angel from whose brow my daylight comes? Look you, she’s there, wrapt in a winding-sheet: Dead, if I falter; living, if I kill. Old man, have mercy! Won’t you speak to me? Please tell

me that you understand my trouble And my despair. Speak! tell me you forgive This fearful martyrdom. Oh, just to hear Your voice, one single word of pardon! God! Just one! My heart is breaking; pity me!

JOB *(rises and throws aside his veil)*. Otbert! Otbert, my child!

OTBETTT.
Count Job! JOB *(embracing him ardently).*
In vain!
All my poor, bleeding heart went out to him. This frightful silence tortured me too much. I'm but an old man, — weak and broken down; I could not die without a last embrace. Come to my heart!
[.He covers OTBERT'S *face with tears and kisses.* Ah, let me see you, child!
You'll not believe it, though I've looked at you With an increasing pleasure six long months, I never saw you well.
[Looks at him with enraptured eyes. 'T is the first time! A young man! Twenty years! What a fine sight! I kiss your pure brow. Let me look at you, And feast my eye. A while ago you talked, And I was silent. Ah, you could not know How deep your words went down into my soul! You'll find my great sword hanging on the wall; I give it to you, child; my helmet, pennon, Which has so often triumphed, — they are yours. If you could only read it in my heart How dear you are to me! I bless you, child! My God, give to this boy all your good gifts; Give him a life as long as mine, but much Less sad than mine; give him a prosperous And honourable destiny. Grant that His sons, as much respected as their sire, May guide, with fondest care, his trembling steps When these locks, now so black, are grey.

OTBERT
My lord —

JOB (*putting his hand on* OTBERT'S *head).* I bless this young man — Heaven, hark to me — In all that he has done, all he may do! Be happy! Listen now, Otbert, to me. I am no more a father and no more a king. My family's in chains; my tower is down. T was right I gave my children up; 't was right, With humbled brow, I should save Germany. But now I ought to die. My poor old hand, It trembles. You are young; you'll help me. Yes!

[Draws from its sheath the dagger which OTBERT *carries and presents it.* ‘T is only you from whom I’d ask so much.

OTBERT (*terrified).* Ask it of me? But don’t you know — I’m here For some one —

JOB.
Fosco? I am he! OTBERT.
Not you!
[Drawing lack and looking around in the darkness. O demons who glare at me, O spectres Standing around, it is the old burgrave, The man I honour and I love! Have mercy! Spare us the fearful torture of this hour! No answer! God! ‘T is horrible ‘ Old Job?
[With despair and solemnity. ‘T is vain. I will not, cannot lift my hand Against that sacred head, against the life Of this great demi-god of the old Rhine.

JOB.
Otbert, it is making easy my way Into the grave. Must I avow still more?
It is the truth: I am a criminal.
Your wife on earth, your sister in the skies, Regina, she is there; she waits for you.
She’s pale, ice-cold, and beautiful. For her You promised to do everything. You swore To save her from all pain, for love is strong, E’en though the promise forced you to the tomb To wrestle with the fiends who guard the door.
You said you’d buy her back with your own soul. Death holds her now. The shadow of his arm Grows taller ‘round her, every instant. Haste! You have the power. Save her!

OTBERT *(wild).*
Do you think I must?

JOB.
I wonder that you hesitate! On one side, I, old, sinful, and condemned, With death’s grim hold already on my heart, Less of a hero than a knave, far more A hawk than eagle, — I whose life, So full of blood and woe and

viciousness, Has often made God’s thunder growl around My home! On my side, crime, old age, and grief. On hers youth, beauty, innocence, and love! A woman who adores you; child who trusts! Oh, fool is he who doubts and cannot choose Between a miserable rag, polluted, vile, And the white linen of a cherubim. She wants to live. I want to die. And you, You falter when with one kind blow you might Bring happiness to both. If you love us —

OTBERT.
Good God!

JOB.

Be our deliverer, Otbert. Saint Sigismund killed Boleslas to cure Him of a hideous ulcer. Who blamed him? Remorse is the rank ulcer of a soul. Cure me of that!

OTBERT (*taking the knife).*
Well, then —— *[He stops.*

JOB.
What hinders now?

OTBERT (*putting lack dagger into sheath).* A fearful thought has come into my mind! You had a child; a gipsy woman stole It, — yes, you told me so this morning! I was taken by a woman, when quite young. Things strange as this have taken place before! If I should be that child; my father, you?

JOB *(aside).*
Oh, heaven!
[Aloud] Sorrow has disturbed your brain. You ‘re not that child! I tell you so!

OTBERT.
But yet You often call me son!

JOB.
I love you so! ‘T is habit; it is such a tender word.

OTBERT.
I feel — here — something strange —

JOB.
Oh, no!

OTBERT.
A voice Seems speaking to me —

JOB.
‘T is a voice that lies.

OTBERT.
My lord! My lord! What if I were your child?

JOB.
I beg you, do not think that senseless thing. I had the proof, — what shall I say to you? — That Jews — they killed him — at their feast. His corpse Was brought to me. I told you that, this morning.

OTBERT.
No!

JOB.
Yes, yes, remember! Think it over well! No, you are not my son! You can trust me. If I had not had proofs, — you are quite right, — I might have had the same idea as you. A young child — stolen by an unknown hand. I’m thankful now that it occurred to you, Because I want to force it from your mind, Lest, when I’m dead, some hard, relentless heart Might tell you, just to torture your poor soul, That old Job was your father. How unkind! You won’t believe it now, for you are not. When we are old, our memory — sometimes Is not so good; but on their Sabbath, Jews, You know, kill children! Thus they killed my boy! I tell you I had proofs! Be quite assured! Rest easy, O my son! Now, there, you see, I called you son! ‘T was habit, — only that. Won’t you believe me? It is very hard To struggle at my age.

Have no more doubts; Obey me without fear. I kiss your brow, I press your hand upon my heart, — your hand Which will deliver me and will be pure!
What! you ray son? Have no such dreams, my child.
I swear — but you, you so intelligent, Who find the truth in every little thing, You think that I would lend my countenance To such a frightful mystery? You think —
Oh, is it possible? But when I know!
But when I tell you, Otbert, my beloved, That you are not my son —

VOICE (*from the depths).*
Regina's life Can last but fifteen minutes more!

OTBERT.
Regina!

JOB.
Wretch! You mean to let her die?

OTBERT.
Almighty God! I also — I have borne Too much! I'm drunk with misery. I'm mad!
In this hole, which is rotting with its crimes, "whose air reeks with the awful breath of hell, Murder's miasmas mount into my brain. *[Beside himself.*
O^ wall, are you athirst for some more blood?
\

JOB *(putting the knife back into his hand).*
Yes!

OTBERT. Do not tempt me!

JOB.
do it!

OTBERT.

Soon I’ll fall! I hang by reeds o’er the great precipice Of crime. It needs but just a touch to push Me down. I will do something horrible! Oh, don’t tempt me!

JOB.
You’ll save the innocent!
You’ll punish sin!

OTBERT.
Hush! don’t you see I’m ready, — At that point when half my reason is gone; That they’ve drugged me with some hot drink from hell To give me strength equal to their monstrosity; That poison’s made a Corsican of me; That I can feel Regina dying; that The she-wolf’s waiting in the shadow, and The tigress has been starved?

JOB.
I know it. Yes, The jaws of retribution shall be filled! ‘T is time! Here, in this place, Donato prayed: I was of stone! Be you as pitiless As I was hard. I am old Satan; be The victorious archangel, you, and strike!

OTBERT *(lifting his knife)*. In spite of me, grim murder lifts my arm.

JOB *(on his knees)*. I was a monster, for I stabbed him. Strike! I killed him — ‘t was my brother. Strike! [OTBERT, *as if mad and beside himself, lifts the dagger; he is about to strike, when some one holds his arm. He turns and recognizes* THE EMPEROR.

SCENE IV.

The same. THE EMPEROR, *afterwards* GUANHUMARA, *afterwards* REGINA.

THE EMPEROR.
‘T was I!

[OTBERT *lets the dagger fall.* JOB *rises and looks at* THE EMPEROR. GUANHUMARA *advances her head from behind the pillar and watches.*

JOB *(to* THE EMPEROR).
‘T was you!

OTBERT. The Emperor!

THE EMPEROR (*to* JOB).
The Duke, our father, Also your king, concealed me in your castle. Wherefore? I do not know.

JOB.
You are my brother? You?

THE EMPEROR. Bleeding, but breathing yet, you held me there, Suspended from that window, and you said, “The tomb for you, and hell for me!” I heard Those words hissed over the black precipice, And then I fell —

JOB *(clasping his hands).*
True! God forbade the crime!

THE EMPEROR. Some shepherds saved me.

JOB (*falling at* THE EMPEROR’S *feet).*
I am at your feet:
Take your revenge!

THE EMPEROR.
My brother! To my arms! What better thing to do, at death’s own door?
[Lifts him up and embraces him.
I pardon you!

JOB.
Thou art almighty. God!

GUANHUMARA (*taking a step forward).* My dagger falls. Donato lives. I'll die Contented at his feet. I give you back All you have loved, all that my hate has seized — *[To* JOB.] To you, your son!
[To OTBERT.] To you, your wife, Regina! *[Makes a sign:* REGINA, *all in white appears at the back of the left gallery; she totters, and is supported by the two masked men; she seems dazed; she sees* OTBERT *and rushes to his arms with a great cry.*

REGINA.
Heaven!
[OTBERT, REGINA, *and* JOB *remain in a rapturous embrace.*

OTBERT. Regina — wife! My father!

JOB (*lifting his eyes to heaven).*
Son!

GUANHUMARA *(at back).* This is my hour! Tomb, open doors to me! *[Lifts a phial to her lips.* THE EMPEROR *goes to her quickly.*

THE EMPEROR.
What's that?

GUANHUMARA.
I swore, that coffin, empty, should Not leave this place!

THE EMPEROR.
Ginevra!

GUANHUMARA.
Donato!
'T is a swift poison — Love! Good-bye! [she *dies.*

THE EMPEROR.
I, too, Must go. Job, reign over your Rhine!

JOB.

Remain!

THE EMPEROR. I leave a sovereign to the world. Just now The herald of the Empire came to tell The princes had at last, at Spire, chosen My grandson Frederic for Emperor. He’s a true sage, untouched by hate and free From sin. I leave my throne to him, while I Go back into my solitudes. Farewell! Live, reign, and suffer! Destiny is hard. Before death claimed me, prostrate at the cross, I wanted to extend my guiding hand, As king, once more upon my people, and, As loving brother, hold it out to you. Whatever life has brought, when the bell tolls, He’s happy who can bless!
[.All fall on their knees to receive the benediction of THE EMPEROR.

JOB (*takes* THE EMPEROR’S *hand and kisses it).* And great who can forgive!

THE POET. Depart with Barbarossa, O Count Job! Go forth together, hand-in-hand, you twain! Make of your royal mantles two great shrouds; Each aiding each, pass on, and bear away The mighty arch of ancient Germany. Colossi! Worlds like this are small for you. Thou solitude, whose depths are resonant, Receive this giant pair within thy gloom; And let all earth, agape, lend eyes to watch This entrance into thy eternal night Of a grand burgrave and grand emperor.

CURTAIN

HERNANI

This play was performed for the first time at the Comédie-Française on 25 February 1830 and published the same year. It is one of Hugo's most famous plays, which concerns the Battle of Hernani, a popular theme for romantic drama at the time. The play was no less than a triumph and later became the inspiration of Verdi's opera *Ernani*.

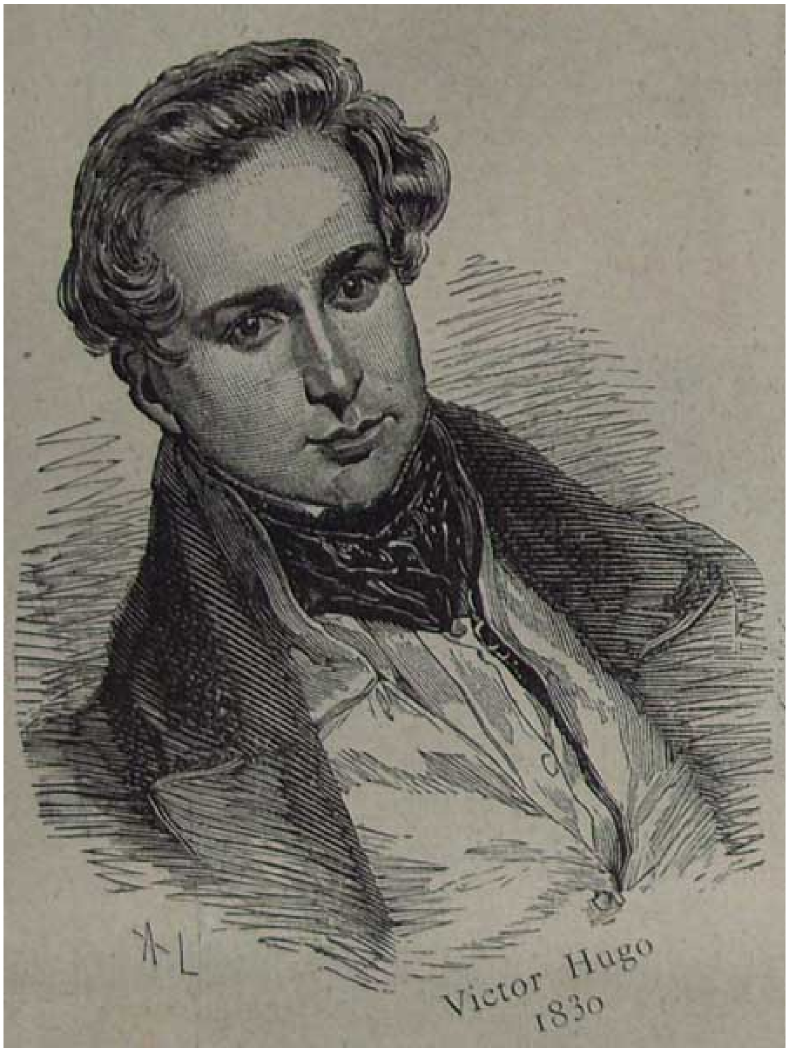
AL
Victor Hugo
1830

Hugo at the time of publication

TABLE DES MATIERES

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SCÈNE PREMIÈRE.
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HERNANI

PREFACE DE L’AUTEUR.

L’auteur de ce drame écrivait il y a peu de semaines à propos d’un poëte mort avant l’âge:

«…Dans ce moment de mêlée et de tourmente littéraire, qui faut-il plaindre, ceux qui meurent ou ceux qui combattent? Sans doute, il est triste de voir un poëte de vingt ans qui s’en va, une lyre qui se brise, un avenir qui s’évanouit; mais n’est-ce pas quelque chose aussi que le repos? N’est-il pas permis à ceux autour desquels s’amassent incessamment calomnies, injures, haines, jalousies, sourdes menées, basses trahisons; hommes loyaux auxquels on fait une guerre déloyale; hommes dévoués qui ne voudraient enfin que doter le pays d’une liberté de plus, celle de l’art, celle de l’intelligence; hommes laborieux qui poursuivent paisiblement leur oeuvre de conscience, en proie d’un côté à de viles machinations de censure et de police, en butte de l’autre, trop souvent, à l’ingratitude des esprits mêmes pour lesquels ils travaillent; ne leur est-il pas permis de retourner quelquefois la tête avec envie vers ceux qui sont tombés derrière eux et qui dorment dans le tombeau? *Invideo*, disait Luther dans le cimetière de Worms, *invideo, quia quiéscunt*.

«Qu’importe toutefois? Jeunes gens, ayons bon courage! Si rude qu’on nous veuille faire le présent, l’avenir sera beau. Le romantisme, tant de fois mal défini, n’est, à tout prendre, et c’est là sa définition réelle, si l’on ne l’envisage que sous son côté militant, que le *libéralisme* en littérature. Cette vérité est déjà comprise à peu près de tous les bons esprits, et le nombre en est grand; et bientôt, car l’oeuvre est déjà bien avancée, le libéralisme littéraire ne sera pas moins populaire que le libéralisme politique. La liberté dans l’art, la liberté dans la société, voilà le double but auquel doivent tendre d’un même pas tous les esprits conséquents et logiques; voilà la double bannière qui rallie, à bien peu d’intelligences près (lesquelles s’éclaireront), toute la jeunesse si forte et si patiente d’aujourd’hui; puis, avec la jeunesse et à sa tête, l’élite de la génération qui nous a précédés, tous ces sages vieillards qui, après le premier moment de défiance et d’examen, ont reconnu que ce que font leur fils est une conséquence de ce qu’ils ont fait eux-mêmes, et que la liberté littéraire est fille de la liberté politique. Ce principe est celui du siècle, et prévaudra. Les *Ultras* de tout genre, classiques ou monarchiques, auront beau se prêter secours pour refaire l'ancien régime de toutes pièces, société et littérature; chaque progrès du pays, chaque développement des intelligences, chaque pas de la liberté fera crouler tout ce qu'ils auront échafaudé. Et, en définitive, leurs efforts de réaction auront été utiles. En révolution, tout mouvement fait avancer. La vérité et la liberté ont cela d'excellent que tout ce qu'on fait pour elles et tout ce qu'on fait contre elles les sert également. Or, après tant de grandes choses que nos pères ont faites et que nous avons vues, nous voilà sortis de la vieille forme sociale; comment ne sortirions-nous pas de la vieille forme poétique? A peuple nouveau, art nouveau. Tout en admirant la littérature de Louis XIV, si bien adaptée à sa monarchie, elle saura bien avoir sa littérature propre et personnelle et nationale, cette France actuelle, cette France du dix-neuvième siècle, à qui Mirabeau a fait sa liberté et Napoléon sa puissance.»

Qu'on pardonne à l'auteur de ce drame de se citer ici lui-même; ses paroles ont si peu le don de se graver dans les esprits, qu'il aurait souvent besoin de les rappeler. D'ailleurs, aujourd'hui, il n'est peut-être point hors de propos de remettre sous les yeux des lecteurs les deux pages qu'on vient de transcrire. Ce n'est pas que ce drame puisse en rien mériter le beau nom d'art nouveau, de *poésie nouvelle*, loin de là; mais c'est que le principe de la liberté en littérature vient de faire un pas; c'est qu'un progrès vient de s'accomplir, non dans l'art, ce drame est trop peu de chose, mais dans le public; c'est que, sous ce rapport du moins, une partie des pronostics hasardés plus haut viennent de se réaliser.

Il y avait péril, en effet, à changer ainsi brusquement d'auditoire, à risquer sur le théâtre des tentatives confiées jusqu'ici seulement au papier *qui souffre tout*; le public des livres est bien différent du public des spectacles, et l'on pouvait craindre de voir le second repousser ce que le premier avait accepté. Il n'en a rien été. Le principe de la liberté littéraire, déjà compris par le monde qui lit et qui médite, n'a pas été moins complètement adopté par cette immense foule, avide des pures émotions de l'art, qui inonde chaque soir les théâtres de Paris. Cette voix haute et puissante du peuple, qui ressemble à celle de Dieu, veut désormais que la poésie ait la même devise que la politique: TOLÉRANCE ET LIBERTÉ.

Maintenant vienne le poëte! il y a un public.

Et cette liberté, le public la veut telle qu’elle doit être, se conciliant avec l’ordre, dans l’état, avec l’art, dans la littérature. La liberté a une sagesse qui lui est propre, et sans laquelle elle n’est pas complète. Que les vieilles règles de d’Aubignac meurent avec les vieilles coutumes de Cujas, cela est bien; qu’à une littérature de cour succède une littérature de peuple, cela est mieux encore; mais surtout qu’une raison intérieure se rencontre au fond de toutes ces nouveautés. Que le principe de liberté fasse son affaire, mais qu’il la fasse bien. Dans les lettres, comme dans la société, point d’étiquette, point d’anarchie des lois. Ni talons rouges, ni bonnets rouges.

Voilà ce que veut le public, et il veut bien. Quant à nous, par déférence pour ce public qui a accueilli avec tant d’indulgence un essai qui en méritait si peu, nous lui donnons ce drame aujourd’hui tel qu’il a été représenté. Le jour viendra peut-être de le publier tel qu’il a été conçu par l’auteur, en indiquant et en discutant les modifications que la scène lui a fait subir. Ces détails de critique peuvent ne pas être sans intérêt ni sans enseignements, mais ils sembleraient minutieux aujourd’hui; la liberté de l’art est admise, la question principale est résolue; à quoi bon s’arrêter aux questions secondaires? Nous y reviendrons du reste quelque jour, et nous parlerons aussi, bien en détail, en la ruinant par les raisonnements et par les faits, de cette censure dramatique qui est le seul obstacle à la liberté du théâtre, maintenant qu’il n’y en a plus dans le public. Nous essayerons, à nos risques et périls et par dévouement aux choses de l’art, de caractériser les mille abus de cette petite inquisition de l’esprit, qui a, comme l’autre saint-office, ses juges secrets, ses bourreaux masqués, ses tortures, ses mutilations et sa peine de mort. Nous déchirerons, s’il se peut, ces langes de police dont il est honteux que le théâtre soit encore emmailloté au dix-neuvième siècle.

Aujourd’hui il ne doit y avoir place que pour la reconnaissance et les remerciements. C’est au public que l’auteur de ce drame adresse les siens, et du fond du coeur. Cette oeuvre, non de talent, mais de conscience et de liberté, a été généreusement protégée contre bien des inimitiés par le public, parce que le public est toujours, aussi lui, consciencieux et libre. Grâces lui soient donc rendues, ainsi qu’à cette jeunesse puissante qui a porté aide et faveur à l’ouvrage d’un jeune homme sincère et indépendant comme elle! C’est pour elle surtout qu’il travaille, parce que ce serait une gloire bien haute que l’applaudissement de cette élite de jeunes hommes, intelligente, logique, conséquente, vraiment libérale en littérature comme en politique, noble génération qui ne se refuse pas à ouvrir les deux yeux à la vérité et à recevoir la lumière des deux côtés.

Quant à son oeuvre en elle-même, il n’en parlera pas. Il accepte les critiques qui en ont été faites, les plus sévères comme les plus bienveillantes, parce qu’on peut profiter à toutes. Il n’ose se flatter que tout le monde ait compris du premier coup ce drame, dont le *Romancero general* est la véritable clef. Il prierait volontiers les personnes que cet ouvrage a pu choquer de relire *le Cid Don Sanche, Nicomède,* ou plutôt tout Corneille et tout Molière, ces grands et admirables poëtes. Cette lecture, si pourtant elles veulent bien faire d’abord la part de l’immense infériorité de l’auteur d’*Hernani,* les rendra peut-être moins sévères pour certaines choses qui ont pu les blesser dans la forme ou dans le fond de ce drame. En somme, le moment n’est peut-être pas encore venu de le juger. *Hernani* n’est jusqu’ici que la première pierre d’un édifice qui existe tout construit dans la tête de son auteur, mais dont l’ensemble peut seul donner quelque valeur à ce drame. Peut-être ne trouvera-t-on pas mauvaise un jour la fantaisie qui lui a pris de mettre, comme l’architecte de Bourges, une porte presque moresque à sa cathédrale gothique.

En attendant, ce qu’il a fait est bien peu de chose, il le sait. Puissent le temps et la force ne pas lui manquer pour achever son oeuvre! Elle ne vaudra qu’autant qu’elle sera terminée. Il n’est pas des ces poëtes privilégiés qui peuvent mourir ou s’interrompre avant d’avoir fini, sans péril pour leur mémoire; il n’est pas de ceux qui restent grands, même sans avoir complété leur ouvrage, heureux hommes dont on peut dire ce que Virgile disait de Carthage ébauchée:

Pendent opera interrupta, minaeque
Murorum ingentes!

9 mars 1830.

Lettre aux éditeurs des poésies de M. Dovalle.

Ce jour, prédit par l’auteur, est venu. Nous donnons dans cette édition *Hernani* tout entier, tel que le poëte l’avait écrit, avec les développements de passion, les détails de moeurs et les saillies de caractères que la représentation avait retranchés. Quant à la discussion critique que l’auteur indique, elle sortira d’elle-même, pour tous les lecteurs, de la comparaison qu’ils pourront faire entre l’Hernani tronqué du théâtre et l’Hernani de cette édition. Espérons tout des progrès que le public des théâtres fait chaque jour.

Mai 1836. (*Note de l’éditeur*.)

PERSONNAGES.

HERNANI. DON MATIAS.
DON CARLOS. DON RICARDO.
DON RUY GOMEZ DE SILVA. DON FRANCISCO.
DOÑA SOL DE SILVA. DON GARCI SUAREZ.
LE ROI DE BOHÊME. DON JUAN DE HARO.
LE DUC DE BAVIERE. DON GIL TELLEZ GIRON.
LE DUC DE GOTHA. DOÑA JOSEFA DUARTE.
LE DUC DE LUTZELBOURG. Un montagnard.
JAQUEZ. Une dame.
DON SANCHO.
Premier conjuré. Deuxième conjuré. Troisième conjuré.
Conjurés de la ligue sacro-sainte, Allemands et Espagnols.
Montagnards, seigneurs, soldats, pages, peuple.
Espagne, 1519.

HERNANI.

ACTE PREMIER - LE ROI.

SARAGOSSE.

Une chambre à coucher. La nuit. Une lampe sur la table.

SCÈNE PREMIÈRE.

DOÑA JOSEFA DUARTE (*vieille, en noir, avec le corps de sa jupe cousu de jais, à la mode d'Isabelle la Catholique*); DON CARLOS.

DOÑA JOSEFA (*seule*). *Elle ferme les rideaux cramoisis de la fenêtre et met en ordre quelques fauteuils. On frappe à une petite porte dérobée à droite. Elle écoute. On frappe un second coup*. Serait-ce déjà lui?

Un nouveau coup. C'est bien à l'escalier Dérobé.

Un quatrième coup. Vite, ouvrons.

Elle ouvre la petite porte masquée. Entre don Carlos, le manteau sur le nez et le chapeau sur les yeux. Bonjour, beau cavalier.

Elle l'introduit. Il écarte son manteau et laisse voir un riche costume de velours et de soie, à la mode castillane de 1519. Elle le regarde sous le nez et recule étonnée. Quoi, seigneur Hernani, ce n'est pas vous! — Main-forte! Au feu!

DON CARLOS (*lui saisissant le bras*).
Deux mots de plus, duègne, vous êtes morte!

Il la regarde fixement. Elle se tait, effrayée.
Suis-je chez doña Sol? fiancée au vieux duc
De Pastraña, son oncle, un bon seigneur, caduc,
Vénérable et jaloux? dites? La belle adore
Un cavalier sans barbe et sans moustache encore,

Et reçoit tous les soirs, malgré les envieux,
Le jeune amant sans barbe à la barbe du vieux.
Suis-je bien informé?

Elle se tait. Il la secoue par le bras.
Vous répondrez peut-être?

DOÑA JOSEFA.
Vous m’avez défendu de dire deux mots, maître.

DON CARLOS.
Aussi n’en veux-je qu’un. — Oui, — non. — Ta dame est bien
Doña Sol de Silva? parle.

DOÑA JOSEFA.
Oui. — Pourquoi?

DON CARLOS.
Pour rien. Le duc, son vieux futur, est absent à cette heure?

DOÑA JOSEFA.
Oui.

DON CARLOS.
Sans doute elle attend son jeune?

DOÑA JOSEFA.
Oui.

DON CARLOS.
Que je meure!

DOÑA JOSEFA.
Oui.

DON CARLOS.
Duègne, c’est ici qu’aura lieu l’entretien?

DOÑA JOSEFA.
Oui.

DON CARLOS.
Cache-moi céans.

DOÑA JOSEFA.
Vous!

DON CARLOS.
Moi.

DOÑA JOSEFA.
Pourquoi?

DON CARLOS.
Pour rien.

DOÑA JOSEFA.
Moi! vous cacher!

DON CARLOS.
Ici.

DOÑA JOSEFA.
Jamais!

DON CARLOS (*tirant de sa ceinture un poignard et une bourse*).
Daignez, madame,
Choisir de cette bourse ou bien de cette lame.

DOÑA JOSEFA (*prenant la bourse*).
Vous êtes donc le diable?

DON CARLOS.
Oui, duègne.

DOÑA JOSEFA (*ouvrant une armoire étroite dans le mur*).
Entrez ici.

DON CARLOS (*examinant l’armoire*).
Cette boîte?

DOÑA JOSEFA (*la refermant*).
Va-t’en, si tu n’en veux pas.

DON CARLOS (*rouvrant l’armoire*).
Si!

L’examinant encore.
Serait-ce l’écurie où tu mets d’aventure
Le manche du balai qui te sert de monture?

Il s’y blottit avec peine.
Ouf!

DOÑA JOSEFA (*joignant les mains et scandalisée*).
Un homme ici!

DON CARLOS (*dans l’armoire restée ouverte*).
C’est une femme, est-ce pas,
Qu’attendait ta maîtresse?

DOÑA JOSEFA.
O ciel! j’entends le pas
De doña Sol. — Seigneur, fermez vite la porte.

Elle pousse la porte de l’armoire, qui se referme.

DON CARLOS (*de l’intérieure de l’armoire*).
Si vous dites un mot, duègne, vous êtes morte.

DOÑA JOSEFA (*seule*).
Qu’est cet homme? Jésus mon Dieu! Si j’appelais?
Qui? Hors madame et moi, tout dort dans le palais.
Bah! l’autre va venir. La chose le regarde.
Il a sa bonne épée, et que le ciel nous garde
De l’enfer!

Pesant la bourse.
Après tout, ce n’est pas un voleur.

Entre doña Sol, en blanc. *Doña Josefa cache la bourse*.

SCÈNE II.

DOÑA JOSEFA, DON CARLOS (*caché*); DOÑA SOL. *Puis* HERNANI.

DOÑA SOL.
Josefa!

DOÑA JOSEFA.
Madame?

DOÑA SOL.
Ah! je crains quelque malheur.
Hernani devrait être ici.

Bruit de pas à la petite porte.
Voici qu'il monte.
Ouvre avant qu'il ne frappe, et fais vite, et sois prompte.

Josefa ouvre la petite porte. Entre Hernani. Grand manteau, grand chapeau. Dessous, un costume de montagnard d'Aragon, gris, avec une cuirasse de cuir, une épée, un poignard, et un cor à la ceinture.

DOÑA SOL (*courant à lui*).
Hernani!

HERNANI.
Doña Sol! Ah! c'est vous que je vois
Enfin! et cette voix qui parle est votre voix!
Pourquoi le sort mit-il mes jours si loin des vôtres?
J'ai tant besoin de vous pour oublier les autres!

DOÑA SOL (*touchant ses vêtements*).
Jésus! votre manteau ruisselle! il pleut donc bien?

HERNANI.
Je ne sais.

DOÑA SOL.
Vous devez avoir froid!

HERNANI.
Ce n’est rien.

DOÑA SOL.
Otez donc ce manteau.

HERNANI.
Doña Sol, mon amie,
Dites-moi, quand la nuit vous êtes endormie,
Calme, innocente et pure, et qu’un sommeil joyeux
Entr’ouvre votre bouche et du doigt clôt vos yeux,
Un ange vous dit-il combien vous êtes douce
Au malheureux que tout abandonne et repousse?

DOÑA SOL.
Vous avez bien tardé, seigneur! Mais dites-moi
Si vous avez froid.

HERNANI.
Moi! je brûle près de toi!
Ah! quand l’amour jaloux bouillonne dans nos têtes,
Quand notre coeur se gonfle et s’emplit de tempêtes,
Qu’importe ce que peut un nuage des airs
Nous jeter en passant de tempête et d’éclairs!

DOÑA SOL (*lui défaisant son manteau*).
Allons! donnez la cape, — et l’épée avec elle.

HERNANI (*la main sur son épée*).
Non. C’est mon autre amie, innocente et fidèle.
— Doña Sol, le vieux duc, votre futur époux,
Votre oncle, est donc absent?

DOÑA SOL.
Oui, cette heure est à nous.

HERNANI.
Cette heure! Et voilà tout. Pour nous, plus rien qu'une heure!
Après, qu'importe? il faut qu'on oublie ou qu'on meure.
Ange! une heure avec vous! une heure, en vérité,
A qui voudrait la vie, et puis l'éternité!

DOÑA SOL.
Hernani!

HERNANI (*amèrement*).
Que je suis heureux que le duc sorte!
Comme un larron qui tremble et qui force une porte;
Vite, j'entre, et vous vois, et dérobe au vieillard
Une heure de vos chants et de votre regard;
Et je suis bien heureux, et sans doute on m'envie
De lui voler une heure, et lui me prend ma vie!

DOÑA SOL.
Calmez-vous.

Remettant le manteau à la duègne.
Josefa, fais sécher le manteau.

Josefa sort. Elle s'assied et fait signe à Hernani de venir près d'elle.
Venez là.

HERNANI (*sans l'entendre*).
Donc le duc est absent du château?

DOÑA SOL (*souriant*).
Comme vous êtes grand!

HERNANI.
Il est absent.

DOÑA SOL.
Chère âme,
Ne pensons plus au duc.

HERNANI.
Ah! pensons-y, madame!
Ce vieillard! il vous aime, il va vous épouser!
Quoi donc! vous prit-il pas l’autre jour un baiser?
N’y plus penser!

DOÑA SOL (*riant*).
C’est là ce qui vous désespère!
Un baiser d’oncle! au front! presque un baiser de père!

HERNANI.
Non. Un baiser d’amant, de mari, de jaloux.
Ah! vous serez à lui, madame! Y pensez-vous?
O l’insensé vieillard, qui, la tête inclinée,
Pour achever sa route et finir sa journée,
A besoin d’une femme, et va, spectre glacé,
Prendre une jeune fille! ô vieillard insensé!
Pendant que d’une main il s’attache à la vôtre,
Ne voit-il pas la mort qui l’épouse de l’autre?
Il vient dans nos amours se jeter sans frayeur!
Vieillard, va-t’en donner mesure au fossoyeur!
— Qui fait ce mariage? On vous force, j’espère!

DOÑA SOL.
Le roi, dit-on, le veut.

HERNANI.
Le roi! le roi! Mon père
Est mort sur l’échafaud, condamné par le sien.
Or, quoiqu’on ait vieilli depuis ce fait ancien,
Pour l’ombre du feu roi, pour son fils, pour sa veuve,
Pour tous les siens, ma haine est encor toute neuve!
Lui, mort, ne compte plus. Et, tout enfant, je fis
Le serment de venger mon père sur son fils.
Je te cherchais partout, Carlos, roi des Castilles!
Car la haine est vivace entre nos deux familles.
Les pères ont lutté sans pitié, sans remords,
Trente ans! Or, c’est en vain que les pères sont morts.

Leur haine vit. Pour eux la paix n'est point venue,
Car les fils sont debout, et le duel continue.
Ah! c'est donc toi qui veux cet exécrable hymen!
Tant mieux. Je te cherchais, tu viens dans mon chemin!

DOÑA SOL.
Vous m'effrayez.

HERNANI.
Chargé d'un mandat d'anathème,
Il faut que j'en arrive à m'effrayer moi-même!
Écoutez. L'homme auquel, jeune, on vous destina,
Ruy de Silva, votre oncle, est duc de Pastrafia,
Riche-homme d'Aragon, comte et grand de Castille.
A défaut de jeunesse, il peut, ô jeune fille,
Vous apporter tant d'or, de bijoux, de joyaux,
Que votre front reluise entre des fronts royaux,
Et pour le rang, l'orgueil, la gloire et la richesse,
Mainte reine peut-être envîra sa duchesse.
Voilà donc ce qu'il est. Moi, je suis pauvre, et n'eus
Tout enfant, que les bois où je fuyais pieds nus.
Peut-être aurais-je aussi quelque blason illustre
Qu'une rouille de sang à cette heure délustre;
Peut-être ai-je des droits, dans l'ombre ensevelis,
Qu'un drap d'échafaud noir cache encor sous ses plis,
Et qui, si mon attente un jour n'est pas trompée,
Pourront de ce fourreau sortir avec l'épée.
En attendant, je n'ai reçu du ciel jaloux
Que l'air, le jour et l'eau, la dot qu'il donne à tous.
Or du duc ou de moi souffrez qu'on vous délivre.
Il faut choisir des deux, l'épouser, ou me suivre.

DOÑA SOL.
Je vous suivrai.

HERNANI.
Parmi mes rudes compagnons?
Proscrits dont le bourreau sait d'avance les noms.

Gens dont jamais le fer ni le coeur ne s'émousse,
Ayant tous quelque sang à venger qui les pousse?
Vous viendrez commander ma bande, comme on dit?
Car, vous ne savez pas, moi, je suis un bandit!
Quand tout me poursuivait dans toutes les Espagnes,
Seule, dans ses forêts, dans ses hautes montagnes,
Dans ses rocs où l'on n'est que de l'aigle aperçu,
La vieille Catalogne en mère m'a reçu.
Parmi ses montagnards, libres, pauvres, et graves,
Je grandis, et demain trois mille de ses braves,
Si ma voix dans leurs monts fait résonner ce cor,
Viendront… Vous frissonnez. Réfléchissez encor.
Me suivre dans les bois, dans les monts, sur les grèves,
Chez des hommes pareils aux démons de vos rêves,
Soupçonner tout, les yeux, les voix, les pas, le bruit,
Dormir sur l'herbe, boire au torrent, et la nuit
Entendre, en allaitant quelque enfant qui s'éveille,
Les balles des mousquets siffler à votre oreille.
Être errante avec moi, proscrite, et, s'il le faut,
Me suivre où je suivrai mon père, — à l'échafaud.

DOÑA SOL.
Je vous suivrai.

HERNANI.
Le duc est riche, grand, prospère.
Le duc n'a pas de tache au vieux nom de son père.
Le duc peut tout. Le duc vous offre avec sa main
Trésors, titres, bonheur…

DOÑA SOL.
Nous partirons demain.
Hernani, n'allez pas sur mon audace étrange
Me blâmer. Etes-vous mon démon ou mon ange?
Je ne sais, mais je suis votre esclave. Écoutez.
Allez où vous voudrez, j'irai. Restez, partez,
Je suis à vous. Pourquoi fais-je ainsi? je l'ignore.

J’ai besoin de vous voir et de vous voir encore
Et de vous voir toujours. Quand le bruit de vos pas
S’efface, alors je crois que mon coeur ne bat pas,
Vous me manquez, je suis absente de moi-même;
Mais dès qu’enfin ce pas que j’attends et que j’aime
Vient frapper mon oreille, alors il me souvient
Que je vis, et je sens mon âme qui revient!

HERNANI (*la serrant dans ses bras*).
Ange!

DOÑA SOL.
A minuit. Demain. Amenez votre escorte,
Sous ma fenêtre. Allez, je serai brave et forte.
Vous frapperez trois coups.

HERNANI.
Savez-vous qui je suis,
Maintenant?

DOÑA SOL.
Monseigneur, qu’importe! Je vous suis.

HERNANI.
Non, puisque vous voulez me suivre, faible femme,
Il faut que vous sachiez quel nom, quel rang, quelle âme
Quel destin est caché dans le pâtre Hernani.
Vous vouliez d’un brigand, voulez-vous d’un banni?

DON CARLOS (*ouvrant avec fracas la porte de l’armoire*).
Quand aurez-vous fini de conter votre histoire?
Croyez-vous donc qu’on soit à l’aise en cette armoire?

Hernani recule étonné. Doña Sol pousse un cri et se réfugie dans ses bras, en fixant sur don Carlos des yeux effarés.

HERNANI (*la main sur la garde de son épée*).
Quel est cet homme?

DOÑA SOL.
O ciel! Au secours!

HERNANI.
Taisez-vous,
Doña Sol! vous donnez l’éveil aux yeux jaloux.
Quand je suis près de vous, veuillez, quoi qu’il advienne,
Ne réclamer jamais d’autre aide que la mienne.

A don Carlos.
Que faisiez-vous là?

DON CARLOS.
Moi? mais, à ce qu’il paraît,
je ne chevauchais pas à travers la forêt.

HERNANI.
Qui raille après l’affront s’expose à faire rire
Aussi son héritier.

DON CARLOS.
Chacun son tour! — Messire,
Parlons franc. Vous aimez madame et ses yeux noirs,
Vous y venez mirer les vôtres tous les soirs,
C’est fort bien. J’aime aussi madame, et veux connaître
Qui j’ai vu tant de fois entrer par la fenêtre,
Tandis que je restais à la porte.

HERNANI.
En honneur,
Je vous ferai sortir par où j’entre, seigneur.

DON CARLOS.
Nous verrons. J’offre donc mon amour à madame.
Partageons. Voulez-vous? J’ai vu dans sa belle âme
Tant d’amour, de bonté, de tendres sentiments,
Que madame à coup sûr en a pour deux amants.
Or, ce soir, voulant mettre à fin mon entreprise,

Pris, je pense, pour vous, j'entre ici par surprise,
Je me cache, j'écoute, à ne vous celer rien;
Mais j'entendais très mal et j'étouffais très bien.
Et puis, je chiffonnais ma veste à la française.
Ma foi, je sors!

HERNANI.
Ma dague aussi n'est pas à l'aise
Et veut sortir.

DON CARLOS (*le saluant*).
Monsieur, c'est comme il vous plaira.

HERNANI (*tirant son épée*).
En garde!

Don Carlos tire son épée.

DOÑA SOL (*se jetant entre eux*).
Hernani! ciel!

DON CARLOS.
Calmez-vous, señora.

HERNANI (*à don Carlos*).
Dites-moi votre nom.

DON CARLOS.
Hé! dites-moi le vôtre!

HERNANI.
Je le garde, secret et fatal, pour un autre
Qui doit un jour sentir, sous mon genou vainqueur,
Mon nom à son oreille, et ma dague à son coeur!

DON CARLOS.
Alors, quel est le nom de l'autre?

HERNANI.
Que t’importe?
En garde! défends-toi!

Ils croisent leurs épées. Doña Sol tombe tremblante sur un fauteuil. On entend des coups à la porte.

DOÑA SOL (*se levant avec effroi*).
Ciel! on frappe à la porte!

Les champions s’arrêtent. Entre Josefa par la petite porte et tout effarée.

HERNANI (*à Josefa*).
Qui frappe ainsi?

DOÑA JOSEFA (à doña Sol).
Madame! un coup inattendu!
C’est le duc qui revient!

DOÑA SOL (*joignant les mains*).
Le duc! tout est perdu!
Malheureuse!

DOÑA JOSEFA (*jetant les yeux autour d’elle*).
Jésus! l’inconnu! des épées!
On se battait! Voilà de belles équipées!

Les deux combattants remettent leurs épées dans le fourreau. Don Carlos s’enveloppe dans son manteau et rabat son chapeau sur ses yeux. On frappe.

HERNANI.
Que faire?

On frappe.

UNE VOIX (*au dehors*).
Doña Sol, ouvrez-moi!

Doña Josefa fait un pas vers la porte. Hernani l’arrête.

HERNANI.
N’ouvrez-pas!

DOÑA JOSEFA (*tirant son chapelet*).
Saint Jacques monseigneur! tirez-nous de ce pas!

On frappe de nouveau.

HERNANI (*montrant l’armoire à Don Carlos*).
Cachons-nous.

DON CARLOS.
Dans l’armoire?

HERNANI (*montrant la porte*).
Entrez-y. Je m’en charge.
Nous y tiendrons tous deux.

DON CARLOS.
Grand merci, c’est trop large!

HERNANI (*montrant la petite porte*).
Fuyons par là.

DON CARLOS.
Bonsoir. Pour moi, je reste ici.

HERNANI.
Ah! tête et sang! monsieur, vous me paîrez ceci!

A doña Sol.
Si je barricadais l’entrée?

DON CARLOS (*à Josefa*).
Ouvrez la porte.

HERNANI.
Que dit-il?

DON CARLOS (*à Josefa interdite*).
Ouvrez donc, vous dis-je!

On frappe toujours. Doña Josefa va ouvrir en tremblant.

DOÑA SOL.
Je suis morte!

SCÈNE III.

LES MEMES. DON RUY GOMEZ DE SILVA, *barbe et cheveux blancs; en noir.*
VALETS *avec des flambeaux*.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Des hommes chez ma nièce à cette heure de nuit!
Venez tous! cela vaut la lumière et le bruit.

A doña Sol.
Par saint Jean d'Avila, je crois que, sur mon âme,
Nous sommes trois chez vous! C'est trop de deux, madame.

Aux deux jeunes gens.
Mes jeunes cavaliers, que faites-vous céans?
Quand nous avions le Cid et Bernard, ces géants
De l'Espagne et du monde allaient par les Castilles
Honorant les vieillards et protégeant les filles.
C'étaient des hommes forts et qui trouvaient moins lourds
Leur fer et leur acier que vous votre velours.
Ces hommes-là portaient respect aux barbes grises,
Faisaient agenouiller leur amour aux églises,
Ne trahissaient personne, et donnaient pour raison
Qu'ils avaient à garder l'honneur de leur maison.
S'ils voulaient une femme, ils la prenaient sans tache,
En plein jour, devant tous, et l'épée, ou la hache,
Ou la lance à la main. — Et quant à ces félons
Qui, le soir, et les yeux tournés vers leurs talons,
Ne fiant qu'à la nuit leurs manoeuvres infâmes,
Par derrière aux maris volent l'honneur des femmes,
J'affirme que le Cid, cet aïeul de nous tous,
Les eût tenus pour vils et fait mettre à genoux,
Et qu'il eût, dégradant leur noblesse usurpée,
Souffleté leur blason du plat de son épée!
Voilà ce que feraient, j'y songe avec ennui,

Les hommes d’autrefois aux hommes d’aujourd’hui.
— Qu’êtes-vous venus faire ici? C’est donc à dire
Que je ne suis qu’un vieux dont les jeunes vont rire?
On va rire de moi, soldat de Zamora?
Et quand je passerai, tête blanche, on rira?
Ce n’est pas vous, du moins, qui rirez!

HERNANI.
Duc…

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Silence!
Quoi! vous avez l’épée, et la dague, et la lance,
La chasse, les festins, les meutes, les faucons,
Les chansons à chanter le soir sous les balcons,
Les plumes au chapeau, les casaques de soie,
Les bals, les carrousels, la jeunesse, la joie,
Enfants, l’ennui vous gagne! A toux prix, au hasard,
Il vous faut un hochet. Vous prenez un vieillard.
Ah! vous l’avez brisé, le hochet! mais Dieu fasse
Qu’il vous puisse en éclats rejaillir à la face!
Suivez-moi!

HERNANI.
Seigneur duc…

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Suivez-moi! suivez-moi!
Messieurs, avons-nous fait cela pour rire? Quoi!
Un trésor est chez moi. C’est l’honneur d’une fille,
D’une femme, l’honneur de toute une famille,
Cette fille, je l’aime, elle est ma nièce, et doit
Bientôt changer sa bague à l’anneau de mon doigt,
Je la crois chaste et pure et sacrée à tout homme,
Or il faut que je sorte une heure, et moi qu’on nomme
Ruy Gomez de Silva, je ne puis l’essayer
Sans qu’un larron d’honneur se glisse à mon foyer!
Arrière! lavez donc vos mains, hommes sans âmes,

Car, rien qu'en y touchant, vous nous tachez nos femmes,
Non. C'est bien. Poursuivez. Ai-je autre chose encor?

Il arrache son collier.
Tenez, foulez aux pieds, foulez ma toison d'or!

Il jette son chapeau.
Arrachez mes cheveux, faites-en chose vile!
Et vous pourrez demain vous vanter par la ville
Que jamais débauchés, dans leurs jeux insolents,
N'ont sur plus noble front souillé cheveux plus blancs.

DOÑA SOL.
Monseigneur…

DON RUY GOMEZ (*à ses valets*).
Écuyers! écuyers! à mon aide!
Ma hache, mon poignard, ma dague de Tolède!

Aux deux jeunes gens.
Et suivez-moi tous deux!

DON CARLOS (*faisant un pas*).
Duc, ce n'est pas d'abord
De cela qu'il s'agit. Il s'agit de la mort
De Maximilien, empereur d'Allemagne.

Il jette son manteau, et découvre son visage caché par son chapeau.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Raillez-vous?… — Dieu! le roi!

DOÑA SOL.
Le roi!

HERNANI (*dont les yeux s'allument*).
Le roi d'Espagne!

DON CARLOS (*gravement*).
Oui, Carlos. — Seigneur duc, es-tu donc insensé?
Mon aïeul l'empereur est mort. Je ne le sai
Que de ce soir. Je viens, tout en hâte, et moi-même,
Dire la chose, à toi, féal sujet que j'aime,
Te demander conseil, incognito, la nuit,
Et l'affaire est bien simple, et voilà bien du bruit!

Don Ruy Gomez renvoie ses gens d'un signe. Il s'approche de don Carlos que doña Sol examine avec crainte et surprise, et sur lequel Hernani demeuré dans un coin fixe des yeux étincelants.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Mais pourquoi tarder tant à m'ouvrir cette porte?

DON CARLOS.
Belle raison! tu viens avec toute une escorte!
Quand un secret d'État m'amène en ton palais,
Duc, est-ce pour l'aller dire à tous tes valets!

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Altesse, pardonnez! l'apparence…

DON CARLOS.
Bon père,
Je t'ai fait gouverneur du château de Figuère,
Mais qui dois-je à présent faire ton gouverneur?

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Pardonnez…

DON CARLOS.
Il suffit. N'en parlons plus, seigneur.
Donc l'empereur est mort.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
L'aïeul de votre altesse
Est mort?

DON CARLOS.
Duc, tu m’en vois pénétré de tristesse.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Qui lui succède?

DON CARLOS.
Un duc de Saxe est sur les rangs.
François premier, de France, est un des concurrents.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Où vont se rassembler les électeurs d’empire?

DON CARLOS.
Ils ont choisi, je crois, Aix-la-Chapelle, ou Spire,
Ou Francfort.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Notre roi, dont Dieu garde les jours,
N’a-t-il pensé jamais à l’empire?

DON CARLOS.
Toujours.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
C’est à vous qu’il revient.

DON CARLOS.
Je le sais.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Votre père
Fut archiduc d’Autriche, et l’empire, j’espère,
Aura ceci présent, que c’était votre aïeul,
Celui qui vient de choir de la pourpre au linceul.

DON CARLOS.
Et puis, on est bourgeois de Gand.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Dans mon jeune âge
Je le vis, votre aïeul. Hélas! seul je surnage
D’un siècle tout entier. Tout est mort à présent.
C’était un empereur magnifique et puissant.

DON CARLOS.
Rome est pour moi.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Vaillant, ferme, point tyrannique,
Cette tête allait bien au vieux corps germanique!

Il s’incline sur les mains du roi et les baise.
Que je vous plains! Si jeune, en un tel deuil plongé!

DON CARLOS.
Le pape veut ravoir la Sicile, que j’ai,
Un empereur ne peut posséder la Sicile,
Il me fait empereur, alors, en fils docile,
Je lui rends Naple. Ayons l’aigle, et puis nous verrons
Si je lui laisserai rogner les ailerons!

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Qu’avec joie il verrait, ce vétéran du trône,
Votre front déjà large aller à sa couronne!
Ah! seigneur, avec vous nous le pleurerons bien,
Cet empereur très grand, très bon et très chrétien!

DON CARLOS.
Le saint-père est adroit. — Qu’est-ce que la Sicile?
C’est une île qui pend à mon royaume, une île,
Une pièce, un haillon, qui, tout déchiqueté,
Tient à peine à l’Espagne et qui traîne à côté.
— Que ferez-vous, mon fils, de cette île bossue
Au monde impérial au bout d’un fil cousue?
Votre empire est mal fait; vite, venez ici,
Des ciseaux! et coupons! — Très saint-père, merci!

Car de ces pièces-là, si j’ai bonne fortune,
Je compte au saint-empire en recoudre plus d’une,
Et, si quelques lambeaux m’en étaient arrachés,
Rapiécer mes états d’îles et de duchés!

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Consolez-vous! il est un empire des justes
Où l’on revoit les morts plus saints et plus augustes!

DON CARLOS.
Ce roi François premier, c’est un ambitieux!
Le vieil empereur mort, vite il fait les doux yeux
A l’empire! A-t-il pas sa France très chrétienne?
Ah! la part est pourtant belle, et vaut qu’on s’y tienne!
L’empereur mon aïeul disait au roi Louis:
— Si j’étais Dieu le Père, et si j’avais deux fils,
Je ferais l’aîné Dieu, le second roi de France.

Au duc.
Crois-tu que François puisse avoir quelque espérance?

DON RUY GOMEZ.
C’est un victorieux.

DON CARLOS.
Il faudrait tout changer.
La bulle d’or défend d’élire un étranger.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
A ce compte, seigneur, vous êtes roi d’Espagne!

DON CARLOS.
Je suis bourgeois de Gand.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
La dernière campagne
A fait monter bien haut le roi François premier.

DON CARLOS.
L’aigle qui va peut-être éclore à mon cimier
Peut aussi déployer ses ailes.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Votre altesse
Sait-elle le latin?

DON CARLOS.
Mal.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Tant pis. La noblesse
D’Allemagne aime fort qu’on lui parle latin.

DON CARLOS.
Ils se contenteront d’un espagnol hautain;
Car il importe peu, croyez-en le roi Charle,
Quand la voix parle haut, quelle langue elle parle.
— Je vais en Flandre. Il faut que ton roi, cher Silva,
Te revienne empereur. Le roi de France va
Tout remuer. Je veux le gagner de vitesse.
Je partirai sous peu.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Vous nous quittez, altesse,
Sans purger l’Aragon de ces nouveaux bandits
Qui partout dans nos monts lèvent leurs fronts hardis?

DON CARLOS.
J’ordonne au duc d’Arcos d’exterminer la bande.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Donnez-vous aussi l’ordre au chef qui la commande
De se laisser faire?

DON CARLOS.
Eh! quel est ce chef? son nom?

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Je l’ignore. On le dit un rude compagnon.

DON CARLOS.
Bah! je sais que pour l’heure il se cache en Galice,
Et j’en aurai raison avec quelque milice.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
De faux avis alors le disaient près d’ici.

DON CARLOS.
Faux avis! — Cette nuit, tu me loges.

DON RUY GOMEZ (*s’inclinant jusqu’à terre*).
Merci, Altesse!

Il appelle ses valets.
Faites tous honneur au roi mon hôte.

Les valets rentrent avec des flambeaux. Le duc les range sur deux haies jusqu’à la porte du fond. Cependant doña Sol s’approche lentement d’Hernani. Le roi les épie tous deux.

DOÑA SOL (*bas à Hernani*).
Demain, sous ma fenêtre, à minuit, et sans faute.
Vous frapperez des mains trois fois.

HERNANI (*bas*).
Demain.

DON CARLOS (*à part*).
Demain!

Haut à doña Sol vers laquelle il fait un pas avec galanterie.
Souffrez que pour rentrer je vous offre la main.

Il la reconduit à la porte. Elle sort.

HERNANI (*la main dans sa poitrine sur la poignée de sa dague*).
Mon bon poignard!

DON CARLOS (*revenant, à part*).
Notre homme a la mine attrapée.

Il prend à part Hernani.
Je vous ai fait l’honneur de toucher votre épée,
Monsieur. Vous me seriez suspect pour cent raisons.
Mais le roi don Carlos répugne aux trahisons.
Allez. Je daigne encore protéger votre fuite.

DON RUY GOMEZ (*revenant et montrant Hernani*).
Qu’est ce seigneur?

DON CARLOS.
Il part. C’est quelqu’un de ma suite.

Ils sortent avec les valets et les flambeaux, le duc précédant le roi, une cire à la main.

SCÈNE IV.

HERNANI (*seul*).
Oui, de ta suite, ô roi! de ta suite! — J’en suis!
Nuit et jour, en effet, pas à pas, je te suis.
Un poignard à la main, l’oeil fixé sur ta trace,
Je vais. Ma race en moi poursuit en toi ta race.
Et puis, te voilà donc mon rival! Un instant
Entre aimer et haïr je suis resté flottant,
Mon coeur pour elle et toi n’était point assez large,
J’oubliais en l’aimant ta haine qui me charge:
Mais puisque tu le veux, puisque c’est toi qui viens
Me faire souvenir, c’est bon, je me souviens!
Mon amour fait pencher la balance incertaine
Et tombe tout entier du côté de ma haine.
Oui, je suis de ta suite, et c’est toi qui l’as dit!
Va, jamais courtisan de ton lever maudit,
jamais seigneur baisant ton ombre, ou majordome
Ayant à te servir abjuré son coeur d’homme,
jamais chiens de palais dressés à suivre un roi
Ne seront sur tes pas plus assidus que moi!
Ce qu’ils veulent de toi, tous ces grands de Castille,
C’est quelque titre creux, quelque hochet qui brille,
C’est quelque mouton d’or qu’on se va pendre au cou;
Moi, pour vouloir si peu je ne suis pas si fou!
Ce que je veux de toi, ce n’est point faveurs vaines,
C’est l’âme de ton corps, c’est le sang de tes veines,
C’est tout ce qu’un poignard, furieux et vainqueur,
En y fouillant longtemps peut prendre au fond d’un coeur.
Va devant! je te suis. Ma vengeance qui veille
Avec moi toujours marche et me parle à l’oreille.
Va! je suis là, j’épie et j’écoute, et sans bruit
Mon pas cherche ton pas et le presse et le suit.
Le jour tu ne pourras, ô roi, tourner la tête
Sans me voir immobile et sombre dans ta fête;

La nuit tu ne pourras tourner les yeux, ô roi,
Sans voir mes yeux ardents luire derrière toi!

Il sort par la petite porte.

ACTE DEUXIÈME - LE BANDIT.

SARAGOSSE.

Un patio du palais de Silva. A gauche, les grands murs du palais, avec une fenêtre à balcon. Au-dessous de la fenêtre, une petite porte. A droite et au fond, des maisons et des rues. Il est nuit. On voit briller ça et là, aux façades des édifices, quelques fenêtres encore éclairées.

SCÈNE PREMIÈRE.

DON CARLOS, DON SANCHO SANCHEZ DE ZUNIGA, COMTE DE MONTEREY, DON MATIAS CENTURION, MARQUIS D'ALMUÑAN, DON RICARDO DE ROXAS, SEIGNEUR DE CASAPALMA.

Ils arrivent tous quatre, don Carlos en tête, chapeaux rabattus, enveloppés de longs manteaux dont leurs épées soulèvent le bord inférieur.

DON CARLOS (*examinant le balcon*).
Voilà bien le balcon, la porte… Mon sang bout.

Montrant la fenêtre qui n'est pas éclairée.
Pas de lumière encor!

Il promène ses yeux sur les autres croisées éclairées.
Des lumières partout
Où je n'en voudrais pas, hors à cette fenêtre
Où j'en voudrais!

DON SANCHO.
Seigneur, reparlons de ce traître.
Et vous l'avez laissé partir!

DON CARLOS.
Comme tu dis.

DON MATIAS.
Et peut-être c'était le major des bandits!

DON CARLOS.
Qu'il en soit le major ou bien le capitaine,
Jamais roi couronné n'eut mine plus hautaine.

DON SANCHO.
Son nom, seigneur?

DON CARLOS (*les yeux fixés sur la fenêtre*).
Mufioz… Fernan…

Avec le geste d’un homme qui se rappelle tout à coup.
Un nom en i.

DON SANCHO.
Hernani, peut-être?

DON CARLOS.
Oui.

DON SANCHO.
C’est lui!

DON MATIAS.
C’est Hernani?
Le chef!

DON SANCHO (*au roi*).
De ses propos vous reste-t-il mémoire?

DON CARLOS (*qui ne quitte pas la fenêtre des yeux*).
Hé! je n’entendais rien dans leur maudite armoire!

DON SANCHO.
Mais pourquoi le lâcher lorsque vous le tenez?

Don Carlos se tourne gravement et le regarde en face.

DON CARLOS.
Comte de Monterey, vous me questionnez.

Les deux seigneurs reculent et se taisent.
Et d’ailleurs ce n’est point le souci qui m’arrête.
J’en veux à sa maîtresse et non point à sa tête.
J’en suis amoureux fou! Les yeux noirs les plus beaux,
Mes amis! deux miroirs! deux rayons! deux flambeaux!
Je n’ai rien entendu de toute leur histoire

Que ces trois mots: Demain, venez à la nuit noire!
Mais c’est l’essentiel. Est-ce pas excellent?
Pendant que ce bandit, à mine de galant,
S’attarde à quelque meurtre, à creuser quelque tombe,
Je viens tout doucement dénicher sa colombe.

DON RICARDO.
Altesse, il eût fallu, pour compléter le tour,
Dénicher la colombe en tuant le vautour.

DON CARLOS (*à don Ricardo*).
Comte! un digne conseil! vous avez la main prompte!

DON RICARDO (*s’inclinant profondément*).
Sous quel titre plaît-il au roi que je sois comte?

DON SANCHO (*vivement*).
C’est méprise!

DON RICARDO (*à don Sancho*).
Le roi m’a nommé comte.

DON CARLOS.
Assez!
Bien.

A Ricardo.
J’ai laissé tomber ce titre. Ramassez.

DON RIARCDO (*s’inclinant de nouveau*).
Merci, seigneur!

DON SANCHO (*à don Matias*).
Beau comte! un comte de surprise.

Le roi se promène au fond, examinant avec impatience les fenêtres éclairées. Les deux seigneurs causent sur le devant.

DON MATIAS (*à don Sancho*).
Mais que fera le roi, la belle une fois prise?

DON SANCHO (*regardant Ricardo de travers*).
Il la fera comtesse, et puis dame d’honneur.
Puis, qu’il en ait un fils, il sera roi.

DON MATIAS.
Seigneur,
Allons donc! un bâtard! Comte, fût-on altesse,
On ne saurait tirer un roi d’une comtesse!

DON SANCHO.
Il la fera marquise, alors, mon cher marquis.

DON MATIAS.
On garde les bâtards pour les pays conquis.
On les fait vice-rois. C’est à cela qu’ils servent.

Don Carlos revient.

DON CARLOS (*regardant avec colère toutes les fenêtres éclairées*).
Dirait-on pas des yeux jaloux qui nous observent?
Enfin! en voilà deux qui s’éteignent! allons!
Messieurs, que les instants de l’attente sont longs!
Qui fera marcher l’heure avec plus de vitesse?

DON SANCHO.
C’est ce que nous disons souvent chez votre altesse.

DON CARLOS.
Cependant que chez vous mon peuple le redit.

La dernière fenêtre éclairée s’éteint.
— La dernière est éteinte!

Tourné vers le balcon de doña Sol toujours noir.
O vitrage maudit!

Quand t'éclaireras-tu? — Cette nuit est bien sombre.
Doña Sol, viens briller comme un astre dans l'ombre!

A don Ricardo.
Est-il minuit?

DON RICARDO.
Minuit bientôt.

DON CARLOS.
Il faut finir
Pourtant! A tout moment l'autre peut survenir.

La fenêtre de doña Sol s'éclaire. On voit son ombre se dessiner sur les vitraux lumineux.
Mes amis! un flambeau! son ombre à la fenêtre!
Jamais jour ne me fut plus charmant à voir naître.
Hâtons-nous! faisons-lui le signal qu'elle attend.
Il faut frapper des mains trois fois. Dans un instant,
Mes amis, vous allez la voir! — Mais notre nombre
Va l'effrayer peut-être… Allez tous trois dans l'ombre
Là-bas, épier l'autre. Amis, partageons-nous
Les deux amants. Tenez, à moi la dame, à vous
Le brigand.

DON RICARDO.
Grand merci!

DON CARLOS.
S'il vient, de l'embuscade
Sortez vite, et poussez au drôle une estocade.
Pendant qu'il reprendra ses esprits sur le grès,
J'emporterai la belle, et nous rirons après,
N'allez pas cependant le tuer! c'est un brave
Après tout, et la mort d'un homme est chose grave.

Les deux seigneurs s'inclinent et sortent. Don Carlos les laisse s'éloigner, puis frappe des mains à deux reprises. A la deuxième fois la *fenêtre s’ouvre, et dama Sol paraît sur le balcon.*

SCÈNE II.

DON CARLOS, DOÑA SOL.

DOÑA SOL (*au balcon*).
Est-ce vous, Hernani?

DON CARLOS (*à part*).
Diable! Ne parlons pas!

Il frappe de nouveau des mains.

DOÑA SOL.
Je descends.

Elle referme la fenêtre, dont la lumière disparaît. Un moment après, la petite porte s'ouvre, et doña Sol en sort, une lampe à la main, sa mante sur les épaules.

DOÑA SOL.
Hernani!

Don Carlos rabat son chapeau sur son visage, et s'avance précipitamment vers elle.

DOÑA SOL (*laissant tomber sa lampe*).
Dieu! ce n'est point son pas!

Elle veut rentrer. Don Carlos court à elle et la retient par le bras.

DON CARLOS.
Doña Sol!

DOÑA SOL.
Ce n'est point sa voix! Ah! malheureuse!

DON CARLOS.
Eh! quelle voix veux-tu qui soit plus amoureuse?
C’est toujours un amant, et c’est un amant roi!

DOÑA SOL.
Le roi!

DON CARLOS.
Souhaite, ordonne, un royaume est à toi!
Car celui dont tu veux briser la douce entrave,
C’est le roi ton seigneur, c’est Carlos ton esclave!

DOÑA SOL (*cherchant à se dégager de ses bras*).
Au secours, Hernani!

DON CARLOS.
Le juste et digne effroi!
Ce n’est pas ton bandit qui te tient, c’est le roi.

DOÑA SOL.
Non. Le bandit, c’est vous! N’avez-vous pas de honte?
Ah! pour vous à la face une rougeur me monte.
Sont-ce là les exploits dont le roi fera bruit?
Venir ravir de force une femme la nuit!
Que mon bandit vaut mieux cent fois! Roi, je proclame
Que, si l’homme naissait où le place son âme,
Si Dieu faisait le rang à la hauteur du coeur,
Certe, il serait le roi, prince, et vous le voleur!

DON CARLOS (*essayant de l’attirer*).
Madame…

DOÑA SOL.
Oubliez-vous que mon père était comte?

DON CARLOS.
Je vous ferai duchesse.

DOÑA SOL (*le repoussant*).
Allez! c’est une honte!

Elle recule de quelques pas.
Il ne peut être rien entre nous, don Carlos.
Mon vieux père a pour vous versé son sang à flots.
Moi je suis fille noble, et de ce sang jalouse.
Trop pour la concubine, et trop peu pour l’épouse!

DON CARLOS.
Princesse?

DOÑA SOL.
Roi Carlos, à des filles de rien
Portez votre amourette, ou je pourrais fort bien,
Si vous m’osez traiter d’une façon infâme,
Vous montrer que je suis dame, et que je suis femme.

DON CARLOS.
Eh bien, partagez donc et mon trône et mon nom.
Venez. Vous serez reine, impératrice!…

DOÑA SOL.
Non.
C’est un leurre. Et d’ailleurs, altesse, avec franchise,
S’agît-il pas de vous, s’il faut que je le dise,
J’aime mieux avec lui, mon Hernani, mon roi,
Vivre errante, en dehors du monde et de la loi,
Ayant faim, avant soif, fuyant toute l’année,
Partageant jour à jour sa pauvre destinée,
Abandon, guerre, exil, deuil, misère et terreur,
Que d’être impératrice avec un empereur!

DON CARLOS.
Que cet homme est heureux!

DOÑA SOL.
Quoi! pauvre, proscrit même!

DON CARLOS.
Qu’il fait bien d’être pauvre et proscrit, puis qu’on l’aime!
Moi, je suis seul! Un ange accompagne ses pas!
— Donc vous me haïssez?

DOÑA SOL.
Je ne vous aime pas.

DON CARLOS (*la saisissant avec violence*).
Eh bien, que vous m’aimiez ou non, cela n’importe!
Vous viendrez, et ma main plus que la vôtre est forte.
Vous viendrez! je vous veux! Pardieu, nous verrons bien
Si je suis roi d’Espagne et des Indes pour rien!

DOÑA SOL (*se débattant*).
Seigneur! oh! par pitié! — Quoi! vous êtes altesse,
Vous êtes roi. Duchesse, ou marquise, ou comtesse,
Vous n’avez qu’à choisir. Les femmes de la cour
Ont toujours un amour tout prêt pour votre amour.
Mais mon proscrit, qu’a-t-il reçu du ciel avare?
Ah! vous avez Castille, Aragon et Navarre,
Et Murcie, et Léon, dix royaumes encor,
Et les Flamands, et l’Inde avec les mines d’or!
Vous avez un empire auquel nul roi ne touche,
Si vaste que jamais le soleil ne s’y couche!
Et, quand vous avez tout, voudrez-vous, vous le roi,
Me prendre, pauvre fille, à lui qui n’a que moi?

Elle se jette à ses genoux. Il cherche à l’entraîner.

DON CARLOS.
Viens! Je n’écoute rien. Viens! Si tu m’accompagnes,
Je te donne, choisis, quatre de mes Espagnes.
Dis, lesquelles veux-tu? Choisis!

Elle se débat dans ses bras.

DOÑA SOL.

Pour mon honneur,
Je ne veux rien de vous que ce poignard, seigneur!

Elle lui arrache le poignard de sa ceinture. Il la lâche et recule.

Avancez maintenant! faites un pas!

DON CARLOS.

La belle!
Je ne m’étonne plus si l’on aime un rebelle!

Il veut faire un pas. Elle lève le poignard.

DOÑA SOL.

Pour un pas, je vous tue, et me tue.

Il recule encore. Elle se détourne et crie avec force

Hernani! Hernani!

DON CARLOS.

Taisez-vous!

DOÑA SOL (*le poignard levé*).

Un pas! tout est fini.

DON CARLOS.

Madame! à cet excès ma douceur est réduite.
J’ai là pour vous forcer trois hommes de ma suite…

HERNANI (*surgissant tout à coup derrière lui*).

Vous en oubliez un!

Le roi se retourne, et voit Hernani immobile derrière lui dans l’ombre, les bras croisés sous le long manteau qui l’enveloppe, et le large bord de son chapeau relevé. Doña Sol pousse un cri, court à Hernani et l’entoure de ses bras.

SCENE III.

DON CARLOS, DOÑA SOL, HERNANI.

HERNANI (*immobile, les bras toujours croisés, et ses yeux étincelants fixés sur le roi*).
Ah! le ciel m'est témoin
Que volontiers je l'eusse été chercher plus loin!

DOÑA SOL.
Hernani, sauvez-moi de lui!

HERNANI.
Soyez tranquille,
Mon amour!

DON CARLOS.
Que font donc mes amis par la ville?
Avoir laissé passer ce chef de bohémiens!

Appelant.
Monterey!

HERNANI.
Vos amis sont au pouvoir des miens.
Et ne réclamez pas leur épée impuissante,
Pour trois qui vous viendraient, il m'en viendrait soixante.
Soixante dont un seul vous vaut tous quatre. Ainsi
Vidons entre nous deux notre querelle ici.
Quoi! vous portiez la main sur cette jeune fille!
C'était d'un imprudent, seigneur roi de Castille,
Et d'un lâche!

DON CARLOS (*souriant avec dédain*).
Seigneur bandit, de vous à moi
Pas de reproche!

HERNANI.
Il raille! Oh! je ne suis pas roi;
Mais quand un roi m'insulte et pour surcroît me raille;

Ma colère va haut et me monte à sa taille,
Et, prenez garde, on craint, quand on me fait affront,
Plus qu'un cimier de roi la rougeur de mon front!
Vous êtes insensé si quelque espoir vous leurre.

Il lui saisit le bras.
Savez-vous quelle main vous étreint à cette heure?
Écoutez. Votre père a fait mourir le mien,
Je vous hais. Vous avez pris mon titre et mon bien,
Je vous hais. Nous aimons tous deux la même femme,
Je vous hais, je vous hais, — oui, je te hais dans l'âme!

DON CARLOS.
C'est bien.

HERNANI.
Ce soir pourtant ma haine était bien loin.
Je n'avais qu'un désir, qu'une ardeur, qu'un besoin,
Doña Sol! — Plein d'amour, j'accourais… Sur mon âme!
Je vous trouve essayant contre elle un rapt infâme!
Quoi! vous que j'oubliais, sur ma route placé!
Seigneur, je vous le dis, vous êtes insensé!
Don Carlos, te voilà pris dans ton propre piège.
Ni fuite, ni secours! je te tiens et t'assiège!
Seul, entouré partout d'ennemis acharnés,
Que vas-tu faire?

DON CARLOS (*fièrement*).
Allons! vous me questionnez!

HERNANI.
Va, va, je ne veux pas qu'un bras obscur te frappe.
Il ne sied pas qu'ainsi ma vengeance m'échappe.
Tu ne seras touché par un autre que moi.
Défends-toi donc.

Il tire son épée.

DON CARLOS.
Je suis votre seigneur le roi.
Frappez. Mais pas de duel.

HERNANI.
Seigneur, qu’il te souvienne
Qu’hier encor ta dague a rencontré la mienne.

DON CARLOS.
Je le pouvais hier. J’ignorais votre nom,
Vous ignoriez mon titre. Aujourd’hui, compagnon,
Vous savez qui je suis et je sais qui vous êtes.

HERNANI.
Peut-être.

DON CARLOS.
Pas de duel. Assassinez-moi. Faites.

HERNANI.
Crois-tu donc que les rois à moi me sont sacrés?
Çà, te défendras-tu?

DON CARLOS.
Vous m’assassinerez!

Hernani recule. Don Carlos fixe des yeux d’aigle sur lui.
Ah! vous croyez, bandits, que vos brigades viles
Pourront impunément s’épandre dans les villes?
Que teints de sang, chargés de meurtres, malheureux!
Vous pourrez après tout faire les généreux,
Et que nous daignerons, nous, victimes trompées,
Ennoblir vos poignards du choc de nos épées?
Non, le crime vous tient. Partout vous le traînez.
Nous, des duels avec vous! arrière! assassinez.

Hernani, sombre et pensif, tourmente quelques instants de la main la poignée de son épée, puis se retourne brusquement vers le roi, et brise la *lame sur le pavé*.

HERNANI.
Va-t’en donc!

Le roi se tourne à demi vers lui et le regarde avec hauteur.
Nous aurons des rencontres meilleures.
Va-t’en.

DON CARLOS.
C’est bien, monsieur. Je vais dans quelques heures
Rentrer, moi votre roi, dans le palais ducal.
Mon premier soin sera de mander le fiscal.
A-t-on fait mettre à prix votre tête?

HERNANI.
Oui.

DON CARLOS.
Mon maître,
Je vous tiens de ce jour sujet rebelle et traître.
Je vous en avertis, partout je vous poursuis.
Je vous fais mettre au ban du royaume.

HERNANI.
J’y suis
Déjà.

DON CARLOS.
Bien.

HERNANI.
Mais la France est auprès de l’Espagne.
C’est un port.

DON CARLOS.
Je vais être empereur d’Allemagne.
Je vous fais mettre au ban de l’empire.

HERNANI.
A ton gré.
J’ai le reste du monde où je te braverai.
Il est plus d’un asile où ta puissance tombe.

DON CARLOS.
Et quand j’aurai le monde?

HERNANI.
Alors j’aurai la tombe.

DON CARLOS.
Je saurai déjouer vos complots insolents.

HERNANI.
La vengeance est boiteuse, elle vient à pas lents,
Mais elle vient.

DON CARLOS (*riant à demi, avec dédain*).
Toucher à la dame qu’adore
Ce bandit!

HERNANI (*dont les yeux se rallument*).
Songes-tu que je te tiens encore?
Ne me rappelle pas, futur césar romain,
Que je t’ai là, chétif et petit dans ma main,
Et que si je serrais cette main trop loyale
J’écraserais dans l’oeuf ton aigle impériale!

DON CARLOS.
Faites.

HERNANI.
Va-t’en! va-t’en!

Il ôte son manteau et le jette sur les épaules du roi.
Fuis, et prends ce manteau.
Car dans nos rangs pour toi je crains quelque couteau.

Le roi s’enveloppe du manteau.
Pars tranquille à présent. Ma vengeance altérée
Pour tout autre que moi fait ta tête sacrée.

DON CARLOS.
Monsieur, vous qui venez de me parler ainsi,
Ne demandez un jour ni grâce ni merci!

Il sort.

SCÈNE IV.

HERNANI, DOÑA SOL.

DOÑA SOL (*saisissant la main d'Hernani*).
Maintenant, fuyons vite.

HERNANI (*la repoussant avec une douceur grave*).
Il vous sied, mon amie,
D'être dans mon malheur toujours plus raffermie,
De n'y point renoncer, et de vouloir toujours
Jusqu'au fond, jusqu'au bout, accompagner mes jours.
C'est un noble dessein, digne d'un coeur fidèle!
Mais, tu le vois, mon Dieu, pour tant accepter d'elle,
Pour emporter joyeux dans mon antre avec moi
Ce trésor de beauté qui rend jaloux un roi,
Pour que ma doña Sol me suive et m'appartienne,
Pour lui prendre sa vie et la joindre à la mienne,
Pour l'entraîner sans honte encore et sans regrets,
Il n'est plus temps; je vois l'échafaud de trop près.

DOÑA SOL.
Que dites-vous?

HERNANI.
Ce roi que je bravais en face
Va me punir d'avoir osé lui faire grâce.
Il fuit; déjà peut-être il est dans son palais.
Il appelle ses gens, ses gardes, ses valets,
Ses seigneurs, ses bourreaux…

DOÑA SOL.
Hernani! Dieu! je tremble.
Eh bien! hâtons-nous donc alors! fuyons ensemble!

HERNANI.
Ensemble! non, non. L'heure en est passée. Hélas!

Doña Sol, à mes yeux quand tu te révélas
Bonne, et daignant m’aimer d’un amour secourable,
J’ai bien pu vous offrir, moi, pauvre misérable,
Ma montagne, mon bois, mon torrent, — ta pitié
M’enhardissait, — mon pain de proscrit, la moitié
Du lit vert et touffu que la forêt me donne;
Mais t’offrir la moitié de l’échafaud! pardonne,
Doña Sol! l’échafaud, c’est à moi seul!

DOÑA SOL.
Pourtant
Vous me l’aviez promis!

HERNANI (*tombant à ses genoux*).
Ange! ah! dans cet instant
Où la mort vient peut-être, où s’approche dans l’ombre
Un sombre dénoûment pour un destin bien sombre,
Je le déclare ici, proscrit, traînant au flanc
Un souci profond, né dans un berceau sanglant,
Si noir que soit le deuil qui s’épand sur ma vie,
Je suis un homme heureux et je veux qu’on m’envie;
Car vous m’avez aimé! car vous me l’avez dit!
Car vous avez tout bas béni mon front maudit!

DOÑA SOL (*penchée sur sa tête*).
Hernani!

HERNANI.
Loué soit le sort doux et propice
Qui me mit cette fleur au bord du précipice!

Il se relève.
Et ce n’est pas pour vous que je parle en ce lieu,
Je parle pour le ciel qui m’écoute, et pour Dieu.

DOÑA SOL.
Souffre que je te suive.

HERNANI.
Ah! ce serait un crime
Que d’arracher la fleur en tombant dans l’abîme.
Va, j’en ai respiré le parfum, c’est assez!
Renoue à d’autres jours tes jours par moi froissés.
Epouse ce vieillard. C’est moi qui te délie.
Je rentre dans ma nuit. Toi, soit heureuse, oublie!

DOÑA SOL.
Non, je te suis! je veux ma part de ton linceul!
Je m’attache à tes pas.

HERNANI (*la serrant dans ses bras*).
Oh! laisse-moi fuir seul.

Il la quitte avec un mouvement convulsif.

DOÑA SOL (*douloureusement et joignant les mains*).
Hernani! tu me fuis! Ainsi donc, insensée,
Avoir donné sa vie, et se voir repoussée,
Et n’avoir, après tant d’amour et tant d’ennui,
Pas même le bonheur de mourir près de lui!

HERNANI.
Je suis banni! je suis proscrit! je suis funeste!

DOÑA SOL.
Ah! vous êtes ingrat!

HERNANI (*revenant sur ses pas*).
Eh bien, non! non, je reste,
Tu le veux, me voici. Viens, oh! viens dans mes bras!
Je reste, et resterai tant que tu le voudras.
Oublions-les! restons.

Il s’assied sur un banc.
Sieds-toi sur cette pierre.

Il se place à ses pieds.

Des flammes de tes yeux inonde ma paupière,
Chante-moi quelque chant comme parfois le soir
Tu m’en chantais, avec des pleurs dans ton oeil noir.
Soyons heureux! buvons, car la coupe est remplie,
Car cette heure est à nous, et le reste est folie.
Parle-moi, ravis-moi. N’est-ce pas qu’il est doux
D’aimer et de savoir qu’on vous aime à genoux?
D’être deux? d’être seuls? et que c’est douce chose
De se parler d’amour la nuit quand tout repose?
Oh! laisse-moi dormir et rêver sur ton sein,
Doña Sol! mon amour! ma beauté!

Bruit de cloches au loin.

DOÑA SOL (*se levant effarée*).

Le tocsin!
Entends-tu? le tocsin!

HERNANI (*toujours à genoux*).

Eh non! c’est notre noce
Qu’on sonne.

Le bruit de cloches augmente. Cris confus, flambeaux et lumières à toutes les fenêtres, sur tous les toits, dans toutes les rues.

DOÑA SOL.

Lève-toi! fuis! Grand Dieu! Saragosse
S’allume!

HERNANI (*se soulevant à demi*).

Nous aurons une noce aux flambeaux.

DOÑA SOL.

C’est la noce des morts! la noce des tombeaux!

Bruit d’épées. Cris.

HERNANI (*se recouchant sur le banc de pierre*).
Rendormons-nous!

UN MONTAGNARD (*L'épée à la main, accourant*).
Seigneur, les sbires, les alcades,
Débouchent dans la place en longues cavalcades!
Alerte, monseigneur!

Hernani se lève.

DOÑA SOL (*pale*).
Ah! tu l'avais bien dit!

LE MONTAGNARD.
Au secours!

HERNANI (*au montagnard*).
Me voici. C'est bien.

CRIS CONFUS (*au dehors*).
Mort au bandit!

HERNANI (*au montagnard*).
Ton épée.

A doña Sol.
Adieu donc!

DOÑA SOL.
C'est moi qui fais ta perte!
Où vas-tu?

Lui montrant la petite porte.
Viens! Fuyons par cette porte ouverte.

HERNANI.
Dieu! laisser mes amis! que dis-tu?

Tumulte et cris.

DOÑA SOL.
Ces clameurs
Me brisent.

Retenant Hernani.
Souviens-toi que si tu meurs, je meurs!

HERNANI (*la tenant embrassée*).
Un baiser!

DOÑA SOL.
Mon époux! mon Hernani! mon maître!

HERNANI (*la baisant au front*).
Hélas! c’est le premier.

DOÑA SOL.
C’est le dernier peut-être.

Il part. Elle tombe sur le banc.

ACTE TROISIÈME - LE VIEILLARD.

LE CHATEAU DE SILVA DANS LES MONTAGNES D'ARAGON.

La galerie des portraits de la famille de Silva; grande salle, dont ces portraits, entourés de riches bordures, et surmontés de couronnes ducales et d'écussons dorés, font la décoration. Au fond une haute porte gothique. Entre chaque portrait une panoplie complète; toutes ces armures des siècles différents.

SCÈNE PREMIÈRE.

DOÑA SOL, *blanche, et debout près d'une table;* DON RUY GOMEZ DE SILVA, *assis dans son grand fauteuil ducal en bois de chêne*.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Enfin! c'est aujourd'hui! dans une heure on sera
Ma duchesse! plus d'oncle! et l'on m'embrassera!
Mais m'as-tu pardonné? J'avais tort, je l'avoue.
J'ai fait rougir ton front, j'ai fait pâlir ta joue.
J'ai soupçonné trop vite, et je n'aurais point dû
Te condamner ainsi sans avoir entendu.
Que l'apparence a tort! Injustes que nous sommes!
Certe, ils étaient bien là, les deux beaux jeunes hommes.
C'est égal. Je devais n'en pas croire mes yeux.
Mais que veux-tu, ma pauvre enfant? quand on est vieux!

DOÑA SOL (*immobile et grave*).
Vous reparlez toujours de cela. Qui vous blâme?

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Moi! J'eus tort. Je devais savoir qu'avec ton âme
On n'a point de galants lorsqu'on est doña Sol,
Et qu'on a dans le coeur de bon sang espagnol.

DOÑA SOL.
Certe, il est bon et pur, monseigneur, et peut-être
On le verra bientôt.

DON RUY GOMEZ (*se levant et allant à elle*).
Écoute, on n'est pas maître
De soi-même, amoureux comme je suis de toi,
Et vieux. On est jaloux, on est méchant, pourquoi?
Parce que l'on est vieux. Parce que beauté, grâce,
Jeunesse, dans autrui, tout fait peur, tout menace.
Parce qu'on est jaloux des autres, et honteux
De soi. Dérision! que cet amour boiteux,

Qui nous remet au coeur tant d’ivresse et de flamme,
Ait oublié le corps en rajeunissant l’âme!
— Quand passe un jeune pâtre — oui, c’en est là! — souvent,
Tandis que nous allons, lui chantant, moi rêvant,
Lui dans son pré vert, moi dans mes noires allées,
Souvent je dis tout bas: — O mes tours crénelées,
Mon vieux donjon ducal, que je vous donnerais,
Oh! que je donnerais mes blés et mes forêts,
Et les vastes troupeaux qui tondent mes collines,
Mon vieux nom, mon vieux titre, et toutes mes ruines,
Et tous mes vieux aïeux qui bientôt m’attendront,
Pour sa chaumière neuve et pour son jeune front!
Car ses cheveux sont noirs, car son oeil reluit comme
Le tien, tu peux le voir, et dire: Ce jeune homme!
Et puis penser à moi qui suis vieux. Je le sais!
Pourtant j’ai nom Silva, mais ce n’est plus assez!
Oui, je me dis cela. Vois à quel point je t’aime!
Le tout, pour être jeune et beau comme toi-même!
Mais à quoi vais-je ici rêver? Moi, jeune et beau!
Qui te dois de si loin devancer au tombeau!

DOÑA SOL.
Qui sait?

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Mais va, crois-moi, ces cavaliers frivoles
N’ont pas d’amour si grand qu’il ne s’use en paroles.
Qu’une fille aime et croie un de ces jouvenceaux,
Elle en meurt, il en rit. Tous ces jeunes oiseaux,
A l’aile vive et peinte, au langoureux ramage,
Ont un amour qui mue ainsi que leur plumage.
Les vieux, dont l’âge éteint la voix et les couleurs,
Ont l’aile plus fidèle, et, moins beaux, sont meilleurs.
Nous aimons bien. Nos pas sont lourds? nos yeux arides?
Nos fronts ridés? Au coeur on n’a jamais de rides.
Hélas! quand un vieillard aime, il faut l’épargner.
Le coeur est toujours jeune et peut toujours saigner.

Oh! mon amour n’est point comme un jouet de verre
Qui brille et tremble; oh! non, c’est un amour sévère,
Profond, solide, sûr, paternel, amical,
De bois de chêne, ainsi que mon fauteuil ducal!
Voilà comme je t’aime, et puis je t’aime encore
De cent autres façons, comme on aime l’aurore,
Comme on aime les fleurs, comme on aime les cieux!
De te voir tous les jours, toi, ton pas gracieux,
Ton front pur, le beau feu de ta fière prunelle,
je ris, et j’ai dans l’âme une fête éternelle!

DOÑA SOL.
Hélas!

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Et puis, vois-tu, le monde trouve beau,
Lorsqu’un homme s’éteint, et lambeau par lambeau
S’en va, lorsqu’il trébuche au marbre de la tombe,
Qu’une femme, ange pur, innocente colombe,
Veille sur lui, l’abrite, et daigne encor souffrir
L’inutile vieillard qui n’est bon qu’à mourir.
C’est une oeuvre sacrée et qu’à bon droit on loue
Que ce suprême effort d’un coeur qui se dévoue,
Qui console un mourant jusqu’à la fin du jour,
Et, sans aimer peut-être, a des semblants d’amour!
Ah! tu seras pour moi cet ange au coeur de femme
Qui du pauvre vieillard réjouit encor l’âme,
Et de ses derniers ans lui porte la moitié,
Fille par le respect et soeur par la pitié.

DOÑA SOL.
Loin de me précéder, vous pourrez bien me suivre,
Monseigneur. Ce n’est pas une raison pour vivre
Que d’être jeune. Hélas! je vous le dis, souvent
Les vieillards sont tardifs, les jeunes vont devant,
Et leurs yeux brusquement referment leur paupière,
Comme un sépulcre ouvert dont retombe la pierre.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Oh! les sombres discours! Mais je vous gronderai,
Enfant! un pareil jour est joyeux et sacré.
Comment, à ce propos, quand l'heure nous appelle,
N'êtes-vous pas encor prête pour la chapelle?
Mais, vite! habillez-vous. Je compte les instants.
La parure de noce!

DOÑA SOL.
Il sera toujours temps.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Non pas.

Entre un page.
Que veut Iaquez!

LE PAGE.
Monseigneur, à la porte
Un homme, un pèlerin, un mendiant, n'importe,
Est là qui vous demande asile.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Quel qu'il soit,
Le bonheur entre avec l'étranger qu'on reçoit.
Qu'il vienne. — Du dehors a-t-on quelques nouvelles?
Que dit-on de ce chef de bandits infidèles
Qui remplit nos forêts de sa rébellion?

LE PAGE.
C'en est fait d'Hernani, c'en est fait du lion
De la montagne.

DOÑA SOL (*à part*).
Dieu!

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Quoi!

LE PAGE.
La bande est détruite.
Le roi, dit-on, s’est mis lui-même à leur poursuite.
La tête d’Hernani vaut mille écus du roi
Pour l’instant; mais on dit qu’il est mort.

DOÑA SOL (*à part*).
Quoi! sans moi,
Hernani!

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Grâce au ciel! il est mort, le rebelle!
On peut se réjouir maintenant, chère belle.
Allez donc vous parer, mon amour, mon orgueil!
Aujourd’hui, double fête!

DOÑA SOL (*à part*).
Oh! des habits de deuil!

Elle sort.

DON RUY GOMEZ (*au page*).
Fais-lui vite porter l’écrin que je lui donne.

Il se rassied dans son fauteuil.
Je veux la voir parée ainsi qu’une madone,
Et, grâce à ses doux yeux, et grâce à mon écrin,
Belle à faire à genoux tomber un pèlerin.
A propos, et celui qui nous demande un gîte?
Dis-lui d’entrer, fais-lui nos excuses, cours vite.

Le page salue et sort.
Laisser son hôte attendre! ah! c’est mal!

La porte du fond s’ouvre. Parait Hernani déguisé en pèlerin. Le duc se lève et va à sa rencontre.

SCÈNE II.

DON RUY GOMEZ, HERNANI.

Hernani s’arrête sur le seuil de la porte.

HERNANI.
Monseigneur,
Paix et bonheur à vous!

DON RUY GOMEZ (*le saluant de la main*).
A toi paix et bonheur,
Mon hôte!

Hernani entre. Le duc se rassied.
N’es-tu pas pèlerin?

HERNANI (*s’inclinant*).
Oui.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Sans doute
Tu viens d’Armillas?

HERNANI.
Non. J’ai pris une autre route;
On se battait par là.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
La troupe du banni,
N’est-ce pas?

HERNANI.
Je ne sais.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Le chef, le Hernani,

Que devient-il? sais-tu?

HERNANI.
Seigneur, quel est cet homme?

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Tu ne le connais pas? tant pis! la grosse somme
Ne sera point pour toi. Vois-tu, ce Hernani.
C’est un rebelle au roi, trop longtemps impuni.
Si tu vas à Madrid, tu le pourras voir pendre.

HERNANI.
je n’y vais pas.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Sa tête est à qui veut la prendre.

HERNANI (*à part*).
Qu’on y vienne!

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Où vas-tu, bon pèlerin?

HERNANI.
Seigneur,
Je vais à Saragosse.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Un voeu fait en l’honneur
D’un saint? de Notre-Dame?

HERNANI.
Oui, duc, de Notre-Dame.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Del Pilar?

HERNANI.
Del Pilar.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Il faut n'avoir point d'âme
Pour ne point acquitter les voeux qu'on fait aux saints.
Mais, le tien accompli, n'as-tu d'autres desseins?
Voir le Pilier, c'est là tout ce que tu désires?

HERNANI.
Oui, je veux voir brûler les flambeaux et les cires,
Voir Notre-Dame, au fond du sombre corridor,
Luire en sa châsse ardente avec sa chape d'or,
Et puis m'en retourner.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Fort bien. — Ton nom, mon frère?
Je suis Ruy de Silva.

HERNANI (*hésitant*).
Mon nom?…

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Tu peux le taire
Si tu veux. Nul n'a droit de le savoir ici.
Viens-tu pas demander asile?

HERNANI.
Oui, duc.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Merci!
Sois le bienvenu. Reste, ami, ne te fais faute
De rien. Quant à ton nom, tu te nommes mon hôte.
Qui que tu sois, c'est bien! et, sans être inquiet,
J'accueillerais Satan, si Dieu me l'envoyait.

La porte du fond s'ouvre à deux battants. Entre doña Sol, en parure de mariée. Derrière elle, pages, valets, et deux femmes portant sur un coussin de velours un coffret d'argent ciselé, qu'elles vont déposer sur une table, et qui renferme un riche écrin, couronne de duchesse, bracelets, colliers, *perles et brillants pêle-mêle. — Hernani, haletant et effaré, considère doña Sol avec des yeux ardents, sans écouter le duc*.

SCÈNE III.

LES MÊMES, DOÑA SOL, PAGES, VALETS, FEMMES.

DON RUY GOMEZ (*continuant*).
Voici ma Notre-Dame à moi. L'avoir priée
Te portera bonheur.

Il va présenter la main à doña Sol, toujours pâle et grave.
Ma belle mariée,
Venez. — Quoi! pas d'anneau! pas de couronne encor!

HERNANI (*d'une voix tonnante*).
Qui veut gagner ici mille carolus d'or?

Tous se retournent étonnés. Il déchire sa robe de pèlerin, la foule aux pieds, et en sort dans son costume de montagnard. Je suis Hernani.

DOÑA SOL (*à part, avec joie*).
Ciel! vivant!

HERNANI (*aux valets*).
Je suis cet homme
Qu'on cherche.

Au duc.
Vous vouliez savoir si je me nomme
Perez ou Diego? — Non, je me nomme Hernani.
C'est un bien plus beau nom, c'est un nom de banni,
C'est un nom de proscrit! Vous voyez cette tête?
Elle vaut assez d'or pour payer votre fête.

Aux valets.
Je vous la donne à tous. Vous serez bien payés!
Prenez! liez mes mains, liez mes pieds, liez!
Mais non, c'est inutile, une chaîne me lie
Que je ne romprai point?

DOÑA SOL (*à part*).
Malheureuse!

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Folie!
Çà, mon hôte est un fou!

HERNANI.
Votre hôte est un bandit.

DOÑA SOL.
Oh! ne l’écoutez pas.

HERNANI.
J’ai dit ce que j’ai dit.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Mille carolus d’or! monsieur, la somme est forte,
Et je ne suis pas sûr de tous mes gens.

HERNANI.
Qu’importe!
Tant mieux si dans le nombre il s’en trouve un qui veut.

Aux valets.
Livrez-moi! vendez-moi!

DON RUY GOMEZ (*s’efforçant de le faire taire*).
Taisez-vous donc! on peut
Vous prendre au mot.

HERNANI.
Amis, l’occasion est belle!
Je vous dis que je suis le proscrit, le rebelle,
Hernani!

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Taisez-vous!

HERNANI.
Hernani!

DOÑA SOL (*d'une voix éteinte, à son oreille*).
Ho! tais-toi!

HERNANI (*se détournant à demi vers doña Sol*).
On se marie ici! Je veux en être, moi!
Mon épousée aussi m'attend.

Au duc.
Elle est moins belle
Que la vôtre, seigneur, mais n'est pas moins fidèle.
C'est la mort!

Aux valets.
Nul de vous ne fait un pas encor?

DOÑA SOL (*bas*).
Par pitié!

HERNANI (*aux valets*).
Hernani! mille carolus d'or!

DON RUY GOMEZ.
C'est le démon!

HERNANI (*à un jeune valet*).
Viens, toi; tu gagneras la somme.
Riche alors, de valet tu redeviendras homme.

Aux valets gui restent immobiles.
Vous aussi, vous tremblez! Ai-je assez de malheur!

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Frère, à toucher ta tête, ils risqueraient la leur.
Fusses-tu Hernani, fusses-tu cent fois pire,
Pour ta vie au lieu d'or offrît-on un empire,

Mon hôte, je te dois protéger en ce lieu,
Même contre le roi, car je te tiens de Dieu.
S’il tombe un seul cheveu de ton front, que je meure!

A doña Sol.

Ma nièce, vous serez ma femme dans une heure;
Rentrez chez vous. Je vais faire armer le château,
J’en vais fermer la porte.

Il sort. Les valets le suivent.

HERNANI (*regardant avec désespoir sa ceinture dégarnie et désarmée*).

Oh! pas même un couteau!

Doña Sol, après que le duc a disparu, fait quelques pas comme pour suivre ses femmes, puis s’arrête, et, dès qu’elles sont sorties, revient vers Hernani avec anxiété.

SCÈNE IV.

HERNANI, DOÑA SOL.

Hernani considère avec un regard froid et comme inattentif l'écrin nuptial placé sur la table; puis il hoche la tête, et ses yeux s'allument.

HERNANI.
Je vous fais compliment! Plus que je ne puis dire
La parure me charme et m'enchante, et j'admire!

Il s'approche de l'écrin.
La bague est de bon goût, — la couronne me plaît,
Le collier est d'un beau travail, — le bracelet
Est rare, — mais cent fois, cent fois moins que la femme
Qui sous un front si pur cache ce coeur infâme!

Examinant de nouveau le coffret.
Et qu'avez-vous donné pour tout cela? — Fort bien!
Un peu de votre amour? mais, vraiment, c'est pour rien!
Grand Dieu! trahir ainsi! n'avoir pas honte, et vivre!

Examinant l'écrin.
Mais peut-être après tout c'est perle fausse et cuivre
Au lieu d'or, verre et plomb, diamants déloyaux,
Faux saphirs, faux bijoux, faux brillants, faux joyaux!
Ah! s'il en est ainsi, comme cette parure,
Ton coeur est faux, duchesse, et tu n'es que dorure!

Il revient au coffret.
— Mais non, non. Tout est vrai, tout est bon, tout est beau!
Il n'oserait tromper, lui qui touche au tombeau.
Rien n'y manque.

Il prend l'une après l'autre toutes les pièces de l'écrin.
Colliers, brillants, pendants d'oreille
Couronne de duchesse, anneau d'or… — A merveille!

Grand merci de l'amour sûr, fidèle et profond!
Le précieux écrin!

DOÑA SOL (*Elle va au coffret, y fouille, et en tire un poignard*).
Vous n'allez pas au fond!
— C'est le poignard qu'avec l'aide de ma patronne
Je pris au roi Carlos, lorsqu'il m'offrit un trône,
Et que je refusai, pour vous qui m'outragez!

HERNANI (*tombant à ses pieds*).
Oh! laisse qu'à genoux dans tes yeux affligés
J'efface tous ces pleurs amers et pleins de charmes,
Et tu prendras après tout mon sang pour tes larmes!

DOÑA SOL (*attendrie*).
Hernani! je vous aime et vous pardonne, et n'ai
Que de l'amour pour vous.

HERNANI.
Elle m'a pardonné,
Et m'aime! Qui pourra faire aussi que moi-même,
Après ce que j'ai dit, je me pardonne et m'aime?
Oh! je voudrais savoir, ange au ciel réservé,
Où vous avez marché, pour baiser le pavé!

DOÑA SOL.
Ami!

HERNANI.
Non, je dois t'être odieux! Mais, écoute,
Dis-moi: Je t'aime! Hélas! rassure un coeur qui doute,
Dis-le-moi! car souvent avec ce peu de mots
La bouche d'une femme a guéri bien des maux.

DOÑA SOL (*absorbée et sans l'entendre*).
Croire que mon amour eût si peu de mémoire!
Que jamais ils pourraient, tous ces hommes sans gloire

Jusqu'à d'autres amours, plus nobles à leur gré,
Rapetisser un coeur où son nom est entré!

HERNANI.
Hélas! j'ai blasphémé! Si j'étais à ta place,
Doña Sol, j'en aurais assez, je serais lasse
De ce fou furieux, de ce sombre insensé
Qui ne sait caresser qu'après qu'il a blessé,
Je lui dirais: Va-t'en! — Repousse-moi! repousse!
Et je te bénirai, car tu fus bonne et douce,
Car tu m'as supporté trop longtemps, car je suis
Mauvais, je noircirais tes jours avec mes nuits,
Car c'en est trop enfin, ton âme est belle et haute
Et pure, et si je suis méchant, est-ce ta faute?
Epouse le vieux duc! il est bon, noble, il a
Par sa mère Olmedo, par son père Alcala.
Encore un coup, sois riche avec lui, sois heureuse!
Moi, sais-tu ce que peut cette main généreuse
T'offrir de magnifique? une dot de douleurs.
Tu pourras y choisir ou du sang ou des pleurs.
L'exil, les fers, la mort, l'effroi qui m'environne,
C'est là ton collier d'or, c'est ta belle couronne,
Et jamais à l'épouse un époux plein d'orgueil
N'offrit plus riche écrin de misère et de deuil.
Epouse le vieillard, te dis-je; il te mérite!
Eh! qui jamais croira que ma tête proscrite
Aille avec ton front pur? qui, nous voyant tous deux,
Toi calme et belle, moi violent, hasardeux,
Toi paisible et croissant comme une fleur à l'ombre,
Moi heurté dans l'orage à des écueils sans nombre,
Qui dira que nos sorts suivent la même loi?
Non. Dieu qui fait tout bien ne te fit pas pour moi.
Je n'ai nul droit d'en haut sur toi, je me résigne.
J'ai ton coeur, c'est un vol! je le rends au plus digne.
Jamais à nos amours le ciel n'a consenti.
Si j'ai dit que c'était ton destin, j'ai menti.
D'ailleurs, vengeance, amour, adieu! mon jour s'achève.

Je m'en vais, inutile, avec mon double rêve,
Honteux de n'avoir pu ni punir ni charmer,
Qu'on m'ait fait pour haïr, moi qui n'ai su qu'aimer!
Pardonne-moi! fuis-moi! ce sont mes deux prières;
Ne les rejette pas, car ce sont les dernières.
Tu vis et je suis mort. Je ne vois pas pourquoi
Tu te ferais murer dans ma tombe avec moi.

DOÑA SOL.
Ingrat!

HERNANI.
Monts d'Aragon! Galice! Estramadoure!
— Oh! je porte malheur à tout ce qui m'entoure!
J'ai pris vos meilleurs fils, pour mes droits sans remords
Je les ai fait combattre, et voilà qu'ils sont morts!
C'étaient les plus vaillants de la vaillante Espagne.
Ils sont morts! ils sont tous tombés dans la montagne,
Tous sur le dos couchés, en braves, devant Dieu,
Et, si leurs yeux s'ouvraient, ils verraient le ciel bleu!
Voilà ce que je fais de tout ce qui m'épouse!
Est-ce une destinée à te rendre jalouse?
Doña Sol, prends le duc, prends l'enfer, prends le roi!
C'est bien. Tout ce qui n'est pas moi vaut mieux que moi!
Je n'ai plus un ami qui de moi se souvienne,
Tout me quitte, il est temps qu'à la fin ton tour vienne,
Car je dois être seul. Fuis ma contagion.
Ne te fais pas d'aimer une religion!
Ah! par pitié pour toi, fuis! — Tu me crois peut-être
Un homme comme sont tous les autres, un être
Intelligent, qui court droit au but qu'il rêva.
Détrompe-toi. Je suis une force qui va!
Agent aveugle et sourd de mystères funèbres!
Une âme de malheur faite avec des ténèbres!
Où vais-je? Je ne sais. Mais je me sens poussé
D'un souffle impétueux, d'un destin insensé.
Je descends, je descends, et jamais ne m'arrête.

Si parfois, haletant, j’ose tourner la tête,
Une voix me dit: Marche! et l’abîme est profond,
Et de flamme ou de sang je le vois rouge au fond!
Cependant, à l’entour de ma course farouche,
Tout se brise, tout meurt. Malheur à qui me touche!
Oh! fuis! détourne-toi de mon chemin fatal,
Hélas! sans le vouloir, je te ferais du mal!

DOÑA SOL.
Grand Dieu!

HERNANI.
C’est un démon redoutable, te dis-je,
Que le mien. Mon bonheur, voilà le seul prodige
Qui lui soit impossible. Et toi, c’est le bonheur!
Tu n’es donc pas pour moi, cherche un autre seigneur!
Va, si jamais le ciel à mon sort qu’il renie
Souriait… n’y crois pas! ce serait ironie!
Epouse le duc!

DOÑA SOL.
Donc, ce n’était pas assez!
Vous aviez déchiré mon coeur, vous le brisez!
Ah! vous ne m’aimez plus!

HERNANI.
Oh! mon coeur et mon âme,
C’est toi, l’ardent foyer d’où me vient toute flamme,
C’est toi! Ne m’en veux pas de fuir, être adoré!

DOÑA SOL.
Je ne vous en veux pas. Seulement j’en mourrai.

HERNANI.
Mourir! pour qui? pour moi? Se peut-il que tu meures
Pour si peu?

DOÑA SOL (*laissant éclater ses larmes*).
Voilà tout.

Elle tombe sur un fauteuil.

HERNANI (*s’asseyant près d’elle*).
Oh! tu pleures! tu pleures!
Et c’est encor ma faute! et qui me punira?
Car tu pardonneras encor! Qui te dira
Ce que je souffre au moins, lorsqu’une larme noie
La flamme de tes yeux dont l’éclair est ma joie!
Oh! mes amis sont morts! Oh! je suis insensé!
Pardonne. Je voudrais aimer, je ne le sai.
Hélas! j’aime pourtant d’une amour bien profonde!
— Ne pleure pas! mourons plutôt! — Que n’ai-je un monde?
Je te le donnerais! Je suis bien malheureux!

DOÑA SOL (*se jetant à son cou*).
Vous êtes mon lion superbe et généreux!
Je vous aime.

HERNANI.
Oh! l’amour serait un bien suprême
Si l’on pouvait mourir de trop aimer!

DOÑA SOL.
Je t’aime!
Monseigneur! je vous aime et je suis toute à vous.

HERNANI (*laissant tomber sa tête sur son épaule*).
Oh! qu’un coup de poignard de toi me serait doux!

DOÑA SOL (*suppliante*).
Ah! ne craignez vous pas que Dieu ne vous punisse
De parler de la sorte?

HERNANI (*toujours appuyé sur son sein*).
Eh bien! qu’il nous unisse!

Tu le veux. Qu’il en soit ainsi! — J’ai résisté.

Tous deux, dans les bras l’un de l’autre, se regardent avec extase, sans voir, sans entendre, et comme absorbés dans leur regard. Entre don Ruy Gomez par la porte du fond. Il regarde et s’arrête comme pétrifié sur le seuil.

SCÈNE V.

HERNANI, DOÑA SOL, DON RUY GOMEZ.

DON RUY GOMEZ (*immobile et croisant les bras sur le seuil de la porte*).
Voilà donc le païment de l’hospitalité!

DOÑA SOL.
Dieu! le duc!

Tous deux se retournent comme réveillés en sursaut.

DON RUY GOMEZ (toujours immobile).
C’est donc là mon salaire, mon hôte?
— Bon seigneur, va-t’en voir si ta muraille est haute,
Si la porte est bien close et l’archer dans sa tour,
De ton château pour nous fais et refais le tour,
Cherche en ton arsenal une armure à ta taille,
Ressaye à soixante ans ton harnois de bataille!
Voici la loyauté dont nous paîrons ta foi!
Tu fais cela pour nous, et nous ceci pour toi!
Saints du ciel! j’ai vécu plus de soixante années,
J’ai vu bien des bandits aux âmes effrénées,
J’ai souvent, en tirant ma dague du fourreau,
Fait lever sur mes pas des gibiers de bourreau,
J’ai vu des assassins, des monnayeurs, des traîtres,
De faux valets à table empoisonnant leur maîtres,
J’en ai vu qui mouraient sans croix et sans pater,
J’ai vu Sforce, j’ai vu Borgia, je vois Luther,
Mais je n’ai jamais vu perversité si haute
Qui n’eût craint le tonnerre en trahissant son hôte!
Ce n’est pas de mon temps. Si noire trahison
Pétrifie un vieillard au seuil de sa maison,
Et fait que le vieux maître, en attendant qu’il tombe,

A l’air d’une statue à mettre sur sa tombe.
Maures et Castillans! quel est cet homme-ci?

Il lève les yeux et les promène sur les portraits qui entourent la salle.
O vous, tous les Silva qui m’écoutez ici,
Pardon si devant vous, pardon si ma colère
Dit l’hospitalité mauvaise conseillère!

HERNANI (*se levant*).
Duc…

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Tais-toi!

Il fait lentement trois pas dans la salle et promène de nouveau ses regards sur les portraits des Silva.
Morts sacrés! aïeux! hommes de fer!
Qui voyez ce qui vient du ciel et de l’enfer,
Dites-moi, messeigneurs, dites, quel est cet homme?
Ce n’est pas Hernani, c’est Judas qu’on le nomme!
Oh! tâchez de parler pour me dire son nom!

Croisant les bras.
Avez-vous de vos jours vu rien de pareil? Non!

HERNANI.
Seigneur duc…

DON RUY GOMEZ (*toujours aux portraits*).
Voyez-vous, il veut parler, l’infâme!
Mais, mieux encor que moi, vous lisez dans son âme.
Oh! ne l’écoutez pas! C’est un fourbe! Il prévoit
Que mon bras va sans doute ensanglanter mon toit,
Que peut-être mon coeur couve dans ses tempêtes
Quelque vengeance, soeur du festin des sept têtes,
Il vous dira qu’il est proscrit, il vous dira
Qu’on va dire Silva comme l’on dit Lara,

Et puis qu’il est mon hôte, et puis qu’il est votre hôte…
Mes aïeux, mes seigneurs, voyez, est-ce ma faute?
Jugez entre nous deux!

HERNANI.
Ruy Gomez de Silva,
Si jamais vers le ciel noble front s’éleva,
Si jamais coeur fut grand, si jamais âme haute,
C’est la vôtre, seigneur! c’est la tienne, ô mon hôte!
Moi qui te parle ici, je suis coupable, et n’ai
Rien à dire, sinon que je suis bien damné.
Oui, j’ai voulu te prendre et t’enlever ta femme,
Oui, j’ai voulu souiller ton lit, oui, c’est infâme!
J’ai du sang. Tu feras très bien de le verser,
D’essuyer ton épée et de n’y plus penser!

DOÑA SOL.
Seigneur, ce n’est pas lui! Ne frappez que moi-même!

HERNANI.
Taisez-vous, doña Sol. Car cette heure est suprême.
Cette heure m’appartient. Je n’ai plus qu’elle. Ainsi
Laissez-moi m’expliquer avec le duc ici.
Duc, crois aux derniers mots de ma bouche; j’en jure,
Je suis coupable, mais sois tranquille, — elle est pure!
C’est là tout. Moi coupable, elle pure; ta foi
Pour elle, un coup d’épée ou de poignard pour moi.
Voilà. — Puis fais jeter le cadavre à la porte
Et laver le plancher, si tu veux, il n’importe!

DOÑA SOL.
Ah! moi seule ai tout fait. Car je l’aime.

Don Ruy se détourne à ce mot en tressaillant, et fixe sur doña Sol un regard terrible. Elle se jette à ses genoux.

Oui, pardon!
Je l’aime, monseigneur!

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Vous l’aimez!

A Hernani.
Tremble donc!

Bruit de trompettes au dehors. — Entre le page. Au page
Qu’est ce bruit?

LE PAGE.
C’est le roi, monseigneur, en personne,
Avec un gros d’archers et son héraut qui sonne.

DOÑA SOL.
Dieu! le roi! Dernier coup!

LE PAGE (*au duc*).
Il demande pourquoi
La porte est close, et veut qu’on ouvre.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Ouvrez au roi.

Le page s’incline et sort.

DOÑA SOL.
Il est perdu!

Don Ruy Gomez va à l’un des tableaux, qui est son propre portrait et le dernier à gauche; il presse un ressort, le portrait s’ouvre comme une porte, et laisse voir une cachette pratiquée dans le mur. Il se tourne vers Hernani.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Monsieur, venez ici.

HERNANI.
Ma tête
Est à toi. Livre-la, seigneur. Je la tiens prête.
Je suis ton prisonnier.

Il entre dans la cachette. Don Ruy presse de nouveau le ressort, tout se referme, et le portrait revient à sa place.

DOÑA SOL (*au duc*).
Seigneur, pitié pour lui!

LE PAGE (*entrant*).
Son altesse le roi.

Doña Sol baisse précipitamment son voile. La porte s'ouvre à deux battants. Entre don Carlos en habit de guerre, suivi d'une foule de gentilshommes également armés, de pertuisaniers, d'arquebusiers, d'arbalétriers.

SCÈNE VI.

DON RUY GOMEZ; DOÑA SOL (*voilée*); DON CARLOS; SUITE.

Don Carlos s'avance à pas lents, la main gauche sur le pommeau de son épée, la droite dans sa poitrine, et fixe sur le vieux duc un oeil de défiance et de colère. Le duc va au devant du roi et le salue profondément. — Silence. — Attente et terreur alentour. Enfin, le roi, arrivé en face du duc, lève brusquement la tête.

DON CARLOS.
D'où vient donc aujourd'hui,
Mon cousin, que ta porte est si bien verrouillée?
Par les saints! je croyais ta dague plus rouillée!
Et je ne savais pas qu'elle eût hâte à ce point,
Quand nous te venons voir, de reluire à ton poing!

Don Ruy Gomez veut parler, le roi poursuit avec un geste impérieux.
C'est s'y prendre un peu tard pour faire le jeune homme!
Avons-nous des turbans? serait-ce qu'on me nomme
Boabdil ou Mahom, et non Carlos, répond!
Pour nous baisser la herse et nous lever le pont?

DON RUY GOMEZ (*s'inclinant*).
Seigneur…

DON CARLOS (*à ses gentilshommes*).
Prenez les clefs! saissisez-vous des portes!

Deux officiers sortent. Plusieurs autres rangent les soldats en triple haie dans la salle, du roi à la grande porte. Don Carlos se retourne vers le duc.
Ah! vous réveillez donc les rébellions mortes?
Pardieu! si vous prenez de ces airs avec moi.
Messieurs les ducs, le roi prendra des airs de roi
Et j'irai par les monts, de mes mains aguerries,
Dans leurs nids crénelés tuer les seigneuries!

DON RUY GOMEZ (*se redressant*).
Altesse, les Silva sont loyaux…

DON CARLOS (l’interrompant).
Sans détours
Réponds, duc, ou je fais raser tes onze tours!
De l’incendie éteint il reste une étincelle,
Des bandits morts il reste un chef. — Qui le recèle?
C’est toi! Ce Hernani, rebelle empoisonneur,
Ici, dans ton château, tu le caches!

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Seigneur,
C’est vrai.

DON CARLOS.
Fort bien. Je veux sa tête, — ou bien la tienne,
Entends-tu, mon cousin?

DON RUY GOMEZ (*s’inclinant*).
Mais qu’à cela ne tienne!
Vous serez satisfait.

Doña Sol cache sa tête dans ses mains et tombe sur le fauteuil.

DON CARLOS (*radouci*).
Ah! tu t’amendes. — Va
Chercher mon prisonnier.

Le duc croise les bras, baisse la tête et reste quelques moments rêveur. Le roi et doña Sol l’observent en silence et agités d’émotions contraires. Enfin le duc relève son front, va au roi, lui prend la main, et le mène à pas lents devant le plus ancien des portraits, celui qui commence la galerie à droite.

DON RUY GOMEZ (*montrant au roi le vieux portrait*).
Celui-ci, des Silva

C’est l’aîné, c’est l’aïeul, l’ancêtre, le grand homme!
Don Silvius, qui fut trois fois consul de Rome.

Passant au portrait suivant.
Voici don Galceran de Silva, l’autre Cid!
On lui garde à Toro, près de Valladolid,
Une châsse dorée où brûlent mille cierges.
Il affranchit Léon du tribut des cent vierges.

Passant à un autre.
— Don Blas, — qui, de lui-même et dans sa bonne foi,
S’exila pour avoir mal conseillé le roi.

A un autre.
— Christoval. — Au combat d’Escalona, don Sanche,
Le roi, fuyait à pied, et sur sa plume blanche
Tous les coups s’acharnaient; il cria: Christoval!
Christoval prit la plume et donna son cheval.

A un autre.
— Don Jorge, qui paya la rançon de Ramire,
Roi d’Aragon.

DON CARLOS (*croisant les bras et le regardant de la tête aux pieds*).
Pardieu! don Ruy, je vous admire!
Continuez!

DON RUY GOMEZ (*passant à un autre*).
Voici Ruy Gomez de Silva,
Grand-maître de Saint-Jacque et de Calatrava.
Son armure géante irait mal à nos tailles.
Il prit trois cents drapeaux, gagna trente batailles,
Conquit au roi Motril, Antequera, Suez,
Nijar, et mourut pauvre. — Altesse, saluez.

Il s’incline, se découvre, et passe à un autre. Le roi l’écoute avec une impatience et une colère toujours croissantes.

Près de lui, Gil son fils, cher aux âmes loyales.
Sa main pour un serment valait les mains royales.

A un autre.
— Don Gaspard, de Mendoce et de Silva l'honneur!
Toute noble maison tient à Silva, seigneur.
Sandoval tour à tour nous craint ou nous épouse,
Manrique nous envie et Lara nous jalouse.
Alencastre nous hait. Nous touchons à la fois
Du pied à tous les ducs, du front à tous les rois!

DON CARLOS.
Vous raillez-vous?

DON RUY GOMEZ (*allant à d'autres portraits*).
Voilà don Vasquez, dit le Sage,
Don Jayme, dit le Fort. Un jour, sur son passage,
Il arrêta Zamet et cent maures tout seul.
— J'en passe, et des meilleurs.

Sur un geste de colère du roi, il passe un grand nombre de tableaux, et vient tout de suite aux trois derniers portraits à gauche du spectateur.
Voici mon noble aïeul.
Il vécut soixante ans, gardant la foi jurée,
Même aux juifs.

A l'avant-dernier.
Ce vieillard, cette tête sacrée,
C'est mon père. Il fut grand, quoi qu'il vint le dernier.
Les maures de Grenade avaient fait prisonnier
Le comte Alvar Giron, son ami. Mais mon père
Prit pour l'aller chercher six cents hommes de guerre;
Il fit tailler en pierre un comte Alvar Giron
Qu'à sa suite il traina, jurant par son patron
De ne point reculer que le comte de pierre
Ne tournât front lui-même et n'allât en arrière.
Il combattit, puis vint au comte, et le sauva.

DON CARLOS
Mon prisonnier!

DON RUY GOMEZ.
C’était un Gomez de Silva.
Voilà donc ce qu’on dit quand dans cette demeure
On voit tous ces héros…

DON CARLOS.
Mon prisonnier sur l’heure!

DON RUY GOMEZ (*Il s’incline profondément devant le roi, lui prend la*
main et le mène devant le dernier portrait, celui qui sert de porte à
la cachette où il a fait entrer Hernani. Doña Sol le suit des yeux
avec anxiété. — Attente et silence dans l’assistance.
Ce portrait, c’est le mien. — Roi don Carlos, merci!
Car vous voulez qu’on dise en le voyant ici:
«Ce dernier, digne fils d’une race si haute,
Fut un traître, et vendit la tête de son hôte!»

Joie de dora Sol. Mouvement de stupeur dans les assistants. Le roi, déconcerté, s’éloigne avec colère. Puis reste quelques instants silencieux, les lèvres tremblantes et l’oeil enflammé.

DON CARLOS.
Duc, ton château me gêne et je le mettrai bas!

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Car vous me la paîriez, altesse, n’est-ce pas?

DON CARLOS.
Duc, j’en ferai raser les tours pour tant d’audace,
Et je ferai semer du chanvre sur la place.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Mieux voir croître du chanvre où ma tour s’éleva
Qu’une tache ronger le vieux nom de Silva.

Aux portraits.
N’est-il pas vrai, vous tous?

DON CARLOS.
Duc, cette tête est nôtre,
Et tu m’avais promis…

DON RUY GOMEZ.
J’ai promis l’une ou l’autre,

Aux portraits.
N’est-il pas vrai, vous tous?

Montrant sa tête.
Je donne celle-ci.

Au roi.
Prenez-la.

DON CARLOS.
Duc, fort bien. Mais j’y perds, grand merci!
La tête qu’il me faut est jeune, il faut que morte
On la prenne aux cheveux. La tienne? que m’importe!
Le bourreau la prendrait par les cheveux en vain.
Tu n’en as pas assez pour lui remplir la main!

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Altesse, pas d’affront! ma tête encore est belle,
Et vaut bien, que je crois, la tête d’un rebelle.
La tête d’un Silva, vous êtes dégoûté!

DON CARLOS.
Livre-nous Hernani!

DON Ruy GOMEZ.
Seigneur, en vérité,
J’ai dit.

DON CARLOS (*à sa suite*).
Fouillez partout! et qu’il ne soit point d’aile,
De cave ni de tour…

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Mon donjon est fidèle
Comme moi. Seul il sait le secret avec moi.
Nous le garderons bien tous deux.

DON CARLOS.
Je suis le roi!

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Hors que de mon château démoli pierre à pierre
On ne fasse ma tombe, on n’aura rien.

DON CARLOS.
Prière,
Menace, tout est vain! — Livre-moi le bandit,
Duc! ou tête et château, j’abattrai tout.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
J’ai dit.

DON CARLOS.
Eh bien donc! au lieu d’une alors j’aurai deux têtes.

Au duc d’Alcala.
Jorge, arrêtez le duc.

DOÑA SOL (*arrachant son voile et se jetant entre le roi, le duc, et les gardes*).
Roi don Carlos, vous êtes
Un mauvais roi!

DON CARLOS.
Grand Dieu! Que vois-je? doña Sol!

DOÑA SOL.
Altesse, tu n’as pas le coeur d’un Espagnol!

DON CARLOS (*troublé*).
Madame, pour le roi vous êtes bien sévère.

Il s’approche de doña Sol. Bas.
C’est vous qui m’avez mis au coeur cette colère.
Un homme devient ange ou monstre en vous touchant.
Ah! quand on est haï, que vite on est méchant!
Si vous aviez voulu, peut-être, ô jeune fille,
J’étais grand, j’eusse été le lion de Castille!
Vous m’en faites le tigre avec votre courroux.
Le voilà qui rugit, madame, taisez-vous!

Doña Sol lui jette un regard. Il s’incline.
Pourtant, j’obéirai.

Se tournant vers le duc.
Mon cousin, je t’estime.
Ton scrupule après tout peut sembler légitime.
Sois fidèle à ton hôte, infidèle à ton roi,
C’est bien, je te fais grâce et suis meilleur que toi.
— J’emmène seulement ta nièce comme otage.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Seulement!

DOÑA SOL (*interdite*).
Moi, seigneur!

DON CARLOS.
Oui, vous.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Pas davantage!
O la grande clémence! ô généreux vainqueur,

Qui ménage la tête et torture le coeur!
Belle grâce!

DON CARLOS.
Choisis. Doña Sol ou le traître.
Il me faut l'un des deux.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Ah! vous êtes le maître!

Don Carlos s'approche de doña Sol pour l'emmener. Elle se réfugie vers don Ruy Gomez.

DOÑA SOL.
Sauvez-moi, monseigneur!

Elle s'arrête. — A part.
Malheureuse, il le faut!
La tête de mon oncle ou l'autre!… Moi plutôt!

Au roi.
Je vous suis.

DON CARLOS (*à part*).
Par les saints! l'idée est triomphante!
Il faudra bien enfin s'adoucir, mon infante!

Doña Sol va d'un pas grave et assuré au coffret qui renferme l'écrin, l'ouvre et y prend le poignard, qu'elle cache dans son sein. Don Carlos vient à elle et lui présente la main.

DON CARLOS (*à doña Sol*).
Qu'emportez-vous là?

DOÑA SOL.
Rien.

DON CARLOS.
Un joyau précieux?

DOÑA SOL.
Oui.

DON CARLOS (*souriant*).
Voyons.

DOÑA SOL.
Vous verrez.

Elle lui donne la main et se dispose à le suivre. Don Ruy Gomez, qui est resté immobile et profondément absorbé dans sa pensée, se retourne et fait quelques pas en criant.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Doña Sol! terre et cieux!
Doña Sol! — Puisque l’homme ici n’a point d’entrailles,
A mon aide! croulez, armures et murailles!

Il court au roi.
Laisse-moi mon enfant! je n’ai qu’elle, ô mon roi!

DON CARLOS (lâchant la main de doña Sol).
Alors, mon prisonnier!

Le duc baisse la tête et semble en proie à une horrible hésitation; puis il se relève, et regarde les portraits en joignant les mains vers eux.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Ayez pitié de moi,
Vous tous!

Il fait un pas vers la cachette; doña Sol le suit des yeux avec anxiété. Il se retourne vers les portraits. Oh! voilez-vous! votre regard m’arrête.

Il s’avance en chancelant jusqu’à son portrait, puis se retourne encore vers le roi. Tu le veux?

DON CARLOS.
Oui.

Le duc lève en tremblant la main vers le ressort.

DOÑA SOL.
Dieu!

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Non!

Il se jette aux genoux du roi.
Par pitié, prends ma tête!

DON CARLOS.
Ta nièce!

DON RUY GOMEZ (*se relevant*).
Prends-la donc! et laisse-moi l'honneur!

DON CARLOS (*saisissant la main de doña Sol tremblante*).
Adieu, duc.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Au revoir!

Il suit de l'oeil le roi, qui se retire lentement avec doña Sol; puis il met la main sur son poignard. Dieu vous garde, seigneur!

Il revient sur le devant, haletant, immobile, sans plus rien voir ni entendre, l'oeil fixe, les bras croisés sur sa poitrine, qui les soulève comme par des mouvements convulsifs. Cependant le roi sort avec doña Sol, et toute la suite des seigneurs sort après lui, deux à deux, gravement et chacun à son rang. Ils se parlent à voix basse entre eux.

DON RUY GOMEZ (à part).
Roi, pendant que tu sors joyeux de ma demeure,
Ma vieille loyauté sort de mon coeur qui pleure.

Il lève les yeux, les promène autour de lui, et voit qu'il est seul. Il court à la muraille, détache deux épées d'une panoplie, les mesure toutes deux, *puis les dépose sur une table. Cela fait, il va au portrait, pousse le ressort, la porte cachée se rouvre.*

SCÈNE VII.

DON RUY GOMEZ, HERNANI.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Sors.

Hernani parait à la porte de la cachette. Don Ruy lui montre les deux épées sur la table.
Choisis. — Don Carlos est hors de la maison.
Il s'agit maintenant de me rendre raison.
Choisis. Et faisons vite. — Allons donc! ta main tremble!

HERNANI.
Un duel! Nous ne pouvons, vieillard, combattre ensemble.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Pourquoi donc? As-tu peur? N'est-tu point noble?
Enfer!
Noble ou non, pour croiser le fer avec le fer,
Tout homme qui m'outrage est assez gentilhomme!

HERNANI.
Vieillard…

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Viens me tuer ou viens mourir, jeune homme.

HERNANI.
Mourir, oui. Vous m'avez sauvé malgré mes voeux.
Donc, ma vie est à vous. Reprenez-la.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Tu veux?

Aux portraits.
Vous voyez qu'il le veut.

A Hernani.
C’est bon. Fais ta prière.

HERNANI.
Oh! c’est à toi, seigneur, que je fais la dernière.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Parle à l’autre Seigneur.

HERNANI.
Non, non, à toi! Vieillard,
Frappe-moi. Tout m’est bon, dague, épée ou poignard.
Mais fais-moi, par pitié, cette suprême joie!
Duc, avant de mourir, permets que je la voie!

DON RUY GOMEZ.
La voir!

HERNANI.
Au moins permets que j’entende sa voix
Une dernière fois! rien qu’une seule fois!

DON RUY GOMEZ.
L’entendre!

HERNANI.
Oh! je comprends, seigneur, ta jalousie.
Mais déjà par la mort ma jeunesse est saisie,
Pardonne-moi. Veux-tu, dis-moi, que, sans la voir,
S’il le faut, je l’entende? et je mourrai ce soir.
L’entendre seulement! contente mon envie!
Mais, oh! qu’avec douceur j’exhalerais ma vie,
Si tu daignais vouloir qu’avant de fuir aux cieux
Mon âme allât revoir la sienne dans ses yeux!
— Je ne lui dirai rien. Tu seras là, mon père.
Tu me prendras après.

DON RUY GOMEZ (*montrant la cachette encore ouverte*).
Saints du ciel! ce repaire
Est-il donc si profond, si sourd et si perdu,
Qu’il n’ait entendu rien?

HERNANI.
Je n’ai rien entendu.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Il a fallu livrer doña Sol ou toi-même.

HERNANI.
A qui, livrée?

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Au roi.

HERNANI.
Vieillard stupide! il l’aime.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Il l’aime!

HERNANI.
Il nous l’enlève! il est notre rival!

DON RUY GOMEZ.
O malédiction! — Mes vassaux! A cheval!
A cheval! poursuivons le ravisseur!

HERNANI.
Écoute.
La vengeance au pied sûr fait moins de bruit en route.
Je t’appartiens. Tu peux me tuer. Mais veux-tu
M’employer à venger ta nièce et sa vertu?
Ma part dans ta vengeance! oh! fais-moi cette grâce.
Et, s’il faut embrasser tes pieds, je les embrasse!

Suivons le roi tous deux. Viens, je serai ton bras,
Je te vengerai, duc. Après, tu me tueras.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Alors, comme aujourd’hui, te laisseras-tu faire?

HERNANI.
Oui, duc.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Qu’en jures-tu?

HERNANI.
La tête de mon père.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Voudras-tu de toi-même un jour t’en souvenir?

HERNANI (*lui présentant le cor qu’il détache de sa ceinture*).
Écoute. Prends ce cor. — Quoi qu’il puisse advenir,
Quand tu voudras, seigneur, quel que soit le lieu, l’heure,
S’il te passe à l’esprit qu’il est temps que je meure,
Viens, sonne de ce cor, et ne prends d’autres soins.
Tout sera fait.

DON RUY GOMEZ (*lui tendant la main*).
Ta main.

Ils se serrent la main. — Aux portraits.
Vous tous, soyez témoins!

ACTE QUATRIÈME - LE TOMBEAU.

AIX-LA-CHAPELLE.

Les caveaux qui renferment le tombeau de Charlemagne à Aix-la-Chapelle. De grandes voûtes d'architecture lombarde. Gros piliers bas, pleins cintres, chapiteaux d'oiseaux et de fleurs. — A droite, le tombeau de Charlemagne, avec une petite porte de bronze, basse et cintrée. Une seule lampe suspendue à une clef de voûte en éclaire l'inscription: KAROLVS MAGNVS. — Il est nuit. On ne voit pas le fond du souterrain; l'ail se perd dans les arcades, les escaliers et les piliers qui s'entre croisent dans l'ombre.

SCÈNE PREMIÈRE.

DON CARLOS, DON RICARDO DE ROXAS, COMTE DE CASAPALMA (*une lanterne à la main. Grands manteaux, chapeaux rabattus*).

DON RICARDO (*son chapeau à la main*).
C'est ici.

DON CARLOS.
C'est ici que la ligue s'assemble!
Que je vais dans ma main les tenir tous ensemble!
Ah! monsieur l'électeur de Trèves, c'est ici!
Vous leur prêtez ce lieu! Certe, il est bien choisi!
Un noir complot prospère à l'air des catacombes.
Il est bon d'aiguiser les stylets sur des tombes.
Pourtant c'est jouer gros. La tête est de l'enjeu,
Messieurs les assassins! et nous verrons. — Pardieu!
Ils font bien de choisir pour une telle affaire
Un sépulcre, — ils auront moins de chemin à faire.

A don Ricardo.
Ces caveaux sous le sol s'étendent-ils bien loin?

DON RICARDO.
Jusques au château-fort.

DON CARLOS.
C'est plus qu'il n'est besoin.

DON RICARDO.
D'autres, de ce côté, vont jusqu'au monastère
D'Altenheim…

DON CARLOS.
Où Rodolphe extermina Lothaire.

Bien. — Une fois encor, comte, redites-moi
Les noms et les griefs, où, comment, et pourquoi.

DON RICARDO.
Gotha.

DON CARLOS.
Je sais pourquoi le brave duc conspire.
Il veut un Allemand d'Allemagne à l'Empire.

DON RICARDO.
Hohenbourg.

DON CARLOS.
Hohenbourg aimerait mieux, je croi,
L'enfer avec François que le ciel avec moi.

DON RICARDO.
Don Gil Tellez Giron.

DON CARLOS.
Castille et Notre-Dame!
Il se révolte donc contre son roi, l'infâme!

DON RICARDO.
On dit qu'il vous trouva chez madame Giron
Un soir que vous veniez de le faire baron.
Il veut venger l'honneur de sa tendre compagne.

DON CARLOS.
C'est donc qu'il se révolte alors contre l'Espagne.
— Qui nomme-t-on encore?

DON RICARDO.
On cite avec ceux-là
Le révérend Vasquez, évêque d'Avila.

DON CARLOS.
Est-ce aussi pour venger la vertu de sa femme?

DON RICARDO.
Puis Guzman de Lara, mécontent, qui réclame
Le collier de votre ordre.

DON CARLOS.
Ah! Guzman de Lara!
Si ce n’est qu’un collier qu’il lui faut, il l’aura.

DON RICARDO.
Le duc de Lutzelbourg. Quant aux plans qu’on lui prête…

DON CARLOS.
Le duc de Lutzelbourg est trop grand de la tête.

DON RICARDO.
Juan de Haro, qui veut Astorga.

DON CARLOS.
Ces Haro
Ont toujours fait doubler la solde du bourreau.

DON RICARDO.
C’est tout.

DON CARLOS.
Ce ne sont pas toutes mes têtes. Comte,
Cela ne fait que sept, et je n’ai pas mon compte.

DON RICARDO.
Ah! je ne nomme pas quelques bandits, gagés
Par Trêve ou par la France…

DON CARLOS.
Hommes sans préjugés

Dont le poignard, toujours prêt à jouer son rôle,
Tourne aux plus gros écus, comme l’aiguille au pôle!

DON RICARDO.
Pourtant j’ai distingué deux hardis compagnons,
Tous deux nouveaux venus. Un jeune, un vieux.

DON CARLOS.
Leurs noms?

Don Ricardo lève les épaules en signe d’ignorance.
Leur âge?

DON RICARDO.
Le plus jeune a vingt ans.

DON CARLOS.
C’est dommage.

DON RICARDO.
Le vieux, soixante au moins.

DON CARLOS.
L’un n’a pas encor l’âge,
Et l’autre ne l’a plus. Tant pis. J’en prendrai soin.
Le bourreau peut compter sur mon aide au besoin.
Ah! loin que mon épée aux factions soit douce,
Je la lui prêterai si sa hache s’émousse,
Comte, et pour l’élargir, je coudrai, s’il le faut,
Ma pourpre impériale au drap de l’échafaud.
— Mais serai-je empereur seulement?

DON RICARDO.
Le collège,
A cette heure assemblé, délibère.

DON CARLOS.
Que sais-je?

Ils nommeront François premier, ou leur Saxon,
Leur Frédéric le Sage! — Ah! Luther a raison,
Tout va mal! — Beaux faiseurs de majestés sacrées!
N’acceptant pour raisons que les raisons dorées!
Un Saxon hérétique! un comte palatin
Imbécile! un primat de Trèves libertin!
— Quant au roi de Bohême, il est pour moi. — Des princes
De Hesse, plus petits encor que leurs provinces!
De jeunes idiots! des vieillards débauchés!
Des couronnes, fort bien! mais des têtes? cherchez!
Des nains! que je pourrais, concile ridicule,
Dans ma peau de lion emporter comme Hercule!
Et qui, démaillotés du manteau violet,
Auraient la tête encor de moins que Triboulet
— Il me manque trois voix, Ricardo! tout me manque!
Oh! je donnerais Gand, Tolède et Salamanque,
Mon ami Ricardo, trois villes à leur choix,
Pour trois voix, s’ils voulaient! Vois-tu, pour ces trois voix,
Oui, trois de mes cités de Castille ou de Flandre,
Je les donnerais! — sauf, plus tard, à les reprendre!

Don Ricardo salue profondément le roi, et met son chapeau sur sa tête.
— Vous vous couvrez?

DON RICARDO.
Seigneur, vous m’avez tutoyé.

Saluant de nouveau.
Me voilà grand d’Espagne.

DON CARLOS (*à part*).
Ah! tu me fais pitié,
Ambitieux de rien! — Engeance intéressée!
Comme à travers la nôtre ils suivent leur pensée!
Basse-cour où le roi, mendié sans pudeur,
A tous ces affamés émiette la grandeur!

Rêvant.
Dieu seul et l'empereur sont grands! — et le saint-père!
Le reste, rois et ducs! qu'est cela?

DON RICARDO.
Moi, j'espère
Qu'ils prendront votre altesse.

DON CARLOS (*à part*).
Altesse! altesse, moi!
J'ai du malheur en tout. — S'il fallait rester roi!

DON RICARDO (*à part*).
Baste! empereur ou non, me voilà grand d'Espagne.

DON CARLOS.
Sitôt qu'ils auront fait l'empereur d'Allemagne,
Quel signal à la ville annoncera son nom?

DON RICARDO.
Si c'est le duc de Saxe, un seul coup de canon.
Deux, si c'est le Français. Trois, si c'est votre altesse.

DON CARLOS.
Et cette doña Sol! Tout m'irrite et me blesse!
Comte, si je suis fait empereur, par hasard,
Cours la chercher. Peut-être on voudra d'un césar!

DON RICARDO (*souriant*).
Votre altesse est bien bonne!

DON CARLOS (*l'interrompant avec hauteur*).
Ah! là-dessus, silence!
Je n'ai point dit encor ce que je veux qu'on pense.
— Quand saura-t-on le nom de l'élu?

DON RICARDO.
Mais, je crois,

Dans une heure au plus tard.

DON CARLOS.
Oh! trois voix! rien que trois!
— Mais écrasons d'abord ce ramas qui conspire,
Et nous verrons après à qui sera l'empire.

Il compte sur ses doigts et frappe du pied.
Toujours trois voix de moins! Ah! ce sont eux qui l'ont!
— Ce Corneille Agrippa pourtant en sait bien long!
Dans l'océan céleste il a vu treize étoiles
Vers la mienne du nord venir à pleines voiles.
J'aurai l'empire, allons! — Mais d'autre part on dit
Que l'abbé Jean Trithème à François l'a prédit.
— J'aurais dû, pour mieux voir ma fortune éclaircie,
Avec quelque armement aider la prophétie!
Toutes prédictions du sorcier le plus fin
Viennent bien mieux à terme et font meilleure fin
Quand une bonne armée, avec canons et piques,
Gens de pied, de cheval, fanfares et musiques,
Prête à montrer la route au sort qui veut broncher,
Leur sert de sage-femme et les fait accoucher.
Lequel vaut mieux, Corneille Agrippa? Jean Trithème?
Celui dont une armée explique le système,
Qui met un fer de lance au bout de ce qu'il dit,
Et compte maint soudard, lansquenet ou bandit,
Dont l'estoc, refaisant la fortune imparfaite,
Taille l'événement au plaisir du prophète.
— Pauvres fous! qui, l'oeil fier, le front haut, visent droit
A l'empire du monde et disent: J'ai mon droit!
Ils ont force canons, rangés en longues files,
Dont le souffle embrasé ferait fondre des villes;
Ils ont vaisseaux, soldats, chevaux, et vous croyez
Qu'ils vont marcher au but sur les peuples broyés…
Baste! au grand carrefour de la fortune humaine,
Qui mieux encor qu'au trône à l'abime nous mène,
A peine ils font trois pas, qu'indécis, incertains,

Tâchant en vain de lire au livre des destins,
Ils hésitent, peu sûrs d'eux-même, et dans le doute
Au nécroman du coin vont demander leur route!

A don Ricardo.
— Va-t'en. C'est l'heure où vont venir les conjurés.
Ah! la clef du tombeau?

DON RICARDO (*remettant une clef au roi*).
Seigneur, vous songerez
Au comte de Limbourg, gardien capitulaire,
Qui me l'a confiée et fait tout pour vous plaire.

DON CARLOS (*le congédiant*).
Fais tout ce que j'ai dit! tout!

DON RICARDO (*s'inclinant*).
J'y vais de ce pas,
Altesse!

DON CARLOS.
Il faut trois coups de canon, n'est-ce pas?

Don Ricardo s'incline et sort. Don Carlos, resté seul, tombe dans une profonde rêverie. Ses bras se croisent, sa tête fléchit sur sa poitrine; puis il se relève et se tourne vers le tombeau.

SCÈNE II.

DON CARLOS (*seul*).
Charlemagne, pardon! ces voûtes solitaires
Ne devraient répéter que paroles austères.
Tu t’indignes sans doute à ce bourdonnement
Que nos ambitions font sur ton monument.
— Charlemagne est ici! Comment, sépulcre sombre,
Peux-tu sans éclater contenir si grande ombre?
Es-tu bien là, géant d’un monde créateur,
Et t’y peux-tu coucher de toute ta hauteur?
— Ah! c’est un beau spectacle à ravir la pensée
Que l’Europe ainsi faite et comme il l’a laissée!
Un édifice, avec deux hommes au sommet,
Deux chefs élus auxquels tout roi né se soumet.
Presque tous les états, duchés, fiefs militaires,
Royaumes, marquisats, tous sont héréditaires;
Mais le peuple a parfois son pape ou son césar,
Tout marche, et le hasard corrige le hasard.
De là vient l’équilibre, et toujours l’ordre éclate.
Électeurs de drap d’or, cardinaux d’écarlate,
Double sénat sacré dont la terre s’émeut,
Ne sont là qu’en parade, et Dieu veut ce qu’il veut.
Qu’une idée, au besoin des temps, un jour éclose,
Elle grandit, va, court, se mêle à toute chose,
Se fait homme, saisit les coeurs, creuse un sillon;
Maint roi la foule au pied ou lui met un bâillon;
Mais qu’elle entre un matin à la diète, au conclave,
Et tous les rois soudain verront l’idée esclave,
Sur leurs têtes de rois que ses pieds courberont,
Surgir, le globe en main ou la tiare au front.
Le pape et l’empereur sont tout. Rien n’est sur terre
Que pour eux et par eux. Un suprême mystère
Vit en eux, et le ciel, dont ils ont tous les droits,
Leur fait un grand festin des peuples et des rois,
Et les tient sous sa nue, où son tonnerre gronde,

Seuls, assis à la table où Dieu leur sert le monde.
Tête à tête ils sont là, réglant et retranchant,
Arrangeant l’univers comme un faucheur son champ.
Tout se passe entre eux deux. Les rois sont à la porte,
Respirant la vapeur des mets que l’on apporte,
Regardant à la vitre, attentifs, ennuyés,
Et se haussant, pour voir, sur la pointe des pieds.
Le monde au-dessous d’eux s’échelonne et se groupe.
Ils font et défont. L’un délie et l’autre coupe.
L’un est la vérité, l’autre est la force. Ils ont
Leur raison en eux-même, et sont parce qu’ils sont.
Quand ils sortent, tous deux égaux, du sanctuaire,
L’un dans sa pourpre, et l’autre avec son blanc suaire,
L’univers ébloui contemple avec terreur
Ces deux moitiés de Dieu, le pape et l’empereur.
— L’empereur! l’empereur! être empereur! — O rage,
Ne pas l’être! et sentir son coeur plein de courage! —
Qu’il fut heureux celui qui dort dans ce tombeau!
Qu’il fut grand! De son temps c’était encor plus beau.
Le pape et l’empereur! ce n’était plus deux hommes.
Pierre et César! en eux accouplant les deux Romes,
Fécondant l’une et l’autre en un mystique hymen,
Redonnant une forme, une âme au genre humain,
Faisant refondre en bloc peuples et pêle-mêle
Royaumes, pour en faire une Europe nouvelle,
Et tous deux remettant au moule de leur main
Le bronze qui restait du vieux monde romain!
Oh! quel destin! — Pourtant cette tombe est la sienne!
Tout est-il donc si peu que ce soit là qu’on vienne?
Quoi donc! avoir été prince, empereur et roi!
Avoir été l’épée, avoir été la loi!
Géant, pour piédestal avoir eu l’Allemagne!
Quoi! pour titre césar et pour nom Charlemagne!
Avoir été plus grand qu’Annibal, qu’Attila,
Aussi grand que le monde!… et que tout tienne là!
Ah! briguez donc l’empire, et voyez la poussière
Que fait un empereur! Couvrez la terre entière

De bruit et de tumulte; élevez, bâtissez
Votre empire, et jamais ne dites: C’est assez!
Taillez à larges pans un édifice immense!
Savez-vous ce qu’un jour il en reste? ô démence!
Cette pierre! Et du titre et du nom triomphants?
Quelques lettres à faire épeler des enfants!
Si haut que soit le but où votre orgueil aspire,
Voilà le dernier terme!…-Oh! l’empire! l’empire!
Que m’importe! j’y touche, et le trouve à mon gré.
Quelque chose me dit: Tu l’auras! — Je l’aurai —
Si je l’avais!… — O ciel! être ce qui commence!
Seul, debout, au plus haut de la spirale immense!
D’une foule d’états l’un sur l’autre étagés
Être la clef de voûte, et voir sous soi rangés
Les rois, et sur leur tête essuyer ses sandales;
Voir au-dessous des rois les maisons féodales,
Margraves, cardinaux, doges, ducs à fleurons;
Puis évêques, abbés, chefs de clans, hauts barons,
Puis clercs et soldats; puis, loin du faîte où nous sommes,
Dans l’ombre, tout au fond de l’abîme, — les hommes.
— Les hommes! c’est-à-dire une foule, une mer,
Un grand bruit, pleurs et cris, parfois un rire amer,
Plainte qui, réveillant la terre qui s’effare,
A travers tant d’échos nous arrive fanfare!
Les hommes! — Des cités, des tours, un vaste essaim,
De hauts clochers d’église à sonner le tocsin! —

Rêvant.
Base de nations portant sur leurs épaules
La pyramide énorme appuyée aux deux pôles,
Flots vivants, qui toujours l’étreignant de leurs plis,
La balancent, branlante, à leur vaste roulis,
Font tout changer de place et, sur ses hautes zones,
Comme des escabeaux font chanceler les trônes,
Si bien que tous les rois, cessant leurs vains débats,
Lèvent les yeux au ciel… Rois! regardez en bas!
— Ah! le peuple! — océan! — onde sans cesse émue,

Où l’on ne jette rien sans que tout ne remue!
Vague qui broie un trône et qui berce un tombeau!
Miroir où rarement un roi se voit en beau!
Ah! si l’on regardait parfois dans ce flot sombre,
On y verrait au fond des empires sans nombre,
Grands vaisseaux naufragés, que son flux et reflux
Roule, et qui le gênaient, et qu’il ne connaît plus!
— Gouverner tout cela! — Monter, si l’on vous nomme,
A ce faîte! Y monter, sachant qu’on n’est qu’un homme!
Avoir l’abîme là!… — Pourvu qu’en ce moment
Il n’aille pas me prendre un éblouissement!
Oh! d’états et de rois mouvante pyramide,
Ton faîte est bien étroit! Malheur au pied timide!
A qui me retiendrais-je! Oh! si j’allais faillir
En sentant sous mes pieds le monde tressaillir!
En sentant vivre, sourdre et palpiter la terre!
— Puis, quand j’aurai ce globe entre mes mains, qu’en faire?
Le pourrai-je porter seulement? Qu’ai-je en moi?
Être empereur, mon Dieu! J’avais trop d’être roi!
Certe, il n’est qu’un mortel de race peu commune
Dont puisse s’élargir l’âme avec la fortune.
Mais moi! qui me fera grand? qui sera ma loi?
Qui me conseillera?

Il tombe à deux genoux devant le tombeau.
Charlemagne! c’est toi!
Ah! puisque Dieu, pour qui tout obstacle s’efface,
Prend nos deux majestés et les met face à face,
Verse-moi dans le coeur, du fond de ce tombeau,
Quelque chose de grand, de sublime et de beau!
Oh! par tous ses côtés fais-moi voir toute chose.
Montre-moi que le monde est petit, car je n’ose
Y toucher. Montre-moi que sur cette Babel
Qui du pâtre à César va montant jusqu’au ciel,
Chacun en son degré se complaît et s’admire,
Voit l’autre par-dessous et se retient d’en rire.
Apprends-moi tes secrets de vaincre et de régner,

Et dis-moi qu'il vaut mieux punir que pardonner!
— N'est-ce pas? — S'il est vrai qu'en son lit solitaire
Parfois une grande ombre au bruit que fait la terre
S'éveille, et que soudain son tombeau large et clair
S'entr'ouvre, et dans la nuit jette au monde un éclair,
Si cette chose est vraie, empereur d'Allemagne,
Oh! dis-moi ce qu'on peut faire après Charlemagne!
Parle! dût en parlant ton souffle souverain
Me briser sur le front cette porte d'airain!
Ou plutôt, laisse-moi seul dans ton sanctuaire
Entrer, laisse-moi voir ta face mortuaire,
Ne me repousse pas d'un souffle d'aquilons.
Sur ton chevet de pierre accoude-toi. Parlons.
Oui, dusses-tu me dire, avec ta voix fatale,
De ces choses qui font l'oeil sombre et le front pâle!
Parle, et n'aveugle pas ton fils épouvanté,
Car ta tombe sans doute est pleine de clarté!
Ou, si tu ne dis rien, laisse en ta paix profonde
Carlos étudier ta tête comme un monde;
Laisse qu'il te mesure à loisir, ô géant.
Car rien n'est ici-bas si grand que ton néant!
Que la cendre, à défaut de l'ombre, me conseille!

Il approche la clef de la serrure.
Entrons.

Il recule.
Dieu! s'il allait me parler à l'oreille!
S'il était là, debout et marchant à pas lents!
Si j'allais ressortir avec de cheveux blancs!
Entrons toujours!

Bruit de pas.
On vient. Qui donc ose à cette heure,
Hors moi, d'un pareil mort éveiller la demeure?
Qui donc?

Le bruit s'approche.

Ah! j'oubliais! ce sont mes assassins.
Entrons!

Il ouvre la porte du tombeau, qu'il referme sur lui. — Entrent plusieurs hommes, marchant à pas sourds, cachés sous leurs manteaux et leurs chapeaux.

SCÈNE III.

LES CONJURÉS. *Ils vont les uns aux autres, en se prenant la main et en échangeant quelques paroles à voix basse*.

PREMIER CONJURÉ (*portant seul une torche allumée*).
Ad augusta.

DEUXIÈME CONJURÉ.
Per angusta.

PREMIER CONJURÉ.
Les saints
Nous protègent.

TROISIÈME CONJURÉ.
Les morts nous servent.

PREMIER CONJURÉ.
Dieu nous garde.

Bruit de pas dans l'ombre.

DEUXIÈME CONJURÉ.
Qui vive?

VOIX DANS L'OMBRE.
Ad augusta.

DEUXIÈME CONJURÉ.
Per angusta.

Entrent de nouveaux conjurés. — Bruit de pas.

PREMIER CONJURÉ (*au troisième*).
Regarde;
Il vient encor quelqu'un.

TROISIÈME CONJURÉ.
Qui vive?

VOIX DANS L'OMBRE.
Ad augusta.

TROISIÈME CONJURÉ.
Per augusta.

Entrent de nouveaux conjurés, qui échangent des signes de mains avec tous les autres.

PREMIER CONJURÉ.
C'est bien. Nous voilà tous. — Gotha,
Fais le rapport. — Amis, l'ombre attend la lumière.

Tous les conjurés s'asseyent en demi-cercle sur des tombeaux. Le premier conjuré passe tour à tour devant tous, et chacun allume à sa torche une cire qu'il tient à la main. Puis le premier conjuré va s'asseoir en silence sur une tombe au centre du cercle et plus haute que les autres.

LE DUC DE GOTHA (*se levant*).
Amis, Charles d'Espagne, étranger par sa mère,
Prétend au saint-empire.

PREMIER CONJURÉ.
Il aura le tombeau.

LE DUC DE GOTHA (*Il jette sa torche à terre et l'écrase du pied*).
Qu'il en soit de son front comme de ce flambeau!

TOUS.
Que ce soit!

PREMIER CONJURÉ.
Mort à lui!

LE DUC DE GOTHA.
Qu'il meure!

TOUS.
Qu’on l’immole!

DON JUAN DE HARO.
Son père est allemand.

LE DUC DE LUTZELBOURG.
Sa mère est espagnole.

LE DUC DE GOTHA.
Il n’est plus espagnol et n’est pas allemand.
Mort!

UN CONJURÉ.
Si les électeurs allaient en ce moment
Le nommer empereur?

PREMIER CONJURÉ.
Eux! lui! jamais!

DON GIL TELLEZ GIRON.
Qu’importe!
Amis! frappons la tête et la couronne est morte!

PREMIER CONJURÉ,
S’il a le saint-empire, il devient, quel qu’il soit,
Très auguste, et Dieu seul peut le toucher du doigt!

LE DUC DE GOTHA.
Le plus sûr, c’est qu’avant d’être auguste, il expire.

PREMIER CONJURÉ.
On ne l’élira point!

TOUS.
Il n’aura pas l’empire!

PREMIER CONJURÉ.
Combien faut-il de bras pour le mettre au linceul?

TOUS.
Un seul.

PREMIER CONJURÉ.
Combien faut-il de coups au coeur?

TOUS.
Un seul.

PREMIER CONJURÉ.
Qui frappera?

TOUS.
Nous tous.

PREMIER CONJURÉ.
La victime est un traître.
Ils font un empereur; nous, faisons un grand prêtre.
Tirons au sort.

Tous les conjurés écrivent leurs noms sur leurs tablettes, déchirent la feuille, la roulent, et vont l'un après l'autre la jeter dans l'urne d'un tombeau. — Puis le premier conjuré dit: Prions.

Tous s'agenouillent. Le premier conjuré se lève et dit:
Que l'élu croie en Dieu,
Frappe comme un Romain, meure comme un Hébreu!
Il faut qu'il brave roue et tenailles mordantes,
Qu'il chante aux chevalets, rie aux lampes ardentes,
Enfin que pour tuer et mourir, résigné,
Il fasse tout!

Il tire un des parchemins de l'urne.

TOUS.
Quel nom?

PREMIER CONJURÉ (*à haute voix*).
Hernani.

HERNANI (*sortant de la foule des conjurés*).
J’ai gagné!
— Je te tiens, toi que j’ai si longtemps poursuivie,
Vengeance!

DON RUY GOMEZ (*perçant la foule et prenant Hernani à part*).
Oh! cède-moi ce coup!

HERNANI.
Non, sur ma vie!
Oh! ne m’enviez pas ma fortune, seigneur!
C’est la première fois qu’il m’arrive bonheur.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Tu n’as rien. Eh bien, tout, fiefs, châteaux, vasselages,
Cent mille paysans dans mes trois cents villages,
Pour ce coup à frapper, je te les donne, ami!

HERNANI.
Non!

LE DUC DE GOTHA.
Ton bras porterait un coup moins affermi,
Vieillard!

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Arrière, vous! sinon le bras, j’ai l’âme.
Aux rouilles du fourreau ne jugez point la lame.

A Hernani.
Tu m’appartiens!

HERNANI.
Ma vie à vous, la sienne à moi.

DON RUY GOMEZ (*tirant le cor de sa ceinture*).
Eh bien, écoute, ami. Je te rends ce cor.

HERNANI (*ébranlé*).
Quoi!
La vie! — Eh! que m'importe! Ah! je tiens ma vengeance!
Avec Dieu dans ceci je suis d'intelligence.
J'ai mon père à venger… peut-être plus encor!
Elle, me la rends-tu?

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Jamais! Je rends ce cor.

HERNANI.
Non!

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Réfléchis, enfant!

HERNANI.
Duc, laisse-moi ma proie.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Eh bien! maudit sois-tu de m'ôter cette joie!

Il remet le cor à sa ceinture.

PREMIER CONJURÉ (*à Hernani*).
Frère! avant qu'on ait pu l'élire, il serait bien
D'attendre dès ce soir Carlos…

HERNANI.
Ne craignez rien
Je sais comment on pousse un homme dans la tombe.

PREMIER CONJURÉ.
Que toute trahison sur le traître retombe,
Et Dieu soit avec vous! — Nous, comtes et barons,

S’il périt sans tuer, continuons! Jurons
De frapper tour à tour et sans nous y soustraire
Carlos qui doit mourir.

TOUS (*tirant leurs épées*).
Jurons!

LE DUC DE GOTHA (au premier conjuré).
Sur quoi, mon frère?

DON RUY GOMEZ (*retourne son épée, la prend par la pointe et l’élève au-dessus de sa tête*). Jurons sur cette croix!

TOUS (*élevant leurs épées*).
Qu’il meure impénitent!

On entend un coup de canon éloigné. Tous s’arrêtent en silence. — La porte du tombeau s’entr’ouvre. Don Carlos parait sur le seuil. Pâle, il écoute. — Un second coup. — Un troisième coup. — Il ouvre tout à fait la porte du tombeau, mais sans faire un pas, debout et immobile sur le seuil.

SCENE IV.

LES CONJURÉS, DON CARLOS: *puis* DON RICARDO,
SEIGNEURS, GARDES; LE
ROI DE BOHÊME, LE DUC DE BAVIÈRE; *puis* DOÑA SOL.

DON CARLOS.
Messieurs, allez plus loin! l’empereur vous entend.

Tous les flambeaux s’éteignent à la fois. — Profond silence. — Il fait un pas dans les ténèbres, si épaisses qu’on y distingue à peine les conjurés, muets et immobiles.
Silence et nuit! l’essaim en sort et s’y replonge.
Croyez-vous que ceci va passer comme un songe,
Et que je vous prendrai, n’ayant plus vos flambeaux,
Pour des hommes de pierre assis sur leurs tombeaux?
Vous parliez tout à l’heure assez haut, mes statues!

Allons! relevez donc vos têtes abattues,
Car voici Charles-Quint! Frappez, faites un pas!
Voyons, oserez-vous? — Non, vous n’oserez pas.
Vos torches flamboyaient sanglantes sous ces voûtes.
Mon souffle a donc suffi pour les éteindre toutes!
Mais voyez, et tournez vos yeux irrésolus,
Si j’en éteins beaucoup, j’en allume encor plus.

Il frappe de la clef de fer sur la porte de bronze du tombeau. A ce bruit, toutes les profondeurs du souterrain se remplissent de soldats portant des torches et des pertuisanes. A leur tête, le duc d’Alcala, le marquis d’Almuñan. Accourez, mes faucons! j’ai le nid, j’ai la proie!

Aux conjurés.
J’illumine à mon tour. Le sépulcre flamboie,
Regardez!

Aux soldats.
Venez tous, car le crime est flagrant.

HERNANI (*regardant les soldats*).
A la bonne heure! Seul il me semblait trop grand.
C’est bien. J’ai cru d’abord que c’était Charlemagne.
Ce n’est que Charles-Quint.

DON CARLOS (*au duc d’Alcala*).
Connétable d’Espagne!

Au marquis d’Almuñan.
Amiral de Castille, ici! — Désarmez-les.

On entoure les conjurés et on les désarme.

DON RICARDO (*accourant et s’inclinant jusqu’à terre*).
Majesté!

DON CARLOS.
Je te fais alcade du palais.

DON RICARDO (*s’inclinant de nouveau*).
Deux électeurs, au nom de la chambre dorée,
Viennent complimenter la majesté sacrée.

DON CARLOS.
Qu’ils entrent.

Bas à Ricardo.
Doña Sol.

Ricardo salue et sort. Entrent, avec flambeaux et fanfares, le roi de Bohême et le duc de Bavière, tout en drap d’or, couronnes en tête. — Nombreux cortège de seigneurs allemands, portant la bannière de l’empire, l’aigle à deux têtes, avec l’écusson d’Espagne au milieu — Les soldats s’écartent, se rangent en haie, et font passage aux deux électeurs, jusqu’à l’empereur, qu’ils saluent profondément, et qui leur rend leur salut en soulevant son chapeau.

LE DUC DE BAVIÈRE.
Charles! roi des Romains,
Majesté très sacrée, empereur! dans vos mains
Le monde est maintenant, car vous avez l’empire.
Il est à vous, ce trône où tout monarque aspire!
Frédéric, duc de Saxe, y fut d’abord élu,
Mais, vous jugeant plus digne, il n’en a pas voulu.
Venez donc recevoir la couronne et le globe.
Le saint-empire, ô roi, vous revêt de la robe,
Il vous arme du glaive, et vous êtes très grand.

DON CARLOS.
J’irai remercier le collège en rentrant.
Allez, messieurs. Merci, mon frère de Bohême,
Mon cousin de Bavière. Allez. J’irai moi-même.

LE ROI DE BOHEME.
Charles, du nom d’amis nos aïeux se nommaient.
Mon père aimait ton père, et leurs pères s’aimaient.
Charles, si jeune en butte aux fortunes contraires,

Dis, veux-tu que je sois ton frère entre tes frères?
Je t’ai vu tout enfant, et ne puis oublier…

DON CARLOS (*l’interrompant*).
Roi de Bohême! eh bien, vous êtes familier!

Il lui présente sa main à baiser, ainsi qu’au duc de Bavière, puis congédie les deux électeurs, qui le saluent profondément. Allez!

Sortent les deux électeurs avec leur cortège.

LA FOULE.
Vivat!

DON CARLOS *(à part*).
J’y suis! et tout m’a fait passage!
Empereur! — Au refus de Frédéric le Sage!

Entre doña Sol, conduite par Ricardo.

DOÑA SOL.
Des soldats! l’empereur! O ciel! coup imprévu.
Hernani!

HERNANI.
Doña Sol!

DON RUY GOMEZ (à côté d’Hernani, à part).
Elle ne m’a point vu!

Doña Sol court à Hernani. Il la fait reculer d’un regard de défiance.

HERNANI.
Madame!…

DOÑA SOL (*tirant le poignard de son sein*).
J’ai toujours son poignard!

HERNANI (*lui tendant les bras*).
Mon amie!

DON CARLOS.
Silence, tous!

Aux conjurés.
Votre âme est-elle raffermie?
Il convient que je donne au monde une leçon.
Lara le Castillan et Gotha le Saxon,
Vous tous! que venait-on faire ici? parlez.

HERNANI (*faisant un pas*).
Sire,
La chose est toute simple, et l’on peut vous la dire.
Nous gravions la sentence au mur de Balthazar.

Il tire un poignard et l’agite.
Nous rendions à César ce qu’on doit à César.

DON CARLOS.
Paix!

A don Ruy Gomez.
Vous traître, Silva!

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Lequel de nous deux, sire?

HERNANI (*se retournant vers les conjurés*).
Nos têtes et l’empire! il a ce qu’il désire.

A l’empereur.
Le bleu manteau des rois pouvait gêner vos pas.
La pourpre vous va mieux. Le sang n’y paraît pas.

DON CARLOS (*à don Ruy Gomez*).
Mon cousin de Silva, c’est une félonie

A faire du blason rayer ta baronnie!
C'est haute trahison, don Ruy, songez-y bien.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Les rois Rodrigue font les comtes Julien.

DON CARLOS (*au duc d'Alcala*).
Ne prenez que ce qui peut être duc ou comte.
Le reste!…

Don Ruy Gomez, le duc de Lutzelbourg, le duc de Gotha, don Juan de Haro, don Guzman de Lara, don Tellez Giron, le baron de Hohenbourg, se séparent du groupe des conjurés, parmi lesquels est resté Hernani. — Le duc d'Alcala les entoure étroitement de gardes.

DOÑA SOL (à part).
Il est sauvé!

HERNANI (*sortant du groupe des conjurés*).
Je prétends qu'on me compte!

A don Carlos.
Puisqu'il s'agit de hache ici, que Hernani,
Pâtre obscur, sous tes pieds passerait impuni,
Puisque son front n'est plus au niveau de ton glaive,
Puisqu'il faut être grand pour mourir, je me lève.
Dieu qui donne le sceptre et qui te le donna
M'a fait duc de Segorbe et duc de Cardona,
Marquis de Monroy, comte Albatera, vicomte
De Gor, seigneur de lieux dont j'ignore le compte.
Je suis Jean d'Aragon, grand maître d'Avis, né
Dans l'exil, fils proscrit d'un père assassiné
Par sentence du tien, roi Carlos de Castille!
Le meurtre est entre nous affaire de famille.
Vous avez l'échafaud, nous avons le poignard.
Donc, le ciel m'a fait duc, et l'exil montagnard.
Mais puisque j'ai sans fruit aiguisé mon épée
Sur les monts et dans l'eau des torrents retrempée,

Il met son chapeau. Aux autres conjurés:
Couvrons-nous, grands d'Espagne!

Tous les Espagnols se couvrent. A don Carlos:
Oui, nos têtes, ô roi,
Ont le droit de tomber couvertes devant toi!

Aux prisonniers.
Silva, Haro, Lara, gens de titre et de race,
Place à Jean d'Aragon! ducs et comtes, ma place!

Aux courtisans et aux gardes.
Je suis Jean d'Aragon, roi, bourreaux et valets!
Et si vos échafauds sont petits, changez-les!

Il vient se joindre au groupe des seigneurs prisonniers.

DOÑA SOL.
Ciel!

DON CARLOS.
En effet, j'avais oublié cette histoire.

HERNANI.
Celui dont le flanc saigne a meilleure mémoire.
L'affront que l'offenseur oublie en insensé
Vit et toujours remue au coeur de l'offensé.

DON CARLOS.
Donc je suis, c'est un titre à n'en point vouloir d'autres,
Fils de pères qui font choir la tête des vôtres!

DOÑA SOL (*se jetant à genoux devant l'empereur*).
Sire, pardon! pitié! Sire, soyez clément!
Ou frappez-nous tous deux, car il est mon amant,
Mon époux! En lui seul je respire. Oh! je tremble.
Sire, ayez la pitié de nous tuer ensemble!
Majesté! je me traîne à vos sacrés genoux!

Je l’aime! Il est à moi, comme l’empire à vous!
Oh! grâce!

Don Carlos la regarde immobile.
Quel penser sinistre vous absorbe?

DON CARLOS.
Allons! relevez-vous, duchesse de Segorbe,
Comtesse Albatera, marquise de Monroy…

A Hernani.
Tes autres noms, don Juan?

HERNANI.
Qui parle ainsi? le roi?

DON CARLOS.
Non, l’empereur.

DOÑA SOL (*se relevant*),
Grand Dieu!

DON CARLOS (*la montrant à Hernani*).
Duc, voilà ton épouse.

HERNANI (*les yeux au ciel, et doña Sol dans ses bras*).
Juste Dieu!

DON CARLOS (*à don Ruy Gomez*).
Mon cousin, ta noblesse est jalouse,
Je sais. Mais Aragon peut épouser Silva.

DON RUY GOMEZ (*sombre*).
Ce n’est pas ma noblesse.

HERNANI (*regardant doña Sol avec amour et la tenant embrassée*).
Oh! ma haine s’en va!

Il jette son poignard.

DON RUY GOMEZ (*à part, les regardant tous deux*).
Éclaterai-je? oh! non! Fol amour! douleur folle!
Tu leur ferais pitié, vieille tête espagnole!
Vieillard, brûle sans flamme, aime et souffre en secret.
Laisse ronger ton coeur. Pas un cri. L'on rirait.

DOÑA SOL (*dans les bras d'Hernani*).
0 mon duc!

HERNANI.
Je n'ai plus que de l'amour dans l'âme.

DOÑA SOL.
O bonheur!

DON CARLOS (*à part, la main dans sa poitrine*).
Éteins-toi, coeur jeune et plein de flamme!
Laisse régner l'esprit, que longtemps tu troublas.
Tes amours désormais, tes maîtresses, hélas!
C'est l'Allemagne, c'est la Flandre, c'est l'Espagne.

L'oeil fixé sur sa bannière.
L'empereur est pareil à l'aigle, sa compagne.
A la place du coeur il n'a qu'un écusson.

HERNANI.
Ah! vous êtes César!

DON CARLOS (*à Hernani*).
De ta noble maison,
Don juan, ton coeur est digne.

Montrant doña Sol.
Il est digne aussi d'elle.
— A genoux, duc!

Hernani s'agenouille. Don Carlos détache sa toison-d'or et la lui passe au cou. Reçois ce collier.

Don Carlos tire son épée et l’en frappe trois fois sur l’épaule.
Sois fidèle!
Par saint Etienne, duc, je te fais chevalier.

Il le relève et l’embrasse.
Mais tu l’as, le plus doux et le plus beau collier,
Celui que je n’ai pas, qui manque au rang suprême,
Les deux bras d’une femme aimée et qui vous aime!
Ah! tu vas être heureux; moi, je suis empereur.

Aux conjurés.
Je ne sais plus vos noms, messieurs. Haine et fureur,
Je veux tout oublier. Allez, je vous pardonne!
C’est la leçon qu’au monde il convient que je donne,
Ce n’est pas vainement qu’à Charles premier, roi,
L’empereur Charles-Quint succède, et qu’une loi
Change, aux yeux de l’Europe, orpheline éplorée,
L’altesse catholique en majesté sacrée.

Les conjurés tombent à genoux.

LES CONJURÉS.
Gloire à Carlos!

DON RUY GOMEZ (*à don Carlos*).
Moi seul je reste condamné.

DON CARLOS.
Et moi!

DON RUY GOMEZ (*à part*).
Mais, comme lui, je n’ai point pardonné!

HERNANI.
Qui donc nous change tous ainsi?

TOUS (*soldats, conjurés, seigneurs*).
Vive Allemagne!

Honneur à Charles-Quint!

DON CARLOS (*se tournant vers le tombeau*).
Honneur à Charlemagne!
Laissez-nous seuls tous deux.

Tous sortent.

SCÈNE V.

DON CARLOS (seul. *Il s’incline devant le tombeau*).
Es-tu content de moi?
Ai-je bien dépouillé les misères du roi,
Charlemagne? Empereur, suis-je bien un autre homme?
Puis-je accoupler mon casque à la mitre de Rome?
Aux fortunes du monde ai-je droit de toucher?
Ai-je un pied sûr et ferme, et qui puisse marcher
Dans ce sentier, semé des ruines vandales,
Que tu nous as battu de tes larges sandales?
Ai-je bien à ta flamme allumé mon flambeau?
Ai-je compris la voix qui parle en ton tombeau?
— Ah! j’étais seul, perdu, seul devant un empire,
Tout un monde qui hurle, et menace, et conspire,
Le Danois à punir, le Saint-Père à payer,
Venise, Soliman, Luther, François premier,
Mille poignards jaloux luisant déjà dans l’ombre,
Des pièges, des écueils, des ennemis sans nombre,
Vingt peuples dont un seul ferait peur à vingt rois,
Tout pressé, tout pressant, tout à faire à la fois,
Je t’ai crié: — Par où faut-il que je commence?
Et tu m’as répondu: — Mon fils, par la clémence!

ACTE CINQUIÈME - LA NOCE.

SARAGOSSE.

Une terrasse du palais d'Aragon. Au fond, la rampe d'un escalier qui s'enfonce dans le jardin. A droite et à gauche, deux portes donnant sur une terrasse, que ferme une balustrade surmontée de deux rangs d'arcades moresques, au-dessus et au travers desquelles on voit les jardins du palais, les jets d'eau dans l'ombre, les bosquets avec les lumières qui s'y promènent, et au fond les faîtes gothiques et arabes du palais illuminé. Il est nuit. On entend des fanfares éloignées. Des masques, des dominos, épars, isolés, ou groupés, traversent çà et là la terrasse. Sur le devant, un groupe de jeunes seigneurs, les masques à la main, riant et causant à grand bruit.

SCÈNE PREMIÈRE.

DON SANCHO SANCHEZ DE ZUNIGA, Comte de MONTEREY, DON MATIAS CENTURION,
MARQUIS D'ALMURAN, DON RICARDO DE ROXAS, Comte de CASAPALMA, DON
FRANCISCO DE SOTOMAYOR, Comte de VELALCAZAR, DON GARCI SUAREZ DE
CARBAJAL, Comte DE PERALVER.

DON GARCI.
Ma foi, vive la joie et vive l'épousée!

DON MATIAS (*regardant au balcon*).
Saragosse ce soir se met à la croisée.

DON GARCI.
Et fait bien! on ne vit jamais noce aux flambeaux
Plus gaie, et nuit plus douce, et mariés plus beaux!

DON MATIAS.
Bon empereur!

DON SANCHO.
Marquis, certain soir qu'à la brune
Nous allions avec lui tous deux cherchant fortune,
Qui nous eût dit qu'un jour tout finirait ainsi?

DON RICARDO (*l'interrompant*).
J'en étais.

Aux autres.
Écoutez l'histoire que voici:
Trois galants, un bandit que l'échafaud réclame,
Puis un duc, puis un roi, d'un même coeur de femme
Font le siège à la fois. L'assaut donné, qui l'a?
C'est le bandit.

DON FRANCISCO.
Mais rien que de simple en cela.
L’amour et la fortune, ailleurs comme en Espagne,
Sont jeux de des pipés. C’est le voleur qui gagne!

DON RICARDO
Moi, j’ai fait ma fortune à voir faire l’amour.
D’abord comte, puis grand, puis alcade de cour,
J’ai fort bien employé mon temps, sans qu’on s’en doute.

DON SANCHO.
Le secret de monsieur, c’est d’être sur la route
Du roi…

DON RICARDO.
Faisant valoir mes droits, mes actions.

DON GARCI.
Vous avez profité de ses distractions.

DON MATIAS.
Que devient le vieux duc? Fait-il clouer sa bière?

DON SANCHO.
Marquis, ne riez pas! car c’est une âme fière.
Il aimait doña Sol, ce vieillard. Soixante ans
Ont fait ses cheveux gris, un jour les a fait blancs.

DON GARCI.
Il n’a pas reparu, dit-on, à Saragosse?

DON SANCHO.
Vouliez-vous pas qu’il mît son cercueil de la noce?

DON FRANCISCO.
Et que fait l’empereur?

DON SANCHO.
L’empereur aujourd’hui
Est triste. Le Luther lui donne de l’ennui.

DON RICARDO.
Ce Luther, beau sujet de soucis et d’alarmes!
Que j’en finirais vite avec quatre gendarmes!

DON MATIAS.
Le Soliman aussi lui fait ombre.

DON GARCI.
Ah! Luther,
Soliman, Neptunus, le diable et Jupiter,
Que me font ces gens-là? Les femmes sont jolies,
La mascarade est rare, et j’ai dit cent folies!

DON SANCHO.
Voilà l’essentiel.

DON RICARDO.
Garci n’a point tort. Moi,
Je ne suis plus le même un jour de fête, et croi
Qu’un masque que je mets me fait une autre tête,
En vérité!

DON SANCHO (*bas à don Matias*).
Que n’est-ce alors tous les jours fête?

DON FRANCISCO (*montrant la porte à droite*).
Messeigneurs, n’est-ce pas la chambre des époux?

DON GARCI (*avec un signe de tête*).
Nous les verrons venir dans l’instant.

DON FRANCISCO.
Croyez-vous?

DON GARCI.
Hé! sans doute!

DON FRANCISCO.
Tant mieux. L'épousée est si belle!

DON RICARDO.
Que l'empereur est bon! Hernani, ce rebelle
Avoir la toison d'or! marié! pardonné!
Loin de là, s'il m'eût cru, l'empereur eût donné
Lit de pierre au galant, lit de plume à la dame.

DON SANCHO (*bas à don Matias*).
Que je le crèverais volontiers de ma lame,
Faux seigneur de clinquant recousu de gros fil.
Pourpoint de comte, empli de conseils d'alguazil!

DON RICARDO (*s'approchant*).
Que dites-vous là?

DON MATIAS (bas à don Sancho).
Comte, ici pas de querelle!

A don Ricardo.
Il me chante un sonnet de Pétrarque à sa belle.

DON GARCI.
Avez-vous remarqué, messieurs, parmi les fleurs,
Les femmes, les habits de toutes les couleurs,
Ce spectre, qui, debout contre une balustrade,
De son domino noir tachait la mascarade?

DON RICARDO.
Oui, pardieu!

DON GARCI.
Qu'est-ce donc?

DON RICARDO.
Mais, sa taille, son air…
C’est don Prancasio, général de la mer.

DON FRANCISCO.
Non.

DON GARCI.
Il n’a pas quitté son masque.

DON FRANCISCO.
Il n’avait garde.
C’est le duc de Soma qui veut qu’on le regarde.
Rien de plus.

DON RICARDO.
Non. Le duc m’a parlé.

DON GARCI.
Qu’est ce alors
Que ce masque? — Tenez, le voilà.

Entre un domino noir qui traverse lentement la terrasse au fond. Tous se retournent et le suivent des yeux, sans qu’il paraisse y prendre garde.

DON SANCHO.
Si les morts
Marchent, voici leur pas.

DON GARCI (*courant au domino noir*).
Beau masque!…

Le domino noir se retourne et s’arrête. Garci recule.
Sur mon âme,
Messeigneurs, dans ses yeux j’ai vu luire une flamme!

DON SANCHO.
Si c’est le diable, il trouve à qui parler.

Il va au domino noir, toujours immobile.
Mauvais!
Nous viens-tu de l’enfer?

LE MASQUE.
Je n’en viens pas, j’y vais.

Il reprend sa marche et disparaít par la rampe de l’escalier. Tous le suivent des yeux avec une sorte d’effroi.

DON MATIAS.
La voix est sépulcrale autant qu’on le peut dire.

DON GARCI.
Baste! ce qui fait peur ailleurs, au bal fait rire.

DON SANCHO.
Quelque mauvais plaisant!

DON GARCI.
Ou si c’est Lucifer
Qui vient nous voir danser, en attendant l’enfer,
Dansons!

DON SANCHO.
C’est à coup sûr quelque bouffonnerie.

DON MATIAS.
Nous le saurons demain.

DON SANCHO (*à don Matias*).
Regardez, je vous prie.
Que devient-il?

DON MATIAS (à la balustrade de la terrasse).
Il a descendu l’escalier.
Plus rien.

DON SANCHO.
C’est un plaisant drôle!

Rêvant.
C’est singulier.

DON GARCI (*à une dame qui passe*).
Marquise, dansons-nous celle-ci?

Il la salue et lui présente la main.

LA DAME.
Mon cher comte,
Vous savez, avec vous, que mon mari les compte.

DON GARCI.
Raison de plus. Cela l’amuse apparemment.
C’est son plaisir. Il compte, et nous dansons.

La dame lui donne la main, et ils sortent.

DON SANCHO (*pensif*).
Vraiment,
C’est singulier!

DON MATIAS.
Voici les mariés. Silence!

Entrent Hernani et doña Sol se donnant la main. Doña Sol en magnifique habit de mariée; Hernani tout en velours noir, avec la toison-d’or au cou. Derrière eux, foule de masques, de dames et de seigneurs qui leur font cortège. Deux hallebardiers en riche livrée les suivent, et quatre pages les précèdent. Tout le monde se range et s’incline sur leur passage. Fanfare.

SCENE II.

LES MEMES, HERNANI, DOÑA SOL, SUITE.

HERNANI (*saluant*).
Chers amis!

DON RICARDO (*allant à lui et s'inclinant*).
Ton bonheur fait le nôtre, excellence!

DON FRANCISCO (*contemplant doña Sol*).
Saint Jacques monseigneur! c'est Vénus qu'il conduit!

DON MATIAS.
D'honneur, on est heureux un pareil jour la nuit!

DON FRANCISCO (*montrant à don Matias la chambre nuptiale*).
Qu'il va se passer là de gracieuses choses!
Être fée, et tout voir, feux éteints, portes closes,
Serait-ce pas charmant!

DON SANCHO (*à don Matias*).
Il est tard. Partons-nous?

Tous vont saluer les mariés et sortent, les uns par la porte, les autres par l'escalier du fond.

HERNANI (*les reconduisant*).
Dieu vous garde!

DON SANCHO (*resté le dernier, lui serre la main*).
Soyez heureux!

Il sort. Hernani et doña Sol restent seuls. Bruit de pas et de voix qui s'éloignent, puis cessent tout à fait. Pendant tout le commencement de la scène qui suit, les fanfares et les lumières éloignées s'éteignent par degrés. La nuit et le silence reviennent peu à peu.

SCÈNE III.

HERNANI, DOÑA SOL.

DOÑA SOL.
Ils s’en vont tous,
Enfin!

HERNANI (*cherchant à l’attirer dans ses bras*).
Cher amour!

DOÑA SOL (*rougissant et reculant*).
C’est… qu’il est tard, ce me semble.

HERNANI.
Ange! il est toujours tard pour être seuls ensemble.

DOÑA SOL.
Ce bruit me fatiguait. N’est-ce pas, cher seigneur,
Que toute cette joie étourdit le bonheur?

HERNANI.
Tu dis vrai. Le bonheur, amie, est chose grave.
Il veut des coeurs de bronze et lentement s’y grave.
Le plaisir l’effarouche en lui jetant des fleurs.
Son sourire est moins près du rire que des pleurs.

DOÑA SOL.
Dans vos yeux, ce sourire est le jour.

Hernani cherche à l’entraîner vers la porte. Elle rougit.
Tout à l’heure.

HERNANI.
Oh! je suis ton esclave! Oui, demeure, demeure!
Fais ce que tu voudras. Je ne demande rien.
Tu sais ce que tu fais! ce que tu fais est bien!

Je rirai si tu veux, je chanterai. Mon âme
Brûle. Eh! dis au volcan qu'il étouffe sa flamme,
Le volcan fermera ses gouffres entr'ouverts,
Et n'aura sur ses flancs que fleurs et gazons verts.
Car le géant est pris, le Vésuve est esclave,
Et que t'importe à toi son coeur rongé de lave?
Tu veux des fleurs? c'est bien! Il faut que de son mieux
Le volcan tout brûlé s'épanouisse aux yeux!

DOÑA SOL.
Oh! que vous êtes bon pour une pauvre femme,
Hernani de mon coeur!

HERNANI.
Quel est ce nom, madame?
Ah! ne me nomme plus de ce nom, par pitié!
Tu me fais souvenir que j'ai tout oublié!
Je sais qu'il existait autrefois, dans un rêve,
Un Hernani, dont l'oeil avait l'éclair du glaive,
Un homme de la nuit et des monts, un proscrit
Sur qui le mot *vengeance* était partout écrit,
Un malheureux traînant après lui l'anathème!
Mais je ne connais pas ce Hernani. — Moi, j'aime
Les prés, les fleurs, les bois, le chant du rossignol.
Je suis Jean d'Aragon, mari de doña Sol!
Je suis heureux!

DOÑA SOL.
Je suis heureuse!

HERNANI.
Que m'importe
Les haillons qu'en entrant j'ai laissés à la porte!
Voici que je reviens à mon palais en deuil.
Un ange du Seigneur m'attendait sur le seuil.
J'entre, et remets debout les colonnes brisées,
Je rallume le feu, je rouvre les croisées,
Je fais arracher l'herbe au pavé de la cour,

Je ne suis plus que joie, enchantement, amour.
Qu’on me rende mes tours, mes donjons, mes bastilles,
Mon panache, mon siège au conseil des Castilles,
Vienne ma doña Sol rouge et le front baissé,
Qu’on nous laisse tous deux, et le reste est passé!
Je n’ai rien vu, rien dit, rien fait. Je recommence
J’efface tout, j’oublie! Ou sagesse ou démence,
Je vous ai, je vous aime, et vous êtes mon bien!

DOÑA SOL (*examinant sa toison-d’or*).
Que sur ce velours noir ce collier d’or fait bien!

HERNANI.
Vous vîtes avant moi le roi mis de la sorte.

DOÑA SOL.
Je n’ai pas remarqué. Tout autre, que m’importe!
Puis, est-ce le velours ou le satin encor?
Non, mon duc, c’est ton cou qui sied au collier d’or.
Vous êtes noble et fier, monseigneur.

Il veut l’entraîner.
Tout à l’heure!
Un moment! — Vois-tu bien, c’est la joie et je pleure!
Viens voir la belle nuit.

Elle va à la balustrade.
Mon duc, rien qu’un moment!
Le temps de respirer et de voir seulement.
Tout s’est éteint, flambeaux et musique de fête.
Rien que la nuit et nous. Félicité parfaite!
Dis, ne le crois-tu pas? sur nous, tout en dormant,
La nature à demi veille amoureusement.
Pas un nuage au ciel. Tout, comme nous, repose.
Viens, respire avec moi l’air embaumé de rose!
Regarde. Plus de feux, plus de bruit. Tout se tait.
La lune tout à l’heure à l’horizon montait
Tandis que tu parlais, sa lumière qui tremble

Et ta voix, toutes deux m’allaient au coeur ensemble,
Je me sentais joyeuse et calme, ô mon amant,
Et j’aurais bien voulu mourir en ce moment!

HERNANI.
Ah! qui n’oublierait tout à cette voix céleste!
Ta parole est un chant où rien d’humain ne reste.
Et, comme un voyageur, sur un fleuve emporté,
Qui glisse sur les eaux par un beau soir d’été
Et voit fuir sous ses yeux mille plaines fleuries,
Ma pensé entraînée erre en tes rêveries!

DOÑA SOL.
Ce silence est trop noir, ce calme est trop profond.
Dis, ne voudrais-tu pas voir une étoile au fond?
Ou qu’une voix des nuits, tendre et délicieuse,
S’élevant tout à coup, chantât?…

HERNANI (*souriant*).
Capricieuse!
Tout à l’heure on fuyait la lumière et les chants!

DOÑA SOL.
Le bal! Mais un oiseau qui chanterait aux champs!
Un rossignol perdu dans l’ombre et dans la mousse,
Ou quelque flûte au loin!… Car la musique est douce,
Fait l’âme harmonieuse, et, comme un divin choeur,
Éveille mille voix qui chantent dans le coeur
Ah! ce serait charmant!

On entend le bruit lointain d’un cor dans l’ombre.
Dieu! je suis exaucée!

HERNANI (*tressaillant, à part*).
Ah! malheureuse!

DOÑA SOL.
Un ange a compris ma pensée.

Ton bon ange sans doute?

HERNANI (*amèrement*).
Oui, mon bon ange!

Le cor recommence. — A part.
Encor!

DOÑA SOL (*souriant*).
Don Juan, je reconnais le son de votre cor!

HERNANI.
N'est-ce pas?

DOÑA SOL.
Seriez-vous dans cette sérénade
De moitié?

HERNANI.
De moitié, tu l'as dit.

DOÑA SOL.
Bal maussade!
Oh! que j'aime bien mieux le cor au fond des bois!
Et puis, c'est votre cor, c'est comme votre voix.

Le cor recommence.

HERNANI (*à part*).
Ah! le tigre est en bas qui hurle, et veut sa proie.

DOÑA SOL.
Don Juan, cette harmonie emplit le coeur de joie.

HERNANI (*se levant terrible*).
Nommez-moi Hernani! nommez-moi Hernani!
Avec ce nom fatal je n'en ai pas fini!

DOÑA SOL (*tremblante*).
Qu’avez-vous?

HERNANI.
Le vieillard!

DOÑA SOL.
Dieu! quels regards funèbres!
Qu’avez-vous?

HERNANI.
Le vieillard, qui rit dans les ténèbres!
— Ne le voyez-vous pas?

DOÑA SOL.
Où vous égarez-vous?
Qu’est-ce que ce vieillard?

HERNANI.
Le vieillard!

DOÑA SOL (*tombant à genoux*).
A genoux
Je t’en supplie, oh! dis, quel secret te déchire?
Qu’as-tu?

HERNANI.
Je l’ai juré!

DOÑA SOL.
Juré?

Elle suit tous ses mouvements avec anxiété. Il s’arrête tout à coup et passe la main sur son front.

HERNANI (à part). Qu’allais-je dire? Épargnons-la.

Haut.
Moi, rien. De quoi t’ai-je parlé?

DOÑA SOL.
Vous avez dit…

HERNANI.
Non. Non. J’avais l’esprit troublé…
Je souffre un peu, vois-tu. N’en prends pas d’épouvante.

DOÑA SOL.
Te faut-il quelque chose? ordonne à ta servante.

Le cor recommence.

HERNANI (*à part*).
Il le veut! il le veut! Il a mon serment!

Cherchant à sa ceinture sans épée et sans poignard.
— Rien!
Ce devrait être fait! — Ah!…

DOÑA SOL.
Tu souffres donc bien.

HERNANI.
Une blessure ancienne, et qui semblait fermée,
Se rouvre…

A part.
Éloignons-la.

Haut.
Doña Sol, bien-aimée,
Écoute. Ce coffret qu’en des jours — moins heureux
Je portais avec moi…

DOÑA SOL.
Je sais ce que tu veux.
Eh bien, qu’en veux-tu faire?

HERNANI.
Un flacon qu’il renferme
Contient un élixir, qui pourra mettre un terme
Au mal que je ressens. — Va!

DOÑA SOL.
J’y vais, mon seigneur.

Elle sort par la porte de la chambre nuptiale.

SCÈNE IV.

HERNANI (*seul*).
Voilà donc ce qu'il vient faire de mon bonheur!
Voici le doigt fatal qui luit sur la muraille!
Oh! que la destinée amèrement me raille!

Il tombe dans une profonde et convulsive rêverie, puis se détourne brusquement.

Eh bien?… — Mais tout se tait. Je n'entends rien venir.
Si je m'étais trompé?…

Le masque en domino noir parait au haut de la rampe. Hernani s'arrête pétrifié.

SCÈNE V.

HERNANI, LE MASQUE.

LE MASQUE.
«Quoi qu’il puisse advenir,
Quand tu voudras, vieillard, quel que soit le lieu, l’heure,
S’il te passe à l’esprit qu’il est temps que je meure,
Viens, sonne de ce cor, et ne prends d’autres soins.
Tout sera fait.» — Ce pacte eut les morts pour témoins.
Eh bien, tout est-il fait?

HERNANI (*à voix basse*).
C’est lui!

LE MASQUE.
Dans ta demeure
Je viens, et je te dis qu’il est temps. C’est mon heure.
Je te trouve en retard.

HERNANI.
Bien. Quel est ton plaisir?
Que feras-tu de moi? Parle.

LE MASQUE.
Tu peux choisir
Du fer ou du poison. Ce qu’il faut, je l’apporte.
Nous partirons tous deux.

HERNANI.
Soit.

LE MASQUE.
Prions-nous?

HERNANI.
Qu’importe!

LE MASQUE.
Que prends-tu?

HERNANI.
Le poison.

LE MASQUE.
Bien! — Donne-moi ta main.

Il présente une fiole à Hernani, qui la reçoit en pâlissant.
Bois, — pour que je finisse.

Hernani approche la fiole de ses lèvres, puis recule.

HERNANI.
Oh! par pitié, demain! —
Oh! s'il te reste un coeur, duc, ou du moins une âme,
Si tu n'es pas un spectre échappé de la flamme,
Un mort damné, fantôme ou démon désormais,
Si Dieu n'a point encor mis sur ton front: jamais!
Si tu sais ce que c'est que ce bonheur suprême
D'aimer, d'avoir vingt ans, d'épouser quand on aime,
Si jamais femme aimée a tremblé dans tes bras,
Attends jusqu'à demain! Demain tu reviendras!

LE MASQUE.
Simple qui parle ainsi! Demain! demain! — Tu railles!
Ta cloche a ce matin sonné tes funérailles!
Et que ferais-je, moi, cette nuit? J'en mourrais.
Et qui viendrait te prendre et t'emporter après?
Seul descendre au tombeau! Jeune homme, il faut me suivre!

HERNANI.
Eh bien, non! et de toi, démon, je me délivre!
Je n'obéirai pas.

LE MASQUE.
Je m'en doutais. Fort bien.

Sur quoi donc m’as-tu fait ce serment! — Ah! sur rien.
Peu de chose, après tout! La tête de ton père!
Cela peut s’oublier. La jeunesse est légère.

HERNANI.
Mon père! Mon père!… — Ah! j’en perdrai la raison!

LE MASQUE.
Non, ce n’est qu’un parjure et qu’une trahison.

HERNANI
Duc!

LE MASQUE.
Puisque les aînés des maisons espagnoles
Se font jeu maintenant de fausser leurs paroles,
Adieu!

Il fait un pas pour sortir.

HERNANI.
Ne t’en va pas.

LE MASQUE.
Alors…

HERNANI.
Vieillard cruel

Il prend la fiole.
Revenir sur mes pas à la porte du ciel!

Rentre doña Sol, sans voir le masque, qui est debout, au fond.

SCÈNE VI.

LES MÊMES, DOÑA SOL.

DOÑA SOL.
Je n’ai pu le trouver, ce coffret.

HERNANI(*à part*).
Dieu! C’est elle!
Dans quel moment!

DOÑA SOL.
Qu’a-t-il? je l’effraie, il chancelle
A ma voix! — Que tiens-tu dans ta main? quel soupçon!
Que tiens-tu dans ta main? réponds.

Le domino s’est approché et se démasque. Elle pousse un cri, et reconnaît don Ruy. C’est du poison!

HERNANI.
Grand Dieu!

DOÑA SOL (*à Hernani*).
Que t’ai-je fait? quel horrible mystère!
Vous me trompiez, don Juan!

HERNANI.
Ah! j’ai dû te le taire.
J’ai promis de mourir au duc qui me sauva.
Aragon doit payer cette dette à Silva.

DOÑA SOL.
Vous n’êtes pas à lui, mais à moi. Que m’importe
Tous vos autres serments!

A don Ruy Gomez.
Duc, l’amour me rend forte,

Contre vous, contre tous, duc, je le défendrai.

DON RUY GOMEZ (*immobile*).
Défends-le, si tu peux, contre un serment juré.

DOÑA SOL.
Quel serment?

HERNANI.
J’ai juré.

DOÑA SOL.
Non, non, rien ne te lie!
Cela ne se peut pas! Crime! attentat! folie!

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Allons, duc!

Hernani fait un geste pour obéir. Doña Sol cherche à l’entraîner.

HERNANI.
Laissez-moi, doña Sol. Il le faut.
Le duc a ma parole, et mon père est là-haut!

DOÑA SOL (*à don Ruy Gomez*).
Il vaudrait mieux pour vous aller aux tigres même
Arracher leurs petits qu’à moi celui que j’aime!
Savez-vous ce que c’est que doña Sol? Longtemps,
Par pitié pour votre âge et pour vos soixante ans,
J’ai fait la fille douce, innocente et timide,
Mais voyez-vous cet oeil de pleurs de rage humide?

Elle tire un poignard de son sein.
Voyez-vous ce poignard? — Ah! vieillard insensé,
Craignez vous pas le fer quand l’oeil a menacé?
Prenez-garde, don Ruy! — Je suis de la famille.
Mon oncle! — Écoutez-moi. Fussé-je votre fille,
Malheur si vous portez la main sur mon époux!

Elle jette le poignard, et tombe à genoux devant le duc.
Ah! je tombe à vos pieds! Ayez pitié de nous!
Grâce! Hélas! monseigneur, je ne suis qu’une femme,
Je suis faible, ma force avorte dans mon âme,
Je me brise aisément. Je tombe à vos genoux!
Ah! je vous en supplie, ayez pitié de nous.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Doña Sol!

DOÑA SOL.
Pardonnez! Nous autres Espagnoles,
Notre douleur s’emporte à de vives paroles,
Vous le savez. Hélas! vous n’étiez pas méchant!
Pitié! vous me tuez, mon oncle, en le touchant!
Pitié! je l’aime tant!

DON RUY GOMEZ (*sombre*).
Vous l’aimez trop!

HERNANI.
Tu pleures!

DOÑA SOL.
Non, non, je ne veux pas, mon amour, que tu meures!
Non! je ne le veux pas.

A don Ruy.
Faites grâce aujourd’hui!
Je vous aimerai bien aussi, vous.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Après lui!
De ces restes d’amour, d’amitié, — moins encore,
Croyez-vous apaiser la soif qui me dévore?

Montrant Hernani.
Il est seul! il est tout! Mais moi, belle pitié!

Qu’est-ce que je peux faire avec votre amitié?
O rage! il aurait, lui, le coeur, l’amour, le trône,
Et d’un regard de vous il me ferait l’aumône!
Et s’il fallait un mot à mes voeux insensés,
C’est lui qui vous dirait: — Dis cela, c’est assez! —
En maudissant tous bas le mendiant avide!
Auquel il faut jeter le fond du verre vide
Honte! dérision! non. Il faut en finir.
Bois.

HERNANI.
Il a ma parole, et je dois la tenir.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Allons!

Hernani approche la fiole de ses lèvres. Doña Sol se jette sur son bras.

DOÑA SOL.
Oh! pas encor! Daignez tous deux m’entendre.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Le sépulcre est ouvert, et je ne puis attendre.

DOÑA SOL.
Un instant! — Mon seigneur! Mon don Juan! — Ah!
tous deux
Vous êtes bien cruels! Qu’est-ce que je veux d’eux?
Un instant! voilà tout, tout ce que je réclame!
Enfin, on laisse dire à cette pauvre femme
Ce qu’elle a dans le coeur!… — Oh! laissez-moi parler!

DON RUY GOMEZ (*à Hernani*).
J’ai hâte.

DOÑA SOL.
Messeigneurs, vous me faites trembler!
Que vous ai-je donc fait?

HERNANI.
Ah! son cri me déchire.

DOÑA SOL (*lui retenant toujours le bras*).
Vous voyez bien que j’ai mille choses à dire!

DON RUY GOMEZ (*à Hernani*).
Il faut mourir.

DOÑA SOL (*toujours pendue au bras d’Hernani*).
Don Juan, lorsque j’aurai parlé
Tout ce que tu voudras, tu le feras.

Elle lui arrache la fiole.
Je l’ai!

Elle élève la fiole aux yeux d’Hernani et du vieillard étonné.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Puisque je n’ai céans affaire qu’à deux femmes,
Don Juan, il faut qu’ailleurs j’aille chercher des âmes.
Tu fais de beaux serments par le sang dont tu sors,
Et je vais à ton père en parler chez les morts!
— Adieu…

Il fait quelques pas pour sortir. Hernani le retient.

HERNANI.
Duc, arrêtez!

A doña Sol.
Hélas! je t’en conjure,
Veux-tu me voir faussaire, et félon, et parjure?
Veux-tu que partout j’aille avec la trahison
Écrite sur le front? Par pitié, ce poison,
Rends-le-moi! Par l’amour, par notre âme immortelle!…

DOÑA SOL (*sombre*).
Tu veux?

Elle boit.
Tiens, maintenant.

DON RUY GOMEZ (*à part*).
Ah! c’était donc pour elle!

DOÑA SOL (*rendant à Hernani la fiole à demi vidée*).
Prends, te dis-je.

HERNANI (*à don Ruy*).
Vois-tu, misérable vieillard!

DOÑA SOL.
Ne te plains pas de moi, je t’ai gardé ta part.

HERNANI (*prenant la fiole*).
Dieu!

DOÑA SOL.
Tu ne m’aurais pas ainsi laissé la mienne,
Toi! Tu n’as pas le coeur d’une épouse chrétienne.
Tu ne sais pas aimer comme aime une Silva.
Mais j’ai bu la première et suis tranquille. — Va!
Bois si tu veux!

HERNANI.
Hélas! qu’as-tu fait, malheureuse?

DOÑA SOL.
C’est toi qui l’as voulu.

HERNANI.
C’est une mort affreuse!

DOÑA SOL.
Non. Pourquoi donc?

HERNANI.
Ce philtre au sépulcre conduit.

DOÑA SOL.
Devions-nous pas dormir ensemble cette nuit?
Qu’importe dans quel lit?

HERNANI.
Mon père, tu te venges
Sur moi qui t’oubliais!

Il porte la fiole à sa bouche.

DOÑA SOL (*se jetant sur lui*).
Ciel! des douleurs étranges!…
Ah! jette loin de toi ce philtre! — Ma raison
S’égare. Arrête! Hélas! mon don Juan, ce poison
Est vivant! ce poison dans le coeur fait éclore
Une hydre à mille dents qui ronge et qui dévore!
Oh! je ne savais pas qu’on souffrît à ce point!
Qu’est-ce donc que cela? c’est du feu! Ne bois point!
Oh! tu souffrirais trop!

HERNANI (*a don Ruy*).
Ah! ton âme est cruelle!
Pouvais-tu pas choisir d’autre poison pour elle?

Il boit et jette la fiole.

DOÑA SOL.
Que fais-tu?

HERNANI.
Qu’as-tu fait?

DOÑA SOL.
Viens, ô mon jeune amant,
Dans mes bras.

Ils s’asseyent l’un près de l’autre.
N’est-ce pas qu’on souffre horriblement?

HERNANI.
Non.

DOÑA SOL.
Voilà notre nuit de noces commencée!
Je suis bien pâle, dis, pour une fiancée?

HERNANI.
Ah!

DON RUY GOMEZ.
La fatalité s’accomplit.

HERNANI.
Désespoir!
O tourment! doña Sol souffrir, et moi le voir!

DOÑA SOL.
Calme-toi. Je suis mieux. — Vers des clartés nouvelles
Nous allons tout à l’heure ensemble ouvrir nos ailes.
Partons d’un vol égal vers un monde meilleur.
Un baiser seulement, un baiser!

Ils s’embrassent.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
O douleur!

HERNANI (*d’une voix affaiblie*).
Oh! béni soit le ciel qui m’a fait une vie
D’abîmes entourée et de spectres suivie,
Mais qui permet que, las d’un si rude chemin,
Je puisse m’endormir ma bouche sur ta main!

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Qu’ils sont heureux!

HERNANI (*d’une voix d plus en plus faible*).
Viens, viens… doña Sol… tout est sombre…
Souffres-tu?

DOÑA SOL (*d’une voix également éteinte*).
Rien, plus rien.

HERNANI.
Vois-tu des feux dans l’ombre?

DOÑA SOL.
Pas encor.

HERNANI (*avec un soupir*).
Voici…

Il tombe.

DON RUY GOMEZ (*soulevant sa tête, qui retombe*).
Mort!

DOÑA SOL (*échevelée, et se dressant à demi sur son séant*).
Mort! non pas! nous dormons.
Il dort. C’est mon époux, vois-tu. Nous nous aimons.
Nous sommes couchés là. C’est notre nuit de noce.

D’une voix qui s’éteint.
Ne le réveillez pas, seigneur duc de Mendoce.
Il est las.

Elle retourne la figure d’Hernani.
Mon amour, tiens-toi vers moi tourné.
Plus près… plus près encor…

Elle retombe.

DON RUY GOMEZ.
Morte! — Oh! je suis damné.

Il se tue.

LUCRÈCE BORGIA

This play in prose was performed for the first time at the Théâtre de la Porte-Saint-Martin on February 2, 1833. It tells the story of Lucrèce Borgia, the natural daughter of the Spanish cardinal and future Pope Rodrigo Borgia.

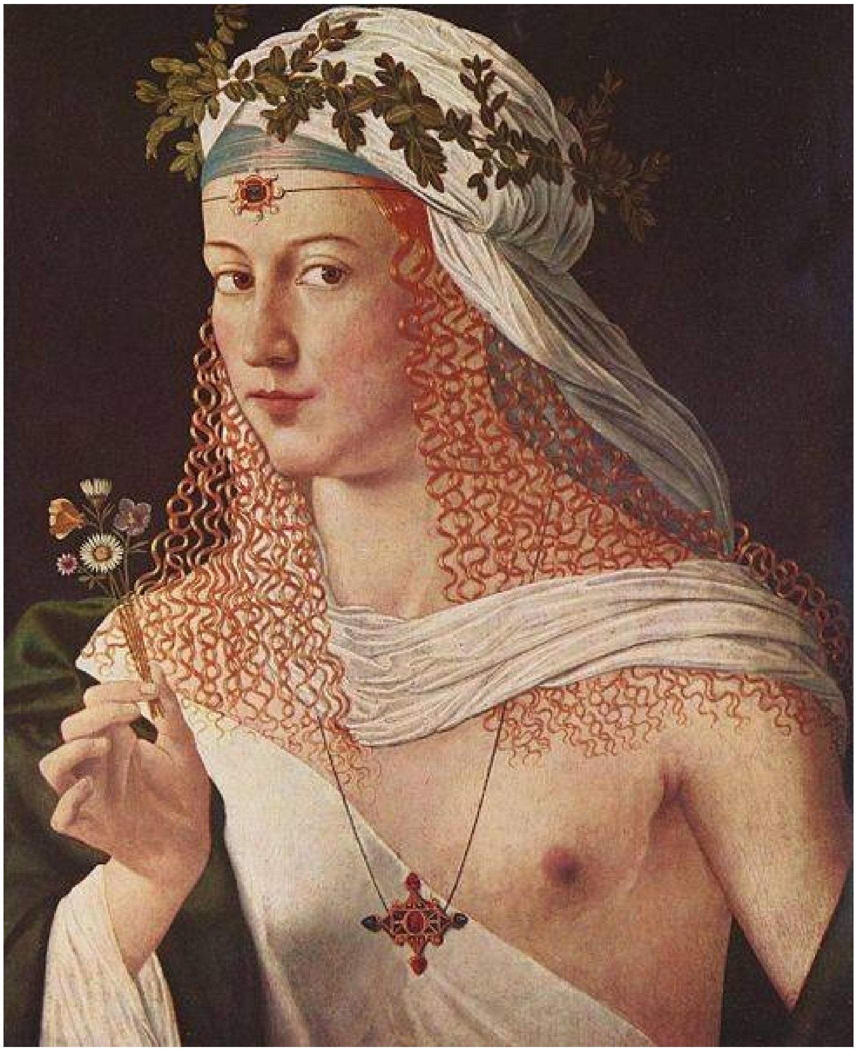

Portrait of Lucrèce Borgia

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AVERTISSEMENT

Ainsi qu’il s’y était engagé dans la préface de son dernier drame, l’auteur est revenu à l’occupation de toute sa vie, à l’art. Il a repris ses travaux de prédilection, avant même d’en avoir tout-à-fait fini avec les petits adversaires politiques qui sont venus le distraire il y a deux mois. Et puis, mettre au jour un nouveau drame six semaines après le drame proscrit, c’était encore une manière de dire son fait au présent gouvernement. C’était lui montrer qu’il perdait sa peine. C’était lui prouver que l’art et la liberté peuvent repousser en une nuit sous le pied maladroit qui les écrase. Aussi compte-t-il bien mener de front désormais la lutte politique, tant que besoin sera, et l’œuvre littéraire. On peut faire en même temps son devoir et sa tâche. L’un ne nuit pas à l’autre. L’homme a deux mains. le roi s’amuse et Lucrèce Borgia ne se ressemblent ni par le fond, ni par la forme, et ces deux ouvrages ont eu chacun de leur côté une destinée si diverse que l’un sera peut-être un jour la principale date politique et l’autre la principale date littéraire de la vie de l’auteur. Il croit devoir le dire cependant, ces deux pièces si différentes par le fond, par la forme et par la destinée, sont étroitement accouplées dans sa pensée. L’idée qui a produit le roi s’amuse et l’idée qui a produit Lucrèce Borgia sont nées au même moment sur le même point du cœur. Quelle est en effet la pensée intime cachée sous trois ou quatre écorces concentriques dans le roi s’amuse? La voici. Prenez la difformité physique la plus hideuse, la plus repoussante, la plus complète; placez-la là où elle ressort le mieux, à l’étage le plus infime, le plus souterrain et le plus méprisé de l’édifice social; éclairez de tous côtés, par le jour sinistre des contrastes, cette misérable créature; et puis, jetez-lui une ame, et mettez dans cette ame le sentiment le plus pur qui soit donné à l’homme, le sentiment paternel. Qu’arrivera-t-il? C’est que ce sentiment sublime, chauffé selon certaines conditions, transformera sous vos yeux la créature dégradée; c’est que l’être petit deviendra grand; c’est que l’être difforme deviendra beau. Au fond, voilà ce que c’est que le roi s’amuse. Eh bien! Qu’est-ce que c’est que Lucrèce Borgia? Prenez la difformité morale la plus hideuse, la plus repoussante, la plus complète; placez-la là où elle ressort le mieux, dans le cœur d’une femme, avec toutes les conditions de beauté physique et de la grandeur royale, qui donnent de la saillie au crime, et maintenant mêlez à toute cette difformité morale un sentiment pur, le plus pur que la femme puisse éprouver, le sentiment maternel; dans votre monstre mettez une mère; et le monstre intéressera, et le monstre fera pleurer, et cette créature qui faisait peur fera pitié, et cette ame difforme deviendra presque belle à vos yeux. Ainsi, la paternité sanctifiant la difformité physique, voilà le roi s'amuse; la maternité purifiant la difformité morale, voilà Lucrèce Borgia. Dans la pensée de l'auteur, si le mot bilogie n'était pas un mot barbare, ces deux pièces ne feraient qu'une bilogie sui generis, qui pourrait avoir pour titre: le père et la mère. Le sort les a séparées, qu'importe! L'une a prospéré, l'autre a été frappée d'une lettre de cachet; l'idée qui fait le fond de la première restera long-temps encore peut-être voilée par mille préventions à bien des regards; l'idée qui a engendré la seconde semble être chaque soir, si aucune illusion ne nous aveugle, comprise et acceptée par une foule intelligente et sympathique; mais quoi qu'il en soit de ces deux pièces, qui n'ont d'autre mérite d'ailleurs que l'attention dont le public a bien voulu les entourer, elles sont soeurs jumelles, elles se sont touchées en germe, la couronnée et la proscrite, comme Louis XIV et le masque de fer.

Corneille et Molière avaient pour habitude de répondre en détail aux critiques que leurs ouvrages suscitaient, et ce n'est pas une chose peu curieuse aujourd'hui de voir ces géans du théâtre se débattre dans des avant-propos et des avis au lecteur sous l'inextricable réseau d'objections que la critique contemporaine ourdissait sans relâche autour d'eux. L'auteur de ce drame ne se croit pas digne de suivre d'aussi grands exemples. Il se taira, lui, devant la critique. Ce qui sied à des hommes pleins d'autorité, comme Molière et Corneille, ne sied pas à d'autres. D'ailleurs il n'y a peut-être que Corneille au monde qui puisse rester grand et sublime, au moment même où il fait mettre une préface à genoux devant Scudery ou Chapelain. L'auteur est loin d'être Corneille; l'auteur est loin d'avoir affaire à Chapelain ou à Scudery. La critique, à quelques rares exceptions près, a été en générale loyale et bienveillante pour lui. Sans doute il pourrait répondre à plus d'une objection. à ceux qui trouvent, par exemple, que Gennaro se laisse trop candidement empoisonner par le duc au second acte, il pourrait demander si Gennaro, personnage construit par la fantaisie du poète, est tenu d'être plus vraisemblable et plus défiant que l'historique Drusus de Tacite, ignarus et juveniliter hauriens. à ceux qui lui reprochent d'avoir exagéré les crimes de Lucrèce Borgia, il dirait: lisez Tomasi, lisez Guicciardini, lisez surtout le diarium. à ceux qui le blâment d'avoir accepté sur la mort des maris de

Lucrèce certaines rumeurs populaires à demi fabuleuses, il répondrait que souvent les fables du peuple font la vérité du poète; et puis il citerait encore Tacite, historien plus obligé de se critiquer sur la réalité des faits que le poète dramatique. Il pourrait pousser le détail de ces explications beaucoup plus loin, et examiner une à une avec la critique toutes les pièces de la charpente de son ouvrage; mais il a plus de plaisir à remercier la critique qu'à la contredire; et, après tout, les réponses qu'il pourrait faire aux objections de la critique, il aime mieux que le lecteur les trouve dans le drame, si elles y sont, que dans la préface.

On lui pardonnera de ne point insister davantage sur le côté purement esthétique de son ouvrage. Il est tout un autre ordre d'idées, non moins hautes selon lui, qu'il voudrait avoir le loisir de remuer et d'approfondir à l'occasion de cette pièce de Lucrèce Borgia. à ses yeux, il y a beaucoup de questions sociales dans les questions littéraires, et toute œuvre est une action. Voilà le sujet sur lequel il s'étendrait volontiers, si l'espace et le temps ne lui manquaient. Le théâtre, on ne saurait trop le répéter, a de nos jours une importance immense, et qui tend à s'accroître sans cesse avec la civilisation même. Le théâtre est une tribune. Le théâtre est une chaire. Le théâtre parle fort et parle haut. Lorsque Corneille dit: pour être plus qu'un roi tu te crois quelque chose, Corneille, c'est Mirabeau. Quand Shakespeare dit: (…), Shakespeare, c'est Bossuet. L'auteur de ce drame sait combien c'est une grande et sérieuse chose que le théâtre. Il sait que le drame, sans sortir des limites impartiales de l'art, a une mission nationale, une mission sociale, une mission humaine. Quand il voit chaque soir ce peuple si intelligent et si avancé qui a fait de Paris la cité centrale du progrès, s'entasser en foule devant un rideau que sa pensée, à lui chétif poète, va soulever le moment d'après, il sent combien il est peu de chose, lui, devant tant d'attente et de curiosité; il sent que si son talent n'est rien, il faut que sa probité soit tout; il s'interroge avec sévérité et recueillement sur la portée philosophique de son œuvre; car il se sait responsable, et il ne veut pas que cette foule puisse lui demander compte un jour de ce qu'il lui aura enseigné. Le poète aussi a charge d'ames. Il ne faut pas que la multitude sorte du théâtre sans emporter avec elle quelque moralité austère et profonde. Aussi espère-t-il bien, dieu aidant, ne développer jamais sur la scène (du moins tant que dureront les temps sérieux où nous sommes), que des choses pleines de leçons et de conseils. Il fera toujours apparaître volontiers le cercueil dans la salle du banquet, la prière des morts à travers les refrains de l’orgie, la cagoule à côté du masque. Il laissera quelquefois le carnaval débraillé chanter à tue-tête sur l’avant-scène; mais il lui criera du fond du théâtre. Il sait bien que l’art seul, l’art pur, l’art proprement dit, n’exige pas tout cela du poète, mais il pense qu’au théâtre surtout il ne suffit pas de remplir seulement les conditions de l’art. Et quant aux plaies et aux misères de l’humanité, toutes les fois qu’il les étalera dans le drame, il tâchera de jeter sur ce que ces nudités-là auraient de trop odieux le voile d’une idée consolante et grave. Il ne mettra pas Marion De Lorme sur la scène, sans purifier la courtisane avec un peu d’amour; il donnera à Triboulet le difforme un cœur de père; il donnera à Lucrèce la monstrueuse des entrailles de mère. Et de cette façon, sa conscience se reposera du moins tranquille et sereine sur son œuvre. Le drame qu’il rêve et qu’il tente de réaliser pourra toucher à tout sans se souiller à rien. Faites circuler dans tout une pensée morale et compatissante, et il n’y a plus rien de difforme ni de repoussant. à la chose la plus hideuse mêlez une idée religieuse, elle deviendra sainte et pure. Attachez Dieu au gibet, vous avez la croix.

12 février 1833.

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ACTE 1 PARTIE 1 SCENE 1

Une terrasse du palais barbarigo, à Venise. C’est une fête de nuit. Des masques traversent par instans le théâtre. Des deux côtés de la terrasse, le palais splendidement illuminé et résonnant de fanfares. La terrasse couverte d’ombre et de verdure. Au fond, au bas de la terrasse, est censé couler le canal de la Zueca, sur lequel on voit passer par momens, dans les tenèbres, des gondoles, chargées de masques et de musiciens, à demi éclairées. Chacune de ces gondoles traverse le fond du théâtre avec une symphonie tantôt gracieuse, tantôt lugubre, qui s’éteint par degrés dans l’éloignement. Au fond, Venise au clair de lune.

De jeunes seigneurs, magnifiquement vêtus, leurs masques à la main, causent sur la terrasse.

Gubetta, Gennaro, vêtu en capitaine, don Apostolo Gazella, Maffio Orsini, Ascanio Petrucci, Oloferno Vitellozzo, Jeppo Liveretto.

Oloferno. Nous vivons dans une époque où les gens accomplissent tant d’actions horribles qu’on ne parle plus de celle-là, mais certes il n’y eut jamais événement plus sinistre et plus mystérieux.

Ascanio. Une chose ténébreuse faite par des hommes ténébreux.

Jeppo. Moi, je sais les faits, messeigneurs. Je les tiens de mon cousin éminentissime le cardinal Carriale, qui a été mieux informé que personne. -vous savez, le cardinal Carriale, qui eut cette fière dispute avec le cardinal Riario au sujet de la guerre contre Charles VIII de France?

Gennaro, bâillant. Ah! Voilà Jeppo qui va nous conter des histoires! -pour ma part, je n’écoute pas. Je suis déjà bien assez fatigué sans cela.

Maffio. Ces choses-là ne t’intéressent pas, Gennaro, et c’est tout simple. Tu es un brave capitaine d’aventure. Tu portes un nom de fantaisie. Tu ne connais ni ton père ni ta mère. On ne doute pas que tu ne sois gentilhomme, à la façon dont tu tiens une épée; mais tout ce qu’on sait de ta noblesse, c’est que tu te bats comme un lion. Sur mon ame, nous sommes compagnons d’armes, et ce que je dis n’est pas pour t’offenser. Tu m’as sauvé la vie à Rimini, je t’ai sauvé la vie au pont de Vicence. Nous nous sommes juré de nous aider en périls comme en amour, de nous venger l’un l’autre quand besoin serait, de n’avoir pour ennemis, moi, que les tiens, toi, que les miens. Un astrologue nous a prédit que nous mourrions le même jour, et nous lui avons donné dix sequins d’or pour la prédiction. Nous ne sommes pas amis, nous sommes frères. Mais enfin, tu as le bonheur de t’appeler simplement Gennaro, de ne tenir à personne, de ne traîner après toi aucune de ces fatalités, souvent héréditaires, qui s’attachent aux noms historiques. Tu es heureux! Que t’importe ce qui se passe et ce qui s’est passé, pourvu qu’il y ait toujours des hommes pour la guerre et des femmes pour le plaisir? Que te fait l’histoire des familles et des villes, à toi, enfant du drapeau, qui n’as ni ville ni famille? Nous, vois-tu, Gennaro? C’est différent. Nous avons droit de prendre intérêt aux catastrophes de notre temps. Nos pères et nos mères ont été mêlés à ces tragédies, et presque toutes nos familles saignent encore.

— dis-nous ce que tu sais, Jeppo.

Gennaro. Il se jette dans un fauteuil, dans l’attitude de quelqu’un qui va dormir.

Vous me réveillerez quand Jeppo aura fini.

Jeppo. Voici. -c’est en quatorze cent quatre-vingt…

Gubetta, dans un coin du théâtre. Quatre-vingt-dix-sept.

Jeppo. C’est juste. Quatre-vingt-dix-sept. Dans une certaine nuit d’un mercredi à un jeudi…

Gubetta. Non. D’un mardi à un mercredi.

Jeppo. Vous avez raison. -cette nuit donc, un batelier du Tibre, qui s’était couché dans son bateau, le long du bord, pour garder ses marchandises, vit quelque chose d’effrayant. C’était un peu au-dessous de l’église santo-Hieronimo. Il pouvait être cinq heures après minuit. Le batelier vit venir dans l’obscurité, par le chemin qui est à gauche de l’église, deux hommes qui allaient à pied, de çà, de là, comme inquiets; après quoi il en parut deux autres; et enfin trois; en tout sept. Un seul était à cheval. Il faisait nuit assez noire. Dans toutes les maisons qui regardent le Tibre, il n’y avait plus qu’une seule fenêtre éclairée. Les sept hommes s’approchèrent du bord de l’eau. Celui qui était monté tourna la croupe de son cheval du côté du Tibre, et alors le batelier vit distinctement sur cette croupe des jambes qui pendaient d’un côté, une tête et des bras de l’autre, -le cadavre d’un homme. Pendant que leurs camarades guettaient les angles des rues, deux de ceux qui étaient à pied prirent le corps mort, le balancèrent deux ou trois fois avec force, et le lancèrent au milieu du Tibre. Au moment où le cadavre frappa l’eau, celui qui était à cheval fit une question à laquelle les deux autres répondirent: oui, monseigneur. Alors le cavalier se retourna vers le Tibre, et vit quelque chose de noir qui flottait sur l’eau. Il demanda ce que c’était. On lui répondit: monseigneur, c’est le manteau de monseigneur qui est mort. Et quelqu’un de la troupe jeta des pierres à ce manteau, ce qui le fit enfoncer. Ceci fait, ils s’en allèrent tous de compagnie, et prirent le chemin qui mène à saint-Jacques. Voilà ce que vit le batelier.

Maffio. Une lugubre aventure! était-ce quelqu’un de considérable que ces hommes jetaient ainsi à l’eau? Ce cheval me fait un effet étrange; l’assassin en selle, et le mort en croupe!

Gubetta. Sur ce cheval il y avait les deux frères.

Jeppo. Vous l’avez dit, Monsieur De Belverana. Le cadavre, c’était Jean Borgia; le cavalier, c’était César Borgia.
Maffio. Famille de démons que ces Borgia! Et dites, Jeppo, pourquoi le frère tuait-il ainsi le frère?

Jeppo. Je ne vous le dirai pas. La cause du meurtre est tellement abominable, que ce doit être un péché mortel d’en parler seulement.

Gubetta. Je vous le dirai, moi. César, cardinal de Valence, a tué Jean, duc de Gandia, parce que les deux frères aimaient la même femme.

Maffio. Et qui était cette femme?

Gubetta, toujours au fond du théâtre. Leur soeur.

Jeppo. Assez, Monsieur De Belverana. Ne prononcez pas devant nous le nom de cette femme monstrueuse. Il n’est pas une de nos familles à laquelle elle n’ait fait quelque plaie profonde.

Maffio. N’y avait-il pas aussi un enfant mêlé à tout cela?

Jeppo. Oui, un enfant dont je ne veux nommer que le père, qui était Jean Borgia.

Maffio. Cet enfant serait un homme maintenant.

Oloferno. Il a disparu.

Jeppo. Est-ce César Borgia qui a réussi à le soustraire à la mère? Est-ce la mère qui a réussi à le soustraire à César Borgia? On ne sait.

Don Apostolo. Si c’est la mère qui cache son fils, elle fait bien. Depuis que César Borgia, cardinal de Valence, est devenu duc de Valentinois, il a fait mourir, comme vous savez, sans compter son frère Jean, ses deux neveux, les fils de Guifry Borgia, prince de Squillacci, et son cousin, le cardinal François Borgia. Cet homme a la rage de tuer ses parens.

Jeppo. Pardieu! Il veut être le seul Borgia, et avoir tous les biens du pape.

Ascanio. La sœur que vous ne voulez pas nommer, Jeppo, ne fit-elle pas à la même époque une cavalcade secrète au monastère de saint-Sixte pour s’y renfermer, sans qu’on sût pourquoi?

Jeppo. Je crois que oui. C’était pour se séparer du seigneur Jean Sforza, son deuxième mari.

Maffio. Et comment se nommait ce batelier qui a tout vu?

Jeppo. Je ne sais pas.

Gubetta. Il se nommait Georgio Schiavone, et avait pour industrie de mener du bois par le Tibre à Ripetta.
Maffio, bas à Ascanio. Voilà un espagnol qui en sait plus long sur nos affaires que nous autres romains.

Ascanio, bas. Je me éfie comme toi de ce Monsieur De Belverana. Mais n’approfondissons pas ceci; il y a peut-être une chose dangereuse là-dessous.

Jeppo. Ah! Messieurs, messieurs! Dans quel temps sommes-nous? Et connaissez-vous une créature humaine qui soit sûre de vivre quelques lendemains dans cette pauvre Italie avec les guerres, les pestes et les Borgia qu’il y a!

Don Apostolo. Ah çà, messeigneurs, je crois que tous tant que nous sommes nous devons faire partie de l’ambassade que la république de Venise envoie au duc de Ferrare, pour le féliciter d’avoir repris Rimini sur les Malatesta. Quand partons-nous pour Ferrare?

Oloferno. Décidément, après-demain. Vous savez que les deux ambassadeurs sont nommés. C’est le sénateur Tiopolo et le général des galères Grimani.

Don Apostolo. Le capitaine Gennaro sera-t-il des nôtres?

Maffio. Sans doute! Gennaro et moi nous ne nous séparons jamais.

Ascanio. J’ai une observation importante à vous soumettre, messieurs; c’est qu’on boit le vin d’Espagne sans nous.

Maffio. Rentrons au palais. -hé! Gennaro! à Jeppo. — mais c’est qu’il s’est réellement endormi pendant votre histoire, Jeppo.

Jeppo. Qu’il dorme. Tous sortent excepté Gubetta.

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ACTE 1 PARTIE 1 SCENE 2

Gubetta, puis Dona Lucrezia, Gennaro endormi.

Gubetta, seul. Oui, j’en sais plus long qu’eux; ils se disaient cela tout bas. J’en sais plus qu’eux, mais dona Lucrezia en sait plus que moi, Monsieur De Valentinois en sait plus que dona Lucrezia, le diable en sait plus que Monsieur De Valentinois, et le pape Alexandre-Six en sait plus que le diable.

Regardant Gennaro. — comme cela dort, ces jeunes gens!

Entre dona Lucrezia, masquée. Elle aperçoit Gennaro endormi, et va le contempler avec une sorte de ravissement et de respect.

Dona Lucrezia, à part. Il dort! -cette fête l’aura sans doute fatigué! — qu’il est beau! Se retournant. — Gubetta!

Gubetta. Parlez moins haut, madame. -je ne m’appelle pas ici Gubetta, mais le comte de Belverana, gentilhomme castillan; vous, vous êtes madame la marquise de Pontequadrato, dame napolitaine. Nous ne devons pas avoir l’air de nous connaître. Ne sont-ce pas là les ordres de votre altesse? Vous n’êtes point ici chez vous; vous êtes à Venise.

Dona Lucrezia. C’est juste, Gubetta. Mais il n’y a personne sur cette terrasse, que ce jeune homme qui dort; nous pouvons causer un instant.

Gubetta. Comme il plaira à votre altesse. J’ai encore un conseil à vous donner; c’est de ne point vous démasquer. On pourrait vous reconnaître.

Dona Lucrezia. Et que m’importe? S’ils ne savent pas qui je suis, je n’ai rien à craindre; s’ils savent qui je suis, c’est à eux d’avoir peur.

Gubetta. Nous sommes à Venise, madame; vous avez bien des ennemis ici, et des ennemis libres. Sans doute la république de Venise ne souffrirait pas qu’on osât attenter à la personne de votre altesse; mais on pourrait vous insulter.

Dona Lucrezia. Ah! Tu as raison; mon nom fait horreur, en effet.

Gubetta. Il n’y a pas ici que des vénitiens; il y a des romains, des napolitains, des romagnols, des lombards, des italiens de toute l’Italie.

Dona Lucrezia. Et toute l’Italie me hait! Tu as raison! Il faut pourtant que tout cela change. Je n’étais pas née pour faire le mal, je le sens à présent plus que jamais. C’est l’exemple de ma famille qui m’a entraînée. -Gubetta!

Gubetta. Madame.
Dona Lucrezia. Fais porter sur-le-champ les ordres que nous allons te donner dans notre gouvernement de Spolette.

Gubetta. Ordonnez, madame; j’ai toujours quatre mules sellées et quatre coureurs tout prêts à partir.

Dona Lucrezia. Qu’a-t-on fait de Galeas Accaioli?

Gubetta. Il est toujours en prison, en attendant que votre altesse le fasse pendre.

Dona Lucrezia. Et Guifry Buondelmonte?

Gubetta. Au cachot. Vous n’avez pas encore dit de le faire étrangler.

Dona Lucrezia. Et Manfredi De Curzola?

Gubetta. Pas encore étranglé non plus.

Dona Lucrezia. Et Spadacappa?

Gubetta. D’après vos ordres, on ne doit lui donner le poison que le jour de Pâques, dans l’hostie. Cela viendra dans six semaines, nous sommes au carnaval.

Dona Lucrezia. Et Pierre Capra?

Gubetta. à l’heure qu’il est, il est encore évêque de Pesaro et régent de la chancellerie; mais, avant un mois, il ne sera plus qu’un peu de poussière, car notre saint-père le pape l’a fait arrêter sur votre plainte, et le tient sous bonne garde dans les chambres basses du Vatican.

Dona Lucrezia. Gubetta, écris en hâte au saint-père que je lui demande la grâce de Pierre Capra! Gubetta, qu’on mette en liberté Accaioli! En liberté Manfredi De Curzola! En liberté Buondelmonte! En liberté Spadacappa!

Gubetta. Attendez! Attendez, madame! Laissez-moi respirer! Quels ordres me donnez-vous là! Ah! Mon dieu! Il pleut des pardons! Il grêle de la miséricorde! Je suis submergé dans la clémence! Je ne me tirerai jamais de ce déluge effroyable de bonnes actions!

Dona Lucrezia. Bonnes ou mauvaises, que t’importe, pourvu que je te les paie.

Gubetta. Ah! C’est qu’une bonne action est bien plus difficile à faire qu’une mauvaise. -hélas! Pauvre Gubetta que je suis! à présent que vous vous imaginez de devenir miséricordieuse, qu’est-ce que je vais devenir, moi?

Dona Lucrezia. Ecoute, Gubetta, tu es mon plus ancien et mon plus fidèle confident…

Gubetta. Voilà quinze ans, en effet, que j’ai l’honneur d’être votre collaborateur.
Dona Lucrezia. Hé bien! Dis, Gubetta, mon vieil ami, mon vieux complice, est-ce que tu ne commences pas à sentir le besoin de changer de genre de vie? Est-ce que tu n’as pas soif d’être béni, toi et moi, autant que nous avons été maudits? Est-ce que tu n’en as pas assez du crime?

Gubetta. Je vois que vous êtes en train de devenir la plus vertueuse altesse qui soit.

Dona Lucrezia. Est-ce que notre commune renommée à tous deux, notre renommée infâme, notre renommée de meurtre et d’empoisonnement, ne commence pas à te peser, Gubetta?

Gubetta. Pas du tout. Quand je passe dans les rues de Spolette, j’entends bien quelquefois des manans qui fredonnent autour de moi: hum! Ceci est Gubetta, Gubetta-poison, Gubetta-poignard, Gubetta-gibet! Car ils ont mis à mon nom une flamboyante aigrette de sobriquets. On dit tout cela, et quand les voix ne le disent pas, ce sont les yeux qui le disent. Mais qu’est-ce que cela fait? Je suis habitué à ma mauvaise réputation comme un soldat du pape à servir la messe.

Dona Lucrezia. Mais ne sens-tu pas que tous les noms odieux dont on t’accable, et dont on m’accable aussi, peuvent aller éveiller le mépris et la haine dans un cœur où tu voudrais être aimé? Tu n’aimes donc personne au monde, Gubetta?

Gubetta. Je voudrais bien savoir qui vous aimez, madame!

Dona Lucrezia. Qu’en sais-tu? Je suis franche avec toi; je ne te parlerai ni de mon père, ni de mon frère, ni de mon mari, ni de mes amans.

Gubetta. Mais c’est que je ne vois guère que cela qu’on puisse aimer.

Dona Lucrezia. Il y a encore autre chose, Gubetta.

Gubetta. Ah çà! Est-ce que vous vous faites vertueuse pour l’amour de Dieu?

Dona Lucrezia. Gubetta! Gubetta! S’il y avait aujourd’hui en Italie, dans cette fatale et criminelle Italie, un coeur noble et pur, un cœur plein de hautes et de mâles vertus, un cœur d’ange sous une cuirasse de soldat; s’il ne me restait, à moi, pauvre femme, haïe, méprisée, abhorrée, maudite des hommes, damnée du ciel, misérable toute-puissante que je suis; s’il ne me restait dans l’état de détresse où mon âme agonise douloureusement qu’une idée, qu’une espérance, qu’une ressource, celle de mériter et d’obtenir avant ma mort une petite place, Gubetta, un peu de tendresse, un peu d’estime dans ce cœur si fier et si pur; si je n’avais d’autre pensée que l’ambition de le sentir battre un jour joyeusement et librement sur le mien; comprendrais-tu alors, dis, Gubetta, pourquoi j’ai hâte de racheter mon passé, de laver ma renommée, d’effacer les taches de toutes sortes que j’ai partout sur moi, et de changer en une idée de gloire, de pénitence et de vertu, l’idée infâme et sanglante que l’Italie attache à mon nom?

Gubetta. Mon dieu, madame! Sur quel hermite avez-vous marché aujourd’hui?
Dona Lucrezia. Ne ris pas. Il y a long-temps déjà que j’ai ces pensées sans te les dire. Lorsqu’on est entraîné par un courant de crimes, on ne s’arrête pas quand on veut. Les deux anges luttaient en moi, le bon et le mauvais; mais je crois que le bon va enfin l’emporter.

Gubetta. — Savez-vous, madame, que je ne vous comprends plus, et que depuis quelque temps vous êtes devenue indéchiffrable pour moi? Il y a un mois, votre altesse annonce qu’elle part pour Spolette, prend congé de monseigneur don Alphonse D’Este, votre mari, qui a du reste la bonhomie d’être amoureux de vous comme un tourtereau et jaloux comme un tigre; votre altesse donc quitte Ferrare, et s’en vient secrètement à Venise, presque sans suite, affublée d’un faux nom napolitain, et moi d’un faux nom espagnol. Arrivée à Venise, votre altesse se sépare de moi, et m’ordonne de ne pas la connaître; et puis, vous vous mettez à courir les fêtes, les musiques, les tertullias à l’espagnole, profitant du carnaval pour aller partout masquée, cachée à tous, déguisée, me parlant à peine entre deux portes chaque soir; et voilà que toute cette mascarade se termine par un sermon que vous me faites! Un sermon de vous à moi, madame! Cela n’est-il pas véhément et prodigieux? Vous avez métamorphosé votre nom, vous avez métamorphosé votre habit, à présent vus métamorphosez votre âme! En honneur, c’est pousser furieusement loin le carnaval. Je m’y perds. Où est la cause de cette conduite de la part de votre altesse?

Dona Lucrezia, lui saisissant vivement le bras, et l’attirant près de Gennaro endormi. Vois-tu ce jeune homme?

Gubetta. Ce jeune homme n’est pas nouveau pour moi, et je sais bien que c’est après lui que vous courez sous votre masque depuis que vous êtes à

Venise.

Dona Lucrezia. Qu’est-ce que tu en dis?

Gubetta. Je dis que c’est un jeune homme qui dort couché sur un banc, et qui dormirait debout s’il avait été en tiers dans la conversation morale et édifiante que je viens d’avoir avec votre altesse.

Dona Lucrezia. Est-ce que tu ne le trouves pas bien beau?

Gubetta. Il serait plus beau, s’il n’avait pas les yeux fermés. Un visage sans yeux, c’est un palais sans fenêtres.

Dona Lucrezia. Si tu savais comme je l’aime!

Gubetta. C’est l’affaire de don Alphonse, votre royal mari. Je dois cependant avertir votre altesse qu’elle perd ses peines. Ce jeune homme, à ce qu’on m’a dit, aime d’amour une belle jeune fille nommée Fiametta.

Dona Lucrezia. Et la jeune fille, l’aime-t-elle?

Gubetta. On dit que oui.
Dona Lucrezia. Tant mieux! Je voudrais tant le savoir heureux!

Gubetta. Voilà qui est singulier et n’est guère dans vos façons. Je vous croyais plus jalouse.

Dona Lucrezia, contemplant Gennaro. Quelle noble figure!

Gubetta. Je trouve qu’il ressemble à quelqu’un…

Dona Lucrezia. Ne me dis pas à qui tu trouves qu’il ressemble! — laisse-moi.

Gubetta sort. Dona Lucrezia reste quelques instants comme en extase devant Gennaro; elle ne voit pas deux hommes masqués qui viennent d’entrer au fond du théâtre et qui l’observent.

Dona Lucrezia, se croyant seule. C’est donc lui! Il m’est donc enfin donné de le voir un instant sans périls! Non, je ne l’avais pas rêvé plus beau. ô Dieu! épargnez-moi l’angoisse d’être jamais haïe et méprisée de lui; vous savez qu’il est tout ce que j’aime sous le ciel! -je n’ose ôter mon masque; il faut pourtant que j’essuie mes larmes.

Elle ôte son masque pour s’essuyer les yeux. Les deux hommes masqués causent à voix basse pendant qu’elle baise la main de Gennaro endormi.

Premier Homme Masqué. Cela suffit, je puis retourner à Ferrare. Je n’étais venu à Venise que pour m’assurer de son infidélité; j’en ai assez vu. Mon absence de Ferrare ne peut se prolonger plus long-temps. Ce jeune homme est son amant. Comment le nomme-t-on, Rustighello?

Deuxième Homme Masqué. Il s’appelle Gennaro. C’est un capitaine aventurier, un brave, sans père ni mère, un homme dont on ne connaît pas les bouts. Il est en ce moment au service de la république de Venise.

Premier Homme. Fais en sorte qu’il vienne à Ferrare.

Deuxième Homme. Cela se fera de soi-même, monseigneur; il part après-demain pour Ferrare avec plusieurs de ses amis, qui font partie de l’ambassade des sénateurs Tiopolo et Grimani.

Premier Homme. C’est bien. Les rapports qu’on m’a faits étaient exacts. J’en ai assez vu, te dis-je; nous pouvons repartir.

Ils sortent.

Dona Lucrezia, joignant les mains et presque agenouillée devant Gennaro. ô mon Dieu, qu’il y ait autant de bonheur pour lui qu’il y a eu de malheur pour moi!

Elle dépose un baiser sur le front de Gennaro, qui s’éveille en sursaut. Gennaro, saisissant par les deux bras Lucrezia interdite. Un baiser! Une femme! -sur mon honneur, madame, si vous étiez reine et si j’étais poète, ce serait véritablement l’aventure de messire Alain Chartier, le rimeur français. -mais j’ignore qui vous êtes, et moi, je ne suis qu’un soldat.

Dona Lucrezia. Laissez-moi, seigneur Gennaro!

Gennaro. Non pas, madame.

Dona Lucrezia. Voici quelqu’un! Elle s’enfuit, Gennaro la suit.

ACTE 1 PARTIE 1 SCENE 3

Jeppo, puis Maffio. Jeppo, entrant par le côté opposé. Quel est ce visage? C’est bien elle! Cette femme à Venise! -hé, Maffio!

Maffio, entrant. Qu’est-ce?

Jeppo. Que je te dise une rencontre inouie. Il parle bas à l’oreille de Maffio.

Maffio. En es-tu sûr?

Jeppo. Comme je suis sûr que nous sommes ici dans le palais Barbarigo et non dans le palais Labbia.

Maffio. Elle était en causerie galante avec Gennaro?

Jeppo. Avec Gennaro.

Maffio. Il faut tirer mon frère Gennaro de cette toile d’araignée.

Jeppo. Viens avertir nos amis. Ils sortent. -pendant quelques instans la scène reste vide; on voit seulement passer, de temps en temps, au fond du théâtre, quelques gondoles avec des symphonies. -rentrent Gennaro et dona Lucrezia masquée.

ACTE 1 PARTIE 1 SCENE 4

Gennaro, dona Lucrezia.

Dona Lucrezia. Cette terrasse est obscure et déserte; je puis me démasquer ici. Je veux que vous voyiez mon visage, Gennaro.

Elle se démasque.

Gennaro. Vous êtes bien belle!

Dona Lucrezia. Regarde-moi bien, Gennaro, et dis-moi que je ne te fais pas horreur!

Gennaro. Vous me faire horreur, madame! Et pourquoi? Bien au contraire, je me sens au fond du coeur quelque chose qui m’attire vers vous.

Dona Lucrezia. Donc tu crois que tu pourrais m’aimer, Gennaro?

Gennaro. Pourquoi non? Pourtant, madame, je suis sincère, il y aura toujours une femme que j’aimerai plus que vous.

Dona Lucrezia, souriant. Je sais, la petite Fiametta.

Gennaro. Non.

Dona Lucrezia. Qui donc?

Gennaro. Ma mère.

Dona Lucrezia. Ta mère! Ta mère, ô mon Gennaro! Tu aimes bien ta mère, n’est-ce pas?

Gennaro. Et pourtant je ne l’ai jamais vue. Voilà qui vous paraît bien singulier, n’est-il pas vrai? Tenez, je ne sais pas pourquoi j’ai une pente à

me confier à vous; je vais vous dire un secret que je n'ai encore dit à personne, pas même à mon frère d'armes, pas même à Maffio Orsini. Cela est étrange de se livrer ainsi au premier venu; mais il me semble que vous n'êtes pas pour moi la première venue. -je suis un capitaine qui ne connaît pas sa famille, j'ai été élevé en Calabre par un pêcheur dont je me croyais le fils. Le jour où j'eus seize ans, ce pêcheur m'apprit qu'il n'était pas mon père. Quelque temps après, un seigneur vint qui m'arma chevalier, et qui repartit sans avoir levé la visière de son morion. Quelque temps après encore, un homme vêtu de noir vint m'apporter une lettre. Je l'ouvris. C'était ma mère qui m'écrivait, ma mère que je ne connaissais pas, ma mère que je rêvais bonne, douce, tendre, belle comme vous! Ma mère, que j'adorais de toutes les forces de mon âme! Cette lettre m'apprit, sans me dire aucun nom, que j'étais noble et de grande race, et que ma mère était bien malheureuse. Pauvre mère!
Dona Lucrezia. Bon Gennaro!

Gennaro. Depuis ce jour-là, je me suis fait aventurier, parce qu'étant quelque chose par ma naissance, j'ai voulu être aussi quelque chose par mon épée. J'ai couru toute l'Italie. Mais le premier jour de chaque mois, en quelque lieu que je sois, je vois toujours venir le même messager. Il me remet une lettre de ma mère, prend ma réponse et s'en va; et il ne me dit rien, et je ne lui dis rien, parce qu'il est sourd et muet.

Dona Lucrezia. Ainsi tu ne sais rien de ta famille?

Gennaro. Je sais que j'ai une mère, qu'elle est malheureuse, et que je donnerais ma vie dans ce monde pour la voir pleurer, et ma vie dans l'autre pour la voir sourire. Voilà tout.

Dona Lucrezia. Que fais-tu de ses lettres?

Gennaro. Je les ai toutes là, sur mon cœur. Nous autres gens de guerre, nous risquons souvent notre poitrine à l'encontre des épées. Les lettres d'une mère, c'est une bonne cuirasse.

Dona Lucrezia. Noble nature!

Gennaro. Tenez, voulez-vous voir son écriture? Voici une de ses lettres.

Il tire de sa poitrine un papier qu’il baise et qu’il remet à dona Lucrezia. — lisez cela.

Dona Lucrezia, lisant. “… ne cherche pas à me connaître, mon Gennaro, avant le jour que je te marquerai. Je suis bien à plaindre, va. Je suis entourée de parens sans pitié, qui te tueraient comme ils ont tué ton père. Le secret de ta naissance, mon enfant, je veux être la seule à le savoir. Si tu le savais, toi, cela est à la fois si triste et si illustre que tu ne pourrais pas t’en taire; la jeunesse est confiante, tu ne connais pas les périls qui t’environnent comme je les connais; qui sait? Tu voudrais les affronter par bravade de jeune homme, tu parlerais ou tu te laisserais deviner, et tu ne vivrais pas deux jours. Oh non! Contente-toi de savoir que tu as une mère qui t’adore et qu veille nuit et jour sur ta vie. Mon Gennaro, mon fils, tu es tout ce que j’aime sur la terre; mon cœur se fond quand je songe à toi…”

elle s’interrompt pour dévorer une larme.

Gennaro. Comme vous lisez cela tendrement! On ne dirait pas que vous lisez, mais que vous parlez. -ah! Vous pleurez! -vous êtes bonne, madame, et je vous aime de pleurer de ce qu’écrit ma mère. Il reprend la lettre, la baise de nouveau, et la remet dans sa poitrine.

— oui, vous voyez, il y a eu bien des crimes autour de mon berceau. -ma pauvre mère! -n’est-ce pas que vous comprenez maintenant que je m’arrête peu aux galanteries et aux amourettes, parce que je n’ai qu’une pensée au cœur, ma mère! Oh! Délivrer ma mère! La servir, la venger, la consoler! Quel bonheur! Je penserai à l’amour après! Tout ce que je fais, je le fais pour être digne de ma mère. Il y a bien des aventuriers qui ne sont pas scrupuleux, et qui se battraient pour Satan après s’être battus pour saint Michel; moi, je ne sers que des causes justes; je veux pouvoir déposer un jour aux pieds de ma mère une épée nette et loyale comme celle d’un empereur. -tenez, madame, on m’a offert un gros enrôlement au service de cette infâme Madame Lucrèce Borgia. J’ai refusé.

Dona Lucrezia. Gennaro! -Gennaro! Ayez pitié des méchans! Vous ne savez pas ce qui se passe dans leur cœur.

Gennaro. Je n’ai pas pitié de qui est sans pitié. -mais laissons cela, madame; et maintenant que je vous ai dit qui je suis, faites de même, et dites-moi à votre tour qui vous êtes.

Dona Lucrezia. Une femme qui vous aime, Gennaro.

Gennaro. Mais votre nom?…

Dona Lucrezia. Ne m’en demandez pas plus. Des flambeaux. Entrent avec bruit Jeppo et Maffio.

Dona Lucrezia remet son masque précipitamment.

ACTE 1 PARTIE 1 SCENE 5

Les mêmes, Maffio Orsini, Jeppo Liveretto, Ascanio Petrucci, Oloferno Vitellozzo, don Apostolo Gazella. -seigneurs, dames, pages portant des flambeaux.

Maffio, un flambeau à la main. Gennaro! Veux-tu savoir quelle est la femme à qui tu parles d’amour?

Dona Lucrezia, à part, sous son masque. Juste ciel!

Gennaro. Vous êtes tous mes amis, mais je jure Dieu que celui qui touchera au masque de cette femme sera un enfant hardi. Le masque d’une femme est sacré comme la face d’un homme.

Maffio. Il faut d’abord que la femme soit une femme,

Gennaro! Mais nous ne voulons point insulter celle-là; nous voulons seulement lui dire nos noms.

Faisant un pas vers dona Lucrezia. — madame, je suis Maffio Orsini, frère du duc de Gravina, que vos sbires ont étranglé la nuit pendant qu’il dormait.

Jeppo. Madame, je suis Jeppo Liveretto, neveu de Liveretto Vitelli, que vous avez fait poignarder dans les caves du Vatican.

Ascanio. Madame, je suis Ascanio Petrucci, cousin de Pandolfo Petrucci, seigneur de Sienne, que vous avez assassiné pour lui voler plus aisément sa ville.

Oloferno. Madame, je m’appelle Oloferno Vitellozzo, neveu d’Iago D’Appiani, que vous avez empoisonné dans une fête, après lui avoir traîtreusement dérobé sa bonne citadelle seigneuriale de Piombino.

Don Apostolo. Madame, vous avez mis à mort sur l’échafaud don Francisco Gazella, oncle maternel de don Alphonse D’Aragon, votre troisième mari, que vous avez fait tuer à coups de hallebarde sur le palier de l’escalier de saint-Pierre je suis don Apostolo Gazella, cousin de l’un et fils de l’autre.

Dona Lucrezia. ô dieu!

Gennaro. Quelle est cette femme?

Maffio. Et maintenant que nous vous avons dit nos noms, madame, voulez-vous que nous vous disions le vôtre?

Dona Lucrezia. Non! Non! Ayez pitié, messeigneurs! Pas devant lui!
Maffio, la démasquant. ôtez votre masque, madame, qu’on voie si vous pouvez encore rougir.

Don Apostolo. Gennaro, cette femme à qui tu parlais d’amour est empoisonneuse et adultère.

Jeppo. Inceste à tous les degrés. Inceste avec ses deux frères, qui se sont entretués pour l’amour d’elle!

Dona Lucrezia. Grâce!

Ascanio. Inceste avec son père, qui est pape!

Dona Lucrezia. Pitié!

Oloferno. Inceste avec ses enfants, si elle en avait; mais le ciel en refuse aux monstres!

Dona Lucrezia. Assez! Assez!

Maffio. Veux-tu savoir son nom, Gennaro?

Dona Lucrezia. Grâce! Grâce! Messeigneurs!

Maffio. Gennaro, veux-tu savoir son nom?

Elle se traîne aux geoux de Gennaro. N’écoute pas, mon Gennaro!

Maffio, étendant le bras. C’est Lucrèce Borgia!

Gennaro, la repoussant. Oh!… elle tombe évanouie à ses pieds.

ACTE 1 PARTIE 2 SCENE 1

Une place de Ferrare. à droite, un palais avec un balcon garni de jalousies, et une porte basse. Sous le balcon, un grand écusson de pierre chargé d’armoiries avec ce mot en grosses lettres saillantes de cuivre doré au-dessous: Borgia. à gauche, une petite maison avec porte sur la place. Au fond des maisons et des clochers.

Dona Lucrezia, Gubetta.

Dona Lucrezia. Tout est-il prêt pour ce soir, Gubetta?

Gubetta. Oui, madame.

Dona Lucrezia. Y seront-ils tous les cinq?

Gubetta. Tous les cinq.

Dona Lucrezia. Ils m’ont bien cruellement outragée, Gubetta!

Gubetta. Je n’étais pas là, moi.

Dona Lucrezia. Ils ont été sans pitié!

Gubetta. Ils vous ont dit votre nom tout haut comme cela?

Dona Lucrezia. Ils ne m’ont pas dit mon nom, Gubetta; ils me l’ont craché au visage!

Gubetta. En plein bal!

Dona Lucrezia. Devant Gennaro!

Gubetta. Ce sont de fiers étourdis d’avoir quitté Venise et d’être venus à Ferrare. Il est vrai qu’ils ne pouvaient guère faire autrement, étant désignés par le sénat pour faire partie de l’ambassade qui est arrivée l’autre semaine.

Dona Lucrezia. Oh! Il me hait et me méprise maintenant, et c’est leur faute. -ah! Gubetta, je me vengerai d’eux.

Gubetta. à la bonne heure, voilà parler. Vos fantaisies de miséricorde vous ont quittée, dieu soit loué! Je suis bien plus à mon aise avec votre altesse quand elle est naturelle comme la voilà. Je m’y retrouve au moins. Voyez-vous, madame, un lac, c’est le contraire d’une île; une tour, c’est le contraire d’un puits; un aqueduc, c’est le contraire d’un pont; et moi, j’ai l’honneur d’être le contraire d’un personnage vertueux.

Dona Lucrezia. Gennaro est avec eux. Prends garde qu’il ne lui arrive rien. Gubetta. Si nous devenions, vous une bonne femme, et moi un bon homme, ce serait monstrueux.

Dona Lucrezia. Prends garde qu’il n’arrive rien à Gennaro, te dis-je!

Gubetta. Soyez tranquille.

Dona Lucrezia. Je voudrais pourtant bien le voir encore une fois! Gubetta.

Vive-dieu, madame, votre altesse le voit tous les jours. Vous avez gagné son valet pour qu’il déterminât son maître à prendre logis là, dans cette bicoque, vis-à-vis votre balcon, et de votre fenêtre grillée vous avez tous les jours l’ineffable bonheur de voir entrer et sortir le susdit gentilhomme.

Dona Lucrezia. Je dis que je voudrais lui parler, Gubetta.

Gubetta. Rien de plus simple. Envoyez lui dire par votre porte-chape Astolfo que votre altesse l’attend aujourd’hui à telle heure au palais.

Dona Lucrezia. Je le ferai, Gubetta. Mais voudra-t-il venir?

Gubetta. Rentrez, madame, je crois qu’il va passer ici tout-à-l’heure avec les étourneaux que vous savez.

Dona Lucrezia. Te prennent-ils toujours pour le comte de Belverana?

Gubetta. Ils me croient espagnol depuis le talon jusqu’aux sourcils. Je suis un de leurs meilleurs amis. Je leur emprunte de l’argent.

Dona Lucrezia. De l’argent! Et pourquoi faire?

Gubetta. Pardieu! Pour en avoir. D’ailleurs il n’y a rien qui soit plus espagnol que d’avoir l’air gueux et de tirer le diable par la queue.

Dona Lucrezia, à part. ô mon dieu! Faites qu’il n’arrive pas malheur à mon Gennaro!

Gubetta. Et à ce propos, madame, il me vient une réflexion.

Dona Lucrezia. Laquelle?

Gubetta. C’est qu’il faut que la queue du diable lui soit soudée, chevillée et vissée à l’échine d’une façon bien triomphante pour qu’elle résiste à l’innombrable multitude de gens qui la tirent perpétuellement!

Dona Lucrezia. Tu ris à travers tout, Gubetta.

Gubetta. C’est une manière comme une autre.
Dona Lucrezia. Je crois que les voici. -songe à tout. Elle rentre dans le palais par la petite porte sous le balcon.

ACTE 1 PARTIE 2 SCENE 2

Gubetta, puis Gennaro, Maffio, Jeppo, Ascanio, don Apostolo, Oloferno.

Gubetta, seul. Qu’est-ce que c’est que ce Gennaro? Et que diable en veut-elle faire? Je ne sais pas tous les secrets de la dame, il s’en faut; mais celui-ci pique ma curiosité. Ma foi, elle n’a pas eu de confiance en moi cette fois, il ne faut pas qu’elle s’imagine que je vais la servir dans cette occasion; elle se tirera de l’intrigue avec le Gennaro comme elle pourra. Mais quelle étrange manière d’aimer un homme quand on est fille de Roderigo Borgia et de la Vanozza, quand on est une femme qui a dans les veines du sang de courtisane et du sang de pape! Madame Lucrèce devient platonique. Je ne m’étonnerai plus de rien maintenant, quand même on viendrait me dire que le pape Alexandre Six croit en Dieu! -allons, voici nos jeunes fous du carnaval de Venise. Ils ont eu une belle idée de quitter une terre neutre et libre pour venir à Ferrare après avoir mortellement offensé la duchesse de Ferrare! à leur place je me serais, certes, abstenu de faire partie de la cavalcade des ambassadeurs vénitiens. Mais les jeunes gens sont ainsi faits. La gueule du loup est de toutes les choses sublunaires celle où ils se précipitent le plus volontiers.

Entrent les jeunes seigneurs sans voir d’abord Gubetta, qui s’est placé en observation sous l’un des piliers qui soutiennent le balcon. Ils causent à voix basse et d’un air d’inquiétude.

Maffio, bas. Vous direz ce que vous voudrez, messieurs, on peut se dispenser de venir à Ferrare quand on a blessé au cœur Madame Lucrèce Borgia.

Don Apostolo. Que pouvions-nous faire? Le sénat nous envoie ici. Est-ce qu’il y a moyen d’éluder les ordres du sérénissime sénat de Venise? Une fois désignés, il fallait partir. Je ne me dissimule pourtant pas, Maffio, que la Lucrezia Borgia est en effet une redoutable ennemie. Elle est la maîtresse ici.

Jeppo. Que veux-tu qu'elle nous fasse, Apostolo? Ne sommes-nous pas au service de la république de Venise? Ne faisons-nous pas partie de son ambassade? Toucher à un cheveu de notre tête, ce serait déclarer la guerre au doge, et Ferrare ne se frotte pas volontiers à Venise.

Gennaro, rêveur dans un coin du théâtre, sans se mêler à la conversation. ô ma mère! Ma mère! Qui me dira ce que je puis faire pour ma pauvre mère!

Maffio. On peut te coucher tout de ton long dans le sépulcre, Jeppo, sans toucher à un cheveu de ta tête. Il y a des poisons qui font les affaires des Borgia sans éclat et sans bruit, et beaucoup mieux que la hache ou le poignard. Rappelle-toi la manière dont Alexandre Six a fait disparaître du monde le sultan Zizimi, le frère de Bajazet.

Oloferno. Et tant d'autres.
Don Apostolo. Quant au frère de Bajazet, son histoire est curieuse, et n'est pas des moins sinistres. Le pape lui persuada que Charles De France l'avait empoisonné le jour où ils firent collation ensemble; Zizimi crut tout, et reçut des belles mains de Lucrèce Borgia un soi-disant contre-poison qui, en deux heures, délivra de lui son frère Bajazet.

Jeppo. Il paraît que ce brave turc n'entendait rien à la politique.

Maffio. Oui, les Borgia ont des poisons qui tuent en un jour, en un mois, en un an, à leur gré. Ce sont d'infâmes poisons qui rendent le vin meilleur, et font vider le flacon avec plus de plaisir. Vous vous croyez ivre, vous êtes mort. Ou bien un homme tombe tout à coup en langueur, sa peau se ride, ses yeux se cavent, ses cheveux blanchissent, ses dens se brisent comme verre sur le pain; il ne marche plus, il se traîne; il ne respire plus, il râle; il ne rit plus, il ne dort plus, il grelotte au soleil en plein midi; jeune homme, il a l'air d'un vieillard; il agonise ainsi quelque temps, enfin il meurt. Il meurt; et alors on se souvient qu'il y a six mois ou un an il a bu un verre de vin de Chypre chez un Borgia.

Se retournant. — tenez, messeigneurs, voilà justement Montefeltro, que vous connaissez peut-être, qui est de cette ville, et à qui la chose arrive en ce moment. — il passe là au fond de la place. -regardez-le. On voit passer au fond du théâtre un homme à cheveux blancs, maigre, chancelant, boitant, appuyé sur un bâton, et enveloppé d’un manteau.

Ascanio. Pauvre Montefeltro!

Don Apostolo. Quel âge a-t-il?

Maffio. Mon âge. Vingt-neuf ans.

Oloferno. Je l’ai vu l’an passé rose et frais comme vous.

Maffio. Il y a trois mois, il a soupé chez notre saint-père le pape, dans sa vigne du belvédère!

Ascanio. C’est horrible!

Maffio. Oh! L’on conte des choses bien étranges de ces soupers des Borgia!

Ascanio. Ce sont des débauches effrénées, assaisonnées d’empoisonnemens.

Maffio. Voyez, messeigneurs, comme cette place est déserte autour de nous. Le peuple ne s’aventure pas si près que nous du palais ducal; il a peur que les poisons qui s’y élaborent jour et nuit ne transpirent à travers les murs.

Ascanio. Messieurs, à tout prendre, les ambassadeurs ont eu hier leur audience du duc. Notre service est à peu près fini. La suite de l’ambassade se compose de cinquante cavaliers. Notre disparition ne s’apercevrait guère dans le nombre. Et je crois que nous ferions sagement de quitter Ferrare.
Maffio. Aujourd’hui même.

Jeppo. Messieurs, il sera temps demain. Je suis invité à souper ce soir chez la princesse Negroni, dont je suis fort éperdument amoureux, et je ne voudrais pas avoir l’air de fuir devant la plus jolie femme de Ferrare.

Oloferno. Tu es invité à souper ce soir chez la princesse Negroni?

Jeppo. Oui.

Oloferno. Et moi aussi.

Ascanio. Et moi aussi.

Don Apostolo. Et moi aussi.

Maffio. Et moi aussi.

Gubetta. Et moi aussi, messieurs.

Jeppo. Tiens, voilà Monsieur De Belverana. Eh bien! Nous irons tous ensemble; ce sera une joyeuse soirée. Bonjour, Monsieur De Belverana.

Gubetta. Que dieu vous garde longues années, seigneur Jeppo.

Maffio, bas à Jeppo. Vous allez encore me trouver bien timide, Jeppo. Hé bien, si vous m'en croyiez, nous n'irions pas à ce souper. Le palais Negroni touche au palais ducal, et je n'ai pas grande croyance aux airs amiables de ce seigneur Belverana.

Jeppo, bas. Vous êtes fou, Maffio. La Negroni est une femme charmante, je vous dis que j'en suis amoureux, et le Belverana est un brave homme. Je me suis enquis de lui et des siens. Mon père était avec son père au siége de Grenade, en quatorze cent quatre-vingts et tant.

Maffio. Cela ne prouve pas que celui-ci soit le fils du père avec qui était votre père.

Jeppo. Vous êtes libre de ne pas venir souper, Maffio.

Maffio. J'irai si vous y allez, Jeppo.

Jeppo. Vive Jupiter, alors! -et toi, Gennaro, est-ce que tu n'es pas des nôtres ce soir?

Ascanio. Est-ce que la Negroni ne t’a pas invité?

Gennaro. Non. La princesse m’aura trouvé trop médiocre gentilhomme.

Maffio, souriant. Alors, mon frère, tu iras de ton côté à quelque rendez-vous d’amour, n’est-ce pas?
Jeppo. A propos, conte-nous donc un peu ce que te disait Madame Lucrèce l’autre soir. Il paraît qu’elle est folle de toi. Elle a dû t’en dire long. La liberté du bal était une bonne fortune pour elle. Les femmes ne déguisent leur personne que pour déshabiller plus hardiment leur âme. Visage masqué, coeur à nu.

Depuis quelques instants dona Lucrezia est sur le balcon dont elle a entrouvert la jalousie. Elle écoute.

Maffio. Ah! Tu es venu te loger précisément en face de son balcon. Gennaro! Gennaro!

Don Apostolo. Ce qui n’est pas sans danger, mon camarade; car on dit ce digne duc de Ferrare fort jaloux de madame sa femme.

Oloferno. Allons, Gennaro, dis-nous où tu en es de ton amourette avec la Lucrèce Borgia.

Gennaro. Messeigneurs! Si vous me parlez encore de cette horrible femme, il y aura des épées qui reluiront au soleil!

Dona Lucrezia, sur le balcon, à part. Hélas!

Maffio. C’est pure plaisanterie, Gennaro. Mais il me semble qu’on peut bien te parler de cette dame, puisque tu portes ses couleurs.

Gennaro. Que veux-tu dire?

Maffio, lui montrant l’écharpe qu’il porte. Cette écharpe?

Jeppo. Ce sont en effet les couleurs de Lucrèce Borgia.

Gennaro. C’est Fiametta qui me l’a envoyée.

Maffio. Tu le crois. Lucrèce te l’a fait dire. Mais c’est Lucrèce qui a brodé l’écharpe de ses propres mains pour toi.

Gennaro. En es-tu sûr, Maffio? Par qui le sais-tu?

Maffio. Par ton valet qui t’a remis l’écharpe et qu’elle a gagné.

Gennaro. Damnation! Il arrache l’écharpe, la déchire et la foule aux pieds.

Dona Lucrezia, à part. Hélas!

Elle referme la jalousie et se retire.

Maffio. Cette femme est belle pourtant!
Jeppo. Oui, mais il y a quelque chose de sinistre empreint sur sa beauté.

Maffio. C’est un ducat d’or à l’effigie de Satan.

Gennaro. Oh! Maudite soit cette Lucrèce Borgia! Vous dites qu’elle m’aime, cette femme! Hé bien, tant mieux! Que ce soit son châtiment! Elle me fait horreur! Oui, elle me fait horreur! Tu sais, Maffio, cela est toujours ainsi; il n’y a pas moyen d’être indifférent pour une femme qui nous aime. Il faut l’aimer ou la haïr. Et comment aimer celle-là? Il arrive aussi que, plus on est persécuté par l’amour de ces sortes de femmes, plus on les hait. Celle-ci m’obsède, m’investit, m’assiége. Par où ai-je pu mériter l’amour d’une Lucrèce Borgia? Cela n’est-il pas une honte et une calamité? Depuis cette nuit où vous m’avez dit son nom d’une façon si éclatante, vous ne sauriez croire à quel point la pensée de cette femme scélérate m’est odieuse. Autrefois je ne voyais Lucrèce Borgia que de loin, à travers mille intervalles, comme un fantôme terrible debout sur toute l’Italie, comme le spectre de tout le monde. Maintenant ce spectre est mon spectre à moi; il vient s’asseoir à mon chevet; il m’aime, ce spectre, et veut se coucher dans mon lit! Par ma mère, c’est épouvantable! Ah! Maffio! Elle a tué Monsieur De Gravina, elle a tué ton frère! Hé bien, ton frère, je le remplacerai près de toi, et je le vengerai près d’elle! -voilà donc son exécrable palais! Palais de la luxure, palais de la trahison, palais de l’assassinat, palais de l’adultère, palais de l’inceste, palais de tous les crimes, palais de Lucrèce Borgia! Oh! La marque d’infamie que je ne puis lui mettre au front à cette femme, je veux la mettre au moins au front de son palais!

Il monte sur le banc de pierre qui est au-dessous du balcon, et avec son poignard, il fait sauter la première lettre du nom de Borgia gravé sur le mur, de façon qu’il ne reste plus que ce mot: orgia.

Maffio. Que diable fait-il?

Jeppo. Gennaro, cette lettre de moins au nom de Madame Lucrèce, c’est ta tête de moins sur tes épaules.

Gubetta. Monsieur Gennaro, voilà un calembourg qui fera mettre demain la moitié de la ville à la question.

Gennaro. Si l’on cherche le coupable, je me présenterai.

Gubetta, à part. Je le voudrais, pardieu, cela embarrasserait Madame Lucrèce.

Depuis quelques instants, deux hommes vêtus de noir se promènent sur la place et observent.

Maffio. Messieurs, voilà des gens de mauvaise mine qui nous regardent un peu curieusement. Je crois qu’il serait prudent de nous séparer. -ne fais pas de nouvelles folies, frère Gennaro.

Gennaro. Sois tranquille, Maffio. Ta main? -messieurs, bien de la joie cette nuit!
Il rentre chez lui; les autres se dispersent.

ACTE 1 PARTIE 2 SCENE 3

Les deux hommes vêtus de noir.

Premier Homme. Que diable fais-tu là, Rustighello?

Deuxième Homme. J’attends que tu t’en ailles, Astolfo.

Premier Homme. En vérité?

Deuxième Homme. Et toi, que fais-tu là, Astolfo?

Premier Homme. J’attends que tu t’en ailles, Rustighello.

Deuxième Homme. à qui donc as-tu affaire, Astolfo?

Premier Homme. à l’homme qui vient d’entrer là. Et toi, à qui en veux-tu?

Deuxième Homme. Au même.

Premier Homme. Diable!

Deuxième Homme. Qu’est-ce que tu en veux faire?

Premier Homme. Le mener chez la duchesse. -et toi?

Deuxième Homme. Je veux le mener chez le duc.

Premier Homme. Diable!

Deuxième Homme. Qu’est-ce qui l’attend chez la duchesse?

Premier Homme. L’amour, sans doute. -et chez le duc?

Deuxième Homme. Probablement, la potence.

Premier Homme. Comment faire? Il ne peut pas être à la fois chez le duc et chez la duchesse, amant heureux et pendu.

Deuxième Homme. Voici un ducat. Jouons à croix ou pile à qui de nous deux aura l’homme.

Premier Homme. C’est dit.

Deuxième Homme. Ma foi, si je perds, je dirai tout bonnement au duc que j’ai trouvé l’oiseau déniché. Cela m’est bien égal les affaires du duc. Il jette un ducat en l’air.
Premier Homme. Pile.

Deuxième Homme, regardant à terre. C’est face.

Premier Homme. L’homme sera pendu. Prends-le. Adieu.

Deuxième Homme. Bonsoir.

L’autre une fois disparu, il ouvre la porte basse sous le balcon, y entre et revient un moment après accompagné de quatre sbires avec lesquels il va frapper à la porte de la maison où est entré Gennaro. La toile tombe.

ACTE 2 PARTIE 1 SCENE 1

Une salle du palais ducal de Ferrare. Tentures de cuir de Hongrie frappées d’arabesques d’or. Ameublement magnifique dans le goût de la fin du quinzième siècle en Italie. -le fauteuil ducal en velours rouge, brodé aux armes de la maison d’Este. à côté, une table couverte de velours rouge. -au fond, une grande porte. à droite, une petite porte. à gauche, une autre petite porte masquée. -derrière la petite porte masquée, on voit, dans un compartiment ménagé sur le théâtre, la naissance d’un escalier en spirale qui s’enfonce sous le plancher et qui est éclairé par une longue et étroite fenêtre grillée. Don Alphonse D’Este, en magnifique costume à ses couleurs. Rustighello, vêtu des mêmes couleurs, mais d’étoffes plus simples.

Rustighello. Monseigneur le duc, voilà vos premiers ordres exécutés. J’en attends d’autres.

Don Alphonse. Prends cette clef. Va à la galerie de Numa. Compte tous les panneaux de la boiserie à partir de la grande figure peinte qui est près de la porte, et qui représente Hercule, fils de Jupiter, un de mes ancêtres. Arrivé au vingt-troisième panneau, tu verras une petite ouverture cachée dans la gueule d’une guivre dorée, qui est une guivre de Milan. C’est Ludovic-Le-Maure qui a fait faire ce panneau. Introduis la clef dans cette ouverture. Le panneau tournera sur ses gonds comme une porte. Dans l’armoire secrète qu’il recouvre, tu verras sur un plateau de cristal un flacon d’or et un flacon d’argent avec deux coupes en émail. Dans le flacon d’argent il y a de l’eau pure. Dans le flacon d’or il y a du vin préparé. Tu apporteras le plateau, sans y rien déranger, dans le cabinet voisin de cette chambre, Rustighello, et si tu as jamais entendu des gens dont les dents claquaient de terreur à parler de ce fameux poison des Borgia qui, en poudre, est blanc et scintillant comme de la poussière de marbre de Carrare, et qui, mêlé au vin, change du vin de Romorantin en vin de Syracuse, tu te garderas de toucher au flacon d’or.

Rustighello. Est-ce là tout, monseigneur?

Don Alphonse. Non. Tu prendras ta meilleure épée, et tu te tiendras dans le cabinet, debout, derrière la porte, de manière à entendre tout ce qui se passera ici, et à pouvoir entrer au premier signal que je te donnerai avec cette clochette d'argent, dont tu connais le son.

Il montre une clochette sur la table.

— si j'appelle simplement: -Rustighello! -tu entreras avec le plateau. Si je secoue la clochette, tu entreras avec l'épée.

Rustighello. Il suffit, monseigneur.

Don Alphonse. Tu tiendras ton épée nue à la main, afin de n'avoir pas la peine de la tirer.
Rustighello. Bien.

Don Alphonse. Rustighello! Prends deux épées. Une peut se briser. -va.

Rustighello sort par la petite porte. Un Huissier, entrant par la porte du fond. Notre dame la duchesse demande à parler à notre seigneur le duc.

Don Alphonse. Faites entrer ma dame.

ACTE 2 PARTIE 1 SCENE 2

Don Alphonse, dona Lucrezia.

Dona Lucrezia, entrant avec impétuosité. Monsieur, monsieur, ceci est indigne, ceci est odieux, ceci est infâme. Quelqu’un de votre peuple, -savez-vous cela, don Alphonse? -vient de mutiler le nom de votre femme gravé au-dessous de mes armoiries de famille sur la façade de votre propre palais. La chose s’est faite en plein jour, publiquement, par qui? Je l’ignore, mais c’est bien injurieux et bien téméraire. On a fait de mon nom un écriteau d’ignominie, et votre populace de Ferrare, qui est bien la plus infâme populace de l’Italie, monseigneur, est là qui ricane autour de mon blason comme autour d’un pilori. Est-ce que vous vous imaginez, don Alphonse, que je m’accommode de cela, et que je n’aimerais pas mieux mourir en une fois d’un coup de poignard qu’en mille fois de la piqûre envenimée du sarcasme et du quolibet? Pardieu, monsieur, on me traite étrangement dans votre seigneurie de Ferrare! Ceci commence à me lasser, et je vous trouve l’air trop gracieux et trop tranquille pendant qu’on traîne dans les ruisseaux de votre ville la renommée de votre femme, déchiquetée à belles dents par l’injure et la calomnie. Il me faut une réparation éclatante de ceci, je vous en préviens, monsieur le duc. Préparez-vous à faire justice. C’est un événement sérieux qui arrive là, voyez-vous? Est-ce que vous croyez par hasard que je ne tiens à l’estime de personne au monde, et que mon mari peut se dispenser d’être mon chevalier? Non, non, monseigneur; qui épouse protége; qui donne la main donne le bras. J’y compte. Tous les jours ce sont de nouvelles injures, et jamais je ne vous en vois ému. Est-ce que cette boue dont on me couvre ne vous éclabousse pas, don Alphonse? Allons, sur mon âme, courroucez-vous donc un peu, que je vous voie, une fois dans votre vie, vous fâcher à mon sujet, monsieur! Vous êtes amoureux de moi, dites-vous quelquefois? Soyez-le donc de ma gloire. Vous êtes jaloux? Soyez-le de ma renommée! Si j’ai doublé par ma dot vos domaines héréditaires; si je vous ai apporté en mariage, non-seulement la rose d’or et la bénédiction du saint-père, mais ce qui tient plus de place sur la surface du monde, Sienne, Rimini, Cesena, Spolette et Piombino, et plus de villes que vous n’aviez de châteaux, et plus de duchés que vous n’aviez de baronnies; si j’ai fait de vous le plus puissant gentilhomme de l’Italie, ce n’est pas une raison, monsieur, pour que vous laissiez votre peuple me railler, me publier et m’insulter; pour que vous laissiez votre Ferrare montrer du doigt à toute l’Europe votre femme plus méprisée et plus bas placée que la servante des valets de vos palefreniers; ce n’est pas une raison, dis-je, pour que vos sujets ne puissent me voir passer au milieu d’eux sans dire: -ha! Cette femme!… -or, je vous le déclare, monsieur, je veux que le crime d’aujourd’hui soit recherché et notablement puni, ou je m’en plaindrai au pape, je m’en plaindrai au valentinois qui est à Forli avec quinze mille hommes de guerre; et voyez maintenant si cela vaut la peine de vous lever de votre fauteuil!

Don Alphonse. Madame, le crime dont vous vous plaignez m’est connu.

Dona Lucrezia. Comment, monsieur! Le crime vous est connu, et le criminel n’est pas découvert!
Don Alphonse. Le criminel est découvert.

Dona Lucrezia. Vive Dieu! S’il est découvert, comment se fait-il qu’il ne soit pas arrêté?

Don Alphonse. Il est arrêté, madame.

Dona Lucrezia. Sur mon âme, s’il est arrêté, d’où vient qu’il n’est pas encore puni?

Don Alphonse. Il va l’être. J’ai voulu d’abord avoir votre avis sur le châtiment.

Dona Lucrezia. Et vous avez bien fait, monseigneur! -où est-il?

Don Alphonse. Ici.

Dona Lucrezia. Ah, ici! -il me faut un exemple, entendez-vous, monsieur? C’est un crime de lèze-majesté. Ces crimes-là font toujours tomber la tête qui les conçoit et la main qui les exécute. -ah! Il est ici! Je veux le voir.

Don Alphonse. C’est facile.

Appelant. — Bautista!

L’huissier reparaît.

Dona Lucrezia. Encore un mot, monsieur, avant que le coupable soit introduit. -quel que soit cet homme, fût-il de votre ville, fût-il de votre maison, don Alphonse, donnez-moi votre parole de duc couronné qu’il ne sortira pas d’ici vivant.

Don Alphonse. Je vous la donne. -je vous la donne, entendez-vous bien, madame?

Dona Lucrezia. C’est bien. Hé, sans doute j’entends. Amenez-le maintenant, que je l’interroge moi-même! -mon dieu, qu’est-ce que je leur ai donc fait à ces gens de Ferrare pour me persécuter ainsi!

Don Alphonse, à l’huissier. Faites entrer le prisonnier.

La porte du fond s’ouvre. On voit paraître Gennaro désarmé entre deux pertuisaniers. Dans le même moment, on voit Rustighello monter l’escalier dans le petit compartiment à gauche, derrière la porte masquée; il tient à la main un plateau sur lequel il y a un flacon doré, un flacon argenté et deux coupes. Il pose le plateau sur l’appui de la fenêtre, tire son épée et se place derrière la porte.

ACTE 2 PARTIE 1 SCENE 3

Les mêmes, Gennaro.

Dona Lucrezia. Gennaro!

Don Alphonse, s’approchant d’elle, bas et avec un sourire.

Est-ce que vous connaissez cet homme?

Dona Lucrezia. C’est Gennaro! -quelle fatalité, mon dieu! Elle le regarde avec angoisse; il détourne les yeux.

Gennaro. Monseigneur le duc, je suis un simple capitaine et je vous parle avec le respect qui convient. Votre altesse m’a fait saisir dans mon logis ce matin; que me veut-elle!

Don Alphonse. Seigneur capitaine, un crime de lèze-majesté humaine a été commis ce matin vis à vis la maison que vous habitez. Le nom de notre bien-aimée épouse et cousine dona Lucrezia Borgia a été insolemment balafré sur la face de notre palais ducal. Nous cherchons le coupable.

Dona Lucrezia. Ce n’est pas lui! Il y a méprise, don Alphonse. Ce n’est pas ce jeune homme!

Don Alphonse. D’où le savez-vous?

Dona Lucrezia. J’en suis sûre. Ce jeune homme est de Venise et non de Ferrare. Ainsi…

Don Alphonse. Qu’est-ce que cela prouve?

Dona Lucrezia. Le fait a eu lieu ce matin, et je sais qu’il a passé la matinée chez une nommée Fiametta.

Gennaro. Non, madame.

Don Alphonse. Vous voyez bien que votre altesse est mal instruite. Laissez-moi l'interroger. -capitaine Gennaro, êtes-vous celui qui a commis le crime?

Dona Lucrezia, éperdue. On étouffe ici! De l'air! De l'air! J'ai besoin de respirer un peu!

Elle va à une fenêtre, et en passant à côté de Gennaro, elle lui dit bas et rapidement: — dis que ce n'est pas toi!
Don Alphonse, à part. Elle lui a parlé bas.

Gennaro. Duc Alphonse, les pêcheurs de Calabre qui m'ont élevé, et qui m'ont trempé tout jeune dans la mer pour me rendre fort et hardi, m'ont enseigné cette maxime, avec laquelle on peut risquer souvent sa vie, jamais son honneur: -fais ce que tu dis, dis ce que tu fais. -duc Alphonse, je suis l'homme que vous cherchez.

Don Alphonse, se tournant vers dona Lucrezia. Vous avez ma parole de duc couronné, madame.

Dona Lucrezia. J'ai deux mots à vous dire en particulier, monseigneur.

Le duc fait signe à l'huissier et aux gardes de se retirer avec le prisonnier dans la salle voisine.

ACTE 2 PARTIE 1 SCENE 4

Dona Lucrezia. Don Alphonse.

Don Alphonse. Que me voulez-vous, madame?

Dona Lucrezia. Ce que je vous veux, don Alphonse, c’est que je ne veux pas que ce jeune homme meure.

Don Alphonse. Il n’y a qu’un instant, vous êtes entrée chez moi comme la tempête, irritée et pleurante, vous vous êtes plaint à moi d’un outrage fait à vous, vous avez réclamé avec injure et cris la tête du coupable, vous m’avez demandé ma parole ducale qu’il ne sortirait pas d’ici vivant, je vous l’ai loyalement octroyée, et maintenant vous ne voulez pas qu’il meure! -par Jésus, madame, ceci est nouveau.

Dona Lucrezia. Je ne veux pas que ce jeune homme meure, monsieur le duc!

Don Alphonse. Madame, les gentilhommes aussi prouvés que moi n’ont pas coutume de laisser leur foi en gage. Vous avez ma parole, il faut que je la retire. J’ai juré que le coupable mourrait, il mourra. Sur mon ame, vous pouvez choisir le genre de mort.

Dona Lucrezia, d’un air riant et plein de douceur. Don Alphonse, don Alphonse, en vérité, nous disons là des folies vous et moi. Tenez, c’est vrai, je suis une femme pleine de déraison. Mon père m’a gâtée; que voulez-vous? On a depuis mon enfance obéi à tous mes caprices. Ce que je voulais il y a un quart d’heure, je ne le veux plus à présent. Vous savez bien, don Alphonse, que j’ai toujours été ainsi. Tenez, asseyez-vous là, près de moi, et causons un peu, tendrement, cordialement, comme mari et femme, comme deux bons amis.

Don Alphonse, prenant de son côté un air de galanterie. Dona Lucrezia, vous êtes ma dame, et je suis trop heureux qu’il vous plaise de m’avoir un instant à vos pieds.

Il s’assied près d’elle.

Dona Lucrezia. Comme cela est bon de s’entendre! Savez-vous bien, Alphonse, que je vous aime encore comme le premier jour de mon mariage, ce jour où vous fîtes une si éblouissante entrée à Rome, entre Monsieur De Valentinois, mon frère, et monsieur le cardinal Hippolyte D’Este, le vôtre. J’étais sur le balcon des degrés de saint-Pierre. Je me rappelle encore votre beau cheval blanc chargé d’orfèvrerie d’or, et l’illustre mine de roi que vous aviez dessus!

Don Alphonse. Vous étiez vous-même bien belle, madame, et bien rayonnante sous votre dais de brocard d’argent.

Dona Lucrezia. Oh! Ne me parlez pas de moi, monseigneur, quand je vous parle de vous. Il est certain que toutes les princesses de l’Europe m’envient d’avoir épousé le meilleur chevalier de la chrétienté. Et moi je vous aime vraiment comme si j’avais dix-huit ans. Vous savez que je vous aime, n’est-ce pas, Alphonse? Vous n’en doutez jamais au moins. Je suis froide quelquefois, et distraite; cela vient de mon caractère, non de mon cœur. Ecoutez, Alphonse, si votre altesse m’en grondait doucement, je me corrigerais bien vite. La bonne chose de s’aimer comme nous faisons! Donnez-moi votre main, -embrassez-moi, don Alphonse! -en vérité, j’y songe maintenant, il est bien ridicule qu’un prince et une princesse comme vous et moi, qui sont assis côte à côte sur le plus beau trône ducal qui soit au monde, et qui s’aiment, aient été sur le point de se quereller pour un misérable petit capitaine aventurier vénitien! Il faut chasser cet homme, et n’en plus parler. Qu’il aille où il voudra, ce drôle, n’est-ce pas, Alphonse? Le lion et la lionne ne se courroucent pas d’un moucheron. -savez-vous, monseigneur, que si la couronne ducale était à donner en concours au plus beau cavalier de votre duché de Ferrare, c’est encore vous qui l’auriez. -attendez, que j’aille dire à Bautista de votre part qu’il ait à chasser au plus vite de Ferrare ce Gennaro!

Don Alphonse. Rien ne presse.

Dona Lucrezia, d’un air enjoué. Je voudrais n’avoir plus à y songer. -allons, monsieur, laissez-moi terminer cette affaire à ma guise!

Don Alphonse. Il faut que celle-ci se termine à la mienne.

Dona Lucrezia. Mais enfin, mon Alphonse, vous n’avez pas de raison pour vouloir la mort de cet homme?

Don Alphonse. Et la parole que je vous ai donnée? Le serment d’un roi est sacré.

Dona Lucrezia. Cela est bon à dire au peuple. Mais de vous à moi, Alphonse, nous savons ce que c’est. Le saint-père avait promis à Charles VIII de France la vie de Zizimi, sa sainteté n’en a pas moins fait mourir Zizimi. Monsieur de Valentinois s’était constitué sur parole ôtage du même enfant Charles VIII, Monsieur de Valentinois s’est évadé du camp français dès qu’il a pu. Vous-même, vous aviez promis aux Petrucci de leur rendre Sienne. Vous ne l’avez pas fait ni dû faire. Hé! L’histoire des pays est pleine de cela. Ni rois ni nations ne pourraient vivre un jour avec la rigidité des sermens qu’on tiendrait. Entre nous, Alphonse, une parole jurée n’est une nécessité que quand il n’y en a pas d’autre.

Don Alphonse. Pourtant, dona Lucrezia, un serment…

Dona Lucrezia. Ne me donnez pas de ces mauvaises raisons-là. Je ne suis pas une sotte. Dites-moi plutôt, mon cher Alphonse, si vous avez quelque motif d’en vouloir à ce Gennaro. Non? Eh bien! Accordez-moi sa vie. Vous m’aviez bien accordé sa mort. Qu’est-ce que cela vous fait? S’il me plaît de lui pardonner. C’est moi qui suis l’offensée.

Don Alphonse. C’est justement parce qu’il vous a offensée, mon amour, que je ne veux pas lui faire grâce.

Dona Lucrezia. Si vous m’aimez, Alphonse, vous ne me refuserez pas plus long-temps. Et s’il me plaît d’essayer de la clémence, à moi? C’est un moyen de me faire aimer de votre peuple. Je veux que votre peuple m’aime. La miséricorde, Alphonse, cela fait ressembler un roi à Jésus-Christ. Soyons des souverains miséricordieux. Cette pauvre Italie a assez de tyrans sans nous depuis le baron vicaire du pape jusqu’au pape vicaire de Dieu. Finissons-en, cher Alphonse. Mettez ce Gennaro en liberté. C’est un caprice, si vous voulez; mais c’est quelque chose de sacré et d’auguste que le caprice d’une femme, quand il sauve la tête d’un homme.

Don Alphonse. Je ne puis, chère Lucrèce.

Dona Lucrezia. Vous ne pouvez? Mais enfin pourquoi ne pouvez-vous pas m’accorder quelque chose d’aussi insignifiant que la vie de ce capitaine?

Don Alphonse. Vous me demandez pourquoi, mon amour?

Dona Lucrezia. Oui, pourquoi?

Don Alphonse. Parce que ce capitaine est votre amant, madame!

Dona Lucrezia. Ciel!

Don Alphonse. Parce que vous l’avez été chercher à Venise! Parce que vous l’iriez chercher en enfer! Parce que je vous ai suivie pendant que vous le suiviez! Parce que je vous ai vue, masquée et haletante, courir après lui comme la louve après sa proie! Parce que tout à l’heure encore vous le couviez d’un regard plein de pleurs et plein de flamme! Parce que vous vous êtes prostituée à lui, sans aucun doute, madame! Parce que c’est assez de honte et d’infamie et d’adultère comme cela! Parce qu’il est temps que je venge mon honneur et que je fasse couler autour de mon lit un fossé de sang, entendez-vous, madame!

Dona Lucrezia. Don Alphonse…

Don Alphonse. Taisez-vous. -veillez sur vos amants désormais, Lucrèce! La porte par laquelle on entre dans votre chambre de nuit, mettez-y tel huissier qu’il vous plaira; mais à la porte par où l’on sort, il y aura maintenant un portier de mon choix, -le bourreau!

Dona Lucrezia. Monseigneur, je vous jure…

Don Alphonse. Ne jurez pas. Les sermens, cela est bon pour le peuple. Ne me donnez pas de ces mauvaises raisons-là.

Dona Lucrezia. Si vous saviez…

Don Alphonse. Tenez, madame, je hais toute votre abominable famille de Borgia, et vous toute la première, que j’ai si follement aimée! Il faut que je vous dise un peu cela à la fin, c’est une chose honteuse, inouie et merveilleuse de voir alliées en nos deux personnes la maison d’Este, qui vaut mieux que la maison de Valois et que la maison de Tudor, la maison d’Este, dis-je, et la famille Borgia, qui ne s’appelle pas même Borgia, qui s’appelle Lenzuoli, ou Lenzolio, on ne sait quoi! J’ai horreur de votre frère César, qui a des taches de sang naturelles au visage! De votre frère César, qui a tué votre frère Jean! J’ai horreur de votre mère la Rosa Vanozza, la vieille fille de joie espagnole qui scandalise Rome après avoir scandalisé Valence! Et quant à vos neveux prétendus, les ducs de Sermoneto et de Nepi, de beaux ducs, ma foi! Des ducs d’hier! Des ducs faits avec des duchés volés! Laissez-moi finir. J’ai horreur de votre père, qui est pape, et qui a un sérail de femmes comme le sultan des turcs Bajazet; de votre père, qui est l’antéchrist; de votre père, qui peuple le bagne de personnes illustres et le sacré collége de bandits, si bien qu’en les voyant tous vêtus de rouge, galériens et cardinaux, on se demande si ce sont les galériens qui sont les cardinaux et les cardinaux qui sont les galériens! -allez maintenant!

Dona Lucrezia. Monseigneur! Monseigneur! Je vous demande, à genoux et à mains jointes, au nom de Jésus et de Marie, au nom de votre père et de votre mère, monseigneur, je vous demande la vie de ce capitaine.

Don Alphonse. Voilà aimer! -vous pourrez faire de son cadavre ce qu’il vous plaira, madame, et je prétends que ce soit avant une heure.

Dona Lucrezia. Grâce pour Gennaro!

Don Alphonse. Si vous pouviez lire la ferme résolution qui est dans mon ame, vous n’en parleriez pas plus que s’il était déjà mort.

Dona Lucrezia, se relevant. Ah! Prenez garde à vous, don Alphonse de Ferrare, mon quatrième mari!

Don Alphonse. Oh! Ne faites pas la terrible, madame! Sur mon ame, je ne vous crains pas! Je sais vos allures. Je ne me laisserai pas empoisonner comme votre premier mari, ce pauvre gentilhomme d'Espagne dont je ne sais plus le nom, ni vous non plus! Je ne me laisserai pas chasser comme votre second mai, Jean Sforza, seigneur de Pesaro, cet imbécille! Je ne me laisserai pas tuer à coups de pique, sur n'importe quel escalier, comme le troisième, don Alphonse D'Aragon, faible enfant dont le sang n'a guère plus taché les dalles que de l'eau pure! Tout beau! Moi je suis un homme, madame. Le nom d'Hercule est souvent porté dans ma famille. Par le ciel! J'ai des soldats plein ma ville et plein ma seigneurie, et j'en suis un moi-même, et je n'ai point encore vendu, comme ce pauvre roi de Naples, mes bons canons d'artillerie au pape, votre saint père!

Dona Lucrezia. Vous vous repentirez de ces paroles, monsieur. Vous oubliez qui je suis…

Don Alphonse. Je sais fort bien qui vous êtes, mais je sais aussi où vous êtes. Vous êtes la fille du pape, mais vous n'êtes pas à Rome; vous êtes la gouvernante de Spolette, mais vous n'êtes pas à Spolette; vous êtes la femme, la sujette et la servante d'Alphonse, duc de Ferrare, et vous êtes à Ferrare!
Dona Lucrezia, toute pâle de terreur et de colère, regarde fixement le duc et recule lentement devant lui, jusqu'à un fauteuil où elle vient tomber comme brisée.

— ah! Cela vous étonne, vous avez peur de moi, madame, jusqu'ici c'était moi qui avais peur de vous. J'entends qu'il en soit ainsi désormais, et pour commencer, voici le premier de vos amans sur lequel je mets la main, il mourra.

Dona Lucrezia, d'une voix faible. Raisonnons un peu, don Alphonse. Si cet homme est celui qui a commis envers moi le crime de lèze-majesté, il ne peut être en même temps mon amant…

Don Alphonse. Pourquoi non? Dans un accès de dépit, de colère, de jalousie! Car il est peut-être jaloux aussi, lui. D’ailleurs, est-ce que je sais, moi? Je veux que cet homme meure. C’est ma fantaisie. Ce palais est plein de soldats qui me sont dévoués et qui ne connaissent que moi. Il ne peut échapper. Vous n’empêcherez rien, madame. J’ai laissé à votre altesse le choix du genre de mort, décidez-vous.

Dona Lucrezia, se tordant les mains. ô mon dieu! ô mon dieu! ô mon dieu!

Don Alphonse. Vous ne répondez pas? Je vais le faire tuer dans l’antichambre à coups d’épée.

Il va pour sortir, elle lui saisit le bras.

Dona Lucrezia. Arrêtez!

Don Alphonse. Aimez-vous mieux lui verser vous-même un verre de vin de Syracuse?

Dona Lucrezia. Gennaro!

Don Alphonse. Il faut qu’il meure.

Dona Lucrezia. Pas à coups d’épée!

Don Alphonse. La manière m’importe peu. -que choisissez-vous?

Dona Lucrezia. L’autre chose.

Don Alphonse. Vous aurez soin de ne pas vous tromper, et de lui verser vous-même du flacon d’or que vous savez? Je serai là d’ailleurs. Ne vous figurez pas que je vais vous quitter.

Dona Lucrezia. Je ferai ce que vous voulez.

Don Alphonse. Bautista!

L’huissier reparaît.
— ramenez le prisonnier.

Dona Lucrezia. Vous êtes un homme affreux, monseigneur!

ACTE 2 PARTIE 1 SCENE 5

Les mêmes, Gennaro, les gardes.

Don Alphonse. Qu’est-ce que j’entends dire, seigneur Gennaro? Que ce que vous avez fait ce matin, vous l’avez fait par étourderie et bravade, et sans intention méchante, que madame la duchesse vous pardonne, et que d’ailleurs vous êtes un vaillant. Par ma mère, s’il en est ainsi, vous pouvez retourner sain et sauf à Venise. à dieu ne plaise que je prive la magnifique république de Venise d’un bon domestique et la chrétienté d’un bras fidèle qui porte une fidèle épée quand il y a devers les eaux de Chypre et de Candie des idolâtres et des sarrasins!

Gennaro. à la bonne heure, monseigneur! Je ne m’attendais pas, je l’avoue, à ce dénouement. Mais je remercie votre altesse. La clémence est une vertu de race royale, et Dieu fera grâce là haut à qui aura fait grâce ici-bas.

Don Alphonse. Capitaine, est-ce un bon service que celui de la république, et combien y gagnez-vous, bon an, mal an?

Gennaro. J’ai une compagnie de cinquante lances, monseigneur, que je défraie et que j’habille. La sérénissime république, sans compter les aubaines et les épaves, me donne deux mille sequins d’or par an.

Don Alphonse. Et si je vous en offrais quatre mille, prendriez-vous service chez moi?

Gennaro. Je ne pourrais. Je suis encore pour cinq ans au service de la république. Je suis lié.

Don Alphonse. Comment? Lié!

Gennaro. Par serment.

Don Alphonse, bas à dona Lucrezia. Il paraît que ces gens-là tiennent les leurs, madame.

Haut. — n’en parlons plus, seigneur Gennaro.

Gennaro. Je n’ai fait aucune lâcheté pour obtenir la vie sauve; mais, puisque votre altesse me la laisse, voici ce que je puis lui dire maintenant. Votre altesse se souvient de l’assaut de Faenza, il y a deux ans. Monseigneur le duc Hercule D’Este, votre père, y courut grand péril de la part de deux cranequiniers du Valentinois qui l’allaient tuer. Un soldat aventurier lui sauva la vie.

Don Alphonse. Oui, et l’on n’a jamais pu retrouver ce soldat.

Gennaro. C’était moi.
Don Alphonse. Pardieu, mon capitaine, ceci mérite récompense. — est-ce que vous n’accepteriez pas cette bourse de sequins d’or?

Gennaro. Nous faisons serment, en prenant le service de la république, de ne recevoir aucun argent des souverains étrangers. Cependant, si votre altesse le permet, je prendrai cette bourse, et je la distribuerai en mon nom aux braves soldats que voici. Il montre les gardes.

Don Alphonse. Faites.

Gennaro prend la bourse.

— mais alors vous boirez avec moi, suivant le vieil usage de nos ancêtres, comme bons amis que nous sommes, un verre de mon vin de Syracuse.

Gennaro. Volontiers, monseigneur.

Don Alphonse. Et pour vous faire honneur comme à quelqu’un qui a sauvé mon père, je veux que ce soit madame la duchesse elle-même qui vous le verse. Gennaro s’incline et se retourne pour aller distribuer l’argent aux soldats au fond du théâtre.

Le duc appelle. — Rustighello!

Rustighello paraît avec le plateau.

— pose le plateau là, sur cette table. — bien.

Prenant dona Lucrezia par la main.

— madame, écoutez ce que je vais dire à cet homme.

— Rustighello, retourne te placer derrière cette porte avec ton épée nue à la main; si tu entends le bruit de cette clochette, tu entreras.

Va. Rustighello sort, et on le voit se replacer derrière la porte.

— madame, vous verserez vous-même à boire au jeune homme, et vous aurez soin de verser du flacon d’or que voici.

Dona Lucrezia, pâle et d’une voix faible. Oui. -si vous saviez ce que vous faites en ce moment, et combien c’est une chose horrible, vous frémiriez vous-même, tout dénaturé que vous êtes, monseigneur!

Don Alphonse. Ayez soin de ne pas vous tromper de flacon. -hé bien, capitaine!

Gennaro, qui a fini sa distribution d’argent, revient sur le devant du théâtre. Le duc se verse à boire dans une des deux coupes d’émail avec le flacon d’argent, et prend la coupe qu’il porte à ses lèvres.
Gennaro. Je suis confus de tant de bonté, monseigneur.

Don Alphonse. Madame, versez à boire au seigneur Gennaro. — quel âge avez-vous, capitaine?

Gennaro, saisissant l’autre coupe et la présentant à la duchesse.

Vingt ans.

Don Alphonse, bas à la duchesse, qui essaie de prendre le flacon d’argent.

Le flacon d’or, madame!

Elle prend en tremblant le flacon d’or. — ah çà, vous devez être amoureux?

Gennaro. Qui est-ce qui ne l’est pas un peu, monseigneur?

Don Alphonse. Savez-vous, madame, que c’eût été une cruauté que d’enlever ce capitaine à la vie, à l’amour, au soleil d’Italie, à la beauté de son âge de vingt ans, à son glorieux métier de guerre et d’aventure par où toutes les maisons royales ont commencé, aux fêtes, aux bals masqués, aux gais carnavals de Venise, où il se trompe tant de maris, et aux belles femmes que ce jeune homme peut aimer et qui doivent aimer ce jeune homme, n’est-ce pas, madame? -versez donc à boire au capitaine.

Bas. — si vous hésitez, je fais entrer Rustighello.

Elle verse à boire à Gennaro sans dire une parole.

Gennaro. Je vous remercie, monseigneur, de me laisser vivre pour ma pauvre mère.

Dona Lucrezia, à part. Oh! Horreur!

Don Alphonse, buvant. à votre santé, capitaine Gennaro, et vivez beaucoup d’années!

Gennaro. Monseigneur, Dieu vous le rende!

Il boit.

Dona Lucrezia, à part. Ciel!

Don Alphonse, à part. C’est fait.

Haut. — sur ce, je vous quitte, mon capitaine. Vous partirez pour Venise quand vous voudrez.

Bas à dona Lucrezia. — remerciez-moi, madame, je vous laisse tête à tête avc lui. Vous devez avoir des adieux à lui faire. Vivez avec lui, si bon vous semble, son dernier quart d’heure.
Il sort, les gardes le suivent.

ACTE 2 PARTIE 1 SCENE 6

Dona Lucrezia, Gennaro. On voit toujours dans le compartiment Rustighello immobile derrière la porte masquée.

Dona Lucrezia. Gennaro! -vous êtes empoisonné!

Gennaro. Empoisonné, madame!

Dona Lucrezia. Empoisonné!

Gennaro. J’aurais dû m’en douter, le vin étant versé par vous.

Dona Lucrezia. Oh! Ne m’accablez pas, Gennaro. Ne m’ôtez pas le peu de force qui me reste et dont j’ai besoin encore pour quelques instans. -écoutez-moi. Le duc est jaloux de vous, le duc vous croit mon amant. Le duc ne m’a laissé d’autre alternative que de vous voir poignarder devant moi par Rustighello, ou de vous verser moi-même le poison. Un poison redoutable, Gennaro, un poison dont la seule idée fait pâlir tout italien qui sait l’histoire de ces vingt dernières années…

Gennaro. Oui, le poison des Borgia!

Dona Lucrezia. Vous en avez bu. Personne au monde ne connaît de contre-poison à cette composition terrible, personne, excepté le pape, Monsieur De Valentinois, et moi. Tenez, voyez cette fiole que je porte toujours cachée dans ma ceinture. Cette fiole, Gennaro, c’est la vie, c’est la santé, c’est le salut. Une seule goutte sur vos lèvres, et vous êtes sauvé!

Elle veut approcher la fiole des lèvres de Gennaro,

il recule.

Gennaro, la regardant fixement. Madame, qui est-ce qui me dit que ce n’est pas cela qui est du poison?

Dona Lucrezia, tombant anéantie sur le fauteuil. ô mon dieu! Mon dieu!

Gennaro. Ne vous appelez-vous pas Lucrèce Borgia? -est-ce que vous croyez que je ne me souviens pas du frère de Bajazet? Oui, je sais un peu d'histoire! On lui fit accroire, à lui aussi, qu'il était empoisonné par Charles Viii, et on lui donna un contre-poison dont il mourut. Et la main qui lui présenta le contre-poison, la voilà, elle tient cette fiole. Et la bouche qui lui dit de le boire, la voici, elle me parle!

Dona Lucrezia. Misérable femme que je suis!

Gennaro. écoutez, madame, je ne me méprends pas à vos semblans d'amour. Vous avez quelque sinistre dessein sur moi. Cela est visible. Vous devez savoir qui je suis. Tenez, dans ce moment-ci, cela se lit sur votre visage que vous le savez, et il est aisé de voir que vous avez quelque insurmontable raison pour ne me le dire jamais. Votre famille doit connaître la mienne, et peut-être à cette heure ce n'est pas de moi que vous vous vengeriez en m'empoisonnant; mais, qui sait? De ma mère!

Dona Lucrezia. Votre mère, Gennaro! Vous la voyez peut-être autrement qu'elle n'est. Que diriez-vous si ce n'était qu'une femme criminelle comme moi?

Gennaro. Ne la calomniez pas. Oh! Non! Ma mère n'est pas une femme comme vous, Madame Lucrèce! Oh! Je la sens dans mon cœur et je la rêve dans mon ame telle qu'elle est; j'ai son image là, née avec moi; je ne l'aimerais pas comme je l'aime si elle n'était pas digne de moi; le cœur d'un fils ne se trompe pas sur sa mère. Je la haïrais si elle pouvait vous ressembler. Mais non, non. Il y a quelque chose en moi qui me dit bien haut que ma mère n'est pas un de ces démons d'inceste, de luxure, et d'empoisonnement comme vous autres, les belles femmes d'à présent. Oh dieu! J'en suis bien sûr, s'il y a sous le ciel une femme innocente, une femme vertueuse, une femme sainte, c'est ma mère! Oh! Elle est ainsi, et pas autrement! Vous la connaissez, sans doute, Madame Lucrèce, et vous ne me démentirez point!

Dona Lucrezia. Non, cette femme-là, Gennaro, cette mère-là, je ne la connais pas!

Gennaro. Mais devant qui est-ce que je parle ainsi? Qu'est-ce que cela vous fait à vous, Lucrèce Borgia, les joies ou les douleurs d'une mère! Vous n'avez jamais eu d'enfans, à ce qu'on dit, et vous êtes bien heureuse. Car vos enfans, si vous en aviez, savez-vous bien qu'ils vous renieraient, madame? Quel malheureux assez abandonné du ciel voudrait d'une pareille mère? être le fils de Lucrèce Borgia! Dire ma mère à Lucrèce Borgia! Oh!…

Dona Lucrezia. Gennaro! Vous êtes empoisonné; le duc, qui vous croit mort, peut revenir à tout moment; je ne devrais songer qu'à votre salut et à votre évasion, mais vous me dites des choses si terribles que je ne puis faire autrement que de rester là, pétrifiée, à les entendre.

Gennaro. Madame…

Dona Lucrezia. Voyons! Il faut en finir. Accablez-moi, écrasez-moi sous votre mépris; mais vous êtes empoisonné, buvez ceci sur-le-champ!

Gennaro. Que dois-je croire, madame? Le duc est loyal, et j'ai sauvé la vie à son père. Vous, je vous ai offensée, vous avez à vous venger de moi.

Dona Lucrezia. Me venger de toi, Gennaro! -il faudrait donner toute ma vie pour ajouter une heure à la tienne, il faudrait répandre tout mon sang pour t'empêcher de verser une larme, il faudrait m'asseoir au pilori pour te mettre sur un trône, il faudrait payer d'une torture de l'enfer chacun de tes moindre plaisirs, que je n'hésiteraispas, que je ne murmurerais pas, que je serais heureuse, que je baiserais tes pieds, mon Gennaro! Oh! Tu ne sauras jamais rien de mon pauvre misérable cœur, sinon qu'il est plein de toi! -Gennaro, le temps presse, le poison marche, tout à l'heure tu le sentirais, vois-tu! Encore un peu, il ne serait plus temps. La vie ouvre en ce moment deux espaces obscurs devant toi, mais l'un a moins de minutes que l'autre n'a d'années. Il faut te déterminer pour l'un des deux. Le choix est terrible. Laisse-toi guider par moi. Aie pitié de toi et de moi, Gennaro. Bois vite, au nom du ciel!

Gennaro. Allons, c’est bien. S’il y a un crime en ceci, qu’il retombe sur votre tête. Après tout, que vous disiez vrai ou non, ma vie ne vaut pas la peine d’être tant disputée. Donnez.

Il prend la fiole et boit.

Dona Lucrezia. Sauvé! -maintenant il faut repartir pour Venise de toute la vitesse de ton cheval. Tu as de l’argent?

Gennaro. J’en ai.

Dona Lucrezia. Le duc te croit mort. Il sera aisé de lui cacher ta fuite. Attends! Garde cette fiole et porte-la toujours sur toi. Dans des temps comme ceux où nous vivons, le poison est de tous les repas. Toi surtout, tu es exposé. Maintenant pars vite. Lui montrant la porte masquée qu’elle entr’ouvre.

— descends par cet escalier. Il donne dans une des cours du palais Negroni. Il te sera aisé de t’évader par là. N’attends pas jusqu’à demain matin, n’attends pas jusqu’au coucher du soleil, n’attends pas une heure, n’attends pas une demi-heure! Quitte Ferrare sur-le-champ, quitte Ferrare comme si c’était Sodome qui brûle, et ne regarde pas derrière toi! — adieu! — attends encore un instant. J’ai un dernier mot à te dire, mon Gennaro!

Gennaro. Parlez, madame.

Dona Lucrezia. Je te dis adieu en ce moment, Gennao, pour ne plus te revoir jamais. Il ne faut plus songer maintenant à te rencontrer quelquefois sur mon chemin. C’était le seul bonheur que j’eusse au monde. Mais ce serait risquer ta tête. Nous voilà donc pour toujours séparés dans cette vie; hélas! Je ne suis que trop sûre que nous serons séparés aussi dans l’autre. Gennaro! Est-ce que tu ne me diras pas quelque douce parole avant de me quitter ainsi pour l’éternité?…

Gennaro, baissant les yeux. Madame…

Dona Lucrezia. Je viens de te sauver la vie, enfin!

Gennaro. Vous me le dites. Tout ceci est plein de tenèbres. Je ne sais que penser. Tenez, madame, je puis tout vous pardonner, une chose exceptée.

Dona Lucrezia. Laquelle?

Gennaro. Jurez-moi par tout ce qui vous est cher, par ma propre tête, puisque vous m’aimez, par le salut éternel de mon ame, jurez-moi que vos crimes ne sont pour rien dans les malheurs de ma mère.
Dona Lucrezia. Toutes les paroles sont sérieuses avec vous, Gennaro. Je ne puis vous jurer cela.

Gennaro. ô ma mère! Ma mère! La voilà donc l’épouvantable femme qui a fait ton malheur!

Dona Lucrezia. Gennaro!…

Gennaro. Vous l’avez avoué, madame! Adieu! Soyez maudite!

Dona Lucrezia. Et toi, Gennaro! Sois béni! Il sort. -elle tombe évanouie sur le fauteuil.

ACTE 2 PARTIE 2 SCENE 1

La deuxième décoration. La place de Ferrare avec le balcon ducal d’un côté et la maison de Gennaro de l’autre.

— il est nuit.

Don Alphonse, Rustighello, enveloppés de manteaux.

Rustighello. Oui, monseigneur, cela s’est passé ainsi. Avec je ne sais quel philtre elle l’a rendu à la vie, et l’a fait évader par la cour du palais Negroni.

Don Alphonse. Et tu as souffert cela?

Rustighello. Comment l’empêcher? Elle avait verrouillé la porte. J’étais enfermé.

Don Alphonse. Il fallait briser la porte.

Rustighello. Une porte de chêne, un verrou de fer. Chose facile!

Don Alphonse. N’importe! Il fallait briser le verrou, te dis-je; il fallait entrer et le tuer.

Rustighello. D’abord, en supposant que j’eusse pu enfoncer la porte, Madame Lucrève l’aurait couvert de son corps. Il aurait fallu tuer aussi Madame Lucrèce.

Don Alphonse. Hé bien? Après?

Rustighello. Je n’avais pas d’ordre pour elle.

Don Alphonse. Rustighello! Les bons serviteurs sont ceux qui comprennent les princes sans leur donner la peine de tout dire.

Rustighello. Et puis j’aurais craint de brouiller votre altesse avec le pape.

Don Alphonse. Imbécille!

Rustighello. C’était bien embarrassant, monseigneur. Tuer la fille du saint-père!

Don Alphonse. Hé bien, sans la tuer, ne pouvais-tu pas crier, appeler, m’avertir, empêcher l’amant de s’évader?

Rustighello. Oui, et puis le lendemain votre altesse se serait reconciliée avec Madame Lucrèce, et le surlendemain Madame Lucrèce m’aurait fait pendre.

Don Alphonse. Assez. Tu m’as dit que rien n’était encore perdu.
Rustighello. Non. Vous voyez une lumière à cette fenêtre. Le Gennaro n’est pas encore parti. Son valet, que la duchesse avait gagné, est à présent gagné par moi, et m’a tout dit. En ce moment il attend son maître derrière la citadelle avec deux chevaux sellés. Le Gennaro va sortir pour l’aller rejoindre dans un instant.

Don Alphonse. En ce cas, embusquons-nous derrière l’angle de sa maison. Il est nuit noire. Nous le tuerons quand il passera.

Rustighello. Comme il vous plaira.

Don Alphonse. Ton épée est bonne?

Rustighello. Oui.

Don Alphonse. Tu as un poignard?

Rustighello. Il y a deux choses qu’il n’est pas aisé de trouver sous le ciel; c’est un italien sans poignard, et une italienne sans amant.

Don Alphonse. Bien. -tu frapperas des deux mains.

Rustighello. Monseigneur le duc, pourquoi ne le faites-vous pas arrêter tout simplement, et pendre par jugement du fiscal?

Don Alphonse. Il est sujet de Venise, et ce serait déclarer la guerre à la république. Non. Un coup de poignard vient on ne sait d’où, et ne compromet personne. L’empoisonnement vaudrait mieux encore, mais l’empoisonnement est manqué.

Rustighello. Alors, voulez-vous, moseigneur, que j’aille chercher quatre sbires pour le dépêcher sans que vous ayez la peine de vous en mêler?

Don Alphonse mon cher, le seigneur Machiavel m’a dit souvent que, dans ces cas-là, le mieux était que les princes fissent leurs affaires eux-mêmes.

Rustighello. Monseigneur, j’entends venir quelqu’un.

Don Alphonse. Rangeons-nous le long de ce mur. Ils se cachent dans l’ombre, sous le balcon. -paraît Maffio en habit de fête, qui arrive en fredonnant et va frapper à la porte de Gennaro.

ACTE 2 PARTIE 2 SCENE 2

Don Alphonse et Rustighello, cachés. Maffio, Gennaro.

Maffio. Gennaro!

La porte s’ouvre, Gennaro paraît.

Gennaro. C’est toi, Maffio? Veux-tu entrer?

Maffio. Non. Je n’ai que deux mots à te dire. Est-ce que décidément tu ne viens pas ce soir souper avec nous chez la princesse Negroni?

Gennaro. Je ne suis pas convié.

Maffio. Je te présenterai.

Gennaro. Il y a une autre raison. Je dois te dire cela, à toi. Je pars.

Maffio. Comment, tu pars?

Gennaro. Dans un quart d’heure.

Maffio. Pourquoi?

Gennaro. Je te dirai cela à Venise.

Maffio. Affaire d’amour?

Gennaro. Oui, affaire d’amour.

Maffio. Tu agis mal avec moi, Gennaro. Nous avions fait serment de ne jamais nous quitter, d’être inséparables, d’être frères; et voilà que tu pars sans moi!

Gennaro. Viens avec moi!

Maffio. Viens plutôt avec moi, toi! -il vaut bien mieux passer la nuit à table avec de jolies femmes et de gais convives que sur la grande route, entre les bandits et les ravins.

Gennaro. Tu n'étais pas très-sûr ce matin de ta princesse Negroni.

Maffio. Je me suis informé. Jeppo avait raison. C'est une femme charmante et de belle humeur, et qui aime les vers et la musique, voilà tout. Allons, viens avec moi.

Gennaro. Je ne puis.
Maffio. Partir à la nuit close! Tu vas te faire assassiner.

Gennaro. Sois tranquille. Adieu. Bien du plaisir.

Maffio. Frère Gennaro, j'ai mauvaise idée de ton voyage.

Gennaro. Frère Maffio, j'ai mauvaise idée de ton souper.

Maffio. S'il allait t'arriver malheur sans que je fusse là!

Gennaro. Qui sait si je ne me reprocherai pas demain de t'avoir quitté ce soir?

Maffio. Tiens, décidément, ne nous séparons pas. Cédons quelque chose chacun de notre côté. Viens ce soir avec moi chez la Negroni, et demain, au point du jour, nous partirons ensemble. Est-ce dit?

Gennaro. Allons, il faut que je te conte, à toi, Maffio, les motifs de mon départ subit. Tu vas juger si j'ai raison.

Il prend Maffio à part et lui parle à l'oreille.

Rustighello, *sous le balcon, bas à don Alphonse.* Attaquons-nous, monseigneur?

Don Alphonse, *bas.* Voyons la fin de ceci.

Maffio, *éclatant de rire après le récit de Gennaro.* Veux-tu que je te dise, Gennaro? Tu es dupe. Il n’y a dans toute cette affaire ni poison, ni contre-poison. Pure comédie. La Lucrèce est amoureuse éperdue de toi, et elle a voulu te faire accroire qu’elle te sauvait la vie, espérant te faire doucement glisser de la reconnaissance à l’amour. Le duc est un bonhomme, incapable d’empoisonner ou d’assassiner qui que ce soit. Tu as sauvé la vie à son père d’ailleurs, et il le sait. La duchesse veut que tu partes, c’est fort bien. Son amourette se déroulerait en effet plus commodément à Venise qu’à Ferrare. Le mari la gêne toujours un peu. Quant au souper de la princesse Negroni, il sera délicieux. Tu y viendras. Que diable! Il faut cependant raisonner un peu et ne rien s’exagérer. Tu sais que je suis prudent, moi, et de bon conseil. Parce qu’il y a eu deux ou trois soupers fameux où les Borgia ont empoisonné, avec de fort bons vins, quelques-uns de leurs meilleurs amis, ce n’est pas une raison pour ne plus souper du tout. Ce n’est pas une raison pour voir toujours du poison dans l’admirable vin de Syracuse et derrière toutes les belles princesses de l’Italie Lucrèce Borgia. Spectres et balivernes que tout cela! à ce compte il n’y aurait que les enfans à la mamelle qui seraient sûrs de ce qu’ils boivent, et qui pourraient souper sans inquiétude. Par Hercule, Gennaro! Sois enfant ou sois homme. Retourne te mettre en nourrice ou viens souper.

Gennaro. Au fait, cela a quelque chose d’étrange de se sauver ainsi la nuit. J’ai l’air d’un homme qui a peur. D’ailleurs, s’il y a du danger à rester, je ne dois pas y laisser Maffio tout seul. Il en sera ce qui pourra. C’est une chance comme une autre. C’est dit. Tu me présenteras à la princesse Negroni. Je vais avec toi.
Maffio, *lui prenant la main.* Vrai dieu! Voilà un ami!

Ils sortent. On les voit s’éloigner vers le fond de la place. Don Alphonse et Rustighello sortent de leur cachette.

Rustighello, *l’épée nue.* Hé bien, qu’attendez-vous, monseigneur? Ils ne sont que deux. Chargez-vous de votre homme. Je me charge de l’autre.

Don Alphonse. Non, Rustighello. Ils vont souper chez la princesse Negroni. Si je suis bien informé…

il s’interrompt et paraît rêver un instant. éclatant de rire. — pardieu! Cela ferait encore mieux mon affaire, et ce serait une plaisante aventure. Attendons à demain.

Ils rentrent au palais.

ACTE 3 SCENE 1

Une salle magnifique du palais Negroni. à droite, une porte bâtarde. Au fond, une grande et très-large porte à deux battans. Au milieu, une table superbement servie à la mode du quinzième siècle. De petits pages noirs, vêtus de brocard d'or, circulent à l'entour. -au moment où la toile se lève, il y a quatorze convives à table, Jeppo, Maffio, Ascanio, Oloferno, Apostolo, Gennaro et Gubetta, et sept jeunes femmes, jolies et très-galamment parées. Tous boivent ou mangent, ou rient à gorge déployée avec leurs voisines, excepté Gennaro qui paraît pensif et silencieux.

Jeppo, Maffio, Ascanio, Oloferno, don Apostolo, Gubetta, Gennaro, des femmes, des pages.

Oloferno, son verre à la main. Vive le vin de Xerès! Xerès de la frontera est une ville du paradis.

Maffio, son verre à la main. Le vin que nous buvons vaut mieux que les histoires que vous nous contez, Jeppo.

Ascanio. Jeppo a la maladie de conter des histoires quand il a bu.

Don Apostolo. L'autre jour, c'était à Venise, chez le sérénissime doge Barbarigo; aujourd'hui, c'est à Ferrare, chez la divine princesse Negroni.

Jeppo. L'autre jour, c'était une histoire lugubre; aujourd'hui, c'est une histoire gaie.

Maffio. Une histoire gaie, Jeppo! Comment il advint que don Siliceo, beau cavalier de trente ans, qui avait perdu son patrimoine au jeu, épousa la très-riche marquise Calpurnia, qui comptait quarante-huit printemps. Par le corps de Bacchus! Vous trouvez cela gai!

Gubetta. C'est triste et commun. Un homme ruiné, qui épouse une femme en ruine. Chose qui se voit tous les jours.

Il se met à manger. De temps en temps, quelques-uns se lèvent de table et viennent causer sur le devant de la scène pendant que l’orgie continue.

La Princesse Negroni, à Maffio, montrant Gennaro. Monsieur le comte Orsini, vous avez là un ami qui me paraît bien triste.

Maffio. Il est toujours ainsi, madame. Il faut que vous me pardonniez de l’avoir amené sans que vous lui eussiez fait la grâce de l’inviter. C’est mon frère d’armes. Il m’a sauvé la vie à l’assaut de Rimini. J’ai reçu à l’attaque du pont de Vicence un coup d’épée qui lui était destiné. Nous ne nous séparons jamais. Nous vivons ensemble. Un bohémien nous a prdit que nous mourrions le même jour.
La Negroni, riant. Vous a-t-il dit si ce serait le soir ou le matin?

Maffio. Il nous a dit que ce serait le matin.

La Negroni, riant plus fort. Votre bohémien ne savait ce qu’il disait. — et vous aimez bien ce jeune homme?

Maffio. Autant qu’un homme peut en aimer un autre.

La Negroni. Eh bien! Vous vous suffisez l’un à l’autre. Vous êtes heureux.

Maffio. L’amitié ne remplit pas tout le cœur, madame.

La Negroni. Mon dieu! Qu’est-ce qui remplit tout le cœur?

Maffio. L’amour.

La Negroni. Vous avez toujours l’amour à la bouche.

Maffio. Et vous dans les yeux.

La Negroni. êtes-vous singulier!

Maffio. êtes-vous belle!

Il lui prend la taille.

La Negroni. Monsieur le comte Orsini, laissez-moi!

Maffio. Un baiser sur votre main?

La Negroni. Non!

Elle lui échappe.

Gubetta, abordant Maffio. Vos affaires sont en bon train près de la princesse.

Maffio. Elle me dit toujours non.

Gubetta. Dans la bouche d’une femme non n’est que le frère aîné de oui.

Jeppo, survenant, à Maffio. Comment trouves-tu madame la princesse Negroni?

Maffio. Adorable. Entre nous, elle commence à m’égratigner furieusement le cœur.

Jeppo. Et son souper?

Maffio. Une orgie parfaite.
Jeppo. La princesse est veuve.

Maffio. On le voit bien à sa gaieté!

Jeppo. J’espère que tu ne te défies plus de son souper?

Maffio. Moi! Comment donc! J’étais fou.

Jeppo, à Gubetta. Monsieur De Belverana, vous ne croiriez pas que Maffio avait peur de venir souper chez la princesse?

Gubetta. Peur? -pourquoi?

Jeppo. Parce que le palais Negroni touche au palais Borgia.

Gubetta. Au diable les Borgia! -et buvons!

Jeppo, bas à Maffio. Ce que j'aime dans ce Belverana, c'est qu'il n'aime pas les Borgia.

Maffio, bas. En effet, il ne manque jamais une occasion de les envoyer au diable avec une grâce toute particulière. Cependant, mon cher Jeppo…

Jeppo. Eh bien!

Maffio. Je l'observe depuis le commencement du souper, ce prétendu espagnol. Il n'a encore bu que de l'eau.

Jeppo. Voilà tes soupçons qui te reprennent, mon bon ami Maffio. Tu as le vin étrangement monotone.

Maffio. Peut-être as-tu raison. Je suis fou.

Gubetta, revenant et regardant Maffio de la tête aux pieds. Savez-vous, Monsieur Maffio, que vous êtes taillé pour vivre quatre-vingt-dix-ans, et que vous ressemblez à un mien grand-père, qui a vécu cet âge, et qui s'appelait comme moi Gil-Basilio-Fernan-Ireneo-Felipe-Frasco-Frasquito comte de Belverana?

Jeppo, bas à Maffio. J'espère que tu ne doutes plus de sa qualité d'espagnol. Il a au moins vingt noms de baptême. — quelle litanie, Monsieur De Belverana!

Gubetta. Hélas! Nos parens ont coutume de nous donner plus de noms à notre baptême que d'écus à notre mariage. Mais qu'ont-ils donc à rire là bas?

à part. — il faut pourtant que les femmes aient un prétexte pour s’en aller. Comment faire?

Il retourne s’asseoir à table.
Oloferno, buvant. Par Hercule! Messieurs! Je n’ai jamais passé soirée plus délicieuse. Mesdames, goûtez de ce vin. Il est plus doux que le vin de Lacryma-Christi, et plus ardent que le vin de Chypre. C’est du vin de Syracuse, messeigneurs!

Gubetta, mangeant. Oloferno est ivre, à ce qu’il paraît.

Oloferno. Mesdames, il faut que je vous dise quelques vers que je viens de faire. Je voudrais être plus poète que je ne le suis pour célébrer d’aussi admirables femmes.

Gubetta. Et moi je voudrais être plus riche que je n’ai l’honneur de l’être pour en donner de pareils à mes amis.

Oloferno. Rien n’est si doux que de chanter une belle femme et un bon repas.

Gubetta. Si ce n’est d’embrasser l’une et de manger l’autre.

Oloferno. Oui, je voudrais être poète. Je voudrais pouvoir m’élever au ciel. Je voudrais avoir deux ailes…

Gubetta. De faisan dans mon assiette.

Oloferno. Je vais pourtant vous dire mon sonnet.

Gubetta. Par le diable, monsieur le marquis Oloferno Vitellozzo! Je vous dispense de nous dire votre sonnet. Laissez-nous boire!

Oloferno. Vous me dispensez de vous dire mon sonnet?

Gubetta. Comme je dispense les chiens de me mordre, le pape de me bénir, et les passans de me jeter des pierres.

Oloferno. Tête-dieu! Vous m’insultez, je crois, monsieur le petit espagnol.

Gubetta. Je ne vous insulte pas, grand colosse d’italien que vous êtes. Je refuse mon attention à votre sonnet. Rien de plus. Mon gosier a plus soif de vin de Chypre que mes oreilles de poésie.

Oloferno. Vos oreilles, monsieur le castillan rapé, je vous les clouerai sur les talons!

Gubetta. Vous êtes un absurde belître! Fi! A-t-on jamais vu lourdaud pareil? S’enivrer de vin de Syracuse, et avoir l’air de s’être soûlé avec de la bière!

Oloferno. Savez-vous bien que je vous couperai en quatre, par la mort-dieu!

Gubetta, tout en découpant un faisan. Je ne vous en dirai pas autant. Je ne découpe pas d’aussi grosses volailles que vous. -mesdames, vous offrirai-je de ce faisan?

Oloferno, se jetant sur un couteau. Pardieu! J’éventrerai ce faquin, fût-il plus gentilhomme que l’empereur!
Les Femmes, se levant de table.

Ciel! Ils vont se battre!

Les Hommes. Tout beau, Oloferno!

Ils désarment Oloferno qui veut se jeter sur Gubetta. Pendant ce temps-là, les femmes disparaissent par la porte latérale.

Oloferno, se débattant. Corps-dieu!

Gubetta. Vous rimez si richement en dieu, mon cher poète, que vous avez mis ces dames en fuite. Vous êtes un fier maladroit.

Jeppo. C’est vrai, cela. Que diable sont-elles devenues?

Maffio. Elles ont eu peur. Couteau qui luit, femme qui fuit.

Ascanio. Bah! Elles vont revenir.

Oloferno, menaçant Gubetta. Je te retrouverai demain, mon petit Belverana d démon!

Gubetta. Demain, tant qu'il vous plaira!

Oloferno va se rasseoir en chancelant avec dépit.

Gubetta éclate de rire. — cet imbécille! Mettre en déroute les plus jolies femmes de Ferrare avec un couteau emmanché dans un sonnet! Se fâcher à propos de vers! Je le crois bien qu'il a des ailes. Ce n'est pas un homme, c'est un oison. Cela perche, cela doit dormir sur une patte, cet Oloferno-là!

Jeppo. Là là, faites la paix, messieurs. Vous vous couperez galamment la gorge demain matin. Par Jupiter, vous vous battrez du moins en gentilshommes, avec des épées, et non avec des couteaux.

Ascanio. à propos, au fait, qu'avons-nous donc fait de nos épées?

Don Apostolo. Vous oubliez qu'on nous les a fait quitter dans l'antichambre.

Gubetta. Et la précaution était bonne, car autrement nous nous serions battus devant les dames; ce dont rougiraient des flamands de Flandre, ivres de tabac!

Gennaro. Bonne précaution, en effet!

Maffio. Pardieu, mon frère Gennaro! Voilà la première parole que tu dis depuis le commencement du souper, et tu ne bois pas! Est-ce que tu songes à Lucrèce Borgia? Gennaro! Tu as décidément quelque amourette avec elle! Ne dis pas non.
Gennaro. Verse-moi à boire, Maffio! Je n'abandonne pas plus mes amis à table qu'au feu.

Un Page Noir, deux flacons à la main. Messeigneurs, du vin de Chypre ou du vin de Syracuse?

Maffio. Du vin de Syracuse. C’est le meilleur. Le page noir remplit tous les verres.

Jeppo. La peste soit d’Oloferno! Est-ce que ces dames ne vont pas revenir?

Il va successivement aux deux portes.

— les portes sont fermées en dehors, messieurs!

Maffio. N’allez-vous pas avoir peur à votre tour, Jeppo! Elles ne veulent pas que nous les poursuivions. C’est tout simple.

Gennaro. Buvons, messeigneurs.

Ils choquent leurs verres.

Maffio. à ta santé, Gennaro! Et puisses-tu bientôt retrouver ta mère!

Gennaro. Que Dieu t’entende! Tous boivent, excepté Gubetta qui jette son vin par-dessus son épaule.

Maffio, bas à Jeppo.

Pour le coup, Jeppo, je l’ai bien vu.

Jeppo, bas. Quoi?

Maffio. L’espagnol n’a pas bu;

jeppo; eh bien?

Maffio. Il a jeté son vin par-dessus son épaule.

Jeppo. Il est ivre, et toi aussi.

Maffio. C’est possible.

Gubetta. Une chanson à boire, messieurs! Je vais vous chanter une chanson à boire qui vaudra mieux que le sonnet du marquis Oloferno. Je jure par le bon vieux crâne de mon père que ce n’est pas moi qui ai fait cette chanson, attendu que je ne suis pas poète, et que je n’ai point l’esprit assez galant pour faire se becqueter deux rimes au bout d’une idée. Voici ma chanson. Elle est adressée à monsieur saint Pierre, célèbre portier du paradis, et elle a pour sujet cette pensée délicate que le ciel du bon Dieu appartient aux buveurs.
Jeppo, bas à Maffio. Il est plus qu’ivre, il est ivrogne.

Tous, excepté Gennaro. La chanson! La chanson!

Gubetta, chantant. Saint Pierre, ouvre ta porte au buveur qui t’apporte une voix pleine et forte pour chanter: domino!

Tous en chœur, excepté Gennaro. (…) ils choquent leurs verres en riant aux éclats. Tout à coup on entend des voix éloignées qui chantent sur un ton lugubre.

Jeppo, riant de plus belle. écoutez, messieurs! -corbacque! Pendant que nous chantons à boire, l’écho chante vêpres.

Tous. écoutons.

Voix au-dehors, un peu plus rapprochées. (…) tous éclatent de rire.

Jeppo. Du plain-chant tout pur.

Maffio. Quelque procession qui passe.

Gennaro. à minuit! C’est un peu tard.

Jeppo. Bah! Continuez, Monsieur De Belverana.

Voix au dehors, qui se rapprochent de plus en plus. (…)

tous rient de plus en plus fort.

Jeppo. Sont-ils braillards, ces moines!

Maffio. Regarde donc, Gennaro. Les lampes s’éteignent ici. Nous voici tout à l’heure dans l’obscurité. Les lampes pâlissent en effet, comme n’ayant plus d’huile.

Voix au-dehors, plus près. (…)

Gennaro. Il me semble que les voix se rapprochent.

Jeppo. La procession me fait l’effet d’être en ce moment sous nos fenêtres.

Maffio. Ce sont les prières des morts.

Ascanio. C’est quelque enterrement.

Jeppo. Buvons à la santé de celui qu’on va enterrer.

Gubetta. Savez-vous s’il n’y en a pas plusieurs?
Jeppo. Hé bien, à la santé de tous?

Apostolo, à Gubetta. Bravo! -et continuons de notre côté notre invocation à saint Pierre.

Gubetta. Parlez donc plus poliment. On dit: à monsieur saint Pierre, honorable huissier et guichetier arenté du paradis.

Il chante.

Saint Pierre, ouvre ta porte au buveur qui t’apporte une voix pleine et forte pour chanter: domino!

Tous. gloria domino!

Gubetta. Au buveur, joyeux chantre, qui porte un si gros ventre qu’on doute, lorsqu’il entre, s’il est homme ou tonneau.

Tous, en choquant leurs verres avec des éclats de rire.

La grande porte du fond s’ouvre silencieusement dans toute sa largeur. On voit au-dehors une vaste salle tapissée en noir, éclairée de quelques flambeaux, avec une grande croix d’argent au fond. Une longue file de pénitens blancs et noirs dont on ne voit que les yeux par les trous de leurs cagoules, croix en tête et torche en main, entre par la grande porte en chantant d’un accent sinistre et d’une voix haute. Puis ils viennent se ranger en silence des deux côtés de la salle, et y restent immobiles comme des statues, pendant que les jeunes gentilshommes les regardent avec stupeur.

Maffio. Qu’est-ce que cela veut dire?

Jeppo, s’efforçant de rire. C’est une plaisanterie. Je gage mon cheval contre un pourceau, et mon nom de Liveretto contre le nom de Borgia, que ce sont nos charmantes comtesses qui se sont déguisées de cette façon pour nous éprouver, et que si nous levons une de ces cagoules au hasard, nous trouverons dessous la figure fraîche et malicieuse d’une jolie femme. — voyez plutôt.

Il va soulever en riant un des capuchons, et il reste pétrifié en voyant dessous le visage livide d’un moine qui demeure immobile, la torche à la main et les yeux baissés. Il laisse tomber le capuchon et recule. — ceci commence à devenir étrange!

Maffio. Je ne sais pourquoi mon sang se fige dans mes veines.

Les Pénitents, chantant d’une voix éclatante. (…)

Jeppo. Quel piége affreux! Nos épées, nos épées! Ah! çà, messieurs, nous sommes chez le démon ici.

ACTE 3 SCENE 2

Les mêmes, dona Lucrezia.

Dona Lucrezia, paraissant tout à coup, vêtue de noir, au seuil de la porte. Vous êtes chez moi!

Tous, excepté Gennaro qui observe tout dans un coin du théâtre où dona Lucrezia ne le voit pas. Lucrèce Borgia!

Dona Lucrezia. Il y a quelques jours, tous, les mêmes qui êtes ici, vous disiez ce nom avec triomphe. Vous le dites aujourd’hui avec épouvate. Oui, vous pouvez me regarder avec vos yeux fixes de terreur. C’est bien moi, messieurs. Je viens vous annoncer une nouvelle, c’est que vous êtes tous empoisonnés, messeigneurs, et qu’il n’y en a pas un de vous qui ait encore une heure à vivre. Ne bougez pas. La salle d’à côté est pleine de piques. à mon tour maintenant, à moi de parler haut et de vous écraser la tête du talon! Jeppo Liveretto, va rejoindre ton oncle Vitelli que j’ai fait poignarder dans les caves du Vatican! Ascanio Petrucci, va retrouver ton cousin Pandolfo, que j’ai assassiné pour lui voler sa ville! Oloferno Vitellozzo, ton oncle t’attend, tu sais bien, Iago D’Appiani, que j’ai empoisonné dans une fête! Maffio Orsini, va parler de moi dans l’autre monde à ton frère de Gravina, que j’ai fait étrangler dans son sommeil! Apostolo Gazella, j’ai fait décapiter ton père Francisco Gazella, j’ai fait égorger ton cousin Alphonse D’Aragon, dis-tu; va les rejoindre! -sur mon âme! Vous m’avez donné un bal à Venise, je vous rends un souper à Ferrare. Fête pour fête, messeigneurs!

Jeppo. Voilà un rude réveil, Maffio!

Maffio. Songeons à Dieu!

Dona Lucrezia. Ah! Mes jeunes amis du carnaval dernier! Vous ne vous attendiez pas à cela? Pardieu! Il me semble que je me venge. Qu’en dites-vous, messieurs? Qui est-ce qui se connaît en vengeance ici? Ceci n’est point mal, je crois! -hein? Qu’en pensez-vous? Pour une femme!

Aux moines. — mes pères, emmenez ces gentilshommes dans la salle voisine qui est préparée, confessez-les, et profitez du peu d’instans qui leur restent pour sauver ce qui peut être encore sauvé de chacun d’eux. — messieurs, que ceux d’entre vous qui ont des âmes y avisent. Soyez tanquilles. Elles sont en bonnes mains. Ces dignes pères sont des moines réguliers de saint-Sixte, auxquels notre saint-père le pape a permis de m’assister dans des occasions comme celle-ci. -et si j’ai eu soin de vos âmes, j’ai eu soin aussi de vos corps. Tenez?

Aux moines qui sont devant la porte du fond. — rangez-vous un peu, mes pères, que ces messieurs voient.
Les moines s’écartent et laissent voir cinq cercueils couverts chacun d’un drap noir rangé devant la porte. — le nombre y est. Il y en a bien cinq. — ah! Jeunes gens! Vous arrachez les entrailles à une malheureuse femme, et vous croyez qu’elle ne se vengera pas! Voici le tien, Jeppo. Maffio, voici le tien. Oloferno, Apostolo, Ascanio, voici les vôtres!

Gennaro, qu’elle n’a pas vu jusqu’alors, faisant un pas. Il en faut un sixième, madame!

Dona Lucrezia. Ciel! Gennaro!

Gennaro. Lui-même.

Dona Lucrezia. Que tout le monde sorte d’ici. -qu’on nous laisse seuls. -Gubetta, quoi qu’il arrive, quoi qu’on puisse entendre du dehors de ce qui va se passer ici, que personne n’y entre!

Gubetta. Il suffit.

Les moines ressortent processionnellement, emmenant avec eux dans leurs files les cinq seigneurs chancelans et éperdus.

ACTE 3 SCENE 3

Gennaro, dona Lucrezia.

Il y a à peine quelques lampes mourantes dans l'appartement. Les portes sont refermées. Dona Lucrezia et Gennaro, restés seuls, s'entre-regardent quelques instans en silence, comme ne sachant par où commencer.

Dona Lucrezia, se parlant à elle-même. C'est Gennaro!

Chant Des Moines au-dehors. (…)

Dona Lucrezia. Encore vous, Gennaro! Toujours vous sous tous les coups que je frappe! Dieu du ciel! Comment vous êtes-vous mêlé à ceci?

Gennaro. Je me doutais de tout.

Dona Lucrezia. Vous êtes empoisonné encore une fois. Vous allez mourir!

Gennaro. Si je veux. -j'ai le contre-poison.

Dona Lucrezia. Ah oui! Dieu soit loué!

Gennaro. Un mot, madame. Vous êtes experte en ces matières. Y a-t-il assez d'élixir dans cette fiole pour sauver les gentilshommes que vos moines viennent d'entraîner dans ce tombeau?

Dona Lucrezia, examinant la fiole. Il y en a à peine assez pour vous, Gennaro!

Gennaro. Vous ne pouvez pas en avoir d'autre sur-le-champ?

Dona Lucrezia. Je vous ai donné tout ce que j'avais.

Gennaro. C'est bien.

Dona Lucrezia. Que faites-vous, Gennaro? Dépêchez-vous donc. Ne jouez pas avec des choses si terribles. On n'a jamais assez tôt bu un contre-poison. Buvez, au nom du ciel! Mon dieu! Quelle imprudence vous avez faite là! Mettez votre vie en sûreté. Je vous ferai sortir du palais par une porte dérobée que je connais. Tout peut se réparer encore. Il est nuit. Des chevaux seront bientôt sellés. Demain matin vous serez loin de Ferrare. N'est-ce pas qu'il s'y fait des choses qui vous épouvantent? Buvez, et partons. Il faut vivre! Il faut vous sauver!

Gennaro, prenant un couteau sur la table. C'est-à-dire que vous allez mourir, madame!
Dona Lucrezia. Comment! Que dites-vous?

Gennaro. Je dis que vous venez d'empoisonner traîtreusement cinq gentilshommes, mes amis, mes meilleurs amis, par le ciel! Et parmi eux, Maffio Orsini, mon frère d'armes, qui m'avait sauvé la vie à Vicence, et avec qui toute injure et toute vengeance m'est commune. Je dis que c'est une action infâme que vous avez faite là, qu'il faut que je venge Maffio et les autres, et que vous allez mourir!

Dona Lucrezia. Terre et cieux!

Gennaro. Faites votre prière, et faites-la courte, madame. Je suis empoisonné. Je n'ai pas le temps d'attendre.

Dona Lucrezia. Bah! Cela ne se peut. Ah bien oui, Gennaro me tuer! Est-ce que cela est possible?

Gennaro. C'est la réalité pure, madame, et je jure dieu qu'à votre place je me mettrais à prier en silence, à mains jointes et à deux genoux. -tenez, voici un fauteuil qui est bon pour cela.

Dona Lucrezia. Non. Je vous dis que c'est impossible. Non, parmi les plus terribles idées qui me traversent l'esprit, jamais celle-ci ne me serait venue. -hé bien, hé bien! Vous levez le couteau! Attendez! Gennaro! J'ai quelque chose à vous dire!

Gennaro. Vite.

Dona Lucrezia. Jette ton couteau, malheureux! Jette-le, te dis-je! Si tu savais… -Gennaro! Sais-tu qui tu es? Sais-tu qui je suis? Tu ignores combien je te tiens de près! Faut-il tout lui dire? Le même sang coule dans nos veines, Gennaro! Tu as eu pour père Jean Borgia, duc de Gandia!

Gennaro. Votre frère! Ah! Vous êtes ma tante! Ah! Madame!

Dona Lucrezia, à part. Sa tante!

Gennaro. Ah! Je suis votre neveu! Ah! C'est ma mère, cette infortunée duchesse de Gandia, que tous les Borgia ont rendue si malheureuse! Madame Lucrèce, ma mère me parle de vous dans ses lettres. Vous êtes du nombre de ces parens dénaturés dont elle m'entretient avec horreur, et qui ont tué mon père, et qui ont noyé sa destinée, à elle, de larmes et de sang. Ah! J'ai de plus mon père à venger, ma mère à sauver de vous maintenant! Ah! Vous êtes ma tante! Je suis un Borgia! Oh! Cela me rend fou! -écoutez-moi, dona Lucrezia Borgia, vous avez vécu long-temps, et vous êtes si couverte d'attentats que vous devez en être devenue odieuse et abominable à vous-même. Vous êtes fatiguée de vivre, sans nul doute, n'est-ce pas? Eh bien, il faut en finir. Dans les familles comme les nôtres, où le crime est héréditaire et se transmet de père en fils comme le nom, il arrive toujours que cette fatalité se clôt par un meurtre, qui est d'ordinaire un meurtre de famille, dernier crime qui lave tous les autres. Un gentilhomme n'a jamais été blâmé pour avoir coupé une mauvaise branche à l'arbre de sa maison. L'espagnol Mudarra a tué son oncle Rodrigue De Lara pour moins que vous n'avez fait. Cet espagnol a été loué de tous pour avoir tué son oncle, entendez-vous, ma tante? -allons! En voilà assez de dit là dessus! Recommandez votre âme à Dieu, si vous croyez à Dieu et à votre âme.

Dona Lucrezia. Gennaro! Par pitié pour toi! Tu es innocent encore! Ne commets pas ce crime!

Gennaro. Un crime! Oh! Ma tête s'égare et se bouleverse! Sera-ce un crime? Eh bien! Quand je commettrais un crime! Pardieu! Je suis un Borgia, moi! à genoux, vous dis-je! Ma tante! à genoux!

Dona Lucrezia. Dis-tu en effet ce que tu penses, mon Gennaro? Est-ce ainsi que tu paies mon amour pour toi?

Gennaro. Amour!…

Dona Lucrezia. C’est impossible. Je veux te sauver de toi-même. Je vais appeler. Je vais crier.

Gennaro. Vous n’ouvrirez point cette porte. Vous ne ferez point un pas. Et quant à vos cris, ils ne peuvent vous sauver. Ne venez-vous pas d’ordonner vous-même tout à l’heure que personne n’entrât, quoi qu’on pût entendre au dehors de ce qui va se passer ici?

Dona Lucrezia. Mais c’est lâche ce que vous faites là, Gennaro! Tuer une femme, une femme sans défense! Oh! Vous avez de plus nobles sentimens que cela dans l’âme! écoute-moi, tu me tueras après si tu veux; je ne tiens pas à la vie, mais il faut bien que ma poitrine déborde, elle est pleine d’angoisses de la manière dont tu m’as traitée jusqu’à présent. Tu es jeune, enfant, et la jeunesse est toujours trop sévère. Oh! Si je dois mourir, je ne veux pas mourir de ta main. Cela n’est pas possible, vois-tu, que je meure de ta main. Tu ne sais pas toi-même à quel point cela serait horrible. D’ailleurs, Gennaro, mon heure n’est pas encore venue. C’est vrai, j’ai commis bien des actions mauvaises, je suis une grande criminelle; et c’est parce que je suis une grande criminelle qu’il faut me laisser le temps de me reconnaître et de me repentir. Il le faut absolument, entends-tu, Gennaro?

Gennaro. Vous êtes ma tante. Vous êtes la sœur de mon père. Qu’avez-vous fait de ma mère, Madame Lucrèce Borgia?

Dona Lucrezia. Attends, attends! Mon dieu, je ne puis tout dire. Et puis, si je te disais tout, je ne ferais peut-être que redoubler ton horreur et ton mépris pour moi! écoute-moi encore un instant. Oh! Que je voudrais bien que tu me reçusses repentante à tes pieds! Tu me feras grâce de la vie, n’est-ce pas? Eh bien, veux-tu que je prenne le voile? Veux-tu que je m’enferme dans un cloître, dis? Voyons, si l’on te disait: cette malheureuse femme s’est fait raser la tête, elle couche dans la cendre, elle creuse sa fosse de ses mains, elle prie Dieu nuit et jour, non pour elle, qui en aurait besoin cependant, mais pour toi, qui peux t’en passer; elle fait tout cela, cette femme, pour que tu abaisses un jour sur sa tête un regard de miséricorde, pour que tu laisses tomber une larme sur toutes les plaies vives de son cœur et de son âme, pour que tu ne lui dises plus comme tu viens de le faire avec cette voix plus sévère que celle du jugement dernier: vous êtes Lucrèce Borgia! Si l’on te disait cela, Gennaro, est-ce que tu aurais le coeur de la repousser! Oh! Grâce! Ne me tue pas, mon Gennaro! Vivons tous les deux, toi pour me pardonner, moi, pour me repentir! Aie quelque compassion de moi! Enfin cela ne sert à rien de traiter sans miséricorde une pauvre misérable femme qui ne demande qu’un peu de pitié!

— un peu de pitié! Grâce de la vie! -et puis, vois-tu bien, mon Gennaro, je te le dis pour toi, ce serait vraiment lâche ce que tu ferais là, ce serait un crime affreux, un assassinat! Un homme tuer une femme! Un homme qui est le plus fort! Oh! Tu ne voudras pas! Tu ne voudras pas!

Gennaro, ébranlé. Madame…

Dona Lucrezia. Oh! Je le vois bien, j’ai ma grâce. Cela se lit dans tes yeux. Oh! Laisse-moi pleurer à tes pieds!

Une Voix au-dehors. Gennaro!

Gennaro. Qui m’appelle?

La Voix. Mon frère Gennaro!

Gennaro. C’est Maffio!

La Voix. Gennaro! Je meurs! Venge-moi!

Gennaro, relevant le couteau. C’est dit. Je n’écoute plus rien. Vous l’entendez, madame, il faut mourir!

Dona Lucrezia, se débattant et lui retenant le bras. Grâce! Grâce! Encore un mot!

Gennaro. Non!

Dona Lucrezia. Pardon! écoute-moi!

Gennaro. Non!

Dona Lucrezia. Au nom du ciel!

Gennaro. Non!

Il la frappe.

Dona Lucrezia. Ah!… tu m’as tuée! -Gennaro! Je suis ta mère!

Fin.

MARIE TUDOR

The first performance of this drama in prose took place at the Théâtre de la Porte-Saint-Martin on November 6, 1833.

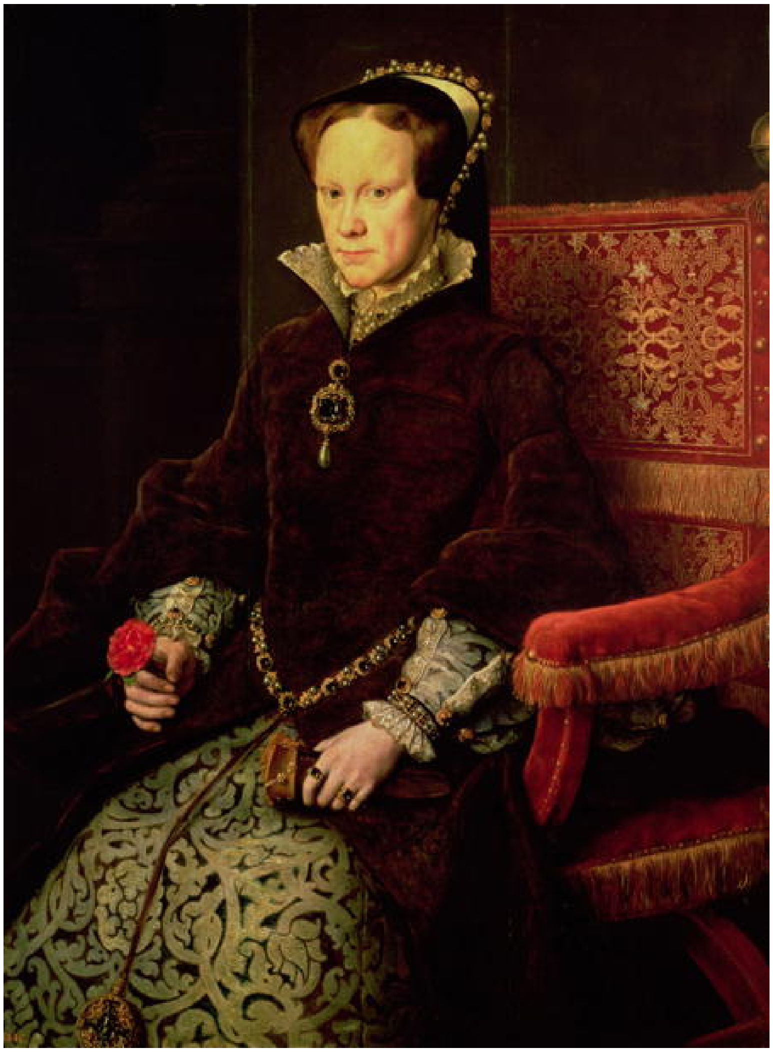

La Reine Marie, 1554, by Antonio Moro

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AVERTISSEMENT

Il y a deux manières de passionner la foule au théâtre: par le grand et par le vrai. Le grand prend les masses, le vrai saisit l’ individu.

Le but du poète dramatique, quel que soit d’ ailleurs l’ ensemble de ses idées sur l’ art, doit donc toujours être, avant tout, de chercher le grand, comme Corneille, ou le vrai, comme Molière; ou, mieux encore, et c’ est ici le plus haut sommet où puisse monter le génie, d’ atteindre tout à la fois le grand et le vrai, le grand dans le vrai, le vrai dans le grand, comme Shakspeare.

Car, remarquons-le en passant, il a été donné à Shakspeare, et c’ est ce qui fait la souveraineté de son génie, de concilier, d’ unir, d’ amalgamer sans cesse dans son œuvre ces deux qualités, la vérité et la grandeur, qualités presque opposées, ou tout au moins tellement distinctes, que le défaut de chacune d’ elles constitue le contraire de l’ autre. L’ écueil du vrai, c’ est le petit, l’ écueil du grand, c’ est le faux. Dans tous les ouvrages de Shakspeare, il y a du grand qui est vrai, et du vrai qui est grand. Au centre de toutes ses créations, on retrouve le point d’ intersection de la grandeur et de la vérité; et là où les choses grandes et les choses vraies se croisent, l’ art est complet. Shakspeare, comme Michel-Ange, semble avoir été créé pour résoudre ce problème étrange dont le simple énoncé paraît absurde: -rester toujours dans la nature, tout en en sortant quelquefois. -Shakspeare exagère les proportions, mais il maintient les rapports. Admirable toute-puissance du poète! Il fait des choses plus hautes que nous qui vivent comme nous. Hamlet, par exemple, est aussi vrai qu’ aucun de nous, et plus grand. Hamlet est colossal, et pourtant réel. C’ est que Hamlet, ce n’ est pas vous, ce n’ est pas moi, c’ est nous tous. Hamlet, ce n’ est pas un homme, c’ est l’ homme.

Dégager perpétuellement le grand à travers le vrai, le vrai à travers le grand, tel est donc, selon l’ auteur de ce drame, et en maintenant, du reste, toutes les autres idées qu’ il a pu développer ailleurs sur ces matières, tel est le but du poète au théâtre. Et ces deux mots, grand et vrai, renferment tout. La vérité contient la moralité, le grand contient le beau.

Ce but, on ne lui supposera pas la présomption de croire qu’ il l’ a jamais atteint, ou même qu’ il pourra jamais l’ atteindre; mais on lui permettra de se rendre à lui-même publiquement ce témoignage, qu’ il n’ en a jamais cherché d’ autre au théâtre jusqu’ à ce jour. Le nouveau drame qu’ il vient de faire représenter est un effort de plus vers ce but rayonnant. Quelle est, en effet, la pensée qu’ il a tenté de réaliser dans Marie Tudor? La voici. Une reine qui soit une femme. Grande comme reine. Vraie comme femme.

Il l’ a déjà dit ailleurs, le drame comme il le sent, le drame comme il voudrait le voir créer par un homme de génie, le drame selon le dix-neuvième siècle, ce n’ est pas la tragi-comédie hautaine, démesurée, espagnole et sublime de Corneille; ce n’ est pas la tragédie abstraite, amoureuse, idéale et divinement élégiaque de Racine; ce n’ est pas la comédie profonde, sagace, pénétrante, mais trop impitoyablement ironique, de Molière; ce n’ est pas la tragédie à intention philosophique de Voltaire; ce n’ est pas la comédie à action révolutionnaire de Beaumarchais; ce n’ est pas plus que tout cela, mais c’ est tout cela à la fois; ou, pour mieux dire, ce n’ est rien de tout cela. Ce n’ est pas, comme chez ces grands hommes, un seul côté des choses systématiquement et perpétuellement mis en lumière, c’ est tout regardé à la fois sous toutes les faces. S’ il y avait un homme aujourd’ hui qui pût réaliser le drame comme nous le comprenons, ce drame, ce serait le cœur humain, la tête humaine, la passion humaine, la volonté humaine; ce serait le passé ressuscité au profit du présent; ce serait l’ histoire que nos pères ont faite confrontée avec l’ histoire que nous faisons; ce serait le mélange sur la scène de tout ce qui est mêlé dans la vie; ce serait une émeute là et une causerie d’ amour ici, et dans la causerie d’ amour une leçon pour le peuple, et dans l’ émeute un cri pour le cœur; ce serait le rire; ce serait les larmes; ce serait le bien, le mal, le haut, le bas, la fatalité, la providence, le génie, le hasard, la société, le monde, la nature, la vie; et au-dessus de tout cela on sentirait planer quelque chose de grand!

à ce drame, qui serait pour la foule un perpétuel enseignement, tout serait permis, parce qu’ il serait dans son essence de n’ abuser de rien. Il aurait pour lui une telle notoriété de loyauté, d’ élévation, d’ utilité et de bonne conscience, qu’ on ne l’ accuserait jamais de chercher l’ effet et le fracas, là où il n’ aurait cherché qu’ une moralité et une leçon. Il pourrait mener François Ier chez Maguelonne sans être suspect; il pourrait, sans alarmer les plus sévères, faire jaillir du cœur de Didier la pitié pour Marion; il pourrait, sans qu’ on le taxât d’ emphase et d’ exagération comme l’ auteur de Marie Tudor, poser largement sur la scène, dans toute sa réalité terrible, ce formidable triangle qui apparaît si souvent dans l’ histoire: une reine, un favori, un bourreau.

à l’ homme qui créera ce drame il faudra deux qualités: conscience et génie. L’ auteur qui parle ici n’ a que la première, il le sait. Il n’ en continuera pas moins ce qu’ il a commencé, en désirant que d’ autres fassent mieux que lui. Aujourd’ hui, un immense public, de plus en plus intelligent, sympathise avec toutes les tentatives sérieuses de l’ art; aujourd’ hui, tout ce qu’ il y a d’ élevé dans la critique aide et encourage le poète. Que le poète vienne donc! Quant à l’ auteur de ce drame, sûr de l’ avenir qui est au progrès, certain qu’ à défaut de talent sa persévérance lui sera comptée un jour, il attache un regard serein, confiant et tranquille sur la foule qui, chaque soir, entoure cette œuvre si incomplète de tant de curiosité, d’ anxiété et d’ attention. En présence de cette foule, il sent la responsabilité qui pèse sur lui, et il l’ accepte avec calme. Jamais, dans ses travaux, il ne perd un seul instant de vue le peuple que le théâtre civilise, l’ histoire que le théâtre explique, le cœur humain que le théâtre conseille. Demain il quittera l’ œuvre faite pour l’ œuvre à faire; il sortira de cette foule pour rentrer dans sa solitude; solitude profonde, où ne parvient aucune mauvaise influence du monde extérieur, où la jeunesse, son amie, vient quelquefois lui serrer la main, où il est seul avec sa pensée, son indépendance et sa volonté. Plus que jamais, sa solitude lui sera chère; car ce n’ est que dans la solitude qu’ on peut travailler pour la foule. Plus que jamais, il tiendra son esprit, son œuvre et sa pensée éloignés de toute coterie; car il connaît quelque chose de plus grand que les coteries, ce sont les partis; quelque chose de plus grand que les partis, c’ est le peuple; quelque chose de plus grand que le peuple, c’ est l’ humanité.

17 novembre 1833.

JOURNEE 1 SCENE 1

Le bord de la Tamise. Une grève déserte. Un vieux parapet en ruine cache le bord de l’ eau. à droite, une maison de pauvre apparence. à l’ angle de cette maison, une statuette de la vierge, au pied de laquelle une étoupe brûle dans un treillis de fer. Au fond, au-delà de la Tamise, Londres. On distingue deux hauts édifices, la tour de Londres et Westminster. -le jour commence à baisser.

Plusieurs hommes groupés çà et là sur la grève, parmi lesquels Simon Renard; John Bridges, Baron Chandos; Robert Clinton, Baron Clinton; Anthony Brown, Vicomte De Montagu.

Lord Chandos
vous avez raison, mylord. Il faut que ce damné italien ait ensorcelé la reine. La reine ne peut plus se passer de lui. Elle ne vit que par lui, elle n’ a de joie qu’ en lui, elle n’ écoute que lui. Si elle est un jour sans le voir, ses yeux deviennent languissans, comme du temps où elle aimait le Cardinal Polus, vous savez?
Simon Renard
très-amoureuse, c’ est vrai, et par conséquent très-jalouse.
Lord Chandos
l’ italien l’ a ensorcelée!
Lord Montagu
au fait, on dit que ceux de sa nation ont des philtres pour cela.
Lord Clinton
les espagnols sont habiles aux poisons qui font mourir, les italiens aux poisons qui font aimer.
Le Fabiani alors est tout à la fois espagnol et

italien. La reine est amoureuse et malade. Il lui a fait boire des deux.

Lord Montagu

ah ça, en réalité, est-il espagnol ou italien?

Lord Chandos

il paraît certain qu' il est né en Italie, dans la Capitanate, et qu' il a été élevé en Espagne. Il se prétend allié à une grande famille espagnole. Lord Clinton sait cela sur le bout du doigt.

Lord Clinton

un aventurier. Ni espagnol, ni italien. Encore moins anglais, dieu merci! Ces hommes qui ne sont d' aucun pays n' ont point de pitié pour les pays quand ils sont puissans!

Lord Montagu

ne disiez-vous pas la reine malade, Chandos? Cela ne l' empêche pas de mener vie joyeuse avec son favori.

Lord Clinton

vie joyeuse! Vie joyeuse! Pendant que la reine rit, le peuple pleure. Et le favori est gorgé. Il mange de l' argent et boit de l' or, cet homme! La reine lui a donné les biens de Lord Talbot, du grand Lord Talbot! La reine l' a fait comte de Clanbrassil et baron de Dinasmonddy, ce Fabiano Fabiani qui se dit de la famille espagnole de Penalver, et qui en a menti! Il est pair d' Angleterre comme vous, Montagu, comme vous, Chandos, comme Stanley, comme Norfolk, comme moi, comme le roi! Il a la jarretière comme l' infant de Portugal, comme le roi de Danemarck, comme Thomas Percy, septième comte de Northumberland! Et quel tyran que ce tyran qui nous gouverne de son lit! Jamais rien de si dur n' a pesé sur l' Angleterre. J' en ai pourtant vu, moi qui suis vieux! Il y a soixante-dix potences neuves à Tyburn; les bûchers sont toujours braise et jamais cendre; la

hache du bourreau est aiguisée tous les matins et ébréchée tous les soirs. Chaque jour c’ est quelque grand gentilhomme qu’ on abat. Avant-hier c’ était Blantyre, hier Northcurry, aujourd’ hui South-Reppo, demain Tyrconnel. La semaine prochaine
ce sera vous, Chandos, et le mois prochain ce sera moi. Mylords! Mylords! C’ est une honte et c’ est une impiété que toutes ces bonnes têtes anglaises tombent ainsi pour le plaisir d’ on ne sait quel misérable aventurier qui n’ est même pas de ce pays! C’ est une chose affreuse et insupportable de penser qu’ un favori napolitain peut tirer autant de billots qu’ il en veut de dessous le lit de cette reine! Ils mènent tous deux joyeuse vie, dites-vous. Par le ciel! C’ est infâme! Ah! Ils mènent joyeuse vie, les amoureux, pendant que le coupe-tête à leur porte fait des veuves et des orphelins! Oh! Leur guitare italienne est trop accompagnée du bruit des chaînes! Madame la reine! Vous faites venir des chanteurs de la chapelle d’ Avignon, vous avez tous les jours dans votre palais des comédies, des théâtres, des estrades pleines de musiciens. Pardieu, madame, moins de joie chez vous, s’ il vous plaît, et moins de deuil chez nous. Moins de baladins ici, et moins de bourreaux là. Moins de tréteaux à Westminster et moins d’ échafauds à Tyburn!
Lord Montagu
prenez garde. Nous sommes loyaux sujets,
Mylord Clinton. Rien sur la reine, tout sur Fabiani.
Simon Renard, posant la main sur l’ épaule de Lord Clinton.
Patience!
Lord Clinton
patience! Cela vous est facile à dire à vous, Monsieur Simon Renard. Vous êtes bailli d’ Amont en Franche-Comté, sujet de l’ empereur et son légat à Londres. Vous représentez ici le prince d’ Espagne,

futur mari de la reine. Votre personne est
sacrée pour le favori. Mais nous, c' est autre chose.
— voyez-vous? Fabiani, pour vous, c' est le berger;
pour nous, c' est le boucher.
La nuit est tout-à-fait tombée.
Simon Renard
cet homme ne me gêne pas moins que vous.
Vous ne craignez que pour votre vie, je crains
pour mon crédit, moi. C' est bien plus. Je ne parle
pas, j' agis. J' ai moins de colère que vous, mylord,
j' ai plus de haine. Je détruirai le favori.
Lord Montagu
oh! Comment faire! J' y songe tout le jour.
Simon Renard
ce n' est pas le jour que se font et se défont les
favoris des reines, c' est la nuit.
Lord Chandos
celle-ci est bien noire et bien affreuse!
Simon Renard
je la trouve belle pour ce que j' en veux faire.
Lord Chandos
qu' en voulez-vous faire?
Simon Renard
vous verrez. -Mylord Chandos, quand une
femme règne, le caprice règne. Alors la politique
n' est plus chose de calcul, mais de hasard. On ne
peut plus compter sur rien. Aujourd' hui n' amène
plus logiquement demain. Les affaires ne se jouent
plus aux échecs, mais aux cartes.
Lord Clinton
tout cela est fort bien, mais venons au fait.
Monsieur le bailli, quand nous aurez-vous délivrés
du favori? Cela presse. On décapite demain Tyrconnel.
Simon Renard
si je rencontre cette nuit un homme comme
j' en cherche un, Tyrconnel soupera avec vous
demain soir.

Lord Clinton
que voulez-vous dire? Que sera devenu Fabiani?
Simon Renard
avez-vous de bons yeux, mylord?
Lord Clinton
oui, quoique je sois vieux et que la nuit soit
noire.
Simon Renard
voyez-vous Londres de l’ autre côté de l’ eau?
Lord Clinton
oui, pourquoi?
Simon Renard
regardez bien. On voit d’ ici le haut et le bas de
la fortune de tout favori, Westminster et la tour
de Londres.
Lord Clinton
t bien?
Simon Renard
si dieu m’ est en aide, il y a un homme qui
au moment où nous parlons est encore là, -
il montre Westminster.
Et qui demain à pareille heure sera ici.
Il montre la tour.
Que dieu vous soit en aide!
Lord Montagu
le peuple ne le hait pas moins que nous. Quelle
fête dans Londres le jour de sa chute!
Lord Chandos
nous nous sommes mis entre vos mains, monsieur
le bailli, disposez de nous. Que faut-il faire?
Simon Renard, montrant la maison près de l’ eau.
Vous voyez bien tous cette maison. C’ est la maison
de Gilbert, l’ ouvrier ciseleur. Ne la perdez pas
de vue. Dispersez-vous avec vos gens, mais sans
trop vous écarter. Surtout ne faites rien sans moi.
Lord Chandos
c’ est dit.

Tous sortent de divers côtés.
Simon renard, resté seul.
Un homme comme celui qu’ il me faut n’ est pas facile à trouver.
Il sort. -entrent Jane et Gilbert se tenant sous le bras; ils vont du côté de la maison. Joshua Farnaby les accompagne, enveloppé d’ un manteau.

JOURNEE 1 SCENE 2

Jane, Gilbert, Joshua Farnaby.

Joshua
je vous quitte ici, mes bons amis. Il est nuit, et
il faut que j' aille reprendre mon service de porte-clefs
à la tour de Londres. Ah, c' est que je ne
suis pas libre comme vous, moi! Voyez-vous? Un
guichetier, ce n' est qu' une espèce de prisonnier.
Adieu, Jane. Adieu, Gilbert. Mon dieu, mes amis,
que je suis donc heureux de vous voir heureux! Ah
ça, Gilbert, à quand la noce?
Gilbert
dans huit jours, n' est-ce pas, Jane?
Joshua
sur ma foi, c' est après demain la noël. Voici le
jour des souhaits et des étrennes, mais je n' ai rien
à vous souhaiter. Il est impossible de désirer plus
de beauté à la fiancée et plus d' amour au fiancé!
Vous êtes heureux!
Gilbert
bon Joshua! Et toi, est-ce que tu n' es pas heureux?
Joshua
ni heureux, ni malheureux. J' ai renoncé à tout,
moi. Vois-tu, Gilbert,
il entr' ouvre son manteau et laisse voir un trousseau
de clefs, qui pend à sa ceinture.
Des clefs de prisons qui vous sonnent sans cesse
à la ceinture, cela parle, cela vous entretient
de toutes sortes de pensées philosophiques. Quand
j' étais jeune, j' étais comme un autre, amoureux
tout un jour, ambitieux tout un mois, fou toute
l' année. C' était sous le roi Henri Viii que j' étais
jeune. Un homme singulier que ce Roi Henri Viii.
Un homme qui changeait de femmes, comme une

femme change de robes. Il répudia la première, il fit couper la tête à la seconde, il fit ouvrir le ventre à la troisième; quant à la quatrième, il lui fit grâce, il la chassa; mais en revanche il fit couper la tête à la cinquième. Ce n' est pas le conte de Barbe-Bleue que je vous fais là, belle Jane, c' est l' histoire de Henri Viii. Moi, dans ce temps-là, je m' occupais de guerres de religion, je me battais pour l' un et pour l' autre. C' était ce qu' il y avait de mieux alors.

La question d' ailleurs était fort épineuse. Il s' agissait d' être pour ou contre le pape. Les gens du roi pendaient ceux qui étaient pour, mais ils brûlaient ceux qui étaient contre. Les indifférens, ceux qui n' étaient ni pour ni contre, on les brûlait ou on les pendait, indifféremment. S' en tirait qui pouvait. Oui, la corde; non, le fagot; ni oui ni non, le fagot et la corde. Moi qui vous parle, j' ai senti le roussi bien souvent, et je ne suis pas sûr de n' avoir pas été deux ou trois fois dépendu. C' était un beau temps; a peu près pareil à celui-ci. Oui, je me battais pour tout cela. Du diable si je sais maintenant pour qui et pour quoi je me battais. Si l' on me reparle de Maître Luther et du Pape Paul Iii, je hausse les épaules. Vois-tu, Gilbert, quand on a des cheveux gris, il ne faut pas revoir les opinions pour qui l' on faisait la guerre et les femmes à qui l' on faisait l' amour à vingt ans. Femmes et opinions vous paraissent bien laides, bien vieilles, bien chétives, bien édentées, bien ridées, bien sottes. C' est mon histoire. Maintenant je suis retiré des affaires. Je ne suis plus soldat du roi, ni soldat du pape, je suis geôlier à la tour de Londres. Je ne me bats plus pour personne, et je mets tout le monde sous clef. Je suis guichetier et je suis vieux; j' ai un pied dans une prison et l' autre dans la fosse. C' est moi qui ramasse

les morceaux de tous les ministres et de tous
les favoris qui se cassent chez la reine. C’ est fort
amusant. Et puis j’ ai un petit enfant que j’ aime,
et puis vous deux que j’ aime aussi, et si vous êtes
heureux, je suis heureux!

Gilbert

en ce cas, sois heureux, Joshua! N’ est-ce pas,
Jane?

Joshua

moi, je ne puis rien pour ton bonheur, mais
Jane peut tout; tu l’ aimes! Je ne te rendrai
même aucun service de ma vie. Tu n’ es heureusement
pas assez grand seigneur pour avoir jamais
besoin du porte-clef de la tour de Londres. Jane
acquittera ma dette en même temps que la sienne.
Car, elle et moi, nous te devons tout Jane
n’ était qu’ une pauvre enfant orpheline abandonnée,
tu l’ as recueillie et élevée. Moi, je me noyais un
beau jour dans la Tamise; tu m’ as tiré de l’ eau.

Gilbert

à quoi bon toujours parler de cela, Joshua?

Joshua

c’ est pour dire que notre devoir, à Jane et à
moi, est de t’ aimer, moi, comme un frère, elle…
— pas comme une sœur!

Jane

non, comme une femme. Je vous comprends,
Joshua.

Elle retombe dans sa rêverie.

Gilbert, bas à Joshua.

Regarde-la, Joshua! N’ est-ce pas qu’ elle est
belle et charmante, et qu’ elle serait digne d’ un
roi? Si tu savais! Tu ne peux pas te figurer comme
je l’ aime!

Joshua

prends garde, c’ est imprudent; une femme, ça
ne s’ aime pas tant que ça; un enfant, à la bonne

heure!

Gilbert

que veux-tu dire?

Joshua

rien. -je serai de votre noce dans huit jours.
— j’ espère qu’ alors les affaires d’ état me laisseront un peu de liberté, et que tout sera fini.

Gilbert

quoi? Qu’ est-ce qui sera fini?

Joshua

ah! Tu ne t’ occupes pas de ces choses-là, toi, Gilbert. Tu es amoureux. Tu es du peuple. Et qu’ est-ce que cela te fait les intrigues d’ en haut, à toi qui es heureux en bas? Mais, puisque tu me questionnes, je te dirai qu’ on espère que d’ ici à huit jours, d’ ici à vingt-quatre heures peut-être, Fabiano Fabiani sera remplacé près de la reine par un autre.

Gilbert

qu’ est-ce que c’ est que Fabiano Fabiani?

Joshua

c’ est l’ amant de la reine, c’ est un favori très-célèbre et très-charmant, un favori qui a plus vite fait couper la tête à un homme qui lui déplaît qu’ un bourgmestre flamand n’ a mangé une cuillerée de soupe, le meilleur favori que le bourreau de la tour de Londres ait eu depuis dix ans. Car tu sais que le bourreau reçoit, pour chaque tête de grand seigneur, dix écus d’ argent, et quelquefois le double, quand la tête est tout-à-fait considérable.
— on souhaite fort la chute de ce Fabiani. -il est vrai que dans mes fonctions à la tour je n’ entends guère gloser sur son compte que des gens d’ assez mauvaise humeur, des gens à qui l’ on doit couper le cou d’ ici à un mois, des mécontens.

Gilbert

que les loups se dévorent entre eux! Que nous importe, à nous, la reine et le favori de la reine? N’ est-ce pas, Jane?

Joshua

oh! Il y a une fière conspiration contre Fabiani! S’ il s’ en tire, il sera heureux. Je ne serais pas surpris qu’ il y eût quelque coup de fait cette nuit. Je viens de voir rôder par là maître Simon Renard tout rêveur.

Gilbert

qu’ est-ce que c’ est que maître Simon Renard?

Joshua

comment ne sais-tu pas cela? C’ est le bras droit de l’ empereur à Londres. La reine doit épouser le prince d’ Espagne, dont Simon Renard est le légat près d’ elle. La reine le hait ce Simon Renard; mais elle le craint, et ne peut rien contre lui. Il a déjà détruit deux ou trois favoris. C’ est son instinct de détruire les favoris. Il nettoie le palais de temps en temps. Un homme subtil et très-malicieux, qui sait tout ce qui se passe, et qui creuse toujours deux ou trois étages d’ intrigues souterraines sous tous les événemens. Quant à Lord Paget, -ne m’ as-tu pas demandé aussi ce que c’ était que Lord Paget? -c’ est un gentilhomme délié, qui a été dans les affaires sous Henri Viii. Il est membre du conseil étroit. Un tel ascendant que les autres ministres n’ osent pas souffler devant lui. Excepté le chancelier cependant, Mylord Gardiner, qui le déteste. Un homme violent, ce Gardiner, et très-bien né. Quant à Paget, ce n’ est rien du tout. Le fils d’ un savetier. Il va être fait baron Paget De Beaudesert en Stafford.

Gilbert

comme il vous débite couramment toutes ces choses-là, ce Joshua!

Joshua

pardieu! à force d’ entendre causer les prisonniers

d’ état.
Simon Renard paraît au fond du théâtre.
 — vois-tu, Gilbert, l’ homme qui sait le mieux
l’ histoire de ce temps-ci, c’ est le guichetier de la
tour de Londres.
Simon Renard, qui a entendu les dernières paroles, du
fond du théâtre.
Vous vous trompez, mon maître, c’ est le bourreau.
Joshua, bas à Jane et à Gilbert.
Reculons-nous un peu.
Simon Renard s’ éloigne lentement. -quand Simon
Renard a disparu.
 — c’ est précisément maître Simon Renard.
Gilbert
tous ces gens qui rôdent autour de ma maison
me déplaisent.
Joshua
que diable vient-il faire par ici? Il faut que je
m’ en retourne vite; je crois qu’ il me prépare de
la besogne. Adieu, Gilbert. Adieu, belle Jane. -je
vous ai pourtant vue pas plus haute que cela!
Gilbert
adieu, Joshua. -mais, dis moi, qu’ est-ce que
tu caches donc là, sous ton manteau?
Joshua
ah! J’ ai mon complot aussi, moi.
Gilbert
quel complot?
Joshua
oh! Amoureux qui oubliez tout! Je viens de vous
rappeler que c’ était après demain le jour des
étrennes et des cadeaux. Les seigneurs complotent
une surprise à Fabiani, moi, je complote de mon
côté. La reine va se donner peut-être un favori
tout neuf. Moi, je vais donner une poupée à mon
enfant.
Il tire une poupée de dessous son manteau.

— toute neuve aussi. -nous verrons lequel des deux aura le plus vite brisé son joujou. -dieu vous garde, mes amis!

Gilbert

au revoir, Joshua.

Joshua s’ éloigne. Gilbert prend la main de Jane, et la baise avec passion.

Joshua, au fond du théâtre.

Oh! Que la providence est grande! Elle donne à chacun son jouet, la poupée à l’ enfant, l’ enfant à l’ homme, l’ homme à la femme, et la femme au diable!

Il sort.

JOURNEE 1 SCENE 3

Gilbert, Jane.

Gilbert

il faut que je vous quitte aussi. Adieu, Jane, dormez bien.

Jane

vous ne rentrez pas ce soir avec moi, Gilbert?

Gilbert

je ne puis. Vous savez, je vous l’ ai déjà dit, Jane, j’ ai un travail à terminer à mon atelier cette nuit. Un manche de poignard à ciseler pour je ne sais quel Lord Clanbrassil, que je n’ ai jamais vu, et qui me l’ a fait demander pour demain matin.

Jane

alors, bon soir, Gilbert. à demain.

Gilbert

non, Jane, encore un instant. Ah! Mon dieu! Que j’ ai de peine à me séparer de vous, fût-ce pour quelques heures! Qu’ il est bien vrai que vous êtes ma vie et ma joie! Il faut pourtant que j’ aille travailler, nous sommes si pauvres! Je ne veux pas entrer, car je resterais, et cependant je ne puis partir, homme faible que je suis! Tenez, asseyons-nous quelques minutes à la porte, sur ce banc; il me semble qu’ il me sera moins difficile de m’ en aller que si j’ entrais dans la maison, et surtout dans votre chambre. Donnez-moi votre main.

Il s’ assied et lui prend les deux mains dans les siennes, elle debout.

— Jane! M’ aimes-tu?

Jane

oh! Je vous dois tout, Gilbert! Je le sais, quoique vous me l’ ayez caché long-temps. Toute petite, presque au berceau, j’ ai été abandonnée par mes parens, vous m’ avez prise. Depuis seize ans,

votre bras a travaillé pour moi comme celui d’ un
père, vos yeux ont veillé sur moi comme ceux
d’ une mère. Qu’ est-ce que je serais sans vous, mon
dieu! Tout ce que j’ ai, vous me l’ avez donné,
tout ce que je suis, vous l’ avez fait.
Gilbert
Jane! M’ aimes-tu?
Jane
quel dévoûment que le vôtre, Gilbert! Vous
travaillez nuit et jour pour moi, vous vous brûlez
les yeux, vous vous tuez. Tenez, voilà encore que
vous passez la nuit aujourd’ hui. Et jamais un reproche,
jamais une dureté, jamais une colère.
Vous si pauvre! Jusqu’ à mes petites coquetteries
de femme, vous en avez pitié, vous les satisfaites.
Gilbert, je ne songe à vous que les larmes aux
yeux. Vous avez quelquefois manqué de pain, je
n’ ai jamais manqué de rubans.
Gilbert
Jane! M’ aimes-tu?
Jane
Gilbert, je voudrais baiser vos pieds!
Gilbert
m’ aimes-tu? M’ aimes-tu? Oh! Tout cela ne me
dit pas que tu m’ aimes. C’ est de ce mot là que j’ ai
besoin, Jane! De la reconnaissance, toujours de la
reconnaissance! Oh! Je la foule aux pieds, la
reconnaissance! Je veux de l’ amour, ou rien. -
mourir! -Jane, depuis seize ans tu es ma fille,
tu vas être ma femme maintenant. Je t’ avais adoptée,
je veux t’ épouser. Dans huit jours! Tu sais, tu
me l’ as promis, tu as consenti, tu es ma fiancée.
Oh! Tu m’ aimais quand tu m’ as promis cela. ô
Jane! Il y a eu un temps, te rappelles-tu, où tu
me disais: je t’ aime! En levant tes beaux yeux au
ciel. C’ est toujours comme cela que je te veux.
Depuis plusieurs mois il me semble que quelque

chose est changé en toi, depuis trois semaines surtout que mon travail m’ oblige à m’ absenter quelquefois les nuits. ô Jane! Je veux que tu m’ aimes,
moi. Je suis habitué à cela. Toi, si gaie auparavant, tu es toujours triste et préoccupée à présent, pas froide, pauvre enfant, tu fais ton possible pour ne pas l’ être; mais je sens bien que les paroles d’ amour ne te viennent plus bonnes et naturelles comme autrefois. Qu’ as-tu? Est-ce que tu ne m’ aimes plus? Sans doute je suis un honnête homme, sans doute je suis un bon ouvrier; sans doute, sans doute, mais je voudrais être un voleur et un assassin et être aimé de toi! -Jane! Si tu savais comme je t’ aime!

Jane

je le sais, Gilbert, et j’ en pleure.

Gilbert

de joie! N’ est-ce pas? Dis-moi que c’ est de joie. Oh! J’ ai besoin de le croire. Il n’ y a que cela au monde, être aimé. Je ne suis qu’ un pauvre coeur d’ ouvrier, mais il faut que ma Jane m’ aime. Que me parles-tu sans cesse de ce que j’ ai fait pour toi? Un seul mot d’ amour de toi, Jane, laisse toute la reconnaissance de mon côté. Je me damnerai et je commettrai un crime quand tu voudras. Tu seras ma femme, n’ est-ce pas, et tu m’ aimes? Vois-tu, Jane, pour un regard de toi je donnerais mon travail et ma peine; pour un sourire, ma vie; pour un baiser, mon âme!

Jane

quel noble cœur vous avez, Gilbert!

Gilbert

écoute, Jane! Ris si tu veux, je suis fou, je suis jaloux! C’ est comme cela. Ne t’ offense pas. Depuis quelque temps il me semble que je vois bien des jeunes seigneurs rôder par ici. Sais-tu, Jane, que j’ ai trente-quatre ans? Quel malheur pour un misérable ouvrier gauche et mal vêtu comme moi, qui n’ est plus jeune, qui n’ est pas beau, d’ aimer une belle et charmante enfant de dix-sept ans, qui attire les beaux jeunes gentilshommes dorés et chamarrés comme une lumière attire les papillons! Oh! Je souffre, va! Je ne t’ offense jamais dans ma pensée, toi si honnête, toi si pure, toi dont le front n’ a encore été touché que par mes lèvres! Je trouve seulement quelquefois que tu as trop de plaisir à voir passer les cortéges et les cavalcades de la reine, et tous ces beaux habits de satin et de velours sous lesquels il y a si peu de cœurs et si peu d’ âmes! Pardonne-moi. -mon dieu! Pourquoi donc vient-il par ici tant de jeunes gentilshommes? Pourquoi ne suis-je pas jeune, beau, noble et riche? Gilbert, l’ ouvrier ciseleur, voilà tout. Eux c’ est Lord Chandos, Lord Gerard Fitz-Gerard, le Comte D’ Arundel, le Duc De Norfolk! Oh! Que je les hais! Je passe ma vie à ciseler pour eux des poignées d’ épées dont je voudrais leur mettre la lame dans le ventre.

Jane

Gilbert!…

Gilbert

pardon, Jane. N’ est-ce pas, l’ amour rend bien méchant?

Jane

non, bien bon. -vous êtes bon, Gilbert.

Gilbert

oh! Que je t’ aime. Tous les jours davantage. Je voudrais mourir pour toi. Aime-moi ou ne m’ aime pas, tu en es bien la maîtresse. Je suis fou. Pardonne-moi tout ce que je t’ ai dit. Il est tard, il faut que je te quitte, adieu. Mon dieu! Que c’ est triste de te quitter! Rentre chez toi. Est-ce que tu n’ as pas ta clef?

Jane

non, depuis quelques jours je ne sais ce qu’ elle est devenue.

Gilbert

voici la mienne. -à demain matin. -Jane, n’ oublie pas ceci. Encore aujourd’ hui ton père; dans huit jours ton mari.

Il la baise au front et sort.

Jane, restée seule.

Mon mari! Oh non, je ne commettrai pas ce crime. Pauvre Gilbert! Il m 4 aime! Celui lâ! -et l’ autre…! -pourvu que je n’ aie pas préféré la vanité à l’ amour! Malheureuse fille que je suis, dans la dépendance de qui suis-je maintenant? Oh! Je suis bien ingrate et bien coupable! J’ entends marcher, rentrons vite.

Elle entre dans la maison.

JOURNEE 1 SCENE 4

Gilbert, un homme enveloppé d’ un manteau et coiffé d’ un bonnet jaune.
L’ homme tient Gilbert par la main.
Gilbert
oui, je te reconnais, tu es le mendiant juif qui rôde depuis quelques jours autour de cette maison. Mais que me veux-tu? Pourquoi m’ as-tu pris la main et m’ as-tu ramené ici?
L’ homme
c’ est que ce que j’ ai à vous dire, je ne puis vous le dire qu’ ici.
Gilbert
hé bien! Qu’ est-ce donc? Parle, hâte-toi.
L’ homme
écoutez, jeune homme. -il y a seize ans, dans la même nuit où Lord Talbot, Comte De Waterford, fut décapité aux flambeaux pour fait de papisme et de rebellion, ses partisans furent taillés en pièces dans Londres même par les soldats du Roi Henri Viii. On s’ arquebusa toute la nuit dans les rues. Cette nuit-là, un tout jeune ouvrier, beaucoup plus occupé de sa besogne que de la guerre, travaillait dans son échoppe. La première échoppe à l’ entrée du pont de Londres. Une porte basse à droite. Il y a des restes d’ ancienne peinture rouge sur le mur. Il pouvait être deux heures du matin. On se battait par-là. Les balles traversaient la Tamise en sifflant. Tout à coup, on frappa à la porte de l’ échoppe à travers laquelle la lampe de l’ ouvrier jetait quelque lueur. L’ artisan ouvrit. Un homme qu’ il ne connaissait pas entra. Cet homme portait dans ses bras un enfant au maillot fort effrayé et qui pleurait. L’ homme déposa l’ enfant sur la table, et dit: voici une créature qui n’ a plus ni

père ni mère. Puis il sortit lentement, et referma la
porte sur lui. Gilbert, l’ ouvrier, n’ avait lui-même
ni père ni mère. L’ ouvrier accepta l’ enfant, l’ orphelin
adopta l’ orpheline. Il la prit, il la veilla,
il la vêtit, il la nourrit, il la garda, il l’ éleva, il
l’ aima. Il se donna tout entier à cette pauvre petite
créature que la guerre civile jetait dans son échoppe.
Il oublia tout pour elle, sa jeunesse, ses amourettes,
son plaisir; il fit de cet enfant l’ objet unique
de son travail, de ses affections, de sa vie, et
voilà seize ans que cela dure. Gilbert, l’ ouvrier,
c’ était vous; l’ enfant…
Gilbert
c’ était Jane. -tout est vrai dans ce que tu dis,
mais où veux-tu en venir?
L’ homme
j’ ai oublié de dire qu’ aux langes de l’ enfant il y
avait un papier attaché avec une épingle sur lequel
on avait écrit ceci: ayez pitié de Jane.
Gilbert
c’ était écrit avec du sang. J’ ai conservé ce papier,
je le porte toujours sur moi. Mais tu me mets
à la torture. Où veux-tu en venir, dis?
L’ homme
à ceci. -vous voyez que je connais vos affaires.
Gilbert! Veillez sur votre maison cette nuit.
Gilbert
que veux-tu dire?
L’ homme
plus un mot. N’ allez pas à votre travail. Restez
dans les environs de cette maison. Veillez. Je ne
suis ni votre ami ni votre ennemi, mais c’ est un
avis que je vous donne. Maintenant, pour ne pas
vous nuire à vous-même, laissez-moi. Allez-vous-en
de ce côté, et venez si vous m’ entendez appeler
main-forte.
Gilbert

qu’ est-ce que cela signifie?
Il sort à pas lents.

JOURNEE 1 SCENE 5

L’ homme, seul.
La chose est bien arrangée ainsi. J’ avais besoin
de quelqu’ un de jeune et de fort qui pût me prêter
secours, s’ il est nécessaire. Ce Gilbert est ce
qu’ il me faut. -il me semble que j’ entends un
bruit de rames et de guitare sur l’ eau. -oui.
Il va au parapet.
On entend une guitare et une voix éloignée qui chante:
quand tu chantes, bercée
le soir entre mes bras,
entends-tu ma pensée
qui te répond tout bas?
Ton doux chant me rappelle
les plus beaux de mes jours… -
chantez, ma belle!
Chantez toujours!
L’ homme
c’ est mon homme.
La Voix
elle s’ approche à chaque couplet.
Quand tu ris, sur ta bouche
l’ amour s’ épanouit,
et le soupçon farouche
soudain s’ évanouit!
Ah! Le rire fidèle
prouve un cœur sans détours… -
riez, ma belle!
Riez toujours!
Quand tu dors, calme et pure,
dans l’ ombre, sous mes yeux,
ton haleine murmure
des mots harmonieux.
Ton beau corps se révèle
sans voile et sans atours… -

dormez, ma belle,
dormez toujours!
Quand tu me dis: je t’ aime!
ô ma beauté! Je croi!
Je crois que le ciel même
s’ ouvre au-dessus de moi!
Ton regard étincelle
du beau feu des amours… -
aimez, ma belle,
aimez toujours!
Vois-tu? Toute la vie
tient dans ces quatre mots,
tous les biens qu’ on envie,
tous les biens sans les maux!
Tout ce qui peut séduire
tout ce qui peut charmer… -
chanter et rire,
dormir, aimer!
L’ homme
il débarque. Bien. Il congédie le batelier. à merveille!
Revenant sur le devant du théâtre.
— le voici qui vient.
Entre Fabiano Fabiani dans son manteau; il se dirige vers la porte de la maison.

JOURNEE 1 SCENE 6

L’ homme, Fabiano Fabiani.
L’ homme, arrêtant Fabiani.
Un mot, s’ il vous plaît.
Fabiani
on me parle, je crois. Quel est ce maraud? Qui es-tu?
L’ homme
ce qu’ il vous plaira que je sois.
Fabiani
cette lanterne éclaire mal. Mais tu as un bonnet jaune, il me semble, un bonnet de juif? Est-ce que tu es un juif?
L’ homme
oui, un juif. J’ ai quelque chose à vous dire.
Fabiani
comment t’ appelles-tu?
L’ homme
je sais votre nom, et vous ne savez pas le mien. J’ ai l’ avantage sur vous. Permettez-moi de le garder.
Fabiani
tu sais mon nom, toi? Cela n’ est pas vrai.
L’ homme
je sais votre nom. à Naples, on vous appelait Signor Fabiani; à Madrid, Don Faviano; à Londres, on vous appelle Lord Fabiano Fabiani, Comte De Clanbrassil.
Fabiani
que le diable t’ emporte!
L’ homme
que dieu vous garde!
Fabiani
je te ferai bâtonner. Je ne veux pas qu’ on sache mon nom quand je vais devant moi la nuit.
L’ homme

surtout quand vous allez où vous allez.
Fabiani
que veux-tu dire?
L’ homme
si la reine le savait!
Fabiani
je ne vais nulle part.
L’ homme
si, mylord! Vous allez chez la belle Jane, la fiancée de Gilbert le ciseleur.
Fabiani, à part.
Diable! Voilà un homme dangereux.
L’ homme
voulez-vous que je vous en dise davantage? Vous avez séduit cette fille, et depuis un mois elle vous a reçu deux fois chez elle la nuit. C’ est aujourd’ hui la troisième. La belle vous attend.
Fabiano
tais-toi! Tais-toi! Veux-tu de l’ argent pour te taire? Combien veux-tu?
L’ homme
nous verrons cela tout à l’ heure. Maintenant, mylord, voulez-vous que je vous dise pourquoi vous avez séduit cette fille?
Fabiani
pardieu! Parce que j’ en étais amoureux.
L’ homme
non. Vous n’ en étiez pas amoureux.
Fabiani
je n’ étais pas amoureux de Jane?
L’ homme
pas plus que de la reine. -amour, non; calcul, oui.
Fabiani
ah çà, drôle, tu n’ es pas un homme, tu es ma conscience habillée en juif!
L’ homme

je vais vous parler comme votre conscience, mylord. Voici toute votre affaire. Vous êtes le favori de la reine. La reine vous a donné la jarretière, la comté et la seigneurie. Choses creuses que cela! La jarretière, c’ est un chiffon; la comté, c’ est un mot; la seigneurie, c’ est le droi d’ avoir la tête tranchée. Il vous fallait mieux. Il vous fallait, mylord, de bonnes terres, de bons bailliages, de bons châteaux et de bons revenus en bonnes livres sterling. Or, le Roi Henri Viii avait confisqué les biens de Lord Talbot, décapité il y a seize ans. Vous vous êtes fait donner par la reine Marie les biens de Lord Talbot. Mais pour que la donation fût valable, il fallait que Lord Talbot fût mort sans postérité. S’ il existait un héritier ou une héritière de Lord Talbot, comme Lord Talbot est mort pour la Reine Marie et pour sa mère Catherine D’ Aragon, comme Lord Talbot était papiste, et comme la Reine Marie est papiste, il n’ est pas douteux que la Reine Marie vous reprendrait les biens, tout favori que vous êtes, mylord, et les rendrait, par devoir, par reconnaissance et par religion, à l’ héritier ou à l’ héritière. Vous étiez assez tranquille de ce côté. Lord Talbot n’ avait jamais eu qu’ une petite fille qui avait disparu de son berceau à l’ époque de l’ exécution de son père, et que toute l’ Angleterre croyait morte. Mais vos espions ont découvert dernièrement que dans la nuit où Lord Talbot et son parti furent exterminés par Henri Viii, un enfant avait été mystérieusement déposé chez un ouvrier ciseleur du pont de Londres, et qu’ il était probable que cet enfant, élevé sous le nom de Jane, était Jane Talbot, la petite fille disparue. Les preuves écrites de sa naissance manquaient, il est vrai, mais tous les jours elles pouvaient se retrouver. L’ incident était fâcheux. Se voir peut-être forcé un jour de rendre

à une petite fille Shrewsbury, Wexford, qui est
une belle ville, et la magnifique comté de Waterford!
C’ est dur. Comment faire? Vous avez cherché
un moyen de détruire et d’ annuler la jeune
fille. Un honnête homme l’ eût fait assassiner ou
empoisonner. Vous, mylord, vous avez mieux fait,
vous l’ avez déshonorée.
Fabiani
insolent!
L’ homme
c’ est votre conscience qui parle, mylord. Un autre
eût pris la vie à la jeune fille, vous lui avez pris
l’ honneur, et par conséquent l’ avenir. La reine
Marie est prude, quoiqu’ elle ait des amans.
Fabiani
cet homme va au fond de tout.
L’ homme
la reine est d’ une mauvaise santé; la reine peut
mourir, et alors, vous favori, vous tomberiez en
ruine sur son tombeau. Les preuves matérielles de
l’ état de la jeune fille peuvent se retrouver, et
alors, si la reine est morte, toute déshonorée que
vous l’ avez faite, Jane sera reconnue héritière de
Talbot. Eh bien! Vous avez prévu ce cas-là; vous
êtes un jeune cavalier de belle mine, vous vous êtes
fait aimer d’ elle, elle s’ est donnée à vous, au
pis-aller, vous l’ épouseriez. Ne vous défendez pas de
ce plan, mylord, je le trouve sublime. Si je n’ étais
moi, je voudrais être vous.
Fabiani
merci.
L’ homme
vous avez conduit la chose avec adresse. Vous
avez caché votre nom. Vous êtes à couvert du côté
de la reine. La pauvre fille croit avoir été séduite
par un chevalier du pays de Sommerset, nommé
Amyas Pawlet.

Fabiani
tout! Il sait tout! Allons, maintenant, au fait,
que me veux-tu?
L’ homme
mylord, si quelqu’ un avait en son pouvoir les
papiers qui constatent la naissance, l’ existence et
le droit de l’ héritière de Talbot, cela vous ferait
pauvre comme mon ancêtre Job, et ne vous laisserait
plus d’ autres châteaux, Don Fabiano, que
vos châteaux en Espagne, ce qui vous contrarierait
fort.
Fabiani
oui; mais personne n’ a ces papiers.
L’ homme
si.
Fabiani
qui?
L’ homme
moi.
Fabiani
bah! Toi, misérable! Ce n’ est pas vrai. Juif qui
parle, bouche qui ment.
L’ homme
j’ ai ces papiers.
Fabiani
tu mens. Où les as-tu?
L’ homme
dans ma poche.
Fabiani
je ne te crois pas. Bien en règle? Il n’ y manque
rien?
L’ homme
il n’ y manque rien.
Fabiani
alors, il me les faut!
L’ homme
doucement.

Fabiani
juif, donne-moi ces papiers.
L’ homme
fort bien. -juif! Misérable mendiant qui
passes dans la rue, donne-moi la ville de Shrewsbury,
donne-moi la ville de Wexford, donne-moi
la comté de Waterford. -la charité, s’ il
vous plaît!
Fabiani
ces papiers sont tout pour moi, et ne sont rien
pour toi.
L’ homme
Simon Renard et Lord Chandos me les paieraient
bien cher.
Fabiani
Simon Renard et Lord Chandos sont les deux
chiens entre lesquels je te ferai pendre.
L’ homme
vous n’ avez rien autre chose à me proposer?
Adieu.
Fabiani
ici, juif! -que veux-tu que je te donne pour
ces papiers?
L’ homme
quelque chose que vous avez sur vous.
Fabiani
ma bourse?
L’ homme
fi donc! Voulez-vous la mienne?
Fabiani
quoi, alors?
L’ homme
il y a un parchemin qui ne vous quitte jamais.
C’ est un blanc-seing que vous a donné la reine, et
où elle jure sur sa couronne catholique d’ accorder
à celui qui le lui présentera la grâce, quelle qu’ elle
soit, qu’ il lui demandera. Donnez-moi ce blanc-seing,

vous aurez les titres de Jane Talbot. Papier pour papier.

Fabiani

que veux-tu faire de ce blanc-seing?

L’ homme

voyons. Jeu sur table, mylord. Je vous ai dit vos affaires, je vais vous dire les miennes. Je suis un des principaux argentiers juifs de la rue Kantersten, à Bruxelles. Je prête mon argent. C’ est mon métier. Je prête dix et l’ on me rend quinze. Je prête à tout le monde, je prêterais au diable, je prêterais au pape. Il y a deux mois, un de mes débiteurs est mort sans m’ avoir payé. C’ était un ancien serviteur exilé de la famille Talbot. Le pauvre homme n’ avait laissé que quelques guenilles. Je les fis saisir. Dans ces guenilles je trouvai une boîte et dans cette boîte des papiers. Les papiers de Jane Talbot, mylord, avec toute son histoire contée en détail et appuyée de preuves pour des temps meilleurs. La reine d’ Angleterre venait précisément de vous donner les biens de Jane Talbot. Or, j’ avais justement besoin de la reine d’ Angleterre pour un prêt de dix mille marcs d’ or. Je compris qu’ il y avait une affaire à faire avec vous. Je vins en Angleterre sous ce déguisement, j’ épiai vos démarches moi-même, j’ épiai Jane Talbot moi-même, je fais tout moi-même. De cette façon j’ appris tout, et me voici. Vous aurez les papiers de Jane Talbot si vous me donnez le blanc-seing de la reine. J’ écrirai dessus que la reine me donne dix mille marcs d’ or. On me doit quelque chose ici au bureau de l’ excise mais je ne chicanerai pas. Dix mille marcs d’ or, rien de plus. Je ne vous demande pas la somme à vous, parce qu’ il n’ y a qu’ une tête couronnée qui puisse la payer. Voilà parler nettement, j’ espère. Voyez-vous, mylord, deux hommes aussi adroits que vous et moi n’ ont rien à gagner à se tromper l’ un l’ autre. Si la franchise était bannie de la terre, c’ est dans le tête-à-tête de deux fripons qu’ elle devrait se retrouver.

Fabiani

impossible. Je ne puis te donner ce blanc-seing. Dix mille marcs d’ or! Que dirait la reine? Et puis, demain je puis être disgracié; ce blanc-seing, c’ est ma sauve-garde; ce blanc-seing, c’ est ma tête.

L’ homme

qu’ est-ce que cela me fait?

Fabiani

demande-moi autre chose.

L’ homme

je veux cela.

Fabiani

juif, donne-moi les papiers de Jane Talbot.

L’ homme

mylord, donnez-moi le blanc-seing de la reine.

Fabiani

allons, juif maudit! Il faut te céder.

Il tire un papier de sa poche.

L’ homme

montrez-moi le blanc-seing de la reine.

Fabiani

montre-moi les papiers de Talbot.

L’ homme

après.

Ils s’ approchent de la lanterne. Fabiani, placé derrière le juif, de la main gauche lui tient le papier sous les yeux. L’ homme l’ examine.

L’ homme, lisant.

“ nous, Marie, reine… “ -c’ est bien. -vous voyez que je suis comme vous, mylord. J’ ai tout calculé. J’ ai tout prévu.

Fabiani

il tire son poignard de la main droite et le lui

enfonce dans la gorge.
Excepté ceci.
L’ homme
oh! Traître!… -à moi!
Il tombe. -en tombant, il jette dans l’ ombre,
derrière lui, sans que Fabiani s’ en aperçoive, un
paquet cacheté.
Fabiani, se penchant sur le corps.
Je le crois mort, ma foi! -vite, ces papiers!
Il fouille le juif.
— mais quoi! Il n’ a rien! Rien sur lui! Pas un
papier, le vieux mécréant! Il mentait! Il me
trompait! Il me volait! Voyez-vous cela, damné juif!
Oh! Il n’ a rien, c’ est fini! Je l’ ai tué pour rien!
Ils sont tous ainsi, ces juifs. Le mensonge et le vol,
c’ est tout le juif! -allons, débarrassons-nous
du cadavre, je ne puis le laisser devant cette porte.
Allant au fond du théâtre.
— voyons si le batelier est encore là, qu’ il m’ aide
à le jeter dans la Tamise.
Il descend et disparaît derrière le parapet.
Gilbert, entrant par le côté opposé.
Il me semble que j’ ai entendu un cri.
Il aperçoit le corps étendu à terre sous la lanterne.
— quelqu’ un d’ assassiné! -le mendiant!
L’ homme, se soulevant à demi.
Ah!… -vous venez trop tard, Gilbert.
Il désigne du doigt l’ endroit où il a jeté le paquet.
— prenez ceci, ce sont des papiers qui prouvent
que Jane, votre fiancée, est la fille et l’ héritière
du dernier Lord Talbot. Mon assassin est Lord
Clanbrassil, le favori de la reine. -ah! J’ étouffe.
— Gilbert! Venge-moi et venge-toi!… -
il meurt.
Gilbert
mort! -que je me venge? Que veut-il dire?
Jane, fille de Lord Talbot! Lord Clanbrassil!

Le favori de la reine! Oh! Je m’ y perds!
Secouant le cadavre.
— parle, encore un mot! -il est bien mort.

JOURNEE 1 SCENE 7

Gilbert, Fabiani.

Fabiani, revenant.
Qui va là?
Gilbert
on vient d’ assassiner un homme
Fabiani
non, un juif.
Gilbert
qui a tué cet homme?
Fabiani
pardieu! Vous ou moi.
Gilbert
monsieur!…
Fabiani
pas de témoins. Un cadavre à terre. Deux hommes à côté. Lequel est l’ assassin? Rien ne prouve que ce soit l’ un plutôt que l’ autre, moi plutôt que vous.
Gilbert
misérable! L’ assassin, c’ est vous.
Fabiani
eh bien oui, au fait! C’ est moi. -après?
Gilbert
je vais appeler les constables.
Fabiani
vous allez m’ aider à jeter le corps à l’ eau.
Gilbert
je vous ferai arrêter et punir.
Fabiani
vous m’ aiderez à jeter le corps à l’ eau.
Gilbert
vous êtes impudent!
Croyez-moi, effaçons toute trace de ceci, vous y êtes plus intéressé que moi.
Gilbert

voilà qui est fort!
Fabiani
un de nous deux a fait le coup. Moi, je suis un grand seigneur, un noble lord. Vous, vous êtes un passant, un manant, un homme du peuple. Un gentilhomme qui tue un juif paie quatre sous d' amende. Un homme du peuple qui en tue un autre est pendu.
Gilbert
vous oseriez?…
Fabiani
si vous me dénoncez, je vous dénonce. On me croira plutôt que vous. En tout cas, les chances sont inégales. Quatre sous d' amende pour moi, la potence pour vous.
Gilbert
pas de témoins! Pas de preuves! Oh! Ma tête s' égare. Le misérable me tient, il a raison.
Fabiani
vous aiderai-je à jeter le cadavre à l' eau?
Gilbert
vous êtes le démon!
Fabiani
Gilbert prend le corps par la tête, Fabiano par les pieds; ils le portent jusqu' au parapet.
Oui. -ma foi, mon cher, je ne sais plus au juste lequel de nous deux a tué cet homme.
Ils descendent derrière le parapet.
Fabiani, reparaissant.
Voilà qui est fait. -bonne nuit, mon camarade, allez à vos affaires.
Il se dirige vers la maison et se retourne, voyant que Gilbert le suit.
— hé bien! Que voulez-vous? Quelque argent pour votre peine? En conscience, je ne vous dois rien; mais, tenez.
Il donne sa bourse à Gilbert, dont le premier mouvement est un geste de refus, et qui accepte

ensuite de l’ air d’ un homme qui se ravise.
— maintenant, allez-vous-en. Hé bien! Qu’ attendez-vous encore?

Gilbert

rien.

Fabiani

ma foi, restez là si bon vous semble. à vous la belle étoile, à moi la belle fille. Dieu vous garde.

Il se dirige vers la porte de la maison et paraît se disposer à l’ ouvrir.

Gilbert

où allez-vous ainsi?

Fabiani

pardieu! Chez moi.

Gilbert

comment, chez vous?

Fabiani

oui.

Gilbert

quel est celui de nous deux qui rêve? Vous me disiez tout à l’ heure que l’ assassin du juif c’ était moi, vous me dites à présent que cette maison-ci est la vôtre.

Fabiani

ou celle de ma maîtresse, ce qui revient au même.

Gilbert

répétez-moi ce que vous venez de dire.

Fabiani

je dis, l’ ami, puisque vous voulez le savoir, que cette maison est celle d’ une belle fille nommée Jane, qui est ma maîtresse.

Gilbert

et moi, je dis, mylord, que tu mens! Je dis que tu es un faussaire et un assassin, je dis que ta mère a été souffletée en place publique par le bourreau, et que je prendrai ta tête entre mes deux

mains, vois-tu, et que je te couperai ta langue
avec tes dents!
Fabiani
là, là. Quel est ce diable d’ homme?
Gilbert
je suis Gilbert le ciseleur. Jane est ma fiancée.
Fabiani
et moi, je suis le chevalier Amyas Pawlett.
Jane est ma maîtresse.
Gilbert
tu mens, te dis-je, tu es Lord Clanbrassil, le
favori de la reine. Imbécile qui croit que je ne sais
pas cela!
Fabiani, à part.
Tout le monde me connaît donc cette nuit! -
encore un homme dangereux, et dont il faudra se
défaire!
Gilbert
dis-moi sur-le-champ que tu as menti comme
un lâche, et que Jane n’ est pas ta maîtresse.
Fabiani
connais-tu son écriture?
Il tire un billet de sa poche.
— lis ceci.
à part, pendant que Gilbert déploie convulsivement le
papier.
— il importe qu’ il rentre chez lui et qu’ il cherche
querelle à Jane, cela donnera à mes gens le temps
d’ arriver.
Gilbert, lisant.
“ je serai seule cette nuit, vous pouvez venir.”
— malédiction! Mylord, tu as deshonoré ma fiancée,
tu es un infâme! Rends-moi raison!
Fabiani, mettant l’ épée à la main.
Je veux bien. Où est ton épée?
Gilbert
ô rage! être du peuple! N’ avoir rien sur soi,

ni épée, ni poignard! Va, je t’ attendrai la nuit au coin d’ une rue, et je t’ enfoncerai mes ongles dans le cou, et je t’ assassinerai, misérable!

Fabiani

là, là, vous êtes violent, mon camarade.

Gilbert

oh! Mylord! Je me vengerai de toi!

Fabiani

toi! Te venger de moi! Toi si bas, moi si haut! Tu es fou! Je t’ en défie.

Gilbert

tu m’ en défies?

Fabiani

oui.

Gilbert

tu verras!

Fabiani, à part.

Il ne faut pas que le soleil de demain se lève pour cet homme.

Haut.

— l’ ami, crois-moi, rentre chez toi! Je suis fâché que tu aies découvert cela; mais je te laisse la belle. Mon intention d’ ailleurs n’ était pas de pousser l’ amourette plus loin. Rentre chez toi.

Il jette une clef aux pieds de Gilbert.

— si tu n’ as pas de clef, en voici une. Ou, si tu l’ aimes mieux, tu n’ as qu’ à frapper quatre coups contre ce volet, Jane croira que c’ est moi, et elle t’ ouvrira. Bonsoir.

Il sort.

JOURNEE 1 SCENE 8

Gilbert, resté seul.
Il est parti! Il n' est plus là! Je ne l' ai pas pétri et broyé sous mes pieds, cet homme! Il a fallu le laisser partir! Pas une arme sur moi!

Il aperçoit à terre le poignard avec lequel Lord Clanbrassil a tué le juif; il le ramasse avec un empressement furieux.

— ah! Tu arrives trop tard! -tu ne pourras probablement tuer que moi! Mais c' est égal, que tu sois tombé du ciel ou vomi par l' enfer, je te bénis! -oh! Jane m' a trahi! Jane s' est donnée à cet infâme! Jane est l' héritière de Lord Talbot! Jane est perdue pour moi! -oh dieu! Voilà en une heure plus de choses terribles sur moi que ma tête n' en peut porter!

Simon Renard paraît dans les ténèbres au fond du théâtre.

— oh! Me venger de cet homme! Me venger de ce Lord Clanbrassil! Si je vais au palais de la reine, les laquais me chasseront à coups de pied comme un chien! Oh! Je suis fou, ma tête se brise. Oh! Cela m' est égal de mourir, mais je voudrais être vengé! Je donnerais mon sang pour la vengeance! N' y a-t-il personne au monde qui veuille faire ce marché avec moi? Qui veut me venger de Lord Clanbrassil et prendre ma vie pour paiement?…

JOURNEE 1 SCENE 9

Gilbert, Simon Renard.
Simon Renard, faisant un pas.
Moi.
Gilbert
toi! Qui es-tu?
Simon Renard
je suis l’ homme que tu désires.
Gilbert
sais-tu qui je suis?
Simon Renard
tu es l’ homme qu’ il me faut.
Gilbert
je n’ ai plus qu’ une idée, sais-tu cela? être vengé de Lord Clanbrassil, et mourir.
Simon Renard
tu seras vengé de Lord Clanbrassil, et tu mourras.
Gilbert
qui que tu sois, merci!
Simon Renard
oui, tu auras la vengeance que tu veux; mais n’ oublie pas à quelle condition. Il me faut ta vie.
Gilbert
prends-la.
Simon Renard
c’ est convenu?
Gilbert
oui.
Simon Renard
Suis-moi.
Gilbert
où?
Tu le sauras.
Gilbert
songe que tu me promets de me venger!

Simon Renard
songe que tu me promets de mourir!

JOURNEE 2 SCENE 1

Une chambre de l’ appartement de la reine. -un évangile ouvert sur un prie-dieu. La couronne royale sur un escabeau. -portes latérales. Une large porte au fond. — une partie du fond masquée par une grande tapisserie de haute lice.

La Reine, splendidement vêtue, couchée sur un lit de repos; Fabiano Fabiani, assis sur un pliant à côté; magnifique costume, la jarretière.

Fabiani, une guitare à la main, chantant.

Quand tu dors, calme et pure,
dans l’ ombre sous mes yeux,
ton haleine murmure
des mots harmonieux.
Ton beau corps se révèle
sans voile et sans atours… -
dormez, ma belle,
dormez toujours!
Quand tu me dis: je t’ aime!
ô ma beauté, je croi
je crois que le ciel même
s’ ouvre au-dessus de moi!
Ton regard étincelle
du beau feu des amours… -
aimez, ma belle,
aimez toujours!
Vois-tu? Toute la vie
tient dans ces quatre mots,
tous les biens qu’ on envie,
tous les biens sans les maux!
Tout ce qui peut séduire
tout ce qui peut charmer… -
chanter et rire,
dormir, aimer!

Il pose la guitare à terre.

Oh! Je vous aime plus que je ne peux dire, madame!
Mais ce Simon Renard! Ce Simon Renard,
plus puissant que vous-même ici! Je le hais.
La Reine
vous savez bien que je n’ y puis rien, mylord.
Il est ici le légat du prince d’ Espagne, mon futur
mari.
Fabiani
votre futur mari!
La Reine
allons, mylord, ne parlons plus de cela. Je vous
aime, que vous faut-il de plus? Et puis, voici
qu’ il est temps de vous en aller.
Fabiani
Marie, encore un instant!
La Reine
mais c’ est l’ heure où le conseil étroit va s’ assembler.
Il n’ y a eu ici jusqu’ à cette heure que la
femme, il faut laisser entrer la reine.
Fabiani
je veux, moi, que la femme fasse attendre la
reine à la porte.
La Reine
vous voulez, vous! Vous voulez, vous! Regardez-moi,
mylord. Tu as une jeune et charmante
tête, Fabiano!
Fabiani
c’ est vous qui êtes belle, madame! Vous n’ auriez
besoin que de votre beauté pour être toute-puissante.
Il y a sur votre tête quelque chose qui
dit que vous êtes la reine, mais cela est encore
bien mieux écrit sur votre front que sur votre
couronne.
La Reine
vous me flattez!
Fabiani
je t’ aime.

La Reine
tu m’ aimes, n’ est-ce pas? Tu n’ aimes que moi? Redis-le-moi encore comme cela, avec ces yeux-là. Hélas! Nous autres pauvres femmes, nous ne savons jamais au juste ce qui se passe dans le coeur d’ un homme; nous sommes obligées d’ en croire vos yeux, et les plus beaux, Fabiano, sont quelquefois les plus menteurs. Mais dans les tiens, mylord, il y a tant de loyauté, tant de candeur, tant de bonne foi, qu’ ils ne peuvent mentir ceux-là, n’ est-ce pas? Oui, ton regard est naïf et sincère, mon beau page. Oh! Prendre des yeux célestes pour tromper, ce serait infernal. Ou tes yeux sont les yeux d’ un ange, ou ils sont ceux d’ un démon.
Fabiani
ni démon, ni ange. Un homme qui vous aime.
La Reine
qui aime la reine?
Fabiani
qui aime Marie.
La Reine
écoute, Fabiano, je t’ aime aussi, moi. Tu es jeune, il y a beaucoup de belles femmes qui te regardent fort doucement, je le sais. Enfin, on se lasse d’ une reine comme d’ une autre. Ne m’ interromps pas. Si jamais tu deviens amoureux d’ une autre femme, je veux que tu me le dises. Je te pardonnerai peut-être si tu me le dis. Ne m’ interromps donc pas. Tu ne sais pas à quel point je t’ aime, je ne le sais pas moi-même! Il y a des momens, cela est vrai, où je t’ aimerais mieux mort qu’ heureux avec une autre; mais il y a aussi des momens où je t’ aimerais mieux heureux. Mon dieu! Je ne sais pas pourquoi on cherche à me faire la réputation d’ une méchante femme.
Fabiani
je ne puis être heureux qu’ avec toi, Marie. Je

n’ aime que toi.
La Reine
bien sûr? Regarde-moi. Bien sûr? Oh! Je suis jalouse par instants! Je me figure, -quelle est la femme qui n’ a pas de ces idées-là? -je me figure quelquefois que tu me trompes. Je voudrais être invisible, et pouvoir te suivre, et toujours savoir ce que tu fais, ce que tu dis, où tu es. Il y a dans les contes des fées une bague qui rend invisible; je donnerais ma couronne pour cette bague-là. Je m’ imagine sans cesse que tu vas voir les belles jeunes femmes qu’ il y a dans la ville. Oh! Il ne faudrait pas me tromper, vois-tu!
Fabiani
mais ôtez-vous donc ces idées-là de l’ esprit, madame! Moi vous tromper, madame, ma reine, ma bonne maîtresse! Mais il faudrait que je fusse le plus ingrat et le plus misérable des hommes pour cela! Mais je ne vous ai donné aucune raison de croire que je fusse le plus ingrat et le plus misérable des hommes! Mais je t’ aime, Marie! Mais je t’ adore! Mais je ne pourrais seulement pas regarder une autre femme! Je t’ aime, te dis-je! Mais est-ce que tu ne vois pas cela dans mes yeux? Oh! Mon dieu! Il y a un accent de vérité qui devrait persuader, pourtant. Voyons, regarde-moi bien, est-ce que j’ ai l’ air d’ un homme qui te trahit? Quand un homme trahit une femme, cela se voit tout de suite. Les femmes ordinairement ne se trompent pas à cela. Et quel moment choisis-tu pour me dire des choses pareilles, Marie? Le moment de ma vie où je t’ aime peut-être le plus! C’ est vrai, il me semble que je ne t’ ai jamais tant aimée qu’ aujourd’ hui! Je ne parle pas ici à la reine. Pardieu, je me moque bien de la reine. Qu’ est-ce qu’ elle peut me faire la reine? Elle peut me faire couper la tête, qu’ est-ce que cela? Toi, Marie, tu

peux me briser le cœur! Ce n’ est pas votre majesté que j’ aime, c’ est toi. C’ est ta belle main blanche et douce que je baise et que j’ adore, et non votre sceptre, madame!

La Reine

merci, mon Fabiano. Adieu. -mon dieu! Mylord, que vous êtes jeune! Les beaux cheveux noirs et la charmante tête que voilà! -revenez dans une heure.

Fabiani

ce que vous appelez une heure, vous, je l’ appelle un siècle, moi!

Il sort.

Sitôt qu’ il est sorti, la reine se lève précipitamment, va à une porte masquée, l’ ouvre et introduit Simon Renard.

JOURNEE 2 SCENE 2

La Reine, Simon Renard.
La Reine
entrez, monsieur le bailli. Eh! Bien, étiez-vous resté là? L’ avez-vous entendu?
Simon Renard
oui, madame.
La Reine
qu’ en dites-vous? Oh! C’ est le plus fourbe et le plus faux des hommes. Qu’ en dites-vous?
Simon Renard
je dis, madame, qu’ on voit bien que cet homme porte un nom en i.
La Reine
et vous êtes sûr qu’ il va chez cette femme la nuit? Vous l’ avez vu?
Simon Renard
moi, Chandos, Clinton, Montagu, dix témoins.
La Reine
c’ est que c’ est vraiment infâme!
Simon Renard
d’ ailleurs la chose sera encore mieux prouvée à la reine tout à l’ heure. La jeune fille est ici, comme je l’ ai dit à votre majesté. Je l’ ai fait saisir dans sa maison cette nuit.
La Reine
mais est-ce que ce n’ est pas là un crime suffisant pour lui faire trancher la tête à cet homme, monsieur?
Simon Renard
avoir été chez une jolie fille la nuit? Non, madame. Votre majesté a fait mettre en jugement Trogmorton pour un fait pareil; Trogmorton a été absous.
La Reine
j’ ai puni les juges de Trogmorton.

Simon Renard
tâchez de n’ avoir pas à punir les juges de Fabiani.
La Reine
oh! Comment me venger de ce traître?
Simon Renard
votre majesté ne veut la vengeance que d’ une
certaine manière?
La Reine
la seule qui soit digne de moi.
Simon Renard
Trogmorton a été absous, madame. Il n’ y a
qu’ un moyen, je l’ ai dit à votre majesté. L’ homme
qui est là.
La Reine
fera-t-il tout ce que je voudrai?
Simon Renard
oui, si vous faites tout ce qu’ il voudra.
La Reine
donnera-t-il sa vie?
Simon Renard
il fera ses conditions; mais il donnera sa vie.
Qu’ est-ce qu’ il veut? Savez-vous?
Simon Renard
ce que vous voulez vous-même. Se venger.
La Reine
dites qu’ il entre, et restez par là à portée de la
voix. -monsieur le bailli!
Simon Renard, revenant.
Madame?…
La Reine
dites à Mylord Chandos qu’ il se tienne là dans la
chambre voisine avec six hommes de mon ordonnance,
tous prêts à entrer. -et la femme aussi,
toute prête à entrer! -allez.
Simon Renard sort.
La Reine, seule.
Oh! Ce sera terrible!

Une des portes latérales s’ ouvre. Entrent Simon Renard et Gilbert.

JOURNEE 2 SCENE 3

La Reine, Gilbert, Simon Renard.
Gilbert
devant qui suis-je?
Simon Renard
devant la reine.
Gilbert
la reine!
La Reine
c’ est bien, oui, la reine. Je suis la reine. Nous n’ avons pas le temps de nous étonner. Vous, monsieur, vous êtes Gilbert, un ouvrier ciseleur. Vous demeurez quelque part par là au bord de l’ eau avec une nommée Jane dont vous êtes le fiancé, et qui vous trompe, et qui a pour amant un nommé Fabiano qui me trompe, moi. Vous voulez vous venger, et moi aussi. Pour cela, j’ ai besoin de disposer de votre vie à ma fantaisie. J’ ai besoin que vous disiez ce que je vous commanderai de dire, quoi que ce soit. J’ ai besoin qu’ il n’ y ait plus pour vous ni faux ni vrai, ni bien ni mal, ni juste ni injuste, rien que ma vengeance et ma volonté. J’ ai besoin que vous me laissiez faire et que vous vous laissiez faire. Y consentez-vous?
Gilbert
madame…
La Reine
la vengeance, tu l’ auras. Mais je te préviens qu’ il faudra mourir. Voilà tout. Fais tes conditions. Si tu as une vieille mère, et qu’ il faille couvrir sa nappe de lingots d’ or, parle, je le ferai. Vends-moi ta vie aussi cher que tu voudras. Je ne suis plus décidé à mourir, madame.
La Reine
comment!

Gilbert
tenez, majesté, j’ ai réfléchi toute la nuit, rien ne m’ est prouvé encore dans cette affaire. J’ ai vu un homme qui s’ est vanté d’ être l’ amant de Jane. Qui me dit qu’ il n’ a pas menti? J’ ai vu une clef. Qui me dit qu’ on ne l’ a pas volée? J’ ai vu une lettre. Qui me dit qu’ on ne l’ a pas fait écrire de force. D’ ailleurs je ne sais même plus si c’ était bien son écriture. Il faisait nuit. J’ étais troublé. Je n’ y voyais pas. Je ne puis donner ma vie qui est la sienne comme cela. Je ne crois à rien, je ne suis sûr de rien, je n’ ai pas vu Jane.
La Reine
on voit bien que tu aimes! Tu es comme moi, tu résistes à toutes les preuves. Et si tu la vois, cette Jane, si tu l’ entends avouer le crime, feras-tu ce que je veux?
Gilbert
oui. à une condition.
La Reine
tu me la diras plus tard.
à Simon Renard.
— cette femme ici tout de suite.
Simon Renard sort. La reine place Gilbert derrière un rideau qui occupe une partie du fond de l’ appartement.
— mets-toi là.
Entre Jane, pâle et tremblante.

JOURNEE 2 SCENE 4

La Reine, Jane, Gilbert derrière le rideau.
La Reine
approche, jeune fille, tu sais qui nous sommes?
Jane
oui, madame.
La Reine
tu sais quel est l’ homme qui t’ a séduite?
Jane
oui, madame.
La Reine
il t’ avait trompée? Il s’ était fait passer pour un gentilhomme nommé Amyas Pawlett?
Jane
oui, madame.
La Reine
tu sais maintenant que c’ est Fabiano Fabiani, Comte De Clanbrassil?
Jane
oui, madame.
La Reine
cette nuit, quand on est venu te saisir dans ta maison, tu lui avais donné rendez-vous, tu l’ attendais?
Jane, joignant les mains.
Mon dieu, madame!
La Reine
réponds.
Jane, d’ une voix faible.
Oui.
La Reine
tu sais qu’ il n’ y a plus rien à espérer ni pour lui, ni pour toi?
Jane
que la mort. C’ est une espérance.
La Reine

raconte-moi toute l’ aventure. Où as-tu rencontré
cet homme pour la première fois?
Jane
la première fois que je l’ ai vu, c’ était… -mais
à quoi bon tout cela? Une malheureuse fille du
peuple, pauvre et vaine, folle et coquette, amoureuse
de parures et de beaux dehors, qui se laisse
éblouir par la belle mise d’ un grand seigneur. Voilà
tout. Je suis séduite, je suis déshonorée, je suis
perdue. Je n’ ai rien à ajouter à cela. Mon dieu!
Vous ne voyez donc pas que chaque mot que je
dis me fait mourir, madame.
La Reine
c’ est bien.
Jane
oh! Votre colère est terrible, je le sais, madame.
Ma tête ploie d’ avance sous le châtiment que vous
me préparez…
La Reine
moi! Un châtiment pour toi! Est-ce que je m’ occupe
de toi, folle! Qui es-tu, malheureuse créature,
pour que la reine s’ occupe de toi? Non,
mon affaire, c’ est Fabiano. Quant à toi, femme,
c’ est un autre que moi qui se chargera de te punir.
Jane
eh bien, madame, quelque soit celui que vous
en chargerez, quelque soit le châtiment, je subirai
tout sans me plaindre, je vous remercierai même,
si vous avez pitié d’ une prière que je vais vous faire.
Il y a un homme qui m’ a prise orpheline au berceau,
qui m’ a adoptée, qui m’ a élevée, qui m’ a
nourrie, qui m’ a aimée et qui m’ aime encore; un
homme dont je suis bien indigne, envers qui j’ ai
été bien criminelle, et dont l’ image est pourtant
au fond de mon cœur chère, auguste et sacrée
comme celle de Dieu; un homme qui sans doute
à l’ heure où je vous parle trouve sa maison vide et

abandonnée, et dévastée, et n’ y comprend rien et
s’ arrache les cheveux de désespoir. Hé bien, ce que
je demande à votre majesté, madame, c’ est qu’ il
n’ y comprenne jamais rien, c’ est que je disparaisse
sans qu’ il sache jamais ce que je suis devenue, ni
ce que j’ ai fait, ni ce que vous avez fait de moi.
Hélas, mon dieu! Je ne sais pas si je me fais bien
comprendre; mais vous devez sentir que j’ ai là un
ami, un noble et généreux ami, -pauvre Gilbert!
Oh oui, c’ est bien vrai! -qui m’ estime et qui me
croit pure, et que je ne veux pas qu’ il me haïsse
et qu’ il me méprise… -vous me comprenez,
n’ est-ce pas, madame? L’ estime de cet homme,
c’ est pour moi bien plus que la vie, allez! Et puis,
cela lui ferait un si affreux chagrin! Tant de
surprise! Il n’ y croirait pas d’ abord. Non, il n’ y
croirait pas. Mon dieu! Pauvre Gilbert! Oh, madame!
Ayez pitié de lui et de moi. Il ne vous a rien fait,
lui. Qu’ il ne sache rien de ceci, au nom du ciel!
Au nom du ciel! Qu’ il ne sache pas que je suis
coupable, il se tuerait. Qu’ il ne sache pas que je suis
morte, il mourrait.
La Reine
l’ homme dont vous parlez est là qui vous écoute,
qui vous juge et qui va vous punir.
Gilbert se montre.
Jane
ciel! Gilbert!
Gilbert, à la reine.
Ma vie est à vous, madame.
La Reine
bien. Avez-vous quelques conditions à me faire?
Gilbert
oui, madame.
La Reine
lesquelles? Nous vous donnons notre parole de
reine que nous y souscrivons d’ avance.

Gilbert
voici, madame. -c’ est bien simple. C’ est une
dette de reconnaissance que j’ acquitte envers un
seigneur de votre cour qui m’ a fait beaucoup travailler
dans mon métier de ciseleur.
La Reine
parlez.
Gilbert
ce seigneur a une liaison secrète avec une femme
qu’ il ne peut épouser, parce qu’ elle tient à une
famille proscrite. Cette femme, qui a vécu cachée
jusqu’ à présent, c’ est la fille unique et l’ héritière
du dernier Lord Talbot, décapité sous le Roi
Henri Viii.
La Reine
comment! Es-tu sûr de ce que tu dis là? Jean
Talbot, le bon lord catholique, le loyal défenseur
de ma mère d’ Aragon, il a laissé une fille, dis-tu?
Sur ma couronne, si cela est vrai, cet enfant est
mon enfant; et ce que Jean Talbot a fait pour la
mère de Marie D’ Angleterre, Marie D’ Angleterre le
fera pour la fille de Jean Talbot.
Gilbert
alors, ce sera sans doute un bonheur pour votre
majesté de rendre à la fille de Lord Talbot les
biens de son père?…
La Reine
oui, certes, et de les reprendre à Fabiano! -
mais a-t-on les preuves que cette héritière existe?
Gilbert
on les a.
La Reine
d’ ailleurs, si nous n’ avons pas de preuves, nous
en ferons. Nous ne sommes pas la reine pour rien.
Gilbert
votre majesté rendra à la fille de Lord Talbot
les biens, les titres, le rang, le nom, les armes et

la devise de son père. Votre majesté la relevera de toute proscription et lui garantira la vie sauve. Votre majesté la mariera à ce seigneur qui est le seul homme qu' elle puisse épouser. à ces conditions, madame, vous pourrez disposer de moi, de ma liberté, de ma vie et de ma volonté, selon votre plaisir.

La Reine

bien. Je ferai ce que vous venez de dire.

Gilbert

votre majesté fera ce que je viens de dire. La reine d' Angleterre me le jure, à moi, Gilbert, l' ouvrier ciseleur, sur sa couronne que voici et sur l' évangile ouvert que voilà.

La Reine

sur la royale couronne que voici et sur le divin évangile que voilà, je te le jure!

Gilbert

le pacte est conclu, madame. Faites préparer une tombe pour moi, et un lit nuptial pour les époux. Le seigneur dont je parlais, c' est Fabiani, Comte De Clanbrassil. L' héritière de Talbot, la voici.

Jane

que dit-il?

La Reine

est-ce que j' ai affaire à un insensé? Qu' est-ce que cela signifie? Maître! Faites attention à ceci, que vous êtes hardi de vous railler de la reine d' Angleterre; que les chambres royales sont des lieux où il faut prendre garde aux paroles qu' on dit, et qu' il y a des occasions où la bouche fait tomber la tête!

Gilbert

ma tête, vous l' avez, madame. Moi, j' ai votre serment!

La Reine

vous ne parlez pas sérieusement. Ce Fabiano! Cette Jane!… -allons donc!

Gilbert

cette Jane est la fille et l’ héritière de Lord Talbot.

La Reine

bah! Vision! Chimère! Folie! Les preuves, les avez-vous?

Gilbert

complètes.

Il tire un paquet de sa poitrine.

— veuillez lire ces papiers.

La Reine

est-ce que j’ ai le temps de lire vos papiers, moi? Est-ce que je vous ai demandé vos papiers? Qu’ est-ce que cela me fait, vos papiers? Sur mon âme, s’ ils prouvent quelque chose, je les jetterai au feu, et il ne restera rien.

Gilbert

que votre serment, madame.

La Reine

mon serment! Mon serment!

Gilbert

sur la couronne et sur l’ évangile, madame! C’ est-à-dire, sur votre tête et sur votre âme, sur votre vie dans ce monde et sur votre vie dans l’ autre.

La Reine

mais que veux-tu donc? Je te jure que tu es en démence!

Gilbert

ce que je veux? Jane a perdu son rang, rendez-le lui! Jane a perdu l’ honneur, rendez-le lui! Proclamez-la fille de Lord Talbot et femme de Lord Clanbrassil, -et puis, prenez ma vie!

La Reine

ta vie! Mais que veux-tu que j’ en fasse de ta vie à présent? Je n’ en voulais que pour me venger de cet homme, de Fabiano! Tu ne comprends donc rien? Je ne te comprends pas non plus, moi. Tu parlais de vengeance! C’ est comme cela que tu te venges? Ces gens du peuple sont stupides! Et puis, est-ce que je crois à ta ridicule histoire d’ une héritière de Talbot? Les papiers! Tu me montre les papiers! Je ne veux pas les regarder. Ah! Une femme te trahit, et tu fais le généreux! à ton aise. Je ne suis pas généreuse, moi! J’ ai la rage et la haine dans le cœur. Je me vengerai, et tu m’ y aideras. Mais cet homme est fou! Il est fou! Il est fou! Mon dieu! Pourquoi en ai-je besoin? C’ est désespérant d’ avoir affaire à des gens pareils dans des affaires sérieuses!

Gilbert

j’ ai votre parole de reine catholique. Lord Clanbrassil a séduit Jane, il l’ épousera.

La Reine

et s’ il refuse de l’ épouser?

Gilbert

vous l’ y forcerez, madame.

Jane

oh non! Ayez pitié de moi, Gilbert!

Gilbert

eh bien! S’ il refuse, cet infâme, votre majesté fera de lui et de moi ce qui lui plaira.

La Reine, avec joie.

Ah! C’ est tout ce que je veux!

Gilbert

si ce cas-là arrivait, pourvu que la couronne de comtesse de Waterford soit solennellement replacée par la reine sur la tête sacrée et inviolable de Jane Talbot que voici, je ferai, moi, tout ce que la reine m’ imposera.

La Reine

tout?

Gilbert

tout.

La Reine

tu diras ce qu' il faudra dire? Tu mourras de la mort qu' on voudra?

Gilbert

de la mort qu' on voudra.

Jane

ô dieu!

La Reine

tu le jures?

Gilbert

je le jure.

La Reine

la chose peut s' arranger ainsi. Cela suffit. J' ai ta parole, tu as la mienne. C' est dit.

Elle paraît réfléchir un moment.

à Jane.

— vous êtes inutile ici, sortez, vous. On vous rappellera.

Jane

ô Gilbert! Qu' avez-vous fait-là? ô Gilbert! Je suis une misérable, et je n' ose lever les yeux sur vous! ô Gilbert! Vous êtes plus qu' un ange, car vous avez tout à la fois les vertus d' un ange et les passions d' un homme!

Elle sort.

JOURNEE 2 SCENE 5

La Reine, Gilbert; puis Simon Renard, Lord
Chandos, et les gardes.
La Reine, à Gilbert.
As-tu une arme sur toi? Un couteau? Un poignard?
Quelque chose?
Gilbert, tirant de sa poitrine le poignard de Lord
Clanbrassil.
Un poignard? Oui, madame.
La Reine
bien. Tiens-le à ta main.
Elle lui saisit vivement le bras.
— monsieur le bailli d’ Amont! Lord Chandos!
Entrent Simon Renard, Lord Chandos et les gardes.
— assurez-vous de cet homme! Il a levé le poignard
sur moi. Je lui ai pris le bras au moment où
il allait me frapper. C’ est un assassin.
Gilbert
madame!…
La Reine, bas à Gilbert.
Oublies-tu déjà nos conventions? Est-ce ainsi
que tu te laisses faire?
Haut.
— vous êtes tous témoins qu’ il avait encore le
poignard à la main? Monsieur le bailli, comment
se nomme le bourreau de la tour de Londres?
Simon Renard
c’ est un irlandais appelé Mac Dermoti.
La Reine
qu’ on me l’ amène, j’ ai à lui parler.
Simon Renard
vous-même?
La Reine
moi-même.
Simon Renard

la reine parlera au bourreau!
La Reine
oui, la reine parlera au bourreau, la tête parlera
à la main. -allez donc!
Un garde sort.
Mylord Chandos, et vous, messieurs, vous me
répondez de cet homme. Gardez-le là, dans vos
rangs, derrière vous. Il va se passer ici des choses
qu’ il faut qu’ il voie. -monsieur le lieutenant
d’ Amont, Lord Clanbrassil est-il au palais?
Simon Renard
il est là, dans la chambre peinte, qui attend
que le bon plaisir de la reine soit de le voir.
La Reine
il ne se doute de rien?
Simon Renard
de rien.
La Reine, à Lord Chandos.
Qu’ il entre.
Simon Renard
toute la cour est là aussi qui attend.
N’ introduira-t-on personne avant Lord Clanbrassil?
La Reine.
Quels sont parmi nos seigneurs ceux qui haïssent
Fabiani?
Simon Renard.
Tous.
La Reine.
Ceux qui le haïssent le plus?
Simon Renard.
Clinton, Montagu, Somerset, le comte de Derby,
Gerard Fitz-Gerard, lord Paget, et le lord
chancelier.
La Reine, à lord Chandos.
Introduisez ceux-là, tous, excepté le lord
chancelier. Allez.
Chandos sort.

à Simon Renard.

— le digne évêque chancelier n’ aime pas Fabiani plus que les autres; mais c’ est un homme à scrupules.

Apercevant les papiers que Gilbert a déposés sur la table.

— ah! Il faut pourtant que je jette un coup d’ œil sur ces papiers.

Pendant qu’ elle les examine, la porte du fond s’ ouvre. Entrent avec de profonds saluts les seigneurs désignés par la reine.

JOURNEE 2 SCENE 6

Les mêmes, lord Clinton et les autres seigneurs.

La Reine.

Bonjour, messieurs. Dieu vous ait en sa garde, mylords.

à lord Montagu.

— Anthony Brown, je n' oublie jamais que vous avez dignement tenu tête à Jean De Montmorency et au sieur de Toulouse dans mes négociations avec l' empereur mon oncle. -lord Paget, vous recevrez aujourd' hui vos lettres de baron Paget de Beaudesert en Stafford. -eh mais! C' est notre vieil ami lord Clinton! Nous sommes toujours votre bonne amie, mylord. C' est vous qui avez exterminé Thomas Wyat dans la plaine de Saint-James. Souvenons-nous-en tous, messieurs. Ce jour-là la couronne d' Angleterre a été sauvée par un pont qui a permis à mes troupes d' arriver jusqu' aux rebelles, et par un mur qui a empêché les rebelles d' arriver jusqu' à moi. Le pont, c' est le pont de Londres. Le mur, c' est lord Clinton!

Lord Clinton, bas à Simon Renard.

Voilà six mois que la reine ne m' avait parlé. Comme elle est bonne aujourd' hui!

Simon Renard, bas à lord Clinton.

Patience, mylord. Vous la trouverez meilleure encore tout à l' heure.

La Reine, à lord Chandos.

Mylord Clanbrassil peut entrer.

à Simon Renard.

— quand il sera ici depuis quelques minutes… elle lui parle bas à l' oreille, et lui désigne la porte par laquelle Jane est sortie.

Simon Renard.

Il suffit, madame.

Entre Fabiani.

JOURNEE 2 SCENE 7

Les mêmes, Fabiani.

La Reine.

Ah! Le voici!…

elle se remet à parler bas à Simon Renard.

Fabiani, à part, salué par tout le monde et regardant autour de lui.

Qu’ est-ce que cela veut dire? Il n’ y a que de mes ennemis ici, ce matin. La reine parle bas à Simon Renard. Diable! Elle rit! Mauvais signe!

La Reine, gracieusement à Fabiani.

Dieu vous garde, mylord!

Fabiani, saisissant sa main qu’ il baise.

Madame…

à part.

— elle m’ a souri. Le péril n’ est pas pour moi.

La Reine, toujours gracieuse.

J’ ai à vous parler.

Elle vient avec lui sur le devant du théâtre.

Fabiani.

Et moi aussi j’ ai à vous parler, madame. J’ ai des reproches à vous faire. M’ éloigner, m’ exiler pendant si long-temps! Ah! Il n’ en serait pas ainsi, si dans les heures d’ absence vous songiez à moi comme je songe à vous.

La Reine.

Vous êtes injuste; depuis que vous m’ avez quittée je ne m’ occupe que de vous.

Fabiani.

Est-il bien vrai? Ai-je tant de bonheur? Répétez-le-moi.

La Reine, toujours souriant.

Je vous le jure.

Fabiani.

Vous m’ aimez donc comme je vous aime?

La Reine.
Oui, mylord. -certainement, je n’ ai pensé qu’ à vous. Tellement que j’ ai songé à vous ménager une surprise agréable à votre retour.
Fabiani.
Comment! Quelle surprise?
La Reine.
Une rencontre qui vous fera plaisir.
Fabiani.
La rencontre de qui?
La Reine.
Devinez. -vous ne devinez pas?
Fabiani.
Non, madame.
La Reine.
Tournez-vous.
Il se retourne et aperçoit Jane sur le seuil de la petite porte entr’ ouverte.
Fabiani, à part.
Jane!
Jane, à part.
C’ est lui!
La Reine, toujours avec un sourire.
Mylord, connaissez-vous cette jeune fille?
Fabiani.
Non, madame.
La Reine.
Jeune fille, connaissez-vous mylord?
Jane.
La vérité avant la vie. Oui, madame.
La Reine.
Ainsi, mylord, vous ne connaissez pas cette femme?
Fabiani.
Madame! On veut me perdre. Je suis entouré d’ ennemis. Cette femme est liguée avec eux sans doute. Je ne la connais pas, madame! Je ne sais

pas qui elle est, madame!

La Reine, se levant et lui frappant le visage de son gant.

Ah! Tu es un lâche! -ah! Tu trahis l' une et tu renies l' autre! Ah! Tu ne sais pas qui elle est! Veux-tu que je te le dise, moi? Cette femme est Jane Talbot, fille de Jean Talbot, le bon seigneur catholique mort sur l' échafaud pour ma mère. Cette femme est Jane Talbot, ma cousine; Jane Talbot, comtesse de Shrewsbury, comtesse de Wexford, comtesse de Waterford, pairesse d' Angleterre! Voilà ce que c' est que cette femme! -lord Paget, vous êtes commissaire du sceau privé, vous tiendrez compte de nos paroles. La reine d' Angleterre reconnaît solennellement la jeune femme ici présente pour Jane, fille et unique héritière du dernier comte de Waterford.

Montrant les papiers.

— voici les titres et les preuves que vous ferez sceller du grand sceau. C' est notre plaisir.

à Fabiani.

— oui, comtesse de Waterford! Et cela est prouvé! Et tu rendras les biens, misérable! -ah! Tu ne connais pas cette femme! Ah! Tu ne sais pas qui est cette femme! Eh bien! Je te l' apprends, moi! C' est Jane Talbot! Et faut-il t' en dire plus encore?…

le regardant en face, à voix basse, entre les dents.

— lâche! C' est ta maîtresse!

Fabiani.

Madame…

La Reine.

Voilà ce qu' elle est; maintenant voici ce que tu es, toi. -tu es un homme sans âme, un homme sans cœur, un homme sans esprit! Tu es un fourbe et un misérable! Tu es… -pardieu, messieurs, vous n' avez pas besoin de vous éloigner. Cela m' est bien égal que vous entendiez ce que je vais dire à

cet homme! Je ne baisse pas la voix, il me semble.
— Fabiano! Tu es un misérable, un traître envers moi, un lâche envers elle, un valet menteur, le plus vil des hommes, le dernier des hommes! Cela est pourtant vrai, je t' ai fait comte de Clanbrassil, baron de Dinasmonddy, quoi encore? Baron de Darmouth en Devonshire. Eh bien! C' est que j' étais folle! Je vous demande pardon de vous avoir fait coudoyer par cet homme-là, mylords. Toi, chevalier! Toi, gentilhomme! Toi, seigneur! Mais compare-toi donc un peu à ceux qui sont cela, misérable! Mais regarde, en voilà autour de toi, des gentilshommes! Voilà Bridges, baron Chandos. Voilà Seymour, duc de Somerset. Voilà les Stanley, qui sont comtes de Derby depuis l' an quatorze-cent quatre-vingt-cinq! Voilà les Clinton, qui sont barons Clinton depuis douze-cent quatre-vingt-dix-huit! Est-ce que tu t' imagines que tu ressembles à ces gens-là, toi! Tu te dis allié à la famille espagnole de Penalver, mais ce n' est pas vrai, tu n' es qu' un mauvais italien, rien! Moins que rien! Fils d' un chaussetier du village de Larino! -oui, messieurs, fils d' un chaussetier! Je le savais et je ne le disais pas et je le cachais, et je faisais semblant de croire cet homme quand il parlait de sa noblesse. Car voilà comme nous sommes, nous autres femmes. ô mon dieu! Je voudrais qu' il y eût des femmes ici, ce serait une leçon pour toutes. Ce misérable! Ce misérable! Il trompe une femme, et renie l' autre! Infâme! Certainement, tu es bien infâme! Comment! Depuis que je parle il n' est pas encore à genoux! à genoux, Fabiani! Mylords, mettez cet homme de force à genoux!

Fabiani.

Votre majesté…

La Reine.

Ce misérable, que j' ai comblé de bienfaits! Ce laquais napolitain, que j’ ai fait chevalier doré et comte libre d’ Angleterre! Ah! Je devais m’ attendre à ce qui arrive! On m’ avait bien dit que cela finirait ainsi. Mais je suis toujours comme cela, je m’ obstine, et je vois ensuite que j’ ai eu tort. C’ est ma faute. Italien, cela veut dire fourbe! Napolitain, cela veut dire lâche! Toutes les fois que mon père s’ est servi d’ un italien, il s’ en est repenti. Ce Fabiani! Tu vois, lady Jane, à quel homme tu t’ es livrée, malheureuse enfant! -je te vengerai, va! -oh! Je devais le savoir d’ avance, on ne peut tirer autre chose de la poche d’ un italien qu’ un stylet, et de l’ âme d’ un italien que la trahison!

Fabiani.

Madame, je vous jure…

La Reine.

Il va se parjurer à présent! Il sera vil jusqu’ à la fin; il nous fera rougir jusqu’ au bout devant ces hommes, nous autres faibles femmes qui l’ avons aimé! Il ne relèvera seulement pas la tête!

Fabiani.

Si, madame! Je la relèverai. Je suis perdu, je le vois bien. Ma mort est décidée. Vous emploierez tous les moyens, le poignard, le poison…

La Reine, lui prenant les mains, et l’ attirant vivement sur le devant du théâtre.

— le poison! Le poignard! Que dis-tu là, italien? La vengeance traître, la vengeance honteuse, la vengeance par derrière, la vengeance comme dans ton pays! Non, signor Fabiani, ni poignard, ni poison. Est-ce que j’ ai à me cacher, moi, à chercher le coin des rues la nuit, et à me faire petite quand je me venge? Non pardieu, je veux le grand jour, entends-tu, mylord? Le plein midi, le beau soleil, la place publique, la hache et le billot, la foule dans la rue, la foule aux fenêtres, la foule

sur les toits, cent mille témoins! Je veux qu' on ait
peur, entends-tu, mylord? Qu' on trouve cela
splendide, effroyable et magnifique, et qu' on
dise: c' est une femme qui a été outragée, mais
c' est une reine qui se venge! Ce favori si envié,
ce beau jeune homme insolent que j' ai couvert de
velours et de satin, je veux le voir plié en deux,
effaré et tremblant, à genoux sur un drap noir,
pieds nus, mains liées, hué par le peuple, manié
par le bourreau. Ce cou blanc où j' avais mis un
collier d' or, j' y veux mettre une corde. J' ai vu
quel effet ce Fabiani faisait sur un trône, je veux
voir quel effet il fera sur un échafaud!
Fabiani.
Madame…
La Reine.
Plus un mot. Ah! Plus un mot. Tu es bien
véritablement perdu, vois-tu. Tu monteras sur
l' échafaud comme Suffolk et Northumberland. C' est
une fête comme une autre que je donnerai à ma bonne
ville de Londres! Tu sais comme elle te hait, ma
bonne ville! Pardieu, c' est une belle chose quand
on a besoin de se venger d' être Marie, dame et
reine d' Angleterre, fille de Henri Viii, et
maîtresse des quatre mers! Et quand tu seras sur
l' échafaud, Fabiani, tu pourras, à ton gré, faire
une longue harangue au peuple comme Northumberland,
ou une longue prière à Dieu comme Suffolk
pour donner à la grâce le temps de venir; le ciel
m' est témoin que tu es un traître et que la grâce
ne viendra pas! Ce misérable fourbe qui me parlait
d' amour et me disait tu ce matin! -hé mon
dieu, messieurs, cela paraît vous étonner que je
parle ainsi devant vous; mais, je vous le répète,
que m' importe?
à lord Somerset.
— mylord duc, vous êtes constable de la tour,

demandez son épée à cet homme.
Fabiani.
La voici; mais je proteste. En admettant qu' il
soit prouvé que j' ai trompé ou séduit une femme…
La Reine.
Eh! Que m' importe que tu aies séduit une femme!
Est-ce que je m' occupe de cela? Ces messieurs sont
témoins que cela m' est bien égal!
Fabiani.
Séduire une femme, ce n' est pas un crime capital,
madame. Votre majesté n' a pu faire condamner
Trogmorton sur une accusation pareille.
Il nous brave maintenant, je crois! Le ver devient
serpent. Et qui te dit que c' est de cela qu' on
t' accuse?
Fabiani.
Alors de quoi m' accuse-t-on? Je ne suis pas anglais,
moi, je ne suis pas sujet de votre majesté. Je
suis sujet du roi de Naples et vassal du saint-père.
Je sommerai son légat, l' éminentissime cardinal
Polus, de me réclamer. Je me défendrai, madame.
Je suis étranger. Je ne puis être mis en cause
que si j' ai commis un crime, un vrai crime. -
quel est mon crime?
La Reine.
Tu demandes quel est ton crime?
Fabiani.
Oui, madame.
La Reine.
Vous entendez tous la question qui m' est faite,
mylords, vous allez entendre la réponse. Faites
attention, et prenez garde à vous tous tant que
vous êtes, car vous allez voir que je n' ai qu' à
frapper du pied pour faire sortir de terre un
échafaud. -Chandos! Chandos! Ouvrez cette porte
à deux battans! Toute la cour! Tout le monde!
Faites entrer tout le monde.

La porte du fond s’ ouvre. Entre toute la cour.

JOURNEE 2 SCENE 8

Les mêmes, le lord chancelier, toute la cour.
La Reine.
— entrez, entrez, mylords. J’ ai véritablement beaucoup de plaisir à vous voir tous aujourd’ hui.
— bien, bien, les hommes de justice, par ici, plus près, plus près. -où sont les sergens d’ armes de la chambre des lords, Harriot et Llanerillo? Ah! Vous voilà, messieurs. Soyez les bienvenus. Tirez vos épées. Bien. Placez-vous à droite et à gauche de cet homme. Il est votre prisonnier.
Fabiani.
Madame, quel est mon crime?
La Reine.
Mylord Gardiner, mon savant ami, vous êtes chancelier d’ Angleterre, nous vous faisons savoir que vous ayez à vous assembler en diligence, vous et les douze lords commissaires de la chambre étoilée, que nous regrettons de ne pas voir ici. Il se passe des choses étranges dans ce palais. écoutez, mylords, Madame élisabeth a déjà suscité plus d’ un ennemi à notre couronne. Il y a eu le complot de Pietro Caro qui a fait le mouvement d’ Exeter, et qui correspondait secrètement avec Madame élisabeth, par le moyen d’ un chiffre taillé sur une guitare. Il y a eu la trahison de Thomas Wyat, qui a soulevé le comté de Kent. Il y a eu la rébellion du duc de Suffolk, lequel a été saisi dans le creux d’ un arbre après la défaite des siens. Il y a aujourd’ hui un nouvel attentat. écoutez tous. Aujourd’ hui, ce matin, un homme s’ est présenté à mon audience. Après quelques paroles, il a levé un poignard sur moi. J’ ai arrêté son bras à temps. Lord Chandos et monsieur le bailli d’ Amont ont saisi l’ homme. Il a déclaré avoir été poussé à ce crime

par lord Clanbrassil.

Fabiani.

Par moi? Cela n' est pas. Oh! Mais voilà une chose affreuse! Cet homme n' existe pas. On ne retrouvera pas cet homme. Qui est-il? Où est-il?

La Reine.

Il est ici.

Gilbert, sortant du milieu des soldats derrière lesquels il est resté caché jusqu' alors.

C' est moi.

La Reine.

En conséquence des déclarations de cet homme, nous, Marie, reine, nous accusons devant la chambre aux étoiles cet autre homme, Fabiano Fabiani, comte de Clanbrassil, de haute trahison et d' attentat régicide sur notre personne impériale et sacrée.

Fabiani.

Régicide, moi! C' est monstrueux! Oh! Ma tête s' égare! Ma vue se trouble! Quel est ce piége? Qui que tu sois, misérable, oses-tu affirmer que ce qu' a dit la reine est vrai?

Gilbert.

Oui.

Fabiani.

Je t' ai poussé au régicide, moi?

Gilbert.

Oui.

Fabiani.

Oui! Toujours oui! Malédiction! C' est que vous ne pouvez pas savoir à quel point cela est faux, messeigneurs! Cet homme sort de l' enfer. Malheureux! Tu veux me perdre; mais tu ignores que tu te perds en même temps. Le crime dont tu me charges te charge aussi. Tu me feras mourir, mais tu mourras. Avec un seul mot, insensé, tu fais tomber deux têtes, la mienne et la tienne. Sais-tu cela?

Gilbert.

Je le sais.

Fabiani.

Mylords, cet homme est payé…

Gilbert.

Par vous. Voici la bourse pleine d' or que vous m' avez donnée pour le crime. Votre blason et votre chiffre y sont brodés.

Fabiani.

Juste ciel! -mais on ne représente pas le poignard avec lequel cet homme voulait, dit-on, frapper la reine. Où est le poignard?

Lord Chandos.

Le voici.

Gilbert, à Fabiani.

C' est le vôtre. -vous me l' avez donné pour cela. On en retrouvera le fourreau chez vous.

Le Lord Chancelier.

Comte de Clanbrassil, qu' avez-vous à répondre? Reconnaissez-vous cet homme?

Fabiani.

Non.

Gilbert.

Au fait, il ne m' a vu que la nuit. -laissez-moi lui dire deux mots à l' oreille, madame; cela aidera sa mémoire.

Il s' approche de Fabiani. Bas.

— tu ne reconnais donc personne aujourd' hui, mylord? Pas plus l' homme outragé que la femme séduite. Ah! La reine se venge, mais l' homme du peuple se venge aussi. Tu m' en avais défié, je crois! Te voilà pris entre les deux vengeances. Mylord, qu' en dis-tu? -je suis Gilbert, le ciseleur!

Fabiani.

Oui! Je vous reconnais. -je reconnais cet homme, mylords. Du moment où j' ai affaire à cet homme, je n' ai plus rien à dire.

La Reine.
Il avoue!
Le Lord Chancelier, à Gilbert.
D’ après la loi normande et le statut vingt-cinq du roi Henri Viii, dans les cas de lèse-majesté au premier chef, l’ aveu ne sauve pas le complice. N’ oubliez point que c’ est un cas où la reine n’ a pas le droit de grâce, et que vous mourrez sur l’ échafaud comme celui que vous accusez. Réfléchissez. Confirmez-vous tout ce que vous avez dit?
Gilbert.
Je sais que je mourrai, et je le confirme.
Jane, à part.
Mon dieu! Si c’ est un rêve, il est bien horrible!
Le Lord Chancelier, à Gilbert.
Consentez-vous à réitérer vos déclarations la main sur l’ évangile?
Il présente l’ évangile à Gilbert, qui y pose la main.
Gilbert.
Je jure, la main sur l’ évangile, et avec ma mort prochaine devant les yeux, que cet homme est un assassin; que ce poignard, qui est le sien, a servi au crime; que cette bourse, qui est la sienne, m’ a été donnée par lui pour le crime. Que Dieu m’ assiste! C’ est la vérité!
Le Lord Chancelier, à Fabiani.
Mylord, qu’ avez-vous à dire?
Fabiani.
Rien. -je suis perdu!
Simon Renard, bas à la reine.
Votre majesté a fait mander le bourreau; il est là.
La Reine.
Bon, qu’ il vienne.
Les rangs des gentilshommes s’ écartent, et l’ on voit paraître le bourreau vêtu de rouge et de noir,

portant sur l’ épaule une longue épée dans son fourreau.

JOURNEE 2 SCENE 9

Les mêmes, le bourreau.
La Reine.
Mylord duc de Somerset, ces deux hommes à la tour! -mylord Gardiner, notre chancelier, que leur procès commence dès demain devant les douze pairs de la chambre aux étoiles, et que Dieu soit en aide à la vieille Angleterre! Nous entendons que ces hommes soient jugés tous deux avant que nous partions pour Exford, où nous ouvrirons le parlement, et pour Windsor, où nous ferons nos pâques.
Au bourreau.
— approche-toi! Je suis aise de te voir. Tu es un bon serviteur. Tu es vieux. Tu as déjà vu trois règnes. Il est d' usage que les souverains de ce royaume te fassent un don, le plus magnifique possible, à leur avénement. Mon père, Henri Viii, t' a donné l' agrafe en diamans de son manteau. Mon frère, édouard Vi, t' a donné un hanap d' or ciselé. C' est mon tour maintenant. Je ne t' ai encore rien donné, moi. Il faut que je te fasse un présent. Approche.
Montrant Fabiani.
— tu vois bien cette tête, cette jeune et charmante tête, cette tête qui, ce matin encore, était ce que j' avais de plus beau, de plus cher et de plus précieux au monde, eh bien! Cette tête, tu la vois bien, dis? -je te la donne!

JOURNEE 3 PARTIE 1 SCENE 1

Salle de l’ intérieur de la tour de Londres. Voûte ogive soutenue par de gros piliers. à droite et à gauche, les deux portes basses de deux cachots. à droite, une lucarne qui est censée donner sur la Tamise. à gauche, une lucarne qui est censée donner sur les rues. De chaque côté, une porte masquée dans le mur. Au fond, une galerie avec une sorte de grand balcon fermé par des vitraux et donnant sur les cours extérieures de la tour.

Gilbert, Joshua.

Gilbert.

Eh bien?

Joshua.

Hélas!

Gilbert.

Plus d’ espoir?

Joshua.

Plus d’ espoir!

Gilbert va à la fenêtre.

Oh! Tu ne verras rien de la fenêtre!

Gilbert.

Tu t’ es informé, n’ est-ce pas?

Joshua.

Je ne suis que trop sûr!

Gilbert.

C’ est pour Fabiani?

Joshua.

C’ est pour Fabiani.

Gilbert.

Que cet homme est heureux! Malédiction sur moi!

Joshua.

Pauvre Gilbert! Ton tour viendra. Aujourd’ hui c’ est lui, demain ce sera toi.

Gilbert.

Que veux-tu dire? Nous ne nous entendons pas.
De quoi me parles-tu?
Joshua.
De l’ échafaud qu’ on dresse en ce moment.
Gilbert.
Et moi, je te parle de Jane!
Joshua.
De Jane!
Gilbert.
Oui, de Jane! De Jane seulement! Que m’ importe le reste! Tu as donc tout oublié, toi? Tu ne te souviens donc plus que depuis un mois, collé aux barreaux de mon cachot d’ où l’ on aperçoit la rue, je la vois rôder sans cesse, pâle et en deuil, au pied de cette tourelle qui renferme deux hommes, Fabiani et moi? Tu ne te rappelles donc plus mes angoisses, mes doutes, mes incertitudes? Pour lequel des deux vient-elle? Je me fais cette question nuit et jour, pauvre misérable! Je te l’ ai faite à toi-même, Joshua, et tu m’ avais promis hier au soir de tâcher de la voir et de lui parler. Oh! Dis! Sais-tu quelque chose? Est-ce pour moi qu’ elle vient ou pour Fabiani?
Joshua.
J’ ai su que Fabiani devait décidément être décapité aujourd’ hui, et toi, demain, et j’ avoue que depuis ce moment-là je suis comme fou, Gilbert. L’ échafaud a fait sortir Jane de mon esprit. Ta mort…
Gilbert.
Ma mort! Qu’ entends-tu par ce mot? Ma mort, c’ est que Jane ne m’ aime plus. Du jour où je n’ ai plus été aimé, j’ ai été mort. Oh! Vraiment mort, Joshua! Ce qui survit de moi depuis ce temps, ne vaut pas la peine qu’ on prendra demain. Oh! Vois-tu, tu ne te fais pas d’ idée de ce que c’ est qu’ un homme qui aime! Si l’ on m’ avait dit il y a deux mois: -Jane, votre Jane sans

tache, votre Jane si pure, votre amour, votre
orgueil, votre lis, votre trésor, Jane se donnera
à un autre. En voudrez-vous après? -j’ aurais
dit: non! Je n’ en voudrai pas! Plutôt mille fois
la mort pour elle et pour moi! Et j’ aurais foulé
sous mes pieds celui qui m’ eût parlé ainsi. -eh
bien si, j’ en veux! -aujourd’ hui, vois-tu bien,
Jane n’ est plus la Jane sans tache qui avait mon
adoration, la Jane dont j’ osais à peine effleurer
le front de mes lèvres, Jane s’ est donnée à un autre,
à un misérable, je le sais, eh bien! C’ est égal,
je l’ aime. J’ ai le cœur brisé; mais je l’ aime. Je
baiserais le bas
de sa robe, et je lui demanderais pardon si elle
voulait de moi. Elle serait dans le ruisseau de la
rue avec celles qui y sont que je la ramasserais là,
et que je la serrerais sur mon cœur, Joshua!
— Joshua! Je donnerais, non cent ans de vie, puisque
je n’ ai plus qu’ un jour, mais l’ éternité que j’ aurai
demain, pour la voir me sourire encore une fois, une
seule fois avant ma mort, et me dire ce mot adoré
qu’ elle me disait autrefois: je t’ aime! -Joshua!
Joshua! C’ est comme cela le cœur d’ un homme
qui aime. Vous croyez que vous tuerez la femme
qui vous trompe? Non, vous ne la tuerez pas, vous
vous coucherez à ses pieds après comme avant,
seulement vous serez triste. Tu me trouves faible!
Qu’ est-ce que j’ aurais gagné, moi, à tuer Jane?
Oh! J’ ai le cœur plein d’ idées insupportables. Oh!
Si elle m’ aimait encore, que m’ importe tout ce
qu’ elle a fait! Mais elle aime Fabiani! Mais elle
aime Fabiani! C’ est pour Fabiani qu’ elle vient!
Il y a une chose certaine, c’ est que je voudrais
mourir! Aie pitié de moi, Joshua!
Joshua.
Fabiani sera mis à mort aujourd’ hui.
Gilbert.

Et moi demain.
Joshua.
Dieu est au bout de tout.
Gilbert.
Aujourd’ hui je serai vengé de lui. Demain il sera vengé de moi.
Joshua.
Mon frère, voici le second constable de la tour, maître éneas Dulverton. Il faut rentrer. Mon frère, je te reverrai ce soir.
Gilbert.
Oh! Mourir sans être aimé! Mourir sans être pleuré! Jane!… Jane!… Jane!…
il rentre dans le cachot.
Joshua.
Pauvre Gilbert! Mon dieu! Qui m’ eût jamais dit que ce qui arrive arriverait?
Il sort. -entrent Simon Renard et maître éneas.

JOURNEE 3 PARTIE 1 SCENE 2

Simon Renard, maître éneas Dulverton.
Simon Renard.
C’ est fort singulier, comme vous dites, mais que voulez-vous? La reine est folle, elle ne sait ce qu’ elle veut. On ne peut compter sur rien, c’ est une femme. Je vous demande un peu ce qu’ elle vient faire ici! Tenez, le cœur de la femme est une énigme dont le roi François Ier a écrit le mot sur les vitraux de Chambord:
souvent femme varie,
bien fol est qui s’ y fie.
écoutez, maître éneas, nous sommes anciens amis. Il faut que cela finisse aujourd’ hui. Tout dépend de vous ici. Si l’ on vous charge…
il parle bas à l’ oreille de maître éneas.
— traînez la chose en longueur, faites-la manquer adroitement. Que j’ aie deux heures seulement devant moi, ce soir ce que je veux est fait, demain plus de favori, je suis tout puissant, et après demain vous êtes baronnet et lieutenant de la tour. Est-ce compris?
Maître éneas.
C’ est compris.
Simon Renard.
Bien. J’ entends venir. Il ne faut pas qu’ on nous voie ensemble. Sortez par là. Moi, je vais au-devant de la reine.
Ils se séparent.

JOURNEE 3 PARTIE 1 SCENE 3

Un geôlier entre avec précaution, puis il introduit lady Jane.

Le Geôlier.

Vous êtes où vous vouliez parvenir, mylady.

Voici les portes des deux cachots. Maintenant, s’ il vous plaît, ma récompense.

Jane détache son bracelet de diamans et le lui donne.

Jane.

La voilà.

Le Geôlier.

Merci. Ne me compromettez pas.

Il sort.

Jane, seule.

Mon dieu! Comment faire? C’ est moi qui l’ ai perdu, c’ est à moi de le sauver. Je ne pourrai jamais. Une femme, cela ne peut rien. L’ échafaud! L’ échafaud! C’ est horrible! Allons, plus de larmes, des actions. -mais je ne pourrai pas! Je ne pourrai pas! Ayez pitié de moi, mon Dieu! On vient, je crois. Qui parle là? Je reconnais cette voix. C’ est la voix de la reine. Ah! Tout est perdu!

Elle se cache derrière un pilier. -entrent la reine et Simon Renard.

JOURNEE 3 PARTIE 1 SCENE 4

La reine, Simon Renard, Jane cachée.

La Reine.

Ah! Le changement vous étonne! Ah! Je ne me ressemble plus à moi-même! Hé bien! Qu' est-ce que cela me fait? C' est comme cela. Maintenant je ne veux plus qu' il meure!

Simon Renard.

Votre majesté avait pourtant arrêté hier que l' exécution aurait lieu aujourd' hui.

La Reine.

Comme j' avais arrêté avant-hier que l' exécution aurait lieu hier; comme j' avais arrêté dimanche que l' exécution aurait lieu lundi. Aujourd' hui j' arrête que l' exécution aura lieu demain.

Simon Renard.

En effet, depuis le deuxième dimanche de l' avent que l' arrêt de la chambre étoilée a été prononcé, et que les deux condamnés sont revenus à la tour, précédés du bourreau, la hache tournée vers leur visage, il y a trois semaines de cela, votre majesté remet chaque jour la chose au lendemain.

La Reine.

Eh bien! Est-ce que vous ne comprenez pas ce que cela signifie, monsieur? Est-ce qu' il faut tout vous dire, et qu' une femme mette son cœur à nu devant vous, parce qu' elle est reine, la malheureuse, et que vous représentez ici le prince d' Espagne mon futur mari? Mon dieu, monsieur, vous ne savez pas cela, vous autres, chez une femme, le cœur a sa pudeur comme le corps. Hé bien oui, puisque vous voulez le savoir, puisque vous faites semblant de ne rien comprendre, oui, je remets tous les jours l' exécution de Fabiani au lendemain, parce que chaque matin, voyez-vous, la force me manque à l' idée que la cloche de la tour de Londres va sonner la mort de cet homme, parce que je me sens défaillir à la pensée qu' on aiguise une hache pour cet homme, parce que je me sens mourir de songer qu' on va clouer une bière pour cet homme, parce que je suis femme, parce que je suis faible, parce que je suis folle, parce que j' aime cet homme, pardieu! -en avez-vous assez? êtes-vous satisfait? Comprenez-vous? Oh! Je trouverai moyen de me venger un jour sur vous de tout ce que vous me faites dire, allez!

Simon Renard.

Il serait temps cependant d' en finir avec Fabiani. Vous allez épouser mon royal maître le prince d' Espagne, madame!

La Reine.

Si le prince d' Espagne n' est pas content, qu' il le dise, nous en épouserons un autre. Nous ne manquons pas de prétendans. Le fils du roi des romains, le prince de Piémont, l' infant de Portugal, le cardinal Polus, le roi de Danemarck et lord Courtenay sont aussi bons gentilshommes que lui.

Simon Renard.

Lord Courtenay! Lord Courtenay!

La Reine.

Un baron anglais, monsieur, vaut un prince espagnol. D' ailleurs lord Courtenay descend des empereurs d' orient. Et puis, fâchez-vous si vous voulez!

Simon Renard.

Fabiani s' est fait haïr de tout ce qui a un coeur dans Londres.

La Reine.

Excepté de moi.

Simon Renard.

Les bourgeois sont d' accord sur son compte avec les seigneurs. S' il n' est pas mis à mort aujourd' hui

même comme l’ a promis votre majesté…
La Reine.
Eh bien?
Simon Renard.
Il y aura émeute des manans.
La Reine.
J’ ai mes lansquenets.
Simon Renard.
Il y aura complot des seigneurs.
La Reine.
J’ ai le bourreau.
Simon Renard.
Votre majesté a juré sur le livre d’ heures de sa mère qu’ elle ne lui ferait pas grâce.
La Reine.
Voici un blanc-seing qu’ il m’ a fait remettre, et dans lequel je jure sur ma couronne impériale que je la lui ferai. La couronne de mon père vaut le livre d’ heures de ma mère. Un serment détruit l’ autre. D’ ailleurs, qui vous dit que je lui ferai grâce?
Simon Renard.
Il vous a bien audacieusement trahie, madame!
La Reine.
Qu’ est-ce que cela me fait? Tous les hommes en font autant. Je ne veux pas qu’ il meure. Tenez, mylord,… -monsieur le bailli, veux-je dire! Mon dieu! Vous me troublez tellement l’ esprit que je ne sais vraiment plus à qui je parle! -tenez, je sais tout ce que vous allez me dire. Que c’ est un homme vil, un lâche, un misérable! Je le sais comme vous, et j’ en rougis; mais je l’ aime. Que voulez-vous que j’ y fasse? J’ aimerais peut-être moins un honnête homme. D’ ailleurs, qui êtes-vous tous tant que vous êtes? Valez-vous mieux que lui? Vous allez me dire que c’ est un favori, et que la nation anglaise n’ aime pas les favoris. Est-ce que je ne sais pas que vous ne

voulez le renverser que pour mettre à sa place le comte de Kildare, ce fat, cet irlandais! Qu' il fait couper vingt têtes par jour! Qu' est-ce que cela vous fait? Et ne me parlez pas du prince d' Espagne. Vous vous en moquez bien. Ne me parlez pas du mécontentement de Monsieur De Noailles, l' ambassadeur de France. Monsieur De Noailles est un sot, et je le lui dirai à lui-même. D' ailleurs je suis une femme, moi, je veux et je ne veux plus, je ne suis pas tout d' une pièce. La vie de cet homme est nécessaire à ma vie. Ne prenez pas cet air de candeur virginale et de bonne foi, je vous en supplie. Je connais toutes vos intrigues. Entre nous, vous savez comme moi qu' il n' a pas commis le crime pour lequel il est condamné. C' est arrangé. Je ne veux pas que Fabiani meure. Suis-je la maîtresse ou non? Tenez, monsieur le bailli, parlons d' autre chose, voulez-vous?

Simon Renard.

Je me retire, madame. Toute votre noblesse vous a parlé par ma voix.

La Reine.

Que m' importe la noblesse!

Simon Renard, à part.

Essayons du peuple.

Il sort avec un profond salut.

La Reine, seule.

Il est sorti d' un air singulier. Cet homme est capable d' émouvoir quelque sédition. Il faut que j' aille en hâte à la maison de ville. -holà, quelqu' un!

Maître éneas et Joshua paraissent.

JOURNEE 3 PARTIE 1 SCENE 5

Les mêmes, moins Simon Renard; maître éneas,
Joshua.
La Reine.
C’ est vous, maître éneas. Il faut que cet homme
et vous, vous vous chargiez de faire évader
sur-le-champ le comte de Clanbrassil.
Maître éneas.
Madame…
La Reine.
Tenez, je ne me fie pas à vous! Je me souviens
que vous êtes de ses ennemis. Mon dieu! Je ne suis
donc entourée que des ennemis de l’ homme que
j’ aime! Je gage que ce porte-clefs, que je ne
connais pas, le hait aussi.
Joshua.
C’ est vrai, madame.
La Reine.
Mon dieu! Mon dieu! Ce Simon Renard est plus
roi que je ne suis reine. Quoi! Personne à qui me
fier ici! Personne à qui donner pleins pouvoirs
pour faire évader Fabiani!
Jane, sortant de derrière le pilier.
Si, madame! Moi!
Joshua, à part.
Jane!
La Reine.
Toi, qui toi? C’ est vous, Jane Talbot? Comment
êtes-vous ici? Ah! C’ est égal! Vous y êtes! Vous
venez sauver Fabiani. Merci. Je devrais vous haïr,
Jane, je devrais être jalouse de vous, j’ ai mille
raisons pour cela. Mais non, je vous aime de l’ aimer.
Devant l’ échafaud, plus de jalousie, rien que
l’ amour. Vous êtes comme moi, vous lui pardonnez,
je le vois bien. Les hommes ne comprennent pas

cela, eux. Lady Jane, entendons-nous. Nous sommes bien malheureuses toutes deux, n’ est-ce pas? Il faut faire évader Fabiani. Je n’ ai que vous, il faut bien que je vous prenne. Je suis sûre du moins que vous y mettrez votre cœur. Chargez-vous-en. Messieurs, vous obéirez tous deux à lady Jane en tout ce qu’ elle vous prescrira, et vous me répondez sur vos têtes de l’ exécution de ses ordres. Embrasse-moi, jeune fille!

Jane.

La Tamise baigne le pied de la tour de ce côté. Il y a là une issue secrète que j’ ai observée. Un bateau à cette issue, et l’ évasion se ferait par la Tamise. C’ est le plus sûr.

Maître éneas.

Impossible d’ avoir un bateau là avant une bonne heure.

Jane.

C’ est bien long.

Maître éneas.

C’ est bientôt passé. D’ ailleurs dans une heure, il fera nuit. Cela vaudra mieux, si sa majesté tient à ce que l’ évasion soit secrète.

La Reine.

Vous avez peut-être raison. Eh bien! Dans une heure, soit! Je vous laisse, lady Jane, il faut que j’ aille à la maison de ville. Sauvez Fabiani!

Jane.

Soyez tranquille, madame!

La reine sort. Jane la suit des yeux.

Joshua, sur le devant du théâtre.

Gilbert avait raison, toute à Fabiani!

JOURNEE 3 PARTIE 1 SCENE 6

Les mêmes, moins la reine.
Jane, à maître éneas.
Vous avez entendu les volontés de la reine. Un bateau là au pied de la tour, les clefs des couloirs secrets, un chapeau et un manteau.
Maître éneas.
Impossible d’ avoir tout cela avant la nuit. Dans une heure, mylady.
Jane.
C’ est bien, allez. Laissez-moi avec cet homme.
Maître éneas sort. Jane le suit des yeux.
Joshua, à part, sur le devant du théâtre.
Cet homme! C’ est tout simple. Qui a oublié Gilbert ne reconnaît plus Joshua.
Il se dirige vers la porte du cachot de Fabiani et se met en devoir de l’ ouvrir.
Jane.
Que faites-vous là?
Joshua.
Je préviens vos désirs, mylady. J’ ouvre cette porte.
Jane.
Qu’ est-ce que c’ est que cette porte?
Joshua.
La porte du cachot de mylord Fabiani.
Jane.
Et celle-ci?
Joshua.
C’ est la porte du cachot d’ un autre.
Jane.
Qui? Cet autre?
Un autre condamné à mort. Quelqu’ un que vous ne connaissez pas. Un ouvrier nommé Gilbert.
Jane.

Ouvrez cette porte!
Joshua, après avoir ouvert la porte.
Gilbert!

JOURNEE 3 PARTIE 1 SCENE 7

Jane, Gilbert, Joshua.
Gilbert, de l’ intérieur du cachot.
Que me veut-on?
Il paraît sur le seuil, aperçoit Jane, et s’ appuie
tout chancelant contre le mur.
Jane! -lady Jane Talbot!
Jane, à genoux, sans lever les yeux sur lui.
Gilbert! Je viens vous sauver.
Gilbert.
Me sauver!
Jane.
écoutez. Ayez pitié, ne m’ accablez pas. Je sais
tout ce que vous allez me dire. C’ est juste; mais
ne me le dites pas. Il faut que je vous sauve. Tout
est préparé. L’ évasion est sûre. Laissez-vous sauver
par moi comme par un autre. Je ne demande
rien de plus. Vous ne me connaîtrez plus ensuite.
Vous ne saurez plus qui je suis. Ne me pardonnez
pas, mais laissez-moi vous sauver. Voulez-vous?
Gilbert.
Merci; mais c’ est inutile. à quoi bon vouloir
sauver ma vie, lady Jane, si vous ne m’ aimez
plus?
Jane, avec joie.
Oh! Gilbert! Est-ce bien en effet cela que vous
me demandez? Gilbert! Est-ce que vous daignez
vous occuper encore de ce qui se passe dans le coeur
de la pauvre fille? Gilbert! Est-ce que l’ amour
que je puis avoir pour quelqu’ un vous intéresse encore
et vous paraît valoir la peine que vous vous en
informiez? Oh! Je croyais que cela vous était bien
égal, et que vous me méprisiez trop pour vous
inquiéter de ce que je faisais de mon cœur. Gilbert!
Si vous saviez quel effet me font les paroles que

vous venez de me dire. C’ est un rayon de soleil
bien inattendu dans ma nuit, allez! Oh! écoutez-moi
donc, alors! Si j’ osais encore m’ approcher de
vous, si j’ osais toucher vos vêtemens, si j’ osais
prendre votre main dans les miennes, si j’ osais
encore lever les yeux vers vous et vers le ciel, comme
autrefois, savez-vous ce que je vous dirais, à genoux,
prosternée, pleurant sur vos pieds, avec des
sanglots dans la bouche et la joie des anges dans
le cœur? Je vous dirais: Gilbert, je t’ aime!
Gilbert, la saisissant dans ses bras avec
emportement.
Tu m’ aimes!
Jane.
Oui, je t’ aime!
Gilbert.
Tu m’ aimes! -elle m’ aime, mon dieu! C’ est
bien vrai, c’ est bien elle qui me le dit, c’ est bien
sa bouche qui a parlé, dieu du ciel!
Jane.
Mon Gilbert!
Gilbert.
Tu as tout préparé pour mon évasion, dis-tu?
Vite! Vite! La vie! Je veux la vie, Jane m’ aime!
Cette voûte s’ appuie sur ma tête et l’ écrase. J’ ai
besoin d’ air. Je meurs ici. Fuyons vite!
Viens-nous-en, Jane! Je veux vivre, moi! Je suis
aimé.
Jane.
Pas encore. Il faut un bateau. Il faut attendre la
nuit. Mais sois tranquille, tu es sauvé. Avant une
heure, nous serons dehors. La reine est à la maison
de ville, et ne reviendra pas de sitôt. Je suis
maîtresse ici. Je t’ expliquerai tout cela.
Gilbert.
Une heure d’ attente, c’ est bien long. Oh! Il me
tarde de ressaisir la vie et le bonheur! Jane,

Jane! Tu es là! Je vivrai! Tu m' aimes! Je reviens de l' enfer! Retiens-moi, je ferais quelques folies, vois-tu. Je rirais, je chanterais. Tu m' aimes donc?

Jane.

Oui! -je t' aime! Oui, je t' aime! Et vois-tu, Gilbert, crois-moi bien, ceci est la vérité comme au lit de la mort, -je n' ai jamais aimé que toi! Même dans ma faute, même au fond de mon crime, je t' aimais! à peine ai-je été tombée aux bras du démon qui m' a perdue, que j' ai pleuré mon ange!

Gilbert.

Oublié! Pardonné! Ne parle plus de cela, Jane. Oh! Que m' importe le passé! Qui est-ce qui résisterait à ta voix! Qui est-ce qui ferait autrement que moi! Oh oui! Je te pardonne bien tout, mon enfant bien aimé! Le fond de l' amour, c' est l' indulgence, c' est le pardon. Jane, la jalousie et le désespoir ont brûlé les larmes dans mes yeux. Mais je te pardonne, mais je te remercie, mais tu es pour moi la seule chose vraiment rayonnante de ce monde, mais à chaque mot que tu prononces, je sens une douleur mourir et une joie naître dans mon ame! Jane! Relevez votre tête, tenez-vous droite là, et regardez-moi. -je vous dis que vous êtes mon enfant.

Jane.

Toujours généreux! Toujours! Mon Gilbert bien aimé!

Gilbert.

Oh! Je voudrais être déjà dehors, en fuite, bien loin, libre avec toi! Oh! Cette nuit qui ne vient pas! -le bateau n' est pas là. -Jane! Nous quitterons Londres tout de suite, cette nuit. Nous quitterons l' Angleterre. Nous irons à Venise. Ceux de mon métier gagnent beaucoup d' argent là. Tu

seras à moi… -oh! Mon dieu! Je suis insensé,
j’ oubliais quel nom tu portes! Il est trop beau,
Jane!
Jane.
Que veux-tu dire?
Gilbert.
Fille de lord Talbot.
Jane.
J’ en sais un plus beau.
Gilbert.
Lequel?
Femme de l’ ouvrier Gilbert.
Gilbert.
Jane!…
Jane.
Oh non! Oh! Ne crois pas que je te demande
cela. Oh! Je sais bien que j’ en suis indigne. Je ne
leverai pas mes yeux si haut; je n’ abuserai pas à ce
point du pardon. Le pauvre ciseleur Gilbert ne se
mésalliera pas avec la comtesse de Waterford. Non,
je te suivrai, je t’ aimerai, je ne te quitterai
jamais. Je me coucherai le jour à tes pieds, la nuit
à ta porte. Je te regarderai travailler, je t’ aiderai,
je te donnerai ce qu’ il te faudra. Je serai pour toi
quelque chose de moins qu’ une sœur, quelque
chose de plus qu’ un chien. Et si tu te maries,
Gilbert, -car il plaira à Dieu que tu finisses par
trouver une femme pure et sans tache, et digne de
toi, -eh bien! Si tu te maries, et si ta femme
est bonne, et si elle veut bien, je serai la servante
de ta femme. Si elle ne veut pas de moi, je m’ en irai,
j’ irai mourir où je pourrai. Je ne te quitterai que
dans ce cas-là. Si tu ne te maries pas, je resterai
près de toi, je serai bien douce et bien résignée,
tu verras; et si l’ on pense mal de me voir avec toi,
on pensera ce qu’ on voudra. Je n’ ai plus à rougir,
moi, vois-tu? Je suis une pauvre fille.

Gilbert, tombant à ses pieds.
Tu es un ange! Tu es ma femme!
Jane.
Ta femme! Tu ne pardonnes donc que comme
Dieu, en purifiant? Ah! Sois béni, Gilbert, de
me mettre cette couronne sur le front.
Gilbert se relève et la serre dans ses bras. Pendant
qu' ils se tiennent étroitement embrassés, Joshua
vient prendre la main de Jane.
Joshua.
C' est Joshua, lady Jane.
Gilbert.
Bon Joshua!
Joshua.
Tout à l' heure vous ne m' avez pas reconnu.
Jane.
Ah! C' est que c' est par lui que je devais commencer.
Joshua lui baise les mains.
Gilbert, la serrant dans ses bras.
Mais quel bonheur! Mais est-ce que c' est bien
réel tout ce bonheur-là?
Depuis quelques instans, on entend au dehors un bruit
éloigné, des cris confus, un tumulte. Le jour baisse.
Joshua.
Qu' est-ce que c' est que ce bruit?
Il va à la fenêtre qui donne sur la rue.
Jane.
Oh! Mon dieu! Pourvu qu' il n' aille rien arriver!
Joshua.
Une grande foule là-bas. Des pioches; des piques;
des torches. Les pensionnaires de la reine à
cheval et en bataille. Tout cela vient par ici. Quels
cris! Ah diable! On dirait une émeute de populaire.
Jane.
Pourvu que ce ne soit pas contre Gilbert!
Cris éloignés.
Fabiani! Mort à Fabiani!

Jane.
Entendez-vous?
Joshua.
Oui.
Jane.
Que disent-ils?
Joshua.
Je ne distingue pas.
Ah! Mon dieu! Mon dieu!
Entrent précipitamment par la porte masquée maître éneas et un batelier.

JOURNEE 3 PARTIE 1 SCENE 8

Les mêmes, maître éneas, un batelier.
Maître éneas.
Mylord Fabiani! Mylord! Pas un instant à perdre.
On a su que la reine voulait sauver votre vie.
Il y a sédition du populaire de Londres contre
vous. Dans un quart d’ heure, vous seriez déchiré.
Mylord, sauvez-vous! Voici un manteau et un chapeau.
Voici les clefs. Voici un batelier. N’ oubliez
pas que c’ est à moi que vous devez tout cela. Mylord,
hâtez-vous!
Bas au batelier.
— tu ne te presseras pas.
Jane.
Elle couvre en hâte Gilbert du manteau et du
chapeau. Bas à Joshua.
Ciel! Pourvu que cet homme ne reconnaisse pas…
Maître éneas, regardant Gilbert en face.
Mais quoi! Ce n’ est pas lord Clanbrassil! Vous
n’ exécutez pas les ordres de la reine, mylady! Vous
en faites évader un autre!
Jane.
Tout est perdu!… j’ aurais dû prévoir cela! Ah
dieu! Monsieur, c’ est vrai, ayez pitié…
Maître éneas, bas à Jane.
Silence! Faites! Je n’ ai rien dit, je n’ ai rien vu.
Il se retire au fond du théâtre d’ un air
d’ indifférence.
Jane.
Que dit-il?… ah! La providence est donc pour
nous! Ah! Tout le monde veut donc sauver Gilbert!
Joshua.
Non, lady Jane. Tout le monde veut perdre
Fabiani.
Pendant toute cette scène, les cris redoublent au

dehors.
Jane.
Hâtons-nous, Gilbert! Viens vite!
Joshua.
Laissez-le partir seul.
Jane.
Le quitter!
Joshua.
Pour un instant. Pas de femme dans le bateau,
si vous voulez qu' il arrive à bon port. Il y a encore
trop de jour. Vous êtes vêtue de blanc. Le péril
passé, vous vous retrouverez. Venez avec moi par
ici. Lui par là.
Joshua a raison. Où te retrouverai-je, mon
Gilbert?
Gilbert.
Sous la première arche du pont de Londres.
Jane.
Bien. Pars vite. Le bruit redouble. Je te voudrais
loin!
Joshua.
Voici les clefs. Il y a douze portes à ouvrir et à
fermer d' ici au bord de l' eau. Vous en avez pour
un bon quart d' heure.
Jane.
Un quart d' heure! Douze portes! C' est affreux!
Gilbert, l' embrassant.
Adieu, Jane. Encore quelques instans de séparation,
et nous nous rejoindrons pour la vie.
Jane.
Pour l' éternité!
Au batelier.
— monsieur, je vous le recommande.
Maître éneas, bas au batelier.
De crainte d' accident, ne te presse pas.
Gilbert sort avec le batelier.
Joshua.

Il est sauvé! à nous maintenant! Il faut fermer
ce cachot.
Il referme le cachot de Gilbert.
— c’ est fait. Venez vite, par ici!
Il sort avec Jane par l’ autre porte masquée.
Maître éneas, seul.
Le Fabiani est resté au piége! Voilà une petite
femme fort adroite que maître Simon Renard eût
payée bien cher. Mais comment la reine prendra-t-elle
la chose? Pourvu que cela ne retombe pas sur moi!
Entrent à grands pas par la galerie Simon Renard
et la reine. Le tumulte extérieur n’ a cessé
d’ augmenter. La nuit est presque tout-à-fait tombée.
— cris de mort; flambeaux; torches; bruit des
vagues de la foule; cliquetis d’ armes; coups de
feu; piétinemens de chevaux. Plusieurs gentilshommes,
la dague au poing, accompagnent la reine. Parmi eux,
le héraut d’ Angleterre, Clarence, portant la
bannière royale, et le héraut de l’ ordre de la
jarretière, Jarretière, portant la bannière de
l’ ordre.

JOURNEE 3 PARTIE 1 SCENE 9

La reine, Simon Renard, maître éneas, lord Clinton, les deux hérauts, seigneurs, pages, etc.

La Reine, bas à maître éneas.

Fabiani est-il évadé?

Maître éneas.

Pas encore.

La Reine.

Pas encore!

Elle le regarde fixement d' un air terrible.

Maître éneas, à part.

Diable!

Cris Du Peuple, au-dehors.

Mort à Fabiani!

Simon Renard.

Il faut que votre majesté prenne un parti sur-le-champ, madame. Le peuple veut la mort de cet homme. Londres est en feu. La tour est investie. L' émeute est formidable. Les nobles de ban ont été taillés en pièces au pont de Londres. Les pensionnaires de votre majesté tiennent encore; mais votre majesté n' en a pas moins été traquée de rue en rue, depuis la maison de ville jusqu' à la tour. Les partisans de Madame élisabeth sont mêlés au peuple. On sent qu' ils sont là, à la malignité de l' émeute. Tout cela est sombre. Qu' ordonne votre majesté?

Cris Du Peuple.

Fabiani! Mort à Fabiani!

Ils grossissent et se rapprochent de plus en plus.

La Reine.

Mort à Fabiani! Mylords, entendez-vous ce peuple qui hurle? Il faut lui jeter un homme. La populace veut à manger.

Simon Renard.

Qu’ ordonne votre majesté?
La Reine.
Pardieu, mylords, vous tremblez tous autour de moi, il me semble. Sur mon ame, faut-il que ce soit une femme qui vous enseigne votre métier de gentilshommes! à cheval, mylords, à cheval. Est-ce que la canaille vous intimide? Est-ce que les épées ont peur des bâtons?
Simon Renard.
Ne laissez pas les choses aller plus loin. Cédez, madame, pendant qu’ il en est temps encore. Vous pouvez encore dire la canaille, dans une heure vous seriez obligée de dire le peuple.
Les cris redoublent, le bruit se rapproche.
La Reine.
Dans une heure!
Simon Renard, allant à la galerie et revenant.
Dans un quart d’ heure, madame. Voici que la première enceinte de la tour est forcée. Encore un pas, le peuple est ici.
Le Peuple.
à la tour! à la tour! Fabiani! Mort à Fabiani!
La Reine.
Qu’ on a bien raison de dire que c’ est une horrible chose que le peuple! Fabiano!
Simon Renard.
Voulez-vous le voir déchirer sous vos yeux dans un instant?
La Reine.
Mais savez-vous qu’ il est infâme qu’ il n’ y en ait pas un de vous qui bouge, messieurs! Mais au nom du ciel, défendez-moi donc!
Lord Clinton.
Vous, oui, madame; Fabiani, non.
La Reine.
Ah ciel! Eh bien oui! Je le dis tout haut, tant pis! Fabiano est innocent! Fabiano n’ a pas

commis le crime pour lequel il est condamné. C’ est
moi, et celui-ci, et le ciseleur Gilbert, qui avons
tout fait, tout inventé, tout supposé. Pure comédie!
Osez me démentir, monsieur le bailli! Maintenant,
messieurs, le défendrez-vous? Il est innocent, vous
dis-je. Sur ma tête, sur ma couronne, sur mon
dieu, sur l’ ame de ma mère, il est innocent du
crime! Cela est aussi vrai qu’ il est vrai que vous
êtes là, lord Clinton! Défendez-le. Exterminez
ceux-ci, comme vous avez exterminé Tom Wyat,
mon brave Clinton, mon vieil ami, mon bon Robert!
Je vous jure qu’ il est faux que Fabiano ait
voulu assassiner la reine.
Lord Clinton.
Il y a une autre reine qu’ il a voulu assassiner,
c’ est l’ Angleterre.
Les cris continuent dehors.
La Reine.
Le balcon! Ouvrez le balcon! Je veux prouver
moi-même au peuple qu’ il n’ est pas coupable!
Simon Renard.
Prouvez au peuple qu’ il n’ est pas italien!
La Reine.
Quand je pense que c’ est un Simon Renard,
une créature du cardinal de Granvelle, qui ose me
parler ainsi! Eh bien, ouvrez cette porte! Ouvrez
ce cachot! Fabiano est là; je veux le voir, je
veux lui parler.
Simon Renard, bas.
Que faites-vous? Dans son propre intérêt, il
est inutile de faire savoir à tout le monde où il
est.
Le Peuple.
Fabiani à mort! Vive élisabeth!
Simon Renard.
Les voilà qui crient vive élisabeth, maintenant.
La Reine.

Mon dieu! Mon dieu!
Simon Renard.
Choisissez, madame:
il désigne d’ une main la porte du cachot.
— ou cette tête au peuple,
il désigne de l’ autre main la couronne que porte la reine.
— ou cette couronne à Madame élisabeth.
Le Peuple.
Mort! Mort! Fabiani! élisabeth!
Une pierre vient casser une vitre à côté de la reine.
Simon Renard.
Votre majesté se perd sans le sauver. La deuxième cour est forcée. Que veut la reine?
La Reine.
Vous êtes tous des lâches, et Clinton tout le premier!
Ah! Clinton, je me souviendrai de cela, mon ami!
Simon Renard.
Que veut la reine?
La Reine.
Oh! être abandonnée de tous! Avoir tout dit sans rien obtenir! Qu’ est-ce que c’ est donc que ces gentilshommes-là? Ce peuple est infâme. Je voudrais le broyer sous mes pieds. Il y a donc des cas où une reine ce n’ est qu’ une femme! Vous me le paierez tous bien cher, messieurs!
Simon Renard.
Que veut la reine?
La Reine, accablée.
Ce que vous voudrez! Faites ce que vous voudrez!
Vous êtes un assassin!
à part.
— oh! Fabiano!
Simon Renard.

Clarence! Jarretière! à moi! -maître éneas,
ouvrez le grand balcon de la galerie.
Le balcon du fond s’ ouvre. Simon Renard y va,
Clarence à sa droite, Jarretière à sa gauche.
Immense rumeur au dehors.
Le Peuple.
Fabiani! Fabiani!
Simon Renard, au balcon, tourné vers le peuple.
Au nom de la reine!
Les Hébauts.
Au nom de la reine!
Profond silence au dehors.
Simon Renard.
Manans! La reine vous fait savoir ceci: aujourd’ hui,
cette nuit même, une heure après le couvre-feu,
Fabiano Fabiani, comte de Clanbrassil, couvert
d’ un voile noir de la tête aux pieds, baillonné
d’ un baillon de fer, une torche de cire jaune du
poids de trois livres à la main, sera mené aux
flambeaux de la tour de Londres par Charing-Cross,
au vieux-marché de la cité, pour y être publiquement
marri et décapité, en réparation de ses crimes de
haute trahison au premier chef et d’ attentat régicide
sur la personne impériale de sa majesté.
Un immense battement de mains éclate au-dehors.
Le Peuple.
Vive la reine! Mort à Fabiani!
Simon Renard, continuant.
Et pour que personne dans cette ville de Londres
n’ en ignore, voici ce que la reine ordonne: -
pendant tout ce trajet que fera le condamné de
la tour de Londres au vieux-marché, la grosse
cloche de la tour tintera. Au moment de l’ exécution,
trois coups de canon seront tirés. Le premier,
quand il montera sur l’ échafaud; le second,
quand il se couchera sur le drap noir; le troisième,
quand sa tête tombera.

Applaudissemens.

Le Peuple.

Illuminez! Illuminez!

Simon Renard.

Cette nuit, la tour et la cité de Londres seront illuminées de flammes et flambeaux, en signe de joie. J' ai dit.

Applaudissemens.

Dieu garde la vieille charte d' Angleterre!

Les Deux Hérauts.

Dieu garde la vieille charte d' Angleterre!

Le Peuple.

Fabiani à mort! Vive Marie! Vive la reine!

Le balcon se referme. Simon Renard vient à la reine.

Simon Renard.

Ce que je viens de faire ne me sera jamais pardonné par la princesse élisabeth.

La Reine.

Ni par la reine Marie. -laissez-moi, monsieur!

Elle congédie du geste tous les assistans.

Simon Renard, bas à maître éneas.

Maître éneas, veillez à l' exécution.

Maître éneas.

Reposez-vous sur moi.

Simon Renard sort. Au moment où maître éneas va sortir, la reine court à lui, le saisit par le bras, et le ramène violemment sur le devant du théâtre.

JOURNEE 3 PARTIE 1 SCENE 10

La reine, maître éneas.
Cris Du Dehors.
Mort à Fabiani! Fabiani! Fabiani!
La Reine.
Laquelle des deux têtes crois-tu qui vaille le mieux en ce moment, celle de Fabiani ou la tienne?
Maître éneas.
Madame…
La Reine.
Tu es un traître!
Maître éneas.
Madame!…
à part.
— diable!
La Reine.
Pas d’ explications. Je le jure par ma mère,
Fabiano mort, tu mourras.
Maître éneas.
Mais, madame…
La Reine.
Sauve Fabiano, tu te sauveras. Pas autrement.
Cris.
Fabiani à mort! Fabiani!
Maître éneas.
Sauver lord Clanbrassil! Mais le peuple est là.
C’ est impossible. Quel moyen?…
La Reine.
Cherche.
Maître éneas.
Comment faire, mon dieu?
La Reine.
Fais comme pour toi.
Maître éneas.

Mais le peuple va rester en armes jusqu’ après l’ exécution. Pour l’ apaiser, il faut qu’ il y ait quelqu’ un de décapité.

La Reine.

Qui tu voudras.

Maître éneas.

Qui je voudrai? Attendez, madame!… -l’ exécution se fera la nuit, aux flambeaux, le condamné couvert d’ un voile noir, baillonné, le peuple tenu fort loin de l’ échafaud par les piquiers, comme toujours, il suffit qu’ il voie une tête tomber. La chose est possible. -pourvu que le batelier soit encore là, je lui ai dit de ne pas se presser.

Il va à la fenêtre d’ où l’ on voit la Tamise.

— il y est encore! Mais il était temps.

Il se penche à la lucarne une torche à la main, en agitant son mouchoir, puis il se tourne vers la reine.

— c’ est bien. -je vous réponds de mylord Fabiani, madame.

La Reine.

Sur ta tête?

Maître éneas.

Sur ma tête!

JOURNEE 3 PARTIE 2 SCENE 1

Une espèce de salle à laquelle viennent aboutir
deux escaliers, un qui monte, l’ autre qui descend.
L’ entrée de chacun de ces deux escaliers occupe une
partie du fond du théâtre. Celui qui monte se perd
dans les frises; celui qui descend se perd dans
les dessous. On ne voit ni d’ où partent ces escaliers,
ni où ils vont.
La salle est tendue de deuil d’ une façon
particulière: le mur de droite, le mur de gauche et
le plafond, d’ un drap noir coupé d’ une grande croix
blanche; le fond, qui fait face au spectateur,
d’ un drap blanc avec une grande croix noire. Cette
tenture noire et cette tenture blanche se prolongent
chacune de leur côté, à perte de vue, sous les deux
escaliers. à droite et à gauche, un autel tendu de
noir et de blanc, décoré comme pour des funérailles.
Grands cierges, pas de prêtres. Quelques rares
lampes funèbres, pendues çà et là aux voûtes,
éclairent faiblement la salle et les escaliers. Ce
qui éclaire réellement la salle, c’ est le grand drap
blanc du fond, à travers lequel passe une lumière
rougeâtre comme s’ il y avait derrière une immense
fournaise flamboyante.
La salle est pavée de dalles tumulaires. -au lever
du rideau, on voit se dessiner en noir sur ce drap
transparent l’ ombre immobile de la reine.
Jane, Joshua.
Ils entrent avec précaution en soulevant une des
tentures noires par quelque petite porte pratiquée
là.
Jane.
Où sommes-nous, Joshua?
Joshua.
Sur le grand palier de l’ escalier par où descendent

les condamnés qui vont au supplice. Cela a été tendu ainsi sous Henri Viii.

Jane.

Aucun moyen de sortir de la tour?

Joshua.

Le peuple garde toutes les issues. Il veut être sûr cette fois d’ avoir son condamné. Personne ne pourra sortir avant l’ exécution.

Jane.

La proclamation qu’ on a faite du haut de ce balcon me résonne encore dans l’ oreille. L’ avez-vous entendue, quand nous étions en bas? Tout ceci est horrible, Joshua!

Joshua.

Ah! J’ en ai vu bien d’ autres, moi!

Jane.

Pourvu que Gilbert ait réussi à s’ évader! Le croyez-vous sauvé, Joshua?

Joshua.

Sauvé! J’ en suis sûr.

Jane.

Vous en êtes sûr, bon Joshua?

Joshua.

La tour n’ était pas investie du côté de l’ eau. Et puis, quand il a dû partir, l’ émeute n’ était pas ce qu’ elle a été depuis. C’ était une belle émeute, savez-vous!

Jane.

Vous êtes sûr qu’ il est sauvé?

Joshua.

Et qu’ il vous attend, à cette heure, sous la première arche du pont de Londres, où vous le rejoindrez avant minuit.

Jane.

Mon dieu! Il va être inquiet de son côté.

Apercevant l’ ombre de la reine.

— ciel! Qu’ est-ce que c’ est que cela, Joshua?

Joshua, bas en lui prenant la main.
Silence! -c’ est la lionne qui guette.
Pendant que Jane considère cette silhouette noire
avec terreur, on entend une voix éloignée, qui paraît
venir d’ en haut, prononcer lentement et distinctement
ces paroles:
— celui qui marche à ma suite, couvert de ce
voile noir, c’ est très-haut et très-puissant seigneur
Fabiano Fabiani, comte de Clanbrassil, baron de
Dinasmonddy, baron de Darmouth en Devonshire,
lequel va être décapité au marché de Londres, pour
crime de régicide et de haute trahison. -Dieu
fasse miséricorde à son ame!
Une Autre Voix.
Priez pour lui!
Jane, tremblante.
Joshua! Entendez-vous?
Joshua.
Oui. Moi, j’ entends de ces choses-là tous les
jours.
Un cortége funèbre paraît au haut de l’ escalier, sur
les degrés duquel il se développe lentement à mesure
qu’ il descend. En tête, un homme vêtu de noir,
portant une bannière blanche à croix noire. Puis
maître éneas Dulverton, en grand manteau noir,
son bâton blanc de constable à la main. Puis un
groupe de pertuisaniers vêtus de rouge. Puis le
bourreau, sa hache sur l’ épaule, le fer tourné vers
celui qui le suit. Puis un homme entièrement couvert
d’ un grand voile noir qui traîne sur ses pieds. On
ne voit de cet homme que son bras nu qui passe par
une ouverture faite au linceul, et qui porte une
torche de cire jaune allumée. à côté de cet homme,
un prêtre en costume du jour des morts. Puis un
groupe de pertuisaniers en rouge. Puis un homme vêtu
de blanc portant une bannière noire à croix blanche.
à droite et à gauche deux files de hallebardiers

portant des torches.
Jane.
Joshua! Voyez-vous?
Joshua.
Oui. Je vois de ces choses-là tous les jours,
moi.
Au moment de déboucher sur le théâtre, le cortége
s’ arrête.
Maître éneas.
Celui qui marche à ma suite, couvert de ce voile
noir, c’ est très-haut et très-puissant seigneur
Fabiano Fabiani, comte de Clanbrassil, baron de
Dinasmonddy, baron de Darmouth en Devonshire,
lequel va être décapité au marché-de-Londres, pour
crime de régicide et de haute trahison. -Dieu
fasse miséricorde à son ame!
Les Deux Porte-Bannière.
Priez pour lui!
Le cortége traverse lentement le fond du théâtre.
Jane.
C’ est une chose terrible que nous voyons là,
Joshua. Cela me glace le sang.
Joshua.
Ce misérable Fabiani!
Jane.
Paix, Joshua! Bien misérable, mais bien malheureux!
Le cortége arrive à l’ autre escalier. Simon Renard,
qui, depuis quelques instans, a paru à l’ entrée de
cet escalier et a tout observé,
se range pour le laisser passer. Le cortége s’ enfonce
sous la voûte de l’ escalier, où il disparaît peu à
peu. Jane le suit des yeux avec terreur.
Simon Renard, après que le cortége a disparu.
Qu’ est-ce que cela signifie? Est-ce bien là
Fabiani? Je le croyais moins grand. Est-ce que
maître éneas?… il me semble que la reine
l’ a gardé auprès d’ elle un instant. Voyons

donc!

Il s’ enfonce sous l’ escalier à la suite du cortége.

Voix, qui s’ éloigne de plus en plus.

Celui qui marche à ma suite, couvert de ce voile noir, c’ est très-haut et très-puissant seigneur Fabiano Fabiani, comte de Clanbrassil, baron de Dinasmonddy, baron de Darmouth en Devonshire, lequel va être décapité au marché-de-Londres, pour crime de régicide et de haute trahison. - Dieu fasse miséricorde à son ame!

Autres Voix, presque indistinctes.

Priez pour lui!

Joshua.

La grosse cloche va annoncer tout à l’ heure sa sortie de la tour. Il vous sera peut-être possible maintenant de vous échapper. Il faut que je tâche d’ en trouver les moyens. Attendez-moi là; je vais revenir.

Jane.

Vous me laissez, Joshua? Je vais avoir peur, seule ici, mon dieu!

Joshua.

Vous ne pourriez parcourir toute la tour avec moi sans péril. Il faut que je vous fasse sortir de la tour. Pensez que Gilbert vous attend.

Jane.

Gilbert! Tout pour Gilbert! Allez!

Joshua sort.

Jane, seule.

Oh! Quel spectacle effrayant! Quand je songe que cela eût été ainsi pour Gilbert!

Elle s’ agenouille sur les degrés de l’ un des autels.

— oh! Merci! Vous êtes bien le dieu sauveur! Vous avez sauvé Gilbert!

Le drap du fond s’ entr’ ouvre. La reine paraît; elle s’ avance à pas lents vers le devant du théâtre, sans voir Jane.

Jane, se détournant.
Dieu! La reine!

JOURNEE 3 PARTIE 2 SCENE 2

Jane, la reine.
Jane se colle avec effroi contre l’ autel, et
attache sur la reine un regard de stupeur et
d’ épouvante.
La Reine.

Elle se tient quelques instans en silence sur le
devant du théâtre, l’ œil fixe, pâle, comme absorbée
dans une sombre rêverie. Enfin elle pousse un profond
soupir.
Oh! Le peuple!
Elle promène autour d’ elle avec inquiétude son
regard qui rencontre Jane.
— quelqu’ un là! -c’ est toi, jeune fille! C’ est
vous, lady Jane! Je vous fais peur. Allons, ne
craignez rien. Le guichetier éneas nous a trahies,
vous savez? Ne craignez donc rien. Enfant, je te
l’ ai déjà dit, tu n’ as rien à craindre de moi, toi.
Ce qui faisait ta perte il y a un mois fait ton salut
aujourd’ hui. Tu aimes Fabiano. Il n’ y a que toi et
moi sous le ciel qui ayons le cœur fait ainsi, que toi et
moi qui l’ aimions. Nous sommes sœurs.
Jane.
Madame…
La Reine.
Oui, toi et moi, deux femmes, voilà tout ce
qu’ il a pour lui, cet homme. Contre lui tout le
reste! Toute une cité, tout un peuple, tout un
monde! Lutte inégale de l’ amour contre la haine!
L’ amour pour Fabiano, il est triste, épouvanté,
éperdu; il a ton front pâle, il a mes yeux en
larmes; il se cache près d’ un autel funèbre; il
prie par ta bouche, il maudit par la mienne. La haine
contre Fabiani, elle est fière, radieuse,
triomphante, elle est armée et victorieuse, elle a

la cour, elle a le peuple, elle a des masses d’ hommes plein les rues, elle mâche à la fois des cris de mort et des cris de joie, elle est superbe, et hautaine, et toute puissante; elle illumine toute une ville autour d’ un échafaud! L’ amour, le voici, deux femmes vêtues de deuil dans un tombeau. La haine, la voilà!
Elle tire violemment le drap blanc du fond, qui, en s’ écartant, laisse voir un balcon, et au-delà de ce balcon, à perte de vue, dans une nuit noire, toute la ville de Londres splendidement illuminée. Ce qu’ on voit de la tour de Londres est illuminé également. Jane fixe des yeux étonnés sur tout ce spectacle éblouissant dont la réverbération éclaire le théâtre.
La Reine.
Oh! Ville infâme! Ville révoltée! Ville maudite! Ville monstrueuse qui trempe sa robe de fête dans le sang et qui tient la torche au bourreau? Tu en as peur, Jane, n’ est-ce pas? Est-ce qu’ il ne te semble pas comme à moi qu’ elle nous nargue lâchement toutes deux, et qu’ elle nous regarde avec ses cent mille prunelles flamboyantes, faibles femmes abandonnées que nous sommes, perdues et seules dans ce sépulcre! Jane! L’ entends-tu rire et hurler, l’ horrible ville! Oh! L’ Angleterre! L’ Angleterre à qui détruira Londres! Oh! Que je voudrais pouvoir changer ces flambeaux en brandons, ces lumières en flammes, et cette ville illuminée en une ville qui brûle!
Une immense rumeur éclate au dehors. Applaudissemens. Cris confus: -le voilà! Le voilà! Fabiani à mort! -on entend tinter la grosse cloche de la tour de Londres. à ce bruit, la reine se met à rire d’ un rire terrible.
Jane.
Grand dieu! Voilà le malheureux qui sort… -vous riez, madame!

La Reine.
Oui, je ris!
Elle rit.
— oui, et tu vas rire aussi! Mais d’ abord il faut que je ferme cette tenture, il me semble toujours que nous ne sommes pas seules et que cette affreuse ville nous voit et nous entend.
Elle ferme le rideau blanc et revient à Jane.
— maintenant qu’ il est sorti, maintenant qu’ il n’ y a plus de danger, je puis te dire cela. Mais ris donc, rions toutes deux de cet exécrable peuple qui boit du sang. Oh! C’ est charmant! Jane! Tu trembles pour Fabiano, sois tranquille! Et ris avec moi, te dis-je! Jane! L’ homme qu’ ils ont, l’ homme qui va mourir, l’ homme qu’ ils prennent pour Fabiano, ce n’ est pas Fabiano!
Elle rit.
Jane.
Ce n’ est pas Fabiano!
La Reine.
Non!
Jane.
Qui est-ce donc?
La Reine.
C’ est l’ autre.
Jane.
Qui? L’ autre?
La Reine.
Tu sais bien, tu le connais, cet ouvrier, cet homme… -d’ ailleurs qu’ importe?
Jane, tremblant de tout son corps.
Gilbert?
La Reine.
Oui, Gilbert, c’ est ce nom-là.
Jane.
Madame! Oh non, madame! Oh! Dites que cela n’ est pas, madame! Gilbert! Ce serait trop

horrible! Il s’ est évadé!
La Reine.
Il s’ évadait quand on l’ a saisi, en effet. On l’ a
mis à la place de Fabiano sous le voile noir. C’ est
une exécution de nuit. Le peuple n’ y verra rien.
Sois tranquille.
Jane, avec un cri effrayant.
Ah! Madame! Celui que j’ aime, c’ est Gilbert!
La Reine.
Quoi? Que dis-tu? Perds-tu la raison? Est-ce
que tu me trompais aussi, toi? Ah! C’ est ce Gilbert
que tu aimes! Eh bien, que m’ importe?
Jane, brisée, aux pieds de la reine, sanglotant,
se traînant sur les genoux, les mains jointes.
La grosse cloche tinte pendant toute cette scène.
Madame, par pitié! Madame, au nom du ciel!
Madame, par votre couronne, par votre mère, par
les anges! Gilbert! Gilbert! Cela me rend folle,
madame, sauvez Gilbert! Cet homme, c’ est ma vie,
cet homme, c’ est mon mari, cet homme… je viens de
vous dire qu’ il a tout fait pour moi, qu’ il m’ a
élevée, qu’ il m’ a adoptée, qu’ il a remplacé près de
mon berceau mon père qui est mort pour votre mère.
Madame, vous voyez bien que je ne suis qu’ une pauvre
misérable et qu’ il ne faut pas être sévère pour moi.
Ce que vous venez de me dire m’ a donné un coup si
terrible que je ne sais vraiment pas comment j’ ai
la force de vous parler. Je dis ce que je peux,
voyez-vous. Mais il faut que vous fassiez suspendre
l’ exécution. Tout de suite. Suspendre l’ exécution.
Remettre la chose à demain. Le temps de se reconnaître,
voilà tout. Ce peuple peut bien attendre à demain.
Nous verrons ce que nous ferons. Non, ne secouez
pas la tête. Pas de danger pour votre Fabiano.
C’ est moi que vous mettrez à la place. Sous le
voile noir, la nuit, qui le saura? Mais sauvez
Gilbert! Qu’ est-ce que cela vous fait, lui ou moi?

Enfin! Puisque je veux bien mourir, moi! -oh
mon dieu! Cette cloche, cette affreuse cloche!
Chacun des coups de cette cloche est un pas vers
l’ échafaud. Chacun des coups de cette cloche frappe
sur mon cœur. -faites cela, madame, ayez pitié!
Pas de danger pour votre Fabiano. Laissez-moi baiser
vos mains. Je vous aime, madame, je ne vous l’ ai
pas encore dit; mais je vous aime bien. Vous êtes
une grande reine. Voyez comme je baise vos belles
mains. Oh! Un ordre pour suspendre l’ exécution.
Il est encore temps. Je vous assure que c’ est
très-possible. Ils vont lentement. Il y a loin de
la tour au vieux-marché. L’ homme du balcon a dit qu’ on
passerait par Charing-Cross. Il y a un chemin plus
court. Un homme à cheval arriverait encore à
temps. Au nom du ciel, madame, ayez pitié! Enfin,
mettez-vous à ma place, supposez que je sois
la reine et vous la pauvre fille, vous pleureriez
comme moi, et je ferais grâce. Faites grâce, madame!
Oh! Voilà ce que je craignais, que les larmes ne
m’ empêchassent de parler. Oh! Tout de suite.
Suspendre l’ exécution. Cela n’ a pas d’ inconvénient,
madame. Pas de danger pour Fabiano, je vous jure!
Est-ce que vraiment vous ne trouvez pas qu’ il faut
faire ce que je dis, madame?
La Reine, attendrie et la relevant.
Je le voudrais, malheureuse. Ah! Tu pleures,
oui, comme je pleurais; ce que tu éprouves je
viens de l’ éprouver. Mes angoisses me font compatir
aux tiennes. Tiens, tu vois que je pleure aussi.
C’ est bien malheureux, pauvre enfant! Sans doute,
il semble bien qu’ on aurait pu en prendre un autre,
Tyreonnel, par exemple; mais il est trop connu,
il fallait un homme obscur. On n’ avait que celui-là
sous la main. Je t’ explique cela pour que tu
comprennes, vois-tu. Oh! Mon dieu! Il y a de ces
fatalités-là. On se trouve pris. On n’ y peut rien.

Jane.

Oui, je vous écoute bien, madame. C' est comme moi, j' aurais encore plusieurs choses à vous dire; mais je voudrais que l' ordre de suspendre l' exécution fût signé et l' homme parti. Ce sera une chose faite, voyez-vous. Nous parlerons mieux après. Oh! Cette cloche! Toujours cette cloche!

La Reine.

Ce que tu veux est impossible, lady Jane.

Jane.

Si, c' est possible. Un homme à cheval. Il y a un chemin très-court. Par le quai. J' irais, moi. C' est possible. C' est facile. Vous voyez que je parle avec douceur.

La Reine.

Mais le peuple ne voudrait pas, mais il reviendrait tout massacrer dans la tour, et Fabiano y est encore, mais comprends donc. Tu trembles, pauvre enfant, moi je suis comme toi, je tremble aussi. Mets-toi à ma place à ton tour. Enfin, je pourrais bien ne pas prendre la peine de t' expliquer tout cela. Tu vois que je fais ce que je peux. Ne songe plus à ce Gilbert, Jane! C' est fini. Résigne-toi!

Jane.

Fini! Non, ce n' est pas fini! Non, tant que cette horrible cloche sonnera, ce ne sera pas fini! Me résigner! à la mort de Gilbert! Est-ce que vous croyez que je laisserai mourir Gilbert ainsi? Non, madame. Ah! Je perds mes peines! Ah! Vous ne m' écoutez pas. Eh bien! Si la reine ne m' entend pas, le peuple m' entendra! Ah! Ils sont bons, ceux-là, voyez-vous! Le peuple est encore dans cette cour. Vous ferez de moi ensuite ce que vous voudrez. Je vais lui crier qu' on le trompe, et que c' est Gilbert, un ouvrier comme eux, et que ce n' est pas Fabiani.

La Reine.

Arrête, misérable enfant!
Elle lui saisit le bras et la regarde fixement d’ un air formidable.
— ah! Tu le prends ainsi? Ah! Je suis bonne et douce, et je pleure avec toi, et voilà que tu deviens folle et furieuse! Ah! Mon amour est aussi grand que le tien, et ma main est plus forte que la tienne. Tu ne bougeras pas. Ah, ton amant! Que m’ importe ton amant? Est-ce que toutes les filles d’ Angleterre vont venir me demander compte de leurs amans, maintenant! Pardieu! Je sauve le mien comme je peux et aux dépens de qui se trouve là. Veillez sur les vôtres!
Jane.
Laissez-moi! -oh! Je vous maudis, méchante femme!
La Reine.
Silence!
Jane.
Non, je ne me tairai pas. Et voulez-vous que je vous dise une pensée que j’ ai à présent? Je ne crois pas que celui qui va mourir soit Gilbert.
La Reine.
Que dis-tu?
Jane.
Je ne sais pas. Mais je l’ ai vu passer sous ce voile noir. Il me semble que si ç’ avait été Gilbert, quelque chose aurait remué en moi, quelque chose se serait révolté, quelque chose se serait soulevé dans mon cœur, et m’ aurait crié: Gilbert! C’ est Gilbert! Je n’ ai rien senti, ce n’ est pas Gilbert!
La Reine.
Que dis-tu là? Ah! Mon dieu! Tu es insensée, ce que tu dis là est fou, et cependant cela m’ épouvante. Ah! Tu viens de remuer une des plus secrètes inquiétudes de mon cœur. Pourquoi cette

émeute m’ a-t-elle empêchée de surveiller tout
moi-même! Pourquoi m’ en suis-je remise à d’ autres
qu’ à moi du salut de Fabiano? éneas Dulverton
est un traître. Simon Renard était peut-être là.
Pourvu que je n’ aie pas été trahie une deuxième
fois par les ennemis de Fabiano! Pourvu que ce
ne soit pas Fabiano en effet…! -quelqu’ un!
Vite quelqu’ un! Quelqu’ un!
Deux geôliers paraissent.
Au premier.
 — vous, courez. Voici mon anneau royal. Dites
qu’ on suspende l’ exécution. Au vieux-marché! Au
vieux-marché! Il y a un chemin plus court,
disais-tu, Jane?
Jane.
Par le quai.
La Reine, au geôlier.
Par le quai. Un cheval! Cours vite!
Le geôlier sort.
Au deuxième geôlier.
 — vous, allez sur-le-champ à la tourelle
d’ édouard-le-confesseur. Il y a là les deux cachots
des condamnés à mort. Dans l’ un de ces cachots, il
y a un homme. Amenez-le-moi sur-le-champ.
Le geôlier sort.
 — ah! Je tremble! Mes pieds se dérobent sous
moi; je n’ aurais pas la force d’ y aller moi-même.
Ah! Tu me rends folle comme toi! Ah! Misérable
fille, tu me rends malheureuse comme toi! Je te
maudis, comme tu me maudis! Mon dieu! L’ homme
aura-t-il le temps d’ arriver? Quelle horrible
anxiété! Je ne vois plus rien. Tout est trouble dans
mon esprit. Cette cloche, pour qui sonne-t-elle?
Est-ce pour Gilbert? Est-ce pour Fabiano?
Jane.
La cloche s’ arrête.
La Reine.

C’ est que le cortége est sur la place de l’ exécution.
L’ homme n’ aura pas eu le temps d’ arriver.
On entend un coup de canon éloigné.
Jane.
Ciel!
La Reine.
Il monte sur l’ échafaud.
Deuxième coup de canon.
— il s’ agenouille.
Jane.
C’ est horrible!
Troisième coup de canon.
Toutes Deux.
Ah!…
La Reine.
Il n’ y en a plus qu’ un de vivant. Dans un instant nous saurons lequel. Mon dieu! Celui qui va entrer, faites que ce soit Fabiano!
Jane.
Mon dieu! Faites que ce soit Gilbert!
Le rideau du fond s’ ouvre. Simon Renard paraît, tenant Gilbert par la main.
Jane.
Gilbert!
Ils se précipitent dans les bras l’ un de l’ autre.
La Reine.
Et Fabiano?
Simon Renard.
Mort.
La Reine.
Mort?… mort! Qui a osé…?
Simon Renard.
Moi. J’ ai sauvé la reine et l’ Angleterre.

FIN.

RUY BLAS

This play in five acts was presented by Hugo and the theatre company of the Renaissance in the salle Ventadour, November 8, 1838. Though considered by many critics to be Hugo's best play, *Ruy Blas* initially met only average success.

The action takes place in 17th century Spain during the reign of Charles II. Ruy Blas, an indentured commoner and poet falls in love with the Queen. As is typical with Hugo, the play is a thinly veiled cry for political reform.

Sarah Bernhardt playing the part of the Queen, 1872

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PREFACE

Trois espèces de spectateurs composent ce qu’on est convenu d’appeler le public: premièrement, les femmes; deuxièmement, les penseurs; troisièmement, la foule proprement dite. Ce que la foule demande presque exclusivement à l’œuvre dramatique, c’est de l’action; ce que les femmes y veulent avant tout, c’est de la passion; ce qu’y cherchent plus spécialement les penseurs, ce sont des caractères. Si l’on étudie attentivement ces trois classes de spectateurs, voici ce qu’on remarque: la foule est tellement amoureuse de l’action, qu’au besoin elle fait bon marché des caractères et des passions. Les femmes, que l’action intéresse d’ailleurs, sont si absorbées par les développements de la passion, qu’elles se préoccupent peu du dessin des caractères; quant aux penseurs, ils ont un tel goût de voir des caractères, c’est-à-dire des hommes, vivre sur la scène, que, tout en accueillant volontiers la passion comme incident naturel dans l’œuvre dramatique, ils en viennent presque à y être importunés par l’action. Cela tient à ce que la foule demande surtout au théâtre des sensations; la femme, des émotions; le penseur, des méditations. Tous veulent un plaisir; mais ceux-ci, le plaisir des yeux; celles-là, le plaisir du cœur; les derniers, le plaisir de l’esprit. De là, sur notre scène, trois espèces d’œuvres bien distinctes: l’une vulgaire et inférieure, les deux autres illustres et supérieures, mais qui toutes les trois satisfont un besoin: le mélodrame pour la foule; pour les femmes, la tragédie qui analyse la passion; pour les penseurs, la comédie qui peint l’humanité. Disons-le en passant, nous ne prétendons rien établir ici de rigoureux, et nous prions le lecteur d’introduire de lui-même dans notre pensée les restrictions qu’elle peut contenir. Les généralités admettent toujours les exceptions; nous savons fort bien que la foule est une grande chose dans laquelle on trouve tout, l’instinct du beau comme le goût du médiocre, l’amour de l’idéal comme l’appétit du commun; nous savons également que tout penseur complet doit être femme par les côtés délicats du cœur; et nous n’ignorons pas que, grâce à cette loi mystérieuse qui lie les sexes l’un à l’autre aussi bien par l’esprit que par le corps, bien souvent dans une femme il y a un penseur. Ceci posé, et après avoir prié de nouveau le lecteur de ne pas attacher un sens trop absolu aux quelques mots qui nous restent à dire, nous reprenons. Pour tout homme qui fixe un regard sérieux sur les trois sortes de spectateurs dont nous venons de parler, il est évident qu'elles ont toutes les trois raison. Les femmes ont raison de vouloir être émues, les penseurs ont raison de vouloir être enseignés, la foule n'a pas tort de vouloir être amusée. De cette évidence se déduit la loi du drame. En effet, au delà de cette barrière de feu qu'on appelle la rampe du théâtre, et qui sépare le monde réel du monde idéal, créer et faire vivre, dans les conditions combinées de l'art et de la nature, des caractères, c'est-à-dire, et nous le répétons, des hommes; dans ces hommes, dans ces caractères, jeter des passions qui développent ceux-ci et modifient ceux-là; et enfin, du choc de ces caractères et de ces passions avec les grandes lois providentielles, faire sortir la vie humaine, c'est-à-dire des événements grands, petits, douloureux, comiques, terribles, qui contiennent pour le cœur ce plaisir qu'on appelle l'intérêt, et pour l'esprit cette leçon qu'on appelle la morale: tel est le but du drame. On le voit, le drame tient de la tragédie par la peinture des assions, et de la comédie par la peinture des caractères. Le drame est la troisième grande forme de l'art, comprenant, enserrant, et fécondant les deux premières. Corneille et Molière existeraient indépendamment l'un de l'autre, si Shakespeare n'était entre eux, donnant à Corneille la main gauche, à Molière la main droite. De cette façon, les deux é lectricités opposées de la comédie et de la tragédie se rencontrent, et l'étincelle qui en jaillit, c'est le drame. En expliquant, comme il les entend et comme il les a déjà indiqués plusieurs fois, le principe, la loi et le but du drame, l'auteur est loin de se dissimuler l'exiguïté de ses forces et la brièveté de son esprit. Il définit ici, qu'on ne s'y méprenne pas, non ce qu'il a fait, mais ce qu'il a voulu faire. Il montre ce qui a été pour lui le point de départ. Rien de plus. Nous n'avons en tête de ce livre que peu de lignes à écrire, et l'espace nous manque pour les développements nécessaires. Qu'on nous permette donc de passer, sans nous appesantir autrement sur la transition, des idées générales que nous venons de poser, et qui, selon nous, toutes les conditions de l'idéal étant maintenues du reste, régissent l'art tout entier, à quelques-unes des idées particulières que ce drame, Ruy Blas, peut soulever dans les esprits attentifs. Et premièrement, pour ne prendre qu'un des côtés de la question, au point de vue de la philosophie de l'histoire, quel est le sens de ce drame? - Expliquons-nous. Au moment où une monarchie va s'écrouler, plusieurs phénomènes peuvent être observés. Et d'abord la noblesse tend à se dissoudre. En se dissolvant elle se divise, et voici de quelle façon: Le royaume chancelle, la dynastie s'éteint, la loi tombe en ruine; l'unité politique s’émiette aux tiraillements de l’intrigue; le haut de la société s’abâtardit et dé génère; un mortel affaiblissement se fait sentir à tous au dehors comme au dedans; les grandes choses de l’état sont tombées, les petites seules sont debout, triste spectacle public; plus de police, plus d’armée, plus de finances; chacun devine que la fin arrive. De là, dans tous les esprits, ennui de la veille, crainte du lendemain, défiance de tout homme, découragement de toute chose, dégoût profond. Comme la maladie de l’état est dans la tête, la noblesse, qui y touche, en est la première atteinte. Que devient-elle alors? Une partie des gentilshommes, la moins honnête et la moins généreuse, reste à la cour. Tout va être englouti, le temps presse, il faut se hâter, il faut s’enrichir, s’agrandir et profiter des circonstances. On ne songe plus qu’à soi. Chacun se fait, sans pitié pour le pays, une petite fortune particulière dans un coin de la grande infortune publique. On est courtisan, on est ministre, on se dépêche d’être heureux et puissant. On a de l’esprit, on se déprave, et l’on réussit. Les ordres de l’état, les dignités, les places, l’argent, on prend tout, on veut tout, on pille tout. On ne vit plus que par l’ambition et la cupidité. On cache les désordres secrets que peut engendrer l’infirmité humaine sous beaucoup de gravité extérieure. Et, comme cette vie acharnée aux vanités et aux jouissances de l’orgueil a pour première condition l’oubli de tous les sentiments naturels, on y devient féroce. Quand le jour de la disgrâce arrive, quelque chose de monstrueux se développe dans le courtisan tombé, et l’homme se change en démon. L’état désespéré du royaume pousse l’autre moitié de la noblesse, la meilleure et la mieux née, dans une autre voie. Elle s’en va chez elle, elle rentre dans ses palais, dans ses châteaux, dans ses seigneuries. Elle a horreur des affaires, elle n’y peut rien, la fin du monde approche; qu’y faire et à quoi bon se désoler? Il faut s’étourdir, fermer les yeux, vivre, boire, aimer, jouir. Qui sait? A-t-on même un an devant soi? Cela dit, ou même simplement senti, le gentilhomme prend la chose au vif, décuple sa livrée, achète des chevaux, enrichit des femmes, ordonne des fêtes, paie des orgies, jette, donne, vend, achète, hypothèque, compromet, dévore, se livre aux usuriers et met le feu aux quatre coins de son bien. Un beau matin, il lui arrive un malheur. C’est que, quoique la monarchie aille grand train, il s’est ruiné avant elle. Tout est fini, tout est brûlé. De toute cette belle vie flamboyante il ne reste pas même de la fumée; elle s’est envolée. De la cendre, rien de plus. Oublié et abandonné de tous, excepté de ses créanciers, le pauvre gentilhomme devient alors ce qu’il peut, un peu aventurier, un peu spadassin, un peu bohémien. Il s’enfonce et disparaît dans la foule, grande masse terne et noire que, jusqu’à ce jour, il a à peine entrevue de loin sous ses pieds. Il s’y plonge, il s’y réfugie. Il n’a plus d’or, mais il lui reste le soleil, cette richesse de ceux qui n’ont rien. Il a d’abord habité le haut de la société, voici maintenant qu’il vient se loger dans le bas, et qu’il s’en accommode; il se moque de son parent l’ambitieux, qui est riche et qui est puissant; il devient philosophe, et il compare les voleurs aux courtisans. Du reste, bonne, brave, loyale et intelligente nature; mélange du poè te, du gueux et du prince; riant de tout; faisant aujourd’hui rosser le guet par ses camarades comme autrefois par ses gens, mais n’y touchant pas; alliant dans sa manière, avec quelque grâce, l’impudence du marquis à l’effronterie du zingaro; souillé au dehors, sain au dedans; et n’ayant plus du gentilhomme que son honneur qu’il garde, son nom qu’il cache, et son épée qu’il montre. Si le double tableau que nous venons de tracer s’offre dans l’histoire de toutes les monarchies à un moment donné, il se présente particulièrement en Espagne d’une façon frappante à la fin du dix-septième siècle. Ainsi, si l’auteur avait réussi à exécuter cette partie de sa pensée, ce qu’il est loin de supposer, dans le drame qu’on va lire, la première moitié de la noblesse espagnole à cette époque se résumerait en don Salluste, et la seconde moitié en don César. Tous deux cousins, comme il convient. Ici, comme partout, en esquissant ce croquis de la noblesse castillane vers 1695, nous réservons, bien entendu, les rares et vénérables exceptions. - Poursuivons. En examinant toujours cette monarchie et cette époque, au-dessous de la noblesse ainsi partagée, et qui pourrait, jusqu’à un certain point, être personnifiée dans les deux hommes que nous venons de nommer, on voit remuer dans l’ombre quelque chose de grand, de sombre et d’inconnu. C’est le peuple. Le peuple, qui a l’avenir et qui n’a pasle présent; le peuple, orphelin, pauvre, intelligent et fort; placé très bas, et aspirant très haut; ayant sur le dos les marques de la servitude et dans le cœur les préméditations du génie; le peuple, valet des grands seigneurs, et amoureux, dans sa misère et dans son abjection, de la seule figure qui, au milieu de cette société écroulée, représente pour lui, dans un divin rayonnement, l’autorité, la charité et la fécondité. Le peuple, ce serait Ruy Blas. Maintenant, au-dessus de ces trois hommes qui, ainsi considérés, feraient vivre et marcher, aux yeux du spectateur, trois faits, et, dans ces trois faits, toute la monarchie espagnole au dix-septième siècle; au-dessus de ces trois hommes, disons-nous, il y a une pure et lumineuse créature, une femme, une reine. Malheureuse comme femme, car elle est comme si elle n’avait pas de mari; malheureuse comme reine, car elle est comme si elle n’avait pas de roi; penchée vers ceux qui sont au-dessous d’elle par pitié royale et par instinct de femme aussi peut-être, et regardant en bas pendant que Ruy Blas, le peuple, regarde en haut. Aux yeux de l’auteur, et sans préjudice de ce que les personnages accessoires peuvent apporter à la vérité de l’ensemble, ces quatre êtes ainsi groupées résumeraient les principales saillies qu’offrait au regard du philosophe historien la monarchie espagnole il y a cent quarante ans. à ces quatre têtes il semble qu’on pourrait en ajouter une cinquième, celle du roi Charles II. Mais, dans l’histoire comme dans le drame, Charles II d’Espagne n’est pas une figure, c’est une ombre. A présent, hâtons-nous de le dire, ce qu’on vient de lire n’est point l’explication de Ruy Blas. C’en est simplement un des aspects. C’est l’impression particulière que pourrait laisser ce drame, s’il valait la peine d’être é tudié, à l’esprit grave et consciencieux qui l’examinerait, par exemple, du point de vue de la philosophie de l’histoire. Mais, si peu qu’il soit, ce drame, comme toutes les choses de ce monde, a beaucoup d’autres aspects et peut être envisagé de beaucoup d’autres manières. On peut prendre plusieurs vues d’une idée comme d’une montagne. Cela dépend du lieu où l’on se place. Qu’on nous passe, seulement pour rendre claire notre idée, une comparaison infiniment trop ambitieuse: le mont Blanc, vu de la Croix-De-Fléchères, ne ressemble pas au mont Blanc vu de Sallenches. Pourtant c’est toujours le mont Blanc. De même, pour tomber d’une très grande chose à une très petite, ce drame, dont nous venons d’indiquer le sens historique, offrirait une tout autre figure, si on le considérait d’un point de vue beaucoup plus élevé encore, du point de vue purement humain. Alors don Salluste serait l’égoïsme absolu, le souci sans repos; don César, son contraire, serait le désintéressement et l’insouciance; on verrait dans Ruy Blas le génie et la passion comprimés par la société, et s’élançant d’autant plus haut que la compression est plus violente; la reine enfin, ce serait la vertu minée par l’ennui. Au point de vue uniquement littéraire, l’aspect de cette pensée telle quelle, intitulée Ruy Blas, changerait encore. Les trois formes souveraines de l’art pourraient y paraître personnifiées et résumées. Don Salluste serait le drame, don César la comédie, Ruy Blas la tragédie. Le drame noue l’action, la comédie l’embrouille, la tragédie la tranche. Tous ces aspects sont justes et vrais, mais aucun d’eux n’est complet. La vérité absolue n’est que dans l’ensemble de l’œuvre. Que chacun y trouve ce qu’il y cherche, et le poète, qui ne s’en flatte pas du reste, aura atteint son but. Le sujet philosophique de Ruy Blas, c’est le peuple aspirant aux régions élevées; le sujet humain, c’est un homme qui aime une femme; le sujet dramatique, c’est un laquais qui aime une reine. La foule qui se presse chaque soir devant cette œuvre, parce qu’en France jamais l’attention publique n’a fait défaut aux tentatives de l’esprit, quelles qu’elles soient d’ailleurs, la foule, disons-nous, ne voit dans Ruy Blas que ce dernier sujet, le sujet dramatique, le laquais; et elle a raison. Et ce que nous venons de dire de Ruy Blas nous semble évident de tout autre ouvrage. Les œuvres vénérables des maîtres ont même cela de remarquable qu’elles offrent plus de faces à étudier que les autres. Tartuffe fait rire ceux-ci et trembler ceux-là. Tartuffe, c’est le serpent domestique; ou bien c’est l’hypocrite; ou bien c’est l’hypocrisie. C’est tantôt un homme, tantôt une idée. Othello, pour les uns, c’est un noir qui aime une blanche; pour les autres, c’est un parvenu qui a épousé une patricienne; pour ceux-là, c’est un jaloux; pour ceux-ci, c’est la jalousie. Et cette diversité d’aspects n’ôte rien à l’unité fondamentale de la composition. Nous l’avons déjà dit ailleurs: mille rameaux et un tronc unique. Si l’auteur de ce livre a particulièrement insisté sur la signification historique de Ruy Blas, c’est que, dans sa pensée, par le sens historique, et, il est vrai, par le sens historique uniquement, Ruy Blas se rattache à Hernani. Le grand fait de la noblesse se montre, dans Hernani comme dans Ruy Blas, à côté du grand fait de la royauté. Seulement, dans Hernani, comme la royauté absolue n’est pas faite, la noblesse lutte encore contre le roi, ici avec l’orgueil, là avec l’épée; à demi féodale, à demi rebelle. En 1519, le seigneur vit loin de la cour, dans la montagne, en bandit comme Hernani, ou en patriarche comme Ruy Gomez. Deux cents ans plus tard, la question est retournée. Les vassaux sont devenus des courtisans. Et, si le seigneur sent encore d’aventure le besoin de cacher son nom, ce n’est pas pour échapper au roi, c’est pour échapper à ses créanciers. Il ne se fait pas bandit, il se fait bohémien. - On sent que la royauté absolue a passé pendant de longues années sur ces nobles têtes, courbant l’une, brisant l’autre. Et puis, qu’on nous permette ce dernier mot, entre Hernani et Ruy Blas, deux siècles de l’Espagne sont encadrés; deux grands siècles, pendant lesquels il a été donné à la descendance de Charles-Quint de dominer le monde; deux siècles que la providence, chose remarquable, n’a pas voulu allonger d’une heure, car Charles-Quint naît en 1500, et Charles II meurt en 1700. En 1700, Louis XIV héritait de Charles-

Quint, comme en 1800 Napoléon héritait de Louis XIV. Ces grandes apparitions de dynasties qui illuminent par moments l'histoire sont pour l'auteur un beau et mélancolique spectacle sur lequel ses yeux se fixent souvent. Il essaie parfois d'en transporter quelque chose dans ses œuvres. Ainsi il a voulu remplir Hernani du rayonnement d'une aurore, et couvrir *Ruy Blas* des ténèbres d'un crépuscule. Dans *Hernani*, le soleil de la maison d'Autriche se lève; dans *Ruy Blas*, il se couche.

Paris, 25 novembre 1838.

ACTE PREMIER

Don SALLUSTE

Le salon de Danaé dans le palais du roi, à Madrid. Ameublement magnifique dans le goût demi-flamand du temps de Philippe IV. À gauche, une grande fenêtre à châssis dorés et à petits carreaux. Des deux côtés, sur un pan coupé, une porte basse donnant dans quelque appartement intérieur. Au fond, une grande cloison vitrée à châssis dorés s’ouvrant par une large porte également vitrée sur une longue galerie. Cette galerie, qui traverse tout le théâtre, est masquée par d’immenses rideaux qui tombent du haut en bas de la cloison vitrée. Une table, un fauteuil, et ce qu’il faut pour écrire. Don Salluste entre par la petite porte de gauche, suivi de Ruy Blas et de Gudiel, qui porte une cassette et divers paquets qu’on dirait disposés pour un voyage. Don Salluste est vêtu de velours noir, costume de cour du temps de Charles II. La toison d’or au cou. Par-dessus l’habillement noir, un riche manteau de velours vert clair, brodé d’or et doublé de satin noir. Épée à grande coquille. Chapeau à plumes blanches. Gudiel est en noir, épée au côté. Ruy Blas est en livrée. Haut-de-chausses et justaucorps bruns. Surtout galonné, rouge et or. Tête nue. Sans épée.

Scène première – Don Salluste De Bazan, Gudiel; par instants Ruy Blas.

DON SALLUSTE.
Ruy Blas, fermez la porte, – ouvrez cette fenêtre.
Ruy Blas obéit, puis, sur un signe de don Salluste,
il sort par la porte du fond. Don Salluste va à la fenêtre.
Ils dorment encor tous ici, – le jour va naître.
Il se tourne brusquement vers Gudiel.
Ah! C’est un coup de foudre! ... – oui, mon règne est passé,
Gudiel! – renvoyé, disgracié, chassé! –
Ah! Tout perdre en un jour! – l’aventure est secrète
Encor, n’en parle pas. – oui, pour une amourette,
– Chose, à mon âge, sotte et folle, j’en convien! –
Avec une suivante, une fille de rien!
Séduite, beau malheur! Parce que la donzelle
Est à la reine, et vient de Neubourg avec elle,
Que cette créature a pleuré contre moi,
Et traîné son enfant dans les chambres du roi;
Ordre de l’épouser. Je refuse. On m’exile.
On m’exile! Et vingt ans d’un labeur difficile,
Vingt ans d’ambition, de travaux nuit et jour;
Le président haï des alcades de cour,
Dont nul ne prononçait le nom sans épouvante;
Le chef de la maison de Bazan, qui s’en vante;
Mon crédit, mon pouvoir; tout ce que je rêvais,
Tout ce que je faisais et tout ce que j’avais,
Charge, emplois, honneurs, tout en un instant s’écroule
Au milieu des éclats de rire de la foule!
Gudiel.
Nul ne le sait encor, monseigneur.
Don Salluste.
Mais demain!
Demain, on le saura! – nous serons en chemin.
Je ne veux pas tomber, non, je veux disparaître!

Il déboutonne violemment son pourpoint.
– Tu m’agrafes toujours comme on agrafe un prêtre,
Tu serres mon pourpoint, et j’étouffe, mon cher! –
Il s’assied.
Oh! Mais je vais construire, et sans en avoir l’air,
Une sape profonde, obscure et souterraine!
Chassé! –
Il se lève.
Gudiel.
D’où vient le coup, monseigneur?
Don Salluste.
De la reine.
Oh! Je me vengerai, Gudiel! Tu m’entends.
Toi dont je suis l’élève, et qui depuis vingt ans
M’as aidé, m’as servi dans les choses passées,
Tu sais bien jusqu’où vont dans l’ombre mes pensées,
Comme un bon architecte, au coup d’oeil exercé,
Connaît la profondeur du puits qu’il a creusé.
Je pars. Je vais aller à Finlas, en Castille,
Dans mes états, – et là, songer! – pour une fille!
– Toi, règle le départ, car nous sommes pressés.
Moi, je vais dire un mot au drôle que tu sais.
À tout hasard. Peut-il me servir? Je l’ignore.
Ici jusqu’à ce soir je suis le maître encore.
Je me vengerai, va! Comment? Je ne sais pas;
Mais je veux que ce soit effrayant! – de ce pas
Va faire nos apprêts, et hâte-toi. – silence!
Tu pars avec moi. Va.
Gudiel salue et sort. – don Salluste appelant.
– Ruy Blas!
Ruy Blas, *se présentant à la porte du fond.*
Votre excellence?
Don Salluste.
Comme je ne dois plus coucher dans le palais,
Il faut laisser les clefs et clore les volets.
Ruy Blas, *s’inclinant.*
Monseigneur, il suffit.

Don Salluste.
Écoutez, je vous prie.
La reine va passer, là, dans la galerie,
En allant de la messe à sa chambre d'honneur,
Dans deux heures. Ruy Blas, soyez là.
Ruy Blas.
Monseigneur,
J'y serai.
Don Salluste, *à la fenêtre*.
Voyez-vous cet homme dans la place
Qui montre aux gens de garde un papier, et qui passe?
Faites-lui, sans parler, signe qu'il peut monter.
Par l'escalier étroit.
Ruy Blas obéit. Don Salluste continue
en lui montrant la petite porte à droite.
– avant de nous quitter,
Dans cette chambre où sont les hommes de police,
Voyez donc si les trois alguazils de service
Sont éveillés.
Ruy Blas. *Il va à la porte, l'entr'ouvre et revient.*
Seigneur, ils dorment.
Don Salluste.
Parlez bas.
J'aurai besoin de vous, ne vous éloignez pas.
Faites le guet afin que les fâcheux nous laissent.
Entre don César De Bazan. Chapeau défoncé. Grande cape déguenillée
qui ne laisse voir de sa toilette que des bas mal tirés et des souliers crevés.
Épée de spadassin.
Au moment où il entre, lui et Ruy Blas se regardent
et font en même temps, chacun de son côté, un geste de surprise.
Don Salluste, les observant, à part.
Ils se sont regardés! Est-ce qu'ils se connaissent?
Ruy Blas sort.

Scène II – Don Salluste, Don César.

Don Salluste.
Ah! Vous voilà, bandit!
Don César.
        Oui, cousin, me voilà.
Don Salluste.
C'est grand plaisir de voir un gueux comme cela!
Don César, *saluant*.
Je suis charmé...
Don Salluste.
      Monsieur, on sait de vos histoires.
Don César, *gracieusement*.
Qui sont de votre goût?
Don Salluste.
        Oui, des plus méritoires.
Don Charles De Mira l'autre nuit fut volé.
On lui prit son épée à fourreau ciselé
Et son buffle. C'était la surveille de pâques.
Seulement, comme il est chevalier de saint-Jacques,
La bande lui laissa son manteau.
Don César.
        Doux Jésus!
Pourquoi?
Don Salluste.
      Parce que l'ordre était brodé dessus.
Eh bien, que dites-vous de l'algarade?
Don César.
          Ah! Diable!
Je dis que nous vivons dans un siècle effroyable!
Qu'allons-nous devenir, bon Dieu! Si les voleurs
Vont courtiser saint Jacque et le mettre des leurs?
Don Salluste.
Vous en étiez!
Don César.
      Eh bien, – oui! S'il faut que je parle,

J’étais là. Je n’ai pas touché votre don Charle,
J’ai donné seulement des conseils.
Don Salluste.
Mieux encor.
La lune étant couchée, hier, Plaza-Mayor,
Toutes sortes de gens, sans coiffe et sans semelle,
Qui hors d’un bouge affreux se ruaient pêle-mêle,
Ont attaqué le guet. – vous en étiez!
Don César.
Cousin,
J’ai toujours dédaigné de battre un argousin.
J’étais là. Rien de plus. Pendant les estocades,
Je marchais en faisant des vers sous les arcades.
On s’est fort assommé.
Don Salluste.
Ce n’est pas tout.
Don César.
Voyons.
Don Salluste.
En France, on vous accuse, entre autres actions,
Avec vos compagnons à toute loi rebelles,
D’avoir ouvert sans clef la caisse des gabelles.
Don César.
Je ne dis pas. – la France est pays ennemi.
Don Salluste.
En Flandre, rencontrant dom Paul Barthélemy,
Lequel portait à Mons le produit d’un vignoble
Qu’il venait de toucher pour le chapitre noble,
Vous avez mis la main sur l’argent du clergé.
Don César.
En Flandre? – il se peut bien. J’ai beaucoup voyagé.
– Est-ce tout?
Don Salluste.
Don César, la sueur de la honte,
Lorsque je pense à vous, à la face me monte.
Don César.
Bon. Laissez-la monter.

Don Salluste.
Notre famille...
Don César.
Non.
Car vous seul à Madrid connaissez mon vrai nom.
Ainsi ne parlons pas famille!
Don Salluste.
Une marquise
Me disait l’autre jour en sortant de l’église:
– Quel est donc ce brigand qui, là-bas, nez au vent,
Se carre, l’oeil au guet et la hanche en avant,
Plus délabré que Job et plus fier que Bragance,
Drapant sa gueuserie avec son arrogance,
Et qui, froissant du poing sous sa manche en haillons
L’épée à lourd pommeau qui lui bat les talons,
Promène, d’une mine altière et magistrale,
Sa cape en dents de scie et ses bas en spirale?
Don César, *jetant un coup d’oeil sur sa toilette*.
Vous avez répondu: c’est ce cher Zafari!
Don Salluste.
Non; j’ai rougi, monsieur.
Don César.
Eh bien! La dame a ri.
Voilà. J’aime beaucoup faire rire les femmes.
Don Salluste.
Vous n’allez fréquentant que spadassins infâmes!
Don César.
Des clercs! Des écoliers doux comme des moutons!
Don Salluste.
Partout on vous rencontre avec des jeannetons!
Don César.
Ô Lucindes d’amour! Ô douces Isabelles!
Eh bien! Sur votre compte on en entend de belles!
Quoi! L’on vous traite ainsi, beautés à l’oeil mutin,
À qui je dis le soir mes sonnets du matin!
Don Salluste.
Enfin, Matalobos, ce voleur de Galice

Qui désole Madrid malgré notre police,
Il est de vos amis!
Don César.
Raisonnons, s’il vous plaît.
Sans lui j’irais tout nu, ce qui serait fort laid.
Me voyant sans habit, dans la rue, en décembre,
La chose le toucha. – ce fat parfumé d’ambre,
Le comte d’Albe, à qui l’autre mois fut volé
Son beau pourpoint de soie...
Don Salluste.
Eh bien?
Don César.
C’est moi qui l’ai.
Matalobos me l’a donné.
Don Salluste.
L’habit du comte!
Vous n’êtes pas honteux? ...
Don César.
Je n’aurai jamais honte
De mettre un bon pourpoint, brodé, passementé,
Qui me tient chaud l’hiver et me fait beau l’été.
– Voyez, il est tout neuf. –
Il entr’ouvre son manteau, qui laisse voir
un superbe pourpoint de satin rose brodé d’or.
Les poches en sont pleines
De billets doux au comte adressés par centaines.
Souvent, pauvre, amoureux, n’ayant rien sous la dent,
J’avise une cuisine au soupirail ardent
D’où la vapeur des mets aux narines me monte.
Je m’assieds là. J’y lis les billets doux du comte,
Et, trompant l’estomac et le coeur tour à tour,
J’ai l’odeur du festin et l’ombre de l’amour!
Don Salluste.
Don César...
Don César.
Mon cousin, tenez, trêve aux reproches.
Je suis un grand seigneur, c’est vrai, l’un de vos proches;

Je m’appelle César, comte de Garofa;
Mais le sort de folie en naissant me coiffa.
J’étais riche, j’avais des palais, des domaines,
Je pouvais largement renter les Célimènes.
Bah! Mes vingt ans n’étaient pas encor révolus
Que j’avais mangé tout! Il ne me restait plus
De mes prospérités, ou réelles ou fausses,
Qu’un tas de créanciers hurlant après mes chausses.
Ma foi, j’ai pris la fuite et j’ai changé de nom.
À présent, je ne suis qu’un joyeux compagnon,
Zafari, que hors vous nul ne peut reconnaître.
Vous ne me donnez pas du tout d’argent, mon maître;
Je m’en passe. Le soir, le front sur un pavé,
Devant l’ancien palais des comtes de Tevé,
– C’est là, depuis neuf ans, que la nuit je m’arrête, –
Je vais dormir avec le ciel bleu sur ma tête.
Je suis heureux ainsi. Pardieu, c’est un beau sort!
Tout le monde me croit dans l’Inde, au diable, – mort.
La fontaine voisine a de l’eau, j’y vais boire,
Et puis je me promène avec un air de gloire.
Mon palais, d’où jadis mon argent s’envola,
Appartient à cette heure au nonce Espinola.
C’est bien. Quand par hasard jusque-là je m’enfonce,
Je donne des avis aux ouvriers du nonce
Occupés à sculpter sur la porte un Bacchus. –
Maintenant, pouvez-vous me prêter dix écus?
Don Salluste.
Écoutez-moi...
Don César, *croisant les bras*.
      Voyons présent votre style.
Don Salluste.
Je vous ai fait venir, c’est pour vous être utile.
César, sans enfants, riche, et de plus votre aîné,
Je vous vois à regret vers l’abîme entraîné;
Je veux vous en tirer. Bravache que vous êtes,
Vous êtes malheureux. Je veux payer vos dettes,
Vous rendre vos palais, vous remettre à la cour,

Et refaire de vous un beau seigneur d'amour.
Que Zafari s'éteigne et que César renaisse.
Je veux qu'à votre gré vous puisiez dans ma caisse,
Sans crainte, à pleines mains, sans soin de l'avenir.
Quand on a des parents il faut les soutenir,
César, et pour les siens se montrer pitoyable...
Pendant que don Salluste parle, le visage de don César
prend une expression de plus en plus étonnée,
joyeuse et confiante; enfin il éclate.

Don César.
Vous avez toujours eu de l'esprit comme un diable,
Et c'est fort éloquent ce que vous dites là.
– Continuez.
Don Salluste.
César, je ne mets à cela
Qu'une condition. – dans l'instant je m'explique.
Prenez d'abord ma bourse.
Don César, *empoignant la bourse, qui est pleine d'or*.
Ah a! C'est magnifique!
Don Salluste.
Et je vous vais donner cinq cents ducats...
Don César, *ébloui*.
Marquis!
Don Salluste, *continuant*.
Dès aujourd'hui.
Don César.
Pardieu, je vous suis tout acquis.
Quant aux conditions, ordonnez. Foi de brave,
Mon épée est à vous. Je deviens votre esclave,
Et, si cela vous plaît, j'irai croiser le fer
Avec don Spavento, capitan de l'enfer.
Don Salluste.
Non, je n'accepte pas, don César, et pour cause,
Votre épée.
Don César.
Alors quoi? Je n'ai guère autre chose.

Don Salluste, *se rapprochant de lui et baissant la voix*.
Vous connaissez, – et c'est en ce cas un bonheur, –
Tous les gueux de Madrid?
Don César.
Vous me faites honneur.
Don Salluste.
Vous en traînez toujours après vous une meute;
Vous pourriez, au besoin, soulever une émeute,
Je le sais. Tout cela peut-être servira.
Don César, *éclatant de rire*.
D'honneur! Vous avez l'air de faire un opéra.
Quelle part donnez-vous dans l'oeuvre à mon génie?
Sera-ce le poëme ou bien la symphonie?
Commandez. Je suis fort pour le charivari.
Don Salluste, *gravement*.
Je parle à don César et non à Zafari.
Baissant la voix de plus en plus.
Écoute. J'ai besoin, pour un résultat sombre,
De quelqu'un qui travaille à mon côté dans l'ombre
Et qui m'aide à bâtir un grand événement.
Je ne suis pas méchant, mais il est tel moment
Où le plus délicat, quittant toute vergogne,
Doit retrousser sa manche et faire la besogne.
Tu seras riche, mais il faut m'aider sans bruit
À dresser, comme font les oiseleurs la nuit,
Un bon filet caché sous un miroir qui brille,
Un piège d'alouette ou bien de jeune fille.
Il faut, par quelque plan terrible et merveilleux,
– Tu n'es pas, que je pense, un homme scrupuleux, –
Me venger!
Don César.
Vous venger?
Don Salluste.
Oui.
Don César.
De qui?
Don Salluste.

D’une femme.
Don César.
Il se redresse et regarde fièrement don Salluste.
Ne m’en dites pas plus. Halte-là! – sur mon âme,
Mon cousin, en ceci voilà mon sentiment.
Celui qui, bassement et tortueusement,
Se venge, ayant le droit de porter une lame,
Noble, par une intrigue, homme, sur une femme,
Et qui, né gentilhomme, agit en alguazil,
Celui-là, – fût-il grand de Castille, fût-il
Suivi de cent clairons sonnant des tintamarres,
Fût-il tout harnaché d’ordres et de chamarres,
Et marquis, et vicomte, et fils des anciens preux, –
N’est pour moi qu’un maraud sinistre et ténébreux
Que je voudrais, pour prix de sa lâcheté vile,
Voir pendre à quatre clous au gibet de la ville!
Don Salluste.
César! ...
Don César.
N’ajoutez pas un mot, c’est outrageant.
Il jette la bourse aux pieds de don Salluste.
Gardez votre secret, et gardez votre argent.
Oh! Je comprends qu’on vole, et qu’on tue, et qu’on pille,
Que par une nuit noire on force une bastille,
D’assaut, la hache au poing, avec cent flibustiers;
Qu’on égorge estafiers, geôliers et guichetiers,
Tous, taillant et hurlant, en bandits que nous sommes,
Oeil pour oeil, dent pour dent, c’est bien! Hommes contre hommes!
Mais doucement détruire une femme! Et creuser
Sous ses pieds une trappe! Et contre elle abuser,
Qui sait? De son humeur peut-être hasardeuse!
Prendre ce pauvre oiseau dans quelque glu hideuse!
Oh! Plutôt qu’arriver jusqu’à ce déshonneur,
Plutôt qu’être, à ce prix, un riche et haut seigneur,
– Et je le dis ici pour Dieu qui voit mon âme, –
J’aimerais mieux, plutôt qu’être à ce point infâme,
Vil, odieux, pervers, misérable et flétri,

Qu’un chien rongeât mon crâne au pied du pilori!
Don Salluste.
Cousin...
Don César.
De vos bienfaits je n’aurai nulle envie,
Tant que je trouverai, vivant ma libre vie,
Aux fontaines de l’eau, dans les champs le grand air,
À la ville un voleur qui m’habille l’hiver,
Dans mon âme l’oubli des prospérités mortes,
Et devant vos palais, monsieur, de larges portes
Où je puis, à midi, sans souci du réveil,
Dormir, la tête à l’ombre et les pieds au soleil!
– Adieu donc. – De nous deux Dieu sait quel est le juste.
Avec les gens de cour, vos pareils, don Salluste,
Je vous laisse, et je reste avec mes chenapans.
Je vis avec les loups, non avec les serpents.
Don Salluste.
Un instant...
Don César.
Tenez, maître, abrégeons la visite.
Si c’est pour m’envoyer en prison, faites vite.
Don Salluste.
Allons, je vous croyais, César, plus endurci.
L’épreuve vous est bonne et vous a réussi;
Je suis content de vous. Votre main, je vous prie.
Don César.
Comment!
Don Salluste.
Je n’ai parlé que par plaisanterie.
Tout ce que j’ai dit là, c’est pour vous éprouver.
Rien de plus.
Don César.
Çà, debout vous me faites rêver.
La femme, le complot, cette vengeance...
Don Salluste.
Leurre!
Imagination! Chimère!

Don César.
        À la bonne heure!
Et l’offre de payer mes dettes! Vision?
Et les cinq cents ducats! Imagination?
Don Salluste.
Je vais vous les chercher.
      Il se dirige vers la porte du fond,
et fait signe à Ruy Blas de rentrer.
Don César, *à part sur le devant,*
et regardant don Salluste de travers.
        Hum! Visage de traître!
Quand la bouche dit oui, le regard dit peut-être.
Don Salluste, *à Ruy Blas*.
Ruy Blas, restez ici.
      À don César.
      Je reviens.
      Il sort par la petite porte de gauche.
Sitôt qu’il est sorti, don César et Ruy Blas vont vivement l’un à l’autre.

Scène III - Don César, Ruy Blas.

Don César.
          Sur ma foi,
Je ne me trompais pas. C’est toi, Ruy Blas!
Ruy Blas.
          C’est toi,
Zafari! Que fais-tu dans ce palais?
Don César.
          J’y passe.
Mais je m’en vais. Je suis oiseau, j’aime l’espace.
Mais toi? Cette livrée? Est-ce un déguisement?
Ruy Blas, *avec amertume*.
Non, je suis déguisé quand je suis autrement.
Don César.
Que dis-tu?
Ruy Blas.
      Donne-moi ta main que je la serre,
Comme en cet heureux temps de joie et de misère

Où je vivais sans gîte, où le jour j’avais faim,
Où j’avais froid la nuit, où j’étais libre enfin!
– Quand tu me connaissais, j’étais un homme encore.
Tous deux nés dans le peuple, – Hélas! C’était l’aurore! –
Nous nous ressemblions au point qu’on nous prenait
Pour frères; nous chantions dès l’heure où l’aube naît,
Et le soir devant Dieu, notre père et notre hôte,
Sous le ciel étoilé nous dormions côte à côte.
Oui, nous partagions tout. Puis enfin arriva
L’heure triste où chacun de son côté s’en va.
Je te retrouve, après quatre ans, toujours le même,
Joyeux comme un enfant, libre comme un bohème,
Toujours ce Zafari, riche en sa pauvreté,
Qui n’a rien eu jamais et n’a rien souhaité!
Mais moi, quel changement! Frère, que te dirai-je?
Orphelin, par pitié nourri dans un collège
De science et d’orgueil, de moi, triste faveur!
Au lieu d’un ouvrier on a fait un rêveur.
Tu sais, tu m’as connu. Je jetais mes pensées
Et mes voeux vers le ciel en strophes insensées.
J’opposais cent raisons à ton rire moqueur.
J’avais je ne sais quelle ambition au coeur.
À quoi bon travailler? Vers un but invisible
Je marchais, je croyais tout réel, tout possible,
J’espérais tout du sort! – et puis je suis de ceux
Qui passent tout un jour, pensifs et paresseux,
Devant quelque palais regorgeant de richesses,
À regarder entrer et sortir des duchesses. –
Si bien qu’un jour, mourant de faim sur le pavé,
J’ai ramassé du pain, frère, où j’en ai trouvé
Dans la fainéantise et dans l’ignominie.
Oh! Quand j’avais vingt ans, crédule à mon génie,
Je me perdais, marchant pieds nus dans les chemins,
En méditations sur le sort des humains;
J’avais bâti des plans sur tout, – une montagne
De projets; – je plaignais le malheur de l’Espagne;
Je croyais, pauvre esprit, qu’au monde je manquais... –

Ami, le résultat, tu le vois: – un laquais!
Don César.
Oui, je le sais, la faim est une porte basse:
Et, par nécessité lorsqu’il faut qu’il y passe,
Le plus grand est celui qui se courbe le plus.
Mais le sort a toujours son flux et son reflux.
Espère.
Ruy Blas, *secouant la tête*.
Le marquis de Finlas est mon maître.
Don César.
Je le connais. – tu vis dans ce palais, peut-être?
Ruy Blas.
Non, avant ce matin et jusqu’à ce moment
Je n’en avais jamais passé le seuil.
Don César.
Vraiment?
Ton maître cependant pour sa charge y demeure.
Ruy Blas.
Oui, car la cour le fait demander à toute heure.
Mais il a quelque part un logis inconnu,
Où jamais en plein jour peut-être il n’est venu.
À cent pas du palais. Une maison discrète.
Frère, j’habite là. Par la porte secrète
Dont il a seul la clef, quelquefois, à la nuit,
Le marquis vient, suivi d’hommes qu’il introduit.
Ces hommes sont masqués et parlent à voix basse.
Ils s’enferment, et nul ne sait ce qui se passe.
Là, de deux noirs muets je suis le compagnon.
Je suis pour eux le maître. Ils ignorent mon nom.
Don César.
Oui, c’est là qu’il reçoit, comme chef des alcades,
Ses espions, c’est là qu’il tend ses embuscades.
C’est un homme profond qui tient tout dans sa main.
Ruy Blas.
Hier, il m’a dit: – il faut être au palais demain.
Avant l’aurore. Entrez par la grille dorée. –
En arrivant il m’a fait mettre la livrée,

Car l’habit odieux sous lequel tu me vois,
Je le porte aujourd’hui pour la première fois.
Don César, *lui serrant la main.*
Espère!
Ruy Blas.
Espérer! Mais tu ne sais rien encore.
Vivre sous cet habit qui souille et déshonore,
Avoir perdu la joie et l’orgueil, ce n’est rien.
Être esclave, être vil, qu’importe! – écoute bien.
Frère! Je ne sens pas cette livrée infâme,
Car j’ai dans ma poitrine une hydre aux dents de flamme
Qui me serre le coeur dans ses replis ardents.
Le dehors te fait peur? Si tu voyais dedans!
Don César.
Que veux-tu dire?
Ruy Blas.
Invente, imagine, suppose.
Fouille dans ton esprit. Cherches-y quelque chose
D’étrange, d’insensé, d’horrible et d’inouï.
Une fatalité dont on soit ébloui!
Oui, compose un poison affreux, creuse un abîme
Plus sourd que la folie et plus noir que le crime,
Tu n’approcheras pas encor de mon secret.
– Tu ne devines pas? – Hé! Qui devinerait? –
Zafari! Dans le gouffre où mon destin m’entraîne
Plonge les yeux! – je suis amoureux de la reine!
Don César.
Ciel!
Ruy Blas.
Sous un dais orné du globe impérial,
Il est, dans Aranjuez ou dans l’Escurial,
– Dans ce palais, parfois, – mon frère, il est un homme
Qu’à peine on voit d’en bas, qu’avec terreur on nomme;
Pour qui, comme pour Dieu, nous sommes égaux tous;
Qu’on regarde en tremblant et qu’on sert à genoux;
Devant qui se couvrir est un honneur insigne;
Qui peut faire tomber nos deux têtes d’un signe;

Dont chaque fantaisie est un événement;
Qui vit, seul et superbe, enfermé gravement
Dans une majesté redoutable et profonde,
Et dont on sent le poids dans la moitié du monde,
Eh bien! moi, le laquais, – tu m'entends, eh bien! Oui,
Cet homme-là! Le roi! Je suis jaloux de lui!
Don César.
Jaloux du roi!
Ruy Blas.
Hé! Oui, jaloux du roi! Sans doute.
Puisque j'aime sa femme!
Don César.
Oh! Malheureux!
Ruy Blas.
Écoute.
Je l'attends tous les jours au passage. Je suis
Comme un fou! Ho! Sa vie est un tissu d'ennuis,
À cette pauvre femme! – oui, chaque nuit j'y songe. –
Vivre dans cette cour de haine et de mensonge,
Mariée à ce roi qui passe tout son temps
À chasser! Imbécile! – un sot! Vieux à trente ans!
Moins qu'un homme! À régner comme à vivre inhabile.
– Famille qui s'en va! – Le père était débile
Au point qu'il ne pouvait tenir un parchemin.
– Oh! Si belle et si jeune, avoir donné sa main
À ce roi Charles Deux! Elle! Quelle misère!
– Elle va tous les soirs chez les soeurs du rosaire,
Tu sais? En remontant la rue Ortaleza.
Comment cette démence en mon coeur s'amassa,
Je l'ignore. Mais juge! Elle aime une fleur bleue
D'Allemagne... – je fais chaque jour une lieue,
Jusqu'à Caramanchel, pour avoir de ces fleurs.
J'en ai cherché partout sans en trouver ailleurs.
J'en compose un bouquet, je prends les plus jolies...
– Oh! Mais je te dis là des choses, des folies! –
Puis minuit, au parc royal, comme un voleur,
Je me glisse et je vais déposer cette fleur

Sur son banc favori. Même, hier, j’osai mettre
Dans le bouquet, – vraiment, plains-moi, frère! – une lettre!
La nuit, pour parvenir jusqu’à ce banc, il faut
franchir les murs du parc, et je rencontre en haut
Ces broussailles de fer qu’on met sur les murailles.
Un jour j’y laisserai ma chair et mes entrailles.
Trouve-t-elle mes fleurs, ma lettre? Je ne sai.
Frère, tu le vois bien, je suis un insensé.
Don César.
Diable! Ton algarade a son danger. Prends garde.
Le comte d’Onate, qui l’aime aussi, la garde
Et comme un majordome et comme un amoureux.
Quelque reître, une nuit, gardien peu langoureux,
Pourrait bien, frère, avant que ton bouquet se fane,
Te le clouer au coeur d’un coup de pertuisane. –
Mais quelle idée! Aimer la reine! Ah çà, pourquoi?
Comment diable as-tu fait?
Ruy Blas, *avec emportement.*
        Est-ce que je sais, moi!
– Oh! Mon âme au démon! Je la vendrais pour être
Un des jeunes seigneurs que, de cette fenêtre,
Je vois en ce moment, comme un vivant affront,
Entrer, la plume au feutre et l’orgueil sur le front!
Oui, je me damnerais pour dépouiller ma chaîne,
Et pour pouvoir comme eux m’approcher de la reine
Avec un vêtement qui ne soit pas honteux!
Mais, ô rage! Être ainsi, près d’elle! Devant eux!
En livrée! Un laquais! Être un laquais pour elle!
Ayez pitié de moi, mon Dieu!
      Se rapprochant de don César.
        Je me rappelle.
Ne demandais-tu pas pourquoi je l’aime ainsi,
Et depuis quand? ... – un jour... – mais à quoi bon ceci?
C’est vrai, je t’ai toujours connu cette manie!
Par mille questions vous mettre à l’agonie!
Demander où? Comment? Quand? Pourquoi? Mon sang bout!
Je l’aime follement! Je l’aime, voilà tout!

Don César.
Là, ne te fâche pas.
Ruy Blas, *tombant épuisé et pâle sur le fauteuil*.
Non. Je souffre. – pardonne.
Ou plutôt, va, fuis-moi. Va-t'en, frère. Abandonne
Ce misérable fou qui porte avec effroi
Sous l'habit d'un valet les passions d'un roi!
Don César, *lui posant la main sur l'épaule*.
Te fuir! – moi qui n'ai pas souffert, n'aimant personne,
Moi, pauvre grelot vide où manque ce qui sonne,
Gueux, qui vais mendiant l'amour je ne sais où,
À qui de temps en temps le destin jette un sou,
Moi, coeur éteint, dont l'âme, hélas! S'est retirée,
Du spectacle d'hier affiche déchirée,
Vois-tu, pour cet amour dont tes regards sont pleins,
Mon frère, je t'envie autant que je te plains!
– Ruy Blas! –

Moment de silence. Ils se tiennent les mains serrées en se regardant tous les deux avec une expression de tristesse et d'amitié confiante.

Entre don Salluste. Il s'avance à pas lents, fixant un regard d'attention profonde sur don César et Ruy Blas, qui ne le voient pas. Il tient d'une main un chapeau et une épée qu'il apporte en entrant sur un fauteuil, et de l'autre une bourse qu'il dépose sur la table.

Don Salluste, *à don César*.
Voici l'argent.

À la voix de don Salluste, Ruy Blas se lève comme réveillé en sursaut, et se tient debout, les yeux baissés, dans l'attitude du respect.

Don César, *à part, regardant don Salluste de travers*.
Hum! Le diable m'emporte!
Cette sombre figure écoutait à la porte.
Bah! Qu'importe, après tout!
Haut don Salluste.
Don Salluste, merci.

Il ouvre la bourse, la répand sur la table et remue avec joie les ducats qu'il range en piles sur le tapis de velours. Pendant qu'il les compte, don Salluste va au fond, en regardant derrière lui s'il n'éveille pas l'attention de *don César. Il ouvre la petite porte de droite. – à un signe qu'il fait, trois alguazils armés d'épées et vêtus de noir en sortent. Don Salluste leur montre mystérieusement don César.*

Ruy Blas se tient immobile et debout près de la table comme une statue, sans rien voir ni rien entendre.

Don Salluste, *bas, aux alguazils*.

Vous allez suivre, alors qu'il sortira d'ici,
L'homme qui compte là de l'argent. – en silence
Vous vous emparerez de lui. – sans violence. –
Vous l'irez embarquer, par le plus court chemin,
à Denia. –

Il leur remet un parchemin scellé.

Voici l'ordre écrit de ma main. –
Enfin, sans écouter sa plainte chimérique,
Vous le vendrez en mer aux corsaires d'Afrique.
Mille piastres pour vous. Faites vite à présent!

Les trois alguazils s'inclinent et sortent.

Don César, *achevant de ranger ses ducats*.

Rien n'est plus gracieux et plus divertissant
Que des écus à soi qu'on met en équilibre.

Il fait deux parts égales et se tourne vers Ruy Blas.

Frère, voici ta part. –

Ruy Blas.

Comment!

Don César, *lui montrant une des deux piles d'or*.

Prends! Viens! Sois libre!

Don Salluste, *qui les observe, à part*.

Diable!

Ruy Blas, *secouant la tête en signe de refus*.

Non. C'est le coeur qu'il faudrait délivrer.
Non, mon sort est ici. Je dois y demeurer.

Don César.

Bien. Suis ta fantaisie. Es-tu fou? Suis-je sage?
Dieu le sait.

Il ramasse l'argent et le jette dans le sac, qu'il empoche.

Don Salluste, *au fond, à part, et les observant toujours*.

À peu près même air, même visage.

Don César, *à Ruy Blas*.
Adieu.
Ruy Blas.
Ta main!
Ils se serrent la main.
Don César sort sans voir don Salluste, qui se tient à l'écart.

Scène IV - Ruy Blas, don Salluste.
Don Salluste.
Ruy Blas!
Ruy Blas, *se retournant vivement*.
Monseigneur?
Don Salluste.
Ce matin,
Quand vous êtes venu, je ne suis pas certain
S'il faisait jour déjà?
Ruy Blas.
Pas encore, excellence.
J'ai remis au portier votre passe en silence,
Et puis je suis monté.
Don Salluste
Vous étiez en manteau?
Ruy Blas
Oui, monseigneur.
Don Salluste.
Personne, en ce cas, au château,
Ne vous a vu porter cette livrée encore?
Ruy Blas.
Ni personne à Madrid.
Don Salluste, *désignant du doigt la porte par où est sorti Don César.*
C'est fort bien. Allez clore
Cette porte. Quittez cet habit.
Ruy Blas dépouille son surtout de livrée
et le jette sur un fauteuil.
Vous avez
Une belle écriture, il me semble. – écrivez.
Il fait signe à Ruy Blas de s'asseoir à la table

où sont les plumes et les écritoires. Ruy Blas obéit.
Vous m’allez aujourd’hui servir de secrétaire.
D’abord un billet doux, – je ne veux rien vous taire, –
Pour ma reine d’amour, pour dona Praxedis,
Ce démon que je crois venu du paradis.
– Là, je dicte. “ Un danger terrible est sur ma tête.
“ Ma reine seule peut conjurer la tempête,
“ En venant me trouver ce soir dans ma maison.
“ Sinon, je suis perdu. Ma vie et ma raison
“ Et mon coeur, je mets tout à ses pieds que je baise. “
Il rit et s’interrompt.
Un danger! La tournure, au fait, n’est pas mauvaise
Pour l’attirer chez moi. C’est que, j’y suis expert,
Les femmes aiment fort à sauver qui les perd.
– Ajoutez: – “ Par la porte au bas de l’avenue,
“ Vous entrerez la nuit sans être reconnue.
“ Quelqu’un de dévoué vous ouvrira. “ – D’honneur,
C’est parfait. – Ah! Signez.
Ruy Blas.
Votre nom, monseigneur?
Don Salluste.
Non pas. Signez César. C’est mon nom d’aventure.
Ruy Blas, *après avoir obéi*.
La dame ne pourra connaître l’écriture?
Don Salluste.
Bah! Le cachet suffit. J’écris souvent ainsi.
Ruy Blas, je pars ce soir, et je vous laisse ici.
J’ai sur vous les projets d’un ami très sincère.
Votre état va changer, mais il est nécessaire
De m’obéir en tout. Comme en vous j’ai trouvé
Un serviteur discret, fidèle et réservé...
Ruy Blas, *s’inclinant*.
Monseigneur!
Don Salluste, *continuant*.
Je vous veux faire un destin plus large.
Ruy Blas, *montrant le billet qu’il vient d’écrire*.
Où faut-il adresser la lettre?

Don Salluste.
Je m’en charge.
S’approchant de Ruy Blas d’un air significatif.
Je veux votre bonheur.
Un silence. Il fait signe à Ruy Blas de se rasseoir à la table.
Écrivez: – “ moi, Ruy Blas,
“ Laquais de monseigneur le marquis de Finlas,
“ En toute occasion, ou secrète ou publique,
“ M’engage à le servir comme un bon domestique. “
Ruy Blas obéit.
– Signez de votre nom. La date. Bien. Donnez.
Il ploie et serre dans son portefeuille la lettre
et le papier que Ruy Blas vient d’écrire.
On vient de m’apporter une épée. Ah! Tenez,
Elle est sur ce fauteuil.
Il désigne le fauteuil sur lequel il a posé l’épée et le chapeau.
Il y va et prend l’épée.
L’écharpe est d’une soie
Peinte et brodée au goût le plus nouveau qu’on voie.
Il lui fait admirer la souplesse du tissu.
Touchez. – Que dites-vous, Ruy Blas, de cette fleur?
La poignée est de Gil, le fameux ciseleur,
Celui qui le mieux creuse, au gré des belles filles,
Dans un pommeau d’épée une boîte à pastilles.
Il passe au cou de Ruy Blas l’écharpe,
à laquelle est attachée l’épée.
Mettez-la donc. – Je veux en voir sur vous l’effet.
– Mais vous avez ainsi l’air d’un seigneur parfait!
Écoutant.
On vient... oui. C’est bientôt l’heure où la reine passe. –
– le marquis Del Basto! –

La porte du fond sur la galerie s’ouvre. Don Salluste détache son manteau et le jette vivement sur les épaules de Ruy Blas, au moment où le marquis Del Basto paraît; puis il va droit au marquis, en entraînant avec lui Ruy Blas stupéfait.

Scène V – Don Salluste, Ruy Blas, don Pamfilo D’Avalos, marquis Del Basto. – puis le marquis de Santa-Cruz. – puis le comte d’Albe. – Puis toute la cour.

Don Salluste, *au marquis Del Basto*.
        Souffrez qu’à votre grâce
Je présente, marquis, mon cousin don César,
Comte de Garofa près de Velalcazar.
Ruy Blas, *à part*.
Ciel!
Don Salluste, *bas, à Ruy Blas*.
      Taisez-vous!
Le Marquis Del Basto, *saluant Ruy Blas*.
        Monsieur... charmé...
      Il lui prend la main, que Ruy Blas lui livre avec embarras.
Don Salluste, *bas, à Ruy Blas*.
          Laissez-vous faire.
Saluez!
      Ruy Blas salue le marquis.
Le Marquis Del Basto, *à Ruy Blas*.
        J’aimais fort madame votre mère.
      Bas, don Salluste, en lui montrant Ruy Blas.
Bien changé! Je l’aurais à peine reconnu.
Don Salluste, *bas, au marquis*.
Dix ans d’absence!
Le Marquis Del Basto, *de même*.
      Au fait!
Don Salluste, *frappant sur l’épaule de Ruy Blas*.
        Le voilà revenu!
Vous souvient-il, marquis? Oh! Quel enfant prodigue!
Comme il vous répandait les pistoles sans digue!
Tous les soirs danse et fête au vivier d’Apollo,
Et cent musiciens faisant rage sur l’eau!
À tous moments, galas, masques, concerts, fredaines,
É blouissant Madrid de visions soudaines!
– En trois ans, ruiné! – C’était un vrai lion.

– Il arrive de l’Inde avec le galion.
Ruy Blas, *avec embarras*.
Seigneur...
Don Salluste, *gaiement*.
Appelez-moi cousin, car nous le sommes.
Les Bazan sont, je crois, d’assez francs gentilshommes.
Nous avons pour ancêtre Iniguez d’Iviza.
Son petit-fils, Pedro De Bazan, épousa
Marianne De Gor. Il eut de Marianne
Jean, qui fut général de la mer océane
Sous le roi don Philippe, et Jean eut deux garçons
Qui sur notre arbre antique ont greffé deux blasons.
Moi, je suis le marquis de Finlas; vous, le comte
de Garofa. Tous deux se valent si l’on compte.
Par les femmes, César, notre rang est égal.
Vous êtes Aragon, moi je suis Portugal.
Votre branche n’est pas moins haute que la nôtre.
Je suis le fruit de l’une, et vous la fleur de l’autre.
Ruy Blas, *à part*.
Où donc m’entraîne-t-il?

Pendant que don Salluste a parlé, le marquis de Santa-Cruz, don Alvar De Bazan Y Benavides, vieillard à moustache blanche et à grande perruque, s’est approché d’eux.
Le Marquis De Santa-Cruz, *à don Salluste*.
Vous l’expliquez fort bien.
S’il est votre cousin, il est aussi le mien.
Don Salluste.
C’est vrai, car nous avons une même origine,
Monsieur De Santa-Cruz.
Il lui présente Ruy Blas.
Don César.
Le Marquis De Santa-Cruz.
J’imagine
Que ce n’est pas celui qu’on croyait mort.
Don Salluste.
Si fait.

Le Marquis De Santa-Cruz.
Il est donc revenu?
Don Salluste.
Des Indes.
Le Marquis De Santa-Cruz, *examinant Ruy Blas*.
En effet!
Don Salluste.
Vous le reconnaissez?
Le Marquis De Santa-Cruz.
Pardieu! Je l'ai vu naître!
Don Salluste, *bas à Ruy Blas*.
Le bonhomme est aveugle et se défend de l'être.
Il vous a reconnu pour prouver ses bons yeux.
Le Marquis De Santa-Cruz, tendant la main à Ruy Blas.
Touchez là, mon cousin.
Ruy Blas, *s'inclinant*.
Seigneur...
Le Marquis De Santa-Cruz, *bas à don Salluste et lui montrant Ruy Blas*.
On n'est pas mieux!
À Ruy Blas.
Charmé de vous revoir!
Don Salluste, *bas au marquis et le prenant à part*.
Je vais payer ses dettes.
Vous le pouvez servir dans le poste où vous êtes.
Si quelque emploi de cour vaquait en ce moment,
Chez le roi, – chez la reine... –
Le Marquis De Santa-Cruz, *bas*.
Un jeune homme charmant!
J'y vais songer. – et puis, il est de la famille.
Don Salluste, *bas*.
Vous avez tout crédit au conseil de Castille.
Je vous le recommande.

Il quitte le marquis de Santa-Cruz, et va à d'autres seigneurs, auxquels il présente Ruy Blas.

Parmi eux le comte d'Albe, très superbement paré.

Don Salluste *lui présente Ruy Blas*.
Un mien cousin, César,

Comte de Garofa près de Velalcazar.
Les seigneurs échangent gravement des révérences avec Ruy Blas interdit.
Don Salluste, *au comte de Ribagorza*.
Vous n'étiez pas hier au ballet d'Atalante?
Lindamire a dansé d'une façon galante.
Il s'extasie sur le pourpoint du comte d'Albe.
C'est très beau, comte d'Albe!
Le Comte D'Albe.
Ah! J'en avais encor
Un plus beau. Satin rose avec des rubans d'or.
Matalobos me l'a volé.
Un Huissier De Cour, *au fond*.
La reine approche.
Prenez vos rangs, messieurs
Les grands rideaux de la galerie vitrée s'ouvrent.
Les seigneurs s'échelonnent près de la porte.
Des gardes font la haie. Ruy Blas, haletant, hors de lui,
vient sur le devant comme pour s'y réfugier.
Don Salluste l'y suit.

Don Salluste, *bas, à Ruy Blas*.
Est-ce que, sans reproche,
Quand votre sort grandit, votre esprit s'amoindrit?
Réveillez-vous, Ruy Blas. Je vais quitter Madrid.
Ma petite maison, près du pont, où vous êtes,
– Je n'en veux rien garder, hormis les clefs secrètes, –
Ruy Blas, je vous la donne, et les muets aussi.
Vous recevrez bientôt d'autres ordres. Ainsi
Faites ma volonté, je fais votre fortune.
Montez, ne craignez rien, car l'heure est opportune.
La cour est un pays où l'on va sans voir clair.
Marchez les yeux bandés; j'y vois pour vous, mon cher!
De nouveaux gardes paraissent au fond.
L'Huissier, *à haute voix*.
La reine!
Ruy Blas, *à part*.

La reine! Ah!

La reine, vêtue magnifiquement, paraît, entourée de dames et de pages, sous un dais de velours écarlate porté par quatre gentilshommes de chambre, tête nue. Ruy Blas, effaré, la regarde comme absorbé par cette resplendissante vision. Tous les grands d'Espagne se couvrent, le marquis Del Basto, le comte d'Albe, le marquis de Santa-Cruz, don Salluste. Don Salluste va rapidement au fauteuil, et y prend le chapeau, qu'il apporte à Ruy Blas.

Don Salluste, *à Ruy Blas, en lui mettant le chapeau sur la tête.*
Quel vertige vous gagne?
Couvrez-vous donc, César. Vous êtes grand d'Espagne.
Ruy Blas, *éperdu, bas à don Salluste*.
Et que m'ordonnez-vous, seigneur, présentement?
Don Salluste, *lui montrant la reine, qui traverse lentement la galerie.*
De plaire à cette femme et d'être son amant.

ACTE II

LA REINE D’ESPAGNE

Un salon contigu à la chambre à coucher de la reine. À gauche, une petite porte donnant dans cette chambre. À droite, sur un pan coupé, une autre porte donnant dans les appartements extérieurs. Au fond, de grandes fenêtres ouvertes. C’est l’après-midi d’une belle journée d’été. Grande table. Fauteuils. Une figure de sainte, richement enchâssée, est adossée au mur; au bas on lit: santa Maria Esclava. Au côté opposé est une madone devant laquelle brûle une lampe d’or. Près de la madone, un portrait en pied du roi Charles II.

Au lever du rideau, la reine dona Maria de Neubourg est dans un coin, assise à côté d’une de ses femmes, jeune et jolie fille. La reine est vêtue de blanc, robe de drap d’argent. Elle brode et s’interrompt par moments pour causer. Dans le coin opposé est assise, sur une chaise à dossier, dona Juana de la Cueva, duchesse d’Albuquerque, camerera mayor, une tapisserie à la main; vieille femme en noir. Près de la duchesse, à une table, plusieurs duègnes travaillant à des ouvrages de femmes. Au fond, se tient don Guritan, comte d’Onate, majordome, grand, sec, moustaches grises, cinquante-cinq ans environ; mine de vieux militaire, quoique vêtu avec une élégance exagérée et qu’il ait des rubans jusque sur les souliers. La reine, la duchesse d’Albuquerque, don Guritan, Casilda, duègnes.

Scène Première: La Reine, La Duchesse d’Albuquerque, Don Guritan, Casilda, Duègnes

La Reine.
Il est parti pourtant! Je devrais être à l’aise.
Eh bien, non! Ce marquis de Finlas, il me pèse!
Cet homme-là me hait.
Casilda.
      Selon votre souhait,
N’est-il pas exilé?
La Reine.
      Cet homme-là me hait
Casilda
Votre majesté...
La Reine.
      Vrai! Casilda, c’est étrange,
Ce marquis est pour moi comme le mauvais ange.
L’autre jour, il devait partir le lendemain,
Et, comme l’ordinaire, il vint au baise-main.
Tous les grands s’avançaient vers le trône à la file;
Je leur livrais ma main, j’étais triste et tranquille,
Regardant vaguement, dans le salon obscur,
Une bataille au fond peinte sur un grand mur,
Quand tout à coup, mon oeil se baissant vers la table,
Je vis venir à moi cet homme redoutable!
Sitôt que je le vis, je ne vis plus que lui.
Il venait à pas lents, jouant avec l’étui
D’un poignard dont parfois j’entrevoyais la lame,
Grave, et m’éblouissant de son regard de flamme.
Soudain il se courba, souple et comme rampant... –
Je sentis sur ma main sa bouche de serpent!
Casilda.
Il rendait ses devoirs; – rendons-nous pas les nôtres?
La Reine.
Sa lèvre n’était pas comme celle des autres.

C’est la dernière fois que je l’ai vu. Depuis,
J’y pense très souvent. J’ai bien d’autres ennuis,
C’est égal, je me dis: – l’enfer est dans cette âme.
Devant cet homme-là je ne suis qu’une femme. –
Dans mes rêves, la nuit, je rencontre en chemin
Cet effrayant démon qui me baise la main;
Je vois luire son oeil d’où rayonne la haine;
Et, comme un noir poison qui va de veine en veine,
Souvent, jusqu’à mon coeur qui semble se glacer,
Je sens en longs frissons courir son froid baiser!
Que dis-tu de cela?
Casilda.
Purs fantômes, madame.
La Reine.
Au fait, j’ai des soucis bien plus réels dans l’âme.
À part.
Oh! Ce qui me tourmente, il faut le leur cacher.
À Casilda.
Dis-moi, ces mendiants qui n’osaient approcher...
Casilda., *allant à la fenêtre*.
Je sais, madame. Ils sont encor là, dans la place.
La Reine.
Tiens! Jette-leur ma bourse.
Casilda prend la bourse et va la jeter par la fenêtre.
Casilda.
Oh! Madame, par grâce,
Vous qui faites l’aumône avec tant de bonté,
Montrant la reine don Guritan, qui, debout et silencieux au fond de la chambre, fixe sur la reine un oeil plein d’adoration muette.
Ne jetterez-vous rien au comte d’Onate?
Rien qu’un mot! – un vieux brave! Amoureux sous l’armure!
D’autant plus tendre au coeur que l’écorce est plus dure!
La Reine.
Il est bien ennuyeux!
Casilda.
J’en conviens. – parlez-lui!
La Reine, *se tournant vers don Guritan*.

Bonjour, comte.

Don Guritan s'approche avec trois révérences, et vient baiser en soupirant la main de la reine, qui le laisse faire d'un air indifférent et distrait.

Puis il retourne à sa place, à côté du siège de la camerera mayor.

Don Guritan, *en se retirant, bas à Casilda*.

La reine est charmante aujourd'hui!

Casilda, *le regardant s'éloigner*.

Oh! Le pauvre héron! Près de l'eau qui le tente
Il se tient. Il attrape, après un jour d'attente,
Un bonjour, un bonsoir, souvent un mot bien sec,
Et s'en va tout joyeux, cette pâture au bec.

La Reine, *avec un sourire triste*.

Tais-toi!

Casilda.

Pour être heureux, il suffit qu'il vous voie!
Voir la reine, pour lui cela veut dire: – joie!

S'extasiant sur une boîte posée sur le guéridon.

Oh! La divine boîte!

La Reine.

Ah! J'en ai la clef là.

Casilda.

Ce bois de calambour est exquis!

La Reine, *lui présentant la clef*.

Ouvre-la.
Vois: – je l'ai fait emplir de reliques, ma chère;
Puis je vais l'envoyer Neubourg, à mon père;
Il sera très content!

Elle rêve un instant, puis s'arrache vivement à sa rêverie. À part.

Je ne veux pas penser!
Ce que j'ai dans l'esprit, je voudrais le chasser.

À Casilda.

Va chercher dans ma chambre un livre... – je suis folle!
Pas un livre allemand! Tout en langue espagnole!
Le roi chasse. Toujours absent. Ah! Quel ennui!
En six mois, j'ai passé douze jours près de lui.

Casilda.

Épousez donc un roi pour vivre de la sorte!
La reine retombe dans sa rêverie, puis en sort de nouveau violemment et comme avec effort.
La Reine.
Je veux sortir!
À ce mot, prononcé impérieusement par la reine, la duchesse d'Albuquerque, qui est jusqu'à ce moment restée immobile sur son siège, lève la tête, puis se dresse debout et fait une profonde révérence à la reine.

La Duchesse D'Albuquerque, *d'une voix brève et dure*.
Il faut, pour que la reine sorte,
Que chaque porte soit ouverte, – c'est réglé! –
Par un des grands d'Espagne ayant droit à la clé.
Or nul d'eux ne peut être au palais à cette heure.
La Reine.
Mais on m'enferme donc! Mais on veut que je meure,
Duchesse, enfin!
La Duchesse, *avec une nouvelle révérence*.
Je suis camerera mayor,
Et je remplis ma charge.
Elle se rassied.
La Reine, *prenant sa tête à deux mains, avec désespoir, à part*.
Allons rêver encor!
Non!
Haut.
– Vite! Un lansquenet! À moi, toutes mes femmes!
Une table, et jouons!
La Duchesse, *aux duègnes*.
Ne bougez pas, mesdames.
Se levant et faisant la révérence à la reine.
Sa majesté ne peut, suivant l'ancienne loi,
Jouer qu'avec des rois ou des parents du roi.
La Reine, *avec emportement*.
Eh bien! Faites venir ces parents.
Casilda, *à part, regardant la duchesse*.
Oh! La duègne!
La Duchesse, *avec un signe de croix.*

Dieu n’en a pas donné, madame, au roi qui règne.
La reine-mère est morte. Il est seul à présent.
La Reine.
Qu’on me serve à goûter!
Casilda.
Oui, c’est très amusant.
La Reine.
Casilda, je t’invite.
Casilda, *à part, regardant la camerera*.
Oh! Respectable aïeule!
La Duchesse, *avec une révérence*.
Quand le roi n’est pas là, la reine mange seule.
Elle se rassied.
La Reine, *poussée à bout.*
Ne pouvoir, – ô mon Dieu! Qu’est-ce que je ferai?
Ni sortir, ni jouer, ni manger à mon gré!
Vraiment, je meurs depuis un an que je suis reine.
Casilda, *à part, la regardant avec compassion*.
Pauvre femme! Passer tous ses jours dans la gêne,
Au fond de cette cour insipide! Et n’avoir
D’autre distraction que le plaisir de voir,
Au bord de ce marais à l’eau dormante et plate,
Regardant don Guritan, toujours immobile et debout au fond de la chambre.
Un vieux comte amoureux rêvant sur une patte!
La Reine, *à Casilda*.
Que faire? Voyons! Cherche une idée.
Casilda.
Ah! Tenez!
En l’absence du roi, c’est vous qui gouvernez.
Faites, pour vous distraire, appeler les ministres!
La Reine, *haussant les épaules*.
Ce plaisir! – avoir là huit visages sinistres
Me parlant de la France et de son roi caduc,
De Rome, et du portrait de monsieur l’archiduc,
Qu’on promène à Burgos, parmi des cavalcades,
Sous un dais de drap d’or porté par quatre alcades!

– Cherche autre chose.
Casilda.
      Eh bien, pour vous désennuyer,
Si je faisais monter quelque jeune écuyer?
La Reine.
Casilda!
Casilda.
      Je voudrais regarder un jeune homme,
Madame! Cette cour vénérable m’assomme.
Je crois que la vieillesse arrive par les yeux,
Et qu’on vieillit plus vite à voir toujours des vieux!
La Reine.
Ris, folle! – il vient un jour où le coeur se reploie.
Comme on perd le sommeil, enfant, on perd la joie.
Pensive.
Mon bonheur, c’est ce coin du parc où j’ai le droit
D’aller seule.
Casilda.
      Oh! Le beau bonheur, l’aimable endroit!
Des pièges sont creusés derrière tous les marbres.
On ne voit rien. Les murs sont plus hauts que les arbres.
La Reine.
Oh! Je voudrais sortir parfois!
Casilda, *bas*.
        Sortir! Eh bien,
Madame, écoutez-moi. Parlons bas. Il n’est rien
De tel qu’une prison bien austère et bien sombre
Pour vous faire chercher et trouver dans son ombre
Ce bijou rayonnant nommé la clef des champs.
– Je l’ai! – quand vous voudrez, en dépit des méchants,
Je vous ferai sortir, la nuit, et par la ville
Nous irons.
La Reine.
      Ciel! Jamais! Tais-toi!
Casilda.
        C’est très facile!
La Reine.

Paix!
Elle s’éloigne un peu de Casilda et retombe dans sa rêverie.
Que ne suis-je encor, moi qui crains tous ces grands,
Dans ma bonne Allemagne, avec mes bons parents!
Comme, ma soeur et moi, nous courions dans les herbes!
Et puis des paysans passaient, traînant des gerbes;
Nous leur parlions. C’était charmant. Hélas! Un soir,
Un homme vint, qui dit, – il était tout en noir,
Je tenais par la main ma soeur, douce compagne, –
“ Madame, vous allez être reine d’Espagne. “
Mon père était joyeux et ma mère pleurait.
Ils pleurent tous les deux à présent. – en secret
Je vais faire envoyer cette boîte à mon père,
Il sera bien content. – vois, tout me désespère.
Mes oiseaux d’Allemagne, ils sont tous morts.
Casilda fait le signe de tordre le cou à des oiseaux, en regardant de travers la camerera.
Et puis
On m’empêche d’avoir des fleurs de mon pays.
Jamais à mon oreille un mot d’amour ne vibre.
Aujourd’hui je suis reine. Autrefois j’étais libre!
Comme tu dis, ce parc est bien triste le soir,
Et les murs sont si hauts, qu’ils empêchent de voir.
– Oh! L’ennui!
On entend au dehors un chant éloigné.
Qu’est ce bruit?
Casilda.
Ce sont les lavandières
Qui passent en chantant, là-bas, dans les bruyères.
Le chant se rapproche. On distingue les paroles. La reine écoute avidement.

Voix Du Dehors.
À quoi bon entendre
Les oiseaux des bois?
L’oiseau le plus tendre
Chante dans ta voix.

Que Dieu montre ou voile
Les astres des cieux!
La plus pure étoile
Brille dans tes yeux.
Qu’avril renouvelle
Le jardin en fleur!
La fleur la plus belle
Fleurit dans ton coeur.
Cet oiseau de flamme,
Cet astre du jour,
Cette fleur de l’âme,
S’appelle l’amour!

Les voix décroissent et s’éloignent.
La Reine, *rêveuse*.
L’amour! – oui, celles-là sont heureuses. – leur voix,
Leur chant me fait du mal et du bien à la fois
La Duchesse, *aux duègnes*.
Ces femmes dont le chant importune la reine,
Qu’on les chasse!
La Reine, vivement.
Comment! On les entend à peine.
Pauvres femmes! Je veux qu’elles passent en paix,
Madame.
À Casilda, en lui montrant une croisée au fond.
Par ici le bois est moins épais,
Cette fenêtre-là donne sur la campagne;
Viens, tâchons de les voir.
Elle se dirige vers la fenêtre avec Casilda.
La Duchesse, *se levant, avec une révérence*.
Une reine d’Espagne
Ne doit pas regarder à la fenêtre.
La Reine, *s’arrêtant et revenant sur ses pas*.
Allons!
Le beau soleil couchant qui remplit les vallons,
La poudre d’or du soir qui monte sur la route,
Les lointaines chansons que toute oreille écoute,

N’existent plus pour moi! J’ai dit au monde adieu.
Je ne puis même voir la nature de Dieu!
Je ne puis même voir la liberté des autres!
La Duchesse, *faisant signe aux assistants de sortir*.
Sortez, c’est aujourd’hui le jour des saints apôtres.
Casilda fait quelques pas vers la porte. La reine l’arrête.
La Reine.
Tu me quittes?
Casilda, montrant la duchesse.
Madame, on veut que nous sortions.
La Duchesse, *saluant la reine jusqu’à terre*.
Il faut laisser la reine à ses dévotions.
Tous sortent avec de profondes révérences.

Scène II - LA REINE seule

La Reine, *seule*.
À ses dévotions? Dis donc à sa pensée!
Où la fuir maintenant? Seule! Ils m’ont tous laissée.
Pauvre esprit sans flambeau dans un chemin obscur!
Rêvant.
Oh! Cette main sanglante empreinte sur le mur!
Il s’est donc blessé? Dieu! – mais aussi c’est sa faute.
Pourquoi vouloir franchir la muraille si haute?
Pour m’apporter les fleurs qu’on me refuse ici,
Pour cela, pour si peu, s’aventurer ainsi!
C’est aux pointes de fer qu’il s’est blessé sans doute.
Un morceau de dentelle y pendait. Une goutte
De ce sang répandu pour moi vaut tous mes pleurs.
S’enfonçant dans sa rêverie.
Chaque fois qu’à ce banc je vais chercher les fleurs,
Je promets à mon Dieu, dont l’appui me délaisse,
De n’y plus retourner. J’y retourne sans cesse.
– Mais lui! Voilà trois jours qu’il n’est pas revenu
– Blessé! – Qui que tu sois,ô jeune homme inconnu
Toi qui, me voyant seule et loin de ce qui m’aime,
Sans rien me demander, sans rien espérer même,
Viens à moi, sans compter les périls où tu cours;
Toi qui verses ton sang, toi qui risques tes jours
Pour donner une fleur à la reine d’Espagne;
Qui que tu sois, ami dont l’ombre m’accompagne,
Puisque mon coeur subit une inflexible loi,
Sois aimé par ta mère et sois béni par moi!
Vivement et portant la main à son coeur.
– Oh! Sa lettre me brûle!
Retombant dans sa rêverie.
Et l’autre! L’implacable
Don Salluste! Le sort me protège et m’accable.
En même temps qu’un ange, un spectre affreux me suit;
Et, sans les voir, je sens s’agiter dans ma nuit,

Pour m’amener peut-être à quelque instant suprême,
Un homme qui me hait près d’un homme qui m’aime.
L’un me sauvera-t-il de l’autre? Je ne sais.
Hélas! Mon destin flotte à deux vents opposés.
Que c’est faible, une reine, et que c’est peu de chose!
Prions.

Elle s’agenouille devant la madone.

– Secourez-moi, madame! Car je n’ose
Élever mon regard jusqu’à vous!

Elle s’interrompt.

– Ô mon Dieu!
La dentelle, la fleur, la lettre, c’est du feu!

Elle met la main dans sa poitrine et en arrache une lettre froissée, un bouquet desséché de petites fleurs bleues et un morceau de dentelle taché de sang qu’elle jette sur la table; puis elle retombe à genoux.

Vierge, astre de la mer! Vierge, espoir du martyre!
Aidez-moi! –

S’interrompant.

Cette lettre!

Se tournant à demi vers la table.

Elle est là qui m’attire.

S’agenouillant de nouveau.

Je ne veux plus la lire! – ô reine de douceur!
Vous qu’à tout affligé Jésus donne pour soeur!
Venez, je vous appelle! –

Elle se lève, fait quelques pas vers la table, puis s’arrête, puis enfin se précipite sur la lettre, comme cédant à une attraction irrésistible.

Oui, je vais la relire
Une dernière fois! Après, je la déchire!

Avec un sourire triste.

Hélas! Depuis un mois je dis toujours cela.

Elle déplie la lettre résolument et lit.

“ Madame, sous vos pieds, dans l’ombre, un homme est là
“ Qui vous aime, perdu dans la nuit qui le voile;
“ Qui souffre, ver de terre amoureux d’une étoile;
“ Qui pour vous donnera son âme, s’il le faut;
“ Et qui se meurt en bas quand vous brillez en haut. “

Elle pose la lettre sur la table.
Quand l’âme a soif, il faut qu’elle se désaltère,
Fût-ce dans du poison!
Elle remet la lettre et la dentelle dans sa poitrine.
Je n’ai rien sur la terre.
Mais enfin il faut bien que j’aime quelqu’un, moi!
Oh! s’il avait voulu, j’aurais aimé le roi.
Mais il me laisse ainsi – seule – d’amour privée.

La grande porte s’ouvre à deux battants. Entre un huissier de chambre, en grand costume.

L’HUISSIER, *à haute voix*
– Une lettre du roi!

LA REINE, *comme réveillée en sursaut, avec un cri de joie.*
Du roi! je suis sauvée!

Scène III
La reine, la duchesse d'Albuquerque, Casilda, don Guritan, femmes de la reine, pages, Ruy Blas.

Tous entrent gravement. La duchesse en tête, puis les femmes. Ruy Blas reste au fond de la chambre. Il est magnifiquement vêtu. Son manteau tombe sur son bras gauche et le cache. Deux pages, portant sur un coussin de drap d'or la lettre du roi, viennent s'agenouiller devant la reine, à quelques pas de distance.

Ruy Blas, *au fond, à part*.
Où suis-je? – qu'elle est belle! – oh! Pour qui suis-je ici?
La Reine, *à part*.
C'est un secours du ciel!
Haut.
Donnez vite!
Se retournant vers le portrait du roi.
Merci,
Monseigneur!
À la duchesse.
D'où me vient cette lettre?
La Duchesse.
Madame,
D'Aranjuez, où le roi chasse.
La Reine.
Du fond de l'âme
Je lui rends grâce. Il a compris qu'en mon ennui
J'avais besoin d'un mot d'amour qui vînt de lui!
– Mais donnez donc.
La Duchesse, *avec une révérence, montrant la lettre*.
L'usage, il faut que je le dise,
Veut que ce soit d'abord moi qui l'ouvre et la lise.
La Reine.
Encore! – Eh bien, lisez!
La duchesse prend la lettre et la déploie lentement.
Casilda, *à part*.

Voyons le billet doux.
La Duchesse, *lisant*.
“ Madame, il fait grand vent et j’ai tué six loups. “
Signé: “ Carlos. “
La Reine, *à part.*
Hélas!
Don Guritan, *à la duchesse*.
C’est tout?
La Duchesse.
Oui, seigneur comte.
Casilda, *à part*.
Il a tué six loups! Comme cela vous monte
L’imagination! Votre coeur est jaloux,
Tendre, ennuyé, malade? – Il a tué six loups!
La Duchesse, *à la reine, en lui présentant la lettre.*
Si sa majesté veut? ...
La Reine, *la repoussant*.
Non.
Casilda, *à la duchesse*.
C’est bien tout?
La Duchesse.
Sans doute.
Que faut-il donc de plus? Notre roi chasse; en route
Il écrit ce qu’il tue avec le temps qu’il fait.
C’est fort bien.
Examinant de nouveau la lettre.
Il écrit? Non, il dicte.
La Reine, *lui arrachant la lettre et l’examinant à son tour.*
En effet,
Ce n’est pas de sa main. Rien que sa signature!
Elle l’examine avec plus d’attention et paraît frappée de stupeur. À part.
Est-ce une illusion? C’est la même écriture
Que celle de la lettre!
Elle désigne de la main la lettre qu’elle vient de cacher sur son coeur.
Oh! Qu’est-ce que cela?
À la duchesse.
Où donc est le porteur du message?

La Duchesse, *montrant Ruy Blas*.
Il est là.
La Reine, *se tournant à demi vers Ruy Blas*.
Ce jeune homme?
La Duchesse.
C’est lui qui l’apporte en personne.
– Un nouvel écuyer que sa majesté donne
À la reine. Un seigneur que, de la part du roi,
Monsieur De Santa-Cruz me recommande, à moi.
La Reine.
Son nom?
La Duchesse.
C’est le seigneur César De Bazan, comte
De Garofa. S’il faut croire ce qu’on raconte,
C’est le plus accompli gentilhomme qui soit.
La Reine.
Bien. Je veux lui parler.
À Ruy Blas.
Monsieur...
Ruy Blas, *à part, tressaillant*.
Elle me voit!
Elle me parle! Dieu! Je tremble.
La Duchesse, *à Ruy Blas*.
Approchez, comte.
Don Guritan, *regardant Ruy Blas de travers, à part.*
Ce jeune homme! Écuyer! Ce n’est pas là mon compte.
Ruy Blas, pâle et troublé, approche à pas lents.
La Reine, *à Ruy Blas*.
Vous venez d’Aranjuez?
Ruy Blas, *s’inclinant.*
Oui, madame.
La Reine.
Le roi
Se porte bien?
Ruy Blas s’incline, elle montre la lettre royale.
Il a dicté ceci pour moi?
Ruy Blas.

Il était à cheval, il a dicté la lettre...
il hésite un moment.
À l'un des assistants.
La Reine, *à part, regardant Ruy Blas*.
Son regard me pénètre.
Je n'ose demander à qui.
Haut
C'est bien, allez.
- Ah! -
Ruy Blas qui avait fait quelques pas pour sortir, revient vers la reine.
Beaucoup de seigneurs étaient là rassemblés?
À part
Pourquoi donc suis-je émue en voyant ce jeune homme?.
Ruy Blas s'incline, elle reprend.
Lesquels?
Ruy Blas.
Je ne sais point les noms dont on les nomme.
Je n'ai passé là-bas que des instants fort courts.
Voilà trois jours que j'ai quitté Madrid.
La Reine, *à part.*
Trois jours!
Elle fixe un regard plein de trouble sur Ruy Blas.
Ruy Blas, *à part*.
C'est la femme d'un autre! Ô jalousie affreuse!
– Et de qui! – Dans mon coeur un abîme se creuse.
Don Guritan, *s'approchant de Ruy Blas*.
Vous êtes écuyer de la reine? Un seul mot.
Vous connaissez quel est votre service? Il faut
Vous tenir cette nuit dans la chambre prochaine,
Afin d'ouvrir au roi, s'il venait chez la reine.
Ruy Blas, *tressaillant*.
À part.
Ouvrir au roi! Moi!
Haut.
Mais... il est absent.
Don Guritan.
Le roi

Peut-il pas arriver à l’improviste?
Ruy Blas, *à part*.
Quoi!
Don Guritan, *à part, observant Ruy Blas*.
Qu’a-t-il?
La Reine, *qui a tout entendu et dont le regard est resté fixé sur Ruy Blas*.
Comme il pâlit!

Ruy Blas chancelant s’appuie sur le bras d’un fauteuil.

Casilda, *à la reine*.
Madame, ce jeune homme
Se trouve mal!
Ruy Blas, *se soutenant à peine*.
Moi, non! Mais c’est singulier comme
Le grand air... le soleil... la longueur du chemin...
À part.
– Ouvrir au roi!

Il tombe épuisé sur un fauteuil. Son manteau se dérange et laisse voir sa main gauche enveloppée de linges ensanglantés.

Casilda.
Grand Dieu, madame! À cette main
Il est blessé!
La Reine.
Blessé!
Casilda.
Mais il perd connaissance!
Mais, vite, faisons-lui respirer quelque essence!
La Reine, *fouillant dans sa gorgerette*.
Un flacon que j’ai là contient une liqueur...

En ce moment son regard tombe sur la manchette que Ruy Blas porte au bras droit.

À part.
C’est la même dentelle!

Au même instant elle a tiré le flacon de sa poitrine, et, dans son trouble, elle a pris en même temps le morceau de dentelle qui y était caché. Ruy Blas, qui ne la quitte pas des yeux, voit cette dentelle sortir du sein de la reine.

Ruy Blas, *éperdu*.

Oh!

Le regard de la reine et le regard de Ruy Blas se rencontrent. Un silence.

La Reine, *à part*.

C’est lui!

Ruy Blas, *à part*.

Sur son coeur!

La Reine, *à part*.

C’est lui!

Ruy Blas, *à part*.

Faites, mon Dieu, qu’en ce moment je meure!

Dans le désordre de toutes les femmes s’empressant autour de Ruy Blas, ce qui se passe entre la reine et lui n’est remarqué de personne.

Cassilda *faisant respirer le flacon à Ruy Blas*.

Comment vous êtes-vous blessé? C’est tout à l’heure?
Non? Cela s’est rouvert en route? Aussi pourquoi
Vous charger d’apporter le message du roi?

La Reine, *à Casilda*.

Vous finirez bientôt vos questions, j’espère.

La Duchesse, *à Casilda*.

Qu’est-ce que cela fait à la reine, ma chère?

La Reine.

Puisqu’il avait écrit la lettre, il pouvait bien
L’apporter, n’est-ce pas?

Casilda.

Mais il n’a dit en rien
Qu’il eût écrit la lettre.

La Reine, *à part*.

Oh!

À Casilda.

Tais-toi!

Casilda, *à Ruy Blas*.

Votre grâce
Se trouve-t-elle mieux?

Ruy Blas.

Je renais!

La Reine, *à ses femmes*.

L’heure passe,
Rentrons. – Qu’en son logis le comte soit conduit.
Aux pages, *au fond*.
Vous savez que le roi ne vient pas cette nuit.
Il passe la saison tout entière à la chasse.

Elle rentre avec sa suite dans ses appartements.

Casilda, *la regardant sortir*.
La reine a dans l’esprit quelque chose.

Elle sort par la même porte que la reine en emportant la petite cassette aux reliques.

Ruy Blas, *resté seul*.

Il semble écouter encore quelque temps avec une joie profonde les dernières paroles de la reine. Il paraît comme en proie à un rêve. Le morceau de dentelle, que la reine a laissé tomber dans son trouble, est resté à terre sur le tapis. Il le ramasse, le regarde avec amour, et le couvre de baisers. Puis il lève les yeux au ciel.

Ô Dieu! Grâce!
Ne me rendez pas fou!

Regardant le morceau de dentelle.

C’était bien sur son coeur!

Il le cache dans sa poitrine. – entre don Guritan. Il revient par la porte de la chambre où il a suivi la reine. Il marche à pas lents vers Ruy Blas. Arrivé près de lui sans dire un mot, il tire à demi son épée, et la mesure du regard avec celle de Ruy Blas. Elles sont inégales. Il remet son épée dans le fourreau. Ruy Blas le regarde avec étonnement.

Scène IV - Ruy Blas, don Guritan.

Don Guritan, *repoussant son épée dans le fourreau*.
J’en apporterai deux de pareille longueur.
Ruy Blas.
Monsieur, que signifie? ...
Don Guritan, *avec gravité*.
En mil six cent cinquante,
J’étais très amoureux. J’habitais Alicante.
Un jeune homme, bien fait, beau comme les amours,
Regardait de fort près ma maîtresse, et toujours
Passait sous son balcon, devant la cathédrale,
Plus fier qu’un capitan sur la barque amirale.
Il avait nom Vasquez, seigneur, quoique bâtard.
Je le tuai. –
Ruy Blas veut l’interrompre, don Guritan l’arrête du geste, et continue.
Vers l’an soixante-six, plus tard,
Gil, comte d’Iscola, cavalier magnifique,
Envoya chez ma belle, appelée Angélique,
Avec un billet doux, qu’elle me présenta,
Un esclave nommé Grifel De Viserta.
Je fis tuer l’esclave et je tuai le maître.
Ruy Blas.
Monsieur! ...
Don Guritan, *poursuivant.*
Plus tard, vers l’an quatre-vingt, je crus être
Trompé par ma beauté, fille aux tendres façons,
Pour Tirso Gamonal, un de ces beaux garçons
Dont le visage altier et charmant s’accommode
D’un panache éclatant. C’est l’époque où la mode
Était qu’on fît ferrer ses mules en or fin.
Je tuai don Tirso Gamonal.
Ruy Blas.
Mais enfin
Que veut dire cela, monsieur?
Don Guritan.

Cela veut dire,
Comte, qu’il sort de l’eau du puits quand on en tire;
Que le soleil se lève à quatre heures demain;
Qu’il est un lieu désert et loin de tout chemin,
Commode aux gens de coeur, derrière la chapelle;
Qu’on vous nomme, je crois, César, et qu’on m’appelle
Don Gaspar Guritan Tassis Y Guevarra,
Comte d’Onate.
Ruy Blas, *froidement*.
Bien, monsieur. On y sera.

Depuis quelques instants, Casilda, curieuse, est entrée à pas de loup par la petite porte du fond, et a écouté les dernières paroles des deux interlocuteurs sans être vue d’eux.

Casilda, *à part*.
Un duel! Avertissons la reine.

Elle rentre et disparaît par la petite porte.

Don Guritan, *toujours imperturbable*.
En vos études,
S’il vous plaît de connaître un peu mes habitudes,
Pour votre instruction, monsieur, je vous dirai
Que je n’ai jamais eu qu’un goût fort modéré
Pour ces godelureaux, grands friseurs de moustache,
Beaux damerets sur qui l’oeil des femmes s’attache,
Qui sont tantôt plaintifs et tantôt radieux,
Et qui dans les maisons, faisant force clins d’yeux,
Prenant sur les fauteuils d’adorables tournures,
Viennent s’évanouir pour des égratignures.
Ruy Blas.
Mais – je ne comprends pas.
Don Guritan.
Vous comprenez fort bien.
Nous sommes tous les deux épris du même bien.
L’un de nous est de trop dans ce palais. En somme,
Vous êtes écuyer, moi je suis majordome.
Droits pareils. Au surplus, je suis mal partagé,
La partie entre nous n’est pas égale: j’ai
Le droit du plus ancien, vous le droit du plus jeune.

Donc vous me faites peur. À la table où je jeûne
Voir un jeune affamé s'asseoir avec des dents
Effrayantes, un air vainqueur, des yeux ardents,
Cela me trouble fort. Quant à lutter ensemble
Sur le terrain d'amour, beau champ qui toujours tremble,
De fadaises, mon cher, je sais mal faire assaut,
J'ai la goutte; et d'ailleurs ne suis point assez sot
Pour disputer le coeur d'aucune Pénélope
Contre un jeune gaillard si prompt à la syncope.
C'est pourquoi, vous trouvant fort beau, fort caressant,
Fort gracieux, fort tendre et fort intéressant,
Il faut que je vous tue.
Ruy Blas.
Eh bien, essayez.
Don Guritan.
Comte
De Garofa, demain, à l'heure où le jour monte,
À l'endroit indiqué, sans témoin ni valet,
Nous nous égorgerons galamment, s'il vous plaît,
Avec épée et dague, en dignes gentilshommes,
Comme il sied quand on est des maisons dont nous sommes.
Il tend la main à Ruy Blas, qui la lui prend.
Ruy Blas.
Pas un mot de ceci, n'est-ce pas? –
le comte fait un signe d'adhésion.
À demain.
Ruy Blas sort.
Don Guritan, *resté seul.*
Non, je n'ai pas du tout senti trembler sa main.
Être sûr de mourir et faire de la sorte,
C'est d'un brave jeune homme!

Bruit d'une clef à la petite porte de la chambre de la reine. Don Guritan se retourne.

On ouvre cette porte?

La reine paraît et marche vivement vers don Guritan, surpris et charmé de la voir. Elle tient entre ses mains la petite cassette.

Scène V - Don Guritan, la reine.

La Reine, *avec un sourire*.
C’est vous que je cherchais!
Don Guritan, *ravi*.
Qui me vaut ce bonheur?
La Reine, *posant la cassette sur le guéridon*.
Oh Dieu! Rien, ou du moins peu de chose, seigneur.
Elle rit.
Tout à l’heure on disait, parmi d’autres paroles, –
Casilda, – vous savez que les femmes sont folles,
Casilda soutenait que vous feriez pour moi
Tout ce que je voudrais.
Don Guritan.
Elle a raison!
La Reine, *riant*.
Ma foi,
J’ai soutenu que non.
Don Guritan.
Vous avez tort, madame!
La Reine.
Elle a dit que pour moi vous donneriez votre âme,
Votre sang...
Don Guritan.
Casilda parlait fort bien ainsi.
La Reine.
Et moi, j’ai dit que non.
Don Guritan.
Et moi, je dis que si!
Pour votre majesté, je suis prêt à tout faire.
La Reine.
Tout?
Don Guritan.
Tout!
La Reine.
Eh bien, voyons, jurez que pour me plaire

Vous ferez à l’instant ce que je vous dirai.
Don Guritan.
Par le saint roi Gaspar, mon patron vénéré,
Je le jure! Ordonnez. J’obéis, ou je meure!
La Reine, *prenant la cassette*.
Bien. Vous allez partir de Madrid tout à l’heure
Pour porter cette boîte en bois de calambour
À mon père monsieur l’électeur de Neubourg.
Don Guritan, *à part*.
Je suis pris!
Haut.
À Neubourg!
La Reine.
À Neubourg.
Don Guritan.
Six cents lieues!
La Reine.
Cinq cent cinquante. –
Elle montre la housse de soie qui enveloppe la cassette.
Ayez grand soin des franges bleues.
Cela peut se faner en route.
Don Guritan.
Et quand partir?
La Reine.
Sur-le-champ.
Don Guritan.
Ah! Demain!
La Reine.
Je n’y puis consentir.
Don Guritan, *à part.*
Je suis pris!
Haut.
Mais...
La Reine.
Partez!
Don Guritan.
Quoi? ...

La Reine.
J’ai votre parole.
Don Guritan.
Une affaire...
La Reine.
Impossible.
Don Guritan.
Un objet si frivole...
La Reine.
Vite!
Don Guritan.
Un seul jour!
La Reine.
Néant.
Don Guritan.
Car...
La Reine.
Faites mon gré.
Don Guritan.
Je...
La Reine.
Non.
Don Guritan.
Mais...
La Reine.
Partez!
Don Guritan.
Si...
La Reine.
Je vous embrasserai!
Elle lui saute au cou et l’embrasse.
Don Guritan, *fâché et charmé.*
Haut.
Je ne résiste plus. J’obéirai, madame.
À part.
Dieu s’est fait homme; soit. Le diable s’est fait femme!
La Reine, *montrant la fenêtre.*

Une voiture en bas est là qui vous attend.
Don Guritan.
Elle avait tout prévu!

Il écrit sur un papier quelques mots à la hâte et agite une sonnette. Un page paraît.

Page, porte à l'instant
Au seigneur don César De Bazan cette lettre.

À part.

Ce duel! À mon retour il faut bien le remettre.
Je reviendrai!

Haut.

Je vais contenter de ce pas
Votre majesté.
La Reine.
Bien.

Il prend la cassette, baise la main de la reine, salue profondément et sort. Un moment après, on entend le roulement d'une voiture qui s'éloigne.

La Reine, *tombant sur un fauteuil*.
Il ne le tuera pas!

ACTE III

RUY BLAS

La salle dite salle de gouvernement, dans le palais du roi à Madrid. Au fond, une grande porte élevée au-dessus de quelques marches. Dans l'angle à gauche, un pan coupé fermé par une tapisserie de haute lice.Dans l'angle opposé, une fenêtre. À droite, une table carrée, revêtue d'un tapis de velours vert, autour de laquelle sont rangés des tabourets pour huit ou dix personnes correspondant à autant de pupitres placés sur la table. Le côté de la table qui fait face au spectateur est occupé par un grand fauteuil recouvert de drap d'or et surmonté d'un dais en drap d'or, aux armes d'Espagne, timbrées de la couronne royale. À côté de ce fauteuil, une chaise. Au moment où le rideau se lève, la junte du despacho universal (conseil privé du roi) est au moment de prendre séance.

Scène première

Don Manuel Arias, président de Castille; don Pedro Velez De Guevarra, comte de Camporeal, conseiller de cape et d'épée de la contaduria-mayor; don Fernando De Cordova Y Aguilar, marquis de Priego, même qualité; Antonio Ubilla, écrivain–mayor des rentes; Montazgo, conseiller de robe de la chambre des Indes; Covadenga, secrétaire suprême des îles. Plusieurs autres conseillers. Les conseillers de robe vêtus de noir. Les autres en habit de cour. Camporeal a la croix de Calatrava au manteau. Priego la toison d'or au cou. Don Manuel Arias, président de Castille, et le comte de Camporeal causent à voix basse, et entre eux, sur le devant. Les autres conseillers font des groupes çà et là dans la salle.
Don Manuel Arias.
Cette fortune-là cache quelque mystère.
Le Comte De Camporeal.
Il a la toison d'or. Le voilà secrétaire
Universel, ministre, et puis duc d'Olmedo!
Don Manuel Arias.
En six mois!
Le Comte De Camporeal.
        On le sert derrière le rideau.
Don Manuel Arias, *mystérieusement.*
La reine!
Le Comte De Camporeal.
        Au fait, le roi, malade et fou dans l'âme,
Vit avec le tombeau de sa première femme.
Il abdique, enfermé dans son Escurial,
Et la reine fait tout!
Don Manuel Arias.
        Mon cher Camporeal,
Elle règne sur nous, et don César sur elle.
Le Comte De Camporeal.
Il vit d'une façon qui n'est pas naturelle.
D'abord, quant à la reine, il ne la voit jamais.
Ils paraissent se fuir. Vous me direz non, mais

Comme depuis six mois je les guette, et pour cause,
J’en suis sûr. Puis il a le caprice morose
D’habiter, assez près de l’hôtel de Tormez,
Un logis aveuglé par des volets fermés,
Avec deux laquais noirs, gardeurs de portes closes,
Qui, s’ils n’étaient muets, diraient beaucoup de choses.
Don Manuel Arias.
Des muets?
Le Comte De Camporeal.
Des muets. – tous ses autres valets
Restent au logement qu’il a dans le palais.
Don Manuel Arias.
C’est singulier.
Don Antonio Ubilla, *qui s’est approché d’eux depuis quelques instants.*
Il est de grande race, en somme.
Le Comte De Camporeal.
L’étrange, c’est qu’il veut faire son honnête homme!
À don Manuel Arias.
– Il est cousin, – aussi Santa-Cruz l’a poussé, –
De ce marquis Salluste écroulé l’an passé. –
Jadis, ce don César, aujourd’hui notre maître,
Était le plus grand fou que la lune eût vu naître.
C’était un drôle, – on sait des gens qui l’ont connu, –
Qui prit un beau matin son fonds pour revenu,
Qui changeait tous les jours de femmes, de carrosses,
Et dont la fantaisie avait des dents féroces
Capables de manger en un an le Pérou.
Un jour il s’en alla, sans qu’on ait su par où.
Don Manuel Arias.
L’âge a du fou joyeux fait un sage fort rude.
Le Comte De Camporeal.
Toute fille de joie en séchant devient prude.
Ubilla.
Je le crois homme probe.
Le Comte De Camporeal, *riant*.
Oh! Candide Ubilla!
Qui se laisse éblouir à ces probités-là!

D’un ton significatif.
La maison de la reine, ordinaire et civile,
appuyant sur les chiffres.
Coûte par an six cent soixante-quatre mille
Soixante-six ducats! – c’est un pactole obscur
Où, certe, on doit jeter le filet à coup sûr.
Eau trouble, pêche claire.
Le Marquis De Priego, *survenant*.
Ah , ne vous déplaise,
Je vous trouve imprudents et parlant fort à l’aise.
Feu mon grand-père, auprès du comte– duc nourri,
Disait: – Mordez le roi, baisez le favori. –
Messieurs, occupons-nous des affaires publiques.

Tous s’asseyent autour de la table; les uns prennent des plumes, les autres feuillettent des papiers. Du reste, oisiveté générale. Moment de silence.

Montazgo, *bas à Ubilla*.
Je vous ai demandé sur la caisse aux reliques
De quoi payer l’emploi d’alcade à mon neveu.
Ubilla, *bas*.
Vous, vous m’aviez promis de nommer avant peu
Mon cousin Melchior D’Elva bailli de l’Èbre.
Montazgo, *se récriant*.
Nous venons de doter votre fille. On célèbre
Encor sa noce. – On est sans relâche assailli...
Ubilla, *bas*.
Vous aurez votre alcade.
Montazgo, *bas*.
Et vous votre bailli.
Ils se serrent la main.
Covadenga, *se levant*.
Messieurs les conseillers de Castille, il importe,
Afin qu’aucun de nous de sa sphère ne sorte,
De bien régler nos droits et de faire nos parts.
Le revenu d’Espagne en cent mains est épars.
C’est un malheur public, il y faut mettre un terme.
Les uns n’ont pas assez, les autres trop. La ferme

Du tabac est à vous, Ubilla. L'indigo
Et le musc sont à vous, marquis de Priego.
Camporeal perçoit l'impôt des huit mille hommes,
L'almojarifazgo, le sel, mille autres sommes,
Le quint du cent de l'or, de l'ambre et du jayet;
à Montazgo.
Vous qui me regardez de cet oeil inquiet,
Vous avez à vous seul, grâce à votre manège,
L'impôt sur l'arsenic et le droit sur la neige;
Vous avez les ports secs, les cartes, le laiton,
L'amende des bourgeois qu'on punit du bâton,
La dîme de la mer, le plomb, le bois de rose! ... –
Moi, je n'ai rien, messieurs. Rendez-moi quelque chose!
Le Comte De Camporeal, *éclatant de rire*.
Oh! Le vieux diable! Il prend les profits les plus clairs.
Excepté l'Inde, il a les îles des deux mers.
Quelle envergure! Il tient Mayorque d'une griffe,
Et de l'autre il s'accroche au pic de Ténériffe!
Covadenga, *s'échauffant.*
Moi, je n'ai rien!
Le Marquis De Priego, *riant*.
Il a les nègres!
Tous se lèvent et parlent la fois, se querellant.
Montazgo.
Je devrais
Me plaindre bien plutôt. Il me faut les forêts!
Covadenga, *au marquis de Priego*.
Donnez-moi l'arsenic, je vous cède les nègres!

Depuis quelques instants, Ruy Blas est entré par la porte du fond et assiste à la scène sans être vu des interlocuteurs. Il est vêtu de velours noir, avec un manteau de velours écarlate; il a la plume blanche au chapeau et la toison d'or au cou. Il les écoute d'abord en silence, puis, tout à coup, il s'avance à pas lents et paraît au milieu d'eux au plus fort de la querelle.

Scène II – Les mêmes, Ruy Blas.

Ruy Blas, *survenant*.
Bon appétit, messieurs! –

Tous se retournent. Silence de surprise et d'inquiétude. Ruy Blas se couvre, croise les bras, et poursuit en les regardant en face.

Ô ministres intègres!
Conseillers vertueux! Voilà votre façon
De servir, serviteurs qui pillez la maison!
Donc vous n'avez pas honte et vous choisissez l'heure,
L'heure sombre où l'Espagne agonisante pleure!
Donc vous n'avez ici pas d'autres intérêts
Que remplir votre poche et vous enfuir après!
Soyez flétris, devant votre pays qui tombe,
Fossoyeurs qui venez le voler dans sa tombe!
– Mais voyez, regardez, ayez quelque pudeur.
L'Espagne et sa vertu, l'Espagne et sa grandeur,
Tout s'en va. – nous avons, depuis Philippe Quatre,
Perdu le Portugal, le Brésil, sans combattre;
En Alsace Brisach, Steinfort en Luxembourg;
Et toute la Comté jusqu'au dernier faubourg;
Le Roussillon, Ormuz, Goa, cinq mille lieues
De côte, et Fernambouc, et les montagnes bleues!
Mais voyez. – du ponant jusques à l'orient,
L'Europe, qui vous hait, vous regarde en riant.
Comme si votre roi n'était plus qu'un fantôme,
La Hollande et l'anglais partagent ce royaume;
Rome vous trompe; il faut ne risquer qu'à demi
Une armée en Piémont, quoique pays ami;
La Savoie et son duc sont pleins de précipices.
La France pour vous prendre attend des jours propices.
L'Autriche aussi vous guette. Et l'infant bavarois
Se meurt, vous le savez. – quant à vos vice-rois,
Médina, fou d'amour, emplit Naples d'esclandres,
Vaudémont vend Milan, Leganez perd les Flandres.
Quel remède à cela? – l'état est indigent,

L’état est épuisé de troupes et d’argent;
Nous avons sur la mer, où Dieu met ses colères,
Perdu trois cents vaisseaux, sans compter les galères.
Et vous osez! ... – messieurs, en vingt ans, songez-y,
Le peuple, – j’en ai fait le compte, et c’est ainsi! –
Portant sa charge énorme et sous laquelle il ploie,
Pour vous, pour vos plaisirs, pour vos filles de joie,
Le peuple misérable, et qu’on pressure encor,
À sué quatre cent trente millions d’or!
Et ce n’est pas assez! Et vous voulez, mes maîtres! ... –
Ah! J’ai honte pour vous! – au dedans, routiers, reîtres,
Vont battant le pays et brûlant la moisson.
L’escopette est braquée au coin de tout buisson.
Comme si c’était peu de la guerre des princes,
Guerre entre les couvents, guerre entre les provinces,
Tous voulant dévorer leur voisin éperdu,
Morsures d’affamés sur un vaisseau perdu!
Notre église en ruine est pleine de couleuvres;
L’herbe y croît. Quant aux grands, des aïeux, mais pas d’oeuvres.
Tout se fait par intrigue et rien par loyauté.
L’Espagne est un égout où vient l’impureté
De toute nation. – tout seigneur à ses gages
À cent coupe-jarrets qui parlent cent langages.
Génois, sardes, flamands, Babel est dans Madrid.
L’alguazil, dur au pauvre, au riche s’attendrit.
La nuit on assassine, et chacun crie: à l’aide!
– Hier on m’a volé, moi, près du pont de Tolède! –
La moitié de Madrid pille l’autre moitié.
Tous les juges vendus. Pas un soldat payé.
Anciens vainqueurs du monde, espagnols que nous sommes.
Quelle armée avons-nous? À peine six mille hommes,
Qui vont pieds nus. Des gueux, des juifs, des montagnards,
S’habillant d’une loque et s’armant de poignards.
Aussi d’un régiment toute bande se double.
Sitôt que la nuit tombe, il est une heure trouble
Où le soldat douteux se transforme en larron.
Matalobos a plus de troupes qu’un baron.

Un voleur fait chez lui la guerre au roi d’Espagne.
Hélas! Les paysans qui sont dans la campagne
Insultent en passant la voiture du roi.
Et lui, votre seigneur, plein de deuil et d’effroi,
Seul, dans l’Escurial, avec les morts qu’il foule,
Courbe son front pensif sur qui l’empire croule!
– Voilà! – l’Europe, hélas! Écrase du talon
Ce pays qui fut pourpre et n’est plus que haillon.
L’état s’est ruiné dans ce siècle funeste,
Et vous vous disputez à qui prendra le reste!
Ce grand peuple espagnol aux membres énervés,
Qui s’est couché dans l’ombre et sur qui vous vivez,
Expire dans cet antre où son sort se termine,
Triste comme un lion mangé par la vermine!
– Charles-Quint, dans ces temps d’opprobre et de terreur,
Que fais-tu dans ta tombe, ô puissant empereur?
Oh! Lève-toi! Viens voir! – les bons font place aux pires.
Ce royaume effrayant, fait d’un amas d’empires,
Penche... il nous faut ton bras! Au secours, Charles-Quint!
Car l’Espagne se meurt, car l’Espagne s’éteint!
Ton globe, qui brillait dans ta droite profonde,
Soleil éblouissant qui faisait croire au monde
Que le jour désormais se levait à Madrid,
Maintenant, astre mort, dans l’ombre s’amoindrit,
Lune aux trois quarts rongée et qui décroît encore,
Et que d’un autre peuple effacera l’aurore!
Hélas! Ton héritage est en proie aux vendeurs.
Tes rayons, ils en font des piastres! Tes splendeurs,
On les souille! – ô géant! Se peut-il que tu dormes? –
On vend ton sceptre au poids! Un tas de nains difformes
Se taillent des pourpoints dans ton manteau de roi;
Et l’aigle impérial, qui, jadis, sous ta loi,
Couvrait le monde entier de tonnerre et de flamme,
Cuit, pauvre oiseau plumé, dans leur marmite infâme!

Les conseillers se taisent consternés. Seuls, le Marquis de Priego et le comte de Camporeal redressent la tête et regardent Ruy Blas avec colère.

Puis Camporeal, après avoir parlé à Priego, va à la table, écrit quelques mots sur un papier, les signe et les fait signer au marquis.

Le Comte De Camporeal, *désignant le marquis de Priego et remettant le papier à Ruy Blas*.

Monsieur le duc, – au nom de tous les deux, – voici
Notre démission de notre emploi.

Ruy Blas, *prenant le papier, froidement*.

Merci.
Vous vous retirerez, avec votre famille,
à Priego.
Vous, en Andalousie, –
à Camporeal.
Et vous, comte, en Castille.
Chacun dans vos états. Soyez partis demain.

Les deux seigneurs s'inclinent et sortent fièrement, le chapeau sur la tête. Ruy Blas se tourne vers les autres conseillers.

Quiconque ne veut pas marcher dans mon chemin
Peut suivre ces messieurs.

Silence dans les assistants. Ruy Blas s'assied à la table sur une chaise à dossier placée à droite du fauteuil royal, et s'occupe à décacheter une correspondance. Pendant qu'il parcourt les lettres l'une après l'autre, Covadenga, Arias et Ubilla échangent quelques paroles à voix basse.

Ubilla, *à Covadenga, montrant Ruy Blas*.

Fils, nous avons un maître.
Cet homme sera grand.

Don Manuel Arias.

Oui, s'il a le temps d'être.

Covadenga.

Et s'il ne se perd pas à tout voir de trop près.

Ubilla.

Il sera Richelieu!

Don Manuel Arias.

S'il n'est Olivarez!

Ruy Blas, *après avoir parcouru vivement une lettre qu'il vient d'ouvrir*.

Un complot! Qu'est ceci? Messieurs, que vous disais-je?

Lisant.

– ... " Duc d'Olmedo, veillez. Il se prépare un piège

“ Pour enlever quelqu’un de très grand de Madrid. “
Examinant la lettre.
– On ne nomme pas qui. Je veillerai. – l’écrit
Est anonyme. –

Entre un huissier de cour qui s’approche de Ruy Blas avec une profonde révérence.

Allons! Qu’est-ce?
L’Huissier.
À votre excellence
J’annonce monseigneur l’ambassadeur de France.
Ruy Blas.
Ah! D’Harcourt! Je ne puis à présent.
L’Huissier, *s’inclinant.*
Monseigneur,
Le nonce impérial dans la chambre d’honneur
Attend votre excellence.
Ruy Blas.
À cette heure? Impossible.

L’huissier s’incline et sort. Depuis quelques instants, un page est entré, vêtu d’une livrée couleur de feu à galons d’argent, et s’est approché de Ruy Blas.

Ruy Blas, *l’apercevant.*
Mon page! Je ne suis pour personne visible.
Le Page, *bas.*
Le comte Guritan, qui revient de Neubourg...
Ruy Blas, *avec un geste de surprise.*
Ah! – page, enseigne-lui ma maison du faubourg.
Qu’il m’y vienne trouver demain, si bon lui semble.
Va.
Le page sort. Aux conseillers.
Nous aurons tantôt à travailler ensemble.
Dans deux heures, messieurs. – revenez.

Tous sortent en saluant profondément Ruy Blas. Ruy Blas, resté seul, fait quelques pas en proie à une rêverie profonde. Tout à coup, à l’angle du salon, la tapisserie s’écarte et la reine apparaît. Elle est vêtue de blanc avec la couronne en tête; elle paraît rayonnante de joie et fixe sur Ruy Blas un regard d’admiration et de respect. Elle soutient d’un bras la tapisserie, *derrière laquelle on entrevoit une sorte de cabinet obscur où l'on distingue une petite porte. Ruy Blas, en se retournant, aperçoit la reine, et reste comme pétrifié devant cette apparition.*

Scène III – Ruy Blas, la reine.

La Reine.
Oh! Merci!
Ruy Blas.
Ciel!
La Reine.
Vous avez bien fait de leur parler ainsi.
Je n’y puis résister, duc, il faut que je serre
Cette loyale main si ferme et si sincère!

Elle marche vivement à lui et lui prend la main, qu’elle presse avant qu’il ait pu s’en défendre.

Ruy Blas.
À part.
La fuir depuis six mois et la voir tout à coup!
Haut.
Vous étiez là, madame? ...
La Reine.
Oui, duc, j’entendais tout
J’étais là. J’écoutais avec toute mon âme!
Ruy Blas, *montrant la cachette.*
Je ne soupçonnais pas... – ce cabinet, madame...
La Reine.
Personne ne le sait. C’est un réduit obscur
Que don Philippe Trois fit creuser dans ce mur,
D’où le maître invisible entend tout comme une ombre.
Là j’ai vu bien souvent Charles Deux, morne et sombre,
Assister aux conseils où l’on pillait son bien,
Où l’on vendait l’état.
Ruy Blas.
Et que disait-il?
La Reine.
Rien.
Ruy Blas.

Rien? – Et que faisait-il?
La Reine.
        Il allait à la chasse.
Mais vous! J’entends encor votre accent qui menace.
Comme vous les traitiez d’une haute façon,
Et comme vous aviez superbement raison!
Je soulevais le bord de la tapisserie,
Je vous voyais. Votre oeil, irrité, sans furie,
Les foudroyait d’éclairs, et vous leur disiez tout.
Vous me sembliez seul être resté debout!
Mais où donc avez-vous appris toutes ces choses?
D’où vient que vous savez les effets et les causes?
Vous n’ignorez donc rien? D’où vient que votre voix
Parlait comme devrait parler celle des rois?
Pourquoi donc étiez-vous, comme eût été Dieu même,
Si terrible et si grand?
Ruy Blas.
      Parce que je vous aime!
Parce que je sens bien, moi qu’ils haïssent tous,
Que ce qu’ils font crouler s’écroulera sur vous!
Parce que rien n’effraie une ardeur si profonde,
Et que pour vous sauver je sauverais le monde!
Je suis un malheureux qui vous aime d’amour.
Hélas! Je pense à vous comme l’aveugle au jour.
Madame, écoutez-moi. J’ai des rêves sans nombre.
Je vous aime de loin, d’en bas, du fond de l’ombre;
Je n’oserais toucher le bout de votre doigt,
Et vous m’éblouissez comme un ange qu’on voit!
– Vraiment, j’ai bien souffert. Si vous saviez, madame!
Je vous parle à présent. Six mois, cachant ma flamme,
J’ai fui. Je vous fuyais et je souffrais beaucoup.
Je ne m’occupe pas de ces hommes du tout,
Je vous aime. – ô mon Dieu, j’ose le dire en face
À votre majesté. Que faut-il que je fasse?
Si vous me disiez: meurs! Je mourrais. J’ai l’effroi
Dans le coeur. Pardonnez!
La Reine.

Oh! Parle! Ravis-moi!
Jamais on ne m'a dit ces choses-là. J'écoute!
Ton âme en me parlant me bouleverse toute.
J'ai besoin de tes yeux, j'ai besoin de ta voix.
Oh! C'est moi qui souffrais! Si tu savais! Cent fois,
Cent fois, depuis six mois que ton regard m'évite...
– Mais non, je ne dois pas dire cela si vite.
Je suis bien malheureuse. Oh! Je me tais. J'ai peur!
Ruy Blas, *qui l'écoute avec ravissement.*
Oh! Madame, achevez! Vous m'emplissez le coeur!
La Reine.
Eh bien, écoute donc!
Levant les yeux au ciel.
Oui, je vais tout lui dire.
Est-ce un crime? Tant pis! Quand le coeur se déchire,
Il faut bien laisser voir tout ce qu'on y cachait. –
Tu fuis la reine? Eh bien, la reine te cherchait.
Tous les jours je viens là, – là, dans cette retraite, –
T'écoutant, recueillant ce que tu dis, muette,
Contemplant ton esprit qui veut, juge et résout,
Et prise par ta voix qui m'intéresse à tout.
Va, tu me sembles bien le vrai roi, le vrai maître.
C'est moi, depuis six mois, tu t'en doutes peut-être,
Qui t'ai fait, par degrés, monter jusqu'au sommet.
Où Dieu t'aurait dû mettre une femme te met.
Oui, tout ce qui te touche a mes soins. Je t'admire.
Autrefois une fleur, à présent un empire!
D'abord je t'ai vu bon, et puis je te vois grand.
Mon Dieu! C'est cela qu'une femme se prend!
Mon Dieu! Si je fais mal, pourquoi, dans cette tombe,
M'enfermer, comme on met en cage une colombe,
Sans espoir, sans amour, sans un rayon doré?
– Un jour que nous aurons le temps, je te dirai
Tout ce que j'ai souffert. – toujours seule, oubliée! –
Et puis, à chaque instant, je suis humiliée.
Tiens, juge, hier encor... – ma chambre me déplaît.
– Tu dois savoir cela, toi qui sais tout, il est

Des chambres où l’on est plus triste que dans d’autres; –
J’en ai voulu changer. Vois quels fers sont les nôtres,
On ne l’a pas voulu. Je suis esclave ainsi! –
Duc, il faut, – dans ce but le ciel t’envoie ici, –
Sauver l’état qui tremble, et retirer du gouffre
Le peuple qui travaille, et m’aimer, moi qui souffre.
Je te dis tout cela sans suite, à ma façon,
Mais tu dois cependant voir que j’ai bien raison.
Ruy Blas, *tombant à genoux*.
Madame...
La Reine, *gravement*.
Don César, je vous donne mon âme.
Reine pour tous, pour vous je ne suis qu’une femme.
Par l’amour, par le coeur, duc, je vous appartien.
J’ai foi dans votre honneur pour respecter le mien.
Quand vous m’appellerez, je viendrai. Je suis prête.
– Ô César! Un esprit sublime est dans ta tête.
Sois fier, car le génie est ta couronne, à toi!
Elle baise Ruy Blas au front.
Adieu.
Elle soulève la tapisserie et disparaît.

Scène IV - Ruy Blas, seul.

Il est comme absorbé dans une contemplation angélique.

Devant mes yeux c’est le ciel que je voi!
De ma vie, ô mon Dieu! Cette heure est la première.
Devant moi tout un monde, un monde de lumière,
Comme ces paradis qu’en songe nous voyons,
S’entr’ouvre en m’inondant de vie et de rayons!
Partout en moi, hors moi, joie, extase et mystère,
Et l’ivresse, et l’orgueil, et ce qui sur la terre
Se rapproche le plus de la divinité,
L’amour dans la puissance et dans la majesté!
La reine m’aime! Ô Dieu! C’est bien vrai, c’est moi-même!
Je suis plus que le roi puisque la reine m’aime!
Oh! Cela m’éblouit. Heureux, aimé, vainqueur!
Duc d’Olmedo, – l’Espagne à mes pieds, – j’ai son coeur!
Cet ange, qu’à genoux je contemple et je nomme,
D’un mot me transfigure et me fait plus qu’un homme.
Donc je marche vivant dans mon rêve étoilé!
Oh! Oui, j’en suis bien sûr, elle m’a bien parlé.
C’est bien elle. Elle avait un petit diadème
En dentelle d’argent. Et je regardais même,
Pendant qu’elle parlait, – je crois la voir encor, –
Un aigle ciselé sur son bracelet d’or.
Elle se fie à moi, m’a-t-elle dit. – pauvre ange!
Oh! S’il est vrai que Dieu, par un prodige étrange,
En nous donnant l’amour, voulut mêler en nous
Ce qui fait l’homme grand à ce qui le fait doux,
Moi, qui ne crains plus rien maintenant qu’elle m’aime,
Moi, qui suis tout-puissant, grâce à son choix suprême,
Moi, dont le coeur gonflé ferait envie aux rois,
Devant Dieu qui m’entend, sans peur, à haute voix,
Je le dis, vous pouvez vous confier, madame,
À mon bras comme reine, à mon coeur comme femme!
Le dévouement se cache au fond de mon amour
Pur et loyal! – allez, ne craignez rien! –

Depuis quelques instants, un homme est entré par la porte du fond, enveloppé d'un grand manteau, coiffé d'un chapeau galonné d'argent. Il s'est avancé lentement vers Ruy Blas sans être vu, et, au moment où Ruy Blas, ivre d'extase et de bonheur, lève les yeux au ciel, cet homme lui pose brusquement la main sur l'épaule. Ruy Blas se retourne comme réveillé en sursaut; l'homme laisse tomber son manteau, et Ruy Blas reconnaît don Salluste.

Don Salluste est vêtu d'une livrée couleur de feu à galons d'argent, pareille à celle du page de Ruy Blas.

Scène V - Ruy Blas, don Salluste.

Don Salluste, *posant la main sur l'épaule de Ruy Blas.*
Bonjour.
Ruy Blas, *effaré.*
À part.
Grand Dieu! Je suis perdu! Le marquis!
Don Salluste, *souriant*.
Je parie
Que vous ne pensiez pas à moi.
Ruy Blas.
Sa seigneurie,
En effet, me surprend.
À part.
Oh! Mon malheur renaît.
J'étais tourné vers l'ange et le démon venait.

Il court à la tapisserie qui cache le cabinet secret et en ferme la petite porte au verrou; puis il revient tout tremblant vers don Salluste.

Don Salluste.
Eh bien! Comment cela va-t-il?
Ruy Blas, *l'oeil fixé sur don Salluste impassible, et comme pouvant à peine rassembler ses idées*.
Cette livrée? ...
Don Salluste, *souriant toujours*.
Il fallait du palais me procurer l'entrée.
Avec cet habit-là l'on arrive partout.
J'ai pris votre livrée et la trouve à mon goût.
Il se couvre. Ruy Blas reste tête nue.
Ruy Blas.
Mais j'ai peur pour vous...
Don Salluste.
Peur! Quel est ce mot risible?
Ruy Blas.
Vous êtes exilé!
Don Salluste.
Croyez-vous? C'est possible.

Ruy Blas.
Si l’on vous reconnaît, au palais, en plein jour
Don Salluste.
Ah bah! Des gens heureux, qui sont des gens de cour,
Iraient perdre leur temps, ce temps qui sitôt passe,
À se ressouvenir d’un visage en disgrâce!
D’ailleurs, regarde-t-on le profil d’un valet?
Il s’assied dans un fauteuil, et Ruy Blas reste debout.
À propos, que dit-on à Madrid, s’il vous plaît?
Est-il vrai que, brûlant d’un zèle hyperbolique,
Ici, pour les beaux yeux de la caisse publique,
Vous exilez ce cher Priego, l’un des grands?
Vous avez oublié que vous êtes parents.
Sa mère est Sandoval, la vôtre aussi. Que diable!
Sandoval porte d’or à la bande de sable.
Regardez vos blasons, don César. C’est fort clair.
Cela ne se fait pas entre parents, mon cher.
Les loups pour nuire aux loups font-ils les bons apôtres?
Ouvrez les yeux pour vous, fermez-les pour les autres.
Chacun pour soi.
Ruy Blas, *se rassurant un peu.*
Pourtant, monsieur, permettez-moi,
Monsieur De Priego, comme noble du roi,
À grand tort d’aggraver les charges de l’Espagne.
Or, il va falloir mettre une armée en campagne;
Nous n’avons pas d’argent, et pourtant il le faut.
L’héritier bavarois penche à mourir bientôt.
Hier, le comte d’Harrach, que vous devez connaître,
Me le disait au nom de l’empereur son maître.
Si monsieur l’archiduc veut soutenir son droit,
La guerre éclatera...
Don Salluste.
L’air me semble un peu froid.
Faites-moi le plaisir de fermer la croisée.
Ruy Blas, *pâle de honte et de désespoir, hésite un moment; puis il fait un effort et se dirige lentement vers la fenêtre, la ferme, et revient vers don Salluste, qui, assis dans le fauteuil, le suit des yeux d’un air indifférent.*

Ruy Blas, *reprenant et essayant de convaincre don Salluste.*
Daignez voir à quel point la guerre est malaisée.
Que faire sans argent? Excellence, écoutez.
Le salut de l'Espagne est dans nos probités.
Pour moi, j'ai, comme si notre armée était prête,
Fait dire à l'empereur que je lui tiendrais tête...
Don Salluste, *interrompant Ruy Blas et lui montrant son mouchoir qu'il a laissé tomber en entrant*.
Pardon! Ramassez-moi mon mouchoir.

Ruy Blas, comme à la torture, hésite encore, puis se baisse, ramasse le mouchoir, et le présente à don Salluste.

Don Salluste, *mettant le mouchoir dans sa poche*.
– Vous disiez? ...
Ruy Blas, *avec effort*.
Le salut de l'Espagne! – oui, l'Espagne à nos pieds,
Et l'intérêt public demandent qu'on s'oublie.
Ah! Toute la nation bénit qui la délie.
Sauvons ce peuple! Osons être grands, et frappons!
Otons l'ombre à l'intrigue et le masque aux fripons!
Don Salluste, *nonchalamment*.
Et d'abord ce n'est pas de bonne compagnie. –
Cela sent son pédant et son petit génie
Que de faire sur tout un bruit démesuré.
Un méchant million, plus ou moins dévoré,
Voilà-t-il pas de quoi pousser des cris sinistres!
Mon cher, les grands seigneurs ne sont pas de vos cuistres.
Ils vivent largement. Je parle sans phébus.
Le bel air que celui d'un redresseur d'abus
Toujours bouffi d'orgueil et rouge de colère!
Mais bah! Vous voulez être un gaillard populaire,
Adoré des bourgeois et des marchands d'esteufs.
C'est fort drôle. Ayez donc des caprices plus neufs.
Les intérêts publics? Songez d'abord aux vôtres.
Le salut de l'Espagne est un mot creux que d'autres
Feront sonner, mon cher, tout aussi bien que vous.
La popularité? C'est la gloire en gros sous.
Rôder, dogue aboyant, tout autour des gabelles?

Charmant métier! Je sais des postures plus belles.
Vertu? Foi? Probité? C’est du clinquant déteint.
C’était usé déjà du temps de Charles-Quint.
Vous n’êtes pas un sot; faut-il qu’on vous guérisse
Du pathos? Vous tétiez encor votre nourrice,
Que nous autres déjà nous avions sans pitié,
Gaîment, à coups d’épingle ou bien à coups de pié,
Crevant votre ballon au milieu des risées,
Fait sortir tout le vent de ces billevesées!
Ruy Blas.
Mais pourtant, monseigneur...
Don Salluste, *avec un sourire glacé*.
        Vous êtes étonnant.
Occupons-nous d’objets sérieux, maintenant.
D’un ton bref et impérieux.
– Vous m’attendrez demain toute la matinée
Chez vous, dans la maison que je vous ai donnée.
La chose que je fais touche à l’événement.
Gardez pour nous servir les muets seulement.
Ayez dans le jardin, caché sous le feuillage,
Un carrosse attelé, tout prêt pour un voyage.
J’aurai soin des relais. Faites tout à mon gré.
– Il vous faut de l’argent, je vous en enverrai. –
Ruy Blas.
Monsieur, j’obéirai. Je consens à tout faire.
Mais jurez-moi d’abord qu’en toute cette affaire
La reine n’est pour rien.
Don Salluste, *qui jouait avec un couteau d’ivoire sur la table, se retourne à demi*.
      De quoi vous mêlez-vous?
Ruy Blas, *chancelant et le regardant avec épouvante*.
Oh! Vous êtes un homme effrayant. Mes genoux
Tremblent... vous m’entraînez vers un gouffre invisible.
Oh! Je sens que je suis dans une main terrible!
Vous avez des projets monstrueux. J’entrevoi
Quelque chose d’horrible... – Ayez pitié de moi!
Il faut que je vous dise, – Hélas! Jugez vous-même!

Vous ne le saviez pas! Cette femme, je l'aime!
Don Salluste, *froidement*.
Mais si. Je le savais.
Ruy Blas.
 Vous le saviez!
Don Salluste.
 Pardieu!
Qu'est-ce que cela fait?
Ruy Blas, *s'appuyant au mur pour ne pas tomber, et comme se parlant à lui-même*.
 Donc il s'est fait un jeu,
Le lâche, d'essayer sur moi cette torture!
Mais c'est que ce serait une affreuse aventure!
 Il lève les yeux au ciel.
Seigneur Dieu tout-puissant! Mon Dieu qui m'éprouvez,
Épargnez-moi, Seigneur!
Don Salluste.
 Ah , mais-vous rêvez!
Vraiment! Vous vous prenez au sérieux, mon maître.
C'est bouffon. Vers un but que seul je dois connaître,
But plus heureux pour vous que vous ne le pensez,
J'avance. Tenez-vous tranquille. Obéissez.
Je vous l'ai déjà dit et je vous le répète,
Je veux votre bonheur. Marchez, la chose est faite.
Puis, grand'chose après tout que des chagrins d'amour!
Nous passons tous par là. C'est l'affaire d'un jour.
Savez-vous qu'il s'agit du destin d'un empire?
Qu'est le vôtre à côté? Je veux bien tout vous dire,
Mais ayez le bon sens de comprendre aussi, vous.
Soyez de votre état. Je suis très bon, très doux,
Mais, que diable! Un laquais, d'argile humble ou choisie,
N'est qu'un vase où je veux verser ma fantaisie.
De vous autres, mon cher, on fait tout ce qu'on veut.
Votre maître, selon le dessein qui l'émeut,
À son gré vous déguise, à son gré vous démasque.
Je vous ai fait seigneur. C'est un rôle fantasque,
– Pour l'instant. – Vous avez l'habillement complet.

Mais, ne l'oubliez pas, vous êtes mon valet.
Vous courtisez la reine ici par aventure,
Comme vous monteriez derrière ma voiture.
Soyez donc raisonnable.
Ruy Blas, *qui l'a écouté avec égarement et comme ne pouvant en croire ses oreilles.*
Ô mon Dieu! – Dieu clément!
Dieu juste! De quel crime est-ce le châtiment?
Qu'est-ce donc que j'ai fait? Vous êtes notre père,
Et vous ne voulez pas qu'un homme désespère!
Voilà donc où j'en suis! – et, volontairement,
Et sans tort de ma part, – pour voir, – uniquement
Pour voir agoniser une pauvre victime,
Monseigneur, vous m'avez plongé dans cet abîme!
Tordre un malheureux coeur plein d'amour et de foi,
Afin d'en exprimer la vengeance pour soi!
Se parlant à lui-même.
Car c'est une vengeance! Oui, la chose est certaine!
Et je devine bien que c'est contre la reine!
Qu'est-ce que je vais faire? Aller lui dire tout?
Ciel! Devenir pour elle un objet de dégoût
Et d'horreur! Un crispin, un fourbe à double face!
Un effronté coquin qu'on bâtonne et qu'on chasse!
Jamais! – Je deviens fou, ma raison se confond!
Une pause. Il rêve.
Ô mon Dieu! Voilà donc les choses qui se font!
Bâtir une machine effroyable dans l'ombre,
L'armer hideusement de rouages sans nombre,
Puis, sous la meule, afin de voir comment elle est,
Jeter une livrée, une chose, un valet,
Puis la faire mouvoir, et soudain sous la roue
Voir sortir des lambeaux teints de sang et de boue,
Une tête brisée, un coeur tiède et fumant,
Et ne pas frissonner alors qu'en ce moment
On reconnaît, malgré le mot dont on le nomme,
Que ce laquais était l'enveloppe d'un homme!
Se tournant vers don Salluste.

Mais il est temps encore! Oh! Monseigneur, vraiment,
L’horrible roue encor n’est pas en mouvement!
Il se jette à ses pieds.
Ayez pitié de moi! Grâce! Ayez pitié d’elle!
Vous savez que je suis un serviteur fidèle.
Vous l’avez dit souvent. Voyez! Je me soumets!
Grâce!
Don Salluste.
Cet homme-là ne comprendra jamais.
C’est impatientant!
Ruy Blas, *se traînant à ses pieds*.
Grâce!
Don Salluste.
Abrégeons, mon maître.
Il se tourne vers la fenêtre.
Gageons que vous avez mal fermé la fenêtre.
Il vient un froid par là!
Il va à la croisée et la ferme.
Ruy Blas, *se relevant*.
Ho! C’est trop! À présent
Je suis duc d’Olmédo, ministre tout-puissant!
Je relève le front sous le pied qui m’écrase.
Don Salluste.
Comment dit-il cela? Répétez donc la phrase.
Ruy Blas duc d’Olmedo? Vos yeux ont un bandeau.
Ce n’est que sur Bazan qu’on a mis Olmedo.
Ruy Blas.
Je vous fais arrêter.
Don Salluste.
Je dirai qui vous êtes.
Ruy Blas, *exaspéré*.
Mais...
Don Salluste.
Vous m’accuserez? J’ai risqué nos deux têtes.
C’est prévu. Vous prenez trop tôt l’air triomphant.
Ruy Blas.
Je nierai tout!

Don Salluste.
Allons! Vous êtes un enfant.
Ruy Blas.
Vous n’avez pas de preuve!
Don Salluste.
Et vous pas de mémoire.
Je fais ce que je dis, et vous pouvez m’en croire.
Vous n’êtes que le gant, et moi je suis la main.
Bas et se rapprochant de Ruy Blas.
Si tu n’obéis pas, si tu n’es pas demain
Chez toi, pour préparer ce qu’il faut que je fasse,
Si tu dis un seul mot de tout ce qui se passe,
Si tes yeux, si ton geste en laissent rien percer,
Celle pour qui tu crains, d’abord, pour commencer,
Par ta folle aventure, en cent lieux répandue,
Sera publiquement diffamée et perdue.
Puis elle recevra, ceci n’a rien d’obscur,
Sous cachet, un papier, que je garde en lieu sûr,
Écrit, te souvient-il avec quelle écriture?
Signé, tu dois savoir de quelle signature?
Voici ce que ses yeux y liront: “ Moi, Ruy Blas,
“ Laquais de monseigneur le marquis de Finlas,
“ En toute occasion, ou secrète ou publique,
“ M’engage à le servir comme un bon domestique. “
Ruy Blas, *brisé et d’une voix éteinte*.
Il suffit. – je ferai, monsieur, ce qu’il vous plaît.
La porte du fond s’ouvre. On voit rentrer les conseillers du conseil privé.
Don Salluste s’enveloppe vivement de son manteau.
Don Salluste, *bas*.
On vient.
Il salue profondément Ruy Blas. Haut.
Monsieur le duc, je suis votre valet.
Il sort.

ACTE IV

DON CÉSAR

Une petite chambre somptueuse et sombre. Lambris et meubles de vieille forme et de vieille dorure. Murs couverts d’anciennes tentures de velours cramoisi, écrasé et miroitant par places et derrière le dos des fauteuils, avec de larges galons d’or qui le divisent en bandes verticales. Au fond, une porte à deux battants. À gauche, sur un pan coupé, une grande cheminée sculptée du temps de Philippe II, avec écusson de fer battu dans l’intérieur. Du côté opposé, sur un pan coupé, une petite porte basse donnant dans un cabinet obscur. Une seule fenêtre à gauche, placée très haut et garnie de barreaux et d’un auvent inférieur comme les croisées des prisons. Sur le mur, quelques vieux portraits enfumés et à demi effacés. Coffre de garde-robe avec miroir de Venise. Grands fauteuils du temps de Philippe III. Une armoire très ornée adossée au mur. Une table carrée avec ce qu’il faut pour écrire. Un petit guéridon de forme ronde à pieds dorés dans un coin. C’est le matin. Au lever du rideau, Ruy Blas, vêtu de noir, sans manteau et sans la toison, vivement agité, se promène à grands pas dans la chambre. Au fond, se tient son page, immobile et comme attendant ses ordres.

Scène première – Ruy Blas, le page.

Ruy Blas, *à part, et se parlant à lui-même*.
Que faire? – elle d’abord! Elle avant tout! – rien qu’elle!
Dût-on voir sur un mur rejaillir ma cervelle,
Dût le gibet me prendre ou l’enfer me saisir!
Il faut que je la sauve! – Oui! Mais y réussir?
Comment faire? Donner mon sang, mon coeur, mon âme,
Ce n’est rien, c’est aisé. Mais rompre cette trame!
Deviner... – deviner! Car il faut deviner! –
Ce que cet homme a pu construire et combiner!
Il sort soudain de l’ombre et puis il s’y replonge,
Et là, seul dans sa nuit, que fait-il? – quand j’y songe,
Dans le premier moment je l’ai prié pour moi!
Je suis un lâche, et puis c’est stupide! – eh bien, quoi!
C’est un homme méchant. – mais que je m’imagine
–La chose a sans nul doute une ancienne origine, –
Que lorsqu’il tient sa proie et la mâche à moitié,
Ce démon va lâcher la reine, par pitié
Pour son valet! Peut-on fléchir les bêtes fauves?
– Mais, misérable! Il faut pourtant que tu la sauves!
C’est toi qui l’as perdue! À tout prix il le faut!
– C’est fini. Me voilà retombé! De si haut!
Si bas! J’ai donc rêvé! – ho! Je veux qu’elle échappe!
Mais lui! Par quelle porte, ô Dieu, par quelle trappe,
Par où va-t-il venir, l’homme de trahison?
Dans ma vie et dans moi, comme en cette maison,
Il est maître. Il en peut arracher les dorures.
Il a toutes les clefs de toutes les serrures.
Il peut entrer, sortir, dans l’ombre s’approcher,
Et marcher sur mon coeur comme sur ce plancher.
– oui, c’est que je rêvais! Le sort trouble nos têtes
Dans la rapidité des choses sitôt faites.
Je suis fou. Je n’ai plus une idée en son lieu.
Ma raison, dont j’étais si vain, mon Dieu! Mon Dieu!
Prise en un tourbillon d’épouvante et de rage,

N’est plus qu’un pauvre jonc tordu par un orage!
Que faire? Pensons bien. D’abord empêchons-la
De sortir du palais. – oh! Oui, le piège est là
Sans doute. Autour de moi, tout est nuit, tout est gouffre.
Je sens le piège, mais je ne vois pas. – je souffre!
C’est dit. Empêchons-la de sortir du palais.
Faisons-la prévenir sûrement, sans délais. –
Par qui? – Je n’ai personne!

Il rêve avec accablement. Puis, tout à coup, comme frappé d’une idée subite et d’une lueur d’espoir, il relève la tête.

Oui, don Guritan l’aime!
C’est un homme loyal! Oui!

Faisant signe au page de s’approcher. Bas.

– Page, à l’instant même,
Va chez don Guritan, et fais-lui de ma part
Mes excuses; et puis dis-lui que sans retard
Il aille chez la reine et qu’il la prie en grâce,
En mon nom comme au sien, quoi qu’on dise ou qu’on fasse,
De ne point s’absenter du palais de trois jours.
Quoi qu’il puisse arriver. De ne point sortir. Cours!

Rappelant le page.

Ah!

Il tire de son garde-notes une feuille et un crayon.

Qu’il donne ce mot à la reine, – et qu’il veille!

Il écrit rapidement sur son genou.

– “ Croyez don Guritan, faites ce qu’il conseille! “

Il ploie le papier et le remet au page.

Quant à ce duel, dis-lui que j’ai tort, que je suis
À ses pieds, qu’il me plaigne et que j’ai des ennuis,
Qu’il porte chez la reine à l’instant mes suppliques,
Et que je lui ferai des excuses publiques.
Qu’elle est en grand péril. Qu’elle ne sorte point.
Quoi qu’il arrive. Au moins trois jours! – de point en point
Fais tout. Va, sois discret, ne laisse rien paraître.
Le Page.
Je vous suis dévoué. Vous êtes un bon maître.
Ruy Blas.

Cours, mon bon petit page. As-tu bien tout compris?
Le Page.
Oui, monseigneur; soyez tranquille.

Il sort.

Ruy Blas*, resté seul, tombant sur un fauteuil*.
Mes esprits
Se calment. Cependant, comme dans la folie,
Je sens confusément des choses que j’oublie.
Oui, le moyen est sûr. – don Guritan! ... – Mais moi?
Faut-il attendre ici don Salluste? Pourquoi?
Non. Ne l’attendons pas. Cela le paralyse
Tout un grand jour. Allons prier dans quelque église.
Sortons. J’ai besoin d’aide, et Dieu m’inspirera!

Il prend son chapeau sur une crédence, et secoue une sonnette posée sur la table. Deux nègres, vêtus de velours vert clair et de brocart d’or, jaquettes plissées à grandes basques, paraissent à la porte du fond.

Je sors. Dans un instant un homme ici viendra.
– Par une entrée à lui. – dans la maison, peut-être,
Vous le verrez agir comme s’il était maître.
Laissez-le faire. Et si d’autres viennent...

Après avoir hésité un moment.

Ma foi,
Vous laisserez entrer!

Il congédie du geste les noirs, qui s’inclinent en signe d’obéissance et qui sortent.

Allons!

Il sort.

Au moment où la porte se referme sur Ruy Blas, on entend un grand bruit dans la cheminée, par laquelle on voit tomber tout à coup un homme, enveloppé d’un manteau déguenillé, qui se précipite dans la chambre. C’est don César.

Scène II – Don César

Don César. *Effaré, essoufflé, décoiffé, étourdi, avec une expression joyeuse et inquiète en même temps.*

Tant pis! C’est moi!

Il se relève en se frottant la jambe sur laquelle il est tombé, et s’avance dans la chambre avec force révérences et chapeau bas.

Pardon! Ne faites pas attention, je passe.
Vous parliez entre vous. Continuez, de grâce.
J’entre un peu brusquement, messieurs, j’en suis fâché!

Il s’arrête au milieu de la chambre et s’aperçoit qu’il est seul.

– Personne! – Sur le toit tout à l’heure perché,
J’ai cru pourtant ouïr un bruit de voix. – personne!

S’asseyant dans un fauteuil.

Fort bien. Recueillons-nous. La solitude est bonne.
– Ouf! Que d’événements! – j’en suis émerveillé
Comme l’eau qu’il secoue aveugle un chien mouillé.
Primo, ces alguazils qui m’ont pris dans leurs serres;
Puis cet embarquement absurde; ces corsaires;
Et cette grosse ville où l’on m’a tant battu;
Et les tentations faites sur ma vertu
Par cette femme jaune; et mon départ du bagne;
Mes voyages; enfin, mon retour en Espagne!
Puis, quel roman! Le jour où j’arrive, c’est fort,
Ces mêmes alguazils rencontrés tout d’abord!
Leur poursuite enragée et ma fuite éperdue;
Je saute un mur; j’avise une maison perdue
Dans les arbres, j’y cours; personne ne me voit;
Je grimpe allègrement du hangar sur le toit;
Enfin, je m’introduis dans le sein des familles
Par une cheminée où je mets en guenilles
Mon manteau le plus neuf qui sur mes chausses pend! ...
– Pardieu! Monsieur Salluste est un grand sacripant!

Se regardant dans une petite glace de Venise posée sur le grand coffre à tiroirs sculptés.

– Mon pourpoint m’a suivi dans mes malheurs. Il lutte.

Il ôte son manteau et mire dans la glace son pourpoint de satin rose usé, déchiré et rapiécé; puis il porte vivement la main à sa jambe avec un coup d'oeil vers la cheminée.

Mais ma jambe a souffert diablement dans ma chute!

Il ouvre les tiroirs du coffre. Dans l'un d'entre eux il trouve un manteau de velours vert clair, brodé d'or, le manteau donné par don Salluste à Ruy Blas. Il examine le manteau et le compare au sien.

– Ce manteau me paraît plus décent que le mien.

Il jette le manteau vert sur ses épaules et met le sien à la place dans le coffre, après l'avoir soigneusement plié; il y ajoute son chapeau , qu'il enfonce sous le manteau d'un coup de poing; puis il referme le tiroir. Il se promène fièrement, drapé dans le beau manteau brodé d'or.

C'est égal, me voilà revenu. Tout va bien.
Ah! mon très cher cousin, vous voulez que j'émigre
Dans cette Afrique où l'homme est la souris du tigre!
Mais je vais me venger de vous, cousin damné,
Épouvantablement, quand j'aurai déjeuné.
J'irai, sous mon vrai nom, chez vous, traînant ma queue
D'affreux vauriens sentant le gibet d'une lieue
Et je vous livrerai vivant aux appétits
De tous mes créanciers – suivis de leurs petits.

Il aperçoit dans un coin une magnifique paire de bottines à canons de dentelles. Il jette lestement ses vieux souliers, et chausse sans façon les bottines neuves.

Voyons d'abord où m'ont jeté ses perfidies.

Après avoir examiné la chambre de tous les côtés.

Maison mystérieuse et propre aux tragédies.
Portes closes, volets barrés, un vrai cachot.
Dans ce charmant logis on entre par en haut,
Juste comme le vin entre dans les bouteilles.

Avec un soupir.

– C'est bien bon, du bon vin! –

Il aperçoit la petite porte à droite, l'ouvre, s'introduit vivement dans le cabinet avec lequel elle communique, puis rentre avec des gestes d'étonnement.

Merveille des merveilles!
Cabinet sans issue où tout est clos aussi!

Il va à la porte du fond, l'entr'ouvre, et regarde au dehors; puis il la laisse retomber et revient sur le devant.

Personne! – où diable suis-je? – au fait j'ai réussi
À fuir les alguazils. Que m'importe le reste?
Vais-je pas m'effarer et prendre un air funeste
Pour n'avoir jamais vu de maison faite ainsi?

Il se rassied sur le fauteuil, bâille, puis se relève presque aussitôt.

Ah çà, mais– je m'ennuie horriblement ici!

Avisant une petite armoire dans le mur, à gauche, qui fait le coin en pan coupé.

Voyons, ceci m'a l'air d'une bibliothèque.

Il y va et l'ouvre. C'est un garde-manger bien garni.

Justement. – un pâté, du vin, une pastèque.
C'est un en-cas complet. Six flacons bien rangés!
Diable! Sur ce logis j'avais des préjugés.

Examinant les flacons l'un après l'autre.

C'est d'un bon choix. – allons! L'armoire est honorable.

Il va chercher dans un coin la petite table ronde, l'apporte sur le devant et la charge joyeusement de tout ce que contient le garde-manger, bouteilles, plats, etc.; il ajoute un verre, une assiette, une fourchette, etc. – puis il prend une des bouteilles.

Lisons d'abord ceci.

Il emplit le verre, et boit d'un trait.

C'est une oeuvre admirable
De ce fameux poëte appelé le soleil!
Xérès-des-chevaliers n'a rien de plus vermeil.

Il s'assied, se verse un second verre et boit.

Quel livre vaut cela? Trouvez-moi quelque chose
De plus spiritueux!

Il boit.

Ah Dieu, cela repose!
Mangeons.

Il entame le pâté.

Chiens d'alguazils! Je les ai déroutés.
Ils ont perdu ma trace.

Il mange.

Oh! Le roi des pâtés!

Quant au maître du lieu, s’il survient... –

Il va au buffet et en rapporte un verre et un couvert qu’il pose sur la table.

Je l’invite.
– Pourvu qu’il n’aille pas me chasser! Mangeons vite.

Il met les morceaux doubles.

Mon dîner fait, j’irai visiter la maison.
Mais qui peut l’habiter? Peut-être un bon garçon.
Ceci peut ne cacher qu’une intrigue de femme.
Bah! Quel mal fais-je ici? Qu’est-ce que je réclame?
Rien, – L’hospitalité de ce digne mortel,
À la manière antique,

Il s’agenouille à demi et entoure la table de ses bras.

En embrassant l’autel.

Il boit.

D’abord, ceci n’est point le vin d’un méchant homme.
Et puis, c’est convenu, si l’on vient, je me nomme.
Ah! Vous endiablerez, mon vieux cousin maudit!
Quoi, ce bohémien? Ce galeux? Ce bandit?
Ce Zafari? Ce gueux? Ce va-nu-pieds? ... – Tout juste!
Don César De Bazan, cousin de don Salluste!
Oh! La bonne surprise! Et dans Madrid quel bruit!
Quand est-il revenu? Ce matin? Cette nuit?
Quel tumulte partout en voyant cette bombe,
Ce grand nom oublié qui tout à coup retombe!
Don César De Bazan! Oui, messieurs, s’il vous plaît!
Personne n’y pensait, personne n’en parlait,
Il n’était donc pas mort? Il vit, messieurs, mesdames!
Les hommes diront: Diable! – Oui-dà! diront les femmes.
Doux bruit qui vous reçoit rentrant dans vos foyers,
Mêlé de l’aboiement de trois cents créanciers!
Quel beau rôle à jouer! – hélas! L’argent me manque.

Bruit la porte.

On vient! – sans doute on va comme un vil saltimbanque
M’expulser. – C’est égal, ne fais rien à demi,
César!

Il s’enveloppe de son manteau jusqu’aux yeux. La porte du fond s’ouvre. Entre un laquais en livrée portant sur son dos une grosse sacoche.

Scène III - Don César, un laquais.

Don César, *toisant le laquais de la tête aux pieds*.
Qui venez-vous chercher céans, l'ami?
À part.
Il faut beaucoup d'aplomb, le péril est extrême.
Le Laquais.
Don César De Bazan?
Don César, *dégageant son visage du manteau*.
Don César! C'est moi-même!
À part.
Voilà du merveilleux!
Le Laquais.
Vous êtes le seigneur
Don César De Bazan?
Don César.
Pardieu! J'ai cet honneur.
César! Le vrai César! Le seul César! Le comte
De Garo...
Le Laquais, *posant sur le fauteuil la sacoche*.
Daignez voir si c'est là votre compte.
Don César, *comme ébloui*.
À part.
De l'argent! C'est trop fort
Haut.
Mon cher...
Le Laquais.
Daignez compter.
C'est la somme que j'ai l'ordre de vous porter.
Don César, *gravement*.
Ah! Fort bien! Je comprends.
À part.
Je veux bien que le diable... –

Çà, ne dérangeons pas cette histoire admirable.
Ceci vient fort à point.
Haut.
Vous faut-il des reçus?
Le Laquais.
Non, monseigneur.
Don César, *lui montrant la table*.
Mettez cet argent là-dessus.
Le laquais obéit.
De quelle part?
Le Laquais.
Monsieur le sait bien.
Don César.
Sans nul doute.
Mais...
Le Laquais.
Cet argent, – voilà ce qu'il faut que j'ajoute, –
Vient de qui vous savez pour ce que vous savez.
Don César, *satisfait de l'explication*.
Ah!
Le Laquais.
Nous devons, tous deux, être fort réservés.
Chut!
Don César.
Chut!!! – cet argent vient... – la phrase est magnifique!
Redites-la-moi donc.
Le Laquais.
Cet argent...
Don César.
Tout s'explique!
Me vient de qui je sais...
Le Laquais.
Pour ce que vous savez.
Nous devons...
Don César.
Tous les deux!!!
Le Laquais.

Être fort réservés.
Don César.
C’est parfaitement clair.
Le Laquais.
Moi, j’obéis; du reste
Je ne comprends pas.
Don César.
Bah!
Laquais.
Mais vous comprenez!
Don César.
Peste!
Le Laquais.
Il suffit.
Don César.
Je comprends et je prends, mon très cher.
De l’argent qu’on reçoit, d’abord, c’est toujours clair.
Le Laquais.
Chut!
Don César.
Chut!!! Ne faisons pas d’indiscrétion. Diantre!
Le Laquais.
Comptez, seigneur!
Don César.
Pour qui me prends-tu?
Admirant la rondeur du sac posé sur la table.
Le beau ventre!
Le Laquais, *insistant*.
Mais...
Don César.
Je me fie à toi.
Le Laquais.
L’or est en souverains.
Bons quadruples pesant sept gros trente-six grains,
Ou bons doublons au marc. L’argent, en croix-maries.

Don César ouvre la sacoche et en tire plusieurs sacs pleins d’or et d’argent, qu’il ouvre et vide sur la table avec admiration; puis il se met à

puiser pleines poignées dans les sacs d'or, et remplit ses poches de quadruples et de doublons.
Don César, *s'interrompant, avec majesté.*
À part.
Voici que mon roman, couronnant ses féeries,
Meurt amoureusement sur un gros million.
Il se met à remplir ses poches.
Ô délices! Je mords à même un galion!
Une poche pleine, il passe à l'autre. Il se cherche des poches partout, et semble avoir oublié le laquais.
Le Laquais, *qui le regarde avec impassibilité*.
Et maintenant, j'attends vos ordres.
Don César, *se retournant.*
Pour quoi faire?
Le Laquais.
Afin d'exécuter, vite et sans qu'on diffère,
Ce que je ne sais pas et ce que vous savez.
De très grands intérêts...
César, *l'interrompant d'un air d'intelligence*.
Oui, publics et privés!!!
Le Laquais.
Veulent que tout cela se fasse à l'instant même.
Je dis ce qu'on m'a dit de dire.
Don César, *lui frappant sur l'épaule*.
Et je t'en aime,
Fidèle serviteur!
Le Laquais.
Pour ne rien retarder,
Mon maître à vous me donne afin de vous aider.
Don César.
C'est agir congrûment. Faisons ce qu'il désire.
À part.
Je veux être pendu si je sais que lui dire.
Haut.
Approche, galion, et d'abord –
il remplit de vin l'autre verre.
Bois-moi a!

Le Laquais.
Quoi, seigneur? ...
Don César.
Bois-moi a!
Le laquais boit. Don César lui remplit son verre.
Du vin d’Oropesa!
Il fait asseoir le laquais, le fait boire, et lui verse de nouveau vin.
Causons.
À part.
Il a déjà la prunelle allumée.
Haut et s’étendant sur sa chaise.
L’homme, mon cher ami, n’est que de la fumée,
Noire, et qui sort du feu des passions. Voilà.
Il lui verse à boire.
C’est bête comme tout, ce que je te dis là.
Et d’abord la fumée, au ciel bleu ramenée,
Se comporte autrement dans une cheminée.
Elle monte gaîment, et nous dégringolons.
Il se frotte la jambe.
L’homme n’est qu’un plomb vil.
Il remplit les deux verres.
Buvons. Tous tes doublons
Ne valent pas le chant d’un ivrogne qui passe.
Se rapprochant d’un air mystérieux.
Vois-tu, soyons prudents. Trop chargé, l’essieu casse.
Le mur sans fondement s’écroule subito.
Mon cher, raccroche-moi le col de mon manteau.
Le Laquais, *fièrement.*
Seigneur, je ne suis pas valet de chambre.
Avant que don César ait pu l’en empêcher, il secoue la sonnette posée sur la table.
Don César, *à part, effrayé.*
Il sonne!
Le maître va peut-être arriver en personne.
Je suis pris!
Entre un des noirs. Don César, en proie à la plus vive anxiété, se retourne du côté opposé, comme ne sachant que devenir.

Le Laquais, *au nègre.*
Remettez l'agrafe à monseigneur.

Le nègre s'approche gravement de don César, qui le regarde faire d'un air stupéfait, puis il rattache l'agrafe du manteau, salue, et sort, laissant don César pétrifié.

Don César, *se levant de table.*
À part.
Je suis chez Belzébuth, ma parole d'honneur!
Il vient sur le devant et se promène à grands pas.
Ma foi, laissons-nous faire, et prenons ce qui s'offre.
Donc je vais remuer les écus à plein coffre.
J'ai de l'argent! Que vais-je en faire?

Se retournant vers le laquais attablé, qui continue à boire et qui commence à chanceler sur sa chaise.

Attends, pardon!
Rêvant, part.
Voyons, – si je payais mes créanciers? – fi donc!
– Du moins, pour les calmer, âmes à s'aigrir promptes,
Si je les arrosais avec quelques acomptes?
– À quoi bon arroser ces vilaines fleurs-là?
Où diable mon esprit va-t-il chercher cela?
Rien n'est tel que l'argent pour vous corrompre un homme,
Et, fût-il descendant d'Annibal qui prit Rome,
L'emplir jusqu'au goulot de sentiments bourgeois!
Que dirait-on? Me voir payer ce que je dois!
Ah!
Le Laquais, *vidant son verre.*
Que m'ordonnez-vous?
Don César.
Laisse-moi, je médite.
Bois en m'attendant.

Le laquais se remet à boire. Lui continue de rêver, et tout à coup se frappe le front comme ayant trouvé une idée.

Oui!
Au laquais.
Lève-toi tout de suite.
Voici ce qu'il faut faire. Emplis tes poches d'or.

Le laquais se lève en trébuchant, et emplit d’or les poches de son justaucorps. Don César l’y aide, tout en continuant.

Dans la ruelle, au bout de la place Mayor,
Entre au numéro neuf. Une maison étroite.
Beau logis, si ce n’est que la fenêtre droite
À sur le cristallin une taie en papier.
Le Laquais.
Maison borgne?
Don César.
Non, louche. On peut s’estropier
En montant l’escalier. Prends-y garde.
Le Laquais.
Une échelle?
Don César.
À peu près. C’est plus roide. – en haut loge une belle
Facile à reconnaître, un bonnet de six sous
Avec de gros cheveux ébouriffés dessous,
Un peu courte, un peu rousse... – une femme charmante!
Sois très respectueux, mon cher, c’est mon amante.
Lucinda, qui jadis, blonde à l’oeil indigo,
Chez le pape, le soir, dansait le fandango.
Compte-lui cent ducats en mon nom. – dans un bouge
À côté, tu verras un gros diable au nez rouge,
Coiffé jusqu’aux sourcils d’un vieux feutre fané
Où pend tragiquement un plumeau consterné,
La rapière à l’échine et la loque à l’épaule.
Donne de notre part six piastres à ce drôle. –
Plus loin, tu trouveras un trou noir comme un four,
Un cabaret qui chante au coin d’un carrefour.
Sur le seuil boit et fume un vivant qui le hante.
C’est un homme fort doux et de vie élégante,
Un seigneur dont jamais un juron ne tomba,
Et mon ami de coeur, nommé Goulatromba.
– Trente écus! – et dis-lui, pour toutes patenôtres,
Qu’il les boive bien vite et qu’il en aura d’autres.
Donne à tous ces faquins ton argent le plus rond,
Et ne t’ébahis pas des yeux qu’ils ouvriront.

Le Laquais.
Après?
Don César.
Garde le reste. Et pour dernier chapitre...
Le Laquais.
Qu’ordonne monseigneur?
Don César.
Va te soûler, bélître!
Casse beaucoup de pots et fais beaucoup de bruit,
Et ne rentre chez toi que demain– dans la nuit.
Le Laquais.
Suffit, mon prince.
Il se dirige vers la porte en faisant des zigzags.
Don César, *le regardant marcher.*
À part.
Il est effroyablement ivre!
Le rappelant. L’autre se rapproche.
Ah! ... – Quand tu sortiras, les oisifs vont te suivre.
Fais par ta contenance honneur à la boisson.
Sache te comporter d’une noble façon.
S’il tombe par hasard des écus de tes chausses,
Laisse tomber, – et si des essayeurs de sauces,
Des clercs, des écoliers, des gueux qu’on voit passer,
Les ramassent, – mon cher, laisse-les ramasser.
Ne sois pas un mortel de trop farouche approche.
Si même ils en prenaient quelques-uns dans ta poche,
Sois indulgent. Ce sont des hommes comme nous.
Et puis il faut, vois-tu, c’est une loi pour tous,
Dans ce monde, rempli de sombres aventures,
Donner parfois un peu de joie aux créatures.
Avec mélancolie.
Tous ces gens-là seront peut-être un jour pendus!
Ayons donc les égards pour eux qui leur sont dus!
– Va-t’en.

Le laquais sort. Resté seul, don César se rassied, s’accoude sur la table, et paraît plongé dans de profondes réflexions.

C’est le devoir du chrétien et du sage,

Quand il a de l’argent, d’en faire un bon usage.
J’ai de quoi vivre au moins huit jours! Je les vivrai.
Et, s’il me reste un peu d’argent, je l’emploierai
À des fondations pieuses. Mais je n’ose
M’y fier, car on va me reprendre la chose.
C’est méprise sans doute, et ce mal-adressé
Aura mal entendu, j’aurai mal prononcé...

La porte du fond se rouvre. Entre une duègne, vieille, cheveux gris; basquine et mantille noires, éventail.

Scène IV - Don César, une duègne.

La Duègne, *sur le seuil de la porte*.
Don César De Bazan?
Don César, absorbé dans ses méditations, relève brusquement la tête.
Don César.
Pour le coup!
À part.
Oh! Femelle!
Pendant que la duègne accomplit une profonde révérence au fond, il vient stupéfait sur le devant.
Mais il faut que le diable ou Salluste s'en mêle!
Gageons que je vais voir arriver mon cousin.
Une duègne!
Haut.
C'est moi, don César. – quel dessein? ...
à part.
D'ordinaire une vieille en annonce une jeune.
La Duègne. *(révérence avec un signe de croix.)*
Seigneur, je vous salue, aujourd'hui jour de jeûne,
En Jésus Dieu le fils, sur qui rien ne prévaut.
Don César, *à part*.
À galant dénouement commencement dévot.
Haut.
Ainsi soit-il! Bonjour.
La Duègne.
Dieu vous maintienne en joie!
Mystérieusement.
Avez-vous à quelqu'un, qui jusqu'à vous m'envoie,
Donné pour cette nuit un rendez-vous secret?
Don César.
Mais j'en suis fort capable.
La Duègne. *Elle tire de son garde-infante un billet plié et le lui présente, mais sans le lui laisser prendre*.
Ainsi, mon beau discret,
C'est bien vous qui venez, et pour cette nuit même,

D’adresser ce message à quelqu’un qui vous aime,
Et que vous savez bien?
Don César.
Ce doit être moi.
La Duègne.
Bon.
La dame, mariée à quelque vieux barbon,
À des ménagements sans doute est obligée,
Et de me renseigner céans on m’a chargée.
Je ne la connais pas, mais vous la connaissez.
La soubrette m’a dit les choses. C’est assez,
Sans les noms.
Don César.
Hors le mien.
La Duègne.
C’est tout simple. Une dame
Reçoit un rendez-vous de l’ami de son âme,
Mais on craint de tomber dans quelque piège, mais
Trop de précautions ne gâtent rien jamais.
Bref, ici l’on m’envoie avoir de votre bouche
La confirmation...
Don César.
Oh! La vieille farouche!
Vrai Dieu! Quelle broussaille autour d’un billet doux!
Oui, c’est moi, moi, te dis-je!
La Duègne. *Elle pose sur la table le billet plié, que don César examine avec curiosité.*
En ce cas, si c’est vous,
Vous écrirez: *Venez*, au dos de cette lettre.
Mais pas de votre main, pour ne rien compromettre.
Don César.
Peste! Au fait, de ma main!
À part.
Message bien rempli!
Il tend la main pour prendre la lettre; mais elle est recachetée, et la duègne ne la lui laisse pas toucher.
La Duègne.

N’ouvrez pas. Vous devez reconnaître le pli.
Don César.
Pardieu!

À part.

Moi qui brûlais de voir! ... Jouons mon rôle!

Il agite la sonnette. Entre un des noirs.

Tu sais écrire?

Le noir fait un signe de tête affirmatif. Étonnement de don César.

À part.

Un signe!

Haut.

Es-tu muet, mon drôle?

Le noir fait un nouveau signe d’affirmation. Nouvelle stupéfaction de don César.

À part.

Fort bien! Continuez! Des muets présent!

Au muet, en lui montrant la lettre, que la vieille tient appliquée sur la table.

– Écris-moi là: Venez.

Le muet écrit. Don César fait signe à la duègne de reprendre la lettre, et au muet de sortir. Le muet sort.

À part.

Il est obéissant!

La Duègne, *remettant d’un air mystérieux le billet dans son garde-infante, et se rapprochant de don César.*

Vous la verrez ce soir. Est-elle bien jolie?
Don César.
Charmante!
La Duègne.
La suivante est d’abord accomplie.
Elle m’a pris à part au milieu du sermon.
Mais belle! Un profil d’ange avec l’oeil d’un démon.
Puis aux choses d’amour elle paraît savante.
Don César, *à part*.
Je me contenterais fort bien de la servante.
La Duègne.
Nous jugeons, – car toujours le beau fait peur au laid, –

La sultane à l’esclave et le maître au valet.
La vôtre est, à coup sûr, fort belle.
Don César.
Je m’en flatte!
La Duègne, *faisant une révérence pour se retirer.*
Je vous baise la main.
Don César, *lui donnant une poignée de doublons*.
Je te graisse la patte.
Tiens, vieille!
La Duègne, *empochant*.
La jeunesse est gaie aujourd’hui!
Don César, *la congédiant*.
Va.
La Duègne. *(révérences.)*
Si vous aviez besoin... j’ai nom dame Oliva.
Couvent San-Isidoro. –
Elle sort. Puis la porte se rouvre, et l’on voit sa tête reparaître.
Toujours droite assise
Au troisième pilier en entrant dans l’église.
Don César se retourne avec impatience. La porte retombe; puis elle se rouvre encore, et la vieille reparaît.
Vous la verrez ce soir! Monsieur, pensez à moi
Dans vos prières.
Don César, *la chassant avec colère*.
Ah!
La duègne disparaît. La porte se referme.
Don César, *seul*.
Je me résous, ma foi,
À ne plus m’étonner. J’habite dans la lune.
Me voici maintenant une bonne fortune;
Et je vais contenter mon coeur après ma faim.
Rêvant.
Tout cela me paraît bien beau. – gare la fin.
La porte du fond se rouvre. Paraît don Guritan avec deux longues épées nues sous le bras.

Scène V - Don César, don Guritan.

Don Guritan, *du fond*.
Don César De Bazan?
Don César.
Il se retourne et aperçoit don Guritan et les deux épées.
Enfin! À la bonne heure!
L’aventure était bonne, elle devient meilleure.
Bon dîner, de l’argent, un rendez-vous, – un duel!
Je redeviens César à l’état naturel!
Il aborde gaiement, avec force salutations empressées, don Guritan, qui fixe sur lui un oeil inquiétant et s’avance d’un pas roide sur le devant.
C’est ici, cher seigneur. Veuillez prendre la peine
il lui présente un fauteuil. Don Guritan reste debout.
D’entrer, de vous asseoir. – comme chez vous, – sans gêne.
Enchanté de vous voir. Çà, causons un moment.
Que fait-on à Madrid? Ah! Quel séjour charmant!
Moi, je ne sais plus rien; je pense qu’on admire
Toujours Matalobos et toujours Lindamire.
Pour moi, je craindrais plus, comme péril urgent,
La voleuse de coeurs que le voleur d’argent.
Oh! Les femmes, monsieur! Cette engeance endiablée
Me tient, et j’ai la tête à leur endroit fêlée.
Parlez, remettez-moi l’esprit en bon chemin.
Je ne suis plus vivant, je n’ai plus rien d’humain,
Je suis un être absurde, un mort qui se réveille,
Un boeuf, un hidalgo de la Castille-vieille.
On m’a volé ma plume et j’ai perdu mes gants.
J’arrive des pays les plus extravagants.
Don Guritan.
Vous arrivez, mon cher monsieur? Eh bien, j’arrive
Encor bien plus que vous!
Don César, *épanoui*.
De quelle illustre rive?
Don Guritan.

De là-bas, dans le nord.
Don César.
        Et moi, de tout là-bas,
Dans le midi.
Don Guritan.
      Je suis furieux!
Don César.
        N’est-ce pas?
Moi, je suis enragé!
Don Guritan.
      J’ai fait douze cents lieues!
Don César.
Moi, deux mille! J’ai vu des femmes jaunes, bleues,
Noires, vertes. J’ai vu des lieux du ciel bénis,
Alger, la ville heureuse, et l’aimable Tunis,
Où l’on voit, tant ces turcs ont des façons accortes,
Force gens empalés accrochés sur les portes.
Don Guritan.
On m’a joué, monsieur!
Don César.
      Et moi, l’on m’a vendu!
Don Guritan.
L’on m’a presque exilé!
Don César.
      L’on m’a presque pendu!
Don Guritan.
On m’envoie à Neubourg, d’une manière adroite,
Porter ces quatre mots écrits dans une boîte:
“ Gardez le plus longtemps possible ce vieux fou. “
Don César, *éclatant de rire.*
Parfait! Qui donc cela?
Don Guritan.
        Mais je tordrai le cou
À César De Bazan!
Don César, *gravement*.
        Ah!
Don Guritan.

Pour comble d’audace,
Tout à l’heure il m’envoie un laquais à sa place.
Pour l’excuser! dit-il. Un dresseur de buffet!
Je n’ai point voulu voir le valet. Je l’ai fait
Chez moi mettre en prison, et je viens chez le maître.
Ce César De Bazan! Cet impudent! Ce traître!
Voyons, que je le tue! Où donc est-il?
Don César, *toujours avec gravité.*
C’est moi.
Don Guritan.
Vous! – raillez-vous, monsieur?
Don César.
Je suis don César.
Don Guritan.
Quoi!
Encor!
Don César.
Sans doute, encor!
Don Guritan.
Mon cher, quittez ce rôle.
Vous m’ennuyez beaucoup si vous vous croyez drôle.
Don César.
Vous, vous m’amusez fort et vous m’avez tout l’air
D’un jaloux. Je vous plains énormément, mon cher.
Car le mal qui nous vient des vices qui sont nôtres
Est pire que le mal que nous font ceux des autres.
J’aimerais mieux encore, et je le dis à vous,
Être pauvre qu’avare et cocu que jaloux.
Vous êtes l’un et l’autre, au reste. Sur mon âme,
J’attends encor ce soir madame votre femme.
Don Guritan.
Ma femme!
Don César.
Oui, votre femme!
Don Guritan.
Allons! Je ne suis pas
Marié.

Don César.
Vous venez faire cet embarras!
Point marié! Monsieur prend depuis un quart d’heure
L’air d’un mari qui hurle ou d’un tigre qui pleure,
Si bien que je lui donne, avec simplicité,
Un tas de bons conseils en cette qualité!
Mais, si vous n’êtes pas marié, par Hercule!
De quel droit êtes-vous à ce point ridicule?
Don Guritan.
Savez-vous bien, monsieur, que vous m’exaspérez?
Don César.
Bah!
Don Guritan
Que c’est trop fort!
Don César.
Vrai?
Don Guritan.
Que vous me le paierez!
Don César.
Il examine d’un air goguenard les souliers de don Guritan, qui disparaissent sous des flots de rubans, selon la nouvelle mode.
Jadis on se mettait des rubans sur la tête.
Aujourd’hui, je le vois, c’est une mode honnête,
On en met sur sa botte, on se coiffe les pieds.
C’est charmant!
Don Guritan.
Nous allons nous battre!
Don César, *impassible*.
Vous croyez?
Don Guritan.
Vous n’êtes pas César, la chose me regarde;
Mais je vais commencer par vous.
Don César.
Bon. Prenez garde
De finir par moi.
Don Guritan.
Il lui présente une des deux épées.

Fat! Sur-le-champ!
Don César, *prenant l’épée*.
De ce pas.
Quand je tiens un bon duel, je ne le lâche pas!
Don Guritan.
Où?
Don César.
Derrière le mur. Cette rue est déserte.
Don Guritan, *essayant la pointe de l’épée sur le parquet*.
Pour César, je le tue ensuite!
Don César.
Vraiment?
Don Guritan.
Certe!
Don César, faisant aussi ployer son épée.
Bah! L’un de nous deux mort, je vous défie après
De tuer don César.
Don Guritan.
Sortons!

Ils sortent. On entend le bruit de leurs pas qui s’éloignent. Une petite porte masquée s’ouvre à droite dans le mur, et donne passage à don Salluste.

Scène VI - Don Salluste

Don Salluste, *vêtu d’un habit vert sombre, presque noir*.
Il paraît soucieux et préoccupé. Il regarde et écoute avec inquiétude.
Aucuns apprêts!
Apercevant la table chargée de mets.
Que veut dire ceci?
Écoutant le bruit des pas de César et de Guritan.
Quel est donc ce tapage?
Il se promène rêveur.
Gudiel ce matin a vu sortir le page,
Et l’a suivi. – Le page allait chez Guritan. –
Je ne vois pas Ruy Blas. – Et ce page... – Satan!
C’est quelque contre-mine! Oui, quelque avis fidèle
Dont il aura chargé don Guritan pour elle!
– On ne peut rien savoir des muets! – C’est cela!
Je n’avais pas prévu ce don Guritan-là!
Rentre don César. Il tient à la main l’épée nue, qu’il jette en entrant sur un fauteuil.

Scène VII - Don Salluste, don César.

Don César, *du seuil de la porte*.
Ah! J’en étais bien sûr! Vous voilà donc, vieux diable!
Don Salluste, *se retournant, pétrifié*.
Don César!
Don César, *croisant les bras avec un grand éclat de rire*.
Vous tramez quelque histoire effroyable!
Mais je dérange tout, pas vrai, dans ce moment?
Je viens au beau milieu m’épater lourdement!
Don Salluste, *à part*.
Tout est perdu!
Don César, *riant*.
Depuis toute la matinée,
Je patauge à travers vos toiles d’araignée.
Aucun de vos projets ne doit être debout.
Je m’y vautre au hasard. Je vous démolis tout.
C’est très réjouissant.
Don Salluste, *à part*.
Démon! Qu’a-t-il pu faire?
Don César, *riant de plus en plus fort*.
Votre homme au sac d’argent, – qui venait pour l’affaire!
– Pour ce que vous savez! – qui vous savez! –
Il rit.
Parfait!
Don Salluste.
Eh bien?
Don César.
Je l’ai soûlé.
Don Salluste.
Mais l’argent qu’il avait?
Don César, *majestueusement*.
J’en ai fait des cadeaux à diverses personnes.
Dame! On a des amis.
Don Salluste.
À tort tu me soupçonnes...

Je...
Don César, *faisant sonner ses grègues*.
J’ai d’abord rempli mes poches, vous pensez.
Il se remet à rire.
Vous savez bien? La dame! ...
Don Salluste.
Oh!
Don César, *qui remarque son anxiété*.
Que vous connaissez, –
don Salluste écoute avec un redoublement d’angoisse.
Don César *poursuit en riant*.
Qui m’envoie une duègne, affreuse compagnonne,
Dont la barbe fleurit et dont le nez trognonne...
Don Salluste.
Pourquoi?
Don César.
Pour demander, par prudence et sans bruit,
Si c’est bien don César qui l’attend cette nuit...
Don Salluste.
À part.
Ciel!
Haut.
Qu’as-tu répondu?
Don César
J’ai dit que oui, mon maître!
Que je l’attendais!
Don Salluste à part
Tout n’est pas perdu peut-être
Don César
Enfin votre tueur, votre grand capitan,
Qui m’a dit sur le pré s’appeler – Guritan,
Mouvement de Don Salluste
Qui ce matin n’a pas voulu voir, l’homme sage,
Un laquais de César lui portant un message,
Et qui venait céans m’en demander raison...
Don Salluste
Eh bien, qu’en as-tu fait?

César.
J’ai tué cet oison.
Don Salluste.
Vrai?
Don César.
Vrai. Là, sous le mur, à cette heure il expire.
Don Salluste.
Es-tu sûr qu’il soit mort?
Don César.
J’en ai peur.
Don Salluste, *à part.*
Je respire!
Allons! Bonté du ciel! Il n’a rien dérangé!
Au contraire. Pourtant donnons-lui son congé.
Débarrassons-nous-en! Quel rude auxiliaire!
Pour l’argent, ce n’est rien.
Haut.
L’histoire est singulière.
Et vous n’avez pas vu d’autres personnes?
Don César.
Non.
Mais j’en verrai. Je veux continuer. Mon nom,
Je compte en faire éclat tout travers la ville.
Je vais faire un scandale affreux. Soyez tranquille.
Don Salluste.
À part.
Diable!
Vivement et se rapprochant de don César.
Garde l’argent, mais quitte la maison.
Don César.
Oui! Vous me feriez suivre! On sait votre façon.
Puis je retournerais, aimable destinée,
Contempler ton azur, ô Méditerranée!
Point.
Don Salluste.
Crois-moi.
Don César.

Non. D’ailleurs, dans ce palais-prison,
Je sens quelqu’un en proie à votre trahison.
Toute intrigue de cour est une échelle double.
D’un côté, bras liés, morne et le regard trouble,
Monte le patient; de l’autre, le bourreau.
– Or vous êtes bourreau– nécessairement.
Don Salluste.
Oh!
Don César.
Moi! Je tire l’échelle, et patatras
Don Salluste.
Je jure...
Don César.
Je veux, pour tout gâter, rester dans l’aventure.
Je vous sais assez fort, cousin, assez subtil,
Pour pendre deux ou trois pantins au même fil.
Tiens, j’en suis un! Je reste!
Don Salluste.
Écoute...
Don César.
Rhétorique!
Ah! Vous me faites vendre aux pirates d’Afrique!
Ah! Vous me fabriquez ici des faux César!
Ah! Vous compromettez mon nom!
Don Salluste.
Hasard!
Don César.
Hasard?
Mets que font les fripons pour les sots qui le mangent.
Point de hasard! Tant pis si vos plans se dérangent!
Mais je prétends sauver ceux qu’ici vous perdez.
Je vais crier mon nom sur les toits.
Il monte sur l’appui de la fenêtre et regarde au dehors.
Attendez!
Juste! Des alguazils passent sous la fenêtre.
Il passe son bras à travers les barreaux, et l’agite en criant.
Holà!

Don Salluste, *effaré, sur le devant du théâtre*.

À part.

Tout est perdu s’il se fait reconnaître!

Entrent les alguazils précédés d’un alcade. Don Salluste paraît en proie à une vive perplexité. Don César va vers l’alcade d’un air de triomphe.

Scène VIII - Les mêmes, un alcade, des alguazils.

Don César, *à l'alcade*.
Vous allez consigner dans vos procès-verbaux...
Don Salluste, *montrant don César à l'alcade*.
Que voici le fameux voleur Matalobos!
Don César, *stupéfait*.
Comment!
Don Salluste, *à part*.
Je gagne tout en gagnant vingt-quatre heures.
À l'alcade.
Cet homme ose en plein jour entrer dans les demeures.
Saisissez ce voleur.
Les alguazils saisissent don César au collet.
Don César, *furieux, à don Salluste*.
Je suis votre valet,
Vous mentez hardiment!
L'Alcade.
Qui donc nous appelait?
Don Salluste.
C'est moi.
Don César.
Pardieu! C'est fort!
L'Alcade.
Paix! Je crois qu'il raisonne.
Don César.
Mais je suis don César De Bazan en personne!
Don Salluste.
Don César? – Regardez son manteau, s'il vous plaît.
Vous trouverez SALLUSTE écrit sous le collet.
C'est un manteau qu'il vient de me voler.
Les alguazils arrachent le manteau, l'alcade l'examine.
L'Alcade.
C'est juste.
Don Salluste.
Et le pourpoint qu'il porte...

Don César, *à part*.

Oh! Le damné Salluste!

Don Salluste, *continuant*.

Il est au comte d’Albe, auquel il fut volé... –

Montrant un écusson brodé sur le parement de la manche gauche.

Dont voici le blason!

Don César, *à part*.

Il est ensorcelé!

L’Alcade, *examinant le blason*.

Oui, les deux châteaux d’or...

Don Salluste.

Et puis, les deux chaudières.

Enriquez et Gusman.

En se débattant, don César fait tomber quelques doublons de ses poches.

Don Salluste montre à l’alcade la façon dont elles sont remplies.

Sont-ce là les manières
Dont les honnêtes gens portent l’argent qu’ils ont?

L’Alcade, *hochant la tête*.

Hum!

Don César, *à part*.

Je suis pris!

Les alguazils le fouillent et lui prennent son argent.

Un Alguazil, *fouillant*.

Voilà des papiers.

Don César, *à part*.

Ils y sont!
Oh! Pauvres billets doux sauvés dans mes traverses!

L’Alcade, *examinant les papiers*.

Des lettres... qu’est cela? – d’écritures diverses? ...

Don Salluste, *lui faisant remarquer les suscriptions.*

Toutes au comte d’Albe!

L’Alcade.

Oui.

Don César.

Mais...

Les Alguazils, *lui liant les mains*.

Pris! Quel bonheur!
Un Alguazil, *entrant, à l’alcade*.
Un homme est là qu’on vient d’assassiner, seigneur.
L’Alcade.
Quel est l’assassin?
Don Salluste, *montrant don César*.
Lui!
Don César, *à part*.
Ce duel! Quelle équipée!
Don Salluste.
En entrant, il tenait à la main une épée.
La voilà.
L’Alcade, *examinant l’épée*.
Du sang. – bien.
À don César.
Allons, marche avec eux!
Don Salluste, *à don César, que les alguazils emmènent.*
Bonsoir, Matalobos.
Don César, *faisant un pas vers lui et le regardant fixement.*
Vous êtes un fier gueux!

ACTE V

LE TIGRE ET LE LION

Même chambre. C’est la nuit. Une lampe est posée sur la table.
Au lever du rideau, Ruy Blas est seul. Une sorte de longue robe noire cache ses vêtements.

Scène première – Ruy Blas, *seul.*

C’est fini. Rêve éteint! Visions disparues!
Jusqu’au soir au hasard j’ai marché dans les rues.
J’espère en ce moment. Je suis calme. La nuit,
On pense mieux, la tête est moins pleine de bruit.
Rien de trop effrayant sur ces murailles noires;
Les meubles sont rangés; les clefs sont aux armoires;
Les muets sont là-haut qui dorment; la maison
Est vraiment bien tranquille. Oh! Oui, pas de raison
D’alarme. Tout va bien. Mon page est très fidèle.
Don Guritan est sûr alors qu’il s’agit d’elle.
Ô mon Dieu! N’est-ce pas que je puis vous bénir,
Que vous avez laissé l’avis lui parvenir,
Que vous m’avez aidé, vous, Dieu bon, vous, Dieu juste,
À protéger cet ange, à déjouer Salluste,
Qu’elle n’a rien à craindre, hélas, rien à souffrir,
Et qu’elle est bien sauvée, – et que je puis mourir?
Il tire de sa poitrine une fiole qu’il pose sur la table.
Oui, meurs maintenant, lâche! Et tombe dans l’abîme!
Meurs comme on doit mourir quand on expie un crime!
Meurs dans cette maison, vil, misérable et seul!

Il écarte sa robe noire, sous laquelle on entrevoit la livrée qu’il portait au premier acte.

Meurs avec ta livrée enfin sous ton linceul!
– Dieu! Si ce démon vient voir sa victime morte,

Il pousse un meuble de façon à barricader la porte secrète.

Qu’il n’entre pas du moins par cette horrible porte!

Il revient vers la table.

– Oh! Le page a trouvé Guritan, c’est certain,
Il n’était pas encor huit heures du matin.

Il fixe son regard sur la fiole.

– Pour moi, j’ai prononcé mon arrêt, et j’apprête
Mon supplice, et je vais moi-même sur ma tête
Faire choir du tombeau le couvercle pesant.
J’ai du moins le plaisir de penser qu’à présent

Personne n'y peut rien. Ma chute est sans remède.
Tombant sur le fauteuil.
Elle m'aimait pourtant! – que Dieu me soit en aide!
Je n'ai pas de courage!
Il pleure.
Oh! L'on aurait bien dû
Nous laisser en paix!
Il cache sa tête dans ses mains et pleure à sanglots.
Dieu!
Relevant la tête et comme égaré, regardant la fiole.
L'homme, qui m'a vendu
Ceci, me demandait quel jour du mois nous sommes.
Je ne sais pas. J'ai mal dans la tête. Les hommes
Sont méchants. Vous mourez, personne ne s'émeut.
Je souffre! – elle m'aimait! – et dire qu'on ne peut
Jamais rien ressaisir d'une chose passée! –
Je ne la verrai plus! – sa main que j'ai pressée,
Sa bouche qui toucha mon front... – ange adoré!
Pauvre ange! – il faut mourir, mourir désespéré!
Sa robe où tous les plis contenaient de la grâce,
Son pied qui fait trembler mon âme quand il passe,
Son oeil où s'enivraient mes yeux irrésolus,
Son sourire, sa voix... – je ne la verrai plus!
Je ne l'entendrai plus! – enfin c'est donc possible?
Jamais!

Il avance avec angoisse sa main vers la fiole; au moment où il la saisit convulsivement, la porte du fond s'ouvre. La reine paraît, vêtue de blanc, avec une mante de couleur sombre, dont le capuchon, rejeté sur ses épaules, laisse voir sa tête pâle. Elle tient une lanterne sourde à la main, elle la pose à terre, et marche rapidement vers Ruy Blas.

Scène II - Ruy Blas, la Reine.

La Reine, *entrant.*
Don César!
Ruy Blas, *se retournant avec un mouvement d'épouvante, et fermant précipitamment la robe qui cache sa livrée.*
Dieu! C'est elle! – au piège horrible
Elle est prise!
Haut.
Madame! ...
La Reine.
Eh bien! Quel cri d'effroi!
César...
Ruy Blas.
Qui vous a dit de venir ici?
La Reine.
Toi.
Ruy Blas.
Moi? – comment?
La Reine.
J'ai reçu de vous...
Ruy Blas, *haletant*.
Parlez donc vite!
La Reine
Une lettre.
Ruy Blas.
De moi!
La Reine.
De votre main écrite.
Ruy Blas.
Mais c'est à se briser le front contre le mur!
Mais je n'ai pas écrit, pardieu, j'en suis bien sûr!
La Reine, *tirant de sa poitrine un billet qu'elle lui présente.*
Lisez donc.
Ruy Blas *prend la lettre avec emportement, et se penche vers la lampe et lit.*
Ruy Blas, *lisant*.

” Un danger terrible est sur ma tête.
“ Ma reine seule peut conjurer la tempête...
Il regarde la lettre avec stupeur, comme ne pouvant aller plus loin.
La Reine, *continuant, et lui montrant du doigt la ligne qu’elle lit.*
“ En venant me trouver ce soir dans ma maison.
“ Sinon, je suis perdu. “
Ruy Blas, *d’une voix éteinte.*
Ho! Quelle trahison!
Ce billet!
La Reine, *continuant de lire.*
“ Par la porte au bas de l’avenue,
“ Vous entrerez la nuit sans être reconnue.
“ Quelqu’un de dévoué vous ouvrira. “
Ruy Blas, *à part.*
J’avais
Oublié ce billet.
À la reine, d’une voix terrible.
Allez-vous-en!
La Reine.
Je vais
M’en aller, don César. Ô mon Dieu! Que vous êtes
Méchant! Qu’ai-je donc fait?
Ruy Blas.
Ô ciel! Ce que vous faites?
Vous vous perdez!
La Reine.
Comment?
Ruy Blas.
Je ne puis l’expliquer.
Fuyez vite.
La Reine.
J’ai même, et pour ne rien manquer,
Eu le soin d’envoyer ce matin une duègne...
Ruy Blas.
Dieu! – mais, à chaque instant, comme d’un coeur qui saigne,
Je sens que votre vie à flots coule et s’en va.
Partez!

La Reine, *comme frappée d’une idée subite*.
Le dévouement que mon amour rêva
M’inspire. Vous touchez à quelque instant funeste.
Vous voulez m’écarter de vos dangers! – Je reste.
Ruy Blas.
Ah! Voilà, par exemple, une idée! Ô mon Dieu!
Rester à pareille heure et dans un pareil lieu!
La Reine.
La lettre est bien de vous. Ainsi...
Ruy Blas, *levant les bras au ciel de désespoir*.
Bonté divine!
La Reine.
Vous voulez m’éloigner.
Ruy Blas, *lui prenant les mains*.
Comprenez!
La Reine.
Je devine.
Dans le premier moment vous m’écrivez, et puis...
Ruy Blas.
Je ne t’ai pas écrit. Je suis un démon. Fuis!
Mais c’est toi, pauvre enfant, qui te prends dans un piège!
Mais c’est vrai! Mais l’enfer de tous côtés t’assiège!
Pour te persuader je ne trouve donc rien?
Écoute, comprends donc, je t’aime, tu sais bien.
Pour sauver ton esprit de ce qu’il imagine,
Je voudrais arracher mon coeur de ma poitrine!
Oh! Je t’aime. Va-t’en!
La Reine.
Don César...
Ruy Blas.
Oh! Va-t’en!
– Mais, j’y songe, on a dû t’ouvrir?
La Reine.
Mais oui.
Ruy Blas.
Satan!
Qui?

La Reine.

Quelqu’un de masqué, caché par la muraille.

Ruy Blas.

Masqué! Qu’a dit cet homme? Est-il de haute taille?
Cet homme, quel est-il? Mais parle donc! J’attends!

Un homme en noir et masqué paraît à la porte du fond.

L’Homme Masqué.

C’est moi!

Il ôte son masque. C’est don Salluste. La reine et Ruy Blas le reconnaissent avec terreur.

Scène III - Les mêmes, don Salluste.

Ruy Blas.
Grand Dieu! Fuyez, madame!
Don Salluste.
Il n'est plus temps.
Madame De Neubourg n'est plus reine d'Espagne.
La Reine, *avec horreur*.
Don Salluste!
Don Salluste, *montrant Ruy Blas*.
À jamais vous êtes la compagne
De cet homme.
La Reine.
Grand Dieu! C'est un piège, en effet!
Et don César...
Ruy Blas, *désespéré.*
Madame, hélas! Qu'avez-vous fait?
Don Salluste, *s'avançant à pas lents vers la reine*.
Je vous tiens. – Mais je vais parler, sans lui déplaire,
À votre majesté, car je suis sans colère.
Je vous trouve, – écoutez, ne faisons pas de bruit, –
Seule avec don César, dans sa chambre, à minuit.
Ce fait, – pour une reine, – étant public, – en somme,
Suffit pour annuler le mariage à Rome.
Le Saint-Père en serait informé promptement.
Mais on supplée au fait par le consentement.
Tout peut rester secret.
Il tire de sa poche un parchemin qu'il déroule et qu'il présente à la reine.
Signez-moi cette lettre
Au seigneur notre roi. Je la ferai remettre
Par le grand écuyer au notaire mayor.
Ensuite, – une voiture, où j'ai mis beaucoup d'or,
Désignant le dehors.

Est là. – partez tous deux sur-le-champ. Je vous aide.
Sans être inquiétés, vous pourrez par Tolède
Et par Alcantara gagner le Portugal.
Allez où vous voudrez, cela nous est égal.
Nous fermerons les yeux. – obéissez. Je jure
Que seul en ce moment je connais l'aventure;
Mais, si vous refusez, Madrid sait tout demain.
Ne nous emportons pas. Vous êtes dans ma main.
Montrant la table, sur laquelle il y a une écritoire.
Voilà tout ce qu'il faut pour écrire, madame.
La Reine, *atterrée, tombant sur le fauteuil*.
Je suis en son pouvoir!
Don Salluste.
De vous je ne réclame
Que ce consentement pour le porter au roi.
Bas Ruy Blas, qui écoute tout, immobile et comme frappé de la foudre.
Laisse-moi faire, ami, je travaille pour toi.
À la reine.
Signez.
La Reine, *tremblante, à part*.
Que faire?
Don Salluste, *se penchant à son oreille et lui présentant une plume*.
Allons! Qu'est-ce qu'une couronne?
Vous gagnez le bonheur, si vous perdez le trône.
Tous mes gens sont restés dehors. On ne sait rien
De ceci. Tout se passe entre nous trois.
Essayant de lui mettre la plume entre les doigts sans qu'elle la repousse ni la prenne.
Eh bien?
La reine, indécise et égarée, le regarde avec angoisse.
Si vous ne signez point, vous vous frappez vous-même.
Le scandale et le cloître!
La Reine, *accablée*.
Ô Dieu!
Don Salluste, montrant Ruy Blas.
César vous aime.
Il est digne de vous. Il est, sur mon honneur,

De fort grande maison. Presque un prince. Un seigneur
Ayant donjon sur roche et fief dans la campagne.
Il est duc d'Olmedo, Bazan, et grand d'Espagne...

Il pousse sur le parchemin la main de la reine éperdue et tremblante, et qui semble prête à signer.

Ruy Blas, *comme se réveillant tout à coup.*
Je m'appelle Ruy Blas, et je suis un laquais!

Arrachant des mains de la reine la plume, et le parchemin qu'il déchire.

Ne signez pas, madame! – enfin! – je suffoquais!

La Reine.
Que dit-il? Don César!

Ruy Blas, *laissant tomber sa robe et se montrant vêtu de la livrée; sans épée*.
Je dis que je me nomme
Ruy Blas, et que je suis le valet de cet homme!

Se retournant vers don Salluste.

Je dis que c'est assez de trahison ainsi,
Et que je ne veux pas de mon bonheur! – merci!
– Ah! Vous avez eu beau me parler à l'oreille! –
Je dis qu'il est bien temps qu'enfin je me réveille,
Quoique tout garrotté dans vos complots hideux,
Et que je n'irai pas plus loin, et qu'à nous deux,
Monseigneur, nous faisons un assemblage infâme.
J'ai l'habit d'un laquais, et vous en avez l'âme!

Don Salluste, *à la reine, froidement*.
Cet homme est en effet mon valet.

À Ruy Blas avec autorité.

Plus un mot.

La Reine, *laissant enfin échapper un cri de désespoir et se tordant les mains*.
Juste ciel!

Don Salluste, *poursuivant.*
Seulement il a parlé trop tôt.

Il croise les bras et se redresse, avec une voix tonnante.

Eh bien, oui! Maintenant disons tout. Il n'importe!
Ma vengeance est assez complète de la sorte.

À la reine.

Qu’en pensez-vous? – Madrid va rire, sur ma foi!
Ah! Vous m’avez cassé! Je vous détrône, moi.
Ah! Vous m’avez banni! Je vous chasse, et m’en vante!
Ah! Vous m’avez pour femme offert votre suivante!
Il éclate de rire.
Moi, je vous ai donné mon laquais pour amant.
Vous pourrez l’épouser aussi! Certainement.
Le roi s’en va! – son coeur sera votre richesse,
Il rit.
Et vous l’aurez fait duc afin d’être duchesse!
Grinçant des dents.
Ah! Vous m’avez brisé, flétri, mis sous vos pieds,
Et vous dormiez en paix, folle que vous étiez!

Pendant qu’il a parlé, Ruy Blas est allé à la porte du fond et en a poussé le verrou, puis il s’est approché de lui sans qu’il s’en soit aperçu, par derrière, à pas lents. Au moment où don Salluste achève, fixant des yeux pleins de haine et de triomphe sur la reine anéantie, Ruy Blas saisit l’épée du marquis par la poignée et la tire vivement.

Ruy Blas, *terrible, l’épée de don Salluste à la main.*
Je crois que vous venez d’insulter votre reine!
Don Salluste *se précipite vers la porte.*
Ruy Blas la lui barre.
– Oh! N’allez point par là, ce n’en est pas la peine,
J’ai poussé le verrou depuis longtemps déjà. –
Marquis, jusqu’à ce jour Satan te protégea,
Mais, s’il veut t’arracher de mes mains, qu’il se montre.
– À mon tour! – On écrase un serpent qu’on rencontre.
– Personne n’entrera, ni tes gens, ni l’enfer!
Je te tiens écumant sous mon talon de fer!
– Cet homme vous parlait insolemment, madame?
Je vais vous expliquer. Cet homme n’a point d’âme,
C’est un monstre. En riant hier il m’étouffait.
Il m’a broyé le coeur à plaisir. Il m’a fait
Fermer une fenêtre, et j’étais au martyre!
Je priais! Je pleurais! Je ne peux pas vous dire.
Au marquis.
Vous contiez vos griefs dans ces derniers moments.

Je ne répondrai pas à vos raisonnements,
Et d’ailleurs– je n’ai pas compris. – ah! Misérable!
Vous osez, – votre reine, une femme adorable!
Vous osez l’outrager quand je suis là! – Tenez,
Pour un homme d’esprit, vraiment, vous m’étonnez!
Et vous vous figurez que je vous verrai faire
Sans rien dire! – écoutez, quelle que soit sa sphère,
Monseigneur, lorsqu’un traître, un fourbe tortueux,
Commet de certains faits rares et monstrueux,
Noble ou manant, tout homme a droit, sur son passage,
De venir lui cracher sa sentence au visage,
Et de prendre une épée, une hache, un couteau! ... –
Pardieu! J’étais laquais! Quand je serais bourreau?
La Reine.
Vous n’allez pas frapper cet homme?
Ruy Blas.
Je me blâme
D’accomplir devant vous ma fonction, madame,
Mais il faut étouffer cette affaire en ce lieu.
Il pousse don Salluste vers le cabinet.
– C’est dit, monsieur! Allez là dedans prier Dieu!
Don Salluste.
C’est un assassinat!
Ruy Blas.
Crois-tu?
Don Salluste, *désarmé, et jetant un regard plein de rage autour de lui.*
Sur ces murailles
Rien! Pas d’arme!
À Ruy Blas.
Une épée au moins!
Ruy Blas.
Marquis! Tu railles!
Maître! Est-ce que je suis un gentilhomme, moi?
Un duel! Fi donc! Je suis un de tes gens à toi,
Valetaille de rouge et de galons vêtue,
Un maraud qu’on châtie et qu’on fouette, – et qui tue!
Oui, je vais te tuer, monseigneur, vois-tu bien?

Comme un infâme! Comme un lâche! Comme un chien!
La Reine.
Grâce pour lui!
Ruy Blas, *à la reine, saisissant le marquis*.
      Madame, ici chacun se venge.
Le démon ne peut plus être sauvé par l’ange!
La Reine, *à genoux*.
Grâce!
Don Salluste, *appelant*.
      Au meurtre! Au secours!
Ruy Blas, *levant l’épée*.
        As-tu bientôt fini?
Don Salluste, *se jetant sur lui en criant*.
Je meurs assassiné! Démon!
Ruy Blas, *le poussant dans le cabinet*.
        Tu meurs puni!
      Ils disparaissent dans le cabinet, dont la porte se referme sur eux.
La Reine, *restée seule, tombant demi-morte sur le fauteuil.*
Ciel!
      Un moment de silence. Rentre Ruy Blas, pâle, sans épée.

Scène IV - La reine, Ruy Blas.

Ruy Blas fait quelques pas en chancelant vers la reine immobile et glacée, puis il tombe à deux genoux, l’oeil fixé à terre, comme s’il n’osait lever les yeux jusqu’à elle.

Ruy Blas, *d’une voix grave et basse*.
Maintenant, madame, il faut que je vous dise.
– Je n’approcherai pas. – Je parle avec franchise.
Je ne suis point coupable autant que vous croyez.
Je sens, ma trahison, comme vous la voyez,
Doit vous paraître horrible. Oh! Ce n’est pas facile
À raconter. Pourtant je n’ai pas l’âme vile,
Je suis honnête au fond. – cet amour m’a perdu. –
Je ne me défends pas; je sais bien, j’aurais dû
Trouver quelque moyen. La faute est consommée!
– C’est égal, voyez-vous, je vous ai bien aimée.
La Reine.
Monsieur...
Ruy Blas, *toujours à genoux*.
      N’ayez pas peur. Je n’approcherai point.
À votre majesté je vais de point en point
Tout dire. Oh! Croyez-moi, je n’ai pas l’âme vile! –
Aujourd’hui tout le jour j’ai couru par la ville
Comme un fou. Bien souvent même on m’a regardé.
Auprès de l’hôpital que vous avez fondé,
J’ai senti vaguement, à travers mon délire,
Une femme du peuple essuyer sans rien dire
Les gouttes de sueur qui tombaient de mon front.
Ayez pitié de moi, mon Dieu! Mon coeur se rompt!
La Reine.
Que voulez-vous?
Ruy Blas, *joignant les mains*.
      Que vous me pardonniez, madame!
La Reine.
Jamais.
Ruy Blas.

Jamais!
Il se lève et marche lentement vers la table.
Bien sûr?
La Reine.
Non, jamais!
Ruy Blas.
Il prend la fiole posée sur la table, la porte à ses lèvres et la vide d'un trait.
Triste flamme,
Éteins-toi!
La Reine, *se levant et courant à lui*.
Que fait-il?
Ruy Blas, *posant la fiole*.
Rien. Mes maux sont finis.
Rien. Vous me maudissez, et moi je vous bénis.
Voilà tout.
La Reine, *éperdue*.
Don César!
Ruy Blas
Quand je pense, pauvre ange,
Que vous m'avez aimé!
La Reine.
Quel est ce philtre étrange?
Qu'avez-vous fait? Dis-moi! Réponds-moi! Parle-moi!
César! Je te pardonne et t'aime, et je te croi!
Ruy Blas.
Je m'appelle Ruy Blas.
La Reine, *l'entourant de ses bras*.
Ruy Blas, je vous pardonne!
Mais qu'avez-vous fait là? Parle, je te l'ordonne!
Ce n'est pas du poison, cette affreuse liqueur?
Dis?
Ruy Blas.
Si! C'est du poison. Mais j'ai la joie au coeur.
Tenant la reine embrassée et levant les yeux au ciel.
Permettez, ô mon Dieu, justice souveraine,
Que ce pauvre laquais bénisse cette reine,

Car elle a consolé mon coeur crucifié,
Vivant, par son amour, mourant, par sa pitié!
La Reine.
Du poison! Dieu! C’est moi qui l’ai tué! – je t’aime!
Si j’avais pardonné? ...
Ruy Blas, *défaillant*.
J’aurais agi de même.
Sa voix s’éteint. La reine le soutient dans ses bras.
Je ne pouvais plus vivre. Adieu!
Montrant la porte.
Fuyez d’ici!
– Tout restera secret. – je meurs.
Il tombe.
La Reine, *se jetant sur son corps.*
Ruy Blas!
Ruy Blas, *qui allait mourir, se réveille à son nom prononcé par la reine.*
Merci!

Selected Non-Fiction

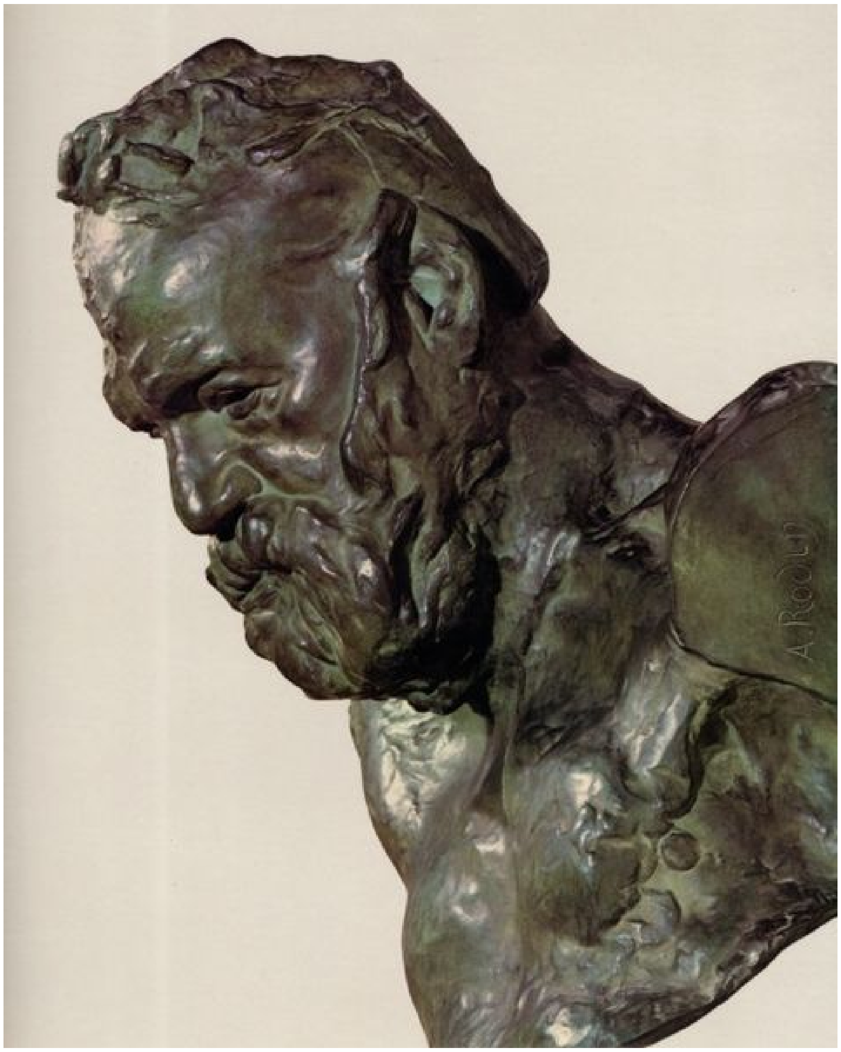

Victor Hugo, by the famous sculptor Rudin

NAPOLEON THE LITTLE

Anonymous translation, 1852

This is an influential political pamphlet, which was written by Hugo to condemn the reign of Napoleon III, Emperor of France. Hugo lived in exile in Guernsey during most of Napoleon III's reign and his criticism of the monarch was significant as he was one of the most prominent French writers of the time. This non-fiction work is famous for the satirical concept of two and two make five, as a denial of truth by authority, an idea used later by George Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty-Four.*

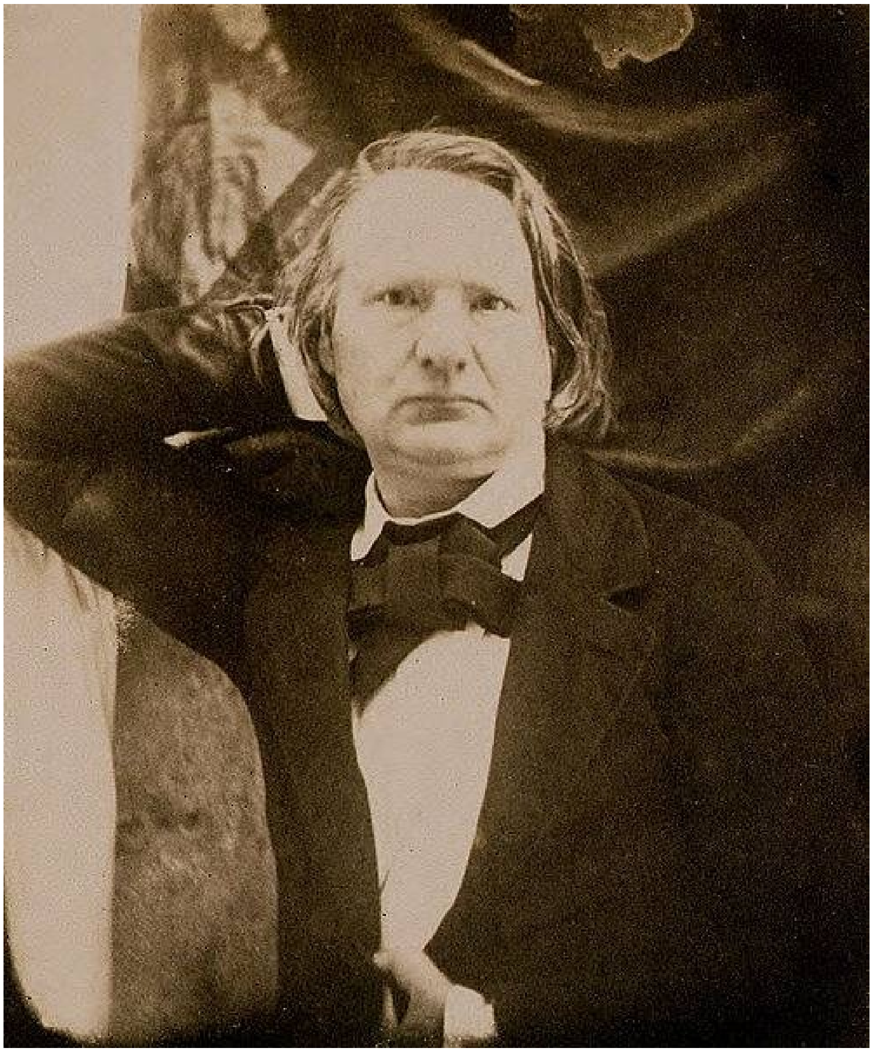

Hugo at the time of publication

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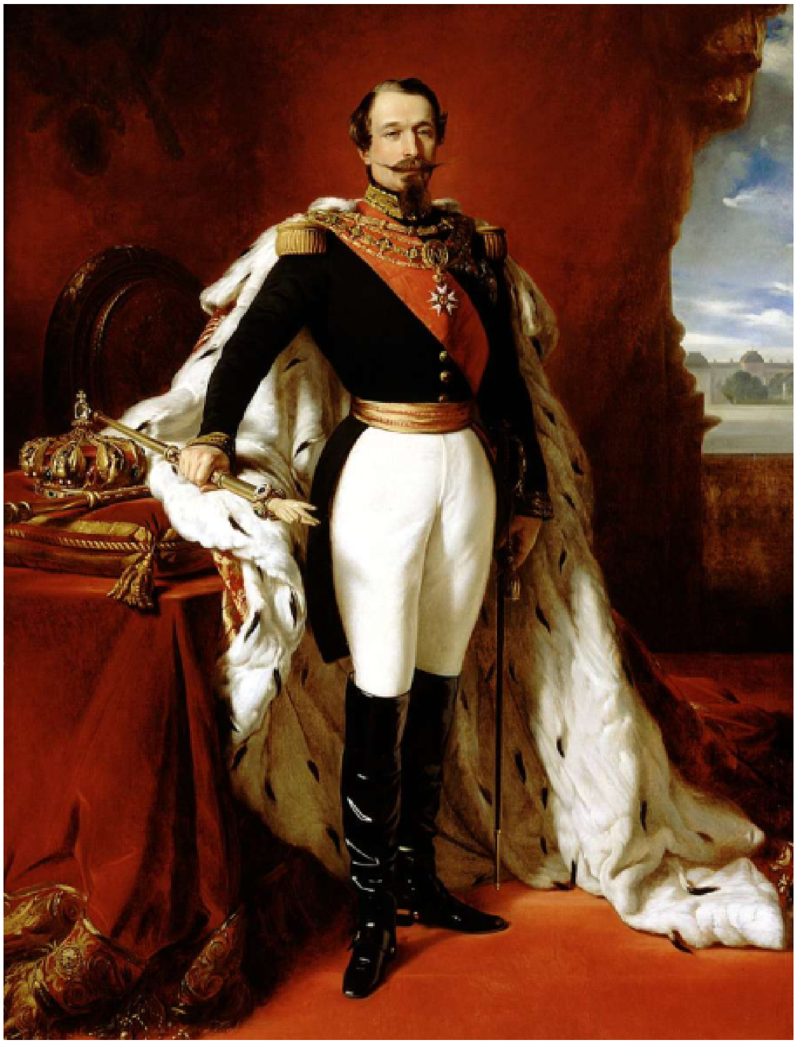

Napoleon III, Hugo’s great enemy

BOOK I

I

December 20, 1848

On Thursday, December 20, 1848, the Constituent Assembly, being in session, surrounded at that moment by an imposing display of troops, heard the report of the Representative Waldeck-Rousseau, read on behalf of the committee which had been appointed to scrutinize the votes in the election of President of the Republic; a report in which general attention had marked this phrase, which embodied its whole idea: “It is the seal of its inviolable authority which the nation, by this admirable application of the fundamental law, itself affixes on the Constitution, to render it sacred and inviolable.” Amid the profound silence of the nine hundred representatives, of whom almost the entire number was assembled, the President of the National Constituent Assembly, Armaud Marrast, rose and said: —

“In the name of the French people,

“Whereas Citizen Charles-Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, born at Paris, fulfils the conditions of eligibility prescribed by Article 44 of the Constitution;

“Whereas in the ballot cast throughout the extent of the territory of the Republic, for the election of President, he has received an absolute majority of votes;

“By virtue of Articles 47 and 48 of the Constitution, the National Assembly proclaims him President of the Republic from this present day until the second Sunday in May, 1852.”

There was a general movement on all the benches, and in the galleries filled with the public; the President of the Constituent Assembly added:

“According to the terms of the decree, I invite the Citizen President of the Republic to ascend the tribune, and to take the oath.”

The representatives who crowded the right lobby returned to their places and left the passage free. It was about four in the afternoon, it was growing dark, and the immense hall of the Assembly having become involved in gloom, the chandeliers were lowered from the ceiling, and the messengers placed lamps on the tribune. The President made a sign, the door on the right opened, and there was seen to enter the hall, and rapidly ascend the tribune, a man still young, attired in black, having on his breast the badge and riband of the Legion of Honour.

All eyes were turned towards this man. A pallid face, its bony emaciated angles thrown into bold relief by the shaded lamps, a nose large and long, moustaches, a curled lock of hair above a narrow forehead, eyes small and dull, and with a timid and uneasy manner, bearing no resemblance to the Emperor, — this man was Citizen Charles-Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte.

During the murmurs which greeted his entrance, he remained for some instants, his right hand in the breast of his buttoned coat, erect and motionless on the tribune, the pediment of which bore these dates: February 22, 23, 24; and above which were inscribed these three words: *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*.

Before being elected President of the Republic, Charles-Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte had been a representative of the people for several months, and though he had rarely attended a whole sitting, he had been frequently seen in the seat he had selected, on the upper benches of the Left, in the fifth row in the zone commonly called the Mountain, behind his old preceptor, Representative Vieillard. This man, then, was no new figure in the Assembly, yet his entrance on this occasion produced a profound sensation. It was to all, to his friends as to his foes, the future that entered, an unknown future. Amid the immense murmur, produced by the whispered words of all present, his name passed from mouth to mouth, coupled with most diverse opinions. His antagonists detailed his adventures, his *coups-de-main*, Strasburg, Boulogne, the tame eagle, and the piece of meat in the little hat. His friends dwelt upon his exile, his proscription, his imprisonment, an excellent work of his on the artillery, his writings at Ham, which were marked, to a certain degree, with the liberal, democratic, and socialistic spirit, the maturity of the more sober age at which he had now arrived; and to those who recalled his follies, they recalled his misfortunes.

General Cavaignac, who, not having been elected President, had just resigned his power into the hands of the Assembly, with that tranquil laconism which befits republics, was seated in his customary place at the head of the ministerial bench, on the left of the tribune, and observed in silence, with folded arms, this installation of the new man.

At length silence was restored, the President of the Assembly struck the table before him several times with his wooden knife, and then, the last murmurs having subsided, said:

"I will now read the form of the oath."

There was something almost religious about that moment. The Assembly was no longer an Assembly, it was a temple. The immense significance of the oath was rendered still more impressive by the circumstance that it was the only oath taken throughout the whole territory of the Republic. February had, and rightly, abolished the political oath, and the Constitution had, as rightly, retained only the oath of the President. This oath possessed the double character of necessity and of grandeur. It was an oath taken by the executive, the subordinate power, to the legislative, the superior power; it was even more than this — in contrast to the monarchical fiction by which the people take the oath to the man invested with power, it was the man invested with power who took the oath to the people. The President, functionary and servant, swore fidelity to the sovereign people. Bending before the national majesty, manifest in the omnipotent Assembly, he received from the Assembly the Constitution, and swore obedience to it. The representatives were inviolable, and he was not. We repeat it: a citizen responsible to all the citizens, he was, of the whole nation, the only man so bound. Hence, in this oath, sole and supreme, there was a solemnity which went to the heart. He who writes these lines was present in his place in the Assembly, on the day this oath was taken; he is one of those who, in the face of the civilized world called to bear witness, received this oath in the name of the people, and who have it still in their hands. Thus it runs: —

"In presence of God, and before the French people, represented by the National Assembly, I swear to remain faithful to the democratic republic, one and indivisible, and to fulfil all the duties imposed upon me by the Constitution."

The President of the Assembly, standing, read this majestic formula; then, before the whole Assembly, breathlessly silent and attentive, intensely expectant, Citizen Charles-Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, raising his right hand, said, in a firm, loud voice:

"I swear it!"

Representative Boulay (de la Meurthe), since Vice-President of the Republic, who had known Charles-Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte from his childhood, exclaimed: "He is an honest man, he will keep his oath."

The President of the Assembly, still standing, proceeded thus (I quote *verbatim* the words recorded in the *Moniteur*): "We call God and man to witness the oath which has just been sworn. The National Assembly receives that oath, orders it to be transcribed upon its records, printed in the *Moniteur*, and published in the same manner as legislative acts."

It seemed that the ceremony was now at an end, and we imagined that Citizen Charles-Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, thenceforth, until the second Sunday in May, 1852, President of the Republic, would descend from the tribune. But he did not; he felt a magnanimous impulse to bind himself still more rigorously, if possible; to add something to the oath which the Constitution demanded from him, in order to show how largely the oath was free and spontaneous. He asked permission to address the Assembly. "You have the floor," said the President of the Assembly.

There was more profound silence, and closer attention than before.

Citizen Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte unfolded a paper and read a speech. In this speech, having announced and installed the ministry appointed by him, he said: —

"I desire, in common with yourselves, citizen representatives, to consolidate society upon its true basis, to establish democratic institutions, and earnestly to seek every means calculated to relieve the sufferings of the generous and intelligent people who have just bestowed on me so signal a proof of their confidence."

He then thanked his predecessor in the executive power, the same man who, later, was able to say these noble words: *"I did not fall from power, I descended from it*;" and he glorified him in these terms: —

"The new administration, in entering upon its duties, is bound to thank that which preceded it for the efforts it has made to transmit the executive power intact, and to maintain public tranquillity.

"The conduct of the Honourable General Cavaignac has been worthy of the manliness of his character, and of that sentiment of duty which is the first quality requisite in the chief of the State."

The Assembly cheered these words, but that which especially struck every mind, which was profoundly graven in every memory, which found its echo in every honest heart, was the declaration, the wholly spontaneous declaration, we repeat, with which he began his address.

"The suffrages of the nation, and the oath I have just taken, command my future conduct. My duty is clearly marked. I will fulfil it as a man of honour.

"I shall regard as the enemies of the country all who seek to change, by illegal means, that which all France has established."

When he had done speaking, the Constituent Assembly rose, and uttered as with a single voice, the exclamation: “Long live the Republic!”

Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte descended from the tribune, went up to General Cavaignac, and offered him his hand. The general, for a few instants, hesitated to accept the grasp. All who had just heard the words of Louis Bonaparte, pronounced in a tone so instinct with good faith, blamed the general for his hesitation.

The Constitution to which Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte took oath on December 20, 1848, “in the face of God and man,” contained, among other articles, these: —

“Article 36. The representatives of the people are inviolable.

“Article 37. They may not be arrested on a criminal charge unless taken in the fact, or prosecuted without the permission of the Assembly first obtained.

“Article 68. Every act by which the President of the Republic dissolves the National Assembly, prorogues it, or impedes the execution of its decrees, is high treason.

“By such act, of itself, the President forfeits his office, the citizens are bound to refuse him obedience, and the executive power passes, of absolute right, to the National Assembly. The judges of the Supreme Court shall thereupon immediately assemble, under penalty of forfeiture; they shall convoke the jurors in such place as they shall appoint, to proceed to the trial of the President and his accomplices; and they shall themselves appoint magistrates who shall proceed to execute the functions of the ministry.”

In less than three years after this memorable day, on the 2nd of December, 1851, at daybreak, there might be read on all the street corners in Paris, this placard: —

“In the name of the French people, the President of the Republic:

“Decrees —

“Article 1. The National Assembly is dissolved.

“Article 2. Universal suffrage is re-established. The law of the 31st of May is repealed.

“Article 3. The French people are convoked in their comitia.

“Article 4. A state of siege is decreed throughout the first military division.

“Article 5. The Council of State is dissolved.

“Article 6. The Minister of the Interior is charged with the execution of this decree.

“Done at the Palace of the Élysée, December 2, 1851.

“Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte.”

At the same time Paris learned that fifteen of the inviolable representatives of the people had been arrested in their homes, during the night, by order of Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte.

II

MISSION OF THE REPRESENTATIVES

Those who, as representatives of the people, received, in trust for the people, the oath of the 20th of December, 1848, those, especially who, being twice invested with the confidence of the nation, had as representatives heard that oath sworn, and as legislators had seen it violated, had assumed, with their writ of summons, two duties. The first of these was, on the day when that oath should be violated, to rise in their places, to present their breasts to the enemy, without calculating either his numbers or his strength, to shelter with their bodies the sovereignty of the people and as a means to combat and cast down the usurper, to grasp every sort of weapon, from the law found in the code, to the paving stone that one picks up in the street. The second duty was, after having accepted the combat and all its chances to accept proscription and all its miseries, to stand eternally erect before the traitor, his oath in their hands, to forget their personal sufferings, their private sorrows, their families dispersed and maltreated, their fortunes destroyed, their affections crushed, their bleeding hearts; to forget themselves, and to feel thenceforth but a single wound — the wound of France to cry aloud for justice; never to suffer themselves to be appeased, never to relent, but to be implacable; to seize the despicable perjurer, crowned though he were, if not with the hand of the law, at least with the pincers of truth, and to heat red-hot in the fire of history all the letters of his oath, and brand them on his face.

He who writes these lines is one of those who did not shrink, on the 2nd of December, from the utmost effort to accomplish the first of these two great duties; in publishing this book he performs the second.

III

NOTICE OF EXPIRATION OF TERM

It is time that the human conscience should awaken.

Ever since the 2nd of December, 1851, a successful ambush, a crime, odious, repulsive, infamous, unprecedented, considering the age in which it was committed, has triumphed and held sway, erecting itself into a theory, pluming itself in the sunlight, making laws, issuing decrees, taking society, religion, and the family under its protection, holding out its hand to the kings of Europe, who accept it, and calling them, “my brother,” or “my cousin.” This crime no one disputes, not even those who profit by it and live by it; they say simply that it was necessary; not even he who committed it, who says merely that he, the criminal, has been “absolved.” This crime contains within itself all crimes, treachery in the conception, perjury in the execution, murder and assassination in the struggle, spoliation, swindling, and robbery in the triumph; this crime draws after it as integral parts of itself, suppression of the laws, violation of constitutional inviolabilities, arbitrary sequestration, confiscation of property, midnight massacres, secret military executions, commissions superseding tribunals, ten thousand citizens banished, forty thousand citizens proscribed, sixty thousand families ruined and despairing. These things are patent. Even so! it is painful to say it, but there is silence concerning this crime; it is there, men see it, touch it, and pass on to their business; shops are opened, the stock jobbers job, Commerce, seated on her packages, rubs her hands, and the moment is close at hand when everybody will regard all that has taken place as a matter of course. He who measures cloth does not hear the yard-stick in his hand speak to him and say: “’Tis a false measure that governs.” He who weighs out a commodity does not hear his scales raise their voice and say: “’Tis a false weight that reigns.” A strange order of things surely, that has for its base supreme disorder, the negation of all law! equilibrium resting on iniquity!

Let us add, — what, for that matter is self-evident, — that the author of this crime is a malefactor of the most cynical and lowest description.

At this moment, let all who wear a robe, a scarf, or a uniform; let all those who serve this man, know, if they think themselves the agents of a power, that they deceive themselves; they are the shipmates of a pirate. Ever since the 2nd of December there have been no office-holders in France, there have been only accomplices. The moment has come when every one must take careful account of what he has done, of what he is continuing to do. The gendarmes who arrested those whom the man of Strasburg and

Boulogne called “insurgents,” arrested the guardians of the Constitution. The judge who tried the combatants of Paris or the provinces, placed in the dock the mainstays of the law. The officer who confined in the hulks the “condemned men,” confined the defenders of the Republic and of the State. The general in Africa who imprisoned at Lambassa the transported men bending beneath the sun’s fierce heat, shivering with fever, digging in the sun-baked soil a furrow destined to be their grave, that general sequestrated, tortured, assassinated the men of the law. All, generals, officers, gendarmes, judges, are absolutely under forfeiture. They have before them more than innocent men, — heroes! more than victims, — martyrs!

Let them know this, therefore, and let them hasten to act upon the knowledge; let them, at least, break the fetters, draw the bolts, empty the hulks, throw open the jails, since they have not still the courage to grasp the sword. Up, consciences, awake, it is full time!

If law, right, duty, reason, common sense, equity, justice, suffice not, let them think of the future! If remorse is mute, let responsibility speak!

And let all those who, being landed proprietors, shake the magistrate by the hand; who, being bankers, fête a general; who, being peasants, salute a gendarme; let all those who do not shun the hôtel in which dwells the minister, the house in which dwells the prefect, as he would shun a *lazaretto*; let all those who, being simple citizens, not functionaries, go to the balls and the banquets of Louis Bonaparte and see not that the black flag waves over the Élysée, — let all these in like manner know that this sort of shame is contagious; if they avoid material complicity, they will not avoid moral complicity.

The crime of the 2nd of December bespatters them.

The present situation, that seems so calm to the unthinking, is most threatening, be sure of that. When public morality is under eclipse, an appalling shadow settles down upon social order.

All guarantees take wing, all supports vanish.

Thenceforth there is not in France a tribunal, nor a court, nor a judge, to render justice and pronounce a sentence, on any subject, against any one, in the name of any one.

Bring before the assizes a malefactor of any sort: the thief will say to the judges: “The chief of the State robbed the Bank of twenty-five millions;” the false witness will say to the judges: “The chief of the State took an oath in the face of God and of man, and that oath he has violated;” the sequestrator will say: “The chief of the State has arrested, and detained against all law, the representatives of the sovereign people;” the swindler will say: “The chief of the State got his election, got power, got the Tuileries, all by swindling;” the forger will say: “The chief of the State forged votes;” the footpad will say: “The chief of the State stole their purses from the Princes of Orleans;” the murderer will say: “The chief of the State shot, sabred, bayonetted, massacred passengers in the streets;” and all together, swindler, forger, false witness, footpad, robber, assassin, will add: “And you judges, you have been to salute this man, to praise him for having perjured himself, to compliment him for committing forgery, to praise him for stealing and swindling, to thank him for murdering! what do you want of us?”

Assuredly, this is a very serious state of things! to sleep in such a situation, is additional ignominy.

It is time, we repeat, that this monstrous slumber of men’s consciences should end. It must not be, after that fearful scandal, the triumph of crime, that a scandal still more fearful should be presented to mankind: the indifference of the civilized world.

If that were to be, history would appear one day as an avenger; and from this very hour, as the wounded lion takes refuge in the solitudes, the just man, veiling his face in presence of this universal degradation, would take refuge in the immensity of public contempt.

IV

MEN WILL AWAKEN

But it is not to be; men will awaken.

The present book has for its sole aim to arouse the sleepers. France must not even adhere to this government with the assent of lethargy; at certain hours, in certain places, under certain shadows, to sleep is to die.

Let us add that at this moment, France — strange to say, but none the less true — knows not what took place on the 2nd of December and subsequently, or knows it imperfectly; and this is her excuse. However, thanks to several generous and courageous publications, the facts are beginning to creep out. This book is intended to bring some of those facts forward, and, if it please God, to present them in their true light. It is important that people should know who and what this M. Bonaparte is. At the present moment, thanks to the suppression of the platform, thanks to the suppression of the press, thanks to the suppression of speech, of liberty, and of truth, — a suppression which has had for one result the permitting M. Bonaparte to do everything, but which has had at the same time the effect of nullifying all his measures without exception, including the indescribable ballot of the 20th of December, — thanks, we say, to this stifling of all complaints and of all light, no man, no fact wears its true aspect or bears its true name. M. Bonaparte’s crime is not a crime, it is called a necessity; M. Bonaparte’s ambuscade is not an ambuscade, it is called a defence of public order; M. Bonaparte’s robberies are not robberies, they are called measures of state; M. Bonaparte’s murders are not murders, they are called public safety; M. Bonaparte’s accomplices are not malefactors, they are called magistrates, senators, and councillors of state; M. Bonaparte’s adversaries are not the soldiers of the law and of right, they are called Jacquerie, demagogues, communists. In the eyes of France, in the eyes of Europe, the 2nd of December is still masked. This book is a hand issuing from the darkness, and tearing that mask away.

Now, we propose to scrutinize this triumph of order, to depict this government so vigorous, so firm, so well-based, so strong, having on its side a crowd of paltry youths, who have more ambition than boots, dandies and beggars; sustained on the Bourse by Fould the Jew, and in the Church by Montalembert the Catholic; esteemed by women who would fain pass for maids, by men who want to be prefects; resting on a coalition of prostitutions; giving fêtes; making cardinals; wearing white neck-cloths and yellow kid gloves, like Morny, newly varnished like Maupas, freshly brushed like Persigny, — rich, elegant, clean, gilded, joyous, and born in a pool of blood!

Yes, men will awaken!

Yes, men will arouse from that torpor which, to such a people, is shame; and when France does awaken, when she does open her eyes, when she does distinguish, when she does see that which is before her and beside her, she will recoil with a terrible shudder from the monstrous crime which dared to espouse her in the darkness, and of which she has shared the bed.

Then will the supreme hour strike!

The sceptics smile and insist; they say:

“Hope for nothing. This government, you say, is the shame of France. Be it so, but this same shame is quoted on the Bourse. Hope for nothing. You are poets and dreamers if you hope. Why, look about you: the tribune, the press, intelligence, speech, thought, all that was liberty, has vanished. Yesterday, these things were in motion, alive; to-day, they are petrified. Well, people are satisfied with this petrification, they accommodate themselves to it, make the most of it, conduct business on it, and live as usual. Society goes on, and plenty of worthy folk are well pleased with this state of things. Why do you want to change it, to put an end to it? Don't deceive yourselves, it is all solid, all firm; it is the present and the future."

We are in Russia. The Neva is frozen over. Houses are built on the ice, and heavy chariots roll over it. It is no longer water, but rock. The people go to and fro upon this marble which was once a river. A town is run up, streets are marked out, shops opened; people buy, sell, eat, drink, sleep, light fires on what once was water. You can do whatever you please there. Fear nothing. Laugh, dance; it is more solid than *terra firma*. Why, it rings beneath the foot, like granite. Long live winter! Long live the ice! This will last till doomsday! And look at the sky: is it day? is it night? what is it? A pale, misty light steals over the snow; one would say that the sun is dying!

No, thou art not dying, O liberty! One of these days, at the moment when thou art least expected, at the very hour when they shall have most utterly forgotten thee, thou wilt rise! — O dazzling vision! the star-like face will suddenly be seen issuing from the earth, resplendent on the horizon! Over all that snow, over all that ice, over that hard, white plain, over that water become rock, over all that wretched winter, thou wilt cast thy arrow of gold, thy ardent and effulgent ray! light, heat, life! And then, listen! hear you that dull sound? hear you that crashing noise, all-pervading and formidable? 'Tis the breaking up of the ice! 'tis the melting of the Neva! 'tis the river resuming its course! 'tis the water, living, joyous, and terrible, heaving up the hideous, dead ice, and crushing it.— 'Twas granite, said you; see, it splinters like glass! 'tis the breaking up of the ice, I tell you: 'tis the truth returning, 'tis progress recommencing, 'tis mankind resuming its march, and uprooting, carrying off, mingling, crushing and drowning in its waves, like the wretched furniture of a submerged hovel, not only the brand-new empire of Louis Bonaparte, but all the structures and all the work of the eternal antique despotism! Look on these things as they are passing. They are vanishing for ever. You will never behold them again. That book, half submerged, is the old code of iniquity; that sinking framework is the throne; that other framework, floating off, is the scaffold!

And for this immense engulfment, this supreme victory of life over death, what was needed? One glance from thee, O sun! one of thy rays, O liberty!

V

BIOGRAPHY

Charles-Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, born at Paris, on April 20, 1808, is the son of Hortense de Beauharnais, who was married by the Emperor to Louis-Napoleon, King of Holland. In 1831, taking part in the insurrections in Italy, where his elder brother was killed, Louis Bonaparte attempted to overthrow the Papacy. On the 30th of October, 1836, he attempted to overthrow Louis Philippe. He failed at Strasburg, and, being pardoned by the King, he embarked for America, leaving his accomplices behind him to be tried. On the 11th of November he wrote: "The King, *in his clemency*, has ordered me taken to America;" he declared himself "keenly affected by the King's *generosity*," adding: "Certainly, we were all culpable towards the government in taking up arms against it, but *the greatest culprit was myself*;" and he concluded thus: "I was *guilty* towards the government, and the government has been *generous* to me."_He returned from America, and went to Switzerland, got himself appointed captain of artillery at Berne, and a citizen of Salenstein, in Thurgovia; equally avoiding, amid the diplomatic complications occasioned by his presence, to call himself a Frenchman, or to avow himself a Swiss, and contenting himself, in order to satisfy the French government, with stating in a letter, dated the 20th of August, 1838, that he lived "almost alone," in the house "where his mother died," and that it was "his firm determination to remain quiet."

On the 6th of August, 1840 he disembarked at Boulogne, parodying the disembarkation at Cannes, with the *petit chapeau* on his head,_carrying a gilt eagle on the end of a flag-staff, and a live eagle in a cage, proclamations galore, and sixty valets, cooks, and grooms, disguised as French soldiers with uniforms bought at the Temple, and buttons of the 42nd Regiment of the Line, made in London. He scatters money among the passers-by in the streets of Boulogne, sticks his hat on the point of his sword, and himself cries, "Vive l'Empereur!" fires a pistol shot at an officer,_which hits a soldier and knocks out three of his teeth, and finally runs away. He is taken into custody; there are found on his person 500,000 francs, in gold and bank-notes;_the procureur-general, Franck-Carrè, says to him in the Court of

Peers: “You have been tampering with the soldiers, and distributing money to purchase treason.” The peers sentenced him to perpetual imprisonment. He was confined at Ham. There his mind seemed to take refuge within itself and to mature: he wrote and published some books, instinct, notwithstanding a certain ignorance of France and of the age, with democracy and with progress: “The Extinction of Pauperism,” “An Analysis of the Sugar Question,” “Napoleonic Ideas,” in which he made the Emperor a “humanitarian.” In a treatise entitled “Historical Fragments,” he wrote thus: “I am a citizen before I am a Bonaparte.” Already in 1852, in his book “Political Reveries,” he had declared himself a republican. After five years of captivity, he escaped from the prison of Ham, disguised as a mason, and took refuge in England.

February arrived; he hailed the Republic, took his seat as a representative of the people in the Constituent Assembly, mounted the tribune on the 21st of September, 1848, and said: “All my life shall be devoted to strengthening the Republic;” published a manifesto which may be summed up in two lines: liberty, progress, democracy, amnesty, abolition of the decrees of proscription and banishment; was elected President by 5,500,000 votes, solemnly swore allegiance to the Constitution on the 20th of December, 1848, and on the 2nd of December, 1851, shattered that Constitution. In the interval he had destroyed the Roman republic, and had restored in 1849 that Papacy which in 1831 he had essayed to overthrow. He had, besides, taken nobody knows how great a share in the obscure affair of the lottery of the gold ingots. A few weeks previous to the *coup d’état*, this bag of gold became transparent, and there was visible within it a hand greatly resembling his. On December 2, and the following days, he, the executive power, assailed the legislative power, arrested the representatives, drove out the assembly, dissolved the Council of State, expelled the high court of justice, suppressed the laws, took 25,000,000 francs from the bank, gorged the army with gold, swept the streets of Paris with grape-shot, and terrorized France. Since then, he has proscribed eighty-four representatives of the people; stolen from the Princes of Orleans the property of their father, Louis Philippe, to whom he owed his life; decreed despotism in fifty-eight articles, under the name of Constitution; throttled the Republic; made the sword of France a gag in the mouth of liberty; pawned the railways; picked the pockets of the people; regulated the budget by ukase; transported to Africa and Cayenne ten thousand democrats; banished to Belgium, Spain, Piedmont, Switzerland, and England forty thousand republicans, brought grief to every heart and the blush of shame to every brow.

Louis Bonaparte thinks that he is mounting the steps of a throne; he does not perceive that he is mounting those of a scaffold.

VI

PORTRAIT

Louis Bonaparte is a man of middle height, cold, pale, slow in his movements, having the air of a person not quite awake. He has published, as we have mentioned before, a moderately esteemed treatise on artillery, and is thought to be acquainted with the handling of cannon. He is a good horseman. He speaks drawlingly, with a slight German accent. His histrionic abilities were displayed at the Eglinton tournament. He has a heavy moustache, covering his smile, like that of the Duke of Alva, and a lifeless eye like that of Charles IX.

Judging him apart from what he calls his “necessary acts,” or his “great deeds,” he is a vulgar, commonplace personage, puerile, theatrical, and vain. Those persons who are invited to St. Cloud, in the summer, receive with the invitation an order to bring a morning toilette and an evening toilette. He loves finery, display, feathers, embroidery, tinsel and spangles, big words, and grand titles, — everything that makes a noise and glitter, all the glassware of power. In his capacity of cousin to the battle of Austerlitz, he dresses as a general. He cares little about being despised; he contents himself with the appearance of respect.

This man would tarnish the background of history; he absolutely sullies its foreground. Europe smiled when, glancing at Haiti, she saw this white Soulouque appear. But there is now in Europe, in every intelligent mind, abroad as at home, a profound stupor, a feeling, as it were, of personal insult; for the European continent, whether it will or no, is responsible for France, and whatever abases France humiliates Europe.

Before the 2nd of December, the leaders of the Right used freely to say of Louis Bonaparte: “*He is an idiot.*” They were mistaken. To be sure that brain of his is awry, and has gaps in it, but one can discern here and there thoughts consecutive and concatenate. It is a book whence pages have been torn. Louis Napoleon has a fixed idea; but a fixed idea is not idiocy; he knows what he wants, and he goes straight to it; through justice, through law, through reason, through honour, through humanity, it may be, but straight on none the less.

He is not an idiot. He is a man of another age than our own. He seems absurd and mad, because he is out of his place and time. Transport him to Spain in the 16th century, and Philip II would recognise him; to England, and Henry VIII would smile on him; to Italy, and Cæsar Borgia would jump on his neck. Or even, confine yourself to setting him outside the pale of European civilization, — place him, in 1817, at Janina, and Ali-Tepeleni would grasp him by the hand.

There is in him something of the Middle Ages, and of the Lower Empire. That which he does would have seemed perfectly simple and natural to Michael Ducas, to Romanus Diogenes, to Nicephorus Botoniates, to the Eunuch Narses, to the Vandal Stilico, to Mahomet II, to Alexander VI, to Ezzelino of Padua, as it seems perfectly simple and natural to himself. But he forgets, or knows not, that in the age wherein we live, his actions will have to traverse the great streams of human morality, set free by three centuries of literature and by the French Revolution; and that in this medium, his actions will wear their true aspect, and appear what they really are — hideous.

His partisans — he has some — complacently compare him with his uncle, the first Bonaparte. They say: “The one accomplished the 18th Brumaire, the other the 2nd of December: they are two ambitious men.” The first Bonaparte aimed to reconstruct the Empire of the West, to make Europe his vassal, to dominate the continent by his power, and to dazzle it by his grandeur; to take an arm-chair himself, and give footstools to the kings; to cause history to say: “Nimrod, Cyrus, Alexander, Hannibal, Cæsar, Charlemagne, Napoleon;” to be a master of the world. And so he was. It was for that that he accomplished the 18th Brumaire. This fellow would fain have horses and women, be called *Monseigneur*, and live luxuriously. It was for this that he accomplished the 2nd of December. Yes: they are both ambitious; the comparison is just.

Let us add, that, like the first Bonaparte, the second also aims to be emperor. But that which somewhat impairs the force of the comparison is, that there is perhaps, a slight difference between conquering an empire and pilfering it.

However this may be, that which is certain and which cannot be veiled, even by the dazzling curtain of glory and of misfortune on which are inscribed: Arcola, Lodi, the Pyramids, Eylau, Friedland, St. Helena — that which is certain, we repeat, is that the 18th Brumaire was a crime, of which the 2nd of December has aggravated the stain on the memory of Napoleon.

M. Louis Bonaparte does not object to have it whispered that he is a socialist. He feels that this gives him a sort of vague field which ambition may exploit. As we have already said, when he was in prison, he passed his time in acquiring a quasi-reputation as a democrat. One fact will describe him. When, being at Ham, he published his book “On the Extinction of Pauperism,” a book having apparently for its sole and exclusive aim, to probe the wound of the poverty of the common people, and to suggest the remedy, he sent the book to one of his friends with this note, which we have ourselves seen: “Read this book on pauperism, and tell me if you think it is calculated *to do me good*.”

The great talent of M. Louis Bonaparte is silence. Before the 2nd of December, he had a council of ministers who, being responsible, imagined that they were of some consequence. The President presided. Never, or scarcely ever, did he take part in their discussions. While MM. Odillon Barrot, Passy, Tocqueville, Dufaure, or Faucher were speaking, *he occupied himself*, says one of these ministers, *in constructing, with intense earnestness, paper dolls, or in drawing men’s heads on the documents before him*.

To feign death, that is his art. He remains mute and motionless, looking in the opposite direction from his object, until the hour for action comes; then he turns his head, and leaps upon his prey. His policy appears to you abruptly, at some unexpected turning, pistol in hand, like a thief. Up to that point, there is the least possible movement. For one moment, in the course of the three years that have just passed, he was seen face to face with Changarnier, who also, on his part, had a scheme in view. “Ibant obscuri,” as Virgil says. France observed, with a certain anxiety, these two men. What was in their minds? Did not the one dream of Cromwell, the other of Monk? Men asked one another these questions as they looked on the two men. In both of them, there was the same attitude of mystery, the same policy of immobility. Bonaparte said not a word, Changarnier made not a gesture; this one did not stir, that one did not breathe; they seemed to be playing the game of which should be the most statuesque.

This silence of his, Louis Bonaparte sometimes breaks; but then he does not speak, he lies. This man lies as other men breathe. He announces an honest intention; be on your guard: he makes an assertion, distrust him: he takes an oath, tremble.

Machiavel made small men; Louis Bonaparte is one of them.

To announce an enormity against which the world protests, to disavow it with indignation, to swear by all the gods, to declare himself an honest man, — and then, at the moment when people are reassured, and laugh at the enormity in question, to execute it. This was his course with respect to the *coup d'état*, with respect to the decrees of proscription, with respect to the spoliation of the Princes of Orleans; — and so it will be with the invasion of Belgium, and of Switzerland, and with everything else. It is his way; you may think what you please of it; he employs it; he finds it effective; it is his affair. He will have to settle the matter with history.

You are of his familiar circle; he hints at a project, which seems to you, not immoral, — one does not scrutinize so closely, — but insane and dangerous, and dangerous to himself; you raise objections; he listens, makes no reply, sometimes gives way for a day or two, then resumes his project, and carries out his will.

There is in his table, in his office at the Élysée, a drawer, frequently half open. He takes thence a paper; reads it to a minister; it is a decree. The minister assents or dissents. If he dissents, Louis Bonaparte throws the paper back into the drawer, where there are many other papers, the dreams of an omnipotent man, shuts the drawer, takes out the key, and leaves the room without saying a word. The minister bows and retires, delighted with the deference which has been paid to his opinion. Next morning the decree is in the *Moniteur*.

Sometimes with the minister's signature.

Thanks to this *modus operandi*, he has always in his service the unforeseen, a mighty weapon, and encountering in himself no internal obstacle in that which is known to other men as conscience, he pursues his design, through no matter what, no matter how, and attains his goal.

He draws back sometimes, not before the moral effect of his acts, but before their material effect. The decrees of expulsion of eighty-four representatives of the people, published on January 6 in the *Moniteur*, revolted public sentiment. Fast bound as France was, the shudder was perceptible. The 2nd of December was not long past; there was danger in popular excitement. Louis Bonaparte understood this. Next day a second decree of expulsion was to have appeared, containing eight hundred names.

Louis Bonaparte had the proof brought to him from the *Moniteur*; the list occupied fourteen columns of the official journal. He crumpled the proof, threw it into the fire, and the decree did not appear. The proscriptions proceeded without a decree.

In his enterprises, he needs aids and collaborators; he needs what he calls "men." Diogenes sought them with a lantern, he seeks them with a banknote in his hand. And finds them. There are certain sides of human nature which produce a particular species of persons, of whom he is the centre, and who group around him *ex necessitate*, in obedience to that mysterious law of gravitation which regulates the moral being no less than the cosmic atom. To undertake "the act of the 2nd of December," — to execute it, and to complete it, he needed these men, and he had them. Now he is surrounded by them; these men form his retinue, his court, mingling their radiance with his. At certain epochs of history, there are pleiades of great men; at other epochs, there are pleiades of vagabonds.

But do not confound the epoch, the moment of Louis Bonaparte, with the 19th century: the toadstool sprouts at the foot of the oak, but it is not the oak.

M. Louis Bonaparte has succeeded. He has with him henceforth money, speculation, the Bourse, the Bank, the counting-room, the strong-box, and all those men who pass so readily from one side to the other, when all they have to straddle is shame. He made of M. Changarnier a dupe, of M. Thiers a stop-gap, of M. de Montalembert an accomplice, of power a cavern, of the budget his farm. They are coining at the Mint a medal, called the medal of the 2nd of December, in honour of the manner in which he keeps his oaths. The frigate *La Constitution* has been debaptized, and is now called *L'Élysée*. He can, when he chooses, be crowned by M. Sibour,_and exchange the couch of the Élysée for the state bed of the Tuileries. Meanwhile, for the last seven months, he has been displaying himself; he has harangued, triumphed, presided at banquets, given balls, danced, reigned, turned himself about in all directions; he has paraded himself, in all his ugliness, in a box at the Opéra; he has had himself dubbed Prince-President; he has distributed standards to the army, and crosses of honour to the commissioners of police. When there was occasion to select a symbol, he effaced himself and chose the eagle; modesty of a sparrow-hawk!

VII

IN CONTINUATION OF THE PANEGYRICS

He has succeeded. The result is that he has plenty of apotheoses. Of panegyrists he has more than Trajan. One thing, however, has struck me, which is, that among all the qualities that have been discovered in him since the 2nd of December, among all the eulogies that have been addressed to him, there is not one word outside of this circle: adroitness, coolness, daring, address, an affair admirably prepared and conducted, moment well chosen, secret well kept, measures well taken. False keys well made — that's the whole story. When these things have been said, all has been said, except a phrase or two about "clemency;" and yet no one extols the magnanimity of Mandrin, who, sometimes, did not take all the traveller's money, and of Jean l'Ecorcheur, who, sometimes, did not kill all travellers.

In endowing M. Bonaparte with twelve millions of francs, and four millions more for keeping up the châteaux, the Senate — endowed by M. Bonaparte with a million — felicitated M. Bonaparte upon "having saved society," much as a character in a comedy congratulates another on having "saved the money-box."

For myself, I am still seeking in the glorification of M. Bonaparte by his most ardent apologists, any praise that would not exactly befit Cartouche or Poulailler, after a good stroke of business; and I blush sometimes for the French language, and for the name of Napoleon, at the terms, really over-raw, and too thinly veiled, and too appropriate to the facts, in which the magistracy and clergy felicitate this man on having stolen the power of the State by burglarising the Constitution, and on having, by night, evaded his oath.

When all the burglaries and all the robberies which constitute the success of his policy had been accomplished, he resumed his true name; every one then saw that this man was a Monseigneur. It was M. Fortoul,_— to his honour be it said — who first made this discovery.

When one measures the man and finds him so small, and then measures his success, and finds it so enormous, it is impossible that the mind should not experience some surprise. One asks oneself: "How did he do it?" One dissects the adventure and the adventurer, and laying aside the advantage he derives from his name, and certain external facts, of which he made use in his escalade, one finds, as the basis of the man and his exploit, but two things, — cunning and cash.

As to cunning: we have already characterised this important quality of Louis Bonaparte; but it is desirable to dwell on the point.

On November 27, 1848, he said to his fellow-citizens in his manifesto: “I feel it incumbent on me to make known to you my sentiments and my principles. *There must be no equivocation between you and me. I am not ambitious....* Brought up in *free* countries, in the school of misfortune, *I shall ever remain faithful* to the duties that shall be imposed on me by your suffrages, and the will of the Assembly. *I shall make it a point of honour to leave, at the end of the four years, to my successor, power consolidated, liberty intact, and real progress accomplished.*”

On December 31, 1849, in his first message to the Assembly, he wrote: “It is my aspiration to be worthy of the confidence of the nation, by maintaining the Constitution *which I have sworn to execute*.” On November 12, 1850, in his second annual message to the Assembly, he said: “If the Constitution contains defects and dangers, you are free to make them known to the country; I alone, *bound by my oath*, confine myself within the strict limits which that Constitution has traced.” On September 4, in the same year, at Caen, he said: “When, in all directions, prosperity seems reviving, he were, indeed, *a guilty man* who should seek to check its progress by *changing that which now exists*.” Some time before, on July 25, 1849, at the inauguration of the St. Quentin railway, he went to Ham, smote his breast at the recollection of Boulogne, and uttered these solemn words:

“Now that, elected by universal France, I am become the legitimate head of this great nation, I cannot pride myself on a captivity which was occasioned by *an attack upon a regular government*.

“When one has observed the enormous evils which even the most righteous revolutions bring in their train, one can scarcely comprehend one’s *audacity in having chosen to take upon one’s self the terrible responsibility of a change*; I do not, therefore, complain of having *expiated* here, by an imprisonment of six years, my *rash defiance of the laws of my country*, and it is with joy that, in the very scene of my sufferings, I propose to you a toast in honour of those who, notwithstanding their convictions, are resolute to *respect the institutions of their country*.”

All the while he was saying this, he retained in the depths of his heart, as he has since proved, after his fashion, that thought which he had written in that same prison of Ham: “Great enterprises seldom succeed at the first attempt.”

Towards the middle of November, 1851, Representative F —— , a frequenter of the Élysée, was dining with M. Bonaparte.

“What do they say in Paris, and in the Assembly?” asked the President of the representative.

“Oh, prince!”

“Well?”

“They are still talking.”

“About what?”

“About the *coup d’état*.”

“And the Assembly believes in it?”

“A little, prince.”

“And you?”

“I — oh, not at all.”

Louis Bonaparte earnestly grasped M. F — — ‘s hands, and said to him with feeling:

“I thank you, M. F —— , you, at least, do not think me a scoundrel.”

This happened a fortnight before December 2. At that time, and indeed, at that very moment, according to the admission of Maupas the confederate, Mazas was being made ready.

Cash: that is M. Bonaparte’s other source of strength.

Let us take the facts, judicially proved by the trials at Strasburg and Boulogne.

At Strasburg, on October 30, 1836, Colonel Vaudrey, an accomplice of M. Bonaparte, commissioned the quartermasters of the 4th Regiment of artillery, “to distribute among the cannoneers of each battery, two pieces of gold.”

On the 5th of August, 1840, in the steamboat he had freighted, the *Ville d’Edimbourg*, while at sea, M. Bonaparte called about him the sixty poor devils, his domestics, whom he had deceived into accompanying him by telling them he was going to Hamburg on a pleasure excursion, harangued them from the roof of one of his carriages fastened on the deck, declared his project, tossed them their disguise as soldiers, gave each of them a hundred francs, and then set them drinking. A little drunkenness does not damage great enterprises. “I saw,” said the witness Hobbs, the under-steward, before the Court of Peers,_“I saw in the cabin a great quantity of money. The passengers appeared to me to be reading printed papers; they passed all the night drinking and eating. I did nothing else but uncork bottles, and serve food.” Next came the captain. The magistrate asked Captain Crow: “Did you see the passengers drink?” — Crow: “To excess; I never saw anything like it.”

They landed, and were met by the custom-house officers of Vimereux. M. Louis Bonaparte began proceedings, by offering the lieutenant of the guard a pension of 1,200 francs. The magistrate: “Did you not offer the commandant of the station a sum of money if he would march with you?” — The Prince: “I caused it to be offered him, but he refused it.”

They arrived at Boulogne. His aides-de-camp — he had some already — wore, hanging from their necks, tin cases full of gold pieces. Others came next with bags of small coins in their hands._Then they threw money to the fishermen and the peasants, inviting them to cry: “Long live the Emperor!”— “Three hundred loud-mouthed knaves will do the thing,” had written one of the conspirators._Louis Bonaparte approached the 42nd, quartered at Boulogne.

He said to the voltigeur Georges Koehly: “*I am Napoleon*; you shall have promotion, decorations.” He said to the voltigeur Antoine Gendre: “*I am the son of Napoleon*; we are going to the Hôtel du Nord to order a dinner for you and me.” He said to the voltigeur Jean Meyer: “*You shall be well paid.*” He said to the voltigeur Joseph Mény: “*You must come to Paris; you shall be well paid.*”

An officer at his side held in his hand his hat full of five-franc pieces, which he distributed among the lookers-on, saying: “*Shout, Long live the Emperor!*”

The grenadier Geoffroy, in his evidence, characterises in these words the attempt made on his mess by an officer and a sergeant who were in the plot: “The sergeant had a bottle in his hand, and the officer a sabre.” In these few words is the whole 2nd of December.

Let us proceed: —

“Next day, June 17, the commandant, Mésonan, who I thought had gone, entered my room, announced by my aide-de-camp. I said to him, ‘Commandant, I thought you were gone!’— ‘No, general, I am not gone. I have a letter to give you.’— ‘A letter? And from whom?’— ‘Read it, general.’

“I asked him to take a seat; I took the letter, but as I was opening it, I saw that the address was — *à M. le Commandant Mésonan*. I said to him: ‘But, my dear Commandant, this is for you, not for me.'— 'Read it, General!' — I opened the letter and read thus: —

"'My dear Commandant, it is most essential that you should immediately see the general in question; you know he is a man of resolution, on whom one may rely. You know also that he is a man whom I have put down to be one day a marshal of France. *You will offer him, from me, 100,000 francs*; and you will ask him into what banker's or notary's hands *I shall pay 300,000 francs* for him, in the event of his losing his command.'

"I stopped here, overcome with indignation; I turned over the leaf, and I saw that the letter was signed, 'Louis Napoleon.'

"I handed the letter back to the commandant, saying that it was a ridiculous and abortive affair."

Who speaks thus? General Magnan. Where? In the open Court of Peers. Before whom? Who is the man seated on the prisoners' bench, the man whom Magnan covers with "scorn," the man towards whom Magnan turns his "indignant" face? Louis Bonaparte.

Money, and with money gross debauchery: such were his means of action in his three enterprises at Strasburg, at Boulogne, at Paris. Two failures and a success. Magnan, who refused at Boulogne, sold himself at Paris. If Louis Bonaparte had been defeated on the 2nd of December, just as there were found on him, at Boulogne, the 500,000 francs he had brought from London, so there would have been found at the Élysée, the twenty-five millions taken from the Bank.

There has, then, been in France, — one must needs speak of these things coolly, — in France, that land of the sword, that land of cavaliers, the land of Hoche, of Drouot, and of Bayard — there has been a day, when a man, surrounded by five or six political sharpers, experts in ambuscades, and grooms of *coups d'état,* lolling in a gilded office, his feet on the fire-dogs, a cigar in his mouth, placed a price upon military honour, weighed it in the scales like a commodity, a thing buyable and sellable, put down the general at a million, the private at a louis, and said of the conscience of the French army: "That is worth so much."

And this man is the nephew of the Emperor.

By the bye, this nephew is not proud: he accommodates himself, with great facility, to the necessities of his adventures; adapts himself readily and without reluctance, to every freak of destiny. Place him in London, and let it be his interest to please the English government, he would not hesitate, and with the very hand which now seeks to seize the sceptre of Charlemagne, he would grasp the truncheon of a policeman. If I were not Napoleon, I would be Vidocq.

And here thought pauses!

And such is the man by whom France is governed! governed, do I say? possessed rather in full sovereignty!

And every day, and every moment, by his decrees, by his messages, by his harangues, by all these unprecedented imbecilities which he parades in the *Moniteur*, this *émigré*, so ignorant of France, gives lessons to France! and this knave tells France that he has saved her! From whom? from herself. Before he came, Providence did nothing but absurdities; God waited for him to put everything in order; and at length he came. For the last thirty-six years poor France had been afflicted with all sorts of pernicious things: that "sonority," the tribune; that hubbub, the press; that insolence, thought; that crying abuse, liberty: he came, and for the tribune, he substituted the Senate; for the press, the censorship; for thought, imbecility; for liberty, the sabre; and by the sabre, the censorship, imbecility, and the Senate, France is saved! Saved! bravo! and from whom, I ask again? from herself. For what was France before, if you please? a horde of pillagers, robbers, Jacquerie, assassins, demagogues! It was necessary to put fetters on this abominable villain, this France, and it was M. Bonaparte Louis who applied the fetters. Now France is in prison, on bread and water, punished, humiliated, throttled and well guarded; be tranquil, everybody; Sieur Bonaparte, gendarme at the Élysée, answers for her to Europe; this miserable France is in her strait waistcoat, and if she stirs! —

Ah! what spectacle is this? What dream is this? What nightmare is this? On the one hand, a nation, first among nations, and on the other, a man, last among men — and see what that man does to that nation! God save the mark! He tramples her under foot, he laughs at her to her face, he flouts her, he denies her, he insults her, he scoffs at her! How now! He says, there is none but I! What! in this land of France where no man's ears may be boxed with impunity, one may box the ears of the whole people! Oh! abominable shame! Each time that M. Bonaparte spits, every one must needs wipe his face! And this can last! And you tell me that it will last! No! No! No! By all the blood we have in our veins, no! this shall not last. Were it to last, it must be that there is no God in heaven, or no longer a France on earth!

BOOK II

I
THE CONSTITUTION

A roll of the drums; clowns, attention!

The President of the Republic,

“Considering that — all the restrictive laws on the liberty of the press having been repealed, all the laws against hand-bills and posting-bills having been abolished, the right of public assemblage having been fully re-established, all the unconstitutional laws, including martial law, having been suppressed, every citizen being empowered to say what he likes through every medium of publicity, whether newspaper, placard, or electoral meeting, all solemn engagements, especially the oath of the 20th of December, 1848, having been scrupulously kept, all facts having been investigated, all questions propounded and discussed, all candidacies publicly defeated, without the possibility of alleging that the slightest violence had been exercised against the meanest citizen, — in one word, in the fullest enjoyment of liberty. “The sovereign people being interrogated on this question: —

“‘Do the French people mean to place themselves, tied neck and heels, at the discretion of M. Louis Bonaparte?’

“Have replied YES by 7,500,000 votes. (*Interruption by the author*: — We shall have more to say of these 7,500,000 votes.)

“PROMULGATES

“THE CONSTITUTION IN MANNER FOLLOWING, THAT IS TO SAY:

“Article 1. The Constitution recognises, confirms, and guarantees the great principles proclaimed in 1789, which are the foundation of the public law of the French people.

“Article 2 and following. The platform and the press, which impeded the march of progress, are superseded by the police and the censorship, and by the secret deliberations of the Senate, the Corps Législatif and the Council of State.

“Article last. The thing commonly called human intelligence is suppressed.

“Done at the Palace of the Tuileries January 14, 1852.

“Louis Napoleon.

“Witnessed and sealed with the great seal.

“E. Rouher.

“*Keeper of the Seals and Minister of Justice*.”

This Constitution, which loudly proclaims and confirms the Revolution of 1789 in its principles and its consequences, and which merely abolishes liberty, was evidently and happily inspired in M. Bonaparte, by an old provincial play-bill which it is well to recall at this time:

This Day,
The Grand Representation
of
LA DAME BLANCHE,
an opera in three acts.

Note. The *music*, which would embarrass the progress of the plot, will be replaced by lively and piquant *dialogue*.

II

THE SENATE

This lively and piquant dialogue is carried on by the Council of State, the Corps Législatif and the Senate.

Is there a Senate then? Certainly. This “great body,” this “balancing power,” this “supreme moderator,” is in truth the principal glory of the Constitution. Let us consider it for a moment.

The Senate! It is a senate. But of what Senate are you speaking? Is it the Senate whose duty it was to deliberate on the description of sauce with which the Emperor should eat his turbot? Is it the Senate of which Napoleon thus spoke on April 5, 1814: “A sign was an order for the Senate, and it always did more than was required of it?” Is it the Senate of which Napoleon said in 1805: “The poltroons were afraid of displeasing me?” Is it the Senate which drew from Tiberius almost the same exclamation: “The base wretches! greater slaves than we require them to be!” Is it the Senate which caused Charles XII to say: “Send my boot to Stockholm.”— “For what purpose, Sire?” demanded his minister.— “To preside over the Senate,” was the reply.

But let us not trifle. This year they are eighty; they will be one hundred and fifty next year. They monopolise to themselves, in full plenitude, fourteen articles of the Constitution, from Article 19 to Article 33. They are "guardians of the public liberties;" their functions are gratuitous by Article 22; consequently, they have from fifteen to thirty thousand francs per annum. They have the peculiar privilege of receiving their salary, and the prerogative of "not opposing" the promulgation of the laws. They are all illustrious personages."_This is not an "abortive Senate,"_like that of Napoleon the uncle; this is a genuine Senate; the marshals are members, and the cardinals and M. Lebœuf.

"What is your position in the country?" some one asks the Senate. "We are charged with the preservation of public liberty."— "What is your business in this city?" Pierrot demands of Harlequin.— "My business," replies Harlequin, "is to curry-comb the bronze horse."

"We know what is meant by *esprit-de-corps*: this spirit will urge the Senate by every possible means to augment its power. It will destroy the Corps Législatif, if it can; and if occasion offers it will compound with the Bourbons."

Who said this? The First Consul. Where? At the Tuileries, in April, 1804.

"Without title or authority, and in violation of every principle, it has surrendered the country and consummated its ruin. It has been the plaything of eminent intriguers; I know of no body which ought to appear in history with greater ignominy than the Senate."

Who said this? The Emperor. Where? At St. Helena.

There is actually then a senate in the "Constitution of January 14." But, candidly speaking, this is a mistake; for now that public hygiene has made some progress, we are accustomed to see the public highway better kept. After the Senate of the Empire, we thought that no more senates would be mixed up with Constitutions.

III

THE COUNCIL OF STATE AND THE CORPS LÉGISLATIF

There is also a Council of State and a Corps Législatif: the former joyous, well paid, plump, rosy, fat, and fresh, with a sharp eye, a red ear, a voluble tongue, a sword by its side, a belly, and embroidered in gold; the Corps Législatif, pale, meagre, sad, and embroidered in silver. The Council of State comes and goes, enters and exits, returns, rules, disposes, decides, settles, and decrees, and sees Louis Napoleon face to face. The Corps Législatif, on the contrary, walks on tiptoe, fumbles with its hat, puts its finger to its lips, smiles humbly, sits on the corner of its chair, and speaks only when questioned. Its words being naturally obscene, the public journals are forbidden to make the slightest allusion to them. The Corps Législatif passes laws and votes taxes by Article 39; and when, fancying it has occasion for some instruction, some detail, some figures, or some explanation, it presents itself, hat in hand, at the door of the departments to consult the ministers, the usher receives it in the antechamber, and with a roar of laughter, gives it a fillip on the nose. Such are the duties of the Corps Législatif.

Let us state, however, that this melancholy position began, in June, 1852, to extort some sighs from the sorrowful personages who form a portion of the concern. The report of the commission on the budget will remain in the memory of men, as one of the most heart-rending masterpieces of the plaintive style. Let us repeat those gentle accents: —

“Formerly, as you know, the necessary communications in such cases were carried on directly between the commissioners and the ministers. It was to the latter that they addressed themselves to obtain the documents indispensable to the discussion of affairs; and the ministers even came personally, with the heads of their several departments, to give verbal explanations, frequently sufficient to preclude the necessity of further discussion; and the resolutions formed by the commission on the budget after they had heard them, were submitted direct to the Chamber.

“But now we can have no communication with the government except through the medium of the Council of State, which, being the confidant and the organ of its own ideas, has alone the right of transmitting to the Corps Législatif the documents which, in its turn, it receives from the ministers.

“In a word, for written reports, as well as for verbal communications, the government commissioners have superseded the ministers, with whom, however, they must have a preliminary understanding.

“With respect to the modifications which the commission might wish to propose, whether by the adoption of amendments presented by the deputies, or from its own examination of the budget, they must, before you are called upon to consider them, be sent to the Council of State, there to undergo discussion.

"There (it is impossible not to notice it) those modifications have no interpreters, no official defenders.

"This mode of procedure appears to be derived from the Constitution itself; and *if we speak of the matter now*, it is *solely* to prove to you that it must occasion *delays* in accomplishing the task imposed upon the commission on the budget."

Reproach was never so mildly uttered; it is impossible to receive more chastely and more gracefully, what M. Bonaparte, in his autocratic style, calls "guarantees of calmness," but what Molière, with the license of a great writer, denominates "kicks."

Thus, in the shop where laws and budgets are manufactured, there is a master of the house, the Council of State, and a servant, the Corps Législatif. According to the terms of the "Constitution," who is it that appoints the master of the house? M. Bonaparte. Who appoints the servant? The nation. That is as it should be.

IV

THE FINANCES

Let it be observed that, under the shadow of these "wise institutions," and thanks to the *coup d'état*, which, as is well known, has re-established order, the finances, the public safety, and public prosperity, the budget, by the admission of M. Gouin, shows a deficit of 123,000,000 francs.

As for commercial activity since the *coup d'état*, as for the prosperity of trade, as for the revival of business, in order to appreciate them it is enough to reject words and have recourse to figures. On this point, the following statement is official and decisive: the discounts of the Bank of France produced during the first half of 1852, only 589,502fr. 62c. at the central bank; while the profits of the branch establishments have risen only to 651,108fr. 7c. This appears from the half-yearly report of the Bank itself.

M. Bonaparte, however, does not trouble himself with taxation. Some fine morning he wakes and yawns, rubs his eyes, takes his pen and decrees — what? The budget. Achmet III. was once desirous of levying taxes according to his own fancy.— "Invincible lord," said his Vizier to him, "your subjects cannot be taxed beyond what is prescribed by the law and the prophet."

This identical M. Bonaparte, when at Ham, wrote as follows: —

“If the sums levied each year on the inhabitants generally are employed for unproductive purposes, such as creating *useless places, raising sterile monuments, and maintaining in the midst of profound peace a more expensive army than that which conquered at Austerlitz*, taxation becomes in such case an overwhelming burden; it exhausts the country, it takes without any return.”

With reference to this word budget an observation occurs to us. In this present year 1852, the bishops and the judges of the *Cour de Cassation*, have 50 francs per diem; the archbishops, the councillors of state, the first presidents, and the procureurs-general, have each 69 francs per diem; the senators, the prefects, and the generals of division receive 83 francs each per diem; the presidents of sections of the Council of State 222 francs per diem; the ministers 252 francs per diem; Monseigneur the Prince-President, comprising of course, in his salary, the sum for maintenance of the royal residences, receives per diem 44,444 francs, 44 centimes. The revolution of the 2nd of December was made against the Twenty-five Francs!

V

THE LIBERTY OF THE PRESS

We have now seen what the legislature is, what the administration, and what the budget.

And the courts! What was formerly called the *Cour de Cassation* is no longer anything more than a record office of councils of war. A soldier steps out of the guard-house and writes in the margin of the book of the law, *I will*, or *I will not*. In all directions the corporal gives the order, and the magistrate countersigns it. Come! tuck up your gowns and begone, or else — Hence these abominable trials, sentences, and condemnations. What a sorry spectacle is that troop of judges, with hanging heads and bent backs, driven with the butt end of the musket into baseness and iniquity!

And the liberty of the press! What shall we say of it? Is it not a mockery merely to pronounce the words? That free press, the honour of French intellect, a light thrown from all points at once upon all questions, the perpetual sentinel of the nation — where is it? What has M. Bonaparte done with it? It is where the public platform is. Twenty newspapers extinguished in Paris, eighty in the departments, — one hundred newspapers suppressed: that is to say, looking only to the material side of the question, innumerable families deprived of bread; that is to say, understand it, citizens, one hundred houses confiscated, one hundred farms taken from their proprietors, one hundred interest coupons stolen from the public funds. Marvellous identity of principles: freedom suppressed is property destroyed. Let the selfish idiots who applaud the *coup d'état* reflect upon this.

Instead of a law concerning the press a decree has been laid upon it; a *fetfa*, a *firman*, dated from the imperial stirrup: the régime of admonition. This régime is well known. Its working is witnessed daily. Such men were requisite to invent such a thing. Despotism has never shown itself more grossly insolent and stupid than in this species of censorship of the morrow, which precedes and announces the suppression, and which administers the bastinado to a paper before killing it entirely. The folly of such a government corrects and tempers its atrocity. The whole of the decree concerning the press may be summed up in one line: "I permit you to speak, but I require you to be silent." Who reigns, in God's name? Is it Tiberius? Is it Schahabaham? Three-fourths of the republican journalists transported or proscribed, the remainder hunted down by mixed commissions, dispersed, wandering, in hiding. Here and there, in four or five of the surviving journals, in four or five which are independent but closely watched, over whose heads is suspended the club of Maupas,_some fifteen or twenty writers, courageous, serious, pure, honest, and noble-hearted, who write, as it were, with a chain round their necks, and a ball on their feet; talent between two sentinels, independence gagged, honesty under surveillance, and Veuillot exclaiming: "I am free!"

VI

NOVELTIES IN RESPECT TO WHAT IS LAWFUL

The press enjoys the privilege of being censored, of being admonished, of being suspended, of being suppressed; it has even the privilege of being tried. Tried! By whom? By the courts. What courts? The police courts. And what about that excellent trial by jury? Progress: it is outstripped. The jury is far behind us, and we return to the government judges. "Repression is more rapid and more efficacious," as Maître Rouher says. And then 'tis so much better. Call the causes: correctional police, sixth chamber; first cause, one Roumage, swindler; second cause, one Lamennais, writer. This has a good effect, and accustoms the citizens to talk without distinction of writers and swindlers. That, certainly, is an advantage; but in a practical point of view, with reference to "repression," is the government quite sure of what it has done on that head? Is it quite sure that the sixth chamber will answer better than the excellent assize court of Paris, for instance, which had for president such abject creatures as Partarrieu-Lafosse, and for advocates at its bar, such base wretches as Suin, and such dull orators as Mongis? Can it reasonably expect that the police judges will be still more base and more contemptible than they? Will those judges, salaried as they are, work better than that jury-squad, who had the department prosecutor for corporal, and who pronounced their judgments and gesticulated their verdicts with the precision of a charge in double quick time, so that the prefect of police, Carlier, good-humouredly observed to a celebrated advocate, M. Desm —— : "*The jury! what a stupid institution! When not forced to it they never condemn, but when forced they never acquit.*" Let us weep for that worthy jury which was made by Carlier and unmade by Rouher.

This government feels that it is hideous. It wants no portrait; above all it wants no mirror. Like the osprey it takes refuge in darkness, and it would die if once seen. Now it wishes to endure. It does not propose to be talked about; it does not propose to be described. It has imposed silence on the press of France; we have seen in what manner. But to silence the press in France was only half-success. It must also be silenced in foreign countries. Two prosecutions were attempted in Belgium, against the *Bulletin Français* and against *La Nation*. They were acquitted by an honest Belgian jury. This was annoying. What was to be done? The Belgian journals were attacked through their pockets. "You have subscribers in France," they were told; "but if you 'discuss' us, you shall be kept out. If you wish to come in, make yourselves agreeable." An attempt was made to frighten the English journals. "If you 'discuss' us" — decidedly they do not wish to be *discussed* — "we shall drive your correspondents out of France." The English press roared with laughter. But this is not all. There are French writers outside of France: they are proscribed, that is to say they are free. Suppose those fellows should speak? Suppose those demagogues should write? They are very capable of doing both; and we must prevent them. But how are we to do it? To gag people at a distance is not so easy a matter: M. Bonaparte's arm is not long enough for that. Let us try, however; we will prosecute them in the countries where they have taken refuge. Very good: the juries of free countries will understand that these exiles represent justice, and that the

Bonapartist government personifies iniquity. These juries will follow the example of the Belgian jury and acquit. The friendly governments will then be solicited to expel these refugees, to banish these exiles. Very good: the exiles will go elsewhere; they will always find some corner of the earth open to them where they can speak. How then are they to be got at? Rouher and Baroche clubbed their wits together, and between them they hit upon this expedient: to patch up a law dealing with crimes committed by Frenchmen in foreign countries, and to slip into it "crimes of the press." The Council of State sanctioned this, and the Corps Législatif did not oppose it, and it is now the law of the land. If we speak outside of France, we shall be condemned for the offence in France; imprisonment (in future, if caught), fines and confiscations. Again, very good. The book I am now writing will, therefore, be tried in France, and its author duly convicted; this I expect, and I confine myself to apprising all those quidams calling themselves magistrates, who, in black and red gown, shall concoct the thing that, sentence to any fine whatever being well and duly pronounced against me, nothing will equal my disdain for the judgment, but my contempt for the judges. This is my defence.

VII

THE ADHERENTS

Who are they that flock round the establishment? As we have said, the gorge rises at thought of them.

Ah! these rulers of the day, — we who are now proscribed remember them when they were representatives of the people, only twelve months ago, running hither and thither in the lobbies of the Assembly, their heads high, and with a show of independence, and the air and manner of men who belonged to themselves. What magnificence! and how proud they were! How they placed their hands on their hearts while they shouted "Vive la Republique!" And if some "Terrorist," some "Montagnard," or some "red republican," happened to allude from the tribune to the planned *coup d'état* and the projected Empire, how they vociferated at him: "You are a calumniator!" How they shrugged their shoulders at the word "Senate!"— "The Empire to-day" cried one, "would be blood and slime; you slander us, we shall never be implicated in such a matter." Another affirmed that he consented to be one of the President's ministers solely to devote himself to the defence of the Constitution and the laws; a third glorified the tribune as the palladium of the country; a fourth recalled the oath of Louis Bonaparte, exclaiming: "Do you doubt that he is an honest man?" These last — there were two of them — went the length of voting for and signing his deposition, on the 2nd of December, at the mayoralty of the Tenth Arrondissement; another sent a note on the 4th of December to the writer of these lines, to "felicitate him on having dictated the proclamation of the Left, by which Louis Bonaparte was outlawed." And now, behold them, Senators, Councillors of State, ministers, belaced, betagged, bedizened with gold! Base wretches! Before you embroider your sleeves, wash your hands!

M. Q.-B. paid a visit to M. O.-B. and said to him: "Can you conceive the assurance of this Bonaparte? he has had the presumption to offer me the place of Master of Requests!"— "You refused it?"— "Certainly." — The next day, being offered the place of Councillor of State, salary twenty-five thousand francs, our indignant Master of Requests becomes a grateful Councillor of State. M. Q.-B. accepts.

One class of men rallied en masse: the fools! They comprise the sound part of the Corps Législatif. It was to them that the head of the State addressed this little flattery:— "The first test of the Constitution, entirely of French origin, must have convinced you that we possess the qualities of a strong and a free government. We are in earnest, discussion is free, and the vote of taxation decisive. France possesses a government animated by faith and by love of the right, which is based upon the people, the source of all power; upon the army, the source of all strength; and upon religion, the source of all justice. Accept the assurance of my regard." These worthy dupes, we know them also; we have seen a goodly number of them on the benches of the majority in the Legislative Assembly. Their chiefs, skilful manipulators, had succeeded in terrifying them, — a certain method of leading them wherever they thought proper. These chiefs, unable any longer to employ usefully those old bugbears, the terms "Jacobin" and "sans-culotte," decidedly too hackneyed, had furbished up the word "demagogue." These ringleaders, trained to all sorts of schemes and manœuvres, exploited successfully the word "Mountain," and agitated to good purpose that startling and glorious souvenir. With these few letters of the alphabet formed into syllables and suitably accented, — Demagogues, Montagnards, Partitioners, Communists, Red Republicans, — they made wildfires dance before the eyes of the simple. They had found the method of perverting the brains of their colleagues, who were so ingenuous as to swallow them whole, so to speak, with a sort of dictionary, wherein every expression made use of by the democratic writers and orators was readily translated. For *humanity* read *ferocity*; for *universal good* read *subversion*; for *Republic* read *Terrorism*; for *Socialism* read *Pillage*; for *Fraternity*, read *Massacre*; for *the Gospel*, read *Death to the Rich*. So that, when an orator of the Left exclaimed, for instance: "*We rush for the suppression of war, and the abolition of the death penalty,*" a crowd of poor souls on the Right distinctly understood: "*We wish to put everything to fire and sword;*" and in a fury shook their fists at the orator. After such speeches, in which there had been a question only of liberty, of universal peace, of prosperity arising from labour, of concord, and of progress, the representatives of that category which we have designated at the head of this paragraph, were seen to rise, pale as death; they were not sure that they were not already guillotined, and went to look for their hats to see whether they still had heads.

These poor frightened creatures did not haggle over their adhesion to the 2nd of December. The expression, "Louis Napoleon has saved society," was invented especially for them.

And those eternal prefects, those eternal mayors, those eternal magistrates, those eternal sheriffs, those eternal complimenters of the rising sun, or of the lighted lamp, who, on the day after success, flock to the conqueror, to the triumpher, to the master, to his Majesty Napoleon the Great, to his Majesty Louis XVIII, to his Majesty Alexander I, to his Majesty Charles X, to his Majesty Louis Philippe, to Citizen Lamartine, to Citizen Cavaignac, to Monseigneur the Prince-President, kneeling, smiling, expansive, bearing upon salvers the keys of their towns, and on their faces the keys of their consciences!

But imbeciles ('tis an old story) have always made a part of all institutions, and are almost an institution of themselves; and as for the prefects and magistrates, as for these adorers of every new régime, insolent with, fortune and rapidity, they abound at all times. Let us do justice to the régime of December; it can boast not only of such partisans as these, but it has creatures and adherents peculiar to itself; it has produced an altogether new race of notabilities.

Nations are never conscious of all the riches they possess in the matter of knaves. Overturnings and subversions of this description are necessary to bring them to light. Then the nations wonder at what issues from the dust. It is splendid to contemplate. One whose shoes and clothes and reputation were of a sort to attract all the dogs of Europe in full cry, comes forth an ambassador. Another, who had a glimpse of *Bicêtre* and *La Roquette*, awakes a general, and Grand Eagle of the Legion of Honour. Every adventurer assumes an official costume, furnishes himself with a good pillow stuffed with bank-notes, takes a sheet of white paper, and writes thereon: "End of my adventures."— "You know So-and-So?"— "Yes, is he at the galleys?"— "No, he's a minister."

VIII

MENS AGITAT MOLEM

In the centre is the man — the man we have described; the man of Punic faith, the fatal man, attacking the civilisation to arrive at power; seeking, elsewhere than amongst the true people, one knows not what ferocious popularity; cultivating the still uncivilized qualities of the peasant and the soldier, endeavouring to succeed by appealing to gross selfishness, to brutal passions, to newly awakened desires, to excited appetites; something like a Prince Marat, with nearly the same object, which in Marat was grand, and in Louis Bonaparte is little; the man who kills, who transports, who banishes, who expels, who proscribes, who despoils; this man with harassed gesture and glassy eye, who walks with distracted air amid the horrible things he does, like a sort of sinister somnambulist.

It has been said of Louis Bonaparte, whether with friendly intent or otherwise, — for these strange beings have strange flatterers,— "He is a dictator, he is a despot, nothing more." — He is that in our opinion, and he is also something else.

The dictator was a magistrate. Livy_and Cicero_call him *praetor maximus*; Seneca_calls him *magister populi*; what he decreed was looked upon as a fiat from above. Livy_says: *pro numine observatum*. In those times of incomplete civilisation, the rigidity of the ancient laws not having foreseen all cases, his function was to provide for the safety of the people; he was the product of this text: *salus populi suprema lex esto*. He caused to be carried before him the twenty-four axes, the emblems of his power of life and death. He was outside the law, and above the law, but he could not touch the law. The dictatorship was a veil, behind which the law remained intact. The law was before the dictator and after him; and it resumed its power over him on the cessation of his office. He was appointed for a very short period — six months only: *semestris dictatura*, says Livy._But as if this enormous power, even when freely conferred by the people, ultimately weighed heavily upon him, like remorse, the dictator generally resigned before the end of his term. Cincinnatus gave it up at the end of eight days. The dictator was forbidden to dispose of the public funds without the authority of the Senate, or to go out of Italy. He could not even ride on horseback without the permission of the people. He might be a plebeian; Marcius Rutilus, and Publius Philo were dictators. That magistracy was created for very different objects: to organize fêtes for saints' days; to drive a sacred nail into the wall of the Temple of Jupiter; on one occasion to appoint the Senate. Republican Rome had eighty-eight dictators. This intermittent institution continued for one hundred and fifty-three years, from the year of Rome 552, to the year 711. It began with Servilius Geminus, and reached Cæsar, passing over Sylla. It expired with Cæsar. The dictatorship was fitted to be repudiated by Cincinnatus, and to be espoused by Cæsar. Cæsar was five times dictator in the course of five years, from 706 to 711. This was a dangerous magistracy, and it ended by devouring liberty.

Is M. Bonaparte a dictator? We see no impropriety in answering yes. *Praetor maximus*, — general-in-chief? the colours salute him. *Magister populi*, — the master of the people? ask the cannons levelled on the public squares. *Pro numine observatum*, — regarded as God? ask M. Troplong. He has appointed the Senate, he has instituted holidays, he has provided for the "safety of society," he has driven a sacred nail into the wall of the Pantheon, and he has hung upon this nail his *coup d'état*. The only discrepancy is, that he makes and unmakes the law according to his own fancy, he rides horseback without permission, and as to the six months, he takes a little more time. Cæsar took five years, he takes double; that is but fair. Julius Cæsar five, M. Louis Bonaparte ten — the proportion is well observed.

From the dictator, let us pass to the despot. This is the other qualification almost accepted by M. Bonaparte. Let us speak for a while the language of the Lower Empire. It befits the subject.

The *Despotes* came after the *Basileus*. Among other attributes, he was general of the infantry and of the cavalry — *magister utriusque exercitus*. It was the Emperor Alexis, surnamed the Angel, who created the dignity of *despotes*. This officer was below the Emperor, and above the Sebastocrator, or Augustus, and above the Cæsar.

It will be seen that this is somewhat the case with us. M. Bonaparte is *despotes*, if we admit, which is not difficult, that Magnan is Cæsar, and that Maupas is Augustus.

Despot and dictator, that is admitted. But all this great *éclat*, all this triumphant power, does not prevent little incidents from happening in Paris, like the following, which honest *badauds*, witnesses of the fact, will tell you, musingly. Two men were walking in the street, talking of their business or their private affairs. One of them, referring to some knave or other, of whom he thought he had reason to complain, exclaimed: “He is a wretch, a swindler, a rascal!” A police agent who heard these last words, cried out: “Monsieur, you are speaking of the President; I arrest you.”

And now, will M. Bonaparte be Emperor, or will he not?

A pretty question! He is master, — he is Cadi, Mufti, Bey, Dey, Sultan, Grand Khan, Grand Lama, Great Mogul, Great Dragon, Cousin to the Sun, Commander of the Faithful, Shah, Czar, Sofi, and Caliph. Paris is no longer Paris, but Bagdad; with a Giaffar who is called Persigny, and a Scheherazade who is in danger of having her head chopped off every morning, and who is called *Le Constitutionnel*. M. Bonaparte may do whatever he likes with property, families, and persons. If French citizens wish to fathom the depth of the “government” into which they have fallen, they have only to ask themselves a few questions. Let us see: magistrate, he tears off your gown, and sends you to prison. What of it? Let us see: Senate, Council of State, Corps Législatif, he seizes a shovel, and flings you all in a heap in a corner. What of it? Landed proprietor, he confiscates your country house and your town house, with courtyards, stables, gardens, and appurtenances. What of it? Father, he takes your daughter; brother, he takes your sister; citizen, he takes your wife, by right of might. What of it? Wayfarer, your looks displease him, and he blows your brains out with a pistol, and goes home. What of it?

All these things being done, what would be the result? Nothing. “Monseigneur the Prince-President took his customary drive yesterday in the Champs Élysées, in a calèche *à la Daumont*, drawn by four horses, accompanied by a single aide-de-camp.” This is what the newspapers will say.

He has effaced from the walls Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity; and he is right. Frenchmen, alas! you are no longer either free, — the strait-waistcoat is upon you; or equal, — the soldier is everything; or brothers, — for civil war is brewing under this melancholy peace of a state of siege.

Emperor? Why not? He has a Maury who is called Sibour; he has a Fontanes, or, if you prefer it, a *Faciuntasinos*, who is called Fortoul; he has a Laplace who answers to the name of Leverrier, although he did not produce the “*Mécanique Céleste*.” He will easily find Esménards and Luce de Lancivals. His Pius VII is at Rome, in the cassock of Pius IX. His green uniform has been seen at Strasburg; his eagle has been seen at Boulogne; his grey riding-coat, did he not wear it at Ham? Cassock or riding-coat, ’tis all one. Madame de Staël comes out, of his house. She wrote “Lelia.” He smiles on her pending the day when he will exile her. Do you insist on an archduchess? wait awhile and he will get one. *Tu, felix Austria, nube.* His Murat is called Saint-Arnaud; his Talleyrand is called Morny; his Duc d’Enghien is called Law.

What does he lack then? Nothing; a mere trifle; merely Austerlitz and Marengo.

Make the best of it; he is Emperor *in petto*; one of these mornings he will be so in the sun; nothing more is wanting than a trivial formality, the mere consecration and crowning of his false oath at Notre-Dame. After that we shall have fine doings. Expect an imperial spectacle. Expect caprices, surprises, stupefying, bewildering things, the most unexpected combinations of words, the most fearless cacophony? Expect Prince Troplong, Duc Maupas, Duc Mimerel, Marquis Leboeuf, Baron Baroche. Form in line, courtiers; hats off, senators; the stable-door opens, monseigneur the horse is consul. Gild the oats of his highness Incitatus.

Everything will be swallowed; the public hiatus will be prodigious. All the enormities will pass away. The old fly-catchers will disappear and make room for the swallowers of whales.

To our minds the Empire exists from this moment, and without waiting for the interlude of the senatus consultum and the comedy of the plebiscite, we despatch this bulletin to Europe: —

“The treason of the 2nd of December is delivered of the Empire.

“The mother and child are indisposed.”

IX
OMNIPOTENCE

Let us forget this man’s origin and his 2nd of December, and look to his political capacity. Shall we judge him by the eight months he has reigned? On the one hand look at his power, and on the other at his acts. What can he do? Everything. What has he done? Nothing. With his unlimited power a man of genius, in eight months, would have changed the whole face of France, of Europe, perhaps. He would not, certainly, have effaced the crime of his starting-point, but he might have covered it. By dint of material improvements he might have succeeded, perhaps, in masking from the nation his moral abasement. Indeed, we must admit that for a dictator of genius the thing was not difficult. A certain number of social problems, elaborated during these last few years by several powerful minds, seemed to be ripe, and might receive immediate, practical solution, to the great profit and satisfaction of the nation. Of this, Louis Bonaparte does not appear to have had any idea. He has not approached, he has not had a glimpse of one of them. He has not even found at the Élysée any old remains of the socialist meditations of Ham. He has added several new crimes to his first one, and in this he has been logical. With the exception of these crimes he has produced nothing. Absolute power, no initiative! He has taken France and does not know what to do with it. In truth, we are tempted to pity this eunuch struggling with omnipotence.

It is true, however, that this dictator keeps in motion; let us do him this justice; he does not remain quiet for an instant; he sees with affright the gloom and solitude around him; people sing who are afraid in the dark, but he keeps moving. He makes a fuss, he goes at everything, he runs after projects; being unable to create, he decrees; he endeavours to mask his nullity; he is perpetual motion; but, alas! the wheel turns in empty space. Conversion of *rentes*? Of what profit has it been to this day? Saving of eighteen millions! Very good: the annuitants lose them, but the President and the Senate, with their two endowments, pocket them; the benefit to France is zero. Credit Foncier? no capital forthcoming. Railways? they are decreed, and then laid aside. It is the same with all these things as with the working-men’s cities. Louis Bonaparte subscribes, but does not pay. As for the budget, the budget controlled by the blind men in the Council of State, and voted by the dumb men in the Corps Législatif, there is an abyss beneath it. There was no possible or efficacious budget but a great reduction in the army: two hundred thousand soldiers left at home, two hundred millions saved. Just try to touch the army! the soldier, who would regain his freedom, would applaud, but what would the officer say? And in reality, it is not the soldier but the officer who is caressed. Then Paris and Lyons must be guarded, and all the other cities; and afterwards, when we are Emperor, a little European war must be got up. Behold the gulf!

If from financial questions we pass to political institutions, oh! there the neo-Bonapartists flourish abundantly, there are the creations! Good heavens, what creations! A Constitution in the style of Ravrio, — we have been examining it, — ornamented with palm-leaves and swans' necks, borne to the Élysée with old easy-chairs in the carriages of the *garde-meuble*; the Conservative Senate restitched and regilded, the Council of State of 1806 refurbished and new-bordered with fresh lace; the old Corps Législatif patched up, with new nails and fresh paint, minus Lainé and plus Morny! In lieu of liberty of the press, the bureau of public spirit; in place of individual liberty, the ministry of police. All these "institutions," which we have passed in review, are nothing more than the old salon furniture of the Empire. Beat it, dust it, sweep away the cobwebs, splash it over with stains of French blood, and you have the establishment of 1852. This bric-à-brac governs France. These are the creations!

Where is common sense? where is reason? where is truth? Not a sound side of contemporary intelligence that has not received a shock, not a just conquest of the age that has not been thrown down and broken. All sorts of extravagance become possible. All that we have seen since the 2nd of December is a gallop, through all that is absurd, of a commonplace man broken loose.

These individuals, the malefactor and his accomplices, are in possession of immense, incomparable, absolute, unlimited power, sufficient, we repeat, to change the whole face of Europe. They make use of it only for amusement. To enjoy and to enrich themselves, such is their "socialism." They have stopped the budget on the public highway; the coffers are open; they fill their money-bags: they have money, — do you want some, here you are! All the salaries are doubled or trebled; we have given the figures above. Three ministers, Turgot (for there is a Turgot in this affair), Persigny and Maupas, have a million each of secret funds; the Senate a million, the Council of State half a million, the officers of the 2nd of December have a Napoleon-month, that is to say, millions; the soldiers of the 2nd of December have medals, that is to say, millions; M. Murat wants millions and will have them; a minister gets married, — quick, half a million; M.

Bonaparte, *quia nominor Poleo*, has twelve millions, plus four millions, — sixteen millions. Millions, millions! This regime is called Million. M. Bonaparte has three hundred horses for private use, the fruit and vegetables of the national domains, and parks and gardens formerly royal; he is stuffed to repletion; he said the other day: “all my carriages,” as Charles V said: “all my Spains,” and as Peter the Great said: “all my Russias.” The marriage of Gamache is celebrated at the Élysée; the spits are turning day and night before the fireworks; according to the bulletins published on the subject, the bulletins of the new Empire, they consume there six hundred and fifty pounds of meat every day; the Élysée will soon have one hundred and forty-nine kitchens, like the Castle of Schônbrunn; they drink, they eat, they laugh, they feast; banquet at all the ministers’, banquet at the École Militaire, banquet at the Hotel de Ville, banquet at the Tuileries, a monster fête on the 10th of May, a still more monster fête on the 15th of August; they swim in all sorts of abundance and intoxication. And the man of the people, the poor day-labourer who is out of work, the pauper in rags, with bare feet, to whom summer brings no bread, and winter no wood, whose old mother lies in agony upon a rotten mattress, whose daughter walks the streets for a livelihood, whose little children are shivering with hunger, fever and cold, in the hovels of Faubourg Saint-Marceau, in the cock-lofts of Rouen, and in the cellars of Lille, does any one think of him? What is to become of him? What is done for him? Let him die like a dog!

X

THE TWO PROFILES OF M. BONAPARTE

The curious part of it is that they are desirous of being respected; a general is venerable, a minister is sacred. The Countess d’Andl —— , a young woman of Brussels, was at Paris in March, 1852, and was one day in a salon in Faubourg Saint-Honoré when M. de P. entered. Madame d’Andl —— , as she went out, passed before him, and it happened that, thinking probably of something else, she shrugged her shoulders. M. de P. noticed it; the following day Madame d’Andl —— was apprised, that henceforward, under pain of being expelled from France like a representative of the people, she must abstain from every mark of approbation or disapprobation when she happened to meet a minister.

Under this corporal-government, and under this countersign-constitution, everything proceeds in military form. The French people consult the order of the day to know how they must get up, how they must go to bed, how they must dress, in what toilette they may go to the sitting of the court, or to the soirée of the prefect; they are forbidden to make mediocre verses; to wear beards; the frill and the white cravat are laws of state. Rule, discipline, passive obedience, eyes cast down, silence in the ranks; such is the yoke under which bows at this moment the nation of initiative and of liberty, the great revolutionary France. The reformer will not stop until France shall be enough of a barrack for the generals to exclaim: “Good!” and enough of a seminary for the bishops to say: “That will do!”

Do you like soldiers? they are to be found everywhere. The Municipal Council of Toulouse gives in its resignation; the Prefect Chapuis-Montlaville replaces the mayor by a colonel, the first deputy by a colonel, and the second deputy by a colonel._Military men take the inside of the sidewalk. “The soldiers,” says Mably, “considering themselves in the place of the citizens who formerly made the consuls, the dictators, the censors, and the tribunes, associated with the government of the emperors a species of military democracy.” Have you a shako on your head? then do what you please. A young man returning from a ball, passed through Rue de Richelieu before the gate of the National Library; the sentinel took aim at him and killed him; the journals of the following morning said: “The young man is dead,” and there it ended. Timour Bey granted to his companions-in-arms, and to their descendants to the seventh generation, impunity for all crimes whatsoever, provided the delinquent had not committed a crime nine times. The sentinel of Rue Richelieu has, therefore, eight citizens more to kill before he can be brought before a court-martial. It is a good thing to be a soldier, but not so good to be a citizen. At the same time, however, this unfortunate army is dishonoured. On the 3rd of December, they decorated the police officers who arrested its representatives and its generals; though it is equally true that the soldiers themselves received two louis per man. Oh, shame on every side! money to the soldiers, and the cross to the police spies!

Jesuitism and corporalism, this is the sum total of the regime. The whole political theory of M. Bonaparte is composed of two hypocrisies — a military hypocrisy towards the army, a catholic hypocrisy towards the clergy. When it is not *Fracasse* it is *Basile*. Sometimes it is both together. In this manner he succeeded wonderfully in duping at the same time

Montalembert, who does not believe in France, and Saint-Arnaud who does not believe in God.

Does the Dictator smell of incense? Does he smell of tobacco? Smell and see. He smells of both tobacco and incense. Oh, France! what a government is this! The spurs pass by beneath the cassock. The *coup d'état* goes to mass, thrashes the civilians, reads its breviary, embraces Catin, tells its beads, empties the wine pots, and takes the sacrament. The *coup d'état* asserts, what is doubtful, that we have gone back to the time of the *Jacqueries*; but this much is certain, that it takes us back to the time of the Crusades. Cæsar goes crusading for the Pope. *Diex el volt.* The Élysée has the faith, and the thirst also, of the Templar.

To enjoy and to live well, we repeat, and to consume the budget; to believe nothing, to make the most of everything; to compromise at once two sacred things, military honour and religious faith; to stain the altar with blood and the standard with holy water; to make the soldier ridiculous, and the priest a little ferocious; to mix up with that great political fraud which he calls his power, the Church and the nation, the conscience of the Catholic and the conscience of the patriot. This is the system of Bonaparte the Little.

All his acts, from the most monstrous to the most puerile, from that which is hideous to that which is laughable, are stamped with this twofold scheme. For instance, national solemnities bore him. The 24th of February and the 4th of May: these are disagreeable or dangerous reminders, which obstinately return at fixed periods. An anniversary is an intruder; let us suppress anniversaries. So be it. We will keep but one birthday, our own. Excellent. But with one fête only how are two parties to be satisfied — the soldier party and the priest party? The soldier party is Voltairian. Where Canrobert smiles, Riancey makes a wry face. What's to be done? You shall see. Your great jugglers are not embarrassed by such a trifle. The *Moniteur* one fine morning declares that there will be henceforth but one national fête, the 15th of August. Hereupon a semi-official commentary: the two masks of the Dictator begin to speak. “The 15th of August,” says the *Ratapoil* mouth, “Saint Napoleon's day!” “The 15th of August,” says the *Tartuffe* mouth, “the fête of the Holy Virgin!” On one side the Second-of-December puffs out its cheeks, magnifies its voice, draws its long sabre and exclaims: “*Sacre-bleu*, grumblers! Let us celebrate the birthday of Napoleon the Great!” On the other, it casts down its eyes, makes the sign of the cross, and mumbles: “My very dear brethren, let us adore the sacred heart of Mary!”

The present government is a hand stained with blood, which dips a finger in the holy water.

XI

RECAPITULATION

But we are asked: “Are you going a little too far? are you not unjust? Grant him something. Has he not to a certain extent ‘made Socialism?’” and the Credit Foncier, the railroads, and the lowering of the interest are brought upon the carpet.

We have already estimated these measures at their proper value; but, while we admit that this is “Socialism,” you would be simpletons to ascribe the credit to M. Bonaparte. It is not he who has made socialism, but time.

A man is swimming against a rapid current; he struggles with unheard-of efforts, he buffets the waves with hand and head, and shoulder, and knee. You say: “He will succeed in going up.” A moment after, you look, and he has gone farther down. He is much farther down the river than he was when he started. Without knowing, or even suspecting it, he loses ground at every effort he makes; he fancies that he is ascending the stream, and he is constantly descending it. He thinks he is advancing, but he is falling hack. Falling credit, as you say, lowering of interest, as you say; M. Bonaparte has already made several of those decrees which you choose to qualify as socialistic, and he will make more. M. Changarnier, had he triumphed instead of M. Bonaparte, would have done as much. Henry V, should he return to-morrow, would do the same. The Emperor of Austria does it in Galicia, and the Emperor Nicholas in Lithuania. But after all, what does this prove? that the torrent which is called Revolution is stronger than the swimmer who is called Despotism.

But even this socialism of M. Bonaparte, what is it? This, socialism? I deny it. Hatred of the middle class it may be, but not socialism. Look at the socialist department *par excellence*, the Department of Agriculture and of Commerce, — he has abolished it. What has he given you as compensation? the Ministry of Police! The other socialist department is the Department of Public Instruction, and that is in danger: one of these days it will be suppressed. The starting-point of socialism is education, gratuitous and obligatory teaching, knowledge. To take the children and make men of them, to take the men and make citizens of them — intelligent, honest, useful, and happy citizens. Intellectual and moral progress first, and material progress after. The two first, irresistibly and of themselves, bring on the last. What does M. Bonaparte do? He persecutes and stifles instruction everywhere. There is one pariah in our France of the present day, and that is the schoolmaster.

Have you ever reflected on what a schoolmaster really is — on that magistracy in which the tyrants of old took shelter, like criminals in the temple, a certain refuge? Have you ever thought of what that man is who teaches children? You enter the workshop of a wheelwright; he is making wheels and shafts; you say, “this is a useful man;” you enter a weaver’s, who is making cloth; you say, “this is a valuable man;” you enter the blacksmith’s shop; he is making pick-axes, hammers, and ploughshares; you say, “this is a necessary man;” you salute these men, these skilful labourers. You enter the house of a schoolmaster, — salute him more profoundly; do you know what he is doing? he is manufacturing minds.

He is the wheelwright, the weaver, and the blacksmith of the work, in which he is aiding God, — the future.

Well! to-day, thanks to the reigning clerical party, as the schoolmaster must not be allowed to work for this future, as this future is to consist of darkness and degradation, not of intelligence and light, — do you wish to know in what manner this humble and great magistrate, the schoolmaster, is made to do his work? The schoolmaster serves mass, sings in the choir, rings the vesper bell, arranges the seats, renews the flowers before the sacred heart, furbishes the altar candlesticks, dusts the tabernacle, folds the copes and the chasubles, counts and keeps in order the linen of the sacristy, puts oil in the lamps, beats the cushion of the confessional, sweeps out the church, and sometimes the rectory; the remainder of his time, on condition that he does not pronounce either of those three words of the devil, Country, Republic, Liberty, he may employ, if he thinks proper, in teaching little children to say their A, B, C.

M. Bonaparte strikes at instruction at the same moment above and below: below, to please the priests, above, to please the bishops. At the same time that he is trying to close the village school, he mutilates the Collège de France. He overturns with one blow the professors’ chairs of Quinet and of Michelet. One fine morning, he declares, by decree, Greek and Latin to be under suspicion, and, so far as he can, forbids all intercourse with the ancient poets and historians of Athens and of Rome, scenting in Æschylus and in Tacitus a vague odour of demagogy. With a stroke of the pen, for instance, he exempts all medical men from literary qualification, which causes Doctor Serres to say: “*We are dispensed, by decree, from knowing how to read and write.*”

New taxes, sumptuary taxes, vestiary taxes; *nemo audeat comedere praeter duo fercula cum potagio*; tax on the living, tax on the dead, tax on successions, tax on carriages, tax on paper. “Bravo!” shouts the beadle party, “fewer books; tax upon dogs, the collars will pay; tax upon senators, the armorial bearings will pay.”— “All this will make me popular!” says M. Bonaparte, rubbing his hands. “He is the socialist Emperor,” vociferate the trusty partisans of the faubourgs. “He is the Catholic Emperor,” murmur the devout in the sacristies. How happy he would be if he could pass in the latter for Constantine, and in the former for Babeuf! Watchwords are repeated, adhesion is declared, enthusiasm spreads from one to another, the École Militaire draws his cypher with bayonets and pistol-barrels, Abbé Gaume and Cardinal Gousset applaud, his bust is crowned with flowers in the market, Nanterre dedicates rosebushes to him, social order is certainly saved, property, family, and religion breathe again, and the police erect a statue to him.

Of bronze?

Fie! that may do for the uncle.

Of marble! *Tu es Pietri et super hanc pietram aedificabo effigiem meam.*

That which he attacks, that which he persecutes, that which they all persecute with him, upon which they pounce, which they wish to crush, to burn, to suppress, to destroy, to annihilate, is it this poor obscure man who is called primary instructor? Is it this sheet of paper that is called a journal? Is it this bundle of sheets which is called a book? Is it this machine of wood and iron which is called a press? No, it is thou, thought, it is thou, human reason, it is thou, nineteenth century, it is thou, Providence, it is thou, God!

We who combat them are “the eternal enemies of order.” We are — for they can as yet find nothing but this worn-out word — we are demagogues.

In the language of the Duke of Alva, to believe in the sacredness of the human conscience, to resist the Inquisition, to brave the state for one’s faith, to draw the sword for one’s country, to defend one’s worship, one’s city, one’s home, one’s house, one’s family, and one’s God, was called *vagabondism*; in the language of Louis Bonaparte, to struggle for freedom, for justice, for the right, to fight in the cause of progress, of civilisation, of France, of mankind, to wish for the abolition of war, and of the penalty of death, to take *au sérieux* the fraternity of men, to believe in a plighted oath, to take up arms for the constitution of one's country, to defend the laws, — this is called *demagogy*.

The man is a demagogue in the nineteenth century, who in the sixteenth would have been a vagabond.

This much being granted, that the dictionary of the Academy no longer exists, that it is night at noonday, that a cat is no longer called cat, and that Baroche is no longer called a knave; that justice is a chimera, that history is a dream, that the Prince of Orange was a vagabond, and the Duke of Alva a just man; that Louis Bonaparte is identical with Napoleon the Great, that they who have violated the Constitution are saviours, and that they who defended it are brigands, — in a word that human probity is dead: very good! in that case I admire this government It works well. It is a model of its species. It compresses, it represses, it oppresses, it imprisons, it exiles, it shoots down with grape-shot, it exterminates, and it even "pardons!" It exercises authority with cannon-balls, and clemency with the flat of the sabre.

"At your pleasure," repeat some worthy incorrigibles of the former party of order, "be indignant, rail, stigmatize, disavow,— 'tis all the same to us; long live stability! All these things put together constitute, after all, a stable government."

Stable! We have already expressed ourselves on the subject of this stability.

Stability! I admire such stability. If it rained newspapers in France for two days only, on the morning of the third nobody would know what had become of M. Louis Bonaparte.

No matter; this man is a burden upon the whole age, he disfigures the nineteenth century, and there will be in this century, perhaps, two or three years upon which it will be recognised, by some shameful mark or other, that Louis Bonaparte sat down upon them.

This person, we grieve to say it, is now the question that occupies all mankind.

At certain epochs in history, the whole human race, from all points of the earth, fix their eyes upon some mysterious spot whence it seems that universal destiny is about to issue. There have been hours when the world has looked towards the Vatican: Gregory VII and Leo X occupied the pontifical throne; other hours, when it has contemplated the Louvre; Philip Augustus, Louis IX, François I, and Henri IV were there; the Escorial, Saint-Just: Charles V dreamed there; Windsor: Elizabeth the Great reigned there; Versailles: Louis XIV shone there surrounded by stars; the Kremlin: one caught a glimpse there of Peter the Great; Potsdam: Frederick II was closeted there with Voltaire. At present, history, bow thy head, the whole universe is looking at the Élysée!

That species of bastard door, guarded by two sentry-boxes painted on canvas, at the extremity of Faubourg Saint-Honoré, that is the spot towards which the eyes of the civilized world are now turned with a sort of profound anxiety! Ah! what sort of place is that, whence no idea has issued that has not been a plot, no action that has not been a crime? What sort of place is that wherein reside all kinds of cynicism and all kinds of hypocrisy? What sort of place is that where bishops elbow Jeanne Poisson on the staircase, and, as a hundred years ago, bow to the ground before her; where Samuel Bernard laughs in a corner with Laubardemont; which Escobar enters, arm-in-arm with Guzman d'Alfarache; where (frightful rumour), in a thicket in the garden, they despatch, it is said, with the bayonet men whom they dare not bring to trial; where one hears a man say to a woman who is weeping and interceding: “I overlook your love-affairs, you must overlook my hatreds!” What sort of place is that where the orgies of 1852 intrude upon and dishonour the mourning of 1815! where Cæsarion, with his arms crossed, or his hands behind his back, walks under those very trees, and in those very avenues still haunted by the indignant phantom of Cæsar?

That place is the blot upon Paris; that place is the pollution of the age; that door, whence issue all sorts of joyous sounds, flourishes of trumpets, music, laughter, and the jingling of glasses; that door, saluted during the day by the passing battalions; illuminated at night; thrown wide open with insolent confidence, — is a sort of public insult always present. There is the centre of the world's shame.

Alas! of what is France thinking? Of a surety, we must awake this slumbering nation, we must take it by the arm, we must shake it, we must speak to it; we must scour the fields, enter the villages, go into the barracks, speak to the soldier who no longer knows what he is doing, speak to the labourer who has in his cabin an engraving of the Emperor, and who, for that reason, votes for everything they ask; we must remove the radiant phantom that dazzles their eyes; this whole situation is nothing but a huge and deadly joke. We must expose this joke, probe it to the bottom, disabuse the people, — the country people above all, — excite them, agitate them, stir them up, show them the empty houses, the yawning graves, and make them touch with their finger the horror of this régime. The people are good and honest; they will comprehend. Yes, peasant, there are two, the great and the little, the illustrious and the infamous, — Napoleon and Naboleon!

Let us sum up this government! Who is at the Élysée and the Tuileries? Crime. Who is established at the Luxembourg? Baseness. Who at the Palais Bourbon? Imbecility. Who at the Palais d’Orsay? Corruption. Who at the Palais de Justice? Prevarication. And who are in the prisons, in the fortresses, in the dungeons, in the casemates, in the hulks, at Lambessa, at Cayenne, in exile? Law, honour, intelligence, liberty, and the right.

Oh! ye proscribed, of what do you complain? You have the better part.

BOOK III

THE CRIME

But this government, this horrible, hypocritical, and stupid government, — this government which causes us to hesitate between a laugh and a sob, this gibbet-constitution on which all our liberties are hung, this great universal suffrage and this little universal suffrage, the first naming the President, and the other the legislators; the little one saying to the great one: “*Monseigneur, accept these millions*,” and the great one saying to the little one: “*Be assured of my consideration*;” this Senate, — this Council of State — whence do they all come? Great Heaven! have we already reached the point that it is necessary to remind the reader of their source?

Whence comes this government? Look! It is still flowing, it is still smoking, — it is blood!

The dead are far away, the dead are dead.

Ah! it is horrible to think and to say, but is it possible that we no longer think of it?

Is it possible that, because we still eat and drink, because the coachmakers’ trade is flourishing, because you, labourer, have work in the Bois de Boulogne, because you, mason, earn forty sous a day at the Louvre, because you, banker, have made money in the mining shares of Vienna, or in the obligations of Hope and Co., because the titles of nobility are restored, because one can now be called *Monsieur le Comte* or *Madame la Duchesse*, because religious processions traverse the streets on the Fête-Dieu, because people enjoy themselves, because they laugh, because the walls of Paris are covered with bills of fêtes and theatres, — is it possible that, because these things are so, men forgot that there are corpses lying beneath?

Is it possible, that, because one has been to the ball at the École Militaire, because one has returned home with dazzled eyes, aching head, torn dress and faded bouquet, because one has thrown one’s self on one’s couch, and fallen asleep, thinking of some handsome officer, — is it possible that one no longer remembers that under the turf, in an obscure grave, in a deep pit, in the inexorable gloom of death, there lies a motionless, ice-cold, terrible multitude, — a multitude of human beings already become a shapeless mass, devoured by worms, consumed by corruption, and beginning to blend with the earth around them — who existed, worked, thought, and loved, who had the right to live, and who were murdered?

Ah! if men recollect this no longer, let us recall it to the minds of those who forget! Awake, you who sleep! The dead are about to pass before your eyes.

EXTRACT FROM AN UNPUBLISHED BOOK ENTITLED
THE CRIME OF THE SECOND OF DECEMBER
“THE DAY OF THE 4th OF DECEMBER
“THE COUP D’ÉTAT AT BAY

I

“The resistance had assumed unexpected proportions.

“The combat had become menacing; it was no longer a combat, but a battle, which was engaged on all sides. At the Élysée and the different departments, people began to turn pale; they had wished for barricades, and they had got them.

“All the centre of Paris was becoming covered with improvised redoubts; the quarters thus barricaded formed a sort of immense trapezium, between the Halles and Rue Rambuteau on one side, and the boulevards on the other; bounded on the east by Rue du Temple, and on the west by Rue Montmartre. This vast network of streets, cut in all directions by redoubts and entrenchments, assumed every hour a more terrible aspect, and was becoming a kind of fortress. The combatants at the barricades pushed their advance guards as far as the quays. Outside the trapezium, which we have described, the barricades extended, as we have said, as far as Faubourg Saint-Martin, and to the neighbourhood of the canal. The quarter of the schools, whither the Committee of Resistance had despatched Representative de Flotte, had risen even more generally than on the evening before; the suburbs were taking fire; the drums were beating to arms at the Batignolles; Madier de Montjau was arousing Belleville; three enormous barricades were in course of construction at the Chapelle-Saint-Denis. In the business streets the citizens were delivering up their muskets, and the women were making lint. ‘All is going well! Paris is up!’ exclaimed B ——, to us, as he entered the Committee of Resistance with a face radiant with joy. Fresh intelligence reached us every instant; all the permanent committees of the different quarters placed themselves in communication with us. The members of the committee deliberated and issued orders and instructions for the combat in every direction. Victory seemed certain. There was a moment of enthusiasm and joy when all these men, still standing between life and death, embraced one another.— 'Now,' exclaimed Jules Favre, 'let but a regiment come over, or a legion, and Louis Bonaparte is lost!'— 'To-morrow, the Republic will be at the Hotel de Ville!' said Michel de Bourges. All was ferment, all was excitement; in the most peaceful quarters the proclamations were torn down, and the ordinances defaced. On Rue Beaubourg, the women cried from the windows to the men employed in erecting a barricade: 'Courage!' The agitation reached even to Faubourg Saint-Germain. At the headquarters on Rue de Jerusalem, which is the centre of the great cobweb that the police spreads over Paris, everyone trembled; their anxiety was immense, for they saw the possibility that the Republic would triumph. In the courtyards, in the bureaus, and in the passages, the clerks and sergents-de-ville began to talk with affectionate regret of Caussidiere.

"If one can believe what has oozed out from this den, the prefect, Maupas, who had been so warm in the cause the evening before, and was put forward so odiously, began to back out and lose courage. It seemed as if he were listening with terror to the noise, as of a rising flood, made by the insurrection — by the holy and legitimate insurrection of the right. He stammered and hesitated while the word of command died away upon his tongue. 'That poor young man has the colic,' said the former prefect, Carlier, on leaving him. In this state of consternation, Maupas clung to Morny. The electric telegraph maintained a perpetual dialogue from the Prefecture of Police to the Department of the Interior, and from the Department of the Interior to the Prefecture of Police. All the most alarming news, all the signs of panic and confusion were passed on, one after another, from the prefect to the minister. Morny, who was less frightened, and who is, at least, a man of spirit, received all these shocks in his cabinet It is reported that at the first communication he said: 'Maupas is ill;' and to the question: 'What is to be done,' replied by the telegraph: 'Go to bed!' To the second question he still replied: 'Go to bed!' and, as the third, losing all patience he answered: 'Go to bed and be d —— d!'

"The zeal of the government agents was fast giving way and beginning to change sides. A courageous man, who had been despatched by the

Committee of Resistance to rouse Faubourg Saint-Marceau, was arrested on Rue des Fossés-Saint-Victor, with his pockets filled with the proclamations and decrees of the Left. He was immediately marched off in the direction of the Prefecture of Police. He expected to be shot. As the escort which was conducting him passed the Morgue on Quai-Saint-Michel, musket-shots were heard in the Cité. The sergent-de-ville at the head of the escort said to the soldiers: ‘Go back to your guard-house; I will take care of the prisoner,’ As soon as the soldiers were gone, he cut the cords with which the prisoner’s hands were fastened, and said to him: ‘Go, I spare your life; don’t forget that it was I who set you at liberty. Look at me well, so that you may know me again.’

“The principal military accomplices held a council. The question was discussed whether it was not necessary for Louis Bonaparte to quit Faubourg Saint-Honoré immediately, and remove either to the Invalides or to the Palais du Luxembourg, two strategic points more easy to defend against a *coup de main* than the Élysée. Some preferred the Invalides, others the Luxembourg; the subject gave rise to an altercation between two generals.

“It was at this moment that the ex-King of Westphalia, Jérôme Bonaparte, seeing that the *coup d’état* was tottering to its fall, and having some care for the morrow, wrote his nephew the following significant letter: —

“My dear Nephew, — The blood of Frenchmen has been spilt; stop its effusion by a serious appeal to the people. Your sentiments are not rightly understood. Your second proclamation, in which you speak of the plebiscitum, is ill received by the people, who do not look upon it as re-establishing the right of suffrage. Liberty possesses no guarantee if there is not an Assembly to contribute to the constitution of the Republic. The army has the upper hand. Now is the moment to complete the material victory by a moral victory, and that which a government cannot do when beaten, it ought to do when victorious. After destroying the old parties, bring about the restoration of the people; proclaim that universal suffrage, sincere, and acting in harmony with the greatest liberty, shall name the President and the Constituent Assembly to save and restore the Republic.

“It is in the name of my brother’s memory, and sharing his horror for civil war, that I now write to you; trust my long experience, and remember that France, Europe, and posterity will be called on to judge your conduct.

"Your affectionate uncle,

"Jérôme Bonaparte.

"On Place de la Madeleine, the two representatives, Fabvier and Crestin, met and accosted each other. General Fabvier directed his colleague's attention to four pieces of cannon which, turning in an opposite direction to that they had before been pursuing, left the Boulevard and galloped off towards the Élysée. 'Can it be that the Élysée is already on the defensive?' said the general. Crestin, pointing to the façade of the palate of the Assembly, on the other side of Place de la Révolution, replied: 'General, to-morrow we shall be there.' — From, some garrets that look on the stables of the Élysée, three travelling carriages were observed from an early hour in the morning, loaded, with the horses put to, and the postilions in their saddles ready to start.

"The impulsion was really given, the movement of rage and hatred was becoming universal, and the *coup d'état* seemed to be lost; one shock more and Louis Bonaparte would fall. Let the day but end as it had begun, and all was over. The *coup d'état* was approaching a state of despair. The hour for supreme resolutions was come. What did he intend doing? It was necessary that he should strike a great blow, an unexpected blow, a terrible blow. He was reduced to this alternative: to perish, or to save himself by a frightful expedient.

"Louis Bonaparte had not quitted the Élysée. He was in a cabinet on the ground floor, near the splendid gilt saloon, where, as a child, in 1815, he had been present at the second abdication of Napoleon. He was there alone; orders had been given that no one should be allowed to have access to him. From time to time the door was opened a little way, and the grey head of General Roguet, his aide-de-camp, appeared. The general was the only person who was allowed to open this door and enter the room. The general brought news, more and more alarming, and frequently terminated what he had to say with the words: 'The thing doesn't work;' or 'Things are going badly.' When he had finished, Louis Bonaparte, who was seated with his elbows on a table and his feet on the fire-dogs, before a roaring fire, turned his head half round on the back of his chair, and, in a most phlegmatic tone, and without apparent emotion, invariably answered in the following words: 'Let them execute my orders.' The last time that General Roguet entered the room in this manner with bad news, it was nearly one o'clock — he himself has related these details, to the honour of his master's calmness. He told the Prince that the barricades in the centre of the town still held out, and were increasing in number; that on the boulevards the cries of 'Down with the dictator' (he did not dare say 'Down with Soulouque'), and hisses everywhere hailed the troops as they passed; that before Galerie Jouffroy a major had been pursued by the crowd, and that at the corner of the Café Cardinal a captain of the staff had been torn from his horse. Louis Bonaparte half rose from his chair, and gazing fixedly at the general, calmly said to him: 'Very well! let Saint-Arnaud be told to execute my orders.'

"What were these orders?

"We shall see.

"Here we pause to reflect, and the narrator lays down his pen with a species of hesitation and distress of mind. We are approaching the abominable crisis of that mournful day, the 4th; we are approaching that monstrous deed from which emerged the success of the *coup d'état*, dripping with blood. We are about to unveil the most horrible of the premeditated acts of Louis Bonaparte; we are about to reveal, to narrate, to describe what all the historiographers of the 2nd of December have concealed; what General Magnan carefully omitted in his report; what, even at Paris, where these things were seen, men scarcely dare to whisper to each other. We are about to enter upon the ghastly.

"The 2nd of December is a crime covered with darkness, a coffin closed and silent, from the cracks in which streams of blood gush forth.

"We are about to raise the coffin-lid."

By Victor Hugo. This book will shortly be published. It will be a complete narrative of the infamous performance of 1851. A large part of it is already written; the author is at this moment collecting materials for the rest.

He deems it apropos to enter somewhat at length into the details of this work, which he has imposed upon himself as a duty.

The author does himself the justice to believe that in writing this narrative, — the serious occupation of his exile, — he has had constantly present to his mind the exalted responsibility of the historian.

When it shall appear, this narrative will surely arouse numerous and violent outcries; the author expects no less; one does not with impunity cut to the quick of a contemporaneous crime, at the moment when that crime is omnipotent. However that may be, and however violent the outcries, more or less interested, and to the end that we may judge beforehand of its merit, the author feels called upon to explain in what way and with what scrupulous devotion to the truth this narrative will have been written, or, to speak more accurately, this report of the crime will have been drawn. This history of the 2nd of December will contain, in addition to the general facts, which everybody knows, a very large number of unknown facts which are brought to light for the first time therein. Several of these facts the author himself saw and touched and passed through; of them he can say: *Quæque ipse vidi et quorum pars fui.* The members of the Republican Left, whose conduct was so fearless, saw these facts as he did, and he will not lack their testimony. For all the rest, the author has resorted to a veritable judicial investigation; he has constituted himself, so to speak, the examining magistrate of the performance; every actor in the drama, every combatant, every victim, every witness has deposed before him; for all the doubtful facts, he has brought the opposing declarations, and at need the witnesses, face to face. As a general rule historians deal with dead facts; they touch them in the tomb with their judicial wands, cause them to rise and question them. He has dealt with living facts.

All the details of the 2nd of December have in this wise passed before his eyes; he has recorded them all, weighed them all — not one has escaped him. History will be able to complete this narration, but not to weaken it. The magistrates were recreant to their trust, he has performed their functions. When direct, spoken testimony has failed him, he has sent to the spot what one might call genuine investigating commissions. He might cite many a fact for which he has prepared genuine interrogatories to which detailed replies were made. He repeats that he has subjected the 2nd of December to a long and severe examination. He has carried the torch so far as he was able. Thanks to this investigation he has in his possession nearly two hundred reports from which the book in question will emerge. There is not a single fact beneath which, when the book is published, the author will not be able to put a name. It will be readily understood that he will abstain from doing so, that he will even substitute sometimes for the real names, yes and for accurate indications of places, designations as obscure as possible, in view of the pending proscriptions. He has no desire to furnish M. Bonaparte with a supplemental list.

It is undoubtedly true that in this narrative of the 2nd of December, the author is not, any more than in this present book, “impartial,” as people are accustomed to say of a history when they wish to praise the historian. Impartiality — a strange virtue, which Tacitus does not possess. Woe to him who should remain impartial in face of the bleeding wounds of liberty! In presence of the deed of December 2nd, 1851, the author feels that all human nature rises to arms within his breast; he does not conceal it from himself, and every one should perceive it when reading him. But in him the passion for truth equals the passion for right. The wrathful man does not lie. This history of the 2nd of December, therefore, — he declares as he is about to quote a few pages of it, — will have been written, we have just seen by what method, under conditions of the most absolute reality.

We deem it profitable to detach from it and to publish in this place a chapter which, we think, will make an impression on men’s minds, in that it casts a new light on the “success” of M. Bonaparte. Thanks to the judicious reticences of the official historiographers of the 2nd of December, people are not sufficiently apprised how near the *coup d’état* came to being abortive, and they are altogether ignorant as to the means by which it was saved. We proceed to place this special detail before the reader’s eyes.

[The author has concluded to reserve for this book alone the chapter in question which now forms an integral part thereof. He has therefore rewritten for the *History of a Crime*, the narrative of the events of December 4, with new facts, and from another point of view.]

A Committee of Resistance, charged with the task of centralizing the action and directing the combat, had been named on the evening of the 2nd of December, by the members of the Left assembled at the house of Representative Lafon, Quai Jemmappes, No. 2. This committee, which was obliged to change its retreat twenty-seven times in four days, and which, so to say, sat night and day, and did not cease to act for a single instant during the various crises of the *coup d’état*, was composed of Representatives Carnot, de Flotte, Jules Favre, Madier de Montjau, Michel de Bourges, Schœlcher, and Victor Hugo.

II

“From an early hour in the morning, — for here (we insist upon this point) premeditation is unquestionable, — from an early hour in the morning, strange placards had been posted up at all the street-corners; we have transcribed these placards, and our readers will remember them. During sixty years that the cannon of revolution have, on certain days, boomed through Paris, and that the government, when menaced, has had recourse to desperate measures, nothing has ever been seen like these placards. They informed the inhabitants that all assemblages, no matter of what kind, would be dispersed by armed force, *without previous warning*. In Paris, the metropolis of civilization, people do not easily believe that a man will push his crime to the last extremity; and, therefore, these notices had been looked upon as a means of intimidation that was hideous and barbarous, but almost ridiculous.

"The public were wrong. These placards contained in germ Louis Bonaparte's whole plan. They were seriously meant.

"One word as to the spot which is about to be the theatre of the unheard-of drama, prepared and perpetrated by the man of December.

"From the Madeleine to Faubourg Poissonnière, the boulevard was unobstructed; from the Gymnase Theatre to the Theatre of the Porte Saint-Martin it was barricaded, as were Rue de Bondy, Rue Neslay, Rue de la Lune, and all the streets which bound, or debouch at, Porte Saint-Denis and Porte Saint-Martin. Beyond Porte Saint-Martin the boulevard was again free as far as the Bastile, with the exception of a single barricade, which had been begun opposite the Château d'Eau. Between Porte Saint-Denis and Porte Saint-Martin, seven or eight redoubts crossed the street at intervals. A square of four barricades shut in Porte Saint-Denis. Of these four barricades, that one which looked towards the Madeleine, and which was destined to receive the first impact of the troops, had been constructed at the culminating point of the boulevard, with its left resting on the corners of Rue de la Lune, and its right on Rue Mazagran. Four omnibuses, five furniture-moving vans, the office of the inspector of hackney coaches, which had been thrown down, the vespasian columns, which had been broken up, the public seats on the boulevards, the flag-stones of the steps on Rue de la Lune, the entire iron railing of the sidewalk, which had been wrenched from its place at a single effort by the powerful hand of the crowd — such was the composition of this fortification, which was hardly sufficient to block the boulevard, which, at this point, is very broad. There were no paving-stones, as the roadway is macadamized. The barricade did not even extend from one side of the boulevard to the other, but left a large open space on the side toward Rue Mazagran, where there was a house in course of erection. Observing this gap, a well-dressed young man got upon the scaffolding, and, quite unaided, without the least hurry, without even taking the cigar from his mouth, cut all the ropes of the scaffolding. The people at the neighbouring windows laughed and applauded him. An instant afterwards the scaffolding fell all at once, and with a loud noise; this completed the barricade.

“While this redoubt was being completed, a score or more of men entered the Gymnase Theatre by the stage-door, and came out a few seconds later with some muskets and a drum which they had found in the wardrobe, and which were a part of what, in theatrical language, are termed ‘the properties,’ One of the men took the drum and began beating to arms. The others, with the overturned vespasian columns, carriages thrown on their sides, blinds and shutters torn from their hinges, and old scenery, constructed, opposite the guard-house of Boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle, a small barricade as a sort of advanced post, or rather a lunette, which commanded Boulevards Poissonnière and Montmartre as well as Rue Hauteville. The troops had evacuated the guard-house in the morning. They took the flag belonging to it and planted it on the barricade. It was this same flag which was afterwards declared by the newspapers of the *coup d’état* to have been a ‘red flag.’

“Some fifteen men took up their position at this advanced post. They had muskets, but no cartridges, or, at most, very few. Behind them, the large barricade, which covered Porte Saint-Denis, was held by about a hundred combatants, in the midst of whom were observed two women and an old man with white hair, supporting himself on a cane with his left hand, and, in his right, holding a musket. One of the two women wore a sabre suspended over her shoulder; while helping to tear up the railing of the sidewalk, she had cut three fingers of her right hand with the sharp edge of an iron bar. She showed the wound to the crowd, crying: ‘*Vive la République!*’ The other woman had ascended to the top of the barricade, where, leaning on the flag-staff, and escorted by two men in blouses, who were armed with muskets and presented arms, she read aloud the call to arms issued by the Representatives of the Left. The crowd clapped their hands.

“All this occurred between noon and one o’clock. On this side of the barricades an immense number of people covered the pavement on both sides of the boulevard; in some places, silent; in others, crying: ‘Down with Soulouque! Down with the traitor!’

“From time to time, mournful processions traversed the multitude; they consisted of files of closed litters borne by hospital attendants and soldiers. At their head marched men holding long poles, from which hung blue placards, on which was inscribed, in huge letters: *Service of the Military Hospitals*. On the curtains of the litters: *Wounded, Ambulance*. The weather was dull and rainy.

“At this time there was a great crowd at the Bourse. On all the walls bill-stickers were posting despatches announcing the adhesion of the departments to the *coup d’état*. Even the stockbrokers, while trying to bull the market, laughed and shrugged their shoulders at these placards. Suddenly, a well-known speculator, who had for two days been a great admirer of the *coup d’état*, made his appearance, pale and breathless, like a fugitive, and exclaimed: ‘They are firing on the boulevards!’

“This is what had happened:

III

“A little after one o’clock, a quarter of an hour after the last order given by Louis Bonaparte to General Roguet, the boulevards throughout their whole length, from the Madeleine, were suddenly covered with cavalry and infantry. Almost the whole of Carrelet’s division, composed of the five brigades of Cotte, Bourgon, Canrobert, Dulac, and Reibell, making a total of sixteen thousand four hundred and ten men, had taken up their position, and extended in echelon from Rue de la Paix to Faubourg Poissonnière. Each brigade had its battery with it. Eleven pieces were counted on Boulevard Poisonnière alone. Two of the guns, with their muzzles turned different ways, were levelled at the entrance to Rue Montmartre and Faubourg Montmartre respectively; no one knew why, as neither the street nor the faubourg presented even the appearance of a barricade. The spectators, who crowded the sidewalks and the windows, gazed in dismay at all these guns, sabres, and bayonets.

“‘The troops were laughing and chatting,’ says one witness. Another witness says: ‘The soldiers acted strangely. Most of them were leaning on their muskets, with the butt-end on the ground, and seemed nearly falling from fatigue, or something else.’ One of those old officers who are accustomed to read a soldier’s thoughts in his eyes, General L —— , said, as he passed Café Frascati: ‘They are drunk.’

“There were now some indications of what was about to happen.

“At one moment, when the crowd was crying to the troops, ‘*Vive la République!*’ ‘Down with Louis Bonaparte!’ one of the officers was heard to say, in a low voice: ‘There’s going to be some pigsticking!’

“A battalion of infantry debouches from Rue Richelieu. Before the Café Cardinal it is greeted by a unanimous cry of ‘*Vive la République!*’ A writer, the editor of a Conservative paper, who happens to be on the spot, adds: ‘*Down with Soulouque!*’ The staff officer in command of the detachment aims a blow at him with his sabre, which, being dodged by the journalist, cuts in two one of the small trees on the boulevard.

“As the 1st Regiment of Lancers, commanded by Colonel Rochefort, reached a point abreast of Rue Taitbout, a numerous crowd covered the pavement of the boulevard. They were residents of the quarter, tradesmen, artists, journalists, and among them several young mothers leading their children by the hand. As the regiment was passing, men and women — every one — cried: ‘*Vive la Constitution!*’ ‘*Vive la Loi!*’ ‘*Vive la République!*’ Colonel Rochefort, — the same who had presided at the banquet given on the 31st of October, 1851, at the École Militaire, by the 1st Regiment of Lancers to the 7th Regiment of Lancers, and who, at this banquet, had proposed as a toast, ‘Prince Louis-Napoleon, the head of the State, the personification of that order of which we are the defenders!’ — this colonel, when the crowd uttered the above perfectly lawful cry, spurred his horse into the midst of them through the chairs on the sidewalk, while the Lancers precipitated themselves after him, and men, women, and children were indiscriminately cut down. ‘A great number remained dead on the spot,’ says a defender of the *coup d’état*; and adds, ‘It was done in a moment.’

“About two o’clock, two howitzers were pointed at the extremity of Boulevard Poissonnière, a hundred and fifty paces from the little advanced barricade at the Bonne Nouvelle guard-house. While placing the guns in position, two of the artillerymen, who are not often guilty of a false manœvre, broke the pole of a caisson. ‘*Don’t you see they are drunk!*’ exclaimed a man of the lower classes.

“At half past two, for it is necessary to follow the progress of this hideous drama minute by minute, and step by step, fire was opened before the barricade languidly, and almost as if done for amusement. The officers appeared to be thinking of anything but a fight. We shall soon see, however, of what they were thinking.

“The first cannon-ball, badly aimed, passed above all the barricades and killed a little boy at the Château d’Eau as he was drawing water from the fountain.

“The shops were shut, as were also almost all the windows. There was, however, one window left open in an upper story of the house at the corner of Rue du Sentier. The curious spectators continued to assemble mainly on the southern side of the street. It was an ordinary crowd and nothing more, — men, women, children, and old people who looked upon the languid attack and defence of the barricade as a sort of sham fight.

“This barricade served as a spectacle pending the moment when it should become a pretext.

IV

“The soldiers had been firing, and the defenders of the barricade returning their fire, for about a quarter of an hour, without any one being wounded on either side, when suddenly, as if by an electric shock, an extraordinary and threatening movement took place, first in the infantry, then in the cavalry. The troops suddenly faced about.

“The historiographers of the *coup d’état* have asserted that a shot, directed against the soldiers, was fired from the window which had remained open at the corner of Rue du Sentier. Others say that it was fired from the roof of the house at the corner of Rue Notre-Dame-de-Recouvrance and Rue Poissonnière. According to others, it was a pistol shot and was fired from the roof of the tall house at the corner of Rue Mazagran. The shot is contested, but what cannot be contested is that, for having fired this problematical shot, which was perhaps nothing more than the slamming of a door, a dentist, who lived in the next house, was shot. The question resolves itself into this: Did any one hear a pistol or musket shot fired from one of the houses on the boulevard? Is this the fact, or is it not? a host of witnesses deny it.

“If the shot was really fired, there still remains a question: Was it a cause, or was it a signal?

“However this may be, all of a sudden, as we have said before, cavalry, infantry, and artillery faced towards the dense crowd upon the sidewalks, and, no one being able to guess why, unexpectedly, without motive, ‘without parley,’ as the infamous proclamations of the morning had announced, the butchery began, from the Gymnase Theatre to the Bains Chinois, that is to say, along the whole length of the richest, the most frequented, and the most joyous boulevard of Paris.

“The army began shooting down the people at close range.

“It was a horrible and indescribable moment: the cries, the arms raised towards heaven, the surprise, the terror, the crowd flying in all directions, a shower of balls falling on the pavement and bounding to the roofs of the houses, corpses strewn along the street in a moment, young men falling with their cigars still in their mouths, women in velvet gowns shot down by the long rifles, two booksellers killed on their own thresholds without knowing what offence they had committed, shots fired down the cellar-holes and killing any one, no matter who, the Bazaar riddled with shells and bullets, the Hôtel Sallandrouze bombarded, the Maison d’Or raked with grape-shot, Tortoni’s carried by assault, hundreds of corpses stretched upon the boulevard, and a torrent of blood on Rue de Richelieu.

“The narrator must here again crave permission to suspend his narrative.

“In the presence of these nameless deeds, I who write these lines declare that I am the recording officer. I record the crime, I appeal the cause. My functions extend no further. I cite Louis Bonaparte, I cite Saint-Arnaud, Maupas, Moray, Magnan, Carrelet, Canrobert, and Reybell, his accomplices; I cite the executioners, the murderers, the witnesses, the victims, the red-hot cannon, the smoking sabres, the drunken soldiers, the mourning families, the dying, the dead, the horror, the blood, and the tears, — I cite them all to appear at the bar of the civilized world.

“The mere narrator, whoever he might be, would never be believed. Let the living facts, the bleeding facts, therefore, speak for themselves. Let us hear the witnesses.

V

“We shall not print the names of the witnesses, we have said why, but the reader will easily recognize the sincere and poignant accent of reality.

“One witness says: —

“‘I had not taken three steps on the sidewalk, when the troops, who were marching past, suddenly halted, faced about towards the south, levelled their muskets, and, by an instantaneous movement, fired upon the affrighted crowd.

"'The firing continued uninterruptedly for twenty minutes, drowned from time to time by a cannon-shot.

"'At the first volley, I threw myself on the ground and crept along on the pavement like a snake to the first door I found open.

"'It was a wine-shop, No. 180, next door to the Bazaar de l'Industrie. I was the last person who went in. The firing still continued.

"'In this shop there were about fifty persons, and among them five or six women and two or three children. Three poor wretches were wounded when they came in; two of them died, after a quarter of an hour of horrible agony: the third was still alive when I left the shop at four o'clock; however, as I afterwards learned, he did not survive his wound.

"'In order to give an idea of the crowd on whom the troops fired, I cannot do better than mention some of the persons assembled in the shop.

"'There were several women, two of whom had come into the quarter to buy provisions for their dinners; a little lawyer's clerk, who had been sent on an errand by his master; two or three frequenters of the Bourse; two or three house-holders; several workmen, in wretched blouses, or in nothing. One of the unhappy beings who had taken refuge in the shop produced a deep impression on me. He was a man of about thirty, with light hair, wearing a gray paletot. He was going with his wife to dine with his family in Faubourg Montmartre, when he was stopped on the boulevard by the passage of the column of troops. At the very beginning, at the first discharge, both he and his wife fell down; he rose and was dragged into the wine-shop, but he no longer had his wife on his arm, and his despair cannot be described. In spite of all we could say, he insisted that the door should be opened so that he might run and look for his wife amid the grape-shot that was sweeping the street. It was all we could do to keep him with us for an hour. The next day, I learned that his wife had been killed, and her body found in the Cité Bergère. A fortnight afterwards I was informed that the poor wretch, having threatened to apply the *lex talionis* to M. Bonaparte, had been arrested and sent to Brest, on his way to Cayenne. Almost all the persons assembled in the wine-shop held monarchical opinions, and I saw only two, a compositor named Meunier, who had formerly worked on the *Réforme*, and a friend of his, who declared themselves to be Republicans. About four o'clock, I left the shop.'

"Another witness, one of those who fancied he heard the pistol-shot on Rue de Mazagran, adds: —

“‘This shot was a signal to the soldiers for a fusillade on all the houses and their windows, the roar of which lasted at least thirty minutes. The discharge was simultaneous from Porte Saint-Denis as far as the Café du Grand Balcon. The artillery soon took part with the musketry.’

“Another witness says: —

“‘At quarter past three, a singular movement took place. The soldiers who were facing Porte Saint-Denis, suddenly faced about, resting on the houses from the Gymnase, the Maison du Pont-de-Fer, and the Hôtel Saint-Phar, and immediately, a running fire was directed on the people on the opposite side of the way, from Rue Saint-Denis to Rue Richelieu. A few minutes were sufficient to cover the pavement with dead bodies; the houses were riddled with balls, and this paroxysm of fury on the part of the troops continued for three quarters of an hour.’

“Another witness says: —

“‘The first cannon-shots aimed at the barricade Bonne-Nouvelle served as a signal to the rest of the troops, who fired almost simultaneously at every one within range of their muskets.’

“Another witness says: —

“‘No words are powerful enough to describe such an act of barbarity. One must himself have seen in order to be bold enough to speak of it, and to attest the truth of so unspeakable a deed.’

“‘The soldiers fired thousands and thousands of shots — the number is inappreciable_— on the unoffending crowd, and that without any sort of necessity. There was a desire to produce a deep impression. That was all.’

“Another witness says: —

“‘The troops of the line, followed by the cavalry and the artillery, arrived on the boulevard at a time when the general excitement was very great. A musket-shot was fired from the midst of the troops, and it was easy to see that it had been fired in the air, from the smoke which rose perpendicularly. This was the signal for firing on the people and charging them with the bayonet without warning. This is a significant fact, and proves that the military wanted the pretence of a motive for beginning the massacre which followed.’

“Another witness tells the following tale: —

“‘The cannon, loaded with grape-shot, cut up all the shop-fronts from the shop *Le Prophète* to Rue Montmartre. From Boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle they must have fired also on the Maison Billecoq, for it was struck at the corner of the wall on the Aubusson side, and the ball, having traversed the wall, penetrated the interior of the house.’

“Another witness, one of those who deny the shot, says: —

“‘People have endeavoured to excuse this fusillade and these murders, by pretending that the troops had been fired on from the windows of some of the houses. Not only does General Magnan’s official report seem to deny this rumour, but I assert that the discharge was instantaneous from Porte Saint-Denis to Porte Montmartre, and that there was not, previously to the general discharge, a single shot fired separately, either from the windows or by the soldiers, from Faubourg Saint-Denis to Boulevard des Italiens.’

“Another witness, who is also one of those who did not hear the shot, says: —

“‘The troops were marching past the veranda of the Café Tortoni, where I had been about twenty minutes, when, before any report of fire-arms had reached us, they quickened their pace; the cavalry went off at a gallop, the infantry at double-quick. All of a sudden we saw, coming from the direction of Boulevard Poissonnière, a sheet of fire, which spread and came on rapidly. I can vouch for the fact that, before the fusillade began, there had been no report of fire-arms, and that not a single shot had been fired from any of the houses between the Café Frascati and the spot where I stood. At last we saw the soldiers before us level their muskets and threaten us. We took refuge on Rue Taitbout, under a porte-cochère. At the same moment the balls flew over our heads, and all around us. A woman was killed ten paces from me just as I ran under the porte-cochère. I can swear that, up to that time, there was neither barricade nor insurgents; there were *hunters, and there was game* flying from them, — that is all.’

“This image ‘hunters and game’ is the one which immediately suggests itself to the mind of all those who beheld this horrible proceeding. We meet with the same simile in the testimony of another witness: —

“‘At the end of my street, and I know that the same thing was observed in the neighbouring ones as well, we saw the gendarmes mobiles with their muskets, and themselves in the position of *hunters waiting for the game to rise*, that is to say, with their muskets at their shoulders, in order that they might take aim and fire more quickly.

“‘In order that those persons who had fallen wounded near the doors on Rue Montmartre might receive the first necessary attentions, we could see the doors open from time to time and an arm stretched out, which hastily drew in the corpse, or dying man, whom the balls were striving to claim as their own.’

“Another witness hits upon the same image: —

“‘The soldiers stationed at the corners of the streets awaited the people as they passed, *like hunters lying in wait for their game*, and as soon as they saw them in the street they fired at them *as at a target*. A great many persons were killed in this manner on Rue du Sentier, Rue Rougemont, and on Rue du Faubourg-Poissonnière.’

“‘“Go on,” said the officers to the unoffending citizens who demanded their protection. At these words they went their way quickly and with confidence; but it was merely a watchword which meant *death*; for they had gone only a few steps before they fell.’

“‘At the moment the firing began on the boulevards,’ says another witness, ‘a bookseller near the carpet warehouse was hastily closing his shop, when a number of fugitives who were striving to obtain admittance were suspected by the troops of the line, or the gendarmerie mobile, I do not know which, of having fired upon them. The soldiers broke into the bookseller’s house. The bookseller endeavoured to explain matters; he was taken out, alone, before his own door, and his wife and daughters had only time to throw themselves between him and the soldiers when he fell dead. His wife had her thigh traversed by a ball, while his daughter was saved by the steel of her stays. I have been informed that his wife has since gone mad.’

“Another witness says: —

“‘The soldiers entered the two booksellers’ shops between *Le Prophète* and M. Sallandrouze’s. The murders committed there have been proved. The two booksellers were massacred on the pavement. The other prisoners were put to death in the shops.’

“Let us conclude with three extracts which it is impossible to transcribe without a shudder: —

“‘For the first quarter of an hour of this scene of horror,’ says a witness, ‘the firing, which for a moment became less sharp, caused some persons who were only wounded to suppose that they might get up. Of those who were lying before *Le Prophète* two rose. One of them fled by Rue du Sentier, from which he was only a few yards away. He reached it amid a shower of balls which carried away his cap. The other could only succeed in raising himself on his knees, in which position, with his hands clasped, he besought the soldiers to spare his life; but he fell at once, shot dead. The next day one could see in the side of the veranda of *Le Prophète* a spot only a few feet in extent, which more than a hundred balls had struck.’

“‘At the end of Rue Montmartre as far as the fountain, a distance of about sixty paces, there were sixty bodies of men and women, mothers, children, and young girls. All these unfortunate creatures had fallen victims of the first volley fired by the troops and the gendarmerie, who were stationed on the opposite side of the boulevard. They all fled at the first discharge, took a few steps, then fell to rise no more. One young man had taken refuge in a gateway, and tried to shelter himself behind the projection of the wall towards the boulevards. After ten minutes of badly aimed shots, he was hit, in spite of all his efforts to render himself as small as possible by drawing himself up to his full height, and he too was seen to fall, to rise no more.’

“Another: —

“‘The plate glass and the windows in the Maison du Pont-de-Fer were all shattered. One man, who was in the courtyard, went mad with fright. The cellars were filled with women who had sought refuge there, but in vain. The soldiers fired into the shops and the cellar windows. From Tortoni’s to the Gymnase Theatre similar things took place. This lasted more than an hour.’

VI

“Let us confine ourselves to these extracts. Let us close this mournful inquest. We have proofs enough.

“The general execration of the deed is visible. A hundred other depositions which we have before us repeat the same facts in almost the same words. It is at present certain, it is proved, it is beyond the possibility of doubt, it cannot be denied, it is evident as the sunlight, that on Thursday, the 4th of December, 1851, the unoffending citizens of Paris, the citizens who were not in any way mixed up with the fighting, were shot down without warning, and massacred merely for the sake of intimidation, and that it is not possible to attach any other meaning to Monsieur Bonaparte’s mysterious command.

“This execution lasted until nightfall. For more than an hour, there was, as it were, a debauch of musketry and artillery. The cannonade and the platoon-firing crossed each other indiscriminately; at one time the soldiers were killing one another. The battery of the 6th Regiment of Artillery, which belonged to Canrobert’s brigade, was dismounted; the horses, rearing in the midst of the balls, broke the axles, the wheels and the poles, and of the whole battery, in less than a minute there remained only one gun in commission. A whole squadron of the 1st Lancers was obliged to seek refuge in a shed on Rue Saint-Fiacre. Seventy bullet-holes were counted the next day in the pennons of the lances. A sort of frenzy had seized the soldiers. At the corner of Rue Rougemont, and in the midst of the smoke, one general was waving his arms as if to restrain them; a medical officer of the 27th was nearly killed by the soldiers whom he endeavoured to check. A sergeant said to an officer who took hold of his arm: ‘Lieutenant, you are betraying us.’ The soldiers had no consciousness of themselves; they had gone mad with the crime they were ordered to commit. There comes a moment when the very outrageousness of what you are doing makes you redouble your blows. Blood is a kind of horrible wine; men get drunk with carnage.

“It seemed as if some invisible hand were launching death from the midst of a cloud. The soldiers were no longer aught but projectiles.

“Two guns in the roadway of the boulevard were pointed at the front of a single house, that of M. Sallandrouze, and fired volley after volley at it, at close range. This house, which is an old mansion of hewn stone, remarkable for its almost monumental flight of steps, being split by bullets as if by iron wedges, opened, gaped, and cracked from top to bottom. The soldiers fired faster and faster. At every discharge, the walls cracked again. Suddenly an officer of artillery galloped up, and cried, ‘Hold! hold!’ The house was leaning forward; another ball, and it would have fallen on the guns and the gunners.

“The artillerymen were so drunk that many of them, not knowing what they were doing, allowed themselves to be killed by the rebound of their guns. The balls came simultaneously from Porte Saint-Denis, Boulevard Poissonnière and Boulevard Montmartre; the drivers, hearing them whizzing past their ears in every direction, lay down upon their horses, while the gunners hid underneath the caissons and behind the wagons; soldiers were seen to drop their caps and fly in dismay into Rue Notre-

Dame-de-Recouvrance; troopers, losing their heads, fired their carbines in the air, while others dismounted and made a breastwork of their horses. Two or three of the latter, without riders, ran here and there, mad with terror.

“The most horrible amusements were blended with the massacre. The tirailleurs from Vincennes had established themselves at one of the barricades on the boulevard which they had carried by assault, and from thence they practised shooting at persons passing at a distance. From the neighbouring houses, such shocking dialogues as this were heard: ‘I’ll bet I bring that fellow down.’— ‘I’ll bet you don’t.’— ‘I’ll bet I do.’ And the shot followed. When the man fell, one could guess by the roar of laughter. Whenever a woman passed, the officers cried: ‘Fire at that woman; fire at the women!’

“This was one of the watchwords; on Boulevard Montmartre, where the bayonet was greatly in requisition, a young staff-captain cried: ‘Prick the women!’

“One woman, with a loaf under her arm, thought she might cross Rue Saint-Fiacre. A tirailleur shot her down.

“On Rue Jean-Jacques-Rousseau they did not go so far. A woman cried, ‘Vive la République!’ she was merely whipped by the soldiers. But let us return to the boulevard.

“One of the passers-by, a bailiff, was struck by a ball aimed at his head; he fell on his hands and knees, imploring mercy! He received thirteen more balls in his body. He survived: by a miraculous chance, not one of his wounds was mortal. The ball which struck his head tore the skin, and made the circuit of his skull without fracturing it.

“An old man of eighty, being found concealed somewhere or other, was brought before the steps of *Le Prophète*, and shot: he fell. ‘He will have no bump on his head,’ said a soldier; the old man had fallen upon a heap of dead bodies. Two young men from Issy, who had been married only a month, to two sisters, were crossing the boulevard on their way from business. They saw the muskets levelled at them, and threw themselves on their knees, crying, ‘We married the two sisters!’ They were killed. A dealer in cocoa, named Robert, living on Faubourg Poissonnière, No. 97, fled, with his can on his back, down Rue Montmartre; he was killed._A boy of thirteen, a saddler’s apprentice, was passing along the boulevard opposite the Café Vachette. The soldiers took aim at him. He uttered the most heart-rending cries, and, holding up a bridle that he had in his hand, waved it in the air, exclaiming, ‘I am sent on an errand!’ He was killed. Three balls perforated his breast. All along the boulevards were heard the shrieks and heavy falls of the wounded, whom the soldiers pierced with their bayonets, and then left, without taking the trouble to despatch them.

“Some villains seized the opportunity to steal. The treasurer of a company, whose offices are on Rue de la Banque, left at two o’clock to collect a note on Rue Bergère, returned with the money, and was killed on the boulevard. When his body was removed, he had neither ring, nor watch, nor the money he was taking to his office.

“On the pretence that shots had been fired at the troops, the latter entered ten or twelve houses, at random, and despatched with their bayonets every one they found. In all the houses on the boulevard, there are metal pipes by which the dirty water runs out into the gutter. The soldiers, with no idea why it was so, conceived a feeling of mistrust or hatred for such and such a house, closed from top to bottom, mute and gloomy, and like all the houses on the boulevard, seeming uninhabited, so silent was it. They knocked at the door; the door opened, and they entered. An instant after there was seen to flow from the mouth of the metal pipes a red, smoking stream. It was blood.

“A captain, with his eyes starting from their sockets, cried to the soldiers: ‘No quarter!’ A major vociferated: ‘Enter the houses and kill every one!’

“Sergeants were heard to say: ‘*Pitch into the Bedouins; hit them hard!*’ ‘In the uncle’s time,’ says a witness, ‘the soldiers used to call the civilians *pékins*. At present, we are Bedouins; the soldiers massacred the people to the cry of “*Give it to the Bedouins*.”’

“At the Frascati Club, where many of the regular frequenters of the place were assembled, among them an old general, they heard the thunder of musketry and artillery, and could not believe that the troops were firing ball. They laughed, and said to one another: ‘It’s blank cartridges. What a *mise-en-scène*! What an actor this Bonaparte is!’ They thought they were at the Circus. Suddenly the soldiers entered, mad with rage, and were about to shoot every one. They had no idea of the danger they were running. They continued to laugh. One of the eye-witnesses said to us: ‘*We thought that this was part of the buffoonery*.’ However, seeing that the soldiers continued to threaten them, they at last understood.— ‘*Kill them all!*’ cried the soldiers. A lieutenant, who recognized the old general, prevented them from carrying out their threat. In spite of this, a sergeant said: ‘Hold your d —— d tongue, lieutenant; this isn’t your affair, it’s ours.’

“The troops killed for the mere sake of killing. A witness says: ‘In the courtyards of the houses, they shot even the horses and dogs.’

“In the house next Frascati’s, at the corner of Rue Richelieu, the soldiers were coolly going to shoot even the women and children, who were already drawn up in a mass before a platoon for that purpose when a colonel arrived. He stopped the massacre, boxed up these poor trembling creatures in the Passages des Panoramas, where he locked them in, and saved them. A celebrated writer, Monsieur Lireux, after having escaped the first balls, was led about, during an hour, from one guard-house to another, preparatory to being shot. It required a miracle to save him. The celebrated artist, Sax, who happened to be in the musical establishment of M. Brandus, was about to be shot, when a general recognized him. Everywhere else the people were killed indiscriminately.

“The first person killed in this butchery — history has in like manner preserved the name of the first person killed at the massacre of Saint Bartholomew — was one Théodore Debaecque, who lived in the house at the corner of Rue du Sentier, where the carnage began.

“We may name the witness who saw this. He is one of the proscribed; it is M. Versigny, a representative of the people. He says: —

“‘I can still see, opposite Rue du Croissant, an unfortunate itinerant vender of cocoa, with his tin can on his back, stagger, then gradually sink in a heap, and fall dead before a shop. Armed only with his bell, he had received all by himself the honour of being fired at by a whole platoon.’

“The same witness adds:— ‘The soldiers swept the streets with their guns, even where there was not a paving-stone moved from its place, not a single combatant.’”

VII

“When the slaughter came to an end, — that is to say when it was black night, and it had begun in broad day, — the dead bodies were not removed; they were so numerous that thirty-three of them were counted before a single shop, that of M. Barbedienne. Every square of ground left open in the asphalt at the foot of the trees on the boulevards was a reservoir of blood. ‘The dead bodies,’ says a witness, ‘were piled up in heaps, one upon another, old men, children, blouses and paletots, assembled pell-mell, in an indescribable mass of heads, arms, and legs.'

"Another witness describes thus a group of three individuals: 'Two had fallen on their backs; and the third, having tripped over their legs, had fallen upon them.' The single corpses were rare and attracted more notice than the others. One young man, well dressed, was seated against a wall, with his legs apart, his arms half folded, one of Verdier's canes in his hand, and seemed to be looking at what was going on around him; he was dead. A little farther on, the bullets had nailed against a shop a youth in velveteen trousers who had some proof-sheets in his hand. The wind fluttered these bloody proofs, on which the fingers of the corpse were still closed. A poor old man, with white hair, was lying in the middle of the road, with his umbrella at his side. His elbow almost touched a young man in patent leather boots and yellow gloves, who had his eye-glass still in his eye. A few steps away, with her head on the sidewalk, and her feet in the road, lay a woman of the people, who had attempted to escape, with her child in her arms. Both were dead; but the mother still tightly grasped her child.'

"Ah! you will tell me, M. Bonaparte, that you are very sorry, but that it was an unfortunate affair; that in presence of Paris, ready to rise, it was necessary to adopt a decided course, and that you were forced to this extremity; that, as regards the *coup d'état*, you were in debt; that your ministers were in debt; that your aides-de-camp were in debt; that your footmen were in debt; that you were answerable for them all; and that, deuce take it! a man cannot be a prince without spending, from time to time, a few millions too much; that one must amuse one's self and enjoy life a bit; that the Assembly was to blame for not having understood this, and for seeking to restrict you to two paltry millions a year, and, what is more, to force you to resign your authority at the expiration of your four years, and to execute the Constitution; that, after all, you could not leave the Élysée to enter the debtors' prison at Clichy; that you had in vain had recourse to those little expedients which are provided for by Article 405; that exposure was at hand, that the demagogical press was chattering, that the matter of the gold ingots threatened to become known, that you were bound to respect the name of Napoleon, and that, on my word! having no other alternative, rather than become one of the vulgar swindlers named in the code, you preferred to be one of the great assassins of history!

"So then, instead of polluting, this blood has purified you! Very good.

“I resume.

VIII

“When all was finished, Paris came to see the sight. The people flocked in crowds to those terrible places; no one interfered with them. This was what the butcher wanted. Louis Bonaparte had not done all this to hide it afterwards.

“The southern side of the boulevard was covered with torn cartridge wads; the sidewalk on the northern side disappeared beneath the mortar torn from the fronts of the houses by the bullets, and was as white as if snow had fallen on it; while pools of blood left large dark patches on that snow of ruins. The foot of the passer-by avoided a corpse only to tread upon fragments of broken glass, plaster, or stone; some houses were so riddled by the grape and cannon-balls, that they seemed on the point of tumbling down; this was the case with M. Sallandrouze’s, which we have already mentioned, and the mourning warehouse at the corner of Faubourg Montmartre. ‘The Billecoq house,’ says a witness, ‘is, at the present moment, still propped up by wooden beams, and the front will have to be partly rebuilt. The balls have made holes in the carpet warehouse in several places.’ Another witness says: ‘All the houses from the Cercle des Étrangers to Rue Poissonnière were literally riddled with balls, especially on the right-hand side of the boulevard. One of the large panes of plate glass in the warehouses of *La Petite Jeannette* received certainly more than two hundred for its share. There was not a window that had not its ball. One breathed an atmosphere of saltpetre. Thirty-seven corpses were heaped up in the Cité Bergère; the passers-by could count them through the iron railings. A woman was standing at the corner of Rue Richelieu. She was looking on. Suddenly she felt that her feet were wet. ‘Why, has it been raining?’ she said, ‘my feet are in the water.’— ‘No, madame,’ replied a person who was passing, ‘it is not water.’ — Her feet were in a pool of blood.

“On Rue Grange-Batelière three corpses were seen in a corner, quite naked.

“During the butchery, the barricades on the boulevards had been carried by Bourgon’s brigade. The corpses of those who had defended the barricade at Porte Saint-Denis, of which we have already spoken at the beginning of our narrative, were piled up before the door of the Maison Jouvin. ‘But,’ says a witness, ‘they were nothing compared to the heaps which covered the boulevard.’

“About two paces from the Théâtre des Variétés, the crowd stopped to look at a cap full of brains and blood, hung upon a tree.

“A witness says: ‘A little beyond the Variétés, I came to a corpse lying on the ground with its face downwards; I tried to raise it, aided by others, but we were repelled by the soldiers. A little farther on, there were two bodies, a man and a woman; then one alone, a workman’ (we abridge the account). ‘From Rue Montmartre to Rue du Sentier *one literally walked in blood*; at certain spots, it covered the sidewalk some inches deep, and, without exaggeration, one was obliged to use the greatest caution not to step into it. I counted there thirty-three corpses. The sight was too much for me: I felt great tears rolling down my cheeks. I asked leave to cross the road, in order to enter my own house, and my request was *granted as a favour*!’

“Another witness says: ‘The boulevard presented a horrible sight. *We literally walked in blood.* We counted eighteen corpses in about five and twenty paces.’

“Another witness, the keeper of a wine-shop on Rue du Sentier, says: ‘I went along Boulevard du Temple to my house. When I got home, I had an inch of blood around the bottom of my trousers.’

“Representative Versigny has this to say: ‘We could see, in the distance, almost as far as Porte Saint-Denis, the immense bivouac-fires of the infantry. The light from them, with the exception of that from a few rare lamps, was all we had to guide us amid that horrible carnage. The fighting in the daytime was nothing compared to those corpses and that silence. R. and I were half-dead with horror. A man was passing us; hearing one of my exclamations, he came up to me, took my hand, and said: “You are a republican; and I was what is called a friend of order, a reactionary, but one must be forsaken of God, not to execrate this horrible orgy. France is dishonoured.” And he left us, sobbing.’

“Another witness, who allows us to give his name, a Legitimist, the honourable Monsieur de Cherville, deposes as follows: ‘In the evening, I determined on continuing my sad inspection. On Rue Le Peletier I met Messieurs Bouillon and Gervais (of Caen). We walked a few steps together, when my foot slipped. I clung to M. Bouillon. I looked at my feet. I had walked into a large pool of blood. M. Bouillon then informed me, that, being at his window, in the morning, he saw a druggist, whose shop he pointed out to me, shutting his door. A woman fell; the druggist rushed forward to raise her; at the same moment, a soldier, ten paces off, aimed at him and lodged a bullet in his head. Overcome with wrath, and forgetting his own danger, M. Bouillon exclaimed to the passers-by: “You will all bear witness to what has taken place.”’

“About eleven o’clock at night, when the fires of the bivouacs were everywhere lighted, M. Bonaparte allowed the troops to amuse themselves. It was like a *fête-de-nuit* on the boulevards. The soldiers laughed and sang, as they threw into the fire the débris of the barricades. After this, as at Strasbourg and Boulogne, money was distributed among them. Let us hear what a witness says: ‘I saw, at Porte Saint-Denis, a staff-officer give two hundred francs to the chief of a detachment of twenty men, with these words: “The prince ordered me to give you this money, to be distributed among your brave soldiers! the marks of his satisfaction will not be confined to this.” — Each soldier received ten francs.’

“On the evening of the battle of Austerlitz, the Emperor said: ‘Soldiers, I am content with you.’

“Another person adds: ‘The soldiers, with cigars in their mouths, twitted the passers-by and jingled the money in their pockets.’ Another says: ‘The officers broke the rolls of louis d’or *like sticks of chocolate*.’

“The sentinels allowed only women to pass; whenever a man made his appearance, they cried: ‘Be off!’ Tables were spread in the bivouacs, and officers and soldiers drank around them. The flame of the braziers was reflected on all those merry faces. The corks and capsules of the champagne bottles floated on the red torrents of blood. From bivouac to bivouac the soldiers exchanged loud cries and obscene jokes. They saluted one another with: ‘Long live the grenadiers!’ ‘Long live the lancers!’ and all joined in, ‘Long live Louis-Napoleon!’ One heard the clinking of glasses, and the crash of broken bottles. Here and there, in the shadow, women, with a taper of yellow wax or a lantern in their hands, prowled among the dead bodies, gazing at those pale faces, one after another, and seeking a son, a father, or a husband.

IX

“Let us hasten to have done with these ghastly details.

“The next day, the fifth, something terrible was seen in the cemetery of Montmartre.

“An immense space, the exact location of which is unknown to this day, was ‘utilized’ for the temporary interment of some of those who had been massacred. They were buried with their heads above ground, in order that their relations might recognize them. Most of them had also their feet above ground, with a little earth upon their breasts. The crowd flocked to the spot, the sightseers pushed one here and there, they wandered about among the graves, and, at times, one felt the earth giving way beneath one’s feet: one was walking on the stomach of a corpse. One turned and beheld a pair of boots, of sabots, or of women’s shoes; while on the other side was the head, which the pressure on the body caused to move.

“An illustrious witness, the great sculptor David, who is now proscribed and wandering far from France, says: —

“‘In the cemetery of Montmartre, I saw about forty bodies with their clothes still on them; they had been placed side by side and a few shovelfuls of earth hid all except their heads, which had been left uncovered in order that they might be recognized by their relations. There was so little earth that their feet were still visible; the crowd, horrible to say, was walking on their bodies. Among them were young men with noble features, bearing the stamp of courage; in the midst was a poor woman, a baker’s servant, who had been killed while she was carrying bread to her master’s customers, and near her a young girl who sold flowers on the boulevards. Those persons who were looking for friends who had disappeared, were obliged to trample the bodies under foot, in order to obtain a near view of their faces. I heard a man of the lower classes say, with an expression of horror: “It is like walking upon a spring-board.”’

“The crowd continued to flock to the various spots where the victims had been carried, especially to the Cité Bergère, so that, on this day, the fifth, as the numbers increased to such an extent as to become troublesome, and as it was necessary to get rid of them, these words, written in capital letters on a large placard, were to be seen at the entrance of the Cité Bergère: ‘There are no more dead bodies here.’

“The three naked corpses on Rue Grange-Batelière were not removed until the evening of the fifth.

“It is evident, and we insist upon it, that at first, and for the advantage which it wished to derive from it, the *coup d’état* did not make the least endeavour to conceal its crime; shame did not come until later; the first day, on the contrary, it flaunted it. It was not content with atrocity, it must needs add cynicism. Massacre was but a means; the end was intimidation.

X

“Was this end attained?

“Yes.

“Immediately afterwards, as early as the evening of December 4, the public excitement subsided. Paris was frozen with stupor. The indignation that raised its voice before the *coup d’état*, held its peace before the carnage. The affair had ceased to resemble anything in history. One felt that one had to deal with a man of a hitherto unknown type.

“Crassus crushed the gladiators; Herod slaughtered the infants; Charles IX exterminated the Huguenots; Peter of Russia, the Strelitz; Mehemet Ali, the Mamelukes; Mahmoud, the Janissaries; while Danton massacred the prisoners. Louis Bonaparte had just discovered a new sort of massacre — the massacre of the passers-by.

“This massacre ended the struggle. There are times when what should exasperate a people, strikes them with terror. The population of Paris felt that a ruffian had his foot upon his throat. It no longer offered any resistance. That same evening Mathieu (of the Drôme) entered the place where the Committee of Resistance was sitting and said to us: ‘We are no longer in Paris, we are no longer under the Republic; we are at Naples under the sway of King Bomba.’

“From that moment, in spite of all the efforts of the committee, of the representatives, and of their courageous allies, there was, save at certain points only, — such as the barricade of the Petit-Carreau, for instance, where Denis Dussoubs, the brother of the representative, fell so heroically, — naught but a resistance which resembled the last convulsions of despair rather than a combat. All was finished.

“The next day, the 5th, the victorious troops paraded on the boulevards. A general was seen to show his naked sword to the people, and to exclaim: ‘The Republic — here it is!’

“Thus an infamous butchery, the massacre of the passers-by, was included, as a supreme necessity, in the ‘measure’ of the 2nd of December. To undertake it, a man must be a traitor; to make it successful, he must be an assassin.

“It was by this proceeding that the *coup d’état* conquered France and overcame Paris. Yes, Paris! It is necessary for one to repeat it again and again to himself, — it was at Paris that all this happened!

“Great God! The Russians entered Paris brandishing their lances and singing their wild songs, but Moscow had been burnt; the Prussians entered Paris, but Berlin had been taken; the Austrians entered Paris, but Vienna had been bombarded; the English entered Paris, but the camp at Boulogne had menaced London; they came to our barriers, these men of all nations, with drums beating, trumpets resounding, colours flying, swords drawn, cannon rumbling, matches lighted, drunk with excitement, enemies, conquerors, instruments of vengeance, shrieking with rage before the domes of Paris the names of their capitals, — London, Berlin, Vienna, Moscow! The moment, however, that they crossed the threshold of the city, the moment that the hoofs of their horses rang upon the pavement of our streets, Englishmen, Austrians, Prussians, Russians, on entering Paris, beheld in its walls, its buildings, its people, something predestined, something venerable and august; they all felt a holy sentiment of respect for the sacred city; they all felt that they had before them, not the city of one people, but the city of the whole human race; they all lowered the swords they had raised! Yes, to massacre the Parisians, to treat Paris like a place taken by assault, to deliver up to pillage one quarter of the town, to outrage the second Eternal City, to assassinate civilization in her very sanctuary, to shoot down old men, children, and women, in this illustrious spot, this home of the world; that which Wellington forbade his half-naked Highlanders, and Schwartzenberg his Croats to do; that which Blucher did not suffer his Landwehr to do, and which Platow dared not allow his Cossacks to undertake, — all these things hast thou, base wretch, caused to be done by French soldiers!”

BOOK IV

THE OTHER CRIMES

I

SINISTER QUESTIONS

What was the number of the dead?

Louis Bonaparte, conscious of the advent of history, and imagining that a Charles IX can extenuate a Saint Bartholomew, has published as a *pièce justificative,* a so-called “official list of the deceased persons.” In this “Alphabetical List,”_you will meet with such items as these: “Adde, bookseller, 17 Boulevard Poissonnière, killed in his house; Boursier, a child seven years and a-half old, killed on Rue Tiquetonne; Belval, cabinetmaker, 10 Rue de la Lune, killed in his house; Coquard, house-holder at Vire (Calvados), killed on Boulevard Montmartre; Debaecque, tradesman, 45 Rue de Sentier, killed in his house; De Couvercelle, florist, 257 Rue Saint-Denis, killed in his house; Labilte, jeweller, 63 Boulevard Saint-Martin, killed in his house; Monpelas, perfumer, 181 Rue Saint-Martin, killed in his house; Demoiselle Grellier, housekeeper, 209 Faubourg Saint-Martin, killed on Boulevard Montmartre; Femme Guillard, cashier, 77 Faubourg Saint-Denis, killed on Boulevard Saint-Denis; Femme Garnier, confidential servant, 6 Boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle, killed on Boulevard Saint-Denis; Femme Ledaust, housekeeper, 76 Passage du Caire, at the Morgue; Françoise Noël, waistcoat-maker, 20 Rue des Fossés-Montmartre, died at La Charité; Count Poninski, annuitant, 32 Rue de la Paix, killed on Boulevard Montmartre; Femme Raboisson, dressmaker, died at the National Hospital; Femme Vidal, 97 Rue de Temple, died at the Hôtel-Dieu; Femme Séguin, embroideress, 240 Rue Saint-Martin, died at the hospital Beaujon; Demoiselle Seniac, shop-woman, 196 Rue du Temple, died at the hospital Beaujon; Thirion de Montauban, house-holder, 10 Rue de Lancry, killed at his own door,” etc., etc.

To abridge: Louis Bonaparte confesses, in this state paper, *one hundred and ninety-one* murders.

This document being cited for what it is worth, the question is, what is the true total? What is the exact figure of his victims? How many corpses bestrew the *coup d’état* of December? Who can tell? Who knows? Who will ever know? As we have already seen, one witness deposed: “I counted in that place thirty-three bodies;” another, at a different part of the boulevard, said: “We counted eighteen bodies within a space of twenty or twenty-five yards.” A third person, speaking of another spot, said: “There were upwards of sixty bodies within a distance of sixty yards.” The writer so long threatened with death told ourselves: “I saw with my eyes upwards of eight hundred dead bodies lying along the boulevard.”

Now think, compute how many it requires of battered brains, of breasts shattered by grape-shot, to cover with blood, “literally,” half a mile of boulevards. Go you, as did the wives, the sisters, the daughters, the wailing mothers, take a torch, plunge into the dark night, feel on the ground, feel along the pavement and the walls, pick up the corpses, interrogate the phantoms, and reckon if you can.

The number of his victims! One is reduced to conjecture. This question must be solved by history. As for us, it is a question which we pledge ourselves to examine and explore hereafter.

On the first day, Louis Bonaparte made a display of his slaughter. We have told the reason why. It suited his purpose. After that, having derived from the deed all the required advantage, he concealed it. Orders were given to the Élyséan journals to be silent, to Magnan to omit, to the historiographers to know nothing. They buried the slain after midnight, without lights, without processions, without prayers, without priests, by stealth. Families were enjoined not to weep too loud.

The massacre along the boulevards was only a part; it was followed by the summary fusillades, the secret executions.

One of the witnesses whom we have questioned asked a major in the gendarmerie mobile, who had distinguished himself in these butcheries: “Come, tell us the figure? Was it four hundred?” The man shrugged his shoulders. “Was it six hundred?” The man shook his head. “Eight hundred?”— “Say twelve hundred,” said the officer, “and you will fall short.”

At this present hour nobody knows exactly what the 2nd of December was, what it did, what it dared, whom it killed, whom it buried. The very morning of the crime, the newspaper offices were placed under seal, free speech was suppressed, by Louis Bonaparte, that man of silence and darkness. On the 2nd, the 3rd, the 4th, the 5th, and ever since, Truth has been taken by the throat and strangled just as she was about to speak. She could not even utter a cry. He has deepened the gloom about his ambuscade and he has succeeded in part. Let history strive as she may, the 2nd of December will, perhaps, continue involved, for a long time to come, in a sort of ghastly twilight. It is a crime made up of audacity and darkness; here it shows itself impudently in broad daylight; there it skulks away into the mist. Hideous and double-faced effrontery, which conceals no one knows what monstrosities beneath its cloak.

But these glimpses are sufficient. There is a certain side of the 2nd of December where all is dark; but, within that darkness, graves are visible.

Beneath this great enormity a host of crimes may be vaguely distinguished. Such is the behest of Providence; there are compulsions linked to treason. You are a perjurer! You violate your oaths! You trample upon law and justice! Well! take a rope, for you will be compelled to strangle; take a dagger, for you will be compelled to stab; take a club, for you will be compelled to strike; take shadow and darkness, for you will be compelled to hide yourself. One crime brings on another; there is a logical consistency in horror. There is no halting, no middle course. Go on! do this first; good! Now do that, then this again; and so for ever! The law is like the veil of the Temple: once rent, it is rent from top to bottom.

Yes, we say it again, in what has been called “the act of the 2nd of December,” one meets with crime at every depth. Perjury floats on the surface, murder lies at the bottom. Partial homicides, wholesale butcheries, shooting in open day, fusillades by night; a steam of blood rises from every part of the *coup d’état*.

Search in the common grave of the churchyards, search beneath the street pavement, beneath the sloping banks of the Champ-de-Mars, beneath the trees of the public gardens, in the bed of the Seine!

But few revelations. That is easily understood. Bonaparte has the satanic art of binding to himself a crowd of miserable officials by I know not what terrible universal complicity. The stamped papers of the magistrates, the desks of the registrars, the cartridge-boxes of the soldiers, the prayers of the priests, are his accomplices. He has cast his crime about him like a network, and prefects, mayors, judges, officers, and soldiers are caught therein. Complicity descends from the general to the corporal, and ascends from the corporal to the president. The *sergent-de-ville* and the minister feel that they are equally implicated. The gendarme whose pistol has pressed against the ear of some unfortunate, and whose uniform has been splashed with human brains, feels as guilty as his colonel. Above, cruel men gave orders which savage men executed below. Savagery keeps the secret of cruelty. Hence this hideous silence.

There is even emulation and rivalry between this savagery and this atrocity; what escaped the one was seized upon by the other. The future will refuse to credit these prodigious excesses. A workman was crossing the Pont au Change, some gendarmes mobiles stopped him; they smelt his hands. “He smells of powder,” said a gendarme. They shot the workman; his body was pierced by four balls. “Throw him into the stream,” cries the sergeant. The gendarmes take him by the neck and heels and hurl him over the bridge. Shot, and then drowned, the man floats down the river. However, he was not dead; the icy river revived him; but he was unable to move, his blood flowed into the water from four holes; but being held up by his blouse, he struck against an arch of one of the bridges. There some lightermen discovered him, picked him up, and carried him to the hospital; he recovered; he left the place. The next day he was arrested, and brought before a court-martial. Rejected by death, he was reclaimed by Louis Bonaparte. This man is now at Lambessa.

What the Champ-de-Mars secretly witnessed, — the terrible night tragedies which dismayed and dishonoured it, — history cannot yet reveal. Thanks to Louis Bonaparte, this revered field of the Federation may in future be called Aceldama. One of the unhappy soldiers whom the man of the 2nd of December transformed into executioners, relates with horror, and beneath his breath, that in a single night the number of people shot was not less than eight hundred.

Louis Bonaparte hastened to dig a grave and threw in his crime. A few shovelfuls of earth, a sprinkling of holy water by a priest, and all was said. And now, the imperial carnival dances above that grave.

Is this all? Can it be that this is the end? Does God allow and acquiesce in such burials? Believe it not. Some day, beneath the feet of Bonaparte, between the marble pavements of the Élysée or the Tuileries, this grave will suddenly re-open, and those bodies will come forth, one after another, each with its wound, the young man stricken to the heart, the old man shaking his aged head pierced by a ball, the mother put to the sword, with her infant killed in her arms, — all of them upstanding, pallid, terrible to see, and with bleeding eyes fixed on their assassin.

Awaiting that day, and even now, history has begun to try you, Louis Bonaparte. History rejects your official list of the dead, and your *pièces justificatives*.

History asserts that they lie, and that you lie.

You have tied a bandage over the eyes of France and put a gag in her mouth. Wherefore?

Was it to do righteous deeds? No, but crimes. The evil-doer is afraid of the light.

You shot people by night, on the Champ-de-Mars, at the Prefecture, at the Palais de Justice, on the squares, on the quays, everywhere.

You say you did not.

I say you did.

In dealing with you we have a right to surmise, to suspect, and to accuse.

What you deny, we have a right to believe; your denial is equivalent to affirmation.

Your 2nd of December is pointed at by the public conscience. Nobody thinks of it without inwardly shuddering. What did you do in those dark hours?

Your days are ghastly, your nights are suspicious. Ah! man of darkness that you are!

Let us return to the butchery on the boulevard, to the words, “Let my orders be executed!” and to the day of the 4th.

Louis Bonaparte, during the evening of that day, must have compared himself to Charles X, who refused to burn Paris, and to Louis Philippe, who would not shed the people’s blood, and he must have done himself the justice to admit that he is a great politician. A few days later, General T —— , formerly in the service of one of the sons of King Louis Philippe, came to the Élysée. As soon as Louis Bonaparte caught sight of him, the comparison we have just pointed out suggesting itself to him, he cried out to the general, exultingly: “Well?”

Louis Bonaparte is in very truth the man who said to one of his former ministers, who was our own informant: “*Had I been Charles X, and had I, during the days of July, caught Laffitte, Benjamin Constant, and Lafayette, I would have had them shot like dogs.*”

On the 4th of December, Louis Bonaparte would have been dragged that very night from the Élysée, and the law would have prevailed, had he been one of those men who recoil before a massacre. Fortunately for him, he had no such scruples. What signified a few dead bodies, more or less? Nonsense! kill! kill at random! cut them down! shoot, cannonade, crush, smash! Strike terror for me into this hateful city of Paris! The *coup d'état* was in a bad way; this great homicide restored its spirit. Louis Bonaparte had nearly ruined himself by his felony; he saved himself by his ferocity. Had he been only a Faliero, it was all over with him; fortunately he was a Cæsar Borgia. He plunged with his crime into a river of gore; one less culpable would have sunk, he swam across. Such was his success as it is called. He is now on the other bank, striving to wipe himself dry, dripping with the blood which he mistakes for the purple, and demanding the Empire.

II

SEQUEL OF CRIMES

Such a man is this malefactor!

And shall we not applaud thee, O Truth! when, in the eyes of Europe and of the world, before the people, in the face of God, while he appealed to honour, the sanctity of an oath, faith, religion, the sacredness of human life, the law, the generosity of all hearts, wives, sisters, mothers, civilization, liberty, the republic, France; before his valets, his Senate and his Council of State; before his generals, his priests, and his police agents, — thou who representest the people (for the people is truth); thou who representest intelligence (for intelligence is enlightenment); thou who representest humanity (for humanity is reason); in the name of the enthralled people, in the name of exiled intelligence, in the name of outraged humanity, before this mass of slaves who cannot, or dare not, speak, thou dost scourge this brigand of order.

Let some one else choose milder words. I am outspoken and harsh; I have no pity for this pitiless man, and I glory in it.

Let us proceed.

To what we have just related add all the other crimes, to which we shall have occasion to return more than once, and the history of which, God granting us life, we shall relate in detail. Add the numberless incarcerations attended with circumstances of ferocity, the overgorged prisons, the sequestration of property of the proscribed in ten departments, notably in La Nièvre, in L'Allier, and in Les Basses-Alpes; add the confiscation of the

Orleans property, with the slice allotted to the clergy. Schinderhannes never forgot to share with the curé. Add the mixed commissions, and the commission of clemency, so called; the councils of war combined with the examining magistrates, and, multiplying the instances of abomination, the batches of exiles, the expulsion of a part of France out of France (the department of the Herault, alone, furnishing 3,200 persons, either banished or transported); add the appalling proscription, — comparable to the most tragic devastations in history, — which for an impulse, for an opinion, for an honest dissent from the government, for the mere word of a freeman, even when uttered before the 2nd of December, takes, seizes, apprehends, tears away the labourer from the field, the working-man from his trade, the house-holder from his house, the physician from his patients, the notary from his office, the counsellor from his clients, the judge from his court, the husband from his wife, the brother from his brother, the father from his children, the child from his parents, and marks its ill-omened cross on every head, from the highest to the lowest. Nobody escapes. A man in tatters, wearing a long beard, came into my room one morning at Brussels. “I have just arrived,” said he; “I have travelled on foot, and have had nothing to eat for two days.” Some bread was given him. He ate. “Where do you come from?”— “From Limoges.”— “Why are you here?”— “I don’t know; they drove me away from my home.”— “What are you?”— “A maker of wooden shoes.”

Add Africa; add Guiana; add the atrocities of Bertrand, of Canrobert, of Espinasse, of Martimprey; the ship-loads of women sent off by General Guyon; Representative Miot dragged from casemate to casemate; hovels in which there are a hundred and fifty prisoners, beneath a tropical sun, with promiscuity of sex, filth, vermin, and where all these innocent patriots, all these honest people are perishing, far from their dear ones, in fever, in misery, in horror, in despair, wringing their hands. Add all these poor wretches handed over to gendarmes, bound two by two, packed in the lower decks of the *Magellan*, the *Canada*, the *Duguesclin*; cast among the convicts of Lambessa and Cayenne, not knowing what there is against them, and unable to guess what they have done. One of them, Alphonse Lambert, of the Indre, torn from his death-bed; another, Patureau Francœur, a vine-dresser, transported, because in his village they wanted to make him president of the republic; a third, Valette, a carpenter at Châteauroux, transported for having, six months previous to the 2nd of December, on the day of an execution, refused to erect the guillotine.

Add to these the man-hunting in the villages, the *battue* of Viroy in the mountains of Lure, Pellion’s *battue* in the woods of Clamecy, with fifteen hundred men; order restored at Crest — out of two thousand insurgents, three hundred slain; mobile columns everywhere. Whoever stands up for the law, sabred and shot: at Marseilles, Charles Sauvan exclaims, “Long live the Republic!” a grenadier of the 54th fires at him; the ball enters his side, and comes out of his belly; another, Vincent, of Bourges, is deputy-mayor of his commune: as a magistrate he protests against the *coup d’état*; they track him through the village, he flies, he is pursued, a cavalryman cuts off two of his fingers with his sword, another cleaves his head, he falls; they remove him to the fort at Ivry before dressing his wounds; he is an old man of seventy-six.

Add facts like these: in the Cher, Representative Vignier is arrested. Arrested for what? Because he is a representative, because he is inviolable, because he is consecrated by the votes of the people. Vignier is cast into prison. One day he is allowed to go out *for one hour* to attend to certain matters which imperatively demand his presence. Before he went out two gendarmes, Pierre Guéret and one Dubernelle, a brigadier, seized Vignier; the brigadier held his hands against each other so that the palms touched, and bound his wrists tightly with a chain; as the end of the chain hung down, the brigadier forced it between Vignier’s hands, over and over, at the risk of fracturing his wrists by the pressure. The prisoner’s hands turned blue and swelled.— “You are putting me to the question,” said Vignier coolly.— “Hide your hands,” sneered the gendarme, “if you’re ashamed.”— “You hound,” retorted Vignier, “you are the one of us two that this chain dishonors.” — In this wise Vignier passed through the streets of Bourges where he had lived thirty years — between two gendarmes, with his hands raised, exhibiting his chains. Representative Vignier is seventy years old.

Add the summary fusillades in twenty departments; “All who resist,” writes Saint-Arnaud, Minister of War, “are to be shot, in the name of society defending itself.” “Six days have sufficed to *crush* the insurrection,” states General Levaillant, who commanded the state of siege in the Var. “I have made some good captures,” writes Commandant Viroy from Saint-Étienne; “I have shot, without stirring, eight persons, and am now in pursuit of the leaders in the woods.” At Bordeaux, General Bourjoly enjoins the leaders of the mobile columns to “have shot forthwith every person caught with arms in his hands.” At Forcalquier, it was better still; the proclamation declaring the state of siege reads:— “The town of Forcalquier is in a state of siege. Those citizens who *took no part* in the day’s events, and those who have arms in their possession, are summoned to give them up on pain of being shot.” The mobile column of Pézenas arrives at Servian: a man tries to escape from a house surrounded by soldiers; he is shot at and killed. At Entrains, eighty prisoners are taken; one of them escapes by the river, he is fired at, struck by a ball, and disappears under the water; the rest are shot. To these execrable deeds, add these infamous ones: at Brioude, in Haute-Loire, a man and woman thrown into prison for having ploughed the field of one of the proscribed; at Loriol, in the Drôme, Astier, a forest-keeper, condemned to twenty years’ hard labour, for having sheltered fugitives. Add too, and my pen shakes as I write it, the punishment of death revived; the political guillotine re-erected; shocking sentences; citizens condemned to death on the scaffold by the judicial janissaries of the courts-martial: at Clamecy, Milletot, Jouannin, Guillemot, Sabatier, and Four; at Lyon, Courty, Romegal, Bressieux, Fauritz, Julien, Roustain, and Garan, deputy-mayor of Cliouscat; at Montpellier, seventeen for the affair of Bédarieux, Mercadier, Delpech, Denis, André, Barthez, Triadou, Pierre Carrière, Galzy, Galas (called Le Vacher), Gardy, Jacques Pagès, Michel Hercule, Mar, Vène, Frié, Malaterre, Beaumont, Pradal, the six last luckily being out of the jurisdiction; and at Montpellier four more, Choumac, Vidal, Cadelard and Pagès. What was the crime of these men? Their crime is yours, if you are a good subject; it is mine, who writes these lines; it is obedience to Article 110 of the Constitution; it is armed resistance to Louis Bonaparte’s crime; and the court “orders that the execution shall take place in the usual way on one of the public squares of Béziers,” with respect to the last four, and, in the case of the other seventeen, on one of the squares at Bédarieux. The *Moniteur* announces it; it is true that the *Moniteur* announces, at the same time, that the service of the last ball at the Tuileries was performed by three hundred maîtres d’hôtel, habited in the liveries rigorously prescribed by the ceremonial of the old imperial palace.

Unless a universal cry of horror should stop this man in time, all these heads will fall.

Whilst we are writing, this is what has just occurred at Belley: —

A native of Bugez, near Belley, a working-man, named Charlet, had warmly advocated, on the 10th of December, 1848, the election of Louis Bonaparte. He had distributed circulars, supported, propagated, and hawked them; the election was in his eyes a triumph; he hoped in Louis-Napoleon; he took seriously the socialist writings of the prisoner of Ham, and his "philanthropical" and "republican" programmes: on the 10th of December there were many such honest dupes; they are now the most indignant. When Louis Bonaparte was in power, when they saw the man at work, these illusions vanished. Charlet, a man of intelligence, was one of those whose republican probity was outraged, and gradually, as Louis Bonaparte plunged deeper and deeper into reactionary measures, Charlet shook himself free; thus did he pass from the most confiding partisanship to the most open and zealous opposition. Such is the history of many other noble hearts.

On the 2nd of December, Charlet did not hesitate. In the face of the many crimes combined in the infamous deed of Louis Bonaparte, Charlet felt the law stirring within him; he reflected that he ought to be the more severe, because he was one of those whose trust had been most betrayed. He clearly understood that there remained but one duty for the citizen, a bounden duty, inseparable from the law, — to defend the Republic and the Constitution, and to resist by every means the man whom the Left, but still more his own crime, had outlawed. The refugees from Switzerland passed the frontier in arms, crossed the Rhône, near Anglefort, and entered the department of the Ain. Charlet joined their ranks.

At Seyssel, the little troop fell in with the custom-house officers. The latter, voluntary or misled accomplices of the *coup d'état*, chose to resist their passage. A conflict ensued, one of the officers was killed, and Charlet was made prisoner.

The *coup d'état* brought Charlet before a court-martial. He was charged with the death of the custom-house officer, which, after all, was but an incident of war. At all events, Charlet was innocent of that death; the officer was killed by a bullet, and Charlet had no weapon but a sharpened file.

Charlet would not recognize as a lawful court the body of men who pretended to sit in judgment on him. He said to them: "You are no judges; where is the law? The law is on my side." He refused to answer them.

Questioned on the subject of the officer's death, he could have cleared up the whole matter by a single word; but to descend to an explanation would, to a certain extent, have been a recognition of the tribunal. He did not choose to recognize it, so he held his peace.

These men condemned him to die, “according to the usual mode of criminal executions.”

The sentence pronounced, he seemed to have been forgotten; days, weeks, months elapsed. Everybody about the prison said to Charlet, “You are safe.”

On the 29th of June, at break of day, the town of Belley saw a mournful sight. The scaffold had risen from the earth during the night, and stood in the middle of the public square.

The people accosted one another, pale as death, and asked: “Have you seen what there is in the square?”— “Yes.”— “Whom is it for?”

It was for Charlet.

The sentence of death had been referred to M. Bonaparte, it had slumbered a long time at the Élysée; there was other business to attend to; but one fine morning, after a lapse of seven months, all the world having forgotten the conflict at Seyssel, the slain custom-house officer, and Charlet himself, M. Bonaparte, wanting most likely to insert some event between the festival of the 10th of May and the festival of the 15th of August, signed the warrant for the execution.

On the 29th of June, therefore, only a few days ago, Charlet was removed from his prison. They told him he was about to die. He continued calm. A man who has justice on his side does not fear death, for he feels that there are two things within him: one, his body, which may be put to death, the other, justice, whose hands are not bound, nor does its head fall beneath the knife.

They wanted to make Charlet ride in a cart. “No,” said he to the gendarmes, “I will go on foot, I can walk, I am not afraid.”

There was a great crowd along his route. Every one in the town knew him and loved him; his friends sought his eye. Charlet, his arms fastened behind his back, bowed his head right and left. “Adieu, Jacques! adieu, Pierre!” said he, smiling. “Adieu, Charlet!” they answered, and all of them wept. The gendarmerie and the infantry surrounded the scaffold. He ascended it with slow and steady steps. When they saw him standing on the scaffold, a shudder ran through the crowd; the women cried aloud, the men clenched their fists.

While they were strapping him to the plank, he looked up at the knife, saying: “When I reflect that I was once a Bonapartist!” Then, raising his eyes to Heaven, he exclaimed, “Vive la République!”

The next moment his head fell.

It was a day of mourning at Belley and through all the villages of the Ain. “How did he die?” people would ask.— “Bravely.”— “God be praised!”

In this wise a man has been killed.

The mind succumbs and is lost in horror in presence of a deed so damnable.

This crime being added to the rest complements and sets a sinister sort of seal upon them.

It is more than the complement, it is the crowning act.

One feels that M. Bonaparte ought to be satisfied! To have shot down at night, in the dark, in solitude, on the Champ-de-Mars, under the arches of the bridges, behind a lonely wall, at random, haphazard, no matter whom, unknown persons, shadows, the very number of whom none can tell; to cause nameless persons to be slain by nameless persons; and to have all this vanish in obscurity, in oblivion, is, in very truth, far from gratifying to one’s self-esteem; it looks like hiding one’s self, and in truth that is what it is; it is commonplace. Scrupulous men have the right to say to you: “You know you are afraid; you would not dare to do these things publicly; you shrink from your own acts.” And, to a certain extent, they seem to be right. To shoot down people by night is a violation of every law, human and divine, but it lacks audacity. One does not feel triumphant afterwards. Something better is possible.

Broad daylight, the public square, the judicial scaffold, the regular apparatus of social vengeance — to hand the innocent over to these, to put them to death in this manner, ah! that is different. I can understand that. To commit a murder at high noon, in the heart of the town, by means of one machine called court, or court-martial, and of another machine slowly erected by a carpenter, adjusted, put together, screwed and greased at pleasure; to say it shall be at such an hour; then to display two baskets, and say: “This one is for the body, that other for the head;” at the appointed time to bring the victim bound with ropes, attended by a priest; to proceed calmly to the murder, to order a clerk to prepare a report of it, to surround the murder victim with gendarmes and naked swords, so that the people there may shudder, and no longer know what they see, and wonder whether those men in uniform are a brigade of gendarmerie or a band of robbers, and ask one another, looking at the man who lets the knife fall, whether he is the executioner or whether he is not rather an assassin! This is bold and resolute, this is a parody of legal procedure, most audacious and alluring, and worth being carried out. This is a noble and far-spreading blow on the cheek of justice. Commend us to this!

To do this seven months after the struggle, in cold blood, to no purpose, as an omission that one repairs, as a duty that one fulfills, is awe-inspiring, it is complete; one has the appearance of acting within one's rights, which perplexes the conscience and makes honest men shudder.

A terrible juxtaposition, which comprehends the whole case. Here are two men, a working-man and a prince. The prince commits a crime, he enters the Tuileries; the working-man does his duty, he ascends the scaffold. Who set up the working-man's scaffold? The prince!

Yes, this man who, had he been beaten in December, could have escaped the death penalty only by the omnipotence of progress, and by an enlargement, too liberal certainly, of the principle that human life is sacred; this man, this Louis Bonaparte, this prince who carries the practices of Poulmann and Soufflard into politics, he it is who rebuilds the scaffold! Nor does he tremble! Nor does he turn pale! Nor does he feel that it is a fatal ladder, that he is at liberty to refrain from erecting it, but that, when once it is erected, he is not at liberty to take it down, and that he who sets it up for another, afterwards finds it for himself. It knows him again, and says to him, "Thou didst place me here, and I have awaited thee."

No, this man does not reflect, he has longings, he has whims, and they must be satisfied. They are the longings of a dictator. Unlimited power would be tasteless without this seasoning. Go to, — cut off Charlet's head, and the others. M. Bonaparte is Prince-President of the French Republic; M. Bonaparte has sixteen millions a year, forty-four thousand francs a day, twenty-four cooks in his household, and as many aides-de-camp; he has the right of fishing in the ponds of Saclay and Saint-Quentin; of hunting in the forests of Laigne, Ourscamp, Carlemont, Champagne and Barbeau; he has the Tuileries, the Louvre, the Élysée, Rambouillet, Saint-Cloud, Versailles, Compiègne; he has his imperial box at every theatre, feasting and music every day, M. Sibour's smile, and the arm of the Marchioness of Douglas on which to enter the ballroom; but all this is not enough; he must have the guillotine to boot; he must have some of those red baskets among his baskets of champagne.

Oh! hide we our faces with both our hands! This man, this hideous butcher of the law and of justice, still had his apron round his waist and his hands in the smoking bowels of the Constitution, and his feet in the blood of all the slaughtered laws, when you, judges, when you, magistrates, men of the law, men of the right...! But I pause; I shall meet you hereafter with your black robes and your red robes, your robes of the colour of ink, and your robes of the colour of blood; and I shall find them, too, and having chastised them once, will chastise them again — those lieutenants of yours, those judicial supporters of the ambuscade, those soilers of the ermine, — Baroche, Suin, Royer, Mongis, Rouher, and Troplong, deserters from the law, — all those names which signify nothing more than the utmost contempt which man can feel.

If he did not crush his victims between two boards, like Christiern II; if he did not bury people alive, like Ludovic the Moor; if he did not build his palace walls with living men and stones, like Timour-Beg, who was born, says the legend, with his hands closed and full of blood; if he did not rip open pregnant women, like Cæsar Borgia, Duke of Valentinois; if he did not scourge women on the breasts, *testibusque viros*, like Ferdinand of Toledo; if he did not break on the wheel alive, burn alive, boil alive, flay alive, crucify, impale, and quarter, blame him not, the fault was not his; the age obstinately refuses to allow it. He has done all that was humanly or inhumanly possible. Given the nineteenth century, a century of gentleness, — of decadence, say the papists and friends of arbitrary power, — Louis Bonaparte has equalled in ferocity his contemporaries, Haynau, Radetzky, Filangieri, Schwartzenberg, and Ferdinand of Naples: he has even surpassed them. A rare merit, with which we must credit him as another impediment: the scene was laid in France. Let us do him this justice: in the times in which we live, Ludovic Sforza, the Valentinois, the Duke of Alva, Timour, and Christiern II, would have done no more than Louis Bonaparte; in their time, he would have done all that they did; in our time, just as they were about to erect their gibbets, their wheels, their wooden horses, their cranes, their living towers, their crosses, and their stakes, they would have desisted like him, in spite of themselves, and unconsciously, before the secret and invincible resistance of the moral environment, of that formidable and mysterious interdiction of an entire epoch, which rises in the north, the south, the east, and the west, to confront tyrants, and says no to them.

The *Bulletin des Lois* publishes the following decree, dated the 27th of March: —

"Considering the law of May 10, 1838, which classes the ordinary expenses of the provincial prisons with those to be included in the departmental budgets:

"Whereas this is not the nature of the expenses occasioned by the arrests resulting from the events of December;

"Whereas the facts which have caused these arrests to multiply are connected with *a plot against the safety of the state*, the suppression of which concerned society at large, and therefore it is just to discharge out of the public funds the excess of expenditure resulting from the *extraordinary increase* in the number of prisoners;

"It is decreed that: —

"An extraordinary credit of 250,000f. be opened, at the Ministry of the Interior, on the revenue of 1851, to be applied to the liquidation of the expenses resulting from the arrests consequent on the events of December."

"Digne, January 5, 1852.

"The Colonel commanding the state of siege in the department of the Basses-Alpes

"Decrees: —

"Within the course of ten days the property of the fugitives from the law *will be sequestrated*, and administered by the director of public lands in the Basses-Alpes, according to civil and military laws, etc. Fririon."

Ten similar decrees, emanating from the commanders of states of siege, might be quoted. The first of the malefactors who committed this crime of confiscating property, and who set the example of arrests of this sort, is named Eynard. He is a general. On December 18, he placed under sequestration the property of a number of citizens of Moulins, "because," as he cynically observed, "*the beginning of the insurrection leaves no doubt* as to the part they took *in the insurrection*, and in the pillaging in the department of the Allier."

The number of *convictions* actually upheld (in most cases the sentences were of transportation) was declared to be as follows, at the date of the reports: —

By M. Canrobert	3,876
By M. Espinasse	3,625
By M. Quentin-Bauchard	1,634
	9,135

)

Read the odious despatch, copied verbatim from the *Moniteur*:

“The armed insurrection has been totally suppressed in Paris by vigorous measures. The same energy will produce the same effect everywhere else.

“Bands of people who spread pillage, rapine, and fire, place themselves outside of the law. With them one does not argue or warn; one attacks and disperses them.

“All who resist must be shot, in the name of society defending itself.”

III

WHAT 1852 WOULD HAVE BEEN

But, had it not been for this abominable 2nd of December, which its accomplices, and after them its dupes, call “necessary,” what would have occurred in France? Mon Dieu! this: —

Let us go back a little, and review, in a summary way, the situation as it was before the *coup d’état*.

The party of the past, under the name of order, opposed the republic, or in other words, opposed the future.

Whether opposed or not, whether assented to or not, the republic, all illusions apart, is the future, proximate or remote, but inevitable, of the nations.

How is the republic to be established? There are two ways of establishing it: by strife and by progress. The democrats would arrive at it by progress; their adversaries, the men of the past, appear to desire to arrive at it by strife.

As we have just observed, the men of the past are for resisting; they persist; they apply the axe to the tree, expecting to stop the mounting sap. They lavish their strength, their puerility, and their anger.

Let us not utter a single bitter word against our old adversaries, fallen with ourselves on the same day, and several among them with honour on their side; let us confine ourselves to noting that it was into this struggle that the majority of the Legislative Assembly of France entered at the very beginning of its career, in the month of May, 1849.

This policy of resistance is a deplorable policy. This struggle between man and his Maker is inevitably vain; but, though void of result, it is fruitful in catastrophes. That which ought to be will be; that which ought to flow will flow; that which ought to fall will fall; that which ought to spring up will spring up; that which ought to grow will grow; but, obstruct these natural laws, confusion follows, disorder begins. It is a melancholy fact that it was this disorder which was called order.

Tie up a vein, and sickness ensues; clog up a stream, and the water overflows; obstruct the future, and revolutions break out.

Persist in preserving among you, as if it were alive, the past, which is dead, and you produce an indescribable moral cholera; corruption spreads abroad, it is in the air, we breathe it; entire classes of society, the public officials, for instance, fall into decay. Keep dead bodies in your houses, the plague will break out.

This policy inevitably makes blind those who adopt it. Those men who dub themselves statesmen do not understand that they themselves have made, with their own hands and with untold labour, and with the sweat of their brows, the terrible events they deplore, and that the very catastrophes which fall upon them were by them constructed. What would be said of a peasant who should build a dam from one side of a river to the other, in front of his cottage, and who, when he saw the river turned into a torrent, overflow, sweep away his wall, and carry off his roof, should exclaim: “Wicked river!”? The statesmen of the past, those great builders of dams across streams, spend their time in exclaiming: “Wicked people!”

Take away Polignac and the July ordinances, that is to say, the dam, and Charles X would have died at the Tuileries. Reform in 1847 the electoral laws, that is to say once more, take away the dam, and Louis Philippe would have died on the throne. Do I mean thereby that the Republic would not have come? Not so. The Republic, we repeat, is the future; it would have come, but step by step, successive progress by progress, conquest by conquest, like a river that flows, and not like a deluge that overflows; it would have come at its own hour, when all was ready for it; it would have come, certainly not more enduring, for it is already indestructible, but more tranquil, free from all possibility of reaction, with no princes keeping watch, with no *coup d'état* behind.

The policy which obstructs the progress of mankind — let us insist on this point — excels in producing artificial floods. Thus it had managed to render the year 1852 a sort of formidable eventuality, and this again by the same contrivance, by means of a dam. Here is a railway; a train will pass in an hour; throw a beam across the rails, and when the train comes to that point it will be wrecked, as it was at Fampoux; remove the beam before the train arrives, and it will pass without even suspecting the catastrophe recently lurking there. This beam is the law of the 31st of May.

The leaders of the majority of the Legislative Assembly had thrown it across 1852, and they cried: "This is where society will be crushed!" The Left replied: "Take away your beam, and let universal suffrage pass unobstructed." This is the whole history of the law of the 31st of May.

These are things for children to understand, but which "statesmen" do not understand.

Now let us answer the question we just now proposed: Without the 2nd of December, what would have occurred in 1852?

Revoke the law of the 31st of May, take away the dam from before the people, deprive Bonaparte of his lever, his weapon, his pretext, let universal suffrage alone, take the beam off the rails, and do you know what you would have had in 1852?

Nothing.

Elections.

A sort of peaceful Sundays, when the people would have come forward to vote, labourers yesterday, today electors, to-morrow labourers, and always sovereign.

Somebody rejoins: "Oh, yes, elections! You talk very glibly about them. But what about the 'red chamber' which would have sprung from these elections."

Did they not announce that the Constitution of 1848 would prove a "red chamber?" Red chambers, red hobgoblins, all such predictions are of equal value. Those who wave such phantasmagorias on the end of a stick before the terrified populace know well what they are doing, and laugh behind the ghastly rag they wave. Beneath the long scarlet robe of the phantom, to which had been given the name of 1852, we see the stout boots of the *coup d'état*.

IV

THE JACQUERIE

Meanwhile, after the 2nd of December, the crime being committed, it was imperative to mislead public opinion. The *coup d'état* began to shriek about the Jacquerie, like the assassin who cried: "Stop thief!"

We may add, that a *Jacquerie* had been promised, and that M. Bonaparte could not break all his promises at once without some inconvenience. What but the Jacquerie was the red spectre? Some reality must be imparted to that spectre: one cannot suddenly burst out laughing in the face of a whole people and say: "It was nothing! I only kept you in fear of yourselves."

Consequently there was a *Jacquerie*. The promises of the play-bill were observed.

The imaginations of his entourage gave themselves a free rein; that old bugbear Mother Goose was resuscitated, and many a child, on reading the newspaper, might have recognized the ogre of Goodman Perrault in the disguise of a socialist; they surmised, they invented; the press being suppressed, it was quite easy; it is easy to lie when the tongue of contradiction has been torn out beforehand.

They exclaimed: "Citizens, be on your guard! without us you were lost. We shot you, but that was for your good. Behold, the Lollards were at your gates, the Anabaptists were scaling your walls, the Hussites were knocking at your window-blinds, the lean and hungry were climbing your staircases, the empty-bellied coveted your dinner. Be on your guard! Have not some of your good women been outraged?"

They gave the floor to one of the principal writers in *La Patrie,* one Froissard.

"I dare not write or describe the horrible and improper things they did to the ladies. But among other disorderly and villainous injuries, they killed a chevalier and put a spit through him, and turned him before the fire, and roasted him before the wife and her children. After ten or twelve had violated the woman, they tried to make her and the children eat some of the body; then killed them, put them to an evil death.

“These wicked people pillaged and burned everything; they killed, and forced, and violated all the women and maidens, without pity or mercy, as if they were mad dogs.

“Quite in the same manner did lawless people conduct themselves between Paris and Noyon, between Paris and Soissons and Ham in Vermandois, all through the land of Coucy. There were the great violators and malefactors; and, in the county of Valois, in the bishopric of Laon, of Soissons, and of Noyon, they destroyed upwards of a hundred châteaux and goodly houses of knights and squires, and killed and robbed all they met. But *God*, by his grace, found a fit remedy, for which all praise be given to him.”

People simply substituted for God, Monseigneur le Prince-President. They could do no less.

Now that eight months have elapsed, we know what to think of this “Jacquerie;” the facts have at length been brought to light. Where? How? Why, before the very tribunals of M. Bonaparte. The sub-prefects whose wives had been violated were single men; the curés who had been roasted alive, and whose hearts Jacques had eaten, have written to say that they are quite well; the gendarmes, round whose bodies others had danced have been heard as witnesses before the courts-martial; the public coffers, said to have been rifled, have been found intact in the hands of M. Bonaparte, who “saved” them; the famous deficit of five thousand francs, at Clamecy, has dwindled down to two hundred expended in orders for bread. An official publication had said, on the 8th of December: “The curé, the mayor, and the sub-prefect of Joigny, besides several gendarmes, have been basely massacred.” Somebody replied to this in a letter, which was made public; “Not a drop of blood was shed at Joigny; nobody’s life was threatened.” Now, by whom was this letter written? This same mayor of Joigny who had been *basely massacred*, M. Henri de Lacretelle, from whom an armed band had extorted two thousand francs, at his château of Cormatin, is amazed, to this day, not at the extortion, but at the fable. M. de Lamartine, whom another band had intended to plunder, and probably to hang on the lamp-post, and whose château of Saint-Point was burned, and who “had written to demand government assistance,” knew nothing of the matter until he saw it in the papers!

The following document was produced before the court-martial in the Nièvre, presided over by ex-Colonel Martinprey: —

“ORDER OF THE COMMITTEE

“Honesty is a virtue of republicans.

“Every thief and plunderer will be shot.

“Every detainer of arms who, in the course of twelve hours, shall not have deposited them at the mayor’s office, or given them up, shall be arrested and confined until further orders.

“Every drunken citizen shall be disarmed and sent to prison.

“Clamecy, December 7, 1851.

“Vive la république sociale!

“THE SOCIAL REVOLUTIONARY COMMITTEE.”

This that you have just read is the proclamation of “Jacques.” “Death to the pillagers! death to the thieves!” Such is the cry of these thieves and pillagers.

One of these “Jacques,” named Gustave Verdun-Lagarde, a native of Lot-Garonne, died in exile at Brussels, on the 1st of May, 1852, bequeathing one hundred thousand francs to his native town, to found a school of agriculture. This partitioner did indeed make partition.

There was not, then, and the honest co-authors of the *coup d’état* admit it now to their intimates, with playful delight, there was not any “Jacquerie,” it is true; but the trick has told.

There was in the departments, as there was in Paris, a lawful resistance, the resistance prescribed to the citizens by Article 110 of the Constitution, and superior to the Constitution by natural right; there was the legitimate defence — this time the word is properly applied — against the “preservers;” the armed struggle of right and law against the infamous insurrection of the ruling powers. The Republic, surprised by an ambuscade, wrestled with the *coup d’état*. That is all.

Twenty-seven departments rose in arms: the Ain, the Aude, the Cher, the Bouches du Rhône, the Côte d’Or, the Haute-Garonne, Lot-et-Garonne, the Loiret, the Marne, the Meurthe, the Nord, the Bas-Rhin, the Rhône, Seine-et-Marne, did their duty worthily; the Allier, the Basses-Alpes, the Aveyron, the Drome, the Gard, the Gers, the Hérault, the Jura, the Nièvre, the Puy-de-Dôme, Saône-et-Loire, the Var and Vaucluse, did theirs fearlessly. They succumbed, as did Paris.

The *coup d’état* was as ferocious there as at Paris. We have cast a summary glance at its crimes.

So, then, it was this lawful, constitutional, virtuous resistance, this resistance in which heroism was on the side of the citizens, and atrocity on the side of the powers; it was this which the *coup d'état* called "Jacquerie." We repeat, a touch of red spectre was useful.

This Jacquerie had two aims; it served the policy of the Elysée in two ways; it offered a double advantage: first, to win votes for the "plebiscite;" to win these votes by the sword and in face of the spectre, to repress the intelligent, to alarm the credulous, compelling some by terror, others by fear, as we shall shortly explain; therein lies all the success and mystery of the vote of the 20th of December; secondly, it afforded a pretext for proscriptions.

The year 1852 in itself contained no actual danger. The law of the 31st of May, morally extinct, was dead before the 2nd of December. A new Assembly, a new President, the Constitution simply put in operation, elections, — and nothing more.

But it was necessary that M. Bonaparte should go. There was the obstacle; thence the catastrophe.

Thus, then, did this man one fine morning seize by the throat the Constitution, the Republic, the Law, and France; he stabbed the future in the back; under his feet he trampled law, common sense, justice, reason, and liberty; he arrested men who were inviolable, he sequestered innocent men; in the persons of their representatives he seized the people in his grip; he raked the Paris boulevards with his shot; he made his cavalry wallow in the blood of old men and of women; he shot without warning and without trial; he filled Mazas, the Conciergerie, Saint-Pélagie, Vincennes, his fortresses, his cells, his casemates, his dungeons, with prisoners, and his cemeteries with corpses; he incarcerated, at Saint-Lazare, a wife who was carrying bread to her husband in hiding; he sent to the galleys for twenty years, a man who had harboured one of the proscribed; he tore up every code of laws, broke every enactment; he caused the deported to rot by thousands in the horrible holds of the hulks; he sent to Lambessa and Cayenne one hundred and fifty children between twelve and fifteen; he who was more absurd than Falstaff, has become more terrible than Richard III; and why has all this been done? Because there was, he said, "a plot against his power;" because the year which was closing had a treasonable understanding with the year which was beginning to overthrow him; because Article 45 perfidiously concerted with the calendar to turn him out;

because the second Sunday in May intended to “depose” him; because his oath had the audacity to plot his fall; because his plighted word conspired against him.

The day after his triumph, he was heard to say: “The second Sunday in May is dead.” No! it is probity that is dead! it is honour that is dead! it is the name of Emperor that is dead!

How the man sleeping in the chapel of St. Jerome must shudder, how he must despair! Behold the gradual rise of unpopularity about his great figure; and it is this ill-omened nephew who has placed the ladder. The great recollections are beginning to fade, the bad ones are returning. People dare no longer speak of Jena, Marengo, and Wagram. Of what do they speak? Of the Duc d’Enghien, of Jaffa, of the 18th Brumaire. They forget the hero, and see only the despot. Caricature is beginning to sport with Cæsar’s profile. And what a creature beside him! Some there are who confound the nephew with the uncle, to the delight of the Élysée, but to the shame of France! The parodist assumes the airs of a stage manager. Alas! a splendour so infinite could not be tarnished save by this boundless debasement! Yes! worse than Hudson Lowe! Hudson Lowe was only a jailor, Hudson Lowe was only an executioner. The man who has really assassinated Napoleon is Louis Bonaparte; Hudson Lowe killed only his life, Louis Bonaparte is killing his glory.

Ah! the villain! he takes everything, he abuses everything, he sullies everything, he dishonours everything. He selects, for his ambuscade the month, the day, of Austerlitz. He returns from Satory as one would return from Aboukir. He conjures out of the 2nd of December I know not what bird of night, and perches it on the standard of France, and exclaims: “Soldiers, behold the eagle.” He borrows the hat from Napoleon, and the plume from Murat. He has his imperial etiquette, his chamberlains, his aides-de-camp, his courtiers. Under the Emperor, they were kings, under him they are lackeys. He has his own policy, his own 13th Vendémiaire, his own 18th Brumaire. Yes, he risks comparison! At the Élysée, Napoleon the Great has disappeared: they say, “*Uncle Napoleon*.” The man of destiny has outdone Géronte. The perfect man is not the first, but this one. It is evident that the first came only to make the second’s bed. Louis Bonaparte, in the midst of his valets and concubines, to satisfy the necessities of the table and the chamber, mingles the coronation, the oath, the Legion of Honour, the camp of Boulogne, the Column Vendôme, Lodi, Arcola, Saint-Jean-d’Acre, Eylau, Friedland, Champaubert — Ah! Frenchmen! look upon this hog covered with slime strutting about in that lion's skin!

BOOK V

PARLIAMENTARISM

I

1789

One day, more than sixty-three years ago, the French people, who had been the property of one family for upwards of eight hundred years, who had been oppressed by the barons down to Louis XI, and since Louis XI by the parliaments, that is to say, to employ the frank remark of a great nobleman of the eighteenth century, “who had been half eaten up by wolves and finished by vermin;” who had been parcelled into provinces, into châtellanies, into bailiwicks, and into seneschalries; who had been exploited, squeezed, taxed, fleeced, peeled, shaven, shorn, clipped and abused without mercy, fined incessantly at the good pleasure of their masters; governed, led, misled, overdriven, tortured; beaten with sticks, and branded with red-hot irons for an oath; sent to the galleys for killing a rabbit upon the king’s grounds; hung for a matter of five sous; contributing their millions to Versailles and their skeletons to Montfauçon; laden with prohibitions, with ordinances, with patents, with royal letters, with edicts pecuniary and rural, with laws, with codes, with customs; ground to the earth with imposts, with fines, with quit-rents, with mortmains, import and export duties, rents, tithes, tolls, statute-labour, and bankruptcies; cudgelled with a cudgel called a sceptre; gasping, sweating, groaning, always marching, crowned, but on their knees, rather a beast of burthen than a nation, — the French people suddenly stood upright, determined to be men, and resolved to demand an account of Providence, and to liquidate those eight centuries of misery. It was a noble effort!

II

MIRABEAU

A large hall was chosen which was surrounded with benches, then they took boards, and with these boards constructed, in the middle of the hall, a kind of platform. When this platform was finished, what in those days was called the nation, that is to say, the clergy, in their red and violet robes, the nobility in spotless white, with their swords at their sides, and the bourgeoisie dressed in black, took their seats upon the benches. Scarcely were they seated when there was seen to ascend the platform and there take its stand an extraordinary figure. “Who is this monster?” said some; “Who is this giant?” said others. It was a singular being, unforeseen, unknown, emerging abruptly from the obscurity, who terrified, and who fascinated. A dreadful disease had given him a kind of tiger’s head; every degree of ugliness seemed to have been imprinted upon that mask by every possible vice. Like the bourgeoisie, he was dressed in black, that is to say, in mourning. His bloodshot eye cast upon the assembly a dazzling glance; it resembled menace and reproach — all looked upon him with a degree of curiosity in which was mingled horror. He raised his hand, and there was silence.

Then were heard to issue from this hideous face sublime words. It was the voice of the new world speaking through the mouth of the old world; it was ‘89 that had risen, and was questioning, and accusing and denouncing to God and man all the fatal dates of the monarchy; it was the past, — an august spectacle, — the past, bruised with chains, branded on the shoulder, ex-slave, ex-convict, — the unfortunate past, calling aloud upon the future, the emancipating future! that is what that stranger was, that is what he did on that platform! At his word, which at certain moments was as the thunder, prejudices, fictions, abuses, superstitions, fallacies, intolerance, ignorance, fiscal infamies, barbarous punishments, outworn authorities, worm-eaten magistracy, discrepit codes, rotten laws, everything that was doomed to perish, trembled, and the downfall of those things began. That formidable apparition has left a name in the memory of men; he should be called Revolution, — his name is Mirabeau!

III

THE TRIBUNE

From the moment that that man put his foot upon that platform, that platform was transformed. The French tribune was founded.

The French tribune! A volume would be necessary to tell all that that word contains. The French tribune has been, these sixty years, the open mouth of human intelligence. Of human intelligence, saying everything, combining everything, blending everything, fertilizing everything: the good, the bad, the true, the false, the just, the unjust, the high, the low, the horrible, the beautiful, dreams, facts, passion, reason, love, hate, the material, the ideal; but, in a word — for that is the essence of its sublime and eternal mission — making darkness in order to draw from it light, making chaos to draw from it life, making the revolution to draw from it the republic.

What has taken place upon that tribune, what it has seen, what it has done, what tempests have raged around it, *to* what events it has given birth, what men have shaken it with their clamour, what men have made it sacred with their truths — how recount this? After Mirabeau, — Vergniaud, Camille Desmoulins, Saint-Just, that stern young man, Danton, that tremendous tribune, Robespierre, that incarnation of the great and terrible year! From it were heard those ferocious interruptions. “Aha!” cries an orator of the Convention, “do you propose to cut short my speech?” “Yes,” answers a voice, “and your neck to-morrow.” And those superb apostrophes. “Minister of Justice,” said General Foy to an iniquitous Keeper of the Seals, “I condemn you, on leaving this room, to contemplate the statue of L’Hôpital.” — There, every cause has been pleaded, as we have said before, bad causes as well as good; the good only have been finally won; there, in the presence of resistance, of denials, of obstacles, those who long for the future, like those who long for the past, have lost all patience; there, it has happened to truth to become violent, and to falsehood to rage; there, all extremes have appeared. On that tribune the guillotine had its orator, Marat; and the Inquisition its Montalembert. Terrorism in the name of public safety, terrorism in the name of Rome; gall in the mouths of both, agony in the audience. When one was speaking, you fancied you saw the gleam of the knife; when the other was speaking, you fancied you heard the crackling of the stake. There factions have fought, all with determination, a few with glory. There, the royal power violated the right of the people in the person of Manuel, become illustrious in history by this very violation; there appeared, disdaining the past, whose servants they were, two melancholy old men: Royer-Collard, disdainful probity, Chateaubriand, the satirical genius; there, Thiers, skill, wrestled with Guizot, strength; there men have mingled, have grappled, have fought, have brandished evidence like a sword. There, for more than a quarter of a century, hatred, rage, superstition, egotism, imposture, shrieking, hissing, barking, writhing, screaming always the same calumnies, shaking always the same clenched fist, spitting, since Christ, the same saliva, have whirled like a cloud-storm about thy serene face, O Truth!

IV

THE ORATORS

All this was alive, ardent, fruitful, tumultuous, grand. And when everything had been pleaded, argued, investigated, searched, gone to the bottom of, said and gainsaid, what came forth from the chaos? always the spark! What came forth from the cloud? always light! All that the tempest could do was to agitate the ray of light, and change it into lightning. There, in that tribune, has been propounded, analyzed, clarified, and almost always determined, every question of the day: questions of finance, questions of credit, questions of labour, questions of circulation, questions of salary, questions of state, questions of the land, questions of peace, questions of war. There, for the first time, was pronounced that phrase which contained a whole new alignment of society, — the Rights of Man. There, for fifty years, has been heard the ringing of the anvil upon which supernatural smiths were forging pure ideas, — ideas, those swords of the people, those lances of justice, that armour of law. There, suddenly impregnated with sympathetic currents, like embers which redden in the wind, all those who had flame in their hearts, great advocates like Ledru-Rollin and Berryer, great historians like Guizot, great poets like Lamartine, rose at once, and naturally, into great orators.

That tribune was a place of strength and of virtue. It saw, it inspired (for it is easy to believe that these emanations sprang from it), all those acts of devotion, of abnegation, of energy, of intrepidity. As for us, we honour every display of courage, even in the ranks of those who are opposed to us. One day the tribune was surrounded with darkness; it seemed as if an abyss had opened around it; and in this darkness one heard a noise like the roaring of the sea; and suddenly, in that impenetrable night, above that ledge of marble to which clung the strong hand of Danton, one saw arise a pike bearing a bleeding head! Boissy d’Anglas saluted it.

That was a day of menace. But the people do not overthrow tribunes. The tribunes belong to the people, and the people know it. Place a tribune in the centre of the world, and in a few days, in the four corners of the earth, the Republic will arise. The tribune shines for the people, and they are not unaware of it. Sometimes the tribune irritates the people, and makes them foam with rage; sometimes they beat it with their waves, they overflow it even, as on the 15th of May, but then they retire majestically like the ocean, and leave it standing upright like a beacon. To overthrow the tribune is, on the part of the people, rank folly; it is the proper work of tyrants only.

The people were rising, full of anger, of irritation. Some generous error had seized them, some illusion was leading them astray; they had misunderstood some act, some measure, some law; they were beginning to be wroth, they were laying aside that superb tranquillity wherein their strength consists, they were invading all the public squares with dull murmurings and formidable gestures; it was an émeute, an insurrection, civil war, a revolution, perhaps. The tribune was there. A beloved voice arose and said to the people: “Pause, look, listen, judge!” *Si forte virum quem conspexere, silent.* This was true at Rome, and true at Paris. The people paused. O Tribune! pedestal of men of might! from thee have sprung eloquence, law, authority, patriotism, devotion, and great thoughts, — the curb of the people, the muzzles of lions.

In sixty years, every sort of mind, every sort of intelligence, every description of genius, has successively spoken in that spot, the most resonant in the world. From the first Constituent Assembly to the last, from the first Legislative Assembly to the last, through the Convention, the Councils, and the Chambers, count the men if you can. It is a catalogue worthy of Homer. Follow the series! How many contrasting figures are there from Danton to Thiers? How many figures that resemble one another, from Barère to Baroche, from Lafayette to Cavaignac? To the names we have already mentioned, — Mirabeau, Vergniaud, Danton, Saint-Just, Robespierre, Camille Desmoulins, Manuel, Foy, Royer-Collard, Chateaubriand, Guizot, Thiers, Ledru-Rollin, Berryer, Lamartine, — add these other names, so different, sometimes hostile, — scholars, artists, men of science, men of the law, statesmen, warriors, democrats, monarchists, liberals, socialists, republicans, all famous, a few illustrious, each having the halo which befits him: Barnave, Cazalès, Maury, Mounier, Thouret, Chapelier, Pétion, Buzot, Brissot, Sieyès, Condorcet, Chénier, Carnot, Lanjuinais, Pontécoulant, Cambacérès, Talleyrand, Fontanes, Benjamin Constant, Casimir Perier, Chauvelin, Voyer d’Argenson, Laffitte, Dupont (de l’Eure), Fitz-James, Cuvier, Villemain, Camille Jordan, Lainé, Bonald, Villèle, Martignac, the two Lameths, the two Davids (the painter in ‘93, the sculptor in ‘48), Lamarque, Mauguin, Odilon Barrot, Arago, Garnier-Pagès, Louis Blanc, Marc Dufraisse, Lamennais, Émile de Girardin, Lamoricière, Dufaure, Crémieux, Michel (de Bourges), Jules Favre. What a constellation of talents! what a variety of aptitudes! what services rendered! what a battling of all the realities against all the errors! what brains at work! what an outlay, for the benefit of progress, of learning, of philosophy, of passion, of conviction, of experience, of sympathy, of eloquence! what a fertilising heat spread abroad! what a shining firmament of light!

And we do not name them all. To make use of an expression which is sometimes borrowed from the author of this book, "*Nous en passons et des meilleurs*." We have not even alluded to that valiant legion of young orators who arose on the Left during these last years, — Arnauld (de l'Ariège), Bancel, Chauffour, Pascal Duprat, Esquiros, de Flotte, Farcounet, Victor Hennequin, Madier de Montjau, Morellet, Noël Parfait, Pelletier, Sain, Versigny.

Let us insist upon this point: starting from Mirabeau, there was in the world, in human society, in civilization, a culminating point, a central spot, a common altar, a summit. This summit was the tribune of France; admirable landmark for coming generations, a glittering height in time of peace, a lighthouse in the darkness of catastrophes. From the extremities of the intelligent world, the peoples fixed their eyes upon this peak, from which has shone the human mind. When dark night suddenly enveloped them, they heard issuing from that height a mighty voice, which spoke to them in the darkness. *Admonet et magna testatur voce per umbras.* A voice which all at once, when the hour had come, like the cockcrow announcing the dawn, like the cry of the eagle hailing the sun, resounded like a clarion of war, or like the trumpet of judgment, and brought to their feet once more, awe-inspiring, waving their winding-sheets, seeking swords in their tombs, all those heroic dead nations, — Poland, Hungary, Italy! Then, at that voice of France, the glorious sky of the future opened; old despotisms, blinded and in fear, hid their heads in the nether darkness, and there, her feet upon the clouds, her forehead among the stars, a sword flashing in her hand, her mighty wings outspread in the azure depths, one saw Liberty appear, the archangel of the nations.

V

INFLUENCE OF ORATORY

This tribune was the terror of every tyranny and fanaticism, it was the hope of every one who was oppressed under Heaven. Whoever placed his foot upon that height, felt distinctly the pulsations of the great heart of mankind. There, providing he was a man of earnest purpose, his soul swelled within him, and shone without. A breath of universal philanthropy seized him, and filled his mind as the breeze fills the sail; so long as his feet rested upon those four planks, he was a stronger and a better man; he felt at that consecrated minute as if he were living the life of all the nations; words of charity for all men came to his lips; beyond the Assembly, grouped at his feet, and frequently in a tumult, he beheld the people, attentive, serious, with ears strained, and fingers on lips; and beyond the people, the human race, plunged in thought, seated in circles, and listening. Such was this grand tribune, from which a man addressed the world.

From this tribune, incessantly vibrating, gushed forth perpetually a sort of sonorous flood, a mighty oscillation of sentiments and ideas, which, from billow to billow, and from people to people, flowed to the utmost confines of the earth, to set in motion those intelligent waves which are called souls. Frequently one knew not why such and such a law, such and such an institution, was tottering, beyond the frontiers, beyond the most distant seas: the Papacy beyond the Alps, the throne of the Czar at the extremity of Europe, slavery in America, the death penalty all over the world. The reason was that the tribune of France had quivered. At certain hours the quiver of that tribune was an earthquake. The tribune of France spoke, and every sentient being on this earth betook itself to reflection; the words sped into the obscurity, through space, at hazard, no matter where,— “It is only the wind, it is only a little noise,” said the barren minds that live upon irony; but the next day, or three months, or a year later, something fell on the surface of the earth, or something rose. What had been the cause of that? The noise that had vanished, the wind that had passed away. This noise, this wind, was “the Word.” A sacred force! From the Word of God came the creation of human beings; — from the Word of Man will spring the union of the peoples.

VI

WHAT AN ORATOR IS

Once mounted upon this tribune, the man who was there was no longer a man: he was that mysterious workman whom we see, at twilight, walking with long strides across the furrows, and flinging into space, with an imperial gesture, the germs, the seeds, the future harvests, the wealth of the approaching summer, bread, life.

He goes to and fro, he returns; his hand opens and empties itself, fills itself and empties itself again and again; the sombre plain is stirred, the deeps of nature open, the unknown abyss of creation begins its work; the waiting dews fall, the spear of wild grain quivers and reflects that the sheaf of wheat will succeed it; the sun, hidden behind the horizon, loves what that workman is doing, and knows that his rays will not be wasted. Sacred and mysterious work!

The orator is the sower. He takes from his heart his instincts, his passions, his beliefs, his sufferings, his dreams, his ideas, and throws them, by handfuls, into the midst of men. Every brain is to him an open furrow. One word dropped from the tribune always takes root somewhere, and becomes a thing. You say, “Oh! it is nothing — it is a man talking,” and you shrug your shoulders. Shortsighted creatures! it is a future which is germinating, it is a new world bursting into bloom.

VII

WHAT THE TRIBUNE ACCOMPLISHED

Two great problems hang over the world. War must disappear, and conquest must continue. These two necessities of a growing civilization seemed to exclude each other. How satisfy the one without failing the other? Who could solve the two problems at the same time? Who did solve them? The tribune! The tribune is peace, and the tribune is conquest. Conquest by the sword, — who wants it? Nobody. The peoples are fatherlands. Conquest by ideas, — who wants it? Everybody. The peoples are mankind. Now two preëminent tribunes dominated the nations — the English tribune doing business, and the French tribune creating ideas. The French tribune had elaborated after ‘89 all the principles which form the political philosopher’s stone, and it had begun to elaborate since 1848 all the principles which form the social philosopher’s stone. When once a principle had been released from confinement and brought into the light, the French tribune threw it upon the world, armed from head to foot, saying: “Go!” The victorious principle took the field, met the custom-house officers on the frontier, and passed in spite of their watch-dogs; met the sentinels at the gates of cities, and passed despite their pass-words; travelled by railway, by packet-boat, scoured continents, crossed the seas, accosted wayfarers on the highway, sat at the firesides of families, glided between friend and friend, between brother and brother, between man and wife, between master and slave, between people and king; and to those who asked: “Who art thou?” it replied: “I am the truth;” and to those who asked: “Whence comest thou?” it replied, “I come from France.” Then he who had questioned the principle offered it his hand, and it was better than the annexation of a province, it was the annexation of a human mind. Thenceforth, between Paris, the metropolis, and that man in his solitude, and that town buried in the heart of the woods or of the steppes, and that people groaning under the yoke, a current of thought and of love was established. Under the influence of these currents certain nationalities grew weak, whilst others waxed strong and rose again. The savage felt himself less savage, the Turk less Turk, the Russian less Russian, the Hungarian more Hungarian, the Italian more Italian. Slowly, and by degrees, the French spirit assimilated the other nations, for universal progress. Thanks to this admirable French language, composed by Providence, with wonderful equilibrium, of enough consonants to be pronounced by the nations of the North, and of enough vowels to be pronounced by the peoples of the South; thanks to this language, which is a power of civilization and of humanity, little by little, and by its radiation alone, this lofty central tribune of Paris conquered the nations and made them France. The material boundary of France was such as she could make it; but there were no treaties of 1815 to determine her moral frontier. The moral frontier constantly receded and broadened from day to day; and before a quarter of a century, perhaps, one would have said the French world, as one said the Roman world.

That is what the tribune was, that is what it was accomplishing for France, a prodigious engine of ideas, a gigantic factory ever elevating the level of intelligence all over the world, and infusing into the heart of humanity a vast flood of light.

And this is what M. Bonaparte has suppressed!

VIII

PARLIAMENTARISM

Yes, that tribune M. Bonaparte has overthrown. That power, created by our revolutionary parturition, he has broken, shattered, crushed, torn with his bayonets, thrown under the feet of horses. His uncle uttered an aphorism: “The throne is a board covered with velvet.” He, also, has uttered his: “The tribune is a board covered with cloth, on which we read, *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*.” He has thrown board and cloth, and Liberty and

Equality and Fraternity, into the fire of a bivouac. A burst of laughter from the soldiers, a little smoke, and all was over.

Is it true? Is it possible? Did it happen so? Has such a thing been seen in these days? Mon Dieu, yes; it is, in fact, extremely simple. To cut off the head of Cicero and nail his two hands upon the rostrum, it sufficed to have a brute who has a knife, and another brute who has nails and a hammer.

The tribune was for France three things: a means of exterior initiative, a method of interior government, a source of glory. Louis Bonaparte has suppressed the initiative. France was the teacher of the peoples, and conquered them by love; to what end? He has suppressed the method of government, — his own is better. He has breathed upon the glory of France, and blown it out. Certain breaths have this property.

But to make an assault upon the tribune is a family crime. The first Bonaparte had already committed it, but at least what he brought into France to replace that glory, was glory, not ignominy.

Louis Bonaparte did not content himself with overthrowing the tribune; he determined to make it ridiculous. As well try that as anything else. The least one can do, when one cannot utter two words consecutively, when one harangues only with written notes in hand, when one is short both of speech and of intelligence, is to make a little fun of Mirabeau. General Ratapoil said to General Foy, "Hold your tongue, chatterbox!"— "What is it you call the tribune?" cries M. Bonaparte Louis; "it is parliamentarism!" What have you to say to "parliamentarism"? Parliamentarism pleases me. Parliamentarism is a pearl. Behold the dictionary enriched. This academician of *coups d'état* makes new words. In truth one is not a barbarian to refrain from dropping a barbarism now and then. He too is a sower; barbarisms fructify in the brains of idiots. The uncle had "ideologists" — the nephew has "parliamentarisms." Parliamentarism, gentlemen; parliamentarism, ladies. This is answerable for everything. You venture timidly to observe: "It is perhaps a pity so many families have been ruined, so many people transported, so many citizens proscribed, so many coffins filled, so many graves dug, so much blood spilt" "Aha!" replies a coarse voice with a Dutch accent; "so you mistrust parliamentarism, do you?" Get out of the dilemma if you can. Parliamentarism is a great find. I give my vote to M. Louis Bonaparte for the next vacant seat at the Institute. What's that? why, we must encourage neology! This man comes from the dung-heap, this man comes from the Morgue, this man's hands steam like a butcher’s, he scratches his ear, smiles, and invents words like Julie d’Angennes. He marries the wit of the Hôtel de Rambouillet to the odour of Montfauçon. We will both vote for him, won’t we, M. de Montalembert?

IX

THE TRIBUNE DESTROYED

So “parliamentarism” — that is to say, protection of the citizen, freedom of discussion, liberty of the press, liberty of the subject, supervision of the taxes, inspection of the receipts and expenses, the safety-lock upon the public money-box, the right of knowing what is being done with your money, the solidity of credit, liberty of conscience, liberty of worship, protection of property, the guarantee against confiscation and spoliation, the safeguard of the individual, the counterpoise to arbitrary power, the dignity of the nation, the glory of France, the steadfast morals of free nations, movement, life, — all these exist no longer. Wiped out, annihilated, vanished! And this “deliverance” has cost France only the trifle of twenty-five millions, divided amongst twelve or fifteen saviours, and forty thousand francs in eau-de-vie, per brigade! Verily, this is not dear! these gentlemen, of the *coup d’état* did the thing at a discount.

Now the deed is done, it is complete. The grass is growing at the Palais-Bourbon. A virgin forest is beginning to spring up between Pont de la Concorde and Place Bourgogne. Amid the underbrush one distinguishes the box of a sentry. The Corps Législatif empties its urn among the reeds, and the water flows around the foot of the sentry-box with a gentle murmur.

Now it is all over. The great work is accomplished. And the results of the work! Do you know that Messieurs So-and-So won town houses and country houses in the Circuit Railway alone? Get all you can, gorge yourselves, grow a fat paunch; it is no longer a question of being a great people, of being a powerful people, of being a free nation, of casting a bright light; France no longer sees its way to that. And this is success! France votes for Louis-Napoleon, carries Louis-Napoleon, fattens Louis-Napoleon, contemplates Louis-Napoleon, admires Louis-Napoleon, and is stupefied. The end of civilization is attained!

Now there is no more noise, no more confusion, no more talking, no more parliament, or parliamentarism. The Corps Législatif, the Senate, the Council of State, have all had their mouths sewn up. There is no more fear of reading a fine speech when you wake up in the morning. It is all over with everything that thought, that meditated, that created, that spoke, that sparkled, that shone among this great people. Be proud, Frenchmen! Lift high your heads, Frenchmen! You are no longer anything, and this man is everything! He holds in his hand your intelligence, as a child holds a bird. Any day he pleases, he can strangle the genius of France. That will be one less source of tumult! In the meantime, let us repeat in chorus: "No more Parliamentarism, no more tribune!" In lieu of all those great voices which debated for the improvement of mankind, which were, one the idea, another the fact, another the right, another justice, another glory, another faith, another hope, another learning, another genius; which instructed, which charmed, which comforted, which encouraged, which brought forth fruit; in lieu of all those sublime voices, what is it that one hears amid the dark night that hangs like a pall over France? The jingle of a spur, of a sword dragged along the pavement!

"Hallelujah!" says M. Sibour. "Hosannah!" replies M. Parisis.

BOOK VI

THE ABSOLUTION: — FIRST PHASE: THE 7,500,000 VOTES

I

THE ABSOLUTION

Some one says to us: “You do not consider! All these facts, which you call crimes, are henceforth ‘accomplished facts,’ and consequently to be respected; it is all accepted, adopted, legitimized, absolved.”

“Accepted! adopted! legitimized! absolved! by what?”

“By a vote.”

“What vote?”

“The seven million five hundred thousand votes.”

“Oh! true. There was a plebiscite, and a vote, and seven million five hundred thousand ayes. Let us say a word of them.”

II

THE DILIGENCE

A brigand stops a diligence in the woods.

He is at the head of a resolute band.

The travellers are more numerous, but they are separated, disunited, cooped up in the different compartments, half asleep, surprised in the middle of the night, seized unexpectedly and without arms.

The brigand orders them to alight, not to utter a cry, not to speak a word, and to lie down with their faces to the ground.

Some resist: he blows out their brains.

The rest obey, and lie on the road, speechless, motionless, terrified, mixed up with the dead bodies, and half dead themselves.

The brigand, while his accomplices keep their feet on the ribs of the travellers, and their pistols at their heads, rifles their pockets, forces open their trunks, and takes all the valuables they possess.

The pockets rifled, the trunks pillaged, the *coup d’état* completed, he says to them: —

“Now, in order to set myself right with justice, I have written down on paper a declaration, that you acknowledge that all I have taken belonged to me, and that you give it to me of your own free will. I propose that this shall be your view of the matter. Each of you will have a pen given you, and without uttering a syllable, without making the slightest movement, without quitting your present attitude” (belly on ground, and face in the mud) “you will put out your arms, and you will all sign this paper. If any one of you moves or speaks, here is the muzzle of my pistol. Otherwise, you are quite free.”

The travellers put out their arms, and sign.

The brigand thereupon tosses his head, and says: —

“I have seven million five hundred thousand votes.”

III

SCRUTINY OF THE VOTE. — A REMINDER OF PRINCIPLES. — FACTS

M. Louis Bonaparte is president of this diligence. Let us recall a few principles.

For a political ballot to be valid, three absolute conditions must exist: First, the vote must be free; second, the vote must be intelligent; third, the figures must be accurate. If one of these three conditions is wanting, the ballot is null. How is it when all three are wanting?

Let us apply these rules.

First. *That the vote must be free.*

What freedom there was in the vote of the 20th of December, we have just pointed out; we have described that freedom by a striking display of evidence. We might dispense with adding anything to it. Let each of those who voted reflect, and ask himself under what moral and physical violence he dropped his ballot in the box. We might cite a certain commune of the Yonne, where, of five hundred heads of families, four hundred and thirty were arrested, and the rest voted “aye;” or a commune of the Loiret, where, of six hundred and thirty-nine heads of families, four hundred and ninety-seven were arrested or banished; the one hundred and forty-two who escaped voted “aye.” What we say of the Loiret and the Yonne might be said of all the departments. Since the 2nd of December, each town has its swarm of spies; each village, each hamlet, its informer. To vote “no” was imprisonment, transportation, Lambessa. In the villages of one department, we were told by an eye-witness, they brought “ass-loads of ‘aye’ ballots.” The mayors, flanked by gardes-champêtres, distributed them among the peasants. They had no choice but to vote. At Savigny, near Saint-Maur, on the morning of the vote, some enthusiastic gendarmes declared that the man who voted “no” should not sleep in his bed. The gendarmerie cast into the house of detention at Valenciennes M. Parent the younger, deputy justice of the peace of the canton of Bouchain, for having advised certain inhabitants of Avesne-le-Sec to vote “no.” The nephew of Representative Aubry (du Nord), having seen the agents of the prefect distribute “aye” ballots in the great square of Lille, went into the square next morning, and distributed “no” ballots. He was arrested and confined in the citadel.

As to the vote of the army, a part of it voted in its own cause; the rest followed.

But even as to the freedom of this vote of the soldiers, let us hear the army speak for itself. This is what is written by a soldier of the 6th Regiment of the Line, commanded by Colonel Garderens de Boisse: —

“So far as our company was concerned, the vote was a roll-call. The subaltern officers, the corporals, the drummers, and the soldiers, arranged in order of rank, were named by the quartermaster in presence of the colonel, the lieutenant-colonel, the major, and the company officers; and as each man named answered, ‘Here!’ his name was inscribed by the sergeant-major. The colonel, rubbing his hands, was saying, ‘Egad, gentlemen, this is going on wheels!’ when a corporal of the company to which I belong approached the table at which the sergeant-major was seated, and requested him to let him have the pen, that he might himself inscribe his name on the ‘no’ register, which was intended to remain blank.

“‘What!’ cried the colonel; ‘you, who are down for quartermaster, and who are to be appointed on the first vacancy, — you formally disobey your colonel, and that in the presence of your company! It would be bad enough if this refusal of yours were simply an act of insubordination, but know you not, wretched man, that by your vote you seek to bring about the destruction of the army, the burning of your father’s house, the annihilation of all society! You hold out your hand to debauchery! What! X —— , you, whom I intended to urge for promotion, you come here to-day and admit all this?’

“The poor devil, it may be imagined, allowed his name to be inscribed with the rest.”

Multiply this colonel by six hundred thousand, and the product is the pressure of the functionaries of all sorts — military, political, civil, administrative, ecclesiastical, judicial, fiscal, municipal, scholastic, commercial, and consular — throughout France, on the soldier, the citizen, and the peasant. Add, as we have above pointed out, the fictitious communist Jacquerie and the real Bonapartist terrorism, the government imposing by phantasmagoria on the weak, and by dictatorship on the refractory, and brandishing two terrors together. It would require a special volume to relate, expose, and develop the innumerable details of that immense extortion of signatures, which is called “the vote of the 20th of December.”

The vote of the 20th of December prostrated the honour, the initiative, the intelligence, and the moral life of the nation. France went to that vote as sheep go to the slaughter-house.

Let us proceed.

Second. *That the vote must be intelligent.*

Here is an elementary proposition. Where there is no liberty of the press, there is no vote. The liberty of the press is the condition *sine quâ non,* of universal suffrage. Every ballot cast in the absence of liberty of the press is void *ab initio*. Liberty of the press involves, as necessary corollaries, liberty of meeting, liberty of publishing, liberty of distributing information, all the liberties engendered by the right — antedating all other rights — of informing one’s self before voting. To vote is to steer; to vote is to judge. Can one imagine a blind pilot at the helm? Can one imagine a judge with his ears stuffed and his eyes put out? Liberty, then, — liberty to inform one’s self by every means, by inquiry, by the press, by speech, by discussion, — this is the express guarantee, the condition of being, of universal suffrage. In order that a thing may be done validly, it must be done knowingly. Where there is no torch, there is no binding act.

These are axioms: outside of these axioms, all is *ipso facto* null.

Now, let us see: did M. Bonaparte, in his ballot of the 20th of December, obey these axioms? Did he fulfil the conditions of free press, free meetings, free tribune, free advertising, free inquiry. The answer is an immense shout of laughter, even from the Élysée.

Thus you are yourself compelled to admit that it was thus that “universal suffrage” was exercised.

What! I know nothing of what is going on: men have been killed, slaughtered, murdered, massacred, and I am ignorant of it! Men have been arbitrarily imprisoned, tortured, banished, exiled, transported, and I scarcely glimpse the fact! My mayor and my curé tell me: “These people, who are taken away, bound with cords, are escaped convicts!” I am a peasant, cultivating a patch of land in a corner of one of the provinces: you suppress the newspaper, you stifle information, you prevent the truth from reaching me, and then you make me vote! in the uttermost darkness of night! gropingly! What! you rush out upon me from the obscurity, sabre in hand, and you say to me: “Vote!” and you call that a ballot.

“Certainly! a ‘free and spontaneous’ ballot,” say the organs of the *coup d’état*.

Every sort of machinery was set to work at this vote. One village mayor, a species of wild Escobar, growing in the fields, said to his peasants: “If you vote ‘aye,’ ’tis for the Republic; if you vote ‘no,’ ’tis against the Republic.” The peasants voted “aye.”

And let us illuminate another aspect of this turpitude that people call “the plebiscite of the 20th of December.” How was the question put? Was any choice possible? Did he — and it was the least that a *coup d’état* man should have done in so strange a ballot as that wherein he put everything at stake — did he open to each party the door at which its principles could enter? were the Legitimists allowed to turn towards their exiled prince, and towards the ancient honour of the *fleurs-de-lys*? were the Orleanists allowed to turn towards that proscribed family, honoured by the valued services of two soldiers, M M. de Joinville and d’Aumale, and made illustrious by that exalted soul, Madame la Duchesse d’Orleans? Did he offer to the people — who are not a party, but the people, that is to say, the sovereign — did he offer to the people that true republic before which all monarchy vanishes, as night before day; that republic which is the manifest and irresistible future of the civilized world; the republic without dictatorship; the republic of concord, of learning, and of liberty; the republic of universal suffrage, of universal peace, and of universal well-being; the republic, initiator of peoples, and liberator of nationalities; that republic which after all and whatever any one may do, “will,” as the author of this book has said elsewhere,_“possess France to-morrow, and Europe the day after.” Did he offer that? No. This is how M. Bonaparte put the matter: there were in this ballot two candidates; first candidate, M. Bonaparte; second candidate — the abyss. France had the choice. Admire the adroitness of the man, and, not a little, his humility. M. Bonaparte took for his opponent in this contest, whom? M. de Chambord? No! M. de Joinville? No! The Republic? Still less. M. Bonaparte, like those pretty Creoles who show off their beauty by juxtaposition with some frightful Hottentot, took as his competitor in this election a phantom, a vision, a socialistic monster of Nuremberg, with long teeth and talons, and a live coal in its eyes, the ogre of Tom Thumb, the vampire of Porte Saint-Martin, the hydra of Theramenes, the great sea-serpent of the *Constitutionnel*, which the shareholders have had the kindness to impute to it, the dragon of the Apocalypse, the Tarask, the Drée, the Gra-ouili, a scarecrow. Aided by a Ruggieri of his own, M. Bonaparte lit up this pasteboard monster with red Bengal fire, and said to the scared voter: “There is no possible choice except this or myself: choose!” He said: “Choose between beauty and the beast; the beast is communism; the beauty is my dictatorship. Choose! There is no medium! Society prostrate, your house burned, your barn pillaged, your cow stolen, your fields confiscated, your wife outraged, your children murdered, your wine drunk by others, yourself devoured alive by the great gaping-jaws yonder, or me as your emperor! Choose! Me or Croque-mitaine!”

The citizen, affrighted, and consequently a child; the peasant, ignorant, and consequently a child, preferred M. Bonaparte to Croque-mitaine. Such is his triumph!

Observe, however, that of ten millions of voters, five hundred thousand would, it seems, have preferred Croque-mitaine.

After all, M. Bonaparte only had seven million five hundred thousand votes.

Thus, then, and in this fashion, — freely as we see, knowingly as we see, — that which M. Bonaparte is good enough to call universal suffrage, voted. Voted what?

Dictatorship, autocracy, slavery, the republic a despotism, France a pachalik, chains on all wrists, a seal on every mouth, silence, degradation, fear, the spy the soul of all things! They have given to a man — to you! — omnipotence and omniscience! They have made that man the supreme, the only legislator, the alpha of the law, the omega of power! They have decreed that he is Minos, that he is Numa, that he is Solon, that he is Lycurgus! They have incarnated in him the people, the nation, the state, the law! and for ten years! What! I, a citizen, vote, not only for my own dispossession, my own forfeiture, my own abdication, but for the abdication of universal suffrage for ten years, by the coming generations, over whom I have no right, over whom you, an usurper, force me to usurp power, which, by the way, be it said in passing, would suffice to nullify that monstrous ballot, if all conceivable nullities were not already piled, heaped and welded upon it. What! is that what you would have me do? You make me vote that all is finished, that nothing remains, that the people is a slave! What! you say to me: “Since you are sovereign, you shall give yourself a master; since you are France, you shall become Haiti!” What an abominable farce!

Such is the vote of the 20th of December, — that sanction, as M. de Morny says; that absolution, as M. Bonaparte says.

Assuredly, a short time hence, — in a year, in a month, perhaps in a week, — when all that we now see has vanished, men will be ashamed of having, if only for an instant, bestowed upon that infamous semblance of a ballot, which they call the ballot of seven million five hundred thousand votes, the honour of discussing it. Yet it is the only basis, the only support, the only rampart of this prodigious power of M. Bonaparte. This vote is the excuse of cowards, this vote is the buckler of dishonoured consciences. Generals, magistrates, bishops, all crimes, all prevarications, all degrees of complicity, seek refuge for their ignominy behind this vote. France has spoken, say they: *vox populi, vox Dei,* universal suffrage has voted; everything is covered by a ballot. — *That* a vote! *that* a ballot? One spits on it, and passes by.

Third. *The figures must be accurate.* I admire that figure: 7,500,000! It must have had a fine effect, through the fog of the 1st of January, in letters of gold, three feet high, on the portal of Notre-Dame.

I admire that figure. Do you know why? Because I consider it humble. Seven million five hundred thousand. Why seven million five hundred thousand? It is not many. No one refused M. Bonaparte full measure. After what he had done on the 2nd of December, he was entitled to something better than that. Tell us, who played him that trick? Who prevented him from putting down eight millions, or ten millions, — a good round sum? As for myself, I was quite disappointed in my hopes. I counted on unanimity. *Coup d’état,* you are indeed modest!

How now! a man has done all we have recalled or related: has taken an oath and perjured himself; was the guardian of a constitution and destroyed it, was the servant of a republic and betrayed it, was the agent of a sovereign assembly and violently crushed it; used the military pass-word as a poignard to kill military honour, used the standard of France to wipe away mud and shame, put handcuffs on the generals of Africa, made the representatives of the people travel in prison-vans, filled Mazas, Vincennes, Mont Valérien, and Sainte-Pélagie with inviolable men, shot down point-blank, on the barricade of the law, the legislator girt with that scarf which is the sacred and venerable symbol of the law; gave to a colonel, whom we could name, a hundred thousand francs to trample duty under foot, and to each soldier ten francs a day; distributed in four days forty thousand francs' worth of brandy to each brigade; covered with the gold of the Bank the card-tables of the Élysée, and said to his friends, "Help yourselves!" killed M. Adde in his own house, M. Belval in his own house, M. Debaecque in his own house, M. Labilte in his own house, M. de Couvercelle in his own house, M. Monpelas in his own house, M. Thirion de Mortauban in his own house; massacred on the boulevards and elsewhere, shot anybody anywhere, committed numerous murders, of which he modestly confesses to only one hundred and ninety-one; changed the trenches about the trees on the boulevards into pools of blood; spilt the blood of the infant with the blood of the mother, mingling with both the champagne of the gendarmes! — a man has done all these things, has taken all this trouble; and when he asks the nation: "Are you satisfied?" he obtains only seven million five hundred thousand voters! — Really, he is underpaid.

Sacrifice one's self "to save society," indeed! O, ingratitude of nations!

In truth, three millions of voices replied "*No*." Who was it, pray, who said that the South Sea savages call the French the "*oui-ouis*?"

Let us speak seriously. For irony is painful in such tragic matters.

Coup d'état men, nobody believes in your seven million five hundred thousand votes.

Come, be frank, and confess that you are more or less swindlers, that you cheat a little. In your balance-sheet of the 2nd of December you set down too many votes, — and not enough corpses.

Seven million five hundred thousand! What figure is that? Whence comes it? What do you want us to do with it?

Seven million, eight million, ten million, what does it matter? We concede you everything, and we contest everything with you.

The seven million you have, plus the five hundred thousand; the round sum, plus the odd money; you say so, prince, you affirm it, you swear it; but what proves it?

Who counted? Baroche. Who examined? Rouher. Who checked? Piétri. Who added? Maupas. Who certified? Troplong. Who made the proclamation? Yourself!

In other words, servility counted, platitude examined, trickery checked, forgery added, venality certified, and mendacity proclaimed.

Very good.

Whereupon, M. Bonaparte ascends to the Capitol, orders M. Sibour to thank Jupiter, puts a blue and gold livery on the Senate, a blue and silver livery on the Corps Législatif, and a green and gold livery on his coachman; lays his hand on his heart, declares that he is the product of “universal suffrage,” and that his “legitimacy” has issued from the ballot-box. That box is a wine-cup.

IV

WHO REALLY VOTED FOR M. BONAPARTE?

We declare therefore, we declare simply this, that on the 20th of December, 1851, eighteen days after the 2nd, M. Bonaparte put his hand into every man’s conscience, and robbed every man of his vote. Others filch handkerchiefs, he steals an Empire. Every day, for pranks of the same sort, a *sergent-de-ville* takes a man by the collar and carries him off to the police-station.

Let us be understood, however.

Do we mean to declare that nobody really voted for M. Bonaparte? That no one voluntarily said “Aye?” That no one knowingly and willingly accepted that man?

By no means.

M. Bonaparte had for him the crowd of officeholders, the one million two hundred thousand parasites of the budget, and their dependents and hangers-on; the corrupt, the compromised, the adroit; and in their train the *crétins,* a very considerable party.

He had for him Messieurs the Cardinals, Messieurs the Bishops, Messieurs the Canons, Messieurs the Curés, Messieurs the Vicars, Messieurs the Arch-deacons, Deacons, and Sub-deacons, Messieurs the Prebendaries, Messieurs the Churchwardens, Messieurs the Sextons, Messieurs the Beadles, Messieurs the Church-door-openers, and the “religious” men, as they say. Yes, we admit, without hesitation, M. Bonaparte had for him all those bishops who cross themselves like Veuillot and Montalembert, and all those religious men, a priceless, ancient race, but largely increased and recruited since the landholders’ terrors of 1848, who pray in this wise: “O, my God! send up the Lyons shares! Dear Lord Jesus, see to it that I make a profit of twenty-five per cent, on my Rothschild-Neapolitan bonds! Holy Apostles, sell my wines for me! Blessed Martyrs, double my rents! Holy Mary, Mother of God, immaculate Virgin, Star of the Sea, Enclosed Garden, *Hortus Conclusus*, deign to cast a favouring eye on my little business at the corner of Rue Tire-chape and Rue Quincampoix! Tower of Ivory, cause the shop over the way to lose trade!"

These really and incontestably voted for M. Bonaparte: first category, the office-holder; second category, the idiot; third category, the religious Voltairian — land-owner — tradesman.

The human understanding in general, and the bourgeois intellect in particular, present singular enigmas. We know, and we have no desire to conceal it, that from the shopkeeper up to the banker, from the petty trader up to the stockbroker, great numbers of the commercial and industrial men of France, — that is to say, great numbers of the men who know what well-placed confidence is, what a trust faithfully administered is, what a key placed in safe hands is, — voted after the 2nd of December for M. Bonaparte. The vote given, you might have accosted one of these men of business, the first you met by chance; and this is the dialogue that you might have exchanged with him:

'You have elected Louis Bonaparte President of the Republic?"

"Yes."

"Would you engage him as your cashier?"

"Certainly not!"

V

CONCESSION

And this is the ballot, — let us repeat it — insist on it — never be tired of uttering it; "I cry the same things a hundred times," says Isaiah, "so that they may be heard once;" this is the ballot, this is the plebiscite, this is the vote, this is the sovereign decree of "Universal Suffrage," beneath whose shadow take shelter — of which they make a patent of authority, a diploma of government — those men who now hold France, who command, who dominate, who administer, who judge, who reign: their arms in gold up to the elbows, their legs in blood up to the knees!

And now, to have done with it, let us make a concession to M. Bonaparte. No more quibbling. His ballot of the 20th of December was free; it was intelligent; all the newspapers printed whatever they pleased; he who says the contrary is a slanderer; electoral meetings were held; the walls were hidden beneath placards; the promenaders in Paris swept with their feet, on the boulevards and on the streets, a snow of ballots, white, blue, yellow, red; everybody spoke who chose, wrote who chose; the figures were accurate; it was not Baroche who counted, it was Barême; Louis Blanc, Guinard, Félix Pyat, Raspail, Caussidière, Thorné, Ledru-Rollin, Etienne Arago, Albert, Barbès, Blanqui, and Gent, were the inspectors; it was they themselves who announced the seven million five hundred thousand votes. Be it so. We concede all that. What then? What conclusion does the *coup d'état* thence derive?

What conclusion? It rubs its hands, it asks nothing further; that is quite sufficient; it concludes that all is right, all complete, all finished, that nothing more is to be said, that it is "absolved."

Stop, there!

The free vote, the actual figures — these are only the physical side of the question; the moral side remains to be considered. Ah! there is a moral side, then? Undoubtedly, prince, and that is precisely the true side, the important side of this question of the 2nd of December. Let us look into it.

VI

THE MORAL SIDE OF THE QUESTION

First, M. Bonaparte, it is expedient that you should acquire a notion what the human conscience is.

There are two things in this world — learn this novelty — which men call good and evil. You must be informed that lying is not good, treachery is evil, assassination is worse. It makes no difference that it is useful, it is prohibited. "By whom?" you will add. We will explain that point to you, a little farther on; but let us proceed. Man — you must also be informed — is a thinking being, free in this world, responsible in the next. Singularly enough — and you will be surprised to hear it — he is not created merely to enjoy himself, to indulge all his fancies, to follow the hazard of his appetites, to crush whatever he finds before him in his path, blade of grass or plighted oath, to devour whatever presents itself when he is hungry. Life is not his prey. For example, to pass from nothing a year to twelve hundred thousand francs, it is not permitted to take an oath which one has no intention to keep; and, to pass from twelve hundred thousand francs to twelve millions, it is not permitted to crush the constitution and laws of one’s country, to rush from an ambuscade upon a sovereign assembly, to bombard Paris, to transport ten thousand persons, and to proscribe forty thousand. I continue your initiation into this singular mystery. Certes, it is agreeable to give one’s lackeys white silk stockings; but, to arrive at this grand result, it is not permitted to suppress the glory and the thought of a people, to overthrow the central tribune of the civilized world, to shackle the progress of mankind, and to shed torrents of blood. That is forbidden. “By whom?” you repeat, who see before you no one who forbids you anything. Patience: you shall know presently.

What! — here you begin to be disgusted, and I can understand it — when one has, on the one hand, one’s interest, one’s ambition, one’s fortune, one’s pleasures, a fine palace to maintain in Faubourg Saint-Honoré; and, on the other side, the jeremiads and whining of women from whom one takes their sons, of families from whom one tears their fathers, of children from whom one takes their bread, of the people whose liberty one confiscates, of society from whom one takes its support, the laws; what! when these clamours are on one side and one’s own interest on the other, is it not permitted to contemn the uproar, to let all these people “vociferate” unheeded, to trample on all obstacles, and to go naturally where one sees one’s fortune, one’s pleasures, and the fine palace in Faubourg Saint-Honoré? A pretty idea, truly! What! one is to trouble one’s self to remember that, some three or four years ago, one cannot now say when or where, one day in December, when it was very cold, and rained, and one felt it desirable to leave a chamber in an inn for a better lodging, one pronounced, one no longer knows in relation to what, in an indifferently lighted room, before eight or nine hundred imbeciles who chose to believe what one said, these eight letters, “I swear it!” What! when one is meditating “a great act,” one must needs waste one’s time asking one’s self what will be the result of the course that he is taking! must worry because one man may be eaten up by vermin in the casemates, or another rot in the hulks, or another die at Cayenne; or because another was killed with bayonets, or another crushed by paving-stones, or another idiot enough to get himself shot; because these are ruined, and those exiled; and because all these men whom one ruins, or shoots, or exiles, or massacres, who rot in the hulks, or die in the hold, or in Africa, are, forsooth, honest men who have done their duty! Is one to be stopped by such stuff as that? What! one has necessities, one has no money, one is a prince, chance places power in one’s hands, one makes use of it, one authorizes lotteries, one exhibits ingots of gold in the Passage Jouffroy; everybody opens his pocket, one takes all one can out of it, one shares what one gets with one’s friends, with the devoted comrades to whom one owes gratitude; and because there comes a moment when public indiscretion meddles in the matter, when that infamous liberty of the press seeks to fathom the mystery, and justice fancies that it is its business, one must needs leave the Éysée, lay down the power, and take one’s seat, like an ass, between two gendarmes on the prisoners’ bench in the sixth chamber! Nonsense! Isn’t it much more simple to take one’s seat on the throne of the emperor? Isn’t it much more simple to destroy the liberty of the press? Isn’t it much more simple to crush justice? Isn’t it a much shorter way to trample the judges under foot? Indeed, they ask nothing better! they are quite ready! And this is not permitted! This is forbidden!

Yes, Monseigneur, this is forbidden!

Who opposes it? Who does not permit it? Who forbids it?

Monsieur Bonaparte, you are master, you have eight millions of votes for your crimes, and twelve millions of francs for your pleasures; you have a Senate, with M. Sibour in it; you have armies, cannon, fortresses, Troplongs flat on their bellies, and Baroches on all fours; you are a despot; you are all-potent; some one lost in the obscurity, unknown, a mere passer-by, rises before you, and says to you: “Thou shalt not do this.”

This some one, this voice that speaks in the darkness, not seen but heard, this passer-by, this unknown, this insolent intruder, is the human conscience.

That is what the human conscience is.

It is some one, I repeat, whom one sees not, and who is stronger than an army, more numerous than seven million five hundred thousand votes, more lofty than a senate, more religious than an archbishop, more learned in law than M. Troplong, more prompt to anticipate any sort of justice than M. Baroche, and who thee-and-thous your majesty.

VII

AN EXPLANATION FOR M. BONAPARTE’S BENEFIT

Let us go a little deeper into all these novelties.

Pray learn this also, M. Bonaparte: that which distinguishes man from brute, is the notion of good and of evil — of that good and that evil of which I was speaking to you just now.

There is the abyss.

The animal is a complete being. That which constitutes the grandeur of man is the being incomplete; it is the feeling one’s self to be many degrees removed from completion; it is the perceiving something on that side of one’s self, something on this side. This something is mystery; it is — to make use of those feeble human expressions which always come one by one, and never express more than one side of things — the moral world. This moral world man bathes in, as much as, more than, in the material world. He lives in what he feels, more than in what he sees. Creation may beset him, want may assail him, pleasure may tempt him, the beast within him may torment him, but all in vain; a sort of incessant aspiration toward another world impels him irresistibly beyond creation, beyond want, beyond pleasure, beyond the beast. He glimpses everywhere, at every moment, the upper world, and he fills his soul with that vision, and regulates his actions by it. He does not feel complete in this life on earth. He bears within him, so to speak, a mysterious pattern of the anterior and ulterior world — the perfect world — with which he is incessantly, and despite himself, comparing the imperfect world, and himself, and his infirmities, and his appetites, and his passions, and his actions. When he perceives that he is approaching this ideal pattern, he is overjoyed; when he sees that he is receding from it, he is sad. He understands thoroughly that there is nothing useless or superfluous in this world, nothing which does not proceed from something, and which does not lead to something. The just, the unjust, good, evil, good works, evil deeds, fall into the abyss, but are not lost there, passing on into the infinite, for the benefit or the burden of those who have accomplished them. After death they are collected, and the sum-total cast up. To disappear, to vanish, to be annihilated, to cease to be, is no more possible for the moral atom than for the material atom. Hence, in man, that great twofold sense of his liberty and of his responsibility. It is given him to be good or to be bad. It is an account that will have to be settled. He may be guilty, and therein — a striking circumstance upon which I dwell — consists his grandeur. There is nothing similar for the brute. With the brute it is all instinct: to drink when thirsty, to eat when hungry, to procreate in due season, to sleep when the sun sets, to wake when it rises, or *vice versa*, if it be a beast of night. The brute has only an obscure sort of *ego*, illumined by no moral light. Its entire law, I repeat, is instinct: instinct, a sort of railway, along which inevitable nature impels the brute. No liberty, therefore, no responsibility, and consequently no future life. The brute does neither evil nor good; it is wholly ignorant. Even the tiger is innocent.

If, perchance, you were innocent as the tiger!

At certain moments one is tempted to believe that, having no warning voice within, any more than the tiger, you have no more sense of responsibility.

Really, at times I pity you. Who knows? perhaps after all, you are only a miserable blind force!

Louis Bonaparte, you have not the notion of good and evil. You are, perhaps, the only man of all mankind who has not that notion. This gives you a start over the human race. Yes, you are formidable. It is that which constitutes your genius, it is said; I admit that, at all events, it is that which at this moment constitutes your power.

But do you know what results from this sort of power? Possession, yes; right, no.

Crime essays to deceive history as to its true name; it says, “I am success.” — Thou art crime!

You are crowned and masked. Down with the mask! Down with the crown!

Ah! you are wasting your trouble, you are wasting your appeals to the people, your plebiscites, your ballots, your footings, your executive committees proclaiming the sum total, your red or green banners, with these figures in gold paper, — 7,500,000! You will derive no advantage from this elaborate *mise-en-scène*. There are things about which universal sentiment is not to be gulled. The human race, taken as a whole, is an honest man.

Even by those about you you are judged. There is not one of your domestics, whether in gold lace or in embroidered coat, valet of the stable, or valet of the Senate, who does not say beneath his breath that which I say aloud. What I proclaim, they whisper; that is the only difference. You are omnipotent, they bend the knee, that is all. They salute you, their brows burning with shame.

They feel that they are base, but they know that you are infamous.

Come, since you are by way of hunting those whom you call “the rebels of December,” since it is on them you are setting your hounds, since you have instituted a Maupas, and created a ministry of police specially for that purpose, I denounce to you that rebel, that recusant, that insurgent, every man’s conscience.

You give money, but ’tis the hand receives it, not the conscience. Conscience! while you are about it, inscribe it on your lists of exiles. It is an obstinate opponent, pertinacious, persistent, inflexible, making a disturbance everywhere. Drive it out of France. You will be at ease then.

Would you like to know what it calls you, even among your friends? Would you like to know in what terms an honourable chevalier of Saint-Louis, an octogenarian, a great antagonist of “demagogues,” and a partisan of yours, cast his vote for you on the 20th of December? “He is a scoundrel,” said he, “but a *necessary scoundrel*.”

No! there are no necessary scoundrels. No! crime is never useful! No! crime is never a good. Society saved by treason! Blasphemy! we must leave it to the archbishops to say these things. Nothing good has evil for its basis. The just God does not impose on mankind the necessity for scoundrels. There is nothing necessary in this world but justice and truth. Had that venerable man thought less of life and more of the tomb, he would have seen this. Such a remark is surprising on the part of one advanced in years, for there is a light from God which enlightens souls approaching the tomb, and shows them the truth.

Never do crime and the right come together: on the day when they should meet, the words of the human tongue would change their meaning, all certainty would vanish, social darkness would supervene. When, by chance, as has been sometimes seen in history, it happens that, for a moment, crime has the force of law, the very foundations of humanity tremble. “*Jusque datum sceleri!*” exclaims Lucan, and that line traverses history, like a cry of horror.

Therefore, and by the admission of your voters, you are a scoundrel. I omit the word necessary. Make the best of this situation.

“Well, be it so,” you say. “But that is precisely the case in question: one procures ‘absolution’ by universal suffrage.”

Impossible.

What! impossible?

Yes, impossible. I will put your finger on the impossibility.

VIII

AXIOMS

You are a captain of artillery at Berne, Monsieur Louis Bonaparte; you have necessarily a smattering of algebra and geometry. Here are certain axioms of which you have, probably, some idea.

Two and two make four.

Between two given points, the straight line is the shortest way.

A part is less than the whole.

Now, cause seven million five hundred thousand voters to declare that two and two make five, that the straight line is the longest way, that the whole is less than a part; cause eight millions, ten millions, a hundred millions of voters so to declare, and you will not have advanced a single step.

Well — you will be surprised to hear it — there are axioms in probity, in honesty, in justice, as there are axioms in geometry; and moral truth is no more at the mercy of a vote than is algebraic truth.

The notion of good and evil is insoluble by universal suffrage. It is not given to a ballot to make the false true, or injustice just. Human conscience is not to be put to the vote.

Now, do you understand?

Look at that lamp, that little obscure light, unnoticed, forgotten in a corner, lost in the darkness. Look at it, admire it. It is hardly visible; it burns in solitude. Make seven million five hundred thousand mouths breathe upon it at once, and you will not extinguish it. You will not even cause the flame to flicker. Cause a hurricane to blow; the flame will continue to ascend, straight and pure, towards Heaven.

That lamp is Conscience.

That flame is the flame which illumines, in the night of exile, the paper on which I now write.

IX

WHEREIN M. BONAPARTE HAS DECEIVED HIMSELF

Thus then, be your figures what they may, counterfeit or genuine, true or false, extorted or not, it matters little; they who keep their eyes steadfastly on justice say, and will continue to say, that crime is crime, that perjury is perjury, that treachery is treachery, that murder is murder, that blood is blood, that slime is slime, that a scoundrel is a scoundrel, that the man who fancies he is copying Napoleon *en petit*, is copying Lacenaire *en grand*; they say that, and they will repeat it, despite your figures, seeing that seven million five hundred thousand votes weigh as nothing against the conscience of the honest man; seeing that ten millions, that a hundred millions of votes, that even the whole of mankind, voting *en masse,* would count as nothing against that atom, that molecule of God, the soul of the just man; seeing that universal suffrage, which has full sovereignty over political questions, has no jurisdiction over moral questions.

I put aside for the moment, as I said just now, your process of ballotting, with eyes bandaged, gag in mouth, cannon in the streets and squares, sabres drawn, spies swarming, silence and terror leading the voter to the ballot-box as a malefactor to the prison; I put these aside; I assume (I repeat) genuine universal suffrage, free, pure, real; universal suffrage controlling itself, as it ought to do; newspapers in everybody's hands, men and facts questioned and sifted, placards covering the walls, speech everywhere, enlightenment everywhere! Very good! to universal suffrage of this sort submit peace and war, the strength of the army, the public credit, the budget, the public aid, the penalty of death, the irremovability of judges, the indissolubility of marriages, divorce, the civil and political status of women, free education, the constitution of the commune, the rights of labour, the payment of the clergy, free trade, railways, the currency, colonisation, the fiscal code, — all the problems, the solution of which does not involve its own abdication — for universal suffrage may do everything except abdicate; submit these things to it and it will solve them, not without error, perhaps, but with the grand total of certitude that appertains to human sovereignty; it will solve them masterfully. Now, put to it the question whether John or Peter did well or ill in stealing an apple from an orchard. At that, it halts; it is at fault. Why? Is it because this question is on a lower plane? No: it is because it is on a higher plane. All that constitutes the proper organization of societies, whether you consider them as territory, commune, state, as country, every political, financial, social matter, depends on universal suffrage and obeys it; the smallest atom of the smallest moral question defies it.

The ship is at the mercy of the ocean, the star is not.

It has been said of M. Leverrier and of yourself, Monsieur Bonaparte, that you were the only two men who believed in your star. You do, in fact, believe in your star; you look for it above your head. Well, that star which you seek outside of yourself, other men have within themselves. It shines beneath the vaulted roof of their brain, it enlightens and guides them, it shows them the true outlines of life; it exhibits to them, in the obscurity of human destiny, good and evil, the just and the unjust, the real and the false, ignominy and honour, honesty and knavery, virtue and crime. This star, without which the human soul is but darkness, is moral truth.

Wanting this light, you have deceived yourself. Your ballot of the 20th of December is, in the eyes of the thinker, merely a sort of monstrous simplicity. You have applied what you call "universal suffrage" to a question to which universal suffrage did not apply. You are not a politician, you are a malefactor. The question what is to be done with you is no concern of universal suffrage.

Yes, simplicity; I insist on the term. The bandit of the Abruzzi, his hands scarcely laved of the blood which still remains under his nails, goes to seek absolution from the priest; you have sought absolution from the ballot, only you have forgotten to confess. And, in saying to the ballot, "Absolve me," you put the muzzle of your pistol to its forehead.

Ah, wretched, desperate man! To "absolve you," as you call it, is beyond the popular power, is beyond all human power.

Listen:

Nero, who had invented the Society of the Tenth-of-December, and who, like yourself, employed it in applauding his comedies, and even, like you again, his tragedies, — Nero, after he had slashed his mother's belly a hundred times with a dagger, might, like you, have appealed to his universal suffrage, which had this further resemblance to yours, that it was no more impeded by the license of the press; Nero, Pontiff and Emperor, surrounded by judges and priests prostrate at his feet, might have placed one of his bleeding hands on the still warm corpse of the Empress, and raising the other towards Heaven, have called all Olympus to witness that he had not shed that blood, and have adjured his universal suffrage to declare in the face of gods and of men that he, Nero, had not killed that woman; his universal suffrage, working much as yours works, with the same intelligence, and the same liberty, might have affirmed by 7,500,000 votes that the divine Cæsar Nero, Pontiff and Emperor, had done no harm to that woman who lay dead; understand, monsieur, that Nero would not have been "absolved;" it would have sufficed for one voice, one single voice on earth, the humblest and most obscure, to lie raised amid that profound night of the Roman Empire, and to cry: "Nero is a parricide!" for the echo, the eternal echo of the human conscience to repeat for ever, from people to people, and from century to century: "Nero slew his mother!"

Well, that voice which protests in the darkness is mine. I exclaim to-day, and, doubt not that the universal conscience of mankind repeats with me: “Louis Bonaparte has assassinated France! Louis Bonaparte has slain his mother!”

BOOK VII

THE ABSOLUTION: — SECOND PHASE: THE OATH

I

FOR AN OATH, AN OATH AND A HALF

What is Louis Bonaparte? He is perjury personified; he is mental reservation incarnate, felony in flesh and bone; he is a false oath wearing a general's hat, and calling himself Monseigneur.

Well! what is it that he demands of France, this man-ambuscade? An oath.

An oath!

Indeed, after the 20th of December, 1848, and the 2nd of December, 1851, after the inviolate representatives of the people had been arrested and hunted down; after the confiscation of the Republic, after the *coup d'état*, one might have expected from this malefactor an honest cynical laugh at the oath, and that this Sbrigani would say to France: "Oh, yes! it is true! I did pledge my word of honour. It is very funny. Let us say no more about such nonsense."

Not so: he requires an oath.

And so, mayors, gendarmes, judges, spies, prefects, generals, *sergents-de-ville*, *gardes champêtres*, commissaries of police, magistrates, office-holders, Senators, Councillors of State, legislators, clerks, it is said, it is his will, this idea has passed through his head, he will have it so, it is his good pleasure; lose no time, start off, you to the registrar, you to a confessional, you under the eye of your brigadier, you to the minister, you, Senators, to the Tuileries, to the salon of the marshals, you, spies, to the prefecture of police, you, first presidents and solicitors-general to M. Bonaparte's ante-chamber; hasten in carriages, on foot, on horseback, in gown, in scarf, in court dress, in uniform, gold-laced, bespangled, embroidered, beplumed, with cap on head, ruff at the neck, sash around the waist, and sword by the side; place yourselves, some before the plaster bust, others before the man himself; very good, there you are, all of you, none are missing; look him well in the face, reflect, search your conscience, your loyalty, your decency, your religion; take off your glove, raise your hand, and take oath to his perjury, swear fealty to his treason.

Have you done it? Yes! Ah, what a precious farce!

So Louis Bonaparte takes the oath *au sérieux*. True, he believes in my word, in yours, in ours, in theirs; he believes everybody's word but his own. He demands that everybody about him shall swear, and he orders them to be loyal. It pleases Messalina to be surrounded by virgins. Capital!

He requires all to be honourable; you must understand this, Saint-Arnaud, and you, Maupas, must look upon it as final.

But let us sift things to the bottom; there are oaths and oaths. The oath which freely, solemnly, before the face of God and man, having received a note of confidence from 6,000,000 of citizens, one swears before the National Assembly, to the constitution of his country, to the law, to the people, and to France, that is nothing, it is not binding, one can trifle with it, laugh at it, and some fine day trample it under foot; but the oath that one swears before the cannon's mouth, at the sword's point, under the eye of the police, in order to retain the employment that gives one food, to preserve the rank which is one's property; the oath which, to save one's daily bread and that of one's children, one swears to a villain, a rebel, the violator of the laws, the slaughterer of the Republic, a fugitive from every court, the man who himself has broken his oath — oh! that oath is sacred! Let us not jest.

The oath that we take on the 2nd of December, nephew of the 18th Brumaire, is sacrosanct!

What I admire most is its ineptitude. To receive as so much ready money and coin of good alloy, all those "I swear" of the official commons; not even to think that every scruple has been overcome, and that there cannot be in them all one single word of pure metal! He is both a prince and a traitor! To set the example from the summit of the State, and to imagine that it will not be followed! To sow lead, and expect to reap gold! Not even to perceive that, in such a case, every conscience will model itself on the conscience at the summit, and that the perjury of the prince transmutes all oaths into counterfeit coin.

II

DIFFERENCE IN PRICE

And from whom, then, are oaths required? From that prefect? he has betrayed the state. From that general? he has betrayed his colours. From that magistrate? he has betrayed the law. From all these office-holders? they have betrayed the Republic. A strange thing, and calculated to make the philosopher reflect, is this heap of traitors from which comes this heap of oaths!

Let us, then, dwell upon this charming feature of the 2nd of December:—

M. Bonaparte Louis believes in men's oaths! he believes in the oaths that one takes to him! When M. Rouher takes off his glove, and says, "I swear;" when M. Suin takes off his glove, and says, "I swear;" when M. Troplong places his hand upon his breast, on that spot where is placed the third button of a senator, and the heart of other men, and says, "I swear," M. Bonaparte feels tears in his eyes; deeply moved, he foots up all these loyalties, and contemplates all these creatures with profound emotion. He trusts! he believes! Oh, abyss of candour! Really, the innocence of rogues sometimes elicits the wonder of honest men.

One thing, however, must astonish the kindly-disposed observer and vex him a little; that is, the capricious and disproportionate manner in which oaths are paid for, the inequality of the prices that M. Bonaparte places on this commodity. For example, M. Vidocq, if he were still chief of police, would receive six thousand francs per annum, M. Baroche receives eighty thousand. It follows, then, that the oath of M. Vidocq would bring him in but 16 francs 66 centimes per day, while the oath of M. Baroche brings him in 222 francs 22 centimes. This is evidently unjust; why such a difference? An oath is an oath; an oath consists of a glove removed and six letters. How much more is there in M. Baroche's oath than in M. Vidocq's?

You will tell me that it is owing to the difference of their functions; that M. Baroche presides in the Council of State, and that M. Vidocq would be merely the chief of police. My answer is, that it is but chance; that probably M. Baroche might excel in directing the police, and that M. Vidocq might very well be President of the Council of State. This is no reason.

Are there then several sorts of oaths? Is it the same as with masses? Are there, in this business also, masses at forty sous, and masses at ten sous, which latter, as the priest said, are but "rubbish?" Does the quality of the oath vary with the price? Are there in this commodity of the oath, superfine, extra-fine, fine, and half-fine? Are some oaths better than others? Are they more durable, less adulterated with tow and cotton, better dyed? Are there new oaths, still unused, oaths worn at the knees, patched oaths and ragged oaths? Is there any choice? Let us know it. The thing is worth while. It is we who pay. Having made these observations in the interest of those who are contributors, I humbly beg pardon of M. Vidocq for having made use of his name. I admit that I had no right to do so. Besides, M. Vidocq might possibly have refused the oath!

III

OATHS OF SCIENTIFIC AND LITERARY MEN

Here is a priceless detail: M. Bonaparte was desirous that Arago should take the oath. Understand, — astronomy must swear fealty. In a well-regulated state, like France or China, everything is bureaucracy, even science. The mandarin of the Institute depends upon the mandarin of the police. The great parallactic telescope owes homage to M. Bonaparte. An astronomer is a sort of constable of the heavens. The observatory is like any sentry-box. It is necessary to keep an eye on the good God up yonder, who seems sometimes not to submit absolutely to the Constitution of the 14th of January. The heavens are full of unpleasant allusions, and require to be kept in order. The discovery of a new spot on the sun is evidently a case for the censorship. The prediction of a high tide may be seditious. The announcement of an eclipse of the moon may be treason. We are a bit moonstruck at the Élysée. Free astronomy is almost as dangerous as a free press. Who can tell what takes place in those nocturnal *tête-à-têtes* between Arago and Jupiter? If it were M. Leverrier, well and good! — but a member of the Provincial Government! Beware, M. de Maupas! the Bureau of Longitude must make oath not to conspire with the stars, and especially with those mad artisans of celestial *coups d'états* which are called comets.

Then, too, as we have already said, one is a fatalist when one is a Bonaparte. Napoleon the Great had his star, Napoleon the Little ought surely to have a nebula; the astronomers are certainly something of astrologers. So take the oath, gentlemen. It goes without saying that Arago refused.

One of the virtues of the oath to Louis Bonaparte is that, according as it is refused or taken, that oath gives you or takes from you merits, aptitudes, talents. You are a professor of Greek or Latin; take the oath, or you are deprived of your chair, and you no longer know Greek or Latin. You are a professor of rhetoric; take the oath, or tremble; the story of Theramenes and the dream of Athalie are interdicted; you shall wander about them for the rest of your days, and never again be permitted to enter. You are a professor of philosophy; take the oath to M. Bonaparte, — if not, you become incapable of understanding the mysteries of the human conscience, and of explaining them to young men. You are a professor of medicine; take the oath, — if not, you no longer know how to feel the pulse of a feverish patient. But if the good professors depart, will there be any more good pupils? Particularly in medicine, this is a serious matter. What is to become of the sick? The sick? as if we cared about the sick! The important thing is that medicine should take the oath to M. Bonaparte. For it comes to this: either the seven million five hundred thousand votes have no sense, or it is evident that it would be better to have your leg amputated by an ass who has taken the oath, than by a refractory Dupuytren.

Ah! one would fain jest, but all this makes the heart sad. Are you a young and generous spirit, like Deschanel; a sane and upright intellect, like Despois; a serious and powerful mind, like Jacques; an eminent writer, a popular historian, like Michelet — take the oath, or die of hunger.

They refuse! The darkness and silence, in which they stoically seek refuge, know the rest.

IV

CURIOSITIES OF THE BUSINESS

All morality is denied by such an oath, the cup of shame drained to the dregs, all decency outraged. There is no reason why one should not see unheard-of things, and one sees them. In some towns, Evreux for example, the judges who have taken the oath sit in judgment on the judges who have refused it;_dishonour seated on the bench places honour at the bar; the sold conscience “reproves” the upright conscience; the courtesan lashes the virgin.

With this oath one journeys from surprise to surprise. Nicolet was but a booby compared to M. Bonaparte. When M. Bonaparte had had the circuit made of his valets, his accomplices, and his victims, and had pocketed all their oaths, he turned good-naturedly to the valiant chiefs of the African army, and “spoke to them nearly in these words:” “By the bye, you are aware I caused you to be arrested at night, by my men, when you were in your beds; my spies broke into your domiciles, sword in hand; I have in fact decorated them for that feat of arms; I caused you to be threatened with the gag if you uttered a cry; my agents took you by the collar; I have had you placed in a felon’s cell at Mazas, and in my own dungeon at Ham; your hands still bear the marks of the cords with which I bound you. Bonjour, messieurs, may God have you in his keeping; swear fealty to me." Changarnier fixed his eyes upon him, and made answer: "No, traitor!" Bedeau replied: "No, forger!" Lamoricière replied: "No, perjurer!" Leflô answered: "No, bandit!" Charras struck him in the face.

At this moment M. Bonaparte's face is red, not from shame, but from the blow.

There is one other variety of the oath. In the fortresses, in the prisons, in the hulks, in the jails of Africa, there are thousands of prisoners. Who are those prisoners? We have said, — republicans, patriots, soldiers of the law, innocent men, martyrs. Their sufferings have already been proclaimed by generous voices, and one has a glimpse of the truth. In our special volume on the 2nd of December, it shall be our task to tear asunder the veil. Do you wish to know what is taking place? — Sometimes, when endurance is at an end and strength exhausted, bending beneath the weight of misery, without shoes, without bread, without clothing, without a shirt, consumed by fever, devoured by vermin, poor artisans torn from their workshops, poor husbandmen forcibly taken from the plough, weeping for a wife, a mother, children, a family widowed or orphaned, also without bread and perhaps without shelter, overdone, ill, dying, despairing, — some of these wretched beings succumb, and consent to "ask for pardon!" Then a letter is presented for their signature, all written and addressed: "To Monseigneur le Prince-President." We give publicity to this letter, as Sieur Quentin Bauchart avows it.

"I, the undersigned, declare upon my honour, that I accept *most thankfully* the pardon offered me by Prince Louis-Napoleon, and I engage never to become a member of any secret society, to respect the law, and be *faithful* to the Government that the country has chosen by the votes of the 20th and 21st of December, 1851."

Let not the meaning of this grave performance be misunderstood. This is not clemency granted, it is clemency implored. This formula: "Ask us for your pardon," means: "Grant us our pardon." The murderer, leaning over his victim and with his knife raised, cries: "I have waylaid you, seized you, hurled you to the earth, despoiled and robbed you, passed my knife through your body, and now you are under my feet, your blood is oozing from twenty wounds; *say you repent*, and I will not finish you." This *repentance* exacted by a criminal from an innocent man, is nothing else than the outward form which his inward remorse assumes. He fancies that he is thus safeguarded against his own criminality. Whatever expedient he may adopt to deaden his feelings, although he may be for ever ringing in his own ears the seven million five hundred thousand little bells of his plebiscite, the man of the *coup d’état* reflects at times; he catches vague glimpses of a tomorrow, and struggles against the inevitable future. He must have legal purgation, discharge, release from custody, quittance. He exacts it from the vanquished, and at need puts them to the torture, to obtain it. Louis Bonaparte knows that there exists, in the conscience of every prisoner, of every exile, of every man proscribed, a tribunal, and that that tribunal is beginning his prosecution; he trembles, the executioner feels a secret dread of his victim; and, under pretext of a pardon accorded by him to that victim, he forces his judges to sign his acquittal.

Thus he hopes to deceive France, which, too, is a living conscience and a watchful tribunal; and that when the hour for passing sentence shall strike, seeing that he has been absolved by his victims, she will pardon him. He deceives himself. Let him cut a hole in the wall on another side, he will not escape through that one.

The President of the Tribunal of Commerce at Evreux refused to take the oath. Let us listen to the *Moniteur*:

“M. Verney, late President of the Tribunal of Commerce at Evreux, was cited to appear, on Thursday last, before the correctional judges of Evreux, on account of facts that took place on the 29th of April last, within the consular auditory.

“M. Verney is accused of inciting to hatred and treason against the Government.”

The judges of first instance discharged M. Verney, and “reproved” him. Appeal *a minima* by the “procureur of the Republic.” Sentence of the Court of Appeal of Rouen: —

“The Court, —

“Whereas the prosecution has no other object than the repression of the crime of inciting to hatred and scorn of the Government;

“Whereas that offence would result, according to the prosecution, from the last paragraph of the letter of M. Verney to the procureur of the Republic at Evreux, on the 26th of April last, which is thus worded: —

“‘But it would be too serious a matter to barter any longer what we conceive to be right. The magistracy itself will owe us thanks for not exposing the ermine of the judge to succumb under the formality which your dispatch announces.’

“Whereas, however blamable *the conduct of Verney has been in this affair*, the Court cannot see in that portion of the letter, the offence of inciting to hatred and contempt of the Government, since the order by which force was to be employed to prevent the judges from taking their seats who had refused to take the oaths, did not emanate from the Government;

“Whereas there is no ground, therefore, for applying to him the penal code;

“For these reasons,

“Confirms the judgment without costs.”

The Court of Appeal at Rouen has for its first President, M. Franck-Carré, formerly procureur-general to the Court of Peers in the prosecution at Boulogne; the same who addressed to M. Louis Bonaparte these words: “You have caused corruption to be employed and money to be distributed to buy treason.”

V

THE 5TH OF APRIL, 1852

On the 5th of April, 1852, this is what was witnessed at the Tuileries. About eight in the evening, the ante-chamber was filled with men in scarlet robes, grave and majestic, speaking with subdued voices, holding in their hands black velvet caps, bedecked with gold lace; most of them were white-haired. These were the presidents and councillors of the Court of Cassation, the first presidents of the Courts of Appeal, and the procureurs-general: all the superior magistracy of France. These persons were kept waiting in the ante-chamber. An aide-de-camp ushered them in and left them there. A quarter of an hour passed, half an hour, an hour; they wandered up and down the room, conversing, looking at their watches, awaiting the ringing of the bell. After more than an hour of tedious waiting they perceived that they had not even chairs to sit upon. One of them, M. Troplong, went to another room where the footmen were, and complained. A chair was brought him. At last a folding-door was thrown open; they rushed pell-mell into a salon. There a man in a black coat was standing with his back against the chimney-piece. What errand summoned these men in red robes to this man in a black coat? They came to tender him their oaths. The man was M.

Bonaparte. He nodded, and, in return, they bowed to the ground, as is meet. In front of M. Bonaparte, at a short distance, stood his chancellor, M. Abbattucci, late a liberal deputy, now Minister of Justice to the *coup d'état*. The ceremony began. M. Abbattucci delivered a discourse, and M. Bonaparte made a speech. The Prince drawled a few contemptuous words, looking at the carpet; he spoke of his "legitimacy;" after which the magistrates took the oath. Each in turn raised his hand. While they were swearing, M. Bonaparte, his back half turned to them, laughed and chatted with his aides-de-camp, who were grouped behind him. When it was over he quite turned his back upon them, and they departed, shaking their heads, humbled and ashamed, not for having done a base deed, but because they had had no chairs in the ante-chamber.

As they were departing, the following dialogue was overheard:—"That," said one of them, "was an oath it was necessary to take." "And," said another, "which it will be necessary to keep." "Yes," said a third, "like the master of the house."

All this is pure servility. Let us proceed.

Among these first presidents who swore fidelity to Louis Bonaparte, were a certain number of former peers of France, who, as such, had passed upon Louis Bonaparte the sentence of perpetual imprisonment. But why should we look back so far? Let us still proceed; here is something even better. Among these magistrates, there were seven individuals, by name, Hardouin, Moreau, Pataille, Cauchy, Delapalme, Grandet, and Quesnault. Prior to the 2nd of December these seven men composed the High Court of Justice; the first, Hardouin, was president, the last two, deputy-presidents, the other four, judges. These men had received and accepted from the Constitution of 1848 a mandate thus conceived: —

"Article 68. Every measure by which the President of the Republic shall dissolve the National Assembly, prorogue it or impede the performance of its decrees, is high treason.

"The judges of the High Court shall thereupon immediately assemble, under penalty of forfeiture; they shall convoke the jurors in such place as they shall appoint, to proceed to the trial of the President and his accomplices; they shall themselves appoint magistrates to perform the functions of the national administration."

On the 2nd of December, in the face of the flagrant felony, they had begun the trial, and appointed a procureur-general, M. Renouard, who had accepted the office, to proceed against Louis Bonaparte on the charge of high treason. Let us add the name of Renouard to the seven. On the 5th of April, they were, all eight, present in the antechamber of Louis Bonaparte; we have just seen what was their business there.

Here it is impossible not to pause.

There are certain melancholy thoughts upon which one must have the strength to insist; there are sinks of ignominy we must have the courage to sound.

Cast your eyes upon that man. He was born at hazard, by misfortune, in a hovel, in a cellar, in a cave, no one knows where, no one knows of whom. He came out of the dust to fall into the mire. He had only so much father and mother as was necessary for his birth, after which all shrank from him. He has crawled on as best he could. He grew up bare-footed, bare-headed, in rags, with no idea why he was living. He can neither read nor write, nor does he know that there are laws above him; he scarcely knows there is a heaven. He has no home, no family, no creed, no book. He is a blind soul. His intellect has never opened, for intellect opens only to light as flowers open only to the day, and he dwells in the dark. However, he must eat. Society has made him a brute beast, hunger makes him a wild beast. He lies in wait for travellers on the outskirts of a wood, and robs them of their purses. He is caught, and sent to the galleys. So far, so good.

Now look at this other man; it is no longer the red cap, it is the red robe. He believes in God, reads Nicole, is a Jansenist, devout, goes to confession, takes the sacrament. He is well born, as they say, wants nothing, nor has ever wanted anything; his parents have lavished everything on his youth — trouble, instruction, advice, Greek and Latin, masters in every science. He is a grave and scrupulous personage; therefore he has been made a magistrate. Seeing this man pass his days in meditating upon all the great texts, both sacred and profane; in the study of the law, in the practice of religion, in the contemplation of the just and unjust, society placed in his keeping all that it holds most august, most venerable — the book of the law. It made him a judge, and the punisher of treason. It said to him: “A day may come, an hour may strike, when the chief by physical force shall trample under his foot both the law and the rights of man; then you, man of justice, you will arise, and smite with your rod the man of power.” — For that purpose, and in expectation of that perilous and supreme day, it lavishes wealth upon him, and clothes him in purple and ermine. That day arrives, that hour, unique, pitiless, and solemn, that supreme hour of duty; the man in the red gown begins to stutter the words of the law; suddenly he perceives that it is not the cause of justice that prevails, but that treason carries the day. Whereupon he, the man who has passed his life in imbuing himself with the pure and holy light of the law, that man who is nothing unless he be the contemner of unmerited success, that lettered, scrupulous, religious man, that judge in whose keeping the law has been placed, and, in some sort, the conscience of the state, turns towards triumphant perjury, and with the same lips, the same voice in which, if this traitor had been vanquished, he would have said:

“Criminal, I sentence you to the galleys,” he says:

“Monseigneur, I swear fealty to you.”

Now take a balance, place in one scale the judge, in the other the felon, and tell me which side kicks the beam.

VI

EVERYWHERE THE OATH

Such are the things we have beheld in France, on the occasion of the oath to M. Bonaparte. Men have sworn here, there, everywhere; at Paris, in the provinces, in the north, in the south, in the cast, and in the west. There was in France, during a whole month, a tableau of hands raised, of arms outstretched, and the final chorus was: “We swear,” etc. The ministers placed their oaths in the hands of the President, the prefects in those of ministers, and the mob in those of the prefects. What does M. Bonaparte do with all these oaths? Is he making a collection of them? Where does he put them? It has been remarked that none but unpaid functionaries have refused the oath, the councillors-general, for instance. The fact is, that the oath has been taken to the budget. We heard on the 29th of March a senator exclaim, in a loud voice, against the omission of his name, which was, so to speak, vicarious modesty. M. Sibour, Archbishop of Paris swore; M. Frank Carré, procureur-general to the Court of Peers in the affair of Boulogne, swore; M. Dupin, President of the National Assembly on the 2nd of December, swore — O, my God! it is enough to make one wring one’s hands for shame. An oath, however, is a sacred obligation.

The man who takes an oath ceases to be a man, he becomes an altar, upon which God descends. Man, that infirmity, that shadow, that atom, that grain of sand, that drop of water, that tear dropped from the eye of destiny;

man, so little, so weak, so uncertain, so ignorant, so restless; man, who lives in trouble and in doubt, knowing little of yesterday, and nothing of to-morrow, seeing just enough of his road to place his foot before him, and then nothing but darkness; who trembles if he looks forward, is sad if he looks back; man, enveloped in those immensities and those obscurities, time, space, and being, and lost in them; having an abyss within him, his soul; and an abyss without, heaven; man, who at certain hours bows his head with a sacred horror, under every force of nature, under the roar of the sea, under the rustling of the trees, under the shadow of the mountain, under the twinkling of the stars; man, who can not lift his head by day, without being blinded by the light, nor by night, without being crushed by the infinite; man, who knows nothing, who sees nothing, who hears nothing, who may be swept away to-morrow, to-day, now, by the waves that pass, by the breeze that blows, by the pebble that falls, by the hour that strikes; on a certain day, man, that trembling, stumbling being, the plaything of chance and of the passing moment, rises suddenly before the riddle that is called human life, feels that there is within him something greater than this abyss, — honour! something stronger than fatality, — virtue! something more mysterious than the unknown, — faith! and alone, feeble and naked, he says to all this formidable mystery that envelopes him: “Do with me what you will, but I will do this, and I will not do that;” and proud, tranquil, serene, creating by a word a fixed point in the sombre instability that fills the horizon, as the mariner casts his anchor in the sea, he casts his oath into the future.

O plighted oath! admirable confidence of the just man in himself! Sublime permission given by God to man, to affirm! It is all over. There are no more of them. Another of the soul’s splendours that has vanished!

BOOK VIII

PROGRESS CONTAINED IN THE COUP D’ÉTAT

I

THE QUANTUM OF GOOD CONTAINED IN EVIL

Among us democrats, many well-meaning minds were stupefied by the event of the 2nd of December. It disconcerted some, discouraged others, and terrified many. I have seen some who cried: *Finis Poloniae*. As for myself, since at certain times I am obliged to say, I, and to speak in the face of history as a witness, I proclaim that I saw that event without perturbation. I say more than this, that at times, in the face of the 2nd of December, I declare myself satisfied.

When I can abstract myself from the present, when for a moment I can turn my eyes away from all the crimes, from all the blood spilt, from all the victims, from all the proscribed, from those hulks that echo the death rattle, from those deadful penal settlements of Lambessa and Cayenne, where death is swift, from that exile where death is slow, from this vote, from this oath, from this vast stain of shame inflicted upon France, which is growing wider and wider each day; when, forgetting for a few moments these painful thoughts, the usual obsession of my mind, I succeed in confining myself within the severe calmness of the politician, and in considering, not the fact, but the consequences of the fact; then, among many results, disastrous beyond doubt, a considerable, real, enormous progress becomes manifest to me, and, from that moment, while I am still of those whom the 2nd of December exasperates, I am no longer of those whom it afflicts.

Fixing my eyes upon certain points in the future, I say to myself: “The deed was infamous, but the result is good.”

Attempts have been made to explain the inexplicable victory of the *coup d’état* in a hundred ways. A true balance has been struck between all possible resistances, and they are neutralized one by the other: the people were afraid of the bourgeoisie, the bourgeoisie were afraid of the people; — the faubourgs hesitated before the restoration of the majority, fearing, wrongfully however, that their victory would bring back to power that Right which is so thoroughly unpopular; the shopocracy recoiled before the red republic; the people did not understand; the middle classes shuffled; some said, “Whom shall we send to the legislative palace?” others: “whom are we going to see at the Hotel de Ville?” In fine, the rude repression of 1848, the insurrection crushed by cannon-shot, the quarries, the casements, and the transportations — a living and terrible recollection; — and then — Suppose some one had succeeded in beating the call to arms! Suppose a single legion had sallied forth! Suppose M. Sibour had been M. Affre, and had thrown himself in the midst of the bullets of the pretorians! Suppose the High Court had not suffered itself to be driven away by a corporal! Suppose the judges had followed the example of the representatives, and we had seen the scarlet gowns on the barricades, as we saw the scarfs! Suppose a single arrest had miscarried! Suppose a single regiment had hesitated! Suppose the massacre on the boulevards had not taken place, or had turned out ill for Louis Bonaparte! etc., etc., etc. This is all true, and yet what has been, was what was to be. Let us say again, under the shadow of that monstrous victory vast and definitive progress is taking place. The 2nd of December succeeded, because in more than one point of view, I repeat, it was good that it should succeed. All explanations are just, but all are vain. The invisible hand is mingled in all this. Louis Bonaparte committed the crime; Providence brought about the result.

In truth, it was essential that *order* should come to the end of its logic. It was essential that people should learn, and should learn for all time, that, in the mouths of the men of the past, that word *order* signifies false oaths, perjury, pillage of the public cash-box, civil war, courts-martial, confiscation, sequestration, deportation, transportation, proscription, fusillades, police, censorship, degradation of the army, disregard of the people, debasement of France, a dumb Senate, the tribune overthrown, the press suppressed, a political guillotine, murder of liberty, garroting of the right, violation of laws, sovereignty of the sword, massacre, treason, ambuscades. The spectacle that we have before our eyes is a profitable spectacle. What we see in France since the 2nd of December is the debauch of order.

Yes, the hand of Providence is in it. Reflect, too, upon this: for fifty years the Republic and the Empire have filled men’s imaginations, the one with its souvenirs of terror, the other with its souvenirs of glory. Of the Republic men saw only 1793, that is to say, the terrible revolutionary necessity, — the furnace; of the Empire they saw only Austerlitz. Hence a prejudice against the Republic, and prestige for the Empire. Now, what is the future of France to be? is it the Empire? No, it is the Republic.

It became necessary to reverse that situation, to suppress the prestige of that which cannot be restored, and to suppress the prejudice against that which must be. Providence did it: it destroyed those two mirages. February came and took away from the Republic its terror; Louis Bonaparte came and deprived the Empire of its prestige. Henceforth, 1848, fraternity, is superimposed upon 1793, terror; Napoleon the Little is superimposed upon Napoleon the Great. The two grand things, one of which alarmed and the other dazzled, are receding. We perceive ‘93 only through its justification, and Napoleon only through his caricature; the foolish fear of the guillotine vanishes, the empty imperial popularity disappears. Thanks to 1848, the Republic no longer terrifies; thanks to Louis Bonaparte, the Empire no longer fascinates. The future has become possible. These are the secrets of the Almighty!

But the word republic is not sufficient; it is the *thing* republic that is wanting; well, we shall have the thing with the word. Let us develop this thought.

II

THE FOUR INSTITUTIONS THAT STAND OPPOSED TO THE REPUBLIC

Awaiting the marvellous but tardy simplifications which the union of Europe and the democratic federation of the continent will some day bring forth, what will be in France, the form of the social edifice, of whose ill-defined and luminous outlines the thinking man already has a glimpse, through the darkness of dictatorships?

That form is this: —

The sovereign commune, ruled by an elective mayor; universal suffrage everywhere, subordinate to the national unity only in respect to acts of general concern; so much for the administration. Syndics and upright men arranging the private differences of associations and industries; the jury, magistrate of the fact, enlightening the judge, magistrate of the law; elective judges; so much for justice. The priest excluded from everything except the church, living with his eye fixed on his book and on Heaven, a stranger to the budget, unknown to the state, known only to his flock, no longer possessing authority, but possessing liberty; so much for religion. War confined to the defence of the territory. The whole nation constituting a national guard, divided into three districts, and able to rise as one man; so much for power. The law for ever, the right for ever, the ballot for ever, the sword nowhere.

Now, what were the obstacles to this future, to this magnificent realization of the democratic ideal?

There were four material obstacles, namely: —

The standing army.

Centralized administration.

The office-holding clergy.

The irremovable magistracy.

III

SLOW MOVEMENT OF NORMAL PROGRESS

What these four obstacles are, what they were even under the Republic of February, even under the Constitution of 1848; the evil they produced, the good they prevented, what sort of past they perpetuated, what excellent social order they postponed, the publicist saw, the philosopher knew, the nation did not know.

These four institutions, immense, ancient, solid, supported one upon another, composite at their base and summit, growing like a hedge of tall old trees, their roots under our feet, their branches over our heads, smothered and crushed on all sides the scattered germs of the new France. Where life and movement, association, local liberty, communal initiative should have been, there was administrative despotism; where there should have been the intelligent vigilance, armed at need, of the patriot and the citizen, there was the passive obedience of the soldier; where the quick Christian faith should have gushed forth, there was the Catholic priest; where there should have been justice, there was the judge. And the future was there, under the feet of suffering generations, which could not rise and were waiting.

Was this known among the people? Was it suspected? Was it divined?

No!

Far from it. In the eyes of the greater part, and of the middle classes in particular, these four obstacles were four buttresses. Army, magistracy, administration, clergy, these were the four virtues of order, the four social powers, the four sacred pillars of the old French structure.

Attack that, if you dare!

I have no hesitation is saying, that in the state of blindness in which are plunged the best minds, with the measured march of normal progress, with our assemblies, of which I shall not be suspected to be the detractor, but which, when they are both honest and timid, as is often the case, are disposed to be led only by their average men, that is, by mediocrity; with the committees of initiative, their delays and ballottings, if the 2nd of December had not brought its overwhelming demonstration, if Providence had not taken a hand, France would have remained condemned for an indefinite term to its irremovable magistracy, to administrative centralization, to the standing army, and to the office-holding clergy.

Surely, the power of the tribune and of the press combined, these two great forces of civilization, — it is not I who seek to deny or belittle them; but see how many efforts of all kinds it would have required, in every direction, and under every form, by the tribune and by the newspaper, by the book and by the spoken word, to succeed even in shaking the universal prejudice in favor of these four fatal institutions! How many to succeed in overthrowing them! to exhibit the evidence to the eyes of all, to overcome selfish, passionate or unintelligent resistance, thoroughly to enlighten public opinion, the consciences of the people, and the ruling powers, to cause this fourfold reform to force its way first into ideas, then into the laws. Reckon up the speeches, the writings, the newspaper articles, the projects of laws, the counter-projects, the amendments, the amendments to amendments, the reports, the counter-reports, the facts, the incidents, the polemics, the discussions, the assertions, the denials, the storms, the steps forward, the steps backward, the days, the weeks, the months, the years, the quarter-century, the half-century!

IV

WHAT AN ASSEMBLY WOULD HAVE DONE

I imagine, on the benches of an assembly, the most intrepid of thinkers, a brilliant mind, one of those men who, when they ascend the tribune, feel it beneath them like the tripod of the oracle, suddenly grow in stature and become colossal, surpass by a head the massive appearances that mask reality, and see clearly the future over the high, frowning wall of the present. That man, that orator, that seer, seeks to warn his country; that prophet seeks to enlighten statesmen; he knows where the breakers are; he knows that society will crumble by means of these four false supports: centralized government, standing army, irremovable judges, salaried priesthood; he knows it, he desires that all should know it, he ascends the tribune and says: —

"I denounce to you four great public perils. Your political system bears that within it that will destroy it. It is incumbent upon you to transform your government root and branch, the army, the clergy, and the magistracy: to suppress here, retrench there, remodel everything, or perish through these four institutions, which you consider as lasting elements, but which are elements of dissolution."

Murmurs. He exclaims: "Do you know what your centralized administration may become in the hands of a perjured executive power? A vast treason, carried into effect at one blow over the whole of France, by every office-holder without exception."

Murmurs break out anew with redoubled violence; cries of "order!" The orator continues: "Do you know what your standing army may become at any moment? An instrument of crime. Passive obedience is the bayonet ever pointed at the heart of the law. Yes, here, in this France, which is the initiatress of the world, in this land of the tribune and the press, in this birthplace of human thought, yes, the time may come when the sword will rule, when you, inviolable legislators, will be collared by corporals, when our glorious regiments will transform themselves, for the profit of one man and to the shame of the nation, into gold-laced hordes and pretorian bands, when the sword of France will become a thing that strikes from behind, like the dagger of a hired assassin, when the life-blood of the first city in the world, done to death, will splash the gold epaulettes of your generals!"

The murmur becomes an uproar, cries of "Order!" are heard from all quarters. The orator is interrupted: "You have been insulting the government, now you insult the army!" The President calls the orator to order.

The orator resumes:

"And if it should happen some day that a man, having in his hand the five hundred thousand officeholders who constitute the government, and the four hundred thousand soldiers composing the army, if it should happen that this man should tear up the Constitution, should violate every law, break every oath, trample upon every right, commit every crime, do you know what your irremovable magistrates, instructors in the right, and guardians of the law, would do? They would hold their tongues."

The uproar prevents the orator from completing his sentence. The tumult becomes a tempest.— "This man respects nothing. After the government and the army, he drags the magistracy in the mire! Censure! censure!" The orator is censured and the censure entered in the journal. The President declares that, if he continues, the Assembly will proceed to a vote, and the floor will be taken from him.

The orator continues: "And your paid clergy! and your office-holding bishops! On the day when a pretender shall have employed in such enterprises the government, the magistracy, and the army; on the day when all these institutions shall drip with the blood shed by and for the traitor; when, placed between the man who has committed the crimes and God who orders an anathema to be launched against the criminal — do you know what these bishops of yours will do? They will prostrate themselves, not before God, but before man!"

Can you form any idea of the frenzied shouts and imprecations that would greet such words? Can you imagine the shouts, the apostrophes, the threats, the whole Assembly rising *en masse*, the tribune escaladed and with difficulty guarded by the ushers! The orator has profaned every sanctified ark in succession, and he has ended by profaning the Holy of Holies, the clergy! And what does he mean by it all? What a medley of impossible and infamous hypotheses! Do you not hear Baroche growl, and Dupin thunder? The orator would be called to order, censured, fined, suspended from the Chamber for three days, like Pierre Leroux and Émile de Girardin; who can tell, perhaps expelled, like Manuel.

And the next day, the indignant citizen would say: "That is well done!" And from every quarter the journals devoted to order would shake their fist at the Calumniator. And in his own party, on his usual bench in the Assembly, his best friends would forsake him, and say: "It is his own fault; he has gone too far; he has imagined chimeras and absurdities."

And after this generous and heroic effort, it would be found that the four institutions that have been attacked were more venerable and impeccable than ever, and that the question, instead of advancing, had receded.

V

WHAT PROVIDENCE HAS DONE

But Providence, — Providence goes about it differently. It places the thing luminously before your eyes, and says, “Behold!”

A man arrives some fine morning, — and such a man! The first comer, the last comer, without past, without future, without genius, without renown, without prestige. Is he an adventurer? Is he a prince? This man has his hands full of money, of bank-notes, of railroad shares, of offices, of decorations, of sinecures; this man stoops down to the office-holders, and says, “Office-holders, betray your trust!”

The office-holders betray their trust.

What, all? without one exception?

Yes, all!

He turns to the generals, and says: “Generals, massacre.”

And the generals massacre.

He turns towards the irremovable judges, and says: “Magistrates, I shatter the Constitution, I commit perjury, I dissolve the sovereign Assembly, I arrest the inviolate members, I plunder the public treasury, I sequester, I confiscate, I banish those who displease me, I transport people according to my fancy, I shoot down without summons to surrender, I execute without trial, I commit all that men are agreed in calling crime, I outrage all that men are agreed in calling right; behold the laws — they are under my feet.”

“We will pretend not to see any thing,” say the magistrates.

“You are insolent,” replies the providential man. “To turn your eyes away is to insult me. I propose that you shall assist me. Judges, you are going to congratulate me to-day, me who am force and crime; and to-morrow, those who have resisted me, those who are honor, right, and law, them you will try, — and you will condemn them.”

These irremovable judges kiss his boot, and set about investigating *l’affaire des troubles*.

They swear fidelity to him, to boot.

Then he perceives, in a corner, the clergy, endowed, gold-laced, with cross and cope and mitre, and he says: —

“Ah, you are there, Archbishop! Come here. Just bless all this for me.”

And the Archbishop chants his *Magnificat*.

VI

WHAT THE MINISTERS, ARMY, MAGISTRACY, AND CLERGY HAVE DONE

Oh! what a striking thing and how instructive! “*Erudimini,*” Bossuet would say.

The Ministers fancied that they were dissolving the Assembly; they dissolved the government.

The soldiers fired on the army and killed it.

The judges fancied that they were trying and convicting innocent persons; they tried and convicted the irremovable magistracy.

The priests thought they were chanting hosannahs upon Louis Bonaparte; they chanted a *De profundis* upon the clergy.

VII

THE FORM OF THE GOVERNMENT OF GOD

When God desires to destroy a thing, he entrusts its destruction to the thing itself.

Every bad institution of this world ends by suicide.

When they have weighed sufficiently long upon men, Providence, like the sultan to his viziers, sends them the bowstring by a mute, and they execute themselves.

Louis Bonaparte is the mute of Providence.

CONCLUSION — PART FIRST

PETTINESS OF THE MASTER — ABJECTNESS OF THE SITUATION

I

Never fear, History has him in its grip.

If perchance it flatters the self-love of M. Bonaparte to be seized by history, if perchance, and truly one would imagine so, he cherishes any illusion as to his value as a political miscreant, let him divest himself of it.

Let him not imagine, because he has piled up horror on horror, that he will ever raise himself to the elevation of the great historical bandits. We have been wrong, perhaps, in some pages of this book, here and there, to couple him with those men. No, although he has committed enormous crimes, he will remain paltry. He will never be other than the nocturnal strangler of liberty; he will never be other than the man who intoxicated his soldiers, not with glory, like the first Napoleon, but with wine; he will never be other than the pygmy tyrant of a great people. Grandeur, even in infamy, is utterly inconsistent with the calibre of the man. As dictator, he is a buffoon; let him make himself emperor, he will be grotesque. That will finish him. His destiny is to make mankind shrug their shoulders. Will he be less severely punished for that reason? Not at all. Contempt does not, in his case, mitigate anger; he will be hideous, and he will remain ridiculous. That is all. History laughs and crushes.

Even the most indignant chroniclers will not help him there. Great thinkers take satisfaction in castigating the great despots, and, in some instances, even exalt them somewhat, in order to make them worthy of their rage; but what would you have the historian do with this fellow?

The historian can only lead him to posterity by the ear.

The man once stripped of success, the pedestal removed, the dust fallen, the tinsel and spangles and the great sabre taken away, the poor little skeleton laid bare and shivering, — can one imagine anything meaner and more pitiful?

History has its tigers. The historians, immortal keepers of wild beasts, exhibit this imperial menagerie to the nations. Tacitus alone, that great showman, captured and confined eight or ten of these tigers in the iron cage of his style. Look at them: they are terrifying and superb; their spots are an element in their beauty. This is Nimrod, the hunter of men; this, Busiris, the tyrant of Egypt; this, Phalaris, who baked living men in a brazen bull, to make the bull roar; this, Ahasuerus, who flayed the heads of the seven Maccabees, and had them roasted alive; this, Nero, the burner of Rome, who smeared Christians with wax and pitch, and then set them alight as torches; this, Tiberius, the man of Capræa; this, Domitian; this, Caracalla; this, Heliogabalus; that other is Commodus, who possesses an additional claim to our respect in the horrible fact that he was the son of Marcus Aurelius; these are Czars; these, Sultans; these, Popes, among whom remark the tiger Borgia; here is Philip, called the Good, as the Furies were called the Eumenides; here is Richard III, sinister and deformed; here, with his broad face and his great paunch, Henry VIII, who, of five wives that he had, killed three, one of whom he disemboweled; here is Christiern II, the Nero of the North; here Philip II, the Demon of the South. They are terrifying: hear them roar, consider them, one after the other; the historian brings them to you; the historian drags them, raging and terrible, to the side of the cage, opens their jaws for you, shows you their teeth and their claws; you can say of every one of them: “That is a royal tiger.” In fact, they are taken from all the thrones of the earth. History parades them through the ages. She prevents them from dying; she takes care of them. They are her tigers.

She does not mingle jackals with them.

She puts and keeps apart the disgusting beasts. M. Bonaparte will be with Claudius, with Ferdinand VII of Spain, with Ferdinand II of Naples, in the hyena cage.

He is a bit of a brigand, and a great deal of a knave. One is always conscious of the poor prince of industry, who lived from hand to mouth in England; his present prosperity, his triumph, his empire, and his inflation amount to nothing; the purple mantle trails over shoes down at heel. Napoleon the Little, nothing more, nothing less. The title of this book is well chosen.

The meanness of his vices prejudices the grandeur of his crimes. What would you have? Peter the Cruel massacred, but he did not steal; Henry III assassinated, but he did not swindle; Timour crushed children under horses’ hoofs, much as M. Bonaparte exterminated women and old men on the boulevard, but he did not lie. Hear the Arabian historian: “Timour-Beg, Sahib-Keran (master of the world and of the age, master of the planetary conjunctions), was born at Kesch, in 1336; he slaughtered a hundred thousand captives; as he was besieging Siwas, the inhabitants, to mollify him, sent him a thousand little children, bearing each a Koran on its head, and crying, ‘Allah! Allah!’ He caused the sacred books to be removed with respect, and the children to be crushed beneath the hoofs of wild horses. He used seventy thousand human heads, with cement, stone, and brick, in building towers at Herat, Sebzvar, Tekrit, Aleppo, and Bagdad; he detested lying; when he had given his word, men could rely upon it.”

M. Bonaparte is not of this stature. He has not that dignity which the great despots of the East and of the West mingle with ferocity. The amplitude of the Cæsars is wanting in him. To bear one’s self worthily and make a fair appearance among all the illustrious executioners who have tortured mankind in the course of four thousand years, one must not have any mental hesitation between a general of division and a bass-drummer on the Champs-Elysées; one must not have been a constable in London; one must not have undergone, with lowered eyes, in the Court of Peers, the haughty scorn of M. Magnan; one must not have been called “pickpocket” by the English newspapers; one must not have been menaced with Clichy; in a word, there must have been nothing of the sneak in the man.

Monsieur Louis Napoleon, you are ambitious, you aim high, but you must have the truth told you. Well, what would you have us do in the matter? In vain have you, by overturning the tribune of France, realized, after your fashion, the wish of Caligula: “I would that mankind had but one head, so that I might cut it off with a blow;” in vain have you banished the republicans by thousands, as Philip III expelled the Moors, and as Torquemada drove out the Jews; in vain have you dungeons like Peter the Cruel, hulks like Hariadan, *dragonnades* like Père Letellier, and *oubliettes* like Ezzelino III; in vain have you perjured yourself like Ludovic Sforza; in vain have you massacred and assassinated *en masse* like Charles IX; in vain have you done all this, in vain have you recalled all these names to men’s minds when they think of your name, — you are nothing but a rogue. A man is not a monster for the wishing.

II

From every agglomeration of men, from every city, from every nation, there inevitably arises a collective force.

Place this collective force at the service of liberty, let it rule by universal suffrage, the city becomes a commune, the nation becomes a republic.

This collective force is not, of its nature, intelligent. Belonging to all, it belongs to no one; it floats about, so to speak, outside of the people.

Until the day comes when, according to the true social formula, — *as little government as possible,* — this force may be reduced to a mere street and road police, paving the streets, lighting the lamps, and looking after malefactors; until that day comes, this collective force, being at the mercy of many chances and many ambitions, needs to be guarded and protected by jealous, clear-sighted, well-armed institutions.

It may be subjugated by tradition, it may be surprised by stratagem.

A man may rush upon it, seize it, bridle it, quell it, and cause it to trample upon the citizens.

The tyrant is the man, who, born of tradition, like Nicholas of Russia, or of stratagem, like Louis Bonaparte, seizes for his own profit, and according to his caprice disposes of the collective force of a people.

This man, if he be by birth what Nicholas is, is the enemy of society; if he have done what Louis Bonaparte has done, he is a public robber.

The former has no account to settle with regular legal justice, with the articles of codes. He has behind him, spying upon and watching him, hatred in their hearts, and vengeance in their hands, Orloff in his palace, and Mouravieff among the people; he may be assassinated by one of his army, or poisoned by one of his family; he runs the risk of barrack conspiracies, of revolts of regiments, of secret military societies, of domestic plots, of sudden, mysterious maladies, of terrible blows, of great catastrophes. The other ought simply to go to Poissy.

The former has the wherewithal to die in the purple, and to end his life with pomp and royally, as monarchs end and tragedies. The other must live; live between four walls behind bars, through which the people can look at him, sweeping courtyards, making horse-hair brushes or list shoes, emptying buckets, with a green cap on his head, wooden shoes on his feet, and straw in his shoes.

Ah! ye leaders of the old parties, ye men of absolutism, in France you voted *en masse* among 7,500,000; outside of France you applauded, taking this Cartouche for the hero of order. He is ferocious enough for it, I admit; but look at his size. Don’t be ungrateful to your real colossi; you have cashiered your Haynaus and your Radetzkys too precipitately. Above all, weigh this comparison, which so naturally presents itself to the mind. What is this Mandrin of Lilliput beside Nicholas, Czar, Emperor, and Pope, a power half-Bible, half-knout, who damns and condemns, drills eight hundred thousand soldiers and two hundred thousand priests, holds in his right hand the keys of paradise, and in his left hand the keys of Siberia, and possesses, as his chattel, sixty millions of men — their souls as if he were God, their bodies as if he were the tomb!

III

If there should not be ere long a sudden, imposing, and overwhelming catastrophe, if the present situation of the nation should be prolonged and endure, the grand injury, the fearful injury, would be the moral injury.

The boulevards of Paris, the streets of Paris, the rural districts and the towns of twenty departments of France, were strewn on the 2nd of December with dead and dying citizens; there were seen, before their thresholds, fathers and mothers slaughtered, children sabred, dishevelled women in pools of blood, disemboweled by grape-shot; there were seen, in the houses, suppliants massacred, some shot in heaps in their cellars, others despatched by the bayonet under their beds, others struck down by a bullet on their own hearths. The impress of bloodstained hands of all sizes may be seen at this moment, here on a wall, there on a door, there in a recess; for three days after the victory of Louis Bonaparte, Paris walked in ruddy mire; a cap full of human brains was hung on a tree on Boulevard des Italiens. I, who write these lines, saw, among other victims, on the night of the 4th, near the Mauconseil barricade, an aged white-haired man, stretched on the pavement, his bosom pierced with a bayonet, his collar-bone broken; the gutter that ran beneath him bore away his blood. I saw, I touched with my hands, I helped to undress, a poor child seven years old, killed, they told me, on Rue Tiquetonne; he was pale, his head rolled from one shoulder to the other while they were taking off his clothes; his half-closed eyes were fixed and staring, and as I leaned over his half-opened mouth, it seemed that I could still hear him murmur faintly, “Mother!”

Well, there is something more heart-rending than murdered child, more lamentable than that old man shot dead, more horrible than that cap full of human brains, more frightful than those pavements red with carnage, more irreparable than those men and women, those fathers and those mothers, stabbed and murdered, — it is the vanishing honour of a great people!

Assuredly those pyramids of dead bodies which one saw in the cemeteries, after the wagons from the Champ-de-Mars had emptied their contents; those immense open trenches, which they filled in the morning with human bodies, making speed because of the increasing light of day, — all this was frightful; but what is still more frightful is to think that, at this hour, the nations are in doubt; and that in their eyes France, that great moral splendour, has disappeared!

That which is more heart-rending than skulls cleft by the sword, than breasts riddled by bullets, more disastrous than houses pillaged, than murder filling the streets, than blood shed in rivers, is to think that now, among all the peoples of the earth, men are saying to one another: “Do you know that that nation of nations, that people of the 14th of July, that people of the 10th of August, that people of 1830, that people of 1848, that race of giants which razed bastiles, that race of men whose faces cast a bright light, that fatherland of the human race which produced heroes and thinkers, those heroes who made all the revolutions and gave birth to all births, that France whose name meant liberty, that soul of the world, so to say, which shone resplendent in Europe, that light.... Well! some one has stepped upon it, and put it out. There is no longer a France. It is at an end. Look! everywhere darkness. The world is feeling its way.”

Ah! it was so grand. Where are those times, those glorious times, interspersed with storms, but glorious, when all was life, when all was liberty, when all was glory? those times when the French people, awake before all others, and up before the light, their brows illumined by the dawn of the future already risen for them, said to the other nations, still drowsy and overborne, and scarcely able to shake their chains in their sleep: “Fear naught, I work for all, I dig the earth for all, — I am the workman of the Almighty!”

What profound grief! Regard that torpor where formerly there was such power! that shame, where formerly there was such pride! that noble people, whose heads were once held erect and are now lowered!

Alas! Louis Bonaparte has done more than kill persons, he has caused men’s minds to dwindle, he has withered the heart of the citizen. One must belong to the race of the invincible and the indomitable, to persevere now in the rugged path of renunciation and of duty. An indescribable gangrene of material prosperity threatens to cause public honesty to degenerate into rottenness. Oh! what happiness to be banished, to be disgraced, to be ruined, — is it not, brave workmen? Is it not, worthy peasants, driven from France, who have no roof to shelter you, and no shoes to your feet? What happiness to eat black bread, to lie on a mattress thrown on the ground, to be out at elbows, to be away from all this, and to those who say to you: “You are French!” to answer, “I am proscribed!”

What a pitiful thing is this delight of self-interest and cupidity, wallowing in the slough of the 2nd of December! Faith! let us live, let us go into business, let us speculate in zinc and railway shares, let us make money; it is degrading but it is an excellent thing; a scruple less, a louis more; let us sell our whole soul at that rate. One runs to and fro, one rushes about, one cools his heels in anterooms, one drinks deep of every kind of shame, and if one cannot get a concession of railways in France or of lands in Africa, one asks for an office. A host of intrepid devotions besiege the Elysée, and collect about the man. Junot, beside the first Bonaparte, defied the splashing of shells, these fellows beside the second, defy the splashing of mud. What care they about sharing his ignominy, provided they share his fortune? The competition is to see who shall carry on this traffic in himself most cynically; and among these creatures there are young men with pure limpid eyes, and all the appearance of generous youth; and there are old men, who have but one fear, which is, that the office solicited may not reach them in time, and that they may not succeed in dishonouring themselves before they die. One would sell himself for a prefecture, another for a collectorship, another for a consulate; one wants a tobacco license, another an embassy. All want money, some more, some less; for it is of the salary they think, not of the duties. Every one has his hand out. All offer themselves. One of these days we shall have to appoint an assayer of consciences at the Mint.

What! this is what we have come to! What! those very men who supported the *coup d’état*, those very men who recoiled from the red *croquemitaine* and the twaddle about Jacquerie in 1852; those very men to whom that crime seemed a good thing, because, according to them, it rescued from peril their consols, their ledgers, their money-boxes, their bill-books, — even they do not comprehend that material interest, surviving alone, would, after all, be only a melancholy waif in an immense moral shipwreck, and that it is a fearful and monstrous situation, when men say: “All is saved, save honour!”

The words independence, enfranchisement, progress, popular pride, national pride, French greatness, may no longer be pronounced in France. Hush! these words make too much noise; let us walk on tiptoe, and speak low; we are in a sick man's chamber.

Who is this man? — He is the chief, the master. Every one obeys him. — Ah! every one respects him, then? — No, every one despises him. — Oh! what a plight!

And military honour, where is it? Let us say no more, if you please, of what the army did in December, but of what it is undergoing at this moment, of that which is at its head, of that which is on its head. Do you think of that? Does it think of that? O army of the republic! army that had for captains, generals paid with four francs a day; army that had for leaders, Carnot, austerity, Marceau, unselfishness, Hoche, honour, Kléber, devotion, Joubert, probity, Desaix, valour, Bonaparte, genius! O, French army, poor, unfortunate, heroic army, gone astray in the train of these men! What will they do with it? whither will they lead it? how will they occupy it? what parodies are we destined to see and hear? Alas! what are these men who command our regiments, and who govern us? The master — we know him. This fellow, who had been a minister, was going to be "seized" on the 3rd of December; it was for that reason he *made* the 2nd. That other is the "borrower" of the twenty-five millions from the Bank. That other is the man of the gold ingots. To that other, before he was made minister, "a friend" said:— "*I say! you are humbugging us about the shares in that affair; that won't go down with me. If there's any swindling going on, let me at least have a finger in it.*" That other, who wears epaulettes, has just been convicted of selling mortgaged property; that other, who also wears epaulettes, received, on the morning of the 2nd of December, 100,000 francs, for "emergencies." He was only a colonel; if he had been a general he would have had more. This man, who is a general, when he was a body-guard of Louis XVIII, being on duty behind the king's chair during mass, cut a gold tassel from the throne and put it in his pocket; he was expelled from the guards for that. Surely, to these men, also, we might rear a column, *ex aere capto*, with the money they stole. This other, who is a general of division, "converted" 52,000 francs, to the knowledge of Colonel Caharras, in the construction of the villages of Saint André and Saint Hippolyte, near Mascara. This one, who is general-in-chief, was christened at Ghent, where he is known, *le général Cinq-cents-francs*. This one, who is Minister of

War, has only General Rulhière’s clemency to thank that he was not sent before a court-martial. Such are the men. No matter; forward! beat, drums, sound, trumpets, wave, flags! Soldiers, from the top of yon pyramids the forty thieves look down upon you!

Let us go farther into this mournful subject, and survey it in all its aspects.

The mere spectacle of fortune like that of M. Bonaparte, placed at the head of the state, would suffice to demoralize a people.

There is always, and it is the fault of our social institutions, that ought, above all, to enlighten and civilize, there is always, in a large population like that of France, a class which is ignorant, which suffers, covets, and struggles, placed between the brutish instinct which impels it to take, and the moral law which invites it to labour. In the grievous and oppressed condition in which it still is, this class, in order to maintain itself in probity and well-doing, requires all the pure and holy light that emanates from the Gospel; it requires that, on the one hand, the spirit of Jesus Christ, and, on the other, the spirit of the French Revolution, should address to it the same manly words, and should never cease to point out to it, as the only lights worthy of the eyes of man, the exalted and mysterious laws of human destiny, — self-denial, devotion, sacrifice, the labour which leads to material well-being, the probity which leads to inward well-being; even with this perennial instruction, at once divine and human, this class, so worthy of sympathy and fraternity, often succumbs. Suffering and temptation are stronger than virtue. Now do you comprehend the infamous counsel which the success of M. Bonaparte gives to this class?

A poor man, in rags, without money, without work, is there in the shadow, at the corner of the street, seated on a stone; he is meditating, and at the same time repelling, a bad action; now he wavers, now he recovers himself; he is starving, and feels a desire to rob; to rob he must make a false key, he must scale a wall; then, the key made and the wall scaled, he will stand before the strong box; if any one wakes, if any one resists, he must kill. His hair stands on end, his eyes become haggard, his conscience, the voice of God, revolts within him, and cries to him: “Stop! this is evil! these are crimes!” At that moment the head of the state passes by; the man sees M. Bonaparte in his uniform of a general, with the *cordon rouge*, and with footmen in gold-laced liveries, dashing towards his palace in a carriage drawn by four horses; the unhappy wretch, hesitating before his crime, greedily gazes on this splendid vision; and the serenity of M. Bonaparte, and his gold epaulettes, and his *cordon rouge*, and the liveries, and the palace, and the four-horse carriage, say to him: “Succeed.”

He attaches himself to this apparition, he follows it, he runs to the Élysée; a gilded mob rushes in after the prince. All sorts of carriages pass under that portal, and he has glimpses of happy, radiant men! This one is an ambassador; the ambassador looks at him, and says: “Succeed.” This is a bishop; the bishop looks at him and says: “Succeed.” This is a judge; the judge looks at him, and smiles on him, and says: “Succeed.”

Thus, to escape the gendarmes, — therein consists henceforth the whole moral law. To rob, to pillage, to poignard, to assassinate, all this is criminal only when one is fool enough to allow himself to be caught. Every man who meditates a crime has a constitution to violate, an oath to break, an obstacle to destroy. In a word, take your measures well. Be adroit. Succeed. The only guilty actions are the *coups* that fail.

You put your hand in the pocket of a passer-by, in the evening, at nightfall, in a lonely place; he seizes you; you let go; he arrests you, and takes you to the guard-house. You are guilty; to the galleys! You do not let go: you have a knife about you, you bury it in the man’s throat; he falls; he is dead; now take his purse, and make off. Bravo! capitally done! You have shut the victim’s mouth, the only witness who could speak. Nobody has anything to say to you.

If you had only robbed the man, you would have been in the wrong; kill him, and you are right.

Succeed, that is the point.

Ah! this is indeed alarming!

On the day when the human conscience shall lose its bearings, on the day when success shall carry the day before that forum, all will be at an end. The last moral gleam will reascend to heaven. Darkness will be in the mind of man. You will have nothing to do but to devour one another, wild beasts that you are!

With moral degradation goes political degradation. M. Bonaparte treats the people of France like a conquered country. He effaces the republican inscriptions; he cut down the trees of liberty, and makes firewood of them. There was on Place Bourgogne a statue of the Republic; he puts the pickaxe to it; there was on our coinage a figure of the Republic, crowned with ears of corn; M. Bonaparte replaces it by the profile of M. Bonaparte. He has his bust crowned and harangued in the market-places, just as the tyrant Gessler made the people salute his cap. The rustics in the faubourgs were in the habit of singing in chorus, in the evening, as they returned from work; they used to sing the great republican songs, the Marseillaise, the Chant du Depart; they were ordered to keep silent; the faubourgers will sing no more; there is amnesty only for obscenities and drunken songs. The triumph is so complete, that they no longer keep within bounds. Only yesterday they kept in hiding, they did their shooting at night; it was shocking, but there was still some shame; there was a remnant of respect for the people; they seemed to think that it had still enough life in it to revolt, if it saw such things. Now they show themselves, they fear nothing, they guillotine in broad day. Whom do they guillotine? Whom? the men of the law, and the law is there! Whom? the men of the people! and the people is there! Nor is this all. There is a man in Europe, who horrifies Europe: that man sacked Lombardy, he set up the gibbets of Hungary; he had a woman whipped under the gibbet upon which hung her husband and her son; we still remember the terrible letter in which that woman recounts the deed, and says: “My heart has turned to stone.”

Last year this man took it into his head to visit England as a tourist, and, while in London, he took it into his head to visit a brewery, that of Barclay and Perkins. There he was recognized; a voice whispered: “It is Haynau!”—“It is Haynau!” repeated the workmen! — It was a fearful cry; the crowd rushed upon the wretch, tore out his infamous white hair by handfuls, spat in his face, and thrust him out. Well, this old bandit in epaulettes, this Haynau, this man who still bears on his cheek the immense buffet of the English people, it is announced that “Monseigneur the Prince-President invites him to visit France.” It is quite right; London put an affront on him, Paris owes him an ovation. It is a reparation. Be it so. We will be there to see. Haynau was cursed and hooted at the brewery of Barclay and Perkins, he will receive bouquets at the brewery of Saint-Antoine. The Faubourg Saint-Antoine will receive an order to conduct itself properly. The Faubourg Saint-Antoine, mute, motionless, impassive, will see them pass, triumphant and conversing together, like two friends, through its old revolutionary streets, one in French, the other in Austrian uniform, — Louis Bonaparte, the murderer of the boulevard, arm-in-arm with Haynau, the whipper of women! Go on, add insult to insult, disfigure this France of ours, fallen flat on the pavement! make her unrecognizable! crush the faces of the people with your heels!

Oh! inspire me, seek for me, give me, invent for me a means, whatever it may be, short of a poignard, which I repudiate, — a Brutus for that man! bah! he is not worthy of even a Louvel! — find me some means of laying that man low, and of delivering my country! of laying that man low, that man of craft, that man of lies, that man of success, that man of evil! Some means, the first that offers, — pen, sword, paving-stone, *émeute*, — by the people, by the soldier; yes, whatever it be, so it be honourable, and in open day, I take it, we all take it, we proscribed, if it can re-establish liberty, set free the republic, deliver our country from shame, and drive back to his dust, to his oblivion, to his cloaca, this imperial ruffian, this prince pick-pocket, this gypsy king, this traitor, this master, this groom of Franconi's! this radiant, imperturbable, self-satisfied governor, crowned with his successful crime, who goes and comes, and peacefully parades trembling Paris, and who has everything on his side, — the Bourse, the shopkeepers, the magistracy, all influences, all guarantees, all invocations, from the *Nom de Dieu* of the soldier to the Te Deum of the priest!

Really, when one has fixed one's eyes too long on certain aspects of this spectacle, even the strongest minds are attacked with vertigo.

But does he, at least, do himself justice, this Bonaparte? Has he a glimmering, an idea, a suspicion, the slightest perception, of his infamy? Really, one is driven to doubt it.

Yes, sometimes, from the lofty words he uses, when one hears him make incredible appeals to posterity, to that posterity which will shudder with horror and wrath at him; when one hears him speak coolly of his "legitimacy," and his "mission," one is almost tempted to think that he has come to take himself into high consideration, and that his head is turned to such a degree that he no longer perceives what he is, nor what he does. He believes in the adhesion of the poor, he believes in the good-will of kings, he believes in the fête of eagles, he believes in the harangues of the Council of State, he believes in the benedictions of the bishops, he believes in the oath that he has forced people to take, he believes in the 7,500,000 votes!

He is talking now, feeling in the humour of Augustus, of granting amnesty to the proscribed. Usurpation granting amnesty to right! treason to honour! cowardice to courage! crime to virtue! He is to that degree embruted by his success that he thinks this all very simple.

Singular effect of intoxication! Optical illusion! In his eyes that thing of the 14th of January appears all golden and glorious and radiant, that constitution defiled with mud, stained with blood, laden with chains, dragged amid the hooting of Europe by the police, the Senate, the Corps Législatif and the Council of State, all newly shod. He takes as a triumphal car, and would drive under the Arc de l’Étoile, that sledge, standing on which, hideous, with whip in hand, he parades the ensanguined corpse of the republic!

CONCLUSION — PART SECOND

FAITH AND AFFLICTION

I

Providence brings to maturity men, things, and events, by the single fact of universal life. To cause the disappearance of an old world it is sufficient that civilization, ascending majestically towards its solstice, should shine upon old institutions, upon old prejudices, upon old laws, and upon old customs. This radiation burns and devours the past. Civilization enlightens, this is the visible fact; and at the same time it consumes, this is the mysterious fact. Under its influence, gradually and without a shock, that which should decline declines, and what should grow old grows old; wrinkles appear upon things condemned, on castes, on codes, on institutions, and on religions. This work of decrepitude is, in some sort, self-acting. A fruitful decrepitude, under which germinates the new life. Little by little the ruin progresses; deep crevices, which are not visible, ramify in the darkness, and internally reduce to powder the venerable structure, which still appears a solid mass without; and suddenly, some fine day, this ancient *ensemble* of worm-eaten things, of which decaying societies are composed, becomes shapeless, the nails come out, the structure becomes disjointed, and overhangs. Then it no longer has any solidity. Let one of those giants peculiar to revolutions appear; let him raise his hand, and all is said. There was a moment in history when a nudge of Danton’s elbow would have shaken all Europe to its foundations.

The year 1848 was such a moment. Ancient Europe, feudal, papal, and monarchical, replastered so disastrously for France, in 1815, tottered. But there was no Danton. The crash did not take place.

It has often been said, in the commonplace phraseology used on similar occasions, that 1848 opened a gulf. Not at all. The corpse of the past lay upon Europe; it lies there still at this moment. The year 1848 opened a grave wherein to throw that corpse. It is this grave that has been taken for a gulf.

In 1848 all that still held to the past, all that still survived of the body, had a close view of this grave. Not only the kings upon their thrones, the cardinals under their hats, the judges in the shadow of their guillotines, the captains on their war-horses, were thrown into commotion; but he who had any interest whatever in what was about to disappear; he who was cultivating for his own profit a social fiction, and had an abuse to let out on hire; he who was guardian of some falsehood, doorkeeper of some prejudice, or farmer of some superstition; he who was taking advantage of another, or dealing in usury, oppression and falsehood; he who sold by false weights, from those who falsify a balance to those who falsify the Bible; from the cheating merchant to the cheating priest; from those who manipulate figures to those who traffic in miracles, — all, from the Jew banker who feels that he is more or less Catholic, to the bishop who becomes more or less of a Jew, — all the men of the past inclined their heads towards one another and trembled.

This grave, which was gaping, and into which had nearly fallen all the fictions — their treasure — which have weighed upon men for so many ages, they resolved to fill up. They determined to wall it up, to pile rocks and stones upon it, and to erect upon the pile a gibbet, and to hang upon this gibbet, all bleeding and dejected, that mighty culprit, Truth.

They determined, once for all, to make an end of the spirit of freedom and emancipation, and to drive back and repress for ever the upward tendency of mankind.

The enterprise was formidable. What the nature of it was we have already indicated, more than once, in this book and elsewhere.

To undo the labour of twenty generations; to kill in the nineteenth century, by strangulation, three centuries, the sixteenth, the seventeenth, and the eighteenth, that is to say, Luther, Descartes, and Voltaire, religious scrutiny, philosophical scrutiny, universal scrutiny; to crush throughout all Europe this immense vegetation of free thought, here a tender blade, there a sturdy oak; to marry the knout and the holy-water-sprinkler; to put more of Spain in the South, and more of Russia in the North; to resuscitate all they could of the Inquisition, and to stifle all they could of intelligence; to stultify youth, in other words to brutalize the future; to make the world a witness of the *auto-da-fé* of ideas; to throw down the tribune, to suppress the newspaper, the placard, the book, the spoken word, the cry, the whisper, the breath; to make silence; to pursue thought into the case of the printer, into the composing-stick, into the leaden type, into the stereotype, into the lithograph, into the drawing, upon the stage, into the street-show, into the mouth of the actor, into the copy-book of the schoolmaster, into the hawker’s pack; to hold out to each man, for faith, for law, for aim in life, and for God, his selfish interest; to say to nations: “Eat and think no more;” to take man from the brain, and put him in the belly; to extinguish individual initiative, local life, national impulse, all those deep-rooted instincts which impel man to that which is right; to annihilate that *ego* of nations which is called the fatherland; to destroy nationality among partitioned and dismembered peoples, constitutions in constitutional states, the republic in France, and liberty everywhere; to plant the foot everywhere upon human effort.

In one word, to close that abyss which is called Progress.

Such was the plan, vast, enormous, European, which no one conceived, for not one of those men of the old world had had genius for it, but which all followed. As for the plan in itself, as for that all-embracing idea of universal repression, whence came it? who could tell? It was seen in the air. It appeared in the past. It enlightened certain souls, it pointed to certain routes. It was a gleam issuing from the tomb of Machiavelii.

At certain moments of human history, from the things which are plotted and the things which are done, it would seem that all the old demons of humanity, Louis XI, Philip II, Catherine de Medicis, the Duke of Alva, Torquemada, are somewhere or other in a corner, seated around a table, and taking counsel together.

We look, we search, and instead of the colossi, we find abortions. Where we expected to see the Duke of Alva, we find Schwartzenberg; where we expected to see Torquemada we find Veuillot. The old European despotism continues its march, with these little men, and goes on and on; it resembles the Czar Peter when travelling:— “*We relay with what we can find*,” he wrote; “*when we had no more Tartar horses, we took donkeys*.” To attain this object, the repression of everything and everybody, it was necessary to pursue an obscure, tortuous, rugged, difficult path; they pursued it. Some of those who entered it, knew what they were doing.

Parties are kept alive by watchwords; those men, those ringleaders, whom 1848 frightened and assembled, had, as we have said above, adopted theirs: religion, family, property. With that commonplace adroitness which suffices when one speaks to fear, they exploited certain obscure aspects of what was called socialism. It was a question of “saving religion, property, and the family.”— “Save the flag!” they exclaimed. The vulgar herd of terrified selfish interests threw themselves into the current.

They coalesced, they made a stand, they formed in mass. They had a crowd around them. This crowd was composed of diverse elements. The landed proprietor entered it because his rents had fallen; the peasant, because he had paid the forty-five centimes; he who did not believe in God thought it necessary to save religion, because he had been forced to sell his horses. They extracted from this crowd the force it contained, and made use of it. They made everything contribute to repression: the law, despotism, the assemblies, the tribune, the jury, the magistracy, the police; in Lombardy the sabre, at Naples the convict prison, in Hungary the gibbet. To remuzzle men's intellects, to replace the fetters on men's minds, these runaway slaves, to prevent the past from disappearing, to prevent the future from being born, to remain kings, powerful, privileged and happy, all means were good, all just, all legitimate. For the exigencies of the struggle, they manufactured and spread throughout the world a sort of ambuscade-morality against liberty, which Ferdinand put in action at Palermo, Antonelli at Rome, Schwartzenberg at Milan and at Pesth, and later, at Paris, those wolves of state, the men of December.

There was a nation among the nations, which was a sort of elder brother in this family of the oppressed, a prophet in the human tribe. This nation took the initiative of the whole human movement. It went on, saying, "Come!" and the rest followed. As a complement to the fraternity of men, in the Gospel, it taught the fraternity of nations. It spoke by the voice of its writers, of its poets, of its philosophers, of its orators, as by a single mouth, and its words flew to the extremities of the earth, to rest, like tongues of fire, upon the brow of all nations. It presided over the communion of intellects. It multiplied the bread of life to those who were wandering in the desert. One day it was enveloped in a tempest; it marched over the abyss, and said to the frightened nations: "Why are you afraid?" The wave of the revolutions it had excited subsided under its footsteps, and, far from engulfing it, increased its glory. The suffering, infirm, and diseased nations pressed around it; one was limping, for the chain of the Inquisition, riveted to its foot for three centuries, had lamed it; to this one it said, "Walk!" and it walked. Another was blind, the old Roman papistry had filled its eyes with mist and darkness; to this one it said, "Receive thy sight!" it opened its eyes and saw. "Throw away your crutches, that is to say, your prejudices," it said; "throw away your bandages, that is to say, your superstitions; stand upright, raise your head, look at the sky, look at God. The future is yours. O nations! you have a leprosy, ignorance; you have a plague, fanaticism; there is not one of you but is afflicted with that frightful malady called a despot; go, march, break the bonds of evil; I deliver you, I cure you!” Throughout the earth a grateful clamour arose among the nations which these words made sound and strong. One day it accosted dead Poland; it raised its finger, and exclaimed, “Arise!” and dead Poland arose.

This nation, the men of the past, whose fall it announced, dreaded and hated. By dint of stratagem, of tortuous patience, and of audacity, they ended by seizing it, and succeeded in throttling it.

For three years and more, the world has witnessed a tremendous agony and a frightful spectacle. For three years and more, the men of the past, the scribes, the Pharisees, the publicans, the princes of the priests, have crucified, in presence of the human race, the Christ of nations, the French people. Some furnished the cross, others the nails, others the hammer. Falloux placed upon its forehead the crown of thorns. Montalembert placed upon its mouth the sponge, dipped in gall and vinegar. Louis Bonaparte is the miserable soldier who struck his lance into its side, and caused it to utter the supreme cry: *Eli! Eli! Lama Sabachthani*!

Now it is all over. The French nation is dead. The great tomb is about to open.

For three days!

II

Let us have faith.

No, let us not be cast down. To despair is to desert.

Let us look to the future.

The future, — no one knows what tempests still separate us from port, but the port, the distant and radiant port, is in sight; the future, we repeat, is the republic for all men; let us add, the future is peace with all men.

Let us not fall into the vulgar error, which is to curse and to dishonour the age in which we live. Erasmus called the sixteenth century “the excrement of the ages,” *fex temporum*. Bossuet thus qualified the seventeenth century: “A wicked and paltry age.” Rousseau branded the eighteenth century, in these terms: “This great rottenness amidst which we live.” Posterity has proved these illustrious men in the wrong. It has said to Erasmus: “The sixteenth century was great;” it has said to Bossuet: “The seventeenth century was great;” it has said to Rousseau: “The eighteenth century was great.”

Even had the infamy of those ages been actual, those great men would have been wrong to complain. The man who thinks should accept simply and calmly the surroundings in which Providence has placed him. The splendour of human intelligence, the loftiness of genius, shine no less by contrast than by harmony with the age. The stoic and profound philosopher is not diminished by an external debasement. Virgil, Petrarch, Racine are great in their purple; Job is still greater on his dunghill.

But we can say, we men of the nineteenth century, that the nineteenth century is not the dunghill. However deep the shame of the present, whatever blows we receive from the fluctuation of events, whatever the apparent desertion or the momentary lethargy of mental vigour, none of us, democrats, will repudiate the magnificent epoch in which we live, the virile age of mankind.

Let us proclaim it aloud, let us proclaim it in our fall and in our defeat, this is the greatest of all ages! and do you know the reason why? because it is the mildest. This age, the immediate issue, the firstborn offspring, of the French Revolution, frees the slave in America, raises from his degradation the *pariah* in Asia, abolishes the suttee in India, and extinguishes in Europe the last brands of the stake, civilizes Turkey, carries the Gospel into the domain of the Koran, dignifies woman, subordinates the right of the strongest to that of the most just, suppresses pirates, mitigates sentences, makes the galleys healthy, throws the red-hot iron into the sewer, condemns the penalty of death, removes the ball and chain from the leg of the convict, abolishes torture, degrades and brands war, stifles Dukes of Alva and Charles the Ninths, and extracts the claws of tyrants.

This age proclaims the sovereignty of the citizen, and the inviolability of life; it crowns the people, and consecrates man.

In art, it possesses all varieties of genius, — writers, orators, poets, historians, publicists, philosophers, painters, sculptors, musicians; majesty, grace, power, force, splendour, colour, form, style; it renews its strength in the real and in the ideal, and bears in its hand the two thunderbolts, the true and the beautiful. In science it accomplishes unheard-of miracles; it makes of cotton saltpetre, of steam a horse, of the voltaic battery a workman, of the electric fluid a messenger, of the sun a painter; it waters itself with subterranean streams, pending the time when it shall warm itself with the central fire; it opens upon the two infinites those two windows, the telescope upon the infinitely great, the microscope upon the infinitely little, and it finds stars in the first abyss, and insects in the second, which prove to it the existence of God. It annihilates time, it annihilates space, it annihilates suffering; it writes a letter from Paris to London, and has an answer in ten minutes; it cuts off a man’s leg, the man sings and smiles.

It has now only to realize — and it has nearly done it — a progress which is nothing compared to the miracles it has already wrought; it has only to find the means of directing through a mass of air a bubble of lighter air; it has already obtained the bubble of air, and keeps it imprisoned; it has now only to find the impulsive force, only to cause a vacuum before the balloon, for instance, only to burn the air before the aerostat, as the rocket does before itself; it has only to solve this problem in some way or other; and it will solve it, and do you know what will happen then? At that instant frontiers will vanish, all barriers will be swept away; everything that constitutes a Chinese wall round thought, round commerce, round industry, round nationalities, round progress, will crumble; in spite of censorships, in spite of *index expurgatorius*, it will rain books and journals upon every country under the sun; Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau, will fall like hail upon Rome, Naples, Vienna, St. Petersburg; the human word is manna, and the serf will gather it in the furrows; fanaticism will die, oppression will be impossible; man dragged himself along the ground, — he will escape; civilization changes itself into a flock of birds, and flies away, and whirls about and alights joyously at the same moment upon every point of the globe. Lo! yonder it passes; aim your cannons, old despotisms, it disdains you; you are only the bullet, it is the lightning; no more hatreds, no more mutually devouring interests, no more wars; a sort of new life, composed of concord and light, pervades and soothes the world; the fraternity of nations soars through space, and holds communion in the eternal azure; men mingle in the skies.

While we await this final progress, let us consider the point to which this age had brought civilization.

Formerly there was a world in which people walked slowly, with bent back, and eyes cast down; in which the Comte de Gouvon was served at table by Jean-Jacques; in which the Chevalier de Rohan belaboured Voltaire with a stick; in which Daniel Defoe was placed in the pillory; in which a city like Dijon was separated from a city like Paris by the necessity of making one’s will, by robbers at every corner, and ten days by stage; in which a book was a sort of infamy and filth which the hangman burned upon the steps of the Palais de Justice; in which superstition and ferocity shook hands; in which the Pope said to the Emperor: “*Jungamus dexteras, gladium gladio copulemus*;” in which one met at every step crosses hung with amulets, and gibbets hung with men; in which there were heretics, Jews, and lepers; in which houses had battlements and loop-holes; in which streets were closed with a chain, rivers with a chain, and even camps with a chain (as at the battle of Tolosa), cities with walls, kingdoms with prohibitions and penalties; in which, with the exception of force and authority, which stuck tightly together, everything was penned up, distributed, divided, cut into fragments, hated and hating, scattered and dead; men were as dust, power a solid block. But now we have a world in which everything is alive, united, combined, coupled, mingled together; a world in which thought, commerce, and industry reign; in which politics, more and more firmly fixed, tends to an intimate union with science; a world in which the last scaffolds and the last cannon are hastening to cut off their last heads and to vomit forth their last shells; a world in which light increases every instant; a world in which distance has disappeared, in which Constantinople is nearer to Paris than Lyons was a hundred years ago, in which Europe and America pulsate with the same heart-throb; a world all circulation and all love, of which France is the brain, the railroads the arteries, and the electric wires the fibres. Do you not see that simply to set forth such a state of affairs is to explain, to demonstrate, and to solve everything? Do you not feel that the old world had an aged soul, tyranny, and that into the new world is about to descend, necessarily, irresistibly, and divinely, a youthful soul, liberty?

This was the work that the nineteenth century had done among men, and was continuing in glorious, fashion to do, — that century of sterility, that century of domination, that century of decadence, that century of degradation, as it is called by the pedants, the rhetoricians, the imbeciles, and all that filthy brood of bigots, of knaves, and of sharpers, who sanctimoniously slaver gall upon glory, who assert that Pascal was a madman, Voltaire a coxcomb, and Rousseau a brute, and whose triumph it would be to put a fool’s-cap upon the human race.

You speak of the Lower Empire; are you serious? Had the Lower Empire behind it John Huss, Luther, Cervantes, Shakespere, Pascal, Molière, Voltaire, Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Mirabeau? Had the Lower Empire behind it the taking of the Bastile, the Federation, Danton, Robespierre, the Convention? Did the Lower Empire possess America? Had the Lower Empire universal suffrage? Had the Lower Empire those two ideas, country and humanity: country which enlarges the heart, humanity which expands the horizon? Do you know that, under the Lower Empire, Constantinople fell in ruins, and finally had only thirty thousand inhabitants? Has Paris fallen so low? Because you have witnessed the success of a pretorian *coup de main*, you liken yourselves to the Lower Empire! 'Tis quickly said, and meanly thought. But reflect, if you can. Had the Lower Empire the compass, the electric battery, the printing press, the newspaper, the locomotive, the electric telegraph? So many wings to bear man aloft, which the Lower Empire did not possess! The nineteenth century soars, where the Lower Empire crawled. Are you aware of this? What! Shall we see once more the Empress Zoé, Roman Argyrio, Nicephorus Logothetes, Michael Calafates? Nonsense! Do you imagine that Providence repeats itself so tamely? Do you believe that God keeps repeating himself?

Let us have faith! Let us speak with decision! Self-irony is the beginning of baseness. It is by speaking with decision that we become good, that we become great. Yes, the enfranchisement of intellects, and the consequent enfranchisement of nations, this was the sublime task that the nineteenth century was performing in conjunction with France; for the twofold providential work of the time and of men, of maturation and of action, was blended in the common labour, and the great epoch had for its true home the great nation.

O my country! it is at this moment, when I see you bleeding, inanimate, your head hanging, your eyes closed, your mouth open, and no words issuing therefrom, the marks of the whip upon your shoulders, the nails of the executioner's shoes imprinted upon your body, naked and ashamed, and like a thing deprived of life, an object of hatred, of derision, alas! it is at this moment, my country, that the heart of the exile overflows with love and respect for you!

You lie there motionless. The minions of despotism and oppression laugh, and enjoy the haughty illusion that you are no longer to be feared. Fleeting joy! The peoples that are in the dark forget the past; they see only the present, and despise you. Forgive them, they know not what they do. Despise you! Great Heaven! despise France? And who are they? What language do they speak? What books have they in their hands? What names do they know by heart? What is the placard pasted on the walls of their theatres? What forms do their arts assume, their laws, their manners, their clothing, their pleasures, their fashions? What is the great date for them, as for us? ‘89! If they take France from out their hearts, what remains to them? O my people! Though it be fallen and fallen for ever, is Greece despised? Is Italy despised? Is France despised? Look at those breasts, they are your nurse; look at that womb, it is your mother.

If she sleeps, if she is in a lethargy, silence, and off with your hat. If she is dead, to your knees!

The exiles are scattered; destiny has blasts which disperse men like a handful of ashes. Some are in Belgium, in Piedmont, in Switzerland, where they do not enjoy liberty; others are in London, where they have no roof to shelter them. One, a peasant, has been torn from his native field; another, a soldier, has only a fragment of his sword, which was broken in his hand; another, an artisan, is ignorant of the language of the country, he is without clothes and without shoes, he knows not if he shall eat food to-morrow; another has left behind him a wife and children, a dearly loved group, the object of his labour, and the joy of his life; another has an old mother with grey hairs, who weeps for him; another an old father, who will die without seeing him again; another is a lover, — he has left behind him some adored being, who will forget him; they raise their heads and they hold out their hands to one another; they smile; there is no nation that does not stand aside with respect as they pass, and contemplate with profound emotion, as one of the noblest spectacles which destiny can offer to men, all those serene consciences, all those broken hearts.

They suffer and are silent; in them the citizen has sacrificed the man; they look with firmness on adversity, they do not cry out even under the pitiless rod of misfortune: *Civis Romanus sum!* But at eve, when one dreams, — when everything in the strange city of the stranger is involved in melancholy, for what seems cold by day becomes funereal in twilight, — but at night, when sleep does not close one’s eyes, hearts the most stoical open to mourning and dejection. Where are the little ones? who will give them bread? who will give them their father’s kiss? where is the wife? where is the mother? where is the brother? where are they all? And the songs which at eventide they used to hear, in their native tongue, where are they? where is the wood, the tree, the forest path, the roof filled with nests, the church tower surrounded by tombs? Where is the street, the faubourg, the lamp burning bright before the door, the friends, the workshop, the trade, the customary toil? And the furniture put up for sale, the auction invading the domestic sanctuary! Oh! these eternal adieux! Destroyed, dead, thrown to the four winds, that moral existence which is called the family hearth, and which is composed not only of loving converse, of caresses and embraces, but of hours, of habits, of friendly visits, of joyous laughter, of the pressure of the hand, of the view from certain windows, of the position of certain furniture, of the arm-chair where the grandsire used to sit, of the carpet on which the first-born used to play! Flown away for ever are those objects which bore the imprint of one's daily life! Vanished are the visible forms of one's souvenirs! There are in grief private and secret recesses, where the most lofty courage bends. The Roman orator put forth his head without flinching to the knife of the centurion Lenas, but he wept when he thought of his house demolished by Clodius.

The exiles are silent, or, if they complain, it is only among themselves. As they know one another, and are doubly brothers, having the same fatherland and sharing the same proscription, they tell one another their sufferings. He who has money shares it with those who have none, he who has firmness imparts it to those who lack it. They exchange recollections, aspirations, hopes. They turn, their arms extended in the darkness towards those they have left behind. Oh! how happy they who think no more of us! Every man suffers and at times waxes wroth. The names of all the executioners are engraven in the memory of all. Each has something to curse, — Mazas, the hulk, the dungeon, the informer who betrayed, the spy who watched, the gendarme who arrested him, Lambessa, where one has a friend, Cayenne, where one has a brother; but there is one thing that is blessed by all, and that is thou, France!

Oh! a complaint, a word against thee, France! No! no! one's country is never so deeply fixed in the heart as when one is torn from it by exile.

They will do their whole duty, with a tranquil brow and unshaken perseverance. Never to see thee again is their sorrow, never to forget thee their joy.

Ah, what grief! And after eight months it is in vain that we say to ourselves that these things are so; it is in vain that we look around us and see the spire of Saint-Michael's instead of the Pantheon, and Saint-Gudule instead of Notre-Dame, — we cannot believe it.

It is, however, true, it cannot be denied, we must admit it, we must acknowledge it, even though we expire of humiliation and despair, — that which is lying there, on the ground, is the nineteenth century, is France!

And it is this Bonaparte who has caused all this ruin!

And it is in the very centre of the greatest nation upon earth! it is in the midst of the greatest century of all history, that this man has suddenly risen and has triumphed! To seize upon France as his prey, great Heaven! What the lion would not dare to do, the ape has done! what the eagle would have dreaded to seize in his talons, the parrot has taken in his claws! What! Louis XI failed! Richelieu destroyed himself in the attempt! Even Napoleon was unequal to it! In a single day, between night and morning, the absurd became the possible! All that was axiomatic has become chimerical. All that was false has become living fact. What! the most brilliant concourse of men! the most magnificent movements of ideas! the most formidable sequence of events! a thing that no Titian could have controlled, that no Hercules could have turned aside, — the human flood in full course, the French wave sweeping onward, civilization, progress, intelligence, revolution, liberty, — he stopped it all one fine morning, stopped it short, he, this mask, this dwarf, this aborted Tiberius, this nothing!

God was advancing. Louis Bonaparte, his plume on his head, blocked his path and said to God: “Thou shalt go no farther!”

God halted.

And you fancy that this is so! and you imagine that this plebiscite exists, that this constitution of some day or other in January exists, that this Senate exists, that this Council of State and this Corps Législatif exist! You fancy that there is a lackey who is called Rouher, a valet who is called Troplong, a eunuch who is called Baroche, and a sultan, a pacha, a master who is called Louis Bonaparte! You do not see, then, that all this is a chimera! you do not see that the 2nd of December is nothing but an immense illusion, a pause, a breathing-space, a sort of drop-curtain behind which God, that marvellous scene-shifter, is preparing and constructing the last act, the supreme, triumphal act of the French Revolution! You gaze stupidly at the curtain, at the things painted on the coarse canvas, this one’s nose, that one’s epaulettes, the great sabre of a third, those belaced venders of *eau de Cologne* whom you call generals, those *poussahs* whom you call magistrates, those worthy men whom you call senators, this mixture of caricatures and spectres, and you take them all for realities! And you do not hear beyond them, in the shadow, that hollow sound! you do not hear some one going and coming! you do not see that curtain quiver in the breath of Him who is behind!

THE END

Extracts from *WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE*

In 1864 Hugo published a large non-fiction work titled *William Shakespeare*. When he had begun writing the book, he had intended for it to be an introduction for a collection of French translations written by his son, Francois Victor Hugo. However, the work grew to be approximately 300 pages in length and Hugo had to write a separate introduction to the plays.

William Shakespeare begins with an approximately twenty page biography, filled with many inaccuracies, and then becomes a work of literary criticism focusing on the literary geniuses of history, focusing on not only Shakespeare, but also Homer, Aeschylus, Lucretius, Juvenal, Tacitus, Dante and Cervantes, to name but a few. Deciding there was more of Hugo in the work than Shakespeare, some French critics cynically suggested he should have entitled the work *Myself*.

To provide readers with a sample of this unusual work, selections from Book V, *The Mind and the Masses*, are available in this collection.

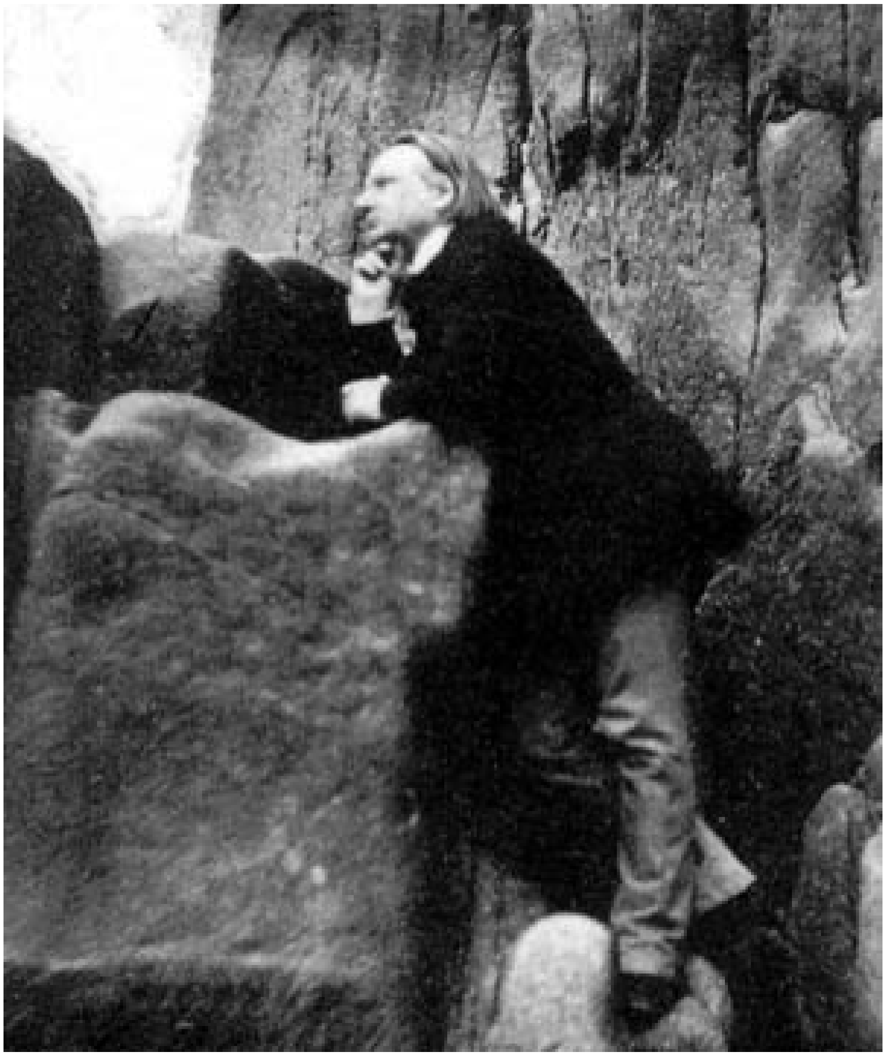

Hugo in Jersey, 1855

THE MINDS AND THE MASSES

THE PEOPLE

For the last eighty years memorable things have been done. A wonderful heap of demolished materials covers the pavement.

What is done is but little by the side of what remains to be done.

To destroy is the task: to build is the work. Progress demolishes with the left hand; it is with the right hand that it builds.

The left hand of Progress is called Force; the right hand is called Mind.

There is at this hour a great deal of useful destruction accomplished; all the old cumbersome civilisation is, thanks to our fathers, cleared away. It is well, it is finished, it is thrown down, it is on the ground. Now, up with you all, intellects! to work, to labour, to fatigue, to duty; it is necessary to construct.

Here three questions: To construct what? To construct where? To construct how?

We reply: To construct the people. To construct the people according to the laws of progress. To construct the people according to the laws of light.

SOCIALISM

To work for the people, — that is the great and urgent necessity.

The human mind — an important thing to say at this minute — has a greater need of the ideal even than of the real.

It is by the real that we exist; it is by the ideal that we live. Now, do you wish to realize the difference? Animals exist, man lives.

To live, is to understand. To live, is to smile at the present, to look toward posterity over the wall. To live, is to have in one’s self a balance, and to weigh in it the good and the evil. To live, is to have justice, truth, reason, devotion, probity, sincerity, commonsense, right, and duty nailed to the heart. To live, is to know what one is worth, what one can do and should do. Life is conscience. Cato would not rise before Ptolemy. Cato lived.

Literature is the secretion of civilisation, poetry of the ideal. That is why literature is one of the wants of societies. That is why poetry is a hunger of the soul. That is why poets are the first instructors of the people. That is why Shakespeare must be translated in France. That is why Molière must be translated in England. That is why comments must be made on them. That is why there must be a vast public literary domain. That is why all poets, all philosophers, all thinkers, all the producers of the greatness of the mind must be translated, commented on, published, printed, reprinted, stereotyped, distributed, explained, recited, spread abroad, given to all, given cheaply, given at cost price, given for nothing.

Poetry evolves heroism. M. Royer-Collard, that original and ironical friend of routine, was, taken all in all, a wise and noble spirit. Some one we know heard him say one day, “Spartacus is a poet.”

That wonderful and consoling Ezekiel — the tragic revealer of progress — has all kinds of singular passages full of a profound meaning: “The voice said to me: Fill the palm of thy hand with red-hot coals, and spread them on the city.” And elsewhere: “The spirit having gone into them, everywhere the spirit went, they went.” And again: “A hand was stretched towards me. It held a roll which was a book. The voice said to me: Eat this roll. I opened the lips and ate the book. And it was sweet in my mouth as honey.” To eat the book is a strange and striking image, — the whole formula of perfectibility, which above is knowledge, and below, teaching.

We have just said, “Literature is the secretion of civilisation.” Do you doubt it? Open the first statistics you come across.

Here is one we find under our hand: Bagne de Toulon, 1862. Three thousand and ten prisoners. Of these three thousand and ten convicts, forty know a little more than to read and write, two hundred eighty seven know how to read and write, nine hundred and four read badly and write badly, seventeen hundred and seventy nine know neither how to read nor write. In this wretched crowd all the merely mechanical trades are represented by numbers decreasing according as they rise toward the enlightened pursuits, and you arrive at this final result: goldsmiths and jewellers, four; ecclesiastics, three; lawyers, two; comedians, one; artist musicians, one; men of letters, not one.

The transformation of the crowd into the people, — profound labour! It is to this labour that the men called socialists have devoted themselves during the last forty years. The author of this book, however insignificant he may be, is one of the oldest in this labour; “The Last Days of a Condemned Man” dates from 1828, and “Claude Gueux” from 1834. He claims his place among these philosophers because it is a place of persecution. A certain hatred of socialism, very blind, but very general, has been at work for fifteen or sixteen years, and is still at work most bitterly among the influential classes. (Classes, then, are still in existence?) Let it not be forgotten, socialism, true socialism, has for its end the elevation of the masses to the civic dignity, and therefore its principal care is for moral and intellectual cultivation. The first hunger is ignorance; socialism wishes then, above all, to instruct. That does not hinder socialism from being caluminated, and socialists from being denounced. To most of the infuriated, trembling cowards who have their say at the present moment, these reformers are public enemies. They are guilty of everything that has gone wrong. “O Romans!” said Tertullian, “we are just, kind, thinking, lettered, honest men. We meet to pray, and we love you because you are our brethren. We are gentle and peaceable like little children, and we wish for concord among men. Nevertheless, O Romans! if the Tiber overflows, or if the Nile does not, you cry, ‘to the lions with the Christians!’”

LIBERTY

The democratic idea, the new bridge of civilisation, undergoes at this moment the formidable trial of overweight. Every other idea would certainly give way under the load that it is made to bear. Democracy proves its solidity by the absurdities that are heaped on, without shaking it. It must resist everything that people choose to place on it. At this moment they try to make it carry despotism.

The people have no need of liberty, — such was the password of a certain innocent and duped school, the had of which has been dead some years. That poor honest dreamer believed in good faith that men can keep progress with them when they turn out liberty. We have heard him put forth, probably without meaning it, this aphorism: Liberty is good for the rich. These kinds of maxims have the disadvantage of not being prejudicial to the establishment of empires.

No, no, no! Nothing out of liberty.

Servitude is the blind soul. Can you figure to yourself a man blind voluntarily? This terrible thing exists. There are willing slaves. A smile in irons! Can anything be more hideous? He who is not free is not a man; he who is not free has no sight, no knowledge, no discernment, no growth, no comprehension, no will, no faith, no love; he has no wife, he has no children: he has a female and young ones; he lives not, — *ab luce principium*. Liberty is the apple of the eye. Liberty is the visual organ of progress.

Because liberty has inconveniences, and even perils, to wish to create civilisation without it is just the same as to try cultivation without the sun; the sun is also a censurable heavenly body. One day, in the too beautiful sumer of 1829, a critic, now forgotten, — and wrongly, for he was not without some talent, — M.P., suffering from the heat, sharpened his pen, saying, “I am going to excoriate the sun!”

Certain social theories, very distinct from socialism such as we understand and want it, have gone astray. Let us discard all that resembles the convent, the barrack, the cell and the straightline system. Paraguay, minus the Jesuits, is Paraguay just the same. To give a new fashion to evil is not a useful task. To recommence the old slavery is idiotic. Let the nations of Europe beware of a despotism made anew from materials they have to some extent themselves supplied. Such a thing, cemented with a special philosophy, might well last. We have just mentioned the theorists, some of whom otherwise right and sincere, who, by dint of fearing the dispersion of activities and energies, and of what they call ‘anarchy’ have arrived at an almost Chinese acceptation of absolute social concentration. They turn their resignation into a doctrine. Provided man eats and drinks, all is right. The happiness of the beast is the solution. But this is a happiness which some other men would call by a different name.

We dream for nations something else besides a felicity solely made up of obedience. The bastinado procures that sort of felicity for the Turkish fellah, the knout for the Russian serf, and the cat-o-nine-tails for the English soldier. These socialists by the side of socialism come from Joseph de Maistre, and from Ancillon, without suspecting it p erhaps; for the ingenuousness of these theorists rallied to the *Fait accompli* has — or fancies it has — democratic intentions, and speaks energetically of the “principles of ‘89.” Let these involuntary philosophers of a possible despotism think a moment. To teach the masses a doctrine against liberty; to cram intellects with appetites and fatalism, a certain situation being given; to saturate it with materialism; and to run the risk of the construction which might proceed from it, — that would be to understand progress in the fashion of a worthy man who applauded a new gibbet, and who exclaimed, “This is all right!” We have had til now but the old wooden gallows. Today the age advances; and here we are with a good stone gibbet, which will do for our children and grandchildren!”

LIGHT

To enjoy a full stomach, a satisfied intestine, a satiated belly, is doubtless something, for it is the enjoyment of the brute. However, one may place one’s ambition higher.

Certainly a good salary is a fine thing. To tread on this firm ground, high wages, is pleasant. The wise man llikes to want nothing. To insure his own position is the characteristic of an intelligent man. An official chair, with ten thousand sesterces a year, is a graceful and convenient seat. Great emoluments give a fresh complexion and good health. One lives to an old age in pleasant, well-paid sincures. The high financial world, rich in plentiful profits, is a place agreeable to live in. To be well at Court settles a family well and brings a fortune. As for myself, I prefer to all these solid comforts the old leaky vessel in which Bishop Quodvultdeus embarks with a smile.

There is something beyond gorging one’s self. The goal of man is not the goal of an animal.

A moral enhancement is necessary. The life of nations, like the life of individuals, has its minutes of depression; these minutes pass, certainly, but no trace of them ought to remain. Man, at this hour, tends to fall into the stomach. Man must be replaced in the heart; man must be replaced in the brain. The brain, — behold the sovereign that must be restored! The social question requires today, more than ever, to be examined on the side of human dignity.

To show man the human end, to ameliorate intelligence first, the animal afterward, to disdain the flesh as long as the thought is despised, and to give the example on their own flesh, — such is the actual, immediate urgent duty of writers.

It is what men of genius have done at all times.

You ask in what poets can be useful? In imbuing civilisation with light, — only that.

LITERATURE

Up to this day there has been a literature of *literati*. In France, particularly, as we have said, literature had a disposition to form a caste. To be a poet was something like being a mandarin. Words did not all belong by right to the language. The dictionary granted or did not grant the registration. The dictionary had a will of its own. Imagine a botanist declaring to a vegetable that it does not exist, and Nature timidly offering an insect to entomology, which refuses it as incorrect. Imagine astronomy cavilling at the stars. We recollect having heard an Academician, now dead, say in full academy that French had been spoken in France only in the seventeenth century, and then for only twelve years, — we do not remember which twelve. Let us give up, for it is time, this order of ideas; democracy requires it. The actual enlarging of thoughts needs something else. Let us leave the college, the conclave, the cell, the weak taste, weak art, the small chapel. Poetry is not a coterie. There is at this hour an effort made to galvanize dead things. Let us strive against this tendency. Let us insist on the truths which are urgent. The *chefs d'oeuvre* recommended by the manual of bachelorship, compliments in verse and in prose, tragedies soaring over the head of some king, inspiration in full official dress, the brilliant nonentities fixing laws on poetry, the *Arts Po&eactue;tiques* which forget La Fontaine, and for which Molière is doubtful, the Planats castrating the Corneilles, prudish tongues, the thoughts enclosed between four walls, and limited by Quintilian, Longinus, Boileau, and La Harpe, — all that, although official and public teaching is filled and saturated with it, all that belongs to the past. Some particular epoch, which is called the grand century, and for a certainty the fine century, is nothing else in reality but a literary monologue. Is it possible to realize such a strange thing, — a literature which is an aside? It seems as if one read on the frontal of art "No admittance." As for ourselves, we understand poetry only with the door wide open. The hour has struck for hoisting the "All for All." What is needed by civilisation, henceforth a grown-up woman, is a popular literature.

1830 has opened a debate, literary on the surface, at the bottom social and human. The moment is come to close the debate. We close it by asking a literature having in view this purpose: "The People."

The author of these pages wrote, thirty one years ago, in the preface to "Lucrèce Borgia," a few words often repeated since: "Le poëte a charge d'âmes." He would add here, if it were worth saying, that, allowing for possible error, the words, uttered by his conscience, have been his rule throughout life.

MACHIAVELLI

Machiavelli had a strange idea of the people. To heap the measure, to overflow the cup, to exaggerate horror in the case of the prince, to increase the crushing in order to stir up the oppressed to revolt, to cause idolatry to change into a curse, to push the masses to extremities, — such seems to be his policy. His "yes" signifies "no." He loads the despot with despotism in order to make him burst. The tyrant becomes in his hands a hideous projectile, which will break to pieces. Machiavelli conspires. For whom? Against whom? Guess. His apotheosis of kings is just the thing to make regicides. On the head of his prince he places a diadem of crimes, a tiara of vices, a halo of baseness; and he invites you to adore his monster, with the air of a man expecting an avenger. He glorifies evil with a squint toward the darkness, — the darkness wherein is Harmodius. Machiavelli, the getter-up of princely outrages, the valet of the Medici and of the Borgias, had in his youth been put to the rack for having admired Brutus and Cassius. He had perhaps plotted with the Soderini the deliverance of Florence. Does he recollect it? Does he continue? His advice is followed, like the lightning, by a low rumbling in the cloud, — alarming reverberation. What did he mean to say? On whom has he a design? Is this advice for or against him to whom he gives it? One day, at Florence, in the garden of Cosmo Ruccelaï&, there being present the Duke of Mantua and John de Medici, who afterward commanded the Black Bands of Tuscany, Varchi, the enemy of Machiavelli, heard him say to the two princes: "Let the people read no book, — not even mine." It is curious to compare with this remark the advice given by Voltaire to the Duke de Choiseul, — at the same time advice to the minister, and insinuation for the king: "Let the boobies read our nonsense. There is no danger in reading, my lord. What can a great king like the King of France fear? The people are but rabble, and the books are but trash." Let them read nothing, let them read everything: These two pieces of contrary advice coinicide more often than one would think. Voltaire, with hidden claws is purring at the feet of the king, Voltaire and Machiavelli are two formidable indirect revolutionists, dissimilar in everything, and yet identical in reality by their profound hatred, disguised in flattery, of the master. The one is malignant, the other is sinister. The princes of the sixteenth century had as theorist on their infamies, and as enigmatical courtier, Machiavelli, an enthusiast dark at heart. The flattery of a sphinx, — terrible thing! Better yet be flattered, like Louis XV, by a cat.

Conclusion: Make the people read Machiavelli, and make them read Voltaire.

Machiavelli will inspire them with horror of, and Voltaire with contempt for, crowned guilt.

But the hearts should turn, above all, twoard the grand pure poets, whether they be sweet like Virgil or bitter like Juvenal.

PROGRESS

The progress of man by the education of minds, — there is no safety but in that. Teach! Learn! All the revolutions of the future are enclosed and embedded in this phrase: Gratuitous and obligatory instruction.

It is by the unfoloding of works of the highest order that this vast intellectual teaching should be crowned. At the top the men of genius.

Wherever there is a gathering of men, there ought to be in a special place, a public expositor of the great thinkers.

By a great thinker we mean a benificent thinker.

The perpetual presence of the beautiful in their works maintains poets at the summit of teaching.

No one can foresee the quantity of light which will be brought forth by letting the people be in communication with men of genius. This combination of the hearts of the people with the heart of the poet will be the Voltaic pile of civilization.

Will the people understand this magnificent teaching? Certainly. We know of nothing too lofty for the people. The people are a great soul. Have you ever gone on a fête-day to a theatre open gratuitously to all? What do you think of the auditory? Do you know of any other more spontaneous and intelligent? Do you know, even in the forest, of a vibration more profound?

The court of Versailles admires like a well-drilled regiment; the people throw themselves passionately into the beautiful. They pack together, crowd, amalgamate, combine, and knead themselves into the theatre, — a living paste that the poet is about to mould. The powerful thumb of Molière will presently make its mark on it; the nail of Corneille will scratch this ill-shaped heap. Whence does that heap come? Whence does it proceed? From the Courtille, from the Porcherons, from the Cunette; it is shoeless, it is bare-armed, it is ragged. Silence! This is the human block.

The house is crowded, the vast multitude looks, listens, loves; all consciences, deeply moved, throw off their inner fire; all eyes glisten; the huge beast with a thousand heads is there, — the Mob of Burke, the *Plebs* of Titus Livius, the *Fex urbis* of Cicero. It caresses the beautiful; smiling at it with the grace of a woman. It is literary in the most refined sense of the word; nothing equals the delicacy of this monster. The tumultuous crowd trembles, blushes, palpitates. Its modesty is surprising; the crowd is a virgin. No prudery however; this brute is not brutal. Not a sympathy escapes it; it has in itself the whole keyboard, from passion to irony, from sarcasm to sobbing. Its compassion is more than compassion; it is real mercy. God is felt in it. All at once the sublime passes, and the sombre electricity of the abyss heaves up suddenly all this pile of hearts and entrails; enthusiasm effects a transfiguration. And now, is the enemy at the gates, is the country in danger? Appeal to that populace, and it would enact the sublime drama of Thermopylæ. Who has called forth such a metamorphosis? Poetry.

The multitude (and in this lies their grandeur) are profoundly open to the ideal. When they come in contact with lofty art they are pleased, they shudder. Not a detail escapes them. The crowd is one liquid and living expanse capable of vibration. A mass is a sensitive plant. Contact with the beautiful agitates ecstatically the surface of multitudes, — sure sign that the depth is sounded. A rustling of leaves, a mysterious breath, passes, the crowd trembles under the sacred insufflation of the abyss.

And even where the man of the people is not in the crowd, he is yet a good hearer of great things. His ingenuousness is honest, his curiousity healthy. Ignorance is a longing. His near connection with Nature renders him subject to the holy emotion of the true. He has, toward poetry, secret natural desires which he does not suspect himself. All the teachings are due to the people. The more divine the light, the more it is made for this simple soul. We would have in the villages a pulpit from which Homer whould be explained to the peasants.

THE IDEAL

Too much matter is the evil of our day. Hence a certain dulness.

It is necessary to reestore some ideal in the human mind. Whence shall you take your ideal? Where is it? The poets, the philosophers, the thinkers are the urns. The ideal is in Æschylus, in Isaiah, in Juvenal, in Aligheri, in Shakespeare. Throw Æschylus, throw Isaiah, throw Juvenal, throw Dante, throw Shakespeare into the deep soul of the human race.

Pour Job, Solomon, Pindar, Ezekiel, Sophocles, Euripides, Herodotus, Theocritus, Plautus, Lucretius, Virgil, Ternce, Horace, Catullus, Tacitus, Saint Paul, Saint Augustine, Tertullian, Petrarch, Pascal, Milton, Descartes, Corneille, La Fontaine, Montesquieu, Diderot, Rousseau, Beaumarchais, Sedaine, André’ Chénier, Kant, Byron, Schiller, — pour all these souls into man. And with them pour all the wits from Æsop up to Molière, all the intellects from Plato up to Newton, all the encyclopædists from Aristotle up to Voltaire.

By that means, while curing the illness for the moment, you will establish forever the health of the human mind.

You will cure the middle class and found the people.

As we have just said now, after the destruction which has delivered the sorld, you will construct the edifice which shall make it prosper.

What an aim, — to make the people! Principles combined with science; every possible quantity of the absolute introduced by degrees into the fact; Utopia treated successsively by every mode of realizationm — by political economym by philosophy, by physics, by chemistry, by dynamics, by logic, by art, union replacing little by little antagonism, and unity replacing union; for religion God, for priest the father, for prayer virtue, for field the whole earth, for language the verb, for law the right, for motive-power duty, for hygiene labor, for economy universal peace, for canvas the very life, for the goal progress, for authority liberty, for people the man, — such is the simplification.

And at the summit the ideal.

The ideal! — inflexible type of perpetual progress.

To whom belong men of genius if not to thee, people? They do belong to thee; they are thy sons and thy fathers. Thou givest birth to them, and they teach thee. They open in thy chaos vistas of light. Children, they have drunk thy sap. They have leaped in the universal matrix, humanity. Each of thy phases, people, is an avatar. The deep essence of life, it is in thee that it must be looked for. Thou art the great bosom. Geniuses are begotten from thee, mysterious crowd.

Let them therefore return to thee.

People, the author, God, dedicates them to thee.

FRATERNIZATION

The nineteenth century springs from itself only; it does not receive its impulse from any ancestor; it is the offspring of an idea. Doubtless, Isaiah, Homer, Aristotle, Dante, Shakespeare, have been or could be great starting points for important philosophical or poetical formations; but the nineteenth century has an august mother, — the French Revolution. It has that powerful blood in its veins. It honours men of genius. When denied it salutes them, when ignored it proclaims them, when persecuted it avenges them, when insulted it crowns them, when dethroned it replaces them upon their pedestal; it venerates them, but it does not proceed from them. The nineteenth century has for family itself, and itself alone. It is the characteristic of its revolutionary nature to dispense with ancestors.

Itself a genius, it fraternizes with men of genius. As for its source, it is where theirs is, — beyond man. The mysterious generations of progress succeed each other according to a providential law. The nineteenth century is born of civilization. It has a continent to bring into the world. France has borne this century; and this century bears Europe.

The Greek stock bore civilization, narrow and circumscribed at first by the mulberry leaf, confined to the Morea; then civilizaiton, gaining step by step, grew broader, and formed the Roman stock. It is today the French stock, — that is to say, all Europe, — with young shoots in America, Africa, and Asia.

The greatest of these young shoots is a democracy, — the United States, the sprouting of which was aided by France in the last century. Fance, sublime essayist in progress, has founded a republic in America before making one in Europe. *Et vidit quod esset bonum.* After having lent to Washington an auxiliary, Lafayette, France, upon returning home, gave to Voltaire, dismayed within his tomb, that formidable successor, Danton. In presence of the monstrous past, hurling every thunder, exhaling every miasma, breathing every darkness, protruding every talon, horrible and terrible, progress, constrained to use the same weapons, has had suddenly a hundred arms, a hundred heads, a hundred tongues of fire, a hundred roarings. The good has transformed itself into a hydra. It is this that is termed the Revolution.

Nothing can be more august.

The Revolution ended one century and began another.

An intellectual awakening prepares the way for an overthrow of facts, — and this is the eighteenth century. After which the political revolution, once accomplished, seeks expression, and the literary and social revolution completes it: this is the nineteenth century. With ill-will, but not unjustly, has it been said that romanticism and socialism are identical: hatred, in its desire to injure, very often establishes, and, so far as is in its power, consolidates.

A Parenthesis. This word, *romanticism*, has, like all war-cries, the advantage of readily summing up a group of ideas. It is brief, — which pleases in the contest; but it has, to our idea, through its militant signification, the objection or appearing to limit the movement that it represents to a warlike action. Now, this movement is a matter of intellect, a matter of civilization, a matter of soul; and this is why the writer of these lines has never used the words *romanticism* or *romantic.* They will not be found in any of the pages of criticism that he has had occasion to write. If to-day he derogates from his usual prudence in polemics, it is for the sake of greater rapidity and with all reservation. The same observation may be made on the subject of the word *socialism,* which admits of so many different interpretations.

The triple movement — literary, philosophical, and social — of the nineteenth century, which is one single movement, is nothing but the current of the revolution in ideas. This current, after having swept away the facts, is perpetuated in minds with all its immensity.

This term, *“literary ‘93,”* so often quoted in 1830 against contemporaneous literature, was not so much an insult as it was intended to be. It was certainly as unjust to employ it as characterizing the whole literary movement as it is iniquitous to employ it to describe all political revolutions; there is in these two phenomena something besides ‘93. But this term, “*literary ‘93,*” was relatively exact, insomuch as it indicated, confusedly but truthfully, the origin of the literary movement which belongs to our epoch, while endeavoring to dishonour that movement. Here again the clairvoyance of hatred was blind. Its daubings of mud upon the face of truth are gilding, light, and glory.

The Revolutioin, turning climacteric of humanity, is made up of several years. Each of these years expresses a period, represents an aspect, or realizes a phase of the phenomenon. Tragic ‘93 is one of those colossal years. Good news must sometimes have a mouth of bronze. Such a mouth is ‘93.

Listen to the immense proclamation proceeding from it. Give attention, remain speechless, and be impressed. God himself said the first time *Fiat lux*, the second time he has caused it to be said.

By whom?

By ‘93.

Therefore, we men of the nineteenth century hold in honour that reproach, “You are ‘93.”

But do not stop there. We are ‘89 as well as ‘93. The Revolution, the whole Revolution, — such is the source of the literature of the nineteenth century.

On these grounds put it on its trial, this literature, or seek its triumph; hate it or love it. Accoding to the amount of the future that you have in you, outrage it or salute it; little do animosities and fury affect it. It is the logical deduction from the great chaotic and genesaical fact that our fathers have witnessed, and which has given a new starting-point in the world. He who is against the fact is against the literature; he who is for that fact is on its side. What the fact is worth the literature is worth. The reactionary writers are not mistaken; whenever there is revolution, patent or latent, the Catholic and royalist scent is unfailing. Those men of letters of the past award to contemporaneous literature an honorable amount of diatribe; their aversion is convulsive. One of their journalists, who is, I believe a bishop, pronounces the word *poet* with the same accent as the word *Septembrist;* another, less of a bishop, but quite as angry, writes, “I feel in all this literature Marat and Robespierre.” This last writer is rather mistaken; there is in “this literature” Danton rather than Marat.

But the fact is true: democracy is in this literature.

The Revolution has forged the clarion; the nineteenth century sounds it.

Ah, this affirmation suits us, and, in truth, we do not recoil before it; we avow our glory, — we are revolutionists. The thinkers of the present time, — poets, writers, historians, orators, philosophers, — all are derived from the French Revolution. They come from it, and it alone. It was ‘89 that demolished the Bastille; it was ‘93 that took the crown from the Louvre. From ‘89 sprung deliverance, and from ‘93 Victory. From ‘89 and ‘93 the men of the 19th century proceed: these are their father and mother. Do not seek for them another affiliation, another inspiration, another insufflation, another origin. They are the democrats of the idea, successors to the democrats of action. They are the emancipators. Liberty bent over their cradles, — they all have sucked her vast breast; they all have her milk in their entrails, her marrow in their bones, her sap in their will, her spirit of revolt in their reason, her flame in their intellect.

Even those among them (there are some) who were born aristocrats, who came to the world banished in some degree among families of the past, who have fatally received one of those primary educations whose stupid effort is to contradict progress, and who have commenced the words that they had to say to our century with an indescribably royalist stuttering, — these, from that period, from their infancy (they will not contradict me), felt the sublime monster within them. They had the inner ebullition of the immense fact. They had in the depth of their conscience a whispering of mysterious ideas; the inward shock of false certainties troubled their mind; they felt their sombre surface of monarchism, catholicism, and aristocracy tremble, shudder, and by degrees split up. One day, suddenly and powerfully, the swelling of truth within them prevailed, the hatching was completed, the eruption took place; the light flamed in them, causing them to burst open, — not falling on them, but (more beautiful mystery!) lightening them, while it burned within them. They were craters unknown to themselves.

This phenomenon has been interpreted to their reproach as a treason. They passed over, in fact, from right divine to human right. They turned their back on false history, on false tradition, on false dogmas, on false philosophy, on false daylight, on false truth. The free spirit which soars up, — bird called by Aurora, — offends intellects saturated with ignorance and the foetus preserved in spirits of wine. He who sees offends the blind; he who hears makes the deaf indignant; he who walks offers an abominable insult to cripples. In the eyes of dwarfs, abortions, Aztecs, myrmidons, and pygmies, forever subject to rickets, growth is apostasy.

The writers and poets of the nineteenth century have the admirable good fortune of proceeding from a genesis, of arriving after an end of the world, of accompanying a reappearance of light, of being the organs of a new beginning. This imposes on them duties unknown to their predecessors — the duties of intentional reformers and direct civilizers. They continue nothing; they remake everything. For new times, new duties. The function of thinkers in our days is complex; to think is no longer sufficient, — they must love; to think and love is no longer sufficient, — they must act; to think, to love, and to act, no longer suffices, — they must suffer. Lay down the pen, and go where you hear the grapeshot. Here is a barricade; be one on it. Here is exile; accept it. Here is the scaffold; be it so. Let John Brown be in Montesquieu, if needful. The Lucretius required by this century in labour should contain Cato. AEschylus, who wrote the “Orestias,” had for a brother Cynegyrus, who fastened with his teeth on the ships of the enemies: that was sufficient for Greece at the time of Salamis, but it no longer suffices for France after the Revolution. That AEschylus and Cynegyrus are brothers is not enough; they must be the same man. Such are the actual requirements of progress. Those who devote themselves to great and pressing things can never be too great. To set ideas in motion, to heap up evidence, to pile up principles, that is the redoubtable movement. To heap Pelion on Ossa is the labour of infants beside that work of giants, the placing of right Upon truth. To scale that afterward, and to dethrone usurpations in the midst of thunders, — such is the work.

The future presses. To-morrow cannot wait. Humanity has not a minute to lose. Quick! quick! let us hasten; the wretched ones have their feet on red-hot iron. They hunger, they thirst, they suffer. Ah, terrible emaciation of the poor human body! Parasitism laughs, the ivy grows green and thrives, the mistletoe is flourishing, the tapeworm is happy. What a frightful object the prosperity of the tapeworm! To destroy that which devours, — in that is safety. Your life has within itself death, which is in good health. There is too much misery, too much desolation, too much immodesty, too much nakedness, too many brothels, too many prisons, too many rags, too many crimes, too much weakness, too much darkness, not enough schools, too many little innocents growing up for evil! The trucklebeds of poor girls are suddenly covered with silk and lace, — and in that is worse misery; by the side of misfortune there is vice, the one urging the other. Such a society requires prompt succour. Let us seek for the best. Go all of you in this search. Where are the promised lands? Civilization would go forward; let us try theories, systems, ameliorations, inventions, progress, until the shoe for that foot shall be found. The attempt costs nothing, or costs but little, — to attempt is not to adopt, — but before all, above all, let us be lavish of light. All sanitary purification begins in opening windows wide. Let us open wide all intellects. Let us supply souls with air.

Quick, quick, O thinkers! Let the human race breathe; give hope, give the ideal, do good. Let one step succeed another, horizon expand into horizon, conquest follow conquest. Because you have given what you promised do not think you have performed all that is required of you. To possess is to promise; the dawn of to-day imposes on the sun obligations for to-morrow.

Let nothing be lost. Let not one strength be isolated. Every one to work! there is vast urgency for it. No more idle art. Poetry the worker of civilization, what more admirable? The dreamer should be a pioneer; the strophe should mean something. The beautiful should be at the service of honesty. I am the valet of my conscience; it rings for me: I come. “Go!” I go. What do you require of me, O truth, sole majesty of this world? Let each one feel in haste to do well. A book is sometimes a source of hoped-for succour. An idea is a balm, a word may be a dressing for wounds; poetry is a physician. Let no one tarry. Suffering is losing its strength while you are idling. Let men leave this dreamy laziness. Leave the kief to the Turks. Let men labour for the safety of all, and let them rush into it and be out of breath. Do not be sparing of your strides. Nothing useless; no inertia. What do you call dread nature? Everything lives. The duty of all is to live; to walk, to run, to fly, to soar, is the universal law. What do you wait for? Who stops you? Ah, there are times one might wish to hear the stones murmur at the slowness of man!

Sometimes one goes into the woods. To whom does it not happen at times to be overwhelmed? — one sees so many sad things. The stage is a long one to go over, the consequences are long in coming, a generation is behindhand, the work of the age languishes. What! so many sufferings yet? One might think he has gone backward. There is everywhere increase of superstition, of cowardice, of deafness, of blindness, of imbecility. Penal laws weigh upon brutishness. This wretched problem has been set, — to augment comfort by putting off right; to sacrifice the superior side of man to the inferior side; to yield up principle to appetite. Caesar takes charge for the belly, I make over to him the brains, — it is the old sale of a birth-right for the dish of porridge. A little more, and this fatal anomaly would cause a wrong road to be taken toward civilization. The fattening pig would no longer be the king, but the people. Alas! this ugly expedient does not even succeed. No diminution whatever of the malady. In the last ten years — for the last twenty years — the low water-mark of prostitution, of mendicity, of crime, has been stationary, below which evil has not fallen one degree. Of true education, of gratuitous education, there is none. The infant nevertheless requires to know that he is man, and the father that he is citizen. Where are the promises? Where is the hope? Oh, poor wretched humanity! one is tempted to shout for help in the forest; one is tempted to claim support, assistance, and a strong arm from that grand mournful Nature. Can this mysterious ensemble of forces be indifferent to progress? We supplicate, appeal, raise our hands toward the shadow. We listen, wondering if the rustlings will become voices. The duty of the springs and streams should be to babble forth the word "Forward!" One could wish to hear nightingales sing new Marseillaises.

Notwithstanding all this, these times of halting are nothing beyond what is normal. Discouragement would be puerile. There are halts, repose, breathing spaces in the march of peoples, as there are winters in the progress of the seasons. The gigantic step, '89, is all the same a fact. To despair would be absurd, but to stimulate is necessary.

To stimulate, to press, to chide, to awaken, to suggest, to inspire, — it is this function, fulfilled everywhere by writers, which impresses on the literature of this century so high a character of power and originality. To remain faithful to all the laws of art, while combining them with the law of progress, — such is the problem, victoriously solved by so many noble and proud minds.

Thence this word deliverance, which appears above everything in the light, as if it were written on the very forehead of the ideal.

The Revolution is France sublimed. There was a day when France was in the furnace, — the furnace causes wings to grow on certain warlike martyrs, and from amid the flames this giant came forth archangel. At this day by all the world, France is called Revolution; and henceforth this word revolution will be the name of civilization, until it can be replaced by the word harmony. I repeat it: do not seek elsewhere the starting-point and the birthplace of the literature of the nineteenth century. Yes, as many as there be of us, great and small, powerful and unknown, illustrious and obscure, in all our works good or bad, whatever they may be, — poems, dramas, romances, history, philosophy, — at the tribune of assemblies as before the crowds of the theatre, as in the meditation of solitudes; yes, everywhere; yes, always; yes, to combat violence and imposture; yes, to rehabilitate those who are stoned and run down; yes, to sum up logically and to march straight onward; yes, to console, to succour, to relieve, to encourage, to teach; yes, to dress wounds in hope of curing them; yes, to transform charity into fraternity, alms into assistance, sluggishness into work, idleness into utility, centralization into a family, iniquity into justice, the bourgeois into the citizen, the populace into the people, the rabble into the nation, nations into humanity, war into love, prejudice into free examination, frontiers into solderings, limits into openings, ruts into rails, vestry-rooms into temples, the instinct of evil into the desire of good, life into right, kings into men; yes, to deprive religions of hell and societies of the galley; yes, to be brothers to the wretched, the serf, the fellah, the proletaire, the disinherited, the banished, the betrayed, the conquered, the sold, the enchained, the sacrificed, the prostitute, the convict, the ignorant, the savage, the slave, the negro, the condemned, and the damned, — yes, we are thy sons, Revolution!

Yes, men of genius; yes, poets, philosophers, historians; yes, giants of that great art of previous ages which is all the light of the past, — O men eternal, the minds of this day salute you, but do not follow you; in respect to you they hold to this law, — to admire everything, to imitate nothing. Their function is no longer yours. They have business with the virility of the human race. The hour which makes mankind of age has struck. We assist, under the full light of the ideal, at that majestic junction of the beautiful with the useful. No actual or possible genius can surpass you, ye men of genius of old; to equal you is all the ambition allowed: but, to equal you, one must conform to the necessities of our time, as you supplied the necessities of yours. Writers who are sons of the Revolution have a holy task.

O Homer, their epic poem must weep; O Herodotus, their history must protest; O Juvenal, their satire must dethrone; O Shakespeare, their “thou shalt be king,” must be said to the people; O AEschylus, their Prometheus must strike Jupiter with thunderbolts; O Job, their dunghill must be fruitful; O Dante, their hell must be extinguished; O Isaiah, thy Babylon crumbles, theirs must blaze forth with light! They do what you have done; they contemplate creation directly, they observe humanity directly; they do not accept as a guiding light any refracted ray, not even yours. Like you, they have for their sole starting-point, outside them, universal being: in them, their soul. They have for the source of their work the one source whence flows Nature and whence flows art, the infinite. As the writer of these lines said forty years ago: “The poets and the writers of the nineteenth century have neither masters nor models.” No; in all that vast and sublime art of all peoples, in all those grand creations of all epochs, — no, not even thee, AEschylus, not even thee, Dante, not even thee, Shakespeare, — no, they have neither models nor masters. And why have they neither masters nor models? It is because they have one model, Man, and because they have one master, God.

LETTER TO THE LONDON NEWS REGARDING JOHN BROWN

Printed in 1859

To the Editor of the London News:

Sir: When our thoughts dwell upon the United States of America, a majestic form rises before the eye of imagination. It is a Washington!

Look, then, to what is taking place in that country of Washington at this present moment.

In the Southern States of the Union there are slaves; and this circumstance is regarded with indignation, as the most monstrous of inconsistencies, by the pure and logical conscience of the Northern States. A white man, a free man, John Brown, sought to deliver these negro slaves from bondage. Assuredly, if insurrection is ever a sacred duty, it must be when it is directed against Slavery. John Brown endeavored to commence the work of emancipation by the liberation of slaves in Virginia. Pious, austere, animated with the old Puritan spirit, inspired by the spirit of the Gospel, he sounded to these men, these oppressed brothers, the rallying cry of Freedom. The slaves, enervated by servitude, made no response to the appeal. Slavery afflicts the soul with weakness. Brown, though deserted, still fought at the head of a handful of heroic men; he was riddled with balls; his two young sons, sacred martyrs, fell dead at his side, and he himself was taken. This is what they call the affair at Harper’s Ferry.

John Brown has been tried, with four of his comrades, Stephens, Coppic, Gree and Copeland.

What has been the character of his trial? Let us sum it up in a few words: —

John Brown, upon a wretched pallet, with six half gaping wounds, a gun-shot wound in his arm, another in his loins, and two in his head, scarcely conscious of surrounding sounds, bathing his mattress in blood, and with the ghastly presence his two dead sons ever beside him; his four fellow-sufferers wounded, dragging themselves along by his side; Stephens bleeding from saber wounds; justice in a hurry, and overleaping all obstacles; an attorney, Hunter, who wishes to proceed hastily, and a judge, Parker, who suffers him to have his way; the hearing cut short, almost every application for delay refused, forged and mutilated documents produced, the witnesses for the defence kidnapped, every obstacle thrown in the way of the prisoner’s counsel, two cannon loaded with canister stationed in the Court, orders given to the jailers to shoot the prisoners if they sought to escape, forty minutes of deliberation, and three men sentenced to die! I declare on my honor that all this took place, not in Turkey, but in America!

Such things cannot be done with impunity in the face of the civilized world. The universal conscience of humanity is an ever-watchful eye. Let the judges of Charlestown, and Hunter and Parker, and the slaveholding jurors, and the whole population of Virginia, ponder it well: they are watched! They are not alone in the world. At this moment, America attracts the eyes of the whole of Europe.

John Brown, condemned to die, was to have been hanged on the 2d of December — this very day.

But news has just reached us. A respite has been granted to him. It is not until the 16th that he is to die. The interval is a brief one. Before it has ended, will a cry of mercy have had time to make itself effectually heard?

No matter! It is our duty to speak out.

Perhaps a second respite may be granted. America is a noble nation. The impulse of humanity springs quickly into life among a free people. We may yet hope that Brown will be saved.

If it were otherwise, if Brown should die on the scaffold on the 16th of December, what a terrible calamity! The executioner of Brown, let us avow it openly (for the day of the Kings is past, and the day of the peoples dawns, and to the people we are bound frankly to speak the truth) — the executioner of Brown would be neither the attorney Hunter, nor the judge Parker, nor the Governor Wise, nor the State of Virginia; it would be, though we can scarce think or speak of it without a shudder, the whole American Republic.

The more one loves, the more one admires, the more one venerates that Republic, the more heart-sick one feels at the contemplation of such a catastrophe. A single State ought not to have the power to dishonor all the rest, and in this case there is an obvious justification for a federal intervention. Otherwise, by hesitating to interfere when it might prevent a crime, the Union becomes a participator in its guilt. No matter how intense may be the indignation of the generous Northern States, the Southern States force them to share the opprobrium of this murder. All of us, no matter who we may be, who are bound together as compatriots by the common tie of a democratic creed, feel ourselves in some measure compromised. If the scaffold should be erected on the 16th of December, the incorruptible voice of history would thenceforward testify that the august Confederation of the New World, had added to all its rites of holy brotherhood a brotherhood of blood, and the fasces of that splendid Republic would be bound together with the running noose that hung from the gibbet of Brown!

This is a bond that kills.

When we reflect on what Brown, the liberator, the champion of Christ, has striven to effect, and when we remember that he is about to die, slaughtered by the American Republic, that crime assumes an importance co-extensive with that of the nation which commits it — and when we say to ourselves that this nation is one of the glories of the human race; that, like France, like England, like Germany, she is one of the great agents of civilization; that she sometimes even leaves Europe in the rear by the sublime audacity of some of her progressive movements; that she is the Queen of an entire world, and that her brow is irradiated with a glorious halo of freedom, we declare our conviction that John Brown will not die; for we recoil horror-struck from the idea of so great a crime committed by so great a people.

Viewed in a political light, the murder of Brown would be an irreparable fault. It would penetrate the Union with a gaping fissure which would lead in the end to its entire disruption. It is possible that the execution of Brown might establish slavery on a firm basis in Virginia, but it is certain that it would shake to its centre the entire fabric of American democracy. You preserve your infamy, but you sacrifice your glory. Viewed in a moral light, it seems to me that a portion of the enlightenment of humanity would be eclipsed, that even the ideas of justice and injustice would be obscured on the day which should witness the assassination of Emancipation by Liberty.

As for myself, though I am but a mere atom, yet being, as I am, in common with all other men, inspired with the conscience of humanity, I fall on my knees, weeping before the great starry banner of the New World; and with clasped hands, and with profound and filial respect, I implore the illustrious American Republic, sister of the French Republic, to see to the safety of the universal moral law, to save John Brown, to demolish the threatening scaffold of the 16th of December, and not to suffer that beneath its eyes, and I add, with a shudder, almost by its fault, a crime should be perpetrated surpassing the first fratricide in iniquity.

For — yes, let America know it, and ponder on it well — there is something more terrible than Cain slaying Abel: It is Washington slaying Spartacus!

Victor Hugo
Hautville House, Dec. 2d, 1859.

ON CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

I avow openly that “The Last Days of a Condemned” is only a pleading, direct or indirect, for the *abolition of punishment by death.* My design herein (and what I would wish posterity to see in my work, if its attention should ever be given to so slight a production) is, not to make out the special defence of any particular criminal, such defence being transitory as it is easy. I would plead generally and permanently for *all* accused persons, present and future; it is the great point of Human Right stated and pleaded before society at large, — that highest judicial court; it is the sombre and fatal question which breathes obscurely in the depths of each capital offence, under the triple envelopes of pathos in which legal eloquence wraps them; it is the question of life and death, I say, laid bare, denuded of the sonorous twisitings of the bar, revealed in daylight, and placed where it should be seen, in its true and hideous position, — not in the law courts, but on the scaffold, — not among the judges, but with the Executioner!

This is what I have desired to effect. If futurity should award me the glory of having succeeded, — which I dare not hope, — I desire no other crown.

I proclaim and repeat it, then, in the name of all accused persons, innocent or guilty, before all courts, juries, or judges. And in order that my pleadings should be as universal as my cause, I have been careful, while writing “The Last Days of a Condemned,” to omit any thing of a special, individual, contingent, relative, or modifiable nature, as also any episode, anecdote, known event, or real name, — keeping to the limit (if “limit” it may be termed!) of pleading the cause of *any* condemned prisoner whatever, executed at any time, for any offence; happy if, with no other aid than my thoughts, I have mined sufficiently into my subject to make a heart bleed, under the *as triplex* of a magistrate! happy if I could render merciful those who consider themselves just! happy if I penetrate sufficiently deep within the Judge to reach the man.

When this book first appeared, some people thought it was worth while to dispute the authorship. Some asserted that it was taken from an English work, and others that it was borrowed from an American author. What a singular mania there is for seeking the origin of matters at a great distance,

— trying to trace from the source of the Nile the streamlet which flows through our village! In this work there is no English, American, or Chinese assistance. I formed the idea of “The Last Days of a Condemned” where you might form it, — where perhaps you all may have formed it (for who is there that has not reflected and had reveries of “the last day of a condemned”? — there, on the public walk, the place of execution!

It was there, while passing casually during an execution, that this forcible idea occurred to me; and since then, after those funereal Thursdays of the Court of Cassation, which send forth through Paris the intelligence of an approaching execution, the hoarse voices of the assembling spectators, as they hurried past my windows, filled my mind with the prolonged misery of the person about to suffer, which I pictured to myself, from hour to hour, according to what I conceived was its actual progress. It was a torture which commenced at daybreak, and lasted, like that of the miserable being who was tortured at the same moment, untilf *four o’clock.* Then only, whence once the *ponens caput expiravit* was announced by the heavy toll of the clock, I breathed again freely, and regained comparative peace of mind.

One day at length — I think it was after the execution of Ulbach — I commenced writing this work; and since then I have felt relieved. When one of those public crimes called *legal executions* is committed, my conscience now acquits me of participation therein. This, however, is not sufficient; it is well to be freed from self-accusation, but it would be better still to endeavour to save human life. I do not know any aim more elevated, more holy, than that of seeking the abolition of capital punishment; with sincere devotion I join the wishes and efforts of those philanthropic men of all nations who have laboured, of late years, to throw down the patibulary tree, — the only tree which revolution fails to uproot! It is with pleasure that I take my turn to give my feeble stroke, after the all-powerful blow which, seventy years ago, Beccaria gave to the ancient gibbet, which had been standing during so many centuries of Christianity.

Extracts from *SATIRISTS AND MORALISTS*

WHEN any one, tormented by the valiant demon of satire, pretends to tell severe truths to the age, he ought, the better to confound vice, to attack the vicious to his face; to punish him, he should name him; but he cannot acquire this right without declaring himself. In this manner, he will almost assure himself of victory; for the more powerful his enemy may be, the more courageous will he appear ã for power always recoils before courage. Besides, truth likes to speak in a loud voice, and an anonymouslie is perhaps more wicked than an open calumny. This is not the case with the peaceable moralist, who mixes in society only to observe in silence its faults and absurdities ã simply for the good of humanity. He examines particular individuals, but criticizes the xvhole race. The study, to which he devotes himself, is innocent, since it is his aim to cure all the world without wounding anybody. Meanwhile, to crown his useful labor with success, his chief precaution should be to preserve his incognito; for such is our self-esteem, that there is always an intuitive perception which causes us to distrust the conduct of every man who sets about scrutinizing our character.

Thus, if we are forced to live with a person whom we look upon as an officious overseer, we conceal our actions under a veil of dissimulation, and all his labor is in vain. If, on the other hand, we can escape him, we drive him from society by denouncing him as a meddlesome bore. The philosophic observer, like the ancient actors, cannot perform his part without wearing a mask. We would very uncourteously receive the blunderer who would sayã’ I come to count up your faults and to study your vices.’ He ought, as Horace says, to put some hay round his horns; else, a hue and cry will be raised. And he who wishes to caper about the field of ridicule, which is always so broad in France, had better slip down than display himself to the world; he must remark without being remarked, and never forget that verse of Mahometã’My empire is destroyed if the man is known.’

SIR WALTER SCOTT AND LADY MORGAN.

Sir Walter Scott is a Scotchman; his novels are enough to to convince us of this fact. His exclusive love of Scottish subjects proves his love for Scotland; revering the old customs of his country, he makes amends to himself, by faithfully portraying them, for not being able to observe them more religiously; and his pious admiration for the national character shines forth in the willingness with which he details its faults. An Irish lady ã Lady Morgan ã presents herself, as the natural rival of Sir Walter Scott, in persisting, like him, in writing only on national topics; hut there is in her works much more love of celebrity than attachment to country, and much less national pride than personal vanity.

Lady Morgan seems to paint Irishmen with pleasure; but it is an Irish woman whom she, above everything and everywhere, paints with enthusiasm; and that Irish woman is herself. Miss O’Hallogan in O’Donnell, and Lady Clancare in Florence Maccarthy, are neither more nor less than Lady Morgan, flattered by herself.

We must say that, after Scott’s pictures, so full of life and warmth, the sketches of Lady Morgan seem but pale and cold. The historical romances of that lady are to be read; the romantic histories of the Scotchinan to be admired. The reason is simple enough : Lady Morgan has sufficient tact to observe what she sees, sufficient memory to retain what she observes, and sufficient art aptly to relate what she has retained; her science goes no farther. This is the reason her characters, though sometimes well drawn, are not sustained; apart from a trait, the truth of which pleases you, because it is copied from nature, you will find another which offends you by its falsity, because she invented it.

Walter Scott, on the contrary, conceives a character after having often observed only one trait; he sees it at a glance, and directly paints it. His excellent judgment prevents him from being misled; and what he creates is nearly always as true as that which he observes. When talent is carried to this point, it is more than talent: we can draw the parallel in two words ã Lady Morgan is a woman of talent ã Walter Scott is a man of genius.

License covers its hundred eyes with its hundred hands.

Some rocks cannot arrest the course of a river; over human obstacles, events roll onward without being turned aside.

There are some unfortunate men in the world. Christopher Columbus cannot attach his name to his discovery; Guillotin cannot detach his from his invention.

Glory, ambition, armies, fleets, thrones, crowns: the playthings of great children. Empires have their crises, as mountains have their winter. A word spoken too loud brings down an avalanche.

The conflagration of Moscow: an aurora borealis lit up by Napoleon.

I have heard men of the present day, distinguished in politics, in literature, in science, complain of envy, of hatred, of calumny. They are wrong. It' is law, it is glory. The high-renowned afford examples. Hatred follows them everywhere. Nothing escapes it. The theatre openly yielded to it Shakspeare and Moliere; the prison could not take away from it Christopher Columbus; the cloister did not preserve St. Bernard; the throne did not save Napoleon. There is only one asylum for genius in this world : it is the tomb

LOVE AMONG HEATHEN AND CHRISTIANS.

The expression of love, in the poets of the old school, (to whatever nation and epoch they may belong) generally fails in chastity and modesty. This observation, seemingly of little importance at first sight, is worthy of the deepest consideration. If we will examine it seriously, we shall find at the bottom of this matter all pagan societies and idolatrous worship. The absence of chastity in love is perhaps the characteristic mark of those states of civilization and literature which Christianity has never purified. Not to mention those strange verses hy which Anacreon, Horace, Virgil himself, have immortalized infamous debauchery and shameful customs, the amorous songs of ancient and modern heathen poets, of Catullus, of Tihullus, of Bertin, of Bernis, of Parny, exhibit none of that delicacy, of that modesty, of that reserve, without which love is nothing more than an animal instinct and a carnal appetite. It is difficult to express more ingeniously what brutes feel; and doubtlessly because there was a difference between their love and that of animals, those gallant jesters have sung its praise. They have even changed the most natural thing in the world into a science; and ~THE ART OF LOVE' was taught by Ovid to the pagans in the age of Augustus; by Gentil Bernard to the pagans in the age of Voltaire.

With some attention, we can see that there is a difference between the first and the last artistes in love. Their colors are the same, to a shade. All sing of sensual pleasure. But the Greek and Roman pagan poets appear oftenest like masters who command slaves; while the French pagan poets are always slaves supplicating their mistresses. And the secret of these two different kinds of civilization lies in this. The polite but idolatrous communities of Rome and Athens, were ignorant of that celestial dignity of woman, revealed at a later day to mankind by him who was horn of a daughter of Eve. As love, among these nations, was only addressed to slaves and courtezans, it wore an imperious and contemptuous air. Everything, in the civilized states of Christendom, tends, on the other hand, to the ennobling of the weak and beautiful sex; and the holy scriptures appear to have awarded to women their rank, after having guided men to the highest point of social perfection. The institution of chivalry is due to woman; and this wonderful institution, though vanished from monarchies, survives in honor like its soul ã honor, that instinct of nature, which is likewise a superstition of society - that only power whose tyranny France has patiently borne, that mysterious sentiment unknown to ancient wisdom, which is both more and less than virtue. At the present day ã and let us note this well honor is unknown among those people to whom the scriptures have not been revealed, or by whom the moral influence of woman is not felt. In our state of civilization, if laws give the first rank to man, honor gives the first rank to woman. Herein is the equilibrium of all the Christian communities.

We ought not to look on the affairs of life through the prism of poetry. It is like those ingenious glasses which magnify obects. They will shew to you, in all their brilliancy and magnificence, the spheres of Heaven; but turn thum towards the earth, and you will indeed behold gigantic forms, but dark, vague and confused.

Every one in his turn becomes unpopular; the people themselves may become unpopular at last.

FRANCE.

How impregnable a citadel is France at this day! For ramparts, the Pyrenees on the south; the Alps en the east; on the north, Belgium, with its mound of fortresses; on the west, there is the ocean for a fosse. On the other side of the Pyrenees, beyond the Alps, on the other side of the Rhine and the Belgian fortresses, three nations in a state of revolution ã Spain, Italy, Belgiurn ã mount as our guards; beyond the sea, is the American republic. And in unconquerable France, there are three millions of bayonets, as a garrison; to sentinel the battlements of the Alps, of the Pyrenees, of Belgium, four hundred thousand soldiers; to defend the groundãthe national guard, in hollow square. Finally, we hold in our hands the match-light of all the revolutions with which Europe is undermined. We have only to give the word ã Fire!

If the clergy do not change their way of living, we shall soon hear in France of no trinity except the tricolor-.

Napoleon.

Do you see that star?

Caulaincourt.

No!

Napoleon.

Hah! I see it!

The spirit of God, like tbe sun, always pours forth a flood of light. The spirit of man is like the pale moon, which has its phases, its departure and its return, its clearness and its spots its fullness and its wane; which borrows all its light from the sun, and which, however, dares sometimes to intercept its rays.

GENIUS.

Every passion is eloquent: every man who is convinced, convinces: to draw tears, we must weep; it has heen well said, ‘enthusiasm is contagious.’

Take an infant away from its mother; collect together all the orators in the world; then sayã ‘Let the child die, and let us go to dinner:’ listen to the mother: whence comes it, that she has excited moans, has caused you all to weep, so that you have repealed the sentence?

The eloquence of Cicero and the clemency of Caesar are spoken of as very wonderful. If Cicero had heen the father of Ligarius, what would he have said? Nothing more simple.

And, in truth, there is a language which never deceives, which all men understand, and with which all men are gifted: it is the language of great passions as well as of great events : it is spoken in moments when all hearts respond to it, when israel rises as one man.

What is eloquence? says Demosthenes: it is action, action, always action, But, in morals, as in physics, to make a motion, you must move yourself. How is this motion communicated? This is looking too high: it is sufficient that it is the fact. Do you wish to move? Be moved: cry and you will draw tears: it is a circle to which everything carries us, and from whence you cannot depart. Indeed, I ask, of what use to us could he the power of communicating our thoughts, if we, like Cassandra, were denied the faculty of making ourselves believed? Which was the most triumphant moment of the Roman orator? When the tribunes of the people forbade him to speak. ‘Romans!’ cried he, ‘I swear that I have saved the republic! ‘ã and all the people stood up and cried, ‘We swear that he has told the truth!’

What we have said of eloquence, we may say of all the arts for all the arts are the same language differently spoken. In truth, what are our ideas? ã sensations and parallel sensations. What are the arts, but various modes of expressing our ideas?

Rousseau, by considering his oxvn character, and confronting it with the ideal model which all men have, engraven upon their consciences, marked out a plan of education in which he guarded his pupil from all his own vices, but also from all his own virtues.

This great man did not perceive that, in hestowing upon Emilia that in which he himself was deficient, he was depriving her of what he possessed.

In fact, the man who is brought up in the midst of laughter and joy, is like a wrestler who has been trained far from the scene of combat. To be a Hercules, one must have strangled serpents in the cradle.

You wish to avoid the struggle of the passions, but do you live because you have avoided life? What is it to exist? says Locke. It is to feel. Great men are those who have felt much, lived much; and often, in a few years, they have lived many lives. Let us not be deceived: the highest firs grow only in a region of storms. Athens, the city of tumult, had a thousand great men Sparta, the city of order, had only one ã Lycurgus; and Lycurgus was born before his laws.

Thus we perceive that most great men arise in the midst of great popular commotions: Homer, in the midst of the heroic ages of Greece; Virgil, under the triumvirate; Ossian, on the ruins of his country; Dante, Ariosto, Tasso, in the midst of the renewed convulsions of Italy; Corneille and Racine, in the age of the Fronde; and finally, Milton, on the raising of the first revolt at the foot of the bloody scaffold of Whitehall.

If we examine what were the particular destinies of these great men, we shall behold them all tormented by troublous and unhappy lives. Camo~ns cleaves the sea, with his poem in his hand: D ‘Ercilla writes his verses on the skins of beasts, in the forests of Mexico. They whose bodily sufferings do not extinguish the sufferings of the soul, lead a stormy life, consumed by an irritability of disposition, which renders them a burthen to themselves and to all around them. Happy those who die not before their time, wasted away by the restlessness of their own genius, like Pascal: by grief, like Molidre and Racine; or overcome by the terrors of their own imagination, like the unfortunate Tasso

Admitting, then, this acknowledged principle of all antiquity, that great excitements make great men, we must likewise acknowledge that, as the excitements are more or less strong, so are the various grades of genius. Now, after examining what things are the most capable of exciting the violence of our passionsãthat is of our desires, which are themselves but wishes more or less strongly expressed, even unto that firm and constant wish, by which a man desires one thing all his lifeãlike Caesar, everything or nothingãa destructive lever, with which man crushes himselfãwe will grant, of course, that if there exists one thing capable of exciting such a wish in a noble and determined spirit, it ought to be that thing which is esteemed greatest among mankind.

Now, casting our eyes around us, let us consider if there is one thing to which this sublime denomination has been attributed by the unanimous consent of all times and all people. And here we are, my youthful readers, arrived in a few words at that ravishing truth, before which all ancient philosophers and the great Plato himself recoiled. GENIUS IS VIRTUE.

THE HISTORY OF A CRIME

THE TESTIMONY OF AN EYE-WITNESS

Translated by T.H. Joyce and Arthur Locker

Published in 1877, this non-fiction book is a lengthy essay on Napoleon III’s takeover of power in France in 1852.

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THE FIRST DAY — THE AMBUSH.

CHAPTER I.

“SECURITY”

On December 1, 1851, Charras shrugged his shoulder and unloaded his pistols. In truth, the belief in the possibility of a *coup d’état* had become humiliating. The supposition of such illegal violence on the part of M. Louis Bonaparte vanished upon serious consideration. The great question of the day was manifestly the Devincq election; it was clear that the Government was only thinking of that matter. As to a conspiracy against the Republic and against the People, how could any one premeditate such a plot? Where was the man capable of entertaining such a dream? For a tragedy there must be an actor, and here assuredly the actor was wanting. To outrage Right, to suppress the Assembly, to abolish the Constitution, to strangle the Republic, to overthrow the Nation, to sully the Flag, to dishonor the Army, to suborn the Clergy and the Magistracy, to succeed, to triumph, to govern, to administer, to exile, to banish, to transport, to ruin, to assassinate, to reign, with such complicities that the law at last resembles a foul bed of corruption. What! All these enormities were to be committed! And by whom? By a Colossus? No, by a dwarf. People laughed at the notion. They no longer said “What a crime!” but “What a farce!” For after all they reflected; heinous crimes require stature. Certain crimes are too lofty for certain hands. A man who would achieve an 18th Brumaire must have Arcola in his past and Austerlitz in his future. The art of becoming a great scoundrel is not accorded to the first comer. People said to themselves, Who is this son of Hortense? He has Strasbourg behind him instead of Arcola, and Boulogne in place of Austerlitz. He is a Frenchman, born a Dutchman, and naturalized a Swiss; he is a Bonaparte crossed with a Verhuell; he is only celebrated for the ludicrousness of his imperial attitude, and he who would pluck a feather from his eagle would risk finding a goose’s quill in his hand. This Bonaparte does not pass currency in the array, he is a counterfeit image less of gold than of lead, and assuredly French soldiers will not give us the change for this false Napoleon in rebellion, in atrocities, in massacres, in outrages, in treason. If he should attempt roguery it would miscarry. Not a regiment would stir. Besides, why should he make such an attempt? Doubtless he has his suspicious side, but why suppose him an absolute villain? Such extreme outrages are beyond him; he is incapable of them physically, why judge him capable of them morally? Has he not pledged honor? Has he not said, “No one in Europe doubts my word?” Let us fear nothing. To this could be answered, Crimes are committed either on a grand or on a mean scale. In the first category there is Caesar; in the second there is Mandrin. Caesar passes the Rubicon, Mandrin bestrides the gutter. But wise men interposed, “Are we not prejudiced by offensive conjectures? This man has been exiled and unfortunate. Exile enlightens, misfortune corrects.”

For his part Louis Bonaparte protested energetically. Facts abounded in his favor. Why should he not act in good faith? He had made remarkable promises. Towards the end of October, 1848, then a candidate for the Presidency, he was calling at No. 37, Rue de la Tour d’Auvergne, on a certain personage, to whom he remarked, “I wish to have an explanation with you. They slander me. Do I give you the impression of a madman? They think that I wish to revivify Napoleon. There are two men whom a great ambition can take for its models, Napoleon and Washington. The one is a man of Genius, the other is a man of Virtue. It is ridiculous to say, ‘I will be a man of Genius;’ it is honest to say, ‘I will be a man of Virtue.’ Which of these depends upon ourselves? Which can we accomplish by our will? To be Genius? No. To be Probity? Yes. The attainment of Genius is not possible; the attainment of Probity is a possibility. And what could I revive of Napoleon? One sole thing — a crime. Truly a worthy ambition! Why should I be considered man? The Republic being established, I am not a great man, I shall not copy Napoleon; but I am an honest man. I shall imitate Washington. My name, the name of Bonaparte, will be inscribed on two pages of the history of France: on the first there will be crime and glory, on the second probity and honor. And the second will perhaps be worth the first. Why? Because if Napoleon is the greater, Washington is the better man. Between the guilty hero and the good citizen I choose the good citizen. Such is my ambition.”

From 1848 to 1851 three years elapsed. People had long suspected Louis Bonaparte; but long-continued suspicion blunts the intellect and wears itself out by fruitless alarms. Louis Bonaparte had had dissimulating ministers such as Magne and Rouher; but he had also had straightforward ministers such as Léon Faucher and Odilon Barrot; and these last had affirmed that he was upright and sincere. He had been seen to beat his breast before the doors of Ham; his foster sister, Madame Hortense Cornu, wrote to Mieroslawsky, “I am a good Republican, and I can answer for him.” His friend of Ham, Peauger, a loyal man, declared, “Louis Bonaparte is incapable of treason.” Had not Louis Bonaparte written the work entitled “Pauperism”? In the intimate circles of the Elysée Count Potocki was a Republican and Count d’Orsay was a Liberal; Louis Bonaparte said to Potocki, “I am a man of the Democracy,” and to D’Orsay, “I am a man of Liberty.” The Marquis du Hallays opposed the *coup d’état*, while the Marquise du Hallays was in its favor. Louis Bonaparte said to the Marquis, “Fear nothing” (it is true that he whispered to the Marquise, “Make your mind easy”). The Assembly, after having shown here and there some symptoms of uneasiness, had grown calm. There was General Neumayer, “who was to be depended upon,” and who from his position at Lyons would at need march upon Paris. Changarnier exclaimed, “Representatives of the people, deliberate in peace.” Even Louis Bonaparte himself had pronounced these famous words, “I should see an enemy of my country in any one who would change by force that which has been established by law,” and, moreover, the Army was “force,” and the Army possessed leaders, leaders who were beloved and victorious. Lamoricière, Changarnier, Cavaignac, Leflô, Bedeau, Charras; how could any one imagine the Army of Africa arresting the Generals of Africa? On Friday, November 28, 1851, Louis Bonaparte said to Michel de Bourges, “If I wanted to do wrong, I could not. Yesterday, Thursday, I invited to my table five Colonels of the garrison of Paris, and the whim seized me to question each one by himself. All five declared to me that the Army would never lend itself to a *coup de force*, nor attack the inviolability of the Assembly. You can tell your friends this.”—“He smiled,” said Michel de Bourges, reassured, “and I also smiled.” After this, Michel de Bourges declared in the Tribune, “this is the man for me.” In that same month of November a satirical journal, charged with calumniating the President of the Republic, was sentenced to fine and imprisonment for a caricature depicting a shooting-gallery and Louis Bonaparte using the Constitution as a target. Morigny, Minister of the Interior, declared in the Council before the President “that a Guardian of Public Power ought never to violate the law as otherwise he would be—” “a dishonest man,” interposed the President. All these words and all these facts were notorious. The material and moral impossibility of the *coup d’état* was manifest to all. To outrage the National Assembly! To arrest the Representatives! What madness! As we have seen, Charras, who had long remained on his guard, unloaded his pistols. The feeling of security was complete and unanimous. Nevertheless there were some of us in the Assembly who still retained a few doubts, and who occasionally shook our heads, but we were looked upon as fools.

Colonel Charras was Under-Secretary of State in 1848, and Acting Secretary of War under the Provisional Government.

CHAPTER II.

PARIS SLEEPS — THE BELL RINGS

On the 2d December, 1851, Representative Versigny, of the Haute-Saône, who resided at Paris, at No. 4, Rue Léonie, was asleep. He slept soundly; he had been working till late at night. Versigny was a young man of thirty-two, soft-featured and fair-complexioned, of a courageous spirit, and a mind tending towards social and economical studies. He had passed the first hours of the night in the perusal of a book by Bastiat, in which he was making marginal notes, and, leaving the book open on the table, he had fallen asleep. Suddenly he awoke with a start at the sound of a sharp ring at the bell. He sprang up in surprise. It was dawn. It was about seven o'clock in the morning.

Never dreaming what could be the motive for so early a visit, and thinking that someone had mistaken the door, he again lay down, and was about to resume his slumber, when a second ring at the bell, still louder than the first, completely aroused him. He got up in his night-shirt and opened the door.

Michel de Bourges and Théodore Bac entered. Michel de Bourges was the neighbor of Versigny; he lived at No. 16, Rue de Milan.

Théodore Bac and Michel were pale, and appeared greatly agitated.

"Versigny," said Michel, "dress yourself at once — Baune has just been arrested."

"Bah!" exclaimed Versigny. "Is the Mauguin business beginning again?"

"It is more than that," replied Michel. "Baune's wife and daughter came to me half-an-hour ago. They awoke me. Baune was arrested in bed at six o'clock this morning."

"What does that mean?" asked Versigny.

The bell rang again.

"This will probably tell us," answered Michel de Bourges.

Versigny opened the door. It was the Representative Pierre Lefranc. He brought, in truth, the solution of the enigma.

"Do you know what is happening?" said he.

"Yes," answered Michel. "Baune is in prison."

"It is the Republic who is a prisoner," said Pierre Lefranc. "Have you read the placards?"

"No."

Pierre Lefranc explained to them that the walls at that moment were covered with placards which the curious crowd were thronging to read, that he had glanced over one of them at the corner of his street, and that the blow had fallen.

"The blow!" exclaimed Michel. "Say rather the crime."

Pierre Lefranc added that there were three placards — one decree and two proclamations — all three on white paper, and pasted close together.

The decree was printed in large letters.

The ex-Constituent Laissac, who lodged, like Michel de Bourges, in the neighborhood (No. 4, Cité Gaillard), then came in. He brought the same news, and announced further arrests which had been made during the night.

There was not a minute to lose.

They went to impart the news to Yvan, the Secretary of the Assembly, who had been appointed by the Left, and who lived in the Rue de Boursault.

An immediate meeting was necessary. Those Republican Representatives who were still at liberty must be warned and brought together without delay.

Versigny said, "I will go and find Victor Hugo."

It was eight o'clock in the morning. I was awake and was working in bed.

My servant entered and said, with an air of alarm, —

"A Representative of the people is outside who wishes to speak to you, sir."

"Who is it?"

"Monsieur Versigny:"

"Show him in."

Versigny entered, and told me the state of affairs. I sprang out of bed.

He told me of the "rendezvous" at the rooms of the ex-Constituent Laissac.

"Go at once and inform the other Representatives," said I.

He left me.

CHAPTER III.

WHAT HAD HAPPENED DURING THE NIGHT

Previous to the fatal days of June, 1848, the esplanade of the Invalides was divided into eight huge grass plots, surrounded by wooden railings and enclosed between two groves of trees, separated by a street running perpendicularly to the front of the Invalides. This street was traversed by three streets running parallel to the Seine. There were large lawns upon which children were wont to play. The centre of the eight grass plots was marred by a pedestal which under the Empire had borne the bronze lion of St. Mark, which had been brought from Venice; under the Restoration a white marble statue of Louis XVIII.; and under Louis Philippe a plaster bust of Lafayette. Owing to the Palace of the Constituent Assembly having been nearly seized by a crowd of insurgents on the 22d of June, 1848, and there being no barracks in the neighborhood, General Cavaignac had constructed at three hundred paces from the Legislative Palace, on the grass plots of the Invalides, several rows of long huts, under which the grass was hidden. These huts, where three or four thousand men could be accommodated, lodged the troops specially appointed to keep watch over the National Assembly.

On the 1st December, 1851, the two regiments hutted on the Esplanade were the 6th and the 42d Regiments of the Line, the 6th commanded by Colonel Garderens de Boisse, who was famous before the Second of December, the 42d by Colonel Espinasse, who became famous since that date.

The ordinary night-guard of the Palace of the Assembly was composed of a battalion of Infantry and of thirty artillerymen, with a captain. The Minister of War, in addition, sent several troopers for orderly service. Two mortars and six pieces of cannon, with their ammunition wagons, were ranged in a little square courtyard situated on the right of the Cour d’Honneur, and which was called the Cour des Canons. The Major, the military commandant of the Palace, was placed under the immediate control of the Questors. At nightfall the gratings and the doors were secured, sentinels were posted, instructions were issued to the sentries, and the

Palace was closed like a fortress. The password was the same as in the Place de Paris.

The special instructions drawn up by the Questors prohibited the entrance of any armed force other than the regiment on duty.

On the night of the 1st and 2d of December the Legislative Palace was guarded by a battalion of the 42d.

The sitting of the 1st of December, which was exceedingly peaceable, and had been devoted to a discussion on the municipal law, had finished late, and was terminated by a Tribunal vote. At the moment when M. Baze, one of the Questors, ascended the Tribune to deposit his vote, a Representative, belonging to what was called “Les Bancs Elyséens” approached him, and said in a low tone, “To-night you will be carried off.” Such warnings as these were received every day, and, as we have already explained, people had ended by paying no heed to them. Nevertheless, immediately after the sitting the Questors sent for the Special Commissary of Police of the Assembly, President Dupin being present. When interrogated, the Commissary declared that the reports of his agents indicated “dead calm” — such was his expression — and that assuredly there was no danger to be apprehended for that night. When the Questors pressed him further, President Dupin, exclaiming “Bah!” left the room.

On that same day, the 1st December, about three o’clock in the afternoon, as General Leflô’s father-in-law crossed the boulevard in front of Tortoni’s, some one rapidly passed by him and whispered in his ear these significant words, “Eleven o’clock — midnight.” This incident excited but little attention at the Questure, and several even laughed at it. It had become customary with them. Nevertheless General Leflô would not go to bed until the hour mentioned had passed by, and remained in the Offices of the Questure until nearly one o’clock in the morning.

The shorthand department of the Assembly was done out of doors by four messengers attached to the *Moniteur*, who were employed to carry the copy of the shorthand writers to the printing-office, and to bring back the proof-sheets to the Palace of the Assembly, where M. Hippolyte Prévost corrected them. M. Hippolyte Prévost was chief of the stenographic staff, and in that capacity had apartments in the Legislative Palace. He was at the same time editor of the musical *feuilleton* of the *Moniteur*. On the 1st December he had gone to the Opéra Comique for the first representation of a new piece, and did not return till after midnight. The fourth messenger from the *Moniteur* was waiting for him with a proof of the last slip of the sitting; M. Prévost corrected the proof, and the messenger was sent off. It was then a little after one o'clock, profound quiet reigned around, and, with the exception of the guard, all in the Palace slept. Towards this hour of the night, a singular incident occurred. The Captain-Adjutant-Major of the Guard of the Assembly came to the Major and said, "The Colonel has sent for me," and he added according to military etiquette, "Will you permit me to go?" The Commandant was astonished. "Go," he said with some sharpness, "but the Colonel is wrong to disturb an officer on duty." One of the soldiers on guard, without understanding the meaning of the words, heard the Commandant pacing up and down, and muttering several times, "What the deuce can he want?"

Half an hour afterwards the Adjutant-Major returned. "Well," asked the Commandant, "what did the Colonel want with you?" "Nothing," answered the Adjutant, "he wished to give me the orders for to-morrow's duties." The night became further advanced. Towards four o'clock the Adjutant-Major came again to the Major. "Major," he said, "the Colonel has asked for me." "Again!" exclaimed the Commandant. "This is becoming strange; nevertheless, go."

The Adjutant-Major had amongst other duties that of giving out the instructions to the sentries, and consequently had the power of rescinding them.

As soon as the Adjutant-Major had gone out, the Major, becoming uneasy, thought that it was his duty to communicate with the Military Commandant of the Palace. He went upstairs to the apartment of the Commandant — Lieutenant Colonel Niols. Colonel Niols had gone to bed and the attendants had retired to their rooms in the attics. The Major, new to the Palace, groped about the corridors, and, knowing little about the various rooms, rang at a door which seemed to him that of the Military Commandant. Nobody answered, the door was not opened, and the Major returned downstairs, without having been able to speak to anybody.

On his part the Adjutant-Major re-entered the Palace, but the Major did not see him again. The Adjutant remained near the grated door of the Place Bourgogne, shrouded in his cloak, and walking up and down the courtyard as though expecting some one.

At the instant that five o'clock sounded from the great clock of the dome, the soldiers who slept in the hut-camp before the Invalides were suddenly awakened. Orders were given in a low voice in the huts to take up arms, in silence. Shortly afterwards two regiments, knapsack on back were marching upon the Palace of the Assembly; they were the 6th and the 42d.

At this same stroke of five, simultaneously in all the quarters of Paris, infantry soldiers filed out noiselessly from every barrack, with their colonels at their head. The *aides-de-camp* and orderly officers of Louis Bonaparte, who had been distributed in all the barracks, superintended this taking up of arms. The cavalry were not set in motion until three-quarters of an hour after the infantry, for fear that the ring of the horses' hoofs on the stones should wake slumbering Paris too soon.

M. de Persigny, who had brought from the Elysée to the camp of the Invalides the order to take up arms, marched at the head of the 42d, by the side of Colonel Espinasse. A story is current in the army, for at the present day, wearied as people are with dishonorable incidents, these occurrences are yet told with a species of gloomy indifference — the story is current that at the moment of setting out with his regiment one of the colonels who could be named hesitated, and that the emissary from the Elysée, taking a sealed packet from his pocket, said to him, "Colonel, I admit that we are running a great risk. Here in this envelope, which I have been charged to hand to you, are a hundred thousand francs in banknotes *for contingencies*." The envelope was accepted, and the regiment set out. On the evening of the 2d of December the colonel said to a lady, "This morning I earned a hundred thousand francs and my General's epaulets." The lady showed him the door.

Xavier Durrieu, who tells us this story, had the curiosity later on to see this lady. She confirmed the story. Yes, certainly! she had shut the door in the face of this wretch; a soldier, a traitor to his flag who dared visit her! She receive such a man? No! she could not do that, "and," states Xavier Durrieu, she added, "And yet I have no character to lose."

Another mystery was in progress at the Prefecture of Police.

Those belated inhabitants of the Cité who may have returned home at a late hour of the night might have noticed a large number of street cabs loitering in scattered groups at different points round about the Rue de Jerusalem.

From eleven o'clock in the evening, under pretext of the arrivals of refugees at Paris from Genoa and London, the Brigade of Surety and the eight hundred *sergents de ville* had been retained in the Prefecture. At three o’clock in the morning a summons had been sent to the forty-eight Commissaries of Paris and of the suburbs, and also to the peace officers. An hour afterwards all of them arrived. They were ushered into a separate chamber, and isolated from each other as much as possible. At five o’clock a bell was sounded in the Prefect’s cabinet. The Prefect Maupas called the Commissaries of Police one after another into his cabinet, revealed the plot to them, and allotted to each his portion of the crime. None refused; many thanked him.

It was a question of arresting at their own homes seventy-eight Democrats who were influential in their districts, and dreaded by the Elysée as possible chieftains of barricades. It was necessary, a still more daring outrage, to arrest at their houses sixteen Representatives of the People. For this last task were chosen among the Commissaries of Police such of those magistrates who seemed the most likely to become ruffians. Amongst these were divided the Representatives. Each had his man. Sieur Courtille had Charras, Sieur Desgranges had Nadaud, Sieur Hubaut the elder had M. Thiers, and Sieur Hubaut the younger General Bedeau, General Changarnier was allotted to Lerat, and General Cavaignac to Colin. Sieur Dourlens took Representative Valentin, Sieur Benoist Representative Miot, Sieur Allard Representative Cholat, Sieur Barlet took Roger (Du Nord), General Lamoricière fell to Commissary Blanchet, Commissary Gronfier had Representative Greppo, and Commissary Boudrot Representative Lagrange. The Questors were similarly allotted, Monsieur Baze to the Sieur Primorin, and General Leflô to Sieur Bertoglio.

> Warrants with the name of the Representatives had been drawn up in the Prefect’s private Cabinet. Blanks had been only left for the names of the Commissaries. These were filled in at the moment of leaving.

In addition to the armed force which was appointed to assist them, it had been decided that each Commissary should be accompanied by two escorts, one composed of *sergents de ville*, the other of police agents in plain clothes. As Prefect Maupas had told M. Bonaparte, the Captain of the Republican Guard, Baudinet, was associated with Commissary Lerat in the arrest of General Changarnier.

Towards half-past five the *fiacres* which were in waiting were called up, and all started, each with his instructions.

During this time, in another corner of Paris — the old Rue du Temple — in that ancient Soubise Mansion which had been transformed into a Royal

Printing Office, and is to-day a National Printing Office, another section of the Crime was being organized.

Towards one in the morning a passer-by who had reached the old Rue du Temple by the Rue de Vieilles-Haudriettes, noticed at the junction of these two streets several long and high windows brilliantly lighted up, These were the windows of the work-rooms of the National Printing Office. He turned to the right and entered the old Rue du Temple, and a moment afterwards paused before the crescent-shaped entrance of the front of the printing-office. The principal door was shut, two sentinels guarded the side door. Through this little door, which was ajar, he glanced into the courtyard of the printing-office, and saw it filled with soldiers. The soldiers were silent, no sound could be heard, but the glistening of their bayonets could be seen. The passer-by surprised, drew nearer. One of the sentinels thrust him rudely back, crying out, "Be off."

Like the *sergents de ville* at the Prefecture of Police, the workmen had been retained at the National Printing Office under plea of night-work. At the same time that M. Hippolyte Prévost returned to the Legislative Palace, the manager of the National Printing Office re-entered his office, also returning from the Opéra Comique, where he had been to see the new piece, which was by his brother, M. de St. Georges. Immediately on his return the manager, to whom had come an order from the Elysée during the day, took up a pair of pocket pistols, and went down into the vestibule, which communicates by means of a few steps with the courtyard. Shortly afterwards the door leading to the street opened, a *fiacre* entered, a man who carried a large portfolio alighted. The manager went up to the man, and said to him, "Is that you, Monsieur de Béville?"

"Yes," answered the man.

The *fiacre* was put up, the horses placed in a stable, and the coachman shut up in a parlor, where they gave him drink, and placed a purse in his hand. Bottles of wine and louis d'or form the groundwork of this hind of politics. The coachman drank and then went to sleep. The door of the parlor was bolted.

The large door of the courtyard of the printing-office was hardly shut than it reopened, gave passage to armed men, who entered in silence, and then reclosed. The arrivals were a company of the Gendarmerie Mobile, the fourth of the first battalion, commanded by a captain named La Roche d'Oisy. As may be remarked by the result, for all delicate expeditions the men of the *coup d’état* took care to employ the Gendarmerie Mobile and the Republican Guard, that it is to say the two corps almost entirely composed of former Municipal Guards, bearing at heart a revengeful remembrance of the events of February.

Captain La Roche d’Oisy brought a letter from the Minister of War, which placed himself and his soldiers at the disposition of the manager of the National Printing Office. The muskets were loaded without a word being spoken. Sentinels were placed in the workrooms, in the corridors, at the doors, at the windows, in fact, everywhere, two being stationed at the door leading into the street. The captain asked what instructions he should give to the sentries. “Nothing more simple,” said the man who had come in the *fiacre*. “Whoever attempts to leave or to open a window, shoot him.”

This man, who, in fact, was De Béville, orderly officer to M. Bonaparte, withdrew with the manager into the large cabinet on the first story, a solitary room which looked out on the garden. There he communicated to the manager what he had brought with him, the decree of the dissolution of the Assembly, the appeal to the Army, the appeal to the People, the decree convoking the electors, and in addition, the proclamation of the Prefect Maupas and his letter to the Commissaries of Police. The four first documents were entirely in the handwriting of the President, and here and there some erasures might be noticed.

The compositors were in waiting. Each man was placed between two gendarmes, and was forbidden to utter a single word, and then the documents which had to be printed were distributed throughout the room, being cut up in very small pieces, so that an entire sentence could not be read by one workman. The manager announced that he would give them an hour to compose the whole. The different fragments were finally brought to Colonel Béville, who put them together and corrected the proof sheets. The machining was conducted with the same precautions, each press being between two soldiers. Notwithstanding all possible diligence the work lasted two hours. The gendarmes watched over the workmen. Béville watched over St. Georges.

When the work was finished a suspicious incident occurred, which greatly resembled a treason within a treason. To a traitor a greater traitor. This species of crime is subject to such accidents. Béville and St. Georges, the two trusty confidants in whose hands lay the secret of the *coup d’état*, that is to say the head of the President; — that secret, which ought at no price to be allowed to transpire before the appointed hour, under risk of causing everything to miscarry, took it into their heads to confide it at once to two hundred men, in order “to test the effect,” as the ex-Colonel Béville said later on, rather naïvely. They read the mysterious document which had just been printed to the Gendarmes Mobiles, who were drawn up in the courtyard. These ex-municipal guards applauded. If they had hooted, it might be asked what the two experimentalists in the *coup d’état* would have done. Perhaps M. Bonaparte would have waked up from his dream at Vincennes.

The coachman was then liberated, the *fiacre* was horsed, and at four o’clock in the morning the orderly officer and the manager of the National Printing Office, henceforward two criminals, arrived at the Prefecture of Police with the parcels of the decrees. Then began for them the brand of shame. Prefect Maupas took them by the hand.

Bands of bill-stickers, bribed for the occasion, started in every direction, carrying with them the decrees and proclamations.

This was precisely the hour at which the Palace of the National Assembly was invested. In the Rue de l’Université there is a door of the Palace which is the old entrance to the Palais Bourbon, and which opened into the avenue which leads to the house of the President of the Assembly. This door, termed the Presidency door, was according to custom guarded by a sentry. For some time past the Adjutant-Major, who had been twice sent for during the night by Colonel Espinasse, had remained motionless and silent, close by the sentinel. Five minutes after, having left the huts of the Invalides, the 42d Regiment of the line, followed at some distance by the 6th Regiment, which had marched by the Rue de Bourgogne, emerged from the Rue de l’Université. “The regiment,” says an eye-witness, “marched as one steps in a sickroom.” It arrived with a stealthy step before the Presidency door. This ambuscade came to surprise the law.

The sentry, seeing these soldiers arrive, halted, but at the moment when he was going to challenge them with a *qui-vive*, the Adjutant-Major seized his arm, and, in his capacity as the officer empowered to countermand all instructions, ordered him to give free passage to the 42d, and at the same time commanded the amazed porter to open the door. The door turned upon its hinges, the soldiers spread themselves through the avenue. Persigny entered and said, “It is done.”

The National Assembly was invaded.

At the noise of the footsteps the Commandant Mennier ran up. "Commandant," Colonel Espinasse cried out to him, "I come to relieve your battalion." The Commandant turned pale for a moment, and his eyes remained fixed on the ground. Then suddenly he put his hands to his shoulders, and tore off his epaulets, he drew his sword, broke it across his knee, threw the two fragments on the pavement, and, trembling with rage, exclaimed with a solemn voice, "Colonel, you disgrace the number of your regiment."

"All right, all right," said Espinasse.

The Presidency door was left open, but all the other entrances remained closed. All the guards were relieved, all the sentinels changed, and the battalion of the night guard was sent back to the camp of the Invalides, the soldiers piled their arms in the avenue, and in the Cour d'Honneur. The 42d, in profound silence, occupied the doors outside and inside, the courtyard, the reception-rooms, the galleries, the corridors, the passages, while every one slept in the Palace.

Shortly afterwards arrived two of those little chariots which are called "forty sons," and two *fiacres*, escorted by two detachments of the Republican Guard and of the Chasseurs de Vincennes, and by several squads of police. The Commissaries Bertoglio and Primorin alighted from the two chariots.

As these carriages drove up a personage, bald, but still young, was seen to appear at the grated door of the Place de Bourgogne. This personage had all the air of a man about town, who had just come from the opera, and, in fact, he had come from thence, after having passed through a den. He came from the Elysée. It was De Morny. For an instant he watched the soldiers piling their arms, and then went on to the Presidency door. There he exchanged a few words with M. de Persigny. A quarter of an hour afterwards, accompanied by 250 Chasseurs de Vincennes, he took possession of the ministry of the Interior, startled M. de Thorigny in his bed, and handed him brusquely a letter of thanks from Monsieur Bonaparte. Some days previously honest M. De Thorigny, whose ingenuous remarks we have already cited, said to a group of men near whom M. de Morny was passing, "How these men of the Mountain calumniate the President! The man who would break his oath, who would achieve a *coup d'état* must necessarily be a worthless wretch." Awakened rudely in the middle of the night, and relieved of his post as Minister like the sentinels of the

Assembly, the worthy man, astounded, and rubbing his eyes, muttered, “Eh! then the President *is* a —— .”

“Yes,” said Morny, with a burst of laughter.

He who writes these lines knew Morny. Morny and Walewsky held in the quasi-reigning family the positions, one of Royal bastard, the other of Imperial bastard. Who was Morny? We will say, “A noted wit, an intriguer, but in no way austere, a friend of Romieu, and a supporter of Guizot possessing the manners of the world, and the habits of the roulette table, self-satisfied, clever, combining a certain liberality of ideas with a readiness to accept useful crimes, finding means to wear a gracious smile with bad teeth, leading a life of pleasure, dissipated but reserved, ugly, good-tempered, fierce, well-dressed, intrepid, willingly leaving a brother prisoner under bolts and bars, and ready to risk his head for a brother Emperor, having the same mother as Louis Bonaparte, and like Louis Bonaparte, having some father or other, being able to call himself Beauharnais, being able to call himself Flahaut, and yet calling himself Morny, pursuing literature as far as light comedy, and politics, as far as tragedy, a deadly free liver, possessing all the frivolity consistent with assassination, capable of being sketched by Marivaux and treated of by Tacitus, without conscience, irreproachably elegant, infamous, and amiable, at need a perfect duke. Such was this malefactor.”

It was not yet six o’clock in the morning. Troops began to mass themselves on the Place de la Concorde, where Leroy-Saint-Arnaud on horseback held a review.

The Commissaries of Police, Bertoglio and Primorin ranged two companies in order under the vault of the great staircase of the Questure, but did not ascend that way. They were accompanied by agents of police, who knew the most secret recesses of the Palais Bourbon, and who conducted them through various passages.

General Leflô was lodged in the Pavilion inhabited in the time of the Duc de Bourbon by Monsieur Feuchères. That night General Leflô had staying with him his sister and her husband, who were visiting Paris, and who slept in a room, the door of which led into one of the corridors of the Palace. Commissary Bertoglio knocked at the door, opened it, and together with his agents abruptly burst into the room, where a woman was in bed. The general’s brother-in-out sprang out of bed, and cried out to the Questor, who slept in an adjoining room, “Adolphe, the doors are being forced, the Palace is full of soldiers. Get up!”

The General opened his eyes, he saw Commissary Bertoglio standing beside his bed.

He sprang up.

“General,” said the Commissary, “I have come to fulfil a duty.”

“I understand,” said General Leflô, “you are a traitor.”

The Commissary stammering out the words, “Plot against the safety of the State,” displayed a warrant. The General, without pronouncing a word, struck this infamous paper with the back of his hand.

Then dressing himself, he put on his full uniform of Constantine and of Médéah, thinking in his imaginative, soldier-like loyalty that there were still generals of Africa for the soldiers whom he would find on his way. All the generals now remaining were brigands. His wife embraced him; his son, a child of seven years, in his nightshirt, and in tears, said to the Commissary of Police, “Mercy, Monsieur Bonaparte.”

The General, while clasping his wife in his arms, whispered in her ear,

“There is artillery in the courtyard, try and fire a cannon.”

The Commissary and his men led him away. He regarded these policemen with contempt, and did not speak to them, but when he recognized Colonel Espinasse, his military and Breton heart swelled with indignation.

“Colonel Espinasse,” said he, “you are a villain, and I hope to live long enough to tear the buttons from your uniform.”

Colonel Espinasse hung his head, and stammered, “I do not know you.”

A major waved his sword, and cried, “We have had enough of lawyer generals.” Some soldiers crossed their bayonets before the unarmed prisoner, three *sergents de ville* pushed him into a *fiacre*, and a sub-lieutenant approaching the carriage, and looking in the face of the man who, if he were a citizen, was his Representative, and if he were a soldier was his general, flung this abominable word at him, “Canaille!”

Meanwhile Commissary Primorin had gone by a more roundabout way in order the more surely to surprise the other Questor, M. Baze.

Out of M. Baze’s apartment a door led to the lobby communicating with the chamber of the Assembly. Sieur Primorin knocked at the door. “Who is there?” asked a servant, who was dressing. “The Commissary of Police,” replied Primorin. The servant, thinking that he was the Commissary of Police of the Assembly, opened the door.

At this moment M. Baze, who had heard the noise, and had just awakened, put on a dressing-gown, and cried, “Do not open the door.”

He had scarcely spoken these words when a man in plain clothes and three *sergents de ville* in uniform rushed into his chamber. The man, opening his coat, displayed his scarf of office, asking M. Baze, “Do you recognize this?”

“You are a worthless wretch,” answered the Questor.

The police agents laid their hands on M. Baze. “You will not take me away,” he said. “You, a Commissary of Police, you, who are a magistrate, and know what you are doing, you outrage the National Assembly, you violate the law, you are a criminal!” A hand-to-hand struggle ensued — four against one. Madame Baze and her two little girls giving vent to screams, the servant being thrust back with blows by the *sergents de ville*. “You are ruffians,” cried out Monsieur Baze. They carried him away by main force in their arms, still struggling, naked, his dressing-gown being torn to shreds, his body being covered with blows, his wrist torn and bleeding.

The stairs, the landing, the courtyard, were full of soldiers with fixed bayonets and grounded arms. The Questor spoke to them. “Your Representatives are being arrested, you have not received your arms to break the laws!” A sergeant was wearing a brand-new cross. “Have you been given the cross for this?” The sergeant answered, “We only know one master.” “I note your number,” continued M. Baze. “You are a dishonored regiment.” The soldiers listened with a stolid air, and seemed still asleep. Commissary Primorin said to them, “Do not answer, this has nothing to do with you.” They led the Questor across the courtyard to the guard-house at the Porte Noire.

This was the name which was given to a little door contrived under the vault opposite the treasury of the Assembly, and which opened upon the Rue de Bourgogne, facing the Rue de Lille.

Several sentries were placed at the door of the guard-house, and at the top of the flight of steps which led thither, M. Baze being left there in charge of three *sergents de ville*. Several soldiers, without their weapons, and in their shirt-sleeves, came in and out. The Questor appealed to them in the name of military honor. “Do not answer,” said the *sergent de ville* to the soldiers.

M. Baze’s two little girls had followed him with terrified eyes, and when they lost sight of him the youngest burst into tears. “Sister,” said the elder, who was seven years old, “let us say our prayers,” and the two children, clasping their hands, knelt down.

Commissary Primorin, with his swarm of agents, burst into the Questor’s study, and laid hands on everything. The first papers which he perceived on the middle of the table, and which he seized, were the famous decrees which had been prepared in the event of the Assembly having voted the proposal of the Questors. All the drawers were opened and searched. This overhauling of M. Baze’s papers, which the Commissary of Police termed a domiciliary visit, lasted more than an hour.

M. Baze’s clothes had been taken to him, and he had dressed. When the “domiciliary visit” was over, he was taken out of the guard-house. There was a *fiacre* in the courtyard, into which he entered, together with the three *sergents de ville*. The vehicle, in order to reach the Presidency door, passed by the Cour d’Honneur and then by the Courde Canonis. Day was breaking. M. Baze looked into the courtyard to see if the cannon were still there. He saw the ammunition wagons ranged in order with their shafts raised, but the places of the six cannon and the two mortars were vacant.

In the avenue of the Presidency the *fiacre* stopped for a moment. Two lines of soldiers, standing at ease, lined the footpaths of the avenue. At the foot of a tree were grouped three men: Colonel Espinasse, whom M. Baze knew and recognized, a species of Lieutenant-Colonel, who wore a black and orange ribbon round his neck, and a Major of Lancers, all three sword in hand, consulting together. The windows of the *fiacre* were closed; M. Baze wished to lower them to appeal to these men; the *sergents de ville* seized his arms. The Commissary Primorin then came up, and was about to re-enter the little chariot for two persons which had brought him.

“Monsieur Baze,” said he, with that villainous kind of courtesy which the agents of the *coup d’état* willingly blended with their crime, “you must be uncomfortable with those three men in the *fiacre*. You are cramped; come in with me.”

“Let me alone,” said the prisoner. “With these three men I am cramped; with you I should be contaminated.”

An escort of infantry was ranged on both sides of the *fiacre*. Colonel Espinasse called to the coachman, “Drive slowly by the Quai d’Orsay until you meet a cavalry escort. When the cavalry shall have assumed the charge, the infantry can come back.” They set out.

As the *fiacre* turned into the Quai d’Orsay a picket of the 7th Lancers arrived at full speed. It was the escort: the troopers surrounded the *fiacre*, and the whole galloped off.

No incident occurred during the journey. Here and there, at the noise of the horses’ hoofs, windows were opened and heads put forth; and the prisoner, who had at length succeeded in lowering a window heard startled voices saying, “What is the matter?”

The *fiacre* stopped. “Where are we?” asked M. Baze.

“At Mazas,” said a *sergent de ville*.

The Questor was taken to the office of the prison. Just as he entered he saw Baune and Nadaud being brought out. There was a table in the centre, at which Commissary Primorin, who had followed the *fiacre* in his chariot, had just seated himself. While the Commissary was writing, M. Baze noticed on the table a paper which was evidently a jail register, on which were these names, written in the following order: Lamoricière, Charras, Cavaignac, Changarnier, Leflô, Thiers, Bedeau, Roger (du Nord), Chambolle. This was probably the order in which the Representatives had arrived at the prison.

When Sieur Primorin had finished writing, M. Baze said, “Now, you will be good enough to receive my protest, and add it to your official report.” “It is not an official report,” objected the Commissary, “it is simply an order for committal.” “I intend to write my protest at once,” replied M. Baze. “You will have plenty of time in your cell,” remarked a man who stood by the table. M. Baze turned round. “Who are you?” “I am the governor of the prison,” said the man. “In that case,” replied M. Baze, “I pity you, for you are aware of the crime you are committing.” The man turned pale, and stammered a few unintelligible words.

The Commissary rose from his seat; M. Baze briskly took possession of his chair, seated himself at the table, and said to Sieur Primorin, “You are a public officer; I request you to add my protest to your official report.” “Very well,” said the Commissary, “let it be so.” Baze wrote the protest as follows: —

“I, the undersigned, Jean-Didier Baze, Representative of the People, and Questor of the National Assembly, carried off by violence from my residence in the Palace of the National Assembly, and conducted to this prison by an armed force which it was impossible for me to resist, protest in the name of the National Assembly and in my own name against the outrage on national representation committed upon my colleagues and upon myself.

“Given at Mazas on the 2d December 1851, at eight o’clock in the morning.

“BAZE.”

While this was taking place at Mazas, the soldiers were laughing and drinking in the courtyard of the Assembly. They made their coffee in the saucepans. They had lighted enormous fires in the courtyard; the flames, fanned by the wind, at times reached the walls of the Chamber. A superior official of the Questure, an officer of the National Guard, Ramond de la Croisette, ventured to say to them, “You will set the Palace on fire;” whereupon a soldier struck him a blow with his fist.

Four of the pieces taken from the Cour de Canons were ranged in battery order against the Assembly; two on the Place de Bourgogne were pointed towards the grating, and two on the Pont de la Concorde were pointed towards the grand staircase.

As side-note to this instructive tale let us mention a curious fact. The 42d Regiment of the line was the same which had arrested Louis Bonaparte at Boulogne. In 1840 this regiment lent its aid to the law against the conspirator. In 1851 it lent its aid to the conspirator against the law: such is the beauty of passive obedience.

The Questors were officers elected by the Assembly, whose special duties were to keep and audit the accounts, and who controlled all matters affecting the social economy of the House.

CHAPTER IV.

OTHER DOINGS OF THE NIGHT

During the same night in all parts of Paris acts of brigandage took place. Unknown men leading armed troops, and themselves armed with hatchets, mallets, pincers, crow-bars, life-preservers, swords hidden under their coats, pistols, of which the butts could be distinguished under the folds of their cloaks, arrived in silence before a house, occupied the street, encircled the approaches, picked the lock of the door, tied up the porter, invaded the stairs, and burst through the doors upon a sleeping man, and when that man, awakening with a start, asked of these bandits, “Who are you?” their leader answered, “A Commissary of Police.” So it happened to Lamoricière who was seized by Blanchet, who threatened him with the gag; to Greppo, who was brutally treated and thrown down by Gronfier, assisted by six men carrying a dark lantern and a pole-axe; to Cavaignac, who was secured by Colin, a smooth-tongued villain, who affected to be shocked on hearing him curse and swear; to M. Thiers, who was arrested by Hubaut (the elder); who professed that he had seen him “tremble and weep,” thus adding falsehood to crime; to Valentin, who was assailed in his bed by Dourlens, taken by the feet and shoulders, and thrust into a padlocked police van; to Miot, destined to the tortures of African casemates; to Roger (du Nord), who with courageous and witty irony offered sherry to the bandits. Charras and Changarnier were taken unawares.

They lived in the Rue St. Honoré, nearly opposite to each other, Changarnier at No. 3, Charras at No. 14. Ever since the 9th of September Changarnier had dismissed the fifteen men armed to the teeth by whom he had hitherto been guarded during the night, and on the 1st December, as we have said, Charras had unloaded his pistols. These empty pistols were lying on the table when they came to arrest him. The Commissary of Police threw himself upon them. “Idiot,” said Charras to him, “if they had been loaded, you would have been a dead man.” These pistols, we may note, had been given to Charras upon the taking of Mascara by General Renaud, who at the moment of Charras’ arrest was on horseback in the street helping to carry out the *coup d’état*. If these pistols had remained loaded, and if General Renaud had had the task of arresting Charras, it would have been curious if

Renaud’s pistols had killed Renaud. Charras assuredly would not have hesitated. We have already mentioned the names of these police rascals. It is useless to repeat them. It was Courtille who arrested Charras, Lerat who arrested Changarnier, Desgranges who arrested Nadaud. The men thus seized in their own houses were Representatives of the people; they were inviolable, so that to the crime of the violation of their persons was added this high treason, the violation of the Constitution.

There was no lack of impudence in the perpetration of these outrages. The police agents made merry. Some of these droll fellows jested. At Mazas the under-jailors jeered at Thiers, Nadaud reprimanded them severely. The Sieur Hubaut (the younger) awoke General Bedeau. “General, you are a prisoner.”— “My person is inviolable.”— “Unless you are caught red-handed, in the very act.”— “Well,” said Bedeau, “I am caught in the act, the heinous act of being asleep.” They took him by the collar and dragged him to a *fiacre*.

On meeting together at Mazas, Nadaud grasped the hand of Greppo, and Lagrange grasped the hand of Lamoricière. This made the police gentry laugh. A colonel, named Thirion, wearing a commander’s cross round his neck, helped to put the Generals and the Representatives into jail. “Look me in the face,” said Charras to him. Thirion moved away.

Thus, without counting other arrests which took place later on, there were imprisoned during the night of the 2d of December, sixteen Representatives and seventy-eight citizens. The two agents of the crime furnished a report of it to Louis Bonaparte. Morny wrote “Boxed up;” Maupas wrote “Quadded.” The one in drawing-room slang, the other in the slang of the galleys. Subtle gradations of language.

CHAPTER V.

THE DARKNESS OF THE CRIME

Versigny had just left me.

While I dressed hastily there came in a man in whom I had every confidence. He was a poor cabinet-maker out of work, named Girard, to whom I had given shelter in a room of my house, a carver of wood, and not illiterate. He came in from the street; he was trembling.

“Well,” I asked, “what do the people say?”

Girard answered me, —

“People are dazed. The blow has been struck in such a manner that it is not realized. Workmen read the placards, say nothing, and go to their work. Only one in a hundred speaks. It is to say, ‘Good!’ This is how it appears to them. The law of the 31st May is abrogated— ‘Well done!’ Universal suffrage is re-established— ‘Also well done!’ The reactionary majority has been driven away— ‘Admirable!’ Thiers is arrested— ‘Capital!’ Changarnier is seized— ‘Bravo!’ Round each placard there are *claqueurs*. Ratapoil explains his *coup d’état* to Jacques Bonhomme, Jacques Bonhomme takes it all in. Briefly, it is my impression that the people give their consent.”

“Let it be so,” said I.

“But,” asked Girard of me, “what will you do, Monsieur Victor Hugo?”

I took my scarf of office from a cupboard, and showed it to him.

He understood.

We shook hands.

As he went out Carini entered.

Colonel Carini is an intrepid man. He had commanded the cavalry under Mieroslawsky in the Sicilian insurrection. He has, in a few moving and enthusiastic pages, told the story of that noble revolt. Carini is one of those Italians who love France as we Frenchmen love Italy. Every warm-hearted man in this century has two fatherlands — the Rome of yesterday and the Paris of to-day.

“Thank God,” said Carini to me, “you are still free,” and he added, “The blow has been struck in a formidable manner. The Assembly is invested. I have come from thence. The Place de la Révolution, the Quays, the

Tuileries, the boulevards, are crowded with troops. The soldiers have their knapsacks. The batteries are harnessed. If fighting takes place it will be desperate work."

I answered him, "There will be fighting."

And I added, laughing, "You have proved that the colonels write like poets; now it is the turn of the poets to fight like colonels."

I entered my wife's room; she knew nothing, and was quietly reading her paper in bed.

I had taken about me five hundred francs in gold. I put on my wife's bed a box containing nine hundred francs, all the money which remained to me, and I told her what had happened.

She turned pale, and said to me, "What are you going to do?"

"My duty."

She embraced me, and only said two words: —

"Do it."

My breakfast was ready. I ate a cutlet in two mouthfuls. As I finished, my daughter came in. She was startled by the manner in which I kissed her, and asked me, "What is the matter?"

"Your mother will explain to you."

And I left them.

The Rue de la Tour d'Auvergne was as quiet and deserted as usual. Four workmen were, however, chatting near my door; they wished me "Good morning."

I cried out to them, "You know what is going on?"

"Yes," said they.

"Well. It is treason! Louis Bonaparte is strangling the Republic. The people are attacked. The people must defend themselves."

"They will defend themselves."

"You promise me that?"

"Yes," they answered.

One of them added, "We swear it."

They kept their word. Barricades were constructed in my street (Rue de la Tour d'Auvergne), in the Rue des Martyrs, in the Cité Rodier, in the Rue Coquenard, and at Notre-Dame de Lorette.

CHAPTER VI.

“PLACARDS”

On leaving these brave men I could read at the corner of the Rue de la Tour d’Auvergne and the Rue des Martyrs, the three infamous placards which had been posted on the walls of Paris during the night.

Here they are.

“PROCLAMATION OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC.

“*Appeal to the People*.

“FRENCHMEN! The present situation can last no longer. Every day which passes enhances the dangers of the country. The Assembly, which ought to be the firmest support of order, has become a focus of conspiracies. The patriotism of three hundred of its members has been unable to check its fatal tendencies. Instead of making laws in the public interest it forges arms for civil war; it attacks the power which I hold directly from the People, it encourages all bad passions, it compromises the tranquillity of France; I have dissolved it, and I constitute the whole People a judge between it and me.

“The Constitution, as you know, was constructed with the object of weakening beforehand the power which you were about to confide to me. Six millions of votes formed an emphatic protest against it, and yet I have faithfully respected it. Provocations, calumnies, outrages, have found me unmoved. Now, however, that the fundamental compact is no longer respected by those very men who incessantly invoke it, and that the men who have ruined two monarchies wish to tie my hands in order to overthrow the Republic, my duty is to frustrate their treacherous schemes, to maintain the Republic, and to save the Country by appealing to the solemn judgment of the only Sovereign whom I recognize in France — the People.

“I therefore make a loyal appeal to the whole nation, and I say to you: If you wish to continue this condition of uneasiness which degrades us and compromises our future, choose another in my place, for I will no longer retain a power which is impotent to do good, which renders me responsible for actions which I cannot prevent, and which binds me to the helm when I see the vessel driving towards the abyss.

“If on the other hand you still place confidence in me, give me the means of accomplishing the great mission which I hold from you.

“This mission consists in closing the era of revolutions, by satisfying the legitimate needs of the People, and by protecting them from subversive passions. It consists, above all, in creating institutions which survive men, and which shall in fact form the foundations on which something durable may be established.

“Persuaded that the instability of power, that the preponderance of a single Assembly, are the permanent causes of trouble and discord, I submit to your suffrage the following fundamental bases of a Constitution which will be developed by the Assemblies later on: —

“1. A responsible Chief appointed for ten years.

“2. Ministers dependent upon the Executive Power alone.

“3. A Council of State composed of the most distinguished men, who shall prepare laws and shall support them in debate before the Legislative Body.

“4. A Legislative Body which shall discuss and vote the laws, and which shall be elected by universal suffrage, without *scrutin de liste*, which falsifies the elections.

“5. A Second Assembly composed of the most illustrious men of the country, a power of equipoise the guardian of the fundamental compact, and of the public liberties.

> “This system, created by the first Consul at the beginning of the century, has already given repose and prosperity to France; it would still insure them to her.
>
> “Such is my firm conviction. If you share it, declare it by your votes. If, on the contrary, you prefer a government without strength, Monarchical or Republican, borrowed I know not from what past, or from what chimerical future, answer in the negative.
>
> “Thus for the first time since 1804, you will vote with a full knowledge of the circumstances, knowing exactly for whom and for what.

“If I do not obtain the majority of your suffrages I shall call together a New Assembly and shall place in its hands the commission which I have received from you.

“But if you believe that the cause of which my name is the symbol, — that is to say, France regenerated by the Revolution of ‘89, and organized by the Emperor, is to be still your own, proclaim it by sanctioning the powers which I ask from you.

"Then France and Europe will be preserved from anarchy, obstacles will be removed, rivalries will have disappeared, for all will respect, in the decision of the People, the decree of Providence.

"Given at the Palace of the Elysée, 2d December, 1851.

"LOUIS NAPOLEON BONAPARTE."

PROCLAMATION OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC TO THE ARMY.

"Soldiers! Be proud of your mission, you will save the country, for I count upon you not to violate the laws, but to enforce respect for the first law of the country, the national Sovereignty, of which I am the Legitimate Representative.

"For a long time past, like myself, you have suffered from obstacles which have opposed themselves both to the good that I wished to do and to the demonstrations of your sympathies in my favor. These obstacles have been broken down.

"The Assembly has tried to attack the authority which hold from the whole Nation. It has ceased to exist.

"I make a loyal appeal to the People and to the Army, and I say to them: Either give me the means of insuring your prosperity, or choose another in my place.

"In 1830, as in 1848, you were treated as vanquished men. After having branded your heroic disinterestedness, they disdained to consult your sympathies and your wishes, and yet you are the flower of the Nation. To-day, at this solemn moment, I am resolved that the voice of the Army shall be heard.

"Vote, therefore, freely as citizens; but, as soldiers do not forget that passive obedience to the orders of the Chief of the State is the rigorous duty of the Army, from the general to the private soldier.

"It is for me, responsible for my actions both to the People and to posterity, to take those measures which may seem to me indispensable for the public welfare.

"As for you, remain immovable within the rules of discipline and of honor. By your imposing attitude help the country to manifest its will with calmness and reflection.

“Be ready to repress every attack upon the free exercise of the sovereignty of the People.

“Soldiers, I do not speak to you of the memories which my name recalls.

They are engraven in your hearts. We are united by indissoluble ties. Your history is mine. There is between us, in the past, a community of glory and of misfortune.

“There will be in the future community of sentiment and of resolutions for the repose and the greatness of France.

“Given at the Palace of the Elysée, December 2d, 1851.

“(Signed) L.N. BONAPARTE.”

“IN THE NAME OF THE FRENCH PEOPLE.

“The President of the Republic decrees: —

“ARTICLE I. The National Assembly is dissolved.

“ARTICLE II. Universal suffrage is re-established. The law of May 31 is abrogated.

“ARTICLE III. The French People are convoked in their electoral districts from the 14th December to the 21st December following.

“ARTICLE IV. The State of Siege is decreed in the district of the first Military Division.

“ARTICLE V. The Council of State is dissolved.

“ARTICLE VI. The Minister of the Interior is charged with the execution of this decree.

“Given at the Palace of the Elysée, 2d December, 1851.

“LOUIS NAPOLEON BONAPARTE.

“DE MORNY, Minister of the Interior.”

CHAPTER VII.

NO. 70, RUE BLANCHE

The Cité Gaillard is somewhat difficult to find. It is a deserted alley in that new quarter which separates the Rue des Martyrs from the Rue Blanche. I found it, however. As I reached No. 4, Yvan came out of the gateway and said, “I am here to warn you. The police have an eye upon this house, Michel is waiting for you at No. 70, Rue Blanche, a few steps from here.”

I knew No. 70, Rue Blanche. Manin, the celebrated President of the Venetian Republic, lived there. It was not in his rooms, however, that the meeting was to take place.

The porter of No. 70 told me to go up to the first floor. The door was opened, and a handsome, gray-haired woman of some forty summers, the Baroness Coppens, whom I recognized as having seen in society and at my own house, ushered me into a drawing-room.

Michel de Bourges and Alexander Rey were there, the latter an ex-Constituent, an eloquent writer, a brave man. At that time Alexander Rey edited the *National*.

We shook hands.

Michel said to me, —

“Hugo, what will you do?”

I answered him, —

“Everything.”

“That also is my opinion,” said he.

Numerous representatives arrived, and amongst others Pierre Lefranc,

Labrousse, Théodore Bac, Noël Parfait, Arnauld (de l’Ariége), Demosthenes

Ollivier, an ex-Constituent, and Charamaule. There was deep and

unutterable indignation, but no useless words were spoken.

All were imbued with that manly anger whence issue great resolutions.

They talked. They set forth the situation. Each brought forward the news which he had learnt.

Théodore Bac came from Léon Faucher, who lived in the Rue Blanche. It was he who had awakened Léon Faucher, and had announced the news to him. The first words of Léon Faucher were, “It is an infamous deed.”

From the first moment Charamaule displayed a courage which, during the four days of the struggle, never flagged for a single instant. Charamaule is a very tall man, possessed of vigorous features and convincing eloquence; he voted with the Left, but sat with the Right. In the Assembly he was the neighbor of Montalembert and of Riancey. He sometimes had warm disputes with them, which we watched from afar off, and which amused us.

Charamaule had come to the meeting at No. 70 dressed in a sort of blue cloth military cloak, and armed, as we found out later on.

The situation was grave; sixteen Representatives arrested, all the generals of the Assembly, and he who was more than a general, Charras. All the journals suppressed, all the printing offices occupied by soldiers. On the side of Bonaparte an army of 80,000 men which could be doubled in a few hours; on our side nothing. The people deceived, and moreover disarmed. The telegraph at their command. All the walls covered with their placards, and at our disposal not a single printing case, not one sheet of paper. No means of raising the protest, no means of beginning the combat. The *coup d'état* was clad with mail, the Republic was naked; the *coup d'état* had a speaking trumpet, the Republic wore a gag.

What was to be done?

The raid against the Republic, against the Assembly, against Right, against Law, against Progress, against Civilization, was commanded by African generals. These heroes had just proved that they were cowards. They had taken their precautions well. Fear alone can engender so much skill. They had arrested all the men of war of the Assembly, and all the men of action of the Left, Baune, Charles Lagrange, Miot, Valentin, Nadaud, Cholat. Add to this that all the possible chiefs of the barricades were in prison. The organizers of the ambuscade had carefully left at liberty Jules Favre, Michel de Bourges, and myself, judging us to be less men of action than of the Tribune; wishing to leave the Left men capable of resistance, but incapable of victory, hoping to dishonor us if we did not fight, and to shoot us if we did fight.

Nevertheless, no one hesitated. The deliberation began. Other representatives arrived every minute, Edgar Quinet, Doutre, Pelletier, Cassal, Bruckner, Baudin, Chauffour. The room was full, some were seated, most were standing, in confusion, but without tumult.

I was the first to speak.

I said that the struggle ought to be begun at once. Blow for blow.

That it was my opinion that the hundred and fifty Representatives of the Left should put on their scarves of office, should march in procession through the streets and the boulevards as far as the Madeleine, and crying "Vive la République! Vive la Constitution!" should appear before the troops, and alone, calm and unarmed, should summon Might to obey Right. If the soldiers yielded, they should go to the Assembly and make an end of Louis Bonaparte. If the soldiers fired upon their legislators, they should disperse throughout Paris, cry "To Arms," and resort to barricades. Resistance should be begun constitutionally, and if that failed, should be continued revolutionarily. There was no time to be lost.

"High treason," said I, "should be seized red-handed, is a great mistake
to suffer such an outrage to be accepted by the hours as they elapse.
Each minute which passes is an accomplice, and endorses the crime.
Beware of that calamity called an 'Accomplished fact.' To arms!"

Many warmly supported this advice, among others Edgar Quinet, Pelletier, and Doutre.

Michel de Bourges seriously objected. My instinct was to begin at once, his advice was to wait and see. According to him there was danger in hastening the catastrophe. The *coup d'état* was organized, and the People were not. They had been taken unawares. We must not indulge in illusion. The masses could not stir yet. Perfect calm reigned in the faubourgs; Surprise existed, yes; Anger, no. The people of Paris, although so intelligent, did not understand.

Michel added, "We are not in 1830. Charles X., in turning out the 221, exposed himself to this blow, the re-election of the 221. We are not in the same situation. The 221 were popular. The present Assembly is not: a Chamber which has been insultingly dissolved is always sure to conquer, if the People support it. Thus the People rose in 1830. To-day they wait. They are dupes until they shall be victims." Michel de Bourges concluded, "The People must be given time to understand, to grow angry, to rise. As for us, Representative, we should be rash to precipitate the situation. If we were to march immediately straight upon the troops, we should only be shot to no purpose, and the glorious insurrection for Right would thus be beforehand deprived of its natural leaders — the Representatives of the People. We should decapitate the popular army. Temporary delay, on the contrary, would be beneficial. Too much zeal must be guarded against, self-restraint is necessary, to give way would be to lose the battle before having begun it.

Thus, for example, we must not attend the meeting announced by the Right for noon, all those who went there would be arrested. We must remain free, we must remain in readiness, we must remain calm, and must act waiting the advent of the People. Four days of this agitation without fighting would weary the army.” Michel, however, advised a beginning, but simply by placarding Article 68 of the Constitution. But where should a printer be found?

Michel de Bourges spoke with an experience of revolutionary procedure which was wanting in me. For many years past he had acquired a certain practical knowledge of the masses. His council was wise. It must be added that all the information which came to us seconded him, and appeared conclusive against me. Paris was dejected.

The army of the *coup d’état* invaded her peaceably. Even the placards were not torn down. Nearly all the Representatives present, even the most daring, agreed with Michel’s counsel, to wait and see what would happen. “At night,” said they, “the agitation will begin,” and they concluded, like Michel de Bourges, that the people must be given time to understand. There would be a risk of being alone in too hasty a beginning. We should not carry the people with us in the first moment. Let us leave the indignation to increase little by little in their hearts. If it were begun prematurely our manifestation would miscarry. These were the sentiments of all. For myself, while listening to them, I felt shaken. Perhaps they were right. It would be a mistake to give the signal for the combat in vain. What good is the lightning which is not followed by the thunderbolt?

To raise a voice, to give vent to a cry, to find a printer, there was the first question. But was there still a free Press?

The brave old ex-chief of the 6th Legion, Colonel Forestier, came in. He took Michel de Bourges and myself aside.

“Listen,” said he to us. “I come to you. I have been dismissed. I no longer command my legion, but appoint me in the name of the Left, Colonel of the 6th. Sign me an order and I will go at once and call them to arms. In an hour the regiment will be on foot.”

“Colonel,” answered I, “I will do more than sign an order, I will accompany you.”

And I turned towards Charamaule, who had a carriage in waiting.

“Come with us,” said I.

Forestier was sure of two majors of the 6th. We decided to drive to them at once, while Michel and the other Representatives should await us at Bonvalet’s, in the Boulevard du Temple, near the Café Turc. There they could consult together.

We started.

We traversed Paris, where people were already beginning to swarm in a threatening manner. The boulevards were thronged with an uneasy crowd. People walked to and fro, passers-by accosted each other without any previous acquaintance, a noteworthy sign of public anxiety; and groups talked in loud voices at the corners of the streets. The shops were being shut.

“Come, this looks better,” cried Charamaule.

He had been wandering about the town since the morning, and he had noticed with sadness the apathy of the masses.

We found the two majors at home upon whom Colonel Forestier counted. They were two rich linendrapers, who received us with some embarrassment. The shopmen had gathered together at the windows, and watched us pass by. It was mere curiosity.

In the meanwhile one of the two majors countermanded a journey which he was going to undertake on that day, and promised us his co-operation.

“But,” added he, “do not deceive yourselves, one can foresee that we shall be cut to pieces. Few men will march out.”

Colonel Forestier said to us, “Watrin, the present colonel of the 6th, does not care for fighting; perhaps he will resign me the command amicably. I will go and find him alone, so as to startle him the less, and will join you at Bonvalet’s.”

Near the Porte St. Martin we left our carriage, and Charamaule and myself proceeded along the boulevard on foot, in order to observe the groups more closely, and more easily to judge the aspect of the crowd.

The recent levelling of the road had converted the boulevard of the Porte St. Martin into a deep cutting, commanded by two embankments. On the summits of these embankments were the footways, furnished with railings. The carriages drove along the cutting, the foot passengers walked along the footways.

Just as we reached the boulevard, a long column of infantry filed into this ravine with drummers at their head. The thick waves of bayonets filled the square of St. Martin, and lost themselves in the depths of the Boulevard Bonne Nouvelle.

An enormous and compact crowd covered the two pavements of the Boulevard St. Martin. Large numbers of workmen, in their blouses, were there, leaning upon the railings.

At the moment when the head of the column entered the defile before the Theatre of the Porte St. Martin a tremendous shout of “Vive la République!” came forth from every mouth as though shouted by one man. The soldiers continued to advance in silence, but it might have been said that their pace slackened, and many of them regarded the crowd with an air of indecision. What did this cry of “Vive la République!” mean? Was it a token of applause? Was it a shout of defiance?

It seemed to me at that moment that the Republic raised its brow, and that the *coup d’état* hung its head.

Meanwhile Charamaule said to me, “You are recognized.”

In fact, near the Château d’Eau the crowd surrounded me. Some young men cried out, “Vive Victor Hugo!” One of them asked me, “Citizen Victor Hugo, what ought we to do?”

I answered, “Tear down the seditious placards of the *coup d’état,* and cry ‘Vive la Constitution!’”

“And suppose they fire on us?” said a young workman.

“You will hasten to arms.”

“Bravo!” shouted the crowd.

I added, “Louis Bonaparte is a rebel, he has steeped himself to-day in every crime. We, Representatives of the People, declare him an outlaw, but there is no need for our declaration, since he is an outlaw by the mere fact of his treason. Citizens, you have two hands; take in one your Right, and in the other your gun and fall upon Bonaparte.”

“Bravo! Bravo!” again shouted the people.

A tradesman who was shutting up his shop said to me, “Don’t speak so loud, if they heard you talking like that, they would shoot you.”

“Well, then,” I replied, “you would parade my body, and my death would be a boon if the justice of God could result from it.”

All shouted “Long live Victor Hugo!”

“Shout ‘Long live the Constitution,’” said I.

A great cry of “Vive la Constitution! Vive la République;” came forth from every breast.

Enthusiasm, indignation, anger flashed in the faces of all. I thought then, and I still think, that this, perhaps, was the supreme moment. I was tempted to carry off all that crowd, and to begin the battle.

Charamaule restrained me. He whispered to me, —

“You will bring about a useless fusillade. Every one is unarmed. The infantry is only two paces from us, and see, here comes the artillery.”

I looked round; in truth several pieces of cannon emerged at a quick trot from the Rue de Bondy, behind the Château d’Eau.

The advice to abstain, given by Charamaule, made a deep impression on me. Coming from such a man, and one so dauntless, it was certainly not to be distrusted. Besides, I felt myself bound by the deliberation which had just taken place at the meeting in the Rue Blanche.

I shrank before the responsibility which I should have incurred. To have taken advantage of such a moment might have been victory, it might also have been a massacre. Was I right? Was I wrong?

The crowd thickened around us, and it became difficult to go forward. We were anxious, however, to reach the *rendezvous* at Bonvalet’s.

Suddenly some one touched me on the arm. It was Léopold Duras, of the *National*.

“Go no further,” he whispered, “the Restaurant Bonvalet is surrounded. Michel de Bourges has attempted to harangue the People, but the soldiers came up. He barely succeeded in making his escape. Numerous Representatives who came to the meeting have been arrested. Retrace your steps. We are returning to the old *rendezvous* in the Rue Blanche. I have been looking for you to tell you this.”

A cab was passing; Charamaule hailed the driver. We jumped in, followed by the crowd, shouting, “Vive la République! Vive Victor Hugo!”

It appears that just at that moment a squadron of *sergents de ville* arrived on the Boulevard to arrest me. The coachman drove off at full speed. A quarter of an hour afterwards we reached the Rue Blanche.

CHAPTER VIII.

“VIOLATION OF THE CHAMBER”

At seven o’clock in the morning the Pont de la Concorde was still free. The large grated gate of the Palace of the Assembly was closed; through the bars might be seen the flight of steps, that flight of steps whence the Republic had been proclaimed on the 4th May, 1848, covered with soldiers; and their piled arms might be distinguished upon the platform behind those high columns, which, during the time of the Constituent Assembly, after the 15th of May and the 23d June, masked small mountain mortars, loaded and pointed.

A porter with a red collar, wearing the livery of the Assembly, stood by the little door of the grated gate. From time to time Representatives arrived. The porter said, “Gentlemen, are you Representatives?” and opened the door. Sometimes he asked their names.

M. Dupin’s quarters could be entered without hindrance. In the great gallery, in the dining-room, in the *salon d’honneur* of the Presidency, liveried attendants silently opened the doors as usual.

Before daylight, immediately after the arrest of the Questors MM. Baze and Leflô, M. de Panat, the only Questor who remained free, having been spared or disdained as a Legitimist, awoke M. Dupin and begged him to summon immediately the Representatives from their own homes. M. Dupin returned this unprecedented answer, “I do not see any urgency.”

Almost at the same time as M. Panat, the Representative Jerôme Bonaparte had hastened thither. He had summoned M. Dupin to place himself at the head of the Assembly. M. Dupin had answered, “I cannot, I am guarded.” Jerôme Bonaparte burst out laughing. In fact, no one had deigned to place a sentinel at M. Dupin’s door; they knew that it was guarded by his meanness.

It was only later on, towards noon, that they took pity on him. They felt that the contempt was too great, and allotted him two sentinels.

At half-past seven, fifteen or twenty Representatives, among whom were MM. Eugène Sue, Joret, de Rességuier, and de Talhouet, met together in M. Dupin’s room. They also had vainly argued with M. Dupin. In the recess of a window a clever member of the Majority, M. Desmousseaux de Givré, who was a little deaf and exceedingly exasperated, almost quarrelled with a Representative of the Right like himself whom he wrongly supposed to be favorable to the *coup d'état*.

M. Dupin, apart from the group of Representatives, alone dressed in black, his hands behind his back, his head sunk on his breast, walked up and down before the fire-place, where a large fire was burning. In his own room, and in his very presence, they were talking loudly about himself, yet he seemed not to hear.

Two members of the Left came in, Benoît (du Rhône), and Crestin. Crestin entered the room, went straight up to M. Dupin, and said to him, "President, you know what is going on? How is it that the Assembly has not yet been convened?"

M. Dupin halted, and answered, with a shrug which was habitual with him, —

"There is nothing to be done."

And he resumed his walk.

"It is enough," said M. de Rességuier.

"It is too much," said Eugène Sue.

All the Representatives left the room.

In the meantime the Pont de la Concorde became covered with troops. Among them General Vast-Vimeux, lean, old, and little; his lank white hair plastered over his temples, in full uniform, with his laced hat on his head. He was laden with two huge epaulets, and displayed his scarf, not that of a Representative, but of a general, which scarf, being too long, trailed on the ground. He crossed the bridge on foot, shouting to the soldiers inarticulate cries of enthusiasm for the Empire and the *coup d'état*. Such figures as these were seen in 1814. Only instead of wearing a large tri-colored, cockade, they wore a large white cockade. In the main the same phenomenon; old men crying, "Long live the Past!" Almost at the same moment M. de Larochejaquelein crossed the Place de la Concorde, surrounded by a hundred men in blouses, who followed him in silence, and with an air of curiosity. Numerous regiments of cavalry were drawn up in the grand avenue of the Champs Elysées.

At eight o'clock a formidable force invested the Legislative Palace. All the approaches were guarded, all the doors were shut. Some Representatives nevertheless succeeded in penetrating into the interior of the Palace, not, as has been wrongly stated, by the passage of the President's house on the side of the Esplanade of the Invalides, but by the little door of the Rue de Bourgogne, called the Black Door. This door, by what omission or what connivance I do not know, remained open till noon on the 2d December. The Rue de Bourgogne was nevertheless full of troops. Squads of soldiers scattered here and there in the Rue de l'Université allowed passers-by, who were few and far between, to use it as a thoroughfare.

The Representatives who entered by the door in Rue de Bourgogne, penetrated as far as the Salle des Conférences, where they met their colleagues coming out from M. Dupin.

A numerous group of men, representing every shade of opinion in the Assembly, was speedily assembled in this hall, amongst whom were MM.

Eugène Sue, Richardet, Fayolle, Joret, Marc Dufraisse, Benoît (du Rhône), Canet, Gambon, d'Adelsward, Créqu, Répellin, Teillard-Latérisse, Rantion, General Leydet, Paulin Durrieu, Chanay, Brilliez, Collas (de la Gironde), Monet, Gaston, Favreau, and Albert de Rességuier.

Each new-comer accosted M. de Panat.

"Where are the vice-Presidents?"

"In prison."

"And the two other Questors?"

"Also in prison. And I beg you to believe, gentlemen," added M. de Panat, "that I have had nothing to do with the insult which has been offered me, in not arresting me."

Indignation was at its height; every political shade was blended in the same sentiment of contempt and anger, and M. de Rességuier was no less energetic than Eugène Sue. For the first time the Assembly seemed only to have one heart and one voice. Each at length said what he thought of the man of the Elysée, and it was then seen that for a long time past Louis Bonaparte had imperceptibly created a profound unanimity in the Assembly — the unanimity of contempt.

M. Collas (of the Gironde) gesticulated and told his story. He came from the Ministry of the Interior. He had seen M. de Morny, he had spoken to him; and he, M. Collas, was incensed beyond measure at M. Bonaparte's crime. Since then, that Crime has made him Councillor of State.

M. de Panat went hither and thither among the groups, announcing to the Representatives that he had convened the Assembly for one o'clock. But it was impossible to wait until that hour. Time pressed. At the Palais Bourbon, as in the Rue Blanche, it was the universal feeling that each hour which passed by helped to accomplish the *coup d'état*. Every one felt as a reproach the weight of his silence or of his inaction; the circle of iron was closing in, the tide of soldiers rose unceasingly, and silently invaded the Palace; at each instant a sentinel the more was found at a door, which a moment before had been free. Still, the group of Representatives assembled together in the Salle des Conférences was as yet respected. It was necessary to act, to speak, to deliberate, to struggle, and not to lose a minute.

Gambon said, "Let us try Dupin once more; he is our official man, we have need of him." They went to look for him. They could not find him. He was no longer there, he had disappeared, he was away, hidden, crouching, cowering, concealed, he had vanished, he was buried. Where? No one knew. Cowardice has unknown holes.

Suddenly a man entered the hall. A man who was a stranger to the Assembly, in uniform, wearing the epaulet of a superior officer and a sword by his side. He was a major of the 42d, who came to summon the Representatives to quit their own House. All, Royalists and Republicans alike, rushed upon him. Such was the expression of an indignant eye-witness. General Leydet addressed him in language such as leaves an impression on the cheek rather than on the ear.

"I do my duty, I fulfil my instructions," stammered the officer.

"You are an idiot, if you think you are doing your duty," cried Leydet to him, "and you are a scoundrel if you know that you are committing a crime. Your name? What do you call yourself? Give me your name."

The officer refused to give his name, and replied, "So, gentlemen, you will not withdraw?"

"No."

"I shall go and obtain force."

"Do so."

He left the room, and in actual fact went to obtain orders from the Ministry of the Interior.

The Representatives waited in that kind of indescribable agitation which might be called the Strangling of Right by Violence.

In a short time one of them who had gone out came back hastily, and warned them that two companies of the *Gendarmerie Mobile* were coming with their guns in their hands.

Marc Dufraisse cried out, “Let the outrage be thorough. Let the *coup d’état* find us on our seats. Let us go to the Salle des Séances,” he added. “Since things have come to such a pass, let us afford the genuine and living spectacle of an 18th Brumaire.”

They all repaired to the Hall of Assembly. The passage was free. The

Salle Casimir-Périer was not yet occupied by the soldiers.

They numbered about sixty. Several were girded with their scarves of office. They entered the Hall meditatively.

There, M. de Rességuier, undoubtedly with a good purpose, and in order to form a more compact group, urged that they should all install themselves on the Right side.

“No,” said Marc Dufraisse, “every one to his bench.” They scattered themselves about the Hall, each in his usual place.

M. Monet, who sat on one of the lower benches of the Left Centre, held in his hand a copy of the Constitution.

Several minutes elapsed. No one spoke. It was the silence of expectation which precedes decisive deeds and final crises, and during which every one seems respectfully to listen to the last instructions of his conscience.

Suddenly the soldiers of the *Gendarmerie Mobile*, headed by a captain with his sword drawn, appeared on the threshold. The Hall of Assembly was violated. The Representatives rose from their seats simultaneously, shouting “Vive la République!”

The Representative Monet alone remained standing, and in a loud and indignant voice, which resounded through the empty hall like a trumpet, ordered the soldiers to halt.

The soldiers halted, looking at the Representatives with a bewildered air.

The soldiers as yet only blocked up the lobby of the Left, and had not passed beyond the Tribune.

Then the Representative Monet read the Articles 36, 37, and 68 of the

Constitution.

Articles 36 and 37 established the inviolability of the Representatives. Article 68 deposed the President in the event of treason.

That moment was a solemn one. The soldiers listened in silence.

The Articles having been read, Representative d’Adelsward, who sat on the first lower bench of the Left, and who was nearest to the soldiers, turned towards them and said, —

“Soldiers, you see that the President of the Republic is a traitor, and would make traitors of you. You violate the sacred precinct of rational Representation. In the name of the Constitution, in the name of the Law, we order you to withdraw.”

While Adelsward was speaking, the major commanding the *Gendarmerie Mobile* had entered.

“Gentlemen,” said he, “I have orders to request you to retire, and, if you do not withdraw of your own accord, to expel you.”

“Orders to expel us!” exclaimed Adelsward; and all the Representatives added, “Whose orders; Let us see the orders. Who signed the orders?”

The major drew forth a paper and unfolded it. Scarcely had he unfolded it than he attempted to replace it in his pocket, but General Leydet threw himself upon him and seized his arm. Several Representatives leant forward, and read the order for the expulsion of the Assembly, signed “Fortoul, Minister of the Marine.”

Marc Dufraisse turned towards the *Gendarmes Mobiles*, and cried out to them, —

“Soldiers, your very presence here is an act of treason. Leave the Hall!”

The soldiers seemed undecided. Suddenly a second column emerged from the door on the right, and at a signal from the commander, the captain shouted, —

“Forward! Turn them all out!”

Then began an indescribable hand-to-hand fight between the gendarmes and the legislators. The soldiers, with their guns in their hands, invaded the benches of the Senate. Repellin, Chanay, Rantion, were forcibly torn from their seats. Two gendarmes rushed upon Marc Dufraisse, two upon Gambon. A long struggle took place on the first bench of the Right, the same place where MM. Odilon Barrot and Abbatucci were in the habit of sitting. Paulin Durrieu resisted violence by force, it needed three men to drag him from his bench. Monet was thrown down upon the benches of the Commissaries. They seized Adelsward by the throat, and thrust him outside the Hall. Richardet, a feeble man, was thrown down and brutally treated. Some were pricked with the points of the bayonets; nearly all had their clothes torn.

The commander shouted to the soldiers, “Rake them out.”

It was thus that sixty Representatives of the People were taken by the collar by the *coup d’état*, and driven from their seats. The manner in which the deed was executed completed the treason. The physical performance was worthy of the moral performance.

The three last to come out were Fayolle, Teillard-Latérisse, and Paulin Durrieu.

They were allowed to pass by the great door of the Palace, and they found themselves in the Place Bourgogne.

The Place Bourgogne was occupied by the 42d Regiment of the Line, under the orders of Colonel Garderens.

Between the Palace and the statue of the Republic, which occupied the centre of the square, a piece of artillery was pointed at the Assembly opposite the great door.

By the side of the cannon some Chasseurs de Vincennes were loading their guns and biting their cartridges.

Colonel Garderens was on horseback near a group of soldiers, which attracted the attention of the Representatives Teillard-Latérisse, Fayolle, and Paulin Durrieu.

In the middle of this group three men, who had been arrested, were struggling crying, “Long live the Constitution! Vive la République!”

Fayolle, Paulin Durrieu, and Teillard-Latérisse approached, and recognized in the three prisoners three members of the majority, Representatives Toupet-des-Vignes Radoubt, Lafosse, and Arbey.

Representative Arbey was warmly protesting. As he raised his voice, Colonel Garderens cut him short with these words, which are worthy of preservation, —

“Hold your tongue! One word more, and I will have you thrashed with the butt-end of a musket.”

The three Representatives of the Left indignantly called on the Colonel to release their colleagues.

“Colonel,” said Fayolle, “You break the law threefold.”

“I will break it sixfold,” answered the Colonel, and he arrested Fayolle, Durrieu, and Teillard-Latérisse.

The soldiery were ordered to conduct them to the guard house of the Palace then being built for the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

On the way the six prisoners, marching between a double file of bayonets, met three of their colleagues Representatives Eugène Sue, Chanay, and Benoist (du Rhône).

Eugène Sue placed himself before the officer who commanded the detachment, and said to him, —

“We summon you to set our colleagues at liberty.”

“I cannot do so,” answered the officer.

“In that case complete your crimes,” said Eugène Sue, “We summon you to arrest us also.”

The officer arrested them.

They were taken to the guard-house of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, and, later on, to the barracks of the Quai d’Orsay. It was not till night that two companies of the line came to transfer them to this ultimate resting-place.

While placing them between his soldiers the commanding officer bowed down to the ground, politely remarking, “Gentlemen, my men’s guns are loaded.”

The clearance of the hall was carried out, as we have said, in a disorderly fashion, the soldiers pushing the Representatives before them through all the outlets.

Some, and amongst the number those of whom we have just spoken, wens out by the Rue de Bourgogne, others were dragged through the Salle des Pas Perdus towards the grated door opposite the Pont de la Concorde.

The Salle des Pas Perdus has an ante-chamber, a sort of crossway room, upon which opened the staircase of the High Tribune, and several doors, amongst others the great glass door of the gallery which leads to the apartments of the President of the Assembly.

As soon as they had reached this crossway room which adjoins the little rotunda, where the side door of exit to the Palace is situated, the soldiers set the Representatives free.

There, in a few moments, a group was formed, in which the Representatives Canet and Favreau began to speak. One universal cry was raised, “Let us search for Dupin, let us drag him here if it is necessary.”

They opened the glass door and rushed into the gallery. This time M. Dupin was at home. M. Dupin, having learnt that the gendarmes had cleared out the Hall, had come out of his hiding-place. The Assembly being thrown prostrate, Dupin stood erect. The law being made prisoner, this man felt himself set free.

The group of Representatives, led by MM. Canet and Favreau, found him in his study.

There a dialogue ensued. The Representatives summoned the President to put himself at their head, and to re-enter the Hall, he, the man of the Assembly, with them, the men of the Nation.

M. Dupin refused point-blank, maintained his ground, was very firm, and clung bravely to his nonentity.

“What do you want me to do?” said he, mingling with his alarmed protests many law maxims and Latin quotations, an instinct of chattering jays, who pour forth all their vocabulary when they are frightened. “What do you want me to do? Who am I? What can I do? I am nothing. No one is any longer anything. *Ubi nihil, nihil*. Might is there. Where there is Might the people lose their Rights. *Novus nascitur ordo*. Shape your course accordingly. I am obliged to submit. *Dura lex, sed lex*. A law of necessity we admit, but not a law of right. But what is to be done? I ask to be let alone. I can do nothing. I do what I can. I am not wanting in good will. If I had a corporal and four men, I would have them killed.”

“This man only recognizes force,” said the Representatives. “Very well, let us employ force.”

They used violence towards him, they girded him with a scarf like a cord round his neck, and, as they had said, they dragged him towards the Hall, begging for his “liberty,” moaning, kicking — I would say wrestling, if the word were not too exalted.

Some minutes after the clearance, this Salle des Pas Perdus, which had just witnessed Representatives pass by in the clutch of gendarmes, saw M. Dupin in the clutch of the Representatives.

They did not get far. Soldiers barred the great green folding-doors. Colonel Espinasse hurried thither, the commander of the gendarmerie came up. The butt-ends of a pair of pistols were seen peeping out of the commander’s pocket.

The colonel was pale, the commander was pale, M. Dupin was livid. Both sides were afraid. M. Dupin was afraid of the colonel; the colonel assuredly was not afraid of M. Dupin, but behind this laughable and miserable figure he saw a terrible phantom rise up — his crime, and he trembled. In Homer there is a scene where Nemesis appears behind Thersites.

M. Dupin remained for some moments stupefied, bewildered and speechless.

The Representative Gambon exclaimed to him, —

“Now then, speak, M. Dupin, the Left does not interrupt you.”

Then, with the words of the Representatives at his back, and the bayonets of the soldiers at his breast, the unhappy man spoke. What his mouth uttered at this moment, what the President of the Sovereign Assembly of France stammered to the gendarmes at this intensely critical moment, no one could gather.

Those who heard the last gasps of this moribund cowardice, hastened to purify their ears. It appears, however, that he stuttered forth something like this: —

“You are Might, you have bayonets; I invoke Right and I leave you. I have the honor to wish you good day.”

He went away.

They let him go. At the moment of leaving he turned round and let fall a few more words. We will not gather them up. History has no rag-picker’s basket.

This grated door was closed on December 2, and was not reopened until the 12th March, when M. Louis Bonaparte came to inspect the works of the Hall of the Corps Legislatif.

CHAPTER IX.

AN END WORSE THAN DEATH

We should have been glad to have put aside, never to have spoken of him again, this man who had borne for three years this most honorable title, President of the National Assembly of France, and who had only known how to be lacquey to the majority. He contrived in his last hour to sink even lower than could have been believed possible even for him. His career in the Assembly had been that of a valet, his end was that of a scullion.

The unprecedented attitude that M. Dupin assumed before the gendarmes when uttering with a grimace his mockery of a protest, even engendered suspicion. Gambion exclaimed, “He resists like an accomplice. He knew all.”

We believe these suspicions to be unjust. M. Dupin knew nothing. Who indeed amongst the organizers of the *coup d’état* would have taken the trouble to make sure of his joining them? Corrupt M. Dupin? was it possible? and, further, to what purpose? To pay him? Why? It would be money wasted when fear alone was enough. Some connivances are secured before they are sought for. Cowardice is the old fawner upon felony. The blood of the law is quickly wiped up. Behind the assassin who holds the poniard comes the trembling wretch who holds the sponge.

Dupin took refuge in his study. They followed him. “My God!” he cried, “can’t they understand that I want to be left in peace.”

In truth they had tortured him ever since the morning, in order to extract from him an impossible scrap of courage.

“You ill-treat me worse than the gendarmes,” said he.

The Representatives installed themselves in his study, seated themselves at his table, and, while he groaned and scolded in an arm-chair, they drew up a formal report of what had just taken place, as they wished to leave an official record of the outrage in the archives.

When the official report was ended Representative Canet read it to the President, and offered him a pen.

“What do you want me to do with this?” he asked.

“You are the President,” answered Canet. “This is our last sitting. It is your duty to sign the official report.”

This man refused.

CHAPTER X.

THE BLACK DOOR

M. Dupin is a matchless disgrace.

Later on he had his reward. It appears that he became some sort of an Attorney-General at the Court of Appeal.

M. Dupin renders to Louis Bonaparte the service of being in his place the meanest of men.

To continue this dismal history.

The Representatives of the Right, in their first bewilderment caused by the *coup d'état*, hastened in large numbers to M. Daru, who was Vice-President of the Assembly, and at the same time one of the Presidents of the Pyramid Club. This Association had always supported the policy of the Elysée, but without believing that a *coup d'état* was premeditated. M. Daru lived at No. 75, Rue de Lille.

Towards ten o'clock in the morning about a hundred of these Representatives had assembled at M. Daru's home. They resolved to attempt to penetrate into the Hall where the Assembly held its sittings. The Rue de Lille opens out into the Rue de Bourgogne, almost opposite the little door by which the Palace is entered, and which is called the Black Door.

They turned their steps towards this door, with M. Daru at their head. They marched arm in arm and three abreast. Some of them had put on their scarves of office. They took them off later on.

The Black Door, half-open as usual, was only guarded by two sentries.

Some of the most indignant, and amongst them M. de Kerdrel, rushed towards this door and tried to pass. The door, however, was violently shut, and there ensued between the Representatives and the *sergents de ville* who hastened up, a species of struggle, in which a Representative had his wrist sprained.

At the same time a battalion which was drawn up on the Place de Bourgogne moved on, and came at the double towards the group of Representatives. M. Daru, stately and firm, signed to the commander to stop; the battalion halted, and M. Daru, in the name of the Constitution, and in his capacity as Vice-President of the Assembly, summoned the soldiers to lay down their arms, and to give free passage to the Representatives of the Sovereign People.

The commander of the battalion replied by an order to clear the street immediately, declaring that there was no longer an Assembly; that as for himself, he did not know what the Representatives of the People were, and that if those persons before him did not retire of their own accord, he would drive them back by force.

“We will only yield to violence,” said M. Daru.

“You commit high treason,” added M. de Kerdrel.

The officer gave the order to charge.

The soldiers advanced in close order.

There was a moment of confusion; almost a collision. The Representatives, forcibly driven back, ebbed into the Rue de Lille. Some of them fell down. Several members of the Right were rolled in the mud by the soldiers. One of them, M. Etienne, received a blow on the shoulder from the butt-end of a musket. We may here add that a week afterwards M. Etienne was a member of that concern which they styled the Consultative Committee. He found the *coup d’état* to his taste, the blow with the butt-end of a musket included.

They went back to M. Daru’s house, and on the way the scattered group reunited, and was even strengthened by some new-comers.

“Gentlemen,” said M. Daru, “the President has failed us, the Hall is closed against us. I am the Vice-President; my house is the Palace of the Assembly.”

He opened a large room, and there the Representatives of the Right installed themselves. At first the discussions were somewhat noisy. M. Daru, however, observed that the moments were precious, and silence was restored.

The first measure to be taken was evidently the deposition of the President of the Republic by virtue of Article 68 of the Constitution.

Some Representatives of the party which was called *Burgraves* sat round a table and prepared the deed of deposition.

As they were about to read it aloud a Representative who came in from out of doors appeared at the door of the room, and announced to the Assembly that the Rue de Lille was becoming filled with troops, and that the house was being surrounded.

There was not a moment to lose.

M. Benoist-d’Azy said, “Gentlemen, let us go to the Mairie of the tenth arrondissement; there we shall be able to deliberate under the protection of the tenth legion, of which our colleague, General Lauriston, is the colonel.”

M. Daru’s house had a back entrance by a little door which was at the bottom of the garden. Most of the Representatives went out that way.

M. Daru was about to follow them. Only himself, M. Odilon Barrot, and two or three others remained in the room, when the door opened. A captain entered, and said to M. Daru, —

“Sir, you are my prisoner.”

“Where am I to follow you?” asked M. Daru.

“I have orders to watch over you in your own house.”

The house, in truth, was militarily occupied, and it was thus that M. Daru was prevented from taking part in the sitting at the Mairie of the tenth arrondissement.

The officer allowed M. Odilon Barrot to go out.

CHAPTER XI.

THE HIGH COURT OF JUSTICE

While all this was taking place on the left bank of the river, towards noon a man was noticed walking up and down the great Salles des Pas Perdus of the Palace of Justice. This man, carefully buttoned up in an overcoat, appeared to be attended at a distance by several possible supporters — for certain police enterprises employ assistants whose dubious appearance renders the passers-by uneasy, so much so that they wonder whether they are magistrates or thieves. The man in the buttoned-up overcoat loitered from door to door, from lobby to lobby, exchanging signs of intelligence with the myrmidons who followed him; then came back to the great Hall, stopping on the way the barristers, solicitors, ushers, clerks, and attendants, and repeating to all in a low voice, so as not to be heard by the passers-by, the same question. To this question some answered "Yes," others replied "No." And the man set to work again, prowling about the Palace of Justice with the appearance of a bloodhound seeking the trail.

He was a Commissary of the Arsenal Police.

What was he looking for?

The High Court of Justice.

What was the High Court of Justice doing?

It was hiding.

Why? To sit in Judgment?

Yes and no.

The Commissary of the Arsenal Police had that morning received from the Prefect Maupas the order to search everywhere for the place where the High Court of Justice might be sitting, if perchance it thought it its duty to meet. Confusing the High Court with the Council of State, the Commissary of Police had first gone to the Quai d'Orsay. Having found nothing, not even the Council of State, he had come away empty-handed, at all events had turned his steps towards the Palace of Justice, thinking that as he had to search for justice he would perhaps find it there.

Not finding it, he went away.

The High Court, however, had nevertheless met together.

Where, and how? We shall see.

At the period whose annals we are now chronicling, before the present reconstruction of the old buildings of Paris, when the Palace of Justice was reached by the Cour de Harlay, a staircase the reverse of majestic led thither by turning out into a long corridor called the Gallerie Mercière. Towards the middle of this corridor there were two doors; one on the right, which led to the Court of Appeal, the other on the left, which led to the Court of Cassation. The folding-doors to the left opened upon an old gallery called St. Louis, recently restored, and which serves at the present time for a Salle des Pas Perdus to the barristers of the Court of Cassation. A wooden statue of St. Louis stood opposite the entrance door. An entrance contrived in a niche to the right of this statue led into a winding lobby ending in a sort of blind passage, which apparently was closed by two double doors. On the door to the right might be read “First President’s Room;” on the door to the left, “Council Chamber.” Between these two doors, for the convenience of the barristers going from the Hall to the Civil Chamber, which formerly was the Great Chamber of Parliament, had been formed a narrow and dark passage, in which, as one of them remarked, “every crime could be committed with impunity.”

Leaving on one side the First President’s Room and opening the door which bore the inscription “Council Chamber,” a large room was crossed, furnished with a huge horse-shoe table, surrounded by green chairs. At the end of this room, which in 1793 had served as a deliberating hall for the juries of the Revolutionary Tribunal, there was a door placed in the wainscoting, which led into a little lobby where were two doors, on the right the door of the room appertaining to the President of the Criminal Chamber, on the left the door of the Refreshment Room. “Sentenced to death! — Now let us go and dine!” These two ideas, Death and Dinner, have jostled against each other for centuries. A third door closed the extremity of this lobby. This door was, so to speak, the last of the Palace of Justice, the farthest off, the least known, the most hidden; it opened into what was called the Library of the Court of Cassation, a large square room lighted by two windows overlooking the great inner yard of the Conciègerie, furnished with a few leather chairs, a large table covered with green cloth, and with law books lining the walls from the floor to the ceiling.

This room, as may be seen, is the most secluded and the best hidden of any in the Palace.

It was here, — in this room, that there arrived successively on the 2d December, towards eleven o’clock in the morning, numerous men dressed in black, without robes, without badges of office, affrighted, bewildered, shaking their heads, and whispering together. These trembling men were the High Court of Justice.

The High Court of Justice, according to the terms of the Constitution, was composed of seven magistrates; a President, four Judges, and two Assistants, chosen by the Court of Cassation from among its own members and renewed every year.

In December, 1851, these seven judges were named Hardouin, Pataille, Moreau, Delapalme, Cauchy, Grandet, and Quesnault, the two last-named being Assistants.

These men, almost unknown, had nevertheless some antecedents. M. Cauchy, a few years previously President of the Chamber of the Royal Court of Paris, an amiable man and easily frightened, was the brother of the mathematician, member of the Institute, to whom we owe the computation of waves of sound, and of the ex-Registrar Archivist of the Chamber of Peers. M. Delapalme had been Advocate-General, and had taken a prominent part in the Press trials under the Restoration; M. Pataille had been Deputy of the Centre under the Monarchy of July; M. Moreau (de la Seine) was noteworthy, inasmuch he had been nicknamed “de la Seine” to distinguish him from M. Moreau (de la Meurthe), who on his side was noteworthy, inasmuch as he had been nicknamed “de la Meurthe” to distinguish him from M. Moreau (de la Seine). The first Assistant, M. Grandet, had been President of the Chamber at Paris. I have read this panegyric of him: “He is known to possess no individuality or opinion of his own whatsoever.” The second Assistant, M. Quesnault, a Liberal, a Deputy, a Public Functionary, Advocate-General, a Conservative, learned, obedient, had attained by making a stepping-stone of each of these attributes, to the Criminal Chamber of the Court of Cassation, where he was known as one of the most severe members. 1848 had shocked his notion of Right, he had resigned after the 24th of February; he did not resign after the 2d December.

M. Hardouin, who presided over the High Court, was an ex-President of Assizes, a religious man, a rigid Jansenist, noted amongst his colleagues as a “scrupulous magistrate,” living in Port Royal, a diligent reader of Nicolle, belonging to the race of the old Parliamentarians of the Marais, who used to go to the Palais de Justice mounted on a mule; the mule had now gone out of fashion, and whoever visited President Hardouin would have found no more obstinacy in his stable than in his conscience.

On the morning of the 2d December, at nine o'clock, two men mounted the stairs of M. Hardouin's house, No. 10, Rue de Condé, and met together at his door. One was M. Pataille; the other, one of the most prominent members of the bar of the Court of Cassation, was the ex-Constituent Martin (of Strasbourg). M. Pataille had just placed himself at M. Hardouin's disposal.

Martin's first thought, while reading the placards of the *coup d'état*, had been for the High Court. M. Hardouin ushered M. Pataille into a room adjoining his study, and received Martin (of Strasbourg) as a man to whom he did not wish to speak before witnesses. Being formally requested by Martin (of Strasbourg) to convene the High Court, he begged that he would leave him alone, declared that the High Court would "do its duty," but that first he must "confer with his colleagues," concluding with this expression, "It shall be done to-day or to-morrow." "To-day or to-morrow!" exclaimed Martin (of Strasbourg); "Mr. President, the safety of the Republic, the safety of the country, perhaps, depends on what the High Court will or will not do. Your responsibility is great; bear that in mind. The High Court of Justice does not do its duty to-day or to-morrow; it does it at once, at the moment, without losing a minute, without an instant's hesitation."

Martin (of Strasbourg) was right, Justice always belongs to To-day.

Martin (of Strasbourg) added, "If you want a man for active work, I am at your service." M. Hardouin declined the offer; declared that he would not lose a moment, and begged Martin (of Strasbourg) to leave him to "confer" with his colleague, M. Pataille.

In fact, he called together the High Court for eleven o'clock, and it was settled that the meeting should take place in the Hall of the Library.

The Judges were punctual. At a quarter-past eleven they were all assembled. M. Pataille arrived the last.

They sat at the end of the great green table. They were alone in the Library.

There was no ceremonial. President Hardouin thus opened the debate: "Gentlemen, there is no need to explain the situation, we all know what it is."

Article 68 of the Constitution was imperative. It was necessary that the High Court should meet *under penalty of high treason*. They gained time, they swore themselves in, they appointed as Recorder of the High Court M. Bernard, Recorder of the Court of Cassation, and they sent to fetch him, and while waiting requested the librarian, M. Denevers, to hold his pen in readiness. They settled the time and place for an evening meeting. They talked of the conduct of the Constituent Martin (of Strasbourg), with which they were offended, regarding it almost as a nudge of the elbow given by Politics to Justice. They spoke a little of Socialism, of the Mountain, and of the Red Republic, and a little also of the judgment which they had to pronounce. They chatted, they told stories, they found fault, they speculated, they spun out the time.

What were they waiting for?

We have related what the Commissary of police was doing for his part in his department.

And, in reference to this design, when the accomplices of the *coup d'état* considered that the people in order to summon the High Court to do its duty, could invade the Palace of Justice, and that they would never look for it where it was assembled, they felt that this room had been excellently chosen. When, however, they considered that the police would also doubtless come to expel the High Court, and that perhaps they would not succeed in finding it, each one regretted to himself the choice of the room. They wished to hide the High Court, they had succeeded too well. It was grievous to think that perhaps when the police and the armed force should arrive, matters would have gone too far, and the High Court would be too deeply compromised.

They had appointed a Recorder, now they must organize a Court. A second step, more serious than the first.

The judges delayed, hoping that fortune would end by deciding on one side or the other, either for the Assembly or for the President, either against the *coup d'état* or for it, and that there might thus be a vanquished party, so that the High Court could then with all safety lay its hands upon somebody.

They lengthily argued the question, whether they should immediately decree the accusation of the President, or whether they should draw up a simple order of inquiry. The latter course was adopted.

They drew up a judgment, not the honest and outspoken judgment which was placarded by the efforts of the Representatives of the Left and published, in which are found these words of bad taste, *Crime* and *High Treason*; this judgment, a weapon of war, has never existed otherwise than as a projectile. Wisdom in a judge sometimes consists in drawing up a judgment which is not one, one of those judgments which has no binding force, in which everything is conditional; in which no one is incriminated, and nothing, is called by its right name. There are species of intermediate courses which allow of waiting and seeing; in delicate crises men who are in earnest must not inconsiderately mingle with possible events that bluntness which is called Justice. The High Court took advantage of this, it drew up a prudent judgment; this judgment is not known; it is published here for the first time. Here it is. It is a masterpiece of equivocal style: —

EXTRACT FROM THE REGISTRY OF THE HIGH COURT OF JUSTICE.

“The High Court of Justice.

“According to Article 68 of the Constitution, considering that printed placards beginning with these words, ‘The President of the Republic’ and ending with the signatures, ‘Louis Napoléon Bonaparte’ and ‘De Morny, Minister of the Interior,’ the said placards ordaining amongst other measures the dissolution of the National Assembly, have been posted to-day on the walls of Paris, that this fact of the dissolution of the National Assembly by the President of the Republic would be of the nature to constitute the case provided for by Article 68 of the Constitution, and renders, in the terms of the aforesaid article, the meeting of the High Court indispensable.

“It is declared that the High Court of Justice is organized, that it appoints … to fulfil with it the functions of the Public Ministry; that M. Bernard, the Recorder of the Court of Cassation, should fulfil the duties of Recorder, and in order to proceed further, according to the terms of the aforesaid Article 68 of the Constitution, the Court will adjourn until to-morrow, the 3d of December, at noon.

“Drawn up and discussed in the Council Chamber, where were sitting MM. Hardouin, president, Pataille, Moreau, Delapalme, and Cauchy, judges, December 2, 1851.”

The two Assistants, MM. Grandet and Quesnault, offered to sign the decree, but the President ruled that it would be more correct only to accept the signatures of the titular judges, the Assistants not being qualified when the Court was complete.

In the meantime it was one o’clock, the news began to spread through the palace that a decree of deposition against Louis Bonaparte had been drawn up by a part of the Assembly; one of the judges who had gone out during the debate, brought back this rumor to his colleagues. This coincided with an outburst of energy. The President observed that it would be to the purpose to appoint a Procureur-General.

There was a difficulty. Whom should they appoint? In all preceding trials they had always chosen for a Procureur-General at the High Court the Procureur-General at the Court of Appeal of Paris. Why should they introduce an innovation? They determined upon this Procureur-General of the Court of Appeal. This Procureur-General was at the time M. de Royer, who had been keeper of the Seals for M. Bonaparte. Thence a new difficulty and a long debate.

Would M. de Royer consent? M. Hardouin undertook to go and make the offer to him. He had only to cross the Mercière Gallery.

M. de Royer was in his study. The proposal greatly embarrassed him. He remained speechless from the shock. To accept was serious, to refuse was still more serious.

There was risk of treason. On the 2d December, an hour after noon, the *coup d’état* was still a crime. M. de Royer, not knowing whether the high treason would succeed, ventured to stigmatize the deed as such in private, and cast down his eyes with a noble shame before this violation of the laws which, three months later, numerous purple robes, including his own, endorsed with their oaths. But his indignation did not go to the extent of supporting the indictment. An indictment speaks aloud. M. de Royer as yet only murmured. He was perplexed.

M. Hardouin understood this state of conscience. Persistence would have been unreasonable. He withdrew.

He returned to the room where his colleagues were awaiting him.

In the meantime the Commissary of the Arsenal Police had come back.

He had ended by succeeding in “unearthing” — such was his expression — the High Court. He penetrated as far as the Council Chamber of the Civil Chamber; at that moment he had still no other escort than the few police agents of the morning. A boy was passing by. The Commissary asked him the whereabouts of the High Court. “The High Court?” answered the boy; “what is that?” Nevertheless the boy told the Librarian, who came up. A few words were exchanged between M. Denevers and the Commissary.

“What are you asking for?”

“The High Court.”

“Who are you?”

“I want the high Court.”

“It is in session.”

“Where is it sitting?”

“Here.”

And the Librarian pointed to the door.

“Very well,” said the Commissary.

He did not add another word, and returned into the Mercière Gallery.

We have just said that he was only accompanied at that time by a few police agents.

The High Court was, in truth, in session. The President was relating to the judges his visit to the Procureur General. Suddenly a tumultuous sound of footsteps is heard in the lobby which leads from the Council Chamber to the room where they were deliberating. The door opens abruptly. Bayonets appear, and in the midst of the bayonets a man in a buttoned-up overcoat, with a tricolored sash upon his coat.

The magistrates stare, stupefied.

“Gentlemen,” said the man, “dissolve your meeting immediately.”

President Hardouin rises.

“What does this mean? Who are you? Are you aware to whom you are speaking?”

“I am aware. You are the High Court, and I am the Commissary of the Police.”

“Well, then?”

“Be off.”

There were there thirty-five municipal guards, commanded by a lieutenant, and with a drum at their head.

“But — —” said the President.

The Commissary interrupted him with these words, which are literally given, —

“Mr. President, I am not going to enter upon an oratorical combat with you. I have my orders, and I transmit them to you. Obey.”

“Whom?”

“The Prefect of Police.”

The President asked this strange question, which implied the acceptance of an order, —

“Have you a warrant?”

The Commissary answered, —

“Yes.”

And he handed a paper to the President.

The judges turned pale.

The President unfolded the paper; M. Cauchy put his head over M.

Hardouin’s shoulder. The President read but, —

“You are ordered to dissolve the High Court, and, in case of refusal, to arrest MM. Béranger, Rocher, De Boissieux, Pataille, and Hello.”

And, turning towards the judges, the President added, —

“Signed, Maupas.”

Then, addressing himself to the Commissary, he resumed, —

“There is some mistake, these are not our names. MM. Béranger, Rocher, and De Boissieux have served their time and are no longer judges of the High Court; as for M. Hello, he is dead.”

The High Court, in reality, was temporary and renewable; the *coup d’état* overthrew the Constitution, but did not understand it. The warrant signed “Maupas” was applicable to the preceding High Court. The *coup d’état* had been misled by an old list. Such is the heedlessness of assassins.

“Mr. Commissary of Police,” continued the President, “you see that these names are not ours.”

“That does not matter to me,” replied the Commissary. “Whether this warrant does or does not apply to you, disperse, or I shall arrest all of you.”

And he added, —

“At once.”

The judges were silenced; one of them picked up from the table a loose sheet of paper, which was the judgment they had drawn up, and put the paper in his pocket.

Then they went away.

The Commissary pointed to the door where the bayonets were, and said, —

“That way.”

They went out by the lobby between two ranks of soldiers. The detachment of Republican Guards escorted them as far as the St. Louis Gallery.

There they set them free; their heads bowed down.

It was about three o’clock.

While these events were taking place in the Library, close by, in the former great Chamber of the Parliament, the Court of Cassation was sitting in judgment as usual, without noticing what was happening so near at hand. It would appear, then, that the police exhaled no odor.

Let us at once have done with this High Court.

In the evening at half-past seven the seven judges met together at the house of one of their number, he who had taken away the decree; they framed an official report, drew up a protest, and recognizing the necessity of filling in the line left blank in their decree, on the proposition of M. Quesnault, appointed as Procureur-General M. Renouard, their colleague at the Court of Cessation. M. Renouard, who was immediately informed, consented.

They met together for the last time on the next day, the 3d, at eleven o’clock in the morning, an hour before the time mentioned in the judgment which we have read above, — again in the Library of the Court of Cassation. M. Renouard was present. An official minute was given to him, recording his appointment, as well as certain details with which he asked to be supplied. The judgment which had been drawn up was taken by M. Quesnault to the Recorder’s Office, and immediately entered upon the Register of the Secret Deliberations of the Court of Cassation, the High Court not having a Special Register, and having decided, from its creation, to use the Register of the Court of Cassation. After the decree they also transcribed the two documents described as follows on the Register: —

I. An official report recording the interference of the police during the discussion upon the preceding decree.

II. A minute of the appointment of M. Renouard to the office of
Procureur-General.

In addition seven copies of these different documents drawn up by the hands of the judges themselves, and signed by them all, were put in a place of safety, as also, it is said, a note-book, in which were written five other secret decisions relating to the *coup d’état*.

Does this page of the Register of the Court of Cassation exist at the present time? Is it true, as has been stated, that the prefect Maupas sent for the Register and tore out the leaf containing the decree? We have not been able to clear up this point. The Register now is shown to no one, and those employed at the Recorder's Office are dumb.

Such are the facts, let us summarize them. If this Court so called "High," had been of a character to conceive such an idea as that of doing its duty — when it had once met together the mere organization of itself was a matter of a few minutes — it would have proceeded resolutely and rapidly, it would have appointed as Procureur-General some energetic man belonging to the Court of Cassation, either from the body of magistrates, such as Freslon, or from the bar, like Martin (of Strasbourg). By virtue of Article 68, and without waiting the initiative of the Assembly, it would have drawn up a judgment stigmatizing the crime, it would have launched an order of arrest against the President and his accomplices and have ordered the removal of the person of Louis Bonaparte to jail. As for the Procureur-General he would have issued a warrant of arrest. All this could have been done by half-past eleven, and at that time no attempt had been made to dissolve the High Court. These preliminary proceedings concluded, the High Court, by going out through a nailed-up door leading into the Salle des Pas Perdus, could have descended into the street, and there have proclaimed its judgment to the people. At this time it would have met with no hindrance. Finally, and this in any case, it should have sat robed on the Judges' Bench, with all magisterial state, and when the police agent and his soldiers appeared should have ordered the soldiers, who perhaps would have obeyed them, to arrest the agent, and if the soldiers had disobeyed, should have allowed themselves to be formally dragged to prison, so that the people could see, under their own eyes, out in the open street, the filthy hoof of the *coup d'état* trampling upon the robe of Justice.

Instead of this, what steps did the High Court take? We have just seen.

"Be off with you!"

"We are going."

We can imagine, after a very different fashion, the dialogue between
Mathieu Molé and Vidocq.

This line was left blank. It was filled in later on with the name of M. Renouard, Councillor of the Court of Cassation.

CHAPTER XII.

THE MAIRIE OF THE TENTH ARRONDISSEMENT

The Representatives, having come out from M. Daru, rejoined each other and assembled in the street. There they consulted briefly, from group to group. There were a large number of them. In less than an hour, by sending notices to the houses on the left bank of the Seine alone, on account of the extreme urgency, more than three hundred members could be called together. But where should they meet? At Lemardelay's? The Rue Richelieu was guarded. At the Salle Martel? It was a long way off. They relied upon the Tenth Legion, of which General Lauriston was colonel. They showed a preference for the Mairie of the Tenth Arrondissement. Besides, the distance was short, and there was no need to cross any bridges.

They formed themselves into column, and set forth.

M. Daru, as we have said, lived in the Rue de Lille, close by the Assembly. The section of the Rue de Lille lying between his house and the Palais Bourbon was occupied by infantry. The last detachment barred his door, but it only barred it on the right, not on the left. The Representatives, on quitting M. Daru, bent their steps on the side of the Rue des Saints-Pères, and left the soldiers behind them. At that moment the soldiers had only been instructed to prevent their meeting in the Palace of the Assembly; they could quietly form themselves into a column in the street, and set forth. If they had turned to the right instead of to the left, they would have been opposed. But there were no orders for the other alternative; they passed through a gap in the instructions.

An hour afterwards this threw St. Arnaud into a fit of fury.

On their way fresh Representatives came up and swelled the column. As the members of the Right lived for the most part in the Faubourg St. Germain, the column was composed almost entirely of men belonging to the majority.

At the corner of the Quai d'Orsay they met a group of members of the Left, who had reunited after their exit from the Palace of the Assembly, and who were consulting together. There were the Representatives Esquiros, Marc Dufraisse, Victor Hennequin, Colfavru, and Chamiot.

Those who were marching at the head of the column left their places, went up to the group, and said, “Come with us.”

“Where are you going?” asked Marc Dufraisse.

To the Mairie of the Tenth Arrondissement.”

“What do you intend to do there?”

“To decree the deposition of Louis Bonaparte.”

“And afterwards?”

“Afterwards we shall go in a body to the Palace of the Assembly; we will force our way in spite of all resistance, and from the top of the steps we will read out the decree of deposition to the soldiers.”

“Very good, we will join you,” said Mare Dufraisse.

The five members of the Left marched at some distance from the column. Several of their friends who were mingled with the members of the Right rejoined them; and we may here mention a fact without giving it more importance than it possesses, namely, that the two fractions of the Assembly represented in this unpremeditated gathering marched towards the Mairie without being mingled together; one on each side of the street. It chanced that the men of the majority kept on the right side of the street, and the men of the minority on the left.

No one had a scarf of office. No outward token caused them to be recognized. The passers-by stared at them with surprise, and did not understand what was the meaning of this procession of silent men through the solitary streets of the Faubourg St. Germain. One district of Paris was as yet unaware of the *coup d’état*.

Strategically speaking, from a defensive point of view, the Mairie of the tenth Arrondissement was badly chosen. Situated in a narrow street in that short section of the Rue de Grenelle-St.-Germain which lies between the Rue des Saints-Pères and the Rue du Sépulcre, close by the cross-roads of the Croix-Rouge, where the troops could arrive from so many different points, the Mairie of the Tenth Arrondissement, confined, commanded, and blockaded on every side, was a pitiful citadel for the assailed National Representation. It is true that they no longer had the choice of a citadel, any more than later on they had the choice of a general.

Their arrival at the Mairie might have seemed a good omen. The great gate which leads into a square courtyard was shut; it opened. The post of the National Guards, composed of some twenty men, took up their arms and rendered military honors to the Assembly. The Representatives entered, a

Deputy Mayor received them with respect on the threshold of the Mairie. “The Palace of the Assembly is closed by the troops,” said the Representatives, “we have come to deliberate here.” The Deputy Mayor led them to the first story, and admitted them to the Great Municipal Hall. The National Guard cried, “Long live the National Assembly!”

The Representatives having entered, the door was shut. A crowd began to gather in the street and shouted “Long live the Assembly!” A certain number of strangers to the Assembly entered the Mairie at the same time as the Representatives. Overcrowding was feared, and two sentries were placed at a little side-door, which was left open, with orders only to allow members of the Assembly who might come afterwards to enter. M. Howyn Tranchère stationed himself at this door, and undertook to identify them.

On their arrival at the Mairie, the Representatives numbered somewhat under three hundred. They exceeded this number later on. It was about eleven o’clock in the morning. All did not go up at once into the hall where the meeting was to take place. Several, those of the Left in particular, remained in the courtyard, mingling with the National Guards and citizens.

They talked of what they were going to do.

This was the first difficulty.

The Father of the meeting was M. de Kératry.

Was he going to preside?

The Representatives who were assembled in the Great Hall were in his favor.

The Representatives remaining in the courtyard hesitated.

Marc Dufraisse went up to MM. Jules de Lasteyrie and Léon de Maleville, who had stayed behind with the Representatives of the Left, and said to them, “What are they thinking of upstairs? To make Kératry President? The name of Kératry would frighten the people as thoroughly as mine would frighten the middle classes.”

A member of the Right, M. de Keranflech, came up, and intending to support the objection, added, “And then, think of Kératry’s age. It is madness to pit a man of eighty against this hour of danger.”

But Esquiros exclaimed, —

“That is a bad reason! Eighty years! They constitute a force.”

“Yes; where they are well borne,” said Colfavru. “Kératry bears them badly.”

“Nothing is greater,” resumed Esquiros, “than great octogenarians.”

"It is glorious," added Chamiot, "to be presided over by Nestor."

"No, by Gerontes," said Victor Hennequin.

These words put an end to the debate. Kératry was thrown out. MM. Léon de Maleville and Jules de Lasteyrie, two men respected by all parties, undertook to make the members of the Right listen to reason. It was decided that the "bureau" should preside. Five members of the "bureau" were present; two Vice-Presidents, MM. Benoist d'Azy and Vitet, and three Secretaries, MM. Griumult, Chapot, and Moulin. Of the two other Vice-Presidents, one, General Bedrau, was at Mazas; the other, M. Daru, was under guard in his own house. Of the three other Secretaries, two, MM. Peapin and Lacaze, men of the Elysée, were absentees; the other, M. Yvan, a member of the Left, was at the meeting of the Left, in the Rue Blanche, which was taking place almost at the same moment.

In the meantime an usher appeared on the steps of the Mairie, and cried out, as on the most peaceful days of the Assembly, "Representatives, to the sitting!"

This usher, who belonged to the Assembly, and who had followed it, shared its fortunes throughout this day, the sequestration on the Quai d'Orsay included.

At the summons of the usher all the Representatives in the courtyard, and amongst whom was one of the Vice-Presidents, M. Vitei, went upstairs to the Hall, and the sitting was opened.

This sitting was the last which the Assembly held under regular conditions. The Left, which, as we have seen, had on its side boldly recaptured the Legislative power, and had added to it that which circumstances required — as was the duty of Revolutionists; the Left, without a "bureau," without an usher, and without secretaries, held sittings in which the accurate and passionless record of shorthand was wanting, but which live in our memories and which History will gather up.

Two shorthand writers of the Assembly, MM. Grosselet and Lagache, were present at the sitting at the Mairie of the Tenth Arrondissement. They have been able to record it. The censorship of the victorious *coup d'état* has mutilated their report and has published through its historians this mangled version as the true version. One lie more. That does not matter. This shorthand recital belongs to the brief of the 2d December, it is one of the leading documents in the trial which the future will institute. In the notes of this book will be found this document complete. The passages in inverted commas are those which the censorship of M. Bonaparte has suppressed. This suppression is a proof of their significance and importance.

Shorthand reproduces everything except life. Stenography is an ear. It hears and sees not. It is therefore necessary to fill in here the inevitable blanks of the shorthand account.

In order to obtain a complete idea of this sitting of the Tenth Arrondissement, we must picture the great Hall of the Mairie, a sort of parallelogram, lighted on the right by four or five windows overlooking the courtyard; on the left, along the wall, furnished with several rows of benches which had been hastily brought thither, on which were piled up the three hundred Representatives, assembled together by chance. No one was sitting down, those in front were standing, those behind were mounted on the benches. Here and there were a few small tables. In the centre people walked to and fro. At the bottom, at the end opposite the door, was a long table furnished with benches, which occupied the whole width of the wall, behind which sat the "bureau." "Sitting" is merely the conventional term. The "bureau" did not "sit;" like the rest of the Assembly it was on its feet. The secretaries, M.M. Chapot, Moulin, and Grimault wrote standing. At certain moments the two Vice-Presidents mounted on the benches so as to be better seen from all points of the room. The table was covered by an old green tablecloth, stained with ink, three or four inkstands had been brought in, and a quire of paper was scattered about. There the decrees were written as soon as they were drawn up. They multiplied the copies, some Representatives became secretaries on the spur of the moment, and helped the official secretaries.

This great hall was on a level with the landing. It was situated, as we have said, on the first floor; it was reached by a very narrow staircase.

We must recollect that nearly the whole of the members present were members of the Right.

The first moment was a serious one. Berryer came out to advantage. Berryer, like all those extemporizers without style, will only be remembered as a name, and a much disputed name, Berryer having been rather a special pleader than an orator who believed what he said. On that day Berryer was to the point, logical and earnest. They began by this cry, "What shall we do?" "Draw up a declaration," said M. de Falloux. "A protest," said M. de Flavigny. "A decree," said Berryer.

In truth a declaration was empty air, a protest was noise, a decree was action. They cried out, “What decree?” “Deposition,” said Berryer. Deposition was the extreme limit of the energy of the Right. Beyond deposition, there was outlawry; deposition was practicable for the Right, outlawry was only possible for the Left. In fact it was the Left who outlawed Louis Bonaparte. They did it at their first meeting in the Rue Blanche. We shall see this later on. At deposition, Legality came to an end; at outlawry, the Revolution began. The recurrence of Revolutions are the logical consequences of *coups d’état*. The deposition having been voted, a man who later on turned traitor, Quentin Bauchart, exclaimed, “Let us all sign it.” All signed it. Odilon Barrot came in and signed it. Antony Thouret came in and signed it. Suddenly M. Piscatory announced that the Mayor was refusing to allow Representatives who had arrived to enter the Hall. “Order him to do so by decree,” said Berryer. And the decree was voted. Thanks to this decree, MM. Favreau and Monet entered; they came from the Legislative Palace; they related the cowardice of Dupin. M. Dahirel, one of the leaders of the Right, was exasperated, and said, “We have received bayonet thrusts.” Voices were raised, “Let us summon the Tenth Legion. Let the call to arms be beaten. Lauriston hesitates. Let us order him to protect the Assembly.” “Let us order him by decree,” said Berryer. This decree was drawn up, which, however, did not prevent Lauriston from refusing. Another decree, again proposed by Berryer, pronounced any one who had outraged the Parliamentary inviolability to be a traitor, and ordered the immediate release of those Representatives who had been wrongfully made prisoners. All this was voted at once without debate, in a sort of great unanimous confusion, and in the midst of a storm of fierce conversations. From time to time Berryer imposed silence. Then the angry outcries broke forth again. “The *coup d’état* will not dare to come here.” “We are masters here.” “We are at home.” “It would be impossible to attack us here.” “These wretches will not dare to do so.” If the uproar had been less violent, the Representatives might have heard through the open windows close at hand, the sound of soldiers loading their guns.

A regiment of Chasseurs of Vincennes had just entered silently into the garden of the Mairie, and, while waiting for orders, were loading their guns.

Little by little the sitting, at first disorderly and tumultuous, had assumed an ordinary aspect. The uproar had relapsed into a murmur. The voice of the usher, crying “Silence, gentlemen,” had succeeded in overcoming the hubbub. Every moment fresh Representatives came in, and hastened to sign the decree of deposition at the "bureau." As there was a great crowd round the "bureau" waiting to sign, a dozen loose sheets of paper to which the Representatives affixed their signatures were circulated in the great Hall and the two adjoining rooms.

The first to sign the decree of deposition was M. Dufaure, the last was M. Betting de Lancastel. Of the two Presidents, one, M. Benoist d'Azy, was addressing the Assembly; the other, M. Vitet, pale, but calm and resolute, distributed instructions and orders. M. Benoist d'Azy maintained a decorous countenance, but a certain hesitation in his speech revealed an inner agitation. Divisions, even in the Right, had not disappeared at this critical moment. A Legitimist member was overheard saying in a low voice, while speaking of one of the Vice-Presidents, "This great Vitet looks like a whited sepulchre." Vitet was an Orleanist.

Given this adventurer with whom they had to deal, this Louis Bonaparte, capable of everything, the hour and the man being wrapt in mystery, some Legitimist personages of a candid mind were seriously but comically frightened. The Marquis of —— , who acted the fly on the coach-wheel to the Right, went hither and thither, harangued, shouted, declaimed, remonstrated, proclaimed, and trembled. Another, M. A —— N —— , perspiring, red-faced, out of breath, rushed about distractedly. "Where is the guard? How many men are there? Who commands them? The officer! send me the officer! Long live the Republic! National Guard, stand firm! Long live the Republic!" All the Right shouted this cry. "You wish then to kill it," said Esquiros. Some of them were dejected; Bourbousson maintained the silence of a vanquished placeman. Another, the Viscount of —— , a relative of the Duke of Escars, was so alarmed that every moment he adjourned to a corner of the courtyard. In the crowd which filled the courtyard there was a *gamin* of Paris, a child of Athens, who has since become am elegant and charming poet, Albert Glatigny. Albert Glatigny cried out to this frightened Viscount, "Hulloa there! Do you think that *coups d'état* are extinguished in the way Gulliver put out the fire?"

Oh, Laughter, how gloomy you are when attended with Tragedy!

The Orleanists were quieter, and maintained a more becoming attitude.

This arose from the fact that they ran greater danger.

Pascal Duprat replaced at the top of the decrees the words, "République Française," which had been forgotten.

From time to time men who were not speaking on the subject of the moment mentioned this strange word, “Dupin,” open which there ensued shouts of derision and bursts of laughter. “Utter the name of that coward no more,” cried Antony Thouret.

There were motions and counter-motions; it was a continual uproar interrupted by deep and solemn silences. Alarmist phrases circulated from group to group. “We are in a blind alley.” “We are caught here as in a rat trap;” and then on each motion voices were raised: “That is it!” “It is right!” “It is settled!” They agreed in a low voice upon a rendezvous at No. 19, Rue de la Chaussée-d’Antin, in case they should be expelled from the Mairie. M. Bixio carried off the decree of deposition to get it printed. Esquiros, Marc Dufraisse, Pascal Duprat, Rigal, Lherbette, Chamiot, Latrade, Colfavru, Antony Thouret, threw in here and there energetic words of advice. M. Dufaure, resolute and indignant, protested with authority. M. Odilon Barrot, motionless in a corner, maintained the silence of stupefied silliness.

MM. Passy and de Tocqueville, in the midst of the groups, described that when they were Ministers they had always entertained an uneasy suspicion of a *coup d’état*, and that they clearly perceived this fixed idea in the brain of Louis Bonaparte. M. de Tocqueville added, “I said to myself every night, ‘I lie down to sleep a Minister; what if I should awake a prisoner?’” Some of those men who were termed “men of order,” muttered while signing the degree of deposition, “Beware of the Red Republic!” and seemed to entertain an equal fear of failure and of success. M. de Vatimesnil pressed the hands of the men of the Left, and thanked them for their presence. “You make us popular,” said he. And Antony Thouret answered him, “I know neither Right nor Left to-day; I only see the Assembly.”

The younger of the two shorthand writers handed their written sheets to the Representatives who had spoken, and, asked them to revise them at once, saying, “We shall not have the time to read them over.” Some Representatives went down into the street, and showed the people copies of the decree of deposition, signed by the members of the “bureau.” One of the populace took one of these copies, and cried out, “Citizens! the ink is still quite wet! Long live the Republic!”

The Deputy-Mayor stood at the door of the Hall; the staircase was crowded with National Guards and spectators. In the Assembly several had penetrated into the Hall, and amongst them the ex-Constituent Beslay, a man of uncommon courage. It was at first wished to turn them out, but they resisted, crying, “This is our business. You are the Assembly, but we are the People.” “They are right,” said M. Berryer.

M. de Falloux, accompanied by M. de Kéranflech, came up the Constituent Beslay, and leaned by his side on the stove, saying to him, “Good-day, colleague;” and reminded him that they both had formed part of the Committee of the National Workshops, and that they had together visited the Workmen at the Parc Monceaux. The Right felt themselves falling; they became affectionate towards Republicans. The Republic is called To-morrow.

Each spoke from his place; this member upon a bench, that member on a chair, a few on the tables. All contradictory opinions burst forth at once. In a corner some ex-leaders of “order” were scared at the possible triumph of the “Reds.” In another the men of the Right surrounded the men of the Left, and asked them: “Are not the faubourgs going to rise?”

The narrator has but one duty, to tell his story; he relates everything, the bad as well as the good. Whatever may have taken place, however, and notwithstanding all these details of which it was our duty to speak, apart from the exceptions which we had mentioned, the attitude of the men of the Right who composed the large majority of this meeting was in many respects honorable and worthy. Some of them, as we have just mentioned, even prided themselves upon their resolution and their energy, almost as though they had wished to rival the members of the Left.

We may here remark — for in the course of this narrative we shall more than once see the gaze of some members of the Right turned towards the people, and in this no mistake should be made — that these monarchical men who talked of popular insurrection and who invoked the faubourgs were a minority in the majority, — an imperceptible minority. Antony Thouret proposed to those who were leaders there to go in a body through the working-class neighborhoods with the decree of deposition in their hands. Brought to bay, they refused. They declared that they would only protect themselves by organized powers, not by the people. It is a strange thing to say, but it must be noted, that with their habits of political shortsightedness, the popular armed resistance, even in the name of the Law, seemed sedition to them. The utmost appearance of revolution which they could endure was a regiment of the National Guard, with their drums at their head; they shrank from the barricade; Right in a blouse was no longer

Right, Truth armed with a pike was no longer Truth, Law unpaving a street gave them the impression of a Fury. In the main, however, and taking them for what they were, and considering their position as politicians, these members of the Right were well-advised. What would they have done with the people? And what would the people have done with them? How would they have proceeded to set fire to the masses? Imagine Falloux as a tribune, fanning the Faubourg St. Antoine into a flame!

Alas! in the midst of this dense gloom, in these fatal complications of circumstances by which the *coup d'état* profited so odiously and so perfidiously, in that mighty misunderstanding which comprised the whole situation, for kindling the revolutionary spark in the heart of the people, Danton himself would not have sufficed.

The *coup d'état* entered into this meeting impudently, with its convict's cap on its head. It possessed an infamous assurance there, as well as everywhere else. There were in this majority three hundred Representatives of the People. Louis Napoleon sent a sergeant to drive them away. The Assembly, having resisted the sergeant, he sent an officer, the temporary commander of the sixth battalion of the Chasseurs de Vincennes. This officer, young, fair-haired, a scoffer, half laughing, half threatening, pointed with his finger to the stairs filled with bayonets, and defied the Assembly. "Who is this young spark?" asked a member of the Right. A National Guard who was there said, "Throw him out of the window!" "Kick him downstairs!" cried one of the people.

This Assembly, grievous as were its offences against the principles of the Revolution — and with these wrongs Democracy alone had the right to reproach it — this Assembly, I repeat, was the National Assembly, that is to say, the Republic incarnate, the living Universal Suffrage, the Majesty of the Nation, upright and visible. Louis Bonaparte assassinated this Assembly, and moreover insulted it. A slap on the face is worse than a poniard thrust.

The gardens of the neighborhood occupied by the troops were full of broken bottles. They had plied the soldiers with drink. They obeyed the "epaulettes" unconditionally, and according to the expression of eyewitnesses, appeared "dazed-drunk." The Representatives appealed to them, and said to them, "It is a crime!" They answered, "We are not aware of it."

One soldier was heard to say to another, “What have you done with your ten francs of this morning?”

The sergeants hustled the officers. With the exception of the commander, who probably earned his cross of honor, the officers were respectful, the sergeants brutal.

A lieutenant showing signs of flinching, a sergeant cried out to him,

“You are not the only one who commands here! Come, therefore, march!”

M. de Vatimesnil asked a soldier, “Will you dare to arrest us — us, the

Representatives of the People?”

“Assuredly!” said the soldier.

Several soldiers hearing some Representatives say that they had eaten nothing since the morning, offered them their ration bread. Some Representatives accepted. M. de Tocqueville, who was unwell, and who was noticed to be pale and leaning on the sill of a window, received from a soldier a piece of this bread, which he shared with M. Chambolle.

Two Commissaries of Police appeared in “full dress,” in black coats girded with their sash-girdles and their black corded hats. One was an old man, the other a young man. The first was named Lemoine-Tacherat, and not Bacherel, as has been wrongly printed: the second was named Barlet. These names should be noted. The unprecedented assurance of this Barlet was remarked. Nothing was wanting in him, — cynical speech, provoking gesture, sardonic intonation. It was with an inexpressible air of insolence that Barlet, when summoning the meeting to dissolve itself, added, “Rightly or Wrongly.” They murmured on the benches of the Assembly, “Who is this scoundrel?” The other, compared to him, seemed moderate and inoffensive. Emile Péan exclaimed, “The old man is simply working in his profession, but the young man is working out his promotion.”

Before this Tacherat and this Barlet entered, before the butts of the muskets had been heard ringing on the stones of the staircase, this Assembly had talked of resistance. Of what kind of resistance? We have just stated. The majority could only listen to a regular organized resistance, a military resistance in uniform and in epaulets. Such a resistance was easy to decree, but it was difficult to organize. The Generals on whom the Assembly were accustomed to rely having been arrested, there only remained two possible Generals, Oudinot and Lauriston. General Marquis de Lauriston, ex-peer of France, and at the same time Colonel of the Tenth

Legion and Representative of the People, drew a distinction between his duty as Representative and his duty as Colonel. Summoned by some of his friends of the Right to beat to arms and call together the Tenth Legion, he answered, “As Representative of the People I ought to indict the Executive Power, but as Colonel I ought to obey it.” It appears that he obstinately shut himself up in this singular reasoning, and that it was impossible to draw him out of it.

“How stupid he is!” said Piscatory.

“How sharp he is!” said Falloux.

The first officer of the National Guard who appeared in uniform, seemed to be recognized by two members of the Right, who said, “It is M. de Perigord!” They made a mistake, it was M. Guilbot, major of the third battalion of the Tenth Legion. He declared that he was ready to march on the first order from his Colonel, General Lauriston. General Lauriston went down into the courtyard, and came up a moment afterwards, saying, “They do not recognize my authority. I have just resigned,” Moreover, the name of Lauriston was not familiar to the soldiers. Oudinot was better known in the army. But how?

At the moment when the name of Oudinot was pronounced, a shudder ran through this meeting, almost exclusively composed of members of the Right. In fact at this critical time, at this fatal name of Oudinot, reflections crowded upon each other in every mind.

What was the *coup d’état*?

It was the “Roman expedition at home.” Which was undertaken against whom? Against those who had undertaken the “Roman expedition abroad.” The National Assembly of France, dissolved by violence, could find only one single General to defend it in its dying hour. And whom? Precisely he, who in the name of the National Assembly of France had dissolved by violence the National Assembly of Rome. What power could Oudinot, the strangler of a Republic, possess to save a Republic? Was it not evident that his own soldiers would answer him, “What do you want with us? That which we have done at Rome we now do at Paris.” What a story is this story of treason! The French Legislature had written the first chapter with the blood of the Roman Constituent Assembly: Providence wrote the second chapter with the blood of the French Legislature, Louis Bonaparte holding the pen.

In 1849, Louis Bonaparte had assassinated the sovereignty of the People in the person of its Roman Representatives; in 1851 he assassinated it in the person of its French Representatives. It was logical, and although it was infamous, it was just. The Legislative Assembly bore at the same time the weight of two crimes; it was the accomplice of the first, the victim of the second. All these men of the majority felt this, and were humbled. Or rather it was the same crime, the crime of the Second of July, 1849, ever erect, ever alive, which had only changed its name, which now called itself the Second of December, and which, the offspring of this Assembly, stabbed it to the heart. Nearly all crimes are parricidal. On a certain day they recoil upon those who have committed them, and slay them.

At this moment, so full of anxiety, M. de Falloux must have glanced round for M. de Montalembert. M. de Montalembert was at the Elysée.

When Tamisier rose and pronounced this terrifying word, "The Roman Question?" distracted M. de Dampierre shouted to him, "Silence! You kill us!"

It was not Tamisier who was killing them — it was Oudinot.

M. de Dampierre did not perceive that he cried "Silence!" to history.

And then without even reckoning the fatal remembrance which at such a moment would have crushed a man endowed in the highest degree with great military qualities, General Oudinot, in other respects an excellent officer, and a worthy son of his brave father, possessed none of those striking qualities which in the critical hour of revolution stir the soldier and carry with them the people. At that instant to win back an army of a hundred thousand men, to withdraw the balls from the cannons' mouths, to find beneath the wine poured out to the Praetorians the true soul of the French soldier half drowned and nearly dead, to tear the flag from the *coup d'état* and restore it to the Law, to surround the Assembly with thunders and lightnings, it would have needed one of those men who exist no longer; it would have needed the firm hand, the calm oratory, the cold and searching glance of Desaix, that French Phocion; it would have needed the huge shoulders, the commanding stature, the thundering voice, the abusive, insolent, cynical, gay, and sublime eloquence of Kléber, that military Mirabeau. Desaix, the countenance of a just man, or Kléber, the face of the lion! General Oudinot, little, awkward, embarrassed, with an indecisive and dull gaze, red cheeks, low forehead, with grizzled and lank hair, polite tone of voice, a humble smile, without oratory, without gesture, without power, brave before the enemy, timid before the first comer, having assuredly the bearing of a soldier, but having also the bearing of a priest; he caused the mind to hesitate between the sword and the taper; he had in his eyes a sort of “Amen!”

He had the best intentions in the world, but what could he do? Alone, without prestige, without true glory, without personal authority, and dragging Rome after him! He felt all this himself, and he was as it were paralyzed by it. As soon as they had appointed him he got upon a chair and thanked the Assembly, doubtless with a firm heart, but with hesitating speech. When the little fair-haired officer dared to look him in the face and insult him, he, holding the sword of the people, he, General of the sovereign Assembly, he only knew how to stammer out such wretched phrases as these, “I have just declared to you that we are unable, ‘unless compelled and constrained,’ to obey the order which prohibits us from remaining assembled together.” He spoke of obeying, he who ought to command. They had girded him with his scarf, and it seemed to make him uncomfortable. He inclined his head alternately first to one shoulder and then to the other; he held his hat and cane in his hand, he had a benevolent aspect. A Legitimist member muttered in a low voice to his neighbor, “One might imagine he was a bailiff speechifying at a wedding.” And his neighbor, a Legitimist also, replied, “He reminds me of the Duc d’Angoulême.”

What a contrast to Tamisier! Tamisier, frank, earnest confident, although a mere Captain of Artillery, had the bearing of a General. Had Tamisier, with his grave and gentle countenance, high intelligence, and dauntless heart, a species of soldier-philosopher, been better known, he could have rendered decisive services. No one can tell what would have happened if Providence had given the soul of Tamisier to Oudinot, or the epaulets of Oudinot to Tamisier.

In this bloody enterprise of December we failed to find a General’s uniform becomingly worn. A book might be written on the part which gold lace plays in the destiny of nations.

Tamisier, appointed Chief of the Staff some instants before the invasion of the hall, placed himself at the disposal of the Assembly. He was standing on a table. He spoke with a resonant and hearty voice. The most downcast became reassured by this modest, honest, devoted attitude. Suddenly he drew himself up, and looking all that Royalist majority in the face, exclaimed, “Yes, I accept the charge you offer me. I accept the charge of defending the Republic! Nothing but the Republic! Do you perfectly understand?”

A unanimous shout answered him. “Long live the Republic!”

“Ah!” said Beslay, “the voice comes back to you as on the Fourth of May.”

“Long live the Republic! Nothing but the Republic!” repeated the men of the Right, Oudinot louder than the others. All arms were stretched towards Tamisier, every hand pressed his. Oh Danger! irresistible converter! In his last hour the Atheist invokes God, and the Royalist the Republic. They cling to that which they have repudiated.

The official historians of the *coup d’état* have stated that at the beginning of the sitting two Representatives had been sent by the Assembly to the Ministry of the Interior to “negotiate.” What is certain is that these two Representatives had no authority. They presented themselves, not on behalf of the Assembly, but in their own name. They offered themselves as intermediaries to procure a peaceable termination of the catastrophe which had begun. With an honesty which bordered on simplicity they summoned Morny to yield himself a prisoner, and to return within the law, declaring that in case of refusal the Assembly would do its duty, and call the people to the defence of the Constitution and of the Republic. Marny answered them with a smile, accompanied by these plain words, “If you appeal to arms, and if I find any Representatives on the barricades, I will have them all shot to the last man.”

The meeting in the Tenth Arrondissement yielded to force. President Vitet insisted that they should forcibly arrest him. A police agent who seized him turned pale and trembled. In certain circumstances, to lay violent hands upon a man is to lay them upon Right, and those who dare to do so are made to tremble by outraged Law. The exodus from the Mairie was long and beset with obstructions. Half-an-hour elapsed while the soldiers were forming a line, and while the Commissaries of Police, all the time appearing solely occupied with the care of driving back the crowd in the street, sent for orders to the Ministry of the Interior. During that time some of the Representatives, seated round a table in the great Hall, wrote to their families, to their wives, to their friends. They snatched up the last leaves of paper; the pens failed; M. de Luynes wrote to his wife a letter in pencil. There were no wafers; they were forced to send the letters unsealed; some soldiers offered to post them. M. Chambolle’s son, who had accompanied his father thus far, undertook to take the letters addressed to Mesdames de Luynes, de Lasteyrie, and Duvergier de Hauranne. General Forey — the same who had refused a battalion to the President of the Constituent Assembly, Marrast, who had promoted him from a colonel to a general — General Forey, in the centre of the courtyard of the Mairie, his face inflamed, half drunk, coming out, they said, from breakfast at the Elysée, superintended the outrage. A member, whose name we regret we do not know, dipped his boot into the gutter and wiped it along the gold stripe of the regimental trousers of General Forey. Representative Lherbette came up to General Forey, and said to him, “General, you are a coward.” Then turning to his colleagues, he exclaimed, “Do you hear? I tell this general that he is a coward.” General Forey did not stir. He kept the mud on his uniform and the epithet on his cheek.

The meeting did not call the people to arms. We have just explained that it was not strong enough to do so; nevertheless, at the last moment, a member of the Left, Latrade, made a fresh effort. He took M. Berryer aside, and said to him, “Our official measures of resistance have come to an end; let us not allow ourselves now to be arrested. Let us disperse throughout the streets crying, ‘To arms!’” M. Berryer consulted a few seconds on the matter with the Vice-President, M. Benoist d’Azy, who refused.

The Deputy Mayor, hat in hand, reconducted the members of the Assembly as far as the gate of the Mairie. As soon as they appeared in the courtyard ready to go out between two lines of soldiers, the post of National Guards presented arms, acid shouted, “Long live the Assembly! Long live the Representatives of the People!” The National Guards were at once disarmed, almost forcibly, by the Chasseurs de Vincennes.

There was a wine-shop opposite the Mairie. As soon as the great folding gates of the Mairie opened, and the Assembly appeared in the street, led by General Forey on horseback, and having at its head the Vice-President Vitet, grasped by the necktie by a police agent, a few men in white blouses, gathered at the windows of this wine-shop, clapped their hands and shouted, “Well done! down with the ‘twenty-five francs!’”

They set forth.

The Chasseurs de Vincennes, who marched in a double line on each side of the prisoners, cast at them looks of hatred. General Oudinot said in a whisper, “These little infantry soldiers are terrible fellows. At the siege of

Rome they flung themselves at the assault like madmen. These lads are very devils.” The officers avoided the gaze of the Representatives. On leaving the Mairie, M. de Coislin passed by an officer and exclaimed, “What a disgrace for the uniform!” the officer retaliated with angry words, and incensed M. de Coislin. Shortly afterwards, during the march, he came up to M. de Coislin and said to him, “Sir, I have reflected; it is I who am wrong.”

They proceeded on the way slowly. At a few steps from the Mairie the precession met M. Chegaray. The Representatives called out to him, “Come!” He answered, while making an expressive gesture with his hands and his shoulders, “Oh! I dare say! As they have not arrested me….” and he feigned as though he would pass on. He was ashamed, however, and went with them. His name is found in the list of the roll-call at the barracks.

A little further on M. de Lespérut passed them. They cried out to him. “Lespérut! Lespérut!” “I am with you,” answered he. The soldiers pushed him back. He seized the butt-ends of the muskets, and forced his way into the column.

In one of the streets through which they went a window was opened. Suddenly a woman appeared with a child; the child, recognizing its father amongst the prisoners, held out its arms and called to him, the mother wept in the background.

It was at first intended to take the Assembly in a body straight to Mazas, but this was counter-ordered by the Ministry of the Interior. It was feared that this long walk, in broad daylight, through populous and easily aroused streets, might prove dangerous; the D’Orsay barracks were close at hand. They selected these as a temporary prison.

One of the commanders insolently pointed out with his sword the arrested Representatives to the passers-by, and said in a fond voice, “These are the Whites, we have orders to spare them. Now it is the turn of the Red Representatives, let them look out for themselves!”

Wherever the procession passed, the populace shouted from the pavements, at the doors, at the windows, “Long live the National Assembly!” When they perceived a few Representatives of the Left sprinkled in the column they cried, “Vive la République!” “Vive la Constitution!” and “Vive la Loi!” The shops were not shut, and passers-by went to and fro. Some people said, “Wait until the evening; this is not the end of it.”

A staff-officer on horseback, in full uniform, met the procession, recognized M. de Vatimesnil, and came up to greet him. In the Rue de Beaune, as they passed the house of the *Démocratic Pacifique* a group shouted, “Down with the Traitor of the Elysée!”

On the Quai d’Orsay, the shouting was redoubled. There was a great crowd there. On either side of the quay a file of soldiers of the Line, elbow to elbow, kept back the spectators. In the middle of the space left vacant, the members of the Assembly slowly advanced between a double file of soldiers, the one stationary, which threatened the people, the other on the march, which threatened tire Representatives.

Serious reflections arise in the presence of all the details of the great crime which this book is designed to relate. Every honest man who sets himself face to face with the *coup d’état* of Louis Bonaparte hears nothing but a tumult of indignant thoughts in his conscience. Whoever reads our work to the end will assuredly not credit us with the intention of extenuating this monstrous deed. Nevertheless, as the deep logic of actions ought always to be italicized by the historian, it is necessary here to call to mind and to repeat, even to satiety, that apart from the members of the Left, of whom a very small number were present, and whom we have mentioned by name, the three hundred Representatives who thus defiled before the eyes of the crowd, constituted the old Royalists and reactionary majority of the Assembly. If it were possible to forget, that — whatever were their errors, whatever were their faults, and, we venture to add, whatever were their illusions — these persons thus treated were the Representatives of the leading civilized nation, were sovereign Legislators, senators of the people, inviolable Deputies, and sacred by the great law of Democracy, and that in the same manner as each man bears in himself something of the mind of God, so each of these nominees of universal suffrage bore something of the soul of France; if it were possible to forget this for a moment, it assuredly would be a spectacle perhaps more laughable than sad, and certainly more philosophical than lamentable to see, on this December morning, after so many laws of repression, after so many exceptional measures, after so many votes of censure and of the state of siege, after so many refusals of amnesty, after so many affronts to equity, to justice, to the human conscience, to the public good faith, to right, after so many favors to the police, after so many smiles bestowed on absolution, the entire Party of Order arrested in a body and taken to prison by the *sergents de ville*!

One day, or rather, one night, the moment having come to save society, the *coup d’état* abruptly seizes the Demagogues, and finds that it holds by the collar, Whom? the Royalists.

They arrived at the barracks, formerly the barracks of the Royal Guard, and on the pediment of which is a carved escutcheon, whereon are still visible the traces of the three *fleurs de lis* effaced in 1830. They halted. The door was opened. “Why!” said M. de Broglie, “here we are.”

At that moment a great placard posted on the barrack wall by the side of the door bore in big letters —

“REVISION OF THE CONSTITUTION.”

It was the advertisement of a pamphlet, published two or three days previous to the *coup d’état*, without any author’s name, demanding the Empire, and was attributed to the President of the Republic.

The Representatives entered and the doors were closed upon them. The shouts ceased; the crowd, which occasionally has its meditative moments, remained for some time on the quay, dumb, motionless, gazing alternately at the closed gate of the Barracks, and at the silent front of the Palace of the Assembly, dimly visible in the misty December twilight, two hundred paces distant.

The two Commissaries of Police went to report their “success” to M. de Morny. M. de Morny said, “Now the struggle has begun. Excellent! These are the last Representatives who will be made prisoners.”

The Gerontes, or Gerontia, were the Elders of Sparta, who constituted the Senate.

The “bureau” of the Assembly consists of the President, for the time being of the Assembly, assisted by six secretaries, whose duties mainly lie in deciding in what sense the Deputies have voted. The “bureau” of the Assembly should not be confounded with the fifteen “bureaux” of the Deputies, which answer to our Select Committees of the House of Commons, and are presided over by self-chosen Presidents.

An allusion to the twenty-five francs a day officially payable to the members of the Assembly.

CHAPTER XIII.

LOUIS BONAPARTE’S SIDE-FACE

The minds of all these men, we repeat, were very differently affected.

The extreme Legitimist party, which represents the White of the flag, was not, it must be said, highly exasperated at the *coup d’état*. Upon many faces might be read the saying of M. de Falloux: “I am so satisfied that I have considerable difficulty in affecting to be only resigned.” The ingenuous spirits cast down their eyes — that is becoming to purity; more daring spirits raised their heads. They felt an impartial indignation which permitted a little admiration. How cleverly these generals have been ensnared! The Country assassinated, — it is a horrible crime; but they were enraptured at the jugglery blended with the parricide. One of the leaders said, with a sigh of envy and regret, “We do not possess a man of such talent.” Another muttered, “It is Order.” And he added, “Alas!” Another exclaimed, “It is a frightful crime, but well carried out.” Some wavered, attracted on one side by the lawful power which rested in the Assembly, and on the other by the abomination which was in Bonaparte; honest souls poised between duty and infamy. There was a M. Thomines Desmazures who went as far as the door of the Great Hall of the Mairie, halted, looked inside, looked outside, and did not enter. It would be unjust not to record that others amongst the pure Royalists, and above all M. de Vatimesnil, had the sincere intonation and the upright wrath of justice.

Be it as it may, the Legitimist party, taken as a whole, entertained no horror of the *coup d’état*. It feared nothing. In truth, should the Royalists fear Louis Bonaparte? Why?

Indifference does not inspire fear. Louis Bonaparte was indifferent. He only recognized one thing, his object. To break through the road in order to reach it, that was quite plain; the rest might be left alone. There lay the whole of his policy, to crush the Republicans, to disdain the Royalists.

Louis Bonaparte had no passion. He who writes these lines, talking one day about Louis Bonaparte with the ex-king of Westphalia, remarked, “In him the Dutchman tones down the Corsican.”— “If there be any Corsican,” answered Jérome.

Louis Bonaparte has never been other than a man who has lain wait for fortune, a spy trying to dupe God. He had that livid dreaminess of the gambler who cheats. Cheating admits audacity, but excludes anger. In his prison at Ham he only read one book, “The Prince.” He belonged to no family, as he could hesitate between Bonaparte and Verhuell; he had no country, as he could hesitate between France and Holland.

This Napoleon had taken St. Helena in good part. He admired England. Resentment! To what purpose? For him on earth there only existed his interests. He pardoned, because he speculated; he forgot everything, because he calculated upon everything. What did his uncle matter to him? He did not serve him; he made use of him. He rested his shabby enterprise upon Austerlitz. He stuffed the eagle.

Malice is an unproductive outlay. Louis Bonaparte only possessed as much memory as is useful. Hudson Lowe did not prevent him from smiling upon Englishmen; the Marquis of Montchenu did not prevent him from smiling upon the Royalists.

He was a man of earnest politics, of good company, wrapped in his own scheming, not impulsive, doing nothing beyond that which he intended, without abruptness, without hard words, discreet, accurate, learned, talking smoothly of a necessary massacre, a slaughterer, because it served his purpose.

All this, we repeat, without passion, and without anger. Louis Bonaparte was one of those men who had been influenced by the profound iciness of Machiavelli.

It was through being a man of that nature that he succeeded in submerging the name of Napoleon by superadding December upon Brumaire.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE D’ORSAY BARRACKS

It was half-past three.

The arrested Representatives entered into the courtyard of the barracks, a huge parallelogram closed in and commanded by high walls. These walls are pierced by three tiers of windows, and posses that dismal appearance which distinguishes barracks, schools, and prisons.

This courtyard is entered by an arched portal which extends through all the breadth of the front of the main building. This archway, under which the guard-house has been made, is close on the side of the quay by large solid folding doors, and on one side of the courtyard by an iron grated gateway. They closed the door and the grated gateway upon the Representatives. They “set them at liberty” in the bolted and guarded courtyard.

“Let them stroll about,” said an officer.

The air was cold, the sky was gray. Some soldiers, in their shirt-sleeves and wearing foraging caps, busy with fatigue duty, went hither and thither amongst the prisoners.

First M. Grimault and then M. Antony Thouret instituted a roll-call. The Representatives made a ring around them. Lherbette said laughingly, “This just suits the barracks. We look like sergeant-majors who have come to report.” They called over the seven hundred and fifty names of the Representatives. To each name they answered “Absent” or “Present,” and the secretary jotted down with a pencil those who were present. When the name of Morny was reached, some one cried out, “At Clichy!” At the name of Persigny, the same voice exclaimed, “At Poissy!” The inventor of these two jokes, which by the way are very poor, has since allied himself to the Second of December, to Morny and Persigny; he has covered his cowardice with the embroidery of a senator.

The roll-call verified the presence of two hundred and twenty

Representatives, whose names were as follows: —

Le Duc de Luynes, d’Andigné de la Chasse, Antony Thouret, Arène, Audren

de Kerdrel (Ille-et-Vilaine), Audren de Kerdrel (Morbihan), de Balzac,

Barchou de Penhoen, Barillon, O. Barrot, Barthélemy Saint-Hilaire,

Quentin Bauchard, G. deBeaumont, Béchard, Behaghel, de Belèvze, Benoist-d’Azy, de Benardy, Berryer, de Berset, Basse, Betting de Lancastel, Blavoyer, Bocher, Boissié, de Botmillan, Bouvatier, le Duc de Broglie, de la Broise, de Bryas, Buffet, Caillet du Tertre, Callet, Camus de la Guibourgère, Canet, de Castillon, de Cazalis, Admiral Cécile, Chambolle, Chamiot, Champannet, Chaper, Chapot, de Charencey, Chasseigne, Chauvin, Chazant, de Chazelles, Chegaray, Comte de Coislin, Colfavru, Colas de la Motte, Coquerel, de Corcelles, Cordier, Corne, Creton, Daguilhon, Pujol, Dahirel, Vicomte Dambray, Marquis de Dampierre, de Brotonne, de Fontaine, de Fontenay, Vicomte de Sèze, Desmars, de la Devansaye, Didier, Dieuleveult, Druet-Desvaux, A. Dubois, Dufaure, Dufougerais, Dufour, Dufournel, Marc Dufraisse, P. Duprat, Duvergier de Hauranne, Étienne, Vicomte de Falloux, de Faultrier, Faure (Rhône), Favreau, Ferre, des Ferrès, Vicomte de Flavigny, de Foblant, Frichon, Gain, Gasselin, Germonière, de Gicquiau, de Goulard, de Gouyon, de Grandville, de Grasset, Grelier-Dufougerais, Grévy, Grillon, Grimault, Gros, Guislier de la Tousche, Harscouët de Saint-Georges, Marquis d’Havrincourt, Hennequin, d’Hespel, Houel, Hovyn-Tranchère, Huot, Joret, Jouannet, de Kéranflech, de Kératry, de Kéridec, de Kermazec, de Kersauron Penendreff, Lèo de Laborde, Laboulie, Lacave, Oscar Lafayette, Lafosse, Lagarde, Lagrenée Laimé, Lainé, Comte Lanjuinais, Larabit, de Larcy, J. de Lasteyrie, Latrade, Laureau, Laurenceau, General Marquis de Lauriston, de Laussat, Lefebvre de Grosriez, Legrand, Legros-Desvaux, Lemaire, Emile Leroux, Lespérut, de l’Espinoy, Lherbette, de Linsaval, de Luppé, Maréchal, Martin de Villers, Maze-Saunay, Mèze, Arnauld de Melun, Anatole de Melun, Merentié, Michaud, Mispoulet, Monet, Duc de Montebello, de Montigny, Moulin, Murat-Sistrière, Alfred Nettement, d’Olivier, General Oudinot, Duc de Reggio, Paillat, Duparc, Passy, Emile Péan, Pécoul, Casimir Perier, Pidoux, Pigeon, de Piogé, Piscatory, Proa,

Prudhomme, Querhoent, Randoing, Raudot, Raulin, de Ravinel, de Rémusat,
Renaud, Rezal, Comte de Rességuier, Henri de Riancey, Rigal, de la
Rochette, Rodat, de Roquefeuille des Rotours de Chaulieu, Rouget-Lafosse,
Rouillé, Roux-Carbonel, Saint-Beuve, de Saint-Germain, General Comte de
Saint-Priest, Salmon (Meuse), Marquis Sauvaire-Barthélemy, de Serré,
Comte de Sesmaisons, Simonot, de Staplande, de Surville, Marquis de
Talhouet, Talon, Tamisier, Thuriot de la Rosière, de Tinguy, Comte de
Tocqueville, de la Tourette, Comte de Tréveneue, Mortimer-Ternaux, de
Vatimesnil, Baron de Vandoeuvre, Vernhette (Hérault), Vernhette
(Aveyron), Vézin, Vitet, Comte de Vogué.

After this list of names may be read as follows in the shorthand report: —

“The roll-call having been completed, General Oudinot asked the Representatives who were scattered about in the courtyard to come round him, and made the following announcement to them, —

“‘The Captain-Adjutant-Major, who has remained here to command the barracks, has just received an order to have rooms prepared for us, where we are to withdraw, as we are considered to be in custody. (Hear! hear!) Do you wish me to bring the Adjutant-Major here! (No, no; it is useless.) I will tell him that he had better execute his orders.’ (Yes, yes, that is right.)”

The Representatives remained “penned” and “strolling” about in this yard for two long hours. They walked about arm in arm. They walked quickly, so as to warm themselves. The men of the Right said to the men of the Left, “Ah! if you had only voted the proposals of the Questors!” They also exclaimed: “Well, how about the *invisible sentry*!” And they laughed. Then Marc Dufraisse answered, “Deputies of the People! deliberate in peace!” It was then the turn of the Left to laugh. Nevertheless, there was no bitterness. The cordiality of a common misfortune reigned amongst them.

They questioned his ex-ministers about Louis Bonaparte. They asked Admiral Cécile, “Now, really, what does this mean?” The Admiral answered by this definition: “It is a small matter.” M. Vézin added, “He wishes History to call him ‘Sire.’” “Poor Sire, then,” said M. de Camas de la Guibourgère. M. Odilon Barrot exclaimed, “What a fatality, that we should have been condemned to employ this man!”

This said, these heights attained, political philosophy was exhausted, and they ceased talking.

On the right, by the side of the door, there was a canteen elevated a few steps above the courtyard. “Let us promote this canteen to the dignity of a refreshment room,” said the ex-ambassador to China, M. de Lagrenée. They entered, some went up to the stove, others asked for a basin of soup. MM. Favreau, Piscatory, Larabit, and Vatimesnil took refuge in a corner. In the opposite corner drunken soldiers chatted with the maids of the barracks. M. de Kératry, bent with his eighty years, was seated near the stove on an old worm-eaten chair; the chair tottered; the old man shivered.

Towards four o’clock a regiment of Chasseurs de Vincennes arrived in the courtyard with their platters, and began to eat, singing, with loud bursts of merriment. M. de Broglie looked at them and said to M. Piscatory, “It is a strange spectacle to see the porringers of the Janissaries vanished from Constantinople reappearing at Paris!”

Almost at the same moment a staff officer informed the Representatives on behalf of General Forey that the apartments assigned to them were ready, and requested them to follow him. They were taken into the eastern building, which is the wing of the barracks farthest from the Palace of the Council of State; they were conducted to the third floor. They expected chambers and beds. They found long rooms, vast garrets with filthy walls and low ceilings, furnished with wooden tables and benches. These were the “apartments.” These garrets, which adjoin each other, all open on the same corridor, a narrow passage, which runs the length of the main building. In one of these rooms they saw, thrown into a corner, side-drums, a big drum, and various instruments of military music. The Representatives scattered themselves about in these rooms. M. de Tocqueville, who was ill, threw his overcoat on the floor in the recess of a window, and lay down. He remained thus stretched upon the ground for several hours.

These rooms were warmed very badly by cast-iron stoves, shaped like hives. A Representative wishing to poke the fire, upset one, and nearly set fire to the wooden flooring.

The last of these rooms looked out on the quay. Antony Thouret opened a window and leaned out. Several Representatives joined him. The soldiers who were bivouacking below on the pavement, caught sight of them and began to shout, “Ah! there they are, those rascals at ‘twenty-five francs a day,’ who wish to cut down our pay!” In fact, on the preceding evening, the police had spread this calumny through the barracks that a proposition had been placed on the Tribune to lessen the pay of the troops. They had even gone so far as to name the author of this proposition. Antony Thouret attempted to undeceive the soldiers. An officer cried out to him, “It is one of your party who made the proposal. It is Lamennais!”

In about an hour and a half there were ushered into these rooms MM. Vallette, Bixio, and Victor Lefranc, who had come to join their colleagues and constitute themselves prisoners.

Night came. They were hungry. Several had not eaten since the morning. M. Howyn de Tranchère, a man of considerable kindness and devotion, who had acted as porter at the Mairie, acted as forager at the barracks. He collected five francs from each Representative, and they sent and ordered a dinner for two hundred and twenty from the Café d’Orsay, at the corner of the Quay, and the Rue du Bac. They dined badly, but merrily. Cookshop mutton, bad wine, and cheese. There was no bread. They ate as they best could, one standing, another on a chair, one at a table, another astride on his bench, with his plate before him, “as at a ball-room supper,” a dandy of the Right said laughingly, Thuriot de la Rosière, son of the regicide Thuriot. M. de Rémusat buried his head in his hands. Emile Péan said to him, “We shall get over it.” And Gustave de Beaumont cried out, addressing himself to the Republicans, “And your friends of the Left! Will they preserve their honor? Will there be an insurrection at least?” They passed each other the dishes and plates, the Right showing marked attention to the Left. “Here is the opportunity to bring about a fusion,” said a young Legitimist. Troopers and canteen men waited upon them. Two or three tallow candles burnt and smoked on each table. There were few glasses. Right and Left drank from the same. “Equality, fraternity,” exclaimed the Marquis Sauvaire-Barthélemy, of the Right. And Victor Hannequin answered him, “But not Liberty.”

Colonel Feray, the son-in-law of Marshal Bugeaud, was in command at the barracks; he offered the use of his drawing-room to M. de Broglie and to M. Odilon Barrot, who accepted it. The barrack doors were opened to M. de Kératry, on account of his great age, to M. Dufaure, as his wife had just been confined, and to M. Etienne, on account of the wound which he had received that morning in the Rue de Bourgogne. At the same time there were added to the two hundred and twenty MM. Eugène Sue, Benoist (du Rhône), Fayolle, Chanay, Toupet des Vignes, Radoubt-Lafosse, Arbey, and

Teillard-Latérisse, who up to that time had been detained in the new Palace of Foreign Affairs.

Towards eight o’clock in the evening, when dinner was over, the restrictions were a little relaxed, and the intermediate space between the door and the barred gate of the barracks began to be littered with carpet bags and articles of toilet sent by the families of the imprisoned Representatives.

The Representatives were summoned by their names. Each went down in turn, and briskly remounted with his cloak, his coverlet, or his foot-warmer. A few ladies succeeded in making their way to their husbands. M.M. Chambolle was able to press his son’s hand through the bars.

Suddenly a voice called out, “Oho! We are going to spend the night here.” Mattresses were brought in, which were thrown on the tables, on the floor, anywhere.

Fifty or sixty Representatives found resting-places on them. The greater number remained on their benches. Marc Dufraisse settled himself to pass the night on a footstool, leaning on a table. Happy was the man who had a chair.

Nevertheless, cordiality and gaiety did not cease to prevail. “Make room for the ‘Burgraves!’” said smilingly a venerable veteran of the Right. A young Republican Representative rose, and offered him his mattress. They pressed on each offers of overcoats, cloaks, and coverlets.

“Reconciliation,” said Chamiot, while offering the half of his mattress to the Duc de Luynes. The Duc de Luynes, who had 80,000 francs a year, smiled, and replied to Chamiot, “You are St. Martin, and I am the beggar.”

M. Paillet, the well-known barrister, who belonged to the “Third Estate,” used to say, “I passed the night on a Bonapartist straw mattress, wrapped in a burnouse of the Mountain, my feet in a Democratic and Socialist sheepskin, and my head in a Legitimist cotton nightcap.” The Representatives, although prisoners in the barracks, could stroll about freely. They were allowed to go down into the courtyard. M. Cordier (of Calvados) came upstairs again, saying, “I have just spoken to the soldiers. They did not know that their generals had been arrested. They appeared surprised and discontented.” This incident raised the prisoners’ hopes.

Representative Michel Renaud of the Basses-Pyrénees, found several of his compatriots of the Basque country amongst the Chasseurs de Vincennes who occupied the courtyard. Some had voted for him, and reminded him of the fact. They added, “Ah! We would again vote for the ‘Red’ list.” One of them, quite a young man, took him aside, and said to him. “Do you want any money, sir? I have a forty-sous piece in my pocket.”

Towards ten o’clock in the evening a great hubbub arose in the courtyard. The doors and the barred gate turned noisily upon their hinges. Something entered which rumbled like thunder. They leaned out of window, and saw at the foot of the steps a sort of big, oblong chest, painted black, yellow, red, and green, on four wheels, drawn by post-horses, and surrounded by men in long overcoats, and with fierce-looking faces, holding torches. In the gloom, and with the help of imagination, this vehicle appeared completely black. A door could be seen, but no other opening. It resembled a great coffin on wheels. “What is that? Is it a hearse?” “No, it is a police-van.” “And those people, are they undertakers?” “No, they are jailers.” “And for whom has this come?”

“For you, gentlemen!” cried out a voice.

It was the voice of an officer; and the vehicle which had just entered was in truth a police-van.

At the same time a word of command was heard: “First squadron to horse.” And five minutes afterwards the Lancers who were to escort the vehicle formed in line in the courtyard.

Then arose in the barracks the buzz of a hive of angry bees. The Representatives ran up and down the stairs, and went to look at the police-van close at hand. Some of them touched it, and could not believe their eyes. M. Piscatory met M. Chambolle, and cried out to him, “I am leaving in it!” M. Berryer met Eugène Sue, and they exchanged these words: “Where are you going?” “To Mount Valérien. And you?” “I do not know.”

At half-past ten the roll-call of those who were to leave began. Police agents stationed themselves at a table between two candles in a parlor at the foot of the stairs, and the Representatives were summoned two by two. The Representatives agreed not to answer to their names, and to reply to each name which should be called out, “He is not here.” But those “Burgraves” who had accepted the hospitality of Colonel Feray considered such petty resistance unworthy of them, and answered to the calling out of their names. This drew the others after them. Everybody answered. Amongst the Legitimists some serio-comic scenes were enacted. They who alone were not threatened insisted on believing that they were in danger. They would not let one of their orators go. They embraced him, and held him back, almost with tears, crying out, “Do not go away! Do you know where they are taking you? Think of the trenches of Vincennes!”

The Representatives, having been summoned two by two, as we have just said, filed in the parlor before the police agents, and then they were ordered to get into the “robbers’ box.” The stowage was apparently made at haphazard and promiscuously; nevertheless, later, by the difference of the treatment accorded to the Representatives in the various prisons, it was apparent that this promiscuous loading had perhaps been somewhat prearranged. When the first vehicle was full, a second, of a similar construction drew up. The police agents, pencil and pocket-book in hand, noted down the contents of each vehicle. These men knew the Representatives. When Marc Dufraisse, called in his turn, entered the parlor, he was accompanied by Benoist (du Rhône). “Ah! here is Marc Dufraisse,” said the attendant who held the pencil. When asked for his name, Benoist replied “Benoist.” “Du Rhône,” added the police agent; and he continued, “for there are also Benoist d’Azy and Benoist-Champy.”

The loading of each vehicle occupied nearly half an hour. The successive arrivals had raised the number of imprisoned Representatives to two hundred and thirty-two Their embarkation, or, to use the expression of M. de Vatimesnil, their “barrelling up,” which began a little after ten in the evening, was not finished until nearly seven o’clock in the morning. When there were no more police-vans available omnibuses were brought in. These various vehicles were portioned off into three detachments, each escorted by Lancers. The first detachment left towards one o’clock in the morning, and was driven to Mont Valérien; the second towards five o’clock, and was driven to Mazas; the third towards half-past six, to Vincennes.

As this business occupied a long time, those who had not yet been called benefited by the mattresses and tried to sleep. Thus, from time to time, silence reigned in the upper rooms. In the midst of one of these pauses M. Bixio sat upright, and raising his voice, cried out, “Gentlemen, what do you think of ‘passive obedience’?” An unanimous burst of laughter was the reply. Again, during one of these pauses another voice exclaimed, —

“Romieu will be a senator.”

Emile Péan asked, —

“What will become of the Red Spectre?”

“He will enter the priesthood,” answered Antony Thouret, “and will turn into the Black Spectre.”

Other exclamations which the historians of the Second of December have spread abroad were not uttered. Thus, Marc Dufraisse never made the remark with which the men of Louis Bonaparte have wished to excuse their crimes: “If the President does not shoot all those among us who resist, he does not understand his business.”

For the *coup d’état* such a remark might be convenient; but for History it is false.

The interior of the police-vans was lighted while the Representatives were entering. The air-holes of each compartment were not closed. In this manner Marc Dufraisse through the aperture could see M. du Rémusat in the opposite cell to his own. M. du Rémusat had entered the van coupled with M. Duvergier de Hauranne.

“Upon my word, Monsieur Marc Dufraisse,” exclaimed Duvergier de Hauranne when they jostled each other in the gangway of the vehicle, “upon my word, if any one had said to me, ‘You will go to Marzas in a police-van,’ I should have said, ‘It is improbable;’ but if they had added, ‘You will go with Marc Dufraisse,’ I should have said, ‘It is impossible!’”

As soon as the vehicle was full, five or six policemen entered and stood in the gangway. The door was shut, the steps were thrown up, and they drove off.

When all the police-vans had been filled, there were still some Representatives left. As we have said, omnibuses were brought into requisition. Into these Representatives were thrust, one upon the other, rudely, without deference for either age or name. Colonel Feray, on horseback, superintended and directed operations. As he mounted the steps of the last vehicle but one, the Duc de Montebello cried out to him, “To-day is the anniversary of the battle of Austerlitz, and the son-in-law of Marshal Bugeaud compels the son of Marshal Lannes to enter a convict’s van.”

When the last omnibus was reached, there were only seventeen places for eighteen Representatives. The most active mounted first. Antony Thouret, who himself alone equalled the whole of the Right, for he had as much mind as Thiers and as much stomach as Murat; Antony Thouret, corpulent and lethargic, was the last. When he appeared on the threshold of the omnibus in all his hugeness, a cry of alarm arose; — Where was he going to sit?

Antony Thouret, noticing Berryer at the bottom of the omnibus, went straight up to him, sat down on his knees, and quietly said to him, “You wanted ‘compression,’ Monsieur Berryer. Now you have it.”

Michel de Bourges had thus characterized Louis Bonaparte as the guardian of the Republic against the Monarchical parties.

CHAPTER XV.

MAZAS

The police-vans, escorted as far as Mazas by Lancers, found another squadron of Lancers ready to receive them at Mazas. The Representatives descended from the vehicle one by one. The officer commanding the Lancers stood by the door, and watched them pass with a dull curiosity.

Mazas, which had taken the place of the prison of La Force, now pulled down, is a lofty reddish building, close to the terminus of the Lyons Railway, and stands on the waste land of the Faubourg St. Antoine. From a distance the building appears as though built of bricks, but on closer examination it is seen to be constructed of flints set in cement. Six large detached buildings, three stories high, all radiating from a rotunda which serves as the common centre, and touching each other at the starting-point, separated by courtyards which grow broader in proportion as the buildings spread out, pierced with a thousand little dormer windows which give light to the cells, surrounded by a high wall, and presenting from a bird’s-eye point of view the drape of a fan — such is Mazas. From the rotunda which forms the centre, springs a sort of minaret, which is the alarm-tower. The ground floor is a round room, which serves as the registrar’s office. On the first story is a chapel where a single priest says mass for all; and the observatory, where a single attendant keeps watch over all the doors of all the galleries at the same time. Each building is termed a “division.” The courtyards are intersected by high walls into a multitude of little oblong walks.

As each Representative descended from the vehicle he was conducted into the rotunda where the registry office was situated. There his name was taken down, and in exchange for his name he was assigned a number. Whether the prisoner be a thief or a legislator, such is always the rule in this prison; the *coup d’état* reduced all to a footing of equality. As soon as a Representative was registered and numbered, he was ordered to “file off.” They said to him, “Go upstairs,” or “Go on;” and they announced him at the end of the corridor to which he was allotted by calling out, “Receive number So-and-So.” The jailer in that particular corridor answered, “Send him on.” The prisoner mounted alone, went straight on, and on his arrival found the jailer standing near an open door. The jailer said, “Here it is, sir.” The prisoner entered, the jailer shut the door, and they passed on to another.

The *coup d’état* acted in a very different manner towards the various Representatives. Those whom it desired to conciliate, the men of the Bight, were placed in Vincennes; those whom it detested, the men of the Left, were placed in Mazas. Those at Vincennes had the quarters of M. Montpensier, which were expressly reopened for them; an excellent dinner, eaten in company; wax candles, fire, and the smiles and bows of the governor, General Courtigis.

This is how it treated those at Mazas.

A police-van deposited them at the prison. They were transferred from one box to another. At Mazas a clerk registered them, weighed them, measured them, and entered them into the jail book as convicts. Having passed through the office, each of them was conducted along a gallery shrouded in darkness, through a long damp vault to a narrow door which was suddenly opened. This reached, a jailer pushed the Representative in by the shoulders, and the door was shut.

The Representative, thus immured, found himself in a little, long, narrow, dark room. It is this which the prudent language of modern legislation terms a “cell.” Here the full daylight of a December noon only produced a dusky twilight. At one end there was a door, with a little grating; at the other, close to the ceiling, at a height of ten or twelve feet, there was a loophole with a fluted glass window. This window dimmed the eye, and prevented it from seeing the blue or gray of the sky, or from distinguishing the cloud from the sun’s ray, and invested the wan daylight of winter with an indescribable uncertainty. It was even less than a dim light, it was a turbid light. The inventors of this fluted window succeeded in making the heavens squint.

After a few moments the prisoner began to distinguish objects confusedly, and this is what he found: White-washed walls here and there turned green by various exhalations; in one corner a round hole guarded by iron bars, and exhaling a disgusting smell; in another corner a slab turning upon a hinge like the bracket seat of a *fiacre*, and thus capable of being used as a table; no bed; a straw-bottomed chair; under foot a brick floor. Gloom was the first impression; cold was the second. There, then, the prisoner found himself, alone, chilled, in this semi-darkness, being able to walk up and down the space of eight square feet like a caged wolf, or to remain seated on his chair like an idiot at Bicêtre.

In this situation an ex-Republican of the Eve, who had become a member of the majority, and on occasions sided somewhat with the Bonapartists, M. Emile Leroux, who had, moreover, been thrown into Mazas by mistake, having doubtless been taken for some other Leroux, began to weep with rage. Three, four, five hours thus passed away. In the meanwhile they had not eaten since the morning; some of them, in the excitement caused by the *coup d'état* had not even breakfasted. Hunger came upon them. Were they to be forgotten there? No; a bell rang in the prison, the grating of the door opened, and an arm held out to the prisoner a pewter porringer and a piece of bread.

The prisoner greedily seized the bread and the porringer. The bread was black and sticky; the porringer contained a sort of thick water, warm and reddish. Nothing can be compared to the smell of this "soup." As for the bread, it only smelt of mouldiness.

However great their hunger, most of the prisoners during the first moment threw down their bread on the floor, and emptied the porringer down the hole with the iron bars.

Nevertheless the stomach craved, the hours passed by, they picked up the bread, and ended by eating it. One prisoner went so far as to pick up the porringer and to attempt to wipe out the bottom with his bread, which he afterwards devoured. Subsequently, this prisoner, a Representative set at liberty in exile, described to me this dietary, and said to me, "A hungry stomach has no nose."

Meanwhile there was absolute solitude and profound silence. However, in the course of a few hours, M. Emile Leroux — he himself has told the fact to M. Versigny — heard on the other side of the wall on his right a sort of curious knocking, spaced out and intermittent at irregular intervals. He listened, and almost at the same moment on the other side of the wall to his left a similar rapping responded. M. Emile Leroux, enraptured — what a pleasure it was to hear a noise of some kind! — thought of his colleagues, prisoners like himself, and cried out in a tremendous voice, "Oh, oh! you are there also, you fellows!" He had scarcely uttered this sentence when the door of his cell was opened with a creaking of hinges and bolts; a man — the jailer — appeared in a great rage, and said to him, —

"Hold your tongue!"

The Representative of the People, somewhat bewildered, asked for an explanation.

“Hold your tongue,” replied the jailer, “or I will pitch you into a dungeon.”

This jailer spoke to the prisoner as the *coup d’état* spoke to the nation.

M. Emile Leroux, with his persistent parliamentary habits, nevertheless attempted to insist.

“What!” said he, “can I not answer the signals which two of my colleagues are making to me?”

“Two of your colleagues, indeed,” answered the jailer, “they are two thieves.” And he shut the door, shouting with laughter.

They were, in fact, two thieves, between whom M. Emile Leroux was, not crucified, but locked up.

The Mazas prison is so ingeniously built that the least word can be heard from one cell to another. Consequently there is no isolation, notwithstanding the cellular system. Thence this rigorous silence imposed by the perfect and cruel logic of the rules. What do the thieves do? They have invented a telegraphic system of raps, and the rules gain nothing by their stringency. M. Emile Leroux had simply interrupted a conversation which had been begun.

“Don’t interfere with our friendly patter,” cried out his thief neighbor, who for this exclamation was thrown into the dungeon.

Such was the life of the Representatives at Mazas. Moreover, as they were in secret confinement, not a book, not a sheet of paper, not a pen, not even an hour’s exercise in the courtyard was allowed to them.

The thieves also go to Mazas, as we have seen.

But those who know a trade are permitted to work; those who know how to read are supplied with books; those who know how to write are granted a desk and paper; all are permitted the hour’s exercise required by the laws of health and authorized by the rules.

The Representatives were allowed nothing whatever. Isolation, close confinement, silence, darkness, cold, “the amount of *ennui* which engenders madness,” as Linguet has said when speaking of the Bastille.

To remain seated on a chair all day long, with arms and legs crossed: such was the situation. But the bed! Could they lie down?

No.

There was no bed.

At eight o’clock in the evening the jailer came into the cell, and reached down, and removed something which was rolled up on a plank near the ceiling. This “something” was a hammock.

The hammock having been fixed, hooked up, and spread out, the jailer wished his prisoner “Good-night.”

There was a blanket on the hammock, sometimes a mattress some two inches thick. The prisoner, wrapt in this covering, tried to sleep, and only succeeded in shivering.

But on the morrow he could at least remain lying down all day in his hammock?

Not at all.

At seven o’clock in the morning the jailer came in, wished the Representative “Good-morning,” made him get up, and rolled up the hammock on its shelf near the ceiling.

But in this case could not the prisoner take down the authorized hammock, unroll it, hook it up, and lie down again?

Yes, he could. But then there was the dungeon.

This was the routine. The hammock for the night, the chair for the day.

Let us be just, however. Some obtained beds, amongst others MM. Thiers and Roger (du Nord). M. Grévy did not have one.

Mazas is a model prison of progress; it is certain that Mazas is preferable to the *piombi* of Venice, and to the under-water dungeon of the Châtelet. Theoretical philanthropy has built Mazas. Nevertheless, as has been seen, Mazas leaves plenty to be desired. Let us acknowledge that from a certain point of view the temporary solitary confinement of the law-makers at Mazas does not displease us. There was perhaps something of Providence in the *coup d’état*. Providence, in placing the Legislators at Mazas, has performed an act of good education. Eat of your own cooking; it is not a bad thing that those who own prisons should try them.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE EPISODE OF THE BOULEVARD ST. MARTIN

When Charamaule and I reached No. 70, Rue Blanche, a steep lonely street, a man in a sort of naval sub-officer's uniform, was walking up and down before the door. The portress, who recognized us, called our attention to him. "Nonsense," said Charamaule, "a man walking about in that manner, and dressed after that fashion, is assuredly not a police spy."

"My dear colleague," said I, "Bedeau has proved that the police are blockheads."

We went upstairs. The drawing-room and a little ante-chamber which led to it were full of Representatives, with whom were mingled a good many persons who did not belong to the Assembly. Some ex-members of the Constituent Assembly were there, amongst others, Bastide and several Democratic journalists. The *Nationale* was represented by Alexander Rey and Léopold Duras, the *Révolution* by Xavier Durrieu, Vasbenter, and Watripon, the *Avénement du Peuple* by H. Coste, nearly all the other editors of the *Avénement* being in prison. About sixty members of the Left were there, and among others Edgar Quinet, Schoelcher, Madier de Montjau, Carnot, Noël Parfait, Pierre Lefranc, Bancel, de Flotte, Bruckner, Chaix, Cassal, Esquiros, Durand-Savoyat, Yvan, Carlos Forel, Etchegoyen, Labrousse, Barthélemy (Eure-et-Loire), Huguenin, Aubrey (du Nord), Malardier, Victor Chauffour, Belin, Renaud, Bac, Versigny, Sain, Joigneaux, Brives, Guilgot, Pelletier, Doutre, Gindrier, Arnauld (de l'Ariége), Raymond (de l'Isère), Brillier, Maigne, Sartin, Raynaud, Léon Vidal, Lafon, Lamargue, Bourzat, and General Rey.

All were standing. They were talking without order. Léopold Duras had just described the investment of the Café Bonvalet. Jules Favre and Baudin, seated at a little table between the two windows, were writing. Baudin had a copy of the Constitution open before him, and was copying Article 68.

When we entered there was silence, and they asked us, "Well, what news?"

Charamaule told them what had just taken place on the Boulevard du Temple, and the advice which he had thought right to give me. They approved his action.

“What is to be done?” was asked on every side. I began to speak.

“Let us go straight to the fact and to the point,” said I. “Louis Bonaparte is gaining ground, and we are losing ground, or rather, we should say, he has as yet everything, and we have as yet nothing. Charamaule and I have been obliged to separate ourselves from Colonel Forestier. I doubt if he will succeed. Louis Bonaparte is doing all he can to suppress us, we must no longer keep in the background. We must make our presence felt. We must fan this beginning of the flame of which we have seen the spark on the Boulevard du Temple. A proclamation must be made, no matter by whom it is printed, or how it is placarded, but it is absolutely necessary, and that immediately. Something brief, rapid, and energetic. No set phrases. Ten lines — an appeal to arms! We are the Law, and there are occasions when the Law should utter a war-cry. The Law, outlawing the traitor, is a great and terrible thing. Let us do it.”

They interrupted me with “Yes, that is right, a proclamation!”

“Dictate! dictate!”

“Dictate,” said Baudin to me, “I will write.”

I dictated:-

“TO THE PEOPLE.

“Louis Napoléon Bonaparte is a traitor.

“He has violated the Constitution.

“He is forsworn.

“He is an outlaw—”

They cried out to me on every side, —

“That is right! Outlaw him.”

“Go on.”

I resumed the dictation. Baudin wrote, —

“The Republican Representatives refer the People and the Army to Article 68—”

They interrupted me: “Quote it in full.”

“No,” said I, “it would be too long. Something is needed which can be placarded on a card, stuck with a wafer, and which can be read in a minute. I will quote Article 110. It is short and contains the appeal to arms.”

I resumed, —

“The Republican Representatives refer the People and the Army to Article 68 and to Article 110, which runs thus— ‘The Constituent

Assembly confides the existing Constitution and the Laws which it consecrates to the keeping and the patriotism of all Frenchmen.’

“The People henceforward and for ever in possession of universal suffrages and who need no Prince for its restitution, will know how to chastise the rebel.

“Let the People do its duty. The Republican Representatives are marching at its head.

“Vive la République! To Arms!”

They applauded.

“Let us all sign,” said Pelletier.

“Let us try to find a printing-office without delay,” said Schoelcher, “and let the proclamation be posted up immediately.”

“Before nightfall — the days are short,” added Joigneaux.

“Immediately, immediately, several copies!” called out the

Representatives.

Baudin, silent and rapid, had already made a second copy of the proclamation.

A young man, editor of the provincial Republican journal, came out of the crowd, and declared that, if they would give him a copy at once, before two hours should elapse the Proclamation should be posted at all the street corners in Paris.

I asked him, —

“What is your name?”

He answered me, —

“Millière.”

Millière. It is in this manner that this name made its first appearance in the gloomy days of our History. I can still see that pale young man, that eye at the same time piercing and half closed, that gentle and forbidding profile. Assassination and the Pantheon awaited him. He was too obscure to enter into the Temple, he was sufficiently deserving to die on its threshold. Baudin showed him the copy which he had just made.

Millière went up to him.

“You do not know me,” said he; “my name is Millière; but I know you, you are Baudin.”

Baudin held out his hand to him.

I was present at the handshaking between these two spectres.

Xavier Durrieu, who was editor of the *Révolution* made the same offer as

Millière.

A dozen Representatives took their pens and sat down, some around a table, others with a sheet of paper on their knees, and called out to me, —

"Dictate the Proclamation to us."

I had dictated to Baudin, "Louis Napoléon Bonaparte is a traitor." Jules Favre requested the erasure of the word Napoléon, that name of glory fatally powerful with the People and with the Army, and that there should be written, "Louis Bonaparte is a traitor."

"You are right," said I to him.

A discussion followed. Some wished to strike out the word "Prince." But the Assembly was impatient. "Quick! quick!" they cried out. "We are in December, the days are short," repeated Joigneaux.

Twelve copies were made at the same time in a few minutes. Schoelcher, Rey, Xavier Durrieu, and Millière each took one, and set out in search of a printing office.

As they went out a man whom I did not know, but who was greeted by several Representatives, entered and said, "Citizens, this house is marked. Troops are on the way to surround you. You have not a second to lose."

Numerous voices were raised, —

"Very well! Let them arrest us!"

"What does it matter to us?"

"Let them complete their crime."

"Colleagues," said I, "let us not allow ourselves to be arrested. After the struggle, as God pleases; but before the combat, — No! It is from us that the people are awaiting the initiative. If we are taken, all is at an end. Our duty is to bring on the battle, our right is to cross swords with the *coup d'état*. It must not be allowed to capture us, it must seek us and not find us. We must deceive the arm which it stretches out against us, we must remain concealed from Bonaparte, we must harass him, weary him, astonish him, exhaust him, disappear and reappear unceasingly, change our hiding-place, and always fight him, be always before him, and never beneath his hand. Let us not leave the field. We have not numbers, let us have daring."

They approved of this. "It is right," said they, "but where shall we go?"

Labrousse said, —

"Our former colleague of the Constituent Assembly, Beslay, offers us his house."

"Where does he live?"

“No. 33, Rue de la Cérisaie, in the Marais.”

“Very well,” answered I, “let us separate. We will meet again in two hours at Beslay’s, No. 33, Rue de la Cérisaie.”

All left; one after another, and in different directions. I begged

Charamaule to go to my house and wait for me there, and I walked out with

Noël Parfait and Lafon.

We reached the then still uninhabited district which skirts the ramparts. As we came to the corner of the Rue Pigalle, we saw at a hundred paces from us, in the deserted streets which cross it, soldiers gliding all along the houses, bending their steps towards the Rue Blanche.

At three o’clock the members of the Left rejoined each other in the Rue de la Cérisaie. But the alarm had been given, and the inhabitants of these lonely streets stationed themselves at the windows to see the Representatives pass. The place of meeting, situated and hemmed in at the bottom of a back yard, was badly chosen in the event of being surrounded: all these disadvantages were at once perceived, and the meeting only lasted a few seconds. It was presided over by Joly; Xavier Durrieu and Jules Gouache, who were editors of the *Révolution*, also took part, as well as several Italian exiles, amongst others Colonel Carini and Montanelli, ex-Minister of the Grand Duke of Tuscany. I liked Montanelli, a gentle and dauntless spirit.

Madier de Montjau brought news from the outskirts. Colonel Forestier, without losing and without taking away hope, told them of the obstacles which he had encountered in his attempts to call together the 6th Legion. He pressed me to sign his appointment as Colonel, as well as Michel de Bourges; but Michel de Bourges was absent, and besides, neither Michel de Bourges nor I had yet at drat time the authority from the Left. Nevertheless, under this reservation I signed his appointment. The perplexities were becoming more and more numerous. The Proclamation was not yet printed, and the evening was closing in. Schoelcher explained the difficulties: all the printing offices closed and guarded; an order placarded that whoever should print an appeal to arms world be immediately shot; the workmen terrified; no money. A hat was sent round, and each threw into it what money he had about him. They collected in this manner a few hundred francs.

Xavier Durrieu, whose fiery courage never flagged for a single moment, reiterated that he would undertake the printing, and promised that by eight o’clock that evening there should be 40,000 copies of the Proclamation. Time pressed. They separated, after fixing as a rendezvous the premises of the Society of Cabinet-makers in the Rue de Charonne, at eight o’clock in the evening, so as to allow time for the situation to reveal itself. As we went out and crossed the Rue Beautreillis I saw Pierre Leroux coming up to me. He had taken no part in our meetings. He said to me, —

“I believe this struggle to be useless. Although my point of view is different from yours, I am your friend. Beware. There is yet time to stop. You are entering into the catacombs. The catacombs are Death.”

“They are also Life,” answered I.

All the same, I thought with joy that my two sons were in prison, and that this gloomy duty of street fighting was imposed upon me alone.

There yet remained five hours until the time fixed for the rendezvous. I wished to go home, and once more embrace my wife and daughter before precipitating myself into that abyss of the “unknown” which was there, yawning and gloomy, and which several of us were about to enter, never to return.

Arnauld (de l’Ariége) gave me his arm. The two Italian exiles, Carini aril Montanelli, accompanied me.

Montanelli took my hands and said to me, “Right will conquer. You will conquer. Oh! that this time France may not be selfish as in 1848, and that she may deliver Italy.” I answered him, “She will deliver Europe.”

Those were our illusions at that moment, but this, however, does not prevent them from being our hopes to-day. Faith is thus constituted; shadows demonstrate to it the light.

There is a cabstand before the front gate of St. Paul. We went there. The Rue St. Antoine was alive with that indescribable uneasy swarming which precedes those strange battles of ideas against deeds which are called Revolutions. I seemed to catch, in this great working-class district, a glimpse of a gleam of light which, alas, died out speedily. The cabstand before St. Paul was deserted. The drivers had foreseen the possibility of barricades, and had fled.

Three miles separated Arnauld and myself from our houses. It was impossible to walk there through the middle of Paris, without being recognized at each step. Two passers-by extricated us from our difficulty. One of them said to the other, “The omnibuses are still running on the Boulevards.”

We profited by this information, and went to look for a Bastille omnibus.

All four of us got in.

I entertained at heart, I repeat, wrongly or rightly, a bitter reproach for the opportunity lost during the morning. I said to myself that on critical days such moments come, but do not return. There are two theories of Revolution: to arouse the people, or to let them come of themselves. The first theory was mine, but, through force of discipline, I had obeyed the second. I reproached myself with this. I said to myself, “The People offered themselves, and we did not accept them. It is for us now not to offer ourselves, but to do more, to give ourselves.”

Meanwhile the omnibus had started. It was full. I had taken my place at the bottom on the left; Arnauld (de l’Ariége) sat next to me, Carini opposite, Montanelli next to Arnauld. We did not speak; Arnauld and myself silently exchanged that pressure of hands which is a means of exchanging thoughts.

As the omnibus proceeded towards the centre of Paris the crowd became denser on the Boulevard. As the omnibus entered into the cutting of the Porte St. Martin a regiment of heavy cavalry arrived in the opposite direction. In a few seconds this regiment passed by the side of us. They were cuirassiers. They filed by at a sharp trot and with drawn swords. The people leaned over from the height of the pavements to see them pass. Not a single cry. On the one side the people dejected, on the other the soldiers triumphant. All this stirred me.

Suddenly the regiment halted. I do not know what obstruction momentarily impeded its advance in this narrow cutting of the Boulevard in which we were hemmed in. By its halt it stopped the omnibus. There were the soldiers. We had them under our eyes, before us, at two paces distance, their horses touching the horses of our vehicle, these Frenchmen who had become Mamelukes, these citizen soldiers of the Great Republic transformed into supporters of the degraded Empire. From the place where I sat I almost touched them; I could no longer restrain myself.

I lowered the window of the omnibus. I put out my head, and, looking fixedly at the dense line of soldiers which faced me, I called out, “Down with Louis Bonaparte. Those who serve traitors are traitors!”

Those nearest to me turned their heads towards me and looked at me with a tipsy air; the others did not stir, and remained at “shoulder arms,” the peaks of their helmets over their eyes, their eyes fixed upon the ears of their horses.

In great affairs there is the immobility of statues; in petty mean affairs there is the immobility of puppets.

At the shout which I raised Arnauld turned sharply round. He also had lowered his window, and he was leaning half out of the omnibus, with his arms extended towards the soldiers, and he shouted, “Down with the traitors!”

To see him thus with his dauntless gesture, his handsome head, pale and calm, his fervent expression, his beard and his long chestnut hair, one seemed to behold the radiant and fulminating face of an angry Christ.

The example was contagious and electrical.

“Down with the traitors!” shouted Carini and Montanelli.

“Down with the Dictator! Down with the traitors!” repeated a gallant young man with whom we were not acquainted, and who was sitting next to Carini.

With the exception of this young man, the whole omnibus seemed seized with terror!

“Hold your tongues!” exclaimed these poor frightened people; “you will cause us all to be massacred.” One, still more terrified, lowered the window, and began to shout to the soldiers, “Long live Prince Napoléon! Long live the Emperor!”

There were five of us, and we overpowered this cry by our persistent protest, “Down with Louis Bonaparte! Down with the traitors!”

The soldiers listened in gloomy silence. A corporal turned with a threatening air towards us, and shook his sword. The crowd looked on in bewilderment.

What passed within me at that moment? I cannot tell! I was in a whirlwind. I had at the same time yielded to a calculation, finding the opportunity good, and to a burst of rage, finding the encounter insolent.

A woman cried out to us from the pavement, “You will get yourselves cut to pieces.” I vaguely imagined that some collision was about to ensue, and that, either from the crowd or from the Army, the spark would fly out. I hoped for a sword-cut from the soldiers or a shout of anger from the people. In short I had obeyed rather an instinct than an idea.

But nothing came of it, neither the sword-cut nor the shout of anger. The soldiers did not bestir themselves and the people maintained silence. Was it too late? Was it too soon?

The mysterious man of the Elysée had not foreseen the event of an insult to his name being thrown in the very face of the soldiers. The soldiers had no orders. They received them that evening. This was seen on the morrow.

In another moment the regiment broke into a gallop, and the omnibus resumed its journey. As the cuirassiers filed past us Arnauld (de l'Ariége), still leaning out of the vehicle, continued to shout in their ears, for as I have just said, their horses touched us, “Down with the Dictator! Down with the traitors!”

We alighted in the Rue Lafitte. Carini, Montanelli, and Arnauld left me, and I went on alone towards the Rue de la Tour d'Auvergne. Night was coming on. As I turned the corner of the street a man passed close by me. By the light of a street lamp I recognized a workman at a neighboring tannery, and he said to me in a low tone, and quickly, “Do not return home. The police surround your house.”

I went back again towards the Boulevard, through the streets laid out, but not then built, which make a Y under my windows behind my house. Not being able to embrace my wife and daughter, I thought over what I could do during the moments which remained to me. A remembrance came into my mind.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE REBOUND OF THE 24TH JUNE, 1848, ON THE 2D DECEMBER, 1851

On Sunday, 26th June, 1848, that four days' combat, that gigantic combat so formidable and so heroic on both sides, still continued, but the insurrection had been overcome nearly everywhere, and was restricted to the Faubourg St. Antoine. Four men who had been amongst the most dauntless defenders of the barricades of the Rue Pont-aux-Choux, of the Rue St. Claude, and of the Rue St. Louis in the Marais, escaped after the barricades had been taken, and found safe refuge in a house, No. 12, Rue St. Anastase. They were concealed in an attic. The National Guards and the Mobile Guards were hunting for them, in order to shoot them. I was told of this. I was one of the sixty Representatives sent by the Constituent Assembly into the middle of the conflict, charged with the task of everywhere preceding the attacking column, of carrying, even at the peril of their lives, words of peace to the barricades, to prevent the shedding of blood, and to stop the civil war. I went into the Rue St. Anastase, and I saved the lives of those four men.

Amongst those men there was a poor workman of the Rue de Charonne, whose wife was being confined at that very moment, and who was weeping. One could understand, when hearing his sobs and seeing his rags, how he had cleared with a single bound these three steps — poverty, despair, rebellion. Their chief was a young man, pale and fair, with high cheek bones, intelligent brow, and an earnest and resolute countenance. As soon as I set him free, and told him my name, he also wept. He said to me, "When I think that an hour ago I knew that you were facing us, and that I wished that the barrel of my gun had eyes to see and kill you!" He added, "In the times in which we live we do not know what may happen. If ever you need me, for whatever purpose, come." His name was Auguste, and he was a wine-seller in the Rue de la Roquette.

Since that time I had only seen him once, on the 26th August, 1819, on the day when I held the corner of Balzac's pall. The funeral possession was going to Père la Chaise. Auguste's shop was on the way. All the streets through which the procession passed were crowded. Auguste was at his door with his young wife and two or three workmen. As I passed he greeted me.

It was this remembrance which came back to my mind as I descended the lonely streets behind my house; in the presence of the 2d of December I thought of him. I thought that he might give me information about the Faubourg St. Antoine, and help us in rousing the people. This young man had at once given me the impression of a soldier and a leader. I remembered the words which he had spoken to me, and I considered it might be useful to see him. I began by going to find in the Rue St. Anastase the courageous woman who had hidden Auguste and his three companions, to whom she had several times since rendered assistance. I begged her to accompany me. She consented.

On the way I dined upon a cake of chocolate which Charamaule had given me.

The aspects of the boulevards, in coming down the Italiens towards the Marais, had impressed rue. The shops were open everywhere as usual. There was little military display. In the wealthy quarters there was much agitation and concentration of troops; but on advancing towards the working-class neighborhoods solitude reigned paramount. Before the Café Turc a regiment was drawn up. A band of young men in blouses passed before the regiment singing the “Marseillaise.” I answered them by crying out “To Arms!” The regiment did not stir. The light shone upon the playbills on an adjacent wall; the theatres were open. I looked at the trees as I passed. They were playing *Hernani* at the Theatre des Italiens, with a new tenor named Guasco.

The Place de la Bastille was frequented, as usual, by goers and comers, the most peaceable folk in the world. A few workmen grouped round the July Column, and, chatting in a low voice, were scarcely noticeable. Through the windows of a wine shop could be seen two men who were disputing for and against the *coup d’état*. He who favored it wore a blouse, he who attacked it wore a cloth coat. A few steps further on a juggler had placed between four candles his X-shaped table, and was displaying his conjuring tricks in the midst of a crowd, who were evidently thinking only of the juggler. On looking towards the gloomy loneliness of the Quai Mazas several harnessed artillery batteries were dimly visible in the darkness. Some lighted torches here and there showed up the black outline of the cannons.

I had some trouble in finding Auguste’s door in the Rue de la Roquette. Nearly all the shops were shut, thus making the street very dark. At length, through a glass shop-front I noticed a light which gleamed on a pewter counter. Beyond the counter, through a partition also of glass and ornamented with white curtains, another light, and the shadows of two or three men at table could be vaguely distinguished. This was the place.

I entered. The door on opening rang a bell. At the sound, the door of the glazed partition which separated the shop from the parlor opened, and Auguste appeared.

He knew me at once, and came up to me.

“Ah, Sir,” said he, “it is you!”

“Do you know what is going on?” I asked him.

“Yes, sir.”

This “Yes, sir,” uttered with calmness, and even with a certain embarrassment, told me all. Where I expected an indignant outcry I found this peaceable answer. It seemed to me that I was speaking to the Faubourg St. Antoine itself. I understood that all was at an end in this district, and that we had nothing to expect from it. The people, this wonderful people, had resigned themselves. Nevertheless, I made an effort.

“Louis Bonaparte betrays the Republic,” said I, without noticing that I raised my voice.

He touched my arm, and pointing with his finger to the shadows which were pictured on the glazed partition of the parlor, “Take care, sir; do not talk so loudly.”

“What!” I exclaimed, “you have come to this — you dare not speak, you dare not utter the name of ‘Bonaparte’ aloud; you barely mumble a few words in a whisper here, in this street, in the Faubourg St. Antoine, where, from all the doors, from all the windows, from all the pavements, from all the very stones, ought to be heard the cry, ‘To arms.’”

Auguste demonstrated to me what I already saw too clearly, and what Girard had shadowed forth in the morning — the moral situation of the Faubourg — that the people were “dazed” — that it seemed to all of them that universal suffrage was restored; that the downfall of the law of the 31st of May was a good thing.

Here I interrupted him.

“But this law of the 31st of May, it was Louis Bonaparte who instigated it, it was Rouher who made it, it was Baroche who proposed it, and the

Bonapartists who voted it. You are dazzled by a thief who has taken your purse, and who restores it to you!”

“Not I,” said Auguste, “but the others.”

And he continued, “To tell the whole truth, people did not care much for the Constitution, they liked the Republic, but the Republic was maintained too much by force for their taste. In all this they could only see one thing clearly, the cannons ready to slaughter them — they remembered June, 1848 — there were some poor people who had suffered greatly — Cavaignac had done much evil — women clung to the men’s blouses to prevent them from going to the barricades — nevertheless, with all this, when seeing men like ourselves at their head, they would perhaps fight, but this hindered them, they did not know for what.” He concluded by saying, “The upper part of the Faubourg is doing nothing, the lower end will do better. Round about here they will fight. The Rue de la Roquette is good, the Rue de Charonne is good; but on the side of Père la Chaise they ask, ‘What good will that do us?’ They only recognize the forty sous of their day’s work. They will not bestir themselves; do not reckon upon the masons.” He added, with a smile, “Here we do not say ‘cold as a stone,’ but ‘cold as a mason’” — and he resumed, “As for me, if I am alive, it is to you that I owe my life. Dispose of me. I will lay down my life, and will do what you wish.”

While he was speaking I saw the white curtain of the glazed partition behind him move a little. His young wife, uneasy, was peeping through at us.

“Ah! my God,” said I to him, “what we want is not the life of one man but the efforts of all.”

He was silent. I continued, —

“Listen to me, Auguste, you who are good and intelligent. So, then, the Faubourgs of Paris — which are heroes even when they err — the Faubourgs of Paris, for a misunderstanding, for a question of salary wrongly construed, for a bad definition of socialism, rose in June, 1848, against the Assembly elected by themselves, against universal suffrage, against their own vote; and yet they will not rise in December, 1851, for Right, for the Law, for the People, for Liberty, for the Republic. You say that there is perplexity, and that you do not understand; but, on the contrary, it was in June that all was obscure, and it is to-day that everything is clear!”

While I was saying these last words the door of the parlor was softly opened, and some one came in. It was a young man, fair as Auguste, in an overcoat, and wearing a workman's cap. I started. Auguste turned round and said to me, "You can trust him."

The young man took off his cap, came close up to me, carefully turning his back on the glazed partition, and said to me in a low voice, "I know you well. I was on the Boulevard du Temple to-day. We asked you what we were to do; you said, 'We must take up arms.' Well, here they are!"

He thrust his hands into the pockets of his overcoat and drew out two pistols.

Almost at the same moment the bell of the street door sounded. He hurriedly put his pistols back into his pockets. A man in a blouse came in, a workman of some fifty years. This man, without looking at any one, without saying anything, threw down a piece of money on the counter. Auguste took a small glass and filled it with brandy, the man drank it off, put down the glass upon the counter and went away.

When the door was shut: "You see," said Auguste to me, "they drink, they eat, they sleep, they think of nothing. Such are they all!"

The other interrupted him impetuously: "One man is not the People!"

And turning towards me, —

"Citizen Victor Hugo, they will march forward. If all do not march, some will march. To tell the truth, it is perhaps not here that a beginning should be made, it is on the other side of the water."

And suddenly checking himself,— "After all, you probably do not know my name."

He took a little pocket-book from his pocket, tore out a piece of paper, wrote on it his name, and gave it to me. I regret having forgotten that name. He was a working engineer. In order not to compromise him, I burnt this paper with many others on the Saturday morning, when I was on the point of being arrested.

"It is true, sir," said Auguste, "you must not judge badly of the Faubourg. As my friend has said, it will perhaps not be the first to begin; but if there is a rising it will rise."

I exclaimed, "And who would you have erect if the Faubourg St. Antoine be prostrate! Who will be alive if the people be dead!"

The engineer went to the street door, made certain that it was well shut, then came back, and said, —

“There are many men ready and willing. It is the leaders who are wanting. Listen, Citizen Victor Hugo, I can say this to you, and,” he added, lowering his voice, “I hope for a movement to-night.”

“Where?”

“On the Faubourg St. Marceau.”

“At what time?”

“At one o’clock.”

“How do you know it?”

“Because I shall be there.”

He continued: “Now, Citizen Victor Hugo, if a movement takes place to-night in the Faubourg St. Marceau, will you head it? Do you consent?”

“Yes.”

“Have you your scarf of office?”

I half drew it out of my pocket. His eyes glistened with joy.

“Excellent,” said he. “The Citizen has his pistols, the Representative his scarf. All are armed.”

I questioned him. “Are you sure of your movement for to-night?”

He answered me, “We have prepared it, and we reckon to be there.”

“In that case,” said I, “as soon as the first barricade is constructed I will be behind it. Come and fetch me.”

“Where?”

“Wherever I may be.”

He assured me that if the movement should take place during the night he would know it at half-past ten that evening at the latest, and that I should be informed of it before eleven o’clock. We settled that in whatever place I might be at that hour I would send word to Auguste, who undertook to let him know.

The young woman continued to peep out at us. The conversation was growing prolonged, and might seem singular to the people in the parlor. “I am going,” said I to Auguste.

I had opened the door, he took my hand, pressed it as a woman might have done, and said to me in a deeply-moved tone, “You are going: will you come back?”

“I do not know.”

“It is true,” said he. “No one knows what is going to happen. Well, you are perhaps going to be hunted and sought for as I have been. It will perhaps be your turn to be shot, and mine to save you. You know the mouse may sometimes prove useful to the lion. Monsieur Victor Hugo, if you need a refuge, this house is yours. Come here. You will find a bed where you can sleep, and a man who will lay down his life for you."

I thanked him by a hearty shake of the hand, and I left. Eight o'clock struck. I hastened towards the Rue de Charonne.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE REPRESENTATIVES HUNTED DOWN

At the corner of the Rue de Faubourg St. Antoine before the shop of the grocer Pepin, on the same spot where the immense barricade of June, 1848, was erected as high as the second story, the decrees of the morning had been placarded. Some men were inspecting them, although it was pitch dark, and they could not read them, and an old woman said, “The ‘Twenty-five francs’ are crushed — so much the better!”

A few steps further I heard my name pronounced. I turned round. It was Jules Favre, Bourzat, Lafon, Madier de Montjau, and Michel de Bourges, who were passing by. I took leave of the brave and devoted woman who had insisted upon accompanying me. A *fiacre* was passing. I put her in it, and then rejoined the five Representatives. They had come from the Rue de Charonne. They had found the premises of the Society of Cabinet Makers closed. “There was no one there,” said Madier de Montjau. “These worthy people are beginning to get together a little capital, they do not wish to compromise it, they are afraid of us. They say, ‘*coups d’état* are nothing to us, we shall leave them alone!’”

“That does not surprise me,” answered I, “a society is shopkeeper.”

“Where are we going?” asked Jules Favre.

Lafon lived two steps from there, at No. 2, Quai Jemmapes. He offered us the use of his rooms. We accepted, and took the necessary measures to inform the members of the Left that we had gone there.

A few minutes afterwards we were installed in Lafon’s rooms, on the fourth floor of an old and lofty house. This house had seen the taking of the Bastille.

This house was entered by a side-door opening from the Quai Jemmapes upon a narrow courtyard a few steps lower than the Quai itself. Bourzat remained at this door to warn us in case of any accident, and to point out the house to those Representatives who might come up.

In a few moments a large number of us had assembled, and we again met — all those of the morning, with a few added. Lafon gave up his drawing-room to us, the windows of which overlooked the back yard. We organized a sort of “bureau,” and we took our places, Jules Favre, Carnot, Michel, and myself, at a large table, lighted by two candles, and placed before the fire. The Representatives and the other people present sat around on chairs and sofas. A group stood before the door.

Michel de Bourges, on entering, exclaimed, “We have come to seek out the people of the Faubourg St. Antoine. Here we are. Here we must remain.”

These words were applauded.

They set forth the situation — the torpor of the Faubourgs, no one at the Society of Cabinet Makers, the doors closed nearly everywhere. I told them what I had seen and heard in the Rue de la Roquette, the remarks of the wine-seller, Auguste, on the indifference of the people, the hopes of the engineer, and the possibility of a movement during the night in the Faubourg St. Marceau. It was settled that on the first notice that might be given I should go there.

Nevertheless nothing was yet known of what had taken place during the day. It was announced that M. Havin, Lieutenant-Colonel of the 5th Legion of the National Guard, had ordered the officers of his Legion to attend a meeting.

Some Democratic writers came in, amongst whom were Alexander Rey and Xavier Durrieu, with Kesler, Villiers, and Amable Lemaître of the *Révolution*; one of these writers was Millière.

Millière had a large bleeding wound above his eye-brow; that same morning on leaving us, as he was carrying away one of the copies of the Proclamation which I had dictated, a man had thrown himself upon him to snatch it from him. The police had evidently already been informed of the Proclamation, and lay in wait for it; Millière had a hand-to-hand struggle with the police agent, and had overthrown him, not without bearing away this gash. However, the Proclamation was not yet printed. It was nearly nine o’clock in the evening and nothing had come. Xavier Durrieu asserted that before another hour elapsed they should have the promised forty thousand copies. It was hoped to cover the walls of Paris with them during the night. Each of those present was to serve as a bill-poster.

There were amongst us — an inevitable circumstance in the stormy confusion of the first moments — a good many men whom we did not know. One of these men brought in ten or twelve copies of the appeal to arms. He asked me to sign them with my own hand, in order, he said, that he might be able to show my signature to the people— “Or to the police,” whispered Baudin to me smiling. We were not in a position to take such precautions as these. I gave this man all the signatures that he wanted.

Madier de Montjau began to speak. It was of consequence to organize the action of the Left, to impress the unity of impulse upon the movement which was being prepared; to create a centre for it, to give a pivot to the insurrection, to the Left a direction, and to the People a support. He proposed the immediate formation of a committee representing the entire Left in all its shades, and charged with organizing and directing the insurrection.

All the Representatives cheered this eloquent and courageous man. Seven members were proposed. They named at once Carnot, De Flotte, Jules Favre, Madier de Montjau, Michel de Bourges, and myself; and thus was unanimously formed this Committee of Insurrection, which at my request was called a Committee of Resistance; for it was Louis Bonaparte who was tire insurgent. For ourselves, the were the Republic. It was desired that one workman-Representative should be admitted into the committee. Faure (du Rhône) was nominated. But Faure, we learned later on, had been arrested that morning. The committee then was, it fact, composed of six members.

The committee organized itself during the sitting. A Committee of Permanency was formed from amongst it, and invested with the authority of decreeing “urgency” in the name of all the Left, of concentrating all news, information, directions, instructions, resources, orders. This Committee of Permanency was composed of four members, who were Carnot, Michel de Bourges, Jules Favre, and myself. De Flotte and Madier de Montjau were specially delegated, De Flotte for the left bank of the river and the district of the schools, Madier for the Boulevards and the outskirts.

These preliminary operations being terminated, Lafon took aside Michel de Bourges and myself, and told us that the ex-Constituent Proudhon had inquired for one of us two, that he had remained downstairs nearly a quarter of an hour, and that he had gone away, saying that he would wait for us in the Place de la Bastille.

Proudhon, who was at that time undergoing a term of three years’ imprisonment at St. Pélagie for an offence against Louis Bonaparte, was granted leave of absence from tine to time. Chance willed it that one of these liberty days had fallen on the 2d of December.

This is an incident which one cannot help noting. On the 2d of December Proudhon was a prisoner by virtue of a lawful sentence, and at the same moment at which they illegally imprisoned the inviolable Representatives, Proudhon, whom they could have legitimately detained, was allowed to go out. Proudhon had profited by his liberty to come and find us.

I knew Proudhon from having seen him at the Concièrgerie, where my two sons were shut up, and my two illustrious friends, Auguste Vacquérie and Paul Meurice, and those gallant writers, Louis Jourdan, Erdan, and Suchet. I could not help thinking that on that day they would assuredly not have given leave of absence to these men.

Meanwhile Xavier Durrieu whispered to me, "I have just left Proudhon. He wishes to see you. He is waiting for you down below, close by, at the entrance to the Place. You will find him leaning on the parapet of the canal."

"I am going," said I.

I went downstairs.

I found in truth, at the spot mentioned, Proudhon, thoughtful, leaning with his two elbows on the parapet. He wore that broad-brimmed hat in which I had often seen him striding alone up and down the courtyard of the Concièrgerie.

I went up to him.

"You wish to speak to me."

"Yes," and he shook me by the hand.

The corner where we were standing was lonely. On the left there was the Place de la Bastille, dark and gloomy; one could see nothing there, but one could feel a crowd; regiments were there in battle array; they did not bivouac, they were ready to march; the muffled sound of breathing could be heard; the square was full of that glistening shower of pale sparks which bayonets give forth at night time. Above this abyss of shadows rose up black and stark the Column of July.

Proudhon resumed, —

"Listen. I come to give you a friendly warning. You are entertaining illusions. The People are ensnared in this affair. They will not stir. Bonaparte will carry them with him. This rubbish, the restitution of universal suffrage, entraps the simpletons. Bonaparte passes for a Socialist. He has said, 'I will be the Emperor of the Rabble.' It is a piece of insolence. But insolence has a chance of success when it has this at its service."

And Proudhon pointed with his finger to the sinister gleam of the bayonets. He continued, —

"Bonaparte has an object in view. The Republic has made the People. He wishes to restore the Populace. He will succeed and you will fail. He has on his side force, cannons, the mistake of the people, and the folly of the Assembly. The few of the Left to which you belong will not succeed in overthrowing the *coup d'état*. You are honest, and he has this advantage over you — that he is a rogue. You have scruples, and he has this advantage over you — that he has none. Believe me. Resist no longer. The situation is without resources. We must wait; but at this moment fighting would be madness. What do you hope for?"

"Nothing," said I.

"And what are you going to do?"

"Everything."

By the tone of my voice he understood that further persistence was useless.

"Good-bye," he said.

We parted. He disappeared in the darkness. I have never seen him since.

I went up again to Lafon's rooms.

In the meantime the copies of the appeal to arms did not come to hand. The Representatives, becoming uneasy, went up and downstairs. Some of them went out on the Quai Jemmapes, to wait there and gain information about them. In the room there was a sound of confused talking the members of the Committee, Madier de Montjau, Jules Favre, and Carnot, withdrew, and sent word to me by Charamaule that they were going to No. 10, Rue des Moulins, to the house of the ex-Constituent Landrin, in the division of the 5th Legion, to deliberate more at their ease, and they begged me to join them. But I thought I should do better to remain. I had placed myself at the disposal of the probable movement of the Faubourg St. Marceau. I awaited the notice of it through Auguste. It was most important that I should not go too far away; besides, it was possible that if I went away, the Representatives of the Left, no longing seeing a member of the committee amongst them, would disperse without taking any resolution, and I saw in this more than one disadvantage.

Time passed, no Proclamations. We learned the next day that the packages had been seized by the police. Cournet, an ex-Republican naval officer who was present, began to speak. We shall see presently what sort of a man Cournet was, and of what an energetic and determined nature he was composed. He represented to us that as we had been there nearly two hours the police would certainly end by being informed of our whereabouts, that the members of the Left had an imperative duty — to keep themselves at all costs at the head of the People, that the necessity itself of their situation imposed upon them the precaution of frequently changing their place of retreat, and he ended by offering us, for our deliberation, his house and his workshops, No. 82, Rue Popincourt, at the bottom of a blind alley, and also in the neighborhood of the Faubourg St. Antoine.

This offer was accepted. I sent to inform Auguste of our change of abode, and of Cournet's address. Lafon remained on the Quai Jemmapes in order to forward on the Proclamations as soon as they arrived, and we set out at once.

Charamaule undertook to send to the Rue des Moulins to tell the other members of the committee that we would wait for them at No. 82, Rue Popincourt.

We walked, as in the morning, in little separate groups. The Quai Jemmapes skirts the left bank of the St. Martin Canal; we went up it. We only met a few solitary workmen, who looked back when we had passed, and stopped behind us with an air of astonishment. The night was dark. A few drops of rain were falling.

A little beyond the Rue de Chemin Vert we turned to the right and reached the Rue Popincourt. There all was deserted, extinguished, closed, and silent, as in the Faubourg St. Antoine. This street is of great length. We walked for a long time; we passed by the barracks. Cournet was no longer with us; he had remained behind to inform some of his friends, and we were told to take defensive measures in case his house was attacked. We looked for No. 82. The darkness was such that we could not distinguish the numbers on the houses. At length, at the end of the street, on the right, we saw a light; it was a grocer's shop, the only one open throughout the street. One of us entered, and asked the grocer, who was sitting behind his counter, to show us M. Cournet's house. "Opposite," said the grocer, pointing to an old and low carriage entrance which could be seen on the other side of the street, almost facing his shop.

We knocked at this door. It was opened. Baudin entered first, tapped at the window of the porter's lodge, and asked "Monsieur Cournet?" — An old woman's voice answered, "Here."

The portress was in bed; all in the house sleeping. We went in.

Having entered, and the gate being shut behind us, we found ourselves in a little square courtyard which formed the centre of a sort of a two-storied ruin; the silence of a convent prevailed, not a light was to be seen at the windows; near a shed was seen a low entrance to a narrow, dark, and winding staircase. “We have made some mistake,” said Charamaule; “it is impossible that it can be here.”

Meanwhile the portress, hearing all these trampling steps beneath her doorway, had become wide awake, had lighted her lamp, and we could see her in her lodge, her face pressed against the window, gazing with alarm at sixty dark phantoms, motionless, and standing in her courtyard.

Esquiros addressed her: “Is this really M. Cournet’s house?” said he.

“M. Cornet, without doubt,” answered the good woman.

All was explained. We had asked for Cournet, the grocer had understood Cornet, the portress had understood Cornet. It chanced that M. Cornet lived there.

We shall see by and by what an extraordinary service chance had rendered us.

We went out, to the great relief of the poor portress, and we resumed our search. Xavier Durrieu succeeded in ascertaining our whereabouts, and extricated us from our difficulty.

A few moments afterwards we turned to the left, and we entered into a blind alley of considerable length and dimly lighted by an old oil lamp — one of those with which Paris was formerly lighted — then again to the left, and we entered through a narrow passage into a large courtyard encumbered with sheds and building materials. This time we had reached Cournet’s.

CHAPTER XIX.

ONE FOOT IN THE TOMB

Cournet was waiting for us. He received us on the ground floor, in a parlor where there was a fire, a table, and some chairs; but the room was so small that a quarter of us filled it to overflowing, and the others remained in the courtyard. “It is impossible to deliberate here,” said Bancel. “I have a larger room on the first floor,” answered Cournet, “but it is a building in course of construction, which is not yet furnished, and where there is no fire.”—“What does it matter?” they answered him. “Let us go up to the first floor.”

We went up to the first floor by a steep and narrow wooden staircase, and we took possession of two rooms with very low ceilings, but of which one was sufficiently large. The walls were whitewashed, and a few straw-covered stools formed the whole of its furniture.

They called out to me, “Preside.”

I sat down on one of the stools in the corner of the first room, with the fire place on my right and on my left the door opening upon the staircase. Baudin said to me, “I have a pencil and paper. I will act as secretary to you.” He sat down on a stool next to me.

The Representatives and those present, amongst whom were several men in blouses, remained standing, forming in front of Baudin and myself a sort of square, backed by the two walls of the room opposite to us. This crowd extended as far as the staircase. A lighted candle was placed on the chimney-piece.

A common spirit animated this meeting. The faces were pale, but in every eye could be seen the same firm resolution. In all these shadows glistened the same flame. Several simultaneously asked permission to speak. I requested them to give their names to Baudin, who wrote them down, and then passed me the list.

The first speaker was a workman. He began by apologizing for mingling with the Representatives, he a stranger to the Assembly. The Representatives interrupted him. “No, no,” they said, “the People and Representatives are all one! Speak — !” He declared that if he spoke it was in order to clear from all suspicion the honor of his brethren, the workmen of Paris; that he had heard some Representatives express doubt about them.

He asserted that this was unjust, that the workmen realized the whole crime of M. Bonaparte and the whole duty of the People, that they would not be deaf to the appeal of the Republican Representatives, and that this would be clearly shown. He said all this, simply, with a sort of proud shyness and of honest bluntness. He kept his word. I found him the next day fighting on the Rambuteau barricade.

Mathieu (de la Drôme) came in as the workman concluded. “I bring news,” he exclaimed. A profound silence ensued.

As I have already said, we vaguely knew since the morning that the Right were to have assembled, and that a certain number of our friends had probably taken part in the meeting, and that was all. Mathieu (de la Drôme) brought us the events of the day, the details of the arrests at their own houses carried out without any obstacle, of the meeting which had taken place at M. Daru’s house and its rough treatment in the Rue de Bourgogne, of the Representatives expelled from the Hall of the Assembly, of the meanness of President Dupin, of the melting away of the High Court, of the total inaction of the Council of State, of the sad sitting held at the Mairie of the Tenth Arrondissement, of the Oudinot, *fiasco*, of the decree of the deposition of the President, and of the two hundred and twenty forcibly arrested and taken to the Quai d’Orsay. He concluded in a manly style: “The duty of the Left was increasing hourly. The morrow would probably prove decisive.” He implored the meeting to take this into consideration.

A workman added a fact. He had happened in the morning to be in the Rue de Grenelle during the passage of the arrested members of the Assembly; he was there at the moment when one of the commanders of the Chasseurs de Vincennes had uttered these words, “Now it is the turn of those gentlemen — the Red Representatives. Let them look out for themselves!”

One of the editors of the *Révolution,* Hennett de Kesler, who afterwards became an intrepid exile, completed the information of Mathieu (de la Drôme). He recounted the action taken by two members of the Assembly with regard to the so-called Minister of the Interior, Morny, and the answer of the said Morny: “If I find any of the Representatives behind the barricades, I will have them shot to the last man,” and that other saying of the same witty vagabond respecting the members taken to the Quai d’Orsay, “These are the last Representatives who will be made prisoners.” He told us that a placard was at that very moment being printed which declared that

“Any one who should be found at a secret meeting would be immediately shot.” The placard, in truth, appeared the next morning.

Baudin rose up. “The *coup d’état* redoubles its rage,” exclaimed he.

“Citizens, let us redouble our energy!”

Suddenly a man in a blouse entered. He was out of breath. He had run hard. He told us that he had just seen, and he repeated, had seen with “his own eyes,” in the Rue Popincourt, a regiment marching in silence, and wending its way towards the blind alley of No. 82, that we were surrounded, and that we were about to be attacked. He begged us to disperse immediately.

“Citizen Representatives,” called out Cournet, “I have placed scouts in the blind alley who will fall back and warn us if the regiment penetrates thither. The door is narrow and will be barricaded in the twinkling of an eye. We are here, with you, fifty armed and resolute men, and at the first shot we shall be two hundred. We are provided with ammunition. You can deliberate calmly.”

And as he concluded he raised his right arm, and from his sleeve fell a large poniard, which he had concealed, and with the other hand he rattled in his pocket the butts of a pair of pistols.

“Very well,” said I, “let us continue.”

Three of the youngest and most eloquent orators of the Left, Bancel, Arnauld (de l’Ariége) and Victor Chauffour delivered their opinions in succession. All three were imbued with this notion, that our appeal to arms not having yet been placarded, the different incidents of the Boulevarde du Temple and of the Café Bonvalet having brought about no results, none of our decrees, owing to the repressive measures of Bonaparte, having yet succeeded in appearing, while the events at the Mairie of the Tenth Arrondissement began to be spread abroad through Paris, it seemed as though the Right had commenced active resistance before the Left. A generous rivalry for the public safety spurred them on. It was delightful to them to know that a regiment ready to attack was close by, within a few steps, and that perhaps in a few moments their blood would flow.

Moreover, advice abounded, and with advice, uncertainty. Some illusions were still entertained. A workman, leaning close to me against the fireplace, said in a low voice to one of his comrades that the People must not be reckoned upon, and that if we fought “We should perpetrate a madness.”

The incidents and events of the day had in some degree modified my opinion as to the course to be followed in this grave crisis. The silence of the crowd at the moment when Arnauld (de l'Ariége) and I had apostrophized the troops, had destroyed the impression which a few hours before the enthusiasm of the people on the Boulevard du Temple had left with me. The hesitation of Auguste had impressed me, the Society of Cabinet Makers appeared to shun us, the torpor of the Faubourg St. Antoine was manifest, the inertness of the Faubourg St. Marceau was not less so. I ought to have received notice from the engineer before eleven o'clock, and eleven o'clock was past. Our hopes died away one after another. Nevertheless, all the more reason, in my opinion, to astonish and awaken Paris by an extraordinary spectacle, by a daring act of life and collective power on the part of the Representatives of the Left, by the daring of an immense devotion.

It will be seen later on what a combination of accidental circumstances prevented this idea from being realized as I then purposed. The Representatives have done their whole duty. Providence perhaps has not done all on its side. Be it as it may, supposing that we were not at once carried off by some nocturnal and immediate combat, and that at the hour at which I was speaking we had still a "to-morrow," I felt the necessity of fixing every eye upon the course which should be adopted on the day which was about to follow. — I spoke.

I began by completely unveiling the situation. I painted the picture in four words: the Constitution thrown into the gutter; the Assembly driven to prison with the butt-end of a musket, the Council of State dispersed; the High Court expelled by a galley-sergeant, a manifest beginning of victory for Louis Bonaparte, Paris ensnared in the army as though in a net; bewilderment everywhere, all authority overthrown; all compacts annulled; two things only remained standing, the *coup d'état* and ourselves.

"Ourselves! and who are we?"

"We are," said I, "we are Truth and Justice! We are the supreme and sovereign power, the People incarnate — Right!"

I continued, —

"Louis Bonaparte at every minute which elapses advances a step further in his crime. For him nothing is inviolable, nothing is sacred; this morning he violated the Palace of the Representatives of the Nation, a few hours later he laid violent hands on their persons; to-morrow, perhaps in a few moments, he will shed their blood. Well then! he marches upon us, let us march upon him. The danger grows greater, let us grow greater with the danger."

A movement of assent passed through the Assembly. I continued, —

"I repeat and insist. Let us show no mercy to this wretched Bonaparte for any of the enormities which his outrage contains. As he has drawn the wine — I should say the blood — he must drink it up. We are not individuals, we are the Nation. Each of us walks forth clothed with the Sovereignty of the people. He cannot strike our persons without rending that. Let us compel his volleys to pierce our sashes as well as our breasts. This man is on a road where logic grasps him and leads him to parricide. What he is killing in this moment is the country! Well, then! when the ball of Executive Power pierces the sash of Legislative Power, it is visible parricide! It is this that must be understood!"

"We are quite ready!" they cried out. "What measures would you advise us to adopt?"

"No half measures," answered I; "a deed of grandeur! To-morrow — if we leave here this night — let us all meet in the Faubourg St. Antoine."

They interposed, "Why the Faubourg St. Antoine?"

"Yes," resumed I, "the Faubourg St. Antoine! I cannot believe that the heart of the People has ceased to beat there. Let us all meet to-morrow in the Faubourg St. Antoine. Opposite the Lenoir Market there is a hall which was used by a club in 1848."

They cried out to me, "The Salle Roysin."

"That is it," said I, "The Salle Roysin. We who remain free number a hundred and twenty Republican Representatives. Let us install ourselves in this hall. Let us install ourselves in the fulness and majesty of the Legislative Power. Henceforward we are the Assembly, the whole of the Assembly! Let us sit there, deliberate there, in our official sashes, in the midst of the People. Let us summon the Faubourg St. Antoine to its duty, let us shelter there the National Representation, let us shelter there the popular sovereignty. Let us intrust the People to the keeping of the People. Let us adjure them to protect themselves. If necessary, let us order them!"

A voice interrupted me: "You cannot give orders to the People!"

"Yes!" I cried, "When it is a question of public safety, of the universal safety, when it is a question of the future of every European nationality, when it is a question of defending the Republic, Liberty, Civilization, the

Revolution, we have the right — we, the Representatives of the entire nation — to give, in the name of the French people, orders to the people of Paris! Let us, therefore, meet to-morrow at this Salle Roysin; but at what time? Not too early in the morning. In broad day. It is necessary that the shops should be open, that people should be coming and going, that the population should be moving about, that there should be plenty of people in the streets, that they should see us, that they should recognize us, that the grandeur of our example should strike every eye and stir every heart. Let us all be there between nine and ten o'clock in the morning. If we cannot obtain the Salle Roysin we will take the first church at hand, a stable, a shed, some enclosure where we can deliberate; at need, as Michel de Bourges has said, we will hold our sittings in a square bounded by four barricades. But provisionally I suggest the Salle Roysin. Do not forget that in such a crisis there must be no vacuum before the nation. That alarms it. There must be a government somewhere, and it must be known. The rebellion at the Elysée, the Government at the Faubourg St. Antoine; the Left the Government, the Faubourg St. Antoine the citadel; such are the ideas which from to-morrow we must impress upon the mind of Paris. To the Salle Roysin, then! Thence in the midst of the dauntless throng of workmen of that great district of Paris, enclosed in the Faubourg as in a fortress, being both Legislators and Generals, multiplying and inventing means of defence and of attack, launching Proclamations and unearthing the pavements, employing the women in writing out placards while the men are fighting, we will issue a warrant against Louis Bonaparte, we will issue warrants against his accomplices, we will declare the military chiefs traitors, we will outlaw in a body all the crime and all the criminals, we will summon the citizens to arms, we will recall the army to duty, we will rise up before Louis Bonaparte, terrible as the living Republic, we will fight on the one hand with the power of the Law, and on the other with the power of the People, we will overwhelm this miserable rebel, and will rise up above his head both as a great Lawful Power and a great Revolutionary Power!"

While speaking I became intoxicated with my own ideas. My enthusiasm communicated itself to the meeting. They cheered me. I saw that I was becoming somewhat too hopeful, that I allowed myself to be carried away, and that I carried them away, that I presented to them success as possible, as even easy, at a moment when it was important that no one should entertain an illusion. The truth was gloomy, and it was my duty to tell it. I let silence be re-established, and I signed with my hand that I had a last word to say. I then resumed, lowering my voice, —

“Listen, calculate carefully what you are doing. On one side a hundred thousand men, seventeen harnessed batteries, six thousand cannon-mouths in the forts, magazines, arsenals, ammunition sufficient to carry out a Russian campaign; on the other a hundred and twenty Representatives, a thousand or twelve hundred patriots, six hundred muskets, two cartridges per man, not a drum to beat to arms, not a bell to sound the tocsin, not a printing office to print a Proclamation; barely here and there a lithographic press, and a cellar where a hand-bill can be hurriedly and furtively printed with the brush; the penalty of death against any one who unearths a paving stone, penalty of death against any one who would enlist in our ranks, penalty of death against any one who is found in a secret meeting, penalty of death against any one who shall post up an appeal to arms; if you are taken during the combat, death; if you are taken after the combat, transportation or exile; on the one side an army and a Crime; on the other a handful of men and Right. Such is this struggle. Do you accept it?”

A unanimous shout answered me, “Yes! yes!”

This shout did not come from the mouths, it came from the souls. Baudin, still seated next to me, pressed my hand in silence.

It was settled therefore at once that they should meet again on the next day, Wednesday, between nine and ten in the morning, at the Salle Roysin, that they should arrive singly or by little separate groups, and that they should let those who were absent know of this rendezvous. This done, there remained nothing more but to separate. It was about midnight.

One of Cournet’s scouts entered. “Citizen Representatives,” he said, “the regiment is no longer there. The street is free.”

The regiment, which had probably come from the Popincourt barracks close at hand, had occupied the street opposite the blind alley for more than half an hour, and then had returned to the barracks. Had they judged the attack inopportune or dangerous at night in that narrow blind alley, and in the centre of this formidable Popincourt district, where the insurrection had so long held its own in June, 1848? It appeared certain that the soldiers had searched several houses in the neighborhood. According to details which we learned subsequently, we were followed after leaving No. 2, Quai Jemmapes, by an agent of police, who saw us enter the house where a M. Cornet was lodging, and who at once proceeded to the Prefecture to denounce our place of refuge to his chiefs. The regiment sent to arrest us surrounded the house, ransacked it from attic to cellar, found nothing, and went away.

This quasi-synonym of Cornet and Cournet lead misled the bloodhounds of the *coup d'état*. Chance, we see, had interposed usefully in our affairs.

I was talking at the door with Baudin, and we were making some last arrangements, when a young man with a chestnut beard, dressed like a man of fashion, and possessing all the manners of one, and whom I had noticed while speaking, came up to me.

"Monsieur Victor Hugo," said he, "where are you going to sleep?"

Up to that moment I had not thought of this.

It was far from prudent to go home.

"In truth," I answered, "I have not the least idea."

"Will you come to my house?"

"I shall be very happy."

He told me his mane. It was M. de la R —— . He knew my brother Abel's wife and family, the Montferriers, relations of the Chambacères, and he lived in the Rue Caumartin. He had been a Prefect under the Provisional Government. There was a carriage in waiting. We got in, and as Baudin told me that he would pass the night at Cournet's, I gave him the address of M. do la R —— , so that he could send for me if any notice of the movement came from the Faubourg St. Marceau or elsewhere. But I hoped for nothing more that night, and I was right.

About a quarter of an hour after the separation of the Representatives, and after we had left the Rue Popincourt, Jules Favre, Madier de Montajau, de Flotte, and Carnot, to whom we had sent word to the Rue des Moulins, arrived at Cournet's, accompanied by Schoelcher, by Charamaule, by Aubry (du Nord), and by Bastide. Some Representatives were still remaining at Cournet's. Several, like Baudin, were going to pass the night there. They told our colleagues what had been settled respecting my proposition, and of the rendezvous at the Salle Roysin; only it appears that there was some doubt regarding the hour agreed upon, and that Baudin in particular did not exactly remember it, and that our colleagues believed that the rendezvous, which had been fixed for nine o'clock in the morning, was fixed for eight.

This alteration in the hour, due to the treachery of memory for which no one can be blamed, prevented the realization of the plan which I had conceived of an Assembly holding its sittings in the Faubourg, and giving battle to Louis Bonaparte, but gave us as a compensation the heroic exploits of the Ste. Marguerite barricade.

CHAPTER XX.

THE BURIAL OF A GREAT ANNIVERSARY

Such was the first day. Let us look at it steadfastly. It deserves it. It is the anniversary of Austerlitz; the Nephew commemorates the Uncle. Austerlitz is the most brilliant battle of history; the Nephew set himself this problem — how to commit a baseness equal to this magnificence. He succeeded.

This first day, which will be followed by others, is already complete. Everything is there. It is the most terrible attempt at a thrust backwards that has ever been essayed. Never has such a crumbling of civilization been seen. All that formed the edifice is now in ruin; the soil is strewn with the fragments. In one night the inviolability of the Law, the Right of the Citizen, the Dignity of the Judge, and the Honor of the Soldier have disappeared. Terrible substitutions have taken place; there was the oath, there is pergury; there was the flag, there is a rag; there was the Army, there is a band of brigands; there was Justice, there is treason; there was a code of laws, there is the sabre; there was a Government, there is a crew of swindlers; there was France, there is a den of thieves. This called itself Society Saved.

It is the rescue of the traveller by the highwayman.

France was passing by, Bonaparte cried, “Stand and deliver!”

The hypocrisy which has preceded the Crime, equals in deformity the impudence which has followed it. The nation was trustful and calm. There was a sudden and cynical shock. History has recorded nothing equal to the Second of December. Here there was no glory, nothing but meanness. No deceptive picture. He could have declared himself honest; He declares himself infamous; nothing more simple. This day, almost unintelligible in its success, has proved that Politics possess their obscene side. Louis Bonaparte has shown himself unmasked.

Yesterday President of the Republic, to-day a scavenger. He has sworn, he still swears: but the tone has changed. The oath has become an imprecation. Yesterday he called himself a maiden, to-day he becomes a brazen woman, and laughs at his dupes. Picture to yourself Joan of Arc confessing herself to be Messalina. Such is the Second of December.

Women are mixed up in this treason. It is an outrage which savors both of the boudoir and of the galleys. There wafts across the fetidness of blood an undefined scent of patchouli. The accomplices of this act of brigandage are most agreeable men — Romieu, Morny. Getting into debt leads one to commit crimes.

Europe was astounded. It was a thunder bolt from a thief. It must be acknowledged that thunder can fall into bad hands, Palmerston, that traitor, approved of it. Old Metternich, a dreamer in his villa at Rennweg, shook his head. As to Soult, the man of Austerlitz after Napoleon, he did what he ought to do, on the very day of the Crime he died, Alas! and Austerlitz also.

THE SECOND DAY — THE STRUGGLE.

CHAPTER I.

THEY COME TO ARREST ME

In order to reach the Rue Caumartin from the Rue Popincourt, all Paris has to be crossed. We found a great apparent calm everywhere. It was one o’clock in the morning when we reached M. de la R — — ‘s house. The *fiacre* stopped near a grated door, which M. de la R —— opened with a latch-key; on the right, under the archway, a staircase ascended to the first floor of a solitary detached building which M. de la R —— inhabited, and into which he led me.

We entered a little drawing-room very richly furnished, lighted with a night-lamp, and separated from the bedroom by a tapestry curtain two-thirds drown. M. de la R —— went into the bedroom, and a few minutes afterwards came back again, accompanied by a charming woman, pale and fair, in a dressing-gown, her hair down, handsome, fresh, bewildered, gentle nevertheless, and looking at me with that alarm which in a young face confers an additional grace. Madame de la R —— had just been awakened by her husband. She remained a moment on the threshold of her chamber, smiling, half asleep, greatly astonished, somewhat frightened, looking by turns at her husband and at me, never having dreamed perhaps what civil war really meant, and seeing it enter abruptly into her rooms in the middle of the night under this disquieting form of an unknown person who asks for a refuge.

I made Madame de la R —— a thousand apologies, which she received with perfect kindness, and the charming woman profited by the incident to go and caress a pretty little girl of two years old who was sleeping at the end of the room in her cot, and the child whom she kissed caused her to forgive the refugee who had awakened her.

While chatting M. de la R —— lighted a capital fire in the grate, and his wife, with a pillow and cushions, a hooded cloak belonging to him, and a pelisse belonging to herself, improvised opposite the fire a bed on a sofa, somewhat short, and which we lengthened by means of an arm-chair.

During the deliberation in the Rue Popincourt, at which I had just presided, Baudin had lent me his pencil to jot down some names. I still had this pencil with me. I made use of it to write a letter to my wife, which

Madame de la R —— undertook to convey herself to Madame Victor Hugo the next day. While emptying my pockets I found a box for the “Italiens,” which I offered to Madame de la R —— . On that evening (Tuesday, December 2d) they were to play *Hernani*.

I looked at that cot, these two handsome, happy young people, and at myself, my disordered hair and clothes, my boots covered with mud, gloomy thoughts in my mind, and I felt like an owl in a nest of nightingales.

A few moments afterwards M. and Madame de la R —— had disappeared into their bedroom, and the half-opened curtain was closed. I stretched myself, fully dressed as I was, upon the sofa, and this gentle nest disturbed by me subsided into its graceful silence.

One can sleep on the eve of a battle between two armies, but on the eve of a battle between citizens there can be no sleep. I counted each hour as it sounded from a neighboring church; throughout the night there passed down the street, which was beneath the windows of the room where I was lying, carriages which were fleeing from Paris. They succeeded each other rapidly and hurriedly, one might have imagined it was the exit from a ball. Not being able to sleep, I got up. I had slightly parted the muslin curtains of a window, and I tried to look outside; the darkness was complete. No stars, clouds were flying by with the turbulent violence of a winter night. A melancholy wind howled. This wind of clouds resembled the wind of events.

I watched the sleeping baby. I waited for dawn. It came. M. de la R —— had explained at my request in what manner I could go out without disturbing any one. I kissed the child’s forehead, and left the room. I went downstairs, closing the doors behind me as gently as I could, so not to wake Madame de la R —— . I opened the iron door and went out into the street. It was deserted, the shops were still shut, and a milkwoman, with her donkey by her side, was quietly arranging her cans on the pavement.

I have not seen M. de la R —— again. I learned since that he wrote to me in my exile, and that his letter was intercepted. He has, I believe, quitted France. May this touching page convey to him my kind remembrances.

The Rue Caumartin leads into the Rue St. Lazare. I went towards it. It was broad daylight. At every moment I was overtaken and passed by *fiacres* laden with trunks and packages, which were hastening towards the Havre railway station. Passers-by began to appear. Some baggage trains were mounting the Rue St. Lazare at the same time as myself. Opposite No. 42, formerly inhabited by Mdlle. Mars, I saw a new bill posted on the wall. I went up to it, I recognized the type of the National Printing Office, and I read,

“COMPOSITION OF THE NEW MINISTRY.

“*Interior* — M. de Morny. “*War* — The General of Division St. Arnaud. “*Foreign Affairs* — M. de Turgot. “*Justice* — M. Rouher. “*Finance* — M. Fould. “*Marine* — M. Ducos. “*Public Works* — M. Magne. “*Public Instruction* — M.H. Fortuol. “*Commerce* — M. Lefebre-Duruflé.”

I tore down the bill, and threw it into the gutter! The soldiers of the party who were leading the wagons watched me do it, and went their way.

In the Rue St. Georges, near a side-door, there was another bill. It was the “Appeal to the People.” Some persons were reading it. I tore it down, notwithstanding the resistance of the porter, who appeared to me to be entrusted with the duty of protecting it.

As I passed by the Place Bréda some *fiacres* had already arrived there. I took one. I was near home, the temptation was too great, I went there. On seeing me cross the courtyard the porter looked at me with a stupefied air. I rang the bell. My servant, Isidore, opened the door, and exclaimed with a great cry, “Ah! it is you, sir! They came during the night to arrest you.” I went into my wife’s room. She was in bed, but not asleep, and she told me what had happened.

She had gone to bed at eleven o’clock. Towards half-past twelve, during that species of drowsiness which resembles sleeplessness, she heard men’s voices. It seemed to her that Isidore was speaking to some one in the antechamber. At first she did not take any notice, and tried to go to sleep again, but the noise of voices continued. She sat up, and rang the bell.

Isidore came in. She asked him,

“Is any one there?”

“Yes, madame.”

“Who is it?”

“A man who wishes to speak to master.”

“Your master is out.”

“That is what I have told him, madame.”

“Well, is not the gentleman going?”

“No, madame, he says that he urgently needs to speak to Monsieur Victor

Hugo, and that he will wait for him.”

Isidore had stopped on the threshold of the bedroom. While he spoke a fat, fresh-looking man in an overcoat, under which could be seen a black coat, appeared at the door behind him.

Madame Victor Hugo noticed this man, who was silently listening.

"Is it you, sir, who wish to speak to Monsieur Victor Hugo?"

"Yes, madame."

"But what is it about? Is it regarding politics?"

The man did not answer.

"As to politics," continued my wife, "what is happening?"

"I believe, madame, that all is at an end."

"In what sense?"

"In the sense of the President."

My wife looked fixedly at the man, and said to him, —

"You have come to arrest my husband, sir."

"It is true, madame," answered the man, opening his overcoat, which revealed the sash of a Commissary of Police.

He added after a pause, "I am a Commissary of Police, and I am the bearer of a warrant to arrest M. Victor Hugo. I must institute a search and look through the house."

"What is your name, sir?" asked Madame Victor Hugo.

"My name is Hivert."

"You know the terms of the Constitution?"

"Yes, madam."

"You know that the Representatives of the People are inviolable!"

"Yes, madame."

"Very well, sir," she said coldly, "you know that you are committing a crime. Days like this have a to-morrow; proceed."

The Sieur Hivert attempted a few words of explanation, or we should rather say justification; he muttered the word "conscience," he stammered the word "honor." Madame Victor Hugo, who had been calm until then, could not help interrupting him with some abruptness.

"Do your business, sir, and do not argue; you know that every official who lays a hand on a Representative of the People commits an act of treason. You know that in presence of the Representatives the President is only an official like the others, the chief charged with carrying out their orders. You dare to come to arrest a Representative in his own home like a criminal! There is in truth a criminal here who ought to be arrested — yourself!”

The Sieur Hivert looked sheepish and left the room, and through the half-open door my wife could see, behind the well-fed, well-clothed, and bald Commissary, seven or eight poor raw-boned devils, wearing dirty coats which reached to their feet, and shocking old hats jammed down over their eyes — wolves led by a dog. They examined the room, opened here and there a few cupboards, and went away — with a sorrowful air — as Isidore said to me.

The Commissary Hivert, above all, hung his head; he raised it, however, for one moment. Isidore, indignant at seeing these men thus hunt for his master in every corner, ventured to defy them. He opened a drawer and said, “Look and see if he is not in here!” The Commissary of Police darted a furious glance at him: “Lackey, take care!” The lackey was himself.

These men having gone, it was noticed that several of my papers were missing. Fragments of manuscripts had been stolen, amongst others one dated July, 1848, and directed against the military dictatorship of Cavaignac, and in which there were verses written respecting the Censorship, the councils of war, and the suppression of the newspapers, and in particular respecting the imprisonment of a great journalist — Emile de Girardin: —

“… O honte, un lansquenet
Gauche, et parodiant César dont il hérite,
Gouverne les esprits du fond de sa guérite!”

These manuscripts are lost.

The police might come back at any moment, in fact they did come back a few minutes after I had left. I kissed my wife; I would not wake my daughter, who had just fallen asleep, and I went downstairs again. Some affrighted neighbors were waiting for me in the courtyard. I cried out to them laughingly, “Not caught yet!”

A quarter of an hour afterwards I reached No. 10, Rue des Moulins. It was not then eight o’clock in the morning, and thinking that my colleagues of the Committee of Insurrection had passed the night there, I thought it might be useful to go and fetch them, so that we might proceed all together to the Salle Roysin.

I found only Madame Landrin in the Rue des Moulins. It was thought that the house was denounced and watched, and my colleagues had changed their quarters to No. 7, Rue Villedo, the house of the ex-Constituent Leblond, legal adviser to the Workmen’s Association. Jules Favre had passed the night there. Madame Landrin was breakfasting. She offered me a place by her side, but time pressed. I carried off a morsel of bread, and left.

> At No. 7, Rue Villedo, the maid-servant who opened the door to me ushered me into a room where were Carnot, Michel de Bourges, Jules Favre, and the master of the house, our former colleague, Constituent Leblond.

“I have a carriage downstairs,” I said to them; “the rendezvous is at the Salle Roysin in the Faubourg St. Antoine; let us go.”

This, however, was not their opinion. According to them the attempts made on the previous evening in the Faubourg St. Antoine had revealed this portion of the situation; they sufficed; it was useless to persist; it was obvious that the working-class districts would not rise; we must turn to the side of the tradesmen’s districts, renounce our attempt to rouse the extremities of the city, and agitate the centre. We were the Committee of Resistance, the soul of the insurrection; if we were to go to the Faubourg St. Antoine, which was occupied by a considerable force, we should give ourselves up to Louis Bonaparte. They reminded me of what I myself had said on the subject the previous evening in the Rue Blanche. We must immediately organize the insurrection against the *coup d’état* and organize it in practicable districts, that is to say, in the old labyrinths of the streets St. Denis and St. Martin; we must draw up proclamations, prepare decrees, create some method of publicity; they were waiting for important communications from Workmen’s Associations and Secret Societies. The great blow which I wished to strike by our solemn meeting at the Salle Roysin would prove a failure; they thought it their duty to remain where they were; and the Committee being few in number, and the work to be done being enormous, they begged me not to leave them.

They were men of great hearts and great courage who spoke to me; they were evidently right; but for myself I could not fail to go to the rendezvous which I myself had fixed. All the reasons which they had given me were good, nevertheless I could have opposed some doubts, but the discussion would have taken too much time, and the hour drew nigh. I did not make any objections, and I went out of the room, making some excuse. My hat was in the antechamber, my *fiacre* was waiting for me, and I drove off to the Faubourg St. Antoine.

The centre of Paris seemed to have retained its everyday appearance. People came and went, bought and sold, chatted and laughed as usual. In the Rue Montorgueil I heard a street organ. Only on nearing the Faubourg St. Antoine the phenomenon which I had already noticed on the previous evening became more and more apparent; solitude reigned, and a certain dreary peacefulness.

We reached the Place de la Bastille.

My driver stopped.

“Go on,” I said to him.

CHAPTER II.

FROM THE BASTILLE TO THE RUE DE COTTE

The Place de la Bastille was at the same time empty and filled. Three regiments in battle array were there; not one passer-by.

Four harnessed batteries were drawn up at the foot of the column. Here and there knots of officers talked together in a low voice, — sinister men.

One of these groups, the principal, attracted my attention. That one was silent, there was no talking. There were several men on horseback; one in front of the others, in a general’s uniform, with a hat surmounted with black feathers, behind this man were two colonels, and behind the colonels a party of *aides-de-camp* and staff officers. This lace-trimmed company remained immovable, and as though pointing like a dog between the column and the entrance to the Faubourg. At a short distance from this group, spread out, and occupying the whole of the square, were the regiments drawn up and the cannon in their batteries.

“My driver again stopped.

“Go on,” I said; “drive into the Faubourg.”

“But they will prevent us, sir.”

“We shall see.”

The truth was that they did not prevent us.

The driver continued on his way, but hesitatingly, and at a walking pace. The appearance of a *fiacre* in the square had caused some surprise, and the inhabitants began to come out of their houses. Several came up to my carriage.

We passed by a group of men with huge epaulets. These men, whose tactics we understood later on, did not even appear to see us.

The emotion which I had felt on the previous day before a regiment of cuirassiers again seized me. To see before me the assassins of the country, at a few steps, standing upright, in the insolence of a peaceful triumph, was beyond my strength: I could not contain myself. I drew out my sash. I held it in my hand, and putting my arm and head out of the window of the *fiacre*, and shaking the sash, I shouted, —

“Soldiers! Look at this sash. It is the symbol of Law, it is the National Assembly visible. Where there this sash is there is Right. Well, then, this is what Right commands you. You are being deceived. Go back to your duty. It is a Representative of the People who is speaking to you, and he who represents the People represents the army. Soldiers, before becoming soldiers you have been peasants, you have been workmen, you have been and you are still citizens. Citizens, listen to me when I speak to you. The Law alone has the right to command you. Well, to-day the law is violated. By whom? By you. Louis Bonaparte draws you into a crime. Soldiers, you who are Honor, listen to me, for I am Duty. Soldiers, Louis Bonaparte assassinates the Republic. Defend it. Louis Bonaparte is a bandit; all his accomplices will follow him to the galleys. They are there already. He who is worthy of the galleys is in the galleys. To merit fetters is to wear them. Look at that man who is at your head, and who dares to command you. You take him for a general, he is a convict."

The soldiers seemed petrified.

Some one who was there (I thank his generous, devoted spirit) touched my arm, and whispered in my ear, "You will get yourself shot."

But I did not heed, and I listened to nothing. I continued, still waving my sash,— "You, who are there, dressed up like a general, it is you to whom I speak, sir. You know who I am, I am a Representative of the People, and I know who you are. I have told you you are a criminal. Now, do you wish to know my name? This is it."

And I called out my name to him.

And I added, —

"Now tell me yours."

He did not answer.

I continued, —

"Very well, I do not want to know your name as a general, I shall know your number as a galley slave."

The man in the general's uniform hung his head, the others were silent. I could read all their looks, however, although they did not raise their eyes. I saw them cast down, and I felt that they were furious. I had an overwhelming contempt for them, and I passed on.

What was the name of this general? I did not know then, and I do not know now.

One of the apologies for the *coup d'état* in relating this incident, and characterizing it as "an insensate and culpable provocation," states that "the moderation shown by the military leaders on this occasion did honor to

General —— :” We leave to the author of this panegyric the responsibility of that name and of this eulogium.

I entered the Rue de Faubourg St. Antoine.

My driver, who now knew my name, hesitated no longer, and whipped up his horse. These Paris coachmen are a brave and intelligent race.

As I passed the first shops of the main street nine o’clock sounded from the Church St. Paul.

“Good,” I said to myself, “I am in time.”

The Faubourg presented an extraordinary aspect. The entrance was guarded, but not closed, by two companies of infantry. Two other companies were drawn up in echelons farther on, at short distances, occupying the street, but leaving a free passage. The shops, which were open at the end of the Faubourg, were half closed a hundred yards farther up. The inhabitants, amongst whom I noticed numerous workmen in blouses, were talking together at their doors, and watching the proceedings. I noticed at each step the placards of the *coup d’état* untouched.

Beyond the fountain which stands at the corner of the Rue de Charonne the shops were closed. Two lines of soldiers extended on either side of the street of the Faubourg on the kerb of the pavement; the soldiers were stationed at every five paces, with the butts of their muskets resting on their hips, their chests drawn in, their right hand on the trigger, ready to bring to the present, keeping silence in the attitude of expectation. From that point a piece of cannon was stationed at the mouth of each of the side streets which open out of the main road of the Faubourg. Occasionally there was a mortar. To obtain a clear idea of this military arrangement one must imagine two rosaries, extending along the two sides of the Faubourg St. Antoine, of which the soldiers should form the links and the cannon the beads.

Meanwhile my driver became uneasy. He turned round to me and said, “It looks as though we should find barricades out there, sir; shall we turn back?”

“Keep on,” I replied.

He continued to drive straight on.

Suddenly it became impossible to do so. A company of infantry ranged three deep occupied the whole of the street from one pavement to the other. On the right there was a small street. I said to the driver, —

“Take that turning.”

He turned to the right and then to the left. We turned into a labyrinth of streets.

Suddenly I heard a shot.

The driver asked me, —

“Which way are we to go, sir?”

“In the direction in which you hear the shots.”

We were in a narrow street; on my left I saw the inscription above a door, “Grand Lavoir,” and on my right a square with a central building, which looked like a market. The square and the street were deserted. I asked the driver, —

“What street are we in?”

“In the Rue de Cotte.”

“Where is the Café Roysin?”

“Straight before us.”

“Drive there.”

He drove on, but slowly. There was another explosion, this time close by us, the end of the street became filled with smoke; at the moment we were passing No. 22, which has a side-door above which I read, “Petit Lavoir.”

Suddenly a voice called out to the driver, “Stop!”

The driver pulled up, and the window of the *fiacre* being down, a hand was stretched towards mine. I recognized Alexander Rey.

This daring man was pale.

“Go no further,” said he; “all is at an end.”

“What do you mean, all at an end?”

“Yes, they must have anticipated the time appointed; the barricade is taken: I have just come from it. It is a few steps from here straight before us.”

And he added, —

“Baudin is killed.”

The smoke rolled away from the end of the street.

“Look,” said Alexander Rey to me.

I saw, a hundred steps before us, at the junction of the Rue de Cotte and the Rue Ste. Marguerite, a low barricade which the soldiers were pulling down. A corpse was being borne away.

It was Baudin.

CHAPTER III.

THE ST. ANTOINE BARRICADE

This is what had happened.

During that same night, and as early as four o’clock in the morning, De Flotte was in the Faubourg St. Antoine. He was anxious, in case any movement took place before daylight, that a Representative of the People should be present, and he was one of those who, when the glorious insurrection of Right should burst forth, wished to unearth the paving-stones for the first barricade.

But nothing was stirring. De Flotte, alone in the midst of this deserted and sleeping Faubourg, wandered from street to street throughout the night.

Day breaks late in December. Before the first streaks of dawn De Flotte was at the rendezvous opposite the Lenoir Market.

This spot was only weakly guarded. The only troops in the neighborhood were the post itself of the Lenoir Market, and another post at a short distance which occupied the guard-house at the corner of the Faubourg and the Rue de Montreuil, close to the old Tree of Liberty planted in 1793 by Santerre. Neither of these posts were commanded by officers.

De Flotte reconnoitred the position. He walked some time up and down the pavement, and then seeing no one coming as yet, and fearing to excite attention, he went away, and returned to the side-streets of the Faubourg.

For his part Aubry (du Nord) got up at five o’clock. Having gone home in the middle of the night, on his return from the Rue Popincourt, he had only taken three hours’ rest. His porter told him that some suspicious persons had inquired for him during the evening of the 2d, and that they had been to the house opposite, No. 12 of the same street, Rue Racine, to arrest Huguenin. This determined Aubry to leave his house before daylight.

He walked to the Faubourg St. Antoine. As he reached the place of rendezvous he met Cournet and the others from the Rue Popincourt. They were almost immediately joined by Malardier.

It was dawn. The Faubourg was solitary. They walked along wrapt in thought and speaking in a low voice. Suddenly an impetuous and singular procession passed them.

They looked round. It was a detachment of Lancers which surrounded something which in the dim light they recognized to be a police-van. The vehicle rolled noiselessly along the macadamized road.

They were debating what this could mean, when a second and similar group appeared, then a third, and then a fourth. Ten police vans passed in this manner, following each other very closely, and almost touching.

“Those are our colleagues!” exclaimed Aubry (du Nord).

In truth the last batch of the Representatives, prisoners of the Quai d’Orsay, the batch destined for Vincennes, was passing through the Faubourg. It was about seven o’clock in the morning. Some shops were being opened and were lighted inside, and a few passers-by came out of the houses.

Three carriages defiled one after the other, closed, guarded, dreary, dumb; no voice came out, no cry, no whisper. They were carrying off in the midst of swords, of sabres, and of lances, with the rapidity and fury of the whirlwind, something which kept silence; and that something which they were carrying off, and which maintained this sinister silence, was the broken Tribune, the Sovereignty of the Assemblies, the supreme initiative whence all civilization is derived; it was the word which contains the future of the world, it was the speech of France!

A last carriage arrived, which by some chance had been delayed. It was about two or three hundred yards behind the principal convoy, and was only escorted by three Lancers. It was not a police-van, it was an omnibus, the only one in the convoy. Behind the conductor, who was a police agent, there could distinctly be seen the Representatives heaped up in the interior. It seemed easy to rescue them.

Cournet appealed to the passers-by; “Citizens,” he cried, “these are your Representatives, who are being carried off! You have just seen them pass in the vans of convicts! Bonaparte arrests them contrary to every law. Let us rescue them! To arms!”

A knot formed of men in blouses and of workmen going to work. A shout came from the knot, “Long live the Republic!” and some men rushed towards the vehicle. The carriage and the Lancers broke into a gallop.

“To arms!” repeated Cournet.

“To arms!” repeated the men of the people.

There was a moment of impulse. Who knows what might have happened? It would have been a singular accident if the first barricade against the *coup d'état* had been made with this omnibus, which, after having aided in the crime, would this have aided in the punishment. But at the moment when the people threw themselves on the vehicle they saw several of the Representative-prisoners which it contained sign to them with both hands to refrain. "Eh!" said a workman, "they do not wish it!"

A second repeated, "They do not wish for liberty!"

Another added, "They did not wish us to have it, they do not wish it for themselves."

All was said, and the omnibus was allowed to pass on. A moment afterwards the rear-guard of the escort came up and passed by at a sharp trots and the group which surrounded Aubry (du Nord), Malardier, and Cournet dispersed.

The Café Roysin had just opened. It may be remembered that the large hall of this *café* had served for the meeting of a famous club in 1848. It was there, it may also be remembered, that the rendezvous had been settled.

The Café Roysin is entered by a passage opening out upon the street, a lobby of some yards in length is next crossed, and then comes a large hall, with high windows, and looking-glasses on the walls, containing in the centre several billiard-tables, some small marble-topped tables, chairs, and velvet-covered benches. It was this hall, badly arranged, however, for a meeting where we could have deliberated, which had been the hall of the Roysin Club. Cournet, Aubry, and Malardier installed themselves there. On entering they did not disguise who they were; they were welcomed, and shown an exit through the garden in case of necessity.

De Flotte had just joined them.

Eight o'clock was striking when the Representatives began to arrive. Bruckner, Maigne, and Brillier first, and then successively Charamaule, Cassal, Dulac, Bourzat, Madier de Montjau, and Baudin. Bourzat, on account of the mud, as was his custom, wore wooden shoes. Whoever thought Bourzat a peasant would be mistaken. He rather resembled a Benedictine monk. Bourzat, with his southern imagination, his quick intelligence, keen, lettered, refined, possesses an encyclopedia in his head, and wooden shoes on his feet. Why not? He is Mind and People. The ex-Constituent Bastide came in with Madier de Montjau. Baudin shook the hands of all with warmth, but he did not speak. He was pensive. "What is the matter with you, Baudin?" asked Aubry (du Nord). "Are you mournful?” “I?” said Baudin, raising his head, “I have never been more happy.”

Did he feel himself already chosen? When we are so near death, all radiant with glory, which smiles upon us through the gloom, perhaps we are conscious of it.

A certain number of men, strangers to the Assembly, all as determined as the Representatives themselves, accompanied them and surrounded them.

Cournet was the leader. Amongst them there were workmen, but no blouses. In order not to alarm the middle classes the workmen had been requested, notably those employed by Derosne and Cail, to come in coats.

Baudin had with him a copy of the Proclamation which I had dictated to him on the previous day. Cournet unfolded it and read it. “Let us at once post it up in the Faubourg,” said he. “The People must know that Louis Bonaparte is outlawed.” A lithographic workman who was there offered to print it without delay. All the Representatives present signed it, and they added my name to their signatures. Aubry (du Nord) headed it with these words, “National Assembly.” The workman carried off the Proclamation, and kept his word. Some hours afterwards Aubry (du Nord), and later on a friend of Cournet’s named Gay, met him in the Faubourg du Temple paste-pot in hand, posting the Proclamation at every street corner, even next to the Maupas placard, which threatened the penalty of death to any one who should be found posting an appeal to arms. Groups read the two bills at the same time. We may mention an incident which ought to be noted, a sergeant of the line, in uniform, in red trousers, accompanied him and protected him. He was doubtless a soldier who had lately left the service.

The time fixed on the preceding evening for the general rendezvous was from nine to ten in the morning. This hour had been chosen so that there should be time to give notice to all the members of the Left; it was expedient to wait until the Representatives should arrive, so that the group should the more resemble an Assembly, and that its manifestation should have more authority on the Faubourg.

Several of the Representatives who had already arrived had no sash of office. Some were made hastily in a neighboring house with strips of red, white, and blue calico, and were brought to them. Baudin and De Flotte were amongst those who girded on these improvised sashes.

Meanwhile it was not yet nine o’clock, when impatience already began to be manifested around them.

Many shared this glorious impatience.

Baudin wished to wait.

"Do not anticipate the hour," said he; "let us allow our colleagues time to arrive."

But they murmured round Baudin, "No, begin, give the signal, go outside. The Faubourg only waits to see your sashes to rise. You are few in number, but they know that your friends will rejoin you. That is sufficient. Begin."

The result proved that this undue haste could only produce a failure. Meanwhile they considered that the first example which the Representatives of the People ought to set was personal courage. The spark must not be allowed to die out. To march the first, to march at the head, such was their duty. The semblance of any hesitation would have been in truth more disastrous than any degree of rashness.

Schoelcher is of an heroic nature, he has the grand impatience of danger.

"Let us go," he cried; "our friends will join us, let us go outside."

They had no arms.

"Let us disarm the post which is over there," said Schoelcher.

They left the Salle Roysin in order, two by two, arm in arm. Fifteen or twenty men of the people escorted them. They went before them, crying, "Long live the Republic! To arms!"

Some children preceded and followed them, shouting, "Long live the Mountain!"

The entrances of the closed shops were half opened. A few men appeared at the doors, a few women showed themselves at the windows. Knots of workmen going to their work watched them pass. They cried, "Long live our Representatives! Long live the Republic!"

Sympathy was everywhere, but insurrection nowhere. The procession gathered few adherents on the way.

A man who was leading a saddled horse joined them. They did not know this man, nor whence this horse came. It seemed as if the man offered his services to any one who wished to fly. Representative Dulac ordered this man to be off.

In this manner they reached the guard-house of the Rue de Montrenil. At their approach the sentry gave the alarm, and the soldiers came out of the guard-house in disorder.

Schoelcher, calm, impassive, in ruffles and a white tie, clothed, as usual, in black, buttoned to the neck in his tight frock coat, with the intrepid and brotherly air of a Quaker, walked straight up to them.

“Comrades,” he said to them, “we are the Representatives of the People, and come in the name of the people to demand your arms for the defence of the Constitution and of the Laws!”

The post allowed itself to be disarmed. The sergeant alone made any show of resistance, but they said to him, “You are alone,” and he yielded. The Representatives distributed the guns and the cartridges to the resolute band which surrounded them.

Some soldiers exclaimed, “Why do you take away our muskets! We would fight for you and with you!”

The Representatives consulted whether they should accept this offer. Schoelcher was inclined to do so. But one of them remarked that some Mobile Guards had made the same overtures to the insurgents of June, and had turned against the Insurrection the arms which the Insurrection had left them.

The muskets therefore were not restored.

The disarming having been accomplished, the muskets were counted; there were fifteen of them.

“We are a hundred and fifty,” said Cournet, “we have not enough muskets.”

“Well, then,” said Schoelcher, “where is there a post?”

“At the Lenoir Market.”

“Let us disarm it.”

With Schoelcher at their head and escorted by fifteen armed men the Representatives proceeded to the Lenoir Market. The post of the Lenoir Market allowed themselves to be disarmed even more willingly than the post in the Rue de Montreuil. The soldiers turned themselves round so that the cartridges might be taken from their pouches.

The muskets were immediately loaded.

“Now,” exclaimed De Flotte, “we have thirty guns, let us look for a street corner, and raise a barricade.”

There were at that time about two hundred combatants.

They went up the Rue de Montreuil.

After some fifty steps Schoelcher said, “Where are we going? We are turning our backs on the Bastille. We are turning our backs upon the conflict.”

They returned towards the Faubourg.

They shouted, “To arms!” They Where answered by “Long live our Representatives!” But only a few young men joined them. It was evident that the breeze of insurrection was not blowing.

“Never mind,” said De Flotte, “let us begin the battle. Let us achieve the glory of being the first killed.”

As they reached the point where the Streets Ste. Marguerite and de Cotte open out and divide the Faubourg, a peasant’s cart laden with dung entered the Rue Ste. Marguerite.

“Here,” exclaimed De Flotte.

They stopped the dung-cart, and overturned it in the middle of the

Faubourg St. Antoine.

A milkwoman came up.

They overturned the milk-cart.

A baker was passing in his bread-cart. He saw what was being done, attempted to escape, and urged his horse to a gallop. Two or three street Arabs — those children of Paris brave as lions and agile as cats — sped after the baker, ran past his horse, which was still galloping, stopped it, and brought back the cart to the barricade which had been begun.

They overturned the bread-cart.

An omnibus came up on the road from the Bastille.

“Very well!” said the conductor, “I see what is going on.”

He descended with a good grace, and told his passengers to get down, while the coachman unharnessed his horses and went away shaking his cloak.

They overturned the omnibus.

The four vehicles placed end to end barely barred the street of the Faubourg, which in this part is very wide. While putting them in line the men of the barricade said, —

“Let us not injure the carts more than we can help.”

This formed an indifferent barricade, very low, too short, and which left the pavements free on either side.

At this moment a staff officer passed by followed by an orderly, saw the barricade, and fled at a gallop.

Schoelcher calmly inspected the overturned vehicles. When he reached the peasant’s cart, which made a higher heap than the others, he said, “that is the only good one.”

The barricade grew larger. They threw a few empty baskets upon it, which made it thicker and larger without strengthening it.

They were still working when a child came up to them shouting, “The soldiers!”

In truth two companies arrived from the Bastille, at the double, through the Faubourg, told off in squads at short distances apart, and barring the whole of the street.

The doors and the windows were hastily closed.

During this time, at a corner of the barricade, Bastide, impassive, was gravely telling a story to Madier de Montjau. “Madier,” said he, “nearly two hundred years ago the Prince de Condé, ready to give battle in this very Faubourg St. Antoine, where we now are, asked an officer who was accompanying him, ‘Have you ever seen a battle lost?’— ‘No, sire.’ ‘Well, then, you will see one now.’ — Madier, I tell you to-day, — you will speedily see a barricade taken.”

In the meanwhile those who were armed had assumed their places for the conflict behind the barricade.

The critical moment drew nigh.

“Citizens,” cried Schoelcher, “do not fire a shot. When the Army and the Faubourgs fight, the blood of the People is shed on both sides. Let us speak to the soldiers first.”

He mounted on one of the baskets which heightened the barricade. The other Representatives arranged themselves near him on the omnibus. Malardier and Dulac were on his right. Dulac said to him, “You scarcely know me, Citizen Schoelcher, but I love you. Let me have the charge of remaining by your side. I only belong to the second rank in the Assembly, but I want to be in the first rank of the battle.”

At this moment some men in blouses, those whom the Second of December had enlisted, appeared at the corner of the Rue Ste. Marguerite, close to the barricade, and shouted, “Down with the ‘Twenty-five francs!’”

Baudin who had already selected his post for the combat, and who was standing on the barricade, looked fixedly at these men, and said to them, —

“You shall see how one can die for ‘twenty-five francs!’”

There was a noise in the street. Some few doors which had remained half opened were closed. The two attacking columns had arrived in sight of the barricade. Further on could be seen confusedly other lines of bayonets. They were those which had barred my passage.

Schoelcher, raising his arm with authority, signed to the captain, who commanded the first squad, to halt.

The captain made a negative sign with his sword. The whole of the Second of December was in these two gestures. The Law said, “Halt!” The Sabre answered, “No!”

The two companies continued to advance, but slowly, and keeping at the same distance from each other.

Schoelcher came down from the barricade into the street. De Flotte, Dulac, Malardier, Brillier, Maigne, and Bruckner followed him.

Then was seen a grand spectacle.

Seven Representatives of the People, armed only with their sashes, that is to say, majestically clothed with Law and Right, advanced in the street beyond the barricade, and marched straight to the soldiers, who awaited them with their guns pointed at them.

The other Representatives who had remained at the barricade made their last preparations for resistance. The combatants maintained an intrepid bearing. The Naval Lieutenant Cournet towered above them all with his tall stature. Baudin, still standing on the overturned omnibus, leaned half over the barricade.

On seeing the Representatives approach, the soldiers and their officers were for the moment bewildered. Meanwhile the captain signed to the Representatives to stop.

They stopped, and Schoelcher said in an impressive voice, —

“Soldiers! we are the Representatives of the Sovereign People, we are your Representatives, we are the Elect of Universal Suffrage. In the name of the Constitution, in the name of Universal Suffrage, in the name of the Republic, we, who are the National Assembly, we, who are the Law, order you to join us, we summon you to obey. We ourselves are your leaders. The Army belongs to the People, and the Representatives of the People are the Chiefs of the Army. Soldiers! Louis Bonaparte violates the Constitution, we have outlawed him. Obey us.”

The officer who was in command, a captain named Petit, did not allow him to finish.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “I have my orders. I belong to the People. I am a Republican as you are, but I am only an instrument.”

"You know the Constitution?" said Schoelcher.

"I only know my instructions."

"There is an instruction above all other instructions," continued

Schoelcher, "obligatory upon the Soldier as upon the Citizen — the Law."

He turned again towards the soldiers to harangue them, but the captain cried out to him, —

"Not another word! You shall not go on! If you add one word, I shall give the order to fire."

"What does that matter to us?" said Schoelcher.

At this moment an officer arrived on horseback. It was the major of the regiment. He whispered for a moment to the captain.

"Gentlemen! Representatives!" continued the captain, waving his sword, "withdraw, or I shall fire."

"Fire!" shouted De Flotte.

The Representatives — strange and heroic copy of Fontenoy — took off their hats, and faced the muskets.

Schoelcher alone kept his hat on his head, and waited with his arms crossed.

"Fix bayonets," said the captain. And turning towards the squads,

"Charge!"

"Vive la République!" cried out the Representatives.

The bayonets were lowered, the companies moved forward, the soldiers came on at the double upon the motionless Representatives.

It was a terrible and superb moment.

The seven Representatives saw the bayonets at their breasts without a word, without a gesture, without one step backwards. But the hesitation which was not in their soul was in the heart of the soldiers.

The soldiers felt distinctly that this was a double stain upon their uniform — the outrage upon the Representatives of the People — which was treason, and the slaughter of unarmed men, which was cowardice. Now treason and cowardice are two epaulets to which a general sometimes becomes reconciled, the soldier — never.

When the bayonets were so close to the Representatives that they touched their breasts, they turned aside of their own accord, and the soldier's by an unanimous movement passed between the Representatives without doing them any harm. Schoelcher alone had his coat pierced in two places, and in his opinion this was awkwardness instead of intention. One of the soldiers who faced him wished to push him away from the captain, and touched him with his bayonet. The point encountered the book of the addresses of the Representatives, which Schoelcher had in his pocket, and only pierced his clothing.

A soldier said to De Flotte, “Citizen, we do not wish to hurt you.”

Nevertheless a soldier came up to Bruckner and pointed his gun at him.

“Well,” said Bruckner, “fire.”

The soldier, touched, lowered his arm, and shook Bruckner’s hand.

It was singular that, notwithstanding the order given by the officers, the two companies successively came up to the Representatives, charged with the bayonet, and turned aside. Instructions may order, but instinct prevails; instructions may be crime, but instinct is honor. Major P —— said afterwards, “They had told us that we should have to deal with brigands, we had to deal with heroes.”

Meanwhile those on the barricade were growing uneasy, and seeing their colleagues surrounded, and wishing to succor them, they fired a musket shot. This unfortunate shot killed a soldier between De Flotte and Schoelcher.

The officer who commanded the second attacking squad passed close to Schoelcher as the poor soldier fell. Schoelcher pointed out the fallen man to the officer, and said to him, “Lieutenant, look!”

The officer answered by a gesture of despair, —

“What would you have us do?”

The two companies replied to the shot by a general volley, and rushed to the assault of the barricade, leaving behind them the seven Representatives astounded at being still alive.

The barricade replied by a volley, but it could not hold out. It was carried.

Baudin was killed.

He had remained standing in his position on the omnibus. Three balls reached him. One struck him in the right eye and penetrated into the brain. He fell. He never regained consciousness. Half-an-hour afterwards he was dead. His body was taken to the Ste. Marguerite Hospital.

Bourzat, who was close to Baudin, with Aubry (du Nord), had his coat pierced by a ball.

We must again remark a curious incident, — the soldiers made no prisoner on this barricade. Those who defended it dispersed through the streets of the Faubourg, or took refuge in the neighboring houses. Representative Maigne, pushed by some affrighted women behind a door, was shut in with one of the soldiers who had just taken the barricade. A moment afterwards the soldier and the Representative went out together. The Representatives could freely leave this first field of battle.

At this solemn moment of the struggle a last glimmer of Justice and of Right still flickered, and military honesty recoiled with a sort of dread anxiety before the outrage upon which they were entering. There is the intoxication of good, and there is an intoxication of evil: this intoxication later on drowned the conscience of the Army.

The French Army is not made to commit crimes. When the struggle became prolonged, and ferocious orders of the day had to be executed, the soldiers must have been maddened. They obeyed not coldly, which would have been monstrous, but with anger, and this History will invoke as their excuse; and with many, perhaps, despair was at the root of their anger.

The fallen soldier had remained on the ground. It was Schoelcher who raised him. A few women, weeping, but brave, came out of a house. Some soldiers came up. They carried him, Schoelcher holding his head, first to a fruiterer’s shop, then to the Ste. Marguerite Hospital, where they had already taken Baudin.

He was a conscript. The ball had entered his side. Through his gray overcoat buttoned to the collar, could be seen a hole stained with blood. His head had sunk on his shoulder, his pale countenance, encircled by the chinstrap of his shako, had no longer any expression, the blood oozed out of his mouth. He seemed barely eighteen years old. Already a soldier and still a boy. He was dead.

This poor soldier was the first victim of the *coup d’état*. Baudin was the second.

Before being a Republican Baudin had been a tutor. He came from that intelligent and brave race of schoolmasters ever persecuted, who have fallen from the Guizot Law into the Falloux Law, and from the Falloux Law into the Dupanloup Law. The crime of the schoolmaster is to hold a book open; that suffices, the Church condemns him. There is now, in France, in each village, a lighted torch — the schoolmaster — and a mouth which blows upon it — the curé. The schoolmasters of France, who knew how to die of hunger for Truth and for Science, were worthy that one of their race should be killed for Liberty.

The first time that I saw Baudin was at the Assembly on January 13, 1850. I wished to speak against the Law of Instruction. I had not put my name down; Baudin's name stood second. He offered me his turn. I accepted, and I was able to speak two days afterwards, on the 15th.

Baudin was one of the targets of Sieur Dupin, for calls to order and official annoyances. He shared this honor with the Representatives Miot and Valentin.

Baudin ascended the Tribune several times. His mode of speaking, outwardly hesitating, was energetic in the main. He sat on the crest of the Mountain. He had a firm spirit and timid manners. Thence there was in his constitution an indescribable embarrassment, mingled with decision. He was a man of middle height. His face ruddy and full, his broad chest, his wide shoulders announced the robust man, the laborer-schoolmaster, the peasant-thinker. In this he resembled Bourzat. Baudin leaned his head on his shoulder, listened with intelligence, and spoke with a gentle and grave voice. He had the melancholy air and the bitter smile of the doomed.

On the evening of the Second of December I had asked him, “How old are you?” He had answered me, “Not quite thirty-three years.”

“And you?” said he.

“Forty-nine.”

And he replied, —

“To-day we are of the same age.”

He thought in truth of that to-morrow which awaited us, and in which was hidden that “perhaps” which is the great leveller.

The first shots had been fired, a Representative had fallen, and the people did not rise! What bandage had they on their eyes, what weight had they on their hearts? Alas! the gloom which Louis Bonaparte had known how to cast over his crime, far from lifting, grew denser. For the first time in the sixty years, that the Providential era of Revolutions had been open, Paris, the city of intelligence, seemed not to understand!

On leaving the barricade of the Rue Ste. Marguerite, De Flotte went to the Faubourg St. Marceau, Madier de Montjau went to Belleville, Charamaule and Maigne proceeded to the Boulevards. Schoelcher, Dulac, Malardier, and Brillier again went up the Faubourg St. Antoine by the side streets which the soldiers had not yet occupied. They shouted, “Vive la

République!” They harangued the people on the doorsteps: “Is it the Empire that you want?” exclaimed Schoelcher. They even went as far as to sing the “Marseillaise.” People took off their hats as they passed and shouted “Long live the Representatives!” But that was all.

They were thirsty and weary. In the Rue de Reuilly a man came out of a door with a bottle in his hand, and offered them drink.

Sartin joined them on the way. In the Rue de Charonne they entered the meeting-place of the Association of Cabinet Makers, hoping to find there the committee of the association in session. There was no one there. But nothing discouraged them.

As they reached the Place de la Bastille, Dulac said to Schoelcher, “I will ask permission to leave you for an hour or two, for this reason: I am alone in Paris with my little daughter, who is seven years old. For the past week she has had scarlet fever. Yesterday, when the *coup d’état* burst forth, she was at death’s door. I have no one but this child in the world. I left her this morning to come with you, and she said to me, ‘Papa, where are you going?’ As I am not killed, I will go and see if she is not dead.”

Two hours afterwards the child was still living, and we were holding a permanent sitting at No. 15, Rue Richelieu, Jules Favre, Carnot, Michel de Bourges, and myself, when Dulac entered, and said to us, “I have come to place myself at your disposal.”

“There was also a misunderstanding respecting the appointed time. Some made a mistake, and thought it was nine o’clock. The first arrivals impatiently awaited their colleagues. They were, as we have said, some twelve or fifteen in number at half-past eight. ‘Time is being lost,’ exclaimed one of them who had hardly entered; ‘let us gird on our sashes; let us show the Representatives to the People, let us join it in raising barricades.’ We shall perhaps save the country, at all events we shall save the honor of our party. ‘Come, let us to the barricades!’ This advice was immediately and unanimously acclaimed: one alone, Citizen Baudin, interposed the forcible objection, ‘we are not sufficiently numerous to adopt such a resolution.’ But he spiritedly joined in the general enthusiasm, and with a calm conscience, after having reserved the principle, he was not the last to gird on his sash.” — SCHOELCHER, *Histoire des Crimes du 2d Decembre*, pp. 130-131.

CHAPTER IV.

THE WORKMEN’S SOCIETIES ASK US FOR THE ORDER TO FIGHT

In presence of the fact of the barricade of the Faubourg St. Antoine so heroically constructed by the Representatives, so sadly neglected by the populace, the last illusions, even mine, should have been dispersed. Baudin killed, the Faubourg cold. Such things spoke aloud. It was a supreme, manifest, absolute demonstration of that fact, the inaction of the people, to which I could not resign myself — a deplorable inaction, if they understood, a self-treason, if they did not understand, a fatal neutrality in every case, a calamity of which all the responsibility, we repeat, recoiled not upon the people but upon those who in June, 1848, after having promised them amnesty, had refused it, and who had unhinged the great soul of the people of Paris by breaking faith with them. What the Constituent Assembly had sown the Legislative Assembly harvested. We, innocent of the fault, had to submit to the consequence.

The spark which we had seen flash for an instant through the crowd — Michel de Bourges from the height of Bonvalet’s balcony, myself from the Boulevard du Temple — this spark seemed extinguished. Maigne firstly, then Brillier, then Bruckner, later on Charmaule, Madier de Montjau, Bastide, and Dulac came to report to us what had passed at the barricade of St. Antoine, the motives which had decided the Representatives present not to await the hour appointed for the rendezvous, and Baudin’s death. The report which I made myself of what I had seen, and which Cassal and Alexander Rey completed by adding new circumstances, enabled us to ascertain the situation. The Committee could no longer hesitate: I myself renounced the hopes which I had based upon a grand manifestation, upon a powerful reply to the *coup d’état*, upon a sort of pitched battle waged by the guardians of the Republic against the banditti of the Elysée. The Faubourgs failed us; we possessed the lever — Right, but the mass to be raised, the People, we did not possess. There was nothing more to hope for, as those two great orators, Michel de Bourges and Jules Favre, with their keen political perception, had declared from the first, save a slow long struggle, avoiding decisive engagements, changing quarters, keeping Paris on the alert, saying to each, It is not at an end; leaving time for the departments to prepare their resistance, wearying the troops out, and in which struggle the Parisian people, who do not long smell powder with impunity, would perhaps ultimately take fire. Barricades raised everywhere, barely defended, re-made immediately, disappearing and multiplying themselves at the same time, such was the strategy indicated by the situation. The Committee adopted it, and sent orders in every direction to this effect. At that moment we were sitting at No. 15, Rue Richelieu, at the house of our colleague Grévy, who had been arrested in the Tenth Arrondissement on the preceding day, who was at Mazas. His brother had offered us his house for our deliberations. The Representatives, our natural emissaries, flocked around us, and scattered themselves throughout Paris, with our instructions to organize resistance at every point. They were the arms and the Committee was the soul. A certain number of ex-Constituents, intrepid men, Garnier-Pagès, Marie, Martin (de Strasbourg), Senart, formerly President of the Constituent Assembly, Bastide, Laissac, Landrin, had joined the Representatives on the preceding day. They established, therefore, in all the districts where it was possible Committees of Permanence in connection with us, the Central Committee, and composed either of Representatives or of faithful citizens. For our watchword we chose “Baudin.”

Towards noon the centre of Paris began to grow agitated.

Our appeal to arms was first seen placarded on the Place de la Bourse and the Rue Montmartre. Groups pressed round to read it, and battled with the police, who endeavored to tear down the bills. Other lithographic placards contained in two parallel columns the decree of deposition drawn up by the Right at the Mairie of the Tenth Arrondissement, and the decree of outlawry voted by the Left. There were distributed, printed on gray paper in large type, the judgment of the High Court of Justice, declaring Louis Bonaparte attainted with the Crime of High Treason, and signed “Hardouin” (President), “Delapalme,” “Moreau” (of the Seine), “Cauchy,” “Bataille” (Judges). This last name was thus mis-spelt by mistake, it should read “Pataille.”

At that moment people generally believed, and we ourselves believed, in this judgment, which, as we have seen, was not the genuine judgment.

At the same time they posted in the populous quarters, at the corner of every street, two Proclamations. The first ran thus: —

“TO THE PEOPLE.

“ARTICLE III.

“The Constitution is confided to the keeping and to the patriotism of French citizens. Louis NAPOLEON is outlawed.

“The State of Siege is abolished.

“Universal suffrage is re-established.

“LONG LIVE THE REPUBLIC.

“To ARMS!

“For the United Mountain.

“The Delegate, VICTOR HUGO.”

The second ran thus: —

“INHABITANTS OF PARIS.

“The National Guards and the People of the Departments are marching on Paris to aid you in seizing the TRAITOR, Louis Napoléon BONAPARTE.

“For the Representatives of the People,

“VICTOR HUGO, President.

“SCHOELCHER, Secretary.”

This last placard, printed on little squares of paper, was distributed abroad, says an historian of the *coup d’état*, by thousands of copies.

For their part the criminals installed in the Government offices replied by threats: the great white placards, that is to say, the official bills, were largely multiplied. On one could be read: —

“WE, PREFECT OF THE POLICE,

“Decree as follows: —

“ARTICLE I. All meetings are rigorously prohibited. They will be immediately dispersed by force.

“ARTICLE II. All seditious shouts, all reading in public, all posting of political documents not emanating from a regularly constituted authority, are equally prohibited.

“ARTICLE III. The agents of the Public Police will enforce the execution of the present decree.

“Given at the Prefecture of Police, December 3, 1851.

“DE MAUPAS, Prefect of Police.

“Seen and approved,

“DE MORNY, Minister of the Interior.”

On another could be read, —

“THE MINISTER OF WAR,

“By virtue of the Law on the State of Siege,

“Decrees: —

“Every person taken constructing or defending a barricade, or carrying arms, WILL BE SHOT.

“General of Division,

“Minister of war,

“DE SAINT-ARNAUD.”

We reproduce this Proclamation exactly, even to the punctuation. The words “Will be shot” were in capital letters in the placards signed “De Saint-Arnaud.”

The Boulevards were thronged with an excited crowd. The agitation increasing in the centre reached three Arrondissements, the 6th, 7th, and the 12th. The district of the schools began to disorderly. The Students of Law and of Medicine cheered De Flotte on the Place de Panthéon. Madier de Montjau, ardent and eloquent, went through and aroused Belleville. The troops, growing more numerous every moment, took possession of all the strategical points of Paris.

At one o’clock, a young man was brought to us by the legal adviser of the Workmen’s Societies, the ex-Constituent Leblond, at whose house the Committee had deliberated that morning. We were sitting in permanence, Carnot, Jules Favre, Michel de Bourges, and myself. This young man, who had an earnest mode of speaking and an intelligent countenance, was named King. He had been sent to us by the Committee of the Workmen’s Society, from whom he was delegated. “The Workmen’s Societies,” he said to us, “place themselves at the disposal of the Committee of Legal Insurrection appointed by the Left. They can throw into the struggle five or six thousand resolute men. They will manufacture powder; as for guns, they will be found.” The Workmen’s Society requested from us an order to fight signed by us. Jules Favre took a pen and wrote,— “The undersigned Representatives authorize Citizen King and his friends to defend with them, and with arms in their hands, Universal Suffrage, the Republic, the Laws.” He dated it, and we all four signed it. “That is enough,” said the delegate to us, “you will hear of us.”

Two hours afterwards it was reported to us that the conflict had begun.

They were fighting in the Rue Aumaire.

A typographical error — it should read “Article LXVIII.” On the subject of this placard the author of this book received the following letter. It does honor to those who wrote it: —

“CITIZEN VICTOR HUGO, — We know that you have made an appeal to arms. We have not been able to obtain it. We replace it by these bills which we sign with your name. You will not disown us. When France is in danger your name belongs to all; your name is a Public Power.

“FELIX BONY.

“DABAT.”

CHAPTER V.

BAUDINS'S CORPSE

With regard to the Faubourg St. Antoine, we had, as I said, lost nearly all hope, but the men of the *coup d'état* had not lost all uneasiness. Since the attempts at rising and the barricades of the morning a rigorous supervision had been organized. Any one who entered the Faubourg ran the risk of being examined, followed, and upon the slightest suspicion, arrested. The supervision was nevertheless sometimes at fault. About two o'clock a short man, with an earnest and attentive air, crossed the Faubourg. A *sergent de ville* and a police agent in plain clothes barred his passage. "Who are you?" "You seem a passenger." "Where are you going?" "Over there, close by, to Bartholomé's, the overseer of the sugar manufactory.—" They search him. He himself opened his pocket-book; the police agents turned out the pockets of his waistcoat and unbuttoned his shirt over his breast; finally the *sergent de ville* said gruffly, "Yet I seem to have seen you here before this morning. Be off!" It was the Representative Gindrier. If they had not stopped at the pockets of his waistcoat — and if they had searched his great-coat, they would have found his sash there — Gindrier would have been shot.

Not to allow themselves to be arrested, to keep their freedom for the combat — such was the watchword of the members of the Left. That is why we had our sashes upon us, but not outwardly visible.

Gindrier had had no food that day; he thought he would go home, and returned to the new district of the Havre Railway Station, where he resided. In the Rue de Calais, which is a lonely street running from Rue Blanche to the Rue de Clichy, a *fiacre* passed him. Gindrier heard his name called out. He turned round and saw two persons in a *fiacre*, relations of Baudin, and a man whom he did not know. One of the relations of Baudin, Madame L —— , said to him, "Baudin is wounded!" She added, "They have taken him to the St. Antoine Hospital. We are going to fetch him. Come with us." Gindrier got into the *fiacre*. The stranger, however, was an emissary of the Commissary of Police of the Rue Ste. Marguerite St. Antoine. He had been charged by the commissary of Police to go to Baudin's house, No, 88, Rue de Clichy, to inform the family. Having only found the women at home he had confined himself to telling them that Representative Baudin was wounded. He offered to accompany them, and went with them in the *fiacre*. They had uttered the name of Gindrier before him. This might have been imprudent. They spoke to him; he declared that he would not betray the Representative, and it was settled that before the Commissary of Police Gindrier should assume to be a relation, and be called Baudin.

The poor women still hoped. Perhaps the wound was serious, but Baudin was young, and had a good constitution. “They will save him,” said they. Gindrier was silent. At the office of the Commissary of Police the truth was revealed.— “How is he?” asked Madame L —— on entering. “Why?” said the Commissary, “he is dead.” “What do you mean? Dead!” “Yes; killed on the spot.”

This was a painful moment. The despair of these two women who had been so abruptly struck to the heart burst forth in sobs. “Ah, infamous Bonaparte!” cried Madame L —— . “He has killed Baudin. Well, then, I will kill him. I will be the Charlotte Corday of this Marat.”

Gindrier claimed the body of Baudin. The Commissary of Police only consented to restore it to the family on exacting a promise that they would bury it at once, and without any ostentation, and that they would not exhibit it to the people. “You understand,” he said, “that the sight of a Representative killed and bleeding might raise Paris.” The *coup d’état* made corpses, but did not wish that they should be utilized.

On these conditions the Commissary of Police gave Gindrier two men and a safe conduct to fetch the body of Baudin from the hospital where he had been carried.

Meanwhile Baudin’s brother, a young man of four-and-twenty, a medical student, came up. This young man has since been arrested and imprisoned. His crime is his brother. Let us continue. They proceeded to the hospital. At the sight of the safe conduct the director ushered Gindrier and young Baudin into the parlor. There were three pallets there covered with white sheets, under which could be traced the motionless forms of three human bodies. The one which occupied the centre bed was Baudin. On his right lay the young soldier killed a minute before him by the side of Schoelcher, and on the left an old woman who had been struck down by a spent ball in the Rue de Cotte, and whom the executioners of the *coup d’état* had gathered up later on; in the first moment one cannot find out all one’s riches.

The three corpses were naked under their winding sheets.

They had left to Baudin alone his shirt and his flannel vest. They had found on him seven francs, his gold watch and chain, his Representative's medal, and a gold pencil-case which he had used in the Rue de Popincourt, after having passed me the other pencil, which I still preserve. Gindrier and young Baudin, bare-headed, approached the centre bed. They raised the shroud, and Baudin's dead face became visible. He was calm, and seemed asleep. No feature appeared contracted. A livid tint began to mottle his face.

They drew up an official report. It is customary. It is not sufficient to kill people. An official report must also be drawn up. Young Baudin had to sign it, upon which, on the demand of the Commissary of Police, they "made over" to him the body of his brother. During these signatures, Gindrier in the courtyard of the hospital, attempted if not to console, at least to calm the two despairing women.

Suddenly a man who had entered the courtyard, and who had attentively watched him for some moments, came abruptly up to him, —

"What are you doing there?"

"What is that to you?" said Gindrier.

"You have come to fetch Baudin's body?"

"Yes."

"Is this your carriage?"

"Yes."

"Get in at once, and pull down the blinds."

"What do you mean?"

"You are the Representative Gindrier. I know you. You were this morning on the barricade. If any other than myself should see you, you are lost."

Gindrier followed his advice and got into the *fiacre*. While getting in he asked the man:

"Do you belong to the Police?"

The man did not answer. A moment after he came and said in a low voice, near the door of the *fiacre* in which Gindrier was enclosed, —

"Yes, I eat the bread, but I do not do the work."

The two men sent by the Commissary of Police took Baudin on his wooden bed and carried him to the *fiacre*. They placed him at the bottom of the *fiacre* with his face covered, and enveloped from head to foot in a shroud. A workman who was there lent his cloak, which was thrown over the corpse in order not to attract the notice of passers-by. Madame L ——

took her place by the side of the body, Gindrier opposite, young Baudin next to Gindrier. A *fiacre* followed, in which were the other relative of Baudin and a medical student named Dutèche. They set off. During the journey the head of the corpse, shaken by the carriage, rolled from shoulder to shoulder; the blood began to flow from the wound and appeared in large red patches through the white sheet. Gindrier with his arms stretched out and his hand placed on its breast, prevented it from falling forwards; Madame L —— held it up by the side.

They had told the coachman to drive slowly; the journey lasted more than an hour.

When they reached No. 88, Rue de Clichy, the bringing out of the body attracted a curious crowd before the door. The neighbors flocked thither. Baudin’s brother, assisted by Gindrier and Dutèche, carried up the corpse to the fourth floor, where Baudin resided. It was a new house, and he had only lived there a few months.

They carried him into his room, which was in order, and just as he had left it on the morning of the 2d. The bed, on which he had not slept the preceding night, had not been disturbed. A book which he had been reading had remained on the table, open at the page where he had left off. They unrolled the shroud, and Gindrier cut off his shirt and his flannel vest with a pair of scissors. They washed the body. The ball had entered through the corner of the arch of the right eye, and had gone out at the back of the head. The wound of the eye had not bled. A sort of swelling had formed there; the blood had flowed copiously through the hole at the back of the head. They put clean linen on him, and clean sheets on the bed, and laid him down with his head on the pillow, and his face uncovered. The women were weeping in the next room.

Gindrier had already rendered the same service to the ex-Constituent James Demontry. In 1850 James Demontry died in exile at Cologne. Gindrier started for Cologne, went to the cemetery, and had James Demontry exhumed. He had the heart extracted, embalmed it, and enclosed it in a silver vase, which he took to Paris. The party of the Mountain delegated him, with Chollet and Joigneux, to convey this heart to Dijon, Demontry’s native place, and to give him a solemn funeral. This funeral was prohibited by an order of Louis Bonaparte, then President of the Republic. The burial of brave and faithful men was unpleasing to Louis Bonaparte — not so their death.

When Baudin had been laid out on the bed, the women came in, and all this family, seated round the corpse, wept. Gindrier, whom other duties called elsewhere, went downstairs with Dutèche. A crowd had formed before the door.

A man in a blouse, with his hat on his head, mounted on a kerbstone, was speechifying and glorifying the *coup d'état*. Universal Suffrage re-established, the Law of the 31st May abolished, the "Twenty-five francs" suppressed; Louis Bonaparte has done well, etc. — Gindrier, standing on the threshold of the door, raised his voice: "Citizens! above lies Baudin, a Representative of the People, killed while defending the People; Baudin the Representative of you all, mark that well! You are before his house; he is there bleeding on his bed, and here is a man who dares in this place to applaud his assassin! Citizens! shall I tell you the name of this man? He is called the Police! Shame and infamy to traitors and to cowards! Respect to the corpse of him who has died for you!"

And pushing aside the crowd, Gindrier took the man who had been speaking by the collar, and knocking his hat on to the ground with the back of his hand, he cried, "Hats off!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE DECREES OF THE REPRESENTATIVES WHO REMAINED FREE

The text of the judgment which was believed to have been dawn up by the High Court of Justice had been brought to us by the ex-Constituent Martin (of Strasbourg), a lawyer at the Court of Cassation. At the same time we learned what was happening in the Rue Aumaire. The battle was beginning, it was important to sustain it, and to feed it; it was important ever to place the legal resistance by the side of the armed resistance. The members who had met together on the preceding day at the Mairie of the Tenth Arrondissement had decreed the deposition of Louis Bonaparte; but this decree, drawn up by a meeting almost exclusively composed of the unpopular members of the majority, might have no effect on the masses; it was necessary that the Left should take it up, should adopt it, should imprint upon it a more energetic and more revolutionary accent, and also take possession of the judgment of the High Court, which was believed to be genuine, to lend assistance to this judgment, and put it into execution.

In our appeal to arms we had outlawed Louis Bonaparte. The decree of deposition taken up and counter-signed by us added weight to this outlawry, and completed the revolutionary act by the legal act.

The Committee of Resistance called together the Republican Representatives.

The apartments of M. Grévy, where we had been sitting, being too small, we appointed for our meeting-place No. 10. Rue des Moulins, although warned that the police had already made a raid upon this house. But we had no choice; in time of Revolution prudence is impossible, and it is speedily seen that it is useless. Confidence, always confidence; such is the law of those grand actions which at times determine great events. The perpetual improvisation of means, of policy, of expedients, of resources, nothing step by step, everything on the impulse of the moment, the ground never sounded, all risks taken as a whole, the good with the bad, everything chanced on all sides at the same time, the hour, the place, the opportunity, friends, family, liberty, fortune, life, — such is the revolutionary conflict.

Towards three o’clock about sixty Representatives were meeting at No. 10, Rue des Moulins, in the large drawing-room, out of which opened a little room where the Committee of Resistance was in session.

It was a gloomy December day, and darkness seemed already to have almost set in. The publisher Hetzel, who might also be called the poet Hetzel, is of a noble mind and of great courage. He has, as is known, shown unusual political qualities as Secretary-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs under Bastide; he came to offer himself to us, as the brave and patriotic Hingray had already done in the morning. Hetzel knew that we needed a printing-office above everything; we had not the faculty of speech, and Louis Bonaparte spoke alone. Hetzel had found a printer who had said to him, “*Force me, put a pistol to my throat, and I will print whatever you wish*.” It was only a question, therefore, of getting a few friends together, of seizing this printing-office by main force, of barricading it, and, if necessary, of sustaining a siege, while our Proclamations and our decrees were being printed. Hetzel offered this to us. One incident of his arrival at our meeting-place deserves to be noted. As he drew near the doorway he saw in the twilight of this dreary December day a man standing motionless at a short distance, and who seemed to be lying in wait. He went up to this man, and recognized M. Yon, the former Commissary of Police of the Assembly.

“What are you doing there?” said Hetzel abruptly. “Are you there to arrest us? In that case, here is what I have got for you,” and he took out two pistols from his pocket.

M. Yon answered smiling, —

“I am in truth watching, not against you, but for you; I am guarding you.”

M. Yon, aware of our meeting at Landrin’s house and fearing that we should be arrested, was, of his own accord, acting as police for us.

Hetzel had already revealed his scheme to Representative Labrousse, who was to accompany him and give him the moral support of the Assembly in his perilous expedition. A first rendezvous which had been agreed upon between them at the Café Cardinal having failed, Labrousse had left with the owner of the *café* for Hetzel a note couched in these terms: —

“Madame Elizabeth awaits M. Hetzel at No. 10, Rue des Moulins.”

In accordance with this note Hetzel had come.

We accepted Hetzel's offer, and it was agreed that at nightfall Representative Versigny, who performed the duties of Secretary to the Committee, should take him our decrees, our Proclamation, such items of news as may have reached us, and all that we should judge proper to publish. It was settled that Hetzel should await Versigny on the pavement at the end of the Rue de Richelieu which runs alongside the Café Cardinal.

Meanwhile Jules Favre, Michel de Bourges and myself had drawn up a final decree, which was to combine the deposition voted by the Right with the outlawry voted by us. We came back into the large room to read it to the assembled Representatives, and for them to sign it.

At this moment the door opened, and Emile de Girardin appeared. We had not seen him since the previous evening.

Emile de Girardin — after dispersing from around him that mist which envelopes every combatant in party warfare, and which at a distance changes or obscures the appearance of a man — Emile de Girardin is an extraordinary thinker, an accurate writer, energetic, logical, skilful, hearty; a journalist in whom, as in all great journalists, can be seen the statesman. We owe to Emile de Girardin this great work of progress, the cheap Press. Emile de Girardin has this great gift, a clearheaded stubbornness. Emile de Girardin is a public watchman; his journal is his sentry-box; he waits, he watches, he spies out, he enlightens, he lies in wait, he cries "Who goes there?" at the slightest alarm, he fires volleys with his pen. He is ready for every form of combat, a sentinel to-day, a General to-morrow. Like all earnest minds he understands, he sees, he recognizes, he handles, so to speak, the great and magnificent identity embraced under these three words, "Revolution, Progress, Liberty;" he wishes for the Revolution, but above all through Progress; he wishes for progress, but solely through Liberty. One can, and according to our opinion sometimes rightly, differ from him as to the road to be taken, as to the attitude to be assumed, and the position to be maintained, but no one can deny his courage, which he has proved in every form, nor reject his object, which is the moral and physical amelioration of the lot of all. Emile de Girardin is more Democratic than Republican, more Socialist than Democratic; on the day when these three ideas, Democracy, Republicanism, Socialism, that is to say, the principle, the form, and the application, are balanced in his mind the oscillations which still exist in him will cease. He has already Power, he will have Stability.

In the course of this sitting, as we shall see, I did not always agree with Emile de Girardin. All the more reason that I should record here how greatly I appreciate the mind formed of light and of courage. Emile de Girardin, whatever his failings may be, is one of those men who do honor to the Press of to-day; he unites in the highest degree the dexterity of the combatant with the serenity of the thinker.

I went up to him, and I asked him, —

"Have you any workmen of the *Presse* still remaining?"

He answered me, —

"Our presses are under seal, and guarded by the *Gendarmerie Mobile*, but I have five or six willing workmen, they can produce a few placards with the brush."

"Well then," said I, "print our decrees and our Proclamation." "I will print anything," answered he, "as long as it is not an appeal to arms."

He added, addressing himself to me, "I know your Proclamation. It is a war-cry, I cannot print that."

They remonstrated at this. He then declared that he for his part made Proclamations, but in a different sense from ours. That according to him Louis Bonaparte should not be combated by force of arms, but by creating a vacuum. By an armed conflict he would be the conqueror, by a vacuum he would be conquered. He urged us to aid him in isolating the "deposed of the Second December." "Let us bring about a vacuum around him!" cried Emile de Girardin, "let us proclaim an universal strike. Let the merchant cease to sell, let the consumer cease from buying, let the workman cease from working, let the butcher cease from killing, let the baker cease from baking, let everything keep holiday, even to the National Printing Office, so that Louis Bonaparte may not find a compositor to compose the *Moniteur*, not a pressman to machine it, not a bill-sticker to placard it! Isolation, solitude, a void space round this man! Let the nation withdraw from him. Every power from which the nation withdraws falls like a tree from which the roots are divided. Louis Bonaparte abandoned by all in his crime will vanish away. By simply folding our arms as we stand around him he will fall. On the other hand, fire on him and you will consolidate him. The army is intoxicated, the people are dazed and do not interfere, the middle classes are afraid of the President, of the people, of you, of every one! No victory is possible. You will go straight before you, like brave men, you risk your heads, very good; you will carry with you two or three thousand daring men, whose blood mingled with yours, already flows. It is heroic, I grant you. It is not politic. As for me, I will not print an appeal to arms, and I reject the combat. Let us organize an universal strike.”

This point of view was haughty and superb, but unfortunately I felt it to be unattainable. Two aspects of the truth seized Girardin, the logical side and the practical side. Here, in my opinion, the practical side was wanting.

Michel de Bourges answered him. Michel de Bourges with his sound logic and quick reasoning put his finger on what was for us the immediate question; the crime of Louis Bonaparte, the necessity to rise up erect before this crime. It was rather a conversation than a debate, but Michel de Bourges and Jules Favre, who spoke next, raised it to the highest eloquence. Jules Favre, worthy to understand the powerful mind of Girardin would willingly have adopted this idea, if it had seemed practicable, of the universal strike, of the void around the man; he found it great, but impossible. A nation does not pull up short. Even when struck to the heart, it still moves on. Social movement, which is the animal life of society, survives all political movement. Whatever Emile de Girardin might hope, there would always be a butcher who would kill, a baker who would bake, men must eat! “To make universal labor fold its arms is a chimera!” said Jules Favre, “a dream! The People fight for three days, for four days, for a week; society will not wait indefinitely.” As to the situation, it was doubtless terrible, it was doubtless tragical, and blood flowed, but who had brought about this situation? Louis Bonaparte. For ourselves we would accept it, such as it was, and nothing more.

Emile de Girardin, steadfast, logical, absolute in his idea, persisted. Some might be shaken. Arguments, which were so abundant in this vigorous and inexhaustible mind, crowded upon him. As for me, I saw Duty before me like a torch.

I interrupted him. I cried out, “It is too late to deliberate what we are to do. We have not got to do it. It is done. The gauntlet of the *coup d’état* is thrown down, the Left takes it up. The matter is as simple as this. The outrage of the Second December is an infamous, insolent, unprecedented defiance to Democracy, to Civilization, to Liberty, to the People, to France. I repeat that we have taken up this gauntlet, we are the Law, but the living Law which at need can arm itself and fight. A gun in our hands is a protest. I do not know whether we shall conquer, but it is our duty to protest. To protest first in Parliament; when Parliament is closed, to protest in the street; when the street is closed, to protest in exile; when exile is fulfilled, to protest in the tomb. Such is our part, our office, our mission. The authority of the Representatives is elastic; the People bestow it, events extend it.”

While we were deliberating, our colleague, Napoleon Bonaparte, son of the ex-King of Westphalia, came in. He listened. He spoke. He energetically blamed, in a tone of sincere and generous indignation, his cousin’s crime, but he declared that in his opinion a written protest would suffice. A protest of the Representatives, a protest of the Council of State, a protest of the Magistracy, a protest of the Press, that this protest would be unanimous and would enlighten France, but that no other form of resistance would obtain unanimity. That as for himself, having always considered the Constitution worthless, having contended against it from the first in the Constituent Assembly, he would not defend it at the last, that he assuredly would not give one drop of blood for it. That the Constitution was dead, but that the Republic was living, and that we must save, not the Constitution, a corpse, but the Republic, the principle!

Remonstrances burst forth. Bancel, young, glowing, eloquent, impetuous, overflowing with self-confidence, cried out that we ought not to look at the shortcomings of the Constitution, but at the enormity of the crime which had been committed, the flagrant treason, the violated oath; he declared that we might have voted against the Constitution in the Constituent Assembly, and yet defend it to-day in the presence of an usurper; that this was logical, and that many amongst us were in this position. He cited me as an example. Victor Hugo, said he, is a proof of this. He concluded thus: “You have been present at the construction of a vessel, you have considered it badly built, you have given advice which has not been listened to. Nevertheless, you have been obliged to embark on board this vessel, your children and your brothers are there with you, your mother is on board. A pirate ranges up, axe in one hand, to scuttle the vessel, a torch in the other to fire it. The crew are resolved to defend themselves and run to arms. Would you say to this crew, ‘For my part I consider this vessel badly built, and I will let it be destroyed’?”

“In such a case,” added Edgar Quinet, “whoever is not on the side of the vessel is on the side of the pirates.”

They shouted on all sides, “The decree! Read the decree!”

I was standing leaning against the fire place. Napoleon Bonaparte came up to me, and whispered in my ear, —

"You are undertaking," said he, "a battle which is lost beforehand."

I answered him, "I do not look at success, I look at duty."

He replied, "You are a politician, consequently you ought to look forward to success. I repeat, before you go any further, that the battle is lost beforehand."

I resumed, "If we enter upon the conflict the battle is lost. You say so, I believe it; but if we do not enter upon it, honor is lost. I would rather lose the battle than honor."

He remained silent for a moment, then he took my hand.

"Be it so," continued he, "but listen to me. You run, you yourself personally, great dancer. Of all the men in the Assembly you are the one whom the President hates the most. You have from the height of the Tribune nicknamed him, 'Napoleon the Little.' You understand that will never be forgotten. Besides, it was you who dictated the appeal to arms, and that is known. If you are taken, you are lost. You will be shot on the spot, or at least transported. Have you a safe place where you can sleep to-night?"

I had not as yet thought of this. "In truth, no," answered I.

He continued, "Well, then, come to my house. There is perhaps only one house in Paris where you would be in safety. That is mine. They will not come to look for you there. Come, day or night, at what hour you please, I will await you, and I will open the door to you myself. I live at No. 5, Rue d'Alger."

I thanked him. It was a noble and cordial offer. I was touched by it. I did not make use of it, but I have not forgotten it.

They cried out anew, "Read the decree! Sit down! sit down!"

There was a round table before the fire place; a lamp, pens, blotting-books, and paper were brought there; the members of the Committee sat down at this table, the Representatives took their places around them on sofas, on arm-chairs, and on all the chairs which could be found in the adjoining rooms. Some looked about for Napoleon Bonaparte. He had withdrawn.

A member requested that in the first place the meeting should declare itself to be the National Assembly, and constitute itself by immediately appointing a President and Secretaries. I remarked that there was no need to declare ourselves the Assembly, that we were the Assembly by right as well as in fact, and the whole Assembly, our absent colleagues being detained by force; that the National Assembly, although mutilated by the *coup d'état*, ought to preserve its entity and remain constituted afterwards in the same manner as before; that to appoint another President and another staff of Secretaries would be to give Louis Bonaparte an advantage over us, and to acknowledge in some manner the Dissolution; that we ought to do nothing of the sort; that our decrees should be published, not with the signature of a President, whoever he might be, but with the signature of all the members of the Left who had not been arrested, that they would thus carry with them full authority over the People, and full effect. They relinquished the idea of appointing a President. Noël Parfait proposed that our decrees and our resolutions should be drawn up, not with the formula: "The National Assembly decrees," etc.; but with the formula: "The Representatives of the People remaining at liberty decree," etc. In this manner we should preserve all the authority attached to the office of the Representatives of the People without associating the arrested Representatives with the responsibility of our actions. This formula had the additional advantage of separating us from the Right. The people knew that the only Representatives remaining free were the members of the Left. They adopted Noël Parfait's advice.

I read aloud the decree of deposition. It was couched in these words: —

"DECLARATION.

"The Representatives of the people remaining at liberty, by virtue of Article 68 of the Constitution, which runs as follows: —

"'Article 68. — Every measure by which the President of the Republic dissolves the Assembly, prorogues it, or obstructs the exercise of its authority, is a crime of High Treason.

"'By this action alone the President is deposed from his office; the citizens are bound to refuse him obedience; the executive power passes by right to the National Assembly; the judges of the High Court of Justice should meet together immediately under penalty of treason, and convoke the juries in a place which they shall appoint to proceed to the judgment of the President and his accomplices.'

"Decree: —

"ARTICLE I. — Louis Bonaparte is deposed from his office of President of the Republic.

"ARTICLE II. — All citizens and public officials are bound to refuse him obedience under penalty of complicity.

"ARTICLE III. — The judgment drawn up on December 2d by the High Court of Justice, and which declares Louis Bonaparte attainted with the Crime of High Treason, shall be published and executed. Consequently the civil and military authorities are summoned under penalty of Treason to lend their active assistance to the execution of the said judgment.

"Given at Paris, in permanent session, December 3d, 1851."

The decree having been read, and voted unanimously, we signed it, and the Representatives crowded round the table to add their signatures to ours. Sain remarked that this signing took time, that in addition we numbered barely more than sixty, a large number of the members of the Left being at work in the streets in insurrection. He asked if the Committee, who had full powers from the whole of the Left, had any objection to attach to the decree the names of all the Republican Representatives remaining at liberty, the absent as well as those present. We answered that the decree signed by all would assuredly better answer its purpose. Besides, it was the counsel which I had already given. Bancel had in his pocket on old number of the *Moniteur* containing the result of a division.

They cut out a list of the names of the members of the Left, the names of those who were arrested were erased, and the list was added to the decree.

The name of Emile de Girardin upon this list caught my eye. He was still present.

"Do you sign this decree?" I asked him.

"Unhesitatingly."

"In that case will you consent to print it?"

"Immediately."

He continued, —

"Having no longer any presses, as I have told you, I can only print it as a handbill, and with the brush. It takes a long time, but by eight o'clock this evening you shall have five hundred copies."

"And," continued I, "you persist in refusing to print the appeal to arms?"

"I do persist."

A second copy was made of the decree, which Emile de Girardin took away with him. The deliberation was resumed. At each moment Representatives came in and brought items of news: Amiens in insurrection — Rheims and Rouen in motion, and marching on Paris — General Canrobert resisting the *coup d'état* — General Castellane hesitating — the

Minister of the United States demanding his passports. We placed little faith in these rumors, and facts proved that we were right.

Meanwhile Jules Favre had drawn up the following decree, which he proposed, and which was immediately adopted: —

“DECREE.

“FRENCH REPUBLIC.

“Liberty, — Equality, — Fraternity.

“The undersigned Representatives remaining at liberty, assembled in Permanent Session, —

“Considering the arrest of the majority of our colleagues, and the urgency of the moment:

“Considering that for the accomplishment of his crime Louis Bonaparte has not contented himself with multiplying the most formidable means of destruction against the lives and property of the citizens of Paris, that he has trampled under foot every law, that he has annihilated all the guarantees of civilized nations:

“Considering that these criminal madnesses only serve to augment the violent denunciation of every conscience and to hasten the hour of national vengeance, but that it is important to proclaim the Right:

“Decree:

“ARTICLE I. — The State of Siege is raised in all Departments where it has been established, the ordinary laws resume their authority.

“ARTICLE II. — It is enjoined upon all military leaders under penalty of Treason immediately to lay down the extraordinary powers which have been conferred upon them.

“ARTICLE III. — Officials and agents of the public force are charged under penalty of treason to put this present decree into execution.

“Given in Permanent Session, 3d December, 1851.”

Madier de Montjau and De Flotte entered. They came from outside. They had been in all the districts where the conflict was proceeding, they had seen with their own eyes the hesitation of a part of the population in the presence of these words, “The Law of the 31st May is abolished, Universal Suffrage is re-established.” The placards of Louis Bonaparte were manifestly working mischief. It was necessary to oppose effort to effort, and to neglect nothing which could open the eyes of the people. I dictated the following Proclamation:-

“PROCLAMATION.

“People! you are being deceived.

“Louis Bonaparte says that he has re-established you in your rights, and that he restores to you Universal Suffrage.

“Louis Bonaparte has lied.

“Read his placards. He grants you — what infamous mockery! — the right of conferring on him, on him *alone*, the Constituent power; that is to say, the Supreme power, which belongs to you. He grants you the right to appoint him Dictator *for ten years*. In other words, he grants you the right of abdicating and of crowning him. A right which even you do not possess, O People! for one generation cannot dispose of the sovereignty of the generation which shall follow it.

“Yes, he grants to you, Sovereign, the right of giving yourself a master, and that master himself.

“Hypocrisy and treason!

“People! we unmask the hypocrite. It is for you to punish the traitor!

“The Committee of Resistance:

> “Jules Favre, De Flotte, Carnot, Madier de Montjau, Mathieu (de la Drôme), Michel de Bourges, Victor Hugo.”

Baudin had fallen heroically. It was necessary to let the People know of his death, and to honor his memory. The decree below was voted on the proposition of Michel de Bourges: —

“DECREE.

“The Representatives of the People remaining at liberty considering that the Representative Baudin has died on the barricade of the Faubourg St. Antoine for the Republic and for the laws, and that he has deserved well of his country, decree:

“That the honors of the Panthéon are adjudged to Representative Baudin.

“Given in Permanent Session, 3d December, 1851.”

After honor to the dead and the needs of the conflict it was necessary in my opinion to enunciate immediately and dictatorially some great popular benefit. I proposed the abolition of the *octroi* duties and of the duty on liquors. This objection was raised, “No caresses to the people! After victory, we will see. In the meantime let them fight! If they do not fight, if they do not rise, if they do not understand that it is for them, for their rights that we the Representatives, that we risk our heads at this moment — if they leave us alone at the breach, in the presence of the *coup d’état* — it is because they are not worthy of Liberty!”

Bancel remarked that the abolition of the *octroi* duties and the duty on liquors were not caresses to the People, but succor to the poor, a great economical and reparatory measure, a satisfaction to the public demand — a satisfaction which the Right had always obstinately refused, and that the Left, master of the situation, ought hasten to accord. They voted, with the reservation that it should not be published until after victory, the two decrees in one; in this form: —

“DECREE.

“The Representatives remaining at liberty decree:

“The *Octroi* Duties are abolished throughout the extent of the territory of the Republic.

“Given in permanent Session, 3d December, 1851.”

Versigny, with a copy of the Proclamations and of the Decree, left in search of Hetzel. Labrousse also left with the same object. They settled to meet at eight o’clock in the evening at the house of the former member of the Provisional Government Marie, Rue Neuve des Petits Champs.

As the members of the Committee and the Representatives withdrew I was told that some one had asked to speak to me. I went into a sort of little room attached to the large meeting-room, and I found there a man in a blouse, with an intelligent and sympathetic air. This man had a roll of paper in his hand.

“Citizen Victor Hugo,” said he to me, “you have no printing office. Here are the means which will enable you to dispense with one.”

He unfolded on the mantel-piece the roll which he had in his hand. It was a species of blotting-book made of very thin blue paper, and which seemed to be slightly oiled. Between each leaf of blue paper there was a sheet of white paper. He took out of his pocket a sort of blunt bodkin, saying, “The first thing to hand will serve your purpose, a nail or a match,” and he traced with his bodkin on the first leaf of the book the word “Republic.” Then turning over the leaves, he said, “Look at this.”

The word “Republic” was reproduced upon the fifteen or twenty white leaves which the book contained.

He added, “This paper is usually used to trace the designs of manufactured fabrics. I thought that it might be useful at a moment like this. I have at home a hundred books like this on which I can make a hundred copies of what you want — a Proclamation, for instance — in the same space of time that it takes to write four or five. Write something, whatever you may think useful at the present moment, and to-morrow morning five hundred copies shall be posted throughout Paris.”

I had none of the documents with me which we had just drawn up. Versigny had gone away with the copies. I took a sheet of paper, and, leaning on the corner of the chimney-piece, I wrote the following Proclamation: —

“TO THE ARMY.

“Soldiers!

“A man has just broken the Constitution. He tears up the oath which he has sworn to the people; he suppresses the law, stifles Right, stains Paris with blood, chokes France, betrays the Republic!

“Soldiers, this man involves you in his crime.

“There are two things holy; the flag which represents military honor and the law which represents the National Right. Soldiers, the greatest of outrages is the flag raised against the Law! Follow no longer the wretched man who misleads you. Of such a crime French soldiers should be the avengers, not the accomplices.

“This man says he is named Bonaparte. He lies, for Bonaparte is a word which means glory. This man says that he is named Napoléon. He lies, for Napoléon is a word which means genius. As for him, he is obscure and insignificant. Give this wretch up to the law. Soldiers, he is a false Napoléon. A true Napoléon would once more give you a Marengo; he will once more give you a Transnonain.

“Look towards the true function of the French army; to protect the country, to propagate the Revolution, to free the people, to sustain the nationalities, to emancipate the Continent, to break chains everywhere, to protect Right everywhere, this is your part amongst the armies of Europe. You are worthy of great battle-fields.

“Soldiers, the French Army is the advanced guard of humanity.

“Become yourselves again, reflect; acknowledge your faults; rise up! Think of your Generals arrested, taken by the collar by galley sergeants and thrown handcuffed into robbers’ cells! The malefactor, who is at the Elysée, thinks that the Army of France is a band of mercenaries; that if they are paid and intoxicated they will obey. He sets you an infamous task, he causes you to strangle, in this nineteenth century, and in Paris itself, Liberty, Progress, and Civilization. He makes you — you, the children of France — destroy all that France has so gloriously and laboriously built up during the three centuries of light and in sixty years of Revolution! Soldiers! you are the ‘Grand Army!’ respect the ‘Grand Nation!’

“We, citizens; we, Representatives of the People and of yourselves; we, your friends, your brothers; we, who are Law and Right; we, who rise up before you, holding out our arms to you, and whom you strike blindly with your swords — do you know what drives us to despair? It is not to see our blood which flows; it is to see your honor which vanishes.

“Soldiers! one step more in the outrage, one day more with Louis Bonaparte, and you are lost before universal conscience. The men who command you are outlaws. They are not generals — they are criminals. The garb of the galley slave awaits them; see it already on their shoulders. Soldiers! there is yet time — Stop! Come back to the country! Come back to the Republic! If you continue, do you know what History will say of you? It will say, They have trampled under the feet of their horses and crushed beneath the wheels of their cannon all the laws of their country; they, French soldiers, they have dishonored the anniversary of Austerlitz, and by their fault, by their crime, the name of Napoléon sprinkles as much shame to-day upon France as in other times it has showered glory!

“French soldiers! cease to render assistance to crime!”

My colleagues of the Committee having left, I could not consult them — time pressed — I signed:

“For the Representatives of the People remaining at liberty, the
Representative member of the Committee of Resistance,

“VICTOR HUGO.”

The man in the blouse took away the Proclamation saying, “You will see it again to-morrow morning.” He kept his word. I found it the nest day placarded in the Rue Rambuteau, at the corner of the Rue de l’Homme-Armé and the Chapelle-Saint-Denis. To those who were not in the secret of the process it seemed to be written by hand in blue ink.

I thought of going home. When I reached the Rue de la Tour d’Auvergne, opposite my door, it happened curiously and by some chance to be half open. I pushed it, and entered. I crossed the courtyard, and went upstairs without meeting any one.

My wife and my daughter were in the drawing-room round the fire with Madame Paul Meurice. I entered noiselessly; they were conversing in a low tone. They were talking of Pierre Dupont, the popular song-writer, who had come to me to ask for arms. Isidore, who had been a soldier, had some pistols by him, and had lent three to Pierre Dupont for the conflict.

Suddenly these ladies turned their heads and saw me close to them. My daughter screamed. “Oh, go away,” cried my wife, throwing her arms round my neck, “you are lost if you remain here a moment. You will be arrested here!” Madame Paul Meurice added, “They are looking for you. The police were here a quarter of an hour ago.” I could not succeed in reassuring them. They gave me a packet of letters offering me places of refuge for the night, some of them signed with names unknown to me. After some moments, seeing them more and more frightened, I went away. My wife said to me, “What you are doing, you are doing for justice. Go, continue!” I embraced my wife and my daughter; five months have elapsed at the time when I am writing these lines. When I went into exile they remained near my son Victor in prison; I have not seen them since that day.

I left as I had entered. In the porter’s lodge there were only two or three little children seated round a lamp, laughing and looking at pictures in a book.

This list, which belongs to History, having served as the base of the proscription list, will be found complete in the sequel to this book to be published hereafter.

CHAPTER VII.

THE ARCHBISHOP

On this gloomy and tragical day an idea struck one of the people.

He was a workman belonging to the honest but almost imperceptible minority of Catholic Democrats. The double exaltation of his mind, revolutionary on one side, mystical on the other, caused him to be somewhat distrusted by the people, even by his comrades and his friends. Sufficiently devout to be called a Jesuit by the Socialists, sufficiently Republican to be called a Red by the Reactionists, he formed an exception in the workshops of the Faubourg. Now, what is needed in these supreme crises to seize and govern the masses are men of exceptional genius, not men of exceptional opinion. There is no revolutionary originality. In order to be something, in the time of regeneration and in the days of social combat, one must bathe fully in those powerful homogeneous mediums which are called parties. Great currents of men follow great currents of ideas, and the true revolutionary leader is he who knows how best to drive the former in accordance with the latter.

Now the Gospel is in accordance with the Revolution, but Catholicism is not. This is due to the fact that in the main the Papacy is not in accordance with the Gospel. One can easily understand a Christian Republican, one cannot understand a Catholic Democrat. It is a combination of two opposites. It is a mind in which the negative bars the way to the affirmative. It is a neuter.

Now in time revolution, whoever is neuter of is impotent. Nevertheless, during the first hours of resistance against the *coup d’état* the democratic Catholic workman, whose noble effort we are here relating, threw himself so resolutely into the cause of Justice and of Truth, that in a few moments he transformed distrust into confidence, and was hailed by the people. He showed such gallantry at the rising of the barricade of the Rue Aumaire that with an unanimous voice they appointed him their leader. At the moment of the attack he defended it as he had built it, with ardor. That was a sad but glorious battle-field; most of his companions were killed, and he escaped only by a miracle.

However, he succeeded in returning home, saying to himself bitterly, “All is lost.”

It seemed evident to him that the great masses of the people would not rise. Thenceforward it appeared impossible to conquer the *coup d’état* by a revolution; it could be only combated by legality. What had been the risk at the beginning became the hope at the end, for he believed the end to be fatal, and at hand. In his opinion it was necessary, as the people were defaulters, to try now to arouse the middle classes. Let one legion of National Guards go out in arms, and the Elysée was lost. For this a decisive blow must be struck — the heart of the middle classes must be reached — the “bourgeois” must be inspired by a grand spectacle which should not be a terrifying spectacle.

It was then that this thought came to this workman, “Write to the Archbishop of Paris.”

The workman took a pen, and from his humble garret he wrote to the Archbishop of Paris an enthusiastic and earnest letter in which he, a man of the people and a believer, said this to his Bishop; we give the substance of his letter: —

“This is a solemn hour, Civil War sets by the ears the Army and People, blood is being shed. When blood flows the Bishop goes forth. M. Sibour should follow in the path of M. Affre. The example is great, the opportunity is still greater.

“Let the Archbishop of Paris, followed by all his clergy, the Pontifical cross before him, his mitre on his head, go forth in procession through the streets. Let him summon to him the National Assembly and the High Court, the Legislators in their sashes, the Judges in their scarlet robes; let him summon to him the citizens, let him summon to him the soldiers, let him go straight to the Elysée. Let him raise his hand in the name of Justice against the man who is violating the laws, and in the name of Jesus against the man who is shedding blood. Simply with his raised hand he will crush the *coup d’état*.

“And he will place his statue by the side of M. Affre, and it will be said that twice two Archbishops of Paris have trampled Civil War beneath their feet.”

“The Church is holy, but the Country is sacred. There are times when the Church should succor the Country.”

The letter being finished, he signed it with his workman’s signature.

But now a difficulty arose; how should it be conveyed to its destination?

Take it himself!

But would he, a mere workman in a blouse, be allowed to penetrate to the

Archbishop!

And then, in order to reach the Archiepiscopal Palace, he would have to cross those very quarters in insurrection, and where, perhaps, the resistance was still active. He would have to pass through streets obstructed by troops, he would be arrested and searched; his hands smelt of powder, he would be shot; and the letter would not reach its destination.

What was to be done?

At the moment when he had almost despaired of a solution, the name of

Arnauld de l’Ariége came to his mind.

Arnauld de l’Ariége was a Representative after his own heart. Arnauld de l’Ariége was a noble character. He was a Catholic Democrat like the workman. At the Assembly he raised aloft, but he bore nearly alone, that banner so little followed which aspires to ally the Democracy with the Church. Arnauld de l’Ariége, young, handsome, eloquent, enthusiastic, gentle, and firm, combined the attributes of the Tribune with the faith of the knight. His open nature, without wishing to detach itself from Rome, worshipped Liberty. He had two principles, but he had not two faces. On the whole the democratic spirit preponderated in him. He said to me one day, “I give my hand to Victor Hugo. I do not give it to Montalembert.”

The workman knew him. He had often written to him, and had sometimes seen him.

Arnauld de l’Ariége lived in a district which had remained almost free.

The workman went there without delay.

Like the rest of us, as has been seen, Arnauld de l’Ariége had taken part in the conflict. Like most of the Representatives of the Left, he had not returned home since the morning of the 2d. Nevertheless, on the second day, he thought of his young wife whom he had left without knowing if he should see her again, of his baby of six months old which she was suckling, and which he had not kissed for so many hours, of that beloved hearth, of which at certain moments one feels an absolute need to obtain a fleeting glimpse, he could no longer resist; arrest, Mazas, the cell, the hulks, the firing party, all vanished, the idea of danger was obliterated, he went home.

It was precisely at that moment that the workman arrived there.

Arnauld de l’Ariége received him, read his letter, and approved of it.

Arnauld de l’Ariége knew the Archbishop of Paris personally.

M. Sibour, a Republican priest appointed Archbishop of Paris by General Cavaignac, was the true chief of the Church dreamed of by the liberal Catholicism of Arnauld de l’Ariége. On behalf of the Archbishop, Arnauld de l’Ariége represented in the Assembly that Catholicism which M. de Montalembert perverted. The democratic Representative and the Republic Archbishop had at times frequent conferences, in which acted as intermediatory the Abbé Maret, an intelligent priest, a friend of the people and of progress, Vicar-General of Paris, who has since been Bishop *in partibus* of Surat. Some days previously Arnauld had seen the Archbishop, and had received his complaints of the encroachment of the Clerical party upon the episcopal authority, and he even proposed shortly to interpellate the Ministry on this subject and to take the question into the Tribune.

Arnauld added to the workman’s letter a letter of introduction, signed by himself, and enclosed the two letters in the same envelope.

But here the same question arose.

How was the letter to be delivered?

Arnauld, for still weightier reasons than those of the workman, could not take it himself.

And time pressed!

His wife saw his difficulty and quietly said, —

“I will take charge of it.”

Madame Arnauld de l’Ariége, handsome and quite young, married scarcely two years, was the daughter of the Republican ex-Constituent Guichard, worthy daughter of such a father, and worthy wife of such a husband.

They were fighting in Paris; it was necessary to face the dangers of the streets, to pass among musket-balls, to risk her life.

Arnauld de l’Ariége hesitated.

“What do you want to do?” he asked.

“I will take this letter.”

“You yourself?”

“I myself.”

“But there is danger.”

She raised her eyes, and answered, —

“Did I make that objection to you when you left me the day before yesterday?”

He kissed her with tears in his eyes, and answered, “Go.”

But the police of the *coup d’état* were suspicious, many women were searched while going through the streets; this letter might be found on Madame Arnauld. Where could this letter be hidden?

“I will take my baby with me,” said Madame Arnauld.

She undid the linen of her little girl, hid the letter there, and refastened the swaddling band.

When this was finished the father kissed his child on the forehead, and the mother exclaimed laughingly, —

“Oh, the little Red! She is only six months’ old, and she is already a conspirator!”

Madame Arnauld reached the Archbishop’s Palace with some difficulty. Her carriage was obliged to take a long round. Nevertheless she arrived there. She asked for the Archbishop. A woman with a child in her arms could not be a very terrible visitor, and she was allowed to enter.

But she lost herself in courtyards and staircases. She was seeking her way somewhat discouraged, when she met the Abbé Maret. She knew him. She addressed him. She told him the object of her expedition. The Abbé Maret read the workman’s letter, and was seized with enthusiasm: “This may save all,” said he.

He added, “Follow me, madam, I will introduce you.”

The Archbishop of Paris was in the room which adjoins his study. The Abbé Maret ushered Madame Arnauldé into the study, informed the Archbishop, and a moment later the Archbishop entered. Besides the Abbé Maret, the Abbé Deguerry, the Curé of the Madeleine, was with him.

Madame Arnauld handed to M. Sibour the two letters of her husband and the workman. The Archbishop read them, and remained thoughtful.

“What answer am I to take back to my husband?” asked Madame Arnauld.

“Madame,” replied the Archbishop, “it is too late. This should have been done before the struggle began. Now, it would be only to risk the shedding of more blood than perhaps has yet been spilled.”

The Abbé Deguerry was silent. The Abbé Maret tried respectfully to turn the mind of his Bishop towards the grand effort unsoiled by the workman. He spoke eloquently. He laid great stress open this argument, that the appearance of the Archbishop would bring about a manifestation of the

National Guard, and that a manifestation of the National Guard would compel the Elysée to draw back.

"No," said the Archbishop, "you hope for the impossible. The Elysée will not draw back now. You believe that I should stop the bloodshed — not at all; I should cause it to flow, and that in torrents. The National Guard has no longer any influence. If the legions appeared, the Elysée could crush the legions by the regiments. And then, what is an Archbishop in the presence of the Man of the *coup d'état*? Where is the oath? Where is the sworn faith? Where is the Respect for Right? A man does not turn back when he has made three steps in such a crime. No! No! Do not hope. This man will do all. He has struck the Law in the hand of the Representatives. He will strike God in mine."

And he dismissed Madame Arnauld with the look of a man overwhelmed with sorrow.

Let us do the duty of the Historian. Six weeks afterwards, in the Church of Notre Dame, some one was singing the *Te Deum* in honor of the treason of December — thus making God a partner in a crime.

This man was the Archbishop Sibour.

CHAPTER VIII.

MOUNT VALERIEN

Of the two hundred and thirty Representatives prisoners at the barracks of the Quai d’Orsay fifty-three had been sent to Mount Valérien. They loaded them in four police vans. Some few remained who were packed in an omnibus. MM. Benoist d’Azy, Falloux, Piscatory, Vatimesail, were locked in the wheeled cells, as also Eugène Sue and Esquiros. The worthy M. Gustave de Beaumont, a great upholder of the cellular system, rode in a cell vehicle. It is not an undesirable thing, as we have said, that the legislator should taste of the law.

The Commandant of Mount Valérien appeared under the archway of the fort to receive the Representative prisoners.

He at first made some show of registering them in the jailer’s book.

General Oudinot, under whom he had served, rebuked him severely, —

“Do you know me?”

“Yes, General.”

“Well then, let that suffice. Ask no more.”

“Yes,” said Tamisier. “Ask more and salute. We are more than the Army; we are France.”

The commandant understood. From that moment he was hat in hand before the generals, and bowed low before the Representatives.

They led them to the barracks of the fort and shut them up promiscuously in a dormitory, to which they added fresh beds, and which the soldiers had just quitted. They spent their first night there. The beds touched each other. The sheets were dirty.

Next morning, owing to a few words which had been heard outside, the rumor spread amongst them that the fifty-three were to be sorted, and that the Republicans were to be placed by themselves. Shortly afterwards the rumor was confirmed. Madame de Luynes gained admission to her husband, and brought some items of news. It was asserted, amongst other things, that the Keeper of the Seals of the *coup d’état*, the man who signed himself Eugène Rouher, “Minister of Justice,” had said, “Let them set the men of the Right at liberty, and send the men of the Left to the dungeon. If the populace stirs they will answer for everything. As a guarantee for the submission of the Faubourgs we shall have the head of the Reds."

We do not believe that M. Rouher uttered these words, in which there is so much audacity. At that moment M. Rouher did not possess any. Appointed Minister on the 2d December, he temporized, he exhibited a vague prudery, he did not venture to install himself in the Place Vendôme. Was all that was being done quite correct? In certain minds the doubt of success changes into scruples of conscience. To violate every law, to perjure oneself, to strangle Right, to assassinate the country, are all these proceedings wholly honest? While the deed is not accomplished they hesitate. When the deed has succeeded they throw themselves upon it. Where there is victory there is no longer treason; nothing serves like success to cleanse and render acceptable that unknown thing which is called crime. During the first moments M. Rocher reserved himself. Later on he has been one of the most violent advisers of Louis Bonaparte. It is all very simple. His fear beforehand explains his subsequent zeal.

The truth is, that these threatening words had been spoken not by

Rouher, but by Persigny.

M. de Luynes imparted to his colleagues what was in preparation, and warned them that they would be asked for their names in order that the white sheep might be separated from the scarlet goats. A murmur which seemed to be unanimous arose. These generous manifestations did honor to the Representatives of the Right.

"No! no! Let us name no one, let us not allow ourselves to be sorted," exclaimed M. Gustave de Beaumont.

M. de Vatimesnil added, "We have come in here all together, we ought to go out all together."

Nevertheless a few moments afterwards Antony Thouret was informed that a list of names was being secretly prepared, and that the Royalist Representatives were invited to sign it. They attributed, doubtless wrongly, this unworthy resolution to the honorable M. de Falloux.

Antony Thouret spoke somewhat warmly in the centre of the group, which were muttering together in the dormitory.

"Gentlemen," said he, "a list of names is being prepared. This would be an unworthy action. Yesterday at the Mairie of the Tenth Arrondissement you said to us, 'There is no longer Left or Right; we are the Assembly.' You believed in the victory of the People, and you sheltered yourself behind us

Republicans. Today you believe in the victory of the *coup d'état*, and you would again become Royalists, to deliver us up, us Democrats! Truly excellent. Very well! Pray do so."

A universal shout arose.

"No! No! No more Right or Left! All are the Assembly. The same lot for all!"

The list which had been begun was seized and burnt.

"By decision of the Chamber," said M. de Vatimesnil, smiling. A

Legitimist Representative added, —

"Of the Chamber? No, let us say of the Chambered."

A few moments afterwards the Commissary of the fort appeared, and in polite phrases, which, however, savored somewhat of authority, invited each of the Representatives of the People to declare his name in order that each might be allotted to his ultimate destination.

A shout of indignation answered him.

"No one! No one will give his name," said General Oudinot.

Gustave de Beaumont added, —

"We all bear the same name: Representatives of the People."

The Commissary saluted them and went away.

After two hours he came back. He was accompanied this time by the Chief of the Ushers of the Assembly, a man named Duponceau, a species of arrogant fellow with a red face and white hair, who on grand days strutted at the foot of the Tribune with a silvered collar, a chain over his stomach, and a sword between his legs.

The Commissary said to Duponceau,— "Do your duty."

What the Commissary meant, and what Duponceau understood by this word *duty*, was that the Usher should denounce the Legislators. Like the lackey who betrays his masters.

It was done in this manner.

This Duponceau dared to look in the faces of the Representatives by turn, and he named them one after the other to a policeman, who took notes of them.

The Sieur Duponceau was sharply castigated while holding this review.

"M. Duponceau," said M. Vatimesnil to him, "I always thought you an idiot, but I believed you to be an honest man."

The severest rebuke was administered by Antony Thouret. He looked Sieur

Duponceau in the face, and said to him, “You deserve to be named Dupin.”

The Usher in truth was worthy of being the President, and the President was worthy of being the Usher.

The flock having been counted, the classification having been made, there were found to be thirteen goats: ten Representatives of the Left; Eugène Sue, Esquires, Antony Thouret, Pascal Duprat, Chanay, Fayolle, Paulin Durrien, Benoit, Tamisier, Tailard Latérisse, and three members of the Right, who since the preceding day had suddenly become Red in the eyes of the *coups d’état*; Oudinot, Piscatory, and Thuriot de la Rosière.

They confined these separately, and they set at liberty one by one the forty who remained.

CHAPTER IX.

THE LIGHTNING BEGINS TO FLASH AMONGST THE PEOPLE

The evening wore a threatening aspect.

Groups were formed on the Boulevards. As night advanced they grew larger and became mobs, which speedily mingled together, and only formed one crowd. An enormous crowd, reinforced and agitated by tributary currents from the side-streets, jostling one against another, surging, stormy, and whence ascended an ominous hum. This hubbub resolved itself into one word, into one name which issued simultaneously from every mouth, and which expressed the whole of the situation: “Soulouque!” Throughout that long line from the Madeleine to the Bastille, the roadway nearly everywhere, except (was this on purpose?) at the Porte St. Denis and the Porte St. Martin, was occupied by the soldiers — infantry and cavalry, ranged in battle-order, the artillery batteries being harnessed; on the pavements on each side of this motionless and gloomy mass, bristling with cannon, swords, and bayonets, flowed a torrent of angry people. On all sides public indignation prevailed. Such was the aspect of the Boulevards. At the Bastille there was a dead calm.

At the Porte St. Martin the crowd, hemmed together and uneasy, spoke in low tones. Groups of workmen talked in whispers. The Society of the 10th December made some efforts there. Men in white blouses, a sort of uniform which the police assumed during those days, said, “Let us leave them alone; let the ‘Twenty-five francs’ settle it amongst themselves! They deserted us in June, 1848; to-day let them get out of the difficulty alone! It does not concern us!” Other blouses, blue blouses, answered them, “We know what we have to do. This is only the beginning, wait and see.”

Others told how the barricades of the Rue Aumaire were being rebuilt, how a large number of persons had already been killed there, how they fired without any summons, how the soldiers were drunk, how at various points in the district there were ambulances already crowded with killed and wounded. All this was said seriously, without loud speaking, without gesture, in a confidential tone. From time to time the crowd were silent and listened, and distant firing was heard.

The groups said, “Now they are beginning to tear down the curtain.”

We were holding Permanent Session at Marie's house in the Rue Croix des Petits Champs. Promises of co-operation poured in upon us from every side. Several of our colleagues, who had not been able to find us on the previous day, had joined us, amongst others Emmanuel Arago, gallant son of an illustrious father; Farconnet and Roussel (de l'Yonne), and some Parisian celebrities, amongst whom was the young and already well-known defender of the *Avénement du Peuple,* M. Desmarets.

Two eloquent men, Jules Favre and Alexander Rey, seated at a large table near the window of the small room, were drawing up a Proclamation to the National Guard. In the large room Sain, seated in an arm-chair, his feet on the dog-irons, drying his wet boots before a huge fire, said, with that calm and courageous smile which he wore in the Tribune, "Things are looking badly for us, but well for the Republic. Martial law is proclaimed; it will be carried out with ferocity, above all against us. We are laid in wait for, followed, tracked, there is little probability that we shall escape. To-day, to-morrow, perhaps in ten minutes, there will be a 'miniature massacre' of Representatives. We shall be taken here or elsewhere, shot down on the spot or killed with bayonet thrusts. They will parade our corpses, and we must hope that that will at length raise the people and overthrow Bonaparte. We are dead, but Bonaparte is lost."

At eight o'clock, as Emile de Girardin had promised, we received from the printing office of the *Presse* five hundred copies of the decree of deposition and of outlawry endorsing the judgment of the High Court, and with all our signatures attached. It was a placard twice as large as one's hand, and printed on paper used for proofs. Noël Parfait brought us the five hundred copies, still damp, between his waistcoat and his shirt. Thirty Representatives divided the bills amongst them, and we sent them on the Boulevards to distribute the Decree to the People.

The effect of this Decree falling in the midst of the crowd was marvellous. Some *cafés* had remained open, people eagerly snatched the bills, they pressed round the lighted shop windows, they crowded under the street lamps. Some mounted on kerbstones or on tables, and read aloud the Decree.— "That is it! Bravo!" cried the people. "The signatures!" "The signatures!" they shouted. The signatures were read out, and at each popular name the crowd applauded. Charamaule, merry and indignant, wandered through the groups, distributing copies of the Decree; his great stature, his loud and bold words, the packet of handbills which he raised, and waved above his head, caused all hands to be stretched out towards him. “Shout ‘Down with Soulouque!’” said he, “and you shall have some.” All this in the presence of the soldiers. Even a sergeant of the line, noticing Charamaule, stretched out his hand for one of the bills which Charamaule was distributing. “Sergeant,” said Charamaule to him, “cry, ‘Down with Soulouque!’” The sergeant hesitated for a moment, and answered “No.” “Well, then,” replied Charamaule, “Shout, ‘Long live Soulouque.’” This time the sergeant did not hesitate, he raised his sword, and, amid bursts of laughter and of applause, he resolutely shouted, “Long live Soulouque!”

The reading of the Decree added a gloomy warmth to the popular anger. They set to work on all sides to tear down the placards of the *coup d’état*. At the door of the Café des Variétés a young man cried out to the officers, “You are drunk!” Some workmen on the Boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle shook their fists at the soldiers and said, “Fire, then, you cowards, on unarmed men! If we had guns you would throw the butts of your muskets in the air.” Charges of cavalry began to be made in front of the Café Cardinal.

As there were no troops on the Boulevard St. Martin and the Boulevard du Temple, the crowd was more compact pact there than elsewhere. All the shops were shut there; the street lamps alone gave any light. Against the gloss of the unlighted windows heads might be dimly seen peering out. Darkness produced silence; this multitude, as we have already said, was hushed. There was only heard a confused whispering. Suddenly a light, a noise, an uproar burst forth from the entrance of the Rue St. Martin. Every eye was turned in that direction; a profound upheaving agitated the crowd; they rushed forward, they pressed against the railings of the high pavements which border the cutting between the theatres of the Porte St. Martin and the Ambigu. A moving mass was seen, and an approaching light. Voices were singing. This formidable chorus was recognized,

“Aux armes, Citoyens; formez vos bataillons!”

Lighted torches were coming, it was the “Marseillaise,” that other torch of Revolution and of warfare which was blazing.

The crowd made way for the mob which carried the torches, and which were singing. The mob reached the St. Martin cutting, and entered it. It was then seen what this mournful procession meant. The mob was composed of two distinct groups. The first carried on its shoulders a plank, on which could be seen stretched an old man with a white beard, stark, the mouth open, the eyes fixed, and with a hole in his forehead. The swinging movement of the bearers shook the corpse, and the dead head rose and fell in a threatening and pathetic manner. One of the men who carried him, pale, and wounded in the breast, placed his hand to his wound, leant against the feet of the old man, and at times himself appeared ready to fall. The other group bore a second litter, on which a young man was stretched, his countenance pale and his eyes closed, his shirt stained, open over his breast, displaying his wounds. While bearing the two litters the groups sang. They sang the “Marseillaise,” and at each chorus they stopped and raised their torches, crying, “To arms!” Some young men waved drawn swords. The torches shed a lurid light on the pallid foreheads of the corpses and on the livid faces of the crowd. A shudder ran through the people. It appeared as though they again saw the terrible vision of February, 1848.

This gloomy procession came from the Rue Aumaire. About eight o’clock some thirty workmen gathered together from the neighborhood of the markets, the same who on the next day raised the barricade of the Guérin-Boisseau, reached the Rue Aumaire by the Rue de Petit Lion, the Rue Neuve-Bourg-l’Abbé, and the Carré St. Martin. They came to fight, but here the combat was at an end. The infantry had withdrawn after having pulled down the barricades. Two corpses, an old man of seventy and a young man of five-and-twenty, lay at the corner of the street on the ground, with uncovered faces, their bodies in a pool of blood, their heads on the pavement where they had fallen. Both were dressed in overcoats, and seemed to belong to the middle class. The old man had his hat by his side; he was a venerable figure with a white beard, white hair, and a calm expression. A ball had pierced his skull.

The young man’s breast was pierced with buck-shot. One was the father, the other the son. The son, seeing his father fall, had said, “I also will die.” Both were lying side by side.

Opposite the gateway of the Conservatoire des Arts et Metiers there was a house in course of building. They fetched two planks from it, they laid the corpses on the planks, the crowd raised them upon their shoulders, they brought torches, and they began their march. In the Rue St. Denis a man in a white blouse barred the way. “Where are you going?” said he to them. “You will bring about disasters! You are helping the ‘Twenty-five francs!’” “Down with the police! Down with the white blouse!” shouted the crowd. The man slunk away.

The mob swelled on its road; the crowd opened out and repeated the “Marseillaise” in chorus, but with the exception of a few swords no one was armed. On the boulevard the emotion was intense. Women clasped their hands in pity. Workmen were heard to exclaim, “And to think that we have no arms!”

The procession, after having for some time followed the Boulevards, re-entered the streets, followed by a deeply-affected and angry multitude. In this manner it reached the Rue de Gravilliers. Then a squad of twenty *sergents de ville* suddenly emerging from a narrow street rushed with drawn swords upon the men who were carrying the litters, and overturned the corpses into the mud. A regiment of Chasseurs came up at the double, and put an end to the conflict with bayonet thrusts. A hundred and two citizen prisoners were conducted to the Prefecture. The two corpses received several sword-cuts in the confusion, and were killed a second time. The brigadier Revial, who commanded the squad of the *sergents de ville*, received the Cross of Honor for this deed of arms.

At Marie’s we were on the point of being surrounded. We decided to leave the Rue Croix des Petits Champs.

At the Elysée they commenced to tremble. The ex-Commandant Fleury, one of the aides-de-camp of the Presidency, was summoned into the little room where M. Bonaparte had remained throughout the day. M. Bonaparte conferred a few moments alone with M. Fleury, then the aide-de-camp came out of the room, mounted his horse, and galloped off in the direction of Mazas.

After this the men of the *coup d’état* met together in M. Bonaparte’s room, and held council. Matters were visibly going badly; it was probable that the battle would end by assuming formidable proportions. Up to that time they had desired this, now they did not feel sure that they did not fear it. They pushed forward towards it, but they mistrusted it. There were alarming symptoms in the steadfastness of the resistance, and others not less serious in the cowardice of adherents. Not one of the new Ministers appointed during the morning had taken possession of his Ministry — a significant timidity on the part of people ordinarily so prompt to throw themselves upon such things. M. Roulier, in particular, had disappeared, no one knew where — a sign of tempest. Putting Louis Bonaparte on one side, the *coup d’état* continued to rest solely upon three names, Morny, St. Arnaud, and Maupas. St. Arnaud answered for Magnan. Morny laughed and said in a whisper, “But does Magnan answer for St. Arnaud?” These men adopted energetic measures, they sent for new regiments; an order to the garrisons to march upon Paris was despatched in the one direction as far as Cherbourg, and on the other as far as Maubeuge. These criminals, in the main deeply uneasy, sought to deceive each other. They assumed a cheerful countenance; all spoke of victory; each in the background arranged for flight; in secret, and saying nothing, in order not to give the alarm to his compromised colleagues, so as, in case of failure, to leave the people some men to devour. For this little school of Machiavellian apes the hopes of a successful escape lie in the abandonment of their friends. During their flight they throw their accomplices behind them.

A popular nickname for Louis Bonaparte. Faustin Soulouque was the negro Emperor of Hayti, who, when President of the Republic, had carried out a somewhat similar *coup d’état* in 1848, being subsequently elected Emperor. He treated the Republicans with great cruelty, putting most of them to death.

CHAPTER X.

WHAT FLEURY WENT TO DO AT MAZAS

During the same night towards four o’clock the approaches of the Northern Railway Station were silently invested by two regiments; one of Chasseurs de Vincennes, the other of *Gendarmerie Mobile*. Numerous squads of *sergents de ville* installed themselves in the terminus. The station-master was ordered to prepare a special train and to have an engine ready. A certain number of stokers and engineers for night service were retained. No explanation however was vouchsafed to any one, and absolute secrecy was maintained. A little before six o’clock a movement was apparent in the troops. Some *sergents de ville* came running up, and a few minutes afterwards a squadron of Lancers emerged at a sharp trot from the Rue du Nord. In the centre of the squadron and between the two lines of horse-soldiers could be seen two police-vans drawn by post-horses, behind each vehicle came a little open barouche, in which there sat one man. At the head of the Lancers galloped the aide-de-camp Fleury.

The procession entered the courtyard, then the railway station, and the gates and doors were reclosed.

The two men in the barouches made themselves known to the Special Commissary of the station, to whom the aide-de-camp Fleury spoke privately. This mysterious convoy excited the curiosity of the railway officials; they questioned the policemen, but these knew nothing. All that they could tell was that these police-vans contained eight places, that in each van there were four prisoners, each occupying a cell, and that the four other cells were filled by four *sergents de ville* placed between the prisoners so as to prevent any communication between the cells.

After various consultations between the aide-de-camp of the Elysée and the men of the Prefect Maupas, the two police-vans were placed on railway trucks, each having behind it the open barouche like a wheeled sentry-box, where a police agent acted as sentinel. The engine was ready, the trucks were attached to the tender, and the train started. It was still pitch dark.

For a long time the train sped on in the most profound silence. Meanwhile it was freezing, in the second of the two police-vans, the *sergents de ville*, cramped and chilled, opened their cells, and in order to warm and stretch themselves walked up and down the narrow gangway which runs from end to end of the police-vans. Day had broken, the four *sergents de ville* inhaled the outside air and gazed at the passing country through a species of port-hole which borders each side of the ceiling of the passage. Suddenly a loud voice issued from one of the cells which had remained closed, and cried out, “Hey! there! it is very cold, cannot I relight my cigar here?”

Another voice immediately issued from a second cell, and said, “What! it is you? Good-morning, Lamoricière!”

“Good-morning, Cavaignac!” replied the first voice.

General Cavaignac and General Lamoricière had just recognized each other.

A third voice was raised from a third cell. “Ah! you are there, gentlemen. Good-morning and a pleasant journey.”

He who spoke then was General Changarnier.

“Generals?” cried out a fourth voice. “I am one of you!”

The three generals recognized M. Baze. A burst of laughter came from the four cells simultaneously.

This police-van in truth contained, and was carrying away from Paris, the Questor Baze, and the Generals Lamoricière, Cavaignac, and Changarnier. In the other vehicle, which was placed foremost on the trucks, there were Colonel Charras, Generals Bedeau and Le Flô, and Count Roger (du Nord).

At midnight these eight Representative prisoners were sleeping in their cells at Mazas, when they heard a sudden knocking at their doors, and a voice cried out to them, “Dress, they are coming to fetch you.” “Is it to shoot us?” cried Charras from the other side of the door. They did not answer him. It is worth remarking that this idea came simultaneously to all. And in truth, if we can believe what has since transpired through the quarrels of accomplices, it appears that in the event of a sudden attack being made by us upon Mazas to deliver them, a fusillade had been resolved upon, and that St. Arnaud had in his pocket the written order, signed “Louis Bonaparte.”

The prisoners got up. Already on the preceding night a similar notice had been given to them. They had passed the night on their feet, and at six o’clock in the morning the jailer said to them, “You can go to bed.” The hours passed by; they ended by thinking it would be the same as the preceding night, and many of them, hearing five o’clock strike from the clock tower inside the prison, were going to get back into bed, when the doors of their cells were opened. All the eight were taken downstairs one by one into the clerk’s office in the Rotunda, and were then ushered into the police-van without having met or seen each other during the passage. A man dressed in black, with an impertinent bearing, seated at a table with pen in hand, stopped them on their way, and asked their names. “I am no more disposed to tell you my name than I am curious to learn yours,” answered General Lamoricière, and he passed outside.

The aide-de-camp Fleury, concealing his uniform under his hooded cloak, stationed himself in the clerk’s office. He was charged, to use his own words, to “embark” them, and to go and report their “embarkation” at the Elysée. The aide-de-camp Fleury had passed nearly the whole of his military career in Africa in General Lamoricière’s division; and it was General Lamoricière who in 1848, then being Minister of War, had promoted him to the rank of major. While passing through the clerk’s office, General Lamoricière looked fixedly at him.

When they entered the police-vans the generals were smoking cigars. They took them from them. General Lamoricière had kept his. A voice from outside cried three separate times, “Stop his smoking!” A *sergent de ville* who was standing by the door of the cell hesitated for some time, but however ended by saying to the general, “Throw away your cigar.”

Thence later on ensued the exclamation which caused General Cavaignac to recognize General Lamoricière. The vehicles having been loaded they set off.

They did not know either with whom they were or where they were going.

Each observed for himself in his box the turnings of the streets, and
tried to speculate. Some believed that they were being taken to the
Northern Railway Station; others thought to the Havre Railway Station.
They heard the trot of the escort on the paving-stones.

On the railway the discomfort of the cells greatly increased. General Lamoricière, encumbered with a parcel and a cloak, was still more jammed in than the others. He could not move, the cold seized him, and he ended by the exclamation which put all four of them in communication with each other.

On hearing the names of the prisoners their keepers, who up to that time had been rough, became respectful. “I say there,” said General Changarnier, “open our cells, and let us walk up and down the passage like yourselves.” “General,” said a *sergent de ville,* “we are forbidden to do so. The Commissary of Police is behind the carriage in a barouche, whence he sees everything that is taking place here.” Nevertheless, a few moments afterwards, the keepers, under pretext of cold, pulled up the ground-glass window which closed the vehicle on the side of the Commissary, and having thus “blocked the police,” as one of them remarked, they opened the cells of the prisoners.

It was with great delight that the four Representatives met again and shook hands. Each of these three generals at this demonstrative moment maintained the character of his temperament. Lamoricière, impetuous and witty, throwing himself with all his military energy upon “the Bonaparte;” Cavaignac, calm and cold; Changarnier, silent and looking out through the port-hole at the landscape. The *sergents de ville* ventured to put in a word here and there. One of them related to the prisoners that the ex-Prefect Carlier had spent the night of the First and Second at the Prefecture of Police. “As for me,” said he, “I left the Prefecture at midnight, but I saw him up to that hour, and I can affirm that at midnight he was there still.”

They reached Creil, and then Noyon. At Noyon they gave them some breakfast, without letting them get out, a hurried morsel and a glass of wine. The Commissaries of Police did not open their lips to them. Then the carriages were reclosed, and they felt they were being taken off the trucks and being replaced on the wheels. Post horses arrived, and the vehicles set out, but slowly; they were now escorted by a company of infantry *Gendarmerie Mobile*.

When they left Noyon they had been ten hours in the police-van. Meanwhile the infantry halted. They asked permission to get out for a moment “We consent,” said one of the Commissaries of the Police, “but only for a minute, and on condition that you will give your word of honor not to escape.” “We will give our word of honor,” replied the prisoners. “Gentlemen,” continued the Commissary, “give it to me only for one minute, the time to drink a glass of water.” “No,” said General Lamoricière, “but the time to do the contrary,” and he added, “To Louis Bonaparte’s health.” They allowed them to get out, one by one, and they were, able to inhale for a moment the fresh air in the open country by the side of the road.

Then the convoy resumed its march.

As the day waned they saw through their port-hole a mass of high walls, somewhat overtopped by a great round tower. A moment afterwards the carriages entered beneath a low archway, and then stopped in the centre of a long courtyard, steeply embanked, surrounded by high walls, and commanded by two buildings, of which one had the appearance of a barrack, and the other, with bars at all the windows, had the appearance of a prison. The doors of the carriages were opened. An officer who wore a captain's epaulets was standing by the steps. General Changarnier came down first. "Where are we?" said he. The officer answered, "You are at Ham."

This officer was the Commandant of the Fort. He had been appointed to this post by General Cavaignac.

The journey from Noyon to Ham had lasted three hours and a half. They had spent thirteen hours in the police van, of which ten were on the railway.

They led them separately into the prison, each to the room that was allotted to him. However, General Lamoricière having been taken by mistake into Cavaignac's room, the two generals could again exchange a shake of the hand. General Lamoricière wished to write to his wife; the only letter which the Commissaries of Police consented to take charge of was a note containing this line: "I am well."

The principal building of the prison of Ham is composed of a story above the ground floor. The ground floor is traversed by a dark and low archway, which leads from the principal courtyard into a back yard, and contains three rooms separated by a passage; the first floor contains five rooms. One of the three rooms on the ground floor is only a little ante-room, almost uninhabitable; there they lodged M. Baze. In the remaining lower chambers they installed General Lamoricière and General Changarnier. The five other prisoners were distributed in the five rooms of the first floor.

The room allotted to General Lamoricière had been occupied in the time of the captivity of the Ministers of Charles X. by the ex-Minister of Marine, M. d'Haussez. It was a low, damp room, long uninhabited, and which had served as a chapel, adjoining the dreary archway which led from one courtyard to the other, floored with great planks slimy and mouldy, to which the foot adhered, papered with a gray paper which had turned green, and which hung in rags, exuding saltpetre from the floor to the ceiling, lighted by two barred windows looking on to the courtyard, which had always to be left open on account of the smoky chimney. At the bottom of the room was the bed, and between the windows a table and two straw-bottomed chairs. The damp ran down the walls. When General Lamoricière left this room he carried away rheumatism with him; M. de Haussez went out crippled.

When the eight prisoners had entered their rooms, the doors were shut upon them; they heard the bolts shot from outside, and they were told: “You are in close confinement.”

General Cavaignac occupied on the first floor the former room of M. Louis Bonaparte, the best in the prison. The first thing which struck the eye of the General was an inscription traced on the well, and stating the day when Louis Bonaparte had entered this fortress, and the day when he had left it, as is well known, disguised as a mason, and with a plank on his shoulder. Moreover, the choice of this building was an attention on the part of M. Louis Bonaparte, who having in 1848 taken the place of General Cavaignac in power; wished that in 1851 General Cavaignac should take his place in prison.

“Turn and turn about!” Morny had said, smiling.

The prisoners were guarded by the 48th of the Line, who formed the garrison at Ham. The old Bastilles are quite impartial. They obey those who make *coups d’état* until the day when they clutch them. What do these words matter to them, Equity, Truth, Conscience, which moreover in certain circles do not move men any more than stones? They are the cold and gloomy servants of the just and of the unjust. They take whatever is given them. All is good to them. Are they guilty? Good! Are they innocent? Excellent! This man is the organizer of an ambush. To prison! This man is the victim of an ambush! Enter him in the prison register! In the same room. To the dungeon with all the vanquished!

These hideous Bastilles resemble that old human justice which possessed precisely as much conscience as they have, which condemned Socrates and Jesus, and which also takes and leaves, seizes and releases, absolves and condemns, liberates and incarcerates, opens and shuts, at the will of whatever hand manipulates the bolt from outside.

CHAPTER XI.

THE END OF THE SECOND DAY

We left Marie's house just in time. The regiment charged to track us and to arrest us was approaching. We heard the measured steps of soldiers in the gloom. The streets were dark. We dispersed. I will not speak of a refuge which was refused to us.

Less than ten minutes after our departure M. Marie's house was invested. A swarm of guns and swords poured in, and overran it from cellar to attic. "Everywhere! everywhere!" cried the chiefs. The soldiers sought us with considerable energy. Without taking the trouble to lean down and look, they ransacked under the beds with bayonet thrusts. Sometimes they had difficulty in withdrawing the bayonets which they had driven into the wall. Unfortunately for this zeal, we were not there.

This zeal came frown higher sources. The poor soldiers obeyed. "Kill the Representatives," such were their instructions. It was at that moment when Morny sent this despatch to Maupas: "If you take Victor Hugo, do what you like with him." These were their politest phrases. Later on the *coup d'état* in its decree of banishment, called us "those individuals," which caused Schoelcher to say these haughty words: "These people do not even know how to exile politely."

Dr. Véron who publishes in his "Mémoires" the Morny-Maupas despatch, adds: "M. du Maupas sent to look for Victor Hugo at the house of his brother-in-law, M. Victor Foucher, Councillor to the Court of Cassation. He did not find him."

An old friend, a man of heart and of talent, M. Henry d'E —— , had offered me a refuge in rooms which he occupied in the Rue Richelieu; these rooms adjoining the Théâtre Français, were on the first floor of a house which, like M. Grévy's residence, had an exit into the Rue Fontaine Molière.

I went there. M. Henry d'E —— being from home, his porter was awaiting me, and handed me the key.

A candle lighted the room which I entered. There was a table near the fire, a blotting-book, and some paper. It was past midnight, and I was somewhat tired; but before going to bed, foreseeing that if I should survive this adventure I should write its history, I resolved immediately to note down some details of the state of affairs in Paris at the end of this day, the second of the *coup d'état*. I wrote this page, which I reproduce here, because it is a life-like portrayal — a sort of direct photograph: —

"Louis Bonaparte has invented something which he calls a 'Consultative Committee,' and which he commissions to draw up the postscript of his crimes.

"Léon Foucher refuses to be in it; Montalember hesitates; Baroche accepts.

"Falloux despises Dupin.

"The first shots were fired at the Record Office. In the Markets in the

Rue Rambuteau, in the Rue Beaubourg I heard firing.

"Fleury, the aide-de-camp, ventured to pass down the Rue Montmartre. A musket ball pierced his képi. He galloped quickly off. At one o'clock the regiments were summoned to vote on the *coup d'état*. All gave their adhesion. The students of law and medicine assembled together at the Ecole de Droit to protest. The Municipal Guards dispersed them. There were a great many arrests. This evening, patrols are everywhere. Sometimes an entire regiment forms a patrol.

"Representative Hespel, who is six feet high, was not able to find a cell long enough for him at Mazas, and he has been obliged to remain in the porter's lodge, where he is carefully watched.

"Mesdames Odilon Barrot and de Tocqueville do not know where their husbands are. They go from Mazas to Mont Valérien. The jailers are dumb. It is the 19th Light Infantry which attacked the barricade when Baudin was killed. Fifty men of the *Gendarmerie Mobile* have carried at the double the barricade of the Oratoire in the Rue St. Honoré. Moreover, the conflict reveals itself. They sound the tocsin at the Chapelle Bréa. One barricade overturned sets twenty barricades on their feet. There is the barricade of the Schools in the Rue St. André des Arts, the barricade of the Rue du Temple, the barricade of the Carrefour Phélippeaux defended by twenty young men who have all been killed; they are reconstructing it; the barricade of the Rue de Bretagne, which at this moment Courtigis is bombarding. There is the barricade of the Invalides, the barricade of the Barrière des Martyres, the barricade of the Chapelle St. Denis. The councils of war are sitting in permanence, and order all prisoners to be shot. The 30th of the Line have shot a woman. Oil upon fire.

“The colonel of the 49th of the Line has resigned. Louis Bonaparte has appointed in his place Lieutenant Colonel Négrier. M. Brun, Officer of the Police of the Assembly, was arrested at the same time as the Questors.

“It is said that fifty members of the majority have signed a protest at

M. Odilon Barrot’s house.

“This evening there is an increasing uneasiness at the Elysée. Incendiarism is feared. Two battalions of engineer-sappers have reinforced the Fire Brigade. Maupas has placed guards over the gasometers.

“Here are the military talons by which Paris has been grasped: — Bivouacs at all the strategical points. At the Pont Neuf and the Quai aux Fleurs, the Municipal Guards; at the Place de la Bastille twelve pieces of cannon, three mortars, lighted matches; at the corner of the Faubourg the six-storied houses are occupied by soldiers from top to bottom; the Marulaz brigade at the Hôtel de Ville; the Sauboul brigade at the Panthéon; the Courtigis brigade at the Faubourg St. Antoine; the Renaud division at the Faubourg St. Marceau. At the Legislative Palace the Chasseurs de Vincennes, and a battalion of the 15th Light Infantry; in the Champs Elysées infantry and cavalry; in the Avenue Marigny artillery. Inside the circus is an entire regiment; it has bivouacked there all night. A squadron of the Municipal Guard is bivouacking in the Place Dauphine. A bivouac in the Council of State. A bivouac in the courtyard of the Tuileries. In addition, the garrisons of St. Germain and of Courbevoie. Two colonels killed, Loubeau, of the 75th, and Quilio. On all sides hospital attendants are passing, bearing litters. Ambulances are everywhere; in the Bazar de l’Industry (Boulevard Poissionière); in the Salle St. Jean at the Hôtel de Ville; in the Rue du Petit Carreau. In this gloomy battle nine brigades are engaged. All have a battery of artillery; a squadron of cavalry maintains the communications between the brigades; forty thousand men are taking part in the struggle; with a reserve of sixty thousand men; a hundred thousand soldiers upon Paris. Such is the Army of the Crime. The Reibell brigade, the first and second Lancers, protect the Elysée. The Ministers are all sleeping at the Ministry of the Interior, close by Morny. Morny watches, Magnan commands. To-morrow will be a terrible day.”

This page written, I went to bed, and fell asleep.

THE THIRD DAY — THE MASSACRE.

CHAPTER I.

THOSE WHO SLEEP AND HE WHO DOES NOT SLEEP

During this night of the 3d and 4th of December, while we who were overcome with fatigue and betrothed to calamity slept an honest slumber, not an eye was closed at the Elysée. An infamous sleeplessness reigned there. Towards two o’clock in the morning the Comte Roguet, after Morny the most intimate of the confidants of the Elysée, an ex-peer of France and a lieutenant-general, came out of Louis Bonaparte’s private room; Roguet was accompanied by Saint-Arnaud. Saint-Arnaud, it may be remembered, was at that time Minister of War.

Two colonels were waiting in the little ante-room.

Saint-Arnaud was a general who had been a supernumerary at the Ambigu Theatre. He had made his first appearance as a comedian in the suburbs. A tragedian later on. He may be described as follows: — tall, bony, thin, angular, with gray moustaches, lank air, a mean countenance. He was a cut-throat, and badly educated. Morny laughed at him for his pronunciation of the “Sovereign People.” “He pronounces the word no better than he understands the thing,” said he. The Elysée, which prides itself upon its refinement, only half-accepted Saint-Arnaud. His bloody side had caused his vulgar side to be condoned. Saint-Arnaud was brave, violent, and yet timid; he had the audacity of a gold-laced veteran and the awkwardness of a man who had formerly been “down upon his luck.” We saw him one day in the tribune, pale, stammering, but daring. He had a long bony face, and a distrust-inspiring jaw. His theatrical name was Florivan. He was a strolling player transformed into a trooper. He died Marshal of France. An ill-omened figure.

The two colonels who awaited Saint-Arnaud in the anteroom were two business-like men, both leaders of those decisive regiments which at critical times carry the other regiments with them, according to their instructions, into glory, as at Austerlitz, or into crime, as on the Eighteenth Brumaire. These two officers belonged to what Morny called “the cream of indebted and free-living colonels.” We will not mention their names here; one is dead, the other is still living; he will recognize himself. Besides, we have caught a glimpse of them in the first pages of this book.

One, a man of thirty-eight, was cunning, dauntless, ungrateful, three qualifications for success. The Duc d’Aumale had saved his life in the Aurés. He was then a young captain. A ball had pierced his body; he fell into a thicket; the Kabyles rushed up to cut off and carry away his head, when the Duc d’Aumale arriving with two officers, a soldier, and a bugler, charged the Kabyles and saved this captain. Having saved him, he loved him. One was grateful, the other was not. The one who was grateful was the deliverer. The Duc d’Aumale was pleased with this young captain for having given him an opportunity for a deed of gallantry. He made him a major; in 1849 this major became lieutenant-colonel, and commanded a storming column at the siege of Rome; he then came back to Africa, where Fleury bought him over at the same time as Saint-Arnaud. Louis Bonaparte made him colonel in July, 1851, and reckoned upon him. In November this colonel of Louis Bonaparte wrote to the Duc d’Aumale, “Nothing need be apprehended from this miserable adventurer.” In December he commanded one of the massacring regiments. Later on, in the Dobrudscha, an ill-used horse turned upon him and bit off his cheek, so that there was only room on his face for one slap.

The other man was growing gray, and was about forty-eight. He also was a man of pleasure and of murder. Despicable as a citizen; brave as a soldier. He was one of the first who had sprung into the breach at Constantine. Plenty of bravery and plenty of baseness. No chivalry but that of the green cloth. Louis Bonaparte had made him colonel in 1851. His debts had been twice paid by two Princes; the first time by the Duc d’Orléans, the second time by the Duc de Némours.

Such were these colonels.

Saint-Arnaud spoke to them for some time in a low tone.

CHAPTER II.

THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE COMMITTEE

As soon as it was daylight we had assembled in the house of our imprisoned colleague, M. Grévy. We had been installed in his private room. Michel de Bourges and myself were seated near the fireplace; Jules Favre and Carnot were writing, the one at a table near the window, the other at a high desk. The Left had invested us with discretionary powers. It became more and more impossible at every moment to meet together again in session. We drew up in its name and remitted to Hingray, so that he might print it immediately, the following decree, compiled on the spur of the moment by Jules Favre: —

“FRENCH REPUBLIC.

“*Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*.

“The undersigned Representatives of the People who still remain at liberty, having met together in an Extraordinary Permanent Session, considering the arrest of the majority of their colleagues, considering the urgency of the moment;

“Seeing that the crime of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte in violently abolishing the operations of the Public Powers has reinstated the Nation in the direct exercise of its sovereignty, and that all which fetters that sovereignty at the present time should he annulled;

“Seeing that all the prosecutions commenced, all the sentences pronounced, by what right soever, on account of political crimes or offences are quashed by the imprescriptible right of the People;

“DECREE:

“ARTICLE I. All prosecutions which have begun, and all sentences which have been pronounced, for political crimes or offences are annulled as regards all their civil or criminal effects.

> “ARTICLE II. Consequently, all directors of jails or of houses of detention are enjoined immediately to set at liberty all persons detained in prison for the reasons above indicated.

“ARTICLE III. All magistrates’ officers and officers of the judiciary police are similarly enjoined, under penalty of treason, to annul all the prosecutions which have been begun for the same causes.

“ARTICLE IV. The police functionaries and agents are charged with the execution of the present decree.

“Given at Paris, in Permanent Session, on the 4th December, 1851.”

Jules Favre, as he passed me the decree for my signature, said to me, smiling, “Let us set your sons and your friends at liberty.” “Yes,” said I, “four combatants the more on the barricades.” The Representative Duputz, a few hours later, received from our hands a duplicate of the decree, with the charge to take it himself to the Concièrgerie as soon as the surprise which we premeditated upon the Prefecture of Police and the Hôtel de Ville should have succeeded. Unhappily this surprise failed.

Landrin came in. His duties in Paris in 1848 had enabled him to know the whole body of the political and municipal police. He warned us that he had seen suspicious figures roving about the neighborhood. We were in the Rue Richelieu, almost opposite the Théâtre Français, one of the points where passers-by are most numerous, and in consequence one of the points most carefully watched. The goings and comings of the Representatives who were communicating with the Committee, and who came in and out unceasingly, would be inevitably noticed, and would bring about a visit from the Police. The porters and the neighbors already manifested an evil-boding surprise. We ran, so Landrin declared and assured us, the greatest danger. “You will be taken and shot,” said he to us.

He entreated us to go elsewhere. M. Grévy’s brother, consulted by us, stated that he could not answer for the people of his house.

But what was to be done? Hunted now for two days, we had exhausted the goodwill of nearly everybody, one refuge had been refused on the preceding evening, and at this moment no house was offered to us. Since the night of the 2d we had changed our refuge seventeen times, at times going from one extremity of Paris to the other. We began to experience some weariness. Besides, as I have already said, the house where we were had this signal advantage — a back outlet upon the Rue Fontaine-Molière. We decided to remain. Only we thought we ought to take precautionary measures.

Every species of devotion burst forth from the ranks of the Left around us. A noteworthy member of the Assembly — a man of rare mind and of rare courage — Durand-Savoyat — who from the preceding evening until the last day constituted himself our doorkeeper, and even more than this, our usher and our attendant, himself had placed a bell on our table, and had said to us, “When you want me, ring, and I will come in.” Wherever we went, there was he. He remained in the ante-chamber, calm, impassive, silent, with his grave and noble countenance, his buttoned frock coat, and his broad-brimmed hat, which gave him the appearance of an Anglican clergyman. He himself opened the entrance door, scanned the faces of those who came, and kept away the importunate and the useless. Besides, he was always cheerful, and ready to say unceasingly, “Things are looking well.” We were lost, yet he smiled. Optimism in Despair.

We called him in. Landrin set forth to him his misgivings. We begged Durand-Savoyat in future to allow no one to remain in the apartments, not even the Representatives of the People, to take note of all news and information, and to allow no one to penetrate to us but men who were indispensable, in short, as far as possible, to send away every one in order that the goings and comings might cease. Durand-Savoyat nodded his head, and went back into the ante-chamber, saying, “It shall be done.” He confined himself of his own accord to these two formulas; for us, “Things are looking well,” for himself, “It shall be done.” “It shall be done,” a noble manner in which to speak of duty.

Landrin and Durand-Savoyat having left, Michel de Bourges began to speak.

“The artifice of Louis Bonaparte, imitator of his uncle in this as in everything,” said Michel de Bourges, “had been to throw out in advance an appeal to the People, a vote to be taken, a plebiscitum, in short, to create a Government in appearance at the very moment when he overturned one. In great crises, where everything totters and seems ready to fall, a People has need to lay hold of something. Failing any other support, it will take the sovereignty of Louis Bonaparte. Well, it was necessary that a support should be offered to the people, by us, in the form of its own sovereignty. The Assembly,” continued Michel de Bourges, “was, as a fact, dead. The Left, the popular stump of this hated Assembly, might suffice for the situation for a few days. No more. It was necessary that it should be reinvigorated by the national sovereignty. It was therefore important that we also should appeal to universal suffrage, should oppose vote to vote, should raise erect the Sovereign People before the usurping Prince, and should immediately convoke a new Assembly.” Michel de Bourges proposed a decree.

Michel de Bourges was right. Behind the victory of Louis Bonaparte could be seen something hateful, but something which was familiar — the Empire; behind the victory of the Left there was obscurity. We must bring in daylight behind us. That which causes the greatest uneasiness to people's imagination is the dictatorship of the Unknown. To convoke a new Assembly as soon as possible, to restore France at once into the hands of France, this was to reassure people's minds during the combat, and to rally them afterwards; this was the true policy.

For some time, while listening to Michel de Bourges and Jules Favre, who supported him, we fancied we heard, in the next room, a murmur which resembled the sound of voices. Jules Favre had several times exclaimed, "Is any one there?"

"It is not possible," was the answer. "We have instructed Durand-Savoyat to allow no one to remain there." And the discussion continued. Nevertheless the sound of voices insensibly increased, and ultimately grew so distinct that it became necessary to see what it meant. Carnot half opened the door. The room and the ante-chamber adjoining the room where we were deliberating were filled with Representatives, who were peaceably conversing.

Surprised, we called in Durand-Savoyat.

"Did you not understand us?" asked Michel de Bourges.

"Yes, certainly," answered Durand-Savoyat.

"This house is perhaps marked," resumed Carnot; "we are in danger of being taken."

"And killed upon the spot," added Jules Favre, smiling with his calm smile.

"Exactly so," answered Durand-Savoyat, with a look still quieter than Jules Favre's smile. "The door of this inner room is shrouded in the darkness, and is little noticeable. I have detained all the Representatives who have come in, and have placed them in the larger room and in the ante-chamber, whichever they have wished. A species of crowd has thus been formed. If the police and the troops arrive, I shall say to them, 'Here we are.' They will take us. They will not perceive the door of the inner room, and they will not reach you. We shall pay for you. If there is any one to be killed, they will content themselves with us."

And without imagining that he had just uttered the words of a hero,

Durand-Savoyat went back to the antechamber.

We resumed our deliberation on the subject of a decree. We were unanimously agreed upon the advantage of an immediate convocation of a New Assembly. But for what date? Louis Bonaparte had appointed the 20th of December for his Plebiscitum; we chose the 21st. Then, what should we call this Assembly? Michel de Bourges strongly advocated the title of "National Convention," Jules Favre that its name should be "Constituent Assembly," Carnot proposed the title of "Sovereign Assembly," which, awakening no remembrances, would leave the field free to all hopes. The name of "Sovereign Assembly" was adopted.

The decree, the preamble of which Carnot insisted upon writing from my dictation, was drawn up in these terms. It is one of those which has been printed and placarded.

"DECREE.

"The crime of Louis Bonaparte imposes great duties upon the Representatives of the People remaining at liberty.

"Brute force seeks to render the fulfilment of these duties impossible.

"Hunted, wandering from refuge to refuge, assassinated in the streets, the Republican Representatives deliberate and act, notwithstanding the infamous police of the *coup d'état*.

"The outrage of Louis Napoleon, in overturning all the Public Powers, has only left one authority standing, — the supreme authority, — the authority of the people: Universal Suffrage.

"It is the duty of the Sovereign People to recapture and reconstitute all the social forces which to-day are dispersed.

"Consequently, the Representatives of the People decree: —

"ARTICLE I. — The People are convoked on the 21st December, 1851, for the election of a Sovereign Assembly.

"ARTICLE II. — The election will take place by Universal Suffrage, according to the formalities determined by the decree of the Provisional Government of March 5, 1848.

"Given at Paris, in Permanent Session, December 4, 1851."

As I finished signing this decree, Durand-Savoyat entered and whispered to me that a woman had asked for me, and was waiting in the ante-chamber. I went out to her. It was Madame Charassin. Her husband had disappeared. The Representative Charassin, a political economist, an agriculturist, a man of science, was at the same time a man of great courage. We had seen him on the preceding evening at the most perilous points. Had he been arrested?

Madame Charassin came to ask me if we knew where he was. I was ignorant. She went to Mazas to make inquiries for him there. A colonel who simultaneously commanded in the army and in the police, received her, and said, “I can only permit you to see your husband on one condition.” “What is that?” “You will talk to him about nothing.” “What do you mean Nothing?” “No news, no politics.” “Very well.” “Give me your word of honor.” And she had answered him, “How is it that you wish me to give you my word of honor, since I should decline to receive yours?”

I have since seen Charassin in exile.

Madame Charassin had just left me when Théodore Bac arrived. He brought us the protest of the Council of State.

Here it is: —

“PROTEST OF THE COUNCIL OF STATE.

“The undersigned members of the Council of State, elected by the Constituent and Legislative Assemblies, having assembled together, notwithstanding the decree of the 2d of December, at their usual place, and having found it surrounded by an armed force, which prohibited their access thereto, protest against the decree which has pronounced the dissolution of the Council of State, and declare that they only ceased their functions when hindered by force.

“Paris, this 3d December, 1851.

“Signed: BETHMONT, VIVIEN, BUREAU DE PUZY, ED. CHARTON, CUVIER, DE
RENNEVILLE, HORACE SAY, BOULATIGNIER, GAUTIER DE RUMILLY, DE JOUVENCEL,
DUNOYER, CARTERET, DE FRESNE, BOUCHENAY-LEFER, RIVET, BOUDET, CORMENIN,
PONS DE L’HERAULT.”

Let us relate the adventure of the Council of State.

Louis Bonaparte had driven away the Assembly by the Army, and the High Court of Justice by the Police; he expelled the Council of State by the porter.

On the morning of the 2d of December, at the very hour at which the Representatives of the Right had gone from M. Daru’s to the Mairie of the Tenth Arrondissement, the Councillors of State betook themselves to the Hotel on the Quai d’Orsay. They went in one by one.

The quay was thronged with soldiers. A regiment was bivouacking there with their arms piled.

The Councillors of State soon numbered about thirty. They set to work to deliberate. A draft protest was drawn up. At the moment when it was about to be signed the porter came in, pale and stammering. He declared that he was executing his orders, and he enjoined them to withdraw.

Upon this several Councillors of State declared that, indignant as they were, they could not place their signatures beside the Republican signatures.

A means of obeying the porter.

M. Bethmont, one of the Presidents of the Council of State, offered the use of his house. He lived in the Rue Saint-Romain. The Republican members repaired there, and without discussion signed the protocol which has been given above.

Some members who lived in the more distant quarters had not been able to come to the meeting. The youngest Councillor of State, a man of firm heart and of noble mind, M. Edouard Charton, undertook to take the protest to his absent colleagues.

He did this, not without serious risk, on foot, not having been able to obtain a carriage, and he was arrested by the soldiery and threatened with being searched, which would have been highly dangerous. Nevertheless he succeeded in reaching some of the Councillors of State. Many signed, Pons de l'Hérault resolutely, Cormenin with a sort of fever, Boudet after some hesitation. M. Boudet trembled, his family were alarmed, they heard through the open window the discharge of artillery. Charton, brave and calm, said to him, "Your friends, Vivien, Rivet, and Stourm have signed." Boullet signed.

Many refused, one alleging his great age, another the *res angusta domi*, a third "the fear of doing the work of the Reds." "Say 'fear,' in short," replied Charton.

On the following day, December 3d, MM. Vivien and Bethmont took the protest to Boulay de la Meurthe, Vice-President of the Republic, and President of the Council of State, who received them in his dressing-gown, and exclaimed to them, "Be off! Ruin yourselves, if you like, but without me."

On the morning of the 4th, M. de Cormenin erased his signature, giving this unprecedented but authentic excuse: "The word *ex*-Councillor of State does not look well in a book; I am afraid of injuring my publisher."

Yet another characteristic detail. M. Béhic, on the morning of the 2d, had arrived while they were drawing up the protest. He had half opened the door. Near the door was standing M. Gautier de Rumilly, one of the most justly respected members of the Council of State. M. Béhic had asked M. Gautier de Rumilly, “What are they doing? It is a crime. What are we doing?” M. Gautier de Rumilly had answered, “A protest.” Upon, this word M. Béhic had reclosed the door, and had disappeared. He reappeared later on under the Empire — a Minister.

CHAPTER III.

INSIDE THE ELYSEE

During the morning Dr. Yvan met Dr. Conneau. They were acquainted. They talked together. Yvan belonged to the Left. Conneau belonged to the Elysée. Yvan knew through Conneau the details of what had taken place during the night at the Elysée, which he transmitted to us.

One of these details was the following: —

An inexorable decree had been compiled, and was about to be placarded. This decree enjoined upon all submission to the *coup d'état*. Saint-Arnaud, who, as Minister of War, should sign the decree, had drawn it up. He had reached the last paragraph, which ran thus: "Whoever shall be detected constructing a barricade, posting a placard of the ex-Representatives, or reading it, shall be…." here Saint-Arnaud had paused; Morny had shrugged his shoulders, had snatched the pen from his hand, and written "*shot*!"

Other matters had been decided, but these were not recorded.

Various pieces of information came in in addition to these.

A National Guard, named Boillay de Dole, had formed one of the Guard at the Elysée, on the night of the 3d and 4th. The windows of Louis Bonaparte's private room, which was on the ground floor, were lighted up throughout the night. In the adjoining room there was a Council of War. From the sentry-box where he was stationed Boillay saw defined on the windows black profiles and gesticulating shadows, which were Magnan, Saint-Arnaud, Persigny, Fleury, — the spectres of the crime.

Korte, the General of the Cuirassiers, had been summoned, as also Carrelet, who commanded the division which did the hardest work on the following day, the 4th. From midnight to three o'clock in the morning Generals and Colonels "did nothing but come and go." Even mere captains had come there. Towards four o'clock some carriages arrived "with women." Treason and debauchery went hand in hand. The boudoir in the palace answered to the brothel in the barracks.

The courtyard was filled with lancers, who held the horses of the generals who were deliberating.

Two of the women who came that night belong in a certain measure to History. There are always feminine shadows of this sort in the background.

These women influenced the unhappy generals. Both belonged to the best circles. The one was the Marquise of —— , she who became enamored of her husband after having deceived him. She discovered that her lover was not worth her husband. Such a thing does happen. She was the daughter of the most whimsical Marshal of France, and of that pretty Countess of —— to whom M. de Chateaubriand, after a night of love, composed this quatrain, which may now be published — all the personages being dead.

The Dawn peeps in at the window, she paints the sky with red;
And over our loving embraces her rosy rays are shed:
She looks on the slumbering world, love, with eyes that seem divine.
But can she show on her lips, love, a smile as sweet as thine?

The smile of the daughter was as sweet as that of the mother, and more fatal. The other was Madame K —— , a Russian, fair, tall, blonde, lighthearted, involved in the hidden paths of diplomacy, possessing and displaying a casket full of love letters from Count Molé somewhat of a spy, absolutely charming and terrifying.

The precautions which had been taken in case of accident were visible even from outside. Since the preceding evening there had been seen from the windows of the neighboring houses two post-chaises in the courtyard of the Elysée, horsed, ready to start, the postilions in their saddles.

In the stables of the Elysée in the Rue Montaigne there were other carriages horsed, and horses saddled and bridled.

Louis Bonaparte had not slept. During the night he had given mysterious orders; thence when morning came there was on this pale face a sort of appalling serenity.

The Crime grown calm was a disquieting symptom.

During the morning he had almost laughed. Morny had come into his private room. Louis Bonaparte, having been feverish, had called in Conneau, who joined in the conversation. People are believed to be trustworthy, nevertheless they listen.

Morny brought the police reports. Twelve workmen of the National Printing Office had, during the night of the Second, refused to print the decrees and the proclamations. They had been immediately arrested. Colonel Forestier was arrested. They had transferred him to the Fort of Bicêtre, together with Crocé Spinelli, Genillier, Hippolyte Magen, a talented and courageous writer, Goudounèche, a schoolmaster, and Polino. This last name had struck Louis Bonaparte. “Who is this Polino?” Morny had answered, “An ex-officer of the Shah of Persia’s service.” And he had added, “A mixture of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza.” These prisoners had been placed in Number Six Casemate. Further questions on the part of Louis Bonaparte, “What are these casemates?” And Morny had answered, “Cellars without air or daylight, twenty-four mètres long, eight wide, five high, dripping walls, damp pavements.” Louis Bonaparte had asked, “Do they give them a truss of straw?” And Morny had said, “Not yet, we shall see by and by.” He had added, “Those who are to be transported are at Bicêtre, those who are to be shot are at Ivry.”

Louis Bonaparte had inquired, “What precautions had been taken?” Morny gave him full particulars; that guards had been placed in all the steeples; that all printing-presses had been placed under seal; that all the drums of the National Guard had been locked up; that there was therefore no fear either of a proclamation emanating from a printing-office, or of a call to arms issuing from a Mairie, or of the tocsin ringing from a steeple.

Louis Bonaparte had asked whether all the batteries contained their full complements, as each battery should be composed of four pieces and two mortars. He had expressly ordered that only pieces of eight, and mortars of sixteen centimètres in diameter should be employed.

“In truth,” Morny, who was in the secret, had said, “all this apparatus will have work to do.”

Then Morny had spoken of Mazas, that there were 600 men of the Republican Guards in the courtyard, all picked men, and who when attacked would defend themselves to the bitter end; that the soldiers received the arrested Representatives with shouts of laughter, and that they had gone so far as to stare Thiers in the face; that the officers kept the soldiers at a distance, but with discretion and with a “species of respect;” that three prisoners were kept in solitary confinement, Greppo, Nadaud, and a member of the Socialist Committee, Arsène Meunier. This last named occupied No. 32 of the Sixth Division. Adjoining, in No. 30, there was a Representative of the Right, who sobbed and cried unceasingly. This made Arsène Meunier laugh, and this made Louis Bonaparte laugh.

Another detail. When the *fiacre* bringing M. Baze was entering the courtyard of Mazas, it had struck against the gate, and the lamp of the *fiacre* had fallen to the ground and been broken to pieces. The coachman, dismayed at the damage, bewailed it. “Who will pay for this?” exclaimed he. One of the police agents, who was in the carriage with the arrested

Questor, had said to the driver, “Don’t be uneasy, speak to the Brigadier. In matters such as this, *where there is a breakage*, it is the Government which pays.”

And Bonaparte had smiled, and muttered under his moustache, “That is only fair.”

Another anecdote from Morny also amused him. This was Cavaignac’s anger on entering his cell at Mazas. There is an aperture at the door of each cell, called the “spy-hole,” through which the prisoners are played the spy upon unknown to themselves. The jailers had watched Cavaignac. He had begun by pacing up and down with folded arms, and then the space being too confined, he had seated himself on the stool in his cell. These stools are narrow pieces of plank upon three converging legs, which pierce the seat in the centre, and project beyond the plank, so that one is uncomfortably seated. Cavaignac had stood up, and with a violent kick had sent the stool to the other end of the cell. Then, furious and swearing, he had broken with a blow of his fist the little table of five inches by twelve, which, with the stool, formed the sole furniture of the dungeon.

This kick and fisticuff amused Louis Bonaparte.

“And Maupas is as frightened as ever,” said Morny. This made Bonaparte laugh still further.

Morny having given in his report, went away. Louis Bonaparte entered an adjoining room; a woman awaited him there. It appears that she came to entreat mercy for some one. Dr. Conneau heard these expressive words: “Madam, I wink at your loves; do you wink at my hatreds.”

The above is a free rendering of the original, which is as follows: —

Des rayons du matin l’horizon se colore,
Le jour vient éclairer notre tendre entretien,
Mais est-il un sourire aux lèvres de l’aurore.
Aussi doux que le tien?

CHAPTER IV.

BONAPARTE’S FAMILIAR SPIRITS

M. Mérimée was vile by nature, he must not be blamed for it.

With regard to M. de Morny it is otherwise, he was more worthy; there was something of the brigand in him.

M. de Morny was courageous. Brigandage has its sentiments of honor.

M. Mérimée has wrongly given himself out as one of the confederates of the *coup d’état*. He had, however, nothing to boast of in this.

The truth is that M. Mérimée was in no way a confidant. Louis Bonaparte made no useless confidences.

Let us add that it is little probable, notwithstanding some slight evidence to the contrary, that M. Mérimée, at the date of the 2d December, had any direct relations with Louis Bonaparte. This ensued later on. At first Mérimée only knew Morny.

Morny and Mérimée were both intimate at the Elysée, but on a different footing. Morny can be believed, but not Mérimée. Morny was in the great secrets, Mérimée in the small ones. Commissions of gallantry formed his vocation.

The familiars of the Elysée were of two kinds, the trustworthy confederates and the courtiers.

The first of the trustworthy confederates was Morny; the first — or the last — of the courtiers was Mérimée.

This is what made the fortune of M. Mérimée.

Crimes are only glorious during the first moment; they fade quickly. This kind of success lacks permanency; it is necessary promptly to supplement it with something else.

At the Elysée a literary ornament was wanted. A little savor of the Academy is not out of place in a brigand’s cavern. M. Mérimée was available. It was his destiny to sign himself “the Empress’s Jester.” Madame de Montijo presented him to Louis Bonaparte, who accepted him, and who completed his Court with this insipid but plausible writer.

This Court was a heterogeneous collection; a dinner-wagon of basenesses, a menagerie of reptiles, a herbal of poisons.

Besides the trustworthy confederates who were for use, and the courtiers who were for ornament, there were the auxiliaries.

Certain circumstances called for reinforcements; sometimes these were women, *the Flying Squadron*.

Sometimes men: Saint-Arnaud, Espinasse, Saint-George, Maupas.

Sometimes neither men nor women: the Marquis de C.

The whole troop was noteworthy.

Let us say a few words of it.

There was Vieillard the preceptor, an atheist with a tinge of
Catholicism, a good billiard player.

Vieillard was an anecdotist. He recounted smilingly the following: — Towards the close of 1807 Queen Hortense, who of her own accord lived in Paris, wrote to the King Louis that she could not exist any longer without seeing him, that she could not do without him, and that she was about to come to the Hague. The King said, “She is with child.” He sent for his minister Van Maanen, showed him the Queen’s letter, and added, “She is coming. Very good. Our two chambers communicate by a door; the Queen will find it walled up.” Louis took his royal mantle in earnest, for he exclaimed, “A King’s mantle shall never serve as coverlet to a harlot.” The minister Van Maanen, terrified, sent word of this to the Emperor. The Emperor fell into a rage, not against Hortense, but against Louis. Nevertheless Louis held firm; the door was not walled up, but his Majesty was; and when the Queen came he turned his back upon her. This did not prevent Napoleon III. from being born.

A suitable number of salvoes of cannon saluted this birth.

Such was the story which, in the summer of 1840, in the house called La
Terrasse, before witnesses, among whom was Ferdinand B —— , Marquis de la
L —— , a companion during boyhood of the author of this book, was told by
M. Vieillard, an ironical Bonapartist, an arrant sceptic.

Besides Vieillard there was Vaudrey, whom Louis Bonaparte made a General at the same time as Espinasse. In case of need a Colonel of Conspiracies can become a General of Ambuscades.

There was Fialin, the corporal who became a Duke.

There was Fleury, who was destined to the glory of travelling by the side of the Czar on his buttocks.

There was Lacrosse, a Liberal turned Clerical, one of those Conservatives who push order as far as the embalming, and preservation as far as the mummy: later on a senator.

There was Larabit, a friend of Lacrosse, as much a domestic and not less a senator.

There was Canon Coquereau, the “Abbé of La Belle-Poule.” The answer is known which he made to a princess who asked him, “What is the Elysée?” It appears that one can say to a princess what one cannot say to a woman.

There was Hippolyte Fortoul, of the climbing genus, of the worth of a Gustave Planche or of some Philarête Chasles, an ill-tempered writer who had become Minister of the Marine, which caused Béranger to say, “This Fortoul knows all the spars, including the ‘greased pole.’”

There were some Auvergants there. Two. They hated each other. One had nicknamed the other “the melancholy tinker.”

There was Sainte-Beuve, a distinguished but inferior man, having a pardonable fondness for ugliness. A great critic like Cousin is a great philosopher.

There was Troplong, who had had Dupin for Procurator, and whom Dupin had had for President. Dupin, Troplong; the two side faces of the mask placed upon the brow of the law.

There was Abbatucci; a conscience which let everything pass by. To-day a street.

There was the Abbé M —— , later on Bishop of Nancy, who emphasized with a smile the oaths of Louis Bonaparte.

There were the frequenters of a famous box at the Opera, Montg —— and Sept —— , placing at the service of an unscrupulous prince the deep side of frivolous men.

There was Romieu — the outline of a drunkard behind a Red spectre.

There was Malitourne — not a bad friend, coarse and sincere.

There was Cuch —— , whose name caused hesitation amongst the ushers at the saloon doors.

There was Suin — a man able to furnish excellent counsel for bail actions.

There was Dr. Veron — who had on his cheek what the other men of the Elysée had in their hearts.

There was Mocquart — once a handsome member of the Dutch Court. Mocquart possessed romantic recollections. He might by age, and perhaps otherwise, have been the father of Louis Bonaparte. He was a lawyer. He had shown himself quick-witted about 1829, at the same time as Romieu. Later on he had published something, I no longer remember what, which was pompous and in quarto size, and which he sent to me. It was he who in May, 1847, had come with Prince de la Moskowa to bring me King Jérome's petition to the Chamber of Peers. This petition requested the readmittance of the banished Bonaparte family into France. I supported it; a good action, and a fault which I would again commit.

There was Billault, a semblance of an orator, rambling with facility, and making mistakes with authority, a reputed statesman. What constitutes the statesman is a certain superior mediocrity.

There was Lavalette, completing Morny and Walewski.

There was Bacciochi.

And yet others.

It was at the inspiration of these intimate associates that during his Presidency Louis Bonaparte, a species of Dutch Machiavelli, went hither and thither, to the Chamber and elsewhere, to Tours, to Ham, to Dijon, snuffling, with a sleepy air, speeches full of treason.

The Elysée, wretched as it was, holds a place in the age. The Elysée, has engendered catastrophes and ridicule.

One cannot pass it over in silence.

The Elysée was the disquieting and dark corner of Paris. In this bad spot, the denizens were little and formidable. They formed a family circle — of dwarfs. They had their maxim: to enjoy themselves. They lived on public death. There they inhaled shame, and they throve on that which kills others. It was there that was reared up with art, purpose, industry, and goodwill, the decadence of France. There worked the bought, fed, and obliging public men; — read prostituted. Even literature was compounded there as we have shown; Vieillard was a classic of 1830, Morny created Choufleury, Louis Bonaparte was a candidate for the Academy. Strange place. Rambouillet's hotel mingled itself with the house of Bancal. The Elysée has been the laboratory, the counting-house, the confessional, the alcove, the den of the reign. The Elysée assumed to govern everything, even the morals — above all the morals. It spread the paint on the bosom of women at the same time as the color on the faces of the men. It set the fashion for toilette and for music. It invented the crinoline and the operetta. At the Elysée a certain ugliness was considered as elegance; that which makes the countenance noble was there scoffed at, as was that which makes the soul great; the phrase, “human face divine” was ridiculed at the Elysée, and it was there that for twenty years every baseness was brought into fashion — effrontery included.

History, whatever may be its pride, is condemned to know that the Elysée existed. The grotesque side does not prevent the tragic side. There is at the Elysée a room which has seen the second abdication, the abdication after Waterloo. It is at the Elysée that Napoleon the First ended and that Napoleon the Third began. It is at the Elysée that Dupin appeared to the two Napoleons; in 1815 to depose the Great, in 1851 to worship the Little. At this last epoch this place was perfectly villainous. There no longer remained one virtue there. At the Court of Tiberius there was still Thraseas, but round Louis Bonaparte there was nobody. If one sought Conscience, one found Baroche; if one sought Religion, one found Montalembert.

Better known afterwards as Persigny.

CHAPTER V.

A WAVERING ALLY

During this terribly historical morning of the 4th of December, a day the master was closely observed by his satellites, Louis Bonaparte had shut himself up, but in doing so he betrayed himself. A man who shuts himself up meditates, and for such men to meditate is to premeditate. What could be the premeditation of Louis Bonaparte? What was working in his mind. Questions which all asked themselves, two persons excepted, — Morny, the man of thought; Saint-Arnaud, the man of action.

Louis Bonaparte claimed, justly, a knowledge of men. He prided himself upon it, and from a certain point of view he was right. Others have the power of divination; he had the faculty of scent. It is brute-like, but trustworthy.

He had assuredly not been mistaken in Maupas. To pick the lock of the Law he needed a skeleton key. He took Maupas. Nor could any burglar's implement have answered better in the lock of the Constitution than Maupas. Neither was he mistaken in Q.B. He saw at once that this serious man had in him the necessary composite qualities of a rascal. And in fact, Q.B., after having voted and signed the Deposition at the Mairie of the Tenth Arrondissement, became one of the three reporters of the Joint Commissions; and his share in the abominable total recorded by history amounts to *sixteen hundred and thirty four victims*.

Louis Bonaparte, however, at times judged amiss, especially respecting Peauger. Peauger, though chosen by him, remained an honest man. Louis Bonaparte, mistrusting the workmen of the National Printing-Office, and not without reason, for twelve, as has been seen, were refractory, had improvised a branch establishment in case of emergency, a sort of State Sub-Printing-Office, as it were, situated in the Rue de Luxembourg, with steam and hand presses, and eight workmen. He had given the management of it to Peauger. When the hour of the Crime arrived, and with it the necessity of printing the nefarious placards, he sounded Peauger, and found him rebellious. He then turned to Saint Georges, a more subservient lackey.

He was less mistaken, but still he was mistaken, in his appreciation of X.

On the 2d of December, X., an ally thought necessary by Morny, became a source of anxiety to Louis Bonaparte.

X. was forty-four years of age, loved women, craved promotion, and, therefore, was not over-scrupulous. He began his career in Africa under Colonel Combes in the forty-seventh of the line. He showed great bravery at Constantine; at Zaatcha he extricated Herbillon, and the siege, badly begun by Herbillon, had been brought to a successful termination by him. X., who was a little short man, his head sunk in his shoulders, was intrepid, and admirably understood the handling of a brigade. Bugeaud, Lamoricière, Cavaignac, and Changarnier were his four stepping-stones to advancement. At Paris, in 1851, he met Lamoricière, who received him coldly, and Changarnier, who treated him better. He left Satory indignant, exclaiming, "*We must finish with this Louis Bonaparte. He is corrupting the army. These drunken soldiers make one sick at heart. I shall return to Africa*." In October Changarnier's influence decreased, and X.'s enthusiasm abated. X. then frequented the Elysée, but without giving his adherence. He promised his support to General Bedeau, who counted upon him. At daybreak on the 2d of December some one came to waken X. It was Edgar Ney. X. was a prop for the *coup d'état*, but would he consent? Edgar Ney explained the affair to him, and left him only after seeing him leave the barracks of the Rue Verte at the head of the first regiment. X. took up his position at the Place de la Madeleine. As he arrived there La Rochejaquelein, thrust back from the Chamber by its invaders, crossed the Place. La Rochejaquelein, not yet a Bonapartist, was furious. He perceived X., his old schoolfellow at the Ecole Militaire in 1830, with whom he was on intimate terms. He went up to him, exclaiming, "This is an infamous act. What are you doing?" "*I am waiting*," answered X. La Rochejaquelein left him; X. dismounted, and went to see a relation, a Councillor of State, M.R., who lived in the Rue de Suresne. He asked his advice. M.R., an honest man, did not hesitate. He answered, "I am going to the Council of State to do my duty. It is a Crime." X. shook his head, and said, "*We must wait and see*."

This *I am waiting*, and *We must see*, preoccupied Louis Bonaparte.

Morny said, "*Let us make use of the flying squadron*."

CHAPTER VI.

DENIS DUSSOUBS

Gaston Dussoubs was one of the bravest members of the Left. He was a Representative of the Haute-Vienne. At the time of his first appearance in the Assembly he wore, as formerly did Théophile Gautier, a red waistcoat, and the shudder which Gautier's waistcoat caused among the men of letters in 1830, Gaston Dussoubs' waistcoat caused among the Royalists of 1851. M. Parisis, Bishop of Langres, who would have had no objection to a red hat, was terrified by Gaston Dussoubs' red waistcoat. Another source of horror to the Right was that Dussoubs had, it was said, passed three years at Belle Isle as a political prisoner, a penalty incurred by the "Limoges Affair." Universal Suffrage had, it would seem, taken him thence to place him in the Assembly. To go from the prison to the Senate is certainly not very surprising in our changeful times, although it is sometimes followed by a return from the Senate to the prison. But the Right was mistaken, the culprit of Limoges was, not Gaston Dussoubs, but his brother Denis.

In fine, Gaston Dussoubs inspired fear. He was witty, courageous, and gentle.

In the summer of 1851 I went to dine every day at the Concièrgerie with my two sons and my two imprisoned friends. These great hearts and great minds, Vacquerie, Meurice, Charles, and François Victor, attracted men of like quality. The livid half-light that crept in through latticed and barred windows disclosed a family circle at which there often assembled eloquent orators, among others Crémieux, and powerful and charming writers, including Peyrat.

One day Michel de Bourges brought to us Gaston Dussoubs.

Gaston Dussoubs lived in the Faubourg St. Germain, near the Assembly.

On the 2d of December we did not see him at our meetings. He was ill, "nailed down" as he wrote me, by rheumatism of the joints, and compelled to keep his bed.

He had a brother younger than himself, whom we have just mentioned, Denis

Dussoubs. On the morning of the 4th his brother went to see him.

Gaston Dussoubs knew of the *coup d’état*, and was exasperated at being obliged to remain in bed. He exclaimed, “I am dishonored. There will be barricades, and my sash will not be there!”

“Yes,” said his brother. “It will be there!”

“How?”

“Lend it to me.”

“Take it.”

Denis took Gaston’s sash, and went away.

We shall see Denis Dussoubs later on.

CHAPTER VII.

ITEMS AND INTERVIEWS

Lamoricière on the same morning found means to convey to me by Madame de Courbonne the following information.

“ —— Fortress of Ham. — The Commandant’s name is Baudot. His appointment, made by Cavaignac in 1848, was countersigned by Charras. Both are to-day his prisoners. The Commissary of Police, sent by Morny to the village of Ham to watch the movements of the jailer and the prisoners, is Dufaure de Pouillac.”

I thought when I received this communication that the Commandant Baudot, “the jailer,” had connived at its rapid transmission.

A sign of the instability of the central power.

Lamoricière, by the same means, put me in possession of some details concerning his arrest and that of his fellow-generals.

These details complete those which I have already given.

The arrests of the Generals were affected at the same time at their respective homes under nearly similar circumstances. Everywhere houses surrounded, doors opened by artifice or burst open by force, porters deceived, sometimes garotted, men in disguise, men provided with ropes, men armed with axes, surprises in bed, nocturnal violence. A plan of action which resembled, as I have said, an invasion of brigands.

General Lamoricière, according to his own expression, was a sound sleeper. Notwithstanding the noise at his door, he did not awake. His servant, a devoted old soldier, spoke in a loud voice, and called out to arouse the General. He even offered resistance to the police. A police agent wounded him in the knee with a sword thrust. The General was awakened, seized, and carried away.

While passing in a carriage along the Quai Malaquais, Lamoricière noticed troops marching by with their knapsacks on their backs. He leaned quickly forward out of the window. The Commissary of Police thought he was about to address the soldiers. He seized the General by the arm, and said to him, “General, if you say a word I shall put this on you.” And with the other hand he showed him in the dim light something which proved to be a gag.

All the Generals arrested were taken to Mazas. There they were locked up and forgotten. At eight in the evening General Changarnier had eaten nothing.

These arrests were not pleasant tasks for the Commissaries of Police. They were made to drink down their shame in large draughts. Cavaignac, Leflô, Changarnier, Bedeau, and Lamoricière did not spare them any more than Charras did. As he was leaving, General Cavaignac took some money with him. Before putting it in his pocket, he turned towards Colin, the Commissary of Police who had arrested him, and said, “Will this money be safe on me?”

The Commissary exclaimed, “Oh, General, what are you thinking of?”

“What assurance have I that you are not thieves?” answered Cavaignac. At the same time, nearly the same moment, Charras said to Courteille, the Commissary of Police, “Who can tell me that you are not pick-pockets?”

A few days afterwards these pitiful wretches all received the Cross of the Legion of Honor.

This cross given by the last Bonaparte to policemen after the 2d of December is the same as that affixed by the first Napoleon to the eagles of the Grand Army after Austerlitz.

I communicated these details to the Committee. Other reports came in. A few concerned the Press. Since the morning of the 4th the Press was treated with soldierlike brutality. Serrière, the courageous printer, came to tell us what had happened at the *Presse*. Serrière published the *Presse* and the *Avénement du Peuple*, the latter a new name for the *Evénement*, which had been judicially suppressed. On the 2d, at seven o’clock in the morning, the printing-office had been occupied by twenty-eight soldiers of the Republican Guard, commanded by a Lieutenant named Pape (since decorated for this achievement). This man had given Serrière an order prohibiting the printing of any article signed “Nusse.” A Commissary of Police accompanied Lieutenant Pape. This Commissary had notified Serrière of a “decree of the President of the Republic,” suppressing the *Avénement du Peuple*, and had placed sentinels over the presses. The workmen had resisted, and one of them said to the soldiers, “*We shall print it in spite of you*.” Then forty additional Municipal Guards arrived, with two quarter-masters, four corporals, and a detachment of the line, with drums at their head, commanded by a captain. Girardin came up indignant, and protested with so much energy that a quarter-master said to him, “*I should like a Colonel of your stamp*.” Girardin’s courage communicated itself to the workmen, and by dint of skill and daring, under the very eyes of the gendarmes, they succeeded in printing Girardin’s proclamations with the hand-press, and ours with the brush. They carried them away wet, in small packages, under their waistcoats.

Luckily the soldiers were drunk. The gendarmes made them drink, and the workmen, profiting by their revels, printed. The Municipal Guards laughed, swore and jested, drank champagne and coffee, and said, “*We fill the places of the Representatives, we have twenty-five francs a day*.” All the printing-houses in Paris were occupied in the same manner by the soldiery. The *coup d’état* reigned everywhere. The Crime even ill-treated the Press which supported it. At the office of the *Moniteur Parisien*, the police agents threatened to fire on any one who should open a door. M. Delamare, director of the *Patrie*, had forty Municipal Guards on his hands, and trembled lest they should break his presses. He said to one of them, “*Why, I am on your side*.” The gendarme replied, “*What is that to me?*”

At three o’clock on the morning of the 4th all the printing-offices were evacuated by the soldiers. The Captain said to Serrière, “We have orders to concentrate in our own quarters.” And Serrière, in announcing this fact, added, “Something is in preparation.”

I had had since the previous night several conversations with Georges Biscarrat, an honest and brave man, of whom I shall have occasion to speak hereafter. I had given him rendezvous at No. 19, Rue Richelieu. Many persons came and went during this morning of the 4th from No. 15, where we deliberated, to No. 19, where I slept.

As I left this honest and courageous man in the street I saw M. Mérimée, his exact opposite, coming towards me.

“Oh!” said M. Mérimée, “I was looking for you.”

I answered him, —

“I hope you will not find me.”

He held out his hand to me, and I turned my back on him.

I have not seen him since. I believe he is dead.

In speaking one day in 1847 with Mérimée about Morny, we had the following conversation: — Mérimée said, “M. de Morny has a great future before him.” And he asked me, “Do you know him?”

I answered, —

“Ah! he has a fine future before him! Yes, I know M. de Morny. He is a clever man. He goes a great deal into society, and conducts commercial operations. He started the Vieille Montagne affair, the zinc-mines, and the coal-mines of Liège. I have the honor of his acquaintance. He is a sharper.”

There was this difference between Mérimée and myself: I despised Morny, and he esteemed him.

Morny reciprocated his feeling. It was natural.

I waited until Mérimée had passed the corner of the street. As soon as he disappeared I went into No. 15.

There, they had received news of Canrobert. On the 2d he went to see Madame Leflô, that noble woman, who was most indignant at what had happened. There was to be a ball next day given by Saint-Arnaud at the Ministry of War. General and Madame Leflô were invited, and had made an appointment there with General Canrobert. But the ball did not form a part of Madame Leflô’s conversation with him. “General,” said she, “all your comrades are arrested; is it possible that you give your support to such an act?” “What I intend giving,” replied Canrobert, “is my resignation and,” he added, “you may tell General Leflô so.” He was pale, and walked up and down, apparently much agitated. “Your resignation, General?” “Yes, Madame.” “Is it positive?” “Yes, Madame, if there is no riot.” “General Canrobert,” exclaimed Madame Leflô, “that *if* tells me your intentions.”

Canrobert, however, had not yet taken his decision. Indeed, indecision was one of his chief characteristics. Pelissier, who was cross-grained and gruff, used to say, “Judge men by their names, indeed! I am christened *Amable*, Randon *César*, and Canrobert *Certain*.”

No. 16, Rue d’Anjou, Saint Honoré.

The author still has in his possession the note written by Lamoricière.

Later on, the wound having got worse, he was obliged to have his leg taken off.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SITUATION

Although the fighting tactics of the Committee were, for the reasons which I have already given, not to concentrate all their means of resistance into one hour, or in one particular place, but to spread them over as many points and as many days as possible, each of us knew instinctively, as also the criminals of the Elysée on their side, that the day would be decisive.

The moment drew near when the *coup d'état* would storm us from every side, and when we should have to sustain the onslaught of an entire army. Would the people, that great revolutionary populace of the faubourgs of Paris, abandon their Representatives? Would they abandon themselves? Or, awakened and enlightened, would they at length arise? A question more and more vital, and which we repeated to ourselves with anxiety.

The National Guard had shown no sign of earnestness. The eloquent proclamation, written at Marie's by Jules Favre and Alexander Rey, and addressed in our name to the National Legions, had not been printed. Hetzel's scheme had failed. Versigny and Lebrousse had not been able to rejoin him; the place appointed for their meeting, the corner of the boulevard and the Rue de Richelieu, having been continually scoured by charges of cavalry. The courageous effort of Colonel Grassier to win over the Sixth Legion, the more timid attempt of Lieutenant Colonel Howyne upon the Fifth, had failed. Nevertheless indignation began to manifest itself in Paris. The preceding evening had been significant.

Hingray came to us during the morning, bringing under his cloak a bundle of copies of the Decree of Deposition, which had been reprinted. In order to bring them to us he had twice run the risk of being arrested and shot. We immediately caused these copies to be distributed and placarded. This placarding was resolutely carried out; at several points our placards were posted by the side of the placards of the *coup d'état*, which pronounced the penalty of death against any one who should placard the decrees emanating from the Representatives. Hingray told us that our proclamations and our decrees had been lithographed and distributed by hand in thousands. It Was urgently necessary that we should continue our publications. A printer, who had formerly been a publisher of several democratic journals, M. Boulé, had offered me his services on the preceding evening. In June, 1848, I had protected his printing-office, then being devastated by the National Guards. I wrote to him: I enclosed our judgments and our decrees in the letter, and the Representative Montaigu undertook to take them to him. M. Boulé excused himself; his printing-presses had been seized by the police at midnight.

Through the precautions which we had taken, and thanks to the patriotic assistance of several young medical and chemical students, powder had been manufactured in several quarters. At one point alone, the Rue Jacob, a hundred kilogrammes had been turned out during the night. As, however, this manufacture was principally carried out on the left bank of the river, and as the fighting took place on the right bank, it was necessary to transport this powder across the bridges. They managed this In the best manner they could. Towards nine o'clock we were warned that the police, having been informed of this, had organized a system of inspection, and that all persons crossing the river were searched, particularly on the Pont Neuf.

A certain strategical plan became manifest. The ten central bridges mere militarily guarded.

People were arrested in the street on account of their personal appearance. A sergent-de-ville, at the corner of he Pont-au-Change, exclaimed, loud enough for the passers-by to hear, "We shall lay hold of all those who have not their beards properly trimmed, or who do not appear to have slept."

Notwithstanding all this we had a little powder; the disarming of the National Guard at various points had produced about eight hundred muskets, our proclamations and our decrees were being placarded, our voice was reaching the people, a certain confidence was springing up.

"The wave is rising! the wave is rising!" exclaimed Edgar Quinet, who had come to shake my hand.

We were informed that the schools were rising in insurrection during the day, and that they offered us a refuge in the midst of them.

Jules Favre exclaimed joyfully, —

"To-morrow we shall date our decrees from the Pantheon."

Signs of good omen grew more numerous. An old hotbed of insurrection, the Rue Saint-André-des-Arts, was becoming agitated. The association called La Presse du Travail gave signs of life. Some brave workmen, at the house of one of their colleagues, Nétré No. 13, Rue du Jardinet, had organized a little printing-press in a garret, a few steps from the barracks of the Gendarmerie Mobile. They had spent the night first in compiling, and then in printing “A Manifesto to Working Men,” which called the people to arms. They were five skilful and determined men; they had procured paper, they had perfectly new type; some of them moistened the paper, while the others composed; towards two o’clock in the morning they began to print. It was essential that they should not be heard by the neighbors; they had succeeded in muffling the hollow blows of the ink-rollers, alternating with the rapid sound of the printing blankets. In a few hours fifteen hundred copies were pulled, and at daybreak they were placarded at the corners of the streets. The leader of these intrepid workmen, A. Desmoulins, who belonged to that sturdy race of men who are both cultured and who can fight, had been greatly disheartened on the preceding day; he now had become hopeful.

On the preceding day he wrote:— “Where are the Representatives? The communications are cut. The quays and the boulevards can no longer be crossed. It has become impossible to reunite the popular Assembly. The people need direction. De Flotte in one district, Victor Hugo in another, Schoelcher in a third, are actively urging on the combat, and expose their lives a score of times, but none feel themselves supported by any organized body: and moreover the attempt of the Royalists in the Tenth Arrondissement has roused apprehension. People dread lest they should see them reappear when all is accomplished.”

Now, this man so intelligent and so courageous recovered confidence, and he wrote, —

“Decidedly, Louis Napoleon is afraid. The police reports are alarming for him. The resistance of the Republican Representatives is bearing fruit. Paris is arming. Certain regiments appear ready to turn back. The Gendarmerie itself is not to be depended upon, and this morning an entire regiment refused to march. Disorder is beginning to show itself in the services. Two batteries fired upon each other for a long time without recognition. One would say that the *coup d’état* is about to fail.”

The symptoms, as may be seen, were growing more reassuring.

Had Maupas become unequal to the task? Had they resorted to a more skilful man? An incident seemed to point to this. On the preceding evening a tall man had been seen, between five and seven o’clock, walking up and down before the café of the Place Saint-Michel; he had been joined by two of the Commissaries of the Police who had effected the arrests of the 2d of December, and had talked to them for a long time. This man was Carlier. Was he about to supplant Maupas?

The Representative Labrousse, seated at a table of the café, had witnessed this conspirators’ parley.

Each of the two Commissaries was followed by that species of police agent which is called “the Commissary’s dog.”

At the same time strange warnings reached the Committee; the following letter was brought to our knowledge.

“3d December.

“MY DEAR BOCAGE,

“To-day at six o’clock, 25,000 francs has been offered to any one who arrests or kills Hugo.

“You know where he is. He must not go out under any pretext whatever.

“Yours ever,

“AL. DUMAS.”

At the back was written, “Bocage, 18, Rue Cassette.” It was necessary that the minutest details should be considered. In the different places of combat a diversity of passwords prevailed, which might cause danger. For the password on the day before we had given the name of “Baudin.” In imitation of this the names of other Representatives had been adopted as passwords on barricades. In the Rue Rambuteau the password was “Eugène Sue and Michel de Bourges;” in the Rue Beaubourg, “Victor Hugo;” at the Saint Denis chapel, “Esquiros and De Flotte.” We thought it necessary to put a stop to this confusion, and to suppress the proper names, which are always easy to guess. The password settled upon was, “What is Joseph doing?”

At every moment items of news and information came to us from all sides, that barricades were everywhere being raised, and that firing was beginning in the central streets. Michel de Bourges exclaimed, “Construct a square of four barricades, and we will go and deliberate in the centre.”

We received news from Mont Valérien. Two prisoners the more. Rigal and Belle had just been committed. Both of the Left. Dr. Rigal was the Representative of Gaillac, and Belle of Lavaur. Rigal was ill; they had arrested him in bed. In prison he lay upon a pallet, and could not dress himself. His colleague Belle acted as his *valet de chambre*.

Towards nine o'clock an ex-Captain of the 8th Legion of the National Guard of 1848, named Jourdan, came to place himself at our service. He was a bold man, one of those who had carried out, on the morning of the 24th February, the rash surprise of the Hôtel de Ville. We charged him to repeat this surprise, and to extend it to the Prefecture of Police. He knew how to set about the work. He told us that he had only a few men, but that during the day he would cause certain houses of strategical importance on the Quai des Cèvres, on the Quai Lepelletier, and in the Rue de la Cité, to be silently occupied, and that if it should chance that the leaders of the *coup d'état*, owing to the combat in the centre of Paris growing more serious, should be forced to withdraw the troops from the Hôtel de Ville and the Prefecture, an attack would be immediately commenced on these two points. Captain Jourdan, we may at once mention, did what he had promised us; unfortunately, as we learnt that evening, he began perhaps a little too soon. As he had foreseen, a moment arrived when the square of the Hôtel de Ville was almost devoid of troops, General Herbillon having been forced to leave it with his cavalry to take the barricades of the centre in the rear. The attack of the Republicans burst forth instantly. Musket shots were fired from the windows on the Quai Lepelletier; but the left of the column was still on the Pont d'Arcole, a line of riflemen had been placed by a major named Larochette before the Hôtel de Ville, the 44th retraced its steps, and the attempt failed.

Bastide arrived, with Chauffour and Laissac.

"Good news," said he to us, "all is going on well." His grave, honest, and dispassionate countenance shone with a sort of patriotic serenity. He came from the barricades, and was about to return thither. He had received two balls in his cloak. I took him aside, and said to him, "Are you going back?" "Yes." "Take me with you." "No," answered he, "you are necessary here. To-day you are the general, I am the soldier." I insisted in vain. He persisted in refusing, repeating continually. "The Committee is our centre, it should not disperse itself. It is your duty to remain here. Besides," added he, "Make your mind easy. You run here more risk than we do. If you are taken you will be shot." "Well, then," said I, "the moment may come when our duty will be to join in the combat." "Without doubt." I resumed, "You who are on the barricades will be better judges than we shall of that moment. Give me your word of honor that you will treat me as you would wish me to treat you, and that you will come and fetch us.” “I give it you,” he answered, and he pressed my two hands in his own.

Later on, however, a few moments after Bastide had left, great as was my confidence in the loyal word of this courageous and generous man, I could no longer restrain myself, and I profited by an interval of two hours of which I could dispose, to go and see with my own eyes what was taking place, and in what manner the resistance was behaving.

I took a carriage in the square of the Palais Royal. I explained to the driver who I was, and that I was about to visit and encourage the barricades; that I should go sometimes on foot, sometimes in the carriage, and that I trusted myself to him. I told him my name.

The first comer is almost always an honest man. This true-hearted coachman answered me, “I know where the barricades are. I will drive you wherever it is necessary. I will wait for you wherever it is necessary. I will drive you there and bring you back; and if you have no money, do not pay me, I am proud of such an action.”

And we started.

The original of this note is in the hands of the author of this book. It was handed to us by M. Avenel on the part of M. Bocage.

CHAPTER IX.

THE PORTE SAINT MARTIN

Important deeds had been already achieved during the morning.

“It is taking root,” Bastide had said.

The difficulty is not to spread the flames but to light the fire.

It was evident that Paris began to grow ill-tempered. Paris does not get angry at will. She must be in the humor for it. A volcano possesses nerves. The anger was coming slowly, but it was coming. On the horizon might be seen the first glimmering of the eruption.

For the Elysée, as for us, the critical moment was drawing nigh. From the preceding evening they were nursing their resources. The *coup d’état* and the Republic were at length about to close with each other. The Committee had in vain attempted to drag the wheel; some irresistible impulse carried away the last defenders of liberty and hurried them on to action. The decisive battle was about to be fought.

In Paris, when certain hours have sounded, when there appears an immediate necessity for a progressive movement to be carried out, or a right to be vindicated, the insurrections rapidly spread throughout the whole city. But they always begin at some particular point. Paris, in its vast historical task, comprises two revolutionary classes, the “middle-class” and the “people.” And to these two combatants correspond two places of combat; the Porte Saint Martin when the middle-class are revolting, the Bastille when the people are revolting. The eye of the politician should always be fixed on these two points. There, famous in contemporary history, are two spots where a small portion of the hot cinders of Revolution seem ever to smoulder.

When a wind blows from above, these burning cinders are dispersed, and fill the city with sparks.

This time, as we have already explained, the formidable Faubourg Antoine slumbered, and, as has been seen, nothing had been able to awaken it. An entire park of artillery was encamped with lighted matches around the July Column, that enormous deaf-and-dumb memento of the Bastille. This lofty revolutionary pillar, this silent witness of the great deeds of the past, seemed to have forgotten all. Sad to say, the paving stones which had seen the 14th of July did not rise under the cannon-wheels of the 2d of December. It was therefore not the Bastille which began, it was the Porte Saint Martin.

From eight o’clock in the morning the Rue Saint Denis and the Rue Saint Martin were in an uproar throughout their length; throngs of indignant passers-by went up and down those thoroughfares. They tore down the placards of the *coup d’état*; they posted up our Proclamations; groups at the corners of all the adjacent streets commented upon the decree of outlawry drawn up by the members of the Left remaining at liberty; they snatched the copies from each other. Men mounted on the kerbstones read aloud the names of the 120 signatories, and, still more than on the day before, each significant or celebrated name was hailed with applause. The crowd increased every moment — and the anger. The entire Rue Saint Denis presented the strange aspect of a street with all the doors and windows closed, and all the inhabitants in the open air. Look at the houses, there is death; look at the street, it is the tempest.

Some fifty determined men suddenly emerged from a side alley, and began to run through the streets, saying, “To arms! Long live the Representatives of the Left! Long live the Constitution!” The disarming of the National Guards began. It was carried out more easily than on the preceding evening. In less than an hour more than 150 muskets had been obtained.

In the meanwhile the street became covered with barricades.

CHAPTER X.

MY VISIT TO THE BARRICADE

My coachman deposited me at the corner of Saint Eustache, and said to me, “Here you are in the hornets’ nest.”

He added, “I will wait for you in the Rue de la Vrillière, near the

Place des Victoires. Take your time.”

I began walking from barricade to barricade.

In the first I met De Flotte, who offered to serve me as a guide. There is not a more determined man than De Flotte. I accepted his offer; he took me everywhere where my presence could be of use.

On the way he gave me an account of the steps taken by him to print our proclamations; Boulé’s printing-office having failed him, he had applied to a lithographic press, at No. 30, Rue Bergère, and at the peril of their lives two brave men had printed 500 copies of our decrees. These two true-hearted workmen were named, the one Rubens, the other Achille Poincellot.

While walking I made jottings in pencil (with Baudin’s pencil, which I had with me); I registered facts at random; I reproduce this page here. These living facts are useful for History; the *coup d’état* is there, as though freshly bleeding.

“Morning of the 4th. It looks as if the combat was suspended. Will it burst forth again? Barricades visited by me: one at the corner of Saint Eustache. One at the Oyster Market. One in the Rue Mauconseil. One in the Rue Tiquetonne. One in the Rue Mandar (Rocher de Cancale). One barring the Rue du Cadran and the Rue Montorgueil. Four closing the Petit-Carreau. The beginning of one between the Rue des Deux Portes and the Rue Saint Sauveur, barring the Rue Saint Denis. One, the largest, barring the Rue Saint Denis, at the top of the Rue Guérin-Boisseau. One barring the Rue Grenetat. One farther on in the Rue Grenetat, barring the Rue Bourg-Labbé (in the centre an overturned flour wagon; a good barricade). In the Rue Saint Denis one barring the Rue de Petit-Lion-Saint-Sauveur. One barring the Rue du Grand Hurleur, with its four corners barricaded. This barricade has already been attacked this morning. A combatant, Massonnet, a comb-maker of 154, Rue Saint Denis, received a ball in his overcoat; Dupapet, called ‘the man with the long beard,’ was the last to stay on the summit of the barricade. He was heard to cry out to the officers commanding the attack, ‘You are traitors!’ He is believed to have been shot. The troops retired — strange to say without demolishing the barricade. A barricade is being constructed in the Rue du Renard. Some National Guards in uniform watch its construction, but do not work on it. One of them said to me, ‘We are not against you, you are on the side of Right.’ They add that there are twelve or fifteen barricades in the Rue Rambuteau. This morning at daybreak the cannon had fired ‘steadily,’ as one of them remarks, in the Rue Bourbon-Villeneuve. I visit a powder manufactory improvised by Leguevel at a chemist’s opposite the Rue Guérin-Boisseau.

“They are constructing the barricades amicably, without angering any one. They do what they can not to annoy the neighborhood. The combatants of the Bourg-Labbé barricades are ankle-deep in mud on account of the rain. It is a perfect sewer. They hesitate to ask for a truss of straw. They lie down in the water or on the pavement.

“I saw there a young man who was ill, and who had just got up from his bed with the fever still on him. He said to me, ‘I am going to my death’ (he did so).

“In the Rue Bourbon-Villeneuve they had not even asked a mattress of the ‘shopkeepers,’ although, the barricade being bombarded, they needed them to deaden the effect of the balls.

“The soldiers make bad barricades, because they make them too well. A barricade should be tottering; when well built it is worth nothing; the paving-stones should want equilibrium, ‘so that they may roll down on the troopers,’ said a street-boy to me, ‘and break their paws.’ Sprains form a part of barricade warfare.

“Jeanty Sarre is the chief of a complete group of barricades. He presented his first lieutenant to me, Charpentier, a man of thirty-six, lettered and scientific. Charpentier busies himself with experiments with the object of substituting gas for coal and wood in the firing of china, and he asks permission to read a tragedy to me ‘one of these days.’ I said to him, ‘We shall make one.’

“Jeanty Sarre is grumbling at Charpentier; the ammunition is failing. Jeanty Sarre, having at his house in the Rue Saint Honoré a pound of fowling-powder and twenty army cartridges, sent Charpentier to get them. Charpentier went there, and brought back the fowling-powder and the cartridges, but distributed them to the combatants on the barricades whom he met on the way. ‘They were as though famished,’ said he. Charpentier had never in his life touched a fire-arm. Jeanty Sarre showed him how to load a gun.

“They take their meals at a wine-seller’s at the corner, and they warm themselves there. It is very cold. The wine-seller says, ‘Those who are hungry, go and eat.’ A combatant asked him, ‘Who pays?’ ‘Death,’ was the answer. And in truth some hours afterwards he had received seventeen bayonet thrusts.

“They have not broken the gas-pipes — always for the sake of not doing unnecessary damage. They confine themselves to requisitioning the gasmen’s keys, and the lamplighters’ winches in order to open the pipes. In this manner they control the lighting or extinguishing.

“This group of barricades is strong, and will play an important part. I had hoped at one moment that they would attack it while I was there. The bugle had approached, and then had gone away again. Jeanty Sarre tells me ‘it will be for this evening.’

“His intention is to extinguish the gas in the Rue du Petit-Carreau and all the adjoining streets, and to leave only one jet lighted in the Rue du Cadran. He has placed sentinels as far as the corner of the Rue Saint Denis; at that point there is an open side, without barricades, but little accessible to the troops, on account of the narrowness of the streets, which they can only enter one by one. Thence little danger exists, an advantage of narrow streets; the troops are worth nothing unless massed together. The soldier does not like isolated action; in war the feeling of elbow to elbow constitutes half the bravery. Jeanty Sarre has a reactionary uncle with whom he is not on good terms, and who lives close by at No. 1, Rue du Petit-Carreau.— ‘What a fright we shall give him presently!’ said Jeanty Sarre to me, laughing. This morning Jeanty Sarre has inspected the Montorgueil barricade. There was only one man on it, who was drunk, and who put the barrel of his gun against his breast, saying, ‘No thoroughfare.’ Jeanty Sarre disarmed him.

“I go to the Rue Pagevin. There at the corner of the Place des Victoires there is a well-constructed barricade. In the adjoining barricade in the Rue Jean Jacques Rousseau, the troops this morning made no prisoners. The soldiers had killed every one. There are corpses as far as the Place des Victoires. The Pagevin barricade held its own. There are fifty men there, well armed. I enter. ‘Is all going on well?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘Courage.’ I press all these brave hands; they make a report to me. They had seen a Municipal Guard smash in the head of a dying man with the butt end of his musket. A pretty young girl, wishing to go home, took refuge in the barricade. There, terrified, she remained for an hour. When all danger was over, the chef of the barricade caused her to be reconducted home by the eldest of his men.

"As I was about to leave the barricade Pagevin, they brought me a prisoner, a police spy, they said.

"He expected to be shot. I had him set at liberty."

Bancel was in this barricade of the Rue Pagevin. We shook hands.

He asked me, —

"Shall we conquer?"

"Yes," I answered.

We then could hardly entertain a doubt.

De Flotte and Bancel wished to accompany me, fearing that I should be arrested by the regiment guarding the Bank.

The weather was misty and cold, almost dark. This obscurity concealed and helped us. The fog was on our side.

As we reached the corner of the Rue de la Vrillière, a group on horseback passed by.

It consisted of a few others, preceded by a man who seemed a soldier, but who was not in uniform. He wore a cloak with a hood.

De Flotte nudged me with his elbow, and whispered, —

"Do you know Fialin?"

I answered, —

"No."

"Have you seen him?

"No."

"Do you wish to see him?"

"No."

"Look at him."

I looked at him.

This man in truth was passing before us. It was he who preceded the group of officers. He came out of the Bank. Had he been there to effect a new forced loan? The people who were at the doors looked at him with curiosity, and without anger. His entire bearing was insolent. He turned from time to time to say a word to one of his followers. This little cavalcade "pawed the ground" in the mist and in the mud. Fialin had the arrogant air of a man who caracoles before a crime. He gazed at the passers-by with a haughty look. His horse was very handsome, and, poor beast, seemed very proud. Fialin was smiling. He had in his hand the whip that his face deserved.

He passed by. I never saw the man except on this occasion.

De Flotte and Bancel did not leave me until they had seen me get into my vehicle. My true-hearted coachman was waiting for me in the Rue de la Vrillière. He brought me back to No 15, Rue Richelieu.

CHAPTER XI.

THE BARRICADE OF THE RUE MESLAY

The first barricade of the Rue Saint Martin was erected at the junction of the Rue Meslay. A large cart was overturned, placed across the street, and the roadway was unpaved; some flag-stones of the footway were also torn up. This barricade, the advanced work of defence of the whole revolted street, could only form a temporary obstacle. No portion of the piled-up stones was higher than a man. In a good third of the barricade the stones did not reach above the knee. “It will at all events be good enough to get killed in,” said a little street Arab who was rolling numerous flag-stones to the barricade. A hundred combatants took up their position behind it. Towards nine o’clock the movements of the troops gave warning of the attack. The head of the column of the Marulaz Brigade occupied the corner of the street on the side of the boulevard. A piece of artillery, raking the whole of the street, was placed in position before the Porte Saint Martin. For some time both sides gazed on each other in that moody silence which precedes an encounter; the troops regarding the barricade bristling with guns, the barricade regarding the gaping cannon. After a while the order for a general attack was given. The firing commenced. The first shot passed above the barricade, and struck a woman who was passing some twenty paces in the rear, full in the breast. She fell, ripped open. The fire became brisk without doing much injury to the barricade. The cannon was too near; the bullets flew too high.

The combatants, who had not yet lost a man, received each bullet with a cry of “Long live the Republic!” but without firing. They possessed few cartridges, and they husbanded them. Suddenly the 49th regiment advanced in close column order.

The barricade fired.

The smoke filled the street; when it cleared away, there could be seen a dozen men on the ground, and the soldiers falling back in disorder by the side of the houses. The leader of the barricade shouted, “They are falling back. Cease firing! Let us not waste a ball.”

The street remained for some time deserted. The cannon recommenced fining. A shot came in every two minutes, but always badly aimed. A man with a fowling-piece came up to the leader of the barricade, and said to him, “Let us dismount that cannon. Let us kill the gunners.”

“Why!” said the chief, smiling, “they are doing us no harm, let us do none to them.”

Nevertheless the sound of the bugle could be distinctly heard on the other side of the block of houses which concealed the troops echelloned on the Square of Saint Martin, and it was manifest that a second attack was being prepared.

This attack would naturally be furious, desperate, and stubborn.

It was also evident that, if this barricade were carried, the entire street would be scoured. The other barricades were still weaker than the first, and more feebly defended. The “middle class” had given their guns, and had re-entered their houses. They lent their street, that was all.

It was therefore necessary to hold the advanced barricade as long as possible. But what was to be done, and how was the resistance to be maintained? They had scarcely two shots per man left.

An unexpected source of supply arrived.

A young man, I can name him, for he is dead — Pierre Tissié, who was a workman, and who also was a poet, had worked during a portion of the morning at the barricades, and at the moment when the firing began he went away, stating as his reason that they would not give him a gun. In the barricade they had said, “There is one who is afraid.”

Pierre Tissié was not afraid, as we shall see later on.

He left the barricade.

Pierre Tissié had only his knife with him, a Catalan knife; he opened it at all hazards, he held it in his hand, and went on straight before him.

As he came out of the Rue Saint Sauveur, he saw at the corner of a little lonely street, in which all the windows were closed, a soldier of the line standing sentry, posted there doubtlessly by the main guard at a little distance.

This soldier was at the halt with his gun to his shoulder ready to fire.

He heard the step of Pierre Tissié, and cried out, —

“Who goes there?”

“Death!” answered Pierre Tissié.

The soldier fired, and missed Pierre Tissié, who sprang on him, and struck him down with a blow of his knife.

The soldier fell, and blood spurted out of his mouth.

“I did not know I should speak so truly,” muttered Pierre Tissié.

And he added, “Now for the ambulance!”

He took the soldier on his back, picked up the gun which had fallen to the ground, and came back to the barricade. “I bring you a wounded man,” said he.

“A dead man,” they exclaimed.

In truth the soldier had just expired.

“Infamous Bonaparte!” said Tissié. “Poor red breeches! All the same, I have got a gun.”

They emptied the soldier’s pouch and knapsack. They divided the cartridges. There were 150 of them. There were also two gold pieces of ten francs, two days’ pay since the 2d of December. These were thrown on the ground, no one would take them.

They distributed the cartridges with shouts of “Long live the Republic!”

Meanwhile the attacking party had placed a mortar in position by the side of the cannon.

The distribution of the cartridges was hardly ended when the infantry appeared, and charged upon the barricade with the bayonet. This second assault, as had been foreseen, was violent and desperate. It was repulsed. Twice the soldiers returned to the charge, and twice they fell back, leaving the street strewn with dead. In the interval between the assaults, a shell had pierced and dismantled the barricade, and the cannon began to fire grape-shot.

The situation was hopeless; the cartridges were exhausted. Some began to throw down their guns and go away. The only means of escape was by the Rue Saint Sauveur, and to reach the corner of the Rue Saint Sauveur it was necessary to get over the lower part of the barricade, which left nearly the whole of the fugitives unprotected. There was a perfect rain of musketry and grape-shot. Three or four were killed there, one, like Baudin, by a ball in his eye. The leader of the barricade suddenly noticed that he was alone with Pierre Tissié, and a boy of fourteen years old, the same who had rolled so many stones for the barricade. A third attack was pending, and the soldiers began to advance by the side of the houses.

“Let us go,” said the leader of the barricade.

“I shall remain,” said Pierre Tissié.

“And I also,” said the boy.

And the boy added, —

“I have neither father nor mother. As well this as anything else.”

The leader fired his last shot, and retired like the others over the lower part of the barricade. A volley knocked off his hat. He stooped down and picked it up again. The soldiers were not more than twenty-five paces distant.

He shouted to the two who remained, —

“Come along!”

“No,” said Pierre Tissié.

“No,” said the boy.

A few moments afterwards the soldiers scaled the barricade already half in ruins.

Pierre Tissié and the boy were killed with bayonet thrusts.

Some twenty muskets were abandoned in this barricade.

It must not be forgotten that this has been written in exile, and that to name a hero was to condemn him to exile.

CHAPTER XII.

THE BARRICADE OF THE MAIRIE OF THE FIFTH ARRONDISSEMENT

National Guards in uniform filled the courtyard of the Mairie of the Fifth Arrondissement. Others came in every moment. An ex-drummer of the Garde Mobile had taken a drum from a lower room at the side of the guard-room, and had beaten the call to arms in the surrounding streets. Towards nine o'clock a group of fourteen or fifteen young men, most of whom were in white blouses, entered the Mairie, shouting, "Long live the Republic!" They were armed with guns. The National Guard received them with shouts of "Down with Louis Bonaparte!" They fraternized in the courtyard. Suddenly there was a movement. It was caused by the arrival of the Representatives Doutre and Pelletier.

"What is to be done?" shouted the crowd.

"Barricades," said Pelletier.

They unharnessed the horses, which the carter led away, and they turned the cart round without upsetting it across the wide roadway of the faubourg. The barricade was completed in a moment. A truck came up. They took it and stood it against the wheels of the cart, just as a screen is placed before a fireplace.

The remainder was made up of casks and paving-stones. Thanks to the flour-cart the barricade was lofty, and reached to the first story of the houses. It intersected the faubourg at the corner of the little Rue Saint Jean. A narrow entrance had been contrived at the barricade at the corner of the street.

"One barricade is not sufficient," said Doutre, "we must place the Mairie between two barriers, so as to be able to defend both sides at the same time."

They constructed a second barricade, facing the summit of the faubourg. This one was low and weakly built, being composed only of planks and of paving-stones. There was about a hundred paces distance between the two barricades.

There were three hundred men in this space. Only one hundred had guns.

The majority had only one cartridge.

The firing began about ten o’clock. Two companies of the line appeared and fired several volleys. The attack was only a feint. The barricade replied, and made the mistake of foolishly exhausting its ammunition. The troops retired. Then the attack began in earnest. Some Chasseurs de Vincennes emerged from the corner of the boulevard.

Following out the African mode of warfare, they glided along the side of the walls, and then, with a run, they threw themselves upon the barricade.

No more ammunition in the barricade. No quarter to be expected.

Those who had no more powder or balls threw down their guns. Some wished to reoccupy their position in the Mairie, but it was impossible for them to maintain any defence there, the Mairie being open and commanded from every side; they scaled the walls and scattered themselves about in the neighboring houses; others escaped by the narrow passage of the boulevard which led into the Rue Saint Jean; most of the combatants reached the opposite side of the boulevard, while those who had a cartridge left fired a last volley upon the troops from the height of the paving-stones. Then they awaited their death. All were killed.

One of those who succeeded in slipping into the Rue Saint Jean, where moreover they ran the gauntlet of a volley from their assailants, was M.H. Coste, Editor of the *Evénement* and of the *Avénement du Peuple*.

M. Coste had been a captain in the Garde Mobile. At a bend in the street, which placed him out of reach of the balls, M. Conte noticed in front of him the drummer of the Garde Mobile, who, like him, had escaped by the Rue Saint Jean, and who was profiting by the loneliness of the street to get rid of his drum.

“Keep your drum,” cried he to him.

“For what purpose?”

“To beat the call to arms.”

“Where?”

“At Batignolles.”

“I will keep it,” said the drummer.

These two men came out from the jaws of death, and at once consented to re-enter them.

But how should they cross all Paris with this drum? The first patrol which met them would shoot them. A porter of an adjoining house, who noticed their predicament, gave them a packing-cloth. They enveloped the drum in it, and reached Batignolles by the lonely streets which skirt the walls.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BARRICADE OF THE RUE THEVENOT

Georges Biscarrat was the man who had given the signal for the looting in the Rue de l’Echelle.

I had known Georges Biscarrat ever since June, 1848. He had taken part in that disastrous insurrection. I had had an opportunity of being useful to him. He had been captured, and was kneeling before the firing-party; I interfered, and I saved his life, together with that of some others, M., D., D., B., and that brave-hearted architect Rolland, who when an exile, later on, so ably restored the Brussels Palace of Justice.

This took place on the 24th June, 1848, in the underground floor of No. 93, Boulevard Beaumarchais, a house then in course of construction.

Georges Biscarrat became attached to me. It appeared that he was the nephew of one of the oldest and best friends of my childhood, Félix Biscarrat, who died in 1828. Georges Biscarrat came to see me from time to time, and on occasions he asked my advice or gave me information.

Wishing to preserve him from evil influences, I had given him, and he had accepted, this guiding maxim, “No insurrection except for Duty and for Right.”

What was this hooting in the Rue de l’Echelle? Let us relate the incident.

On the 2d of December, Bonaparte had made an attempt to go out. He had ventured to go and look at Paris. Paris does not like being looked at by certain eyes; it considers it an insult, and it resents an insult more than a wound. It submits to assassination, but not to the leering gaze of the assassin. It took offence at Louis Bonaparte.

At nine o’clock in the morning, at the moment when the Courbevoie garrison was descending upon Paris, the placards of the *coup d’état* being still fresh upon the walls, Louis Bonaparte had left the Elysée, had crossed the Place de la Concorde, the Garden of the Tuileries, and the railed courtyard of the Carrousel, and had been seen to go out, by the gate of the Rue de l’Echelle. A crowd assembled at once. Louis Bonaparte was in a general’s uniform; his uncle, the ex-King Jérôme, accompanied him, together with Flahaut, who kept in the near. Jérôme wore the full uniform of a Marshal of France, with a hat with a white feather; Louis Bonaparte’s horse was a head before Jérôme’s horse. Louis Bonaparte was gloomy, Jérôme attentive, Flahaut beaming. Flahaut had his hat on one side. There was a strong escort of Lancers. Edgar Ney followed. Bonaparte intended to go as far as the Hôtel de Ville. Georges Biscarrat was there. The street was unpaved, the road was being macadamized; he mounted on a heap of stones, and shouted, “Down with the Dictator! Down with the Praetorians!” The soldiers looked at him with bewilderment, and the crowd with astonishment. Georges Biscarrat (he told me so himself) felt that this cry was too erudite, and that it would not be understood, so he shouted, “Down with Bonaparte! Down with the Lancers!”

The effect of this shout was electrical. “Down with Bonaparte! Down with the Lancers!” cried the people, and the whole street became stormy and turbulent. “Down with Bonaparte!” The outcry resembled the beginning of an execution; Bonaparte made a sudden movement to the right, turned back, and re-entered the courtyard of the Louvre.

Georges Biscarrat felt it necessary to complete his shout by a barricade.

He said to the bookseller, Benoist Mouilhe, who had just opened his shop, “Shouting is good, action is better.” He returned to his house in the Rue du Vert Bois, put on a blouse and a workman’s cap, and went down into the dark streets. Before the end of the day he had made arrangements with four associations — the gas-fitters, the last-makers, the shawl-makers, and the hatters.

In this manner he spent the day of the 2d of December.

The day of the 3d was occupied in goings and comings “almost useless.” So Biscarrat told Versigny, and he added, “However I have succeeded in this much, that the placards of the *coup d’état* have been everywhere torn down, so much so that in order to render the tearing down more difficult the police have ultimately posted them in the public conveniences — their proper place.”

On Thursday, the 4th, early in the morning, Georges Biscarrat went to Ledouble’s restaurant, where four Representatives of the People usually took their meals, Brives, Bertlhelon, Antoine Bard, and Viguier, nicknamed “Father Viguier.” All four were there. Viguier related what we had done on the preceding evening, and shared my opinion that the closing catastrophe should be hurried on, that the Crime should be precipitated into the abyss which befitted it. Biscarrat came in. The Representatives did not know hire, and stared at him. “Who are you?” asked one of them. Before he could answer, Dr. Petit entered, unfolded a paper, and said, —

“Does any one know Victor Hugo’s handwriting?”

“I do,” said Biscarrat. He looked at the paper. It was my proclamation to the army. “This must be printed,” said Petit. “I will undertake it,” said Biscarrat. Antoine Bard asked him, “Do you know Victor Hugo?” “He saved my life,” answered Biscarrat. The Representatives shook hands with him.

Guilgot arrived. Then Versigny. Versigny knew Biscarrat. He had seen him at my house. Versigny said, “Take care what you do. There is a man outside the door.” “It is a shawl-maker,” said Biscarrat. “He has come with me. He is following me.” “But,” resumed Versigny, “he is wearing a blouse, beneath which he has a handkerchief. He seems to be hiding this, and he has something in the handkerchief.”

“Sugar-plums,” said Biscarrat.

They were cartridges.

Versigny and Biscarrat went to the office of the *Siècle*; at the *Siècle* thirty workmen, at the risk of being shot, offered to print my Proclamation. Biscarrat left it with them, and said to Versigny, “Now I want my barricade.”

The shawl-maker walked behind them. Versigny and Biscarrat turned their steps towards the top of the Saint Denis quarter. When they drew near to she Porte Saint Denis they heard the hum of many voices. Biscarrat laughed and said to Versigny, “Saint Denis is growing angry, matters are improving.” Biscarrat recruited forty combatants on the way, amongst whom was Moulin, head of the association of leather-dressers. Chapuis, sergeant-major of the National Guard, brought them four muskets and ten swords. “Do you know where there are any more?” asked Biscarrat. “Yes, at the Saint Sauveur Baths.” They went there, and found forty muskets. They gave them swords and cartridge-pouches. Gentlemen well dressed, brought tin boxes containing powder and balls. Women, brave and light-hearted, manufactured cartridges. At the first door adjoining the Rue du Hasard-Saint-Sauveur they requisitioned iron bars and hammers from a large courtyard belonging to a locksmith. Having the arms, they had the men. They speedily numbered a hundred. They began to tear up the pavements. It was half-past ten. “Quick! quick!” cried Georges Biscarrat, “the barricade of my dreams!” It was in the Rue Thévenot. The barrier was constructed high and formidable. To abridge. At eleven o’clock Georges Biscarrat had completed his barricade. At noon he was killed there.

CHAPTER XIV.

OSSIAN AND SCIPIO

Arrests grew more numerous.

Towards noon a Commissary of Police, named Boudrot, appeared at the divan of the Rue Lepelletier. He was accompanied by the police agent Delahodde. Delahodde was that traitorous socialist writer, who, upon being unmasked, had passed from the Secret Police to the Public Police Service. I knew him, and I record this incident. In 1832 he was a master in the school at which were my two sons, then boys, and he had addressed poetry to me. At the same time he was acting the spy upon me. The Lepelletier divan was the place of meeting of a large number of Republican journalists. Delahodde knew them all. A detachment of the Republican Guard occupied the entrances to the café. Then ensued an inspection of all the ordinary customers, Delahodde walking first, with the Commissary behind him. Two Municipal Guards followed them. From time to time Delahodde looked round and said, “Lay hold of this man.” In this manner some score of writers were arrested, among whom were Hennett de Kesler. On the preceding evening Kesler had been on the Saint Antoine barricade. Kesler said to Delahodde, “You are a miserable wretch.” “And you are an ungrateful fellow,” replied Delahodde; “*I am saving your life*.” Curious words; for it is difficult to believe that Delahodde was in the secret of what was to happen on the fatal day of the Fourth.

At the head-quarters of the Committee encouraging information was forwarded to us from every side. Testelin, the Representative of Lille, is not only a learned man, but a brave man. On the morning of the 3d he had reached, shortly after me, the Saint Antoine barricade, where Baudin had just been killed. All was at an end in that direction. Testelin was accompanied by Charles Gambon, another dauntless man. The two Representatives wandered through the agitated and dark streets, little followed, in no way understood, seeking a ferment of insurgents, and only finding a swarming of the curious. Testelin, nevertheless, having come to the Committee, informed us of the following: — At the corner of a street of the Faubourg Saint Antoine Gambon and himself had noticed a crowd. They had gone up to it. This crowd was reading a bill placarded on a wall. It was the Appeal to Arms signed “Victor Hugo.” Testelin asked Gambon, “Have you a pencil?” “Yes,” answered Gambon. Testelin took the pencil, went up to the placard, and wrote his name beneath mine, then he gave the pencil to Gambon, who in turn wrote his name beneath that of Testelin. Upon this the crowd shouted, “Bravo! these are true-hearted men!” “Shout ‘Long live the Republic!’” cried Testelin. All shouted “Long live the Republic!” “And from above, from the open windows,” added Gambon, “women clapped their hands.”

“The little hands of women applauding are a good sign,” said Michel de Bourges.

As has been seen, and we cannot lay too much stress upon the fact, what the Committee of Resistance wished was to prevent the shedding of blood as much as possible. To construct barricades, to let them be destroyed, and to reconstruct them at other points, to avoid the army, and to wear it out, to wage in Paris the war of the desert, always retreating, never yielding, to take time for an ally, to add days to days; on the one hand to give the people time to understand and to rise, on the other, to conquer the *coup d’état* by the weariness of the army; such was the plan discussed and adopted.

The order was accordingly given that the barricades should be but slightly defended.

We repeated in every possible form to the combatants, —

“Shed as little blood as possible! Spare the blood of the soldiers and husband your own.”

Nevertheless, the struggle once begun, it became impossible in many instances, during certain excited hours of fighting, to moderate their ardor. Several barricades were obstinately defended, particularly those in the Rue Rambuteau, in the Rue Montorgueil, and in the Rue Neuve Saint Eustache.

These barricades were commanded by daring leaders.

Here, for the sake of history, we will record a few of these brave men fighting outlines who appeared and disappeared in the smoke of the combat. Radoux, an architect, Deluc, Mallarmet, Félix Bony, Luneau, an ex-Captain of the Republican Guard, Camille Berru, editor of the *Avénement*, gay, warmhearted, and dauntless, and that young Eugène Millelot, who was destined to be condemned at Cayenne to receive 200 lashes, and to expire at the twenty-third stroke, before the very eyes of his father and brother, proscribed and convicts like himself.

The barricade of the Rue Aumaire was amongst those which were not carried without resistance. Although raised in haste, it was fairly constructed. Fifteen or sixteen resolute men defended it; two were killed.

The barricade was carried with the bayonet by a battalion of the 16th of the line. This battalion, hurled on the barricade at the double, was received by a brisk fusillade; several soldiers were wounded.

The first who fell in the soldiers’ ranks was an officer. He was a young man of twenty-five, lieutenant of the first company, named Ossian Dumas; two balls broke both of his legs as though by a single blow.

At that time there were in the army two brothers of the name of Dumas, Ossian and Scipio. Scipio was the elder. They were near relatives of the Representative, Madier de Montjau.

These two brothers belonged to a poor but honored family. The elder had been educated at the Polytechnic School, the other at the School of Saint Cyr.

Scipio was four years older than his brother. According to that splendid and mysterious law of ascent, which the French Revolution has created, and which, so to speak, has placed a ladder in the centre of a society hitherto caste-bound and inaccessible, Scipio Dumas’ family had imposed upon themselves the most severe privations in order to develop his intellect and secure his future. His relations, with the touching heroism of the poor of the present era, denied themselves bread to afford him knowledge. In this manner he attained to the Polytechnic School, where he quickly became one of the best pupils.

Having concluded his studies, he was appointed an officer in the artillery, and sent to Metz. It then became his turn to help the boy who had to mount after him. He held out his hand to his younger brother. He economized the modest pay of an artillery lieutenant, and, thanks to him, Ossian became an officer like Scipio. While Scipio, detained by duties belonging to his position, remained at Metz, Ossian was incorporated in an infantry regiment, and went to Africa. There he saw his first service.

Scipio and Ossian were Republicans. In October, 1851, the 16th of the line, in which Ossian was serving, was summoned to Paris. It was one of the regiments chosen by the ill-omened hand of Louis Bonaparte, and on which the *coup d’état* counted.

The 2d of December arrived.

Lieutenant Ossian Dumas obeyed, like nearly all his comrades, the order to take up arms; but every one round him could notice his gloomy attitude.

The day of the 3d was spent in marches and counter-marches. On the 4th the combat began. The 16th, which formed part of the Herbillon Brigade, was told off to capture the barricades of the Rues Beaubourg, Trausnonain, and Aumaire. This battle-field was formidable; a perfect square of barricades had been raised there.

It was by the Rue Aumaire, and with the regiment of which Ossian formed part, that the military leaders resolved to begin action.

At the moment when the regiment, with arms loaded, was about to march upon the Rue Aumaire, Ossian Dumas went up to his captain, a brave and veteran officer, with whom he was a favorite, and declared that he would not march a step farther, that the deed of the 2d of December was a crime, that Louis Bonaparte was a traitor, that it was for them, soldiers, to maintain the oath which Bonaparte violated; and that, as for himself, he would not lend his sword to the butchery of the Republic.

A halt was made. The signal of attack was awaited; the two officers, the old captain and the young lieutenant, conversed in a low tone.

“And what do you want to do?” asked the captain.

“Break my sword.”

“You will be taken to Vincennes.”

“That is all the same to me.”

“Most certainly dismissed.”

“Possibly.”

“Perhaps shot.”

“I expect it.”

“But there is no longer any time; you should have resigned yesterday.”

“There is always time to avoid committing a crime.”

The captain, as may be seen, was simply one of those professional heroes, grown old in the leather stock, who know of no country but the flag, and no other law but military discipline. Iron arms and wooden heads. They are neither citizens nor men. They only recognize honor in the form of a general’s epaulets. It is of no use talking to them of political duties, of obedience to the laws, of the Constitution. What do they know about all this? What is a Constitution; what are the most holy laws, against three words which a corporal may murmur into the ear of a sentinel? Take a pair of scales, put in one side the Gospels, in the other the official instructions; now weigh them. The corporal turns the balance; the Deity kicks the beam.

God forms a portion of the order of the day of Saint Bartholomew. “Kill all. He will recognized his own.”

This is what the priests accept, and at times glorify.

Saint Bartholomew has been blessed by the Pope and decorated with the Catholic medal.

Meanwhile Ossian Dumas appeared determined. The captain made a last effort.

“You will ruin yourself,” said he.

“I shall save my honor.”

“It is precisely your honor that you are sacrificing.”

“Because I am going away?”

“To go away is to desert.”

This seemed to impress Ossian Dumas. The captain continued, —

“They are about to fight. In a few minutes the barricade will be attacked. Your comrades will fall, dead or wounded. You are a young officer — you have not yet been much under fire.”

“At all events,” warmly interrupted Ossian Dumas, “I shall not have fought against the Republic; they will not say I am a traitor.”

“No, but they will say that you are a coward.”

Ossian made no reply.

A moment afterwards the command was given to attack.

The regiment started at the double. The barricade fired.

Ossian Dumas was the first who fell.

He had not been able to bear that word “coward,” and he had remained in his place in the first rank.

They took him to the ambulance, and from thence to the hospital.

Let us at once state the conclusion of this touching incident.

Both of his legs were broken. The doctors thought that it would be necessary to amputate them both.

General Saint-Arnaud sent him the Cross of Honor.

As is known, Louis Bonaparte hastened to discharge his debt to his praetorian accomplices. After having massacred, the sword voted.

The combat was still smoking when the army was brought to the ballot-box.

The garrison of Paris voted “Yes.” It absolved itself.

With the rest of the army it was otherwise. Military honor was indignant, and roused the civic virtue. Notwithstanding the pressure which was exercised, although the regiments deposited their votes in the shakos of their colonels, the army voted “No” in many districts of France and Algeria.

The Polytechnic School voted “No” in a body. Nearly everywhere the artillery, of which the Polytechnic School is the cradle, voted to the same effect as the school.

Scipio Dumas, it may be remembered, was at Metz.

By some curious chance it happened that the feeling of the artillery, which everywhere else had pronounced against the *coup d’état*, hesitated at Metz, and seemed to lean towards Bonaparte.

Scipio Dumas, in presence of this indecision set an example. He voted in a loud voice, and with an open voting paper, “No.”

Then he sent in his resignation. At the same time that the Minister at Paris received the resignation of Scipio Dumas, Scipio Dumas at Metz, received his dismissal, signed by the Minister.

After Scipio Dumas’ vote, the same thought had come at the same time to both the Government and to the officer, to the Government that the officer was a dangerous man, and that they could no longer employ him, to the officer that the Government was an infamous one, and that he ought no longer to serve it.

The resignation and the dismissal crossed on the way. By this word “dismissal” must be understood the withdrawal of employment.

According to our existing military laws it is in this manner that they now “break” an officer. Withdrawal of employment, that is to say, no more service, no more pay; poverty.

Simultaneously with his dismissal, Scipio Dumas learnt the news of the attack on the barricade of the Rue Aumaire, and that his brother had both his legs broken. In the fever of events he had been a week without news of Ossian. Scipio had confined himself to writing to his brother to inform him of his vote and of his dismissal, and to induce him to do likewise.

His brother wounded! His brother at the Val-de. Grâce! He left immediately for Paris.

He hastened to the hospital. They took him to Ossian’s bedside. The poor young fellow had had both his legs amputated on the preceding day.

At the moment when Scipio, stunned, appeared at his bedside, Ossian held in his hand the cross which General Saint-Arnaud had just sent him.

The wounded man turned towards the aide-de-camp who had brought it, and said to him, —

“I will not have this cross. On my breast it would be stained with the blood of the Republic.”

And perceiving his brother, who had just entered, he held out the cross to him, exclaiming, —

“You take it. You have voted “No,” and you have broken your sword! It is you who have deserved it!”

Died in exile in Guernsey. See the “Pendant l’Exil,” under the heading *Actes et Paroles*, vol. ii.

Died in exile at Termonde.

Pro Hugonotorum strage. Medal struck at Rome in 1572.

CHAPTER XV.

THE QUESTION PRESENTS ITSELF

It was one o’clock in the afternoon.

Bonaparte had again become gloomy.

The gleams of sunshine on such countenances as these last very short time.

He had gone back to his private room, had seated himself before the fire, with his feet on the hobs, motionless, and no one any longer approached him except Roquet.

What was he thinking of?

The twistings of the viper cannot be foreseen.

What this man achieved on this infamous day I have told at length in another book. See “Napoleon the Little.”

From time to time Roquet entered and informed him of what was going on. Bonaparte listened in silence, deep in thought, marble in which a torrent of lava boiled.

He received at the Elysée the same news that we received in the Rue Richelieu; bad for him, good for us. In one of the regiments which had just voted, there were 170 “Noes:” This regiment has since been dissolved, and scattered abroad in the African army.

They had counted on the 14th of the line which had fired on the people in February. The Colonel of the 14th of the line had refused to recommence; he had just broken his sword.

Our appeal had ended by being heard. Decidedly, as we have seen, Paris was rising. The fall of Bonaparte seemed to be foreshadowed. Two Representatives, Fabvier and Crestin, met in the Rue Royale, and Crestin, pointing to the Palace of the Assembly, said to Fabvier, “We shall be there to-morrow.”

One noteworthy incident. Mazes became eccentric, the prison unbent itself; the interior experienced an undefinable reverberation from the outside. The warders, who the preceding evening had been insolent to the Representatives when going for their exercise in the courtyard, now saluted them to the ground. That very morning of Thursday, the 4th, the governor of the prison had paid a visit to the prisoners, and had said to them, “It is not my fault.” He brought them books and writing-paper, a thing which up to that time he had refused. The Representative Valentin was in solitary confinement; on the morning of the 4th his warder suddenly became amiable, and offered to obtain for him news from outside, through his wife, who, he said, had been a servant in General Leflô’s household. These were significant signs. When the jailer smiles it means that the jail is half opening.

We may add, what is not a contradiction, that at the same time the garrison at Mazas was being increased. 1200 more men were marched in, in detachments of 100 men each, spacing out their arrivals in “little doses” as an eye-witness remarked to us. Later on 400 men. 100 litres of brandy were distributed to them. One litre for every sixteen men. The prisoners could hear the movement of artillery round the prison.

The agitation spread to the most peaceable quarters. But the centre of Paris was above all threatening. The centre of Paris is a labyrinth of streets which appears to be made for the labyrinth of riots. The Ligue, the Fronde, the Revolution — we must unceasingly recall these useful facts — the 14th of July, the 10th of August, 1792, 1830, 1848, have come out from thence. These brave old streets were awakened. At eleven o’clock in the morning from Notre Dame to the Porte Saint Martin there were seventy-seven barricades. Three of them, one in the Rue Maubuée, another in the Rue Bertin-Poirée, another in the Rue Guérin-Boisseau, attained the height of the second stories; the barricade of the Porte Saint Denis was almost as bristling and as formidable as the barrier of the Faubourg Saint Antoine in June, 1848. The handful of the Representatives of the People had swooped down like a shower of sparks on these famous and inflammable crossroads. The beginning of the fire. The fire had caught. The old central market quarter, that city which is contained in the city, shouted, “Down with Bonaparte!” They hooted the police, they hissed the troops. Some regiments seemed stupefied. They cried, “Throw up your butt ends in the air!” From the windows above, women encouraged the construction of the barricades. There was powder there, there were muskets. Now, we were no longer alone. We saw rising up in the gloom behind us the enormous head of the people. Hope at the present time was on our side. The oscillation of uncertainty had at length become steady, and we were, I repeat, almost perfectly confident.

There had been a moment when, owing to the good news pouring in upon us, this confidence had become so great that we who had staked our lives on this great contest, seized with an irresistible joy in the presence of a success becoming hourly more certain, had risen from our seats, and had embraced each other. Michel de Bourges was particularly angered against Bonaparte, for he had believed his word, and had even gone so far as to say, "He is my man." Of the four of us, he was the most indignant. A gloomy flash of victory shone in him. He struck the table with his fist, and exclaimed, "Oh! the miserable wretch! To-morrow—" and he struck the table a second time, "to-morrow his head shall fall in the Place de Grève before the Hôtel de Ville."

I looked at him.

"No," said I, "this man's head shall not fall."

"What do you mean?"

"I do not wish it."

"Why?"

"Because," said I, "if after such a crime we allow Louis Bonaparte to live we shall abolish the penalty of death."

This generous Michel de Bourges remained thoughtful for a moment, then he pressed my hand.

Crime is an opportunity, and always gives us a choice, and it is better to extract from it progress than punishment. Michel de Bourges realized this.

Moreover this incident shows to what a pitch our hopes had been raised.

Appearances were on our side, actual facts not so. Saint-Arnaud had his orders. We shall see them.

Strange incidents took place.

Towards noon a general, deep in thought, was on horseback in the Place de la Madeleine, at the head of his wavering troops. He hesitated.

A carriage stopped, a woman stepped out and conversed in a low tone with the general. The crowd could see her. The Representative Raymond, who lived at No 4, Place de la Madeleine, saw her from his window. This woman was Madame K. The general stooping down on his horse, listened, and finally made the dejected gesture of a vanquished man. Madame K. got back into her carriage. This man, they said, loved that woman. She could, according to the side of her beauty which fascinated her victim, inspire either heroism or crime. This strange beauty was compounded of the whiteness of an angel, combined with the look of a spectre.

It was the look which conquered.

This man no longer hesitated. He entered gloomily into the enterprise.

From twelve to two o'clock there was in this enormous city given over to the unknown an indescribable and fierce expectation. All was calm and awe-striking. The regiments and the limbered batteries quitted the faubourg and stationed themselves noiselessly around the boulevards. Not a cry in the ranks of the soldiery. An eye-witness said, "The soldiers march with quite a jaunty air." On the Quai de la Ferronnerie, heaped up with regiments ever since the morning of the 2d of December, there now only remained a post of Municipal Guards. Everything ebbed back to the centre, the people as well as the army; the silence of the army had ultimately spread to the people. They watched each other.

Each soldier had three days' provisions and six packets of cartridges.

It has since transpired that at this moment 10,000 francs were daily spent in brandy for each brigade.

Towards one o'clock, Magnan went to the Hôtel de Ville, had the reserve limbered under his own eyes, and did not leave until all the batteries were ready to march.

Certain suspicious preparations grew more numerous. Towards noon the State workmen and the hospital corps had established a species of huge ambulance at No. 2, Faubourg Montmartre. A great heap of litters was piled up there. "What is all this for?" asked the crowd.

Dr. Deville, who had attended Espinasse when he had been wounded, noticed him on the boulevard, and asked him, "Up to what point are you going?"

Espinasse's answer is historical.

He replied, "To the end."

At two o'clock five brigades, those of Cotte, Bourgon, Canrobert, Dulac, and Reybell, five batteries of artillery, 16,400 men, infantry and cavalry, lancers, cuirassiers, grenadiers, gunners, were echelloned without any ostensible reason between the Rue de la Paix and the Faubourg Poissonnière. Pieces of cannon were pointed at the entrance of every street; there were eleven in position on the Boulevard Poissonnière alone. The foot soldiers had their guns to their shoulders, the officers their swords drawn. What did all this mean? It was a curious sight, well worth the trouble of seeing, and on both sides of the pavements, on all the thresholds of the shops, from all the stories of the houses, an astonished, ironical, and confiding crowd looked on.

Little by little, nevertheless, this confidence diminished, and irony gave place to astonishment; astonishment changed to stupor. Those who have passed through that extraordinary minute will not forget it. It was evident that there was something underlying all this. But what? Profound obscurity. Can one imagine Paris in a cellar? People felt as though they were beneath a low ceiling. They seemed to be walled up in the unexpected and the unknown. They seemed to perceive some mysterious will in the background. But after all they were strong; they were the Republic, they were Paris; what was there to fear! Nothing. And they cried, “Down with Bonaparte!” The troops continued to keep silence, but the swords remained outside their scabbards, and the lighted matches of the cannon smoldered at the corners of the streets. The cloud grew blacker every minute, heavier and more silent. This thickening of the darkness was tragical. One felt the coming crash of a catastrophe, and the presence of a villain; snake-like treason writhed during this night, and none can foresee where the downward slide of a terrible design will stop when events are on a steep incline.

What was coming out of this thick darkness?

16,410 men, the figures taken from the Ministry of War.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE MASSACRE

Suddenly a window was opened.

Upon Hell.

Dante, had he leaned over the summit of the shadow, would have been able to see the eighth circle of his poem; the funereal Boulevard Montmartre.

Paris, a prey to Bonaparte; a monstrous spectacle. The gloomy armed men massed together on this boulevard felt an appalling spirit enter into them; they ceased to be themselves, and became demons.

There was no longer a single French soldier, but a host of indefinable phantoms, carrying out a horrible task, as though in the glimmering light of a vision.

There was no longer a flag, there was no longer law, there was no longer humanity, there was no longer a country, there was no longer France; they began to assassinate.

The Schinderhannes division, the brigades of Mandrin, Cartouche, Poulailler, Trestaillon, and Tropmann appeared in the gloom, shooting down and massacring.

No; we do not attribute to the French army what took place during this mournful eclipse of honor.

There have been massacres in history, abominable ones assuredly, but they have possessed some show of reason; Saint Bartholomew and the Dragonnades are explained by religion, the Sicilian Vespers and the butcheries of September are explained by patriotism; they crush the enemy or annihilate the foreigner; these are crimes for a good cause; but the carnage of the Boulevard Montmartre is a crime without an ostensible reason.

The reason exists, however. It is hideous.

Let us give it.

Two things stand erect in a State, the Law and the People.

A man murders the Law. He feels the punishment approaching, there only remains one thing for him to do, to murder the People. He murders the People.

The Second of December was the Risk, the Fourth was the Certainty.

Against the indignation which arose they opposed the Terror.

The Fury, Justice, halted petrified before the Fury, Extermination.

Against Erinnyes they set up Medusa.

To put Nemesis to flight, what a terrifying triumph!

To Louis Napoleon pertains this glory, which is the summit of his shame.

Let us narrate it.

Let us narrate what History had never seen before.

The assassination of a people by a man.

Suddenly, at a given signal, a musket shot being fired, no matter where, no matter by whom, the shower of bullets poured upon the crowd. A shower of bullets is also a crowd; it is death scattered broadcast. It does not know whither it goes, nor what it does; it kills and passes on.

But at the same time it has a species of soul; it is premeditated, it executes a will. This was an unprecedented moment. It seemed as though a handful of lightnings was falling upon the people. Nothing simpler. It formed a clear solution to the difficulty; the rain of lead overwhelmed the multitude. What are you doing there? Die! It is a crime to be passing by. Why are you in the street? Why do you cross the path of the Government? The Government is a cut-throat. They have announced a thing, they must certainly carry it out; what is begun must assuredly be achieved; as Society is being saved, the People must assuredly be exterminated.

Are there not social necessities? Is it not essential that Béville should have 87,000 francs a year and Fleury 95,000 francs? Is it not essential that the High Chaplain, Menjaud, Bishop of Nancy, should have 342 francs a day, and that Bassano and Cambacérès should each have 383 francs a day, and Vaillant 468 francs, and Saint-Arnaud 822 francs? Is it not necessary that Louis Bonaparte should have 76,712 francs a day? Could one be Emperor for less?

In the twinkling of an eye there was a butchery on the boulevard a quarter of a league long. Eleven pieces of cannon wrecked the Sallandrouze carpet warehouse. The shot tore completely through twenty-eight houses. The baths of Jouvence were riddled. There was a massacre at Tortoni’s. A whole quarter of Paris was filled with an immense flying mass, and with a terrible cry. Everywhere sudden death. A man is expecting nothing. He falls. From whence does this come? From above, say the Bishops’ *Te Deum*; from below, says Truth.

From a lower place than the galleys, from a lower place than Hell.

It is the conception of a Caligula, carried out by a Papavoine.

Xavier Durrieu comes upon the boulevard. He states, —

“I have taken sixty steps, I have seen sixty corpses.”

And he draws back. To be in the street is a Crime, to be at home is a Crime. The butchers enter the houses and slaughter. In slaughter-house slang the soldiers cry, “Let us pole-axe the lot of them.”

Adde, a bookseller, of 17, Boulevard Poissonnière, is standing before his door; they kill him. At the same moment, for the field of murder is vast, at a considerable distance from there, at 5, Rue de Lancry, M. Thirion de Montauban, owner of the house, is at his door; they kill him. In the Rue Tiquetonne a child of seven years, named Boursier, is passing by; they kill him. Mdlle. Soulac, 196, Rue du Temple, opens her window; they kill her. At No. 97, in the same street, two women, Mesdames Vidal and Raboisson, sempstresses, are in their room; they kill them. Belval, a cabinet-maker, 10, Rue de la Lune, is at home; they kill him. Debaëcque, a merchant, 45, Rue du Sentier, is in his own house; Couvercelle, florist, 257, Rue Saint Denis, is in his own house; Labitte, a jeweller, 55, Boulevard Saint Martin, is in his own house; Monpelas, perfumer, 181, Rue Saint Martin, is in his own house; they kill Monpelas, Labitte, Couvercelle, and Debaëcque. They sabre at her own home, 240, Rue Saint Martin, a poor embroideress, Mdlle. Seguin, who not having sufficient money to pay for a doctor, died at the Beaujon hospital, on the 1st of January, 1852, on the same day that the Sibour *Te Deum* was chanted at Notre Dame. Another, a waistcoat-maker, Françoise Noël, was shot down at 20, Rue du Faubourg Montmartre, and died in the Charité. Another, Madame Ledaust, a working housekeeper, living at 76, Passage du Caire, was shot down before the Archbishop’s palace, and died at the Morgue. Passers-by, Mdlle. Gressier, living at 209, Faubourg Saint Martin; Madame Guilard, living at 77, Boulevard Saint Denis; Madame Gamier, living at 6, Boulevard Bonne Nouvelle, who had fallen, the first named beneath the volleys on the Boulevard Montmartre, the two others on the Boulevard Saint Denis, and who were still alive, attempted to rise, and became targets for the soldiers, bursting with laughter, and this time fell back again dead. Deeds of gallantry ware performed. Colonel Rochefort, who was probably created General for this, charged in the Rue do la Paix at the head of his Lancers a flock of nurses, who were put to flight.

Such was this indescribable enterprise. All the men who took part in it were instigated by hidden influences; all had something which urged them forward; Herbillon had Zaatcha behind him; Saint-Arnaud had Kabylia; Renault had the affair of the Saint-André and Saint Hippolyte villages; Espinasse, Rome and the storming of the 30th of June; Magnan, his debts.

Must we continue? We hesitate. Dr. Piquet, a man of seventy, was killed in his drawing-room by a ball in his stomach; the painter Jollivart, by a ball in the forehead, before his easel, his brains bespattered his painting. The English captain, William Jesse, narrowly escaped a ball which pierced the ceiling above his head; in the library adjoining the Magasins du Prophète, a father, mother, and two daughters were sabred. Lefilleul, another bookseller, was shot in his shop on the Boulevard Poissonnière; in the Rue Lepelletier, Boyer, a chemist, seated at his counter, was "spitted" by the Lancers. A captain, killing all before him, took by storm the house of the Grand Balcon. A servant was killed in the shop of Brandus. Reybell through the volleys said to Sax, "And I also am discoursing sweet music." The Café Leblond was given over to pillage. Billecoq's establishment was bombarded to such a degree that it had to be pulled down the next day. Before Jouvain's house lay a heap of corpses, amongst them an old man with his umbrella, and a young man with his eye-glass. The Hôtel de Castille, the Maison Dorée, the Petite Jeannette, the Café de Paris, the Café Anglais became for three hours the targets of the cannonade. Raquenault's house crumbled beneath the shells; the bullets demolished the Montmartre Bazaar.

None escaped. The guns and pistols were fired at close quarters.

New Year's-day was not far off, some shops were full of New Year's gifts. In the passage du Saumon, a child of thirteen, flying before the platoon-firing, hid himself in one of these shops, beneath a heap of toys. He was captured and killed. Those who killed him laughingly widened his wounds with their swords. A woman told me, "The cries of the poor little fellow could be heard all through the passage." Four men were shot before the same shop. The officer said to them, "This will teach you to loaf about." A fifth named Mailleret, who was left for dead, was carried the next day with eleven wounds to the Charité. There he died.

They fired into the cellars by the air-holes.

A workman, a currier, named Moulins, who had taken refuge in one of these shot-riddled cellars, saw through the cellar air-hole a passer-by, who had been wounded in the thigh by a bullet, sit down on the pavement with the death rattle in his throat, and lean against a shop. Some soldiers who heard this rattle ran up and finished off the wounded man with bayonet thrusts.

One brigade killed the passer-by from the Madeleine to the Opera, another from the Opera to the Gymmase; another from the Boulevard Bonne Nouvelle to the Porte Saint Denis; the 75th of the line having carried the barricade of the Porte Saint Denis, it was no longer a fight, it was a slaughter. The massacre radiated — a word horribly true — from the boulevard into all the streets. It was a devil-fish stretching out its feelers. Flight? Why? Concealment? To what purpose? Death ran after you quicker than you could fly. In the Rue Pagevin a soldier said to a passer-by, “What are you doing here?” “I am going home.” The soldier kills the passer-by. In the Rue des Marais they kill four young men in their own courtyard. Colonel Espinasse exclaimed, “After the bayonet, cannon!” Colonel Rochefort exclaimed, “Thrust, bleed, slash!” and he added, “It is an economy of powder and noise.” Before Barbedienne’s establishment an officer was showing his gun, an arm of considerable precision, admiringly to his comrades, and he said, “With this gun I can score magnificent shots between the eyes.” having said this, he aimed at random at some one, and succeeded. The carnage was frenzied. While the butchering under the orders of Carrelet filled the boulevard, the Bourgon brigade devastated the Temple, the Marulaz brigade devastated the Rue Rambuteau; the Renault division distinguished itself on the “other side of the water.” Renault was that general, who, at Mascara, had given his pistols to Charras. In 1848 he had said to Charras, “Europe must be revolutionized.” And Charras had said, “Not quite so fast!” Louis Bonaparte had made him a General of Division in July, 1851. The Rue aux Ours was especially devastated. Morny that evening said to Louis Bonaparte, “The 15th Light Infantry have scored a success. They have cleaned out the Rue aux Ours.”

At the corner of the Rue du Sentier an officer of Spahis, with his sword raised, cried out, “This is not the sort of thing! You do not understand at all. Fire on the women.” A woman was flying, she was with child, she falls, they deliver her by the means of the butt-ends of their muskets. Another, perfectly distracted, was turning the corner of a street. She was carrying a child. Two soldiers aimed at her. One said, “At the woman!” And he brought down the woman. The child rolled on the pavement. The other soldier said, “At the child!” And he killed the child.

A man of high scientific repute, Dr. Germain Sée, declares that in one house alone, the establishment of the Jouvence Baths, there were at six o’clock, beneath a shed in the courtyard, about eighty wounded, nearly all of whom (seventy, at least) were old men, women, and children. Dr. Sée was the first to attend to them.

In the Rue Mandar, there was, stated an eye-witness, “a rosary of corpses,” reaching as far as the Rue Neuve Saint Eustache. Before the house of Odier twenty-six corpses. Thirty before the hotel Montmorency. Fifty-two before the Variétés, of whom eleven were women. In the Rue Grange-Batelière there were three naked corpses. No. 19, Faubourg Montmartre, was full of dead and wounded.

A woman, flying and maddened, with dishevelled hair and her arms raised aloft, ran along the Rue Poissonnière, crying, “They kill! they kill! they kill! they kill! they kill!”

The soldiers wagered. “Bet you I bring down that fellow there.” In this manner Count Poninsky was killed whilst going into his own house, 52, Rue de la Paix.

I was anxious to know what I ought to do. Certain treasons, in order to be proved, need to be investigated. I went to the field of murder.

In such mental agony as this, from very excess of feeling one no longer thinks, or if one thinks, it is distractedly. One only longs for some end or other. The death of others instills in you so much horror that your own death becomes an object of desire; that is to say, if by dying, you would be in some degree useful! One calls to mind deaths which have put an end to angers and to revolts. One only retains this ambition, to be a useful corpse.

I walked along terribly thoughtful.

I went towards the boulevards; I saw there a furnace; I heard there a thunderstorm.

I saw Jules Simon coming up to me, who during these disastrous days bravely risked a precious life. He stopped me. “Where are you going?” he asked me. “You will be killed. What do you want?” “That very thing,” said I.

We shook hands.

I continued to go on.

I reached the boulevard; the scene was indescribable. I witnessed this crime, this butchery, this tragedy. I saw that reign of blind death, I saw the distracted victims fall around me in crowds. It is for this that I have signed myself in this book AN EYE-WITNESS.

Destiny entertains a purpose. It watches mysteriously over the future historian. It allows him to mingle with exterminations and carnages, but it does not permit him to die, because it wishes him to relate them.

In the midst of this inexpressible Pandemonium, Xavier Durrieu met me as I was crossing the bullet-swept boulevard. He said to me, “Ah, here you are. I have just met Madame D. She is looking for you.” Madame D. and Madame de la R., two noble and brave women, had promised Madame Victor Hugo, who was ill in bed, to ascertain where I was, and to give her some news of me. Madame D. had heroically ventured into this carnage. The following incident happened to her. She stopped before a heap of bodies, and had had the courage to manifest her indignation; at the cry of horror to which she gave vent, a cavalry soldier had run up behind her with a pistol in his hand, and had it not been for a quickly opened door through which she threw herself, and which saved her, she would have been killed.

It is well known that the total slaughter in this butchery is unrecorded. Bonaparte has kept these figures hidden in darkness. Such is the habit of those who commit massacres. They are scarcely likely to allow history to certify the number of the victims. These statistics are an obscure multitude which quickly lose themselves in the gloom. One of the two colonels of whom we have had a glimpse in pages 223-225 of this work, has stated that his regiment alone had killed “at least 2,500 persons.” This would be more than one person per soldier. We believe that this zealous colonel exaggerates. Crime sometimes boasts of its blackness.

Lireux, a writer, arrested in order to be shot, and who escaped by a miracle, declares that he saw “more than 800 corpses.”

Towards four o’clock the post-chaises which were in the courtyard of the Elysée were unhorsed and put up.

This extermination, which an English witness, Captain William Jesse, calls “a wanton fusillade,” lasted from two till five o’clock. During these three terrible hours, Louis Bonaparte carried out what he had been premeditating, and completed his work. Up to that time the poor little “middle-class” conscience was almost indulgent. Well, what of it? It was a game at Prince, a species of state swindling, a conjuring feat on a large scale; the sceptics and the knowing men said, “It is a good joke played upon those idiots.” Suddenly Louis Bonaparte grew uneasy and revealed all his policy. “Tell Saint-Arnaud to execute my orders.” Saint-Arnaud obeyed, the *coup d’état* acted according to its own code of laws, and from that appalling moment an immense torrent of blood began to flow across this crime.

They left the corpses lying on the pavements, wild-looking, livid, stupefied, with their pockets turned inside out. The military murderer is thus condemned to mount the villainous scale of guilt. In the morning an assassin, in the evening a thief.

When night came enthusiasm and joy reigned at the Elysée. These men triumphed. Conneau has ingeniously related the scene. The familiar spirits were delirious with joy. Fialin addressed Bonaparte in hail-fellow-well-met style. “You had better break yourself of that,” whispered Vieillard. In truth this carnage made Bonaparte Emperor. He was now “His Majesty.” They drank, they smoked like the soldiers on the boulevards; for having slaughtered throughout the day, they drank throughout the night; wine flowed upon the blood. At the Elysée they were amazed at the result. They were enraptured; they loudly expressed their admiration. “What a capital idea the Prince had had! How well the thing had been managed! This was much better than flying the country, by Dieppe, like D’Haussez; or by Membrolle, like Guernon-Ranville; or being captured, disguised as a footboy, and blacking the boots of Madame de Saint Fargeau, like poor Polignac!” “Guizot was no cleverer than Polignac,” exclaimed Persigny. Fleury turned to Morny: “Your theorists would not have succeeded in a *coup d’état*.” “That is true, they were not particularly vigorous,” answered Morny. He added, “And yet they were clever men, — Louis Philippe, Guizot, Thiers—” Louis Bonaparte, taking his cigarette from his lips, interrupted, “If such are clever men, I would rather be an ass—”

“A hyena in an ass’s skin,” says History.

No. 20, Cité Rodier.

Rue Caumartin. See pages 142, 145-148.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE APPOINTMENT MADE WITH THE WORKMEN’S SOCIETIES

What had become of our Committee during these tragic events, and what was it doing? It is necessary to relate what took place.

Let us go back a few hours.

At the moment when this strange butchery began, the seat of the Committee was still in the Rue Richelieu. I had gone back to it after the exploration which I had thought it proper to make at several of the quarters in insurrection, and I gave an account of what I had seen to my colleagues. Madier de Montjau, who also arrived from the barricades, added to my report details of what he had seen. For some time we heard terrible explosions, which appeared to be close by, and which mingled themselves with our conversation. Suddenly Versigny came in. He told us that horrible events were taking place on the Boulevards; that the meaning of the conflict could not yet be ascertained, but that they were cannonading, and firing volleys of musket-balls, and that the corpses bestrewed the pavement; that, according to all appearances, it was a massacre, — a sort of Saint Bartholomew improvised by the coup d’état; that they were ransacking the houses at a few steps from us, and that they were killing every one. The murderers were going from door to door, and were drawing near. He urged us to leave Grévy’s house without delay. It was manifest that the Insurrectionary Committee would be a “find” for the bayonets. We decided to leave, whereupon M. Dupont White, a man distinguished for his noble character and his talent, offered us a refuge at his house, 11, Rue Monthabor. We went out by the back-door of Grévy’s house, which led into 1, Rue Fontaine Molière, but leisurely, and two by two, Madier de Montjau with Versigny, Michel de Bourges with Carnot, myself arm-in-arm with Jules Favre. Jules Favre, dauntless and smiling as ever, wrapped a comforter over his mouth, and said, “I do not much mind being shot, but I do mind catching cold.”

Jules Favre and I reached the rear of Saint Roch, by the Rue des Moulins. The Rue Veuve Saint Roch was thronged with a mass of affrighted passers-by, who came from the Boulevards flying rather than walking. The men were talking in a loud voice, the women screaming. We could hear the cannon and the ear-piercing rattle of the musketry. All the shops were being shut. M. de Falloux, arm-in-arm with M. Albert de Rességuier, was striding down the Rue de Saint Roch and hurrying to the Rue Saint Honoré. The Rue Saint Honoré presented a scene of clamorous agitation. People were coming and going, stopping, questioning one another, running. The shopkeepers, at the threshold of their half-opened doors, asked the passers-by what was taking place, and were only answered by this cry, “Oh, my God!” People came out of their houses bareheaded and mingled with the crowd. A fine rain was falling. Not a carriage in the street. At the corner of the Rue Saint Roch and Rue Saint Honoré we heard voices behind us saying, “Victor Hugo is killed.”

“Not yet,” said Jules Favre, continuing to smile, and pressing my arm.

They had said the same thing on the preceding day to Esquiros and to Madier de Montjau. And this rumor, so agreeable to the Reactionaries, had even reached my two sons, prisoners in the Concièrgerie.

The stream of people driven back from the Boulevards and from the Rue Richelieu flowed towards the Rue de la Paix. We recognized there some of the Representatives of the Right who had been arrested on the 2d, and who were already released. M. Buffet, an ex-minister of M. Bonaparte, accompanied by numerous other members of the Assembly, was going towards the Palais Royal. As he passed close by us he pronounced the name of Louis Bonaparte in a tone of execration.

M. Buffet is a man of some importance; he is one of the three political advisers of the Right; the two others are M. Fould and M. Molé.

In the Rue Monthabor, two steps from the Rue Saint Honoré, there was silence and peace. Not one passer-by, not a door open, not a head out of window.

In the apartment into which we were conducted, on the third story, the calm was not less perfect. The windows looked upon an inner courtyard. Five or six red arm-chairs were drawn up before the fire; on the table could be seen a few books which seemed to me works on political economy and executive law. The Representatives, who almost immediately joined us and who arrived in disorder, threw down at random their umbrellas and their coats streaming with water in the corner of this peaceful room. No one knew exactly what was happening; every one brought forward his conjectures.

The Committee was hardly seated in an adjoining little room when our ex-colleague, Leblond, was announced. He brought with him King the delegate of the working-men’s societies. The delegate told us that the committee of the societies were sitting in permanent session, and had sent him to us. According to the instructions of the Insurrectionary Committee, they had done what they could to lengthen the struggle by evading too decisive encounters. The greater part of the associations had not yet given battle; nevertheless the plot was thickening. The combat had been severe during the morning. The Association of the Rights of Man was in the streets; the ex-constituent Beslay had assembled, in the Passage du Caire, six or seven hundred workmen from the Marais, and had posted them in the streets surrounding the Bank. New barricades would probably be constructed during the evening, the forward movement of the resistance was being precipitated, the hand-to-hand struggle which the Committee had wished to delay seemed imminent, all was rushing forward with a sort of irresistible impulse. Should we follow it, or should we stop? Should we run the risk of bringing matters to an end with one blow, which should be the last, and which would manifestly leave one adversary on the ground — either the Empire or the Republic? The workmen’s societies asked for our instructions; they still held in reserve their three or four thousand combatants; and they could, according to the order which the Committee should give them, either continue to restrain them or send them under fire without delay. They believed themselves curtain of their adherents; they would do whatever we should decide upon, while not hiding from us that the workmen wished for an immediate conflict, and that it would be somewhat hazardous to leave them time to become calm.

The majority of the members of the Committee were still in favor of a certain slackening of action which should tend to prolong the struggle; and it was difficult to say that they were in the wrong. It was certain that if they could protract the situation in which the *coup d’état* had thrown Paris until the next week, Louis Bonaparte was lost. Paris does not allow herself to be trampled upon by an army for a whole week. Nevertheless, I was for my own part impressed with the following: — The workmen’s societies offered us three or four thousand combatants, a powerful assistance; — the workman does not understand strategy, he lives on enthusiasm, abatements of ardor discourage him; his zeal is not extinguished, but it cools: — three thousand to-day would be five hundred to-morrow. And then some serious incident had just taken place on the Boulevards. We were still ignorant of what it actually was: we could not foresee what consequences it might bring about; but seemed to me impossible that the still unknown, but yet violent event, which had just taken place would not modify the situation, and consequently change our plan of battle. I began to speak to this effect. I stated that we ought to accept the offer of the associations, and to throw them at once into the struggle; I added that revolutionary warfare often necessitates sudden changes of tactics, that a general in the open country and before the enemy operates as he wishes; it is all clear around him; he knows the effective strength of his soldiers, the number of his regiments; so many men, so many horses, so many cannons, he knows his strength, and the strength of his enemy, he chooses his hour and his ground, he has a map under his eyes, he sees what he is doing. He is sure of his reserves, he possesses them, he keeps them back, he utilizes them when he wishes, he always has them by him. "But for ourselves," cried I, "we are in an undefined and inconceivable position. We are stepping at a venture upon unknown risks. Who is against us? We hardly know. Who is with us? We are ignorant. How many soldiers? How many guns? How many cartridges? Nothing! but the darkness. Perhaps the entire people, perhaps no one. Keep a reserve! But who would answer for this reserve? It is an army to-day, it will be a handful of dust to-morrow. We only can plainly distinguish our duty, as regards all the rest it is black darkness. We are guessing at everything. We are ignorant of everything. We are fighting a blind battle! Let us strike all the blows that can be struck, let us advance straight before us at random, let us rush upon the danger! And let us have faith, for as we are Justice and the Law, God must be with us in this obscurity. Let us accept this glorious and gloomy enterprise of Right disarmed yet still fighting."

The ex-constituent Leblond and the delegate King being consulted by the Committee, seconded my advice. The Committee decided that the societies should be requested in our name to come down into the streets immediately, and to call out their forces. "But we are keeping nothing for to-morrow," objected a member of the Committee, "what ally shall we have to-morrow?" "Victory," said Jules Favre. Carnot and Michel de Bourges remarked that it would be advisable for those members of the association who belonged to the National Guard to wear their uniforms. This was accordingly settled.

The delegate King rose,— “Citizen Representatives,” said he, “these orders will be immediately transmitted, our friends are ready, in a few hours they will assemble. To-night barricades and the combat!”

I asked him, “Would it be useful to you if a Representative, a member of the Committee, were with you to-night with his sash girded?”

“Doubtless,” he answered.

“Well, then,” resumed I, “here I am! Take me.”

“We will all go,” exclaimed Jules Favre.

The delegate observed that it would suffice for one of us to be there at the moment when the societies should make their appearance, and that he could then notify the other members of the Committee to come and join him. It was settled that as soon as the places of meeting and the rallying-points should be agreed upon, he would send some one to let me know, and to take me wherever the societies might be. “Before an hour’s time you shall hear from me,” said he on leaving us.

As the delegates were going away Mathieu de la Drôme arrived. On coming in he halted on the threshold of the door, he was pale, he cried out to us, “You are no longer in Paris, you are no longer under the Republic; you are in Naples and under King Bomba.”

He had come from the boulevards.

Later on I again saw Mathieu de la Drôme. I said to him, “Worse than Bomba, — Satan.”

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE VERIFICATION OF MORAL LAWS

The carnage of the Boulevard Montmartre constitutes the originality of the *coup d'état*. Without this butchery the 2d of December would only be an 18th Brumaire. Owing to the massacre Louis Bonaparte escapes the charge of plagiarism.

Up to that time he had only been an imitator. The little hat at Boulogne, the gray overcoat, the tame eagle appeared grotesque. What did this parody mean? people asked. He made them laugh; suddenly he made them tremble.

He who becomes detestable ceases to be ridiculous.

Louis Bonaparte was more than detestable, he was execrable.

He envied the hugeness of great crimes; he wished to equal the worst. This striving after the horrible has given him a special place to himself in the menagerie of tyrants. Petty rascality trying to emulate deep villainy, a little Nero swelling himself to a huge Lacénaire; such is this phenomenon. Art for art, assassination for assassination.

Louis Bonaparte has created a special genus.

It was in this manner that Louis Bonaparte made his entry into the

Unexpected. This revealed him.

Certain brains are abysses. Manifestly for a long time past Bonaparte had harbored the design of assassinating in order to reign. Premeditation haunts criminals, and it is in this manner that treason begins. The crime is a long time present in them, but shapeless and shadowy, they are scarcely conscious of it; souls only blacken gradually. Such abominable deeds are not invented in a moment; they do not attain perfection at once and at a single bound; they increase and ripen, shapeless and indecisive, and the centre of the ideas in which they exist keeps them living, ready for the appointed day, and vaguely terrible. This design, the massacre for a throne, we feel sure, existed for a long time in Louis Bonaparte's mind. It was classed among the possible events of this soul. It darted hither and thither like a *larva* in an aquarium, mingled with shadows, with doubts, with desires, with expedients, with dreams of one knows not what Caesarian socialism, like a Hydra dimly visible in a transparency of chaos. Hardly was he aware that he was fostering this hideous idea. When he needed it, he found it, armed and ready to serve him. His unfathomable brain had darkly nourished it. Abysses are the nurseries of monsters.

Up to this formidable day of the 4th December, Louis Bonaparte did not perhaps quite know himself. Those who studied this curious Imperial animal did not believe him capable of such pure and simple ferocity. They saw in him an indescribable mongrel, applying the talents of a swindler to the dreams of an Empire, who, even when crowned, would be a thief, who would say of a parricide, What roguery! Incapable of gaining a footing on any height, even of infamy, always remaining half-way uphill, a little above petty rascals, a little below great malefactors. They believed him clever at effecting all that is done in gambling-hells and in robbers' caves, but with this transposition, that he would cheat in the caves, and that he would assassinate in the gambling-hells.

The massacre of the Boulevards suddenly unveiled this spirit. They saw it such as it really was: the ridiculous nicknames "Big-beak," "Badinguet," vanished; they saw the bandit, they saw the true *contraffatto* hidden under the false Bonaparte.

There was a shudder! It was this then which this man held in reserve!

Apologies have been attempted, they could but fail. It is easy to praise Bonaparte, for people have praised Dupin; but it is an exceedingly complicated operation to cleanse him. What is to be done with the 4th of December? How will that difficulty be surmounted? It is far more troublesome to justify than to glorify; the sponge works with greater difficulty than the censer; the panegyrists of the *coup d'état* have lost their labor. Madame Sand herself, although a woman of lofty intellect, has failed miserably in her attempt to rehabilitate Bonaparte, for the simple reason that whatever one may do, the death-roll reappears through this whitewashing.

No! no! no extenuation whatever is possible. Unfortunate Bonaparte. The blood is drawn. It must be drunk.

The deed of the 4th of December is the most colossal dagger-thrust that a brigand let loose upon civilization has ever effected, we will not say upon a people, but upon the entire human race. The stroke was most monstrous, and struck Paris to the ground. Paris on the ground is Conscience, is Reason, is all human liberty on the ground; it is the progress of centuries lying on the pavement; it is the torch of Justice, of Truth, and of Life reversed and extinguished. This is what Louis Bonaparte effected the day when he effected this.

The success of the wretch was complete. The 2d of December was lost; the 4th of December saved the 2d of December. It was something like Erostratus saving Judas. Paris understood that all had not yet been told as regards deeds of horror, and that beneath the oppressor there was the garbage-picker. It was the case of a swindler stealing César's mantle. This man was little, it is true, but terrifying. Paris consented to this terror, renounced the right to have the last word, went to bed and simulated death. Suffocation had its share in the matter. This crime resembled, too, no previous achievements. Even after centuries have passed, and though he should be an Aeschylus or a Tacitus, any one raising the cover would smell the stench. Paris resigned herself, Paris abdicated, Paris surrendered; the novelty of the treason proved its chief strength; Paris almost ceased to be Paris; on the next day the chattering of this terrified Titan's teeth could be heard in the shadows.

Let us lay a stress upon this, for we must verify the laws of morality. Louis Bonaparte remained, even after the 4th of December, Napoleon the Little. This enormity still left him a dwarf. The size of the crime does not change the stature of the criminal, and the pettiness of the assassin withstands the immensity of the assassination.

Be that as it may, the Pigmy had the better of the Colossus. This avowal, humiliating as it is, cannot be evaded.

Such are the blushes to which History, that greatly dishonored one, is condemned.

THE FOURTH DAY — THE VICTORY.

CHAPTER I.

WHAT HAPPENED DURING THE NIGHT — THE RUE TIQUETONNE

Just as Mathieu de la Drôme had said, “You are under King Bomba,” Charles Gambon entered. He sank down upon a chair and muttered, “It is horrible.” Bancel followed him. “We have come from it,” said Bancel. Gambon had been able to shelter himself in the recess of a doorway. In front of Barbedienne’s alone he had counted thirty-seven corpses. What was the meaning of it all? To what purpose was this monstrous promiscuous murder? No one could understand it. The Massacre was a riddle.

We were in the Sphinx’s Grotto.

Labrousse came in. It was urgently necessary that we should leave Dupont White’s house. It was on the point of being surrounded. For some moments the Rue Monthabor, ordinarily so deserted, was becoming thronged with suspicious figures. Men seemed to be attentively watching number Eleven. Some of these men, who appeared to be acting in concert, belonged to the ex-”Club of Clubs,” which, owing to the manoeuvres of the Reactionists, exhaled a vague odor of the police. It was necessary that we should disperse. Labrousse said to us, “I have just seen Longe-pied roving about.”

We separated. We went away one by one, and each in his own direction. We did not know where we should meet again, or whether we should meet again. What was going to happen and what was about to become of us all? No one knew. We were filled with a terrible dread.

I turned up towards the Boulevards, anxious to see what was taking place.

What was taking place I have just related.

Bancel and Versigny had rejoined me.

As I left the Boulevards, mingled with the whirl of the terrified crowd, not knowing where I was going, returning towards the centre of Paris, a voice suddenly whispered in my ear, “There is something over there which you ought to see.” I recognized the voice. It was the voice of E.P.

E.P. is a dramatic author, a man of talent, for whom under Louis Philippe I had procured exemption from military service. I had not seen him for four or five years. I met him again in this tumult. He spoke to me as though we had seen each other yesterday. Such are these times of bewilderment. There is no time to greet each other "according to the rules of society." One speaks as though all were in full flight.

"Ah! it is you!" I exclaimed. "What do you want with me?"

He answered me, "I live in a house over there."

And he added,-

"Come."

He drew me into a dark street. We could hear explosions. At the bottom of the street could be seen the ruins of a barricade. Versigny and Bancel, as I have just said, were with me. E.P. turned to them.

"These gentlemen can come," said he.

I asked him, —

"What street is this?"

"The Rue Tiquetonne."

We followed him.

I have elsewhere told this tragical event.

E.P. stopped before a tall and gloomy house. He pushed open a street-door which was not shut, then another door and we entered into a parlor perfectly quiet and lighted by a lamp.

This room appeared to adjoin a shop. At the end could be distinguished two beds side by side, one large and one small. Above the little bed hung a woman's portrait, and above the portrait a branch of holy box-tree.

The lamp was placed over the fireplace, where a little fire was burning.

Near the lamp upon a chair there was an old woman leaning forward, stooping down, folded in two as though broken, over something which was in the shadow, and which she held in her arms. I drew near. That which she held in her arms was a dead child.

The poor woman was silently sobbing.

E.P., who belonged to the house, touched her on the shoulder, and said, —

"Let us see it."

The old woman raised her head, and I saw on her knees a little boy, pale, half-undressed, pretty, with two red holes in his forehead.

The old woman stared at me, but she evidently did not see me, she muttered, speaking to herself, —

"And to think that he called me 'Granny' this morning!"

E.P. took the child’s hand, the hand fell back again.

“Seven years old,” he said to me.

A basin was on the ground. They had washed the child’s face; two tiny streams of blood trickled from the two holes.

At the end of the room, near a half-opened clothes-press, in which could be seen some linen, stood a woman of some forty years, grave, poor, clean, fairly good-looking.

“A neighbor,” E.P. said to me.

He explained to me that a doctor lived in the house, that the doctor had come down and had said, “There is nothing to be done.” The child had been hit by two balls in the head while crossing the street to “get out of the way.” They had brought him back to his grandmother, who “had no one left but him.”

The portrait of the dead mother hung above the little bed.

The child had his eyes half open, and that inexpressible gaze of the dead, where the perception of the real is replaced by the vision of the infinite. The grandmother spoke through her sobs by snatches: “God! is it possible? Who would have thought it? — What brigands!”

She cried out, —

“Is this then the Government?”

“Yes,” I said to her.

We finished undressing the child. He had a top in his pocket. His head rolled from one shoulder to the other; I held him and I kissed him on the brow; Versigny and Bancel took off his stockings. The grandmother suddenly started up.

“Do not hurt him!” she cried.

She took the two little white and frozen feet in her old hands, trying to warm them.

When the poor little body was naked, they began to lay it out. They took a sheet from the clothes-press.

Then the grandmother burst into bitter lamentation.

She cried out, —

“They shall give him back to me!”

She drew herself up and gazed at us, and began to pour forth incoherent utterances, in which were mingled Bonaparte, and God, and her little one, and the school to which he went, and her daughter whom she had lost, and even reproaches to us. She was livid, haggard, as though seeing a vision before her, and was more of a phantom than the dead child.

Then she again buried her face in her hands, placed her folded arms on her child, and once more began to sob.

The woman who was there came up to me, and without saying a word, wiped my mouth with a handkerchief. I had blood upon my lips.

What could be done? Alas! We went out overwhelmed.

It was quite dark. Bancel and Versigny left me.

“Les Châtiments.”

CHAPTER II.

WHAT HAPPENED DURING THE NIGHT — THE MARKET QUARTER

I came back to my lodging, 19, Rue Richelieu.

The massacre seemed to be at an end; the fusillades were heard no longer. As I was about to knock at the door I hesitated for a moment; a man was there who seemed to be waiting. I went straight up to this man, and I said to him, —

“You seem to be waiting for somebody?”

He answered, —

“Yes.”

“For whom?”

“For you.”

And he added, lowering his voice, “I have come to speak to you.”

I looked at this man. A street-lamp shone on him. He did not avoid the light.

He was a young man with a fair beard, wearing a blue blouse, and who had the gentle bearing of a thinker and the robust hands of a workman.

“Who are you?” I asked him.

He answered,— “I belong to the Society of the Last-makers. I know you very well, Citizen Victor Hugo.”

“From whom do you come?” I resumed.

He answered still in a whisper, —

“From Citizen King.”

“Very good,” said I.

He then told me his name. As he has survived the events of the night of the 4th, and as he since escaped the denunciations, it can be understood that we will not mention his name here, and that we shall confine ourselves to terming him throughout the course of this story by his trade, calling him the “last-maker.”

“What do you want to say to me?” I asked him.

He explained that matters were not hopeless, that he and his friends meant to continue the resistance, that the meeting-places of the Societies had not yet been settled, but that they would be during the evening, that my presence was desired, and that if I would be under the Colbert Arcade at nine o'clock, either himself or another of their men would be there, and would serve me as guide. We decided that in order to make himself known, the messenger, when accosting me, should give the password, "What is Joseph doing?"

I do not know whether he thought he noticed any doubt or mistrust on my part. He suddenly interrupted himself, and said, —

"After all, you are not bound to believe me. One does not think of everything: I ought to have asked them to give me a word in writing. At a time like this one distrusts everybody."

"On the contrary," I said to him, "one trusts everybody. I will be in the Colbert Arcade at nine o'clock."

And I left him.

I re-entered my asylum. I was tired, I was hungry, I had recourse to Charamaule's chocolate and to a small piece of bread which I had still left. I sank down into an arm-chair, I ate and I slept. Some slumbers are gloomy. I had one of those slumbers, full of spectres; I again saw the dead child and the two red holes in his forehead, these formed two mouths: one said "Morny," and the other "Saint-Arnaud." History is not made, however, to recount dreams. I will abridge. Suddenly I awoke. I started: "If only it is not past nine o'clock!" I had forgotten to wind up my watch. It had stopped. I went out hastily. The street was lonely, the shops were shut. In the Place Louvos I heard the hour striking (probably from Saint Roch); I listened. I counted nine strokes. In a few moments I was under the Colbert Arcade. I peered into the darkness. No one was under the Arcade.

I felt that it was impossible to remain there, and have the appearance of waiting about; near the Colbert Arcade there is a police-station, and the patrols were passing every moment. I plunged into the street. I found no one there. I went as far as the Rue Vivienne. At the corner of the Rue Vivienne a man was stopping before a placard and was trying to deface it or to tear it down. I drew near this man, who probably took me for a police agent, and who fled at the top of his speed. I retraced my steps. Near the Colbert Arcade, and just as I reached the point in the street where they post the theatrical bills, a workman passed me, and said quickly, "What is Joseph doing?"

I recognized the last-maker.

"Come," he said to me.

We set out without speaking and without appearing to know each other, he walking some steps before me.

We first went to two addresses, which I cannot mention here without pointing out victims for the proscription. In these two houses we got no news; no one had come there on the part of the societies.

“Let us go to the third place,” said the last-maker, and he explained to me that they had settled among them three successive meeting-places, in case of need, so as to be always sure of finding each other if, perchance, the police discovered the first or even the second meeting-place, a precaution which for our part we adopted as much as possible with regard to our meetings of the Left end of the Committee.

We had reached the market quarter. Fighting had been going on there throughout the day. There were no longer any gas-lamps in the streets. We stopped from time to time, and listened so as not to run headlong into the arms of a patrol. We got over a paling of planks almost completely destroyed, and of which barricades had probably been made, and we crossed the extensive area of half-demolished houses which at that epoch encumbered the lower portions of the Rue Montmartre and Rue Montorgueil. On the peaks of the high dismantled gables could be seen a flickering red glow, doubtless the reflection of the bivouac-fires of the soldiers encamped in the markets and in the neighborhood of Saint Eustache. This reflection lighted our way. The last-maker, however, narrowly escaped falling into a deep hole, which was no less than the cellar of a demolished house. On coming out of this region, covered with ruins, amongst which here and there a few trees might be perceived, the remains of gardens which had now disappeared, we entered into narrow, winding, and completely dark streets, where it was impossible to recognize one’s whereabouts. Nevertheless the last-maker walked on as much at his ease as in broad daylight, and like a man who is going straight to his destination. Once he turned round to me, and said to me, —

“The whole of this quarter is barricaded; and if, as I hope, our friends come down, I will answer that they will hold it for a long time.”

Suddenly he stopped. “Here is one,” said he. In truth, seven or eight paces before us was a barricade entirely constructed of paving-stones, not exceeding a man’s height, and which in the darkness appeared like a ruined wall. A narrow passage had been formed at one end. We passed through it. There was no one behind the barricade.

“There has already been fighting here a short time ago,” said the last-maker in a low voice; and he added, after a pause, “We are getting near.”

The unpaving had left holes, of which we had to be careful. We strode, and sometimes jumped, from paving-stone to paving-stone. Notwithstanding the intense darkness, there yet hovered about an indefinable glimmer; on our way we noticed before us on the ground, close to the foot-pavement, something which looked like a stretched-out form. “The devil!” muttered my guide, “we were just going to walk upon it.” He took a little wax match from his pocket and struck it on his sleeve; the flame flashed out. The light fell upon a pallid face, which looked at us with fixed eyes. It was a corpse lying there; it was an old man. The last-maker rapidly waved the match from his head to his feet. The dead man was almost in the attitude of a crucified man; his two arms were stretched out; his white hair, red at the ends, was soaking in the mud; a pool of blood was beneath him; a large blackish patch on his waistcoat marked the place where the ball had pierced his breast; one of his braces was undone; he had thick laced boots on his feet. The last-maker lifted up one of his arms, and said, “His collar-bone is broken.” The movement shook the head, and the open mouth turned towards us as though about to speak to us. I gazed at this vision; I almost listened. Suddenly it disappeared.

This face re-entered the gloom; the match had just gone out.

We went away in silence. After walking about twenty paces, the last-maker, as though talking to himself, said in a whisper, “Don’t know him.”

We still pushed forward. From the cellars to the roofs, from the ground-floors to the garrets, there was not a light in the house. We appeared to be groping in an immense tomb.

A man’s voice, firm and sonorous, suddenly issued out of the darkness, and shouted to us, “Who goes there?”

“Ah, there they are!” said the last-maker, and he uttered a peculiar whistle.

“Come on,” resumed the voice.

It was another barricade. This one, a little higher than the first, and separated from it by a distance of about a hundred paces, was, as far as could be seen, constructed of barrels filled with paving-stones. On the top could be seen the wheels of a truck entangled between the barrels; planks and beams were intermingled. A passage had been contrived still narrower than the gangway of the other barricade.

"Citizens," said the last-maker, as he went into the barricade, "how many of you are there here?"

The voice which had shouted, "Who goes there?" answered, —

"There are two of us."

"Is that all?"

"That is all."

They were in truth two, — two men who alone during that night, in that solitary street, behind that heap of paving-stones, awaited the onslaught of a regiment.

Both wore blouses; they were two workmen; with a few cartridges in their pockets, and a musket upon each of their shoulders.

"So then," resumed the last-maker, in an impatient tone, "our friends have not yet come!"

"Well, then," I said to him, "let us wait for them."

The last-maker spoke for a short time in a low tone, and probably told my name to one of the two defenders of the barricade, who came up to me and saluted me. "Citizen Representative," said he, "it will be very warm here shortly."

"In the meantime," answered I laughingly, "it is cold."

It was very cold, in truth. The street which was completely unpaved behind the barricade, was nothing better than a sewer, ankle deep in water.

"I say that it will be warm," resumed the workman, "and that you would do well to go farther off."

The last-maker put his hand on his shoulder: "Comrade, it is necessary that we should remain here. The meeting-place is close by, in the ambulance."

"All the same," resumed the other workman, who was very short, and who stood up on a paving-stone; "the Citizen Representative would do well to go farther off."

"I can very well be where you are," said I to him.

The street was quite dark, nothing could be seen of the sky. Inside the barricade on the left, on the side where the passage was, could be seen a high paling of badly joined planks, through which shone in places a feeble light. Above the paling rose out, lost in the darkness, a house of six or seven storys; the ground floor, which was being repaired, and which was underpinned, being closed in by these planks. A ray of light issuing from between the planks fell on the opposite wall, and lighted up an old torn placard, on which could be read, “Asnières. Water tournaments. Grand ball.”

“Have you another gun?” asked the last-maker of the taller of the two workmen.

“If we had three guns we should be three men,” answered the workman.

The little one added, “Do you think that the good will is wanting? There are plenty of musicians, but there are no clarionets.”

By the side of the wooden paling could be seen a little, narrow and low door, which looked more like the door of a stall than the door of a shop. The shop to which this door belonged was hermetically sealed. The door seemed to be equally closed. The last-maker went up to it and pushed it gently. It was open.

“Let us go in,” he said.

I went in first, he followed me, and shut the door behind me. We were in a room on the ground floor. At the end, on the left, a half-opened door emitted the reflection of a light. The room was only lighted by this reflection. A counter and a species of stove, painted in black and white, could be dimly distinguished.

A short, half-suffocated, intermittent gurgling could be heard, which seemed to come from an adjoining room on the same side as the light. The last-maker walked quickly to the half-opened door. I crossed the room after him, and we found ourselves in a sort of vast shed, lighted by one candle. We were on the other side of the plank paling. There was only the plank paling between ourselves and the barricade.

This species of shed was the ground floor in course of demolition. Iron columns, painted red, and fixed into stone sockets at short distances apart, supported the joists of the ceiling; facing the street, a huge framework standing erect, and denoting the centre of the surrounding paling, supported the great cross-beam of the first story, that is to say, supported the whole house. In a corner were lying some masons’ tools, a heap of rubbish, and a large double ladder. A few straw-bottomed chairs were scattered here and there. The damp ground served for the flooring. By the side of a table, on which stood a candle in the midst of medicine bottles, an old woman and a young girl of about eight years old — the woman seated, the child squatting before a great basketful of old linen — were making lint. The end of the room, which was lost in the darkness, was carpeted with a litter of straw, on which three mattresses had been thrown. The gurgling noise came from there.

“It is the ambulance,” said the last-maker.

The old woman turned her head, and seeing us, shuddered convulsively, and then, reassured probably by the blouse of the last-maker, she got up and came towards us.

The last-maker whispered a few words in her ear. She answered, “I have seen nobody.”

Then she added, “But what makes me uneasy is that my husband has not yet come back. They have done nothing but fire muskets the whole evening.”

Two men were lying on two of the mattresses at the end of the room. A third mattress was unoccupied and was waiting.

The wounded man nearest to me had received a musket ball in his stomach. He it was who was gurgling. The old woman came towards the mattress with a candle, and whispered to us, showing us her fist, “If you could only see the hole that that has made! We have stuffed lint as large as this into his stomach.”

She resumed, “He is not above twenty-five years old. He will be dead to-morrow morning.”

The other was still younger. He was hardly eighteen. “He has a handsome black overcoat,” said the woman. “He is most likely a student.” The young man had the whole of the lower part of his face swathed in blood-stained linen. She explained to us that he had received a ball in the mouth, which had broken his jaw. He was in a high fever, and gazed at us with lustrous eyes. From time to time he stretched his right arm towards a basin full of water in which a sponge was soaking; he took the sponge, carried it to his face, and himself moistened his bandages.

It seemed to me that his gaze fastened upon me in a singular manner. I went up to him, I stooped down, and I gave him my hand, which he took in his own. “Do you know me?” I asked him. He answered “Yes,” by a pressure of the hand which went to my heart.

The last-maker said to me, “Wait a minute for me here, I shall be back directly; I want to see in this neighborhood, if there is any means of getting a gun.”

He added, —

“Would you like one for yourself?”

"No," answered I. "I shall remain here without a gun. I only take a half share in the civil war; I am willing to die, I am not willing to kill."

I asked him if he thought his friends were going to come. He declared that he could not understand it, that the men from the societies ought to have arrived already, that instead of two men in the barricade there should be twenty, that instead of two barricades in the street there should have been ten, and that something must have happened; he added, —

"However, I will go and see; promise to wait for me here."

"I promise you," I answered, "I will wait all night if necessary."

He left me.

The old woman had reseated herself near the little girl, who did not seem to understand much of what was passing round her, and who from time to time raised great calm eyes towards me. Both were poorly clad, and it seemed to me that the child had stockingless feet. "My man has not yet come back," said the old woman, "my poor man has not yet come back. I hope nothing has happened to him!" With many heart-rending "My God's," and all the while quickly picking her lint, she wept. I could not help thinking with anguish of the old man we had seen stretched on the pavement at a few paces distant.

A newspaper was lying on the table. I took it up, and I unfolded it. It was the *P* —— , the rest of the title had been torn off. A blood-stained hand was plainly imprinted on it. A wounded man on entering had probably placed his hand on the table on the spot where the newspaper lay. My eyes fell upon these lines: —

"M. Victor Hugo has just published an appeal to pillage and assassination."

In these terms the journal of the Elysée described the proclamation which I had dictated to Baudin, and which may be read in page 103 of this History.

As I threw back the paper on the table one of the two defenders of the barricade entered. It was the short man.

"A glass of water," said he. By the side of the medicine bottles there was a decanter and a glass. He drank, greedily. He held in his hand a morsel of bread and a sausage, which he was biting.

Suddenly we heard several successive explosions, following one after another, and which seemed but a short distance off. In the silence of this dark night it resembled the sound of a load of wood being shot on to the pavement.

The calm and serious voice of the other combatant shouted from outside,

“It is beginning.”

“Have I time to finish my bread?” asked the little one.

“Yes,” said the other.

The little one then turned to me.

“Citizen Representative,” said he to me, “those are volleys. They are attacking the barricades over there. Really you must go away.”

I answered him, “But you yourselves are going to stay here.”

“As for us, we are armed,” resumed he; “as for you, you are not. You will only get yourself killed without benefiting any one. If you had a gun, I should say nothing. But you have not. You must go away.”

“I cannot,” I answered him. “I am waiting for some one.”

He wished to continue and to urge me. I pressed his hand.

“Let me do as I like,” said I.

He understood that my duty was to remain, and no longer persisted.

There was a pause. He again began to bite his bread. The gurgling of the dying man alone was audible. At that moment a sort of deep and hollow booming reached us. The old woman started from her chair, muttering, “It is the cannon!”

“No,” said the little man, “it is the slamming of a street-door.” Then he resumed, “There now! I have finished my bread,” and he dusted one hand against the other, and went out.

In the meantime the explosions continued, and seemed to come nearer. A noise sounded in the shop. It was the last-maker who was coming back. He appeared on the threshold of the ambulance. He was pale.

“Here I am,” said he, “I have come to fetch you. We must go home. Let us be off at once.”

I arose from the chair where I had seated myself. “What does this mean?

Will they not come?”

“No,” he answered, “no one will come. All is at an end.”

Then he hastily explained that he had gone through the whole of the quarter in order to find a gun, that it was labor lost, that he had spoken to “two or three,” that we must abandon all hope of the societies, *that they would not come down*, that what had been done during the day had appalled every one, that the best men were terrified, that the boulevards were “full of corpses," that the soldiers had committed "horrors," that the barricade was about to be attacked, that on his arrival he had heard the noise of footsteps in the direction of the crossway, that it was the soldiers who were advancing, that we could do nothing further there, that we must be off, that this house was "stupidly chosen," that there was no outlet in the rear, that perhaps we should already find it difficult to get out of the street, and that we had only just time.

He told this all panting, briefly, jerkily, and interrupted at every moment with this ejaculation, "And to think that they have no arms, and to think that I have no gun!"

As he finished we heard from the barricade a shout of "Attention!" and almost immediately a shot was fired.

A violent discharge replied to this shot.

Several balls struck the paling of the ambulance, but they were too obliquely aimed, and none pierced it. We heard the glass of several broken windows falling noisily into the street.

"There is no longer time," said the last-maker calmly; "the barricade is attacked."

He took a chair and sat down. The two workmen were evidently excellent marksmen. Two volleys assailed the barricade, one after the other. The barricade answered with animation. Then the fire ceased. There was a pause.

"Now they are coming at us with the bayonet! They are coming at the double!" said a voice in the barricade.

The other voice said, "Let us be off." A last musket-shot was fired. Then a violent blow which we interpreted as a warning shook our wooden wall. It was in reality one of the workmen who had thrown down his gun when going away; the gun in falling had struck the paling of the ambulance. We heard the rapid steps of the two combatants, as they ran off.

Almost at the same moment a tumult of voices, and of butt ends of muskets striking the paving-stones, filled the barricade.

"It is taken," said the last-maker, and he blew out the candle.

To the silence which enveloped this street a moment before succeeded a sort of ill-omened tumult. The soldiers knocked at the doors of the houses with the butt-ends of their muskets. It was by a miracle that the shop-door escaped them. If they had merely pushed against it, they would have seen that it was not shut, and would have entered.

A voice, probably the voice of an officer, cried out, “Light up the windows!” The soldiers swore. We heard them say, “Where are those blackguard Reds? Let us search the houses.” The ambulance was plunged in darkness. Not a word was spoken, not a breath could be heard; even the dying man, as though he divined the danger, had ceased to gurgle. I felt the little girl pressing herself against my legs.

A soldier struck the barrels, and said laughingly, —

“Here is something to make a fire with to-night.”

Another resumed, —

“Which way have they gone? They were at least thirty. Let us search the houses.”

We heard one raising objections to this, —

“Nonsense! What do you want to do on a night like this? Enter the houses of the ‘middle classes’ indeed! There is some waste ground over yonder. They have taken refuge there.”

“All the same,” repeated the others, “let us search the houses.”

At this moment a musket-shot was fired from the end of the street.

This shot saved us.

In fact, it was probably one of the two workmen who had fired in order to draw off their attention from us.

“That comes from over there,” cried the soldiers, “They are over there!” and all starting off at once in the direction from which the shot had been fired, they left the barricade and ran down the street at the top of their speed.

The last-maker and myself got up.

“They are no longer there,” whispered he. “Quick! let us be off.”

“But this poor woman,” said I. “Are we going to leave her here?”

“Oh,” she said, “do not be afraid, I have nothing to fear; as for me, I am an ambulance. I am taking care of the wounded. I shall even relight my candle when you are gone. What troubles me is that my poor husband has not yet come back!”

We crossed the shop on tiptoe. The last-maker gently opened the door and glanced out into the street. Some inhabitants had obeyed the order to light up their windows, and four or five lighted candles here and there flickered in the wind upon the sills of the windows. The street was no longer completely dark.

“There is no one about now,” said the last-maker; “but let us make haste, for they will probably come back.”

We went out: the old woman closed the door behind us, and we found ourselves in the street. We got over the barricade and hurried away as quickly as possible. We passed by the dead old man. He was still there, lying on the pavement indistinctly revealed by the flickering glimmer from the windows; he looked as though he was sleeping. As we reached the second barricade we heard behind us the soldiers, who were returning.

We succeeded in regaining the streets in course of demolition. There we were in safety. The sound of musketry still reached us. The last-maker said, “They are fighting in the direction of the Rue de Cléry.” Leaving the streets in course of demolition, we went round the markets, not without risk of falling into the hands of the patrols, by a number of zigzags, and from one little street to another little street. We reached the Rue Saint Honoré.

At the corner of the Rue de l’Arbre Sec the last-maker and I separated, “For in truth,” said he to me, “two run more danger than one.” And I regained No. 19, Rue Richelieu.

While crossing the rue des Bourdonnais we had noticed the bivouac of the Place Saint Eustache. The troops who had been dispatched for the attack had not yet come back. Only a few companies were guarding it. We could hear shouts of laughter. The soldiers were warming themselves at large fires lighted here and there. In the fire which was nearest to us we could distinguish in the middle of the brazier the wheels of the vehicles which had served for the barricades. Of some there only remained a great hoop of red-hot iron.

We may now, after twenty-six years, give the name of this loyal and courageous man. His name was Galoy (and not Galloix, as certain historians of the *coup d’état* have printed it while recounting, after their fashion, the incidents which we are about to read).

CHAPTER III.

WHAT HAPPENED DURING THE NIGHT. — THE PETIT CARREAU

On the same night, almost at the same moment, at a few paces distant, a villainous deed was being perpetrated.

After the taking of the barricade, where Pierre Tissié was killed, seventy or eighty combatants had retired in good order by the Rue Saint Sauveur. They had reached the Rue Montorgueil, and had rejoined each other at the junction of the Rue du Petit Carreau and the Rue du Cadran. At this point the street rises. At the corner of the Rue du Petit Carreau and the Rue de Cléry there was a deserted barricade, fairly high and well built. There had been fighting there during the morning. The soldiers had taken it, but had not demolished it. Why? As we have said, there were several riddles of this nature during this day.

The armed band which came from the Rue Saint Denis had halted there and had waited. These men were astonished at not being pursued. Had the soldiers feared to follow them into the little narrow streets, where each corner of the houses might conceal an ambuscade? Had a counter order been given? They hazarded various conjectures. Moreover they heard close by, evidently on the boulevard, a terrific noise of musketry, and a cannonade which resembled continuous thunder. Having no more ammunition, they were reduced to listen. If they had known what was taking place there, they would have understood why they were not pursued. The butchery of the boulevard was beginning. The generals employed in the massacre had suspended fighting for awhile.

The fugitives of the boulevard streamed in their direction, but when they perceived the barricade they turned back. Some, however, joined them indignant, and crying out for vengeance. One who lived in the neighborhood ran home and brought back a little tin barrel full of cartridges.

These were sufficient for an hour’s fighting. They began to construct a barricade at the corner of the Rue du Cadran. In this manner the Rue du Petit Carreau, closed by two barricades, one towards the Rue de Cléry, the other at the corner of the Rue du Cadran, commanded the whole of the Rue

Montorgueil. The space between these two barricades formed a perfect citadel. The second barricade was stronger than the first.

These men nearly all wore coats. Some of them rolled the paving-stones with gloves on.

Few workmen were amongst them, but those who were there were intelligent and energetic. These workmen were what might be termed the “pick of the crowd.”

Jeanty Sarre had rejoined them; he at once became their leader.

Charpentier accompanied him, too brave to abandon the enterprise, but too much a dreamer to become a commander.

Two barricades, enclosing in the same manner some forty yards of the Rue

Montorgueil, had just been constructed at the top of the Rue Mauconseil.

Three other barricades, extremely feebly constructed, again intersected the Rue Montorgueil in the space which separates the Rue Mauconseil from Saint Eustache.

Evening was closing in. The fusillade was ceasing upon the boulevard. A surprise was possible. They established a sentry-post at the corner of the Rue du Cadran, and sent a main-guard in the direction of the Rue Montmartre. Their scouts came in to report some items of information. A regiment seemed to be preparing to bivouac in the Place des Victoires.

Their position, to all appearance strong, was not so in reality. There were too few in number to defend at the same time the two barricades on the Rue de Cléry and the Rue Montorgueil, and the soldiers arriving in the rear hidden by the second barricade would have been upon them without being even noticed. This determined them to establish a post in the Rue de Cléry. They put themselves in communication with the barricades of the Rue du Cadran and with the two Mauconseil barricades. These two last barricades were only separated from them by a space of about 150 paces. They were about six feet high, fairly solid, but only guarded by six workmen who had built them.

Towards half-past four, in the twilight — the twilight begins early in December — Jeanty Sarre took four men with him and went out to reconnoitre. He thought also of raising an advanced barricade in one of the little neighboring streets. On the way they found one which had been abandoned, and which had been built with barrels. The barrels, however, were empty, only one contained any paving-stones, and the barricade could not have been held for two minutes. As they left this barricade they were assailed by a sharp discharge of musketry. A company of infantry, hardly visible in the dusk, was close upon them.

They fell back hastily; but one of them, who was a shoemaker of the Faubourg du Temple, was hit, and had remained on the pavement. They went back and brought him away. He had the thumb of the right hand smashed. “Thank God!” said Jeanty Sarre, “they have not killed him.” “No,” said the poor man, “it is my bread which they have killed.”

And he added, “I can no longer work; who will maintain my children?”

They went back, carrying the wounded man. One of them, a medical student, bound up his wound.

The sentries, whom it was necessary to post in every direction, and who were chosen from the most trustworthy men, thinned and exhausted the little central land. There were scarcely thirty in the barricade itself.

There, as in the Quarter of the Temple, all the streetlamps were extinguished; the gas-pipes cut; the windows closed and unlighted; no moon, not even stars. The night was profoundly dark.

They could hear distant fusillades. The soldiers were firing from around Saint Eustache, and every three minutes sent a ball in their direction, as much as to say, “We are here.” Nevertheless they did not expect an attack before the morning.

Dialogues like the following took place amongst them: —

“I wish I had a truss of straw,” said Charpentier; “I have a notion that we shall sleep here to-night.”

“Will you be able to get to sleep?” asked Jeanty Sarre.

“I? Certainly I shall go to sleep.”

He did go to sleep, in fact, a few moments later.

In this gloomy network of narrow streets, intersected with barricades, and blockaded by soldiers, two wine-shops had remained open. They made more lint there, however, than they drank wine; the orders of the chiefs were only to drink reddened water.

The doorway of one of these wine-shops opened exactly between the two barricades of the Petit Cancan. In it was a clock by which they regulated the sentries’ relief. In a back room they had locked up two suspicious-looking persons who had intermingled with the combatants. One of these men at the moment when he was arrested said, “I have come to fight for Henri V.” They kept them under lock and key, and placed a sentry at the door.

An ambulance had been established in an adjoining room. There the wounded shoemaker was lying upon a mattress thrown upon the ground.

They had established, in case of need, another ambulance in the Rue du Cadran. An opening had been effected at the corner of the barricade on this side, so that the wounded could be easily carried away.

Towards half-past nine in the evening a man came up to the barricade.

Jeanty Sarre recognized him.

"Good day, Denis," said he.

"Call me, Gaston," said the man.

"Why?"

"Because—"

"Are you your brother?"

"Yes, I am my brother. For to-day."

"Very well. Good-day, Gaston."

They heartily shook hands.

It was Denis Dussoubs.

He was pale, calm, and bleeding; he had already been fighting during the morning. At the barricade of the Faubourg Saint Martin a ball had grazed his breast, but had been turned off by some money in his pocket, and had only broken the skin. He had had the rare good fortune of being scratched by a ball. It was like the first touch from the claws of death. He wore a cap, his hat having been left behind in the barricade where he had fought: and he had replaced his bullet-pierced overcoat, which was made of Belleisle cloth, by a pea-jacket bought at a slop-shop.

How had he reached the barricade of the Petit Carreau? He could not say.

He had walked straight before him. He had glided from street to street.

Chance takes the predestined by the hand, and leads them straight to their goal through the thick darkness.

At the moment when he entered the barricade they cried out to him, "Who goes there?" He answered, "The Republic!"

They saw Jeanty Sarre shake him by the hand. They asked Jeanty Sarre, —

"Who is he?"

Jeanty Sarre answered, —

"It is some one."

And he added, —

"We were only sixty a short time since. We are a hundred now."

All pressed round the new-comer. Jeanty Sarre offered him the command.

"No," said he, "I do not understand the tactics of barricade fighting. I should be a bad chief, but I am a good soldier. Give me a gun."

They seated themselves on the paving-stones. They exchanged their experiences of what had been done. Denis described to them the fighting on the Faubourg Saint Martin. Jeanty Sarre told Denis of the fighting in the Rue Saint Denis.

During all this time the generals were preparing a final assault, — what the Marquis of Clermont-Tonnerre, in 1822, called the "Coup de Collier," and what, in 1789, the Prince of Lambese had called the "Coup de Bas." Throughout all Paris there was now only this point which offered any resistance. This knot of barricade, this labyrinth of streets, embattled like a redoubt, was the last citadel of the People and of Right. The generals invested it leisurely, step by step, and on all sides. They concentrated their forces. They, the combatants of this fateful hour, knew nothing of what was being done. Only from time to time they interrupted their recital of events and they listened. From the right and from the left, from the front, from the rear, from every side, at the same time, an unmistakable murmur, growing every moment louder, and more distinct, hoarse, piercing, fear-inspiring, reached them through the darkness. It was the sound of the battalions marching and charging at the trumpet-command in all the adjoining streets. They resumed their gallant conversation, and then in another moment they stopped again and listened to that species of ill-omened chant, chanted by Death, which was approaching.

Nevertheless some still thought that they would not be attacked till the next morning. Night combats are rare in street-warfare. They are more "risky" than all the other conflicts. Few generals venture upon them. But amongst the old hands of the barricade, from certain never-failing signs, they believed that an assault was imminent.

In fact, at half-past ten at night, and not at eight o'clock as General Magnan has said in the despicable document which he calls his report — a special movement was heard in the direction of the markets. This was the marching of the troops. Colonel de Lourmel had determined to make the attack. The 51st of the Line, posted at Saint Eustache, entered the Rue Montorgueil. The 2d battalion formed the advanced guard. The Grenadiers and the Light Infantry, hurled forward at the double, quickly carried the three little barricades which were on the other side of the vacant space of the Rue Mauconseil, and the feebly defended barricades of the adjoining streets. It was at that very moment that the barricade near which I was happened to be carried.

From the barricade of the Petit Carreau they heard the night-strife draw near through the darkness, with a fitful noise, strange and appalling. First a great tumult, then volleys, then silence, and then all began again. The flashing of the fusillades suddenly delineated in the darkness the outlines of the houses, which appeared as though they themselves were affrighted.

The decisive moment drew near.

The outpost had fallen back upon the barricades. The advanced posts of the Rue de Cléry and the Rue du Cadran had come back. They called over the roll. Not one of those of the morning was missing.

They were, as we have said, about sixty combatants, and not a hundred, as the Magnan report has stated.

From the upper extremity of the street where they were stationed it was difficult to ascertain what was happening. They did not exactly know how many barricades they were in the Rue Montorgueil between them and Saint Eustache, whence the troops were coming. They only knew that their nearest point of resistance was the double Mauconseil barricade, and that, when all was at an end there, it would be their turn.

Denis had posted himself on the inner side of the barricade in such a manner that half his body was above the top, and from there he watched. The glimmer which came from the doorway of the wine-shop rendered his gestures visible.

Suddenly he made a sign. The attack on the Mauconseil redoubt was beginning.

The soldiers, in fact, after having some time hesitated before this double wall of paving-stones, lofty, well-built, and which they supposed was well defended, had ended by rushing upon it, and attacking it with blows of their guns.

They were not mistaken. It was well defended. We have already said that there were only six men in this barricade, the six workmen who had built it. Of the six one only had three cartridges, the others had only two shots to fire. These six men heard the regiment advancing and the roll of the battery which was followed on it, and did not stir. Each remained silent at his post of battle, the barrel of his gun between two paving-stones. When the soldiers were within range they fired, and the battalion replied.

“That is right. Rage away, Red Breeches,” said, laughingly, the man who had three shots to fire.

Behind them, the men of the Petit Carreau were crowded round Denis and Jeanty Sarre, and leaning on the crest of their barricade, stretching their necks towards the Mauconseil redoubt, they watched them like the gladiators of the next combat.

The six men of this Mauconseil redoubt resisted the onslaught of the battalion for nearly a quarter of an hour. They did not fire together, “in order,” one of them said, “to make the pleasure last the longer.” The pleasure of being killed for duty; a noble sentence in this workman’s mouth. They did not fall back into the adjoining streets until after having exhausted their ammunition. The last, he who had three cartridges, did not leave until the soldiers were actually scaling the summit of the barricade.

In the barricade of the Petit Carreau not a word was spoken; they followed all the phases of this struggle, and they pressed each other’s hands.

Suddenly the noise ceased, the last musket-shot was fired. A moment afterwards they saw the lighted candles being placed in all the windows which looked on on the Mauconseil redoubt. The bayonets and the brass ornaments on the shakos sparkled there. The barricade was taken.

The commander of the battalion, as is always the custom in similar circumstances, had sent orders into the adjoining houses to light up all the windows.

This was done at the Mauconseil redoubt.

Seeing that their hour had come, the sixty combatants of the barricade of the Petit Carreau mounted their heap of paving-stones, and shouted with one voice, in the midst of the darkness, this piercing cry, “Long live the Republic!”

No one answered them.

They could only hear the battalion loading their guns.

This acted upon them as a species of signal for action. They were all worn out with fatigue, having been on their feet since the preceding day, carrying paving-stones or fighting, the greater part had neither eaten nor slept.

Charpentier said to Jeanty Sarre, —

“We shall all be killed.”

“Shall we really!” said Jeanty Sarre.

Jeanty Sarre ordered the door of the wine-shop to be closed, so that their barricade, completely shrouded in darkness, would give them some advantage over the barricade which was occupied by the soldiers and lighted up.

In the meantime the 51st searched the streets, carried the wounded into the ambulances, and took up their position in the double barricade of the Rue Mauconseil. Half an hour thus elapsed.

Now, in order to clearly understand what is about to follow, the reader must picture to himself in this silent street, in this darkness of the night, at from sixty to eighty yards apart, within speaking distance, these two redoubts facing each other, and able as in an Iliad to address each other.

On one side the Army, on the other side the People, the darkness over all.

The species of truce which always precedes decisive encounters drew to a close. The preparations were completed on both sides. The soldiers could be heard forming into order of battle, and the captains giving out their commands. It was evident that the struggle was at hand.

“Let us begin,” said Charpentier; and he raised his gun.

Denis held his arm back. “Wait,” he said.

Then an epic incident was seen.

Denis slowly mounted the paving-stones of the barricade, ascended to the top, and stood there erect, unarmed and bareheaded.

Thence he raised his voice, and, facing the soldiers, he shouted to them, “Citizens!”

At this word a sort of electric shudder ensued which was felt from one barricade to the other. Every sound was hushed, every voice was silent, on both sides reigned a deep religious and solemn silence. By the distant glimmer of a few lighted windows the soldiers could vaguely distinguish a man standing above a mass of shadows, like a phantom who was speaking to them in the night.

Denis continued, —

“Citizens of the Army! Listen to me!”

The silence grew still more profound.

He resumed, —

“What have you come to do here? You and ourselves, all of us who are in this street, at this hour, with the sword or gun in hand, what are we about to do? To kill each other! To kill each other, citizens! Why? Because they have raised a misunderstanding between us! Because we obey — you your discipline — we our Right! You believe that you are carrying out your instructions; as for us, we know that we are doing our duty. Yes! it is Universal Suffrage, it is the Right of the Republic, it is our Right that we are defending, and our Right, soldiers, is your Right. The Army is the People, as the People is the Army. We are the same nation, the some country, the same men. My God! See, is there any Russian blood in my veins, in me who am speaking to you? Is there any Prussian blood in your veins, in you who are listening to me? No! Why then should we fight? It is always an unfortunate thing for a man to fire upon a man. Nevertheless, a gun-shot between a Frenchman and an Englishman can be understood; but between a Frenchman and a Frenchman, ah! that wounds Reason, that wounds France, that wounds our mother!”

All anxiously listened to him. At this moment from the opposite barricade a voice shouted to him, —

“Go home, then!”

At this coarse interruption an angry murmur ran through Denis’s companions, and several guns could be heard being loaded. Denis restrained them by a sign.

This sign possessed a strange authority.

“Who is this man?” the combatants behind the barricade asked each other.

Suddenly they cried out, —

“He is a Representative of the People!”

Denis had, in fact, suddenly assumed his brother Gaston’s sash.

What he had premeditated was about to be accomplished; the hour of the heroic falsehood had arrived. He cried out, —

“Soldiers, do you know what the man is who is speaking to you at this moment? He is not only a citizen, he is a Legislator! He is a Representative chosen by Universal Suffrage! My name is Dussoubs, and I am a Representative of the People. It is in the name of the National Assembly, it is in the name of the Sovereign Assembly, it is in the name of the People, and in the name of the Law, that I summon you to hear me. Soldiers, you are the armed force. Well, then, when the Law speaks, the armed force listens.”

This time the silence was not broken.

We reproduce these words almost literally; such as they are, and such as they have remained graven on the memory of those who heard them; but what we cannot reproduce, and what should be added to these words, in order to realize the effect, is the attitude, the accent, the thrill of emotion, the vibration of the words issuing from this noble breast, the intense impression produced by the terrible hour and place.

Denis Dussoubs continued: “He spoke for some twenty minutes,” an eye-witness has told me. Another has said, “He spoke with a loud voice; the whole street heard him.” He was vehement, eloquent, earnest; a judge for Bonaparte, a friend for the soldiers. He sought to rouse them by everything which could still vibrate in them; he recalled to them their true wars, their true victories, the national glory, the ancient military honor, the flag. He told them that all this was about to be slain by the bullets from their guns. He adjured them, he ordered them to join themselves to the People and to the Law; and then suddenly coming back to the first words which he had pronounced, carried away by that fraternity with which his soul overflowed, he interrupted himself in the middle of a half-completed sentence, and cried out: —

“But to what purpose are all these words? It is not all this that is wanted, it is a shake of the hand between brothers! Soldiers, you are there opposite us, at a hundred paces from us, in a barricade, with the sword drawn, with guns pointed; you are aiming directly at me; well then, all of us who are here love you! There is not one of us who would not give his life for one of you. You are the peasants of the fields of France; we are the workmen of Paris. What, then, is in question? Simply to see each other, to speak to each other, and not to cut each other’s throats. Shall we try this? Say! Ah! as for myself in this frightful battle-field of civil war, I would rather die than kill. Look now, I am going to get off this barricade and come to you. I am unarmed; I only know that you are my brothers. I am confident, I am calm; and if one of you presents his bayonet at me, I will offer him my hand.”

He finished speaking.

A voice cried out from the opposite barricade, “Advance in order!”

Then they saw him slowly descend the dimly-lighted crest of the barricade, paving-stone by paving-stone, and plunge with head erect into the dark street.

From the barricade all eyes followed him with an inexpressible anxiety.

Hearts ceased beating, mouths no longer breathed.

No one attempted to restrain Denis Dussoubs. Each felt that he was going where he ought to go. Charpentier wished to accompany him. “Would you like me to go with you?” he cried out to him. Dussoubs refused, with a shake of the head.

Dussoubs, alone and grave, advanced towards the Mauconseil Barricade. The night was so dark that they lost sight of him immediately. They could distinguish only for a few seconds his peaceable and intrepid bearing. Then he disappeared. They could no longer see anything. It was an inauspicious moment. The night was dark and dumb. There could only be heard in this thick darkness the sound of a measured and firm step dying away in the distance.

After some time, how long no one could reckon, so completely did emotion eclipse thought amongst the witnesses of this marvellous scene, a glimmer of light appeared in the barricade of the soldiers; it was probably a lantern which was being brought or taken away. By the flash they again saw Dussoubs, he was close to the barricade, he had almost reached it, he was walking towards it with his arms stretched out like Christ.

Suddenly the word of command, “Fire!” was heard.

A fusillade burst forth.

They had fired upon Dussoubs when he was at the muzzles of their guns.

Dussoubs fell.

Then he raised himself and cried, “Long live the Republic!”

Another bullet struck him, he fell again. Then they saw him raise himself once more, and heard him shout in a loud voice, “I die with the Republic.”

These were his last words.

In this manner died Denis Dussoubs.

It was not vainly that he had said to his brother, “Your sash will be there.”

He was anxious that this sash should do its duty. He determined in the depths of his great soul that this sash should triumph either through the law or through death.

That is to say, in the first case it would save Right, in the second save Honor.

Dying, he could say, “I have succeeded.”

Of the two possible triumphs of which he had dreamed, the gloomy triumph was not the less splendid.

The insurgent of the Elysée thought that he had killed a Representative of the People, and boasted of it. The sole journal published by the *coup d’état* under these different titles *Patrie*, *Univers*, *Moniteur*, *Parisien*, etc., announced on the next day, Friday, the 5th, “that the ex-Representative Dussoubs (Gaston) had been killed at the barricade of the Rue Neuve Saint Eustache, and that he bore ‘a red flag in his hand.’”

CHAPTER IV.

WHAT WAS DONE DURING THE NIGHT — THE PASSAGE DU SAUMON

When those on the barricade of the Petit Carreau saw Dussoubs fall, so gloriously for his friends, so shamefully for his murderers, a moment of stupor ensued. Was it possible? Did they really see this before them? Such a crime committed by our soldiers? Horror filled every soul.

This moment of surprise did not last long. “Long live the Republic!” shouted the barricade with one voice, and it replied to the ambuscade by a formidable fire.

The conflict began. A mad conflict on the part of the *coup d’état*, a struggle of despair on the side of the Republic. On the side of the soldiers an appalling and cold blooded resolution, a passive and ferocious obedience, numbers, good arms, absolute chiefs, pouches filled with cartridges. On the side of the People no ammunition, disorder, weariness, exhaustion, no discipline, indignation serving for a leader.

It appears that while Dussoubs was speaking, fifteen grenadiers, commanded by a sergeant named Pitrois, had succeeded in gliding in the darkness along the houses, and, unperceived and unheard, had taken up their position close to the barricade. These fifteen men suddenly formed themselves together with lowered bayonets at twenty paces from the barricade ready to scale it. A volley received them. They fell back, leaving several corpses in the gutter. Major Jeannin cried out, “Finish them off.” The entire battalion which occupied the Mauconseil barricade, then appeared with raised bayonets upon the uneven crest of this barricade, and from there without breaking their line, with a sudden, but regulated and inexorable movement, sprang into the street. The four companies, in close order, and as though mingled and hardly visible, seemed like a wave precipitating itself with a great noise from the height of the barricade.

At the barricade of the Petit Carreau they noted the manoeuvre, and had paused in their fire. “Present,” cried Jeanty Sarre, “but do not fire; wait for the order.”

Each put his gun to his shoulder, then placed the barrels between the paving-stones, ready to fire, and waited.

As soon as it had quitted the Mauconseil redoubt, the battalion rapidly formed itself into an attacking column, and a moment afterwards they heard the intermittent sound of an advance at the double. It was the battalion which was coming upon them.

“Charpentier,” said Jeanty Sarre, “you have good eyes. Are they midway?”

“Yes,” said Charpentier.

“Fire,” said Jeanty Sarre.

The barricade fired. The whole street was filled with smoke. Several soldiers fell. They could hear the cries of the wounded. The battalion, riddled with balls, halted and replied by platoon firing.

Seven or eight combatants whose bodies reached above the barricade, which had been made hastily and was too low were hit. Three were killed on the spot. One fell wounded by a ball in his stomach, between Jeanty Sarre and Charpentier. He shrieked out with pain.

“Quick, to the ambulance:” said Jeanty Sarre.

“Where?”

“In the Rue du Cadran.”

Jeanty Sarre and Charpentier picked up the wounded man, the one by the feet, the other by the head, and carried him to the du Cadran through the passage in the barricade.

During all this time there was continued file firing. There no longer seemed anything in the street but smoke, the balls whistling and crossing each other, the brief and repeated commands, some plaintive cries, and the flash of the guns lighting up the darkness.

Suddenly a loud void died out, “Forwards!” The battalion resumed its double-quick march and threw itself upon the barricade.

Then ensued a horrible scene. They fought hand to hand, four hundred on the one side, fifty on the other. They seized each other by the collar, by the throat, by the mouth, by the hair. There was no longer a cartridge in the barricade, but there remained despair. A workman, pierced through and through, snatched the bayonet from his belly, and stabbed a soldier with it. They did not see each other, but they devoured each other. It was a desperate scuffle in the dark.

The barricade did not hold out for two minutes. In several places, it may be remembered, it was low. It was rather stridden over than scaled. That was all the more heroic. One of the survivors told the writer of these lines, “The barricade defended itself very badly, but the men died very well.”

All this took place while Jeanty Sarre and Charpentier were carrying the wounded man to the ambulance in the Rue du Cadran. His wounds having been attended to, they came back to the barricade. They had just reached it when they heard themselves called by name. A feeble voice close by said to them, “Jeanty Sarre! Charpentier!” They turned round and saw one of their men who was dying leaning against a wall, and his knees giving way beneath him. He was a combatant who had left the barricade. He had only been able to take a few steps down the street. He held his hand over his breast, where he had received a ball fired at close quarters. He said to them in a scarcely audible voice, “The barricade is taken, save yourselves.”

“No,” said Jeanty Sarre, “I must unload my gun.” Jeanty Sarre re-entered the barricade, fired a last shot and went away.

Nothing could be more frightful than the interior of the captured barricade.

The Republicans, overpowered by numbers, no longer offered any resistance. The officers cried out, “No prisoners!” The soldiers billed those who were standing, and despatched those who had fallen. Many awaited their death with their heads erect. The dying raised themselves up, and shouted, “Long live the Republic!” Some soldiers ground their heels upon the faces of the dead, so that they should not be recognized. There, stretched out amongst the corpses, in the middle of the barricade, with his hair in the gutter, was seen the all-but namesake of Charpentier, Carpentier, the delegate of the committee of the Tenth Arrondissement, who had been killed, and had fallen backwards, with two balls in his breast. A lighted candle which the soldiers had taken from the wine-shop was placed on a paving stone.

The soldiers were infuriated. One would say that they were revenging themselves. On whom? A workman, named Paturel, received three balls and six bayonet-thrusts, four of which were in the head. They thought that he was dead, and they did not renew the attack. He felt them search him. They took ten francs which he had about him. He did not die till six days later, and he was able to relate the details which are given here. We may note, by the way, that the name of Paturel does not figure upon any of the lists of the corpses published by M. Bonaparte.

Sixty Republicans were shut up in this redoubt of the Petit Carreau. Forty-six were killed there. These men had come there that morning free, proud to fight, and joyous to die. At midnight all was at an end. The night wagons carried away on the next day nine corpses to the hospital cemetery, and thirty-seven to Montmartre.

Jeanty Sarre escaped by a miracle, as well as Charpentier, and a third whose name we have not been able to ascertain. They glided along the houses and reached the Passage du Saumon. The grated doors which closed the Passage during the night only reached to the centre of the archway. They climbed it and got over the spikes, at the risk of tearing themselves. Jeanty Sarre was the first to climb it; having reached the summit, one of the spikes pierced his trousers, hooked them, and Jeanty Sarre fell headforemost upon the pavement. He got up again, he was only stunned. The other two followed him, and gliding along the bars, all three found themselves in the Passage. It was dimly lighted by a lamp which shone at one end. In the meanwhile, they heard the soldiers, who were pursuing them, coming up. In order to escape by the Rue Montmartre, they would have to climb the grated gateway at the other end of the Passage; their hands were grazed, their knees were bleeding; they were dying of weariness; they were in no condition to recommence a similar ascent.

Jeanty Sarre knew where the keeper of the Passage lived. He knocked at his window, and begged him to open. The keeper refused.

At this moment the detachment which had been sent in pursuit of them reached the grated gateway which they had just climbed. The soldiers, hearing a noise in the Passage, passed the barrels of their guns through the bars. Jeanty Sarre squeezed himself against the wall behind one of those projecting columns which decorate the Passage; but the column was very thin, and only half covered him. The soldiers fired, and smoke filled the Passage. When it cleared away, Jeanty Sarre saw Charpentier stretched on the stones, with his face to the ground. He had been shot through the heart. Their other companion lay a few paces from him, mortally wounded.

The soldiers did not scale the grated gateway, but they posted a sentinel before it. Jeanty Sarre heard them going away by the Rue Montmartre. They would doubtless come back.

No means of flight. He felt all the doors round his prison successively. One of them at length opened. This appeared to him like a miracle. Whoever could have forgotten to shut the door? Providence, doubtless. He hid himself behind it, and remained there for more than an hour, standing motionless, scarcely breathing. He no longer heard any sound; he ventured out. The sentinel was no longer there. The detachment had rejoined the battalion.

One of his old friends, a man to whom he had rendered services such as are not forgotten, lived in this very Passage du Saumon. Jeanty Sarre looked for the number, woke the porter, told him the name of his friend, was admitted, went up the stairs, and knocked at the door. The door was opened, his friend appeared in his nightshirt, with a candle in his hand.

He recognized Jeanty Sarre, and cried out, “You here! What a state you are in! Where hove you come from? From what riot? from what madness? And then you come to compromise us all here? To have us murdered? To have us shot? Now then, what do you want with me?”

“I want you to give me a brush down,” said Jeanty Sarre.

His friend took a brush and brushed him, and Jeanty Sarre went away.

While going down the stairs, Jeanty Sarre cried out to his friend,

“Thanks!”

Such is the kind of hospitality which we have since received in Belgium, in Switzerland, and even in England.

The next day, when they took up the bodies they found on Charpentier a note-book and a pencil, and upon Denis Dussoubs a letter. A letter to a woman. Even these stoic souls love.

On the 1st of December, Denis Dussoubs began this letter. He did not finish it. Here it is: —

“MY DEAR MARIE,

“Have you experienced that sweet pain of feeling regret for him who regrets you? For myself since I left you I have known no other affliction than that of thinking of you. Even in my affliction itself there was something sweet and tender, and although I was troubled, I was nevertheless happy to feel in the depths of my heart how greatly I loved you by the regret which you cost me. Why are we separated? Why have I been forced to fly from you? For we were so happy! When I think of our little evenings so free from constraint, of our gay country chats with your sisters, I feel myself seized with a bitter regret. Did we not love each other clearly, my darling? We had no secret from each other because we had no need to have one, and our lips uttered the thoughts of our hearts without our thinking to keep anything back.

“God has snatched away from us all these blessings, and nothing will console me for having lost them; do you not lament with me the evils of absence?

“How seldom we see those whom we love! Circumstances take us far from them, and our soul tormented and attracted out of ourselves lives in a perpetual anguish. I feel this sickness of absence. I imagine myself wherever you are. I follow your work with my eyes, or I listen to your words, seated beside you and seeking to divine the word which you are about to utter; your sisters sew by our side. Empty dreams — illusions of a moment — my hand seeks yours; where are you, my beloved one?

“My life is an exile. Far from those whom I love and by whom I am loved, my heart calls them and consumes away in its grief. No, I do not love the great cities and their noise, towns peopled with strangers where no one knows you and where you know no one, where each one jostles and elbows the other without ever exchanging a smile. But I love our quiet fields, the peace of home, and the voice of friends who greet you. Up to the present I have always lived in contradiction with my nature; my fiery blood, my nature so hostile to injustice, the spectacle of unmerited miseries have thrown me into a struggle of which I do not foresee the issue, a struggle in which will remain to the end without fear and without reproach, that which daily breaks me down and consumes my life.

“I tell you, my much-loved darling, the secret miseries of my heart; no, I do not blush for what my hand has just written, but my heart is sick and suffering, and I tell it to you. I suffer… I wish to blot out these lines, but why? Could they offend you? What do they contain that could wound my darling? Do I not know your affection, and do I not know that you love me? Yes, you have not deceived me, I did not kiss a lying mouth; when seated on my knees you lulled me with the charm of your words, I believed you. I wished to bind myself to a burning iron bar; weariness preys upon me and devours me. I feel a maddening desire to recover life. Is it Paris that produces this effect upon me? I always yearn to be in places where I am not. I live here to a complete solitude. I believe you, Marie….”

Charpentier’s note-book only contained this line, which he had written in the darkness at the foot of the barricade while Denis Dussoubs was speaking: —

Admonet et magna testatur voce per umbras.

February 18. Louvain.

CHAPTER V.

OTHER DEEDS OF DARKNESS

Yvan had again seen Conneau. He corroborated the information given in the letter of Alexandre Dumas to Bocage; with the fact we had the names. On the 3d of December at M. Abbatucci's house, 31, Rue Caumartin, in the presence of Dr. Conneau and of Piétri, a Corsican, born at Vezzani, named Jacques François Criscelli, a man attached to the secret and personal service of Louis Bonaparte, had received from Piétri's own mouth the offer of 25,000 francs "to take or kill Victor Hugo." He had accepted, and said, "That is all very well if I am alone. But suppose there are two of us?"

Piétri had answered, —

"Then there will be 50,000 francs."

This communication, accompanied by urgent prayers, had been made to me by Yvan in the Rue de Monthabor, while we were still at Dupont White's.

This said, I continue my story.

The massacre of the 4th did not produce the whole of its effect until the next day, the 5th. The impulse given by us to the resistance still lasted for some hours, and at nightfall, in the labyrinth of houses ranging from the Rue du Petit Carreau to the Rue du Temple, there was fighting. The Pagevin, Neuve Saint Eustache, Montorgueil, Rambuteau, Beaubourg, and Transnonain barricades were gallantly defended. There, there was an impenetrable network of streets and crossways barricaded by the People, surrounded by the Army.

The assault was merciless and furious.

The barricade of the Rue Montorgueil was one of those which held out the longest. A battalion and artillery was needed to carry it. At the last moment it was only defended by three men, two shop-clerks and a lemonade-seller of an adjoining street. When the assault began the night was densely dark, and the three combatants escaped. But they were surrounded. No outlets. Not one door was open. They climbed the grated gateway of the Passage Verdeau as Jeanty Sarre and Charpentier had scaled the Passage du Saumon, had jumped over, and had fled down the Passage. But the other grated gateway was closed, and like Jeanty Sarre and

Charpentier they had no time to climb it. Besides, they heard the soldiers corning on both sides. In a corner at the entrance of the Passage there were a few planks which had served to close a stall, and which the stall-keeper was in the habit of putting there. They hid themselves beneath these planks.

The soldiers who had taken the barricade, after having searched the streets, bethought themselves of searching the Passage. They also climbed over the grated gateway, looked about everywhere with lanterns, and found nothing They were going away, when one of them perceived the foot of one of these three unfortunate men which was projecting from beneath the planks.

They killed all three of them on the spot with bayonet-thrusts. They cried out, “Kill us at once! Shoot us! Do not prolong our misery.”

The neighboring shop-keepers heard these cries, but dared not open their doors or their windows, for fear, as one of them said the next day, “that they should do the same to them.”

The execution at an end, the executioners left the three victims lying in a pool of blood on the pavement of the Passage. One of those unfortunate men did not die until eight o’clock next morning.

No one had dared to ask for mercy; no one had dared to bring any help.

They left them to die there.

One of the combatants of the Rue Beaubourg was more fortunate. They were pursuing him. He rushed up a staircase, reached a roof, and from there a passage, which proved to be the top corridor of an hotel. A key was in the door. He opened it boldly, and found himself face to face with a man who was going to bed. It was a tired-out traveller who had arrived at the hotel that very evening. The fugitive said to the traveller, “I am lost, save me!” and explained him the situation in three words.

The traveller said to him, “Undress yourself, and get into my bed.” And then he lit a cigar, and began quietly to smoke. Just as the man of the barricade had got into bed a knock came at the door. It was the solders who were searching the house. To the questions which they asked him the traveller answered, pointing to the bed, “We are only two here. We have just arrived here. I am smoking my cigar, and my brother is asleep.” The waiter was questioned, and confirmed the traveller’s statement. The soldiers went away, and no one was shot.

We will say this, that the victorious soldiers killed less than on the preceding day. They did not massacre in all the captured barricades. The order had been given on that day to make prisoners. It might also be believed that a certain humanity existed. What was this humanity? We shall see.

At eleven o’clock at night all was at an end.

They arrested all those whom they found in the streets which had been surrounded, whether combatants or not, they had all the wine-shops and the *cafés* opened, they closely searched the houses, they seized all the men whom they could find, only leaving the women and the children. Two regiments formed in a square carried away all these prisoners huddled together. They took them to the Tuileries, and shut them up in the vast cellar situated beneath the terrace at the waterside.

On entering this cellar the prisoners felt reassured. They called to mind that in June, 1848, a great number of insurgents had been shut up there, and later on had been transported. They said to themselves that doubtless they also would be transported, or brought before the Councils of War, and that they had plenty of time before them.

They were thirsty. Many of them had been fighting since that morning, and nothing parches tire mouth so much as biting cartridges. They asked for drink. Three pitchers of water were brought to them.

A sort of security suddenly fell upon them. Amongst them were several who had been transported in June, 1848, and who had already been in that cellar, and who said, “In June they were not so humane. They left us for three days without food or drink.” Some of them wrapped themselves up in their overcoats or cloaks, lay down, and slept. At one o’clock in the morning a great noise was heard outside. Soldiers, carrying torches, appeared in the cellars, the prisoners who were sleeping woke with a start, an officer ordered them to get up.

They made them go out anyhow as they had come in. As they went out they coupled them two by two at random, and a sergeant counted them in a loud voice. They asked neither their names, nor their professions, nor their families, nor who they were, nor whence they came; they contented themselves with the numbers. The numbers sufficed for what they were about to do.

In this manner they counted 337. The counting having come to an end, they ranged them in close columns, still two by two and arm-in-arm. They were not tied together, but on each side of the column, on the right and on the left, there were three files of soldiers keeping them within their ranks, with guns loaded; a battalion was at their head, a battalion in their rear. They began to march, pressed together and enclosed in this moving frame of bayonets.

At the moment when the column set forward, a young law-student, a fair pale Alsatian, of some twenty years, who was in their ranks, asked a captain, who was marching by him with his sword drawn, —

“Where are we going?”

The officer made no reply.

Having left the Tuileries, they turned to the right, and followed the quay as far as the Pont de la Concorde. They crossed the Pont de la Concorde, and again turned to the right. In this manner they passed before the esplanade of the Invalides, and reached the lonely quay of Gros-Caillou.

As we have just said, they numbered 337, and as they walked two by two, there was one, the last, who walked alone. He was one of the most daring combatants of the Rue Pagevin, a friend of Lecomte the younger. By chance the sergeant, who was posted in the inner file by his side, was a native of the same province. On passing under a street-lamp they recognized each other. They exchanged quickly a few words in a whisper.

“Where are we going?” asked the prisoner.

“To the military school,” answered the sergeant. And he added, “Ah! my poor lad!”

And then he kept at a distance from the prisoner.

As this was the end of the column, there was a certain space between the last rank of the soldiers who formed the line, and the first rank of the company which closed the procession.

As they reached the lonely boulevard of Gros-Caillon, of which we have just spoken, the sergeant drew near to the prisoner, and said to him in a rapid and low tone, —

“One can hardly see here. It is a dark spot. On the left there are trees. Be off!”

“But,” said the prisoner, “they will fire at me.”

“They will miss you.”

“But suppose they kill me?”

“It will be no worse than what awaits you.”

The prisoner understood, shook the sergeant’s hand, and taking advantage of the space between the line of soldiers and rear-ground, rushed with a single bound outside the column, and disappeared in the darkness beneath the trees.

“A man is escaping!” cried out the officer who commanded the last company. “Halt! Fire!”

The column halted. The rear-guard company fired at random in the direction taken by the fugitive, and, as the sergeant had foreseen, missed him. In a few moments the fugitive had reached the streets adjoining the tobacco manufactory, and had plunged into them. They did not pursue him. They had more pressing work on hand.

Besides, confusion might have arisen in their ranks, and to recapture one they risked letting the 336 escape.

The column continued its march. Having reached the Pont d’Iéna, they turned to the left, and entered into the Champ de Mars.

There they shot them all.

These 336 corpses were amongst those which were carried to Montmartre

Cemetery, and which were buried there with their heads exposed.

In this manner their families were enabled to recognize them. The

Government learned who they were after killing them.

Amongst these 336 victims were a large number of the combatants of the Rue Pagevin and the Rue Rambuteau, of the Rue Neuve Saint Eustache and the Porte Saint Denis. There were also 100 passers-by, whom they had arrested because they happened to be there, and without any particular reason.

Besides, we will at once mention that the wholesale executions from the 3d inst. were renewed nearly every night. Sometimes at the Champ de Mars, sometimes at the Prefecture of Police, sometimes at both places at once.

When the prisons were full, M. de Maupas said “Shoot!” The fusillades at the Prefecture took place sometimes in the courtyard, sometimes in the Rue de Jérusalem. The unfortunate people whom they shot were placed against the wall which bears the theatrical notices. They had chosen this spot because it is close by the sewer-grating of the gutter, so that the blood would run down at once, and would leave fewer traces. On Friday, the 5th, they shot near this gutter of the Rue de Jérusalem 150 prisoners. Some one said to me, “On the next day I passed by there, they showed the spot; I dug between the paving-stones with the toe of my boot, and I stirred up the mud. I found blood."

This expression forms the whole history of the *coup d'état*, and will form the whole history of Louis Bonaparte. Stir up this mud, you will find blood.

Let this then be known to History: —

The massacre of the boulevard had this infamous continuation, the secret executions. The *coup d'état* after having been ferocious became mysterious. It passed from impudent murder in broad day to hidden murder at night.

Evidence abounds.

Esquiros, hidden in the Gros-Caillou, heard the fusillades on the Champ de Mars every night.

At Mazas, Chambolle, on the second night of his incarceration, heard from midnight till five o'clock in the morning, such volleys that he thought the prison was attacked.

Like Montferrier, Desmoulins bore evidence to blood between the paving-stones of the Rue de Jérusalem.

Lieutenant-Colonel Cailland, of the ex-Republican Guard, is crossing the Pont Neuf; he sees some *sergents de ville* with muskets to their shoulders, aiming at the passers-by; he says to them, "You dishonor the uniform." They arrest him. They search him. A *sergent de ville* says to him, "If we find a cartridge upon you, we shall shoot you." They find nothing. They take him to the Prefecture of Police, they shut him up in the station-house. The director of the station-house comes and says to him, "Colonel, I know you well. Do not complain of being here. You are confided to my care. Congratulate yourself on it. Look here, I am one of the family, I go and I come, I see, I listen; I know what is going on; I know what is said; I divine what is not said. I hear certain noises during the night; I see contain traces in the morning. As for myself I am not a bad fellow. I am taking care of you. I am keeping you out of the way. At the present moment be contented to remain with me. If you were not here you would be underground."

An ex-magistrate, General Leflô's brother-in-law, is conversing on the Pont de la Concorde with some officers before the steps of the Chamber; some policemen come up to him: "You are tampering with the army." He protests, they throw him into a vehicle, and they take him to the Prefecture of Police. As he arrives there he sees a young man, in a blouse and a cap, passing on the quay, who is being shoved along by three municipal guards with the butt-ends of their muskets. At an opening of the parapet, a guard shouts to him, “Go in there.” The man goes in. Two guards shoot him in the back. He falls. The third guard despatches him with a shot in his ear.

On the 13th the massacres were not yet at an end. On the morning of that day, in the dim light of the dawn, a solitary passer-by, going along the Rue Saint Honoré, saw, between two lines of horse-soldiers, three wagons wending their way, heavily loaded. These wagons could be traced by the stains of blood which dripped from them. They came from the Champ de Mars, and were going to the Montmartre Cemetery. They were full of corpses.

It was this same Criscelli, who later on at Vaugirard in the Rue du Trancy, killed by special order of the Prefect of Police a man named Kech, “suspected of plotting the assassination of the Emperor.”

The Marquis Sarrazin de Montferrier, a relative of my eldest brother. I can now mention his name.

CHAPTER VI.

THE CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE

Al danger being over, all scruples vanished. Prudent and wise people could now give their adherence to the *coup d'état*, they allowed their names to be posted up.

Here is the placard:

"FRENCH REPUBLIC.

"*In the name of the French People*.

"The President of the Republic,

"Wishing, until the reorganization of the Legislative Body and the Council of State, to be surrounded by men who justly possess the esteem and the confidence of the country,

"Has created a Consultative committee, which is composed of MM. —

"Abbatucci, ex-Councillor of the Court of Cassation (of the Loiret).
General Achard (of the Moselle).
André, Ernest (of the Seine).
André (of the Charente).
D'Argout, Governor of the Bank, ex-Minister.
General Arrighi of Padua (of Corsica).
General de Bar (of the Seine).
General Baraguay-d'Hilliers (of Doubs).
Barbaroux, ex-Procureur-General (of the Réunion).
Baroche, ex-Minister of the Interior and of Foreign Affairs,
Vice-President of the Committee (of the Charente-Inférieure).
Barret (Ferdinand), ex-Minister (of the Seine).
Barthe, ex-Minister, first President (of the Cour de Comptes).
Bataille (of the Haute-Vienne).
Bavoux (Evariste) (of the Seine-et-Marne).
De Beaumont (of the Somme).
Bérard (of the Lot-et-Garonne).
Berger, Prefect of the Seine (of Puy-de-Dôme).
Bertrand (of the Yonne).
Bidault (of the Cher).
Bigrel (of the Côtes-du-Nord).

Billault, barrister.
Bineau, ex-Minister (of the Maine-et-Loire).
Boinvilliers, ex-President of the body of barristers (of the Seine).
Bonjean, Attorney-General of the Court of Cassation (of the Drome).
Boulatignier.
Bourbousson (of Vaucluse).
Bréhier (of the Manche).
De Cambacérès (Hubert).
De Cambacérès (of the Aisne).
Carlier, ex-Prefect of Police.
De Casabianca, ex-Minister (of Corsica).
General de Castellane, Commander-in-Chief at Lyons.
De Caulaincourt (of Calvados).
Vice-Admiral Cécile (of the Seine-Inférieure).
Chadenet (of the Meuse).
Charlemagne (of the Indre).
Chassaigne-Goyon (of Puy de Dôme).
General de Chasseloup-Laubat (of the Seine-Inférieure).
Prosper de Chasseloup-Laubat (Charente-Inférieure).
Chaix d’Est-Ange, Barrister of Paris (of the Marne).
De Chazelles, Mayor of Clermont-Ferrand (of Puy-de-Dôme).
Collas (of the Gironde).
De Crouseilhes, ex-Councillor of the Court of Cassation, ex-Minister (of the Basses-Pyrénées).
Curial (of the Orne).
De Cuverville (of the Côtes-du-Nord).
Dabeaux (of the Haute-Garonne).
Dariste (of the Basses-Pyrénées).
Daviel, ex-Minister.
Delacoste, ex-Commissary-General (of the Rhône).
Delajus (of the Charente-Inférieure).
Delavau (of the Indre).
Deltheil (of the Lot).
Denjoy (of the Gironde).
Desjobert (of the Seine-Inférieure).
Desmaroux (of the Allier).
Drouyn de Lhuys, ex-Minister (of the Seine-et-Marne).

Théodore Ducos, Minister of the Marine and of the Colonies (of the Seine).
Dumas (of the Institut) ex-Minister (of the Nord).
Charles Dupin, of the Institut (of the Seine-Inférieure).
General Durrieu (of the Landes).
Maurice Duval, ex-Prefect.
Eschassériaux (of the Charente-Inférieure).
Marshal Excelmans, Grand Chancellor of the Legion of Honor.
Ferdinand Favre (of the Loire-Inférieure) General de Flahaut, ex-Ambassador.
Fortoul, Minister of Public Instruction (of the Basses-Alpes).
Achille Fould, Minister of Finance (of the Seine).
De Fourment (of the Somme).
Fouquier-d’Hérouël (of the Aisne).
Fremy (of the Yonne).
Furtado (of the Seine).
Gasc (of the Haute Garonne).
Gaslonde (of the Manche).
De Gasparin (ex-Minister).
Ernest de Girardin (of the Charente).
Augustin Giraud (of Maine-et-Loire).
Charles Giraud, of the Institut, member of the Court of Public Instruction, ex-Minister.
Godelle (of the Aisne).
Goulhot de Saint-Germain (of the Manche).
General de Grammont (of the Loire).
De Grammont (of the Haute-Saône).
De Greslan (of the Réunion).
General de Grouchy (of the Gironde).
Kallez Claparède (of the Bas-Rhin).
General d’Hautpoul, ex-Minister (of the Aude).
Hébert (of the Aisne).
De Heeckeren (of the Haut-Rhin).
D’Hérembault (of the Pas-de-Calais).
Hermann.
Heurtier (of the Loire).
General Husson (of the Aube).

Janvier (of the Tarn-et-Garonne).
Lacaze (of the Hautes-Pyrénées).
Lacrosse, ex-Minister (of Finistère).
Ladoucette (of the Moselle).
Frédéric de Lagrange (of the Gers).
De Lagrange (of the Gironde).
General de La Hitte, ex-Minister.
Delangle, ex-Attorney-General.
Lanquetin, President of the Municipal Commission.
De la Riboissière (of Ille-et-Vilaine).
General Lawoestine.
Lebeuf (of the Seine-et-Marne).
Genéral Lebreton (of the Eure-et-Loir).
Le Comte (of the Yonne).
Le Conte (of the Côtes-du-Nord).
Lefebvre-Duruflé, Minister of Commerce (of the Eure).
Lélut (of the Haute-Saône).
Lemarois (of the Manche).
Lemercier (of the Charente). Lequien (of the Pas-de-Calais).
Lestiboudois (of the Nord).
Levavasseur (of the Seine-Inférieure).
Le Verrier (of the Manche).
Lezay de Marnésia (of Loir-et-Cher).
General Magnan, Commander-in-chief of the Army of Paris.
Magne, Minister of Public Works (of the Dordogne).
Edmond Maigne (of the Dordogne).
Marchant (of the Nord).
Mathieu Bodet, Barrister at the Court of Cassation.
De Maupas, Prefect of Police.
De Mérode (of the Nord).
Mesnard, President of the Chamber of the Court of Cassation.
Meynadier, ex-Prefect (of the Lozère).
De Montalembert (of the Doubs).
De Morny (of the Puy-de-Dôme).
De Mortemart (of the Seine-Inférieure).
De Mouchy (of the Oise).
De Moustiers (of the Doubs).

Lucien Murat (of the Lot).
General d’Ornano (of the Indre-et-Loire).
Pepin Lehalleur (of the Seine-et-Marne).
Joseph Périer, Governor of the Bank.
De Persigny (of the Nord).
Pichon, Mayor of Arras (of the Pas de Calais).
Portalis, First President of the Court of Cassation.
Pongerard, Mayor of Pennes (of the Ille-et-Vilaine).
General de Préval.
De Rancé (of Algeria).
General Randon, ex-Minister, Governor-General of Algeria.
General Regnauld de Saint-Jean-d’Angély, ex-Minister (of the Charente-Inférieure).
Renouard de Bussière (of the Bas-Rhin).
Renouard (of the Lozère).
General Rogé.
Rouher, Keeper of the Seals, Minister of Justice (of the Puy-de-Dôme).
De Royer, ex-Minister, Attorney-General at the Court of Appeal of Paris.
General de Saint-Arnaud, Minister of War.
De Saint-Arnaud, Barrister at the Court of Appeal of Paris.
De Salis (of the Moselle).
Sapey (of the Isère).
Schneider, ex-Minister.
De Ségur d’Aguesseau (of the Hautes-Pyréneés).
Seydoux (of the Nord).
Amédée Thayer.
Thieullen (of the Côtes-du-Nord).
De Thorigny, ex-Minister.
Toupot de Béveaux (of the Haute-Marne).
Tourangin, ex-Prefect. Troplong, First President of the Court of Appeal.
De Turgot, Minister for Foreign Affairs.
Vaillant, Marshal of France.
Vaisse, ex-Minister (of the Nord).
De Vandeul (of the Haute-Marne).
General Vast-Vimeux (of the Charente-Inférieure).

Vauchelle, Mayor of Versailles.
Viard (of the Meurthe).
Vieillard (of the Manche).
Vuillefroy.
Vuitry, Under-Secretary of State at the Ministry of Finance De Wagram.

"The President of the Republic,

"LOUIS NAPOLEON BONAPARTE.

"Minister of the Interior, DE MORNY."

The name of Bourbousson is found on this list.

It would be a pity if this name were lost.

At the same time as this placard appeared the protest of M. Daru, as follows: —

"I approve of the proceedings of the National Assembly at the Mairie of the Tenth Arrondissement on the 2d of December, 1851, in which I was hindered from participating by force.

"DARU."

Some of these members of the Consultative Committee came from Mazas or from Mount Valerien. They had been detained in a cell for four-and-twenty hours, and then released. It may be seen that these legislators bore little malice to the man who had made them undergo this disagreeable taste of the law.

Many of the personages comprised in this menagerie possessed no other renown but the outcry caused by their debts, clamoring around them. Such a one had been twice declared bankrupt, but this extenuating circumstance was added, "not under his own name:" Another who belonged to a literary or scientific circle was reputed to have sold his vote. A third, who was handsome, elegant, fashionable, dandified, polished, gilded, embroidered, owed his prosperity to a connection which indicated a filthiness of soul.

Such people as these gave their adherence with little hesitation to the deed which "saved society."

Some others, amongst those who composed this mosaic, possessed no political enthusiasm, and merely consented to figure in this list in order to keep their situations and their salaries; they were under the Empire what they had been before the Empire, neuters, and during the nineteen years of the reign, they continued to exercise their military, judicial, or administrative functions unobtrusively, surrounded with the right and proper respect due to inoffensive idiots.

Others were genuine politicians, belonging to that learned school which begins with Guizot, and does not finish with Parieu, grave physicians of social order, who reassure the frightened middle-classes, and who preserve dead things.

“Shall I lose my eye?” asked Messer Pancrace.

“Not at all, my friend, I hold it in my hand.”

In this quasi Council of State there were a goodly number of men of the Police, a race of beings then held in esteem, Carlier, Piétri, Maupas, etc.

Shortly after the 2d of December under the title of Mixed Commissions, the police substituted itself for justice, drew up judgments, pronounced sentences, violated every law judicially without the regular magistracy interposing the slightest obstacle to this irregular magistracy: Justice allowed the police to do what it liked with the satisfied look of a team of horses which had just been relieved.

> Some of the men inscribed on the list of this commission refused: Léon Faucher Goulard, Mortemart, Frédéric Granier, Marchand, Maillard Paravay, Beugnot. The newspapers received orders not to publish these refusals.

M. Beugnot inscribed on his card: “Count Beugnot, who does not belong to the Consultative Committee.”

M. Joseph Périer went from corner to corner of the streets, pencil in hand, scratching out his name from all the placards, saying, “I shall take back my name wherever I find it.”

General Baraguay d’Hilliers did not refuse. A brave soldier nevertheless; he had lost an arm in the Russian war. Later on, he has been Marshall of France; he deserved better than to have been created a Marshal by Louis Bonaparte. It did not appear likely that he would have come to this. During the last days of November General Baraguay d’Hilliers, seated in a large arm-chair before the high fireplace of the Conference Hall of the National Assembly, was warming himself; some one, one of his colleagues, he who is writing these lines, sat down near him on the other side of the fireplace. They did not speak to each other, one belonging to the Right, the other to the Left; but M. Piscatory came in, who belonged a little to the Right and a little to the Left. He addressed himself to Baraguay d’Hilliers: “Well, general, do you know what they are saying?”

“What?”

“That one of these days the President will shut the door in our faces.”

General Baraguay d’Hilliers answered, and I heard the answer,— “If M. Bonaparte should close the door of the Assembly against us, France will fling it wide open again.”

Louis Bonaparte at one moment thought of entitling this committee the “Executive Commission.” “No,” said Morny to him, “that would be to credit them with courage. They will willingly be supporters; they will not be proscribers.”

General Rulhière was dismissed for having blamed the passive obedience of the army.

Let us here mention an incident. Some days after the 4th of December,

Emmanuel Arago met M. Dupin, who was going up the Faubourg Saint Honoré.

“What!” said Arago, “are you going to the Elysée?”

M. Dupin answered, “I never go to disreputable houses.”

Yet he went there.

M. Dupin, it may be remembered, was appointed Attorney-General at the

Court of Cessation.

CHAPTER VII.

THE OTHER LIST

Opposite to the list of adherents should be placed the list of the proscribed. In this manner the two sides of the *coup d'état* can be seen at a glance.

"DECREE.

"ARTICLE I. — The ex-Representatives of the Assembly, whose names are found beneath, are expelled from French territory, from Algeria, and from the Colonies, for the sake of public safety: —

"Edmond Valentine. Charrassin.
Paul Racouchot. Bandsept.
Agricol Perdiguier. Savoye.
Eugène Cholat. Joly.
Louis Latrade. Combier.
Michel Renaud. Boysset.
Joseph Benoist (du Rhône). Duché.
Joseph Burgard. Ennery.
Jean Colfavru. Guilgot.
Joseph Faure (du Rhone). Hochstuhl.
Pierre-Charles Gambon. Michot Boutet.
Charles Lagrange. Baune.
Martin Nadaud. Bertholon.
Barthélemy Terrier. Schoelcher.
Victor Hugo. De Flotte.
Cassal. Joigneaux.
Signard. Laboulaye.
Viguier. Bruys.
Esquiros. Gaston Dussoubs.
Madier de Montjau. Guiter.
Noël Parfait. Lafon.
Emile Péan. Lamarque.
Pelletier. Pierre Lafranc.
Raspail. Jules Leroux.
Théodore Bac. Francisque Maigne.
Bancel. Malardier.

Belin (Drôme). Mathieu (de la Drôme).
Bosse. Millotte.
Bourzat. Roselli-Mollet.
Brive. Charras.
Chavoix. Saint-Ferreol.
Clément Dulac. Sommier.
Dupout (de Bussac). Testelin (Nord).

“ARTICLE II. — In the event, contrary to the present decree, of one of the persons named in Article I. re-entering the prohibited limits, he may be transported for the sake of public safety.

“Given at the Palace of the Tuileries, at the Cabinet Council assembled, January 9th, 1852.

“LOUIS BONAPARTE.

“DE MORNY, Minister of the Interior.”

There was besides a list of the “provisionally exiled,” on which figured Edward Quinet, Victor Chauffour, General Laidet, Pascal Duprat, Versigny, Antony Thouret, Thiers, Girardin, and Rémusat. Four Representatives, Mathé, Greppo, Marc-Dufraisse, and Richardet, were added to the list of the “expelled.” Representative Miot was reserved for the tortures of the casemates of Africa. Thus in addition to the massacres, the victory of the *coup d’état* was paid for by these figures: eighty-eight Representatives proscribed, one killed.

I usually dined at Brussels in a café, called the Café des Mille Colonnes, which was frequented by the exiles. On the 10th of January I had invited Michel de Bourges to lunch, and we were sitting at the same table. The waiter brought me the *Moniteur Français*; I glanced over it.

“Ah,” said I, “here is the list of the proscribed.” I ran my eye over it, and I said to Michel de Bourges, “I have a piece of bad news to tell you.” Michel de Bourges turned pale. I added, “You are not on the list.” His face brightened.

Michel de Bourges, so dauntless in the face of death, was faint-hearted in the face of exile.

CHAPTER VIII.

DAVID D’ANGERS

Brutalities and ferocities were mingled together. The great sculptor, David d’Angers, was arrested in his own house, 16, Rue d’Assas; the Commissary of Police on entering, said to him, —

“Have you any arms in your house?”

“Yes,” Said David, “for my defence.”

And he added, —

“If I had to deal with civilized people.”

“Where are these arms?” rejoined the Commissary. “Let us see them.”

David showed him his studio full of masterpieces.

They placed him in a *fiacre*, and drove him to the station-house of the Prefecture of Police.

Although there was only space for 120 prisoners, there were 700 there. David was the twelfth in a dungeon intended for two. No light nor air. A narrow ventilation hole above their heads. A dreadful tub in a corner, common to all, covered but not closed by a wooden lid. At noon they brought them soup, a sort of warm and stinking water, David told me. They stood leaning against the wall, and trampled upon the mattresses which had been thrown on the floor, not having room to lie down on them. At length, however, they pressed so closely to each other, that they succeeded in lying down at full length. Their jailers had thrown them some blankets. Some of them slept. At day break the bolts creaked, the door was half-opened and the jailers cried out to them, “Get up!” They went into the adjoining corridor, the jailer took up the mattresses, threw a few buckets of water on the floor, wiped it up anyhow, replaced the mattresses on the damp stones, and said to them, “Go back again.” They locked them up until the next morning. From time to time they brought in 100 new prisoners, and they fetched away 100 old ones (those who had been there for two or three days). What became of them? — At night the prisoners could hear from their dungeon the sound of explosions, and in the morning passers-by could see, as we have stated, pools of blood in the courtyard of the Prefecture.

The calling over of those who went out was conducted in alphabetical order.

One day they called David d’Angers. David took up his packet, and was getting ready to leave, when the governor of the jail, who seemed to be keeping watch over him, suddenly came up and said quickly, “Stay, M. David, stay.”

One morning he saw Buchez, the ex-President of the Constituent Assembly, coming into his cell “Ah!” said David, “good! you have come to visit the prisoners?”— “I am a prisoner,” said Buchez.

They wished to insist on David leaving for America. He refused. They contented themselves with Belgium. On the 19th December he reached Brussels. He came to see me, and said to me, “I am lodging at the Grand Monarque, 89, Rue des Fripiers.”

And he added laughing, “The Great Monarch — the King. The old clothesmen — the Royalists, ‘89. The Revolution.” Chance occasionally furnishes some wit.

Anglice, “old clothes men.”

CHAPTER IX.

OUR LAST MEETING

On the 3d of December everything was coming in in our favor. On the 5th everything was receding from us. It was like a mighty sea which was going out. The tide had come in gloriously, it went out disastrously. Gloomy ebb and flow of the people.

And who was the power who said to this ocean, “Thou shalt go no farther?”

Alas! a pigmy.

These hiding-places of the abyss are fathomless.

The abyss is afraid. Of what?

Of something deeper than itself. Of the Crime.

The people drew back. They drew back on the 5th; on the 6th they disappeared.

On the horizon there could be seen nothing but the beginning of a species of vast night.

This night has been the Empire.

We found ourselves on the 5th what we were on the 2d. Alone.

But we persevered. Our mental condition was this — desperate, yes; discouraged, no.

Items of bad news came to us as good news had come to us on the evening of the 3d, one after another. Aubry du Nord was at the Concièrgerie. Our dear and eloquent Crémieux was at Mazas. Louis Blanc, who, although banished, was coming to the assistance of France, and was bringing to us the great power of his name and of his mind, had been compelled, like Ledru Rollin, to halt before the catastrophe of the 4th. He had not been able to get beyond Tournay.

As for General Neumayer, he had not “marched upon Paris,” but he had come there. For what purpose? To give in his submission.

We no longer possessed a refuge. No. 15, Rue Richelieu, was watched, No. 11, Rue Monthabor, had been denounced. We wandered about Paris, meeting each other here and there, and exchanging a few words in a whisper, not knowing where we should sleep, or whether we should get a meal; and amongst those heads which did not know what pillow they should have at night there was at least one upon which a price was set.

They accosted each other, and this is the sort of conversation they held: —

“What has became of So-and-So?”

“He is arrested.”

“And So-and-So?”

“Dead.”

“And So-and-So?”

“Disappeared.”

We held, however, one other meeting. This was on the 6th, at the house of the Representative Raymond, in the Place de la Madeleine. Nearly all of us met there. I was enabled to shake the hands of Edgar Quinet, of Chauffour, of Clément Dulac, of Bancel, of Versigny, of Emile Péan, and I again met our energetic and honest host of the Rue Blanche, Coppens, and our courageous colleague, Pons Stande, whom we had lost sight of in the smoke of the battle. From the windows of the room where we were deliberating we could see the Place de la Madeleine and the Boulevards militarily occupied, and covered with a fierce and deep mass of soldiers drawn up in battle order, and which still seemed to face a possible combat. Charamaule came in.

He drew two pistols from his great cloak, placed them on the table, and said, “All is at an end. Nothing feasible and sensible remains, except a deed of rashness. I propose it. Are you of my opinion, Victor Hugo?”

“Yes,” I answered.

I did not know what he was going to say, but I knew that he would only say that which was noble.

This was his proposition.

“We number,” resumed he, “about fifty Representatives of the People, still standing and assembled together. We are all that remains of the National Assembly, of Universal Suffrage, of the Law, of Right. To-morrow, where shall we be? We do not know. Scattered or dead. The hour of to-day is ours; this hour gone and past, we have nothing left but the shadow. The opportunity is unique. Let us profit by it.”

He stopped, looked at us fixedly with his steadfast gaze, and resumed, —

“Let us take the advantage of this chance of being alive and the good fortune of being together. The group which is here is the whole of the

Republic. Well, then; let us offer in our persons all the Republic to the army, and let us make the army fall back before the Republic, and Might fall back before Right. In that supreme moment one of the two must tremble, Might or Right, and if Right does not tremble Might will tremble. If we do not tremble the soldiers will tremble. Let us march upon the Crime. If the Law advances, the Crime will draw back. In either case we shall have done our duty. Living, we shall be preservers, dead, we shall be heroes. This is what I propose."

A profound silence ensued.

"Let us put on our sashes, and let us all go down in a procession, two by two, into the Place de la Madeleine. You can see that Colonel before that large flight of steps, with his regiment in battle array; we will go to him, and there, before his soldiers, I will summon him to come over to the side of duty, and to restore his regiment to the Republic. If he refuses …"

Charamaule took his two pistols in his hands.

"… I will blow out his brains."

"Charamaule," said I, "I will be by your side."

"I knew that well," Charamaule said to me.

He added, —

"This explosion will awaken the people."

"But," several cried out, "suppose it does not awaken them?"

"We shall die."

"I am on your side," said I to him.

We each pressed the other's hand. But objections burst forth.

No one trembled, but all criticised the proposal. Would it not be madness? And useless madness? Would it not be to play the last card of the Republic without any possible chance of success? What good fortune for Bonaparte! To crush with one blow all that remained of those who were resisting and of those who were combating! To finish with them once for all! We were beaten, granted, but was it necessary to add annihilation to defeat? No possible chance of success. The brains of an army cannot be blown out. To do what Charamaule advised would be to open the tomb, nothing more. It would be a magnificent suicide, but it would be a suicide. Under certain circumstances it is selfish to be merely a hero. A man accomplishes it at once, he becomes illustrious, he enters into history, all that is very easy. He leaves to others behind him the laborious work of a long protest, the immovable resistance of the exile, the bitter, hard life of the conquered who continues to combat the victory. Some degree of patience forms a part of politics. To know how to await revenge is sometimes more difficult than to hurry on its catastrophe. There are two kinds of courage — bravery and perseverance; the first belongs to the soldier, the second belongs to the citizen. A hap-hazard end, however dauntless, does not suffice. To extricate oneself from the difficulty by death, it is only too easily done: what is required, what is the reverse of easy, is to extricate one's country from the difficulty. No, said those high-minded men, who opposed Charamaule and myself, this to-day which you propose to us is the suppression of to-morrow; take care, there is a certain amount of desertion in suicide….

The word "desertion" grievously wounded Charamaule. "Very well," said he,

"I abandon the idea."

This scene was exceedingly grand, and Quinet later on, when in exile, spoke to me of it with deep emotion.

We separated. We did not meet again.

I wandered about the streets. Where should I sleep? That was the question. I thought that No. 19, Rue Richelieu would probably be as much watched as No. 15. But the night was cold, and I decided at all hazards to re-enter this refuge, although perhaps a hazardous one. I was right to trust myself to it. I supped on a morsel of bread, and I passed a very good night. The next morning at daybreak on waking I thought of the duties which awaited me. I thought that I was abut to go out, and that I should probably not come back to the room; I took a little bread which remained, and I crumbled it on the window-sill for the birds.

CHAPTER X.

DUTY CAN HAVE TWO ASPECTS

Had it been in the power of the Left at any moment to prevent the *coup d'état*?

We do not think so.

Nevertheless here is a fact which we believe we ought not to pass by in silence. On the 16th November, 1851, I was in my study at home at 37, Rue de la Tour d'Auvergne; it was about midnight. I was working. My servant opened the door.

"Will you see M. —— , sir?"

And he mentioned a name.

"Yes," I said.

Some one came in.

I shall only speak reservedly of this eminent and distinguished man. Let it suffice to state that he had the right to say when mentioning the Bonapartes "my family."

It is known that the Bonaparte family is divided into two branches, the Imperial family and the private family. The Imperial family had the tradition of Napoleon, the private family had the tradition of Lucien: a shade of difference which, however, had no reality about it.

My midnight visitor took the other corner of the fireplace.

He began by speaking to me of the memoirs of a very highminded and virtuous woman, the Princess —— , his mother, the manuscript of which he had confided to me, asking my advice as to the utility or the suitability of their publication; this manuscript, besides being full of interest, possessed for me a special charm, because the handwriting of the Princess resembled my mother's handwriting. My visitor, to whom I gave it back, turned over the leaves for a few moments, and then suddenly interrupting himself, he turned to me and said, —

"The Republic is lost."

I answered, —

"Almost."

He resumed, —

"Unless you save it."

“I?”

“You.”

“How so?”

“Listen to me.”

Then he set forth with that clearness, complicated at times with paradoxes, which is one of the resources of his remarkable mind, the situation, at the same time desperate and strong, in which we were placed.

This situation, which moreover I realized as well as he himself, was this: —

The Right of the Assembly was composed of about 400 members, and the Left of about 180. The four hundred of the majority belonged by thirds to three parties, the Legitimist party, the Orleanist party, the Bonapartist party, and in a body to the Clerical party. The 180 of the minority belonged to the Republic. The Right mistrusted the Left, and had taken a precaution against the minority.

A Vigilance Committee, composed of sixteen members of the Right, charged with impressing unity upon this trinity of parties, and charged with the task of carefully watching the Left, such was this precaution. The Left at first had confined itself to irony, and borrowing from me a word to which people then attached, though wrongly, the idea of decrepitude, had called the sixteen Commissioners the “Burgraves.” The irony subsequently turning into suspicion, the Left had on its side ended by creating a committee of sixteen members to direct the Left, and observe the Right; these the Right had hastened to name the “Red Burgraves.” A harmless rejoinder. The result was that the Right watched the Left, and that the Left watched the Right, but that no one watched Bonaparte. They were two flocks of sheep so distrustful of one another that they forgot the wolf. During that time, in his den at the Elysée, Bonaparte was working. He was busily employing the time which the Assembly, the majority and the minority, was losing in mistrusting itself. As people feel the loosening of the avalanche, so they felt the catastrophe tottering in the gloom. They kept watch upon the enemy, but they did not turn their attention in the true direction. To know where to fix one’s mistrust is the secret of a great politician. The Assembly of 1851 did not possess this shrewd certainty of eyesight, their perspective was bad, each saw the future after his own fashion, and a sort of political short-sightedness blinded the Left as well as the Right; they were afraid, but not where fear was advisable; they were in the presence of a mystery, they had an ambuscade before them, but they sought it where it did not exist, and they did not perceive where it really lay. Thus it was that these two flocks of sheep, the majority, and the minority faced each other affrightedly, and while the leaders on one side and the guides on the other, grave and attentive, asked themselves anxiously what could be the mewing of the grumbling, of the Left on the one side, of the bleatings of the Right on the other, they ran the risk of suddenly feeling the four claws of the *coup d'état* fastened in their shoulders.

My visitor said to me,-

"You are one of the Sixteen!"

"Yes," answered I, smiling; "a 'Red Burgrave.'"

"Like me, a 'Red Prince.'"

And his smile responded to mine.

He resumed, —

"You have full powers?"

"Yes. Like the others."

And I added, —

"Not more than the others. The Left has no leaders."

He continued, —

"Yon, the Commissary of Police, is a Republican?'

"Yes."

"He would obey an order signed by you?"

"Possibly."

"*I* say, without doubt."

He looked at me fixedly.

"Well, then, have the President arrested this night."

It was now my turn to look at him.

"What do you mean?"

"What I say."

I ought to state that his language was frank, resolute, and self-convinced, and that during the whole of this conversation, and now, and always, it has given me the impression of honesty.

"Arrest the President!" I cried.

Then he set forth that this extraordinary enterprise was an easy matter; that the Army was undecided; that in the Army the African Generals counterpoised the President; that the National Guard favored the Assembly, and in the Assembly the Left; that Colonel Forestier answered for the 8th

Legion; Colonel Gressier for the 6th, and Colonel Howyne for the 5th; that at the order of the Sixteen of the Left there would be an immediate taking up of arms; that my signature would suffice; that, nevertheless, if I preferred to call together the Committee, in Secret Session, we could wait till the next day; that on the order from the Sixteen, a battalion would march upon the Elysée; that the Elysée apprehended nothing, thought only of offensive, and not of defensive measures, and accordingly would be taken by surprise; that the soldiers would not resist the National Guard; that the thing would be done without striking a blow; that Vincennes would open and close while Paris slept; that the President would finish his night there, and that France, on awakening, would learn the twofold good tidings: that Bonaparte was out of the fight, and France out of danger.

He added, —

"You can count on two Generals: Neumayer at Lyons, and Lawoëstyne at Paris."

He got up and leaned against the chimney-piece; I can still see him there, standing thoughtfully; and he continued:

"I do not feel myself strong enough to begin exile all over again, but I feel the wish to save my family and my country."

He probably thought he noticed a movement of surprise in me, for he accentuated and italicized these words.

"I will explain myself. Yes; I wish to save my family and my country. I bear the name of Napoleon; but as you know without fanaticism. I am a Bonaparte, but not a Bonapartist. I respect the name, but I judge it. It already has one stain. The Eighteenth Brumaire. Is it about to have another? The old stain disappeared beneath the glory; Austerlitz covered Brumaire. Napoleon was absolved by his genius. The people admired him so greatly that it forgave him. Napoleon is upon the column, there is an end of it, let them leave him there in peace. Let them not resuscitate him through his bad qualities. Let them not compel France to remember too much. This glory of Napoleon is vulnerable. It has a wound; closed, I admit. Do not let them reopen it. Whatever apologists may say and do, it is none the less true that by the Eighteenth of Brumaire Napoleon struck himself a first blow."

"In truth," said I, "it is ever against ourselves that we commit a crime."

"Well, then," he continued, "his glory has survived a first blow, a second will kill it. I do not wish it. I hate the first Eighteenth Brumaire; I fear the second. I wish to prevent it."

He paused again, and continued, —

"That is why I have come to you to-night. I wish to succor this great wounded glory. By the advice which I am giving you, if you can carry it out, if the Left carries it out, I save the first Napoleon; for if a second crime is superposed upon his glory, this glory would disappear. Yes, this name would founder, and history would no longer own it. I will go farther and complete my idea. I also save the present Napoleon, for he who as yet has no glory will only have come. I save his memory from an eternal pillory. Therefore, arrest him."

He was truly and deeply moved. He resumed, —

"As to the Republic, the arrest of Louis Bonaparte is deliverance for her. I am right, therefore, in saying that by what I am proposing to you I am saving my family and my country."

"But," I said to him, "what you propose to me is a *coup d'état*."

"Do you think so?"

"Without doubt. We are the minority, and we should commit an act which belongs to the majority. We are a part of the Assembly. We should be acting as though we were the entire Assembly. We who condemn all usurpation should ourselves become usurpers. We should put our hands upon a functionary whom the Assembly alone has the right of arresting. We, the defenders of the Constitution, we should break the Constitution. We, the men of the Law, we should violate the Law. It is a *coup d'état*."

"Yes, but a *coup d'état* for a good purpose."

"Evil committed for a good purpose remains evil."

"Even when it succeeds?"

"Above all when it succeeds."

"Why?"

"Because it then becomes an example."

"You do not then approve of the Eighteenth Fructidor?"

"No."

"But Eighteenth Fructidors prevent Eighteenth Brumaires."

"No. They prepare the way for them."

"But reasons of State exist?"

"No. What exists is the Law."

"The Eighteenth Fructidor has been accepted by exceedingly honest minds."

"I know that."

"Blanqui is in its favor, with Michelet."

"I am against it, with Barbès."

From the moral aspect I passed to the practical aspect.

"This said," resumed I, "let us examine your plan."

This plan bristled with difficulties. I pointed them out to him.

"Count on the National Guard! Why, General Lawoëstyne had not yet got command of it. Count on the Army? Why, General Neumayer was at Lyons, and not at Paris. Would he march to the assistance of the Assembly? What did we know about this? As for Lawoëstyne, was he not double-faced? Were they sure of him? Call to arms the 8th Legion? Forestier was no longer Colonel. The 5th and 6th? But Gressier and Howyne were only lieutenant-colonels, would these legions follow them? Order the Commissary Yon? But would he obey the Left alone? He was the agent of the Assembly, and consequently of the majority, but not of the minority. These were so many questions. But these questions, supposing them answered, and answered in the sense of success, was success itself the question? The question is never Success, it is always Right. But here, even if we had obtained success, we should not have Right. In order to arrest the President an order of the Assembly was necessary; we should replace the order of the Assembly by an act of violence of the Left. A scaling and a burglary; an assault by scaling-ladders on the constituted authority, a burglary on the Law. Now let us suppose resistance; we should shed blood. The Law violated leads to the shedding of blood. What is all this? It is a crime."

"No, indeed," he exclaimed, "it is the *salus populi*."

And he added, —

"*Suprema Lex*."

"Not for me," I said.

I continued, —

"I would not kill a child to save a people."

"Cato did so."

"Jesus did not do so."

And I added, —

"You have on your side all ancient history, you are acting according to the uprightness of the Greeks, and according to the uprightness of the Romans; for me, I am acting according to the uprightness of Humanity. The new horizon is of wider range than the old."

There was a pause. He broke it.

"Then he will be the one to attack!"

"Let it be so."

"You are about to engage in a battle which is almost lost beforehand."

"I fear so."

"And this unequal combat can only end for you, Victor Hugo, in death or exile."

"I believe it."

"Death is the affair of a moment, but exile is long."

"It is a habit to be learned."

He continued, —

"You will not only be proscribed. You will be calumniated."

"It is a habit already learned."

He continued, —

"Do you know what they are saying already?"

"What?"

"They say that you are irritated against him because he has refused to make you a Minister."

"Why you know yourself that—"

"I know that it is just the reverse. It is he who has asked you, and it is you who have refused."

"Well, then—"

"They lie."

"What does it matter?"

He exclaimed, —

"Thus, you will have caused the Bonapartes to re-enter France, and you will be banished from France by a Bonaparte!"

"Who knows," said I, "if I have not committed a fault? This injustice is perhaps a justice."

We were both silent. He resumed, —

"Could you bear exile?"

"I will try."

"Could you live without Paris?"

"I should have the ocean."

"You would then go to the seaside?"

"I think so."

"It is sad."

"It is grand."

There was another pause. He broke it.

"You do not know what exile is. I do know it. It is terrible. Assuredly, I would not begin it again. Death is a bourne whence no one comes back, exile is a place whither no one returns."

"If necessary," I said to him, "I will go, and I will return to it."

"Better die. To quit life is nothing, but to quit one's country—"

"Alas!" said I, "that is every thing."

"Well, then, why accept exile when it is in your power to avoid it? What do you place above your country?"

"Conscience."

This answer made him thoughtful. However, he resumed.

"But on reflection your conscience will approve of what you will have done."

"No."

"Why?"

"I have told you. Because my conscience is so constituted that it puts nothing above itself. I feel it upon me as the headland can feel the lighthouse which is upon it. All life is an abyss, and conscience illuminates it around me."

"And I also," he exclaimed — and I affirm that nothing could be more sincere or more loyal than his tone— "and I also feel and see my conscience. It approves of what I am doing. I appear to be betraying Louis; but I am really doing him a service. To save him from a crime is to save him. I have tried every means. There only remains this one, to arrest him. In coming to you, in acting as I do, I conspire at the same time against him and for him, against his power, and for his honor. What I am doing is right."

"It is true," I said to him. "You have a generous and a lofty aim."

And I resumed, —

"But our two duties are different. I could not hinder Louis Bonaparte from committing a crime unless I committed one myself. I wish neither for an Eighteenth Brumaire for him, nor for an Eighteenth Fructidor for myself. I would rather be proscribed than be a proscriber. I have the choice between two crimes, my crime and the crime of Louis Bonaparte. I will not choose my crime."

"But then you will have to endure his."

"I would rather endure a crime than commit one."

He remained thoughtful, and said to me, —

“Let it be so.”

And he added, —

“Perhaps we are both in the right.”

“I think so,” I said.

And I pressed his hand.

He took his mother’s manuscript and went away. It was three o’clock in the morning. The conversation had lasted more than two hours. I did not go to bed until I had written it out.

14th of June, 1847. Chamber of Peers. See the work “Avant l’Exile.”

CHAPTER XI.

THE COMBAT FINISHED, THE ORDEAL BEGINS

I did not know where to go.

On the afternoon of the 7th I determined to go back once more to 19, Rue Richelieu. Under the gateway some one seized my arm. It was Madame D.

She was waiting for me.

“Do not go in,” she said to me.

“Am I discovered?”

“Yes.”

“And taken.”

“No.”

She added, —

“Come.”

We crossed the courtyard, and we went out by a backdoor into the Rue Fontaine Molière; we reached the square of the Palais Royal. The *fiacres* were standing there as usual. We got into the first we came to.

“Where are we to go?” asked the driver.

She looked at me.

I answered, —

“I do not know.”

“I know,” she said.

Women always know where Providence lies.

An hour later I was in safety.

From the 4th, every day which passed by consolidated the *coup d’état*. Our defeat was complete, and we felt ourselves abandoned. Paris was like a forest in which Louis Bonaparte was making a *battue* of the Representatives; the wild beast was hunting down the sportsmen. We heard the indistinct baying of Maupas behind us. We were compelled to disperse. The pursuit was energetic. We entered into the second phase of duty — the catastrophe accepted and submitted to. The vanquished became the proscribed. Each one of us had his own concluding adventures. Mine was what it should have been — exile; death having missed me. I am not going to relate it here, this book is not my biography, and I ought not to divert to myself any of the attention which it may excite. Besides, what concerns me personally is told in a narrative which is one of the testaments of exile.

Notwithstanding the relentless pursuit which was directed against us, I did not think it my duty to leave Paris as long as a glimmer of hope remained, and as long as an awakening of the people seemed possible. Malarmet sent me word in my refuge that a movement would take place at Belleville on Tuesday the 9th. I waited until the 12th. Nothing stirred. The people were indeed dead. Happily such deaths as these, like the deaths of the gods, are only for a time.

I had a last interview with Jules Favre and Michel de Bourges at Madame Didier’s in the Rue de la Ville-Lévêque. It was at night. Bastide came there. This brave man said to me, —

“You are about to leave Paris; for myself, I remain here. Take me as your lieutenant. Direct me from the depths of your exile. Make use of me as an arm which you have in France.”

“I will make use of you as of a heart,” I said to him.

On the 14th, amidst the adventures which my son Charles relates in his book, I succeeded in reaching Brussels.

The vanquished are like cinders, Destiny blows upon them and disperses them. There was a gloomy vanishing of all the combatants for Right and for Law. A tragical disappearance.

“Les Hommes de l’Exile,” by Charles Hugo.

CHAPTER XII.

THE EXILED

The Crime having succeeded, all hastened to join it. To persist was possible, to resist was not possible. The situation became more and more desperate. One would have said that an enormous wall was rising upon the horizon ready to close in. The outlet: Exile.

The great souls, the glories of the people, emigrated. Thus there was seen this dismal sight — France driven out from France.

But what the Present appears to lose, the Future gains, the hand which scatters is also the hand which sows.

The Representatives of the Left, surrounded, tracked, pursued, hunted down, wandered for several days from refuge to refuge. Those who escaped found great difficulty in leaving Paris and France. Madier de Montjan had very black and thick eyebrows, he shaved off half of them, cut his hair, and let his beard grow. Yvan, Pelletier, Gindrier, and Doutre shaved off their moustaches and beards. Versigny reached Brussels on the 14th with a passport in the name of Morin. Schoelcher dressed himself up as a priest. This costume became him admirably, and suited his austere countenance and grave voice. A worthy priest helped him to disguise himself, and lent him his cassock and his band, made him shave off his whiskers a few days previously, so that he should not be betrayed by the white trace of his freshly-cut beard, gave him his own passport, and only left him at the railway station.

De Flotte disguised himself as a servant, and in this manner succeeded in crossing the frontier at Mouscron. From there he reached Ghent, and thence Brussels.

On the night of December 26th, I had returned to the little room, without a fire, which I occupied (No. 9) on the second story of the Hôtel de la Porte-Verte; it was midnight; I had just gone to bed and was falling asleep, when a knock sounded at my door. I awoke. I always left the key outside. “Come in,” I said. A chambermaid entered with a light, and brought two men whom I did not know. One was a lawyer, of Ghent, M. —— ; the other was De Flotte. He took my two hands and pressed them tenderly. “What,” I said to him, “is it you?”

At the Assembly De Flotte, with his prominent and thoughtful brow, his deep-set eyes, his close-shorn head, and his long beard, slightly turned back, looked like a creation of Sebastian del Piombo wandering out of his picture of the “Raising of Lazarus;” and I had before my eyes a short young man, thin and pallid, with spectacles. But what he had not been able to change, and what I recognized immediately, was the great heart, the lofty mind, the energetic character, the dauntless courage; and if I did not recognize him by his features, I recognized him by the grasp of his hand.

Edgar Quinet was brought away on the 10th by a noble-hearted Wallachian woman, Princess Cantacuzène, who undertook to conduct him to the frontier, and who kept her word. It was a troublesome task. Quinet had a foreign passport in the name of Grubesko, he was to personate a Wallachian, and it was arranged that he should not know how to speak French, he who writes it as a master. The journey was perilous. They ask for passports along all the line, beginning at the terminus. At Amiens they were particularly suspicious. But at Lille the danger was great. The gendarmes went from carriage to carriage; entered them lantern in hand, and compared the written descriptions of the travellers with their personal appearance. Several who appeared to be suspicious characters were arrested, and were immediately thrown into prison. Edgar Quinet, seated by the side of Madame Cantacuzène awaited the turn of his carriage. At length it came. Madame Cantacuzène leaned quickly forward towards the gendarmes, and hastened to present her passport, but the corporal waved back Madame Cantacuzène’s passport saying, “It is useless, Madame. We have nothing to do with women’s passports,” and he asked Quinet abruptly, “Your papers?” Quinet held out his passport unfolded. The gendarmes said to him, “Come out of the carriage, so that we can compare your description.” It happened, however, that the Wallachian passport contained no description. The corporal frowned, and said to his subordinates, “An irregular passport! Go and fetch the Commissary.”

All seemed lost, but Madame Cantacuzène began to speak to Quinet in the most Wallachian words in the world, with incredible assurance and volubility, so much so that the gendarme, convinced that he had to deal with all Wallachia in person, and seeing the train ready to start, returned the passport to Quinet, saying to him, “There! be off with you!” — a few hours afterwards Edgar Quinet was in Belgium.

Arnauld de l’Ariège also had his adventures. He was a marked man, he had to hide himself. Arnauld being a Catholic, Madame Arnauld went to the priest; the Abbé Deguerry slipped out of the way, the Abbé Maret consented to conceal him; the Abbé Maret was honest and good. Arnauld d’Ariège remained hidden for a fortnight at the house of this worthy priest. He wrote from the Abbé Maret’s a letter to the Archbishop of Paris, urging him to refuse the Pantheon, which a decree of Louis Bonaparte took away from France and gave to Rome. This letter angered the Archbishop. Arnauld, proscribed, reached Brussels, and there, at the age of eighteen months, died the “little Red,” who on the 3d of December had carried the workman’s letter to the Archbishop — an angel sent by God to the priest who had not understood the angel, and who no longer knew God.

In this medley of incidents and adventures each one had his drama.

Cournet’s drama was strange and terrible.

Cournet, it may be remembered, had been a naval officer. He was one of those men of a prompt, decisive character, who magnetized other men, and who on certain extraordinary occasions send an electric shock through a multitude. He possessed an imposing air, broad shoulders, brawny arms, powerful fists, a tall stature, all of which give confidence to the masses, and the intelligent expression which gives confidence to the thinkers. You saw him pass, and you recognized strength; you heard him speak, and you felt the will, which is more than strength. When quite a youth he had served in the navy. He combined in himself in a certain degree — and it is this which made this energetic man, when well directed and well employed, a means of enthusiasm and a support — he combined the popular fire and the military coolness. He was one of those natures created for the hurricane and for the crowd, who have begun their study of the people by their study of the ocean, and who are at their ease in revolutions as in tempests. As we have narrated, he took an important part in the combat. He had been dauntless and indefatigable, he was one of those who could yet rouse it to life. From Wednesday afternoon several police agents were charged to seek him everywhere, to arrest him wherever they might find him, and to take him to the Prefecture of the Police, where orders had been given to shoot him immediately.

Cournet, however, with his habitual daring, came and went freely in order to carry on the lawful resistance, even in the quarters occupied by the troops, shaving off his moustaches as his sole precaution.

On the Thursday afternoon he was on the boulevards at a few paces from a regiment of cavalry drawn up in order. He was quietly conversing with two of his comrades of the fight, Huy and Lorrain. Suddenly, he perceives himself and his companions surrounded by a company of *sergents de ville*; a man touches his arm and says to him, “You are Cournet; I arrest you.”

“Bah!” answers Cournet; “My name is Lépine.”

The man resumes, —

“You are Cournet. Do not you recognize me? Well, then, I recognize you;

I have been, like you, a member of the Socialist Electoral Committee.”

Cournet looks him in the face, and finds this countenance in his memory.

The man was right. He had, in fact, formed part of the gathering in the

Rue Saint Spire. The police spy resumed, laughing, —

“I nominated Eugène Sue with you.”

It was useless to deny it, and the moment was not favorable for resistance. There were on the spot, as we have said, twenty *sergents de ville* and a regiment of Dragoons.

“I will follow you,” said Cournet.

A *fiacre* was called up.

“While I am about it,” said the police spy, “come in all three of you.”

He made Huy and Lorrain get in with Cournet, placed them on the front seat, and seated himself on the back seat by Cournet, and then shouted to the driver, —

“To the Prefecture!”

The *sergents de ville* surrounded the *fiacre*. But whether by chance or through confidence, or in the haste to obtain the payment for his capture, the man who had arrested Cournet shouted to the coachman, “Look sharp, look sharp!” and the *fiacre* went off at a gallop.

In the meantime Cournet was well aware that on arriving he would be shot in the very courtyard of the Prefecture. He had resolved not to go there.

At a turning in the Rue St Antoine he glanced behind, and noticed that the *sergents de ville* only followed the *fiacre* at a considerable distance.

Not one of the four men which the *fiacre* was bearing away had as yet opened their lips.

Cournet threw a meaning look at his two companions seated in front of him, as much as to say, “We are three; let us take advantage of this to escape.” Both answered by an imperceptible movement of the eyes, which pointed out the street full of passers-by, and which said, “No.”

A few moments afterwards the *fiacre* emerged from the Rue St. Antoine, and entered the Rue de Fourcy. The Rue de Fourcy is usually deserted, no one was passing down it at that moment.

Cournet turned suddenly to the police spy, and asked him, —

“Have you a warrant for my arrest?”

“No; but I have my card.”

And he drew his police agent’s card out of his pocket, and showed it to

Cournet. Then the following dialogue ensued between these two men, —

“This is not regular.”

“What does that matter to me?”

“You have no right to arrest me.”

“All the same, I arrest you.”

“Look here; is it money that you want? Do you wish for any? I have some with me; let me escape.”

“A gold nugget as big as your head would not tempt me. You are my finest capture, Citizen Cournet.”

“Where are you taking me to?”

“To the Prefecture.”

“They will shoot me there?”

“Possibly.”

“And my two comrades?”

“I do not say ‘No.’”

“I will not go.”

“You will go, nevertheless.”

“I tell you I will not go,” exclaimed Cournet.

And with a movement, unexpected as a flash of lightning, he seized the police spy by the throat.

The police agent could not utter a cry, he struggled: a hand of bronze clutched him.

His tongue protruded from his mouth, his eyes became hideous, and started from their sockets. Suddenly his head sank down, and reddish froth rose from his throat to his lips. He was dead.

Huy and Lorrain, motionless, and as though themselves thunderstruck, gazed at this gloomy deed.

They did not utter a word. They did not move a limb. The *fiacre* was still driving on.

“Open the door!” Cournet cried to them.

They did not stir, they seemed to have become stone.

Cournet, whose thumb was closely pressed in the neck of the wretched police spy, tried to open the door with his left hand, but he did not succeed, he felt that he could only do it with his right hand, and he was obliged to loose his hold of the man. The man fell face forwards, and sank down on his knees.

Cournet opened the door.

“Off with you!” he said to them.

Huy and Lorrain jumped into the street and fled at the top of their speed.

The coachman had noticed nothing.

Cournet let them get away, and then, pulling the check string, stopped the *fiacre*, got down leisurely, reclosed the door, quietly took forty sous from his purse, gave them to the coachman, who had not left his seat, and said to him, “Drive on.”

He plunged into Paris. In the Place des Victoires he met the ex-Constituent Isidore Buvignier, his friend, who about six weeks previously had come out of the Madelonnettes, where he had been confined for the matter of the *Solidarité Républicaine*. Buvignier was one of the noteworthy figures on the high benches of the Left; fair, close-shaven, with a stern glance, he made one think of the English Roundheads, and he had the bearing rather of a Cromwellian Puritan than of a Dantonist Man of the Mountain. Cournet told his adventure, the extremity had been terrible.

Buvignier shook his head.

“You have killed a man,” he said.

In “Marie Tudor,” I have made Fabiani answer under similar circumstances, —

“No, a Jew.”

Cournet, who probably had not read “Marie Tudor,” answered, —

“No, a police spy.”

Then he resumed, —

“I have killed a police spy to save three men, one of whom was myself.”

Cournet was right. They were in the midst of the combat, they were taking him to be shot; the spy who had arrested him was, properly speaking, an assassin, and assuredly it was a case of legitimate defence. I add that this wretch, a democrat for the people, a spy for the police, was a twofold traitor. Moreover, the police spy was the jackal of the *coup d'état*, while Cournet was the combatant for the Law.

"You must conceal yourself," said Buvignier; "come to Juvisy."

Buvignier had a little refuge at Juvisy, which is on the road to Corbeil. He was known and loved there; Cournet and he reached there that evening.

But they had hardly arrived when some peasants said to Buvignier, "The police have already been here to arrest you, and are coming again to-night."

It was necessary to go back.

Cournet, more in danger than ever, hunted, wandering, pursued, hid himself in Paris with considerable difficulty. He remained there till the 16th. He had no means of procuring himself a passport. At length, on the 16th, some friends of his on the Northern Railway obtained for him a special passport, worded as follows: —

"Allow M. —— , an Inspector on the service of the Company, to pass."

He decided to leave the next day, and take the day train, thinking, perhaps rightly, that the night train would be more closely watched.

On the 17th, at daybreak, favored by the dim dawn, he glided from street to street, to the Northern Railway Station. His tall stature was a special source of danger. He, however, reached the station in safety. The stokers placed him with them on the tender of the engine of the train, which was about to start. He only had the clothes which he had worn since the 2d; no clean linen, no trunk, a little money.

In December, the day breaks late and the night closes in early, which is favorable to proscribed persons.

He reached the frontier at night without hindrance. At Neuvéglise he was in Belgium; he believed himself in safety. When asked for his papers he caused himself to be taken before the Burgomaster, and said to him, "I am a political refugee."

The Burgomaster, a Belgian but a Bonapartist — this breed is to be found — had him at once reconducted to the frontier by the gendarmes, who were ordered to hand him over to the French authorities.

Cournet gave himself up for lost.

The Belgian gendarmes took him to Armentières. If they had asked for the Mayor it would have been all at an end with Cournet, but they asked for the Inspector of Customs.

A glimmer of hope dawned upon Cournet.

He accosted the Inspector of Customs with his head erect, and shook hands with him.

The Belgian gendarmes had not yet released him.

“Now, sir,” said Cournet to the Custom House officer, “you are an Inspector of Customs, I am an Inspector of Railways. Inspectors do not eat inspectors. The deuce take it! Some worthy Belgians have taken fright and sent me to you between four gendarmes. Why, I know not. I am sent by the Northern Company to relay the ballast of a bridge somewhere about here which is not firm. I come to ask you to allow me to continue my road. Here is my pass.”

He presented the pass to the Custom House officer, the Custom House officer read it, found it according to due form, and said to Cournet, —

“Mr. Inspector, you are free.”

Cournet, delivered from the Belgian gendarmes by French authority, hastened to the railway station. He had friends there.

“Quick,” he said, “it is dark, but it does not matter, it is even all the better. Find me some one who has been a smuggler, and who will help me to pass the frontier.”

They brought him a small lad of eighteen; fair-haired, ruddy, hardy, a Walloon and who spoke French.

“What is your name?” said Cournet.

“Henry.”

“You look like a girl.”

“Nevertheless I am a man.”

“Is it you who undertake to guide me?”

“Yes.”

“You have been a smuggler?”

“I am one still.”

“Do you know the roads?”

“No. I have nothing to do with the roads.”

“What do you know then?”

“I know the passes.”

“There are two Custom House lines.”

“I know that well.”

“Will you pass me across them?”

“Without doubt.”

“Then you are not afraid of the Custom House officers?”

“I’m afraid of the dogs.”

“In that case,” said Cournet, “we will take sticks.”

They accordingly armed themselves with big sticks. Cournet gave fifty francs to Henry, and promised him fifty more when they should have crossed the second Custom House line.

“That is to say, at four o’clock in the morning,” said Henry.

It was midnight.

They set out on their way.

What Henry called the “passes” another would have called the “hindrances.” They were a succession of pitfalls and quagmires. It had been raining, and all the holes were pools of water.

An indescribable footpath wound through an inextricable labyrinth, sometimes as thorny as a heath, sometimes as miry as a marsh.

The night was very dark.

From time to time, far away in the darkness, they could hear a dog bark. The smuggler then made bends or zigzags, turned sharply to the right or to the left, and sometimes retraced his steps.

Cournet, jumping hedges, striding over ditches, stumbling at every moment, slipping into sloughs, laying hold of briers, with his clothes in rags, his hands bleeding, dying with hunger, battered about, wearied, worn out, almost exhausted, followed his guide gaily.

At every minute he made a false step; he fell into every bog, and got up covered with mud. At length he fell into a pond. It was several feet deep. This washed him.

“Bravo!” he said. “I am very clean, but I am very cold.”

At four o’clock in the morning, as Henry had promised him, they reached Messine, a Belgian village. The two Custom House lines had been cleared.

Cournet had nothing more to fear, either from the Custom House nor from the *coup d’état*, neither from men nor from dogs.

He gave Henry the second fifty francs, and continued his journey on foot, trusting somewhat to chance.

It was not until towards evening that he reached a railway station. He got into a train, and at nightfall he arrived at the Southern Railway Station at Brussels.

He had left Paris on the preceding morning, had not slept an hour, had been walking all night, and had eaten nothing. On searching in his pocket he missed his pocket book, but found a crust of bread. He was more delighted at the discovery of the crust than grieved at the loss of his pocket-book. He carried his money in a waistband; the pocket-book, which had probably disappeared in the pond, contained his letters, and amongst others an exceedingly useful letter of introduction from his friend M. Ernest Koechlin, to the Representatives Guilgot and Carlos Forel, who at that moment were refugees at Brussels, and lodged at the Hôtel de Brabant.

On leaving the railway station he threw himself into a cab, and said to the coachman, —

“Hôtel de Brabant.”

He heard a voice repeat, “Hôtel de Brabant.” He put out his head and saw a man writing something in a notebook with a pencil by the light of a street-lamp.

It was probably some police agent.

Without a passport, without letters, without papers, he was afraid of being arrested in the night, and he was longing for a good sleep. A good bed to-night, he thought, and to-morrow the Deluge! At the Hôtel de Brabant he paid the coachman, but did not go into the hotel. Moreover, he would have asked in vain for the Representatives Forel and Guilgot; both were there under false names.

He took to wandering about the streets. It was eleven o’clock at night, and for a long time he had begun to feel utterly worn out.

At length he saw a lighted lamp with the inscription “Hôtel de la Monnaie.”

He walked in.

The landlord came up, and looked at him somewhat askance.

He then thought of looking at himself.

His unshaven beard, his disordered hair, his cap soiled with mud, his blood-stained hands, his clothes in rags, he looked horrible.

He took a double louis out of his waistband, and put it on the table of the parlor, which he had entered and said to the landlord, —

“In truth, sir, I am not a thief, I am a proscript; money is now my only passport. I have just come from Paris, I wish to eat first and sleep afterwards.”

The landlord was touched, took the double louis, and gave him bed and supper.

Next day, while he was still sleeping, the landlord came into his room, woke him gently, and said to him, —

“Now, sir, if I were you, I should go and see Baron Hody.”

“Who and what is Baron Hody?” asked Cournet, half asleep.

The landlord explained to him who Baron Hody was. When I had occasion to ask the same question as Cournet, I received from three inhabitants of Brussels the three answers as follows: —

“He is a dog.”

“He is a polecat.”

“He is a hyena.”

There is probably some exaggeration in these three answers.

A fourth Belgian whom I need not specify confined himself to saying to me, —

“He is a beast.”

As to his public functions, Baron Hody was what they call at Brussels “The Administrator of Public Safety;” that is to say, a counterfeit of the Prefect of Police, half Carlier, half Maupas.

Thanks to Baron Hody, who has since left the place, and who, moreover, like M. de Montalembert, was a “mere Jesuit,” the Belgian police at that moment was a compound of the Russian and Austrian police. I have read strange confidential letters of this Baron Hody. In action and in style there is nothing more cynical and more repulsive than the Jesuit police, when they unveil their secret treasures. These are the contents of the unbuttoned cassock.

At the time of which we are speaking (December, 1851), the Clerical party had joined itself to all the forms of Monarchy; and this Baron Hody confused Orleanism with Legitimate right. I simply tell the tale. Nothing more.

“Baron Hody. Very well, I will go to him,” said Cournet.

He got up, dressed himself, brushed his clothes as well as he could, and asked the landlord, “Where is the Police office?”

“At the Ministry of Justice.”

In fact this is the case in Brussels; the police administration forms part of the Ministry of Justice, an arrangement which does not greatly raise the police and somewhat lowers justice.

Cournet went there, and was shown into the presence of this personage.

Baron Hody did him the honor to ask him sharply, —

“Who are you?”

“A refugee,” answered Cournet; “I am one of those whom the *coup d’état* has driven from Paris.

“Your profession?”

“Ex-naval officer.”

“Ex-naval officer!” exclaimed Baron Hody in a much gentler tone, “did you know His Royal Highness the Prince de Joinville?”

“I have served under him.”

It was the truth. Cournet had served under M. de Joinville, and prided himself on it.

At this statement the administrator of Belgian safety completely unbent, and said to Cournet, with the most gracious smile that the police can find, “That’s all right, sir; stay here as long as you please; we close Belgium to the Men of the Mountain, but we throw it widely open to men like you.”

When Cournet told me this answer of Hody’s, I thought that my fourth

Belgian was right.

A certain comic gloom was mingled at times with these tragedies. Barthelémy Terrier was a Representative of the people, and a proscript. They gave him a special passport for a compulsory route as far as Belgium for himself and his wife. Furnished with this passport he left with a woman. This woman was a man. Préveraud, a landed proprietor at Donjon, one of the most prominent men in the Department of Allier, was Terrier’s brother-in-law. When the *coup d’état* broke out at Donjon, Préveraud had taken up arms and fulfilled his duty, had combated the outrage and defended the law. For this he had been condemned to death. The justice of that time, as we know. Justice executed justice. For this crime of being an honest man they had guillotined Charlet, guillotined Cuisinier, guillotined Cirasse. The guillotine was an instrument of the reign. Assassination by the guillotine was one of the means of order of that time. It was necessary to save Préveraud. He was little and slim: they dressed him as a woman. He was not sufficiently pretty for them not to cover his face with a thick veil. They put the brave and sturdy hands of the combatant in a muff. Thus veiled and a little filled out with padding, Préveraud made a charming woman. He became Madame Terrier, and his brother-in-law took him away. They crossed Paris peaceably, and without any other adventure than an imprudence committed by Préveraud, who, seeing that the shaft-horse of a wagon had fallen down, threw aside his muff, lifted his veil and his petticoat, and if Terrier, in dire alarm, had not stopped him, he would have helped the carter to raise his horse. Had a *sergent de ville* been there, Préveraud would have been captured. Terrier hastened to thrust Préveraud into a carriage, and at nightfall they left for Brussels. They were alone in the carriage, each in a corner and face to face. All went well as far as Amiens. At Amiens station the door was opened, and a gendarme entered and seated himself by the side of Préveraud. The gendarme asked for his passport, Terrier showed it him; the little woman in her corner, veiled and silent, did not stir, and the gendarme found all in due form. He contented himself with saying, "We shall travel together, I am on duty as far as the frontier."

The train, after the ordinary delay of a few minutes, again started. The night was dark. Terrier had fallen asleep. Suddenly Préveraud felt a knee press against his, it was the knee of the policeman. A boot placed itself softly on his foot, it was a horse-soldier's boot. An idyll had just germinated in the gendarme's soul. He first tenderly pressed Préveraud's knee, and then emboldened by the darkness of the hour and by the slumbering husband, he ventured his hand as far as her dress, a circumstance foreseen by Molière, but the fair veiled one was virtuous. Préveraud, full of surprise and rage, gently pushed back the gendarme's hand. The danger was extreme. Too much love on the part of the gendarme, one audacious step further, would bring about the unexpected, would abruptly change the eclogue into an official indictment, would reconvert the amorous satyr into a stony-hearted policeman, would transform Tircis into Vidocq; and then this strange thing would be seen, a passenger guillotined because a gendarme had committed an outrage. The danger increased every moment. Terrier was sleeping. Suddenly the train stopped. A voice cried, "Quièvrain!" and the door was opened. They were in Belgium. The gendarme, obliged to stop here, and to re-enter France, rose to get out, and at the moment when he stepped on to the ground he heard behind him these expressive words coming from beneath the lace veil, "Be off, or I'll break your jaw!"

See "Les Hommes de l'Exile."

The name given to a population belonging to the Romanic family, and more particularly to those of French descent, who occupy the region along the frontiers of the German-speaking territory in the South Netherlands from Dunkirk to Malmedy in Rhenish Prussia.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MILITARY COMMISSIONS AND THE MIXED COMMISSIONS

Justice sometime meets with strange adventures.

This old phrase assumed a new sense.

The code ceased to be a safeguard. The law became something which had sworn fealty to a crime. Louis Bonaparte appointed judges by whom one felt oneself stopped as in the corner of a wood. In the same manner as the forest is an accomplice through its density, so the legislation was an accomplice by its obscurity. What it lacked at certain points in order to make it perfectly dark they added. How? By force. Purely and simply. By decree. *Sic jubeo*. The decree of the 17th of February was a masterpiece. This decree completed the proscription of the person, by the proscription of the name. Domitian could not have done better. Human conscience was bewildered; Right, Equity, Reason felt that the master had over them the authority that a thief has over a purse. No reply. Obey. Nothing resembles those infamous times.

Every iniquity was possible. Legislative bodies supervened and instilled so much gloom into legislation that it was easy to achieve a baseness in this darkness.

A successful *coup d'état* does not stand upon ceremony. This kind of success permits itself everything.

Facts abound. But we must abridge, we will only present them briefly.

There were two species of Justice; the Military Commissions and the Mixed Commissions.

The Military Commissions sat in judgment with closed doors. A colonel presided.

In Paris alone there were three Military Commissions: each received a thousand bills of indictment. The Judge of Instruction sent these accusations to the Procureur of the Republic, Lascoux, who transmitted them to the Colonel President. The Commission summoned the accused to appear. The accused himself was his own bill of indictment. They searched him, that is to say, they "thumbed" him. The accusing document was short. Two or three lines. Such as this, for example, —

Name. Christian name. Profession. A sharp fellow. Goes to the Café.

Reads the papers. Speaks. Dangerous.

The accusation was laconic. The judgment was still less prolix. It was a simple sign.

The bill of indictment having been examined, the judges having been consulted, the colonel took a pen, and put at the end of the accusing line one of three signs: —

- + o

- signified consignment to Lambessa.

+ signified transportation to Cayenne. (The dry guillotine. Death.)

o signified acquittal.

While this justice was at work, the man on whose case they were working was sometimes still at liberty, he was going and coming at his ease; suddenly they arrested him, and without knowing what they wanted with him, he left for Lambessa or for Cayenne.

His family was often ignorant of what had become of him.

People asked of a wife, of a sister, of a daughter, of a mother, —

“Where is your husband?”

“Where is your brother?”

“Where is your father?”

“Where is your son?”

The wife, the sister, the daughter, the mother answered,— “I do not know.”

In the Allier eleven members of one family alone, the Préveraud family of Donjon, were struck down, one by the penalty of death, the others by banishment and transportation.

A wine-seller of the Batignolles, named Brisadoux, was transported to Cayenne for this line in his deed of accusation: *his shop is frequented by Socialists*.

Here is a dialogue, word for word, and taken from life, between a colonel and his convicted prisoner: —

“You are condemned.”

“Indeed! Why?”

“In truth I do not exactly know myself. Examine your conscience. Think what you have done.”

“I?”

“Yes, you.”

"How I?"

"You must have done something."

"No. I have done nothing. I have not even done my duty. I ought to have taken my gun, gone down into the street, harangued the people, raised barricades; I remained at home stupidly like a sluggard" (the accused laughs); "that is the offence of which I accuse myself."

"You have not been condemned for that offence. Think carefully."

"I can think of nothing."

"What! You have not been to the *café*?"

"Yes, I have breakfasted there."

"Have you not chatted there?"

"Yes, perhaps."

"Have you not laughed?"

"Perhaps I have laughed."

"At whom? At what?"

"At what is going on. It is true I was wrong to laugh."

"At the same time you talked?"

"Yes."

"Of whom?"

"Of the President."

"What did you say?"

"Indeed, what may be said with justice, that he had broken his oath."

"And then?"

"That he had not the right to arrest the Representatives."

"You said that?"

"Yes. And I added that he had not the right to kill people on the boulevard…."

Here the condemned man interrupted himself and exclaimed, —

"And thereupon they send me to Cayenne!"

The judge looks fixedly at the prisoner, and answers,— "Well, then?"

Another form of justice: —

Three miscellaneous personages, three removable functionaries, a Prefect, a soldier, a public prosecutor, whose only conscience is the sound of Louis Bonaparte's bell, seated themselves at a table and judged. Whom? You, me, us, everybody. For what crimes? They invented crimes. In the name of what laws? They invented laws. What penalties did they inflict? They invented penalties. Did they know the accused? No. Did they listen to him? No. What advocates did they listen to? None. What witnesses did they question? None. What deliberation did they enter upon? None. What public did they call in? None. Thus, no public, no deliberation, no counsellors, no witnesses, judges who are not magistrates, a jury where none are sworn in, a tribunal which is not a tribunal, imaginary offences, invented penalties, the accused absent, the law absent; from all these things which resembled a dream there came forth a reality: the condemnation of the innocent.

Exile, banishment, transportation, ruin, home-sickness, death, and despair for 40,000 families.

That is what History calls the Mixed Commissions.

Ordinarily the great crimes of State strike the great heads, and content themselves with this destruction; they roll like blocks of stone, all in one piece, and break the great resistances; illustrious victims suffice for them. But the Second of December had its refinements of cruelty; it required in addition petty victims. Its appetite for extermination extended to the poor and to the obscure, its anger and animosity penetrated as far as the lowest class; it created fissures in the social subsoil in order to diffuse the proscription there; the local triumvirates, nicknamed “mixed mixtures,” served it for that. Not one head escaped, however humble and puny. They found means to impoverish the indigent, to ruin those dying of hunger, to spoil the disinherited; the *coup d’état* achieved this wonderful feat of adding misfortune to misery. Bonaparte, it seems, took the trouble to hate a mere peasant; the vine-dresser was torn from his vine, the laborer from his furrow, the mason from his scaffold, the weaver from his loom. Men accepted this mission of causing the immense public calamity to fall, morsel by morsel, upon the humblest walks of life. Detestable task! To crumble a catastrophe upon the little and on the weak.

CHAPTER XIV.

A RELIGIOUS INCIDENT

A little religion can be mingled with this justice. Here is an example.

Frederick Morin, like Arnauld de l’Ariège, was a Catholic Republican. He thought that the souls of the victims of the 4th of December, suddenly cast by the volleys of the *coup d’état* into the infinite and the unknown, might need some assistance, and he undertook the laborious task of having a mass said for the repose of these souls. But the priests wished to keep the masses for their friends. The group of Catholic Republicans which Frederick Morin headed applied successively to all the priests of Paris; but met with a refusal. They applied to the Archbishop: again a refusal. As many masses for the assassin as they liked, but far the assassinated not one. To pray for dead men of this sort would be a scandal. The refusal was determined. How should it be overcome? To do without a mass would have appeared easy to others, but not to these staunch believers. The worthy Catholic Democrats with great difficulty at length unearthed in a tiny suburban parish a poor old vicar, who consented to mumble in a whisper this mass in the ear of the Almighty, while begging Him to say nothing about it.

CHAPTER XV.

HOW THEY CAME OUT OF HAM

On the night of the 7th and 8th of January, Charras was sleeping. The noise of his bolts being drawn awoke him.

"So then!" said he, "they are going to put us in close confinement." And he went to sleep again.

An hour afterwards the door was opened. The commandant of the fort entered in full uniform, accompanied by a police agent carrying a torch.

It was about four o'clock in the morning.

"Colonel," said the Commandant, "dress yourself at once."

"What for?"

"You are about to leave."

"Some more rascality, I suppose!"

The Commandant was silent. Charras dressed himself.

As he finished dressing, a short young man, dressed in black, came in.

This young man spoke to Charras.

"Colonel, you are about to leave the fortress, you are about to quit

France. I am instructed to have you conducted to the frontier."

Charras exclaimed, —

"If I am to quit France I will not leave the fortress. This is yet another outrage. They have no more the right to exile me than they had the right to imprison me. I have on my side the Law, Right, my old services, my commission. I protest. Who are you, sir?"

"I am the Private Secretary of the Minister of the Interior."

"Ah! it is you who are named Léopold Lehon."

The young man cast down his eyes.

Charras continued, —

"You come on the part of some one whom they call 'Minister of the Interior,' M. de Morny, I believe. I know M. de Morny. A bald young man; he has played the game where people lose their hair; and now he is playing the game where people risk their heads."

The conversation was painful. The young man was deeply interested in the toe of his boot.

After a pause, however, he ventured to speak, —

“M. Charras, I am instructed to say that if you want money—”

Charras interrupted him impetuously.

“Hold your tongue, sir! not another word. I have served my country five-and-twenty years as an officer, under fire, at the peril of my life, always for honor, never for gain. Keep your money for your own set!”

“But, sir—”

“Silence! Money which passes through your hands would soil mine.”

Another pause ensued, which the private secretary again broke, —

“Colonel, you will be accompanied by two police agents who have special instructions, and I should inform you that you are ordered to travel with a false passport, and under the name of Vincent.”

“Good heavens!” said Charras; “this is really too much. Who is it imagines that they will make me travel by order with a false passport, and under a false name?” And looking steadily at M. Léopold Lehon, “Know, sir, that my name is Charras and not Vincent, and that I belong to a family whose members have always borne the name of their father.”

They set out.

They journeyed by carriage as far as Creil, which is on the railway.

At Creil station the first person whom Charras saw was General Changarnier.

“Ah! it is you, General.”

The two proscripts embraced each other. Such is exile.

“What the deuce are they doing with you?” asked the General.

“What they are probably doing with you. These vagabonds are making me travel under the name of Vincent.”

“And me,” said Changarnier, “under the name of Leblanc.”

“In that case they ought at least to have called me Lerouge,” said Charras, with a burst of laughter.

In the meantime a group, kept at a distance by the police agents, had formed round them. People had recognized them and saluted them. A little child, whose mother could not hold him back, ran quickly to Charras and took his hand.

They got into the train apparently as free as other travellers. Only they isolated them in empty compartments, and each was accompanied by two men, who sat one at the side and the other facing him, and who never took their eyes off him. The keepers of General Changarnier were of ordinary strength and stature. Those of Charras were almost giants. Charras is exceedingly tall; they topped him by an entire head. These men who were galley sergeants, had been carabineers; these spies had been heroes.

Charras questioned them. They had served when quite young, from 1813. Thus they had shared the bivouac of Napoleon; now they ate the same bread as Vidocq. The soldier brought to such a sorry pass as this is a sad sight.

The pocket of one of them was bulged out with something which he was hiding there.

When this man crossed the station in company with Charras, a lady traveller said, —

“Has he got M. Thiers in his pocket?”

What the police agent was hiding was a pair of pistols. Under their long, buttoned-up and doubled-breasted frock coats these men were armed. They were ordered to treat “those gentlemen” with the most profound respect, but in certain circumstances to blow out their brains.

The prisoners had each been informed that in the eyes of the different authorities whom they would meet on the road they would pass for foreigners, Swiss or Belgians, expelled on account of their political opinions, and that the police agents would keep their title of police agents, and would represent themselves as charged with reconducting these foreigners to the frontier.

Two-thirds of the journey were accomplished without any hindrance. At

Valenciennes an incident occurred.

The *coup d’état* having succeeded, zeal reigned paramount. No task was any longer considered despicable. To denounce was to please; zeal is one of the forms of servitude towards which people lean the most willingly. The general became a common soldier, the prefect became a commissary of police, the commissary of police became a police spy.

The commissary of police at Valenciennes himself superintended the inspection of passports. For nothing in the world would he have deputed this important office to a subordinate inspector. When they presented him the passport of the so-called Leblanc, he looked the so-called Leblanc full in the face, started, and exclaimed, —

“You are General Changarnier!”

“That is no affair of mine,” said the General.

Upon this the two keepers of the General protested and exhibited their papers, perfectly drawn up in due form.

"Mr. Commissary, we are Government agents. Here are our proper passports."

"Improper ones," said the General.

The Commissary shook his head. He had been employed in Paris, and had been frequently sent to the headquarters of the staff at the Tuileries, to General Changarnier. He knew him very well.

"This is too much!" exclaimed the police agents. They blustered, declared that they were police functionaries on a special service, that they had instructions to conduct to the frontier this Leblanc, expelled for political reasons, swore by all the gods, and gave their word of honor that the so-called Leblanc was really named Leblanc.

"I do not much believe in words of honor," said the Commissary.

"Honest Commissary," muttered Changarnier, "you are right. Since the 2d of December words of honor and oaths are no more than worthless paper money."

And then he began to smile.

The Commissary became more and more perplexed. The police agents ended by invoking the testimony of the prisoner himself.

"Now, sir, tell him your name yourself."

"Get out of the difficulty yourselves," answered Changarnier.

All this appeared most irregular to the mind of a provincial alguazil.

It seemed evident to the Commissary of Valenciennes that General Changarnier was escaping from Ham under a false name with a false passport, and with false agents of police, in order to mislead the authorities, and that it was a plot to escape which was on the point of succeeding.

"Come down, all three of you!" exclaimed the Commissary.

The General gets down, and on putting foot to the ground notices Charras in the depths of his compartment between his two bullies.

"Oho! Charras, you are there!" he cries.

"Charras!" exclaimed the Commissary. "Charras there! Quick! the passports of these gentlemen!" And looking Charras in the face, —

"Are you Colonel Charras?"

"Egad!" said Charras.

Yet another complication. It was now the turn of Charras's bullies to bluster. They declared that Charras was the man called Vincent, displayed passports and papers, swore and protested. The Commissary's suspicions were fully confirmed.

“Very well,” said he, “I arrest everybody.”

And he handed over Changarnier, Charras, and the four police agents to the gendarmes. The Commissary saw the Cross of Honor shining in the distance. He was radiant.

The police arrested the police. It happens sometimes that the wolf thinks he has seized a victim and bites his own tail.

The six prisoners — for now there were six prisoners — were taken into a parlor at the railway station. The Commissary informed the town authorities. The town authorities hastened hither, headed by the sub-prefect.

The sub-prefect, who was named Censier, comes in, and does not know whether he ought to salute or to question, to grovel in the dust or to keep his hat on his head. These poor devils of magistrates and local officials were very much exercised in their minds. General Changarnier had been too near the Dictatorship not to make them thoughtful. Who can foresee the course of events? Everything is possible. Yesterday called itself Cavaignac, to-day calls itself Bonaparte, to-morrow may call itself Changarnier. Providence is really cruel not to let sub-prefects have a peep at the future.

It is sad for a respectable functionary, who would ask for nothing better than to be servile or arrogant according to circumstances, to be in danger of lavishing his platitudes on a person who is perhaps going to rot forever in exile, and who is nothing more than a rascal, or to risk being insolent to a vagabond of a postscript who is capable of coming back a conqueror in six months’ time, and of becoming the Government in his turn. What was to be done? And then they were spied upon. This takes place between officials. The slightest word would be maliciously interpreted, the slightest gesture would be laid to their discredit. How should he keep on good terms at the same time this Cabbage, which is called To-day, and that Goat, which is called To-morrow? To ask too many questions would offend the General, to render to many salutations would annoy the President. How could he be at the same time very much a sub-prefect, and in some degree a lacquey? How could he combine the appearance of obsequiousness, which would please Changarnier, with the appearance of authority, which would please Bonaparte?

The sub-prefect thought to get out of the difficulty by saying, “General, you are my prisoner,” and by adding, with a smile, “Do me the honor of breakfasting with me?” He addressed the same words to Charras.

The General refused curtly.

Charras looked at him fixedly, and did not answer him.

Doubts regarding the identity of the prisoners came to the mind of the sub-prefect. He whispered to the Commissary "Are you quite sure?" "Certainly," said the Commissary.

The sub-prefect decided to address himself to Charras, and dissatisfied with the manner in which his advances had been received, asked him somewhat sharply, "But, in short, who are you?"

Charras answered, "We are packages."

And turning to his keepers who were now in their turn in keeping: —

"Apply to our exporters. Ask our Custom House officers. It is a mere matter of goods traffic."

They set the electric telegraph to work. Valenciennes, alarmed, questioned Paris. The sub-prefect informed the Minister of the Interior that, thanks to a strict supervision, which he had trusted to no one but himself, he had just effected an important capture, that he had just discovered a plot, had saved the President, had saved society, had saved religion, etc., that in one word he had just arrested General Changarnier and Colonel Charras, who had escaped that morning from the fort of Ham with false passports, doubtless for the purpose of heading a rising, etc., and that, in short, he asked the Government what was to be done with the two prisoners.

At the end of an hour the answer arrived:— "Let them go on their way."

The police perceived that in a burst of zeal they had pushed profundity to the point of stupidity. That sometimes happens.

The next train carried away the prisoners, restored, not to liberty, but to their keepers.

They passed Quiévrain.

They got down from the carriage, and got in again.

When the train again started Charras heaved the deep, joyous sigh of a freed man, and said, "At last!"

He raised his eyes, and perceived his two jailers by his side.

They had got up behind him into the carriage.

"Ah, indeed!" he said to them; "you there!"

Of these two men there was only one who spoke, that one answered, —

"Yes, Colonel."

"What are you doing here?"

"We are keeping watch over you."

"But we are in Belgium."

“Possibly.”

“Belgium is not France.”

“Ah, that may be.”

“But suppose I put my head out of the carriage? Suppose I call out? Suppose I had you arrested? Suppose I reclaimed my liberty?”

“You will not do all that, Colonel.”

“How will you prevent me?”

The police agent showed the butt-end of his pistol and said “Thus.”

Charras burst out laughing, and asked them, “Where then are you going to leave me?”

“At Brussels.”

“That is to say, that at Brussels you will salute me with your cap; but that at Mons you will salute me with your pistol.”

“As you say, Colonel.”

“In truth,” said Charras, “it does not matter to me. It is King Leopold’s business. The Bonaparte treats countries as he has treated the Representatives. He has violated the Assembly, he violates Belgium. But all the same, you are a medley of strange rascals. He who is at the top is a madman, those who are beneath are blockheads. Very well, my friends, let me go to sleep.”

And he went to sleep.

Almost the same incident happened nearly at the same moment to Generals Changarnier and Lamoricière and to M. Baze.

The police agents did not leave General Changarnier until they had reached Mons. There they made him get down from the train, and said to him, “General, this is your place of residence. We leave you free.”

“Ah!” said he, “this is my place of residence, and I am free? Well, then, good-night.”

And he sprang lightly back into the carriage just as the train was starting, leaving behind him two galley sergeants dumfounded.

The police released Charras at Brussels, but did not release General Lamoricière. The two police agents wished to compel him to leave immediately for Cologne. The General, who was suffering from rheumatism which he had caught at Ham, declared that he would sleep at Brussels.

“Be it so,” said the police agents.

They followed him to the Hôtel de Bellevue. They spent the night there with him. He had considerable difficulty to prevent them from sleeping in his room. Next day they carried him off, and took him to Cologne-violating Prussian territory after having violated Belgian territory.

The *coup d'état* was still more impudent with M. Baze.

They made M. Baze journey with his wife and his children under the name of Lassalle. He passed for the servant of the police agent who accompanied him.

They took him thus to Aix-la-Chapelle.

There, in the middle of the night, in the middle of the street, the police agents deposited him and the whole of his family, without a passport, without papers, without money. M. Baze, indignant, was obliged to have recourse to threats to induce them to take him and identify him before a magistrate. It was, perhaps, part of the petty joys of Bonaparte to cause a Questor of the Assembly to be treated as a vagrant.

On the night of the 7th of January, General Bedeau, although he was not to leave till the next day, was awakened like the others by the noise of bolts. He did not understand that they were shutting him in, but on the contrary, believed that they were releasing M. Baze, his neighbor in the adjoining cell. He cried through the door, “Bravo, Baze!”

In fact, every day the Generals said to the Questor, “You have no business here, this is a military fortress. One of these fine mornings you will be thrust outside like Roger du Nord.”

Nevertheless General Bedeau heard an unusual noise in the fortress. He got up and “knocked” for General Leflô, his neighbor in the cell on the other side, with whom he exchanged frequent military dialogues, little flattering to the *coup d'état*. General Leflô answered the knocking, but he did not know any more than General Bedeau.

General Bedeau's window looked out on the inner courtyard of the prison. He went to this window and saw lanterns flashing hither and thither, species of covered carts, horsed, and a company of the 48th under arms. A moment afterwards he saw General Changarnier come into the courtyard, get into a carriage, and drive off. Some moments elapsed, then he saw Charras pass. Charras noticed him at the window, and cried out to him, “Mons!”

In fact he believed he was going to Mons, and this made General Bedeau, on the next day, choose Mons as his residence, expecting to meet

Charras there.

Charras having left, M. Léopold Lehon came in accompanied by the Commandant of the fort. He saluted Bedeau, explained his business, and gave his name. General Bedeau confined himself to saying, “They banish us; it is an illegality, and one more indignity added to the others. However, with the people who send you one is no longer surprised at anything.”

They did not send him away till the next day. Louis Bonaparte had said,

“We must ‘space out’ the Generals.”

The police agent charged with escorting General Bedeau to Belgium was one of those who, on the 2d of December, had arrested General Cavaignac. He told General Bedeau that they had had a moment of uneasiness when arresting General Cavaignae: the picket of fifty men, which had been told off to assist the police having failed them.

In the compartment of the railway carriage which was taking General Bedeau into Belgium there was a lady, manifestly belonging to good society, of very distinguished appearance, and who was accompanied by three little children. A servant in livery, who appeared to be a German, had two of the children on his knees, and lavished a thousand little attentions on them. However, the General, hidden by the darkness, and muffled up, like the police agents, in the collar of his mantle, paid little attention to this group. When they reached Quièvrain, the lady turned to him and said, “General, I congratulate you, you are now in safety.”

The General thanked her, and asked her name.

“Baroness Coppens,” she answered.

It may be remembered that it was at M. Coppens’s house, 70, Rue Blanche, that the first meeting of the Left had taken place on December 2d.

“You have charming children there, madam,” said the General, “and,” he added, “an exceedingly good servant.”

“It is my husband,” said Madame Coppens.

M. Coppens, in fact, had remained five weeks buried in a hiding-place contrived in his own house. He had escaped from France that very night under the cover of his own livery. They had carefully taught their children their lesson. Chance had made them get into the same carriage as General Bedeau and the two bullies who were keeping guard over him, and throughout the night Madame Coppens had been in terror lest, in the presence of the policeman, one of the little ones awakening, should throw its arms around the neck of the servant and cry “Papa!”

CHAPTER XVI.

A RETROSPECT

Louis Bonaparte had tested the majority as engineers test a bridge; he had loaded it with iniquities, encroachments, enormities, slaughters on the Place du Havre, cries of “Long live the Emperor,” distributions of money to the troops, sales of Bonapartist journals in the streets, prohibition of Republican and parliamentary journals, reviews at Satory, speeches at Dijon; the majority bore everything.

“Good,” said he, “It will carry the weight of the *coup d’état*.”

Let us recall the facts. Before the 2d of December the *coup d’état* was being constructed in detail, here and there, a little everywhere, with exceeding impudence, and yet the majority smiled. The Representative Pascal Duprat had been violently treated by police agents. “That is very funny,” said the Right. The Representative Dain was seized. “Charming.” The Representative Sartin was arrested. “Bravo.” One fine morning when all the hinges had been well tested and oiled, and when all the wires were well fixed, the *coup d’état* was carried out all at once, abruptly. The majority ceased to laugh, but the trick, was done. It had not perceived that for a long time past, while it was laughing at the strangling of others, the cord was round its own neck.

Let us maintain this, not to punish the past, but to illuminate the future. Many months before being carried out, the *coup d’état* had been accomplished. The day having come, the hour having struck, the mechanism being completely wound up, it had only to be set going. It was bound not to fail, and nothing did fail. What would have been an abyss if the majority had done its duty, and had understood its joint responsibility with the Left, was not even a ditch. The inviolability had been demolished by those who were inviolable. The hand of gendarmes had become as accustomed to the collar of the Representatives as to the collar of thieves: the white tie of the statesman was not even rumpled in the grasp of the galley sergeants, and one can admire the Vicomte de Falloux — oh, candor! — for being dumfounded at being treated like Citizen Sartin.

The majority, going backwards, and ever applauding Bonaparte, fell into the hole which Bonaparte had dug for it.

CHAPTER XVII.

CONDUCT OF THE LEFT

The conduct of the Republican Left in this grave crisis of the 2d of December was memorable.

The flag of the Law was on the ground, in the mire of universal treason, under the feet of Louis Bonaparte; the Left raised this flag, washed away the mire with its blood, unfurled it, waved it before the eyes of the people, and from the 2d to the 5th of December held Bonaparte at bay.

A few men, a mere handful, 120 Representatives of the people escaped by chance from arrest, plunged in darkness and in silence, without even possessing that cry of the free press which sounds the tocsin to human intellects, and which encourages the combatants, without generals under their orders, without soldiers, without ammunition, went down into the streets, resolutely barred the way against the *coup d'état,* and gave battle to this monstrous crime, which had taken all its precautions, which was mail-clad in every part, armed to the teeth, crowding round it forests of bayonets, and making a pack of mortars and cannons give tongue in its favor.

They had that presence of mind, which is the most practical kind of courage; they had, while lacking everything else, the formidable improvisation of duty, which never loses heart. They had no printing-offices, they obtained them; they had no guns, they found them; they had no balls, they cast them; they had no powder, they manufactured it; they had nothing but paving-stones, and from thence they evolved combatants.

It is true that these paving-stones were the paving-stones of Paris, stones which change themselves into men.

Such is the power of Right, that, during four days these hundred and twenty men, who had nothing in their favor but the goodness of their cause, counterbalanced an army of 100,000 soldiers. At one moment the scale turned on their side. Thanks to them, thanks to their resistance, seconded by the indignation of honest hearts, there came an hour when the victory of the law seemed possible, and even certain. On Thursday, the 4th, the *coup d'état* tottered, and was obliged to support itself by assassination. We seen that without the butchery of the boulevards, if he had not saved his perjury by a massacre, if he had not sheltered his crime by another crime, Louis Bonaparte was lost.

During the long hours of this struggle, a struggle without a truce, a struggle against the army during the day and against the police during the night, — an unequal struggle, where all the strength and all the rage was on one side, and, as we have just said, nothing but Right on the other, not one of these hundred and twenty Representatives, not a single one failed at the call of duty, not one shunned the danger, not one drew back, not one wearied, — all these heads placed themselves resolutely under the axe, and for four days waited for it to fall.

To-day captivity, transportation, expatriation, exile, the axe has fallen on nearly all these heads.

I am one of those who have had no other merit in this struggle than to rally into one unique thought the courage of all; but let me here heartily render justice to those men amongst whom I pride myself with having for three years served the holy cause of human progress, to this Left, insulted, calumniated, unappreciated, and dauntless, which was always in the breach, and which did not repose for a single day, which recoiled none the more before the military conspiracy than before the parliamentary conspiracy, and which, entrusted by the people with the task of defending them, defended them even when abandoned by themselves; defended them in the tribune with speech, and in the street with the sword.

When the Committee of Resistance in the sitting at which the decree of deposition and of outlawry was drawn up and voted, making use of the discretionary power which the Left had confided to it, decided that all the signatures of the Republican Representatives remaining at liberty should be placed at the foot of the decree, it was a bold stroke; the Committee did not conceal from itself that it was a list of proscription offered to the victorious *coup d’état* ready drawn up, and perhaps in its inner conscience it feared that some would disavow it, and protest against it. As a matter of fact, the next day we received two letters, two complaints. They were from two Representatives who had been omitted from the list, and who claimed the honor of being reinstated there. I reinstate these two Representatives here, in their right of being proscripts. Here are their names — Anglade and Pradié.

From Tuesday, the 2d, to Friday, the 5th of December, the Representatives of the Left and the Committee, dogged, worried, hunted down, always on the point of being discovered and taken, that is to say — massacred; repaired for the purpose of deliberating, to twenty-seven different houses, shifted twenty-seven times their place of meeting, from their first gathering in the Rue Blanche to their last conference at Raymond’s. They refused the shelters which were offered them on the left bank of the river, wishing always to remain in the centre of the combat. During these changes they more than once traversed the right bank of Paris from one end to the other, most of the time on foot, and making long circuits in order not to be followed. Everything threatened them with danger; their number, their well-known faces, even their precautions. In the populous streets there was danger, the police were permanently posted there; in the lonely streets there was danger, because the goings and comings were more noticed there.

They did not sleep, they did not eat, they took what they could find, a glass of water from time to time, a morsel of bread here and there. Madame Landrin gave us a basin of soup, Madame Grévy the remainder of a cold pie. We dined one evening on a little chocolate which a chemist had distributed in a barricade. At Jeunesse’s, in the Rue de Grammont, during the night of the 3rd, Michel de Bourges took a chair, and said, “This is my bed.” Were they tired? They did not feel it. The old men, like Ronjat, the sick, like Boysset, all went forward. The public peril, like a fever, sustained them.

Our venerable colleague, Lamennais, did not come, but he remained three days without going to bed, buttoned up in his old frock coat, his thick boots on his feet, ready to march. He wrote to the author these three lines, which it is impossible not to quote:— “You are heroes without me. This pains me greatly. I await your orders. Try, then, to find me something to do, be it but to die.”

In these meetings each man preserved his usual demeanor. At times one might have thought it an ordinary sitting in one of the bureaux of the Assembly. There was the calm of every day, mingled with the firmness of decisive crises. Edgar Quinet retained all his lofty judgment, Noël Parfait all his mental vivacity, Yvan all his vigorous and intelligent penetration, Labrousse all his animation. In a corner Pierre Lefranc, pamphleteer and ballad-writer, but a pamphleteer like Courier, and a ballad-writer like Béranger smiled at the grave and stern words of Dupont de Bussac. All that brilliant group of young orators of the Left, Baneel with his powerful ardor, Versigny and Victor Chauffour with their youthful daring. Sain with his coolheadedness which reveals strength, Farconnet with his gentle voice and his energetic inspiration, lavishing his efforts in resisting the *coup d'état*, sometimes taking part in the deliberations, at others amongst the people, proving that to be an orator one must possess all the qualifications of a combatant. De Flotte, indefatigable, was ever ready to traverse all Paris. Xavier Durrieu was courageous, Dulac dauntless, Charamaule fool-hardy. Citizens and Paladins. Courage! who would have dared to exhibit none amongst all these men, of whom not one trembled? Untrimmed beards, torn coats, disordered hair, pale faces, pride glistening in every eye. In the houses where they were received they installed themselves as best they could. If there were no sofas or chairs, some, exhausted in strength, but not in heart, seated themselves on the floor. All became copyists of the decrees and proclamations; one dictated, ten wrote. They wrote on tables, on the corners of furniture, on their knees. Frequently paper was lacking, pens were wanting. These wretched trifles created obstacles at the most critical times. At certain moments in the history of peoples an inkstand where the ink is dried up may prove a public calamity. Moreover, cordiality prevailed among all, all shades of difference were effaced. In the secret sittings of the Committee Madier de Montjau, that firm and generous heart, De Flotte, brave and thoughtful, a fighting philosopher of the Devolution, Carnot, accurate, cold, tranquil, immovable, Jules Favre, eloquent, courageous, admirable through his simplicity and his strength, inexhaustible in resources as in sarcasms, doubled, by combining them, the diverse powers of their minds.

Michel de Bourges, seated in a corner of the fireplace, or leaning on a table enveloped in his great coat, his black silk cap on his head, had an answer for every suggestion, gave back to occurrences blow for blow, was on his guard for danger, difficulty, opportunity, necessity, for his is one of those wealthy natures which have always something ready either in their intellect or in their imagination. Words of advice crossed without jostling each other. These men entertained no illusion. They knew that they had entered into a life-and-death struggle. They had no quarter to expect. They had to do with the Man who had said, “Crush everything.” They knew the bloody words of the self-styled Minister, Merny. These words the placards of Saint-Arnaud interpreted by decrees, the Praetorians let loose in the street interpreted them by murder. The members of the Insurrectionary Committee and the Representatives assisting at the meetings were not ignorant that wherever they might be taken they would be killed on the spot by bayonet-thrusts. It was the fortune of this war. Yet the prevailing expression on every face was serenity; that profound serenity which comes from a happy conscience. At times this serenity rose to gaiety. They laughed willingly and at everything. At the torn trousers of one, at the hat which another had brought back from the barricade instead of his own, at the comforter of a third. “Hide your big body,” they said to him. They were children, and everything amused them. On the morning of the 4th Mathien de la Drôme came in. He had organized for his part a committee which communicated with the Central Committee, he came to tell us of it. He had shaved off his fringe of beard so as not to be recognized in the streets. “You look like an Archbishop,” said Michel de Bourges to him, and there was a general laugh. And all this, with this thought which every moment brought back; the noise which is heard at the door, the key which turns in the lock is perhaps Death coming in.

The Representatives and the Committee were at the mercy of chance. More than once they could have been captured, and they were not; either owing to the scruples of certain police agents (where the deuce will scruples next take up their abode?) or that these agents doubted the final result, and feared to lay their hand heedlessly upon possible victors. If Vassal, the Commissary of Police, who met us on the morning of the 4th, on the pavement of the Rue des Moulins, had wished, we might have been taken that day. He did not betray us. But these were exceptions. The pursuit of the police was none the less ardent and implacable. At Marie’s, it may be remembered that the *sergents de ville* and the gendarmes arrived ten minutes after we had left the house, and that they even ransacked under the beds with their bayonets.

Amongst the Representatives there were several Constituents, and at their head Bastide. Bastide, in 1848, had been Minister for Foreign Affairs. During the second night, meeting in the Rue Popincourt, they reproached him with several of his actions. “Let me first get myself killed,” he answered, “and then you can reproach me with what you like.” And he added, “How can you distrust me, who am a Republican up to the hilt?” Bastide would not consent to call our resistance the “insurrection,” he called it the “counter-insurrection.” he said, “Victor Hugo is right. The insurgent is at the Elysée.” It was my opinion, as we have seen, that we ought to bring the battle at once to an issue, to defer nothing, to reserve nothing; I said, “We must strike the *coup d’état* while it is hot.” Bastide supported me. In the combat he was impassive, cold, gay beneath his coldness. At the Saint Antoine barricade, at the moment when the guns of the *coup d’état* were leveled at the Representatives of the people, he said smilingly to Madier de Montjau, “Ask Schoelcher what he thinks of the abolition of the penalty of death.” (Schoelcher, like myself, at this supreme moment, would have answered, “that it ought to be abolished”) In another barricade Bastide, compelled to absent himself for a moment, placed his pipe on a paving-stone. They found Bastide’s pipe, and they thought him dead. He came back, and it was hailing musket-balls; he said, “My pipe?” he relighted it and resumed the fight. Two balls pierced his coat.

When the barricades were constructed, the Republican Representatives spread themselves abroad; and distributed themselves amongst them. Nearly all the Representatives of the Left repaired to the barricades, assisting either to build them or to defend them. Besides the great exploit at Saint Antoine barricade, where Schoelcher was so admirable, Esquiros went to the barricade of the Rue de Charonne, De Flotte to those of the Pantheon and of the Chapelle Saint Denis, Madier de Montjau to those of Belleville and the Rue Aumaire, Doutre and Pelletier to that of the Mairie of the Fifth Arrondissement, Brives to that of Rue Beaubourg, Arnauld de l’Ariège to that of Rue de Petit-Repîsoir, Viguier to that of the Rue Pagevin, Versigny to that of the Rue Joigneaux; Dupont de Bussac to that of the Carré Saint Martin; Carlos Forel and Boysset to that of the Rue Rambuteau. Doutre received a sword-cut on his head, which cleft his hat; Bourzat had four balls in his overcoat; Baudin was killed; Gaston Dussoubs was ill and could not come; his brother, Denis Dussoubs, replaced him. Where? In the tomb.

Baudin fell on the first barricade, Denis Dussoubs on the last.

I was less favored than Bourzat; I only had three balls in my overcoat, and it is impossible for me to say whence they came. Probably from the boulevard.

After the battle was lost there was no general helter-skelter, no rout, no flight. All remained hidden in Paris ready to reappear, Michel in the Rue d’Alger, myself in the Rue de Navarin. The Committee held yet another sitting on Saturday, the 6th, at eleven o’clock at night. Jules Favre, Michel de Bourges, and myself, we came during the night to the house of a generous and brave woman, Madame Didier. Bastide came there and said to me, “If you are not killed here, you are going to enter upon exile. For myself, I am going to remain in Paris. Take me for your lieutenant.” I have related this incident.

They hoped for the 9th (Tuesday) a resumption of arms, which did not take place. Malarmet had announced it to Dupont de Bussac, but the blow of the 4th had prostrated Paris. The populace no longer stirred. The Representatives did not resolve to think of their safety, and to quit France through a thousand additional dangers until several days afterwards, when the last spark of resistance was extinguished in the heart of the people, and the last glimmer of hope in heaven.

Several Republican Representatives were workmen; they have again become workmen in exile. Nadaud has resumed his trowel, and is a mason in London. Faure (du Rhône), a cutler, and Bansept, a shoemaker, felt that their trade had become their duty, and practise it in England. Faure makes knives, Bansept makes boots. Greppo is a weaver, it was he who when a proscript made the coronation robe of Queen Victoria. Gloomy smile of Destiny. Noël Parfait is a proof-reader at Brussels; Agricol Perdiguier, called Avignonnais-la-Vertu, has girded on his leathern apron, and is a cabinet-maker at Antwerp. Yesterday these men sat in the Sovereign Assembly. Such things as these are seen in Plutarch.

The eloquent and courageous proscript, Emile Deschanel, has created at Brussels, with a rare talent of speech, a new form of public instruction, the Conferences. To him is due the honor of this foundation, so fruitful and so useful.

Let us say in conclusion that the National Legislative Assembly lived badly but died well.

At this moment of the fall, irreparable for the cowards, the Right was worthy, the Left was great.

Never before has History seen a Parliament fall in this manner.

February had blown upon the Deputies of the legal country, and the Deputies had vanished. M. Sauzet had sunk down behind the tribune, and had gone away without even taking his hat.

Bonaparte, the other, the first, the true Bonaparte, had made the “Five Hundred” step out of the windows of the Orangery of Saint Cloud, somewhat embarrassed with their large mantles.

Cromwell, the oldest of the Bonapartes, when he achieved his Eighteenth Brumaire, encountered scarcely any other resistance than a few imprecations from Milton and from Ludlaw, and was able to say in his boorishly gigantic language, “I have put the King in my knapsack and the Parliament in my pocket.”

We must go back to the Roman Senate in order to find true Curule chairs.

The Legislative Assembly, let us repeat, to its honor, did not lose countenance when facing the abyss. History will keep an account of it. After having betrayed so many things, it might have been feared that this Assembly would end by betraying itself. It did nothing of the kind. The Legislature, one is obliged to remember, had committed faults upon faults; the Royalist majority had, in the most odious manner, persecuted the Republican minority, which was bravely doing its duty in denouncing it to the people; this Assembly had had a very long cohabitation and a most fatal complicity with the Man of Crime, who had ended by strangling it as a robber strangles his concubine in his bed; but whatever may be said of this fateful Assembly, it did not exhibit that wretched vanishing away which Louis Bonaparte hoped for; it was not a coward.

This is due to its having originated from universal suffrage. Let us mention this, for it is an instructive lesson. The virtue of this universal suffrage, which had begotten the Assembly and which the Assembly had wished to slay, it felt in itself to its last hour.

The sap of a whole people does not spread in vain throughout an Assembly, even throughout the most decrepit. On the decisive day this sap asserts itself.

The Legislative Assembly, laden as it may be with formidable responsibilities, will, perhaps, be less overwhelmed than it deserves by the reprobation of posterity.

Thanks to universal suffrage, which it had deceived, and which constituted its faith and its strength at the last moment, thanks to the Left, which it had oppressed, scoffed at, calumniated, and decimated, and which cast on it the glorious reflection of its heroism, this pitiful Assembly died a grand death.

CHAPTER XVIII.

PAGE WRITTEN AT BRUSSELS

Well then, yes, I will kick open the door of this Palace, and I will enter with you, History! I will seize by the collar all the perpetrators, continually caught red-handed in the commission of all these outrages! I will suddenly illuminate this cavern of night with the broad daylight of truth!

Yes, I will bring in the daylight! I will tear down the curtain, I will open the window, I will show to every eye such as it really is, infamous, horrible, wealthy, triumphant, joyous, gilded, besmirched — this Elysée! this Court! this group! this heap! call it what you will! this galley-crew! where writhe and crawl, and pair and breed every baseness, every indignity, every abomination: filibusters, buccaneers, swearers of oaths, Signers of the Cross, spies, swindlers, butchers, executioners, from the brigand who vends his sword, to the Jesuit who sells his God second-hand! This sink where Baroche elbows Teste! where each brings his own nastiness! Magnan his epaulets; Montalembert his religion, Dupin his person!

And above all the innermost circle, the Holy of Holies, the private Council, the smug den where they drink — where they eat — where they laugh — where they sleep — where they play — where they cheat — where they call Highnesses "Thou," — where they wallow! Oh! what ignominies! It is them! It is there! Dishonor, baseness, shame, and opprobrium are there! Oh History! A hot iron for all these faces.

It is there that they amuse themselves, and that they jest, and that they banter, and that they make sport of France! It is there that they pocket haphazard, amid great shouts of laughter, the millions of louis and the millions of votes! See them, look at them! They have treated the Law like a girl, they are content! Right is slaughtered, Liberty is gagged, the flag is dishonored, the people are under their feet. They are happy! And who are they? What are these men? Europe knows not. One fine morning it saw them come out of a crime. Nothing more. A parcel of rascals who vainly tried to become celebrated, and who have remained anonymous. Look! they are all there! See them, I tell you! Look at them, I tell you! Recognize them if you can. Of what sex are they? To what species do they belong? Who is this one? Is he a writer? No; he is a dog. He gobbles human flesh. And that one? Is he a dog? No, he is a courtier — he has blood on his paw.

New men, that is what they term them. New, in truth! Unlooked-for, strange, unprecedented, monstrous! Perjury, iniquity, robbery, assassination, erected into ministerial departments, swindling applied to universal suffrage, government under false pretences, duty called crime, crime called duty, cynicism laughing in the midst of atrocity, — it is of all this that their newness is compounded.

Now, all is well, they have succeeded, they have a fair wind, they enjoy themselves to the full. They have cheated France, they are dividing the spoil. France is a bag, and they put their hand in it. Rummage, for Heaven's sake! Take, while you are there; help yourselves, draw out, plunder, steal! One wants money, another wants situations, another wants a decorative collar round his neck, another a plume in his hat, another embroidery on his sleeve, another women, another power; another news for the Bourse, another a railway, another wine. I should think, indeed, that they are well satisfied. Picture to yourself a poor devil who, three years ago, borrowed ten sous of his porter, and who to-day, leaning voluptuously on the *Moniteur*, has only to sign a decree to take a million. To make themselves perfectly happy, to be able to devour the finances of the State, to live at the expense of the Treasury like a son of the family, this is what is called their policy. Their ambition has a true name, it is gluttony.

They ambitious? Nonsense! They are gluttons. To govern is to gamble. This does not prevent betrayal. On the contrary, they spy upon each other, they betray each other. The little traitors betray the great traitors. Pietri looks askance at Maupas, and Maupas at Carlier. They all lie in the same reeking sewer! They have achieved the *coup d'état* in common. That is all. Moreover they feel sure of nothing, neither of glances, nor of smiles, nor of hidden thoughts, nor of men, nor of women, nor of the lacquey, nor of the prince, nor of words of honor, nor of birth certificates. Each feels himself fraudulent, and knows himself suspected. Each has his secret aims. Each alone knows why he has done this. Not one utters a word about his crime, and no one bears the name of his father. Ah! may God grant me life, and may Jesus pardon me, I will raise a gibbet a hundred yards high, I will take hammer and nails, and I will crucify this Beauharnais called Bonaparte, between this Leroy called Saint-Arnoud, and this Fialin called Persigny!

And I would drag you there also, all of you accomplices! This Morny, this Romieu, this Fould, the Jew senator, this Delangle, who bears on his back this placard: JUSTICE! and this Troplong, this judicial glorifier of the violation of the laws, this lawyer apologist of the *coup d'état*, this magistrate flatterer of perjury, this judge panegyrist of murder, who will go down to posterity with a sponge filled with mud and with blood in his hand.

I begin the battle therefore. With whom? With the present ruler of Europe. It is right that this spectacle should be given to the world. Louis Bonaparte is the success, is the intoxicated triumph, is the gay and ferocious despotism, opening out under the victory, he is the mad fulness of power, seeking limits and finding none, neither in things nor in men; Louis Bonaparte holds France, *Urbem Roman habit*; and whoever holds France holds the world; he is master of the votes, master of the consciences, master of the people; he nominates his successor, reigns forever over future electoral scrutinies, disposes of eternity, and places futurity in an envelope; his Senate, his Legislative Body, his Council of State, with heads lowered and mingled confusedly behind him, lick his feet; he drags along in a leash the bishops and cardinals; he tramples on the justice which curses him, and on the judges who adore him, thirty correspondents inform the Continent that he has frowned, and every electric telegraph vibrates if he raises his little finger; around him is heard the rustling of sabres, and the drums beat the salute; he sits under the shadow of the eagle in the midst of bayonets and of citadels, the free nations tremble and hide their liberties for fear that he should steal them, the great American Republic herself falters in his presence, and dares not withdraw her Ambassador from him; the kings, surrounded by their armies, look at him smilingly, with their hearts full of fear. Where will he begin? With Belgium? With Switzerland? With Piedmont? Europe expects to be overrun. He is capable of all, and he dreams of all.

Well, then! Before this master, this triumpher, this conqueror, this dictator, this Emperor, this all-powerful, there rises a solitary man, a wanderer, despoiled, ruined, prostrate, proscribed, and attacks him. Louis Napoleon has ten thousand cannons, and five hundred thousand soldiers; the writer has his pen and his ink-stand. The writer is nothing, he is a grain of dust, he is a shadow, he is an exile without a refuge, he is a vagrant without a passport, but he has by his side and fighting with him two powers, Right, which is invincible, and Truth, which is immortal.

Assuredly, for this struggle to the death, for this formidable duel, Providence could have chosen a more illustrious champion, a grander athlete. But what matter men, there, where it is the idea with combats! Such as it is, it is good, let us repeat, that this spectacle should be given to the world. What is this in truth? It is intellect, an atom which resists strength — a colossus.

I have only one stone in my sling, but that stone is a good one; that stone is justice.

I attack Louis Bonaparte at this hour, when he is erect; at this hour, when he is master. He is in his zenith. So much the better; it is that which suits me.

Yes, I attack Louis Bonaparte. I attack him before the world; I attack him in the presence of God and men; I attack him resolutely, desperately; for the love of the people and of France. He is about to be Emperor, let it be so. Let there be at least one brow which resists. Let Louis Bonaparte know that an Empire may be taken, but that a Conscience cannot be taken.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE INFALLIBLE BENEDICTION

The Pope approved.

When the mails brought to Rome intelligence of the event of the 2d of December, the Pope went to a review held by General Gémeau, and begged him to congratulate Prince Louis Napoléon for him.

There was a precedent for this.

On the 12th December, 1572, Saint-Goard, Ambassador of Charles the Ninth, King of France, to Philip the Second, King of Spain, wrote from Madrid to his master, Charles the Ninth, “The news of the events of the day of Saint Bartholomew have reached the Catholic King. Contrary to his wont and custom, he has shown so much joy, that he has manifested it more openly than he has ever done for all the happy events and good fortune which have previously befallen him. So that I went to him on Sunday morning at Saint Hieronimus, and having approached him, he burst out laughing, and with every demonstration of extreme pleasure and contentment, began to praise your Majesty.”

The hand of Pius IX. remained extended over France, when it had become the Empire.

Then, under the shadow of this benediction, began an era of prosperity.

“Archives of the house of Orange,” page 125, Supplement.

CONCLUSION — THE FALL.

CHAPTER I.

I was coming back from my fourth exile — an exile in Belgium, a small matter. It was one of the last days of September, 1871. I was re-entering France by the Luxembourg frontier. I had fallen asleep in the carriage. Suddenly the jolt of the train coming to a standstill awoke me. I opened my eyes.

The train had stopped in the middle of a charming landscape.

I was in the half-consciousness of an interrupted sleep; and ideas, as yet half-dreams, hazy and diffuse, hovered between myself and reality. I experienced the undefinable and confused sensation of awakening.

A river flowed by the side of the railway, clear, around a bright and verdant island. This vegetation was so thick that the moor-hens, on reaching it, plunged beneath it and disappeared. The river wound through a valley, which appeared like a huge garden. Apple-trees were there, which reminded one of Eve, and willows, which made one think of Galatea. It was, as I have said, in one of those equinoctial months when may be felt the peculiar charm of a season drawing to a close. If it be winter which is passing away, you hear the song of approaching spring; if it be summer which is vanishing, you see glimmering on the horizon the undefinable smile of autumn. The wind lulled and harmonized all those pleasant sounds which compose the murmur of the fields; the tinkling of the sheep-bells seemed to soothe the humming of the bees; the last butterflies met together with the first grapes; this hour of the year mingles the joy of being still alive with the unconscious melancholy of fast approaching death; the sweetness of the sun was indescribable. Fertile fields streaked with furrows, honest peasants' cottages; under the trees a turf covered with shade, the lowing of cattle as in Virgil, and the smoke of hamlets penetrated by rays of sunshine; such was the complete picture. The clanging of anvils rang in the distance, the rhythm of work amidst the harmony of nature. I listened, I mused vaguely. The valley was beautiful and quiet, the blue heavens seemed as though resting upon a lovely circle of hills; in the distance were the voices of birds, and close to me the voices of children, like two songs of angels mingled together; the universal purity enshrouded me: all this grace and all this grandeur shed a golden dawn into my soul….

Suddenly a fellow-traveller asked, —

“What place is this?”

Another answered, —

“Sedan.”

I shuddered.

This paradise was a tomb.

I looked around. The valley was circular and hollow, like the bottom of a crater; the winding river resembled a serpent; the high hills, ranged one behind the other, surrounded this mysterious spot like a triple line of inexorable walls; once there, there is no means of exit. It reminded me of the amphitheatres. An indescribable disquieting vegetation which seemed to be an extension of the Black Forest, overran all the heights, and lost itself in the horizon like a huge impenetrable snare; the sun shone, the birds sang, carters passed by whistling; sheep, lambs, and pigeons were scattered about, leaves quivered and rustled; the grass, a densely thick grass, was full of flowers. It was appalling.

I seemed to see waving over this valley the flashing of the avenging angel’s sword.

This word “Sedan” had been like a veil abruptly torn aside. The landscape had become suddenly filled with tragedy. Those shapeless eyes which the bark of trees delineates on the trunks were gazing — at what? At something terrible and lost to view.

In truth, that was the place! And at the moment when I was passing by thirteen months all but a few days had elapsed. That was the place where the monstrous enterprise of the 2d of December had burst asunder. A fearful shipwreck.

The gloomy pathways of Fate cannot be studied without profound anguish of the heart.

CHAPTER II.

On the 31st of August, 1870, an army was reassembled, and was, as it were, massed together under the walls of Sedan, in a place called the Givonne Valley. This army was a French army — twenty-nine brigades, fifteen divisions, four army corps — 90,000 men. This army was in this place without any one being able to divine the reason; without order, without an object, scattered about — a species of heap of men thrown down there as though with the view of being seized by some huge hand.

This army either did not entertain, or appeared not to entertain, for the moment any immediate uneasiness. They knew, or at least they thought they knew, that the enemy was a long way off. On calculating the stages at four leagues daily, it was three days' march distant. Nevertheless, towards evening the leaders took some wise strategic precautions; they protected the army, which rested in the rear on Sedan and the Meuse, by two battle fronts, one composed of the 7th Corps, and extending from Floing to Givonne, the other composed of the 12th Corps, extending from Givonne to Bazeilles; a triangle of which the Meuse formed the hypothenuse. The 12th Corps, formed of the three divisions of Lacretelle, Lartigue, and Wolf, ranged on the right, with the artillery, between the brigades formed a veritable barrier, having Bazeilles and Givonne at each end, and Daigny in its centre; the two divisions of Petit and Lhéritier massed in the rear upon two lines supported this barrier. General Lebrun commanded the 12th Corps. The 7th Corps, commanded by General Douay, only possessed two divisions — Dumont's division and Gilbert's division — and formed the other battle front, covering the army of Givonne to Floing on the side of Illy; this battle front was comparatively weak, too open on the side of Givonne, and only protected on the side of the Meuse by the two cavalry divisions of Margueritte and Bonnemains, and by Guyomar's brigade, resting in squares upon Floing. Within this triangle were encamped the 5th Corps, commanded by General Wimpfen, and the 1st Corps, commanded by General Ducrot. Michel's cavalry division covered the 1st Corps on the side of Daigny; the 5th supported itself upon Sedan. Four divisions, each disposed upon two lines — the divisions of Lhéritier, Grandchamp, Goze, and Conseil-Duménil — formed a sort of horseshoe, turned towards Sedan, and uniting the first battle front with the second. The cavalry division of Ameil and the brigade of Fontanges served as a reserve for these four divisions. The whole of the artillery was upon the two battle fronts. Two portions of the army were in confusion, one to the right of Sedan beyond Balan, the other to the left of Sedan, on this side of Iges. Beyond Balan were the divisions of Vassoigne and the brigade of Reboul, on this side of Iges were the two cavalry divisions of Margueritte and Bonnemains.

These arrangements indicated a profound feeling of security. In the first place the Emperor Napoleon III. would not have come there if he had not been perfectly tranquil. This Givonne Valley is what Napoleon I. called a “washhand basin.” There could not be a more complete enclosure. An army is so much at home there that it is too much so; it runs the risk of no longer being able to get out. This disquieted some brave and prudent leaders such as Wimpfen, but they were not listened to. If absolutely necessary, said the people of the Imperial circle, they could always be sure of being able to reach Mézières, and at the worst the Belgian frontier. Was it, however, needful to provide for such extreme eventualities? In certain cases foresight is almost an offence. They were all of one mind, therefore, to be at their ease.

If they had been uneasy they would have cut the bridges of the Meuse; but they did not even think of it. To what purpose? The enemy was a long way off. The Emperor, who evidently was well informed, affirmed it.

The army bivouacked somewhat in confusion, as we have said, and slept peaceably throughout this night of August 31, having, whatever might happen, or believing that they had, the retreat upon Mézières open behind it. They disdained to take the most ordinary precautions, they made no cavalry reconnaissances, they did not even place outposts. A German military writer has stated this. Fourteen leagues at least separated them from the German army, three days' march; they did not exactly know where it was; they believed it scattered, possessing little unity, badly informed, led somewhat at random upon several points at once, incapable of a movement converging upon one single point, like Sedan; they believed that the Crown Prince of Saxony was marching on Chalons, and that the Crown Prince of Prussia was marching on Metz; they were ignorant of everything appertaining to this army, its leaders, its plan, its armament, its effective force. Was it still following the strategy of Gustavus Adolphus? Was it still following the tactics of Frederick II.? No one knew. They felt sure of being at Berlin in a few weeks. What nonsense! The Prussian army! They talked of this war as of a dream, and of this army as of a phantom.

During this very night, while the French army was sleeping, this is what was taking place.

M. Harwik.

CHAPTER III.

At a quarter to two in the morning, at his headquarters at Mouzon,

Albert, Crown Prince of Saxony, set the Army of the Meuse in motion; the

Royal Guard were beat to arms, and two divisions marched, one upon

Villers-Cernay, by Escambre and Fouru-aux-Bois, the other upon

Francheval by Suchy and Fouru-Saint-Remy. The Artillery of the Guard followed.

At the same moment the 12th Saxon Corps was beaten to arms, and by the high road to the south of Douzy reached Lamécourt, and marched upon La Moncelle; the 1st Bavarian Corps marched upon Bazeilles, supported at Reuilly-sur-Meuse by an Artillery Division of the 4th Corps. The other division of the 4th Corps crossed the Meuse at Mouzon, and massed itself in reserve at Mairy, upon the right bank. These three columns maintained close communication with each other. The order was given to the advanced guards to begin no offensive movement before five o’clock, and silently to occupy Fouru-aux-Bois, Fouru-Saint-Remy, and Douay. They had left their knapsacks behind them. The baggage-wagons did not stir. The Crown Prince of Saxony was on horseback on the heights of Amblimont.

At the same time, at his headquarters at Chémery, Blumenthal was having a bridge built over the Meuse by the Wurtemburg division. The 11th Corps, astir before daylight, crossed the Meuse at Dom-le-Mesnil and at Donchery, and reached Vrigne-sur-Bois. The artillery followed, and held the road from Vrigne to Sedan. The Wurtemburg division kept the bridge which it had built, and held the road from Sedan to Mézières. At five o’clock, the 2d Bavarian Corps, with the artillery at its head, detached one of its divisions, and sent it by Bulson upon Frénois; the other division passed by Noyers, and drew up before Sedan, between Frénois and Wadelincourt. The artillery of the Reserve was drawn up on the heights of the left bank, opposite Donchery.

At the same time the 6th Cavalry Division was sent from Mazeray, and passing by Boutancourt and Bolzicourt, reached the Meuse at Flize; the 2d Cavalry Division quitted its encampment, and took up its position to the south of Boutancourt; the 4th Cavalry Division took up its position to the south of Frénois; the 1st Bavarian Corps installed itself at Remilly; the 5th Cavalry Division and the 6th Corps were posted to observe, and all in line, and order, massed upon the heights waited for the dawn to appear. The Crown Prince of Prussia was on horseback on the hill of Frénois.

At the same moment, upon every point of the horizon, other and similar movements were taking place from every side. The high hills were suddenly overrun by an immense black army. Not one shout of command. Two hundred and fifty thousand men came silently to encircle the Givonne Valley.

This is what the circle consisted of, —

The Bavarians, the right wing, at Bazeilles on the Meuse; next to the
Bavarians the Saxons, at La Moncelle and Daigny; opposite Givonne, the
Royal Guard; the 5th Corps at Saint Menges; the 2d at Flaigneux; the
Wurtemburgers at the bend of the Meuse, between Saint Menges and
Donchery; Count Stolberg and his cavalry at Donchery; in front, towards
Sedan, the 2d Bavarian Army.

All this was carried out in a ghostly manner, in order, without a whisper, without a sound, through forests, ravines, and valleys. A tortuous and ill-omened march. A stealthy gliding onwards of reptiles.

Scarcely could a murmur be heard beneath the thick foliage. The silent battle swarmed in the darkness awaiting the day.

The French army was sleeping.

Suddenly it awoke.

It was a prisoner.

The sun rose, brilliant on the side of God — terrible on the side of man.

CHAPTER IV.

Let us review the situation.

The Germans have numbers on their side; they are three against one, perhaps four; they own to 250,000 men, and it is certain that their attacking front extended for 30 kilomètres; they have on their side the positions, they crown the heights, they fill the forests, they are covered by all these escarpments, they are masked by all this shade; they possess an incomparable artillery. The French army is in a valley, almost without artillery and without supplies, utterly naked beneath their hail of lead. The Germans have on their side the ambuscade, and the French have only on their side heroism. Death is glorious, but surprise is profitable.

A surprise, that is the true description of this brilliant exploit.

Is it fair warfare? Yes. But if this is fair, what is unfair warfare? It is the same thing.

This said, the story of the Battle of Sedan has been told.

I should have wished to stop there. But I cannot. Whatever horror the historian may feel, History is a duty, and this duty must be fulfilled. There is no incline more inexorable than this: to tell the truth; he who ventures on it rolls to the very bottom. It must be so. The guardian of Justice is doomed to justice.

The Battle of Sedan is more than a battle which has been fought; it is a syllogism which is completed; a formidable premeditation of destiny. Destiny never hurries, but it always comes. At its hour, there it is. It allows years to pass by, and at the moment when men are least thinking of it, it appears. Of this character is the fatal, the unexpected catastrophe named Sedan. From time to time in History, Divine logic makes an onslaught. Sedan is one of those onslaughts.

Thus on the 1st of September, at five o'clock in the morning the world awoke under the sun, and the French army under the thunderbolt.

CHAPTER V.

Bazeilles takes fire, Givonne takes fire, Floing takes fire; the battle begins with a furnace. The whole horizon is aflame. The French camp is in this crater, stupefied, affrighted, starting up from sleeping, — a funereal swarming. A circle of thunder surrounds the army. They are encircled by annihilation. This mighty slaughter is carried on on all sides simultaneously. The French resist, and they are terrible, having nothing left but despair. Our cannon, almost all old-fashioned and of short range, are at once dismounted by the fearful and exact aim of the Prussians. The density of the rain of shells upon the valley is so great, that "the earth is completely furrowed," says an eye-witness, "as though by a rake." How many cannon? Eleven hundred at least. Twelve German batteries upon La Moncelle alone; the 3d and 4th *Abtheilung*, an awe-striking artillery, upon the crests of Givonne, with the 2d horse battery in reserve; opposite Doigny ten Saxon and two Wurtemburg batteries; the curtain of trees of the wood to the north of Villers-Cernay masks the mounted *Abtheilung*, which is there with the 3d Heavy Artillery in reserve, and from this gloomy copse issues a formidable fire; the twenty-four pieces of the 1st Heavy Artillery are ranged in the glade skirting the road from La Moncelle to La Chapelle; the battery of the Royal Guard sets fire to the Garenne Wood; the shells and the balls riddle Suchy, Francheval, Fouru-Saint-Remy, and the valley between Heibes and Givonne; and the third and fourth rank of cannon extend without break of continuity as far as the Calvary of Illy, the extreme point of the horizon. The German soldiers, seated or lying before the batteries, watch the artillery at work. The French soldiers fall and die. Amongst the bodies which cover the plain there is one, the body of an officers on which they will find, after the battle, a sealed note, containing this order, signed NAPOLEON: "To-day, September 1st, rest for the whole army."

The gallant 35th of the Line almost completely disappears under the overwhelming shower of shells; the brave Marine Infantry holds at bay for a moment the Saxons, joined by the Bavarians, but outflanked on every side, draws back; all the admirable cavalry of the Targueritte Division hurled against the German infantry, halts and sinks down midway, "annihilated," says the Prussian Report, "by well-aimed and cool firing." This field of carnage has three outlets; all three barred: the Bouillon road by the Prussian Guard, the Carignan road by the Bavarians, the Mézières road by the Wurtemburgers. The French have not thought of barricading the railway viaduct; three German battalions have occupied it during the night. Two isolated houses on the Balan road could be made the pivot of a long resistance; but the Germans are there. The wood from Monvilliers to Bazeilles, bushy and dense, might prevent the junction of the Saxons, masters of La Moncelle, and the Bavarians, masters of Bazeilles; but the French have been forestalled: they find the Bavarians cutting the underwood with their bill-hooks. The German army moves in one piece, in one absolute unity; the Crown Prince of Saxony is on the height of Mairy, whence he surveys the whole action; the command oscillates in the French army; at the beginning of the battle, at a quarter to six, MacMahon is wounded by the bursting of a shell; at seven o'clock Ducrot replaces him; at ten o'clock Wimpfen replaces Ducrot. Every instant the wall of fire is drawing closer in, the roll of the thunder is continuous, a dismal pulverization of 90,000 men! Never before has anything equal to this been seen; never before has an army been overwhelmed beneath such a downpour of lead and iron! At one o'clock all is lost. The regiments fly helter-skelter into Sedan. But Sedan begins to burn; Dijonval burns, the ambulances burn, there is nothing now possible but to cut their way out. Wimpfen, brave and resolute, proposes this to the Emperor. The 3d Zouaves, desperate, have set the example. Cut off from the rest of the army, they have forced a passage, and have reached Belgium. A flight of lions!

Suddenly, above the disaster, above the huge pile of dead and dying, above all this unfortunate heroism, appears disgrace. The white flag is hoisted.

Turenne and Vauban were both present, one in his statue, the other in his citadel.

The statue and the citadel witnessed the awe-striking capitulation. These two virgins, one of bronze, the other of granite, felt themselves prostituted.

O noble face of our country! Oh, eternal blushes!

The Franco-German War of 1870-71. Report of the Prussian Staff, page 1087.

CHAPTER VI.

This disaster of Sedan was easy of avoidance by any other man, but impossible of avoidance for Louis Bonaparte. He avoided it so little that he sought it. *Lex fati*.

Our army seemed expressly arranged for the catastrophe. The soldier was uneasy, ignorant of his whereabouts, famished. On the 31st of August, in the streets of Sedan, soldiers were seeking their regiments, and going from door to door asking for bread. We have seen the Emperor's order announcing the next day, September 1st, as a day of rest. In truth the army was worn out with fatigue. And yet it had only marched by short stages. The soldier was almost losing the habit of marching. One corps, the 1st, for example, only accomplished two leagues per day (on the 29th of August from Stonne to Raucourt).

During that time the German army, inexorably commanded and driven at the stick's end like the army of the Xerxes, achieved marches of fourteen leagues in fifteen hours, which enabled it to arrive unexpectedly, and to surround the French army while asleep. It was customary to allow oneself to be surprised. General Failly allowed himself to be surprised at Beaumont; during the day the soldiers took their guns to pieces to clean them, at night they slept, without even cutting the bridges which delivered them to the enemy; thus they neglected to blow up the bridges of Mouzon and Bazeilles. On September 1st, daylight had not yet appeared, when an advance guard of seven battalions, commanded by General Schultz, captured La Rulle, and insured the junction of the army of the Meuse with the Royal Guard. Almost at the same minute, with German precision, the Wurtemburgers seized the bridge of La Platinerie, and hidden by the Chevalier Wood, the Saxon battalions, spread out into company columns, occupied the whole of the road from La Moncelle to Villers-Cernay.

Thus, as we have seen, the awakening of the French Army was horrible. At Bazeilles a fog was added to the smoke. Our soldiers, attacked in this gloom, knew not what death required of them; they fought from room to room and from house to house.

It was in vain that the Reboul brigade came to support the Martin des Pallières brigade; they were obliged to yield. At the same time Ducrot was compelled to concentrate his forces in the Garenne Wood, before the Calvary of Illy; Douay, shattered, fell back; Lebrun alone stood firm on the plateau of Stenay. Our troops occupied a line of five kilomètres; the front of the French army faced the east, the left faced the north, the extreme left (the Guyomar brigade) faced the west; but they did not know whether they faced the enemy, they did not see him; annihilation struck without showing itself; they had to deal with a masked Medusa. Our cavalry was excellent, but useless. The field of battle, obstructed by a large wood, cut up by clumps of trees, by houses and by farms and by enclosure walls, was excellent for artillery and infantry, but bad for cavalry. The rivulet of Givonne, which flows at the bottom of the valley and crosses it, for three days ran with more blood than water. Among other places of carnage, Saint-Menges was appalling. For a moment it appeared possible to cut a way out by Carignan towards Montmédy, and then this outlet reclosed. This refuge only remained, Sedan; Sedan encumbered with carts, with wagons, with carriages, with hospital huts; a heap of combustible matter. This dying agony of heroes lasted ten hours. They refused to surrender, they grew indignant, they wished to complete their death, so bravely begun. They were delivered up to it.

As we have said, three men, three dauntless soldiers, had succeeded each other in the command, MacMahon, Ducrot, Wimpfen; MacMahon had only time to be wounded, Ducrot had only time to commit a blunder, Wimpfen had only time to conceive an heroic idea, and he conceived it; but MacMahon is not responsible for his wound, Ducrot is not responsible for his blunder, and Wimpfen is not responsible for the impossibility of his suggestion to cut their way out. The shell which struck MacMahon withdrew him from the catastrophe; Ducrot’s blunder, the inopportune order to retreat given to General Lebrun, is explained by the confused horror of the situation, and is rather an error than a fault. Wimpfen, desperate, needed 20,000 soldiers to cut his way out, and could only get together 2000. History exculpates these three men; in this disaster of Sedan there was but one sole and fatal general, the Emperor. That which was knitted together on the 2d December, 1851, came apart on the 2d September, 1870; the carnage on the Boulevard Montmartre, and the capitulation of Sedan are, we maintain, the two parts of a syllogism; logic and justice have the same balance; it was Louis Bonaparte’s dismal destiny to begin with the black flag of massacres and to end with the white flag of disgrace.

"The French were literally awakened from sleep by our attack." —Helvic.

CHAPTER VII.

There was no alternative between death and opprobrium; either soul or sword must be surrendered. Louis Bonaparte surrendered his sword.

He wrote to William:

"SIRE, MY BROTHER,

"Not having been able to die in the midst of my troops, it only remains for me to place my sword in your Majesty's hands.

"I am, your Majesty,

"Your good Brother,

"NAPOLEON.

"Sedan, 1st September, 1870."

William answered, "Sire, my Brother, I accept your sword."

And on the 2d of September, at six o'clock in the morning, this plain, streaming with blood, and covered with dead, saw pass by a gilded open carriage and four, the horses harnessed after Daumont fashion, and in this carriage a man, cigarette in mouth. It was the Emperor of the French going to surrender his sword to the King of Prussia.

The King kept the Emperor waiting. It was too early. He sent M. de Bismarck to Louis Bonaparte to say that he "would not" receive him yet awhile. Louis Bonaparte entered into a hovel by the side of the road. A table and two chairs were there. Bismarck and he leant their arms on the table and conversed. A mournful conversation. At the hour which suited the King, towards noon, the Emperor got back into his carriage, and went to the castle of Bellevue, half way to the castle of Vandresse. There he waited until the King came. At one o'clock William arrived from Vandresse, and consented to receive Bonaparte. He received him badly. Attila has not a light hand. The King, a blunt, straightforward man, showed the Emperor a pity involuntarily cruel. There are pities which overwhelm. The conqueror upbraided the conquered with the victory. Bluntness handles an open wound badly. "Whatever was your reason for declaring this war?" The conquered excused himself, accusing France. The distant hurrahs of the victorious German army cut short this dialogue.

The King caused the Emperor to be reconducted by a detachment of the Royal Guard. This excess of ignominy is called "an escort of honor."

After the sword the Army.

On the 3d of September, Louis Bonaparte handed over to Germany 88,000

French soldiers.

“In addition” (says the Prussian report): —

“One eagle and two flags.

“419 field-guns and mitrailleuses.

“139 heavy pieces.

“1079 vehicles of all kinds.

“60,000 muskets.

“6000 horses, still good for service.”

These German figures are not wholly to be depended upon. According to what seems useful at the moment, the Aulic chancellors swell or reduce the disaster. There were about 13,000 wounded amongst the prisoners. The numbers vary in the official documents. A Prussian report, reckoning up the French soldiers killed and wounded in the battle of Sedan, publishes this total: *Sixteen thousand four hundred* men. This number causes a shudder. For it is that very number, *Sixteen thousand four hundred* men, which Saint Arnaud had set to work on the Boulevard Montmartre upon the 4th of December, 1851.

Half a league to the north-west of Sedan, near Iges, the bend of the Meuse almost forms an island. A canal crosses the isthmus, so that the peninsula becomes an island. It was there that there were penned, under the stick of the Prussian corporals, 83,000 French soldiers. A few sentinels watched over this army.

They placed but few, insolently. These conquered men remained there ten days, the wounded almost without care, the able-bodied almost without nourishment. The German army sneered around them. The heavens took part against them. The weather was fearful. Neither huts nor tents. Not a fire, not a truss of straw. For ten days and ten nights these 83,000 prisoners bivouacked with their heads beneath the rain, their feet in the mud. Many died of fever, regretting the hail of bullets.

At length ox-wagons came and took them away.

The King placed the Emperor in some place or other. Wilhelmshöhe.

What a thing of rags and tatters, an Emperor “drawn” like a fowl!

CHAPTER VIII.

I was there, thoughtful. I looked on these fields, these ravines, these hills, shuddering. I would willingly have insulted this terrible place.

But sacred horror held me back.

The station-master of Sedan came to my carriage, and explained to me what I had before my eyes. I seemed to see, through his words, the pale lightnings of the battle. All these distant cottages, scattered about and charming in the sun, had been burnt; they were rebuilt; Nature, so quickly diverted, had repaired everything, had cleaned everything, had swept everything, had replaced everything. The ferocious convulsion of men had vanished, eternal order had resumed its sway. But, as I have said, the sun was there in vain, all this valley was smoke and darkness. In the distance, upon an eminence to my left, I saw a huge castle; it was Vandresse. There lodged the King of Prussia. Halfway up this height, along the road, I distinguished above the trees three pointed gables; it was another castle, Bellevue; there Louis Bonaparte surrendered to William; there he had given and delivered up our army; it was there that, not being immediately admitted, and requested to exercise a little patience, he had remained for nearly an hour silent and wan before the door, bringing his disgrace, and waiting until it should please William to open the door to him; it was there that before receiving it the King of Prussia had made the sword of France dangle about in an ante-chamber. Lower down, nearer, in the valley, at the beginning of a road leading to Vandresse, they pointed out to me a species of hovel. There they told me, while waiting for the King of Prussia, the Emperor Napoleon III. had got down, livid; he had gone into a little courtyard, which they pointed out to me, and where a dog growled on the chain; he had seated himself on a stone close by a dunghill, and he had said, “I am thirsty.” A Prussian soldier had brought him a glass of water.

Terrible end of the *coup d’état*! Blood when it is drunk does not quench the thirst. An hour was to come when the unhappy one should utter the cry of fever and of agony. Disgrace reserved for him this thirst, and Prussia this glass of water.

Fearful dregs of Destiny.

Beyond the road, at a few steps from me, five trembling and pale poplars sheltered the front of the house, the single story of which was surmounted by a sign. On this sign was written in great letters this name: DROUET. I became haggard. *Drouet* I read *Varennes*. Tragical Chance, which mingled Varennes with Sedan, seemed to wish to bring the two catastrophes face to face, and to couple in a manner with the same chain the Emperor a prisoner of the foreigner, to the King a prisoner of his people.

The mist of reverie veiled this plain from me. The Meuse appeared to me to wear a ruddy reflection, the neighboring isle, whose verdure I had admired, had for its subsoil a tomb: Fifteen hundred horses, and as many men, were buried there: thence the thick grass. Here and there, as far as could be seen, mounds, covered with ill-favored vegetation, dotted the valley; each of these patches of vegetation marked the place of a buried regiment. There Guyomar’s Brigade had been annihilated; there, the Lhéritier Division had been exterminated; here the 7th Corps had perished; there, without having even reached the enemy’s infantry, had fallen “beneath the cool and well-aimed firing,” as the Prussian report states, the whole of General Margueritte’s cavalry. From these two heights, the most elevated of this circle of hills, Daigny, opposite Givonne, which is 266 mètres high, Fleigneux, opposite Illy, 296 mètres high, the batteries of the Prussian Royal Guard had crushed the French Army. It was done from above, with the terrible authority of Destiny. It seemed as though they had come there purposely, these to kill, the others to die. A valley for a mortar, the German Army for a pestle, such is the battle of Sedan. I gazed, powerless to avert my eyes, at this field of disaster, at this undulating country which had proved no protection to our regiments, at this ravine where all our cavalry were demolished, at all this amphitheatre where the catastrophe was spread out, at the gloomy escarpments of La Marphée, at these thickets, at these declivities, at these precipices, at these forests filled with ambushes, and in this terrible shadow, O Thou the Invisible! I saw Thee.

CHAPTER IX.

Never was there a more dismal fall.

No expiation can be compared with this. The unprecedented drama was in five acts, so fierce that Aeschylus himself would not have dared to dream of them. “The Ambush!” “The Struggle!” “The Massacre!” “The Victory!” “The Fall!” What a tangle and what an unwinding! A poet who would have predicted it would have seemed a traitor. God alone could permit Himself Sedan.

Everything in proportion, such is His law. Far worse than Brumaire, it needed a more crushing retribution than Waterloo.

The first Napoleon, as we have said elsewhere, had faced his destiny; he had not been dishonored by his punishment, he fell while steadfastly regarding God. He came back to Paris, appraising the deserts of those men who overthrew him, proudly distinguishing amongst them, esteeming Lafayette and despising Dupin. He had at the last moment wished to see clearly into his destiny, he had not allowed his eyes to be bandaged; he had accepted the catastrophe while making his conditions with it. Here there is nothing of the kind. One might almost say that the traitor is struck treacherously. In this case there is a bad man who feels himself in the grasp of Destiny, and who does not know what it is doing to him. He was at the summit of his power, the blind master of an idiot world. He had wished for a *plebiscitum*, he had had one. He had at his feet this very William. It was at this moment that his crime suddenly seized him. He did not struggle against it; he was the condemned man who obeys his sentence. He submitted to everything which terrible Fate exacted from him. Never was there a more docile patient. He had no army, he made war; he had only Rouher, he provoked Bismarck; he had only Leboeuf, he attacked Moltke. He confided Strasburg to Uhrich; he gave Metz to Bazaine to guard. He had 120,000 men at Châlons; he had it in his power to cover Paris. He felt that his crime rose up there, threatening and erect; he fled, not daring to face Paris. He himself led — purposely, and yet despite himself; willing and yet unwilling, knowingly and yet unknowingly, a miserable mind, a prey to the abyss — he led his army into a place of annihilation; he made that terrible choice, a battle-field without an outlet; he was no longer conscious of anything, no more of his blunder of to-day than of his crime of former days; he must finish, but he could only finish as a fugitive; this condemned one was not worthy to look his end in the face; he lowered his head, he turned his back. God executed him in degrading him. Napoleon III. as an Emperor had a right to thunder, but for this man the thunder was ignominious — he was thunderstruck in the back.

“L’Année Terrible.”

CHAPTER X.

Let us forget this man, and let us look at Humanity.

The invasion of France by Germany, in 1870, was a night effect. The world was astonished that so much gloom could come forth from a people. Five black months — such was the siege of Paris. To create night may prove Power, but Glory consists in the creation of daylight. France creates daylight. Thence her immense human popularity. To her Civilization owes the dawn. The human mind in order to see clearly turns in the direction of

France. Five months of darkness, that is what, in 1870, Germany succeeded in giving to the Nations; France has given to them four centuries of light.

To-day the civilized world more than ever feels the need which it has of France. France has proved this by her danger. The ungrateful apathy of Governments only increased the anxiety of nations. At the sight of Paris threatened, there arose among the peoples dread that their own heads were in danger. Would they allow Germany to go on? But France saved herself quite alone. She had only to rise. *Patuit dea*.

To-day she is greater than ever. What would have killed another nation has hardly wounded her. The darkening of her horizon has rendered her light more visible. What she has lost in territory she has gained in radiancy. Moreover, she is fraternal without an effort. Above her misfortune there is her smile. It is not on her that the Gothic Empire weighs. She is a nation of citizens and not a flock of subjects. Frontiers? Will there be any frontiers in twenty years? Victories? France counts in her past victories of war, and in her future victories of peace. The future belongs to Voltaire, and not to Krupp; the future belongs to the book, and not to the sword. The future belongs to life, and not to death. There is in the policy opposed to France a certain amount of the tomb; to seek life in the old institutions is a vain task, and to feed upon the past is to bite the dust. France has the faculty of giving light; no catastrophe, political or military, will deprive her of this mysterious supremacy. The cloud passes away, the star is seen once more.

The star possesses no anger; the dawn bears no malice. Light is satisfied in being light. Light is everything; the human race has no other love. France knows herself beloved because she is good, and the greatest of all powers is to be loved. The French revolution is for all the world. It is a battle perpetually waged for Right, and perpetually gained for Truth. Right is the innermost part of man; Truth is the innermost part of God. What can be done against a revolution which has so much right on its side? Nothing. To love it. That is what the nations do. France offers herself, the world accepts her. The whole phenomenon lies in these few words. An invasion of armies can be resisted; an invasion of ideas cannot be resisted. The glory of barbarians is to be conquered by humanity; the glory of savages is to be conquered by civilization; the glory of darkness is to be conquered by the torch. This is why France is desired and assented to by all. This is why, having no hatred, she has no fear; this is why she is fraternal and maternal; this is why it is impossible to lessen her, impossible to humiliate her, impossible to irritate her; this is why, after so many ordeals, after so many catastrophes, after so many disasters, after so many calamities, after so many falls, incorruptible and invulnerable she holds out her hand to all the peoples from above.

When our glance rests on this old continent, stirred to-day by a new breath, certain phenomena appear, and we seem to gain a glimpse of that august and mysterious problem, the formation of the future. It may be said, that in the same manner as light is compounded of seven colors, civilization is compounded of seven peoples. Of these peoples, three, Greece, Italy, and Spain, represent the South; three, England, Germany, and Russia, represent the north; the seventh, or the first, France, is at the same time North and South, Celtic and Latin, Gothic and Greek. This country owes to its heaven this sublime good fortune, the crossing of two rays of light; the crossing of two rays of light is as though we were to say the joining of two hands, that is to say Peace. Such is the privilege of this France, she is at the same time solar and starry. In her heaven she possesses as much dawn as the East, and as many stars as the North. Sometimes her glimmer rises in the twilight, but it is in the black night of revolutions and of wars that her resplendence blazes forth, and her aurorean dawn becomes the Aurora Borealis.

One day, before long, the seven nations, which combine in themselves the whole of humanity, will join together and amalgamate like the seven colors of the prism, in a radiant celestial arch; the marvel of Peace will appear eternal and visible above civilization, and the world, dazzled, will contemplate the immense rainbow of the United Peoples of Europe.

THE END

The Criticism

VICTOR HUGO by John Cowper Powys

This essay was taken from the critical book *Suspended Judgements*, first published in 1916. Powys was a British novelist and lecturer, as well as a respected literary critic.

The critic John Cowper Powys

VICTOR HUGO

My first notions of Victor Hugo were associated with the sea. It was from the old Weymouth harbour that as a child I used to watch those Channel-Island steamers with red funnels setting forth on what seemed to me in those days a wondrous voyage of mystery and peril. I read “The Toilers of the Sea” at my inland school at Mr. Hardy’s Sherton Abbas; whither, it may be remembered, poor Giles Winterbourne set off with such trembling anxiety to fetch home his Grace.

I read it in what was probably a very quaint sort of translation. The book was bound in that old-fashioned “yellow back” style which at that time was considered in clergymen’s families as a symbol of all that was dissipated and dangerous; and on the outside of the yellow cover was a positively terrifying picture of the monstrous devilfish with which Gellert wrestled in that terrible sea-cavern.

Certain scenes in that romance lodged themselves in my brain with diabolic intensity. That scene, for instance, when the successful scoundrel, swimming in the water, “feels himself seized by one foot,” that scene where the man buys the revolver in the little gunsmith’s shop; that appalling scene at the end where Gellert drowns himself, watching the ship that bears his love away to happiness in the arms of another — all these held my imagination then, as indeed they hold it still, with the vividness of personal experience.

It was long after this, not more than five or six years ago in fact, that I read “Notre Dame de Paris.” This book I secured from the ship’s library of some transatlantic liner and the fantastic horrors it contains, carried to a point of almost intolerable melodrama, harmonised well enough with the nightly thud of the engines and the daylong staring at the heaving water.

“Notre Dame” is certainly an amazing book. If it were not for the presence of genius in it, that ineffable all-redeeming quality, it would be one of the most outrageous inventions of flagrant sensationalism ever indulged in by the morbidity of man. But genius pervades it from beginning to end; pervades even its most impossible scenes; and on the whole I think it is a much more arresting tale than, say, “The Count of Monte Cristo,” or any of Dumas’ works except “The Three Musketeers.”

I have never, even as a child, cared greatly for Dumas, and I discern in the attitude of the persons who persist in preferring him to Victor Hugo the presence of a temperamental cult so alien to my own that I am tempted to regard it as no better than an affected pose.

Nowhere is Victor Hugo's genius more evident than in his invention of names. Esmeralda, Quasimodo, Gellert, Cosette, Fantine — they all have that indescribable ring of genuine romance about them which more than anything else restores to us the "long, long thoughts" of youth.

I think that Fantine is the most beautiful and imaginative name ever given to any woman. It is far more suggestive of wild and delicate mysteries than Fragoletta or Dolores or Charmian or Ianthe.

I am inclined to maintain that it is in the sphere of pure poetic imagination that Victor Hugo is greatest; though, like so many other foreigners, I find it difficult to read his formal poetry. It is, I fancy, this poetic imagination of his which makes it possible for him to throw his isolated scenes into such terrific relief that they lodge themselves in one's brain with such crushing force. In all his books it is the separate individual scenes of which one finds oneself thinking as one recalls the progress of this narrative or the other. And when he has struck out with a few vivid lightning-like flashes the original lineaments of one of his superb creations, it is rather in separate and detached scenes that he makes such a person's indelible characteristics gleam forth from the surrounding darkness, than in any continuous psychological process of development.

His psychology is the psychology of a child; but none the worse perhaps for that; for it is remarkable how often the most exhaustive psychological analysis misses the real mystery of human character. Victor Hugo goes to work by illuminating flashes. He carries a flaring torch in his hand; and every now and then he plunges it into the caverns of the human heart, and one is conscious of vast stupendous Shadows, moving from midnight to midnight.

His method is gnomic, laconic, oracular; never persuasive or plausible. It is "Lo — here" and then again "Lo — there!" and we are either with him or not with him. There are no half measures, no slow evolutionary disclosures.

One of his most interesting literary devices, and it is an essentially poetic one, is the diffusion through the story of some particular background, a background which gathers to itself a sort of brooding personality as the tale proceeds, and often becomes before the book is finished far more arresting and important than any of the human characters whose drama it dominates.

Such is the sea itself, for instance, in “The Toilers.” Such is the historic cathedral in “Notre Dame.” Such is the great Revolution — certainly a kind of natural cataclysm — in “Ninety-three.” Such are the great sewers of Paris in “Les Misérables.” Such — though it is rather a symbol than a background — is the terrible fixed smile of the unfortunate hero in “L’Homme qui Rit.”

It is one of the most curious and interesting phenomena in the history of literature, this turning of a poet into a writer of romances, romances which have at least as much if not more of the poetic quality in them than the orthodox poetry of the same hand.

One is led to wonder what kind of stories Swinburne would have written had he debouched into this territory, or what would have been the novels conceived by Tennyson. Thomas Hardy began with poetry and has returned to poetry; and one cannot help feeling that it is more than anything else the absence of this quality in the autobiographical studies of sex and character which the younger writers of our day spin out that makes them after a time seem so sour and flat.

It is the extravagance of the poetic temper and its lack of proportion which leads to some of the most glaring of Victor Hugo’s faults; and it is the oracular, prophetic, gnomic tone of his genius which causes those queer gaps and rents in his work and that fantastic arbitrariness which makes it difficult for him to evoke any rational or organic continuity.

It is an aspect of the poetic temper too, the queer tricks which the humour of Victor Hugo will condescend to play. I suppose he is by nature the least endowed with a sense of humour of all the men of genius who have ever lived. The poet Wordsworth had more. But like so many poetic natures, whose vivid imagination lends itself to every sort of human reaction, even to those not really indigenous, Victor Hugo cannot resist in indulging in freakish sallies of jocularity which sometimes become extraordinarily strained and forced, and even remind one now and then of the horrible mechanical smile on the countenance of the mutilated man in his own story.

Poet-like too is the portentous pedantry of his archaeological vein; the stupendous air of authority with which he raps out his classical quotations and his historic allusions. He is capable sometimes of producing upon the mind the effect of a hilarious school-master cracking his learned jokes to an audience only too willing to encourage him. At other times, so bizarre and out of all human proportion are his fantasies, one receives an impression as if one of the great granite effigies representing Liberty or Equality or the Rights of Man, from the portico of some solemn Palais de Justice, had suddenly yielded to the temptation of drink and was uttering the most amazing levities. Victor Hugo in his lighter vein is really, we must honestly confess, a somewhat disconcerting companion. One has such respect for the sublime imaginations which one knows are lurking behind “that cliff-like brow” that one struggles to find some sort of congruity in these strange gestures. It is as though when walking by the side of some revered prophet, one were suddenly conscious that the man was skipping or putting out his tongue. It is as though we caught Ajax masquerading as a mummer, or Aeschylus dressed up in cap and bells.

There are persons who interest themselves still in Victor Hugo’s political attitudes, in his orations on the balcony of the Hotel de Ville; in his theatrical visits to the barricades where “he could be shot, but could not shoot”; in his diatribes against Napoleon the Third; in his defence of the Commune from the safe remoteness of Brussels. There are persons who suffer real disillusion when they discover how much of a conservative and a courtier he was in his youth. There are persons who are thrilled to recall how he carried his solemn vengeance against his imperial enemy so far as to rebuke in stern language Queen Victoria for her friendliness towards the Empress.

I must confess I find it difficult to share these emotions. I seem to smell the foot-lights of the opera in these heroic declamations, and indeed poor Napoleon the Little was himself so much of an operatic hero that to exalt him into a classic tyrant seems little short of ridiculous.

We derive a much truer picture of Victor Hugo’s antagonist from Disraeli’s “Endymion” than we do from the poet’s torrential invectives. I have a shrewd idea that the Emperor was a good deal more amiable, if not more philosophical, than his eloquent judge.

Victor Hugo was an impassioned lover of children. Who can forget those scenes in “Les Misérables” about little Cosette and the great wonderful doll which Valjean gave her? He loved children and — for all his lack of humour; sometimes I think because of it — he thoroughly understood them. He loved children and he was a child himself.

No one but a child would have behaved as he did on certain occasions. The grave naiveté of his attitude to the whole spectacle of life was like the solemnity of a child who takes very seriously every movement of the game which he is playing. A child is solemn when it is pretending to be an engine-driver or a pilot, and Victor Hugo was solemn when he pretended to be a saviour of society. No one but a person endowed with the perfect genius of childishness could have acted toward his mistress and his wife in the way he did, or have been so serenely blind to the irony of the world.

There is as little of the sensual in Victor Hugo's temperament as there is in the temperament of a pure-minded child; but like a child he finds a shuddering pleasure in approaching the edge of the precipice; like a child he loves to loiter in melancholy fields where the white moon-daisies are queerly stained with the old dark blood of weird and abnormal memories.

Irony of any kind, worldly or otherwise, never crossed so much as the margin of his consciousness. He is shamelessly, indecently, monstrously lacking in the ironic sense.

"What are we going to do?" he dramatically asked his sons when they had established themselves in their island home; and after they had each replied according to their respective tastes, "I," he added, "am going to contemplate the ocean!"

I am ready to confess that I feel a certain shame in thus joining the company of the godless and making sport of my childhood's hero. "He was a man, take him for all in all," and *we* at any rate shall not live to see his like again.

There was something genuinely large and innocent and elemental in Victor Hugo. The austere simplicity of his life may have been perhaps too self-consciously flung at the world's face; but it was a natural instinct in him. I hesitate to call him a charlatan. Was it Goethe who said "There is something of charlatanism in all genius"? Victor Hugo hardly deserves to have Goethe quoted in his favour, so ignorantly did he disparage, in his childish prejudice, the great German's work; but what perhaps the world calls charlatanism in him is really only the reaction of genius when it comes into conflict with the brutal obstinacy of real life.

What is charlatanism? I am almost scared to look up the word in the dictionary for fear of discovering that I am myself no better than that opprobrious thing. But still, if Victor Hugo was really a charlatan, one can safely say one would sooner be damned with the author of “L’Homme qui Rit” than saved with many who have no charlatanism in them.

But what is charlatanism? Does it imply false and extravagant claims to qualities we do not possess? Or is there the spirit of the Mountebank in it? If one were a deliberate Machiavel of dissimulation, if one fooled the people thoroughly and consciously, would one be a charlatan? Or are charlatans simply harmless fools who are too embarrassed to confess their ignorance and too childish to stop pretending?

There is something nobly patriarchal about the idea of Victor Hugo in his old age. The man’s countenance has certainly extraordinary genius “writ large” there for all men to see. His head is like something that has been carved by Michelangelo. Looking at his face one realises where the secret of his peculiar genius lay. It lay in a certain tragic abandonment to a sublime struggle with the elements. When in his imagination he wrestled with the elements he forgot his politics, his prejudices, his moral bravado.

Whatever this mysterious weakness may have been which we call his “charlatanism,” it certainly dropped away from him like a mask when he confronted the wind or sea or such primitive forms of human tragedy as are elemental in their simple outlines. Probably for all his rhetoric Victor Hugo would have made an obstinate invincible sailor on the high seas. I discern in the shape of his head something of the look of weather-beaten mariners. I can fancy him holding fast the rudder of a ship flying before the fury of an Atlantic storm.

The sea-scenes in his books are unequalled in all prose literature. To match them you would have to go to the poets — to Shakespeare — to Swinburne. A single line of Hugo has more of the spirit of the sea, more of its savagery, its bitter strength, its tigerish leap and bite, than pages of Pierre Loti. Whether I am prejudiced by my childish associations I do not know, but no other writer makes me smell the sea-weed, catch the sharp salt tang, feel the buffeting of the waves, as Victor Hugo does. Yes, for all his panoramic evocations of sea-effects, Pierre Loti does not touch the old eternal mystery of the deep, with its answer of terror and strange yearning in the heart of man, in the way this other touches it. The great rhetorician found a rhetoric here that put his eloquence to silence and he responded to it with sentences as sharp, as brief, as broken, as abrupt, as stinging and wind-driven, as the rushing waves themselves pouring over a half drowned wreck.

And just as he deals with the sea, so he deals with the wind and rain and snow and vapour and fire. Those who love Victor Hugo will think of a hundred examples of what I mean, from the burning castle in “Ninety-three,” to the wind-rocked gibbet on the Isle of Portland, when the child hero of the “Man who Laughs” escapes from the storm.

When one tries to cast one’s critical plummet into the secret motive forces of Hugo’s genius, one is continually being baffled by the presence there of conflicting elements. For instance no one who has read “Notre Dame” can deny the presence of a certain savage delight in scenes of grotesque and exaggerated terror. No one who has read “Les Misérables” can deny the existence in him of a vein of lovely tenderness that, with a little tiny push over the edge, would degenerate into maudlin sentiment of the most lamentable kind.

The performances of the diabolical “archdeacon” in “Notre Dame” to the moment when Quasimodo watches him fall from the parapet, are just what one might expect to enjoy in some old-fashioned melodramatic theatre designed for such among the pure in heart as have a penchant for ghastliness. But one forgets all this in a moment when some extraordinary touch of illuminating imagination gets hold of one by the throat.

I do not think that Victor Hugo will go down to posterity honoured and applauded because of his love for the human race. I suspect those critics who hold him up as a grand example of democratic principles and libertarian ideals of not being great lovers of his stories. He is a name for them to conjure with and that is all.

Victor Hugo loved children and he loved the mothers of children, but he was too great a soul to spoil his colossal romance with any blatant humanitarianism. I do not say he was the high, sad, lonely, social exile he would have liked the world to believe him; for he was indeed of kind, simple, honest domestic habits and a man who got much happiness from quite little things. But when we come to consider what will be left of him in the future I feel sure that it will be rather by his imagination than by his social eloquence that he will touch our descendants. It is indeed not in the remotest degree as a rhetorician that he arrests us in these unique tales. It is by means of something quite different from eloquence.

His best effects are achieved in sudden striking images which seem to have in them a depth of fantastic diablerie worthy of the wreck-strewn “humming waters” whose secrets he loved to penetrate.

It is not sufficiently realised how much there was of the “macabre” about Victor Hugo. Like the prophet Ezekiel, he had strange visions from the power he served, and in the primordial valleys of his imagination there lie, strewn to the bleaching winds, the bones of men and of demons and of gods; and the breath that blows upon them and makes them live — live their weird phantasmal life of mediaeval goblins in some wild procession of madness — is the breath of the spirit of childhood’s fancies.

LETTER ON HUGO by Charles Dickens

48, Rue de Courcelles, Paris, *January 24th, 1847.*

My dear Lady Blessington,

I feel very wicked in beginning this note, and deeply remorseful for not having begun and ended it long ago. But *you* know how difficult it is to write letters in the midst of a writing life; and as you know too (I hope) how earnestly and affectionately I always think of you, wherever I am, I take heart, on a little consideration, and feel comparatively good again.

Forster has been cramming into the space of a fortnight every description of impossible and inconsistent occupation in the way of sight-seeing. He has been now at Versailles, now in the prisons, now at the opera, now at the hospitals, now at the Conservatoire, and now at the Morgue, with a dreadful insatiability. I begin to doubt whether I had anything to do with a book called "Dombey," or ever sat over number five (not finished a fortnight yet) day after day, until I half began, like the monk in poor Wilkie's story, to think it the only reality in life, and to mistake all the realities for short-lived shadows.

Among the multitude of sights, we saw our pleasant little bud of a friend, Rose Chéri, play Clarissa Harlowe the other night. I believe she does it in London just now, and perhaps you may have seen it. A most charming, intelligent, modest, affecting piece of acting it is, with a death superior to anything I ever saw on the stage, except Macready's Lear. The theatres are admirable just now. We saw "Gentil Bernard" at the Variétés last night, acted in a manner that was absolutely perfect. It was a little picture of Watteau, animated and talking from beginning to end. At the Cirque there is a new show-piece called the "French Revolution," in which there is a representation of the National Convention, and a series of battles (fought by some five hundred people, who look like five thousand) that are wonderful in their extraordinary vigour and truth. Gun-cotton gives its name to the general annual jocose review at the Palais Royal, which is dull enough, saving for the introduction of Alexandre Dumas, sitting in his study beside a pile of quarto volumes about five feet high, which he says is the first tableau of the first act of the first piece to be played on the first night of his new theatre. The revival of Molière’s “Don Juan,” at the Français, has drawn money. It is excellently played, and it is curious to observe how different *their* Don Juan and valet are from our English ideas of the master and man. They are playing “Lucretia Borgia” again at the Porte St. Martin, but it is poorly performed and hangs fire drearily, though a very remarkable and striking play. We were at Victor Hugo’s house last Sunday week, a most extraordinary place, looking like an old curiosity shop, or the property-room of some gloomy, vast, old theatre. I was much struck by Hugo himself, who looks like a genius as he is, every inch of him, and is very interesting and satisfactory from head to foot. His wife is a handsome woman, with flashing black eyes. There is also a charming ditto daughter of fifteen or sixteen, with ditto eyes. Sitting among old armour and old tapestry, and old coffers, and grim old chairs and tables, and old canopies of state from old palaces, and old golden lions going to play at skittles with ponderous old golden balls, they made a most romantic show and looked like a chapter out of one of his own books.

VICTOR HUGO’S LAST NOVEL by Henry James

This essay was taken from the literary collection *Notes and Reviews.*

RELIGION, society, and nature,” says M.Victor Hugo in his preface, “such are the three struggles of man. . . . Man deals with difficulty under the form superstition, under the form prejudice, and under the form element. A triple anafikt weighs upon us: the anan’k’e of dogmas, the ananke of laws, the anank’e of things. In ‘Notre Dame de Paris’ the author has denounced the first; in ‘Ees Miserables’ he has pointed out the second; in the present work he indicates the third.”

Great programmes and Intentions, even though they be a posteriori, are one of M. Victor Hugo’s I’veliest characteristics. It will, therefore, not surprise any of his old readers to find him calling what a writer less fond of magnificent generalizations would have been content to describe as “a tale of the sea”, a picture of “the anattke of things.” But M. Victor Hugo is a poet, and he embarks upon the deep in a very different spirit from the late Captain Marrvat He carries with him provisions for a voyage all but interminable; he touches at foreign lands whose existence has never been suspected; and he makes discoveries of almost fabulous importance.

The scene of “Les Travailleurs de la Mer” is laid in M. Hugo’s adopted home of Guernsey, or rather in great part in — yes, literally in — the circumjacent ocean. The story is a very small one in spite of its enormous distensions and inflations. An inhabitant of the island, the proprietor of a very pretty niece, becomes also proprietor, in the early days of the invention, of a very pretty steamer, with which he establishes communication with the coast of France. He employs as captain one Sieur Clubin, a man long noted on the island for his exquisite probity and virtue. One of his chief recommendations to the esteem of his employer is the fact that in former years, when the latter had admitted to partnership a person of doubtful antecedents, by name Rantaine, he had, out of the fulness of his integrity, divined this gentleman’s rascality, and had forewarned his master that some line day Rantaine would decamp with the cash-box. This catastrophe is, indeed, not slow in happening. Rantaine suddenly departs for regions unknown, taking with him fifty thousand francs more than his share of the capital. These three persons, Lethierry, the proprietor of the steamer, Rantaine, and the captain, Clubin. are all described with a minuteness very disproportionate to any part they play in the story. But when M. Victor Hugo picks up a supernumerary he is not wont to set him down until he has bedecked h'm with more epigrams, anecdotes, formulas, and similes than would fur nish forth a dozen ordinary heroes. Lethierry is famous for his alacrity in rescuing the victims of shipwrecks. In heavy weather he paces the shore, scanning the horizon, and if he descries a craft of any species or degree in need of assistance, he is soon seen from afar "upright on the vessel, dripping wi-h rain, mingled with the lightning, with the face of a lion who should have a mane of sea- foam." After a day spent in this exercise, he goes home and knits a pair of stockings. He was a savage, says the author, but he had his elegances. The chief of these is that he is very fastidious about women's hands. The reason that he had never married was probably that he had never found a pretty enough pair of hands in his own station of life. He brings up his niece, Deru- chette, to take care, above all things, of her hands. About this young lady M. Hugo says an enormous number of extravagant and pretty things. We all know what to expect, however, when M. Hugo enters upon the chapter jeune fille. "To have a smile", he says at the close of a rhapsody on th's subject, "which, one knows not how, lightens the weight of the enormous chain dragged in common by all the living, is — what else can I call it but divine? Deruchette had this smile. We will say more. Deruchette was this smile." Rantaine, the villain, is a most formid- able creature. He is a mass of incongruities. He has been everywhere and everything. "He was capable of all things, and of worse." "He had passed his life in making eclipses — appearing, disappearing, re-appearing. He was a rascal with a revolving light." "He used to say, "Je suis pour les mceurs' — I go in for morals." Sieur Clubin is the reverse of Rantaine. His life is all above-board. He is piety, honesty, decency incarnate. To suspect him is to make one's self suspected. He is like the ermine; he would die of a stain. As we have said, he sails the little steamer from Guernsey to Saint Malo. One of his idio- syncracies is never to forget a face he has seen. At the latter place, accordingly, he recognizes after a number of years the ci-devant humbug, Rantaine. He procures a revolver, surprises him on the cliff, just after (unfortunately, as you might say) he has confirmed his identity by pushing a coast-guard over into the sea; he faces him, and coolly demands a restitution of the fifty thousand francs. Such is his address that the formidable Rantaine complies like a child, and hands over the little box containing the money: Finding a surplus of ten thousand francs, Clubin returns them, pockets the balance, and dismisses the criminal. All that Clubin desires is to restore to his impoverished employer his dues. Forthwith, accordingly, he gets up steam, and departs for Guernsey, with his fifty thousand francs secured in a belt about his waist. On the Guernsey coast, however, the sreamer enters a heavy fog, which soon obscures all progress; and to make matters worse at this critical moment, the pilot is drunk. The captain takes the helm and advances boldly through the fog. But a sudden break in the sky shows the vessel to be close upon a terrible shoal, and before it can be avoided a terrific shock indicates that the steamer has struck. The passengers are huddled into a boat, but the captain, who has conducted himself throughout with admirable presence of mind, announces his intention of remaining with the vessel until it goes down. This ideal of heroism is vainly combated; the boat moves away, and the disinterested Clubin is left alone with the ocean, the wreck, and — do you see the point? — the fifty thousand francs. Doubtless, you do not see it yet; for, in the first place, the Sieur Clubin cannot use the money if he will, and then, as we know, he would not if he could. But here comes a grand coup de theatre, one of ML Hugo’s own. What if the virtuous Clubin should, after all, be no better than the iniquitous Rantaine, no better than a life-long hypocrite, the would-be murderer of a shipload of innocents?

The author develops this hypothesis in a wonderful chapter entitled “The Interior of a Soul Illumined.” A very dark soul indeed is this of Clubin, needing all the rockets and bonfires of M. Hugo’s speech to penetrate its dusky recesses. Left alone on the dreadful ocean, this monstrous being bursts into a wicked laugh. He folds his arms and tastes his solitude. He is free, he is rich, he has succeeded. Now he is going to begin. He has “eliminated the world.” “There are caverns in the hypocrite,” adds the author; “or rather, the whole hypocrite is a single cavern. When Clubin found lrmself alone his cavern opened. He ventilated his soul.” “He had been”, we furthermore read, “the Tantalus of cynicism.” He now looks upon his honesty as a serpent looks upon his old skin; and as he does so he laughs a second time. But in these delights he does not forget the practical. His plan is to swim ashore (he is a marvellous swimmer), to remain h’Jden on the coast until a smuggling vessel picks him up, and then to make his way to America. His exultation, however, is but short-lived. As he looks the fog is rent i i twain, and he sees that be has lost his way more effectually than he had intended. The fog has served hi .i but too well. He has not struck the small shoal which he had, as he fancied, steered for, but a much larger one further distant from the shore. Instead of having a mile to swim, he has fifteen. Nevertheless he strips and plunges. As he touches bottom be feels h’s foot seized. Meanwhile the small boat has been picked up by a sloop, and the passengers have brought the evil tidings into the port of Saint Sampson. The good proprietor of the steamer is overwhelmed with grief for the loss of his precious, his unique, his laboriously wrought machinery. It is suggested, however, that it may still be recovered, that it may be disengaged from the double embrace of the wreck and the rocks, and successfully brought ashore. Whereupon Miss Deruchette steps forth and declares that she will marry the man who shall accomplish this herculean labor. Now this young lady has long been adored in silence by a young amateur of the ocean, a strange, brooding, melancholy, ill-reputed fellow, a kind of amphibious Werther, whose only outlet for his passion has been, for a number of years, to serenade his mistress with an instrument which M. Hugo repeatedly denominates a “bug- pipe.” He accepts the challenge, and straightway betakes h’tnself, alone and unaided, to the fatal shoal between which the hapiess vessel stands wedged. Here begins M. Hugo’s version of the struggle of man with the elements, “the anank’e of things” promised in his preface, and a wonderful version it is.

The whole of the second book is devoted to the labors of this new Hercules in wrenching with his single hands the machinery of the steamer from the angry clutch of nature. Gilliatt (such is the hero’s name) encamps upon the summit of a great rock hard by the field of his operations, one of a brace of strong brothers which just hold their chins out of water. Here, under the stars, surrounded by the world of waves, he spends the nights of two long months, during which, through hurricane and cold and fever and hunger, thirst, and despair, he gradually, by a combination of cranks and cross-beams and pulleys which, we doubt not, are as admirably self-consistent as the famous camel which the German philosopher evolved from the depths of his moral consciousness, he finally, we say, disenthralls the machinery from the shattered authority of the wreck. To believe so big a story you must understand what an extraordinary personage was this Gi’liatt. M. Hugo has smoothed the way by a full analysis of his nature and habits at the opening of the work; but we protest in all gravity that we utterly fail to comprehend him. Physically, he is of those days when there were giants: morally, he is the product of too much reading of M. de Lamarfine, Alfred de Musset, and M. Victor Hugo h;m- self. “La somme,” says the author, “he was simply a poor man who knew how to read and write.” Elsewhere, he is “a great troubled mind and a great wild heart.” He has thus a certain affiliation with Mr. Carlyle. Again, whi’e he is defying the tempests and tides for the love of Deruchette, he is “a kind of Job of the ocean. But a Job militant, a Job conqueror, a Job Prometheus.” There is a vast deal in this long description of his daily battle with the elements which we should like to quote, had we the space. A great deal we should quote for the reader’s amusement; but for a few passages we should expect his admiration. Never, we believe, has mere writing gone so far: that is, never was nature so effectually ousted from its place, ‘n its own nominal interest. We have room only for half-a-dozen sentences relative to Gilliatt’s adventure with a certain hideous marine animal, called by M. Hugo the pieuvre: an enlarged jelly-fish, with tentacles, and eyes of hideous expression. This obscene creature will become famous through M. Hugo’s magnificent hyperbole. “Compared with the pieuvre” he says, “the old hydras provoke a smile. Homer and Hesiod could only make the Chimaera. God has made the pieuvre. When God wishes, he excels in the execrable.”

The author then proceeds with solemn iteration to rehearse all the monsters, fabulous and veritable, which have ever been the terror of man, together with their respective death-dealing attributes. The pieuvre has none of all these — none of these vulgar agencies of dread. What, then, is the pieuvre? It is a sucker. “It is, in appearance, a mere rag floating under water. When at rest it is dust-colored. Hut enraged it grows violet. Then it throws itself upon you. Fearful sensation! it is soft.” Its tentacular thongs garrote you; its contact paralyzes. “It looks scorbutic, gangrenescent. It is disease arranged into a monstrosity.” But we will leave M. Hugo the fine illustrations of his own tongue. “ Une viscosite qui a utte volonte, quot de plus ej- fray able? De la glue petrie de haine.” This irresistible creature devours you in such a way as to elicit from M. Hugo the following remark: “Be- yond the terrible, being eaten alive, is the Ineffable, being drunk alive.” This is followed by some characteristic ratiocinations on physiology. Gil- liatt comes near being absorbed into the pieuvre; but, for the matter of that, we all go into each other. “Pour, it lire, cest nourriture. Eearful cleaning of the globe! Carnivorous man is an entomber; and life is made of death. . . . We are sepulchres.” In spite of this general law, however, Gilliatt defers his burial by decapitating the pieuvre. Shortly afterwards, he discovers, in a very nearly submarine cavern, a human skeleton, girded about with a money belt, inside of which is written Sieur Clubin. It was not in vain, therefore, that this unfaithful servant had been detained beneath the waters. Gilliatt appropriates, provisionally, the belt, and ultimately arrives at a successful solution of his problem in mechanics. His interruptions, his perils, his sufferings, his visions, must be read in detail. There is a long description of a storm which grazes the sublime and jostles the ridiculous. Detached from its context, any example of the former would, we fear, fail to justify itself to the reader; and, indeed, the nearest approach to greatness in this whole episode is not to be found in particular passages, but in the very magnificent intention of the whole. As for the ridiculous, we cannot but think that it is amply presented by everything that follows Gilliatt’s successful return with the rescued and renovated vessel. While Deruchette’s uncle is digesting his surprise, gratitude, and joy, Deruchette herself is engaged in a very sentimental tete-a-tete in the garden with a young Anglican divine. An involuntary witness of their emotions, Gillian immediately withdraws his claims. More than this, he personally superintends the marriage of the young couple, and sees them on board the vessel which, after the wedding, is to convey them to England. And after this, says the superficial reader, he of course goes home and smokes a pipe. But little has such a reader fathomed the depths of this heroic nature. He betakes himself to a well-known spot on the side of a cliff, where a depression in the rock forms, at low tide, a sort of natural chair. Here he seats himself in time to witness the passage of the vessel bearing away Deruchette and her husband. It almost “grazed the cliff”, says M. Hugo. There on the deck, in a bar of sunshine, sit the happy young couple, lost in mutual endearments. The vessel moves away toward the horizon, while the tide rises to Gilliatt’s feet. As the vessel travels before his unwinking eye, so gradually the water surges about him. It reaches his knees, his waist, his shoulders, his chin: but he moves not. The little birds call to him warningly, but he heeds them not. He sits open-eyed, gazing at the sloop. His eye, says the author, “resembled nothing that can be seen on this earth. That calm and tragic pupil contained the inexpressible.” As the distant sloop disappears from the horizon, the eye is hidden, the head is covered, the ocean reigns alone.

Such is M. Victor Hugo’s story. The reader will see that, dramatically, if is emphatically not what, from the title, if was likely pre-eminently to be — a study from nature. Nature is nowhere: M. Victor Hugo is everywhere; and his work will add very little to our knowledge of anything but himself. It is, in our opinion, the work of a decline. We have not hesitated to speak of it with levity, because we believe if to have been written exclusively from the head. This fact we deeply regret, for we have an enormous respect for M. Victor Hugo’s heart.

THE LEGEND OF VICTOR HUGO by Paul Lafargue

Victor Hugo is now the impartiality of history.

Since the coup of 1852 the legend has captured Hugo. During the Empire, in the interest of the anti-Bonapartist and Republican, no one dared oppose the crystallization of fantasy in search of semi-gods after May 16, there was no need to disturb the last years of an elderly man, whose role was over. But now that the poet, celebrated by the press, recognized and proclaimed the “great man of the century” asleep at the Pantheon, “the colossal tomb of geniuses, the critics regains his rights. It can compromise without fear of political interests and hurt unnecessarily become a harmless old man studying the life of this man, sounding name. It has the duty to reach the truth hidden beneath the lies and exaggerations.

The hugolâtres was scandalized that a critical impious dare lay hands on their idol, but they make up their minds. - Historical criticism does not seek to please and not afraid to offend. The study, written notes collected in 1869, did not pretend to be exhaustive, but simply to highlight the true character of Victor Hugo, so strangely misunderstood.

P. L.

Sainte Pelagie, June 23, 1885.

The study, written for years after the death of Victor Hugo, has lost none of its originality, the side of his public life that I intend never been neither studied nor criticized.

P. L.

Paris, March 30, 1891.

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On June 1885 Paris was celebrating the most beautiful funeral of the century: Victor Hugo is buried there poeta Sovrano. For ten days the entire press prepared the public opinion of France and Europe. Paris, for a moment touched by walking the red flag and police charges of Pere Lachaise, which revive the memories of the Bloody Week, began to deal only with one who was “the most illustrious representative of human consciousness “. The newspapers did not have enough of their three pages - the fourth being taken by the ads, to exalt “the genius who lived in the human idea.” The language, however, Victor Hugo had enriched so many laudatory expressions, seemed poor journalists, since she was called to express their admiration for “the most gigantic thinker of the universe”, we resorted to the image. A sheet of the evening, short of words, represented on its first page, the sun dipping into the ocean. Hugo’s death was the death of a star. “Art was finished!”.

The population, brewed by the journalistic enthusiasm, threw three hundred thousand men, women and children, behind the chariot of the poor who bore the poet in the Pantheon, and one million squares, streets and sidewalks where he went.

A canopy black mourning veil the Arc de Triomphe of imperial glory, the light of gas lamps and floor lamps filtered, mournful, through the crepe; immortal crowns and stuffed animals, portraits of Hugo on her bed death, bronze medals, engraved with: National mourning ... in short, all the symbols of the desperate pain had been requisitioned, and yet the immense multitude had no regrets for the death or memories for the writer: Hugo was reckless. She seemed unaware that it was conducting under his eyes, the Hall of Fame “the greatest poet that ever existed”.

The surging crowd and good humor noisily showed its appreciation of time and entertainment, she inquired the names of celebrities and delegations from cities and countries who marched for her pleasure and she admired the monumental crowns of flowers on tanks and she applauded the minions of the shooting, tearing the ears of their discordant tunes, she greeted with laughter and ironic Deroulede serious green coat, and to crown his happiness, he lacked only the reputation of comic Benni -always the procession - the rabbit jumped and their weapon - the gigantic syringe box.

Actors and spectators were jubilant. It is true that people in big boulevards, disappointed that we did not walk the corpse in front of their doors, speculated with bitterness the tidy sum they would not have failed to pocket, the wounded heart, they told that windows and balconies were hired hundreds and thousands of francs in three clock hours earned it two more times the rent for six months. But the sorrow of cranky disappeared in the general rejoicing. Breweries women to Boulevard Saint-Michel overflowed the sidewalk scaffolding, they bought their weight in gold right to bake in the sun, drink to beer adulterated. Small people, located in the right places, at break of day, which with a chair, a table, bench, ladder, gave way to curious for the price of two days of fun and life of the annuitant. Hoteliers, publicans, the livers of race greedy smile of joy by feeling their pockets franc pieces that brought the festival: one of them said, looking very satisfied “should be that he dies every week a Victor Hugo to go trade! “ Commerce walk indeed! Trade flowers and funeral emblems, trade journals, prints, lyres zinc bronze, gold, silver medals in galvano, effigies mounted pin; trade crepe and black armbands, sashes, ribbons and multicolored lights, trade beer, wine, charcuterie; hungry people ate and drank standing in the street in front of counters, and anything at any price, trade of love - the provincial and foreigners from all corners of the Year, honored the dead by feasting with the horizontal.

The funeral of the first June were worthy of death that Pantheon and worthy of the class that was escorting the corpse.

The revolutionary socialist organizations of France and abroad, who are the conscious part of the proletariat had not been represented at the funeral of Victor Hugo. The anarchists were an exception and to distinguish themselves once more socialist revolutionaries, they tried to blend their black flag with colorful flags of the procession; Reclus, their remarkable man, asked his friend Nadar to write his name on the register of deaths. However, striking the government banned the deployment of the red flag, Mr. Vacquerie stating that in exile, Hugo had always marched behind the red flag whenever they wore into the ground one of the victims of the coup and the radical press claiming the right to the street to the flag of the Commune and recalling that in 1871 the exile of the Empire had opened his house in Brussels from Paris to the vanquished, all seemed to want to invite revolutionaries to gather around the coffin of Victor Hugo, as a rallying point for Republican parties. But revolutionary socialists refused to take part in the carnival ride the first of June.

City of London, invited, did not send delegation to funeral of the poet of its board members claimed they did not understand from reading his works were in fact very difficult to understand that Victor Hugo motivate the refusal by such reasons. Undoubtedly, the honorable Michelin, Ruel and Lyons German from London imagined that the writer, who had just expired, was one of the proletarians of the pen, that rent by the week and year of their brains to Hachette the éditorat and Villemessant Press. But if they had learned that the deceased had his account with Rothschild, he was the strongest shareholder of the Belgian Bank, providing that man, he had placed his money out of France, where they made revolutions and when it comes to burning the ledger, and he departed for his prudence and bought the loan of five billion for the liberation of his country, because the placement was at six percent and if they had heard that the poet had accumulated five million by selling phrases and words, he was a shrewd trader of letters, a master in art of debate and draw up a contract to its advantage, he had enriched himself by ruining his publishers, who had never seen, and if we had listed the titles of the dead, of course the honorable representatives of the City of London, the commercial heart of both worlds, n ‘ would not bargain their support for the important ceremonies but would, instead, held to honor the millionaire who was able to combine poetry and should have.

The bourgeoisie of France, better informed, Victor Hugo saw one of the most perfect and most brilliant personification of his instincts, his passions and his thoughts.

The bourgeois press, intoxicated by the hyperbolic praise thrown at it full columns on the death, neglected to highlight the next representative of Victor Hugo, who may be his title as real in the eyes of posterity. I will try to repair this omission.

2

Legitimists never forgive Victor Hugo, the ultra-royalist and an ardent Catholic in 1830 before being passed to the Republican Party. They forget that a son of Vendée, de la Eochejacquelein, enlisted in the Senate of the Second Empire, cavalierly replied to such criticisms: “Only fools never change.” The poet, unable to this disdain aristocratic Never throw the party he deserted this impertinent excuse but it would explain why the Republicans had been a royalist.

- My mother was a robber of the Vendee to fifteen years she fled through the Grove, like Madame Bonchamp, as Madame de la Roche-JACQUELEIN, he wrote in 1831, in the preface to Leaves of Autumn. - My father, a soldier of the Republic and the Empire bivouacked in Europe and I lived with my mother and suffered his opinions to her “the Revolution was the guillotine, Napoleon the man who took the son, the Empire of the sword . His influence, not offset, planted in the heart of young Hugo a strong hatred of Napoleon and the Revolution, because “he had submitted everything to his mother and ready for whatever she wanted . The loyalty of Hugo was that of filial piety and one knows that better than he deserves the epitaph of a good son, good husband, good father.

Carried away by his imagination, Hugo, converted in 1830, imagined the opinions of his mother, not as they were, but as the needs of his excuses required. That robber, who fought campaign for the king fell in love with a clumsy, Republican J.-L.-S. Hugo, who, to put themselves in the fashion of the day, was saddled with the name of Brutus. She had been sitting at Nantes, where a military commission, which sometimes considered and passed by the arms in one day, batches of ten and twelve robbers and brigands. Brutus Hugo met with the committee clerk functions. In 1796, the robber married civilly Republican soldier, who more than ever Brutus, is for the time and remained until 1797, rapporteur of a war council, which considered expeditiously the royalists without further ado He condemned to death, identity and inclusion on the list of suspects identified. The robber followed her husband to Madrid, adorned the court of Joseph on the throne of Spain, replacing the legitimate king and allowed his eldest son Abel, to don the livery Bonapartist as a page. The loyalty of Mrs. Hugo, if indeed it had a political opinion, should be very platonic: otherwise he would have to admit that this woman so courageous, so faithful in his friendships (for 18 months, the risk of many dangers, she hid to Feuillantines, General Lahorie, hunted by the imperial police), and had renounced his faith and come to terms with the worst enemies of his party. Hugo had not know what excuse to turn to come to lend his dead mother, contrary opinions if flagrant acts of his life and we show the party traitor, traitor to the king that she would have faced death. He, the filial son, he has suffered from being reduced to stigmatize the mother so devoted to her children, who raised and cared so tenderly while the father abandoned them, leaving them free to grow and to obey the impulses nature. But it was absolutely necessary to find someone on whom the blame of his royalist odes, which embarrassed him more than the ball does not hinder the convict to escape across the fields he took his mother . He may plead extenuating circumstances. Were used at the time, the mother of all the ways she was already the great string dramatic was the memory of the mother to the theater paralyzed the arm of the assassin ready to strike, it was the cross mother, who exhibited at the psychological moment, warned rape, incest and saved the heroine was the death of his mother, who’s skeptical Chateaubriand and disciple of Jean-Jacques in 1797, drew the Chateaubriand mystagogical d ‘Atala and the Spirit of Christianity in 1800. Victor Hugo who never outran 24 hours of public opinion, but could always do the same, Chateaubriand mimicked his master, and applied to his private use the trick that never missed its effect on the stage.

That loyalty was Hugo circumstance or maternal origin, no matter it is certain that he was paid handsomely, and was happy, because the public bought his books in moderation: the editors Hans of Iceland him wrote in 1823 that they knew how to get rid of the 500 copies of the first edition, which remained in store. Louis XVIII granting the poet, in September 1822, a pension of 1,000 francs from his private purse, and in February 1823, a second pension of 2,000 francs on the Literary Fund of the Ministry of Interior. Victor Hugo and his two brothers, Abel and Eugene, were with the courage and tenacity of these funds based literature in 1821, they complained bitterly that the department had not supported their bimonthly magazine, The Conservative literature . They bitterly defended the merits of the reptiles while they attacked him with lust, and the indignant Conservative cons Benjamin Constant, the ex-man of letters who has denied the House a sum of 40,000 francs for to give encouragement to men of letters. The purpose of the Liberal MP, he said, to prevent the money being used to bribe some ministerial pamphleteer . Crop secret funds of the Minister was to lay hands on the property of Hugo. At the end of 1826, Victor called the Vicomte de la Rochefoucauld increased his share of these funds: since my pension has been granted, he wrote, “Four years have passed and if my pension remained what it was, I at least had the joy (which does not delighted) to see the goodness of the king increase pensions by several men of letters to my friends and some of them over the top of double. My pension is only stagnated, I think, Monsieur le Vicomte, being not without law to increase ... I put my application with confidence in your hands, begging you want to put in front of king who wants to fine arts, the brightest jewel in its crown. “ It took no account of the demand was so earnest and faithful servant of the reasons which to console himself, poured out his disappointment in a poem, where he treated Charles X of “king-joist” and his ministers of miscreants, who “France to sell the Cossacks and the soul to owls.” But to keep the existing pensions, he kept to his portfolio until 1866 they were published in Songs of streets and woods under the title: “Written in 1827.”

It is unfortunate that Victor Hugo, instead of swearing at his mother for his royalist overcome his sin of loyalty, did not simply tell the truth, that was so honorable. Indeed what is more honorable than winning money!

Hugo sold to the king and his ministers, his lyrical talent as the engineer and the chemist to capitalist rent their mathematical and chemical knowledge, it detailing his merchandise stanzas intellectual and odes, like the grocer and haberdasher trot out their cotton to meter and oil bottles. If he had confessed that the rhyming ode on the birth of the Duke of Bordeaux or the ode to his baptism, or any other of his odes, he had been inspired and sustained by the hope of gain, he would at once conquered the esteem of the Bourgeoisie, who knows the give-and equal exchange and does not accept that we distribute worms, maggots or slippers gratis pro deo. Convinced that Victor Hugo was not “art for art”, but produced for sale to the bourgeoisie would have silenced the envious scribblers who, under Louis Philippe, accused the writer, his royal rewards .

If the poet had no hesitation and turns exposed the real motive of his conduct royalist, he would have gone to French poetry more real service in writing Hernani, Ruy Blas and especially the preface to Cromwell he had with the France of multiple Hugo, although only one is sufficient and beyond to the glory of a century.

Baudelaire, the evil spirit came in this age of commercialism, who learned this evil trade abhorred, lamented that when:

The poet appears in this world bored
Her mother terrified and full of blasphemy,
Clenches his fists at God who takes pity.

Why, in the middle-class families, curse and anger greet the poet’s birth? Because it has so often said that poets live in poverty and die in the hospital, as Gilbert as Malfilatre that fathers and mothers had to end up believing that poetry was synonymous with misery. But if they had proved that in this century of progress, the Romantics had domesticated the muse wanders, they had taught him the art of “playing the censer, fulfilling one of the ordinary rate, to earn bread every evening “, and if they showed the head of the romantic school receiving at twenty three thousand francs for pension to” sleeping “parent, holding that poetry brought more than the student rabbits or bookkeeping may have encouraged, rather than repress, the poetic fancies of their offspring .

The industrial and commercial bourgeoisie would not have expected his death for storing Victor Hugo, among the greatest men in history, if she had known the heroic sacrifices he imposed upon himself and the mental torture he endured to acquire these two pensions.

3

Ms. Hugo did not like Napoleon, she chose her friends for enemies after the defeat at Waterloo, to trample upon the color of the Empire, she wearing green boots, this simple fact characterizes the violent nature of his feelings . The uncle and father of Hugo ate many grievances against the Emperor, who refused to confirm it in his rank of general, given by Joseph. Lahori, who during his imprisonment from 18 months to Feuillantines, taught the young Victor to “read Tacitus”, should not, inculcate love of Bonaparte, against whom he conspired. Hugo had to marry the mother of his hatred for Napoleon, shared her husband and friends, while he put on his royalist, but he was impervious to any influence, no one could impose its sentiments, neither father nor mother, uncle, or friends: Napoleon and his extraordinary fortune filled his head, “his image constantly shook his thought.” All men of his generation underwent this disturbing action. It should read Red and Black to understand how Napoleon captured the imagination of men willing and able. All his life he obsessed Hugo as a child, he was her ideal. His classmates were playing plays his composition or those of his brother Eugene. “The usual subjects of these pieces were the wars of the empire ... it was Victor who played Napoleon. Then he covered his chest decorations radiant eagle gold and silver.” . In this time he thought little of the Vendée and his virgin martyrs, to Henry IV and the virtues of legitimate kings: Napoleon had entirely, and forgetting the play of adolescence, he studied his campaigns and followed the map the progress of his armies.

But his hero, defeated at Waterloo, is imprisoned at St. Helena that her father for refusing to go abroad Fortress Thionville is accused of treason, that Louis XVIII, makes his triumphal entry into Paris, escorted of “Cossacks huge, rolling his eyes in fierce shaggy caps, brandishing spears and red blood on the neck collars to human ears, mingled with watch chains” , and the young poet, adorn “his lapel a lily of money “, chose the subject for his first tragedy, restoration, and insults Bonaparte” the tyrant who devastated the earth. “ .

And for ten years without experiencing a moment of weariness, he “thundered in his verse the curse of the dead, like an echo of his fatal glory” . It should arrive in 1827, to see it in his Ode to the column, try to glorify the Empire indirectly praising his marshals, but to depart from the course he had imposed and had followed with such firm, Hugo had an excuse. The insult offered by the Embassy of Austria, the Marshals Soult and Oudinot highly indignant if the army and the court, that the debates and newspapers royalists took their defense in writing Ode to the column, he obeyed the word order of the royalist party. Debates inserted it to the third page.

It would be difficult. if we knew the customs of the time and the qualities of the Hugo family, understand that a young man, even a genius, could possess so perfectly, the art of containing and concealing his feelings .

Political regimes had reigned since 1789, with a dizzying speed so that the art of re denying his opinions and to greet the rising sun, was cultivated as a necessity of the struggle for existence . The Hugo family excelled in this precious art. Some biographical details on General Hugo and his eldest son, Abel, may diminish the admiration of hugolâtres for the Machiavellian genius of their hero, but will allow the psychologist to explain how such diplomacy could fit in so young brain.

Brutus Hugo, the fierce Republican in 1793, who provided Chouan royalists and the firing squad and the guillotine fructidorized the legislative body with Augereau, took service in the palace of Joseph, as a butler, changed his nickname Roman against a Spanish title of Comte, his oath to Louis XVIII, who decorates the cross of St. Louis rallied to Napoleon landed at Cannes, offers lending the oath to Louis XVIII returned to Ghent, who is retired and internal Blois there to occupy his spare time he wrote his memoirs. Abel, his eldest son, enrich a specific historical, beginning with this act of faith: “Bound by belief in constitutional monarchy, deeply imbued with the doctrine of legitimacy, by feeling committed to the August family who made us , etc. ...”.

Victor Hugo could not help but admire the examples of conduct fair that bequeathed to his children the former Brutus: he said:

Go, your son is happy in your noble heritage,
The most beautiful heritage is a venerable name!
Odes. Book II. VIII. Edit. 1823.

Abel, who died in 1873, lived until 1815 almost always with his father so he could visit his mother in charge of ultra-royalists who turned suddenly in his writings after the fall of the Empire. As Victor, he was especially committed to personal service of the royal family. While Victor sings to the coronation of the king, he published prose life anecdote of Count d’Artois, Charles X today: “No prince was more attractive than the Comte d’Artois ... it is filled grace, candor, nobility, etc. ... “ and this continues for tens of pages. The king praised he lengthens his kick “this revolution, which had plunged into all crimes and all crawled under the teacher,” he insults Bonaparte, swoons at the reading of the proclamation to the army of the Comte d ‘ Artois, Lieutenant-General of the kingdom, sent to Lyon to stop the march of Napoleon, and he commented: “As the language was noble and delicate least it was proper to make an impression on minds that seemed accessible, that that of seduction. Traitors there opposed a mocking laugh. “ His father, General Hugo was among those traitors. - Exiled Charles X, Abel decorated by Louis-Philippe for “services rendered by the pen,” wrote the popular History of Napoleon (1853), she won the warm praise of Prince Napoleon.

Abel joined to the remarkable flexibility of driving a commercial spirit, rich in resources. He published to meet the fads and the public to satisfy its tastes, studies on the Spanish theater, an edition of Romancero a brochure Guano, its value as a fertilizer, a constant guide to Paris: A Paris for 12 cents, a Remember the period of scarcity, which threatens France, an illustrated history of France, he wrote a vaudeville in collaboration with Romieu he studied Africa in the agricultural point of view, created the Journal du Soir, invented publications illustrated by delivery, etc.. Abel was a clever industrial letters.

But what we should expect is to meet the soldier in the wars of the empire, the humanitarian, on the lyre Victor had to replace the King and Catholicism. Under the pseudonym Genty, General Hugo in 1818 published a pamphlet which mingle happily concerns industrialist and philanthropist . It solves the dual problem: given a dowry for foundlings, and provide workers with white farmers, who could not, as in the past, get blacks on the African coast.

The white workers were taken to the Foundling. The government is raising the children at his own expense, may dispose at will: “he would undertake to provide the settlers, children in the age of 9 to 10 years for girls and 10 to 11 years for boys. The commitment to take all the actual date of shipment and could not exceed 15 years upon expiry of which would stop right there. The administration would then count these children as dowry, namely men 600 francs, and Women 500 francs. “ This project would satisfy everyone, and tightly bind the colonies to the metropolis. The settlers bought their pickaninnies 2 and 4 cents francs motherland provides them with small white gratis. The white children who resisted the regime lashes and forced growers would receive after 15 years, a dowry of 5 to 6 cents francs. Philanthropy bourgeois who invented the jail cell, forced labor of women and children in the workshops, waltz and simpering in the charity balls to appease the hunger of the hungry, should resume the project of General Hugo and to complement the law on repeat offenders .

4

The revolution of 1830 Victor Hugo dumbfounded, but did not prevent him from continuing, as before, to reach three thousand francs pension so honorably earned. The preface of “Autumn Leaves, published in 1831, shows hesitation, he had established relationships with young and ardent Republicans, to attract, flattered him: and the Biography of Contemporary Rabbe said that Hugo had sang the three days in the most beautiful poetry they inspired. But the doctrines Republican who could give himself the weight of inducement, entered readily into his brain: he did not need, such as Marius in Les Miserables, mount the barricades and to receive wounds to heal its neo-republicanism. Once he understands that the throne of Louis-Philippe is strengthened, he said “we need something the republic and the monarchy word” . This sentence will appear a plagiarism of the word historic ranger, is a profession of faith: it meant that he would accept the graces and favors of the monarchy, while remaining a Republican in his heart. Under Louis XVIII and Charles X, Napoleon he loved in his heart, and insulted in the verses published to please his bosses Legitimists. The Republican flattered Louis-Philippe for the peerage, as the Napoleonic Adula the Bourbons to extort pensions.

On July 21, 1842, he had the courage to throw in the face of Louis-Philippe of sentences of this caliber: “Sire, you are the noble and tireless guardian of nationality and civilization ... Your blood is the blood of country, your family and France have the same heart ... Sir, you will live much longer, for God and France need you. “ Victor Hugo has always been cosmopolitan: it united all the kings of Europe in its adulation. Later, after 1848, it will discuss the United States of Europe. But first he had “praised the accession of Queen Victoria” and celebrated the Czar Nicolas “the noble and pious emperor” . In 1846 he asked the Baron de Humboldt to deliver a speech academic “in its August King, for which, you know my sympathy and admiration.” This majesty was so admired William IV, King of Prussia, brother of the Emperor of Germany, crowned at Versailles . History does not tell if the poet received gratuities from the United Majesties of Europe.

Finally the big day arrives: Hugo recapturing the freedom of thought, will no longer be obliged to flatter the king in public and to cherish the republic in his heart. The revolution of 1848 hunting “the royal guard of civilization”, and perches in power the Republican National. One moment you think the regency possible, Victor Hugo was quick to ask the Place des Vosges, is proclaimed the Republic, Victor Hugo, without losing a minute turns into a Republican. Those who stop to appearances, accusing him of having changed, because to turn round he was a Bonapartist, legitimist Orleanist Republican, but a somewhat careful study shows instead that in all these schemes, it never altered his conduct, as always, without being distracted by the comings and reversals of government, he pursued a single subject, his interest, he always remained hugoïste, which is worse selfish, saying that merciless mocking of Heine, Victor Hugo, unable to appreciate the genius, could never feel.

Is it the fault of that poor man, so to make money, the serious purpose of the bourgeois life he had put his hat all the roundels? If there is fault, it falls on the middle class who cheered and threw all these successive governments. Hugo suffers from these policy changes: until 1830, he had to stifle his ardent admiration for Napoleon and until 1848, he had to bury his republicanism in flattery to the king, as Harmodius tyrannicide his dagger concealed beneath the flowers.

They understand evil Hugo, who see him as a man dedicated to the realization of an idea that has his life is a tissue of irreconcilable contradictions. He left that role to the ideologues, the cranks who dream life he was content to be a reasonable man, not caring, or the likeness of his five-franc pieces, or form of government maintains the ‘order in the street is good for trade, and provides pensions and places. In his autobiography he states explicitly that “the form of government seemed secondary issue.” In the preface to the inner voice of 1837, he took as his motto: “Be all parties for their generous side, (that is to say that report) be any of their bad sides (c that is to say that cause loss).

Hugo was a friend of order: he never conspired against any government, that of Napoleon III, except it has accepted and supported all of his pen and his word and has not abandoned the day after their fall. His conduct is that of any trader, knowing his job a house can prosper only if his master sacrifices his political preferences and accept the fait accompli. The Dollfus, the Koechlin, the Scheurer-Kestner, the Republicans models of

Mulhouse, the free city until 1793, did they not accommodated at all speeds, which for nearly a century, have succeeded in Alsace; have not received grants from the Empire and did not they called for customs exemptions for their industry and repressive measures against their workers? Business first, then politics.

From 1848 to 1885, Hugo behaves as “honest and moderate Republican” and one can challenge his opponents to discover during these long years, one day fail.

In 1848, conservatives and reactionaries most pronounced compromise for the republic that had just been proclaimed: Victor Hugo did not hesitate a moment to follow their noble example. “I’m ready,” he said in his manifesto to the voters, to devote my life to establish the Republic, which multiply the railways ... tenfold the value of land ... dissolve the riot will ... order, the law of citizens of France ... grow, conquer the world, is in short the majestic embrace of humankind in God’s eyes met. “ This republic is good, true, the Republic of cases, this “generous sides” of its currency in 1837.

- I am ready went there to devote my life to “prevent the establishment of the republic who will shoot the tricolor flag in red, make big money with the column, to lay down the statue of Napoleon and compile the statue of Marat, destroy Institute, Ecole Polytechnique and the Legion of Honor; add to the famous motto: Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, option sinister or death will become bankrupt, ruin the rich without enrich the poor, destroy the credit is the fortune and all the work that is the bread of each property and abolish the family, walk heads on pikes, fill prisons with suspicion and empty out the massacre, will put Europe in flames and civilization to ashes, will make France the home of darkness, kill freedom, stifle the arts, decapitated thought, deny God. “ This republic is the social republic.

Victor Hugo has faithfully kept his word. It was from those who shut their national workshops, which threw the workmen in the street, to drown in blood the social ideas that were strafing and deporting the insurgents of June, the prosecution who voted against the deputies suspected of socialism, which supported the Prince Napoleon, who wanted a strong government to restrain the masses, terrorize socialists, reassure the citizens and protect the family, religion, property threatened by the Communists, the barbarians of civilization. With heroic courage, no pity for the vanquished, no sense of justice of their cause n’ébranlèrent, Victor Hugo, worthy son of Brutus

Hugo in 1793, voted with the majority, mistress of force. His votes glorious and eloquent words are well known and are collected in the annals of the reaction that gave birth to the empire, but it ignores the conduct, not less admirable in his journal, founded the event July 30, 1848, with the contest Vacquerie, Theophile Gautier, and her son, she deserves to be reported.

The event took the motto, which, after June was the season: “Hate to anarchy - tender and profound love of the people.” And we do not mistake the meaning of the second sentence, the specimen number said that the event “just talk to the poor of the rights of the rich in each of its duties.” The issue the first of November announced “it is good that the National Who is the aristocracy of the Republic is given for 15 cents, the event that wants to talk to the poor will sell for a penny.” The poet began to understand that in small grants for the poor, were better pensions in secret funds and government coffers of the rich.

Following the example set by Thiers in the Rue de Poitiers, as Victor Hugo someone always imitated, Event indoctrinated people, spread in the masses of workers healthy and comforting theories of political economy, rejects Proudhon fighting “the flattering language of the people who slander. The people listen to those who maintain the principles and obligations more willingly than those who talk about their interests and rights.” (Number 1 November). He is the apostle of liberalism, bourgeois religion that entertains the people with principles, it teaches the duty, and turn from their interests and rights, which makes him abandon the substance for the shadow.

After the insurrection of June, there remained, according to Hugo, a way to save the republic - to deliver his enemies. Thiers thought so after the Commune. Reform incapable of rising to the intelligence of this Machiavellian tactics, complaining that “the Republicans are blacklisted. They fled, they were denied, while there is no Legitimists or Orleans, disparaged, whose ignorance is not back and we try to rehabilitate at any price. “ The bank’s Event nail him with this striking reply: “If the Republicans are so suspicious, is not the fault of Republicans? ... Christianity has been really powerful only when the priests were lost direction. “ (Number 1 August). And to protect the Republic against the Republican newspaper of Victor Hugo takes the field against Caussidiere because he is not “the head, but the hand”; cons Louis Blanc, because “his crime, what are his ideas; his books, his speeches, his accomplices, are his three hundred thousand people! “ (Number 27 August); Proudhon cons because it is “a small man with a common, miserable people’s advocate”; cons Ledru-Rollin because “its circular civilization plunged into a civil war four days. From February 24 until June 24 Ledru-Rollin was one of those who have contributed most to pave the road to the abyss. “ (Number August 6).

But in pursuing his injuries, his anger and his denunciations of the defeated in June, the event gives the measure of his deep love for the Republic. Listen, is the author speaks of punishment: “Yesterday, at the end of the most painful corruption, which broke, it was greed, those who were poor had only one idea, stripping rich. We did not ask more of life, we asked the stock exchange. The property was treated flight State was ordered to feed at great expense idleness, the first task of government was to distribute, not the king’s power, but Millions of the civil list, and talk to people not of intelligence and thought but food and belly ... Yes, we have arrived at this point that all decent people, and the broken heart pale forehead, are forced to admit the war councils at all times, transportations distant clubs closed newspapers suspended, and the indictment of representatives of the people. “ (Number 28 August).

The hard necessity which distressed the heart of honest people and hardened to the ruthless repression, Hugo forced to lie shamelessly.

On August 28, 1848, Victor Hugo, to arouse the martial to condemn mercilessly beaten denounces as “poor, who had only one idea: rob the rich.” Two months ago, looters in June had invaded her house. They knew it was “one of the sixty representatives sent by the Constituent to quell the insurgency and lead columns of attack.” They searched the apartment to search for weapons, they saw hanging on the wall “a Turkish yatagan, the handle and scabbard are solid silver ... arranged on a table, jewelry, stamps precious gold and silver .. . when they were gone, we found that these hands ... black powder had touched anything. Not a valuable object was missing. “ These are the words of Victor Hugo, telling the bag from his home by looters of June But to describe the scene, he waited until the councils of war had finished their work of repression, he was then exiled. - Victor Hugo remains the same, among the most diverse circumstances: during the restoration legitimist insults Napoleon, who enthusiastically during the bourgeois reaction, it slander the insurgents, whom he admires the delicate act of honesty.

A strange fate hung over Victor Hugo and his whole life, he was sentenced to say and write the opposite of what he thought and felt.

In exile, to please those around him, he harangued on the freedom of press, speech and other freedoms yet, but he did not hate nothing more than this freedom, which enables “demagogues madmen, sow in the soul of the people of mad dreams, theories treacherous ... and ideas of rebellion. “ (Event of 3 November). The rebellion crushed, the House passed the security commander “silence the poor!” in the words of Lamennais. The event hastened and the Debates on Constitutional and approve the Century “measure so favorable to the serious press. ... We consider it necessary ... the Company had a gangrenous freedom; bail the surgeon has to operate feared the social body. “ (Number 11 August). The libertarian Hugo was not the man to hesitate before amputation of freedom that worries the ruling class and the confusion over the award.

Victor Hugo then committed the great blunder of his political life: he took the Prince Napoleon for a fool, which he hoped to make a step. Indeed it was the general opinion of politicians on the one that Rochefort was nicknamed the Parrot melancholy because even in error, Hugo was not original, mistaking it imitated someone. He was so absorbed by the desire to cram in a Bonapartist ministry, he did not notice that the Morny, the Persigny and other Cassagnac band had captured the fool and they heard it book operation. These gentlemen, with a shamelessness that surprised and shocked him greatly, sent the gossip in the small branch of the Rue de Poitiers and escamotèrent his nose and his beard department so ardently coveted. Instead of epayment his disappointment and his indignation was as usual, he forgot himself and flung himself impetuously into the opposition. The Republicans of the House, missing men, welcomed him despite his past and compromising the anointed leader. Intoxicated he dreamed the presidency.

The coup that surprised to read the Republican leaders, disturbed his plans, he was forced into exile following his supporters, since they had promoted to chief. The scoundrels who, unexpectedly, had seized the government, were so deficient, their power seemed so precarious, that the citizens of France swept Republicans do not believe the length of the Empire. During the weeks and months, every morning, trembling with emotion, they unfolded their newspapers to read the government fell in December and triumphant reminder, they held their trunks packed for the trip. These bourgeois republicans who were massacred and deported en masse workers naive enough to claim the term social reforms that were to pay three months of misery in the service of the Republic, did not include the two in December was logical consequence of days in June They did not notice that even when they had not believed that strafe Communist and workers, they had killed the most vigorous defenders of their Republic. Victor Hugo, who was unable to untangle a political situation, shared their blindness, he cursed in prose and verse the people because he did not overturn the instant the Empire that he and his friends had established and consolidated in the People's blood.

Thrown from his ambitious dreams and fevered by the constant expectation of the immediate fall of Napoleon III, Hugo for the first and only time in his life gives free rein to turbulent passions that troubled him her heart. Disappointed in his personal ambitions, the furious attacks on individuals, Rouher to Maupas, to Troplong, who overthrew his plans: he takes them head on, the covers of spitting, biting, strikes, the terrace tramples with epileptic fury. The poet is sincere in punishment: it is the whole with his wounded vanity, his ambition betrayed, anger and envy jealous rage. His verses that idle amplifications and stunning make comparisons usually so cold, come alive and vibrate with passion. It emerges under loads of rubbish romantic verses like sharp knives and hot irons as red worms that repeat history. The punishment, the most popular work of Victor Hugo, taught the youth of the empire of hatred and contempt for men of the Empire.

There are hugolâtres good company, monarchists, even Republicans, who took fright shouting matches with cats: they never talk about it or sometimes if they mention it with oratorical and reluctance endless. Their prudery prevents them from recognizing the services that this pamphlet went mad and makes even the conservatives from all sources. Hugo dying of insults Canrobert and Saint-Arnaud of the Bonapartist party in December, but he shoots not only to the Cavaignac, the Brea and Clement Thomas Band bourgeois June Kill socialists in overalls, seemed the order of things, but loaded on the Boulevard Montmartre, take by storm the house-Drouzas Sallan, snipe some citizens in tails and top hat hat! Oh! the most heinous crimes! The punishment does not know in June and December complain that: concentrating on December hatreds, they cast oblivion on June

In his preface of 18 Brumaire, Karl Marx said about Napoleon the Little: “Victor Hugo is confined to spiritual and bitter invective against the chief editor of the coup. In his book seems to be the event that a thunderbolt in a serene sky, the violent act of one individual. He did not notice that the individual grows, instead of shrinking, giving it a force of its own initiative, such it would be unprecedented in world history. “ But by magnifying unconsciously, the Little Napoleon in Napoleon the Great, by piling on his head the crimes of the bourgeois class, Hugo exonerate the bourgeois republicans who prepared the empire and innocent social institutions that create antagonism classes, fomenting civil war, require the coup against the socialist and allow the coups against the bourgeois parliament. By accumulating anger on people, on Napoleon and his acolytes, it distracts people from looking for causes of social misery, which are the monopoly of social wealth by the capitalist class it away people’s share of its revolutionary goal, which is the expropriation of the capitalist class and the socialization of the means of production. - Few books have been more useful to the wealthy that Napoleon le Petit and cats.

Other hugolâtres, panegyrists awkward, taking seriously the statements of dedication and selflessness of the poet, represent him as a hero of self-denial - they stripped him of his bourgeois prestige, for simplicity. At the hearing, he was one of these dangerous maniacs, infatuated with social and political ideas to the point of sacrificing their material interests, they would assimilate these Blanqui, these Garibaldi, these Varlin, these fools who had a purpose in life, achieving their ideal. - No, Victor Hugo was never stupid enough to serve the Republican propaganda, even a few thousand francs from his millions - if he had sacrificed anything for his ideas, a procession of citizens, as many, would not have accompanied the Pantheon M. Jules Ferry wish him his birthday, two years before his death, would not have welcomed the name of Master. If Victor Hugo had this policy of reckless, he would be out of the bourgeois tradition. For the characteristic of the political evolution in civilized countries, is to rid the political dangers it presented and the sacrifices that used to require.

In France, England, the United States ministers in power and elected to the House and the Municipal Councils, only ruin themselves more, but enriched: in these countries is no longer condemns ministers for fiddling boursicotiers, embezzlement and abuse of power. Parliamentary responsibility covers their mistakes and protects against any suit, France’s republican gave a memorable example of this policy reasonable and pleasant day it raised to the rank of senators MM. Broglie and Buffet for the console to have failed in their attempt monarchist coup. Parliamentary politics is a lucrative career: it offers no pecuniary risks of trade and industry, a small capital of establishment, a good supply of gab, a bit of luck and good interpersonal skills will ensure success . Hugo knew that this positive policy. Once he became convinced that the existence of the empire was assured for a long time, he put out his wrath justiciardes and concentrated all his activity to his trade of adjectives and phrases rhyme and rhythm.

He was in his blind rage launched such categorical statements, and unfortunately for him they had a huge impact if he had scored the men's coup to such poignant, it was impossible to make them forget it had to remain Republican and abandoning the policy it thought it better to bravely accept the role of martyr for the Republic, a victim of Duty. The role appealed to his vanity. If he was not born in an island, like Napoleon, he was exiled to live on an island as well as himself. Imitating Napoleon, become the Napoleon of letters, rocked the ambition of his life.

The proscribed elbow all the misery, "said the great Florentine, but Hugo had more intelligence than Dante. With an art that Barnum never equaled, it was the exile of the most sensational advertisements. The exile was loud and blinding sign hanging in his shop bookstore Upper Town House. The kings had not retired as a sum of 3,000 francs, its bourgeois clientele it was worth fifty thousand francs a year. There was not lost on exchange. He found that the Empire was good: "Napoleon has made my fortune," he confessed in one of those rare moments when he deposited his crown of thorns. How bourgeois bourgeoisie ecstatic she not before the man, who had managed to restore the exiled so sweet and so profitable? - The geniuses we know renames find that pain in exile, traders who move abroad in Senegal, India, the countries of fever and hepatitis, after ten and twenty years of exile fail to gather a ball of several hundred thousand francs, if they have the wind in its sails in luck, and Victor Hugo himself, the Modern Prometheus, lives in a delicious island, where doctors send their handicapped, he 's surrounded by a court of eager flatterers, who are frothing, he travels quietly in Europe, he hoarded millions and he gets the crown of martyrdom! ...

Friends and foes of Victor Hugo, were accredited rash judgments brought upon him by fear and admiration in the interests of its glory it is necessary to revise them.

Phraseology soaring Hugo thirty-five years gives goosebumps to shakers qu’épouvantent the words to Prudhomme, who all clown, juggling with the words Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, Humanity, Cosmopolitanism, United States of Europe, revolution and other swings of liberalism, is a revolutionary, a socialist right to safe, if not shot. But Hugo, and this is its most serious claim to fame was able to so blatantly contradict his actions and his words, he has not yet found in Europe and America a politician to demonstrate a more striking the perfect safety of truculent expressions of liberalism.

As we eat bread and meat, Hugo feeds of humanity and fraternity. - On August 14, 1848, eight days after the start of the first convoy, carrying 581 insurgents, he founded next to the Meeting of the Rue de Poitiers Meeting of the Society. The fear of losing their dear money, the Pereire and Mires of imperial finance, were confiscated so blithely, had enraged the middle class of 1848. The press should be moderate and the insurgents told some horrible stories: - looted houses, mobile sawn between two planks, one filled skulls of wine and emptied it singing obscenities ... Hugo knew that if the rebels invaded the houses, they do not plunder he had seen them fight like heroes. The simple humanity required him to protest against these idiotic slander and try to appease those citizens fearful, demanding a ruthless crackdown. But the Brotherhood hugoïste composition was not so human, it did not intend to suspend the activities of councils of war, “but tempered the eye of the judge by the tears of a brother ... and try to carry through into punishing the fraternity of the assembly. “ (Event, No. 14). - And in almost all issues, the event continues to stir anger and fear against the defeated .

Liberty was one of Pegasus, qu’enfourchait Hugo. But it must be three times Prudhomme for not noticing that the Pegasus was overinflated hugoïste wind to take the bit between their teeth and throwing fireworks. The fiery freedom of Hugo was a humble pony, he returned to the stable of all governments. Since the immortal revolution of 1789, Freedom, Freedom darling, is the refrain in fashion. All politicians since Polignac to Napoleon the Little have repeated in every key. Hugo singing loudly when he approved the bond which amputated body social “free mortified” by the press.

Hugo planted in his verses the red cockade of equality. But there is equality and equality as poets and poets: there are as many as moral. Any class, any social body manufactures for use by its members a moral force. The moral of the merchant, authorizing him to sell his wares ten and twenty times over its value, if possible, that the judge encouraged him to use trickery and deception to compel the defendant to accuse; that of the customs officer requires him to violate it medically women suspected of working with their sex of the annuitant exemption to obey the biblical commandment - “Thou shalt earn thy bread by the sweat of your brow ... “ Death lays his way to a tie, the big and small pox create others, social inequalities have given birth to two beautiful coming of equalities: the equality of heaven, which compensates for Christians inequalities in society and civil equality, the very sublime conquest of the Revolution serves the same purpose. The civil equality, which retains the Rothschild their millions and their parks, and their poor rags and fleas, is the only equality that Hugo knows. He was too fond of his income and the antitheses to desire equality property of the blow he had taken his millions and stole the easiest and most brilliant contrasts of his poetics.

Instead, the Event of September 9, 1848 assumed the defense of “luxury slandered the false philanthropy of our days” and triumphantly demonstrated the need for poverty to achieve social balance. - “The lazy wealth is the best friend of the laborious poverty, the paper develops hugoïste. Who is this that provides the wealth that ruinous superfluous; this research, this bauble which is comprised of fashion and pleasure? Work , industry, art, that is to say, poverty. Luxury is the most certain alms alms is involuntary. The vagaries of the rich are the best income of the poor. Most of the show will pleasure, the workshop will be more welfare. Mysterious scales that measure the heaviest part of the necessities of society lighter frivolities of another! strange balance established between the fantasies of the top, and needs from below! The more flowers and lace in the plateau that rises, the more bread in the tray down! “ - The most useless waste and ridicule becomes more mysterious ways of divine providence to create social harmony based on the misery needy and the idle rich. Luxury has never been more beautifully glorified. When the Event, the body of the Fraternity hugoïste, published his apology for luxury, just two months had elapsed since the insurrection of June, “protest the misery” and the blood of civil war still blushed the cobbled streets.

The words Hugo enriches his vocabulary after 1848, brought him wrong in the minds of Prudhommes they bewildering to the point where they would take bladders for lanterns and writer for a socialist for sharing. Victor Hugo share! - Rather than sharing anything with anyone, he would have sacrificed his hand all the executors and all his first friend, her beloved Vacquerie, who could not kill himself on his bier and the servants on the burning of ancient heroes would be buried in the tomb effigy in the master. The poet was worthy of such sacrifice Hugo was indeed a hero of the sentence.

The revolution of 1848 launched in honest language and moderate people of new words from the literary reaction started in the consulate, they slept in speeches, pamphlets, newspapers and proclamations of the great revolutionary period and did not venture daylight timidly, in the vernacular. The bullies of romanticism, Janin, the Gauthier, fell back appalled, but Hugo does not have blinked an eye, he grabbed the nouns and adjectives horrifying, invading the language written in newspapers and spoken at the forum of popular assemblies; magician and wonderful he juggled to stun onlookers with the immortal principles of 1789 and the words still stained with the blood of nobles and priests. He then opened the romance a career that was to go alone; literary companions of 1832, more timid than the citizens they were mocked and dared not follow that they called their master.

Victor Hugo himself, seems to have been intimidated by the revolutionary expressions which he handled and he does not understand the exact meaning. He wanted to ensure he had committed by mistake, even in thought, sin socialist he examined his conscience in his autobiography and he became convinced that he who had written about the poor people, poverty, and other subjects compositions rhetoricians tirades pave the Palais Bourbon, he had requested a single social reform, the abolition of the death penalty “the first of all - be small . And yet he could say he had only followed the example of all the apostles of humanitarianism, from Guizot to Louis-Philippe, and that at first he had considered the penalty Death at a literary point of view and fanciful, like an excellent theme verbose declamation, to add to “cross my mother -” Voice of Blood “and other stuff of romance that began to wear out and lose their action on the big public.

A socialism that is limited to practical social reform: the abolition of the death penalty, is liable to disturb the executioners, he threatens vested interests. And it should not be surprised if at the publication of the “bible socialist Hugo, Les Miserables, it is found that Lamartine or older to be shocked that, thirty years after Eugene Sue,” the only man who by Thomas De Banville had something to say, “dare to pity a man sent to the galleys for stealing a loaf and a poor girl prostituting herself to feed the bourgeois bastard who abandoned pregnant. It was indeed quaint and childish. But where Victor Hugo spreads roughly bourgeois spirit is personified when these two institutions of any bourgeois society, the police operation within two ridiculous Javert, made under the informer and Jean Valjean, the convict which rehabilitates in a few years amassing a fortune on the backs of its workers. Fortune wash all the stains and is in lieu of all virtues, Hugo, and any citizen, can understand the existence of a society without police and without exploitation of workers.

The worship of God Property is the religion of Victor Hugo. In his view, the confiscation of the Orleans family is one of the most hideous crimes of Napoleon III. And if it had been a member of the Assembly of Versailles, he would, on the proposal of Mr. Thiers, passed the 50 million award to the Orleans, respect for property. His hatred of the Socialists, he denounced so fiercely in 1848, is so intense that its classification of beings, which disturb society, it places the last step Lacenaire, the murderer, and immediately above, Babeuf, the Communist .

People who would be the most appalling bad faith, they were ignorant or forgetful, have supposed that the man who in November 1848, wrote that “the insurrection of June is criminal and will be sentenced by the history, as it was by the company ... if it had succeeded, it would not work on, but the looting, “(Event, No. 94) that the man had deserted the cause of sacred property and defended the uprising of March 18. And this because he had opened his house in Brussels to refugees from the Commune. But in his letter noisy while in Hugo is claimed, and later as a terrible year, did not he protested indignantly against acts of war of the Commune did not he insulted the Communards so violently that ‘formerly Bonapartists, stigmatizing them with the epithets of killers of children fifteen years, robbers, assassins, incendiaries? But the radicals and so hugolâtre Camille Pelletan had to find that the Victor Hugo compromised by incontinence of insults and slander against the losers of the Bloody Week.

What was so extraordinary in the act of Victor Hugo, and to disturb the Pessard Press Versailles. Is it that despite the pressing demands of MM. Thiers and Favre, the ministers of Queen Victoria and King Amadeo did not open their countries, England and Spain, these losers, they have never insulted and Victor Hugo. Nobody will accuse the men of State pact with the Socialists and the enemies of the property. In Switzerland, Belgium, England, everywhere, the citizens, everything is more bourgeois, did not they open their purses to help the exiles without bread or work that has Victor Hugo never, former exile millionaire?

That Legitimists, who had nurtured, pampered, advocated decorated Victor Hugo, piously preserve a bitter grudge against the young Eliacim, that coward when the Revolution of 1830 their hard hands the key of the cassette to pensions, nothing more natural. They accused him of desertion, betrayal, nothing more just. However, the peer of France of the Orleans monarchy, which was brought to his mother the weight of his loyalty, might have explained his Orleanism by his love of the corporation and say: “I, the man always faithful to duty j ‘ I had to obey the commandments of morality higher than the gratitude I obeyed the orders of practical morality: no money, no Swiss, nor a poet. “ But the former bosses of the writer beyond all measure, when to damage the disposal of his goods among the pious, they slander him and call him an infidel. Nothing more false.

Victor Hugo had the misfortune to be born of wicked parents, and to be high among the ungodly. Her mother did not allow him to eat God , but gave him, however, for teachers, priests skeptics, who during the Revolution had thrown to the winds the cassock and breviary. And yet an ardent faith suddenly awakens in his soul, the same day that the throne and the altar, one supporting the other, are placed back on their feet. He then strangled her and sings Voltairianism the Catholic religion, its pomp and pensions . Legitimists they do not recognize is the sure sign dune faith sincere opportunist? They show demanding to the extreme, when they ask that Catholicism hand survive the causes that had led. They had to remain the masters of power to preserve that Hugo until his eighty-third year, faith in God, the priests, but he had to go to identify and suspend its worship for this God who continually reveal his real presence in the distribution of pensions. Thus a banker cuts the client’s credit ruined, spinning on Belgium.

The Revolution of 1830 gave way to Voltaire and free thought; Victor Hugo, the sunflower, as its nature condemned to turn with the sun, placed as a cook's apron, her lawful and circumstance of his Catholicism. There were new teachers to meet. He worshiped the God of the good people of Beranger and burned Jehovah, the God grim and dark, but that was better suited to her romantic brain. This change of Gods proves the sincerity of his deism. He must at all costs God he needed for his personal use to be a prophet to be a tripod .

He rose easily to the level of gross irreligion of his readers because it not asked to sacrifice the effects of banal romantic poetry that drew from the idea of God and Christian Charity, on which the Freethinkers are discharged from care to relieve the misery created by their operation, he could even continue to praise the priest and the nun, the moral police that the middle class employee to complete the work of law enforcement constable and a soldier .

Victor Hugo died without priests, or prayers or communion without confession, Catholics are appalled, but people to God, can not blame him for never had a wicked thought. Its gigantic brain remained hermetically sealed to the criticism leveled encyclopaedists and philosophical theories of modern science. In 1831, a scientific debate passionately intellectual Europe: Cuvier and Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire were discussing the origin and formation of beings and worlds. The old Goethe, that Hugo disdainfully calls "the poet of the indifference", the soul filled with a sublime enthusiasm, listening to reason these two powerful geniuses. - Hugo, indifferent to philosophy and science, devote his "great genius" who "embraced in its immensity visible and invisible, the ideal and the real monsters of the sea and the creatures of the earth. .. " to tilt the "balance hemistich" and rhyming navel and April, Jewish and tallow, dyke and gibberish, Marengo and lumbago.

Thirty years later, Charles Darwin took up the theory of G. Saint-Hilaire and Lamarck, his master, he fertilized his vast knowledge and his brilliant discoveries, and triumphant, he implanted in natural science and renewed conception of human creation. Hugo, "the thinker of the nineteenth century º, that hugolâtres called" the century of Hugo "; Hugo, who was in his head" idea man "lived indifferent to the middle of this wonderful movement of ideas. It poeta Sovrano, who spent most of his life to run in the catalogs and dictionaries history and geography, after the rich rhymes, does not deign to notice that Lamarckism, Darwinism, Transformism, rhymed more richly although hunger and génovéfain.

We will remember the orgy of hyperbole in the Paris press, which lasted ten long days. Already we are beginning to return to the exuberance of forced admiration, and we soon come to regard these days of excitement and climax, as a moment of inexplicable madness.

It would be idle to discuss whether in the near future the works of Victor Hugo live in the memory of men such as Molière and Lafontaine in France, of Heine and Goethe in Germany in Shakespeare's England; Cervantes in Spain, or whether they will sleep a deep sleep next to the poems of the Cavalier Marino, laminated with fatigue, only a few scholars studying the origins of classical literature. But scholars of the seventeenth century º announced that Adone erase forever the Furioso, the Divine Comedy and the Iliad, and delirious crowds walking banners, which was proclaimed as illustrated Marin was "the soul poetry, the spirit of lyres, the rule of poets ... the miracle of genius ... the man whose glorious pen gives the poem its true value, the speech its natural colors, the verse its true harmony in the Fireworks his perfect prose ... admired doctors, kings honored, subject acclamations of the world, celebrated by the desire itself, etc.. etc... " Shakespeare died forgotten his age.

Sometimes the future generations do not ratify the judgments of contemporaries. But historical criticism that admires nor blame, but tries to explain everything, adopt the popular axiom, there is no smoke without fire, she thinks that the writer hailed by his contemporaries, has won their applause because he was able to flatter their tastes and their passions and express their thoughts and feelings in the language they could understand. Every writer that spends the public's infatuation, whatever its literary merits and demerits, becomes by that fact alone a high historical value and becomes what Emerson called a representative type of a class, then dune. - This is how Hugo came looking to win the admiration of the bourgeoisie.

The bourgeoisie, sovereign mistress of social power, would have a literature that reproduced his ideas and feelings and speak the language she loved classical literature developed to please the aristocracy, could not suit him. When you consider the romantic critically, studies so far has been only rhetorical exercises, where we took care to praise or denigrate, rather than analyze, compare and d explain, we'll see exactly how the Romantic writers met, in form and substance, the requirements of the bourgeoisie, although many of them did not suspect the role they filled with such consciousness.

Hugo, is distinguished not by ideas, nor feelings, but the shape he was conscious. The form is for him the important thing, “Take,” he said to all these great men and this simple little thing, style, and Voltaire, Pascal, Boileau, Bossuet, Fenelon, Racine, Corneille , Lafontaine, Molière, these masters, you will he? - What remains of Homer after passing through Bitaubé. - The truth of the observation and the strength and originality of thought, things are secondary, which does not count. - “The form is something more absolute than you think ... All art that wants to live well must begin to ask itself questions of form of language and style ... Style is the key to the future ... Without style you can have success at the time, the applause, noise, band, crown, drunk with the acclamation of the multitude, you will not have the true triumph of true glory, true conquest, laurel true, as Cicero said: insignia victoriae not victoriam “.

Victor Cousin, the romantic philosophy, and Victor Hugo, the philosopher of Romanticism, the bourgeoisie served the kind of philosophy and literature she asked. The Diderot, Voltaire, Rousseau, the D’Alembert and Condillac º eighteenth century had too much to think that it should desire to relax and enjoy without breaking a sweet head of philosophy and sentimental poetry, which were put more intelligence into play, but amuse the reader, the transport in the clouds and the land of dreams, and his eyes charmed by the beauty and boldness of the images, and his ears by the pump and harmony periods.

The revolution of 1789 transplanted the center of social life from Versailles to Paris, and the court rooms, streets, cafes and popular assemblies. The newspapers, pamphlets, speeches were the literature of the time, everyone spoke and wrote without any discomfort and trampled on the rules of taste and grammar. A nation of words, neologisms, expressions, phrases and images, drawn from all provinces and all social strata, invaded the polite language, developed by two centuries of aristocratic culture. The day after the death of Robespierre, grammarians and purists took the rod torn out of their hands and began to work to expel the intruder and repair the breaches of the language of the XVIII ° century, started by the sans-culottes. They succeeded in part and imitating precious Hotel Rambouillet, they châtrèrent language spoken and written thousands of words, phrases that he had not yet been returned. Fortunately Chateaubriand, following the example set by the royalists in the Acts of the Apostles who had supported the throne and the altar in the language of markets, defended, to the horror of purists, the reaction and religion with the language and rhetoric engendered by the revolution. The success of Atala, Engineering of Christianity and the Martyrs was immense. The honor of being in this century, not made, but on literary language is romantic Chateaubriand, who was the master of Victor Hugo.

But Chateaubriand, with the exception of a small fort known song and a play precisely known, write in prose. He still had to break the mold of classic verse, to soften to a new harmony to enhance images, phrases and words that had already commonplace and prose to resurrect the old forms of French poetry . Victor Hugo, Lamartine, Musset, Vigny, Gautier, Banville, Baudelaire and others undertook this task. Hugo, in the eyes of the large public monopolized the glory of the galaxy romantic, not because he was the greatest poet, but because his poetry embraces all genres and subjects, the ode to the satire, the love song to the political pamphlet: and because he was the only one to put into tirades quack philanthropy and bourgeois liberalism. Everywhere he appeared virtuoso skill. As the milliners and dressmakers mannequins adorn the shelves of their brightest clothes to catch the eye of the passer, as Victor Hugo costume ideas and feelings that furnished the bourgeois phraseology bewildering calculated to strike the ear and cause consternation, a bombastic verbiage, harmony and rhythmic rhyming, studded with dazzling and striking antitheses, epithets lightning. It was, after Chateaubriand, the biggest displays of words and images of the century.

His literary talents merchandiser had not sufficed to assure him the admiration of confidence, so universal, and his acts, even more than his writings earned him the esteem of the bourgeoisie. Hugo was bourgeois into any of his actions.

He crossed himself devoutly before the sacramental formula of Romanticism: Art for art, but all citizens and thinking only of making his fortune, he devoted his talent to please the tastes of the public who pays, and under the circumstances He sang the monarchy or republic, proclaimed freedom or approved the gagging of the press and when it was necessary to arouse public attention he fired shots from pistols - the beautiful, the ugly is the most its noisy firecrackers.

He boasted of being the unchanging man, attached to duty as the mollusk to rock, but as any citizen wishing to make any money his way, he adapted himself to all circumstances and greeted eagerly powers and opinions rising in the distance. Embedded lightly in a political, poorly combined, he turned quickly, leaving his buddies conspire and spend their time and money to the Republican propaganda, and start to use his fame and while he intimated that he cherished the traditional black bread of exile, it sold its weight in gold his prose and poetry.

He said simple heart, speaking as he was thinking and acting as he spoke, but, as any trader seeking to busy his shop, he threw the dressing in handfuls, and rose steadily beaten in public. The staging of his death is the culmination of his career as an actor, so rich in effect cleverly engineered. Everything is considered, planned, since the float of the poor in order to exaggerate its size by the simplicity and win the sympathy of the crowd always gobeuse, to gossip about the million he bequeathed to a hospital on 50 thousand for this, and 20 miles to do this in order to push the government to the generosity and obtain triumphal funeral without paying a penny.

The citizens appreciated the high qualities of Hugo, so rare to find together in a man of letters: the skill in the conduct of life and economy in the wealth management . They recognized in Hugo, crowned with the halo of martyrdom and flaming rays of glory, a man of their case and the more exalted devotion to duty, his love of the idea and the depth of his thought, and they were proud to see that he was petrified of the same qualities themselves. They gazed and admired in Hugo, as well as in a mirror. The bourgeoisie gave significant evidence of its identification with the “great man” it buried in the Pantheon. While she invited him to his funeral the first of June all nations, it does not close the Exchange and did not suspend the commercial and financial life because the first day of June was maturity of commercial bills and vouchers of public values . Her heart told her that Victor Hugo, poeta Sovrano have disapproved this measure, he who, for anything, would delayed twenty four hours of receipt of his income and his debts.

VICTOR HUGO'S ROMANCES by Robert Louis Stevenson

This essay was first published in Stevenson's literary criticism book *Familiar Studies of Men and Books* (1882).

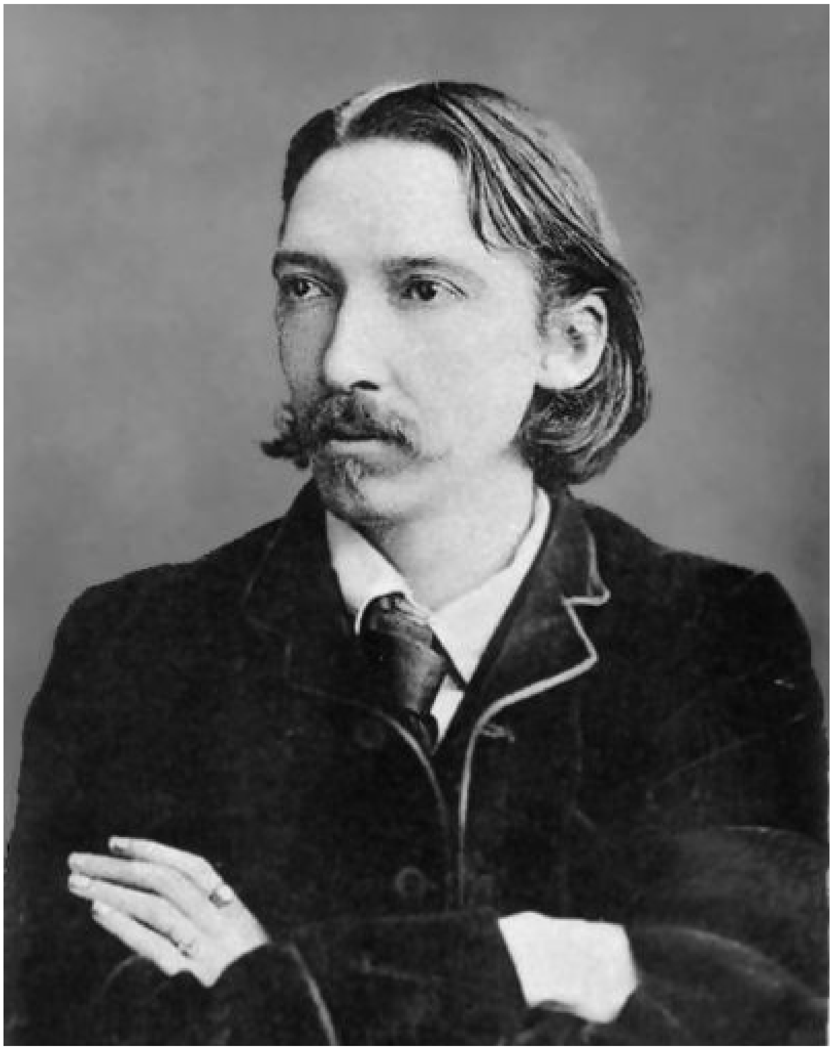

Robert Louis Stevenson, a great admirer of Hugo’s novels

VICTOR HUGO’S ROMANCES

Après le roman pittoresque mais prosaïque de Walter Scott il restera un autre roman à créer, plus beau et plus complet encore selon nous. C’est le roman, à la fois drame et épopée, pittoresque mais poétique, réel mais idéal, vrai mais grand, qui enchâssera Walter Scott dans Homère. — Victor Hugo on “Quentin Durward.”

Victor Hugo’s romances occupy an important position in the history of literature; many innovations, timidly made elsewhere, have in them been carried boldly out to their last consequences; much that was indefinite in literary tendencies has attained to definite maturity; many things have come to a point and been distinguished one from the other; and it is only in the last romance of all, “Quatrevingt-treize,” that this culmination is most perfect. This is in the nature of things. Men who are in any way typical of a stage of progress may be compared more justly to the hand upon the dial of the clock, which continues to advance as it indicates, than to the stationary milestone, which is only the measure of what is past. The movement is not arrested. That significant something by which the work of such a man differs from that of his predecessors goes on disengaging itself and becoming more and more articulate and cognisable. The same principle of growth that carried his first book beyond the books of previous writers carries his last book beyond his first. And just as the most imbecile production of any literary age gives us sometimes the very clue to comprehension we have sought long and vainly in contemporary masterpieces, so it may be the very weakest of an author’s books that, coming in the sequel of many others, enables us at last to get hold of what underlies the whole of them — of that spinal marrow of significance that unites the work of his life into something organic and rational. This is what has been done by “Quatrevingt-treize” for the earlier romances of Victor Hugo, and, through them, for a whole division of modern literature. We have here the legitimate continuation of a long and living literary tradition; and hence, so far, its explanation. When many lines diverge from each other in direction so slightly as to confuse the eye, we know that we have only to produce them to make the chaos plain: this is continually so in literary history; and we shall best understand the importance of Victor Hugo’s romances if we think of them as some such prolongation of one of the main lines of literary tendency.

When we compare the novels of Walter Scott with those of the man of genius who preceded him, and whom he delighted to honour as a master in the art — I mean Henry Fielding — we shall be somewhat puzzled, at the first moment, to state the difference that there is between these two. Fielding has as much human science; has a far firmer hold upon the tiller of his story; has a keen sense of character, which he draws (and Scott often does so too) in a rather abstract and academical manner; and finally, is quite as humorous and quite as good-humoured as the great Scotsman. With all these points of resemblance between the men, it is astonishing that their work should be so different. The fact is, that the English novel was looking one way and seeking one set of effects in the hands of Fielding; and in the hands of Scott it was looking eagerly in all ways and searching for all the effects that by any possibility it could utilise. The difference between these two men marks a great enfranchisement. With Scott the Romantic movement, the movement of an extended curiosity and an enfranchised imagination, has begun. This is a trite thing to say; but trite things are often very indefinitely comprehended: and this enfranchisement, in as far as it regards the technical change that came over modern prose romance, has never perhaps been explained with any clearness.

To do so, it will be necessary roughly to compare the two sets of conventions upon which plays and romances are respectively based. The purposes of these two arts are so much alike, and they deal so much with the same passions and interests, that we are apt to forget the fundamental opposition of their methods. And yet such a fundamental opposition exists. In the drama the action is developed in great measure by means of things that remain outside of the art; by means of real things, that is, and not artistic conventions for things. This is a sort of realism that is not to be confounded with that realism in painting of which we hear so much. The realism in painting is a thing of purposes; this, that we have to indicate in the drama, is an affair of method. We have heard a story, indeed, of a painter in France who, when he wanted to paint a sea-beach, carried realism from his ends to his means, and plastered real sand upon his canvas; and that is precisely what is done in the drama. The dramatic author has to paint his beaches with real sand: real live men and women move about the stage;

we hear real voices; what is feigned merely puts a sense upon what is; we do actually see a woman go behind a screen as Lady Teazle, and, after a certain interval, we do actually see her very shamefully produced again. Now all these things, that remain as they were in life, and are not transmuted into any artistic convention, are terribly stubborn and difficult to deal with; and hence there are for the dramatist many resultant limitations in time and space. These limitations in some sort approximate towards those of painting: the dramatic author is tied down, not indeed to a moment, but to the duration of each scene or act; he is confined to the stage almost as the painter is confined within his frame. But the great restriction is this, that a dramatic author must deal with his actors, and with his actors alone. Certain moments of suspense, certain significant dispositions of personages, a certain logical growth of emotion, — these are the only means at the disposal of the playwright. It is true that, with the assistance of the scene-painter, the costumier and the conductor of the orchestra, he may add to this something of pageant, something of sound and fury; but these are, for the dramatic writer, beside the mark, and do not come under the vivifying touch of his genius. When we turn to romance, we find this no longer. Here nothing is reproduced to our senses directly. Not only the main conception of the work, but the scenery, the appliances, the mechanism by which this conception is brought home to us, have been put through the crucible of another man's mind, and come out again, one and all, in the form of written words. With the loss of every degree of such realism as we have described, there is for art a clear gain of liberty and largeness of competence. Thus, painting, in which the round outlines of things are thrown on to a flat board, is far more free than sculpture, in which their solidity is preserved. It is by giving up these identities that art gains true strength. And so in the case of novels as compared with the stage. Continuous narration is the flat board on to which the novelist throws everything. And from this there results for him a great loss of vividness, but a great compensating gain in his power over the subject; so that he can now subordinate one thing to another in importance, and introduce all manner of very subtle detail, to a degree that was before impossible. He can render just as easily the flourish of trumpets before a victorious emperor and the gossip of country market women, the gradual decay of forty years of a man's life and the gesture of a passionate moment. He finds himself equally unable, if he looks at it from one point of view — equally able, if he looks at it from another point of view — to reproduce a colour, a sound, an outline, a logical argument, a physical action. He can show his readers, behind and around the personages that for the moment occupy the foreground of his story, the continual suggestion of the landscape; the turn of the weather that will turn with it men's lives and fortunes, dimly foreshadowed on the horizon; the fatality of distant events, the stream of national tendency, the salient framework of causation. And all this thrown upon the flat board — all this entering, naturally and smoothly, into the texture of continuous intelligent narration.

This touches the difference between Fielding and Scott. In the work of the latter, true to his character of a modern and a romantic, we become suddenly conscious of the background. Fielding, on the other hand, although he had recognised that the novel was nothing else than an epic in prose, wrote in the spirit not of the epic, but of the drama. This is not, of course, to say that the drama was in any way incapable of a regeneration similar in kind to that of which I am now speaking with regard to the novel. The notorious contrary fact is sufficient to guard the reader against such a misconstruction. All that is meant is, that Fielding remained ignorant of certain capabilities which the novel possesses over the drama; or, at least, neglected and did not develop them. To the end he continued to see things as a playwright sees them. The world with which he dealt, the world he had realised for himself and sought to realise and set before his readers, was a world of exclusively human interest. As for landscape, he was content to under-line stage directions, as it might be done in a play-book: Tom and Molly retire into a practicable wood. As for nationality and public sentiment, it is curious enough to think that Tom Jones is laid in the year forty-five, and that the only use he makes of the rebellion is to throw a troop of soldiers into his hero's way. It is most really important, however, to remark the change which has been introduced into the conception of character by the beginning of the romantic movement and the consequent introduction into fiction of a vast amount of new material. Fielding tells us as much as he thought necessary to account for the actions of his creatures; he thought that each of these actions could be decomposed on the spot into a few simple personal elements, as we decompose a force in a question of abstract dynamics. The larger motives are all unknown to him; he had not understood that the nature of the landscape or the spirit of the times could be for anything in a story; and so, naturally and rightly, he said nothing about them. But Scott's instinct, the instinct of the man of an age profoundly different, taught him otherwise; and, in his work, the individual characters begin to occupy a comparatively small proportion of that canvas on which armies manœuvre, and great hills pile themselves upon each other's shoulders. Fielding's characters were always great to the full stature of a perfectly arbitrary will. Already in Scott we begin to have a sense of the subtle influences that moderate and qualify a man's personality; that personality is no longer thrown out in unnatural isolation, but is resumed into its place in the constitution of things.

It is this change in the manner of regarding men and their actions, first exhibited in romance, that has since renewed and vivified history. For art precedes philosophy, and even science. People must have noticed things and interested themselves in them before they begin to debate upon their causes or influence. And it is in this way that art is the pioneer of knowledge; those predilections of the artist he knows not why, those irrational acceptations and recognitions, reclaim, out of the world that we have not yet realised, ever another and another corner; and after the facts have been thus vividly brought before us and have had time to settle and arrange themselves in our minds, some day there will be found the man of science to stand up and give the explanation. Scott took an interest in many things in which Fielding took none; and for this reason, and no other, he introduced them into his romances. If he had been told what would be the nature of the movement that he was so lightly initiating, he would have been very incredulous and not a little scandalised. At the time when he wrote, the real drift of this new manner of pleasing people in fiction was not yet apparent; and, even now, it is only by looking at the romances of Victor Hugo that we are enabled to form any proper judgment in the matter. These books are not only descended by ordinary generation from the Waverley Novels, but it is in them chiefly that we shall find the revolutionary tradition of Scott carried further; that we shall find Scott himself, in so far as regards his conception of prose fiction and its purposes, surpassed in his own spirit, instead of tamely followed. We have here, as I said before, a line of literary tendency produced, and by this production definitely separated from others. When we come to Hugo, we see that the deviation, which seemed slight enough and not very serious between Scott and Fielding, is indeed such a great gulf in thought and sentiment as only successive generations can pass over: and it is but natural that one of the chief advances that Hugo has made upon Scott is an advance in self-consciousness. Both men follow the same road; but where the one went blindly and carelessly, the other advances with all deliberation and forethought. There never was artist much more unconscious than Scott; and there have been not many more conscious than Hugo. The passage at the head of these pages shows how organically he had understood the nature of his own changes. He has, underlying each of the five great romances (which alone I purpose here to examine), two deliberate designs: one artistic, the other consciously ethical and intellectual. This is a man living in a different world from Scott, who professes sturdily (in one of his introductions) that he does not believe in novels having any moral influence at all; but still Hugo is too much of an artist to let himself be hampered by his dogmas; and the truth is that the artistic result seems, in at least one great instance, to have very little connection with the other, or directly ethical result.

The artistic result of a romance, what is left upon the memory by any really powerful and artistic novel, is something so complicated and refined that it is difficult to put a name upon it; and yet something as simple as nature. These two propositions may seem mutually destructive, but they are so only in appearance. The fact is, that art is working far ahead of language as well as of science, realising for us, by all manner of suggestions and exaggerations, effects for which as yet we have no direct name; nay, for which we may never perhaps have a direct name, for the reason that these effects do not enter very largely into the necessities of life. Hence alone is that suspicion of vagueness that often hangs about the purpose of a romance: it is clear enough to us in thought; but we are not used to consider anything clear until we are able to formulate it in words, and analytical language has not been sufficiently shaped to that end. We all know this difficulty in the case of a picture, simple and strong as may be the impression that it has left with us; and it is only because language is the medium of romance that we are prevented from seeing that the two cases are the same. It is not that there is anything blurred or indefinite in the impression left with us, it is just because the impression is so very definite after its own kind, that we find it hard to fit it exactly with the expressions of our philosophical speech.

It is this idea which underlies and issues from a romance, this something which it is the function of that form of art to create, this epical value, that I propose chiefly to seek and, as far as may be, to throw into relief, in the present study. It is thus, I believe, that we shall see most clearly the great stride that Hugo has taken beyond his predecessors, and how, no longer content with expressing more or less abstract relations of man to man, he has set before himself the task of realising, in the language of romance, much of the involution of our complicated lives.

This epical value is not to be found, let it be understood, in every so-called novel. The great majority are not works of art in anything but a very secondary signification. One might almost number on one's fingers the works in which such a supreme artistic intention has been in any way superior to the other and lesser aims, themselves more or less artistic, that generally go hand in hand with it in the conception of prose romance. The purely critical spirit is, in most novels, paramount. At the present moment we can recall one man only, for whose works it would have been equally possible to accomplish our present design: and that man is Hawthorne. There is a unity, an unwavering creative purpose, about some at least of Hawthorne's romances, that impresses itself on the most indifferent reader; and the very restrictions and weaknesses of the man served perhaps to strengthen the vivid and single impression of his works. There is nothing of this kind in Hugo: unity, if he attains to it, is indeed unity out of multitude; and it is the wonderful power of subordination and synthesis thus displayed, that gives us the measure of his talent. No amount of mere discussion and statement, such as this, could give a just conception of the greatness of this power. It must be felt in the books themselves, and all that can be done in the present essay is to recall to the reader the more general features of each of the five great romances, hurriedly and imperfectly, as space will permit, and rather as a suggestion than anything more complete.

The moral end that the author had before him in the conception of “Notre Dame de Paris” was (he tells us) to “denounce” the external fatality that hangs over men in the form of foolish and inflexible superstition. To speak plainly, this moral purpose seems to have mighty little to do with the artistic conception; moreover, it is very questionably handled, while the artistic conception is developed with the most consummate success. Old Paris lives for us with newness of life: we have ever before our eyes the city cut into three by the two arms of the river, the boat-shaped island “moored” by five bridges to the different shores, and the two unequal towns on either hand. We forget all that enumeration of palaces and churches and convents which occupies so many pages of admirable description, and the thoughtless reader might be inclined to conclude from this that they were pages thrown away; but this is not so: we forget, indeed, the details, as we forget or do not see the different layers of paint on a completed picture; but the thing desired has been accomplished, and we carry away with us a sense of the "Gothic profile" of the city, of the "surprising forest of pinnacles and towers and belfries," and we know not what of rich and intricate and quaint. And throughout, Notre Dame has been held up over Paris by a height far greater than that of its twin towers: the Cathedral is present to us from the first page to the last; the title has given us the clue, and already in the Palace of Justice the story begins to attach itself to that central building by character after character. It is purely an effect of mirage; Notre Dame does not, in reality, thus dominate and stand out above the city; and any one who should visit it, in the spirit of the Scott-tourist to Edinburgh or the Trossachs, would be almost offended at finding nothing more than this old church thrust away into a corner. It is purely an effect of mirage, as we say; but it is an effect that permeates and possesses the whole book with astonishing consistency and strength. And then, Hugo has peopled this Gothic city, and, above all, this Gothic church, with a race of men even more distinctly Gothic than their surroundings. We know this generation already: we have seen them clustered about the worn capitals of pillars, or craning forth over the church-leads with the open mouths of gargoyles. About them all there is that sort of stiff quaint unreality, that conjunction of the grotesque, and even of a certain bourgeois snugness, with passionate contortion and horror, that is so characteristic of Gothic art. Esmeralda is somewhat an exception; she and the goat traverse the story like two children who have wandered in a dream. The finest moment of the book is when these two share with the two other leading characters, Dom Claude and Quasimodo, the chill shelter of the old cathedral. It is here that we touch most intimately the generative artistic idea of the romance: are they not all four taken out of some quaint moulding Illustrative of the Beatitudes, or the Ten Commandments, or the seven deadly sins? What is Quasimodo but an animated gargoyle? What is the whole book but the reanimation of Gothic art?

It is curious that in this, the earliest of the five great romances, there should be so little of that extravagance that latterly we have come almost to identify with the author's manner. Yet even here we are distressed by words, thoughts, and incidents that defy belief and alienate the sympathies. The scene of the *in pace*, for example, in spite of its strength, verges dangerously on the province of the penny novelist. I do not believe that Quasimodo rode upon the bell; I should as soon imagine that he swung by the clapper. And again, the following two sentences, out of an otherwise admirable chapter, surely surpass what it had ever entered into the heart of any other man to imagine (vol. ii.): “Il souffrait tant que par instants il s’arrachait des poignées de cheveux, *pour voir s’ils ne blanchissaient pas*.” And, : “Ses pensées étaient si insupportables qu’il prenait sa tête à deux mains et tàtchait de l’arracher de ses épaules *pour la briser sur le pavé*.”

One other fault, before we pass on. In spite of the horror and misery that pervade all of his later work, there is in it much less of actual melodrama than here, and rarely, I should say never, that sort of brutality, that useless insufferable violence to the feelings, which is the last distinction between melodrama and true tragedy. Now, in “Notre Dame,” the whole story of Esmeralda’s passion for the worthless archer is unpleasant enough; but when she betrays herself in her last hiding-place, herself and her wretched mother, by calling out to this sordid hero who has long since forgotten her — well, that is just one of those things that readers will not forgive; they do not like it, and they are quite right; life is hard enough for poor mortals without having it indefinitely embittered for them by bad art.

We look in vain for any similar blemish in “Les Misérables.” Here, on the other hand, there is perhaps the nearest approach to literary restraint that Hugo has ever made: there is here certainly the ripest and most easy development of his powers. It is the moral intention of this great novel to awaken us a little, if it may be — for such awakenings are unpleasant — to the great cost of the society that we enjoy and profit by, to the labour and sweat of those who support the litter, civilisation, in which we ourselves are so smoothly carried forward. People are all glad to shut their eyes; and it gives them a very simple pleasure when they can forget that our laws commit a million individual injustices, to be once roughly just in the general; that the bread that we eat, and the quiet of the family, and all that embellishes life and makes it worth having, have to be purchased by death — by the deaths of animals, and the deaths of men wearied out with labour, and the deaths of those criminals called tyrants and revolutionaries, and the deaths of those revolutionaries called criminals. It is to something of all this that Victor Hugo wishes to open men’s eyes in “Les Misérables”; and this moral lesson is worked out in masterly coincidence with the artistic effect.

The deadly weight of civilisation to those who are below presses sensibly on our shoulders as we read. A sort of mocking indignation grows upon us as we find Society rejecting, again and again, the services of the most serviceable; setting Jean Valjean to pick oakum, casting Galileo into prison, even crucifying Christ. There is a haunting and horrible sense of insecurity about the book. The terror we thus feel is a terror for the machinery of law, that we can hear tearing, in the dark, good and bad, between its formidable wheels with the iron stolidity of all machinery, human or divine. This terror incarnates itself sometimes and leaps horribly out upon us; as when the crouching mendicant looks up, and Jean Valjean, in the light of the street lamp, recognises the face of the detective; as when the lantern of the patrol flashes suddenly through the darkness of the sewer; or as when the fugitive comes forth at last at evening, by the quiet riverside, and finds the police there also, waiting stolidly for vice and stolidly satisfied to take virtue instead. The whole book is full of oppression, and full of prejudice, which is the great cause of oppression. We have the prejudices of M. Gillenormand, the prejudices of Marius, the prejudices in revolt that defend the barricade, and the throned prejudices that carry it by storm. And then we have the admirable but ill-written character of Javert, the man who had made a religion of the police, and would not survive the moment when he learned that there was another truth outside the truth of laws; a just creation, over which the reader will do well to ponder.

With so gloomy a design this great work is still full of life and light and love. The portrait of the good Bishop is one of the most agreeable things in modern literature. The whole scene at Montfermeil is full of the charm that Hugo knows so well how to throw about children. Who can forget the passage where Cosette, sent out at night to draw water, stands in admiration before the illuminated booth, and the huckster behind “lui faisait un peu l’effet d’être le Père éternel”? The pathos of the forlorn sabot laid trustingly by the chimney in expectation of the Santa Claus that was not, takes us fairly by the throat; there is nothing in Shakespeare that touches the heart more nearly. The loves of Cosette and Marius are very pure and pleasant, and we cannot refuse our affection to Gavroche, although we may make a mental reservation of our profound disbelief in his existence. Take it for all in all, there are few books in the world that can be compared with it. There is as much calm and serenity as Hugo has ever attained to; the melodramatic coarsenesses that disfigured “Notre Dame” are no longer present. There is certainly much that is painfully improbable; and again, the story itself is a little too well constructed; it produces on us the effect of a puzzle, and we grow incredulous as we find that every character fits again and again into the plot, and is, like the child's cube, serviceable on six faces; things are not so well arranged in life as all that comes to. Some of the digressions, also, seem out of place, and do nothing but interrupt and irritate. But when all is said, the book remains of masterly conception and of masterly development, full of pathos, full of truth, full of a high eloquence.

Superstition and social exigency having been thus dealt with in the first two members of the series, it remained for "Les Travailleurs de la Mer" to show man hand to hand with the elements, the last form of external force that is brought against him. And here once more the artistic effect and the moral lesson are worked out together, and are, indeed, one. Gilliat, alone upon the reef at his herculean task, offers a type of human industry in the midst of the vague "diffusion of forces into the illimitable," and the visionary development of "wasted labour" in the sea, and the winds, and the clouds. No character was ever thrown into such strange relief as Gilliat. The great circle of sea-birds that come wonderingly around him on the night of his arrival, strikes at once the note of his pre-eminence and isolation. He fills the whole reef with his indefatigable toil; this solitary spot in the ocean rings with the clamour of his anvil; we see him as he comes and goes, thrown out sharply against the clear background of the sea. And yet his isolation is not to be compared with the isolation of Robinson Crusoe, for example; indeed, no two books could be more instructive to set side by side than "Les Travailleurs" and this other of the old days before art had learnt to occupy itself with what lies outside of human will. Crusoe was one sole centre of interest in the midst of a nature utterly dead and utterly unrealised by the artist; but this is not how we feel with Gilliat; we feel that he is opposed by a "dark coalition of forces," that an "immense animosity" surrounds him; we are the witnesses of the terrible warfare that he wages with "the silent inclemency of phenomena going their own way, and the great general law, implacable and passive": "a conspiracy of the indifferency of things" is against him. There is not one interest on the reef, but two. Just as we recognise Gilliat for the hero, we recognise, as implied by this indifferency of things, this direction of forces to some purpose outside our purposes, yet another character who may almost take rank as the villain of the novel, and the two face up to one another blow for blow, feint for feint, until, in the storm, they fight it epically out, and Gilliat remains the victor; — a victor, however, who has still to encounter the octopus. I need say nothing of the gruesome, repulsive excellence of that famous scene; it will be enough to remind the reader that Gilliat is in pursuit of a crab when he is himself assaulted by the devil fish, and that this, in its way, is the last touch to the inner significance of the book; here, indeed, is the true position of man in the universe.

But in “Les Travailleurs,” with all its strength, with all its eloquence, with all the beauty and fitness of its main situations, we cannot conceal from ourselves that there is a thread of something that will not bear calm scrutiny. There is much that is disquieting about the storm, admirably as it begins. I am very doubtful whether it would be possible to keep the boat from foundering in such circumstances, by any amount of breakwater and broken rock. I do not understand the way in which the waves are spoken of, and prefer just to take it as a loose way of speaking, and pass on. And lastly, how does it happen that the sea was quite calm next day? Is this great hurricane a piece of scene-painting after all? And when we have forgiven Gilliat’s prodigies of strength (although, in soberness, he reminds us more of Porthos in the “Vicomte de Bragelonne” than is quite desirable), what is to be said to his suicide, and how are we to condemn in adequate terms that unprincipled avidity after effect, which tells us that the sloop disappeared over the horizon, and the head under the water, at one and the same moment? Monsieur Hugo may say what he will, but we know better; we know very well that they did not; a thing like that raises up a despairing spirit of opposition in a man’s readers; they give him the lie fiercely as they read. Lastly, we have here already some beginning of that curious series of English blunders, that makes us wonder if there are neither proof-sheets nor judicious friends in the whole of France, and affects us sometimes with a sickening uneasiness as to what may be our own exploits when we touch upon foreign countries and foreign tongues. It is here that we shall find the famous “first of the fourth,” and many English words that may be comprehensible perhaps in Paris. It is here that we learn that “laird” in Scotland is the same title as “lord” in England. Here, also, is an account of a Highland soldier’s equipment, which we recommend to the lovers of genuine fun.

In “L’Homme qui Rit,” it was Hugo’s object to “denounce” (as he would say himself) the aristocratic principle as it was exhibited in England; and this purpose, somewhat more unmitigatedly satiric than that of the two last, must answer for much that is unpleasant in the book. The repulsiveness of the scheme of the story, and the manner in which it is bound up with impossibilities and absurdities, discourage the reader at the outset, and it needs an effort to take it as seriously as it deserves. And yet when we judge it deliberately, it will be seen that, here again, the story is admirably adapted to the moral. The constructive ingenuity exhibited throughout is almost morbid. Nothing could be more happily imagined, as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the aristocratic principle, than the adventures of Gwynplaine, the itinerant mountebank, snatched suddenly out of his little way of life, and installed without preparation as one of the hereditary legislators of a great country. It is with a very bitter irony that the paper, on which all this depends, is left to float for years at the will of wind and tide. What, again, can be finer in conception than that voice from the people heard suddenly in the House of Lords, in solemn arraignment of the pleasures and privileges of its splendid occupants? The horrible laughter, stamped for ever “by order of the king” upon the face of this strange spokesman of democracy, adds yet another feature of justice to the scene; in all time, travesty has been the argument of oppression; and, in all time, the oppressed might have made this answer: “If I am vile, is it not your system that has made me so?” This ghastly laughter gives occasion, moreover, for the one strain of tenderness running through the web of this unpleasant story: the love of the blind girl Dea, for the monster. It is a most benignant providence that thus harmoniously brings together these two misfortunes; it is one of those compensations, one of those after-thoughts of a relenting destiny, that reconcile us from time to time to the evil that is in the world; the atmosphere of the book is purified by the presence of this pathetic love; it seems to be above the story somehow, and not of it, as the full moon over the night of some foul and feverish city.

There is here a quality in the narration more intimate and particular than is general with Hugo; but it must be owned, on the other hand, that the book is wordy, and even, now and then, a little wearisome. Ursus and his wolf are pleasant enough companions; but the former is nearly as much an abstract type as the latter. There is a beginning, also, of an abuse of conventional conversation, such as may be quite pardonable in the drama where needs must, but is without excuse in the romance. Lastly, I suppose one must say a word or two about the weak points of this not immaculate novel; and if so, it will be best to distinguish at once. The large family of English blunders, to which we have alluded already in speaking of “Les Travailleurs,” are of a sort that is really indifferent in art. If Shakespeare makes his ships cast anchor by some seaport of Bohemia, if Hugo imagines Tom-Jim-Jack to be a likely nickname for an English sailor, or if either Shakespeare, or Hugo, or Scott, for that matter, be guilty of “figments enough to confuse the march of a whole history — anachronisms enough to overset all chronology,” the life of their creations, the artistic truth and accuracy of their work, is not so much as compromised. But when we come upon a passage like the sinking of the *Ourque* in this romance, we can do nothing but cover our face with our hands: the conscientious reader feels a sort of disgrace in the very reading. For such artistic falsehoods, springing from what I have called already an unprincipled avidity after effect, no amount of blame can be exaggerated; and above all, when the criminal is such a man as Victor Hugo. We cannot forgive in him what we might have passed over in a third-rate sensation novelist. Little as he seems to know of the sea and nautical affairs, he must have known very well that vessels do not go down as he makes the *Ourque* go down; he must have known that such a liberty with fact was against the laws of the game, and incompatible with all appearance of sincerity in conception or workmanship.

In each of these books, one after another, there has been some departure from the traditional canons of romance; but taking each separately, one would have feared to make too much of these departures, or to found any theory upon what was perhaps purely accidental. The appearance of “Quatrevingt-treize” has put us out of the region of such doubt. Like a doctor who has long been hesitating how to classify an epidemic malady, we have come at last upon a case so well marked that our uncertainty is at an end. It is a novel built upon “a sort of enigma,” which was at that date laid before revolutionary France, and which is presented by Hugo to Tellmarch, to Lantenac, to Gauvain, and very terribly to Cimourdain, each of whom gives his own solution of the question, clement or stern, according to the temper of his spirit. That enigma was this: “Can a good action be a bad action? Does not he who spares the wolf kill the sheep?” This question, as I say, meets with one answer after another during the course of the book, and yet seems to remain undecided to the end. And something in the same way, although one character, or one set of characters, after another comes to the front and occupies our attention for the moment, we never identify our interest with any of these temporary heroes nor regret them after they are withdrawn. We soon come to regard them somewhat as special cases of a general law; what we really care for is something that they only imply and body forth to us. We know how history continues through century after century; how this king or that patriot disappears from its pages with his whole generation, and yet we do not cease to read, nor do we even feel as if we had reached any legitimate conclusion, because our interest is not in the men, but in the country that they loved or hated, benefited or injured. And so it is here: Gauvain and Cimourdain pass away, and we regard them no more than the lost armies of which we find the cold statistics in military annals; what we regard is what remains behind; it is the principle that put these men where they were, that filled them for a while with heroic inspiration, and has the power, now that they are fallen, to inspire others with the same courage. The interest of the novel centres about revolutionary France: just as the plot is an abstract judicial difficulty, the hero is an abstract historical force. And this has been done, not, as it would have been before, by the cold and cumbersome machinery of allegory, but with bold, straightforward realism, dealing only with the objective materials of art, and dealing with them so masterfully that the palest abstractions of thought come before us, and move our hopes and fears, as if they were the young men and maidens of customary romance.

The episode of the mother and children in “Quatrevingt-treize” is equal to anything that Hugo has ever written. There is one chapter in the second volume, for instance, called “*Sein guéri, cœur saignant*,” that is full of the very stuff of true tragedy, and nothing could be more delightful than the humours of the three children on the day before the assault. The passage on La Vendée is really great, and the scenes in Paris have much of the same broad merit. The book is full, as usual, of pregnant and splendid sayings. But when thus much is conceded by way of praise, we come to the other scale of the balance, and find this, also, somewhat heavy. There is here a yet greater over-employment of conventional dialogue than in “L’Homme qui Rit”; and much that should have been said by the author himself, if it were to be said at all, he has most unwarrantably put into the mouths of one or other of his characters. We should like to know what becomes of the main body of the troop in the wood of La Saudraie during the thirty pages or so in which the foreguard lays aside all discipline, and stops to gossip over a woman and some children. We have an unpleasant idea forced upon us at one place, in spite of all the good-natured incredulity that we can summon up to resist it. Is it possible that Monsieur Hugo thinks they ceased to steer the corvette while the gun was loose? Of the chapter in which Lantenac and Halmalho are alone together in the boat, the less said the better; of course, if there were nothing else, they would have been swamped thirty times over during the course of Lantenac's harangue. Again, after Lantenac has landed, we have scenes of almost inimitable workmanship that suggest the epithet "statuesque" by their clear and trenchant outline; but the tocsin scene will not do, and the tocsin unfortunately pervades the whole passage, ringing continually in our ears with a taunting accusation of falsehood. And then, when we come to the place where Lantenac meets the royalists, under the idea that he is going to meet the republicans, it seems as if there were a hitch in the stage mechanism. I have tried it over in every way, and I cannot conceive any disposition that would make the scene possible as narrated.

Such then, with their faults and their signal excellences, are the five great novels.

Romance is a language in which many persons learn to speak with a certain appearance of fluency; but there are few who can ever bend it to any practical need, few who can ever be said to express themselves in it. It has become abundantly plain in the foregoing examination that Victor Hugo occupies a high place among those few. He has always a perfect command over his stories; and we see that they are constructed with a high regard to some ulterior purpose, and that every situation is informed with moral significance and grandeur. Of no other man can the same thing be said in the same degree. His romances are not to be confused with "the novel with a purpose" as familiar to the English reader: this is generally the model of incompetence; and we see the moral clumsily forced into every hole and corner of the story, or thrown externally over it like a carpet over a railing. Now the moral significance, with Hugo, is of the essence of the romance; it is the organising principle. If you could somehow despoil "Les Misérables" or "Les Travailleurs" of their distinctive lesson, you would find that the story had lost its interest and the book was dead.

Having thus learned to subordinate his story to an idea, to make his art speak, he went on to teach it to say things heretofore unaccustomed. If you look back at the five books of which we have now so hastily spoken, you will be astonished at the freedom with which the original purposes of story-telling have been laid aside and passed by. Where are now the two lovers who descended the main watershed of all the Waverley Novels, and all the novels that have tried to follow in their wake? Sometimes they are almost lost sight of before the solemn isolation of a man against the sea and sky, as in “Les Travailleurs”; sometimes, as in “Les Misérables,” they merely figure for awhile, as a beautiful episode in the epic of oppression; sometimes they are entirely absent, as in “Quatrevingt-treize.” There is no hero in “Notre Dame”: in “Les Misérables” it is an old man: in “L’Homme qui Rit” it is a monster: in “Quatrevingt-treize” it is the Revolution. Those elements that only began to show themselves timidly, as adjuncts, in the novels of Walter Scott, have usurped ever more and more of the canvas; until we find the whole interest of one of Hugo’s romances centring around matter that Fielding would have banished from his altogether, as being out of the field of fiction. So we have elemental forces occupying nearly as large a place, playing (so to speak) nearly as important a *rôle*, as the man, Gilliat, who opposes and overcomes them. So we find the fortunes of a nation put upon the stage with as much vividness as ever before the fortunes of a village maiden or a lost heir; and the forces that oppose and corrupt a principle holding the attention quite as strongly as the wicked barons or dishonest attorneys of the past. Hence those individual interests that were supreme in Fielding, and even in Scott stood out over everything else, and formed as it were the spine of the story, figure here only as one set of interests among many sets, one force among many forces, one thing to be treated out of a whole world of things equally vivid and important. So that, for Hugo, man is no longer an isolated spirit without antecedent or relation here below, but a being involved in the action and reaction of natural forces, himself a centre of such action and reaction; or an unit in a great multitude, chased hither and thither by epidemic terrors and aspirations, and, in all seriousness, blown about by every wind of doctrine. This is a long way that we have travelled: between such work and the work of Fielding is there not, indeed, a great gulf of thought and sentiment?

Art, thus conceived, realises for men a larger portion of life, and that portion one that it is more difficult for them to realise unaided; and, besides helping them to feel more intensely those restricted personal interests which are patent to all, it awakes in them some consciousness of those more general relations that are so strangely invisible to the average man in ordinary moods. It helps to keep man in his place in nature, and, above all, it helps him to understand more intelligently the responsibilities of his place in society. And in all this generalisation of interest, we never miss those small humanities that are at the opposite pole of excellence in art; and while we admire the intellect that could see life thus largely, we are touched with another sentiment for the tender heart that slipped the piece of gold into Cosette's sabot, that was virginally troubled at the fluttering of her dress in the spring wind, or put the blind girl beside the deformity of the laughing man. This, then, is the last praise that we can award to these romances. The author has shown a power of just subordination hitherto unequalled; and as, in reaching forward to one class of effects, he has not been forgetful or careless of the other, his work is more nearly complete work, and his art, with all its imperfections, deals more comprehensively with the materials of life, than that of any of his otherwise more sure and masterly predecessors.

These five books would have made a very great fame for any writer, and yet they are but one façade of the monument that Victor Hugo has erected to his genius. Everywhere we find somewhat the same greatness, somewhat the same infirmities. In his poems and plays there are the same unaccountable protervities that have already astonished us in the romances. There, too, is the same feverish strength, welding the fiery iron of his idea under forge-hammer repetitions — an emphasis that is somehow akin to weakness — a strength that is a little epileptic. He stands so far above all his contemporaries, and so incomparably excels them in richness, breadth, variety, and moral earnestness, that we almost feel as if he had a sort of right to fall oftener and more heavily than others; but this does not reconcile us to seeing him profit by the privilege so freely. We like to have, in our great men, something that is above question; we like to place an implicit faith in them, and see them always on the platform of their greatness; and this, unhappily, cannot be with Hugo. As Heine said long ago, his is a genius somewhat deformed; but, deformed as it is, we accept it gladly; we shall have the wisdom to see where his foot slips, but we shall have the justice also to recognise in him one of the greatest artists of our generation, and, in many ways, one of the greatest artists of time. If we look back, yet once, upon these five romances, we see blemishes such as we can lay to the charge of no other man in the number of the famous; but to what other man can we attribute such sweeping innovations, such a new and significant presentment of the life of man, such an amount, if we merely think of the amount, of equally consummate performance?

Prefatory letter to “Peveril of the Peak.”

TO VICTOR HUGO by Alfred Tennyson

This poem was first published in the magazine *Littell's Living Age*, 1878.

To Victor Hugo

Victor in poesy, Victor in romance,
Cloud-weaver of phantasmal hopes and fears,
French of the French, and lord of human tears;
Child-lover; bard whose fame-lit laurels glance
Darkening the wreaths of all that would advance,
Beyond our strait, their claim to be thy peers;
Weird Titan by thy winter weight of years
As yet unbroken, stormy voice of France!
Who dost not love our England — so they say;
I know not — England, France, all man to be
Will make one people ere man's race be run:
And I, desiring that diviner day,
Yield thee full thanks for thy full courtesy
To younger England in the boy my son.

The Biographies

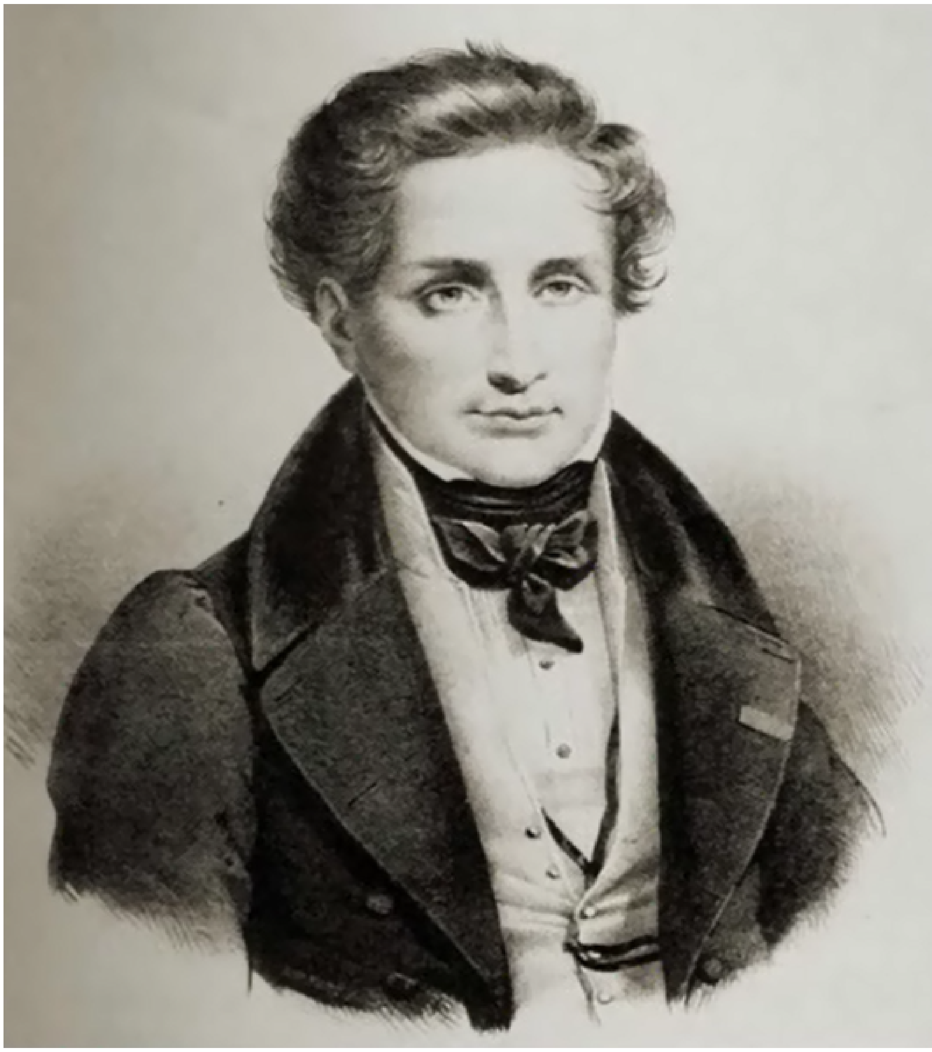

Hugo, aged 23

THE MEMOIRS OF VICTOR HUGO

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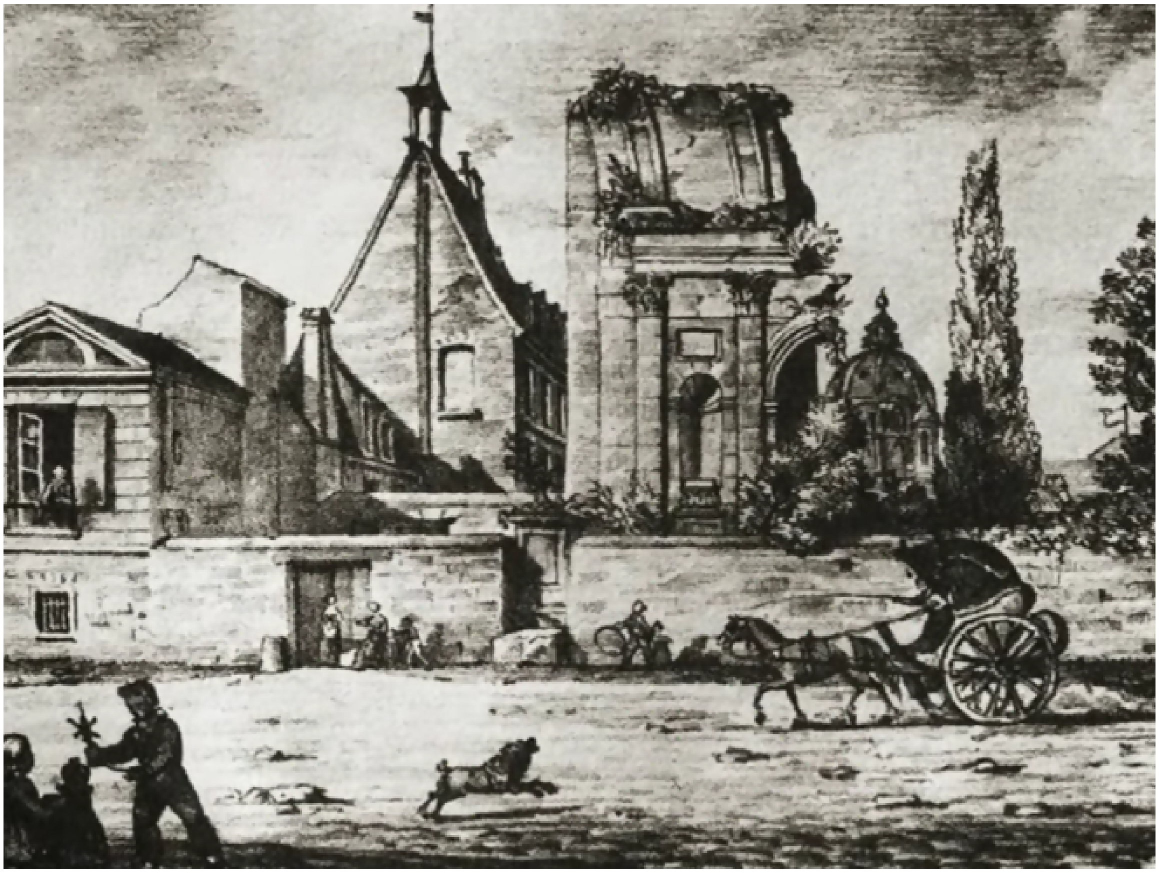

Les Feuillantines, Hugo’s childhood home, situated by the ruins of a convent

PREFACE.

This volume of memoirs has a double character — historical and intimate. The life of a period, the XIX Century, is bound up in the life of a man, VICTOR HUGO. As we follow the events set forth we get the impression they made upon the mind of the extraordinary man who recounts them; and of all the personages he brings before us he himself is assuredly not the least interesting. In portraits from the brushes of Rembrandts there are always two portraits, that of the model and that of the painter.

This is not a diary of events arranged in chronological order, nor is it a continuous autobiography. It is less and it is more, or rather, it is better than these. It is a sort of haphazard *chronique* in which only striking incidents and occurrences are brought out, and lengthy and wearisome details are avoided. VICTOR HUGO'S long and chequered life was filled with experiences of the most diverse character — literature and politics, the court and the street, parliament and the theatre, labour, struggles, disappointments, exile and triumphs. Hence we get a series of pictures of infinite variety.

Let us pass the gallery rapidly in review.

It opens in 1825, at Rheims, during the coronation of CHARLES X, with an amusing *causerie* on the manners and customs of the Restoration. The splendour of this coronation ceremony was singularly spoiled by the pitiable taste of those who had charge of it. These worthies took upon themselves to mutilate the sculpture work on the marvellous façade and to "embellish" the austere cathedral with Gothic decorations of cardboard. The century, like the author, was young, and in some things both were incredibly ignorant; the masterpieces of literature were then unknown to the most learned *littérateurs*: CHARLES NODIER had never read the "Romancero", and VICTOR HUGO knew little or nothing about Shakespeare.

At the outset the poet dominates in VICTOR HUGO; he belongs wholly to his creative imagination and to his literary work. It is the theatre; it is his "Cid", and "Hernani", with its stormy performances; it is the group of his actors, Mlle. MARS, Mlle. GEORGES, FREDERICK LEMAITRE, the French KEAN, with more genius; it is the Academy, with its different kind of coteries.

About this time VICTOR HUGO questions, anxiously and not in vain, a passer-by who witnessed the execution of LOUIS XVI, and an officer who escorted Napoleon to Paris on his return from the Island of Elba.

Next, under the title, “Visions of the Real”, come some sketches in the master’s best style, of things seen “in the mind’s eye,” as Hamlet says. Among them “The Hovel” will attract attention. This sketch resembles a page from EDGAR POE, although it was written long before POE’s works were introduced into France.

With “Love in Prison” VICTOR HUGO deals with social questions, in which he was more interested than in political questions. And yet, in entering the Chamber of Peers he enters public life. His sphere is enlarged, he becomes one of the familiars of the Tuileries. LOUIS PHILIPPE, verbose and full of recollections that he is fond of imparting to others, seeks the company and appreciation of this listener of note, and makes all sorts of confidences to him. The King with his very haughty bonhomie and his somewhat infatuated wisdom; the grave and sweet DUCHESS D’ORLEANS, the boisterous and amiable princes — the whole commonplace and home-like court — are depicted with kindliness but sincerity.

The horizon, however, grows dark, and from 1846 the new peer of France notes the gradual tottering of the edifice of royalty. The revolution of 1848 bursts out. Nothing could be more thrilling than the account, hour by hour, of the events of the three days of February. VICTOR HUGO is not merely a spectator of this great drama, he is an actor in it. He is in the streets, he makes speeches to the people, he seeks to restrain them; he believes, with too good reason, that the Republic is premature, and, in the Place de la Bastille, before the evolutionary Faubourg Saint Antoine, he dares to proclaim the Regency.

Four months later distress provokes the formidable insurrection of June, which is fatal to the Republic.

The year 1848 is the stormy year. The atmosphere is fiery, men are violent, events are tragical. Battles in the streets are followed by fierce debates in the Assembly. VICTOR HUGO takes part in the mêlée. We witness the scenes with him; he points out the chief actors to us. His “Sketches” made in the National Assembly are “sketched from life” in the fullest acceptation of the term. Twenty lines suffice. ODILON BARROT and CHANGARNIER, PRUDHON and BLANQUI, LAMARTINE and "Monsieur THIERS" come, go, speak — veritable living figures.

The most curious of the figures is LOUIS BONAPARTE when he arrived in Paris and when he assumed the Presidency of the Republic. He is gauche, affected, somewhat ridiculous, distrusted by the Republicans, and scoffed at by the Royalists. Nothing could be more suggestive or more piquant than the inauguration dinner at the Elysee, at which VICTOR HUGO was one of the guests, and the first and courteous relations between the author of "Napoleon the Little" and the future Emperor who was to inflict twenty years of exile upon him.

But now we come to the year which VICTOR HUGO has designated "The Terrible Year," the war, and the siege of Paris. This part of the volume is made up of extracts from note-books, private and personal notes, dotted down from day to day. Which is to say that they do not constitute an account of the oft-related episodes of the siege, but tell something new, the little side of great events, the little incidents of everyday life, the number of shells fired into the city and what they cost, the degrees of cold, the price of provisions, what is being said, sung, and eaten, and at the same time give the psychology of the great city, its illusions, revolts, wrath, anguish, and also its gaiety; for during these long months Paris never gave up hope and preserved an heroic cheerfulness.

On the other hand a painful note runs through the diary kept during the meeting of the Assembly at Bordeaux. France is not only vanquished, she is mutilated. The conqueror demands a ransom of milliards — it is his right, the right of the strongest; but he tears from her two provinces, with their inhabitants devoted to France; it is a return towards barbarism. VICTOR HUGO withdraws indignantly from the Assembly which has agreed to endorse the Treaty of Frankfort. And three days after his resignation he sees CHARLES HUGO, his eldest son, die a victim to the privations of the siege. He is stricken at once in his love of country and in his paternal love, and one can say that in these painful pages, more than in any of the others, the book is history that has been lived.

PAUL MAURICE.
Paris, Sept. 15, 1899.

AT RHEIMS. 1823-1838.

It was at Rheims that I heard the name of Shakespeare for the first time. It was pronounced by Charles Nodier. That was in 1825, during the coronation of Charles X.

No one at that time spoke of Shakespeare quite seriously. Voltaire’s ridicule of him was law. Mme. de Staël had adopted Germany, the great land of Kant, of Schiller, and of Beethoven. Ducis was at the height of his triumph; he and Delille were seated side by side in academic glory, which is not unlike theatrical glory. Ducis had succeeded in doing something with Shakespeare; he had made him possible; he had extracted some “tragedies” from him; Ducis impressed one as being a man who could chisel an Apollo out of Moloch. It was the time when Iago was called Pezare; Horatio, Norceste; and Desdemona, Hedelmone. A charming and very witty woman, the Duchess de Duras, used to say: “Desdemona, what an ugly name! Fie!” Talma, Prince of Denmark, in a tunic of lilac satin trimmed with fur, used to exclaim: “Avaunt! Dread spectre!” The poor spectre, in fact, was only tolerated behind the scenes. If it had ventured to put in the slightest appearance M. Evariste Dumoulin would have given it a severe talking to. Some Génin or other would have hurled at it the first cobble-stone he could lay his hand on — a line from Boileau: *L’esprit n’est point ému de ce qu’il ne croit pas*. It was replaced on the stage by an “urn” that Talma carried under his arm. A spectre is ridiculous; “ashes,” that’s the style! Are not the “ashes” of Napoleon still spoken of? Is not the translation of the coffin from St. Helena to the Invalides alluded to as “the return of the ashes”? As to the witches of Macbeth, they were rigorously barred. The hall-porter of the Théâtre-Français had his orders. They would have been received with their own brooms.

I am mistaken, however, in saying that I did not know Shakespeare. I knew him as everybody else did, not having read him, and having treated him with ridicule. My childhood began, as everybody’s childhood begins, with prejudices. Man finds prejudices beside his cradle, puts them from him a little in the course of his career, and often, alas! takes to them again in his old age.

During this journey in 1825 Charles Nodier and I passed our time recounting to each other the Gothic tales and romances that have taken root in Rheims. Our memories and sometimes our imaginations, clubbed together. Each of us furnished his legend. Rheims is one of the most impossible towns in the geography of story. Pagan lords have lived there, one of whom gave as a dower to his daughter the strips of land in Borysthenes called the “race-courses of Achilles.” The Duke de Guyenne, in the fabliaux, passes through Rheims on his way to besiege Babylon; Babylon, moreover, which is very worthy of Rheims, is the capital of the Admiral Gaudissius. It is at Rheims that the deputation sent by the Locri Ozolae to Apollonius of Tyana, “high priest of Bellona,” “disembarks.” While discussing this disembarkation we argued concerning the Locri Ozolae. These people, according to Nodier, were called the Fetidae because they were half monkeys; according to myself, because they inhabited the marshes of Phocis. We reconstructed on the spot the tradition of St. Remigius and his adventures with the fairy Mazelane. The Champagne country is rich in tales. Nearly all the old Gaulish fables had their origin in this province. Rheims is the land of chimeras. It is perhaps for this reason that kings were crowned there.

Legends are so natural to this place, are in such good soil, that they immediately began to germinate upon the coronation of Charles X. itself. The Duke of Northumberland, the representative of England at the coronation ceremonies, was reputed fabulously wealthy. Wealthy and English, how could he be otherwise than *a la mode*? The English, at that period, were very popular in French society, although not among the people. They were liked in certain salons because of Waterloo, which was still fairly recent, and to Anglicize the French language was a recommendation in ultra-fashionable society. Lord Northumberland, therefore, long before his arrival, was popular and legendary in Rheims. A coronation was a godsend to Rheims. A flood of opulent people inundated the city. It was the Nile that was passing. Landlords rubbed their hands with glee.

There was in Rheims in those days, and there probably is to-day, at the corner of a street giving on to the square, a rather large house with a carriage-entrance and a balcony, built of stone in the royal style of Louis XIV., and facing the cathedral. About this house and Lord Northumberland the following was related:

In January, 1825, the balcony of the house bore the notice: “House for Sale.” All at once the “Moniteur” announced that the coronation of Charles X. would take place at Rheims in the spring. There was great rejoicing in the city. Notices of rooms to let were immediately hung out everywhere. The meanest room was to bring in at least sixty francs a day. One morning a man of irreproachable appearance, dressed in black, with a white cravat, an Englishman who spoke broken French, presented himself at the house in the square. He saw the proprietor, who eyed him attentively.

“You wish to sell your house?” queried the Englishman.

“How much?”

“Ten thousand francs.”

“But I don’t want to buy it.”

“What do you want, then?”

“Only to hire it.”

“That’s different. For a year?”

“For six months?”

“No. I want to hire it for three days.”

“How much will you charge?”

“Thirty thousand francs.”

The gentleman was Lord Northumberland’s steward, who was looking for a lodging for his master for the coronation ceremonies. The proprietor had smelled the Englishman and guessed the steward. The house was satisfactory, and the proprietor held out for his price; the Englishman, being only a Norman, gave way to the Champenois; the duke paid the 30,000 francs, and spent three days in the house, at the rate of 400 francs an hour.

Nodier and I were two explorers. When we travelled together, as we occasionally did, we went on voyages of discovery, he in search of rare books, I in search of ruins. He would go into ecstasies over a *Cymbalum Mound* with margins, and I over a defaced portal. We had given each other a devil. He said to me: “You are possessed of the demon Ogive.” “And you,” I answered, “of the demon Elzevir.”

At Soissons, while I was exploring Saint Jean-des-Vignes, he had discovered, in a suburb, a ragpicker. The ragpicker’s basket is the hyphen between rags and paper, and the ragpicker is the hyphen between the beggar and the philosopher. Nodier who gave to the poor, and sometimes to philosophers, had entered the ragpicker’s abode. The ragpicker turned out to be a book dealer. Among the books Nodier noticed a rather thick volume of six or eight hundred pages, printed in Spanish, two columns to a page, badly damaged by worms, and the binding missing from the back. The ragpicker, asked what he wanted for it, replied, trembling lest the price should be refused: “Five francs,” which Nodier paid, also trembling, but with joy. This book was the *Romancero* complete. There are only three complete copies of this edition now in existence. One of these a few years ago sold for 7,500 francs. Moreover, worms are vying with each other in eating up these three remaining copies. The peoples, feeders of princes, have something else to do than spend their money to preserve for new editions the legacies of human intellect, and the *Romancero*, being merely an Iliad, has not been reprinted.

During the three days of the coronation there were great crowds in the streets of Rheims, at the Archbishop’s palace, and on the promenades along the Vesdre, eager to catch a glimpse of Charles X. I said to Charles Nodier: “Let us go and see his majesty the cathedral.”

Rheims is a proverb in Gothic Christian art. One speaks of the “nave of Amiens, the bell towers of Chartres, the façade of Rheims.” A month before the coronation of Charles X a swarm of masons, perched on ladders and clinging to knotted ropes, spent a week smashing with hammers every bit of jutting sculpture on the façade, for fear a stone might become detached from one of these reliefs and fall on the King’s head. The debris littered the pavement and was swept away. For a long time I had in my possession a head of Christ that fell in this way. It was stolen from me in 1851. This head was unfortunate; broken by a king, it was lost by an exile.

Nodier was an admirable antiquary, and we explored the cathedral from top to bottom, encumbered though it was with scaffolding, painted scenery, and stage side lights. The nave being only of stone, they had hidden it by an edifice of cardboard, doubtless because the latter bore a greater resemblance to the monarchy of that period. For the coronation of the King of France they had transformed a church into a theatres and it has since been related, with perfect accuracy, that on arriving at the entrance I asked of the bodyguard on duty: “Where is my box?”

This cathedral of Rheims is beautiful above all cathedrals. On the façade are kings; on the absis, people being put to the torture by executioners. Coronation of kings with an accompaniment of victims. The façade is one of the most magnificent symphonies ever sung by that music, architecture. One dreams for a long time before this oratorio. Looking up from the square you see at a giddy height, at the base of the two towers, a row of gigantic statues representing kings of France. In their hands they hold the sceptre, the sword, the hand of justice, and the globe, and on their heads are antique open crowns with bulging gems. It is superb and grim. You push open the bell-ringer’s door, climb the winding staircase, “the screw of St. Giles,” to the towers, to the high regions of prayer; you look down and the statues are below you. The row of kings is plunging into the abysm. You hear the whispering of the enormous bells, which vibrate at the kiss of vague zephyrs from the sky.

One day I gazed down from the top of the tower through an embrasure. The entire façade sheered straight below me. I perceived in the depth, on top of a long stone support that extended down the wall directly beneath me to the escarpment, so that its form was lost, a sort of round basin. Rain-water had collected there and formed a narrow mirror at the bottom; there were also a tuft of grass with flowers in it, and a swallow’s nest. Thus in a space only two feet in diameter were a lake, a garden and a habitation — a birds’ paradise. As I gazed the swallow was giving water to her brood. Round the upper edge of the basin were what looked like crenelles, and between these the swallow had built her nest. I examined these crenelles. They had the form of fleurs-de-lys. The support was a statue. This happy little world was the stone crown of an old king. And if God were asked: “Of what use was this Lothario, this Philip, this Charles, this Louis, this emperor, this king?” God peradventure would reply: “He had this statue made and lodged a swallow.”

The coronation occurred. This is not the place to describe it. Besides my recollections of the ceremony of May 27, 1825, have been recounted elsewhere by another, more ably than I could set them forth.

Suffice it to say that it was a radiant day. God seemed to have given his assent to the fête. The long clear windows — for there are no more stained-glass windows at Rheims — let in bright daylight; all the light of May was in the church. The Archbishop was covered with gilding and the altar with rays. Marshal de Lauriston, Minister of the King’s Household, rejoiced at the sunshine. He came and went, as busy as could be, and conversed in low tones with Lecointe and Hittorf, the architects. The fine morning afforded the occasion to say, “the sun of the coronation,” as one used to say “the sun of Austerlitz.” And in the resplendent light a profusion of lamps and tapers found means to beam.

At one moment Charles X., attired in a cherry-coloured simar striped with gold, lay at full length at the Archbishop’s feet. The peers of France on the right, embroidered with gold, beplumed in the Henri IV. style, and wearing long mantles of velvet and ermine, and the Deputies on the left, in dress-coats of blue cloth with silver fleurs-de-lys on the collars, looked on.

About all the forms of chance were represented there: the Papal benediction by the cardinals, some of whom had witnessed the coronation of Napoleon; victory by the marshals; heredity by the Duke d'Angoulême, dauphin; happiness by M. de Talleyrand, lame but able to get about; the rising and falling of stocks by M. de Villèle; joy by the birds that were released and flew away, and the knaves in a pack of playing-cards by the four heralds.

A vast carpet embroidered with fleurs-de-lys, made expressly for the occasion, and called the "coronation carpet," covered the old flagstones from one end of the cathedral to the other and concealed the tombstones in the pavement. Thick, luminous smoke of incense filled the nave. The birds that had been set at liberty flew wildly about in this cloud.

The King changed his costume six or seven times. The first prince of the blood, Louis Philippe, Duke d'Orleans, aided him. The Duke de Bordeaux, who was five years old, was in a gallery.

The pew in which Nodier and I were seated adjoined those of the Deputies. In the middle of the ceremony, just before the King prostrated himself at the feet of the Archbishop, a Deputy for the Doubs department, named M. Hémonin, turned towards Nodier, who was close to him, and with his finger on his lips, as a sign that he did not wish to disturb the Archbishop's orisons by speaking, slipped something into my friend's hand. This something was a book. Nodier took it and glanced over it.

"What is it?" I whispered.

"Nothing very precious," he replied. "An odd volume of Shakespeare, Glasgow edition."

One of the tapestries from the treasure of the church hanging exactly opposite to us represented a not very historical interview between John Lackland and Philip Augustus. Nodier turned over the leaves of the book for a few minutes, then pointed to the tapestry.

"You see that tapestry?"

"Yes."

"Do you know what it represents?"

"No."

"John Lackland."

"Well, what of it?"

“John Lackland is also in this book.”

The volume, which was in sheep binding and worn at the corners, was indeed a copy of *King John*.

M. Hémonin turned to Nodier and said: “I paid six sous for it.”

In the evening the Duke of Northumberland gave a ball. It was a magnificent, fairylike spectacle. This Arabian Nights ambassador brought one of these nights to Rheims. Every woman found a diamond in her bouquet.

I could not dance. Nodier had not danced since he was sixteen years of age, when a great aunt went into ecstasies over his terpsichorean efforts and congratulated him in the following terms: “*Tu est charmant, tu danses comme rim chou*!” We did not go to Lord Northumberland’s ball.

“What shall we do tonight?” said I to Nodier. He held up his odd volume and answered:

“Let us read this.”

We read.

That is to say, Nodier read. He knew English (without being able to speak it, I believe) enough to make it out. He read aloud, and translated as he read. At intervals, while he rested, I took the book bought from the ragpicker of Soissons, and read passages from the *Romancero*. Like Nodier, I translated as I read. We compared the English with the Castilian book; we confronted the dramatic with the epic. Nodier stood up for Shakespeare, whom he could read in English, and I for the *Romancero*, which I could read in Spanish. We brought face to face, he the bastard Faulconbridge, I the bastard Mudarra. And little by little in contradicting we convinced each other, and Nodier became filled with enthusiasm for the *Romancero*, and I with admiration for Shakespeare.

Listeners arrived. One passes the evening as best one can in a provincial town on a coronation day when one doesn’t go to the ball. We formed quite a little club. There was an academician, M. Roger; a man of letters, M. d’Eckstein; M. de Marcellus, friend and country neighbour of my father, who poked fun at his royalism and mine; good old Marquis d’Herbouville, and M. Hémonin, donor of the book that cost six sous.

“It isn’t worth the money!” exclaimed M. Roger.

The conversation developed into a debate. Judgment was passed upon *King John*. M. de Marcellus declared that the assassination of Arthur was an improbable incident. It was pointed out to him that it was a matter of history. It was with difficulty that he became reconciled to it. For kings to kill each other was impossible. To M. de Marcellus's mind the murdering of kings began on January 21. Regicide was synonymous with '93. To kill a king was an unheard-of thing that the "populace" alone were capable of doing. No king except Louis XVI. had ever been violently put to death. He, however, reluctantly admitted the case of Charles I. In his death also he saw the hand of the populace. All the rest was demagogic lying and calumny.

Although as good a royalist as he, I ventured to insinuate that the sixteenth century had existed, and that it was the period when the Jesuits had clearly propounded the question of "bleeding the basilic vein," that is to say of cases in which the king ought to be slain; a question which, once brought forward, met with such success that it resulted in two kings, Henry III. and Henry IV., being stabbed, and a Jesuit, Father Guignard, being hanged.

Then we passed to the details of the drama, situations, scenes, and personages. Nodier pointed out that Faulconbridge is the same person spoken of by Mathieu Paris as Falcasius de Trente, bastard of Richard Coeur de Lion. Baron d'Eckstein, in support of this, reminded his hearers that, according to Hollinshed, Faulconbridge, or Falcasius, slew the Viscount de Limoges to avenge his father Richard, who had been wounded unto death at the siege of Chaluz; and that this castle of Chaluz, being the property of the Viscount de Limoges, it was only right that the Viscount, although absent, should be made to answer with his head for the falling of an arrow or a stone from the castle upon the King. M. Roger laughed at the cry of "Austria Limoges" in the play and at Shakespeare's confounding the Viscount de Limoges with the Duke of Austria. M. Roger scored the success of the evening and his laughter settled the matter.

The discussion having taken this turn I said nothing further. This revelation of Shakespeare had moved me. His grandeur impressed me. *King John* is not a masterpiece, but certain scenes are lofty and powerful, and in the motherhood of Constance there are bursts of genius.

The two books, open and reversed, remained lying upon the table. The company had ceased to read in order to laugh. Nodier at length became silent like myself. We were beaten. The gathering broke up with a laugh, and our visitors went away. Nodier and I remained alone and pensive, thinking of the great works that are unappreciated, and amazed that the intellectual education of the civilized peoples, and even our own, his and mine, had advanced no further than this.

At last Nodier broke the silence. I can see his smile now as he said:

“They know nothing about the Romancero!”

I replied:

“And they deride Shakespeare!”

Thirteen years later chance took me to Rheims again.

It was on August 28, 1838. It will be seen further on why this date impressed itself on my memory.

I was returning from Vouziers, and seeing the two towers of Rheims in the distance, was seized with a desire to visit the cathedral again. I therefore went to Rheims.

On arriving in the cathedral square I saw a gun drawn up near the portal and beside it gunners with lighted fuses in their hands. As I had seen artillery there on May 27, 1825, I supposed it was customary to keep a cannon in the square, and paid little attention to it. I passed on and entered the church.

A beadle in violet sleeves, a sort of priest, took me in charge and conducted me all over the church. The stones were dark, the statues dismal, the altar mysterious. No lamps competed with the sun. The latter threw upon the sepulchral stones in the pavement the long white silhouettes of the windows, which through the melancholy obscurity of the rest of the church looked like phantoms lying upon these tombs. No one was in the church. Not a whisper, not a footfall could be heard.

This solitude saddened the heart and enraptured the soul. There were in it abandonment, neglect, oblivion, exile, and sublimity. Gone the whirl of 1825. The church had resumed its dignity and its calmness. Not a piece of finery, not a vestment, not anything. It was bare and beautiful. The lofty vault no longer supported a canopy. Ceremonies of the palace arc not suited to these severe places; a coronation ceremony is merely tolerated; these noble ruins are not made to be courtiers. To rid it of the throne and withdraw the king from the presence of God increases the majesty of a temple. Louis XIV. hides Jehovah from sight.

Withdraw the priest as well. All that eclipsed it having been taken away, you will see the light of day direct. Orisons, rites, bibles, formulas, refract and decompose the sacred light. A dogma is a dark chamber. Through a religion you see the solar spectre of God, but not God. Desuetude and crumbling enhance the grandeur of a temple. As human religion retires from this mysterious and jealous edifice, divine religion enters it. Let solitude reign in it and you will feel heaven there. A sanctuary deserted and in ruins, like Jumièges, like St. Bertin, like Villers, like Holyrood, like Montrose Abbey, like the temple of Paestum, like the hypogeum of Thebes, becomes almost an element, and possesses the virginal and religious grandeur of a savannah or of a forest. There something of the real Presence is to be found.

Such places are truly holy; man has meditated and communed with himself therein. What they contained of truth has remained and become greater. The *à-peu-prês* has no longer any voice. Extinct dogmas have not left their ashes; the prayer of the past has left its perfume. There is something of the absolute in prayer, and because of this, that which was a synagogue, that which was a mosque, that which was a pagoda, is venerable. A stone on which that great anxiety that is called prayer has left its impress is never treated with ridicule by the thinker. The trace left by those who have bowed down before the infinite is always imposing.

In strolling about the cathedral I had climbed to the triforium, then under the arched buttresses, then to the top of the edifice. The timber-work under the pointed roof is admirable; but less remarkable than the “forest” of Amiens. It is of chestnut-wood.

These cathedral attics are of grim appearance. One could almost lose one’s self in the labyrinths of rafters, squares, traverse beams, superposed joists, traves, architraves, girders, madriers, and tangled lines and curves. One might imagine one’s self to be in the skeleton of Babel. The place is as bare as a garret and as wild as a cavern. The wind whistles mournfully through it. Rats are at home there. The spiders, driven from the timber by the odour of chestnut, make their home in the stone of the basement where the church ends and the roof begins, and low down in the obscurity spin their webs in which you catch your face. One respires a mysterious dust, and the centuries seem to mingle with one’s breath. The dust of churches is not like the dust of houses; it reminds one of the tomb, it is composed of ashes.

The flooring of these colossal garrets has crevices in it through which one can look down into the abysm, the church, below. In the corners that one cannot explore are pools of shadow, as it were. Birds of prey enter through one window and go out through the other. Lightning is also familiar with these high, mysterious regions. Sometimes it ventures too near, and then it causes the conflagration of Rouen, of Chartres, or of St. Paul’s, London.

My guide the beadle preceded me. He looked at the dung on the floor, and tossed his head. He knew the bird by its manure, and growled between his teeth:

“This is a rook; this is a hawk; this is an owl.”

“You ought to study the human heart,” said I.

A frightened bat flew before us.

While walking almost at hazard, following this bat, looking at this manure of the birds, respiring this dust, in this obscurity among the cobwebs and scampering rats, we came to a dark corner in which, on a big wheelbarrow, I could just distinguish a long package tied with string and that looked like a piece of rolled up cloth.

“What is that?” I asked the beadle.

“That,” said he, “is Charles X.’s coronation carpet.”

I stood gazing at the thing, and as I did so — I am telling truthfully what occurred — there was a deafening report that sounded like a thunder-clap, only it came from below. It shook the timber-work and echoed and re-echoed through the church. It was succeeded by a second roar, then a third, at regular intervals. I recognised the thunder of the cannon, and remembered the gun I had seen in the square.

I turned to my guide:

“What is that noise?”

“The telegraph has been at work and the cannon has been fired.”

“What does it mean?” I continued.

“It means,” said the beadle, “that a grandson has just been born to Louis Philippe.”

The cannon announced the birth of the Count de Paris.

These are my recollections of Rheims.

RECOUNTED BY EYE-WITNESSES

I. THE EXECUTION OF LOUIS XVI.
II. THE ARRIVAL OF NAPOLEON I IN PARIS IN 1815.

I. THE EXECUTION OF LOUIS XVI.

There were certain characteristic details connected with the execution of Louis XVI. that are not recorded in history. They were recounted to me by an eye-witness* and are here published for the first time.

> * This eye witness was one Leboucher, who arrived in Paris from Bourges in December, 1792, and was present at the execution of Louis XVI. In 1840 he recounted to Victor Hugo most of these details which, as can easily be imagined, had impressed themselves deeply upon his mind.

The scaffold was not, as is generally believed, erected in the very centre of the Place, on the spot where the obelisk now stands, but on a spot which the decree of the Provisional Executive Council designates in these precise terms: “between the pied d’estal and the Champs-Elysées.”

What was this pedestal? Present generations who have seen so many things happen, so many statues crumble and so many pedestals overthrown do not quite know what meaning to give to this very vague designation, and would be embarrassed to tell for what monument the mysterious stone which the Executive Council of the Revolution laconically calls the “pied d’estal” served as a base. This stone had borne the statue of Louis XV.

Let it be noted *en passant* that this strange Place which had been called successively the Place Louis XV., Place de la Revolution, Place de la Concorde, Place Louis XVI., Place du Garde-Meuble and Place des Champs-Elysées, and which could not retain any name, could not keep any monument either. It has had the statue of Louis XV., which disappeared; an expiatory fountain which was to have laved the bloody centre of the Place was projected, but not even the first stone was laid; a rough model of a monument to the Charter was made: we have never seen anything but the socle of this monument. Just when a bronze figure representing the Charter of 1814 was about to be erected, the Revolution of July arrived with the Charter of 1830. The pedestal of Louis XVIII. vanished, as fell the pedestal of Louis XV. Now on this same spot we have placed the obelisk of Sesostris. It required thirty centuries for the great Desert to engulf half of it; how many years will the Place de la Revolution require to swallow it up altogether?

In the Year II of the Republic, what the Executive Council called the “pied d’estal” was nought but a shapeless and hideous block. It was a sort of sinister symbol of the royalty itself. Its ornaments of marble and bronze had been wrenched off, the bare stone was everywhere split and cracked. On the four sides were large square gaps showing the places where the destroyed bas reliefs had been. Scarcely could a remnant of the entablature still be distinguished at the summit of the pedestal, and beneath the cornice a string of ovolos, defaced and worn, was surmounted by what architects call a “chaplet of paternosters.” On the table of the pedestal one could perceive a heap of debris of all kinds, in which tufts of grass were growing here and there. This pile of nameless things had replaced the royal statue.

The scaffold was raised a few steps distant from this ruin, a little in rear of it. It was covered with long planks, laid transversely, that masked the framework. A ladder without banisters or balustrade was at the back, and what they venture to call the head of this horrible construction was turned towards the Garde-Meuble. A basket of cylindrical shape, covered with leather, was placed at the spot where the head of the King was to fall, to receive it; and at one of the angles of the entablature, to the right of the ladder, could be discerned a long wicker basket prepared for the body, and on which one of the executioners, while waiting for the King, had laid his hat.

Imagine, now, in the middle of the Place, these two lugubrious things, a few paces from each other: the pedestal of Louis XV. and the scaffold of Louis XVI.; that is to say, the ruins of royalty dead and the martyrdom of royalty living; around these two things four formidable lines of armed men, preserving a great empty square in the midst of an immense crowd; to the left of the scaffold, the Champs-Elysees, to the right the Tuileries, which, neglected and left at the mercy of the public had become an unsightly waste of dirt heaps and trenches; and over these melancholy edifices, over these black, leafless trees, over this gloomy multitude, the bleak, sombre sky of a winter morning, and one will have an idea of the aspect which the Place de la Revolution presented at the moment when Louis XVI., in the carriage of the Mayor of Paris, dressed in white, the Book of Psalms clasped in his hands, arrived there to die at a few minutes after ten o'clock on January 21, 1793.

Strange excess of abasement and misery: the son of so many kings, bound and sacred like the kings of Egypt, was to be consumed between two layers of quicklime, and to this French royalty, which at Versailles had had a throne of gold and at St. Denis sixty sarcophagi of granite, there remained but a platform of pine and a wicker coffin.

Here are some unknown details. The executioners numbered four; two only performed the execution; the third stayed at the foot of the ladder, and the fourth was on the waggon which was to convey the King's body to the Madeleine Cemetery and which was waiting a few feet from the scaffold.

The executioners wore breeches, coats in the French style as the Revolution had modified it, and three-cornered hats with enormous tri-colour cockades.

They executed the King with their hats on, and it was without taking his hat off that Samson, seizing by the hair the severed head of Louis XVI., showed it to the people, and for a few moments let the blood from it trickle upon the scaffold.

At the same time his valet or assistant undid what were called "les sangles" (straps); and, while the crowd gazed alternately upon the King's body, dressed entirely in white, as I have said, and still attached, with the hands bound behind the back, to the swing board, and upon that head whose kind and gentle profile stood out against the misty, sombre trees of the Tuileries, two priests, commissaries of the Commune, instructed to be present, as Municipal officials, at the execution of the King, sat in the Mayor's carriage, laughing and conversing in loud tones. One of them, Jacques Roux, derisively drew the other's attention to Capet's fat calves and abdomen.

The armed men who surrounded the scaffold had only swords and pikes; there were very few muskets. Most of them wore large round hats or red caps. A few platoons of mounted dragoons in uniform were mingled with these troops at intervals. A whole squadron of dragoons was ranged in battle array beneath the terraces of the Tuileries. What was called the Battalion of Marseilles formed one of the sides of the square.

The guillotine — it is always with repugnance that one writes this hideous word — would appear to the craftsmen of to-day to be very badly constructed. The knife was simply suspended to a pulley fixed in the centre of the upper beam. This pulley and a rope the thickness of a man’s thumb constituted the whole apparatus. The knife, which was not very heavily weighted, was of small dimensions and had a curved edge, which gave it the form of a reversed Phrygian cap. No hood was placed to shelter the King’s head and at the same time to hide and circumscribe its fall. All that crowd could see the head of Louis XVI. drop, and it was thanks to chance, thanks perhaps to the smallness of the knife which diminished the violence of the shock, that it did not bound beyond the basket to the pavement. Terrible incident, which often occurred at executions during the Terror. Nowadays assassins and poisoners are decapitated more decently. Many improvements in the guillotine have been made.

At the spot where the King’s head fell, a long rivulet of blood streamed down the planks of the scaffold to the pavement. When the execution was over, Samson threw to the people the King’s coat, which was of white molleton, and in an instant it disappeared, torn by a thousand hands.

At the moment when the head of Louis XVI. fell, the Abbé Edgeworth was still near the King. The blood spirted upon him. He hastily donned a brown overcoat, descended from the scaffold and was lost in the crowd. The first row of spectators opened before him with a sort of wonder mingled with respect; but after he had gone a few steps, the attention of everybody was still so concentrated upon the centre of the Place where the event had just been accomplished, that nobody took any further notice of Abbé Edgeworth.

The poor priest, enveloped in his thick coat which concealed the blood with which he was covered, fled in bewilderment, walking as one in a dream and scarcely knowing where he was going. However, with that sort of instinct which preserves somnambulists he crossed the river, took the Rue du Bac, then the Rue du Regard and thus managed to reach the house of Mme. de Lézardière, near the Barrière du Maine.

Arrived there he divested himself of his soiled clothing and remained for several hours, in a state of collapse, without being able to collect a thought or utter a word.

Some Royalists who rejoined him, and who had witnessed the execution, surrounded the Abbé Edgeworth and reminded him of the adieu he had addressed to the King: “Son of St. Louis, ascend to heaven!” These words, however, memorable though they were, had left no trace on the mind of him who had uttered them. “We heard them,” said the witnesses of the catastrophe, still moved and thrilled. “It is possible,” he replied, “but I do not remember having said such a thing.”

Abbé Edgeworth lived a long life without ever being able to remember whether he really did pronounce these words.

Mme. de Lézardière, who had been seriously ill for more than a month, was unable to support the shock of the death of Louis XVI. She died on the very night of January 21.

II. ARRIVAL OF NAPOLEON IN PARIS. March 20, 1815.

History and contemporaneous memoirs have truncated, or badly related, or even omitted altogether, certain details of the arrival of the Emperor in Paris on March 20, 1815. But living witnesses are to be met with who saw them and who rectify or complete them.

During the night of the 19th, the Emperor left Sens. He arrived at three o’clock in the morning at Fontainebleau. Towards five o’clock, as day was breaking, he reviewed the few troops he had taken with him and those who had rallied to him at Fontainebleau itself. They were of every corps, of every regiment, of all arms, a little of the Grand Army, a little of the Guard. At six o’clock, the review being over, one hundred and twenty lancers mounted their horses and went on ahead to wait for him at Essonnes. These lancers were commanded by Colonel Galbois, now lieutenant general, and who has recently distinguished himself at Constantine.

They had been at Essonnes scarcely three-quarters of an hour, resting their horses, when the carriage of the Emperor arrived. The escort of lancers were in their saddles in the twinkling of an eye and surrounded the carriage, which immediately started off again without having changed horses. The Emperor stopped on the way at the large villages to receive petitions from the inhabitants and the submission of the authorities, and sometimes to listen to harangues. He was on the rear seat of the carriage, with General Bertrand in full uniform seated on his left. Colonel Galbois galloped beside the door on the Emperor’s side; the door on Bertrand’s side was guarded by a quartermaster of lancers named Ferrès, to-day a wineshop keeper at Puteaux, a former and very brave hussar whom the Emperor knew personally and addressed by name. No one on the road approached the Emperor. Everything that was intended for him passed through General Bertrand’s hands.

Three or four leagues beyond Essonnes the imperial cortege found the road suddenly barred by General Colbert, at the head of two squadrons and three regiments echelonned towards Paris.

General Colbert had been the colonel of the regiment of lancers from which the detachment that escorted the Emperor had been drawn. He recognised his lancers and his lancers recognised him. They cried: “General, come over to us!” The General answered: “My children, do your duty, I am doing mine.” Then he turned rein and went off to the right across country with a few mounted men who followed him. He could not have resisted; the regiments behind him were shouting: “Long live the Emperor!”

This meeting only delayed Napoleon a few minutes. He continued on his way. The Emperor, surrounded only by his one hundred and twenty lancers, thus reached Paris. He entered by the Barrière de Fontainebleau, took the large avenue of trees which is on the left, the Boulevard dim Mont-Parnasse, the other boulevards to the Invalides, then the Pont do la Concorde, the quay along the river and the gate of the Louvre.

At a quarter past eight o’clock in the evening he was at the Tuileries.

VISIONS OF THE REAL.

I. THE HOVEL.
II. PILLAGE.
III. A DREAM.
IV. THE PANEL WITH THE COAT OF ARMS.
V. THE EASTER DAISY.

I. THE HOVEL.

You want a description of this hovel? I hesitated to inflict it upon you. But you want it. I’ faith, here it is! You will only have yourself to blame, it is your fault.

“Pshaw!” you say, “I know what it is. A bleared, bandy ruin. Some old house!”

In the first place it is not an old house, it is very much worse, it is a new house.

Really, now, an old house! You counted upon an old house and turned up your nose at it in advance. Ah! yes, old houses; don’t you wish you may get them! A dilapidated, tumble-down cottage! Why, don’t you know that a dilapidated, tumble-down cottage is simply charming, a thing of beauty? The wall is of beautiful, warm and strong colour, with moth holes, birds’ nests, old nails on which the spider hangs his rose-window web, a thousand amusing things that break its evenness. The window is only a dormer, but from it protrude long poles on which all sorts of clothing, of all sorts of colours, hang and dry in the wind-white tatters, red rags, flags of poverty that give to the hut an air of gaiety and are resplendent in the sunshine. The door is cracked and black, but approach and examine it; you will without doubt find upon it a bit of antique ironwork of the time of Louis XIII., cut out like a piece of guipure. The roof is full of crevices, but in each crevice there is a convolvulus that will blossom in the spring, or a daisy that will bloom in the autumn. The tiles are patched with thatch. Of course they are, I should say so! It affords the occasion to have on one’s roof a colony of pink dragon flowers and wild marsh-mallow. A fine green grass carpets the foot of this decrepit wall, the ivy climbs joyously up it and cloaks its bareness — its wounds and its leprosy mayhap; moss covers with green velvet the stone seat at the door. All nature takes pity upon this degraded and charming thing that you call a hovel, and welcomes it. 0 hovel! honest and peaceful old dwelling, sweet and good to see! rejuvenated every year by April and May! perfumed by the wallflower and inhabited by the swallow!

No, it is not of this that I write, it is not, I repeat, of an old house, it is of a new house, — of a new hovel, if you will.

This thing has not been built longer than two years. The wall has that hideous and glacial whiteness of fresh plaster. The whole is wretched, mean, high, triangular, and has the shape of a piece of Gruyère cheese cut for a miser a dessert. There are new doors that do not shut properly, window frames with white panes that are already spangled here and there with paper stars. These stars are cut coquettishly and pasted on with care. There is a frightful bogus sumptuousness about the place that causes a painful impression — balconies of hollow iron badly fixed to the wall; trumpery locks, already rotten round the fastenings, upon which vacillate, on three nails, horrible ornaments of embossed brass that are becoming covered with verdigris; shutters painted grey that are getting out of joint, not because they are worm-eaten, but because they were made of green wood by a thieving cabinet maker.

A chilly feeling comes over you as you look at the house. On entering it you shiver. A greenish humidity leaks at the foot of the wall. This building of yesterday is already a ruin; it is more than a ruin, it is a disaster; one feels that the proprietor is bankrupt and that the contractor has fled.

In rear of the house, a wall white and new like the rest, encloses a space in which a drum major could not lie at full length. This is called the garden. Issuing shiveringly from the earth is a little tree, long, spare and sickly, which seems always to be in winter, for it has not a single leaf. This broom is called a poplar. The remainder of the garden is strewn with old potsherds and bottoms of bottles. Among them one notices two or three list slippers. In a corner on top of a heap of oyster shells is an old tin watering can, painted green, dented, rusty and cracked, inhabited by slugs which silver it with their trails of slime.

Let us enter the hovel. In the other you will find perhaps a ladder “rickety,” as Regnier says, “from the top to the bottom.” Here you will find a staircase.

This staircase, “ornamented” with brass-knobbed banisters, has fifteen or twenty wooden steps, high, narrow, with sharp angles, which rise perpendicularly to the first floor and turn upon themselves in a spiral of about eighteen inches in diameter. Would you not be inclined to ask for a ladder?

At the top of these stairs, if you get there, is the room.

To give an idea of this room is difficult. It is the “new hovel” in all its abominable reality. Wretchedness is everywhere; a new wretchedness, which has no past, no future, and which cannot take root anywhere. One divines that the lodger moved in yesterday and will move out tomorrow. That he arrived without saying whence he came, and that he will put the key under the door when he goes away.

The wall is “ornamented” with dark blue paper with yellow flowers, the window is “ornamented” with a curtain of red calico in which holes take the place of flowers. There is in front of the window a rush-bottom chair with the bottom worn out; near the chair a stove; on the stove a stewpot; near the stewpot a flowerpot turned upside down with a tallow candle stuck in the hole; near the flowerpot a basketful of coal which evokes thoughts of suicide and asphyxiation; above the basket a shelf encumbered with nameless objects, distinguishable among which are a worn broom and an old toy representing a green rider on a crimson horse. The mantelpiece, mean and narrow, is of blackish marble with a thousand little white blotches. It is covered with broken glasses and unwashed cups. Into one of these cups a pair of tin rimmed spectacles is plunging. A nail lies on the floor. In the fireplace a dishcloth is hanging on one of the fire-iron holders. No fire either in the fireplace or in the stove. A heap of frightful sweepings replaces the heaps of cinders. No looking glass on the mantelpiece, but a picture of varnished canvas representing a nude negro at the knees of a white woman in a decolletée ball dress in an arbour. Opposite the mantelpiece, a man’s cap and a woman’s bonnet hang from nails on either side of a cracked mirror.

At the end of the room is a bed. That is to say, a mattress laid on two planks that rest upon a couple of trestles. Over the bed, other boards, with openings between them, support an undesirable heap of linen, clothes and rags. An imitation cashmere, called “French cashmere,” protrudes between the boards and hangs over the pallet.

Mingled with the hideous litter of all these things are dirtiness, a disgusting odour, spots of oil and tallow, and dust everywhere. In the corner near the bed stands an enormous sack of shavings, and on a chair beside the sack lies an old newspaper. I am moved by curiosity to look at the title and the date. It is the “Constitutionnel” of April 25, 1843.

And now what can I add? I have not told the most horrible thing about the place. The house is odious, the room is abominable, the pallet is hideous; but all that is nothing.

When I entered a woman was sleeping on the bed — a woman old, short, thickset, red, bloated, oily, tumefied, fat, dreadful, enormous. Her frightful bonnet, which was awry, disclosed the side of her head, which was grizzled, pink and bald.

She was fully dressed. She wore a yellowish fichu, a brown skirt, a jacket, all this on her monstrous abdomen; and a vast soiled apron like the linen trousers of a convict.

At the noise I made in entering she moved, sat up, showed her fat legs, that were covered with unqualifiable blue stockings, and with a yawn stretched her brawny arms, which terminated with fists that resembled those of a butcher.

I perceived that the old woman was robust and formidable.

She turned towards me and opened her eyes. I could not see them.

“Monsieur,” she said, in a very gentle voice, “what do you want?”

When about to speak to this being I experienced the sensation one would feel in presence of a sow to which it behoved one to say: “Madam.”

I did not quite know what to reply, and thought for a moment. Just then my gaze, wandering towards the window, fell upon a sort of picture that hung outside like a sign. It was a sign, as a matter of fact, a picture of a young and pretty woman, decolletée, wearing an enormous beplumed hat and carrying an infant in her arms; the whole in the style of the chimney boards of the time of Louis XVIII. Above the picture stood out this inscription in big letters:

Mme. BECOEUR

Midwife

BLEEDS AND VACCINATES

“Madam,” said I, “I want to see Mme. Bécoeur.”

The sow metamorphosed into a woman replied with an amiable smile:

“I am Mme. Bécoeur, Monsieur.”

II. PILLAGE. THE REVOLT IN SANTO DOMINGO.

I thought that I must be dreaming. None who did not witness the sight could form any idea of it. I will, however, endeavour to depict something of it. I will simply recount what I saw with my own eyes. This small portion of a great scene minutely reproduced will enable you to form some notion as to the general aspect of the town during the three days of pillage. Multiply these details *ad libitum* and you will get the ensemble.

I had taken refuge by the gate of the town, a puny barrier made of long laths painted yellow, nailed to cross laths and sharpened at the top. Near by was a kind of shed in which some hapless colonists, who had been driven from their homes, had sought shelter. They were silent and seemed to be petrified in all the attitudes of despair. Just outside of the shed an old man, weeping, was seated on the trunk of a mahogany tree which was lying on the ground and looked like the shaft of a column. Another vainly sought to restrain a white woman who, wild with fright, was trying to flee, without knowing where she was going, through the crowd of furious, ragged, howling negroes.

The negroes, however, free, victorious, drunk, mad, paid not the slightest attention to this miserable, forlorn group of whites. A short distance from us two of them, with their knives between their teeth, were slaughtering an ox, upon which they were kneeling with their feet in its blood. A little further on two hideous negresses, dressed as marchionesses, covered with ribbons and pompons, their breasts bare, and their heads encumbered with feathers and laces, were quarrelling over a magnificent dress of Chinese satin, which one of them had grasped with her nails while the other hung on to it with her teeth. At their feet a number of little blacks were ransacking a broken trunk from which the dress had been taken.

The rest was incredible to see and impossible to describe. It was a crowd, a mob, a masquerade, a revel, a hell, a terrible buffoonery. Negroes, negresses and mulattoes, in every posture, in all manner of disguises, displayed all sorts of costumes, and what was worse, their nudity.

Here was a pot-bellied, ugly mulatto, of furious mien, attired like the planters, in a waistcoat and trousers of white material, but with a bishop’s mitre on his head and a crosier in his hand. Elsewhere three or four negroes with three-cornered hats stuck on their heads and wearing red or blue military coats with the shoulder belts crossed upon their black skin, were harassing an unfortunate militiaman they had captured, and who, with his hands tied behind his back, was being dragged through the town. With loud bursts of laughter they slapped his powdered hair and pulled his long pigtail. Now and then they would stop and force the prisoner to kneel and by signs give him to understand that they were going to shoot him there. Then prodding him with the butts of their rifles they would make him get up again, and go through the same performance further on.

A number of old mulattresses had formed a ring and were skipping round in the midst of the mob. They were dressed in the nattiest costumes of our youngest and prettiest white women, and in dancing raised their skirts so as to show their lean, shrivelled legs and yellow thighs. Nothing queerer could be imagined than all these charming fashions and finery of the frivolous century of Louis XV., these Watteau shepherdess costumes, furbelows, plumes and laces, upon these black, ugly-faced, flat-nosed, woolly-headed, frightful people. Thus decked out they were no longer even negroes and negresses; they were apes and monkeys.

Add to all this a deafening uproar. Every mouth that was not making a contortion was emitting yells.

I have not finished; you must accept the picture complete to its minutest detail.

Twenty paces from me was an inn, a frightful hovel, whose sign was a wreath of dried herbs hung upon a pickaxe. Nothing but a roof window and three-legged tables. A low ale-house, rickety tables. Negroes and mulattoes were drinking there, intoxicating and besotting themselves, and fraternising. One has to have seen these things to depict them. In front of the tables of the drunkards a fairly young negress was displaying herself. She was dressed in a man’s waistcoat, unbuttoned, and a woman’s skirt loosely attached. She wore no chemise and her abdomen was bare. On her head was a magistrate’s wig. On one shoulder she carried a parasol, and on the other a rifle with bayonet fixed.

A few whites, stark naked, ran about miserably in the midst of this pandemonium. On a litter was being borne the nude body of a stout man, in whose breast a dagger was sticking as a cross is stuck in the ground.

On every hand were gnomes bronze-coloured, red, black, kneeling, sitting, squatting, heaped together, opening trunks, forcing locks, trying on bracelets, clasping necklaces about their necks, donning coats or dresses, breaking, ripping, tearing. Two blacks were trying to get into the same coat;

each had got an arm on, and they were belabouring each other with their disengaged fists. It was the second stage of a sacked town. Robbery and joy had succeeded rage. In a few corners some were still engaged in killing, but the great majority were pillaging. All were carrying off their booty, some in their arms, some in baskets on their backs, some in wheelbarrows.

The strangest thing about it all was that in the midst of the incredible, tumultuous mob, an interminable file of pillagers who were rich and fortunate enough to possess horses and vehicles, marched and deployed, in order and with the solemn gravity of a procession. This was quite a different kind of a medley!

Imagine carts of all kinds with loads of every description: a four-horse carriage full of broken crockery and kitchen utensils, with two or three dressed-up and beplumed negroes on each horse; a big wagon drawn by oxen and loaded with bales carefully corded and packed, damask armchairs, frying pans and pitchforks, and on top of this pyramid a negress wearing a necklace and with a feather stuck in her hair; an old country coach drawn by a single mule and with a load of ten trunks and, ten negroes, three of whom were upon the animal’s back. Mingle with all this bath chairs, litters and sedan chairs piled high with loot of all kinds, precious articles of furniture with the most sordid objects. It was the hut and the drawing-room pitched together pell-mell into a cart, an immense removal by madmen defiling through the town.

What was incomprehensible was the equanimity with which the petty robbers regarded the wholesale robbers. The pillagers afoot stepped aside to let the pillagers in carriages pass.

There were, it is true, a few patrols, if a squad of five or six monkeys disguised as soldiers and each beating at his own sweet will on a drum can be called a patrol.

Near the gate of the town, through which this immense stream of vehicles was issuing, pranced a mulatto, a tall, lean, yellow rascal, rigged out in a judge’s gown and white tie, with his sleeves rolled up, a sword in his hand, and his legs bare. He was digging his heels into a fat-bellied horse that pawed about in the crowd. He was the magistrate charged with the duty of preserving order at the gate.

A little further on galloped another group. A negro in a red coat with a blue sash, a general’s epaulettes and an immense hat surcharged with tri-colour feathers, was forcing his way through the rabble. He was preceded by a horrible, helmetted negro boy beating upon a drum, and followed by two mulattoes, one in a colonel’s coat, the other dressed as a Turk with a hideous Mardi Gras turban on his ugly Chinese-like head.

Out on the plain I could see battalions of ragged soldiers drawn up round a big house, on which was a crowded balcony draped with a tri-colour flag. It had all the appearance of a balcony from which a speech was being delivered.

Beyond these battalions, this balcony, this flag and this speech was a calm, magnificent prospect-trees green and charming, mountains of superb shape, a cloudless sky, the ocean without a ripple.

Strange and sad it is to see the grimace of man made with such effrontery in presence of the face of God!

III. A DREAM. September 6, 1847.

Last night I dreamed this — we had been talking all the evening about riots, a propos of the troubles in the Rue Saint Honoré:

I entered an obscure passage way. Men passed and elbowed me in the shadow. I issued from the passage. I was in a large square, which was longer than it was wide, and surrounded by a sort of vast wall, or high edifice that resembled a wall, which enclosed it on all four sides. There were neither doors nor windows in this wall; just a few holes here and there. At certain spots it appeared to have been riddled with shot; at others it was cracked and hanging over as though it had been shaken by an earthquake. It had the bare, crumbling and desolate aspect of places in Oriental cities.

No one was in sight. Day was breaking. The stone was grey, the sky also. At the extremity of the place I perceived four obscure objects that looked liked cannon levelled ready for firing.

A great crowd of ragged men and children rushed by me with gestures of terror.

“Save us!” cried one of them. “The grape shot is coming!”

“Where are we?” I asked. “What is this place?”’

“What! do you not belong to Paris?” responded the man. “This is the Palais-Royal.”

I gazed about me and, in effect, recognised in this frightful, devastated square in ruins a sort of spectre of the Palais-Royal.

The fleeing men had vanished, I knew not whither.

I also would have fled. I could not. In the twilight I saw a light moving about the cannon.

The square was deserted. I could hear cries of: “Run! they are going to shoot!” but I could not see those who uttered them.

A woman passed by. She was in tatters and carried a child on her back. She did not run. She walked slowly. She was young, cold, pale, terrible.

As she passed me she said: “It is hard lines! Bread is at thirty-four sous, and even at that the cheating bakers do not give full weight.”

I saw the light at the end of the square flare up and heard the roar of the cannon. I awoke.

Somebody had just slammed the front door.

IV. THE PANEL WITH THE COAT OF ARMS.

The panel which was opposite the bed had been so blackened by time and effaced by dust that at first he could distinguish only confused lines and undecipherable contours; but the while he was thinking of other things his eyes continually wandered back to it with that mysterious and mechanical persistence which the gaze sometimes has. Singular details began to detach themselves from the confused and obscure whole. His curiosity was roused. When the attention becomes fixed it is like a light; and the tapestry growing gradually less cloudy finally appeared to him in its entirety, and stood out distinctly against the sombre wall, as though vaguely illumined.

It was only a panel with a coat of arms upon it, the blazon, no doubt, of former owners of the château; but this blazon was a strange one.

The escutcheon was at the foot of the panel, and it was not this that first attracted attention. It was of the bizarre shape of German escutcheons of the fifteenth century. It was perpendicular and rested, although rounded at the base, upon a worn, moss covered stone. Of the two upper angles, one bent to the left and curled back upon itself like the turned down corner of a page of an old book; the other, which curled upward, bore at its extremity an immense and magnificent morion in profile, the chinpiece of which protruded further than the visor, making the helm look like a horrible head of a fish. The crest was formed of two great spreading wings of an eagle, one black, the other red, and amid the feathers of these wings were the membranous, twisted and almost living branches of a huge seaweed which bore more resemblance to a polypus than to a plume. From the middle of the plume rose a buckled strap, which reached to the angle of a rough wooden pitchfork, the handle of which was stuck in the ground, and from there descended to a hand, which held it.

To the left of the escutcheon was the figure of a woman, standing. It was an enchanting vision. She was tall and slim, and wore a robe of brocade which fell in ample folds about her feet, a ruff of many pleats and a necklace of large gems. On her head was an enormous and superb turban of blond hair on which rested a crown of filigree that was not round, and that followed all the undulations of the hair. The face, although somewhat too round and large, was exquisite. The eyes were those of an angel, the mouth was that of a virgin; but in those heavenly eyes there was a terrestrial look and on that virginal mouth was the smile of a woman. In that place, at that hour, on that tapestry, this mingling of divine ecstasy and human voluptuousness had something at once charming and awful about it.

Behind the woman, bending towards her as though whispering in her ear, appeared a man.

Was he a man? All that could be seen of his body — legs, arms and chest — was as hairy as the skin of an ape; his hands and feet were crooked, like the claws of a tiger. As to his visage, nothing more fantastic and frightful could be imagined. Amid a thick, bristling beard, a nose like an owl’s beak and a mouth whose corners were drawn by a wild-beast-like rictus were just discernible. The eyes were half hidden by his thick, bushy, curly hair. Each curl ended in a spiral, pointed and twisted like a gimlet, and on peering at them closely it could be seen that each of these gimlets was a little viper.

The man was smiling at the woman. It was disquieting and sinister, the contact of these two equally chimerical beings, the one almost an angel, the other almost a monster; a revolting clash of the two extremes of the ideal. The man held the pitchfork, the woman grasped the strap with her delicate pink fingers.

As to the escutcheon itself, it was sable, that is to say, black, and in the middle of it appeared, with the vague whiteness of silver, a fleshless, deformed thing, which, like the rest, at length became distinct. It was a death’s head. The nose was lacking, the orbits of the eyes were hollow and deep, the cavity of the ear could be seen on the right side, all the seams of the cranium could be traced, and there only remained two teeth in the jaws.

But this black escutcheon, this livid death’s head, designed with such minuteness of detail that it seemed to stand out from the tapestry, was less lugubrious than the two personages who held up the hideous blazon and who seemed to be whispering to each other in the shadow.

At the bottom of the panel in a corner was the date: 1503.

V. THE EASTER DAISY. May 29, 1841.

A few days ago I was passing along the Rue de Chartres.* A palisade of boards, which linked two islands of high six-story houses, attracted my attention. It threw upon the pavement a shadow which the sunshine, penetrating between the badly joined boards, striped with beautiful parallel streaks of gold, such as one sees on the fine black satins of the Renaissance. I strolled over to it and peered through the cracks.

* The little Rue de Chartres was situated on the site now occupied by the Pavilion de Rohan. It extended from the open ground of the Carrousel to the Place du Palais-Royal. The old Vaudeville Theatre was situated in it.

This palisade encloses the site on which was built the Vaudeville Theatre, that was destroyed by fire two years ago, in June, 1839.

It was two o’clock in the afternoon, the sun shone hotly, the street was deserted.

A sort of house door, painted grey, still ornamented with rococo carving and which a hundred years ago probably was the entrance to the boudoir of some little mistress, had been adjusted to the palisade. There was only a latch to raise, and I entered the enclosure.

Nothing could be sadder or more desolate. A chalky soil. Here and there blocks of stone that the masons had begun to work upon, but had abandoned, and which were at once white as the stones of sepulchres and mouldy as the stones of ruins. No one in the enclosure. On the walls of the neighbouring houses traces of flame and smoke still visible.

However, since the catastrophe two successive springtides had softened the ground, and in a corner of the trapezium, behind an enormous stone that was becoming tinted with the green of moss, and beneath which were haunts of woodlice, millepeds, and other insects, a little patch of grass had grown in the shadow.

I sat on the stone and bent over the grass.

Oh! my goodness! there was the prettiest little Easter daisy in the world, and flitting about it was a charming microscopical gnat.

This flower of the fields was growing peaceably and in accordance with the sweet law of nature, in the open, in the centre of Paris, between a couple of streets, two paces from the Palais-Royal, four paces from the Carrousel, amid passers-by, omnibuses and the King’s carriages.

This wild flower, neighbour of the pavement, opened up a wide field of thought. Who could have foreseen, two years ago, that a daisy would be growing on this spot! If, as on the ground adjoining, there had never been anything but houses, that is to say, proprietors, tenants, and hail porters, careful residents extinguishing candle and fire at night before going to sleep, never would there have been a wild flower here.

How many things, how many plays that failed or were applauded, how many ruined families, how many incidents, how many adventures, how many catastrophes were summed up in this flower! To all those who lived upon the crowd that was nightly summoned here, what a spectre this flower would have been had it appeared to them two years ago! What a labyrinth is destiny and what mysterious combinations there were that led up to the advent of this enchanting little yellow sun with its white rays. It required a theatre and a conflagration, which are the gaiety and the terror of a city, one of the most joyous inventions of man and one of the most terrible visitations of God, bursts of laughter for thirty years and whirlwinds of flame for thirty horn’s to produce this Easter daisy, the delight of a gnat.

THEATER

I. JOANNY.
II. MADEMOISELLE MARS.
III. FREDERICK LEMAITRE.
IV. THE COMIQUES.
V. MADEMOISELLE GEORGES.
VI. TABLEAUX VIVANTS.

JOANNY. March 7, 1830, Midnight.

They have been playing “Hernani” at the Théâtre-Français since February 25. The receipts for each performance have been five thousand francs. The public every night hisses all the verses. It is a rare uproar. The parterre hoots, the boxes burst with laughter. The actors are abashed and hostile; most of them ridicule what they have to say. The press has been practically unanimous every morning in making fun of the piece and the author. If I enter a reading room I cannot pick up a paper without seeing: “Absurd as ‘Hernani’; silly, false, bombastic, pretentious, extravagant and nonsensical as ‘Hernani’.” If I venture into the corridors of the theatre while the performance is in progress I see spectators issue from their boxes and slam the doors indignantly. Mlle. Mars plays her part honestly and faithfully, but laughs at it, even in my presence. Michelot plays his resignedly and laughs at it behind my back. There is not a scene shifter, not a super, not a lamp lighter but points his finger at me.

To-day I dined with Joanny, who had invited me. Joanny plays Ruy Gomez. He lives at No. 1 Rue du Jardinet, with a young seminarist, his nephew. The dinner party was sober and cordial. There were some journalists there, among others M. Merle, the husband of Mme. Dorval. After dinner, Joanny, who has the most beautiful white hair in the world, rose, filled his glass, turned towards me. I was on his right hand. Here literally is what he said to me; I have just returned home and I write his words:

“Monsieur Victor Hugo, the old man, now unknown, who two hundred years ago filled the role of Don Diègue in ‘Le Cid’ was not more penetrated with respect and admiration in presence of the great Corneille than the old man who plays Don Buy Gomez is to-day in your presence.”

MADEMOISELLE MARS.

In her last illness Mlle. Mars was often delirious. One evening the doctor arrived. She was in the throes of a high fever, and her mind was wandering. She prattled about the theatre, her mother, her daughter, her niece Georgina, about all that she held dear; she laughed, wept, screamed, sighed deeply.

The doctor approached her bed and said to her: “Dear lady, calm yourself, it is I.” She did not recognise him and her mind continued to wander. He went on: “Come, show me your tongue, open your mouth.” Mlle. Mars gazed at him, opened her mouth and said: “Here, look. Oh! all my teeth are my very own!”

Célimène still lived.

FREDERICK LEMAITRE.

Frédérick Lemaitre is cross, morose and kind. He lives in retirement with his children and his mistress, who at present is Mlle. Clarisse Miroy.

Frédérick likes the table. He never invites anybody to dinner except Porcher, the chief of the claque.* Fredérick and Porcher “thee-thou” each other. Porcher has common sense, good manners, and plenty of money, which he lends gallantly to authors whose rent is due. Porcher is the man of whom Harel said: “He likes, protects and disdains Literary men.”

* A band of men and boys who are paid to applaud a piece or a certain actor or actress at a given signal. The applause contractor, or *chef de claque*, is an important factor in French theatrical affairs.

Frédérick has never less than fifteen dishes at his table. When the servant brings them in he looks at them and judges them without tasting them. Often he says:

“That is bad.”

“Have you eaten of it?”

“No, God forbid!”

“But taste it.”

“It is detestable.”

“I will taste it,” says Clarisse.

"It is execrable. I forbid you to do so."

"But let me try it."

"Take that dish away! It is filthy!" And he sends for his cook and rates her soundly.

He is greatly feared by all his household. His domestics live in a state of terror. At table, if he does not speak, no one utters a word. Who would dare to break the silence when he is mute? One would think it was a dinner of dumb people, or a supper of Trappists, except for the good cheer. He likes to wind up the repast with fish. If there is turbot he has it served after the creams. He drinks, when dining, a bottle and a half of Bordeaux wine. Then, after dinner, he lights his cigar, and while smoking drinks two other bottles of wine.

For all that he is a comedian of genius and a very good fellow. He is easily moved to tears, which start to his eyes at a word said to him angrily or reproachfully.

This dates back to 1840. Mlle. Atala Beaudouin (the actress who under the name of Louise Beaudouin created the role of the Queen in Ruy Bias) had left Frédérick Lemaître, the great and marvellous comedian. Frédérick adored her and was inconsolable.

Mlle. Atala's mother had strongly advised her daughter on this occasion. Frédérick was occasionally violent, notwithstanding that he was very amorous; and, besides, a Russian prince had presented himself. In short, Mlle. Atala persisted in her determination and positively refused to see Frederick.

Frederick made frightful threats, especially against the mother. One morning there was a violent ringing at Mlle. Atala's bell. Her mother opened the door and recoiled in terror. It was Frédérick. He entered, dropped into the chair that was handiest to him, and said to the old woman:

"Don't be afraid, I haven't come to kick your — , I have come to weep."

THE COMIQUES September, 1846

Potier, having grown old, played at the Porte Saint Martin towards the close of his life. He was the same in the street as he was on the stage. Little boys would follow him, saying: "There is Potier!" He had a small cottage near Paris and used to come to rehearsals mounted on a small horse, his long thin legs dangling nearly to the ground.

Tiercelin was a Hellenist. Odry is a connoisseur of chinaware. The elephantine Lepeintre junior runs into debt and lives the life of a *coquin de neuveu*.

Alcide Tousez, Sainville and Ravel carry on in the green room just as they do on the stage, inventing cock-and-bull yarns and cracking jokes.

Arnal composes classic verse, admires Samson, waxes wrath because the cross has not been conferred upon him. And, in the green room, with rouge on his nose and cheeks and a wig on his head, talks, between two slaps in the face given or received, about Guizot’s last speech, free trade and Sir Robert Peel; he interrupts himself, makes his entry upon the stage, plays his part, returns and gravely resumes: “I was saying that Robert Peel — —”

Poor Arnal recently was driven almost insane. He had a mistress whom he adored. This woman fleeced him. Having become rich enough she said to him: “Our position is an immoral one and an end must be put to it. An honest man has offered me his name and I am going to get married.” Arnal was disconsolate. “I give you the preference,” said the belle, “marry me.” Arnal is married. The woman left him and has become a bourgeoise. Arnal nearly lost his reason through grief. This does not prevent him from playing his pasquinades every night at the Vaudeville. He makes fun of his ugliness, of his age, of the fact that he is pitted with small-pox — laughs at all those things that prevented him from pleasing the woman he loved, and makes the public laugh — and his heart is broken. Poor red queue! What eternal and incurable sorrows there be in the gaiety of a buffoon! What a lugubrious business is that of laughter!

MADEMOISELLE GEORGES. October, 23, 1867.

Mlle. George came to see me to-day. She was sad, and elegantly dressed in a blue dress with white stripes. She said: “I am weary and disgusted. I asked for Mars’ reversion. They granted me a pension of two thousand francs which they do not pay. Just a mouthful of bread, and even that I do not get a chance to eat! They wanted to engage me at the Historique (at the Théâtre Historique). I refused. What could I do there among those transparencies! A stout woman like me! Besides, where are the authors? Where are the pieces? Where are the roles? As to the provinces, I tried touring last year, but it is impossible without Harel.* I don’t know how to manage actors. How do you think I can get on with these evil doers? I was to have finished the 24th. I paid them on the 20th, and fled. I returned to Paris to visit poor Harel’s tomb. It is frightful, a tomb! It is horrible to see his name there on the stone! Yet I did not weep. I was dry-eyed and cold. What a strange thing is life! To think that this man who was so clever, so witty, should die an idiot! He passed his days doing like this with his fingers. Not a spark of reason remained. It is all over. I shall have Rachel at my benefit; I shall play with her that chestnut “Iphigênie”. We shall make money, but I don’t care. Besides, I’m sure she wouldn’t play Rodogune! I will also play, if you will permit me, an act of “Lucrèce Borgia”. You see, I am for Rachel; she is an artful one, if you like. See how she checkmates those rascally French actors! She renews her engagements, assures for herself pyrotechnics, vacations, heaps of gold. When the contract is signed she says: “By the bye, I forgot to tell you that I have been enceinte for four months; it will be five months before I am able to play.” She does well. If I had done the same thing I shouldn’t have to die like a dog on a litter of straw. Tragedians, you see, are comedians after all. That poor Dorval, what has become of her, do you know? There is one to be pitied, if you like! She is playing I know not where, at Toulouse, at Carpentras, in barns, to earn her living! She is reduced like me to showing her bald head and dragging her poor old carcass on badly planed boards behind footlights of four tallow candles, among strolling actors who have been to the galleys, or who ought to be there! Ah! Monsieur Hugo, all this is nothing to you who are in good health and well off, but we are poor miserable creatures!”

* M. Harel was manager of the Porte St. Martin Theatre.

Mlle. Georges lived with him.

TABLEAUX VIVANTS

In the year 1846 there was a spectacle that caused a furore in Paris. It was that afforded by women attired only in pink tights and a gauze skirt executing poses that were called *tableaux vivants*, with a few men to complete the groups. This show was given at the Porte Saint Martin and at the Cirque. I had the curiosity one night to go and see the women behind the scenes. I went to the Porte Saint Martin, where, I may add in parentheses, they were going to revive “Lucrêce Borgia”. Villemot, the stage manager, who was of poor appearance but intelligent, said: “I will take you into the gynecium.”

A score of men were there — authors, actors, firemen, lamp lighters, scene shifters — who came, went, worked or looked on, and in the midst of them seven or eight women, practically nude, walked about with an air of the most naïve tranquillity. The pink tights that covered them from the feet to the neck were so thin and transparent that one could see not only the toes, the navel, and the breasts, but also the veins and the colour of the least mark on the skin on all parts of their bodies. Towards the abdomen, however, the tights became thicker and only the form was distinguishable. The men who assisted them were similarly arranged. All these people were English.

At intervals of five minutes the curtain parted and they executed a *tableau*. For this they were posed in immobile attitudes upon a large wooden disc which revolved upon a pivot. It was worked by a child of fourteen who reclined on a mattress beneath it. Men and women were dressed up in chiffons of gauze or merino that were very ugly at a distance and very ignoble *de prês*. They were pink statues. When the disc had revolved once and shown the statues on every side to the public crowded in the darkened theatre, the curtain closed again, another tableau was arranged, and the performance recommenced a moment later.

Two of these women were very pretty. One resembled Mme. Rey, who played the Queen in “Ruy Blas” in 1840; it was this one who represented Venus. She was admirably shaped. Another was more than pretty: she was handsome and superb. Nothing more magnificent could be seen than her black, sad eyes, her disdainful mouth, her smile at once bewitching and haughty. She was called Maria, I believe. In a tableau which represented “A Slave Market,” she displayed the imperial despair and the stoical dejection of a nude queen offered for sale to the first bidder. Her tights, which were torn at the hip, disclosed her firm white flesh. They were, however only poor girls of London. All had dirty finger nails.

When they returned to the green room they laughed as freely with the scene shifters as with the authors, and talked broken French while they adjusted all kinds of frightful rags upon their charming visages. Their smile was the calm smile of perfect innocence or of complete corruption.

AT THE ACADEMY.

Session of November 23, 1843.

CHARLES NODIER. — The Academy, yielding to custom, has suppressed universally the double consonant in verbs where this consonant supplanted euphoniously the *d* of the radical *ad*.

MYSELF. — I avow my profound ignorance. I had no idea that custom had effected this suppression and that the Academy had sanctioned it. Thus one should no longer write *atteindre, approuver, appeler, apprehender*, etc., but *ateindre, aprouver, apeler, apréhender*?

M. VICTOR COUSIN. — I desire to point out to M. Hugo that the alterations of which he complains come from the movement of the language, which is nothing else than decadence.

MYSELF. — M. Cousin having addressed a personal observation to me, I beg to point out to him in turn that his opinion is, in my estimation, merely an opinion and nothing more. I may add that, as I view it, "movement of the language" and decadence have nothing in common. Nothing could be more distinct than these two things. Movement in no way proves decadence. The language has been moving since the first day of its formation; can it be said to be deteriorating? Movement is life; decadence is death.

M. COUSIN. — The decadence of the French language began in 1789.

MYSELF. — At what hour, if you please?

October 8, 1844.

This is what was told to me at to-day's session:

Salvandy recently dined with Villemain. The repast over, they adjourned to the drawing-room, and conversed. As the clock struck eight Villemain's three little daughters entered to kiss their father good night. The youngest is named Lucette; her birth cost her mother her reason; she is a sweet and charming child of five years.

"Well, Lucette, dear child," said her father, "won't you recite one of Lafontaine's fables before you go to bed?"

"Here," observed M. de Salvandy, "is a little person who to-day recites fables and who one of these days will inspire romances."

Lucette did not understand. She merely gazed with her big wondering eyes at Salvandy who was lolling in his chair with an air of benevolent condescension.

“Well, Lucette.” he went on, “will you not recite a fable for us?”

The child required no urging, and began in her naïve little voice, her fine, frank, sweet eyes still fixed upon Salvandy:

One easily believes one’s self to be somebody in France.

1845.

During the run of M. Ponsard’s “Lucrece”, I had the following dialogue with M. Viennet at a meeting of the Academy:

M. VIENNET. — Have you seen the “Lucrece” that is being played at the Odéon?

MYSELF. — NO.

M. VIENNET. — It is very good.

MYSELF. — Really, is it good?

M. VIENNET. — It is more than good, it is fine.

MYSELF. — Really, is it fine?

M. VIENNET. — It is more than fine, it is magnificent.

MYSELF. — Really, now, magnificent?

M. VIENNET. — Oh! magnificent!

MYSELF. — Come, now, is it as good as “Zaire”?

M. VIENNET. — Oh! no! Oh! you are going too far, you know. Gracious! “Zaire”! No, it is not as good as “Zaire”.

MYSELF. — Well, you see, “Zaire” is a very poor piece indeed!

AN ELECTION SESSION.

February 11, 1847.

Thirty-one Academicians present. Sixteen votes are necessary.

First ballot.

Emile Deschamps	2 votes.
Victor Leclerc	14 “
Empis	15 “

Lamartine and M. Ballanche arrive at the end of the first ballot. M. Thiers arrives at the commencement of the second; which makes 34.

The director asks M. Thiers whether he has promised his vote. He laughingly replies: “No,” and adds: “I have offered it.” (Laughter.)

M. Cousin, to M. Lebrun, director: “You did not employ the sacramental expression. One does not ask an Academician whether he has *promised* his vote, but whether he has *pledged* it.”

Second ballot.

Emile Deschamps	2 votes.
Empis	18”
Victor Leclerc	14”

M. Empis is elected. The election was decided by Lamartine and M. Ballanche.

On my way out I meet Leon Gozlan, who says to me: “Well?”

I reply: “There has been an election. It is Empis.”

“How do you look at it?” he asks.

“In both ways.”

“Empis?—”

“And *tant pis*!”

March 16, 1847.

At the Academy to-day, while listening to the poems, bad to the point of grotesqueness, that have been sent for the competition of 1847, M. de Barante remarked: “Really, in these times, we no longer know how to make mediocre verses.”

Great praise of the poetical and literary excellence of these times, although M. de Barante was not conscious of it.

April 22, 1847.

Election of M. Ampere. This is an improvement upon the last. A slow improvement. But Academies, like old people, go slowly.

During the session and after the election Lamartine sent to me by an usher the following lines:

C’est un état peu prospere

D’aller d’Empis en Ampere.
I replied to him by the same usher:
Toutefois ce serait pis
D’aller d’Ampere en Empis.

October 4, 1847.
I have just heard M. Viennet say: “I think in bronze.”

December 29, 1848. Friday.

Yesterday, Thursday, I had two duties to attend to at one and the same time, the Assembly and the Academy; the salt question on the one hand, on the other the much smaller question of two vacant seats. Yet I gave the preference to the latter. This is why: At the Palais Bourbon the Cavaignac party had to be prevented from killing the new Cabinet; at the Palais Mazarin the Academy had to be prevented from offending the memory of Chateaubriand. There are cases in which the dead count for more than the living; I went to the Academy.

The Academy last Thursday had suddenly decided, at the opening of the session, at a time when nobody had yet put in an appearance, when there were only four or five round the green table, that on January 11 (that is to say, in three weeks) it would fill the two seats left vacant by MM. de Chateaubriand and Vatout. This strange alliance, I do not say of names, but of words,— “replace MM. de Chateaubriand and Vatout,” — did not stop it for one minute. The Academy is thus made; its wit and that wisdom which produces so many follies, are composed of extreme lightness combined with extreme heaviness. Hence a good deal of foolishness and a good many foolish acts.

Beneath this lightness, however, there was an intention. This giddiness was fraught with deep meaning. The brave party that leads the Academy, for there are parties everywhere, even at the Academy, hoped, public attention being directed elsewhere, politics absorbing everything, to juggle the seat of Chateaubriand pell-mell with the seat of M. Vatout; two peas in the same goblet. In this way the astonished public would turn round one fine morning and simply see M. de Noailles in Chateaubriand’s seat: a small matter, a great lord in the place of a great writer!

Then, after a roar of laughter, everybody would go about his business again, distractions would speedily come, thanks to the veering of politics, and, as to the Academy, oh! a duke and peer the more in it, a little more ridicule upon it, what would that matter? It would go on just the same!

Besides, M. de Noailles is a considerable personage. Bearing a great name, being lofty of manner, enjoying an immense fortune, of certain political weight under Louis Philippe, accepted by the Conservatives although, or because, a Legitimist, reading speeches that were listened to, he occupied an important place in the Chamber of Peers; which proves that the Chamber of Peers occupied an unimportant place in the country.

Chateaubriand, who hated all that could replace him and smiled at all that could make him regretted, had had the kindness to tell him sometimes, by Mme. Récamier's fireside, "that he hoped he would be his successor;" which prompted M. de Noailles to dash off a big book in two volumes about Mme. de Maintenon, at the commencement of which, on the first page of the preface, I was stopped by a lordly breach of grammar.

This was the state of things when I concluded to go to the Academy.

The session which was announced to begin at two o'clock, as usual, opened, as usual, at a quarter past three. And at half past three —

At half past three the candidacy of Monsieur the Duke do Noailles, *replacing* Chateaubriand, was irresistibly acclaimed.

Decidedly, I ought to have gone to the Assembly.

March 26, 1850. Tuesday.

I had arrived early, at noon.

I was warming myself, for it is very cold, and the ground is covered with snow, which is not good for the apricot trees. M. Guizot, leaning against the mantelpiece, was saying to me:

"As a member of the dramatic prize committee, I read yesterday, in a single day, mind you, no fewer than six plays!"

"That," I responded, "was to punish you for not having seen one acted in eighteen years."

At this moment M. Thiers came up and the two men exchanged greetings. This is how they did it:

M. THIERS: Good afternoon, Guizot.

M. GUIZOT: Good afternoon, Monsieur.

AN ELECTION SESSION. March 28, 1850.

M. Guizot presided. At the roll call, when M. Pasquier's name was reached he said: "Monsieur the Chancellor—" When he got to that of M. Dupin, President of the National Assembly, he called: "Monsieur Dupin."

First ballot.

Alfred de Musset	5 votes.
M. Nisard	23 "

M. Nisard is elected.

—— —— —

To-day, September 12, the Academy worked at the dictionary. A propos of the word "increase," this example, taken from the works of Mme. de Staël, was proposed:

"Poverty increases ignorance, and ignorance poverty."

Three objections were immediately raised:

1. Antithesis.
2. Contemporary writer.
3. Dangerous thing to say.

The Academy rejected the example.

LOVE IN PRISON.

I.

BESIDES misdeeds, robberies, the division of spoils after an ambuscade, and the twilight exploitation of the barriers of Paris, footpads, burglars, and gaol-birds generally have another industry: they have ideal loves.

This requires explanation.

The trade in negro slaves moves us, and with good reason; we examine this social sore, and we do well. But let us also learn to lay bare another ulcer, which is more painful, perhaps: the traffic in white women.

Here is one of the singular things connected with and characteristic of this poignant disorder of our civilization:

Every gaol contains a prisoner who is known as the “artist.”

All kinds of trades and professions peculiar to prisons develop behind the bars. There is the vendor of liquorice-water, the vendor of scarfs, the writer, the advocate, the usurer, the hut-maker, and the barker. The artist takes rank among these local and peculiar professions between the writer and the advocate.

To be an artist is it necessary to know how to draw? By no means. A bit of a bench to sit upon, a wall to lean against, a lead pencil, a bit of pasteboard, a needle stuck in a handle made out of a piece of wood, a little Indian ink or sepia, a little Prussian blue, and a little vermilion in three cracked beechwood spoons, — this is all that is requisite; a knowledge of drawing is superfluous. Thieves are as fond of colouring as children are, and as fond of tattooing as are savages. The artist by means of his three spoons satisfies the first of these needs, and by means of his needle the second. His remuneration is a “nip” of wine.

The result is this:

Some prisoners, say, lack everything, or are simply desirous of living more comfortably. They combine, wait upon the artist, offer him their glasses of wine or their bowls of soup, hand him a sheet of paper and order of him a bouquet. In the bouquet there must be as many flowers as there are prisoners in the group. If there be three prisoners, there must be three flowers. Each flower bears a figure, or, if preferred, a number, which number is that of the prisoner.

The bouquet when painted is sent, through the mysterious means of communication between the various prisons that the police are powerless to prevent, to Saint Lazare. Saint Lazare is the women’s prison, and where there are women there also is pity. The bouquet circulates from hand to hand among the unfortunate creatures that the police detain administratively at Saint Lazare; and in a few days the infallible secret post apprises those who sent the bouquet that Palmyre has chosen the tuberose, that Fanny prefers the azalea, and that Seraphine has adopted the geranium. Never is this lugubrious handkerchief thrown into the seraglio without being picked up.

Thenceforward the three bandits have three servants whose names are Palmyre, Fanny, and Seraphine. Administrative detentions are relatively of short duration. These women are released from prison before the men. And what do they do? They support them. In elegant phraseology they are providences; in plain language they are milch-cows.

Pity has been transformed into love. The heart of woman is susceptible of such sombre graftings. These women say:

“I am married.” They are married indeed. By whom? By the flower. With whom? With the abyss. They are fiancées of the unknown. Enraptured and enthusiastic fiancées. Pale Sulamites of fancy and fog. When the known is so odious, how can they help loving the unknown?

In these nocturnal regions and with the winds of dispersion that blow, meetings are almost impossible. The lovers see each other in dreams. In all probability the woman will never set eyes on the man. Is he young? Is he old? Is he handsome? Is he ugly? She does not know; she knows nothing about him. She adores him. And it is because she does not know him that she loves him. Idolatry is born of mystery.

This woman, drifting aimlessly on life’s tide, yearns for something to cling to, a tie to bind her, a duty to perform. The pit from amid its scum throws it to her; she accepts it and devotes herself to it. This mysterious bandit, transformed into heliotrope or iris, becomes a religion to her. She espouses him in the presence of night. She has a thousand little wifely attentions for him; poor for herself, she is rich for him; she whelms this manure with her delicate solicitude. She is faithful to him with all the fidelity of which she is still capable; the incorruptible emanates from the corruptible. Never does this woman betray her love. It is an immaterial, pure, ethereal love, subtile as the breath of spring, solid as brass.

A flower has done all this. What a well is the human heart, and how giddy it makes one to peer into it! Lo! the cloaca. Of what is it thinking? Of perfume. A prostitute loves a thief through a lily. What plunger into human thought could reach the bottom of this? Who shall fathom this immense yearning for flowers that springs from mud? In the secret self of these hapless women is a strange equilibrium that consoles and reassures them. A rose counterbalances an act of shame.

Hence these amours based on and sustained by illusion. This thief is idolized by this girl. She has not seen his face, she does not know his name; she sees him in visions induced by the perfume of jessamine or of pinks. Henceforward flower-gardens, the May sunshine, the birds in their nests, exquisite tints, radiant blossoms, boxes of orange trees and daphne odora, velvet petals upon which golden bees alight, the sacred odours of spring-tide, balms, incense, purling brooks, and soft green grass are associated with this bandit. The divine smile of nature penetrates and illumines him.

This desperate aspiring to paradise lost, this deformed dream of the beautiful, is not less tenacious on the part of the man. He turns towards the woman; and this preoccupation, become insensate, persists even when the dreadful shadow of the two red posts of the guillotine is thrown upon the window of his cell. The day before his execution Delaporte, chief of the Trappes band, who was wearing the strait-jacket, asked of the convict Cogniard, whom, through the grating in the door of the condemned cell, he saw passing by: “Are there any pretty women in the visitors’ parlor this morning?” Another condemned man, Avril (what a name!), in this same cell, bequeathed all that he possessed — five francs — to a female prisoner whom he had seen at a distance in the women’s yard, “in order that she may buy herself a fichu a la mode.”

Between the male and female wretch dreams build a Bridge of Sighs, as it were. The mire of the gutter dallies with the door of a prison cell. The Aspasia of the street-corner aspires and respires with the heart of the Alcibiades who waylays the passer-by at the corner of a wood.

You laugh? You should not. It is a terrible thing.

II.

The murderer is a flower for the courtesan. The prostitute is the Clytia of the assassin sun. The eye of the woman damned languourously seeks Satan among the myrtles.

What is this phenomenon? It is the need of the ideal. A sublime and awful need.

A terrible thing, I say.

Is it a disease? Is it a remedy? Both. This noble yearning is at the same time and for the same beings a chastisement and a reward; a voluptuousness full of expiation; a chastisement for faults committed, a recompense for sorrows borne! None may escape it. It is a hunger of angels felt by demons. Saint Theresa experiences it, Messalina also. This need of the immaterial is the most deeply rooted of all needs. One must have bread; but before bread, one must have the ideal. One is a thief, one is a street-walker — all the more reason. The more one drinks of the darkness of night the more is one thirsty for the light of dawn. Schinderhannes becomes a cornflower, Poulailler a violet. Hence these sinisterly ideal weddings.

And then, what happens?

What I have just said.

Cloaca, but abyss. Here the human heart opens partly, disclosing unimaginable depths. Astarte becomes platonic. The miracle of the transformation of monsters by love is being accomplished. Hell is being gilded. The vulture is being metamorphosed into a bluebird. Horror ends in the pastoral. You think you are at Vouglans’s and Parent-Duchâtelet’s; you are at Longus’s. Another step and you will stumble into Berquin’s. Strange indeed is it to encounter Daphnis and Chloe in the Forest of Bondy!

The dark Saint Martin Canal, into which the footpad pushes the passer-by with his elbow as he snatches his victim’s watch, traverses the Tender and empties itself into the Lignon. Poulmann begs a ribbon bow; one is tempted to present a shepherdess’s crook to Papavoine. Through the straw of the sabot one sees gossamer wings appearing on horrible heels. The miracle of the roses is performed for Goton. All fatalities combined have for result a flower. A vague Rambouillet Palace is superposed upon the forbidding silhouette of the Salpêtrière. The leprous wall of evil, suddenly covered with blossoms, affords a pendant to the wreath of Juliet. The sonnets of Petrarch, that flight of the ideal which soars in the shadow of souls, venture through the twilight towards this abjection and suffering, attracted by one knows not what obscure affinity, even as a swarm of bees is sometimes seen humming over a dungheap from which arises, perceptible to the bees alone and mingling with the miasms, the perfume of a hidden flower. The gemoniae are Elysian. The chimerical thread of celestial unions floats ‘neath the darkest vault of the human Erebus and binds despairing hearts to hearts that are monstrous. Manon through the infinite sends to Cartouche a smile ineffable as that with which Everallin entranced Fingal. From one pole of misery to the other, from one gehenna to another, from the galleys to the brothel, tenebrous mouths wildly exchange the kiss of azure.

It is night. The monstrous ditch of Clamart opens. From it arises a miasm, a phosphorescent glow. It shines and flickers in two separate tarts; it takes shape, the head rejoins the body, it is a phantom; the phantom gazes into the darkness with wild, baleful eyes, rises, grows bigger and blue, hovers for an instant and then speeds away to the zenith to open the door of the palace of the sun where butterflies flit from flower to flower and angels flit from star to star.

In all these strange, concordant phenomena appears the inadmissibility of the principle that is all of man. The mysterious marriage which we have just related, marriage of servitude with captivity, exaggerates the ideal from the very fact that it is weighed down by all the most hideous burdens of destiny. A frightful combination! It is the From it rises a miasm, a phosphorescent glow. It shines meeting of these two redoubtable words in which human existence is summed up: enjoy and suffer.

Alas! And how can we prevent this cry from escaping us? For these hapless ones, enjoy, laugh, sing, please, and love exist, persist; but there is a death-rattle in sing, a grating sound in laugh, putrefaction in enjoy, there are ashes in please, there is night in love. All these joys are attached to their destiny by coffin-nails.

What does that matter? They thirst for these lugubrious, chimerical glimpses of light that are full of dreams.

What is tobacco, that is so precious and so dear to the prisoner? It is a dream. “Put me in the dungeon,” said a convict, “but give me some tobacco.” In other words: “Throw me into a pit, but give me a palace.” Press the prostitute and the bandit, mix Tartarus and Avernus, stir the fatal vat of social mire, pile all the deformities of matter together, and what issues therefrom? The immaterial.

The ideal is the Greek fire of the gutter. It burns there. Its brightness in the impure water dazzles the thinker and touches his heart. Nini Lassive stirs and brightens with Fiesehi’s bilets-doux that sombre lamp of Vesta which is in the heart of every woman, and which is as inextinguishable in that of the courtesan as in that of the Carmelite. This is what explains the word “virgin,” accorded by the Bible equally to the foolish virgin and to the wise virgin.

That was so yesterday, it is so to-day. Here again the surface has changed, the bottom remains the same. The frank harshness of the Middle Ages has been somewhat softened in our times. Ribald is pronounced light o’ love; Toinon answers to the name of Olympia or Imperia; Thomasse-la-Maraude is called Mme. de Saint Alphonse. The caterpillar was real, the butterfly is false; that is the only change. Clout has become chiffon.

Regnier used to say “sows “; we say “fillies.”

Other fashions; same manners.

The foolish virgin is lugubriously immutable.

III.

Whosoever witnesses this kind of anguish witnesses the extreme of human misfortune.

Dark zones are these. Baleful night bursts and spreads o’er them. Evil accumulated dissolves in misfortune upon them, they are swept with blasts of despair by the tempest of fatalities, there a downpour of trials and sorrows streams upon dishevelled heads in the darkness; squalls, hail, a hurricane of distress, swirl and whirl back and forth athwart them; it rains, rains without cease: it rains horror, it rains vice, it rains crime, it rains the blackness of night; yet we must explore this obscurity, and in the sombre storm the mind essays a difficult flight, the flight of a wet bird, as it were.

There is always a vague, spectral dread in these low regions where hell penetrates; they are so little in the human order and so disproportionate that they create phantoms. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that a legend should be connected with this sinister bouquet offered by Bicêtre to La Salpêtrière or by La Force to Saint Lazare; it is related at night in the cells and wards after the keepers have gone their rounds.

It was shortly after the murder of the money-changer Joseph. A bouquet was sent from La Force to a woman’s prison, Saint Lazare or the Madelonnettes. In this bouquet was a sprig of white lilac which one of the women prisoners selected.

A month or two elapsed; the woman was released from prison. She was extremely enamoured, through the white lilac, of the unknown master she had given to herself. She began to perform for him her strange function of sister, mother, and mystic spouse, ignorant of his name, knowing only his prison number. All her miserable savings, religiously deposited with the clerk of the prison, went to this man. In order the better to affiance herself to him, she took advantage of the advent of spring to cull a sprig of real lilac in the fields. This sprig of lilac, attached by a piece of sky-blue ribbon to the head of his bed, formed a pendant to a sprig of consecrated box, an ornament which these poor desolate alcoves never lack. The lilac withered thus.

This woman, like all Paris, had heard of the affair of the Palais-Royal and of the two Italians, Malagutti and Ratta, arrested for the murder of the money-changer.

She thought little about the tragedy, which did not concern her, and lived only in her white lilac. This lilac was all in all to her; she thought only of doing her “duty” to it.

One bright, sunny day she was seated in her room, sewing some garment or other for her sorry evening toilet. Now and then she looked up from her work at the lilac that hung at the head of the bed. At one of these moments while her gaze was fixed upon the sprig of faded flower the clock struck four.

Then she fancied she saw an extraordinary thing.

A sort of crimson pearl oozed from the extremity of the stalk of the flower, grew larger, and dripped on to the white sheet of the bed.

It was a spot of blood.

That day, at that very hour, Ratta and Malagutti were executed.

It was evident that the white lilac was one of these two. But which one?

The hapless girl became insane and had to be confined in La Salpêtrière. She died there. From morn to night, and from night to morn, she would gibber: “I am Mme. Ratta-Malagutti.”

Thus are these sombre hearts.

IV.

Prostitution is an Isis whose final veil none has raised. There is a sphinx in this gloomy odalisk of the frightful Sultan Everybody. None has solved its enigma. It is Nakedness masked. A terrible spectacle!

Alas! in all that we have just recounted man is abominable, woman is touching.

How many hapless ones have been driven to their fall!

The abyss is the friend of dreams. Fallen, as we have said, their lamentable hearts have no other resource than to dream.

What caused their ruin was another dream, the dreadful dream of riches; nightmare of glory, of azure, and ecstasy which weighs upon the chest of the poor; flourish of trumpets heard in the gehenna, with the triumph of the fortunate appearing resplendent in the immense night; prodigious overture full of dawn! Carriages roll, gold falls in showers, laces rustle.

Why should I not have this, too? Formidable thought!

This gleam from the sinister vent-hole dazzled them; this puff of the sombre vapour inebriated them, and they were lost, and they were rich.

Wealth is a fatal distant light; woman flies frantically towards it. This mirror catches this lark.

Wherefore they have been rich. They, too, have had their day of enchantment, their minute of fête, their sparkle.

They have had that fever which is fatal to modesty. They have drained the sonorous cup that is full of nothingness. They have drunk of the madness of forgetfulness. What a flattering hope! What temptation! To do nothing and have everything; alas! and also to have nothing, not even one's own self. To be slave-flesh, to be beauty for sale, a woman fallen to a thing! They have dreamed and they have had — which is the same thing, complete possession being but a dream — mansions, carriages, servants in livery, suppers joyous with laughter, the house of gold, silk, velvet, diamonds, pearls, life giddy with voluptuousness — every pleasure.

Oh! how much better is the innocence of those poor little barefooted ones on the shore of the sea, who hear at nightfall the tinkling of the cracked bells of the goats on the cliffs!

There was a disastrous morrow to these brief, perfidious joys that they had savoured. The word love signified hatred. The invisible doubles the visible, and it is lugubrious. Those who shared their raptures, those to whom they gave all, received all and accepted nothing. They — the fallen ones — sowed their seed in ashes. They were deserted even as they were being embraced. Abandonment sniggered behind the mask of the kiss.

And now, what are they to do? They must perforce continue to love.

V.

Oh! if they could, the unhappy creatures, if they could put from them their hearts, their dreams, harden themselves with a hardness that could not be softened, be forever cold and passionless, tear out their entrails, and, since they are filth, become monsters! If they could no longer think! If they could ignore the flower, efface the star, stop up the mouth of the pit, close heaven! They would at least no longer suffer. But no. They have a right to marriage, they have a right to the heart, they have a right to torture, they have a right to the ideal. No chilling of their hearts can put out the internal fire. However cold they may be they burn. This, we have said, is at once their misery and their crown. This sublimeness combines with their abjection to overwhelm them and raise them up. Whether they will or not, the inextinguishable does not become extinguished. Illusion is untamable. Nothing is more invincible than dreams, and man is almost made up of dreams. Nature will not agree to be insolvable. One must contemplate, aspire, love. If need be marble will set the example. The statue becomes a woman rather than the woman a statue.

The sewer is a sanctuary in spite of itself. It is unhealthy, there is vitiated air in it, but the irresistible phenomenon is none the less accomplished; all the holy generosities bloom livid in this cave. Cynicism and the secret despair of pity are driven back by ecstasy, the magnificences of kindness shine through infamy; this orphan creature feels herself to be wife, sister, mother; and this fraternity which has no family, and this maternity which has no children, and this adoration which has no altar, she casts into the outer darkness. Some one marries her. Who? The man in the gloom. She sees on her finger the ring made of the mysterious gold of dreams. And she sobs. Torrents of tears well from her eyes. Sombre delights!

And at the same time, let us repeat it, she suffers unheard-of tortures. She does not belong to him to whom she has given herself. Everybody takes her away again. The brutal public hand holds the wretched creature and will not let her go. She fain would flee. Flee whither? From whom? From you, herself, above all from him whom she loves, the funereal ideal man. She cannot.

Thus, and these are extreme afflictions, this hapless wight expiates, and her expiation is brought upon her by her grandeur. Whatever she may do, she has to love. She is condemned to the light. She has to condole, she has to succour, she has to devote herself, she has to be kind. A woman who has lost her modesty, fain would know love no more; impossible. The refluxes of the heart are as inevitable as those of the sea; the lights of the heart are as fixed as those of the night.

There is within us that which we can never lose. Abnegation, sacrifice, tenderness, enthusiasm, all these rays turn against the woman within her inmost self and attack and burn her. All these virtues remain to avenge themselves upon her. When she would have been a wife, she is a slave. Hers is the hopeless, thankless task of lulling a brigand in the blue nebulousness of her illusions and of decking Mandrin with a starry rag. She is the sister of charity of crime. She loves, alas! She endures her inadmissible divinity; she is magnanimous and thrills at so being. She is happy with a horrible happiness. She enters backwards into indignant Eden.

We do not sufficiently reflect upon this that is within us and cannot be lost.

Prostitution, vice, crime, what matters!

Night may become as black as it likes, the spark is still there. However low you go there is light. Light in the vagabond, light in the mendicant, light in the thief, light in the street-walker. The deeper you go the more the miraculous light persists in showing itself.

Every heart has its pearl, which is the same for the heart gutter and the heart ocean — love.

No mire can dissolve this particle of God.

Wherefore, there, at the extreme of gloom, of despondency, of chill-heartedness and abandonment; in this obscurity, in this putrefaction, in these gaols, in these dark paths, in this shipwreck; beneath the lowest layer of the heap of miseries, under the bog of public disdain which is ice and night; behind the eddying of those frightful snowflakes the judges, the gendarmes, the warders and the executioners for the bandit, the passers-by for the prostitute, which cross each other, innumerable, in the dull grey mist that for these wretches replace the sun; beneath these pitiless fatalities; beneath this bewildering maze of vaults, some of granite, the others of hatred; at the deepest depths of horror; in the midst of asphyxiation; at the bottom of the chaos of all possible blacknesses; under the frightful thickness of a deluge composed of expectorations, there where all is extinct, where all is dead, something moves and shines. What is it? A flame.

And what flame?

The soul.
O adorable prodigy!
Love, the ideal, is found even in the Pit.

AT THE TUILERIES. 1844-1848.

I. THE KING.
II. THE DUCHESS D’ORLEANS.
III. THE PRINCES.

I. THE KING. * June, 28, 1844.

* Louis Philippe.

The King told me that Talleyrand said to him one day:

“You will never be able to do anything with Thiers, although he would make an excellent tool. He is one of those men one cannot make use of unless one is able to satisfy them. Now, he never will be satisfied. It is unfortunate for him, as for you, that in our times, he cannot be made a cardinal.”

A propos of the fortifications of Paris, the King told me how the Emperor Napoleon learned the news of the taking of Paris by the allies.

The Emperor was marching upon Paris at the head of his guard. Near Juvisy, at a place in the Forest of Fontainebleau where there is an obelisk (“that I never see without feeling heavy at heart,” remarked the King), a courier on his way to meet Napoleon brought him the news of the capitulation of Paris. Paris had been taken. The enemy had entered it. The Emperor turned pale. He hid his face in his hands and remained thus, motionless, for a quarter of an hour. Then, without saying a word, he turned about and took the road back to Fontainebleau.

General Athalin witnessed this scene and recounted it to the King.

July, 1844.

A few days ago the King said to Marshal Soult (in presence of others):

“Marshal, do you remember the siege of Cadiz?”

“Rather, sire, I should think so. I swore enough before that cursed Cadiz. I invested the place and was forced to go away as I had come.”

“Marshal, while you were before it, I was inside it.”

“I know, sire.”

“The Cortes and the English Cabinet offered me the command of the Spanish army.”

“I remember it.”

“The offer was a grave one. I hesitated long. Bear arms against France! For my family, it is possible; but against my country! I was greatly perplexed. At this juncture you asked me, through a trusty person, for a secret interview in a little house situated on the Cortadura, between the city and your camp. Do you remember the fact, Monsieur the Marshal?”

“Perfectly, sire; the day was fixed and the interview arranged.”

“And I did not turn up.”

“That is so.”

“Do you know why?”

“I never knew.”

“I will tell you. As I was preparing to go to meet you, the commander of the English squadron, apprised of the matter, I know not how, dropped upon me brusquely and warned me that I was about to fall into a trap; that Cadiz being impregnable, they despaired of seizing me, but that at the Cortadura I should be arrested by you; that the Emperor wished to make of the Duke d’Orleans a second volume of the Duke d’Enghien, and that you would have me shot immediately. There, really,” added the King with a smile, “your hand on your conscience, were you going to shoot me?”

The Marshal remained silent for a moment, then replied, with a smile not less inexpressible than that of the King:

“No, sire; I wanted to compromise you.”

The subject of conversation was changed. A few minutes later the Marshal took leave of the King, and the King, as he watched him go, said with a smile to the person who heard this conversation:

“Compromise! compromise! To-day it is called compromise. In reality, he would have shot me!”

August 4, 1844.

Yesterday the King said to me:

“One of my embarrassments at present, in all this affair of the University and the clergy, is M. Affre.” *

* Archbishop Affre was shot and killed in the Faubourg Saint Antoine on September 25, 1848, while trying to stop

the fighting between the troops and insurgents.

“Then why, sire,” said I, “did you appoint him?”

“I made a mistake, I admit. I had at first appointed to the archbishopric of Paris the Cardinal of Arras, M. de la Tour d’Auvergne.”

“It was a good choice,” I observed.

“Yes, good. He is insignificant. An honest old man of no account. An easy-going fellow. He was much sought after by the Carlists. Greatly imposed upon. His whole family hated me. He was induced to refuse. Not knowing what to do, and being in haste, I named M. Affre. I ought to have been suspicious of him. His countenance is neither open nor frank. I took his underhand air for a priestly air; I did wrong. And then, you know, it was in 1840. Thiers proposed him to me, and urged me to appoint him. Thiers is no judge of archbishops. I did it without sufficient reflection. I ought to have remembered what Talleyrand said to me one day: ‘The Archbishop of Paris must always be an old man. The see is quieter and becomes vacant more frequently.’ I appointed M. Affre, who is young; it was a mistake. However, I will re-establish the chapter of St. Denis and appoint as primate of it the Cardinal de la Tour d’Auvergne. The Papal Nuncio, to whom I spoke of my project just now, laughed heartily at it, and said: ‘The Abbé Affre will commit some folly. Should he go to Rome the Pope will receive him very badly. He has acted pusillanimously and blunderingly on all occasions since he has been an archbishop. An archbishop of Paris who has any wit ought always to be on good terms with the King here and the Pope yonder.’”

August, 1844.

A month or two ago the King went to Dreux. It was the anniversary of the death of the Duke d’Orleans. The King had chosen this day to put the coffins of his relatives in the family vault in order.

Among the number was a coffin that contained all the bones of the princes of the House of Orleans that the Duchess d’Orleans, mother of the King, had been able to collect after the Revolution, when the sepulchre was violated and they were dispersed. The coffin, placed in a separate vault, had recently been smashed in by the fall of an arch. The debris of the arch, stones and plaster, had become mingled with the bones.

The King had the coffin brought and opened before him. He was alone in the vault with the chaplain and two aides-de-camp. Another coffin, larger and stronger, had been prepared. The King himself, with his own hands, took, one after the other, the bones of his ancestors from the broken coffin and arranged them carefully in the new one. He would not permit any one else to touch them. From time to time he counted the skulls and said: “This is Monsieur the Duke de Penthièvre. This is Monsieur the Count de Beaujolais.” Then to the best of his ability and as far as he was able to he completed each group of bones.

This ceremony lasted from nine o’clock in the morning until seven o’clock in the evening without the King taking either rest or nourishment.

August, 1844.

Yesterday, the 15th, after having dined at M. Villemain’s, who lives in a country house near Neuilly, I called upon the King.

The King was not in the salon, where there were only the Queen, Madame Adelaide and a few ladies, among them Mme. Firmin-Rogier, who is charming. There were many visitors, among others the Duke de Brogue and M. Rossi, who were of the dinner party at which I had been present, M. de Lesseps, who lately distinguished himself as consul at Barcelona, M. Firmin-Rogier and the Count d’Agout.

I bowed to the Queen, who spoke to me at length about the Princess de Joinvile, who was delivered the day before yesterday, and whose baby arrived on the very day the news of the bombardment of Tangier by its father was received. It is a little girl. The Princess de Joinvile passes the whole day kissing her and saying: “How pretty she is!” with that sweet southern accent which the raillery of her brothers-in-law has not yet caused her to lose.

While I was talking to the Queen, the Duchess d’Orleans, dressed in black, came in and sat beside Madame Adelaide, who said to her: “Good evening, dear Helene.”

A moment afterwards, M. Guizot, in black, wearing a chain of decorations, with a red ribbon in his buttonhole and the badge of the Legion of Honour on his coat, and looking pale and grave, crossed the salon. I grasped his hand as he passed and he said:

“I have sought you vainly during the past few days. Come and spend a day with me in the country. We have a lot to talk about. I am at Auteuil, No. 4, Place d’Agueneau.”

“Will the King come to-night?” I asked.

“I do not think so,” he replied. “He is with Admiral de Mackau. There is serious news. He will be occupied all the evening.”

Then M. Guizot went away.

It was nearly ten o’clock, and I also was about to take my departure when one of Madame Adelaide’s ladies of honour, sent by the Princess, came and told me that the King desired to speak with me and requested that I would remain. I returned to the salon, which had become almost empty.

A moment later, as ten o’clock was striking, the King came in. He wore no decorations and had a preoccupied air. As he passed by he said to me:

“Wait until I have gone my round; we shall have a little more time when everybody has left. There are only four persons here now and I have only four words to say to them.”

In truth, he only tarried a moment with the Prussian Ambassador and M. de Lesseps, who had to communicate to him a letter from Alexandria relative to the strange abdication of the Pacha of Egypt.

Everybody took leave, and then the King came to me, thrust his arm in mine and led me into the large anteroom where he seated himself, and bade me be seated, upon a red lounge which is between two doors opposite the fireplace. Then he began to talk rapidly, energetically, as though a weight were being lifted from his mind:

“Monsieur Hugo, I am pleased to see you. What do you think of it all? All this is grave, yet it appears graver than it really is. But in politics, I know, one has sometimes to take as much into account that which appears grave as that which is grave. We made a mistake in taking this confounded protectorate. * We thought we were doing something popular for France, and we have done something embarrassing for the world. The popular effect was mediocre; the embarrassing effect is enormous. What did we want to hamper ourselves with Tahiti (the King pronounced it Taëte) for? What to us was this pinch of tobacco seeds in the middle of the ocean? What is the use of lodging our honour four thousand leagues away in the box of a sentry insulted by a savage and a madman? Upon the whole there is something laughable about it. When all is said and done it is a small matter and nothing big will come of it. Sir Robert Peel has spoken thoughtlessly. He has acted with schoolboy foolishness. He has diminished his consideration in Europe. He is a serious man, but capable of committing thoughtless acts. Then he does not know any languages. Unless he be a genius there are perforce gaps in the ideas of a man who is not a linguist. Now, Sir Robert has no genius. Would you believe it? He does not know French. Consequently he does not understand anything about France. French ideas pass before him like shadows. He is not malevolent, no; he is not open, that is all. He has spoken without reflection. I judged him to be what he is forty years ago. It was, too, forty years ago that I saw him for the first time. He was then a young man and secretary of the Earl of — (I did not quite catch the name. The King spoke quickly). I often visited that house. I was then in England. When I saw young Peel I felt sure that he would go a long way, but that he would stop. Was I mistaken? There are Englishmen, and of the highest rank, who do not understand Frenchmen a bit. Like that poor Duke of Clarence, who afterwards was William IV. He was but a sailor. One must beware of the sailor mind, as I often say to my son Joinville. He who is only a sailor is nothing on land. Well, this Duke of Clarence used to say to me: ‘Duke d’Orleans, a war between France and England is necessary every twenty years. History shows it.’ I would reply: ‘My dear duke, of what use are people of intelligence if they allow mankind to do the same foolish things over and over again?’ The Duke of Clarence, like Peel, did not know a word of French.

* The protectorate of Tahiti.

“What a difference between these men and Huskisson! You know, Huskisson who was killed on a railway. He was a masterly man, if you like. He knew French and liked France. He had been my comrade at the Jacobins’ Club. I do not say this in bad part. He understood everything. If there were in England now a man like him, he and I would ensure the peace of the world. — Monsieur Hugo, we will do it without him. I will do it alone. Sir Robert Peel will reconsider what he has said. Egad! he said that! Does he even know why or how?

“Have you seen the English Parliament? You speak from your place, standing, in the midst of your own party; you are carried away; you say more often than not what others think instead of what you think yourself. There is a magnetic communication. You are subjected to it. You rise (here the King rose and imitated the gesture of an orator speaking in Parliament). The assembly ferments all round and close to you; you let yourself go. On this side somebody says: ‘England has suffered a gross insult;’ and on that side: ‘with gross indignity.’ It is simply applause that is sought on both sides. Nothing more. But this is bad. It is dangerous. It is baleful. In France our tribune which isolates the orator has many advantages.

“Of all the English statesmen, I have known only one who was able to withstand this influence of assemblies. He was M. Pitt. M. Pitt was a clever man, although he was very tall. He had an air of awkwardness and spoke hesitatingly. His lower jaw weighed a hundredweight. Hence a certain slowness which forcibly brought prudence into his speeches. Besides, what a statesman this Pitt was! They will render justice to him one of these days, even in France. Pitt and Coburg are still being harped upon. But it is a childish foolishness that will pass. M. Pitt knew French. To carry on politics properly we must have Englishmen who know French and Frenchmen who know English.

“Look here, I am going to England next month. I shall be very well received: I speak English. And then, Englishmen appreciate the fact that I have studied them closely enough not to detest them. For one always begins by detesting the English. This is an effect of the surface. I esteem them, and pride myself upon the fact. Between ourselves, there is one thing I apprehend in going to England, and that is, a too warm welcome. I shall have to elude an ovation. Popularity there would render me unpopular here. But I must not get myself badly received either. Badly received there, taunted here. Oh! it is not easy to move when one is Louis Philippe, is it, Monsieur Hugo?

“However, I will endeavour to manage it better than that big stupid the Emperor of Russia, who went riding full gallop in search of a fall. There is an addle-pate for you. What a simpleton! He is nothing but a Russian corporal, occupied with a boot-heel and a gaiter button. What an idea to arrive in London on the eve of the Polish ball! Do you think I would go to England on the eve of the anniversary of Waterloo? What is the use of running deliberately into trouble? Nations do not derange their ideas for us princes.

“Monsieur Hugo! Monsieur Hugo! intelligent princes are very rare. Look at this Pacha of Egypt, who had a bright mind and who abdicates, like Charles V., who, although he was not without genius, committed the same foolish action. Look at this idiotic King of Morocco! What a job to govern amid this mob of bewildered Kings. They won’t force me into committing the great mistake of going to war. I am being pushed, but they won’t push me over. Listen to this and remember it: the secret of maintaining peace is to look at everything from the good side and at nothing from the bad point of view. Oh! Sir Robert Peel is a singular man to speak so wildly. He does not know all our strength. He does not reflect!

“The Prince of Prussia made a very true remark to my daughter at Brussels last winter: ‘What we envy France, is Algeria. Not on account of the territory, but on account of the war. It is a great and rare good fortune for France to have at her doors a war that does not trouble Europe and which is making an army for her. We as yet have only review and parade soldiers. When a collision occurs we shall only have soldiers who have been made by peace. France, thanks to Algiers, will have soldiers made by war.’ This is what the Prince of Prussia said, and it was true.

“Meanwhile, we are making children, too. Last month it was my daughter of Nemours, this month it is my daughter of Joinville. She has given me a princess. I would have preferred a prince. But, pish! in view of the fact that they are trying to isolate my house among the royal houses of Europe future alliances must be thought of. Well, my grandchildren will marry among themselves. This little one who was born yesterday will not lack cousins, nor, consequently, a husband.”

Here the King laughed, and I rose. He had spoken almost without interruption for an hour and a quarter. I had only said a few words here and there. During this sort of long monologue Madame Adelaide passed as she retired to her apartments. The King said to her: “I will join you directly,” and he continued his conversation with me. It was nearly half-past eleven when I quitted the King.

It was during this conversation that the King said to me:

“Have you ever been to England?”

“No, sire.”

“Well, when you do go — for you will go — you will see how strange it is. It resembles France in nothing. Over there are order, arrangement, symmetry, cleanliness, wellmown lawns, and profound silence in the streets. The passers-by are as serious and mute as spectres. When, being French and alive, you speak in the street, these spectres look back at you and murmur with an inexpressible mixture of gravity and disdain: ‘French people!’ When I was in London I was walking arm-in-arm with my wife and sister. We were conversing, not in a too loud tone of voice, for we are well-bred persons, you know; yet all the passers-by, bourgeois and men of the people, turned to gaze at us and we could hear them growling behind us: ‘French people! French people!’”

September 5, 1844.

The King rose, paced to and fro for a few moments, as though violently agitated, then came and sat beside me and said:

“Look here, you made a remark to Villemain that he repeated to me. You said to him:

“‘The trouble between France and England a propos of Tahiti and Pritchard reminds me of a quarrel in a café between a couple of sub-lieutenants, one of whom has looked at the other in a way the latter does not like. A duel to the death is the result. But two great nations ought not to act like a couple of musketeers. Besides, in a duel to the death between two nations like England and France, it is civilization that would be slain.’

“This is really what you said, is it not?”

“Yes, Sire.”

“I was greatly struck by your observation, and this very evening I reproduced it in a letter to a crowned head, for I frequently write all night long. I pass many a night doing over again what others have undone. I do not say anything about it. So far from being grateful to me they would only abuse me for it. Oh! yes, mine is hard work indeed. At my age, with my seventy-one years, I do not get an instant of real repose either by day or by night. I am always unquiet, and how can it be otherwise when I feel that I am the pivot upon which Europe revolves?”

September 6, 1844.

The King said to me yesterday:

“What makes the maintenance of peace so difficult is that there are two things in Europe that Europe detests, France and myself — myself even more than France. I am talking to you in all frankness. They hate me because I am Orleans; they hate me because I am myself. As for France, they dislike her, but would tolerate her in other hands. Napoleon was a burden to them; they overthrew him by egging him on to war of which he was so fond. I am a burden to them; they would like to throw me down by forcing me to break that peace which I love."

Then he covered his eyes with his hands, and leaning his head back upon the cushions of the sofa, remained thus for a space pensive, and as though crushed.

September 6, 1844.

"I only met Robespierre in society once," said the King to me. "It was at a place called Mignot, near Poissy, which still exists. It belonged to a wealthy cloth manufacturer of Louviers, named M. Decréteau. It was in ninety-one or two. M. Decréteau one day invited me to dinner at Mignot. I went. When the time came we took our places at table. The other guests were Robespierre and Pétion, but I had never before seen Robespierre. Mirabeau aptly traced his portrait in a word when he said that his face was suggestive of that of 'a cat drinking vinegar.' He was very gloomy, and hardly spoke. When he did let drop a word from time to time, it was uttered sourly and with reluctance. He seemed to be vexed at having come, and because I was there.

"In the middle of the dinner, Pétion, addressing M. Decréteau, exclaimed: 'My dear host, you must get this buck married!' He pointed to Robespierre.

"'What do you mean, Pétion?' retorted Robespierre.

"'Mean,' said Pétion, 'why, that you must get married. I insist upon marrying you. You are full of sourness, hypochondria, gall, bad humour, biliousness and atrabiliousness I am fearful of all this on our account. What you want is a woman to sweeten this sourness and transform you into an easy-going old fogey.'

"Robespierre tossed his head and tried to smile, but only succeeded in making a grimace. It was the only time," repeated the King, "that I met Robespierre in society. After that I saw him in the tribune of the Convention. He was wearisome to a supreme degree, spoke slowly, heavily and at length, and was more sour, more gloomy, more bitter than ever. It was easy to see that Pétion had not married him."

September 7, 1844.

Said the King to me last Thursday:

“M. Guizot has great qualities and immense defects. (Queerly enough, M. Guizot on Tuesday had made precisely the same remark to me about the King, beginning with the defects.) M. Guizot has in the highest degree, and I esteem him for it profoundly, the courage of his unpopularity among his adversaries; among his friends he lacks it. He does not know how to quarrel momentarily with his partisans, which was Pitt’s great art. In the affair of Tahiti, as in that of the right of search, M. Guizot is not afraid of the Opposition, nor of the press, nor of the Radicals, nor of the Carlists, nor of the Legitimists, nor of the hundred thousand howlers in the hundred thousand public squares of France; he is afraid of Jacques Lefebvre. What will Jacques Lefebvre say? And Jacques Lefebvre is afraid of the Twelfth Arrondissement. * What will the Twelfth Arrondissement say? The Twelfth Arrondissement does not like the English: we must stand firm against the English; but it does not like war: we must give way to the English. Stand firm and give way. Reconcile that. The Twelfth Arrondissement governs Jacques Lefebvre, Jacques Lefebvre governs Guizot; a little more and the Twelfth Arrondissement will govern France. I say to Guizot: ‘What are you afraid of? Have a little pluck. Have an opinion.’ But there they all stand, pale and motionless and make no reply. Oh! fear! Monsieur Hugo, it is a strange thing, this fear of the hubbub that will be raised outside! It seizes upon this one, then that one, then that one, and it goes the round of the table. I am not a Minister, but if I were, it seems to me that I should not be afraid. I should see the right and go straight towards it. And what greater aim could there be than civilization through peace?”

* Twelfth District of Paris.

The Duke d’Orleans, a few years ago, recounted to me that during the period which followed immediately upon the revolution of July, the King gave him a seat at his council table. The young Prince took part in the deliberations of the Ministers. One day M. Merilhou, who was Minister of Justice, fell asleep while the King was speaking.

“Chartres,” said the King to his son, “wake up Monsieur the Keeper of the Seals.”

The Duke d’Orleans obeyed. He was seated next to M. Merilhou, and nudged him gently with his elbow. The Minister was sleeping soundly; the Prince recommenced, but the Minister slept on. Finally the Prince laid his hand upon M. Merilhou’s knee. The Minister awoke with a start and exclaimed:

“Leave off, Sophie, you are tickling me!”

This is how the word “subject” came to be eliminated from the preamble of laws and ordinances.

M. Dupont de l’Eure, in 1830, was Minister of Justice. On August 7, the very day the Duke d’Orleans took the oath as King, M. Dupont de l’Eure laid before him a law to sign. The preamble read: “Be it known and decreed to all our subjects,” etc. The clerk who was instructed to copy the law, a hot-headed young fellow, objected to the word “subjects,” and did not copy it.

The Minister of Justice arrived. The young man was employed in his office.

“Well,” said the Minister, “is the copy ready to be taken to the King for signature?”

“No, Monsieur the Minister,” replied the clerk.

Explanations. M. Dupont de l’Eure listened, then pinching the young man’s ear said, half smilingly, half angrily:

“Nonsense, Monsieur the Republican, you just copy it at once.”

The clerk hung his head, like a clerk that he was, and copied it.

M. Dupont, however, laughingly told the King about it. The King did not laugh. Everything appeared to be a serious matter at that time. M. Dupin senior, Minister without a portfolio, had entered the council chamber. He avoided the use of the word and got round the obstacle. He proposed this wording, which was agreed to and has always been used since: “Be it known and decreed to all.”

1847.

The State carriage of Louis Philippe was a big blue coach drawn by eight horses. The interior was of gold coloured damask. On the doors was the King’s monogram surmounted by a crown, and on the panels were royal crowns. The roof was bordered by eight little silver crowns. There was a gigantic coachman on the box and three lackeys behind. All wore silk stockings and the tri-colour livery of the d’Orleans.

The King would enter the carriage first and seat himself in the right hand corner. Then the Duke de Nemours would take his place beside the King.

The three other princes would follow and seat themselves, M. de Joinville opposite the King, M. de Montpensier opposite M. de Nemours, and M. d’Aumale in the middle.

The day the King attended Parliament, the grand deputations from both Houses, twelve peers and twenty-five deputies chosen by lot, awaited him on the grand staircase of the Palais Bourbon. As the sessions were nearly always held in winter, it was very cold on the stairs, a biting wind made all these old men shiver, and there are old generals of the Empire who did not die as the result of having been at Austerlitz, at Friedland, at the cemetery at Eylau, at the storming of the grand redoubt at Moskowa and under the fire of the Scottish squares at Waterloo, but of having waited in the cold upon these stairs.

The peers stood to the right and the deputies to the left, leaving the middle of the stairs clear. The staircase was partitioned off with hangings of white drill with blue stripes, which was a poor protection against draughts. Where are the good and magnificent tapestries of Louis XIV. They were indeed royal; wherefore they were taken down. Drill is a common material and more pleasing to the deputies. It charms and it freezes them.

The Queen arrived first with the princesses, but without the Duchess d’Orleans, who came separately with the Count de Paris. These ladies walked quickly upstairs, bowing to right and left, without speaking, but graciously, followed by a swarm of aides-de-camp and grim turbaned old women whom M. de Joinville called “the Queen’s Turks” — Mmes. de Dolokieu, de Chanaleilles, etc.

At the royal session of 1847, the Queen gave her arm to the Duchess de Montpensier. The princess was muffled up on account of the cold. I could see only a big red nose. The three other princesses walked behind, chatting and laughing. M. Anatole de Montesquiou came next in the much worn uniform of a major-general.

The King arrived about five minutes after the Queen; he walked upstairs even more quickly than she had done, followed by the princes running like schoolboys, and bowed to the peers on the right and the deputies on the left. He tarried a moment in the throne-room and exchanged a few greetings with the members of the two deputations. Then he entered the large hall.

The speech from the throne was written on parchment, on both sides of the sheet, and usually filled four pages. The King read it in a firm, well modulated voice.

Marshal Soult was present, resplendent with decorations, sashes, and gold lace, and complaining of his rheumatism. M. Pasquier, the Chancellor, did not put in an appearance. He had excused himself on the plea of the cold and of his eighty years. He had been present the year before. It was the last time.

In 1847 I was a member of the grand deputation. While I strolled about the waiting room, conversing with M. Villemain about Cracow, the Vienna treaties and the frontier of the Rhine, I could hear the buzzing of the groups around me, and scraps of conversation reached my ears.

COUNT DE LAGRANGE. — Ah! here comes the Marshal (Soult).

BARON PEDRE LACAZE. — He is getting old.

VISCOUNT CAVAIGNAC. — Sixty-nine years!

MARQUIS DR RAIGECOURT. — Who is the dean of the Chamber of Peers at present?

DUKE DE TREVISE. — M. de Pontecoulant, is he not?

MARQUIS DE LAPLACE. — NO, President Boyer. He is ninety-two.

PRESIDENT BARTHE. — He is older than that.

BARON D’OBERLIN. — He no longer comes to the Chamber.

M. VIENNET. — They say that M. Rossi is returning from Rome.

DUKE DE FESENZAC. — Well, I pity him for quitting Rome. It is the finest and most amiable city in the world. I hope to end my days there.

COUNT DE MONTALEMBERT. — And Naples!

BARON THENARD. — I prefer Naples.

M. FULCHIRON. — Yes, Naples, that’s the place. By the by, I was there when poor Nourrit killed himself. I was staying in the house next to his.

BARON CHARLES DUPIN. — He took his life? It was not an accident?

M. FULCHIRON. — Oh! it was a case of suicide, sure enough. He had been hissed the previous day. He could not stand that. It was in an opera composed expressly for him— “Polyceucte.” He threw himself from a height of sixty feet. His voice did not please that particular public. Nourrit was too much accustomed to sing Glück and Mozart. The Neapolitans said of him: “Vecchico canto.”

BARON DUPIN. — Poor Nourrit! why did he not wait! Duprez has lost his voice. Eleven years ago Duprez demolished Nourrit; to-day Nourrit would demolish Duprez.

MARQUIS DE BOISSY. — How cold it is on this staircase.

COUNT PHILIPPE DE SEGUR. — It was even colder at the Academy the other day. That poor Dupaty is a good man, but he made a bad speech.

BARON FEUTRIER. — I am trying to warm myself. What a frightful draught! It is enough to drive one away.

BARON CHARLES DUPIN. — M. Français de Nantes had conceived this expedient to rid himself of those who came to solicit favours and abridge their solicitations: he was given to receiving people between two doors.

M. Thiers at this time had a veritable court of deputies about him. After the session he walked out in front of me. A gigantic deputy, whose back only I could see, stepped aside, saying: “Make way for historical men!” And the big man let the little man pass.

Historical? May be. In what way?

II. THE DUCHESS D’ORLEANS.

Madame the Duchess d’Orleans is a rare woman, of great wit and common sense. I do not think that she is fully appreciated at the Tuileries. The King, though, holds her in high esteem and often engages in long conversations with her. Frequently he gives her his arm to escort her from the family drawing-room to her apartments. The royal daughters-in-law do not always appear to act as kindly towards her.

February 26, 1844.

Yesterday the Duchess d’Orleans said to me:

“My son is not what one would call an amiable child. He is not one of those pretty little prodigies who are an honour to their mothers, and of whom people say: ‘What a clever child! What wit! What grace!’ He has a kind heart, I know; he has wit, I believe; but nobody knows and believes this save myself. He is timid, wild, uncommunicative, easily scared. What will he become? I have no idea. Often at his age a child in his position understands that he must make himself agreeable, and, little as he is, sets himself to play his role. Mine hides himself in his mother’s skirt and lowers his eyes. But I love him, just as he is. I even prefer him this way. I like a savage better than a comedian.”

August, 1844.

The Count de Paris has signed the birth certificate of the Princess Françoise de Joinville. It was the first time that the little prince had signed his name. He did not know what was wanted of him, and when the King handed him the certificate and said “Paris, sign your name,” the child refused. The Duchess d’Orleans took him on her knee and whispered something to him. Then the child took the pen, and at the dictation of his grandfather wrote upon the certificate L. P. d. O. He made the O much too large and wrote the other letters awkwardly, and was very much embarrassed and shy.

He is charming, though, and adores his mother, but he hardly knows that his name is Louis Philippe d’Orleans. He writes to his comrades, to his tutor, and to his mother, but he signs his little missives “Paris.” It is the only name he knows himself by.

This evening the King sent for M. Regnier, the prince’s tutor, and gave him orders to teach the Count de Paris to sign his name.

1847.

The Count de Paris is of a grave and sweet disposition; he learns well. He is imbued with a natural tenderness, and is kind to those who suffer.

His young cousin of Wurtemberg, who is two months older, is jealous of him; as his mother, the Princess Marie, was jealous of the mother of the Count de Paris. During the lifetime of the Duke d’Orleans little Wurtemberg was long the object of the Queen’s preferences, and, in the little court of the corridors and bedchambers, it was the custom to flatter the Queen by comparisons between the one and the other that were always favourable to Wurtemberg. To-day that inequality has ceased. The Queen, by a touching sentiment, inclined towards little Wurtemberg because he had lost his mother; now there is no reason why she should not lean towards the Count de Paris, seeing that he has lost his father.

Little Michel Ney plays with the two princes every Sunday. He is eleven years old, and the son of the Duke d’Elchingen. The other day he said to his mother:

“Wurtemberg is an ambitious fellow. When we play he always wants to be the leader. Besides, he insists upon being called Monseigneur. I don’t mind calling him Monseigneur, but I won’t let him be leader. One day I invented a game, and I said to him: ‘No, Monseigneur, you are not going to be the leader. I will be leader, for I invented the game, and Chabannes will be my lieutenant. You and the Count de Paris will be soldiers.’ Paris was willing, but Wurtemberg walked away. He is an ambitious fellow.”

Of these young mothers of the Château, apart from the Duchess d’Orleans, Mme. de Joinville is the only one who does not spoil her children. At the Tuileries, everybody, even the King himself, calls her little daughter “Chiquette.” The Prince of Joinville calls his wife “Chicarde” since the pierrots’ ball, hence “Chiquette.” At this pierrots’ ball the King exclaimed: “How Chicarde is amusing herself!” The Prince de Joinville danced all the risquée dances. Mme. de Montpensier and Mme. Liadères were the only ones who were not decolletees. “It is not in good taste,” said the Queen. “But it is pretty,” observed the King.

III. THE PRINCES. 1847.

At the Tuileries the Prince de Joinville passes his time doing all sorts of wild things. One day he turned on all the taps and flooded the apartments. Another day he cut all the bell ropes. A sign that he is bored and does not know what to do with himself.

And what bores these poor princes most is to receive and talk to people ceremoniously. This is almost a daily obligation. They call it — for princes have their slang— “performing the function.” The Duke de Montpensier is the only one who performs it gracefully. One day the Duchess d’Orleans asked him the reason. He replied: “It amuses me.”

He is twenty years old, he is beginning.

When the marriage of M. de Montpensier with the Infanta was published, the King of the Belgians was sulky with the Tuileries. He is an Orleans, but he is a Coburg. It was as though his left hand had smitten his right cheek.

The wedding over, while the young couple were making their way from Madrid to Paris, King Leopold arrived at Saint Cloud, where King Louis Philippe was staying. The King of the Belgians wore an air of coldness and severity. Louis Philippe, after dinner, took him aside into a recess of the Queen’s drawing-room, and they conversed for fully an hour. Leopold’s face preserved its thoughtful and *English* expression. However at the conclusion of the conversation, Louis Philippe said to him:

“See Guizot.”

“He is precisely the man I do not want to see.”

“See him,” urged the King. “We will resume this conversation when you have done so.”

The next day M. Guizot waited upon King Leopold. He had with him an enormous portfolio filled with papers. The King received him. His manner was cold in the extreme. Both were reserved. It is probable that M. Guizot communicated to the King of the Belgians all the documents relative to the marriage and all the diplomatic papers. No one knows what passed between them. What is certain is that when M. Guizot left the King’s room Leopold’s air was gracious, though sad, and that he was heard to say to the Minister as he took leave of him: “I came here greatly dissatisfied with you. I shall go away satisfied. You have, in fact, in this affair acquired a new title to my esteem and to our gratitude. I intended to scold you; I thank you.”

These were the King’s own words.

The Prince de Joinville’s deafness increases. Sometimes it saddens him, sometimes he makes light of it. One day he said to me: “Speak louder, I am as deaf as a post.” On another occasion he bent towards me and said with a laugh:

“*J’abaisse le pavillion de l’oreille.*”

“It is the only one your highness will ever lower,” I replied.

M. de Joinville is of somewhat queer disposition. Now he is joyous to the point of folly, anon gloomy as a hypochondriac. He is silent for three days at a time, or his bursts of laughter are heard in the very attics of the Tuileries. When he is on a voyage he rises at four o’clock in the morning, wakes everybody up and performs his duties as a sailor conscientiously. It is as though he were to win his epaulettes afterwards.

He loves France and feels all that touches her. This explains his fits of moodiness. Since he cannot talk as he wants to, he keeps his thoughts to himself, and this sours him, He has spoken more than once, however, and bravely. He was not listened to and he was not heeded. “They needn’t talk about me,” he said to me one day, “it is they who are deaf!”

Unlike the late Duke d’Orleans, he has no princely coquettishness, which is such a victorious grace, and has no desire to appear agreeable. He rarely seeks to please individuals. He loves the nation, the country, his profession, the sea. His manner is frank, he has a taste for noisy pleasures, a fine appearance, a handsome face, with a kind heart, and a few feats of arms to his credit that have been exaggerated; he is popular.

M. de Nemours is just the contrary. At court they say: “There is something unlucky about the Duke de Nemours.”

M. de Montpensier has the good sense to love, to esteem and to honour profoundly the Duchess d’Orleans.

The other day there was a masked and costumed ball, but only for the family and the intimate court circle — the princesses and ladies of honour. M. de Joinville appeared all in rags, in complete Chicard costume. He was extravagantly gay and danced a thousand unheard-of dances. These capers, prohibited elsewhere, rendered the Queen thoughtful. “Wherever did he learn all this?” she asked, and added: “What naughty dances! Fie!” Then she murmured: “How graceful he is!”

Mme. de Joinville was dressed as a bargee and affected the manner of a street gamin. She likes to go to those places that the court detests the most, *the theatres and concerts of the boulevards*.

The other day she greatly shocked Mme. de Hall, the wife of an admiral, who is a Protestant and Puritan, by asking her: “Madame, have you seen the “Closerie des Genêts”?”

The Prince de Joinville had imagined a nuisance that exasperated the Queen. He procured an old barrel organ somewhere, and would enter her apartments playing it and singing in a hoarse, grating voice. The Queen laughed at first. But it lasted a quarter of an hour, half an hour. “Joinville, stop it!” He continued to grind away. “Joinville, go away!” The prince, driven out of one door, entered by another with his organ, his songs and his hoarseness. Finally the Queen fled to the King’s apartments.

The Duchess d’Aumale did not speak French very fluently; but as soon as she began to speak Italian, the Italian of Naples, she thrilled like a fish that falls back into the water, and gesticulated with Neapolitan verve. “Put your hands in your pockets,” the Duke d’Aumale would say to her. “I shall have to have your hands tied. Why do you gesticulate like that?”

“I didn’t notice it,” the princess would reply.

“That is true, she doesn’t notice it,” said the Prince to me one day. “You wouldn’t believe it, but my mother, who is so dignified, so cold, so reserved when she is speaking French, begins gesticulating like Punchinello when by chance she speaks Neapolitan.”

The Duke de Montpensier salutes passers-by graciously and gaily. The Duke d’Aumale does not salute more often than he is compelled to; at Neuilly they say he is afraid of ruffling his hair. The Duke de Nemours manifests less eagerness than the Duke de Montpensier and less negligence than the Duke d’Aumale; moreover, women say that when saluting them he looks at them in a most embarrassing way.

Donizetti’s “Elixir of Love” was performed at court on February 5, 1847, by the Italian singers, the Persiani, Mario, Tagliafico. Ronconi acted (acted is the word, for he acted very well) the role of Dulcamara, usually represented by Lablache. It was in the matter of size, but not of talent, a giant in the place of a dwarf. The decoration of the theatre at the Tuileries was then still the same as it had been in the time of the Empire — designs in gold on a grey background, the ensemble being cold and pale.

There were few pretty women present. Mme. Cuvillier-Floury was the prettiest; Mme. V. H. the most handsome. The men were in uniform or full evening dress. Two officers of the Empire were conspicuous in their uniforms of that period. Count Dutaillis, a one-armed soldier of the Empire, wore the old uniform of a general of division, embroidered with oak leaves to the facings. The big straight collar reached to his occiput; his star of the Legion of Honour was all dented; his embroidery was rusty and dull. Count de Lagrange, an old beau, wore a white spangled waistcoat, black silk breeches, white, or rather pink, stockings; shoes with buckles on them, a sword at his side, a black dress coat, and a peer’s hat with white plumes in it. Count Dutaillis was a greater success than Count de Lagrange. The one recalled Monaco and Trenitz; the other recalled Wagram.

M. Thiers, who the previous day had made a somewhat poor speech, carried opposition to the point of wearing a black cravat.

The Duchess de Montpensier, who had attained her fifteenth birthday eight days before, wore a large crown of diamonds and looked very pretty. M. de Joinville was absent. The three other princes were there in lieutenant-general’s uniform with the star and grand cordon of the Legion of Honour. M. de Montpensier alone wore the order of the Golden Fleece.

Mme. Ronconi, a handsome person, but of a wild and savage beauty, was in a small box on the stage, in rear of the proscenium. She attracted much attention.

There was no applause, which chilled the singers and everybody else.

Five minutes before the piece terminated the King began to pack up. He folded his programme and put it in his pocket, then he wiped the glasses of his opera-glass, closed it up carefully, looked round for the case which he had laid on his chair, placed the glass in it and adjusted the hooks very scrupulously. There was a good deal of character in his methodical manner.

M. de Rambuteau was there. His latest "rambutisms" (the word was Alexis de Saint-Priest's) were recounted among the audience. It was said that on the last day of the year M. de Rambuteau wrote on his card: "M. de Rambuteau et Venus," or as a variation: "M. de Rambuteau, Venus en personne."

Wednesday, February 24, the Duke de Nemours gave a concert at the Tuileries. The singers were Mlle. Grisi, Mme. Persiani, a Mme. Corbari, Mario, Lablache and Ronconi. M. Aubert, who conducted, did not put any of his own music on the programme: Rossini, Mozart, and Donizetti, that was all.

The guests arrived at half-past eight. The Duke de Nemours lives on the first floor of the Pavilion de Marsan, over the apartments of the Duchess d'Orleans. The guests waited in a first salon until the doors of the grand salon were opened, the women seated, the men standing. As soon as the prince and princess appeared the doors were thrown wide open and everybody went in. This grand salon is a very fine room. The ceiling is evidently of the time of Louis XIV. The wails are hung with green damask striped with gold. The inner window curtains are of red damask. The furniture is in green and gold damask. The ensemble is royal.

The King and Queen of the Belgians were at this concert. The Duke de Nemours entered with the Queen, his sister, upon his arm, the King giving his arm to the Duchess de Nemours. Mmes. d'Aumale and de Montpensier followed. The Queen of the Belgians resembles the Queen of the French, save in the matter of age. She wore a sky-blue toque, Mme. d'Aumale a wreath of roses, Mme. de Montpensier a diadem of diamonds, Mme. de Nemours her golden hair. The four princesses sat in high-backed chairs opposite the piano; all the other women sat behind them; the men were in the rear, filling the doorway and the first salon. The King of the Belgians has a rather handsome and grave face, and a delicate and agreeable smile; he was seated to the left of the princesses.

The Duke de Brogue sat on his left. Next to the Duke were Count Mole and M. Dupin senior. M. de Salvandy, seeing an empty chair to the right of the King, seated himself upon it. All five wore the red sash, including M. Dupin. These four men about the King of the Belgians represented the old military nobility, the parliamentary aristocracy, the pettifogging bourgeoisie, and moonshine literature; that is to say, a little of what France possesses that is illustrious, and a little of what she possesses that is ridiculous.

MM. d’Aumale and de Montpensier were to the right in the recess of a window with the Duke of Wurtemberg, whom they called their “brother Alexander.” All the princes wore the grand cordon and star of Leopold in honour of the King of the Belgians; MM. de Nemours and de Montpensier also wore the Golden Fleece. The Fleece of M. de Montpensier was of diamonds, and magnificent.

The Italian singers sang standing by the piano. When seated they occupied chairs with wooden backs.

The Prince de Joinville was absent, as was also his wife. It was said that lately he was the hero of a love affair. M. de Joinville is prodigiously strong. I heard a big lackey behind me say: “I shouldn’t care to receive a slap from him.” While he was strolling to his rendezvous M. de Joinville thought he noticed that he was being followed. He turned back, went up to the fellow and struck him.

After the first part of the concert MM. d’Aumale and de Montpensier came into the other salon where I had taken refuge with Théophile Gautier, and we chatted for fully an hour. The two princes spoke to me at length about literary matters, about “Les Burgraves,” “Ruy Blas,” “Lucrèce Borgia,” Mme. Halley, Mlle. Georges, and Frédérick Lemaitre. Also a good deal about Spain, the royal wedding, bull-fights, hand-kissings, and etiquette, that M. de Montpensier “detests.” “The Spaniards love royalty,” he added, “and especially etiquette. In politics as in religion they are bigots rather than believers. They were greatly shocked during the wedding fetes because the Queen one day dared to venture out afoot!”

MM. d’Aumale and de Montpensier are charming young men, bright, gay, gracious, witty, sincere, full of that ease that communicates itself to others. They have a fine air. They are princes; they are perhaps men of intellect. M. de Nemours is embarrassed and embarrassing. When he comes towards you with his blond whiskers, his blue eyes, his red sash, his white waistcoat and his melancholy air he perturbs you. He never looks you in the face. He always casts about for something to say and never knows what he does say.

November 5, 1847.

Four years ago the Duke d’Aumale was in barracks at Courbevoie with the 17th, of which he was then colonel. During the summer, in the morning, after the manoeuvres which took place at Neuilly, he frequently strolled back along the river bank, alone, his hands behind his back. Nearly every day he happened upon a pretty girl named Adele Protat, who every morning went from Courbevoie to Neuilly and returned at the same hour as M. d’Aumale. The young girl noticed the young officer in undress uniform, but was not aware that he was a prince. At length they struck up an acquaintance, and walked and chatted together. Under the influence of the sun, the flowers, and the fine mornings something very much like love sprang up between them. Adele Protat thought she had to do with a captain at the most. He said to her: “Come and see me at Courbevoie.” She refused. Feebly.

One evening she was passing near Neuilly in a boat. Two young men were bathing. She recognized her officer.

“There is the Duke d’Aumale,” said the boatman.

“Really!” said she, and turned pale.

The next day she had ceased to love him. She had seen him naked, and knew that he was a prince.

IN THE CHAMBER OF PEERS. 1846.

Yesterday, February 22, I went to the Chamber of Peers. The weather was fine and very cold, in spite of the noonday sun. In the Rue de Tournon I met a man in the custody of two soldiers. The man was fair, pale, thin, haggard; about thirty years old; he wore coarse linen trousers; his bare and lacerated feet were visible in his sabots, and blood-stained bandages round his ankles took the place of stockings; his short blouse was soiled with mud in the back, which indicated that he habitually slept on the ground; his head was bare, his hair dishevelled. Under his arm was a loaf. The people who surrounded him said that he had stolen the loaf, and it was for this that he had been arrested.

When they reached the gendarmerie barracks one of the soldiers entered, and the man stayed at the door guarded by the other soldier.

A carriage was standing at the door of the barracks. It was decorated with a coat of arms; on the lanterns was a ducal coronet; two grey horses were harnessed to it; behind it were two lackeys. The windows were raised, but the interior, upholstered in yellow damask, was visible. The gaze of the man fixed upon this carriage, attracted mine. In the carriage was a woman in a pink bonnet and costume of black velvet, fresh, white, beautiful, dazzling, who was laughing and playing with a charming child of sixteen months, buried in ribbons, lace and furs.

This woman did not see the terrible man who was gazing at her.

I became pensive.

This man was no longer a man for me; he was the spectre of misery, the brusque, deformed, lugubrious apparition in full daylight, in full sunlight, of a revolution that is still plunged in darkness, but which is approaching. In former times the poor jostled the rich, this spectre encountered the rich man in all his glory; but they did not look at each other, they passed on. This condition of things could thus last for some time. The moment this man perceives that this woman exists, while this woman does not see that this man is there, the catastrophe is inevitable.

GENERAL FABVIER

Fabvier had fought valiantly in the wars of the Empire; he fell out with the Restoration over the obscure affair of Grenoble. He expatriated himself about 1816. It was the period of the departure of the eagles. Lallemand went to America, Allard and Vannova to India, Fabvier to Greece.

The revolution of 1820 broke out. He took an heroic part in it. He raised a corps of four thousand palikars, to whom he was not a chief, but a god. He gave them civilization and taught them barbarity. He was rough and brave above all of them, and almost ferocious, but with that grand, Homeric ferocity. One might have thought that he had come from a tent of the camp of Achilles rather than from the camp of Napoleon. He invited the English Ambassador to dinner at his bivouac; the Ambassador found him seated by a big fire at which a whole sheep was roasting; when the animal was cooked and unskewered, Fabvier placed the heel of his bare foot upon the neck of the smoking and bleeding sheep and tore off a quarter, which he offered to the Ambassador. In bad times nothing daunted him. He was indifferent alike to cold, heat, fatigue and hunger; he never spared himself. The palikars used to say: “When the soldier eats cooked grass Fabvier eats it green.”

I knew his history, but I had not seen him when, in 1846, General Fabvier was made a peer of France. One day he had a speech to make, and the Chancellor announced: “Baron Fabvier has the tribune.” I expected to hear a lion, I thought an old woman was speaking.

Yet his face was a truly masculine one, heroic and formidable, that one might have fancied had been moulded by the hand of a giant and which seemed to have preserved a savage and terrible grimace. What was so strange was the gentle, slow, grave, contained, caressing voice that was allied to this magnificent ferocity. A child’s voice issued from this tiger’s mouth.

General Fabvier delivered from the tribune speeches learned by heart, graceful, flowery, full of allusions to the woods and country — veritable idylls. In the tribune this Ajax became a Némorin.

He spoke in low tones like a diplomat, he smiled like a courtier. He was not averse to making himself agreeable to princes. This is what the peerage had done for him. He was only a hero after all.

August 22, 1846.

The Marquis de Boissy has assurance, coolness, self-possession, a voice that is peculiar to himself, facility of speech, wit occasionally, the quality of imperturbability, all the accessories of a great orator. The only thing he lacks is talent. He wearies the Chamber, wherefore the Ministers do not consider themselves bound to answer him. He talks as long as everybody keeps quiet. He fences with the Chancellor as with his particular enemy.

Yesterday, after the session which Boissy had entirely occupied with a very poor speech, M. Guizot said to me:

“It is an affliction. The Chamber of Deputies would not stand him for ten minutes after the first two times. The Chamber of Peers extends its high politeness to him, and it does wrong. Boissy will not be suppressed until the day the whole Chamber rises and walks out when he asks permission to speak.”

“You cannot think of such a thing,” said I. “Only he and the Chancellor would be left. It would be a duel without seconds.”

It is the custom of the Chamber of Peers never to repeat in its reply to the speech from the throne the titles that the King gives to his children. It is also the custom never to give the princes the title of Royal Highness when speaking of them to the King. There is no Highness in presence of his Majesty.

To-day, January 18, the address in reply to the speech from the throne was debated. Occasionally there are flashes of keen and happy wit in M. de Boissy’s nonsense. He remarked to-day: “I am not of those who are grateful to the government for the blessings of providence.”

As usual he quarrelled with the Chancellor. He was making some more than usually roving excursion from the straight path. The Chamber murmured and cried: “Confine yourself to the question.” The Chancellor rose:

“Monsieur the Marquis de Boissy,” he said, “the Chamber requests that you will confine yourself to the question under discussion. It has saved me the trouble of asking you to do so.” (“Our colleague might as well have said ‘spared me!’” I whispered to Lebrun.)

“I am delighted on your account, Monsieur the Chancellor,” replied M. de Boissy, and the Chamber laughed.

A few minutes later, however, the Chancellor took his revenge. M. de Boissy had floundered into some quibble about the rules. It was late. The Chamber was becoming impatient.

“Had you not raised an unnecessary incident,” observed the Chancellor, “you would have finished your speech a long time ago, to your own satisfaction and that of everybody else.”

Whereat everybody laughed.

“Don’t laugh!” exclaimed the Duke de Mortemart. “Laughter diminishes the prestige of a constituted body.”

M. de Pontécoulant said: “M. de Boissy teases Monsieur the Chancellor, Monsieur the Chancellor torments M. de Boissy. There is a lack of dignity on both sides!”

During the session the Duke de Mortemart came to my bench and we spoke about the Emperor. M. de Mortemart went through all the great wars. He speaks nobly of him. He was one of the Emperor’s orderlies in the Campaign of 1812.

“It was during that campaign that I learned to know the Emperor,” he said. “I was near him night and day. I saw him shave himself in the morning, sponge his chin, pull on his boots, pinch his valet’s ear, chat with the grenadier mounting guard over his tent, laugh, gossip, make trivial remarks, and amid all this issue orders, trace plans, interrogate prisoners, decree, determine, decide, in a sovereign manner, simply, unerringly, in a few minutes, without missing anything, without losing a useful detail or a second of necessary time. In this intimate and familiar life of the bivouac flashes of his intellect were seen every moment. You can believe me when I say that he belied the proverb: ‘No man is great in the eyes of his valet.’”

“Monsieur the Duke,” said I, “that proverb is wrong. Every great man is a great man in the eyes of his valet.”

At this session the Duke d’Aumale, having attained his twenty-fifth birthday, took his seat for the first time. The Duke de Nemours and the Prince de Joinville were seated near him in their usual places behind the ministerial bench. They were not among those who laughed the least.

The Duke de Nemours, being the youngest member of his committee, fulfilled the functions of secretary, as is customary. M. de Montalembert wanted to spare him the trouble. “No,” said the prince, “it is my duty.” He took the urn and, as secretary, went the round of the table to collect the votes.

At the close of the session of January 21, 1847, at which the Chamber of Peers discussed Cracow and kept silent concerning the frontier of the Rhine, I descended the grand staircase of the Chamber in company with M. de Chastellux. M. Decazes stopped me and asked:

“Well, what have you been doing during the session?”

“I have been writing to Mme. Dorval.” (I held the letter in my hand.)

“What a fine disdain! Why did you not speak?”

“On account of the old proverb: ‘He whose opinion is not shared by anybody else should think, and say nothing.’

“Did your opinion, then, differ from that of the others?”

“Yes, from that of the whole Chamber.”

“What did you want then?”

“The Rhine.”

“Whew! the devil!”

“I should have protested and spoken without finding any echo to my words; I preferred to say nothing.”

“Ah! the Rhine! To have the Rhine! Yes, that is a fine idea. Poetry! poetry!”

“Poetry that our fathers made with cannon and that we shall make again with ideas!”

“My dear colleague,” went on M. Decazes, “we must wait. I, too, want the Rhine. Thirty years ago I said to Louis XVIII.: ‘Sire, I should be inconsolable if I thought I should die without seeing France mistress of the left bank of the Rhine. But before we can talk about that, before we can think of it even, we must beget children.’”

“Well,” I replied, “that was thirty years ago. We have begotten the children.”

April 23, 1847.

The Chamber of Peers is discussing a pretty bad bill on substitutions for army service. To-day the principal article of the measure was before the House.

M. de Nemours was present. There are eighty lieutenant-generals in the Chamber. The majority considered the article to be a bad one. Under the eye of the Duke de Nemours, who seemed to be counting them, all rose to vote in favour of it.

The magistrates, the members of the Institute and the ambassadors voted against it.

I remarked to President Franck-Carré, who was seated next to me: “It is a struggle between civil courage and military poltroonery.”

The article was adopted.

June 22, 1847.

The Girardin* affair was before the Chamber of Peers to-day. Acquittal. The vote was taken by means of balls, white ones for condemnation, black ones for acquittal. There were 199 votes cast, 65 white, 134 black. In placing my black ball in the urn I remarked: “In blackening him we whiten him.”

* Emile de Girardin had been prosecuted for publishing an article in a newspaper violently attacking the government.

I said to Mme. D — : “Why do not the Minister and Girardin provoke a trial in the Assize Court?”

She replied: “Because Girardin does not feel himself strong enough, and the Minister does not feel himself pure enough.”

MM. de Montalivet and Mole and the peers of the Château voted, queerly enough, for Girardin against the Government. M. Guizot learned the result in the Chamber of Deputies and looked exceedingly wrath.

June 28, 1847.

On arriving at the Chamber I found Franck-Carre greatly scandalised.

In his hand was a prospectus for champagne signed by the Count de Mareuil, and stamped with a peer’s mantle and a count’s coronet with the de Mareuil arms. He had shown it to the Chancellor, who had replied: “I can do nothing!”

“I could do something, though, if a mere councillor were to do a thing like that in my court,” said Franck-Carré to me. “I would call the Chambers together and have him admonished in a disciplinary manner.”

1848.

Discussion by the committees of the Chamber of Peers of the address in reply to the speech from the throne.

I was a member of the fourth committee. Among other changes I demanded this. There was: “Our princes, your well-beloved children, are doing in Africa the duties of servants of the State.” I proposed: “The princes, your well-beloved children, are doing,” etc., “their duty as servants of the State.” This fooling produced the effect of a fierce opposition.

January 14, 1848.

The Chamber of Peers prevented Alton-Shée from pronouncing in the tribune even the name of the Convention. There was a terrific knocking upon desks with paper-knives and shouts of “Order! Order!” and he was compelled almost by force to descend from the tribune.

I was on the point of shouting to them: “You are imitating a session of the Convention, but only with wooden knives!”

I was restrained by the thought that this *mot*, uttered during their anger, would never be forgiven. For myself I care little, but it might affect the calm truths which I may have to tell them and get them to accept later on.

THE REVOLUTION OF 1848.

I. THE DAYS OF FEBRUARY.
II. EXPULSIONS AND EVASIONS.
III. LOUIS PHILIPPE IN EXILE.
IV. KING JEROME.
V. THE DAYS OF JUNE.
VI. CHATEAUBRIAND.
VII. DEBATES ON THE DAYS OF JUNE.

I. THE DAYS OF FEBRUARY.

THE TWENTY-THIRD.

As I arrived at the Chamber of Peers — it was 3 o’clock precisely — General Rapatel came out of the cloak-room and said: “The session is over.”

I went to the Chamber of Deputies. As my cab turned into the Rue de Lille a serried and interminable column of men in shirt-sleeves, in blouses and wearing caps, and marching arm-in-arm, three by three, debouched from the Rue Bellechasse and headed for the Chamber. The other extremity of the street, I could see, was blocked by deep rows of infantry of the line, with their rifles on their arms. I drove on ahead of the men in blouses, with whom many women had mingled, and who were shouting: “Hurrah for reform!” “Hurrah for the line!” “Down with Guizot!” They stopped when they arrived within rifle-shot of the infantry. The soldiers opened their ranks to let me through. They were talking and laughing. A very young man was shrugging his shoulders.

I did not go any further than the lobby. It was filled with busy and uneasy groups. In one corner were M. Thiers, M. de Rémusat, M. Vivien and M. Merruau (of the “Constitutionnel”); in another M. Emile de Girardin, M. d’Alton-Shée and M. de Boissy, M. Franck-Carré, M. d’Houdetot, M. de Lagrenée. M. Armand Marrast was talking aside with M. d’Alton. M. de Girardin stopped me; then MM. d’Houdetot and Lagrenée. MM. Franck-Carré and Vignier joined us. We talked. I said to them:

“The Cabinet is gravely culpable. It forgot that in times like ours there are precipices right and left and that it does not do to govern too near to the edge. It says to itself: ‘It is only a riot,’ and it almost rejoices at the outbreak. It believes it has been strengthened by it; yesterday it fell, to-day it is up again! But, in the first place, who can tell what the end of a riot will be? Riots, it is true, strengthen the hands of Cabinets, but revolutions overthrow dynasties. And what an imprudent game in which the dynasty is risked to save the ministry! The tension of the situation draws the knot tighter, and now it is impossible to undo it. The hawser may break and then everything will go adrift. The Left has manoeuvred imprudently and the Cabinet wildly. Both sides are responsible. But what madness possesses the Cabinet to mix a police question with a question of liberty and oppose the spirit of chicanery to the spirit of revolution? It is like sending process-servers with stamped paper to serve upon a lion. The quibbles of M. Hébert in presence of a riot! What do they amount to!”

As I was saying this a deputy passed us and said:

“The Ministry of Marine has been taken.”

“Let us go and see!” said Franc d’Houdetot to me.

We went out. We passed through a regiment of infantry that was guarding the head of the Pont de la Concorde. Another regiment barred the other end of it. On the Place Louis XV. cavalry was charging sombre and immobile groups, which at the approach of the soldiers fled like swarms of bees. Nobody was on the bridge except a general in uniform and on horseback, with the cross of a commander (of the Legion of Honour) hung round his neck — General Prévot. As he galloped past us he shouted: “They are attacking!”

As we reached the troops at the other end of the bridge a battalion chief, mounted, in a bernouse with gold stripes on it, a stout man with a kind and brave face, saluted M. d’Houdetot.

“Has anything happened?” Franc asked.

“It happened that I got here just in time!” replied the major.

It was this battalion chief who cleared the Palace of the Chamber, which the rioters had invaded at six o’clock in the morning.

We walked on to the Place. Charging cavalry was whirling around us. At the angle of the bridge a dragoon raised his sword against a man in a blouse. I do not think he struck him. Besides, the Ministry of Marine had not been "taken." A crowd had thrown a stone at one of the windows, smashing it, and hurting a man who was peeping out. Nothing more.

We could see a number of vehicles lined up like a barricade in the broad avenue of the Champs-Elysées, at the rond-point.

"They are firing, yonder," said d'Houdetot. "Can you see the smoke?"

"Pooh!" I replied. "It is the mist of the fountain. That fire is water."

And we burst into a laugh.

An engagement was going on there, however. The people had constructed three barricades with chairs. The guard at the main square of the Champs-Elysées had turned out to pull the barricades down. The people had driven the soldiers back to the guard-house with volleys of stones. General Prévot had sent a squad of Municipal Guards to the relief of the soldiers. The squad had been surrounded and compelled to seek refuge in the guard-house with the others. The crowd had hemmed in the guard-house. A man had procured a ladder, mounted to the roof, pulled down the flag, torn it up and thrown it to the people. A battalion had to be sent to deliver the guard.

"Whew!" said Franc d'Houdetot to General Prévot, who had recounted this to us. "A flag taken!"

"Taken, no! Stolen, yes!" answered the general quickly.

M. Pèdre-Lacaze came up arm-in-arm with Napoleon Duchatel. Both were in high spirits. They lighted their cigars from Franc d'Houdetot's cigar and said:

"Do you know? Genoude is going to bring in an impeachment on his own account. They would not allow him to sign the Left's impeachment. He would not be beaten, and now the Ministry is between two fires. On the left, the entire Left; on the right, M. de Genoude."

Napoleon Duchâtel added: "They say that Duvergier de Hauranne has been carried about in triumph on the shoulders of the crowd."

We had returned to the bridge. M. Vivien was crossing, and came up to us. With his big, old, wide-brimmed hat and his coat buttoned up to his cravat the ex-Minister Of Justice looked like a policeman.

"Where are you going?" he said to me. "What is happening is very serious!"

Certainly at this moment one feels that the whole constitutional machine is rocking. It no longer rests squarely on the ground. It is out of plumb. One can hear it cracking.

The crisis is complicated by the disturbed condition of the whole of Europe.

The King, nevertheless, is very calm, and even cheerful. But this game must not be played too far. Every rubber won serves but to make up the total of the rubber lost.

Vivien recounted to us that the King had thrown an electoral reform bill into his drawer, saying as he did so: “That is for my successor!” “That was Louis XV.’s *mot*,” added Vivien, “supposing reform should prove to be the deluge.”

It appears to be true that the King interrupted M. Salandrouze when he was laying before him the grievances of the “Progressists,” and asked him brusquely: “Are you selling many carpets?” *

* M. Salandrouze was a manufacturer of carpets.

At this same reception of the Progressists the King noticed M. Blanqui, and graciously going up to him asked:

“Well, Monsieur Blanqui, what do people talk about? What is going on?”

“Sire,” replied M. Blanqui, “I ought to tell the King that in the departments, and especially at Bordeaux, there is a great deal of agitation.”

“Ah!” interrupted the King. “More agitation!” and he turned his back upon M. Blanqui.

While we were talking Vivien exclaimed: “Listen! I fancy I can hear firing!”

A young staff officer, addressing General d’Houdetot with a smile, asked: “Are we going to stay here long?”

“Why?” said Franc d’Houdetot.

“Well, I am invited out to dinner,” said the officer.

At this moment a group of women in mourning and children dressed in black passed rapidly along the other pavement of the bridge. A man held the eldest child by the hand. I looked at him and recognized the Duke de Montebello.

“Hello!” exclaimed d’Houdetot, “the Minister of Marine!” and he ran over and conversed for a moment with M. de Montebello. The Duchess had become frightened, and the whole family was taking refuge on the left bank of the river.

Vivien and I returned to the Palace of the Chamber. D’Houdetot quitted us. In an instant we were surrounded. Said Boissy to me:

"You were not at the Luxembourg? I tried to speak upon the situation in Paris. I was hooted. At the *mot*, 'the capital in danger,' I was interrupted, and the Chancellor, who had come to preside expressly for that purpose, called me to order. And do you know what General Gourgaud said to me? 'Monsieur de Boissy, I have sixty guns with their caissons filled with grape-shot. I filled them myself.' I replied: 'General, I am delighted to know what is really thought at the Château about the situation.'"

At this moment Durvergier de Hauranne, hatless, his hair dishevelled, and looking pale but pleased, passed by and stopped to shake hands with me.

I left Duvergier and entered the Chamber. A bill relative to the privileges of the Bank of Bordeaux was being debated. A man who was talking through his nose occupied the tribune, and M. Sauzet was reading the articles of the bill with a sleepy air. M. de Belleyme, who was coming out, shook hands with me and exclaimed: "Alas!"

Several deputies came up to me, among them M. Marie, M. Roger (of Loiret), M. de Rémusat, and M. Chambolle. I related to them the incident of the tearing down of the flag, which was serious in view of the audacity of the attack.

"What is even more serious," said one of them, "is that there is something very bad behind all this. During the night the doors of more than fifteen mansions were marked with a cross, among the marked houses being those of the Princess de Liéven, in the Rue Saint Florentin, and of Mme. de Talhouët."

"Are you sure of this?" I asked.

"With my own eyes I saw the cross upon the door of Mme. de Liéven's house," he replied.

President Franck-Carré met M. Duchâtel this morning and said: "Well, how goes it?"

"All is well," answered the Minister.

"What are you going to do about the riot?"

"I am going to let the rioters alone at the rendezvous they arranged for themselves. What can they do in the Place Louis XV. and the Champs-Elysées? It is raining. They will tramp about there all day. To-night they will be tired out and will go home to bed."

M. Etienne Arago entered hastily at this juncture and said: "There are seven wounded and two killed already. Barricades have been erected in the

Rue Beaubourg and in the Rue Saint Avoye."

After a suspension of the session M. Guizot arrived. He ascended the tribune and announced that the King had summoned M. Mole, to charge him with the formation of a new Cabinet.

Triumphant shouts from the Opposition, shouts of rage from the majority.

The session ended amid an indescribable uproar.

I went out with the deputies and returned by way of the quays.

In the Place de la Concorde the cavalry continued to charge. An attempt to erect two barricades had been made in the Rue Saint Honoré. The paving-stones in the Marché Saint Honoré were being torn up. The overturned omni-buses, of which the barricades had been made, had been righted by the troops. In the Rue Saint Honoré the crowd let the Municipal Guards go by, and then stoned them in the back. A multitude was swarming along the quays like irritated ants. A very pretty woman in a green velvet hat and a large cashmere shawl passed by amid a group of men wearing blouses and with bared arms. She had raised her skirt very high on account of the mud, with which she was much spattered; for it was raining every minute. The Tuileries were closed. At the Carrousel gates the crowd had stopped and was gazing through the arcades at the cavalry lined up in battle array in front of the palace.

Near the Carrousel Bridge I met M. Jules Sandeau. "What do you think of all this?" he queried.

"That the riot will be suppressed, but that the revolution will triumph."

On the Quai de la Ferraille I happened upon somebody else I knew. Coming towards me was a man covered with mud to the neck, his cravat hanging down, and his hat battered. I recognized my excellent friend Antony Thouret. Thouret is an ardent Republican. He had been walking and speech-making since early morning, going from quarter to quarter and from group to group.

"Tell me, now, what you really want?" said I. "Is it the Republic?"

"Oh! no, not this time, not yet," he answered. "What we want is reform — no half measures, oh! dear no, that won't do at all. We want complete reform, do you hear? And why not universal suffrage?"

"That's the style!" I said as we shook hands.

Patrols were marching up and down the quay, while the crowd shouted "Hurrah for the line!" The shops were closed and the windows of the houses open.

In the Place du Châtelet I heard a man say to a group:

“It is 1830 over again!”

I passed by the Hotel de Ville and along the Rue Saint Avoye. At the Hotel de Ville all was quiet. Two National Guards were walking to and fro in front of the gate, and there were no barricades in the Rue Saint Avoye. In the Rue Rambuteau a few National Guards, in uniform, and wearing their side arms, came and went. In the Temple quarter they were beating to arms.

Up to the present the powers that be have made a show of doing without the National Guard. This is perhaps prudent. A force of National Guards was to have taken a hand. This morning the guard on duty at the Chamber refused to obey orders. It is said that a National Guardsman of the 7th Legion was killed just now while interposing between the people and the troops.

The Mole Ministry assuredly is not a Reform one, but the Guizot Ministry had been for so long an obstacle to reform! Its resistance was broken; this was sufficient to pacify and content the child-like heart of the generous people. In the evening Paris gave itself up to rejoicing. The population turned out into the streets; everywhere was heard the popular refrain *Des lampioms! des larnpioms!* In the twinkling of an eye the town was illuminated as though for a fête.

In the Place Royale, in front of the Mairie, a few yards from my house, a crowd had gathered that every moment was becoming denser and noisier. The officers and National Guards in the guard-house there, in order to get them away from the Maine, shouted: “On to the Bastille!” and, marching arm-in-arm, placed themselves at the head of a column, which fell in joyously behind them and started off shouting: “On to the Bastille!” The procession marched hat in hand round the Column of July, to the shout of “Hurrah for Reform!” saluted the troops massed in the Place with the cry of “Hurrah for the line!” and went off down the Faubourg Saint Antoine. An hour later the procession returned with its ranks greatly swelled, and bearing torches and flags, and made its way to the grand boulevards with the intention of going home by way of the quays, so that the whole town might witness the celebration of its victory.

Midnight is striking. The appearance of the streets has changed. The Marais quarter is lugubrious. I have just returned from a stroll there. The street lamps are broken and extinguished on the Boulevard Bourdon, so well named the “dark boulevard.” The only shops open to-night were those in the Rue Saint Antoine. The Beaumarchais Theatre was closed. The Place Royale is guarded like a place of arms. Troops are in ambush in the arcades. In the Rue Saint Louis, a battalion is leaning silently against the walls in the shadow.

Just now, as the clock struck the hour, we went on to the balcony listening and saying: “It is the tocsin!”

I could not have slept in a bed. I passed the night in my drawing-room, writing, thinking and listening. Now and then I went out on the balcony and strained my ears to listen, then I entered the room again and paced to and fro, or dropped into an arm-chair and dozed. But my slumber was agitated by feverish dreams. I dreamed that I could hear the murmur of angry crowds, and the report of distant firing; the tocsin was clanging from the church towers. I awoke. It was the tocsin.

The reality was more horrible than the dream.

This crowd that I had seen marching and singing so gaily on the boulevards had at first continued its pacific way without let or hindrance. The infantry regiments, the artillery and cuirassiers had everywhere opened their ranks to let the procession pass through. But on the Boulevard des Capucines a mass of troops, infantry and cavalry, who were guarding the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its unpopular Minister, M. Guizot, blocked the thoroughfare. In front of this insurmountable obstacle the head of the column tried to stop and turn; but the irresistible pressure of the enormous crowd behind pushed the front ranks on. At this juncture a shot was fired, on which side is not known. A panic ensued, followed by a volley. Eighty fell dead or wounded. Then arose a general cry of horror and fury: “Vengeance!” The bodies of the victims were placed in a tumbril lighted by torches. The crowd faced about and, amid imprecations, resumed its march, which had now assumed the character of a funeral procession. In a few hours Paris was bristling with barricades.

THE TWENTY-FOURTH.

At daybreak, from my balcony, I see advancing a noisy column of people, among whom are a number of National Guards. The mob stops in front of the Mairie, which is guarded by about thirty Municipal Guards, and with loud cries demands the soldiers’ arms. Flat refusal by the Municipal

Guards, menacing clamours of the crowd. Two National Guard officers intervene: “What is the use of further bloodshed? Resistance will be useless.” The Municipal Guards lay down their rifles and ammunition and withdraw without being molested.

The Mayor of the Eighth Arrondissement, M. Ernest Moreau, requests me to come to the Mairie. He tells me the appalling news of the massacre on the Boulevard des Capucines. And at brief intervals further news of increasing seriousness arrives. The National Guard this time has definitely turned against the Government, and is shouting: “Hurrah for Reform!” The army, frightened at what it did yesterday, appears resolved not to take any further part in the fratricidal struggle. In the Rue Sainte Croix la Bretonnerie the troops have fallen back before the National Guard. At the neighbouring Mairie of the Ninth Arrondissement, we are informed, the soldiers are fraternising and patrolling with the National Guard. Two other messengers in blouses arrive almost together: “The Reuilly Barracks has been taken.” “The Minimes Barracks has surrendered.”

“And from the Government I have neither instructions nor news!” says M. Ernest Moreau. “What Government, if any, is there? Is the Mole Ministry still in existence? What is to be done?”

“Go to the Prefecture of the Seine,” advises M. Perret, a member of the General Council. “It isn’t far to the Hotel de Ville.”

“Well, then, come with me.”

They go. I reconnoitre round the Place Royale. Everywhere reign agitation, anxiety and feverish expectation. Everywhere work is being actively pushed upon barricades that are already formidable. This time it is more than a riot, it is an insurrection. I return home. A soldier of the line, on sentry duty at the entrance to the Place Royale, is chatting amicably with the vedette of a barricade constructed twenty paces from him.

At a quarter past eight M. Ernest Moreau returns from the Hotel de Ville. He has seen M. de Rambuteau and brings slightly better news. The King has entrusted the formation of a Cabinet to Thiers and Odilon Barrot. Thiers is not very popular, but Odilon Barrot means reform. Unfortunately the concession is coupled with a threat: Marshal Bugeaud has been invested with the general command of the National Guard and of the army. Odilon Barrot means reform, but Bugeaud means repression. The King is holding out his right hand and clenching his left fist.

The Prefect requested M. Moreau to spread and proclaim the news in his quarter and in the Faubourg Saint Antoine.

“This is what I will do,” says the Mayor.

“Very good,” I observe, “but believe me, you will do well to announce the Thiers-Barrot Ministry and say nothing about Marshal Bugeaud.”

“You are right.”

The Mayor requisitions a squad of National Guards, takes with him his two deputies and the Municipal Councillors present, and descends into the Place Royale. The roll of drums attracts the crowd. He announces the new Cabinet. The people applaud and raise repeated shouts of “Hurrah for Reform!” The Mayor adds a few words recommending harmony and the preservation of order, and is universally applauded.

“The situation is saved!” he says, grasping my hand.

“Yes,” I answer, “if Bugeaud will give up the idea of being the saviour.”

M. Ernest Moreau, followed by his escort, goes off to repeat his proclamation in the Place de la Bastille and the faubourg, and I return home to reassure my family.

Half an hour later the Mayor and his cortege return greatly agitated and in disorder to the Mairie. This is what had happened:

The Place de la Bastille was occupied at its two extremities by troops, leaning on their rifles. The people moved freely and peaceably between the two lines. The Mayor, arrived at the foot of the July column, made his proclamation, and once again the crowd applauded vigorously. M. Moreau started towards the Faubourg Saint Antoine. At this moment a number of workingmen accosted the soldiers amicably and said: “Your arms, give up your arms.” In obedience to the energetic orders of their captain the soldiers refused. Suddenly a shot was fired; it was followed by other shots; the terrible panic of the previous day was perhaps about to be renewed. M. Moreau and his escort were pushed about, thrown down. The firing on both sides lasted over a minute, and five or six persons were killed or wounded.

Fortunately, this time the affray occurred in broad daylight. At the sight of the blood they had shed there was a revulsion of feeling on the part of the troops, and after a moment of surprise and horror the soldiers, prompted by an irresistible impulse, raised the butts of their rifles in the air and shouted: “Long live the National Guard!” The general in command, being powerless to control his men, went off to Vincennes by way of the quays and the people remained masters of the Bastille and of the faubourg.

“It is a result that might have cost more dear, in my case especially,” remarks M. Moreau and he shows us his hat which has been pierced by a bullet. “A brand new hat,” he adds with a laugh.

Half past ten o’clock. — Three students from the Ecole Polytechnique have arrived at the Mairie. They report that the students have broken out of the school and have come to place themselves at the disposition of the people. A certain number have therefore distributed themselves among the mairies of Paris.

The insurrection is making progress every hour. It now demands that Marshal Bugeaud be replaced and the Chamber dissolved. The pupils of the Ecole Polytechnique go further and talk about the abdication of the King.

What is happening at the Tuileries? There is no news, either, from the Ministry, no order from the General Staff. I decide to go to the Chamber of Deputies, by way of the Hotel de Ville, and M. Ernest Moreau is kind enough to accompany me.

We find the Rue Saint Antoine bristling with barricades. We make ourselves known and the insurgents help us to clamber over the heaps of paving-stones. As we draw near to the Hotel de Ville, from which the roar of a great crowd reaches our ears, and as we cross some ground on which are buildings in course of erection, we see coming towards us with hurried steps M. de Rambuteau, the Prefect of the Seine.

“Hi! Monsieur the Prefect, what brings you here?” I cry.

“Prefect! Do I know whether I am still Prefect?” he replies with a surly air.

A crowd, which looks anything but benevolent, has already begun to gather. M. Moreau notices a house that is to let. We enter it, and M. de Rambuteau recounts his misadventure.

“I was in my office with two or three Municipal Councillors,” he says, “when we heard a great noise in the corridor. The door was thrown violently open, and there entered unto me a big strapping captain of the National Guard at the head of an excited body of troops.

“‘Monsieur,’ said the man, ‘you must get out of here.’

“‘Pardon me, Monsieur, here, at the Hotel de Ville I am at home, and here I propose to stay.’

“‘Yesterday you were perhaps at home in the Hotel de Ville; to-day the people are at home in it.’

“‘Ah! But—’

“‘Go to the window and look out on the square.’

“The square had been invaded by a noisy, swarming crowd in which workingmen, National Guards and soldiers were mingled pell-mell. And the rifles of the soldiers wore in the hands of the men of the people. I turned to the intruders and said:

“‘You are right, messieurs, you are the masters here.’

“‘Well, then,’ said the captain, ‘instruct your employés to recognise my authority.’

“That was too much. I replied: ‘What do you take me for?’ I gathered up a few papers, issued a few orders, and here I am. Since you are going to the Chamber, if there is still a Chamber, tell the Minister of the Interior, if the Ministry still exists, that at the Hotel de Ville there is no longer either Prefect or Prefecture.”

It is with great difficulty that we make our way through the human ocean that with a noise as of a tempest covers the Place de Hotel de Ville. At the Quai de la Mégisserie is a formidable barricade; thanks to the Mayor’s sash shown by my companion we are allowed to clamber over it. Beyond this the quays are almost deserted. We reach the Chamber of Deputies by the left bank of the river.

The Palais Bourbon is encumbered by a buzzing crowd of deputies, peers and high functionaries. From a rather large group comes the sharp voice of M. Thiers: “Ah! here is Victor Hugo!” He comes to us and asks for news about the Faubourg Saint Antoine. We add that about the Hotel de Ville. He shakes his head gloomily.

“And how are things here?” I question in turn. “But first of all are you still a Minister?”

“I? Oh! I am nobody! Odilon Barrot is President of the Council and Minister of the Interior.”

“And Marshal Bugeaud?”

“He has also been replaced by Marshal Gerard. But that is nothing. The Chamber has been dissolved, the King has abdicated and is on his way to Saint Cloud, and the Duchess d’Orleans is Regent. Ah! the tide is rising, rising, rising!”

M. Thiers advises us, M. Ernest Moreau and me, to come to an understanding with M. Odilon Barrot. Action by us in our quarter, which is such an important one, can be of very great utility. We therefore set out for the Ministry of the Interior.

The people have invaded the Ministry and crowded it to the very office of the Minister, where a not over respectful crowd comes and goes. At a large table in the middle of the vast room secretaries are writing. M. Odilon Barrot his face red, his lips compressed and his hands behind his back, is leaning against the mantelpiece.

“You know what is going on, do you not?” he says when he sees us; “the King has abdicated and the Duchess d’Orleans is Regent.”

“If the people so wills,” says a man in a blouse who is passing.

The Minister leads us to the recess of a window, looking uneasily about him as he does so.

“What are you going to do? What are you doing?” I query.

“I am sending telegrams to the departments.”

“Is this very urgent?”

“France must be informed of events.”

“Yes, but meanwhile Paris is making events. Alas! has it finished making them? The Regency is all very well, but it has got to be sanctioned.”

“Yes, by the Chamber. The Duchess d’Orleans ought to take the Count de Paris to the Chamber.”

“No, since the Chamber has been dissolved. If the Duchess ought to go anywhere, it is to the Hotel de Ville.”

“How can you think of such a thing! What about the danger?”

“There is no danger. A mother, a child! I will answer for the people. They will respect the woman in the princess.

“Well, then, go to the Tuileries, see the Duchess d’Orleans, advise her, enlighten her.”

“Why do you not go yourself?”

“I have just come from there. Nobody knew where the Duchess was; I could not get near her. But if you see her tell her that I am at her disposal, that I await her orders. Ah! Monsieur Victor Hugo, I would give my life for that woman and for that child!”

Odilon Barrot is the most honest and the most devoted man in the world, but he is the opposite of a man of action; one feels trouble and indecision in his words, in his look, in his whole person.

“Listen,” he goes on, “what must be done, what is urgent, is that the people should be made acquainted with these grave changes, the abdication and Regency. Promise me that you will proclaim them at your mairie, in the faubourg, and wherever you possibly can.”

“I promise.”

I go off, with M. Moreau, towards the Tuileries.

In the Rue Bellechasse are galloping horses. A squadron of dragoons flashes by and seems to be fleeing from a man with bare arms who is running behind them and brandishing a sword.

The Tuileries are still guarded by troops. The Mayor shows his sash and they let us pass. At the gate the concierge, to whom I make myself known, apprises us that the Duchess d’Orleans, accompanied by the Duke de Nemours, has just left the château with the Count de Paris, no doubt to go to the Chamber of Deputies. We have, therefore, no other course than to continue on our way.

At the entrance to the Carrousel Bridge bullets whistle by our ears. Insurgents in the Place du Carrousel are firing upon the court carriages leaving the stables. One of the coachmen has been killed on his box.

“It would be too stupid of us to stay here looking on and get ourselves killed,” says M. Ernest Moreau. “Let us cross the bridge.”

We skirt the Institute and the Quai de la Monnaie. At the Pont Neuf we pass a band of men armed with pikes, axes and rifles, headed by a drummer, and led by a man brandishing a sabre and wearing a long coat of the King’s livery. It is the coat of the coachman who has just been killed in the Rue Saint Thomas du Louvre.

When we arrive, M. Moreau and I, at the Place Royale we find it filled with an anxious crowd. We are immediately surrounded and questioned, and it is not without some difficulty that we reach the Mairie. The mass of people is too compact to admit of our addressing them in the Place. I ascend, with the Mayor, a few officers of the National Guard and two students of the Ecole Polytechnique, to the balcony of the Mairie. I raise my hand, the crowd becomes silent as though by magic, and I say:

“My friends, you are waiting for news. This is what we know: M. Thiers is no longer Minister and Marshal Bugeaud is no longer in command (applause). They have been replaced by Marshal Gerard and M. Odilon Barrot (applause, but less general). The Chamber has been dissolved. The King has abdicated (general cheering). The Duchess d’Orleans is Regent.” (A few isolated bravos, mingled with low murmurs.)

I continue:

“The name of Odilon Barrot is a guarantee that the widest and most open appeal will be made to the nation; and that you will have in all sincerity a representative government.”

My declaration is responded to with applause from several points, but it appears evident that the great bulk of the crowd is uncertain as to what view of the situation they ought to take, and are not satisfied.

We re-enter the hall of the Mairie.

“Now,” I say to M. Ernest Moreau, “I must go and proclaim the news in the Place de la Bastille.”

But the Mayor is discouraged.

“You can very well see that it is useless,” he says sadly. “The Regency is not accepted. And you have spoken here in a quarter where you are known and loved. At the Bastille your audience will be the revolutionary people of the faubourg, who will perhaps harm you.”

“I will go,” I say, “I promised Odilon Barrot that I would.”

“I have changed my hat,” the Mayor goes on, “but remember my hat of this morning.”

“This morning the army and the people were face to face, and there was danger of a conflict; now, however, the people are alone, the people are the masters.”

“Masters — and hostile; have a care!”

“No matter, I have promised, and I will keep my promise.”

I tell the Mayor that his place is at the Mairie and that he ought to stay there. But several National Guard officers present themselves spontaneously and offer to accompany me, among them the excellent M. Launaye, my former captain. I accept their friendly offer, and we form a little procession and proceed by the Rue du Pas de la Mule and the Boulevard Beaumarchais towards the Place de la Bastille.

Here are a restless, eager crowd in which workingmen predominate, many of them armed with rifles taken from the barracks or given up to them by the soldiers; shouts and the song of the Girondins: “Die for the fatherland!” numerous groups debating and disputing passionately. They turn round, they look at us, they interrogate us:

“What’s the news? What is going on?” And they follow us. I hear my name mentioned coupled with various sentiments: “Victor Hugo! It’s Victor Hugo!” A few salute me. When we reach the Column of July we are surrounded by a considerable gathering. In order that I may be heard I mount upon the base of the column.

I will only repeat the words which it was possible for me to make my turbulent audience hear. It was much less a speech than a dialogue, but the dialogue of one voice with ten, twenty, a hundred voices more or less hostile.

I began by announcing at once the abdication of Louis Philippe, and, as in the Place Royale, applause that was practically unanimous greeted the news. There were also, however, cries of “No! no abdication, deposition! deposition!” Decidedly, I was going to have my hands full.

When I announced the Regency violent protests arose:

“No! no! No Regency! Down with the Bourbons! Neither King nor Queen! No masters!”

I repeated: “No masters! I don’t want them any more than you do. I have defended liberty all my life.”

“Then why do you proclaim the Regency?”

“Because a Queen-Regent is not a master. Besides, I have no right whatever to proclaim the Regency; I merely announce it.”

“No! no! No Regency!”

A man in a blouse shouted: “Let the peer of France be silent. Down with the peer of France!” And he levelled his rifle at me. I gazed at him steadily, and raised my voice so loudly that the crowd became silent: “Yes, I am a peer of France, and I speak as a peer of France. I swore fidelity, not to a royal personage, but to the Constitutional Monarchy. As long as no other government is established it is my duty to be faithful to this one. And I have always thought that the people approved of a man who did his duty, whatever that duty might be.”

There was a murmur of approbation and here and there a few bravos. But when I endeavoured to continue: “If the Regency—” the protests redoubled. I was permitted to take up only one of these protests. A workman had shouted: “We will not be governed by a woman.” I retorted quickly:

“Well, neither will I be governed by a woman, nor even by a man. It was because Louis Philippe wanted to govern that his abdication is to-day necessary and just. But a woman who reigns in the name of a child! Is that not a guarantee against all thought of personal government? Look at Queen Victoria in England—”

“We are French, we are!” shouted several voices. “No Regency!”

“No Regency? Then, what? Nothing is ready, nothing! It means a total upheaval, ruin, distress, civil war, perhaps; in any case, it is the unknown.”

One voice, a single voice, cried: “Long live the Republic!”

No other voice echoed it. Poor, great people, irresponsible and blind! They know what they do not want, but they do not know what they do want.

From this moment the noise, the shouts, the menaces became such that I gave up the attempt to get myself heard. My brave Launaye said: “You have done what you wanted to, what you promised to do; the only thing that remains for us to do is to withdraw.”

The crowd opened before us, curious and inoffensive. But twenty paces from the column the man who had threatened me with his rifle came up with us and again levelled his weapon at me, shouting: “Down with the peer of France!” “No, respect the great man!” cried a young workman, who, with a quick movement, pushed the rifle downward. I thanked this unknown friend with a wave of the hand and passed on.

At the Mairie, M. Ernest Moreau, who it appears had been very anxious about us, received us with joy and cordially congratulated me. But I knew that even when their passions are aroused the people are just; and not the slightest credit was due to me, for I had not been uneasy in the least.

While these things were happening in the Place de la Bastille, this is what was taking place at the Palais Bourbon:

There is at this moment a man whose name is in everybody’s mouth and the thought of whom is in everybody’s mind; that man is Lamartine. His eloquent and vivid *History of the Girondins* has for the first time taught the Revolution to France. Hitherto he had only been illustrious; he has become popular and may be said to hold Paris in his hand.

In the universal confusion his influence could be decisive. This is what they said to themselves in the offices of the National, where the possible chances of the Republic had been weighed, and where a scheme for a provisional government had been sketched, from which Lamartine had been left out. In 1842, at the time of the debate over the Regency which resulted in the choice of the Duke de Nemours, Lamartine had pleaded warmly for the Duchess d’Orleans. Was he imbued with the same ideas to-day? What did he want? What would he do? It was necessary that this should be ascertained. M. Armand Marrast, the editor-in-chief of the National, took with him three notorious Republicans, M. Bastide, M. Hetzel, the publisher, and M. Bocage, the eminent comedian who created the role of Didier in “Marion de Lorme.” All four went to the Chamber of Deputies. They found Lamartine there and held a conference with him in one of the offices.

They all spoke in turn, and expressed their convictions and hopes. They would be happy to think that Lamartine was with them for the immediate realization of the Republic. If, however, he judged that the transition of the Regency was necessary they asked him to at least aid them in obtaining serious guarantees against any retrogression. They awaited with emotion his decision in this great matter.

Lamartine listened to their reasons in silence, then requested them to allow him a few minutes for reflection. He sat apart from them at a table, leaned his head upon his hands, and thought. His four visitors, standing and silent, gazed at him respectfully. It was a solemn moment. “We listened to history passing,” said Bocage to me.

Lamartine raised his head and said: “I will oppose the Regency.”

A quarter of an hour later the Duchess d’Orleans arrived at the Chamber holding by the hand her two sons, the Count de Paris and the Duke de Chartres. M. Odilon. Barrot was not with her. The Duke de Nemours accompanied her.

She was acclaimed by the deputies. But, the Chamber having been dissolved, were there any deputies?

M. Crémieux ascended the tribune and flatly proposed a provisional government. M. Odilon Barrot, who had been fetched from the Ministry of the Interior, made his appearance at last and pleaded for the Regency, but without éclat and without energy. Suddenly a mob of people and National Guards with arms and flags invaded the chamber. The Duchess d’Orleans, persuaded by her friends, withdrew with her children.

The Chamber of Deputies then vanished, submerged by a sort of revolutionary assembly. Ledru-Rollin harangued this crowd. Next came Lamartine, who was awaited and acclaimed. He opposed the Regency, as he had promised.

That settled it. The names for a provisional government were proposed to the people. And by shouts of “yes” or “no” the people elected successively: Lamartine, Dupont de l’Eure, Arago, and Ledru-Rollin unanimously, Crémieux, Gamier-Pages, and Marie by a majority.

The new ministers at once set out for the Hotel de Ville.

At the Chamber of Deputies not once was the word “Republic” uttered in any of the speeches of the orators, not even in that of Ledru-Rollin. But now, outside, in the street, the elect of the people heard this words this shout, everywhere. It flew from mouth to mouth and filled the air of Paris.

The seven men who, in these supreme and extreme days, held the destiny of France in their hands were themselves at once tools and playthings in the hands of the mob, which is not the people, and of chance, which is not providence. Under the pressure of the multitude; in the bewilderment and terror of their triumph, which overwhelmed them, they decreed the Republic without having time to think that they were doing such a great thing.

When, having been separated and dispersed by the violent pushing of the crowd, they were able to find each other again and reassemble, or rather hide, in one of the rooms of the Hotel de Ville, they took half a sheet of paper, at the head of which were printed the words: “Prefecture of the Seine. Office of the Prefect.” M. de Rambuteau may that very morning have used the other half of the sheet to write a love-letter to one of his “little bourgeoises,” as he called them.

Under the dictation of terrible shouts outside Lamartine traced this phrase:

“The Provisional Government declares that the Provisional Government of France is the Republican Government, and that the nation shall be immediately called upon to ratify the resolution of the Provisional Government and of the people of Paris.”

I had this paper, this sheet smeared and blotted with ink, in my hands. It was still stamped, still palpitating, so to speak, with the fever of the moment. The words hurriedly scribbled were scarcely formed. *Appelée* was written *appellée*.

When these half dozen lines had been written Lamartine handed the sheet to Ledru-Rollin.

Ledru-Rollin read aloud the phrase: “The Provisional Government declares that the Provisional Government of France is the Republican Government—”

“The word ‘provisional’ occurs twice,” he commented.

“That is so,” said the others.

“One of them at least must be effaced,” added Ledru-Rollin.

Lamartine understood the significance of this grammatical observation, which was simply a political revolution.

“But we must await the sanction of France,” he said. “I can do without the sanction of France,” cried Ledru-Rollin, “when I have the sanction of the people.”

“Of the people of Paris. But who knows at present what is the will of the people of France?” observed Lamartine.

There was an interval of silence. The noise of the multitude without sounded like the murmuring of the ocean. Ledru-Rollin went on:

“What the people want is the Republic at once, the Republic without waiting.”

“The Republic without any delay?” said Lamartine, covering an objection in this interpretation of Ledru-Rollin’s words.

“We are provisional,” returned Ledru-Rollin, “but the Republic is not!”

M. Crémieux took the pen from Lamartine’s hands, scratched out the word “provisional” at the end of the third line and wrote beside it: “actual.”

“The actual government? Very well!” said Ledru-Rollin, with a slight shrug of the shoulder.

The seal of the City of Paris was on the table. Since 1830 the vessel sailing beneath a sky starred with fleurs-de-lys and with the device, *Proelucent clarius astris*, had disappeared from the seal of the City. The seal was merely a circle with the words “Ville de Paris” in the centre. Crémieux took the seal and stamped the paper so hastily with it that the words appeared upside down.

But they did not sign this rough draught. Their whereabouts had been discovered; an impetuous stream was surging against the door of the office in which they had taken refuge. The people were calling, ordering, them to go to the meeting-hall of the Municipal Council.

There they were greeted by this clamour: “The Republic! Long live the Republic! Proclaim the Republic!” Lamartine, who was at first interrupted by the cries, succeeded at length with his grand voice in calming this feverish impatience.

The members of the Provisional Government were thus enabled to return and resume their session and lively discussion. The more ardent ones wanted the document to read: “The Provisional Government proclaims the Republic.” The moderates proposed: “The Provisional Government desires the Republic.” A compromise was reached on the proposition of M. Crémieux, and the sentence was made to read: “The Provisional Government ‘is for’ the Republic.” To this was added: “subject to the ratification of the people, who will be immediately consulted.”

The news was at once announced to the crowds in the meeting-hall and in the square outside, who would listen to nothing but the word “republic,” and saluted it with tremendous cheering.

The Republic was established. *Alea jacta*, as Lamartine observed later.

THE TWENTY-FIFTH.

During the morning everything at and in the neighbourhood of the Mairie of the Eighth Arrondissement was relatively calm, and the steps to maintain order taken the previous day with the approval of M. Ernest Moreau appeared to have assured the security of the quarter.* I thought I might leave the Place Royale and repair towards the centre of the city with my son Victor. The restlessness and agitation of a people (of the people of Paris!) on the morrow of a revolution was a spectacle that had an irresistible attraction for me.

* On the evening of the 24th, there had been reason to apprehend disturbances in the Eighth Arrondissement, disturbances particularly serious in that they would not have been of a political character. The prowlers and evil-doers with hang-dog mien who seem to issue from the earth in times of trouble were very much in evidence in the streets. At the Prison of La Force, in the Rue Saint Antoine, the common law criminals had begun a revolt by locking up their keepers. To what public force could appeal be made? The Municipal Guard had been disbanded, the army was confined to barracks; as to the police, no one would have known where to find them. Victor Hugo, in a speech which this time was cheered, confided life and property to the protection and devotedness of the people. A civic guard in blouses was improvised. Empty shops that were to let were transformed into guard houses, patrols were organized and sentries posted. The rebellious prisoners at La Force, terrified by the assertion that cannon (which did not exist) had been brought to bear upon the prison and that unless they surrendered promptly and unconditionally they would be blown sky-high, submitted quietly and returned to work.

The weather was cloudy, but mild, and the rain held off. The streets were thrilling with a noisy, joyous crowd. The people continued with incredible ardour to fortify the barricades that had already been constructed, and even to build new ones. Bands of them with flags flying and drums beating marched about shouting “Long live the Republic!” and singing the “Marseillaise and Die for the Fatherland!” The cafés were crowded to overflowing, but many of the shops were closed, as on holidays; and, indeed, the city did present a holiday appearance.

I made my way along the quays to the Pont Neuf. There, at the bottom of a proclamation I read the name of Lamartine, and having seen the people, I experienced the desire to see my great friend. I therefore turned back with Victor towards the Hotel de Ville.

As on the previous day, the square in front of the building was filled with a crowd, and the crowd was so compact that it immobilized itself. It was impossible to approach the steps of the front entrance. After several attempts to get somewhere near to them, I was about to force my way back out of the crowd when I was perceived by M. Froment-Meurice, the artist-goldsmith, brother of my young friend, Paul Meurice. He was a major of the National Guard, and on duty with his battalion at the Hotel de Ville. “Make way!” he shouted authoritatively. “Make way for Victor Hugo!” And the human wall opened, how I do not know, before his epaulettes.

The entrance once passed, M. Froment-Meurice guided us up all sorts of stairways, and through corridors and rooms encumbered with people. As we were passing a man came from a group, and planting himself in front of me, said: “Citizen Victor Hugo, shout ‘Long live the Republic!’”

“I will shout nothing by order,” said I. “Do you understand what liberty is? For my part, I practise it. I will shout to-day ‘Long live the people!’ because it pleases me to do so. The day when I shout ‘Long live the Republic!’ it will be because I want to.”

“Hear! hear! He is right,” murmured several voices.

And we passed on.

After many detours M. Froment-Meurice ushered us into a small room where he left us while he went to inform Lamartine that I wished to see him.

The glass door of the room gave on to a gallery, passing along which I saw my friend David d’Angers, the great statuary. I called to him. David, who was an old-time Republican, was beaming. “Ah! my friend, what a glorious day!” he exclaimed. He told me that the Provisional Government had appointed him Mayor of the Eleventh Arrondissement. “They have sent for you for something of the same kind, I suppose?” he said. “No,” I answered, “I have not been sent for. I came of my own accord just to shake Lamartine’s hand.”

M. Froment-Meurice returned and announced that Lamartine awaited me. I left Victor in the room, telling him to wait there till I came back, and once more followed my obliging guide through more corridors that led to a vestibule that was crowded with people. “They are all office seekers!” explained M. Froment-Meurice. The Provisional Government was holding a session in the adjoining room. The door was guarded by two armed grenadiers of the National Guard, who were impassible, and deaf alike to entreaties and menaces. I had to force my way through this crowd. One of the grenadiers, on the lookout for me, opened the door a little way to let me in. The crowd immediately made a rush and tried to push past the sentries, who, however, aided by M. Froment-Meurice, forced them back and closed the door behind me.

I was in a spacious hall that formed the angle of one of the pavilions of the Hotel de Ville, and was lighted on two sides by long windows. I would have preferred to find Lamartine alone, but there were with him, dispersed about the room and talking to friends or writing, three or four of his colleagues in the Provisional Government, Arago, Marie, and Armand Marrast. Lamartine rose as I entered. On his frock-coat, which was buttoned up as usual, he wore an ample tri-colour sash, slung across his shoulder. He advanced to meet me, and stretching out his hand, exclaimed: “Ah! you have come over to us! Victor Hugo is a strong recruit indeed for the Republic.”

“Not so fast, my friend,” said I with a laugh. “I have come simply to see my friend Lamartine. Perhaps you are not aware of the fact that yesterday while you were opposing the Regency in the Chamber, I was defending it in the Place de la Bastille.”

“Yesterday, that was all right; but to-day? There is now neither Regency nor Royalty. It is impossible that Victor Hugo is not at heart Republican.”

“In principle, yes, I am. The Republic is, in my opinion, the only rational form of government, the only one worthy of the nations. The universal Republic is inevitable in the natural course of progress. But has its hour struck in France? It is because I want the Republic that I want it to be durable and definitive. You are going to consult the nation, are you not? — the whole nation?”

“The whole nation, assuredly. We of the Provisional Government are all for universal suffrage.”

At this moment Arago came up to us with M. Armand Marrast, who held a folded paper in his hand.

“My dear friend,” said Lamartine, “know that this morning we selected you for Mayor of your arrondissement.”

“And here is the patent signed by us all,” said Armand Marrast.

“I thank you,” said I, “but I cannot accept it.”

“Why?” continued Arago. “These are non-political and purely gratuitous functions.”

“We were informed just now about the attempted revolt at La Force,” added Lamartine. “You did better than suppress it, you forestalled it. You are loved and respected in your arrondissement.”

“My authority is wholly moral,” I rejoined; “it could but lose weight in becoming official. Besides, on no account would I dispossess M. Ernest Moreau, who has borne himself loyally and valiantly throughout this trouble.”

Lamartine and Arago insisted: “Do not refuse our brevet.”

“Very well,” said I, “I will take it — for the sake of the autographs; but it is understood that I keep it in my pocket.”

“Yes, keep it,” said Armand Marrast laughingly, “so that you can say that one day you were *pair* and the next day *maire*.”

Lamartine took me aside into the recess of a window.

“It is not a mairie I would like you to have, but a ministry. Victor Hugo, the Republic’s Minister of Instruction! Come now, since you say that you are Republican!”

“Republican — in principle. But in fact, I was yesterday peer of France, I was yesterday for the Regency, and, believing the Republic to be premature, I should be also for the Regency to-day.”

“Nations are above dynasties,” went on Lamartine. “I, too, have been a Royalist.”

“Yes, but you were a deputy, elected by the nation; I was a peer, appointed by the King.”

“The King in choosing you, under the terms of the Constitution, in one of the categories from which the Upper House was recruited, but honoured the peerage and also honoured himself.”

“I thank you,” said I, “but you look at things from the outside; I consider them in my conscience.”

We were interrupted by the noise of a prolonged fusillade which broke out suddenly on the square. A bullet smashed a window-pane above our heads.

"What is the matter now?" exclaimed Lamartine in sorrowful tones.

M. Armand Marrast and M. Marie went out to see what was going on.

"Ah! my friend," continued Lamartine, "how heavy is this revolutionary power to bear! One has to assume such weighty and such sudden responsibilities before one's conscience and in presence of history! I do not know how I have been living during the past ten days. Yesterday I had a few grey hairs; to-morrow they will be white."

"Yes, but you are doing your duty as a man of genius grandly," I commented.

In a few minutes M. Armand Marrast returned.

"It was not against us," he said. "How the lamentable affray came about could not be explained to me. There was a collision, the rifles went off, why? Was it a misunderstanding, was it a quarrel between Socialists and Republicans? No one knows."

"Are there any wounded?"

"Yes, and dead, too."

A gloomy silence followed. I rose. "You have no doubt some measures to take?" I said.

"What measures?" answered Lamartine. "This morning we resolved to decree what you have already been able to do on a small scale in your quarter: the organization of the citizen's National Guard — every Frenchman a soldier as well as a voter. But time is required, and meanwhile —" he pointed to the waves and eddies of heads surging on the square outside— "look, it is the sea!"

A boy wearing an apron entered and spoke to him in low tones.

"Ah! very good!" said Lamartine, "it is my luncheon. Will you share it with me, Hugo?"

"Thanks, I have already lunched."

"I haven't and I am dying of hunger. At least come and look on at the feast; I will let you go, afterwards."

He showed me into a room that gave on to an interior court-yard. A gentle faced young man who was writing at a table rose and was about to withdraw. He was the young workman whom Louis Blanc had had attached to the Provisional Government.

“Stay where you are, Albert,” said Lamartine, “I have nothing of a private nature to say to Victor Hugo.”

We saluted each other, M. Albert and I.

The little waiter showed Lamartine a table upon which were some mutton cutlets in an earthenware dish, some bread, a bottle of wine and a glass. The whole came from a wine-shop in the neighbourhood.

“Well,” exclaimed Lamartine, “what about a knife and fork?”

“I thought you had knives and forks here,” returned the boy. “I had trouble enough to bring the luncheon, and if I have got to go and fetch knives and forks—”

“Pshaw!” said Lamartine, “one must take things as they come!”

He broke the bread, took a cutlet by the bone and tore the meat with his teeth. When he had finished he threw the bone into the fireplace. In this manner he disposed of three cutlets, and drank two glasses of wine.

“You will agree with me that this is a primitive repast!” he said. “But it is an improvement on our supper last night. We had only bread and cheese among us, and we all drank water from the same chipped sugar-bowl. Which didn’t, it appears, prevent a newspaper this morning from denouncing the great orgy of the Provisional Government!”

I did not find Victor in the room where he was to have waited for me. I supposed that, having become tired of waiting, he had returned home alone.

When I issued on to the Place de Grève the crowd was still excited and in a state of consternation at the inexplicable collision that had occurred an hour before. The body of a wounded man who had just expired was carried past me. They told me that it was the fifth. It was taken, as the other bodies had been taken, to the Salle Saint Jean, where the dead of the previous day to the number of over a hundred had been exposed.

Before returning to the Place Royale I made a tour for the purpose of visiting our guard-houses. Outside the Minimes Barracks a boy of about fifteen years, armed with the rifle of a soldier of the line, was proudly mounting guard. It seemed to me that I had seen him there in the morning or the day before.

“What!” I said, “are you doing sentry duty again?”

“No, not again; I haven’t yet been relieved.”

“You don’t say so. Why, how long have you been here?”

“Oh, about seventeen hours!”

“What! haven’t you slept? Haven’t you eaten?”

“Yes, I have had something to eat.”

“You went to get it, of course?”

“No, I didn’t, a sentry does not quit his post! This morning I shouted to the people in the shop across the way that I was hungry, and they brought me some bread.”

I hastened to have the brave child relieved from duty.

On arriving in the Place Royale I inquired for Victor. He had not returned. I was seized with a shudder of fear. I do not know why the vision of the dead who had been transported to the Salle Saint Jean should have come into my mind. What if my Victor had been caught in that bloody affray? I gave some pretext for going out again. Vacquerie was there; I told him of my anguish in a whisper, and he offered to accompany me.

First of all we called upon M. Froment-Meurice, whose establishment was in the Rue Lobau, next to the Hotel de Ville, and I asked him to have me admitted to the Salle Saint Jean. At first he sought to dissuade me from seeing the hideous sight; he had seen it the previous day and was still under the impression of the horror it inspired. I fancied his reluctance was a bad sign, that he was trying to keep something from me. This made me insist the more, and we went.

In the large Salle Saint Jean, transformed into a vast morgue, lay the long line of corpses upon camp bedsteads. For the most part they were unrecognisable. And I held the dreadful review, quaking in my shoes when one of the dead was young and slim with chestnut hair. Yes, the spectacle of the poor blood-stained dead was horrible indeed! But I could not describe it; all that I saw of each body was that it was not that of my child. At length I reached the last one, and breathed freely once more.

As I issued from the lugubrious place I saw Victor, very much alive, running towards me. When he heard the firing he had left the room where he was waiting for me, and not being able to find his way back, had been to see a friend.

II. EXPULSIONS AND ESCAPES.

May 3, 1848.

On February 24 the Duke and Duchess Decazes were literally driven from the Luxembourg. And by whom? By the very denizens of the palace, all employés of the Chamber of Peers, all appointed by the grand referendary. A rumour was circulated in the quarter that during the night the peers would commit some anti-revolutionary act, publish a proclamation, etc. The entire Faubourg Saint Jacques prepared to march against the Luxembourg. Hence, great terror. First the Duke and Duchess were begged, then pressed, then constrained to leave the palace.

“We will leave to-morrow. We do not know where to go. Let us pass the night here,” they said.

They were driven out.

They slept in a lodging-house. Next day they took up their abode at 9, Rue Verneuil.

M. Decazes was very ill. A week before he had undergone an operation. Mme. Decazes bore it all with cheerfulness and courage. This is a trait of character that women often display in trying situations brought about through the stupidity of men.

The ministers escaped, but not without difficulty. M. Duchâtel, in particular, had a great fright.

M. Guizot, three days previously, had quitted the Hotel des Capucines and installed himself at the Ministry of the Interior. He lived there *en famille* with M. Duchâtel.

On February 24, MM. Duchâtel and Guizot were about to sit down to luncheon when an usher rushed in with a frightened air. The head of the column of rioters was debouching from the Rue de Bourgogne. The two ministers left the table and managed to escape just in time by way of the garden. Their families followed them: M. Duchâtel’s young wife, M. Guizot’s aged mother, and the children.

A notable thing about this flight was that the luncheon of M. Guizot became the supper of M. Ledru-Rollin. It was not the first time that the Republic had eaten what had been served to the Monarchy.

Meanwhile the fugitives had taken the Rue Bellechasse. M. Guizot walked first, giving his arm to Mme. Duchâtel. His fur-lined overcoat was buttoned up and his hat as usual was stuck on the back of his head. He was easily recognisable. In the Rue Hillerin-Bertin, Mme. Duchâtel noticed that some men in blouses were gazing at M. Guizot in a singular manner, She led him into a doorway. It chanced that she knew the doorkeeper. They hid M. Guizot in an empty room on the fifth floor.

Here M. Guizot passed the day, but he could not stay there. One of his friends remembered a bookseller, a great admirer of M. Guizot, who in better days had often declared that he would devote himself to and give his life for him whom he called “a great man,” and that he only hoped the opportunity for doing so might present itself. This friend called upon him, reminded him of what he had said, and told him that the hour had come. The brave bookseller did not fail in what was expected of him. He placed his house at M. Guizot’s disposal and hid him there for ten whole days. At the end of that time the eight places in a compartment of a carriage on the Northern Railway were hired. M. Guizot made his way to the station at nightfall. The seven persons who were aiding in his escape entered the compartment with him. They reached Lille, then Ostend, whence M. Guizot crossed over to England.

M. Duchâtel’s escape was more complicated.

He managed to secure a passport as an agent of the Republic on a mission. He disguised himself, dyed his eye-brows, put on blue spectacles, and left Paris in a post-chaise. Twice he was stopped by National Guards in the towns through which he passed. With great audacity he declared that he would hold responsible before the Republic those who delayed him on his mission. The word “Republic” produced its effect. They allowed the Minister to pass. The Republic saved M. Duchâtel.

In this way he reached a seaport (Boulogne, I think), believing that he was being hotly pursued, and very nervous in consequence. A Channel steamer was going to England. He went on board at night. He was installing himself for the voyage when he was informed that the steamer would not leave that night. He thought that he had been discovered and that he was a lost man. The steamer had merely been detained by the English Consul, probably to facilitate, if necessary, the flight of Louis Philippe. M. Duchâtel landed again and spent the night and next day in the studio of a woman painter who was devoted to him.

Then he embarked on another steamer. He went below at once and concealed himself as best he could pending the departure of the vessel. He scarcely dared to breathe, fearing that at any moment he might be recognised and seized. At last the steamer got under way. Hardly had the paddle wheels begun to revolve, however, when shouts of “Stop her! Stop her!” were raised on the quay and on the boat, which stopped short. This time the poor devil of a Minister thought it was all up with him. The hubbub was caused by an officer of the National Guard, who, in taking leave of friends, had lingered too long on deck, and did not want to be taken to

England against his will. When he found that the vessel had cast off he had shouted “Stop her!” and his family on the quay had taken up the shout. The officer was put ashore and the steamer finally started.

This was how M. Duchâtel left France and reached England.

III. LOUIS PHILIPPE IN EXILE. May 3, 1848.

The Orleans family in England are literally in poverty; they are twenty-two at table and drink water. There is not the slightest exaggeration in this. Absolutely all they have to live upon is an income of about 40,000 francs made up as follows: 24,000 francs a year from Naples, which came from Queen Marie Amélie, and the interest on a sum of 340,000 francs which Louis Philippe had forgotten under the following circumstances: During his last triumphal voyage made in October, 1844, with the Prince de Joinville, he had a credit of 500,000 francs opened for him with a London banker. Of this sum he spent only 160,000 francs. He was greatly amazed and very agreeably surprised on arriving in London to find that the balance of the 500,000 francs remained at his disposal.

M. Vatout is with the Royal Family. For the whole of them there are but three servants, of whom one, and one only, accompanied them from the Tuileries. In this state of destitution they demanded of Paris the restitution of what belongs to them in France; their property is under seizure, and has remained so notwithstanding their reclamations. For different reasons. One of the motives put forward by the Provisional Government is the debt of the civil list, which amounts to thirty millions. Queer ideas about Louis Philippe were entertained. He may have been covetous, but he certainly was not miserly; he was the most prodigal, the most extravagant and least careful of men: he had debts, accounts and arrears everywhere. He owed 700,000 francs to a cabinet-maker; to his market gardener he owed 70,000 francs *for butter*.

Consequently none of the seals placed on the property could be broken and everything is held to secure the creditors — everything, even to the personal property of the Prince and Princess de Joinville, rentes, diamonds, etc., even to a sum of 198,000 francs which belongs in her own right to the Duchess d’Orleans.

All that the Royal Family was able to obtain was their clothing and personal effects, or rather what could be found of these. Three long tables were placed in the theatre of the Tuileries, and on these were laid out all that the revolutionists of February had turned over to the governor of the Tuileries, M. Durand Saint-Amand. It formed a queer medley — court costumes stained and torn, grand cordons of the Legion of Honour that had been trailed through the mud, stars of foreign orders, swords, diamond crowns, pearl necklaces, a collar of the Golden Fleece, etc. Each legal representative of the princes, an aide-de-camp or secretary, took what he recognised. It appears that on the whole little was recovered. The Duke de Nemours merely asked for some linen and in particular his heavy-soled shoes.

The Prince de Joinville, meeting the Duke de Montpensier, greeted him thus: “Ah! here you are, Monsieur; you were not killed, you have not had good luck!”

Gudin, the marine painter, who went to England, saw Louis Philippe. The King is greatly depressed. He said to Gudin: “I don’t understand it. What happened in Paris? What did the Parisians get into their heads? I haven’t any idea. One of these days they will recognise that I did not do one thing wrong.” He did not, indeed, do one thing wrong; he did all things wrong!

He had in fact reached an incredible degree of optimism; he believed himself to be more of a king than Louis XIV. and more of an emperor than Napoleon. On Tuesday the 22nd he was exuberantly gay, and was still occupied solely with his own affairs, and these of the pettiest character. At 2 o’clock when the first shots were being fired, he was conferring with his lawyers and business agents, MM. de Gérante, Scribe and Denormandie, as to what could best be done about Madame Adelaide’s will. On Wednesday, at 1 o’clock, when the National Guard was declaring against the government, which meant revolution, the King sent for M. Hersent to order of him a picture of some kind.

Charles X. was a lynx.

Louis Philippe in England, however, bears his misfortune worthily. The English aristocracy acted nobly; eight or ten of the wealthiest peers wrote to Louis Philippe to offer him their châteaux and their purses. The King replied: “I accept and keep only your letters.”

The Duchess d’Orleans is also in straitened circumstances. She is on bad terms with the d’Orleans family and the Mecklenburg family is on bad terms with her. On the one hand she will accept nothing, and on the other she can expect nothing.

At this time of writing (May, 1848) the Tuileries have already been repaired, and M. Empis remarked to me this morning: “They are going to clean up and nothing of the damage done will be apparent.” Neuilly and the Palais-Royal, however, have been devastated. The picture gallery of the Palais-Royal, a pretty poor one by the by, has practically been destroyed. Only a single picture remains perfectly intact, and that is the Portrait of Philippe Egalité. Was it purposely respected by the riot or is its preservation an irony of chance? The National Guards amused, and still amuse, themselves by cutting out of the canvases that were not entirely destroyed by fire faces to which they take a fancy.

IV. KING JEROME.

There entered my drawing-room in the Place Royale one morning in March, 1848, a man of medium height, about sixty-five or sixty-six years of age, dressed in black, a red and blue ribbon in his buttonhole, and wearing patent-leather boots and white gloves. He was Jerome Napoleon, King of Westphalia.

He had a very gentle voice, a charming though somewhat timid smile, straight hair turning grey, and something of the profile of the Emperor.

He came to thank me for the permission that had been accorded to him to return to France, which he attributed to me, and begged me to get him appointed Governor of the Invalides. He told me that M. Crémieux, one of the members of the Provisional Government, had said to him the previous day:

“If Victor Hugo asks Lamartine to do it, it will be done. Formerly everything depended upon an interview between two emperors; now everything depends upon an interview between two poets.”

“Tell M. Crémieux that it is he who is the poet,” I replied to King Jerome with a smile.

In November, 1848, the King of Westphalia lived on the first floor above the entresol at No. 3, Rue d’Alger. It was a small apartment with mahogany furniture and woollen velvet upholstering.

The wall paper of the drawing-room was grey. The room was lighted by two lamps and ornamented by a heavy clock in the Empire style and two not very authentic pictures, although the frame of one bore the name: “Titiens,” and the frame of the other the name: “Rembrandt.” On the mantelpiece was a bronze bust of Napoleon, one of those familiar and inevitable busts that the Empire bequeathed us.

The only vestiges of his royal existence that remained to the prince were his silverware and dinner service, which were ornamented with royal crowns richly engraved and gilded.

Jerome at that time was only sixty-four years old, and did not look his age. His eyes were bright, his smile benevolent and charming, and his hands small and still shapely. He was habitually attired in black with a gold chain in his buttonhole from which hung three crosses, the Legion of Honour, the Iron Crown, and his Order of Westphalia created by him in imitation of the Iron Crown.

Jerome talked well, with grace always and often with wit. He was full of reminiscences and spoke of the Emperor with a mingled respect and affection that was touching. A little vanity was perceptible; I would have preferred pride.

Moreover he received with bonhomie all the varied qualifications which were brought upon him by his strange position of a man who was no longer king, no longer proscribed, and yet was not a citizen. Everybody addressed him as he pleased. Louis Philippe called him “Highness,” M. Boulay de la Meurthe “Sire” or “Your Majesty,” Alexandre Dumas “Monseigneur,” I addressed him as “Prince,” and my wife called him “Monsieur.” On his card he wrote “General Bonaparte.” In his place I would have understood his position. King or nothing.

RELATED BY KING JEROME.

In the evening of the day following that on which Jerome, recalled from exile, returned to Paris, he had vainly waited for his secretary, and feeling bored and lonely, went out. It was at the end of summer (1847). He was staying at the house of his daughter, Princess Demidoff, which was off the Champs-Elysées.

He crossed the Place de la Concorde, looking about him at the statues, obelisk and fountains, which were new to the exile who had not seen Paris for thirty-two years. He continued along the Quai des Tuileries. I know not what reverie took possession of his soul. Arrived at the Pavillon de Flore, he entered the gate, turned to the left, and began to walk up a flight of stairs under the arch. He had gone up two or three steps when he felt himself seized by the arm. It was the gatekeeper who had run after him.

“Hi! Monsieur, monsieur, where are you going?”

Jerome gazed at him in astonishment and replied:

“Why, to my apartments, of course!”

Hardly had he uttered the words, however, when he awoke from his dream. The past had bewitched him for a moment. In recounting the incident to me he said:

“I went away shamefacedly, and apologizing to the porter.”

V. THE DAYS OF JUNE.

MISCELLANEOUS NOTES.

The insurrection of June presented peculiar features from the outset.* It suddenly manifested itself to terrified society in monstrous and unknown forms.

* At the end of June, four months after the proclamation of the Republic, regular work had come to a standstill and the useless workshops known as the “national workshops” had been abolished by the National Assembly. Then the widespread distress prevailing caused the outbreak of one of the most formidable insurrections recorded in history. The power at that time was in the hands of an Executive Committee of five members, Lamartine, Arago, Ledru Rollin, Garnier-Pages and Marie. General Cavaignac was Minister of War.

The first barricade was erected in the morning of Friday, the 23rd, at the Porte Saint Denis. It was attacked the same day. The National Guard marched resolutely against it. The attacking force was made up of battalions of the First and Second Legions, which arrived by way of the boulevards. When the assailants got within range a formidable volley was fired from the barricade, and littered the ground with National Guards. The National Guard, more irritated than intimidated, charged the barricade.

At this juncture a woman appeared upon its crest, a woman young, handsome, dishevelled, terrible. This woman, who was a prostitute, pulled up her clothes to her waist and screamed to the guards in that frightful language of the lupanar that one is always compelled to translate:

"Cowards! fire, if you dare, at the belly of a woman!" Here the affair became appalling. The National Guard did not hesitate. A volley brought the wretched creature down, and with a piercing shriek she toppled off the barricade. A silence of horror fell alike upon besiegers and besieged.

Suddenly another woman appeared. This one was even younger and more beautiful; she was almost a child, being barely seventeen years of age. Oh! the pity of it! She, too, was a street-walker. Like the other she lifted her skirt, disclosed her abdomen, and screamed: "Fire, brigands!" They fired, and riddled with bullets she fell upon the body of her sister in vice.

It was thus that the war commenced.

Nothing could be more chilling and more sombre. It is a hideous thing this heroism of abjection in which bursts forth all that weakness has of strength; this civilization attacked by cynicism and defending itself by barbarity. On one side the despair of the people, on the other the despair of society.

On Saturday the 24th, at 4 o'clock in the morning, I, as a Representative of the people, was at the barricade in the Place Baudoyer that was defended by the troops.

The barricade was a low one. Another, narrow and high, protected it in the street. The sun shone upon and brightened the chimney-tops. The tortuous Rue Saint Antoine wound before us in sinister solitude.

The soldiers were lying upon the barricade, which was little more than three feet high. Their rifles were stacked between the projecting paving-stones as though in a rack. Now and then bullets whistled overhead and struck the walls of the houses around us, bringing down a shower of stone and plaster. Occasionally a blouse, sometimes a cap-covered head, appeared at the corner of a street. The soldiers promptly fired at it. When they hit their mark they applauded "Good! Well aimed! Capital!"

They laughed and chatted gaily. At intervals there was a rattle and roar, and a hail of bullets rained upon the barricade from roofs and windows. A very tall captain with a grey moustache stood erect at the centre of the barrier, above which half his body towered. The bullets pattered about him as about a target. He was impassible and serene and spoke to his men in this wise:

“There, children, they are firing. Lie down. Look out, Laripaud, you are showing your head. Reload!”

All at once a woman turned the corner of a street. She came leisurely towards the barricade. The soldiers swore and shouted to her to get out of the way:

“Ah! the strumpet! Will you get out of that you w — ! Shake a leg, damn you! She’s coming to reconnoitre. She’s a spy! Bring her down. Down with the moucharde!”

The captain restrained them:

“Don’t shoot, it’s a woman!”

After advancing about twenty paces the woman, who really did seem to be observing us, entered a low door which closed behind her.

This one was saved.

At 11 o’clock I returned from the barrier in the Place Baudoyer and took my usual place in the Assembly. A Representative whom I did not know, but who I have since learned was M. Belley, engineer, residing in the Rue des Tournelles, came and sat beside me and said:

“Monsieur Victor Hugo, the Place Royale has been burned. They set fire to your house. The insurgents entered by the little door in the Cul-de-sac Guéménée.”

“And my family?” I inquired.

“They are safe.”

“How do you know?”

“I have just come from there. Not being known I was able to get over the barricades and make my way here. Your family first took refuge in the Mairie. I was there, too. Seeing that the danger was over I advised Mme. Victor Hugo to seek some other asylum. She found shelter with her children in the home of a chimney-sweep named Martignon who lives near your house, under the arcades.”

I knew that worthy Martignon family. This reassured me.

“And how about the riot?” I asked.

“It is a revolution,” replied M. Belley. “The insurgents are in control of Paris at this moment.”

I left M. Belley and hurriedly traversed the few rooms that separated the hall in which we held our sessions and the office occupied by the Executive Committee.

It was a small salon belonging to the presidency, and was reached through two rooms that were smaller still. In these ante-chambers was a buzzing crowd of distracted officers and National Guards. They made no attempt to prevent any one from entering.

I opened the door of the Executive Committee’s office. Ledru-Rollin, very red, was half seated on the table. M. Gamier-Pages, very pale, and half reclining in an armchair, formed an antithesis to him. The contrast was complete: Garnier-Pagès thin and bushy-haired, Ledru-Rollin stout and close-cropped. Two or three colonels, among them Representative Charras, were conversing in a corner. I only recall Arago vaguely. I do not remember whether M. Marie was there. The sun was shining brightly.

Lamartine, standing in a window recess on the left, was talking to a general in full uniform, whom I saw for the first and last time, and who was Négrier. Négrier was killed that same evening in front of a barricade.

I hurried to Lamartine, who advanced to meet me. He was wan and agitated, his beard was long, his clothes were dusty.

He held out his hand: “Ah! good morning, Hugo!”

Here is the dialogue that we engaged in, every word of which is still fresh in my memory:

“What is the situation, Lamartine?”

“We are done for!”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean that in a quarter of an hour from now the Assembly will be invaded.”

(Even at that moment a column of insurgents was coming down the Rue de Lille. A timely charge of cavalry dispersed it.)

“Nonsense! What about the troops?”

“There are no troops!”

“But you said on Wednesday, and yesterday repeated, that you had sixty thousand men at your disposal.”

“So I thought.”

“Well, but you musn’t give up like this. It is not only you who are at stake, but the Assembly, and not only the Assembly, but France, and not only France, but the whole of civilization. Why did you not issue orders yesterday to have the garrisons of the towns for forty leagues round brought to Paris? That would have given you thirty thousand men at once.”

“We gave the orders—”

“Well?”

“The troops have not come!”

Lamartine took my hand and said;

“I am not Minister of War!”

At this moment a few representatives entered noisily. The Assembly had just voted a state of siege. They told Ledru-Rollin and Garnier-Pages so in a few words.

Lamartine half turned towards them and said in an undertone:

“A state of siege! A state of siege! Well, declare it if you think it is necessary. I have nothing to say!”

He dropped into a chair, repeating:

“I have nothing to say, neither yes nor no. Do what you like!”

General Négrier came up to me.

“Monsieur Victor Hugo,” he said, “I have come to reassure you; I have received news from the Place Royale.”

“Well, general?”

“Your family are safe.”

“Thanks! Yes, I have just been so informed.”

“But your house has been burnt down.”

“What does that matter?” said I.

Négrier warmly pressed my arm:

“I understand you. Let us think only of one thing. Let us save the country!”

As I was withdrawing Lamartine quitted a group and came to me.

“Adieu,” he said. “But do not forget this: do not judge me too hastily; I am not the Minister of War.”

The day before, as the riot was spreading, Cavaignac, after a few measures had been taken, said to Lamartine:

“That’s enough for to-day.”

It was 5 o’clock.

“What!” exclaimed Lamartine. “Why, we have still four hours of daylight before us! And the riot will profit by them while we are losing them!”

He could get nothing from Cavaignac except:

“That’s enough for to-day!”

On the 24th, about 3 o’clock, at the most critical moment, a Representative of the people, wearing his sail across his shoulder, arrived at the Mairie of the Second Arrondissement, in the Rue Chauchat, behind the Opera. He was recognised. He was Lagrange.

The National Guards surrounded him. In a twinkling the group became menacing:

“It is Lagrange! the man of the pistol shot![*] What are you doing here? You are a coward! Get behind the barricades. That is your place — your friends are there — and not with us! They will proclaim you their chief; go on! They at any rate are brave! They are giving their blood for your follies; and you, you are afraid! You have a dirty duty to do, but at least do it! Get out of here! Begone!”

[*] It was popularly but erroneously believed that Lagrange fired the shot that led to the massacre in the Boulevard des Capucines on February 23.

Lagrange endeavoured to speak. His voice was drowned by hooting.

This is how these madmen received the honest man who after fighting for the people wanted to risk his life for society.

June 25.

The insurgents were firing throughout the whole length of the Boulevard Beaumarchais from the tops of the new houses. Several had ambushed themselves in the big house in course of construction opposite the Galiote. At the windows they had stuck dummies, — bundles of straw with blouses and caps on them.

I distinctly saw a man who had entrenched himself behind a barricade of bricks in a corner of the balcony on the fourth floor of the house which faces the Rue du Pont-aux-Choux. The man took careful aim and killed a good many persons.

It was 3 o’clock. The troops and mobiles fringed the roofs of the Boulevard du Temple and returned the fire of the insurgents. A cannon had just been drawn up in front of the Gaité to demolish the house of the Galiote and sweep the whole boulevard.

I thought I ought to make an effort to put a stop to the bloodshed, if possible, and advanced to the corner of the Rue d’Angoulême. When I reached the little turret near there I was greeted with a fusillade. The bullets pattered upon the turret behind me, and ploughed up the playbills with which it was covered. I detached a strip of paper as a memento. The bill to which it belonged announced for that very Sunday a fête at the Château des Flours, “with a thousand lanterns.”

For four months we have been living in a furnace. What consoles me is that the statue of the future will issue from it. It required such a brazier to melt such a bronze.

VI. CHATEAUBRIAND.

July 5, 1848.

Chateaubriand is dead. One of the splendours of this century has passed away.

He was seventy-nine years old according to his own reckoning; according to the calculation of his old friend M. Bertin, senior, he was eighty years of age. But he had a weakness, said M. Bertin, and that was that he insisted that he was born not in 1768, but in 1769, because that was the year of Napoleon’s birth.

He died yesterday, July 4, at 8 o’clock in the morning. For five or six months he had been suffering from paralysis which had almost destroyed his brain, and for five days from inflammation of the lungs, which abruptly snuffed out his life.

M. Ampere announced the news to the Academy, which thereupon decided to adjourn.

I quitted the National Assembly, where a questor to succeed General Négrier, who was killed in June, was being nominated, and went to M. de Chateaubriand’s house, No. 110, Rue du Bac.

I was received by M. de Preuille, son-in-law of his nephew. I entered Chateaubriand’s chamber.

He was lying upon his bed, a little iron bedstead with white curtains round it and surmounted by an iron curtain ring of somewhat doubtful taste. The face was uncovered; the brow, the nose, the closed eyes, bore that expression of nobleness which had marked him in life, and which was enhanced by the grave majesty of death. The mouth and chin were hidden by a cambric handkerchief. On his head was a white cotton nightcap which, however, allowed the grey hair on his temples to be seen. A white cravat rose to his ears. His tawny visage appeared more severe amid all this whiteness. Beneath the sheet his narrow, hollow chest and his thin legs could be discerned.

The shutters of the windows giving on to the garden were closed. A little daylight entered through the half-opened door of the salon. The chamber and the face were illumined by four tapers which burned at the corners of a table placed near the bed. On this table were a silver crucifix, a vase filled with holy water, and an aspergillum. Beside it a priest was praying.

Behind the priest a large brown-coloured screen hid the fireplace, above which the mantel-glass and a few engravings of churches and cathedrals were visible.

At Chateaubriand's feet, in the angle formed by the bed and the wall of the room, were two wooden boxes, placed one upon the other. The largest I was told contained the complete manuscript of his Memoirs, in forty-eight copybooks. Towards the last there had been such disorder in the house that one of the copybooks had been found that very morning by M. de Preuille in a dark and dirty closet where the lamps were cleaned.

A few tables, a wardrobe, and a few blue and green armchairs in disorder encumbered more than they furnished the room.

The adjoining salon, the furniture of which was hidden under unbleached covers, contained nothing more remarkable than a marble bust of Henry V. and a full-length statuette of Chateaubriand, which were on the mantelpiece, and on each side of a window plaster busts of Mme. de Berri and her infant child.

Towards the close of his life Chateaubriand was almost in his second childhood. His mind was only lucid for about two or three hours a day, at least so M. Pilorge, his former secretary, told me.

When in February he was apprised of the proclamation of the Republic he merely remarked: “Will you be any the happier for it?”

When his wife died he attended the funeral service and returned laughing heartily — which, said Pilorge, was a proof that he was of weak mind. “A proof that he was in his right mind!” affirmed Edouard Bertin.

Mme. de Chateaubriand's benevolence was official, which did not prevent her from being a shrew at home. She founded a hospice — the Marie Thérèse Infirmary — visited the poor, succoured the sick, superintended crêches, gave alms and prayed; at the same time she was harsh towards her husband, her relatives, her friends, and her servants, and was sour-tempered, stern, prudish, and a backbiter. God on high will take these things into account.

She was ugly, pitted with small-pox, had an enormous mouth, little eyes, was insignificant in appearance, and acted the *grande dame*, although she was rather the wife of a great man than of a great lord. By birth she was only the daughter of a ship-owner of Saint Malo. M. de Chateaubriand feared, detested, and cajoled her.

She took advantage of this to make herself insupportable to mere human beings. I have never known anybody less approachable or whose reception of callers was more forbidding. I was a youth when I went to M. de Chateaubriand's. She received me very badly, or rather she did not receive me at all. I entered and bowed, but Mme. de Chateaubriand did not see me. I was scared out of my wits. These terrors made my visits to M. de Chateaubriand veritable nightmares which oppressed me for fifteen days and fifteen nights in advance. Mme. de Chateaubriand hated whoever visited her husband except through the doors that she opened. She had not presented me to him, therefore she hated me. I was perfectly odious to her, and she showed it.

Only once in my life and in hers did Mme. de Chateaubriand receive me graciously. One day I entered, poor little devil, as usual most unhappy, with affrighted schoolboy air and twisting my hat about in my hands. M. de Chateaubriand at that time still lived at No. 27, Rue Saint Dominique.

I was frightened at everything there, even at the servant who opened the door. Well, I entered. Mme. de Chateaubriand was in the salon leading to her husband's study. It was a summer morning. There was a ray of sunshine on the floor, and what dazzled and astonished me much more than the ray of sunshine was a smile on Mme. de Chateaubriand's face. "Is that you, Monsieur Victor Hugo?" she said. I thought I was in the midst of a dream of the *Arabian Nights*. Mme. de Chateaubriand smiling! Mme. de Chateaubriand knowing my name, addressing me by name! It was the first time that she had deigned to notice my existence. I bowed so low that my head nearly touched the floor. She went on: "I am delighted to see you." I could not believe my ears. "I was expecting you," she continued. "It is a long time since you called." I thought then that there certainly must be something the matter either with her or myself. However, she pointed to a rather large object of some kind on a little table, and added: “I reserved this for you. I felt sure you would like to have it. You know what it is?” It was a pile of packets of chocolate made by some religious institution. She had taken the stuff under her protection and the proceeds of its sale were to be devoted to charitable works. I took it and paid for it. At that time I had to live for fifteen months on 800 francs. The Catholic chocolate and Mme. de Chateaubriand’s smile cost me 15 francs; that is to say, a fortnight’s board. Fifteen francs meant as much to me then as 1,500 francs does now.

It was the most costly smile of a woman that ever was sold to me.

M. de Chateaubriand, at the beginning of 1847, was a paralytic; Mme. Récamier was blind. Every day at 3 o’clock M. de Chateaubriand was carried to Mme. Recamier’s bedside. It was touching and sad. The woman who could no longer see stretched forth her hands gropingly towards the man who could no longer feel; their hands met. God be praised! Life was dying, but love still lived.

VII. DEBATES IN THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY ON THE DAYS OF JUNE.

SESSION OF NOVEMBER 25, 1848.

What had to be determined before the Assembly and the country was upon whom devolved the heavy responsibility for the painful days of June. The Executive Committee was then in power; ought it not to have foreseen and provided against the insurrection? General Cavaignac, Minister of War, and, moreover, invested with dictatorial powers by the National Assembly, had alone issued orders.

Had he issued them in time? Could he not have crushed the riot at the outset instead of permitting it to gain strength, spread and develop into an insurrection? And, finally, had not the repression which followed victory been unnecessarily bloody, if not inhuman?

As the time for rendering an account approached Cavaignac became thoughtful and his ill-humour was manifest even in the Chamber.

One day Crémieux took his seat on the ministerial bench, whence he approved with an occasional “Hear! Hear!” the remarks of the orator who occupied the tribune. The speaker chanced to belong to the Opposition.

“Monsieur Crémieux,” said Cavaignac, “you are making a good deal of noise.”

“What does that matter to you?” replied Crémieux.

“It matters that you are on the ministerial bench.”

“Do you want me to leave it?”

“Well—”

Cremieux rose and quitted his bench, saying as he did so:

“General, you compel me to leave the Cabinet, and it was through me that you entered it.”

Crémieux, in point of fact, had, as a member of the Provisional Government, had Cavaignac appointed Minister of War.

During the three days that preceded the debate, which had been fixed for the 25th, the Chamber was very nervous and uneasy. Cavaignac’s friends secretly trembled and sought to make others tremble. They said: “You will see!” They affected assurance. Jules Favre having alluded in the tribune to the “great and solemn debate” which was to take place, they burst into a laugh. M. Coquerel, the Protestant pastor, happening to meet Cavaignac in the lobby, said to him: “Keep yourself in hand, General!” “In a quarter of an hour,” replied Cavaignac with flashing eyes, “I shall have swept these wretches away!” These wretches were Lamartine, Gamier-Pages, and Arago. There was some doubt about Arago, however. It was said that he was rallying to Cavaignac. Meanwhile Cavaignac had conferred the cross of the Legion of Honour upon the Bishop of Quimper, the Abbé Legraverand, who had accepted it.

“A cross for a vote,” was the remark made in the Chamber. And these reversed roles, a general giving a cross to a bishop, caused much amusement.

In reality we are in the midst of a quarrel over the presidency. The candidates are shaking their fists at each other. The Assembly hoots, growls, murmurs, stamps its feet, crushes one, applauds the other.

This poor Assembly is a veritable *fille a soldats*, in love with a trooper. For the time being it is Cavaignac.

Who will it be to-morrow?

General Cavaignac proved himself to be clever, and occasionally even eloquent. His defence partook more of the character of an attack. Frequently he appeared to me to be sincere because he had for so long excited my suspicion. The Assembly listened to him for nearly three hours with rapt attention. Throughout it was evident that he possessed its confidence. Its sympathy was shown every moment, and sometimes it manifested a sort of love for him.

Cavaignac, tall and supple, with his short frock-coat, his military collar, his heavy moustache, his bent brow, his brusque language, broken up by parentheses, and his rough gestures, was at times at once as fierce as a soldier and as passionate as a tribune. Towards the middle of his discourse he became an advocate, which, as far as I was concerned, spoiled the man; the harangue became a speech for the defence. But at its conclusion he roused himself again with a sort of real indignation. He pounded on the desk with his fist and overturned the glass of water, much to the consternation of the ushers, and in terminating he said:

“I have been speaking for I know not how long; I will speak again all the evening, all night, all day to-morrow, if necessary, and it will no longer be as an advocate, but as a soldier, and you will listen to me!”

The whole Assembly applauded him enthusiastically.

M. Barthélemy Saint Hilaire, who attacked Cavaignac, was an orator cold, rigid, somewhat dry and by no means equal to the task, his anger being without fierceness and his hatred without passion. He began by reading a memoir, which always displeases assemblies. The Assembly, which was secretly ill-disposed and angry, was eager to crush him. It only wanted pretexts; he furnished it with motives. The grave defect in his memoir was that serious accusations were built upon petty acts, a surcharge that caused the whole system to bend. This little pallid man who continually raised one leg behind him and leaned forward with his two hands on the edge of the tribune as though he were gazing down into a well, made those who did not hiss laugh. Amid the uproar of the Assembly he affected to write at considerable length in a copybook, to dry the ink by sprinkling powder upon it, and with great deliberation to pour the powder back into the powder-box, thus finding means to increase the tumult with his calmness. When M. Barthélemy Saint Hilaire descended from the tribune, Cavaignac had only been attacked. He had not then replied, yet was already absolved.

M. Garnier-Pagès, tried Republican and honest man, but with a substratum of vanity and an emphatic manner, succeeded M. Barthélemy Saint Hilaire. The Assembly tried to crush him, too, but he rose again amid murmurs. He reminded his hearers of his past, invoked recollections of the Salle Voisin, compared the henchmen of Cavaignac to the henchmen of

Guizot, bared his breast “which had braved the poignards of the Red Republic,” and ended by resolutely attacking the general, with too few facts and too many words, but fairly and squarely, taking him, so to speak, as the Bible urges that the bull be taken, by the horns.

Garnier-Pages propped up the accusation that had almost been laid low. He brought the personal pronoun much too frequently into the discussion; he acted ill-advisedly, for everybody’s personality ought to have been effaced in view of the seriousness of the debate and the anxiety of the country. He turned to all sides with a sort of disconsolate fury; he summoned Arago to intervene, Ledru-Rollin to speak, Lamartine to explain. All three remained silent, thus failing in their duty and destiny.

The Assembly, however, pursued Garnier-Pages with its hooting, and when he said to Cavaignac: “You wanted to throw us down,” it burst into a laugh, at the sentiment as well as at the expression. Garnier-Pages gazed at the laughing house with an air of despair.

From all sides came shouts of: “The closure!”

The Assembly had reached a state in which it would not listen and could no longer hear.

M. Ledru-Rollin appeared in the tribune.

From every bench the cry arose: “At last!”

Silence ensued.

Ledru-Rollin’s speech had a physical effect as it were; it was coarse, but powerful. Garnier-Pages had pointed out the General’s political shortcomings; Ledru-Rollin pointed out his military shortcomings. With the vehemence of the tribune he mingled all the skill of the advocate. He concluded with an appeal for mercy for the offender. He shook Cavaignac’s position.

When he resumed his seat between Pierre Leroux and de Lamennais, a man with long grey hair, and attired in a white frock-coat, crossed the Chamber and shook Ledru-Rollin’s hand. He was Lagrange.

Cavaignac for the fourth time ascended the tribune. It was half past 10 o’clock at night. The noise of the crowd and the evolutions of the cavalry on the Place de la Concorde could be heard. The aspect of the Assembly was becoming sinister.

Cavaignac, who was tired, had decided to assume a haughty attitude. He addressed the Mountain and defied it, declaring to the mountaineers, amid the cheers of the majority and of the reactionaries, that he at all times preferred “their abuse to their praise.” This appeared to be violent and was clever; Cavaignac lost the Rue Taitbout, which represented the Socialists, and won the Rue de Poitiers, which represented the Conservatives.

After this apostrophe he remained a few moments motionless, then passed his hand over his brow.

The Assembly shouted to him:

“Enough! Enough!”

He turned towards Ledru-Rollin and exclaimed:

“You said that you had done with me. It is I who have done with you. You said: ‘For some time.’ I say to you: ‘For ever!’”

It was all over. The Assembly wanted to close the debate.

Lagrange ascended the tribune and gesticulated amid hoots and hisses. Lagrange was at once a popular and chivalrous declaimer, who expressed true sentiments in a forced voice.

“Representatives,” said he, “all this amuses you; well, it doesn’t amuse me!”

The Assembly roared with laughter, and the roar of laughter continued throughout the remainder of his discourse. He called M. Landrin M. Flandrin, and the gaiety became delirious.

I was among those whom this gaiety made heavy at heart, for I seemed to hear the sobs of the people above these bursts of hilarity.

During this uproar a list which was being covered with signatures and which bore an order of the day proposed by M. Dupont de l’Eure, was passed round the benches.

Dupont de l’Eure, bent and tottering, read from the tribune, with the authority of his eighty years, his own order of the day, amid a deep silence that was broken at intervals by cheers.

The order of the day, which was purely and simply a reiteration of the declaration of June 28: “General Cavaignac has merited well of the fatherland,” was adopted by 503 votes to 34.

Mine was among the thirty-four. While the votes were being counted, Napoleon Bonaparte, son of Jerome, came up to me and said:

“I suppose you abstained?”

“From speaking, yes; from voting, no,” I replied.

“Ah!” he went on. “We ourselves abstained from voting. The Rue de Poitiers also abstained.”

I took his hand and said:

"You are free to do as you like. For my part I am not abstaining. I am judging Cavaignac, and the country is judging me. I want the fullest light thrown upon my actions, and my votes are my actions."

1849.

I. THE JARDIN D'HIVER.
II. GENERAL BREA'S MURDERERS.
III. THE SUICIDE OF ANTONIN MOYNE.
IV. A VISIT TO THE OLD CHAMBER OF PEERS.

I. THE JARDIN D'HIVER. FEBRUARY, 1849.

In February, 1849, in the midst of the prevailing sorrow and terror, fetes were given. People danced to help the poor. While the cannon with which the rioters were threatened on January 29, were, so to speak, still trained ready for firing, a charity ball attracted all Paris to the Jardin d'Hiver.

This is what the Jardin d'Hiver was like:

A poet had pictured it in a word: "They have put summer under a glass case!" It was an immense iron cage with two naves forming a cross, as large as four or five cathedrals and covered with glass. Entrance to it was through a gallery of wood decorated with carpets and tapestry.

On entering, the eyes were at first dazzled by a flood of light. In the light all sorts of magnificent flowers, and strange trees with the foliage and altitudes of the tropics, could be seen. Banana trees, palm trees, cedars, great leaves, enormous thorns, and queer branches twisted and mingled as in a virgin forest. The forest alone was virgin there, however. The prettiest women and the most beautiful girls of Paris whirled in this illumination *a giorno* like a swarm of bees in a ray of sunshine.

Above this gaily dressed throng was an immense resplendent chandelier of brass, or rather a great tree of gold and flame turned upside down which seemed to have its roots in the glass roof, and whose sparkling leaves hung over the crowd. A vast ring of candelabra, torch-holders and girandoles shone round the chandelier, like the constellations round the sun. A resounding orchestra perched high in a gallery made the glass panes rattle harmoniously.

But what made the Jardin d'Hiver unique was that beyond this vestibule of light and music and noise, through which one gazed as through a vague and dazzling veil, a sort of immense and tenebrous arch, a grotto of shadow and mystery, could be discerned. This grotto in which were big trees, a copse threaded with paths and clearings, and a fountain that showered its water-diamonds in sparkling spray, was simply the end of the garden. Red dots that resembled oranges of fire shone here and there amid the foliage. It was all like a dream. The lanterns in the copse, when one approached them, became great luminous tulips mingled with real camellias and roses.

One seated one's self on a garden seat with one's feet in the grass and moss, and one felt the warmth arising from a heat-grating beneath this grass and this moss; one happened upon an immense fireplace in which half the trunk of a tree was burning, in proximity to a clump of bushes shivering in the rain of a fountain. There were lamps amid the flowers and carpets in the alleys. Among the trees were satyrs, nude nymphs, hydras, all kinds of groups and statues which, like the place itself, had something impossible and living about them.

What were people doing at this ball? They danced a little, made love a little, and above all talked politics.

There were about fifty Representatives present that evening. The negro Representative Louisy Mathieu, in white gloves, was accompanied by the negrophile Representative Schoelcher in black gloves. People said: "O fraternity! they have exchanged hands!"

Politicians leaning against the mantels announced the approaching appearance of a sheet entitled the "Aristo," a reactionary paper. The Brea affair,* which was being tried at that very moment, was discussed. What particularly struck these grave men in this sinister affair was that among the witnesses was an ironmonger named "Lenclume" and a locksmith named "Laclef."

* General Bréa was assassinated on June 25, 1848, while parleying with the insurgents at the Barriêre de Fontainebleau.

Such are the trivial things men bring into the events of God.

II. GENERAL BREA'S MURDERERS. March, 1849.

The men condemned to death in the Bréa affair are confined in the fort at Vanves. There are five of them: Nourry, a poor child of seventeen whose father and mother died insane, type of the gamin of Paris that revolutions make a hero and riots a murderer; Daix, blind of one eye, lame, and with only one arm, a *bon pauvre* of the Bicetre Hospital, who underwent the operation of trepanning three years ago, and who has a little daughter eight years old whom he adores; Lahr, nicknamed the Fireman, whose wife was confined the day after his condemnation, giving life at the moment she received death; Chopart, a bookseller's assistant, who has been mixed up in some rather discreditable pranks of youth; and finally Vappreaux junior, who pleaded an alibi and who, if the four others are to be believed, was not at the Barrière de Fontainebleau at all during the three days of June.

These hapless wights are confined in a big casemate of the fort. Their condemnation has crushed them and turned them towards God. In the casemate are five camp beds and five rush-bottomed chairs; to this lugubrious furniture of the dungeon an altar has been added. It was erected at the end of the casemate opposite the door and below the venthole through which daylight penetrates. On the altar is only a plaster statue of the Virgin enveloped in lace. There are no tapers, it being feared that the prisoners might set fire to the door with the straw of their mattresses. They pray and work. As Nourry has not been confirmed and wishes to be before he dies, Chopart is teaching him the catechism.

Beside the altar is a board laid upon two trestles. This board, which is full of bullet holes, was the target of the fort. It has been turned into a dining-table, a cruel, thoughtless act, for it is a continual reminder to the prisoners of their approaching death.

A few days ago an anonymous letter reached them. This letter advised them to stamp upon the flagstone in the centre of the casemate, which, it was affirmed, covered the orifice of a well communicating with old subterranean passages of the Abbey of Vanves that extended to Châtillon. All they had to do was to raise the flagstone and they could escape that very night.

They did as the letter directed. The stone, it was found, did emit a hollow sound as though it covered an opening. But either because the police had been informed of the letter, or for some other reason, a stricter watch than ever has been kept upon them from that moment and they have been unable to profit by the advice.

The gaolers and priests do not leave them for a minute either by day or by night. Guardians of the body cheek by jowl with guardians of the soul. Sorry human justice!

The execution of the condemned men in the Bréa affair was a blunder. It was the reappearance of the scaffold. The people had kicked over the guillotine. The bourgeoisie raised it again. A fatal mistake.

President Louis Bonaparte was inclined to be merciful. The revision and cassation could easily have been delayed. The Archbishop of Paris, M. Sibour, successor of a victim, had begged for their lives. But the stereotyped phrases prevailed. The country must be reassured. Order must be reconstructed, legality rebuilt, confidence re-erected! And society at that time was still reduced to employing lopped heads as building material. The Council of State, such as it then was, consulted under the terms of the Constitution, rendered an opinion in favour of the execution. M. Cresson, counsel for Daix and Lahr, waited upon the President. He was an emotional and eloquent young man. He pleaded for these men, for the wives who were not yet widows, for the children who were not yet orphans, and while speaking he wept.

Louis Bonaparte listened to him in silence, then took his hands, but merely remarked: “I am most unhappy!”

In the evening of the same day — it was on the Thursday — the Council of Ministers met. The discussion was long and animated. Only one minister opposed recourse to the scaffold. He was supported by Louis Napoleon. The discussion lasted until 10 o’clock. But the majority prevailed, and before the Cabinet separated Odilon Barrot, the Minister of Justice, signed the order for the execution of three of the condemned men, Daix, Lahr and Chopart. The sentences of Nourry and Vappreaux, junior, were commuted to penal servitude for life.

The execution was fixed for the next morning, Friday.

The Chancellor’s office immediately transmitted the order to the Prefect of Police, who had to act in concert with the military authorities, the sentence having been imposed by a court-martial.

The prefect sent for the executioner. But the executioner could not be found. He had vacated his house in the Rue des Marais Saint Martin in February under the impression that, like the guillotine, he had been deposed, and no one knew what had become of him.

Considerable time was lost in tracing him to his new residence, and when they got there he was out. The executioner was at the Opera. He had gone to see “The Devil’s Violin.”

It was near midnight, and in the absence of the executioner the execution had to be postponed for one day.

During the interval Representative Larabit, whom Chopart had befriended at the barricade of the barriers, was notified and was able to see the President. The President signed Chopart’s pardon.

The day after the execution the Prefect of Police summoned the executioner and reproved him for his absence.

“Well,” said Samson, “I was passing along the street when I saw a big yellow poster announcing The Devil’s Violin. ‘Hello!’ said I to myself, ‘that must be a queer piece,’ and I went to see it.”

Thus a playbill saved a man’s head.

There were some horrible details.

On Friday night, while those who formerly were called *les maitres des basses oeuvres** were erecting the scaffold at the Barrière de Fontainebleau, the *rapporteur* of the court-martial, accompanied by the clerk of the court, repaired to the Fort of Vanves.

* The executioner in France is officially styled
l’executeur des hautes-oeuvres.

Daix and Lahr, who were to die, were sleeping. They were in casemate No. 13 with Nourry and Chopart. There was a delay. It was found that there were no ropes with which to bind the condemned men. The latter were allowed to sleep on. At 5 o’clock in the morning the executioner’s assistants arrived with everything that was necessary.

Then the casemate was entered. The four men awoke. To Nourry and Chopart the officials said: “Get out of here!” They understood, and, joyful and terror-stricken, fled into the adjoining casement. Daix and Lahr, however, did not understand. They sat up and gazed about them with wild, frightened eyes. The executioner and his assistants fell upon them and bound them. No one spoke a word. The condemned men began to realise what it all meant and uttered terrible cries. “If we had not bound them,” said the executioner, “they would have devoured us!”

Then Lahr collapsed and began to pray while the decree for their execution was read to them.

Daix continued to struggle, sobbing, and roaring with horror. These men who had killed so freely were afraid to die.

Daix shouted: “Help! Help!” appealed to the soldiers, adjured them, cursed them, pleaded to them in the name of General Bréa.

“Shut up!” growled a sergeant. “You are a coward!”

The execution was performed with much ceremony. Let this fact be noted: the first time the guillotine dared to show itself after February an army was furnished to guard it. Twenty-five thousand men, infantry and cavalry, surrounded the scaffold. Two generals were in command. Seven guns commanded the streets which converged to the circus of the Barrière de Fontainebleau.

Daix was executed first. When his head had fallen and his body was unstrapped, the trunk, from which a stream of blood was pouring, fell upon the scaffold between the swing-board and the basket.

The executioners were nervous and excited. A man of the people remarked: “Everybody is losing his head on that guillotine, including the executioner!”

In the faubourgs, which the last elections to the National Assembly had so excited, the names of popular candidates could still be seen chalked upon the walls. Louis Bonaparte was one of the candidates. His name appeared on these open-air bulletins, as they may be termed, in company with the names of Raspail and Barbès. The day after the execution Louis Napoleon’s name wherever it was to be seen had a red smear across it. A silent protest, a reproach and a menace. The finger of the people pending the finger of God.

III. THE SUICIDE OF ANTONIN MOYNE. April, 1849.

Antonin Moyne, prior to February, 1848, was a maker of little figures and statuettes for the trade.

Little figures and statuettes! That is what we had come to. Trade had supplanted the State. How empty is history, how poor is art; inasmuch as there are no more big figures there are no more statues.

Antonin Moyne made rather a poor living out of his work. He had, however, been able to give his son Paul a good education and had got him into the Ecole Polytechnique. Towards 1847 the art-work business being already bad, he had added to his little figures portraits in pastel. With a statuette here, and a portrait there, he managed to get along.

After February the art-work business came to a complete standstill. The manufacturer who wanted a model for a candlestick or a clock, and the bourgeois who wanted a portrait, failed him. What was to be done? Antonin Moyne struggled on as best he could, used his old clothes, lived upon beans and potatoes, sold his knick-knacks to bric-à-brac dealers, pawned first his watch, then his silverware.

He lived in a little apartment in the Rue de Boursault, at No. 8, I think, at the corner of the Rue Labruyère.

The little apartment gradually became bare.

After June, Antonin Moyne solicited an order of the Government. The matter dragged along for six months. Three or four Cabinets succeeded each other and Louis Bonaparte had time to be nominated President. At length M. Leon Faucher gave Antonin Moyne an order for a bust, upon which the statuary would be able to make 600 francs. But he was informed that, the State funds being low, the bust would not be paid for until it was finished.

Distress came and hope went.

Antonin Moyne said one day to his wife, who was still young, having been married to him when she was only fifteen years old: “I will kill myself.”

The next day his wife found a loaded pistol under a piece of furniture. She took it and hid it. It appears that Antonin Moyne found it again.

His reason no doubt began to give way. He always carried a bludgeon and razor about with him. One day he said to his wife: “It is easy to kill one’s self with blows of a hammer.”

On one occasion he rose and opened the window with such violence that his wife rushed forward and threw her arms round him.

“What are you going to do?” she demanded.

“Just get a breath of air! And you, what do you want?”

“I am only embracing you,” she answered.

On March 18, 1849, a Sunday, I think it was, his wife said to him:

“I am going to church. Will you come with me?”

He was religious, and his wife, with loving watchfulness, remained with him as much as possible.

He replied: “Presently!” and went into the next room, which was his son’s bedroom.

A few minutes elapsed. Suddenly Mme. Antonin Moyne heard a noise similar to that made by the slamming of a front door. But she knew what it was. She started and cried: “It is that dreadful pistol!”

She rushed into the room her husband had entered, then recoiled in horror. She had seen a body stretched upon the floor.

She ran wildly about the house screaming for help. But no one came, either because everybody was out or because owing to the noise in the street she was not heard.

Then she returned, re-entered the room and knelt beside her husband. The shot had blown nearly all his head away. The blood streamed upon the floor, and the walls and furniture were spattered with brains.

Thus, marked by fatality, like Jean Goujon, his master, died Antonin Moyne, a name which henceforward will bring to mind two things — a horrible death and a charming talent.

IV. A VISIT TO THE OLD CHAMBER OF PEERS. June, 1849.

The working men who sat in the Luxembourg during the months of March and April under the presidency of M. Louis Blanc, showed a sort of respect for the Chamber of Peers they replaced. The armchairs of the peers were occupied, but not soiled. There was no insult, no affront, no abuse. Not a piece of velvet was torn, not a piece of leather was dirtied. There is a good deal of the child about the people, it is given to chalking its anger, its joy and its irony on walls; these labouring men were serious and inoffensive. In the drawers of the desks they found the pens and knives of the peers, yet made neither a cut nor a spot of ink.

A keeper of the palace remarked to me: “They have behaved themselves very well.” They left their places as they had found them. One only left his mark, and he had written in the drawer of Louis Blanc on the ministerial bench:

> Royalty is abolished.
> Hurrah for Louis Blanc!

This inscription is still there.

The fauteuils of the peers were covered with green velvet embellished with gold stripes. Their desks were of mahogany, covered with morocco leather, and with drawers of oak containing writing material in plenty, but having no key. At the top of his desk each peer’s name was stamped in gilt letters on a piece of green leather let into the wood. On the princes' bench, which was on the right, behind the ministerial bench, there was no name, but a gilt plate bearing the words: "The Princes' Bench." This plate and the names of the peers had been torn off, not by the working men, but by order of the Provisional Government.

A few changes were made in the rooms which served as ante-chambers to the Assembly. Puget's admirable "Milo of Crotona," which ornamented the vestibule at the top of the grand staircase, was taken to the old museum and a marble of some kind was substituted for it. The full length statue of the Duke d'Orleans, which was in the second vestibule, was taken I know not where and replaced by a statue of Pompey with gilt face, arms and legs, the statue at the foot of which, according to tradition, assassinated Caesar fell. The picture of founders of constitutions, in the third vestibule, a picture in which Napoleon, Louis XVIII. and Louis Philippe figured, was removed by order of Ledru-Rollin and replaced by a magnificent Gobelin tapestry borrowed from the Garde-Meuble.

Hard by this third vestibule is the old hall of the Chamber of Peers, which was built in 1805 for the Senate. This hall, which is small, narrow and obscure; supported by meagre Corinthian columns with mahogany-coloured bases and white capitals; furnished with flat desks and chairs in the Empire style with green velvet seats, the whole in mahogany; and paved with white marble relieved by lozenges of red Saint Anne marble, — this hall, so full of memories, had been religiously preserved, and after the new hall was built in 1840, had been used for the private conferences of the Court of Peers.

It was in this old hall of the Senate that Marshal Ney was tried. A bar had been put up to the left of the Chancellor who presided over the Chamber. The Marshal was behind this bar, with M. Berryer, senior, on his right, and M. Dupin, the elder, on his left. He stood upon one of the lozenges in the floor, in which, by a sinister hazard, the capricious tracing of the marble figured a death's head. This lozenge has since been taken up and replaced by another.

After February, in view of the riots, soldiers had to be lodged in the palace. The old Senate-hall was turned into a guard-house. The desks of the senators of Napoleon and of the peers of the Restoration were stored in the lumber rooms, and the curule chairs served as beds for the troops.

Early in June, 1849, I visited the hall of the Chamber of Peers and found it just as I had left it seventeen months before, the last time that I sat there, on February 23, 1848.

Everything was in its place. Profound calmness reigned; the fauteuils were empty and in order. One might have thought that the Chamber had adjourned ten minutes previously.

SKETCHES MADE IN THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY.

I. ODILON BARROT.
II. MONSIEUR THIERS.
III. DUFAURE.
IV. CHANGARNIER.
V. LAGRANGE.
VI. PRUDHON.
VII. BLANQUI.
VIII. LAMARTINE.
IX. BOULAY DE LA MEURTHE.
X. DUPIN.

ODILON BARROT.

Odilon Barrot ascends the tribune step by step and slowly; he is solemn before being eloquent. Then he places his right hand on the table of the tribune, throwing his left hand behind his back, and thus shows himself sideways to the Assembly in the attitude of an athlete. He is always in black, well brushed and well buttoned up.

His delivery, which is slow at first, gradually becomes animated, as do his thoughts. But in becoming animated his speech becomes hoarse and his thoughts cloudy. Hence a certain hesitation among his hearers, some being unable to catch what he says, the others not understanding. All at once from the cloud darts a flash of lightning and one is dazzled. The difference between men of this kind and Mirabeau is that the former have flashes of lightning, Mirabeau alone has thunder.

MONSIEUR THIERS.

M. Thiers wants to treat men, ideas and revolutionary events with parliamentary routine. He plays his old game of constitutional tricks in face of abysms and the dreadful upheavals of the chimerical and unexpected. He does not realise that everything has been transformed; he finds a resemblance between our own times and the time when he governed, and starts out from this. This resemblance exists in point of fact, but there is in it a something that is colossal and monstrous. M. Thiers has no suspicion of this, and pursues the even tenour of his way. All his life he has been stroking cats, and coaxing them with all sorts of cajolling processes and feline ways. To-day he is trying to play the same game, and does not see that the animals have grown beyond all measure and that it is wild beasts that he is keeping about him. A strange sight it is to see this little man trying to stroke the roaring muzzle of a revolution with his little hand.

When M. Thiers is interrupted he gets excited, folds and unfolds his arms, then raises his hands to his mouth, his nose, his spectacles, shrugs his shoulders, and ends by clasping the back of his head convulsively with both hands.

I have always entertained towards this celebrated statesman, this eminent orator, this mediocre writer, this narrow-minded man, an indefinable sentiment of admiration, aversion and disdain.

DUFAURE.

M. Dufaure is a barrister of Saintes, and was the leading lawyer in his town about 1833. This led him to aspire to legislative honours. M. Dufaure arrived in the Chamber with a provincial and cold-in-the-nose accent that was very queer. But he possessed a mind so clear that occasionally it was almost luminous, and so accurate that occasionally it was decisive.

With that his speech was deliberate and cold, but sure, solid, and calmly pushed difficulties before it.

M. Dufaure succeeded. He was a deputy, then a minister. He is not a sage. He is a grave and honest man who has held power without greatness but with probity, and who speaks from the tribune without brilliancy but with authority.

His person resembles his talent. In appearance he is dignified, simple and sober. He comes to the Chamber buttoned up in his dark grey frock-coat, and wearing a black cravat, and a shirt collar that reaches to his ears. He has a big nose, thick lips, heavy eyebrows, an intelligent and severe eye, and grey, ill-combed hair.

CHANGARNIER.

Changarnier looks like an old academician, just as Soult looks like an old archbishop.

Changarnier is sixty-four or sixty-five years old, and tall and thin. He has a gentle voice, a graceful and formal air, a chestnut wig like M. Pasquier’s, and a lady-killing smile like M. Brifaut’s.

With that he is a curt, bold, expeditious man, resolute, but cunning and reserved.

At the Chamber he occupies the extreme end of the fourth bench of the last section on the left, exactly above M. Ledru-Rollin.

He usually sits with folded arms. The bench on which Ledru-Rollin and Lamennais sit is perhaps the most habitually irritated of the Left. While the Assembly shouts, murmurs, yells, roars, and rages, Changarnier yawns.

LAGRANGE.

Lagrange, it is said, fired the pistol in the Boulevard des Capucines, fatal spark that heated the passions of the people and caused the conflagration of February. He is styled: Political prisoner and Representative of the people.

Lagrange has a grey moustache, a grey beard and long grey hair. He is overflowing with soured generosity, charitable violence and a sort of chivalrous demagogy; there is a love in his heart with which he stirs up hatred; he is tall, thin, young looking at a distance, old when seen nearer, wrinkled, bewildered, hoarse, flurried, wan, has a wild look in his eyes and gesticulates; he is the Don Quixote of the Mountain. He, also, tilts at windmills; that is to say, at credit, order, peace, commerce, industry, — all the machinery that turns out bread. With this, a lack of ideas; continual jumps from justice to insanity and from cordiality to threats. He proclaims, acclaims, reclaims and declaims. He is one of those men who are never taken seriously, but who sometimes have to be taken tragically.

PRUDHON.

Prudhon was born in 1803. He has thin fair hair that is ruffled and ill-combed, with a curl on his fine high brow. He wears spectacles. His gaze is at once troubled, penetrating and steady. There is something of the house-dog in his almost flat nose and of the monkey in his chin-beard. His mouth, the nether lip of which is thick, has an habitual expression of ill-humour. He has a Franc-Comtois accent, he utters the syllables in the middle of words rapidly and drawls the final syllables; he puts a circumflex accent on every "a," and like Charles Nodier, pronounces: "*honorable, remarquable*." He speaks badly and writes well. In the tribune his gesture consists of little feverish pats upon his manuscript with the palm of his hand. Sometimes he becomes irritated, and froths; but it is cold slaver. The principal characteristic of his countenance and physiognomy is mingled embarrassment and assurance.

I write this while he is in the tribune.

Anthony Thouret met Prudhon.

"Things are going badly," said Prudhon.

"To what cause do you attribute our embarrassments?" queried Anthony Thouret.

"The Socialists are at the bottom of the trouble, of course.

"What! the Socialists? But are you not a Socialist yourself?"

"I a Socialist! Well, I never!" ejaculated Prudhon.

"Well, what in the name of goodness, are you, then?"

"I am a financier."

BLANQUI.

Blanqui got so that he no longer wore a shirt. For twelve years he had worn the same clothes — his prison clothes — rags, which he displayed with sombre pride at his club. He renewed only his boots and his gloves, which were always black.

At Vincennes during his eight months of captivity for the affair of the 15th of May, he lived only upon bread and raw potatoes, refusing all other food. His mother alone occasionally succeeded in inducing him to take a little beef-tea.

With this, frequent ablutions, cleanliness mingled with cynicism, small hands and feet, never a shirt, gloves always.

There was in this man an aristocrat crushed and trampled upon by a demagogue.

Great ability, no hypocrisy; the same in private as in public. Harsh, stern, serious, never laughing, receiving respect with irony, admiration with sarcasm, love with disdain, and inspiring extraordinary devotion.

There was in Blanqui nothing of the people, everything of the populace.

With this, a man of letters, almost erudite. At certain moments he was no longer a man, but a sort of lugubrious apparition in which all degrees of hatred born of all degrees of misery seemed to be incarnated.

LAMARTINE. February 23, 1850.

During the session Lamartine came and sat beside me in the place usually occupied by M. Arbey. While talking, he interjected in an undertone sarcastic remarks about the orators in the tribune.

Thiers spoke. “Little scamp,” murmured Lamartine.

Then Cavaignac made his appearance. “What do you think about him?” said Lamartine. “For my part, these are my sentiments: He is fortunate, he is brave, he is loyal, he is voluble — and he is stupid.”

Cavaignac was followed by Emmanuel Arago. The Assembly was stormy. “This man,” commented Lamartine, “has arms too small for the affairs he undertakes. He is given to joining in mêlées and does not know how to get out of them again. The tempest tempts him, and kills him.”

A moment later Jules Favre ascended the tribune. “I do not know how they can see a serpent in this man,” said Lamartine. “He is a provincial academician.”

Laughing the while, he took a sheet of paper from my drawer, asked me for a pen, asked Savatier-Laroche for a pinch of snuff, and wrote a few lines. This done he mounted the tribune and addressed grave and haughty words to M. Thiers, who had been attacking the revolution of February. Then he returned to our bench, shook hands with me while the Left applauded and the Right waxed indignant, and calmly emptied the snuff in Savatier-Laroche’s snuffbox into his own.

BOULAY DE LA MEURTHE.

M. Boulay de la Meurthe was a stout, kindly man, bald, pot-bellied, short, enormous, with a short nose and a not very long wit. He was a friend of Hard, whom he called *mon cher*, and of Jerome Bonaparte, whom he addressed as “your Majesty.”

The Assembly, on January 20, made him Vice-President of the Republic.

It was somewhat sudden, and unexpected by everybody except himself. This latter fact was evident from the long speech learned by heart that he delivered after being sworn in. At its conclusion the Assembly applauded, then a roar of laughter succeeded the applause. Everybody laughed, including himself; the Assembly out of irony, he in good faith.

Odilon Barrot, who since the previous evening had been keenly regretting that he did not allow himself to be made Vice-President, contemplated the scene with a shrug of the shoulders and a bitter smile.

The Assembly followed Boulay de la Meurthe, congratulated and gratified, with its eyes, and in every look could be read this: “Well, I never! He takes himself seriously!”

When he was taking the oath, in a voice of thunder which made everybody smile, Boulay de la Meurthe looked as if he were dazzled by the Republic, and the Assembly did not look as if it were dazzled by Boulay de la Meurthe.

DUPIN.

Dupin has a style of wit that is peculiar to himself. It is Gaulish, tinged with the wit of a limb of the law and with jovial grossness. When the vote upon the bill against universal suffrage was about to be taken some member of the majority, whose name I have forgotten, went to him and said:

“You are our president, and moreover a great legist. You know more about it than I do. Enlighten me, I am undecided. Is it true that the bill violates the Constitution?”

Dupin appeared to think for a moment and then replied:

“No, it doesn’t violate it, but it lifts its clothes up as high as possible!”

This reminds me of what he said to me the day I spoke upon the Education Bill. Baudin had permitted me to take his turn to speak, and I went up to the presidential chair to notify Dupin.

“Ah! you are going to speak! So much the better!” said he; and pointing to M. Barthélemy Saint Hilaire, who was then occupying the tribune and delivering a long and minute technical speech against the measure, added:

“He is rendering you a service. He is doing the preparatory work. He is turning the bill’s trousers down. This done you will be able to at once—”

He completed the phrase with the expressive gesture which consists of tapping the back of the fingers of the left hand with the fingers of the right hand.

LOUIS BONAPARTE.

- I. HIS DEBUTS.
- II. HIS ELEVATION TO THE PRESIDENCY.
- III. THE FIRST OFFICIAL DINNER.
- IV. THE FIRST MONTH.
- V. FEELING HIS WAY.

I. HIS DEBUTS.

Upon his arrival in Paris Louis Bonaparte took up his residence in the Place Vendome. Mlle. Georges went to see him. They conversed at some length. In the course of the conversation Louis Bonaparte led Mlle. Georges to a window from which,the column with the statue of Napoleon I. upon it was visible and said:

“I gaze at that all day long.”

“It’s pretty high!” observed Mlle. George.

September 24, 1848.

Louis Napoleon appeared at the National Assembly today. He seated himself on the seventh bench of the third section on the left, between M. Vieillard and M. Havin.

He looks young, has a black moustache and goatee, and a parting in his hair, a black cravat, a black coat buttoned up, a turned-down collar, and white gloves. Perrin and Leon Faucher, seated immediately below him, did not once turn their heads. In a few minutes the galleries began to turn their opera-glasses upon the prince, and the prince gazed at the galleries through his own glass.

September 26.

Louis Bonaparte ascended the tribune (3.15 P.M.). Black frock-coat, grey trousers. He read from a crumpled paper in his hand. He was listened to with deep attention. He pronounced the word “compatriots” with a foreign accent. When he had finished a few cries of “Long live the Republic!” were raised.

He returned leisurely to his place. His cousin Napoleon, son of Jerome, who so greatly resembles the Emperor, leaned over M. Vieillard to congratulate him.

Louis Bonaparte seated himself without saying a word to his two neighbours. He is silent, but he seems to be embarrassed rather than taciturn.

October 9.

While the question of the presidency was being raised Louis Bonaparte absented himself from the Assembly. When the Antony Thouret amendment, excluding members of the royal and imperial families was being debated, however, he reappeared. He seated himself at the extremity of his bench, beside his former tutor, M. Vieillard, and listened in silence, leaning his chin upon his hand, or twisting his moustache.

All at once he rose and, amid extraordinary agitation, walked slowly towards the tribune. One half of the Assembly shouted: “The vote!” The other half shouted: “Speak!”

M. Sarrans was in the tribune. The president said:

“M. Sarrans will allow M. Louis Napoleon Bonaparte to speak.”

He made a few insignificant remarks and descended from the tribune amid a general laugh of stupefaction.

November 1848.

On November 19 I dined at Odilon Barrot’s at Bougival.

There were present MM. de Rémusat, de Tocqueville, Girardin, Leon Faucher, a member of the English Parliament and his wife, who is ugly but witty and has beautiful teeth, Mme. Odilon Barrot and her mother.

Towards the middle of the dinner Louis Bonaparte arrived with his cousin, the son of Jerome, and M. Abbatucci, Representative.

Louis Bonaparte is distinguished, cold, gentle, intelligent, with a certain measure of deference and dignity, a German air and black moustache; he bears no resemblance whatever to the Emperor.

He ate little, spoke little, and laughed little, although the party was a merry one.

Mme. Odilon Barrot seated him on her left. The Englishman was on her right.

M. de Rémusat, who was seated between the prince and myself, remarked to me loud enough for Louis Bonaparte to hear:

"I give my best wishes to Louis Bonaparte and my vote to Cavaignac."

Louis Bonaparte at the time was feeding Mme. Odilon Barrot's greyhound with fried gudgeons.

II. HIS ELEVATION TO THE PRESIDENCY. December 1848.

The proclamation of Louis Bonaparte as President of the Republic was made on December 20.

The weather, which up to then had been admirable, and reminded one more of the approach of spring than of the beginning of winter, suddenly changed. December 20 was the first cold day of the year. Popular superstition had it that the sun of Austerlitz was becoming clouded.

This proclamation was made in a somewhat unexpected manner. It had been announced for Friday. It was made suddenly on Wednesday.

Towards 3 o'clock the approaches to the Assembly were occupied by troops. A regiment of infantry was massed in rear of the Palais d'Orsay; a regiment of dragoons was echeloned along the quay. The troopers shivered and looked moody. The population assembled in great uneasiness, not knowing what it all meant. For some days a Bonapartist movement had been vaguely spoken of. The faubourgs, it was said, were to turn out and march to the Assembly shouting: "Long live the Emperor!" The day before the Funds had dropped 3 francs. Napoleon Bonaparte, greatly alarmed, came to see me.

The Assembly resembled a public square. It was a number of groups rather than a parliament. In the tribune a very useful bill for regulating the publicity of the sessions and substituting the State Printing Office, the former Royal Printing Office, for the printing office of the "Moniteur," was being discussed, but no one listened. M. Bureau de Puzy, the questor, was speaking.

Suddenly there was a stir in the Assembly, which was being invaded by a crowd of Deputies who entered by the door on the left. It was the committee appointed to count the votes and was returning to announce the result of the election to the Presidency. It was 4 o'clock, the chandeliers were lighted, there was an immense crowd in the public galleries, all the ministers were present. Cavaignac, calm, attired in a black frock-coat, and not wearing any decoration, was in his place. He kept his right hand thrust in the breast of his buttoned frock-coat, and made no reply to M. Bastide, who now and then whispered in his ear. M. Fayet, Bishop of Orleans, occupied a chair in front of the General. Which prompted the Bishop of Langres, the Abbé Parisis, to remark: "That is the place of a dog, not a bishop."

Lamartine was absent.

The *rapporteur* of the committee, M. Waldeck-Rousseau, read a cold discourse that was coldly listened to. When he reached the enumeration of the votes cast, and came to Lamartine's total, 17,910 votes, the Right burst into a laugh. A mean vengeance, sarcasm of the unpopular men of yesterday for the unpopular man of to-day.

Cavaignac took leave in a few brief and dignified words, which were applauded by the whole Assembly. He announced that the Ministry had resigned in a body, and that he, Cavaignac, laid down the power. He thanked the Assembly with emotion. A few Representatives wept.

Then President Marrast proclaimed "the citizen Louis Bonaparte" President of the Republic.

A few Representatives about the bench where Louis Bonaparte sat applauded. The remainder of the Assembly preserved a glacial silence. They were leaving the lover for the husband.

Armand Marrast called upon the elect of the nation to take the oath of office. There was a stir.

Louis Bonaparte, buttoned up in a black frock-coat, the decoration of Representative of the people and the star of the Legion of Honour on his breast, entered by the door on the right, ascended the tribune, repeated in a calm voice the words of the oath that President Marrast dictated to him, called upon God and men to bear witness, then read, with a foreign accent which was displeasing, a speech that was interrupted at rare intervals by murmurs of approval. He eulogized Cavaignac, and the eulogy was noted and applauded.

After a few minutes he descended from the tribune, not like Cavaignac, amid the acclamations of the Chamber, but amid an immense shout of "Long live the Republic!" Somebody shouted "Hurrah for the Constitution!"

Before leaving Louis Bonaparte went over to his former tutor, M. Vieillard, who was seated in the eighth section on the left, and shook hands with him. Then the President of the Assembly invited the committee to accompany the President of the Republic to his palace and have rendered to him the honours due to his rank. The word caused the Mountain to murmur. I shouted from my bench: “To his functions!”

The President of the Assembly announced that the President of the Republic had charged M. Odilon Barrot with the formation of a Cabinet, and that the names of the new Ministers would be announced to the Assembly in a Message; that, in fact, a supplement to the Moniteur would be distributed to the Representatives that very evening.

It was remarked, for everything was remarked on that day which began a decisive phase in the history of the country, that President Marrast called Louis Bonaparte “citizen” and Odilon Barrot “monsieur.”

Meanwhile the ushers, their chief Deponceau at their head, the officers of the Chamber, the questors, and among them General Lebreton in full uniform, had grouped themselves below the tribune; several Representatives had joined them; there was a stir indicating that Louis Bonaparte was about to leave the enclosure. A few Deputies rose. There were shouts of “Sit down! Sit down!”

Louis Bonaparte went out. The malcontents, to manifest their indifference, wanted to continue the debate on the Printing Office Bill. But the Assembly was too agitated even to remain seated. It rose in a tumult and the Chamber was soon empty. It was half past 4. The proceedings had lasted half an hour.

As I left the Assembly, alone, and avoided as a man who had disdained the opportunity to be a Minister, I passed in the outer hall, at the foot of the stairs, a group in which I noticed Montalembert, and also Changarnier in the uniform of a lieutenant-general of the National Guard. Changarnier had just been escorting Louis Bonaparte to the Elysee. I heard him say: “All passed off well.”

When I found myself in the Place de la Revolution, there were no longer either troops or crowd; all had disappeared. A few passers-by came from the Champs-Elysees. The night was dark and cold. A bitter wind blew from the river, and at the same time a heavy storm-cloud breaking in the west covered the horizon with silent flashes of lightning. A December wind with August lightning — such were the omens of that day.

III. THE FIRST OFFICIAL DINNER. December 24, 1848.

Louis Bonaparte gave his first dinner last evening, Saturday the 23rd, two days after his elevation to the Presidency of the Republic.

The Chamber had adjourned for the Christmas holidays. I was at home in my new lodging in the Rue de la Tour d'Auvergne, occupied with I know not what bagatelles, *totus in illis*, when a letter addressed to me and brought by a dragoon was handed to me. I opened the envelope, and this is what I read:

The orderly officer on duty has the honour to inform Monsieur the General Changarnier that he is invited to dinner at the Elysee-National on Saturday, at 7 o'clock.

I wrote below it: "Delivered by mistake to M. Victor Hugo," and sent the letter back by the dragoon who had brought it. An hour later came another letter from M. de Persigny, Prince Louis's former companion in plots, to-day his private secretary. This letter contained profuse apologies for the error committed and advised me that I was among those invited. My letter had been addressed by mistake to M. Conti, the Representative from Corsica.

At the head of M. de Persigny's letter, written with a pen, were the words: "Household of the President."

I remarked that the form of these invitations was exactly similar to the form employed by King Louis Philippe. As I did not wish to do anything that might resemble intentional coldness, I dressed; it was half past 6, and I set out immediately for the Elysee.

Half past 7 struck as I arrived there.

As I passed I glanced at the sinister portal of the Praslin mansion adjoining the Elysee. The large green carriage entrance, enframed between two Doric pillars of the time of the Empire, was closed, gloomy, and vaguely outlined by the light of a street lamp. One of the double doors of the entrance to the Elysee was closed; two soldiers of the line were on guard. The court-yard was scarcely lighted, and a mason in his working clothes with a ladder on his shoulder was crossing it; nearly all the windows of the outhouses on the right had been broken, and were mended with paper. I entered by the door on the perron. Three servants in black coats received me; one opened the door, another took my mantle, the third said:

"Monsieur, on the first floor!" I ascended the grand staircase. There were a carpet and flowers on it, but that chilly and unsettled air about it peculiar to places into which one is moving.

On the first floor an usher asked:

"Monsieur has come to dinner?"

"Yes," I said. "Are they at table?"

"Yes, Monsieur."

"In that case, I am off."

"But, Monsieur," exclaimed the usher, "nearly everybody arrived after the dinner had begun; go in. Monsieur is expected."

I remarked this military and imperial punctuality, which used to be customary with Napoleon. With the Emperor 7 o'clock meant 7 o'clock.

I crossed the ante-chamber, then a salon, and entered the dining-room. It was a square room wainscotted in the Empire style with white wood. On the walls were engravings and pictures of very poor selection, among them "Mary Stuart listening to Rizzio," by the painter Ducis. Around the room was a sideboard. In the middle was a long table with rounded ends at which about fifteen guests were seated. One end of the table, that furthest from the entrance, was raised, and here the President of the Republic was seated between two women, the Marquise de Hallays-Coëtquen, née Princess de Chimay (Tallien) being on his right, and Mme. Conti, mother of the Representative, on his left.

The President rose when I entered. I went up to him. We grasped each other's hand.

"I have improvised this dinner," he said. "I invited only a few dear friends, and I hoped that I could comprise you among them. I thank you for coming. You have come to me, as I went to you, simply. I thank you."

He again grasped my hand. Prince de la Moskowa, who was next to General Changarnier, made room for me beside him, and I seated myself at the table. I ate quickly, for the President had interrupted the dinner to enable me to catch up with the company. The second course had been reached.

Opposite to me was General Rulhières, an ex-peer, the Representative Conti and Lucien Murat. The other guests were unknown to me. Among them was a young major of cavalry, decorated with the Legion of Honour. This major alone was in uniform; the others wore evening dress. The Prince had a rosette of the Legion of Honour in his buttonhole.

Everybody conversed with his neighbour. Louis Bonaparte appeared to prefer his neighbour on the right to his neighbour on the left. The Marquise de Hallays is thirty-six years old, and looks her age. Fine eyes, not much hair, an ugly mouth, white skin, a shapely neck, charming arms, the prettiest little hands in the world, admirable shoulders. At present she is separated from M. de Hallays. She has had eight children, the first seven by her husband. She was married fifteen years ago. During the early period of their marriage she used to fetch her husband from the drawing-room, even in the daytime, and take him off to bed. Sometimes a servant would enter and say: "Madame the Marquise is asking for Monsieur the Marquis." The Marquis would obey the summons. This made the company who happened to be present laugh. To-day the Marquis and Marquise have fallen out.

"She was the mistress of Napoleon, son of Jerome, you know," said Prince de la Moskowa to me, sotto voce, "now she is Louis's mistress."

"Well," I answered, "changing a Napoleon for a Louis is an everyday occurrence."

These bad puns did not prevent me from eating and observing.

The two women seated beside the President had square-topped chairs. The President's chair was surmounted with a little round top. As I was about to draw some inference from this I looked at the other chairs and saw that four or five guests, myself among them, had chairs similar to that of the President. The chairs were covered with red velvet with gilt headed nails. A more serious thing I noticed was that everybody addressed the President of the Republic as "Monseigneur" and "your Highness." I who had called him "Prince," had the air of a demagogue.

When we rose from table the Prince asked after my wife, and then apologized profusely for the rusticity of the service.

"I am not yet installed," he said. "The day before yesterday, when I arrived here, there was hardly a mattress for me to sleep upon."

The dinner was a very ordinary one, and the Prince did well to excuse himself. The service was of common white china and the silverware bourgeois, worn, and gross. In the middle of the table was a rather fine vase of craquelé, ornamented with ormolu in the bad taste of the time of Louis XVI.

However, we heard music in an adjoining hall.

"It is a surprise," said the President to us, "they are the musicians from the Opera."

A minute afterwards programmes written with a pen were handed round. They indicated that the following five selections were being played:

1. Priere de la “Muette.”
2. Fantaisie sur des airs favoris de la “Reine Hortense.”
3. Final de “Robert Bruce”.
4. “Marche Republicaine.”
5. “La Victoire,” pas redoublé.

In the rather uneasy state of mind I, like the whole of France, was in at that moment, I could not help remarking this “Victory” piece coming after the “Republican March.”

I rose from table still hungry.

We went into the grand salon, which was separated from the dining-room by the smaller salon that I had passed through on entering.

This grand salon was extremely ugly. It was white, with figures on panels, after the fashion of those of Pompeii, the whole of the furniture being in the Empire style with the exception of the armchairs, which were in tapestry and gold and in fairly good taste. There were three arched windows to which three large mirrors of the same shape at the other end of the salon formed pendants and one of which, the middle one, was a door. The window curtains were of fine white satin richly flowered.

While the Prince de la Moskowa and I were talking Socialism, the Mountain, Communism, etc., Louis Bonaparte came up and took me aside.

He asked me what I thought of the situation. I was reserved. I told him that a good beginning had been made; that the task was a difficult but a grand one; that what he had to do was to reassure the bourgeoisie and satisfy the people, to give tranquillity to the former, work to the latter, and life to all; that after the little governments, those of the elder Bourbons, Louis Philippe, and the Republic of February, a great one was required; that the Emperor had made a great government through war, and that he himself ought to make a great one through peace; that the French people having been illustrious for three centuries did not propose to become ignoble; that it was his failure to appreciate this high-mindedness of the people and the national pride that was the chief cause of Louis Philippe’s downfall; that, in a word, he must decorate peace.

“How?” asked Louis Napoleon.

“By all the greatness of art, literature and science, by the victories of industry and progress. Popular labour can accomplish miracles. And then, France is a conquering nation; when she does not make conquests with the sword, she wants to make them with the mind. Know this and act accordingly. Ignore it and you will be lost.”

He looked thoughtful and went away. Then he returned, thanked me warmly, and we continued to converse.

We spoke about the press. I advised him to respect it profoundly and at the same time to establish a State press. “The State without a newspaper, in the midst of newspapers,” I observed, “restricting itself to governing while publicity and polemics are the rule, reminds one of the knights of the fifteenth century who obstinately persisted in fighting against cannon with swords; they were always beaten. I grant that it was noble; you will grant that it was foolish.”

He spoke of the Emperor. “It is here,” he said, “that I saw him for the last time. I could not re-enter this palace without emotion. The Emperor had me brought to him and laid his hand on my head. I was seven years old. It was in the grand salon downstairs.”

Then Louis Bonaparte talked about La Malmaison. He said:

“They have respected it. I visited the place in detail about six weeks ago. This is how I came to do so. I had gone to see M. Odilon Barrot at Bougival.

“‘Dine with me,’ he said.

“‘ I will with pleasure.’ It was 3 o’clock. ‘What shall we do until dinner time?’

“‘Let us go and see La Malmaison,’ suggested M. Barrot.

“We went. Nobody else was with us. Arrived at La Malmaison we rang the bell. A porter opened the gate, M. Barrot spoke:

“‘We want to see La Malmaison.’

“‘Impossible!’ replied the porter.

“‘What do you mean, impossible?’

“‘I have orders.’

“‘From whom?’

“‘From her Majesty Queen Christine, to whom the château belongs at present.’

“‘But monsieur here is a stranger who has come expressly to visit the place.’

“‘Impossible!’

"'Well,' exclaimed M. Odilon Barrot, 'it's funny that this door should be closed to the Emperor's nephew!'

"The porter started and threw his cap on the ground. He was an old soldier, to whom the post had been granted as a pension.

"'The Emperor's nephew!' he cried. 'Oh! Sire, enter!'

"He wanted to kiss my clothes.

"We visited the château. Everything is still about in its place. I recognised nearly everything, the First Consul's study, the chamber of his mother, my own. The furniture in several rooms has not been changed. I found a little armchair I had when I was a child."

I said to the Prince: "You see, thrones disappear, arm-chairs remain."

While we were talking a few persons came, among others M. Duclerc, the ex-Minister of Finance of the Executive Committee, an old woman in black velvet whom I did not know, and Lord Normanby, the English Ambassador, whom the President quickly took into an adjoining salon. I saw Lord Normanby taken aside in the same way by Louis Philippe.

The President in his salon had an air of timidity and did not appear at home. He came and went from group to group more like an embarrassed stranger than the master of the house. However, his remarks are *a propos* and sometimes witty.

He endeavoured to get my opinion anent his Ministry, but in vain. I would say nothing either good or bad about it.

Besides, the Ministry is only a mask, or, more properly speaking, a screen that hides a baboon. Thiers is behind it. This is beginning to bother Louis Bonaparte. He has to contend against eight Ministers, all of whom seek to belittle him. Each is pulling his own way. Among these Ministers some are his avowed enemies. Nominations, promotions, and lists arrive all made out from the Place Saint Georges. They have to be accepted, signed and endorsed.

Yesterday Louis Bonaparte complained about it to the Prince de la Moskowa, remarking wittily: "They want to make of me a Prince Albert of the Republic."

Odilon Barrot appeared mournful and discouraged. To-day he left the council with a crushed air. M. de la Moskowa encountered him.

"Hello!" said he, "how goes it?"

"Pray for us!" replied Odilon Barrot.

"Whew!" said Moskowa, "this is tragical!"

“What are we to do?” went on Odilon Barrot. “How are we to rebuild this old society in which everything is collapsing? Efforts to prop it up only help to bring it down. If you touch it, it topples over. Ah! pray for us!”

And he raised his eyes skywards.

I quitted the Elysee about 10 o’clock. As I was going the President said to me: “Wait a minute.” Then he went into an adjoining room and came out again a moment later with some papers which he placed in my hand, saying: “For Madame Victor Hugo.”

They were tickets of admission to the gallery of the Garde-Meuble for the review that is to be held to-day.

And as I went home I thought a good deal. I thought about this abrupt moving in, this trial of etiquette, this bourgeois-republican-imperial mixture, this surface of a deep, unfathomed quantity that to-day is called the President of the Republic, his entourage, the whole circumstances of his position. This man who can be, and is, addressed at one and the same time and from all sides at once as: prince, highness, monsieur, monseigneur and citizen, is not one of the least curious and characteristic factors of the situation.

Everything that is happening at this moment stamps its mark upon this personage who sticks at nothing to attain his ends.

IV. THE FIRST MONTH. January. 1849.

The first month of Louis Bonaparte’s presidency is drawing to a close. This is how we stand at present:

Old-time Bonapartists are cropping up. MM. Jules Favre, Billault and Carteret are paying court — politically Speaking — to the Princess Mathilde Demidoff. The Duchess d’Orleans is residing with her two children in a little house at Ems, where she lives modestly yet royally. All the ideas of February are brought up one after the other; 1849, disappointed, is turning its back on 1848. The generals want amnesty, the wise want disarmament. The Constituent Assembly’s term is expiring and the Assembly is in savage mood in consequence. M. Guizot is publishing his book *On Democracy in France*. Louis Philippe is in London, Pius IX. is at Gaete, M. Barrot is in power; the bourgeoisie has lost Paris, Catholicism has lost Rome. The sky is rainy and gloomy, with a ray of sunshine now and then. Mlle. Ozy shows herself quite naked in the role of Eve at the Porte

Saint Martin; Fréderick Lemaitre is playing “L’Auberge des Adrets” there. Five per cents are at 74, potatoes cost 8 cents the bushel, at the market a pike can be bought for 20 sous. M. Ledru-Rollin is trying to force the country into war, M. Prudhon is trying to force it into bankruptcy. General Cavaignac takes part in the sessions of the Assembly in a grey waist-coat, and passes his time gazing at the women in the galleries through big ivory opera-glasses. M. de Lamartine gets 25,000 francs for his “Toussaint L’Ouverture.” Louis Bonaparte gives grand dinners to M. Thiers, who had him captured, and to M. Mole, who had him condemned. Vienna, Milan, and Berlin are becoming calmer. Revolutionary fires are paling and seem to be dying out everywhere on the surface, but the peoples are still deeply stirred. The King of Prussia is getting ready to seize his sceptre again and the Emperor of Russia to draw his sword. There has been an earthquake at Havre, the cholera is at Fécamp; Arnal is leaving the Gymnase, and the Academy is nominating the Duke de Noailles as Chateaubriand’s successor.

V. FEELING HIS WAY. January, 1849.

At Odilon Barrot’s ball on January 28 M. Thiers went up to M. Leon Faucher and said: “Make So-and-So a prefect.” M. Leon Faucher made a grimace, which is an easy thing for him to do, and said: “Monsieur Thiers, there are objections.” “That’s funny!” retorted Thiers, “it is precisely the answer the President of the Republic gave to me the day I said: ‘Make M. Faucher a Minister!’”

At this ball it was remarked that Louis Bonaparte sought Berryer’s company, attached himself to him and led him into quiet corners. The Prince looked as though he were following Berryer, and Berryer as though he were trying to avoid the Prince.

At 11 o’clock the President said to Berryer: “Come with me to the Opera.”

Berryer excused himself. “Prince,” said he, “it would give rise to gossip. People would believe I am engaged in a love affair!”

“Pish!” replied Louis Bonaparte laughingly, “Representatives are inviolable!”

The Prince went away alone, and the following quatrain was circulated:

En vain l’empire met du fard,
On baisse ses yeux et sa robe.

Et Berryer-Joseph so derobe
A Napoléon-Putiphar.

February, 1849.

Although he is animated with the best intentions in the world and has a very visible quantity of intelligence and aptitude, I fear that Louis Bonaparte will find his task too much for him. To him, France, the century, the new spirit, the instincts peculiar to the soil and the period are so many closed books. He looks without understanding them at minds that are working, Paris, events, men, things and ideas. He belongs to that class of ignorant persons who are called princes and to that category of foreigners who are called *êmigrês*. To those who examine him closely he has the air of a patient rather than of a governing man.

There is nothing of the Bonapartes about him, either in his face or manner. He probably is not a Bonaparte. The free and easy ways of Queen Hortense are remembered. “He is a memento of Holland!” said Alexis de Saint Priest to me yesterday. Louis Bonaparte certainly possesses the cold manner of the Dutch.

Louis Bonaparte knows so little about Paris that the first time I saw him he said to me:

“I have been hunting for you. I went to your former residence. What is this Place des Vosges?”

“It is the Place Royale,” I said.

“Ah!” he continued, “is it an old place?”

He wanted to see Beranger. He went to Passy twice without being able to find him at home. His cousin Napoleon timed his visit more happily and found Béranger by his fireside. He asked him:

“What do you advise my cousin to do?”

“To observe the Constitution.”

“And what ought he to avoid?”

“Violating the Constitution.”

Béranger could not be induced to say anything else.

Yesterday, December 5, 1850, I was at the Français. Rachel played “Adrienne Lecouvreur.” Jerome Bonaparte occupied a box next to mine. During an entr’acte I paid him a visit. We chatted. He said to me:

“Louis is mad. He is suspicious of his friends and delivers himself into the hands of his enemies. He is suspicious of his family and allows himself to be bound hand and foot by the old Royalist parties. On my return to France I was better received by Louis Philippe at the Tuileries than I am at the Elysee by my nephew. I said to him the other day before one of his ministers (Fould): ‘Just remember a little! When you were a candidate for the presidency, Monsieur here (I pointed to Fould) called upon me in the Rue d’Alger, where I lived, and begged me in the name of MM. Thiers, Mole, Duvergier de Hauranne, Berryer, and Bugeaud to enter the lists for the presidency. He told me that never would you get the “Constitutionnel;” that in Mole’s opinion you were an idiot, and that Thiers looked upon you as a blockhead; that I alone could rally everybody to me and win against Cavaignac. I refused. I told them that you represented youth and the future, that you had a quarter of a century before you, whereas I could hardly count upon eight or ten years; that I was an invalid and wanted to be let alone. That is what these people were doing and that is what I did. And you forget all this! And you make these gentlemen the masters! And you show the door to your cousin, my son, who defended you in the Assembly and devoted himself to furthering your candidacy! And you are strangling universal suffrage, which made you what you are! I’ faith I shall say like Mole that you are an idiot, and like Thiers that you are a blockhead!’”

The King of Westphalia paused for a moment, then continued:

“And do you know, Monsieur Victor Hugo, what he replied to me? ‘You will see!’ No one knows what is at the bottom of that man!”

THE SIEGE OF PARIS. EXTRACTS FROM NOTE-BOOKS

BRUSSELS, September 1. — Charles* leaves this morning with MM. Claretie, Proust, and Frédérix for Virton. Fighting is going on near there, at Carignan. They will see what they can of the battle. They will return tomorrow.

* Victor Hugo’s son.

September 2. — Charles and his friends did not return to-day.

September 3. — Yesterday, after the decisive battle had been lost, Louis Napoleon, who was taken prisoner at Sedan, surrendered his sword to the King of Prussia. Just a month ago, on August 2, at Sarrebrück, he was playing at war.

To save France now would be to save Europe.

Shouting newsboys pass, with enormous posters on which are the words: “Napoleon III. a Prisoner.”

5 o’clock. — Charles and our friends have returned.

9 o’clock. — Meeting of exiles at which Charles and I are present.

Query: Tricolour flag or red flag?

September 4. — The deposition of the Emperor is proclaimed in Paris.

At 1 o’clock a meeting of exiles is held at my house.

At 3 o’clock I receive a telegram from Paris couched in the following terms: “Bring the children with you.” Which means “Come.”

MM. Claretie and Proust dined with us.

During the dinner a telegram signed “François Hugo” arrived, announcing that a provisional government had been formed: Jules Favre, Gambetta, Thiers.

September 5. — At 6 o’clock in the morning a telegram signed “Barbieux,” and asking the hour of my arrival in Paris, is brought to me. I instruct Charles to answer that I shall arrive at 9 o’clock at night. We shall take the children with us. We shall leave by the 2.35 o’clock train.

The Provisional Government (according to the newspapers) is made up of all the Deputies of Paris, with the exception of Thiers.

At noon, as I was about to leave Brussels for Paris, a young man, a Frenchman, accosted me in the Place de la Monnaie and said:

Monsieur, they tell me that you are Victor Hugo."

"Yes."

"Be so kind as to enlighten me. I would like to know whether it is prudent to go to Paris at present."

"Monsieur, it is very imprudent, but you should go," was my reply.

We entered France at 4 o'clock.

At Tergnier, at 6.30, we dined upon a piece of bread, a little cheese, a pear and a glass of wine. Claretie insisted upon paying, and said: "I want particularly to give you a dinner on the day of your return to France."

En route I saw in the woods a camp of French soldiers, men and horses mingled. I shouted to them: "Long live the army!" and I wept.

At frequent intervals we came across train-loads of soldiers on their way to Paris. Twenty-five of these passed during the day. As one of them went by we gave to the soldiers all the provisions we had, some bread, fruit and wine. The sun shone brightly and was succeeded by a bright moon.

We arrived in Paris at 9.35 o'clock. An immense crowd awaited me. It was an indescribable welcome. I spoke four times, once from the balcony of a café and thrice from my carriage.

When I took leave of this ever-growing crowd, which escorted me to Paul Meurice's, in the Avenue Frochot, I said to the people: "In one hour you repay me for twenty years of exile."

They sang the "Marseillaise" and the "Chant du Depart."

They shouted: "Long live Victor Hugo!"

The journey from the Northern Railway station to the Rue Laval took two hours.

We arrived at Meurice's, where I am to stay, at mid-night. I dined with my travelling companions and Victor. I went to bed at 2 o'clock.

At daybreak I was awakened by a terrible storm. Thunder and lightning.

I shall take breakfast with Paul Meurice, and we shall dine together at the Hotel Navarin, in the Rue Navarin, where my family is staying.

PARIS, September 6. — Innumerable visits, innumerable letters.

Rey came to ask me whether I would consent to join a triumvirate composed as follows: Victor Hugo, Ledru-Rollin, and Schoelcher. I refused. I said: "It is almost impossible to amalgamate me."

I recalled several things to his mind. He said: "Do you remember that it was I who received you when you arrived at the Baudin barricade?" * I replied: “I remember the fact so well that — . And I recited the lines at the beginning of the piece (unpublished) upon the Baudin barricade:

La barricade était livide dans l’aurore,
Et comme j’arrivais elle fumait encore.
Rey me serra la main et dit: Baudin est mort...

* Representative Baudin was killed on the barricade in the Faubourg Saint Antoine on December 2, 1852, during Louis Bonaparte’s coup d’Etat.

He burst into tears.

September 7. — Louis Blanc, d’Alton-Shée, Banville and others came to see me.

The women of the Markets brought me a bouquet.

September 8. — I am warned that it is proposed to assassinate me. I shrug my shoulders.

This morning I wrote my “Letter to the Germans.” It will be sent tomorrow.

Visit from General Cluseret.

At 10 o’clock I went to the office of the Rappel to correct the proofs of my “Letter to the Germans.”

September 9. — Received a visit from General Montfort. The generals are asking me for commands, I am being asked to grant audiences, office-seekers are asking me for places. I reply: “I am nobody.”

I saw Captain Feval, husband of Fanny, the sister of Alice. * He was a prisoner of war, and was released on parole.

* Wife of Charles Hugo.

All the newspapers publish my “Appeal to the Germans.”

September 10. — D’Alton-Shée and Louis Ulbach lunched with us. Afterwards we went to the Place de la Concorde. At the foot of the flower-crowned statue of Strasburg is a register. Everybody comes to sign the resolution of public thanks. I inscribed my name. The crowd at once surrounded me. The ovation of the other night was about to recommence. I hurried to my carriage.

Among the persons who called upon me was Cernuschi.

September 11. — Received a visit from Mr. Wickham Hoffman, Secretary of the United States Legation. Mr. Washburne, the American Minister, had requested him to ask me whether I did not think that some good might result were he to intervene *officiously* and see the King of Prussia. I sent him to Jules Favre.

September 12. — Among other callers was Frédérick Lemaître.

September 13. — To-day there is a review of the army of Paris. I am alone in my chamber. The battalions march through the streets singing the “Marseillaise” and the “Chant du Depart.” I hear this immense shout:

For France a Frenchman should live,
For France a Frenchman should die.*

* The “Chant du Depart.”

I listen and I weep. On, valiant ones! I will go where you go.

Receive a visit from the United States Consul-General and Mr. Wickham Hoffman.

Julie* writes me from Guernsey that the acorn I planted on July 14 has sprouted. The oak of the United States of Europe issued from the ground on September 5, the day of my return to Paris.

* Victor Hugo’s sister-in-law.

September 14. — I received a visit from the committee of the Société des Gens de Lettres, which wants me to be its president; from M. Jules Simon, Minister of Public Instruction; from Colonel Piré, who commands a corps of volunteers, etc.

September 16. — One year ago to-day I opened the Peace Congress at Lausanne. This morning I wrote the “Appeal to Frenchmen” for a war to the bitter end against the invasion.

On going out I perceived hovering over Montmartre the captive balloon from which a watch is to be kept upon the besiegers.

September 17. — All the forests around Paris are burning. Charles made a trip to the fortifications and is perfectly satisfied with them. I deposited at the office of the Rappel 2,088 francs 30 centimes, subscribed in Guernsey for the wounded and sent by M. H. Tupper, the French Consul.

At the same time I deposited at the “Rappel” office a bracelet and earrings of gold, sent anonymously for the wounded by a woman. Accompanying the trinkets was a little golden neck medal for Jeanne.*

* Victor Hugo’s little granddaughter.

September 20. — Charles and his little family left the Hotel Navarin yesterday and installed themselves at 174, Rue de Rivoli. Charles and his wife, as well as Victor, will continue to dine with me every day.

The attack upon Paris began yesterday.

Louis Blanc, Gambetta and Jules Ferry came to see me this morning.

I went to the Institute to sign the Declaration that it proposes to issue encouraging the capital to resist to the last.

I will not accept any limited candidacy. I would accept with devotedness the candidacy of the city of Paris. I want the voting to be not by districts, with local candidates, but by the whole city with one list to select from.

I went to the Ministry of Public Instruction to see Mme. Jules Simon, who is in mourning for her old friend Victor Bois. Georges and Jeanne were in the garden. I played with them.

Nadar came to see me this evening to ask me for some letters to put in a balloon which he will send up the day after tomorrow. It will carry with it my three addresses: “To the Germans,” “To Frenchmen,” “To Parisians.”

October 6. — Nadar’s balloon, which has been named the “Barbes,” and which is taking my letters, etc., started this morning, but had to come down again, as there was not enough wind. It will leave to-morrow. It is said that Jules Favre and Gambetta will go in it.

Last night General John Meredith Read, United States Consul-General, called upon me. He had seen the American General Burnside, who is in the Prussian camp. The Prussians, it appears, have respected Versailles. They are afraid to attack Paris. This we are aware of, for we can see it for ourselves.

October 7. — This morning, while strolling on the Boulevard de Clichy, I perceived a balloon at the end of a street leading to Montmartre. I went up to it. A small crowd bordered a large square space that was walled in by the perpendicular bluffs of Montmartre. In this space three balloons were being inflated, a large one, a medium-sized one, and a small one. The large one was yellow, the medium one white, and the small one striped yellow and red.

In the crowd it was whispered that Gambetta was going. Sure enough I saw him in a group near the yellow balloon, wearing a heavy overcoat and a sealskin cap. He seated himself upon a paving-stone and put on a pair of high fur-lined boots. A leather bag was slung over his shoulder. He took it off, entered the balloon, and a young man, the aeronaut, tied the bag to the cordage above Gambetta’s head.

It was half past 10. The weather was fine and sunshiny, with a light southerly breeze. All at once the yellow balloon rose, with three men in it, one of whom was Gambetta. Then the white balloon went up with three men, one of whom waved a tricolour flag. Beneath Gambetta’s balloon hung a long tricolour streamer. “Long live the Republic!” shouted the crowd.

The two balloons went up for some distance, the white one going higher than the yellow one, then they began to descend. Ballast was thrown out, but they continued their downward flight. They disappeared behind Montmartre hill. They must have landed on the Saint Denis plain. They were too heavily weighted, or else the wind was not strong enough.

The departure took place after all, for the balloons went up again.

We paid a visit to Notre Dame, which has been admirably restored.

We also went to see the Tour Saint Jacques. While our carriage was standing there one of the delegates of the other day (from the Eleventh Arrondissement) came up and told me that the Eleventh Arrondissement had come round to my views, concluded that I was right in insisting upon a vote of the whole city upon a single list of candidates, begged me to accept the nomination upon the conditions I had imposed, and wanted to know what ought to be done should the Government refuse to permit an election. Ought force be resorted to? I replied that a civil war would help the foreign war that was being waged against us and deliver Paris to the Prussians.

On the way home I bought some toys for my little ones — a zouave in a sentry-box for Georges, and for Jeanne a doll that opens and shuts its eyes.

October 8. — I have received a letter from M. L. Colet, of Vienna (Austria), by way of Normandy. It is the first letter that has reached me from the outside since Paris has been invested.

There has been no sugar in Paris for six days. The rationing of meat began to-day. We shall get three quarters of a pound per person and per day.

Incidents of the postponed Commune. Feverish unrest in Paris. Nothing to cause uneasiness, however. The deep-toned Prussian cannon thunder continuously. They recommend unity among us.

The Minister of Finance, M. Ernest Picard, through his secretary, asks me to “grant him an audience;” these are the terms he uses. I answer that I will see him on Monday morning, October 10.

October 9. — Five delegates from the Ninth Arrondissement came in the name of the arrondissement to *forbid me to get myself killed*.

October 10. — M. Ernest Picard came to see me. I asked him to issue immediately a decree liberating all articles pawned at the Mont de Piété for less than 15 francs (the present decree making absurd exceptions, linen, for instance). I told him that the poor could not wait. He promised to issue the decree to-morrow.

There is no news of Gambetta. We are beginning to get uneasy. The wind carried him to the north-east, which is occupied by the Prussians.

October 11. — Good news of Gambetta. He descended at Epineuse, near Amiens.

Last night, after the demonstrations in Paris, while passing a group that had assembled under a street lamp, I heard these words: “It appears that Victor Hugo and the others — .” I continued on my way, and did not listen to the rest, as I did not wish to be recognised.

After dinner I read to my friends the verses with which the French edition of *Les Châtiments* begins (“When about to return to France,” Brussels, August 31, 1870).

October 12. — It is beginning to get cold. Barbieux, who commands a battalion, brought us the helmet of a Prussian soldier who was killed by his men. This helmet greatly astonished little Jeanne. These angels do not yet know anything about earth.

The decree I demanded for the indigent was published this morning in the “Journal Officiel.”

M. Pallain, the Minister’s secretary, whom I met as I came out of the Carrousel, told me that the decree would cost 800,000 francs.

I replied: “Eight hundred thousand francs, all right. Take from the rich. Give to the poor.”

October 13. — I met to-day Théophile Gautier, whom I I had not seen for many years. I embraced him. He was rather nervous. I told him to come and dine with me.

October 14. — The Château of Saint Cloud was burned yesterday!

I went to Claye’s to correct last proofs of the French edition of *Les Chatiments* which will appear on Tuesday. Dr. Emile Allix brought me a Prussian cannon-ball which he had picked up behind a barricade, near Montrouge, where it had just killed two horses. The cannon-ball weighs 25 pounds. Georges, in playing with it, pinched his fingers under it, which made him cry a good deal.

To-day is the anniversary of Jena!

October 16. — There is no more butter. There is no more cheese. Very little milk is left, and eggs are nearly all gone.

The report that my name has been given to the Boulevard Haussmann is confirmed. I have not been to see it for myself.

October 17. — To-morrow a postal balloon named the "Victor Hugo" is to be sent up in the Place de la Concorde. I am sending a letter to London by this balloon.

October 18. — I have paid a visit to Les Feuillantines. The house and garden of my boyhood have disappeared.

A street now passes over the site.

October 19. — Louis Blanc came to dine with me. He brought a declaration by ex-Representatives for me to sign. I said that I would not sign it unless it were drawn up in a different manner.

October 20. — Visit from the Gens de Lettres committee. To-day the first postage stamps of the Republic of 1870 were put in circulation.

Les Châtiments (French edition) appeared in Paris this morning.

The papers announce that the balloon "Victor Hugo" descended in Belgium. It is the first postal balloon to cross the frontier.

October 21.-They say that Alexandre Dumas died on October 13 at the home of his son at Havre. He was a large-hearted man of great talent. His death grieves me greatly.

Louis Blanc and Brives came to speak to me again about the Declaration of Representatives. My opinion is that it would be better to postpone it.

Nothing is more charming than the sounding of the reveille in Paris. It is dawn. One hears first, nearby, a roll of drums, followed by the blast of a bugle, exquisite melody, winged and warlike. Then all is still. In twenty seconds the drums roll again, then the bugle rings out, but further off. Then silence once more. An instant later, further off still, the same song of bugle and drum falls more faintly but still distinctly upon the ear. Then after a pause the roll and blast are repeated, very far away. Then they are heard again, at the extremity of the horizon, but indistinctly and like an echo. Day breaks and the shout "To arms!" is heard. The sun rises and Paris awakes.

October 22. — The edition of 5,000 copies of *Les Châtiments* has been sold in two days. I have authorised the printing of another 3,000.

Little Jeanne has imagined a way of puffing out her cheeks and raising her arms in the air that is adorable.

The first 5,000 copies of the Parisian edition of *Les Chatiments* has brought me in 500 francs, which I am sending to the “Siècle” as a subscription to the national fund for the cannon that Paris needs.

Mathe and Gambon, the ex-Representatives, called to ask me to take part in a meeting of which former representatives are to form the nucleus. The meeting would be impossible without me, they said. But I see more disadvantages than advantages in such a meeting. I thought I ought to refuse.

We are eating horsemeat in every style. I saw the following in the window of a cook-shop: “Saucisson chevaleresque.”

October 23. — The 17th Battalion asked me to be the first subscriber of “one sou” to a fund for purchasing a cannon. They will collect 300,000 sous. This will make 15,000 francs, which will purchase a 24-centimetre gun, carrying 8,500 metres — equal to the Krupp guns.

Lieutenant Maréchal brought to collect my sou an Egyptian cup of onyx dating from the Pharaohs, engraved with the moon and the sun, the Great Bear and the Southern Cross (?) and having for handles two cynocephalus demons. The engraving of this cup required the life-work of a man. I gave my sou. D’Alton-Shée, who was present, gave his, as did also M. and Mme. Meurice, and the two servants, Mariette and Clémence. The 17th Battalion wanted to call the gun the “Victor Hugo.” I told them to call it the “Strasburg.” In this way the Prussians will still receive shots from Strasburg.

We chatted and laughed with the officers of the 17th Battalion. It was the duty of the two cynocephalus genie of the cup to bear souls to hell. I remarked: “Very well, I confide William and Bismarck to them.”

Visit from M. Edouard Thierry. He came to request me to allow “Stella” to be read in aid of the wounded at the Théâtre Français. I gave him his choice of all the “Châtiments.” That startled him. And I demanded that the reading be for a cannon.

Visit from M. Charles Floquet. He has a post at the Hotel de Ville. I commissioned him to tell the Government to call the Mont Valérien “Mont Strasbourg.”

October 24. — Visit from General Le Flo. Various deputations received.

October 25. — There is to be a public reading of *Les Châtiments* for a cannon to be called “Le Châtiment.” We are preparing for it.

Brave Rostan,* whom I treated harshly one day, and who likes me because I did right, has been arrested for indiscipline in the National Guard. He has a little motherless boy six years old who has nobody else to take care of him. What was to be done, the father being in prison? I told him to send the youngster to me at the Pavilion de Rohan. He sent him to-day.

* A workingman, friend of Victor Hugo.

October 26.-At 6.30 o’clock Rostan, released from prison, came to fetch his little Henri. Great joy of father and son.

October 28. — Edgar Quinet came to see me.

Schoelcher and Commander Farcy, who gave his name to his gunboat, dined with me. After dinner, at half past 8 I went with Schoelcher to his home at 16, Rue de la Chaise. We found there Quinet, Ledru-Rollin, Mathé, Gambon, Lamarque, and Brives. This was my first meeting with Ledru-Rollin. We engaged in a very courteous argument over the question of founding a club, he being for and I against it. We shook hands. I returned home at midnight.

October 29. — Visits from the Gens de Lettres committee, Frédérick Lemaitre, MM. Berton and Lafontaine and Mlle. Favart for a third cannon to be called the “Victor Hugo.” I oppose the name.

I have authorised the fourth edition of 3,000 copies of *Les Châtiments*, which will make to date 11,000 copies for Paris alone.

October 30. — I received the letter of the Société des Gens de Lettres asking me to authorise a public reading of Les Chatiments, the proceeds of which will give to Paris another cannon to be called the “Victor Hugo.” I gave the authorisation. In my reply written this morning I demanded that instead of “Victor Hugo” the gun be called the “Châteaudun.” The reading will take place at the Porte Saint Martin.

M. Berton came. I read to him *L’Expiation,* which he is to read. M. and Mme. Meurice and d’Alton-Shée were present at the reading.

News has arrived that Metz has capitulated and that Bazaine’s army has surrendered.

Bills announcing the reading of *Les Châtiments* have been posted. M. Raphael Felix came to tell me the time at which the rehearsal is to take place tomorrow. I hired a seven-seat box for this reading, which I placed at the disposal of the ladies.

On returning home this evening I met in front of the Mairie, M. Chaudey, who was at the Lausanne Peace Conference and who is Mayor of the Sixth Arrondissement. He was with M. Philibert Audebrand. We talked sorrowfully about the taking of Metz.

October 31. — Skirmish at the Hotel de Ville. Blanqui, Flourens and Delescluze want to overthrow the provisional power, Trochu and Jules Favre. I refuse to associate myself with them.

An immense crowd. My name is on the lists of members for the proposed Government. I persist in my refusal.

Flourens and Blanqui held some of the members of the Government prisoners at the Hotel de Ville all day.

At midnight some National Guards came from the Hotel de Ville to fetch me “to preside,” they said, “over the new Government.” I replied that I was most emphatically opposed to this attempt to seize the power and refused to go to the Hotel de Ville.

At 3 o’clock in the morning Flourens and Blanqui quitted the Hotel de Ville and Trochu entered it.

The Commune of Paris is to be elected.

November 1. — We have postponed for a few days the reading of *Les Châtiments*, which was to have been given at the Porte Saint Martin to-day, Tuesday.

Louis Blanc came this morning to consult me as to what ought to be the conduct of the Commune.

The newspapers unanimously praise the attitude I took yesterday in rejecting the advances made to me.

November 2. — The Government demands a “yes” or a “no.”

Louis Blanc and my sons came to talk to me about it.

The report that Alexandre Dumas is dead is denied.

November 4. — I have been requested to be Mayor of the Third, also of the Eleventh, Arrondissement. I refused.

I went to the rehearsal of *Les Châtiments* at the Porte Saint Martin. Frédérick Lemaitre and Mmes. Laurent, Lia Felix and Duguéret were present.

November 5. — To-day the public reading of *Les Châtiments*, the proceeds of which are to purchase a cannon for the defence of Paris, was given.

The Third, Eleventh and Fifteenth Arrondissements want me to stand for Mayor. I refuse.

Mérimée has died at Cannes. Dumas is not dead, but he is paralyzed.

November 7. — The 24th Battalion waited upon me and wanted me to give them a cannon.

November 8. — Last night, on returning from a visit to General Le Flo, I for the first time crossed the Pont des Tuileries, which has been built since my departure from France.

November 9. — The net receipts from the reading of *Les Châtiments* at the Porte Saint Martin for the gun which I have named the "Châteaudun" amounted to 7,000 francs, the balance going to pay the attendants, firemen, and lighting, the only expenses charged.

At the Cail works mitrailleuses of a new model, called the Gatling model, are being made.

Little Jeanne is beginning to chatter.

A second reading of *Les Châtiments* for another cannon will be given at the "Théâtre Français".

November 11. — Mlle. Periga called today to rehearse *Pauline Roland*, which she will read at the second reading of *Les Châtiments*, announced for to-morrow at the Porte Saint Martin. I took a carriage, dropped Mlle. Périga at her home, and then went to the rehearsal of to-morrow's reading at the theatre. Frederick Lemaitre, Berton, Maubart, Taillade, Lacressonnière, Charly, Mmes. Laurent, Lia Felix, Rousseil, M. Raphael Felix and the committee of the Société des Gens de Lettres were there.

After the rehearsal the wounded of the Porte Saint Martin ambulance asked me, through Mme. Laurent, to go and see them. I said: "With all my heart," and I went.

They are lying in several rooms, chief of which is the old green-room of the theatre with its big round mirrors, where in 1831 I read to the actors "Marion de Lorme". M. Crosnier was then director. (Mme. Dorval and Bocage were present at that reading.) On entering I said to the wounded men: "Behold one who envies you. I desire nothing more on earth but one of your wounds. I salute you, children of France, favourite sons of the Republic, elect who suffer for the Fatherland."

They seemed to be greatly moved. I shook hands with each of them. One held out his mutilated wrist. Another had lost his nose. One had that very morning undergone two painful operations. A very young man had been decorated with the military medal a few hours before. A convalescent said to me: “I am a Franc-Comtois.” “Like myself,” said I. And I embraced him. The nurses, in white aprons, who are the actresses of the theatre, burst into tears.

November 13. — I had M. and Mme. Paul Meurice, Vacquerie and Louis Blanc to dinner this evening. We dined at 6 o’clock, as the second reading of *Les Chatiments* was fixed to begin at the Porte Saint Martin at 7.30. I offered a box to Mme. Paul Meurice for the reading.

November 14. — The receipts for *Les Chatiments* last night (without counting the collection taken up in the theatre) amounted to 8,000 francs.

Good news! General d’Aurelle de Paladine has retaken Orleans and beaten the Prussians. Schoelcher came to inform me of it.

November 15. — Visit from M. Arsène Houssaye and Henri Houssaye, his son. He is going to have Stella read at his house in aid of the wounded.

M. Valois came to tell me that the two readings of *Les Châtiments* brought in 14,000 francs. For this sum not two, but three guns can be purchased. The Société des Gens de Lettres desires that, the first having been named by me the “Châteaudun” and the second “Les Châtiments”, the third shall be called the “Victor Hugo.” I have consented.

Pierre Veron has sent me Daumier’s fine drawing representing the Empire annihilated by *Les Chatiments*.

November 16. — Baroche, they say, has died at Caen.

M. Edouard Thierry refuses to allow the fifth act of “Hernani” to be played at the Porte Saint Martin for the victims of Châteaudun and for the cannon of the 24th Battalion. A queer obstacle this M. Thierry!

November 17. — Visit from the Gens de Lettres committee. The committee came to ask me to authorise a reading of *Les Châtiments* at the Opera to raise funds for another cannon.

I mention here once for all that I authorise whoever desires to do so, to read or perform whatever he likes that I have written, if it be for cannon, the wounded, ambulances, workshops, orphanages, victims of the war, or the poor, and that I abandon all my royalties on these readings or performances.

I decide that the third reading of *Les Chatiments* shall be given at the Opera gratis for the people.

November 19. — Mme. Marie Laurent came to recite to me *Les Pauvres Gens*, which she will recite at the Porte Saint Martin to-morrow to raise funds for a cannon.

November 20. — Last evening there was an aurora borealis.

“La Grosse Josephine” is no longer my neighbour. She has just been transported to Bastion No. 41. It took twenty-six horses to draw her. I am sorry they have taken her away. At night I could hear her deep voice, and it seemed to me that she was speaking to me. I divided my love between “Grosse Joséphine” and Little Jeanne.

Little Jeanne can now say “papa” and “mamma” very well.

To-day there was a review of the National Guard.

November 21. — Mme. Jules Simon and Mme. Sarah Bernhardt came to see me.

After dinner many visitors called, and the drawing-room was crowded. It appears that Veuillot insulted me.

Little Jeanne begins to crawl on her hands and knees very well indeed.

November 23. — Jules Simon writes me that the Opera will be given to me for the people (free reading of *Les Châtiments*) any day I fix upon. I wanted Sunday, but out of consideration for the concert that the actors and employés of the Opera give Sunday night for their own benefit I have selected Monday.

Frédérick Lemaitre called. He kissed my hands and wept.

It has been raining for two or three days. The rain has soaked the plains, the cannon-wheels would sink into the ground, and the sortie has therefore had to be deferred. For two days Paris has been living on salt meat. A rat costs 8 sous.

November 24. — I authorise the Théâtre Français to play to-morrow, Friday, the 25th, on behalf of the victims of the war, the fifth act of “Hernani” by the actors of the Théâtre Français and the last act of “Lucrece Borgia” by the actors of the Porte Saint Martin, and in addition the recitation as an intermede of extracts from *Les Châtiments*, *Les Contemplations* and *La Légende des Siècles*.

Mlle. Favart came this morning to rehearse with me *Booz Endormie*. Then we went together to the Français for the rehearsal for the performance of to-morrow. She acted Doña Sol very well indeed. Mme. Laurent (Lucrèce Borgia) also played well. During the rehearsal M. de Flavigny dropped in. I said to him: “Good morning, my dear ex-colleague.” He looked at me, then with some emotion exclaimed: “Hello! is that you?” And he added: “How well preserved you are!” I replied: “Banishment preserves one.”

I returned the ticket for a box that the Théâtre Français sent to me for to-morrow’s performance, and hired a box, which I placed at the disposal of Mme. Paul Meurice.

After dinner the new Prefect of Police, M. Cresson, paid me a visit. M. Cresson was the barrister who twenty years ago defended the murderers of General Bréa. He spoke to me about the free reading of *Les Châtiments* to be given on Monday the 28th at the Opera. It is feared that an immense crowd — all the faubourgs — will be attracted. More than 25,000 men and women. Three thousand will be able to get in. What is to be done with the rest? The Government is uneasy. Many are called but few will be chosen, and it fears that a crush, fighting and disorders will result. The Government will refuse me nothing. It wants to know whether I will accept the responsibility. It will do whatever I wish done. The Prefect of Police has been instructed to come to an understanding with me about it.

I said to M. Cresson: “Let us consult Vacquerie and Meurice and my two sons.” He replied: “Willingly.” The six of us held a council. We decided that three thousand tickets should be distributed on Sunday, the day before the lecture, at the mairies of the twenty arrondissements to the first persons who presented themselves after noon. Each arrondissement will receive a number of tickets in proportion to the number of its population. The next day the 3,000 holders of tickets (to all places) will wait their turn at the doors of the Opera without causing any obstruction or trouble. The “Journal Officiel” and special posters will apprise the public of the measures taken in the interest of public order.

November 25. — Mlle. Lia Felix came to rehearse *Sacer Esto*, which she will recite to the people on Monday.

M. Tony Révillon, who is to make a speech, came to see me with the Gens de Lettres committee.

A deputation of Americans from the United States came to express their indignation with the Government of the American Republic and with President Grant for abandoning France— “To which the American Republic owes so much!” said I. “Owes everything,” declared one of the Americans present.

A good deal of cannonading has been heard for several days. To-day it redoubled.

Mme. Meurice wants some fowls and rabbits in order to provide against the coming famine. She is having a hutch made for them in my little garden.

The carpenter who is constructing it entered my chamber a little while ago and said: “I would like to touch your hand.” I pressed both his hands in mine.

November 27. — The Academy has given a sign of life. I have received official notice that in future it will hold an extraordinary session every Tuesday.

Pâtés of rat are being made. They are said to be very good.

An onion costs a sou. A potato costs a sou.

They have given up asking my authorisation to recite my works which are being recited everywhere without my permission. They are right. What I write is not my own. I am a public thing.

November 28. — Noel Parfait came to ask my help for Châteaudun. Certainly; with all my heart!

Les Châtiments was recited gratis at the Opera. An immense crowd. A gilt wreath was thrown on the stage. I gave it to Georges and Jeanne. The collection made in Prussian helmets by the actresses produced 1,521 francs 35 centimes in coppers.

Emile Allix brought us a leg of antelope from the Jardin des Plantes. It is excellent.

To-night the sortie is to be made.

November 29. — All night long I heard the cannon.

The fowls were installed in my garden to-day.

The sortie is being delayed. The bridge thrown across the Marne by Ducros has been carried away, the Prussians having blown open the locks.

November 30. — All night long the cannon thundered. The battle continues.

At midnight last night as I was returning home through the Rue de Richelieu from the Pavilion de Rohan, I saw just beyond the National Library, the street being deserted and dark at the time, a window open on the sixth floor of a very high house and a very bright light, which appeared to be that of a petroleum lamp, appear and disappear several times; then the window closed and the street became dark again. Was it a signal?

The cannon can be heard at three points round Paris, to the east, west and south. This is because a triple attack is being made on the ring the Prussians have drawn round us. The attack is being made at Saint Denis by Laroncière, at Courbevoie by Vinoy, and on the Marne by Ducros. Laroncière is said to have swept the peninsula of Gennevilliers and compelled a Saxon regiment to lay down its arms, and Vinoy is said to have destroyed the Prussian works beyond Bougival. As to Ducros, he has crossed the Marne, taken and retaken Montédy, and almost holds Villiers-sur-Marne. What one experiences on hearing the cannon is a great desire to be there.

This evening Pelletan sent his son, Camille Pelletan, to inform me on behalf of the Government that to-morrow's operations will be decisive.

December 1. — It appears that Louise Michel has been arrested. I will do all that is necessary to have her released immediately. Mme. Meurice is occupying herself about it. She went out this morning for that purpose.

D'Alton-Shée came to see me.

We ate bear for dinner.

I have written to the Prefect of Police to have Louise Michel released.

There was no fighting to-day. The positions taken were fortified.

December 2. — Louise Michel has been released. She came to thank me.

Last evening M. Coquelin called to recite several pieces from *Les Châtiments*.

It is freezing. The basin of the Pigalle fountain is frozen over.

The cannonade recommenced at daybreak.

11.30 A.M. — The cannonade increases.

Flourens wrote to me yesterday and Rochefort to-day. They are coming round to me again.

Dorian, Minister of Public Works, and Pelletan came to dine with me.

Excellent news to-night! The Army of the Loire is at Montargis. The Army of Paris has driven back the Prussians from the Avron plateau. The despatches announcing these successes are read aloud at the doors of the mairies.

Victory! The Second of December has been wiped out!

December 3. — General Renault, who was wounded in the foot by a splinter from a shell, is dead.

I told Schoelcher that I want to go out with my sons if the batteries of the National Guard to which they belong are sent to the front. The batteries drew lots. Four are to go. One of them is the 10th Battery, of which Victor is a member. I will go out with that battery. Charles does not belong to it, which is a good job; he will stay behind, he has two children. I will order him to stay. Vacquerie and Meurice are members of the 10th Battery. We shall be together in the combat. I will have a cape with a hood made for me. What I fear is the cold at night.

I made some shadows on the wall for Georges and Jeanne. Jeanne laughed delightedly at the shadow and the grimaces of the profile; but when she saw that the shadow was me she cried and screamed. She seemed to say: “I don’t want you to be a phantom!” Poor, sweet angel! Perhaps she has a presentiment of the coming battle.

Yesterday we ate some stag; the day before we partook of bear; and the two days previous we fared on antelope. These were presents from the Jardin des Plantes.

To-night at 11 o’clock, cannonading. Violent and brief.

December 4. — A notice has been posted on my door indicating the precautions to be taken “in case of bombardment.” That is the title of the notice.

There is a pause in the combat. Our army has recrossed the Marne.

Little Jeanne crawls very well on her bands and knees and says “papa” very prettily.

December 5. — I have just seen a magnificent hearse, draped with black velvet, embroidered with an “H” surrounded by silver stars, go by to fetch its burden. A Roman would not disdain to be borne in it.

Gautier came to dine with me. After dinner Banville and Coppée called.

Bad news. Orleans has been captured from us again. No matter. Let us persist.

December 7. — I had Gautier, Banville and François Coppée to dinner. After dinner Asselineau came. I read *Floréal and L’Egout de Rome* to them.

December 8. — The “Patrie en Danger” has ceased to appear. In the absence of readers, says Blanqui.

M. Maurice Lachâtre, publisher, came to make me an offer for my next book. He has sent me his *Dictionary and The History of the Revolution* by Louis Blanc. I shall present to him Napoleon the Little and *Les Châtiments*.

December 9. — I woke up in the night and wrote some verses. At the same time I heard the cannon.

M. Bondes came to see me. The correspondent of the “Times,” who is at Versailles, has written him that the guns for the bombardment of Paris have arrived. They are Krupp guns. They are awaiting their carriages. They have been arranged in the Prussian arsenal at Versailles side by side “like bottles in a cellar,” according to this Englishman.

I copy the following from a newspaper:

M. Victor Hugo had manifested the intention to leave Paris unarmed, with the artillery battery of the National Guard to which his two sons belong.

The 144th Battalion of the National Guard went in a body to the poet's residence in the Avenue Frochot. Two delegates waited upon him.

These honourable citizens went to forbid Victor Hugo to carry out his plan, which he had announced some time ago in his "Address to the Germans."

"Everybody can fight," the deputation told him. "But everybody cannot write *Les Chatiments*. Stay at home, therefore, and take care of a life that is so precious to France."

I do not remember the number of the battalion. It was not the 144th. Here are the terms of the address which was read to me by the major of the battalion:

The National Guard of Paris forbids Victor Hugo to go to the front, inasmuch as everybody can go to the front, whereas Victor Hugo alone can do what Victor Hugo does.

"Forbids" is touching and charming.

December 11. — Rostan came to see me. He has his arm in a sling. He was wounded at Créteil. It was at night. A German soldier rushed at him and pierced his arm with a bayonet. Rostan retaliated with a bayonet thrust in the German's shoulder. Both fell and rolled into a ditch. Then they became good friends. Rostan speaks a little broken German.

"Who are you?"

"I am a Wurtembergian. I am twenty-two years old. My father is a clockmaker of Leipsic."

They remained in the ditch for three hours, bleeding, numb with cold, helping each other. Rostan, wounded, brought the man who wounded him back as a prisoner. He goes to see him at the hospital. These two men adore each other. They wanted to kill each other, and now they would die for each other.

Eliminate kings from the dispute!

Visit from M. Rey. The Ledru-Rollin group is completely disorganized. No more parties; the Republic. It is well.

I presented some Dutch cheese to Mme. Paul Meurice. Sleet is falling.

December 12. — I arrived in Brussels nineteen years ago to-day.

December 13. — Since yesterday Paris has been lighted with petroleum.

Heavy cannonade to-night.

December 14. — Thaw. Cannonade.

To-night we glanced over *Goya's Disasters of War* (brought by Burty, the art critic). It is fine and hideous.

December 15. — Emmanuel Arago, Minister of Justice, came to see me and informed me that there would be fresh meat until February 15, but that in future only brown bread would be made in Paris. There will be enough of this to last for five months.

Allix brought me a medal struck to commemorate my return to France. It bears on one side a winged genius and the words: "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity," and on the other side, round the rim: "Appeal to Universal Democracy," and in the centre: "To Victor Hugo, From His Grateful Fatherland.' September, 1870."

This medal is sold in the streets and costs 5 centimes. There is a little ring in it by which it can be suspended to a chain.

December 16. — Pelleport* came to-night. I requested him to visit Flourens, in Mazas Prison, on my behalf, and to take him a copy of *Napoleon the Little*.

* One of the editors of the "Rappel."

December 17. — The "Electeur Libre" calls upon Louis Blanc and me to enter the Government, and affirms that it is our duty to do so. My duty is dictated to me by my conscience.

I saw the gunboat "Estoc" pass under the Pont des Arts, going up Seine. She is a fine vessel and her big gun has a terribly grand appearance.

December 18. — I worked a magic lantern for little Georges and little Jeanne.

My royalty for Mme. Favart's recitation of *Stella* at a performance given by the 14th Battalion amounted to 130 francs. My agent took my royalty in spite of my instructions. I have ordered him to turn the money over to the sick fund of the battalion.

M. Hetzel writes: "The closing of the printing office is imminent, as I can get no more coal to keep the presses going."

I authorise another issue of 3,000 copies of *Les Châtiments*, which will bring the total for Paris up to 22,000.

December 20. — Captain Breton, of the Garde Mobile, who has been cashiered on the charge of being a coward, brought against him by his lieutenant-colonel, demands a court-martial, but first of all to be sent to the firing line. His company leaves to-morrow morning. He begs me to obtain for him from the Minister of War permission to go and get himself killed. I have written to General Le Flô about him. It is likely that he will take part in to-morrow's battle.

December 21. — At 3 o'clock this morning I heard the bugles of the troops marching to battle. When will my turn come?

December 22. — Yesterday was a good day. The action continues. The thunder of cannon can be heard to the east and west.

Little Jeanne begins to talk at length and very expressively. But it is impossible to understand a word she says. She laughs.

Leopold has sent me thirteen fresh eggs, which I will reserve for little Georges and little Jeanne.

Louis Blanc came to dine with me. He came on behalf of Edmond Adam, Louis Jourdan, Cernuschi and others to tell me that he and I must go to Trochu and summon him to save Paris or resign. I refused. I should be posing as an arbiter of the situation and at the same time hamper a battle begun and which may be a successful one. Louis Blanc was of my way of thinking, as were also Meurice, Vacquerie and my sons, who dined with us.

December 23. — Henri Rochefort came to dine with me. I had not seen him since August of last year, when we were in Brussels. Georges did not recognise his godfather. I was very cordial. I like him very much. He has great talent and great courage. The dinner was a very merry one, although we are all threatened with incarceration in a Prussian fortress if Paris is captured. After Guernsey, Spandau. So be it.

I bought for 19 francs at the Magasins du Louvre a soldier's cape with hood, to wear on the ramparts.

My house continues to be crowded with visitors. To-day a painter named Le Genissel called. He reminded me that I saved him from the galleys in 1848. He was one of the insurgents of June.

Heavy cannonade during the night. A battle is in preparation.

December 24. — It is freezing. Ice floes are floating down the Seine.

Paris only eats brown bread now.

December 25. — Heavy cannonade all night.

An item of news of present-day Paris: A basket of oysters has just reached the city. It sold for 750 francs.

At a bazar in aid of the poor at which Alice and Mme. Meurice acted as vendors, a young turkey fetched 250 francs.

The Seine is freezing over.

December 26. — Louis Blanc called, then M. Floquet. They urge me to summon the Government to do something or resign. Again I refuse.

M. Louis Koch paid 25 francs for a copy of the *Rappel* at the bazar in aid of the poor. The copy of *Les Châtiments* was purchased by M. Cernuschi for 300 francs.

December 27. — Violent cannonade this morning. The firing of this morning was an attack by the Prussians. A good sign. Waiting annoys them. Us, too. They threw nineteen shells, which killed nobody, into the Fort of Montrouge.

Mme. Ugalde dined with us and sang "Patria." I escorted Mme. Ugalde to her home in the Rue de Chabanais, then returned to bed.

The concierge said to me:

"Monsieur, they say that bombs will fall in this neighbourhood to-night."

"That is all right," I replied. "I am expecting one."

December 29. — Heavy firing all night. The Prussians continue their attack.

Théophile Gautier has a horse. This horse was requisitioned. It was wanted for food. Gautier wrote me begging me save the animal. I asked the Minister to grant his request.

I saved the horse.

It is unfortunately true that Dumas is dead. This has been ascertained through the German newspapers. He died on December 5 at the home of his son at Puys, near Dieppe.

I am being urged more strongly than ever, to enter the Government. The Minister of Justice, M. Emmanuel Arago, called and stopped to dinner. We talked. Louis Blanc dropped in after dinner. I persist in my refusal.

Besides Emmanuel Arago and the friends who usually dine with me on Thursdays, Rochefort and Blum came. I invited them to come every Thursday if we have many more Thursdays to live. At desert I drank Rochefort's health.

The cannonade is increasing. The plateau of Avron had to be evacuated.

December 31. — D'Alton-Shée paid a visit to me this morning. It appears that General Ducros wants to see me.

Within three days the Prussians have sent us 12,000 shells.

Yesterday I ate some rat, and then hiccoughed the following quatrain:

O mesdames les hétaires
Dans vos greniers, je me nourris:
Moi qui mourais de vos sourires,
Je vais vivre de vos souris.

After next week there will be no more washing done in Paris, because there is no more coal.

Lieutenant Farcy, commander of the gunboat, dined with me.

It is bitterly cold. For three days I have worn my cloak and hood whenever I have had to go out.

A doll for little Jeanne. A basketful of toys for Georges.

Shells have begun to demolish the Fort of Rosny. The first shell has fallen in the city itself. The Prussians to-day fired 6,000 shells at us.

In the Fort of Rosny a sailor working at the gabions was carrying a sack of earth. A shell knocked it off his shoulder. “Much obliged,” commented the sailor, “but I wasn’t tired.”

Alexandre Dumas died on December 5. On looking over my notebook I see that it was on December 5 that a large hearse with an “H” on it passed before me in the Rue Frochot.

We have no longer even horse to eat. *Perhaps* it is dog? *Maybe* it is rat? I am beginning to suffer from pains in the stomach. We are eating the unknown!

M. Valois, representing the Société des Gens de Lettres, came to ask me what was to be done with the 3,000 francs remaining from the proceeds of the three readings of Les Châtiments, the guns having been delivered and paid for. I told him that I wanted the whole amount turned over to Mme. Jules Simon for the fund for the victims of the war.

January 1, 1871. — Louis Blanc has addressed to me through the newspapers a letter upon the situation.

Stupor and amazement of little Georges and little Jeanne at their basketful of New Year presents. The toys, when unpacked from the basket, covered a large table. The children touched all of them and did not know which to take. Georges was nearly furious with joy. Charles remarked: “It is the despair of joy!”

I am hungry. I am cold. So much the better. I suffer what the people are suffering.

Decidedly horse is not good for me. Yet I ate some. It gives me the gripes. I avenged myself at dessert with the following distich:

Mon diner m'inquiete et même me harcêle,
J'ai mange du cheval et je songe a la selle.

The Prussians are bombarding Saint Denis.

January 2. — Daumier and Louis Blanc lunched with us.

Louis Koch gave to his aunt as a New Year gift a couple of cabbages and a brace of living partridges!

This morning we lunched on wine soup. The elephant at the Jardin des Plantes has been slaughtered. He wept. He will be eaten..

The Prussians continue to send us 6,000 bombs a day.

January 3. — The heating of two rooms at the Pavillon de Rohan now costs 10 francs a day.

The Mountaineers' club again demands that Louis Blanc and I be added to the Government in order to direct it. I continue to refuse.

There are at present twelve members of the French Academy in Paris, among them Ségur, Mignet, Dufaure, d'Haussonville, Legouvé, Cuvillier-Fleury, Barbier and Vitet.

Moon. Intense cold. The Prussians bombarded Saint Denis all night.

From Tuesday to Sunday the Prussians hurled 25,000 projectiles at us. It required 220 railway trucks to transport them. Each shot costs 60 francs; total, 1,500,000 francs. The damage to the forts is estimated at 1,400 francs. About ten men have been killed. Each of our dead cost the Prussians 150,000 francs.

January 5. — The bombardment is becoming heavier. Issy and Vanves are being shelled.

There is no coal. Clothes cannot be washed because they cannot be dried. My washerwoman sent this message to me through Mariette:

"If M. Victor Hugo, who is so powerful, would ask the Government to give me a little coal-dust, I could wash his shirts."

Besides my usual Thursday guests I had Louis Blanc, Rochefort and Paul de Saint Victor to dinner. Mme. Jules Simon sent me a Gruyère cheese. An extraordinary luxury, this. We were thirteen at table.

January 6. — At dessert yesterday I offered some bonbons to the ladies, saying as I did so:

Grace a Boissier, chêre colombes,
Heureux, a vos pieds nous tombons.

Car on prend les forts par les bombes
Et les faibles par les bonbons.

The Parisians out of curiosity visit the bombarded districts. They go to see the shells fall as they would go to a fireworks display. National Guards have to keep the people back. The Prussians are firing on the hospitals. They are bombarding Val-de-Grâce. Their shells set fire to the wooden booths in the Luxembourg, which were full of sick and wounded men, who had to be transported, undressed and wrapped up as well as they could be, to the Charité Hospital. Barbieux saw them arrive there about 1 o'clock in the morning.

Sixteen streets have already been hit by shells.

January 7. — The Rue des Feuillantines, which runs through the place where the garden of my boyhood used to be, is heavily bombarded. I was nearly struck by a shell there.

My washerwoman having nothing to make a fire with, and being obliged to refuse work in consequence, addressed a demand to M. Clémenceau, Mayor of the Ninth Arrondissement, for some coal, which she said she was prepared to pay for. I endorsed it thus:

"I am resigned to everything for the defence of Paris, to die of hunger and cold, and even to forego a change of shirt. However, I commend my laundress to the Mayor of the Ninth Arrondissement."

And I signed my name. The Mayor gave her the coal.

January 8. — Camille Pelletan brought us good news from the Government. Rouen and Dijon retaken, Garibaldi victorious at Nuits, and Fraidherbe at Bapaume. All goes well.

We had brown bread, now we have black bread. Everybody fares alike. It is well.

The news of yesterday was brought by two pigeons.

A shell killed five children in a school in the Rue de Vaugirard.

The performances and readings of *Les Châtiments* have had to be stopped, the theatres being without gas or coal, therefore without light or heat.

Prim is dead. He was shot and killed at Madrid the day the king after his own heart, Amedeus, Duke of Genoa, entered Spain.

The bombardment was a furious one to-day. A shell crashed through the chapel of the Virgin at Saint Sulpice, where my mother's funeral took place and where I was married.

January 10. — Bombs on the Odéon Theatre.

Chifflard sent me a piece of a shell. This shell, which fell at Auteuil, is marked with an “H.” I will have an inkstand made out of it.

January 12. — The Pavilion de Rohan demands of me from to-day on 8 francs a head for dinner, which with wine, coffee, fire, etc., brings the cost of dinner up to 13 francs for each person.

We had elephant steak for luncheon to-day.

Schoelcher, Rochefort, Blum and all the usual Thursday guests dined with us. After dinner Louis Blanc and Pelletan dropped in.

January 13. — An egg costs 2 francs 75 centimes. Elephant meat costs 40 francs a pound. A sack of onions costs 800 francs.

The Société des Gens de Lettres asked me to attend the presentation of the cannon to the city at the Hotel de Ville. I begged to be excused. I will not go.

We spent the day looking for another hotel. Could not find one suitable. All are closed. Expenses for the week at the Pavilion de Rohan (including the cost of a broken window-pane), 701 francs 50 centimes.

Remark by a poor woman anent some newly felled wood:

“This hapless green wood is under fire; it didn’t expect that it would have to face it, and weeps all the time!”

January 15. — A furious bombardment is in progress.

I have written a piece of poetry entitled “Dans le Cirque.” After dinner I read it to my Sunday guests. They want me to publish it. I will give it to the newspapers.

January 17. — The bombardment has been going on for three nights and three days without cessation.

Little Jeanne was cross with me because I would not let her play with the works of my watch.

All the newspapers publish my verses “Dans le Cirque.” They may be useful.

Louis Blanc called this morning. He urged me to join with Quinet and himself in bringing pressure to bear upon the Government. I replied: “I see more danger in overturning the Government than in supporting it.”

January 18. — M. Krupp is making cannon for use specially against balloons.

There is a cock in my little garden. Yesterday Louis Blanc lunched with us. The cock crowed. Louis Blanc paused and said:

“Listen!”

“What is it?”

“A cock is crowing.”

“Well, what of it?”

“Don’t you hear what it says?”

“It is calling: ‘Victor Hugo!’”

We listened and laughed. Louis Blanc was right It did sound as if the cock were crowing my name.

I gave some of my bread-crumbs to the fowls. They would not eat them.

This morning a sortie against Montretout was made. Montretout was taken. This evening the Prussians captured it from us again.

January 20. — The attack on Montretout has interrupted the bombardment.

A child of fourteen years was suffocated in a crowd outside a baker’s shop.

January 21. — Louis Blanc came to see me. We held a council. The situation is becoming extreme and supreme. The Mairie of Paris asks my advice.

Louis Blanc dined with us. After dinner we held a sort of council at which Colonel Laussedat was present.

January 22. — The Prussians are bombarding Saint Denis.

Tumultuous demonstrations at the Hotel de Ville. Trochu is withdrawing. Rostan comes to tell me that the Breton mobiles are firing on the people. I doubt it. I will go myself, if necessary.

I have just returned. There was a simultaneous attack by both sides. To the combatants who consulted me I said: “I recognise in the hands of Frenchmen only those rifles which are turned towards the Prussians.”

Rostan said to me:

“I have come to place my battalion at your service. We are five hundred men. Where do you want us to go?”

“Where are you now?” I asked.

“We have been massed towards Saint Denis, which is being bombarded,” he replied. “We are at La Villette.”

“Then stay there,” said I. “It is there where I should have sent you. Do not march against the Hotel de Ville, march against Prussia.”

January 23. — Last night there was a conference at my quarters. In addition to my Sunday guests Rochefort and his secretary, Mourot, had dined with us. Rey and Gambon came in the evening. They brought me, the former with a request that I would subscribe to it, Ledru-Rollin's poster-programme (group of 200 members), and the latter, the programme of the Republican Union (50 members). I declared that I approved of neither the one nor the other.

Chanzy has been beaten. Bourbaki has succeeded. But he is not marching on Paris. Enigma, of which I fancy I can half guess the secret.

There appears to be an interruption to the bombardment.

January 24. — Flourens called this morning. He asked for my advice. I responded: "No violent pressure on the situation."

January 25. — Flourens is reported to have been arrested as he was leaving the house after his visit to me.

I had a couple of fresh eggs cooked for Georges and Jeanne.

M. Dorian came to the Pavilion de Rohan this morning to see my sons. He announced that capitulation is imminent. Frightful news from outside. Chanzy defeated, Faidherbe defeated, Bourbaki driven back.

January 27. — Schoelcher came to tell me that he has resigned as colonel of the artillery legion.

Again they came to ask me to head a demonstration against the Hotel de Ville. All sorts of rumours are in circulation. To everybody I counsel calmness and unity.

January 28. — Bismarck in the course of the pourparlers at Versailles said to Jules Favre: "What do you think of that goose of an Empress proposing peace to me!"

It has become cold again.

Ledru-Rollin (through Brives) says he wants to come to an understanding with me.

Little Jeanne is unwell. Sweet little thing!

Leopold told me this evening that I was the subject of a dialogue between Pope Pius IX. and Jules Hugo, my nephew, brother of Leopold, who died a camerico of the Pope. The Pope, on seeing Jules, said to him:

"You name is Hugo, is it not?"

"Yes, Holy Father."

"Are you a relative of Victor Hugo?"

"His nephew, Holy Father."

"How old is he?" (It was in 1857.)

"Fifty-five years."

“Alas! he is too old to return to the Church!”

Charles tells me that Jules Simon and his two sons passed the night drawing up lists of possible candidates for the National Assembly.

Cernuschi is having himself naturalized a French citizen!

January 29. — The armistice was signed yesterday. It was published this morning. The National Assembly will be elected between February 5 and 18. Will meet on the 12th at Bordeaux.

Little Jeanne is a trifle better. She almost smiled at me.

No more balloons. The post. But unsealed letters. It snows. It freezes.

January 30. — Little Jeanne is still poorly and does not play.

Mlle. Périga brought me a fresh egg for Jeanne.

January 31. — Little Jeanne is still ill. She is suffering from a slight attack of catarrh of the stomach. Doctor Allix says it will last for another four or five days.

My nephew Leopold came to dine with us. He brought us some pickled oysters.

February 1. — Little Jeanne is better. She smiled at me.

February 2. — The Paris elections have been postponed to February 8.

Horsemeat continues to disagree with me. Pains in the stomach. Yesterday I said to Mme. Ernest Lefèvre, who was dining beside me:

De ces bons animaux la viande me fait mal.
J’aime tant les chevaux que je hais le cheval.

February 4. — The weather is becoming milder.

A crowd of visitors this evening. Proclamation by Gambetta.

February 5. — The list of candidates of the Republican journals appeared this morning. I am at the head of the list.

Bancal is dead.

Little Jeanne this evening has recovered from her cold.

I entertained my usual Sunday guests. We had fish, butter and white bread for dinner.

February 6. — Bourbaki, defeated, has killed himself. A grand death.

Ledru-Rollin is drawing back from the Assembly. Louis Blanc came and read this news to me to-night.

February 7. — We had three or four cans of preserves which we ate to-day.

February 8. — To-day, elections for the National Assembly. Paul Meurice and I went to vote together in the Rue Clauzel.

After the capitulation had been signed, Bismarck, on leaving Jules Favre, entered the room where his two secretaries were awaiting him and said: “The beast is dead.”

I have put my papers in order in anticipation of my departure.

Little Jeanne is very merry.

February 11. — The counting of the votes progresses very slowly.

Our departure for Bordeaux has been put off to Monday the 13th.

February 12. — Yesterday, for the first time, I saw my boulevard. It is a rather large section of the old Boulevard Haussmann. “Boulevard Victor Hugo” is placarded on the Boulevard Haussmann at four or five street corners giving on to this boulevard.

The National Assembly opens to-day at Bordeaux. The result of the elections in Paris has not yet been determined and proclaimed.

While I have not yet been appointed, time presses, and I expect to leave for Bordeaux to-morrow. There will be nine of us, five masters and four servants, plus the two children. Louis Blanc wants to leave with us. We shall make the journey together.

In my hand-bag I shall take various important manuscripts and works that I have begun, among others, *Paris Besieged* and the poem “Grand Père.”

February 13. — Yesterday, before dinner, I read to my guests, M. and Mme. Paul Meurice, Vacquerie, Lockroy, M. and Mme. Ernest Lefevre, Louis Koch and Vilain (Rochefort and Victor did not arrive until the dinner hour), two pieces of poetry which will form part of Paris Besieged (“To Little Jeanne,” and “No, You will not Take Alsace and Lorraine”).

Pelleport brought me our nine passes. Not having yet been proclaimed a Representative, I wrote on mine: “Victor Hugo, proprietor,” as the Prussians require that the quality or profession of the holder of the pass be stated.

It was with a heavy heart that I quitted this morning the Avenue Frochot and the sweet hospitality that Paul Meurice had extended to me since my arrival in Paris on September 5.

THE ASSEMBLY AT BORDEAUX. EXTRACTS FROM NOTE-BOOKS.

February 14. — Left yesterday at 12.10 P.M. Arrived at Etampes at 3.15. Wait of two hours, and luncheon.

After lunch we returned to our drawing-room car. A crowd surrounded it, kept back by a squad of Prussian soldiers. The crowd recognised me and shouted “Long live Victor Hugo!” I waved my hand out of window, and doffing my cap, shouted: “Long live France!” Whereupon a man with a white moustache, who somebody said was the Prussian commandant of Etampes, advanced towards me with a threatening air and said something to me in German that he no doubt intended to be terrible. Gazing steadily in turn at this Prussian and the crowd, I repeated in a louder voice: “Long live France’!” Thereat all the people shouted enthusiastically: “Long live France!” The fellow looked angry but said nothing. The Prussian soldiers did not move.

The journey was a rough, long and weary one. The drawing-room car was badly lighted and not heated. One feels the dilapidation of France in this wretched railway accommodation. At Vierzon we bought a pheasant, a chicken, and two bottles of wine for supper. Then we wrapped ourselves up in our rugs and cloaks and slept on the seats.

We arrived at Bordeaux at 1.30 this afternoon. We went in search of lodgings. We took a cab and drove from hotel to hotel. No room anywhere. I went to the Hotel de Ville and asked for information. I was told that there was an apartment to let at M. A. Porte’s, 13, Rue Saint Maur, near the public garden. We went there. Charles hired the apartment for 600 francs a month and paid half a month’s rent in advance. Then we started out in search of a lodging for us, but could not get one. At 7 o’clock we returned to the station to fetch our trunks, and not knowing where we should pass the night. We went back to the Rue Saint Maur, where Charles is, negotiated with the landlord and his brother, who had a couple of rooms at 37, Rue de la Course, hard by, and came to an arrangement at last.

Alice made this remark:

“The number 13 clings to us. We were thirteen at table every Thursday in January. We left Paris on February 13. There were thirteen of us in the railway carriage, counting Louis Blanc, M. Béchet and the two children. We are lodging at 13, Rue Saint Maur!"

February 15. — At 2 o'clock I went to the Assembly. When I came out again I found an immense crowd awaiting me in the great square. The people, and the National Guards who lined the approaches to the building, shouted: "Long live Victor Hugo!" I replied: "Long live the Republic! Long live France!" They repeated this double cry. Then the enthusiasm became delirium. It was a repetition of the ovation I met with on my arrival in Paris. I was moved to tears. I took refuge in a café at the corner of the square. I explained in a speech why I did not address the people, then I escaped — that is the word — in a carriage.

While the enthusiastic people shouted "Long live the Republic!" the members of the Assembly issued and filed past impassible, almost furious, and with their hats on, in the midst of the bare heads and the waving caps about me.

Visit from Representatives Le Flo, Rochefort, Locroy, Alfred Naquet, Emmanuel Arago, Rességuier, Floquot, Eugene Pelletan, and Noel Parfait.

I slept in my new lodging at 37, Rue de la Course.

February 16. — At the Assembly today the result of the Paris elections was proclaimed. Louis Blanc was first with 216,000 votes; then came myself with 214,000 votes, then Garibaldi with 200,000.

The ovation extended to me by the people yesterday is regarded by the Majority as an insult to it. Hence a great display of troops on the square outside (army, National Guard and cavalry). There was an incident in this connection before my arrival. The men of the Right demanded that the Assembly be protected. (Against whom? Against me?) The Left replied with the shout of: "Long live the Republic!"

When I was leaving I was notified that the crowd was waiting for me in the square. To escape the ovation I went out by a side door, but the people caught sight of me, and I was immediately surrounded by an immense crowd shouting: "Long live Victor Hugo!" I replied: "Long live the Republic!" Everybody, including the National Guards and soldiers of the line, took up the shout. I drove away in a carriage, which the people followed.

The Assembly to-day elected its committees. Dufaure proposes Thiers as chief of the executive power.

We dined at home for the first time. I had invited Louis Blanc, Schoelcher, Rochefort and Lockroy. Rochefort was unable to come. After dinner we went to Gent’s, Quay des Chartrons, to attend a meeting of the Left. My sons accompanied me. The question of the chief executive was discussed. I had the following added to the definition: appointed by the Assembly and revokable by that body.

General Cremer came this morning to enlighten us concerning the disposition of the army.

February 17. — At the Assembly Gambetta came up to me and said: “Master, when can I see you? I have a good many things to explain to you.”

Thiers has been named chief of the executive power. He is to leave to-night for Versailles, the headquarters of the Prussians.

February 18. — To-night there was a meeting of the Left, in the Rue Lafaurie-Monbadon. The meeting chose me as president. The speakers were Louis Blanc, Schoelcher, Colonel Langlois, Brisson, Lockroy, Millière, Clémenceau, Martin Bernard, and Joigneaux. I spoke last and summed up the debate. Weighty questions were brought up — the Bismarck-Thiers treaty, peace, war, the intolerance of the Assembly, and the case in which it would be advisable to resign in a body.

February 19. — The president of the National Club of Bordeaux came to place his salons at my disposal.

My hostess, Mme. Porte, a very pretty woman, has sent me a bouquet.

Thiers has appointed his Ministers. He has assumed the equivocal and suspicious title of “head president of the executive power.” The Assembly is to adjourn. We are to be notified at our residences when it is to be convened again.

February 20. — To-day the people again acclaimed me when I came out of the Assembly. The crowd in an instant became enormous. I was compelled to take refuge in the lodging of Martin Bernard, who lives in a street adjacent to the Assembly.

I spoke in the Eleventh Committee. The question of the magistracy (which has petitioned us not to act against it) came up unexpectedly. I spoke well. I rather terrified the committee.

Little Jeanne is more than ever adorable. She does not want to leave me at all now.

February 21. — Mme. Porte, my hostess of the Rue de la Course, sends me a bouquet every morning by her little daughter.

I take little Georges and little Jeanne out whenever I have a minute to spare. I might very well be dubbed: “Victor Hugo, Representative of the People and dry nurse.”

To-night I presided at the meeting of the Radical Left.

February 25. — To-night there was a meeting of the two fractions of the Left, the Radical Left and Political Left, in the hall of the Academy, in the Rue Jacques Bell. The speakers were Louis Blanc, Emmanuel Arago, Vacherot, Jean Brunet, Bethmont, Peyrat, Brisson, Gambetta, and myself. I doubt whether my plan for fusion or even for an *entente cordiale* will succeed. Schoelcher and Edmond Adam walked home with me.

February 26. — I am 69 years old to-day.

I presided at a meeting of the Left.

February 27. — I have resigned the presidency of the Radical Left in order to afford full independence to the meeting.

February 28. — Thiers read the treaty (of peace) from the tribune to-day. It is hideous. I shall speak to-morrow. My name is the seventh on the list, but Grévy, the president of the Assembly, said to me: “Rise and ask to be heard when you want to. The Assembly will hear you.”

To-night there was a meeting of the Assembly committees. I belong to the eleventh. I spoke.

March 1. — There was a tragical session to-day. The Empire was executed, also France, alas! The Shylock-Bismarck treaty was adopted. I spoke.

Louis Blanc spoke after me, and spoke grandly.

I had Louis Blanc and Charles Blanc to dinner.

This evening I went to the meeting in the Rue Lafaurie-Monbadon over which I have ceased to preside. Schoelcher presided. I spoke. I am satisfied with myself.

March 2. — Charles has returned. No session to-day. The adoption of peace has opened the Prussian net. I have received a packet of letters and newspapers from Paris. Two copies of the *Rappel*.

We dined *en famille*, all five of us. Then I went to the meeting.

Seeing that France has been mutilated, the Assembly ought to withdraw. It has caused the wound and is powerless to cure it. Let another Assembly replace it. I would like to resign. Louis Blanc does not want to. Gambetta and Rochefort are of my way of thinking. Debate.

March 3. — This morning the Mayor of Strasburg, who died of grief, was buried.

Louis Blanc called in company with three Representatives, Brisson, Floquet and Cournet. They came to consult me as to what ought to be done about the resignation question. Rochefort and Pyat, with three others, are resigning. I am in favour of resigning. Louis Blanc resists. The remainder of the Left do not appear to favour resignation *en masse*.

Session.

As I ascended the stairs I heard a fellow belonging to the Right, whose back only I could see, say to another: “Louis Blanc is execrable, but Victor Hugo is worse.”

We all dined with Charles, who had invited Louis Blanc and MM. Lavertujon and Alexis Bouvier.

Afterwards we went to the meeting in the Rue Lafaurie-Monbadon. The President of the Assembly having, on behalf of the Assembly, delivered a farewell address to the retiring members for Alsace and Lorraine, my motion to maintain their seats indefinitely, which was approved by the meeting, is without object, inasmuch as the question is settled. The meeting, however, appears to hold to it. We will consider the matter.

March 4. — Meeting of the Left. M. Millière proposed, as did also M. Delescluze, a motion of impeachment against the Government of the National Defence. He concluded by saying that whoever failed to join him in pressing the motion was a “dupe or an accomplice.”

Schoelcher rose and said:

“Neither dupe nor accomplice. You lie!”

March 5. — Session of the Assembly.

Meeting in the evening. Louis Blanc, instead of a formal impeachment of the ex-Government of Paris, demands an inquiry. I subscribe to this. We sign.

Meeting of the Left. They say there is great agitation in Paris. The Government which usually never receives less than fifteen dispatches a day from Paris has not received a single one up to 10 o’clock to-night. Six telegrams sent to Jules Favre have not been answered. We decide that either Louis Blanc or I will interpellate the Government as to the situation in Paris, if the present anxiety continues and no light is thrown upon the situation.

A deputation of natives of Alsace and Lorraine came to thank us.

March 6. — At noon we lunched *en famille* at Charles's. I took the two ladies to the Assembly. There is talk of transferring the Assembly to Versailles or Fontainebleau. They are afraid of Paris. I spoke at the meeting of the Eleventh Committee. I was nearly elected commissioner. I got 18 votes, but a M. Lucien Brun got 19.

Meeting in the Rue Lafaurie. I proposed that we all refuse to discuss the situation in Paris, and that a manifesto be drawn up, to be signed by all of us, declaring our intention to resign if the Assembly goes anywhere else than to Paris. The meeting did not adopt my plan, and urged me to speak to-morrow. I refused. Louis Blanc will speak.

March 8. — I have handed in my resignation as a Representative.

There was a discussion about Garibaldi. He had been elected in Algeria. It was proposed that the election be annulled. I demanded to be heard. I spoke. Uproar on the Right. They shouted: "Order! Order!" It all reads very curiously in the "Moniteur." In face of this explosion of wrath I made a gesture with my hand and said:

"Three weeks ago you refused to hear Garibaldi. Now you refuse to hear me. That is enough. I will resign."

I went to the meeting of the Left for the last time.

March 9. — This morning three members of the Moderate Left, which meets in the hall of the Academy, came as delegates from that body, the 220 members of which unanimously requested me to withdraw my resignation. M. Paul Bethmon acted as spokesman. I thanked them, but declined.

Then delegates from another meeting came with the same object. The meeting of the Central Left, to which MM. d'Haussonville and de Rémusat belong, unanimously requested me to withdraw my resignation. M. Target acted as spokesman. I thanked them, but declined.

Louis Blanc ascended the tribune (in the Assembly) and bade me farewell with grandeur and nobleness.

March 10. — Louis Blanc spoke yesterday and to-day — yesterday about my resignation, to-day about the question of Paris. Grandly and nobly on each occasion.

March 11. — We are preparing for our departure.

March 12. — Many visits. My apartment was crowded. M. Michel Levy came to ask me for a book. M. Duquesnel, associate director of the Odéon Theatre, came to ask me for *Ruy Blas*.

We shall probably leave to-morrow.

Charles, Alice and Victor went to Arcachon. They returned to dinner.

Little Georges, who has been unwell, is better.

Louis Blanc dined with me. He is going to Paris.

March 13. — Last night I could not sleep. Like Pythagoras, I was thinking of numbers. I thought of all these 13's so queerly associated with our movements and actions since the first of January, and upon the fact that I was to leave this house on a 13th. Just then there was the same nocturnal knocking (three taps, as though made by a hammer on a board) that I had heard twice before in this room.

We lunched at Charles's, with Louis Blanc.

I then went to see Rochefort. He lives at 80, Rue Judaique. He is convalescent from an attack of erysipelas that at one time assumed a dangerous character. With him I found MM. Alexis Bouvier and Mourot, whom I invited to dinner to-day, at the same time asking them to transmit my invitation to MM. Claretie, Guillemot and Germain Casse, with whom I want to shake hands before I go.

On leaving Rochefort's I wandered a little about Bordeaux. Fine church, partly Roman. Pretty Gothic flowered tower. Superb Roman ruin (Rue du Colysée) which they call the Palais Gallien.

Victor came to embrace me. He left for Paris at 6 o'clock with Louis Blanc.

At half past 6 I went to Lanta's restaurant. MM. Bouvier, Mourot and Casse arrived. Then Alice. We waited for Charles.

Charles died at 7 o'clock.

The waiter who waits upon me at Lanta's restaurant entered and told me that somebody wanted to see me. In the ante-chamber I found M. Porte, who lets the apartment at 13, Rue Saint Maur, that Charles occupied. M. Porte whispered to me to get Alice, who had followed me, out of the way. Alice returned to the salon. M. Porte said to me:

"Monsieur be brave. Monsieur Charles—"

"Well?"

"He is dead!"

Dead! I could not believe it. Charles! I leaned against the wall for support.

M. Porte told me that Charles had taken a cab to go to Lanta's, but had told the cabman to drive first to the Café de Bordeaux. Arrived at the Café de Bordeaux, the driver on opening the door of the cab, found Charles dead.

He had been stricken with apoplexy. A number of blood vessels had burst. He was covered with blood, which issued from his nose and mouth. The doctor summoned pronounced him dead.

I would not believe it. I said: “It is a lethargy.” I still hoped. I returned to the salon, told Alice that I was going out, but would soon be back, and ran to the Rue Saint Maur. I had hardly reached there when they brought Charles.

Alas! my beloved Charles! He was dead.

I went to fetch Alice. What despair!

The two children were asleep.

March 14. — I have read again what I wrote on the morning of the 13th about the knocking I heard during the night.

Charles has been laid out in the salon on the ground floor of the house in the Rue Saint Maur. He lies on a bed covered with a sheet which the women of the house have strewn with flowers. Two neighbours, workingmen who love me, asked permission to watch by the body all night. The coroner’s physician, on uncovering the dear dead, wept.

I sent to Meurice a telegram couched in the following terms:

Meurice, 18 Rue Valois —

Appalling misfortune. Charles died this evening, 13th. Sudden stroke of apoplexy. Tell Victor to come back at once.

The Prefect sent this telegram over the official wire.

We shall take Charles with us. Meanwhile he will be placed in the depository.

MM. Alexis Bouvier and Germain Casse are helping me in these heart-rending preparations.

At 4 o’clock Charles was placed in the coffin. I prevented them from fetching Alice. I kissed the brow of my beloved, then the sheet of lead was soldered. Next they put the oaken lid of the coffin on and screwed it down; thus I shall never see him more. But the soul remains. If I did not believe in the soul I would not live another hour.

I dined with my grandchildren, little Georges and little Jeanne.

I consoled Alice. I wept with her. I said “thou” to her for the first time.

March 15. — For two nights I have not slept. I could not sleep last night.

Edgar Quinet came to see me last evening. On viewing Charles’s coffin in the parlor, he said:

“I bid thee adieu, great mind, great talent, great soul, beautiful of face, more beautiful of thought, son of Victor Hugo!”

We talked together of this great mind that is no more. We were calm. The night watcher wept as he listened to us.

The Prefect of the Gironde called. I could not receive him.

This morning at 10 o’clock I went to No. 13, Rue Saint Maur. The hearse was there. MM. Bouvier and Mourot awaited me. I entered the salon. I kissed the coffin. Then he was taken away. There was one carriage. These gentlemen and I entered it. Arrived at the cemetery the coffin was taken from the hearse. Six men carried it. MM. Alexis Bouvier, Mourot and I followed, bareheaded. It was raining in torrents. We walked behind the coffin.

At the end of a long alley of plane trees we found the depository, a vault lighted only by the door. You descend five or six steps to it. Several coffins were waiting there, as Charles’s will wait. The bearers entered with the coffin. As I was about to follow, the keeper of the depository said to me: “No one is allowed to go in.” I understood, and I respected this solitude of the dead. MM. Alexis Bouvier and Mourot took me back to No. 13, Rue Saint Maur.

Alice was in a swoon. I gave her some vinegar to smell and beat her hands. She came to, and said: “Charles, where art thou?”

I am overcome with grief.

March 16. — At noon Victor arrived with Barbieux and Louis Mie. We embraced in silence and wept. He handed me a letter from Meurice and Vacquerie.

We decide that Charles shall be buried in the tomb of my father in Père Lachaise, in the place that I had reserved for myself. I write a letter to Meurice and Vacquerie in which I announce that I shall leave with the coffin tomorrow and that we shall arrive in Paris the following day. Barbieux will leave to-night and take the letter to them.

March 17. — We expect to leave Bordeaux with my Charles at 6 o’clock this evening.

Victor and I, with Louis Mie, fetched Charles from the Depository, and took him to the railway station.

March 18. — We left Bordeaux at 6.30 in the evening and arrived in Paris at 10.30 this morning.

At the railway station we were received in a salon where the newspapers, which had announced our arrival for noon, were handed to me. We waited. Crowd; friends.

At noon we set out for Père Lachaise. I followed the hearse bareheaded. Victor was beside me. All our friends followed, the people too. As the procession passed there were cries of: “Hats off!”

In the Place de la Bastille a spontaneous guard of honour was formed about the hearse by National Guards, who passed with arms reversed. All along the line of route to the cemetery battalions of the National Guard were drawn up. They presented arms and gave the salute to the flag. Drums rolled and bugles sounded. The people waited till I had passed, then shouted: “Long live the Republic!”

There were barricades everywhere, which compelled us to make a long detour. Crowd at the cemetery. In the crowd I recognised Rostan and Millière, who was pale and greatly moved, and who saluted me. Between a couple of tombs a big hand was stretched towards me and a voice exclaimed: “I am Courbet.” At the same time I saw an energetical and cordial face which was smiling at me with tear-dimmed eyes. I shook the hand warmly. It was the first time that I had seen Courbet.

The coffin was taken from the hearse. Before it was lowered into the vault I knelt and kissed it. The vault was yawning. A stone had been raised. I gazed at the tomb of my father which I had not seen since I was exiled. The cippus has become blackened. The opening was too narrow, and the stone had to be filed. This work occupied half an hour. During that time I gazed at the tomb of my father and the coffin of my son. At last they were able to lower the coffin. Charles will be there with my father, my mother, and my brother.

Mme. Meurice brought a bunch of white lilac which she placed on Charles’s coffin. Vacquerie delivered an oration that was beautiful and grand. Louis Mie also bade Charles an eloquent and touching farewell. Flowers were thrown on the tomb. The crowd surrounded me. They grasped my hands. How the people love me, and how I love them! An ardent address of sympathy from the Belleville Club, signed “Millière, president,” and “Avril, secretary,” was handed to me.

We went home in a carriage with Meurice and Vacquerie. I am broken with grief and weariness. Blessings on thee, my Charles!

VICTOR HUGO: HIS LIFE AND WORK by G. Barnett Smith

This biography was first published in English in 1885. George Barnett Smith (1841-1909) was an author and journalist. Smith came as a young man to London, and was a member of the editorial staff of the *Globe* and later the *Echo*. As an author, his principal fields were history and political biography.

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I INSCRIBE THIS VOLUME
TO
ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE,
REJOICING THUS TO CONNECT
THE
GREAT BARD AND PROPHET OF FRANCE
WITH THE ENGLISH
SINGER OF A YOUNGER DAY,
WHO HAS DRUNK DEEPLY
OF
THE MASTER’S SPIRIT.
G. B. S.

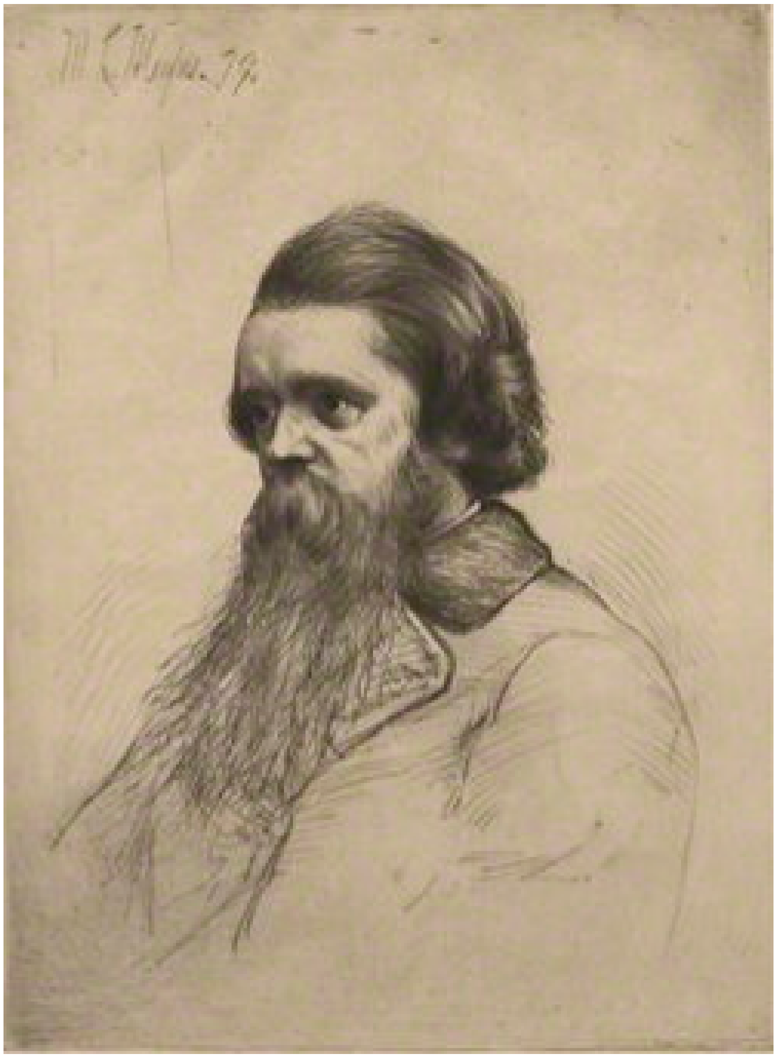

George Barnett Smith (1841-1909)

PRELIMINARY NOTE.

I began this study of Victor Hugo in December last, and arrangements were made for its early publication. The great poet has now passed away, and this melancholy event gives the biographical portion of the present volume a completeness not originally anticipated. Notwithstanding the multitude of criticisms which have appeared in our own and other languages upon Hugo’s works, this is the only book which relates the full story of his life, and now traces to its close his literary career. More than twenty years have elapsed since the publication of Madame Hugo’s memorials of the earlier portion of the poet’s history, and since that time M. Barbou’s work (excellently translated by Miss Frewer) is the only narrative of a biographical character which has appeared. The writings of various French and English critics, the two works I have named, and those valuable chroniclers, the journals of London and Paris, have been of considerable service to me in the preparation of the biography now offered to the public.

The writings of Victor Hugo are so varied and multifarious, and many of them are so well known to English readers, that I have not deemed it necessary to subject them to a detailed analysis. At the same time, the reader unfamiliar with these powerful works will, I trust, be able to gather something of their purport and scope from the ensuing pages. As they have impressed all minds, moreover, by their striking originality, I thought that it would not be without its value if, while venturing to record my own impressions, I gave at the same time a representation of critical contemporary opinion upon them. Finally, it has been my object to present to the reader, within reasonable compass, a complete survey of the life and work of the most celebrated Frenchman of the nineteenth century.

G. Barnett Smith.

Highgate, London, N.,
June 3rd, 1885.

VICTOR HUGO: HIS LIFE AND WORK.

CHAPTER I. EARLY YEARS.

The glory of France touched its zenith at the period when our narrative opens. Europe virtually lay at the feet of Napoleon, who had risen to a height of authority and power which might well have satisfied the most vaulting ambition. Nations whose records extended back into the ages of antiquity trembled before him; and only one people, that of this sea-girt isle of Britain, declined to bend the knee to the all-conquering First Consul. Yet the philosophic mind, reflecting that the stability of a nation or a throne must be measured by its growth, must surely have distrusted the permanence of a grandeur and a greatness thus rapidly achieved. And speedily would such prevision have been justified, for in little more than one brief decade the sun of Napoleon set as suddenly as it arose.

But while as yet the fame and the splendour of the conqueror were in their noonday, there was born at Besançon another child of genius, whose triumphs were to be won in a different and a nobler sphere. He was destined to touch, as with Ithuriel’s spear, the sleeping spirit of French poesy, and to animate it with new life, vigour, and enthusiasm; he was to recall the divine muse from the drear region of classicism, and, by revivifying almost every branch of imaginative literature, he was himself to gain the triple crown of poet, romancist, and dramatist. And not alone for this was the child Victor Hugo to grow into manhood and venerable age. He was to become a great apostle of liberty, and as his life opened with the triumphs of the first Napoleon, so before its close he was destined to behold the last of that name pass away in the whirlwind, and France recover much of her prosperity and her power under the ægis of the Republic, of which the poet sang and for which he laboured.

The ancestry of Victor Hugo were not undistinguished. Documents concerning them before the fifteenth century were lost in the pillage of Nancy, but since that time a clear genealogy is claimed. There was one Hugo, a soldier, who obtained in 1535 letters patent of nobility for himself and his descendants from Cardinal Jean de Lorraine, Archbishop of Rheims, which letters were subsequently confirmed by the Cardinal’s brother, Antoine, Duke of Lorraine. The fifth descendant from this warrior-noble, Charles Hyacinthe Hugo, obtained new letters patent; and his grandson, Joseph Leopold Sigisbert, was the father of the poet. In the seventeenth century, a member of the Hugo family was known both in the Church and in literature, and became Abbé of Estival and Bishop of Ptolemais. Another who lived in the eighteenth century, Louis Antoine Hugo, was a member of the Convention, and was executed for moderatism. Thus in career, as in character, there was much variety in the Hugo family.

Sigisbert Hugo, who entered the army as a cadet in 1788, ultimately attained the rank of General under the First Empire. Although the hereditary title of Count was the appanage of this rank, he never took it up. While brave and fearless in war, he is represented as being devotion and goodness personified, and humane to a fault. ‘He set his children a fine example of duty, being ever their instructor in the paths of honour.’ During a period of military service at Nantes, he became acquainted with Sophie Trébuchet, the daughter of a wealthy shipowner. An attachment soon sprang up between them, and they were married in Paris, Hugo having been summoned thither as reporter to the first council of war on the Seine.

Though the grandfather of Victor Hugo on the maternal side was engaged in commerce, he belonged to an old family, and one famous in La Vendée for its devotion to the Royalist cause. A cousin of Madame Hugo was the Count de Chassebœuf, better known as Volney, the author of *Les Ruines*; and another cousin was Count Cornet, who was very prominent in political matters both before and during the First Empire. Two sons were born to Major Hugo and his wife, and then they looked forward with hope to the birth of a daughter, whom it was decided to name Victorine. Another son, however, came instead, and one so weakly and diminutive that the accoucheur declared strongly against his chances of life. The babe was taken to the mairie at Besançon, and registered as having been born on the 26th of February, 1802. He received the names of Victor Marie Hugo, and his godfather was Major Hugo’s intimate friend, General Lahorie, chief of the staff to General Moreau. It has been pointed out that the word Hugo in old German was the equivalent of the Latin word *spiritus*, and this fact, combined with the Christian name of Victor, caused Dumas the elder to say that ‘the name of Victor Hugo stands forth as the conquering spirit, the triumphant soul, the breath of victory.’

But for some time there could be little presage of triumph or victory in connection with Victor Hugo. Languid and ailing in body, he became unusually sad for a child of such tender years, and ‘was sometimes discovered in a corner, weeping silently without any reason.’ He afterwards described his untoward childhood in the opening lines of the *Feuilles d’Automne*. For some time the Hugo family accompanied its head in his military journeyings; but when Major Hugo was ultimately ordered to join the army of Italy, he settled his wife and their three young children in Paris, in the Rue de Clichy. That the youngest scion of the house could not really have been as feeble and frail as he looked, and that he must have had the basis of a good, sound constitution, is proved by his long life; but we must not forget also in this regard the great care and assiduous attention lavished upon him by his mother. His career furnishes another illustration of the truth that while the most glorious promise sometimes sets in gloom and premature death, on the other hand genius also not infrequently advances from the wavering spark to a noble flame, and out of weakness is made strength.

Major (afterwards General) Hugo rendered conspicuous service in Italy by the capture of the notorious bandit chief, Fra Diavolo, and the pacification of Naples. For these acts he was made Colonel of Royal Corsica and Governor of Avellino. When not quite five years old Victor was taken by his mother, with his brothers, Abel and Eugène, to Avellino, and the journey to Italy is associated with his first observations of natural scenery. Though so young, his imagination was fired by all he saw, and the impressions he formed were very distinct — so much so that in after life he would discuss with Alexandre Dumas the aspects of the country through which he had travelled in his childhood.

In 1808 Colonel Hugo was sent to Madrid in the train of Joseph Bonaparte; but, as Spain was disturbed by war, he would not hazard the presence of his wife and children in that country. Madame Hugo accordingly went to Paris, and established herself at the house No. 12, in the Impasse des Feuillantines, where she now devoted herself to the education of her children. Late in life, Victor Hugo described the household in the Feuillantines. Near by there was an aged priest, who acted as tutor to the boys, teaching them a good deal of Latin, a smattering of Greek, and the barest outlines of history. In the gardens, and amid the ruins of an old convent in the grounds, the Hugo boys passed many happy days. ‘Together in their work and in their play, rough-hewing their lives regardless of destiny, they passed their time as children of the spring, mindful only of their books, of the trees, and of the clouds, listening to the tumultuous chorus of the birds, but watched over incessantly by one sweet and loving smile.’ ‘Blessings on thee, O my mother!’ was the invocation of the poet in his later years.

Once the family received an accession in the person of General Lahorie, who had been connected with Moreau’s conspiracy, and was condemned to death for contumacy. Madame Hugo, in her secluded dwelling, and in a little chapel buried amongst the foliage, gave him a secure shelter for eighteen months. Young Victor did not then know that the stranger in whom he took so deep an interest, and in whom he begat an equal interest, was his godfather. Lahorie took kindly to the boy, and frequently conversed with him, saying to him on one occasion with great impressiveness, ‘Child, everything must yield to liberty!’ The precautions of Lahorie and his friends were in the end of no avail. In 1811 he was arrested at the Feuillantines, tried and condemned by court-martial, and shot on the plain of Grenelle. Napoleon was implacable in his revenge; his wrath might sleep, but it was never allowed to die.

Another visitor to the Feuillantines was General Louis Hugo, uncle to the youths. With that strong poetic imagery which characterized him, little Victor said that the entrance of his uncle into the salon ‘had on us the effect of the Archangel Michael appearing on a beam of light.’ The visitor came at the request of his brother to hasten the departure of the family for Spain. The boys Hugo were informed by their mother that they must learn Spanish, and just as they would have performed much more impossible feats under such a command, they acquired the language in the course of a few weeks.

In the spring of 1811, Madame Hugo and her children began their journey into Spain. At Bayonne they had to await a convoy for Madrid. Here the travellers paid several visits to the theatre, which made a deep impression upon Victor, yet one which, while more lasting perhaps, was not so deep as that made by the little daughter of a widow, who seems to have quite captivated the boy. He afterwards referred to this attachment as bearing the same relation to love that the light of dawn bears to the full blaze of day. But he never saw again the youthful *inamorata* who stirred ‘the first cry of the awakening heart.’

The dilatory progress of the convoy to Madrid, though irksome to Madame Hugo, was not so to her youngest son. He delighted in observing the features of the scenery and the towns through which they passed. With Ernani he was especially pleased, and subsequently gave to one of his dramas the name of this town. After a number of adventures, some of them of a trying character, the convoy entered Madrid, and Madame Hugo and her family were accommodated at the palace of Prince Masserano. Their rooms and all the appointments were very sumptuous, and there was a great display of Bohemian and Venetian glass and magnificent China vases. Concerning the latter, Victor Hugo said that he had ‘never since met with any so remarkable.’ Victor’s eldest brother, Abel, was made a page to King Joseph, and it was intended that Victor himself should follow his example. Meanwhile Eugène and Victor were placed in the Seminary of Nobles, a proceeding which affected them deeply, and made them inexpressibly miserable after the happiness they had found in the Masserano Palace.

But great and dire events were impending in Napoleonic history. By the beginning of the year 1812 the position of French affairs generally became so threatening that General Hugo decided to send his wife and the two younger children back to Paris. Not many months elapsed before his prescience was justified. Bonaparte’s army was decimated by the inclement snows of Russia after the burning of Moscow, and the kings he had set up in the European capitals began to tremble for the stability of their thrones.

Madame Hugo and her two sons safely reached Paris after a tedious journey, and once more established themselves in the Feuillantines. The biographical work written by the poet’s wife shows that Madame Hugo had liberal ideas on the subject of education: that where religion was in question she was averse to forcing any particular persuasion on her sons, or to interfere with their natural tendencies; neither did she wish to tax their intelligence any more than their consciences. In the matter of reading she was equally liberal: the boys were allowed the greatest freedom, and read Rousseau, Voltaire, Diderot, and other authors; but the works of such writers paled in comparison with Captain Cook’s travels, which had a great fascination for the young students. Madame Hugo judged that any errors her sons were likely to imbibe in their wide and catholic reading would be rendered innocuous by the influence of a good example and the purity of the home life. She restrained them by her authority, and, while attending to their mental and moral development, she did not neglect the physical. She desired them to grow up healthy and complete in mind and body alike.

The troubles in Spain thickened apace, and King Joseph left Madrid, being followed by General Hugo. The victory of the Allies at Vittoria practically settled the fate of Joseph Bonaparte and the Spanish crown. The King dismissed his retinue of officers and retired into private life, and General Hugo returned to Paris with his son Abel. Madame Hugo and the other children had moved into the Rue du Cherche-Midi. Having herself been an invader, it was now the turn of France to be invaded. General Hugo was no favourite with the Emperor (who had not forgotten the Moreau conspiracy), but when his country was in danger he could not remain inactive. So he volunteered, and went into the provinces, where he rendered conspicuous service. He long held Thionville, keeping the Allies at bay, and refused to open the town until he received official despatches from his General-in-Chief announcing the cessation of hostilities. The restoration of the Bourbons followed, and, although this was hailed with great joy by Madame Hugo, it led to General Hugo being deprived of his command and removed from active employment, together with all the officers who had shared in the defence of Thionville.

Eugène and Victor Hugo now lost the liberty they had for some time enjoyed, and were sent to school, being placed in the Collége Cordier et Decotte, in the Rue Ste. Marguerite. At first the removal was especially bitter to Victor, as it separated him from Adèle Foucher, a young girl who had completely won his youthful heart. This love continued to grow from its inception in the Rue du Cherche-Midi till the time when Adèle became his devoted wife, and returned Victor Hugo’s affection with an ardour equal to his own.

The Hugo boys were naturally the subject of a cross-fire in regard to politics. Their father was devoted to the Empire, and their mother was equally devoted to the Royalists. But as the influence of a mother always has priority in regard to time, Victor Hugo was for a season enthusiastic about royalty. He could not, with his warm temperament and lively imagination, be half-hearted about anything. Nor need it surprise us that he yielded first to the influence of his mother as regarded the Bourbons, and then to that of his father as regarded the Bonapartes. In youth it is the imagination which is developed; the judgment is formed by slow stages. It would have surprised us more if Victor Hugo had not shown himself amenable to the potent influences of his home training. His father and mother were of no ordinary type; they had both great latent force of nature and character, which deeply impressed itself upon their children. In estimating the career of Victor Hugo, then, with its later changes of opinion, the circumstances which surrounded his early years, and greatly assisted in moulding his character, must not be forgotten.

Early in 1815 Paris was electrified by the news that Napoleon had returned from Elba. For a brief period the magic of his name once more exercised a profound influence; and under this revival of Bonapartist prospects General Hugo was again despatched to take the command of Thionville. He exhibited the same capacity and spirit as before, but all was of no avail. The crowning disaster of Waterloo extinguished the hopes of the Bonapartists, and Napoleon fell, ‘like Lucifer, never to rise again.’

It is matter for regret that the differences between General and Madame Hugo on the subject of politics and dynasties led to a separation between them, though one that was mutually desired. Each felt too strongly on these subjects to give way, and thereby stultify his or her convictions. But political disagreements did not affect the deep interest of both parents in their children. The boys made great progress at school, and also attended courses of lectures in physics, philosophy, and mathematics at the Collége Louis-le-Grand. Their proficiency was especially marked in mathematics, and it obtained for both honourable mention in the examinations.

Poetry, however, even thus early, was the real mistress of Victor Hugo. His tentative efforts in this direction were as varied as they were numerous, and he has left an amusing record of his first wooings of the Muse. He alternated fights at the college (he and Eugène were the kings of the school) with flights of the imagination. Nothing came amiss to him, whether ode, satire, epistle, lyric, tragedy, elegy, etc.; and he imitated Ossian and translated from Virgil, Horace, and Lucan at an age when others only just begin to acquire an appreciation and understanding of those authors. Nor were such writers as Martial and Ausonius unknown to him. Then from poetry he would turn to romances, fables, stories, epigrams, madrigals, logographs, acrostics, charades, enigmas, and impromptus; and he even wrote a comic opera.

In one of these youthful pieces he deprecated the exercise of the reader’s satirical rage over the effusion; and certainly the chief impression which these initial attempts at composition leave upon the reader is not a critical one founded upon their manifest crudity and inconsequences of thought, but one of surprise at the exuberance of fancy and command of expression so soon and so singularly displayed. There was more than sufficient in them to the observant eye to foreshadow the genius which their author afterwards developed. Each of these poems was an effort of the imagination after strength of wing. But of all those who perused these early poetic efforts, Madame Hugo was probably the only one able to gauge the great promise of the writer. She could not but anticipate much from that genius which was just essaying to unfold itself in the sun. Yet even she could not fully foresee the magnificent, eagle-like flights of which these imaginings were but the first faint flutterings of the eaglet’s wing.

CHAPTER II. DAWNINGS OF GENIUS.

Victor Hugo was not quite thirteen when he wrote his first poetical essay, which had for its subject *Roland and Chivalry*. This was followed in the same year, 1815, by an intensely Royalist poem, and one breathing indignation against the Emperor, after the disaster of Waterloo. The poet had been thrown constantly into the midst of Royalist influences and surroundings; not only his mother, but General Lahorie and M. Foucher, her most intimate friends, were enemies of the Empire, and the youth consequently imbibed at the same time hatred of the Empire and love of the Bourbons.

His first tragedy, *Irtamène*, was written in honour of Louis XVIII., and though professedly dealing with Egyptian themes, it was really a defence of the French King. There is a usurper in it, who meets with condign chastisement, and the play ends with the coronation of the legitimate monarch. 'Those who hate tyrants should love kings,' said the writer, to whom at that time the restoration of the Bourbons meant liberty. But these things must not be made too much of. The poet was at that nebulous stage when the fact of writing poetry was more to him than the subject-matter of his exercises. He read voluminously, but he had not as yet begun to separate, to weigh, and to discriminate.

A course of the *Théâtre de Voltaire* led him to begin a new tragedy, *Athéli; or, the Scandinavians*, all in dramatic order, with its five acts, and its due regard to narrative, scenery, etc. Before he had completed it, however, he turned to a comic opera, *A Quelque Chose Hasard est Bon*. Then he reverted to the drama, and wrote a play in three acts, with two interludes, entitled *Inez de Castro*. From the point of view of literary art, little is to be said of these things; but there are many scattered passages in them which reveal remarkable insight on the part of one so young. In the year 1817 he first sought publicity for his compositions, competing for the poetical prize annually offered by the French Academy. The subject chosen was, *The Advantages of Study in every situation of Life*, and amongst the competitors were Lebrun, Delavigne, Saintine, and Loyson, who all on this occasion made their poetical debut. The first prize was divided between Saintine and Lebrun, and Hugo received honourable mention; but when the poems came to be declaimed in public, the warmest applause followed that by Victor

Hugo. The Academy judges were considerably puzzled by Master Hugo's exercise. In one place he wrote as though he had arrived at years of discretion and comparative maturity, and then demolished this idea by the lines —

'I, who have ever fled from courts and cities,
Scarce three short lustres have accomplished yet.'

The judges came to the conclusion that the young poet was playing with them, and in their report accordingly threw doubt upon his statement that he was only fifteen years old. The production of his birth certificate set this question at rest, and Victor's name now became prominent in the newspapers. M. Raynouard, the cultured Secretary of the Academy, finding that the 'most potent, grave, and reverend signors' had not been deceived, expressed the great pleasure he had in making the youthful competitor's acquaintance. Other distinguished men followed suit, and Hugo was described as 'the sublime child,' either by Chateaubriand or Soumet. The evidence points to the latter having first made use of this phrase, but its origin matters little, for Chateaubriand fully adopted it, remarking that anyone might naturally have used the words, they expressed so decided a truth. Hugo was taken by a friend to see the author of *Atala*, and the impression made upon his mind by this man of genius found utterance in the exclamation, 'I would be Chateaubriand or nothing.'

In 1818 Victor's brother Eugène was awarded a prize at the floral games of Toulouse. The younger brother's ambition was touched, and in the following year he secured two prizes from the same Academy for his poems on *The Statue of Henry IV.*, and *The Virgins of Verdun*. The former poem gained the golden lily, and the latter the golden amaranth. It seems that just as the writer was about to set to work on the first-named poem, Madame Hugo was seized with inflammation of the chest. She lamented that her son would be unable to complete his poem in time; but he set to work, wrote it in a single night, and it was despatched next morning in time to compete for the prize. The President of the Toulouse Academy admitted that it was an enigma for one so young to exhibit such remarkable talents in literature.

A poem, *Moses on the Nile*, gained him a third prize at Toulouse, and this constituted him Master of the Floral Games, so that at the age of eighteen he became a provincial academician. He was still Royalist in his opinions, and on the few occasions when he was in the company of his father, the latter did not attempt to change his views, feeling that it would be useless to attempt to set the arguments of a few hours against a daily and hourly influence. But he had a true apprehension of his son’s character, and on one occasion, when Victor had expressed himself warmly in favour of the Vendeans, General Hugo turned to General Lucotte, and said: ‘Let us leave all to time. The child shares his mother’s views; the man will have the opinions of his father.’

Victor Hugo was now the subject of conflicting claims. There was the law, which he had chosen as a profession, with its demands upon him, and there was literature, which he loved too much to surrender; while at the same time love and politics also claimed their share in him. He determined to throw himself ardently into literature. Separated from the object of his youthful affections, he wrote his *Han d’Islande*, in which, while there are many crimes and horrors, there are also passages of tenderness, wherein he sought to embalm and reveal his feelings of love. His courage sustained him through many trials, but at last he was called upon to bear one that made a profound impression upon his heart. Madame Hugo, who was now living in the Rue Mézières, was seized with serious illness after working in her garden, which was her favourite occupation. For some time she struggled successfully with the disease, but it had obtained too firm a hold upon her, and she died suddenly on the 27th of June, 1821. On the evening of the funeral, Adèle Foucher, unconscious of what had occurred, was dancing at a party given in celebration of her birthday. Next morning Victor called upon her, and the lovers, mingling their tears together, mutually renewed their old vows of attachment. Victor, to whom life had seemed without an object on the death of his mother, speedily found another after his betrothal to Adèle. Her parents no longer actively opposed the union, but stipulated for its postponement until Victor could provide a home.

In conjunction with several friends, Hugo had already founded the *Conservateur Littéraire*, to which he contributed articles on Sir Walter Scott, Byron, Moore, etc., and a number of political satires. He had a sum of seven hundred francs, upon which he subsisted for a year, and the method by which he did it will be found related in the experiences of Marius in *Les Misérables*. Translations from Lucan and Virgil, which appeared under the name of D’Auverney, and the Epistles from Aristides to Brutus on *Thou* and *You*, emanated from his pen. He also wrote a very noticeable article on Lamartine’s *Méditations Poétiques*, which had just appeared. Then came the first instalment of his own *Odes et Ballades*, a work in which his genius began to attain a fuller freedom and a richer expression. The volume was received with very wide favour, and though, as M. Barbou has observed, it presents many ideas that would find no approval now, the poet, nevertheless, declared that he could proudly and conscientiously place the work side by side with the democratical books and poems of his matured manhood. This, he said, he should be prepared to do, because in ‘the fierce strife against early prejudices imbibed with a mother’s milk, and in the slow rough ascent from the false to the true, which to a certain extent makes up the substance of every man’s life, and causes the development of his conscience to be the type of human progress in general; each step so taken represents some material sacrifice to moral advancement, some interest abandoned, some vanity eschewed, some worldly benefit renounced — nay, perhaps, some risk of home or even life incurred.’ This justification may fairly be accepted, but from another aspect also these *Odes* are worthy of attention. They were the first noble efforts of the poet to emancipate French poetry from the trammels which had too long governed it, and which had rendered it almost dead, and effete alike in spirit and in form. At length imagination was to resume its rightful sway, and exhibit some return to its pristine vigour.

The *Odes* not only brought the author friends like Émile Deschamps and Alfred de Vigny, but they were pecuniarily successful. The first edition yielded him a profit of seven hundred francs, and a second quickly followed. The attention of the King was called to the poems, and the interest his Majesty took in them, together with a romantic incident in connection with the Saumur plot, led to a pension of 1,000 francs being conferred upon the poet from the King’s privy purse. He now thought he was entitled to press the question of his marriage. His father, who had married again, offered no opposition; the Fouchers also gave way, and bestowed the hand of their daughter Adèle upon the young and now successful poet. Victor Hugo had shortly before this made the acquaintance of the celebrated priest Lamennais, and it was from his hands that he received the certificate of confession required before he could get married. ‘I trust with all my heart,’ wrote the priest, ‘that God will bless this happy union, which He appears Himself to have prepared by implanting in you a long and unchanged affection, and a mutual love as pure as it is sweet.’

The Saumur plot, to which I have referred, took place in 1822, and amongst those implicated in it was a young man named Delon, who had been an intimate friend of Victor Hugo in his childhood. On hearing of Delon's danger, Hugo wrote to the conspirator's mother, offering an asylum for her son in his own house, and remarking that as the writer was well known for his devotion to the Bourbons, he would never be sought in such a retreat. This letter fell into the hands of the King, but instead of its prejudicing him against Victor Hugo, he generously said, 'That young man has a good heart as well as great genius; he is an honourable fellow; I shall take care he has the next pension that falls vacant.' This was the origin of the poet's pension, which was in nowise due to an expressed wish or desire on his own part.

Hans of Iceland, the first published romance of Victor Hugo, appeared anonymously in 1823. The work at once attracted attention by reason of its graphic power and the startling nature of its contrasts. It combines horror with tenderness, the deepest gloom with flashes of the purest light. The author himself had a great affection for it, on the personal ground already mentioned. But its chief features are of a different order. In this northern romance, as one critic has observed, the youthful novelist has turned to great account the savage wilds, gloomy lakes, stormy seas, pathless caves, and ruined fortresses of Scandinavia. 'A being savage as the scenery around him — human in his birth, but more akin to the brute in his nature; diminutive, but with a giant's strength; whose pastime is assassination, who lives literally as well as metaphorically on blood — is the hero; and round this monster are grouped some of the strangest, ghastliest, and yet not wholly unnatural beings which it is possible for the imagination to conceive — Spiagudry, the keeper of the dead-house, or *morgue*, of Drontheim, and Orugex, the State executioner — while gentler forms, the noble and persecuted Schumacker, and the devoted and innocent Ethel, relieve the monotony of crime and horror.' M. Charles Nodier, one of the ablest of French contemporary critics, in a review of the work in the *Quotidienne*, remarked upon the fact that there were men of a certain organization, to whom glory and distinction were temptations, just as happiness and pleasure tempted other men. 'Precocious intellects and deep sensibility do not take the future into consideration — they devour their future. The passions of a young and powerful mind know no to-morrow; they look to satiate their ambition and their hopes with the reputation and excitement of the present moment. *Han d'Islande* has been the result of this kind of combination, if indeed one can describe as a combination that which is only the thoughtless instinct of an original genius, who obeys, without being aware of it, an impulse at variance with his true interests, but whose fine and wide career may not improbably justify this promise of excellence, and may hereafter redeem all the anxiety he has caused by the excusable error he committed when he first launched himself upon the world.' M. Nodier then discussed with much freedom, and yet with almost as much fairness, the peculiar features of the romance, its close and painful search into the morbidities of life, its pictures of the scaffold and the *morgue*, etc., as well as its strong local colouring, its historical truth, its learning, its wit, and its vigorous and picturesque style.

The author and his critic became personally acquainted. The latter called upon Victor Hugo, who, after other changes of abode, had now established himself in the Rue de Vaugirard. A second pension of 2,000 francs had been awarded him by the King; hence his migration into comparatively sumptuous quarters. Other literary friendships besides that with M. Nodier were formed as the result of Victor Hugo's first romance.

At this period he wrote an ode on the *Arc de Triomphe de l'Étoile*, and there were many indications that his early Royalist opinions were in process of abandonment. He visited his father at Blois, and the General was not slow to observe the changes taking place in his son's views. While he could not admire Napoleon personally, he began to do justice to those who had planted the French standard in all the capitals of Europe. But it seemed as though the King was resolved to retain him by favours, for there was now conferred upon him the coveted badge of the Legion of Honour. He attended the coronation of Charles X. at Rheims, and from thence went to pay a visit to Lamartine. A project was formed and a treaty signed with a publisher, by which M. Lamartine, Victor Hugo, M. Charles Nodier, and M. Taylor engaged to prepare a work detailing a poetical and picturesque trip to Mont Blanc and the Valley of Chamouni. For four meditations Lamartine was to receive 2,000 francs, Hugo 2,000 for four odes, Taylor 2,000 for eight drawings, and Nodier 2,250 for all the text. The travellers set out, Hugo being accompanied by his wife and child. On reaching Geneva — after a temporary arrest of Hugo, some time before, on account of the delay of his passport in its journey from Paris — the visitors found the police regulations very annoying. Each hotel possessed a register, in which every traveller was bound to write his name, his age, his profession, the place from whence he came, and his object in travelling. M. Nodier was so exasperated that in reply to the last query he wrote, ‘Come to upset your Government.’ For a few moments the hotel-keeper was not unnaturally electrified. The travellers got their jaunt, but owing to the insolvency of the publisher with whom they had arranged, the literary scheme was never carried out.

In ascending the Alps to the Mer de Glace, Victor Hugo had a narrow escape. His guide, who was new to the business, took the wrong path, and landed the visitor upon a dangerous tongue of ice. From this he was rescued with great difficulty, and for several moments, which seemed like hours, he was suspended over a terrible abyss. Victor Hugo wrote a description of the journey from Sallenches to Chamouni, which was translated by Madame Hugo, and published in her sketch of the poet.

Bug Jargal, the second romance by Victor Hugo, but the earliest in point of time, was published in 1826. It had been originally written for the *Conservateur Littéraire*; but after its appearance there, it was almost entirely remodelled and rewritten. It is a tale of the insurrection in St. Domingo. The essential improbability of such a character as Bug Jargal (by what means did the author get such an uncouth name?), a negro of the noblest moral and intellectual character, passionately in love with a white woman, has been unfavourably commented upon. The hero is represented as not only tempering the wildest passion with the deepest respect, but he even sacrifices life itself at last in behalf of the woman of his love, and of her husband. It was objected that this was too violent a call upon the imagination, but knowledge of the negro character would tend to prove that such a devotion as Bug Jargal’s is by no means impossible. In any case, as the novelist is allowed great license, this objection cannot be regarded as fatal to the romance. Notwithstanding its alleged defects of plot, however, this story has many enthralling passages. No reader is likely to forget ‘the scenes in the camp of the insurgent chief Biassou, or the death-struggle between Habihrah and d’Auverney on the brink of the cataract. The latter, in particular, is drawn with such intense force, that the reader seems almost to be a witness of the changing fortunes of the fight, and can hardly breathe freely till he comes to the close.’ Whatever else these early romances demonstrated, or failed to demonstrate, they were at least inspired by enthusiasm, and tinged with aspirations of a noble order.

The genius of the author had drawn towards him the admiration, and very speedily the friendship, of such men as M. Méry, the journalist; M. Rabbe, author of the ‘History of the Popes;’ M. Achille Devéria and M. Louis Boulanger, the eminent artists; M. Sainte-Beuve, one of the most incisive of critics, and others whose names have since occupied considerable space in the roll of fame. Hugo was indefatigable in his literary efforts. *La Revue Française*, a periodical which unfortunately had but a brief existence, bore testimony to this, as well as his poetical miscellany entitled *La Muse Française*. He also wrote a criticism upon Voltaire, which was afterwards reprinted in his *Mélanges de Littérature*; but this estimate did not reveal the breadth of view which the writer manifested in later years, when he passed an eloquent eulogium upon the philosopher of Ferney.

For a new edition of the *Odes* issued in 1826, and now separated from the *Ballades*, the author wrote an introduction in which he distinctly unfolded his principles of liberty in the realm of literature. He expressed his belief that ‘in a literary production the bolder the conception the more irreproachable should be the execution;’ and he added that liberty need not result in disorder. It was the first occasion on which the claims of what was called, for want of a better word, romanticism were formally promulgated by a writer eminent in that school. We shall shortly see how Victor Hugo translated these ideas into a concrete form in his works. Meantime, in February, 1827, an incident occurred which led to a stirring poem by Hugo, and one which made him friends in a new quarter, while it lost them in an old one.

It appears that at a ball given by the Austrian Ambassador in Paris, the distinguished French marshals who attended were deliberately shorn of their legitimate titles. Thus, the Duke of Taranto was announced as Marshal Macdonald; the Duke of Dalmatia as Marshal Soult; the Duke of Treviso as Marshal Mortier, and so on. The insult was studied and deliberate on the part of the Ambassador; ‘Austria, humiliated by titles which recalled its defeats, publicly denied them. The marshals had been invited in order to show contempt for their victories, and the Empire was insulted in their persons. They immediately quitted the Embassy in a body.’ Victor Hugo’s blood was stirred by this incident, and, without counting the cost, he took his revenge. Throwing all the weight of his indignation into the *Ode à la*

Colonne, he hurled that effusion at the enemies of France. He was now only anxious to show that he was a Frenchman first, and a Vendéan afterwards.

The Ode made a great sensation, but it had a wider effect than its author anticipated. The Opposition welcomed him as one of themselves, for in celebrating the marshals had not the poet celebrated the Empire? The Royalists, on the other hand, seeing this bitter attack upon the Austrians, who were the most powerful friends of the Bourbons, naturally thought that Victor Hugo had abandoned the Royalist cause. Neither side could quite understand how such a burst of invective as that witnessed in the Ode might be due alone to the outraged feelings of a Frenchman, without being intended in the least to partake of the nature of a political manifesto. To these fierce partisans, party was everything; to Victor Hugo it was the nation that was everything. But his rupture with the Royalists is naturally enough traced to this period. He and they could never be the same again to each other. The poet passed now from his admiration of the Bourbons to an acknowledgment of the glory and prowess of the Empire, as at a later period he pressed still further forward, and hailed the fuller liberty of Republican France.

CHAPTER III. VICTOR HUGO'S HUMANITARIANISM.

In 1829 Victor Hugo published anonymously his *Le Dernier Jour d'un Condamné* ('The Last Day of a Convict'). It thrilled the heart of Paris by its vivid recitals. While having no pretensions to the character of a regular tale, it was, as a writer in the *Edinburgh Review* remarked, one of the most perfect things the author had as yet produced. It was the representation of one peculiar state of mind — that of a criminal faced by the certainty of his approaching death under the guillotine. Like Sterne, Hugo had taken a single captive, shut him up in his dungeon, and 'then looked through the twilight of the grated door, to take his picture.' The work is a chronicle of thoughts, a register of sensations; and it is amazing to see what variety and dramatic movement may be imparted to a monologue in which the scene shifts only from, the Bicètre to the Conciergerie, the Hôtel de Ville, and the Place de Grève.

Few descriptions could be found in literature to vie with that in which Victor Hugo places the criminal before us as he enters the court to receive his sentence on a lovely August morning. But all the incidents attending the trial, the condemnation, and the execution are depicted with graphic skill and powerful energy. No one knows better than Victor Hugo how to relieve unutterable gloom by some brilliant ray of human affection, and so upon this condemned prisoner he causes to break a temporary vision of youth and innocence. The intensity all through this piece is such as to give the reader a strange realization of the criminal, with his weight of guilt, and his terrible and conflicting emotions.

But the critic of the *Edinburgh* would have us believe that all this was merely due to a desire by Victor Hugo to exhibit his literary skill. He even calls it absurd to regard the sketch as a pleading against the punishment of death, and roundly denies that the author had any such esoteric purpose. Unfortunately for him, there is conclusive evidence to prove that Victor Hugo had a deeper intent in this painful representation than a mere literary play upon the feelings. In a preface to the edition of 1832 he distinctly avows his purpose: 'It is the author's aim and design that posterity should recognise in his work *not* a mere special pleading for any one particular criminal, which is always easy and always transitory, but a general and permanent appeal in behalf of all the accused, alike of the present and of the future. Its great point is the right of humanity urged upon society.’

Moreover, there is another powerful argument to be considered. Ever since 1820 Victor Hugo had been deeply moved on the question of capital punishment, and resolved to labour for its abolition. It will be convenient here to review briefly his public utterances on the subject, both before and subsequent to the appearance of *Le Dernier Jour d’un Condamné*. We shall thereby be enabled to keep the literary and personal thread of our narrative intact. In the year above named Victor Hugo had seen Louvel, the murderer of the Duke of Berry, on his way to the scaffold. The culprit was a being for whom he had not the slightest sympathy; but his fate begat pity, and he began to reflect on the anomaly that society should, in cold blood, commit the same act as that which it punished. From that time, observes Madame Hugo, he had an idea of writing a book against the guillotine. Two executions which he witnessed during the next few years strengthened his convictions, and led to the work we have already discussed. Subsequently he wrote *Claude Gueux*, founded upon the sad and miserable story of a man of that name. Gueux was condemned to death in 1832 for a crime to which the pangs of hunger had impelled him. The case was doubly painful from the fact that the father of Claude, a very old man, had been sentenced to a punishment in the prison of Clairvaux, and the son, in order to bring help to him, committed an act whose consequences brought him within the walls of the same prison. Strenuous exertions were made by Hugo and others to save Gueux, but the Council of Ministers rejected the appeal. The man was executed, and a noble protest which Victor Hugo afterwards issued greatly moved the public conscience, and rendered society still more familiar with the writer’s views.

In May, 1839, one Barbès was condemned to death for his share in the insurrection in the Place Royale. Victor Hugo immediately sent this message of appeal to the King:

‘By your guardian-angel fled away like a dove,
By your royal child, a sweet and frail reed,
Pardon yet once more, pardon in the name of the tomb!
Pardon in the name of the cradle!’

The King, against the advice of his Ministers, insisted on pardoning Barbès. More than twenty years afterwards the latter figured as a character in *Les Misérables*, and a correspondence, alike honourable to both, ensued between him and the author. Twice as a peer of France Victor Hugo was called upon to give verdicts in cases where capital punishment would follow conviction, and in both instances he voted in favour of perpetual imprisonment and against the death-penalty. When the question of capital punishment came before the Assembly in 1848, Victor Hugo ascended the tribune and made an impassioned speech, from which I take these extracts:

‘What is the penalty of death? It is the especial and eternal mark of barbarism. Wherever the penalty is, death is common, barbarism dominates; wherever the penalty of death is rare, civilization reigns supreme. You have just acknowledged the principle that a man’s private dwelling should be inviolate; we ask you now to acknowledge a principle much higher and more sacred still — the inviolability of human life. The nineteenth century will abolish the penalty of death. You will not do away with it, perhaps, at once; but be assured, either you or your successors will abolish it. I vote for the abolition, pure, simple, and definitive, of the penalty of death.’

In March, 1849, Victor Hugo made an unsuccessful appeal in the case of Daix, condemned to death for the affair of Bréa; and in the following year the poet himself appeared as an advocate in the Court of Assize. He defended his eldest son, Charles Hugo, who had been summoned for protesting in his journal, *L’Évènement*, against the execution, which had been accompanied by revolting circumstances. In the course of his eloquent pleadings, Victor Hugo said: ‘The real culprit in this matter, if there is a culprit, is not my son. It is I myself. I, who, for a quarter of a century, have not ceased to battle against all forms of the irreparable penalty — I, who, during all this time, have never ceased to advocate the inviolability of human life.... Yes, I assert it, this remains of barbarous penalties — this old and unintelligent law of retaliation — this law of blood for blood — I have battled against it all my life; and, so long as there remains one breath in my body, I will continue to battle against it with all my power as an author, and with all my acts and votes as a legislator. And I make this declaration’ — (*the pleader here stretched out his arm towards the crucifix at the end of the hall above the tribunal*)— ‘before the Victim of the penalty of death, whose effigy is now before us, who is now looking down upon us, and who hears what I utter. I swear it, I say, before this sacred tree, on which, nearly two thousand years ago, and for the instruction of men to the latest generation, the laws, instituted by men, fastened with accursed nails the Divine Son of

God!’ In conclusion, the orator exclaimed, ‘My son! thou wilt this day receive a great honour. Thou art judged worthy of fighting, perhaps of suffering, for the sacred cause of truth. From to-day thou enterest the just and true manly life of our time, the struggle for the true. Be proud, thou who art now admitted to the ranks of those who battle for the human and democratic idea! Thou art seated on the bench where Béranger and Lamennais have sat.’ Notwithstanding his father’s defence, which powerfully moved the whole court, Charles Hugo was sentenced to six months’ imprisonment.

While living in exile in Jersey, in 1854, Victor Hugo made an appeal on behalf of a man who was to be hanged in Guernsey. One of his letters was addressed to the people of Guernsey, who petitioned, but in vain, for the life of the convict Tapner. Another was addressed to Lord Palmerston, who gave the usual orders for the execution; and probably no English Minister ever received, either before or since, a communication couched in such burning and passionate language. The writer was literally overwhelming in his indignant rhetoric.

For John Brown, of Harper’s Ferry, the anti-slavery enthusiast, Victor Hugo put in a strong plea with the United States. He told that country that ‘Brown’s executioner would neither be the Attorney Hunter, nor the Judge Parker, nor the Governor Wyse, nor the State of Virginia; it would be, though one shudders to think it, and still more to say it, the great American Republic itself.... When we consider that this nation is the glory of the whole earth; that, like France, England, and Germany, it is one of the organs of civilization, that it has even gone beyond Europe in certain sublime strokes of bold progress, that it is at the summit of the whole world, that it wears on its brow the star of liberty, we are tempted to affirm that John Brown will not die; for we shrink back horrified at the idea of so great a crime being committed by so great a nation!’ The writer predicted that ‘the murder of Brown would make in the Union a rent, at first concealed, but which would end by splitting it asunder.’ John Brown was executed, and Hugo’s prediction was verified. The South did indeed discover that the spirit of Brown was ‘marching on’; and the American Union was for a time convulsed to its centre, ostensibly on the ground of union, but practically on account of slavery. Brown, the martyr, was justified by the event, and slavery was abolished in the United States.

During the year 1861, a Belgian jury pronounced, on a single occasion only, nine sentences of death. Thereupon a writer, assuming the name of Victor Hugo, published some verses in the Belgian journals, imploring the King's pardon for the nine convicts. Hugo's attention was drawn to the verses, when he replied that he was quite willing for his name to be used, or even abused, in so good a cause. As his *alter ego* had addressed the King, so he now addressed the nation. He called upon it to arrest this great sacrifice of life, and to abolish the scaffold. 'It would be a noble thing that a small people should give a lesson to the great, and by this fact alone should become greater than they. It would be a fine thing that, in the face of the abominable growth of darkness, in the presence of a growing barbarism, Belgium, taking the place of a great Power in civilization, should communicate to the human race by one act the full glare of light.' The sentence of seven of the condemned men was commuted, but the two remaining convicts were executed.

When the Republic of Geneva revised its constitution in 1862, the principal question remitted to the people was the abolition of the punishment of death. M. Bost, a Genevese author, appealed to Victor Hugo for his intervention in the discussion. The poet replied by a long and exhaustive communication, in which he reviewed the leading cases in various European countries where the scaffold had recently been called into requisition, and he closed with this exordium: 'O people of Geneva, your city is situate on a lake in the Garden of Eden! you live in a blessed place! all that is most noble in creation surrounds you! the habitual contemplation of the beautiful reveals the truth and imposes duties on you! Your civilization ought to be in harmony with nature. Take counsel of all these merciful marvels. Believe in your sky so bright; and as goodness descends from the sky, abolish the scaffold. Be not ungrateful. Let it not be said that in gratitude, and, as it were, in exchange for this admirable corner of the earth, where God has shown to man the sacred splendour of the Alps, the Arve and the Rhone, the blue lake, and Mont Blanc in the glory of sunlight, man has offered to the Deity the spectacle of the guillotine.' The question had already been decided by the retention of the scaffold when this letter reached Geneva, but Victor Hugo now addressed the people. His second letter had an immense effect, and secured the rejection of the constitution proposed by the Conservatives. It also brought over a great number of adherents to the cause of abolition, which ultimately triumphed.

On many subsequent occasions, and notably in connection with Italy and Portugal, Victor Hugo wrote and strove for the abolition of capital punishment. In France his pressing personal appeals more than once availed to procure a commutation of the death-punishment. To his *Last Day of a Convict* was due the introduction of extenuating circumstances in the criminal laws of France, and he projected a work to be entitled *Le Dossier de la Peine de Mort*.

It is not my intention here, nor, indeed, is it necessary, to discuss the arguments which may be advanced for or against capital punishment. It has been simply my object to present Victor Hugo in a light which, while it may divide men in their judgments, will unite them in their sympathies. The cases I have cited will be more than sufficient to demonstrate that noble enthusiasm of humanity which forms so conspicuous a feature in Victor Hugo’s character.

CHAPTER IV. THE TRIUMPH OF ROMANTICISM.

The war between the two great schools of French poetry, the classic and the romantic, passed into an acute stage shortly before the publication of Victor Hugo’s *Cromwell*. Romanticism meant more than was implied in the definition of Madame de Staël, viz., the transference to French literature of ‘the poetry originating in the songs of the troubadours, the offspring of chivalry and Christianity.’ Victor Hugo, and men of a kindred if not an equal genius, were engaged in a struggle for the very life and soul of poetry. Poetic genius in France was wrapped in the grave-clothes of classicism; it was a corpse that needed galvanizing into life; and it was practically Victor Hugo who rose and said, ‘Loose her, and let her go.’

Goethe had already fought the battle of literary freedom from old superstitions in Germany, and Byron had done the same in England. It was now the turn of France to feel the new gush of life, and to gather strength and lustre in the revival. As M. Asselineau has observed of the French romanticists, ‘to their sincerity, their detestation of tediousness, their sympathy with life and joy and freshness, as well as to their youthful audacity, that was not abashed either by ridicule or insult, belongs the honour of securing to the nineteenth century the triumph of liberty, invaluable for its preciousness in the world of art.’ And in enumerating the leaders of the movement, he cites as the most prominent and influential, Chateaubriand, Victor Hugo, Madame de Staël, Lamartine, Dumas, Alfred de Vigny, Balzac, George Sand, Théophile Gautier, Mérimée, Philarète Chasles, Alfred de Musset, and Jules Janin. Certainly the influence that developed the talents of such a galaxy of genius, so far from being despised, should be acclaimed as a force worthy of all admiration. It was one, in fact, that practically saved French literature from expiring of inanition.

But the romantics were fiercely assailed; so fiercely that Victor Hugo said, if they had been thieves, murderers, and monsters of crime, they could not have been exposed to severer condemnation. Duvergier de Hauranne treated romanticism as a brain disease, and recommended a careful diagnosis of those suffering from it, in order to recover for them gradually their lost senses. But pleasantries such as these were not likely to affect a man in severe earnest. The literary revolutionaries of the Cénacle Club, whose leading spirit was Victor Hugo, laughed at the denunciations hurled against them, knowing that their opportunity had come. There was only one writer who, having put his hand to the plough, turned backward. This was Sainte-Beuve. The temper of his mind was critical, and after the first burst of enthusiasm with which he hailed the new school, and under whose influence he for a time joined it, had spent itself, he threw off his allegiance to the movement, and vowed that he had never really belonged to the reforming band.

Victor Hugo soon gave a pledge, though not in some respects a successful one, of the sincerity of his own convictions. M. Taylor, Commissaire Royal at the Comédie Française, and afterwards widely known in the world of art, asked the poet on one occasion why he never wrote for the theatre. Hugo replied that he was thinking of doing so, and had already commenced a drama on the subject of Cromwell. ‘A Cromwell of your writing should only be acted by Talma,’ said Taylor; and he forthwith arranged a meeting between the famous tragedian and the dramatist. Talma was at that time greatly depressed, taking gloomy views of the stage, and asserting that his own career had been a failure — had never fulfilled its ends. No one knew what he might have been, he confided to Hugo, but now he expected to die without having really acted once. Nevertheless, from the genius of Hugo he did look for something original, and he had always longed to act Cromwell. In response, the author explained his intentions with regard to the proposed play, and also his views upon the drama generally. These views he afterwards enlarged upon in the preface to the play. He asserted that there were three epochs in poetry, each corresponding to an era in society; and these were the ode, the epic, and the drama. ‘Primitive ages are the lyric, ancient times the heroic, and modern times the dramatic. The ode sings of eternity, the epic records history, the drama depicts life.... The characters of the ode are colossal — Adam, Cain, Noah; those of the epic are gigantic — Achilles, Atreus, Orestes; those of the drama are human — Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth. The ode contemplates the ideal; the epic, the sublime; the drama, the real. And, to sum up the whole, this poetical triad emanates from three fountain-heads — the Bible, Homer, and Shakespeare.’

In *Cromwell*, urged Hugo, he intended to substitute a drama for a tragedy, a real man for an ideal personage, reality for conventionalism; the piece was to pass from the heroic to the positive; the style was to include all varieties, epic, lyric, satiric, grave, comic; and there were to be no verses for effect. The author repeated his first line, ‘*Demain, vingt-cinq juin, mil six cent cinquante-sept,*’ which was certainly ludicrously matter-of-fact. Talma was delighted with the whole idea, and begged the poet to complete his work at once. Unfortunately the actor died soon afterwards, and the dramatist now went leisurely on with his play. While engaged upon the preface he saw some Shakespearean dramas performed in English at the Odéon, and the representations affected him deeply, and tinged his dramatic views. At the close of 1827 *Cromwell* was published, and great indeed was the controversy to which it gave rise. The period dealt with was not what would be considered one of the most dramatic in the career of the Protector. It was that ‘when his ambition made him eager to realize the benefits of the King’s death,’ when, having attained what any other man would have reckoned the summit of fortune, being not only master of England, but by his army, his navy, and his diplomacy, master of Europe too, he was urged onwards to fulfil the visions of his youth, and to make himself a king. Cromwell’s final relinquishment of the kingly idea, with the preliminary stages which led up to his resolution, were delineated with subtle power and psychological skill.

But it was not the play so much as its preface — which the author put forward as the manifesto of himself and his literary friends — that stirred the gall of the critics. A writer in the *Gazette de France*, referring to Hugo’s avowed aim to break ‘all those threads of spiders’ web with which the army of Liliput have undertaken to chain the drama whilst slumbering,’ reminded him that in this liliputian army there were some dwarfs to be found not so despicable after all; and amongst others stood out those men who had written for the stage from *Le Cid* down to *Cromwell*. ‘But what would these men be worth in the eyes of him who calls Shakespeare the god of the Theatre? It is necessary to possess some strength to venture to attack giants; and when one undertakes to dethrone writers whom whole generations have united in admiring, it would be advisable to fight them with weapons which, if not equal to theirs, are at least so constructed as to have some chance.’ M. de Rémusat in *Le Globe* endeavoured to hold the scales of justice between the contending parties, while the famous Preface acted as a rallying-cry for the supporters of the new principles. M. Soumet, Hugo’s old friend, wrote concerning the drama: ‘It seems to me full of new and daring beauties; and although in your preface you spoke mercilessly of mosses and climbing ivy, I cannot do less than acknowledge your admirable talent, and I shall speak of your work — grand in the style of Michael Angelo — as I formerly spoke of your odes.'

About the time of the publication of *Cromwell*, Victor Hugo was severely visited in his domestic relations. Madame Foucher, his wife's mother, and a woman of many and great virtues, passed away; and on the 28th of January, 1828, the poet's father died suddenly of apoplexy. The General and his second wife had been quite reconciled to Victor and his brothers, and the Government had once more recognised the title of the old soldier as General of Division. He was happy in the affection of his sons, his daughter-in-law, and Victor Hugo's two children — Léopoldine and Charles. On the evening of his death he had spent several happy hours with the poet, but in the night the apoplexy struck him with the rapidity of a shot, and he immediately expired. The incident, as may be imagined, profoundly affected the sensitive and impressionable spirit of Victor Hugo.

Some years before these events, Victor Hugo had, in conjunction with M. Soumet, written a play entitled *Amy Robsart*, founded upon Scott's *Kenilworth*. Not being able to agree as to the value of each other's contributions, the two authors separated, each bearing away his own dramatic goods. Hugo afterwards handed over his play to his brother-in-law, Paul Foucher, who produced the piece in his own name at the Odéon. It was loudly hissed. There were passages in it that unmistakably bore the impress of Victor Hugo, and the latter chivalrously wrote to the newspapers to say that those parts which had been hissed were his own work. This acknowledgment drew a number of young men to the theatre, who were as loud in their applause as a large portion of the audience were in their condemnation. Altogether, matters became so lively that the Government interfered, and, to allay the tumult, interdicted the play.

In the Rue Notre-Dame des Champs there were some rare meetings of poets and wits, when Victor Hugo and Alfred de Musset would recite poems composed during the day, and Mérimée and Sainte-Beuve would engage in arguments. M. Henri Beyle, M. Louis Boulanger, and M. Eugène Delacroix were also to be seen there; and once the venerable Benjamin Constant was a guest. When Béranger was condemned to three months' imprisonment for one of his songs, Victor Hugo visited him in his cell. He found that the French Burns, though obnoxious to the authorities, was the idol of the populace. His cell was generally full of visitors, and he was inundated with pâtés, game, fruit, and wine.

Another great stride in romanticism was made by the publication of Victor Hugo’s *Orientales*, which appeared in 1828. These lyrical poems were full of energy and inspiration, and it was clear that the very antithesis of the classical style had now been reached. They enhanced the reputation of the writer, while they charmed all readers by their freshness, simplicity, and vigour.

In July, 1829, a brilliant company assembled at Hugo’s house to listen to the reading of a new play by the poet, the famous *Marion de Lorme*, originally called *A Duel under Richelieu*. The writer, it was soon seen, had avoided the faults which marked the construction of *Cromwell*, and had produced a real drama, and one well adapted for stage representation. The company present at the reading included Balzac, Delacroix, Alfred de Musset, Mérimée, Sainte-Beuve, Alfred de Vigny, Dumas, Deschamps, and Taylor. Dumas, with the generous frankness which always characterized him, afterwards wrote respecting the play: ‘I listened with admiration the most intense, but yet an admiration that was tinged with sadness, for I felt that I could never attain to such a powerful style. I congratulated Hugo very heartily, telling him that I, deficient in style as I was, had been quite overwhelmed by the magnificence of his.’ But there was one point upon which Dumas, supported by Sainte-Beuve and Mérimée, pleaded, and pleaded successfully. Not feeling satisfied that Didier should meet his death without forgiving Marion, Hugo yielded to the pressure put upon him, and altered the drama accordingly. The news of a new play by Victor Hugo brought forward the managers at once, but it had already been promised to M. Taylor for the Théâtre Français. However, there was the ordeal of the censors yet to pass through, and fears were entertained as to the fourth act, in which Louis XIII. was described as a hunter, and represented as governed by a priest — points in which everybody would see a resemblance to Charles X. Permission to perform the play was refused. Victor Hugo appealed to the King, who removed from office the Minister of the Interior (M. de Martignac), the dramatist’s chief enemy, and promised to read the offending act himself. Having done so, his Majesty declined to give his sanction to the representation of the drama, but by way of a solatium granted the poet a fresh pension of 4,000 francs. Hugo was indignant, and at once wrote declining the pension, upon which the *Constitutionnel* remarked, ‘Youth is less easily corrupted than the Ministers think.’ With regard to the drama itself, it has been well remarked that ‘had Marion, in spite of her heroism and her repentance, been adequately chastised for her lapse from virtue, probably much of the sentimentality would have been avoided, which, although now exploded, at the time caused a great depravity of taste, and invested the “Dames aux Camellias” and the “Mimis” of Bohemian life with an interest that they did not deserve.’

Undismayed by what had occurred, Victor Hugo now devoted himself to the composition of another drama, and his *Hernani* was shortly in the hands of M. Taylor for production. The censors again interfered, and in the course of a very impertinent report, observed that the play was ‘a tissue of extravagances, generally trivial, and often coarse, to which the author has failed to give anything of an elevated character. Yet while we animadvert upon its flagrant faults, we are of opinion that not only is there no harm in sanctioning the representation of the piece, but that it would be inadvisable to curtail it by a single word. It will be for the benefit of the public to see to what extremes the human mind will go, when freed from all restraint.’ These literary censors did, however, require the alteration or removal of certain passages in which the kingly state and dignity were handled with too much freedom; and they forbade the name of Jesus to be used throughout the piece.

The supporters of the classical drama strenuously exerted themselves to prevent the play from being produced, but in vain. Of course, this creation of a new style meant the decline of the old one. The play went into rehearsal, and the author had a passage of arms with Mademoiselle Mars, who took the part of Doña Sol. This lady, whose power had made her imperious, found her master in Hugo, and when threatened with the loss of her part, she consented to deliver a disputed phrase as written. The time for production came, and when the author was asked to name his systematic applauders, according to custom, he declined to do so, stating that there would be no systematic applause. The play excited the liveliest curiosity. Benjamin Constant was amongst those who earnestly begged for seats, and M. Thiers wrote personally to the author for a box. The literary friends of Victor Hugo attended in great numbers, including Gautier, Borel, and Balzac. The theatre was crowded, and the feeling of all parties intense. As the play progressed from act to act, nevertheless, it gained in its hold upon the audience. When the fourth act closed, M. Maine, a publisher, sought out

Victor Hugo, and offered him 6,000 francs for the play, but the matter, he said, must be decided at once. The author protested, remarking that the success of the piece might be less complete at the end. ‘Ah, that’s true, but it may be much greater,’ replied the publisher. ‘At the second act I thought of offering 2,000 francs; at the third act I got up to 4,000; I now at the fourth act offer 6,000; and after the fifth I am afraid I should have to offer 10,000.’ Hugo laughingly concluded the bargain for 6,000 francs, and went with the eager publisher into a tobacco shop to sign a roughly improvised agreement. The play concluded brilliantly, Mademoiselle Mars securing a great triumph in the last act. The whole house applauded vociferously, and the triumph of romanticism was complete.

The literary war which ensued was very fierce. In the provinces, as in Paris, it divided the public into hostile camps, and so deep were the feelings which it excited that in Toulouse a duel was fought over the play, and one of the antagonists was killed. Armand Carrel was especially bitter in his assaults upon *Hernani*, but Hugo was more than consoled for this and other attacks by the following letter from Chateaubriand: ‘I was present, sir, at the first representation of *Hernani*. You know how much I admire you. My vanity attaches itself to your lyre, and you know the reason. I am going — you are coming. I commend myself to the remembrance of your muse. A pious glory ought to pray for the dead.’ As an amusing pendant to this, it may be mentioned in connection with the poet and *Hernani*, that a provincial Frenchman (in making his will) ordered the following inscription to be placed on his tombstone: ‘Here lies one who believed in Victor Hugo.’

In spite of the attacks in the press, also of personal threats and of the deliberate and almost unparalleled attempts to stifle the play in the theatre itself, *Hernani* held its own, and continued to be played with great pecuniary success until the enforced absence of Mademoiselle Mars, when it was withdrawn from the stage, and not acted again for some years. But the play had practically established the new drama. It was the herald of the renaissance, and for this reason must continue to occupy a conspicuous position whenever an attempt is made to estimate the dramatic work and influence of Victor Hugo.

CHAPTER V. ‘NOTRE-DAME DE PARIS.’

There is a natural desire to know something of the personal aspect of men who have become great. What would the world give, for example, for a faithful account of the character, the appearance, the sayings, the habits of Shakespeare, written by a friend and a contemporary? In the case of Victor Hugo we fortunately have such a description from the pen of one of his most enthusiastic admirers, Théophile Gautier. The sketch represents the poet as he appeared at the time which we have now reached in his history, that is when he was about twenty-eight years of age.

Gautier was exceedingly nervous over his contemplated interview with Victor Hugo, and twice failed to summon up the necessary courage for the meeting. On the third occasion he found himself in the poet’s study. All his prepared eloquence, we are told, at once vanished away; the long apostrophe of praise which he had spent whole evenings in composing came to nothing. He felt like Heine, who, when he was going to have an interview with Goethe, prepared an elaborate speech beforehand, but at the crucial moment could find nothing better to say to the author of *Faust* than that the plum-trees on the road between Jena and Weimar bore plums that were very nice when one was thirsty. But the Jupiter of German poetry was probably more flattered by his visitor’s bewilderment than he would have been by the most glowing eulogium. Passing over Gautier’s panegyrics, here is what he wrote concerning the person of Hugo: ‘He was then twenty-eight years of age, and nothing about him was more striking than his forehead, that like a marble monument rose above his calm and earnest countenance: the beauty of that forehead was well-nigh superhuman; the deepest of thoughts might be written within, but it was capable of bearing the coronet of gold or the chaplet of laurel with all the dignity of a divinity or a Cæsar. This splendid brow was set in a frame of rich chestnut hair that was allowed to grow to considerable length behind. His face was closely shaven, its peculiar paleness being relieved by the lustre of a pair of hazel eyes, keen as an eagle’s. The curved lips betokened a firm determination, and when half opened in a smile, displayed a set of teeth of charming whiteness. His attire was neat and faultless, consisting of black frock-coat, grey trousers, and a small lay-down collar. Nothing in his appearance could ever have led anyone to suspect that this perfect gentleman was the leader of the rough-bearded, dishevelled set that was the terror of the smooth-faced *bourgeoisie*. Such was Victor Hugo. His image, as we saw it in that first interview, has never faded from our memory. It is a portrait that we cherish tenderly; its smiles, beaming with talent, continue with us, ever diffusing a clear and phosphorescent glory!'

In the year 1831 Victor Hugo published a work which, if he had written nothing else, would have given him a place amongst the immortal writers of France. This was his *Notre-Dame de Paris,* undertaken and produced under extraordinary circumstances. It was received with mixed favour by the critics, but at once made its way to the heart of the people. Any number of hostile reviews would have been insufficient to check the progress of so singular and powerful a work. The author had made an engagement to write this book for a publisher named Gosselin, and the latter now claimed the execution of the contract. The work was originally to have been ready by the close of 1829, but in July, 1830, it was not yet begun, and a new contract was prepared, under which it was to be completed by the ensuing December. Political events greatly disturbed the progress of the romance, and a further difficulty was created by the loss of manuscript notes which had taken two months to collect. In the removal of Hugo's books and manuscripts from the house in the Rue Jean Goujon to the Rue du Cherche-Midi, these valuable notes went astray. They were not recovered till some years afterwards, when they were incorporated in a later edition of the novel. A still further delay was granted by the publisher, in accordance with which the author was to complete the story by February, 1831, having just five months in which to accomplish the task.

Hugo set to work with marvellous energy, and some amusing details are given of the way in which he laboured with his romance. 'He bought a bottle of ink, and a thick piece of grey worsted knitting which enveloped him from the neck to the heels; he locked up his clothes, in order not to be tempted to go out, and worked at his novel as if in a prison. He was very melancholy.' It appears that he never left the writing-table except to eat and to sleep, and occasionally to read over some chapters to his friends. The book was finished on the 14th of January, and as the writer concluded his last line and his last drop of ink at the same moment, he thought of changing the title of the novel, and calling it 'The Contents of a Bottle of Ink.' This title, which was not thus used, however, was subsequently adopted by Alphonse Karr.

On being asked by his publisher for some descriptive notes upon the work, which might be useful in advertising it, Victor Hugo wrote: ‘It is a representation of Paris in the fifteenth century, and of the fifteenth century in its relations to Paris. Louis XI. appears in one chapter, and the King is associated with, or practically decides, the *dénouement*. The book has no historical pretensions, unless they be those of painting with some care and accuracy — but entirely by sketches, and incidentally — the state of morals, creeds, laws, arts, and even civilization, in the fifteenth century. This is, however, not the most important part of the work. If it has a merit, it is in its being purely a work of imagination, caprice, and fancy.’ Nevertheless, the author has underrated in certain respects the value of his own work. Powerful as it is from the imaginative point of view, it is no less remarkable for the way in which the writer has brought together a mass of historical and antiquarian lore. Its thoroughness and careful construction in regard to such details may be recommended to less accurate writers in the field of historical romance. Paris, with its myriad interests, is vividly represented by one to whom it had given up its past as well as its present. Whether we see life beneath the shadow of Notre-Dame, in the Cour des Miracles, the Place de Grève, the Palais de Justice, the Bastille or the Louvre, it is all the same — the master-hand has given life and vitality to all it has touched.

The gipsy girl Esmeralda, a fascinating creation, has been compared with the Fenella of Scott, the La Gitanilla of Cervantes, and the Mignon of Goethe. But she has a character of her own distinct from all of these. In her history the power of love is once more exemplified, and if round her centres the finest pathos of the work, so also is she its noblest gleam of light and grace and beauty. It has been said that love makes the learned archdeacon forget his studies, his clerical character, his reputation for sanctity, to court the favours of a volatile Bohemian. ‘Love for this same Parisian Fenella softens the human savage Quasimodo, the dumb one-eyed bell-ringer of Notre-Dame, and transforms him into a delicate monster, a devoted humble worshipper of the Bohemian. While she, who is the cynosure of neighbouring eyes, the object of adoration to these singular lovers, is herself hopelessly attached in turn to a giddy-pated captain of the guard, who can afford to love no one but himself.’ In his grand and startling effects, the writer has been compared with the painter Martin. There is an almost unparalleled breadth, which gives the work a Rembrandtish effect in all the chief scenes. The siege of the cathedral by the banded beggars and vagabonds of Paris in the night is one not readily effaced from the memory; and this is equally true of the terrible interview between the infatuated monk and his victim in the filthy dungeons of the Palais de Justice; of the weird scene of the Fête de Fous in the Hall of the Palace; of the Alsatian picture of the examination and projected hanging of Gringoire among the thieves in the Cour des Miracles; of the execution of Esmeralda; and of the fearful fate of the impassioned monk.

The strange fatality attending upon mere passion is insisted on all through; it binds together in one miserable chain the priest who is prepared to sacrifice all that is sacred in duty for love, the heartless soldier, and the trusting maiden. As to the *dramatis personæ*, the *Athenæum*, observed, ‘No character can be more intimately identified with the genius of Victor Hugo than the interesting, generous, and high-minded gipsy girl Esmeralda. The character of Phœbus de Chateaupers, the bold, reckless, gay, gallant, good-tempered, light-hearted, and faithless captain of gendarmerie, is also original, and wrought out with great skill. The Archdeacon Claude Frollo is a striking specimen of those churchmen of the fifteenth century who united the grossest superstition to the most consummate hypocrisy, and applied the influences of religion to acts of the blackest perfidy. There are many historical characters in this work, and, among others, our old acquaintances in Quentin Durward, Louis XI., Olivier-le-Daim, and the squinting Provost, Tristan l’Hermite.’ In eloquence, in vigour, in animation, and in all the masterly pageantry of a bygone age, this work will continue to hold a unique position amongst symbolical and historical romances.

Notre-Dame was assailed by the majority of the Parisian journals, but in the minority warmly in its favour were to be found some of the first writers of the age. Touching the style of the work, Sainte-Beuve said, ‘There is a magical facility and freedom in saying all that should be said; there is a striking keenness of observation, especially is there a profound knowledge of the populace, and a deep insight into man in his vanity, his emptiness, and his glory, whether he be mendicant, vagabond, *savant*, or sensualist. Moreover, there is an unexampled comprehension of form; an unrivalled expression of grace, material beauty, and greatness; and altogether a worthy presentment of an abiding and gigantic monument. Alike in the pretty prattlings of the nymph-like child, in the cravings of the she-wolf mother, and in the surging passion, almost reaching to delirium, that rages in a man’s brain, there is the moulding and wielding of everything just at the author’s will.’ Alfred de Musset, while unable to take in the scope of the work, acknowledged that it was colossal. Jules Janin remarked that ‘of all the works of the author it is pre-eminently that in which his fire of genius, his inflexible calmness, and his indomitable will are most conspicuous. What accumulation of misfortunes is piled up in these mournful pages! What a gathering together there is of ruinous passion and bewildering incident! All the foulness as well as all the faith of the Middle Ages are kneaded together with a trowel of gold and of iron. At the sound of the poet’s voice all that was in ruins has risen to its fullest height, reanimated by his breath.... Victor Hugo has followed his vocation as poet and architect, as writer of history and romance; his pen has been guided alike by ancient chronicle and by his own personal genius; he has made all the bells of the great city to clang out their notes; and he has made every heart of the population, except that of Louis XI., to beat with life! Such is the book; it is a brilliant page of our history, which cannot fail to be a crowning glory in the career of its author.’ Finally, Eugène Sue wrote: ‘If the useless admiration of a barbarian like myself had the power to express and interpret itself in a manner worthy of the book which has inspired it, I should tell you, sir, that you are a great spendthrift; that your critics resemble those poor people on the fifth story, who, whilst gazing on the prodigalities of the great nobleman, would say to each other, with anger in their hearts, “I could live during my whole life on the money spent in a single day.”’

The publisher had some doubts of the pecuniary success of the novel, but these speedily disappeared, as edition after edition was called for. In the course of a year only, eight large editions had been disposed of, and the number of editions which have been issued since that time may be described as legion. From thinking, as he did originally, that he had made a bad bargain, M. Gosselin soon had reason to arrive at the conclusion that he had made a remarkably good one. Together with other publishers, he now pestered the author continually for more novels. Hugo protested that he had none to give them; but wearied at length by their importunities he furnished the titles of two stories he proposed to write, which were to be called the *Fils de la Bossue* and *La Quinquengrogne*. The latter name was the popular designation of one of the towers of Bourbon l’Aschembault, and in the novel the author intended to complete the account of his views concerning the art of the Middle Ages. Notre-Dame was the cathedral, La Quinquengrogne was to be the dungeon.

Victor Hugo wrote at this time his admirable descriptive work *Le Rhin* — a work full of learning, vivacity, and humour — but he never proceeded with the two projected novels. *Notre-Dame* remained for many years the only romance in which the author revealed his marvellous power of moulding human sympathies, of throwing into imaginative conceptions the very form and substance of being, and of realizing a dead-past age as though it were that of the actual and the living.

CHAPTER VI. ‘MARION DE LORME’ AND OTHER DRAMAS.

That despotic monarch, Charles X., having been driven from his throne by the Revolution of July, 1830, there naturally followed the removal of the interdict from the theatres. Victor Hugo was at once applied to by the Comédie Française for his drama of *Marion de Lorme*, which had been in enforced abeyance. But when the political reaction was an absolute certainty, the sensitive mind of Hugo shrank from a demonstrative triumph. It is true that he was now in the full tide of masculine judgment, and that his ideas of progress and liberty were crystallized and matured; but he could not forget his early opinions. Though crudely formed, and based upon sentiment and not upon reason, they had been genuine and disinterested, and his chief feeling at this later period was not one of hatred of the King, but rather of rejoicing with the people.

However, after a year had elapsed from Charles’s fall, there was no reason why a drama should be lost to the stage simply because it contained an historical presentment of Louis XIII. After declining many offers, the author resolved to give the play to M. Crosnier, for the theatre of the Porte St. Martin; and he also entered into an agreement to write yearly two works of importance for this theatre. Dumas’s *Antony* was being performed at the Porte St. Martin, but on the conclusion of its run *Marion de Lorme* was produced, with Madame Dorval in the part of Marion, and M. Bocage in that of Didier. Difficulties as usual were thrown in the way of the new play, but it eventually triumphed over them. The journals, nevertheless, were hostile, the *Moniteur* especially so, affirming that the author had never yet conceived anything more meagre and commonplace, and more full of eccentricities, than this piece. One critic asserted that the character of Didier was taken from that of Antony, although Hugo’s play had been written first. Those friends who formerly applauded Hugo and Dumas conjointly, now divided themselves into two parties, one of which persistently assailed the writer of *Marion de Lorme*. From a variety of causes the play was only performed four nights on its first production, but the performances were afterwards resumed. It may be added that the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, whose judgment was better worth having than that of most of its contemporaries, remarked that Victor Hugo had never so truly shown himself a poet, nor attained to so high a range of vision, nor so wide a field of judgment, as in this piece.

A tragic incident which occurred not long after the representation of this play affected the poet deeply. Amongst the warmest of his band of admirers was M. Ernest de Saxe-Coburg, whose race and origin are indicated by his name. He and his mother lived in Paris, on a pension granted them by the Duke. Ernest was taken seriously ill, and the distracted parent rushed to the house of Victor Hugo, exclaiming, ‘You alone can save him! Come at once!’ But the unfortunate young man was already dead; and a painful scene took place in the chamber of death on the arrival of Victor Hugo and the mother. ‘The unhappy woman, who had but this only child in the world to love, would not believe that he was dead. He was but cold, she said; and she threw herself on his bed, encircling him in her arms in order to impart warmth to the corpse. She frantically kissed his marble face, which was already cold. Suddenly she felt within herself that it was all over; she raised herself, and haggard and wild as she was, though still beautiful, she exclaimed, “He is dead!” M. Victor Hugo spent the night by the side of the mother and the corpse.’ It was the lot of Hugo to awaken by his genius many personal attachments and enthusiasms such as that felt for him by this ill-fated youth; and these attachments were invariably strengthened and deepened by subsequent friendship.

In 1832 the poet wrote his *Le Roi s’Amuse*. It has been charged against this play that it presents an unredeemed picture of vice and licentiousness. It has ‘overstepped all bounds,’ wrote one critic; ‘history, reason, morality, artistic dignity, and refinement, are all trampled under foot. The whole piece is monstrous; history is set at nought, and the most noble characters are slandered and vilified. The play is entirely void of interest, and the horrible, the mean, and the immoral are all jumbled together into a kind of chaos.’ As we shall see, Victor Hugo traversed the whole of these and similar judgments. Baron Taylor secured the play for the Théâtre Français, Triboulet being assigned to M. Ligier, Saint-Vallier to M. Joanny, Blanche to Mademoiselle Anaïs, and Francis I. to M. Perrier. A preliminary flourish occurred between Hugo and M. d’Argout, the Minister of Public Works, in whose department the theatres lay. The Minister first demanded the manuscript, then sent for the author, and finally wrote that the Monarchical principle in France must suffer from the author’s attacks on Francis I., which would be taken as being levelled against Louis Philippe. The poet replied that the interests of history were to be consulted before those of royalty, but he denied that there was anything in the piece reflecting on Louis Philippe. The play was produced on the 22nd of November, and met with a very mixed reception, the hisses predominating. It was partly damned by the defects of the actors. When the curtain fell upon the last act, and it was felt that the play had failed, the leading performer said to the author, ‘Shall I mention your name?’ Hugo answered haughtily, ‘Sir, I have a rather higher opinion of my play now it is a failure.’

Next day the play was suspended, the reason given being that it was an offence against public morality. It appears that a number of devotees of the classical school had persuaded the Minister that a drama which had for its subject the assassination of a king was not to be tolerated on the very day after the existing monarch had himself escaped assassination; that the play was an apology for regicides, etc. Victor Hugo was not the man to be thus crushed without an effort to save his drama. In the first place he issued a manifesto to the public, briefly summarizing the plot of the piece, and denying that it was immoral. Then he entered a civil suit before the Board of Trade to compel the Théâtre Français to perform *Le Roi s’Amuse*, and likewise to compel the Government to sanction the performance. The trial opened in a densely crowded court, many celebrities being amongst the audience. They had been attracted by the announcement that the author would plead his own case. Hugo’s speech was applauded by a band of very sympathetic listeners, and on its conclusion M. de Montalembert assured him that he was as great an orator as he was a writer, and that if the doors of the theatre were closed against him, the tribune was still available. Judgment was given against the poet, and for the Minister. M. Paul Foucher, describing the scene on the night of the first performance of *Le Roi s’Amuse*, observed that while the whole theatre was in an uproar, and Hugo’s name was drowned in the sea of roaring voices, ‘the author’s face exhibited no sign of despondency at the failure any more than it had shown passion or excitement during the struggle. His Olympian brow had withstood the tempest with the firmness of a rock, and after the curtain fell, he went to offer his thanks and encouragements to the actors and actresses, saying, “You are a little discomposed to-night; but you will find it different the day after to-morrow!” In spite of the hissing, he was sanguine about his play; nevertheless, it was not destined to be repeated.’

The poet’s enemies now caused him considerable annoyance on the subject of his pension. He had ceased to receive the 1,000 francs granted him by Louis XVIII. out of his privy purse, but still received the 2,000 francs allowed him by the Home Minister. In reply to the recriminations of the Ministerial journals, he wrote a letter to M. d’Argout, showing that this pension was clearly granted to him on literary grounds, quite apart from political opinions. But he had decided to accept it no longer, and thus stated his reasons: ‘Now that the Government appears to regard what are called literary pensions as proceeding from itself, and not from the country, and as this kind of grant takes from an author’s independence; now that this strange pretension of the Government serves as the basis to the somewhat shameful attacks of certain journals, the management of which is, unfortunately, though no doubt incorrectly, imagined to be in your hands; as it is also of importance to me to maintain my relations with the Government in a higher region than that in which this kind of warfare goes on — without discussing whether your pretensions relating to this indemnity have the smallest foundation, I hasten to inform you that I entirely relinquish it.’ The Minister replied, taking the poet’s view, that the pension was a debt due from the country, and stating that it should still be reserved for him; but Victor Hugo never took it up from this time forward.

For a brief period managers held aloof from the dramatist, and when he wrote *Le Souper à Ferrare*, which title was afterwards changed to that of *Lucrèce Borgia*, no one was eager for it. But this attitude changed after his speech at the tribunal, and M. Harel, director of the Porte St. Martin, sought for and obtained the play. Admirable representatives were found for the chief parts, Frédérick Lemaître taking that of Grennaro, Delafosse that of Don Alphonse d’Esté, Mademoiselle Georges that of Lucretia, and Mademoiselle Juliette that of the Princess Negroni. Meyerbeer and Berlioz composed the music for the song which was sung at the supper given by the Princess Negroni. Only one person was allowed to be present at the final rehearsal, and that was Sainte-Beuve. The critic was playing a double part towards the dramatist, with whom he had been out of sympathy for some time past, and it is recorded that at the close of the rehearsal of *Lucrèce Borgia* he warmly congratulated the author upon his drama, and went away circulating reports everywhere that the piece was an utter absurdity! ‘It was solely due to his treachery and infamous gossip that on the morning of the day on which the piece was to be performed in the evening, several newspapers announced that they were in possession of the plot, and that the whole production was in the highest degree obscene, depicting orgies terrible and indecent beyond conception.’

Great interest, notwithstanding, was manifested in the play, and amongst those who implored the author for first-night seats was General Lafayette. The representation was a triumphant success, and for awhile nothing was talked about in Paris but the new play. The monetary success was equal to the literary and dramatic. The receipts for the first three performances amounted to 84,769 francs — a sum which no other work had equalled or approached during M. Harel’s management. Referring to two of his most widely known dramas, Victor Hugo predicted that *Le Roi s’Amuse* would one day prove to be the principal political era, and *Lucrèce Borgia* the principal literary era of his life. He had purposely presented deformities in both, but he believed that by uniting monsters to humanity, one could not fail to excite interest and perhaps sympathy. ‘Physical deformity, sanctified by paternal love, this is what you have in *Le Roi s’Amuse*; moral deformity, purified by maternal love, this is what you find in *Lucrèce Borgia*.’

Hugo was fated to be the victim of misunderstanding with regard to almost all his dramas, and he found no exception in *Lucrèce Borgia*. From an attitude of delight and complacency, M. Harel, the director of the theatre, passed to one of studious neglect and insolence. He took off the play, and then demanded a new one, which he averred the poet had agreed to write for him. A quarrel ensued, and the manager challenged the dramatist to a duel. It would have taken place, but M. Harel thought better of the affair, and apologized, whereupon Hugo agreed to give him his next piece. M. Harel remarked upon the whole incident, ‘You are probably the first author to whom a manager has said, “Your play or your life!”’

Marie Tudor, produced in November, 1833, was the next play by Victor Hugo. It was concerned with a queen, a favourite, and an executioner, a trio as common in history as upon the mimic stage. The dramatist had now two difficulties to contend with. In the first place, the partisans of Dumas sowed dissension between the two authors, and spread lying reports respecting Hugo and his attitude towards Dumas; and in the second place, the writer’s own friends grew alarmed at various reports which gained currency. ‘I hear on all sides,’ wrote one of them, ‘that your play is more than ever a tissue of horrors — that your Mary is a bloodthirsty creature, that the executioner is perpetually on the stage, and several other reproaches all equally well founded.’ Hugo remained calm and unmoved, though he was warned that the presence of the executioner on the stage had been given as the watchword to those who intended to hiss the play. The piece was produced in due course, and Mademoiselle Georges looked superbly and acted well. But the author’s enemies kept up a persistent hissing, and there was a strong contest between those who formed a genuine judgment upon the play and greatly admired it, and those who were resolved upon its ruin. The first night left the result dubious, but the piece continued to be played beyond the time generally regarded as constituting an average success. On its withdrawal, all the relations between the author and the Porte St. Martin naturally ceased, and the treaty with M. Harel for a third drama was destroyed by mutual consent.

Hugo’s dramatic work was now interrupted by the composition of his *L’Étude sur Mirabeau*, which may be taken as an apology for his advanced political and social views. He felt it necessary to review his past career, and to make known to the world the processes of education through which his mind had passed since his early days of Royalist fervour. This study, which appeared in his *Littérature et Philosophie Mêlées*, is a defence of conscience, and illustrates the power of growing convictions to emancipate the mind from prejudice and error, regarding the matter, of course, from the standpoint of the writer himself.

In 1835 the Théâtre Français applied to Victor Hugo for a new drama, and in response he gave to it his *Angelo*, one of his best pieces for construction and for rapid and vigorous effects. It was the author’s intention in this drama, as he has himself stated, ‘to depict two sad but contrasted characters — the woman in society, and the woman out of society; the one he has endeavoured to deliver from despotism, the other he has striven to defend from contempt; he has shown the temptations resisted by the virtue of the one, and the tears shed over her guilt by the other; he has cast blame where blame is due, upon man in his strength and upon society in its absurdity; in contrariety to the two women, he has delineated two men — the husband and the lover, one a sovereign and one an outlaw, and, by various subordinate methods, has given a sort of summary of the relations, regular and irregular, in which a man can stand with a woman on the one hand, and with society in general on the other.’ There is nothing more characteristic of the author’s dramas than this exhibition of striking contrasts; and, indeed, in all his poetic work is to be traced this juxtaposition of the strongest lights and shades of which human life and human emotion are capable.

The two leading stars in *Angelo* were Mademoiselle Mars and Madame Dorval. Unfortunately, a serious feud arose in consequence of the former discovering that the part she had chosen was not the most forcible and picturesque; and it required all the strong will of Victor Hugo to bring the actress to reason. The two ladies had their partisans in the theatre when the play came to be acted, but the representation passed over without mishap, and it was conceded that a fair success had been achieved.

Whatever might be Victor Hugo’s defects as a dramatist, and however he might divide in opinion the theatre-going public of Paris upon the general claims of his plays, he had certainly infused life into the dramatic literature of the time. He had attained a commanding position, and although his genius was marred by some eccentricities, it was also as unquestionably distinguished for its grand conceptions, its dramatic felicities, and its splendours of diction.

CHAPTER VII. LAST DRAMATIC WRITINGS.

In some respects, no man of equal genius was ever so unfortunate as Victor Hugo in his relations with the stage. I refer, of course, to the earlier part of his career, for there came a time when the appreciation of him as a dramatist was as high and universal as was the admiration of his literary excellence. But during the long struggle between the old and the new drama there were always enemies ready to denounce and hiss whatsoever he produced; and had he given them a *Romeo and Juliet* or a *Hamlet*, the result would have been precisely the same.

We have seen the alternations of failure and success which attended the plays already passed in review; and the same mixed reception was awarded to those final efforts in connection with the drama which led him to adopt the resolution to quit the stage for ever. An operatic venture into which the poet was drawn in 1836 resulted in the same ill-fortune which had marked more regular dramatic compositions. Meyerbeer and other celebrated musicians had begged Victor Hugo to make an opera of *Notre-Dame de Paris*, but he had steadfastly declined all such proposals. At length he yielded to friendship, and wrote the libretto of an opera called *La Esmeralda*, the music being composed by Mademoiselle Bertin, daughter of the conductor of the *Journal des Débats*. Curiously enough, the libretto ended with the word ‘fatality,’ and this represented the misfortune of the piece and its performers. Though boasting a singular array of talent in its production and representation, it was hissed. Mademoiselle Falcon, the leading singer, lost her voice; M. Nourrit, the tenor, subsequently went to Italy, and killed himself; the Duke of Orleans gave the name of *Esmeralda* to a valuable mare, which was killed at a steeplechase; and finally, a ship called the Esmeralda was lost in crossing from England to Ireland, and every soul on board perished.

A domestic grief visited the poet in the following year, when his brother Eugène died. For some time before his death he had been insane, and towards the end his one favourite relative, Victor, even could not visit him, as the sight of his brother conjured up illusions which made him dangerously violent. Though of strong constitution naturally, when the sufferer’s mind gave way his physical health began to fail also, and he gradually wasted away until death released him in February, 1837. This was the brother who had been Victor Hugo’s constant companion in early life, and the news of his death deeply agitated the survivor, keenly awakening the slumbering recollections of childhood.

Louis Philippe gave a grand fête at Versailles in the summer of 1837, on the occasion of the marriage of the Duke of Orleans. Victor Hugo, Dumas, Balzac, and other men of letters were invited, and were obliged to appear in fancy dress, the result being ludicrous in some cases, as in that of Balzac, who had on the dress of a marquis, which, it was jokingly said, fitted him as badly as the title itself would. Hugo was an object of special distinction by the Royal family. The King conversed with him, and the Duchess of Orleans paid him marked attention. There were two people, she said, with whom she wished to become acquainted — M. Cousin and himself. She had often spoken of him to Monsieur de Goethe; she had read all his works, and knew his poems by heart. Her favourite book was the *Chants du Crépuscule*; and she added, ‘I have visited *your* Notre-Dame.’ Hugo was promoted to the rank of Officer of the Legion of Honour, and he received from the Duchess a painting by M. Saint-Evre representing Inez de Castro. It was a valuable work, and on the gilding of the frame was inscribed, ‘*Le Duc et la Duchesse d’Orléans à M. Victor Hugo, 27 Juin, 1837.*’

At this juncture the poet brought a second action before the Board of Trade, to compel the Comédie Française to fulfil its agreement with him by producing his plays. He also claimed compensation for past neglect. Hugo’s advocate, M. Paillard de Villeneuve, in an effective speech, demonstrated the injustice of a theatre supported by the State becoming the monopoly of a clique; showed how the existing state of things pressed heavily upon such men of genius as his client; and asserted that not only had no pieces ever realized greater profits, but that actually at that moment, while they were prohibited in France, they were drawing large and appreciative audiences in London, Vienna, Madrid, Moscow, and other important cities. Victor Hugo himself also spoke, complaining that the manager of the French theatre had deceived him, and that he wore two masks — one of which was intended to deceive authors, and the other to elude justice. The Board gave judgment in the poet’s favour, sentencing the Comédie Française to pay 6,000 francs damages, and to perform *Hernani*, *Marion de Lorme*, and *Angelo* without delay. An appeal was entered against this judgment, and when it came on for hearing Hugo pleaded his cause in person, asserting that there was an organized effort to close the stage against the new and rising school of literature. The appeal was dismissed, and justice was at length done to the dramatist. In conformity with the judgment, *Hernani* was first produced, and the play was brilliantly successful.

I must refer in this place to some of Victor Hugo's lyrical efforts. Not without reason has the volume entitled *Feuilles d'Automne* held a high place in the regard of his admirers. It is the poetry of the emotions expressed in such graceful lyric verse as has rarely been penned. In these tender and exquisite poems, as M. Alfred Nettement observed, the poet's 'lay is of what he has seen, of what he has felt, of what he has loved: he sings of his wife, the ornament of his home; of his children, fascinating in their fair-haired beauty; of landscapes ever widening in their horizon; of trees under which he has enjoyed a grateful shade.' Nature and personal experiences — from the opening thoughts of the child to the greater aspirations of the man — are blended in beautiful harmony in these poems, which may be turned to again and again for their sweetness and melody. In 1835 appeared *Les Chants du Crépuscule*, which truly represent a kind of twilight of the soul. 'As compared with what had gone before, the book exhibits the same ideas; the poet is identically the same poet, but his brow is furrowed by deeper lines, and maturity is more stamped upon his years; he laments that he cannot comprehend the semi-darkness that is gathering around; his hope seems damped by hesitation; his love-songs die away in sighs of misgiving; and when he sees the people enveloped in doubt, he begins to be conscious of faltering too. But from all this temper of despondency he quickly rallies, and returns to a bright assurance of a grand development of the human race.' The volume has tones of gentleness and also tones of lofty scorn. To the suffering and the unfortunate the poet was ever tender and pitiful; but to the mean, the base, and the vicious he was as a whip and a scourge. He always endeavoured to separate the worthy from the unworthy, and wherever the latter were to be found, whether in the ranks of friends or foes, they were never suffered to escape the lash of his indignation.

Another volume of poems, *Les Voix Intérieures*, was published in 1837. 'The poet in this production,' says one of his biographers, 'regards life under its threefold aspect, at home, abroad, and at work; he maintains that it is the mission of the poet not to suffer the past to become an illusion to blind him in the present, but to survey all things calmly, to be ever staunch yet kind, to be impartial, and equally free from petty wrath and petty vanity;

in everything to be sincere and disinterested. Such was his ideal, and in accordance with it Victor Hugo spared no effort to improve the minds and morals of men in general, and by his poetry, as well as by his romances and his plays, he desired to constitute himself the champion of amelioration.' This same desire for the elevation of the race ran through all his efforts — social, literary, and political. He may have been mistaken in his means sometimes, never in the honesty and purity of his intent.

Returning to the stage, Victor Hugo had become so impressed with the idea that the French nation had a right to have a theatre in which the higher drama should be performed, that he was brought to consent to several interviews on the subject with M. Guizot. The latter admitted that there never was a more legitimate request; he agreed with the poet that a new style of art required a new style of theatre; that the Comédie Française, which was the seat of Tradition and Conservatism, was not the proper arena for original literature of the day; and that the Government would only be doing its duty in creating a theatre for those who had created a department of art. A scheme was perfected for a new theatre, and M. Anténor Joly was named as manager. No building but a very old one was to be had, however, and this — which was in a bad situation — was transformed into the Théâtre de la Renaissance. For this theatre Hugo wrote his *Ruy Blas*, a drama which, as is well known, deals with the love of a queen for a valet who subsequently becomes a minister. The play was in five acts, and the leading character was sustained by Lemaître. The actor strongly approved the first three acts, but was more than dubious about the fourth and fifth. During the final rehearsals of this piece Victor Hugo had a marvellous escape of his life. Two of the actors happening to station themselves awkwardly, he got up in order to indicate their right positions. Scarcely had he left his chair when a great bar of iron fell upon it from an arch above, smashing it to atoms. The author would undoubtedly have been killed on the spot but for this momentary rising to correct the mistake of the actors.

The body of the theatre being incomplete when the play came to be produced, difficulties beset the representation. It was winter, and many of the audience were chilled by violent draughts. But the play soon warmed them into enthusiasm. In the fifth act, we are told by one who was present, Lemaître rivalled the greatest comedians, and success was more decided than ever. 'The way in which he tore off his livery, drew the bolt, and struck his sword on the table, the way in which he said to Don Sallustre:

‘“*Tenez,*
Pour un homme d’esprit, vraiment vous m’étonnez!”

— the way in which he came back to entreat the Queen’s pardon, and finally drank off the poison — everything had so much greatness, truth, depth, and splendour, that the poet had the rare joy of seeing the ideal of which he had dreamt become a living soul.’

The play was successful with that part of the public which was unprejudiced, and the press generally was in its favour. But it appears that the theatre was wanted by the co-manager for comic opera, so the fourth act of Hugo’s play was persistently hissed at every representation by interested persons. The *claqueurs* were detected and instantly recognised. *Ruy Blas* ran for fifty nights, the same programme of hissing being carried through to the end. The manuscript of the piece was sold to the manager of a publishing company, M. Delboye. The company also purchased the right of publication of the whole of the poet’s works for eleven years, for which they agreed to pay 240,000 francs; and the poet on his part agreed to add two unpublished volumes.

Victor Hugo produced no drama after this for several years; but in 1840 he issued his work *Les Rayons et les Ombres*, consisting of poems which had previously been read to his friends Lamartine, Deschamps, De Lacretelle, and others. Here again he sought expression for his ever-widening aspirations after human perfectibility. Once more in this work ‘he claims the right of expressing his goodwill for all who labour, his aversion to all who oppress; his love for all who serve the good cause, and his pity for all who suffer in its behalf; he declares himself free to bow down to every misery, and to pay homage to all self-sacrifice.’ In the poetical alternations and contrasts in this volume will be discovered a profound love and appreciation of Nature, as well as an undercurrent of affection for the human. The poet himself, looking back upon what he had accomplished, and forward towards what he hoped to do, at the transition period before he went into exile, asserted his thesis that ‘a poet ought to have in him the worship of conscience, the worship of thought, and the worship of Nature; he should be like Juvenal, who felt that day and night were perpetual witnesses within him; he should be like Dante, who defined the lost to be those who could no longer think; he should be like St. Augustine, who, heedless of any accusation of Pantheism, declared the sky to be an intelligent creation.’ And it is under such inspiration that ‘he has attempted to write the poem of humanity. He loves brightness and sunshine. The Bible has been his Book; Virgil and Dante have been his masters; he has laboured to reconcile truth and poetry, knowing that knowledge must precede thought, and thought must precede imagination, while knowledge, thought, and imagination combined are the secret of power.’ It would be impossible for a poet with any vigour of imagination, and any perception of the soul of beauty in all things, to fail with these sublime ideals before him.

I now come to the last of Victor Hugo’s writings for the stage, and in *Les Burgraves* we have in some respects the best of his dramatic works. It was written towards the close of 1842, and produced (like its predecessors) in the midst of difficulties in March, 1843, at the Comédie Française. At the time of its production, the author’s political opinions had arrived at a stage of compromise. Though he was a Republican in theory, he had no strong objection to such a monarchy as that of Louis Philippe, which was liberty itself compared with that which it overthrew. For a sovereign who refrained from tyranny, and was not inimical to progress, he had some sympathy, and he was willing to wait until the time became ripe for the advent of the Republic. Writing to M. Thiers, indeed, to beg for some amelioration in the lot of an imprisoned editor, he said of himself, ‘I do not at the present time take any definite political part. I regard all parties as acting with impartiality, full of affection for France, and anxious for progress. I applaud sometimes those in power, sometimes the opposition, according as those in power or in opposition seem to me to act best for the country.’

The catholic spirit in which he looked upon public affairs was manifested in his study upon Mirabeau. Defining the position of the wise politician, he remarked that ‘he must give credit to the moderate party for the way in which they smooth over transitions; to the extreme parties for the activity with which they advance the circulation of ideas, which are the very life-blood of civilization; to lovers of the past for the care which they bestow on roots in which there is still life; to people zealous for the future, for their love of those beautiful flowers which will some day produce fine fruits; to mature men for their moderation, to young men for their patience; to those for what they do, to those for what they desire to do; to all the difficulty of everything.’ So, some years later he stated that the aim he had in view was ‘to agree with all parties in what is liberal and generous, but with none in what is illiberal and mischievous.’ The form of government he regarded as a secondary affair; liberty and progress demanded the first and most urgent thought. Herein, of course, he differed from the professional politician, who has ever looked at great questions not from the poet’s point of view, but from the immediately personal and practical. Many of his humanitarian ideas appeared Quixotic and chimerical to those who viewed politics as a matter of party, or as a means of personal triumph; while unjust and illiberal men were not also wanting in the ranks of the Republicans.

Then there were some who, like Armand Carrel, were prepared to go with Victor Hugo in politics, but rejected his new literary ideas. They clung to the old form of the drama, and found a new star in Ponsard, the author of *Lucrèce*, a tragedy which had for its subject the expulsion of the Tarquins and the establishment of a Republic in Rome. So the Parisians were beguiled by the name of Ponsard, who found a great and useful ally in Rachel; and Hugo was contemned, in spite of such strictures as those of Thierry in *Le Messager*, who drew a comparison between the ostracism with which his countrymen visited such brilliant writers as Hugo, and that of the Athenians, who punished people whose renown lasted too long.

It was at this juncture that *Les Burgraves* was produced, and even the genius of the writer himself added to the difficulties by which he was beset. He had conceived three stupendous characters, Job, Otbert, and Barbarossa; and although the actors who sustained these characters, MM. Beauvallet, Geffroy, and Ligier, were undoubtedly men of dramatic instinct and ability, neither they nor any other living tragedians could adequately set forth these epic creations. In the matter of this magnificent trilogy, the author has been not inaptly compared with Æschylus. ‘The first of Greek tragedians, Æschylus, after he had long stirred the emotions of the Athenians, was finally deserted by them; they preferred Sophocles to him, and full of dejection he went into exile, saying, ‘I dedicate my works to Time;’ and Time at last did him ample justice, though he did not live to enjoy his triumph. But in this, Hugo differed from the glorious Greek, for he lived to witness the repentance of the people.

Les Burgraves was ill received on the first night, but this was nothing compared with the opposition subsequently manifested. At every representation, sneers and hissing interrupted the progress of the piece; but the manager and the actors struggled on and played the drama for thirty nights. Some of the most influential journals joined themselves to the enemy, and the time was marked by the defection of Lamartine to the side of Ponsard. Théophile Gautier was one of the small band who boldly applauded Hugo’s drama in the press. ‘In our day,’ he asserted, ‘there is no one except M. Hugo who is capable of giving the epic tone to three great acts, or of maintaining their lyric swing. Every moment seems to produce a magnificent verse that resounds like the stroke of an eagle’s wing, and exalts us to the supremest height of lyric poetry. The play is diversified in tone, and displays a singular flexibility of rhythm, making its transitions from the tender to the terrible, from the smile to the tear, with a happy facility that no other author has attained.’

With the production of this play dates Victor Hugo’s final abandonment of the stage. Strange fate this for a writer for whom Charles Nodier claimed the honour of being, after Rabelais and Molière, one of the most original geniuses that French literature ever saw. But the dramatist was disgusted with the literary hostility, the political insincerity, and the personal antipathy which abounded, and although he had a play, *Les Jumeaux*, which had never been produced, he resolved to give no more of his writings to the stage. He was repeatedly pressed in after years to depart from this resolution, but in vain. ‘My decision is final,’ he said on one occasion. ‘Under no pretext shall any more of my plays appear on the stage during my life.’

The poet wrote several plays not for publication after this time, and one of them, *Torquemada*, has been published. Others, named respectively *L’Épée*, *La Grand’mère*, and *Peut-être Frère de Gavoche*, will only appear posthumously. That there will be in them characters which will live, and that the plays themselves are such as to enhance the public view of Victor Hugo’s dramatic talents, are points upon which we have explicit assurances from those who have had the privilege of listening to the pieces as read by the late venerable author himself.

CHAPTER VIII. THE FRENCH ACADEMY.

A seat amongst the ‘forty Immortals’ is the high and honourable aim of every distinguished Frenchman. But the chequered history of the Academy since its formation by Richelieu two centuries and a half ago, furnishes another evidence of the truth that merit does not always secure its just reward. Again and again have men illustrious in letters been passed over, whilst those who had no claim upon the nation’s regard have snatched fortuitous honours by unworthy means. Amongst those who knocked on more than one occasion at the doors of the French Academy in vain, was Victor Hugo. That such a man must be ultimately successful was beyond a doubt; but it says little for the Academy that it failed to recognise his claims until its hostile attitude had become a scandal to literature.

As a kind of apology for, or defence of his career, in 1834 Hugo published his *Littérature et Philosophie Mêlées*. For those who could see nothing but tergiversation in the development of his views, as regarded from the Royalist standpoint of 1819 and the Revolutionary standpoint of 1834, these collected papers presented a series of progressive arguments well worthy of study. Nor was it merely from the personal point of view that the author issued this work; he believed that the gradual changes of thought which they revealed, all tending towards a fuller liberty in art, politics, and literature, were but typical of the states of mind through which a very large moiety of the young thinkers of his generation had passed. That he did not spare the crudities and defects which marked his own period of literary adolescence will be apparent from this passage, in which he frankly discusses his early compositions: ‘There were historical sketches and miscellaneous essays, there were criticism and poetry; but the criticism was weak, the poetry weaker still; the verses were some of them light and frivolous, some of them tragically grand; the declamations against regicides were as furious as they were honest; the men of 1793 were lampooned with epigrams of 1754, a species of satire now obsolete, but very fashionable at the date at which they were published; next came visions of regeneration for the stage, and vows of loyalty to the State; every variety of style is represented; every branch of classical knowledge made subordinate to literary reform; finally, there are schemes of government and studies of tragedies, all conceived in college or at school.’

The time had now come in which he demanded a larger scope. His ideas had expanded, and while not abandoning the life contemplative, he desired to become in some way the man of action, and to mingle in the literary and political conflicts going forward around him. Taxed with forsaking the study of Nature, the poet replied that he still loved that holy mother, but in this century of adventure a man must be the servant of all. Reviewing his political position, he felt that he had more than paid his debt to the fallen monarchy, while he could at the same time conscientiously acknowledge Louis Philippe. The recollection of a pension was balanced by the confiscation of a drama, observes Madame Hugo, and he was now his own master to follow out his convictions. In the adoption of a public career there were two courses nominally open to him. But with respect to one of these, that of entering the Chamber of Deputies, he was met by an obstacle which completely disbarred him. He was not a wealthy man, and by the electoral law of that day only wealthy men could become deputies. Moreover, if he could have secured by some means a nominal qualification, the electors looked askance upon literary men. They regarded them as more fitted for the quietude of the study than the bustling activity of the tribune. Lamartine was a deputy, it is true, but he was a rare exception.

Abandoning all idea of the Chamber of Deputies at that time, Victor Hugo next thought of the Chamber of Peers. But here again he was met by a practical difficulty. In the selection of peers the King could only choose men who had attained to certain dignities; and in Hugo’s case election to the Academy was the only qualifying dignity that was open to him. To the Academy accordingly he appealed. The first vacancy occurred in 1836. But Victor Hugo had enemies, and amongst these was Casimir Delavigne, who had considerable weight amongst the Forty. M. Barbou states that ‘the poet of the imperial era was sickly and asthmatic, and he detested Victor Hugo simply for his robustness and power.’ When Dumas canvassed Delavigne in the interest of his friend, the author of *Notre-Dame*, Delavigne replied with warmth that he would vote for Dumas with all his heart, but for Hugo never. The Academicians elected M. Dupaty, probably on the principle that his fame was of such a restricted character that it could not in the least detract from their own lustre. Commenting upon his defeat, Hugo said, ‘I always thought the way to the Académie was across the Pont des Arts; I find that it is across the Pont Neuf.’

Three years later there was another vacancy, and Hugo canvassed the Academicians in turn. But the whole nature of his work was opposed in spirit to the exclusives of the Academy, and it is not to be wondered at, from this standpoint, that he failed to meet with a favourable appreciation. However brilliant a candidate might be, most of the members were unable to take a large and liberal view. Alexandre Duval was especially bitter against Hugo, and when the poet was asked what he had done to offend him, he replied, 'I had written *Hernani*.' Though in a dying condition, Duval insisted upon being taken from his bed to vote against Hugo. M. Molé was elected. In 1840 a third vacancy occurred, and although Hugo was again a candidate, the Academicians elected M. Flourens.

At length, in 1841, on the occasion of his fourth candidature, Victor Hugo was successful. Amongst the distinguished men who voted for him were Lamartine, Chateaubriand, Villemain, Mignet, Cousin, and Thiers. In the list of those who opposed him were the names of only two men of real note, Delavigne and Scribe. One, M. Viennet, voted for Hugo, though the amusing anecdote is told concerning him that when the poet was made a Chevalier of the Legion of Honour, he said he should like to claim 'the cross of a chevalier for everyone who had the courage to read right through any work of a romantic, and the cross of an officer for everyone who had the wit to understand it!' Amidst much that is paltry in the jealousies of literary men, it deserves to be stated to the honour of Balzac that this eminent writer declined to become a candidate against Victor Hugo.

The new Academician, who was by no means universally congratulated upon his success, was received on the 3rd of June, 1841. According to custom he was called on to pronounce a eulogium upon his predecessor, M. Népomucène Lemercier. His oration began with a description of the splendour and power of Napoleon. Before his greatness, said the speaker, the whole universe bowed down, with the exception of six contemplative poets. 'Those poets were Ducis, Delille, Madame de Staël, Benjamin Constant, Chateaubriand, and Lemercier. But what did their resistance mean? Europe was dazzled, and lay, as it were, vanquished and absorbed in the glory of France. What did these six resentful spirits represent? Why, they represented for Europe the only thing in which Europe had failed — they represented independence; and they represented for France the only thing in which France was wanting — they represented liberty.' Alluding still more directly to M. Lemercier, Hugo related that he was on brotherly terms with Bonaparte the consul, but that when the consul became an emperor he was no longer his friend. Finally, the orator declared with much eloquence that it was the mission of every author to diffuse civilization; and avowed that for his own part it had ever been his aim to devote his abilities to the development of good fellowship, feeling it his duty to be unawed by the mob, but to respect the people; and although he could not always sympathize with every form of liberty which was advocated, he was yet ever ready to hold out the hand of encouragement to all who were languishing through want of air and space, and whose future seemed to promise only gloom and despair. To ameliorate the condition of the masses he would have every generous and thinking mind lay itself out by devising fresh schemes of improvement; and libraries, studies, and schools should be multiplied, as all tending to the advancement of the human race, and to the propagation of the love of law and liberty.

Victor Hugo's address was enthusiastically received by the bulk of the members of the Academy, and the press generally commented upon it in flattering terms. Times had changed since the poet had first called upon M. Royer-Collard to solicit his vote, when the latter professed his entire ignorance of Victor Hugo's name, and the following conversation took place:

'I am the author of *Notre-Dame de Paris*, *Bug Jargal*, *Le Dernier Jour dun Condamné, Marion Delorme*, etc.'

'I never heard of any of them.'

'Will you do me the honour of accepting a copy of my works?'

'I never read new books.'

The later relations of Hugo with the Academy are of considerable interest. A generous forgetfulness of offence characterized him. When Casimir Delavigne died, and it fell upon Hugo to deliver the funeral oration over one who had been his enemy, he testified to the fine talents of Delavigne, and magnanimously exclaimed: 'Let all the petty jealousies that follow high renown, let all disputes of the conflicting schools, let all the turmoil of party feeling and literary rivalry be forgotten. Let them pass into the silence into which the departed poet has gone to take his long repose!' In January, 1845, Hugo had to reply to the speech of M. Saint Marc Girardin, and shortly afterwards — which was a much more difficult and delicate matter — to the opening address of M. Sainte-Beuve. In the early stage of the poet's career, Sainte-Beuve, as we have seen, warmly hailed his advent, but he afterwards became his enemy, turning his back upon all his old literary beliefs. By way of covering his retreat, he advocated in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* a union between the classics and romanticists; and while he did justice to every other writer whom he named, he arrested his praise when he came to the name of Victor Hugo. He remarked that all signs of magnificent promise were forgotten, ‘as soon as we think of his numerous stubborn relapses, or consider the way in which he holds to theories which public opinion has already condemned. Sentiments of humanizing art, which might easily enough be praised, are utterly ignored, and M. Hugo clings with a steadfast persistence to his own peculiar style.’ The public were naturally curious to know how Hugo would speak of one who had acted treacherously towards him, but with his usual high-minded courtesy, the speaker uttered not one word of a personal character against the man who had been so unjust towards himself.

The Academy had few members who were so regular in attendance, or were so useful to that august body, as Victor Hugo. He brought into all his relations with it the same energy and conscientiousness which marked his course in connection with literature and the drama. His association with the Academy was virtually the first stage of a new departure in his career.

CHAPTER IX. PERSONAL AND POLITICAL.

Amongst all Victor Hugo’s contemporaries there was no greater admirer of the poet than Balzac. There mingled with his admiration a feeling which amounted almost to reverence; and probably the proudest moment in the novelist’s life was that in which he received Hugo at the Jardies. Léon Grozlan tells us that he awaited his arrival with eagerness; indeed, so great was his anxiety that he could not remain for an instant in one place.

These distinguished men of letters were noticeable in their attire, which was certainly far from Solomon-like in its splendour. ‘Balzac was picturesque in rags. His pantaloons, without braces, receded from his ample waistcoat *à la financière*; his shoes, trodden down, receded from his pantaloons; the knot of his cravat darted its points close to his ear; his beard was in a state of four days’ high vegetation. As to Victor Hugo, he wore a grey hat of a rather doubtful shade; a faded blue coat with gilt buttons, and a frayed black cravat, the whole set off by green spectacles of a shape and form to rejoice a rural bailiff.’ During breakfast, in speaking of literature and the drama, Hugo incidentally mentioned his large profits as a dramatist. ‘Balzac listened with the air of a martyr listening to an angel, while he heard Hugo recount the enormous sums which had accrued to him from his magnificent dramas. This *coup de soleil* was likely to excite Balzac’s brain for a long time to come.’ At that period the author of the *Comédie Humaine* was a personal authority on the bitterness of poverty. The talk proceeded to royalty, to the patronage of talent, and such like matters. Balzac spoke eloquently upon the lustre which men of genius have shed upon their own times. ‘The pen alone,’ he said, ‘can save kings and their reigns from oblivion. Without Virgil, Horace, Livy, Ovid, who would recognise Augustus in the midst of so many of his name?... Without Shakespeare the reign of Elizabeth would gradually disappear from the history of England. Without Boileau, without Racine, without Corneille, without Pascal, without La Bruyère, without Molière, Louis XIV., reduced to his mistresses and his wigs, is but a crowned goat, like the sign of an inn. Without the pen, Philippe le Roi would leave behind him a name less known than that of Philippe the eating-house keeper of the Rue Montorgueil, or of Philippe the famous pilferer and juggler. Some day it will be said (at least, I hope so, for his Majesty’s sake), “Once upon a time there lived a king called Louis

Philippe, who, by the grace of Victor Hugo, Lamartine, etc."' French rulers were emphatically destined to live in the pages of Victor Hugo, but in the case of at least one sovereign it was to be by the immortality of contempt.

At the residence of Hugo in the Place Royale, whither he had moved on leaving the Rue Jean Goujon, there was a frequent visitor in the person of one Auguste Vacquerie. This young poetic enthusiast was born at Villequier, in La Seine Inférieure, in the year 1820. He was educated first at Rouen, but having an unconquerable longing to see and be near Victor Hugo, he went to complete his studies at the Pension Favart, Paris, within a few doors of Hugo's house. In one of his poems he confessed that though he ardently sighed for Paris, that city meant to him Hugo and nothing beside — it was the shrine of the poet's fame. Like his friend Paul Meurice, he lived in the inspiration of Victor Hugo's name, and the two youths became constant and intimate visitors at the house in the Place Royale. Vacquerie fell seriously ill, and he was nursed with all the devotion of a mother by Madame Hugo. After his recovery, and in acknowledgment of the care bestowed on his son, M. Vacquerie, senior, invited Madame Hugo to occupy his château at Villequier during the summer vacation. The offer was gladly accepted, and Madame Hugo and her four children left Paris for Normandy on this pleasurable excursion. In the course of this visit, Auguste Vacquerie's brother Charles was introduced to Léopoldine Hugo, and these impressionable natures at once fell in love. An engagement of no long duration followed, for the young couple were married in the following spring of 1843. The wedded life of the poet's daughter was unfortunately as brief as it was happy and joyous. After a period of five months only it came to a sad and tragic termination. The catastrophe with which it closed is thus described: 'The Vacquerie family property at Yillequier is on the banks of the Seine, which is tidal as far as Rouen; but the periodical rising of the water was a matter of no uneasiness to the family, who were accustomed to make excursions almost daily from Villequier to Caudebec. One of these excursions was arranged for the 4th of September, when M. Charles Vacquerie, with his wife, his uncle, and cousin, started to make a trial trip in a large new boat. They all set out in high spirits upon what was quite an ordinary outing; but a sudden squall came on, and the boat capsized. Léopoldine had always been taught that in the event of being upset, the safest thing to do was to cling to the boat, and accordingly she now instinctively grasped its side amidst convulsions of alarm; her husband was a good swimmer, and, anxious to carry her off, did his utmost to make her relax her hold. But all his efforts were unavailing; in her agony she seemed to have embedded her finger-nails in the wood; his very attempt to break her fingers proved ineffectual. He was but a few yards from the shore, but finding it was impossible to save her, he determined not to survive her, and, taking her into his embrace, sank with her in the stream. The two bodies were recovered a few hours afterwards.'

One can well understand the accession of melancholy which would come over the poet and his wife in consequence of such a disaster as this. Gloom fell upon the house in the Place Royale, but Victor Hugo found consolation in the affection of the partner of his youth, whose devotion had seemed thus far to increase with the lapse of years. Again and again she animated his lyre, and gave his verse much of its sweetest and noblest inspiration. She entered fully into his high aspirations, and received with grace and *bonhomie* visitors like Lamartine and Madame de Girardin, who came to exchange the courtesies of friendship and genius.

Victor Hugo was given to silent wanderings by night in the Champs Élysées and the vicinity, and he has stated that many of his finest thoughts occurred to him during these midnight walks. On one occasion this habit nearly proved of serious import to him, for as he was passing along near the Rue des Tournelles, wrapped in meditation, he was attacked and knocked down by a band of pickpockets, and would in all probability have suffered severe injury had not some passers-by caused his assailants to take precipitate flight. The incident caused no modification in the poet's custom, for of physical or moral fear he had scant knowledge.

Notwithstanding his advanced political views in later life, Victor Hugo, as I have already had occasion to observe, moved forward towards a republic by gradual stages. He had no faith in the stability of a government which was merely the result of revolt, and in 1832, when there appeared considerable danger of insurrectionary bloodshed, he wrote: 'Some day we shall have a republic, and it will be a good one. But we must not gather in May the fruit which will only be ripe in August. We must learn to be patient, and the republic proclaimed by France will be the crown of our hoary heads.' His political honesty impressed his contemporaries. Louis Blanc saw a noble unity in his political progressiveness; and another critic, M. Spuller, in eulogizing the three great French poets of the nineteenth century, Chateaubriand, Lamartine, and Hugo, observed that although they were all born outside the pale of the Revolution, they proved to be the very men to help forward and to glorify the democracy, Hugo especially being a noble exponent of the new social truths.

There naturally came a time, therefore, when Hugo desired actual contact with political life. At first, as I have remarked, he formed the design of getting returned for the Chamber of Deputies, but this idea had to be abandoned. Then he was sent for by Louis Philippe. This monarch, though generally immovable on social and literary questions, and caring little for the conciliation of the democracy, was much impressed by the power he recognised in Victor Hugo. Stories are told of interviews, prolonged into the night, between the King and the poet. The result was that on the 13th of April, 1845, Hugo was created a peer — an event which was warmly applauded by the bulk of the people. In taking his seat in the Upper Chamber the new peer was by profession an independent Conservative, but there was in him already a large Republican leaven. His maiden speech was delivered in defence of artists and their copyright, and this was followed in March, 1846, by a vigorous address on Poland. As was the case with many other literary men, Victor Hugo sympathized deeply with the Poles. He denounced the avowed policy of M. Guizot, that France could do nothing towards re-establishing the Polish nationality. ‘He maintained that it was not a material but a moral intervention that was required, and that such intervention ought to be made in the name of European civilization, of which the French were the missionaries and the Poles the champions. He reminded his audience how Sobieski had been to Poland what Leonidas had been to Greece, and he claimed the gratitude and moral support of France for a people who had done their part in the noble defence of freedom.’ But, apart from the fact that Poland had few friends, the ideas of freedom expounded by Hugo excited little sympathy in the breasts of the French aristocracy.

In 1847 the new peer showed his catholicity of spirit by supporting the petition of Prince Jerome Napoleon Bonaparte, praying that his family might be allowed to return to France. His chief arguments were: that the Chamber would evidence its strength by its generosity; that it was repugnant to his feelings for any Frenchman to be an exile or an outlaw; that any pretender must be harmless in the midst of a nation where there was freedom of work and of thought; and that by mercifulness the Chamber would consolidate its power with the people. Louis Philippe was so impressed by these views that he allowed the Bonapartes to return.

That momentous revolutionary year, 1848, did not come upon Victor Hugo altogether as a surprise. That which astonished him was not the character, but the strength of the new movement. He had long before seen that the stability of any French Government would depend upon its attitude towards the people and the pressing social and political questions of the time. If a Government ignored, or attempted to crush the forces which were at work in society, then it was inevitably doomed to fall before them. He had indulged some hope that the Government of Louis Philippe would inaugurate an enlightened policy; but it failed to do this, while it perpetuated abuses which had long been obnoxious. That which the far-seeing predicted actually occurred; the monarchy was swept away. Hugo thought for a moment that a compromise might be effected by constituting the Duchess of Orleans regent; but he speedily saw that the popular movement was against all Royalty and its forms, and he gave in his adhesion to the Republic. The Provisional Government having fixed the elections for the 23rd of April, Hugo was nominated as a candidate for Paris; but he was unsuccessful. Shortly afterwards, however, he was returned to the National Assembly, on the occasion of the supplementary elections rendered necessary in Paris. He took an independent part in the debates in the Assembly, voting now with the Right and now with the Left. His socialistic views found expression during the discussion upon the national factories, which had borne such lamentable results. ‘Admitting the necessity which might seem to justify their establishment, he insisted that practically they had had a most disastrous influence upon business, and pointed out the serious danger which they threatened, not alone to the finances, but to the population of Paris. As a socialist, he addressed himself to socialists, and invoked them to labour in behalf of the perishing, but to labour without causing alarm to the world at large; he implored them to bestow upon the disendowed classes, as they were called, all the benefits of civilization, to provide them with education, with the means of cheap living; and, in short, to put them in the way of accumulating wealth instead of multiplying misery.’ From the point of view of the social reformer, his utterances were wise and conciliatory. During the sanguinary days of June he went from place to place, striving to avert bloodshed; and after the outbreak he was instrumental in saving the lives of several of the insurgents.

He advocated mercy, and in the Assembly proposed that an entire amnesty should be proclaimed. A deputy rose and embraced him, and with this deputy, who was none other than Victor Schœlcher, a close friendship was formed. Hugo would have no part in the proceedings against Louis Blanc, and he declined to assent to the vote that Cavaignac deserved the gratitude of his country. He opposed the project of having but one Chamber, and it has been pointed out that the existence of a second Chamber would in all probability have saved France from the *Coup d'État*. From his place in the Assembly he spoke strongly in favour of the liberty of the press and of the abolition of capital punishment. In April, 1848, he started the journal *L'Évènement*, which had for its motto 'Intense hatred to anarchy, tender love for the people,' and which included amongst its contributors Charles Hugo, Paul Meurice, Auguste Vitu, Théophile Gautier, and Auguste Vacquerie. This journal, which supported the cause of the Revolution, was for a time, but a brief one only, successful.

In January, 1849, the Constituent Assembly was dissolved, and a Legislative Assembly summoned in its stead a few months afterwards. Hugo was elected one of the twenty-eight deputies for Paris, his name standing tenth on the list. He has left it on record in *Le Droit et la Loi* that this year formed an epoch in his life. He became at this time a thorough Republican. 'An inanimate body was lying on the ground; he was told that that lifeless thing was the Republic; he drew near and gazed, and lo! it was Liberty; he bent over it and raised it to his bosom. Before him might be ruin, insult, banishment, and scorn, but he took it unto him as a wife! From that moment there existed within his very soul the union between Liberty and the Republic.' The uncompromising attitude he now assumed seems to have alarmed some persons, who charged him with apostasy; but they must have been superficial students of his career. The poet had long been drifting towards this end. With the advance in his political views there seems to have come an expansion in his eloquence; and the tribune witnessed many impassioned speeches from the deputy — speeches which moved his auditors to the utmost depths of emotion. When he defended Italy at the time the French entered Rome — and in doing so strongly attacked the abuses attendant upon ecclesiastical domination — he incurred the anger of his former friend Montalembert. Replying to the Comte he said: 'There was a time when he employed his noble talents better. He defended Poland as now I defend Italy. I was with him then; he is against me now. The explanation is not far to seek. He has gone over to the side of the oppressors: I have remained on the side of the oppressed.’

Presiding at the Peace Congress of Paris, held on the 21st of August, 1849, and addressing Richard Cobden and his fellow-delegates from various parts of the world, Hugo gave expression to his sanguine humanitarian sentiments. ‘You have come,’ he observed to these representatives of peace, ‘to turn over, if it may be, the last and most august page of the Gospel, the page that ordains peace amongst the children of the one Creator; and here in this city, which has rejoiced to proclaim fraternity to its own citizens, you have assembled to proclaim fraternity to all men.’ The orator expressed his conviction that universal peace was attainable, and at the closing sitting of the Congress, held on the 24th, the anniversary of St. Bartholomew, he spoke in this impassioned strain: ‘On this very day, 277 years ago, this city of Paris was aroused in terror amidst the darkness of the night. The bell, known as the silver bell, chimed from the Palais de Justice, and a bloody deed, unprecedented in the annals of crime, was perpetrated; and now, on that self-same date, in that self-same city, God has brought together into one general concourse the representatives of that old antagonism, and has bidden them transform their sentiments into sentiments of love. The sad significance of this mournful anniversary is removed; each drop of blood is replaced by a ray of light. Well-nigh beneath the shadow of that tower whence tolled the fatal vespers of St. Bartholomew, not only Englishmen and Frenchmen, Germans and Italians, Europeans and Americans, but actually Papists and Huguenots have been content to meet, happy, nay proud, to unite themselves together in an embrace alike honourable and indissoluble.’ These words excited a strange fervour and enthusiasm in the audience, and amidst the waving of hats and handkerchiefs, and other demonstrations of applause, a Roman Catholic abbé and a Protestant pastor might have been seen embracing, overcome by the power of the orator’s language.

During the debate on the new Education Bill, introduced by M. de Falloux in January, 1850, Victor Hugo adversely criticized the measure as placing too much power in the hands of the clergy. He announced that he should oppose any scheme which entrusted the education of youth to the clerical party, who were always seeking to fetter the human mind. Church and State must pursue independent courses. ‘Your law,’ he exclaimed, directly addressing the Minister, ‘is a law with a mask. It says one thing, it does another. It may bear the aspect of liberty, but it means thraldom. It is practically confiscation under the name of a deed of gift. But it is all one with your usual policy. Every time that you forge a new chain you cry, “See, here is freedom!”’ During the same session Hugo appealed for mercy for the political criminals, and condemned the law of transportation, by which they were not only banished but liable to be shut up in citadels. His speech on this occasion created such a profound impression that it was afterwards printed and distributed throughout the country, and a medal was struck in honour of the orator.

Troublous times were again looming over France. The protestations of Louis Napoleon that he desired to rank as a patriot only, and not as a Bonaparte, had been accepted by Victor Hugo, Louis Blanc, and others, in good faith. In his prison at Ham, he had been visited by several staunch Republicans, who believed his asseverations that he had no other end in view than the welfare of France and the consolidation of her liberties. Indeed, when the exile returned to Paris he sought out Victor Hugo, and in the most frank and unambiguous language said to him, ‘What would it be for me to be Napoleon over again? Why, it would not simply be an ambition, it would be a crime. Why should you suppose me a fool? I am not a great man, and when the Republic is made I shall never follow the steps of Napoleon. As for me, I am honest; and I shall follow in the way of Washington.’ It never struck the poet that his visitor protested too much. Upright and sincere himself, he liked to believe in the integrity of others, and he little dreamt that Louis Napoleon, who had sworn fidelity to the Constitution, and again and again declared himself bound by his oath, would in a short time strangle the Republic with his own hands.

But, alas! it was not long before the poet and his friends were disillusioned, for, as Proudhon remarked, ‘Citizen Bonaparte, who but yesterday was a mere speck in the fiery heavens, has become an ominous cloud, bearing storm and tempest in its bosom.’ Hugo, seeing what was advancing, bore himself courageously, and from his place in the tribune never ceased to advocate the cause of freedom, while he bade the people repose securely in their own strength. The reactionary policy began with the curtailment of the liberty of the press, and culminated in the *Coup d’État* of the 2nd December, 1851. On that date the Legislative Assembly was dissolved; universal suffrage was established, and Paris was declared to be in a state of siege. Thiers, Cavaignac, and others were arrested and sent to the Castle of Vincennes. About 180 members of the Assembly, with M. Berryer at their head, on endeavouring to meet, were also arrested, and Paris was occupied by troops. Sanguinary conflicts ensued between the people and the soldiery, but the troops were victorious. Napoleon put a pistol at the head of Paris, and ultimately, by means which will be condemned in history to all ages, the Empire was established.

Victor Hugo did all in his power for the maintenance of the rights of the people, but in vain. In the tribune he indignantly inveighed against the tyranny of Napoleon, and was in consequence placed at the head of the list of the proscribed. He supported the Committee of Resistance in their efforts to depose the Prince; but the people were paralyzed by the display of power, and he was obliged to fly from Paris. A sum of 25,000 francs was offered to anyone who would either kill or arrest him, and so great was the terror of the populace that no one could be found who would give the friend of freedom an asylum. At length he secured temporary shelter beneath the roof of a relation, remaining here until the 12th of December, when he left Paris, completely disguised, by the Northern Railway Station. The expatriated poet reached Brussels in safety, but his sons and the rest of the staff of *L'Évènement* had been cast into prison. It was a momentous time for the friends of Victor Hugo, who were naturally anxious for his safety when so many of the friends of the Republic had been seized and incarcerated.

In his retreat the great patriot found himself confronted by a new task. He resolved to compile a history of the infamous events which had driven him into exile. 'His lashes should reach to the faces of Napoleon and his acolytes at the Tuileries; he became at once the Tacitus and Juvenal of his time, only his accents were mightier than theirs, because his indignation was greater and his wrath more just.' Napoleon had triumphed, but the scourge was soon to descend which should leave him exposed to the derision and contempt of the world to the end of time. The sword is powerful; but the pen, which is the stronger weapon, has always overtaken it, and adjusted the historical balance in the interests of humanity.

CHAPTER X. THE POET IN EXILE.

In Brussels Victor Hugo came upon friends, amongst them being the novelist, Alexandre Dumas. The latter was living in this city because he was the better able to pursue his literary work there, undistracted by the myriad claims which such a centre as Paris presents. He had never mixed ardently in politics, but he was so chagrined at the banishment of Hugo that he chivalrously resolved never to visit Louis Napoleon or the Tuileries again; and he resolutely adhered to this decision. Victor Schœlcher followed Hugo to Brussels, having escaped from his pursuers in the disguise of a priest. Towards the close of December, 1851, the poet began to write his stirring narrative, *L’Histoire d’un Crime*, and the work was completed by the following May. It was not published until 1877, and I shall make some references to it in a later chapter. Amongst other exiles in Brussels were the ill-assorted couple Émile de Girardin and General Lamoricière. But Belgium also sheltered in this hour of peril Ledru Rollin, the sculptor David, Barbès, Louis Blanc, Edgar Quinet, and Eugène Sue. Indeed, many of the finest and choicest spirits of France had been driven from their native soil.

The sons of Victor Hugo joined their father in January, 1852, and the poet determined to remain in Brussels so long as Napoleon III. reigned at the Tuileries. Fate, nevertheless, decreed otherwise. The Belgian Government, though favourable to Hugo, was still more anxious to maintain friendly relations with the new French Empire. Victor Hugo soon made it impossible, however, for the Belgian rulers to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. The publication of his *Napoléon le Petit* fell like a thunderbolt over both Paris and Brussels. That scathing work made the Dictator writhe amid the splendours of his palace. It was charged with wit, pathos, sarcasm, and invective. Amongst the many personal passages denunciatory of Louis Napoleon was the following: ‘He will never be other than the nocturnal strangler of liberty; he will never be other than the man who has intoxicated his soldiers, not with glory, like the first Napoleon, but with wine; he will never be other than the pigmy tyrant of a great people. Grandeur, even in infamy, is utterly inconsistent with the character and calibre of the man. As Dictator, he is a buffoon; let him make himself Emperor, he would be grotesque. That would at once put an end to him. His destiny is to make mankind shrug their shoulders. Will he be less severely punished for that reason? Not at all: contempt does not in his case mitigate anger. He will be hideous, and he will remain ridiculous. That’s all. History laughs, and crushes. What would you have the historian do with this fellow? He can only lead him to posterity by the ear. The man once stripped of success, the pedestal removed, the dust fallen, the lace and spangles and the great sabre taken away, the poor little skeleton laid bare and shivering — can anyone imagine anything meaner and more miserable?’ This powerful satire closed with a vision of vengeance: ‘You do not perceive that the 2nd of December is nothing but an immense illusion, a pause, a stop, a sort of working curtain, behind which the Deity, that marvellous machinist, is preparing and constructing the last act, the final and triumphant scene of the French Revolution! You look stupefied upon the curtain, upon the things painted upon the coarse canvas, this one’s nose, that one’s epaulettes, the great sabre of a third, those embroidered vendors of *eau-de-Cologne* whom you call generals, those *poussahs* that you call magistrates, those worthy men that you call senators, this mixture of caricatures and spectres — and you take them all for realities. You do not hear yonder in the shade that hollow sound! You do not hear some one going backwards and forwards! You do not see that curtain shaken by the breath of Him who is behind!’

The excitement caused by this work proved too much for the Belgian Government, and, desirous of keeping well with Napoleon III., it reluctantly decided that the author must be expelled. As there was no law bearing upon Hugo’s case, the Belgian Chamber passed one to meet it, and Hugo was cast out from what he deemed to be a secure asylum. He embarked for England, but only on his way to Jersey, which he had decided upon as his next place of habitation. He landed at St. Helier on the 5th of August, 1852, and was received by a body of French compatriots and exiles.

Hugo was now somewhat straitened in means, as he derived nothing from his dramas and his various works. From his very ability and genius, he was singled out as a special object of disapprobation on the part of the French rulers. The poet first settled down in a small house on the Marine Terrace, and the money he received from the sale of his effects in Paris was a very welcome addition to his small store. But he had passed through too many periods of hardship and vicissitude to repine over these altered circumstances — he rather rejoiced to suffer for conscience’ sake. He now gave himself up to intellectual labour, and found much happiness in his leisure hours in the bosom of his family, every member of which was deeply attached to him; and in the interchange of affectionate confidences with his intimate friends, Vacquerie, Paul Meurice, and others. He was treated with great distinction by the islanders, not (as he himself said) because he was Victor Hugo the poet, but because he was a peer of France. In consequence of his rank, observes one writer, ‘he enjoyed certain privileges, one of which was that he was exempt from the obligation of sweeping his doorstep and clearing away the grass from the front of his house!’ But he was obliged to supply the suzerain of the Duchy of Normandy with two fowls every year, a tax that was religiously exacted from ‘his lordship.’

Yet even in the little island home of their adoption the exiles were not permitted to rest in peace. Spies were sent amongst them, who endeavoured to gather evidence of sedition, and although Jersey had its own laws, as Napoleon was now the ally of England the situation was not without its dangers. One Imperial spy, named Hubert, was discovered; and when the exiles determined that he should die for his treachery, Hugo, with his usual large-hearted magnanimity, came forward and saved his life.

Another terrible denunciation of Napoleon and his satellites was penned by Hugo during his stay in Jersey. *Les Châtiments*, this new satire, was even more powerful and telling than *Napoléon le Petit*. Its verse burned with indignation. The poet spared no one who was in any degree responsible for the crime of the 2nd December. ‘Sometimes he is full of pity for the victims of the dastardly aggression, pouring out his sympathy for those whom the convict-ships were conveying to the deadly climates of Cayenne and Lambessa, to receive for political offences the fate of the worst of felons; sometimes he sounds forth their virtues in brilliant strophes; and sometimes he rises into grandeur as he scourges the great men of the Second Empire, whilst at others he uses the lash of satire, and depicts them all as circus grooms and mountebanks. Page after page seems to bind his victim to an eternal pillory.’ The work showed, in its various divisions, how society was ‘saved,’ order re-established, the dynasty restored, religion glorified, authority consecrated, stability assured, and the deliverers themselves delivered. It was first published in Brussels, but only in a mutilated form, the Belgian Government dreading the effects of some of its bitter attacks upon the ruler of France. In vain the poet protested against this infringement of liberty. A complete edition of the work, however, soon appeared at St.

Helier, and it speedily got into circulation in all the European capitals, ingeniously defying every effort to suppress it. ‘The more it was hunted down the more thoroughly it penetrated France. It had as many disguises as an outlaw. Sometimes it was enclosed in a sardine-box, or rolled up in a hank of wool; sometimes it crossed the frontier entire, sometimes in fragments; concealed occasionally in plaster busts or clocks, laid in the folds of ladies’ dresses, or even sewn in between the double soles of men’s boots.’

Matters were thus rendered righteously unpleasant for Napoleon, who dreaded these attacks upon his person and power. A man of genius fighting for liberty is sometimes stronger than a throne; and it was possible that this might be the issue between the poet and the Dictator. The work brought no profit to its author, but he had the far higher reward of seeing it carry terror into the midst of the Tuileries, while it at the same time stirred the slumbering conscience of the French nation. For two or three years the Jersey exiles remained unmolested, but Napoleon, feeling insecure, determined that they should ‘move on.’ Victor Hugo on several occasions delivered funeral orations over departed patriots. He never spared the French rulers, and invariably expressed sympathy with ‘the heartrending cry of humanity which made the crowned criminal turn pale upon his throne.’

At the obsequies of one Félix Bony, who had been a victim of Imperial tyranny, the poet referred to the British alliance with the Emperor of the French as a degradation to England. Upon this, Sir Robert Peel intimated in the House of Commons that he should feel it his duty to put an end to this kind of language on the part of French refugees as soon as possible. Ribeyrolles, the editor of *L’Homme*, the French newspaper in Jersey, retorted that England was England no longer, and Victor Hugo returned the following answer: ‘M. Bonaparte has driven me from France because I have acted on my rights as a citizen, and as a representative of the people; he has driven me from Belgium because I have written *Napoléon le Petit*, and he will probably drive me from England because of the protests that I have made and shall continue to make. Be it so. That concerns England more than it concerns me. America is open to me, and America is sufficiently after my heart. But I warn him, that whether it be from France, from Belgium, from England, or from America, my voice shall never cease to declare that sooner or later he will have to expiate the crime of the 2nd of December. What is said is true: there *is* a personal quarrel between him and me; there is the old quarrel of the judge upon the bench and the prisoner at the bar.'

The tension became too great when Félix Pyat published in *L'Homme* a 'Letter to Queen Victoria,' commenting in sarcastic but foolish terms upon her Majesty's visit to the Emperor and Empress of the French. Some of the personal portions of the pamphlet affecting the Queen were perfectly unjustifiable, and the result was a serious agitation in Jersey for the expulsion of the exiles. At one moment their lives were in danger. Hugo confessed that he did not care for this, but he should greatly regret the destruction of his manuscripts. His compositions, which represented thirty years' labour, and included *Les Contemplations*, *La Légende des Siècles*, and the first portion of *Les Misérables*, were accordingly secured in a strong iron-bound chest. Madame Hugo, though warned of her danger, resolutely remained by the side of her husband.

The conductors of *L'Homme* were at once expelled from Jersey, whereupon Victor Hugo drew up a protest on behalf of the exiles. 'The *Coup d'État*,' said this document, 'has penetrated into English liberty. England has reached this point that she now banishes exiles.' It then went onto inveigh against the crimes of 'treason, perjury, spoliation, and murder,' committed by Napoleon III., for which he had been legally condemned by the French Court of Assize, and morally by the bulk of the English press. The protest received thirty-seven signatures, amongst them being those of Louis Blanc and Victor Schœlcher. After a period of uncertainty, the English Government consented to the expulsion of the refugees.

On the 27th of October, 1855, the news was communicated to Victor Hugo that he must quit the island by the 2nd of November. The poet said to the constable of St. Clément, the bearer of the tidings, 'I do not await the expiration of the respite that is given me. I hasten to quit a land where honour has no place, and which burns my feet.' After paying a farewell visit to the graves of their dead comrades, the exiles dispersed, leaving Jersey for various destinations; and on the 31st of October, Hugo and his family embarked for Guernsey.

CHAPTER XI. IN GUERNSEY.— ‘LES MISÉRABLES.’

Though harassed in mind and in person, Victor Hugo had reserved to himself, during his troubled stay in Jersey, leisure in which to devote himself to the Muses pure and simple. As the result of these periods of meditation, there appeared in Paris in 1856 *Les Contemplations*. This work, which speedily went through several editions, was the lyrical record of twenty-five years. According to the author himself, it holds, more than any other of the numerous collections of his poetry, ‘as in a rocky chalice, the gathered waters of his life.’ And, again, he observed that ‘the author has allowed this book to form itself, so to speak, within him. Life, filtering drop by drop, through events and sufferings, has deposited it in his heart.’

Divided into two parts, the earlier division of the work dealt with other times, the second with ‘to-day.’ From the trials and the joys through which the poet had passed he endeavoured to extract the philosophy of life. Everything is tinged with deep feeling, for it would be superfluous to say that Hugo was ever the subject of profound emotions. He felt more deeply and strongly than other men, and this gives that intense personal realism to his work which distinguished it from the first recorded utterance to the last. Virulently attacked in some quarters, this series of poems was as warmly welcomed in others. With the public it found ready favour, and speedily ran through numerous editions. It may safely be affirmed that criticism which is merely captious has never yet permanently injured any work. Wherever there is genius, it will force its way through such obstacles, and find an honest public appreciation. If Hugo had not himself had faith in the poetic seed in such works as *Les Contemplations*, he must have despaired; but with that egotism of talent which is never offensive, he left his work confidently to the judgment of minds which could think and souls which could feel. Of that gigantic work, *La Légende des Siècles*, the first part of which appeared in 1859, I shall speak in greater detail when referring to its completion.

Expelled from Jersey, the poet found a home in Guernsey; for although the islands are geographically near, the sentiments of the islanders differed greatly on the subject of political refugees. At Hauteville House, which, as its name implies, occupied a commanding elevation, Victor Hugo found a home which is now peculiarly linked with his name. The re-arrangement of the place was a work of time. Writing to Jules Janin, Hugo announced his getting into new quarters: ‘England has hardly been a better guardian of my fireside than France. My poor fireside! France broke it up, Belgium broke it up, Jersey broke it up; and now I am beginning, with all the patience of an ant, to build it up anew. If ever I am driven away again I shall turn to England, and see whether that worthy prude Albion can help me to find myself *at home*.... I have taken a house in Guernsey. It has three stories, a flat roof, a fine flight of steps, a courtyard, a crypt, and a look-out; but it is all being paid for by the proceeds of *Les Contemplations*.’

Innumerable are the pilgrimages which have been made to Hauteville House, with consequent descriptions of the residence. A brief sketch of the leading features of the poet’s home, for which I am indebted to an account written by one of such visitors, will not be unacceptable. Hauteville House, which overlooks the city and fort beneath, and commands a vast expanse of sea, is likewise famed for its interior treasures. The visitor finds carvings of the Renaissance and the Middle Ages, and porcelain, enamels, and glass, the work of Venetian and Florentine masters. Entering the house by a vestibule, there is first perceived on the upper lintel a *basso-relievo* representing the chief subject in *Notre-Dame de Paris*. On the right and left, in carved oak, are two medallions, by David, of Victor Hugo and his second daughter. A fine Renaissance column supports the whole. Passing on, the monumental door of the dining-room is reached. Upon one of the panels is written ‘Love and Believe;’ and over one of the doors, and below a statuette of the Virgin, is the word of welcome to the visitor, ‘*Ave*.’ In the billiard-saloon are hung the poet’s designs, framed in varnished fir. To his other evidences of ability Hugo adds that of a graphic artist. Many of his sketches have a breadth and power which strongly recall the pencil of Rembrandt, though in the matter of drawing and some other points they will not, of course, sustain comparison with the work of that wonderful master.

The tapestry-parlour is an apartment of special interest, the mantelpiece particularly fixing the attention. Imagine a cathedral of carved oak, which, rising vigorously from the floor, springs up to the ceiling, where its upper carving touches the tapestry. The doorway corresponds to the fireplace; the rosace is a convex mirror, placed above the mantelpiece; the central gable is a firm entablature covered with fantastic foliage, and decorated by arches of exquisite taste, in which the Byzantine mingles with the rococo; the two towers are two counterforts, which repeat all the ornamentation of the entire mass. The coping, very imposing in its effect, recalls the fronts of the houses in Antwerp and Bruges. A face appears amid the woodwork, vigorously thrown out. It is that of a bishop, whose crosier alone is gilded. On each side of it is a shield, with the witty motto:

‘Crosier of wood, bishop of gold:
Crosier of gold, bishop of wood.’

On two scrolls, representing rolled parchment, are inscribed the names of those whom Victor Hugo looks upon as the principal poets of humanity — Job, Isaiah, Homer, Æschylus, Lucretius, Dante, Shakespeare, Molière. On the opposite side are the names of Moses, Socrates, Christ, Columbus, Luther, Washington. Two oaken statues lean from the double entablature of the chimney-piece. One represents St. Paul reading, with an inscription on the pedestal— ‘The Book;’ the other shows a monk in ecstasy, with his eyes uplifted, and on the pedestal is written ‘Heaven.’ The working-room contains another fine monumental piece of work, bearing a motto taken from the fourth act of *Hernani*, ‘*Ad augusta per angusta*.’ The dining-room walls are covered with splendid Dutch delf of the seventeenth century, and the room has also a magnificent mirror and a piece of Gobelin tapestry representing the riches of Summer. Vases and statuettes are to be met with everywhere; and on panels are carved various legends— ‘Man,’ ‘God,’ ‘My country,’ ‘Life is exile.’ An armchair of carved oak, which was regarded by the poet as the ancestral seat at his table, is closed by a chain, and bears the inscription, ‘The absent are here.’ The galleries and rooms of the first story are likewise rich in Renaissance work, and in Chinese and Japanese treasures. The Oak Gallery, which is a kind of guest-chamber, has six windows looking out upon Fort St. George, which distribute the light through a perfect forest of carved oak. The mantelpiece — a marvellous piece of work, represents the sacrifice of Isaac. A state bed and a massive candelabrum in oak, surmounted by a figure carved by Victor Hugo, are also noticeable objects; but they are almost eclipsed by the splendid door of entrance, which, as seen from the interior, is as brilliant as a church window. Two spiral columns sustain a pediment of oak with Renaissance grotesques, surrounded by arabesques and monsters; it advances with two folds, which are resplendent with paintings, among which are eight large figures of the martyrs, attired in gold and purple, the principal being St. Peter. There is inscribed on the lintel, ‘*Surge, perge*,’ and close by the words of Lucan, ‘The conquerors have the gods, with the conquered Cato remains.’ There are also numerous maxims, poetic and otherwise. Hugo’s own room was the look-out — a little belvedere open in all directions, but very small in extent. It contains the poet’s writing-table and an iron bed. Whether regarded from the point of view of its noble situation, or from that of the artistic treasures which find a lodgment in its interior, Hauteville House is a place to inspire a poet of a far less expansive imagination than Victor Hugo.

While the author of *Notre-Dame* pursued his studies and compositions in the belvedere, the other inmates of Hauteville House were generally engaged in a variety of pursuits beneath. The elder son, Charles, devoted himself to the writing of dramas and romances, while the second son, Victor François, undertook with much spirit and success a translation of Shakespeare. Adèle, the one daughter now remaining, composed music; Auguste Vacquerie plunged into a series of curious literary studies, which resulted in the production of *Les Mielles de l’Histoire* and *Profils et Grimaces*; and Madame Victor Hugo busied herself in collecting notes for her husband’s *Life*. Unfortunately, owing to her death, her task was never completed, a portion only of her labour of love seeing the light in 1863. The whole family ever cordially welcomed any Frenchmen who sought a refuge at Hauteville House, and Gérard de Nerval, Balzac, and many others occupied in turns a room specially set apart for the use of such visitors.

Two or three years after Hugo established himself in Guernsey, an amnesty was announced by the Emperor of the French. The proclamation was dated the 15th of August, 1859. The poet refused to avail himself of the act of grace, and in conjunction with Louis Blanc, Edgar Quinet, and others, replied to the Imperial pardon by a counter manifesto. He was blamed by some for this step, it being urged that it was his duty to return to France during the days of the Second Empire, and to use every effort to procure that amelioration of the condition of the people, and the fruition of their hopes, which he and other patriots desired. But Victor Hugo was very depressed at this time, and saw little prospect of the realization of his own aspirations and of those who felt and acted with him. But an idea of the vast personal influence attributed to the poet may be gathered from such language as the following which was used concerning him at this time:

‘Had Victor Hugo stood forward, as he was morally bound to do, the fatal day of Sadowa might never have happened, the disastrous Ministry of M. Émile Ollivier would have been impossible, and France could have been spared the overwhelming ruin which fell upon her when absolutely abandoned to the counsels and government of the feeblest mediocrity.’ It is impossible, of course, to say that these sanguine expectations would have been justified; but they will at least serve to show the high esteem in which the poet was held, and the weight attached to his individual will and example.

Another epoch in the literary career of Victor Hugo was reached in 1862 by the publication of the celebrated romance, *Les Misérables*. This work had been begun many years before, and was to have been published in 1848. Its original conception was vastly extended in course of time, until what was at first meant to occupy only two octavo volumes ultimately spread over ten. The work appeared simultaneously in Paris, London, Brussels, New York, Madrid, Berlin, Turin, St. Petersburg, Leipzig, Milan, Rotterdam, Warsaw, Pesth, and Rio de Janeiro. The first Paris edition amounted to 15,000 copies, the first Brussels edition to 12,000, and the first Leipzig edition to 3,000. No fewer than 150,000 copies were sold in one year, and altogether, in various forms and editions, more than three times this immense number of copies were disposed of. The book was found everywhere, from the Steppes of Russia to the battlefields of the United States, where it solaced many a soldier during the Civil War.

This stupendous work is divided into five parts, entitled respectively ‘Fantine,’ ‘Cosette,’ ‘Marius,’ ‘L’Idylle Rue Plumet et l’Épopée Rue St. Denis,’ and ‘Jean Valjean.’ Each of these parts consists of eight or more books, which are again divided into chapters. It was complained that the book was partly the offspring of a poet, and partly the offspring of a social philosopher, and that while the poetry was noble the philosophy was detestable. At the same time it was admitted that the writer had stamped upon every page the hall-mark of genius, and the loving patience and conscientious labour of a true artist. The romance opens with a finely-sketched portrait of a worthy bishop, called by the people Monseigneur Bienvenu, a noble creation, which surprised those who looked upon Hugo merely as a curser of the Church and all its works. A scene of strong dramatic power occurs in Chapter X., which deals with an interview between the bishop and a dying conventionnel, who had all but voted for the death of the King. Victor Hugo's unequalled command of language and his terse and vigorous emphasis come here into full play. 'All French writers of mark,' says a writer in the *Quarterly Review*, 'are divisible into two schools; the one is characterized by the polish and smoothness to which the romance element is carried in a Racine, or, in more modern times, a Lamartine; the other is full of a *viel esprit Gaulois*, a Molière or a La Fontaine. For this rugged force of speech, all knots, the bark still on, M. Hugo is very remarkable. The terseness with which he throws into a word the compressed power which a feebler but more elegant writer would draw out into a whole sentence, indicates an amount of genius which belongs only to the kinglier spirits of an age, and which in French literature has only been matched by Rabelais, in Italian by Dante.'

The real hero of the story is Jean Valjean, the son of a woodcutter of Faverolles. Losing his father and mother when a child, he grew up to carry on the former's craft, supporting thereby an elder sister (left a widow) and her seven children. One night, in that terrible year of famine, 1795, Jean Valjean broke into a baker's shop to steal a loaf for the starving children at home. He was arrested for the theft, and condemned to five years at the galleys. Frequent attempts to escape added fourteen years more to his punishment. At length, after nineteen years, he was liberated; but, while now free, his lot was as hard as though he were still in confinement. No one will recognise or aid this pariah of civilization, and he enters the episcopal town of D —— in despair. The good bishop alone will receive the outcast, and he entertains him, and has a bed provided for him. In the middle of the night Valjean is overcome by wild impulses. He steals the spoons from the cupboard over the bed of the sleeping bishop, and escapes through the garden. In the morning he is caught and brought back, but the bishop only heaps coals of fire upon his head in return for his perfidy. Valjean is allowed to go out into the world, but there is a terrible struggle between the good and the evil nature within him. The psychological power of this part of the novel is marvellous. The conflict between right and wrong is renewed periodically in Valjean's breast all through the romance, and it is the influence of the Christian bishop which prevents the miserable man from becoming dead to all his better instincts. The third book of the first part is devoted to the episode of Fantine, an unhappy being who is more sinned against than sinning, and whose sorrows are vividly and painfully described, with some few delicate lights thrown in upon child-life. A striking portrait of Javert, a severe French *agent de police,* testifies once more to Victor Hugo's power of human analysis; but the most thrilling scenes still centre round Valjean. The ex-convict becomes a respectable provincial mayor under an assumed name, and when a man is arrested in his old name of Valjean, after a tremendous struggle, in which he sees the dead bishop calling upon him to be true to his conscience, he resolves to deliver himself up and save the innocent man. I cannot follow all the ramifications of this extraordinary work, which absolutely teems with exciting incidents, all graphically told, and having for their central and cardinal motive the trials of Valjean and the revolt against society. In the last volume we have the marriage of Cosette, daughter of Fantine, with one Marius, both of whom owed their lives to Valjean. Marius and Cosette shrink from Valjean when they hear his confession that he is a liberated convict. But when Marius learns further that Valjean had saved his life and conveyed him from the barricades to his grandfather's house, and that he had also secured for him his wife's dowry of 600,000 francs, remorse overcomes him for his ingratitude. He and Cosette seek out Valjean at his lodgings, but only arrive in time to witness the death of the suffering, sinning, struggling convict, and to receive his last blessing.

This romance contains passages which, for grandeur of conception and skill in execution, have never been equalled by any other French writer. At the same time the work is not without its defects, chief of which is the frequent recurrence of prolix digressions. For example, at a very critical point in the story, when Jean Valjean has effected his escape with Marius in his arms from the pursuit of the soldiery, the reader is treated to some hundred pages of speculation on the valuable uses to which the sewage of large towns may be put. Other eccentricities might be pointed out, but high and above them all burns the light of the original genius of the author, which transforms the book for us into a veritable wizard's spell. Hugo, even with his perversities and his literary contradictions, can move us as no other man can. Writing to Lamartine, who had been considerably exercised by the social views promulgated in this book, the author said: 'A society that admits misery, a humanity that admits war, seem to me an inferior society and a debased humanity; it is a higher society, and a more elevated humanity at which I am aiming — a society without kings, a humanity without barriers. I want to universalize property, not to abolish it; I would suppress parasitism; I want to see every man a proprietor, and no man a master. This is my idea of true social economy. The goal may be far distant, but is that a reason for not striving to advance towards it? Yes, as much as a man can long for anything I long to destroy human fatality. I condemn slavery; I chase away misery; I instruct ignorance; I illumine darkness; I discard malice. Hence it is that I have written *Les Misérables*.' So much for one side of the work; but if its social and political philosophy be condemned to the exclusion of its manifold excellences and beauties, then I can only pity the mole-like blindness of those who, in their haste to be critical, have lost that key-note of human sympathy which alone can unlock the treasures of *Les Misérables*.

CHAPTER XII. LITERARY AND DRAMATIC.

Utopian as some of Victor Hugo’s social theories might be, his aspirations after the perfection of the race were unquestionably noble. What is more, he furnished practical evidence of the sincerity of his desire to bridge over the gulf which separates humanity into classes. At his house in Guernsey he entertained periodically the children of the poor, frequently to the number of forty, at his own table. They would be accompanied by their mothers, and would sit down to an excellent repast, the hospitable board being presided over by the poet himself. In this fraternal spirit he endeavoured to carry out his democratic ideas. At one of his Christmas feasts at Hauteville House, Hugo remarked: ‘My idea of providing a substantial dinner for the destitute has been well received almost everywhere; as an institution of fraternity it is accepted with a cordial welcome — accepted by Christians as being in conformity with the Gospel, and by democrats as being agreeable to the principles of the Revolution.’ He also advocated the education of children, as well in the principles of justice and real happiness as in the various branches of knowledge; for by elevating the child they would elevate the people of the future.

The good work thus initiated in Guernsey was imitated by humanitarians in London, who provided acceptable meals for the poor in the Ragged Schools, and for the neglected and the outcast. Hugo’s example was therefore not barren of results, though systematic care for the poor was still a dream of the future.

A strangely interesting scene took place at Brussels, when Victor Hugo’s publishers in that city, Messrs. Lacroix and Verboeckhoven, gave a grand banquet to the author in celebration of the success of *Les Misérables*. Distinguished representatives of the English, French, Italian, Spanish and Belgian press attended, and amongst the chief guests were the Burgomaster of Brussels, the President of the Chamber of Representatives, MM. Eugène Pelletan, De Banville, Champfleury, and Louis Blanc. The illustrious exile was much moved as he listened to speeches breathing sympathy and affection for himself as a man, and admiration for him as a writer. ‘Eleven years ago, my friends,’ he said in reply, ‘you saw me departing from among you comparatively young. You see me now grown old. But though my hair has changed, my heart remains the same. I thank you for coming here to-day, and beg you to accept my best and warmest acknowledgments. In the midst of you I seem to be breathing my native air again; every Frenchman seems to bring me a fragment of France; and while thus I find myself in contact with your spirits, a beautiful glamour appears to encircle my soul, and to charm me like the smile of my mother-country.' The Empire had made this gathering impossible in Paris, the city where it should naturally have been held.

A pleasant act of reparation for past injustice was performed when, on the 18th of May, 1860, the inhabitants of Jersey once more welcomed Hugo to their island. He went over upon the requisition of five hundred sympathizers with liberty, who invited him to speak on behalf of the subscription which was being raised to assist Garibaldi in the liberation of Italy. The occasion was pre-eminently one to unseal the fount of eloquence in the exile and the poet. His own deep love for France led him to feel profoundly with the noble patriot who was struggling for a united Italy. Hugo spoke with great energy, first depicting Italy in her bondage, then pleading for her freedom and independence, and prophesying the near approach of the time when, with the sword of Garibaldi, aided by the support of France and England, Italy would rise victorious in the struggle for liberty.

A few years later, and we have some glimpses of the domestic relations of the poet. His son Charles was married in 1866, at Brussels, to the ward of M. Jules Simon. In April, 1867, Victor Hugo became a grandfather, and amongst the many evidences of his affection for children this little letter, written upon his grandson's birth, is well worthy of preservation: 'Georges, — Be born to duty, grow up for liberty, live for progress, die in light! Bear in thy veins the gentleness of thy mother, the nobleness of thy father. Be good, be brave, be just, be honourable! With thy grandmother's kiss, receive thy father's blessing.' The child had scarcely come, however, to gladden the household before he was taken away again. He lived a twelvemonth only; but in his place there soon came another Georges, and he was followed by a sister Jeanne — offshoots of humanity which twined themselves round the heart of the grandfather, and on more than one occasion inspired his pen.

In the summer of 1866, the poet and his two sons, with a party of friends, went upon a tour of pleasure through Zealand. But the journey, which was intended to be pursued strictly incognito, became in reality a kind of progress. The principal traveller was recognised at Antwerp, and Charles Hugo, who afterwards published a work entitled *Victor Hugo en Zélande*, remarked that though his father had come to discover Zealand, Zealand had discovered him instead. Many pleasant incidents marked the journey, not the least gratifying being a reception at Ziericsee, when, in addition to being welcomed by the municipal authorities, two little girls, dressed in white, came forward and presented Hugo with magnificent bouquets. On leaving Dordrecht, the farewell was one that might have been tendered to a sovereign.

Shortly before making this tour Hugo had issued *Les Chansons des Rues et des Bois*. In these songs of the streets and the woods will be discovered the amusing recreations of a great spirit and the representations of its lighter moods. Applying to the volume a standpoint quite out of keeping with its scope and motive, some of the reviewers saw in it a decadence of genius. They had no ear for its music or for its more delicate undertones. It was so different from the work they expected from such a writer that it must be bad. Charles Monselet thought there were some passages in this book which, in pure musical quality, were worthy of Rossini or Hérold.

But those who complained of the poems had no reason to complain of the work which followed it in 1866, *Les Travailleurs de la Mer*. This was another of the great romances by which the name of Victor Hugo will live. In announcing the completion of the work the author wrote, ‘In these volumes I have desired to glorify work, will, devotion, and whatever makes man great. I have made it a point to demonstrate how the most insatiable abyss is the human heart, and that what escapes the sea, does not escape a woman.’ In the work itself was the inscription, ‘I dedicate this book to the rock of hospitality and liberty, to that portion of old Norman ground inhabited by the noble little people of the sea: to the island of Guernsey, severe yet kind, my present refuge, and probably my grave.’ This powerful story dealt with the last of three great forces which Victor Hugo had now illumined by his genius — religion, society, and Nature. In these forces were to be seen the three struggles of man. They constitute at the same time, said the writer, his three needs. Man has need of a faith; hence the temple. He must create; hence the city. He must live; hence the plough and the ship. But these three solutions comprise three perpetual conflicts. The mysterious difficulty of life results from all three. Man strives with obstacles under the form of superstition, under the form of prejudice, and under the form of the elements. He is weighed down by a triple kind of fatality or necessity. First, there is the fatality of dogmas, then the oppression of human laws, and finally the inexorability of nature. The author had denounced the first of these fatalities in *Notre-Dame de Paris*; the second was fully exemplified in *Les Misérables*; and the third was indicated in *Les Travailleurs de la Mer*. But with all these fatalities there also mingled that inward fatality, the supreme agonizing power, the human heart.

This book on the toilers of the sea has been compared with the *Prometheus* of Æschylus. The story or plot is very subordinate, the author having devoted himself to the great contest between his hero and the powers of Nature. In the whole range of literature there is probably nothing more graphic than the account of Gilliatt's battle with the devil-fish. 'This is St. George and the Dragon over again,' remarked a critic in the *British Quarterly Review*; 'and you might as well blame Ariosto or Dante, or great mediæval painters and sculptors, for their innumerable elaborate creations of such monstrous objects, as blame the modern who has, by his study of modern science, seen and restored much that our ancestors conceived. The Pieuvre, moreover, is an ugly symbol of the evil spiritual powers with which man contends. For the rest, Hugo may revel in his strength of creation in this region, as Ariosto and Dante revelled before him, as the builders, too, of our great Gothic cathedrals revelled in their gargoyles and hobgoblins. But before we quit this romance, observe the perfect unity of it as a work of art.'

The career of Gilliatt, the hero of this romance, is important from certain social and philosophical aspects, as well as from the individual point of view. The work is a dissertation upon the dignity, duty, and power of labour, the French writer thus endorsing the dictum of Carlyle on this great question. Gilliatt, hand to hand with the elements, grapples with the last form of external force that is brought against him. It has been well observed that the artistic and moral lesson are worked out together, and are, indeed, one. Gilliatt, alone upon the reef at his herculean task, offers a type of human industry in the midst of the vague 'diffusion of forces into the illimitable' and the visionary development of 'wasted labour' in the sea, and the winds, and the clouds. It is man harassed and disappointed, and yet unconquered.

In 1869 appeared a fourth important romance by Victor Hugo, the strange and grotesque *L'Homme qui Rit*. In this book there is a good deal to make the reader restive, for in some parts it is unquestionably repulsive. But when this has been borne with, there is still much invested with that peculiar interest which only the author can weave round his creations. The movement of life plays a subordinate part in the story, and the real purpose of the work is seen to be a description of the battle waged in the individual breast, first with Fate, and then with those ancient enemies of man, the World, the Flesh, and the Devil. Criticizing this book, Mr. Swinburne remarked: 'Has it not been steeped in the tears and the fire of live emotion? If the style be overcharged and overshining with bright sharp strokes and points, these are no fireworks of any mechanic's fashion; these are the phosphoric flashes of the sea-fire moving in the depths of the limitless and living sea. Enough that the book is great and heroic, tender and strong, full from end to end of divine and passionate love, of holy and ardent pity for men that suffer wrong at the hands of men; full, not less, of lyric loveliness and lyric force; and I, for one, am content to be simply glad and grateful: content in that simplicity of spirit to accept it as one more benefit at the hands of the Supreme singer now living among us the beautiful and lofty life of one loving the race of men he serves, and of them in all time to be beloved.' Yet, notwithstanding its evidences of power, *L'Homme qui Rit* failed to obtain that deep hold upon the public mind which was secured by its predecessors.

A writer in the *Cornhill* pointed out that it was Hugo's object in this romance to denounce the aristocratic principle as it is exhibited in England. Satire plays a conspicuous part, but the constructive ingenuity exhibited throughout is almost morbid. 'Nothing could be more happily imagined, as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the aristocratic principle, than the adventures of Gwynplaine, the itinerant mountebank, snatched suddenly out of his little way of life, and installed without preparation as one of the hereditary legislators of a great country. It is with a very bitter irony that the paper, on which all this depends, is left to float for years at the will of wind and tide.' There are also other striking contrasts. 'What can be finer in conception than that voice from the people heard suddenly in the House of Lords, in solemn arraignment of the pleasures and privileges of its splendid occupants? The horrible laughter, stamped for ever "by order of the King" upon the face of this strange spokesman of Democracy, adds yet another feature of justice to the scene; in all time, travesty has been the argument of oppression; and, in all time, the oppressed might have made this answer: “If I am vile, is it not your system that has made me so?” This ghastly laughter gives occasion, moreover, for the one strain of tenderness running through the web of this unpleasant story: the love of the blind girl Dea for the monster. It is a most benignant providence that thus harmoniously brings together these two misfortunes; it is one of these compensations, one of these after-thoughts of a relenting destiny, that reconcile us from time to time to the evil that is in the world; the atmosphere of the book is purified by the presence of this pathetic love; it seems to be above the story somehow, and not of it, as the full moon over the night of some foul and feverish city.’ This last sentence exhibits a misapprehension of Victor Hugo’s method. It is part of his plan to discover that which would be accounted as the most vile, the most contemptible, the most loathsome in human nature, and to show that it has some point of contact with the most educated, the most refined, the most beautiful. Critics may complain that he sacrifices art sometimes in doing so, but his reply would be that there can be no sacrifice of art where truth is concerned. Falsehood alone is destructive of art.

I must pause here to note some interesting dramatic reproductions which took place in Paris in connection with the Exhibition of 1867. Existing dramatic literature was at a very low ebb, when the Emperor felt that this important international occasion ought to be further distinguished by the production of some new dramas. The managers were nonplussed, for they had nothing worth producing, and the Minister of Fine Arts ventured to hint as much to his Majesty. Ultimately the name of Victor Hugo was brought forward, and it was decided to bring out *Hernani* at the Théâtre Français, and *Ruy Blas* at the Odéon. On the 20th of June, accordingly, *Hernani* was produced, and performed by a brilliant company, including Delaunay, Bressant, and Mademoiselle Favart. Twenty thousand applications had been made for tickets for the first performance. The audience was a very mixed one, and as it was feared that political disturbances might occur, the most rigid precautions were taken by the authorities. But there was no need for this — the piece was received with a favour that was practically unanimous; and although M. Francisque Sarcey (who was not then numbered amongst Hugo’s admirers) hinted that the applause was not precisely genuine, his insinuations were soon rudely scattered to the winds. On the next night, and for eighty succeeding nights, this remarkable play drew forth the most genuine and vociferous applause.

A number of young authors, including François Coppée, Armand Silvestre, and Sully Prudhomme, were so delighted with the success of *Hernani* that they addressed the following letter to the poet: ‘Master most dear and most illustrious, we hail with enthusiastic delight the reproduction of *Hernani*. The fresh triumph of the greatest of French poets fills us with transports. The night of the 20th of June is an era in our existence. Yet sorrow mingles with our joy. Your absence was felt by your associates of 1830; still more was it bewailed by us younger men, who never yet have shaken hands with the author of *La Légende des Siècles*. At least they cannot resist sending you this tribute of their regard and unbounded admiration.’ Writing from Brussels, Hugo thus replied: ‘Dear poets, the literary revolution of 1830 was the corollary of the Revolution of 1789; it is the speciality of our century. I am the humble soldier of the advance. I fight for revolution in every form, literary as well as social. Liberty is my principle, progress my law, the ideal my type. I ask you, my young brethren, to accept my acknowledgments. At my time of life, the end, that is to say the infinite, seems very near. The approaching hour of departure from this world leaves little time for other than serious meditations; but while I am thus preparing to depart, your eloquent letter is very precious to me; it makes me dream of being among you, and the illusion bears to the reality the sweet resemblance of the sunset to the sunrise. You bid me welcome whilst I am making ready for a long farewell. Thanks; I am absent because it is my duty; my resolution is not to be shaken; but my heart is with you. I am proud to have my name encircled by yours, which are to me a crown of stars.’ The writer who thus contemplated an early departure from the stage of human life was to accomplish much more before that event, and to witness many startling changes in his beloved France.

The third Napoleon seems to have been inspired by a bitter jealousy of the genius of Victor Hugo, whose great influence he dreaded; and the poet answered this by an unconquerable distrust of the Emperor. After the representations to which I have drawn attention, Hugo declined to allow his play to be acted, and it was only at the close of Napoleon’s reign that he could be prevailed upon to allow the production of *Lucrèce Borgia* at the Porte St. Martin. George Sand was present on this occasion, and thus wrote to the dramatist: ‘I was present thirty-seven years ago at the first representation of *Lucrèce*, and I shed tears of grief; with a heart full of joy I leave the performance of this day. I still hear the acclamations of the crowd as they shout, “Vive Victor Hugo!” as though you were really coming to hear them.’

Hugo’s sympathy with Garibaldi — for whom he had a profound admiration — found vent in 1867, in a poem entitled *La Voix de Guernesey*. It severely condemned the Mentana Expedition, and encouraged Garibaldi under the check he had sustained at the hands of the Pope and Napoleon III. Garibaldi replied with some verses styled ‘Mentana,’ and this interchange of friendship and goodwill between the two patriots stirred the worst blood of the French clerical party. The poems were circulated by some means throughout France in considerable numbers, the result being an Imperial order to stop the representations of *Hernani*, while the following letter was also despatched to the poet in Guernsey: ‘The manager of the Imperial Théâtre de l’Odéon has the honour to inform M. Victor Hugo that the reproduction of *Ruy Blas* is forbidden. — Chilly.’ From Guernsey came this pithy reply, addressed to the Tuileries: ‘To M. Louis Bonaparte. — Sir, it is you that I hold responsible for the letter which I have just received signed Chilly. — Victor Hugo.’

The Emperor would doubtless have given much could he have quenched the genius and subdued the patriotism of the exile. But though the former affected security in his power, and the latter looked for the triumph of the people, neither could anticipate the dawning of that day of humiliation and blood which in the course of a few years was to break over unhappy France.

CHAPTER XIII. PARIS AND THE SIEGE.

Having vowed never again to visit the land that was ‘the resting-place of his ancestors and the birthplace of his love’ until she had been restored to liberty, it is not surprising that Victor Hugo rejected the renewed amnesty offered him by Napoleon in 1869. The past ten years had wrought in him no signs of relenting, and when he was urged by his friend M. Félix Pyat to accept this new offer of a truce, he replied, ‘*S’il n’en reste qu’un, je serai celui-là*’ (‘If there remain only one, I will be that one’). When the Republican journal *Le Rappel* was started, with Charles and François Hugo, Auguste Vacquerie, and Paul Meurice as its principal contributors (joined subsequently by M. Rochefort), he wrote for the opening number a congratulatory manifesto addressed to the editors. By every means in his power, indeed, he endeavoured to advance Republican principles.

Early in 1870 Napoleon was so impressed by the spread of Republican feeling that he resolved to test the stability of his power and the magic of his name by a *plébiscite*. This step was condemned by Hugo, who asked why the people should be invited to participate in another electoral crime. He thus gave vent to his burning indignation at the proposal: ‘While the author of the *Coup d’État* wants to put a question to the people, we would ask him to put this question to himself, “Ought I, Napoleon, to quit the Tuileries for the Conciergerie, and to put myself at the disposal of justice?” “Yes!”’ This bold and stinging retort led to the prosecution of the journal and the writer for inciting to hatred and contempt of the Imperial Government. But the poet went on his course unmoved, now engaged in writing his study of *Shakespeare*, and now in responding to the appeals made to him from various quarters, including those from the insurgents of Cuba, the Irish Fenians who had just been convicted, and the friends of peace at the Lausanne Congress. He had suffered another domestic grief in 1868 by the death of his wife, his unfailing sympathizer and consoler in his early struggles, and other sorrows were impending.

The war with Prussia in 1870 led to the disaster of Sedan, and the collapse of the Empire. Hugo at once hastened to France, where he was welcomed with heartfelt enthusiasm by his friends of the Revolutionary Government formed on the 4th of September. M. Jules Claretie, who accompanied the poet on the journey from Brussels to Paris, has written a graphic account of his return to the beloved city. At Landrecies Hugo saw evidences of the rout and the ruin which had overtaken France. ‘In the presence of the great disaster, whereby the whole French army seemed vanquished and dispersed, tears rolled down his cheeks, and his whole frame quivered with sobs. He bought up all the bread that could be secured, and distributed it among the famished troops.’ The scene in Paris on Hugo’s arrival was a memorable one. ‘Through the midst of the vast populace,’ continues the narrator, ‘I followed him with my gaze. I looked with admiration on that man, now advancing in years, but faithful still in vindicating right, and never now do I behold him greeted with the salutations of a grateful people without recalling the scene of that momentous night, when with weeping eyes he returned to see his country as she lay soiled and dishonoured and well-nigh dead.’ Concerning this scene, M. Alphonse Daudet also wrote: ‘He arrived just as the circle of investment was closing in around the city; he came by the last train, bringing with him the last breath of the air of freedom. He had come to be a guardian of Paris; and what an ovation was that which he received outside the station from those tumultuous throngs already revolutionized, who were prepared to do great things, and infinitely more rejoiced at the liberty they had regained than terrified by the cannon that were thundering against their ramparts! Never can we forget the spectacle as the carriage passed along the Rue Lafayette, Victor Hugo standing up, and being literally borne along by the teeming multitudes.’ At one point, in acknowledging his enthusiastic reception, Hugo said: ‘I thank you for your acclamations. But I attribute them all to your sense of the anguish that is rending all hearts, and to the peril that is threatening our land. I have but one thing to demand of you. I invite you to union. By union you will conquer. Subdue all ill-will; check all resentment. Be united, and you shall be invincible. Rally round the Republic. Hold fast, brother to brother. Victory is in our keeping. Fraternity is the saviour of liberty!’ Addressing also the crowd assembled in the Avenue Frochot, the place of his destination, the poet assured them that that single hour had compensated him for all his nineteen years of exile.

Installed at the house of his friend Paul Meurice, Hugo remained in Paris all through the siege. The Empire having fallen, the cause of strife had ceased, and Hugo addressed a manifesto to the Germans, in which he said: ‘This war does not proceed from us. It was the Empire that willed the war; it was the Empire that prosecuted it. But now the Empire is dead, and an excellent thing too. We have nothing to do with its corpse; it is all the past, we are the future. The Empire was hatred, we are sympathy; that was treason, we are loyalty. The Empire was Capua, nay, it was Gomorrha; we are France. Our motto is “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity;” on our banner we inscribe, “The United States of Europe.” Whence, then, this onslaught? Pause a while before you present to the world the spectacle of Germans becoming Vandals, and of barbarism decapitating civilization.’ But the victorious Germans did not share the peaceful sentiments of the writer, and it would have gone ill with him if, like his manifesto, he had fallen into the hands of the Prussian Generals.

The siege went on, and the poet laid the funds from his works at the feet of the Republic. Readings were given of *Les Châtiments*, and other poems, and the proceeds expended in ammunition. It was a brave struggle on the part of the Parisians. Gambetta called on Hugo to thank him for his services to the country, when the latter replied: ‘Make use of me in any way you can for the public good. Distribute me as you would dispense water. My books are even as myself; they are all the property of France. With them, with me, do just as you think best.’ The poet kept up a brave heart during the privations of hunger, and cheered many of the younger spirits at his table by his pleasantry and wit, which relieved the gloom that pressed so heavily over all. When the great and terrible time of peril and suffering was past, he left it on record: ‘Never did city exhibit such fortitude. Not a soul gave way to despair, and courage increased in proportion as misery grew deeper. Not a crime was committed. Paris earned the admiration of the world. Her struggle was noble, and she would not give in. Her women were as brave as her men. Surrendered and betrayed she was; but she was not conquered.’ One can scarcely wonder that men who loved Paris as a woman loves her child can never forget the humiliation she was called upon to pass through.

In the list of the Committee of Public Safety, which was responsible for the insurrectionary movement of the 31st of October, the name of Victor Hugo appeared; but he disavowed its use, and on the ensuing 5th of November he declined to become a candidate at the general election of the mayors of Paris. Nevertheless, 4,029 suffrages were accorded him in the 15th arrondissement. In the elections of February, 1871, he was returned second on the list with 214,000 votes, Louis Blanc coming first with 216,000, and Garibaldi third with 200,000 votes. Speaking on the 1st of March in the National Assembly — which met at Bordeaux — Hugo strongly denounced the preliminaries of peace. The treaty, however, was ratified. Interposing in the debate which subsequently took place on the election of Garibaldi, he said: ‘France has met with nothing but cowardice from Europe. Not a Power, not a single King rose to assist us. One man alone intervened in our favour; that man had an idea and a sword. With his idea he delivered one people; with his sword he delivered another. Of all the Generals who fought for France, Garibaldi is the only one who was not beaten.’ A strange scene of tumult arose upon this speech, many members of the Right gesticulating and threatening violently. Rising in the midst of an uproar that was indescribable, Hugo announced that he should send in his resignation. This he accordingly did, and remained firm, notwithstanding the earnest entreaties to withdraw it on the part of the President, M. Grévy. Next day, in consequence, there was nothing for the President to do but to announce the resignation, which was couched in these terms: ‘Three weeks ago the Assembly refused to hear Garibaldi; now it refuses to hear me. I resign my seat.’ Louis Blanc expressed his profound grief at the resignation; it was, he said, adding another drop of sorrow to a cup that seemed already over-full; and he grieved that a voice so powerful should be hushed just at an emergency when the country should be showing its gratitude to all its benefactors. Garibaldi thus wrote to Hugo: ‘It needs no writing to show that we are of one accord; we understand each other; the deeds that you have done, and the affection that I have borne for you make a bond of union between us. What you have testified for me at Bordeaux is a pledge of a life devoted to humanity.’

It was at this juncture that the poet was called upon to mourn the loss of his son Charles, who died suddenly from congestion of the brain. There had been an unusually close bond between the two, and the shock came with great force upon the father. The body of the deceased was brought to Paris for interment, Hugo following the hearse on foot to the family vault at Père la Chaise. Funeral orations were delivered by Auguste Vacquerie and Louis Mie.

From Brussels, whither he had gone after his son’s death, the poet protested against the horrors of the Commune. He also vainly tried to preserve the column in the Place Vendôme from destruction. He wrote his poem, *Les deux Trophées,* referring to the column and the Arc de Triomphe, with the object of staying the hands of the destroyers, but the mad work went forward. Nevertheless, it was characteristic of him that after the insurrection was at an end, he pleaded for mercy towards the offenders. In his house at Brussels many fugitives found shelter, until the Belgian Government banished them from the country. In reply to this edict Hugo published an article in *L’Indépendance*. He declared that although Belgium by law might refuse an asylum to the refugees, his own conscience could not approve that law. The Church of the Middle Ages had offered sanctuary even to parricides, and such sanctuary the fugitives should find at his home; it was his privilege to open his door if he would to his foe, and it ought to be Belgium’s glory to be a place of refuge. England did not surrender the refugees, and why should Belgium be behindhand in magnanimity? But these arguments were of no avail with the exasperated Belgians. A few of the more ruffianly spirits of Brussels actually made an attack upon the poet’s house, which they assaulted with stones, to the great danger of Madame Charles Hugo and her children. Defeated in their attempts to break in the door or to scale the house, the assailants at length made off. So far at first from any redress being granted to Hugo for this outrageous assault, or any punishment being meted out to the offenders, the poet himself was ordered to quit the kingdom immediately, and forbidden to return under penalties of the law of 1865. A debate took place in the Chamber, and as the result of this debate and various protests, the Government did not order the indiscriminate expulsion of all exiles, as they had contemplated. They also made some show of satisfaction to Hugo by ordering a judicial inquiry into the attack upon his residence. In the end a son of the Minister of the Interior was fined a nominal sum of 100 francs for being concerned in the outrage.

Hugo now made a tour through Luxemburg, and afterwards visited London, returning to Paris at the close of the year 1871. After the trial of the Communists he pleaded earnestly, but in vain, for the lives of Rossel, Lullier, Ferré, Crémieux, and Maroteau. In the elections of January, 1872, he got into a difficulty with the Radicals of Paris in consequence of his refusal to accept the *mandat impératif*. This, he explained, was contrary to his principles, for conscience might not take orders. He was willing to accept a *mandat contractuel*, by which there could be a more open discussion between the elector and the elected. Hugo was defeated, receiving only 95,900 votes, as against 122,435 given to his opponent, M. Vautrain, a result partly accounted for by Hugo’s amnesty proposals. The poet published, in September, 1873, *La Libération du Territoire*, a poem which was sold for the benefit of the inhabitants of Alsace and Lorraine. In it the writer strongly condemned the adulation poured upon the Shah of Persia, then on a visit to France, and respecting whose cruelty and barbarism many anecdotes were current.

On the morning following Christmas Day, 1873, the poet was again called upon to bear a great loss by the death of his only remaining son, François Victor. At the funeral Louis Blanc delivered a short address, in which he extolled the literary ability, the integrity, and the virtues of the deceased. To the shouts of '*Vive Victor Hugo! Vive la République!*' the weeping poet was led away from the grave-side.

During the siege of Paris, Hugo kept a diary of this lurid history, and upon this he constructed his poem *L'Année Terrible* — the events celebrated extending from August, 1870, to July, 1871. Speaking of this work, a writer whom I have already quoted remarked that 'the poems of the siege at once demand and defy commentary; they should be studied in their order as parts of one tragic symphony. From the overture, which tells of the old glory of Germany before turning to France with a cry of inarticulate love, to the sad majestic epilogue which seals up the sorrowful record of the days of capitulation, the various and continuous harmony flows forward through light and shadow, with bursts of thunder and tempest, and interludes of sunshine and sweet air.' The variety of note in these tragic poems has also been well insisted upon. 'There is an echo of all emotions in turn that the great spirit of a patriot and a poet could suffer and express by translation of suffering into song; the bitter cry of invective and satire, the clear trumpet-call to defence, the triumphal wail for those who fell for France, the passionate sob of a son on the stricken bosom of a mother, the deep note of thought that slowly opens into flower of speech; and through all and after all, the sweet unspeakable music of natural and simple love. After the voice which reproaches the priest-like soldier, we hear the voice which rebukes the militant priest; and a fire, as the fire of Juvenal, is outshone by a light as the light of Lucretius.' Mr. Dowden sees in these poems the work of a Frenchman throughout, not a man of the Commune, nor a man of Versailles. 'The most precious poems of the book are those which keep close to facts rather than concern themselves with ideas. The sunset seen from the ramparts; the floating bodies of the Prussians borne onward by the Seine, caressed and kissed and still swayed on by the eddying water; the bomb which fell near the old man's feet while he sat where had been the Convent of the Feuillantines, and where he had walked in under the trees in Aprils long ago, holding his mother’s hand; the petroleuse, dragged like a chained beast through the scorching streets of Paris; the gallant boy who came to confront death by the side of his friends — memories of these it is which haunt us when we have closed the book — of these, and of the little limbs and transparent fingers, and baby-smile, and murmur like the murmur of bees, and the face changed from rosy health to a pathetic paleness of the one-year-old grandchild, too soon to become an orphan.’ But other critics, while acknowledging the force of the writing and the noble aspirations of the author, place the work on a considerably lower level as a whole. Yet no one who knows the work can surely deny that the poet has thrown a halo of glory round the concrete facts of a disastrous and momentous period.

While the language of despair was held by many of his friends at this dark crisis in French history, Victor Hugo never once wavered in his hopes for the future of his country. So far from being annihilated, he predicted that France would rise to enjoy a greater height of prosperity, and a more durable peace, than she had ever enjoyed under the Empire.

CHAPTER XIV. ‘QUATRE-VINGT-TREIZE.’ — POLITICS, ETC.

In 1874 appeared the last of Victor Hugo’s great romances, *Quatre-Vingt-Treize*. It was published on the same day in ten languages. This grand historical and political novel was a fitting close to a series of works unexampled in scope and breadth of conception. A great prose epic upon that terrible year in French history, 1793, it excited the liveliest interest throughout Europe, and critics of all shades of opinion hastened to do justice to its extraordinary merits. Even those warm admirers of the author’s superb imaginative genius, who had looked forward with misgiving to this daring excursion into the historic field, admitted that his complete success had justified the effort. They extolled the work as ‘a monument of its author’s finest gifts; and while those who are, happily, endowed with the capacity of taking delight in nobility and beauty of imaginative work will find themselves in possession of a new treasure, the lover of historic truth, who hates to see abstractions passed off for actualities, and legend erected in the place of fact, escapes with his praiseworthy sensibilities unwounded.’

The work is on a colossal scale, exhibiting great breadth of touch, while the style has now the power of the lightning, and now the calm and the depth of the measureless sea. ‘With La Vendée for background, and some savage incidents of the bloody Vendean war for external machinery, Victor Hugo has realized his conception of ‘93 in three types of character — Lantenac, the Royalist marquis; Cimourdain, the Puritan turned Jacobin; and Gauvain, for whom one can as yet find no short name, he belonging to the Millenarian times.’ It was said that there is nothing more magnificent in literature than the last volume of this work, and while its author had no rival in the sombre, mysterious heights of imaginative effect, he was equally a master in strokes of tenderness and the most delicate human sympathy. Rapidity and profusion are the pre-eminent characteristics of this work— ‘a profusion as of starry worlds, a style resembling waves of the sea, sometimes indeed weltering dark and massive, but ever and anon flashing with the foamy lightning of genius. The finish and rich accurate perfection of our own great living poet Tennyson are absent. Hugo is far more akin to Byron; but his range is vaster than Byron’s. He has Byron’s fierce satire, and more than Byron’s humour, though it is the fashion to generalize and say that the French have none. He is both a lyrical and epic poet. He is a greater dramatist than Byron; and whether in the dramas or prose romances, he shows that vast sympathy with, and knowledge of, human nature which neither Byron, Shelley, Coleridge, nor Wordsworth had. Scott could be his only rival. In France they had lived dramatic lives for the last ninety years; we have lived much more quietly in England, and in France there is a real living drama.’

As this book, full-hearted in its passion, and deeply-veined with human emotion, is the last of Victor Hugo’s prose romances, some brief general allusions to him as a novelist will be appropriate. Taking the five books (which have been referred to in the order of their publication) alone, viz., *Notre-Dame*, *Les Misérables*, *Les Travailleurs*, *L’Homme qui Rit*, and *Quatre-Vingt-Treize* — they would have made the fame of any writer; and yet, it has been justly remarked, they are but one façade of the splendid monument that Victor Hugo has erected to his own genius. I am not one of those who would contend that Hugo’s style is everywhere immaculate. On the contrary, he sometimes sins greatly; but these occasions are rare compared with his mighty triumphs. Still, justice must not be extinguished in admiration. My own view of Hugo’s literary gifts, as expressed more especially in his romances, has been so fairly put by another writer that I shall transfer, and at the same time in the main adopt, his language: ‘Everywhere we find somewhat the same greatness, somewhat the same infirmities. In his poems and plays there are the same unaccountable protervities that have already astonished us in the romances; there, too, is the same feverish strength, welding the fiery iron of his idea under forge-hammer repetitions; an emphasis that is somehow akin to weakness; a strength that is a little epileptic. He stands so far above all his contemporaries, and so incomparably excels them in richness, breadth, variety, and moral earnestness, that we almost feel as if he had a sort of right to fall oftener and more heavily than others; but this does not reconcile us to seeing him profit by the privilege so freely. We like to have in our great men something that is above question; we like to place an implicit faith in them, and see them always on the platform of their greatness: and this, unhappily, cannot be with Hugo. As Heine said long ago, his is a genius somewhat deformed; but, deformed as it is, we accept it gladly; we shall have the wisdom to see where his foot slips, but we shall have the justice also to recognise in him the greatest artist of our generation, and, in many ways, one of the greatest artists of all time. If we look back, yet once, upon these five romances, we see blemishes such as we can lay to the charge of no other man in the number of the famous; but to what other man can we attribute such sweeping innovations, such a new and significant view of life and man, such an amount, if we think of the amount merely, of equally consummate performance?' It is in the nature of the human intellect, finite as it is, to relax sometimes from its highest strain, and if Victor Hugo failed at times to scale his loftiest note of thought or expression, it may be remembered also that even Shakespeare was not always in the mood for producing *Hamlets*.

There appeared, in 1874, Hugo's pathetic sketch 'Mes Fils,' containing a tribute of affection to his own dead children; and in 1875-6 was published his *Actes et Paroles*. This justificatory work was in three parts, which dealt respectively with the period before exile, the period of exile, and the period since exile. 'The trilogy is not mine,' said the author, 'but the Emperor Napoleon's; he it is who has divided my life; to him the honour of it is due. That which is Bonaparte's we must render to Cæsar.' Although he first strongly countenanced resistance, the writer concluded with an exhortation to clemency, holding that resistance to tyrants should not be deemed inconsistent with mercy to the vanquished. We have here a complete collection of Hugo's addresses, orations, and confessions of faith, etc., during the preceding thirty years. *Pour un Soldat*, a little brochure written in favour of an obscure soldier, appeared in 1875. Its publication not only resulted in saving the life of the soldier, who had been condemned for a venial crime, but the sufferers in Alsace and Lorraine reaped the pecuniary fruits of its popularity. The second part of *La Légende des Siècles* was published in 1877. At this time the poet was living in the Rue de Clichy, No. 21, sharing part of the house with Madame Charles Hugo, who, after a widowhood of some years, married M. Charles Lockroy, deputy for the Seine, and also known as a man of letters. Madame Drouet, who had befriended the poet when he was proscribed in 1851, placed her salon in this house at the poet's disposal for the reception of his friends. M. Barbou, who saw much of Hugo in this residence, thus describes the man and his habits: 'The hand, no doubt, is too slow for the gigantic work that the poet conceives. And yet no moment is ever lost. Generally up with the sun, he writes until mid-day, and often until two o'clock. Then, after a light luncheon, he goes to the Senate, where, during intervals of debate, he despatches all his correspondence. He finds his recreation generally by taking a walk, although not unfrequently he will mount to the top of an omnibus just for the sake of finding himself in the society of the people, with whom he has shown his boundless sympathy. At eight o'clock he dines, making it his habit to invite not only his nearest friends, but such as he thinks stand in need of encouragement, to join him and his grandchildren at their social meal. At table Victor Hugo relaxes entirely from his seriousness. The powerful orator, the earnest pleader, becomes the charming and attractive host, full of anecdote, censuring whatever is vile, but ever ready to make merry over what is grotesque.... Hale and vigorous in his appearance, precise and elegant in his attire, with unbowed head, and with thick, white hair crowning his unfurrowed brow, he commands involuntary admiration. Round his face is a close white beard, which he has worn since the later period of his sojourn in Guernsey as a safeguard against sore throat; but he shows no token of infirmity. His countenance may be said to have in it something both of the lion and the eagle, yet his voice is grave, and his manner singularly gentle.'

The same writer devotes a chapter to Hugo's love of children, *à propos* of his *L'Art d'être Grand-père*. It is perfectly true that women, and children also, stirred in the poet an element of chivalrous devotion. He also strove to exalt woman as something far beyond the mere passion and plaything of man; while as to children, 'he is pathetic over an infant's cradle, he is delighted at childhood's prattle, and to him the fair-haired head of innocence is as full of interest as the glory of a man.' Nor was there anything derogatory to his genius in this, or in his making Georges and Jeanne, his two grandchildren, the hero and heroine of the work above named. When the wisdom of his indulgence was questioned, he replied that he agreed with M. Gaucher, who held that 'a father's duties are by no means light; he has to instruct, to correct, to chastise; but with the grandfather it is different, he is privileged to love and to spoil.' But he taught the oneness of humanity even to his grandchildren; and once, when they were about to enjoy the good and pleasant things of this life, he bade the children fetch in some houseless orphans who were crouching under the window, in order to share their appetizing dishes. Unconquered by his opponents, Hugo confessed himself a captive to the children, and he defined Paradise as 'a place where children are always little, and parents are always young.'

Towards the close of his eighth decade, the poet seemed to have almost abandoned political life, but he had not forgotten his friends and the electors of Paris. Innumerable letters published in the public press proved this, as well as his presence as chairman at a number of Democratic conventions, and the delivery of a number of public discourses, such as those pronounced at the obsequies of M. Edgar Quinet and Madame Louis Blanc. Preparatory to the first Senatorial elections, M. Clémenceau, President of the Municipal Council of Paris, waited upon the poet, and in the name of the majority of his colleagues offered him the function of delegate. Hugo accepted, and at once issued his manifesto, entitled ‘The Delegate of Paris to the Delegates of the 36,000 Communes of France,’ in which he reiterated, with redoubled energy, his old idea of the abolition of monarchy by the federation of the peoples. On the 30th of January, 1876, he was elected Senator of Paris, but only after a keen struggle. He was fourth out of five, and was not returned until after a second scrutiny, when it was found that he had secured 114 votes out of a total of 216.

Soon after his election, Hugo introduced a proposal in the Senate for granting an amnesty to all those condemned for the events of March, 1871, and to all those then undergoing punishment for political crimes or offences in Paris, including the assassins of the hostages. On the 22nd of May he delivered an eloquent oration in support of his motion. Towards the close of his address, he described the state of the prisoners in New Caledonia. Having painted their agony, and deplored the continuation of the prosecutions and the last transport of convicts, he said: ‘That is how the 18th of March has been atoned for. As for the 2nd of December, it has been glorified, it has been adored and venerated, it has become a legal crime. The priests have prayed for it, the judges have judged by it, and the representatives of the people, at whom the blows were dealt by this crime, not only received them, but accepted and submitted to them, acting with all rigour against the people and all baseness before the Emperor. It is time to put a stop to the astonishment of the human conscience; it is time to renounce that double shame of two weights and two measures. I ask a full amnesty for the events of the 18th of March.’ The motion was rejected, only about seven hands being held up for the amnesty. The poet-orator again pleaded the same cause in January, 1879, but his proposal was coldly received. Nevertheless, in the following month an Amnesty Bill was passed by the Chamber of Deputies.

Early in 1877 appeared the second part of the *Légende des Siècles*; and it is pleasant to recall an interchange of courtesies which took place in this year between Victor Hugo and our own greatly-honoured poet, Lord Tennyson. In the month of June, 1877, there appeared in the *Nineteenth Century* the following sonnet, addressed to Hugo by the Poet Laureate:

‘Victor in Poesy, Victor in Romance,
Cloud-weaver of phantasmal hopes and fears,
French of the French, and lord of human tears;
Child-lover; Bard whose fame-lit laurels glance,
Darkening the wreaths of all that would advance,
Beyond our strait, their claim to be thy peers;
Weird Titan, by the winter-weight of years
As yet unbroken, stormy voice of France;
Who dost not love our England — so they say;
I know not — England, France, all man to be
Will make one people ere man’s race be run:
And I, desiring that diviner day,
Yield thee full thanks for thy full courtesy
To younger England in the boy, my son.’

To this sonnet the French poet returned a reply which I may translate as follows: ‘My dear and eminent *confrère,* I read with emotion your superb lines. It is a reflection of your own glory that you send me. How shall I not love that England which produces such men as you! The England of Wilberforce, the England of Milton and of Newton! The England of Shakespeare! France and England are for me one people only, as Truth and Liberty are one light only. I believe in the unity of humanity, as I believe in the Divine unity. I love all peoples and all men. I admire your noble verses. Receive the cordial grasp of my hand. It made me happy to know your charming son, for it seemed to me that while clasping his hand I was pressing yours.’

In 1877-78 appeared Hugo’s *L’Histoire d’un Crime*. It possessed special interest from its autobiographical character, and, like many of its predecessors, it was instinct with energy and passion. By way of preface to this history, the author remarked, ‘This work is more than opportune; it is imperative. I publish it.’ Then came the following explanatory note: ‘This work was written twenty-six years ago at Brussels, during the first months of exile. It was begun on the 14th of December, 1851, and on the day succeeding the author’s arrival in Belgium, and was finished on the 5th of May, 1852, as though chance had willed that the anniversary of the death of the first Bonaparte should be countersigned by the condemnation of the third. It is also chance which, through a combination of work, of cares, and of bereavements, has delayed the publication of this history until this extraordinary year, 1877. In causing the recital of events of the past to coincide with the events of to-day, has chance had any purpose? We hope not. As we have just said, the story of the *Coup d’État* was written by a hand still hot from the combat against the *Coup d’État*. The exile immediately became an historian. He carried away this crime in his angered memory, and he was resolved to lose nothing of it: hence this book. The manuscript of 1851 has been very little revised. It remains what it was, abounding in details, and living, it might be said bleeding, with real facts. The author constituted himself an interrogating judge; all his companions of the struggle and of exile came to give evidence before him. He has added his testimony to theirs. Now history is in possession of it; it will judge. If God wills, the publication of this book will shortly be terminated. The continuation and conclusion will appear on the 2nd of December. An appropriate date.’

When the second part of the work was issued at the beginning of 1878, France had fortunately passed through a time of great political excitement without those fearful consequences which have frequently followed such periods in her history. The continuation of Victor Hugo’s work did not consequently create such popular fervour as it might otherwise have done. But the author was as scathing as ever in his invectives, and no one knew such strong depths of bitterness and indignation as he. The satellites of Louis Napoleon were sketched with the pen of a Swift, and in the delineation of their master we find such touches as this: ‘Louis Napoleon laid claim to a knowledge of men, and his claim was justified. He prided himself on it, and from one point of view he was right. Others possess discrimination; he had a nose. ’Twas bestial, but infallible.’ As for the members of his court, ‘they lived for pleasure. They lived by the public death. They breathed an atmosphere of shame, and throve on what kills honest people.’ There are many interesting episodes in a momentous period dealt with throughout this work, which, like everything else by its author, is instinct with his strong personality.

CHAPTER XV. POEMS ON RELIGION.

Victor Hugo’s attitude on religion was the subject of frequent comment. It is now known that so far from being a sceptic, as was frequently declared, he had a firm belief in God and immortality. When a rationalist on one occasion said to him that though he himself had a dim belief in immortality, he doubted whether the outcasts of society could have any belief in their own immortality, the poet replied, ‘Perhaps they believe in it more than you do.’

Arsène Houssaye has left an interesting sketch of certain religious confidences with which Hugo favoured him some years before his last illness. ‘I am conscious within myself of the certainty of a future life,’ the poet expressly said. ‘The nearer I approach my end the clearer do I hear the immortal symphonies of worlds that call me to themselves. For half a century I have been outpouring my volumes of thought in prose and in verse, in history, philosophy, drama, romance, ode, and ballad, yet I appear to myself not to have said a thousandth part of what is within me; and when I am laid in the tomb I shall not reckon that my life is finished; the grave is not a *cul-de-sac*, it is an avenue; death is the sublime prolongation of life, not its dreary finish; it closes in the twilight, it opens in the dawn. My work is only begun; I yearn for it to become brighter and nobler; and this craving for the infinite demonstrates that there is an infinity.’ He denied that there were any occult forces responsible for the creation of man and nature; there was a luminous force, and that was God. Continuing the thought as to his own future existence, he added, ‘I am nothing, a passing echo, an evanescent cloud; but let me only live on through my future existences, let me continue the work I have begun, let me surmount the perils, the passions, the agonies, that age after age may be before me, and who shall tell whether I may not rise to have a place in the council-chamber of the Ruler that controls all, and whom we own as God?’

If his creed had not many doctrines, it was at least very clear upon those which he did hold. He set against the God of the Papists, as he conceived him, another being whom he regarded as the personification of the true, the just, and the beautiful, who made his influence everywhere felt, but nowhere more deeply or more permanently than in the human conscience.

In April, 1878, Hugo gave a concrete form to some of his religious ideas in his poem entitled *Le Pape*. It represented the Pope — though not the existing or any particular Pontiff — as having a long dream. He finds himself treading in the steps of Christ, mixing with and succouring the poor and the afflicted, eschewing all pomp, interposing between two hostile armies and preventing bloodshed, saving the malefactor from the scaffold, and finally leaving Rome for Jerusalem. All this, of course, is a fearful mistake; his Holiness wakes up, declares that he has had a frightful dream, and clings to the Syllabus and worldly state more firmly than ever. The contrast was very sharply drawn between the good, ideal pastor, and the worldly and sensual father too often met with. Hugo's evolvement of his own ideas led to much controversy, and his book was severely attacked. By way of reply he issued *La Pitié Suprême*. For those who sinned through ignorance and defective education, he inculcated pity and forgiveness; and the work generally furnished but another illustration to many which had gone before of the liberality of his mind, and his support of the doctrine of universal toleration. At a still later date, in his *L'Âne*, he once more denounced false teachers. Desiring, like Rabelais, to lash his kind, the poet put his denunciations into the mouth of an ass, which animal was taken to be the type of unsophisticated man. In the pages of this satire, observed Louis Ulbach, 'the poet at the climax of his life, dazzled though he is by the nearness of the dawn beyond, glances back at those whom he has left behind, addresses them with raillery keen enough to stimulate them, but not stern enough to discourage them, and from the standpoint of his severity, puts a fool's cap upon all false science, false wisdom, and false piety.' Nevertheless, the work was regarded as a failure, in spite of its scintillations of genius, the satiric power of Victor Hugo being one rather of fierce denunciation than that which consists in the perception of the incongruous in humanity.

Another work in which Hugo endeavoured to place the false and the true in religion side by side, was his *Religions et Religion*, issued in 1880. 'This book,' said the author in a prefatory note, 'was commenced in 1870, and completed in 1880. The year 1870 gave infallibility to the Papacy, and Sedan to the Empire. What is the year 1880 to bring forth?' *Religions et Religion* was an attack not only upon various systems of religion, but also upon those who attack all religion. The writer made an assault upon the system of Milton, and established a system of religion of his own, which in its catholicity should embrace all spirits who love the good. The work was regarded as part of the great epic *Le Fin de Satan*, which had been foreshadowed many years before. But, as one of his critics remarked, if Hugo had fallen into the mistake of thinking that this book was not only a poem full of the loveliest sayings and the noblest aspirations, but a valuable treatise on theology and philosophy, it was but a mistake which he had been making ever since he began to write. Hugo's new poem 'is an emphatic, not to say a violent, answer to two different systems of poetic religion, each of which is itself at war with the other — the system of Dante and the system of Milton. Without Hell, Dante would never have been able to write a line of the Inferno; and without the Devil, Milton would have been in a condition equally forlorn. Yet M. Hugo's book is an attack upon both these venerable beliefs, and also upon the positivists who are trying to undermine them.' Hugo, in short, gave his support to the unconscious humourist who complained of *Paradise Lost* that it proved nothing.

As a polemic in verse, the poet was not very successful; but no one would turn to the poems of Victor Hugo in order to find the successful controversial theologian. No doubt he made the mistake of believing that he was eminently fitted for grappling with abstruse religious theories, and he was not the first literary genius who has done so. But if he failed in polemics in the work at which I have just glanced, there still remained, in all his energy and fulness, Hugo the poet and the philanthropist.

CHAPTER XVI. PUBLIC ADDRESSES, ETC.

Victor Hugo was unquestionably a great orator, or rather I ought perhaps to say he exhibited the powers of a great orator on special occasions. If eloquence is to be measured by the effect which it has upon the audience, he had the electrical force of the orator in no small degree; for in connection with certain persons and topics he was successful in enkindling an enthusiasm in his hearers which was almost unparalleled. But his oratory was not of that even kind which, if it never passes beyond a given elevation, never sinks on the other hand into bathos or commonplace. Hugo had a wonderful gift of language, and he was an orator when his heart was thrown into his subject, and he pressed into its service all the wealth of rhetoric he had at command. Nevertheless, some of his public utterances were far from being successful — a result due in some instances to extravagance of language and quixotism of idea, and in others to the absence of that ‘sweet reasonableness’ which dispassionately weighs and considers the opinions of others, and judges righteous judgment.

At the celebration of the Voltaire centenary in Paris in May, 1878, Hugo was the chief speaker. The great meeting was held in the Gaîté Theatre, which was crowded to suffocation. One who was present stated that while all the speakers at the demonstration were warmly applauded, it was only when Victor Hugo arose that the full tempest of acclamation burst forth. ‘Can a grander, a more striking, a more exaggerated scene be conceived than this association of Victor Hugo and Voltaire, of the most eloquent and the most touching of French orators exhausting his mines of highly coloured epithets and colossal antitheses on the ironical head of Voltaire? A report of his speech does not suffice; the white head and apostle’s beard, the inspired eye, the solemn voice, rolling as if it would sound in the ears of posterity; the involuntarily haughty attitude in vain striving to seem modest; the imperturbable seriousness with which he piles antithesis upon antithesis — all this must be realized.’ Hugo was enthusiastically cheered on taking the chair. Waving his arm he exclaimed, ‘*Vive la République!*’ — a cry which was then taken up with equal fervour by every person in the audience. After the other speakers had been heard, the distinguished chairman delivered his oration. He rapidly sketched the work accomplished by Voltaire, and concluded thus: ‘Alas! the present moment, worthy as it is of admiration and respect, has still its dark side. There are still clouds on the horizon; the tragedy of peoples is not played out; war still raises its head over this august festival of peace; princes for two years have persisted in a fatal misunderstanding; their discord is an obstacle to our concord, and they are ill-inspired in condemning us to witness the contrast. This contrast brings us back to Voltaire. Amid these threatening events let us be more peaceful than ever. Let us bow before this great dead, this great living spirit. Let us bend before the venerated sepulchre. Let us ask counsel of him whose life, useful to men, expired a hundred years ago, but whose work is immortal. Let us ask counsel of other mighty thinkers and auxiliaries of this glorious Voltaire — of Jean Jacques, Diderot, Montesquieu. Let us stop the shedding of human blood. Enough, despots. Barbarism still exists. Let philosophy protest. Let the eighteenth century succour the nineteenth. The philosophers, our predecessors, are the apostles of truth. Let us invoke these illustrious phantoms that, face to face with monarchies thinking of war, they may proclaim the right of man to life, the right of conscience to liberty, the sovereignty of reason, the sacredness of labour, the blessedness of peace. And as night issues from thrones, let light emanate from the tombs.' There are probably no two great French writers who present more marked points of contrast than Voltaire and Victor Hugo; yet the latter, not only in praising his predecessor, but on many other occasions, gloried in being grandly inconsistent if he could thereby, as he believed, advance the interests of humanity.

Victor Hugo presided at the International Literary Congress held in Paris in June, 1878. His speech on that occasion, though by no means confined to business details, was accepted by the Congress as forming the basis of its decisions. The speaker urged that a book once published becomes in part the property of society, and that after its author's death his family have no right to prevent its reissue. He held that a publisher should be required to declare the cost and the selling price of any book he intended to bring out; that the author's heirs should be entitled to 5 or 10 per cent. of the profit, and that in default of heirs the profit should revert to the State, to be applied to the encouragement of young writers.

Passing to more general questions, and dwelling on the memorableness of the year 1878, Hugo defined the Exhibition as the alliance of industry, the Voltaire Centenary as the alliance of philosophy, and the Congress then sitting as the alliance of literature. 'Industry seeks the useful, philosophy seeks the true, literature seeks the beautiful — the triple aim of all human forces.’ He welcomed the foreign delegates as the ambassadors of the human mind, citizens of a universal city, the constituent assembly of literature. Peoples, he remarked, were estimated by their literature; Greece, small in territory, thereby earning greatness, the name of England suggesting that of Shakespeare, and France being at a certain period personified in Voltaire. He next showed that copyright was in the interest of the public, by securing the independence of the writer; and, glancing at the former dependent position of men of letters, he remarked that paternal government resulted in this — the people without bread and Corneille without a sou. Deriding the alleged dangerousness of books, and urging the real dangers of ignorance, he described schools as the luminous points of civilization. He ridiculed as harmless archæological curiosities those who wished mankind to be kept in perpetual leading-strings, and who anathematized 1789, liberty of conscience, free speech, and a free tribune. He exhorted men of letters to recognise as their mission conciliation for ideas and reconciliation for men. They should war against war. ‘Love one another’ signified universal disarmament, the restoration to health of the human race, the true redemption of mankind. An enemy was better disarmed by offering him your hand than by shaking your fist. In lieu of *Delenda est Carthago*, he proposed the destruction of hatred, which was best effected by pardon. After showing her industry and hospitality, France should show her clemency, for a festival should be fraternal, and a festival which did not forgive somebody was not a real festival. The symbol of public joy was the Amnesty, and let this be the crowning of the Paris Exhibition.

In the August following this Congress, a great working-men’s conference was held in the French capital in favour of International Arbitration. Victor Hugo being unable to attend and preside at the gathering, as originally announced, sent a communication expressing his approbation of the objects of the meeting. ‘I demand what you demand,’ he wrote. ‘I want what you want. Our alliance is the commencement of unity. Let us be calm; without us, Governments attempt something, but nothing of what they try to do will succeed against your decision, against your liberty, against your sovereignty. Look on at what they do without uneasiness, always with serenity, sometimes with a smile. The supreme future is with you. All that is done, even against you, will serve you. Continue to march, labour, and think. You are a single people; Europe and you want a single thing — peace.’ Two or three months subsequent to this meeting, the English Working-men’s Peace Association waited upon Victor Hugo in Paris, and presented him with an address, magnificently illuminated and framed, as a token of admiration for the services he had rendered to the cause of humanity and peace. In reply, Hugo said: ‘As long as I live I shall oppose war, and defend the cause which is dear and common to us all — the cause of labour and peace.’

As honorary president of a secular education congress in 1879, Victor Hugo thus addressed that body: ‘Youth is the future. You teach youth, you prepare the future. This preparation is useful, this teaching is necessary to make the man of to-morrow. The man of to-morrow is the universal Republic. The Republic is unity, harmony, light, industry, creating comfort; it is the abolition of conflicts between man and man, nation and nation, the abolition of the law of death, and establishment of the law of life. The time of sanguinary and terrible revolutionary necessities is past. For what remains to be done the unconquerable law of progress suffices. Great battles we have still to fight — battles the evident necessity of which does not disturb the serenity of thinkers; battles in which revolutionary energy will equal monarchical obstinacy; battles in which force joined with right will overthrow violence allied with usurpation — superb, glorious, enthusiastic, decisive battles, the issue of which is not doubtful, and which will be the Hastings and the Austerlitz of humanity. Citizens, the time of the dissolution of the old world has arrived. The old despotisms are condemned by the Providential law. Every day which passes buries them still deeper in annihilation. The Republic is the future.’

Another address, in which Hugo expounded his views of the future of humanity, of labour and progress, etc., was delivered at Château d’Eau, on behalf of the Workmen’s Congress at Marseilles. Differentiating the achievements of the centuries, he remarked that ‘for four hundred years the human race has not made a step but what has left its plain vestige behind. We enter now upon great centuries. The sixteenth century will be known as the age of painters; the seventeenth will be termed the age of writers; the eighteenth, the age of philosophers; the nineteenth, the age of apostles and prophets. To satisfy the nineteenth century it is necessary to be the painter of the sixteenth, the writer of the seventeenth, the philosopher of the eighteenth; and it is also necessary, like Louis Blanc, to have the innate and holy love of humanity which constitutes an apostolate, and opens up a prophetic vista into the future. In the twentieth century war will be dead, the scaffold will be dead, animosity will be dead, royalty will be dead, and dogmas will be dead; but man will live. For all there will be but one country — that country the whole earth; for all there will be but one hope — that hope the whole heaven.’

It will be seen that there was a sweeping breadth and magnificence about Victor Hugo’s prophecies for the twentieth century. But that epoch is so near that we may well doubt whether the seer’s extensive programme will so speedily be realized. Still, the prophecy is lofty, generous, noble, and I will not attempt to destroy the horoscope. Passing on to the great question of the day, that of labour, the orator observed: ‘The political question is solved. The Republic is made, and nothing can unmake it. The social question remains; terrible as it is, it is quite simple; it is a question between those who have, and those who have not. The latter of these two classes must disappear, and for this there is work enough. Think a moment! Man is beginning to be master of the earth. If you want to cut through an isthmus, you have Lesseps; if you want to create a sea, you have Roudaire. Look you; there is a people and there is a world; and yet the people have no inheritance, and the world is a desert. Give them to each other, and you make them happy at once. Astonish the universe by heroic deeds that are better than wars. Does the world want conquering? No, it is yours already; it is the property of civilization; it is already waiting for you; no one disputes your title. Go on, then, and colonize.’

This is no doubt grand, but it is vague. However, the men of highest aspiration have frequently proved themselves ill-fitted for the practical development of their own theories. It is the penalty which the brain has to pay for being stronger than the hand that it must often call in the services and co-operation of the latter. Hugo was exceedingly happy in dealing with cavillers at material progress. He showed that those who make the worst mistakes are those who ought to be the least mistaken. ‘Forty-five years ago M. Thiers declared that the railway would be a mere toy between Paris and St. Germain; another distinguished man, M. Pouillet, confidently predicted that the apparatus of the electric telegraph would be consigned to a cabinet of curiosities. And yet these two playthings have changed the course of the world. Have faith, then; and let us realize our equality as citizens, our fraternity as men, our liberty in intellectual power. Let us love not only those who love us, but those who love us not. Let us learn to wish to benefit all men. Then everything will be changed; truth will reveal itself; the beautiful will arise; the supreme law will be fulfilled, and the world shall enter upon a perpetual fête-day. I say, therefore, have faith! Look down at your feet, and you see the insect moving in the grass; look upwards, and you will see the star resplendent in the firmament: yet what are they doing? They are both at their work; the insect is doing its work upon the ground, and the star is doing its work in the sky. It is an infinite distance that separates them, and yet while it separates, unites. They follow their law. And why should not their law be ours? Man, too, has to submit to universal force, and inasmuch as he submits in body and in soul, he submits doubly. His hand grasps the earth, but his soul embraces heaven; like the insect he is a thing of dust, but like the star he partakes of the empyrean. He labours and he thinks. Labour is life, and thought is light!'

Some idea of Victor Hugo's social and humanitarian ideas may be gained from these addresses. In the course of a conversation with M. Barbou, however, he supplemented these views and theories by explicit statements upon various questions. France, he said, was in possession of a *bourgeoise* Republic, which was not an ideal one, but which would undergo a slow and gradual transformation. He regarded himself and his contemporaries as having been pioneers and monitors, whose advice was worth obtaining, because they had gained their knowledge by experience, having lived through the struggles of the past; but whose theories could not be put into practice by themselves. The future solution of the social question belonged to younger men, and to the twentieth century. That solution, he maintained, would be found in nothing less than the universal spread of instruction; it would follow the formation of schools where salutary knowledge should be imparted. By educating the child they would endow the man, and when that had been accomplished, society might proceed to exercise severe repression upon anyone who resisted what was right, because he would have been already so trained that he could not plead ignorance in his own behalf.

But Hugo was careful to add that he did not expect a Utopia to follow this universal dissemination of knowledge. When man had proceeded well on the path of advancement, he would require land to cultivate. He would go out and colonize, and the whole interior of Africa was destined, he believed, before long to be conquered by civilization. Frontiers would disappear, for the idea of fraternity was making its way throughout the world. As the whole earth belonged to man, men must go forth and reclaim it. For the whole race he saw a brighter future, and his watchwords in this respect would seem to have been — Labour, progress, peace, happiness, and enlightenment.

CHAPTER XVII. ‘LA LÉGENDE DES SIÈCLES,’ ETC.

I have reserved this poem for somewhat fuller mention than I have been able to accord to Victor Hugo’s other works. This is called for by reason of the inherent grandeur of the work, and because upon this noble achievement the greatness of the poet’s fame must ultimately rest. Mr. Swinburne holds it to be the greatest work of the century, and many critics who have not his *perfervidum ingenium* incline to the same view. When the first part of the *Légende* appeared, in 1859, it excited so much interest that every poet of any note in France wrote warm letters of congratulation to the author. To one of these, penned by Baudelaire, and typical of the rest, Hugo characteristically replied.

Regarding humanity in two aspects — the historical and the legendary, and maintaining that the latter was in one sense as true as the former, Hugo took up the legendary side of the question in this Legend of the Ages. It was intended to be followed by two other sections under the respective titles of ‘The End of Satan’ and ‘God.’ The first part of this great trilogy was far more striking than any of its author’s previous poems. Its brilliancy and energy, its literary skill and its powerful conceptions, enchained the attention. The poet divided his work into sixteen cycles, extending from the Creation to the Trump of Judgment. A full and on the whole discriminating criticism of this remarkable poem has been given by the Bishop of Derry, who also, with some success, has translated passages from it. But Victor Hugo’s French is too peculiar and impassioned to be brought within the trammels of English verse. Nevertheless, I will quote from the Bishop the last three stanzas of that beautiful poem, *Booz Endormi*, one of the first set of poems, all of which are devoted to Scriptural subjects. The rich man Boaz sleeps, quite unconscious of the Moabitess Ruth, who lies expectant at his feet:

‘Asphodel scents did Gilgal’s breezes bring —
Through nuptial shadows, questionless, full fast
The angels sped, for momently there pass’d
A something blue which seem’d to be a wing.

‘Silent was all in Jezreel and in Ur —
The stars were glittering in the heaven’s dusk meadows.
Far west among those flowers of the shadows,
The thin clear crescent, lustrous over her,
‘Made Ruth raise question, looking through the bars
Of Heaven, with eyes half-oped, what God, what comer
Unto the harvest of the eternal summer,
Had flung his golden hook down on the field of stars.’

The second section deals with the Decadence of Rome, and here the poet’s imagination has full sway. The well-known story of Androcles and the Lion is the subject of a beautiful poem. The third section is Islam, and then come the Heroic Christian Cycle, the Day of Kings, etc. But perhaps the most important composition in the work is Eviradnus, a poem in praise of the true and gentle knight. The Thrones of the East, Ratbert, Sultan Mourad, the Twentieth Century, and some other sections, all bear evidence of intense poetic realism, and show the mastery of the author over pictorial and dramatic effects.

The Bishop of Derry raises a question upon which a good deal might be said, when he propounds a theory to the effect that Victor Hugo possesses fancy rather than imagination. It may not be possible to produce passages from Hugo which, for sustained grandeur and breadth of conception, would be equal to isolated passages that could be cited from Dante and Milton; yet there are as unquestionably scores of other passages in the works of Victor Hugo in describing which it would be wholly inadequate to use the term fancy. They are either grandly and powerfully imaginative, or they are nothing. This writer no doubt too frequently distorts his conceptions, while his treatment sometimes falls from sublimity into caricature; but it is incontestable, I think, that in spite of all *bizarrerie*, and every other exception or qualification, he possesses a mobile and an impressive imagination.

In 1877 appeared the second part of *La Légende des Siècles*. Although it scarcely rose to the level of the first part, it was not without those exalted passages which gave supremacy to the poet. ‘Once again the seer surveys the cycle of humanity from the days of Paradise to the future which he anticipates; he takes his themes alike from the legends of the heroic age of Greece, and from the domains of actual history, and after singing of the achievements of the great, he dedicates his lay to the little ones, and in a charming poem entitled *Petit Paul* he depicts with fascinating pathos all the tenderness and all the sorrows of childhood.'

The third and final part of the work was published in 1883. Discussing the unity of tone which entitles this strange work, with its multitude of separate characters and incidents, to be called a poem, a writer in the *Athenæum* observed: 'It is an apprehension, at once profound and tender, of the pathos of man's mysterious life on the earth; a pity such as has never before been expressed by any poet; a beautiful faith in God such as, in these days, can only find an echo in rare and noble souls; and an aspiration for justice and the final emancipation of man such as seems an anachronism, indeed, in a time which has given birth to Gautier and to Baudelaire on the one hand, and to Zola and his followers on the other.' Yet, notwithstanding its unity, it is not a little curious that the Legend was as finished a work at the end of the first instalment as it was at the end of the whole. As to the poetic qualities of the closing part of the work, there was no decadence of true poetic impulse, nor any subsidence of that marvellous brilliance which dazzled Europe when the first part of the poem appeared. But neither was there any growth of those highest poetic characteristics 'in which Hugo's magnificent poetry was always weak — such as self-dominance, serenity, and that wise sweetness of a balancing judgment, equitable alike to the slave in the field and to the king on his throne, which belongs to the mind we call dramatic, whether the dramatist be the writer of *Œdipus* or the writer of *Hamlet*.'

The *Légende des Siècles* offers a bewildering maze of things, sweet, beautiful, and sublime. It scintillates with the brilliant lights of genius as the vault of heaven is fretted with the glittering stars. Yet what is perhaps nobler still, as Mr. Swinburne has said, 'Over and within this book faith shines as a kindling torch, hope breathes as a quickening wind, love burns as a changing fire. It is tragic, not with the hopeless tragedy of Dante, or the all but hopeless tragedy of Shakespeare. Whether we can or cannot share the infinite hope and inviolable faith to which the whole active and suffering life of the poet has borne such unbroken and imperishable witness, we cannot in any case but recognise the greatness and heroism of his love for mankind. As in the case of Æschylus, it is the hunger and thirst after righteousness, the deep desire for perfect justice in heaven as on earth, which would seem to assure the prophet's inmost heart of its final triumph by the prevalence of wisdom and of light over all claims and all pleas established or asserted by the children of darkness, so in the case of Victor Hugo is it the hunger and thirst after reconciliation, the love of loving-kindness, the master-passion of mercy, which persists in hope and insists on faith, even in face of the hardest and darkest experience through which a nation or a man can pass. Hugo’s poetic masterpiece, to translate his own language concerning it, had its rise in the past, in the tomb, in the darkness and the night of the ages; but permeating all is the regenerating light of a mighty hope.’

The poet published in 1881 *Les Quatre Vents de l’Esprit*. The work which bore this fanciful title of the four winds of the Spirit was divided into four distinct sections — the Book Satiric, the Book Dramatic, the Book Lyric, and the Book Epic. The wind of Victor Hugo, however, is chiefly of the lyric kind. It ‘is like a fine sou’wester, warm and bright, but deeply charged with tears. Over the bitter and eager wind of satire, for instance, he has no real command, and none over that bracing north wind of masculine thought and intellectual strength which is necessary to vitalize epic and drama.’ So it was complained, and not without force or reason, that while it would be impossible to praise the lyrical portions of his work too highly, the satirical lacked subtlety and delicacy to make it effective; the epic wanted a larger freedom of natural growth; while situations intended to be dramatic rarely rose above the merely theatrical. The play in which these situations occur is concerned with the absolute equality of all men in regard to the great human passions. Cynicism or conventionality may for a long period encrust a man, but there comes a time when the heart will have its way. Hugo’s latest illustrator of this truth, Duc Gallus, rescues a peasant girl from a proposed marriage with a brutal fellow whom she loathes, but rescues her with the deliberate intention of making her his mistress. Though surrounded with splendour, the girl soon pines and breaks her heart through sheer loneliness, and at last in despair she kills herself by means of a poisoned ring. The Nemesis of remorse now overtakes the Duc. Beneath this pretended cynicism there has been all the while smouldering a real passion, which, now that it is too late, breaks out into a fierce and inextinguishable flame; it was in depicting these heights and depths of emotion that Hugo found his keenest delight.

The Book Epic deals with the great French Revolution, but it is in the Book Lyric that the poet achieves his finest triumph. In considering the substance and variety of Hugo’s lyrical efforts, every reader will agree with the judgment that amongst poets of energy, as distinguished from the poets of art and culture, Shelley’s is the only name in nineteenth-century literature which can stand beside that of Victor Hugo.

In 1882 was published *Torquemada*, a drama written chiefly during Victor Hugo’s exile in Guernsey. The poet himself regarded it as one of his best efforts, and it certainly exhibits his glowing imagination and his power of depicting human misery at their highest. The great Inquisitor is drawn as a single-minded enthusiast who, following relentlessly to their conclusion the doctrines upon which he has been nourished from childhood, burns and tortures people out of pure love of their souls — that is, fastens their bodies to the stake for the purpose of saving from the everlasting fires of hell both their souls and their bodies. The poet shows how the idea gradually mastered him until it became irresistible as fate. The chief point in the plot well illustrates this. Torquemada having been condemned as a fanatic by the Bishop of Urgel, is ordered to be bricked up alive in a vault. He is rescued from his living tomb by two lovers, Don Sanche and Donna Rosa. Torquemada swears to be their eternal friend, and subsequently saves them from the wrath of the King. Sanche and Rosa are just being freed when the former relates the manner of the deliverance of Torquemada from his tomb. Sanche had used as a lever on that occasion an iron cross which hung upon the tottering wall. ‘O ciel! ils sont damnés!’ exclaims Torquemada, when he hears this. In his view the lovers are now condemned to eternal perdition, but in order to save their souls he sends their bodies to the stake. It need scarcely be said that the author, in ascribing honesty and other characteristics to the bloodthirsty Inquisitor, gives a more exalted view of him than is taken by impartial history. But the play must be read for its poetry and its scenic effects, which are magnificent.

A prose work by Hugo, to which considerable interest attaches, was published in 1883, under the title of *L’Archipel de la Manche*. As its title implies, it deals with the Channel Islands, in one of which the author found for so long a time his home. From the literary aspect, the work suffers when compared with its author’s verse, which alone can be grandly descriptive — at least since the production of his earlier romances. But for its glimpses of the inhabitants of Guernsey, and its occasional touches of rich local colour, this work may be turned to with pleasure and advantage.

CHAPTER XVIII. HONOURS TO VICTOR HUGO.

Unlike many other great men, Victor Hugo was not compelled to wait for a posthumous recognition of his powers. His genius was incontestable; he towered far above all his contemporaries; and the universal acknowledgment of his talents left no room for jealousy. Hence writers and artists of all classes, and of varying eminence, combined with their less distinguished fellow-countrymen in paying homage to one who has shed undying lustre upon the French name.

The chief ovations accorded to the poet I must briefly pass in review. Several revivals of his best-known dramas have taken place of recent years, but the most striking of these celebrations was undoubtedly that at the Théâtre Français, on the 25th of February, 1880. It was the fiftieth anniversary of the original representation of *Hernani*, and that play was again produced to mark ‘the golden wedding of Hugo’s genius and his glory.’ After the termination of the play the curtain was lifted, when a bust of the dramatist was seen elevated on a pedestal profusely decorated with wreaths and palm-leaves. The stage was filled with actors dressed to represent the leading characters in Hugo’s various plays. Mademoiselle Sarah Bernhardt came forward in the character of Doña Sol, and recited with much feeling and energy some laudatory verses by M. François Coppée, which roused anew the enthusiasm of the audience. In response to the call of M. Francisque Sarcey, the vast assembly rose, and filled the air with their congratulatory vociferations. ‘*Ad multos annos!* long live Victor Hugo!’ Such were the cries from all parts of the house, which so affected the venerable poet that he was compelled to retire.

A few days subsequent to this performance the members of the Parisian press gave a grand banquet to Victor Hugo at the Hôtel Continental. The speech of welcome and honour to the poet was delivered by M. Émile Augier, himself a writer of considerable reputation. After referring to the marvellous vitality of Victor Hugo’s poems and romances, the speaker said: ‘Time, O glorious master, takes no hold upon you; you know nothing of decline; you pass through every stage of life without diminishing your virility; for more than half a century your genius has covered the world with the unceasing flow of its tide. The resistance of the first period, the rebellion of the second, have melted away into universal admiration, and the last refractory spirits have yielded to your power.... When La Bruyère before the Academy hailed Bossuet as father of the Church, he was speaking the language of posterity, and it is posterity itself, noble master, that surrounds you here, and hails you as our father.'

At the word 'father' the whole audience rose, and took up the salutation. When quiet was restored M. Delaunay suggested that the poet should be solicited for a new dramatic work. The enthusiasm was renewed at this suggestion, and it may well be imagined that the acclamations reached their culminating point when Sarah Bernhardt rose and embraced the aged author of *Hernani*. On this occasion Victor Hugo read his address of thanks, which was brief and pregnant in its allusions. 'Before me I see the press of France,' said Hugo. 'The worthies who represent it here have endeavoured to prove its sovereign concord, and to demonstrate its indestructible unity. You have assembled to grasp the hand of an old campaigner, who began life with the century, and lives with it still. I am deeply touched. I tender you all my thanks. All the noble words that we have just been hearing only add to my emotion. There are dates that seem to be periodically repeated with marked significance. The 26th of February, 1802, was my birthday; in 1830 it was the time of the first appearance of *Hernani*; and this again is the 26th of February, 1880. Fifty years ago, I, who am now here speaking to you, was hated, hooted, slandered, cursed. Today, to-day — but the date is enough. Gentlemen, the French press is one of the mistresses of the human intellect; it has its daily task, and that task is gigantic. In every minute of every hour it has its influence upon every portion of the civilized world; its struggles, its disputes, its wrath resolve themselves into progress, harmony, and peace. In its premeditations it aims at truth; from its polemics it flashes forth light. I propose as my toast the prosperity of the French press, the institution that fosters such noble designs, and renders such noble services.'

On the 27th of December, 1880, there was a grand festival at Besançon in honour of the poet, its most illustrious son. The chief inhabitants of the town, and the visitors from Paris, assembled at the Mairie, and proceeded thence to the Place St. Quentin. The Mayor was accompanied by M. Rambaud, chief secretary to the Minister of Public Instruction, and General Wolff, commander of the *Corps d'Armée*. There were also present deputations from the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies, officers, university professors, a representative of the President of the Republic, the Rector of the Academy, the Prefect, the Municipal Councillors, and a large body of members of the press. The poet was represented by M. Paul Meurice. The whole of Besançon was *en fête*. In a street facing the Place St. Quentin a large platform had been erected, and here the proceedings took place. A beautiful medallion affixed to a house near the platform was uncovered by the Mayor. This medallion represented a five-stringed lyre with two laurel branches of gold, and there was an inscription which, by the poet's express desire, consisted simply of his name and the date of his birth — 'Victor Hugo: 26th of February, 1802.' The lyre was surmounted by a head typical of the Republic, encircled by rays. The procession adjourned from the Place St. Quentin to the stage at the Besançon Theatre, in the centre of which had been placed David's bust of Victor Hugo. At the request of the Mayor, M. Rambaud delivered an address upon the poet's character and genius. He recited the history of his struggles and of his literary conflicts, and of the gradual attainment of victory over thought and intellect; descanted upon his ever-increasing influence, his development as a politician, his internal conflicts, and his final triumph; described his prolonged duel with the Empire, and his ultimate success; reviewed the leading characteristics of his lyrical, dramatic, and historical writings; and finally demonstrated how, after a life fraught with conflicts, trials, and sorrows, he found his reward in the revival of France, in the progress of democracy; and last, though not least, in the peaceful joys of domestic life and the society of his grandchildren.

To this address M. Paul Meurice responded, and read the following letter from Victor Hugo himself: 'It is with deep emotion that I tender my thanks to my compatriots. I am a stone on the road that is trodden by humanity; but that road is a good one. Man is master neither of his life nor of his death. He can but offer to his fellow-citizens his efforts to diminish human suffering; he can but offer to God his indomitable faith in the growth of liberty.' The marble bust of the poet was crowned with a wreath of golden laurel, and while the whole audience stood, a band of one hundred and fifty musicians performed the *Marseillaise*. Cries of '*Vive Victor Hugo! Vive la République!*' were heard as the audience left the theatre.

An ovation such as few sovereigns have ever received was accorded to Victor Hugo by the City of Paris on the 27th of February, 1881. The day before, the poet had completed his seventy-ninth year, and by the French people this is regarded as entitling to octogenarian honours. A celebration took place which was compared with the reception of Voltaire in 1788. The Avenue d’Eylau, where Victor Hugo resided, was densely thronged, and the poet, being recognised with his children and grandchildren at an upper window of his house, was cheered by a vast multitude, estimated by unsympathetic observers at 100,000. The Municipality had erected at the entrance to the Avenue lofty flagstaffs decorated with shields bearing the titles of his works, and supporting a large drapery inscribed ‘1802, Victor Hugo, 1881.’ Early in the morning the Avenue was thronged with processions consisting of collegians, trades unions, musical and benefit societies, deputations from the districts of Paris and from the provinces, etc. A deputation of children, bearing a blue and red banner with the inscription, ‘*L’Art d’être Grand-père*,’ and headed by a little girl in white, arrived at the house, and was received by Victor Hugo in the drawing-room. The little maiden, who recited some lines by M. Mendès, was blessed by the venerable poet. Among other incidents of the day, the Paris Municipality drew up in front of the house, and Victor Hugo read to them the following speech: ‘I greet Paris, I greet the city. I greet it not in my name, for I am naught, but in the name of all that lives, reasons, thinks, loves, and hopes on earth. Cities are blessed places; they are the workshops of Divine labour. Divine labour is human labour. It remains human so long as it is individual; as soon as it is collective, as its object is greater than its worker, it becomes Divine. The labour of the fields is human; the labour of the towns is Divine. From time to time history places a sign upon a city. That sign is unique. History in 4,000 years has thus marked three cities, which sum up the whole effort of civilization. What Athens did for Greek antiquity, what Rome did for Roman antiquity, Paris is doing to-day for Europe, for America, for the civilized universe. It is the city of the world. Who addresses Paris addresses the whole world, *urbi et orbi*. I, a humble passer-by, who have but my share in your rights, in the name of all cities, of the cities of Europe, of America, of the civilized world, from Athens to New York, from London to Moscow; in thy name, Rome; in thine, Berlin — I praise, with love I hail, the hallowed city, Paris.’

A stream of processions then filed past the house, many of them bearing imposing bouquets, which were deposited in front of Hugo’s residence. The musical societies alone exceeded 100; strains of the *Marseillaise* were now and again audible, and the entire Avenue, nearly a mile long, was thickly lined with spectators, while that part of it commanding a view of the poet's house was densely packed, except for a passage-way for the processions. Medals and photographs of the hero of the day were to be seen everywhere, and the behaviour of the enormous assemblage was most exemplary. Victor Hugo, whose love of the fresh air always made him careless of exposure, remained at the open window for several hours bareheaded, acknowledging the greetings of the successive deputations and of the multitude. At the Trocadéro a musical and literary festival was held, when selections from Victor Hugo's works were sung or recited by some of the leading Paris *artistes*, and the *Marseillaise* was performed by a military band. M. Louis Blanc, who presided, said that few great men had entered in their lifetime into their immortality. Voltaire and Victor Hugo had both deserved this, one for stigmatizing religious intolerance, the other for having, with incomparable lustre, served humanity. He commended the committee for inviting the co-operation of men of different opinions, for genius united in a common admiration men otherwise at discord, and the idea of union was inseparable from a grand festival. 'There were enough days in the year given to what separated men. It was well to give a few hours to what brought them together, and there could be no better opportunity than the festival of an unrivalled poet, an eloquent apostle of human brotherhood, whose use of his genius was greater than his genius itself, the oneness of his life consisting in the constant ascent of his spirit towards the light.' In the evening of the day there was a Victor Hugo concert at the Conservatoire, and at many of the theatres verses were recited in his honour. On the night of the 25th a special performance was given at the Gaîté of *Lucrèce Borgia*, which had not been produced for ten years. The house was filled, all the notabilities of Paris being present, while the poet himself also appeared for a short time. The celebration generally was one triumphant success.

In honour of Hugo's eightieth birthday, on the 26th of February, 1882, the French Government ordered a free performance of *Hernani* at the Théâtre Français. Crowds stood outside for hours waiting for admission, and 2,300 persons managed to squeeze themselves into seats intended to accommodate only 1,500. The poet and his grandchildren were present during the last act, and were loudly applauded. Hugo's bust was placed on the stage at the close of the piece, and verses in his honour by M. Coppée were recited. On the preceding evening 5,000 persons had attended his reception, when the committee of the previous year's grand celebration presented him with a bronze miniature of Michael Angelo’s ‘Moses.’ In acknowledging the gift, the poet said, ‘I accept your present, and I await a still better one, the greatest a man can receive: I mean death — death, that recompense for the good done on earth. I shall live in my descendants, my grandchildren, Jeanne and Georges. If, indeed, I have a narrow-minded thought it is for them. I wish to ensure their future, and I confide them to the protection of all the loyal and devoted hearts here present.’

Yet one more celebration I must notice. On the 22nd of November, 1882, the Théâtre Français gave a brilliant performance of Victor Hugo’s *Le Roi s’Amuse*. It has already been seen that this piece was first produced on the 22nd of November, 1832, amid such a scene of disorder and tumult that the Government forbade its further representation. From that time forward it had never been produced until this fiftieth anniversary in 1882. It was the subject of preliminary conversation for weeks in Paris, and great anxiety was manifested on the subject of seats. It was stated that if the house, which had only provision for 1,500 persons, could have been made to accommodate 10,000, there would still have been an insufficiency of places to satisfy all the supplications with which the Théâtre Français was besieged. The intrinsic value of the work, however, was not the first thought of those who engaged in the feverish quest for seats, which for a full month possessed all fashionable, artistic, literary, political, diplomatic, and financial Paris. It was chiefly the desire to do honour to the veteran poet. With regard to the representation itself, the splendour of the mounting, the beauty of the accessories, and the historical fidelity of the costumes, transcended all expectation. Never was a piece placed on the stage with greater, or indeed probably equal, art.

CHAPTER XIX. PERSONAL AND MISCELLANEOUS.

In private life and character, it is well known that Victor Hugo was one of the noblest and most unselfish of men. Numberless are the anecdotes related of his generosity and kindliness of disposition. His children’s repasts at Hauteville House, Guernsey, and his hospitality to the suffering and distressed in Paris, I have already alluded to. He had a special talent for organizing Christmas parties, and was never happier than when surrounded by his grandchildren. He mingled in all their games, and even shared their troubles and their punishments. When his favourite little grandchild was put on dry bread for bad conduct, the grandfather was so unhappy that he would take no dessert. His pleasures were as simple as his mind was great. The writer who furnishes me with these details warmly contradicted the statement that Victor Hugo was an infidel; on the contrary, he was a firm believer in God and in a future state; and this, as we have seen, the poet himself confirmed. Even when in his octogenarian period it was the poet’s habit to rise with the day, summer and winter, and to work until nine. He then allowed himself an hour’s rest for breakfast and his morning constitutional, after which he again sat at his desk, mostly pursuing his intellectual labours, till five in the afternoon. Work being concluded, he dined at half-past six, and invariably retired to rest at ten. On one occasion, speaking of his future works, the poet said, ‘I shall have more to do than I have already done. One would think that with age the mind weakens; with me it appears, on the contrary, to grow stronger. The horizon gets larger, and I shall pass away without having finished my task.’

On one occasion, a poor old woman was so delighted with the poetry of her grandson, aged eighteen, that in the fulness of her heart she sent his verses to Victor Hugo. The poet thus spoke of this incident to a friend— ‘In spite of myself, I must hurt this worthy woman’s feelings by not replying to her letter; the verses of her grandson are simply mine, taken from *Les Contemplations*. I can’t anyhow write to say I find my own verses beautiful — I can’t encourage plagiarism; and I won’t tell the grandmother that her grandson is a liar.’

Much has been written concerning Hugo’s skill as a draughtsman. It appears that this own discovery of his powers in this direction was made in a little village near Meulan, where he stopped to change horses, when travelling with a lady in a diligence. He went inside the village church, and was so struck by the graceful beauty of the apse that he made an attempt to copy some of the details, using his hat as an easel. He obtained a fair *souvenir* of the place, and for the first time realized how beneficially copying from nature might be combined with his literary pursuits. After that he always delighted in sketching architectural peculiarities of fabrics which remained in the original design, and had not been ‘improved’ by modern handling.

He never took artistic lessons, but by constant practice he acquired considerable facility in representing a certain class of subjects, ruined castles with deep shadows, gloomy landscapes, stormy skies, etc. M. Ph. Burty and several writers and artists of the first class have expressed their admiration of his artistic work, and its striking effects. His drawings were chiefly illustrative of his own thoughts. They were employed either to develop his poems, or to serve as pictorial commentaries upon his own literary creations. Théophile Gautier wrote: ‘M. Hugo is not only a poet, he is a painter, and a painter whom Louis Boulanger, C. Roqueplan, or Paul Huet would not refuse to own as a brother in art. Whenever he travels he makes sketches of everything that strikes the eye. The outline of the hill, a break in the horizon, an old belfry — any of these will suffice for the subject of a rough drawing, which the same evening will see worked up well-nigh to the finish of an engraving, and the object of unbounded surprise even to the most accomplished artists.’ M. Castel collected many of Hugo’s early drawings into an album, and published them with the object of furthering the poet’s work among poor children. Théophile Gautier supplied an introduction to the album, and it had an excellent sale. A number of land and sea pieces, bearing Hugo’s signature, passed into the possession of M. Auguste Vacquerie. The poet prepared a set of illustrations for his *Les Travailleurs de la Mer*, and a second album, consisting of miscellaneous illustrations by Hugo, has also been prepared. Many of his sketches were left in Hauteville House, and M. Paul Meurice, Madame Lockroy, and Madame Drouet came into possession of others. Victor Hugo himself sat for a great number of portraits between his twenty-fifth and his seventy-seventh year, and he was likewise the subject of numerous caricatures. These portraits and caricatures were edited and published by M. Bouvenne. A very sumptuous volume is M. Blémont’s *Livre d’Or* of Victor Hugo, containing beautiful illustrations by eminent artists, suggested by his poems and romances.

During the latter years of his life Victor Hugo resided in the quarter already mentioned, the Avenue d’Eylau (near the Bois de Boulogne), whose name, out of compliment to the poet, has been changed by the Municipality of Paris into the Avenue Victor Hugo. The house is semi-detached, and adjoins that occupied by M. and Madame Lockroy and Georges and Jeanne. A communication between the two residences, however, brought the whole of the family practically under the same roof. The house is three stories high, and the poet’s study was on the first floor, where he lived in a kind of bower, looking out upon one side in the direction of the Avenue, and on the other towards a pleasant garden, with a lawn surrounded by flowers and shaded by noble trees. The daily post to Hugo’s house was an important matter, for he had a stream of communications from all parts of the world. If a poetaster in America or Australia thought he possessed immortal genius he could not rest content until he had received, or at least attempted to obtain, Victor Hugo’s imprimatur. There were many things the kindly veteran would smooth over in order not to wound sensitive minds bitten with the *cacoëthes scribendi*. The poet was also very accessible to personal callers, so much so that it was said you had only to put on a black coat, pull at his bell, and there you were. Sometimes his good-nature was imposed upon, as will happen with all men, little or great. An amusing story is told of a cabman who, after driving the poet one day, refused to take the fare, on the ground that the honour of having Victor Hugo in his vehicle was a sufficient reward. The author of *Notre-Dame* asked his admiring Jehu to dinner; but when the meal was over, and Hugo might naturally have thought they could cry quits, the guest drew a manuscript from his pocket with the ominous words, ‘I also am a poet!’ Greatness is thus not without its penalties.

A good deal of interest attaches to Victor Hugo’s manuscripts. Madame Drouet was the poet’s literary secretary for thirty years, and during all that period she copied with her own hand the manuscripts of his various works as he wrote them. This was done to guard against the danger of the originals being lost, or mangled by printers. A writer in the *Pall Mall Gazette* has furnished some interesting details respecting the manuscripts, which will be valuable as showing how the poet worked. What he effaced, he says, was so covered with ink, applied in a horizontal direction, that nobody will ever be able to make it out. When he wanted to get a subject well into his mind's eye he drew it sometimes with great finish of detail on the margin. There is something in several of the manuscripts reminding one of Doré's illustrations of the *Contes Drôlatiques*; while others bring to mind Albert Dürer's orfèvrerie. All Victor Hugo's important manuscripts have been bequeathed to the Bibliothèque Nationale.

The writer to whom I have just referred further adds these personal details respecting the poet and his habits: 'Victor Hugo occupied the room looking on the garden in which he died. The window of his chamber is framed with ivy, and opens on an ivy-clad balcony. A vast old-fashioned four-post bed, with a flat, short drapery of antique brocade round the roof, stands in an alcove. The poet's body lay on it after death. A dressing-room is at the head, and a small closet used as a wardrobe at the foot. The desk is massive, and made with shelves, on which precious books are placed. One of them is the volume of the *Contemplations*, paid for by public subscription when Victor Hugo was in exile, and presented to Madame Victor Hugo. The vignettes and other illustrated portion of the work were done by the artists who had known, admired, and loved her husband. Between every second page there was a blank sheet, upon which a literary celebrity wrote a thought, good wish, or sentiment. Michelet led off; Louis Blanc, Jules Janin, Théophile Gautier, Dumas père, and other celebrities of the time filled blank pages. Lamartine shines by his absence. He was always jealous of Victor Hugo, and querulously attacked *Les Misérables* soon after that strange *chef d'œuvre* was published. There is also a tall desk in Victor Hugo's bedroom. It was the one that he most used. He was up every morning at six, when he washed in cold water, and then took a cup of black coffee and a raw egg. This refection kept up strength and did not draw blood from the brain, as must a less easily digested one. If ideas did not come rapidly he went to the window, which was all day open, winter and summer, sought inspiration by gazing thence, returned to the desk, sketched, and then wrote. If his "go" slacked, he walked about, and again looked out and drew. At eleven he breakfasted. His Pegasus, he used to say, was the knifeboard (impérial) of an omnibus, and he generally mounted it early in the afternoon. If he had nothing particular to do he did not get down till he had been to the terminus and back again. The objective faculties were not more active in these rides than the subjective. He used to observe, reflect, and dream simultaneously.’ When not riding, Hugo was equally fond of walking about Paris, revisiting old sites associated with personal or historic events.

It will have been seen in the course of this volume that Victor Hugo was much tried by domestic affliction. Both his sons died young, Charles leaving the two children, Georges and Jeanne, of whom their grandfather was so fond. Madame Charles Hugo, the mother of these children, married afterwards, as already stated, M. Lockroy, the Extremist Deputy and journalist. The poet’s second daughter, Adèle Hugo, fifty years of age, is in an asylum in the neighbourhood of Paris; and from the Paris correspondent of the *Times*, and other sources, I glean the following information concerning her: Thirty years ago she married an officer of the English Navy, while her father was living at Guernsey. The marriage was contrary to the wishes of Victor Hugo, who refused to have further intercourse with his daughter. She went to India with her husband. Some years afterwards she came back to Europe insane, under the care of a negro woman, who had become attached to her. Her father secured her admission to an asylum, and visited her there every week. On these journeys to St. Mandé to see his daughter, he would take the Muette-Belville omnibus, with a correspondence to Vincennes, and every Christmas he sent 500 francs to the conductors of these lines. His pockets were stuffed with bonbons and little articles of finery which it gave Adèle pleasure to receive. It is stated that her madness takes the gentle and childish form. She would always know Victor Hugo, but did not understand why he did not take her to live with him. He placed her under the guardianship of his and her old friend Vacquerie, and made no attempt to evade the law, in virtue of which she comes, as alleged, into a fortune of £120,000, and half the income which may be derived from the copyright of Victor Hugo’s works. The poet is said to have regretted during his later years his harshness in connection with his daughter’s marriage, and her melancholy history cast over him one of the few sorrowful shadows that visited his life.

Hugo possessed one valuable piece of landed property, a plot of ground bought by him for 337,365 francs in the Avenue which bears his name. It is covered with trees, which surround a bright patch of lawn, and throw deep shadows over the ground, grateful to the eyes of those accustomed to the dusty streets of Paris. It says not a little for his vigour and apparent hold upon life, that after he had passed his eighty-second year he intended to superintend the erection of his new house, which was to be built entirely from his own designs. A large portion of Hugo's fortune — which was estimated altogether at about four million francs — was invested in Belgian National Bank shares, English Consols, and French Rentes.

For several years before his death Victor Hugo had renounced public speaking, his latest efforts in this direction having brought on an indisposition which obliged him to go to Guernsey for rest and quiet. He had also ceased to issue political appeals and manifestoes, though agitators of all shades of opinion (including the Irish Nationalists) endeavoured to enlist his sympathies. Occasionally he would give the weight of his name to a movement with whose ramifications he was not very familiar; but it was only for a time that he yielded to such blandishments. He attended the Senate periodically until the very last, although his deafness prevented him from following the course of the discussions.

The relation of the poet's life begun by Madame Hugo, has been completed by M. Paul Meurice, who includes in his work reprints of early poems and criticisms by Hugo, which are useful as strengthening the view taken in the earlier part of this narrative of his youthful political opinions. The poet is stated to have bequeathed his theatrical copyrights to M. Meurice, and the copyrights of his other works to M. Vacquerie. A magnificent national edition of the whole of Victor Hugo's works is now being issued in Paris. When completed, the work will contain etchings executed from original designs by fifty-seven of the chief French painters of the day, including Bonnat, Boulanger, Baudry, Cabanel, Constant, Comerre, Cormon, Gérôme, Harpignies, Henner, Moreau, and Rochegrosse. There will also be no fewer than 2,500 ordinary illustrations. The edition, which will extend to forty volumes, will contain unpublished, as well as all the published, works of the poet, and it will be completed by the opening day of the Universal Exhibition of 1889. No other monument could more fitly, or more worthily, commemorate this distinguished writer.

CHAPTER XX. THE POET’S DEATH AND BURIAL.

When the news that Victor Hugo had been seized with a serious illness was made known on the 17th of May, it excited a painful sensation not only in Paris and throughout France, but also in London, Vienna, and other European capitals. The great age of the sufferer caused the gravest apprehensions, notwithstanding his well-known vigour and robustness of constitution.

The last public act of the poet was to stand sponsor to M. de Lesseps at the Academy reception, held towards the close of April, 1885. In accordance with his customary practice he was thinly clad, although the weather was inclement, and the rain fell while he stood for a considerable time in the quadrangle. His friends dreaded the result of this exposure. It seems that the spectators, as if with the presentiment that they would not see him again, gave him a prolonged cheer, ‘which he acknowledged with the seriousness of a man already looking back, as from a distance, on the world’s transient satisfactions. He then sat down, apparently absorbed in listening to what he called the inner voices, scarcely raising his head to respond to the plaudits evoked by the passage in his honour.’ A fortnight after this incident, Hugo received his friend Lesseps and his family to dinner, according to his weekly custom. It was noticed by the poet’s relatives, though it escaped the attention of his godson of the Academy, that the host was far from being in his usual health. Nevertheless, he exerted himself with his wonted courtesy, and remained with his guests until they departed at a late hour. He was already suffering from a cold, caught, it is said, on the 13th of May, when he took one of those omnibus rides to which, as we have seen, he was very partial. Overtaxed by his exertions in entertaining his friends, and unable to shake off the effects of the cold, serious symptoms began to develop themselves. In addition to an affection of the heart, congestion of the lungs set in. Although for some time he battled heroically with the disease, he at length looked for and anticipated death.

A correspondent of the *Daily News*, reporting a conversation with an intimate friend of the Hugo family upon the poet’s last illness, said: ‘He tells me that he never heard of a more terrible struggle between organic vitality and the morbid causes that are at work. Victor Hugo would like to die, so that it cannot be said it is his strength of will that enables him to resist the disease from which he is suffering. Contrary to what some of the journals have said, he is a very bad patient. Last night, when after straining his whole body to breathe, he had fallen into a prostrate state, a strong blister was prescribed, and the three doctors agreed to stay and watch its effects. As one of them was going to apply it, Victor Hugo jumped up and not only pushed him away but the others also, with a muscular force that astounded them. He rushed to and fro, convulsively throwing up his arms, and clutching the furniture. In the intervals between the crises, the poet likes to have his granddaughter near him. He feels that death has come to summon him, and that medical help is impotent to save him. He chafes at having to lie in bed. His voice is very weak, but remains audible to those near him. He was greatly affected on hearing that numbers of working people come in the evening to stand mutely and respectfully at a short distance from his house, so as to hear from those who call, as they are walking away, how he is. With his characteristic politeness, he has ordered that a direct notification is to be made to the humble watchers in the street of his decease, and wishes it to be known that his last thoughts have been about his friends the poor of Paris, with whom he has long been in brotherhood by feeling.’

On hearing of Victor Hugo’s alarming illness, Cardinal Guibert, the Archbishop of Paris, wrote to Madame Lockroy: ‘I have the deepest sympathy with the sufferings of M. Victor Hugo and with the anxieties of his family. I have prayed much at the Holy Sacrifice of Mass for the illustrious patient. Should he desire to see a minister of our holy religion, although I am myself still weak, and in a state of convalescence from a disease much resembling his, I should make it my very pleasing duty to bring him the succour and consolation so much needed in these cruel ordeals.’ M. Lockroy at once replied as follows: ‘Madame Lockroy, who cannot leave the bedside of her father-in-law, begs me to thank you for the sentiments which you have expressed with so much eloquence and kindness. As regards M. Victor Hugo, he has again said, within the last few days, that he had no wish during his illness to be attended by a priest of any persuasion. We should be wanting in our duty if we did not respect his resolution.’ As the correspondent of the *Times* observed, the Archbishop could scarcely have expected an acceptance of his offer, for Victor Hugo was not the man to play the revolting death-bed farce of Talleyrand; and to have died a Catholic would not even have been a reversion to the creed of his childhood, for, strictly speaking, he was not brought up a Catholic. His mother, though a Vendéan Royalist, was a Voltairian; and when she entered her sons at the monastic college of Madrid, she declared them Protestants in order to exempt them from the confessional. But all through life Hugo was a Theist, and ran the gauntlet of much criticism from sceptical friends in consequence of his firm belief in the Deity.

There seemed at one time a possibility of the poet's recovery, though he did not himself share this view. 'I only wish that death may come quickly,' he exclaimed the day before his death; and again, in passing through a severe spasmodic fit, he said: 'It is the struggle between day and night.' The patient's sufferings were very great, and those about him could desire nothing but his release. For several days he was kept alive only by injections of morphia. On the evening of the 21st he rallied sufficiently from his lethargy to embrace his two grandchildren, both in their 'teens, and to utter a few words. His breathing was temporarily easier, though the action of the heart continued to be very feeble. At five o'clock on the following morning the last agony commenced. Almost his last words, addressed to his granddaughter, were, 'Adieu, Jeanne, adieu!' His final movement of consciousness was to grasp his grandson's hand. The pulse gradually grew weaker and weaker, and at half-past one o'clock he raised his head, made a gesture as if bowing, and fell back lifeless.

In the afternoon M. Nadar attended, to photograph the death-bed. M. Bonnat, whose striking portrait of Hugo was one of the features of the Salon a few years ago, took a sketch, and M. Dalou, the sculptor, made a cast of the head. M. and Madame Jules Simon were the first amongst a long list of notabilities to pay a visit of condolence to the family. Early on the morning of the poet's death a crowd had assembled in the Avenue Victor Hugo, and the painful news of his decease rapidly spread through their midst, and was soon known throughout Paris.

When the Senate met, shortly after the melancholy event, the President, M. Le Royer (a Protestant), said: 'Victor Hugo is dead. He who for more than sixty years has excited the admiration of the world and the legitimate pride of France has entered into immortality. I will not sketch his life;

everyone knows it. His glory is the property of no party or opinion; it is the appanage and inheritance of all. I have only to express the deep and painful emotion of the Senate, and the unanimity of its regret. In sign of mourning, I have the honour to ask the Senate to adjourn.’ M. Brisson then said: ‘The Government joins in the noble words of the President of the Senate. To-morrow the Government will have the honour of submitting to the Chamber a Bill for a national funeral to Victor Hugo.’ The Senate then rose. The Municipal Council paid similar homage to the man whose name was imperishably associated with that of Paris. The Council also resolved upon attending the funeral in a body.

For some days the poet’s death was the only subject of conversation in Paris. Foreign visitors delayed their departure in order to be able to say that they had witnessed his funeral. The Mayor of the 46th arrondissement declared the house where he died to be sacred, and the property of the city of Paris, and it was decided to give his name to new streets in the capital. For the first time, it was said, since Lafayette’s death — and even this comparison proved to be inadequate — France was to celebrate a truly national funeral. The funerals of Thiers and Gambetta, though the most striking in France for at least a generation, aroused sympathy in one section of the people, and drew forth protests from the rest; but all France felt that it could bow the head with unanimous respect and veneration before the remains of Victor Hugo.

A doubt which had troubled all persons holding religious beliefs in France was set at rest by the publication of the following unsealed memorandum handed by the poet to M. Vacquerie on the 2nd of August, 1883:— ‘I give 50,000 francs to the poor. I wish to be carried to the cemetery in their hearse. I refuse the prayers (*oraisons*) of all churches: I ask for a prayer (*prière*) from all souls. I believe in God. — Victor Hugo.’ Though rejecting creeds, it was seen that the illustrious departed had not rejected belief. On one point M. Renan expressed the universal feeling when he wrote as follows:— ‘M. Victor Hugo was one of the evidences of the unity of our French conscience. The admiration which enveloped his last years has shown that there are still points upon which we are agreed. Without distinction of class, party, sect, or literary opinion, the public, for some days past, has hung upon the heartrending narratives of his agony; and now there is nobody who does not perceive a great void in the heart of the country. He was an essential member of the church in whose communion we dwell — one might say that the spire of that old cathedral has crumbled into dust with the noble existence which has carried the banner of the ideal highest in our century.’

At the opening of the French Chamber on the 23rd, M. Floquet pronounced an eloquent eulogium upon Victor Hugo. He spoke of France as having lost one of her best citizens, who had enriched the treasure of national glory, had restored courage in adversity, and after having suffered everything for the Republic had inculcated concord and tolerance. He described him as a hero of humanity, who for sixty years had been the champion of the poor, the weak, the humble, the woman, and the child, and as the advocate of inviolable respect for life, and of mercy to those who had gone astray. His name ought to be proclaimed, not only in the academies of artists, poets, and philosophers, but in all legislative assemblies, on which he had sought to impress the inspirations of his all-powerful and benevolent genius.

In proposing a vote of 20,000 francs for a national funeral, M. Henri Brisson said:— ‘Victor Hugo is no more. While living he became immortal. Death itself, which often adds to the reputation of men, could not add to his glory. His genius dominates our century. Through him France irradiated the world. It is not letters alone that mourn, but our country and humanity — every reading and thinking man in the whole world. As regards us Frenchmen, for the last sixty-five years his voice has entered into our inner moral life and our national existence, bringing into them all that is sweetest and brightest, most touching and most elevated, in the private and public history of that long series of generations which he has charmed, consoled, kindled with pity or indignation, enlightened, and warmed with his own fire. What man of our time is not indebted to him? Our democracy laments his loss. He has sung all its grandeurs; he has wept over all its miseries. The weak and lowly cherished and venerated his name. They knew that this great man had their cause in his heart. It is a whole people that will follow him to the grave.’

Loud acclamations followed this speech, and the proposal was adopted by 415 votes to 3.

The news of the poet’s death excited as much emotion in the French provinces as in the capital. The Municipal Councils of Lyons, Marseilles, and Toulon closed their sittings as a mark of grief, after having appointed delegates to represent them at the funeral. The Municipal Council of Besançon sent the following address to the Hugo family:— ‘The native town of Victor Hugo, through the Council, places at the feet of the departed its sentiments of profound grief. The glory of the greatest of her children will for ever irradiate her and the whole world. By his genius he was foremost among men of letters and poets. By his love of his country and of liberty he was the enemy of usurpers and despots, and the power of his heart and his zeal for the welfare of humanity place him at the head of the protectors of the oppressed, the humble, and the weak.’ The Mayor of Nancy addressed the following letter to M. Lockroy:— ‘The town of Nancy has always felt proud of having been the birthplace of General Hugo, the father of the man of genius for whom France mourns. She claimed as a glory for the blood of Lorraine, which ran in his veins, the renown of the great poet. I am an inadequate but sincere interpreter of the general grief.’ At Algiers the Municipal Council closed its sittings, and from London, Vienna, and St. Petersburg messages of sympathy were despatched. On the day following the poet’s death it was computed that at least ten thousand letters and messages of condolence reached the Avenue Victor Hugo.

A desire having been expressed that Victor Hugo should be buried in the Panthéon, the feeling spread rapidly through almost all classes. In pursuance of this wish, M. Anatole de la Forge moved in the Chamber of Deputies that the Panthéon, known as the Church of St. Geneviève, should be secularized, in order that Victor Hugo’s remains might be buried there. Urgency was voted for the motion by 229 against 114 votes, but the Minister of the Interior requested the House to postpone the vote upon it until the next sitting.

It may be here stated that the Panthéon was commenced in 1764 as a church, completed in 1790 as a Walhalla, was a church from 1822 to 1830, and again from 1851 until 1885. The interments in it of Mirabeau, Voltaire, Rousseau, and Marat are matters of history, as are also the expulsions which followed. Mirabeau’s body was publicly expelled by the Terrorists; Marat’s by the Anti-Terrorists; and Voltaire’s and Rousseau’s clandestinely by the Legitimists. In 1881 the last French Chamber passed a Bill secularizing it; but this did not pass through the Senate.

Two days after the discussion upon M. de la Forge’s motion, the *Journal Officiel* published a series of documents which summarily disposed of the matter. Ministers having advised President Grévy that an opportune moment had arrived for accomplishing the wish expressed by the Chamber in 1881, and for restoring the building to its original destination as a burial-place for illustrious Frenchmen, two Presidential Decrees were made, one declaring the Panthéon to be henceforth a mausoleum for great men who should have merited the gratitude of the nation, and the other directing that the body of Victor Hugo should be laid there. In the Chamber an order of the day was proposed by the Comte de Mun, condemning the Presidential Decree as a provocation to Catholics and as an act of feebleness; but this was rejected by 388 to 83. Another motion expressing the Chamber's entire approval of the letter and spirit of the Decree was then submitted, and carried by 338 to 90. Hugo's family consented to the body being taken to the Panthéon, but insisted on its being carried in a pauper's hearse from the Arc de Triomphe, where it was to lie in state, to the national mausoleum.

At six o'clock on the morning of the 31st of May the remains of the poet were transferred to the Arc de Triomphe, where waggon-loads of flowers and memorial wreaths had been constantly arriving. All the shops, cafés, and restaurants in the Avenue Victor Hugo, and near the Triumphal Arch, had remained open all night. ‘There was nothing disorderly,’ wrote a correspondent, ‘and the impression everything gave was one of sadness, though all day the aspect of the Place de l'Étoile had been really festive. The cenotaph was visible from the Tuileries. The coffin was covered with a silver-spangled pall, which rose from a base covered with black and violet cloth, violet being regal mourning, and Victor Hugo having attained an intellectual and moral sovereignty over France.’ Early in the day the crowds of human beings in all the avenues leading to the Place de l'Étoile were very dense. As evening drew on the aspect was like that of some great fair. Medals bearing *Les Châtiments*, *Napoléon le Petit*, and other legends, were offered for sale, as well as medallions and numberless other memorials of the dead. The display of flowers was wholly unparalleled. At night a flood of electric light poured upon the Place de l'Étoile, revealing the coffin with Dalou's powerfully modelled bust at the foot, and bringing out the flowers and the names of Victor Hugo's works on shields. The effect of the Horse Guards with torches and veiled lamps was very striking. Twelve schoolboys, relieved every hour, formed a picket in front of the cenotaph, round which there was an outer circle of juvenile guards, and an inner one of Hugo's intimate friends. English literature and the fine arts were worthily represented in the votive offerings laid at the feet of the great poet. Wreaths, flowers, and memorial cards were sent in great abundance. Lord Tennyson wrote under his name the word ‘Homage,’ and at the top of his card, ‘*In Memoriam celeberrimi Poetæ*.’ Mr. Browning also was represented, as well as Sir Frederick Leighton, the President of the Royal Academy. Archdeacon Farrar sent the message, ‘In honour of one who honoured man as man.’ Sir F. Burton, director of the National Gallery, wrote, ‘Honour to the memory of the great master;’ and similar tributes were paid by many men of letters, poets, Royal Academicians, and others.

The funeral ceremony took place on the 1st of June, and it was of such a character as to live in the memory of all who witnessed it. What distinguished the procession in honour of Victor Hugo from the only one comparable with it, that of Gambetta, observed the correspondent of the *Times*, was not only its vast size, which was without precedent, but also the distinct sentiment which dominated both its members and the crowd. It was at once the triumph of the democracy and an illustration of its power. In the case of Gambetta, France beheld a statesman cut off in his prime, with all the dreams of hope and ambition before him. In the case of Victor Hugo, it was a veteran in letters entering into his rest. ‘At the tidings of his death, all France, all parties, seemed to claim him; and it was the loss of the poet, the thinker, the humanitarian, which was first deplored. Then, by degrees, party claims were put forth. The poet and thinker disappeared, and this made his funeral less sublime. The crowd paid homage to the political weaknesses of his latter years, to the democratic philanthropist, to the Extremist Senator, to a Hugo, in fact, whom posterity will ignore, while honouring him with a place among great literary geniuses.’ The struggle over his remains ended by other parties giving way, and the people for whom he had laboured claiming him as their especial champion and prophet. But certainly, whether for king, priest, statesman, or man of letters, Paris and the provinces never before turned out in such vast multitudes.

The wreaths arriving from all parts were placed on twelve cars, drawn by four or six horses each, and they formed a brilliant spectacle. Before six o’clock in the morning there were already four rows of spectators assembled on each side of the Champs Élysées. ‘The authorities, with considerable skill and foresight, had directed most of the societies likely to bear what might be qualified as seditious banners to meet in the Avenue du Bois de Boulogne. Here accordingly, at a little before nine o’clock, were massed various free-thought societies, nearly all of them bearing red flags or banners, from Boulogne, Asnières, Argenteuil, Suresne, Bicêtre, Sèvres, Puteaux, and other places. Some of the banners were ornamented with Phrygian caps. Close by, in the Avenue de la Grande Armée, the proscripts of 1851-52 had also a red banner. By ten o’clock there were fifteen red flags close to the Arc de Triomphe. At the corner of the Rue Brunel M. Lissagaray, M. Martin, and some thirty well-known anarchists had responded to the call of the Revolutionary Committee. They seemed, however, lost in the crowd. Twice this little group of anarchists tried to unfurl a red flag, but being so closely watched, they had not time to hoist the colour in the air before flag-bearer and flag were both captured. By half-past ten the anarchists, having already lost two flags, abandoned the Rue Brunel. A little before eleven o’clock a Commissioner of Police, in plain clothes, accompanied by half-a-dozen policemen and a company of Republican Guards, marched down the Avenue du Bois de Boulogne, and, accosting the bearer of every red flag that seemed at all objectionable, lifted his hat, and demanded that the emblem should be covered over.’ Although disturbances had been feared none occurred. The Red Republicans and anarchists (whom Victor Hugo had more than once condemned) were but as a drop in the bucket, compared with the myriads of other citizens assembled to do honour to the dead. Although some arrests were made, the greatness of the whole occasion dwarfed their significance, and the most imposing spectacle within living memory became a veritable popular triumph, and one reflecting credit upon the French nation.

Vivid descriptions were penned of the ceremony. According to one of these, by eleven o’clock the sight at the foot of the Arc de Triomphe became more and more impressive. The dull, grey sky, the roll of the muffled drums, the mournful strains of Chopin’s *Funeral March,* combined with the hushed tones of conversation, helped to impress the numerous audience gathered round. The bright red robes of the judges and the sombre gowns of the barristers made a picturesque contrast with the very plain, unpretending dress of the members of the Government and of the Foreign Diplomatic Corps, who sat in the most favoured places at the foot of the Arc. In the background the glitter of cuirassier armour and the gold braiding of the representatives of the army gave tone and vivacity to the scene. Much interest was manifested at the presence of the French Cabinet, of both

Houses, and of the English Ambassador, sitting side by side with M. de Mohrenheim, the Russian Ambassador.

When the mourning family had taken their places, Ministers went to pay them their condolences. The funeral addresses were then delivered from a tribune erected on the left of the catafalque. The first speaker, M. Le Royer, President of the Senate, described Victor Hugo as the most illustrious senator, whose Olympian forehead, bowed on his breast in an anticipated posture of immortality, always attracted respectful homage from all his colleagues. He never mounted the tribune but to support a cause always dear to him — the Amnesty. Amidst apparent hesitations, he had all his life consistently pursued a high ideal of justice and humanity, and his moral action on France was immense. He unmasked the sophisms of crowned crime, comforted weak hearts, and restored to honest men right notions of moral law, which had been momentarily obscured.

The speech of the day, however, was delivered by M. Floquet, President of the Chamber of Deputies. In tones which could be distinctly heard throughout the vast arena, and with much eloquence of gesture, the orator said: ‘What can equal the grandeur of the spectacle before us, which history will record! Under this arch, constellated with the legendary names of so many heroes, who have made France free, and wished to render her glorious, we see to-day the mortal remains, or rather, I should say, the still serene image, of the great man who so long sang the glory of our country and struggled for her liberty. We see here around us the most eminent men in arts and sciences, the representatives of the French people, the delegates of our departments and communes, voluntary and spontaneous ambassadors, and missionaries from the civilized universe, piously bending the knee before him who was a sovereign of thought, an exile for crushed right and a betrayed Republic, a persevering protector of all the weak and oppressed, and the chosen defender of humanity in our century. In the name of the nation we salute him, not in the humble attitude of mourning, but with all the pride of glorification. This is not a funeral, but an apotheosis. We weep for the man who is gone, but we acclaim the imperishable apostle whose word remains with us, and, surviving from age to age, will conduct the world to the definite conquest of liberty, equality, and fraternity. This immortal giant would have been ill at ease in the solitude and obscurity of subterranean crypts. We have elevated him there, exposed to the judgment of men and Nature, under the grand sun which illuminated his august conscience. Whole peoples realize the poetical dream of this sweet genius. May this coffin, covered with the flowers of the grateful inhabitants of Paris, which Victor Hugo loved to call the *Cité Mère*, and of which he was the respectful son and faithful servant, teach the admiring multitude duty, concord, and peace.'

M. Floquet concluded by reciting the verses beginning '*Je hais l'oppression d'une haine profonde*' ('I hate oppression with a profound hatred'). This address, which elicited enthusiastic approval, was followed by one from M. Goblet, Minister of Public Instruction. The Minister said that Victor Hugo, while living, figured in the glorious pleiad of great poets — with Corneille, Molière, Racine, and Voltaire. He would always remain the highest personification of the nineteenth century, the history of which, with its contradictions, its doubts, its ideas, and aspirations, had been best reflected in his works. The speaker laid stress upon the profoundly human character of Victor Hugo, who represented in France the spirit of toleration and peace. M. Émile Augier, who appeared in the uniform of the Academy, said: 'The great poet that France has lost vouchsafed me a place in his friendship. Hence the honour I have to be chosen by the Academy to express our grief, which is as nothing to that of the whole nation. To the sovereign poet France renders sovereign honours. She is not prodigal of the surname Great. Hitherto it has been almost the exclusive appanage of conquerors; but one preceding poet was universally called the Great Corneille, and henceforth we shall say the Great Victor Hugo. His long-acquired renown is now called glory, and posterity commences. We are not celebrating a funeral, but a coronation.' M. Michelin, President of the Municipal Council of Paris, delivered the last speech of the day.

On the conclusion of the addresses, the drums beat the salute, and then the band of the Republican Guard struck up the *Marseillaise*. Just as they had reached the chorus of the stirring French national anthem, the coffin was brought out from the catafalque, and at that precise moment the sun, bursting through the grey clouds, threw a ray of brilliant light on the mountain of flowers whence the remains of Victor Hugo had emerged. Now the march commenced, the school battalions and the representatives of the Press taking the lead, amid clapping of hands. Chopin's *Marche Funèbre* was the music played at the opening of the ceremonial. After this came in slow movement the strains of the *Marseillaise*, which were soon followed by the *Chant du Départ*, and then by the Girondins' celebrated chant, *Mourir pour la Patrie*. Faithful to the stipulation of his will, Victor Hugo's body was conveyed to its last resting-place in the poor man's hearse — that is to say, the cheapest hearse which the Pompes Funèbres provide. As the corpse was being removed from the cenotaph every head was uncovered. The artillery of the Invalides and of Mont Valérian boomed out a farewell salute. 'The procession,' wrote a correspondent of the *Daily News*, 'had for vanguard a squadron of mounted gendarmes, followed by General Saussier, the Governor of Paris, and the Cuirassiers, with band playing; twelve crown-laden cars, the band of the Republican Guard, the delegates of Besançon carrying a white crown, the French and foreign journalists, the Society of Dramatic Authors, and the delegates of the National and other theatres. The cars were surrounded by the children of the school battalion. There was no crown on the pauper's hearse. The friends of the deceased held the cords of the pall, and Georges Hugo walked alone, behind. He was in evening dress, and looked a young man. His face is handsome, and his air distinguished. His mother, sister, and different ladies and other friends of the family walked at a short distance behind him. The crowd of people was astounding round the Arch of Triumph, and in the Champs Élysées' side-ways the windows, balconies, house-roofs, and even the chimney-tops were crowded.'

The very trees seemed to bud with human beings; and the crowd of spectators in the streets was so deep and serried that it was impossible for any wearied senator, savant, or other venerable person to get out if once imprisoned. All along the route of the procession heads were religiously uncovered as the hearse passed. The school battalion guarded it, and then came many companies of boyish militia. Gymnastic societies in white, blue, and red flannel shirts, with white trousers, gaiters, and caps; delegations of the learned societies, political clubs, printers, publishers, newspapers, foreign Radicals, literati, philanthropical societies, fire brigades, humane societies, trades unions, came in processional order. Each group was distinctly separated from the other. Down the broad Champs Élysées the procession moved with great facility, as all carriages had been cleared away before eight o'clock in the morning. All the available standing-room of the broad causeway was filled with an eager throng; but the most sublime sight was presented at the Place de la Concorde. The corner from the Champs Élysées to the bridge was walled off by the troops, so that an innumerable multitude was able to collect at this point. Not content with this, the banks of the Seine, down to the water’s edge, on both sides of the bridge, were thickly studded with people, and every floating barge or boat was dangerously loaded with spectators. Far up the broad stretch of the Avenue the procession, with its thousand crowns and banners, could be seen slowly descending. Many groups had not yet left the Arc de Triomphe when the head of the procession reached the Panthéon. A dense mass of spectators had gathered in and around the Place de la Concorde; but perhaps no portion of the route was so crowded as the Rue Soufflot, which leads from the Boulevard St. Michel to the Panthéon. Windows, ladders, roofs, and chimneys were all utilized by those eager to witness the passing of the procession. Shortly after half-past one the head of the procession reached the steps of the Panthéon, and at two o’clock the coffin was brought up the front steps, and placed on the catafalque. The representatives of the family, of Government, and the various authorities took their places on either side of the main entrance. Once more a grand spectacle was offered by the artistic grouping of crowns, flowers, uniforms, and colours under the majestic pillars of the Panthéon. Speeches were again delivered, and these continued while the procession, with, bands and banners, filed past. The working-class corporations followed in their various order, and these were succeeded by the Secular Technical School for Girls, the Republican Socialist Alliance, the Comedians of Paris, the Montmartre Choral Society, the Women’s Suffrage Society, the Radical Socialist Club, and many other bodies. ‘A few minutes after six o’clock,’ remarked the *Times* correspondent, ‘the last crowns and banners passed by, and after a short interval the troops representing the Army of Paris commenced their march-past. Dragoons, Republican Guard, and Line were in their turn acclaimed by the multitude, pleased by their martial appearance and their light tread after the fatigues of the day. Then came the blare of the Artillery trumpets, followed by those of the Dragoons, and at precisely a quarter to seven the last soldier made the last salute to the remains of Victor Hugo. A statue of Hugo in his famous posture of reverie fronted the Panthéon. This papier-mâché statue represented Victor Hugo watching the long procession that did him honour. It was a trifle; but there was a touch of tender thoughtfulness in this reminder to the surging multitude that they must not forget the man who was being borne to the grave.’

Thus ended a funeral pageant worthy, on the whole, of the poet and the nation — a pageant in which were to be found representatives of all classes of the French community. Victor Hugo, whose genius recalled the elder glory of French literature, now sleeps in the Panthéon. While he differed from the illustrious men of the past, having neither the wit of Rabelais nor Molière, the classic dignity of Corneille, nor the philosophic depth of Voltaire, he had a greatness, though of a different kind, equal to their own. He therefore joins them as an equal. He has given to French literature a new departure; for every book he has written, while wet with human tears, is yet stamped with the terrible earnestness which possessed his spirit, and made immutable by the Herculean strength of his genius.

CHAPTER XXI. GENIUS AND CHARACTERISTICS.

Victor Hugo, though simple in nature, was many-sided in intellect. As I approach the conclusion of my task, I feel how truly great the sum of this man’s work was, notwithstanding the flaws which disfigured it. And in proportion to its greatness is the difficulty of appraising, or even of approximately appraising, its value. This task belongs to a writer or writers yet unborn; for neither in his own nor even in the next generation does such a man of genius as Hugo — an author *sui generis*, one utterly unlike all others — assume his distinctive niche in the Walhalla of literature. But there are some suggestions of a general character which may be offered respecting his work, and these will naturally fall under four headings — political, social, moral or religious, and literary.

It has been said that Hugo failed in politics; but as he never posed for being a practical politician, the charge does not possess the significance that would have attached to it had he come forward as a political saviour — of whom France has had so many. For the sinuosities and compromises of party politics, however wise and necessary at times, he had no aptitude. He had no political creed; or, if he had, it might be summed up in one article. He individualized humanity, and declared it to be miserable. The whole of his creed, therefore, consisted in the destruction of monopolies and abuses, and the uplifting of the masses. But he was certainly unfitted for the debates of such a body as the French Chamber, and it was probably one of the best things he ever did in his life when he shook the dust from under his feet, and bade the Assembly an indignant farewell. Yet he was more successful than scores of other politicians who have set up a claim to superior political wisdom. The French Chamber has been too frequently suggestive of a *maison d’aliénés*. The modern Gallic politician is about the most impulsive creature of which we have any knowledge. He lacks the phlegmatic nature of the German and the logical hardheadedness of the Briton. He is hypersensitive and emotional, not argumentative and judicial. He only knows that he has ideas, and that every man who opposes those ideas is an enemy of the human species, and must be put out of the way. This was proved again and again in that terrible year of Revolution, 1793, when the friends of Reason sent each other to the block as they successively gained the upper hand. One would think that this was a sufficient baptism of blood; but it was not so; the tale has been renewed at intervals, and the communistic horrors of 1871 added another fearful page to the grim catalogue. French politics are a succession of storms; the lightning breaks, the thunder rolls, and the deluge follows; then, for a time, the sky clears and the sun shines brilliantly: but the clouds return after the rain; the barometer becomes demoralized; and electrical disturbance is once more the order of the day.

But in the intervals of sanity in the French political world — I use the word ‘sanity’ in its larger sense — great and noble work is done, work worthy of the world’s admiration. When the French mind conceives projects of amelioration, it conceives them with boldness and generosity. In this lies the safety-valve of the people, and also the best hope for the future of the race. Men like Hugo are the men to suggest and to push forward these great conceptions for the national welfare. They may have few political principles as such, but the political sympathies of such a man as Victor Hugo have more force and weight than the most orthodox and irreproachable doctrines of a hundred smaller men. While politicians may be struggling for unimportant details, men of great sympathies are mighty to the moving of mountains. As a practical politician, then, let it be frankly admitted that Hugo was a failure; that in his speeches he was frequently rhapsodical; and that he could take no initiative in practical legislation. All these are matters in which lesser intellects might, could, should, would, and do succeed. But in that higher region where the eternal principles of justice come into play, where sublime benevolence holds her seat, where by a quick and living sympathy universal humanity is made to feel a universal brotherhood, then Victor Hugo had a political illumination to which none other of his contemporaries could lay claim.

From the political to the social is but a step, and that a natural one. It cannot be said of Hugo that he was liberal in his social theories and aristocratic in his practice. He had a courteousness of nature that made him equally esteemed, and had in reverence, by such an one as a king or an emperor, and the meanest of his compatriots who called upon him for advice or aid. If he endeavoured to teach the higher social life to others, he at least led the way by setting before himself only such aims as were noble and humane. He was the very soul of truth in all his relations, and if he were not the equal of Rousseau as a great social teacher, he far transcended the author of the *Contrat Social* in his irreproachable life and his deep personal sympathies. One writer has said that ‘Victor Hugo’s own strongest influence is but a breath of the influence of Rousseau.’ This is a deliverance as unhappy as it is dogmatic. There is neither necessity nor appositeness in placing the two writers in such juxtaposition. France before Rousseau was not the France of Victor Hugo; the former had work of an originative character to do in the social sphere, as Victor Hugo had in that of literature. But while Hugo was not the creator of a new social system, one of the primary causes of his influence was of a social character. His intense and genuine sympathy with the humble and the poor and the suffering gave him a place in the affection of thousands who knew little of social theories. The key, indeed, to Hugo’s personal character and influence, as distinguished from the literary, was that human sympathy which led to his untiring efforts to protect the weak against the strong. He would have no parleying with oppression and violence, and notwithstanding his passionateness he really exercised a salutary and calming influence in the main, and one which told for goodness. To him the orphan’s rags, the shame of woman, and the anguish of the toiler never appealed in vain. I can imagine him doing what sturdy old Samuel Johnson did when he rescued the outcast woman in the Strand, and himself bore her away to a place of safety. Hugo had a clear enough insight into those social reforms which are still a necessity even in this enlightened age. He did not believe in the perfection of the poor, though he did believe in the absolute imperfection of kings and priests. By setting the latter in the full blaze of publicity, he believed he was doing a great social work, and helping on that golden age of happiness for which he laboured. In his earnestness and enthusiasm, he might commit, and doubtless did commit, errors of judgment; but then without these very qualities of earnestness and enthusiasm all the great things associated with his name could have had no birth. Where we gain much, we can easily forgive a little. Victor Hugo had a conscience, and as a man amongst men, pleading for men, he threw it all into his social work. In Jean Valjean he will never cease to plead, though he himself is dead. He has given to the sufferings of humanity a voice which will continue to speak in tones of pathos and of sadness until the last of those sufferings and social wrongs shall have passed away. Of many devastating spirits has the world been called upon to say that they made a solitude and called it peace; but of Victor Hugo we may say that he found humanity a bleak and cheerless wilderness, and endeavoured to make it blossom as the rose.

Yet loving the world and humanity as he did, and feeling that the earth was ‘bound by gold chains about the feet of God,’ Hugo, as I have before said, has been claimed by some as an unbeliever. As though any great poet who had come to years of discretion could be a materialist or an infidel. So far from seeing no God in the universe, the poet as a rule is God-intoxicated. I shall be reminded, perhaps, of Lucretius and Shelley, but even these, as the exceptions, would only serve to prove the rule. The Roman, however, was philosopher first, and poet afterwards; while as for the atheism of Shelley, it was a spasmodic experience due to a revolt against authority — not a deep-settled conviction — and an experience out of which he was rapidly growing at the time of his death. No poet of the first order has ever been an atheist, and Victor Hugo was no exception to the rule. While discarding religious systems, he was, in fact, profoundly religious. He never swerved in this matter from the position he held in 1850, and which he thus explained at the close of a speech on public instruction, ‘God will be found at the end of all. Let us not forget Him; and let us teach Him to all. There would otherwise be no dignity in living, and it would be better to die entirely. What soothes suffering, what sanctifies labour, what makes man good, strong, wise, patient, benevolent, just, and at the same time humble and great, worthy of liberty, is to have before him the perpetual vision of a better world throwing its rays through the darkness of this life. As regards myself, I believe profoundly in this better world, and I declare it in this place to be the supreme certainty of my soul. I wish, then, sincerely, or, to speak more strongly, I wish ardently for religious instruction.’ There is surely nothing vague or nebulous about this. No man could express himself more clearly or emphatically if directly questioned upon the great and momentous topics of God and immortality. As a religious teacher, then, Hugo may be justly claimed; for the whole weight of his name and influence was thrown upon the side of those profound religious convictions which have been the consolation of the human race, and which have knit man in indissoluble bonds to the Divine.

What shall I say of Victor Hugo from the literary point of view? His true glory is that he revivified French literature — created it afresh, as it were —

and was himself the best representative of its new excellences. But this subject is so great that I scarcely dare venture upon it. The poet carried out in his own person and work the advice he once gave to some younger spirits, ‘Act so that your conscience will approve, and your works praise you; and, like those great unknown, you will leave the world better than you found it; while, in virtue of the justice which I believe to be the law of the universe, you will rise high elsewhere in the scale of creation. A man is splendidly praised when he is praised by his works.’ Of course, he had his detractors — such men as Charles Maurice, who believed himself to be a greater writer than Victor Hugo, and who only perceived in *Hernani* the effects of ‘an intolerable system of style destructive of all poesy.’ The world has since regulated this matter adversely to Maurice. Then there were others not so unjust as this writer, but men who were so strongly impressed by the defects of Hugo that they scarcely gave him due credit for his manifest powers of literary expression. Heine and Amiel may be taken to represent this type. To set against these are the Hugolâtres, as Théophile Gautier called them. In England the most enthusiastic admirer of the poet is undoubtedly Mr. Swinburne, and from his numerous tributes I may select one passage that is a kind of triumphant summary of the rest. It is the last stanza from his New-Year Ode to Hugo, in the *Midsummer Holiday, and other Poems*:

‘Life, everlasting while the worlds endure,
Death, self-abased before a power more high,
Shall bear one witness, and their word stand sure,
That not till time be dead shall this man die.
Love, like a bird, comes loyal to his lure;
Fame flies before him, wingless else to fly.
A child’s heart toward his kind is not more pure,
An eagle’s toward the sun no lordlier eye.
Awe sweet as love and proud
As fame, though hushed and bowed,
Yearns toward him silent as his face goes by;
All crowns before his crown
Triumphantly bow down,
For pride that one more great than all draws nigh:
All souls applaud, all hearts acclaim,
One heart benign, one soul supreme, one conquering name.’

Making allowance for the fervour which a peculiarly fervid singer throws into his admiration, there is much truth in this metrical tribute to the literary and personal worth of the great poet. Substantially the same high view of Hugo is held by Lord Tennyson and other literary men in this country. But, with regard to criticism in particular, the writer from whom I have just quoted was even happier still in his prose comparisons. He remarked in his essay on *La Légende des Siècles* that ‘Hugo, for all his dramatic and narrative mastery of effect, will always probably remind men rather of such poets as Dante or Isaiah than of such poets as Sophocles or Shakspeare. We cannot, of course, imagine the Florentine or the Hebrew endowed with his infinite variety of sympathies, of interests, and of powers; but as little can we imagine in the Athenian such height and depth of passion, in the Englishman such unquenchable and sleepless fire of moral and prophetic faith. And hardly in any one of these, though Shakspeare perhaps may be excepted, can we recognise the same buoyant and childlike exultation in such things as are the delight of a high-hearted child — in free glory of adventure and ideal daring, in the triumph and rapture of reinless imagination, which gives now and then some excess of godlike empire and superhuman kinship to their hands whom his hands have created, and the lips whose life is breathed into them from his own.’ And again, ‘In his love of light and freedom, reason and justice, he not of Jerusalem, but of Athens; but in the bent of his imagination, in the form and colour of his dreams, in the scope and sweep of his wide-winged spiritual flight, he is nearer akin to the great insurgent prophets of deliverance and restoration than to any poet of Athens, except only their kinsman Æschylus.’ Even the most superficial reading of Hugo must leave an impression of magnificent powers, of powers which in given circumstances might have produced many and different forms of greatness. He had that exaltation of the intellect and imagination, that lofty range of mental force, which moulds centuries and moves the world.

But there are special literary qualities in Hugo which should be noticed. First among them is his extreme conscientiousness. His natural eloquence has sometimes been regarded as a snare to him, and yet in all the details of his work he was rigidly exact, so far as the most minute search could enable him to be. This was apparent in *Notre-Dame*, and especially so in *Les Misérables*, where he devoted a volume to a description of the battle of Waterloo, or Mont St. Jean, as the French designate it. Before writing on this, he lived for some time in the vicinity of the scene, and closely noted every item in connection with the fight on that great battlefield. He wrote to a correspondent, ‘I have studied Waterloo profoundly; I am the only historian who has passed two months on the field of battle.’ This same feeling of conscientiousness he also carried into other matters.

Another point which must be borne in mind in endeavouring to get at the source of Victor Hugo’s influence upon literature is the extent and flexibility of his vocabulary. ‘No one,’ wrote M. Edmond About, shortly after the appearance of *Quatre-Vingt-Treize*, ‘can fail to recognise the power of Hugo’s invention, the wealth of his ideas, the grandeur of his oratorical flights, and that sublimity which is the mark of a man of genius; but it is not known in Europe, nor even in France, that Victor Hugo is the most learned of men of letters. He possesses an enormous vocabulary. Out of the 27,000 words which the dictionary of the Academy contains, and 6,000 of which have an individuality of their own, the language of common life employs at most about a thousand. I could mention illustrious publicists, popular dramatists, novelists, whose books are much read and much liked, none of whom has more than 1,500 words at his disposal. Théophile Gautier, a studious man and a dilettante, used to boast to his friends of possessing 3,000. “But,” he used to add, “I might toil to the last day of my life without attaining to the vocabulary of Hugo.” Genius apart, merely by his knowledge and use of his mother-tongue, Hugo is the Rabelais of modern days. This is the minor side of his glory, I allow; but critics ought not to neglect it, or they will lead people to form false ideas.’

As to Hugo’s human passion, it agonizes in almost every page of his writings. He is nothing if not intensely human. And his weird and powerful effects are heightened by that undertone, that minor chord of music which he touches more often than the more jubilant major notes. ‘The still sad music of humanity’ is for ever beating in his ear, and he translates its moving pathos into words. A mind of this stamp feels that it can rarely turn to the humorous, and accordingly it is objected that he has no sense of humour. The charge is true in the main, for the grim humour of some of his situations may be better expressed by the epithet of grotesque. He lacked just this saving sense of humour to place him on a level with the greatest writers — or rather with those writers who are greatest in the delineation of human nature and its passions; for we have great writers, such as Dante and Milton, who are equal strangers with Hugo to the humour which plays about the pages of Shakspeare.

But Hugo is pre-eminent in other qualities. He is firmly and uncompromisingly veracious. No special correspondent who ever described a battlefield could be more vivid and telling in his reminiscences. There is the stamp of reality and truthfulness upon all that he has written. With a gloomy magnificence of imagery he has described scenes and events that are now immortal in literature. There is a grand spontaneity in his utterances — an eloquence that springs from the heart as much as from the head; while over all his poems and romances a noble halo has been thrown which is the reflex of the innate nobility of the man.

M. Émile Montégut has observed that Hugo is master of all that is colossal and fearful. His imagination prefers sublime and terrible spectacles: war, shipwreck, death, and primitive civilizations, with their babels and convulsions — these attract him. How well, also, can he imitate the plaintive cries of the ocean under the tempest which torments it! Let him but paint a feudal ruin and you will be made to feel all its imposing horrors; or a palace of Babylon, and you will realize its massive splendours. He knows the secrets of the Sphinx, and of the monstrous idols; he is familiar with the burning deserts of Africa, and the horrors of hyperborean countries. In the domain of the weird he is sovereign king, and no one will dispute with him. In other fields he may have rivals, but in the region where the fantastic mingles with the superhuman he has no equal.

But there is yet another side to Hugo which English critics have been just to note — it is that concerned with his human creations. While he may revel in the scenes which M. Montégut depicts, his heart is mostly in his human creations. And with regard to his treatment of these, it has been observed that the spectator is put outside the scene, and can do nothing but look on breathless, while amid mist and cloud, with illuminations fiery or genial, as the case may be, the great picture rises before him, each actor detached and separate, some in boldest relief, with a force which is often tremendous, and always forcibly dramatic. The giant and the child are treated with equal care and conscientiousness. Though first in massive effects, in deep broad lines, Hugo is also first in the most delicate shades of tenderness. ‘The babes are as distinct as the heroes, every pearly curve of them tender and sweet as rose-leaves, yet complete creatures, nowhere blurred or indefinite, even in the most delicious softness of execution.’ I quote from a writer in *Blackwood*, who had the candour (not always displayed by critics) to acknowledge that neither in France nor upon our own side of the Channel is there a contemporary writer who can with any show of justice be placed by the side of Victor Hugo. ‘His genius is too national, his workmanship too characteristic, to be contrasted with the calmer inspiration of any Englishman.... His subject, the character he is unfolding, possesses the writer: he throws himself upon it with a glow and fervour of knowledge, with a certainty of delineation which is not the mere exercise of practised powers, but with that something indescribable, something indefinable, added to it, swelling in every line, and transforming every paragraph. The workmanship is often wonderful; but it is not the workmanship which strikes us most — it is the abundant, often wild, sometimes unguided and undisciplined touch of genius which inspires and expands and exaggerates and dilates the words it is constrained to make use of — almost forcing a new meaning upon them by way of fiery compulsion, to blazon its own meaning upon brain and sense, whether they will or not. We know no literary work of the age — we had almost said no intellectual work of any kind — so possessed and quivering with this indescribable but extraordinary power.’

Hugo’s works are undoubtedly in parts eccentric, and all too frequently extravagant; but this is the nodding of Homer. His conceptions are gigantic, and his figures truly dramatic; and these are the chief things with which we have to do. In his superb excellences he stands alone — he is unique. His table is weighted with intellectual sustenance; so great is his abundance that a myriad writers could be fed from the crumbs which fall from his table. From the literary point of view we must not forget his chief distinction — that he effected the most brilliant and complete revolution that has been witnessed in the history of French literature. He changed the whole face of art in French poetry, and destroyed for ever the poetry of conventionality. He has endowed his native language with new nerve and sensibility; he has given it a fresh and vital force, and the effects of his influence upon the nation and literature of which he was the brightest ornament must be radical and abiding.

One quality only, or so it seems to me, Hugo lacked to place him on a level with the few great master spirits of the world. He wanted the universality of Homer and Shakspeare. Whenever the *Iliad* is read, the power of that mighty story is felt, and methinks that had I been born of any other than that English nationality of which I can boast, there is still something in Shakspeare which would have moved me as no other writer does. It is that secret power which draws all hearts to him— ‘that touch of nature which makes the whole world kin,’ and unites all men in admiration of his singular genius. Hugo is great also, but he has not that Shakspearean greatness which compels the tribute of all other peoples, as it receives the willing homage of his own. His noble poems and romances, with their sonorous eloquence, their rapid changes, their varied effects, remind me of Nature on an autumn day. The gloomy cloud gathers in the heavens, the lurid lightning darts from its bosom, the thunder rolls and reverberates in the mountains; but anon the tempest passes, the heavens open, and the glorious and beneficent sun once more smiles upon the world. So Hugo is a mixture of thunder and sunshine; of smiles and tears. No man had ever a greater heart — Shakspeare, and few others only, a more expansive intellect. He lacks the grand impartiality and the majestic calm of the author of *Hamlet*; but his soul is filled with the same love of his species, and it is large enough to embrace all the sons of humanity. His is a name which any nation, might well hold in everlasting honour. Though his life be ended, the splendour of his fame has but just begun; for the works infused and moulded by his genius, and into which he threw so much of passionate energy, of a noble idealism, of radiant hope, of moral fervour, and of human sympathy, will assuredly confer upon him glory and immortality.

Le Panthéon, Ile-de-France, Paris — Hugo's final resting place

Hugo’s tomb in Le Panthéon